Summary

Dwalin Fundin/Ori Ri, Dwalin/Ori, Dwori, Balin Fundin/Dori Ri, Balin/Dori, Darlin. Soon Nori/Bofur, Eventual Fili/Sigrid, and Kili/Tauriel, Several OC dwarrows. Eventual Thorin Oakenshield/Bilbo Baggins, Thilbo, Bagginsheid, Ori of the Brothers Ri is a freelance scribe in the poorest part of the City of Dale. He rushes to rescue his trouble-making elder brother Nori and finds a life, romance and food in the Mountain among royalty. Dori has secrets! And there’s nothing like a fairy-tale of scandal and lost nobility! The story is completely from Ori’s point of view. Expect appearances from Thror, Frerin (who is an utterly spoiled brat - apologies to Frerin worshipers), Lady Galadriel, Thranduil and practically everyone else. This is totally safe for Dain fans! Smaug never hatched and Isildur listened to Elrond (somebody has to) and the one Ring no longer exists. Sauron is just a bad guy with orc armies. There are some serious bits, but mostly it’s just a lively romp with food. Did we mention the food?

Notes
Those of you have read Stevvie’s previous epic know she is heavily influenced by Jane Austen and more so by Georgette Heyer’s regencies. Dolly loves them, too (and is unanimous in this - Lots of ridiculdockle pop culture references. See how many you can find!). There are some shocking bits; fist fights, mentions of past violence, murders, and abortion but in the past and Dwalin and Nori use rather a lot of bad language. This is not at the level of Pride of the Jedi silliness but Ori has some truly loopy adventures and lots of interesting friends, both canonical and OC. We have included various hints from other fanfics we have enjoyed. Our favorite authors listed below. Also the names of Erda (Bombur’s wife), Gridr (Gloin’s better half), and Binni (Oin’s hubster) as all used as tokens of respect to original authors.

We bow in the four directions and to the following writers who have blown our tiny minds with their writing :-

determinamfidd: Empress of all Tolkien fanfic.
sam_ptarmigan: As no one can write Dori like Sam! And Sam’s term ‘jill’ for bearer.
badskippy: Intertwined - so cool!
bubbyssub: Bother had me in stitches laughing
Meg_Thilbo: My big fat dwarven wedding was hilarious!!
scarletjedi: Comes around again - Wow!
crueltyland: Adorable fics!!
sum_nemo: Because there’s nothing like a good old accidental wedding and the beautiful hairbrush!
Bluesparkle and Hattedhedgehog for the saga of Chicken, inspired by a clip of Jed Brophy somewhere on the ’net.

Finally Stevie would like to thank profusely editor and co-author Dollypegs. She has been amazingly patient with Stevie’s lapses in grammar and spelling, an excellent sounding board, and made Stevie draw rooms and interiors so the descriptions matched! (Stevie recommends this practice!). Dolly also has the amazing ability to edit on Stevie’s laptop while Stevie’s driving both of them to work!
Finally you can find us on Tumblr as Stevviefox or Dollypegs. We delight in kudos, feedback, other sorts commentary and any artwork you fancy sending us. We also adore any suggestions or recipes you’d like to send.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Scares, saves and socks

Chapter by Stevie_Foxx

Ori of the Brothers Ri and son of Rikmha was busy at his desk come kitchen table in the little house in Steam Alley in the town of Dale outside of the Great Dwarf Mountain Kingdom of Erebor. He was proud of the work he could do as a free lance journeyman scribe. True, he and his two elder brothers were amongst the poorest of dwarrow and lived outside the mountain but he was talented in his penmanship, drawing and languages which included Ancient Khuzdul, every day Westron and Sindarin.

He was busy transcribing a letter for the master of his eldest brother Dori. The master was a weapons smith who coveted Dori’s eye and hand for knives. He was fulfilling an order for the current Steward of Gondor, which had required Dori to be away yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Ori was half way through the letter when there came a bang against the door and little Tilda Bardsdatter nearly fell through it.

“Tilda, whatever is the matter?” Ori cried, out of his chair and crossing to help her up.

Tilda scrambled to her feet.

“Oh, Ori! It’s terrible! Nori’s been taken by the Master of Dale and they’re going to execute him!”

Ori felt his heart drop into his stomach. Nori was between Dori and Ori in age and just as dear. Ori flung himself to the kitchen cupboard and reached to the back, fumbled the lock of the strongbox and wrenched out the bag of all the coin he’d saved from his pay for the last six months.

Tilda slammed the door behind them as Ori lead the way down the street toward the main road that lead into the center of Dale.

Ori raced around the corner and crashed into what he thought might be a wall. He almost fell flat on his back but his arms were caught fast in a strong grip.

“Oi, lad!”

Ori’s heart sank. Of all the times to run into a dwarf cadre. Nori was a well-known mischief maker among his own, and for Ori to run straight into Dwalin, son of Fundin, Captain of the Royal Guard of Erebor and Protector of the City of Dale at a time like this didn’t bode well.

Ori struggled without success to free himself of the captain, who looked at him with narrowed eyes.

“Please excuse me, Captain Dwalin, sir. I must hurry.”

The captain set him on his feet and looked him over.

“Bit of a rush, Ori-lad?”

“Please! I must go!”

Ori yanked himself free and fled to his goal. He felt sick as he heard the fading voice of Tilda telling the captain that Nori was going to be killed very soon. A part of his brain registered delight in how handsome the captain looked this day and the fact he actually knew Ori’s name!

Ori yanked to a stop in front of the Master’s grand house and High Court of Dale. The guards in front were busy talking to one another. Ori slipped passed. He tried the double doors. They were barred, so he sidled to the right and slid in the open window, and hurried into the opulent meeting room where the Master regularly ‘held court’. There before him was a vile sight. The Master sat heavy in his extravagant, overlarge chair on the raised platform. He was ostentatious in his person and dress. His oily smile ranged over those before him: three of his soldiers, basically hired thugs, two of whom were holding a kneeling Nori.

“Wait!” Ori cried.

Nori turned. Only Ori registered the horror in his older brother’s eyes. The thugs snarled and one reached for Ori. The Master waved an idle hand.

“No, let it come forward. Now who might you be, little rat?”
Ori bristled at the slur but held himself and advanced to stop by Nori.

“Master, I am Ori of the Brothers Ri, Nori’s younger brother. I have brought his fine.”

The thugs sneered and elbowed each other. The Master smirked.

“Oh, indeed, have you? Unfortunately, his fine is his life. Have you enough to buy a life in your little bag?”

The Master nodded and Ori gasped as the bag was snatched from him and its contents dumped out on the floor. The Master leaned forward, regarding the collection of copper, silver and a few gold coins.

“I think not. Not even for this piece of dung. Anything else?”

Ori thought wildly for a moment.

“You said a life? Then I offer myself. I give myself in turn for my brother.”

“Ori, no!” Nori growled.

“Quiet,” Ori hissed and put himself in front of his brother.

The Master seemed nonplussed for a moment then as he looked Ori over slowly, his ugly mouth began to smile. Ori didn’t think this was any improvement whatsoever but stood his ground.

“Well, well, well, I’ve heard of the Ri and you are the youngest. Oh yes, yes I shall like this arrangement much better. Guard, throw this other one away. I’ll keep this little thing as my new pet.”

“No!” Nori shouted and got to his feet.

The thugs he’d throw off leaped back to grab at him but there was loud shouting and crashing outside.

“What in-?”

The Master never finished his words as the double doors smashed open and in rode a cadre of Erebor royal guards. Ori was half over-joyed and half horror stricken. In the lead, on a very large, malevolent-looking goat, sat an equally large, malevolent-looking Captain Dwalin.

The captain rode forward to stop directly behind Ori. Ori glanced to his side and found he was eye to eye with the goat. He’d never realized goat pupils were square.

“Afternoon, Master Calmar,” the captain began in a conversational tone. “Heard you were havin’ a hearin’ concernin’ one of our folk, so I’m here t’ represent His Majesty Under the Mountain.”

The Master turned ingratiating.

“No, never, of course not, my good captain. I would never hold a case against one of your people without first consulting your Liege Lord. This is merely a matter of payment.”

“Payment?” The captain laid his war hammer across his knees and regarded the Master with a disarming smile that fooled no one. The rest of soldiers and goats seemed to stray about aimlessly but quickly hemmed the six persons in the room into a circle. The Master looked about in shock as he realized he was surrounded. His thugs muttered amongst each other in fear. Nori grabbed Ori’s arm and pulled him nearer.

“An’ what sort a’ payment would this be?” the captain prodded.

The Master licked his lips then began plaintively.

“That evil dwarf with the three prong beard robbed me! I wish re-payment and a fine of course!”

“Did he now?”

The captain eyed Nori, who had the manners to flush slightly before shrugging and grinning. Captain Dwalin pointed at the scattering of Ori’s pay. Nori swooped in to scoop it back up. Dwalin rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to the Master.

“I take it, then, yer thinkin’ that lovely pile a’ coin is reimbursement?”

“Ye… No! You don’t understand, my good captain! We have a file on this one. All his thievery.”

The Master snatched up a thick pile of papers from his lap and waved them about for good measure.

Captain Dwalin rode forward with his hand out. The Master placed the file in the captain’s hand. Captain Dwalin leafed through it with a disinterested air. His goat leaned down to have a taste of the rug on the platform.

“And,” the master continued, eyeing the goat worriedly, “that other one has just pledge his life as payment for it. So, you see, it was all but a small matter and it is clean and tidy now. There’s nothing
for you to do here.”

The Master rose with another oily smile.

Dwalin’s goat spat out the pieces of rug, looking unimpressed.

“Right ye’ are, Master Calmar.” Dwalin smirked back. “Come along, lads. Let’s be getting’
back.”

The captain reached Ori’s side and held out his hand.

“Up yeh get, lad.”

Ori stared.

The Master stared forward crying, “Wait! He’s mine!”

Captain Dwalin looked piercingly down at Ori.

“Ori of the Brothers Ri, did yeh just say yeh’d stand as payment f’r yer brother’s deeds?”

“I did.” Ori said and shivered.

“Well, then I accept yer payment f’r yer brother. Up ye get.”

“But-” the Master began.

Captain Dwalin swung round, goat and all, facing the Master.

“Unless it’s f’r goods ‘r in gold, payment a’ dwarrow goes t’ dwarrow same as payment f’r men
goes t’ men. Yeh sayin’ th’ treaty between our folk’s no’ honored by yeh, Calmar, Master a’
Laketown?”

The Master’s mouth opened and shut helplessly.

Ori’s arm was taken in a firm grasp and he flopped as he was swung bodily up and seated before
Captain Dwalin.

Next thing he knew they were out in the sunshine and riding up the road that lead to the Great
Gate of Erebor. One of the guards was talking to a raven which flew off at speed to the mountain.
Ori glanced about. He was crushed against the captain’s chest. The feeling of the goat trotting
beneath him was most unsettling and strangely enough most of the streets were empty here.

The captain slowed, and when they reached stone open courtyard before the gate, Ori noticed
they were right before the door of the Mountain. It towered above them. The vast statues of warrior
dwarrow on either side carved from the sold green granite of the lonely mountain itself.

A large brasier sat on either side of the open door before them. Being still early spring and after
the noon hour, there were no merchants or deliveries coming in or out. The captain dismounted
and set Ori on his feet. Nori rushed up from another goat and tried to seize hold of Ori. The captain
stopped him with a large hand against his chest. The captain reached into his tunic and brought out
the sheaf of papers he had taken from the Master and gave Nori a look. Nori swallowed whatever he
had been about to say and watched.

There was the sound of hurrying hooves. Ori looked up. Another dwarf emerged from the
mountain on pony back. The dwarf hailed the cadre and cheerfully alit.

“Captain Dwalin, son of Fundin. I’m at your service.”

“Gloin, son of Groin. Well met, old friend. Glad yeh were able t’ get here right quick.”

“Yes, your raven was most prompt.”

Master Gloin undid a saddle bag and pulled out a rather blocky-looking something wrapped in a
bright red cloth. He tossed the cloth back over the pony’s saddle and Ori watched in delight as
Master Gloin unfolded and set up a cunningly wrought wooden desk stand. Gloin readied a
parchment on it, uncorked an ink bottle, sharpened a pen and stood at the ready.

The captain turned to Ori.

“Did yeh offer tha’ bag a’ coin as fine f’r yer brother?”

Ori straightened.

“Yes, I did, captain.”

“An’ did yeh pledge yer life as payment f’r yer brother’s deeds?”

“Yes, I did, captain.”

“Yeh heard me say t’ Calmar that payment other than goods or gold a’ dwarrow goes t’ dwarrow
same as payment f'r men goes t' men?"
    “Yes I did, captain. I accept being your indentured servant.”
    “Yeh know we dwarrow don’t do that, lad.”
    “Oh.”
    Ori puzzled a moment then untied his neck scarf and opened his collar.
    “I accept my brother’s execution order, captain.”
    Dwalin raised a quizzical eyebrow.
    “I ain’t killing’ a dwarf over that, lad.”
    Ori stared.
    “What are you going to do, captain?”
    “Th’ only thin’ I can, lad.”
    “Say ‘no’, Ori!” Nori interjected.
    Captain Dwalin turned and told Master Gloin to write a basic contract. Master Gloin wrote busily
while Captain Dwalin rummaged in his inner pockets.
    He found what he wanted and, taking Ori’s arm, drew him to Master Gloin’s desk. Gloin finished
what he was writing with a flourish and turned the desk to the captain. Dwalin signed it and Ori
added his name without bothering to read it. He turned back to the captain who smiled and nodded
curly then began putting a braid into Ori’s hair.
    Am I being adopted? Ori wondered.
Maybe he should have read that contract after all.
    Dwalin finished the braid and, to Ori’s shock, attached a mithril bead set with emeralds in the
braid. He turned Ori to face him and handed him a matching bead.
    “Better put it in me beard, lad. I ain’t got enough on top anymore.”
    This brought laughter and a few cracked jokes from the squad, which the captain shushed with a
glare. Ori braided carefully with shaking hands and attached the bead he was given. When that was
accomplished, Master Gloin beamed and spoke the ancient words of Khuzdul that declared them
married.
    Married? Ori thought wildly. I’m married to Captain Dwalin. Blessed Mahal! Dear Lady
Yevanna! Dori’s going to kill me!!
    Ori felt himself reel a little and Nori swore.
    “I’m fine, Nori” Ori said the first thing that occurred to him.
    Nori came to his side, almost shaking with rage.
    The captain looked coolly at him.
    “What else could I ha’ done. You saw-”
    “It’s fine, captain,” Nori hissed. “May I salute you as my brother?”
    Captain Dwalin raised an eyebrow.
    Ori gasped as Nori’s fist flew passed his head.
    “Nori! No!”
    To Ori’s surprise, the captain only staggered back a step and put his hand to his mouth. Ori and
Nori were instantly at the sharp end of every soldier’s weapon. Nori growled, but the captain waved
them away. Ori cringed as a small trickle of blood showed in the captain’s beard.
    “Leave ’m be,” the captain ordered, then chuckled as he turned back to Nori.
    “I accept this. Yeh see it that I’ve hurt yer brother. Yer act’s honorable.”
    Nori looked flabbergasted and Ori shuddered with relief. The captain reached out to his second
and took the sheaf of papers removed from the Master of Dale. He walked to the brazier and tossed
the papers in. They caught instantly and were gone within moments.
    The captain came back and stood before Nori.
    “I ain’t never seen yeh before and I better no’ again.”
    “What’s that supposed t’ mean?” Nori demanded with a side look at Ori.
    “It means stay th’ fuck outa trouble, pebble brain.”
    Nori pondered this silently. A shout flew up from the bottom of the road. The group turned to see
little Tilda running up to them, panting.
She handed Ori his worn leather satchel.

“Here,” she rattled off. “I know you were finishing an important letter and I didn’t know when you’d be back, so I brought it. And I corked your ink really tight, so it wouldn’t spill and I grabbed your pens and sharpening knife, but I couldn’t find the cover, so please be careful. Are you coming back soon? What should I tell Mister Dori when he gets back? Shall I tell my Da anything?”

“Um…” Nori began.

“I won’t be back for a while, pet. I’ve married Captain Dwalin, so-“

“You’ve married Captain Dwalin?!” Tilda squealed and clapped her hands. “That’s so wonderful, ‘cose he is the one you like best, isn’t he? I heard you tell Sigrid he’s got a nice bum. Isn’t that him?”

Tilda pointed at the captain, who was obviously trying very hard not to laugh. Ori wished the ground would swallow him. Nori groaned and raised his eyes to the sky, muttering about mouthy badgers. The collected soldiers were also trying not to laugh as they covered their mouths or turned away. Master Gloin looked terribly pleased and patted Tilda on the head.

“That’s right, little lassie. Splendid news, yes?”

Tilda looked Master Gloin over with a wondering stare.

“My! You do have an awfully bushy beard!”

“Why, thank you, my dear!” Gloin looked fit to burst with pride. “You are most kind to notice that. What a clever little lass, you are!”

Tilda turned back to the captain,

“You better be nice to our Ori, ‘cose he’s my best friend,” she stated in an authoritative tone.

Captain Dwalin folded his arms and looked down at her.

“An’ who might yeh be, wee ‘un?”

“I’m Tilda Bardsdatter. He’s the bowman. He’s got a posh barge boat.”

“Bard th’ Bowman, grandson a’ Girion, eh. Fine man, he is.”

“Yes, he is. So you better be nice an’ all proper gentlemanly and romantic and stuff.”

She drew herself up, folding her arms and trying hard to mimic Dwalin’s stern stance.

The captain looked amused.

“Are we making’ a bargain then, lass?”

Tilda paused, then nodded firmly.

“Yes, yes we are.”

She marched up to the captain, spat on the palm of her right hand and offered it to him. Without missing a beat, Captain Dwalin spat on his right palm and they exchanged a firm handshake.

“We set?” the captain asked.

“Yes,” Tilda confirmed then turned to Ori as she wiped her hand on the back of her dress.

“You’ll be alright.”


“Why do boys do that?” She indicated her hand. “It’s gross.”

“Yer supposed t’ lick it,” the captain told her.

“Eww!” Tilda objected.

Ori palmed his face before he could stop himself. This day simply could not get any more silly or frightening or both. He pulled himself together as best he could.

“Master Gloin, might I trouble you for a small scrap of paper? I need to scratch a note to my eldest brother.”

Master Gloin was happy to oblige. He produced a cream colored piece of textured notepaper, moved aside, and adjusted the desk to Ori’s needs.


Dear Dori,

I hope this finds you well. I regret to inform you I have been obliged to marry Captain Dwalin, the circumstances of which I leave Nori to advise you.

Young Tilda has restored my writing satchel and pens to me,
so I shall finish your Master's letter a soon as I may.
I shall do my very best to inform you of my further actions, when I discover what they might be.
All my love,
Ori
—Please don’t kill Nori, he didn’t do anything this time, at least he didn’t do anything I’m aware of this time.

Ori started to blow gently to dry the ink, but Master Gloin rescued him by amply a blotter and sanding the paper with some rosemary scented powder. He folded it, attached an unmarked white wafer, and handed it, smiling, back to Ori.

Ori shoved the sealed letter into Tilda’s hands and requested Nori to escort her home. Nori said what he thought. Ori attempted to glare at him the way Dori would have. Ori must have succeeded somewhat as Nori looked horror-struck then stomped off. Tilda paused to hug Ori fiercely then tore after Nori. The captain nodded to one of his soldiers who turned his goat, scooped up Tilda, and proceeded to follow Nori, who appear to be heading to a pub. Ori knew Tilda was clever enough to instruct the guard to take her home.

Ori sighed and looked down at himself. Everyday clothes, wrapped in woolens as he had only managed to get himself out of bed before doing the household chores then working on the letter. His face was still unwashed, his hair unbrushed, and his socks didn’t match. He looked like an old, ill-used laundry bag.

“Right, lad,” Captain Dwalin said. “Let’s be getting’ back t’ th’ barrack offices. I got reports t’ write.”

Ori shook himself. He had to concentrate on what was happening. He had to make his way in a new life without Dori, but with his husband. His husband, the handsome, strong, experienced warrior. Handsome….

Ori felt the blush rising again. He had once buried a feather and a red cotton ribbon to Yevanna, when he had first clapped eyes on Dwalin. He’d just come of age at the time and nearly swooned at the sight of the captain. He and Sigrid spent many happy hours discussing the merits of Captain Dwalin compared to Sigrid’s favorite, Prince Fili. Every single compliment from light to downright rude came back to his mind in a rush.

He had read the Queen of the Fertile Land had a sense of humor, but this was a bit much.
He looked at the captain who was standing beside his goat obviously waiting for Ori to come over. The rest of the soldiers were back on their mounts and ready. Ori hurried to Dwalin’s side. Dwalin swung up easily then offered Ori his hand. Ori was effortlessly brought up before him and the goat trotted through the gate and into the mountain.
Sitting, scribbling and mortification

Chapter by Stevie Foxx

Chapter Summary

CHICKEN!!
Dorothy’s nemesis!

Ori sat on the edge of the plush chair while Captain Dwalin rifled through a large marble cabinet full of scrolls. With a grunt, he pulled out a group tied together with twine dyed green. He brought these over to Ori, while untying the twine. Ori looked through. Nori had not been too, too much of a bother to the dwarrow guards. A few petty thefts of trinkets, but mostly bar fights, general mischief of stealing hats (a favorite past-time of Nori’s since a badger, and chalking rude words and pictures on nobles’ house walls and a rather obscure habit of drawing Ori’s badgerhood pet chicken Cluck-cluck as a signature.

Ori sighed, rolling the scrolls up, grateful the Captain had burnt the lot from the Master of Dale as Nori’s Dale thievery had been prolific and shocking in some cases. Dwalin took the scrolls back and tossed them into a small covered hole in the wall. When Ori cocked his head, Dwalin explained that it was a chute that ended in the forges.

The captain handed a lap desk to Ori and bade him write whatever letter he had been working on before the Incident. Ori wrote busily, every now and then glancing at Dwalin who was at his desk also writing and signing different reports. Occasionally he would read one, snort, and throw it into the chute.

When he had finished his own work, Ori looked about. The office was pleasant, large and airy with a high ceiling. The room was richly appointed but not ostentatious. There were several large candelabras as well as a heavy iron wheel suspended from the ceiling, covered in quartz shards that reflected the candles mounted on it to light the room well. Maps covered the walls and Ori itched to go and study them.

There was a row of little tubes in the wall where it met the ceiling. Ori wondered what they might be for. In answer, a small brown bat came hurtling through one and landed inelegantly on the Captain’s desk.

Dwalin chuckled at it, removed the intricately folded piece of paper it carried, and lifted the bat over to settle on a stand. There was a circle of fur, a large shallow basin of water and several little pots Ori thought might contain food of some kind for the bats. The tiny creature peeped at the captain, who snickered, patted the little head with a finger, and left it to drink its fill.

He undid the paper, read it, and closed his eyes as though in a headache.

“Gloin, yeh got a gob th’ size a Mordor.”

Ori watched as Dwalin turned back to his desk. He saw Ori looking at him and shrugged.

“We’ll be getting breakfast at Thorin’s. Dis wants to met you.”
Ori felt his stomach fall into his boots. Dis, the Princess Royal, Amad of the Heir of Erebor. The only daughter born in the direct line of Durin in 500 years. He gulped.

“She’s fine, lad. She ain’t gonna eat yeh. I grew up with her an’ Thorin. Mahal knows I’ve badgersat and trained those two brats of hers often enough.”

Ori tried to connect all the things he’d heard about the heirs - Fili the Golden and his Lionhearted younger brother Kili - with the captain referring to them as ‘brats’.

“I hope I won’t embarrass you,” he managed faintly.

The captain chortled.

“Not to worry, lad. The princes’ll embarrass themselves within a moment or two a’ meeting’ yeh.”

Ori stared, having no reply to this. Dwalin sat down and began working again. Ori returned to examining the room. He reflected that at the moment the captain seemed quite likable and kind. He hadn’t tried to do anything impolite to Ori or treat him as a servant. He shuddered a little. Of course, they were still at the captain’s place of work, there was no saying what he might be like when they went to the house for the evening.

He and Sigrid had read enough novels about terrifying trader kings who captured helpless young maidens and took them off to be concubines and dance naked in throne rooms. That was until handsome heroes came to rescue them and take them away to live happily ever after somewhere.

Ori knew he couldn’t dance for shit. He’d look ridiculous dancing naked.

Visions assailed Ori: himself dressed in wispy garments, hiding nothing, sitting at Captain Dwalin’s feet while he worked at his desk. What would he have to do with his hair and beard? The young maidens in the novels always had long flowing hair. His was barely down to his shoulders and his beard was still quite sparse. None of the maidens ever had beards!

He started to shake, wondering if the captain would force him to shave it off. The maidens! Oh no, he’d have to have his entire body shaved. He trembled, staring at the captain, terrified at the thought of being shaved, then waxed, and covered in fine perfume then dancing.

Captain Dwalin looked up, caught his eye, and stared back, incredulous.

“What’s th’ fuck is wrong, lad? Yeh look like ye jus’ found an orc army in yer britches.”

“I…I can’t dance,” Ori blabbered. “And…and I don’t want to be shaved. Dori will have a fit then die of shame and it’ll be all my fault and Nori will never forgive me…”

“What th’ flying’ fuck are yeh talking’ about?”

“Like the maidens in books, they’re stolen and the evil trader kings…”

Ori realized he was babbling stupidly and clamped his mouth shut. Captain Dwalin continued to stare at him like he had three heads.

“Lad… Catch me up. What’s stolen by who?”

Ori felt his face burn and squirmed in spite of himself. He felt a fool.

“Nuthin’,” he mumbled, then recovered himself. “I-I read a lot.”
Dwalin turned at his desk to face him. Ori thought he saw amusement in those bright hazel eyes.

“Read a lot? A lot by the famous, ’r should I say infamous, Notathain A. Shire?”

“You read Shire’s novels, too?” Ori gasped out before he could stop himself.

The captain smiled.

“Have to.”

“Why?” Ori asked.

“Self-defense. Whole bloody royal family reads ‘em. If I want to have any chat or peace I have to know ‘em.”

Ori giggled before he could stop himself.

“Sigrid… I mean Miss Bardsdatter…”

“I know th’ family,” Dwalin encouraged.

“Sigrid and I read them together. They are rather fun. Shire must do a great deal of traveling to know so much about distant parts.”

“Or reads a lot and likes maps.” Dwalin winked at him. “Don’t you write?”

“Yes, I… No! Don’t you dare accuse me of being Shire. I couldn’t come up with such adventures even in my wildest dreams.”

Ori laughed and Dwalin crossed to his side offering a goblet. Ori took it and sniffed. It was a light ale. He sipped.

Dwalin regarded him a moment then dropped his voice low.

“Moo-ha-ha-ha-ha, I’ll get you, my pretty!”

Ori managed not to choke, but got half a mouthful down his front.

“Bastard!” he cried and kicked out at the captain, who leapt aside, laughing at him.

Ori remembered his situation and hurriedly got to his feet and bowed.

“I’m sorry, I—“

“F’r what, lad? Nice kick by th’ way. Nori teach yeh?”

“No, Dori. He said most don’t suspect such and, among Men, it’s to our advantage. Their knees, you know.”

“He’s right about tha’,” the captain agreed.

Ori’s drink made him realize how thirsty he was and he swallowed it, wiping his mouth with his sleeve; the alcohol hit and he cursed as he remembered he’d had nothing since his morning tea. In answer to his unspoken question, the low call of the evening horn volley sounded.

“Huh, late as that is it?” the captain commented. “C’mon, laddie. Let’s be getting’ home. Don’t know about you, but I could use a meal.”
Ori folded the letter he had finished. He’d have to go and deliver it to Dori’s master tomorrow as he’d promised.

“Captain?”

“Let’s start as we mean t’ go on, lad. Yeh call me Dwalin an’ I’ll call yeh Ori.”

“Um, Dwalin. I must get back to the Dale tomorrow. I promised Dori’s master I would have this letter ready for him.”

“Where’s he live?”

“Master JinGhr, he’s at the Great Forge of Dale. He lives beside it.”

Dwalin went to the door and gave a shrill whistle. In a moment, a large raven swooped in and landed on the desk. Dwalin took one of the little pots off the stand where the brown bat was still grooming itself. He offered the pot to the raven who gobbled a few morsels, then looked at him expectantly. Dwalin repeated the name and address of Dori’s master. He motioned Ori over. Ori held the letter out, the raven took it in its beak and flew off.

Ori got his satchel together while Dwalin put out the lights. As he shut the office door, he took Ori’s hand and led him out of the building. Dwalin whistled again, long with two high notes. There came a clatter of hooves and Dwalin’s goat arrived from around the corner. Dwalin swung Ori up in front of him again and the goat trotted off at a brisk pace.
Stable, house and sleeping

Chapter Summary

Your hint is: Thor.

Also there’re are two links : to where I got Dwalin’s pony’s name and to some rather lovely arctic flowers

Chapter Notes

Hello again!

It’s Friday and here’s chapter three of Ori’s weird adventures in Erebor. I do hope you’re all enjoying reading it as much I am, writing it.

Stay tuned for chapter four next Friday, friends, and keep those cards and letters coming!

Ori stared. The mountain was big enough when seen from the outside but inside its vastness and importance imposed upon him: the soaring walls with beautiful bridges connecting the endless layers. Some bridges met and joined in large squares where open markets had their pavilions. Dwarrows were everywhere busy with their lives, talking, laughing, singing, and music swirled all around. Phosphorus rock lined all the streets and bridges and walls with a mix of yellows, blues and greens.

Ori was busy looking around and didn’t notice they were making their way upward until the goat struck out on one of the great roads that wound layer by layer up the edge of the mountain. From here he could see the middle of the kingdom and down to the bottom of the city where the forges over the mines glowed with orange light.

Looking up and up his eye caught an almost pinkish light coming from the far away peak of Erebor. Why it was pink he didn’t know but filed that thought away to ask Dwalin later.

The road became more elaborate and Ori gasped as they passed under a intricately wrought archway. He’d only read of this place. This was the entry to the royal living quarters.

Right next to this, carved from the wall, reaching from the top of the city and down to the gate where they had entered from the Dale was what he knew instinctively to be the great Library of Erebor.

The goat trotted through the open gate and the edifice was lost from sight as they rode down a tunnel lined with highly wrought phosphorescent lamps. Suddenly all the sounds of the city were shut out. Ori felt strange. He had never been in such a quiet place.

The goat brought them into a large open cavern. In the middle of this was a beautiful mosaic
covering the groundstone and at its center a mirror-still reflecting pool. The far wall curved and was lined with separate courtyards behind magnificent iron gates. Beyond these gates the walls were carved and clad to indicate separate houses set into the rock face. He saw huge doors in huge walls, each decorated differently. They passed a house and door of sandstone set with rubies. When they reached one of red granite with a oak and beaten copper door they stopped. Dwalin got down and opened the gate.

Pathways checkered the courtyard in patterns interspersed with different colors of moss and lichens. Every now and then various sized and shaped plinths held containers of other plants found in the deep.

The goat’s hooves rang loud as Dwalin led the way to another beaten copper door off to the side of the house, a smaller twin to the larger. He opened it and Ori rode into the smell of hay and leather. This was the stable.

Dwalin lifted Ori off the goat, then undid the saddle, and removed it. The goat hunched its shoulders then stretched its back legs straight out behind, almost putting its belly to the ground, then stepped forward, shaking itself a little.

Dwalin slapped the goat’s haunch and ruffled the fur.

“There’s a good lad, Gnasher. Time f’r yeh t’ get yer feed an’ rest.”

Dwalin crossed the stable to a matching door opposite the entry and threw it open. The evening light poured into the stable. Gnasher trotted out into a vast meadow, snorting, and proceeded to leap about and kick out his back legs like a tiny kid, then fell on his side and legs straight out, rolled ecstatically around for a few moments, scrambled back on his hooves, shook, and scratched his ear with a hind foot. Ori laughed and, at Dwalin’s nod, went outside.

The town of Dale was like a badger’s plaything. He had never been so high up the mountain in all his life. Huge boulders rose all about and looking upward he could see the snow covered cap of the very top. A few clouds ringed it and he felt the wind, cooled by the snow, rush down the sides. Ori wrapped his cardigan closer around himself. Spring was only beginning here, so snow dotted the hollows as well but where the rocks provided shelter Ori saw the tiniest spots of color.

The sunset cast the mountain in a pinkish light. Ori wondered how this had been reflected to the inside of the mountain. It was beautiful to see it from so high up.

He went to the closest spot of color in the grass and found a small, newly green plant, showing it’s rich purple-pink blossoms proudly. From where he stood now he could see a few daisies here and there in the meadow.

Ori made his way a little farther down and flopped into the grass. He was not alone as there were several ponies grazing and they spared him an inquiring look.

He lay back. Although somewhat cold and dampish, it was lovely to feel the grass beneath him and the only sounds were the calls of ravens and other birds.

He was startled out of his daydreams by another shrill whistle. He sat up. A large brown pony with a black mane and tail lifted its head, ears up, gave a squeal, and lit out for the stable. Ori went after it, curious. He remembered seeing Dwalin riding such a pony through the square in Dale.

“There yeh be,” Dwalin greeted the pony which shoved its face into his chest nearly knocking him over.
“Mind out, yeh daft beast! C’mon in and I’ll get yeh bedded down. Come away in, yeh great shithead.” Dwalin ruffled the mane affectionately with a smile.

Ori giggled and Dwalin winked at him. They went into the stable and Dwalin shut the back door then proceeded groom the pony before breaking out in another round of swearing.

“What in th’ name a’ Mahal’s big hairy balls’ve yeh been’ down’, yeh great knob? Yeh got burrs from one end t’other! Curse it, Harley, can yeh no’ keep yersel’ outta trouble f’r five bloody minutes?”

Ori watched as Dwalin continued to scold the pony which wiggled and nosed at him happily. Dwalin settled Harley in a loose box, amply supplied with hay, gave him a small bag of grain, and twisted a brass spigot in the wall which poured sparkling water into a metal trough.

All this finished, Dwalin shut the first door, led Ori out and around through the front door of the House of Fundin.

Ori looked about him at the large, beautiful, octagonal room, walls of shining red granite and polished wood wainscoting from shoulder height to the floor. The floor was tiled with octagons of different shades of red granite in circular patterns. A grand fireplace loomed to the left, surrounded by fine, heavy furniture. A massive table set with chairs balanced it to the right and beyond that a staircase with carved balusters and rail traced the angles of the walls with a sweeping row of glass faced lanterns. At the landing a red curtain with gold trim graced another arch.

“What a beautiful sitting room,” Ori sighed.

“Eh? This’s th’ receivin’ room. Sittin’ room’s through there.”

Across from Ori loomed another great door of beaten copper with hexagonal prisms of brass set in a crescent. Dwalin led the way through this and stopped to kick off his boots, set his axes and other weapons down on the floor, and hang his fur vest on a peg beside the door. Ori came after and followed suit with his boots, satchel, and scarf as Dwalin shut the door. The floor was warm! Ori wiggled his toes. There was definitely warmth coming through the floor. Ori looked down and cringed at his mismatched socks again but Dwalin, after lighting the fire, was heading deeper into the apartment.

Ori followed him through the large but cozy sitting room with its fireplace a twin to the last, but surrounded by a couch and three armchairs, all plush and well worn, with a low, red granite table between the seating and the fireplace.

A very elegant but sturdy desk sat off to the side of the couch. It was carved from the rock of both the floor and wall with a comfortable looking leather chair before it. Another archway opposite the door led to a wide hallway with a high ceiling, but Dwalin went through a smaller archway to the right and into another room. Ori trotted after him.

Ori walked into the most beautiful kitchen he had ever seen, a rectangle crowned on each side with cupboards of dark wood, glass fronted, and filled with dishes and all kinds of jars and crocks. The entire ceiling was covered in a lattice work of steel. Many chains with hooks fell from it and off these, above anyone’s head, hung bright copper pots, pans, and cooking utensils of all kinds.

White marble counters ran to the left and right, each pausing with smaller versions of the door they had just entered. The wall to the left of him held a vast cooking surface and a cast iron heater containing three ovens.
A good sized table with six chairs about it sat in the middle of the room.

At the far end of the room the ends of twilight still showed through a long, tall halfmoon window filled with circles of highly polished mica.

Dwalin opened one of the narrow door on the right. Cool air wafted through the room.

“Eggs?” Dwalin asked.

“Huh? Oh! Yes, please.”

“How many yeh want?”

“Four. if you have enough?”

Dwalin raised and eyebrow then palmed an enormous egg to Ori. Ori goggled at it.

“That’s not from a squab!”

“Nah, goose.”

Dwalin brought out six and a pile of other things in his arms. He dumped these on the table and reached up for a shining frying pan, twirling it in his hand before setting it on the cook top. He nodded to a big loaf of bread and requested Ori to cut some slices. Ori busied himself and Dwalin lit the heat under the pan, mixed the eggs in a bowl, then started laying rashers of bacon on the griddle. He took down a few small jars from the cupboard and brought them to Ori along with a mortar and pestle.

Ori took up the pestle and watched as Dwalin dropped in salt, pink pepper corns, and a couple of other powders Ori didn’t know, but smelled delicious. Dwalin put an knob of butter on a small plate and had Ori pour half his now ground spice mix into it.

After combining these, he handed it back to Ori to butter four slices of bread on both sides. These were added to the griddle. By now the bacon filled the room with its good scent. Ori’s mouth was watering.

In minutes, they both sat down to a dinner of fried bread, bacon, and spiced scrambled eggs. Dwalin had ale while Ori was on his second mug of cool, fresh water from the spigot over the smaller of three sinks at the end of the left side counter. The other two, Dwalin had explained, were for washing up and the water was roasting hot from the forges below.

Ori was so happy, it had been so long since he’d had a big meal like this and it was so good. He figured out that one of the powders was garlic and the other was the popular spice mixture most dwarrow favored to marinate their meats. They ate in silence; each paying attention to their meals. Dwalin rose, Ori assumed it was to get more ale, but he came back in a few moments with more bread, this time soaked in the remaining egg mix and fried with more bacon, all of which he dumped on Ori’s plate. Dwalin had got himself bacon as well, but was eating it with thick slices of bread liberally plastered with butter.

Ori sat back, full and very comfortable, and sighed contentedly. He was about to burp then remembered this was considered impolite among the noble and rich men. Was it so with noble dwarrow? He swallowed and looked up. Dwalin was regarding him with a teasing look in his eyes.

“The question is, laddie, kin yeh finish the first three lines of the primer?”
Ori almost choked. The primer was how every badger started their Khuzdul. It began with “All Hail to Mahal and to the Seven Stars of Durin Shining Bright.” It was considered quite a feat to get out the complete ‘All Hail to Mahal’.

Ori gave Dwalin as contemptuous a look as he could muster, summoned the best burp he could and intoned, “All Hail to Mahal and the Seven Stars” before he ran out of burp and almost peed his britches.

Dwalin threw back his head and roared with laughter, reaching over to clap Ori on the shoulder, nearly knocking him off his chair.

“Well done, lad!” ‘Yer better than ol’ Tzlur! It took him two tankards a’ ale, one a’ soda water and a crock a’ beans t’ get even that much out.”

Ori laughed with him. He hadn’t had this much fun since Nori had taken him out to a quiet pub for a boiled dinner.

“Nori says there’s a dwarf called Old Granda Tz and he’d eat a crock of beans and fart the entire thing in his sleep.”

“That’s the one and the same. Thorin an’ me took guard duty with him as youngsters. Had t’ share a tent with him and three others. Ol’ Tzlur slept happy an’ th’ rest a’ us nearly died a’ fumes.”

“Ugh!” Ori commiserated.

Dwalin rose and stacked their dishes and put them in the sink and turned on the spigot. This water came out like a geyser and billowed with steam. Dwalin only had to hold each item in the stream for a moment before handing it to Ori, sparkling clean. Ori dried each and Dwalin showed him where they were kept.

“Tea?”

“Yes, please.” Ori said quickly.

Dwalin led the way back into the sitting room and placed the large tray on the low red granite table before the hearth, pushed the large sofa closer and dropped into it, slapping the cushion near him for Ori to seat himself. Ori came over and sat with the cushion between them. Dwalin parked his feet on the table. Ori was about to follow suit, saw his socks again, and chose to sit cross legged instead.

“That the latest fashion?” Dwalin commented in a friendly way.

“I shouldn’t sit like this?” Ori asked.

“Sit anyway yeh like, lad. I meant yer socks. Is tha’ th’ latest thin’ among th’ young and artsy set down th’ Dale?”

Ori blushed hotly, briefly considered telling him it was, but shook his head.

“I was a bit sleepy this morning, when I got dressed.”

“Thank Mahal.” Dwalin grumbled. “It it’d been a fad, I’d be off t’ warn Thorin as he’d be havin’ Fili and Kili up his arse trying’ t’ get’ him t’ do it with ‘em.”
Ori wondered again and caught Dwalin’s eye. Dwalin’s look narrowed and he seemed fierce, but the laughter was still there.

“Don’t yeh bloody dare, lad!”

Ori made a show of cocking his head, then giggled.

“I promise I won’t. Sigrid would never forgive me if I made his Royal Highness, Prince Fili the Golden, look foolish.”

“Oh aye?”

“She thinks he’s got a nice bum.” Ori snorted into his tea. If Tilda could embarrass him in front of Dwalin, Nori, and an entire cadre of soldiers, he could tell Dwalin that Sigrid fancied Fili.

“Nice as mine?” Dwalin teased.

Before he thought, Ori threw the teaspoon at him. Dwalin only caught it and laughed. Ori swallowed his fear.

Dwalin went through to the kitchen again and returned with a large crock and a plate. He dumped some of the contents on the plate and passed it to Ori. Lovely fat biscuits, crisp, smelling of ginger, and full of currants. Ori grabbed two and crunched blissfully. Dwalin dropped back down, shoved a very puffy tasseled pillow between them, and leaned his elbow on it. He dunked the biscuit in his tea before eating it. Dwalin belched contentedly and rooted out his pipe and pouch. Ori liked the scent of the smoke. It was rich and not stinging like so many others he’d come across.

“That’s not like the weed men usually smoke or the local field balsam,” Ori commented.

“This is the good stuff, lad. Old Toby pipeweed, from the Shire. Say wha’ yeh like about’ th’ hobbit folk, but they know weed, beer, an’ fortified wine. Dark stuff kicks yeh right’ in th’ arse. Not like tha’ twice watered shit th’ tree shaggers pass off as wine.”

He handed Ori the pipe. Ori took a draw. He was deeply impressed with the flavor, dark, rich and with an almost coffee taste to it.

“That’s very nice,” he praised, returning the pipe.

Dwalin grinned and nodded before settling back. Ori curled agains the other side of the pillow. It was made of brushed velvet and the firelight was cozy and pleasant. He was full, warm, and very comfortable.

Ori blinked. His cardigan was removed and he was lain down against the softest pillow he’d ever felt. He closed his eyes again.
Fry-ups, stories, and shopping

Chapter Summary

The continued adventures of Ori!!
Your hint is: Who do you think Balin's tailor might be if this story took place in today's New York City?

Also there’re are two links: to where I got the term ‘jill’ and to what Ori calls ’chips'

Chapter Notes

Last Friday's chapter was rather short, so I decided to give you another which is nice and long and Ori meets more interesting people.

Also please welcome Dollypegs as co-author. It's making it so much easier on both of us to do it this way. She is very evil and has given me so many excellent ideas!

Stay tuned for chapter five on Friday, friends, and keep those cards and letters coming!

Ori woke in a cocoon of comfort. He had no idea where he was.

Well, yes, he was in a bedroom, in a fine bed with blankets and he lay between cotton sheets. On the bedside table a carafe of water with a small glass sat beside a wrought iron lantern. His eye swept over the dresser and matching wardrobe of light colored wood, to the sunlight that poured through a small halfmoon window. It matched the mica window in the kitch-

He was married to Captain Dwalin.

He was married to Captain Dwalin!

Ori sat up, put his feet on the floor and sighed. Warmth soaked through his socks, still mismatched. He rose and went to a large silver water pitcher sitting in a matching bowl on a stand. A facecloth and towel hung from the rail.

Ori quickly gave himself a wash and felt more awake. He found a comb on the dresser and borrowed it. He opened the door and peeked out. Opposite, a long wide hall led to the sitting room where he had sat with Dwalin last night. To his left and right were more doors all on the same wall as his. At the very end of the right side, a door opened. Dwalin appeared in trousers, barefoot, and rubbing his hair with a towel. He saw Ori and nodded.

“Mornin’, lad. Was jus’ coming’ t’ wake yeh. We’re bidden t’ Dis f’r breakfast.”

“Good morning, Capt- Dwalin. Yes, I remember you mentioning that. Where might I find the privy?”

Dwalin tapped the door on his immediate right. Ori hurried down and Dwalin opened the door.
Ori emerged feeling a great deal more awake and trotted down to the sitting room. He noticed that the other door to the kitchen opened into this hall. That left three other doors around this room and, he thought, an upstairs.

Dwalin was pulling on his boots when he got there. Ori reached down but Dwalin passed his boots to him. Ori wasn’t sure what to say, so went with the amusing.

“As you see, I’m once more artistically attired.”

Dwalin snorted, shrugging his weaponry on.

“Aye, fancier than a goldfinch. You sleep alright?”

“Yes. I’m sorry I fell asleep on the couch.” Ori girded his loins. “Shocking behavior for a newlywed, really.”

Dwalin scoffed.

“Don’t feel too badly, lad. I woke meself up with me own snorin’ at the second night bell.”

Ori snickered and brushed at himself.

“Hungry?” Dwalin asked.

Ori was surprised to find he was, even after all he’d put away last evening.

“Yes. You?”

“Starvin’. Lucky f’r us, Dis always puts on a good spread.”

Dwalin opened the door, waved Ori through then shut it behind him.

“So do you,” Ori pointed out.

“Soldiers’ fare, lad. I can cook, but nuthin’ fancy,” as they went through the receiving area.

“It was very good,” Ori insisted, stepping out and Dwalin shut the front door.

Dwalin chuckled, ruffled Ori’s hair, and took him by the hand. Dwalin led the way across the Fundin courtyard then out to the main one.

Ori saw they were heading toward the neighboring home with its lapis lazuli facade, courtyard and wall, the wall inset with stars filed with tiny diamonds. Under the middle and largest star was a gate of rose gold.

Ori gulped and glanced down at himself.

“Yer fine, lad,” Dwalin said quietly. “Stop worrying’ yersel’.”

They passed through the golden gate.

“There you are,” said a female voice.

Ori jumped, in spite of himself, and turned quickly.
The dwarrowdam who stood before them was like none Ori had ever seen.

She was almost his height but wider and exquisitely dressed in Durin blue. Her dark brown hair and beard were set with mithril beads and sapphires, her hair piled on top of her head with a few curls dropping fetchingly about her neck. Her black eyes snapped and sparkled as she peered at Ori.

“So, you are the new husband.”

Ori nodded, remembered his manners, and bowed.

Dis straightened him immediately.

“Now, none of that. I’ve been waiting to meet you since Gloin came and told us he presided over your marriage. It was too bad of you not to invite us, and with Balin away. Well, we’ll talk of it later. Breakfast’s ready.”

Dis grabbed Ori’s wrist.

“Mornin’ Dis,” Dwalin said laconically.

Dis turned back to look at him.

“Well, don’t just stand there, Dwalin, your new husband must be hungry.”

She hustled Ori inside.

Ori was ushered through a wide hallway of lapis into a huge receiving area, all wooden paneling, which opened into a dining room of white marble set with mithril panels: floor, walls and ceiling. Ori felt like he had been popped into a youth’s snow fort. The table was set with silver, silver … everything. Feeling like a badger at a glass vendor, Ori automatically put his hands behind his back. In a burst of loud laughter, Dwalin entered with another dwarf. Ori didn’t need to be told who this was. He bowed to Prince Thorin Oakenshield.

Thorin was dark like his sister and came forward with a ready smile.

“Ori, is it?”

“Yes, your highness.”

“Yes, Thorin,” the prince gently corrected.

“Yes, Thorin,” Ori repeated and blushed.

Thorn looked him over and smirked at Dwalin.

“He is very pretty. No wonder you don’t shut up about him.”

It was Dwalin’s turn to redden.

“Fuck you, Thorin,” he muttered.

Ori didn’t know where to look.

Thorin chuckled and went to sit at the head of the table. He waved for Dwalin to sit on his right and
Ori to his left. Ori sat carefully on the ornately carved white marble chair upholstered in white leather. He swallowed and felt his appetite vanish. Dwalin and Thorin were already discussing something about a diplomatic trip to Gondor. The party was due to return shortly.

Dis swished in with two covered platters in her hands, abjuring someone behind to mind out. After her came two male dwarrow close to Ori’s age or older. Ori knew them to be Princes Fili and Kili, the sons of Princess Dis and her late husband Vili. Both also carried platters which they bumped down gracelessly.

Fili was fair, with honey-colored hair like his long dead blacksmith father while Kili looked like a younger Thorin - a younger, very mischievous Thorin. Kili looked at Ori, pointed and shouted.

“You’re him!”

Kili bounded around the table to Ori, who rose. Kili genially knocked foreheads with him, and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Well met. Are you going to soldier with Dwalin or keep house?”

Ori couldn’t answer as he was knocking foreheads with Fili. Dis ordered the princes to their seats and began to serve. Dis handed Ori a plate piled high with fried chicken eggs, bacon, spicy sausage, blood sausage, morels, tomatoes, fried bread, and beans in tangy sweet sauce. Ori swallowed and wondered if he would end his days looking like the magnificent Bombur, son of Ur of the Lake Inn. Master Bombur was the largest dwarf ever but he was also the handsomest. Ori might grow large, but he doubted he would ever have Bombur’s charming personality or superb beard.

Thorin and Dwalin continued to talk while the princes shoveled their breakfasts into their mouths. Ori enjoyed his, but thought he was going to need a nap after. He was glad when Dis passed him a cup of tea which revived him a little. Dis was torn between commenting on what Dwalin and Thorin were discussing and scolding her sons for their manners. Ori was glad everyone was distracted for the time. The time didn’t last as Fili finished his meal and looked at Ori with a curious air.

“You’re from the Dale, yes.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t remember you scribing for any of the meetings or working in the library. Who do you scriven for?”

“I free-lance.”

“Nice,” Kili put in on Ori’s left. “Who do you know in the Dale? You live in the main square where all those lawyers are?”

“I don’t think we … er … socialize in the same circles. We don’t live in the square,” Ori began.

“You have a big family?” Fili put in.

“Just three of us. I have two older brothers.”

“The Dale’s small, you must know Master Calmar,” Kili went on.

Ori felt a surge of rage spurt through him at the mention of the Master.

“I have met him exactly once and I didn’t enjoy it.” Ori didn’t quite hiss.
Both princes looked startled, looked at each other, then went back to questioning him.

“What happened to your parents?” asked Fili.

“Are they in the Iron Hills or the Blue Mountains?” asked Kili.

“Our mam is dead. I have no information on our das.”

“Boys!”

Ori was grateful for Dis’ interruption even if it was merely to tell the princes they needed to be on their way or they would be late for lessons. Both rose, crossing to their mother, one on either side and simultaneously removed her matching ear cuffs while they bade her and their uncle goodbye, and Dwalin reminded them they had a practice with him that afternoon, making them both groan. Dis cursed them roundly and took back her jewelry. Kili looked doubtfully at Ori and Fili clapped him kindly on the shoulder.

“We’ll see you later, Ori-mate!”

Ori smiled in return and watched the princes go out as two dams came in. Ori wasn’t sure if they were cousins and if he should rise to greet them. Dis merely smiled and nodded at them as they removed the platters and, as Dis rose, slid away a leaf of the table. They replaced the tea tray on a table now half the size it had been, bobbed curtsies when Thorin and Dis thanked them, and went out. Dis drew her chair closer and refilled the cups. She passed Ori’s cup back to him and smiled.

“I heard you telling my boys that you live with your two brothers in Dale and your amad has passed to the Halls.”

“Yes, she died when I was just a badgerling. My eldest brother, Dori, raised me and my other older brother Nori.”

“Your adad?”

“I never knew him, ma’am.”

“That’s unusual among our people, what happened?”

“Dis,” Dwalin growled.

“I’m just trying to get to know your new husband, Dwalin!”

“Then try bein’ general. Yer worse’n me best interrogator!”

“And that’s saying a great deal,” Thorin commented dryly.

Dis huffed at them and smiled warmly back at Ori.

“I’m not interrogating you. Just wanting to get to know you, so we can have your best interests at heart. So, when I introduce you—“

“We go by the Brothers Ri,” Ori helped.

“You’re amad’s name was Ri. Ah, Ri of the Iron Hills?”

“No, Ri short for Rikmha.”
Thorin exchanged a look with Dwalin and Dis looked startled.

“An unusual name for a dam. What was her craft?”

“She was a cleaning dam in Dale,” Ori told her, waiting for royal disapproval.

“Oh. Did she work for herself or was she in a union?”

“For herself.”

“She must have been very successful and to have three boys. A fine family,” Dis approved. “What a pity she died when you were so young. Was it an accident?”

Ori blushed again.

“Sort of. She was out … enjoying herself with a group of … er … friends and she fell badly. She was bedridden for three years before she died.”

Dis looked shocked.

“That’s dreadful. I am sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.”

Thorin reached over and gave his shoulder a squeeze.

“And your brothers?” Thorin asked.

“Dori is an assistant to a weapons maker.”

“Master JinGhr at the Great Forge of Dale,” Dwalin said.

“I’ve seen their work,” Thorin nodded. “Excellent. The knife work is exquisite.”

Ori glowed.

“That’s Dori’s specialty.”

Thorin smiled in return.

“Then I shall have to cultivate your eldest brother’s acquaintance.”

Thorin rose with Dwalin.

“I have a meeting with udad. Provided he’ll consent to see me outside of the treasury. Dwalin?”

“Aye, I’m with yeh. Dis, would yeh keep Ori comp’ny ’til I get back?”

“Certainly. What are you doing after?”

“Takin’ Ori t’ Balin’s tailor. He needs a few things.”

Dwalin winked at Ori and followed Thorin out. Dis rose and bade Ori to accompany her. She led him through to a sunny room. The long, tall window was actually a series of six doors, two of which were open and lead out to area paved with lapis. A scattering of white marble urns held only earth.

Dis settled him in a one of the comfortable oaken chairs upholstered with embroidered black linen.
One of the dams returned with a crystal jug and two glasses. Dis thanked her, poured out for both of them and passed a glass to Ori.

“I hope my sons didn’t embarrass you. They are very enthusiastic when meeting new friends.”

“No, I … I’m just a little on edge. Sometimes when living among men, one has to be careful with what one says.”

“Of course,” Princess Dis agreed absently, she glared pensively out at her patio.

Ori sipped at his drink. Ice-cold water flavored with ginger and lemon balm, and sweetened with honey.

Princess Dis seemed to debate something in her head, then turned back to him.

“You said your amad’s name was Rikmha?”

“Yes, milady.”

Dis frowned.

“Dis is fine. I thought I heard Thorin telling you titles were not used among family.”

“He did, but,” Ori searched for a way to explain. “I am rather new at being married and being er … suddenly royal.”

Dis laughed at that and regarded him curiously.

“Rikmha.”

“My mam?”

“Where was she from before she came to the Dale?”

“As far as I know she was born and bred in the Dale. I was never told otherwise. Though she must have spent some of her life in Ered Luin as Dori speaks of it and I think Nori was born there. I don’t remember her well. Just her being in the bed and coughing and groaning a lot. Dori was more my parent that she. Why does her name cause such curiosity?”

Dis sighed.

“I supposed it became a popular name outside of the mountain as news like that rarely travels beyond the circles in which it happens.”

Ori looked at her incredulously and she rattled her nails against the chair arm.

“Oh, well, I supposed it really doesn’t matter any more. The family is in disfavor anyway. Although Lady Klakuna still tries to curry approval with me every time she sees me at open court.”

“What’s open court?” Ori asked, having always heard court among dwarrow referred to in terms of royal names and for the wealthy.

Dis stared at him, incredulous.

“Open court. Any and all dwarrow are welcome to bring their complaints and questions before the king. Although udad has not been well the past few times so Thorin has stood for him.”
“Dwarrow in the mountain.” Ori nodded.

“All dwarrow,” Dis corrected.

Ori stared at her.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing. No one I’ve ever spoken to has ever mentioned it either.”

Dis frowned.

“That is something Thorin will need to know immediately.”

She seemed to ponder again then turned back.

“Are you acquainted with Lady Klakuna or her household?”

“No, this is the first I’ve heard that name. Does she employ dwarrow from the Dale? Did my mam work for her?”

Dis sighed, reached out and took Ori’s hand in hers.

“Ori, there has only been one Lady Klakuna, thank Mahal. And as far as I’ve ever heard one Rikmha. They were both of the House of Rikanta. Klakuna is the yâsith to the current head of that house and she lives with her younger inùdoy’s yâsith, her nathith-in-law, Riuna. Klakuna was known for her grandnathith… Rikmha.”

“Are you trying to tell me I’m royal?” Ori asked.

“Um, I don’t know. Like I said it may have become a popular name in the Dale. Let me tell you the story first,” Princess Dis hedged. “Are you familiar with the term ‘bearer’?”

“Yes, though I’ve always heard them referred to as ‘jills’.”

Dis snorted a little, then continued.

“Bearers are considered almost divine amongst our people. They are very rare now. In the past when we were a small numbered people, they were responsible for saving the race of Durin. We would have dwindled and died out long ago. They are considered in the light of a great gift from the dear wife of Mahal, Yavanna.

“Very occasionally one or two are born into our race nowadays. Many years ago, the house of Rikanta arrived here from Ered Luin. With them was their Lord Rikut and Lady Klakuna and their two inùdoy. The eldest was married and so they had a grandchild, a mere badger at the time, who was a bearer. A bearer arriving was a time of great rejoicing and King Thror made much of Lord Rikut and his family. For a time Lord Rikut was considered a rival to the Fundin family as favorites of the king went.

“I attended schooling with the bearer and we grew up with the other children of nobility. When we had all come of age, the bearer was presented at court. The bearer was graceful, charming, a wonderful dancer, and such a social success. This went on for a number of years. One Yule, Thror threw a huge party as his favorite cousin, King Nain of the Iron Hills, was visiting. The bearer was presented and Nain was most struck. Well, as with many parties and celebrations one thing led to another and you can imagine how that went.

“The following morning there was the most terrible argument between Thror and Nain. It boiled
down to the fact that the bearer wasn’t a bearer at all; she was a dam.

“Lord Rikut claimed his older inùdoy, his inùdoy’s yâsith, and their servants had lied to himself and his wife, Lady Klakuna, and he sent his guards to slaughtered all of them. Lord Rikut also banished his granddaughter from the mountain. It was the most horrid scandal. Turned out Thror had convinced Nain to marry this ‘bearer’ and Nain thought his cousin was making a fool of him.

“Thus Thror now tolerates the Rikanta clan. Lord Rikut is on the periphery of the court.”

Ori began to realize what he was about to be told and felt his entire body freeze.

“The whole thing was hushed up and only those in the upper court knew about it. I doubt the story traveled to the Dale. The reason I’m telling you this, Ori, is that the granddaughter’s name was Rikmha. Of course, it could be a common name in Dale or Ered Luin.”

Ori sat still. His mam was the only dwarf he had ever heard of with the name Rikmha. It had been bad enough that she had born three sons by three different sires but now this. He hated the thought of Dori ever finding out.

Dori was on the brink of having Prince Thorin wanting to know of him. Dori’s career in his craft would be made with the prince as a patron.

Nori wouldn’t give a rat’s ass about it, that Ori knew immediately.

At first, Ori thought it wouldn’t affect him much then horrid realization crawled into his heart.

Dwalin was now married to a fatherless whelp of the cast off of the rivals of the House of Fundin. Ori closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He had to tell Dwalin. It might dissolve their marriage and that was easily done as it was unconsummated and came about accidentally, really.

A part of him was deeply saddened by this thought. But it would be terrible to force Dwalin and thus Lord Balin to live with such shame. His mind cleared. Of course, Dis had told him the story. The royal family would gently disengage him from Dwalin and hush things up and life would gone on as before. He hoped Dwalin would remain a nodding acquaintance to him.

He heard a door slam in the distance, pulled his hand out of Dis’ clasp, and rose.

“I believe that is the return of your nadad and the captain, ma’am. I must go now.”

“Ori—”

“Thank you for telling me that story and for your gracious hospitality, ma’am. It was most … illuminating.”

Ori made himself walk out of the room and into the hall where Dwalin and Thorin were talking.

“There yeh are, lad,” Dwalin greeted him, cheerfully.

Ori smiled and went to him.

Harley waited outside, looking both bouncy and impatient. Dwalin lifted Ori into the saddle and swung up behind him. Harley rushed off in the direction of the city.

At an imposing facade with a conservative silver name plate, which read simply ‘Greneeld’, Dwalin
secured Harley and led Ori inside. There was a respectably sized room, lined with long narrow shelves. In these Ori saw many different piles of fabric bolts. A dwarf arrived from behind a vast cream velvet curtain. He was thin by most standards, and dressed entirely in grey.

“Why, Captain Dwalin,” he greeted in a surprisingly soft voice. “How very lovely to see you. You look well.”

“Thanks,” Dwalin replied, not his usual dry silent self as Ori had see him behave with merchants in the Dale.

“And Lord Balin; has he returned?”

“Not yet.” Dwalin grinned at the smaller dwarf. “So yeh’ll have to wait a little to find out just how many folk in Gondor were blinded by that diamond coat yeh made ’im.”

The dwarf gave Dwalin a reproving look followed by a small smile.

Ori stared at the dwarf. For all he was dressed in the most unremarkable grey, his clothes were beautiful. The cloth seemed to have grown in the shape of him. It wasn’t until he was closer that Ori, after squinting a little, finally saw the barest hint of stitching. So intent was he in admiring the cut and non-existence of the thread that must hold the clothing together, he didn’t register the next time Dwalin spoke. He startled when Dwalin’s hand rest on his shoulder.

“Ori, lad, this is Master Mahrdin, son of Greneeld. He’s Balin’s and, when he can put up wi’ me, me tailor.”

“I am delighted to be presented to you, Master Ori,” Master Mahrdin bowed. “How may I be of service to you?”

Ori looked at the dwarf, realized he had no idea why he was here and looked up at Dwalin.

“He need a few thin’s,” Dwalin responded helpfully.

“And what sort of few things does Master Ori require?” Mahrdin asked, smiling gently at Ori and casting a stink eye at Dwalin.

“Um,” Ori elaborated.

“He needs a bit a’ everythin’,” Dwalin put in.

Master Mahrdin humph-ed and gave Dwalin another disapproving look and gently took Ori’s arm.

“If I may have the privilege of measuring you, Master Ori, then we shall be able to proceed.”

Master Mahrdin snapped his fingers and two assistant scurried out silently. One rushed over to lock the entry door while the other placed chairs and a table with refreshments to the side and a large round piece of wood in the middle of the floor. Ori presently found himself standing on this.

The first assistant was a young dam with bushy black hair all pulled to the top of her head and clased there with several coils of brass, set with black onyx. The hair then poured down freely rather like the fountain in the center of Dale. Her beard was twisted into tiny points which stuck out like thorns. Her clothes, entirely of yellow satin, ballooned hugely about her arms and legs. She was introduced as Dipfa. She was very excited about her work.

The other assistant was a young male dwarf, more conservative and traditional in his dress. His light
brown hair and beard were braided tight all around his skull, to the point he looked like he was wearing a brown hat with chin straps, and he wore a suit, absolutely skin-tight, in shades of brown. He was introduced as Pika. He looked terrified.

Ori felt extremely weird being stripped to his combinations by three people, but the way they removed his clothing, folded it carefully, and laid it aside as though it was some priceless silk made him want to giggle.

He looked at the ceiling, so he wouldn’t have to see his socks. He heard Dwalin snort and settled for glaring at him.

“I’m artistic,” he said in a grumpy tone.

“Aye, that yeh are, lad,” Dwalin teased, relaxing back in one of the chairs looking terribly pleased with himself.

“Mmmm,” Dipfa observed. “I love those fashion-progressive socks, such a statement! But that scarf is totally Second Age! Very lovely stitchery, though.”

“Thank you,” Ori managed. “My brother made it for me.”

“He’s got matchin’ pair a’ them socks back home.” Dwalin drawled.

Trapped on the stand, Ori settled for making a face at him. Dipfa ran around Ori, looking up and down critically. Ori felt like a public statue.

Master Mahrdin waved the assistants away and stepped forward. Dipfa and Pika produced notebooks and stood at the ready while Master Mahrdin measured every inch of Ori. While he did this he talked gently to Ori about himself and how he had come to have his own shop.

“My family and I were in Moria when the orcs came. I was a mere badger at the time. I was the only one of my family to survive. Lord Balin found me wounded and brought me to the healers. I travelled back to Erebor with him and he had me apprenticed to a dwarf who was then the royal tailor. Lord Balin noticed my work and began to request me specifically. In time, I rose to prominence and was able to open my own business. In honor of his patronage, I added the ‘din’ ending to my name”

“I’ve heard much of Lord Balin’s excellent taste,” Ori ventured, looking around for Dipfa and Pika who had vanished.

“Do you enjoy his company?”

“I have yet to have the honor of being introduced to him. I look forward to it when he returns,” Ori said.

He planned to remember all his manners when the Lord of Fundin House returned… if he wasn’t back in the Dale, a single lad, by then.

Master Mahrdin turned and looked at Dwalin.

“Married without your brother’s consent?”

“I’m a second son, Mahrdin. He’s the heir and I’m the spare,” Dwalin replied easily.

“Youth,” Master Mahrdin scolded gently, despite it was quite obvious he was younger than Dwalin.
The assistants reappeared with armfuls of things. Ori was shown to a curtained room to change into new underthings then brought out again for a very nice pair of trousers and a matching pale lavender shirt. Pika disappeared again. Ori was fitted with an intricately stamped pale leather belt with a silver buckle. A lilac padded over-tunic was added and Ori was led to a large mirror to approve. Ori stared. He had never worn such fine clothes in all his life. He smoothed his hands down the tunic enjoying the feel of the soft linen.

“Like?” Dipfa asked.

“Oh, yes, it’s beautiful!”

Pika arrived suddenly, puffing and very red in the face. He carried a large paper-wrapped parcel which Master Mahrdin took, unwrapped and placed before Ori. It was a pair of sheepskin boots dyed dark purple with nickel trim. Ori stepped into them while Dipfa adjusted the fit. She frowned, rifled in her pockets, found what she wanted, and laced the boots up with a braided cotton cord in the most alarming shade of green.

Master Mahrdin raised an eyebrow at this.

“Master, you see,” Dipfa explained, “House of Fundin is dark red, which goes with his pale purple, and green is the Captain’s color.”

“Mmm, no doubt it will fade to the proper shade,” Master Mahrdin observed. He turned to Dwalin.

“Captain?”

“Bloody brilliant. Right lad. we’ve got another stop t’ make before heading’ back. Mahrdin?” He turned back to the tailor, who inclined his head interestingly. “When yeh’ve go’ some done, send ‘em up t’ the house.”

Dwalin laid a leather bag on the table beside the refreshment tray. Ori heard the heavy sound of coins.

Master Mahrdin ignore this and bowed.

“Serving the House of Fundin is both my honor and pleasure, Captain. Master Ori, your servant.”

All three bowed. Ori ducked his head shyly in return.

Dwalin lifted Ori back on Harley and they galloped back across towards the royal apartments, but they turned aside and rode to the Great Library. Leaving Harley once more, Ori trotted along with Dwalin as they went in a small side door half way up the edifice.

As they entered an enormous room, Ori looked eagerly around for the books. They were everywhere: books, maps, scroll, piles of parchment, rocks with etchings in them, paintings, drawings and prints of places and people, all varieties of various historical ephemera, on shelves and in boxes, on carts and on other tables covered in tools related to bindery and preservation. They left this and went down a long hall. Dwalin stopped at what turned out to be a large office.

Dwalin led the way in, pulling off one of his knuckle dusters. A dwarf sat hunched over a large desk piled high with papers, scrolls, and books of every size and color. The dwarf’s back was to them and all Ori could see was a completely bald head and a mountainous orange robe.

Dwalin rudely knocked his knuckles on top of the head. The dwarf whipped around with a roar and glared at him.
“You! Out!” he ordered, his enormous grey beard bristling in every direction.

“Afternoon, Brur,” Dwalin greeted him cheerily.


“Yeh look well, friend,” Dwalin complimented.

“Yeh look like a damn pack of trouble. As usual. Wha’ yeh done tha’ I’ve got t’ get yeh out of this blasted time’?”

“Nuthin’. Got a scribe for yeh.”

“Bat dung. All these young scribes suck old cave water. They can’t write script f’r shit.”

“Try this one,” Dwalin encouraged.

Master Brur glared at Ori, who stood quietly with his hands folded.

“Those journeyman braids yeh got in yer hair, lad?” Master Brur demanded.

“Yes, sir,” Ori replied, keeping his voice even and calm.

Brur snatched a few things from his desk and rose. He went to a small table, cleared a space with a sweep of his arm and shoved a chair next to it.

“Sit. Translate this passage from Sindarin to Khuzdul an’ illustrate it, then write about why yeh chose to illustrate it the way yeh did. If yeh feel ambitious, try guessing what it was like in the original Westron.”

Ori settled himself and sharpened the pen he was given. The poem was an early work of Shire’s about walking on a road. He remembered the poem well and quickly wrote it out in its original form, before translating it into Khuzdul. The Sindarin was easy enough but the poem scanned better when translated from Westron to Khuzdul. It didn’t take him long to write out the translation. He decorated it with flowers, a few birds, and a road wandering off into a grassy field. He wrote briefly about hobbits, their way of life, and the romantic writings of Shire.

Ori rose. Dwalin was smiling at him and Brur was glaring at Dwalin. Brur turned when Ori cleared his throat.

“Stuck?”

“No, sir,” Ori responded. “Finished.”

Brur stared, was beside Ori in a trice and snatched the paper away. He glanced it over, before raising his eyes to stare at Ori admiringly.

“Well, fuck a duck,” Brur chortled. “The lad can write.”

“Yeh think I’d a’ brough’ ’m here if he couldn’t?” Dwalin groused.

“Ach well, laddie,” Brur was all smiles and friendliness. “Yeh an’ tha’ princeling did some daft shit back in the day.”

Ori suddenly wanted desperately to know what possible ‘daft shit’ either Thorin or Dwalin could have got themselves into. Brur turned to him.
“Brur, son a’ Abjur, lad. Yeh’ll be getting yer mastery soon enough or I’ll kiss his arse.” nodding to Dwalin.

“Yeh keep yer mouth an’ th’ rest a’ yeh t’ yerself.” Dwalin agreed.

Ori couldn’t stop his mouth before saying, “As his husband, his arse is my business, so keep your bits away from it.”

Brur and Dwalin roared with laughter and Ori cringed at himself. His shoulder was grabbed and Dwalin slung an arm around him.

“He’s me keeper now. Gotta make sure I do as I’m told,” Dwalin joked.

Ori tried to slug him in the ribs but couldn’t squirm free.

“His keeper?” Brur looked at Ori. “Lad, either yeh’ve tied ‘im round yer wee finger or yer as daft as he is.”

Ori peered up at Dwalin, who was grinning at him.

“Bit a’ both, aye?” Dwalin said.

Ori snickered.

“Very likely.”

“Right,” Brur was serious once more. “Enough a’ yer lovely-dovey slop. Ori of the Brothers Ri, is it? Fine, we need a cataloguer and someone on th’ reference desk. Yeh seem th’ right sort. I’ll look yeh out a desk and th’ rules we go by. Yeh’ll start tomorrow. I’ll just have yeh follow me about. I’ll see yeh back here at eight of th’ morning bell. Yes?”

“Yes,” Ori said eagerly.

“Aye, he’ll be here,” Dwalin promised.

“Good, good!” Brur grinned at them, frowned, and pointed at the door.

“Out!”

Dwalin drew Ori to the hallway and Brur’s door slammed violently behind them.

“I think I just got hired to work at the greatest library in all dwarrowdom,” Ori said in an awed voice.

Dwalin led the way back.

“Aye yeh did, lad. Knew yeh would! C’mon, it’s near dinner an’ I’m gettin’ perishin’ hungry.”

Ori set the kitchen table, then leaned against it. Since he’d peeled and chopped several potatoes, he hoped Dwalin knew about chips.

What a strange day it had been, Ori mused. Hired at the library, new clothes, meeting Dis, finding out his mam had been banished and was the shame….
Ori swallowed and clutched at his stomach. Why in Mahal’s name had he gone through with everything? It was ridiculous. Dis and Thorin realized who he was and were no doubt going to tell Dwalin he had been led astray.

Ori took a deep breath. No, they were not going to tell Dwalin anything. They wouldn’t get the damn chance. He was going to tell Dwalin. He shivered. How? How could Dwalin possibly believe that Ori had been completely ignorant of his parentage?

Ori shook himself and took a breath. Well, he had been and that was sad. He would be honest and tell the captain what he had learned. Things would be set aside, hushed up, and hopefully, hopefully they might still talk occasionally.

He turned to Dwalin who came in from the cold room carrying a platter with two large pieces of fresh meat.

“How yeh like yer steak, lad?”

“Dwalin I have to tell you something I didn’t know it until today when Princess Dis told me I was in utter ignorance until that time I am not who you think I am I am a fatherless whelp of one of the greatest scandals of Erebor I know you don’t want to be married to such and believe me I’m sure Dis and Thorin will hush things up and I will run away forever to the Dale and Lord Balin will never know it’s all quite fixable I’m sure it will be quite plausible and you will not live in shame for the rest of your life and go on to be a mighty captain and marry an excellent female with whom you may have many, many children I know a dwarf who had fourteen children well his dam did and it was all very nice and I’m sure this can be seen as nothing but I’m sure your men would vouch if you asked them and say you had more to drink in that pub in Dale where I ran into you I do apologize for that I was quite upset about hearing about Nori being executed and that’s another thing he should not have hit you.”

Dwalin put the platter of meat down on the counter, crossed to Ori, grabbed him around the waist, lifted and sat him on the table, so they were at eye level. Ori stared at Dwalin, who was staring at him.

“What?” Dwalin asked quietly.

Ori burst into tears. He vaguely felt Dwalin’s hands on his shoulders, rubbing gently. Ori got his breath back and looked up.

“Why would Dis an’ Thorin want t’ hush up anything’ an’ I don’t want fourteen brats!” Dwalin said in a more moderate tone.

“Because I’m Rikmha’s child. I—”

“I know tha’, lad.”

“You do?”

“Aye, ‘ve known f’r quite a bit now.”

“But Thorin and Dis won’t like it!”

“Thorin knew I was doing’ some investigation’ and he’ll be filling’ Dis in, too. He’s fine wi’ it an’ she’ll be, too.”

“Are you sure?”
“Aye, an’ yeh and yer brothers don’t have nuthin’ t’ do with any of it. That family are no’ one a’ Thror’s favorites. They got no power in court. They’re rich enough but no one give a shit abou’ wha’ they think.”

Ori sniffed then realized he was gripping Dwalin by his braces. He removed his hands and wiped his eyes.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be, lad.” Dwalin looked at him then leaned forward and gave Ori a hug.

“No more tears now, lad. Everythin’s fine.”

Ori clutched him a moment then let go.

“Thank you. You’re very kind to me. I’ll try and be a good husband.”

“Yer a fine husband.”

Ori found his handkerchief and wiped his eyes and nose.

“Right,” Ori said. “First order of being a good husband, feed him.”

He smiled up and Dwalin chuckled.

“Aye, how yeh want yer steak? Warm and bloody on th’ inside?”

“Yes, please,” Ori agreed eagerly.

Ori sat back. The steak and chips were probably the best meal he’d ever had. He had a feeling he’d eaten most of the chips. Dwalin was finishing up the steak Ori couldn’t manage. He glanced over at Ori, who smiled.

“Better, lad?”

“Much, thank you. I’m sorry I made such a fuss.”

“S alright’, lad. Yeh had a bit ’f a shock, tha’s all. Yeh honestly didn’t know abou’ yer mam?”

“No. I wonder if Dori or Nori know. It’s all so strange. Although Dis wondered if it had become a common name in Dale or Ered Luin. I never heard of any with even a similar sounding name. I don’t think I want to be related to that family, though.”

“Can’t blame yeh there. Never liked ’em much. Rikut always put me hackles up. No one really made much of ’n effort t’ find out ’bout ’em. They came out fra Ered Luin and there wasn’t much correspondence going’ out tha’ way, so who knows. I did quite a bit a’ checkin when I was finding’ out about yeh. And yer brothers, a’ course.” Dwalin finished quickly.

Ori raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t worry, lad. I’ll keep me eye on that family. They won’t cause yeh no trouble.”

Ori smiled again, picked up the plates, and took them to the sink. He washed them quickly and took down cups and a pot to make tea. He poked through the jars trying to decide what tea he wanted.
Dori would love this he thought and stopped dead. Dori. Dori was due back late tonight. He had to write to Dori!

“Everything’ alright?”

“I need to write a proper note to Dori! He’ll be worried sick if I don’t tell him more.”

“I though’ Nori… Aye, yeh better drop Dori a word. I’ll call yeh a raven t’ take it down. Kettle’s about ready.”

“I’ll take our tea through to the sitting room. May I use the desk there?”

“Aye.”

Ori brought the tray through and set it on the red granite table. He went to the desk and rooted out paper, ink, and a pen which he set to sharpening.

Dwalin came through with a large raven sitting on his shoulder. Ori started to rise to pour the tea but Dwalin waved him down and the raven hopped onto the table with a loud croak.

Ori tapped the nib for a moment then:

“Dear Dori,

By now you will have heard the whole story from Nori. I do assure you that

I am well and Captain Dwalin has been everything that is polite and kind.

I now have a job with the Library of Erebor and start tomorrow!

Please be easy that I’m perfectly safe and very comfortable.

I will come and see you as soon as I can and, hopefully,

Captain Dwalin will accompany me.

All my love,

Your Ori.”

Ori folded the letter up and tucked the edges in. He turned to Dwalin, who was sitting on the couch but hunched forward so he could tease the raven by tapping its beak and pulling his finger away before the bird could catch it. The raven cackled at Dwalin, dancing about, obviously enjoying their game. It looked up at Ori when Dwalin did.

“All set, lad?” Dwalin asked.

The raven hopped over. Ori handed the raven the letter. It took it and flew out to the reception area. Dwalin went with it. Ori moved to the table and poured out the tea. Dwalin returned and lifted a bag off a shelf. He sat down on the couch and put the cushion Ori had fallen asleep on last night next to him and patted it. Ori put Dwalin’s cup near him, took his own and sat down.
Dwalin opened the bag and removed a beautiful viol. Ori watched as Dwalin plucked at the strings, listening and tuning, then set it to his arm and drew the bow across the strings.

Ori sighed, settled against the couch and tucked his feet up. Dwalin played an old mining tune, then drifted into others about marching and poetry. Ori drank his tea, staring at the fire while the soft music wrapped him in contentment.

Dwalin stopped and placed the instrument on his knee.

“Ye play, lad?”

“Not strings. I do have a flute at ho- Dori’s.” Ori gulped his slip and went on. “Nori taught me and Dori plays one, too. Dori’s very good at it. Sometimes I talk him into playing while I do the knitting. I know he likes playing it more than knitting.”

“Oh, aye. Yeh like t’ knit?”

“Very much. Dori taught me. He made up a special pattern that only Nori and I know how to do. It’s on my cardigan. I” He paused. Where was his cardigan? The tailors. Ori leapt to his feet.

“Dwalin! What will the tailors do with my old clothes? Do I have to go and get them? Will they send them back to Dori? Will they destroy them?”

“They’ll bring ‘em to th’ house t’morrow.”

“Oh.”

“Destroy ‘em?”

“Well…”

“Who in th’ whole a’ Arda does tha’?”

Ori thought of several of the meaner merchant men of Dale and shrugged. Dwalin gave him a narrow look then put the instrument and bow on the table and looked around with a frown. He went to the opposite side of the room and started going through the shelves. Ori followed, skimmed over the titles of the books there, and looked at the many knick-knacks collected by the Fundins over the years.

He looked over at the sound of Dwalin’s muttered curses and saw him on his haunches, digging through a cupboard.

“What are you looking for? Perhaps if I looked, too, I-“

“Here we are.”

Dwalin rose, turning to Ori with a grin, and handed over a large round ball of a basket of woven grasses. It was obviously very old. Ori looked curiously at it while Dwalin escorted him back to the couch. They both sat and, at Dwalin’s nod, Ori lifted off the lid.

The inside swam with beautiful colors. All different kinds of worsted and other types of yarns. Ori gasped and touched the ones on top. Some threads caught as his fingers were rough from cold and working with pens, paper and other chores. He turned back to Dwalin, who looked satisfied.

Ori scooted forward and removed skein after skein, feeling and admiring each one before laying it on the table. Among the skeins was a long packet wrapped in embroidered linen which Ori took out
and examined. Untying the ribbon fastener, he unrolled it, and shining knitting needles of all sizes and dainty crochet hooks revealed themselves.

“Mam liked to knit, too,” Dwalin said. “Balin hid these away as adad didn’t like either of us doin’ it. Said it wasn’t a warrior’s craft. Bloody batshit. Warriors need socks an’ clothes an’ th’ gumption to mend ‘em. ’M sure Balin’d be delighted yeh like th’ craft.”

“You don’t think he’ll mind?”

“Nah, lad. Help yerself t’ it. Stuff should still be good to work with.”

Ori looked at the bounty all round him. He leaned back against the couch and put his head on Dwalin’s arm and patted it.

“Thank you, Dwalin.”

Dwalin covered Ori’s hand with his own and gave it a squeeze. Ori couldn’t resist and sat forward again. He looked carefully and drew out a skein of dark green.

“Shall I make you a scarf, some gloves, or a jumper?”

Dwalin took the skein and felt it. He looked distant yet pleased.

“Me mam was going to make me a jumper a’ this but she never go’ ’round t’ it. If yeh could—”

“Of course!” Ori said immediately. “What pattern would you like?”

“Plain’s fine. Mebbe a bit a’ yer special pattern ‘round th’ collar an’ arm bands.”

“How long? Do you wants long sleeves, too?”

“Real long, lad. Like ‘em t’ come down t’ me knees, but no sleeves.”

Ori dug in the basket again and found five more skeins of the same.

“This isn’t sheep’s wool.”

“Nah, goat. Men call our goats, like my Gnasher, giant kahmeere goats.”

“It’s lovely,” Ori admired. He inspected the needles and removed a pair of silver ones. They were perfectly smooth and highly polished. The ends were capped with emeralds. Ori sat back and dropped the skein in his lap. He found the end and pulled several lengths free and began to cast on his stitches. When he thought he’d put on enough he started the bottom hem with the Ri brothers’ pattern. Dwalin watched him for a few minutes, then took up his viol and began playing again.

Ten lines in, a yawn nearly split Ori’s face. He rubbed his eyes. In the distance, he faintly heard the night bell for the hour. It was quite late.

“Shit,” Dwalin commented and put the viol away.

Ori put everything back in the basket and laid his work on the top.

“Just put it beside the couch. Nice t’ see it out again,” Dwalin said as he picked up the tea tray and headed to the kitchen. Ori tidied what little there was to do and went to the fireplace. He turned the lever as he’d seen Dwalin do, the flames lowered and went out with a hiss. He heard something close. Dwalin came back in.
“Is this the right way to do this?” Ori asked.

Dwalin twitched the knob.

“Aye, lad, yeh go’ it.”

“How exactly . . . What is…? It’s a lovely fire-“

“Comes up fra’ th’ forges,” Dwalin explained. “Lets th’ smiths change the height a’ th’ heat, when they’re working’ with different metals. Every fireplace, cook top an’ oven in th’ mountain’s linked t’ ’em.”

“Ooohh,” Ori sighed with envy. “How lucky you all are! It’s such a grind having to fetch from the woods or buy from the coal merchants.”

Dwalin said nothing but frowned a little.

“Need t’ get yer rest, lad. And-“

Dwalin stopped dead and Ori, who had started to follow him, went nose first into his back.

“Yeh a’riga’, lad?”

“Yes, what is it?”

Dwalin paused, seemed to choose his words, then reddened as he finally said, “Yeh don’t have anythin’?”

“What do you mean?”

“Shit, I shoulda gone t’ yer Dori’s yesterday and go’ yer thin’s. Yeh’ve no’ even go’ a nightshirt in tha’ scrivener’ bag wee Tilda brought yeh?”

It was Ori’s turn to blush.

“I didn’t think of it either until I wondered about my cardigan.”

“Right,” Dwalin said decisively. He walked through the hall and opened Ori’s room door. He went to the wardrobe and lifted a huge chest down from the top. It was made in the same manner as the wardrobe so Ori had thought it was part of it. Dwalin opened the chest, which was filled to the brim, rifled through, then nodded.

“Make free with anything’ yeh find. Was my stuff when I were young. Was about yer height then. Yeh’ll need th’ belts f’r th’ britches.”

“Thank you,” Ori brightened.

There was a wealth of clean, carefully folded clothes. He could see the finely made linen from where he stood.

Dwalin turned and went to the door.

“Sleep well,” he said with a smile.

Without a thought, Ori rushed to him and, reaching and throwing his arms about Dwalin’s neck, kissed his cheek impulsively.
“Thank you again so much. You are so kind to me. Sleep well, too!”

Dwalin looked both surprised and pleased as he scooped Ori into a bear’s hug.

Embarrassed, Ori slid away and shut the door.
Arguments, ambitions and a letter

Chapter Summary

The continued adventures of Ori!
Here we learn more about Dipfa. What the upstairs of the Fundin house is like. Also the exciting way Thorin and Dwalin killed Azog!!

Three hidden hints this time; Dylan Thomas, Persuasion (1995 film) with Amanda Root, Addams Family Values movie.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Master laughed horribly as the guard chopped Nori’s head off. Ori screamed. There was blood everywhere. It rose from the floor and welled out of the walls. The Master’s laughter grew louder and more horrible. Screaming came from everywhere - Dwarrow, men, elves....

Ori sat up in bed with a small cry, shaking, soaked in sweat and gasping for breath. He was safe in the House of Fundin, married to Captain Dwalin, who was kind to him, and Nori had gone home safely. It was just an awful dream. Ori sighed and gathered his wits.

He got out of bed and helped himself to the water in the carafe. Moonlight shone through the window and he could hear the wind outside. His borrowed night shirt was so long it brushed his ankles. He walked back and forth wondering if elves felt this way when they wandered about the trees in their long robes.

Seized with the desire to get out of his room, Ori silently opened his door and peered out. There was only darkness broken by the two tiny lines of green phosphorous along the edges of the floors. Ori, overcome with curiosity, peeped into Dwalin’s room. By the small glow from the low fire he saw Dwalin sprawled face down across a bed big enough for three. The room was a disaster with weapons covering every wall, things for cleaning, mending and making weapons and bits of clothing strewn everywhere. There were books, pilled on the nightstand, on a large desk, and more unceremoniously dumped near the hearth. along with several maps and unrolled scrolls. A raven stood on a stand with its head under its wing. The only sound was Dwalin snoring. Ori closed the door soundlessly.

Ori padded down the hall and through to the kitchen. He sat for a minute then decided he didn’t want any tea and wandered though to the sitting room, then the reception room and all around that. It was vast and cool although the floor was warm like the back living quarters. He decided to climb the stair to the second floor.

Behind the curtain he found a large room with comfortable seating and two fireplaces. Three hallways went off from the room. Ori explored these and only found silent bedrooms and sitting rooms, all unused and empty. Dwalin’s parents must have entertained many people. He
remembered that Lord Balin was away, so when his lordship returned the rooms would probably be busy again with visiting diplomats.

Ori looked around the largest room again and realized he was tired. He went quietly back to his own room and climbed into bed.

He suddenly felt very small and alone without Nori and Dori close by. He tried not to but ended crying himself to sleep.

Ori woke to sunshine glowing pinkly through the window. He clambered out of bed and looked at himself in the mirror, at the dark circles under his eyes and his hair completely on end and in all directions. He grabbed the towel and washcloth and scampered to the privy. After washing up in the sink there, he returned to his room. He dealt with his hair, put his new trousers back on and went to the chest. He found some dark green socks and a pair of bright red ones. Snickering to himself he put on one red and one green. He pulled on a cream linen shirt on and found the purple tunic. He glanced at his reflection once more and went out. The door on his right opened and Dwalin walked out, mumbling.

“Good morning.” Ori greeted him.

“‘Mornin’, lad.” Dwalin managed and peered at him. “Yer awful chipper this early.”

Ori giggled at him. Dwalin blinked, grinned, and tousled Ori’s hair as he went past and down the hall. The door to the privy slammed.

Ori padded through to the kitchen and perched at the kitchen table until Dwalin pushed in and smiled at him.

“Are we going to Dis and Thorin’s again?” Ori asked. “Or shall I make you something?”

“Goin’ over there. Ready?”

Dwalin led the way through to the sitting room, shrugged into his furs and his halberd, sliding the hooded axes into place. Ori took up his satchel and they went out to the courtyard.

Fili opened the door.

“Ori-mate!”

“Good morning, Fili.”

“Dwalin, our idad Frerin’s here. I think it might get ugly,” Fili said quietly.

Dwalin didn’t reply. Ori cocked his head at Fili.

“Frerin’s the youngest and udad’s favorite. He likes to think he’s the heir, “ Fili remarked dryly.

Ori drew a little behind Dwalin wondering what if anything he might do to assist Dwalin as Fili led the way to the white dining room.

Seated on Thorin’s left was an exceptionally handsome dwarf. He had the Durin face, like his siblings, but his blond hair fell in ringlets obviously created by the copious use of sugar water and
rags followed by a great deal of pomade. He wore several braids, mostly family and 
accomplishments like archery, swordsmanship and pony riding. He was also a journeyman gem 
inspector. His hands were covered in rings of gold. He wore wore his beard tightly braided and 
adorned with lapis beads.

“Fili,” he said and turned to look up as Fili proceeded Dwalin and Ori into the room. “Come, my 
child, sit and eat. Dwalin, you’re late.”

Frerin’s voice was pleasant but he spoke with a mincing tone that made Ori’s hackles rise. He 
cought sight of Ori and looked down his nose.

“What’s this?”

Thorin cuffed Frerin.

“Manners, little brother. This is Ori of the Brothers Ri and Dwalin’s new husband.” Thorin 
smiled warmly at Ori and nodded to his right side. Dwalin pulled out the next chair for Ori and sat 
directly at Thorin’s right. Dis arrived.

“Ori! Dwalin! Good morning to you both. You’re just in time.”

“Good morning.” Ori greeted her with a smile.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“Yes,” Ori said slowly.

“You just look a little peaky.”

Ori made himself shrug. “Queer dream. Startled me a little.”

Dis seated herself.

“Sleeping in a different place and bed will do that to me, too,” Dis said comfortingly and dished 
up from the enormous pie in front of her.

Ori had never had sausage pie before. It was very good as were the pile of scrambled eggs Dis 
added to his plate. Thorin and Dwalin were talking about the caravan again. Fili and Kili were 
telling their mother about training with Dwalin that day. Ori enjoyed his breakfast until he felt eyes 
on him. He looked up at Frerin staring at him with a look of faint disgust on his face.

“Dwalin,” Frerin said.

Dwalin and Thorin looked at each other and both of them looked at Frerin.

“Wha’?” Dwalin grunted.

“A scribe? Really?”

“Me brother started as a scribe. What of it?”

“Yes, but look at him.”

Dwalin turned in his chair and looked Ori over. Ori blinked prettily at him with a smile and 
Dwalin chucked him under the chin.
“He looks finer than a new cut gem, doesn’ he?” Dwalin teased.

Both Thorin and Dis chuckled as Fili and Kili made kissy noises. Ori blushed and nudged Dwalin with his knee. Dwalin nudged back, still grinning.

“Well, I don’t remember having my permission asked for,” Frerin growled.

“Your permission isn’t required,” Dis snapped. “Dwalin told us about Ori a long time ago. We like him.”

Ori blushed to his toes and squirmed before he could stop himself.

“Well, it’s of no real matter to me,” Frerin said loftily. “I have excellent news for all of you, although perhaps not for Fili and Kili.”

Frerin smirked at the two princes, who looked at each other, shrugged, and went back to their food. Frerin didn’t look very pleased with their reaction and went on.

“I believe I have found the dam who shall be my bride.”

Thorin picked at his leftover crust and glanced at Dwalin, who obviously didn’t give a shit. Dis looked a little exasperated with all of them and replied pleasantly.

“That’s wonderful, Frer! I didn’t know you were courting. What’s the dam’s name? Where did you meet?”

Frerin leaned forward, delighted to have all the attention.

“Well as you know I was riding parade yesterday with some of Udad’s guard and we had paused, most kindly, I thought, to let a group of dwarrow coming out of the mines and heading to their various little homes, I suppose. And there among them was the loveliest dam I have ever laid eyes on. She was walking aloof and tall and beautiful. I immediately accosted her and introduced myself. She was properly impressed, I do assure you, sister, she stared open mouthed up at me on my white pony.”

Ori sat back. He could just imagine it. A group of miners coming out, tired from work, desperately ready for food and rest, and all of a sudden this primped and shiny princeling rides his pony into the center of their group and starts talking at them while his guards circle around. Poor dam probably thought she was being arrested for something! He tore himself away from his thoughts as Frerin announced he had asked her to present herself at dinner here some time this week.

Frerin smiled.

“She seemed quite overcome. I count on you to be friendly to her, namad.”

Dis smiled faintly, lifting her teacup to drink. Frerin tossed his napkin down on his plate, rose, and headed for the door. He waved his hand vaguely in their direction, pulled open the door, demanded of the arriving servant why she hadn’t been on hand to open the door for him and ordered her to clear the table. The servant entered the room and shut the door, blocking out the rest of whatever Frerin was going on about.

There was the sound of breaking porcelain as Dis crushed her cup in her hand and the rasp of the chair legs as Thorin got to his feet.

“Mistress Dazla, I apologize-“ Thorin began.
The servant merely shook her head at him.

“No need, your highness. I’ve been in this house all his life and he’s never had a piece of manners at all.”

“True, but you shouldn’t have to put up with his-“

“I don’t regard him, sir. I serve you and her highness, I don’t take orders from the likes of him. And neither does any other dwarf with sense,” Dazla added.

Dis laid her hand on Dazla’s arm and the older dam patted it.

“More’s the pity you have to put up with that, marm.”

“Oh Dazla, he didn’t used to be this way. You remember.”

“Course I do, marm. Which is why I’ve never broken a kitchen crock over his head. Unlike the captain there.”

Dwalin turned, eyebrow raised playfully at Dazla.

“I ain’t never touched any a’ yer crocks, missus. Not even th’ one yer married t’.”

“Oh! You dreadful wretch!” Dazla scolded and, for the want of anything not breakable, settled for throwing a napkin at Dwalin.

Thorin sighed and sat back down heavily. Dazla went out and shut the door. Fili and Kili started to laugh.

Fili flapped his napkin at his uncle.

“After lessons today I shall accost a poor dam and tell her to present herself at my amad’s then marry me as I haven’t the charm of stuck pig!”

“Hoink, hoink! I don’t know her name but I know mine. Hoink!” Kill added, snickering.

Dwalin roared with laughter. Thorin tried not to. Dis tried to frown and settled on telling Kili not to make such noises at the table. Dis turned to Ori.

“Really, Ori, he’s isn’t mean at the bone, he’s just, well, Amad hadn’t expected another dwarfling after me and he was a lovely surprise for our parents.”

“Until he learned to talk,” said Dwalin.

Dis frowned at Dwalin and continued. “Udad was so taken with him. He’s the spit of our Umand, you know.”

“And wasn’t given the training and discipline you and Prince Thorin did?” Ori guessed.

“Exactly,” Dis smiled wanly. “Thus he’s very spoiled and thinks he’s very grand and kingly. I do hope this dam he speaks of will help bring him around.”

“She’ll need a bleedin’ warhammer,” Dwalin added.

Thorin snorted, went to the fireplace and rested his foot on the fender. “Fili, Kili, off to lessons, the pair of you.”
The princes scrambled good naturally out of their seats, kissed their amad, nearly knocking her from her chair, and went off.

“Later, Ori-mate!” Fili called back and Kili echoed, “Later!”

Dwalin turned to Ori.

“Right, I’d better be getting’ yeh t’ th’ library. Ol’ Brur’ll have a conniption if yer late.”

“I’m ready.” Ori got up. To Dis he said, “Thank you.”

Dis rose and came and kissed his cheek.

“We’ll see you at dinner, then,” she instructed kindly.

Dwalin lifted Ori down from Harley and gave his shoulder a pat.

“Enjoy yersel’, lad.”

“I’m sure I will,” Ori said, adjusting his satchel over his shoulder. “Will you be seeing Dori or are you busy?”

“I’ll make time to look in on ‘im.” Dwalin promised and rode away.

Ori went through library’s big main doors and into a vast room at least four floors high. All the walls were shelves filled with books. There were long tables and chairs for readers and a large desk that made a square of itself in the middle of the room. Master Brur was there, talking with another dwarf. Ori trotted over and Master Brur saw him.

“There yeh be, lad and right on time. Good. I’ll take yeh up t’ yer desk.”

Ori’s desk was on the same floor as Brur’s office, in a great hall full of desks with scribes busily working at each one. Ori put away his satchel in a small cupboard for personal items under his desk. Brur left him there to study how the library divided its collections with numbers and rune markings.

Brur collected Ori for lunch and while eating, Brur discussed what fonts and size of scripts were used for what and how each subject had a bibliographer who organized, collected, and managed each part of the collection. After lunch, Ori was given a very intensive tour and introduced to each bibliographer.

Brur brought him back to his desk after that. Ori nearly gasped when he heard the afternoon bell for two. He turned back to his perusal of how subject headings were grouped when there was a throat cleared next to him. He looked up and Tilda threw herself at him.

“Tilda! What are you doing… Hello.”

Ori saw the soldier who had taken Tilda home the other day.

“Furh’nk, sir,” the soldier supplied as Ori rose.

“Master Furh’nk, it was most kind of you to bring Tilda to visit but how…?” Ori wasn’t sure how to phrase his question.
“Captain Dwalin’s orders, sir. He was at your brother’s earlier, still there now, but thought it be best t’ send me along with the lassie.”

“He’s got a pretty goat,” Tilda put in. “Its name is Puffball and she’s a girl.”

“Aye, that she is,” Furh’nk agreed, obviously very amused with Tilda.

Ori thought Furh’nk was either a good father or an overly indulgent uncle.

“We brought you your clothes and Dori put some other stuff in,” Tilda went on. “He wrote you a letter. And he pressed really hard on the paper as he was really mad at Nori but there wasn’t much of a point ’cause Nori was really drunk and tried to beat up Dwalin, but Dwalin pushed him away and Nori fell on his butt and then he got up and took off his trousers, climbed on the table and yelled ‘Does anybody want a fight?’ Dori called him an old baboon then my da lifted him down and he sat on the floor and cried that he was a bad brother and Dori said yes he was and get off the floor and make some tea. Da told Dori Captain Dwalin was very nice and I told them you like his butt and Sigrid told me to hush which wasn’t fair and she bundled your things while Dori wrote you a letter and told me to bring it to you and Captain Dwalin told this nice soldier to bring me and I got to ride on his goat and I never knew the mountain was so beautiful on the inside. Do you live right here at this desk now?”

Ori waited calmly until this barrage of Tilda’s excitement ran out of steam. Furh’nk was inspecting the ceiling with the most terrible frown on his face. It was obvious it was the only way he could stop himself from bursting into laughter. Ori notice a few of the other scribes had peered around their desk to see.

“You ain’t arresting’ me scribe,” Brur’s growl got the soldier’s attention.

“I’m sorry for the commotion, Master Brur,” Ori said quickly. “My young neighbor has just stopped in to give me news and a parcel from my eldest brother.”

Brur looked at the guard, then turned to Ori, opened his mouth then looked back at the guard.

“You Missus Helar’s boy?”

“Aye, Master Brur, that I am.”

“Weren’t you the one who used to put centipedes in my ink bottle to watch them crawl out and ruin my papers with their little ink tracks?”

The soldier grinned.

“Aye, Master Brur, that was me. Just barely a pebble back then. You were so good letting’ me play with yer stuff.” Furh’nk was almost misty-eyed.

“Aye,” Brur agreed, narrowed his eyes, and gave the soldier a clip round the head with the back of his hand.

Furh’nk chuckled at this and Tilda’s eyes got big. Ori quickly turned back to Master Brur.

“Master Brur, this is my er.. brothers’ young neighbor Miss Tilda Bardsdatter. Tilda, this is Master Brur, he-“

“Sooo,” Brur drawled folding his arms and looking as far down at Tilda as he could. “Ye enjoying’ yourself around these scribes are yeh? D’ yeh know what scribes do, little lass?”
“Of course,” replied Tilda loftily. “I’ve watched Ori loads of times and he taught me stuff and my teacher thinks I’m a genius because I have joined up writing and I don’t need lines on paper to write straight. I’m going to be a scribe. I’m sure when I’m old enough I’ll be working here, too. There’s an empty desk just over there. That might be my desk and Ori and I will work next to each other!”


He leaned over Ori’s desk and pulled out a blank sheet of paper and a pen.

“Go on,” he ordered.

Tilda looked up at Ori, who helped her into the chair and got her started with the ink.

“Put you full name at the top. There,” Ori murmured. “The date goes in that corner. Now begin with a greeting.”

Tilda put her tongue between her teeth and carefully wrote ‘Master Brur’. Beneath this she wrote the Westron alphabet in both small and capitals, wrote her numbers through 30, followed by her teacher’s favorite writing practice sentence. She finished and, with Ori’s help blotted it, then she handed it proudly to Master Brur. Master Brur took it and looked the writing over scrupulously. He looked at Ori.

“I take it that you taught her.”

“Letters, numbers and basic reading,” Ori admitted.

Master Brur turned his attention back to the paper and frowned.

“‘The quick brown fox jumps over th’ lazy dog’…” Master Brur looked at Tilda. “That’s one bloody lazy dog.”

Tilda shrugged.

“That’s what I said and the teacher made me sit in the corner. Ori explained that it uses every letter in the Westron alphabet, so it’s just practice and doesn’t mean anything else. I wish Ori could just be my teacher. He knows everything.”

“Mahal, Tilda!” Ori choked. “No one knows everything!”

His demurring was lost on Master Brur, who was shaking soundlessly and Furh’nk almost had to leave the room.

“Well, young lassie,” Master Brur said when he could speak. “Yeh keep practicing and yer nose in yer books and mebbe we will see yeh up here when yer of age.”

“Really?” Tilda squealed then clapped her hand over her mouth and whispered “Sorry.” loudly.

Master Brur chuckled and patted her on the head.

“We’ll see, lass, we’ll see. You need to be off home now. Master Furh’nk here needs to be back at his duties and Ori has work to do.”

Master Furh’nk took Tilda’s shoulder and began to steer her out. She yanked away to hug Ori again then trotted off, turning only to wave and shout, “Bye!”

The door shut behind them and Master Brur turned back to Ori.
Ori blushed.

“Tilda is excitable,” he managed.

Master Brur stroked his beard.

“She’s also very clever,” Master Brur said seriously. “If she does stick to it, I’d hire her. I’m not as old fashioned as some. Knowledge’s something for all who wish to study. I’ve had a project in the back of me head for a while. I’d like to see th’ history of dwarrow in other languages. A full set of our history in Westron or even Sindarin. The Lord of Imladris would pay dearly for such. Yeh can translate to Sindarin and having a man-child translating that t’ Westron’d be quite an accomplishment for th’ library.”

“Are you in earnest, sir?” Ori asked, his mind reeling with possibility.

“I am, lad.” Master Brur cleared his throat. “Well, this is down the road a bit and we need to get yeh trained and doin’. Yeh’ve got about half a bell and another before yeh leave. Keep on with that headings work. I’ll pop in to see how yer doin’ tomorrow.”

Master Brur left and Ori sat down again, his thoughts all to the winds. He finally gathered himself and went back to his studies until he heard the last afternoon bell and got up as did all the other scribes.

Ori came out the great doors and saw Dwalin on Harley. Next to him was Dipfa dressed in similar fashion as yesterday except her suit was bright orange. She was seated on a freshly sheared goat. The goat’s wool was white with rather garish pink and yellow spots painted all over it. As he drew closer Ori saw the goat also pulled a small cart.

“Hello,” Ori said.

Dwalin dropped down, Dipfa followed and bowed to Ori.

“I have some your new wardrobe all ready.” She was positively beaming.

Dwalin chuckled as Ori put his hand into Dwalin’s.

“None a’ yer new socks match,” Dwalin added.

Ori blushed, elbowed Dwalin, and smiled to Dipfa.

“Really? So soon? That’s wonderful.”

Dwalin put Ori’s parcel into Dipfa’s cart. He caught Ori around the waist, set him on Harley, and swung up behind. Harley trotted off and Dipfa brought her goat alongside with some coaxing.

“Get a wiggle on, Poot-poot.”


“That’s what a little man child called him once. I was never sure if it was because of the dots or that particular time while I was looking at fabric someone fed him beans. He’s also a bit fat, so makes a kind of quiet ‘poot-poot’ noise when he has to go up hill,” Dipfa explained.

“Why’d yeh paint th’ poor thin’?” Dwalin asked.
“Emotional movement,” Dipfa explained. “When Poot-poot is in motion, the primary color is randomly blended and thrown into relief by the secondary. At times this can happen simultaneously. As living beings our physical state can be a blend or it may cast our emotional state into relief.”

Dwalin looked at Ori and Ori folded his lips carefully and observed that this was a fascinating concept and asked how had she developed it. The rest of the ride to the Fundin residence was taken up with Dipfa regaling them with her metaphysical relationship with color.

They stopped at the front door of the Fundin House. Dwalin let Ori down and Dipfa hopped off Poot-poot. Dwalin took Harley to the stable while Ori opened the door. He was about to help Dipfa bring things in, but she winked and let down the back gate of the cart. Inside was a metal box. Dipfa pulled on this and as it slid out, metal legs unfolded. They had little wheels on the ends and she rolled to the door. She then removed the cart’s wooden back gate, laid it down, and rolled the metal cart up the improvised ramp.

Ori led her through to the sitting room, hung up his satchel and took off his boots. Dipfa looked about and declared the room very cozy. Ori put the fire on and came to help her unpack.

Dipfa first handed him the bag Tilda had brought. This Ori put on the couch. He saw a flash of paper and grabbed it. It was the letter from Dori as Tilda had said. Ori shoved it in his pocket and turned to Dipfa. Dipfa was admiring his socks.

“I’m so glad you’re staying with your crossed harmonic color choices.”

She pulled the dust cover off the cart.

“I tried to incorporate it into your new clothes, but subtly, as you seem to be a dwarf of great subtly and mystery.”

Dwalin came in on that statement and grinned at Ori. Ori blushed furiously and created a smile for Dipfa.

“I’m very excited to see what you’ve do- created.”

Dipfa basked in the word created and brought out a complete set of clothes, all draped over a piece of wood with an attached hook to hang it with. There were lilac colored trousers and a coat in a paler shade, inside was a shirt of checkered material containing both colors, each square outlined in the tiniest thread of dark green. A silk scarf to go with this ensemble was striped again with both colors; She matched this with a pair of deep purple shoes and dark green socks. One sock had a lilac strip and the other a lavender stripe. Ori cringed, but was overcome with joy at such lovely clothing.

“Dipfa! It’s perfect!”

“Oh,” she demurred and laid it across one of the chairs. “It’s just for everyday. Here’s another.”

She drew out a second suit. This had dark green trousers with side slashes filled with a currant colored satin. Instead of a shirt, this had a long tunic of dark green with bunches of currant berries and leaves embroidered along the edges. There were soft boots dyed dark green. These laced from toes to knees and were paired with currant colored socks with two different shades of green dots on them to show through the laces. This joined the other on the chair. Dipfa took away a cotton cloth and removed another suit.
“This is your court dress.”

Dipfa held up the most amazing suit Ori had ever seen. It looked black but when the material moved, it showed the darkest green Ori had ever seen. It was sewn together in red thread with garnets studded along each seam. There were black boots with tassels of dark green silk, each tied off with emeralds.

Dwalin rose from his seat on the back of the couch and came over to look.

“Aye, this is fine and proper. Yeh’ll look a treat in this.”

“It’s…beautiful.” Ori gasped.

“My pleasure, sir.” Dipfa curtsied low and laid it with the others on the chair. She went back to the cart and removed a final parcel wrapped in white cotton cloth. She gave this directly to Ori with a murmur about underpinnings.

“Thank you so much, Dipfa.” Ori managed. “You have done amazing work in so little time. I’ll be so proud to wear these.”

Dipfa blushed and curtsied again.

“It’s my pleasure and honor to be your tailor and dresser, Master Ori of the House of Fundin.”

Dwalin chuckled and tossed her a small purse. She looked at it and frowned.

“I thought this was-

“Yeh did a fine job, lass. Yeh deserve it.”

Dipfa didn’t squeal but Ori could see it in her face. She curtsied again, grabbed her cart and headed out. Dwalin went with her to open the door.

Ori turned back and stared at all his new finery. He had never owned so much clothing in all his life. He was still sitting there, staring when Dwalin came back in.

“Yeh like ‘em, lad?”

“Yes…I’ve never owned anything so fine before… I’m almost afraid to touch them.”

Dwalin chuckled again and scooped the pile into his arms.

“Right, lad. Let’s get these t’ yer room so yeh kin put ‘em away. We’re going’ t’ Dis f’r dinner, yeh want t’ put one on? How about this purple one?”

“Shall I?” Ori asked.

“Aye, do it. Yeh kin show off.”

Ori looked up at Dwalin, who was smiling down at him. He waggled his eyebrows making Ori burst into laughter.

“Oh, alright,” Ori conceded. “The purple one it is!”

Dwalin went out and Ori opened Dori’s parcel. His clothing and his little treasures he’d kept in his room were there, and the long leather folder in which he’d kept all his sketches. And the secret
one he had hidden between his mattress and the straw tick. He shuddered to think Dori had known where that was. He considered whether Sigrid had put it in as he had shown it to her a few times.

He put his own few clothes away. They were not as fine as his new ones but they had been made with Dori’s love and he still wanted to wear them. Buried in the middle of all the clothing was his little wooden flute, carved by Nori from birch near the River Running. Ori was delighted to see it again.

Next to this, there was something wrapped in thin paper. Ori opened it carefully and found the beautiful hairbrush Nori had once brought Dori. It was very old, an antique. Dori had said it was from Ered Luin but occasionally Ori wondered who Nori had stolen it from. Ori placed it carefully on the dresser.

Half in eagerness and half dread, Ori sat on the bed and opened Dori’s letter.

My dear wee badger,

Nori was not able to apprise me of the situation until I had come home. I stepped around the street corner to Bard’s and he immediately returned with me, bringing both Sigrid and Tilda. Tilda related all the events she knew.

It was then your Captain arrived. He explained the incident thoroughly and was most patient in answering all my questions. Even although your brother was in a disgracefully inebriated state, he did apologize for hitting the Captain.

As this had been done I did not foresee the need for me to do so myself. I do wish the Captain had come to a less momentous decision than marriage, however what is done is done and unless you tell me you wish it otherwise, I shall accustom myself to it. In his favor, Captain Dwalin seems upright and honorable and did state he shall do all in his power to make your happiness complete.

He also promised that you both shall join us for dinner tomorrow evening. I look forward to seeing you again soon. And trust me when I say that it shall only take from you a word, a look, will be enough to decide me that this marriage will be called quits.

All my love,

Ori’s very own Dori.

Ori smiled after reading this. Dori was so good. He was ready to support Ori no matter how he chose to live. Well, as long as he didn’t get up to half the things Nori did, Ori reflected. He folded
the letter up and tucked it into the sketching folder and decided he should get washed and dressed.

Ori looked himself over. He had put the other two suits in the wardrobe and nearly cried with delight at the lovely cotton underclothing now filling the small dresser. He had put on a new set of combinations then carefully combed his hair and put on the purple suit. He turned and looked in the mirror. He looked so different than he had two days ago. He looked like a well-born dwarf scribe.

He went out to the sitting room where Dwalin, who had also changed into more comfortable clothing, was waiting for him. Dwalin looked him over then walked around him.

“Ahh, lad, yeh look finer than a new cut diamond.”

“Thank you. These are so comfortable. I never thought anything would be so nice to wear.”

“C’mon then,” Dwalin said clapping Ori’s shoulder. “Let’s go an’ show yeh off.”

“Look at you!” Dis cried as she greeted them at the door. “That color suits you, Ori. Did you take him to Mahrdin, son of Greneeld’s, Dwalin?”

“Aye, an’ ol’ Mahrdin put ‘im th’ hands a’ his new assistant; lass called Dipfa. She thinks our Ori’s very fashion progressive.”

“Well,” Dis giggled. “I shall have to take care I’m not thrown into the darkness by your husband.” She looked Ori over then paused.

“I’m afraid your Dipfa has mismatched the stripes in your socks.”

Ori swallowed a laugh and tried to look down his nose.

“They’re not mismatched, your highness, they are in a deep metaphysical state of emotional movement and throwing each other into relief with the rest of my clothes.”

Dis stared.

“What in Durin’s name does that mean?”

Ori grinned.

“I have no idea. Dipfa says that’s what’s happening.”

Dis laughed and pushed the pair of them through to the dining room. Thorin came through from another door and nodded to Ori. Ori looked about.

“Fili and Kili are over with the In’s this evening,” Dis told him. “Gloin has a young son they like to spend time with. I hear he’s quite up and coming with all his lessons.”

“Not too bad with his axe, either,” Dwalin put in. “Lad’s got tha’ gift from his da.”

Dazla entered with a large tray and told Dis she was served.
Ori tucked into his dinner. Meat dried then stewed in a sweet, spicy sauce served with soft, floury rolls and a large glass bowl filled with two colors of raw cabbage, finely shredded and mixed with carrots, onions, nuts, and raisins, and dressed with a milky spiced sauce.

“Ori.”

Ori looked up at Thorin who was regarding at him rather seriously. Ori swallowed his mouthful and waited.

“Dis tells me you’ve never heard of open court.”

“No, I haven’t. It is something new?”

“No, it’s something that’s been going on since the time of Durin the Deathless.”

“Oh.”

“Does the Master of Dale have such?”

“No. He just levies a lot of taxes. It’s a little hard as only certain jobs are open to dwarrow who live in the Dale. We can’t be hired to do things like accounting or litigation for men. Of course, this led to dwarrow only working for other dwarrow. It’s kind of strange. Ever since I was a mere badger I’ve watched as the Men of Dale seemed to change. Not change as people but people moving away and different people coming in.”

Thorin leaned back in his chair, frowning slightly.

“Have…have I said something amiss?” Ori asked.

“No, not at all,” Thorin assured him. “I have been under the impression that things had become rather different in the Dale than what we had thought. We dwarrow, as you may of noticed,” he said with a slight smile, “are slow to change and very set in our ways. We are also much longer lived than men, thus we do not always expect them to change as quickly as they do. I have been slowly over the past five years taking on more responsibility concerning the Dale and our people. Dwalin has been assisting me in this. You’ve probably noticed the soldiers are traveling through the town rather than just scouting the outer borders.”

“Yes,” Ori said quickly. “Most of the dwarrow left in the Dale noticed. We weren’t sure why and just thought Calmar had asked for them to patrol. He thinks everyone is after his money. Actually that’s how I saw Dwalin for the first time and Sigrid saw Fili.”

“She think Fili’s go’ a nice bum,” Dwalin supplied unhelpfully, making both Thorin and Dis choke on their tea.

“He gets it from me,” Thorin commented, smirking.

“He gets it from Vili, thank you very much. I should know,” Dis countered.

“He gets the blond hair from Vili and Amad,” Thorin argued. “When he was a babe, he had our Umad’s eyes.”

“’S aright,” Dwalin told Ori. “We took ‘em outa his mouth right after.”

“Dwalin!” Dis cried as Thorin roared with laughter. Ori giggled watching as Dwalin grinned like a fool. Suddenly he remembered what Master Brur had said.
“Dis, what did Dwalin and Thorin do when they were young that Master Brur had to get them out of trouble for?”

Dis looked surprised then sly.

“Yes, tell us, boys. What was it? I heard amad say something about wargs?”

“Oh that wasn’t it. Brur got us out of what we did to the poncey elf King’s robe mess.”

“Robe mess?” Ori asked, eyes alight.

“We were naught but badgers,” Dwalin explained. “They were having a council meeting and we got under the table. We poured yellow ink on the floor near his feet and they were there f’r a couple hours, talkin’. When the elf King got up he got this weird look on his face and looked down. His entire front t’ the waist was wet an’ stained yellow. Looked like he’d had a huge piss under the table.”

“Oh Mahal!” Dis cried. “I never heard that story! What happened?”

“Nuthin’. He glared and marched out and the council stood about. Me an’ Thorin were stuck under th’ table. ‘Course we started gigglin’. Thror hauled us out, promising’ a beatin’ but Brur assured Thror he’d told us we could be there t’ listen in. Good f’r our education, he said. We got outa there freer than ravens. Lucky f’r us there was no ink on the floor. That robe soaked up the lot.”

Dis fell back in her chair laughing and Ori giggled so hard he could barely breath. Thorin and Dwalin watched them. When Ori and Dis got their breath back Thorin and Dwalin exchanged a look.

“The wargs,” Ori cajoled as Dazla and another dam came in, removed the dinner dishes, set down a pie and a large jug of thickened cream.

Thorin chuckled and Dwalin encouraged him with a wave of his hand. Thorin turned his chair, crossed his legs and played with his tea cup as Dis served out slices of the quince and pear pie, ladling the thick sweet cream over them.

“Dwalin and I were sent out for a summer season to ride with the outer border patrols. There were a lot more small orc raiding parties then and they mostly went after merchant wagons. Dwalin and I noticed after being sent to spy on them that the wargs were instantly loyal to their riders. The orcs encouraged breeding and the pups started out very small but they were quick to learn. That told us that the wargs were, in some ways, smarter than their orc riders. It didn’t take much to train the wargs as when they’re pups as they’re eager to please.”

“Very eager,” Dwalin added.

“So whenever there was a warg on guard without a rider, we...well, we’d bring them treats.”

“Treats?” Dis demanded.

“Piece of meat, something like that,” Thorin said airily. “We’d teach them little tricks like ‘sit’ or ‘stay’.”

“Roll over, play dead, shit on command,” Dwalin continued.

“Exactly,” Thorin agreed. “We’d also name them.”
“Name them,” Dis repeated.

“Name them what?” Ori asked, half horrified, half delighted.

“Silly things,” Thorin said. “Like there was one with yellow spots so we named her ‘Buttercup’.

“Th’ brown one, ‘Shitass’,” Dwalin helped.

“There there was the white one Azog rode.”

Both Thorin and Dwalin looked feral.

“Aye, we named him, ‘Creampot’.”

" But you killed Azog, how-?” Dis asked frowning.

“Easy.” Dwalin grinned. “We gave Creampot lots a’ treats. He loved us. Every time we snuck over he’d come t’ us, tail waggin’, all happy.”

“Yes, so when Azog towered over us on that huge boulder, threatening to kill our entire party, all we had to do was get Creampot’s attention and tell him to ‘sit’.”

“How in-” Dis was confused.

“Creampot sat and Azog fell right off his back like a lump, toppled off the boulder, ass over tea kettle, and spattered his ugly head all over the ground. The Orcs didn’t know what to do and we destroyed them.”

“Durin’s hammer!” Dis cried.

Ori laughed until he nearly fell out of his chair. The picture was ludicrous!

When he recovered and Dis was wiping her eyes, Dwalin turned thoughtful.

“They’re not a bad animals, those wargs. Ugly as shit but damn useful.”

“I know,” Thorin agreed. “Think what we could do if we had a few breeding pairs. Train them to herd the goats and protect them. Riding them would be a bit of a challenge, they don’t move the same as goats and ponies, but still.”

There was the sound of doors opening and closing. Thorin and Dis looked at each other and sighed.

“An’ here comes th’ bloody floor show,” Dwalin commented dryly.

The dining room door opened and Frerin swept in.

“Thorin, her name is Janifur. You need to tell Udad I want to marry her. You know he’ll want you and Dis to back me on this. I found out today. I stopped her again and asked for her name. I think she’s quite shy and I need you to convince Udad that this is the real thing. I love her.”

Thorin stared.

“Who?”

“Janifur! The miner dam I told you about yesterday!”
Dis looked up.

“Frer, If you’ve only just met her-”

“It’s love! I love her!” Frerin’s voice raised to a shout.

Dwalin rolled his eyes and leaned his elbows on the table.

Thorin looked as though he was developing a headache.

“Little brother,” he began. “I can’t go to Udad to support you in a marriage claim to someone we only have a given name for. I-“

“I knew it! You give Dwalin free rein to marry a nobody and tell me I can’t marry my heartsong. I can’t believe you of all people would betray me this way!” Frerin yelled. He stormed out of the room and the slamming of doors marked his passing through the house and out.

Thorin sighed and looked at Dwalin.

“Ori isn’t a-“

“I know and Ori knows, doncha, lad.”

“I think,” Ori said quietly. “Prince Frerin will have to do more than what he has done if he wishes to court a miner. Many mining families are very selective as to where they marry, nobility or not. They like to know their family members are treated well and are happy. If she has family, they will wish to examine Frerin’s family and him in particular.”

Dis pondered this.

“Then that may teach him a few lessons. We shall have to hope for the best. You two come for breakfast again tomorrow. Fili and Kili will be sorry they missed you, Ori.” She rose and came to Ori’s side. He got up and she embraced him.

“I do apologize you had to witness his outburst.”

“Don’t,” Ori said quickly. “I have the advantage of being very close to my brothers and although they do bicker on occasion we never treat each other so. I hope, as you say, this er…courtship will teach him to appreciate you and Thorin more.”

“Thank you, Ori,” Thorin said gravely.

He rose also as did Dwalin, who clapped Thorin’s shoulder and they laid their brows together, briefly sharing breath as brothers in arms. The act moved Ori greatly. It was strange yet beautiful to see these powerful warrior dwarrows clasp each other in tenderness. He felt his eyes sting and he wanted Nori and Dori there to hold.

Dwalin and Thorin drew apart and Thorin patted Dwalin on the back. Dwalin came to Ori and grinned.

“C’mon , lad. Let’s get yeh home and t’ bed. We’ve both got work in th’ mornin’.”

Chapter End Notes
I'm using the terms:
idad - uncle
udad - grandfather
imad - aunt
umad - grandmother
namad - sister
Late Night Intruder.

Chapter Summary

And just when you thought things were settling down.....

Ori gets to be Brave!!

Stay tuned for chapter seven this Friday, friends, and keep those cards and letters coming!

Your hint is: Meow set to Music

Ori registered the noise in his sleep at first. It was as though Nori was trying to creep in without waking Dori. He slipped somewhat clumsily out of bed, clad in his long nightshirt, to help his brother in and make a cup of tea to clear the night’s cold and drunk as usual.

The instant Ori’s bare feet touched the heated marble floor his mind set him abruptly back to reality. He listened again. He did hear someone moving stealthily in the outer rooms, quietly rummaging. A sick cold knifed through Ori, then he pulled himself together. Dori wasn’t there with his strength, nor was Nori here with his fighting skills.

Ori took a breath. He was Dwalin’s husband and this was something they should deal with together. Ori threw on his old winter coat and yanked the hood up. Thus prepared against some punches and barefoot so as not to slip, he silently opened his door.

A faint light glowed from the sitting room. Ori slid silently over to Dwalin’s door, which opened under his hand. The fire still burned in the grate but the raven was gone and Dwalin was clearly not in bed. Ori choked and wondered how whoever had broken in had managed to overpower Dwalin without a noisy struggle. Ori’s mind worked. He had heard noises. Maybe it had been a distraction to bring Dwalin out of the house. Balin’s absence was well-known but barely anyone knew Dwalin was now married.

Ori tightened his belt and turned. The walls held quite an array of weaponry. He selected a manageable sword, as Nori’s voice reminded him that a knife would allow an enemy too close to his body. Thus armed, Ori chose some hefty-looking manacles.

Ori padded noiselessly along the corridor to the sitting room. The Interloper leaned over the desk opposite, going through a drawer. The casual blasphemy of the relaxed stance suddenly made Ori’s blood boil. How dare this … this crook try and pillage the House of Fundin. His house!

Ori leapt across the room and thumped the villain across the back with the sword. With a loud “Oof!!” the criminal dropped to his knees. Ori finished the job by whipping out the manacles and fastening them around the burglar’s wrists via the stout front leg of the desk.

“Right you!” Ori shouted and pointed his blade at the crouched figure. “Thought you could rob the House of Fundin, did you? Turn around and face me. I’m not afraid of one burglar. You want a tussle? I’m up for it. I’ll give you a taste of dwarfish iron! Right up your jacksie!”

The villain turned and looked at Ori during this speech. Ori was surprised to say the least. The
dwarf was a good deal older that Ori expected, dressed in nothing but a rather threadbare set of grimy combinations and a thick pair of wet, muddy socks. His eyes were bright with a calculating look. The surprising part was the dwarf’s beard, which if clean and combed would might have been a beautiful white, thick and long to nearly his waist.

“Well at least you’ve got some sense of propriety seeing as how well you keep your beard,” Ori commented.

The dwarf raised a bushy eyebrow at him as Ori glanced over to see what valuables were about to be stolen.

There, on the floor, spilling away from Ori's captive was a small waxed paper bag of sweets. Ori glanced at the dwarf again who looked about to speak.

“Don’t,” Ori told him shortly with no anger in his voice this time. He placed the sword out of reach.

“Wait here.”

Ori went though to the kitchen, but kept an eye on his captive. He threw off his coat then pushed the kettle back onto cook top and lit it.

He went though to the larder and quickly put together butter, bread, cold meat, some cheese and a couple of apples. The kettle sang as he brought the food through. He warmed a teapot, added the tea, poured then caught up two mugs and returned to the sitting room laden.

The burglar was busily chewing a sweet and trying without success to break the albeit rusted iron manacles against the desk leg. Ori stifled a chuckle. Seeing as how the desk was carved out of the wall and floor, the thief would have to work at this a long time to get free.

“Let be,” Ori ordered gently as he put down the plate of food, teapot and two cups. He pushed a stool over to the burglar. Once both were seated, one awkwardly on the stool and Ori on a chair near the red granite table, Ori passed the plate of food over to the captive and proceeded to pour them each a cup of tea.

“Thank yeh, lad,” the dwarf started.

“Don’t try and worm your way out of it,” Ori interrupted. “And you’ve nothing to be ashamed of by falling on hard times. Believe me, I know what it is to be poor. Mahal, if you’d just come to the door and asked, I’d have given you a meal.”

“Hard times?” the prisoner repeated.

“Well.” Ori looked over the brim of his mug. “You’re not exactly dressed for the court and you’ve just broken into the House of Fundin, the elder of whom is the head advisor to the king and the elder prince, and the younger is the captain of the royal guard, and also my husband.”

Ori briefly wondered if revealing this information was wise, but the dwarf was chained, so if any of his fellows came back, they would be less inclined to kidnap and ransom someone armed and ready. However, the only reaction was a stunned look that quickly melted into amusement.

“Yeh’re Captain Dwalin’s husband?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Really!” The prisoner’s lips twitched and his eyes twinkled. “Well, where’re me manners? Congratulations, laddie.”
“Thank you,” Ori replied gravely, feeling somewhat thrown by the burglar’s behavior. “Are you some drinking fellow of his and lost almost all but your unmentionables in a dice game? Surely just asking my husband for help would be better than breaking in. Or are you some highly placed flunky of Lord Balin perhaps?”

The reception room door banged open and Ori turned as Dwalin barged in.

“Right, that’s the ponies set.”

Dwalin kicked off his boots, stopped short and stared at the tableau before him. Ori went and tugged shyly on Dwalin’s sleeve.

“Please don’t be too angry. I really don’t think he meant any harm by breaking in.”

“What?” Dwalin managed, staring at the prisoner, who looked both serene and amused.

“That dwarf broke in and was stealing something for clothing or a gambling debt but only managed some candy before I caught him.”

Dwalin looked down, Ori had never seen Dwalin look so confused.

“What?” Dwalin repeated.

Ori pointed at the other dwarf.

“I heard noises, you weren’t in your room and I found him sneaking about, so I caught him.” “Aye! Thumped me properly with that blade then chained me up quick as spit,” the prisoner helped, holding his wrist up, so the manacles could be admired yet still managing to balance his half drunk mug of tea.

Dwalin was frozen in place, gawking. Ori looked up into his husband’s face then down where Dwalin had covered Ori’s ink-stained fingers with a strong hand.

“Dwalin?”

Dwalin’s head came down gently against Ori’s brow and rested there. Now Ori was confused. Dwalin’s eyes were shut tight, his face worked and his shoulders were shaking.

“Dwalin?”

Ori looked up as his husband threw back his head and roared with laughter. Ori sighed and decided that either his husband was laughing at a caught friend or that Dwalin had lost his mind. He looked back at his prisoner.

“I take it you and my husband are acquainted.”

“Aye, yeh could say that.” The other dwarf was all smiles and his eyes crinkled merrily at Ori. Dwalin recovered and put his arm across Ori’s shoulders and cocked his head at the captive.

“Thumped with what blade?”

Ori fetched it over.

“This one, Dwalin.”
Dwalin took the blade. His grin gave Ori fuzzy squiggles up and down his spine then settled, much to Ori’s chagrin, in his crotch.

Dwalin looked over the blade then gave the chain on their captive a tug. He turned back to Ori, his eyes bright with humor.

“Where yeh get these?”

“Your room,” Ori answered truthfully. “They were on the wall.”

Dwalin laughed again. “All the arms on the wall’re just f’r decoration. That blade couldn’t cut butter.”

“So yer goin’ to open this lock?” the captive inquired and drained his tea with a satisfied sip.

Dwalin smirked.

“Nah, I ain’t got keys f’r those. That’s why they’re hangin’ up.”

The captive sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Brother, please tell me yer just jokin’.”

Ori felt his stomach turn over with cold horror.

“Brother?” he whispered hoarsely. He bowed as low as he could. “I am so sorry, Lord Balin… I…”

“Now, none o’ that, laddie,” Balin interrupted him right away and reached over to pat Ori’s shoulder with both manacled hands.

Ori wanted to sink though the floor.

Dwalin stretched.

“Right, you two sit tight. I’ll pop ‘round t’ Gloin’s an’ borrow his heavy shears.”

Ori grabbed Dwalin’s arm. “Wait! If you have two or three old key pin shards, I can help.”

Dwalin looked incredulous but fished said items out of a pocket.

“Donno what yeh kin do wi’ just spikes, lad.”

Ori dropped to his knees next to Balin and worked busily at the locks.

“Dori always locks up tight at night and Nori was suppose to have a key. I was too young to have one. Nori lost his key ages ago, so he taught me how to pick the front locks when I had to sneak out and help him home some times.”

There was a crunching click and the locks opened.

Ori helped Balin to his feet.

“I really am very-”

“Hush, laddie. Yeh did very well.”

Ori stared at Balin. “But-”
“Come now. Yeh’d no idea who I was an’ ye acted perfectly properly. Isn’t that right?” Balin
looked at Dwalin, eyebrows raised. Dwalin grinned, tossing the blade from hand to hand.

“’Aye, not bad at the lock picking either. I’ve had a locksmith mess with those f’r half a day. He
claimed they’d never open if shut again,”

Ori felt a blush crawl up his neck, but he couldn’t keep a smiling from showing. He turned back
to Balin.

“But are you alright? How did you get so… so…?” Ori trailed off, unsure how to ask Lord
Balin why he was sneaking about the place in muddy skivvies.

“Just so you know, lad,” Dwalin chucked the blade and manacles on the low red granite table
with a clatter that made Balin frown. “there’s a bell in me room; th’ guard can call me an’ I meet up
with a runner. There was a bad storm earlier. Roads all to mud an’ ruts. Went up there t’ help ’em
get the carts and ponies out.”

“Oh dear,” Ori sympathized. “Perhaps some hot food, milord? You must be chilled through.”

Balin smiled sweetly.

“Now laddie, ye’ve already got me a meal an’ a good hot cuppa. I’m feelin’ much better.”
Balin poured a second cup for himself and picked up his plate of food. “Well now, I’ll tell ye both
good night as I’m off f’r a wash an’ a long soak in th’ tub.”

With that Lord Balin strolled off down the hall, food laden and muddy, but with the air of a
parade marshal.

“Little brother, if ye’d be so kind as to’ fetch me my dressing gown that’d be lovely.”

“Get it yerself.” Dwalin responded without heat.

Balin turned and fixed Dwalin with the pin of his eye.

“Me dear brother, if ye’d be so kind.”

Dwalin grunted and Balin sailed off down the hall.

“’Aye alright?” Dwalin asked Ori.

“Yes, I hope Lord Balin isn’t too angry.”

“Nah, lad. He ain’t angry ’tall. That’s just his way a’ sayin’ he wants t’ cross examine me about
things, mostly likely yeh.”

“Will he be upset with you after he finds out everything?” Ori asked worriedly.

Dwalin looked surprised then chuckled.

“Likely no’. Balin and I’re very close.” Dwalin was thoughtful a moment. “We’ve never struck
each other. Well, never in anger. Was Dori angry with yeh?”

“No, and he spoke well of you.” Ori smiled, feeling better. “Shall I make more tea for you?
Would you like something to eat?”

“Nah, love. Get back t’ yer rest.”
With that, Dwalin escorted him to his room and they hugged briefly. It was only when Ori was snuggled back under the covers that he recalled the Dwalin had not called him ‘lad’ that last time but ‘love’.
Morning has broken several more rules of Dwarrow deportment.

Chapter Summary

It's Friday and time for a new chapter!! It's a shorter one but I have tried my very best to pack it with excitement.

Ori furthers his acquaintance with Lord Balin and learns a great deal more about hair, beard, beads and braiding than he ever wanted, and we discover the mystery about Dwalin's underpants.

Applause for my editor/co-author Dollypegs for her amazing ability to type and edit in a moving vehicle.

Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!!

This chapter's hint is: In Georgette Heyer’s The Talisman Ring - What did Ludovic do for a bet at Mrs. Ashley’s?

Ori woke as his bedroom door eased open and someone came in.

First he froze, then he took a breath and forced himself to remain still and calm. Dwalin was kind and unlikely to hurt him out of cruelty. Perhaps he was just coming in to wake Ori or refill the carafe of water at the bedside. Ori peeked out from under the covers with one eye as someone put a tray on the bedside table. On the tray sat a cup and saucer with a tiny silver cream jug and matching bowl of honey; a teapot smothered in an intricately sewn cozy took up most of the tray. Ori’s shoulder was gently patted.

“Wake up, laddie,” Balin greeted him cheerily. “It’s time f’r tea.”

Ori struggled out of the blankets and stared at his brother-in-law. Balin looked very fetching with his hair and beard clean, bright white and immaculately curled. He wore a quilted red velvet dressing gown with gold tassels around the cuffs, collar and hood.

“G-good morning,” Ori managed.

Balin smiled warmly.

“Didn’t hear how yeh liked your tea, so I brought both cream an’ honey.”

Ori looked down to admire the charming round tray.

“Th-thank you, Lo- Balin.”

“Why so surprised, laddie? Surely-” Bain paused then shook his head. “Nah, he’d not bother while I was away. Really, he ought t’ have now that yer married an’ all.”

Balin went to the door then turned back.

“When our adad was away, mam would always make tea an’ we’d each have a tray. It gives us
another hour or so in bed t’ doze or read. Since she passed t’ th’ Great Halls, Dwalin and I always do this when we’re both home.”

Ori smiled at the tale, suddenly reminded of an earlier question.

“Thank you so much for including me. That’s such a dear story, I would fully understand if either of you preferred to keep it just between you.”

“Nonsense, laddie.” Balin beamed at him from the doorway.

Ori noticed he had another tray in one hand and was lifting a second off the bureau near the door.

“If you and Dwalin are going to er … read for a bit, might I trouble you to tell me where I might perhaps have a bath?” Ori asked quickly as he hopped out of bed.

“Of course, laddie. Hold this and I’ll just take Dwalin’s tray to him. On second thought—”

Balin handed Ori very old tray with a faded pattern of barely recognizable small blue flowers. The lower corner had a chunk out of it. Ori looked at the chunk wondering and Balin chuckled.

“Back in th’ day when we were lads, he’d throw it up at th’ ceiling t’ see if he could get it stuck in th’ wall rails. That chip’s all that’s left now t’ remind the pair of us when he fired it off too blasted hard an’ shattered th’ overhead glass light; fifteen candles - Or was it sixteen? - an’ all blown elfin glass. Mam hated the thing and just laughed. When adad found out, he beat Dwalin bloody, but Dwalin never cried an’ adad gave up in a rage. This tray’s somethin’ of a trophy now.”

“Mahal,” Ori intoned piously then blurted out, “All I could wonder was what had tried to eat it.”

Balin convulsed again. “If that was the case, yeh can assure yerself it was Dwalin.”

As though in a dream, Ori followed Balin through into Dwalin’s room. The raven woke and flapped its wings a little then settled once more. Ori watched as Balin strode over to the dark and cold fireplace and turned the lever. The flames leapt up and Ori got a good look at his sleeping husband.

Dwalin sprawled face down on the enormous bed. Black tattoos marched from under Dwalin’s hair down his spine to disappear into his drawers. Ropes of muscle stood out even at rest. The blankets tangled around his feet. One pillow lay on the floor, another propped against the headboard and the third under Dwalin’s left armpit. All was still and silent but for the whispers of the flames and Dwalin’s sonorous snoring.

Ori placed the tray on the bedside table, noting the handless stoneware cup, glazed grass green with bright yellow spots scattered over, and the battered enameled tin teapot of butter yellow with green cornets on the bottom and lid.

Balin made a shooing motion and Ori followed his method and laid a hand on Dwalin’s well-muscled shoulder. Dwalin shifted a little, growled deeply then, to Ori’s surprise, smiled, eyes still closed, and muttered.

“Fuck off, Balin.”

His tone was so warm and kind, Ori choked and giggled. Dwalin sat straight up and stared at him wide-eyed. Ori decided he quite liked his early morning husband, hair and beard askew, eyes wide, and sitting in the middle of a semi-destroyed nest.
“Good morning,” Ori said pertly.

Dwalin dragged a hand over his own face and stared at Ori.

“Fuck.”

Balin snickered.

Dwalin’s gaze whipped to his brother.

“What the fuck, Balin?”

“Good mornin’, brother.” Balin bowed with a flourish.

Dwalin squinted at him.

“What the fuck yeh got on yer feet?”

Balin lifted his dressing gown hem and Ori goggled at a pair of very elaborate slippers, red velvet, open above the ankle like a two-spouted ewer with gold tassels on each end. The slipper completely covered the foot and extended upward at the toe into an elegant curl with its own gold tassel. Balin turned his foot about and pointed his toe.

“We came back through Mirkwood, an’ th’ Sylvan elves came out t’ trade. Aren’t these fine?”

Ori nodded, wordless.

Dwalin snorted and rolled over to pour out a cup.

“You look like a tree-fuckin’ elf. Yeh gonna do a spring dance or sumthin’ f’r us?”

Ori clapped a hand over his mouth. Dwalin took a noisy sip and winked broadly at Ori. Ori blushed then winked back. Balin looked at both of them, caught up the hems of both the dressing gown and nightshirt and pranced across the floor to the bed, kicking up one leg then the next. Ori burst out laughing and scrambled out of the way. Balin twirled gracefully up to the bedside, turned, bent and fully mooned his younger brother. Poor Ori was choking by this point.

“Mahal!” Dwalin barked, slamming the mug down. “Put that away. I ain’t even had me first cup!”

Balin chuckled and wagged his rear but hopped nimbly out of range when Dwalin tried to smack the tempting target. Dwalin missed and tumbled to the floor, cursing. Ori, still giggling, helped him up. Balin executed a step dance out of the room, calling after.

“Ori, come with me an’ I’ll show yeh th’ bath. Come along, me poor grubby lad.”

Dwalin smirked, blushed, then rubbed the back of his neck.

“Better run an’ have yer bath, lad.” He smirk grew to a rueful smile. “Sorry, didn’t think of givin’ yeh a proper show around before. Feel free t’ hog as much hot water as yeh fancy, there’s always plenty.”

Ori return the smile, thanked him shyly then headed to the door. At the exit he turned and looked at his husband. Ori saw the humor in those bright hazel eyes as Dwalin caught him staring. Dwalin grinned naughtily and sucked in his stomach, raised his arms in a stretch then flamboyantly flexed his arms and chest muscles, swirled with tattooed runes and piercings. He popped one pec then the
next, each accented by a flash of silver from the nipples, followed by a ripple of the abs beneath. Ori felt his face burn and his stomach flutter. He shifted, slid through the doorway then quickly turned, ready to run.

“What nice drawers you wear, husband. The color suits you. Dipfa would be so proud.”

Ori fled to the sound of Dwalin laughing and calling after that he was a “rascal.”

Balin, halfway down the hall, held his sides, silently shaking with laughter. When his eyes met Ori’s, they both snickered.

“Balin?” Ori managed.

“Aye, laddie?”

“The color suits him down to the ground but I never expected Dwalin of all people to wear pink drawers.”

“Well, our Dwalin gets impatient with servants an’ was making th’ point t’ me that we didn’t need ‘em. He did th’ wash. Once.”

Ori winced and closed his eyes,

“Aye, lad,” Balin affirmed. “Boiled it all together. Ruined most everything we had in th’ clothes baskets. Needless t’ say, he’s a stubborn so-and-so. Mind, he won’t be caught dead outside the house in ‘em. Here’s the bath f’r yeh.”

Ori leaned against the side of the tub, blissfully submerged to his chin in the hottest water he could bear. It was wonderful to be so clean and in a bath this size. Sitting with his legs out stretched he could not touch the far end and the sides came up to his ears. He desperately wanted Nori and Dori there, so they could share. No! Better, than that, they could each take a turn! He sat up a little, straightened, reached out to the small table beside and brought his tea back to finish his second cup with a contented sigh.

Lord Balin seemed perfectly happy to brush aside the insult of Ori attacking him. Dwalin had become more flirtatious and playful this morning. Ori put the playfulness down to the brothers being reunited once again. They seemed as close to each other as Ori was to Nori and Dori.

Today was the day Ori and Dwalin met Dori and Nori for dinner. Ori wondered what he could say to convince both his brothers that he did want to stay and give his marriage a chance. Everything he had written to Dori still held true despite Dori offering to ‘rescue’ him. The sound of movement in the hallway reminded Ori they were, as before, bidden to Lady Dis’ for breakfast.

Ori regretfully climbed out, pulled the stopper out of the drain, tidied the room and dressed. He padded down to his bedroom, rubbing the towel in his hair. Dwalin came out of his own room and grinned at Ori, the former still rumpled and only in his drawers but a great deal more alert. He stopped and ran a hand over Ori’s hair.

“Don’t dry it too much. I’ll redo yer braids f’r yeh. I won’t be long.”

“Where should I wait for you?” Ori asked politely.

Dwalin gave him a confused look.
“Where’ver yeh fancy. I’ll find ye. Mind, Balin’ll probably want company while I get meself sorted.”

Dwalin disappeared into the bathroom. Ori caught himself watching the pink linen clad behind. The solder had excellent posture and his movements were smooth. Watching the muscle flex and flow across his back and butt was like watching runes being written.

Blushing, Ori pulled his attention back to his hair. He drew his fingers down his marriage braid to the end to remove his marriage bead—that was not there.

Sick horror plunged him into shock. Ori took some deep breaths and closed his eyes. He meticulously cast his mind back then remembered: the wall spigot. He had washed his hair under the wall spigot before he climbed into the tub.

Ori burst through the bathroom door and flung himself on the floor, hands out-stretched, searching across the tiles around the drain as hot water coursed down.

“Bloody fucking Mahal!”

“My marriage bead,” Ori cried out, searching the floor nearby.

Perhaps it was in the tub.

He knelt up then was pulled to his feet and turned. His eyes followed the pointing finger to the two mithril beads tucked safely in the soap dish. Ori gulped with relief and nearly wept.

“Oh, thank Mahal! Thank you, Dwalin.” Still gasping, Ori hopped up on tiptoe to kiss Dwalin’s cheek. “Thank you so much I thought I’d lost it!”

Dwalin shook his head with a lop-sided smile.

“Easy love, it’s found, no need t’ fuss. Now go through and muck with Balin’s brain. I’ll bring ’em both when I’m done here.”

With relief still surging through him, Ori went to his bedroom, caught up his hairbrush and trotted through to the living area. Balin sat at the big desk he had been chained to not many hours ago, writing in a large, scrolling hand.

“Ah, there yeh are, wee brother,” Balin addressed him with a twinkle in his eye. “Feelin’ better are we now?”

“Much better, Ba- brother, thank you.”

Balin looked him over then straightened the papers, set the pen back in the tray and clicked shut the lid of the gem studded ink bottle. Ori noticed there were now several matching bottles along the polished marble shelf above the desk. Each bottle contained a different hue of ink. Ori resisted reaching for them as Balin rose. Balin escorted Ori to the sofa.

“I take it Dwalin’s going t’ put yer hair an’ beard in order when he comes through.”

“Yes.” Realizing Balin was running a critical eye over him, Ori added quickly. “He’s got our marriage beads with him.”

Balin nodded, looking at the brush in Ori’s hand.

“May I?”
“It was my eldest brother’s.”

Ori handed it over a little reluctantly.

Balin glanced at him then returned to the desk, twitched open a small side drawer and removed a box shaped object. Balin flicked it open to reveal a magnifier. He turned one end and it expanded into a double magnifier. With this Balin examined the brush carefully.

“Well, well, well. Very interestin’.”

“It was my brother’s!” Ori insisted. “He told me Nori didn’t steal it!”

Balin gave him a flabbergasted look, then cleared his throat and explained.

“This’s quite th’ treasure, laddie. It’s an oil brush. Did yeh know this?”

Ori shook his head.

“There was an art t’ makin’ these. Now look here.”

Balin came back to the couch and passed the magnifier to Ori and directed it for him.

“See here how th’ bristles’re hollow an’ th’ inside of th’ brush is soft? See over here, there’s a wee pommel? It should open an’ yeh’d siphon th’ oil into th’ brush.”

Ori stared then gasped.

“How cunning! You brush and oil your hair and beard perfectly! That’s why it always smelled so good. I just associated the scent with my brother.”

Balin put the magnifier away and regarded the brush.

“A very rare treasure. Hmm, we’ll need t’ take it t’ Lady Gridr, Master Gloin’s wife, cousins of ours. She’s an expert with trinkets an’ novelties such as this. She can clean an’ refill it with oil f’r yeh.

“Isn’t that right, brother?”

Balin turned, as Dwalin plowed into the room and over to the entryway to dumped his weaponry on the floor near the door, grunted in reply to Balin and unceremoniously tucked his linen shirt into his breeches. Balin tut-tutted at him.

“Brother, yer not half dressed.”

Dwalin turned, grinned at Ori then stepped over Ori’s knees to sit on the low red granite table in front of Ori.

“If yer in that much of a tearin’ hurry, do my hair while I do Ori’s.”

Ori leaned forward, expecting Dwalin to re-do just his marriage braid, but Dwalin had decided that he was going to brush and comb through Ori’s hair and beard.

Balin made quick work of Dwalin’s hair then came around to Ori’s side and started to instruct Dwalin on the intricacies of the differences between a scrivener’s braid and a scrivener who was training as a scholar at the library.
“It’ll do them all a deal of good t’ see th’ proper braids in yer hair, laddie.”

Dwalin grunted, busy with Ori’s hair. “I remember. I used t’ do yers.”

“Aye, but I got me scrivening as a scholar working in th’ diplomatic corp. Our Ori’s a fully-fledged journeyman scrivener working as a scholar toward academics. Th’ braid starts higher an’ begins with each end twisted t’ th’ right.”

Ori remained still as the brothers worked on his hair. Part of him was overwhelmed to think that the captain of the guard and the advisor to the king were doing this for him, nothing more than a poor parentless dwarf from the Dale. Yet part was thrown back to his childhood when both Dori and Nori would do his hair. The true difference in this was that unlike Dori’s fast-moving hands tugging through and Nori making the family braids far too tight, Dwalin’s hands were so gentle in Ori’s hair and neither brother pulled too tight or worked it too loose. Their interaction made Ori want to fall over giggling.

“Aye, lad,” Balin instructed. “No. Turn that one under then twist th’ middle to yer left … to yer left …No, yer other left.”

“Fuck yeh, Balin.”

“That’s me left.”

“I’m goin’ t’ bloody kill yeh.”

“Now yeh have it, lad. Well done.”

<grunt>

“Let’s tie t’em off with th’ teaching library color. There now … Dwalin, that’s th’ wrong color.”


“Th’ library color’s meridian blue. That bead yeh’ve got’s cobalt with gold inlay.”

“Fuck yeh, Balin! It’s blue. Th’ library color is blue; shades of blue f’r scholars.”

“Wonderful. Aye, let’s have our Ori go in front of Brur, th’ head of th’ Great Library of Erebor labeled with braids that say he’s a scholar working as a sausage-maker currently employed as a court dancer. Excellent!”

“What th’ fuck’re yeh talkin’ ’bout?”

“Cobalt in th’ hair on tha’ side’s mixed meat. Gold inlay’s a court dancer. Pray, why d’ we even have such beads in our house?”

“How th’ fuck do I know. I’m not th’ one spendin’ all ’is time muckin’ about in foreign parts.”

“I travel f’r- Don’t tie his journeyman braids that loose, Dwalin! People’ll think he’s a stable hand!”

“Fuck yeh t’ Khazad-dûm and back!”

“Now yer just bein’ shrill.”

“No, I’m bein’ pissed. If I were bein’ shrill it’d sound like this!” On the last words Dwalin lifted
the timbre of his voice until he sounded rather like an irate peacock if one could speak.

“Fuck yerself, Balin!” said the peacock.

Ori snorted louder than he meant to and shoved his hand into his mouth to shut himself up which resulted in a sound rather like a barn animal. Ori looked up. Both brothers’ faces were almost in his, opposing eyebrows raised. The family likeness burst in on Ori and he almost slid off the couch laughing. He was immediately resettled by one hand from each brother in each of his armpits, hoisting him back up.

“Well, brother, I’ll leave th’ pair a’ yeh t’ put in yer marriage beads. Ah, here they are.” Balin picked up the mithril beads, looked them over frowning. He puffed on them then held the two beads together and polished them with his sleeve.

Dwalin carefully braided Ori’s marriage bead back in. Ori peered around to look. Dwalin had a soft smile on his face. He caught Ori’s glance and winked.

“Don’t worry. No one’s going t’ mistake this braid f’r a mastery in button-making.”

Ori snickered. “And I’ll do my best not to braid yours up to be mistaken for a paid companion.”

“Yeh kin try, laddie,” Dwalin chuckled, “but I’m sure as axes wouldn’t be able t’ pick up extra f’r the house-keepin’.”

“Why not?” Ori asked encouragingly. “You have a wonderful beard.”

“Thanks, love. But the ol’ fizz above it? Not likely!”

“You could always show ’em your pink skivvies.”

Ori felt slightly aghast at his own boldness but Dwalin was highly amused

“Nah, that’d scare off even a seasoned guard like meself. Sorry, love, yeh’ll have to’ come up with somethin’ else.”

Dwalin finished Ori’s braid and turned, so Ori could put in his. Ori bit his lower lip, and then seeing as how his husband seemed in a mood to joke, asked anyway.

“Is that why you still insist on wearing pink drawers?” Ori finished Dwalin’s braid quickly. “To frighten your subordinates?”

There was a loud snort and both Dwalin and Ori turned to see Balin bent double. Ori looked back at Dwalin, who smirked at his confusion then licked the tops of his two fingers and tapped them against Ori’s nose.

“Smart arse,” he said warmly.

“Are we ready then?” Balin inquired, seemingly fully recovered.

“Aye, right behind yeh.” Dwalin rose and offered his hand. Ori took it and was surprised by the sudden spark as their hands slid into one another. He’d never felt that before when Dwalin took his hand. Ori got up, he felt like a flame rising from the strongest spark that could ignite any tinder. He looked up at Dwalin. The older dwarf’s eyes were hazel with a fiery burn.

“Come along th’ pair of yeh,” Balin ordered.
Ori stepped out into the courtyard, hand in hand with his husband.
Hello again, friends,

It's Tuesday and the last Tuesday of regular postings. I had to use up some vacation time and was helping some friends, which gave me Tuesday evenings free for storytelling. That's finished as of today. I'll only be posting on Fridays now. This also works well for me and for Dollypegs as we have almost reached the point where I'm still furiously scribbling events to happen to Ori!

This is another shortish chapter and it is rather action-packed. And I get to use the word 'majestic'!

BIG WARNING: This chapter contains a nasty fist fight. If you don't want to read the fight part, no problem, the details of it are not vital to the story *but* that it takes place is. To avoid the fight, skip from "That chair's aslant." and start again at "Laddie! Wee brother! Yeh a'right?".

Your hint this chapter is: What is Erebor made of?

We'll meet again this coming Friday

Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!!

“I think it says a great deal that you weren’t attacked on this trip,” Dis put in, helping Balin to more bacon.

“Oh, but I was, milady! Quite suddenly, too! I was completely overpowered an’ taken prisoner.”

There were several gasps and the crashing of dropped cutlery and food.

“What?!?” roared Thorin.

Dis stifled a slight scream, while Frerin, Fili, and Kili’s eyes were wider than saucers. Ori wanted to slide under the table but rallied when Dwalin’s hand caught his. Dwalin leaned close and murmured in Ori’s ear.

“Balin loves spinnin’ a good tale. Jus’ look surprised an’ try not t’ laugh.”

Ori concentrated on his eggs while Balin spun the long, breathlessly exciting tale of his capture by Ori, conveniently not mentioning Ori’s name.

Ori snuck looks at the rest of the dwarrow at the table; all but Dwalin were hanging on Balin’s every word.

“Then,” Balin said after a dramatic pause, “Dwalin stepped into th’ room saw me predicament; saw me capturer, his sword an’ th’ manacles biting into me wrist an’ he said…” Balin turned to
Dwalin glanced around at Balin’s audience now waiting for his part in the drama. Dwalin took a swig of tea, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“I said I ain’t got keys f’r those.”

Ori almost choked, while everyone else’s agog expressions melted into confusion.

“No,” Balin complained.

“Aye, that’s what I said when I saw th’ manacles.”

Balin sighed gustily and shook his head.

“Yer never one f’r a good tale, Dwalin.”

“Dwalin, really!” Lady Dis scolded. “How can you be so lax about this? Thorin, don’t you-? Brother, whatever is so funny?”

Thorin grinned at Dwalin then leaned across the table to Ori.

“Let me guess; you woke up alone and heard someone lurching around your home that you knew was not Dwalin.”

Ori shrugged and saw humor in those deep blue eyes.

“I didn’t know who he was.”

“No!” cried Dis, her eyes wide. “Ori! You captured Balin?! Durin’s beard!” She burst out laughing.

“That’s brilliant, Ori-mate!” Fili reached over to clap Ori on the shoulder.

“But,” Kili started. “Didn’t you notice the sword was blunt?”

Ori blushed. “I don’t know much about swords.”

Balin beamed at him.

“Well, yeh’ve got a good arm if yeh ever want t’ take it up, laddie.”

Ori shook his head. “Thank you, but I believe I’ll leave the weaponry to Dwalin. Seeing as how my first attempt led to your … um… imprisonment.”

Balin chuckled. “Aye, an’ there I was caught with me hands in a poke of candy; clad in nuthin’ but me skivvies an’ muddy socks.”

This along with Balin’s shaking head and doleful tone set the entire company laughing again.

* * *

Dis signaled Dazla who brought out a small bowls of honey and cream covered tiny spring
strawberries while Balin finished his tea and asked for the latest court news. To Ori’s surprise, there was a crash of fists and elbows on the table as Frerin leaned heavily forward.

“The news, oh great diplomat? Well, I shall tell you that the most interesting of which is that my elder siblings have, for no solid reasoning, rejected to support my suit to Udad,” Frerin barked angrily.

Thorin sighed and squeezed the bridge of his nose.

“Oh!” Fili spoke up. “The mine lass, Janifur, the one you met while on parade?”

“Yes. Suddenly she’s not good enough!”

“I didn’t say that!” Thorin roared.

“You might as well have,” Frerin yelled back.

“I said, I would not and, frankly, could not support your suit without being able to speak of her family.”

“And neither will I,” Dis agreed. “We must at least meet her!”

“There’s nothing wrong with her family!” Frerin argued.

“Now, laddie,” Balin soothed. “I’m sure we can sort this out. Who’s she the daughter of?”

Frerin sulked.

Thorin replied, “He doesn’t know her family name.”

Balin appeared to consider then looked back at Frerin.

“Now lad, that’s going to be the first thing the King’ll ask.”

“Why does it matter? She’s wonderful. She’d clever and beautiful and strong! She’d be a wonderful yâsith in this family. You’d all like her!”

“I’m sure we would and will, little brother,” Thorin continued, “But until we know her family we can’t…”

“Stop worming your way out of this!” Frerin shouted. “You’re just like Adad and Udad! You just want to marry me off like a tool, not a living being, to the most useful ally you want to because you’re both afraid Udad will leave me the throne.”

Ori glanced at Thorin and Dis, both looked as though they were developing headaches. Balin was obviously keeping a patient face on. Dwalin looked bored. Ori caught his eye and lifted an inquiring eyebrow. Dwalin shrugged and rolled his eyes. Ori calmed, this was obviously an old argument taking a different form. Ori pondered as the shouting match continued.

Frerin would be the worst king that could ever happen. Thror has become so insular and hard times have been descending on all over us and the people of Dale for quite some time. He will only make this worse. Janifur. Ori could think of at least three families who used the suffix ‘fur’ for their children, all with more than one child. They were all good families.

“Frerin,” Ori put in when all participants had stopped to draw breath. “I’ve been thinking-“
“I’m sure you have,” Frerin bit out. “Thinking how lucky you are to have snagged Dwalin hard enough that he’d elope with you.”

Ori gasped as Dwalin snarled and was on his feet. Balin held out a hand.

“Hold on, brother. Here, Frerin, lad, what do yeh mean by that?”

“Yes, Frerin,” Dis said over Thorin’s growl. “Tell us.”

Frerin glared at Ori, leaving the young dwarf puzzled as to what he might have done to earn Frerin’s anger.

“Well, Ori freely states he’s adadless by going as ‘of the Brothers Ri’ and he’s from the Dale rather than the mountain. Who of any good standing lives in the Dale rather than the mountain?”

“Good standing and wealth are not the same things, little brother,” Thorin said quietly.

“Fine!” Frerin went on. “Ori, have you brothers and sisters?”

“Only brothers,” Ori replied, keeping his tone good-natured. “I have two elder brothers, no sisters.”

“And you live where?”

“The end of Steam Alley.”

“Steam Alley - well, there are certainly some excellent families there! Running rag and bone shops, pawn brokers and several extremely dirty pubs.”

“Frerin, prince or no’!”

“Let me finish, Dwalin! And your brothers, what do they do for work?”

“Dori is a metal smith. He is first assistant and journeyman to Master JinGhr at the Forge in Dale.”

“And the other brother?”

“Nori’s…” Ori started.

“Nori does stupid things and gets in trouble.” Dwalin bit out. “Only he doesn’t had wealthy relatives t’ bail him out all the time.”

“I’ve paid Nori’s bail the last few times; ever since I got my journeyman’s,” Ori reminded him.

“Oh, you pay bail for a gaming philanderer, Ori of the Brothers Ri?” Frerin was back on him.

“Nori’s not a gaming philanderer,” Ori corrected quickly. “He’s a trouble-maker and sometimes thief who gets caught every now and then. It was so we could eat in the beginning, but now it’s his habit.”

“Brilliant. A thief in the family,” Frerin shouted.

“Makes an honest change from our own gaming philanderer,” Dis sniffed.

Thorin coughed then pushed Fili’s chair with his foot.
“Off to lessons, you two, now.” He reached into his pocket and Ori heard the clink of coins. Thorin placed some in Fili’s hand. “Hurry up. The butchers are at the market center today. Buy your lunch there.”

“Thank you, Idad.” Fili said brightly. Kili opened his hand for his share but Fili put it all in his pocket. “Don’t worry, Mam, I’ll make sure he eats properly.”

Kili pouted.

“Tidy your back, lad,” Thorin ordered and grabbed Kili by the belt. Ori saw him push a few coins into Kili’s pocket.

Kili turned with a huge grin on his face and glomped onto his idad.

“Thank you, Idad Thorin. I don’t like being seen with a messy back.”

Thorin grunted and pushed the young dwarf off him.

“Off with the pair of you. Now!”

Both dwarrow grinned as they barreled over to kiss their amad and shout farewells to everyone else at the table before pushing, arguing, and shoving each other out the door.

Balin smiled around. “Now we-”

“We were happy with having a thief in the family,” Frerin barked.

“Give it a rest, Frerin,” Thorin groaned.

“No. Ori, what do you do so well that you can afford a thief’s bail every now and then?”

Dwalin snarled and Ori put a hand on his husband’s beneath the table before he thought. Ori cocked his head at Frerin then said slowly and clearly.

“I am a scribe. You knew that from when we first met.” Ori finished his fruit, watching Frerin. The youngest prince showed no sign of letting the subject go even in the plain sight of his elder siblings’ boredom.

“Yes, an amazing scribe! Who’s shop do you work out of? Not any in the mountain.”

“I free-lanced from home after I finished my journeyman’s at Khujik’s shop. You know them as they publish all the pamphlets from the court land use cases.” Ori waited to see where Frerin wanted to lead this conversation.


Dwalin was almost half way around the table to Frerin before Thorin and Balin grabbed him. Ori felt the cold stone of shame settle in his stomach, although this was not the first time he’d heard the jokes about working out of his home.

“Of course not,” he replied frostily and quietly. “I charge by the hour it takes me to do the entire work and whether or not a translation is involved. I take it from your statement that the scribes you are used to dealing with only use those letters and have not a care for the character they draw from. Mind, even such can say they know what it is to earn their bread, unlike you.”
Frerin snarled in reply and Thorin and Dwalin both turned to look at Ori.

“Good one, laddie,” Balin commented as Thorin and Dwalin started to chuckle and returned to their seats.

“Well, expert wage-earner,” Frerin groused. “How did you trap Dwalin into marriage? I’d heard he was sweet on you but why not just keep you in elfin sheets with your own kind at Steam Alley? What did you do to force him to bring you up in the world?”

Ori froze. He had never thought of their situation in such a way before. His blood turned to ice as he slowly realized that this was exactly what he had done, though not by original design. To the noble class, it would look as thought he had trapped Dwalin. Dwalin was a dwarf of honor and good lineage. Faced with Frerin’s words Ori knew he had trapped Dwalin in the cruelest manner possible.

Ori rose, fists clenched, glaring at Frerin as tears rolled hot down his cheeks.

“Yes, Frerin, I trapped Dwalin. I had offered myself in payment to Master Calmar when Calmar decided to execute Nori for his tricks and thefts. Instead of leaving me to my fate at Master Calmar’s, Dwalin rescued me and instead of accepting my service or my life, Dwalin married me instead. Nori and Dori are all I have and I would happily have given my life for them. Instead Dwalin gave me a new life, he freed Nori, burnt his file, married me, got me a job at the library where I can make a good living, and neither Dori nor Nori will have to go hungry. Yes, I trapped him and – ”

Ori’s words caught in his throat and became sobs. The next moment he was held tight, sagging into Dwalin’s broad chest, crying hysterically. Ori clenched Dwalin’s shirt in his fists.

“I’m sorry, Dwalin! I’m so sorry! I jus-”

“Hush, love. Ain’t nuthin’ t’ be sorry f’r.”

Ori choked, he knew that some how he had to make this right. He had acted dishonorably. He registered Dwalin’s arm about him with one hand deep in his hair.

“But Dis,” Frerin’s voice had taken a to a whiney turn. “Janifur?”

“Yes, yes, she and her chosen family members. Bring them to dinner; anytime convenient.”

Frerin crowed and called back over his retreating footsteps, “I knew you’d support me, namad!”

Dwalin muttered several curse words Ori didn’t know as Thorin growled in Khuzdul. Dwalin lifted Ori out of his embrace. Ori swipe at his eyes. Enough, he told himself. He had to face what he had done and at least do that as a proper dwarf.

Ori was thrown for a moment as now he and Dwalin were seated in a couch before a good fire. Ori remembered it as the room he and Dis had spent the afternoon in just the other day. Dis was at the fire and Balin and Thorin were placing chairs opposite Dwalin and Ori. Thorin pulled his up close in front of Ori.

“My prince,” Ori began, determined to get through this, “you must free Master Dwalin. I only-”


As the other two came and seated themselves the prince leaned forward, fixing Ori with his
majestic gaze.

“Ori of the Brothers Ri, son of Rikmha, did you or did you not just claim that you tricked Dwalin to marry you?”

Ori sat up. “Yes, my prince.”

“And do you feel that this is a harmful marriage to Dwalin?”

Ori nodded, eyes stinging.

“Answer me,” Thorin ordered.

“Yes, my prince.”

“Do you see this marriage as solely for your own benefit with nothing to benefit Dwalin?”

“Yes, my prince.”

“Then let this tribunal decide. You will explain your side and Dwalin shall explain his. Now repeat, in detail for all present, how you came to be married to Dwalin.”

Ori straightened his spine and carefully repeated the circumstances from how he had first heard of Nori’s predicament to falling asleep in the Fundin House.

“Very well,” Thorin said evenly. “You will now explain why this is harmful to Dwalin.”

Ori swallowed; it just was.

He paused and said slowly, “Dwalin is the captain of the guard, thus with me as being poor and from the Dale and …”

Ori trailed off as Thorin raised one eyebrow while Dis looked as though she was trying not to laugh. Ori realized this argument would lead nowhere, so he tried again.

“Um… I’m a scribe… I have nothing to …to improve his, um… well, his life. And- and he doesn’t know me and Nori’s a thief and hit him. And we live in Steam Alley. I don’t know anything about his career as a soldier. And…”

Ori wavered then the right words arrived.

“My past life and associations could only hurt Dwalin’s standing in court and among his peers and men-at-arms,” Ori finished quickly and paused. He looked at Thorin, who regarded him calmly.

“How is this solely for your benefit,” Thorin asked, “and not Dwalin’s?”

Ori felt back in his element.

“That’s obvious, my prince. I have already listed the ways it could damage Dwalin and all of you can readily see I have received all manner of benefits.” Ori gestured, taking in the room, the company, and his own clothing.

“Hmph,” Thorin replied. “Dwalin, did the marriage come about as Ori said?”

“Aye,” Dwalin agreed.
“Are you harboring a deep hurt from this marriage?”

“Nah, me lip’s pretty much all cleared up.”

Silence.

“Dwalin?”

“Wha’?”

“Attempt to stay with me in this discussion. Are you hurt in anyway… barring the physical?”

“Nah.”

Thorin sighed in unison with Balin. Ori glanced to his right. Dwalin leaned against the couch back, looking quite pleased with himself.

“Do you see this marriage as hurting your standing at court or with your superiors or with your men?”

“Nah, if they’re in service t’ me, they already know me as a commander an’ they respect me or I wouldn’t be where I am. They know when it comes t’ family and personal matters I don’t give an elf’s crotch hairs about such matters.”

Both Balin and Dis choked and Thorin muttered, “Charming.” but Ori saw the deep affection in the prince’s eye.

“Do you feel you were forced into this marriage under false pretenses?”

“Yeh’ve got to be kidding!”

“Do you feel you have been in many ways led astray?” Thorin asked with a long-suffering sigh.

“Led astray?”

“Captain Dwalin!” Thorin finally shouted, though Ori thought there was a tiny edge of laughter in his voice.

“Look,” Dwalin leaned forward, obviously ready to give more that a monosyllabic reply. “I’ll tell yeh sommat about what was going on a’ th’ Master’s court. I’d bin checkin int’ thin’s there f’r a good while now. Yeh an’ Balin know why.

Thorin’s eyebrow raised in query.

“What we were talkin’ on b’fore Balin went off.”

Both nodded.

“Besides I couldn’t’ve shown up in Dale th’ next rest day askin’ t’ see Ori, could I? What in Mahal’s sight would that’ve looked like? ‘Good day t’ yeh, Master Ori. I’m Captain Dwalin. I left yeh to watch Calmar murder yer brother and even though yer a slave now di’ yeh fancy a long walk down by th’ lake with me?’ That’ve been bloody grand, wouldn’t it?”

“Good point,” Thorin conceded. “Still do you see yourself as being forced into this marriage?”

“Mahal, no! It was th’ only thing I could think a’ do t’ save th’ lad.”
“Save me,” Ori repeated. “You saved Nori by taking me.”

Dwalin paused. He drew a breath and his expression hardened.

“Nah, lad.”

Ori stared at him puzzled, then Thorin leaned forward.

“Master Ori, if Dwalin had not come to your rescue, what would you have done?”

Ori shuddered at the memory.

“I’d have…” Ori took a breath. “I’d have acted no differently. I’m glad Dwalin came, though.”

“Why?” Dis asked.

“Calmar was so disgusting,” Ori whispered then made himself shrugged before continuing. “Dori always said time heals all; cuts, bruises, tears, and in time memory fades…”

“Lad,” Dwalin cut him off softly. He laid his hand on Ori’s cheek and bowed his forehead against Ori’s.

“Oh, lad, didn’t yeh wonder about what Calmar woulda’ done t’ yeh?”

Ori shuddered again.

“But I had to save Nori…”

“Aye, yeh know once that sort gets a taste they only want more and they share.”

Ori choked then tried to stifle sobs as the full horror of his situation finally dawned on him.

“Mahal! Oh Mahal!” Ori buried his face in his hands, his body shaking. Ice curled about his heart but steadied a little as he felt Dwalin’s arms about him.

“It’s a’right, lad. I was there an’ I’m here, now. Yer gonna be safe wi’ me.”

“But-” Ori struggled to recover. “This isn’t your choice. You don’t want to be married to me. I…”

“Didn’t I jus’ say I was plannin’ on comin’ down t’ call on yeh?”

Ori looked up at him.

“Whatever I can do to-”

“I don’t want yer pity ‘r gratitude,” said Dwalin sharply.

“What else could I do to be a good husband?” Ori asked. “Other than the obvious and I am grateful.”

“Good point,” Thorin repeated. “Tell us Dwalin, in what other way does this marriage benefit you, other than, as Ori say, the obvious?”

Dwalin glared at his prince, who remained aloof and immune.

“Fine. He can write and take notes faster then any other I’ve seen. He can write in different
scripts as well as doing fine illustration. Master Brur hired him on the spot. He’s got proper manners as yeh’ve seen, so there’s no need to train him up f’r court nonsense an’- Eh?”

Dis was making slight movement of encouragement to Ori, Dwalin snorted.

“I know he can cook, he told me. I also know he’s a dab hand at makin’ and knittin’. He’s also good with maps as I caught him looking over some at the office. And I’ve seen some a his sketchin’. Balin and Brur can have him trained up in no time f’r codes and other languages. And….” Dwalin paused. “You lot an’ Balin all like him. He’s a good fit with us.”

Thorin leaned back in his chair.

“Ori,” Dis asked gently, “is there a reason why you and Dwalin should not be married?”

Ori gawped at her, at a loss.

Balin smiled and leaned forward.

“Perhaps all this business with Nori aside; if Dwalin had come callin’, would yeh’ve received him?”

“Of course, but I…” Ori wasn’t sure how to put what he wanted to say politely.

“Say it, lad.” Dwalin’s voice was resigned but gentle.

Ori sighed.

“I would have, but considering the differences in our statuses, I … I would have been quite suspicious that you were either amusing yourself for some strange reason or trying to get information out of me about Nori, - which would be useless as he never tells me anything like that because if he did Dori would break his head - or that you had lost a bet.”

“Lost a bet?” Dis cried. “Ori, you are not allowed to speak so low of yourself!”

“I hadn’t given courting much thought without my master’s in scrivening. The only other thing was Dori told me once that your really should attain your mastery before thinking about things like courting and getting married.”

Balin cleared his throat.

“Ori, laddie, are we t’ understand that yer only true objections t’ being married t’ Dwalin’re that yeh don’t feel yeh know him well enough t’ trust his interest thus affection an’ attraction t’ yeh. An’ yeh do not feel yer qualified either as relatin’ t’ yer chosen work or social status?”

Ori pondered. “Well, yes, I think so… I thought, well, I was in for a rough life then suddenly I’m signing contracts in Khuzdul and braiding hair.”

Thorin snorted. “You’re such a joy to be around, Dwalin. No wonder Ori’s swept away by your charm.”

“Fuck yerself, Thorin.”

Ori giggled before he could stop himself.

“Ori,” Dis reached out and took his hand. “Let’s be practical for a moment; do you like Dwalin, the entire concept of games like “hide the sausage” or “What’s in the mine shaft” aside?
"Namad!"

"Lady Dis!"

"Fuck!"

"Aside!" Dis continued loudly. "Do you like him well enough as a companion and want to work together as his partner?"

Ori looked sidelong at Dwalin, who was as red as hot coals.

"I – I- Yes. I mean these last few days have quite wonderful and both he and Balin were most forgiving of my er… poor decision skills this morning."

Both Thorin and Dwalin roared with laughter.

"An’ that’s another reason Dwalin an’ I benefit,” Balin pointed out. “He’s quite capable of defending our household! True, it was defending it against a son of th’ house but it showed great honor an’ courage.”

“In my note to Dori,” Ori continued. “I told him that I did intend to give this marriage a try but then I was only thinking of my advantages.”

Thorin turned to Dwalin. “So, other than the obvious reasons to marry Ori-“

“Will yeh stop fuckin’ sayin’ that!”

“Fine. Aside from fucking-“

“I’ll kill yeh!”

“Do you like Ori?”

“Are yeh off yer head? Did I just say that I want’d t’ court him? Ain’t I bin sayin’ f’r the last year and a bloody half I’m that blind-ass daft about him?” Dwalin roared.

“Thank yeh, dear brother! Well said,” Balin praised. “See how much easier thing are when yeh use yer words!”

Dis and Thorin stifled their laughter in each other’s shoulders. Dwalin groaned and looked pleadingly at Ori. Ori could feel his own face burning and presumed it quite matched Dwalin’s at the moment but at the same time, Ori felt his heart warm and he found himself smiling through new tears of happiness.

“Oh! Captain! I mean Dwalin! I- I- No one has- I mean- I never ever expected such words from anyone in my life. I can assure you no one has ever expressed such sweetness to me before. I promise I shall endeavor to do my very best to be an excellent husband, scribe and map specialist for you and the House of Fundin.”

Ori reached over and took both Dwalin's hands into his, and his heart melted when Dwalin responded by catching him close, an arm about him, a large hand burying itself in Ori’s thick hair, mumbling.

“Just wantin’ yeh to be happy and have everythin’ yeh need and never goin’ without again.”

Thorin broke the moment by clearing his throat at a rather unnecessarily loud volume.
“Since both of you are in agreement in giving your somewhat surprising marriage a try, I shall grant you two years trial period. We will open this matter again at that time. For now, barring death or violence against one another, the matter is closed.

“Dis and I are late for court, Dwalin needs to be in the Dale. Balin has a meeting with Brur and thus will be able to escort Ori to the library.”

Dis bustled off to the kitchen with Balin in tow. As Thorin told Dwalin to help him get the ponies ready, Dwalin gave Ori’s hand a squeeze. Ori squeezed back happily.

“Shall I come and help you both?” he offered.

“No,” Dis popped in again. “You stay here, I’m just going to put on my court shoes. Hurry up you two.” This to Thorin and Dwalin, both of whom chuckled. Dwalin let go of Ori’s hand and led the way out. Thorin chucked Ori under the chin and followed.

The house seemed suddenly empty even although Ori could hear Dis swearing somewhere about a ‘stupid heel” and in the distance he thought he could hear Balin singing something about birds and bees and sycamore trees. Whatever a sycamore tree was.

Ori glanced about then quickly busied himself with putting the room and furniture back to rights. He pushed the last chair in place when he heard footfalls in the room.

“Mahal, Dis! Your court shoes sound very-“

Ori turned and there was Frerin in the doorway, Ori took a breath. Everything had been sorted. There was no need for further enmity between himself and the younger prince. He smiled

“Oh! You’re back quickly, I-” A thought struck him. “Nothing’s happened at the court, has it? If you need Thorin, he and Dwalin are in the stable getting-”

“Well, aren’t you just making yourself comfortable in this house.”

Ori sighed, so much for calm family times.

“I’m just helping put things back to rights before we all leave. Speaking of which.” Ori decided to change the subject to something less tense. “Would you happen to know what a sycamore tree is? I heard Balin-”

“You. Balin. Already counting yourself as our equals then?”

Ori sighed.

“Lord Balin invited me to address him as so… your highness.”

“Better. Though why Dwalin would hang on the likes of you when he’s been tupping Thorin since they were grubby badgers.”

Ori shrugged.

“Don’t care, eh?” Frerin commented. “As long as you get your full pay in house and home I suppose it matters not.”

“It’s the tradition of princes and men at arms bond together over time and become comrades in arms. I think I would be more surprised to learn they were not, your highness.”
“I bet you would be. That chair’s aslant.”

Ori turned. The next thing he knew he was on the floor with a pounding pain on his jaw.

“That’s for Dwalin. I heard what your brother did. Striking a captain of the royal guard, too. Your brother should have gone down on his knees and thanked Dwalin. Dirty street scum.”

Ori struggled up and looked at Frerin as bravely as he could.

“I accept this. My brother hurt a member of your family. Your act is honorable. May we put our animosity aside now and at least behave as friends?”

“Friends? Friends with you? Of all the…creatures Dwalin could have chosen. He should have been mine, you know! Once Thrain was lost in Azanulbizar and Thorin took his place for Thror, Dwalin ought to have been assigned to me. Me! And by Mahal, I would have had him knowing his place and obeying!”

Ori registered thinking that Frerin was as fruity as a nut cake in Nori’s terms, before Frerin grabbed him by the throat and slammed him against the wall.

Ori reacted as Nori had taught him, as this was the behavior of men. He grabbed Frerin’s littlest finger and wrenched it back while kicking Frerin in the crotch as hard as he could.

Frerin howled in both pain and rage, dropping Ori. Ori jumped to his feet, but being unfamiliar with thick carpeting, tripped on the rug and stumbled back on the couch.

Frerin loomed over Ori. As quickly as he could, Ori scrunched down on the seat and pulled up his knees. He grabbed the fabric for leverage and kicked out with both feet as hard as he could. Frerin toppled back across the room, falling heavily to the floor. Ori got to his feet, panting.

Unfortunately Frerin was a trained warrior who was both taller than and outweighed Ori. Ori was forced back against the wall. Frerin’s forearm shoved into his collarbone, holding him there. Ori pulled up his knees again and kicked out. Without the proper leverage his feet did not have the accuracy or power of his first kicks. They were however, effective enough that one landed in Frerin’s thigh and the other on his knee.

Frerin landed a breath-stealing punch to Ori’s gut then vanished upward. A familiar pair of brawny arms lifted Frerin by the belt and hair to a full arm’s outstretch toward the ceiling then body-slammed Frerin to the floor.

Ori slid to the carpet, gasping; Dis and Balin were on either side immediately

“Laddie! Wee brother! Yeh a’right?”

“Ori! Ori, dear- Mahal, you’re bleeding!”

Ori looked at Dwalin, who was holding a furious Frerin pinned to the floor, with his boot on Frerin’s face.

Thorin grabbed Ori, lifted, and passed him bodily to Dwalin. Ori sank gratefully against Dwalin’s chest as the larger dwarf’s strong arms wrapped him close. Ori felt safe there.

“Yeh hurt?” Dwalin murmured in his ear.

“Not much. Just a couple of scratches-“
Thorin started laughing in a most unpleasant manner.

“Look at you, brother. Both eyes blackened, missing tooth, all scratched and cut from top to bottom. Perhaps it’s for the best it was here in private. Now you can safely say you were set upon by a pack of warg-riding Orcs rather than admit you just got your ass beaten by a little scribe half your age and size!”

Ori started to apologize to Dis about her furniture, but she was more concerned with the blood on him, which turned out to be mostly Frerin’s.

“It’s all his fault!” Frerin shouted, pointing at Ori as Thorin had finally managed to force Dwalin to get his boot off the dwarf prince’s face. “If he had behaved in courteous manner towards his betters—”

“Fuck yerself, Frerin!”

“But I did, “ Ori protested. “I called you by your title when speaking to you as you asked.”

“Family members don’t use titles in private!” Dis scolded. “Just a moment, Ori, pet. I’ll get you one of Kili’s shirts. You can’t go to the library looking like that.”

Frerin pointed at Ori.

“You struck a son of the royal house.”

“I said I accepted your first hit as revenge for what Nori did to Dwalin. That’s fair – “

“Fuckin’ Frerin! I’ll kill yeh!!”

“But…” Ori went on, putting his hand on Dwain’s fist. “When you struck me again I was within my rights to defend myself.”

“No, you’re not!” Frerin roared, “You live in the Dale, not under the mountain! You should have begged for mercy”

“Frerin! Don’t talk such idiocy!” Thorin barked. “All of the race of Durin are equal whether they live beneath the mountain, around it, or high in the vales of Ered Luin. We as nobles and leaders are born to help our people not demand their worship the way the races of men do.

“A true king is only as great as the lowest of his people. We serve. We do not expect anything more of our people that we are not prepared to do ourselves. You want to be pandered to? Go rule among men or elves.”

Frerin sniffed and Ori rubbed at his throat. Suddenly Dwalin’s hands were there, lifting his chin. Ori saw a look pass between Dwalin and Thorin. Thorin came over and inspected Ori’s throat.

“Laddie!” Balin gasped. To Ori’s surprise the older dwarrow reached over and grabbed the youngest prince by his side-whiskers, eliciting a yelp of pain.

“Leave be, Balin,” Dwalin said suddenly. The brothers exchanged a look of understanding.

“Frerin,” Thorin said quietly. “You come with me and Dwalin to the stables. Balin, would you please get Ori to work.”

Dwalin bowed his head to Ori’s brow with a murmur.
“I’ll catch yeh up later.”

Ori, out of sheer gall that Frerin was still watching them, leaned up to press a kiss to Dwalin’s cheek.

“Remember, we are bidden to Dori’s tonight for dinner.”

“Aye, I’ll fetch yeh from the library.” Dwalin smiled, an impish look in his eyes as he returned the gentle peck to Ori’s mouth.
New Faces, Old Friends.

Chapter Summary

Hello again friends!

It's Friday so we're back and ready for another exciting chapter of the weird life we've given Ori

In this chapter, we meet some new people. Do tell us how you like them as both will be good friends to our hero. No overt hints this time, but there is a library joke.

We love seeing the hits count going up and thank all you very much for the kudos which make our days when we see them. Please tell us what you think, as constructive criticism is always welcome. If you have any plot bunnies for us, do tell! We can't promise to pop them in, but we'd love to hear about them or see your artwork!

If I have a minute or two Tuesday night, I will try and get the next chapter up, but if not, we'll see you all back here next Friday!

Keep those cards and letters coming! And we're off!!!

Ori could still feel himself blush whenever his mind returned to that kiss. Balin guided the pretty grey pony at a fast trot through the streets and then cantered up to the huge edifice of the library.

Ori stroked the beautiful bright blue linen shirt he now wore. Dis had caught him in the hall, on the point of his walking out the door with Balin, stripped off his blood-spattered shirt, then manhandled Ori into this one of Kili’s. It sat rather longer on Ori than Dipfa would approve of, but he knew he looked very nice.

Balin drew the pony to a halt at the front steps, hopped out, then held out his hands to Ori. Ori carefully navigated his way out of the little shay. He turned and blushed hotly as Master Brur walked up to them. Brur told one of the young library pages to see to Lord Balin’s pony and, with a sly wink, Balin tossed the badger a little coin bag.

“So I see yeh’ve each made the acquaintance a’ th’ other,” Brur commented obviously quite amused.

“Aye, indeed we have.” Balin smiled and drew Ori’s hand through his arm. “I couldn’t have chosen better f’r my brother. Our Ori’s been a joy from th’ start.”

Ori stared wide-eyed at Balin, who winked at him and laid an expressive finger along the side of his nose. Ori turned to Brur, hoping his aghast confusion wasn’t showing too much. Brur looked him up and down and Ori felt as though he was back in his badger days when Dori had once caught him sitting in the middle of a mud puddle in his feast-day clothes.

“Well, yer a little early, young master Ori,” Brur observed, “but it does rather appear yeh’ve something of a busy morning.”

Ori swallowed down the comment that rose to his lips.
Why yes, Master Brur. I have already ambushed and manacled Lord Balin, teased the Captain of the Royal Guard about the color of his drawers and interrupted his bathing, had a fist-fight with one prince, and am now roaming abroad in the shirt of another.

Ori took a breath.

“A little complicated perhaps, Master Brur.”

“Hm. I’ve had th’ pages supply yeh with th’ books I want yeh t’ start with on yer desk. Miss Konul here’ll show yeh th’ way up to th’ Scholars’ Hall from this door. I’m no’ sending yeh t’ lectures, as that’d be a waste of yer time. I’ve also put yeh down t’ spend th’ afternoon in th’ reference hall t’ familiarize yeh with general searching an’ such.”

Ori perked right up at the Head Librarian’s words.

“Miss Konul,” the librarian called.

A badger lass raced over, pink-cheeked and eager. Ori quickly named himself and offered his hand with an “at your service”.

Konul, daughter of Thul, was thrilled and told him so in a voice so high-pitched Ori decided her parents had put her to work in the center of the mountain so the people of Dale would not suffer hearing damage.

He turned and bowed to Brur, then to Balin, who tut-tutted and embraced him. Chucking Ori under the chin, Balin turned to Brur.

“Please go easy on him t’day, old friend. He’s only beaten th’ living snot out a’ Frerin this morning. Just after breakfast, actually.”

Brur remained motionless in body and expression except for the one large eyebrow, which shot upwards at an alarming speed.

“Oh, did he now?”

A clatter of hooves turned all four dwarrow toward the road as Harley galloped up and jumped to a stop. Dwalin got off and went to Ori. Ori, not sure what to expect, chose to hold his ground while Dwalin roughly invaded his personal space, gathering him close.

“Here,” Dwalin shoved a small coin purse into Ori’s hand. “Yeh’ll need to pop out t’ the market f’r yer lunch. Both Balin an’ I’ll be back later with th’ ponies t’ get us all t’ yer brothers.”

“Oh,” Ori turned. “Are you coming too, Lord Balin?”

“Of course, laddie. I’m lookin’ forward to meetin’ me new brothers-in-law very much.”

Ori, under the guise of hugging Dwalin, whispered, “I’ll probably be paid soon so if you would please buy something extra for Dori’s table, I’ll repay-“

“I’ll take care of it,” Dwalin murmured.

Ori sighed then raised his eyes.

“We both need to be at our work.”

“Aye, I know. Here, yeh know I-“
Ori surprised himself by saying, “Yes, and if you keep behaving as you are I shall likely be falling ass over tea kettles in love with you before next week is out. So never say I didn’t warn you.”

Ori felt his cheek burn at his own brashness but Dwalin grinned around a blush of his own. Ori smiled to Dwalin, who leaned in to kiss him. Ori delighted in the burn of Dwalin’s lips against his own.

“Be safe,” Ori said softly and started as he was rewarded for his sauce by a wicked grin and gentle slap on his butt.

Harley whickered while Dwalin swung himself back on. Ori giggled as Dwalin urged the pony forward and the velvety nose snuffled Ori’s ear. Harley gave a squeal of mischief and, with Dwalin’s encouragement, took off at full speed, up the street leaping lightly and cleanly over a merchant’s cart and vanishing out toward the main gate.

“Ooooh, Master Ori!” the page sighed in delighted admiration. “You are so lucky! Your husband is sooo handsome.”

Ori smiled to himself.

“Yes, Miss Konul, he certainly is.”

Konul giggled.

“Well, I suppose I shall be quite rude and ask you if he has any brothers.”

Ori turned to Balin, who cocked an eyebrow at the page. Konul turned purple as Brur rolled his eyes.

“Let me take you to your desk, Master Ori,” she squeaked and rushed for the door.

Ori followed and when they were through, Konul turned.

“I’m so sorry, Master Ori! Do you think Lord Balin will be very angry?”

“I doubt it.” Ori smiled.

Konul bustled forward and she and Ori vanished into the great halls of the library.

* * *

Ori put down the last translation and collected his notes to reread and edit.

“Master Ori?”

He looked up at a dam close to his own age standing by his bookshelf. She was obviously quite passionate about the color pink. Two large, pink bows perched side by side on the back of her head, holding back a thick cascade of nut brown hair. Tiny pink ribbons dotted the mass of tiny braids crisscrossing her beard.
She was shadowed by another dwarf who was about as round as he was as he was tall, wore an anxious frown, and was clad completely in black. Something about the way he did his hair made Ori think it was colored that amazing shade of absolute black by copious use of boot polish.

Ori rose and offered his hand to the dam.

“Yes, I’m Master Ori, at your service”

“Omibur, at your service,” she said as she grasped his hand eagerly. “You’ve just started yes?”

“Yes, I have, so I may not be able to assist you with much.”

Omibur laughed, her head ribbons bobbing.

“You can assist us by coming to the market for lunch, please.”

Ori was a little shocked at her bubbly manner, but found he liked her right away. She looked vaguely familiar but Ori couldn’t place her just then.

“I’m Buj, at your service,” the other young dwarf announced out of the blue. “I apologize for Omi’s rudeness. She was raised at an inn.”

Ori turned at looked at Buj, who glared at Omi, whose sole response was to put out her tongue.

Buj offered Ori his hand.

“I’m trying my best, Master Ori, she wasn’t raised in the mountain and I don’t want the other dwararrow to make fun of her.”

Ori clasped Buj’s hand briefly.

“Then I’m afraid I’m placing both of you in danger. I was born and raised around Steam Alley.”

“How nice!” Omi cried.

Ori stared at her.

She giggled again.

“I mean it’s nice because I know Steam Alley. My mam goes there to see old Dam Rittl. She makes medicines for dams.”

Ori smiled.

“Mistress Rittl also makes the best current buns if you’re there on first rest day.”

Omi clapped her hands softly. “I know!”

“We’re wasting our lunch time,” Buj told them.

Ori corked his ink bottle and laid his pens aside.

“I’m coming.”

He smiled at Buj, who grinned hugely in reply.
Ori had seen the area and heard many things about the meat market but to be going about in it was bewildering. Everything smelled delicious! The young dwarrow wandered about deciding what to eat. Ori chose a thick mutton stew served inside a heavy roll and some raspberry cordial. He found a seat on the broad stone dock set over a decorative pool in the middle of the market. He looked up to see Omi and Buj making their way over to him.

“We have a sample tray!” Omi called. She hurried up and showed the woven straw tray with a number of little rolls, each with different fillings.

“And,” she cried, putting them on the stone, then bumping down opposite Ori. “My imad gave me these today!”

In another basket were several quite lovely looking elderberry tarts.

Buj arrived with four large filled pastries and something wrapped in white paper. Ori was about to ask about them when suddenly two large dwarrow landed one on either side of him.

“Hello, Ori, old mate!” Fili greeted him cheerily then began stuffing his own face with a large chop, using the bone as a handle.

“Ori!” Kili stuck his head into Ori’s space. “What have you got?’

“Stew. My friends-”

Kili looked up at Omi and Buj staring at him. Omi obviously recognized the princes. Buj was merely startled at the expansion of their little group.

“I’m Kili, he’s Fili,” Kili stated, smiling.

Fili grunted around the bite he’d just taken.

Omi swallowed her awe and immediately introduced herself and Buj.

“I’m Omi, he’s Buj. Do you want some of these samples with us?”

“Thanks.” Kili was delighted. “Here, have some of this bird I’ve got.”

He tore off wing and held it out to Buj, who regarded it in the light of something about to bite him.

“No, thank you. I’m involved with some research. I’m proving a theory on myself. It’s complex.”

Kili blinked then paled a little.

“Oi, come on, mate, there’s a dam here and we’re out and about. You can’t go poking yourself! Besides the humans say the palms of your hands will grow hair.”

“He said prove,” Fili bellowed around another mouthful. “Not poke, you idiot!”

Kili pointed at Omi.
“Dam! There’s a dam here! You can’t talk filth like that in front of a dam! I’m telling Mam!”

Fili grasped frantically at his belt for weaponry, found nothing large enough to satisfy his outrage and settled for glaring at Kili who, having finished his fried bird, was wolfing down his fourth sample. Buj busily peeled all the pastry off his food and Omi laughed so hard she curled on the stone, holding her sides.

“What is your theory?” Ori asked, weakly.

“What in Mahal’s name are you eating?” Fili demanded.

Buj raised a superior eyebrow at the elder prince and laid out all his food items on the tray for their inspection.

“We have a selection of different items consumed by the various peoples of the realms,” Buj explained. “These are seed cakes - hobbit food. Hobbits are smaller than us and have large feet connecting them to the ground in which they grow their grains. Here we have a custard - food from Men. They make cheeses, puddings, and butter. They get their food from animals, mostly as liquid. Now, here is our food, mostly meat roasted over fire. Finally, here are some items Elves eat.”

Buj opened the paper and displayed a bunch of fresh green leaves and a bunch of dried herbs.

“Their food comes from plants, which feed on air. As the men say ‘you become what you eat’.”

“If I eat that seed cake, will I shrink?” Kili asked.

Buj beamed at Kili.

“I’m very glad you asked that question, Master Kili. You show great depth and it is at this depth that my testing begins. One or two seed cakes here and there aren’t going to matter a whit. But what if, and I repeat if, you ate nothing but seed cakes?”

“You’d get the runs!” Omi said firmly.

“No,” Buj said, tiredly.

“Yes, you do!” Omi insisted. “My mam made a whole tray for the dinner crowd and my youngest brother ate the lot! He spent the whole night on the pot and the noises he made were dreadful!”

Fili looked up. “Was he moaning and groaning in pain?”

“No, he was farting and poo-ing which woke us all up and we thought it was an early spring thunderstorm!”

“That bad?” Fili gasped. “Just from seed cakes? Mah-a-a-al, I wonder how the hobbits cope?”

“That is just my point!” Buj said loudly. “If it’s the only things you eat, your body will change and adjust.”

Fili leaned forward, licking his fingers.

“So you’re going to eat all that elf food to grow taller?”

Buj shrugged.
“That may be a side effect but we do know for a fact elves are durable and very light. Light to the point of walking on top of newly drifted snow.”

“Yes,” Ori agreed, “but how does that prove your theory of … er … your theory?”

Buj reached onto a deep pocket and withdrew a small book. His fingers fluttered through pages, riddled with notes in a crabbed hand and violent sketches.

“He dropped the book open on the stone, his forefinger jammed to a picture of a dwarf in what looked like a bird costume. All looked at the picture, then at Buj, all in a similar state of confusion. Buj beamed at their attention.

“Yes, my friends, by eating extreme amounts of elfin food I shall render my person quite light, don this apparatus and, from the top of our mountain, and using the wind …” He paused for dramatic effect. “Fly!”

“Mahal!” Fili, Kili and Omi gasped together.

Ori wasn’t sure about this.

“Are you certain the apparatus and the wind will be enough?” he asked

Buj gave another superior smile, tucking his book back into his pocket and patting the outside.

“No matter. I have been saving my pay against such projects. As my inventions require, of course. If further calculations show more thrust is necessary, I shall petition the king for the use of the military catapult.”

Ori was assailed by a vision of Buj being hurled via catapult from the top of Erebor in a high east wind. Such would put Buj straight into Mirkwood. Having only seen an over-copied print of the king of the Greenwood, Ori could not imagine Thranduil’s reaction to a dwarf in a bird costume suddenly plummeting into his court.

Ori sighed. He’d best let Balin know there was such an idea afoot. Balin would make sure Sylvan elves understood this was a testing of a theory and not King Thror suddenly deciding to turn the joke about dwarf-tossing into a form of active warfare.

Kili poked him and startled Ori out of his reverie

“Wha’?”

Kili looked him over.

“I don’t remember you wearing a blue shirt this morning at breakfast. It looks exactly like one of mine. Blue really isn’t your color, Ori-mate.”

“I know. It is your shirt,” Ori supplied. “Your mam put it on me before I came to work.”

“I know. It is your shirt,” Ori supplied. “Your mam put it on me before I came to work.”

“Oh.” Kili pondered. “Didn’t you like the shirt you were wearing? I thought you looked well in it. Didn’t you, Fili?”

“Aye, aye, suited you fine, Ori! Don’t remember you getting covered in your own breakfast to have to change it. What happened?”

Ori didn’t think it was a good idea to tell them he’d been fighting with their idad.
“Um … It’s kind of complicated,” he floundered.
Kili nodded compassionately and patted his shoulder.
“I understand, old fellow. I have days like that, too.”

* * *

Brur introduced Ori to the reference librarian, who was heading the main desk that afternoon. Wobr, tall for a dwarf, carried himself with a military build and manner. His clothes, all of varying shades of brown velvet, were copiously bejeweled with brown enstatite, his hair heavily oiled and beaded with tourmalines. His beard coiled tight to his face and braided into a long strand that almost touched his collar button. His waxed mustache wound into large double curls on both sides. He didn’t bother to hide that he was unimpressed with Ori.

After Brur left, Wobr waved Ori off to the stacks area to reshelve the cart of books by the desk, telling him to explore and find his way about.

Ori studied the file markings on the books and various shelves. It didn’t take him long to see the pattern of filing and he went about his duty with pleasure.

He was about to shelve the last book and turned down the area to do so. On the floor, at the back wall between the shelves, sat a red haired young dwarf paging grumpily through a book and muttering. There were more books on the floor than on the shelves, many open in various places and others piled recklessly about.

He was in the most magnificent sulk Ori had ever seen.

“Hello,” Ori greeted him and was treated to a frowning yet morose look.

The book in use was dumped on the floor.

“I hate books,” the young dwarf declared in a surprisingly deep voice.

His words were childish but his tone was more defeat than anything else.

Ori looked at the mess between the two shelves.

“You appear out-numbered. May I offer some assistance?”

He made his way through the piles and offered his hand to the dwarf.

“I’m Ori, first level librarian on reference duty this afternoon. At your service.”

“Gimli, Son of Gloin, at me wits end an’ ready t’ pull out me beard, at yers,” the dwarf replied glumly.

Ori quickly picked up all the books and put them on his cart. Gimli gave him a hand once he saw what was happening.

Ori led Gimli out to a long reading table and sat him down at the head. He turned the cart and so all the titles from the books showed on the spines and then sat at the corner of that table.
"How may I assist you, Master Gimli?"

"I need t’ know some Elvish."

"To converse?"

"I suppose so . . . sort of."

"In person?"

"Nah, letter."

"Do you need a translator?"

"No!"

"I’m sorry.” Ori pondered his now crabby client. “Let’s begin anew.”

"I jus’ want t’ be able to say a couple of thin’s in elvish.”

"Oh.” Ori smiled. “I know a few phrases—”

"Yer a pointy-eared, tree-shaggin’ butt-head.”

"Oh. Ah. Unfortunately, those aren’t any of the ones I know.”

"Aye, well it ain’t in these books neither.”

Ori arranged his chair to a more conversation oriented set.

“Perhaps it might be best if you explain how this need to call someone a butthead in elvish came about. Is it perhaps a one-up game with your friends?”

‘One-Up’ was a badgers’ insult game and was annoyingly popular among the richer classes of badgers.

Gimli shook his head then glared at Ori.

“Yeh better not tell—”

“This is a reference interview,” Ori interrupted curtly, “not a gossip session. Please proceed.”

This turn of phrase seemed to impress Gimli enough that, after grumbling to himself, he dug out a piece of paper, and handed it to Ori.

Ori examined the delicate written sheet. It was not the smooth vellum dwarrow used. It was soft to the touch and looked as though it was made of birch bark. He unfolded it and read quite an insulting letter in Westron. Placing the letter on the table he pondered the insults. There was no rhyme or reason, no statement of intent, no demand for apology for an insult or injury.

“Had you met the writer and held conversation with this person before?"

“No, jus’ smiled an’ handed it to me.”

“An elf?”

“Aye.”
“May I examine this fully?”

Gimli looked a little confused but nodded. Ori held the letter up to the oil lamp then crossed to the great fireplace then tried to see if there was another layer between the paper as even bark grew in layers.

“What in Mahal’s name’re yeh doin’?”

“Elves are known for codes and riddles. This could also be his way of trying to play one up but there’s no sense to the insults.”

Ori laid the letter on the table and placed his hand across, obscuring all but the first letter of each line.

“Look.”

As he and Gimli gazed at the first letters, Ori showed Gimli that reading downward, the letter now read, ‘Hello, my name is Legolas. Would you like to be friends?’

“It’s called an acrostic,” Ori explained. “As I said elves are known for riddles especially word games.”

“Would yeh look at tha’!” Gimli admired.

Ori smiled to see the younger dwarf’s eyes light up.

“So how do I answer back? How d’ yeh make these thin’s?”

Ori pondered then looked through the books Gimli had been going through.

“Well, first off, why are you in code PJ5118? That’s language and etymology.”

“Because tha’ oily bonce over there said so.”

Ori sketched a glance at Wobr, who was busily inspecting the ink bottle label.

“Come, ‘Ori said. “We need to be in code GV1507 and while we’re at it, probably GV1507 rune break W9.”

Putting his full cart next to the desk for counting, Ori led the way to the various places and soon had young Gimli supplied with a simple Sindarin to Westron dictionary and three books about making word puzzles. Ori also raided the references desk while Wobr was mending his pen.

Gimli stared at the vellum heavily inked with a grid. The next hour saw Ori and Gimli carefully build a word puzzle with a friendly answering message hidden amongst a jumble of other Westron letters in the shape of a Dwarrow Rune.

Gimli patted the blotter lightly over his message and beamed at Ori.

“’This’s brilliant! I’ll tuck it back in with Da’s letters goin’ t’ th’ West this evenin’.”

“I hope you had an enjoyable time with this,” Ori replied. “I’ve made a note here of the codes and the titles, so when you need you can look them out again.”

“Troll poo!” Gimli grinned. “I’ll just ask f’r another reference interview with Ori th’ first level
Ori took a deep breath, deciding on the shortest answer.

“I’m not long married into the House of Fundin. We’re quite near—“

“Fundin?” Gimli barked as his eyebrows shot up. “Yer Captain Dwalin’s new husband then?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Sweet golden ore! What a choice turn! I’m right glad we’ve met. My Mam’s first lady in waitin’ t’ Princess Dis an’ th’ pair of ’em were in a huge flutter abou’ th’ whole thing. Lady Dis thinks gems fall out of yer every orifice an’ Mam’s tha’ eager t’ meet yeh. She’ll about get her beard in a twist when I tell her we’ve met. We live next t’ you. Th’ door Da had done in red sand stone with th’ name plates in rubies.”

Ori remembered it and nodded.

“I am happy to know you, Master Gimli.”

“Right, I’m off,” the younger dwarf announced abruptly. “Yeh want puttin’ ’em all back? I could probably do it in a hic an’a half.”

Ori pictured Brur in a towering rage and demurred politely.

Gimli marched out, his boots thumping across the stone floor twice as loudly as before, whistling a jolly tune, and slamming the main door for good measure on his way out. Ori was thankful no one else was about.

Ori gathered the books and took them to the reference desk. To his horror, Wobr glared at him and Brur was watching Ori with interest.

Ori placed the books on the cart and came to stand in front of the desk.

“I can’t believe you had the gall to conduct a reference interview on someone I had already helped!” Wobr hissed angrily.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know,” Ori replied quietly. “I was shelving the books you told me to and found him in the PJ section in a rather morose state. I was only trying to help.”

Wobr opened his mouth but Brur stopped him.

“Thank yeh, Master Wobr, yer time f’r reference desk’s finished f’r th’ afternoon. I believe yer due up in preservation.”

Wobr stalked off. Brur sighed and sat down at the desk, motioning Ori to follow suit.

“I see our young researcher nearly took th’ PJ section apart. Obviously he wasn’t findin’ what he wanted.”

“No, Master Brur,” Ori replied honestly. “We found what he needed in code GV1507.”

Brur sighed.

“I didn’t think he looked th’ sort t’ be wanting a bunch of text books an’ such.” The older dwarf looked up. “I’m glad yeh were here. Did yeh enjoy it?”
Ori reflected a moment. *Yes, I did. Doing copy work for others has its own rewards but helping that badger decipher and create a letter in a different code, hopefully meeting a new friend had been, well, it was fun.*

“I’m still finding my way about but, yes, I did enjoy it.”

“Good.” Brur smiled, nodding. “I’ll assign yeh some work yeh can bring t’ this desk.”

Brur rose and turned to leave Ori at the desk.

“An’ by th’ way,” Brur looked faintly displeased. “We’ve pages t’ shelve an’ keep use count, librarians of any level do not.”

Brur drifted off soundlessly. Ori was inclined to feel angry with Wobr until he remembered Wobr was now going to have to deal with Brur, so it was nothing Ori had to worry about.

He examined the desk to his satisfaction, going through all the drawers, notes, seeing what instruction books were left about, studying the maps of the floor plans of the reference room and it’s twenty floors of open stacks, to the two hundred and eight floors of closed stacks, offices, workrooms, lectures halls, and storage areas for more unusual items.

“Sorry I’m late, the lecture-“

Ori turned to see a dam about his own age hurrying forward. She reminded him of Omi and he knew he had met her before. He knew her well. The dam obviously had the same thought.

“Ori?”

“Lolibur?”

Loli clapped her hands over her mouth to stop a squeal and rushed forward. Ori was so happy he nearly cried.

Lolibur, daughter of Bombur, had been his only friend as a small badger. Her parents Master Bombur and Mistress Erda had owned a pub at the far corner of Steam Alley on Steam Track.

When Ori was just starting to be considered for an apprenticeship, Master Bombur’s older cousin arrived home from the war in Azanubizar where he had been thought lost years ago. Master Bifur was fine, he was still a little confused, of course, and could only speak in Khuzdul or sign in iglishmêk as he had the remains of an orc axe stove into his forehead, but was otherwise quite well. After visiting the military headquarters in the Mountain he also had a hero’s pay. The whole family, Master Bombur, his wife, his brother, and all thirteen of Loli’s brothers and sisters moved to the far side of Lake Town to a beautiful inn Master Bifur purchased with the pay.

Loli and Ori had a good, long hug and a good hard forehead thump that left them both giggling.

“Oh, Ori! I’ve missed you so! How are you?” she asked, looking him over, rather like Dori inspecting a roasting swede. “How are Dori and Nori? What are you doing here? Not that I’m surprised! How long have you been working here since I’ve never seen you!”

Ori laughed. “It’s so good to see you, too, Loli! We’re all fine. Dori and Nori are in a house in Steam Alley now, not in that horrid rooms to rent place any more. I only just started here yesterday. How’s all your family?”

“Are you in classes?” Loli skipped the family question in her eagerness.
"No. Master Brur said study in the mornings, reference desk in the afternoons."

Loli stared. "You must be a genius! But then you always were the cleverest one."

"And you had all the courage," Ori reminded her.

They looked at one another again and laughed.

"So," Loli proceeded when they let go. "I’m here with my younger sister Omi."

"I met Omi and Buj! They invited me to lunch with them today."

"Oh Durin’s beard! Buj! He’s clever but completely off his nest. His parents, Broadbeams from the West a few generations back, are very noble. Don’t know what to make of him. His elder brother Wobr works here too and pretends they aren’t related. Their mam feels like the weasel that ate the hen only to lay eggs for the rest of her life."

"Buj is a very unusual egg at that," Ori allowed. *Now that egg has not only hatched but quite determined to fly in truth. No wonder Buj is so resolute. To be so inventive and have an elder brother like Wobr? Nori would never treat me with such pettiness any more than I would treat either Dori or him.*

Ori had a sudden flash of memory.

"I remember Omi now! We used to call her Moth, didn’t we, as she was always chasing shiny things!" Ori recalled. "No wonder I didn’t recognize her name."

A thought shook him.

"What happened to the lovely inn down near the Lake at Dale?"

"Nothing," Loli smiled. "It’s a vast success! We’ve even had Elves to stay. Why?"

"It’s a long haul to travel every morning for the pair of you."

"Oh. We stay with Mam’s sister’s husband’s brother-in-law and his husband. He’s Oin, son of Groin and his husband, idad Binni. Idad Oin’s the Master Healer. He’s awfully nice, deaf as a stone troll but nice. We call him idad along with his own brother Gloin and his wife imad Gridr. They have a—"

"Son named Gimli," Ori finished. "He was just here."

"Well, Mahal’s hammer! Gimli in the library? Next you’ll be telling me King Thanduil’s gone dry."

"The ‘Vigorous Spring’ never dries!" Ori and Loli chorused together in the old joke on the Elf King’s name and ability to consume vast amounts of alcohol without visible effects.

After another hug, Loli went off with the full cart and Ori settled with the unabridged copy of the Annotated Arrangement of Codes for Research, second revised edition. He needed to know this before tackling the third revision which was organized with the title Research, Discussion, and Admission. Master Brur had told him not to bother with the mens’ way of coding, which had been invented by a strange man from Bree names Doowhee Dezimahl. He had created a coding system using only numbers and had died of a heart attack when he discovered (as dwarrow and elves had always known) the concept of infinity.
Ceremony, Kings and Dale

Chapter Summary

Happy Friday, friends, and we're off and running once again!

Ori is plunged into the depths of Erebor royal manners and gets another outfit! (surprise, surprise!)

No deep, hidden hints this chapter as I had too much fun with Balin's room or, as Dollypeg's fondly calls my habit, 'telling what the room is wearing'.

And here we go, friends. Keep those cards and letters coming!

Ori walked out with Omi, Loli, and Buj to the foyer. Wobr ignored them, talking and posturing at a dwarrowdam with immaculate black curls and heavy green and gold beading in both her hair and beard. Her clothes were expensive green velvet and silk with entirely too much gold and green variscite festooning all the pleats, flounces, rouching, and frills.

Loli spared the two a glance and told Ori that T’dilla was considered a catch at court and Wobr was baiting himself with everything he had - which, Buj informed them, wasn’t much beyond a vat of hair wax from the wilds of Angmar.

Omi, Loli, and Ori were still laughing about this when there was a clatter of hooves and Balin arrived. Ori said good evening to his friends and hurried over. Balin, to Ori’s surprise, hopped down from the shay and helped Ori up to his seat. Taking the reins again Balin nodded to the young dwarrow and chirped to start the pony.

“Very good, laddie. Yeh seem t’ have made a nice group of friends there.”

“Yes,” Ori replied both surprised and pleased. “Mind, I know Lolibur and Omibur from before. Her parents, Master Bombur and Mistress Erda once owned a pub near us.”

Balin turned.

“Master Bombur of th’ Lakeside Inn?”

“You know them?” Ori asked.

“Only in passing, lad.”

Ori glanced at Balin as he guided the pony toward the house.

“Are we not going up to Dori’s? And where’s Dwalin?”

“We’ll be meeting up with Dwalin on th’ way, but we need t’ get yeh dressed, laddie.”

Ori started to worry as Balin merely tied the pony to the handrail near the door. He hurried Ori inside and sent him back to wash.

Ori had just managed to pull on clean drawers when Balin came and escorted Ori off to Balin’s own rooms.

Balin’s rooms overwhelmed Ori. Balin explained that as the eldest he was entitled to the main suite, as he called it, which had been his parents’. They entered through a small seating area with large, plumply stuffed furniture the frames of which were elaborately carved from a black marble, set with rubies. From this a flight of four steps led up to a vast circular bed festooned in great swathes of red silk and velvet draperies and all the walls and the very ceiling itself were inset with gold-framed mirrors.

Balin hurried Ori into a dressing room the size of the ground floor at Dori’s. Off this Ori saw a spacious bathing area beautifully tiled in iridescent blues, greens and gold.

Balin snatched up some robes and hurriedly dressed Ori. Ori was two blinks away from being
horrified when he realized these were noble wedding clothes. He choked but Balin smiled and smoothly explained as he continued to dress, primp, and sort Ori from matching boots to his hair.

“Well, you see, m’dear, it was all a long time ago. Adad never approved of me bookishness, nor that I was utterly disinterested in any of th’ dams of ‘our set’ as he would say. He contracted a marriage with a Firebeard dam f’r me an’ Mam made these bridal clothes.

“As everythin’ was ready, we only had t’ wait f’r me wife-t’be t’ arrive from Mount Dolmed. Amad, Adad an’ King Thror with Dwalin, Thorin an’ meself went f’r th’ ceremony in that beautiful inn by th’ great lake in th’ Dale f’r a final time together before me new wife took me back to th’ Blue Mountains.

“To our combined surprise, me wife-t’be was already there. Most unfortunate. Apparently, she’d decided th’ rooms she’d been given wouldn’t do an’ took over th’ rooms reserved f’r King Thror. Needless t’ say th’ marriage was called off when our king was ushered int’ a scene of debauchery between me wife-t’be an’ her elfin lover. He was half elf, half man from Imladris. Believe his name was ‘Star-dome’ or somethin’.”

Ori swallowed. Even he had heard of the far off Last Homely House and its mysterious lord.

“I’m very sorry for you, brother. If these clothes give you sad memories-”

Ori held out the surcoat he wore.

“Nonsense, laddie,” Balin beamed. “These robes were made by me adad with great love an’ they mark th’ happiest day of me life. Me adad went int’ a rage an’ told me I was never t’ marry a dam! Such a relief!”

Balin straightened the collar before placing the medallion of the House of Fundin about Ori’s neck.

“I was small like yeh back then an’ these robes do look well on yeh, m’dear.”

Balin turned Ori to face the full-length, three-way mirror at the front of the dressing room. Ori stared at his reflection in disbelief and delight as Balin carefully arranged his hair into the proper braids of accomplishment.

The bridal clothing was made in the ancient dwarrow traditions. The linen was as soft as breath against his skin. The colors of the Fundin House were deep where they touched his body at the shoulders down to the thighs but faded to the cream of the raw fabric at his heart, as was right, because now he was part of the family but he was new to them so the colors were not completely saturating his entire dress.

“Balin, what are we .. ? Why I am-?”

“Oh, it’s just f’r th’ ceremony, dear.”

“Ceremony?” Ori felt nauseous. “What ceremony, please? We’re supposed to be going to Dori’s!”

“We are, m’dear. But ceremony first.”

“But-”

“Oh, not t’ worry, m’dear. It’s just a little thing with th’ Guard. Dwalin’s Captain of th’ Royal Guard and Protecter of Dale, so it’s considered a polite gesture on his part to present yeh publicly t’ his main cadre of soldiers. Now don’t look like that, dear. They’re no’ going t’ eat yeh. All that’ll happen is yeh’ll be walked by ‘em, they’ll congratulate yeh, th’ older ones may tease gently but all yeh need do then is blush. It’ll please ‘em no end.”

Balin finished the get-up with some soft, doeskin boots like leather socks. Ori easily felt the floor through them.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” he whispered, mostly to himself.

“In these clothes, m’love? I don’t think so.”

* * *

Ori wasn’t quite shaking as Balin drove them up to the Dale and towards the main square and court house of the Master where this mad course of action set in motion. Ori’s heart sank. Those who had witnessed his shame before the Master might be present.
“Balin, this is where I offered myself to Calmar. They’ll know that.”
“Which is why we’re here, laddie. Now all yeh have t’ do is, when I stop th’ cart, hop out an’ get t’ Dwalin’s side as quick as yeh can, all righ’?”
“But—”
“That’s all yeh need t’ do, lad. We’ll take care of everythin’ else.”
Ori swallowed and sat still, clinging to the side of his seat, as for reason’s known only to himself, Balin set the pony to a gallop.

The shay hurtled into a square full of excited-looking Dale people, any number of nobility in and out of carts, on and off ponies, milling around, dressed in their finest, and the full cadre of King Thror’s guards, their helms, weapons and standard glowing in the red gold of the evening sun.

“Right, laddie, there’s Dwalin on th’ pony. See him?”
“Yes.”

“Soon as I stop this, off yeh go.”

The pony hopped to a standstill and Ori leapt free. He focused only on Dwalin as he ran a gauntlet of peers, nobles, townspeople, and military. He felt all their eyes on him. Dwalin seemed a beacon of safety before him.

“Dwalin!” he rasped out.

“Hello, me chuck,” Dwalin greeted him. “Yer lookin’ finer than a lava forge.”

Ori was about to answer when the pony flung up its head to look back at Dwalin and whinnied. Ori clung to Dwalin for dear life as the pony pranced a few steps then hopped in place a time or two.

“Quick muckin’ about, Harley!” Dwalin scolded without rancor. “We’re on parade, not at some jacksie pony version of a country dance.”

Harley flung his head back again, looked at Dwalin, gave a snort and a foot stamp then rolled his eyes to look at Ori. Ori would swear to any who ever questioned him after that Harley winked. Dwalin guided Harley forward. Ori gulped, staring at the huge chair mounted on a low dray bedecked in gold, mithril and obsidian. Dis stood on one side of the seated king and Thorin on the other. On the steps of the Dale court house stood the Master, dressed in his most ostentatious clothing, with his thugs around him. Dwalin swung off the pony and held out his arms. Ori slid into them, unable to take his eyes from the aged king. Dwalin walked them forward keeping Ori’s hand firmly in his as they both bowed.

King Thror stared at them in silence. Ori instinctively pressed himself to Dwalin’s side. Dwalin pulled Ori in front of himself but kept his arms close around Ori’s waist.

“So,” rumbled King Thror, “the rumors are true. I can see the ink stains. A scribe, Captain Dwalin? Can you do no better?”

Ori felt Dwalin straighten.

“Me own brother, yer and yer grandson’s most valued advisor, began as a scribe, sire. I take it as an excellent example.”

King Thror watched them in a way that made Ori feel cornered.

“I hear among some, the other title would be ‘pup of a penniless slut’.”

Red swirled before Ori’s eyes. He felt Dwalin move. Ori remembered that if either of them raised their arms to their king, he and Dwalin would be spending the rest of their married life dead. Ori white-knuckled Dwalin’s arms about him, keeping the larger dwarf from springing, as Dwalin snarled.

“Then some may be lookin’ t’ have their tongues cut out.”

King Thror laughed.
“Ori heard himself say, ‘If it was a true concern of honor in the Court of Erebor, your majesty, why then do ‘some’ not come forward to make their complaint?’”

King Thror snickered and folded his hands then looked directly at Ori.

“Come here.”

Ori looked up at Dwalin, who released him but followed closely as Ori went to the edge of the dray.

King Thror peered down into Ori’s face, searching, rather as Dis had when telling him of his amad.

“What’s your name then, cosset?”

“Ori of the Brothers Ri, son of Rikmha, at your service, sire,” Ori stated clearly and automatically held out his hand.

King Thror looked at the proffered hand, smirked and, leaning forward, grasped Ori’s in a cold, dry clasp. Despite the size and amount of armor and other metals there was little or no strength in the grip. Ori tightened lightly then released. The old monarch regarded him.

“Ye’ve more spit in ye than old Rikut’s other grandsons.”

“I have no knowledge of them, sire.

Thror stared.

“Who’s your adad?”

“I don’t know, sire.

“Who raised yeh? Which of Rikut’s boys?

“My amad, Rikmha, then my own elder brothers, sire.

“Who are they?”

Dori and Nori, sire.”

“Who were their adads?”

“I don’t know, sire.”

King Thror snorted

“Aye, yer little Rikmha’s spit. An’ freckles. She should have done right by you and taken what was offered. Do any of you blame her, for you should?”

“I haven’t the pleasure of understanding you, sire.”

“She should have taken what I offered and at least ye’d have had a proper home. It’d’ve been in prison with a single prisoner to be ada to all a’ yeh, but yeh’d have been in the mountain.”

Ori clenched his teeth, holding himself in check, wishing he had Dori’s strength to knock this dwarf with all the sensibilities of a goblin off his seat.

Dwalin growled and moved but Ori grabbed the warrior’s hand again.

“Amad, with my brothers’ help, always made sure there was a roof over our heads and food on the table and, when she left us for the Great Halls, my brothers saw to it we had a home, sire. Neither Amad nor any of us were anyone’s prisoner.”

Thror grunted.

“Aye, she said as much when I offered. Said she’d rather die a in a pauper’s bed with adadless pups to tend her. I told her I’d like to see that.”

Ori wanted to cry but his tight hold on Dwalin and hearing Dwalin hissing curses helped.

“Had we known of your wish, sire, my brothers would have sent an invitation for your viewing pleasure over sixty years ago.”

“I’m sure Rikut, for all his talk-“

“Did nothing for us, sire. I wouldn’t know this Rikut person to speak to or even recognize in the streets.”

The king stared at Ori.

“You speak the truth, pup?”

“Yes, sire.”

The old king sighed. He waved his hand to Thorin, saying, “I’m too old to hear such.”

Thorin didn’t budge.

“Boy!” the king barked, “be you blind and deaf these days?”
“Udad,” Thorin pitched his voice for the gathered crowd to hear, “we and the good people of Dale have come together this day to witness you giving your blessing to my dearest friend, cousin, and brother at arms and his new husband. We are all eagerly waiting to celebrate this moment.”

“As am I, Udad,” Dis added.

Thror cursed then ordered Ori and Dwalin nearer and told them to stand together.

As the Khuzdul words of royal blessing were said over himself and Dwalin, Ori tried to appreciate them but on the inside he was still shaking with rage. When he and Dwalin stood back to let the royal dray roll away, Ori managed to calm his breathing. The crowd cheered and shouted congratulations. The court house bell rang out and all children of men ran about tossing handfuls of rolled oats high over the couple as a sign of good fortune.

Thorin and Dis approached them. Dis pulled Ori into her arms and turned him.

“Now, Ori, here’s someone much better fun than Udad.”

Ori turned to the dam before him. She was easily the finest, most beautiful dam Ori had ever laid eyes on. Her hair and beard were a ruddy brown, intricately braided and beaded with gold and rubies. She was almost as wide as she was tall. Her braids marked her as a worker in gold, an accomplished cook and baker, a birthing dam, and amad. Ori recognized her birthplace medallion as Blue Mountains, her husband as the richest dwarf in Erebor, and mischievous eyes as young Gimli’s amad.

She held out both hands to Ori and he shyly offered his own to be grasped then his left to be tucked firmly across her arm.

“Well, Sweet Daughter of the Maker! The way this day has been progressing I quite thought I’d never meet you, my little butty! It’s been that busy and here I am stuck. Yes, my lady, stuck!” turning to nod at Lady Dis, who was stifling laughter behind her hands, “hearing what a sweet little chook you’ve turned out to be to her.”

Dis did giggle at that point and took Ori’s other arm to hold with her own.

“Ori, this is Gridr, she is officially my first lady-in-waiting but tends more toward my friend, helper, second amad to my boys, and all around keep-me-in-line and behaving when Udad is present.”

Both dams laughed delightedly at each other. Lady Gridr turned about.

“Now, Dwalin, stop standing about with Thorin, you both make the place untidy. We need this ceremony done soon or your guards will fall asleep waiting.”

Dwalin smirked at Lady Gridr.

“I’ll do th’ damn ceremony as soon as Dis an’ yeh gimme me husband back already.”

Dis and Gridr looked at each other then at Ori. Gridr flicked the tip of her nose with her thumb at Dwalin.

“No, we’re keepin’ him! Learn t’ cope and get on with this before Balin there dies of old age.”

Balin widened his eyes as he stood next to Thorin and Dwalin.

“Me very, very dear Mistress Gridr, yer settled, married, an’ have a growing son. Why th’ unseemly need f’r hasty action from males?” Dwalin and Thorin roared in with the lewdest laughter Ori had ever heard. Gridr and Dis were not far behind. Gridr kissed her fingertips to Balin.

“Why, my very dearest lord! You know I was speaking to Dwalin as such, being new wed and all. I would never think to ask for any sort of speed from one such as yourself . . . age be damned, of course.”

Dis shrieked delightedly. Dwalin was about bent double. Ori cottoned on to what was being implied and blushed to his toes.

Balin winked at Gridr and bowed with a flourish in reply.

Gridr tucked Ori closer.

“Now you just never listen to Balin. He’s nowt but a dirty old lecher. You let Dwalin take care of you. Just be your soft little self and he’ll be good and hard until you tell him t’ melt.”

Ori thought his face was going to boil off and Dwalin removed Ori from the two laughing dams. “Enow with yer smut, th’ pair a’ yeh. Gimme him here “

Ori leaned against Dwalin, horribly embarrassed but now giggling. Dwalin put an arm about his
shoulders and led him over to the cavalcade of soldiers.

The commander at the starting end was a terrifying looking dwarf with muscles like Dwalin, wider and more heavily scarred. He peered in at Ori with his one eye. Dwalin introduced him. Ori bowed his head slightly. To his surprise, the commander grinned, touched his armored glove to his own lips, touched his marriage bead then reached out to run his finger down Ori’s braid while murmuring the seven bridal blessings.

As though in a dream, Ori was walked along the line of soldiers, introduced and blessed. Furf’nk was there with a huge grin for Ori. Those who were married touched their marriage beads then his in the old symbol of offering their happiness and good fortune to a newlywed.

Unmarried ones just bowed their heads, blessed Ori and usually made a smart remark to Dwalin. Some older soldiers stood with their offspring and fewer with their grandchildren. Those few times the grandparent would bless then gently tug on Ori’s braid then proceed to tug the hair of the child where their marriage braid may be then tease and tell the younger to hurry up or say this would be ‘luck’ for them.

The outpouring of respect and caring was overwhelming. Ori was glad of Dwalin’s arm about him as well as the wise-cracking presences of Lady Gridr and Lord Balin behind them. Those guards who had been with Dwalin when Ori was at the Master’s made no remark beyond what others had already said.

Ori was both sad and relieved when the end of the parade was before him, though he did get quite the surprise when he realized it was Prince Frerin standing before them. The prince bowed slightly and mumbled something before Ori was glomped on by Kili, who erupted from behind his idad. Frerin was rudely shoved aside as the young dwarf pounced at Ori.

“Ori! Isn’t this a wonderful ceremony?! Did you know I was in the Guard with Dwalin? Isn’t this exciting?! Lady Gridr, we never call her that, only imad, made a cake this afternoon and won’t let Fili and I have any until you’re there, too!”

“Kee, stop squashing Ori!” Gridr scolded as she pried Kili off Ori.

Kili looked hurt.

“I get to hug him! He’s my cousin now! Well, sort of.”

“Cousin? You and Fee’s cousin? How do you come by that, leveret?”

“We call Dwalin idad sometimes as he’s like Thorin’s brother. Balin, too.”

“Laddie, that’d make him yer idad too.” Dwalin pointed out.

Kili brushed that aside.

“Ori’s not idad aged, so that makes him a cousin-in-law.” Kili added the ‘in-law’ as an after thought.

Dwalin and Thorin looked at each other and snorted.

“My son,” Lady Dis interrupted, “I do not know what to fear more: your concept of family relationships or your complete disregard for common Westron grammar.”

“I’d stick him with both, Mam,” Fili put in, but that statement didn’t stop the older prince from embracing Ori just as enthusiastically as his brother. Both Fili and Kili stayed clamped to Ori as they were teased and scolded by Lady Gridr, who also thanked Ori for helping her young Gimli that afternoon.

Ori glanced over to where Dwalin, Balin, and Thorin were having what looked like an important discussion with several of the commanders. Ori wondered what was going on. If a parade was merely for show why use it to have such discussions? Then Ori wondered about the fact that the parade was at the Dale court house in the evening, especially as … Ori’s brain slowed weakly.

Especially as the Master and his thugs bore witness. When Ori glanced about they were still watching nervously from the court house steps. These same thugs had see him offer himself to the Master in trade for his brother’s life, offer himself as a plaything to Calmar three days past. Now they saw him back here with Dwalin in the company of the royal family dressed in new bridals as the captain’s husband.

A strange, fierce pride suddenly bubbled up in Ori. He had left this place in shame but now there was no question he was honorably and properly married. He was acceptable in the highest circles of
dwarf society. Yes, he had come from low beginnings but it was not a matter that his family had no name, he was respectable.

Ori straightened his shoulders and lifted his eyes to stare back at them, unashamed, the medallion of the House of Fundin against his heart, the mithril marriage bead glowing in the evening light.

Ori made himself look coldly at those who had derided him and those once sneering gazes dropped with respect and heads bowed with only courteous murmurs to be heard.

Ori took a deep breath and walked slowly back to his captain’s side. He caught hold of Dwalin’s wrist and held it as he slowly and purposefully slid his hand into Dwalin’s in full view of all. Dwalin other hand covered his.

“Love?” Ori raised his eyes and smiled. “Our family is waiting for us.”
Dori and Nori, Danger and Knickers.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends! You're just in time for another... Dinner party!
Yes, the Fundin Brothers and the Brothers Ri enjoy a nice, quiet family dinner. Nope!

This is a longer chapter as it's full of all kinds of action, adventure, and most importantly, food!

Your hint is the movie "A Wonderful Life"

Do let us know what you think so far, friends! And keep those cards and letters coming!

It was strange to watch Dori’s house come into view as the shay turned from Steam Square down Steam Street to Steam Alley. Dwalin rode beside them on Harley, who gave the impression that he was Middle Earth’s Happiest Pony.

Ori was slowly getting used to riding in the shay. He had never done so before today, nor had he ridden a pony. To be moving so far off the ground was unnerving enough, but Balin’s pony, Ducati, seemed incapable of going any slower than a fast trot.

Dwalin swung off Harley and looped his reins on the boot scraper at the front door. He caught Ducati’s reins when Balin tossed them out and put her next to Harley before coming to the cart and lifting Ori down.

Balin took a large bunch of carrots from the wide basket mounted behind the seats of the shay and handed them to Dwalin who dropped them down for the ponies. Balin passed Ori a beautiful little straw cage containing two very intelligent looking birds, one sparrow and one wren. Dwalin took the three bottles of wine, which came out next, and Ori a pretty box. The design declared it to be from a bakery and the sweet, sugary scent emerging made Ori’s mouth water.

Balin closed the shay basket, holding a deep rush bag. Through the woven grasses Ori thought he saw bread, fruit and what might be a haunch of some kind.

The front door flew open.

“Ori! My dear, dear lad!”

Hands still full, Ori found himself crushed to Dori’s chest, his feet dangling freely. Ori stifled a giggle as Dori kissed both his cheeks loudly and sloppily

“Oh, my little badger, I’ve been that worried! Are you all right? Have you been frightened?”

“Oh, laddie, have yeh not written t’ yer poor brother?” Balin’s friendly tone chimed in.

Dori put Ori down to look at Balin and Ori managed to squirm into the house, so everyone had to follow. Ori felt a tad guilty, as he’d never seen Dori so fussy since he left his tweens.

Their one room of seating and kitchen was just the same. Ori sniffed. Granny pie for dinner!
Balin put his burden down on the table and proceeded to gently thump foreheads with Dori and embraced him.

“How dreadful that yeh were worrying needlessly,” said Balin. “Th’ young’re so thoughtless when they’re in th’ midst of excitement. If I’d known I’d’ve either stopped ‘round ’r at least dropped yeh a note.”

“Why- he did, but- thank you,” Dori managed, looking both surprised, pleased, and, strangely enough, as though he and Balin had met before. Ori wondered if Balin patronized the Dale forge. Dori hadn’t mentioned Lord Balin’s name before, but then, Ori reflected naughtily, Balin was extremely handsome by dwarrow standards.

“Balin,” he spread his arms wide and bowed low, the charming smile never leaving his face. “Son of Fundin an’ this lummox’s elder brother.”

Balin reached over and caught Dori’s hands again and patted them while Dori beamed at Dwalin.

Dwalin put the wine on the kitchen counter and took Ori’s burdens from him. Ori looked up at Dwalin, who rolled his eyes, then pulled a bratty child’s disgusted face. Ori giggled. Dwalin wink at him, turned back to his brother and said in a genial tone,

“Fuck yeh, Balin.”

To Ori’s surprised, Dwalin offered his hand and when Dori clasped it, congenially thumped foreheads with him. Then Dori turned, clasped Ori’s hands and stood a little back, admiring him. Ori blushed and tears showed in Dori’s eyes.

“You look beautiful, pet. Just beautiful.”

Ori couldn’t stand it any more and pounced on Dori for another hug. Releasing him, Dori went into full fuss mode and together, with Balin, they removed Ori’s outer robes and popped a clean shirt of Nori’s on him instead. Satisfied, Dori turned back to the table and gaped at the pile on it.

“What in Mahal’s name?”

“I thought it best,” Balin explained, “seeing as th’ original plan was, I think, just Dwalin bringing Ori. Now you have both of us an’ he,” pausing to raise a dramatic eyebrow in Dwalin’s direction, “can eat half an ox. I thought I’d save yer larder a little. By my beard, it does smell quite luscious in here.”

Balin sniffed about eagerly. Ori thought he made it look as though he was sniffing Dori.

“Is it granny pie, Dori?” Ori asked.

“Yes, my love.” Dori smiled, though he was looking at Balin the entire time.

Ori felt relieved that Dori seemed to approve of Balin at least.

“Where’s Nori?” Ori asked.

“Upstairs sleeping off his indisposition.” Dori wrinkled his nose then turned to Balin, who released the two birds onto the window sill and turned his attention back to the table. “Why, Master Balin! Is that a venison haunch?”
“Yes, Master Dori, smoked and ready. I hope you have a care for venison?”

“Why, Master Balin, this is too kind of you. I hardly know how to thank you.”

“I’m sure th’ pair a yeh’ll think a somethin’,’” Dwalin commented.

“Dori, you’re so good with blade smithing, perhaps you could make him something,” Ori suggested, while he put the haunch in the oven with the pie. “Balin, you can’t imagine how gifted Dori is with his hands.”

Ori wanted his new family to know they were exemplary dwarrow.

“Of that I have no doubt.” Balin smiled at Dori.

“Well, I certainly hope I would never disappoint, Master Balin.” Dori favored Balin with a naughty grin.

“Will the pair a yeh just find a room already. Me and our Ori’re hungry f’r dinner.” Dwalin smirked at Ori.

Ori realized the connotations his helpful suggestion had brought about and blushed furiously. He busied himself with setting the table and finding dishes for the Balin-enhanced bounty. He kept his eyes down but he knew Balin and Dori continued to flirt and Dwalin watched them, arms folded, occasionally suggesting they go elsewhere and take full advantage of each other.

Dori finally excused himself to Balin, on a mission to get Nori, but from the noise upstairs Ori knew Dori had gone to his own room.

Balin turned to Ori.

“Yer brother’s a darling.”

“Yes he is,” Ori replied, suddenly feeling fiercely protective. He took a couple of deep breaths and tried to keep his voice calm. “If you hurt his feelings, I’ll manacle you to the desk permanently.”

Dwalin laughed.

Ori nearly jumped as Balin turned Ori so they faced each other.

“Laddie, I’d never do such a thin’, so no feelin’ angry with me now.”

Balin’s face was entirely serious and full of tenderness.

Ori hugged him immediately.

“I-I know. It’s just, he’s my Dori and he raised me. I have a very small family, Balin, and-”

“An’ now yeh’ve more in Dwalin an’ meself.” Balin rested his forehead against Ori’s. “All right now, laddie?”

“Yes. I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

“Nonsense, laddie. Just know that, at th’ moment, yer Dori an’ I’re merely amusin’ ourselves with flattery. An’ speaking o’ flattery, Master Dori, those beard beads’re marvelous! Wherever did yeh get them?”
Ori looked, his eyes widening. Dori had apparently washed, brushed, and changed clothes in a matter of moments; he was now perfectly posed half way down the stair, resplendent in his good tunic and breeches of bright plum with garnet and gold beads intricate braided into his hair and beard.

Dori stopped, blinked rather confusedly at Balin’s question, then absently patted the adornments on his beard and smiled coyly.

“Oh! These old things? Why I only wear them when I don’t care how I look.”

“Rogue,” Balin laughed and went forward, offering his hand to escort Dori down the steps. Ori sidled over to Dwalin

“Those are Dori’s best,” he whispered.

“Th’ pair of ‘em are just bein’ silly t’ make th’ other laugh. Watch an’ see.”

Dori mocked a bow then laid his fingertips on Balin’s wrist and came the rest of the way down the stair all gracefulness until Ori noticed he had Nori by the ear, dragging the other along behind.

“Lemme go! I ain’t about to eat with a pair of sodding, cradle-snatching.”

“Nori! _Dear!”_ Ori heard the steely tone in Dori’s voice he only used when he was angry.

“These are our brothers! Balin and Dwalin are here for dinner.”

“I ain’t callin’ that prick of a captain brother!”

“Master Balin, my younger brother Nori. You must excuse him he’s feeling a trifle out of sorts.”

“I am not!”

“Of course, of course.” Balin smiled, ignoring Nori’s loud protests.

“Captain Dwalin, you remember Nori.”

“Nah, never seen ‘im before in me life.” Dwalin nodded to Ori, who grinned, remembering Dwalin’s promise when he’d burned Nori’s file.

Dori just tittered and Nori went into full roar.

“I won’t eat with this dirty great brother-napper! He’s a rake and a bully and he’s probably bruised our baby brother’s bottom like a cave troll in a well.”

Dwalin growled, but Dori dragged Nori over to the table and sat him down with such force the sturdy chair creaked dangerously. Nori whimpered that now his bottom hurt.

To continue Ori’s surprise, instead of seating himself at the head of the table, Dori sat Balin there, waving Ori to sit with Dwalin, who settled at the foot. There were only four chairs and Dori perched on the kitchen stool. He got up a moment later to fetch the pie out of the oven as Balin helped with the haunch. Ori quickly switched his chair for the stool.

“Ori, dear,” Dori started, placing the steaming golden pie on the table.
Ori just grinned at him and scooted closer to the table and sniffed eagerly at the pie.

“Where’d yeh want this, Dori?” Dwalin asked, a small keg of ale in his arms.

Nori rose out of his chair.

“It goes on the stool, so you better let Ori have your chair. It’s only proper.”

“Nori!” said Dori and Balin at once, frowning.

Dwalin grinned like a wolf at Nori. He turned to Ori, putting the keg on the table.

“It can balance on the sofa back,” Ori said quickly.

Dwalin gave him a naughty look then offered his hands to Ori.

“No’ a problem. Here Ori, we’ll put this on th’ stool jus’ as our Nori insists an’ yeh come sit on me knee.”

Dwalin dropped into his chair and swung ’round to face Ori, patting his right knee invitingly while giving Ori a teasing look.

“C’mon me little nug-humper, sit on your honey-papa’s knee.”

Dori gave a horrified gasp and snatched Ori back into his seat. Nori lunged forward across the table and seized the keg to balance it on the couch back before crashing into his seat.

“Brother, please!” Balin chided.

“Honey-what?” Ori asked sliding closer to Dwalin.

Dwalin laid his hands on Ori’s waist, drawing the smaller dwarf close and parking him on his right thigh.

Ori was first and foremost startled by the heat. Dwalin’s body was warm. Very warm. Ori felt himself blush as Dwalin’s heat smoothed through Ori’s breeches to curl around his butt. Ori twisted to lean his elbow on Dwalin’s shoulder.

“Nug-humper? Since when am I a rabbit trapped in a forge? And what was the last one?”

“Ori, don’t encourage him. Sit down properly,” Dori said.

“I’ll tell yeh later,” Dwalin promised.

“No, you won’t!” Dori snapped.

Ori glanced at his brothers then looked at Dwalin.

“Later as in bed?”

“Ori!”

“Aye, if yeh like.”

“Dwalin!” Balin scolded. “This is no’ a dirty low drinking pit in Gondor. This’s a respectable dwarrow household. Neither Master Dori nor meself wish t’ hear such language again! Am I no’ correct, Master Dori?”
“Oh, you are quite correct, Master Balin.”

“Thank yeh, Master Dori.”

“You’re quite welcome, Master Balin. Your intervention is most appreciated.”

“Me pleasure, Master Dori.”

And with that Dori began to serve the pie and bade Balin to carve the roast, if he would be so kind.

Nori snorted, “It ain’t right this marriage.”

“We both agreed to it, Nori,” Ori reminded him.

“Aye, fine. What if you fall in love or your Heartsong turns up in a week or so?”

“Nori, please!” Dori gasped.

Balin raised his eyebrows, clearly surprised that Nori would so easily speak of what was so private in the dwarrow world.

“Well, I’m thinkin’ of our Ori. What if he does and he’s chained to that arsehole? Yeh think I want t’ see out Ori’s heart broken?”

“Nori,” Balin said gravely, “yeh know as well as th’ rest a’ us that th’ marriage law in Erebor an’ th’ other dwarrow kingdoms release a spouse if a Heartsong’s found an’ also in th’ case of love outside a’ arranged marriage. We’ll leave violence an’ other such things out of th’ picture f’r now. None’d be so cruel as t’ forbid either.”

“So you’d release him?” Nori demanded of Dwalin who frowned.

“’Course I would, provided the One met me provisions.”

“What?” Dori and Nori cried together.

“Ori’d have to ask f’r release,” Dwalin stated firmly and looked straight at Ori. “Freely an’ of yer own will. I need t’ know that yeh’d want t’ go an’ be with yer One or love.”

“Thank you,” Ori replied, wondering how someone would not desire to be with their Heartsong or love.

“Good,” Balin murmured.

"Any’d rather be with their One,” Nori snapped.

Balin and Dwalin looked at each other, then Balin gave the barest of nods and Dwalin sighed and, to Ori’s surprise, clasped his hand.

“Aye, well, our adad an’ mam were Heartsongs.”

“But that can’t be,” Ori tried. “I heard Balin say he was cruel to you as a badger.”

“He was, an’ t’ Balin, an’ he’d beat our mam. An’ that’s why I tell yeh now that I’ll be havin’ a full investigation as t’ how yeh’ll be treated, be it Heartsong or love.”
Dori cleared his throat. “Well, Master Dwalin, that’s very thoughtful of you and I have no doubt that you’ll be keeping Nori and myself apprised of whatever you find out.”

“’Course.” Dwalin nodded.

“Well then, now we’ve finished with that-” Dori began.

“Wait,” cried Ori and colored a little when everyone turned to stare at him.

“What about you?” Ori looked at Dwalin.

Dori tut-tutted.

“You’d just come back home to us, pet.”

Dwalin seemed to ponder a moment then looked Ori in the eye.

“Yeh’ve nothin’ t’ worry ‘bout, a’right?”

“Fine by us,” Nori barked.

“But you might find your Heartsong,” Ori insisted.

Dwalin just smiled.

“Which brings us,” Dori chimed in, “to the rather annoying discussion of your being a soldier. What happens to Ori if you go off fighting and, Mahal forbid naturally, get yourself killed?”

“Both Balin and Thorin are avowed t’ me that if need be they’d care f’r him. If he is to come back here t’ yer house, he’s entitled t’ my estate, includin’ wealth, forge, my side of the mines, and the keep up in Blue Mountain.”

“Oi, Ori. Want me t’ just, ye’ know!” Nori mimed a stabbing Dwalin in the ribs.

Both Dwalin and Nori laughed but a wave of white hot pain shot through Ori. He slammed to his feet.

“You shut right up, Nori! That’s not funny!”

Nori stared at him, aghast.

Dwalin put his hands on Ori’s shoulders, sitting him gently down.

“Easy, love, he’s only jokin’.”

“It was mean,” Ori argued, furious with Nori and the tears he could feel burning in his eyes.

Dwalin took both Ori’s hands and smiled.

“Oh, c’mon now, love. Yeh really think f’r one moment our Nori could get th’ drop on me?”

Ori giggled at that, swiped at his eyes and sniffed.

“Good point. You’re right.”

“Well and we all know the silly badger would never dream of such,” Dori put in with a tender smile to Ori and a blazing stink eye at Nori.
Nori gulped, half-laughed and nudged Dwalin’s elbow.

“Aye, li’le un! Even Dwalin here knows I was just having me joke.”

“There ye are.”

Dwalin squeezed Ori’s hands once more.

Dori served Balin first, then Ori, Dwalin and Nori then himself, but then he put more grannie pie on Ori’s plate.

“Eat up, darling. Being hungry is making you all silly.”

Nori tore into the venison as though it was his last meal.

Both Dwalin and Balin declared grannie pie delicious but wondered at the name.

“Grannies can make goodness out of anything,” Dori explained.

Ori took a bite and savored it. The crust was oat flour mixed with dripping, inside a delectable mix of chunks of potato, parsnip, onion, leeks, carrot, and turnips with chicken stock thickened with oat flour and flavored with salt, watercress, and plenty of ground pepper root.

Everyone was tucking in while Balin started discussing forge work with Dori.

“Master Dori, our Ori here says yeh’ve a gift f’r th’ blade.”

“Oh, well, Master Balin, I do my best.”

“May I ask yer indulgence, Master Dori, t’ look over this blade I came across in me travels? It has a most strange patina.”

Balin drew out an impressive dagger, the blade of which was encrusted with a chalky white substance. Balin used a thumbnail to scrape off some. Ori watched as the pale flakes, each oddly shaped, fell from the blade.

“Aren’t these strange, Master Dori?” Balin pushed the various detritus into a line then held the dagger out to Dori.

Dori stared at the line of flakes, raised an eyebrow at Balin then examined the dagger. It didn’t look to be that interesting.

Dori’s face drew into a moue of disinterest as he moved two or three of the flakes into a line beneath the first.

“I can see why you would think it to be quite exotic, Master Bain. The artisan has used pig iron as a base to give it that early first age look. The flakes are known as carrot mold as it turns an orange color over time. It’s easily cleaned with a solution of vinegar and natron, shaken vigorously.”

Balin applauded Dori and swept the dagger, holder and flakes into the bag he had brought it in.

“Wonderful! Thank yeh most sincerely, m’dear Master Dori.”

“Oh, please don’t mention it, Master Balin.”

Dori excused himself to hurry upstairs. Ori stared as his elder brother returned down with the
“Dori?” Ori started.

“Well, pet. I can’t just sit about. Need to have my knitting with me don’t I? Nori! Don’t be such a warg with the venison. I would like at least a small taste of it!”

Dori sat down again with the box on the floor between his knees, fluffing his long tunic to cover it.

* * *

“…An’ he picked th’ locks quick as quick wide open. Rusted shut they were. Dwalin’s best locksmith said there’d be no way t’ open ‘em again,” Balin ended chuckling.

Ori swirled his finger through the remains of the honey topping from the pastry left on his plate. As chagrined as he felt, he was beginning to think Balin rather liked telling the story of how he and Ori ‘met’. Ori glanced about. There was nothing but a few bits of crust left of the grannie pie. Half the haunch was eaten away. Dwalin sliced the rest of it, put it onto buttered bread and placed it at Nori’s elbow. Nori was eating vaguely, totally bound by Balin’s tales. Dori was similarly taken in and didn’t notice Balin subtly sliding extra food onto his host’s plate.

A happy warmth filled Ori. Never had he seen anyone care for himself or his brothers the way Dwalin and Balin were now.

Ori reflected that along with the public announcement of his marriage this afternoon, not only had the House of Fundin restored Ori’s reputation, but now it was spreading its wealth to enrich Dori and Nori. Ori pondered that, although he had not been ready to marry, and he still didn’t know Dwalin that well, he was ready to give this his best over the next two years. He blushed thinking that the time he had spent with Dwalin had not diminished how much he still fancied the older dwarf, especially since he now knew Dwalin also held him in great regard.

There was one bottle of wine left and Nori pulled the tap out of the barrel to get the last of the ale. Dori was busy telling Balin that Nori had all the classic symptoms of middle child syndrome and what was Dori to do?

“Have yeh a cellar?” Balin enquired.

“I tried that. He tamed the rats, taught them to race and began to make book. Highly illegal.”

“Oi,” said Nori.

Dwalin rattled a small bag he’d drawn from his pocket and drew Nori’s attention. When Nori sat down again Dwalin tossed him the bag, Nori’s eyes lit up as he emptied the dice out of the pouch.

Ori watched them throw but he thought Dwalin looked distracted, as though he was listening or waiting for something to happen. Then Ori heard tiny rustling noises. His mind raced as he tried to think of a way to tell Dwalin without his brothers noticing. He swallowed and shuffled closer and leaned against Dwalin.

“I’m sleepy,” he announced and settled himself in a way so he could whisper in Dwalin’s ear.
“There’s someone or two outside,” he murmured.

Dwalin hrumphed and cleared his thought before muttering back, “Aye, they’re getting’ in position. Be ready.”

Ori gave the barest nod and stayed seated. He adjusted his stance, so Dwalin could move quickly if needed. Dwalin exchanged a glance with Balin and tossed the dice again with an extra flick of his wrist. The dice fell in perfect nines. Nori roared in protest, saying the dice must be uphills. Both Balin and Dori exclaimed loudly that Nori was being silly. Ori heard the knock at the front door once then twice. Balin and Dori continued to talk and laugh loudly at Nori’s arguments.

The third time someone was obviously getting impatient and banging on the door.

“Did you hear something?” Dori asked

“Oh, probably just squirrels, m’dear,” Balin teased. “I hear they’re quite violent this time o’ year.”

Dori shouted with laughter as Dwalin bellowed over it

“Don’t be daft, Balin! Aren’t any about this side a’ town! Me guard took ’em out last month.”

“I think it’s the bloody door!” Nori roared, staring at Balin and Dwalin as thought the pair had lost their minds.

“Oh!” Dori gasped, pink-cheeked and wide-eyed. “I do believe you’re right, Nori, do be a dear and open it. I’m all fankled up with my knitting at the moment.”

Dori hauled out some knitting and, knocking over a wine bottle, made a pile of some of the plates.

“What?” Nori started.

“Nori, dear!”

“Aye, aye! Hold yer carts. I’m comin’.”

Nori opened the door and was knocked over by group of about six men, three of whom Ori recognized as the Master’s thugs.

“Got yeh this time, bastard.”

The lead thug grabbed Nori.

Dori screamed dramatically. Ori stare at him. Dori never screamed.

“Oi.”

The group looked up. There was Dwalin playing with the dice box, sitting tipped back in his chair, boots now on the table.

“What yeh lot think yer doin’?”

The first thug gulped. “Captain Dwalin! Er, sir, I- We’re apprehending this thief, of course, sir…er captain.”

“Thief?” Dwalin asked genially. “He’s been here all evening with us.”
“We know he has evidence leading to a syndicate of thieves, captain. We’re takin’ him in f’r questionin’!”

“Why?” Dwalin asked, still playing with the dice box.

“Well.” The thug looked a little confused the straightened. “We need to search the place and take all occupants into custody to be questioned with regarding connections to a crime syndicate.”

“All occupants, soldier?” Dwalin raised his eyebrow with a smile.

The group of men laughed a bit uncertainly.

Dwalin turned to Dori.

“Our Dori, d’ yeh mind havin’ yer house searched f’r evidence leadin’ t’ a syndicate a’ thieves?”

Dori tittered, “Oh Mahal, really, captain, how funny you are!”

The thugs growled.

Dwalin shrugged and Dori finished his line and laughed.

“Oh, very well. Be sure you check under my bed for the strong box and don’t forget the false board in Nori’s room, end of the corridor, the squeaky board in the middle. And do show us the evidence you find.”

Dori looked back at Balin. “Now I am most intrigued, what are we connected with? Smuggling ponies, perhaps? Nori, I just thought you were too lazy to clean your room! How do you keep the ponies so quiet?”

Nori gaped at his brother then laughed slightly hysterically.

“Well, ye know, straw, whisky, er… yer mornin’ porridge!” he flashed at Dori.

Dori widened his eyes playfully.

“Well, now I understand why you weren’t getting fat! Three bows full every morning!” this to Balin.

They could all hear the squad rummaging around upstairs, a sprinkling of cuss words then a shout of triumph.

Nori turned pale and looked pleadingly at Dori. Dori added a thread of green to the yellow worsted he was knitting. Ori frowned. There was no way in all Arda he would wear a scarf that looked like it was made of snot.

The thugs rushed down with a small thin box and a larger one.

The lead thug placed them on the table before Dwalin, who ignored them, smiling at Ori. Ori wasn’t too sure what game was being played so he decided in favor of shyly lowering his eyes and fiddling with the crochet hook and a pretty blue cord Dori had passed him. Dwalin tickled him under the chin and Ori giggled in spite of himself.

“Captain?”

Dwalin stroked one of the family braids in Ori’s beard.
“Captain?”

Dwalin chucked Ori under the chin, saying, “Gimme a minute, love.” Then slammed to his feet.

Despite being considerably shorter than the man, the thug still cowered away, fully aware an angry dwarf could make mincemeat of at least three men in an instant.

“What? An’ this be’er be good.”

“We found the evidence, captain. See?”

The lead thug tore open the slim box to reveal a sheaf of papers. Nori looked as though he as going to throw up. Dwalin went through the papers then threw them on the table.

“Ye’ve got to be jokin’!” he roared. “Evidence? This only show’s tha’ he spends a lot’ a time with a hand down his britches.”

The lead thug stared down. Ori looked, then looked again. At first he thought he was looking at grossly over colored anatomy prints of dams in rather scanty underclothing, but an instant later Dori cried out in horror and slapped his left hand over Ori’s head to cover his eyes.

“Put that disgusting pornography away at once! Nori! I’m ashamed of you! How could you allow such filth to be brought into this house? What if our Ori had seen it? You could have done terrible damage to his mind.”

Ori struggled to no avail to get away from Dori. He was beginning to think it was Dori’s mind that was terribly damaged at this point. Nori had brought such pictures home long ago and Dori shrugged, then pointed out to Nori that in the ones where the dam’s entrance could be seen meant that the dam had had to shave her area because of infection or infestation. Dori then told Ori in no uncertain terms that it was unwise to fall with any who had no hair in such areas as he might catch whatever they had.

Ori struggled away from Dori only to see the outraged thug shoving Nori’s hands full of the crumpled prints. Nori’s face worked but no clear thought pattern could be seen.

The furious searchers started on the other box.

“Now there’s no need for you to go through that one as you seen from the top it’s just my knitting!” Dori insisted.

Ori frowned. Dori’s voice was a shade higher and he wrung his hands as he rose. He reached out for the box but the thug smirked and snatched up the box and dumped the contents all over the table. Dori screamed louder than the last time as they all stared.

The new evidence consisted of material. In fact, it was his mam’s old underclothing, stockings, stays and some red velvet knickers.

The searching men gaped at the pile of lace and unmentionables now sloughed through the dinner dishes.

Dori stood there, fists clenched

“Well, sir. Are you finished?”

The lead thug looked confusedly at him.
Ori watched as Dori’s face went purple and there were tears in his eyes.

“Are you quite finished shaming me before my family and noble guests? You’ve flung my secrets on the dinner table, now perhaps you’d like to quote a price to my guests? All my life I’ve worked to put food on this table honestly and this is how people we all trust to keep us safe at night, this is how you thank me, you shame me like this!”

Dori’s voice had risen to a shriek at the thugs, all of whom looked horrified. Whether they were shocked at the ugliness of the revealed underclothing or they were all worried that they hadn’t realized Dori was actually a dam wasn’t clear. Ori wanted to laugh. Men were notorious for not being able to tell dwarrow gender apart. When dams went to sell their crafts in the Dale they always made sure to wear clothing that was recognizably female to the men.

“Enough!” Dwalin roared.

Balin took Dori in his arms and Dori sobbed loudly.

“If that’s it, yeh pack a’ ijits?” Dwalin glared.

“No, Captain. We’ve got a file on that one longer than my arm. He’s a criminal, sir.” The leader flailed an accusatory finger in Nori’s direction.


The lead thug and his second slunk to the corner as the rest rushed out to fetch the file, no doubt from the Master.

Ori and Nori looked at each other then quietly began repacking all their late mam’s dainties back into the large box. Dori appeared to be still sobbing into Balin’s shoulder but from the way his body was quivering and sniffing loudly, Ori could tell Dori was laughing fit to burst.

Balin seemed to cope with his humor by frowning horribly at the two accusers across the room. Ori wondered what Balin, Dwalin and Dori had planned.

Ori was just curious as to how Dori seemed to be ‘in’ on whatever Balin and Dwalin were doing.

There came a crashing of wheels and feet. The rest of the group arrived and they were all strangely quiet and white-faced.

“Ha!” The lead thug grinned maniacally. “Now, Captain, ye’ll see the evidence.”

“Good, ‘cause yer’ wastin’ my time an’ th’ judge’s here.”

“Not t’ mention tramplin’ on th’ good name o’ ‘n excellent young dwarf!” Balin snarled, patting Dori’s head a little harder than necessary as Dori made an agonized sound of sorrow more akin to an irritated duck.

“Well?” The leader looked to his minions as Dwalin rose, paused to nuzzle Ori’s throat, making him giggle involuntarily, and sauntered over.

Ori was feeling a little more in control of whatever it was they were doing and cooed delightedly, “Oooh, Captain!”

“Well?” Dwalin demanded.

The leader looked at his men, who settled an entire filing cabinet on the floor.
“Why in Eru’s name did yeh bring all this?” the leader asked.

“Because we couldn’t find it,” a minion whispered.

“Can’t find what?”

“We can’t find the file on that one, sir.”

“What do you mean you can’t find the file?!” the leader about screamed.

He wrenched open the cabinet and started rummaging.

“It was here!” he roared. “I added to it the day the Master called you lot to take that one’s thrice damned head off! You remember, captain?” to Dwalin

“Lad, yeh expect me t’ remember every soddin’ fool who’s committed a crime in Dale over me life?”

“Um.”

“Look, laddie, either there’s a file or there ain’t. Now which is it?”

There was a general murmuring among the guards, then one called out, “Who cares! We all know!”

Dwalin looked the group of eight over, then glared at the leader.

“Well, I know these three t’ be guards. Who in th’ Bloods’re th’ rest a’ these an’ why’re they now privy t’ Master Calmar’s files?”

The leader started to explain as well as argue with his compatriots for a few seconds before Dwalin roared for them all to shut the fuck up.

Dori rose.

“I need some tea after this horrific scene.”

He moved to the stove.

Ori noticed he was tottering and swaying.

Dori?” Ori moved toward him.

Dori turned and, with a hand pressed to his brow and the other to his chest, said in an oddly high pitched way, “Oh Mahal! I do believe I feel a trifle faint. Ori, pet, do get me some water, there’s a dear.”

Ori hurried to comply as Dori gasped, “Oh my! Oh my heart! Such spasms! I never felt so weak. Oh dear!”

Dori turned so the men had the full effect of his agony and then Dori promptly fainted dead away into Balin’s amazingly ready arms.

“Master Dori!” Balin cried out in a voice of horror. “Master Dori!”

“Sweet Mahal!” Nori leapt into action “NO! Not now! Yer so young and full of life!! Sweet
brother! NO!"

“Don’t stand there li’ ijits,” Dwalin bellowed at the thugs. “Get him a healer!”

The men all knocked in to each other and one fell into the files, spilling them all over the floor. Ori flung himself down on the floor next to Dori, calling out his brother’s name. Nori was beside him, uselessly patting Dori’s hand.

“Try and cry,” Nori hissed in Ori’s ear.

Ori threw him a ‘don’t be stupid’ look but flung himself over Dori and buried his face in Dori’s tummy.

“Dori! Dori!” he wailed through the material.

“Get out a’ th’ way. Clear a space! Move!” Dwalin backed the men up. “Balin! Call tha’ sparrow in th’ yard. Send a note t’ Oin th’ Chief o’ Healing in Erebor. Let him know what’s happened then yeh an’ th’ lads get that poor sufferin’ creature t’ Oin as quick as ever yeh can.”

Dwalin started shoving the guards and the mess into a corner.

“Master Dori! Come now, open your eyes,” Balin pleaded.

Dori did so with a cry of shock.

“Oh, where am I? Am I dead?”

“Please don’t die, Dori!” Ori shouted.

Nori knelt with his face on the floor, yanking his hair and howling like an angry cat.

Balin and Ori assisted Dori to his feet. Ori kicked Nori’s boot and he hopped up with a curse.

“Get him a cloak ’r he’ll take a chill,” Balin ordered.

Nori threw Dori’s full length rain cloak with the purple hood on the invalid. Dori, slightly bent, panting laboriously, scooped up the strong box and hid it all under the cloak, out of sight of the men.

“Nori,” Dori quavered, “you stay here and straighten up like a good lad. Ori, pet, help me to the cart. Oh!”

Ori clutched Dori as they staggered out the front door and Dori landed back in Balin’s arms.

“Oh, Lord Balin,” Dori gasped, almost weeping again. “How kind you are! I don’t like to think what would have happened if I’d been here, all alone with my badgers! It’s too cruel to think of.”

“Right now, Master Dori,” Dwalin said gruffly, but with great gentleness, “yeh let me brother here take yeh t’ Master Oin. He’ll have yeh t’ rights in no time. Lemme help yeh over th’ wheels.”

Ori snuffled into his sleeves and collar, stopping at the doorsill to hug Nori.

Nori patted his back vigorously.

“Now, now, pip, you be brave for our Dori while he’s not well. I’ll take care a’ things here. Don’t you worry your pretty little head at all.”
Ori sniffed loudly and clenched Nori tight to hiss in his ear, “Fuck you, Nori.”

Nori resorted to his sleeve to hide a smirk.

Ori hurried to the cart. Dwalin turned from helping a rather overly clumsy Dori into the shay. Dwalin took Ori’s hand.

“Yeh help Balin take good care a yer Dori now. I’ll catch yeh up in a little bit after I help Nori here, then I kin escort yeh home.”

Ori ducked his head in a vain attempt not to giggle at the rather overdone leer and wink Dwalin gave him.

“Why you!” Ori paused then smirked. “You naughty captain!” he managed as Nori pushed him into the seat as Balin started the pony.
Fainting, ‘fessing up, and fright

Chapter Summary

Hello again, friends, and welcome back!

Dollypegs and I do apologize for this late posting! Things were frightfully busy and today is our first chance to sit down, stuff our faces with breakfast, and entertain you!

Because we worry, we would like to warn you this next chapter, though expressed in the past, does contain some things that may cause triggering in some readers. Unfortunately, the events related are integral to moving the plot along.

These contain violence, behavior that can be interpreted as stalking, and abortion.

On the flip side, there’s cake!!

Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori hung onto his seat and Dori as Ducati hurtled along, flashing through the main market toward the gates of the mountain.

Ori glanced behind. There was Harley at full gallop and Dwalin in his green hood. Then he realized that was not Dwalin. Whomever was on Harley, they were not as good a rider.

Ori whispered to Dori, who glanced back also.

“Nori,” he murmured to Ori. “I can tell. Never could ride a pony or anything like that. He gets all funny if it’s between his legs and not the other way around. Ori, pet, do look like you’re comforting me still. And try and look a bit more pitiful. Pretend you’re a badgerling again and Nori’s just spoilt your pen.”

They rode through the first resident gate of the royal living quarters and rolled up to the splendid sandstone and ruby encrusted door which, now looking closer, led to two grand houses occupying the same space. The rubies in the beaten gold plaque that stated the Sons of Groin lived there.

The ‘Dwalin’ rider caught up just as a spasming, tottering Dori was tenderly helped from the cart and half carried up the path. The double front door popped open and three dwarrow hurried out. A very familiar dwarf with brilliant red hair shouted for his son to take care of the cart and ponies. Gimli bounded past, nodded to Ori, and went about his work.

“Come right in,” said the third dwarf in a loud voice. “The surgery is ready. I’ve got all my instruments; we can begin the operation immediately.”

Dori gave a final bellow of sorrow and collapsed carefully backward and full length into three waiting pairs of arms.
Once they were safely inside and the door shut tight, Oin, who was very grey and as hard of hearing as Ori had heard, and his brother Gloin, Gimli’s da, introduced themselves and roared with laughter when Balin gave them an account of the men.

Gridr ordered them into a quiet, small sitting room. She took Dori’s cloak.

“Here we are. Do sit down, chook, you must be wore to a thread with all this espionage cafuffle. Now all formality aside, I’m Gridr and I know you’re our Ori’s dear brother Dori. What kind of tea would you like? Sit right here by the fire, love.”

“Oh, my dearest Gridr, such a ridiculous to-do. I do believe I’d like a little raspberry leaf if you have it.”

“Oh I do. You just stay right here, warm up and-” Gridr flashed them a grin from the door, “rest your poor nerves.”

Dori laughed delightedly.

Ori sank onto the beautifully cushioned settle opposite Dori. Dori perched comfortably on the small couch, looking terribly pleased with himself. Balin sat beside Dori and raised Dori’s hand to his lips. Dori chuckled at him.

“Was my ‘pretense’ to your standards, Lord Balin?”

“Oh, m’ very dear Master Dori. Yer magnificent. I believe our entrapment t’ be a triumph.”

Balin turned to Ori just as Nori landed with a thud next to Ori.

“Oh, lad, don’t worry about a thin’,” Balin assured him. “Dwalin'll be home later this night. Th’ trap, now sprung, is water-tight, yeh’ll see.”

Ori folded his hand and looked at the pair.

“May I ask what’s going on?”

Dori glared at Nori, who had the gall to look embarrassed.

“’M sorry, pet,” said Nori. “It’s sort a’ my fault.”

“Sort of?” Dori asked, annoyed.

“Fine It’s all me bloody fault! Happy?”

“Not happy until you change your ways!”

“Well as to that-“

“Would someone please explain how I became the toss stone in this game?” Ori snapped.

Dori turned, as did Balin.

“Now then, laddie-“

“Darling, you’re not a toss stone, thank Mahal. You were almost a slave!”

Balin patted Dori’s hand.
“Master Nori, perhaps yeh’d like to tell yer brother what yeh’ got yerself into.”

“Wouldn’t like it ’t all, actually,” Nori barked.

“Master Nori,” Balin’s voice was suddenly quiet and full of menace. “That was a politely put order, no’ a serving suggestion.”

“Ah, a’right.” Nori turned to Ori, still shamefaced. “Look, pet, you know I ain’t too bothersome about how I get money, right?”

“Gaming, thieving, pick-pocketing, looting, yes, I do.”

“Well, I got involved with a grand scheme, or so I thought. It was Calmar’s group who had a system f’r gaming that cheat a player out o’ gold, dagger, an’ boots, then sent ‘em up prison-ward f’r not payin’. It was easy money.”

“And?” Ori asked.

Nori squirmed.

“I was goin’ through things t’ get a group of me own started one night an’ found a stack a papers. I grabbed ’em t’ check f’r treasure holes an’ like. Turns out th’ Master weren’t locking folk up f’r debts but using it as a cover f’r sellin’ ’em int’ slavery down south t’ Mordor f’r Orcs and such.”

Ori had to clap both hands to his mouth to stop himself from getting sick.

“I hid the papers upstairs.”

“Then they have them now?” Ori gasped.

“No, I have them.” Dori patted the strong box.

Nori stared.

“How’d you know where t’ find ‘em? Along with me…erm, night-time readin’?”

“Please,” Dori snorted. “I know all the hidey-holes in that house. I even know you taught little Ori to pick the front lock as you lost your key near forty years ago. I knew he was an honest lad and would never use that knowledge to do anything untoward.”

“So what’s happening at our house?” Ori asked.

“Lemme finish,” Nori went on. “That time yeh came t’ rescue me an’ that arse married yeh, the next day he came down an’ spent most a th’ day gettin’ in me face about what, if anythin’, I might know about the slave ring. I told him even if I knew anythin’ what the rocks could he really do t’ me an’ you two’d be better off anyway.

“He called me a fool and said they’d make Dori an’ you suffer f’r sure as you ain’t warriors. After he left, one o’ them men from the gang told me they knew I’d taken the papers an’ if I didn’t give ‘em back, and keep me mouth shut, they’d see t’ it that you an’ our Dori’d be on the next cart south with the orcs.”

Ori stared at Nori, who was yanking on his beard braids.

“I crept out th’ other night an’ came ‘round t’ yer Dwalin’s door an’ told him everythin’ and showed him the papers. Balin called in some bloke Br-sumthin’.”
“Brur.” Balin smiled.

“Aye, he came an’ copied the papers exactly, then gave me th’ copies. Then yer Dwalin told me everythin’ would be fine an’ t’ go home an’ he’d take care of everythin’ when yeh all came t’ dinner. What he’s doin’ now, I couldn’t tell yeh. Last I saw, he clipped me ’round the ear, called me a pest, threw his cloak on me an’ said t’ ride off w’ yeh an’ do whatever his brother says.”

“Oh, Nori,” Ori sighed, “you silly, greedy fool. You do realize if it wasn’t for our marriage he’d have never been able to stop them if that gang had shipped you off?”

Nori sulked. “Aye, well, kiss him f’r me. You’re probably real good at that now.”

“Dwalin’s never laid a hand on me like that,” Ori paused. “Never in seriousness or in private, I mean.”

Nori’s eyes went round.

“Mahal! Is he war-wounded and can’t get it up? Did some enemy whack it off?”

“No!” Ori snapped.

“How d’ yeh know then? If yeh ain’t fallen with him?”

“I saw him bathing.”

“Yeh spied on a feller bathin’? Oi, but yer a dirty wee lad, aren’t yeh!” Nori laughed.

“No, you idiot! I thought I’d lost my marriage bead and walked in on him.” Ori blushed as he recalled.

“If it was lost, then why not just come home and say it all never happened?”

“It was in the soap dish.”

“Aye, but it wasn’t in yer hair. So why not just say he lied and seduced yeh. None ’ud think less a’ yeh, yeh being young and romantical.”

“Nori, that’s wrong!”

“Why’re yeh defending that ugly ol’ buffalo? Yeh had an open chance t’ come back t’ us!”

Ori groaned, he felt a headache coming on.

“Nori, that would bring dishonor upon our family for lying and dishonor upon the House of Fundin for lying about his intentions.”

“Is that it?”

“’That and…’ Ori paused a moment, recalling his and Dwalin’s meeting with Balin, Dis and Thorin that very morning.

“And what?” Nori prodded.

Ori smiled and felt himself blush.

“And I happened to rather like my buffalo, who for the record is neither old nor ugly.”
Balin and Dori smothered chuckles and Nori made a face.

“I don’t like him.”

“I imagine the sentiment is mutual,” Ori commented dryly.

Nori flung himself back into the settle to sulk. Balin and Dori ooked pleased. Dori opened his mouth to say something but then Gridr swept back into the room followed by her three menfolk.

The dwarrow sat down with teapots, cups, saucers, cream, honey and a plate piled high with buttered toast. Into the middle of all that Gridr placed a dark-colored cake on a beautiful platter. Ori thought it must be some sort of molasses, or possibly even coffee.

* * *

Ori was nearly nodding in his seat when Oin sat up and brushed the crumbs off his knees.

“Well, that’s a good long time, if they’ve got anyone or a creature watching. Master Nori, you’ll be stayin’ here with us. Balin, if you’ll set your brother’s cloak on Master Dori there you’ll be able t’ take him and our young Ori home.”

“Yes, indeed,” Gridr nodded. “All of you must be close to dropping. Gimli, good lad, you show Master Nori there to his room. Put him in the east wing, so you don’t disturb your cousins. They have to be up early. Your Uncle Binni made up the red guest room there.”

The various party members rose and said good night. Dori embraced Nori most affectionately but Ori was close enough to hear Dori hissing in Nori’s ear exactly what would happen if Nori dared do anything even slightly criminal at the In residence.

Once more the shay moved off and Ori was relieved to see the steps of the Fundin House almost immediately. They drove in to the stabling area. Balin closed the door behind them.

Ori relaxed at the sound of the locks clicking shut. They were safe. He and Dori helped Balin see to Harley and Ducati. Ori tried not to yawn too much but he felt it was getting late. Balin opened a side door half-hidden behind a pile of straw, put out the lanterns and led Dori and Ori along the connecting bare hallway to another door at the end. Balin opened this.

“I’m terribly sorry, Master Dori, bringin’ yeh int’ th’ house through th’ side door. Most improper f’r a guest such as yerself, m’dear.”

Dori smiled demurely. “Nonsense, Master Balin. I much prefer it. Feels more like family this way.”

Ori glanced about. They were in the large hall area next to Dwalin’s bedroom.

Ori thoroughly enjoyed dragging Dori all around the house - except for the bedrooms as this made him feel self-conscious. If Dori noticed the omission, he didn’t comment on it. Dori praised all he saw but he was only effusive of the cooking equipment, larder, pantry and scullery. Ori smiled and hugged his brother.

“We can cook together here sometimes.”
“Oh, Ori, pet, I’d like that very much.”

Dori held Ori and rested his cheek on Ori’s hair, something he hadn’t done in a long time. They were standing that way when Balin rejoined them.

“Ah, there yeh both are, m’dears. Ori, my lad, would yeh like t’ show our Dori th’ bath so he can relax an’ change while yeh an’ I make a room ready? Dori m’dear, may I tempt yeh with a nightcap? I’ve some rather good red currant wine. Nicely fortified an’ steel barreled in th’ Shire, Late Second Age?”

Ori had no idea what that all meant but he squeezed Dori’s arm.

“I think you ought to be tempted, Dori.”

“As you wish, pet.” Dori smiled. “Thank you, Master Balin, you are more than kind.”

Balin bowed them out. Ori dragged Dori down the hall again and eagerly showed him how the bath worked. Balin had thoughtfully provided clean drawers, a night shift, felted house shoes and a beautiful dressing gown of elfin silk with lovely lavender pastel stripes and creamy satin cuffs and collar.

Ori left Dori to it and hurried out. Balin met him half way down the hall with a basin full of water and a cloth bag.

“Ori, lad, come and help me a moment, please.”

Ori trotted after Balin into Dwalin’s room. It was spotlessly clean. Ori glanced about and Balin chuckled.

“I got th’ cleaners in while th’ pair a’ yeh were at work. F’r one who’s so scrupulous in his military doin’s, forgin’, and weapons, he’s th’ most dreadful slob here at home.”

Ori snickered. “Dori says the same thing about my pens and paints. They’re always perfect and tidy, yet I end up covered in ink.”

“I think th’ pair a’ yeh’re well suited, then.”

Ori blushed then realized what Balin was doing and helped. He had spent more than enough time patching up Nori after fights to recognize bandages and salves.

“If he’s badly injured, how shall I get ahold of Master Oin?”

“He’ll send his own raven, first t’ Oin then t’ me, if he’s no’ well enough t’ come home. If I receive such, I’ll wake yeh, if yeh wish.”

“Yes, please.”

Balin patted Ori’s cheek.

“Don’t look so worried, lad. It’s usually no more than scratches, scrapes an’ bruises. Come, let’s go an’ put together something nice f’r our Dori, yes?”

Balin led Ori to a cozy sitting room right next to Balin’s own suite. It was smaller than the downstairs room at Dori’s house. There was only room for four people to sit comfortably. Balin turned up the fire and smiled as he went out, leaving Ori to inspect the four walls each covered in bookcases to the ceiling.
Ori had never seen so many books in a residence before. He guessed that both Balin and his
amad had been avid collectors, and maybe Dwalin, if his bedroom floor earlier had been anything
to go by. It appeared the House of Fundin enjoyed poetry, First Age classical drama, Old Púkel
burlesque, High Elven literature as well as many satirical works from Gondor, both translated into
runes and in the original Westron.

A deep box contained large maps fixed to thin pieces of slate: maps of villages, forests, mines and
lakes, some colored, others solely lines of elevation. Ori sighed blissfully, one day he would sit here
and look at all of them.

Many shelves held histories of the peoples of Middle Earth as well as great tomes about the
properties of that earth, stone, both precious and common, and many about lava.

It surprised him to discover a high shelf filled with books about the sky and all the constellations.
The study of the stars was not anything he had given a great deal of thought to before. He paged
through, intrigued.

“Ori! What in Mahal’s name are you doing up there?” Dori’s voice startled him.

Ori nearly fell off the back of the couch but gripped the shelf.

Dori stood next to Balin, looking very well in his borrowed clothes. His hair and beard streamed
loose about his shoulders and down his back.

Balin laughed and stepped forward. He took the book from Ori and helped him down.

“Astronomy a favorite of yers, m’dear?”

Ori shook his head. “I know next to nothing about it. I’m sorry I didn’t mean to pry.”

Ori took the book again as Balin handed it to him and sat on the couch corner near the fire as
Balin indicated.

“Nonsense, m’dear, this is yer home. I insist yeh both feel perfectly free to help yerself to our
books. I will tell yeh just to be careful, as we do tend to put in bookmarks or little mementoes and
such. We’ve never had any qualms about writing notes in them either. As long as it’s neat an’
doesn’t obscure anything already written.”

Now Ori wanted to check every volume to see what notes and other treasures they might hold.
Balin ushered Dori to the corner opposite Ori and nearest the fire then poured each of them a glass of
ruby red wine. The scent was delicious as they all leaned forward to toast.

“Welcome home, m’dears,” Balin said gently.

The wine tasted better than it smelled and the first sip went down like honey.

Ori smiled, then it playfully kicked him behind the eyes, and he giggled.

Dori turned slightly in his corner and curled his feet underneath.

“Dear Balin?”

“Yes, m’dear?”

“I’m almost frightened to ask but what is happening at my house at the moment?”
Balin studied the color of his wine then looked up.

“I sincerely hope nothin’, an’ that th’ entire mess is nice an’ tidy by now.”

Dori made a non-committal noise.

Ori glanced from one to the other.

“Balin?” he asked. “Did you tell Dori what was going to happen earlier today?”

Dori and Balin smiled at each other.

“Do show the lad,” Dori prompted.

Balin reached into his tunic pocket and drew out the ornate dagger he had asked Dori about over dinner. He laid it on the table and arranged the detritus nearby. Ori peered at the white flakes, each with its own distinct shape.

“Are those runes of some kind?”

“Yes, pet.”

“Very good, laddie.”

Ori looked up.

“So you told Dori about the plan when he was looking at the dagger?”

Dori nodded. “After a fashion. I had to, shall we say, improvise somewhat.”

Balin sighed.

“It’s been months in th’ works gettin' Gondor, Rohan an' Mirkwood t' discuss an' share information on th' slave trade, gettin' everyone t' cooperate, first t' find out what Calmar an' Sauron were doin', then how they were doin' it. Everythin' hinged on t’night as we knew Calmar’s group was plannin’ t’ set out from Erebor with a load o’ slaves. Our plan was t’ replace each load o’ slaves leavin' Dale with our soldiers an’ never let th' evidence leak t’ the next stoppin' point.

"At first we thought this whole to-do with Nori'd muck it up, then we realized, we could use th' master's vendetta against Nori as a diversion."

Dori looked askance.

Balin sighed.

“Yeh have me word whatever’s been broken or lost’ll be repaired or replaced. In th' meantime, yer quite welcome t’ stay as long as yeh fancy.”

“Thank you, Master Balin, you’re very kind,” Dori said graciously.

Ori tucked his feet up and yawned then tried to cover it but it was too late.

“Off to bed with you, pet,” Dori commanded.

Ori opened his mouth to protest but his face cracked into another yawn.

“Aye, laddie,” Blain concurred. “And I’ve left yeh a clean night shirt and house socks. Do be
careful hanging up that wedding tunic. We’re due f’r the market tomorrow and folk always like t’ see the newlywed. Don’t f’rget yer book either.”

Balin handed it to him as Ori leaned in to kiss Dori’s cheek.

“Good night, Dori. I hope you’ll be comfortable here, brother.”

“Oh, I don’t see how I couldn’t be, pet. Go and get some sleep now like a good badger. Sweet dreams.”

Balin kissed Ori’s cheek and patted his shoulder.

“Off yeh go, laddie. Night-night.”

* * *

Ori padded from the bathroom, the wedding clothes hung carefully in the steamer closet. He was washed, comfortable in the cream linen nightshirt and long drawers that Balin had left out for him. Wearing the felt house socks in matching cream, Ori found he could walk silently. Book in hand he headed back to his room, but voices stopped him dead, listening.

“Dori, m’dear, if I’ve satisfied yer curiosity about our younger brothers, there’s somethin’ else we must discuss.”

Dori sighed. “Must we?”

“Aye, me darlin’, as it could throw this entire arrangement for Dwalin an’ Ori completely awry.”

Ori hesitated only a moment before deciding that since it was a discussion about him, he had a right to know. He dropped to all fours and slipped back into the room, hiding under the table covered in a thin cloth so he could just see them. Dori and Balin still sat on the couch but Balin was holding Dori’s hand!

“Jus’ tell me th' truth, beloved,” Balin said gently. “Is Ori mine?”

“What?”

“Is he mine?”

“Balin, you must be aware I’m male. You have seen me-”

“Yes, dearest, an' touched you. Thoroughly.”

Dori blushed and Balin went on.

“I also see that yer exceptionally strong in th’ hips, yer center is there, an’, though small by dwarrowdam terms, yeh do have enough in th’ breast t’ nurse and yeh’ve a very nestin' nature. All that an’ th’ fact that many male dwarrow with mithril hair’re bearers.”

Dori sighed again. “Yes, I’m a bearer but no, my love, he is not yours, though he should have been.”
Ori held himself silent with the cuff of his shirt stuffed in his mouth.

Dori stroked Balin’s hands.

“Please, my love, hear me out. The day we met in the town forge in Ered Luin was the second most beautiful day of my life. Wait. There was nothing I wanted more that to go with you and be your love. We are each other’s Ones but I left you in that delightful inn room for a reason.”

“Yeh said family.”

“Yes, Mam was still trying to get Nori’s adad to marry her. She was working in the mines then and Nori was already learning to be a naughty little badger. It needed both of us working to keep hearth and home together. You did look lovely but I was not going to drop everything in your hands.

“I spent the next month full of joy that I knew of you, my One, and that we loved one another. Mam had taken Nori with her to stay at Nori’s adad’s place. I had our rooms to myself. I was happy to distraction. Believe me, my love, I was. I had every hope that Mam’s relationship was set and I could get my mastery and then find you again.

“They did come back and were very happy together. Mam noticed my joy and one evening we sat down together to talk. I told her everything. How I had planned it all out and made a budget for her and Nori’s adad to live comfortable without me. Mam made a pot of tea and we sat together as I as I explained it all.”

“Tea?” Balin queried.

Ori felt his stomach drop out of him.

Balin’s eyes widened in horror.

“Oh, no, me beloved?”

Dori held up his hand, shaking his head tiredly.

“Yes. Two days later I was sick and had a horribly painful flux that lasted nearly three days. I don’t know if a child had formed or not but I grieved for the possibility.

“Mam, when I confronted her, was adamant that I was confused about Heartsongs. They were only stories and I had been foolish enough to fall with a handsome noble just as she had. She firmly held that she was protecting me from her fate.”

Ori felt faint. Tears burned his eyes.

“Beloved,” Balin said gently.

He moved closer and Dori rested his head against Balin’s shoulder as the other dwarf put an arm around him.

“Needless to say,” Dori went on, “I was devastated, but there was Nori to help with and Mam left him to me often enough.

“For all the bad that was in her relationship with Nori’s adad, he was usually a kind sort. It wasn’t until they’d been together a few years that things began to change for the worse. Both of them liked to drink and Nori was growing more adventurous and bold in the trouble he was getting
Mam and her love were spending more and more time down in the pubs which meant more of my pay went to keep us fed and clothed and a roof over our heads. It didn’t help matters Nori’s adad liked to gamble occasionally.”

“So,” Balin put in quietly, “there was no chance t’ follow yer plan t’ save an’ leave?”

“Mmm, you’d think she’d want me out of the place. I wasn’t her current love’s child and I was a reminder of her fall from her family. No one would have been surprised if she had encouraged me to leave or even if she’d thrown me out. I made a point of saying this to her once while helping her to bed when she was blind drunk.

“Apparently she held onto hope that we should all travel back to Erebor and one of her noble family or my adad’s family would see me and, being struck by my amazing beauty, take back both of us. And all would be forgiven.”

“Yer adad?” Balin asked.

Dori looked at him a long moment before saying, “The noble Thror tried to marry her to.”

“Sweet Mahal’s hammer,” Balin moaned. “Dwalin was righ’.”

“Dwalin?” Dori raised his eyebrows.

“He’s a soldier bu’ also a dab hand a’ investigation,” Balin explained. “When he began his work on yeh-

“Why?” Dori demanded.

Balin smiled ruefully.

“Ori, of course. When Ori came of age t’ be courted, Dwalin felt he’d need t’ know more abou’ him, so he could request o’ th’ proper head o’ th’ family th’ permission t’ court him.”

“Idiot,” Dori muttered.

Balin chuckled and nodded.

“Rather delusional o’ Rikmha if she though’ Lord Rikut’d welcome her back.”

“Yes it was. So life went along in Ered Luin until Nori’s adad took a journey to the Iron Hills.”

“Oh no!”

“Oh yes. While he was gone, she met a new one at the pub, a darling young thing. My age. And a scribe who wrote plays for a traveling carnival and theater. He left and she decided to follow him. She thought he’d said he was going to Erebor. It took us nearly four months on the road, tinkering and whatever other work we could find to keep us in food and shelter on the way. Nori’s thieving skills kept us alive often enough. She took up work cleaning when we arrived in Dale. She didn’t realize she was carrying until there was an accident at the building she worked in. She was examined by a healer and put on lighter duties.”

“I take it this wasn't Nori’s adad’s work?”

“No, no it wasn’t. She was furious. Herbs and tea would kill both herself and the child at this point and no healer would be able to remove it without destroying her ability to have more children. Then she heard from an old Ered Luin neighbor that Nori’s adad had returned from the Iron Hills
and he was on his way to Erebor in search of her. She was stuck and counting her days to make sure she gave birth before he got there. Needless to say luck was with her. A few weeks before he was due to arrive, she gave birth. She didn’t even want to see the child. The midder caring for her just handed me the baby and went back to help her settle. Oh, my darling! He was the most beautiful little boy and he opened his eyes and looked right up at me! His were that sweet hazel, just like yours.”

“Ah, dear love!”

“He was my baby, my darling Ori. I would never let him go. The midder came back to tell me Mam was sleeping and said that Mam had told her to take the brat to the healers for adoption. I’d bathed and settled my little badger by then and told the midder I’d take care of all of it. While Mam recovered in bed over the next few days I kept my badger with me and quiet. Oh, such a good badgerling. I loved him so within a day I found I was able to nurse him. He almost never cried and then it was just a wee little noise.

“When Mam found out she was furious. She tried to force me to take the child to the healers but I would not be swayed by any amount of talk and there was no way she could physically overpower me.”

“But Nori’s adad?”

“Oh, he and I’d had one bout back in Ered Luin and he learn right quick not to cross me. Well, the days passed and my little Ori grew more and more sweet. Nori came for a visit and fell head over heels in love. I would take both of them to the forge with me and they’d play for hours. Mam met Ori’s adad again and they took up where they had left off. Fortunately he was of the classic empty-headed sort of writer who cannot focus on anything beyond what Mahal or the Green Lady happen to whisper in their ears at the moment. He never noticed I was caring for a child, and if he did he probably thought it was mine.

“Well, three months later Nori’s adad arrived. He found her in Dale. The fight was loud and out he walked. Did you or Dwalin ever hear of the Millgakhin pub murders?”

“Aye, love, but we were still down in Khazad Dûm a’ that time. Clearin’ up after th’ battle. Ori’s adad?”

“Yes, stinking drunk one night. Nori’s da and a gang of his equally soused cronies went after Ori’s adad and his brothers. Burned the place to the ground. Twenty folk were sent to healers and three dead - two of them Nori and Ori’s adads.”

“Oh, beloved.”

“It doesn’t matter now. Mam was finally resigned. Nori was helping us again with his skills and I had my Ori. He may have called her Mam like the rest of us but it was me he came to for praise or comfort. It did mean I couldn’t come to you, but he’s grown now.”

“I wished I’d betrayed yer trust, come an’ taken yeh all away t’ be with me here. I don’t like t’ think how yeh suffered, love.”

Balin pressed a kiss onto Dori’s temple.

“We’re here now, aren’t we?” Dori smiled.

Ori watched as they came together in a long kiss. They rose. Balin closed down the fire and placed the screen. Dori picked up the tray of glasses as they left, putting out the lamps as they
Ori was sure he could hear Dori crying softly.
Welcome back, friends, to a new chap-episode and a nice long one!

We have Ori’s reaction to what he heard previously. This includes a melt-down, vomit, and smooching but, we do assure you, not all at the same time.

There’s a link to what seemed to be a perfect piece of music for the moment.

A old familiar friend pops in and we find out more about the mysterious dwarrowdam Frerin is nutty on.

Keep those cards and letters coming, friends! We adore hearing from you!

Ori sat very still under the table, hugging the all but forgotten book to himself. His mind was empty except for Dori’s voice repeating the tale over and over. He crept from the room and wandered blindly through the hall. He went to Dwalin’s room. He couldn’t absorb all this. Dwalin would be back soon and he would need medicine and wound cleaning. Ori sat on the edge of the bed.

_Nori’s adad killed my adad. Nori and I are only half brothers. Mam. Mam killed Dori and Balin’s baby!

He curled up on the foot of the bed, staring into the fire glowing before the large armchair there.

_Dori and Balin were each other’s One but have been forced to live apart most of their lives._

Ori fell into an uneasy sleep. Ori dreamed. Ori dreamed his One came to the door and swept him away with the promise of love and adoration but only took him back to the squalor of Steam Alley Close, the freezing cold of a winter in a single room in the letting house with nothing but a communal stove at the center of every floor. There was no rest and no work and the One was drunk and violent. Ori cried for Dwalin, but in the Alley, Dori’s house was burnt down and there among the ashes the bodies of the Fundin brothers lay dead.

“Dwalin!”

Ori jerked awake and stumbled away from the bed. With a shaking hand, he poured water from the pitcher and drank. He stared at the fire, willing himself to be calm.

He nearly fell over when the back part of the high chimney opened seamlessly and Dwalin stepped in. Ori stared. Dwalin was disheveled, blood-spattered as were his axes; he clapped them and his hammer in one hand while he closed the door.

Ori took the kettle from the hearth and poured some hot water into the wash basin.

“I take it things went well?” Ori asked.

Dwalin jerked around to look at him.
“Ori! What yeh doin’?”

Ori added some herbs and a few drops of the tincture as Balin had showed him.

“Waiting for you. Put those weapons down for now and let me see to the damage.”

“I’m a’right, yeh jus’ go off t’ yer bed, love.”

Dwalin placed the weaponry on a large long table near the others and turned.

Ori pointed to the chair, cloth in hand.

“Go and sit down, so I can take care of this.”

Dwalin smiled gently.

“I said, I’m a’right, love, really. Go an’ get some sleep.”

“Don’t patronize me. I am your husband and equal now! Go. Sit. Down!”

Dwalin stared blankly at him.

Ori pointed to the chair.

Dwalin backed up a few steps and did as he was bid.

“I’m sittin’. I’m sittin’,” he said, slowly lowering himself into the chair, never taking his eyes from Ori.

Ori re-wetted the cloth, warming it.

“Take off your tunic and shirt.”

“Aye, love, just lemme-”

“Take them off!”

Dwalin struggled out of his belt and shoulder weapons harness, which would have been a great deal easier to do had he been standing up, then stripped to the waist.

Ori kept his calm by frowning, quickly and efficiently clearing the grime and blood off Dwalin. Ori forced his hands to remain steady, aware that Dwalin was watching his face intently. Ori was, somewhere deep down inside, relieved to see it was mostly just grime and someone else’s blood. Ori finished Dwalin’s torso, dried him and pulled a nightshirt over his husband’s head.

“Thank yeh. Love, I-”

“Boots and britches,” Ori ordered.

Dwalin opened his mouth, seemed to think the better of it and complied meekly.

Ori tossed all the clothing in the hamper near the bedroom door, took the boots to the fireplace door, opened it and put the boots beside the step, shut the door, then returned to Dwalin. Really, the only nasty wound was a cut down his left thigh.

“Sword?” Ori asked in a neutral tone as he cleaned, anointed, and bandaged it.

“Broken plank.” Dwalin shrugged. “Uh, everythin’ a’right, love?”
“Fine.”

Ori pulled the footstool closer and busily finished washing and drying Dwalin’s legs and feet.

Dwalin continued to watch him keenly but otherwise gingerly followed whatever Ori told him to do.

Ori told himself he was fine and everything would work out well.

“Here, put on your drawers and tell me how to clean up the weaponry,” Ori instructed.

Dwalin looked ready to argue but after a moment complied. Ori then learned about cleaning and oiling weapons by watching. Whether he would remember any of it was not high on his list of priorities.

Ori tidied away the medical supplies and put out the lamp. He crossed to the bed ready to put the final lamp out. He turned to Dwalin.

“Come along. Get into bed.”

Dwalin crossed to his side. He started to reach for Ori then paused.

“Ori, love-“

“What?” Ori replied brusquely and folded back the covers.

“I- Whatever I’ve done, I’m very, very sorry. I realize-”

“You haven’t done anything,” Ori said shorty. “I’ve been thinking things through. We’ve both been tiptoeing around each other and playing courting games. The fact of the matter is we are married and a Royal Triad has given us two years. It would dishonor both our families if we fail at this. I refuse to fail. We are married and we will be a proper married pair. Now, take off all your clothes!”

“What-?”

“You heard me.” Ori proceeded to undress himself and, pushing Dwalin out of the way, climbed into bed, moved over to make room for Dwalin, then sat against the headboard, arms folded, and frowned at Dwalin. Dwalin was still standing at the bedside watching Ori, only now one eyebrow was raised.

“Hurry up,” Ori snapped.

Dwalin removed the nightshirt and slowly sat down beside him in the bed.

Ori glared

“Now. Have sex with me.”

Dwalin’s other eyebrow shot up and he looked Ori straight in the eye.

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

“Yeh sure?”
“Yes!”

“It’s late, love an’ we’re both tired—“

“I don’t care. Do it.”

“Yeh sure yeh wouldn’t like t’ sleep f’r a bit an—“

“I said: *Now!*”

Dwain cocked his head, eyes narrowed.

Ori frowned and glared at the fireplace for a few moments.

Dwalin didn’t do anything other than look at him.

“I’m waiting,” Ori growled.

“Right.”

Ori decided to glare at Dwalin again.

“May we just get on with this?”

“Aye…right.”

Dwalin slid nearer and put his arm around Ori’s shoulders. It was warm and comforting. Ori felt his throat tighten. Refusing to cry, Ori shoved Dwalin away.

“Don’t touch me!”

Dwalin turned and sat cross-legged opposite Ori.

“’M sorry, love, but I kinda have t’ if we’re goin’ t’ have sex.”

Ori blushed hotly, instantly enraged.

“I know that!”

“Righ’.”

“Oh, will you stop making fun of me and just get this…out of the way so we don’t have to dread it anymore!”

“Wasn’t makin’ fun of yeh, love, I—”

“Dwalin!”

“C’mon, love, we don’t have t’—“

“Yes we do! So then it’s over and done with and people can stop hinting and we can get on with life. We’ll go and adopt a baby that looks like Dori and Balin, so they’ll have one and we’ll get Nori a proper job, so he won’t have to find out his da was a murderer and Dis won’t remember any more about Rikmha and Dori won’t have to think about his baby dying and remembering that Mam—”

Ori choked. He curled forward, his face in the mattress and wailed into the covers. His insides hurt so much he wanted to rip them out. Dwalin held him tight and settled Ori in his lap, cradling
Ori’s head against his shoulder.

“’M here, love.”

“This has to work!” Ori sobbed. “It has to or you’ll leave me.”

“’M not leavin’ yeh.”

“I won’t go if my One comes. I’ll stay, as he’s a drunk and a horrible person. He’ll kill you and Balin and what’ll Dori do?”

“I’ve got yeh, love. ’M not lettin’ yeh go an’ it’ll take more’n some arsehole t’ dust me an’ Balin, don’t yeh worry.”

Ori sobbed harder. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew he was beyond hysterical, but he was crying so hard he was almost throwing up. He wished he hadn’t had that thought because his body thought that throwing up was a great idea.

Next thing Ori knew he was lying across one of Dwalin’s thighs, spilling his guts onto the puddle of his own night shirt and drawers on the floor beside the bed.

“Oh shit,” Ori rasped.

“Nah, but I’ll carry ye t’ th’ pot if yeh need.”

Ori laid his cheek against Dwalin’s thigh. He felt exhausted and useless.

“I’m sorry,” he offered listlessly.

Dwalin wiped Ori’s face with his own nightshirt in reply. He tossed it on top of the mess and turned Ori to lie down.

“Shhh, just rest a minute an’ I’ll get yeh some water.”

Dwalin rose, covered Ori with a thin cotton quilt and moved away.

Ori stared at nothing, his cheek against the cool linen underquilt.

Dwalin came back. He easily slid his arm under Ori, raised the smaller dwarf to help him drink a cup of cool water, then eased Ori down to lie on his back. He folded a wet cloth over Ori’s eyes. A few moments later, Dwalin removed it, wiped Ori’s face and neck with it before re-soaking it in the pitcher now on the side table. He folded it again and laid it over Ori’s eyes. The second time he removed it, Ori reached up to rub his eyes, but Dwalin stopped his hand.

“Don’t love, yeh’ll bruise ’em.”

Ori obeyed but did nothing more. After a few more times Dwalin left the cloth in the pitcher and helped Ori into a clean nightshirt. Ori rose and padded toward the door. He wanted to go to his own bed, pull the covers over his head and sleep, never wake up again.

Dwalin came to his side and walked him to the bath.

Ori felt a bit better after washing his face properly. He looked up at Dwalin, who was leaning against the wall next to the sink.

“Um…I’m....” Ori didn’t know what to say.
Dwalin smiled at him.

“Fancy a walk?”

“A walk? At this hour? Where?” Ori was completely thrown by the question.

“Nowhere. Up the circle. Get some air and get out a th’ house.”

Ori blinked. “Actually a walk sounds nice.”

Dwalin slid off the wall with a grin.

“Grab yer britches an’ socks an’ I’ll meet yeh back in me room with yer boots.”

Ori came back into Dwalin’s room. He’d thrown on his old trousers and a long-sleeved tunic. Dwalin, similarly dressed to Ori, was putting the screen in front of the fire. He opened the fireplace door and they sat together on the step pulling on their boots. Ori found himself smiling. He liked this part of married life.

Dwalin led him down a dark cramped hallway and pulled the end door inwards.

Ori peered around him to see they were in the stable. Ducati and Harley looked at them sleepily. Ori couldn’t resist going over and patting both ponies. Dwalin handed him an apple for Ducati and gave his to Harley.

Dwalin shut the stable door behind them silently, locking it as Ori looked about.

It was completely silent in the cavern. The street was steaming slightly, but beautiful.

Ori looked questioningly at Dwalin.

“They flush all th’ streets of th’ city with the geysers below the mines.”

“How luxurious,” Ori marveled.

“Aye, that an’ who really wants t’ have th’ job of cleanin’ pony shit an’ th’ like off th’ street every day.”

“Good point,” Ori agreed.

He stretched and sniffed the air. It smelled bright with the tang of fresh cut gems and the crisp scent of stone mixed with ore.

They walked down the long tunnel and out under the arch that marked the royal residence cavern. The whole silent city, the entire mountain, stretched before them. Ori suddenly wanted nothing more than to run. He had always loved to run as a badger and even now if pressed he could leave Nori far behind. He turned to Dwalin

“Where are we going?”

“See that spire up over there? Right by that arch?”

“Race you!”

Ori took off like a deer. It felt wonderful. Suddenly, he heard pounding feet behind him. He
risked a glance back. Dwalin was almost at his heels. Ori pushed himself as hard as he could. Dwalin kept up and drew almost abreast.

“Left at th’ stair,” Dwalin said.

They barreled under an arch that marked the entry to an ornamental garden with artistic arrangements of cavern plants and carved wooden trees.

They slowed to a stop, panting, in front of a reflecting pool circled with graceful statuary and benches.

“Feelin’ a bit better?” Dwalin asked.

Ori nodded, catching his breath.

“Much. You’re the first who’s ever caught up to me.

“Years a’ trainin’, love. ‘Sides, we dwarrow’re natural sprinters.”

Dwalin went over to the pool and flopped down on his stomach, slapping the ground beside him.

“C’mere. Show yeh summat.”

Ori followed suit. Dwalin pointed into the pool.

“Now if yeh look careful yeh can see th’ stars from th’ dome in top a’ th’ mountain.”

Ori peered into the pool, then gasped. “I do see it! So beautiful! I didn’t know the very top of the mountain was open.”

“Only when it’s safe an’ clear. Th’ openings just a dwarf’s length across, th’ light’s refracted with crystal and mirrors.” Dwalin sat up. “It’s good f’r any livestock folk bring down from th’ surface. S’why we don’t actually build on th’ side of th’ mountain, grazing and such. Yeh saw part a’ it with th’ meadow outside the house.”

“This is lovely. Thank you,” Ori said quietly.

He scooted a little nearer to Dwalin. The older dwarf smiled and also moved closer, so their shoulders just touched. They stayed there looking into the water for a while. Dwalin told Ori all about the stars they could see sparkling in the mirror-like pool.

“Yeh see th’ difference between th’ brightness a’ those three an’ th’ little sparklers ’round about?”

“Yes. This pool makes it very easy to see.”

“Aye, yeh don’t get th’ torch light from th’ town t’ interfere. Now, what yeh kin do if yeh get yerself turned ’round when travelin’ is find that group a’ stars there. See?”

“Yes, they look like a ladle.”

“Aye, th’ one at th’ top of th’ handle always shows north, so yeh kin work out where t’ go on a journey.”

Ori gaped.

“Really? I thought the stars moved with the sky.”
Dwalin turned to look at him. “No, love, our world moves beneath th’ sky.”

Ori stared into the pool, his mind spinning with this new line of thinking. *Our world moves beneath the sky? What’s under our world? Our world is round; if we are moving, then are the stars all around us? Is our world alone spinning in the sky? Are there other worlds?*

Everything had turned on an edge; the sky, the world, who he was, and dear Dori. Ori blinked hard, determined not to cry.

“So,” Dwalin said gently. “After yeh left with Dori, did Nori catch yeh up quick enough? I didn’t hear anythin’ about yeh bein’ attacked.”

“No,” Ori replied, forcing his mind back on present matters. “No, we made it to Master Oin’s fine. Dori had more time for spasming and fainting there, too.”

Dwalin snickered.

“We had toast, jam, cake, and tea,” Ori counted off on his fingers. “Then we went home with Dori pretending to be you. After we got in, Balin got Dori and I nightwear and fed us cakes and wine.”

Ori paused, his eyes stung. He stared into the water, trying not to start crying again.

Dwalin rolled once again onto his back and turned to face Ori. He cupped the smaller dwarf’s cheek with his large hand.

“What’s happened, love?”

Ori blinked and was temped to laugh it off, saying he was affected by the stars and their beauty, but was stalled when a couple of his tears splashed into the pool, rippling its surface.

“It’s not my secret to tell. I’ve a bad habit, Captain Dwalin, since badgerhood. I like to listen to conversations I am not part of.”

“Yeh heard Balin an’ Dori say summat that upset yeh?”

Ori nodded.

Dwalin frowned, obviously thinking it through, while his hand still rested on Ori’s cheek.

Ori clutched at the hand as the lump in his throat threatened to choke him.

Dwalin pulled Ori down to rest his head against Dwalin’s shoulder. Ori wrapped both arms around Dwalin’s thick muscled one and curled against it. He felt Dwalin roll so they were spooned together. Ori took a shaky breath.

“Never tell. Promise.”

“Promise. We’re married. Our secrets’re jus’ ours an’ we’ve no secrets from each other. Yeh kin tell me anythin’. I’ll no’ judge yeh.”

Ori held on tight while he related what he’d heard under the table of the little sitting room. By the time he got to the end, he was crying again.

“So everything I thought I knew about me is a lie,” he finished in a whisper.
Dwalin hugged him tighter and Ori felt a kiss pressed into his hair.

“Nah, yer still yerself.”

Ori squirmed loose then settled on his side, facing Dwalin.

“But I’m not.”

“Yeh still love both yer brothers the same, right?”

“Of course.”

“Then they’re still yer brothers. Doesn’t matter th’ blood part. Balin an’ Dis accept each other as siblings since they know Thorin an’ I’re brothers at arms. I jus’ wish I’d had th’ chance t’ finish my investigation’, so I could’a told yeh an’ mabbe spared yeh a bit a’ pain.”

Ori sighed. “It’s alright I suppose, but poor, poor Dori and Balin.”

“Aye, that’s an iniquitous thing. If Rikmha was alive th’ only thing keepin’ me from hatin’ her is yeh, but I’d be more f’r thankin’ yer Dori f’r that. Poor shit, wha’ a life. Wha’ he’s like makes a lo’ more sense now.”

Ori nodded, thinking back on Dori’s words and his own actions.

“Dwalin?”

“Aye, love?”

“I’m so sorry for the way I behaved and for what I said this evening.”

Dwalin laid his forehead against Ori’s and ruffled his hair.

“No harm done, love. I knew yeh were upset when I first got in.”

“How? I thought I was calm.”

“Aye, very calm, with a face whiter than mountain snow an’ eyes all but screamin’ with pain. All I could wonder was wha’ in Durin’s name I’d done. I really thought yeh were gonna slit me throat from eyes t’ crotch.”

“I’d never-“

“I know, love. Yeh jus’ looked that upset.”

Ori sighed and shook his head.

“I’m still sorry for-“

Dwalin rubbed his knuckles against Ori’s cheek. Ori grabbed the hand and held it there.

“C’mere,” Dwalin rumbled and drew him in for a hug then rolled onto his back, pulling Ori on top and murmured an old cradle song.

Ori sighed and laid his head on Dwalin’s chest. He heard the steady, strong beat of the older dwarf’s heart. Ori closed his eyes to listen as, unbidden, the song of his own heart rose in his mind. Ori treasured and found comfort in the low, deep tones. It had always made him feel stronger and
protected. He smiled as the song grew louder and almost rang in his ears, well mostly his left ear. That was against Dwalin’s chest. Ori paused his thoughts.

His song, the song of his heart, was coming from…Dwalin?

He raised his head. Dwalin looked sleepily at him, still humming. Ori stared at Dwalin. Dwalin’s eyes snapped into focus. He stopped the old tune and crinkled his mouth into a fond smile. Ori’s brain grasped desperately at what was going on. *How can a heart song be heard with the ears?*

Dwalin grinned and stroked Ori’s face with both hands.

“Hear it?” Dwalin whispered.

“I thought only I- Can you- hear me?”

“Ever since we won th’ day at Khazad Dûm.”

“I was born that day.”

A bubble of happiness formed inside him and he grinned back.

“It’s you! You’re my One! We’ve found each other!”

“Aye, love.”

Ori flung himself over Dwalin, shoved his arms around and underneath Dwalin’s neck and held on hard, squeezing as fiercely as he could. He felt Dwalin chuckling as he hugged back. Ori let go to lean up and peer into Dwalin’s face, nose to nose. Dwalin was still grinning but there was a glisten of moisture in his eyes.

“You said since Khazad Dûm,” Ori whispered. “Is that why you were waiting and not coming ’round to walk out with me? You were waiting for me to notice?”

“Aye, sort of. I kept plannin’ t’ ask yeh to court but every time I had a day t’ spare and a decent interval’d passed, yer brother would go and do summat stupid and yeh’d have t’ come and get him and I’d be back at square one.”

Ori smiled. “I wish I’d been able to hear you earlier. It must have been very hard for you to see that I couldn’t.”

“Nah, just tried t’ be about an’ see what I could do an’ mebbe if yeh’d notice.”

“I’ve noticed now,” Ori offered and leaned in to *kiss him.*

Dwalin’s lips were warm and as gentle as before and it thrilled Ori more than ever.

Suddenly shy, he buried his face in Dwalin’s beard.

“I always did like the way you behaved and you are very handsome,” Ori mumbled.

Dwalin made a noise between a purr and a growl as he slid a hand into Ori’s hair. Ori sighed as the kisses and nibbles at his throat made him shiver. Ori murmured in delight.

“I don’t know how you do it. It’s always so nice when you kiss me or hold me. I never did like it before.”
Ori felt a minuscule pause in Dwalin’s attentions the larger dwarf drew away but only far enough to rest their foreheads together.

“Love, I had lovers a’fore yeh were born an’ that can’t be undone, so I’ll never fault yeh fra havin’ yer own before this. But if some arsehole treated yeh bad when yeh were expectin’ sweetness, name ‘em an’ so help me I’ll hunt ‘em down an’ skin ‘em alive.”

Ori surprised himself by chuckling.

“No, I never loved anyone that way and Mam being who she was, no one was interested in me. The other times? Well, the first was in a pub when I was fetching Nori home. The adad of the publican, who was a nice old fellow, it was his name day I think. He was kissing each of the bar maids goodnight and I was standing there and it was quite funny, actually, but he tasted horrid.

“The second was one of Nori’s drinking cronies. He grabbed me and kissed me. Nori punched him in the nose. That was disgusting. His mouth was all wet and slimy and cold. I felt like it took weeks to wash the feel and taste of him out of my mouth.

“The only other one was a stable boy in Lake Town, who thought slamming his mouth into mine was a good idea before throwing me down in a stall and telling me to open my legs. I did. I kicked him in the crotch with one foot and the throat with the other when he bent over. I never really liked the idea since. As I said, but you’re different.”

Ori looked into Dwalin’s dark eyes, which were full of sympathy and barely suppressed rage.

“They weren’t thinkin’ a’ yeh, love, just themselves, curse ’em.”

“I know, but still it’s strange to think it can be nice.”

Dwalin grinned and pulled Ori in close and was extremely nice to him for a while.

When they drew apart to breathe, Dwalin smirked and said, “I hate t’say it, love, but it’s about time we think o’ heading’ home.”

They walked toward home hand in hand.

“So,” said Ori playfully. “What do you want to do when we get home?”

“I can show yeh how to do somethin’ else nice.”

Ori wrinkled his nose and grinned.

“Too late! Nori taught me to jerk off when I was a tween.”

Dwalin roared with laughter.

“No, he did! Dori had to go to a mastering session overnight, so Nori had to watch me. He invited his friends around to play cards. He wanted, apparently, to talk shop with them, so I couldn’t stay in the room but he would not let me take a light to read upstairs. I think he figured if he showed me I would be occupied for the rest of my life or at least until I attained a semblance of adulthood.”

Ori kissed Dwalin on the end of his nose.

“Even that should wait until we get inside,” said Ori, though he did kiss Dwalin on the lips and Dwalin kissed him back, and then they kissed each other rather passionately and Ori pulled a bit away. “We really should not be out here rolling around having sex in the street.”
Dwalin snorted.

“We are not rolling around in the street. This is rolling around in the street.”

Ori gasped as Dwalin covered the back of Ori’s head with his hand and clamped the other around Ori’s waist, dropped them to the ground, then rolled them off somewhere. Nor could Ori stop laughing when they finally slowed to a stop with Ori sprawled across Dwalin’s chest.

“See?” Dwalin said. “Now that was rolling in the street.”

“You great silly!” Ori managed, looking about.

They were at the entrance to the royal cavern. Dwalin leered, pulled him in for another long kiss, and roll them over once more which started Ori laughing and made kissing rather ineffective.

“Oi,” a male dwarf’s voice said. “Get yourselves a room, yeh drunks.”

Ori was not quite sure how Dwalin managed to spring from lying flat to being on his feet in one smooth movement and keep hold of Ori while he was doing it. Dwalin was in the other dwarf’s face instantly.

“Who wants t’ repeat what they just said? No’ t’ mention what business they go’ in th’ royal caverns a’ this time a’ nigh’?”

Ori peered around Dwalin.

The other dwarf was obviously a miner, pleasant featured and amused about catching them. Ori knew that familiar face and funny hat anywhere.

“Master Bofur. How lovely to see you again after all this time!”

“Well bless my beard! If it ain’t young Ori, Rikmha’s son! Grand t’ see yeh, laddie!”

Master Bofur offered his hand immediately then chuckled and ruffled Ori’s hair.

Dwalin stepped closer with growl. Ori put his hand on Dwalin’s chest and put himself in between the dwarrow.

“Dwalin, please. This is an old friend of my family. Master Bofur and his brother, Master Bombur, used to run the Steam Circle Pub. They were always very good to us.”

Dwalin grunted assent and glared at Bofur but kept Ori’s back flush to his chest and leaned his arm casually under Ori’s chin. Ori blushed and smiled weakly. Master Bofur looked Dwalin over then narrowed his eyes.

“Ori, lad, does yer Dori know yer here with him at this time of night?”

“Well, no, but it’s alright.”

“Oh, really?” Master Bofur frowned. “Here you! I think it’s time this young dwarf was home safe with his brothers.”

“This young dwarf’s me husband an’ he’s perfectly safe,” Dwalin snarled.

Master Bofur’s eyes bugged slightly as he gasped out, “Master Ori! Yer married? Durin bless us all! Truly?”
Ori grinned and nodded enthusiastically. Master Bofur dropped his pack and tools at his feet with a huge grin.

“Well, then I’ll shut my scolding and offer yeh my hand instead! Married our Ori, did you? Bless us all, that is fine news.”

Dwalin unbent enough to take the other dwarf’s hand

“Dwalin, son of Fundin. I’m Captain of the City guard.”

“And Prince Thorin’s personal guard. Our Ori’s flying high. Bofur, son of Scur, miner an’ toy maker dependin’ on the market, at yers. My congratulations to both of yeh.”

“Bit late t’ be diggin’ ain’t it?” Dwalin asked conversationally. “Hit a vein good enough t’ rouse the royal family?”

Bofur chuckled.

“Nah. Was havin’ a chat down the Central Pub, then…well, jus’ came up to, er… take in th’ lay of th’ land, as it were.”

“Lay of the land?” Ori asked.

“Aye,” Bofur sighed. “Ori, lad, you remember our Janifur, yes?”

Ori and Dwalin looked at each other then Ori said, “So it is your younger sister Frerin is trying to court?”

Bofur groaned.

“I knew it! I told her th’ princeling was after her, bu’ she jus’ kept saying she don’t know him from nowt. Came home all excited t’ other night. Been invited to Princess Dis’ house f’r dinner. I’m not happy about thin’s. Came up t’ find the blessed place, so we wouldn’t be late! Oi, how d’ yeh know about it?”

“We had breakfast with Princess Dis the other day and Prince Frerin told us,” Ori explained.


Bofur picked up his pack and the three dwarrows walked beneath the arch way and strolled up through the tunnel to the royal cavern.

“Bollocks!” Bofur frowned. “He’s not already done that has he?”

“Nah,” Dwalin shrugged. “Idiot badger f’rgot to ask f’r her family name, so no one’ll say nowt as that’ll be first thing Thror’ll want t’ know.”

Bofur rolled his eyes.

“Should be an interestin’ dinner party then. I’ll tell Bom what’s t’ do.”

“How are Master Bombur and Dam Erda?” Ori asked.

“Very well, very well indeed, laddie. May I tell ’em of yer good fortune?”

“Oh yes,” Ori blushed again. “Please do. Will any other of your family members be attending
the dinner with your sister?”

“Aye, me an’ Bom’ll be there. Prob’ly our cousin Bifur, if he fancies it.

Dwalin frowned. “Yeh talkin’ a’ Bifur, son o’ Ozur?”

“Aye. Yeh know my cousin?”

“An’ well. He was with us down in Khazad Dûm. Still no’ acceptin’ his key t’ the Great Halls, eh?”

“Aye, both his sight an’ hearing’ve returned an’ he can get about as fine as any of us.”

Dwalin grinned.

“That’s good news, Master Bofur. Tell ’im I’m lookin’ forward t’ meetin’ up with him a’ dinner. I know both Balin an’ Thorin’ll be thrilled t’ see ‘im. It’s th’ lapis house you’ll be wantin’ to show at, by th’ way.”

Bofur looked.

“Fuckin’ eh,” he commented.

Bofur grinned back at Dwalin and started digging through the pack.

“Master Dwalin, it’s been a right pleasure makin’ yer acquaintance an’ seein’ our Ori again, lookin’ finer than a new smelter. Now here we are. Jus’ lemme give me blessin’s here.”

“No, yeh don’t have t’!” Dwalin started.

Ori blinked as Master Bofur started tossing liberal amounts of gold dust over them, saying the ancient seven blessings in Khuzdul. After the last cloud landed over them Bofur saluted them and sloped off.

“Bloody bless his tools up his arse,” Dwalin growled.

A little shocked, Ori started, “Dwalin! It was very kind of him to bless us and he’ll hear you!”

“Good!” Dwalin said louder.

Bofur popped out from behind the first turn of the tunnel to the city.

“Don’t want yer business known, don’t do yer business in th’ street!” the miner called jauntily.

“I’ll teach ye some business,” Dwalin threatened and Bofur ducked out of sight but they could still hear him laughing.

“Dwalin,” Ori pleaded. “He’s a friend!”

“Aye, who jus’ covered us in gold dust. We walk anywhere, we’ll trail it after us.”

“Oh!” Ori realized. “Oh. Slag! What should we do? We can’t walk about and the streets are already washed.”

“Son of a barrow-wight!” Dwalin griped, then he caught hold of Ori and leaned him over.

“Here.”
Dwalin ruffled Ori’s hair and beard. Gold dust showered down. Ori giggled in spite of himself and swiped at his clothes.

After bushing themselves off for some time they were finally able to walk away unmarked. Ori looked back at the mess then glanced at the houses then realized they had been exactly in front of the Sons of Groin household.

“Dwalin, look where we were.”

Ori pointed. Dwalin said “fuck” and led the way back the center of the courtyard were there was another, smaller reflecting pool.

Ori bent and touched the water to see it ripple.

“Ye kin play an’ stick yer feet in but it ain’t potable,” Dwalin commented idly.

“I love to watch it ripple,” Ori confided. “It’s what I imagine lava to be like.”

“Lava’s a bit different. Here, wha’ ye mean ‘imagine’?”

Ori looked up at Dwalin’s incredulous face.

“I know about lava from what I’ve read.”

“Ye’ve never seen it?”

“In pictures.”

“Can’t have that. C’mon.”

Dwalin offered his hand and Ori grabbed it, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet and back down the tunnel. Half way along Dwalin turned and placed both hands on the wall. A door just large enough for a dwarf to pass through slid open. Dwalin ushered Ori into a room the size of a closet. The entire tiny room was paneled in blue-green jewels. Ori felt like he’d been popped into a lake-themed trinket box.

Dwalin told him to hold onto a think glass handle on the wall. Ori did so and watched Dwalin pull an ornate glass lever. Ori nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt the box slide downwards. He had to hang on tightly which was difficult as the downward speed made it feel as though his tummy was trying to fly into his head. Dwalin pulled on the lever and the box slowed and gently slid to a stop. Dwalin opened the door and Ori hurried after him down the long, curving spiral staircase.

They reached the bottom and walked out a big porcelain door into what looked like Mahal’s own forge, but in reality was the work and mining levels of the mountain.

“Where’re we going?” Ori asked.

“T’ me family’s forge.”

Ori about swallowed his tongue. He had only read stories about the old Noble Forges.

At the end of an enormous long hallway, Ori saw a huge door, the family crest of the Fundins emblazoned on it.

Dwalin pulled out several keys all chained together and undid a sequence of tiny locks then
pushed the door open. Ori padded into an open area surrounded by doorways screened by panels of
glowing red phosphorous, the sole lighting in the room. Dwalin slid back a screen and Ori saw each
of these doorways gave access to rooms stuffed with treasure. Ori had never seen so many riches in
all his life, or even imagined so much.

Though these dazzled briefly, they paled in comparison to the scent that seemed to physically
draw him forward. He vaguely heard Dwalin close and lock the doors behind them. Ori reached the
far wall and the only other solid door in the room and laid his hand on it. It was warm, an alloy of
steel and mithril. He rested his cheek against the metal. The scent drew him to press himself against
the smooth surface. His fingers sought something along the metal.

He turned as Dwalin chuckled.

“Lemme open that.”

Ori stood back as Dwalin unlocked and hauled the door back into its recess. Despite being of a
hand’s length thickness, the door glided sideways soundlessly.

Ori stepped through and peered into the gloom. Dwalin slid the door closed and locked it again,
tossing the keys on the floor.

“Wha’ yeh think?” he murmured gruffly, crossing to lay his hands on Ori’s shoulders.

“I can’t see much but there’s a scent, a feeling.”

Dwalin walked him over to what looked like a vast stone trough running clear around the room.
In the middle of the room sat the anvil, blackened by centuries of use but the edges and surface were
flawless. To Ori, it was the size of a full bed. The rounded point jutted out over the trough.

Ori turned at the scrape of a lever. Dwalin had his foot braced against the trough and he was
pulling on a huge chain. Ori watched as a stone lifted at the back of the trough.
Lava poured through. The hot scent titillated and the ripe heat flowed across his face and skin. It
rolled and billowed out, soundless, until it touched the trough then it sputtered and hissed. It spilled
through with all the beauty and colors of fire. It spread over the stone and the flames leapt up and
danced as in a seer’s flame bowl.

Ori was entranced and moved to the side of the trough. The moist bubbling rose into his face.
He took a deep breath: sweet, salt and heavy like syrup. Ori leaned closer.

“Mmm, so good,” he murmured.

“Aye, there’s naught like it,” Dwalin agreed. “Dwarves alone can revel in that scent. If they
smell it close enough men and elves’ll be overcome and die. Orcs and goblins, too. Nor can they
stand this close and no’ burn.”

“I never dreamed it would be so beautiful,” Ori breathed. “Look how it moves. It’s like poetry.”
He gasped, eyes glued to the element before him. “No it’s- it’s like runes!”

Ori felt Dwalin draw closer.

“Yeh know the legend then?”

“Yes,” Ori said. “Durin the Deathless watched the lava move about his forge. He listened for the
voice of Mahal to command his hammer, but as he stood in the beauty, a song of Yavanna came to him in the dancing flames. He was overcome with the melding of flames and lava. He took up his splinter of mithril and poured the lava upon his anvil and as it cooled it traced the first runes which gave us the words of Khuzdul and he spoke them there in the forge.”

Dwalin slid his arms about Ori’s waist from behind. Ori felt the warmth at his back and leaned on Dwalin’s chest.

“I never had th’ steady hand like yeh an’ Balin. I got so far with me studies before adad came home an’ put an end to ’em.”

Ori felt the sorrow in his mate and folded his hands over Dwalin’s.

“I can help you, if you’d like.”

“Thanks, love. If yeh could read me some of th’ old poets sometime, I’d like that.”

“Of course I will.”

Ori enjoyed the silence between them.

The lava roiled in the trough before them. Runes formed and changed in the trough, casting their light. Reflected sigils flowed over the walls all around them.

As the runes came and went, ancient words and poetry sprang forward. Ori felt he could hear the songs playing for him. He fumbled to speak, to sing as they rushed into his sight.

“And so they dig the depths of the Arkenstone. The star within our star. Breath of our breath. The One of…”

Ori felt Dwalin catch him as his knees gave way.
Welcome back, friends, to another episode!

Things are slightly calmer but not much this time. It’s a new morning for new things to happen and we learn the value of the Donelan adage that there’s no use in taking a lover if you can’t double your wardrobe.

Keep those cards and letter coming, friends, we love hearing from you!

Ori opened his eyes. He lay flat on his back on a bed. The ceiling told him it was in Dwalin’s room. The vague light from the window told him it wasn’t quite dawn. He glanced about and counted one pillow on the floor, one up against the headboard. He himself was tucked under Dwalin’s armpit. He heard only the flames hissing in the fireplace and the sonorous sound of Dwalin’s snoring.

Dwalin’s face at rest was more telling than awake. The scar across his eye crinkled, his skin was tanned from the sun, toil, and battle to the texture of oiled leather. The tattoos tracked across his pate.

Ori craned for a better look at them, the runes for the battle cries of their people faded with time but still easily seen. His shoulders bore the marks of the triumphs of the House of Durin. Ori smiled, this was his house now. The Rikanta line had a distant kinship. He started to wonder when and what the rest of the Rikanta clan would think of his marriage. What would they say? What would they do? He knew that both Balin and Dwalin, and most likely Thorin, would stand behind him. Thror had already given them the royal blessing, so there was no argument there. Added to that, he and Dori were Dwalin’s and Balin’s Ones.

Dwalin rumbled and shifted closer. Ori smiled. Dwalin stirred again and opened his eyes. He looked at Ori

“Ah, there now. Yer awake.”

“Yes. Thank you for tucking me up.”

Ori wiggled a little, enjoying the heat of the furs.

“Mmmm. Jus’ so yeh know, love, I should’a put yeh back in yer room, but seein’ as yeh’d been that upset t’ the point a’ bein’ sick, it made me feel better t’ put yeh here where I could keep an eye on yeh.”

Ori looked back up at the ceiling and grinned remembering.

“I heard the tea tray knocked out fifteen candles before destroying an entire light of elfin blown glass.”

Dwalin snorted.

“Sixteen candles, love.”
“Are you sure it wasn’t fifteen?” Ori tried to keep his voice steady.

Dwalin started chuckling.

“Sixteen an’ Thorin was stayin’ over an’ Balin was relegated t’ this room as Dis was in his.”

Ori started giggling.

“Oh well, seeing as you had witnesses.” Ori attempted to sound demure but failed.

He snuggled into his furs again, wrapped to the point he felt rather like a moth still in its cocoon. He’d never slept in furs before. They were so soft compared to the woolens he was used to. Then again, the past few nights he had been enamored of his cotton sheets. He smiled to himself and burrowed in again.

“So soft,” he murmured. “Furs and a cotton quilt below. You have the best bed in the world.”

“Like it?” Dwalin asked.

“Yes.”

“Anytime yeh like.”

“Oh- I- ”

“I don’t mean that, love. I mean, if yeh like sleepin’ here, yer more then welcome. An’ I do mean just’ sleep.”

Ori turned to face Dwalin, who lay stretched out on his belly beside him.

“I do like it,” he said truthfully.

“I like yeh here. Yer good t’ talk to.”

Ori smiled shyly.

“You’re very good to me, Dwalin.”

“I’m yer husband. An’ speakin’ a which, yer a pretty damn good husband yerself.”

Ori blinked in surprise.

“Really? How so? I haven’t done much.”

“Well, as Balin says, yeh put up with me an’ he says me temper’s improved.”

Ori laughed. “If this is you good tempered I’d hate to see you sulk.”

Dwalin chuckled.

Ori had been going to roll and put part of his fur over Dwalin but found he was found he was wrapped far tighter than he had thought.

“How do I get out of this?”

Dwalin knelt up and got ahold of the end of Ori’s other side and started to pull. Ori rolled onto his side. Ori looked up at Dwalin, who grinned wickedly.
“Don’t you dare!” Ori gasped out.

Too late. Dwalin was on his feet in a flash and yanked the wrapping upward. Ori flew into the air and spun around before landing back in the bed on his belly.

“Dwalin!” Ori choked, laughing and reeling with dizziness.

Dwalin dropped down beside him, laughing quietly. Ori sat up, grabbed a pillow to swat Dwalin, but was still too dizzy and fell over. Dwalin laughed harder. Ori sat up again, got a good hold of the pillow, and swatted Dwalin upside the head. Dwalin nearly fell off the bed but didn’t stop laughing.

“Nice shot, love!”

“You made me dizzy, you- you buffalo!”

Dwalin raised an eyebrow then put both his fists to his brow and pointed his forefingers like horns then made a snort noise.

Ori squeaked and swung the pillow into a ready position, having a terrible time trying not to giggle. They fenced, then Dwalin charged, knocking both of them to the end of the bed. Ori smothered a shout, lest he awaken the house. With the pillow between them, Dwalin rolled to them back up to the top of the bed then freed Ori, snickering. Ori tried to frown but couldn’t.

He settled on “Daft!”, reached out and ruffled the hair around Dwalin’s ear.

“Snort, snort, bellow,” Dwalin replied cheerfully then settled back about the pillows. He pulled up the furs and patted the space beside him

“C’mon, love. Back t’ sleep.”

Ori laughed, scooted over and settled beside Dwalin, automatically turning on his side. He was pleasantly surprised as Dwalin spooned behind him and pulled the furs in close. Ori drifted back to sleep with a smile on his face.

Ori felt warm, curled on his side, with a heavy arm around him and a large breathing furnace behind him. Ori licked his lips and tasted powder. His eyes popped open and he groaned at the sight. He and Dwalin cuddled together in the middle of the bed and completely covered in gold dust.

“Fuck you both, Balin and Dori,” Ori muttered to himself, spitting quietly to get the dust out of his mouth.

“Just swallow, love,” Dwalin grunted. “It’s considered good luck if yeh shit gold th’ next day.”

Ori sat up and looked down at Dwalin, who flopped over on his back and laced his fingers across his chest. He looked like he had been dropped in a bin of gold dust. Ori glanced down and saw he had fared the same.

Dwalin snorted in good humor.

“Apparently some people think we need a shit full of luck,” Ori groused. As bits and pieces of the night before came back to him, Ori groaned, “Please don’t tell me I fainted in the forge.”

“Nah, yeh fell asleep readin’ fire runes on th’ wall.”
Dwalin rolled over and grabbed a small bound notebook while Ori tried not stare at Dwalin’s ass.

“Here.” Dwalin handed Ori the book and opened it to about a quarter of the way through. “I wrote down all yeh said when yeh started readin’.”

Ori was at a loss for words, so he settled on, “Thank you, Dwalin. That was so good of you.”

Dwalin smirked at him.

“Can’t yeh thank a body better than that?”

Ori considered, then decided he was fine.

“Alright then.” He smiled. “Just let me take off my britches.”

“Ori!”

“What?” Ori asked in surprised.

“Durin’s arse, love. I were only hintin’ f’r a kiss!”

“Oh!” Ori blushed then realized how silly the situation was and giggled. “Sorry.”

He crawled over to Dwalin and puckered up. Dwalin caught his chin and kissed him.

Once free Ori giggled again and stood upright on the bed. Gold dust streamed off him. He struggled to keep his feet. The bed was remarkable springy. Curious, he hopped a little. The bed bounced him back higher than before. Ori couldn’t suppress a crow of delight as he bounced up and down as hard as he could. Covers went every which way, the pillows toppled off, clouds of gold dust went everywhere, and the headboard knocked against the wall. The bed made a distinct squeak noise.

“Springs, metal. A mannish idea,” Dwalin explained as he kept himself on the bed with both hands on the underquilt.

Ori was about to reply when he heard voices in the hallway.

“Leave them be, lad.”

“Yes, Nori, dear Balin has the right of it. Let them get up in their own time.”

“Hush up! Couple a cooshy-doos the pair a yeh. I’m just checkin’ on our wee Ori.”

“Nori! Leave them be!”

Ori looked at Dwalin, who rolled his eyes, got off the bed, and rose to his feet. Ori couldn’t help himself. He bounced violently on the bed. Dwalin turned and stared. The voices in the hall died at the sound of the metal springs and the headboard doing a regular beat against the wall. Ori grinned at Dwalin.

“Oooooh Dwalin!” he moaned loudly.

Dwalin bent double with a hand clapped over his mouth.

Ori felt creative as he bounced.

Ori watched as Dwalin staggered back on the bed and buried his face in the under quilt, shoulders shaking.

“You’re a huge bear,” Ori cried, delighted with his mate’s reaction. “Oh! By all the gods, I’m being fucked by the Lord of the Carrock, Beorn himself. Yessss! Ooze within me, my beloved!”

There came a horrible roar and something Nori-sized crashed against the door, a scolding protest from Dori, then the unwelcome noise of Nori retching. Ori fell back against the mattress and stuffed the hem of his night shirt into his mouth. Dwalin came into his line of vision and dropped a pillow on his face. Ori desperately tried to laugh quietly. Dwalin’s face came under the pillow and Ori felt the furs being pulled over the both of them.

“Nori! That’s disgusting!” Dori scolded. “And Sweet Yavannah! What have you being eating, you horrid badger?”

“I’ll get the bucket from the stable,” said Balin.

Dwalin and Ori giggled harder into each other’s necks.

“I’m so fuckin proud a’ yeh!” Dwalin managed to hiss into Ori’s ear.

“I’m not going out there before Nori cleans up his sick,” Ori replied.

He snuggled closer to Dwalin as they listened to Dori scold while Nori cleaned and swore. Ori smiled. It sounded like home.

A bit later, the noises faded and Ori lifted his head. Dwalin seemed to be dozing off again. Pleased with the lack of bodies outside the door, Ori sat up carefully but woke Dwalin anyway.

“Oi! Where ye off to, me wee nug-humper?”

Ori turned and made a face at Dwalin’s naughty grin.

“To pee, oh great cock of the north.”

Dwalin snorted.

“That’s right. Th’ envy a men an’ elves.”

“Aren’t you lucky then,” Ori teased, putting out his tongue.

Dwalin caught him close and kissed him deeply. First Ori was startled, but the warmth and sweetness of Dwalin’s tongue exploring his mouth quickly turned him boneless.

It was so gentle, yet teasing. Ori wasn’t sure how to respond, but clung to Dwalin and tried to mimic what he’d enjoyed earlier. It must have been right as Dwalin made a pleased growl and laid Ori back against the mattress, sliding his arm around Ori as he did. Ori wrapped his arms around Dwalin’s neck and couldn’t stifle a murmur of pleasure of his own. Dwalin worked around to kiss along his cheeks and his eyelids, light feathery kisses, before trailing down to Ori’s neck. Ori gasped and clutched Dwalin’s shoulders as Dwalin left a trail of hot kisses and little nips. Even though Ori hadn’t done this before his body seemed to know what to do as he relaxed and drew his left knee up to clasp against Dwalin’s hip.
Dwalin was heavy on him, nuzzling his collarbone, nipping hard, then soothing with his tongue and more kisses.

“Dwalin,” Ori managed and hugged him tighter.

Ori squirmed round to get another kiss and Dwalin obliged, worrying Ori’s lower lip gently between his teeth. Ori felt the heat and pleasure down in his crotch. He moaned for more and his stomach growled loudly.

Ori blushed and Dwalin fell away laughing.

“Some ane needs their breakfast.”

“Sorry,” Ori chuckled at himself.

Dwalin rolled off the bed and offered Ori his hand. Ori let Dwalin take his weight as he was pulled off the bed. Dwalin drew him close for another kiss.

“I’ll be right back,” Ori said with a smile.

“Go eat. I’ll be through in a bit,” Dwalin said.

Ori turned but squeaked when he received a light smack on his butt. He made a face at Dwalin, who grinned.

After visiting the bathroom, Ori romped through to the kitchen. On the hob, there was a kettle on the side plate and on the steady heat was a large pan bubbling with porridge. Honey and cream were set on the counter. Ori found himself a bowl and spoon. He helped himself to porridge and the consistency told him Dori had made it, creamy and salty. He greedily poured cream over the surface, he was about to stuff the first loaded spoonful into his mouth when he saw an open door leading to a small, beautiful eating area. He went through and there were Dori and Balin having tea. Ori bounced forward, and dumped his bowl on the table.

“Ori’s Dori!” he shouted and pounced into Dori’s lap.

“Oomph!” Dori managed, immediately squashed. “Sweet Yavanna, my love! You’re far too big to sit in my lap!”

“ORI’S DORI!” Ori laughed and hugged harder, shoving his mop of hair into Dori’s face and rubbing.

As of old, Dori burst out laughing and hugged back then tickled Ori until Ori fell on the floor in helpless giggles.


Balin chuckled as Ori clambered to his feet and glomped onto him.

“Good morning brother,” Ori cried out in Balin’s ear.

Balin laughed ad patted Ori’s back with both hands

“Sleep well, laddie?” he asked with a sly wink.
“Brilliantly,” Ori answered with a grin.

“Sit down properly and eat your porridge. I’ll pour your tea,” Dori ordered. “Such a carry-on and before breakfast on first rest day.”

Ori plumped down on a chair and shoved a spoonful of porridge into his mouth. Dori filled another cup, adding cream and honey before putting it before Ori.

“Chew, badgerling, don’t inhale.”

“Eth, Duthee,” Ori managed. He hadn’t realized how hungry was was.

“Aye, lad.” Balin agreed. “You’re missing a treat.”

“Where’s th’ tea?” Dwalin strode in, wearing nothing but his pink drawers.

Dori had to suppress a shriek of mirth.

“Good morning to you, too, brother,” Balin said dryly. “Ask Master Dori.”

Dori had both hands clapped over his mouth, eyes dancing with laughter. Dwalin reached across between Balin and Dori to put his bowl of porridge next to Ori then put his mug down next to Dori.

“Wha’?” Dwalin asked as Dori was still attempting to control himself but failing miserably

“Dori’s never boiled the reds with the whites.” Ori explained around his last mouthful of porridge.

Dwalin rolled his eyes and a tinge of a blush appeared in his cheeks. Dori fell back in his chair and roared with laughter. Balin took mercy on his brother and filled the waiting mug. Dwalin grunted thanks. Nori entered, grunted a greeting, and poured himself some tea. Ori pushed his bowl aside, came over to Dori and climbed back into his lap.

“Ooof, pet,” Dori huffed. “Whatever’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” Ori said. “Ori’s Dori. Always Ori’s Dori.“

Dori chuckled and cuddled Ori close.

“I take it you want to go in the other room and tell me something,” Dori stated with the innate knowledge of a parent.

Ori nodded, climbed off, and, grasping Dori’s hand, pulled him into the kitchen. Dori smiled and held both Ori’s hands across his belly.

“What is it, pet? Was your first time nice?”

Ori blushed.

“Not that, Dori. I - I have something to tell you. I - I’m sorry. Dori, pleased don’t be angry...well, too angry.”

Dori’s eyes widened.

“Whatever’s happened, pet?”

Ori took a breath.
“You know I have a bad habit of...”

Dori paled then said, “You heard Balin and I talking last night.”

“Yes. And I don’t care, Dori! You’ve always been more to me than Mam. I’ve always loved you best that way and please don’t ever think that I don’t. I-”

Dori hugged him close

“Oh, pet, I know. I just don’t like you knowing about your adad and Nori’s.”

“Does Nori know?” Ori asked tucking his head under Dori’s chin.

“Oh yes, pet. He does. Don’t worry, I’ll tell him you know now.”

“I-I’m sorry about the baby, Dori. I wish-“

“I know, dear one but I have you, don’t I?”

“Oh yes! Dori there’s something else. It’s Princess Dis.”

“What in all the mines does the princess have to do with anything?” Dori asked.

“She and Mam knew one another as badgers. She’s hinted she knows who your adad was.”

To Ori’s surprise, Dori smiled and patted his hair.

“Oh, that’s no secret to me, pet. I know fine well who my sire was.”

Ori popped up. “You know?”

“Of course, pet, it was Nain, adad to Dain Ironfoot.”

Ori goggled at Dori’s shrewd smile a moment.

“Dain rules the Ironhills.” Ori started.

“I know pet, that’s why Nain had to, shall we say, to return to his own mountains so quickly.”

Ori pondered a moment then, “Dain is Thorin’s second cousin, is there something-?”

Dori shrugged and cuddled Ori closer, saying, “It’s no doubt why this Dis is so interested in me.”

“Dori, what about Mam’s family? We’re going to have to face them at some point.”

Dori chuckled, “Now pet. They cast our mam out. How can we three possibly expect to be recognize by any of them at all?”

Ori frowned.

“You mean just pretend we don’t know them?”

“Do you know any of them?” Dori asked with a smile.

“Well, no,” Ori was forced to admit. “Not really and I was still quite small when Mam died.”

Dori patted his cheek. “Then there we are, pet.”
“Nori-

“He’s of the same opinion as I am, pet. So not to worry.”

Ori was about to comment when there was a noise at the front door.

“Hello, we’re here!” Dis’ voice caroled down the hall.

Ori froze and Balin came swiftly through just as Dis entered the kitchen.

“Balin,” Dis greeted him, then caught sight of Dori.

“Durin’s beard. Balin! You have been lucky! Marvelous time out at a Dale pub?”

Ori gasped and heard Dwalin mutter “shit” in chorus with Nori. Before Balin could say a word Dori laughed brittlely.

“Oh good. I’m glad you’re here before I’m dressed. You may take the dirty laundry with you. Ori, Nori, come with me so I can do your hair. Oh, and you may start with the kitchen.”

Dori, with a hand on Ori and Nori swept out leaving stunned looks behind them as they went to Balin’s rooms.

Dori shut the door behind the, humming and smiling.

Nori flung himself on a couch.

“Pretty dressed up f’r a housekeeper. Hope she brought herself a pinnie ‘r she’ll ’be a mess before long,” Nori commented.

“Dori!” Ori gasped. “That was Princess Dis!”

Nori fell off the couch in a coughing fit that quickly turned to smothered laughter.

Dori started going through Balin’s clothes.

“I know, pet,” Dori said in soothing tones. “But if I’m just something Balin picked up at a pub, why can’t she be a cleaning dam?”

Ori sighed and hoped to Mahal that Balin and Dis would understand and there would not be any dead bodies in the kitchen.

Dori was resplendent in a few moments and was just finishing his beard braids when Balin came in. He closed the door and leant against it. Ori saw his eyes were twinkling and felt better.

“Love?”

“Yes, my One.” Dori peeped into the mirror, put the brush down and turned to smile teasingly at Balin.

“That was very naughty o’yeh, me darlin’,” Balin said lightly.

Dori laughed.

“Well, my dear, if you are happy as being my ‘latest.’”
“No, dear. I’ve explained. Now come along in yer finery an’ we can have a proper breakfast.”

Dori laughed again and sailed forward into Balin’s arms.

“How fortunate for you that I’m a bearer and it is the law that we may not be slaughtered.”

Balin snorted and enveloped Dori in his arms, murmuring, “Foolish one.”

Nori sat up looking from Dori to Ori and back.

“Dor! That’s your One?”

Ori nodded vigorously as Dori smiled.

“Yes, Nori, Balin’s my One.”

Nori stared a moment then started to grin which quickly slid to feral.

“Mahal’s big-assed bouncing balls! This is rich!” Nori laughed uproariously at them. “Thank Mahal, I’m a single lad yet!”

Balin ushered them back into the sitting room. Ori saw that not only was Dis there but also Thorin, Fili and Kili. The young dwarrow looking puzzled as Balin drew Dori close.

“Prince Thorin, Princess Dis, here is Dori, son of Rikmha, my One. We have found one another again.”

Ori watched as Dis jumped up and held out her hands to Dori.

“I am so pleased to finally meet you, Dori. Balin has missed you greatly. I do hope we shall be great friends.”

Dori took the hands offered him.

“Oh, I know we shall, my dear Princess, and more so for you have already done so much for my Ori.”

Dori and Dis came together and bumped foreheads. Dis released Dori as Thorin came forward to also bump foreheads with Dori.

“I’m glad you’re here, Dori. It’s been too long for both you and Balin,” Thorin said graciously.

Dori widened his eyes and fluttered his lashes at the prince.

“Why, thank you, dear prince. You are too good.”

Thorin briefly looked as though he’d swallowed his own tongue but recovered and bowed gracefully.

Dis introduced Fili and Kili. Ori almost groaned aloud as both princes puffed out their chests and tried to out do each other in charm.

“Ori-mate!” Fili almost shouted as he laid eyes on Ori.

Ori took the easy way out and introduced them to Nori.
Kili was quick to ask if Nori played cards.

“Oh now, lads, I haven’t played cards in ages. Ye’ll prob’ly have t’ teach me again,” Nori drawled.

“Oh no, you don’t!” Ori said elbowing Nori sharply. “You play most card games just fine.”

The other three laughed.

“Ori,” Dori called. “Come and help me scratch a few things together for a light breakfast, pet.”

Ori followed Dori through and chopped and mixed while Dori flew about to produce more porridge, eggs cooked in cream and dill. paper thin pancakes with shaved ham, onions, and sharp cheese rolled inside, hand pies filled with dried herbs stewed in wine and strained with curds. Ori made more tea and toasted an entire loaf of egg bread and kept an eye on the vast skillet piled with bacon and sausage while a huge platter of mushroom and tomatoes, roasted dark, sizzled in the side oven.

Dori spooned plum compote onto the last piece of toast and passed it to Kili. Fili and Kili were seated opposite Dori and had behaved like well-mannered puppies for the entire meal. Ori glanced down the table to see Nori between Balin and Thorin with Dwalin. The four were in deep conversation. This had been the case most of the meal with Nori being closed off at first then slowly opening up and all four were now talking heads together very seriously. Ori wondered if Dwalin and Balin had convinced Nori that his knowledge and underworld connections would be of use to the prince.

Dori and Dis seemed to have become instant bosom bows. They chattered about cooking, food, and metal work. Ori swiped the last of the jam from his plate with a forefinger, watching everyone. He sucked the jam and savored the rich flavor on his tongue. Dwalin caught his eye and winked. Ori winked back then realized the connotations and blushed.

“Right,” Dori said loudly. “Ori, pet, come and get ready. We’re all to go marketing. Now I might need a small bit of help with the clearing and washing up—”

Kili leapt to his feet.

“I shall help you gladly, Master Dori.”

Fili was on his feet, also.

“I’ll come, too, dear Master Dori. Kili can be clumsy, so I’ll make sure he doesn’t break anything.”

“Oi, I do not!” Kili argued

“You go and take your time getting ready. We’ll take care of everything,” Fili promised.

“Yes,” Kili agreed, not to be outdone. “You won’t have to lift a finger!” and began piling up dishes.

Dori smiled sweetly at both princes.

“Oh, dear Dis! What excellent young dwarrow you have raised. Thank you so much! You’re
both too kind.”

Ori stifled a laugh as both princes almost wriggled at the attention from the Bearer. Dori rose and didn’t even notice the frenzied rush to get to his side to pull his chair out. Dis did and winked at Dori as Fili triumphantly opened the door for Dori to leave. Ori didn’t quite roll his eyes. Balin, Thorin, and Dwalin were still talking to Nori.

Dori took Ori’s hand and led him out.

Ori was glad it didn’t take Dori long to get Ori back into his wedding clothes. Ori felt a little worried about going through the market in such finery, while Dori sighed over it a few times.

“Dori?”

“Yes, pet?”

“When will you and Balin get married?”

“Oh, not for a bit yet, pet. As the eldest, Balin will have to put on quite a show.” Dori smiled. “Which should amuse the entire mountain at the very least.”

Ori giggled at the thought. Dori guided him to a chair, then Dori went and washed his own face and rechecked himself in the mirror.

“Come along, pet,” he said to Ori.

When they reached the sitting room everyone was waiting. Dwalin was in his full uniform and looked very well. Dis had several string shopping bags. Thorin, Nori, and Balin looked amused and Fili and Kili looked damp.
Hello again, friends!
Welcome to a new episode of Ori’s adventures. Again it’s a short one but don’t worry chapter 16 will be nice and long.

We’re going shopping, now, and we’re shopping Dwarrow Downtown Central Erebor! Oh, and we meet someone new! Not much food this time, so please be sure have your own beverage and snack. Rest assured the next chapter will be so full of food we nearly popped writing it.

Keep those cards and letters coming, friends as we love hearing from you!! Stay tuned for next Friday’s episodes and bring your appetites and don’t forget your dancing shoes!

Ori had never been to this market before. Along with carts, barrow, stalls, and tables lining the walkways, the shop fronts were built into the mountainside, each huge building that towered above was one shop with more than just a sales floor.

Balin led the way into one of these called iKrôth. Ori brightened. The place smelled rather like the library with the added scents of oils, waxes and pigments. Balin went straight to the counter and asked for the owner. While an underling rushed away, Balin had others pull out reams of different kinds of paper from thick cushiony parchment to vellum so fine, it was transparent. Balin turned to Ori.

“Now, lad, some canvases, I think. An’ take time t’ practice outside as well. Th’ river’s quite lovely any season depending on th’ weather.”

Ori gasped as the owner, Kujur, son of Tajur, arrived, bowed deeply and called for canvas. Several rolls of canvas were brought out, different widths as well as different sizes and others already stretched on frames of every proportion. Ori was almost dizzy as Balin chose several of each.

Dwalin took Ori’s hand and walked him up the spun brass spiral staircase in the middle of the shop that reached all four of the floors. They stopped at the third.

The entire space was devoted to writing implements, pens of feathers, some of steel, ornate with gems or scrollwork, and others of blown glass with colors swirled into them. The shelves held thousands of tiny glass jars of ink every color imaginable. There were pallets of stone, holding mortars and pestles of all kinds, materials and discs of colors, if you chose to grind your own ink.

Balin arrived with the others and began advising Ori on what pens he would need for different types of work. Ori stared as Balin ordered out boxes of different colors including the ones needing to be ground. Handfuls of different pens, charcoal sticks, brushes of all kinds, and graphite wands were added. There were various shades of putty and exquisite glass templates for drawing shapes and lines.

Dwalin put his foot down when it came to selecting the small bottles for carry ink for daily use. He insisted on plain round glass as he informed the group Dwalin himself would be doing the scroll
work that would make them a matching set and exclusively Ori’s. Ori sidled closer and squeezed his husband’s hand, receiving a grin in reply.

The owner had three underlings with him now and all were scampering about wrapping and packing all of the things into crates to be sent to the house. Ori wasn’t allowed to protest. He looked to Dori for assistance but Dori only smiled at him, then preened as Balin looked his way. Ori began to wonder about Dori and Balin’s wedding. At this rate, it would be a huge affair.

Outside of the stationary shop they re-grouped with Thorin, Nori, Fili and Kili. Ori was firmly tucked under Dwalin’s arm as he looked about.

He saw an overdressed house guard shepherding three other dwarrow. Two middle aged dwarrowdams trailed after one very elderly, very elaborately dressed dwarrowdam. There was something about that elderly dam that made Ori nervous.

He turned and caught Dori’s eye. Dori glanced over at the group looked back at Ori and winked. Then he tucked his arm into Balin’s. Ori shrugged inwardly and laced his fingers with Dwalin’s hand resting on his shoulder.

Dis was telling them that they needed to see to Dori and Nori’s other clothes. Nori was refusing, as his contacts would suspect something. In his peripheral vision, Ori saw the elderly lady noticed Dis and Thorin and began to make her way over to them to pay her respects. Ori took a deep breath and forced himself to relax.

“Your Highnesses! A most pleasant rest day to you and all your lovely family,” the elderly lady greeted Dis.

Dis turned and nodded politely as the family before her bowed low.

“Lady Klakuna, daughter of Rikanta's house. And to your family,” Dis responded coolly.

Lady Klakuna hurriedly asked after Dis’ dear sons. Ori saw Lady Klakuna was trying overly hard to be regally charming but her air of desperation did nothing for her. She greeted Balin, who smiled and introduced Dori as his mate. Dori deigned to notice Lady Klakuna, who promptly screamed and fainted dead away at the sight of him.

Her family hurriedly picked her up, quickly explaining that the dear lady had probably had too much excitement and took her away across the market to an ornate cart drawn by a rather garishly blue dyed sheep.

Dis turned and grinned at Dori, saying softly, “So what do you think of your lovely great umad?”

“Oh dear,” Dori sighed. “She does seem a bit high-strung to be wandering about. I do hope her family will take good care of her.”

Ori nudged Dwalin as the warrior choked and swallowed his laughter. Both Thorin and Balin had trouble schooling their features.

Fili and Kili were chatting with two young dams in a cart. Ori recognized Omi and Loli. Buj approached Fili and Kili from around the cart, making vast gestures. Ori grinned and hurried over.

“Ori!” Loli called.
The young dams alit and the three friends bumped heads happily.

“Come meet everyone!” Ori said, tugging on Loli’s arm.

The young group hurried over and Dori was delighted to see the girls again.

Ori made special care to introduce Buj to Thorin and Balin.

“Buj does experiments,” Ori urged, nodding at the younger dwarf.

Buj turned raspberry and looked very pleased.

“Show ‘em your flying one!” Kili urged.

Buj happily took out his notebook and explained the plan to the prince and the lord. Balin’s expression of polite interest never changed but his eyebrows flew into his hairline. Thorin affected great attention while politely clamping a hand over his mouth.

Dori took Dis and Ori off with him to shop for clothing leaving the chatting group behind. They ran into Lady Gridr and Oin who were also delighted to see them again and explained they had just lost Gimli to Fili and the youngsters.

Ori was tired by the time Dis and Dori decided they had done enough for the day. Dis had introduced them to scores of people, some pleasant, some too noble to show disappointment that their daughters were now out of luck where Captain Dwalin was concerned.

* * *

It was late in the afternoon when they finally returned home from the markets. Thankfully Ori was sent to remove the wedding robes. It was a relief to change into his plain tunic and comfortable breeches. He slipped on his house shoes and carefully hung up the robes back in the steamer closet before he padded back into the sitting room. Thorin, Balin and Dwalin had gone but Fill and Kili lingered, trying to get Nori to play cards with them as Nori was suggesting they play dice instead.

Ori went to the kitchen where Dori and Dis were putting together tea and some cakes. Ori could see that there were several simmering pots on the cook surface and good smells came from both large ovens.

“I thought we were going to your house, Dis, for the dinner with Janifur and her brothers?” Ori asked.

“Oh, we are, dear.” She smiled.

“I just thought we’d prepare a few dishes now,” Dori said, “so it will be less of a chore when we go over.”

Ori looked about at the ‘few’ dishes. The ovens were obviously loaded and every cooking surface covered.

“Dwalin said he met Master Bofur,” said Dori.

“Yes, he and and Master Bombur will be accompanying their sister.” Ori grinned. Master
Bombur’s ability at the table was legend. “Is there anything I can do, Dori?”

“Yes. Go through and tell those boys we’ll need help to ferry all this over to dear Dis’ home.”

Ori nodded, popped a tiny raspberry tart into his mouth and pranced out of reach as Dori threatened him with a small wooden dough docker. He went out to the sound of Dis’ and Dori’s laughter. Back in the sitting room Fill and Kili watched as Thorin and Dwalin adjusted a movable twin of Balin’s desk. Balin held a straight backed, leather padded chair at the ready.

Dwalin got to his feet and grinned at Ori.

“C’mere, love, and see if it’ll suit.”

Ori trotted over. The desk was beautiful, just like Balin’s, large and full of drawers and cubby-holes for storing things. Ori admired it.

“It’s lovely, Dwalin.”

“Try it out, love.”

Ori stared.

“For me?”

“Aye, wee brother,” Balin assured.

Dwalin pulled the chair around and Ori slid into it. It was perfect. Everything was in reach and the correct height for him. The chair was so comfortable yet supported his seat and back well.

“Dwalin, it’s splendid! I don’t know how to thank you!”

“Kiss him, you pillock,” Kili supplied then yelped as Thorin cuffed him.

Ori rose with a blush and stepped into Dwalin’s arms for a quick kiss and a long hug.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode! Lots of food, fun, food, drama, food, and dancing! There’s also food! Always food! If you are offended by people getting rather soused, please bear up, these are dwarrow. Besides, they won’t be soused long and most are funny drunks. Lots of links in this one, mostly so you can see/hear/cook what inspired us while we wrote. Keep those cards and letters coming! We love getting your comments and especially your speculations! ;D Enjoy and see you all next Friday!!

“You want us to bring in all the shopping, sister?” Thorin asked in an oddly light tone as he stood in the receiving area of the Durin household.

Between helping Dori and Dis organize the food and seeing the Fundin side of the family all dressed for the special dinner with the Urs, Ori had yet to be able to wrench his eyes from his husband. Thorin, his nephews, and Dwalin were in dress battle uniform. With his usual weapons and boots, Dwalin was dressed in the green tartan with red stripes of the Fundin House and kilt. The sash was caught at his shoulder with an old fashion brass medallion. Thorin and his nephews were similarly attired in the plaid of the Durin blue.

Dis poked her head around the hallway door from the kitchen where she and Dori were setting down the last of the food they had made.

“Yes, brother, bring in all the shopping. Thank you!” She vanished with a huff and Ori could hear her telling Dori and Dori commiserating.

Thorin turned with an evil grin to Dwalin and Nori.

“Well, lads, you heard. All of it.”

Dwalin straightened his shoulders and Nori snickered and rolled up his sleeves. Ori had a bad feeling about it. He opened his mouth to ask Dwalin if this was wise but Dwalin stopped him with a swift kiss.

“Jus’ stay here, love. We’ll take care a’ all of it.”

The three dwarrow went out and returned with all the cloth, food and supplies. These were parked near the far wall of the receiving room. Ori was about to breathe a sigh of relief but the three trooped out again, mischief on their faces.

Ori groaned as the double doors opened and the three returned carrying Ori’s new pony, Honda. Ori was so glad he and Honda had liked one another instantly. She was a little nervous being carried into a house but she saw Ori and he couldn’t stop himself from giving the pony a guilty yet non-committed shrug. Ori could have sworn she rolled her eyes.
Thorin, Dwalin and Nori carried the now placid Honda into the middle of the room. Thorin patted her head as Dwalin and Nori maneuvered her into position. Dwalin grinned like a fool at Ori, who shook his head. As if Nori needed help pulling pranks and causing trouble. Ori was quite sure Fili and Kili got their streak of naughtiness form their idad.

“All in, dear sister,” Thorin almost crowed.

“Thank you,” Dis called.

Ori watched as the three snickered together.

There was a heavy knock at the front door. Ori realized the Ur family had arrived.

Mistress Dazla hurried in from the kitchen, having shed her apron. She sidestepped the dwarrow and the pony with barely a quirk of her brow and opened the door with a flourish.

“Welcome, honored guests!”

Ori smiled weakly as Bofur, Bombur and Master Bifur trooped in first.

Their friendly smiles dissolved as they stared at Thorin, Nori, and Dwalin standing beside Honda. Honda regarded the guests with a banal expression and whinnied politely.

“Mahal’s arse!” Bofur said. “Bif, when yeh said the royals were a tad daft I din’t think yeh meant this daft!”

Dis hurried in with swish of skirt and a flash of blue.

“Come in, come in! Welcome. Please make yourselves comf-”

Master Bifur looked at the pony, threw back his head and roared with laughter. This galvanized Thorin and Balin, who recognized Bifur immediately.

“Master Bifur!” Thorin shouted. “Well met, old friend! It’s good to see you so well.”

The prince greeted his old man-at-arms with a hearty embrace and an enthusiastic forehead thump. Balin was not far behind in exclaiming his pleasure at seeing Master Bifur again after so long. Thorin turned.

“Sister, look! Here’s-”

“Dear brother.” Dis had her arms akimbo and turned the full force of the Durin glare on Thorin.

“What?” Thorin asked, confused.

“What? What!” Dis’ voice rose. “There’s a pony in my receiving room and you have the nerve to stand there and say ‘what’?”

Fili and Kili popped in on either side of their amad

“Oi,” Fili announced. “There’s a pony in here?”

“Where?” Kili demanded. “Amad, why’s there a pony in the room?”

“I don’t know,” Dis hissed. “Ask your idad.”
Put on the spot, Thorin cleared his throat, took a nonchalant stance, and shrugged.

“Well sister, you did tell us to bring in all the shopping. We simply did as you asked.”

The Ur family all chuckled.

“There’s a tease for yeh, mistress,” Bofur commented genially.

Thorin looked pleased at this.

Dis pinned Bofur with her eye then scowled at Thorin.

“Thorin Oakenshield, Prince of Dwarrow, get that pony out of my house or I swear I’ll take you out in the square and beat you with it!”

“Well said, dear,” Dori chimed in, appearing at the door.

“Hear that, Bif?” Bofur quipped. “Lass is going t’ beat ‘im with a pony. I want t’ see this!”

“Thorin!” Dis didn’t quite scream but Fili and Kili dove for cover and the Ur family backed up.

“Right, lads,” Balin said soothingly. “Excellent fun for all, now let’s get our Ori’s poor pony out to the stable.”

Ori suddenly felt his moment had arrived. He hurried over.

“I’ll do it.”

He caught the reins from the back and hopped up as Dwalin had taught him earlier. He nudged Honda’s flank with his heel and Honda trotted gaily toward the door.

Fili and Kili rushed to the door but only succeeded in knocking into a young dam which sent all three of them ass over tea kettle. Honda watched unimpressed.

Fili was up first and helped the dam to her feet, which was difficult as she was laughing so hard.

Kill held open the double doors. Ori urged Honda forward a bit too vigorously. Honda barreled through the open doors and bowled Frerin off the front step. Honda buzzed into the square and reared happily, rolling Ori off onto his butt. Ori squawked but wasn’t hurt. Honda was beside him instantly, snuffling in his hair.

Ori started to pick himself up, part of him horrified at what he had done, but he couldn’t stop the giggles. He’d got to his knees when a pair of familiar hands hoisted him up.

“I’m fine.” He beamed up at an extremely amused Dwalin.

“Aye, love, jus’ ride a bloody pony through the royal household.”

Ori smiled sweetly.

“It wasn’t through the household, just the receiving room.”

“Smartarse.”

Ori turned and saw Balin and Thorin solicitously picking up and brushing off Frerin, while Dis, her boys and the Ur family watched.
Ori caught a hold of Honda’s reins and Dwalin called over a young badger who was employed in Thorin’s stable and gave him a gold coin to take Honda back to Fundin House. Dwalin led Ori back in time to see Bombur hand Dis a large box tied with pink string. Master Bombur had made his famous strawberry tarts.

Dis thanked him profusely and Dori whisked the box off to the kitchen.

Ori finally had a chance to have a look at Frerin’s ‘miner lass’.

Janifur was as tall as Bofur and as wide as Bombur, crossed across her back were the tools of her trade, a mattock and a pickaxe. Her red-blond hair was caught up in series top knots from her forehead to her neck then the rest poured freely down her back to below her waist. Her beard was intricately divided and braided upwards into her eyebrows and hair. She wore brown breeches and copper-toed boots. Her rose-colored, lace-trimmed tunic showed off her cleavage most advantageously. Ori slapped himself mentally for thinking that Frerin could easily asphyxiate in those enormous, round pillows of boobage and die happy.

* * *

The food was sumptuous and so good. It was the first time Ori ever attended a dinner so fancy that it included a gravy course.

He glanced about. Thorin sat at the head of the table with Bifur on his left and, as always, Balin on his right. Dori was cozily next to Balin and across from Dwalin. Ori smiled, very happy to be seated next to his husband and opposite Fili. Bofur was on Ori’s other side and bantering across the table with Nori. Bombur sat easily between Nori and his younger sister, smiling benignly across the table at Kili who seemed vaguely uncomfortable with his Idad Frerin between himself and his amad at the foot. Frerin gazed dreamily over the table at Jani, who was chatting animatedly with Dis.

First course consisted of several different kinds of mushrooms cooked with bacon and flavored with parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme.

Ori ate and watched the two dams laughing and talking. Jani often reached over and grasped Dis’ hand when making a point. It hadn’t taken Ori long to realize not only would Frerin and Janifur make a terrible match, but their likes were far from similar.

At this point the second course arrived. Ori was rather disappointed at all the vegetables: roasted ramps, morels, wood sorrel, nettles, fiddle heads, and fried pickles. He shook his head when Dori passed him the dish of fiddleheads, drenched in butter and fried with bacon.

“Try it,” Dori murmured to him. “Just a mouthful.”

Ori shook his head.

“I don’t like green food.”

Dori heaved a sigh and rolled his eyes. He put half a spoonful on Ori’s plate anyway along with one fried pickle. Ori tried the pickle and refused to admit it was quite nice. He smiled hugely at Dwalin when his kind husband swiped the fiddleheads off his plate and ate them while Dori wasn’t
Frerin liked the idea of the mines but his love was the court and nobles. He was quick-witted but at the same time short tempered and spoiled by his position in society.

Ori thoroughly enjoyed the third course which got him a good bowl of rich goat stew, deep brown and redolent with chunks of meat.

Janifur was on par with Frerin’s wit but she was temperate, even in the greatest passion about her work. She and Dis were equals when it came to matching gems to gold. Ori overheard Dis exclaim when Janifur admitted it had been she who had left small ingots of rose gold on Dis’ supply table.

The fourth course was chrain which Ori had never tasted and decided that for a vegetable item it was rather good. It was served with boiled beef tongue, the meat dark and very tender but with Nori and Bofur joking about the meat that tastes you back, he had a hard time enjoying it.

Ori glanced back at Janifur and caught himself from gasping. On Janifur’s face he saw the same dizzy look of love Ori remembered on Frerin’s except instead of directing it at the young prince, Janifur was looking at the princess.

“Oh no,” Ori thought. “But it does make sense as to why she happily agreed to come to have dinner. Now what? Frerin’s too enamored to notice how Janifur is looking at Dis. I wonder…”

Ori was utterly distracted by the gravy course which was excellent and warmed his tummy through and through.

Ori went back to watching Dis under his lashes. Dis was quite unaffected and obviously enjoyed talking with another who shared her passion.

A movement caught Ori’s eye and he followed from the hand to Dori’s eyes. Dori raised an eyebrow. Ori glanced back at Dis and Janifur. Dori didn’t have to look long. The adoration in Janifur’s face was obvious.

Dori smiled like an overindulged cat who had just eaten the pet songbird. Always quick, Nori widened his eyes and his grin became feral as he turned to Bofur. Bofur grinned back and shrugged. Bombur took a long sip of wine and winked at Bifur, who snickered and signed in Ingleshmek to the upper table ‘beguiled, besotted, and befuddled.’

“Fuck,” hissed Dwalin in Ori’s ear.

Ori nodded with his mouth full.

Fill and Kili slowly became cognizant of what was happening while the sixth course was served. Lecsó with bread and hard boiled pigeon eggs.

Dis caught her older brother’s eye and realized that, except for Frerin and Janifur, the entire table was smiling knowingly at her. Her mouth opened then she turned to Janifur and saw the dam’s smitten gaze. Dis swallowed and blushed. Janifur realized her brothers and cousin were watching and turned scarlet. She fervently tried to admire the ceiling rather than face anyone.

Everyone was reduced to silence by the main course which was grilled elk chop smothered with morels, topinambour, roasted potatoes, parsnips, honeyed carrots and mashed turnips.

Dis recovered and bit her lip a little then neatly turned to Frerin to ask his opinion of the work in the mines.
Frerin grinned triumphantly at his sister.

“See, sis, I told you she’d fit right in with us. Thorin!” he called loudly. “Now you and Balin have no reason not to see udad about her!”

“What?” squawked Dis and Janifur together.

“Durin’s balls, Frerin!” Janifur barked, making him stare at her like a kicked puppy.

“What Janifur? I just—“

“I said I admired and liked your sister. That doesn’t give you the right to barge in before I get a chance to ask if she’d like to court!”

Janifur’s face froze when she caught up with what had been coming out of her mouth. She clapped both hands over it and turned horrified eyes on Dis. Dis recovered her composure. Frerin was still trying to get his jaw off the table.

“Nice one, Jani!” Bofur called as Bombur and Bifur could no longer contained their laughter.

Frerin refitted his jaw.

“You mean you don’t fancy me?”

Janifur gaped.

“You? You’ve said you’ve seen me before and never noticed I don’t fancy males?”

“You don’t fancy any males?” Frerin paused.

Janifur rolled her eyes.

“Oh, honestly Frerin! How can you be so dense? I’ve got a dam to dam bead in my beard and another in my hair, not a dam to dwarf!”

Frerin looked abashed then blurted out.

“I just thought you were poor and it didn’t matter so much in the lower classes.”

Silence.

Ori grumbled inwardly. The Ur family went stone-faced. Thorin groaned aloud and buried his face in his hands. Balin squeezed the bridge his nose and muttered about years of teaching wasted. Dis was mortified and Fili and Kili shifted embarrassment.

“Frerin, yeh dumb-fuck,” Dwalin said.

The tension broke at that and everyone except Frerin chuckled.

Janifur looked at Dis, mumbling.

“’M sorry. Wasn’t supposed to come out like that.”

Dis laughed.

“Things like that never do, dear.”
Frerin leapt to his feet.

“So you just used me to get to my sister and get yourself a place in the nobility, did you? And make me a laughing stock of the place! Well, I hope you’re happy that you succeeded in making both me and my family look like fools!”

“You did that fine on your own,” Thorin commented dryly. “Bifur, old friend-”

“I hope you’re pleased, you above-ground spiderling!” shouted Frerin. “Going to find a nice tree-shagger next?”

Dis and Bombur grabbed Janifur as she lunged across the table in her rage. An instant later Balin and Dwalin forcibly escorted Frerin out.

Dis and Thorin started to apologize but both Bifur and Bombur waved the whole matter away and Bofur made a few jokes about youth and hot heads.

When the Fundin brothers returned with a still furious Frerin, the rest of the dinner passed merrily except for Frerin who refused any more food and openly seethed in silence. The Ur family ignored him. They finished with diplomat pudding and figgy duff.

They had all risen from the table and Dis was leading the way back through the reception area when Dazla met them and smiled.

“The families of the Sons of Groin, marm.”

“Here we are!” Gridr cried.

Janifur gave a shout of delight and rushed to her aunt. The two dams hugged ecstatically. Gloin and Gimli called welcome to both the Urs and the Durins, followed by Oin and Binni.

Ori had not met Binni before. He was of a height with Oin but built along the lines of Marhdin. His hair and beard were mithril like Dori’s, both tied back in leather thongs. The two long braids of his mustache swung heavily, completely beaded with jade to match his eyes.

He dressed in an unadorned deep orange suit with boots dyed to match. They had open lacings which sported his bright yellow socks.

When he was presented to Dori they saluted each other on the lips then Binni pulled Nori’s ear and patted Ori on the head.

Ori was delighted to knock foreheads with both Omi and Loli, both of them in very fancy party dresses. The dresses had puffed sleeves (the latest thing, Loli told him later, from West Farthing) and the hems dropped to a little below the knee. Both were in white with foaming lace at their throats, their sleeves and the hems of their skirts. Both wore white kidskin boots, tied with lace ribbons, which reminded Ori of his wedding boots.

Gimli also greeted Ori with a forehead thump of some violence and was obviously quite pleased with his own new suit of fawn brown leather adorned with iolite.

Dis brought Ori, Dori, Gridr, Binni, Omi, Loli, and Jani with her to a small parlor with a wonderfully figured curtained archway opposite and a lovely fire in a small marble brazier in the middle. There were seats around the fire and Dis bade them make themselves comfortable and
served them **frozen dessert** of mixed fruit and strong liquor along with the raspberry tarts. Gridr had brought cupcakes with pink icing and honey cakes. Binni added a platter of iced cookies. Dori was kind enough to bring out his little silver **flute** and played for them while Binni sang. Dis, Gridr, and Jani shared a pipe and Ori, Loli and Omi thoroughly enjoyed their dessert.

Soon, Ori became aware of some rather strange noises from beyond the curtained archway. Gridr started up at a loud thump and went to the arch. She drew the curtain open and there was Bofur.

“There yeh are, mistress! Just coming’ through t’ fetch yeh ladies.”

“Why thank you Master Bofur,” Dori said with a dazzling smile. “How kind you are. May I request the pleasure of your arm to escort me through?”

Ori choked on a giggle as Bofur blushed and almost bounded across the room to do as he was bid. He gamely offered his other arm to Binni, who smiled ferally and sidled close to the miner. Jani and Dis giggled like school dams and Gridr had to hold the princess up.

Ori hopped up, a touch dizzy but in a very pleasant way and went through to the bigger room, Loli and Omi scampering after him. While he and the others enjoyed dessert, the Urs, the Fundins, the Sons of Groin, and the Durins were busy (Frerin had obviously stomped off in high dudgeon.) for the low table by the hearth overflowed with empty tankards around a large, tapped keg.

Master Bombur beat his fingers on a large drum between his knees and adjusted the tension to his liking. Bifur bent over a box, fitting his pipes together. Ori gasped as Thorin uncovered a beautiful harp. Kili and Fili had produced fiddles and the Fundin brothers their viols. Dwalin looked up and grinned at Ori, who was walking quite steadily thank you very much. Dwalin started to cross to him but Bombur struck the drum and began to keep a beat. Bifur swung the bagpipes to his shoulder and the drone rasped out under the first notes. Dwalin turned and glared at them, but the **pipes and drum were insistent**. Bombur laughed. Dwalin blew out a breath and chuckled.

“Bash on with it, Dwalin!” Thorin called. “Do what you’re called to!”

Kili gave a shout, seconded by Gimli, and Loli and Omi squealed delightedly.

Dwalin cussed but removed his axes and tossed aside his shoulder plaid. Removing the hoods, he laid the axes crossed on the floor then turned and bowed to Ori with the others behind him. Ori’s mouth dropped open as Dwalin turned and, with a lightness Ori had never expected, Dwalin stepped up to the axe heads and began to **dance**.

Ori had heard of, but never seen, the warriors’ axe dance. Dwalin crossed and circled his weapons, his boots pounded against the floor and the kilt swung with his movements. But never once, no matter how close he seemed to come, did any part of his boots ever touch the weapons. With a final leap, Dwalin finished and bowed to his audience. Bombur gave the drum a last blow and shouted in triumph as everyone else clapped and cheered.

“Oi, Jani, “ Bifur called, he pointed at another case. Jani grinned at Dis and went over and produced a balalaika. She spun a silver plectrum and strummed a chord. Balin twirled on his heel and bowed low to Dori. Dori went off into a peal of laughter and allowed himself to be led to the middle of the floor which Dwalin had vacated along with his axes. They bowed to each other and began to clap. Everyone but Bombur on the drum, Fili on the fiddle and Jani strumming a country tune joined in.

Balin and Dori lifted their hands and began to do the forward kicks in time with the clapping. They whirled and bowed to each other then caught their hands high and hopped deftly about in a
circle.

Ori loved to watch Dori dance. He was so light on his feet. Dori was laughing and beaming at Balin who glowed back at him in perfect love.

Ori clapped until his palms tingled.

Balin finished by lifting Dori in a spin then they bowed together.

Dwalin shouted for more and Nori and Bofur seconded him.

“No,” cried Dori. “You two shall sing to us!”

Nori and Bofur exchanged bows and wicked looks.

“Now here we go,” Bofur began then he and Nori gave the company a silly, rather rude song about dragons and maidens. Fili, Kili and Jani shrieked with laughter while Dis and Dori scolded. Loli and Omi were giggling but very red.

Ori was beyond delight when Dwalin fetched him to join the others in a circle dance. Bombur, Bifur and Kili teased the dancers by playing faster and faster until they were all breathless and almost falling over one another.

Balin took over the drum, Kili the fiddle, and Dori played the flute for a reel. Again the musicians raced the dancers. Dwalin tossed Ori in the air, making him shout, and Jani swung Dis so hard she crashed into Thorin and kicked the pair of them head over haunches and when the tune finally ended they fell about, panting and laughing. Mistress Dazla came in with iced liquors and they refreshed themselves.

Thorin played them some soft beautiful melodies on the harp while they rested. Ori sat cross-legged on the floor before the hearth. Strangely enough Fili, Kili, Gimli, Loli, and Omi joined him there.

Gridr, Gloin, Oin and Binni sang some old ballads with Thorin. Dis, Balin and Dwalin joined in. Nori and Bofur played their flutes with Thorin’s harp. Ori sighed, he was warm and the air full of music. Sounding through, the voice of his heartsong thrilled him. He was full of food and the iced liquors were so delicious. He turned to look up at Dwalin who was seated in a deep arm chair beside him. Dwalin looked down to him and grinned fondly. Ori clambered to his knees and then up into Dwalin’s chair. Dwalin helped Ori sit in his lap. Ori snuggled his head into Dwalin’s shoulder.

“I’m sooooo happy,” he crooned into his husband’s ear.

“Oh, aye? Are yeh now?”

“Yes, yes completely. I wish I was a bearer.”

“Huh?”

Ori lifted his head and smiled at Dwalin, who was staring at him confused.

“Yes,” he said, grinning. “I wish I was a bearer and I’d give you lots and lots and lots of badgers! Yes, I would and I don’t particularly like looking after young ones. Oh, Tilda was alright because she would go home after a bit. You know we’d have to get the stone masons in.”
“Why?” Dwalin asked very carefully for some reason.

“If I was a bearer and gave you lots and lots and lots of badgers, we’d have to convert the upstairs into a huge nursery. Imagine that! You might have to expand the house! There I’d be, popping out badger after badger like a bubble mud geyser. Mind,” Ori frowned in thought, “I really don’t know how I’d get any of my work at the library done as I’d be having to run back and forth popping out badgers. I’m not sure I’d like that,” he reflected. “What little I’ve read about pregnancy, it sounds too much like being constipated and badgers aren’t poop. They’re much larger and that would hurt.”

Dwalin was shaking. Ori examined him. Dwalin was definitely shaking, had his face in the hand that wasn’t holding Ori. Ori took the hand away from his husband’s face.

“Don’t cry, beloved,” he comforted. “Neither of us are bearers so we can always adopt or simply enjoy any badgers produced by Balin and Dori.”

Dwalin grinned up at Ori.

“Love, yer a’ least three parts drunk.”

Ori eyed him owlishly.

“No, I’m not. I know I’m not. I’m rather happy but I know I’m not drunk. I got drunk with Nori. He took me to a pub and we had a boiled dinner and he gave me all the ale I wanted as Dori was away and doesn’t approve of me having lots of ale. Nori was sitting opposite me and I downed my eighth ale, I felt sick and tried to get up and accidentally threw up all over Nori’s drink, his front, and in his lap. He had to carry me home. Don’t laugh. He was most annoyed with me!”

Dwalin choked and re-arranged their seating so Ori was straddling Dwalin’s knees facing him.

“So you see,” Ori continued, “I know I’m not drunk as I don’t feel in the least bit queasy and I know I’m not going to throw up.”

“I’ll put yer head over th’ side a’ th’ chair, if I see yeh lookin’ that way, love.”

“Would you?” Ori asked, raising his eyebrows interestedly. “You know, I think that is a very wise idea. Floors are much easier to clean that chairs.”

Ori paused and sighed. He really was the luckiest dwarf ever to live. Dwalin was so handsome.

“You are beautiful,” he said simply.

Dwalin blinked, swallowed then chucked Ori under the chin.

“Aye, an’ yer lovelier than any I’ve ever seen.”

Ori wrapped his arms somewhat awkwardly around Dwalin’s neck and kissed him. He knew this was a good idea as Dwalin made a pleased noise and leaned back in the chair. One of Dwalin’s hands clamped around Ori’s butt and Dwalin’s other hand slid up into Ori’s thick hair, pulling him closer into the kiss.

“Oi,” Bofur said. “Get yerselves a room, yeh drunks.”

Enraged, Ori sat up so quickly he overbalanced. If it hadn’t been for Dwalin’s grip on him, he’d have continued back and landed smack on the floor.

“I’m not sex and we’re not having drunk!” Ori snapped angrily.
Dwalin roared with laughter.

Bofur grinned down at Ori.

“Are yeh sure, laddie? Want t’ run that by us again?”

“Huh?” Ori inquired.

Dori swam into his eyesight and handed him a cup.

“Drink this, pet. No more frozen drinks for you.”

Ori obediently knocked back the contents. He almost wailed as the bitter, oily taste hit his tongue.

“Dori!”

Ori felt the inside of his stomach burn then the fuzzy feeling in his head cleared. He blinked and looked around. Gimli lay flat on his back and snoring on the floor before the hearth. Loli and Omi curled on either side of him using his belly as a pillow. Kili and Fili played cards beside them. Bombur and Bifur chatted quietly with Nori and Binni, smoking their pipes. Thorin strummed his harp idly, while he had a discussion with Gridr and Gloin. Balin and Oin stood with Dori. Dis and Janifur were squeezed together in a chair, examining each others hands and whispering.

“Better?” asked Dori.

“Yes.” Ori rubbed his eyes. “Yes, thank you. What a disgusting concoction.”

“I know, pet. Look on the bright side. It’s the first time I’ve ever had to make it for you. I’m rather proud that you’ve never come home drunk.” Dori paused to send a glare Nori-ward. “Unlike our brother.”

“Nori gets sing-y and staggerish, when he gets under the mine hatches with ale,” Ori admitted. “Unfortunately, I just throw up.”

Dori looked startled.

“I don’t ever remember that happening, pet.”

Ori smiled sweetly up at Dori.

“Well, Nori was trying to teach me how to handle myself and thought I should at least know how to drink.”

“Why, I never!”

“He’s been punished,” Ori forestalled the rapidly angering Dori.

Dori raised an eyebrow.

“Has he?”

“Yes, every time he took me out and got me drunk, no matter where he placed himself I always threw up all over him.”

Dori choked, then patted Ori’s cheek.
“That’s my good badger.”

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There were hugs, forehead thumps, and promises of meeting again at breakfast. Ori saw Dis and Jani standing a little away. Jani held both the princess’ hands, speaking quite earnestly to her. Dis was being very regal but smiled with pink cheeks. She nodded and Jani squeezed her hands again and moved toward her brothers.

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The Urs and the Fundins trotted off in flurries of well wishes, waving, and lewd commentary back at the Sons of Groin and the Durins. The Sons of Groin and the Ur young ladies went to their residence. Balin, arm in arm with Dori, chatting amicably with Bifur and Bombur, while Nori and Bofur lagged behind. Ori leaned against Dwalin. Dwaín was so nice and warm and strong. Ori smiled and felt his eyes close.
Elves, birds and breakfast.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode!! As you’ve all noticed, Thror’s not behaving like a king, Frerin is a pain in the pahtoot, and things are not well with the people and dwarrow who live in Dale; this is where Dollypegs and I embark on fixing those problems. So, in the words of the incomparable Ms. Davis: “Fasten your seatbelts, we’re in for a bumpy night.” Don’t worry, there’s still lots of food, fun, food, comedy and food!!!
See you all next Friday, friends, and keep those cards and letters coming!

Ori woke in the warmth of Dwalin’s arms. He wondered how that had happened then bits and pieces of the end of the evening came back to him. He felt his face heat. Dwalin chuckled.

“Aye, love, yer a funny drunk. An’ yeh didn’t even brin’ up yer dinner on me.”

Ori giggled.

“Perhaps that’s something my drunk mind only does to Nori.”

Dwalin roared with laughter.

“Oh, lad, I hope so. That’s too precious. Yeh got t’ tell ‘im.”

“No. If I did, he’d try and get me drunk then go and dump me all over you when I do get sick.”

There was a tapping on the door and Dori came bustling in.

“Oh, good, you’re awake, pet. And good morning to you too, dearie,” this to Dwalin. “I do need help with getting breakfast together and Nori isn’t in his bed, so it seemed simple enough to come and find you as the Ur family is still abed upstairs.”

“Yeh try Bofur’s bed?” Dwalin asked, yawning, as he sat up and stretched.

“Don’t be disgusting, dearie.” Dori admonished.

Dwalin leaned back o the pillow his arms folded looking at Dori from under a raised brow.

“Disgustin’?”

“You are a very determined, dominating dwarf,” Dori said, actually waving his finger at the warrior. “You might, even with the best of intentions, teach our Ori or influence him to the detriment of his still-forming character.”

“Aye, righ’!” Dwalin grumped then pointed out, “an’ unlike me equally determined an’ dominatin’ brother a’ leas’ I’d th’ manners t’ marry Ori b’fore I bounced int’ bed wi’ ‘im.”

“Don’t be absurd, you provoking creature!” Dori whisked out to hide his glowing cheeks.

Ori leaned over and kissed his husband.
“He’s gone an’ bloody called me ‘dearie’,” said Dwalin. His face was a study.

“You should hear what he’s calls Nori, even when he’s not upset,” Ori giggled, clambered out of bed, and scampered after Dori via the bathroom and his old room to dress himself.

By the time he romped into the kitchen, Dori was busy and Dis, Gridr, and Binni were all at various employments.

“There you are, pet,” Dori smiled at him while hefting a bowl of creamy, fluffy eggs, pouring all of it into a heavy iron skillet and shoving it into the top oven.

“Please go and set the table in the breakfast parlor. Put everything on the sideboard as, no doubt, we’ll have people bobbing in and out. Enough plates and things for nineteen, pet.”

Ori went about his chore. The sideboard had one end piled with plates and closely followed by many platters of breads, rolls, pastries. The long hob at the end of the room was keeping hot pans of hash, fried potatoes, flapjacks, sausages, bacon and slices of meat puddings. Ori made sure there were enough chairs as Balin brought through more. The table bore several pots of tea and Ori put out mugs and spoons. The scent of all the food was almost making him drool.

He heard noises from the sitting room and saw Dwalin hurrying through, still tucking his shirt in and fastening his braces. Ori tore after him and was pounced upon by Fili and Kili, who had dragged young Gimli, Gloin, the cousins and their uncles along with them. Thorin brought up the rear looking rather amused. All the younger ones were chattering nineteen to the dozen.

In the receiving room, the Urs were descending the stairs, dressed and looking refreshed. Bofur had quite the spring in his step and Nori followed closely, appearing to be running his hands over pretty much everything within his reach, including Bofur.

Ori noticed that the Durins, Fundins, Urs, and Groinsons were all accounted for – minus Frerin, of course. Ori didn’t know what Frerin actually did with his time when he wasn’t bullying people and Ori wasn’t sad for the lack of his company.

Dwalin and Balin shepherded their guests into the now tiny-seeming breakfast parlor.

Ori and Dwalin seated themselves in the middle of the long side of the table, facing Bofur and Nori who had their backs to four long, tall windows, two of which were doors now open to let in the spring sun and pleasant breezes from the meadow. To the right of Dwalin sat the older generation and to the left of Ori the younger. It was rather amusing to see the occupations.

Gimli, the princes, and their cousins were all eating and writing notes to their friends. A small peregrine falcon sat on Gimli’s forearm, tweeting occasionally, and helped him eat sausages while Gimli was busy with his letter, which started in the middle and spread outwards and circularly on the paper. Ori supposed the falcon belonged to the elf named Legolas.

Loli and Omi were scribbling notes on ribbons and wrapping them about their bats’ legs. The bats, perfectly used to this morning routine, stood idle on one leg and drank their fill, one of the fruit syrup and the other out of the cream jug, twittering at each other now and then.

Fili and Kili took turns adding text to a letter to their second cousin, who lived in the Iron Hills and named Thorin.

Bats, ravens and other birds, including an extremely small owl at one point, flew in and out of the doors opposite Ori.
Watching them all reminded Ori of those times Dori chided him for sitting at the table with his face in a book.

Well, except for he never had any correspondence with friends and unlike Gimli he never had that elf thing happen to him.

Ori called out to him, “Gimli, how did you fare with the acrostic?”

Gimli chuckled. “He wrote to tell me it took him most of the night to figure out. He thinks I’m very clever.”

Gridr beamed and Gloin looked proud, but troubled.

Dis asked, “With whom does he correspond?”

“Legolas of Mirkwood,” said Gridr.

“The crown prince?” Dis asked, amazed. “Thranduil’s son?”

“Gimli has slain him with a single axe blow from his eyes,” said Gridr. Gloin choked on his breakfast. Gridr patted his back and refilled his cup.

“His first flirt,” said Gridr, sighing with sentimental smile.

Gimli listened to this, his face the color of raspberry compote.

“Amad!” he protested, at the same time exceedingly pleased with himself.

Fili and Kili stared at him, appalled.

Kili said, “Imagine wanting to flirt with an elf!”

“He’s not that bad,” Gimli protested.

Kili thought on it and shrugged.

“Legolas’s an excellent bowman” he allowed.

Fili muttered, “I’m sure his aim will be perfect.”

Gimli threw a roll at his head.

The older generation were entertaining each other for the most part. Balin had his arm across the back of Dori’s chair, feeding him fresh strawberries dipped in honeyed cream.

Gridr, Dis, and Binni had their heads together over the plate of scones which Dori had made. Ori suspected them of attempting to deconstruct the recipe by taste and minute examination.

Oin and his brother were applying themselves to hearty breakfasts.

Thorin brooded over a cup of tea.

Bofur, Nori, (who Ori suspected, had his hand in Bofur’s trousers) and Bombur discussed the excellence of the ham with Jani, who was seated close to Dis. Dwalin sat like his brother, with his arm across the back of Ori’s chair, his fingers occasionally brushing and flicking Ori’s hair.
Roak perched on Thorin’s chair back and Dwalin’s own raven was finishing Dwalin’s hash for him. Binni got up to call in the oddest looking bird, (Binni later told Ori it was called a parrot) which was swooping around the meadow in a confused way. This brightly colored creature landed on the table and after helping itself to an entire sausage walked over to Balin and spoke. Its voice was guttural and it accented its phrases with whistles.

“Greetings Lord Balin (whistle). Lady Hoondah of Angmar wishes to know if perhaps this year you shall grace her ladyship with your presence (whistle). You haven’t visited since your most delightful acquaintance was made by her ladyship (whistle).”

The parrot cocked its eye at Balin. Balin smiled serenely and bowed his heads slightly.

“Greetings Great Lady of Angmar. I regret that I shall not be visiting this year as I have lately become engaged. I do hope however her ladyship will be so kind as to receive my betrothed and I once we have celebrated our nuptials.”

The parrot did a double take, glared at Balin and made the most horrid crackling screech noise.

“Bugger,” the bird croaked clearly and flew away the last rasher of bacon in its claws.

When most of the serving dishes were empty and the breakfast group had sat back with communal, contented sighs, Thorin raised his demeanor from beverage contemplation.

“Dori?”

“Yes, dear Thorin?” cooed Dori, all quite at one with the world.

Thorin smirked and went on.

“As you are the…er…unknown son of my udad’s nephew, Nain—“

“I thought Nain was his cousin,” Dori interrupted.

“As did I,” Dis said, putting down her third scone.

“It’s the name and closeness in age,” Thorin explained. “Nain was Thror’s nephew, which makes Dain my cousin.”

“A cousin once removed,” elaborated Balin.

“Ye’d have t’ remove him lot more then tha’ before ye couldn’t hear ’im,” Dwalin added making Ori giggle and Bofur frown.

“Ye’d have to go all the way to Dale,” he muttered. “That’s where it starts.”


“To continue,” said Thorin, eyebrow raised. “Dori, Balin is sixth in line for the throne and he is a public figure. Whether or not you’re actually presented to the king, people will wonder who you are.”

Though Thorin’s tone was gentle Dori still looked anxious. He put his hand into Balin’s.

“My mother’s people may now realize who I am,” said Dori. “I’m not concerned with them.”
“But your brother in the Iron Hills doesn’t know about you,” said Thorin, “and I’d rather he heard about you from us, not from the Rikanta.”

“I have considered that,” said Dori.

“Then, may I please have your permission to write to him?”

“It’s not as though I can stop you.”

Balin squeezed Dori’s hand.

“M’dear, please.”

Ori glanced at Dwalin.

“What sort of person is Lord Dain?” he asked. “Will he be angry about Dori? Will he see Dori as a threat?”

Dwalin and Thorin exchanged looks of pure glee.

“Well, Thorin?” Dwalin drawled. “Do tell us. Wha’ sort a’ person is Dain?”

“Loud,” Thorin supplied.

Dori muttered, “Hardly a complete picture.”

Dis, on Dori’s other side, patted his arm and struggled to elaborate.

“He’s not entirely like us in his manners,” she said.

“He doesn’t have any,” Thorin added.

She frowned at her brother, who chuckled to himself, unrepentant.

“But he isn’t really so different from us either,” she finished.

Kili added helpfully, “He has a family. His wife is a lot like Imad Gridr, except even more patient. And he has a son. His name is Thorin, too.”

“I told him not to do that,” said Thorin, half to himself, but still looking pleased.

“Very well,” said Dori, resigned. “Thorin, if you would contact Lord Dain and, of course, send him my and my younger brothers regards.”

Balin kissed Dori.

“It’ll be f’r th’ best, beloved. Yeh’ll see.”

“Thank you, Dori,” said Thorin. “I’ll send a raven as soon as I’m able.”

Ori looked out over the meadow, clear to the wall at the far end. He saw a movement at the top of the rocks. A blond head hopped up to stand there, closely followed by another, redheaded.

“Who’s that?” he asked, quickly. “There’s someone climbing over the great rock wall into the meadow.”

Everyone rose to the open doors. Swords, axes, and knives appeared out of nowhere.
Dwalin flung himself out, closely followed by Gimli, both of them armed and roaring. Ori slipped around behind them in time to hear Gimli roar again, this time in greeting.

By now everyone else had clambered through, save for Dis and Gridr, hampered by their dresses, and Bombur who stood by the dams, ably protecting them with the carving knife.

Gimli sprinted down the meadow as the blond jumped down to land by him.

Gimli shouted and grabbed the elf around the waist in a hug, bellowing that he was welcome and must get inside before he got his head cut off.

The redhead dropped down gracefully beside them.

In his enthusiasm, Gimli grasped the blond by the hand and half dragged him up the way. The blond elf looked confused but happy to be dragged by the hand and at speed. It was obvious to Ori, the elf had never been lead by hand at speed anywhere. The other elf, terribly amused, followed gamely.

Excited by the arrival of his friend, Gimli immediately forgot all manners and introduced Legolas first to his mam, then to his adad. Gloin looked appalled and Gridr pleased, but also appalled.

“Gimli!” she cried.

Gimli instantly remembered his manners and properly introduced Legolas to Thorin.

With a raised eyebrow, already acquainted with the prince, Thorin greeted him.

Dis also greeted him from the other side of the doors. Dori invited them in to breakfast.

Fili and Kili discovered two more chairs and drew them up to the table as Dwalin and Gimli brought the elves into the breakfast parlor. Dori politely asked them to sit. Dis introduced the rest of the party and the elven prince introduced his companion, his close friend Captain Tauriel.

Ori sat again, this time with Gimli at his side, and Fili and Kili opposite. Kili looked the elven prince over and turned a teasing eye at Gimli.

“I don’t care much for elf maids myself, too thin, and all creamy skin and high cheekbones. Not enough facial hair for my taste.”

He smiled at Legolas.

“But you’re not bad.”

“He’s no’ an elf maid!” Gimli thundered and threw the butter at Kili.

“What brings you to the Wall of Erebor?” Thorin asked Legolas.

“Three things, the first of which is that Ada is on the outs with me. He found Gimli’s letter and he’s furious and warns me I’ll catch a beard.”

Nori snickered.

“Looks like you’ve already caught one, laddie.”

Legolas gave a wisp of Gimli’s beard a small tug with a smile. Gimli flushed darker than a
ruby, Gloin sputtered on the verge of exploding. The older dwarrow gasped in shock, except for Dwalin, who threw his head back and roared with laughter, and Balin, Dori and Binni all chuckled.

Gimli muttered, “We don’t do that lad, at least not in front of other people, like my parents.”

“Most of us don’t,” said Nori, shrugging.

Legolas realized he’d breached conduct and apologized profusely to Gloin and Gridr.

Balin cleared his throat.

“The other two things, your highness?”

Legolas frowned, a worried look on his face, which melted into surprise as Gridr put a nourishing bowl of oatmeal in front of him and filled a mug with tea.

Ori noticed Kili staring open-mouthed at Captain Tauriel as she gingerly sampled her oatmeal, appeared to find it tasty and started to tuck in.

Ori nudged Dwalin

“Look.”

Dwalin murmured loud enough for the table to hear, “Mahal’s hairy arse, I thin’ I jus’ heard th’ lad’s testicles drop.”

Fili, Bofur and Nori cackled maniacally.

It was Kili’s turn to blush red.

The captain looked up and smiled sweetly at him.

“Hello,” she said.

“Grch,” Kili responded politely.

“The second thing?” Dori prompted gently.

“Lord Balin, were you able to put an end to the slave trade as you discussed with my father?”

“Aye, your highness.”

“Then why are there still wagons leaving Dale for Mordor? We have heard nothing from King Thror and my father grows wary.”

Balin and Thorin exchanged looks.

“The third has come to our ears that Gondor will march on Mordor to free the slaves there. Gondor intends to call on Rohan. The Ents of Fangorn grow restless. Has King Thror not received word from Gondor?”

Thorin’s hands gripped the arms of his chair hard enough that the wood creaked.

Balin stepped in smoothly.

“This is the first we’ve heard of it, Prince Legolas. The message must have gone astray,”
Ori thought it must have strayed into King Thror’s fireplace along with many another vital letters.
Elves, sneaky birds and Dain-ful letters!

Chapter Summary

Hello, friends, and welcome back to another episode! We have more elves and more animal allies of the dwarrow. Oh, the things Ori learns! Not to mention what he gets to eat! The excitement’s just beginning, so stay tuned and see you back here next Friday. Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Legolas' aquamarine eyes gazed steadily into Thorin’s.

Thorin remained cool in the princeling's stare.

"Quite so," he stated quietly.

There was a horn volley in the distance and Ori heard the clock tower bell faintly from Dale.

Gimli grumbled that he was due in the armory for a practice in hand to hand combat with Furhnk. He rose, grabbed Legolas by the shoulder and knocked his forehead into the princeling’s and gave him a pat on the back. He headed out while Legolas rubbed his forehead, a little confused.

Ori leaned over and said, “That’s a gesture of friendship, your highness.”

“Oh, good,” Legolas observed.

Loli and Omi groaned simultaneously as Gridr reminded them they had a tutor coming for their illuminated script practice from their last lectures.

They shooed their bats off with their messages and bade everyone farewell for the day.

With the removal of the youngsters, Dwalin turned to the elves.

"So," he drawled in a conversational tone. "How’d the pair a’ yeh get over th’ wall?"

The prince and captain exchanged glances. Tauriel rose fluidly and removed something from her belt. She handed it to Thorin.

"These are from Lórien from our Lady Galadriel. They are only made there and allow the wearer to keep out of sight of any eyes. Well," she smiled ruefully at the ravens, "most eyes."

The assembled dwarrow glared at Roäc, son of Carc, Garnet and Sapphire, who was Gloin’s raven. The ravens continued to help themselves to table scraps. Ori thought they looked quite pleased.

“Lemme guess,” said Dwalin dryly. “The ravens told me guards on the wall t’ let th’ elves pass an then didn’t bother t’ tell us wha’ they told th’ guards. Some sentries yeh be.”

Roäc gave the raven equivalent of a shrug.

“It was Thranduil’s egg, not an orc.”
There was some giggling at this, particularly from Captain Tauriel.

Dis came to her brother's side and together they unrolled the strange fabric Tauriel had given them. Ori thought it looked rather like a grey, green cobweb.

"How clever," Thorin allowed in a level tone.

"But can it keep the rain out?" Dis asked, fingering the material.

"No," Tauriel allowed. "But they do hold heat so you cannot freeze, even if you would fall a slept midst snow and ice. Yet they are so light you can wear them in the hottest weather so that your skin will not burn from the sun."

"Fascinating," Gridr allowed, an eyebrow raised, as she held the fabric up towards the window.

Balin humphed,

"Do go on yer highness; yeh mentioned wagons leaving th’ warehouses."

"Yes," Legolas nodded. "It's built as though it might house a barge or a few small boats but we noticed that miners and other workers, both men and dwarf, were being let in the back. They look very shabby so they are no doubt the poor of both peoples."

Balin and Groin both groaned.

"We need to keep an eye on this," Thorin said to Roäc.

"I'm rather obvious," Roäc reminded him.

Dis said, "Roäc, can one of your people take Rutile down into the mine?"

Roäc looked to Sapphire, who hopped forward.

Dis swished out.

Thorin suggested to Roäc, "Perhaps some songbirds, thrushes, would be willing to keep their eyes open for us?"

Roäc cocked his head, considering, and croaked in agreement.

Dis returned with a small gilded box. She opened the box, which Ori noticed had air holes. It appeared sumptuously cushioned inside. Dis smiled down at the contents saying, "We have work for you, Rutile my dear."

To Ori’s surprise, the largest, hairiest spider he had ever seen climbed jauntily from the box. It was dark brown, but appeared to wear red and yellow socks. It was bigger than Dwalin’s hand. All its eyes appeared to look up at the princess and it waved two forelegs eagerly at her.

“Oh, how pretty!” cried Jani and reached over to tickle the spider's abdomen.

The spider’s back legs arched up like a cat’s and its wiggled its pincers happily.

Dis brought out a black handkerchief and Rutile scampered in to the middle and curled up. Dis tied the ends of the handkerchief together and Sapphire, taking the ends in her beak, flew off.
Ori frowned briefly, then said, “How will Rutile tell us what’s going on?”

Dis smiled brilliantly.

“Rutile can write runes.”

“Oh, famous!” said Dori, much pleased.

They seated themselves again and Binni came back from the kitchen with two plates full of scones and another pot of tea.

Balin went out and returned with a lap desk and placed it before Thorin. Thorin sighed, drew out ink, paper and pen and began to write.

The scones and tea were passed around and everyone tucked in.

“I never realized dwarrow ate this much,” said Legolas, “but you eat like hobbits do. You eat seven meals a day as well.”

“I ain’t never seen a hobbit,” said Nori. “Are they huge like men?”

“No, actually. They are smaller in height than dwarrow.”

“Where do they put all the food?” asked Kili.

“No one knows,” Tauriel said with a mysterious smile.

Thorin finished his letter, blotted it, sanded it and handed it Balin who read it aloud.

Dear Dain,

I hope this finds you well, and your queen and Prince Thorin (I still haven't forgiven you for that) equally so.

You recall the unfortunate incident between King Thror and your father. I would not stir up such pain again

but to give you a balm for it. The union of your late father and Rikmha of Rikanta produced a dwarfing, Dori

of Rikmha, a bearer who has been living, impoverished, in Dale.

It would never have been known but that Dori's younger brother Ori is heartsong and husband to Dwalin.

Yes, that Dwalin.

Their was a marriage of expediency and the families had not previously met, or so we thought.

You will recall Cousin Balin long ago briefly met his One but they were separated. This was Dori of Rikmha,

your half sibling. Dori and Balin are promised to each other and Dori is also living at Fundin
A middle brother, Nori, is dear to his siblings, but far harder to pin down. He comes and goes as he will.

Dori sends his kindest regards and, along with myself, invites you to visit if you are so inclined. Please let us know.

You are, as always, most welcome.

Yours,

Thorin.

"Will it do?" Thorin asked.

"It will," said Dori slowly. "As long as he understands I have nothing to do with the Rikanta clan. I even made my dear umadel faint. And that I have no interest in Dain's throne, nor do any of my brothers."

"Well," Nori started.

Dori smacked him hard across the back of the head.

"Oi!" Nori cried.

Ori said, "It's so strange being suddenly noble. I keep expecting that I fell asleep over Dori's letter and I'm drooling on it and when I wake up I'll have to rewrite it."

Dwalin gathered him up, laughing, and kissed him.

"Not a dream, love, I promise."

Nori grimaced.

"For those who don't care for syrupy sweetness it's more on the order of a nightmare."

Dori smacked him again.

"Cut it out!" Nori growled.

Ori looked at Nori askance.

"And you're not syrupy sweet with Bofur?"

Nori sputtered. He actually sputtered.

Ori jumped up and pointed.

"Dori! Look! Nori's blushing! Hold on to everything, the mountain's about to fall!"


He frowned so terribly, so hard, that his hair moved.
Ori giggled.
"Braided your eyebrows too tight again."

Nori gave a bellow of rage.

Dori said, "That's enough out of both of you."

Ori snuggled up to Dwalin, who was still chuckling.

Dori admonished, "Don't tease your brother, pet. You know he's sensitive about these things."

"Aye! That's right. I'm- I'm what?"

Dori shrugged and said, "Well?"

Bofur looked up from his tea.

Ori called out, "Careful, Bofur, Nori's in a sensitive mood."

Nori threw a scone at him. Ori tried and failed to catch it in his mouth. Dwalin caught it in his hand instead and split it with him.

"He's what now?" Bofur asked. "Don't worry, Dori, I know our Nori and I'll take care of him. Won't I, Ducky?"

Nori's face turned the same color as his hair.

"Ducky?" Dwalin asked.

Ori said, "Bofur always called Nori 'Ducky' when we were all together in Steam Alley. Nori was Ducky, Dori was Mother Goose and I was Chick."

"Why were you called Chick?"

"I had a pet chicken. Lovely, speckled thing. Nori gave her to me. I called her Cluck-cluck and she laid the best eggs."

"Speckled?" Dwalin asked, eyes narrowing. "With white patches on each leg?"

"Yes!" Ori cried. Then dread stole over him. "Yes?"

"She always laid exactly five eggs every mornin'?"

"Yes, always brown, with double yolks."

Dwalin rounded on Nori.

"Yeh stole Chicken! Yeh shithead!"

Nori cackled helplessly, all the while he leaned up against Bofur.

Thorin broke in. "I remember Chicken."

Balin face-palmed.

"Oh, Mahal."
"She followed Dwalin everywhere," Thorin continued. "She sat on Gnasher's arse when he rode. Even laid an egg or two there."

Ori put a placating hand on Dwalin's arm.

"I took very good care of her," Ori promised. "You don't mind that I called her Cluck-cluck, do you?"

Dwalin deflated.

"Nah, love. I'm glad she went t' yeh. Wha' happened t' her?"

"She stole a nest and brought off thirteen chicks. We gave them to Bard. His late wife Matilde had a flock. He shared the eggs. Eventually Cluck-cluck died of old age. Sigrid helped me bury her under the doorstep."

"Mahal wept," Balin groaned.

"And Nori was kind enough to sing the funeral song for her."

Bofur fell back in his chair, roaring with laughter.

"Nori, yeh sang a dirge… f-fer a chicken?"

"Shuddup, arsehole," Nori hissed.

The table had dissolved into snickering.

Ori said to Dwalin, "I'm sure if we asked Sigrid would give you one of her great-great-great-great grandchicks."

"That's kind o' yeh, love, but I'm set."

"I had a kitten after that. I named her Sassafras," said Ori, "though, Nori brought me that too. Mahal, Nori, you didn't steal that as well?"

Nori said, highly offended, "I found that kitten."

"That's what you said about Cluck-cluck," Ori protested. "It's the same thing where you're concerned. Is Sassy still around the house, Dori? We should go get her, though I'm sure Sigrid's looking after her."

"Of course, pet," Dori soothed.

"You had a chicken?" Legolas asked Dwalin, his eyes full of curiosity. "Why?"

"She was a pet," Dwalin explained dismissively.

Captain Tauriel nodded. "I have heard chickens are wonderfully docile."

"You ain't bin pecked by one." Dwalin assured her.

Thorin rose and withdrew from his pocket a silver key. He held it up before Tauriel and Legolas.

"To save you some climbing I'm entrusting you with this. Roäc will show you the door. It will bring you to the meadow and down to the end of the lake. The ravens guard it, no one else knows of
it. If you see any other strange goings on please feel free to tell us. And should we or Roäc’s people see danger approaching your lands we will send a warning to Mirkwood immediately.”

The captain and the prince bowed politely and thanked the dwarrow for the breakfast.

Gridr hurried to Legolas and smiled up at him.

"Ach, wee badger, you're just so thin. Not to worry, I'll get you nice and fattened up."

She patted his tummy. The elf prince did nothing beyond widen his eyes in amazement.

Both elves stifled laughter and went to the door.

Gridr followed, gave them each a maternal swat on the bottom and told them to be off.

Ori thought he could hear them giggle as they went back out to the meadow.
Treasonous plots, traumatized tarantulas, and scones

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to another exciting episode of our little dwarf telenovela-ish story!! The plot thickens like gravy in this one!! As always, we love hearing your thoughts!

Join us again next Friday, friends, and keep those cards and letters coming!!

While they waited for Rutile and Garnet to return Ori helped Dori gather the plates. The talk around the table grew more serious, and not just because of the scones, which were Dori’s best and not to be taken lightly.

Ori wasn’t sure if he belonged at the table. It seemed more of a political discussion and he didn’t know anything about that but his seat beside Dwalin remained empty.

He considered staying in the kitchen where Dori was washing up but Binni, despite he was company, had insisted on doing the drying. The two of them talked and laughed with their mithril silver braids close together. They had only just met, yet to Ori they acted like old friends. They felt alike somehow and it occurred to Ori that they might actually be very much the same, that perhaps Binni was a Bearer as well, though he knew Binni and Oin didn’t have dwarflings of their own.

“I’m finished here, Dori,” Ori said.

“Thank you, pet. Run along now and have fun.”

Ori swithered and trailed out to the breakfast parlor again. People seemed reluctant to move from this pleasant spot and seeing as how Ori thought he had over heard Dori and Binni talking about more food and tea, it was unlikely anyone would. Ori pondered about the situation. He had the feeling Dori would not be best pleased if he was involved. He knew he was determined to be involved no matter what the outcome was. He needed an ally first.

Ori went to his husband and put a hand on Dwalin’s arm.

“Bin shooed outa the kitchen, love?”

“May I speak to you a moment? In private?”

“A’ course, love.”

Dwalin rose with a nod to Thorin. He slid his arm about Ori’s waist and they left the parlor. Ori led the way to Dwalin’s room. Ori shut the door and leaned against it for a moment. Then he sighed and came forward. Dwalin ran gentle hands down Ori’s shoulders.

“What’s wrong, love?”

“Dwalin, what’s going on?”

“Th’ Ur’ve stayed t’ talk business.”
“But not the business with Frerin.”

“Mahal, no, tha’ won’t be ’n issue now.”

“Then, what is it?” Ori took a breath then, “I think I understand some of it but not all.”

Dwalin looked troubled.

“I don’t like t’ tell yeh, no’ ’cause I don’t think yeh’d understand. It’s jus’ no’ information it’s safe t’have.”

“It’s about the king, isn’t it.”

“Aye.”

“Then I should be there.”

He expected Dwalin to laugh or pat him on the shoulder and tell him not to worry himself. He didn’t expect Dwalin to look at him with such thoughtfulness.

“Love, it’s reached th’ point where there’s no goin’ back. Wha’ said in tha’ room could get every one o’ us killed. Tha’s not what I want fer yeh.”

“It’s not what I want for you either.”

“Then, let me ask yeh this. Why do yeh want t’ be there?”

Ori heard himself say, “I want to help Thorin. I can’t do it the same way you do. I’m not a soldier, but if there’s anything I can do for him, I want to be there to do it. I know you need to be ready day or night. I know whatever happens could take minutes or it could take days. Whatever it takes, even if it means… I guess that was the shortest library career in history.”

“Yeh’d give that up for the Durins? For Thorin?”

“What good would it do me if you and Balin and Thorin and everyone else is gone? If everything goes to Mordor?”

“Yeh’re already in, aren’t yeh,” said Dwalin and he sighed. “Mahal’s blessed balls. Look, don’t worry abou’ Brur. Yeh know he’s in this, too. If it comes to it, we’ll send him a note t’ say yer absent on account’ ye’ve ‘official business’. If Brur’s angry with any it’ll be me an’ Thorin an’ it sure won’t be th’ first time.”

Ori nodded then impulsively pushed forward and wrapped himself around Dwalin. Dwalin folded him into his arms and kissed the top of his head. They stood that way for a few moments. Then Ori looked up.

“What exciting lives we live, husband.”

Dwalin roared with laughter

“Aye, love, an’ wha’ a gift f’r understatement yeh’ve got. C’mon, we best get back b’fore Thorin finds a way t’ hang himself with out anyone noticing.”

It was only when they returned to the breakfast room that Ori realized he’d forgotten something important.
Dori was there and by the look on the eldest Ri brother’s face it was obvious he hadn’t expected Ori to be as well.

Ori stepped between Dwalin and the angry Dori as he’d so often stepped between Nori and Dori, because of all the dwarrow in Arda, Ori was the one Dori could never hurt.

Balin, wisely Ori thought, had not moved to become involved.

“Dori,” said Ori, “we’ll talk about this later.”

Dori turned his glare from Dwalin to look at Ori and froze.

Ori had been practicing his ‘Dori Has Spoken’ imitation for decades. Judging by the look on Dori’s face, he had finally gotten it right.

They held this gaze for what seemed like an hour before Dori said emphatically, “We will talk about this later.”

Ori took this as the sum total of Dori’s surrender.

They had work to do.

Ori felt the atmosphere of the room seemed far more serious than before. Even Fili and Kili sat at the table, looking unusually grim.

Thorin said, “Bofur, you have something we need to discuss?”

“Aye. Tell the truth now. Is your Udad Thror mad?”

Instead of leaping across the table for Bofur’s throat, Nori would have done it. Mahal at the forge, Bofur himself would have done it. Ori thought, Thorin answered the question with another question.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because if he’s not, then he’s a tyrant and, to dwarrow, that’s a whole lot worse.”

It was, Ori knew. The mad were sick and sickness happened, just like breaking an arm or leg happened. A mad dwarf was locked away, but given every comfort no matter their station.

If Thror was mad it was pitiable, but not punishable.

Tyrants were overthrown and executed out of hand, generally tossed to the mob.

In the end, though, among dwarrow the same consequences applied. The old king’s line was weakened, easily toppled by a stronger rival house, and at best dwarven society was thrown into chaos. If the style of the incoming monarch was to quell the chaos with violence, the chaos could spread to engulf other dwarf states and leave the dwarrow open to conquest by men or elves or even orcs.

It was the greatest weakness of their society, as far as Ori was concerned, to leave the security of the entire race in the hands of one dwarf. Historically speaking, the Longbeards, the people of Durin, had flirted with disaster from the day they stepped from the stone.

“You are suggesting that Thror is unfit to rule?” Thorin asked evenly. “That the descendent of Durin himself is not fit to rule?”
“The way things are going? I’d say no, he’s not. In which case, he oughter be removed for his own good as well as ours.”

“You realize this is treason?”

“Someone has to say it,” said Bofur with deceptive cheer. “Better to execute a miner or two than us all bleed out slowly, ain’t it? From what I seen, plenty of folk’re already pretty much bleeding out as it is. Or wishing they were. Or they’d do it themselves if they had a choice.”

"The true treason," Bombur said in his quiet voice. "Is the treason being committed by Thror. The way he is taking the life, taking food out of the mouths of other children of Durin, is treason against the laws of Durin the Deathless. Those were given to him by Mahal. Thror is no longer following the ways of Mahal. To me, this is treason."

“I said it was treason,” Thorin replied. “I didn’t say I disagreed with you.”

It seemed to be the best answer Bofur was going to get and he knew it. So he changed the subject.

“As it stands, if you wanted to become king right now, the miners of Erebor will support you… to point. But if you’re to be king, you’d best be ready to right some terrible wrongs the minute that crown hits yer head.”

“Tell me.”

“Been in the mines lately?” Bofur asked. It seemed almost conversational. “I don’t mean the royal mines. Yer brother has charge of ‘em and he’s a git but he don’t mess where he eats. And he knows you an’ Dwalin and the lot’ve you are down there tolerably often. I’m talkin’ the private mines, the ones held by Thror’s cronies, the ones not controlled by the guild.

“Go have a look, yer highness. I think you’ll fin it ed-oo-cashnul. Specially as that’s now the work done by half the dwarrow who live down in Dale. Even the master owns a mine.”

Thorin blinked.

“It’s illegal for anyone who isn’t a dwarf to own a mine in Erebor.”

“Oh, it ain’t obvious,” put in Jani. “He’s what ye call a silent partner, and I expect he’ll soon have bigger problems than lode yields, courtesy of yerself.”

“If the mines are tainted Erebor will collapse around them,” said Thorin.

“Best get busy with the shorin’ timbers then,” said Bofur.

“Where do you suggest I start?”

Bofur sat back, considering.

“Yeh plan on movin’ on this now?”

“Yes. As soon as possible. If I’m going to rush down there to find rot I don’t want anyone to have time to cover it up.”

“Best start with Lord Vors’ zinc mine then.”

Gloin spoke up.
“Vors owns a zinc mine? I have no records for that.”

“Yeh won’t. That’s the one the master owns. I worked it meself last week without me guild badge – heh, even without me hat – just to see. Every miner down there lives in Dale, has for the past six-month.”

“I also have all the numbers of dwarrow who go down the mines every day,” said Gloin. “They’ve steadily risen for years, but no sudden increases by a few hundred miners.”

“You can’t count these,” said Bofur. “They don’t come through Erebor. They come through the tunnel adit under the warehouse in Dale.”

Dwalin jumped up, enraged.

“They come through a wha’?”

He and Thorin exchanged looks of horror.

“You knew,” Thorin accused Bofur. “You knew what Rutile will find in Dale.”

“Couldn’t expect you to just take my word for it,” said Bofur with a shrug. “I ain’t official.”

“Bofur,” said Thorin, not quite calm, “you’re telling me there is an unguarded tunnel that leads from Dale, right under the heart of this mountain. Whether you think I believed you or not is immaterial.”

“Oh, aye, but it is guarded, y’see,” said Bofur, “by the master’s thugs. Not like they hang around outside or anythin’, but they keep our miner folk quiet and in line. Y’don’t want to be the one to rat ’em out.”

“But you are doing so,” said Thorin.

“Like I said, better one miner than the rest all bleedin’ out.”

“And all that zinc,” said Gloin asked. “Erebor is supplying zinc to Mordor.

Balin groaned.

“No wonder those wagons t’ Mordor were so dashed heavy.”

Slowly Dwalin sunk back into his chair, muscles tight.

Ori put a hand over his on the table and carefully rubbed over his fingers, attempting to soothe his husband without crowding him. Dwalin let out a pent up breath, and with it some of the tension bled from his shoulders. He turned his hand under Ori’s and held it.

“I don’t understand,” said Ori. “Why does Mordor need zinc? What is it for?”

Jani said, “Zinc’s used to stabilize iron, turn it into steel. Right now the orcs have shite weapons of pure iron, brittle, easily forged but just as easily broken. Better steel means orcs with better weapons.”

Ori sucked in a horrified breath as his brain glibly remarked Really, what was next? Forging better orcs?

Thorin said, “Then this is where we start, with the worst of it. This is the worst? You’re not
holding back anything, Bofur, Jani? Once I’ve tipped my hand the others will have time to protect
themselves.”

“Vors is the worst I know,” said Bofur.

Bifur, who had not spoken before, did so now, his deep voice rolling in the poetic, ancient
Khuzdul.

“If I may? Thorin, thou will needs have to make an example of the Lord Vors, with or without
the king’s sanction. Unfortunately, thou be at a crosstunnel. If thou do naught and find thyself
king, thou shalt be complicit in this unholiness. If thou act, thou wilt bring down the wrath of King
Thror, or at least they who would call Frerin his heir.”

“You’ve forced my hand,” said Thorin.

“Indeed, we have. I’m sorry, mine friend. And I do remain thy friend, no matter the cost. I, and
many others who fought with thee at Dimrill Dale, will stand with thee now, in this, which shalt be
the beginning of thy mighty rule of honor among dwarrow. Thy support there hast never wavered.”

“Nor has that of the merchants,” said Bombur. “Princess Dis has been tireless in finding us new
trading partners. Our markets are the most diverse in Arda, and our trade routes the safest and best
patrolled.”

“Yes,” said Thorin, “all the while I’ve been protecting the dwarrow abroad I’ve been letting the
ground collapse under my feet. I’ve done a proper job of it.”

The Urs exchanged looks but said no more, the room grew quiet. They all turned to Thorin. Ori
thought he could hear the thoughts reforming in Thorin’s head.

Garnet and Sapphire all but blew in the open doors. Sapphire once more carrying the
handkerchief. The material was bowing out as though a tiny but mighty struggle was going on
inside. Ori quickly laid several pieces of paper next to the one sheet Dis had laid out and poured ink
into a saucer. Rutile leapt free and dropped to the table. Every hair on the spider twitched with
obvious agitation.

“Rutile…?” Dis gasped.

Rutile flung herself onto the paper thrusting four of her legs into the ink. Ori watched as runes
appears. Each leg made a stroke and Rutile turned as she made the mark. She appeared to dance,
spinning across the paper at high speed.

“Blessed silks of all! That utter inedible dirty fly!! His acts towards little hairy half-legged
spiderlings just tears my web! May his dinner always break loose and get away!!”

There were gasps all around as Dis read out the message.

“What spiderlings? Does she mean badgers?” Thorin asked, horrified.

“Yes,” Dis returned as shocked as her brother.

“Hairy half-legged adults and spiderlings in that deep hole. No paths, oozing water!
Smelly! Not good for any to find dinner in! Dig! Scrape! Dig! Scrape! Adults and
spiderlings! Not getting fat at all. Never stopping! Nasty adult shouting, No rest! Nasty adult
with long leather snake hitting them!”
There was a sharp grinding as Thorin leapt out of his chair and began to pace the room, then, abruptly, the piercing blue eyes looked straight into Ori’s.

“Ori, I need a favor.”

“Of course, Thorin.”

“I need you to come with me into the mine. I’ll need a scribe.”

Ori swallowed, aware of the enormity of the responsibility.

“You don’t want to take a royal scribe with you?”

“Royal scribes report everything I do and say to the king,” said Thorin. “I need someone I can trust.”

Gloin said, “You’ll want Vors’ mine records, he owns several, though I suspect Calmar has all the real and useful information.”

Thorin nodded. “Dwalin, put together enough units to take the building in Dale, and also everything, every paper, every rug, every lamp from Vors’ home and office, but hold back awaiting my signal. I don’t want Vors to be able to say he knew nothing, even if he can say Calmar forced this on him.”

“And Vors himself?” Dwalin asked.

“Pick him up now, quick and clean. Put him in solitary in the common lock up in Erebor. No one talks to him, not his family, not other nobles, no one but me.”

Dwalin made a smirk of disgust.

“As a nobleman he’ll have the right to plead his case before the king.”

“He’ll get it, just not right away.”

Thorin turned to Bofur.

“I hope for your sake you’re right about all this, Bofur. If you aren’t, you’ve just toppled the House of Durin.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode! Well, we're off, running, and completely over the deep end! Hope you all enjoy it and come back to join us for more next Friday! Thanks, friends, and keep those cards and letters coming!

Thorin sat, thinking a moment. Gloin muttered an excuse and went out, taking Gridr with him. The Urs looked at each other, remaining quiet while the Crown prince considered.

“I need to make an ostensible inspection of the mines. It hasn’t been done in decades. One of the duties my grandfather has neglected and I wasn’t even aware of it until Bofur mentioned it. This can be the official reason should any question be raised.” Thorin’s gaze fixed upon Ori. “You’re sure you want to go with me? Remember, it’s up to you, Ori. As I said, this is a favor. I can’t just order someone into the mines.”

To Ori it was obvious Thorin could do just that, but Thorin didn’t do things that way. Ori really could refuse if he didn’t want to do it.

“I’m sure, Thorin.”

“Thank you, Ori.”

Ori went to prepare and Thorin left the room as well. Dwalin followed Ori back to the small room where Ori’s old clothes still sat. Dwalin pulled from the trunk again to place a stout leader jerkin over Ori’s shirt and strapped on some leather elbow braces and vambrances. Ori also added some woolen breeches over his own and Dwalin made sure his knees and shins were also protected before Ori put on his oldest cardigan.

Ori reflected that although it was meant to be a rest day, the mines never stopped. There were always miners who longed to be in the depths. The mines were the place they felt complete. It was those forced to mine just to eat the Durins worried over, and so it must be today that Thorin went to Vors’ zinc mine.

Dwalin gave him a quick kiss and went off to complete his various tasks.

Ori found Dori sitting alone in the kitchen over a cup of tea. Even though Ori felt nervous and keyed up it cheered him to see how Dori was so immediately at home here, how quickly this kitchen was becoming Dori’s kitchen. Dori poured a second cup with milk and honey and pushed it toward the seat next to his. Ori sat and sipped. They drank in silence.

Finally Dori said, “There was a time, not so long ago, that I could say I forbade this and you would simply obey.”

“You did what you thought best, Dori, but now I have an obligation to my husband’s family.”

“You’re far too young, Ori, you only have a husband because our Nori is such a rat.”

Ori’s face must have shown some of the hurt he felt.

Dori sighed, his shoulders rounding.

“I’m sorry, pet. I shouldn’t have said that. Not the thing about your husband, anyway. We all
know Nori is a rat.”
   “But he’s our rat,” Ori concluded.

   “If only Dwalin had the opportunity to court you properly. It might have given you time to grow
   into yourself a little more. You’ve always been so impressionable. Dwalin is a very domineering
dwarf, he could easily manipulate you even with the best intentions.”
   Ori thought about pots calling kettles black, but let it pass.
   Dori muttered something about “too many Shire novels”

Now Ori huffed in frustration.
   “I may be young, and I may read tunic-rippers for fun, but I’m not some opal-eyed romantic
   idiot. He didn’t seduce me. We’ve barely had time to kiss.”
   Dori reared back, fire in his eyes.
   “He leaves you alone every night?”
   “Calm down, Dori. It’s not like he’s down at the pub. He’s busy. Mahal’s blessed forge, I’ve
   been busy. When I imagined married life, it never include worry over the fate of Erebor.”
   “The Durins do run amok,” said Dori, setting back into his seat. “You know other noble families
   aren’t like this, don’t you?”
   “Or so Balin claims?” Ori teased.
   “Or so he claims. It’s not as though I’ve taken tea with the queen of Gondor recently. If Thorin
   has his way I may do so, sooner rather than later.”
   “You’d love it,” said Ori slyly. “You’d wear a plum velvet tunic with jeweled gilt lace at the
   cuffs and terrify them all.”
   Dori’s whole face lit in an evil smile and it set Ori off giggling. Dori laughed softly. He reached
   and smoothed Ori’s hair.
   “If only it were all like that, pet.”
   Balin bustled in. He kissed Dori soundly and turned to Ori.
   “Here, wee brother. I’ve got somethin’ that’ll come in handy in th’ mines.”
   It turned out to be a wooden desk contraption worn around the waist and easily closed in tight
   spaces, all without spilling a drop of ink. There were compartments fitted with lids for more ink, his
   penknife and spare nibs.
   “This is beautiful, Balin, but my night vision will only carry me so far. How do I see to write?”
   “Turn th’ lids of the nib an’ pen compartment all th’ way over.”
   Each was backed with the thinnest veneer of phosphorescent stone and settled perfectly into place
   upside down.
   “Oh, that’s clever,” said Ori. “Where did this come from?”
   “One of Gridr’s trinkets. She’s got quite th’ collection. Yeh can give it back when you go visit
   Gloin.”

   Ori gathered his courage and his equipment and went in search of Thorin’s study.
   Nothing in it or about it surprised the scribe.
   It was a large, square room, almost entirely blue granite, with a few old rugs on the floor and
   tapestries on the walls for insulation. Overflowing bookshelves backed the desk to the left. An
   ornate hearth dominated the wall to the right. The room itself was filled with well-worn furniture,
   and heavily decorated with ancient implements of mayhem, both real and... imaginary.
   Ori tipped his head.
   “Is that a wooden sword?”
   “That was Fili’s,” said Thorin at the desk, scratching his signature on some orders. “His shield is
   around here somewhere as well, probably under the couch. That’s where he hid all his important
   possessions. I think his toy raven is still under there too.”
   Ori imagined Fili and Kili as badgers, leaping around this room, dueling and shrieking and
knocking over piles of documents while their Idad Thorin tried to work at his desk.

“I got most of my work done after they wore themselves out,” said Thorin, as if reading his mind. “They would nap on that couch just like I used to.”

“This was your father’s office,” Ori guessed.

“It’s where I feel closest to him. I find myself wondering what he would have done with this situation. Now I won’t know until I get to the Halls.”

“I never thought much about the Halls,” said Ori. “I supposed it’s different when you’ll have someone there to meet you.”

“You will have,” said Thorin, “but we’ll try to keep that for many years in the future. Right now, we’re meeting Bofur at the warehouse. He’ll bring us down into the mine itself and hopefully keep us from falling into an open mine shaft.”

Ori swallowed.

“There’s an open mind shaft? No rail?”

“There are at least six open mine shafts. The floors of two have fallen so they’re considered bottomless.”

“How jolly,” said Ori dryly.

“When we get back to the surface a guard will be there to bring you to Gloin’s house. Whatever you’ve written down, give it all to Gloin. Don’t keep any of it.

“I won’t, Thorin.”

Thorin regarded him with a small grin.

“You’re so calm.”

Ori laughed.

“Ask poor Dwalin how calm I am. He’s there when I’m not calm. I’m sure he’s told you.”

“He’s told me when you’ve been very upset, but no details, Ori. Those are between you and Dwalin. Given how you came into this family, you’re entitled to be upset every now and then.”

“Do you get really upset?”

“Lately the top of my head blows off at least once a day, but very few people have ever seen it. The crown prince has to have his royal upsets in private. It’s a good thing Dwalin has such broad shoulders.”

They rode unrecognized, or at least with discretion, hooded against a sudden fine spring rain. Their escort – Furh’k and another warrior named Targ – rode a little ways behind them, but in ready enough reach.

Honda seemed to enjoy the outing despite the weather. She’d been chosen in part for her easy, placid nature, and Ori was grateful. This was not the time or place to come blazing in on a war stallion, axes whirling overhead.

Draped in an old oilskin cloak of Fili’s, he didn’t feel terribly heroic.

Thorin wore a plain blue tunic over black leggings and boots, his clothes of excellent quality but unadorned, and he had removed his jewelry, even the rings from his fingers. He wore his hair in a long queue with a single smaller braid wrapped around it and capped with the family bead that marked him as both Clan Longbeard and of the line of Durin. Identical to Dwalin’s, the bead was mithril, engraved and without gems, but there was no need to make it any fancier. This was the one bead Thorin would not remove, Ori knew.

Except when bathing, for fear of losing it down the drain, Ori recalled with an inner smirk.

Idly he wondered if Dori would have one, if Balin would give him one, or even if he already had. Dori’s hair was complicated. The beads were decorated with glass, not gems, but it was all so shiny it was hard to rest the eye on any one of them.

Ori knew that Thorin was humbling himself by taking off his jewels and beads, but if he was looking to be approachable, he had failed. Unadorned he looked fiercer than ever, as if the customary noble details had simply softened and blunted the sharp edges of a trained dwarf warrior.

He wasn’t a solid wall of muscle, like Dwalin, but his broad shoulders dominated his rawboned
frame. With his height he seemed to loom in from above.
Nori would have said, “Now that ain’t half intimidatin’.”
The prince wore a simple dagger at his belt, under a black coat, but otherwise went unarmed.
Ori, along with his trusty slingshot, carried a knife in his boot, which Nori had long ago forced
into his hand and taught him to use, but right now it was more of a security blanket. He was not a
trained dwarf warrior. He hoped it wouldn’t come to a fight with anyone. He needed space to use
the slingshot with any accuracy.
They dismounted and paused under a porch overhang at the side of a pub where Ori thought he
had been sick a time or two, and waited for Dwalin’s signal.
Around them the city sat eerily quiet, except for the plash of rain as it drained from the roofs into
barrels. The quiet unnerved him. He grew up in this city and it was almost never like this. Unless
there was a howling blizzard there was always a todo.
Dwalin gave them the all clear and they entered a big, weatherbeaten warehouse like a dozen
others around it. Ori saw a small smear of blood on a bin and some scuffing across the dirt, the only
signs of struggle. Bofur was there, but all the other dwarrows in the building wore the uniforms of the
city patrol.
Ori looked his husband up and down for possible injuries, relieved to see him unhurt. Ori would
have liked to hug him.
Dwalin gave him a wide grin and a saucy wink.
“The mine bosses from this shift’ve been ‘detained’,” he said. “Yeh shouldn’t run inta tha’ kinda
trouble.”
“Does the mine go all the way back to Erebor?” Thorin asked.
“Aye,” said Dwalin sourly. “We grabbed all Calmar’s men before they could leave th’
warehouse. The ones still in the mine nearly got away. Turns out they have an escape hatch and a
lift into the mountain.”
Ori thought he could hear Thorin grind his teeth.
“Where does the lift leave them?” Thorin asked.
Bofur snorted.
“An old side tunnel at the central textiles market. Not by accident neither. Twenty orcs, kick-
dancing in their skivvies, could probably go unnoticed there, never mind a coupla men coming out of
a crack in a back wall.”
Ori tried very hard not to imaging orcs in skivvies. Sadly, he failed.
“They won’t care about a few men passing through,” Ori said, “but a few dozen dirt covered
miners?”
“Mebbe if the miners promise not to handle the velvets?”
Thorin, wisely, didn’t touch that comment.
“This will work out better than what we’d planned,” he said, “It’s safer to evacuate the miners
directly into the mountain than try to smuggled them through the streets. Dwalin, send a raven, warn
the unit on patrol in the market that we’re coming through.”
“Aye, I’m on it.”
“The ponies?” Ori asked. “If we won’t be coming back.”
“Someone’ll take ‘em back t’ th’ stables, love,” Dwalin assured him.
Thorin turned to Bofur.
“Were any of the miners hurt when the soldiers raided the mine?”
“Naw,” said Bofur. “They’re used to scuffles breakin’ out ’tween the master’s men. They just went along with their business. Still doing it now.”
“They’re still working?” Thorin asked, eyebrows high.
“They’re afraid to stop,” said Bofur. “The mine bosses’re gone, but the Master’ll just send more.”
“If he does it won’t do him any good,” said Thorin. “This mine is now forfeit to the crown.”

As they descended in a rickety lift that seemed cobbled together from old fish barrels, Ori remembered what Bofur told him about mines.
“They’re supposed t’ be our birthright as dwarrow, but, y’know, there’s some who just can’t do it, can’t go down in the mines without thinkin’ th’ whole mountain’s gonna crush ’em. Only, they don’t know it ’til the lift opens an’ they go t’ step out an’ they freeze. Just like statues. No way around that. Only thing left t’ do is ship ’em back up topside.”
“That must be really embarrassing.”
“Oh, they’re teased a little by their mates down th’ pub, but there’s naught anybody can do about it. Just the way they’re made.”

Ori had been to the forges with Dwalin, but he had never been in a working mine and the fear of freezing up when he was needed was, ironically, the thing that nearly paralyzed him.

At the bottom they stepped out into a large anteroom carved from the stone, lit with bare phosphorescent lanterns, and not many of them. In the gloom ragged dwarrow and a few men sorted raw ore into bins.
Bofur stepped forward and one of the dwarrow saw him and waved absently before bending back to his task – then whipped his head back up to gawp at the cloaked figures behind Bofur and the uniformed soldiers who flanked them.

No one else stopped working, their hands sorting ceaselessly, but Ori could see they stared at the newcomers from under lashes and fringes of hair.
Bofur approached the dwarf who had hailed him and they spoke in low, urgent voices. The grizzled worker wore a braid that gave his original craft as brewer of ale and mead. He looked over Bofur's shoulder at the prince with fear in his eyes and bowed his head.
Thorin returned his bow.
Bofur drew the dwarf forward.
“This is Tin, son of Tanis. He’ll take us through.”
Thorin raised his voice just enough that everyone in the room could hear him.
“Thorin, son of Thrain, at your service, Master Tin. It’s very kind of you to do this.”
“Eh… erm… are we under arrest, yer highness?”
“No, you haven’t done anything wrong. These soldiers and the ones above in the warehouse are here to protect you.”
“Above us?” Tin looked up as if he could see through a mile of stone before he turned back to Thorin. “Where are the mine bosses?”
“In the lockup in Erebor.”
“I see,” said Tin. “And, um, when’re they gettin’ out?”
“They’re not.”
“And the rest of ’em?”
“Will be dealt with, but you won’t see them again either.”

Now the mine workers looked at one another openly, shaking their heads, as if they couldn't understand what this strange, delusional dwarf was saying. Ori could hear them thinking: Poor sod thinks he’s the prince if Erebor.

Later Ori was glad he'd written down his impressions as well as recorded what happened. He could only recall the mine itself as a string of nightmarish sights, sounds, and smells. It was dark, but unlike men dwarrow didn't need much light. It stank, and not just of stale air and exposed minerals. The uneven stones beneath them, flat only in the tracks of the mine cart, tripped him up every other
“Water on the floor,” Thorin muttered. “Most of it's been stagnant but here it's running and fast. There’s a bad seep someplace.”

Ori shuddered. Water was dangerous. It cracked and broke rock like the heaviest hammer, then it rolled through and filled tunnels and drowned miners.

Dwarrow could breathe mine gasses, even coal dust, and absorb it all happily, but they couldn’t breathe water.

“The walls are compromised too,” Thorin said.

Ori felt it, the strain on the shoring timbers, far too few and flimsy. Sweat ran down his back in rivulets as he looked around, increasingly wide-eyed.

He reminded himself like a chant: I am a dwarf. I belong here.

If he wasn’t convinced, at least it burned some nervous energy.

They saw dwarrow all along the path, thin, ragged figures moving frantically, if not carefully. Most never even looked up as the party passed. If anything the sound of approaching footsteps made them busier.

The first large knot of miners they ran into was pulling a full ore cart by dint of sweat toward the sorting room.

Ori knew next to nothing about how mines worked, but he knew carts were traditionally hauled by stout ponies, bred especially for that work. Nowadays dwarf mines had mechanical systems that ran on pulleys run remotely by steam. Dwarrow did not pull mine carts.

Master Tin halted them.

"Alright lads. Time to knock off."

They looked up at him in amazement and kept moving.

"Yeh lost yer mind, Tin?" asked the dwarf at the lead.

"Years ago, Jat, as yer so fond've tellin' me, but it don't change that it's time to go."

"Go where? Next shift hasn’t come."

"They ain't comin'," said Tin.

Silently, ominously, everyone in earshot stopped and turned to look at them, expressions bleak.

The cart came to a screeching stop.

"They didn't all get taken away in the wagons?" Jat asked in a low, desperate whisper.

Ori frowned. Did these dwarrow not know the slave carts had been halted?

"No," said Tin, “they ain't been taken away, but they ain't comin' back and we can't be here neither."

"Why not?" Jat demanded. He seemed to notice Thorin and the soldiers for the first time and looked them up and down, with a shiver.

"The mine's been closed," said Master Tin. "Fer, um, repairs."

"Repairs? Repair what?" someone out in the darkness asked. “Where would yeh bloody start?”

He was shushed viciously. The tension in the air only tightened another notch.

“Never mind repairs. Where will we go?” Jat demanded, his voice cracking. "If we can't work, we’ll starve."

Someone started crying in long, exhausted jags.

“You will not starve,” said Thorin, finally. "You’ll be paid while repairs are made."

The voice in the dark snorted in disgust.

“Who’ll pay us for no’ workin’? No one!”

“The crown prince of Erebor will pay you.”

“Oh aye? D’yeh know ’im?”

Low, bitter laughter swept the miners.

“That would be me,” said Thorin.

The laughter stopped.

“He serious?” a young dwarf asked. “The prince of bloody Erebor? In this mine?”
Ori’s head shot up. He wasn’t sure if he was allowed to speak, but he felt compelled.
“Lor, son of Tor, is that you?” he asked.
“An’ who wants t’ know?”
“Ori of the Brothers Ri, you dip.”
A young miner rounded the edge of the cart and peered at him.
“Mahal’s hairy hind end! It’s Scribe Ori from Steam Alley, right enough.”

Abruptly, oddly, the tension was broken, as if Ori’s presence meant there couldn’t possibly be any danger. If this was the case, Ori, thought, the miners were the victims of disorganized thinking. They surged forward suddenly and a babble of voices boiled over:

"Ori, Dori’s brother?"

"Oi! Ori! How’s tricks?"
"Can’t be him. I heard he went and worked in Gondor."
"Naw, I seen the king come and marry ’im off t’ that great lummox of a dwarf who runs the city guard."
"Wait, Ori, son o’ Rikhma? His brother Nori owes me twenny silver coins, th’ rat."

Finally Lor got another word in edgewise.
"What’s this really about, Ori?” he asked. "The master payin’ this joker t’ trick us?"
"No, he really is the crown prince of Erebor."
"Where’s ’is crown?"
Ori rolled his eyes.
"He’s not going to wear it in a mine any more than you’d wear your mam’s knickers."
Someone gave a saucy whistle and the miners snickered.
A female voice shot out, "Here, yeh leave me underpinnin's outa this!"
"So, yeh say he’s good to ’is word?" Lor asked.
"Yes, he is," said Ori, startled into realizing that he had blithely assured Lor after having known Thorin all of a week. Of course, Ori had also known his own husband all of a week. A tiny part of him wondered how he could trust so easily after a lifetime of distrust as self-defense. "Besides that, prince or not, it’s rude to talk about him like he’s not standing right there. If you did it to me I’d thrash you flat. You know I can."
Lor sniffed.
"Yeh got lucky th’ one time."
Jat rolled his eyes.
"Aw, shuddup Lor. He flattened yeh fair an’ square."
Lor subsided and just as well. Ori thought. He and Lor had been going round and round about that fight since they were badgers.

Once the miners recognized Ori it was easy to get them to agree to go up the lift, but they weren’t going without him, as if he were the security knife in their boot. They insisted on traveling with the prince’s party in an ever-increasing parade.

Ori shrugged to Thorin apologetically. As they moved deeper into newer parts of the excavation the roof pitched dramatically lower, and in a side mine where Tin led Thorin’s party, it was barely shoulder height and they had to stoop, the water rising around their ankles. The light was almost non-existent and Ori used the panels in his kit as much to see where he was going as to see to write. He heard the ring of handpicks and mattocks ahead in the darkness, but by the time they approached the worksite the roof had dipped to waist height. If they continued they’d be crawling through the water on their hands and knees.

Thorin called a halt.
“What are they doing in there?” Thorin asked Bofur. “They can’t even stand up. Shouldn’t the rest of the wall been carved out as they pursued this vein?”
“Bosses didn’t want to waste time,” said Bofur. “Instead o’ digging it all out they just jammed some supports in and called it good.”
“No full grown dwarf could move under there, never mind work.”
“No full grown dwarf could,” Bofur agreed.
Ori felt sick.
He watched comprehension slide over Thorin’s face and the mask of calm slid just a little.
“Mebbe yeh’d like t’meeet ‘em?” Bofur suggested.
“Please.”
“Alright, you lot. Knock off and come out.” He turned to Thorin. “Might want t’ back up a little. Give ’em some room.”
Somehow a dozen tiny miners and their gear had squeezed into that space and when they made their way back toward the main tunnel Ori saw they were badgerlings, not even tweens.
“This here’s Prince Thorin,” said Bofur. “He come t’ meet yeh and see where yeh work.”
“Are you really Prince Thorin?” one of them asked, eyes wide. From the voice Ori could tell it was a young dam.
“At your service,” said Thorin, and he bowed as well as he could in the cramped space. “And what is your name?”
The badgerling swallowed, but she quickly found her feet and introduced herself.
“Caris, daughter of Nadaris, at your service and your family’s, Prince Thorin.”
“Are these your siblings?” Thorin asked.
“Some of ‘em are.”
Obviously the ringleader and the boldest, she introduced each one of them properly by their name and a parent’s name. Ori wrote everything down.
“Here, Caris, who’re you talkin’ to?”
A great strapping dam struggled down the passage, visibly alarmed. Bofur caught her up and whatever he told her made the dam’s eyes enormous in her dirt-caked face.
“No!” she gasped. “What would he want with us?”
“What do you want with us, Prince Thorin?” Caris asked.
Thorin said honestly and directly, “I want to take you all out of here.”
“To do what?” Nadaris demanded. “If we leave now we’ll lose our jobs. It ain’t like they’re thick on the ground. We ain’t Erebor dwarrow.”
“But you are,” said Thorin. “For a long time a lot of very powerful people pretended you weren’t until everyone, including you, believed it. Truly, no matter where you are from, you don’t belong here in this mine. It’s a disaster in the making. But you all specifically, you deserve better. Caris, you and your siblings belong in school. Your parents deserve work that earns them enough that you can go to school and no one goes hungry.”
Nadaris snorted. “Well, that’s a nice fairy tale.”
“It’s not a fairy tale. It’s the way the dwarrow under the mountain live. It’s their birthright as dwarrow. It’s yours as well.”
Nadaris didn’t look convinced.
"You Durins abandoned the dwarrow in Dale," said Nadaris. "Now you say you want to fix this?"
"I will fix this, or I will offer you something better. I give my word."
"What does your word mean to us?" she demanded.
Thorin looked down. Ori watched every emotion cross his face, from shame to despair to resolve, his royal mask not serving him well. When he looked up again, it was directly at Caris. He unwrapped the smaller of his braids from the larger, took his dagger and cut it off, bead and all, and offered it to the dwarfling.
"We are dwarrow," he said. "When words mean nothing, this still means everything."
Caris took it, open-mouthed, before regaining her composure with admirable speed.
Even as the other dwarrow burst into exclamations of shock and urgent whispering, Caris fixed him with a look far older than her years.
"We'll hold you t' this, yeh know, Prince Thorin."
"I expect you to, Caris. If I fail you, with that bead you can demand my life."
She opened her mouth again, and closed it, looking to her amad.
Ori slid his gaze over to Nadaris, even as he wrote faster than he ever had in his life. His heart pumped at a painful speed, all fear of the mine forgotten.
Nadaris lifted her chin, assent, if not quite agreement.
Caris tucked the braid into her tunic.
"I guess we'll see then," said the dwarfling and offered her hand to Thorin.
They clasped wrists in the universal dwarf symbol of 'deal made'.
"Now, we all need to leave," said Thorin. "You know far better than I that this is no place for the living."
Caris asked, "So where do we go?"
"We can't go home," said Nadaris, "and wait for the mine bosses to pick us off in our beds."
"For now, you aren't going home," said Thorin. "There's a back way into the mountain and we're taking it. Plans are already in motion to round up those responsible for this mine. You have someplace safe to stay until then."
Tin groaned.
"I have a dam and my son's dwarflings still at home. What of our kin still in town?"
"Furh'nk," Thorin signalled.
The young guardsmen came forward.
"Master Tin, you know Master Furh'nk?"
"Aye, grew up with his udad. Yeh've grown tall an' broad, Master Furh’nk. Mahal’s blessed yeh."
"Thank yeh, Master Tin."
"Ori," Thorin called, "take down the information on the families still topside. Furh’nk, organize a unit to get them to safety."
"But, where are we going?" Caris repeated.
"The miners' commons," said Thorin.
Nadaris shook her head.
"Those are for guild miners. Dwarrow who live in Erebor."
"That's not true," said Thorin. Ori saw the tightness in his jaw, the frustration building. "They're for any miner who needs them. Garnet?"
The bird swooped down to land on Thorin's outstretched arm. Ori realized she must have been with them the entire time, waiting.
Thorin and Garnet had a brief, clicking, scraping conversation in the language of the Erebor ravens, then Garnet flew away, disappearing back into the darkness, although Ori didn't know how she saw where she was flying.
Ori noted angrily that the lift to the tunnel behind the market was much smaller, but much safer.. They could only go two and three at once and the rest had to wait, but in that time Thorin stood and talked to the miners who waited. Or, the miners talked and Thorin listened.
Bofur leaned on Ori's shoulder and chuckled.
"That's miners for yeh. Never say a bloody word, then when they do start talkin' they never shut up."
"Bofur, what are the miners' commons?"
"Safe place to rest, wash, get somethin' t' eat. Erebor's got seven in all, the main commons and six smaller ones supplied off've it. Guild dues pay for some of it, but mostly it's the mine owners' get, and the crown chips in." He lowered his voice to a murmur, expression grim once more. "Or it usedta. Food still comes from the royal kitchens anyway."

When it his turn came Ori stepped in with Bofur. He waited until they were well on their way to turn to the miner.
"You don't know what to think of Thorin, do you. You don't trust him."
Bofur gave him a 'Who? Me?' look, then chuckled self-consciously.
"Not a matter o' trust. Me cousin Bifur's hero pay that bought us the inn? That didn't come outa the royal treasury. That come out of Thorin's pocket. He's got a good heart, aye, but he's in a bad spot, an' no tellin' what a dwarf in a spot like that'll do. Mark me words, Ori lad. Whether his grandad's alive or not Thorin'll be wearin' Thror's crown by Durin's Day."

Ori watched with shameful relief as Bofur and the last of the miners disappear into the main commons dormitory. His hand was cramping and his eyes watered from writing endlessly in poor light, but he had done good work that day, he knew. He wished he could lay down and sleep, but at the same time he couldn't get what he'd seen and heard out of his mind.

He turned to follow Thorin on their borrowed rams to take them back home.

Thorin’s expression had grown distant and hard. He was obviously deep inside himself and it wasn’t a peaceful place.

They returned to the royal quarters in silence, Ori increasingly worried over Thorin’s state. The prince had gone from merely withdrawn, to agitated, to drumming his fingers on his thigh and breathing through his teeth.

An explosion was imminent.

Finally they halted in front of the prince’s house and dismounted. Ori wanted to take his leave, but a jaunty ‘toodles’ wasn’t going to cut it and he was afraid for Thorin – and anyone unfortunate enough to cross his path. Ori screwed up his courage finally and asked,

“Thorin, are you so angry you can’t speak right now?”

The prince nodded.

“Would you like to be left alone?”

Another nod.

“Are you going to throw things, brood over a past you can’t change and refuse to eat or sleep?”

Thorin stared at him, startled.

“Just a guess,” Ori said dryly. “I’m not going to tell you not to blame yourself because you’ll blame yourself no matter what. I won’t tell you to get some sleep, because I don’t think I could right now either, but at least eat something while you’re blaming yourself and not sleeping or you’ll be sick and Dwalin will kick your arse.”

Thorin nodded, still a bit shocked.

Ori realized he was standing with his hands on his hips like Dori on a tear and was this far from waving a finger at the crown prince of Erebor as if Thorin were a puppy who had peed on the kitchen floor.

“Alright, then. I have to go. Please take care of yourself?”

Thorin shrugged somewhat helplessly, but at least he looked less homicidal, or maybe that was just Ori’s wishful thinking. He watched Thorin disappear into the house just as Dwalin arrived on Harley.

“Dwalin!”

Finally Ori got that hug he had wanted, and a kiss in the bargain.
Dwalin pulled back a little, and looked down at him with a frown.

“Ori, love. What’s wrong?”
“With me, nothing. I think you need to go and see Thorin.”
Dwalin looked over at the lapis house.
“Upset by things in the mine?”
“I think if King Thrór had been there, Thorin would be under arrest right now.”
“He so mad he can’t talk?”
“Yes.”
Dwalin rubbed his face.
“Mahal’s hairy arse. Have you gone to Gloin with yer notes yet?”
“I’m on my way, but I couldn’t just leave Thorin like that and not tell anyone.”
“Right, I’ll take care of it,” said Dwalin.

“It sounds like you always do,” said Ori as he stole just one more hug. Dwalin rode off.

Ori ran into the Fundin House and dumped the desk on the low stone table in the sitting room then hurried out again to ride his borrowed ram down to meet Gimli, only to find the ram missing. Wondering if it had decided to make its own way home, he ran into the long tunnel leading to the city.

He stopped. All the lanterns that usually lit the way were out. He frowned then turned to go back to the house for a lamp.

A crowd of ravens blocked his way. He began to back away and then looked toward the darkened tunnel.

He was now completely surrounded by ravens.
Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to another episode!
We do assure you we are not in anyway influenced by the late, great Mr. Hitchcock in this chapter!
Hope you are riveted and we look forward to you joining us for more next Friday! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The ravens dove at him. He cried out, covering his head, but instead of falling on him they and wheeled and squawked all around him, forced him to move and drove him forward toward the wall, up against the wall, and through a crevice he had not even seen. It was Ori-sized. A larger dwarf would never have fit.

He tripped on loose debris, fell forward, tried to catch himself. His hand caught a rock, which skittered away and he went sprawling.

Stunned, he lay absolutely still and let his eyes adjust to the gloom and his heart slow from its gallop.

The soft breath of wings sent his shoulders up around his ears, but the noises settled around him in croaks and squeaks.

He knew he was in a side tunnel, the mountain was riddled with them. Some were used as shortcuts, but many others were forgotten as the dwarrow carved the inside of Erebor into ever new dwellings, businesses and offices and quicker, more permanent routes were mapped.

This was an old tunnel, filled with undisturbed debris until he’d so gracelessly slid through it, but the debris was small and probably mixed with raven droppings. He turned his thoughts to the structure of the walls, what the stone itself could tell him. The rock around him did not groan under stress and he doubted the ravens would use the tunnel if they thought it might collapse.

Slowly he stood, reaching with his arms over his head. He couldn’t touch the ceiling. He looked up, carefully shading his eyes in case of falling stone. The remnants of the phosphorescent lamps were only enough to show the roof of the passage disappeared somewhere far above in the gloom.

Wings brushed his head and talons grazed his hair. He might have thought it an accident, but he suspected nothing here had happened without the ravens’ intent. They were urging him forward, down the passage, away from the entrance.

He lost track of time, slowly picking his way down the path, fearing he would tumble down some sink hole or long abandoned mine pit. Dwalin would never find him. No one would.

Finally a lamp far ahead, slightly brighter and yellower than the others, grew into a doorway.

He should have been happy, or at least relieved, but instead anxiety bloomed in his chest and confusing smells assaulted his memory.

Metals of all kinds, gold, silver and steel, but mostly gold.
Dread seized him all at once. He did not want to see where this tunnel led. He might have turned back, but a huge black shape descended before him and cawed.

Slowly he walked toward the light and saw that this wasn’t just any raven. By the mithril message tethers on his legs, Ori saw this was Roäc.

The tunnel ended just beyond, in a shallow walkway running left and right and backed by a crumbling wall. The wall rose to about chest height, and above he saw the carved and decorated ceiling of a vast, torchlit cavern.

Unsure what lurked behind the wall he hunkered down between two broken sections and looked.

The golden light was not just the torches, but fire reflecting off a sea of gold.

He’d been led to the great treasury room of Erebor.

Ori did not like this, not the feel in his gut or the scent on the air. It smelled of gold and cut gems, but also rot, though not the dead-mouse-under-the-floorboards decay. This was the smell of evil.

Coins clinked and slid and a vague, unmusical humming heralded the appearance of King Thror from around the back of a huge, obsidian pillar. The old king waded through gold chains and crowns and other trinkets up to his knees, though he hardly seemed to notice, as if years had been stripped from his limbs. He was counting coins.

Thror piled the shiny discs in columns on the tilted surface of an emerald-covered coffer. When the coins rolled off Thror simply laughed and started counting again. Ori watched this happen five times, six times, seven.

Abruptly Thror froze.

He swept the remaining coins off the coffer, opened it and drew out a cut gem so large he held it in both his hands.

It glittered like an opal, but with the smoke of obsidian underneath the sheen. Black shifted to red, then violet, independent of the torchlight.

It must have been heavy, for the king’s arms soon trembled under the weight and he was forced to close the lid of the coffer with his forearm and place the gem on top. There he caressed it and murmured at it as though it were a child.

A weird glow formed around it, pulsed outward about a foot and back on a heartbeat, then out again a little further and back, and every time it retreated more gold surrounded the coffer. Every time the wave rose in length and height and violence.

The skin on the back of Ori’s neck prickled as the waves of - something - rolled across the room in all directions, including his.

Surely it couldn’t reach the broken wall, he thought, but it did, and it kept coming, leaping, breaking on the stone and spraying a flume of something horrible over the wall, over him.

He gagged on the filth, his eyes streaming, his stomach rebelling.

He didn’t scream but the fear of being swamped again pushed it up his throat.

The wave retreated once more, and a little farther, and a little farther.
He turned back to look. In his wavering sight he watched the king put the evil thing back into its coffer and close the lid with satisfaction, all the while freeing his legs and robe from under the new piles of treasure.

Túrth was talking to someone Ori couldn’t see.

Too far away to hear Túrth clearly, Ori leaned forward, still dizzy, still sick.

Then he leaned a little too far.

He dislodged a chunk of stone.

It fell thirty feet, picked up speed, careened off to the left, bounced off a pillar of rose quartz, knocked over a teetering stack of gem-encrusted bucklers and the chain of falling treasure fell inevitably toward unsuspecting the king.

Rather than engulfing him in a mass it threw forth a ruby-studded goblet that struck Túrth across the back of the head and knocked him face down in the gold.

He lay there unmoving.

Blood roared in Ori’s ears.

Mahal’s hairy arse. He’d killed the king.

He killed the king.

He wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. He wanted-

It was then he finally threw up, right over the edge and into the gold.

The raven at his shoulder cawed uproariously.

Ori turned and fell with his back to the broken wall as the cavern echoed with the harsh scrape of mockery.

Dozens of ravens had exited the tunnel and were laughing - rolling around, beating their wings in the dirt, falling down laughing.

Because Ori killed the king.

A sound, low and deeper than the ravens filtered through to him, then the clink of displaced coins.

Ori turned to peer back into the treasury.

Túrth rolled over in the gold, rubbed the back of his ill-used skull and looked right up at Ori’s hiding place.

“Shut up, you little bastards!” Túrth barked. “That wasn’t funny!”

The ravens disagreed.

Ori had reached the end.

He crawled back toward the tunnel, staggered to his feet and back the way he had come.

Eventually he found his entry point and walked toward home.
As he exited the tunnel he heard a great uproar ahead.

A crowd of dwarrows, many of them soldiers, had gathered in front of Fundin House, and Dwalin stood at the center, barking orders, his face like a storm.

Ori swallowed and slowed.

A dozen horrible possibilities swirled around in his head. The masters’ men had somehow got into the house and kidnapped Dori or even killed him. The king had discovered what Thorin did in the mine and had him dragged away to the dungeons. Frerin had declared himself king and they were all in danger.

He dismissed the second and third choices almost immediately. Unless full scale rebellion was imminent the soldiers wouldn't be here, armed and grim and ready to march.

That left-

Ori rushed forward.

"Dwalin! Dwalin, what's happened to Dori?"

Dwalin's eyes flew open.

"Ori!"

To a dwarf, the soldiers turned and stared at him.

Furh’nk deflated in what looked suspiciously like relief and growled, "Oh, thank blessed frickin' Mahal."

Dwalin was on Ori in three large strides and gathered him up, dirt, blood and feathers, and all. Ori's feet left the ground and he was held agreeably tight, though the thundering beat of Dwalin's heart did nothing to calm Ori's fears.

"Dwalin, what's the matter?"

"Wha's th'- Love, yeh never went to meet Gimli, yer notes were still sittin' on the table in th' sitting' room and yer battle ram was grazin' at Dis' herb boxes. Yeh vanished off th' face o' Arda! The Durins're all over Erebor and Dale lookin' fer yeh!"

Dori appeared in the doorway and reached them without seeming to even open the gate.

"Ori! Put him down, you oliphant. He could be injured!"

"Aw, love, look at yeh!" said Dwalin mournfully. "Tell me the other fella got the worse of it!"

"Uhm... Um, no." Ori buried his face in Dwalin’s front. Feeling Dwalin’s strength and breathing in his scent made the moments of remembered horror leave Ori’s brain for the moment.

“Take me home, Dwalin, please,” he mumbled.

Dwalin turned to shout over his shoulder.

"Gimli!"

Gimli appeared at the door of his father's house, gawped at what he saw, turned and ran back
inside, presumably in search of Oin.

Dwalin scooped Ori up so he looked less like a kitten dangling from a branch and rushed into Fundin House, Dori at his heels berating him in endless, creative ways.

Dwalin carried him into the washroom and set Ori carefully down on a stool.

Ori looked up at Dwalin’s face, it was hardened and grim but his eyes were full of worry as he peeled back the layers of clothing.

“Wha’ hurts, love?”

“Nothing, but kind of everything. I don’t think I broke anything, just stumbled a lot.”

“An’ wha’ happened?”

Ori opened his mouth to reply, but he couldn’t string the words together and Dori jumped in.

“May we wait to make sure he’s unharmed before you interrogate him?”

“If someone’s after him? No.”

“No one’s after me,” said Ori wearily.

“Pet, you look like someone dumped an aerie over your head,” Dori insisted. “How did you get this way?”

“Ravens. I tripped.”


“Dori, please” Ori started, then the door opened again.

Balin came in with Oin, who immediately made sure Ori’s pupils were the same size. He helped Dori and Dwalin clean Ori up, put a nightshirt on him and then nodded approvingly.

“He’s not in acute pain. He’ll bruise like a patchful of crushed blackberries, but he ain’t complainin’ of particular injuries. Heh, give him some of this spirea to chew to cut the ache. Sorry, laddie, it tastes disgusting. Make sure you lot paint any cuts with this salve, give him some water and put him to bed,” said Oin.

Dori went off to let Oin out and get the water.

Dwalin returned to Ori’s knee.

“What else, love?” he urged.

“When we’re alone,” said Ori.

He had no idea who knew the truth about Thror. Some part of him understood he was lying to Dori, which he had never done. At the same time he suspected it wouldn’t be long until everyone knew.

The king was not simply mad, he was playing with something far too dangerous to hide.

Dori returned and made him drink the entire mug of water, chew the spirea root which made him
grimace, and drink more water to get rid of the horrid taste.

“Now, pet, into bed, by yourself,” said Dori, in a tone that brooked no argument.

“Aye,” Dwalin argued. “He’s comin’ with me, so I can watch him.”

Dori demanded. “Where were you when he was injured?”

“Where were you?” Dwalin asked.

“Please, Dori,” said Ori. “You’ve patched me up. Dwalin will take care of the rest.”

Dori opened his mouth, but when Balin put a hand on his arm, he shut it again and went out, muttering about making tea.

Dwalin lifted Ori and took him to what Ori considered to be their bedroom now. He put Ori down on the bed, kicked off his boots and tossed aside his tunic before sitting down and taking Ori into his lap.

Ori finally felt safe and embarrassed himself by starting to cry.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a watery voice. “It’s foolish-”

“Nah, love. Yeh’ve had a bad time. Let yerself get through it.”

“I’m always crying on you,” Ori said, trying vainly to be stalwart.

“‘S why Mahal gave me broad shoulders, love. Jus’ f’r yeh.”

With that, Ori let himself weep for a little, while Dwalin held him close and stroked his hair, murmuring comfortingly.

In a while Ori was able to pull himself together and sit up a little.

“There now,” said Dwalin. “Kin yeh tell me what happened? Last I saw of yeh, was when yeh were about to see about our Gimmers.”

Slowly, Ori told him the whole, shuddering over the part about the king.

Dwalin listened without comment.

“I saw him,” said Ori. “I saw the king in the treasury. I don’t know what that gem - thing in the box was. I suppose one could say it was very pretty, but to me it was horrible. Just evil.”

Dwalin was obviously thinking deeply, then his eyes went to the door.

Ori turned.

Thorin came into the room, closing the door after him. He crossed to the bedside and sat down next to them. He sighed, then reached over and laid his hand on the back of Ori’s neck, pulling the younger dwarf to him, touching their brows together.

“I’m sorry for what happened to you.” he said quietly, then released Ori.

He and Dwalin caught each other’s hands for a moment.

“I’m alright, now,” Ori assured him, feeling almost himself again, except for a lingering fatigue.
“Good.” Thorin looked him over. “Rest. You’ve earned it.”

Thorin rose and left the room.

Dwalin settled Ori beside him. Ori closed his eyes and knew nothing more.

Ori woke up alone, rested though a little sore. He crawled out of the big bed, went to the dresser, looked in the mirror above and shook his head. That bruise on his cheek had bloomed magnificently and the scratch through it, though not deep, would bear watching. Likely it would scar and wouldn’t that be something, to gain his first battle mark because of a bunch of rude birds.

He looked about. Someone had left clothes over the arm of the chair for him. He put on the old, soft tunic and breeches. His stomach rumbled. He decided to go and find Dori and ask for something to eat. Feeding Ori always made Dori happy.

When he opened the door he heard hushed, urgent voices down the hall. He picked out Dwalin’s, Balin’s, Dori’s and Dis’ and… his heart sank.

Thorin was there.

“- miners having someplace to go will tip the balance,” he said. ”We’re not tossing them out into the street. They’ll still have jobs, it will just be a while until the mine reopens.”

“An’ what if it can’t be reopened?” Bofur asked.

“There’s legitimate work within the guild.”

“That costs money. Yeh have to pay a fee, then yer dues, and yeh have to be sponsored by a member t’ join. Yeh might pay their way, Thorin, but yeh ain’t a guild member.”

“No, but you are.”

Bofur drew a breath of surprise, then he laughed in delight.

“Yeh want me to put me standing in th’ guild on the line by sponsorin’ dwarrow I don’t know?”

“Yes.”

“Alright.”

“Alright? Just like that?”

“Aye, well, I sorta owe yeh fer talkin’ business at yer breakfast table. Not t’ mention puttin’ yer entire family line at risk.”

Ori took a deep breath and gathered up his courage.

When he appeared at the sitting room doorway, everyone stopped talking and started at him.

Ori made his way to Dwalin and held his hand.

Thorin recovered first.

"I apologize again, Ori.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Thorin. I’m glad you’re here. We need to talk about the king. He really is
mad. I saw him in the treasury. The ravens showed me.”

The prince’s eyebrows shot straight up and Ori took that as permission enough to continue.

“They just swooped down on me and herded me off the street and down this passage I couldn’t see. It was scary, but if I didn’t know they were your ravens it would have been worse.”

“Roäc and his family?”

“Yes.”

Dwalin muttered to himself, something about ravens on a spit.

Dis cocked an eyebrow at him before turning to Ori.

“You were still very brave,” she said. “We trust them, yes, but they aren’t always gentle when they help.”

“But they are the eyes and ears of Mahal, aren’t they,” said Ori.

He turned back to Thorin.

“I had no idea that much gold existed, never mind in one place.”

Thorin’s shoulders sagged.

“Unfortunately, it does, and it’s sitting in the middle of Erebor, just waiting for a dragon to fall on it – and us.”

Ori’s hand tightened in Dwalin’s.

“We can’t defend the mountain against a dragon!”

“But we would be duty bound to try,” said Thorin, “and countless dwarrow would die in the effort. My grandfather knows it, but in his gold sickness he will not part with a single coin. Dis and I and Dwalin and Balin and Oin and Gloin have been emptying our own troves, both to stave off a wyrm and to support the dwarrow and men abandoned by royal greed. It seems Thror accumulates it faster than we can get rid of it.”

“It did seem to grow as I watched,” said Ori.

Thorin sighed.

“I don’t know what Udad has done or what sorcerous bargains he’s struck, but whatever they are they’re exacting their price. As time goes on it grows harder to keep what Thror has become from the people. There are so many traps and pitfalls. What if a dragon comes? What if our people starve through the Durins’ neglect? What if Thror is deposed and our family isn’t strong enough to hold the throne?”

Ori took the last to mean: What if Frerin becomes king and then becomes his grandfather?

Thror had been a mighty king in his time. If gold sickness happened to the strongest of dwarrow, it might certainly happen to one of the most foolish. And what of Thorin himself?

Thorin smiled humorlessly.
“If I fall to the gold sickness, your husband is under orders to make sure no one ever finds the body.”

Ori looked up at Dwalin with his mouth hanging open.

Dwalin had Thorin fixed with a hard stare.

“Aye, an’ yer under orders t’ make sure it don’ ever come t’ tha’.”

“I hear and obey,” said Thorin.

“But, I don’t understand why Roäc showed me the treasure trove,” said Ori. “It’s not like I can help you.”

Dis smile warmly.

“You don't think so? You've done nothing but help since the day you arrived. In this case... I suppose it was a foolish attempt to limit the number of people who know about the gold sickness.”

"I don't think it's foolish," said Ori.

“We were tryin’ t’ protect yeh, love,” said Dwalin. “But thin’s’re movin’ fast now, and ye're far better able t’ handle yerself than we first thought.”

“It would seem” said Dis, “the ravens knew better than the rest of us. The eyes and ears of Mahal indeed.”

“Do Fili and Kili know?” Ori asked.

“Yes,” said Thorin, even more troubled. “Fili has to know. Despite what Frerin thinks, Fili is my heir. If the worst happens, Fili may have to become king long before he’s ready, possibly even in exile. And what Fili knows, Kili knows. I always wondered how that was, since Fili is often sworn to secrecy and I know Fili to be a dwarf of his word, brother or not.”

“Do you think Roäc tells Kili things too?” Ori ventured.

“It’s beginning to look that way, isn’t it,” said Thorin.

“Aye, a spit,” said Dwalin darkly. “An’ mebbe a nice birdie pie.”

“Thorin, I’m really sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“Actually, I might have… It was such a long way down from where I could see and this rock fell and then a cup hit the king in the head and I thought for a moment I’d killed him and i was sick and dizzy and I threw up.”

The strangest look crossed Thorin’s face, as if he wore a mask of pure marble.

“You thought you’d killed King Thror?”

“Yes, with a cup. Then I got sick.”

“On what, Ori?”
“I don’t know,” said Ori in a tiny voice. “The ravens were laughing, and then he got up and he must have a head made of granite! Um, that is… I didn’t mean it, and I’m really sorry, and I’m so embarrassed because I threw up again!”

Thorin didn’t seem to be able to speak.

Ori thought he must be furious until Thorin choked and managed, “No matter.” before his composure broke entirely.

Ori turned to Dwalin for support but his husband was clenching the back of a chair and visibly shaking.

“Dwalin! Husband! Are you laughing at me again?” Ori demanded fiercely.

“No.” Dwalin managed before completely giving way to guffaws of laughter. “People’ve fainted at th’ sight of the treasury, laughed, cried, screamed. But yeh, love… Yer th’ first t’ vomit on it!”

Fili and Kili burst in, talking excitedly to each other, but then they caught sight of Ori.

Kili slowed to a stop.

“Oi, Ori-mate, did you beat up Idad Frerin again?”

“Again?” said Dori, in accents frozen.
Welcome back, friends! In this episode, poor, pooped Ori is reviving after his last action-packed adventure. We’re giving him something that might seems like a rest but isn’t! Yes, you all know us well! Do let us know how you’re enjoying the story and we hope to see you back here next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori didn’t quite know what to say, but that didn’t stop Nori from appearing like smoke to do it for him.

“Naw, the ravens just rouged him up a bit.”

“Nori!” Ori hissed. “That’s not true.”

“Well, yeh almost did kill the king.”

While the princes gaped, speechless, Dwalin reached over and smacked Nori across the back of the head.

“Tha’s enough o’ tha’, nuisance!”

“Ow! Hey! Leave off, you. Only Dori’s allowed t’ do that.”

Dori said coldly,

“I consider that as perpetual permission, brother.”

Nori groaned at Dwalin.

“See, now look what yeh done.”

“Pet,” Dori said gently to Ori. “I have some tea here for you and Gloin. He mentioned you have notes to go over?”

Oh, the notes! Ori bolted his tea and got up. He had completely forgotten in the face of everything else. The mine felt like days ago, yet it was only this morning.

Ori and Gloin adjourned to the Fundin’s library.

Gloin opened the little folding scribe’s desk and took out the notes, each piece of paper written thoroughly in official black, but many pages rotated ninety degrees and written across again. Each version was legible and Gloin turned a pages this way and that, fascinated.

“I haven’t seen paper used this way in years,” he said.

“Paper is expensive,” said Ori. “What’s crosswise are my own observations, nothing important.”

“No?”
“No, though it turned out to be a good idea anyway. I used every single sheet I had.”

Even professing to be fascinated, Gloin took what Ori considered an inordinate amount of time on each page, reading the actual notes, then Ori’s own.

Ori didn’t mind Gloin reading his personal notes of course, but Gloin’s increasingly perplexed expression was making him nervous and they spent so long over the whole, sad mess that, by the time they had finished Ori realized he’d taken most of the pot of tea for himself.

“I need to step out for a moment,” said Ori.

“Hm? Oh, certainly.”

He went and returned, much relieved, at least until he heard the voices coming from the study. Thorin and Gloin were discussing something that had them both agitated.

Ori heard his name and his heart abruptly started to pound.

He reached the doorway and cleared his throat.

Thorin turned with Ori’s notes in his hand.

"Ori? What in Arda did you write?"

"Er... my raw notes weren’t supposed to see the light of day," said Ori. "I used the the cross through space for a scholarly exercise."

"Yes, but what is that for?"

"A scribe writes what he’s told but a scholar writes what he sees and thinks as well. I'm sorry, Thorin, it won't happen again."

"It would be a shame if it didn't," said Thorin. "These insights are valuable. You saw things I missed and you saw meaning in things I wouldn't know anything about. I didn't grow up with these dwarrow, you did."

"So, it's helpful?"

"Yes, it will help me reach people. It's just what I need, though, you may want to carry more paper when possible."

“As I was telling Gloin, I know paper is expensive.”

“But this is the best use for it,” said Thorin. “For a kingdom of stone, Erebor goes through a lot of paper and ink.”

It was just as well Ori had worked up an appetite.

Dori served him a joint of beef larger than his head and half a field each of potatoes and carrots roasted and swimming in sweet glaze.

“Dori! Not so much veg!”

“It’s not green, pet. Think of the potatoes as chips in their natural state.”
The eldest Ri was making such a fuss, Ori feared Dori might go so far as to cut him his meat for him, but Balin swooped down to draw Dori into a discussion with Dis, Gloin and Gridr at the far end of the table. Ori was left with Fili and Kili, both still happily shoveling food into their mouths.

“Dwalin and Thorin didn’t come in with you?” he asked.

“Last minute planning,” said Fili. “Happens a lot. They’ll be here.”

“Thanks for helping out today, Ori-mate,” said Kili

“You’re welcome, but I only wrote things down.”

And attempted, with limited success, to comfort a furious Durin.

“What we found really hit Thorin hard,” said Ori. “He never faltered while we were down in the mines with people, but afterwards… All those poor badgers working down there beside their parents.”

The brothers looked at him, then at each other. Kili rubbed his eyes with his free hand. Fili glared down at his plate.

“It was just as bad as Bofur said,” Fili muttered. “No wonder Thorin had locked himself in his office.”

“He shouldn’t blame himself,” said Ori. Even he heard the pleading tone in his voice.

“Of course he’s blaming himself,” said Fili. “What you saw goes against everything idad’s taught us, everything that being a Durin is about.”

Kili breathed out in frustration.

“I’m amazed Thorin didn’t go looking for Udadel Thror,” he said.

“Ori sent Dwalin to look after him,” said Fili. “Dwalin keeps him from doing things he’ll regret. It’s getting to be his whole job lately. Here, Ori-mate, see this plate of food?”

Before Ori could reply or Fili go on Dori bustled forward and refilled Fili’s plate, Kili’s plate and topped up Ori’s plate with a murmur and a pat on the shoulder, then he hastened back to Balin’s side.

“He does that,” Ori assured them.

Kili muttered something about Dori being related to Mistress Dazla or Rutile.

“Why Rutile?” Ori asked.

Fili laughed and Kili grimaced.

“Rutile’s very maternal,” Fili snickered. “When we’re home, Amad lets Rutile run loose during the night. Rutile goes to Kili’s room and tries to untangle his hair. Before that she comes to my room and takes all my beard and hair beads out of the dish and lines them up by color value. She used to visit Idad Thorin but he doesn’t like it when she starts recleaning his toenails for him.”

Ori giggled.

“Please go on,” Ori prompted Fili. “You were telling me about Thorin.”
“See this plate of food?” Fili repeated. “If you’re a Durin, it’s not enough just to be thankful you have it.”

“Though we are,” Kili assured him. “A lot.”

“You also need to ask: Who doesn’t have it? Then you make sure they do. We’re, y’know, responsible.”

Ori said, “He can’t fix problems he doesn’t know about.”

“No, he can’t,” said Fili. “He can’t fix the whole mountain by himself either, but until pretty recently he thought he should. Balin and Amad and everyone else have always tried to help, but just now he’s started actually asking for help. Like he asked you.”

Gimli burst in, apparently having dined with friends, judging by the state of his tunic. Ori watched him bump foreheads with Gloin, startled once more by how similar they were.

Well, except for the elf thing.

Binni and Oin arrived directly after, each carrying a mysterious and extremely scrumptious-smelling parcel.

All excitement, Dori took Oin’s and, with Binni, disappeared into the kitchen, already talking at speed.

Soon the elder Durins withdrew to the sitting room while the younger lingered at table. Gimli restlessly moved between the rooms, still at the age where a badger could not sit still in company.

Or perhaps, Ori thought, it was just Gimli. After all, Ori had seen him stationary at the library, but only in low spirits.

Fili swirled a finger through the sheen of gravy on his plate and licked his finger clean. Ori looked around, sure Dis must be lurking.

“Y’know,” Fili said, “Balin thinks he’s being subtle, assigning us history lessons about which dwarf kings were most successful and what they all had in common.”

“We figured it out,” said Kili with an eyeroll. “They didn’t work themselves to death.”

“Balin is still your tutor?” Ori asked.

“One of ‘em,” said Kili. “Dwalin teaches us fighting and tactics and weaponry. He even taught me the bow, though Udadel Thror doesn’t think it’s a proper weapon for a ‘prince of Durin’.”

He said the last in such a way that Ori had to smile.

Kili gulped down half a cup of watered mead before he continued.

“Bow comes in handy when Idad takes us to Mirkwood. For some reason Prince Legolas spends a lot of time outside the palace.”

“For some reason,” Fili echoed with a snort.

“We go hunting.”

“Arrow diplomacy,” said Ori.
“Oi! I like that, Ori-mate,” said Kili. “Definitely writing that down. Anyway, it’s widened my range as an archer. We aren’t always at war, but we always have to eat.”

Fili sat back in his chair, arms crossed.

“Maybe this whole thing with the mines’ll be good in a way. Maybe Idad will let Kili and me help him more. We aren’t shaleheads. Well, not complete shaleheads anyway. We can do things for him. He protects us too much.”

Ori debated his own coin’s worth, then shrugged to himself and tossed it in.

“Maybe because he was younger than you when he became crown prince? He doesn’t want you to miss out on actually being young.”

“I’ve thought of that,” Fili agreed.

“Fi’s the responsible one,” said Kili as he chased the last chunk of potato across his plate and onto the table.

“I’m not that responsible,” Fili protested. “Just shows you how bad it’s gotten if even I think I should spend more time in boring meetings.”

Dori entered with a cake on a platter and fresh plates and silverware.

Having only just put the final morsel of his own dinner in his mouth, Ori wondered once more over Dori’s secret power that allowed him to know when pudding was truly necessary.

Like, right this moment.

Dori gave him a wink.

Ori, Fili, and Kili hurriedly stacked up the dirty dishes to take back and Ori stood to remove the tray when Dori waved him off and swept out with it.

Ori was left to sit back down and consider the bounty before them.

“This looks like the same kind of cake we had at Gridr’s,” said Ori. “Xocolātl?”

“Xocolātl,” Fili affirmed. “From the far southeast.”

He sliced off a slab for Ori and one for himself while Kili attacked it from the opposite side.

Fili refilled Ori’s cup.

“Ever since Amad hosted that Ironfist delegation we’ve been getting ‘gifts’, all kinds of things we never heard of before. Even Balin had to do research to figure out what to do with the xocolātl seed pods.”

“This came from a tree?” Ori asked, amazed.

Kili grinned.

“Yep, and you should have seen King Thranduil’s face when Idad Thorin gave him one of the pods. Imagine a dwarf gifting an elf something that grew on a tree. For a moment Thranduil’s expression actually changed.”
“To what?” Ori asked. “Did he smile? Has anyone ever seen him smile?”

“I did once,” said Fili, “but it was only his ‘very funny, peasant, now I’m going to eat you’ smile.”

“To be fair,” said Kili, “we were running around with his favorite bottles of wine on our foreheads, pretending to be elk.”

“But you were very young badgers, of course,” said Ori

Fili grinned maniacally.

“Two months ago, actually. He hasn’t had us back since, though he did invite Amad to take tea.”

Ori had a brief, terrible vision of Dori and Thranduil taking tea together. He shook it off with a shudder.

“Anyway,” said Kili, “it was a great gift, even to the elves. I mean, they like to say they’ve seen everything and nothing surprises them.”

Fili snickered.

“His face was all ‘surprise-happiness-horror’.”

Dwalin entered, grimfaced, kissed his husband, and sat beside him in a graceless sprawl.

“Is Idad Thorin coming to eat?” Fili asked.

“Aye, he made it a point t’ say he would.” Dwalin smiled at Ori. “He said he had t’, seein’ as he was under orders.”

Ori sank a little in his chair.

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“He took it in th’ spirit it was intended, love,” said Dwalin. “Is tha’ xocolātl cake?”

Fili cut him off a slice.

“What happens now?” Ori asked.

“Now our friend Bofur gets t’ see wha’ it takes t’ fix this mess. Thorin’s made him his personal mine inspector an’ informant which, considerin’ Thror’s appointed inspectors never set foot in th’ mines, shouldn’t be th’ hard to pull off.

“Getting’ around Thror’s cronies who own th’ mines, tha’s another problem f’r th’ list.”

Dwalin took a bite of cake, chewed and swallowed, his face transformed in ecstasy. The sight of it made Ori squirm a little in his seat, pleased and warm and mortified.

Kili pushed over a cup of mead to Dwalin.

Ori cleared his throat and tried to sound stern.

“Husband, you have not had your supper yet.”

“Puddin’ first,” said Dwalin. “Pattin’ mehself on th’ back f’r talkin’ ‘round his royal broodiness
this afternoon.”

“His royal what?” Ori cried as the brothers laughed.

“His royal broodiness,” said Dwalin. “Tha’s wha’ I called him when we were badgers. He used t’ call me a few thin’s too, none o’ ‘em tha’ nice.”

“Do you have to go back on duty?”

“No, I’m stayin’ close ’til we ride out tonight.” Dwalin slid a grin at Ori. “There’s someone else I gotta take care o’ besides Thorin, someone else’s who’s had a tough day.”

“Really,” Ori protested once more, “all I did was write things down.”

“An’ yeh knew somethin’ was wrong with our Thorin, or yeh wouldn’t’ve said so t’ me. An’ yeh got roughed up by them talkin’ vultures. Home’s where I need t’ be.” He turned a warning eye on the princes. “Bu’ don’t go thinkin’ me gettin’ married’s made me any less’ve a bastard.”

Fili nodded.

“We think it’s made you a much better bastard. Don’t we, Ki?”

“Uh-huh,” said Kili, as he cut another piece of cake.
Pleasantries, pockets, and a pig

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode! We’ve got a lot of excitement in this one and a momentous meeting! And another Heyer reference! Do let us know how you like it and join us again next Friday for more fun and adventure! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends.

Ori sighed tiredly and leaned back against Dwalin's chest.

"Yeh wantin' yer bed, love?" was the quiet rumble behind him.

"I- no not quite yet. I think I need some fresh air."

"Go through to the breakfast parlor, pet," Dori said, still bustling about between the kitchen and the sitting room. "I'll bring you and our deary a nice cup of tea and some little cakes so light you won't know you're eating them."

"Then wha's th' fuckin' point?" Dwalin muttered, escorting Ori through.

Ori giggled at this.

"You still haven't reconciled yourself to being called ‘deary’ have you?"

Dwalin chuckled.

"Could be worse I s'pose. Least ways, he ain't called me darlin' yet."

"Shhh!" Ori gasped in a whisper. "He'll hear you!"

"He's in the kitchen, love."

"Dori's ears go 'round corners!"

Dwalin opened the mica-paned doors out to the meadow and Ori took a deep breath. The ponies and goats grazed peacefully and all traces of snow were gone. Spring had arrived. The meadow was dotted with bright colors. Along the paved area, beautiful sky blue flowers shaped like trumpets were closing for the day. White ones were starting to open. All around wafted the light scent of the mint that tangled through the grass.

Ori sighed and Dwalin slid his arms around Ori from behind. Ori leaned back against his chest. Dwalin rubbed his face in Ori’s hair pressing kisses into it. Ori giggled as Dwalin leaned lower and nibbled at his neck.

“’Bout bleedin’ time we got t’ take a shared breath,” he muttered into Ori’s ear.

“I know. Everything’s running at the highest speed. I used to think my life was quite quiet and dull.”

Ori turned and grinned up at Dwalin.
“What a terrible influence you Durins are.”

“Yeah, I notice our Dori’s jus’ so shocked he’s runnin’ you away from us.”

Ori laughed again and hugged Dwalin. They stood together in silence enjoying the peaceful evening light and each other.

Honda looked up, gave a happy whinny and cantered over. Ori smiled and Dwalin released him with a chuckle. Ori moved to the edge of the walkway and reached out. The pony put her head across his shoulder making snuffling sounds in his ear. Ori patted the warm, fuzzy face and scratched gently down the line of the pony’s mane. Honda whinnied and drew her head back. The velvety lips nipped Ori’s sleeves. Ori bowed his head to the pony’s forelock.

"There," he whispered. "Do you know how many adventures I’ve been having since you came here and I didn’t get to ride you except for once. You’ve just been here in the field playing with Harley and Ducati!"

"An’ gettin’ fat!" Dwalin added.

"Who’s getting fat?" Thorin asked as he, Balin and Dis joined them.

"I hope it's my Ori," Dori said, bringing a large tray and setting it on the low stone table Fili and Kili brought out.

The Sons of Groin and the Urs join them, Omi and Loli and Buj following. Dori brought over two large mugs of sweet tea and two cakes. Ori took a tiny bite of cake and frowned. It was cake but it tasted like lavender blossom but it was cake. Ori decided Dori had given up on making him eat green food and now was trying to make him eat flowers. Buj was not so nice.

"These cakes are fascinating. They have the consistency of traditional tea cakes, yet they smell and taste like my amad's linen closet."

Ori looked at Dwalin, who had an eyebrow raised at Buj. Ori murmured, "I don't want to know how he knows what a linen closet tastes like."

Dwalin snorted. “Probably tried eatin’ it t’ see if he could turn int’ a kite ‘r somethin’.”

Ori fell into giggles and had to separate himself from the group in case he was asked what was amusing him so much.

His gaze went beyond the meadow and rock barricade, far off to the east and north to the Iron Hills. The last of the setting sun made the distant peaks just visible. Ori wondered how King Dain was taking Thorin’s news. Roäc had made no comment that Ori had heard when the King of Ravens delivered Thorin’s message.

Ori's eyes caught a faint movement out there. Idly, he wondered at it. At first, it just seemed to be a faint wisp of smoke. Then Ori realized it was something moving, something moving toward Erebor. Whatever it was, it was moving very quickly.

"What's that?" Ori asked, pulling at Dwalin's sleeve.

"Eh, love?" Dwalin turned, catching the attention of Thorin as well as Balin, Dori and Buj.

Buj climbed on the low stone table for a better look.
"Mahal's hammer!" Dwalin said, slowly. "That's Dain on his way or I'll eat Bofur's hat."

"Yeh bloody well, won't," Bofur put in and he and Nori began having a tug of war over the hat, making Dis and Jani giggle.

Balin smiled.

"Aye, that'll be our Dain for sure. Doesn't care f'r letter writin', would much rather speak in person, so here he comes."

"He's coming awfully fast," Thorin observed. "Who knew his pigs had such speed in them."

"Is that pig even touching the ground?" Dori asked. "Thorin, didn't you send that letter…"

"This morning," said Thorin blankly.

"Fuck," said Dwalin.

Dori chuckled.

"A dwarf on a pig in flight!"

"Flight?" burst out Buj. "Curse it! I wanted to be the first!"

The entire company turned to stare at him as he jumped down from the stone table in the deepest disgust.

Ori over heard Thorin asking Dwalin, "Where did he come from? Isn’t he a librarian?"

"Aye," Dwalin responded. "Prob’ly testin’ wind currents ’r somethin’."

"He’s going to fall on his head," Thorin observed as Buj tried to climb up the doorframe for a better look.

"Won’t hurt him," Dwalin commented with a grin at Ori.

Ori gave a sign of strangulation at his husband and went over to assist Buj down from standing on one of the door handles before he broke it.

"It's the pig. He's not doing it unassisted. It’s just galloping," Ori said, comfortingly.

Buj rewarded him with a sweet smile, which quickly lapsed back into perturbed brooding.

"I must resume my research," Buj grumbled. "If he has perfected flying pigs, he is only a step away from my own ideas. Excuse me."

Buj wandered out, notebook in hand, chewing on the end of his pen.

Kili and Dis looked at each other.

"Pigs can't fly," Kili said.

Fili snorted. "Well, not yet they can’t, but no doubt Buj will make that a lie."

Gloin went halfway back indoors and roared for “Our Gimmers!” Ori faintly heard the adad instructing his badger to go to such and such tunnel.
Ori peered again. The plume of smoke had become larger and there was definitely something tearing along at full speed and something else on top with a red cloak flapping wildly like a much fraught battle standard. Ori worried a little. If King Dain was coming this quickly, it might be he was angry. Perhaps, despite Thorin’s assurances in his letter, King Dain still wanted Dori ‘out of the way’ or saw him as competition for inheritance or perhaps King Dain had wanted someone else to marry Balin or Dwalin.

Ori frowned as the tiny, high-speed shape reached the foot of the mountain and disappeared.

Dis came out.

“If that’s Dain, he’ll be here in a shake of a ram’s tail. I asked Dazla to bring more dishes over for a sizable tea. Shall I ask her to stay?”

“Dis, dear, how kind you are,” Dori replied with a warm smile. “Please tell Mistress Dazla she is quite welcome to go home and rest. I’m sure she’s tired after today’s labors. If we’re having tea, I imagine we must get out the stoneware, from what I’ve heard of King Dain. I do hope he’s not in a temper.”

Dori and Dis went back into the kitchen. Leaving the doors open in the breakfast parlor, the company went into the sitting room. Balin was just telling Dwalin that he may want to go and meet Dain as he entered the courtyard to put the pig out to graze when there was a thundering racket coming from, it seemed to Ori, behind the sitting room wall. A hidden door in the wall seamlessly crashed open and a gigantic mass erupted into the room.

“Halt, Chopper!” bellowed a deep voice, pitched to the battlefield.

The biggest, hairiest, sharp-tusked, most savage-looking battle-boar Ori had ever dreamed of, stopped so suddenly it slid along the carpet, rucking it up into several folds and leaving skid marks on the stone floor. Ori stared. The vast dwarf on its back allowed the force of the speed to carry him over the pig’s head and land firmly before them all.

This dwarf was of a height with Thorin and, although he sported muscles like Dwalin, he was wider. He had the brilliant blue Durin eyes but his hair was as red as Ori’s own. It was streaked with grey and left long like his vast beard. The top of his hair was drawn away from his eyes and ears, being caught up in a topknot that gave him the appearance of a pissed-off rooster and his mustache was twisted on both sides of his mouth to hold a ferocious tusk on each side.

It was at that moment Dori entered the room followed by Dis. Ori noticed that his eldest brother had not only put on his best plum-colored tunic but had also redone his hair with rubies. Dori assumed an elegant pose, looked about the room, and finally allowed his eyes to come to rest on the newcomer, who was staring at him, eyes positively bulging.

“Ahhh,” Dori crooned, with a winsome smile. “Your Majesty, King Dain, I presume. I am Dori, betrothed to Balin and I do bid you be welcome in the House of Fundin.”

The King of the Iron Hills gawped for a moment longer then in two strides crossed the room, scooped Dori under the armpits and hoisted him in the air at arm’s length, and began spinning them both about and roaring joyously. The massive hog flung its tail in the air and squealed in delight.

“Sister!” Dain bellowed.

“Um-“ Dori began.
“Brother!” Dain shouted, not even pausing for breath, continuing to carry Dori high and capering about the room, the pig bouncing after, grunting and oinking in a merry way.

“Actually-“ Dori tried again.

Dain stood still, looking up at him.

“Sibling?” he offered.


Dain put Dori down only to seize him into a crushing hug, which ended with Dain giving Dori a large, loud kiss on the cheek. Dain held Dori out at arm’s length to look him over. Dori looked rather piqued as his lovely tunic was now unduly creased and his beard a little skew-whiff. Dain looked immensely pleased and rudely patted Dori’s belly, gave him what might have been for Dain a gentle shake, further fluffing Dori’s tunic, and tucked Dori back under his arm.

“How fine yeh look, me dumplin’!” Dain brayed jovially. “So lovely an’ ripe for any flirtin’ possible.”

“Really-,” Dori gasped, hovering on the edge of being offended.

“An’ marryin’ Balin!” Dain continued at volume. “Well, he’s a prosy old windbag f’r all he’s th’ best advisor any could wish f’r. But if he keeps yeh happy in th’ bottom bits, me dumplin’, I’ve nothing t’ say on th’ matter.”

“Well, thank Mahal for small favors,” Dori snapped and frowned terribly at Dain, who looked down at him, raised an eyebrow then laughed again and gave Dori another hearty kiss on the cheek. Ori sneaked a glance at Balin, who was quietly seething. Ori almost fancied he could see smoke rising in wisps from Balin’s ears. Gimli, with Fili and Kili’s help, was giving Chopper a mighty tummy rub. The pig was rolling on its back, enjoying itself hugely, and squealing in delight.

Dori managed to free himself and grabbed Nori by the shoulder.

“Dain, dear brother, here is my younger brother Nori-”

Nori was mightily clapped on upper arms and there was a crash as Dain brought his forehead into resounding contact with Nori’s. Ori’s heart sank as he saw Nori’s hand whip out and slip instantly in and out of Dain’s outer coat pocket. Dain freed him and looked Nori over in great interest. Nori grinned like the holder of an undiscovered loaded die. Dain frowned, grabbed Nori’s hand, and twitched it open. Ori groaned. Nori appeared to have relieved the King of the Iron Hills of a remarkably fine pocket time-piece.

“Nori! Dear!” Dori started but Dain just threw back his head and roared with laughter.

He clapped Nori on the shoulders again.

“Well done! Well done!” Dain put the timepiece back in Nori’s hand.

Nori stared at him with a brow raised.

“No, no,” Dain assured him at volume. “Yeh found it an’ thus yeh keep it. Was me an’ our Dori’s father’s. Very proper yeh should have such.”

“I ain’t related, sunshine,” Nori said politely.
“Nonsense,” Dain barked, frowning. “Dori said yer his brother. Tha’ makes yeh me half-brother as well. By the way, yeh’ll like this watch. Lookee here.”

Dain opened Nori’s hand and popped the lid on the watch. Ori could see that it was gold, round, and flat, but there were tiny spokes all around the edge. Dain removed one and Ori saw it was the smallest knife he had ever seen.

“Mahal’s arse!” Nori was impressed.

“Wait,” Dain bellowed eagerly. He withdrew another. This one was obviously a lock pick. The others were all different tiny tools. Nori was practically salivating by the end of Dain’s exhibition.

“Dain, dear,” Dori interposed.

Dain gave the appearance of forgetting all about Nori, which was fine as Nori was so delighted with his newest acquisition he had forgotten Dain’s presence.

Ori took a breath and fortified himself. Dori smiled at him

“Dain, dear, here is my youngest brother who-”

Ori steeled himself as Dain launched himself at Ori. Ori was also swung, dizzily into the air and hugged to the point he feared his ribs would crack. Dain put him back on his feet and held him also at arm’s length to look him over. Close to, Ori could see that Dain was perhaps a few years younger than Thorin and Dwalin. His hair had greyed earlier than theirs and there were a remarkable number of crowsfeet that crinkled merrily at the corners of his eyes. Dain huffed a laugh and thumped foreheads with Ori quite gently then turned to Dori.

“Well, me dumplin’, yeh must be full o’ pride with this one. Look how young an’ got his journeyman braids in scrivenin’ already. With those big eyes an’ sweet little fluff of a beard, he’s as cute as a new farrowed piglet!”

Ori didn’t really fancy being compared to a piglet.

“He’s sweeter than a nut an’ as fancy lookin’ as th’ King of Gondor’s wee spaniel!” Dain continued.

A little ticked off and feeling mischievous, Ori, as Dain was busily patting his cheek, turned his head slightly and bit Dain’s finger.

“Ooop!” Dain yelped, staring in surprise and good humor. “Feisty, too! No’ a wonder tha’ our Dwalin’s took up with him.”

Ori turned to see his husband’s reaction but sighed and shook his head at the sight of Thorin and Dwalin laughing so hard they had to hold one another up.

Dori saved the situation by quickly inviting Dain to come have some tea and something to eat. Dain chortled and agreed, patting Dori’s arm but excused himself to the washroom as he needed to refresh himself, tidy his clothes and, as he candidly told the room at volume, take a good dump.

Fili, Kili, and Gimli helped Chopper out of the saddle and bridle. After an extreme amount of shaking and some pleased grunting, Chopper trotted off to stand outside the washroom, squealed impatiently, and occasionally kicked the door.

Everyone had removed to the breakfast parlor once more. Dain returned with Chopper frisking
happily at his heels.

Ori saw that Dain walked with a barely noticeable limp, though Ori knew he had been wounded at the Khazad-dûm battle. Dain greeted the Sons of Gloin, pinched Binni’s ass, grabbed Gimli and turned him upside down before dropping him on the couch, then kissed Gridr noisily on the back of her hand. He embraced Loli and Omi loudly and pinched their cheeks, declaring them to be quite the sweetest, fuzziest peaches ever and gave them both candy. Dain didn’t appear to realize that Buj was not part of the family, patted him violently on the head, and handed him a dagger. Buj examined it as though it was a new kind of centipede.

Thorin, Dwalin, and Dain cuffed each other good naturally. Dain was then introduced to the Urs, who he greeted cheerily and took time to ruthlessly tease Dis and Jani. At being reunited with Bifur, the joyful volume rose to amazing heights.

Once more everyone sat down. Dori and Binni had created a light late night supper and Dori helped his elder brother to goat stew redolent with carrots, onions, raisins, apricots and smoky spices. Dain was a thorough eater and polished off everything Dori set before him. Everyone else took tea and more of Dori’s scones, cheese, dried fruit, and fried chicken. Dori gingerly put down a saucepan of porridge for Chopper, who immediately thrust his nose all the way in and the sound of chewing went on for some time.

After all that, Dori brought through a hot dish of bread pudding that looked as though it was made with the left-over xocolātl cake, cherries soaked in brandy, and whipped, sweetened cream. Everyone partook of this treat.

Ori leaned back in his chair. His brain registered that the day had begun in this room with breakfast and a visit from two elves. Ori sighed. No wonder he felt tired, the day had been quite ridiculous with events and some remarkably frightening in their intensity.

Ori looked up. There in the meadow were two quickly moving tall figures.

Gimli bellowed a welcome as Legolas and Tauriel came in. The elves made their bows and answered the greetings given them by all present. Legolas seated himself next to Gimli and was immediately provided with pudding and chucked under the chin by Gridr. Tauriel seated herself gracefully next to Kili, who gazed worshipfully at her as he shoved his half-eaten bowl of pudding in front of her. She smiled, confused, but once she tasted the pudding, polished it off happily.

Dain regarded Legolas.

“So it’s yourself, is it Greenleaf? Yer lookin’ well enough.”

“Thank you, King Dain,” Legolas responded formally

“How is tha’ snockered old woodland sprite, anyway?” Dain returned around a mouthful of pudding.

Tauriel twitched and Legolas fought a smile.

“If, by that honorific, you are referring to my royal father, your majesty, he is in excellent health, I thank you.”

Thorin turned to Legolas,

“If you think King Thranduil will allow it, I’d like you both to stay this evening. We muster at midnight tonight to scour Dale before dawn.”
“My captain and I are quite at your service, King Thorin,” Legolas returned gravely but with the light of unholy glee in his eyes.

“My grandfather’s not dead yet, elf.”

“Oh. When may I tell my royal father to expect to hear of his abdication?” Legolas inquired in an innocent tone.

Dain and Dwalin roared with laughter making the rest of the table join in.

Thorin frowned then relented.

"Brought yeh a present, cous’,” said Dain. He waved to the open doorway. "Take a look."

Thorin went to and stood upon the paving and looked toward the east and north. He chuckled. Ori, curious, slid out to stand beside him. Hidden from Dale in the lee of the mountain were an awful lot of torches.

“Rather a lot of light for a camp of one,” Thorn said casually.

Dain grinned.

"Thought yeh'd like a nice army."

Thorin turned to him, eyes lit brighter than any beacon.

“Why, Dain! You spoil me. So, does this mean-"

The secret sitting room door crashed open and then the door to the breakfast parlor was completely filled with a single dwarrowdam, Dain's equal in height and girth, with jet black hair and beard in a thousand tiny, spangled plates.

"Hullooooo! We're arrived at LAST!"

"Sculdis! Me delicate jewel of a bride," Dain announced. "Come give us a kiss and meet yer new brothers!"

She swept in like the queen she was, exquisitely graceful, with hands the size of stove lids and her eyes the color of iron. Behind her, looking very amused and patient, stood a miniature copy of Dain.

Ori thought this must be Young Thorin.

Dain and his queen crashed together in the middle of the room like two headlong mine carts. There were several loud sloppy noises, and they parted, though somewhat slowly as they had to disentangle themselves from now locked together braids, beard beads and leather lacings. Dain swooped an arm about her and drew her over to Dori.

Dori and Sculdis embraced rapturously, with plenty of giggling. Sculdis kissed Nori’s cheek, slapped his bottom, and called him her naughty badger, which made him blush. Ori steeled himself for another hug like Dain’s, but she simply enfolded him warmly and kissed both his cheeks, beaming proudly at him.

Once she released him, Fili, Kili, Omi, Loli and Gimli all pounced on her immediately. She hugged and grappled with all of them, laughing uproariously.

“All me little goats! How lovely t’ see yeh all again! An’ this time we get t’ go into battle
t’getter!! Go greet yer cousin!”

With that she left them all to crack heads with young Thorin, who was quite good at it. They all referred to him as Stonehelm.

Sculdis hugged Gridr and Dis at the same time, squeezed Binni, slapped Gloin on the nose, making him chortle and reached for Oin’s mustache braids. Oin wasn’t in the mood to have his mustache yanked and there was a little chase around the room. She relented and he deigned to hug her. She got to twitch the mustache anyway making him sputter and Binni giggle. She finally hugged both Thorin and Balin then turned to Dwalin.

“You!” she snapped then pointed to the door. “Out!”

Dwalin grinned maniacally, turned, whipped up his tunic, and made as though he was going to treat her to a view of the full moon.

“Eugh!,” she cried. “Don’t! Ugh, the things you see when you haven’t got an axe!”

Balin politely introduced the Urs and Buj, all of whom she also embraced. She greeted Jani, caught Dis’ eye, and winked. Dis clicked her tongue and huffed, hissing under her breath that she was not obvious and people were gossips, that’s what.

Thorin went over to greet Stonehelm.

“How are things in the Iron Hills, little cousin?”

“Oh, yeh know, loud.”

Thorin nodded, trying hard not to snort.

Stonehelm narrowed his eyes.

“Aye, cousin, lots o’ tha’, too.”

Which just caused Thorin to laugh uncontrollably in a very unkingly fashion.

Soon everyone was seated again in the sitting room. The younger dwarf sat on the floor near the hearth, both elves gamely with them and the older generation all over the furniture at hand as well as several additions from other parts of the house. Dori brought young Thorin and his mother each a large bowl of stew and after that, some pudding. Ori wondered how Dori instinctively knew to keep some back so both had plenty. Sculdis praised the stew and Stonehelm was quite blissful over his pudding.

The talk quickly turned back to the plans for midnight. Dain and Sculdis declared themselves and their army ready to march whenever Thorin gave the word. Thorin finally rose and, going to the hearth, stood before them all.

“My dear friends, I cannot begin to thank all of you for standing with me. Bifur, my brother at arms, my thanks to you and your family for bringing these difficulties to my attention. Through your good work many, many dwarf will soon be able to partake amply of the riches of Erebor and we shall be prosperous as Great Durin the Deathless decreed we should be.”

Dwalin and Dain rose and everyone followed, raising their drinks to toast Thorin.

“My king, we art with thee now and indeed always,” Bifur stated.
The company drank to that and as a one they all bowed. Thorin raised his glass to them.

“May Mahal make me always worthy of your respect and may He always remember those who pledge to follow me. Loyalty. Honor. A willing heart... I can ask no more than that.”

He bowed to all assembled. He broke the formality with a ruefully look and a smile.

“And now, my friends, those involved in the muster should get some sleep before we go,” Thorin finished quietly.
Fur, fun, and fear

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode! Since you’ve all been hinting like mad it’s time for a little bit of….romance! And food and clothes and excitement, and adventure, and really wild things! (Quick, where’s that from?) (there an Heyer reference just for Acopia, too!) Join us again next Friday for more here at Dwarf Telenovela Central! Same dwarf time, same dwarf tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori saw Dwalin go off to the bath to wash and get ready for bed. He took a deep breathe and decided. Silently, he slipped into the kitchen and hunted through the cupboards for the wine goblets he had seen once. He frowned and finally located them. There were only two and he silently scolded Dori as he likely had used the other two for himself and Balin.

Carefully bringing them to the table he added a bottle of sweet wine and put it all on a silver tray. Another deep breath and he picked up the full tray and trotted through to Dwalin’s and his bedroom.

The door was ajar and firelight danced through. Ori slipped in and stopped dead. There, leaning an arm on the mantle shelf was Dwalin. He was dressed only in a pair of deep green drawers. His hair and beard were brushed to shining and loose, all but for his marriage bead in his beard. The firelight glinted off Dwalin’s tattoos and piercings. Ori’s breath caught. He was swamped once more by the reaction he had had years ago when he had first seen Captain Dwalin. He was so handsome and strong and…. Ori shook himself and grinned. Who could have guessed that now Captain Dwalin would be his husband? Ori stepped forward and Dwalin turned with a soft smile.

“There yeh be, love.” Dwalin looked at the burden in Ori’s hand and laughed. “Looks as though we both had the same idea.”

Ori cocked his head and Dwalin nodded towards a table. There was a matching silver tray with the other two goblets and a bottle of the same wine. Ori giggled then his eyes went to the floor before the fire. In front of it lay what looked like a great quilt with fur.

“What’s that?” he asked.


“Where did it come from?”

He had heard of bears but they were usually black or brown.

“Up north. We’d gone t’ see Dain f’r a Yule party an’ he took Thorin an’ me hunting. We then had t’ stay until both Thorin and Dain got one each.”

Ori laughed.

“That doesn’t surprise me in the least.”

Ori put his tray next to Dwalin’s and crossed to examine the enormous white pelt on the floor.
“It’s very beautiful,” he marveled and squatted down and patted it reverently. He tried to wrap his mind around the size of the creature. “It must have been quite fierce!”

Dwalin laughed.

“Aye, aye, yeh could say that. Have a seat on it, love.”

Ori didn’t have to be told twice as he clambered on it with delight and then flopped down and rolled, rubbing his face in the softness.

“So wonderful!” he managed around a mouthful of fur.

“Here,” said Dwalin as Ori slowly removed his face from the fur.

Ori sat up, took the goblet Dwalin held out, and gave Dwalin an enquiring look.

Dwalin touched his glass to Ori’s.

"To us."

Ori smiled.

"And all the wild, careening rides that entails."

Dwalin laughed.

"Aye, seems like we never get a moment's peace does it."

"And we only have a few hours until you and your soldiers... er, clean up Dale."

"I ain't talkin' about that, love."

"Ah, so now I should take off my pants."

Dwalin choked on the wine.

"Only if yeh want to."

"Dori would say you're trying to seduce me."

"Nah, just want t' spend some quiet time with yeh."

Dwalin reached over and pulled some cushions closer and lay on his side, leaning against them. Ori followed suit and stretched out a hand to stroke his braid in Dwalin’s beard. They kissed gently, leaning in a little, then a little more, soft and light and sweet. Ori felt Dwalin’s tongue on his lip and opened to it, giddy and pleased and slightly ticklish with the beard. He wondered what that beard would feel like on his-

“Oh!” Ori cried.

“Love?”

“You spilled wine down my back.”

“What? Aw!”

Ori grimaced mirthfully.
“It’s cold!”

Dwalin laughed.

“Now there’s romance.”

“I’m afraid your nice white rug is going to have a few spots,” said Ori. “I don’t regard my tunic, since it’s dark, but you’ll have to take a wet cloth to the rug right now, or it will stain.”

“So me snow bear rug has a few spots? It’ll be inked jus’ like me. I’m no’ inclined to get up an’ leave yeh right now.”

“You’re so sweet.”

“I’m sweet?” Dwalin asked, and huffed out a laugh. “There’s no’ many who’d go along wi’ yeh.”

“You’ve been nothing but sweet to me since the day we got married.”

“If I am, it’s ’cause yeh make it easy t’ be sweet,” said Dwalin. “That was quite a day, our weddin’.”

Ori giggled.

"Yes, and I suppose we will have to thank Nori at some point, when things calm down. When he sees how happy we are, he’ll take full credit for it."

Dwalin chuckled.

"Hopefully he'll be too busy wi' Bofur t' notice."

"That's true. I think they make a lovely couple."

"Couple o' wha'?"

Ori shoved Dwalin's shoulder and laughed.

"Exactly, but not as sweet as Balin and Dori. I often wondered who would be the best person for Dori. I sometimes wondered if Bard would do, but I see now that Balin is quite perfect."

Dwalin raised his brows.

"Did Dori ever fancy Bard?"

Ori pondered.

"I don't think so, but I do know it was quite a few years before Bard realized Dori wasn't a dam. Dori was always so good to Bard's children, you see, and I believe he was well-acquainted with Bard's late wife. I'm not sure if Matilde ever realized Dori wasn't a dam either."

"I mostly played with Loli and Omi when I was very young. I didn't make friends with the man children. Then I was training to be a scribe. Once I had my apprentice braid and started my jouneyman’s, I used to look after Tilda. Her mother died when she was born. Dori always tried to help with Sigrid when she was growing up. She is quite like Dori in some ways now. He taught her to cook and market like he had taught her mother. Sigrid is very good, but she doesn't have Dori's knack with pastry."
"That granny pie was bloody good," Dwalin put in.

Ori chuckled.

"Dori's way of getting us to eat vegetables."

"Aye, not partial to 'em meself, but those spring ones Dis made were fine."

"It was the butter and bacon, wasn't it?" Ori teased.

Dwalin grinned.

"Mind," Ori went on, "I'm not allowed to say I don't like green food, as Dori says the Bardlings will copy me."

"Bardlings?"

"That's what we always called Bard's children. Matilde though it was funny. Bard gets vaguely embarrassed when we say it. On that, what will happen to all the women and children of the men of Dale when you go to clean up?"

"Furh'nk's got that charge. He's good with 'em."

"Tilda certainly likes him," said Ori, "and his goat named Puffball."

Dwalin laughed.

"It's actually the old Khuzdul term for Thistledown."

"Well, that does make more sense."

Ori pondered a moment.

Dwalin reached out and drew Ori's brow to his own.

Ori blurted, "I'm scared for you."

"Don't be, love. It's not like we're goin' up against orcs."

"I know but I- I don't want you to get hurt."

"I'll do me best not to."

Ori recalled himself.

"We only have a few hours as you leave at midnight. You should rest."

Dwalin finished his wine, as did Ori. Dwalin put the goblets aside and took Ori in his arms and laid him down on his back against the cushions.

Ori raised an eyebrow and Dwalin grinned.

"Wanted t' kiss yeh some more wi' out tha' dangerous weapon in me hand."

"I thought you were going to rest?" Ori teased.

"In a minute. Got somethin’ t’ see t’ first."
Ori tasted the wine again on Dwalin’s lips, pleased to feel how his own mouth had learned to fit against Dwalin’s. Now that his mouth knew what to do, his hands could roam at will, over broad shoulders and down the nape of the thick, muscular neck. Ori’s fingers traced the edges of Dwalin’s large ears, one rounded and cuffed with iron, the other flat over the top from an old wound.

Ori pulled back and frowned.

“Does that still hurt to the touch?”

“Naw, no’ anymore,” said Dwalin idly, his own hands busy under Ori’s tunic. “Now it jus’ looks like the wors’ piercing job in the history o’ Arda.”

“Warrior piercings,” said Ori. “Promise you’ll to teach me what to do and not do to those.”

Dwalin’s smile took on a wolfish cast and Ori felt himself mimic it.

“If it’s wha’ yeh want, love.”

“It is what I want,” said Ori. He breathed in exasperation. “When will we have time?”

“We’ll make time,” said Dwalin.

“Right now you need to sleep.”

Dwalin sighed.

“Aye.”

He pillowed his head on Ori’s chest, over his heart.

Ori wrapped his arms around his husband and stroked the hair flowing down Dwalin’s back.

Dwalin held him tight and sighed deeply.

Ori kissed the bald pate and tightened his knees around Dwalin’s waist.

“My love,” Ori began.

“Shhhh, me darlin’. Just lemme me hold yeh. I ain’t got pretty words.”

Ori sighed with happiness.

He remembered the time in the city garden when he first heard Dwalin singing softly to him in the voice of his heart.

Firelight danced as Ori gazed idly around the room, still gently stroking Dwalin’s hair.

How strange, he thought. Dwalin and I have only been married for six days as of today, and since that day the fortunes of my brothers and I have changed to the point of standing on our heads. I fancied Dwalin for so long and soon found out he’d been fancying me and that he is my heartsong. I don’t know how how I could have been so lucky. I’m half scared of him a little but I can’t stop myself from jumping to his arms whenever I see him. He’s so good to me. Mind, his parents where heartsongs but they really didn’t get along very well. Poor Dwalin and Balin. How difficult it must have been for them. They are very close but when I think on it, Dori always made sure we had a loving home. He and Nori bickered a lot but they both lavished love on me.

How beautiful Dwalin is, so tall and strong and his beard is perfectly magnificent. How I wish I was not so small and scrawny and was beautiful for him too. I wish I knew all kinds of things about
seduction and flirting so he would be enraptured with me. I never thought this would happen so I contented myself with books and took vicarious pleasure in Shire’s novels.

Maybe I should ask Dori to teach me to dance and then dress up in filmy material and sway around the bedroom until he was half mad with lust. Oh, but I can just imagine.

‘Dori, would you teach me to dance?’

‘I’ve already taught you to dance, pet. You know ever so many: the round dance, the-‘

‘No, I mean, like a bearer, so I can dance for-‘

‘For Dwalin? Certainly not! How could I live with myself knowing what you were doing in there with him?’

‘I imagine you’d distract yourself by doing the same thing with Balin.’

‘No, pet, I couldn’t concentrate knowing you were in there dancing for that… that buffalo!’

And, of course, Dwalin would be standing right behind him when he said it. What a row!

So, no, not dancing.

Perhaps I should wait until I know he’ll be home early one day and bathe and perfume myself then languish on the bed and throw my underwear at him when he comes in the bedroom. Or maybe leave a trail of clothing leading up to the bedroom? That would be naughty. But then Dori would find it and pick it all up and Dwalin wouldn’t think to come to the bedroom and I’d be languishing naughtily and Dori would walk in and demand why I was late for dinner.

Perhaps I could climb in the bath tub with him. I could bounce in and fling off my clothes then climb in. Water would go everywhere and then we’d have to do an awful lot of mopping after.

Hmmm, perhaps if I accosted him in the armory. He could shove me against the wall and have his way with me. Someone might walk in and there’d I’d be up against the wall with my trousers hanging off my boots, Dwalin having his way and what does one say at such a moment? ‘Hello’? ‘Excuse us’? How very awkward that would be for Dwalin.

All these scenarios were getting him nowhere but they were making him slightly uncomfortable in the crotch and that was nothing he could do anything about at the moment so he let his mind drift to other things.

Dori is Balin’s heartsong and they’ve been apart for years and years. It’s almost like a Shire novel. So much romance and court intrigue. Perhaps, since I’m noble now, I may meet Shire and give him permission to write the story like one of his novels. Names changed, of course. We’ll have to be the Sisters Ri. What laugh! All the silly things will have to be left out, as nobles have to be terribly formal and reserved.

Ori frowned.

Shire would have to rewrite Dwalin as Balin’s cousin, because the way Shire writes it would be very important that I was Dori and Balin’s secret child.

I wonder how Shire would make me look. Hmmm, I think I should have curls instead of what I have now, and I shall have violet eyes and dark brows. Yes. Those eyes and brows and curly hair would be our family trademark. How mysterious Shire would make us!
Ori’s attention went back to his husband, whose breathing had grown low and steady.

He’s asleep. Good. He needs to rest. I mustn’t worry so much. Dwalin is a fine soldier, and perfectly accomplished at fighting orcs. Dealing with Calmar and his thugs shouldn’t be too difficult. Bofur has the dwarrow miners loyal to him. I can’t think of anything that’s been left undug.

Those dwarrow and men in the zinc mine are just like we were back in Steam Alley, just trying to make enough to eat and be sheltered. I know I did plenty of copy work for some who had left lessons early to go and help their families. I don’t like to think how many of the men folk didn’t have any money to send their badgers to school rooms. Those poor tutors receive nothing from Calmar for their work, and like their parents they barely had anything in the way of true schooling themselves.

Everything is so wrong in Dale. If Bard was king, things would be so different.

Mind, if everything goes to plan, Bard will be king. I’m so glad nothing came of my and Nori’s attempts to see he and Dori married. Dear Yavanna, how silly we were!

Ori’s thoughts drifted as he dozed lightly.

Bard is like many men folk and would feel funny about marrying another male. Men as a race seem to be funny about gender. I have read this is not so in Rohan or Gondor, but in Dale and other settlements like Bree. I wonder if hobbits are similar, or if they are like dwarrow and elves. Admittedly, from what I’ve seen of elves I can’t tell who is male and who is female, until we’ve been properly introduced. I wonder if they have bearers too.

A slight noise brought him to awareness again. His eyes slid to the door. Balin and Dori entered silently with their arms full of Dwalin’s armor.

Ori deliberately closed his eyes and feigned sleep. He heard them place the gear upon the bed.

Ori heard a firm tread he knew to be Thorin’s. Why was Thorin here? He peeked out from under his lashes and Dori leaned over him, smiled and winked.

Ori sighed and glanced up. He heard the soft toll of the midnight bell.

Dwalin stirred, lifted his head, leaned up, and kissed Ori thoroughly.

Ori wished the others would go away and leave the pair of them for the rest of the night.

Dwalin stood and helped Ori up too.

In silence, the warrior went and sat on the edge of the bed and pulled on his socks.

Balin beckoned Ori over and handed him the armor a piece at a time, teaching Ori how to help Dwalin put it on. They were nearly finished when Thorin stepped forward with a box in one hand and a long piece of cloth over his arm.

He put the box on the bed and unfolded the cloth to reveal several long chains of mithril. Thorin himself crossed and recrossed the chains over Dwalin’s chest and back.

“You have a husband now,” Thorin said quietly. “While I ask you to take many risks for me, the
least I can do is offer you protection for him.”

Thorin smiled at Ori, who tried very hard not to cry.

Then Thorin took the cloth itself, a surcoat to go over Dwalin’s armor, dark blue with the simple seven stars of Durin, not the ornate silver runes that Thror’s soldiers usually wore. These were the arms of Durin the Deathless. Ori understood the gesture, a sign that Thorin intended for Erebor to return to the trust of Mahal.

Thorin placed the surcoat over Dwalin’s head and settled it on his shoulders and helped him close the belt around it. Thorin beckoned to Balin who brought the box and opened it. The prince removed mithril knuckledusters, beautiful and shining. Dwalin drew a startled breath.

“Durin the First forged these himself,” said Thorin.

He handed each to Ori, who with Dwalin’s help, secured them on the warrior’s large hands where they fit perfectly. Ori stroked them carefully. Dwalin gathered Ori close and embraced him, his husband of barely a week, then drew back and kissed him firmly. They parted and Ori took Dwalin’s hands and placed them in Thorin’s.

“My heart and hands are yours to command,” said Ori. “Use us well… my king.”

Thorin’s eyes glistened.

“Thank you. May Mahal see that I am always worthy of them.”

Dwalin stepped back and bowed to Thorin, who drew Ori to his side.

“My shield brother, if I send you to your death, know that your heart will remain always in my care and I will see him crowned my consort should it be his will.”

Thorin and Dwalin clasped wrists and touched foreheads, then Dwalin’s gave Ori a last, quick kiss before turning. Furh’nk, Fili, and Kili stood in the doorway with Dain and Sculdis, each wearing Durin’s colors. Sculdis came and folded Ori in her arms.

“Stay safe,” Ori whispered.

“I will,” Sculdis replied.

The soldiers made their way silently out into the night.

Dori turned to Ori.

“Did you sleep, pet?”

“A little.”

“They’ll be fine, wee brother,” Balin encouraged him.

“I know,” Ori sighed.

Dori hugged him.

“Do you want to go back to bed?”

“No, I’ll just lie there and worry.”
“Well then, pet, come with me to the kitchen. We have a deal of baking to do.”

“I’ll be off, makin’ sure no one who shouldn’t sees anything.” said Balin.

He kissed Dori and strode out.

Dori and Ori went to the kitchen and started taking out implements, dishware and staples.

Once more they had work to do.
Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central! Midnight has come and dawn is approaching and our Ori is busier than the average bee! Nori’s out doing what he does best and being a spying busy-body, and Dori is keeping everyone else busy. Do let us know how you like the story so far and remember to join us again next Friday for more excitement! Oh, and you may want snacks for this one! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Nori came into the kitchen while Ori was measuring ten pounds of flour into a huge vat for Dori’s scones.

Dori was in the vast larders of Durin House, supervising the bringing up of even more barrels of flour. The plotters had already commandeered every egg in Erebor. Dori had said to expect ‘all hands’ imminently to help with preparations.

Nori wasn’t terribly helpful, though he did look well pleased with himself.

“Old Vors’s had ‘is hearing, for all the good it done ‘im,” said Nori.

He stole a chip off Ori’s plate.

Dori had made Ori a snack to fortify him for baking. Only Dori would fry chips while waiting for two hundred people to arrive for tea. Two hundred people, as he’d informed Ori earlier. Ori still wasn’t over that news.

“You were there when Vors went before the king?” Ori asked.

“Not where anyone could see, but close enough.”

Ori pictured Nori hunkered down under the throne.

“Oh, it was a treat,” said Nori.

He reached for another chip. Ori smacked his hand.

“Get your own!”

Nori looked put out, but he did so, then sat with the plateful. He poured liberal amounts of spiced vinegar over all of it, peered into the bottle, shrugged, and swigged the rest.

“Ew!” Ori gasped.

Nori fixed a stare at him

“Wha’? ’S good f’r the blood. Cleanses it. Yeh should drink a tablespoonful everyday.”

Ori made a face and Nori and continued his tale, while eating.
“There’s old Vors, all rumpled and havin’ the hysterics after only a few hours in the lockup, sputterin’ and whinin’ and demandin’ his rights. And there’s Thror, lookin’ like he’d rather be somewhere else. And Thror says, ‘I don’t have time for this shite’.”

“He did not!”

“I’m, whatyacall, paraphrasin’,”

Ori’s eyebrows shot up.

Nori shrugged.

“That’s the word, ain’t it?”

“It is, go on.”

“Then Thorin, cool as they come, says, ‘Oi, grandad, yeh want me t’ make this problem disappear?’ and Thror says, ‘Aye, go make yerself useful fer once.’ and the king just up and leaves old Vors standin’ there with Thorin, who looks like a ferret with a field mouse. I swear Vors about pissed hisself.”

“What did Thorin do?” Ori demanded.

“Wait a mo’, I ain’t half finished. Then Vors says, ‘Where’s Prince Frerin?’ and Thorin says, ‘No place that’ll save you. Yeh’re for the razor and the mob, my lad.’ An’ Vors falls on his face, grovelin’, swearin’ he’ll go into exile, he’ll give Thorin half o’ everything he owns.”

Ori winced.

“That was exactly the wrong thing to say.”

“Bet yer arse it was. So there I am thinkin’ Vors ain’t gonna get as far as the mob, mebbe Thorin’ll take him out right there in th’ throne room, but then your Dwalin’s soldier, that Furh’nk, he rushes up to Balin, whisperin’ like he found out Princess Dis’s laid a egg, and Balin whispers t’ Thorin, and Thorin says t’ the guards, ‘Take Lord Vors back t’ the cells.’. I guess Thorin’s gonna finish ’im off later.”

“I hope Vors doesn’t get to Frerin before then.”

Nori leaned back, smile cold.

“No worries about the git prince, little brother. He’s busy eatin’ at a new trough just now. Seems he tore out o’ dinner the other night and smack int’ T’dillah of Rikanta, the choicest cut on the noble meat market. They’re awful cozy. Sickenin’.”

“Do you want more chips?”

"Silly question."

Ori fetched more for himself and for Nori along with a new bottle of the vinegar.

"Where did Thorin go when he left the throne room?" Ori wondered.

Nori snorted.

"Where d’ye think? A certain scribe married t’ a certain prince's shield brother just -Pop!-
disappeared off the face o’ Arda.”

"Ooooh,” said Ori. His face burned all the way to the tops of his ears. "I seem to have impeded progress."

"So Vors spends a couple few more hours in the lockup, stewin’ over his fate. Sounds like progress t’ me."

Except that it made Ori an unwitting party to passive torture.

Nori shot him a stinkeye.

"Oi, I know that look. That’s the ‘I broke Dori’s teapot’ look. It was dumb when yeh was twenny and it’s dumber now. Yeh didn’t do nothin’. Yeh didn’t even know. Not that the bastard don’t deserve it."

Ori sighed, then cursed.

He’d lost count on the measuring. If he messed up Dori’s scones the ‘teapot affair’ would be nothing in comparison.

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Binni and Gridr arrived with Omi and Loli, and Buj was in there too, though Ori didn’t know why or how, all carrying huge baskets of bread and crocks of butter and endless platters of jam tarts.

“Only six different kinds,” Binni apologized. “Short on time.”

“We helped,” said Loli.

“Everyone else is out fighting or guarding the doors,” said Omi, around a mouthful of cheese scone.

It seemed no time at all passed before the heavy knocker at the front door sounded and he heard Dori answered it.

Dori quickly returned.

“The guests are here, pet.”

As Gridr flipped flat cake after flat cake directly onto a plate Omi smeared each with jam or butter or both and Loli rolled them and stacked them on a growing mountain on the largest platter the Durins owned. Mistress Dazla directed a cadre of dwarrow toward the back door with huge urns of tea and jugs of honey and cream.

“More blankets,” someone said. “We’ve cleared about as much shite as we’re going to out of the top of the meadow.”

Dori directed, “Take the table out of the receiving room if you need it. Dis, dear, do you have some to spare?”

Ori’s world, meanwhile, had shrunk to scrambling vats of eggs and frying rashers of bacon.
“Gimli and Young Thorin are with the unit holding the gates,” said Gridr merrily. “What terrible faces! They want to be down in the city.”

Binni laughed.

“Stuck up here with the badgers and the codgers. Their times will come. Impatient tweens.”

Ori realized Oin wasn’t here and his heart sank. Of course, Oin would be at Dale to see to any wounded. They would be treated first at the fighting itself, then at the royal infirmary. Who-

“Ori!”

A storm of braids and skirts nearly knocked him into the hob.

“Tilda!” he cried.

“Ori! Furh’nk came’n got us and said we were to take tea in the meadow and there’s ever so many badgers and their parents and tea and juice and lovely cakes and Princess Dis is sooo pretty and I want my beard to look like that someday only Sigrid is mean and says I won’t have one and Furh’nk is so strong and he gave me a piggyback ride and he ran all over with me and I didn’t get sick once!”

Ori put down his spoon and placed a hand on each of her shoulders.

“What?”

She clicked her tongue and cried out in strangled annoyance.

“Furh’nk got a whole bunch’ve us from Dale and we’re all here in the meadow for tea.” She grabbed his forearm and tried, without success, to drag him away. “Come on now, we’re missing cake.”

Bain arrived, dodging trays and pans.

“Sorry, Ori,” said the youth. “She ran off to find you before I could catch her and your eggs are gonna burn.”

“Oh, mahumb,” he muttered, then clapped his hand over his mouth, but it was too late.

“What does ‘mahumb’ mean?” Tilda asked sharply.

“It’s a bad word, so don’t you repeat it,” Ori warned, stirring for all he was worth. “Tilda, can you go and save me some cake? I won’t be finished here for a while and I’m afraid I’ll miss out.”

“Oh, alright!”

She darted away, happy to have a mission of her own.

Bain looked tired, and now that Tilda was gone, he looked scared too.

“I should be back in the city,” Bain said. “They won’t tell us what’s going on, but Da’s down there and I should be with him.”

Ori wanted to cheer him up, but the best he could come up with was, “If you aren’t here, who’s going to protect me from your little sister?”
Bain shrugged, at a loss, but then Dori noticed that he was there and standing still with empty hands.

“Bain, my dear, take a tray and gather any empty plates and cups and silver you find on the lawn. We’re running low, there’s a lad. Ori, pet, I’ll take over the eggs for right now. The platter of rolled flat cakes needs to go out.”

For such lights cakes they nearly staggered him with their weight. Must have been all the jam.

“Where do I put them down?” he asked.

“You won’t have to, pet. The lot of them out there are vicious.”

Ori had read of locusts, how they descended on field and farm, turned day to night and ate every stalk and blade in their path, leaving only desolation. Now he saw it firsthand.

He thought he heard some of them say ‘thank you’ but it was hard to tell with their mouths full.

Ori took a moment to stand with his empty tray and look at their guests: men and dwarrow, the very old and very young, harried looking women surrounded by man badgers and Dis was somehow everywhere, asking after the young and coaxing someone to have another cup of tea, and soothing someone else’s fears over not knowing what happened in the Dale.

For adults the fear seemed to war with stunned fascination at taking tea with the dwarf princess, a beautiful bearded whirlwind of kindness no taller than most of the children.

Ori saw her speaking to a dam surrounded by badgers. The dam's hair was already streaked grey and he saw she carried one shoulder lower than the other. He recalled Nadaris, in Vors' zinc mine, had stood in such a way.

“-what I’m supposed t’ tell her,” said the dam. “At least she’ll be fed today. Regular spoiled she is. And blackberry jam! But, I s’pose you have that every day under the mountain.”

“We’re thankful for it every day, Mistress Nadaris, believe me. I’ve just been telling the dwarflings that there are far too many ponies and goats in the streets for Dale to be safe right now and most of them simply shrug and run off.”

“But not my Caris?” Nadaris asked slyly.

Dis laughed and shook her head.

“Your Caris gave me the first, second and third degrees and I don’t think she’s happy with my answers yet.”

“Aye, welcome to me life.”

Dis looked over at Ori, her smile widening.

“Here’s Master Ori. How are you faring?”

“Glad to step out of the kitchen for a moment, your highness. It’s a lovely day.”

Nadaris cocked her head at him.

“I know you,” she said. “You’re Ori of the Brothers Ri, who was at the mine yesterday.”
Dis excused herself to bring a cup of tea to an elderly man who sat nearby on one of the Fundins’ receiving room chairs.

“I hope you’re well, mistress,” said Ori.

“Fair ’t middlin’. We wondered what become of you all. The house in Steam Alley is shut.”

“We live here now.”

Her eyes flew open in amazement.

“You work for the swells too? Ain’t you the clever one.”

“Er… actually, I live here. I’m married to Captain Dwalin, the head of the city guard.”

The old man laughed. He was so elderly his eyes were blind white and a cane leaned on the arm of his chair.

“I remember him. He’s th’ one with all that scribblin’ on his head. He still got that mess of a coxcomb for hair?”

“Master Arim!” Nadaris cried, then cackled.

“No,” said Ori, “it’s all migrated down and hangs from about his ears.”

“Oh!” Master Arim cried happily. “A fellow sufferer! Well, there’s more room for his pate scribblin’ now I daresay.”

Nadaris peered sharply at the bruise on Ori’s cheek.

“He’s a hard one, that Captain Dwalin. And you with a mark. He knockin’ you around?”

“No, mistress, I lost a fight with some ravens.”

She didn’t seem to know what to do with that, her expression moving from horror to sympathy to mirth.

Finally she settled for, “Since yesterday we saw you? You do have a busy life.”

“Mam! Mam! Look!”

A badger ran up to her with what seemed to be a disgruntled rock lizard in his hands.

Nadaris sighed.

“And so do I.”

He took leave and wandered back toward the house with his tray, thinking about what he saw and heard.

So the badgers of either race had mostly accepted this strange circumstance, as they accepted their circumstances in Dale, and ate like piglets and drank juice. For them, at least, Ori was relieved. He remembered what it was like to worry over things he didn’t understand, or understood all too well at too young an age.

Here in the meadow, those badgers who wished to ran wild. Furh’nk led them in playing games
Furh’nk had a dozen nephews, nearly all pre-tweens) or the badgers wrestled in the grass. For others, Brur had a table surrounded by benches and the older badgers and children practiced their letters and those who didn’t want to, or were too young, used the clever, colored pieces of wax Brur had invented to draw on paper scraps.

One small daughter of men ran up to Brur with a brightly rendered picture of something or other and tugged on the old dwarf’s sleeve.

“Look, Idad Brur! I drew you!”

Ori jerked back in surprise.

Had she just called Brur ‘uncle’ in Khuzdul?

Ori held his breath at what was usually a trespass, but gruff, dour Brur only approved and encouraged and didn’t correct her.

The longer Ori stood, the more he realized they all called him that, dwarfling and child alike.

He turned, distracted, and walked right into Sigrid.

“Sigrid! Sorry!”

Her face like thunder, she glowered down on him with her hands on her hips and a smear of jam on her chin.

“Ori!” she hissed. “What is really going on in Dale?”

“I haven’t a clue, Sig.”

“You’re a lousy liar, Ori. Your husband’s the captain, you must know.”

“Oh, look!” he cried. “Prince Fili has returned!”

She spun around to look behind her and he quickly slipped away.

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When Ori returned to the kitchen Dori met him with a full plate and a cup of ale.

“Here, pet. Balin’s in the sitting room.”

“You want me to take these to him?”

“He already has his. I want you to take this for yourself and go sit and eat it.”

Ori sagged.

“I love you, Dori.”

“As well you should,” said Dori haughtily. He nudged Ori along. “I love you too, pet, so eat while you can. The lunch rush is coming.”
Ori groaned and fled.

He found Balin, impeccably dressed as always, happily consuming eggs, bacon and fried potatoes smothered in onions and garlic.

“Mornin’, wee brother. How’re yeh holdin’ up?”

Ori sat beside him on the couch and put his plate down on the table.

“I have a stomach ache I can’t get rid of, but I’m still hungry enough to eat a bat.”

“That’ll be nerves,” said Balin. “Not surprisin’. Even seasoned warriors get those before a fight.”

“Even Dain?” asked Ori slyly.

“Mebbe not Dain,” Balin admitted. “He’s hovered so close to death he could smell meat roastin’ in the ancestors’ halls. Nothin’ seems t’ frighten him.”

Ori was half afraid to ask and half afraid not to know, but he ventured, “Have we heard from the city?”

“Thin’s re proceedin’ apace. No casualties, no serious injury.”

“There’s that at least,” said Ori, though it didn’t bring him the relief he sought. He knew anything could happen at any time. “Meanwhile, I’ve been scramblin’ eggs.”

“We all do wha’ we can, laddie. Meself, I’ve been out an’ about makin’ sure tha’ no one who shouldn’t know anythin’ doesn’t know anythin’.”

“And do they?”

“The lords who’re smart enough t’ know’re afraid they’ll be sharin’ th’ lockup wi’ Vors if they talk. The king only cares f’r his treasure an’ Frerin pays court t’ T’dillah o’ Rikanta, a pretty dam, rather vacuous an’ a little too young, even if she is o’ age, if yeh take me meanin’. Her family can think only o’ Frerin’s interest in their daughter an’ Frerin himself thinks his sister’s havin’ a tea party an’ couldn’t care less. Though, t’ be fair, Fili an’ Kili wouldn’t willingly attend a tea party either, unless it was f’r th’ cake.”

“So, everyone is either afraid or doesn’t care?” Ori asked, astonished and appalled.

“So it seems,” said Balin.

“How is this kingdom still functioning?”

“On th’ backs o’ th’ common people, wee brother, as always. Yeh can administrate an’ delegate an’ be as lordly as yeh like, but at th’ end o’ th’ day, all yeh’ve done is help or hinder th’ dwarf who really keeps th’ mountain alive.”

“Because authority isn’t about power, it’s about service,” said Ori.

“Got it in one,” said Balin slyly.

Ori recalled that, among many other things, Balin was a teacher. Ori chewed thoughtfully.

“Balin, about Dain… He seems familiar, but I don’t know why.”
“Reminds yeh a little o’ Bombur?”

“Yes, actually, though I can’t say exactly how, except for the red hair.”

“Dain’s amad was a Broadbeam like th’ Ur. They get their red hair from Firebeard stock.”

Ori couldn’t imagine two clans so different: the cheerful, practical, hardworking Broadbeams and the proud, wrathful warrior Firebeards, who had nearly been wiped out in retaliation for the sacking of the elven city of Doriath. He supposed if you folded all that together you might equally get Bombur or Dain.

“From which side does Dain get his volume?” Ori teased.

Balin grinned impishly.

“That’s all Durin blood, laddie. Yeh never met me adad or Dain’s. Even Thrain in his cups could rattle th’ mine braces. Dwalin manages it when he’s barkin’ out orders. I never had th’ need fer it m’self.”

“Thorin doesn’t seem to do a lot of shouting.”

“Thorin’s sort o’ deadly quiet like his amad Freris. Terrifying dam. She could silence a guild meeting with a look. Dis is very like her, though she’s gained th’ sort o’ grace a princess needs if she’s t’ be more than a warrior an’ more than just a means t’ get an heir. Dis is a great axe wielder, just like Freris.”

“I would never have imagined that,” said Ori. “Dis always looks so elegant, and it can’t be easy to fight in a brocade gown.”

“Make no mistake, even if she don’ haul th’ axe about, our Dis is heavily armed no matter th’ occasion. Fili got tha’ from her. Amazin’ the lad don’ rattle when he walks. One time when Fili was a badger Dwalin saw him walkin’ out o’ th’ armory lookin’ rather fat, so Dwalin grabbed him up by th’ ankles an’ shook him upside down. Soon enough there was a grea’ pile o’ knives under him. Oh, the wee lad went pale when he was brought before his mam, an’ was she angry.”

“Because he stole them.”

“Because he did such a sloppy job tryin’ t’ smuggle them out!”

The memory obviously tickled Balin no end.

“Aye, she’s a tough one, our Dis. She could’ve gone t’ Dale wi’ her brother last night, but she serves him better here.”

“So, she was trained like Dwalin and Thorin.”

“Durins are raised t’ fight from th’ cradle, wi’ no thought t’ gender. Oh, she was angry t’ be left behind when we marched t’ take back Khazad Dum. It was a very unpopular campaign, a suicide mission. Yet she would have gone. She was the next in line, yeh see, if Thorin didn’t come home, an’ someone had t’ be here in case Thror was overthrown, t’ get wee Frerin t’ safety. Thror didn’t go. O’ course.”

Balin drained his cup, and then frowneded at it, even as he continued his story.

“Tha’ was when th’ trouble between Thror an’ Thorin really started, at Khazad Dum, when th’
crown prince was killed. Thrain, an’ Dain’s adad, an’ both me parents, all o’ them burned dwarrow. No time t’ entomb them proper in th’ stone, too far t’ bring th’ bodies home in th’ hot sun. I remember stragglin’ in off th’ trail. Dwalin had t’ hold Thorin back from killin’ Thror himself. Mahal help me, but sometimes I wish he’d just let Thorin do it.

“Thror demanded Thorin pick up th’ crown prince’s duties from the day he returned, though Thorin wasn’t exactly in his right mind either. He’d brought Dain back to Erebor, yeh see, rather than returnin’ him t’ th’ Iron Hills alone. Dain was little more than a badger. He’d lost his adad an’ he’d lost his leg, nearly bled out from it an’ he was in constant, horrible pain. Thorin couldn’t stand it.”

“Wait,” said Ori. “Dain lost a leg? I wouldn’t have known that either. He barely limps. I’ve seen miners with mangled legs. The ruined one drags after them if it moves at all.”

“Dain an’ Thorin designed and built tha’ contraption Dain’s walkin’ on an’ Dain’s been makin’ improvements ever since. Tha’s his craft. Th’ lunatic’s a mechanical engineer.”

Balin laughed.

“Oh, laddie, yer face is a picture. Aye, Thorin helped him learn t’ walk, then helped him figure out how t’ fight on it. Then Thorin an’ Dwalin an’ an army of volunteers rode at Dain’s back t’ th’ Iron Hills t’ claim Nain’s crown from the regent.”

Ori chewed and swallowed, Dain’s words from last night coming back to him.

“Thorin brought Dain an army, so Dain brought Thorin an army.”

“The pair a’ them’re ridiculous but dead loyal. Tha’ was a long, horrible year between Khazad Dum an’ ridin’ on th’ Iron Hills. All th’ while Thror complained tha’ Thorin was neglectin’ his duty to his own people.”

Ori frowned.

“But Dain is one of his people.”

“Aye, an’ family besides. Thorin wasn’t even as old as Kili is now, but he always did have an outsized responsibility to save th’ entire bloody dwarven world.

“I watched him throw himself into helpin’ th’ soldiers, th’ refugees, anyone touched by wha’ happened at Khazad-dûm, an’ there weren’t many who lived at th’ time who weren’t. Tha’s when I first thought: There is one I could call king.”

“King Thror never noticed,” said Ori.

“No, too busy seethin’ an’ countin’ his gold. He couldn’t outright take Thorin’s title away. Thorin was a hero. But from tha’ very first day I could see Thror groomin’ Frerin’ t’ take Thorin’s place. It never happened, thankfully. Thror’s mind’s been crumblin’ fer decades. Half th’ time he can’t remember who Frerin is. If Thror had a plan for th’ crown o’ Erebor it’s gone by th’ wayside now. Hah! I almost feel sorry f’r Frerin.”

“Do you? Really?”

“Imagine if yeh’d been told all yer life tha’ yeh’d be king someday, an’ when tha’ day came th’ crown went t’ another, even though tha’ other was th’ rightful heir.”
Ori thought about it and decided Balin was right in a way. It did sound like a painful turn of affairs. Still, Frerin would remain a prince of Erebor. He would have more power and more wealth than Ori could even imagine. So, what was Frerin’s disappointment compared to that of a miner, expecting the tiny pay that kept many mouths fed, only to discover the pay wouldn’t come? Ori shook his head.

“I’ll never be able to sympathize with him. I’ve seen too many good dwarrow and men go without.”

Balin huffed out a laugh.

“I said I almost felt sorry for Frerin. I’ve never quite managed to finish th’ journey.”

Their cups and plates were empty by now. Ori started to gather them up. Balin rose and stretched.

“Don’ get old, laddie. I’ll be flexible as granite in short order.”

“Balin, you’re only twenty years older than Dwalin.”

“It’s no’ th’ years. It’s how yeh use ‘em. Besides, look at me hair. Yer darlin’ husband’s th’ one who put every white strand on me head.”

“All of them?” asked Ori with a grin.

“All right, he put half o’ them there. Thorin put in th’ others.”

“Balin, Dain brought Thorin an army. How did Dain know to bring one? Thorin’s letter didn’t say anything about Dale or what Thorin was planning.”

“I guarantee tha’ was Roac’s doin’. He can never jus’ deliver a message. He’s got to hang around an’ gossip after. Ravens are terrible gossips, laddie, keep tha’ in mind. Almost as bad as dwarrow.”

Notes

Mahumb - in Khuzdul, literally 'droppings'. In Westron, basically 'Oh, shit.'
Kings, Kin, and Kittens

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. In the interest of space (and travel time) we’ve congealed the City of Dale with Laketown. Since the Long Lake is a port, it makes sense that the City would slowly creep towards the main money making-part as well as to Erebor where the mines are. City centers do ‘move’ around as they grow and depending of which neighborhood is the most popular so, that it’s Dale but the port part is the Laketown side of Dale. This isn’t technically canon, but we’ve tossed aside Smaug and so Dale was never destroyed and it does make things easier on the storytelling in this one. Right This is is another little party chapter and Ori gets lots to do and a lovely surprise, but things occasionally get a trifle…er…gassy. Do let us know how you’re liking the story and please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori washed his hands a final time and glanced around the kitchen. Everyone else was now out in the meadow talking and eating. Ori had come in needing some quiet to think. The longer this went on the more he couldn’t stop wondering what was going on and worrying about Dwalin. Not being capable of making light conversation, he had retreated to the kitchen and, needing something to do, he cleaned it.

He wiped down the table one last time. There was a cauldron taking up most of the bottom oven filled with beef stew bubbling with potatoes, onions, with a stock of dark beer, spiced with mustard and a dash of strawberry jelly. The middle oven was full of more bread and the top one full of rich dark honey loaf cakes filled with berries and nuts. The cook top was covered with a huge pot of peppery fish stew of trout, bass, perch, eel, leeks, garlic, and parsley simmering in white wine and tomatoes. Ori wasn’t sure about the fish but the stew did smell quite good.

Everything was ready if things progressed to the dinner hour. Ori sighed wondering what to occupy himself with next. If people were going to eat here he had best light the fires in the receiving room.

He trailed through, lit both and then began lighting each of the huge lanterns hanging from every panel edge around the room. He lit the ones on the stairway also.

This took some time and he paused at the top, looking around to make sure he had got all the lights. He couldn’t help admiring the room. It was enormous and unlike the other times when they just walked through it, it looked both elegant and welcoming. Ori imagined people would bring in the tables and chairs in when they came to eat.

There wasn’t anything else to do. All the dishes and flatware were in use and all the cooking and baking implements were now washed and piled neatly along the counter.

“Yer worryin’ ‘bout yer buffalo, ain’t ya?”

“Nori!” Ori turned and pushed Nori, who had somehow arrived behind him on the top step.
“Aw, don’t get all het up ’cause yer happy I’m fine, pet.” Nori teased.

“I am happy you’re fine, but this sneaking up on me-”

“Yeh make it too easy, pet.”

“Shithead.” Ori decided.

“Language, pet.”

The front door opened and in came Gimli, Legolas, and Stonehelm. Ori hurried down.

“Is everything-”

“Done!” Gimli bellowed happily. “All Calmar’s dirty rats’ve been rounded up and’re bein’ stuffed down th’ dungeons.”

“Not stuffed,” Legolas frowned, puzzled. “It looked as though they had a cell each.”

“Yeh know wha’ I mean, khuzsh!”

“Do you want something to eat?” Ori asked. “There’s stew in the kitchen or snacks out on the meadow with the people of Dale?”

The little cadre headed to the kitchen

“Toldja,” Nori grinned.

Ori made a face at him then pounced for a hug.

Ori ladled out four bowls of the beef stew and turned as Sigrid’s voice sounded.

“Ori!”

He sighed. Sigrid was pissed at him.

“Stew?” he offered.

“Up your bum!”

Nori snickered. “Not a good thing unless there’s a carrot or two in it, lassie.”

“Shut up, Nori!” Ori and Sigrid shouted in unison, which made them giggle.

Gimli industriously tried to shove his entire chunk of bread into his half eaten stew making the gravy puddle up and dribble over the sides. He squished the bread in half and raised the messy improvised sandwich to his mouth and consumed half of it in one mouthful.

Legolas watched interestedly, apparently thought this was the correct way of eating stew if one was a dwarf, and copied him. Unfortunately Legolas’ mouth lacked the capacity of Gimli’s and shortly there was gravy on the table and all down the elfin prince’s tunic.

Stonehelm actually cackled at him.

“Tha’s it!” Gimli praised Legolas, who was obviously horrified at the state of his front. “Yeh’re a
“Does trencher mean I’m a mess?” Legolas asked.

“Nah, means yeh know how t’ eat.”

“Among my people, knowing how to eat means you don’t miss your mouth.” Legolas sighed, taking the damp dishcloth Ori handed him and wiping ineffectually at his clothing.

“Yeh just need t’ open yer mouth more,” Gimli consoled. “Practice, lad, that’s all.”

Legolas said nothing and, grinning, Nori slammed his empty ale mug down on the table and shouted. “All Hail to Mahal and to the Seven Stars of Durin Shining Bright!”

Stonehelm managed ‘all hail-’ in his belch. Nori got ‘to Mahal’ and Gimli threw back his head and got out “All hail to Mahal and-” before he ended.

Stonehelm and Nori cheered and Legolas stared wide-eyed. “You can talk and burp at the same time?”

“Aye, laddie,” said Gimli. “It’s an art!”

At this moment, Kili and Tauriel wandered into the kitchen. Tauriel was smiling and Kili was holding her hand and obviously telling her something very wonderful. “Dwarrow can burp and talk at the same time.” Legolas informed her.

Tauriel blinked and considered. “Why?”

Legolas shrugged and Nori helped. “It’s a gift of Mahal, lassie.”

“What strange gifts your valar gives.”

“It’s fun,” Kili told her and made a grabbing motion at Nori who poured out two fresh mugs of ale and fired them off, sliding down the table. Kili caught one in one hand, spun, and caught the other then passed the first to Tauriel with a grin. “The trick is to take a gulp of air, hold it and drink the ale down,” he instructed.

“Don’t tell her that!” Nori shouted indignantly.

Tauriel sniffed the ale, licked her lips, and chugged the entire mug. She concentrated and sucked in her stomach. She frowned and concentrated again. The noise was impressive.

“Wrong end, lassie.” Nori informed her as the rest of the table dissolved into howls of laughter and she turned raspberry.

Kili who had been right beside her, rolled his eyes up into his skull, and fell over backward, flat
on the floor.

Tauriel cried out and knelt beside him.

“Kili! My prince!”

"I used to be ‘my prince’,” Legolas informed Gimli.

“She aint yer sort, laddie,” was the reply.

“Don’t just sit there!” Tauriel rose and waved them to do something. “Get a healer.”

Kili opened his eyes, saw the tableau, grinned naughtily and winked, then hurriedly feigned unconsciousness again.

“Maybe you need to kiss him,” suggested Sigrid. “That’s how you cure things in the stories.”

Tauriel stared blankly at her, turned, and knelt to do so. Kili made the mistake of puckering up. She gasped then bapped him on the nose.

“You- you arrogant rabbit!” she raged, choking on her own laughter.

“And we all know what rabbits’er like.” Nori added.

“Shut up, Nori.” chorused Ori and Sigrid again, this time joined by Tauriel.

Tauriel sat down on the last chair, stretching her long legs under the table as Legolas did. Kili jumped to his feet, sidled up to her, and sat on her knee. She giggled and shifted to make them both more comfortable. Gimli made a decisive grunt, pushed his chair back a little and proceeded to wrestle a puzzled Legolas into his lap. Both elves looked at each other and startled to laugh.

Sigrid turned to Ori as the raucous laughter and drinking continued at the table.

“So, how’s life?”

“Oh, Sig! It’s - it’s so- so busy and in the most insane ways. I love it.” Ori grinned at her.

“Is his bum as nice as you hoped?”

Ori giggled and blushed.

“Sig! We haven’t, well, done…everything.”

“Why not?” she asked, hushing her voice.

Ori felt his face still burning.

“He’s so good to me, Sig. From the start he was just like a good friend and we’d talk about anything and everything and if I got upset he’d always be there to calm me down and hug me and…” Ori paused then grinned shyly. “It sound so silly to say it but we’ve fallen in love, Sig.”

“Ooo, Ori! That’s so wonderful! He’s so fierce-looking but he’s really good to you?”

“Oh yes. We’ll have to sit and talk it all over soon. I have so much to tell you and-”

Ori heard the front door open again.
Fili swaggered in a moment later, walked directly up to Sigrid and bowed low.

“Your highness,” he said with a grin.

Sigrid looked at him, dumbfounded, then around at the others coming in.

“Er… what?”

He straightened, his grin warmer and fonder.

“You don’t know?” he asked.

“Know what?” She looked past him, stabbed Bard with a look and shouted, “Da!”

“Ah, Sigrid. I’m glad you’re here.”

“Not for long,” she promised. She darted forward, grabbed his sleeve and pulled him aside.

Ori could chart the course of the conversation by how rapidly the color drained from Sigrid’s cheeks.

“Da, are you out of your mind?” she cried.

“Possibly. It seems I’m now a king.”

Tilda flew through and right into her father’s arms.

“Da! Where’ve you been? You missed the cake!”

“I’ve been out with our friends, scouring Dale.”

“You scrubbed the street? Did you use our mop?”

Dain roared with laughter.

“Aye, she’s darlin’.”

Tilda glared up at him, frowned, and put her hands on her hips, looking scarily enough like Dori.

“Who’re you? You’d best have helped Da with the mopping!”

“Aye, Chopper used his tail.”

“Who’s ‘Chopper’?”

Dain brayed over his shoulder, “ChoPPER!”

The boar squeed and frisked in, tail in the air. Ori could swear he looked pleased with himself.

“This here’s Chopper,” said Dain to Tilda.

Furh’nk gestured to Dain. “An’ this here is Chopper’s daddy.”

Tilda looked between the dwarf and the pig, entirely unsure if Furh’nk was serious.

“This is a pig,” she said. “Isn’t it?”
“He’s a battle boar, lassie,” said Dain. “He likes his ears scratched.”

Tilda looked over at Bard, who couldn’t seem to find the words and ended in a shrug.

Dain said, “See, like this, lassie. He won’ bite ‘less I tell him t’.”

Tilda very carefully reached out and scratched Chopper’s head as she was directed.

The pig immediately leaned into her hand and tilted his head, to take full advantage of the scratching on offer. The flat nose snuffled at her and he made happy grunting noises.

Tilda’s eyes brightened and she laughed.

“He likes that!”

“Of course he likes it,” said Dain. “He’s a very intelligent boar.”

Dori and Balin entered from the meadow and Dori went to Dain immediately.

“Ah, brother, back and in one piece, I see.”

“You have another brother?” Tilda asked. “That makes three! I only have one!”

Bard sighed.

“It’s not a competition, Tilda, and no, I’m not making you another brother.”

“That’s alright, Da, I think I want a Chopper instead.”

“You’ll have plenty of room,” said Thorin.

“Why will we have plenty of room?” Tilda asked. “Are we moving house?”

“In a manner of speaking,” said Bard. “I seem to have become king of Dale.”

“What? With a crown and everything?”

“Not yet.”

“We’ll work on that,” said Thorin.

Bard shot him a wary look.

“Tilda, I thought you wanted a goat,” Bard said.

“I do. If you’re going to be king we can probably have both.”

“At least she hasn’t mentioned a pony,” said Thorin, lightly, smiling at a glare from Bard.

Bain arrived and hugged his father without the usual adolescent embarrassment.

“Da, are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Bain. Master Calmar and his men are locked up. He can’t hurt the people anymore.”

“But, what’s happened?”
Bard sighed. He turned to Thorin.

“You’re going to make me announce this, aren’t you.”

“I can’t make you do anything,” said Thorin.

“Mmm. Alright, for everyone present, someone,” he nodded in Thorin’s direction, “has talked me into taking back my grandfather’s crown. I will henceforth be King Bard of Dale, at least until my neighbors wise up and run me out of town at the point of a pitchfork.”

While most present shouted out congratulations, Bain only looked concerned.

“Um, Da, does that mean I’m going to have to be crown prince or something?”

“No, Bain, Sigrid will be the crown princess.”

Bain looked relieved.

“That’s alright then. Being the heir means having to do all the boring stuff she likes to do anyway.”

“I’m going to have you executed,” Sigrid growled.

Dori bustled forward and immediately took her in hand.

“Oh, dearie, what a shock this must be for you. Come sit down now. We’ll have tea and you can rest your nerves and we’ll work this out, just like always.”

“Mother Goose,” said Bofur as he entered.

Ori looked around as people arrived, increasingly uneasy. If Thorin was here, then where-

“Has anyone seen my husband?” he asked, a little more desperately than he intended.

Thorin went to him with a smile and bumped foreheads with him.

“He said he had something to take care of in the city before he came home. He’s fine, Ori. No one was killed.”

“Kili did try,” said Fili. “He fell off his pony.”

Kili made a ‘snerk’ and turned scarlet.

“Tattler!”

Fili clicked his tongue, “No one’s ever died of embarrassment.”

“Considering the lecture Oin gave him, he could try for dying of mortification,” said Thorin.

Binni shooed them out of the kitchen.

“Go on with you, out into the receiving room. Look what you’ve done to the table! And the benches… and the floor. Piglets!”

Chopper squealed indignantly.

Dain was offended on Chopper’s behalf.
“I’ll have yeh know his manners’re far finer than this lot’s. An’ mine, come t’ think o’ it.”

Ori made to grab a damp rag but Binni snatched it up and bustled him along with the others.

The front door opened just as Ori reached the receiving room. It was Dwalin.

Ori’s heart bounced in his boots.

Dwalin was hunched forward with his arms crossed over his stomach.

“Dwalin!”

Ori ran to embrace him.

“Easy, love.”

“You’re hurt?”

“Naw. Went looking for yer old cat. Sorry, love, but she must’ve lost a fight. She did leave yeh presents.”

They cleared a path to the fire place.

“Here, put tha’ blanket on th’ rug.”

Ori did so and Dwalin gently withdrew three tiny balls of fur from under his surcoat and put them down on the blanket. They made peeping noises and squinted at their new surroundings.

“Kittens!” Ori cried.

One was grey, one was orange with stripes and one was all brown and black patchwork over cream with a dark patch bisecting its face perfectly from ears to chin.

Bofur said, “I suppose you’ll name them ‘Tassy, Kassy and Nassy’.”

“I’m naming this orange one Nori. It matches his hair. See how it staggers? Just like he does when he’s drunk.”

“Oi!” said Nori.

Tilda viciously elbowed Nori aside to get to the kittens.

“Can I pat them?” she asked longingly.

“Gently,” said Ori. “Remember, they’re babies.”

Dori said, “I’ll warm some goats’ milk, shall I? I’ll have to search to find some teaspoons to feed them.”

“Here,” said Bain. Absently he removed a handful from his pocket. “You had me on dish patrol, remember?”

Ori turned to Dwalin, glowing with happiness, and threw himself into Dwalin’s arms.

“Thank you!”

“Only took a minute, love. Thought it might brighten yer day.”
Nori looked at Bofur.

“Mush,” he pronounced solemnly.

“Oh, yeh love it,” said Bofur.

“Nah,” Nori denied, but with a goofy grin.

Dori said, “Speaking of our day, we do still have over a hundred people in the meadow and Dis is out there being supreme hostess with very little support. I know the starlight is very beautiful and the night balmy, but someone is going to have to sleep eventually.”

“Now, m’dear,” Balin interposed, “it’s not a problem, we’ll jus’ move everyone int’ th’ receivin’ room. plenty o’ space and seating’ in there an’ tha’ lovely stew yeh’ve been keepin’ on th’ back oven will do nicely f’r everyone. Dwalin an’ I will roll out a few o’ th’ kegs an’ we’ll have a nice wee party t’ finish th’ day.”

Dori went out to inform Dis and in few moments all the guests from the meadow happily strolled through from the breakfast parlor through the sitting room to the receiving room. Fili, Kili, Dain and Scudis had led a squad to the receiving room bringing in the chairs and tables. People, mostly the returning menfolk of Dale, exclaimed at the sight of the food and Dori bade them help themselves which they did with gusto. Bofur took the lead then. He and Bomber gathered people from the meadow into the open center of the room laughing and clapping as Bofur piped a dance tune and Bomber accompanied him on his drum. A round dance stated. Fili and Kili reappeared with their fiddles and Jani with her balalaika and soon there was a jolly celebration going on.

Dori and Binni piled two tables high with more clean dishes and dinner time food and Dwalin, Thorin and Dain tapped a hogshead of Shire brown ale.

When Binni called him, Ori went back to the kitchen, his arms full of sleeping kittens, Dwalin and Tilda at his heel. He hadn’t felt so blissfully happy in ages. His husband was safe and although missing Sassy hurt, her kittens were his. He looked up to ask Dori about more milk but saw his eldest brother had other business as Furh’nk wavered a little from his post at the kitchen door. Dori honed in on him like a lightning strike.

“Master Furh’nk! When was the last time you slept?”

“Uh-”

Furh’nk looked over at Dwalin in panic.

Dwalin winced apologetically.

Finding he was on his own, Furh’nk tried to straighten his spine.

“I can’t remember, Bearer. I’ve been busy.”

“Busy! Honestly! Our Dwalin, you aren’t looking after your badgers.”

“He’s not my badger!” Dwalin protested.

Dori waved his hand in violent dismissal.

“Here, Master Furh’nk, you march right down the hall and second door on your left.”
Since this was technically Ori’s room, Ori considered his options and retired from the field of battle.

Furh’nk was still trying.

“But, Bearer-“

“Don’t you give me ‘but’. You get yourself to bed.”

“I wouldn’t want t’ put anyone out, Bearer.”

“No one is using that room right now,” said Dori. He shot Ori a pointed look.

“Er, if yeh don’t need me right now, Captain Dwalin?”

“Go t’ bed, Furh’nk. It’s not worth me life or yers t’ disobey a direct order.”

“Just so,” said Dori dismissively. He turned to Ori. “Now, pet, I found a nice basket in the scullery and some rather odd pink dish towels to use as a lining.”

“Oh,” said Ori, biting his tongue so it hurt.

“And when we’ve tucked them up we’ll start bringing out the stew.”

They carried in the kettles and people began ladling out for themselves.

Ori saw Master Tin helping Master Arim along as the elder hobbled to a chair. Master Tin poured him some ale and the two chatted amiably as the music played.

Ori brought over a bowls of stew. He gave one to Master Tin before he turned to the elder.

“Here, Master Arim,” said Ori, “there’s a bowl for you on the table and here’s a spoon.”

“Thank you, lad.”

Master Tin turned to speak to Bard.

Ori said to the old man, “You and Master Tin are great friends.”

“Oh, aye, his brother and my brother were close. They were also great friends and, er, they shared a room and …” The old man heaved a sigh and a laugh. “They were married. I think I can say that now, can’t I? They’ve been gone for many a year and it won’t matter to you what they were.”

“Actually, it makes me very happy to hear, Master Arim. I’m sorry they aren’t still with you.”

“I kinda wish they’d been around to see this, truth to tell. Great Eru, I’m around and I rather wish I could see it. I’ll have to settle for hearing it, I suppose. At the moment it’s quite tuneful.”

Kili had approached Tauriel with his fiddle, playing a jig and capered around her. She caught up with him and quickly they were dancing together, Tauriel graceful and Kili sometimes out of step, making her laugh and him redden, but then laughing at himself.

Ori saw Thorin watching them dance from over the rim of his cup. Ori lost a breath or two in apprehension but Thorin seemed perfectly at ease. When he caught Ori staring Thorin winked.
Robes, Romance, and Rude Bits.

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Dori loves his new home and growing wardrobe, Nori loves getting up to mischief and Ori loves his kittens and Dwalin! Yes, that song is exactly what you think it is. You’re all on your own for snacks this time as supper’s finished and the people of Dale ate most of it. Do join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The people of Dale departed with their new king, Bard. There was a good deal of laughter in the talk along with some side long glances and whispers at Prince Fili and the new Crown Princess Sigrid. They were apart from the crowd, sitting on one of the long tables now clear of dishes in the receiving room, Fili cross-legged on the table and Sigrid beside him her feet on a chair seat, and talking quite seriously to each other in low tones.

Ori went through and sat down on the sitting room sofa, quite pooped. Thorin’s Company drifted through in ones and twos until they were able to shut up the receiving room and everyone had settled in the sitting room and only quiet talk was heard. Dori, Binni and Gridr once again produced tea and, as Binni called them, snackies.

The door popped open and Omi and Loli barged back in with Buj and made their way to the snacks and the bookshelf to sit about. They were soon followed by Mahdrin and his two favorite assistants. The tailors came forward and bowed to Thorin.

"My king," Mahdrin murmured, "I am here as I understand there will soon be a presentation of a bearer to the court."

Thorin stared at Mahdrin. "I am the crown prince. King Thror is in his treasury."

Mahdrin widened his eyes and bowed again.

"Just so, sire."

Mahdrin, with another bow, moved on to speak to Binni.

Dain threw an arm around Thorin’s shoulders.

“Lemme give yeh some advice, 'cous. If yeh announce yehrself wi’ a bonfire on a mountaintop, yeh can’t put it out by pissin’ on it.”

“It was Bard’s bonfire,” Thorin argued.

Dain snorted and smacked him lightly on the back of the head.

“Idjit.”

Thorin laughed, a genuine laugh that made his demeanor lighter and his face more handsome. Ori could see just how much care had worn Thorin down.

A movement caught Ori’s eye and he looked at Pika. The young dwarf was staring at Omi who had just turned from her inspection of the books on the far shelves; she was singing softly to herself. She stopped, stared back at him, tossed her be-ribboned beard, and pointed her left boot toe outward in a decidedly flirtatious gesture. Ori was amused that little Moth had grown up fully absorbed with Loli’s courage.

Pika bowed with such a swoop, his right knee hit the floor. He made the Iglishmêk sign for 'heart'. Omi blushed and giggled behind her hand and fluttered her fingers for 'song'. Pika amazed Ori by prancing across the intervening floor in a step dance. Omi hopped in place until they were close enough to clasp hands. They stood gazing into each other’s eyes. Their foreheads bowed and touched.
Ori smiled at the sweet scene. They turned away from the rest of the company, quite in their own world.

Dori came bustling through at that point. Balin introduced his tailor to his betrothed. Mahdrin was obviously most taken and called his assistants but there was no response.

Omi and Pika were seated close together, sharing a chair. Their fingers danced in Iglishmêk. Ori watched them then blushed hotly. He was married and well read, but some of the things they were saying to each other were shocking and rather interesting.

There was a crash and Ori looked around at Buj and Dipfa. Buj had dropped his books, notes, and pens in a heap around his feet. Dipfa stood in a similar pool of fabric and haberdashery. They stared at one another in open mouthed silence. By now everyone had noticed them and watched most interestingly. Dipfa gave out a sudden, delighted scream of joy and rushed at Buj.

"My heartsong!" Buj managed to bellow before the force of Dipfa landed on him, knocking them both to the floor where they rolled energetically, rapturously kissing.

The Urs chuckled and the sons of Groin almost as loudly. Thorin face palmed and shook his head. Dwalin winked at Ori. Fili and Kili watched with interest as their mother and aunt tried to pull the boys away.

Dori looked highly amused and Balin put his arm around Dori's waist.

"Ah, lovely memories, eh, m'dear?"

"Yes, but at least we waited until we were not quite so public."

"Aye, nothin' as shockin' as a sittin' room floor. We were very discreet in tha' lovely pub's airin' cupboard."

"Oi," Nori cried. "The pair a' ye pounced on each other and had yer first tup in an airing cupboard. Well, that's romance!"

Dori rounded on him.

"You and Bofur aren't to talk. I caught the pair of you in my bed!"

Nori looked vaguely guilty and Bofur came to his rescue.

"Now then, we changed the bedding f'r yeh, yeh know we did! Even after yeh chased both of us up th' street with a mop!"

"Yes," said Dori, "and left me the laundry to do, you dirty badgers!"

Mahdrin cleared his throat with extreme volume and Dipfa and Pika recalled themselves.

"Master Mahdrin!"

Pika stood at attention, red to his hair and Omi sat fanning herself with both hands, panting slightly.

Dipfa rushed over and stood ready, now oblivious to Buj, who was still in a somewhat confused heap on the floor. He blinked, rolled a little and pulled out his notebook. He flipped a few pages and began to make copious notes.

Ori could not decide if he wanted to know what Buj was writing.

Dwalin dropped onto the sofa beside him.

"Well, love, Balin and Dori went at it in an airing cupboard. Bofur an' Nori borrowed Dori's bed. Yeh know, everyone who's sayin our marriage were sudden an' shockin're full a shit."

Ori giggled.

"Except they think that I think you're Beorn of the Valley."

Dwalin snorted

"Aye, true enough."

A worry float across Ori’s mind.

"Dwalin, are you disappointed in me?"

Dwalin stared

"'Eh? Wha'? Why th' fuck would I be?"

"Well, because we really haven't...done anything yet."

"Di' yeh like wha' we've done?"

"Oh, yes, but-"

"Then tha's wha' matters."
"But you...um..." Ori wasn't sure how to frame what he wanted to say. "Do you like what we've done?" he said finally.

Dwalin shot him a feral grin and put his arm about Ori’s shoulders. Ori pressed closer instinctively.

"I donno, love. Wha yeh think?"

Ori chuckled. "Sometimes I worry..."

"Don't. Keepin' yeh happy makes me happy. Don't ever forget tha'..."

Ori turned to lean into Dwalin's lap and laid his head over Dwalin's heart.

"I'm so happy it frightens me sometimes. We have all this intrigue and things rushing around us and all I think about is that it must be a lovely dream that I married you."

"Even when there're ravens draggin' yeh through Mahal knows wha'?"

Ori giggled again.

"Well, it may have slipped my mind for a moment or two at that point," he said.

Nori came over with Bofur and the pair of them sat on the low stone table. Nori looked at Ori thoughtfully for a moment then reached over and tweaked Ori's family braid.

"Yeh happy, pet?"

Ori smile and lazily brought his leg around to kick Nori's boot.

"Yes, I am. So there "

Nori kicked at Ori's and they thumped their boots together back and forth for a few moments. Nori grunted and kicked Dwalin's boot again.

"Alright, wee pet. If yeh're happy then I'm happy f'r yeh."

Nori winked at Ori and removed Nori's vest knife. Nori looked at Bofur with raised brows and then snatched Bofur's hat away. Bofur tried to get it back but Nori threw it to Ori. Intrigued, Ori tried it on. It was nice and warm but it was too big and the front slid down covering his eyes. Amused, Ori sat up and folded his arms against his sides then flapped his elbows.

"Quack! Quack! Quack!" he said, slightly muffled by the hat.

Bofur and Nori roared with laughter. The hat was removed and Ori turned to see Dwalin try it on. Dwalin's head was too big and the hat perched on top like a hedgehog.

Ori yipped happily, grabbed the hat and jammed it down on Nori's head. Nori yowled and tried to free himself. Ori half climbed on the table attempting to keep the hat squashed on Nori's head. Nori's hand shot out and rippled along Ori's sides, tickling him. Ori screamed and fell on Dwalin, laughing.

"Oi! Don't you two go spoiling my hat!" Bofur shouted and rescued it.

Nori's amazing hairdo was utterly wrecked. The top point was bent down to where the tip pointed at Nori's nose. Nori swore and tried in vain to fix it. Dwalin stood, neatly put Nori in a headlock and wound the point tightly around his fingers then let go.

Nori glared.

"Bastard," he said as Ori and Bofur laughed helplessly. Nori's once perfectly triangular point was now a long stiff coil winding straight out from his forehead.

Bofur recovered and managed, "it's not all that bad, duck. Looks like yer off t' a fancy party." Ori giggled.

"You look like Poofy, the Magic Horned Horse from Tilda's old story book."

Nori stood up on the table and started to sing an old traditional dwarrow marching song using his deepest voice and his own lyrics.

"I'm a horned horsey
I'm a horned horsey
What's having a horn all about?
I'm a horned horsey
I'm a horned horsey
Having a horn is magic!"
Bofur pulled out his flute and kept the tune for him.

"I'm a horned horsey
I used to wonder what kind of hay I'd eat at night.
I'm a horned horsey
Until the goats shared their pasture grass with me!"

Dwalin was completely flopped back against the sofa, laughing so hard, he just shook soundlessly. Ori put his face in his husband's line of vision. Dwalin silently jerked a thumb towards the back. Ori looked over. Dis, Thorin, Fili and Kili all stood behind the sofa, staring at Nori. Thorin's face hadn't worked out what he was feeling. Dis and her sons had eyes like saucers.
Nori noticed them and finished in a bullfrog's voice.

"Yes, I'm a horned horsey!"

Nori bowed low, removed Bofur's hat from the miner's head and waved it for a flourish. Ori glanced around to see the reactions. Gloin in the other chair shook his head. Oin opposite his brother, snored while Omi slept at his knee. Buj was still on the floor writing busily.
Dori swept back into the room with his entourage of Binni, Gridr, Jani, Mahdrin and his assistants.
Dori looked up.
"Nori, get off the table."
Nori hopped off and started going around with the hat held out in solicitation.
Both Fili and Kili happily dropped a couple of silver coins in.
Nori went to Dis.
"Go away," she said with a giggle.
Nori looked offended.
"Wicked princess! I'll have yeh know I'm a happy horned horsey an' if yeh don't put silver in my happy horsey hat, I'll impale yeh with my magic horn!"
Dis laughed harder.
Nori grinned and danced forward and made as though to poke her with his hair. Dis grabbed the horn and yanked on it. Nori grabbed Dis and hoisted her over his shoulder.
"The Happy Horned Horsey has a prisoner! I shall gallop around!" Nori shouted as he started to rush around the room recklessly leaping and climbing over furniture. The young princes shouted and tore after Nori and their hopelessly laughing mother. There was a whoop from Bofur and Jani as they joined the race.
Ori stood up on the sofa to watch. Dwalin rose and stood with Thorin, Balin and Dori.
"How nice," Dori said, smiling. "Nori has always missed the days when I played with him."
Thorin snickered.
"Well Dis always did enjoy it when Dwalin and I used to rough house with her."
Dwalin turned to Ori. Ori snatched up a tasseled cushion and grabbed at Dwalin's shoulder. Ori had been planning on a pig-a-back but Dwalin hoisted him up to sit on his shoulders.
Nori saw what was in the wind and fumbled Dis to sit on his shoulders. She was laughing so hard she wasn't much help and her skirts were bummled up and everywhere. Nori rushed toward Dwalin and Ori, hollering it was time for a joust. Half-way there Dis' skirts fell over his face, blinding him. Nori careened forward anyway. Dwalin dodged and Nori rammed into Oin's chair. Nori fell over the chair arm and Dis crashed down on Oin.
Omi and Oin shrieked awake.
"What in Durin's name?" the old dwarf roared.
"It's all Nori's fault," cried Dis and she frantically tried to get herself together and ended rolling off the other arm.
“I don’t care if it’s all for naught. The pair of you should watch what you’re doing,” Oin scolded. “Her skirts got in me eyes,” said Nori as he tried to shift the blame. “Dessert was lovely! I’ll tell your poor brother you said there was only shit for pies,” Oin vowed dangerously and rose.

Ori leaned on Dwalin’s head. He was laughing so hard his ribs hurt.

Dwalin reached up and slowly took Ori down sliding him against Dwalin’s body which Ori enjoyed. Mahdrin and Dipfa were having a last minute discussion with Dori. Binni, Bombur, and Bofur began to clean up. Fili and Kili were sent through to the kitchen to wash dishes. Thorin was talking quietly with Bifur. Dain and Sculdis were talking to Stonehelm and the other younger dwarrows. Ori trip to suppress a yawn. Jane and Dis were sitting on the sofa arm hand in hand.

Ori went back into the kitchen to check on his kittens. They were still in their basket, curled together sound asleep. One cracked an eye open, saw him and began to mew. This woke the other two. Soon Ori was seated beside them on the floor, feeding them warm milk from a teaspoon again. He pondered that it might be best if he took them to the bedroom that night. They would probably get hungry again in a few hours.

Ori found a stone flask for carrying tea and soup. He carefully filled this with more warm milk and stoppering it tightly, put it in his pocket; carrying the basket of now-sleeping kittens, he went through to the bedroom. Dwalin came through a moment later.

“Yeh beat me t’ it, love.”

“I’ve got milk for them, too, if they wake up in a few hours. Where do you think would be the best place?”

They decided the safest spot was by bedside on the floor, nearest the headboard, so there was no danger of the little fur balls tumbling off the bed and no danger of stepping on them. Ori put the flask and spoon on the bedside table.

Garnet came to inspect.

"Tha’s no’ a snack," Dwalin warned her.

She gave him what Ori could swear was a raven ‘I’m not impressed’ look.

Dwalin put a screen before the fire and attached it securely. He stretched and yawned.

“I’m off f’r a wash and a salt soak. Somethin’ abou’ Calmar’s thugs makes me feel like I bin tussling with orcs. Filthy bastards.”

“I’ll bring you some vinegar and natron to scrub yourself. Mind, with that lot I’d be tempted to offer lye,” Ori suggested.

Dwalin snickered as he left the room.

Garnet whisked out the window on some mission of her own.

Ori made the kittens comfortable, turned down the bed covers and washed his face in the basin before pulling on his drawers and night shirt. He scrunched down on hands and knees for a bit, watching Sassy’s babies.

The orange one was definitely Nori. This might cause difficulty if he was calling for either one as cats didn’t usually come when called, but then neither did Nori. A naughty smile crossed his face. The kitten could be Nori-pori, very singsong-y. Bofur would laugh his head off, Nori would growl but if Ori was lucky the kitten would come when called and with the suffix Nori would pointedly ignore him.

The grey kitten he thought would be Powder and the three-colored one, Mask. He got up again, a little stiff from being in that position for so long, and glanced at the timepiece on the bedside table. An hour had passed since Dwalin went to bathe. Ori frowned. He must have got caught up talking to someone. If that was Thorin, Ori decided he’d better interfere.

He peeked out the bedroom door and looked about the hallway. Only the phosphorescent light showed. Ori padded barefoot through to the bathroom and saw the door ajar. He pushed it open. Dwalin sat in the tub in the light of a single torchiere. The water was a thin, milky color for the salts. Dwalin’s head was bent forward. He looked to be asleep. Ori came into the room and stopped half way, remembering that one should never startle a warrior from sleep as it was a good
"Dwalin?" he whispered.
The only reply was a whoof of an out breath.
He tried again.
"Dwalin? Husband, wake up."
Dwalin’s head lifted slowly. He blinked, turned and saw Ori.
"Love? Shit, I must a’ been’ dozin’.
Ori came to the side of the tub.
"It would be an ignominious thing to drown in the tub after such a triumph."
Dwalin chuckled,
"Aye, it would. How long I bin here?"
"Nearly an hour."
"Fuck."
Ori was turned by a sudden idea. Half eager, half terrified, he dropped his drawers and, grabbing hold of the tub sides, carefully climbed in. Dwalin looked surprised then feral. The bathwater was not steaming hot as it must have been but the stone tub, the warmth of the surrounding water pipes and chunks of salt held the heat so it was not chilled. Ori put a foot down near the edge and his foot slid past the outside of Dwalin’s leg. He stood warily and started to put the other foot down. The salts had made the bottom of the tub slippery and down he went.
Dwalin let out an ‘oof’ as Ori landed clumsily on his chest and water splashed and poured over the tub’s sides.
"Shards!" Ori muttered, feeling his face flame.
He would have scrambled up, but the weight of his soaked nightshirt made it hard to move quickly. He was such an orc. He should have paid attention to the side of his brain said this was bound to happen. He should have-
Dwalin was laughing, not mockingly, but a fond and happy laugh, and to Ori’s surprise Dwalin caught him close and, sliding his hands under Ori’s hips, pulled him up to straddle Dwalin lap.
"Well!" Dwalin said, eyes bright. "Fancy findin’ yeh here, love!"
Ori giggled nervously before he found his courage again. He didn’t quite know where to look as he pulled off the sodden nightshirt and dropped it in the puddle at the side of the tub. Naked, he leaned back and grinned shyly up. Dwalin looked extremely pleased, both at what he’d done and how he looked.
Dwalin trailed blunt, gentle fingers down his cheek, down his chest, and lingeringly caressed a nipple.
Ori drew in a sharp breath of surprise. He had never thought to touch himself there.
When Dwalin moved his hand Ori caught it and put it back, biting his lower lip, completely flustered.
Dwalin growled.
"Yeh like tha’, do yeh?"
Dwalin ducked forward for a kiss and Ori was happy to oblige. Now that his mouth knew Dwalin’s it heightened the pleasure and made him sure of what he had dared to do. Well, that made him sure and Dwalin’s growing hardness confirmed it. No voice in his head would stop him now.
The salts clouded the water, so Ori went by feel and hoped to Mahal that he would do this right. He slid hands down through the slick hair on Dwalin’s chest and stomach, under the water and around Dwalin’s cock.
He only knew what had worked for himself the few times he’d stolen moments to do so, but Dwalin was bigger. Ori shrugged inwardly and used both hands.
A breath caught in Dwalin’s throat. Ori stole a glance, not quite daring to look his husband in the eye.
It seemed that what had worked for him did fine for Dwalin. His eyes lost focus and his head fell back and he grinned foolishly.
"Ahhh, love," he murmured, “yer hands’er perfect!”
Encouraged Ori concentrated on his work. Dwalin’s own hand rubbed up and down his back in rhythm with his own. Abruptly Dwalin sat up and seized hold of Ori’s hands and tightened them. They locked eyes as Dwalin let out a gasp and a long groan of pleasure and slow, deep shudder.

Ori released him, smiling, elated. Dwalin pulled him up hard and they kissed.

“How’d yeh know jus’ wha’ I were needin’?” Dwalin murmured in his ear when he got his breath back.

“I didn’t. I just wanted to.”

“Anytime, love,” Dwalin chuckled. “Yeh get wantin’ yeh jus’ come an’ find me I’ll see t’ yeh.”

“Or I’ll see to you,” Ori teased.

Dwalin laughed.

"Right, love. Let’s get this salt offa us.”

Dwalin rose, lifting Ori clear of the water and stepped out of the tub. Ori leaned over his arm and pulled the chain of the stopper. He expected Dwalin to set him down but Dwalin carried him over to the limestone enclosure where the spigot emerged from the wall above them. He put Ori down and the spigot gushed pleasantly hot water over the pair of them. Dwalin soaped a washcloth and rubbed Ori down with it, taking his time, and when Ori was covered with suds Dwalin tossed the cloth aside and did the same with his big, powerful hands.

Ori closed his eyes, his breath coming quicker. He didn’t know how he was keeping his feet as Dwalin’s hands slid over his skin. The lather made the movement smooth and slick and Ori moaned aloud before he could stop himself. He shook his head to clear it, but then he was in Dwalin’s arms and the lather made a tease of all that friction. Ori really felt he could do this forever.

“So beautiful,” he said, “I love touching you.”

Dwalin grunted impatiently.

He muttered something about touch, but he had already pulled Ori under the spray and rinsed the pair of them. Ori was about to step out but Dwalin backed him against the wall with a naughty grin.

“No’ finished, love,” he said.

He dropped to his knees and caught Ori’s hips firmly in his hands.

“Dwalin? What? Ooooh!”

Dwalin’s mouth sucked in his cock and held him firmly in perfect, tight heat. Ori had never dreamed anything could feel this amazing. He couldn’t feel his legs and he didn’t really miss them. He was almost drowning in the sheer delight of Dwalin’s tongue swirling around him.

Then there was no thinking anymore, no room to think. He moaned Dwalin’s name, clutching a double handful of Dwalin’s hair, gasped and babbled that he was going to come and Dwalin ought to-

His knees gave out and he was vaguely aware of sliding down the wall in a blissful haze. He heard Dwalin chuckle and felt the room move around him as he was sat on the stool, Dwalin drying him with a towel.

“I love you,” Ori said, grinning and wondering how he would ever manage to walk again.

Dwalin hoisted him easily once more and walked out of the bathroom into the hall. Ori nuzzled his neck mumbling that Dwalin was beautiful and must be the very image of Mahal and he was perfect in every way. Dwalin hugged him closer. Ori was faintly aware of Nori’s voice telling them to get a room.

“Not t’ worry, nuisance. It’s where we’re headed,” Dwalin answered cheerily.

Dwalin laid Ori down on their bed. Ori sighed with happiness. He reached up as Dwalin lay beside him and enclosed Ori in a hug.

“I love yeh, too, me darlin’, me ghivashel,” Dwalin whispered.

Ghivashel. Treasure of treasures.

He turned Ori on his side and spooned behind him. Ori closed his eyes, warm and content in his husband’s arms.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Now that everyone has settled, we can proceed with the next part of the adventure! Such fun! Be sure to have your own snacks on hand as we have another meal in this chapter and it won’t do if any of you drool on your keyboards or phones!! Do join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori jolted awake at the first morning volley going off in the center of the mountain. Oh, Mahal! He’d be late to the library. He hopped out of bed, waking Dwalin.

“Love? Shit! Was tha’ th’ first volley?”

“Yes, I’m going to be late,” Ori gasped, splashing water on his face and throwing on some clothes, the nearest he could find.

“The kittens!” he remembered as one mewed and the other two were stretching.

“I’ll tend ’em. Get yourself gone, love.”

Ori rushed over, kissed Dwalin, and tore out of the room. He galloped into the kitchen, grabbed a roll stuffed with egg, cheese and bacon off the plate, and yelled something with his mouth full back at a disgusted Dori and laughing Balin.

He sped along the corridor to the city and caught up with Omi and Loli, who were also rushing along, bits of breakfast in their hands.

“I can’t believe all three of us will be late,” wailed Loli, swallowing down the last bite of cheese scone and trying to re-tie a ribbon in her beard.

“But such a day yesterday!” bubbled Omi.

“Hush,” warned Ori. “No one’s supposed to know. At least, I don’t think they are.”

“How can they not?” Loli wondered.

“I’m in love with a beautiful dwarf named Pika,” Omi crooned. “He’s so accomplished! He is so erudite in Iglishmêk and he studies how color expresses silence!”

“How?” Ori asked wondering vaguely if this was the case how Pika managed to co-exist with Dipfa.

“The solidity of primary colors,” Omi said authoritatively.

Loli caught Ori’s eye and rolled hers.

They were able to slow to a sedate pace as they arrived at the entrance of the library. Buj plodded
toward them, moving as though he was underwater.

They reached the reference entrance. Ori, Loli and Omi slowed to a stop and stared around. It was empty of workers, silent and unlit, but for a few tapers.

Buj kept moving, smacked hard into a pillar, bounced backward three steps, bowed and said, “I beg your pardon, Master Brur.”

“Buj. I am behind you,” said Master Brur, dryly.

The four of them turned and peered at the librarian, who managed to look down on them from a great height despite the fact that he was shorter than any of them.

“The lot of you, go home,” he ordered.

Ori gulped.

“But, Master Brur-“

“Oh, for the love o’ Mahal’s blessed arse. Mebbe th’ nobles ain’t noticed yet, but yeh overthrew a government last night. Yeh’ve earned a little time off. Home. Bed. Now.”

“Yes, Master Brur,” they chorused, turned as one and filed back out again.

On the way home, Omi got the hysterical giggles and it was contagious.

They remained in a ridiculous cadre all the way to Fundin House and through the gate, through the front door, through the sitting room door to where Dori, tidying, looked up in surprise.

“What’s happened, pet?”

“Master Brur says overthrowing a government means we get to stay home and nap.”

“All of you?”

It never occurred to Ori that this might be unusual. They trooped through toward the bedroom.

At the clamor, Dwalin entered from the washroom.

“What the fuck?”

Ori grinned at him as he and his friends went into the bedroom, shucked off their boots, climbed into bed.

“Saved you a space,” said Ori with a sleepy smile before falling quite asleep.

He awoke briefly to a loud ‘thud’, but since Dwalin was now curled up around him, he had no desire to investigate.

By the time he woke again, Dori was at the door, calling them for supper.

“Pet,” said Dori, “why is Buj on the floor?”
Ori peered over Dwalin and down on the floor. Buj was flat on his back, he would have been snoring but there were three kittens sleeping on him; Powder on his brow, Mask on his beard and Nori-Pori on his face.

“Um, warming the kittens?” Ori offered with a grin up at Dori. Dori clicked his tongue and shook the dams’ shoulders.

“Up you get, dears. Get yourselves tidied and dressed. Dinner’s ready.”

Buj and the girls filed out. Ori sat up. Nori’s description of Furh’nk being so excited the he looked like he was going to tell Balin the Dis had laid an egg floated into his brain. He giggled a bit.

“What love?” Dwalin asked gently, a hand on the small of Ori’s back.

“Nothing. I was just remembering Nori how described that scene in the throne room with Vors.”

“Telt yeh ‘bout tha’, did ‘e?” Dawlin said sleepily.

“Yes, he told me Furh’nk rushed in all excited and looked like he was going to tell Balin Dis had laid an egg.”

“What?!” roared Dwalin, sitting up straight, looking wild-eyed at Ori.

Ori shrugged.

Dwalin paused a moment longer then fell back on the bed, bellowing with laughter.

Ori watched delighted as his husband almost fell out of bed.

Soon the five of them were making their way through to the breakfast room. Dwalin sat with Ori and Buj plumped down near them. Stonehelm moved to let the girls in on either side off him. Sculdis came in, dressed in what Ori guessed was Dain’s night shirt and smacked Dain lightly in the arm.

“Squash up, you. I’m sitting here too.”

She crowded him over and Chopper stirred at Dain’s feet under the table, but only turned onto his back and snored. Dain and Sculdis had pulled the bread closest to them and were demolishing it with lashings of butter.

The Durins, the Urs, and the Sons of Groin were all there along with Legolas and Tauriel. Gridr, Dis, and Jani had arrived from the bath.

Dis sat with a graceless thump, far too tired to remember her manners or to care that everyone had now seen her in her oldest, rattiest, most comfortable shift. Her freshly washed hair and beard were braided into simple plaits without ornaments and her eyes sat in deep shadows under her brows.

Bofur had jumped up when the dams arrived and now he put a mug of ale in front of each of them.

“Thank you, Bofur,” said Dis.

“Pleasure’s mine,” said Bofur.
“Durin males, take note,” said Dis. “A gentledwarf of quality notices when a dam needs a drink and brings her one.”

“You missed it,” Gridr said, sitting down next to her husband. “Our Dis did such a song and dance yesterday, she stole the whole show.”

“I wish I’d only stolen half of it,” said Dis. “I’m glad it’s Dori’s presentation tomorrow and not mine. I’m done.”

“I don’t see what’s so exhausting about serving tea,” Thorin teased.

“Dori,” said Dis, “do we have any forks left? I need to stab my brother.”

“Just use his, dear,” said Dori. “That way I only have to wash it once.”

“A hundred and twenty gallons of tea, Thorin,” said Dis pointedly. “I drank at least two gallons of that myself. I’ve tanned my innards to rawhide for you.”

“I acknowledge and honor the sacrifice of your innards,” said Thorin. “Seriously, Dis, all of you, thank you for this. You managed to pull off something in two days that it usually takes months to plan.”

Gridr waved a negligent hand.

“Lot easier when you don’t have to send invitations.”

“Really, Thorin,” said Dis, “we couldn’t leave it up to you. You would have served them a buffet of cold cuts, tapped a keg of ale and still managed to burn down the kitchen.”

She turned to speak to her youngest but shut her mouth and nudged Jani who giggled.

Kili was next to the elf dam, gazing at her worshipfully. Gimli and Legolas were arguing over how many of the thugs Legolas had downed.

“It was forty three,” Legolas affirmed.

“That ain’t what Dain said,” Gimli argued.

“That’s King Dain,” Legolas pointed out.

“Exactly,” Gimli grumbled.

Gridr was admiring the pair and Gloin was trying to but was too confused by the attraction between his son and an elf.

The Ur men were occupied with baiting Jani and Dis, who were teasing in their turn. Oin was discussing something with Thorin, Bifur, and Fili. Binni and Dori came through bringing out dinner and scolded everyone to attend and eat.

“You still haven’t told us what happened in the city,” said Dis, pointing a serving spoon at Dwalin.

“First we picked off Calmar’s sentries,” said Dwalin. “I should say our Nori picked off th’ sentries. I never though’ I’d be happy tha’ our Nori’s so blasted hard t’ catch. Bit vicious. He didn’t kill any of ‘em, but he wasn’ gentle. Where’d he learn t’ do that’s wha’ I want t’ know.”
“The quietness, I have no idea,” said Ori. “I think he gets the viciousness from Dori.

“Now pet,” Dori reproved but his eyes twinkled merrily as he filled Ori’s plate for him.

Ori was happy to tuck into roasted mutton garnished with meaty brown mushrooms and roasted potatoes. Tiny onions smothered in bread sauce were in a huge bowl and a enormous platter of rabbits cut in strips and fried crisp, on a bed of new peas were passed around. Tangy mint sauce and pickled tomato puree were in bowls to be spooned on the sides.

“Most o’ th’ lads took th’ perimeter,” Dwalin went on.

“Originally,” said Kili, chimed in “I was supposed to guard the perimeter while Fili went house to house with Bard, but there’s no way I’m leaving Fi’s back undefended.”

“There were other people to do that,” Dis reminded him, “including your Idad Thorin.”

Kili shook his head.

“I belong with my brother. We’re better as a team. Besides, Fi doesn’t have a Dwalin to keep him safe. Every crown prince should have a Dwalin. He should be standard issue. Since there’s only one of him Fili will just have to make do with me.”

“Mahal has a weird sense of humor,” Fili commented and got a piece of rabbit thrown at him.

Dori went back into the kitchen and brought more bread in the form of small, floury rolls. Bofur and Kili were soon throwing these at Stonehelm, who was an excellent catcher and had quite remarkable aim as well.

In the distance, they heard someone call. Dori hurried off and then welcomed Bard into the room.

Thorin rose with a grin and a bow.

“Do come in your majesty, we are deeply honored.”

“Shut up,” grumbled Bard, obviously embarrassed. He bowed to the ladies and came and sat a little awkwardly as Dain wretched over a chair and banged it up near the table.

“Siddown, Bard! Eat yer fill b’fore these wargs finish it. Ouch!”

Both Sculdis and Dori bopped Dain on the head at the same time which made him chuckle. Dori put a plate piled high with food in front of Bard and Thorin handed down a mug foaming over with ale. Bard looked a little unsure but the smell of the food stopped that and in a moment he was eating like a man starving.

“How did you get all those Dale people to come with your without causing an uproar?” Ori asked when the rolls stopped flying.

Thorin grinned.

“That was Bard. He went with us to every single house and asked them to go with the nice dwarrow. They love him to pieces down there.”

Thorin winked as Bard said something rude with his mouthful. Bofur chimed in at that point.

“He’s been in Calmar’s lockup more times than anyone else. It’s like battle scars to them. Offering them free meals didn’t hurt either.”
Ori nodded, food was hard to come by often if you weren’t part of the rich who fawned on Calmar.

Buj had poured his plate full of onions in sauce, picked out and eaten all the onions. He was now staring at his plate, as though undecided about what to do with the lake of sauce left.

Gimli took his plate away, poured half the sauce over all his own food and a roll and poured the rest all over Legolas’s rabbit. Legolas smiled sweetly at Gimli, who blushed, grunted, and handed Buj’s plate back to him. Problem solved, Buj reached for the peas, covered his plate with them and dumped most of the pickled tomato puree over the steaming green mound.

“Then what?” Dis wanted to know.

Fili, being the only one without his mouth full, recalled, “We started from the edge of town. We had the perimeter set up as planned. The thugs might’ve gone to ground but they weren’t getting out of Dale. Then Furh’nk and Bard cleared two streets of innocents and once they were on their way to the mountain we started on the first street picking up targets. We went to the first house on Nori’s list. Then we went to the next and the next. Right, Kí?”

Kili nodded, while he was making sure Tauriel’s plate was supplied with mushrooms, which she was enjoying thoroughly. Dwalin buttered a roll, shoved a large piece of roast potato in it, and handed it to Ori. Ori chewed ecstatically and immediately surrendered his peas over to his husband.

“Calmar’s men never knew wha’ boulder fell on ‘em,” said Dwalin around a mouthful of mushrooms. “Some put up a fight, but no’ many. Most’ve ‘em were smart enough t’ surrender. Now if only they’d bin smart enough no’ t’ be arseholes in th’ firs’ place. Ah, well, Dain an’ Thorin had themselves a merry time with tha’.”

Dain laughed raucously and said, “Aye, well, waking up in their wee trundle beds surrounded by twelve heavily armed dwarrow smartened ‘em up quick.”

Thorin shot his cousin a grin.

“You enjoyed that a little too much.”

“There’s no such thing, cous’.”

Nori snorted.

“Oh, right. There they are, asleep in the lap o’ Mahal and then Dain calls ‘em,” Nori did a credible imitation of Dain, complete with evil grin: ‘Wakey wakey, sweet pot. There’s a lad. Now better come along quiet or I’ll have to stick me axe up yer arse. Aw, look, he shite the bed. Naughty!’”

The room fell apart.

“Well, he did,” Dain insisted. “Wha’ a stench! Mahal alone knows wha’ he had t’ eat tha’ night.”

Suddenly there was a angry scream from Dori and he bounced up and rushed over to slap Nori, who was drinking the mint sauce straight from the jug.

“Oi! It’s a compliment t’ th’ cook!” Nori protested.

“Then just say so, you horrid badger, and leave some for others.”
“Everyone’s had some.”

“That’s not the point!” Dori snapped and snatched the jug away, huffed in annoyance that the jug was empty, and flounced back into the kitchen. Dain reached over and ruffled Nori’s hair.

“Good lad, wee brother. Mint’s a proper tonic f’r the stomach. Sensible f’r yeh t’ look after yer health.”

“Mint promotes digestion,” Sculdis confirmed.

Nori grinned maniacally and Bofur roared with laughter. Bard stretched and pushed back his now empty plate, looking happy and sated. Dis grinned at him.

“Would you like to get a word in edgeways?”

Bard laughed,

“It’s alright milady, I have three children, I’m used to not get a word in at all, but if you insist.”

“And you know we do, your majesty,” Thorin teased. Bard flipped his middle finger at Thorin which Ori knew was a curse gesture among men.

Bard took a long pull at his ale and settled.

“By the time we got to Calmar’s house, he’d somehow gotten wind,” said Bard. “That was a mess. He’d had a tunnel dug out to escape and he made a break for it. Bofur warned us not to follow him down there, and good thing too. Once he started running, Calmar collapsed the tunnel behind him, and the house on top of it.”

“How did you catch him?” Legolas asked.

“His own men ratted him out about the tunnel exit. Even then, he had a head start. He still might have gotten away if he didn’t try to take every ounce of gold he owned with him.”

“Where is he now?” Dis inquired.

“In his own lockup, thanks to your Furh’nk” Bard grinned. “I’m happy to say the accommodations aren’t to his liking.”

“Where is Furh’nk?” Dori put in suddenly. The room went silent. Frowns crossed a number of faces.

“I remember you telling him to go to bed in my old room,” Ori recalled. Dori and Binni exchanged a look and Binni vanished.

In a short time, Dori rose to get dessert while the younger dwarrow gathered the dishes to take them through. Fortunately, all were scraped clean as Fili, Kili and Nori began to chuck them about and juggle the flatware. Bofur piped a merry tune to keep time.

Ori stood patiently, moving slightly as dishes landed in an ever growing pile in his arms. He carried the plates to the kitchen. The others following with the platters and the rest. Binni arrived looking amused and bade them to put all the washing up in the sink. Dori was fussing over what looked like an enormous tart as well as a metal bucket which was so cold the sides were frosted. There were three porcelain pitchers warming on the cook top. Ori went back into the parlor just as Furh’nk walked in.
Furh’nk seemed to be slightly muddled and his hair and beard jutted off entirely to his left, as though he’d stood in a stiff gale. He’d had the presence of mind to remove most of his uniform before he went to sleep, but was less than successful donning it again, and some of the buckles were fastened to wrong ends.

With a squint, he took in the room, bowed to Thorin and presented himself to a startled Dwalin with great dignity.

“At ease, Furh’nk,” said Dwalin, rubbing his own temple and obviously struggling for control. “Sit down an’ eat. Then go back t’ bed.”

“Yes, captain,” said Furh’nk.

He sat, his eyes closed, and he started to snore.

“Or not,” said Dwalin.

“Brother,” Balin began. “Brother, how long was Furh’nk on duty before th’ siege?”

“I thought’ he’d stood down with th’ others a’ th’ end o’ every shift,” said Dwalin.

“I believe yeh thought wrong,” said Balin.

“Aye, an’ yeh’d be right. Fuck yeh anyway, Balin.”

Dwalin rose, moved to the comatose guard, slung him over his shoulder with a grunt and left. Binni followed with a flask and what looked like a covered dish of food.

They returned in a few minutes.

“Maple sugar tart!” Dori announced and placed a communal platter on the table with fresh bowls and a serving spoon.

“Maple?” Thorin inquired.

Legolas smiled.

“Yes, my people tap these trees for their sap in the spring. If boiled down, it makes a soft, brown sugar unlike the beets the Hobbits use or the cane that’s grown in the south. The flavor is very pleasant.”

“Indeed,” Dori said proudly. “And it makes a delightful sweet tart and the sap when boiled half way makes a delicious syrup to pour over. That’s what’s in the jugs. Have a care, it’s hot. And there is sweet, frozen custard flavored with it, too.”

They fell on it like wargs.

Dori finished his and played with the few drops of syrup on his plate. Ori knew that look. Dori was planning something.

“Do-ri!” he teased.

“Yes, pet?”

“What are you thinking of doing?”
Dori smiled wickedly.

“I think this maple sap or syrup will make a quite marvelous mead.”

There was a table-wide cheer.

Ori curled himself into the corner of the sofa before the fireplace. Omi, Loli, Fili, Gimli and Stonehelm were playing cards on the floor. Legolas sat behind Gimli as Gimli explained the game and Legolas watched his cards.

Buj was on a stool so near the fire, Ori thought he must be roasting himself while he busily wrote in his book. Kili and Tauriel shared a cushion watching the game and whispering.

Gloin, Gridr, Thorin and the other older group were sitting around the kitchen table. Their conversations and laughter drifting through.

Ori remembered and checked beside the sofa then went to the far cupboard. He withdrew the basket and returned to his corner. He took out his knitting happily. He’d just finished a line when Dwalin came out of the kitchen and sat down beside him. He grinned at Ori’s work and put a mug of tea down on the table near him.

“Thank you,” Ori smiled and snuggled a little closer,

“Good t’ see yeh down’ th’ work yeh like, love.

Dori came out of the kitchen and took Bofur over to a corner and had a very serious conversation with him. Bofur paled and nodded wide-eyed. Dori seemed satisfied and called to Binni. The pair of them went out and Ori heard them going up the stairs in the receiving room.

Judging by the faint noises soon after, Ori decided that Binni and Dori had locked themselves into one of the big meeting rooms up there, so as not to disturb anyone wanting their beds.

There was a rustling noise and the hidden sitting room door opened. Nori came out, looked around, cursed, and disappeared back behind the door, closing it as he went. Ori shrugged to Dwalin, who seemed amused. Dwalin lit up his pipe and put his arm around Ori’s shoulders. Ori knitted on, perfectly happy.

Moments later, Dain and Sculdis came through.

Dain went over to his son.

“Ye’ve had enough supper, laddie?”

“Yes, Adad.”

“Right, off with ye, then. I kin see ye there noddin’.”

Stonehelm didn’t even bother to argue.

He bumped foreheads with Dain and Sculdis and wandered off toward the upstairs, his parents bidding everyone good night and leisurely following him.

Not long after, a rock, half way up the opposite wall, opened out. Nori stuck his head through
“You lot again? Shit!” He vanished immediately.

“What’s he doing?” Ori wondered.

“Probably trying’ t’ spy on our Dori an’ Binni. They’re upstairs practicing’ f’r Dori’s presentation dance.”

“Ahh,” Ori nodded. “If they’ve locked him out, he’ll go daft trying to find out. Nori can’t stand not knowing things.”

“I wish ‘im th’ best then,” Dwalin snickered. He passed the pipe to Ori, who took a pull and let the dark scent waft through him.

Loli and Omi yawned in unison then giggled at each other. They tossed their cards in and whatever they owed in hard candies then scrambled to their feet.

Gimli looked like he might try to hold out, but Gridr appeared in the doorway and raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, Amad,” said Gimli, utterly embarrassed.

“Good lad,” she approved.

He chucked down his cards and Fili divided the sweet spoils with him. Gimli and Legoas gently knocked heads. Gimli, blushingly handed over the candy to the elfin prince and went off with his parents, Uncle Oin, his cousins, and Buj back to the In residence.

Fili put the cards away, stretched and yawned. He went over and kicked Kili’s boot.

“Say good night, Kili.”

Kili grinned hugely at Tauriel

“Good night, Kili!”

“Sleep well, Tauriel,” she giggled in reply. Fili rolled his eyes and dragged his brother off by the hand.

Bofur, Bombur and Bifur came though and wished everyone left a good rest and took themselves off upstairs. Dis and Jani came in followed by Thorin and Balin. They all sat down near the fire seeming content to enjoy the quiet around them.

Bard yawned, stretched and took his leave as well, pausing to request that his thanks to Binni and Dori profusely for such a delicious meal be conveyed to them when they reappeared. Laughing Thorin walked him out to the front door.

Dwalin showed Ori the three impressive smoke rings he had blown, one after the other. Ori giggled, tried but couldn’t duplicate the effect. Thorin returned and landed back in a chair.

A small vent in the ceiling right in front of the fireplace opened and Nori fell out onto the hearth rug. He was covered in soot and stank of smoke. He looked at them, looked up at the ceiling, and swore again.

“Yeh know, Balin brother,” Nori grumped, brushing himself off. “That there hidden passage was a bad notion. It’s dirty, smoky and a right narrow way t’ crawl through. What’s it for anyway?”
Balin raised an eyebrow at Nori and said placidly, “We didn’t have it built as a passageway, laddie.”

Dwalin snorted.

“It’s th’ bloody fuckin’ chimney, nuisance!”

Nori looked briefly embarrassed then grinned again.

“Still ain’t an excuse, lads. Got t’ have everything’ set up right!”

He vanished again but this time into the kitchen. Ori thought he heard the pantry door slam.

Ori yawned, laid his knitting down to rub his eyes, then cuddled closer to Dwalin and slept.
Breakfast, Broth, and Brouhaha.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Why are all the nobles not available, you wonder? Easy, everyone who thinks they can get themselves into the main throne room hall which supposedly can hold all the population of Erebor, is getting ready with so much excitement. Why are they excited? Because Balin has got them all terribly excited because this day of days is the day when a Bearer will be presented to King Thror! The last time that happened it turned out to be a False Bearer and what a scandal that was! So shocking! Balin has been busy telling everyone that this is a True Bearer and Of Royal Descent!! Sweet Hammer of Mahal and Mighty Lady Yavanna. This hasn’t happened since before Thror was crowned! Everyone is so excited and decorating themselves in that mountain, who would even bother to notice anything happening in Dale! So much….Uh-oh, if Dolly catches me using the word excitement again, she’ll stab me with her editorial pencil! Hang onto your hats and do join us again next Friday for more excitement! Challenge of the week: Find the Sansukh quote! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori woke in his nightshirt over his drawers and cuddled up to Dwalin who lay on his back snoring. Ori sighed with happiness and rubbed his face in Dwalin’s chest hair. There was a snort then a low chuckle.

“Think I’d be happy with tha’ as a wake up every day.”

“Oh would you?” Ori asked, grinning then leaning up so he could reach to kiss his husband.

“Mmm, I think I like this way even be’er.”

Ori giggled.

They heard Balin singing out in the hallway. There was a rap at their door and Balin came in.

“Good morning, brother, wee brother. I’ve just had a raven from Master Brur. The library’s closed f’r th’ presentation an’ he’s comin’ t’ breakfast. Might want t’ get yerselves dressed.”

Balin went out. Dwalin groaned and kissed Ori again.

“No lyin’ in bed f’r us, love.”

“It’s amazing how rare a thing that is,” Ori commented and made a point of crawling over Dwalin to get out of bed. As he hoped, it got him groped a little before he made it to sit on the edge.

Dwalin sat up and slid his arm around him.

“Mebbe we can have a late breakfast.”

He nuzzled Ori’s neck making him giggle again, before turning and regarding his husband with a quizzical eyebrow.
“Late for a breakfast made by Dori on his presentation day?”

“Aye, yer righ’. I’d rather have breakfast with Azog.”

Ori choked and said wryly, “I don’t think you’d be alive to have breakfast with Azog, ”

Ori clambered off the bed and headed for the bathroom. After some quick ablutions, he came out and met Dwalin on his way to the privy. He dodged the attempt to grab him and ran to his old bedroom to dress. He skidded to a stop as there was Fruh’nk still unconscious on the bed. Ori quickly and silently grabbed a few clothes, his hairbrush and fled back to their shared bedroom.

He was almost finished dressing when Dwalin arrived.

“Dwalin?” Ori wondered how exactly to frame his sentence.

“Whate’er it is, aye, a’course.”

“You don’t even know what I going to say,” Ori laughed. “But thank you!”

Dwalin laughed, too, and crossed to Ori’s side and ruffled his hair before kissing him.

“A’right, love. What yeh wantin’?”

“I bounced in on Fruh’nk; fortunately he stayed asleep while I got myself some clothing.”

Dwalin grunted.

“We gotta find time t’ get yer thin’s in here.” He paused and looked at Ori. “If yeh want a’course.”

“That’s what I was going to ask you. Except where would it all go?”

Dwalin glanced about.

“I’ll organize me books a bit an’ there’s a dresser ’r two upstairs. We’ll go up after breakfast an’ yeh kin pick th’ one yeh like.”

“Um, a wardrobe?”

“Tha’ un’s empty.” Dwalin nodded to an oak affair standing off to one side of the window. It had a twin on the other side.

“I only use th’ other.” He grinned down at Ori. “So there’s plenty a’ room f’r all yer fancy stuff.”

Ori chuckled.

“At the rate Dipfa’s going, I may need two.”

“Then yeh’ll get two. C’mon, I’m hungry.”

They entered the breakfast parlor to find it was filling up, with dwarrow, with Tauriel and Legolas, and with incredible, delicious smells. A huge tureen of soup held pride of place at the center of the table, filled with rosemary-spiced chicken and plump white dumplings speckled with
some other mysterious herb. Sweet potatoes pureed with more of the maple syrup filled several bowls surrounding the tureen, and a platter of tiny onion and leek tarts was making the rounds.

It was odd for a breakfast, even for Dori, and it all must have taken hours to prepare.

Ori wondered if Dori had slept at all, yet there was Dori, fresh and fierce as always. How Dori could still be standing Ori hadn’t a clue. It wasn’t even his own presentation and Ori’s nervous stomachache was back with a vengeance.

Only the slightest tremor as Dori ladled out Ori’s soup betrayed any nervousness, and then only because Ori had known Dori all his life. Ori rested his cheek on Dori’s shoulder for a moment, earning an appreciative pat from Dori's free hand.

Dis entered from the kitchen with a plate of hardboiled eggs.

“Where did those come from?” Ori asked as she put them down.

“I brought them,” said Dis.

“Oh they’re yours, then,” Ori said coyly.

“Yes,” Dis replied with a puzzled frown.

Ori looked over at his middle brother.

“There you go, Nori.”

Nori sputtered, turned red, and roared, “Shut up, you little asshole!”

Dori smacked Nori’s forehead with a spoon.

“Language!” He turned as Binni entered. "Ah! The omelet! It's amazing we've any sausages left at all."

He turned and smacked Nori again.

"Oi!"

"For what you were thinking," Dori explained dryly.

Nori muttered something to Bofur, kissed him, and slipped away, stealing a handful of tarts in passing.

Furh'nik came through immaculately dressed. He promptly ate two entire loaves of bread and then excused himself to attend his duties.

Binni went out and came back in with Master Brur, resplendent in his ink-stained orange robe. He was accompanied by three ravens, one on either shoulder and one on top of his head. He carried a large mug which he immediately, wordlessly proffered to Dori.

“Master Brur, I presume. Tea this morning?”

“<grunt>”

“There’s plenty on the table, do sit up and help yourself.”
“<Grunt-grunt>” Master Brur crashed into a chair and poured half the contents of the maple sugar bowl into his tea and drank the entire thing down. He sat still a moment then slowly his head rose, he blinked benignly around the table and then to Dori where upon he rose and bowed.

“Good Morning. Master Dori I presume.”

“Master Brur, I am delighted to make your acquaintance. I do hope you are satisfied with my young badger’s work?”

“Capital, capital!” Brur enthused, then snarled loudly, “Gettoff, yeh wee fuck-heads!”

The ravens hopped off him as a unit and stood in a line on the table. They all turned in perfect sync and bowed to Dori, cawed, then put their heads into the bowl of soup Dori passed over to Brur.

Brur swore at them. Dis passed over a plate of cut up bacon and the three ravens mechanically ate from that.

“They are quite determined,” Dis giggled. “What are their names?”

Brur pointed at them as they all simultaneously lifted their heads and turned to face Dis.

“Eggr, Alyne and Po.”

‘How sweet they are,” Dori observed. “Eat up,” he commanded waving his hand in a way that encompassed the birds and Brur.

Ori glanced across the table. Legolas and Tauriel were sitting together, whispering to each other in Sindarin and trying not to look as though they were both staring at Brur.

“Did you ever see a flagon that size used for tea? And he’s carrying it around with him.” Tauriel was obviously rather confused. Legolas glanced at Brur under his lashes and murmured in reply.

“It’s because he’s a librarian. They carry the mugs they always use for everything as a symbol of the library’s single dedication to the pursuit of knowledge. They all have one.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. Ada told me they’re buried with them.”

“Stars!”

Ori glanced at Brur, who winked at him. Brur turned his mug slightly so Ori could see that there was painted on the side a rather cartoonish bat frowning and displaying its top wing claws the way a man would his middle finger and in ancient Khuzdul above the bat’s head were the words. “I ain’t had my tea. Fuck off.”

Ori confined his brain to his plate until he had his face under a semblance of control.

“Dori, how do you manage this meal after meal?” Thorin asked. “This soup is incredible.”

“Broadbeam family recipe,” said Dori serenely.

“Something about the spice in the dumplings,” said Ori. “Bombur swore Dori to secrecy. I don’t even know what’s in them.”

Everyone else at the table was duly impressed.
“Good people Broadbeams,” said Dain. “Good soup.”

“Thank you,” Bombur smiled. “Dori, these are just right.”

Dori blushed.

“I had a good teacher.”

Ori caught Thorin’s eye.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Ori asked.

Thorin paused with the spoon halfway to his mouth. Slowly he lowered it back into the bowl.

“Why do I have the feeling you really want to know?”

“Because I really want to know,” said Ori.

Thorin pushed at a dumpling.

“I’m cautiously relieved. We could all be in the lockup by now. We’re lucky Bifur was right, the soldiers are loyal to me, or at least to Dwalin, and not to my grandfather.”

“But things could still fall apart,” said Gloin cheerfully. “We did just stage a coup.”

“It’s not a coup,” said Thorin. “My grandfather is still king. The crown prince is allowed to make independent decisions without the permission of the king if the situation is dire.”

Balin regarded him with amusement.

“True, though usually th’ crown prince goes an’ tells th’ king wha’ he’s done afterward.”

“Anyone who needs to know already does,” said Thorin.

Dain gave a bark of a laugh.

“Yeh’ve already got this ‘king’ deal well in hand.”

“We’ll see. Everyone in the mountain is excited about the presentation today, and rightly so, but there may still be repercussions. We just don’t know what they are yet.”

“Now there ye go,” Dain admonished. “Ruinin’ everybody’s fun.”

Thorin deflated. First Ori thought it must be relief, but his eyes were troubled and he continued eating silently while the others talked.

At least he was eating.

“Still, it went well,” said Ori. “If the king had burst in during the raid and started giving orders, you would really have been sunk.”

“He wasn’t going to burst in anywhere,” said Thorin. “He was still in the treasury. We made sure he stayed there.”

Thorin slipped a key from the pocket of his tunic. Ostentatious, crusted with diamonds, it seemed from another, much shinier, age.
“This is the master key to the treasury. It overrides the locks for every other key on Thror’s ring. He received it at his coronation.”

“Where did you get it?” Ori asked, before immediately answering his own question. “Nori! Nori stole that right off Thror’s belt?”

“While he was wearing it. For someone who’s spent most of his life in Dale, its amazing how much Nori knows about the layout of the royal quarters. And it explains the chicken.”

“The chicken?” Ori asked, a horrified suspicion rising in his brain.

“One night I went to check on Udad. He was fast asleep in his bed and on the wall beside it someone had scrawled a drawing of a chicken.”

“What did Nori take?”

“I have no idea. I do remember rousing Mistress Dazla to help me scrub it off the bedroom wall before Thror awoke.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. Your family displays an amazing array of talents.”

“Thror doesn’t notice he’s being locked up?”

“We make sure he has food and so on, though he hardly eats it. Come to think on it, he’s been in there since before the siege.”

Ori gaped at him.

"He's been in there for two days? No one's noticed the king has been missing for two days?"

“Not even himself,” Thorin assured him. “He’s been doing it now of his own volition for months. In fact, now we’ll have to dislodge him and neaten him up for the presentation. He will not be amused at being disturbed.”

Thorin passed the key over his shoulder. A hand slipped out from behind the arras, took the key and disappeared back behind the cloth.

“I’ll have him at his chambers in fifteen minutes,” said Thorin, answered by a familiar snort.

Dori shouted, “We will speak about this!”

There was a faint chuckle in the distance.

At that point, Gridr roused her brood and the sons of Groin and two elves headed out to prepare themselves for the presentation. The Ur’s and Dain and his family went upstairs and the Durins left soon after. Ori bullied Dori to sit with a cup of tea and supervise while he Dwalin and Balin cleared the table, washed the dished and cleaned up the kitchen.

Shortly before the noontime horn volley, Mahrdin, Dipfa and Pika arrived. Dori was hustled into his and Balin’s chambers and Balin endured the slight indignity of having this door shut in his face, much to Dwalin amusement.

In a few minutes Dipfa came out, carrying a large, wrapped parcel, and took Ori’s arm and said, “Time to get you dressed for your brother’s royal presentation, Master Ori.”
“Couldn’t you just call me Ori,” Ori suggested, allowing her to take him to his and Dwalin’s bedroom.

“No, Master Ori. It isn’t seemly.” She grinned naughtily.

Ori sighed.

Ori watched in the mirror as Dipfa dressed him like a badger’s plaything. He’d been a little flustered as she’d had him strip down to nothing and wash in the basin, while she opened the parcel on the bed. He supposed as her craft was tailoring and dressing she had seen all the sorts of bodies that were possible. He tried not to be too bashful. One by one she dressed him in new under garments. Each one was in Dwalin’s deep green and all were finest silk.

“Why do I need silk drawers?” Ori asked. “I don’t think Thror’s going to care about such.”

“Master Dwalin will,” she replied, settling his court breeches about his waist.

The material still fascinated Ori. He couldn’t stop himself from moving to see the black material shift and turn to dark green in the lamp light. Dipfa sternly put a stop to this. The tunic was next. This showed off the red thread of garnets studded along each seam even more than breeches did. The black boots shone richly, now sporting brass caps, with their tassels and dark green silk tied off with emeralds.

Dipfa went to her open parcel and removed a matching cloak. Ori gaped. This was trimmed in the fur of a black warg. The fur was on every edge in a dark roll, the width of Ori’s hand. The fastenings were highly polished brass. Dipfa laid this across Ori’s shoulders and showed him how the fastenings could either hold the cloak shut against the cold or pin it back to show off his fine clothes.

Dipfa went back to the bed for another, smaller parcel and this held a slender brass box. She brought it over and set it on a chair nearby.

“Captain Dwalin gave me these the other day for you to wear.” She opened the box and drew out a pair of beaten brass wristlets studded with rubies and inlaid with mithril. There was a wide banded brass belt to match, with a large mithril bands and shining buckle each inlaid with garnets and emeralds. Finally she brought out the hair beads. They were like his originals but made over in brass and mithril, all with a signature garnet or emerald. She was about to start on Ori’s hair when Dwalin came in wearing his battle dress uniform. Ori sighed in delight.

When Dwalin caught sight of Ori and what Ori was wearing, his smile looped around one ear and reached to loop around the other.

Dwalin swaggered up to him, grasped him by both shoulders, kissed him breathless and whispered in his ear.

“Yeh look edible.”

Ori felt white hot with embarrassment and pleasure.

“So I really?” he teased.

“Aye, quite th’ mouthful.”
Ori had to look away before he combusted.

“You’d better stop that right now or we won’t be presentable at court.”

“Dori’s th’ one being presented, no’ us,” said Dwalin, giving the earlobe a little nibble.

“A-hem,” said Nori, slipping into the room. “Y’ might wanna save that ’til after the presentation, unless y’ wanna be prying Dori’s head outa the ceiling.”

“You’re not going to dress up?” Ori asked.

“I’m not actually gonna be there, even though I’m gonna be there,” said Nori. “Some o’ us got work t’do.”

“Oooooh, well,” said Ori with a smirk.

Dwalin heaved a sigh. “Unfortunately, I do as well. Have t’ go be official an’ soldierly. We’ll see each other at th’ feast, love.”

Nori fluttered his eyelashes.

“Of course we will, darling!”

“No’ yeh, nuisance. Yeh behave yehrself an’ mebbe I’ll slip yeh some ale.”

“Looks like another dry night for poor Nori,” said Ori.

The brothers traded filthy looks.

Ori turned back to Dipfa, who had both hands clamp over her mouth trying vainly to stifle giggles. She held out the comb. Dwalin took it and, with Dipfa handing him each bead, he put all Ori’s braids in for him. Dipfa opened another side case in the box and removed and unfolded a piece of dark green velvet. Dwalin put a mithril ring with a oval garnet inlaid with brass stripes on Ori’s left middle finger and then a ring of brass with a large square cut emerald and put it on Ori’s right third finger. He put a matching ear cuff on Ori’s right ear and the left was a mithril cuff with a tiny brass chain hanging from it. At the end of the chain was an emerald set in a bezel of two tiny crossed axes of mithril.

Ori looked in the mirror again. Dwalin looked also and slid his arms around Ori.

“We look extremely regal, husband,” Ori said finally.

Hand in hand, Dwalin led Ori out to the receiving room. Legolas and Tauriel were in their Greenwood guard attire with their hoods drawn up. Legolas passed on the information that the Sons of Groin had already gone to the throne room. The Ur family were assembled all in their best. Brown with copper seemed to be the colors of the family.

Master Bombur looked positively like the dwarrow ideal male with his girth, his black iron mace, and magnificent beard, braided in a thick rope that looped around his body.

Bofur had cleaned up well but was not without his hat. His mattock was slung across his back; for some strange reason he looked vaguely uneasy.

Jani was in her usual mining gear with her mattock in her hand, her toast to the occasion was a
low cut bodice of apple green.

Bifur had donned his old armor, polished to a high sheen and Dipfa was employed to quickly tie a few ribbons of silver lace into a bow at the top of the shaft of his great boar spear.

There was a noise in the receiving room and Bard and the bardings arrived. Ori and Sigrid hugged ecstatically, and Tilda demanded her share as well. Balin and Dwalin shook hands with Bard and Bain.

“Oh, Ori you do look fine!!” Sigrid admired.

“So do you!” he returned for she did. Sigrid was in a beautiful deep blue dress embroidered with flowers in silver thread. Her hair was up as was proper for a young lady of age. She wore a head band that perfectly matched her dress. Tilda was in a pretty poppy red frock and her little buttoned boots had curled toes. She seemed very happy with herself. Both Bain and his father were dressed in greens and browns, not decked out as Calmar used to but simply. Ori wondered which if not how many of the Dale ladies had got together to dress up their king and his family in one night!

Dain and Sculdís came down the stairs. Ori stared. They looked magnificent. Dain’s hair was washed, brushed and pomaded into a top knot that rose to at least two feet over his head. On either side of this, his hair was tufted out in a way that looked exactly like Chopper’s ears. His hair and beard flowed with gold and rhodochrosite trinkets and he’d added many more tusks to his look. His tunic was scarlet with gold trim. His wide gold belt has a large buckle of rhodochrosite shaped like a pig. His tunic bottom hem was trimmed with tiny rhodochrosite pigs running. His breeches and boots were also scarlet and gold with a rhodochrosite pig face on each boot toe. He wore a reddish brown bearskin cloak with shining gold fastenings.

Sculdis had a matching cloak. Her dress was scarlet with gold trim also. The placket of her bodice closed in a line of tiny rhodochrosite buttons. On either side of the placket were embroidered very pink running pigs, the heads at the top and the hind feet and curly tails just above the waist. Her enormous skirt pooled around her, the flounce showing the gold lace festooned petticoats. Her hair was amazing. Ori wondered how she had poofed and pinned it into an almost exact shape of a boar’s head, complete with tusks.

Stonehelm was mostly covered in brown fur and gold and his hair was merely in order and braided with his family and achievements. The look was quite restrained. Ori suspected he didn’t care to compete with his parents.

He stopped by Ori’s side as they stood waiting for Dori.

“You look very well, Stonehelm,” said Ori.

“Thank yeh, cousin. As do yeh.”

“You parents must have spent hours preparing. All those extra tusks in Dain’s hair!”

“Tha’s pretty simple fer ’da, really. Doesn’ want t’ show Dori up on his big day. Looks like he left th’ tail at home,” Stonehelm suggested.

“Maybe he’s wearing it under his cloak.”

“Hadin’t thought o’ tha’.”

Tilda rushed to hug both Dain and Sculdís and squeal in delight over the pigs on their clothes and stand back in open-mouthed admiration of Sculdís’ hair-do.
Balin arrived in his best deep red court robes. His hair and beard shone a blinding white, looking well with the mithril trimmings on his clothing.

They all turned at the sound of a door opening upstairs. Mahrdin came out escorting Dori, who was resplendent in the traditional long sleeved high necked white robe of a bearer. His hair was loose and flowed about him with a few strands of mithril pinned in, further accenting its beauty.

Dori floated slowly down the stairs to the sound of everyone’s compliments and gushings of praise.

Dain and Sculdis went forward and each took an arm and helped Dori down the last three steps. They escorted him to Balin, who bowed deeply and respectfully kissed Dori’s hand. Overcome Ori rushed over and kissed Dori’s cheek.

“Oh, Dori! You’re so beautiful!”

Dori beamed and his eyes went a trifle misty.

“Thank you, my sweet pet. I’m so happy you think so.”

“Are you nervous?”

“Only a little, my badgerling, but just in a proper way, of course.”

Ori looked him over again.

“I thought you said you and Binni and Mahrdin had designed a completely new robe. This one looks just like the traditional one you see in all the pictures.”

“This one is a ruse, my pet, just a ruse. Wait and see.”

Ori sighed but decided he wouldn’t spoil whatever Dori had planned.

Tilda pronounced that Dori was a fairy princess which made everyone laugh. Sigrid said nothing just hugged Dori very hard and sniffed. Ori thought he saw her wipe away a tear when she turned away. He went over and squeezed her hand. Apparently Bard and Bain were both too tongue tied to say anything. Dori fluttered his eyelashes at Bard, who colored a little and swept Dori a most courtly bow.

Mahrdin cleared his throat and everyone parted so the tailor could present the cloak which Ori recognized as a white bear’s pelt. After he and Dain placed this on Dori’s shoulders, Mahrdin unrolled a large silver filigree lace cloth which Sculdis and Dain cast over Dori, veiling him completely.

The entire group moved out to the courtyard where Chopper was hitched up to a beautiful cart that looked like a large pink velvet upholstered teacup. Gnasher and Balin’s goat, Grinder, and Poot-poot stood saddled and ready for master Mahrdin and his assistants. The Ur’s cart was hitched up with two of Thorin’s ponies. There was another upholstered shay, much larger than the ‘teacup’, drawn by Fili and Kili’s two ponies. Kawa and Saki were a matched pair, white with a lovely sprinkling of black dots all over them. Honda, Ducati and Harley were also saddled up.

The royal family of Dale and their elven companions went into the large shay and Bard assured them he was fine with driving the ponies. Dain and Sculdis with Dori between them got into the teacup and Stonehelm took the reins. The Ur’s were in their cart with Master Bombur driving and Master Brur already in deep conversation with Bifur. Dwalin assisted Ori onto Honda then swung
onto Harley. Balin maneuvered Ducati around, inspecting the line up, and off they went. Balin and Dwalin led the party from Dale, then Ori, then the teacup, then the Urs followed by Mahrdin and his assistants.

As they left the royal cavern a guard swung in, with two riders on massive fierce goats beside each cart. As they slowly processed along the streets, dwarrow, all hurrying to the throne room on the ground entrance floor of the mountain, stared and cheered and waved, goggling at the veiled figure sparkling at the center of the teacup.

Ori wasn’t sure he like being the center of attention like this but reflected that everyone was concentrating on what they could see of Dori rather than anything else. Dain and Sculdis waved serenely from the teacup. Occasionally when Dain recognized a friend he’d bellow a greeting. Tilda was standing up being held securely by Sigrid as she tried to wave to everyone.

They got to the main floor and the cadre of soldiers who had escorted them gave the carts and animals over to more soldiers waiting there. Dain and Sculdis helped Dori out of the teacup and people cheered as Mahrdin and his assistants ran forward to adjust the Bearer’s cloak and veil. The Bearer turned to the group of dwarrow and gave a little bow, inclining the head to acknowledge them which brought on louder cheering.

The soldiers herded the entire party through into an anteroom to prepare to be presented. Brur went through and took his place at the arched doorway to announce them. The guards went out leaving only a few to keep them safe and Dwalin, giving Ori a quick kiss, vanished off to his duty.

There was a small hallway off the anteroom and there was something going on in it. Ori heard a scuffle and a shout. The guards turned as did the entire party. Everyone went to have a look.

Prince Frerin and the Rikanta in all their finery were arrayed in the hallway and Lord Rikut and Lady Klakuna appeared to be in the middle of quite a tiff as she jammed her sharp finger into her husband Rikut’s breastbone with every word.

“You lied!” Lady Klakuna shrieked. “You lied about my granddaughter being dead, you lied about my great-grandson. You lied about everything! I don’t want to be married to you anymore. I am NOT married to you. It’s my line you married into, my wealth and prestige you have enjoyed and myself you have abused and I declare before all my relatives here and now that I am NOT married to you. You will go away. Anyone who wants to stay with me may stay, but you will take yourself out of this mountain. I state right now before this entire mountain and Mahal himself and his Lady I Am. Not. Married. To. You!”

“But, my dea-“

She had an amazing left hook and he left an amazing imprint of his body in the stone behind him.

From the onlookers there came a delighted “Oooooh.” mingled with shock, except for T’dillah, who gave a little noise and started to cry, and Frerin who immediately comforted her.

The nobility had a new scandal broth in which to partake.

Ori sighed.

It would not be long-lived. No one had seen Dori in his presentation robe.

Catching sight of Dori’s party Lady Klakuna, her flavescent gown flowing behind her, marched over to Dain and announced without preamble, “Your majesty, allow me to present my great-grandchild with you.”
Dain’s eye twinkled.

“Of course, of course,” he said, perfectly amiably. “Get in line with us, my dear. Off we go.”

Dain gave a whistle and Chopper, now be-ribboned with silver lace bows on each ear and tail wagging, came trotting around the corner with a happy squeal, almost pushing aside Lady Klakuna. Sculdis caught hold of her arm and tucked it under her own, declaring merrily, “I love presentations, don’t you?”

“Oh, so do I,” trilled Lady Klakuna. “And such a special day for our dearest Dori. I’m so proud!”

Every torch in the throne room was lit, every crystal cleaned, every inch of stone polished, every tapestry dusted and aired for this occasion. Having never been in the throne room Ori would have been awestruck at any rate, but he could only think this was the perfect setting to display his jewel of a brother. Above the tapestries the walls of the natural cavern had been left in their original state, with only balconies carved out and these were full. Every dwarf in Erebor or Dale who could possibly attend had done so and since this was a Bearer presentation, no dwarf could be locked out.

A flutter of movement in and around the galleries caught Ori’s eye. He swallowed hard. What he had taken for bands of jet in the rock were ravens, perhaps a thousand, perched on every possible surface in the chamber and looking down on the dais with unsettling intensity. They didn’t make a sound. Ori had a mad thought for a moment that he was the only one who could see them, but Stonehelm muttered something about the ‘bloody terrifyin’ birds’.

The object of their interest, the king himself, looked even more gaunt and brittle than he had a few days before, a strangely shrunken doll of a dwarf, overwhelmed by the gold ornaments in his beard.

Thorin stood beside him in his usual blues and blacks though trimmed in silver ermine. His face beneath his crown was masklike, yet he still looked far more alive than Thror.

Ori saw Dis and Fili and Kili a step below the main dais. Kili caught his eye, smiled and waved. Dis closed her eyes and set her mouth in a straight line as if to keep herself from laughing and possibly from smacking at him. Under her chin, her brooch also waved at Ori and he realized Dis was wearing Rutile as an ornament. Glints in the torchlight told Ori, Dis had created rings small enough for Rutile to wear on each little leg.

Frerin stood at the lowest raised level of the dais, in front of the throne, as though he thought he was presenting important noble visitors. The Rikanta had claimed a spot close by, with T’dillah, pretty and slightly terrified out front, and it occurred to Ori that Frerin had plans of his own today, plans which probably included upstaging Dori by presenting what he surely thought was the next queen of Erebor.

To the left of the dais, at attention, stood a unit of the city guard, with Furh’nk out front, pale but polished. To the far side Dwalin had stood Targ at the head of the royal guard, his eyes roving the crowds of elites on the main floor, meeting those of each of his lieutenants in turn. Dwalin himself stood at attention on the second step down from the dais. Dwalin had deployed his soldiers carefully. He was taking no chances. The unit closest to Frerin consisted of some of Dwalin’s most capable fighters. Apparently Frerin’s plans had not gone unnoticed there either.

Brur cleared his throat and roared out that all attention and homage be given to the High King of Dwarrow, King Thror. Every dwarf present bowed to the king who waved a vague hand at this.
Brur started talking about how important Bearers were and Ori lost the thread. He realized with the gesture from one of the guards he was to cross from the ante room to the throne first. He had to walk up that aisle which suddenly seemed leagues long. He looked helplessly over Brur’s shoulder then he saw Dwalin. Looking at Dwalin steadied him. Dwalin was on guard and ready. He was safe.

Brur waved his hand behind his back and the guard nodded to Ori. Ori went forward.


Ori stepped out, keeping his eyes on Dwalin. To his surprise, a polite applause followed him from the floor as he walked steadily toward the throne.

Then the gallery erupted into saucy whistles and shouts.

“Oi! Ori! It’s me! Lor! I made it!”

“Scrunch down, Lor, we can’t see around yer fat head!”

“Ooooo! Don’t our Ori look a treat!”

“Bit sexy, in’t he?”

“My, but he is sharp! Cleaned up nice.”

“Who wouldn’t look good in a suit like that?”

“Oh, hush! He looks fine. YEH LOOK FINE, LADDIE! WE’RE JUST MAKIN’ SURE YER HUBBY’S TAKIN’ CARE O’ YEH!”

“I’ll just bet his hubby takes care o’ him.”

“SHUT YER MOUTH! YER EMBARRASSIN’ TH’ POOR LAMB!”

“His brother still owes me twenny gold, the rat.”

The corners of Dwalin’s mouth twitched but he held his composure. Ori, on the other hand, thought his own head may explode from the embarrassment.

He got to the steps to the dais and bowed low to Thror who nodded but was obviously thinking of something else. Probably that horrid thing in the box down in the treasury, Ori thought waspishly as he crossed to Dwalin’s side. Dwalin winked at him and Ori couldn’t stop himself from grinning up at Dwalin. How marvelous he looked in his battledress and Ori silently wondered why Dwalin didn’t wear a kilt more often. He looked wonderful in it.

“Bard, Grandson of Girion, King of Dale and his family.”

Brur’s voice brought Ori back to the now. Bard, followed by his children and the two elves, made their was across and bowed to Thror. Thror was interested enough to rise and offer his arm to Bard.

“Old Girion’s grandson, are you? I remember him well. Great Bowman in his time.”

“Thank you, your majesty.”
“Glad to see Dale’s come to it senses and brought back it’s monarchy. And this is your family?”

“Yes, My eldest Sigrid and then Bain-“

Thror promptly shook hands with Tauriel then Legolas.

“I see they get their height from you. And who else?”

Bard was still horrified at what had just happened but Legolas stepped easily in, gesturing Sigrid and Bain.

“And here are Tauriel, Legolas.”

Thror nodded.

“And Tilda.” Legolas patted her shoulder.

“Welcome welcome! Girion, it’s good to see you again. You haven’t aged a day. Rare among your folk. Looks like old Brur’s going to make the official announcement. Here, stand with my guard Fundin, there.”

Wordless, the group from the Dale moved to stand with Ori. Bard looked as though he wanted to be a thousand miles away Sigrid and Bain were horrified. Tauriel and Legolas were unrepentant and, to Ori’s annoyance, inclined to giggle. Tilda was caught up in the magic of the room.

Brur bellowed out again.

“Their majesties King Dain and Queen Sculdis of the Iron Hills and their son and heir Prince Thorin Stonehelm.”

Dain, his family and Chopper strolled up the aisle and at the edge of the dais Dain strode forward and bowed.

“Great Uncle Thror! “

“Oink,” put in Chopper.

A change swept over the king, as though he suddenly woke, and what he woke to horrified him.

“Oh, Great Mahal, not you again! And that fucking enormous bloody pig! Mahal! Balin, lock up all the larders before Dain and his pigs eat us out of house and home!”

Dain grinned.

“A pleasure, as always, idadel!”

“For whom?” Thror demanded. He turned to Thorin. “Please tell me he isn’t here to stay?”

“He’s not, udadel,” Thorin assure him.

Thror collapsed in relief.

“So, Dain, what is the purpose of your mercifully brief visit?”

“T’ meet me long lost sibling, and t’ present him here at court.”

“Sibling?” Thror’s eyelid twitched. “There are more of you?”
“Just the one more, Idad Thror. May I present Dori of Rikmha?”

Music started from a gallery and Dori appeared at the far end of the aisle. The crowd gasped as Lady Klakuna drew off his veil and again as Mahrdin removed Dori’s cloak. Dori’s mithril hair hung around him in long, shining locks catching the light and he carried a fan of raven feathers all painted with silver and diamonds at the tips.

A thrill shot through the crowd as everyone turned to look. Dori took the white silk cushion Lady Klakuna passed him. On it was the silver flute that would play the music to which the Bearer would dance. Anyone who was any kind of musician readied themselves as the Bearer looked about. Dori nodded to Bofur. Bofur went to him, bowed, and took up the flute. Bombur and Jani came up behind him. Bombur had a small hand drum and Jani held two sticks with tiny silver bells attached to them.

At their fanfare, Dori struck the proper pose and clasped the neckline of the traditional presentation robe and tore it away revealing the robe he, Binni and Mahrdin had designed.

Ori gasped!
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. No food this time but Music! Dollypegs and I hunted through lots of various kinds of dance music with flutes and we decided we liked especially Mr. Remo Fernandes’ “Flute Song”, but feel free to imagine any music you wish to think of Dori dancing to as we don’t know if all of you can reach a link, if we posted it. Believe me, we shall, at some point post an appendix or something, with all the links, hints, and recipes. Do join us again next Friday more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Dori stood barefoot in the perfect starting pose for the ritual dance. Dori’s hair fell loose all about him like a pour of melted mithril. Set on his shoulders was a wide band of white silk shining with diamonds and attached to this falling all about him was a full length robe. The material looked as though it was created of water, it flowed and shimmered about Dori in the torch light and yet left no part of his body to the imagination.

After a brief, regal pause, on the proper beat, he began to dance.

It was such a spectacle as the court had not seen in many a year. All around him Ori heard gasps and whispers.

“What a beauty! Where has Dain been hiding this one?”

“Is that really a Bearer? I remember umad saying only Bearers danced at their presentation.”

“A Bearer of Durin blood! A great omen!”

The music began in earnest. Instead of stately parade, Dori took seven steps to the right, leapt high and spun around to land at the correct spot to assume the proper Pose of Shyness. The pose was perfect, yet somehow Dori rendered it to be not so much a studied posed but as a true Bearer, awash with sudden startled demureness of being brought into a crowd of new people. On the turn of the melody, Dori whirled out of that pose, skipped lightly to the far side of the walkway and executed a daring pirouette, making his robe whirl about him. To Ori, he seemed like a large drop of water.

Ori heard Dwalin choked behind him and glanced to see. Dwalin’s mouth fell open with an audible creak.

“He looks like a bloody great soap bubble with a dick!” he hissed in Ori’s ear.

Dori, arms expressively raised and toe pointed, fell into the Pose of Recognizing a Childhood Friend. This completed, Dori sailed into a number of complicated skips and shimmies that took him back across and scooped himself into the Pose of Saluting Family Members. The flute trilled and, instead of processing further, Dori whirled back the way he’d come, nearly to Brur’s side, turned and came up the walkway at a run. Before he reached the center of the walkway for the next pose, Dori turned three neat handsprings and flipped himself high in the air, spinning while aloft.
A side glance showed Ori that Bard had put his hand over Bain’s and Tilda’s eyes. Ori heard Tilda protest, wanting to see the pretty princess dance. Bain said clearly, “It’s alright Da, I don’t want to look.”

Sigrid mumbled, “I was really looking forward to seeing more of Dori, but this isn’t at all what I had in mind…”

“I don’t think any of us did,” reflected Tauriel.

“I certainly didn’t,” put in Legolas.

Once more the bubble of Dori’s robe surrounded him. He moved forward quickly and flawless into the Pose of Saluting the Great Friends to All Dwarrow, the Ravens. They cawed as one when Dori completed this pose and he skipped off while fanning himself all over.

“What is she… I mean he… I mean, what are they wearing?”

“Not terribly much.”

“… betrothed to Lord Balin, lucky bastard.”

All the while Dori approached the throne, Balin practically glowed with pride.

Thror himself was struck dumb, frozen with his mouth open.

Ori couldn’t hear what Thorin said as the prince leaned toward King Thror, but he read the concern in Thorin’s face.

Dori cavorted up the walkway to stop and glance over either shoulder in the Pose of Invitation before spinning again and capering in another circle, prancing as though to a lively country dance. In the middle of this he stopped as though in fear, but this melted into a gesture of respect as the Pose of Saluting the High King of Dwarrow brought Dori into a graceful bending of knees.

Thror’s jaw worked, but no sound emerged.

When Dori had almost reached the foot of the dais, the old king rose, shaking, white-knuckling the arms of the throne. His face had gone perfectly slack and grey. He moved forward to stand at the center of the dais.

Dori bounced up again to spin a little then skipped easily backward then ran forward and flung himself high in the air twirling and toss up his fan which burst apart. Dori landed with perfect grace almost at Thror’s feet and fell into the Pose of Durin the Deathless’ Vision of the Seven Stars with the glittering feathers floating down to rain about him in the stunned silence.

The crowd held its collective breath.

“Y-you,” Thror croaked in a terrible voice. “You are the Arkenstone! I have been blinded! Blinded by an evil beyond everything! I have failed my people, myself as a king, and Mahal Himself! You, beautiful Bearer, are the True Arkenstone!”

With a choke, Thror fell forward and collapsed onto the dais before Dori, terribly still.

Then everything happened at once.

Balin and Thorin leaned over the king. Oin sprang up the steps far faster than Ori would have believed he could move. Frerin, standing above the Rikanta, shot toward his grandfather and made it
all of three steps before a tearing cry split the silence and a great black cloud of ravens led by Roäc fell upon him, pecking him, and smashed him to the floor. Dis and her sons skidded to a stop as they had started forward to intercept Frerin. They stood in shock, staring at the moving mound that buried Frerin under of feathery black mass and cacophony angry cries.

Oin was beside the king in a trice. He leaned over, his hand flitting over the various pulse points and listening for breath.

He shook his head at Balin, and said in a stage whisper, “Deader than a cold forge.”

Balin rose, turned to the crowd and shouted, “The king is dead!”

Dori rose to his feet in complete grace and moved into a series of postures of grief, one right after the other, as if he’d done this every day of his life, before falling into the culminating Pose of Unutterable Agony of Spirit.

Balin raised Thorin from his grandfather’s side, turned him to face the assembled dwarrow and shouted, “Long live the king!”

Dori leapt up into the Pose of Saluting the High King of Dwarrow again as Roäc landed gracefully on Thorin’s shoulder.

They all went down like avalanches after that, Ori thought as he automatically bowed to Thorin.

Dwalin bowed, which meant all the soldiers bowed. Dis and her family bowed, so all the nobles bowed, even the Rikanta, except for Frerin, who was still covered in vicious, violent birds. Bard came to his senses as Legolas touched his arm and both he and the elves promptly bowed to acknowledge the new king.

For a moment Thorin froze, then he slowly exhaled, and when all had straightened again he held out his hand to Fili, who needed a slight prompting from Dis to realize what was expected of him. When he arrived, he knelt at Thorin’s feet. Thorin took off his own crown and placed it on Fili’s head.

“Prince Fili, son of Dis, Durin by blood and my heir.”

Ori shot a look over at Frerin, who was being helped to his feet by the Rikanta but still guarded by the malevolent ravens. The stunned look on his face was not simply the daze of attack, but the realization that he’d been supplanted in the line of succession by Thorin’s decree. By decree of King Thorin II of Erebor.

Dain and Sculdis crossed to the dais and Dwalin nodded to the cadre of the Royal Guards. Dain looked down at Thror and sighed. Sculdis did as well but, putting her arms akimbo, gusted, “Well, fuck a duck.” Chopper nudged her while oinking in ready agreement.

The soldiers quickly fitted their shields together, creating a broad platform and Thorin, Dwalin, Balin, and the other Durins and Dain and his family lifted Thror’s body onto this. The shields were raised high with the royal family surrounding them. Thorin took his place at the front to lead the mourners and the body of the late king to the room of rest where Thror would lie in state until his funeral could be held.

Dori, glowing and panting slightly from his dancing, immediately came to stand behind Thorin as Lady Klakuna scuttled after him, vainly trying to put the bearskin cloak back over him, clucking anxiously that he would ‘take a chill’. Binni was there also, kissing Dori fondly and assuming him he had been fabulous. Ori was horrified to overhear them whisper.
“Did I look alright?” Dori murmured.

“The king died, darling.”

“Hush, you naughty thing!”

“You were a triumph, my love, trust me,” Binni cooed and straightened the cloak as Lady Klakuna brushed fussily at it.

Dwalin took Ori’s hand to walk with him as part of the royal family in their mourning. The room was awash with the whispers of dwarrow amazed, shocked, worried and horrified, yet many more delighted.

At this moment the great entrance gate opened of its own volition. A tall figure in dusty, grey travel robes and a tall pointed hat, strode in and looked about.

“Ah,” said a calm, clear voice, “it seems I have been expected.”

Thorin whirled, glaring, and roared.

“Tharkûn!”
Death, dirges and Tharkûn.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Great Mahal!! There’s a Wizard in Erebor! Whatever shall Ori do? Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwararrow time, same dwararrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori stared in shock then horror as everything he had ever read concerning wizards dropped through his thoughts like a fall of boulders. It all came from the novels of Shire where, when wizards appeared, things exploded and people got turned into unnatural forms, or their heads popped off or they had nasty things fall out of their every orifice.

That Thorin shouted in such rage at perhaps the most famous, or infamous, of all wizards in Arda was terrifying.

The wizard raised an eyebrow and moved into the hall. Without thinking, Ori leapt forward and flung himself in front of Thorin.

“No, Great Wizard! You are not to incinerate the king before he’s been king for barely five minutes!”

Strangely enough, his small action galvanized the entire population of Erebor to mirror his reaction. Anything from a roll of paper to the finest steel was drawn and there were shouts of support for the new king.

The wizard turned and regarded Ori. He took his staff, now in both his hands, and leaned on it with a low chuckle.

“Ah, so you’re the one,” said Tharkûn.

“One what? Me?” Ori questioned, startled. “What have I done? I didn’t do it…I mean yes, I did it! It’s all my fault and nothing to do with Thorin!”

Ori found himself pushed aside by Nori, who puffed himself up.

“Th’ lad’s right. Thorin didn’t do nuffin’! I did it.”

“No, you didn’t! I did!” Ori insisted.

“Hush up, banty-cock. Every’un knows I’m th’ trouble-maker.”

“Shut up, Nori. You had nothing to do with it! Everyone knows that! I did it.”

“Yer full o’ it! I did it and that, th’ wizard kin tie to!”

“You’re overflowing with it, Nori! I’m the one who does weird things around here!”

Dori put a powerful hand on each of their shoulders, holding them still and silencing them.
“Why, Master Tharkûn.” Dori’s smile was winsome and his eyes full of amusement. “How lovely for you to visit to celebrate with us. Unfortunately, it has proved too much for the dear late King Thror’s health. Thus you find us quite despondent.”

Ori glanced over at Dwalin, who instead of being afraid was at ease to the point of disinterest. Dis looked amused and Fili and Kili just curious. Perhaps the Durins had better knowledge of wizards than Ori did.

“Ah.” Tharkûn looked at the late king’s body on the shields and nodded. He turned to Dis with a bow.

“My condolences, ma’am.”

Dis made an slight curtsy and Dori continued politely.

“Indeed, Master Tharkûn, we were about to gather in the main hall for a little refreshment. If you would be so kind as to remain here for a short time, we are just going to pop our late grandsire down in the Room of Rest.”

There was a shrill cry from T’dilla that someone needed to help Frerin before he bled to death.

Dori turned and, regarding Frerin as though he had never seen him before, “Dear me! We appear to have wounded. Cousin Oin, perhaps he could be tended?”

“Aye,” Oin grunted and shouted across the hall to a knot of his assistants. “Oi! You lot! Get this one an’ bung him up in the infirmary. Clean an’ tape ‘im up.”

They were immediately at Frerin’s side, taking hold of him as though they were a cadre of Dwalin’s trained guards. They began to escort him away under the prince’s loud protests and Oin barked a final order.

“An’ tape ‘is mouth while yer at it.”

Ori felt a mad desire to laugh, but Dori was in full host mode and readying the group at the base of the dais to carry the late king out.

“If you would kindly excuse us, Tharkûn.” Thorin’s tone was now bland.

“Yes, yes, of course.” The wizard was now surrounded by ravens and had somehow produced treats from one of his robe’s capricious pockets.

Thorin led the way down from the dais, dwarrow moved aside and bowed as they passed. Nothing was said, neither in praise nor in sorrow, only silence. This unnerved Ori and made him wonder what the funeral would bring.

Once through the royal entry way they had a long trip towards a grand door which was opened. They marched along a very long dark hallway until a guard hurried ahead and went to another set of doors. They passed through these and entered an ante-room. This room was empty and at the other end was a set of grey velvet curtains set against a wall. Two guards parted these to reveal a large stone door, incised on this were ancient Khuzdul runes reading “Death”.

Behind him, Ori heard Kili and Fili muttering.

“So,” Kili pondered. “This is death’s door. I did wonder what was meant when people said they
had heard someone was at it. Now I know.”

“Yes,” Fili replied, dryly. “Covered by death’s curtain.”

“Hush,” admonished Dis.

Ori glanced around to catch Dwalin rolling his eyes at Thorin, who’s lips were pinched together as though suppressing either anger or laughter. Ori suspected it was the latter.

The two guards opened Death’s Door and inside was an even smaller room. They all filed in. This room was suddenly remarkably crowded. The walls were tiled in slate and the grout holding them was silver. The rune of Mahal’s name was written in silver on all the walls and the ceiling and floor.

Dwalin open a tiny cupboard beside the door and pull a lever. Ori realized they were in a contraption like the little one Dwalin had used to transport them to the forges. This ride took much longer and was slower. Ori felt they had gone deeper than the forges here. Finally, there was a slight bump and the guards opened the doors again.

They entered a huge cavern. Ori thought it was at least half the size of the inside of the mountain, though this was not anything like the great city carved by hand. This was a naturally formed cavern. Enormous stalactites and stalagmites hung and rose all about them. All was bare rock except for streaks of phosphorus glowing here and there.

They walked along a path that opened out into a vast, deep canyon. It was completely dark and, to Ori, it seemed bottomless. In the middle, rose a single round plinth. Flat on the top, the surface was large enough to host a lively dance party. On it sat a single block of black obsidian. They crossed the chasm by a steel bridge toward the block.

The guards moved aside and Thorin and the other Durins carefully laid Thror’s body upon the block. He was, fortunately, perfectly dressed for the occasion. Thorin drew the king’s sword, called Warg Cutter, and Dis and Fili and Kili helped him to lay it along the king’s body and move his arms up so that he clasped it. The Durins drew back.

Dori went forward with Binni and removed a tiny cover at the corner of the block. Gloin had a tinder box ready. The flame burst up immediately. Then, in turn, all along the edges of the block, light danced to surround the late king in a frame of small blue flames.

They all stood around the king’s resting place. Balin chanted the prayer of first mourning. Oin hissed in a stage whisper that someone was now supposed to sing the king’s favorite song. Balin winced and Thorin closed his eyes as though in pain. Dwalin snorted a little.

“Fine,” Thorin sighed. “Who wants to do the honors? Dain, you’ve the voice for it.”

“Don’t know what he liked, cous.” Dain lied, grinning like a warg.

Thorin growled then sighed again, stepped to his late grandfather’s head and took a breath, then his deep tenor rolled lushly over them as he sang.

“There’s an inn, there’s an inn, There’s a merry old inn-“

Ori was very glad he was not the only one to give an involuntary choke of laughter at the ridiculous old pub ditty. Soon everyone joined in the singing and clapped and stamped their feet.

At the close of the song, they all bowed to the late king’s body and filed back across the steel
bridge, back to the lifting device.

The door closed on them once more and Ori felt them rising.

“Well, that was somewhat bizarre,” Dis commented.

“It was his favorite,” Thorin shrugged. “Don’t worry. All the appropriate dirges will be sung at the funeral ceremony.”

“That’s why there’s always a private one first, laddie,” Balin comforted. “I don’t know about the lot a’ yeh, but I’m a bit peckish. Are yeh, m’dear?” turning to Dori.

“Mahal, I’m so hungry!” Dori approved. “The thought of that feast waiting is positively making my poor tummy rumble.”

“I could eat,” Dwalin observed. “Love?”

Ori swallowed. “What about Tharkûn?”

“What about him?” Thorin replied with raised brows.

“Is he going to kill us or make the mountain explode? That’s all I know about wizards!”

Thorin shook his head.

“I’ve known him all my life. He’s been popping in and out of Erebor since the beginning, and before that in Khazad-dûm. He was probably loafing in Mahal’s forge the day Durin was made.”

“So, he hasn’t exploded or imploded anything yet?”

“If he didn’t do it when udad was king, he’s not going to do it.”

“But, he says I’m the one. One what?”

Thorin and Dwalin exchanged looks. Dwalin scowled and put his arms around Ori.

“He’s no’ allowed t’ do tha’ t’ me husband,” said Dwalin. “He’s always dropping’ a box o’ hammers on yeh, then disappearin’ before explainin’.”

Dori said, “That’s right. No dessert for him until he explains himself.”

“No idle threat,” said Balin. “It’s trifle with blackberries an’ brandy. Tharkûn never could resist it.”

Ori looked around him, realizing two very different things at once. The first thing was that he was surrounded by people who loved him, the second thing was that he was thicker than a warg skull. Of course, Tharkûn wasn’t going to hurt Thorin.

He looked up at Dwalin.

“I’m an idiot,” he stated.

“Wha? Yer no’ such thin’.”

“I thought Tharkûn was going to roast Thorin with apples, eat him with new potatoes and wash him down with a glass of rum.”
Dwalin grinned.

"Yer just fine, love. How many wizards’ve yeh met? Wish we’d had warnin’, but Tharkûn don’t
give yeh those. Likes t’ make an entrance. We’re just used t’ him is all. Yeh fit in with us so well,
we forget yeh didn’t grow up with th’ family.” He leaned down and whispered. “An’ yeh fit in with
me so well, sometimes I can’ think straight.”

Ori giggled.

Dwalin kissed him.

“Love, promise me this. Next time yeh think Thorin’s in danger, let me be th’ one who jumps in
front o’ him. It’s me job, remember?”

“I don’t know if I can promise you that,” said Ori, honestly. “I didn’t plan it, I just did it.”

Thorin looked over at him.

“It was very brave of you, Ori, but Dwalin is right. If you put him out of a job, he’ll be home all
day getting in Dori’s way. You think wizards are dangerous!”

Ori laughed, a little self-conscious, but a genuine laugh all the same.

Before he thought of it, he patted Thorin’s arm, as he’d seen Dori do so often when giving
comfort.

“I’m sorry about your udad, Thorin.”

“Thank you, Ori. I have to admit, it was a very Durin way to go.”

The lift reached the level of the throne room and the door slid open. Thorin and Balin walked
side by side, speaking with quiet urgency.

“You sent the raven to make the arrangements we always talked about?” Thorin asked him.

Balin gave him the most evil smile Ori had ever seen.

“Aye, this’ll put some sparks up their tunics.”

“Or cause a riot,” said Thorin.

“No, these’re dwarrow o’ quality,” said Balin. “They’ll save th’ riot fer Thror’s funeral.”

And so Ori found himself sitting with Dori on one side of him and an empty seat for Dwalin on
the other, at the king’s own banquet table. Dwalin stood behind and to the side of Thorin’s chair,
leaned on Grasper and looked terrifying every time one of Thror’s cronies entered and approached
the table to speak to the new king. Each dwarf or dam had started the day assuming that they would
be sitting at this table come feast time and was silently reminded that their time was up.

Balin sat in his customary place to Thorin’s left, smiling benevolently at each of them in turn.

First came Lord Zark and his family. After making his obeisance to Thorin, Zark turned to the
room. The vast banquet hall was usually ringed in tables, each traditionally seating the family of one
of the nobles at the king’s table. It took a small army to do it, but today the room had been swiftly
rearranged so as to be unrecognizable to these highborn people. The center, usually left open for after dinner entertainment, was now filled with long tables and benches and dwarrow of every station.

“Where is my table?” Lord Zark inquired.

“Oh, yeh kin jus’ sit anywhere, milord,” said a dwarf in an apron, who was sliding a huge tray of mugs and jugs of ale onto the table.

“I can’t sit ‘just anywhere’!” Zark protested. “Do you know who I am?”

The dwarrow already at the table, many of whom had been in the zinc mine, whooped and bellowed with laughter, startling the lord and causing his lady to draw her son closer to her side as if to protect him, despite he was old enough to tower over her.

An elderly dam seated close by, cackled and shouted.

“Great Mahal! Poor thins fergotten who he is!” She took hold of Zark’s belt and yanked him bodily onto the bench beside her. “Siddown, yer lordship. Let’s pour yeh a drink.”

Now sitting, but facing the wrong way, Zark gingerly turned toward the table. Lor, son of Tor, sitting on his other side, slid down a bit to allow room for the lady and her son. Zark’s older dwarfling, a well-grown dam, shrugged and sat in an open space nearby next to a grizzled old veteran and those two dams were soon trading tips on knife sharpening.

The same scene happened over and over again as Ori watched, and though some nobles took this change better than others, none refused to sit. These were dwarrow, after all. Who would refuse a meal?

“What are we doing here?” Ori asked Dori, who sat to Balin’s left. “This table’s reserved for the king’s family and close councillors.”

“So it is, pet,” said Dori.

Fili sat at Thorin’s other side, Dis beside her eldest, separating him from Kili by a chair. She’d been doing this since they were badgers and many a noble lady had commented rapturously on how sweet that was, Dis flanked by her sons. Dis had admitted to Ori that she started sitting there because separating them was the only way she could enjoy at least a little of the meal before the food began to fly. She continued to do so for the same reason.

Dain, Sculdis, Lady Klakuna and Stonehelm sat to the side of Kili, and Chopper sat at Dain’s feet, privileged to eat before even the king was served, his snout buried deep in a large basin of maple syrup glazed yams.

Bard, the Bardlings and the elves sat at the side table to the king’s right. Gimli had insinuated himself between Tauriel and Legolas, abandoning his seat between his parents at the table across, to his mother’s amusement. Gridr and Gloin sat at that side table with the Ur, who looked as puzzled as Ori felt, but were not averse to being fed under any circumstance, and with Oin and Binni.

“I’m afraid I’m not dressed for dinner,” Tharkûn commented as he removed his hat.

“Yeh never are,” Gloin said jovially as he lowered the section of stone on which Gimli’s abandoned chair sat. As the stone tile moved downward, a smaller section of stone just in front of the chair sank independently a further two feet, allowing Tharkûn to sit comfortably with his feet on the floor. The dwarrow had done the same for the chairs of the men and elves, so that everyone was
more or less at eye level with their host.

“Very kind of you, Master Gloin,” said Tharkûn.

“Aye, can’t have yeh sittin’ here wi’ yer knees about yer ears.”

“At my age, if I were to bend myself into such a configuration I would never escape it. King Roäc could use me as a perch.”

Roäc, on the back of Thorin’s chair, cawed out a laugh and a gargoyle of sounds that caused Tharkûn to lift his brows.

“Really, Roäc! There are dwarflings present!”

Ori’s vision went fuzzy and the noises in the room grew distant. Tharkûn was bantering with Roäc when abruptly the wizard’s features changed. The old man was gone and in its place a being of pure silver light, the great, almond-shaped eyes the only feature.

Ori shook his head to clear it and Tharkûn was just as he had ever been as far as Ori knew.

A murmur of excitement grew as doors around the room opened and the food was carried in with great ceremony.

Dwalin opened the door behind the king’s table and a long line of bowls, platters, and plates began a seemingly endless march before Ori’s eyes.

Legolas had sent to Mirkwood for fresh venison and a haunch of moose. The venison was roasted, sliced and served unadorned. The moose had been marinated with juniper to tenderize it before cooking and it arrived with a compote of blueberry preserves.

Great wedges of potatoes smashed with garlic and cream stood out over their plates like cliffs above the sea.

Chicken and apple sausages, shot through with rosemary, sat on a bed of caramelized onions along with sausages of turkey, cranberries and bay.

Rolls of heavy, dark bread and crocks of sweet butter reached the tables accompanied by sliced hardboiled eggs, and then the oddest thing Ori had ever seen on any dining table. Smaller glass crocks and flasks of water sat in a much larger bowl filled with crushed ice, and in each glass crock, a differently colored pearlescent mound of grains.

Dwalin had taken his seat by this time, Furh’nk having relieved him at loom-and-scowl duty.

“What is this?” Ori asked, indicating the grains.

“Tharkûn brought it. Don’t know how he got it here without it spoilin’. Must have ice in his pockets.”

“It’s food?”

“Aye, fish eggs from the western sea, to eat with th’ bread an’ butter.”

“Fish eggs?” Ori was aghast, and slightly revolted. “They’re so tiny! How do you peel them?”

“They’re small enough yeh don’ have t’ even bite into them, but if yeh do, they pop like pomegranate pips.”
“I’ve read about those,” said Ori. “What do they taste like?”

“No’ like fish eggs. Here, try this.”

Ori would rather pin his mouth shut with his own boot dagger than try it, but he sat here in the company of the king and when he looked around he realized several nobles who had approached Thorin earlier were now smirking up at him knowingly.

Bastards.

“Tell me what to do,” Ori murmured to Dwalin.

It wasn’t nearly as bad as he had feared. When the eggs burst in his mouth, he mostly tasted brine.

Thirsty, he grabbed a flask of the clear liquid and drank it down in a gulp.

The minute it hit his tongue, he realized this wasn’t water.

It burned all the way down and hit the pit of his stomach like an ember in a quench bucket, throwing off steam.

“Shit!” he hissed though clenched teeth, refusing to cough or even grimace. “What is that?”

Dwalin sighed.

“Tha’s potato liquor, an’ I shoulda warned yeh, but yeh moved too fast.”

“It tastes like ink solvent”

“Drink a lot o’ ink solvent, d’yeh?”

“You know what I mean!”

“Aye, it goes with the fish eggs an’ bread. Now yeh’ve had th’ whole set.”

“And I never have to have it again,” said Ori.

He stuffed a chunk of bread and butter into his mouth, the better to stave off the acrid taste on his tongue.

“Psst! Psst! Ori!”

That was Nori’s voice, but Ori couldn’t pinpoint him.

“Where are you?”

“In the space under yer chair platform, so don’t lower it!”

“What? Why are you down there?”

“Pass us down some ale, would yeh?”

“You’re on duty!”

“Aye, and it’s thirsty work.”
“How are you supposed to drink it?”

A narrow straw poked up from the gap between the stone tiles.

“Oh, Mahal’s blessed arse, are you serious?”

Nori started whimpering and whining loudly, like a pup.

“Ahem,” said Dori.

Abruptly the noises stopped and the straw whipped out of sight.

Dori sighed.

“I suppose we should admire his inventiveness, and be thankful there are no cloths on these tables. It’s impossible for him to fiddle with Bofur in plain view.”

Bofur squawked and jumped in his chair.

“Nearly impossible,” Dori corrected.

The vast banquet room had been carved out long ago with the acoustics of performers in mind, and so that anyone in the room could be heard by the king without shouting. Of course, the dwarf shouted anyway, but it wasn’t strictly necessary. Because of this, Ori was privy to snippets of talk throughout the room. With food and decent ale, people who never thought to sit in the same room, never mind side by side, slowly drifted into conversation. At a table nearby, Ori saw two miner lasses admiring Lord Zark’s daughter:

“She’s a pretty thing. Bit above my station, eh?”

“Her scullery maid’s above yer station, Miris. Dream on.”

“Ooo, she’s lookin’ this way. Did she just wink at me?”

“Must’ve, look at that scowl on her amad’s face.”

On the other side, Ori heard Sculdís say to Lady Klakuna:

“So I said to Dain, ‘It’s time he slept in his own bed. He’s old enough and that’s why he has a nightlight.’ An’ Dain, the big soggy lump says, ‘Suppose he has a nightmare? It’s no’ like he’s go’ thumbs t’ turn the’ doorknob an’ come get us.’”

Lady Klakuna, who was about six flagons of ale ahead of Sculdís, clicked her tongue and cried, “Fuck me! You’re fuckin’ talkin’ about that bloody fucking pig! I thought you were fuckin’ talking about your son!”

“He’s like a son to Dain. Takes after ‘im, too.”

Not too far away, toward one of the large braziers, Ori noticed that Tharkûn had plunked himself down on a bench and was surrounded by small badgers as he performed the time honored ‘rabbit
from a handkerchief’ trick that Nori used to show Ori at that age. Some ravens had fluttered down to perch on him and watch as well. Tharkûn produced a handkerchief and flapped it to display it was nothing more than such. With great deliberation and slowness he made several intricate folds, tied a knot in it and displayed a comical ‘bunny’ with a rather long tail. He patted it while the little ones leaned in to admire and with the slightest movements of his hands Tharkûn made the ‘bunny’ look as though it was wriggling about. One badger stretched out a hand and tried to pat bunny. With a simple flick of the long old fingers bunny leapt to Tharkûn’s shoulder. The badgers squealed with laughter and the ravens looked at him askance.

“Careful now, little ones. You startled him,” crowed Tharkûn. He replaced bunny in his hand. Another then another badger reached in to pat bunny. Sometimes bunny stayed still and waggled a little, other times bunny took flying leaps, sometimes landing on Tharkûn’s hat, other times on some badger’s head.

Ori’s eyes were caught by a sudden movement at the table with Bard, his Bardlings and the elves. Tilda was now standing on her chair and looking down at the table, her eyes like saucers. Bain had pushed his chair away from the table and Bard and Sigrid both looked a little worried. On the table before them was Rutile. Being as Ori had heard that Rutile was of a maternal nature, he supposed that Rutile had come to check on the Bardlings.

“That’s the biggest spider I’ve ever seen, da.” Bain sounded concerned.

“Is it going to eat us?” Tilda asked.

Tauriel looked over from Bard’s left and said,

“Oh, that’s Rutile. She belongs to Princess Dis. She acts as a messenger, like the ravens. Kili says she’s very motherly, so she must have come to see you.”

Tauriel’s eyes glinted at Tilda. Tilda leaned over then sat back down in her chair. Bain returned his chair halfway to the table. Bard looked at Legolas, shrugged and went back to his meal.

Tilda was studying Rutile intently as the spider stood before her. Rutile raised a leg and waved it at the child. Tilda’s eyes got big again and she giggled. A passing servant saw the spider and put a small shallow bowl of water on the table for Rutile.

Rutile waved two legs in thanks. She looked back at Tilda, jumped straight up in the air and landed in the center of the dish of water. Tilda squeaked. Rutile then danced around, spinning in the dish, minuscule drops of water showered all about. Tilda squealed with joy and clapped her hands.

“Tauriel! Look! What’s it doing?”

Tauriel gave the spider a look. Rutile waved at the elf captain.

“Offhand,” Tauriel said. “I’d say she was showing off.”

“Can I pet her?”

“May I,” Bard and Sigrid chorused. Tilda huffed.

“ May I pet her?”
“Be very gentle, she is a spider,” Tauriel warned. “Don’t be surprised if she shies away.”

Tilda gamely put out a hand. Rutile hopped out of the water and hurried to the outstretched fingers. She bumped her head into them and then with four legs caressed the ends of Tilda’s fingers making her giggle and shout that it tickled. Bain put his hand flat on the table. In a trice, Rutile was on it and running straight up his arm to sit on the top of his head.

“Da!” Bain raised excited eyes, “Da, may we have a spider?”

“No!” replied both Bard and Sigrid loudly.

And as the ale began to flow even more freely, tongues loosened until the dwarrow reached that point between pleasantly drunk and barroom brawl. The dwarrow with younger badgers withdrew and Ori heard the old dam say to Lord Zark:

“Oh, aye, old Thror was a rotten bastard toward th’ end, may Mahal rest his soul. I heard him talkin’ t’ th’ young princes once, while I was scrubbin’ th’ floor in the ante-chamber. Made me so mad I wanted t’ jump up an’ feed him my scrub brush, only me knee’s so bad now, y’know.”

“Very kind-hearted of you, dear lady, to want to take the princes’ part that way. You have a beautiful soul to go with a pretty face.”

“Yer lordship’s a flirt and a cad.”

“Who would have thought?”

They were both giggling by this time and given that Lord Zark’s wife was right there, Ori thought there was trouble on the horizon, but the lady had engaged Master Tin across the table and that talk had crossed the line beyond flirty. Lord Zark’s son, who had to be forty if he was a day, had crawled under the table and showed every sign of being asleep.

Dain and Brur who had been doing a friendly circuit of the room, Chopper trotting after them, had obviously been having a few drinks with said friends, Ori noticed. The two large dwarf males sat heavily down on the top of the three steps that raised the king’s tale before the hall. Dain waved to a servant, who grinning, stopped to refill their tankards. Chopper push between the two and snorted loudly. Dain immediately turned, put his arm around the pig, and, lifting his tankard as Chopper raised his head, Dain poured the contents into Chopper’s open mouth and the pig chugged happily. Sculdis was on her feet, shouting.

“Dain. Don’t yeh dare go makin’ tha’ pig drunk again! Las’ time yeh did tha’, he ate me best pair a’ indoor shoes an’ a sack o’ turnips!” Dain looking wonderingly at her then looked at Brur. Brur shrugged and amicably put his arm around Chopper. His voice began to rumble and Dain joined in a drunken dirge with Chopper helping.

On this day o’ days,

When I harken t’ Mahal, [oink, oink]
Raise yer cup, say farewell,
'Til we meet within His halls. [oink, oink]

On this day o’ days,
I will scratch my fuzzy balls, [oink, oink]
An’ yeh can kiss me arse,
Fer I’ll be drinkin’ with Mahal! [oink, oink, oink]

At the head tables Fili had traded with Kili to sit with Sigrid, who was looking annoyed.

Sigrid said, “Inger Jansdaughter told me I should eat nothing but water and hard biscuits.”

“Sigrid!” Fili cried, aghast. “Why would you do that?”

“She said I was too fleshy to be a princess and needed to reduce.”

“Reduce to what? All of you is perfect the way you are.”

“Flatterer.”

“It’s true. Sigrid, you’d be perfect if you had three heads and a horn.”

“Don’t talk about horns. Nori will hear and then he’ll sing. I heard about that.”

Fili winced. “Good point. Wait a moment. That woman, that Inger, she’s the daughter of Calmar’s lawyer.”

“Aye, that’s her.”

“She has no business speaking of your appearance or anyone’s. She looks like a skeleton and she can barely walk without winding herself. Amad, Inger Jansdaughter told Sigrid she was too fleshy.”

“It’s not Inger’s business speaking of anyone’s appearance,” said Dis.

“Apparently she tells people it’s all due to eating nothing but water and hard biscuits.”

“If she does that, then she’s a fool. It’s one thing to be that slim naturally, but to suffer for it? She’s fully of age and she looks like a little boy in a nightgown.”

Then the tables were cleared off and more plates and spoons arrived. Dessert made its appearance to hearty cheers. Huge glass bowls of trifle, the chunks of cake, covered in blackberry jam soaked with blackberry brandy piled around the bottom then covered in more blackberries, topped with more cake, jam and brandy until the layers came to the rims of the bowls and the tops were heavy with sweetened, whipped cream.
Ori heard Master Tin said to Lord Rikut:

“Here, have some o’ this trifle. It’ll sweeten yer disposition. Naw, better have more than that.”

Both roared with laughter and toasted each other.

“Ah,” said Tharkûn returning to the table. “Trifle!”

“None for you, I’m afraid, Master Tharkûn,” said Dori, rising and wrapping the bear skin around himself with great dignity. “Not until you’ve come back to Fundin House with us and explained yourself to my poor Ori.”

Ori, who had been rather mellow and looking forward to the trifle, sat up abruptly.

Tharkûn peered at Dori from under his bushy brows.

“You’ve an iron core under all that beauty, Bearer.”

“Master Tharkûn, you don’t know the half. Shall we?”

Tharkûn rose and popped his hat back on, while the rest of the royal family was also preparing to leave.

As one, the entire population rose from their seats out of respect. Thorin was briefly startled, but calmly bowed to his people and bade them all a good rest and to not allow the absence of the Presence to put a damper on their banquet. He turned with a benign smile on them and, taking his sister on his arm, led them out. Several ravens fluttered after them.

Thorin nodded to the head server and only said “Princess protocol, Hijli.”

Hiljli nodded, fighting a grin.

“That’s Durin protocol,” Dis snapped with a filthy look at her brother. Ori filed this away to ask about later.

The Urs, the Sons of Groin, Bard, his children and the elves followed. Ori noticed that Dain and Sculdís walked with Stonehelm, who had given his arm to Lady Klakuna. Chopper snorted happily and brought up the rear, tail high.
Prophecies, Passages, and a Bad Thing in a Box

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Well, things are just getting strange now that the wizard is here. What will Ori do? And whatever will Chopper think? Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori sighed with relief as they all once more came in and gathered in the sitting room of Fundin house. Dori murmured to Binni and turned to his guests.

“You must excuse me a few moments. This dancing robe is lovely to wear, so light and freeing, but a trifle chilly.”

This brought laughter. Binni, Dain, Sculdis, and Lady Klakuna went into the kitchen. Gimli went to the fireplace with the princes, crown princess, Stonehelm, Bain, Omi, Loli, and Buj following. Tauriel and Legolas gamely joining the younger dwarrow.

Throin, Tharkûn, Balin and Bard seated themselves at the large table at the other end of the room. Bard held Tilda in his lap. She was fast asleep. Oin came to Bard’s side, muttered something and took the exhausted child over to the corner, where Chopper had decided to nap. Gloin put a cushion on the floor and, after his brother laid Tilda down, unfolded a blanket to cover her. Chopper woke briefly, looked his charge over, settled closer around her and closed his eyes with a contented sigh.

Ori ran back to the bedroom and checked on the kittens. They were asleep but promptly woke as he came in. He carefully lifted their basket and brought it through to the kitchen. Dwalin was there and warming some goat’s milk off to the side as the others bustled about getting a light supper ready. Ori and Dwalin fed the kittens and brought the basket with them through to the sitting room. The younger set by the fire immediately helped to occupy the furballs.

Dori came back in, all smiles, dressed in his everyday breeches, house shoes, and an old tunic of Balin’s. He went to the kitchen but Binni came out with the largest teapot Ori had ever seen. Dain and Sculdis brought a tray each of food stuffs and Lady Klakuna bore a large tray of cups, saucers, and plates.

“No,” said Dori, pouring Tharkûn out a cup, which looked tiny in his long, narrow hands, “what is all this about my Ori?”

Tharkûn sighed.

“If I must speak plainly, and though it pains me greatly-”

Thorin snorted.

“It’s obviously against the wizards’ code.”

“Yes, well, be that as it may, I received a visit from a raven, who shall remain nameless.”
Tharkûn looked directly at Roäc, who was making a great show of preening just then from his perch on the back of Thorin’s chair. “He said there was a dwarf here who had read the fire runes.”

“But any dwarf can read those,” said Ori, nuzzling Powder, who was lying like a baby in his arms. “Can’t they?”

From the looks on the faces surrounding him, he thought not. Ori turned to Dwalin, as Powder batted playfully at his beard beads.

“You never said anything.”

“Didn’t want t’ scare yeh, love. Though’ it might be a one time thin’.”

“You were terribly calm about it,” Ori noted.

“I was quakin’ in me boots, love, but panic wouldn’t’ve done yeh any good. I didn’t think on it much ’til Thror called Dori th’ true arkenstone.”

Dwalin removed Powder who had got one of her tiny claws firmly latched into Ori’s beard.

“I’d dearly love to know what that was about,” said Dori “What is the arkenstone?”

Kili, who was lying on the floor, teasing Nori-pori, piped up, “That’s the ghivashel, the treasure of treasures we’re supposed to find to secure our prosperity for a million years or some such.”

Fili added, “Great as far as it goes, but whoever possesses it eventually goes mad.”

“Well, I am good,” said Dori, “but I’m not that good.”

“The arkenstone is just a story,” said Thorin. “Udad was mad on his own merit. It runs in the blood.”

“What if it’s not just a story?” Ori replied, cuddling Powder and Mask in his lap. “What if Thror found it and it just made his madness worse? The treasure of all treasures makes treasure, doesn’t it?”

“An’ th’ gold an’ such in th’ treasury seemed t’ grow while yeh watched,” Dwalin recalled. “Love, d’yeh remember wha’ yeh said in the forge? Wha’ yeh read from th’ runes? I wrote it down f’r yeh.”

Ori gave Dwalin the kittens and went through his pockets until he came up with the small bound book filled with Dwalin’s painstakingly even writing, all in graphite pen. He didn’t have to skim very far to read *And so they dug the depths of the arkenstone.*

“Oh,” he said, rather shaken, since it seemed he’d unwittingly augured a prophecy.

Tharkûn winked at him.

“Yes, you are one with a talent, young master.”

Ori felt himself pale and was glad of Dwalin sitting behind him.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “I’ve never done anything like this. Have I, Dori?”

“No, pet. You’ve always been quite of-this-world. Adorable, of course, but quite of-this-world.”
Ori rolled his eyes as snickers filled the room. Mask and Powder tumbled down and went to see what Nori-pori was doing.

Ori turned to face Tharkûn.

“You seem to know more than you’re saying,” he accused. “Where did this come from? Are you responsible?”

“No, not this time, anyway. I suspect it may have something to do with your brother Dori coming into his own. Is that not how it works, Master Binni?”

“It is, yes. Oin wasn’t much for prophecy before he met me, but now he reads the signs quite well. I think it’s just the magic of the Bearer overflowing.”

Nori shot Dori a look.

“Yeh overflow on me an’ I’ll slug yeh.”

Ori was comforted a little. If it came from Dori, that wasn’t so bad. He didn’t think anything from Dori could hurt him. Ori turned his mind back to the problem at hand.

“But, that means the arkenstone is still down in the treasury. We can’t just leave it there.”

“It could take a lifetime to find it,” said Thorin, “and then only if we know what it looks like.”

“I know what it looks like,” said Ori. “I’ve seen it. I think that’s what made me sick.”

Tharkûn chuckled and muttered to himself about vomit and treasure.

“Ori, you are not going down into the treasury,” said Dori.

“I don’t have a choice, Dori. I know what it looks like.”

“But not alone,” Dori pleaded.

“Aye,” said Dwalin, pulling Ori back to sit on his knee. “Our Dori’s no’ th’ only one who don’t like yeh goin’ in th’ treasury alone.”

A call like a saw through lead echoed around them. Garnet landed on Dwalin’s shoulder. She pecked at Dwalin’s torn ear and croaked at him in the raven language. She preened the edge of his beard and grumbled and scraped and laughed at him.

“Garnet says she’ll help yeh,” said Dwalin. “She an’ some o’ her brood. If yer certain, love.”

Of course, he wasn’t certain. He was frightened and already queasy, but a sick stomach didn’t give him leave not do what amounted to the will of Mahal.

“I need to do it right now,” said Ori. “I don’t want time to think about it.”

Thorin turned to Tharkûn.

“Are you coming with us?”

“No, no. There’s something else I must currently tend to, so I’ll just pop back to the party and make sure all’s going well and you’re not running out of wine or such like.”
The old man grinned and tapped his finger alongside his nose and went off, chuckling.

Nori shook his head and pronounced.

“Nutter.”

“But not a fool,” said Dori. “That’s where the trifle is.”

Ori hurried to the bedroom and Dwalin helped him don old clothes. They came out of the bedroom meeting Balin and Dori, Dori was yawning. He paused to hug Ori affectionately.

“Do be careful my pet. Mahal, I’m exhausted. Have a care to my badger, deary.”

“No’ t’ worry, our Dori. I’ll keep ‘im close.”

Balin patted Ori’s shoulder and thumped foreheads with Dwalin.

Ori and Dwalin returned to the sitting room, hand in hand, where Thorin and Furh’nk were waiting to take him to the treasury. The younger set on the rug called promises of ‘kitten-sitting’. Lady Klakuna was on the sofa resting her eyes. Bard remained at the table with Dîs, Dain and Sculdís, the Urs, and the Older Sons of Groin. Both Tilda and Chopper were still completely unconscious. Thorin and Furh’nk led the way out to the courtyard where Mahrdnin and Binni had saddled up Honda, Harley, Thorin’s pony, Minty, whom Furh’nk addressed as the Queen of All Ponies, and Furh’nk’s pony, Suzuki.

Soon the four of them were riding down the eerily empty streets of the city as all the population, though technically in mourning now, was still in the great hall drinking. In the vague distance, Ori could occasionally hear shouts. Here even the streetlamp covers were partially closed, dimmed. It might have been any of those nights Ori tried to slip his inebriated brother home through a sleeping Dale.

They gained the treasury level and threaded a maze of narrow streets lined with archers’ slots. The looming stonewalls and tall buildings felt artificial and cold, lacking the age-old vibration of carved stone everywhere else under the mountain.

Dwalin leaned in to whisper, “All this’s new in th’ past five years. This street used t’ be twen’y feet across.”

Ori shivered. He felt many eyes upon them. Even though he was with the king and Dwalin’s uniform and distinct features granted them passage, still Ori could not say it felt like safe passage.

Thorin turned to Dwalin.

“Why are there still soldiers on duty here?”

“They mustn’t’ve got an order t’ do anythin’ else.” Dwalin rode Harley to a stop and stood on the stirrups to shout. “A’right, yeh lot, stand down. There’s food an’ drink in th’ great hall fer yeh. Yeh kin report t’ th’ office tamarrah at the usual time.”

They were too professional to whoop and holler, but they cleared their posts with amazing speed.

The party pulled to a halt at a grand, windowless facade clad entirely in gold. Furh’nk guarded the ponies while the rest walked up the steps and approached two stone-faced guards. Dwalin dismissed them and the three comrades entered yet another maze, this time of narrow corridors with more archers’ slots, though the archers had gotten the word to leave their posts.
Two more royal guards, nearly identical to the first sentries, stood one on either side of a pair of enormous golden doors. A smaller access door set into the bottom of the left door.

“You are dismissed,” said Thorin to the guards. “Please join your fellows in the great hall with my compliments.”

Ori could have sworn he saw flickers of amazement and a little fear, though they obeyed Thorin readily.

“Yes, er, yer majesty,” said the elder as they bowed and took their leave.

Thorin drew the diamond-coated key from the folds of his tunic and threaded it through the keyhole, nearly invisible in the doorjamb. He turned the key to the right a quarter turn. The access door swung inward. Another quarter turn and a transom above the door fell open on huge chains. All at once Ori heard the ravens on the other side and saw that the room was already fully lit.

Ori looked over at Thorin in amazement.

“Udad ordered the lanterns lit at every hour of the day and night,” Thorin explained. “There’s a fuel reservoir, so no one else had to enter to tend them.”

Thorin himself had not looked into the room.

“Listen, Ori, “ Thorin said. “When you find it, put it in this and Roâc will fly it out and get rid of it.”

He handed Ori a plain cotton sack the size of his head. It had a draw string that had several knots in it, for the ease of a raven carrying it.

Ori felt Dwalin’s hand moving in slow circles over his back.

“Yeh don’t have t’do this, yeh know.”

“No one will think ill of you if you can’t,” Thorin added.

“I can do this,” said Ori.

He walked through the doorway and heard the access door click shut behind him and it was just he and more ravens than he could count on opposite shores of a sea of gold.

The room looked different from down here, the piles of gold mountainous, threatening. For just a moment, he shrank in despair, his mind full of ‘what ifs’, then he forced himself to straighten up and look. The ravens circled the obsidian pillar where the goblet glanced off and struck Thror down on his face.

Ori knew it was the right one. They were all made of different stone and not even the gold and jewels could bury them to the ceiling.

Getting to it was another matter. He couldn’t fly like the ravens. As he tried to move forward, the coins and chains and jeweled hilts shifted under his feet and he fell to his knees. As he struggled up he knew he could be buried under all this and his body never found. He looked around him with a sinking feeling. A voice in his head that sounded very like Nori’s suggested that there might already be bodies under the surface.

Ori rolled his eyes and continued to slog on.
Heat and nerves sluiced over him and through him and down his skin as sweat. He tried to keep his mind and his eyes on the column, on the ravens, and not think of how long this was taking or how far he had or hadn’t advanced. He would get there eventually. Thror had, every day, and he had been ancient and frail.

When he found himself at the pillar, at the trunk, his hand on the latch, he realized his struggle wasn’t over. He tried to clear his mind and took a deep breath as he threw open the lid. A blast of heat and evil knocked him back on his arse into the coins.

The ravens scattered, screaming, to the upper reaches of the chamber.

As he sat there, stunned, the stone seized his mind and put images there, all the wonderful things he could be and have if only he left the stone where it was, perhaps put a chunk of pyrite in the sack instead, if he just left the arkenstone here and worshipped it.

First the stone offered him power. It showed him a world where dwarrow and men and elves bowed to him and did his bidding. He saw himself as a mighty king on the throne of Erebor. He wore velvet robes and the raven crown and held forth with proclamations that kept all of Arda enthralled.

It was the silliest picture Ori could imagine and he actually snorted with laughter.

The vision was snatched away.

Then the stone showed him wealth beyond wealth. He would never be hungry or cold or have to depend on the pity or good will of anyone. Dori could live in a grand palace with a hundred servants and a dozen mithril teapots holding the finest teas. Nori would never have to steal again.

Ori shook his head. He had a warm, cozy home and food and a wonderful job he’d earned on his own merit. Dori already owned a teapot, and had the use of any of Balin’s, and none of them were mithril, but they all held tea, which was the whole point. Nori could never stop stealing or sneaking no matter how rich he grew, because he liked the challenge and because he knew it drove Dori crazy.

“No, I don’t think so,” said Ori.

If it were a dwarf the stone would have huffed in exasperation.

A new vision rather made Ori blush. Handsome and beautiful bearers swayed towards him and opened their robes, smiling lovingly and declaring him to be their master. Ori shook his head to rid himself of the vision. This was beyond silly. No one could compare to Dwalin and Dwalin was his One. The One given by Mahal.

The stone actually growled. To Ori, it sounded like frustration. All the visions of riches and lust were whisked away.

Ori found himself standing in the royal library of Erebor, surrounded by tall shelves filled with books and scrolls. He didn’t know why the stone thought this would tempt him. He already worked in the library.

Then he stepped forward and looked closely at the books on the shelf in front of him, beautiful volumes all bound in colored leathers and decorated in gold. Every title bore the name of the same author: Ori, Son of Rikhma. He looked up and down the shelves and around at all the others. Each volume bore the same name, his own.
This shook him, but only for a moment.

In this vision he reached and pulled out a volume and opened it. All the pages were blank. He didn’t even have to look at the others to know they were the same. The stone tempted him with fame, but fame such as this couldn’t be given. It had to be built.

“You know,” said Ori, “I don’t think you have anything I want.”

The flare of bright gold blinded him and the stench made him gag. The stone howled like an animal, but when the spots cleared from Ori’s eyes, he still sat in the coins. The heat and sickly energies had subsided.

Carefully he stood and looked down upon the arkenstone, much shrunken and now dulled from Ori’s refusal. He scooped it up easily with the sack and it didn’t even whimper.

Without another thought, he tied off the bag and held it out. Roäc appeared in the open transom, swooped down, grasped the material in his sharp talons and flew back out, on his way to the open aeries of the mountain and hopefully to a place where the cursed stone would never be seen again.

It hardly seemed the work of a minute to return to the access door, lift the latch and step out, right into Dwalin’s arms.

“Ori, love, yeh did it!” Dwalin shouted and kissed him breathless.

It hit him all at once that he had succeeded and he would have liked to shout his triumph too, but he felt filthy to the point of disgusting and as though he hadn’t slept in days.

“I did,” he said. “Now I need a bath and a nap.”

“Aye, we’ll rinse yeh down, but I won’t put yeh in water by yerself. Yeh’d fall asleep an’ drown. Th’ hero o’ th’ day shouldn’t meet his end in his own bathtub. It would be, yeh know, ignominious.”

Ori felt his knees giving way and he slumped in Dwalin’s arms. Between Thorin and Dwalin, Ori was walked back along the corridor out to where Furh’nk was waiting. Dwalin tied Honda’s bridle to Harley’s saddle and swung up before leaning down to lift Ori onto the saddle before him. Ori rested against Dwalin the entire ride back. Ori wondered why the others were not more cheerful but then the creepy thought of wondering just how such an object had come into Thror’s possession in the first place shook him.

He peered around Dwalin’s arm and looked at Thorin.

“Thorin?”

Thorin smiled encouragingly, so Ori asked,

“Do you think there might be another arkenstone somewhere under this mountain?”

Thorin frowned.

“That’s more a question for Tharkûn.”

They arrived back at Fundin house. Marhdin, Dain, Gloin and Binni were waiting for them. Dain shooed Thorin, Dwalin, and Ori to go inside.
“We’ll put up th’ ponies, get tha’ lad inside. He looks ready t’ fall on ‘is ‘ead.”

Both Dori and Dipfa were waiting to pounce on him. Dori allowed Dwalin to take Ori to the bathroom with Dipfa. Dwalin helped Ori to strip off. Dipfa made comforting noises and took the vile clothes away, muttering about storing them in a forge chute.

Ori was too tired to do much other than let Dwalin tend him. Slowly the scent of soap and steam from the hot water revived him a little. He was able to get up and dry himself. Dori came back in bringing Ori clean, soft linen drawers, a nightshirt, and a pair of slippers.

Soon they came back to the sitting room. Dori provided Ori with a large mug of chamomile tea and a plate of hot, buttered toast. This seemed to attract a good deal of attention so some time was taken to make sure everyone had some. The younger group at the fire was given a tea service, a large dish of butter and a couple of loaves a bread. The kittens had been fed, they assured Ori, and were tucked back in their basket, apparently Legolas had sung them to sleep much to the enchantment of Gimli and the consternation of the rest, leaving their ‘sitters’ to enjoy themselves toasting slices on highly polished, long-handled steel forks.

Ori was happily settled on the couch, tucked securely under Dwalin’s shoulder. He sipped the tea, lavishly sweetened with honey, and began to feel better. Marhdin seemed satisfied to stay as his assistants were spending a happy time with their Ones. Pika and Omi were glued together eating toast from each other’s hands and Buj wrote busily, perched on half a small bench jammed against the fender and Dipfa beside him on the other half with her own notebook, drawing fashion impossibilities. Sigrid had given way to tiredness and was curled on the floor beside Fili, her head on his belly as he lounged before an armchair where Lady Klakuna now snored contentedly. Kili and Tauriel sat on one end of the couch and Loli, Bain, Stonehelm, Gimli, and Legolas made a pile at the other end.

Thorin, Balin and Bard and the older set were back at the large table.

Tharkûn breezed back in.

“And where is it?”

“Where’s what?” Thorin asked, seeming not terribly interested.

Tharkûn frowned awfully at him.

“Thorin Oakenshield, where is the arkenstone?”

“Oh. Yes… I remember. Roäc took it.”

“Roäc?” Tharkûn demanded, his eyes wide. “Roäc took it? Where?”

Thorin turned and peered at the wizard with an overly puzzled look.

“I have no idea. Somewhere appropriate, I imagine. Roäc is the king of the messengers of Mahal.”

Tharkûn groaned and sat down heavily.

“I might’ve known. I made the mistake of assuming that you would bring it to me, thus thought I would be safe in having a small dish of trifle.”

“Undone by fine trifle,” Balin consoled. “A sad lesson for all of us.”
Thorin chuckled at this and Tharkûn shot him a filthy look.

“I have to admit,” said Bard to Thorin, “that raven of yours gives me the shivers.”

Thorin smiled wryly.

“He’s not my raven. I am his dwarf.”
Danger averted, mourning perverted, and Frerin subverted

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Thror’s clammy dead body’s in the crypt, there’s a funeral to plan and many other things to take care of. Ori’s got a lot to do!! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

In the cozy firelight, Bard stared at Thorin, who was occupied now with lighting his pipe.

“You are his dwarf?”

“Yes, Thorin replied, and took a pull from the tankard at his elbow.

“I’m sorry, Thorin,” said Bard, “that’s just… I’m still getting over the idea that you can speak to a raven, never mind that he talks back. That you talk to each other.”

Dis chuckled. She was curled in Jani’s lap and Rutile perched over Dis’ ear, looking like nothing so much as a jeweled hair ornament.

“You men talk of having ‘pets’ among animals,” said Dis. “Do you not speak to them?”

Bard’s eyebrows hit his hairline.

“We speak to them, yes, but the first time my dog answers me in Westron I’ll be on the next caravan to Gondor.”

Tharkûn looked chidingly at Dis.

“Really, ma’am, you’re becoming as bad a tease as… as me!”

Dis clicked her tongue.

“Shame on you, Tharkûn, ruining my fun.”

Bard looked from princess to wizard and back, his face increasingly uneasy.

Thorin took pity on him, though with a mischievous grin Ori thought made him look eerily like Kili.

“Bard, I can talk to Roäc and he talks back because he’s not an average raven. Ereboorean ravens were sent by Mahal, making their pedigrees rather better than ours. If anything, Roäc considers me his pet and not the other way around.”

“When di’ yeh think Roäc’ll be back, lad?” Balin turned to Thorin.

Thorin shook his head.

“I have no idea. He’s getting rid of an extremely dangerous object. The arkenstone is not to be
cast aside lightly.”

“Aye,” Dwalin agreed. “Needs t’ be hurled wi’ great force.”

“Master Tharkûn,” Ori asked, “will there be another arkenstone in Erebor?”

“Given what the arkenstone is? No.”

“I figured it was just an evil rock,” said Ori. “All rocks are alive just like all dwarrow are alive. It only stands to reason rocks could be good or evil as well.”

“It does stand to reason, but the arkenstone was not a rock, it was a dormant dragon egg.”

Everyone in the room looked horrified.

“Oh, not to worry,” Tharkûn said in a reassuring tone. “Dragons generally nest far to the north where nothing lives that goes on two feet and dragons only produce one egg at a time, else we would be knee deep in them.”

“Yeh’d be knee deep,” said Dwalin. “We’d be up t’ our hairy arses.”

“Tharkûn, how did this egg get into Erebor?” Thorin demanded.

“I would say, long ago in the age of dragons, one was passing by when it was time to lay the egg and this was the best nest on offer. It’s not like dragons are attentive parents. The egg hatches at some time after two millennia, and the hatchling grows to full size overnight.”

Thorin sat up, horrified and furious.

“That thing could have hatched at any time? Sweet, blessed Mahal!”

He sank back in the chair and buried his head in his arms. Abruptly he looked up again and growled at Tharkûn, “You knew! You knew what it was and what it could do and you just let it sit there! Are you simply content to have so much blood on your hands?”

Tharkûn seemed to shrink in on himself, looking miserable. Finally, he sighed.

“You want a direct answer? I suppose I owe you at least one in your lifetime. I am not a man, an elf or a dwarf, Thorin. I am not truly self-willed in this world. The points where I may interfere in the lives of middle earth are few enough and not negotiable. For the ‘why’, you would have to take that up with Eru Himself.”

Ori stared at him.

“That’s why!” he exclaimed, then slapped his hand over his mouth.

Tharkûn raised an eyebrow.

“That is why?” he inquired.

Nori said, “Don’t tell him, Ori. See how he likes his own game.”

“Shut up, Nori,” said Ori. To the wizard he said, “That’s why you looked different in the feasting hall.”

“What does he look like?” Nori asked. “A stick insect with a hat?”
Ori ignored him.

“This isn’t your face,” he persisted.

“Ah, but it is, young master,” said Tharkûn, “for the moment. My original would not allow me to converse with you very well. This one was chosen, not by me, mind you, because it was thought to be non-threatening… and rather silly. These eyebrows? Really? Now, I have reached the limit to the questions I will answer. I’ve already bent the rules as it is.”

“You still haven’t told me what I’m to do,” said Ori. “Or even really why I’ve been chosen to do it at all.”

Tharkûn grinned.

“Others will do so over time, several of them quite a bit better looking than the Old Grey Goat of Arda, but none who do a better job making a rabbit out of a handkerchief.”

“A dragon’s egg,” said Thorin to Dis. “It was a dragon’s egg. It could have hatched inside Erebor.”

She rose, crossed to his side, and squeezed his arm.

“It didn’t, nadad. It’s over.”

Thorin sighed, clawed his fingers through his hair. “Well, that part certainly. We still have one dead and one uncrowned king. The moon needs to go through its phase three times before my coronation. We need to prepare for full mourning. It wouldn’t do to perform for Thror what we did privately for father.”

Dwalin said to Ori, “We sat on Thrain’s empty tomb an’ go’ blind drunk. We were all in mournin’ fer our folks.”

“Not a lot of ceremony,” said Thorin. “At least we were sincere.”

“Mm,” Dis agreed. “Sloshed but sincere.”

Ori had another cup of tea, then, feeling restless, he went over to the fireplace to check on the kittens. They had woken once again. Powder was fascinated with Legolas’ nose, the elf prince sprawled on his stomach. Gimli trundled in and sat very deliberately on Legolas’ rear end.

Legolas turned to Tauriel and said in Sindarin, “Dwarrow are heavy.”

She replied, “It’s alright. I intend to ride on top.”

Ori gaped at them. Legolas noticed and turned red.

“You speak Sindarin?”

“A little,” said Ori. He was actually fluent, but he had already had a rough day, too rough to go into it.

“Hey, Ori-mate,” said Kili, leaning against his older brother on the rug closest to the fire. Mask had decided to stalk the closures on Kili’s tunic.

While Kili just sagged with fatigue, Fili looked scared despite having a lovely crown Princess snoozing on his turm.
“How are you?” Ori asked, leaning over them.

Fili flapped a loose hand in the air. It seemed to sum up the atmosphere in the room.

“So,” Gimli announced. “What’s t’ happen now?”

Dis said, “We were just talking about how we would go about the mourning.”

Dipfa’s head jerked up and she stared at Ori.

“Master Ori! You’ll need mourning clothes.” She tore the previous three pages out of her notebook, threw them in the fire and began scribbling maniacally.

Balin sighed and cast a dubious glance at Dori, who sighed too.

“Lad,” said Balin to Thorin. “Our beards?”

Bard looked confused. Thorin took pity on him.

“It’s traditional for members of the royal family to cut their beards in mourning.”

This had everyone glancing at each other in a way that was not comforting. Thorin held up is hand and continued.

“Considering how we all felt about Udad by the end of his life, that seems like hypocrisy. We aren’t mourning. We’re relieved. Maybe we can mourn later, with time and distance.”

“Form must be observed, laddie,” said Balin, though he looked like he’d eaten something sour when he did.

“It will be,” said Thorin, “by me. I’ll cut my beard as the head of the family. For everyone else the proscribed clothing and jewelry are enough.”

“But how will it look to the people, nadad?” Dis asked.

“Given how despised Thror had become? They’ll likely see it as the token gesture it is and think him fortunate to warrant such consideration. At some point in the future his memory will be rehabilitated, but right now it’s best we distance ourselves from it. And from him.”

“What do you need me to do?” Bard offered. “Shall I ask my people to observe the death in some way? I will, of course, be at the funeral…if it’s permitted?”

“Thank you,” Thorin said. “You’ll be welcome. Dwarrow wear gray, the color of plain stone, for mourning. If you wish your people to wear that or make whatever observance men do, we will appreciate the gesture.”

“An’ that leads t’ another issue,” said Balin. “What will yeh say about him?”

Thorin deflated once more.

“They’ll expect me to speak at his funeral service. The only thing saving me is that it’s not about me, it’s about the kingdom. In his time Thror was a great king. I suppose I could emphasize that.”

“But it feels false,” said Ori.

“Eventually I may learn to let go of my anger, but right now? Yes, he was sick, but the sickness
sprang from greed. Yet, if it were me who’d been seized by gold sickness, is that all I’d want anyone to remember about me?”

Ori thought back on what he had read about the funeral rites of kings. They were always described in minute detail, but Ori preferred the most ancient ceremonies, which were by far the most elegant and austere.

“You could do the ceremony in its ancient form,” he said. “It’s in Khuzdul and the words don’t allow for variation. In practical terms it fits with the concept of returning to the ways of Mahal.

“Also, it might keep you from wanting to scream and throw things.”

“Where did you get the idea that I throw things?” Thorin asked. “That’s the second time you’ve mentioned it.”

“Is it accurate?”

“Yes, but that’s not the point.”

Dis, Dain and Sculdis chuckled.

Ori raised an eyebrow.

“I’ll go find the description of the rite.”

“Try the small parlor, laddie,” Ballin said. “Shelf to the right of the fireplace. Should be something on that there.”

Ori grinned at Balin and rose.

“Thank you, Ori.” Thorin said, majestically, while his eyes twinkled. “I’ll try not to throw things while you’re gone.”

Ori giggled, then glanced around as suddenly the back of his neck was prickling.

“Wait! Where’s Tharkûn?”

Everyone immediately looked about.

“He’s gone,” said Thorin.

“People come and go so quickly here,” said Ori.

“And then,” said Tharkûn, sweeping in, “they come back again!”

He was not alone. He had Prince Frerin, now covered in dozens of gauzy white plasters, by the scruff and deposited him on the rug in front of Thorin where Frerin sulked like a pre-tween.

Sculdis looked down at him.

“Wha’ th’ bloody fuck ’re yeh tryin’ t’ do, cosset?”

“Don’t call me that!” Frerin snapped.

“Laddie, yeh look like yeh’ve rolled in th’ lint barrel,” Dain commented. “Wha’re yeh tryin’ t’ hide as a ewe all preggers or somethin’?”
“His highness was heading toward the stables,” Tharkûn broke in. “Perhaps he was just going for a walk to clear his head? Then again, given his pretty companion, perhaps not. I wouldn’t have interfered with love’s young dream, but they seem to be packed for a journey of some duration.”

“Didn’t he take a cart?” Kili asked. “Idad Frerin, if you’re going on a trip you need to take a cart. It’s easier on the pony and you don’t run the chance of getting a sore butt.”

“Where were you going, Frerin?” Thorin interrupted quickly as Frerin didn’t look as though he was going to answer Kili in a polite manner.

“Away from here, to be happy with T’dillah,” Frerin spat.

Thorin glanced at Tharkûn.

“I sent her back to her family. She is safe enough,” said Tharkûn.

“Oh dear,” Buj observed thoughtfully. “Wobr will be disappointed. All that hair wax for nothing. And Prince Frerin is blond. That borders on his being jilted!”

Lady Klakuna raised an eyebrow. “Well, my dear young badger, I wouldn’t get too upset for your brother. She is my own bloodline, you know, but really all she does is write bad poetry and recline tragically upon the divan. Perhaps our sympathy should be directed to the young man over there, Prince…”

She let the line fade away like her interest as Powder began trying to climb her dress hem.

“Dear little kitten,” she gushed.

“How shocking!” Difpa frowned. “Buj, perhaps your dear brother has made a good escape after all.”

Thorin rubbed his temples, then appeared to come to a decision. He rose to his feet and turned toward Frerin.

“We will discuss this in my office. Now.”

“No.”

“No?”

“We will discuss it here if we are to discuss it at all,” said Frerin imperiously. “I want witnesses.”

“You didn’t seem so keen on them on your way to the stables just now.”

“Aye, f’r sure, laddie!” Jani was most helpful. “Happy t’ be of service t’ th’ witless.”

Frerin shot her an ugly look, then,

“If you must know, we were eloping. Thorin’s pet wizard has put paid to that.”

Tharkûn chuckled and Thorin replied in a heavy tone.

“You will not leave this mountain before you marry T’dillah and I will perform the ceremony myself.”

“Why sh-“
“You will not dishonor her and you will not dishonor this family. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly” Frerin grit out.

“Do you even know where you’ll go once you leave? Have you thought that far?”

“Why do y-.” Frerin obviously thought better of this tactic now. “We intend to live at her grandfather’s old estate in Ered Luin until we make the choice of our own.”

“By the time that household’s done with you, you’ll not have the money to do anything but crawl home to Erebor. The very last thing you want.”

“And I suppose you have a better idea? Because you always do, don’t you, Thorin.”

“If I had all the answers we wouldn’t be at each other’s throats right now.”

Thorin looked troubled, but Frerin’s face only hardened further into contempt.

“I’m listening.”

“Beleghost is without a king. It was something grandfather spoke of long ago as a missed opportunity, because the ground is rich in mineral deposits and it sits on a major trade road. We’ve had a succession of regional governors, but no one with the skills or authority to make it prosper. If you go there with your fortune intact you will have your own court.”

Dis added, encouragingly, “Since Thorin doesn’t intend to move his household into the king’s quarters you might offer grandfather’s staff the chance to move with you.”

“We’re well aware you chose almost all of them,” said Thorin.

Frerin’s eyebrows shot up, his only show of surprise.

Thorin shook his head.

“You think I don’t know you ran that house while grandfather was ill?”

“He sees all and he knows all,” said Frerin sarcastically. “Easy to look clever when the ravens tell you everything, I suppose. Tell me, Thorin, was it your idea that they attack me or their own?”

Thorin stared right through him.

“They let you off easy, Frerin. I’ve seen them peck someone’s eyes out.”

Frerin, taken aback, did not answer for a moment. Garnet and Sapphire laughed uproariously at Frerin and danced forward in false threat. Frerin twitched slightly and when he could speak again he blatantly changed the subject. “And when did you plan on this all going forward?”

“First mourning has begun. If you can be ready in a week, it will give you time to make arrangements. You can make offers to anyone you wish to go with you as your court and assemble a staff to ready the royal caravan to Beleghost. With the prospect of being queen, I imagine T’dillah will happily wait here an extra week.”

Nothing was said about dealing with personal sadness in that time, if indeed Frerin felt any. He was supposed to be closest to Thror, but Ori couldn’t see that the old king’s passing affected Frerin at all.
Frerin’s eye swept sideways toward Dori and Balin on the couch.

“We will be few in number. We should take the bearer with us.”

Dori’s smile was nothing short of feral.

“I’d like to see you try,” he said.

Frerin swallowed and made a strategic retreat. He turned back to Thorin. The two stood face to face and no one moved and no one spoke.

Ori inched a little aside to give Dwalin a clear path to the two if he needed it.

Finally Frerin lifted his chin, a sharp, regal movement.

Ori felt the urge to giggle.

“I’ll take your offer under advisement,” said Frerin, “and give you my answer tomorrow. If I have leave to retire, your majesty?”

Thorin sighed.

“Of course, Frerin. Go to bed. It’s late.”

When Gloin and Binni had escorted the sulking prince away, Ori didn’t want to know where, Bard rose to his feet.

“We had best go, too. Poor Tilda is out and I can hear Bain snoring from here.”

Dori said, “Why don’t you all stay the night? We have plenty of room and tomorrow we can give you a proper breakfast.”

Bard shot Dori a crooked smile.

“In other words, we’ll be waddling our way back to Dale tomorrow. Thank you, Dori, we’ll take you up on that.”

Bard lifted Tilda into his arms and Dain said to Chopper, “Come, laddie, time t’go. Yer needin’ yer beauty sleep.”

Bard said to Dain, “I wonder if Tilda would consider her wished-for pig the same way you consider him. Very few men in Dale keep animals as ‘pets’. If its not a working animal, we can’t afford it. What does a pig give unless it becomes dinner?”

“Depends on th’ pig,” Dain reflected. “They’re smarter than dogs, but no’ as obedient. Have their own minds, an’ their own tempers.”

“You think a pig is a bad idea?” Bard asked.

“No’ necessarily,” said Dain. “But, indeed, it’d have t’ be th righ’ pig. I’ve raised ‘em all me life an’ Chopper’s a gem beyond any!”

“He certainly is,” agreed Sculdis.

Chopper oinked up at them sleepily.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. No dead bodies here. Clammy? A little. Sweaty? Definitely! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrows time, same darrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori fetched up his knitting again. The repetitive movements calmed him a little. He was also determined to have this finished for Dwalin as soon as he could.

“We should depart as well,” said Legolas, finishing the last of the bread and butter. “At least to show my father I’m still alive.”

Gimli got off him with visible reluctance. Legolas rose and turned to him then shyly bent and bumped foreheads with him. Kili obviously thought he’d got a better reward, however, since Tauriel rose only to her knees to hug him before following the woodland prince out to the breakfast parlor and the meadow. Fili appeared to think he had won, when Sigrid mumbled as she got to her feet, pausing only to kiss Fili’s cheek before groping her way to her father, leaning into his side as he followed Dain and Sculdis out to the receiving room and upstairs to the guest chambers.

Finally it was just the Fundins, with Dwalin and Thorin deep in discussion near the fire.

“My, but it’s been a busy day,” said Dori, as he returned from the kitchen where he’d taken the dishes. “I believe it’s time for me to turn in. Balin?”

Balin rose, smiling and crossed to his side.

“Of course, m’dear, yeh must be exhausted.”

They bid the room goodnight and went to bed.

But not, apparently, to sleep.

And they left the bedroom door open.

It started with a distinct slap and some not-so-discrete giggling. Ori didn’t think much of it at first. He just rolled his eyes and went on with his knitting. He wanted to finished these next few lines and as far as Balin and Dori’s romantic noises, he resigned himself to waiting it out.

“Balin, your hands are cold.”

“Just tryin’ t’ warm them up.”

“There’s a fire in the hearth right there.”

“I find this forge right here t’ me likin’.”

“I’ll just bet. Mmmm, that is rather nice.”
“On second thought, this bit here’s even better.”

“Ooo, I do believe you’re right.”

This went on rather longer than made Ori comfortable, and it only increased in volume.

“Now, now, turn about is fair play.”

“Oof! Wha’ a grip yeh have.”

“And how well you fill it.”

“I kin think o’ a few places I’d like it t’fill.”

Ori dropped a stitch, cussed under his breath and tried to recount. He couldn’t concentrate. He glanced around. So far he seemed to be the only one who noticed. That lasted another thirty seconds.

“Oh, Balin!” Dori cried. “Oh Balin, you naughty creature!”

“Naughty, am I? Oh, yeh’ve seen nothin’ yet.”

“I beg your pardon, I believe I’m seeing plenty!”

Oh, Mahal’s hairy arse!

“Close the door-close the door-close the door!” Ori moaned, covering his ears, sinking into the sofa cushions.

Dori’s delighted squeal as Ballin molested him was not something he wanted to hear. Ever. He was happy to think Dori was being well taken care of by Balin, that they were happily in love. But this? Er. No.

Dwalin and Thorin turned to stare in the direction of the bedroom. Nori slid from behind an arras with a smirk. There was a thud and Bofur’s feet, then legs appeared as Nori had left him to slide sated to the floor.

“Balin did say Dori had to be exhausted. Seems like Balin’s just the dwarf t’ do it.”

Dwalin moved to the hallway and bellowed, “Shut th’ door, yeh fuckin’ rabbits!”

“Fuck yerself, Dwalin!” Balin called back merrily, though they did hear the door latch shut.

“Right,” said Nori. “I need a drink. Who’s with me?”

“Aye!” Bofur thrust himself free of the wall covering and leapt to his feet, grinning like a fool.

It was late when Ori turned in. He made sure the kittens were safely asleep in their basket at the bedside. Garnet, on her wrought iron perch, yawned and tucked her head under her wing. He curled up cozily on the cotton under-quilt, the over-quilt and furs nestled around him. He closed his eyes but his brain was racing.

What could Thorin possibly say about Thror that was complimentary? Ori was young and he didn’t know about Thror’s great deeds. Thror had just been the king and Ori never gave him a great
deal of thought. Ori’s thoughts once he’d grown older were more occupied with helping Dori keep food on the table and a roof over their heads. He’d never considered the injustices that were visited on his fellow dwarrow. Life in the Dale was hard but that was due to the Master.

Ori rolled over again. He realized why he had instantly disliked Frerin. Frerin was very like Calmar. He cared only for position, power and wealth. He treated the people who served him like so many pieces of furniture or as a something that existed to serve him. He cared nothing for them as his own people. Thorin did. Thorin treated his servants as valued colleagues. They made it possible for him to assists others. They were as his arms and legs and through them he was able to reach as many as he could. He cared more for them than he did himself. He was a true leader. Ori had read how, in the Battle of Khazad-dûm, Thorin had headed the battlelines, calling his warriors to follow. Thorin never ordered any to do what he would not be willing to do himself.

Ori couldn’t think too hard about what Tharkûn had said about him being an instrument of Mahal. Mahal was the Maker of All. Ori was a scribe from a penniless home in Dale. He wasn’t from the line of Durin. Dori was, but Ori’s father from what Dori had revealed to Balin was a playwright from a traveling band of actors and musicians. Ori didn’t even know what clan his father had hailed from. He knew the Rikantas were of Lady Klakuna’s line in Ered Luin.

How could Mahal have chosen him? He was a nothing. What could he possibly do that wouldn’t be better handled by someone like Balin or Gloin? Oin read the signs, surely he could be a better judge of what Mahal was saying and was better positioned to carry out such things.

Ori glanced at the window. The moon was sinking toward the west. He heard Dwalin’s footsteps and their bedroom door opened quietly. Dwalin must have finally finished discussing ‘the Frerin business’ with Thorin. Ori heard Dwalin undress and the bed sank on the side as Dwalin climbed into bed carefully, as though making sure he didn’t wake Ori.

Ori rolled over, kissed him and rested his head on Dwalin’s chest.

“What’re yeh still doin’ awake, love?” Dwalin asked.

“So tired,” said Ori, “but I can’t imagine sleeping right now. It’s so busy inside my head.”

“Worried abou’ this whole thin’ with Mahal?”

Ori laughed.

“That makes it sound like we’re two friends who had a tiff! But, yes, I am worried about that, and about what we all have to do next. Mourning a king? As a member of his family? Me? Here I thought a zinc mine was the hardest thing I’d have to navigate!”

“I shoulda warned yeh. It never stops with th’ Durins. Been doin’ it all me life.”

“How do you sleep?”

“Yeh learn t’ live in th’ moment, like a wolf, and t’ put yer thoughts aside when yer tired.”

“But how?”

“I give ’em t’ yer friend Mahal,” said Dwalin.

Ori could almost hear Dwalin smile.

“I think I can do that,” said Ori.
“I know yeh kin.”

Ori couldn’t quite picture Mahal, but he could imagine a hand the size of Erebor as it descended from clouds full of fire. His thoughts, both leaden and loud, left his mind and settled in the giant palm. The world rumbled with laughter and another hand appeared and a huge forefinger caressed the top of his head. Ori heard a sharp ‘crack’ at the crease of his shoulders and neck and the tension fell away as he snuggled further into his husband.

“Love you,” said Ori.

“Love yeh, too.”

The sun shone through the window when Ori opened his eyes again. It seemed like less than a minute since he closed them, but he felt rested and at peace.

He lay on his side with Dwalin curled around him. Dwalin’s chin rested on his head, deep breaths ruffling Ori’s hair.

Dwalin stirred, muttering as he woke.

“Good morning,” said Ori.

“Mornin’. Sleep well?”

“Really well. Now I’m… awake,” Ori giggled. “All of me.”

“Uh?” Dwalin’s hand drifted down to cradle him through his drawers. “So yeh are.”

Ori wriggled his arse back against Dwalin where it was obvious he was also awake.

Dwalin grunted.

“Keep doin’ tha’ an’ yeh’ll be late fer yer breakfast.”

“Right now I’m aiming for lunch,” said Ori.

“Oh? Aye? I don’ think we have quite tha’ much time, but we’ve more than time enough. If yer interested?”

Ori nodded. He felt his face glowing as Dwalin tugged loose the tie of his drawers and drew them down. Then Dwalin pushed the covers away so they could both see what he was doing and Ori swallowed a whimper.

He’d been too startled in the bath to pay too close attention. This was slow and close. Lazily Dwalin ran his fingers along Ori’s prick.

“Yeh have such a pretty cock,” said Dwalin.

“I do?” Ori asked, breathless.

“Aye, goes wi’ th’ rest o’ yeh.”

Dwalin’s hand curled around him and slowly tugged, over and over. Ori lengthened and filled while Dwalin’s grip tightened, the hand strong and the skin rough against his.
This went on and on, the pleasure building slowly with the pace of Ori’s breath. He felt Dwalin breathe in his ear and then Dwalin’s mouth took hold of his earlobe. Dwalin growled low then slowly, gently, insistently, bit it.

Every nerve and muscle in Ori’s body twitched at once. He could swear he heard Dwalin give an evil little laugh before he bit Ori again! And licked where he’d bitten and then bit him again!

While Ori got over the shock his body had better ideas and he writhed back against Dwalin, suddenly very hard and very, very turned on.

“Rub against me!” Ori ordered.

Dwalin pushed his pelvis hard against Ori’s behind and rubbed his trapped prick in lazy rhythm with his hand. Ori pushed back and purred.

“Oh, yeh know I like tha’,” said Dwalin.

“You do? I mean – uhm… Do you need to pull down your drawers?”

Dwalin drew away, the cooler air startling against Ori’s skin. A bit of a scuffle took place behind him and then Dwalin returned, all fur and warm hardness nestled in the crack of Ori’s bum.

Ori bit his lip, now redder than his own hair, as they moved in earnest. He put his hands flat on the mattress for leverage, determined to give as good as he got.

They rocked the bed, the springs singing, and Ori laughed.

“Y- you want me to call you ‘Beorn’?”

“If yer still talkin’ we’re doin’ this wrong.”

“Oh, no, you’re doing this – ooooh.”

Ori shuddered and twitched. This was different from before, pleasure spreading from both sides, the sharper, gasping, irresistible burn, caught in Dwalin’s grasp, and the new, tingling vibrations from his backside, traveling up into his ass and under his stones and also up his spine. He wanted more of that.

He wanted more.

He ground back, pushing a gasp and a moan from Dwalin’s throat.

“Oh, Mahal, Ori.”

Then Ori was on his hands and knees with Dwalin shoving against him and Ori still gripped and throttled in the slickened palm.

He bucked back as hard as he could, his muscles locking as he came, his lungs burning, his panting breaths taking on the edge of a cry as he sprayed the sheets and didn’t care.

Dwalin still moved over him, gasping as he milked the last drop from Ori’s prick. His big, rough hands took Ori by the hips as Dwalin ground into him, not pulling back anymore, pushing and pushing and coming with a groan Ori would remember the rest of his life.

Dwalin spent, splashing Ori’s lower back as his cock shook and leapt in the crack of Ori’s arse.
In the moment of shaky silence Ori wondered how he’d be able to stand it when Dwalin actually put the thing inside him.

The hard breaths echoed in the room as Ori lowered himself to the bed and Dwalin followed to cover him.

“Ori, love, are yeh alright?”

Ori rested his cheek on the mattress and laughed.

“I’m fine, and I may never move again.”

Dwalin chuckled and pressed a kiss to his shoulder before easing off him. Ori flopped over on his back, surprised to see that Dwalin still looked uncertain.

Ori wiped a trickle of sweat from the side of Dwalin’s face and drew his hand down the braid in his beard. Dwalin’s tattoos stood out nearly black against his ruddy skin.

“You’re beautiful,” said Ori.

To his amazement Dwalin closed his eyes, laughing a little, and going even redder.

Dwalin – his Dwalin – was embarrassed?

Ori put a hand on each side of Dwalin’s face and drew him down to kiss him.

“Good morning, husband.”

“Good mornin’, love.”

They both felt it at once.

Just for a moment the stones beneath them, around them, above them, undulated in all directions.

Ori grasped Dwalin and drew a horrified breath.

“That wasn’t a mine collapsing?” he pleaded.

“No, love, tha’ wasn’t a collapse,” Dwalin assured him. “Tha’ would ‘feel’ like stone breakin’ an’ there’d be damage. This felt like… th’ lava?”

“The lava…” Ori repeated.

In his minds eye he could see the endless stream of fire far below the deepest mines. Without warning it had leapt from its channel, then slammed down again and flowed on, as if Erebor had merely hiccuped.

“Has that ever happened before?”

“No’ in my memory, but it’s over now.”

Ori sagged into him, relieved. He giggled.

“I thought the earth was supposed to move during sex, not after.”

Dwalin chuckled.
“Alright, funny dwarf.”

“I’m funny?” Ori asked, squinting at him.

“Aye, an’ bossy, too, orderin’ me t’ rub against yeh.”

Ori looked away, embarrassed.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m no’. I liked it.”

Ori turned back, amazed.

“You did?”

“A lot.”

Ori grinned and kissed him, then kissed him a little more.

Dwalin growled, easing him back into the pillows, burly hands on his shoulders.

Ori was wondering if they should try to push on through to lunch after all when a tiny, fuzzy head popped up over the side of the bed and Nori-Pori gave a meow exactly twice his size.

Dwalin groaned.

“He’s already scalin’ th’ side o’ th’ bed?”

“We’ll have to be careful when we – er – romp before breakfast,” said Ori.

“Rompin’? Is tha’ wha’ they callin’ it these days?”

“It’s what I’m calling it. Dori’s going to make us wash our own bedding, you know.”

“A very small price t’ pay,” Dwalin assured him, “fer the pleasure o’ yer company.”

Nori-Pori padded across the mattress and smacked Dwalin’s arm with a sharp little paw.

“I think his lordship wants his milk,” said Ori.

“I think his lordship’s gonna start sleepin’ with Nori an’ Bofur.”
Beads, Brunch and Bonnets

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Wakey-wakey, it’s time for brunch with the usual Durin romps. We find out what ever happened to that horrid Master of Dale! And some secrets about Bearers. Please do join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori was washed and dressed in mourning gray, clothes sent along to him from Gridr. She had rooted them out from Oin’s young days. They were disgracefully out of fashion but for the rites going to be performed at Thror’s funeral they were remarkably apt. Ori didn’t care about fashion one way or the other, but he looked at his marriage bead with its chips of emerald and sighed. It went into the bead box with Dwalin’s. Ori found the sewing box and rummaged through it.

“What’re yeh doin’, love?” Dwalin entered the room, washed and wearing a dressing gown and a towel on his head like an odd turquoise hood.

“Looking for some grey thread to bind the end of my marriage braid.”

“Ah, leave off then an’ come with me.”

Dwalin sat Ori on the end of their bed and sat next to him, unbraiding and rebraiding the plait of Ori’s marriage braid. Then Dwalin took a familiar-looking mithril bead, plain with carved cirths and clasped the end of the braid.

“Um, Dwalin? That’s a Durin bead. I can’t wear that.”

“If the king says yer a Durin, then yeh are. Thorin meant this fer yeh when th’ time came. Time’s come.”

“Shouldn’t it be on a different braid?”

“It will be when yeh kin wear yer marriage bead again.”

Ori thought how ironic it was that a nameless scribe wore this bead while Thorin’s own bead rested in possession of a miner’s daughter.

He wondered if Thorin would ever get it back.

Thorin must have others like it, Ori knew, but the king had not replaced the missing bead in his hair.

Ori noticed that he and Dwalin were not the only ones who ‘slept in’. It was closing on midday when they finally made their appearance. Following an enticing savory hot scent Ori led Dwalin into the breakfast parlor.
At the table were Thorin and Balin, and Dori. Dori sat to the left of the head of the table and was presiding over the teapot, a loaded bread board and a large covered silver platter. He wore an immaculate robe of dove gray that rustled softly whenever he moved. Ori decided it was entirely of silk.

Balin, clad in his usual style but in a grey matching Dori’s, was at the table’s head, reading a scroll.

“Good morning brother and wee brother.”

Dori gave Ori and Dwalin the eye.

Thorin, on the other side of Balin, was still wearing yesterday’s clothes. A book sat open on the table before him, the parchment yellowed and the runes faded.

“Found it,” Thorin said to Ori with a teasing smile.

“Really, pet,” said Dori, starting to fill plates for Ori and Dwalin. “This is hardly a seemly hour to appear. It gives one pause as to what you might have got up to.”

Ori was in such a happy mood, he blinked innocently at his elder brother.

“Did you pause to consider what I was getting up to while Balin was making you squeal like Chopper at dinner?” Ori asked saucily.

“Ori!” Dori cried, cheeks flushed, but his eyes twinkling.

“Oh, Balin! Oh Balin, you naughty creature!” Ori mimicked. “Really, Dori, you could have done terrible damage to my mind.”

Dori flushed scarlet and sputtered as Balin clamped his mouth shut, but was obviously holding in a laugh.

“Really!” Dori protested.

“Next time, shut the door before you start!” Ori said.

“Noted,” said Balin, who took a sip of tea, then shut his mouth again.

Dwalin leaned in the doorjamb, laughing too hard to breathe.

Dori whirled on him.

“This is all your fault!”

“No, it’s not,” said Ori, seating himself, taking the two full plates handed to him, setting one next to him and started to work on the other. “He made sure the door was shut before I took off my britches.”

“Mahal’s beard!” Dori exclaimed, covering his ears. “I do not want to hear this! I am not hearing this!”

Nori stuck his head out of the vent above the stove.

“I guess he really is related to that Klakuna dam.”
“Good morning every- oh! Captain! Are you alright?” Lady Klakuna trotted in, full of the joys of life and obviously ready for brunch.

“Bugger,” Nori’s voice sounded.

“Nori, you naughty lad!” Lady Klakuna scolded indulgently as she seated herself next to Dori, kissing his cheek fondly. “You come down from there, my precious badger! You’ll get your tunic all dirty!”

Ori singsonged under his breath, “Gran-ny’s precious bad-ger.”

“Fuck you, Ori,” Nori snarled from somewhere behind the ovens.

Lady Klakuna ‘tut-tutted’ while Dori poured her tea.

“Thank you, darling,” she crooned, patting Dori’s hand. “What a great trial it must have been when you were so young and alone. To have such a busy little badgerling to raise.”

Balin regarded his tea with great focus and Dori’s face was a study.

Ori glanced over the rim of his teacup to see what Thorin was doing.

Thorin’s face was impassive but he was white-knuckling the book.

Dwalin pushed off from the doorway, passing Thorin on his way to Ori. He gave Thorin a swat about the head.

“Fuck yeh, Thorin, stop laughin’.”

Thorin looked up with a ‘Who? Me?’ expression worthy of his nephews. A grin appeared. Ori knew where Kili’s had come from.

Said nephews arrived, Kili moving at speed toward sustenance, Fili attempting to swagger, but that proved difficult as he and Kili were falling over each other in their bid to arrive first.

“Uncle!” shouted Kili.

Thorin raise an inquisitive brow.

“Good morning!” Kili replied gleefully. “Did you get any sleep or have you been reading Balin’s dusty old books all night?”

“Been reading all night by the looks of it,” said Fili, bouncing a fresh hot roll off Kili’s head. “You’re the one who sleeps in his clothes.”

“Boys,” Dori said in dulcet tones.

Ori heard his slippered toe tapping under the table.

Fili and Kili exchanged glances.

As one they leapt up and seized Dori, kissing him soundly on each cheek.

“Sorry, Dori!” Kili said.

“Don’t hit us in the head with a spoon!” Fili pleaded.
At that moment Sculdis, Dain and Stonehelm entered. Stonehelm headed straight for the food. Dain passed by Thorin’s chair pausing only to plant a large sloppy kiss on the very top of Thorin’s head. Thorin did not move except to swing a fist behind him. He missed and Dain chuckled all the way to his seat.

Thorin took in the grey garb all around him and pulled back his chair.

“If you’ll all excuse me for a moment, I need to wash and I’ll rejoin you presently.”

“Aye, g’wan an’ make yerself pretty fer us, cous’,” Dain cooed.

“Why are Fili and Kili’s mourning grays so dark?” Ori whispered to his husband.

“Food stains,” said Dwalin. “Watch.”

Gimli entered and he, too, was wearing very dark gray.

“Ah,” said Ori.

It was just as well, seeing what Dori had on offer: beef ribs barbecued with a tangy sauce of tomatoes and hot peppers, roasted potatoes with butter and salt, pickled beets and sliced eggs.

As if following the delicious scents the Ur males, Bard and his family, and the Sons of Groin and their families drifted in. Dis arrived last with Jani, hand in hand. Soon the room was full and noisy with everyone speaking at volume and eating.

When Thorin returned the room fell silent.

Everyone stared.

Dis burst into tears and her sons were not far behind.

“What? Is it uneven?” Thorin asked, running his hand over his beard shorn to barely a finger’s breadth long.

Ori stared, horrified, as Dis threw herself into his arms and hid her face in his shoulder.

“He doesn’t deserve it!” Came the muffled cry. “The bastard doesn’t deserve it!”

Thorin held her and murmured something to her, but she only shook her head furiously.

“That’s really disturbing,” said Bain with his mouth full.

“Shut up,” Sigrid hissed, passing a mug of tea to her father whose eyebrows were at his hairline.

Thorin sent Jani a pleading look.

Jani went over and drew Dis back to her seat.

“Come with me, lovely. Yer food’s gettin’ cold.”

“He doesn’t deserve it, Jani!”

“Aye, I know, I know.”

It was then the elves reappeared.
Dori welcomed them and there was a general cry of greeting that Ori knew was usually saved for other dwarrow. He doubted the elves would understand the significance, but they definitely knew when they were wanted.

Legolas sat with Gimli. Sigrid moved up for Tauriel to sit by Kili.

Legolas did a double take at Thorin’s beard, but was too well bred to make any personal comments to a king. He had no such compunctions with Gimli.

“Why are you wearing such a dark—“

“Shut up. Eat this.”

Legolas looked askance at the contents of his plate.

“What is this?”

“Beef rib with tangy sauce.”

“Really?” Legolas looked horrified, yet fascinated. “Where are the utensils?”

“Don’t need ‘utensils’. That’s against th’ rules.”

“What rules?”

“Here, like this.”

Gimli picked up a meaty rib in his meaty fingers and tore off a piece of beef with his mouth. Sauce dribbled down his chin, into his beard and disappeared into the dark fabric of his tunic.

“Ah, that explains it,” said Legolas. Gamely he picked up a rib, sniffed it, apparently liked what he smelled and sampled it.

His face betrayed amazement, enjoyment and finally the corners of his mouth practically curled with glee.

“Tauriel, you must try this!”

While the elves made culinary inroads avidly aided by the younger set, the talk at the other end of the table had turned serious.

“I chose to send Calmar off to Mordor with his thugs and their accomplices rather than execute him,” said Bard. “It probably sounds cowardly to dwarrows, but beheading isn’t the way of men, at least not in Dale.”

“We quite understand, lad,” said Bain in a comforting tone.

“I just hope tha’ don’t come back t’ bite us,” muttered Dwalin.

“It won’t,” said Legolas. He’d heard everything quite clearly. “When Ada learned about that last load of wagons going off to Mordor, he rode his elk out and stopped them. Calmar saw him and threw himself on Ada’s mercy.”

Legolas snorted at the idea and licked the sauce off his fingers as he’d seen Gimli do before lifting his brow at Bard, adding, “Did you mean to mock him by dressing him that way?”
“Dressing him what way?” Bard asked. “He looked same as always when we put him in the cart.”

“Aye,” said Dwalin. “Put him in with some o’ th’ Dale wives. We figured th’ other men would shank him before they reached Mordor.”

Legolas snickered, “When he came out of it he was dressed like a female of men.”

“Like a what?” Dwalin, Fili, and Kili bellowed.

“He and that associate of his,” explained Legolas, reaching for another rib. “They were dressed as ladies.”

“The other elves didn’t see how it could have fooled anyone, really,” observed Tauriel. “Perhaps they were distracted by the sheer size of Calmar’s…”

She lifted her cupped hands to chest height as though holding a pair of watermelons.

Kili choked, colored, and applied himself to his food.

“To be sure,” she continued, “there were actual females, though none of such a stature. Even that Alfish… Foetid…”

“Alfrid,” Bard stuttered. “His name is… Well, I see your point. Sorry, go on.”

“Alfrid, then. They could see where he might pass for a female. But the volume of his skirts! Like standing in the middle of a horse! How do such females fit through doors?”

“Sideways,” Dis supplied.

“Sideways?” Tauriel exclaimed. “That can’t be practical, unless they fear falling down, then the layers might prop them up somehow.”

She listed to one side in her chair, face intent with the experiment.

“I’m going to assume,” said Thorin, “that King Thranduil didn’t take pity on him.”

“No,” said Legolas, “he took pity on everyone else. He had the guards free Calmar into his ‘protection’, then Ada killed him.”

Everyone at the table stared.

By now Legolas had sauce in his hair, but he hardly seem to notice.

“When he told me what he did I said, ‘You said you would free him.’, and Ada said, ‘I did, I freed his ugly head from his vile body and I saved us from that hideous hat.’. Apparently it looked like a violet salamander.”

Dori shuddered.

“Perhaps it’s for the best, Thorin dear.”

“Yes,” said Thorin dryly. “Now arda is safe from bad millinery.”

And then, just like that, there were two other elves in the room.
Ori could not have said where they came from or how. He knew he didn’t know them, but since the other dwarrow didn’t reach for their weapons, he assumed they were not hostile.

Perhaps he’d learned his lesson with Tharkûn?

“Lady Galadriel,” said Thorin, rising and bowing. “Had we heard of your approach we would have turned out to greet you.”

“I didn’t approach, I arrived,” said the elf lady. “But I thank you anyway. You called for me?”

“Actually, we didn’t.”

“No matter. I’m here now.”

Although all elves were immortal, Ori felt she was much older than any he’d met so far. Her clothing was white, and rippled without any help from the air, and her hair was so pale gold it was nearly silver. Ori’s neck hair crinkled just from her presence and positively jutted out straight when he saw that her feet did not quite touch the ground.

The male elf with her was shorter, darker, far younger, although still ancient.

She waved a hand in the direction of her companion.

“You’ve met Lord Elrond of Imladris?”

Ori’s eye was caught by Balin, who looked at Elrond with considerable amusement from under his lashes. Something about the name Elrond was familiar. He recalled it meant something about the dome of the-

Oh.

Oh dear.

Elrond and Thorin bowed to one another. Thorin introduced the company and bade the new guests to sit and eat.

“Tea, milady?” Dori asked smoothly, passing down a dainty porcelain cup painted with primroses.

“Yes. Lovely. Thank you.”

“What can we do for you, Lady Galadriel?” Thorin asked.

“Actually, I believe I can help you. When Mount Doom erupts, there’s usually something afoot.”

“Mount Doom erupted,” said Thorin.

“This morning!” Ori cried. “That was it!”

“Nuthin’ like bouncin’ lava t’ wake yeh up.” Dain observed.

“Er, how did you know that was us?” Thorin asked.

“My mystical powers!” she cried, then she laughed at herself and said, “King Thranduil told me.”

“Who th’ fuck told him?” Dwalin muttered.
“He’s such an old gossip,” said Galadriel. “I can say that. Had his suit been successful he would have been my son-in-law.”

“Really?” Dori asked enthusiastically.

“Oh, yes, but Celebrian - that’s my daughter, Celebrian - had already decided upon dear Elrond.”

She put a ridiculously graceful white hand on Elrond’s arm. He blushed like a badger and smiled tightly.

Balin clean his throat suddenly as though he was trying to disguise a laugh.

“Giviris must’ve been a bit of a come down, lad.”

“I thought we were just going to discuss trade,” Elrond explained, looking rueful. “Her majesty was rather stronger than I was expecting and I’m afraid I was as surprised as you were. I don’t recall being so confused in my life.”

“Must’ve though’ yeh were a maid.” Sculdis commented. “She’s never been interested in males.”

“That’s what I had heard.” Elrond nodded in agreement.

“Luncheon, Lady Galadriel?” Dori offered.

“Please!”

“We have several choices really, some quite nice veg.”

“Do you have any more of those ribs?” The lady craned her neck toward the sadly depleted platter.

“Yes, yes we do,” said Dori, startled. “What would you like to go with it?”

“Some elderberry jam?”

“We… have that, yes,” said Dori.

Here ancient eyes lit up.

Literally, Ori noted with a swallow.

Binni shook his head at Dori and went out to the kitchen and returned with the platter replenished and a crock under one arm. Binni pour a generous amount of the shining purple jelly into a bowl and set it and the platter before Galadriel.

She happily dipped each rib delicately in the jam before savoring them.

“So, Master Dori,” she said, “I understand you are a Bearer.”

“Yes, milady.”

“How fortunate for the kingdom. The touch of a Bearer is purifying.”

Dwalin eyed Balin.

“Really?” the soldier asked.
“Really?” Nori and Ori asked together, totally agog.

“I’m as pure as the driven snow,” Dori assured them with a sniff.

Binni snarked into his tea.

“Aye, but yeh drifted,” said Bofur.

“Such a lovely family,” Galadriel said.

Nori spoke up.

“So, yer ladyship, what’s this got to do with the price o’ chicken feed?”

“The treasury,” said Thorin. “Dori can purify Thror’s treasure.”

Dori scoffed.

“I’m not going to go live in the treasury, thank you very much!”

“You don’t have to live in it,” said Galadriel. “You just have to spread your energies there.”

“Spread my energies how?” Dori asked suspiciously.

“You do have a lover?”

Balin, great diplomat of Erebor, choked on his tea and was silent.

“First, you must dance and cavort in the gold,” said Galadriel.

Dwalin turned to Balin.

“Right, lad, get those cavortin’ shoes out.”

Dis, Gridr and the other dams fell in a heap, laughing over each other.

“Sure, yer not too old t’cavort?” Dwalin challenged.

“Hush, dear brother,” Balin growled.

But Dwalin was not bridled. He all but licked his chops.

“Where’re them elf slippers with th’ pointy toes?”

“Oh, no, no,” said Galadriel. “You must go unshod. Naked is best!”

“Cavort-cavort-cavort,” Bofur chortled.

Dori banged a serving spoon on the table.

“That is enough!” he admonished. He turned to Galadriel. “I imagine, milady, you can instruct us on this dance?”

“Indeed! Elrond and I will give you a demonstration. Won’t we, Elrond?”

Elrond’s brows hit the circlet on his forehead then he looked grave, yet horrified.
Roäc flew in.

“Thranduil’s at the gate! Hide the silver!”

Dwalin stretched and rose.

“I’ll go put on me boots an’ give him an escort.”

Galadriel hurriedly finished the elderberry jam.

Dori said gently, “There’s plenty more of that, milady.”

“Don’t tell Thranduil, or there won’t be.”

In a few moments, Dwalin opened the door and Thranduil swept through in all his glory, his robes billowing over the room. The king of Mirkwood was dressed in shades of green and brown and his hair was white gold. His brows were incongruous with his hair, being large, black and almost as bushy as a dwarf’s. His nose was high and he didn’t look particularly pleased to be present. His eyes lit immediately on his son, who sat stuffing his face with ribs, smeared to the eyebrows in sauce.

Thranduil sighed, swiped Thorin’s napkin and wiped Legolas’ face.

“Ada!” Legolas protested, while Gimli snickered and Tauriel looked over at that very interesting corner by the windows.

“If you are going to eat like a fawn, you should expect to be tidied like one.”

Bofur chimed in.

“Look on th’ bright side, lad. He didn’t clean yeh with spit. Leastways, not yet!”

Thranduil tossed down the napkin, bowed to Lady Galadriel with his hand over his heart and demanded of the room, “What goes on here?”

Galadriel sighed.

“You’re just sulking because you weren’t invited.”

Dori smiled sweetly at the king of Mirkwood.

“Lady Galadriel was about to give a demonstration of purification by cavorting. I don’t suppose you have anything to offer in that area?”

Dain pushed a chair out with his foot, tacitly inviting Thranduil to have a seat. In the spirit of avuncular benevolence he offered the elf a toke from his freshly lit silver pipe.

“Ah, no thank you,” said Thranduil.

“Just hold it fer a mo, willya?” said Dain. “Got a squeak.”

Thranduil held the pipe at arm’s length. Dain propped his leg on the table, opened a flap in his trouser leg, then a metal door in his fake leg, plucked a tiny screw driver from behind his ear and fiddled with the cogs which ground away where his shinbone should be.

If Ori was discomfited, Thranduil went luridly grey.
“There we are,” said Dain, slamming the hatch shut and relieving Thranduil of the pipe. “Ta!”

Binni put a plate down in front of Thranduil piled high with toast, tomatoes, mushrooms and ribs all fried together.

The woodland king consumed the tomatoes, mushrooms and toast, while looking askance at the ribs.

“They’re really good, Ada!” Legolas enthused.

But Thranduil had left it too long and Roäc and Garnet relieved him of them.

“Best part,” said Roäc.

“His loss,” said Garnet.

Thranduil inquired of Galadriel how cavorting could purify treasure.

Galadriel murmured something in Quenya.

Thranduil blanched, then turned purple, then took refuge in the mug of ale that Dwalin set before him earlier.

Thorin excused himself and presently returned with an ornately carved wooden box. He sat and placed the box before Thranduil.

The elf’s brows flew to his hairline.

Thorin smiled faintly.

“You son and captain have rendered me great assistance,” he noted.

“Have they?”

Thranduil frowned slightly and opened the box. Startled, he let the lid fall back on its hinges. The gems inside threw sparkles of light around the room. He lifted the object which proved to be a necklace apparently set with stars.

For once he struggled for something to say. He looked at Thorin with changed demeanor.

“These were in your grandfather’s possession,” he said softly.

“Yes, though not in the treasury. I understand you placed the order some time ago. The assistance of your kin has rendered the debt paid in full.”

Thranduil nodded and closed the box.

“I am well satisfied.”

Ori thought probably not, but it was prettily said.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Royal business never ends, there’s a funeral to prepare for and Ori’s in the thick of it and people want to make him thicker! Please do join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

They had three days to commit Thror to the stone, in accordance with custom. All dwarrow throughout the mountain and in the Dale were dressed in grey with only iron or silver or clear gems. All but the most necessary businesses were closed in respect for the kingdom’s mourning. All the forges, even the lava ones, were reduced to glow status. There was no music or merriment in the streets. This, however, did not mean the Durins were idle. It was just as well Ori did not need go to the library as it was also closed. They were moving now at speed.

Thror had long since severed all royal ties to the Scribes’ Guild, instead giving the position of ‘royal scribe’ as favors. Most of the real business of the mountain was recorded by Balin’s ever-growing team of ‘secretaries’, who were on loan from the minister of finance, which was to say, Gloin.

Now that the coup was complete, however oddly it happened, Ori was prepared to let more experienced scribes take his place at Thorin’s side.

But Thorin didn’t replace him. Thorin was busy every moment of every day, and wherever he went, he took Ori with him. Ori learned more about running a kingdom in those three days than he’d realized there was to know and Gríadr’s little waist desk became almost a part of him during this time.

He also understood why Thorin never gained weight.

*Royal Decree 1.1 in the Reign of His Majesty, King Thorin II of Erebor. All public and private debt currently held against any dwarf or dam under the Mountain of Erebor, or residing in the Kingdom of Dale, or in the surrounding countryside within sound of the River Running, will revert to the hand of the crown and therefrom be paid.*

“Even those of nobles?” Ori asked.

“Even those of nobles,” said Thorin. “I want to make it as easy as possible for those who want to follow Frerin to go to Belegost.”

*Royal Decree 1.12 in the Reign of His Majesty, King Thorin II...*

When they returned to Fundin House for a late lunch Ori soaked his wrist in ice water, but it was Thorin who winced.

“I’m sorry, Ori.”

“That’s alright, Thorin, but I think I may need some help.”

At Brur’s insistence, Buj, Omi and Loli were pressed into service for copying and were very excited to do so. Brur set them up at the big table in the Fundins’ sitting room and Ori was ordered to hand over all his notes. Brur provided the necessary paper and special inks for the proclamations. These would be entered into the library, sent out to all nobles, officials and guilds as well as several
to the dwarrow neighborhoods in Dale. During lunch Ori hurried his food, like Thorin and despite Dori’s scoldings, leaving his three friends in a whirl of hard work and the contemplation that their work, their handwriting, would be preserved in the archives of the Great Library in perpetuity, a dizzying sort of immortality for journeyman scribes.

Royal Decree 1.16 in the Reign of His Majesty, King Thorin II…Any dwarf or dam of noble station, and all their kith, kin descendants or heirs who now or evermore remove their household from Under the Mountain shall forfeit their land and buildings therein, private and of business, to the hand of the crown.

“They’ll fight yeh on that, laddie,” said Balin. “They won’t go quietly.”
“They’ll go,” said Thorin grimly.

Royal Decree 1.19 in the Reign of His Majesty, King Thorin II… Being the execution warrant for Vors, Lord of Erebor, declared an enemy to the peoples of Erebor and Dale.

“No’ just th’ dwarrow?” asked Balin.
Thorin held up a letter in a plain, even hand, in westron letters.
“Bard has consented.”
“Got it in writing, did yeh? Yeh actually listened t’ somethin’ I said?”
“I do on occasion.”

“… death by beheading by the king’s own hand in the great courtyard before the main gates of Erebor at dawn on the seventh day following the death of King Thror. The body of Lord Vors shall be cast to the mob in accordance with tradition, save his head which shall be displayed at the gates until time, weather and ravens remove it.”

“Gruesome,” said Nori approvingly.
“An’ smart,” said Dwalin. “Th’ nobles who leave with Frerin’ll have t’ ride out past it on their way t’ Beleghost.”
Ori peered up at Thorin.
“Have you ever beheaded anyone?”
“Yes, but I don’t enjoy it.”
“I would never accuse you of that,” said Ori.
Thorin squeezed his shoulder.
“You’re worried about me.”
“Always, since you don’t worry about yourself.”
Thorin called for ponies to be saddled for himself, Ori, Dwalin, and Fili. Ori had noticed that since Dain had arrived, the loyal servants of Dis and Thorin came to Fundin House for the day. Jani and Dis seemed to have made one of the upstairs bedroom at Fundin House their own. Nori and Bofur had a small chamber up there, too. Fili and Kili had also claimed rooms upstairs as had Thorin. The king had also taken over half of Balin’s study which suited both of them well. Dori presided over the kitchen but Mistress Dazla asserted herself as his assistant in all other things household related, making sure Fundin House was always shining. Ori briefly overheard Balin and Dori discussing with Thorin and Gloin about creating a tunnel between the House of Fundin and the House of In and expanding the stable. Ori was amused and happy at this. To have his family all together in one place was comforting. It also allowed Thorin to have impromptu council meetings whenever they were needed.
Ori reflected on this while he and the other three moved off into the receiving room, the huge double doors thrown open to the royal cavern for the day.
“Where are we going this afternoon?” Ori asked Thorin.
“Bard is expecting us in Dale.”
Just then a carriage pulled up before Fundin House and an ancient noble dwarf in elaborate grey robes was assisted down the step by a footman.

“Oh, Mahal,” Thorin breathed. “I should have expected him first.”

“Who is that?” Ori asked.

“Lord Sikar.”

Fili groaned and Dwalin rolled his eyes.

The dwarf was announced by Mistress Dazla in an emotionless voice, disguising her annoyance.

“I beg His Majesty forgive my intrusion,” said Sikar in his creaky, gravelly voice, bowing painfully as he looked as though he was already half way to stone. “I did attempt to call to convey my condolences in person, only to find His Majesty on a visit.”

The censure was barely audible but it was there.

“This is my cousins’ house, Lord Sikar,” said Thorin. “My family is of great comfort to me, as I’m sure yours is to you.”

“Oh. Quite. Quite,” said Sikar, bowing. “Best to have everything dealt with in the family, mind cleared of rash emotions, before His Majesty attempts business of State.”

He bowed again, as if for good measure.

The rest of the company entered, as they were each of them off on assignments of their own, and Lord Sikar looked startled to see so many dwarrow at once. He raised an eyebrow at Bofur and his hat, then his eye lit upon Dori and he bowed yet again.

“Bearer,” he said, all but licking his lips.

“I’m afraid milord has the advantage of me,” said Dori smoothly.

Introductions were made.

Thorin said, “And, of course you are acquainted with Lady Klakuna.”

The edges of Sikar’s beard practically curled.

“Yes, yes, very well,” said Sikar, bowing over her hand. “Lady.”

She sighed, pulling back her fingers as soon as she decently could. Ori would swear she was counting her rings.

“How have you been, Sikki?”

“Desolate without you, Klakuna. Why do you never visit? Surely old Rikut can’t object now that you are … best rid of him.”

“Oh, I won’t have much time for frivolity, Sikki. My dear Dori will need my help, as the new head of the family.”

This was news to Ori, and he wasn’t the only one.

“Well! Congratulations are in order, Lord Dori,” said Sikar, practically batting his lashes.

“Lady,” Dori corrected.

“Er… lady?”

“At the moment. I’m afraid it will depend upon my mood which I choose for the day.”

Mistress Dazla and two maids curtsied immediately to reinforce Lady Dori’s mood. Ori thought he saw them stifling giggles.

“That will make it difficult to address your lordship without insult from day to day,” said Sikar, bemused and befuddled. “How shall one know what to call you?”

“I suppose one will wait until I call upon one,” said Dori with a winsome smile.

Abashed, Sikar made a strategic retreat back to Thorin.

“I’m eager to see what direction Erebor will take in the coming year. I’m sure once His Majesty has emerged from bereavement, He’ll wish to address His council?”

“Thank you,” said Thorin with a smile and a nod, “I already have.”

Sikar opened his mouth but paused before he spoke, as if reviewing what this might mean.

“I was unaware the council had met. Where are His Majesty’s preferred chambers?”

“The breakfast table. As you know, these meetings are not public.”

“But, Your Majesty, I served Your grandfather faithfully for Eleven decades!”

“And I thank you for your long, devoted service. No doubt now you will be relieved to devote yourself to your family and your craft.”
“Er… that… may I ask His Majesty, who now serves as royal council?”
“You may. The House of Fundin and the House of Groin.”
“His Majesty's kinsmen, of course.”
“The Siblings Ur and the Siblings Ri.”
“They… I don’t believe I’m familiar with the family Ur. Are they some lesser branch of His Majesty’s amad’s family?”
“The Ur are Broadbeams,” said Thorin, indicating the family behind him. Jani chose that moment to adjust her breasts around her equipment straps. “Lady Dori’s brother Ori is married to Captain Dwalin and is my close associate.”
Ori fought the urge to wave.
“But, Your Majesty, the Ur and Master Ori, they are not noble.”
“There is no law which demands they be so.”
“No law, certainly, but by tradition the council has always consisted of nobles. Tradition is vital.”
“Of course. Master Ori, will you please make note of this? Every dwarf or dam at the table this morning who was not then noble is now, by my decree, ennobled.”
“Done, your majesty.” Ori wrote on his waist desk with great flourishing movements of his pen and promptly passed the paper to Loli, who had come through to see what was going on, bowed to Thorin and took it back through to the table and squared up to the paper to make it so.
“Unless the lords or lady candidate have some objection?” Thorin asked, looking around.
“Naw,” said Bofur. “I don’t mind. Long’s I don’t hafta give up me hat.”
“I would never presume to ask,” said Thorin. He turned to Lord Sikar. “There. All tidied. I bid you an excellent day, milord. You are dismissed.”
Rather stunned, the rejected nobleman went.
Thorin glanced over to arras by the fireplace and lifted his chin.
A flutter of cloth was the only sound to betray Nori’s exit.
“Ah, t’ be a fly on tha’ wall,” said Balin.
“Nori will be,” said Thorin. “I suspect the wall in question will be Frerin’s.”
“Yeh think he’ll try t’ persuade Frerin t’ contest yer right?”
“He’ll try, but Frerin’s already half way out of the mountain with a new crown. If there’s trouble it won’t come now, maybe in six months or so.”
Thorin turned to Balin and grinned.
“In the meantime, we’ll just have to put such a loss as Lord Sikar behind us and bravely carry on.”
“Er, Thorin,” said Bofur.
“Yes, Lord Bofur?”
“Well, that answers that. Y’know we ain’t exactly lordly.”
“Lord Sikar’s father was a cheese monger. He used to prop his feet up on the table and pick his teeth with his fingernail during meetings. He was ennobled because he promised my grandfather free cheese for life. I dare say you’ve already exceeded him.”
Bombur cleared his throat.
“Thorin, I can’t leave the inn, as much as it’s an honor to be included. Bifur and I are needed at home.”
“Understood. We still have a quorum without you. I wouldn’t keep you from your family for long stretches of time.”
“We will, of course, attend you as needed,” said Bombur.
Bifur added his affirmative in inglishmek. Apparently he wasn’t feeling very verbal at the moment.
“I’ll take you both up on that, trust me,” said Thorin.
Ori threw a teasing glance at Thorin.
“And the elves and men, your majesty?”
Thorin slewed a look at him.
“There is no need, most royal of scribes, they are already extremely noble.”
They dismounted at the main square in Dale and were there for only moments when they were
descended upon by a pack of elderly dams, who all seemed to coo in unison.
Dwalin muttered, “Brace yerselves, lads.”
Like a wave breaking on a wall the dams reached them, proffering sympathy and baked goods in
great profusion.
“Oh, yeh poor lad - er, majesty! Yer beard an’ all. He wasn’t worth it, deary, fer all he was yer
udad. He wasn’t worth yer beard!”
“Isn’t our Prince Fili handsome! What a fine couple they’ll make. She’s not spindly like some of
those women, she’s a hearty lass and she’ll make them plenty o’ babies, mark me!”
“Here now, King Thorin, you take these rolls. You’re so thin! How will you ever run a kingdom
when you can’t hear for your belly growling?”
“Oh, Mahal, here comes Lord Vors’ sister. Yeh best look out, yer majesty. Don’ take nothin’
tha’ come outta her kitchen. Dam can’t cook t’ save her life.”
“Oh, and here’s some rolls for our Master Ori. You need some building up if yer to keep that
great strapping husband of yers happy.”
This dam turned and gave Dwalin a saucy wink.
They made very slow progress across the square, and Ori could see Bard watching them from the
step of his temporary headquarters, smiling and snickering.
When they made it to the step they had a parade of dwarrow and men behind them.
“How do you fare, King Bard?” Thorin asked.
“Much better now,” Bard replied.
Thorin mouthed the word ‘bastard’ at him.
They all went inside - just Ori, Dwalin, Thorin and Fili with Bard, thankfully, though Ori feared
the others might try to shoehorn themselves in. But Bard hadn’t had enough time to even pick
councilors.
Ori sagged against his husband.
“Can we go kill some orcs now? I need a vacation.”
“Sounds good,” said Dwalin.
They sat at a scarred table surrounded by mismatched chairs, all original to the squat, square
building. It had once been the detached kitchen of an ancient mansion. It was very small, just a few
rooms, its chief advantages being its sturdiness and a hearth that hadn’t fallen in. They could hear
badgers playing in the ruins of the old walled herb garden just outside.
Sigrid entered with ale, bread and cheese and sat beside her father. Fili beamed at her. Sigrid
blushed but was otherwise composed.
“Personally, things are going well,” said Bard. “I haven’t had my throat cut yet.”
“Me neither. Encouraging, isn’t it,” Thorin agreed.
“Publicly, things aren’t quite so shiny. Until last week the Master controlled all the farmland
around Dale. He dictated what we’d plant and how much, so as to make sure there was a shortfall of
something important.”
“And that drove up the prices,” Thorin concluded.
“We’d already planted for the year when he was removed. It was going to be a very, very bad
year. Even looking at adding cold weather crops, a lot of our poorer families will have a bad time of
it.”
“No,” said Thorin. “There’s enough money in Erebor to bring food from the four corners of
Arda. We can get it here and we can distribute it. No one is going hungry.”
“And what is it you wish in exchange for this largesse, King Thorin?”
“Your immortal soul, King Bard.”
“Rather cheaply bought, Thorin,” said Bard into his cup.
“Da!” chastised Sigrid and gave Ori and exasperated look as she shook her head at her father. Ori
just smiled and held his tongue.
“We’ve spoken of this before, Bard.” Thorin continued. “I have no intention of going back on my
word.” He signaled to Ori. “I am now in a position where I can commit that word to paper. We
will happily tide you over until you have the planting under control.”

Tilda skipped in, up to her father and clambered into his lap.

“When is your birthday, King Thorin?” she demanded.

“It’s Midwinter Day,” Thorin replied solemnly.

“Good, I have lots and lots of time then.”

She jumped off and bounced away.

“Should I be afraid?” Thorin asked.

“Why should I be the only one?” Bard replied.

“At least she didn’t ask how old I was,” Thorin reflected.

“She assumes you and I are the same age: two inches from decrepit.”

After an hour’s discussion, which defined the manner and intricacies of the trade and supply lines, they decided it was time to brave the square again. Here they discovered things had proceeded apace in their absence.

Furh’nk looked apologetic and each of his soldiers was steadfastly facing forward, spine stiff, holding baskets and bags that smelled suspiciously like baked goods. There were more containers on the benches nearby and a royal wagon was pulling away with still more.

Yet more elderly dams had descended upon the square, their numbers swelled by the sisters of men.

“Thorin,” Ori whispered.

“Don’t show fear,” said Thorin. “It just riles them up.”

To Ori’s horror, he was the sole target of their concern now. Despite a balmy breeze, apparently they thought he wasn’t wearing enough to keep his neck and hands warm. The mitts were rather well-done, he thought, though he’d never go through fifty pair in his lifetime, and each scarf was louder and warmer than the one before. He peered up over the top of the last they’d draped over him and scowled at his snickering husband.

“Yeh look adorable,” said Dwalin.

“I look like a sheep’s worst nightmare,” he breathed in exasperation. “It’s very, very heavy. I’ll never get on Honda wearing all this.”

“Here, gimme some o’ tha’. Ah, so yeh are under there after all.”

“You’re sleeping in the barn tonight.”

“With a bunch o’ naked sheep I’m guessin’.”

“When did they even have the time to make all this? This one has little books and pens knit into it! This one is… Are those radishes?”

“Upside down hearts?” Fili guessed.

Thorin cleared his throat, intoning sonorously,

“Those are representations of Dwalin’s behind.”

“They are no’!” Dwalin roared.

“So they are,” crowed Ori delightedly. “So they are. Look, Dwalin, they even have your dimples.”

“Master Ori! Oh, Master Ori! There he is, Margr, told yeh!”

“Well, bash on with it, Vi, he don’t have all day.”

Facing away from the approaching dams, Ori indulged in a wince, then plastered a smile on his face and turned around.

“Mistress Margr! Mistress Vi! A good afternoon to you!”

They were obviously sisters, their hair and ornaments identical. They were also obviously retired from some heavy trade, for they were as tall and broad as Dwalin and they stood shoulder to shoulder, as formidable as any battlement.

Mistress Margr put her hand over her heart, her impressive bosom straining her tunic.

“Well! Master Ori! It does me heart good to see yeh.”

“An’ mine,” said Vi.

“When we saw th’ house in Steam Alley shut, we thought f’r a moment yeh’d all been pitched
“Out!” said Margr.

“An’ after all Dori’s strife an’ struggle!” Vi added.

“I said t’ my Rogi, yeh remember me Rogi, th’ pair a’ yeh were badgers together. He finally got out o’ th’ lock up last week an’ he’s livin’ with us f’r a time, I said, Rogi, yeh wouldn’t believe, but th’ house in Steam Alley’s shut! But Rogi said yeh weren’t turned out, but had all got married, ‘r gone into th’ army ‘r something.”

Vi interjected, “An’ we said, What? All three at once? Not bloody likely, chuck!”

“An’ then Ribdis from next door dropped by f’r a visit,” Margr continued, “an’ said she’d seen yeh here with th’ king an’ th’ prince, yer pardon, yer worships,” she curtseyed, “an’ that great, strappin’ Captain Dwalin an’ yer married after all! An’ so young! Oh, let us give yeh a kiss!”

They did so, Ori thanking them nervously.

“An’ one f’r Captain Dwalin!” Margr cried, throwing her arms rapturously around the startled Dwalin.

Furh’nk, visibly horrified, was obviously unsure whether he should intervene or guard the king and prince from similar affection.

Dwalin had only just recovered when Vi took her turn.

“Er, thank yeh, Mistress Margr, Mistress Vi,” said Dwalin, bowing.

“An’ many happy returns o’ th’ day!” Margr cried, apparently thinking this was somehow appropriate.

Vi dug her elbow in the vicinity of Margr’s ribs.

“Time t’ go, hen. I’m sure Master Ori’s very busy writin’ thin’s down f’r the king an’ all.”

They curtsied once more in tandem and they were gone.

The silence was startling.

“What in Mahal’s blessed name was tha’?” Dwalin asked.

“You want the long version or the short version?” Ori asked.

“I take it this gossip has some value beyond entertainment?”

“Not bloody likely,” said Fili, nodding vigorously, then looking suddenly horrified. “Mistress Margr and Mistress Vi won’t expect an invitation to tea or something, will they?”
Of course they will! Dori will have to invite them since they came all that way just to congratulate me. That’s why they did it! Imagine, Margr and Vi of Steam Alley, getting a personal invitation to Fundin House to take tea with the Bearer? Not just tea with the whole town and meeting the princess, but just themselves invited especially! Seeing all those knickknacks and ornaments? Eating with that silverware? They’ll think they’ve died and gone to Mahal’s Halls, and they’ll have gossip to lord over Steam Alley for the rest of their days!”

“Um,” said Fili.

“Shall I make sure it’s when you’re out on patrol?”

“Yes?” Fili asked in a small voice.

Ori looked over at Furh’nk, who was striving to be brave.

“You too, Furh’nk?”

“If it’s all convenient, Master Ori.”

“Er-” Dwalin started.

“You’re doomed,” concluded Ori.

Thorin hunched over his pony, arm on his belly, laughing.

“Shall I ask Dori to invite you, too, my king?” threatened Ori.

“Please do. I must hear all this excellent gossip.”

“They’ll kiss you,” Ori reminded him.

“I’ll suffer.”

By the time they reached Fundin House they were all bright red with laughter, in stark contrast to their mourning garb. They collapsed on the furniture in the receiving room, trying in vain to catch their breaths.

Dori swept in.

“What in Arda have you done?”

Dwalin leapt up and snapped to military attention, barking out,

“Master Dori! It is me pleasure t’ inform yeh tha’ yer youngest brother has acquitted himself honorably in battle with th’ most ferocious creatures in Middle Earth - an army a’ dwarrow grandmothers!”

Dwalin saluted smartly then swept aside to reveal the table where the soldiers had stacked their sugary gifts.

“Behold! Th’ spoils o’ war!” Dwalin bellowed with an exaggerated sweep of both arms and another bow.

Dori’s eyebrows flew up.

“Well, I see you have all been very busy.”

Kili entered, already shouting, “What’s for dinner?”

“Rolls,” said Fili.

“Lots of rolls,” added Ori.

“You got those in town?” Kili asked. “Idad, those could be poisoned! You weren’t afraid to take them?”

“I was more afraid not to take them,” chuckled Thorin, sprawled in the deep armchair. “Roäc ‘vetted’ them, if you’re worried.”

“Still,” Dori observed, “I can’t see you eating all those on top of supper.”

“I had hoped you would know who needed them most,” said Thorin.

“I certainly do.” Dori was all business. “Where is our Furh’nk?”

Furh’nk looked in from his post at the door.

“Bearer?”

“You round up a few of your comrades and take these down to Mistress Annis’ rooming house in Steam Close. Make sure she knows I sent you or she won’t let you in. If you put them on the parlor table, every one of them will be gone by nightfall.”

“Immediately, Bearer.”

“And mind you each take one for yourselves.”
“Yes, Bearer.”
“You’re looking a might peaky.”
Ori quickly donated all the knitwear he had received, save the scarf with the pencils and the one covered with tiny ‘Dwalin arses’, to the pile. Personally he thought Furh’nk was the least ‘peaky’ dwarf he’d ever met, but Ori wouldn’t get between Dori and one of his ‘projects’. Apparently this one involved making Furh’nk as wide as he was tall.
“That’s an excellent choice, Dori,” said Thorin. “Thank you.”
Kili looked crestfallen, so Fili picked him out a blackberry jelly bun, which Kili took gratefully and ate in two bites.
Dwalin turned to Thorin.
“D’yeh think he even tastes his food before it hits his stomach?”
“Did we at that age?”
They rested for a couple of hours then Dori sent them all to dress. Thorin looked grim but resigned. They had Thror’s funeral tomorrow and Thorin had arranged for Frerin to celebrate his nuptials that evening. All the Fundins had talked Thorin out of holding the ceremony at Fundin House before he’d even had a chance to voice it. It was to be held in Thorin and Dis’ old home. With the assistance of Mistress Dazla and the loyal servants, Thorin and Dis had moved all their own and the royal family’s personal effects to Fundin house, so the old residence was now merely an empty, though elegantly appointed, meeting place.
Thus the Durins were waiting in the receiving room of Thorin and Dis’ old home for the Rikanta to arrive with T’dillah. Dis attended, with Fili at her side every moment, but Kili was out in Dale on patrol. Balin, Dwalin, Ori and Lady Klakuna rounded out Thorin’s party. Technically Lady Klakuna was representing the head of her family, so she had to attend, but she refused to mix with the rest of the Rikanta clan and placed herself near Ori at all times.
“Did you find the crowns you wanted in the treasury?” Thorin asked Frerin. Frerin wore blue court robes, his second best set, since his first had been aerated by the ravens. He was still a little scraped up from his ordeal, but the swelling had gone down considerably.
“Yes.”
“And you asked Dori to handle them to purify them?”
“Yes,” said Frerin wearing a puzzled look. “But I had to have them cleaned carefully first. They seemed to have been caked with dried something or other.”
“Really? Extraordinary.” Thorin’s face was bland but Ori wanted to crawl up the chimney. Dori had used the ‘strain of the cleansing’ as an excuse for his absence, but it was Ori who actually felt strained.
Mistress Dazla ushered in the bride’s family. Everyone except the bride and groom (and the bride’s mother) still wore mourning grey. T’dillah arrived dressed in a red brocade gown with gold trim, rather daring for dwarrow bridal colors. Klakuna told Ori quietly that it had belonged to T’dillah’s mother Bathis, that skinny dwarrow dam over there, wearing that rancid green dress with too many ruffles, so deedy! Bathis had fancied herself a trendsetter in her youth, and the dress looked as though it only needed taking in at the bodice for it to be ready in time for the wedding.
“I remain unimpressed,” Lady Klakuna assured Ori.
“A queen,” Bathis repeated to herself under her breath, over and over. The dyed green chicken feathers waving in her coiffure looked ready to wilt. “My daughter will be a queen.”
The small throne room-come-drawing room provided a pleasant place for the ceremony. Thorin stood before the roaring fireplace and Frerin was straight backed and looking very proud of himself as T’dillah’s parents escorted her into the room. The Rikanta family applauded and complimented the couple.
Thorin used the ancient marriage rite to marry them and there were sighs of delight over this. Frerin was given leave to salute his bride and Ori was unimpressed with the amount of time they took over thoroughly exploring each other’s mouths with their tongues.
The delighted noises the Rikanta made drowned out Dwalin’s hissed whisper to Ori, ‘He mus’ be
inspectin’ her back teeth.”
Ori stifled a giggle and nudged his husband.
Lady Klakuna told them in an undertone, “He won’t find any. T’dillah had six of her back teeth
removed due to too many sweets as a tween.”
The bridal couple finally broke for air and the assembled family exploded into loud applause and
Bathis burst into a flood of tears. Dwalin leaned over to murmur in Ori’s ear.
“I wanted t’ give yeh somethin’ like this, but, yeh know, happy.”
“A wedding is just one day,” whispered Ori. “You’ve made me happy every day since.”
Dwalin smiled lovingly down at him, then froze and his smile turned naughty.
“Aye, we were wed, then courted an’ fell in love, then bedded each other. Remind me t’ propose
t’ yeh.”
“Tonight?” Ori said, batting his eyelashes playfully. Dwalin grinned and winked.
Balin cleared his throat and looked pointedly at Dwalin. The assembled drew back once more and
Thorin came to Dwalin and Ori’s side. Since Thorin had not been crowned yet, Balin did the
honors.
“Frerin, Prince o’ th’ House o’ Durin, step forward.
Frerin did so, kneeling somewhat painfully at Balin’s feet.
Balin looked for the crown which should have been on a blue velvet pillow on a chest, but, having
been encouraged by Klakuna, Dwalin was twirling it on his finger.
“Gimme that,” Balin hissed, snatching it, but with a twinkle in his eye.
Balin held the crown over Frerin’s head.
“Frerin, Son o’ Thrain, Son o’ Thror, do yeh swear t’ uphold th’ laws an’ customs set down by
yer forefather Durin th’ Deathless which were given t’ him by Our Maker Mahal?”
“I so swear.”
“Do yeh swear t’ answer th’ call o’ th’ high king o’ dwarrow, providing aid in arms or sustenance
in times o’ strife?”
“I so swear.”
“Do yeh swear no’ t’ be a little sh- short tempered with yer consort, yer subjects an’ comrades at
arms?”
Frerin raised an eyebrow.
“I so swear.”
“Then I crown yeh Frerin I, King o’ Beleghost. May Mahal grant yeh Wisdom, Strength an’
Prosperity.”
Balin placed the crown on his head. It was a little small, but it didn’t tilt or slide off, to Ori’s
disappointment.
Frerin rose and turned to receive a courtesy bow from the assembled witnesses, which he
thoroughly enjoyed.
Balin moved back.
Frerin held out his hand to T’dillah, who all but squeaked as she bustled forward to kneel before
him.
“Mahal’s blood,” Ori muttered, “she’s panting like a spaniel.”
“Not to worry, Ori dear,” Klakuna murmured. “She only drools in her sleep.”
Ori wanted to sink through the floor. Dwalin was shaking but silent.
Frerin said very grandly, “T’dillah of the House of Durin, Queen of Beleghost.”
He placed the crown on her head and raised her up to stand beside him.
She was given her courtesy bow, which made her giggle.
“Thank you!” she cried, rapturously. “Queen T’dillah! How well that sounds!”
Bathis was still weeping.
Thorin came forward to give his blessing. T’dillah offered him a rather damp piece of black
paper. Even from where Ori stood he could see the metallic silver ink on it.
“I wrote this poem as a gift for my darling Frerin,” T’dillah gushed. “Will you please read it, your
majesty?”
“Aloud?”
“Well, yes.”
Ori could practically hear Thorin thinking: Mahal’s hairy arse!
So Thorin read, and all the while T’dillah clasped her hands and held them to her bosom, mouthing the words to Frerin as Thorin spoke them:

“Rubies are Red,
Sapphires are Blue,
Diamonds do Sparkle,
Just like my Love for You.
There are Rocks in Life,
Through them We Shall Hew,
And Diamonds Shall Sparkle,
Just like my Love for You.
The Rocks are Solid,
Solid and True,
And Still Diamonds Always Sparkle,
Just like my Love for You.”

Bathis gave a cry of ecstasy and passed out, completely overcome
Klakuna muttered, “Silly chit should stick with dirges.”

They adjourned to the dining room for the wedding supper. Ori found himself oddly nostalgic in the large, silvery chamber, though he’d first seen it not two weeks before. The table had been expanded with several leaves, with Frerin and T’dillah together at one end on a small, red velvet upholstered divan made of oak as symbolic king and queen of their wedding day.

Though the party was relatively small and sedate, with no music or dancing due to the kingdom being in mourning, they certainly would not pass on the traditional wedding supper and a sumptuous feast was served with all the traditional food and drink.

Ori felt ravenous, but he looked at the food askance.
Thorin saw his discomfort and leaned in.
“What’s the matter?” he asked quietly.
“Did the Rikanta provide all this?”
“It came from the royal kitchens,” said Thorin. “I’ve never employed a royal food taster and I’m not going to start at my own brother’s wedding.”

T’dillah and Frerin fed each other spoonfuls of a scaldingly spicy soup, the idea being that the more they could swallow the better their chances for healthy dwarflings. There was an entire young goat roasted with turnips, potatoes and carrots. Somehow the cook had braced the goat in such a way that it stood on its four legs with a large carrot still with its greens hanging off it in the goat’s mouth. The veggies were piled about to look like the rocky land beneath its hooves and there were bundles of herbs with spring flowers scattered on them for the complete meadow effect. There was much teasing involved in the bride and groom sharing the goat’s heart.

There was a gravy course, beef with chunks of morel, and a great big platter of chicken cut into strips and served in a spicy sauce of peppers, nuts and bean shoots.

There were sausages wrapped in fried scallion pancakes. The dwarrow snickered but no one refused them.

The dessert was T’dillah’s favorite. It was a four tiered, molded white gelatin, flavored with vanilla, sugar and cream. It had green sweet spearmint sauce poured over it and was decorated with sugared spearmint leaves.

And then the serious drinking began. Conversation was kept to neutral subjects, mostly the couple’s dreams about their kingdom and how it should be decorated.

Finally, just before they retired for the night, the happy couple gifted each unpartnered dwarf and
dam who wished it a ginger-spiced cake stuffed with golden raisins to sleep on, the better to dream of the face of their One.

T'dillah shyly approached Thorin and put one in his hand.
“Er, thank you… namad,” he said.
She blushed and shrugged.
“It couldn’t hurt.”
Klakuna murmured to Ori, “It will if there’s a piece of glass in it.”
Dwalin choked back a laugh.
Eventually the Durins went back to Fundin House and the Rikanta hardly noticed, for there was still food to eat and ale to drink.

“Do you think Frerin and T’dillah will be happy together?” Ori asked Dwalin.
“They’re each other’s One. They got a shot at it.”
“Do you think they love each other?”
“I don’ know. They each have wha’ they want. She’s go’ a rich, handsome king fer a husband.
He’s go’ a kingdom, wealth, an’ a pretty heiress queen who thinks he hung th’ bleedin’ moon. Sad truth is, there’s been many a royal marriage made on far less.”
“At least they got to meet before the wedding,” said Ori philosophically.
“Aye, an’ it wasn’ hate at first sight.”
“Don’t be silly,” Ori giggled. “Nori didn’t hate you, he just loathed you.”
Family, Friends, and Funereal Functions

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Clear your throats, friends, it’s time for us to sing dirges for the late King Thror. We’d also like to take this moment to thank our dear reader Arel for the fabulous plot bunny of Thorin as a wee badgerling scampering about. Please do join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori stared at himself in the mirror. Dwalin was putting some last touches to the gleam of his axes. Dipfa fuss ed around Ori.

“I still can’t believe Thror is dead.” Ori said softly.

“And thus you need to look well as the husband of the captain of the guard,” Dipfa said.

She brushed his back free of imaginary lint and fluffed his hair a little. Ori wore a grey version of his court robe. Dipfa was quite observant of tradition but her sop to fashion was that one of Ori’s socks was a shade lighter than the other. Ori caught Dwalin’s eye over this and they exchanged smiles.

Dwalin wore a matching grey to Ori but Ori still thought he looked magnificent in it.

Dori bustled in.

“Pet, I have a cap for you. Light hair is usually covered in times like these.”

“Oh, yes, Master Dori!” Dipfa was delighted.

Ori turned.

Dori’s hair was covered up in a long grey net that came down to his waist. Lady Klakuna, who seemed to have become Dori’s shadow, pattered in after him.

“Dori, dearest,” she began, “are you sure you’ll be alright for this? I’ve seen a royal funeral. I was a mere child, of course, but it was devastatingly sad.”

Dori turned an amused smile on her.

“Now, dearest grandmamma, I understand your worry but do think of poor Thorin. I must be there to support him in his despondency.”

“True,” Klakuna sighed gustily. “You are a proper Bearer, so kind, so very worthy. Oh dear, I feel a trifle faint.”

Dori swept off to the kitchen with her, promising to make her something he called a vinaigrette.

In a few moments, they were all gathered in the main entrance to the royal cavern. They were
once more in the carriages they had ridden to Dori’s presentation. The carriages were swathed in grey fabric. There was a large amount of matching grey ponies, each blanketed in grey material. Harley, Honda, and the others were all safely locked in the stable.

Tharkûn rode with Dis, Thorin, Fili, and Kili. Dain followed with his family and then the Fundins including Lady Klakuna. The house of the Sons of Groin and the Urs brought up the rear.

They rolled off down the streets to the main hall once more. This was the opposite of what they had experienced at the presentation. The lamps were shuttered to half light, all windows were closed and only suspicions of light cracked out. Any dwarf they passed only bowed a grey hooded head or their dark hair, loose and unadorned.

It was an unearthly ride. Ori, despite not having any liking for the late king, was depressed by the gloom. The cap felt funny on his head. It was, for the most part, like a hood but it split above his ears so they showed and the two lengths coming down on either side of his chin had their ends embroidered with the Brothers Ri pattern.

The entire mountain seemed shrouded in deep sorrow. It was the falsity of this which disturbed him most. To Ori, it was as though the entire kingdom had become a theater and everyone played a part strange to themselves.

The carriages stopped at the main entrance of the mountain. The entrance was full. To the left stood a contingent of elves. Ori gazed wonderingly at them. King Thranduil was there and beside him was Legolas with Tauriel behind him. A cadre of elven soldiers followed. The king of Mirkwood was dressed in shades of brown and grey.

Beside Thranduil was Lord Elrond. The elf next to him was much paler in skin tone, dressed in varying shades of white, and his hair was a flat sheet of gold. Thranduil introduced him as Celeborn, Lady Galadriel’s husband. Behind them was their captain, Haldir. Galadriel, like the other elves, had politely covered her hair in a long trailing grey mantle.

To the right, Bard stood with his family around him and behind them were many, many people from the Dale. Ori stared. He wondered if the entire population of Dale had showed up. All of them were dressed in black as was the usual color of grief among men. Each male had a length of grey material knotted about their upper right arms. The females wore grey gloves and hats.

Unlike her people, Sigrid wore a grey dress trimmed with black and her hair was caught up in the ancient povyazka of the people who had travelled from the east to settle in Dale. The open lacework threaded with black ribbons trailed down all around her head making her seem almost fragile in appearance.

Thorin and Dis stepped down from the carriages followed by the two princes. They bowed to both men and elves and Thorin thanked them for their kindness and respect in attending. Dis echoed this. They all came forward and clasped hands first with the elves and then with the men. The four elf males murmured condolences but Galadriel said nothing. Ori glanced at Dori to catch Galadriel giving Dori a small, knowing smile. Dori nodded and smiled back.

When Thorin shook hands with Bard, Fili went to Sigrid and bowed over her hand. She smiled and said something that made them both smile. Tilda clasped her hands and bounced a little. Bain made a grimace while pretending to stick his finger down his throat.

Tharkûn got down from the carriage and hurried forward, saying, “Wait. Someone else is coming.”
A figure strode up, passing the people of Dale who drew aside in startlement. Ori blinked and shook his head before looking again. The figure as it came forward was obviously much taller than all the people of Dale and the elves. He was like a man but larger and he was as hairy as the most respectable dwarf. His hair rose far above his head more like fur than hair. His clothing was as simple as that of any poor Dale person.

Tharkûn welcomed him and brought him forward to meet Thorin.

“Your majesty, this is Beorn, Guardian of the Valley. Beorn, Thorin Oakenshield, King-To-Be Under the Mountain.”

Thorin and Beorn bowed slightly to each other and, after looking Thorin over, Beorn said,

“Condolences or congratulations, dwarf king?”

Dis choked a little, but Thorin’s face remained calm.

“My people and I thank you for your condolences, Master Beorn, and are honored you came to support us in our mourning.”

The elves, Beorn, and the Dale royals joined the progress, Dis having arranged carriages for people in advance. The men and women of Dale and the cadre of elven soldiers following, mingling with the dwarrow. In a long procession, the carriages began to follow a dark tunnel that sank down inside the mountain, spiraling beneath, it was lit only with phosphorus and the walls chiseled with prayers to Mahal.

After a long time Ori saw huge doors open before them. Soldiers came and the royal party alighted from their coaches and went forward on foot. Ori heard the beginnings of an ancient dirge. He followed Dori and Balin through the doors.

Once more they entered the enormous cavern where they had laid out Thror’s body. This time, coming from these great doors, Ori noticed small paths and steps upward and down, winding between huge stalactites and stalagmites which hung and rose all about them. Great torches blazed everywhere.

“Tain’t right,” a voice near Ori barked. “Shouldn’t have non-dwarrow seen’ this, bein’ here.”

Ori glanced over and saw a noble dwarf frowning at two elvish soldiers who were waiting as a young mother aided a woman of great age to climb a stair.

A dam sneered at the noble as she went forward to assist.

“Oh, wha’ yeh think they’re gonna do? Tell someone we’ve rites f’r our dead? Who in Arda doesn’t’?”

“They might copy ‘em!” was the argument.

“Aye, so they’ll be takin’ it up with Mahal then, won’t they?” The dam looked up at the elvish guards, jerked her head at the noble dwarf and pointed at her temple.

“Off his lump, he is! Are yeh lot goin’ t’ copy us then?”

The two guards looked at each other puzzled, then turned back to the dam.

“Why?” one asked politely, his tone was respectful and his curiosity genuine. “We are not
Ori smiled to himself, following Dori along the edge of the chasm.

As the noble party once again headed toward the steel bridge to cross to the plinth, the other dwarrow and people behind turned off following the paths. Ori looked around as they made their way forward. Although the torches were large, the vastness of the cavern was still mostly in darkness, making them mere pinpoints of light.

Ori’s eyes tuned in to the dimness; he began to see that all around the cavern outer circles were filling with mourners. He caught sight of Frerin with T’dillah, still in bridal colors, but covered in gray cloaks, walking with the Rikanta clan. Ori watched as the entire population of Erebor and much of Dale filled the cavern but still it felt empty.

As before, they crossed the steel bridge one by one to gather there. The great block of black obsidian was clear and the lights surrounding it were still lit. Ori wondered where Thror’s body had gone.

His questioning look was noticed by Balin, who murmured that it had been removed and pall bearers would be bringing it back in on a bier from the door as the ceremony started. Once more they gathered near. The elvish nobles and Bard and his family closed behind them.

Bard looked to Thorin who nodded. Bard turned and waved to a group of Dale women standing before the great doorway, and they readied themselves.

Ori recognized the funeral song of the people of Dale. The group of nine women sang their mourning. Despite its size the cavern framed the sound beautifully. Ori’s fingers itched for his pens. This was history. Never before had the people of men or elves entered this place, to say nothing of participating in such a rite.

The song came to an end. The women bowed and stepped away. King Thranduil nodded to Legolas. The elven prince stepped forward and sang in Sindarin of the sorrow of passing.

When the final note died away, the sound of heavy boots rang. Oin went to the point of the plinth and began the opening verse of the dwarrow dirge of mourning. After the first two lines, the rest of the royals joined in and then the voice of every dwarf was raised.

The squad of soldiers entered the cavern, bearing King Thror’s body. Unlike the first time, the late king was not laid upon their shields but on a plate of polished steel. The dirge went on as he was carried around the periphery of the great canyon. The dirge ended when the circle was complete.

Balin took Oin’s place and chanted in khuzdul about putting a king in the cavern to return to the stone and enter Mahal’s Halls to meet with his ancestors. While Balin chanted, the soldiers took Thror’s body around the periphery once again.

Once more the voices of dwarrow swam around the cavern in another dirge. For the third time the soldiers carried Thror’s body around the periphery.

Finally Thorin came to the head of the obsidian block. He looked about the cavern before he, too, began to speak in khuzdul about Kingship. The soldiers stopped at the foot of the iron bridge, holding the bier high, this time crossing to stop near Thorin.

Under the solemn speech, there seemed to be a noise like a drumbeat, though there were no musicians on the plinth, or anywhere else Ori could see.
Nor was it terribly musical.

Perhaps it was martial?

The longer he thought about it the louder it became, so much so that he knew he was not the only one who heard it. Distracted, dwarf, elf, and man looked all around them.

If Thorin had been worried about how the mourners would react to his speech he needn’t have, Ori thought, because no one was paying attention to him anymore. Lady Klakuna placed a delicate hand on Dori’s forearm. Elrond and Celeborn exchanged raised eyebrows. Thranduil looked at Beorn, who had his eyes turned toward the huge open doorway. Even Tharkûn looked worried, but Lady Galadriel remained perfectly serene with a secretive little smile.

The drumbeat grew to a pounding and seemed to circle the entire, vast chamber, as if something very large was moving in the tunnel the funeral procession had come down. It was coming very fast.

Thorin stopped speaking. The pallbearers shifted about, looking.

Through the huge doorway burst a familiar, four-legged figure, running and squealing for all he was worth.

“Chopper!” Dain bellowed.

Indeed, it was Dain’s favorite battle boar and he was not alone.

“That,” said Thranduil, “is my elk.”

Chopper flew across the threshold, a long length of brown cloth in his teeth and triumph in his eyes. Thranduil’s elk galloped and bellowed in pursuit. The sound of hooves on rock rang all around like bells out of tune.

“Those are my trousers,” said Haldir.

“Aw, that’s cute,” said Dain. “Chopper playin’ wi… with tha’ thing betwixt a donkey and a pine tree.”

“Those are my favorite dress uniform trousers,” said Haldir.

“There’s Harley, an’ Honda, an’ Ducati,” said Dwalin bleakly. “An’…”

The two animals became four, then six, then ten as the combined inhabitants of the Fundin stable blew through, eager to join this exciting game. A cloud of squawking ravens swept in and hovered around them, cawing and cackling at them, doing everything to encourage the mayhem.

The mourners all around gasped and the talk became wild as the animals bounded in a wide circle before the canyon. The elk seized hold of the flapping end of the cloth and the resulting snap spun Chopper around in a great arc. The two beasts yanked violently, but Chopper once more gained the upper hoof and he was off, running towards them right up the steel bridge.

They romped across it to the plinth. They romped toward the pall bearers. They romped very close to the pall bearers. They were almost upon the pallbearers when the pallbearers decided discretion was better than being flattened and leapt away each in a different direction.

The bier hit the ground with a violent clang. The raven crown bounced free and rolled clattering to Balin’s feet. The bier slid away, metal screeching along the polished stone, teetered for a heartbeat
on the edge and then slowly, deliberately, plunged over the edge into the chasm.

The silence was horrible, punctuated by ever further bangs and pings as the body and the bier caromed down through eternity and were finally gone.

Out of the silent shock came young Tilda’s voice.

“Da, is that how it’s supposed to go?”

“Ohops,” said Dain.

Thorin sighed. “Shit.”

“Well, fuck me,” said Balin.

The ravens were all over the plinth and flying around cackling, shrieking and laughing.

The tittering among the dwarrow started very small, then a wave of laughter swept through the cavern. All dwarrow howled with mirth. Shouts of “Ooops!” and “Guess Mahal wants him quick!” peppered through. The people of Dale weren’t far behind in amusement and the entire cavern rang with merriment.

Ori looked at Dwalin, who was snickering. Balin lifted up the crown and, with an eyebrow raised, offered it to Thorin. Thorin looked as though he was being offered something smelly and shook his head. His voice was heard over the receding mirth.

“Let it stay here in the stone with Thror. It was his and his father’s crown. It does not follow the designs of Durin.”

There were murmurs of approval all around. Thorin sighed and nodded for Balin to place the crown on the obsidian block. Thorin glanced about.

“I think we’re done here,” he stated and, with a majestic toss of his loose hair, led the way across the bridge. He was followed by his family, extended family, Bard and his children, the elvish nobles, and a small herd of barn animals. Ori glanced back and was vaguely worried when he saw that the ravens had stayed on the plinth, some hovering, others strutting around the block and still others on the block itself. Roäc perched next to the crown, watching the royal mourners leave. Ori caught Roäc’s eye. The raven winked.

Ori waited in the group behind Thorin who stood at the doorway with his sister and nephews. As the mourners filed out, they bowed and murmured condolences. Thorin and his family bowed and thanked each one as was perfectly proper. The impudent grins and winks Thorin received were also accepted with calm demeanor.

At last, only the nobles who had been on the plinth remained. The Urs lagged back to rejoin them. Thorin nodded to the guards who stood ready to shut the doors. It was then Thorin noticed that Roäc was still perching next to the crown out on the plinth. Everyone saw Thorin’s distraction and turned to look.

“Oh, dear,” sighed Dori.

Roäc, keeping his eyes fixed on Thorin, lifted one leg and placed it on the crown. Roäc looked at Thorin. Thorin stared back.

“Oh, go on, you little shithead.”
Roäc cawed triumphantly and gave the crown a shove. It slid off the obsidian block and hit the floor with a loud clang, bounced across the plinth and the cavern rang once more with metallic bangs as the raven crown followed its erstwhile wearer into the depth of the chasm.

Balin sighed.

“Yeh can’t go about crownless, laddie, an’ yeh can’t be crowned with a day circlet.”

“We’ll worry about that later,” Thorin replied. “We’re due in the main hall for the mourning feast. And I have every intention of getting extremely drunk. I knew somehow this was going to be a terribly bad ceremony.”

“Well,” Ori wracked his brain for something cheerful. “It wasn’t bad, Thorin, it was actually quite epic-worthy.”

This started their company giggling. Thorin gave Ori a side-long look.

“Then, young scribe, I trust you will write this epic out to your own satisfaction.”

“Aye, that’ll be quite th’ read,” Bofur snickered.

“Come,” Thorin said briskly, “The feast awaits and we have guests who, I think, need food and drink. Furh’nk, princess protocol this evening.”

“Durin protocol,” Dis grumbled as Thorin gracefully helped her back in the carriage.

Ori clambered in with Dori, Balin and the rest of his little family. The carriage started forward and began to trail back upward through the long tunnel. Ori turned to Dwalin.

“Princess or Durin protocol?”

Both Balin and Dwalin chuckled.

“Way back when Dis was just a wee badgerling, “ Balin explained, “she crept out in the middle of the night after a feast. Found plenty of dwarrow lyin’ on th’ banquet hall floor sleepin’ off their er… potations. She got all concerned an’ started coverin’ everyone up with tablecloths, rugs an’ anythin’ else she could find t’ hand. She put empty buckets around an’ put jugs of water all about. Makin’ sure there were places t’ be sick an’ that there was plenty f’r any who woke up thirsty. After that she made a point a’ wakin’ after any feast an’ hurryin’ down t’ cover sleepin’ folk.

“She go’ caught at it an’ cried so much tha’ folk’d freeze, be sick on th’ floor an’ need water. Thrain and her mother, Princess Freris, instituted th’ practice o’ whomever was doin’ clean up would put blankets over whoever was passed out in th’ room. There’d be buckets an’ those gallon drums o’ water f’r all. They told her it would be called Durin protocol. We’ve always called it princess protocol.”

Ori and both his brothers laughed over this.

Ori peered into the feasting room, which was not festooned gaily as for Dori’s presentation, but bare of decoration, except for some grey, coarse material hung to hide the bright tapestries and the mirrors.

The food would be different, Ori knew, rather plain, just stew for the dwarrow and greens and
vegetables for the elves. Right then Ori was hungry enough to actually contemplate eating vegetables.

He turned to speak to Dwalin, but his husband was not standing beside him. Ori looked around and watched as Dwalin sidled up to Beorn, the mischievous look on his face giving Ori pause, then a horrified amusement swallowed him.

“Somethin’ the matter?” Beorn rumbled.

“Naw, just thinking’ about me cock.”

Beorn’s demeanor instantly lightened.

“You raise them, too?”

“Aye, raise mine every chance I get.”

Ori groaned. Whether Beorn would do the deed or he would strangle Dwalin himself, he was going to be widowed before the night was out.

Beorn stared at Dwalin, then threw back his head and laughed uproariously.

If anything, there were even more people in the feasting hall than after Dori’s presentation, except now the noble and everyday dwarrow were also obliged to mix with elves. There was some stilted conversation at first, until the dwarrow realized the elves could hold their drink. Vats and enormous hogshead barrels were rolled in and tapped. Dwarrow ale, called zul, flowed like the River Running at spring melt with the dorwinian wine not far after. The head tables were now fuller than before, so that some guests sat opposite others at the side tables. The conversation there wasn’t stilted at all, but then the Durins seemed to be drinking for the effects more than the pleasure. It was difficult to stand on ceremony with everyone talking to everyone else at the tops of their voices. Ori decided after two mugs of ale that before things got too hazy he should get to the bottom of events. He sidled up to Lady Galadriel, who was drinking zul from a long pilsner glass. She beamed at him very much as though she already knew what he planned.

“Lady Galadriel?” Ori asked. “Did you put Chopper up to that?”

“Up to what, dear?”

“Dragging Haldir’s britches through the funeral.”

“Were those Haldir’s?” she asked and drained the glass in one long pull.

“He did mention they were his favorites.”

“Oh,” Lady Galadriel looked faintly befuddled and blinked prettily before turning back to him in all innocence. “Really, I try not to think about Haldir’s … er… britches if I can at all help it.”

“You’re not answering the question, milady,” Ori reminded her as politely as he could.

“And what question was that, my dear?”

“How’d he lose his trousers there anyway?” Dain barged in and refilled both his drink and Galadriel’s. “It’s no’ like Chopper could go through his baggage.”

“How indeed?” Haldir sniffed. He was helping King Thranduil empty their third carafe of wine.
“Well, tell us, lad,” said Dain. “Were yeh rollin’ around in the hay wi’ someone an had t’ run out before yeh were caught?”

Haldir reared back, horrified.

Thranduil snorted into his wine.

“Climb off your high horse, Haldir,” The elven king smiled around his glass. “When your ada caught us you ran bare-assed naked across the High Summer Market.”

“Oh!” Dis cried, bumping down a keg on the table and seating herself. “Just like Thorin!”

“Dis! Don’t you d-” The king whipped around from his discussion with Bard, a miner, and Dwalin.

“Just like Uncle Thorin what, amad?” Kili cried eagerly, spilling zul down the table on over to Nori who made a vain attempt using his hand to sweep the puddle back Kili’s way.

“Yes, tell us!” Fili seconded and mimicked Bofur trying to slurp up the puddle from the table top.

Thorin buried his face in his hands.

“Why couldn’t this be my funeral?” he muttered as Dwalin refilled his drink and told him to shut up.

“You remember, Thranduil,” said Dis. “When Thorin was just a badgerling?”

Thranduil smiled like he tasted blood.

“Ah, yes, Oakenshield. I do recall. You went through the phase where your clothes were not to your liking and you would fling them off in public at every opportunity.”

Thorin shot Dis a filthy look.

“You are completely disinherited.”

But it was too late to stop Thranduil announcing to all and sundry, “He ran right through the assembly of kings, naked to the world and shrieking, with Balin in close pursuit, waving a pair of tiny trousers over his head.”

Balin, lounging at ease with his arm about Dori who was sitting on his lap, smiled fondly at the remembrance.

“Aye, he was a speedy wee shit. Not unlike our Dwalin, so I knew the drill, but our Thorin-Forgive me. His majesty - had a gift f’r speed I was unable t’ match.”

“Fuck yeh, Balin,” said Dwalin, apparently forgetting his company.

“It was baths our Dwalin didn’t like,” said Balin. “Got up t’ such escapes t’ avoid ‘em as our Nori would be proud. Finally he got so filthy we tracked him by his wee footprints an’ caught him in a blanket an’ he was still kickin’ an’ screamin’ like an angry warg pup.”

Ori leaned in close to his husband.

“You seem to enjoy them well enough now,” he whispered.
Dwalin gave him a happy leer.

“Especially when I got th’ righ’ company.”

Ori giggled and, as Dwalin slammed his drink on the table and slapped his thighs, climbed happily into his husband’s lap.

Bombur arrived with four bottles of brandy laced in the fingers of one hand and a larger keg under his other arm. The huge elegant dwarf chuckled as he refilled all the glasses. He seated himself near Bofur and removed his elder brother’s face from the table as Bofur finished drinking the puddle.

“I loved baths as a lad,” Bombur said reminiscently. “Our mam had a lovely porcelain tub which was oval. I loved swishing back and forth, end to end. Of course, by the time Mam came back in, all the water was on the floor and I was scooting back and forth in about a finger’s breadth of water, enjoying the lovely scootching noises my bottom made against the pottery. Our bathroom had the cleanest floor you ever did see.”

“Ada!” Legolas cried, having just heard the story speeding around the table. “You and Haldir? Really?”

“I was very young and apparently quite desperate,” said Thranduil blithely.

Elrond made a noise like he was sneezing underwater as Balin threw him a most lascivious wink.

“Really,” Balin went on, his gaze teasing Elrond. “That sort of thing can often happen at delightful inns, usually by lakes.”

“I believe there is a syndrome called ‘lake effect’,” Elrond replied solemnly, but his eyes twinkled merrily.

“Ah, laddie, is that what they’re callin’ it now?” Balin asked. “Well, good t’ know, good t’ know.”

Thorin looked up at the nearest server.

“More wine, please?”

The dam snickered and dumped a new keg at the other end of the table from what Bombur had just brought.

Thranduil peered at his son imperiously.

“You also went through a phase where your clothing was not to your liking and I could never catch you. Inevitably you climbed a tree and were too afraid to climb down and I was obliged to rescue you.”

Legolas laughed.

“I wasn’t afraid, Ada, I just liked watching you climb trees!”

Thorin raised is glass in Legolas’ direction.

“Do you know when last Mount Doom erupted?” Lady Galadriel asked Dis. “When Isildur tossed in Sauron’s ring.”
“Not our fault,” Thorin insisted.

“That was thousands of years ago,” said Ori.

“I thought it was a legend,” said Nori.

“It was thousands of years ago and it’s not a legend,” Galadriel stated solemnly. “I was there.”

Nori mumbled under his breath, “So not a legend. Just ancient history.”

Galadriel shot him a look.

“Oi!” Nori cried. “Get outa me head, woman!”

“Gladly, it’s a mess in there. You never tidy.”

“You should see his room,” announced Dori.

“No, thank you,” she replied with a brilliant smile.

“More wine, milady?” Dori offered.

“Yes, please. You’re such a dear, Lord Dori.” She patted his arm. “You must come to Lorien in the spring and see the leaves. Next time you have ambassador duties to Gondor, please stop through. We’ll have tea.”

“Why, thank you, Lady Galadriel. You’re most kind.”

Balin’s eyebrows bounced against his hairline but he said nothing as Dori was suddenly focused on Klakuna who was sitting back in her chair, fanning herself with her napkin.

“Are you feeling faint, my dear?” Dori asked solicitously. “Do you have your vinaigrette?”

“Dear Nori drank it all, such a naughty boy, but I’m quite well, dear, not to worry.”

“Yes, he is quite a naughty boy,” said Dori, patting her shoulder. He leaned across the table and grabbed one of Nori’s eyebrow braids. Ori heard Dori hiss, “Stop drinking her vinaigrette, you ass.”

“Good for the blood! Leggo!” Nori whined.

Dori released him so abruptly Nori nearly tipped over, but the evil smile could not be moved.

Galadriel, who had watched this unfold in silence, turned to Ori and said abruptly, “You have the Sight.”

Ori felt his cheeks heating and gulped.

“I’ve only seen the fire runes once, milady.”

“Thus far,” she agreed.

“I’ll see them again?” he asked. He hated the way his voice squeaked.

“Once the valar find a suitable vessel they tend to use it again.”

“That’s terrifying,” he said frankly.
“It was meant to be encouraging,” she said, “but I’m aware my reputation bespeaks that. The truth is, I almost always mean to be encouraging, but I’m a scary old bat.”

Ori giggled, tried to stifle it and couldn’t.

“There, that’s better,” said Galadriel. “Do not fear, Ori of Rikhma. You are stone, not porcelain. You are not a vessel that is easily broken. Besides, the Sight is not always about war and heroes, life and death. You may foresee the doom of Middle Earth, or you might foresee a rise in the market price of carrots.”

Ori blinked.

“Have you ever-?”

“I recommend investing in carrots,” she said dryly. “Potatoes, not as much.”

“Ah.”

“On the other hand, you might not want to spread it around that the universe is telling you about vegetables. It’s hard to cultivate an air of mystery when you’re the Queen of Crops Futures.”

“I’m not certain I’m up for mystery, milady,” said Ori.

“Just as well,” said Galadriel. “It’s positively exhausting.”

Ori looked to see how Bard was doing. Bard was sitting back in his chair regarding Thorin studiously.

“King Bard, you look very serious,” Ori commented, a little louder than he meant to and hanging over Dwalin’s arm to see Bard better.

Bard huffed a laugh.

“I’m supposed to be a king, but I certainly don’t look like that.”

Bard gestured helplessly to Thorin, who, even joking rudely with Dwalin, carried himself effortlessly and regally.

“He’s had his whole life to practice,” Ori explained. “And the hair doesn’t hurt.”

Bard regarded Thorin once more, a ghost of a smile hovering.

"I suppose if I lived as long as a dwarf."

"Exactly," Ori encouraged. "And we both know how old King Thranduil is."

Bard’s eyes twinkled, "So you mean the longer one lives-"

"No," Ori said, firmly. "No, I don't mean that the longer you live the more likely you will turn into an elf."

Bard laughed.

"A drunk, certainly," Ori reflected, "but not an elf."

Bard watched as Thorin smirked at something Balin said.
“I suppose the hair does help. I’ll have to let my hair grow.”

Thorin laughed, then gave his black silken mane a regal toss.

“Now *that* I can’t do.” Bard observed. “I’d break my damn neck.”

Ori nodded in agreement then as his head was in motion he realized he and his beloved husband had never shared a friendly head butt despite being married for over a week. Ori stared at his husband’s profile and relished the handsome face. It was time.

"Husband!!"

“Ori-love, would yeh marry me?”

Delighted, Ori knocked his forehead into Dwalin’s with all the force he could muster.

Ori admired the beautiful shower of stars that danced before his eyes.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. We've dialed back the excitement for this chapter so our poor dwarrow may recover. Ori, of course, is getting into things and has Dwalin to get him out. Out of what, you ask? Read and see. Do let us know what you think of the story so far. Dollypegs and I are having the greatest fun coming up with things we think will keep you all amused. As you saw from the opening last chapter, we are always open to ideas, so let us know! Please do join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The next morning the Durins resembled nothing short of an epidemic aftermath, bruise-eyed and stumbling over furniture, barely alive and certainly not enjoying it.

Fili kicked something near the sitting room fireplace and the metallic ricochet set dwarrow groaning with their arms over their heads.

"Oh, so there it is," said Fili.
"What?" said Kili.
"The top of my head. I wondered where I left it."

Even Dori looked slightly worse for his libations. He muttered about them getting their just desserts for overindulging, but he soon found himself administering his disgusting 'anti-drunk fixer-upper' medicine to dwarf and dam, one by one, with a line out the kitchen door. It was the only way he could get them to eat, to make sure they could stomach something. Anything.

At first he wasn't going to give Nori any, but Bofur threw Dori a pitiful pleading whine and Dori relented "just this once".

"Dori," Thorin mumbled into the tabletop, "if you weren't already a lord, I'd ennoble you."
"Yes, I do believe I'm a 'lord' this morning," said Dori. "I'm feeling about as dainty as a warg."

In this case it was plain porridge with salt and butter and large cups of strong tea. For those truly in pain, dried toast was consumed and everyone stumbled back to bed, rising only with the midday volley.

A few of the merchants had reopened that day and Dis, Jani, Sculdis and Gridr were off to the central textile market, to look at cloth in some other hue than grey. As Dis threatened Jani with a velvet brocade gown of her very own in 'Ur' family colors, Ori wondered once more at the nature of their relationship. Dis had married and lost her One years ago, but dwarrow were far too practical to demand someone remain alone for centuries. Ori thought Jani must be craftwed, married to her mining, a dwarf through and through.

He was hard pressed to come up with an elegant term to describe their union, and he would have to, since Jani was now part of the recent history of Erebor.

Of course, so was he, leaving him in a unique position. Scribe historians traditionally recorded events, but were not part of them. Ori could downplay his role, but he could not erase it because, to his mortification, he realized he'd cause a great deal of it.

While everyone else went out, napped or was minimally functional, he seated himself at his new desk, grateful and excited to finally put it to use. He set about recording his impressions of the funeral and the feast thereafter, or at least what he could remember of it.

Dwalin wandered over to him and draped himself over Ori’s shoulders, carelessly, to all appearances, but Dwalin had actually waited until he put his pen down.
“Love?”
“Yes?”
“Di’ I propose las’ night?”
“I believe so.”
“D’yeah say ‘yes’?”

Ori giggled and Dwalin’s breath blew his hair into his eyes. Ori brushed it aside with his forearm, well aware of too many ‘ink smear’ incidents in his past, none of which left him looking the least bit dashing.

“Yer hair’s gettin’ long.”
“I know. Pretty soon Dori will want to cut it. He hates seeing it in my eyes.”
“Yeh don’t sound thrilled.”
“I’d actually like to grow it out, but with Dori you have to pick your battles.”
“WASN’T aware yeh battled him all tha’ much.”
“I’m sure lately he thinks that’s all I do. I’ve become a naughty and defiant badger, just like Nori. Alright, maybe not just like Nori. That takes up too much time. I’d never get anything else done!”

“Wha’s this yer doin’?”
“Writing about the funeral. I’m trying to strike the proper tone, but all I keep coming up with is farce.”

They blinked at one another.

“I think I need to let it rest for right now,” said Ori. “How are you feeling?”
“No’ like death, so improved.”
“Are you on duty right now?”
“No’ actively, which is jus’ as well. Right now I wouldn’t trust meself with a pocket knife. Since Thorin has no intentions o’ goin’ ou’, or o’ receivin’ visitors ’til tonight, I kin stay put.”

“I was thinking we could indulge in a nice distraction,” said Ori, looking anyplace but at Dwalin.

“A distraction?” Dwalin lifted an eyebrow.

“If you’re feeling up to it,” said Ori. “I found a book of poetry, I thought we could read it together.”

“Tha’ sounds like th’ best use t’ make o’ this day.”
So they found themselves once more wrapped up together on the bear rug, surrounded by pillows and quilts, with a small fire in the grate, more for comfort than to ward off chill. They had stripped to their drawers. Ori lounged in the crook of Dwalin’s left arm as Dwalin read aloud from the book Ori found.

"More than th' bottomless shaft
F'r tha’ is empty
But, rather, like a well,
Risin' an' fallin'
With spring rains
Though never runnin' dry
Yeh quench th' thirst.
Still, fr yeh
I am thirstin’.

"It's no' bad," Dwalin judged, putting the book aside. "Bit trite."
"I thought it was rather racy," said Ori with a twinkle. "All that rising and falling."
"An’ thirstin’?" Dwalin teased.
"Especially the thirsting," said Ori.
"Yer right. It is a bit sexy. Where’d yeh get this book?"
"Balin’s library."
"Oh, really? Do tell," said Dwalin.
"I'm sure he keeps the truly explicit works elsewhere."
"Yeh looked f'r 'em, didn't yeh."
Ori blushed bright red and said in a small voice, "Yes."
Dwalin laughed in delight and hugged him.
Ori giggled a little nervously.
Dwalin pulled back and smiled at him.
"Makes yeh uneasy t' tell me such thin's."
"It's better than it was," said Ori. "Before I got married I'd only every been treated as a badger.
It's a bigger leap than I thought, from thinking about sex to actually talking about it. I keep expecting
Dori to pop out of an alcove to give scathing reproof."

"He is pretty scathin'," Dwalin agreed.
"I was always a bit spoiled, actually. Dori saved his most scathing comments for Nori, who
ignored them."
"Aye, wha' a thankless task it is, raisin' badgers," said Dwalin, draping his wrist across his
forehead in woe.
Ori laughed and poked him in the ribs.
"Dori's never been that bad!"
"That's a fib."
"Yes, it is," Ori admitted happily.
"I've thought, talented as yeh are, yeh'd have written yer own smut an' drawn the pictures t' go
with it."
"I didn't have the experience to imagine much beyond two people kissing. Actually, I need to
clarify that. I had plenty of vocabulary. I'd hear it on the street. I just didn't have the - er -
mechanics to go with them."

It bothered him still that he couldn't give Dwalin everything in bed that his husband might want.
Dwalin was more patient with Ori than Ori was with himself. He felt he needed to remedy his
ignorance soon, though he knew a trip to an as-yet-unexplored section of the great library would
have to wait.

"Yer awful quiet all of a sudden," said Dwalin, kissing the top of his head.
"I want to show you something, but I'm afraid you'll just think it's silly."
"I dunno if yeh realize it, love, but no' much yeh do is actually silly."

"This is," said Ori. "Let me up for a moment."
"Awwwww," said Dwalin, tickling him on the way to his feet.
"I'll be right back!" Ori promised. "Oh, no. Dwalin, please, don't stick out your bottom lip that
way."
"Make yeh feel guilty enough no' t' go?"
"No."
Dwalin lay back, laughing, while Ori went to his satchel and returned with his sketchbook with
the blue cover.

"This a new one?" Dwalin asked. "I ne'er seen it before."
"No one has, except Sigrid. I carry it around with me, so it doesn't fall into the wrong hands," said Ori, continuing in his mind, Lest I die of mortification.

He settled back down amid the pillows and handed the book to Dwalin, who opened it.
Dwalin turned the pages in complete silence, eyes growing larger the further he went on.
"This is pi'tures o' me."
"I'm sorry, they're not very good, but they are drawn mostly from life."
"They're beautiful, Ori. Though, I'm sure I never looked this heroic on even me best days."
Ori shrugged, rather than answer this directly.
"I had to study you at a distance and armor throws off the anatomy."
"Yeh got everythin' down t' me uniform buckles, love. It's-"
Ori knew he had reached the drawings Ori had done after they were married. These were also drawn from life, but there were no buckles involved.

"Oho," said Dwalin, his smile widening out to a grin.

They were mostly done in graphite pen, but at least one drawing was brightened with the judicious use of color.

"Mahal's hairy arse!" Dwalin laughed and fell back on the rug, the book open to the picture of him flaunting his pink drawers.

"You like it?"

"Love it! Makes me wish I could draw one o' yeh in yer combinations. We could frame 'em an' display 'em on th' mantle as a pair!"

"Maybe for our first anniversary," said Ori slyly.

Dwalin lay the book aside with the other and opened his arms. Ori dropped down into them for a kiss and a cuddle.

Ori touched the gold hoop through Dwalin’s nipple.

"Didn’t it hurt?" he asked.

"A little, at first. Th’ trick was t’ keep me chainmail from rubbin’ against it before it healed. Usually yeh wait ’till yer on leave before yeh have it done, but this was done right after Khazad-dûm. Thorin an’ I got ‘em at th’ same time, an’ a lot o’ mourning marks as well.”

Ori ran his finger along the hoop, then by experiment, back and forth over the nipple itself. He remembered Dwalin’s hands on him in the bath, how the pleasure of those blunt fingers on his nipple shot straight to his crotch.

"Yeh can keep tha’ up as long as yeh like,” said Dwalin.

"Feels good?"

"Aye."

"I wasn’t sure, with the piercing, if you’d feel it the same."

"I feel it.”

Impulsively Ori leaned in and kissed where his finger had rubbed. He felt a tremor go through Dwalin’s body, and so he set out down this new path.

He darted out his tongue to lick the nub then closed his lips over it and sucked.

Dwalin stirred beneath him.

Ori kept up his attention to the nipple in his mouth and ran his hand through the gorgeous, thick mat of hair on Dwalin’s chest until he found the twin and rubbed his fingers over it.

“If yeh tug on th’ ring just a little, tha’s lovely too.”

Ori did so and he could swear Dwalin purred.

He eased the tip of his tongue through the ring and pulled it gently over and over.

Dwalin’s hand cradled the back of his head, so he dared a glance up. Dwalin’s eyes, darkened nearly to black, caught his and held them.

Ori felt a flash of heat at the adoration he saw there.

For him?

Just for him?

He gave the nipple a long, lingering kiss, then stretched up his face to peck the corner of Dwalin’s mouth. Their lips fit together and the kisses only deepened.

It almost felt like abandonment when Dwalin left his mouth to kiss down Ori’s neck, sliding down to press more kisses into his collarbone, over his heart, and to take one of Ori’s nippled in his mouth and suck and-

“Oh,” Ori breathed, sparks of sensation, tingling from the barest nip of Dwalin’s teeth on his sensitive skin. Then Dwalin licked over it with the flat of his tongue.

When Dwalin squeezed his ass cheek it suddenly occurred to Ori that his drawers were quite a bit tighter than when he put them on.

“Wait,” said Ori.

He struggled up to his knees, untied his drawers and shimmied out of them. He did it nearly without thinking and it only caught up with him how easily he’d done it when he saw the wide grin
on Dwalin’s face.
“‘Well,'” said Ori, looking away modestly, then squeaking as Dwalin growled, seized him and tumbled him to the rug, tickling him ferociously.
Ori shrieked with laughter.
“No fair!” he cried.
“Oh, am I bein’a villain, then?” Dwalin loomed over him menacingly.
“Yes! And I, the helpless object of your villainy! Alas!”
Dwalin drew his furry belly across the head of Ori’s cock, which was very much at attention.
“A lass, eh? Coulda fooled me!”
“Well, you villains are supposed to be terribly clever.”
Dwalin kissed him and whispered in his ear.
“I was thinkin’ o’ suckin’ yeh off, if tha’ appeals,”
“That would be wonderful. Feel free to proceed, Captain Dwalin.”
It was different from the first time in the bath. For one thing, Ori wasn’t in total shock, and now that he had time to think about it, he very much wanted to watch.
He propped a pillow behind his head as Dwalin’s mouth made its meandering journey down his torso, the fringe of his long beard a silky caress before moist kisses.
Rather than just swallow Ori whole, Dwalin rubbed his cheek against the shaft and thoroughly sucked and licked every trembling inch of it. Only when Ori didn’t think he could wait another moment did Dwalin slowly pull Ori in and Ori went off with a shock that arched him right off the rug.
As he lay there, panting, the grains of the stone in the ceiling starkly visible, everything in sharper focus than he could ever recall, it occurred to him that he’d come.
“Dwalin?” he gasped.
Dwalin’s face appeared above his, mouth wet.
“Love?”
“Did you remember to lock the door?”
They napped for a while and when Ori woke Dwalin was returning to the room with a plate.
“What’s that?” Ori asked sleepily.
“Buttered toast an’ tea. There’s jam, as well.”
“Oo, lovely.”
Dwalin sank to the pillows beside him, kissing the top of his head on the way down.
He poured the tea while Ori spread berry jam on the toast.
Ori sat between Dwalin’s legs, resting against his broad chest and sighed happily.
“Yer content?”
“Yes. I’m almost ashamed at how much. What about you? Is there anything you’re missing?”
“No, right now I’m exactly where I belong.”
“Funny, that’s what I was just thinking;” said Ori cheekily, nudging back with his elbow.
“Oh, are yeh? Kiddin’ aside, I’m one o’ th’ lucky ones. I knew what I wanted out o’ life even as a badger. What about you?”
“I always knew I wanted to be a scholar, but I could never afford the training. I became a scribe because I knew it would bring money in. I studied on my own at night.”
“Yeh never went t’ school?”
“No. Dori taught me to read and write and sometimes when he could scrape up the money I had a tutor to teach me special things.” Ori laughed. “I had a drawing master who taught me to sketch from life and she also brought me books showing the nude figures of the various peoples. I was rather young, and I thought Dori’s head would pop right off, but he clamped his mouth shut because he’d already promised payment.”
Ori squeezed the last few drops from the teapot.
“Dwalin, is there anyone in the company who can’t read?”
“No, don’t think so, except mebbe Bifur, since he was wounded. I remember bein’ surprised the Ur could read, but their mam was bonded by th’ guild t’ read out th’ contracts o’ miners who
Ori couldn’t read for themselves, before they signed or made their mark. Why d’ye ask?”

Ori turned his thoughts over in his mind. He didn’t like to sound foolish, but in the end he realized it was quite a practical notion.

“I wonder if the adult dwarrow in Erebor and Dale who can’t read would like to learn?”

“An’ why would yeh have ‘em do tha’?” Dwalin asked.

Ori searched for censure or ridicule in Dwalin’s voice, but didn’t find it. Still he parcelled out the next notion with just as much care.

“I was thinking about all those dwarrows from the zinc mine. If Thorin gets his way, they’ll all have guild contracts. When you think about it, we are a race that runs on contracts. We’re always signing or making our mark on some document or other, and usually without a trusted person to read them first. I wonder what horrible things the Master made people sign and what they agreed to without knowing.”

Dwalin nodded.

“Yeh should bring that up with Thorin.”

Ori swallowed.

“Alright,” he said, “if you’re sure it’s a worthy idea.”

“It’s a very worthy idea. Explain it t’ him jus’ like yeh did t’ me.”

“Er-”

Dwalin chuckled.

“Go on an’ write it down. I’ll wait. I won’t even pout. Much.”

Ori kissed him and ran to the bedside table to make the note, but quickly returned to snuggle down with him.

They woke with the tapping on the door.

“Tea time!” Dori called, through the door, thankfully, which Ori discovered was, indeed, locked.

When they had tidied and made their appearance, everyone else had assembled, looking a lot less dead.

Three days later in the early evening, Mistress Dazla tapped on the sitting room door and put in her head from the receiving room.

“The elves have arrived, yer highness.”

“Thank you,” said Dis. “Oh, do we have more elderberry jam?”

“I made sure we have a good supply, yer highness.”

“I am very glad I have you to think of these things.”

Mistress Dazla curtsied and showed the guests in.

The elves swept in. Tharkûn joined them and ate nearly as much cake as Bombur, but neither ate as much as Lady Galadriel.

“Layer cake with raspberry preserves and cream,” she sighed, licking each long finger tip of her own and then eyeing Celeborn’s rather keenly, a look her husband returned with a small smile.

Just as they were all enjoying themselves, Furh’nk arrived, looking harried and rather annoyed.

He bowed to the assembly.

“Everythin’ alright, Furh’nk?” Dwalin asked, already half way to his feet.

“Er, well. Yer majesty, yer brother has requested to speak with you.”

Thorin closed his eyes tightly and opened them, perfectly composed.

“He’s standing on the other side of the door?”

“Yeh, yer majesty.”

“And he knows who is here?”

“Yes, yer majesty. He’s come to take his leave.”

“Please, show him in,” said Thorin.

Frerin swaggered in, as if he weren’t under house arrest until he left the mountain.

He bowed, face grave.

“The royal caravan departs for Belegost at dawn tomorrow, your majesty. I take it my wife and I
will be freed from my chambers to depart?"
   "Yes, Frerin, but you already knew that," said Thorin.
Dis sighed.
   "Please, Frerin, sit and have some cake. How does T’dillah fare?"
   "She is quite well, but no thank you, namad," He glanced around the room dubiously. "Udad and I had similar taste when choosing our friends."
Thranduil opened his eyes wide.
   "You have friends?" he said in his silken voice.
A crash came from the kitchen.
   "Don’t mind me," came Nori’s voice. "Just getting some ice f’r that burn!"
Elrond looked over toward the kitchen, then over at Dori.
   "Silly badger fell out of the cabinet," said Dori.
   "Ah," said Elrond, as if this were not at all surprising.
Thorin and Dis rose and Fili and Kili followed and crossed to Frerin to say their farewells.
Frerin merely bowed coldly and said to Thorin, "Your majesty."
Tharkun looked up with a smile and said, "Live long and prosper."
Elrond looked over at him now.
   "Little something I picked up on my travels," said the wizard.
Ori reflected that Elrond had well-exercised neck muscles.
Frerin cleared his throat and said, "Yes, well -"
Lady Galadriel laughed and made a shooing motion at him with her hand saying, "Go, go, we would not wish you back again."
Frerin stiffened, black affronted, but before he could respond Dori rose with elegant grace and a look Ori knew meant danger.

   "A moment, Frerin."
   "Bearer," said Frerin with a sneer.
Dori glided winsomely up to him. Fili grasped Kili by the sleeve and very insistently tugged him out of the way.
   "I understand," said Dori to Frerin, "when you first met my dearest badger, a small unpleasantness occurred between you."
   Frerin gave an ugly laugh and said, "Yes, your dear little badger."
   He turned to Ori and back to Dori with a nasty smile. Dori returned it with a glowing smile of his own, drew back his fist and slammed it into Frerin’s jaw. Frerin crashed into the wall beside the open door, breaking the wood panelling. Dori was on him and grabbed him up by the collar with one hand.
   "No one," said Dori with deadly softness, "touches my family."
   Dori pulled back his fist again but Thorin, Dain, Dwalin, Gloin and Sculdis seized him and tried to pull him back.
   "Beloved, let him go," Balin pleaded, standing between the combatants, attempting to pry Dori’s fingers from Frerin’s collar.
   "I already beat him up, our Dori," said Dwalin. "Mahal, Ori’s already beaten him up!"
   "Just let him go an’ we’ll bill him f’r th’ panelling," said Gloin.
Furhnk and his squad wrestled Frerin away from the enraged Dori. Frerin was still reeling, and still trying to speak. He recovered, thrust the soldiers away, and straightened his collar.
   "Well-"
   Dori lunged forward, dragging all five of the dwarrow with him, and it was obvious that this time they would not hold him back.
   Nori’s head burst through the grate above the fireplace and he shouted at Frerin, "Get out o’ here, you ass!"
   The soldiers snatched up Frerin and carried him away, protesting, over their heads.
Nori snorted.
“With any luck, they’re off t’ toss him down the chasm as well.”
“T’ll kill him, Balin!” Dori hissed. “I will find him and I will kill him!”
“He’s not worth the effort, beloved,” Ballin soothed.
Really,” said Binni with a sniff. “He’s already caused you to break a sweat, Dori. It’s most unseemly.”
“My dears,” Thanduil purred. “This is the sign for both of you to stand down.”
Everyone turned to see Legolas and Tauriel lowering their bows.
Dori took a deep breath, closed his eyes, took another deep breath and smiled upon the company.
“More tea, anyone?”
“Oh, yes, please,” said Lady Galadriel. “This is such delicious tea.”
Dori turned to Lady Klakuna, perhaps remembering suddenly that his great-grandmother had been present for the entire event. She sat on the sofa, shaking.
“Umadel? I’m sorry, dearest, has this upset you? Where is your vinaigrette?”
“Oh! Oh, I am j-just f-fine, my love,” said Lady Klakuna, who was suddenly laughing with delight. “More tea w-would be lovely. Drop a shot of medicinal brandy in mine, if you please.”
Dori set off in pursuit of the brandy.
Lady Klakuna assured Lady Galadriel, “He gets that right hook from my side of the family.”
After that they had quite a merry party. Lady Galadriel also had some medicinal brandy, then insisted Celeborn needed some as well “to guard against the shock, dear”, all the while with her hand on his knee.

Lady Galadriel and Lord Celeborn retired earlier than the others.
Nori, who had slipped in from somewhere unseen, leaned over to Ori and muttered, “Bastard’s gotta be good fer somethin’.”
Ori smacked at him and hissed, “Will you shut up? Go drink someone’s vinaigrette.”
Tharkûn was next to go.
“I’m afraid I must be leaving Erebor at first light,” he said, rising and stretching in a chorus of cracks and pops. “I take my leave of you now, my dear dwarrow. Who knows, but perhaps we may all meet again.”
“It’s inevitable,” said Thorin drily, though he did bow cordially.
“You’re leaving already?” Ori asked, rather surprised to find he was sorry to see the wizard go.
“I’m afraid I must, Master Ori, I have new, pressing business to the West. I leave you in good hands. Indeed, you are the most closely guarded scribe I have ever met. I’ve certainly never been denied trifle for the sake of one before. Most disconcerting!”
Elrond rose and bowed to Thorin and they exchanged promises to keep in touch and set up new trading policies.
Thranduil finished the last elderberry tart and brushed his robe. He turned to Legolas.
“My child, I take it you and Tauriel will be staying?”
The two younger elves looked at each other then toward Kili and Gimli who looked at Thorin.
"He has a key,"Thorin smiled and shrugged.
"Oh, he has a key." said Thranduil. An eyebrow lifted in his son’s direction.
Legolas tossed his hair.
"I have a key."
Gimli chuckled and slapped Legolas on the back.
"Aye, he's got a key."
Kili gazed lovingly at Tauriel and muttered something about a key.
Tauriel smiled, pink in her cheeks.
"Mush," said Nori, coming out of the kitchen with a chicken leg in hand.
"Put that back!" Dori cried. "That was for lunch!"
"Ha! Already got me spit on it."
Lady Klakuna bustled over, gave Nori a tiny smack on the bum and said, "Naughty badger!"
She took him by the free hand and led him back into the kitchen.
"Let's find you something else," she said.
"Righty-ho, Granny Klak," said Nori, tossing off a salute and grinning back at the company.
Ori sing-songed quietly, "Granny's precious badg-er."
Dwalin snickered and kissed him.
"Moving along," said Thranduil dryly.
"Yes, Ada, King Thorin did give me a key to keep," Legolas replied, then after a thought, "If you allow."
Thranduil sniffed.
"I am amused and no longer wish to play the villain. Oakenshield."
"Oropheron."
"Cheerio, our pixie," Dain called from the far side of the room.
"Rot in peace, pig-herder," was the light reply.
"Princess Dis," Thranduil bowed elegantly over her hand and stepped away with a teasing smile.
"Your servant, my dear."
Dis snickered and bowed a dainty curtsy.
Thranduil bowed over Dori's hand as well. "Bearer."
"Thrandy," Dori purred.
Thranduil startled as though he'd been goosed and shot Dori a look.
"Only you, Dori. Only. You."
"Of course," Dori smiled prettily and raised a flirtatious cheek to Thranduil.
Thranduil looked shocked, then his mouth fell into a mischievous grin and he kissed Dori's cheek.
"Whenever you're in the area," said Dori, "do stop by for tea."
"Oh, I shall. I shall."
He turned and stopped short.
Legolas and Tauriel gaped, open-mouthed and horrified.
Ori was willing to bet they had never seen Thranduil act like this.
"Some of us don't need a key," said Thranduil, and he swept out.
The dams fell about laughing.
Dis cackled, "I don't believe you did that! Thrandy!"
"Ah ah ah," said Dori. "Only me."
Balin shook his head fondly.
"Yer shameless, beloved."
"That's why I'm yours, my sweet."
Nori returned from the kitchen with a sizable chunk of cake on a plate and another sizable chunk of cake in his mouth, which he spoke around.
"Wha' I miss?"
Thorin said, "Your older brother has set up a flirt with Thranduil."
"Has he?" Nori turned to Dori. "Greedy bugger, aintcha."
Dori just batted his lashes.
Galadriel rose and bowed to Dori.
"Congratulations, Dori, not even my own daughter got him to do that."
"Of course not, milady. He loved her."
Thorin shut the door to the receiving room and leaned his back on it.
"And now, to get on with our lives."

The next morning brought a breakfast of Dori's excellent fowl hash. Sculdis exclaimed over it.
"It's just cut up chicken meat," Dori explained. "Put it in a baking dish, dust it with salt, pepper and nutmeg, add cream to just cover it and sprinkle it with a sharp cheese before it goes into the oven. Simple, easy and you only use one pan."
Three dishes of this, four loaves of new bread, and at least a gallon of elderberry jam later, the lady and her lord made to take their leave. The dwarrow had no idea how the elven couple would achieve this, though the guard told them quite a crowd had assembled to watch.
Lady Galadriel lingered in the receiving room close to Thorin and Ori, while Lord Celeborn and the others walked out into the courtyard.

“Before my grandfather died, it had been many a long year since we last met,” said Thorin. “By the accounting of dwarrow at any rate.”

Galadriel gave him a small, sad smile.

“I am aware my presence is not linked to any happiness for the dwarrow.”

“Not happiness perhaps, but gratitude always. If your people hadn’t ridden into Dimrill Dale to support us the death toll would have been far higher.”

“You were already withdrawing with your wounded. It is not heroism to keep someone from getting a knife in the back. I am sorry we could not help you reclaim Khazad-dûm.”

Thorin shook his head.

“It was a lost cause from the first. Even survivors of the original disaster said we had dug our mines too deep, taken too much from the ground. We woke up evil things that should never have been wakened, not the least of which was our own greed.”

“You are content with Erebor?”

“I’m not planning any empire building. Most of my ambitions are less than grandiose. Our strength as dwarrow once sat on the bedrock of our prosperity. No one went hungry. No one slaved day after day for a tenth of nothing. That’s what I want us to have again.”

“An excellent ambition, I would say, to see your people fed and clothed and housed.”

“Time will tell how successful we are, Lady Galadriel, but please don’t let all of it pass before we see you again. You are welcome, with or without your… party.”

She grinned a little feral grin.

“My ‘party’ and I will take you up on that offer, perhaps sooner than you think, and possible more often than you would like.”

“I like to live dangerously,” said Thorin. “The offer still stands.”

After she had gone Ori found himself alone with Thorin.

“What makes up the rest of your ambitions?” Ori asked. “Were you planning on becoming a pastry chef?”

Thorin grinned wryly.

“No, I need to keep my aspirations within the realm of possibility.”

Ori raised and eyebrow and Thorin laughed.

“Pastry is a little too fiddly for me,” Thorin confessed. “No, what I want to change is how I define ‘my people’.”

“You want Erebor to belong to more than the dwarrow.”

“Technically the dwarrow already share it with the ravens. They far outnumber us, not to mention thinking of us as lesser beings. The dwarrow of all dwarf kingdoms combined are less than half what they were in my great great udad’s day, and the numbers continue to dwindle. Even if every dam who could have a dwarfling did, we would still be extinct in five generations. We need to change or we will perish.”

“And dwarrow by definition resist change.”

“Our strength and our weakness. What do you think?”

Ori thought about it.

“What you want is admirable, but if you succeed will be still be dwarrow?”

“We will, only not as we are now. Just as a dwarfling will one day be a grown dwarf. They’ll have a different form, but they won’t be a different person.”

“That’s why you didn’t speak against Fili courting Sigrid.”

“Their child or dwarfling or whatever it might be will unite the thrones of two kingdoms. I wouldn’t have forced them together if they weren’t already inclined. I wouldn’t force Fili to marry just to produce an heir. It’s not the dwarrow way to arrange marriages like that.”

“You never married.”

“I’ve been busy,” said Thorin glibly. “I’m fortunate my sister took the time.”
“You’ve never had offers?” Ori asked slyly.
“The crown prince has offers, and would have them even if he looked like the bottom of an orc’s boot, but I am determined that only the greatest love with tempt me into marriage.”
“You haven’t heard your heartsong?”
“No.”
“Maybe they just haven’t been born yet.”
“Given how old I am already? I wouldn’t saddle some fine young dwarf with me seventy years into the future. So, I will have to content myself with being ‘married’ to Erebor. It's not a bad thing. So many of us never get married. I’ll be in good stead.”
Ori said nothing, though in his personal experience anyone who said they were never getting married usually did so by the following Durin’s Day.
Dwalin returned to join them. Thorin put one arm over each of their shoulders as they walked back through the house.
“But,” Thorin said, briskly, “if I have very good luck, I may in time meet with another T’dillah.”
Ori felt a shiver run through him. His sight dimmed, then returned and he shook himself off and was fine.
Dwalin said, “Thorin, yeh best pray he ain’t seein’ fire runes, or yer ass-deep in th’ slag.”
Wayward writers, royal quandaries, and furry things

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. And now begins the Mystery of the famous writer Mr. Notathain A. Shire! Do join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Dawn was just breaking. The great balcony over the main door of Erebor was still sunk in darkness but all around the edges the pale pink light was growing. Ori stood with Omi and Loli as they watched Frerin’s wagon train head out of Erebor and towards the junction of the Great Northern Road. Even at the distance of the balcony over the front gate, Ori could see the lump impaled on a long pike in the center of the courtyard. The butt of the pike had been driven into the ground there. Ori knew rather than saw that it was topped by the head of Vors.

The wagons had to veer slightly to go around it. The message was clear and cold. Even in the thin light of the dawn, Ori knew the slowly growing dark patch on the ground was the blood draining from it. Already, the ravens screamed and fought for the eyes and other choice pieces of soft flesh.

Loli sighed when they spotted the wagons that bore the crest of Buj’s family.

“Poor Buj. It’s so sad about him and Dipfa. Do you think his parents ever found out?”

“I don’t know,” Ori said. “They really don’t seem to pay any attention to him whatsoever.”

They waited until the last wagon turned over the bridge of the foot hills and disappeared into the far end of Mirkwood.

The three of them wandered back toward the royal quarters.

“That’s Buj’s family home.” Omi pointed as they went along one of the fine streets.

Ori looked. It was quite fancy, the windows and doorframe decorated with tourmaline and brown enstatite. It looked dark and desolate. Ori frowned. There was a tiny round decorative window just under the roof and Ori saw a flicker of light.

“I think they’ve left a candle burning,” he said.

“We’d best go in and make sure,” said Loli quickly. “It would be like them to try and undermine Thorin by accidentally staring a fire. It might be a lava point.”

The three friends hurried to the house to try the front door. Surprisingly, it was ajar. Ori quickly found the stairs as there were several phosphorous stones that gave a dim glow throughout. He went up two flights and saw a definite glow under a far door.

“Careful,” adjured Omi.

Ori pressed forward. He couldn’t smell anything other than the faint scent of candle wax. He
touched the door. It was not heated as though there was a fire behind it. Ori eased the door open.

The room was obviously a study with a small library, all lit with a single candelabra. There, seated at a battered desk, was Buj, busily writing and hunched over a few books.

Ori stared.

“Buj?” Ori ventured

Buj sat up with a frown then turned.

“Ori! How very good to see you, my friend. I’m glad you’ve decided to ignore my puffed up family and come to call on me. I believe I may be on the verge of a breakthrough but I will need your assistance.”

Omi and Loli pushed in behind Ori.

“Buj!” cried Loli. “What in Mahal’s name are you doing here? The wagon train has completely left!”

Buj widened his eyes at her in puzzlement.

“What wagon train?”

“The wagon train for those following Frerin to Belegost,” Omi interrupted. “We saw the ones with your family crest on them!”

“My family moved to Belegost?” Buj asked. “When?”

“Today! We just saw them cross the foot hills,” said Omi.

“Huh.” Buj frowned and considered. “Well, I had no I idea. Mind, I did think there was a great deal of noise last night and earlier today. That does explain it.”

“Buj, this house is empty,” Ori said gently. “What are you going to do? Do you want us to help you catch them up?”

“Catch them up to go to Belegost?” Buj stared. “I can’t do that. I have a job at the Library of Erebor and I have Dipfa, my precious diamond, to think of. No, no, I cannot leave.”

“What would you like us to help you do?” Ori offered.

“I have no idea,” said Buj vaguely. “I must complete my experiments.”

“Well.” Ori paused then said, “Come to Fundin house and have some breakfast. We can talk it over and see what’s to be done.”

Buj thought about this and nodded

“I think that’s a good notion, Ori. Now that I think of it, I can’t remember having anything to eat. Food would be a good idea. It’s breakfast time, is it?”

“Yes, “ said Ori gently and took his arm. Loli put out the candles and Omi gathered the books and notes Buj had been working on and popped them into his satchel.

After shutting the door, the four went downstairs and out to the street. Buj was deep in thought.
and no one felt like talking.

Ori was horrified. He couldn’t believe that Buj’s family either forgot or abandoned him.

Ori led the way into the kitchen where the Durins and Balin were already seated and Dori was dishing up.

“There you are, pet, I was about to send a bat.”

“Sorry, Dori, we were watching the wagons leave.”

Dori waved him to a chair, put out plates and cutlery, and bade the other three to draw up chairs and eat.

Ori didn’t know how to broach the subject but noticed that Balin was looking thoughtfully at Buj.

Gimli, leading his parents, came in and joined the group at the table.

Gridr paused in her discussion with Dori and Balin about what was to be done with the family houses left vacant by the new court of Belegost.

“Buj dear,” she said, “I didn’t know yeh planned to remain. Are yeh going to stay in yer family home or will yeh be taking lodgings near th’ library? I’m surprised yeh convinced yer family to let yeh stay.”

Buj looked up from his third helping of green apples fried with onions and slivered almonds. Ori worried slightly over Buj’s digestion as this dish was the only one Buj had partaken of and heartily.

“They didn’t inform me,” Buj stated, wiped his mouth delicately on a napkin and went back to demolishing his plate of apples.

“What?!?” Gridr, Gloin, and Dori all gasped together.

The sudden noise startled Buj and he jerked back up, to stare at them.

Balin leaned forward.

“Laddie, are yeh sayin’ tha’ yer family told yeh not t’ come?”

“No, Lord Balin. I had no idea they even wished to accompany Frerin.”

“Why of all th’-” Gridr broke off, words failing her. She turned to her husband and Gloin humphed a moment then they exchanged a nod.

“Lad,” Gloin said, “yeh needn’t stay in that bloody great barn of a house unless yer over fond of it. Why don’t yeh just take lodgings with us?”

“Of course, yeh must,” Gridr immediately concurred. “Yeh have a room with yer things in it as yeh’ve stayed often enough and it would be delightful to have yeh permanently settled with us. Of course, yeh will be marrying Dipfa when yeh both reach yer mastery and then yeh can either found yer own house or simply stay with us in th’ family home!”

“My experiments-“

“Oh come now, laddie,” Gloin. “Yeh’ve a big room with us and I know Oin has a couple of
rooms yeh could use for yer studies.”

“We’ll help you move your things!” Loli said immediately. “We could probably do it today!”

“Aye, aye,” Gloin agreed. “I’ll speak to some friends of ours and we’ll have yeh packed up and moved in time for supper.”

Dori shot a look at Mistress Dazla, who gave a sharp nod.

“Thank you,” said Buj seriously. “You are most kind, Mistress Gridr and Master Gloin.”

“Perhaps, since yeh are now part of our household,” Gridr smiled, “yeh should best call us Aunt and Uncle. Will that suit yeh?”

Buj rose and bowed solemnly to them.

Later, Ori joined Omi, Loli and Buj as they left the library for the courtyard to discover what Dori had seen fit to pack in the enormous basket for their lunch. They sat down near the paddock for the ponies and opened the basket. There were insulated metal bowls clamped shut, full of piping hot soup of chicken broth, barley, and nettles with pepper and salt. Ori picked out all the nettle leaves and gave them to Buj, who was perfectly happy to take them. There were about a dozen sandwiches, some filled with ham, grated carrot, and creamed cheese and others filled a mix of chopped dates, figs, and nuts with butter. They were just polishing off the shortbread topped with caramel and melted xocolātl when they heard a shout.

“Ori! Ori!” Sigrid called.

He looked up.

“Hullo, Sigrid! Come join us!”

She bumped down beside him, purposely jostling Buj just a little. He shot her a sour eye and snickered. Loli gave her the last piece of shortbread.

“You have to see this!” she said, pulling a thick sheaf of paper from her apron pocket.

“What is this?” Ori asked, taking it.

‘This’ was a folio of printed paper, folded over once and sewn into a booklet. The cover was only paper of a slightly heavier stock, with a simple printed image.

“It’s a new novel by Notathain Shire!” Ori said, amazed. “The Heaving Bosom of the Ocean - A Tale of Terror and True Love on the High Seas!” Why is it printed like this?”

“It’s a different edition from the one with the leather covers. It’s the same text, but it sells for three coppers!”

The librarians all gaped, amazed.

“Three coppers!” Omi cried. “Why would he - oh, so more people can afford to buy it.”

“It came with the post wagon,” Sigrid said around a mouthful of shortbread. “The driver said soft-covered books are all the rage in Gondor, because everyone can read out there. Da thinks the publishers must be trying their luck with a new king in Erebor. But that’s not the most important
part. Read the note at the back!”

Ori turned to the colophon and, indeed, there was a note from the publisher.

Loli urged Ori, “Read it aloud.”

‘We extend our sincerest apologies to our Dear Readers for leaving the Story at such a Delicate Juncture. We have long awaited the Concluding Chapters from Mr. Shire, but in vain. News has reached us that the whereabouts of Mr. Shire remain Unknown.’

“Shire is missing?” Loli cried.

“Impossible!” Buj interjected.

Ori shook his head.

“It must be a stunt to attract more readership,” Ori said.

“I don’t think so, Ori,” said Sigrid. “We get a new Shire novel twice a year, once when the last snows of spring finally allow the post through and then just before the snows close the passes for the winter. When was the last time we got a novel?”

“It wasn’t that long ago, surely,” said Ori. “We got one… Oh, we got the last one just before Yule. There wasn’t one this spring. Things have been so chaotic I hadn’t even noticed!”

The first afternoon bell rang and they parted company. Ori studied forms of description while he looked after the reference desk that afternoon. The strange news about Shire buzzed in and out of his thoughts often.

When he and his friends gathered to walk home, they discussed it again in great detail.

Ori wandered with Loli, Omi and Buj into the central part of the city. They waited outside the tailor’s for Pika and Dipfa to be released for the day. Then the six young dwarrow strolled toward the outskirts.

Ori listened to the conversations around him. He watched Omi and Pika converse in a rather erotic form of Iglishmêk, and he learned from Dipfa, walking hand in hand with Buj, that the legendary Grandda Tz was Pika’s grandfather. Pika had been often given to his grandfather’s care as a tiny badgerling and had developed a most dreadful fear of sudden loud noises. Ori commiserated politely.

Loli turned the conversation to discussing when it would be allowed for them to have a little party. Loli had heard from one of her brothers that there was a new dance now popular among young people in Gondor. It was called the Beleghost body-wag. The city elders disapproved and referred to it as musical graffiti. The group of musicians who had invented and made it popular called themselves White City Bang-Crash.

Loli’s brother had received not only the written lyrics of the song and map of the steps and arm movements, but also a much coveted music box note sheet to play the song. There was also a new
snack associated with the band which consisted of a food called azzip, which Loli whispered excitedly was bread dough flattened then covered in a savory sauce and an assortment of smoked meats and cheeses. It was then baked and served in hot slices and one drank sparkling water infused with fruit while eating it.

Ori thought izzip sounded good but he didn’t think he wanted to drink sparkling water with it. He was pondering whether or not it would taste better with a deep red wine or with a good dark ale, when a variety of noises caught his attention.

There was a shop which seemed full of cages.

“What’s that?” he asked loud enough for the group to turn and look.

“Ah,” Buj observed. “That is the small animal emporium. It’s owned by Master Vobwi. He deals in exotic pets and orphaned bats, falcons and pigeons. He also takes orders for flocks of chickens. He is a most interesting conversationalist.”

Ori was instantly intrigued. The group went over and entered the shop.

Master Vobwi stood behind a counter. He wore very thick spectacles, his hair was salt and pepper, and stuck straight up in the air like a hedgehog’s. His beard was oiled and braided tightly into a long strand that disappeared below the counter.

Master Vobwi looked up and greeted them.

“Welcome, welcome younglings. Pardon the smell, me new owl’s damp. Me and them don’ like it, make ‘em musty. What might yeh be lookin’ f’r?”

“Good evening, Master Vobwi,” Buj said gravely. “My friend here is new to this part of the city and was fascinated by your shop.”

Ori bowed. Master Vobwi looked pleased and bowed also.

“Well, laddie, I’ve got all kinds a thing’s t’ keep a young gentle-dwarf like yerself company. What yeh like?”

“I have three kittens—” Ori began.

“Ahh, very good. Nice an’ playful. Jus’ th’ thin’. I do have a number a’ toys they may like.”

Master Vow moved toward a shelf across the shop, stepping between cages full of brightly colored, twittering birds the like of which Ori had never seen. Master Vobwi took down a large jar full of small felted balls of wool. He handed one to Ori and it made a tinkling sound. Ori looked up at Master Vobwi, who grinned.

“There’s a wee metal ball with a bell inside then we felt the wool around it.”

Ori immediately asked for three and chose a red, a green, and a bright blue one.

Omi and Loli asked for dried bat treats. Dipfa examined a very large white bird with a pale yellow crown that Master Vobwi assured her could be taught to speak a few words.

Pika and Buj inspected an albino blood sucking bat.

Ori looked about the cages. He wandered farther into the shop which gave way to large glass tanks. The first ones held strange kinds of lizards or turtles or snakes.
Further on there were more tanks filled with water and held many different kinds of tiny fish. Ori stared half fascinated and half horrified at a creature in a very large, water-filled tank. It looked like a brown and grey speckled bag with eight long snaky legs that all wiggled about freely.

The name plate on the side declare the animal to be a false squid and its name was apparently Kthulluh. Ori realized the bag also had two very round black eyes that stared back at him. Ori waved a hand vaguely at it. A snaky appendage waved back and Ori stepped away quite unnerved.

He’d reached the back wall and noticed a box full of straw. Ori peeked in. There, lying on its side, was the largest bat Ori had ever seen. Its fur was the most beautiful reddish brown and fine and thick. It was obvious the bat had given birth very recently. Its eyes opened and Ori felt his heart tear at the look of utter sorrow he received. He was wondering where her kits might be when Master Vobwi came to his side.

“Aye, poor wee thin’. She’s quite th’ morose fruit bat. Only eats fruit, berries an’ th’ like. Poor thin’ ain’t eatin’ now. She’s just lost her kits. She had three, very rare. Poor thin’s were born weak an’ got sick in a day. Don’t know what I’m goin’ t’ do with ‘er."

Ori was overtaken by a wonderful idea.

“Master Vobwi, how much do you want for her?”

“Eh, laddie?” Master Vobwi was taken back.

“How much do you want for her? My kittens have only just opened their eyes and need a mother.”

“I dunno if they’ll take t’ each other, laddie.”

“If they don’t, neither are worse off, are they?” Ori reasoned.

Master Vobwi considered, polishing his spectacles.

“Well, laddie, if yeh think she’ll be happy, I’ll let yeh take her, never mind th’ gold. If they don’t take, bring her back an’ I’ll deal with her. If they do take t’ each other an’ prosper, yeh come back an’ we’ll talk gold.”

“Really?” Ori asked, delighted. Something told him that the bat would love the kittens.

Master Vobwi grinned and gave his shoulder a friendly slap.

“Aye, laddie. I’ll wrap her up in a cloth f’r yeh. Remember now, she eats juicy fruits an’ needs a big window t’ get out of by night.”

“I’ll make sure,” Ori promised eagerly. Master Vobwi lifted the listless animal and gently swaddled her. Ori was about to settle her warmly in his satchel when there was a flash of dark brown fur and his satchel was suddenly full of two writhing bodies.

“Get out a’ there, yeh wee bastards!” Master Vobwi bellowed and dug savagely in Ori’s satchel while Ori clutched the fruit bat. Master Vobwi managed to disgorge two baby ferrets.

“Dratted little thieves, the pair o’ yeh!” Master Vobwi muttered and gave both a little shake. This unfortunately loosened his hold and, in perfect sync, the pair leapt back amongst Ori’s belongings.

Ori looked at Master Vobwi.
“I have a brother who’s always wanted ferrets. How much?”

“F’r them two? A bloody copper a piece an’ I’d be tempted t’ pay yeh t’ take ‘em.”

Ori laughed as he handed over the money for the toys and the ferrets, now happily asleep in his satchel. Omi and Loli had a bag of bat treats each. Fortunately Dipfa and Pika had talked Buj out of buying the blood sucking bat by telling him that sending it to feed on Wobr would make the bat die of hair wax poisoning.

Ori was half way to the door when he felt something crawling up his back thigh. He stopped and turned to scootch his sight over his shoulder. A baby badger had caught hold of his tunic and was determined to come along. Ori thought this would be ideal for Ballin and put down six silver for it. Master Vobwi threw in a bucket full of hay to carry the badger.

The friends walked on and headed toward their various homes. Buj and Dipfa turned off near the main avenue, as Buj refused to let his precious diamond walk unescorted. Pika and Omi parted romantically and then Ori and the two sisters headed to the royal cavern. Loli told Ori that Buj’s belongings had been removed to the Sons of Groin’s residence while they worked.

It wasn’t until Ori came in through the receiving room that he had a stab of worry about what Dori might say.

“I’m home,” he called as he shut the sitting room door behind him.

He was greeted with silence. He kicked off his boots and took his wiggly purchases through to his and Dwalin’s room. He placed the satchel carefully on the bed so as not to wake the ferrets. He put down the bucket and laid the large bat in her cloth on the bed.

The kittens peeped out of the basket, watching as he removed his cloak and thick cardigan. He returned to the bed and carefully unwrapped the bat. It gave him a sad look. He kissed the furry head impulsively.

“I have something for you,” he murmured and knelt down by the basket. The kittens began making hungry noises. The bat’s ear flicked. Ori laid her down in the basket and helped the kittens to her still full nipples.

All three kittens latched on and began feeding greedily. The bat raised its head and looked at them. Ori swore he saw surprise and interest in her eyes. She watched for a moment then leaned down her head and began to wash the kitten nearest. Ori pulled a stool from nearby and watched. The bat curled around her new kits and washed a second one with new vigor. Her wing opened and covered them. Ori got up and hurried upstairs. He found the stand he remembered from his earlier explorations, brought it down and set it in the bedroom. It was made to hold several bats and a few ravens so he was sure it was up to bearing her weight. When he went back to the basket by the bed the bat had wrapped both her wings around the kittens and was holding them close to her body. Omi smiled down at her.

“Better?” he asked.

The bat looked up, her eyes full of life and sparkling. He lifted her carefully and brought her to the stand and helped her grasp the bar to hang upside down as bats preferred. The kittens wiggled in the cradle of her wings, obviously righting themselves, and settled again. The bat sighed deeply and drifted off to sleep.
Ori went through to the pantry and found a packing box. He filled this with the hay from the badger’s bucket. The badger was now curled into a ball on the bed.

The ferrets were also asleep and he placed them in the box and took them upstairs to Nori and Bofur’s room. He placed it on the bed, closed the window, and locked the door behind him.

Returning to the bedroom with a basket from a store room upstairs, he found an old, very poufy cushion and placed it in the basket. Ori dexterously lifted the badger into the basket and carried this off to Balin’s and Thorin’s office. He put it on Balin’s desk chair and left him a note.

Ori came out and heard noises in the kitchen. He went though and found that Dori was home with Klakuna in tow and Mistress Dazla was fussing behind them.

“There you are, pet.” Dori came over to kiss his forehead and pat his hair.

“Guess what, Dori!” Ori said eagerly.

“They found Shire?”

“How did you know he’s missing?”

“It’s all over the mountain, dearest. Did they?”

“No, or, at least, not that I know of. Come see!”

Ori dragged his brother to the bedroom and showed him the fruit bat. The bat opened an eye then closed it again. Dori stared.

“My dear, that is the biggest bat I’ve ever seen!” Dori marveled. “Is it for deary?”

“No, the kittens!”

“Where are they?” Dori asked, looking at the empty basket.

Ori went to the bat, cradling her gently and encouraged her to open her wings a little. Dori looked startled at the sight of the three kittens curled happily in their new mother’s wings.

“Well,” Dori managed. “it will be quite something when she tries to teach them to hunt mice.”

“She won’t,” Ori explained. “She’s a fruit bat. Master Vobwi says she likes things that have lots of juice like raspberries.”

“Who is Master Vobwi?”

“He owns the small animal emporium. He had all kind of different things. The most beautiful tiny birds all different colors from every corner of Arda. And lizards and fish and a horrid thing with eight legs. I suppose it was an underwater spider but I didn’t see a web. Mind, it must be difficult to spin a web under water. Master Vobwi made these lovely toys for the kittens, too.”

Ori unearthed them from his satchel. Dori looked over the felt balls, amused.

“Well, pet. I’m glad you had fun, but how did you find Master Vobwi’s place?”

“Buj took us. We went with Omi and Loli and Pika and Dipfa. Buj wanted to buy a blood sucking bat to eat Wobr over time but Pika talked him out of it.”
Dori chuckled, and putting his arm about Ori, led him back to the kitchen.

“So, my pet, what is your red bat’s name?”

“Kihshassa,” said Ori decidedly. “You know like that red licorice candy from Rohan.”

“I like it,” Dori approved. “Kihshassa, she is.”

Dori and Ori had just sat down to share a cup of tea when there was a shout from upstairs. Ori giggled and Dori gave him a what-did-you-do look. Nori came bounding into the kitchen, his arms full of ferrets. Bofur bounced in after him waving his hat.

Dori! Lookee, I’ve got me ferrets!” Nori was jubilant.

“Yeh aint keepin’ them destructive monsters! Look what they done t’ me hat!” Bofur shouted.

Nori scoffed.

“They ain’t done nuffin’! Just had a wee nibble on the edge. They’re are makin’ themselves comfy!”

“It’s me hat, not a bleedin’ nest f’r yer vermin!”

“You like them?” Ori asked eagerly.

Nori grabbed Ori’s head and rubbed his knuckles through Ori’s hair, making him yelp.

“Love ‘em, pet. Yer th’ best! I’ll have ‘em all trained up in a tic.”

“Tea, dears?” Dori offered.

Bofur slumped in a chair and stared morosely at the edge of the hat which Ori noticed bore a lot of tiny tooth marks.

Dori looked up toward the doorway and rose. Ori heard the front door open and there were rather a lot of voices. He raised his eyes to Dori, who calmly made more tea.

The sitting room door burst open to admit a major Durin crisis.

“You have to do something, Thorin!” Dis insisted, waving her arms at Thorin in a very un-Dis-like manner, Kili at her elbow, wringing his hands.

“What in Mahal’s name can I do about it?” Thorin demanded.

“Shire is missing! You’re a king. There must be something you can do.”

“Get a grip, Dis, I can’t just issue a proclamation ordering him found.”

“You could offer a reward!”

Dori turned to Ori.

“As I said.”

“Uhm. Yes, but I’m going to read what Sigrid brought me before I decide.”

As Ori finished his tea he heard the front door open again and Sigrid’s voice greeting them.
“Did you read it?” she demanded of Ori as soon as she saw him.

“But I’m about to. Come on.”

And Ori dragged her off to his bedroom, where the pair of them sprawled on the bed to read.

Excerpt from ‘The Heaving Bosom of the Ocean - A Tale of Terror and True Love on the High Seas!’ by Notathain A. Shire

Squire Harsh sneered at her.

“Don’t be a fool, girl. Come away with me now. The pirate king has given you to me.”

“He has given me leave to stay or go at my will and I will not go with you.”

“And why not?”

“I know you for a brute. I will not be whipped by you like your oxen or your horse.”

The squire drew back his shoulders and declared, “I shall not whip you! You will be my wife. I will be kindness itself to you. Certainly, I will be kinder than a barbarian who chains you to his bed.”

She shook her head.

“No, if you take no pity on dumb animals, you will not spare your wife, definitely not one with so tart a tongue as I. You assume much. I am not chained to his bed. I come and go from it quite freely.”

Squire Harsh sputtered and gasped as though he had been splashed with icy water. His face turned several shades of purple, then scarlet, than nearly grey before he mastered himself again.

“Think carefully on what you throw away, Estrella. I am willing to forgive that you are soiled and give you a respectable establishment. I am willing to lift you up in this world.”

“Captain Cockrell has already lifted me as far as I care to go.”

“How long will that last? How many women has he had? He tires of your charms already or he would not give you leave to go so readily. Soon you will be just another perfumed jade in his hareem.”

She blinked at him.

“He lives on his boat, Harsh. Where do you think he hides such a hareem? Amongst the rum barrels?”
“You were once a noble lady, Estrella, who knew every comfort, every luxury. Perhaps I am not a lord, but I am a man of wealth and respectability, a landlord, and my father’s heir. You would give up all that? I ask you one last time, Estrella, will you come away with me now?”

Ori gasped as he read that very last line in the book.

“Don’t do it, Estrella!”

“That’s exactly what I said,” Sigrid agreed, vehemently. “But the pirate king isn’t helping by not telling her that he loves her. How can he command fifty bloodthirsty cutthroats and be the terror of the high seas and not know he has to do that? Really? He cannot be that dense!”

“You know how these things go,” said Ori. “He is that dense until he nearly loses her and then he confesses his love and reveals he is the true, lost king of someplace or other, who can’t return home because of something or other.”

“You live for that,” Sigrid accused.

“Yes. Yes, I do,” Ori admitted happily.

From Balin’s study they heard Thorin curse.

“Really? How can you be a pirate king and be that dense?”

Balin’s tongue clicked as his voice obviously came from the study as well.

“Have mercy, laddie, th’ rest o’ us haven’t read it yet.”

“Sorry.”

“An’, aren’t yeh supposed t’ be writin’ a ‘no thank yeh’ reply t’ General Aris’ latest proposal o’ marriage?”

Thorin’s voice took on a nasal, whiny tone. “Yes, Master Balin.”

“Aye, very nice. Give me tha’.”

“Dis has a copy,” said Thorin in mock petulance.

“Dwalin took it t’ read in his office.”

A brief pause, then Balin came to the bedroom doorway.

“Wee brother?”

Ori and Sigrid snickered.

Ori held out his copy.

“Here, we just finished.”
“Thank yeh, laddie. If yeh could give Thorin a hand with his letters, laddie, that’d be grand. Yer highness, I believe our Dori is waitin’ in th’ kitchen t’ have a chat with yeh.”

“Is there tea and cake?” Sigrid asked hopefully. “And don’t call me ‘your highness’, it’s weird.”

Balin winked and laid his finger alongside his nose.

“A’ course, yer highness.”

Sigrid stuck her tongue out at Balin then pushed Ori off the bed and ran out laughing as he cursed her.

Balin led the way to his and Thorin’s study.

Ori was briefly taken aback by what looked like a set of drying racks beside the window. There were four long rungs, each thickly populated by bats, crows, owls, thrushes, and pigeons. Ravens disdained the racks and perched themselves wherever they felt like it. There was a single pole, on which Thranduil’s falcon perched. It looked about, seeming fascinated by everything around it. It held a large piece of dried meat in one claw and snacked on this while it waited.

Before the fireplace, sitting on a large velvet cushion, was the most enormous bird Ori had ever see. Ori wondered if it was a goose of some kind, but it was larger than that and completely white. Seeing his look, Balin chuckled.

“It’s called a swan, wee brother. It’s a water bird an’ can fly high an’ very fast. Belongs t’ th’ Queen a’ th’ Blue Mountains out by th’ western sea. Apparently, th queen there fancies lakes. She has a great big ‘un with fountains an’ th’ like, full a’ these sort a’ bird.”

Soon Ori was settled at Thorin’s desk, proper papers before him, but he held a scratch notebook for rough drafts. Thorin was staring out the window and Balin seated himself at his own desk. He gave Ori a look as he picked up the baby badger and settled it in his lap.

“What have you named it?” Ori asked, eagerly.

“Brandy,” Balin replied. “A sweet, strong name for a sweet, strong, wee badger lass.”

“Hello, Brandy,” Ori greeted the kit.

Brandy paid no attention as she industriously dug at Balin’s lap then settled herself with a little grunt. She looked up at Balin and delivered a long speech of squeaks and snorts. Balin looked inquiringly down at her and nodded gravely.

“Aye, wee one, that’s jus’ wha’ I think.”

Thorin turned from the window and nodded to Balin’s desk. Balin picked up the letter on it and read it over.

“Very polite, laddie. So, married t’ th’ mountain, are yeh?”

“No, you’re not,” Ori interrupted.

“Yes, I am,” Thorin replied, trying not to smile at Ori’s vehemence.

“No, you’re not.”

“Ori,” Thorin reasoned. “I told you and Dwalin yesterday-”
“No, you’re not!” Ori wasn’t too sure why it seemed very important to him that Thorin not say this officially. “You can’t be. You’re not king… I mean, you haven’t been crowned.”

“Lad has a point, Thorin.” Balin came to Ori’s assistance.

Thorin waved the matter away.

“Very well. Tell her I’m currently too busy with affairs of state to be entertaining such and certainly cannot do so in the middle of mourning.”

“Ahh, very good, laddie. Mourning is an excellent excuse.”

Balin’s pen stroked through the offending line and wrote out the chosen excuse. Balin then handed it to Ori, who quickly copied the letter out fair and handed it back to Thorin.

Thorin re-read it, nodded and signed it. Balin prepared the wax and Thorin slid his signet ring to his knuckle to seal the letter shut.

There were a number of similar letters. It was now that Ori learned the letters that went to merchants and guilds were taken care of by Dis. Kingdom-wide trades had to go through Thorin first. Ori quickly recognized Dis’ hand and stationary. Thorin merely glanced through these, and signed them. Thorin never quibbled with anything Dis had negotiated. She was quite as adept as Dori when it came to haggling, except hers was on a much larger scale.


“Yes, “ sighed Thorin. “Some how I’m going to have to explain that Thror’s correspondence was not attended to personally due to his declining health. Now I am king so he needs to correspond with me and also to be wary of Frerin.

“Aye,” Bain agreed, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “Absolute truth yet polite, hmmm.”

Ori watched as the two older dwarrow considered. Ori fidgeted and scribbled nonsense to keep his mind clear. He looked up. Both were now staring at him.

“What?”

Thorin cocked an eyebrow.

“We heard you writing. What did you think?”

“Umm,” Ori gulped and looked at what he’d written. “It’s nothing; I was just messing about and…practicing keeping my handwriting nice.”

Thorin narrowed his eyes, a grin starting.

“Ori.”

“Yes, your majesty…er…Thorin.”

“Read what you wrote.”

Ori looked panicked at Balin.

“Yeh heard his majesty.” Bain filled his pipe, his eyes crinkling in mirth.
Ori gulped again and read aloud.

“Dear King of Gondor,

My grandpappy dropped dead so I’m king and my brother’s an asshat.

Cheers,

Thorin.”

Thorin and Balin roared with laughter, Ori tittered nervously.

“Yes,” Thorin assured him blithely. “Very elegant.”

He turned to the raven on the corner of his desk.

“Roäc, what do you think?”

Roäc snorted and chuckled.

“Asshat, eh? The scribe has admirable restraint. I would have called him a little-“

“Ahem” said Thorin. “I’ll just bet. Shall we try this again?”

“Yes,” said Ori. “I’m ready when you are. Please tell me what you’d like it to say.”

“I’ll leave out that ‘asshat’, then?”

“Please,” Ori muttered, totally embarrassed, but relieved to find Thorin was far from angry.

Thorin began,

“Saluations, Elessar, King of Gondor…”

Several minutes later Ori handed the finished letter to Balin, who approved it and passed it on to Thorin to read over and seal.

“That’s done,” said Thorin, offering it to Roäc, who took it without comment and flew it away. “One ruler down, an endless number to go.”

Balin regarded him slyly.

“Wait ‘til th’ coronation invites have t’ go out. Gold ink on parchment, raised seal and all.”

“And each guaranteed arrived graced with genuine Ereboean raven spit,” said Thorin. “A homey touch.”

“The swan is waiting,” said Balin.
Said swan seemed to shrug, and wave him off with a negligent wing before tucking its head underneath and starting to snore.

“Or not,” said Balin, “as the case may be.”

Dori called them in for supper. They arrived to find Bofur grumbling to Jani about his hat.

“Oh, calm yer arse down,” Jani muttered. She reached into her kit and pulled out another, identical hat and tossed it to him. “Here.”

Ori whispered to Dwalin, “He has a spare?”

“Safety first,” said Dwalin.
Training, tiny tots, and tea.

Chapter by Stevie Foxx

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. And so the days progress and the mystery deepens. Again we’d like to give thanks and cute kudos to #Arel for her suggestion and translation of the Mushroom Song. Thank you so much, dear. We love it! There’s a tea party in this one and dinner, so you may want to er… fortify yourselves before reading and maybe during. Please do join us next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Shortly after breakfast next morning, Ori sat on one of the spectator benches at Erebor’s martial training grounds and pulled out his sketchbook. It was a beautiful, warm day.

Down in the round, sandy arena Dwalin put the youngest badgers through the first steps of warrior training. They came from all over Erebor and Dale for this opportunity, and their parents filled the benches around Ori, calling out encouragement to their tiny warriors-to-be.

Even with training gear sized to their frames, the badgers still moved liked they’d been popped into iron nappies, lifting and swinging unwieldy girders for swords.

They wobbled and fell a great deal more often than they managed to stay upright. Much of Dwalin’s time was taken up encouraging them to get up on their own, and finally, after watching them struggle like stranded turtles, picking them up and putting them back on unsteady feet.

None of this dampened their excitement or enthusiasm.

Ori saw Dain and Thorin entering from the armory, kitted out for combat, carrying their weapons and helmets. They stopped to watch the proceedings, but one of the badgers caught sight of them and cried out, “Look! There’s King Thorin and King Dain.”

The badgers immediately lost all discipline and stood, staring with their mouths open, except for the badger who remained on the ground, struggling, and crying piteously, “I want t’ see King Thorin!”

Thorin handed his sword and helmet to Dain and went and scooped the dwarfling up, placing him on his feet.

“There you are. My, but you struggled bravely!” Thorin commended him.

The badger gaped at him, speechless, with huge eyes.

Thorin winked and brushed the badger’s braids out of his face before returning to his chuckling cousin.
Perhaps sensing they would get no more out of them today, Dwalin and Furh’nk shelled them from their armor like dwarf walnuts and lined them up once more.

“Alright, yeh wee wargs,” Dwalin barked, “ten laps an’ off t’ th’ baths wi’ yeh!”

They stood and stared at him in confusion.

The bravest one said, “Captain Dwalin, sir, what’s ‘laps’?”

“It means: run around th’ circle, yeh silly nestlin’s! Go!”

They did this far more energetically than the older soldiers, shrieking and chasing each other, until Furh’nk herded them off to the bath. The parents gathered themselves, ready to collect their badgers, hopefully less sand-covered after the bath than they were now. Assistants retrieved the abandoned armor to sort and clean. It would be a while before the little ones would be expected, or trusted, to clean their own.

A dam sitting nearby looked over Ori’s shoulder.

“Oi, that’s my pebble Nattis. How much yeh want f’r tha?”

Ori pulled the page free and turned to the dam, “Oh, nothing. Here. You take this. It’s just for practice.”

“Y’r that Lord Ori feller, th’ king’s scribe, ain’tha?”

“Um… just Ori, but, yes, I am a scribe.”

“Well! I never! Here, will yeh sign it? She’ll think tha’s grand!”

“Of course.”

He did so, rather startled to find that this opened a kind of floodgate. In a short span, his sketchpad was largely decimated, though he still did have a few extra drawings as he’d done several of this badger or that as he worked out movements and shading.

“I think you’ve captured the essence of the chaos,” said Dis over Ori’s shoulder. She sat next to him. “May I?”

He handed her his book and she leafed through, smiling and nodding.

“These are wonderful, Ori. It doesn’t seem so long ago that my own terrors were just like this. Fili waved his sword around, shouting threats as if he could defend Arda single-handed and Kili sat in the sand with his arms crossed and announced that he’d have nothing to do with all this silly ‘sword stuff’ and had decided to become a wolf.”

Ori choked, then,

“Was Dwalin stricter with them than the others?”

“I think he tried to be, at first, as his father had been with him, but once he learned to treat them as he did any other badger, he got more from them.”

“I can’t even imaging Dwalin was ever this small,” said Ori.

“Small is a relative term. He was never exactly fragile, I admit.”
In the arena, Dwalin took the smoothing plane with its long handle to the kicked up sand. He turned to Dain and Thorin, who donned padded hoods and then their helmets over them.

“I don’ suppose yeh’ll need a referee?”

Dain settled his helmet with a tap.

“Like we’d listen t’ an old worrywort like yeh!”

“Fine, jus’ keep th’ bloodshed t’ a minimum. Oin’s out in Dale with Binni t’day. Unless yeh want me t’ stitch yeh up with a rusty needle?”

They made him rude replies as they took their positions. Dwalin chuckled as he made his way to the benches.

“Hullo, love,” he said and kissed the top of Ori’s head. “Wha’ yeh got there?”

Dis enthused, “Show him, Ori. Dwalin, you have to see these.”

Shyly, Ori offered the sketchbook to Dwalin, who went through the drawings of his badgerling trainees with sparkling eyes and a grin.

“These’re great! Look at Tirin bitin’ his lip. I’ll have t’ train him outa tha’. An’ Mris with her wee scowl. She’ll be murder one day, yeh’ll see.”

A howl and a ring of metal drew their attention to the arena where Dain started with a great, swooping chop that Thorin parried so the axe blade sank six inches into the sand. Dain swung his bulk around to knock Thorin off balance while he freed it, but Thorin spun away and tried to kick Dain’s legs out from under him. Dain leapt clear on his metal leg with impressive grace and swung the axe in a blur. Thorin dodged to protect his midsection, but this left his belly exposed and Dain pressed the advantage, forcing Thorin back and back across the sand.

Dain’s sinister chuckle reached them on the wind.

“So,” said Ori, “this is what Durins do for family fun.”

“Sometimes,” said Dis. “You can only drink so much tea. Unless you’re Dori, of course.”

She watched as Dain jabbed Thorin hard in the side with the butt of his axe. The armor took the bulk of the impact, but it still knocked Thorin sideways several feet.

“Yer outa shape!” Dain roared. “Dwalin oughter make yeh run in greaves like th’ badgers!”

Thorin did not rise to the bait. He dropped back into a ready stance and they circled each other. They feinted and glared and waited for one of them to make a move, make a mistake.

Dis raised an eyebrow, and said in a voice meant to be heard by the combatants, “You should have brought your knitting, Ori. Those two can do this for hours.”

“We await your pleasure,” Thorin said, dryly.

“Well, bash on with it, then, you sorry old dwarrow!” goaded his sister. “You’ve both gone to scree!”

Dain laughed and Thorin grinned.
“She wants a show, cous’,” said Dain. “Should we give the lady what she wants?”

Thorin bellowed and attacked. Dain deflected and they were off.

It was fast and harsh and they had fallen silent to save their breaths for storms of savage blows. They struck and kicked and threw dust in each other’s eyes.

Dain clouted Thorin across the back of the helmet with his metal gauntlet, throwing sparks. Thorin spun and clocked Dain in the chin below his faceplate with a wicked elbow.

They were so equally matched and so competitive that the fight went on and on until the two of them grew clumsy with exhaustion and Dwalin called a halt.

“Tha’s enough, yeh lot. Yeh’ll run each other through in a minute an’ I’m no’ scrapin’ yer innards off th’ sand.”

“Aw,” Dain complained. “Yer worse’n me mam.”

“I’ve met yer mam, an’ tha’ ain’t hardly possible.”

Their weapons put up, they pulled off their helmets and caps, sweat pouring down their reddened faces, and bashed their armored shoulders together, chuckling and gasping.

“I’d’a had yeh in other minute,” Dain declared.

“You mean you’d have had it in another minute,” Thorin shot back. He looked up at Dis. “Will that suffice, your highness?”

“Not bad for an off day,” she said airily.

“Oh! Me fragile ego!” Dain cried. “Evil dam! Well, I stink. Time for th’ bath. Then, a pint or twelve, I think.”

“Sounds good,” Thorin agreed. “Would her highness care to join us?”

“And listen to you two whine in your ale? Terrible waste of a few hours!”

Off they went.

Dis turned to Ori.

“When they were younger they tried to outdrink each other, too.”

“You never had to sneak Thorin home drunk, did you?” Ori asked.

“Tha’ was my job,” said Dwalin. “I could hold me ale better than those shaleheads, at least at th’ pub. At home, we all got plastered often enough, an’ we didn’t have a Dori standin’ by with a magic drink. I think Oin knew how t’ make it, but he kept tryin’, with no success, t’ teach us a lesson.”

“So, yes,” said Dis. “I suppose this is what Durins do for fun. Can you think of a better way to spend a morning?”

“Yes, and that’s why I’m here,” said Ori. “Dori and Balin found the better way.”

“I see,” said Dis sympathetically.
“Right through a locked door,” said Ori, shaking his head. “They’re really good.”

“Or at least really loud,” she said.

“I’m just not terribly comfortable listening to that right now. I don’t suppose I ever will be comfortable with it. No more than Dori would probably be listening to me and Dwalin.” Ori frowned. “Especially considering some of the things we say to each other when we’re… I’m going to stop talking now.”

Dwalin roared with laughter and hauled Ori to his feet and, with Dis, they headed to Fundin house for lunch.

Once home, Dori shooed Dwalin off to bathe before the meal. While he did so, Ori rummaged in the larder and filled a wooden bowl with new strawberries, red brambles, and a few plums. He took this through to the bedroom. Kihshassa blinked, flipped neatly down to the floor, and opened her wings. Powder, Nori-Pori, and Mask tumbled out and scampered to Ori’s tunic.

Ori rolled out their new toys onto the floor. Nori-Pori fought like a warg with his, knocking it into the stand and hissing as he lunged after it. Mask was dainty as he patted the ball and looked startled every time it rolled and rang. Powder curled her fluffy tail about her front paws and regarded the balls with disgust.

Ori sat on the floor near Kihshassa and the bat clambered up to balance her wing fingers on his knee. Ori put the bowl in his lap and held out the plum to her.

Ori was very pleased to watch as the bat devoured all the plums and strawberries. He started on the raspberries just as Dwaln walked in. He was drying his hair, with another towel slung about his waist. He came over and watched as Ori fed Kihshassa berries, one at a time.

“Them raspberries, love?”

“Yes,” Ori chuckled. “She’s already had three plums and a dozen strawberries. She seems to like these best.”

“Mmmm,” Dwalin observed. “Better be careful feedin’ her them.”

“Why?” Ori looked up, surprised.

“Yes, why?” Dori and Balin looked in at the door.

“All them rasps,” Dwalin grinned. “They’ll get in her milk an’ when she feeds th’ kittens it’ll turn their fur pink.”

Dori and Balin laughed. Ori tried to frown at his husband, but could’t.

“Perhaps then they can hide in your drawers. Such perfect camouflage.”

Dori and Balin laughed harder to the point that Dori leaned against the door jamb. Dwalin dropped the towel on Ori’s head, removed it swiftly to kiss him and then turned toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Ori asked.

“Kitchen. Find some cool water f’r tha’ burn.”
Ori giggled. Dwalin turned, swooped down and seized him, noisily kissing his cheek.

“Oh dear,” Dori wiped his eyes. “I’m so glad they left the door open, my heart.” This to Balin.

“At least we do know when to close it,” Ori replied. “Unlike you two.”

Ori lifted Kihshassa to the stand where she started grooming. Ori looked at his still laughing brother.

“Mahal, the pair of you!” Ori waved his hands about and went on in a silly, raised voice. “Oooo Balin! OOO Balin! OOO that tickles! If Dwalin and I want to play such games, we shut the door.”

It was Dwalin’s turn to roar with laughter.

Dori shook his finger at them.

“Come along, now. We have to get lunch out of the way. I must make ready as dear Mistress Margr and Mistress Vi are coming to tea this afternoon.

“Hmmm,” said Dwalin. “Just remembered somethin’ I got t’ take care o’ in me office. In town.”

Dwalin left rather quickly after lunch, to take care of his alleged business in his ‘office in town’ and Fili went along ‘to help’. Dori had Mistress Dazla and her assistants polishing everything in the sitting room and receiving room and laying out silver cutlery. As they did, Dori baked scones, shortbread, cake and myriad of other goodies, all the while singing to himself, periodically breaking into giggles.

If you have a knife in your pocket

and against the thirst something in your bottle

and a handkerchief for the mushrooms you don't need anything else.

You have to know though, where the good mushrooms grow

or you will only bring home poisonous ones this evening.

Ori looked down at the plate of fresh gnishes stuffed with mushroom and sweet and sour mutton and wondered if Mistress Margr and Mistress Vi were in for more than what they bargained.

“How are they getting here?” Ori asked, idly re-arranging things on one of the tea trays.

“Balin has sent the Fundin carriage for them. The teacup-shaped one. Though it’s still decorated in grey mourning, I’m sure they won’t object.”

“The Fundin carriage is going to Steam Alley?”

“The driver should be safe enough,” said Dori blithely. “At least, from the thugs in Steam Alley, though possibly not from Margr or Vi. We were right to send Fuhrn’k off to hide. They’d eat him alive and he certainly wouldn’t enjoy it.”
“Who did Balin send?”

“Mokrah, the stable lad. He’s deaf and mute.”

“He is not!” Ori gasped, hotly.

“That’s what I told him to sign in inglishmek, it’ll be easier on him that way.”

Ori considered this then shrugged.

“Desperate times do call for desperate measures.”

In this case, the measures involved four kinds of scones: milk, cheese, wild chive, and basil. Ori took the shortbread biscuits from the cooling rack and topped them in melted caramel and xocolātl. Dori sliced a round sponge cake into three layers and filled them with last year’s red current jelly and sweetened whipped cream, and dusted the top with powdered sugar.

He ordered Ori to open a crock of elderberry jam, and butter a huge pile of toast as Mistress Dazla came in and raised an eyebrow. Dori nodded then shooed Ori out of the kitchen, telling him to put on his ‘nice purple suit’.

When Ori came back in, buttoning a grey sleeveless cardigan of grey over the ‘nice suit’, Dori was there, dressed in a a simple robe of a cloud of rose-colored silk, all trimmed with mourning grey. His demitrain whispered across the floor as he moved to inspect the table settings, casually attaching ear cuffs that looked like tiny silver butterflies. There were matching rings on his fingers and his grey felted slippers peeped from beneath the hem, Ori saw they were splashed with silver butterflies. Dori’s hair was unbraided but a few of the soft waves were caught up with silver butterfly shaped pins.

“Dori, you look…” Ori wondered what in Arda he could say. His stalwart brother, the strongest dwarf, if not any in the Dale and maybe the whole of Erebor had morphed into a dainty vision of apple blossom.

Dori raised an eyebrow, “Yes?”

Ori decided.

“You’ve bloomed, Dori.”

Dori blushed faintly and hurried forward to clasp him.

“My sweet little badgerling,” Dori murmured and kissed Ori’s hair.

“Ori’s Dori,” Ori mumbled into Dori’s hair, hugging back hard.

After a moment, Dori released him and gave his bottom a spank. “Now you wait here and I’m going to check on the tea.”

A moment later Mistress Dazla went whisking through the sitting room door to the receiving room. It was this time that Ori spotted the tiny chickadee that obviously gave her warnings as to when and who was coming and going, flying before her to the front door.

Ori heard her offer welcome, then he heard the voices of Margr and Vi.

“Oh!” Margr exclaimed. “Vi, would yeh jus’ look at that fireplace! It’s bigger’n me whole kitchen.”
“And cleaner,” said Vi tartly.

The two of them laughed uproariously.

Mistress Dazla admitted them to the sitting room and they exclaimed like pigeons.

“Such a room!”

“Such ornaments!”

“Such furnishings as I never in my life-“

“Lookit tha’ table, yeh could clog dance on tha’ until yeh was fagged to th’-”

“An’ there’s Master Ori lookin’ cute as a nugget!”

“An’ tha’ suit! So rich lookin’!”

Dori swept in.

“Ladies! I bid you welcome to the House of Fundin.”

“Ooooooooh, our Dori,” Vi cried. “Yeh look just ravishin’!”

“And you, Vi, and you. You and Margr both look simply… incredible.”

Ori imagined that was the safest word either of them could use.

Plaid. He saw endless yardage of cranberry-raspberry plaid, from their voluminous matching frocks to the oversized bows in their oversized coifs to the ties of their boots. They wore rings on every finger, bangles and bracelets up each arm and mounds of necklaces in profusion thick as scarves. Their ears were invisible beneath earcuffs and rings and in their hair, which Vi had dyed cranberry and Margr’s raspberry to match their outfits. As a sop to mourning, they had tied huge grey ribbon bows around each ankle.

To his horror, Ori got a glimpse of how Omi and Loli might look in another hundred fifty years.

Doubtless they would think such a thing wonderful.

He thought Vi and Margr were more like unfortunate Yule tree ornaments.

He wondered if Dori had any more of that medicinal brandy about.

The ladies and Dori kissed each other’s cheeks rapturously and Ori bravely endured having his cheeks pinched.

Mistress Dazla swept out of the kitchen carrying an enormous silver tray. On this was a set of porcelain cups and saucers, plates with a matching pattern of cream background emblazoned with fat crimson and peach colored roses and gold trim. In the middle, stood a tall, pot-bellied mithril teapot.

“Would you care for refreshments?” Dori asked them.

“Would we!” Vi cried. “It’s rumored yeh Durins put on quite a spread.”

“No fair guessing,” Dori purred quietly while the ladies turned and charged the table.

Once settled, Dori poured tea and Mistress Dazla passed around the shortbread before curtseying
“Thank you so much, Mistress Dazla,” Dori cooed. “I’d be lost without you.”

“It is always an honor and a pleasure to serve you, Bearer,” sighed Mistress Dazla with a melting smile before she retired to the kitchen.

Margr stared after Mistress Dazla, then hissed at Vi.

“Servants! He has servants!”

Dori smiled sweetly.

“Mutton gnish?”

For a long little while there was minimal talk and maximum chewing, though the sisters’ eyes never stopped wandering the room, doubtless taking in every detail.

Margr said at length, “So many changes in Steam Alley in so little time, our Dori. Yeh know where the grocer’s was that burned? They salvaged th’ front and knocked in a wall to the flat behind an’ now there’s a bakery there, just like that! Very nice. Quite pretty stuff, high class but not so high priced. It’s that Dal who’s doin’ it, the one who’s got that aunt of his mam’s out in Gondor. Foreign lady, yeh know. They’re bringin’ in Gondorian pastries and the badgers’er all beggin’ f’r coppers f’r a taste.”

The teapot was on its fourth pass when Lady Galadriel swept in, unannounced.

“Dori, my dear! I was just passing by and I thought I’d pop in.”

Vi’s mouth creaked open and her biscuit fell into her tea with a splash.

Margr’s eyes went directly to Galadriel’s bare, white feet.

Ori would have sworn Galadriel was floating a little higher than usual on purpose.

Dori and Ori rose and bowed, leaving Margr and Vi to scramble up after.

“Lady Galadriel!” Dori called, coming forward, holding out both his hands. “Do come and join us.”

“I’ve been desolate without you, my dear,” said Galadriel, kissing Dori on both cheeks and Ori on one and giving him a cheeky wink with her back to the Dale ladies. She was wearing her usual white robes but this time there was a sprig of apple blossom tied with a ribbon at her left shoulder. The lady turned.

Dori said, “Here are my neighbors from Dale, Mistress Margr and Mistress Vi. Ladies, Lady Galadriel of Lothlorien.”

“Er…” said Vi.

Margr curtsied and said loudly, “Please t’ meetcha, milady.”

Vi caught up, “Yes, yes, any friend of our Dori’s and so forth and so on and on and…”

“How lovely to meet you both!” Galadriel cried. “Please, do sit down before your tea gets cold.”
Ori adjusted the chair platform to Galadriel’s height and she patted him fondly on the cheek.

Dori said, “I’ll just ask Mistress Dazla to bring you some of Binni’s elderberry jam and another platter of toast.”

Mistress Dazla walked through the door with said items on a tray at that moment, smiling a winning smile.

Lady Galadriel beamed at her.

“Mistress Dazla! You darling! You remembered.”

“Of course, ma’am,” said Mistress Dazla, dropping a curtsy.

Dori spooned honey and milk into a cup and poured tea for Galadriel.

He said, “Margr and Vi were just telling me about a new bakery that’s opened up. Apparently the family has an aunt in Gondor and they’re introducing Gondorian pastries. Go on, Margr, you tell it so nicely.”

“Well!” said Margr. “Dal, son of Lal-“

“You remember, our Dori?” said Vi. “His sister is married to that butcher we never liked.”

“Mm, yes,” said Dori.

“Oh, not anymore, hen. She’s shown him the door anyway,” said Margr, “and good riddance I say. Anyway, Dal always was a dab hand at pastries.”

“Only we never realized just how dab it was,” said Vi.

“Very dab, as it turned out,” said Margr. “He’s got the sweetest and the sourest tarts, of course.”

“Rather like her sister’s ex husband,” said Vi wryly.

“But he’s brought out this breadish, donutish affair filled with cream and dipped in jocklatel or some such. Have you had that yet, our Dori?”

Ori was about to point out that, yes, Dori had, and so had she, since she was talking around a mouthful of it, but Margr would not be stopped.

“The latest thing. Rather pricy, but I’m sure he adds a lot of sugar to stretch it. He calls it an iklar or some such.”

Vi tittered.

“Long, thick tube o’ cream with a hole at the end. Woulda thought they’d call em somethin’ else.”

“But, where did the money come from to open such a place? Who shops there?” asked Dori. “Can the neighborhood support it?”

Margr swallowed her biscuit.

“That Lord Whatisname’s invested in it. Invested in a lot o’ stuff now. What was ‘is name, Vi?”

“Zark. Lord Zark,” said Vi, obviously proud to know his proper name and title. “He didn’t go
on t’ Beleghost with th’ others. He’s invested in th’ bakery and in old Amalin’s brewery that Amalin lost to th’ Master on account of his gambling debts. Amalin’s son Tin’s a master brewer.”

“He was one o’ them zinc mine fellers, poor things,” said Margr. “Oh, everyone’s very excited t’ have the brewery open again. He’s taken on apprentices an’ o’ course he needs laborers, so there’s some jobs t’ be had.”

Vi slurped her tea with a twinkle in her eye.

“That ain’t all Tin’s taken on, is it Margr?”

“No, not the least of it,” said Margr. “Rumor has it Lord Zark an’ his wife Lady Kadis are very great friends with Master Tin and his wife, Mistress Ondr. Such great friends that they’re all over at Zark’s house or Tin’s house nearly every night and none of ’em leaves ’til dawn.”

Ori had thought they were all rather friendly at the Bearer’s Feast, but at the time he’d assumed it was mostly alcohol. However, he wouldn’t spoil the sisters’ triumph by revealing he suspected first. They were guests, after all.

“All four of them?” Galadriel asked, amazed.

Dori sliced into the cake and served everyone with a plump triangle.

“Oh, yes, me dea- milady,” said Vi. “It ain’t all that unusual in itself. They’re all old enough, certainly. Oooo, our Dori! This cake!”

“Old enough t’ know better, certainly,” said Margr with a laugh, swiping her sixth biscuit.

“It’s just Zark’s a lord, ain’t he, and Tin’ ain’t, you know. That’s not done, or it wasn’t ’til our Thorin became king. An’ speaking’ o’ our Thorin, our Dori, yeh’ve got t’ get him married. Wouldn’t want t’ waste such a nice set o’ shoulders an’ that pretty bum.”

Something in Balin’s study crashed to the floor.

Ori suspected it was Thorin falling out of his chair.

The sisters turned to Galadriel.

“And how’re yeh keepin’, milady?” asked Vi solicitously.

“Yes, did poor Captain Haldir ever get a new set of trousers?” Dori asked, stirring his tea daintily. “Such a pity my brother Dain’s pig ate the others.”

Vi and Margr erupted into laughter.

Margr said, “Oh, so that’s whose britches they were!”

“Least he wasn’t in ’em at th’ time,” said Vi.

“Wait,” said Margr. “Yer brother?”


“That’s right!” said Margr triumphantly.
Ori could swear she was constructing a family tree for Dori in her head. Or, in this case, a guilty-by-association tree.

“I wonder where they got a bed big enough for all of them?” Galadriel wondered, a thousand miles away at least.

Slowly the pot slid across the table and tipped to dispense tea into her cup.

She startled.

“Oh, dear! I’m sorry, Dori. Where are my manners?”

“Where are mine, letting your cup run dry?” asked Dori. “Speaking of which, more toast?”

“Actually a bowl and a spoon would be lovely.”

Vi and Margr’s eyes were large enough Ori wondered they didn’t drop out of their skulls.

The door from the receiving room opened and Balin entered bearing a large pink box tied with a white ribbon.

Dori saw him and lit up like a bit of phosphorus in water.

“Balin! My heart, you’re back early from Dale!”

“Aye, beloved, got somethin’ here f’r yeh an’ th’ ladies.”

Dori met him halfway and they kissed and tapped foreheads. Then Balin saw Lady Galadriel had joined them.

“An’ th’ Lady! Well, now here’s a whole pi’ture o’ loveliness.”

Ori raised an eyebrow.

“Aye, aye, wee brother, yer lovely, too.”

Balin kissed Lady Galadriel’s hand and bowed low to Margr and Vi. To Ori’s eyes, they practically vibrated with excitement. Oh! How much they would have to tell!

“There’s a new pastry shop in Dale, I thought yeh might like an assortment o’ dainties.”

“Oh!” Dori exclaimed. “Margr was just telling us about that.”

Vi, who apparently could not contain herself, cried, “Did yeh bring th’ iklars?”

Balin tilted his head, an eyebrow raised but he replied smoothly,

“Yeh must understand, Mistress Vi, tha’ yeh know much more o’ these things than I. It was easier simply t’ ask th’ baker for a samplin’ o’ their best.

Mistress Dazla entered and took the box away. Balin sat at the table and Dori poured his tea.

“How are yeh ladies keepin’?” Balin asked. “Though I kin see yer all in very fine point, indeed!”

Margr giggled and the Dale ladies practically hugged each other in delight.

Vi tittered, “Oh, Lord Balin, yer as smooth as yer beard.”
“You must tell us all about the wedding,” said Margr, though Ori knew she must know it hadn’t taken place yet.

“We’re still betrothed as yet,” said Dori.

“Well!” Vi cried. “Now there will be a great marriage!”

“Have you picked the date?” Margr asked, shrewdly.

“Oh, we’ll marry next spring. It will take a while to plan, of course.”

Dori lowered his eye in feigned shyness, but with a wicked smile. Balin put his cup down and regarded Dori fondly. “I’ll not have it be any less than th’ best o’ everything for me beloved.”

“Of course not!” Vi and Margr chorused.

Dori beamed at Balin.

“Yes, Mahrdin must have time to design a wedding robe for me. I can hardly be married in my presentation robe!”

“Yeh were a vision!” Vi opined in delight.

“We all so enjoy seein’ yeh dance, Dori,” breathed Margr. “Yer so light on yer feet.”

“Whereas I’m only light on everyone else’s,” said Vi, giggling.

Mistress Dazla entered with a tray full of the dainties.

“Here we are, yer graces,” she said.

Balin rose.

“Alas, my dear ladies, I have work waitin’ in me office.”

Dori said, “Wait, my heart, take some -er- iklars with you.”

He put several on a plate.

“I can’t possibly eat all those, beloved,” murmured Balin.

“They aren’t all for you,” muttered Dori out of the side of his mouth.

They kissed and Balin swept a bow to the ladies and he went out.

Vi got back to the business of local gossip and said, “Have yeh heard about tha’ Shire, th’ writin’ feller, vanishin’?”

“It’s the talk of the mountain,” Dori agreed.

“What’s this?” Galadriel asked. “Shire is missing?”

Margr nodded sagely, apparently quite chuffed to be one up on an elf.

“Tha’s what me badger, Milgr, says. She reads all o’ Shire’s books t’ us. Such a good daughter! She was just readin’ us that new three copper one an’ she gets t’ th’ end an’ such a shock we got! Gone an’ without even finishin’ the book properly!”
“A scandal!” Vi agreed.

Galadriel looked surprised, then more than a little horrified.

“I wonder if Mithrandir knows…” she mused.

Ori wondered who Mithrandir was, and what they had to do with it, when the door opened and Dwalin walked in. Ori caught just a glimpse of a startled Fili behind his husband, but Fili apparently was sensible of the danger - and that he hadn’t yet been spied by the visitors, vanished.

Dwalin smirked over his shoulder and continued into the room alone after shutting the door.

He bowed politely.

“Yer ladyship. Mistress Vi, Mistress Margr.”

“Oh, it’s our dear Captain Dwalin!” Margr crowed, resting a rough hand gently on her bosom.

“It’s like Yule,” Vi agreed. “Presents all around!”

Dwalin took Balin’s abandoned seat, kissing his husband on the way down.

Margr and Vi sighed at this vision of romance.

“Here you go, deary,” said Dori, passing him a cup of tea. “And a nice gnish to go with it.”

“Thanks, our Dori.”

He was about to dig in when a dusting of plaster filtered through the air. A chip of it fell in Ori’s tea.

Ori looked at Dwalin. Dwalin looked at Ori.

Margr stopped talking and Lady Galadriel murmured, “Oh, dear.”

Their coordination was flawless.

Dori snatched the teapot, Galadriel, the jam, Margr, the milk and Vi, the honey. Everyone nabbed their cups and Dwalin and Ori swept away the trays of dainties as Nori crashed through the ceiling and landed on the table in a heap.

Nori groaned, looked around at them, rather dazed, grinned and said. “I had a dream and you were there, Dori, and you, and you.”

“You imbecile,” Dori snapped, “you could have squashed the iklars!”

Nori rolled over.

“If it’s all the same t’ yeh, Dori, I believe I’ve squashed mine. Oh, hullo, yer Lady Galadrielness. Didn’t know yeh had a twin.”

Balin and Thorin both appeared at the door. Balin sighed.

“Yeh know, Nori, me ‘da had tha’ trap door sealed up f’r a reason.”

“Obviously faulty workmanship,” said Nori.
Dwalin picked out a berry tart, inspected it, and fed a bite to Ori.

“Least we don’t ‘ave t’ get anyone in t’ reopen it.”

“Thanks fer yer concern,” said Nori. “I’m fine. A mere concussion is all.”

“Nonsense,” said Dori, wrestling him off the table. “Clearly if you fell on your head you wouldn’t feel it. Margr and Vi, you remember our Nori, my rat of a younger brother.”

“Oh! Yes!” Margr cried and Vi dusted him off. “Never mind, lovey, you join us fer tea.”

Dori looked properly horrified.

Thorin, though he obviously regretted drawing attention, said, “Nori, I think we should send for a healer.”


“Because your hair is flattened and even from here I can see your pupils aren’t the same size.”

“Aw! Tha’s total shite, Ori. I’m fine. Quit yer mewlin’.”

“Nori,” said Ori, “I’m over here.”

That rather tore it.

Dwalin sighed and handed the tray to Ori.

“I’ll go an’ get Oin.”

Dwalin went, Ori rather wished he could go, too. Thorin found himself the unwilling center of attention. There may have been only two sisters ogling him, but they appeared everyplace he turned. Finally he tried,

“Ladies, your servant,” he bowed. “May I say your frocks are stunning.”

“D’yeh really like them, yer majesty?” asked Vi, starry eyed as a tween.

“Really, I have no proper words to describe them,” said Thorin truthfully.

He looked to Ori for help. Ori could have committed regicide at that moment.

“They are fascinating,” Ori began. “Every time I look at them I see something I’ve never seen before.”

The tea party continued around the events. Dwalin came in then Binni and Sculdis entered with Oin and Sculdis assured Dori she and Binni would get dinner on. Lady Galadriel finished the elderberry jam, six cream puffs, and an apple-rhubarb turnover, then eyed the remaining mixed berry tart that Dazla had brought from the kitchen over the course of the exciting tea. Oin went out again muttering about getting something. Others began arriving home from work or other duties and Nori, despite he was supposed to remain quiet and still, insisted on telling his adventure to each arrival, changing the story every time so that, by the end, Dori was actually supposed to have picked up the table and clobbered Nori over the head with it.

“Good thing I saved the teapot,” said Nori to Gloin.
Then Bofur arrived home, tired and filthy, to find Nori telling his ferrets, now suddenly named Assault and Battery, that they were very naughty for tripping him down that flight of stairs.

“Nor?” Bofur asked leaning over him on the couch. “Yeh alright?”

“Hullo, dumplin’ butt,” said Nori, kissing him soundly.

Dori shook his head as Oin returned.

“Physically, he’s concussed,” said Dori. “Mentally, he’s really not much different that usual.”

Bofur looked grim. He wiped his hand on the underside of his tunic before tucking a loose fall of hair back over Nori’s shoulder.

“Head wound’s naught t’ joke about, Dor,” said Bofur.

Oin said very loudly and succinctly, “He never lost consciousness and he didn’t vomit. He’s got a bump the size o’ Erebor, but he’s not bleeding. That’s encouraging, at least. Here, I’ve got the skull hammer.”

The healer had to take the ruins of Nori’s hair down, which the thief fought vehemently so that Dori had to sit on him to keep him still while Oin examined the options, decrying Nori’s ‘irregular head shape’. Nori stuck out his tongue.

Oin muttered and struck Nori sharply on the head with the hammer. The crack echoed off the walls and Nori sighed and his smaller pupil grew to match his larger.

“Better?” Oin demanded.

“Aye,” said Nori. “Don’t feel like me head’s in a vice anymore. Oi, Bo, when’d you come in? Bofur snorted.

“Shortly before yeh called me ‘dumplin’ butt’ in front o’ th’ entire company, yeh daft thin’.”

Bofur kissed him, obviously relieved, and dragged him out to redo his hair.

Binni entered.

“Dinner will be ready momentarily, darlings. Meanwhile, here are some snackies.”

Balin turned to Vi and Margr, who had planted themselves in a corner, well out of the way. Ori imagined they were absorbing every single word and deed. At sight of the tray of hot toast pieces dripping with sharp cheese and mustard, they were once more in the thick of the crowd.

“Ladies,” said Balin, “if you would be so kind as to join us for dinner?”

“Oh,” said Margr, “we couldn’t possibly, could we, Vi?”

“We couldn’t? I mean, oh, but we wouldn’t want t’ put anyone out.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” said Balin. He turned to Lady Galadriel.

“Milady? May we tempt you?”

“It’s a very good thing for you that we are both otherwise engaged, Lord Balin. You’re far too
tempting in and of yourself.”

Dain blustered in, Stonehelm under his arm.

“Well, me lovely family, we’ll be leaving’ yeh tomorrow so me an’ me darlin’ queen’re makin’ yeh a proper Iron Hills dinner!”

“Oh, how exciting!” Dori enthused as his older brother dropped his heir and barged over to take Dori in his arms and look him over.

“Ah, me dumplin’ yeh look like a pink sugar bun an’ twice as sweet.”

Dori giggled and snuggled up basking in the attention. Balin chuckled and shook his head, then gave Dori a look.

“Oh,” Dori cried. “My manners have gone sadly begging’! Margr. Vi. Come and meet my dear older brother. Dain, these are my two lovely neighbors from the Dale.”

Dain turned and immediately burst his attentions on the two dams.

“Well, well, well, an’ who’re these pretty young thin’s? Lovely peaches. An’ where’s yer mam? Can’t be introducin’ such sweet young thin’s t’ an ol’ goat like me, Dori. Shocking’ behavior, me dumplin’.”

“Dear brother,” said Dori sweetly, “your wife is in the kitchen, likely wielding a cleaver. I’d say that thought should provide you chaperone enough.”

“Aye, well,” said Dain breezily. “All me important bits’re in her saddlebag anyway.”

He bowed to the sisters very low, making the sisters giggle and hold out their hands for him to salute, which he did quite noisily.

Sculdis came out of the kitchen.

“Me king, get yer arse in here as I’m ready t’ serve. Quite flirtin’, yeh ol’ goat. Ignore ‘im, ladies. He’s ain’t go’ th’ manners o’ a warg. Don’ yeh, me love.”

“Aye, aye, me diamond,” Dain concurred happily and trotted off to the kitchen.

Chopper bounced in the door and then scampered, squealing to the kitchen which elicited a howl of rage from Binni.

Once again all seated themselves at the table. Sculdis and Binni came in one carrying a massive platter of fluffily mashed potatoes and the other with a matching platter of equally fluffy mashed turnips. These were placed on the table and the pair seated themselves. Stonehelm arrived with six dusty bottles of Iron Hills lava whisky which was poured out.

Dain bellowed out of the kitchen bearing a vast ashet which he placed before Dori at the foot of the table to serve.

Ori stared at what looked like a huge, dead hedgehog. It was grayish and round with flecks of black.

Dori looked it over with an air of interest.

“And how do I serve this, dear brother?”
“Give it a wee slice across th’ top an’ spoon it out, me dumplin’,” Dain instructed proudly.

Gingerly, Dori followed these directions and what came out Ori recognized as a sort of sausage meat. All were served and helped themselves to both potatoes and turnips.

Ori sniffed. It smelled like mutton and oatmeal but mostly like black pepper. He tasted it cautiously and it was exactly that. Couple with the potatoes and turnips and washed down with the rough whisky, it was quite a tasty meal.

Margr and Vi looked deeply interested and Ori was quite sure they were deconstructing it so they could cook an exciting foreign meal for their household.

Lady Galadriel, despite having throughly enjoyed everything served at the tea party, serenely consumed her plateful of Iron Hills special cuisine as though she was dining on the finest elven food.

“This is quite delicious, King Dain,” she commented. “What is your secret?”

Dain put another mouthful in and grunted.

“Entrails.”

After dinner, Thorin called for the Durin’s own carriage to take Margr and Vi home to Steam Alley and Ori requested a moment of Lady Galadriel’s time in private.

Since he didn’t have an office, they adjourned to the bedroom, which Ori reflected had now been seen by more females in two days than it had in probably Dwalin’s previous lifetime. Or maybe not. Ori would have to inquire about the nature of Dwalin’s former partners, if he ever got up the nerve.

Lady Galadriel exclaimed over the kittens and picked Powder up to nuzzled her. She seated herself on one of the chairs and Ori took the other. Ori opened his mouth but stopped as, now that he had the lady alone to talk to in private, the words he needed to describe what he felt were not available. Lady Galadriel waited patiently, stroking a purring Powder. The lady’s eyes held his. Part of him hoped she would just see what was in his brain and explain it to him. He sighed and she smiled.

“There are many things on your mind, Ori of Fundin House.”

“I can’t explain it in a way that would be sensible.” he said, ruefully. “At least, if I knew how to begin, it would help.”

Galadriel smiled more broadly.

“Then begin at the beginning. Is this something private to you or does it concern another?”

“It’s Thorin,” Ori stated. “If it was just my eyesight, I wouldn’t have bothered you, but I don’t think it is.”

“You seen something in Thorin?” she suggested.

Ori twisted the end of his cuff then blurted out,

“Lady Galadriel, when you look at Thorin, what do you see?”
She looked as though she were holding in a smile.

“Perhaps you should be more specific, dear.”

“Get me a staff and a pointy hat, I’ve lost my mind,” he groaned. “I mean, when you look at him, does it seem like… like…. As though there’s something near him but you can’t see it? Perhaps you can and I can’t but…?”

“Yes. I wondered if you would notice.”

Ori didn’t know whether to be relieved or worried.

“It’s as though there’s a space next to him,” Ori went on slowly, hunting for the words to describe what was technically indescribable. “As though…as though, I don’t know. As though someone should be standing there?”

“But isn’t,” she agreed. “Not yet.”

Ori digested this for a moment then,

“He almost declared himself married to the mountain the other day.”

“Oh! He mustn’t do that!” she cried.

“I know. But, he’s so stubborn. I don’t want to know the penalty for telling your king to keep his big gob shut!”

The lady laughed gently at that.

“I don’t think that will ever be a worry to you. You are his scribe and that casts you into the roll of an advisor as well.

“I can’t advise him,” Ori gasped. “I don’t know anything about politics and ruling and… and being royal.”

“And there lies your talent,” she went on. “Your experience is different. You see things his training and life have never shown him. How would he had ever found out the true needs of Erebor if you had not…er…arrived in his life?”

Ori swallowed.

“You know all about it, I suppose.”

The lady merely looked amused.

“I love Dwalin,” Ori said honestly. “I’ve barely known him a month and I love him like he’s always been a part of my life.”

“He was designed for you by Aüle, just as you were designed for him.”

“I know,” Ori sighed. “I just wish we came with the technical specifications. It would make things so much easier.”

Galadriel laughed whole heartedly.

“You are not alone in that, dear child.”
Ori looked into the fire for a moment. That the lady had known and understood what had troubled him was a relief.

“What would you advise me to do?” he asked.

Galadriel’s eyes widened.

“I have every faith in your ability to keep Dwalin happy.”

“No!” he squawked and she looked teasingly at him.

“Ah, about Thorin. You will know.”

Ori groaned and dropped his head into his hands.

“Why can’t some wizard or ancestor just, I don’t know, appear at the end of my bed and say, ‘do this as it would be a good thing for so-and-so’. It would make sense then.”

Lady Galadriel stared beyond him then sat up straight.

“Ori.”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Always be careful what you wish for.”

“Yes, ma’am. Nori always told me the story of the wandering peddler who granted wishes. A man meet the peddler on the road and the man paid the peddler and said he wanted a bird with long, lovely legs.”

Galadriel’s brows lifted.

“‘Bird’ is Dale slang for a woman,” Ori elaborated.

“Oh.”

“Well, the man said that’s what he wanted and the peddler waved his arms and ‘poof’, there was a giant ostrich from the southern Islands. It then kicked the man down a nearby well and ran away.”

Galadriel stared at him.

“It shows that you have to be careful what you’re asking for,” Ori explained. “He did get what he asked for.”

Galadriel giggled.

“I’m going to use that story next time Elrond or Thranduil ask me for anything.”

Ori grinned.

“Just promise me you won’t tell them I told it to you.”

“Never.”

“Ma’am?”

“Yes?”
“Do you think that peddler was Tharkûn?”

“I was rather wondering that myself, my dear.”

Ori felt much better and escorted the lady back to the sitting room.

After all the guests had gone, Dori and Ori related the entire horrifying tea party experience to the company, imitating voices and gestures and laughing as though they’d imbibed something a great deal more potent than tea.

“Can you imagine what’s going on in Dale right now?” Dori exclaimed. “Oh, sweet, blessed Mahal!”

Ori said, “They’re running from house to house like blindingly-dressed town criers.”

Dori said, roughening his voice like Margr,

“Ooooo, an’ tha’ Lady Glad-rail! Y’know the witch o’ the wood, an’ all the time her feet never touched th’ ground! I doubt her butt ever touched th’ chair!”

Ori snickered and put his hand delicately to his imaginary bosom and squealed, “Ooooo, my dear! Yes! And the ornaments! And the furnishings! Because we’ve never seen a chair before!”

Ori and Dori collapsed together in hysterics.

“What were they on about?” Ori asked, frowning. “Their furniture in Steam Alley was much nicer than ours!”

“It’s different now, my love.”

“Yes, apparently now we have nicer chairs. Really? You can only sit on one at a time.”

Dis and Jani entered, aghast to find them strewn across the cushions in their finery, laughing to the point of tears.

“Dori! What are you wearing?” Dis cried. “What are you supposed to be?”

“A powderpuff, dear. If you think I look like a cushion, you should have seen the couches that just left.”

“You missed it, Dis,” said Thorin, sitting with his head back on the sofa, eyes closed.

“What’s wrong, Thorin?”

“Headache. I had to compliment their frocks. Plaid, Plaid everywhere. Plaid for days.”

“I don’t know if I should be sorry I missed it or glad,” said Dis.

“Be glad,” said Thorin. “At least one Durin will live to carry on the line.”

“Aye,” Dwalin agreed. “Fili fled a’fore he go’ in th’ door! Mebbe it’s f’r th’ best as they’d a’ spent th’ time askin’ him about our Siggy.”

Ori sat up as the full horror of the idea slid through his brain.
“Where is Fili?” he asked Kili as the young archer arrived with Legolas and Tauriel beside him.

“Oh, we passed him in the Dale. Apparently he was dropping in to see Bard for tea and dinner. ‘See Bard’ my ass. He went to goggle at Sigrid.”

“Shite head.” Dwalin observed.

Lady Klakuna swished in and embraced Dori.

“I’m all settle in my rooms upstairs and the old house is cleaned out, dearest. I must thank you for inviting me to live here. It’s too generous and I shan’t bother you-“

Dori tut-tutted, interrupting

“Nonsense, dearest grandmamma. You’re family and however would I manage without you?”

Ori thought Dori would manage very well but Klakuna had cast off her family for Dori and Dori took this strangely seriously.

Bard, Fili and the Bardlings arrived shortly thereafter and Nori and Bofur rejoined the party. Nori’s hair was really no neater than it had been and Ori was not surprised.

For dessert, Dori served the remnants of the sweets and the dainties from the bakery with tea and he and Ori reenacted the entire debacle again. Tilda was enraptured by the new ‘princess dress’ Dori wore. Sigrid and Fili were holding hands.

Bard leaned over Thorin.

“Is this why you look like you’ve taken to your bed like a romance novel heroine?”

“It was horrible. I had to say nice things about their hideous clothes.”

“Heavy is the head that wears the crown,” said Bard.

“And you, Bard, and you.”

“So,” Dori began, “Bard, dear, when will you be inviting Mistresses Margr and Vi to take tea at your home?”

Bard’s face fell.

“I-I- I’m a widower! It wouldn’t be proper for me to invite single ladies to my home. I- I- don’t.”

“We don’t want to die!” Bain cried.

Dori laughed delightedly.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Things are moving apace as usual and plans are being made. Ah, but plans for what? And what can top last night’s dinner?? Please do join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori woke when Dwalin stirred. Since he was lying on top of Dwalin, this was inevitable. Ori smiled into his husband’s chest and tried to pretend he was still asleep. He felt Dwalin looking at him. A chuckle rumbled in his ear.

“I know yeh ain’t asleep, love.”

Ori made an asleep noise and tried to stay still. Nothing happened. Ori waited, wondering what Dwalin was going to do.

He shrieked as Dwalin’s fingers lightly tensed against his sides and he almost leapt free. Almost. Ori found himself flat on his back, Dwalin on top, grinning down at him.

“Feels kinda strange t’ be tickin’ th’ instrument o’ Mahal,” Dwalin teased. “Dunno if it ain’t some sort o’ blasphemy.”

“Don’t you dare stop!” Ori cried.

“Tha’ an order, librarian?”

“Yes, I’m giving all the orders now. Thorin is to eat and you are to eat me.”

Dwalin’s eyes flew open wide and he laughed.

“So speaks th’ instrument o’ Mahal!”

“No one ever says what kind of instrument,” Ori mused.

“Triangle? Balalaika?”

“Maybe you should think of me as a bugle.”

“Aye, I kin blow a bugle,” Dwalin growled.

Ori giggled and stretched his neck so he could kiss Dwalin on the end of his nose. Dwalin leaned down. Then his eyes widened and he roared a curse.

Dwalin rose straight up on his knees and Ori sat up right after him, staring.

“Mew?” inquired Nori-Pori, hanging off the back of Dwalin’s drawers with all his tiny, needle-sharp claws.
“Fuck,” said Dwalin.

He grabbed the kitten around the belly and gently pulled it free. He brought Nori-Pori up to look the kitten in the eye.

“Yeh do tha’ again an’ I’ll make yeh int’ a hat!”

Nori-Pori licked his nose and purred. Ori fell back against the bed and laughed.

“Oh, your poor bum!” he cried. “Maybe I should kiss it and make it better?”

“Yer as much o’ a menace as he is,” Dwalin replied.

Ori recovered and looked around. Dwalin was sitting cross-legged and defeated as Nori-Pori finished his climb and sat triumphantly on top of Dwalin’s bald head. Ori’s fingers itched for his sketch book.

Kihshassa hopped onto the bed looking half asleep while Mask attacked a fold of blanket and Powder stretched her butt in the air and yawned to the point of almost folding her head in half.

Ori heard footsteps and there was a tapping on their bedroom door.

“Breakfast.” Dori called.

Ori looked at Dwalin, who grinned at him and removed the kitten.

“Guess we’re up,” Ori reflected.

“Mmm,” Dwalin commented and leaned over to kiss him.

“Aye, might as well eat while we’re at it.”

Ori chuckled and let Dwalin pull him off the bed.

Ori led Dwalin by the hand into the breakfast parlor, followed by the three kittens.

Kihshassa swooped in and landed in the middle of the table. Dori took the lid off a bowl of raspberries and put it in front of the fruit bat.

Balin, Dain, Binni, Oin Gloin and Gridr were all there. Binni, Bombur, and Sculdis helped Dori put food on the table while Balin talked with the rest.

Dwalin seated himself and made sure Ori was next to him. Ori lifted Nori-Pori and Mask into his lap and Powder marched over to Dori and meowed loudly to be picked up. Dori, never missing a beat, scooped the kitten up, popped her onto his shoulder and continued his preparations.

Roäc flew in, dropped something large onto Thorin’s plate and flew out again.

Omi, Loli, Buj, Stonehelm, and Gimli came in chattering nineteen to the dozen with their bats and settled themselves just as a small cloud of birds and bats flew in to land between dishes at their end of the table, all the winged beasts laden with the daily messages from friends.

Nori and Bofur strolled in and seated themselves. Assault and Battery peeked out of Nori’s hair and hopped down to the table. Both Bofur and Nori fed them toast.
Fili and Kili arrived and Dori started dishing up.

Dis came in with Jani and Thorin arrived in their wake.

Legolas and Tauriel arrived, ducking out-going and incoming birds and bats.

Thorin greeted everyone and Dori told him he was late and passed him a plate loaded with scrambled eggs, fried mealy pudding, and toasted bannocks. Thorin thanked Dori and took up the missive before putting his plate down. It bore an elaborate seal in silver wax and the paper was obviously thick and very fine. He opened it and raised his eyebrows.

“What is it, idad?” Kili asked.

“It’s a letter from the king of Gondor.”

“Oh, aye?” Dain said around a mouthful of bannock and gooseberry compote. “How’s th’ wee lad doin’? He old enough t’ marry tha’ elf of his yet?”

“No that I’ve heard,” Tauriel reported. “We would have had to attend such a wedding and, no doubt, so would all of you.”

“Hope they know how t’ feast proper f’r weddings.” Sculdis remarked. Her tone didn’t hold much hope. She glanced over at Thorin, suddenly everyone quieted down and watched Thorin look over the letter then he read it aloud.

To Thorin II, King-Presumptive of Erebor, Greetings,

I offer my sincere condolences upon the death of your grandsire.

Thror was a mighty king in his time and my grandfather often spoke of him warmly.

“I’m glad someone did,” Thorin muttered and put a forkful of eggs into his mouth before going on.

“Very courteous o’ him t’ say so, laddie,” Balin added, smiling at Dori, who was lovingly re-filling his tea cup.

I will happily accept ambassadors from Erebor at any time, or in fact send ambassadors to you or to any point between our kingdoms at your earliest convenience.

“Excellent,” Gloin, rumbled. “That’ll give us a chance to re-establish those trade routes Thror let drop and we can do the pretty with yer coronation invites.”

“Indeed,” Bombur agreed. “My dear Erda and I were discussing expanding our inn. More trade will give us the patrons to do so and that will bring in more trade and work as we start to build and
need more staff and construction workers.”

“Remind me t’ send someone down when yeh go, laddie,” Sculdis joggled Gloin’s arm making his fork fly out and into the trencher of eggs.

“Absolutely,” Binni concurred and passed the eggs to Gloin who had more and retrieved his utensil. Thorin cleared his throat and read on.

Also, I understand my recent overtures regarding the freeing of slaves from Mordor were unfortunately timed, given subsequent events.

You will be gladdened to hear the campaign was successful. We managed to liberate the peoples of the several kingdoms and were able to get them to safety before a sudden, unforeseen eruption of Mt Doom.

“Ahem, well,” said Balin.

“Naughty mountain,” Dori commented airily, making the younger dwarrow and the elves giggle.

Per your messenger, we will approach the new …”

Thorin’s voice trailed off and he stared blankly at the letter. Everyone glanced at each other in wonder.

Dis frowned.

“Thorin?”

Thorin gave her a strange look and went on.

“… we will approach the newly crowned king of Beleghost with caution.

Forgive the confusion, but is ‘asshat’ a corruption of the khuzdul or is he, in fact, an asshat?

Sincerest regards,

Elessar of Gondor

It took a moment of silence for that all to sink in.
“Mahal,” groaned Balin.

Everyone else was looking about at each other in half horror, half delight.

“I did not put that in the letter we sent to Gondor,” shouted Ori, horrified his joking note had somehow made it to the foreign king’s knowledge.

“I know,” Thorin stated. “I signed and sealed it before I gave it to-”

He slammed to his feet and went to the open doorway to the meadow.

“Roäc!” he bellowed.

The only reply was a distant, cackling laugh.

“Mahal’s blessed… Roäc!”

The raven fluttered in, landed on the back of Thorin’s chair and proceeded to preen.

“You idiot,” Thorin growled, coming back in.

“Well, cuz, he’s righ’ ‘bout yer brother,” Dain attempted to placate. Thorin ignored him.

Ori could swear Roäc shrugged, which did nothing to soothe Thorin’s temper.

Roäc finally said, “Calm down, Thorin. I know what I’m doing.”

“Do you know what will happen if this gets to my brother?”

“He’ll despise you even more than he does now? Not possible.”

Balin sighed.

“Done’s done, laddie. I hate t’ say it, bu’ th’ wee bastard’s right.”

Roäc mantled at Balin and hissed in his direction but it seemed a half-hearted effort. He was obviously well pleased with himself. He pecked at the letter on the table.

“This Gondor’s reply?”

“Yes,” said Thorin tightly.

Roäc hopped around and leaned over it, reading under his breath.

“Sincerest condolences… mighty king… la di dah, la di dah…ambassador… la di dah… Asshat!” He laughed uproariously. “Famous! Oh, yes, I do like that man.”

“Roäc?” Fili started.

The raven fixed him with an eye.

“Roäc, did you really tell King Elessar that Idad Frerin was an asshat?”

“Oh Mahal,” gasped Gridr. “Oh Mahal!” She threw back her head and laughed. That started everyone laughing. Thorin sat down with a thump and glared at Roäc, his mouth twitching.

“I’m sorry,” said Ori to Thorin.
Thorin waved this away.

“Balin and I did want to start by being honest. Oh well. And as that young Elessar is betrothed to Arwen Undómiel and she’s Lord Elrond’s daughter, it’ll be in his ears before lunch.”

“And Lady Galadriel’s before mid-morning,” Dori reflected.

“Already told her,” Roäc commented, busily eating the slice of mealy pudding Dori had put on a saucer for him.

“You read King Elessar’s letter for me to her?” Thorin choked.

“No,” Roäc snapped. “Told her what I said.”

“Brilliant!” Nori grinned ferally.

“What did she say?” Dis demanded.

“Laughed. That mate of hers, Cele-whatsis, wasn’t very amused. Impudent elf. Called me a gossip. Stole his lembas. Not very tasty that stuff. Any more of this?” Roäc looked at Dori who put another slice on the saucer and stroked Roäc, who made a show of enjoying it more than he should.

Thorin sighed, then looked back at Roäc.

“Did you tell anyone else on your way back?”

“No, well, that Beorn fella. Stopped for a drink and a peck at something.”

“And he said?”

“Said it was a good name for him, laughed, and fed me buttered bread.”

Dain sighed, exchanged a look with Sculdis, and stretched.

“Well, cuz, time fer us t’go,” he said.

Dori batted his eyelashes.

“Oh, must you, brother dear?”

Dain ruffled his hair annoyingly and let out a long sigh then burped.

“Aye, me dumplin’, we must. I’ve a kingdom t’ tend an’ Stonehelm’s got lessons. Me diamond has her own thin’s t’ keep a-runnin’ as well.”

Dori looked wide-eyed.

“You two can’t do that here?”

“Dori!” Dis cried in delighted horror.

Dain pulled one of Dori’s braids

“Saucy wee minx,” he smiled. “I may be th’ loudest dwarf who ever lived, but even I can’t give orders from this distance.”

“An’ he has tried,” Sculdis winked at him.
Everyone giggled congenially but the two elves, who blushed.

There was some fanfare at the gates where Dain’s army was beginning the march east. Many of the people of Dale turned out to cheer and wave. Dain bid farewell to his new family members.

Dori was hugged to the point of being squashed out of shape. Nori was patted violently only on the shoulders as Bofur had put himself bravely between his love and Dain when the king attempted to give Nori a forehead bump. Dain picked Ori off his feet for a hug then rudely tossed him over a few heads and into Dwalin’s arms.

Dwalin shot Dain a filthy look

“Don’t ever dare t’ toss me husband, turnip sucker.”

Dain laughed joyously, his arm around his queen, who was calling farewells and promises to meet again soon and blowing kisses. Sculdis jumped up to the driver’s seat of her war wagon. Dain boosted Stonehelm onto the heir’s excited pony, then Dain himself hopped lightly onto Chopper and the pig trotted off, oinking loudly and cheerfully into the sunshine.

They watched the Iron Hills family go off around the bend.

“Ironic, isn’t it,” Ori muttered.

“How quiet it will be without them,” said Dori. “What a pity they couldn’t stay. Perhaps next time it will be longer.”

“You really are going to miss him?”

“Yes,” said Dori, smiling, “though it is hard to believe anyone could miss him. Even if he were hiding, he could be traced by his belching alone. Yes, pet, I will miss all of them.”

“Me, too,” Ori owned. At the sound of the morning volley, he turned. “I have to get to work, Dori.”

“Yes, pet, off you go. I’ll send lunch over in time for you and the others.”

“Thanks, Ori’s Dori.”

He pecked Dori’s cheek and Dwalin lifted him up on Honda’s back.

“Ride careful, love.”

Ori leaned down to kiss him. “I will.” And with that Honda cantered off to the library.

At the Reference Desk, Ori was supposed to be studying, but he kept thinking about him and Dwalin and what they were doing - or not doing - in bed. It was shocking to think that a few weeks ago his sexual curiosity was of the idle variety. He really didn’t think he’d ever have practical use for it and imagined he would be doing hypothetical research on it when he was one hundred seventy five or so and going grey.

Now it was still research, except it wasn’t hypothetical and he wasn’t grey, though dithering over what to do would likely make him so sooner than he’d like.
He chided himself for acting like a tween. Really, he was a grown dwarf. No one would think twice about him going over to look at the sex manuals. That was what grown dwarrow did. Of course, he suspected most grown dwarrow didn’t have Dori living in their heads, clicking his tongue in disappointment and admonishing them about being naughty badgers.

I’m a grown dwarf. I’m of age. I have my own life. I have a husband. I have…

“A big problem,” he muttered to himself with a sigh.

He and Dwalin actually beat Dori home that night. They had just come in and Ori put his satchel in the bedroom when he heard Dori enter the kitchen, greeted by Lady Klakuna who said, “I’ve just put the kettle on, love. We’ll have a nice cup of tea. Oooo, what did you buy?”

Ori went to the kitchen door where the answer was obviously: Everything in every market under the mountain. There were numerous parcels and sacks and boxes and Larit, one of Mistress Dazla’s assistance, was bringing in more. Ori knew these were just the specialized items, the ground spices, cheeses, and fruits, and special wines imported from across Arda. Bulk items like flour and honey were delivered at the beginning of each week by the barrel, the fresh milk and eggs brought each day before dawn, and shortly thereafter the butcher visited.

“Well, it was a fierce melee at the markets,” said Dori. “You’d think the entire mountain had been a week without access to any sustenance and the confectioner was entirely out of ‘hundreds and thousands’.”

Dwalin turned to Ori.

“What’s ‘hundreds an’ thousands’?”

Before Ori could answer Nori stuck his head out of the lower cupboards and said, “It’s those little bits o’ colored, sugary shite yeh put all over ice cream.”

Dori dumped the, fortunately still cold, contents of the tea kettle over his head.

“Oi!” Nori yelped and withdrew back into the cupboard.

Without blinking, Dori refilled the kettle and put it on the hob.

“Dinner will be a little late tonight, pet,” he said to Ori. “I completely lost track of time in the shops.”

Lady Klakuna took stock of the new teas Dori bought.

“Not to worry, my love,” she said. “Binni is bringing dinner, and Master Bombur has a cake all frosted and waiting in the larder.”

Dori sighed. “Bombur and Bifur will be leaving tomorrow as well.”

“Now, now,” Klakuna patted his arm. “Even without them, I’m sure the chaos will be quite enough to keep you entertained. After all, Nori will still be here.”

“Oi!” Nori protested from behind the ovens. “Granny Klak! I thought y’ liked me!”

“Of course I love you, my troublesome little badger, and so does Dori or he would have flattened you years ago.”
“True,” said Nori.

“Now come out from behind the ovens and have some tea.”

“In a mo’, Gran, I’m just wringin’ out me under-pinnin’s.”

Binni brought a ‘Dale’ pie, the flaky crust hiding a tasty mix of noodles, mutton, tomato and finely chopped onions. The dish was, appropriately, bathtub-sized and Binni required Oin’s help bringing it in.

“We should pop it in the oven to keep warm until we’re ready to eat it,” Binni said.

“Right,” said Nori.

An oven door fell open, seemingly of its own accord.

“That’s creepy,” said Ori.

“Just a knack,” said Nori.

Dori kept glancing over at Ori all through dinner, and so Ori knew what was coming.

They were finishing with more tea when Dori said, “Your hair is getting long, pet. Time to give it a trim.”

Of course, now Dori didn’t have as many distractions, the Bearer would reframe his focus to its customary place.

“I think I’m going to let it grow, Dori,” said Ori.

“It’s in your eyes, pet.”

“Dwalin likes it,” said Ori into his plate.

“Oh? Dwalin likes it.”

“Be nice, Dori. It’s like the plum tunic you always wear because Balin likes it.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that tunic.”

“There’s nothing wrong with growing my hair.”

But Dori, apparently, would not be deterred.

“How can you see to write?”

Considering the conditions under which he’d had to write in the past few weeks. Ori thought his hair far down on the list of challenges.

Dwalin, around a mouthful of cake said, “He could use a clip t’ pull it back like Fili and Kili do.”

Ori turned to Dwalin with a grateful look. Dwalin winked at him. Ori took a deep breath and turned back to Dori, who seemed surprised at Dwalin’s interference. Ori thought he should press his advantage while Dori was a little off balance.

“I’ve had the same haircut since I was a badger, Dori, and what looked cute when I was twenty doesn’t do much for me now.”
“Not t’ mention it’s kinda creepy,” said Nori.

“Thanks,” said Ori dryly.

“Ain’t my fault yer head looks like the top of a carrot muffin.”

Dwalin glared.

“His head does no’ look like a muffin.”

“Yes, it does,” said Ori resignedly.

“No,” said Dwalin, pulling back to look at him. “It doesn’ loo… Oh, Mahal’s hairy arse. I wondered why it looked so familiar.”

Ori’s forehead clunked against the top of the table. He despaired over this, then realized he could use it. He lifted his head and looked at Dori.

“I can’t spend my life with my husband thinking I look like a muffin. I can’t, Dori.”

Dori sighed.

“I see your point. It could be a bit scarring, couldn’t it.”

Dwalin said, “There, all sorted. We’ll get yeh a plain clip f’r now, an’ one in the Fundin colors f’r the end o’ mournin’. Sound good?”

Ori smiled and nodded.

Dwalin kissed him.

“Yeh go’ beautiful, coarse dwarf hair, th’ perfect texture. Holds a braid like a dream.”

Ori reddened.

“You might be a little biased,” he said shyly.

“Who th’ fuck cares?” Dwalin replied with a smile.

They were about to kiss again when Nori snorted.

“Mush,” he said, then jumped in his seat with a shout. He whirled on Bofur. “Oi! That’s me ankle.”

“Be thankful I can’t reach th’ other, yeh big puddin’.”

“I can reach it,” Jani said helpfully from Nori’s other side.

Nori drew his knees up to his chin and pouted.

“Very well, pet,” said Dori with a sigh. “We’ll let it grow, see how it looks.”

“And no taking the scissors to it after I’ve fallen asleep,” Ori warned.

Dori looked shocked - shocked - at Ori’s suggestion, going so far as to place his hand against his bosom.
Nori snickered.

“That’d be a little tough t’ do around yer overgrown attack dwarf.”

Ori raised his brow. He’d seen Dori do it often enough.

“I’ll have you know my attack dwarf is exactly the right size.”

“Perfect fit, eh?”

Ori threw a spoon at him.

Balin, who had watched the entirety of Ori’s negotiation in silence, now smiled in amusement and turned to Thorin.

“An’ now, laddie, th’ moment yeh’ve been dreadin’.”

“Frerin’s come for a visit?” Thorin asked.

“No, we’ve gone as far as we can without yer input, now we need t’ talk about th’ coronation.”

Thorin held onto his tea cup as if it would ward off evil.

“Already?”

“Second mournin’s almost over. In another month or so yeh’ll be withdrawin’ with th’ family fer th’ ceremony t’ end th’ bereavement.”

There was no description of this ceremony in any book Ori had ever read. It was performed by the family of every king since the first passing of Deathless so long ago, but was never even spoken of to anyone outside the Durin’s inner circle. The family went into seclusion for over a week. A regent ruled, and though the incoming king was supposed to be immediately available in case of disaster, or should someone try to seize the throne, he was not to be otherwise disturbed.

Ori hoped it wasn’t some type of enforced meditation. He couldn’t imagine Thorin sitting still that long.

“Where does the ceremony take place?” Ori asked. “What do you need me to do?”

Fili and Kili exchanged grins and Fili said, “Ori-mate, can you swim?”

“Swim? Er, no. Why?”

“Never mind,” said Kili. “We’ll teach you. No drowning the scribe. We like having you around.”

“Um… thank you?”

Thorin said, “Bombur has very graciously invited us to the inn for the withdrawal.”

“We’ll be very happy to host you, Thorin,” said Bombur. “Really it’s not even high season, so we will have the rooms. It will be no trouble at all.”

“Thank you, Bombur,” said Thorin. “This is by way of an experiment. It’s never happened outside the mountain before.”
Now Ori’s curiosity was bad enough to cause a rash.

A ceremony that took place at an inn on the mountainside, and which apparently involved swimming.

“That sounds like a holiday,” he said.

Thorin nodded.

“That’s exactly what it is, Ori. Perhaps the only one the king ever gets, and he takes it before he’s even king.”

“So, that means-“

“Yes, the Durins are going on vacation.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. When a to-be-crowned king plans going on holiday, there’s a lot to be done. And we all need fun summer clothes! Also, we have an important announcement at the end of this chapter, so please read! Please do join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The next day, Ori arrived home from work to find the sitting room filled with Bard and the Bardlings. Dori, Thorin and Bard sat at the dining table deep in talk. Tilda played on the floor with the kittens under Kihshassa’s supervision and Bain was curled up in the corner surrounded by books he’d pulled from the shelf while Kili looked over his shoulder, apparently explaining the khuzdul. Ori looked to Thorin. This was, technically, forbidden. Thorin simply shrugged.

Sigrid’s voice drifted in from the kitchen, and Fili’s lower tones flowed beneath it. Lady Klakuna said something and the other two laughed.

“Ori,” said Thorin, “come join us if you have a moment.”

“I’ll just put my satchel away.”

He did so and when he returned Mistress Dazla was putting out another cup and plate for him. The plate held a portion of cold pork, a bun and a slice of very sharp cheese. The cup held beer. It wasn’t Dori’s usual pre-dinner snack, but the sort of thing the men enjoyed in Dale.

Bard smiled to him and said, “We were just talking about Sigrid going with you all to the inn.”

“That would be wonderful,” Ori enthused, further brightened by the prospect of having his dear friend with him.

“It will be a good opportunity for she and Fili to get to know each other,” said Thorin, “and between Dori and Dis there’s only so much trouble they can get into.”

“I’m not so worried about that,” Bard said quickly. “I just rely on her so much to mind Tilda and keep the house. It’s not fair to her, I know. Most women that age have a least a little freedom to socialize before they marry.”

Mistress Dazla cleared her throat.

“Begging your pardon, your majesties, but if the family has gone to the inn, I won’t be needed here as much. I could mind Princess Tilda and my mister could help with Prince Bain.”

Thorin smiled.

“I had intended for you to take a well-deserved break, Mistress Dazla, not do even more work.”
“Oh, it isn’t much of anything. I raised two pebbles of my own, and a rowdy pair they were. Princess Tilda’s mischievous to be sure, King Bard, but I doubt you’ve ever come home to find her dismantling the stove.”

“No, no she hasn’t attempted it yet. I always say ‘yet’ with Tilda. It could happen. If you wouldn’t mind, mistress? It is a lot of work, despite what you say.”

“Oh, stuff and nonsense, your majesty. It’s all settled.”

Sigrid was beyond excited at the prospect of going to the inn. Neither she nor Ori had ever been so far from the mountain. It was a whole other hillside and required a ride of at least two hours! Loli and Omi had said it was on the shore of the lake and there was a lovely stretch of sand at the lake edge. Gondorians and people from Rohan would come occasionally and lie on large towels on the sand to soak up the sun and swim in the lake. And, Omi informed them, they would actually be able to see all of Erebor and the city from a distance!

Tilda was not excited.

“I want to go, too!” she cried. “Why can Sigrid go and not me?”

Bard sighed.

Bain was unhelpful.

“Princesses don’t whine,” he said.

“Really, Bain?” Bard asked.

Ori said, “Tilda, can I tell you a secret?”

She swung to look at him, eyes large.

“A real secret?”

“An important one,” said Ori.

“Alright!”

She grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him to the far side of the fireplace. Then she turned to everyone else and ordered, “Don’t listen!” before she cocked an ear at Ori, in silent demand to be told.

Ori realized she had grown recently. He didn’t have to bend much at all to whisper in her ear.

“Sigrid is going to court with Fili and they might kiss.”

“Really?” Tilda shrieked, gleefully horrified, before lending her ear again.

“And, well, they can’t do much of that while you and Bard and Bain are there.”

“But what about the dwarrow?” Tilda asked aloud, forgetting to whisper.

Ori didn’t.
“Dwarrow don’t worry so much about kissing.”

“Does Da’ know?”

“He might suspect, but he won’t know for sure. But you will.”

Tilda’s face split into a grin that would not have been out of place on Nori and for a moment Ori worried he may have created an entirely different problem.

“Remember,” Ori said aloud. “It’s a secret. You can’t tell anyone.”

“Pinky swear,” Tilda vowed solemnly.

There followed a flurry of preparations. The king’s workload seemed to triple with the possibility of him being unavailable for even a brief time, as if he would never come back to pick it all up again. Even when he wasn’t scribing, or supervising the others, or working at the library, Ori was busy with other things, almost too busy to worry about his own problems. Almost.

On top of everything was something Ori had not even thought of. He found himself looking through endless sketches of what Dipfa considered appropriate holiday clothes for a royal scribe of Erebor, which seemed to consist of white cotton material with various pale colored strips on it, which she announced was called seersucker. She also had any number of ideas for coronation robes of the royal scribe traditional garb, many unearthed then subjected to her artistic fervor then to be resized for him.

He barely saw Dwalin at all except for meals, and he found this quite wearing as well.

One day he returned from work to find Nori loitering in the hallway outside Dori and Balin’s rooms.

“What’s going on?” Ori asked.

“Oh, yer missin’ it,” said Nori. “Take a listen.”

Dori’s voice filtered through.

“Just a little lace at the throat, dearie.”

“No!” Thorin’s voice returned implacably. “No lace!”

“It’s not even scratchy, look.”

“I don’t care if it’s velvet, I don’t want anything tight around my throat.”

“That’s a good point actually,” Dori conceded.

“Thank you!” said Thorin, sounding relieved.

“We’ll spill it down the front of your tunic in a sort of foaming jabot.”

“Oh, Mahal’s hairy arse!”

Ori slapped his hand over his mouth. That traitorous voice in his head said he should be recording this battle for posterity.
Dori continued, “How about this jacquard, dearie? It’ll drape quite nicely from those broad shoulders.”

“It’s pink,” Thorin barked.

“With your complexion, you could pull it off.”

“Pink is not a Durin color, Dori!”

“Thorin, you can’t spend the rest of your life looking like a vicious, heavily-armed blueberry.”

“A blue-“

Zindis, Thorin’s tailor said, “Oh, Master Dori, that’s just what I’ve been trying to tell him for decades. But will he listen?”

“I don’t look like a blueberry! I’m not wearing pink and I’m not wearing lace!”

Dori said in a long-suffering tone, “Oh, I suppose small steps first. Look, Thorin. Here’s a different blue than you usually wear, a nice deep teal with just a tiny edging of lace at the cuffs and along the placket. Not even white, more of a pewter, actually.”

“Universal teal, your majesty,” Zindis put in. “Anyone can wear it.”

A tense silence followed until Thorin finally said, “It’s not hideous.”

“No, of course not. You see. Zindis can make you a tunic of this for court and some in linen for the summer.”

Nori smirked.

“That’s one decision made. Good thing he don’t run Erebor like he picks clothes.”

“How long have they been in there?”

“An hour. It’s slow work wearin’ away stone, especially when the stone’s been wearin’ the exact same color an’ cut o’ clothes his entire adult life.”

“I suppose that makes it easy to get dressed every morning,” said Ori.

“Aye, well, the king needs a little more panache. He ain’t Dori, it’s true, but he ain’t too ugly. ’Sides, if he ever wants t’ attract company o’ the romantical type, he probably shouldn’t dress like an East Dale assassin.”

“How do you even know he wants romantic company?”

“I don’t. He don’t even know hisself, but I think Thorin’s in the way o’ bein’ one o’ Dori’s ’projects’.”

“Oh, Mahal,” Ori groaned. “We’ll be lucky if Erebor’s still standing at the end.”

Dori said to Thorin, “Now, dearie, about your underpinnings, I think you should go with silk.”

“There’s nothing wrong with linen. I’ve been wearing it my entire life.”

“When you can be bothered to wear it at all,” said Zindis archly.
Ori stuffed his sleeve in his mouth, exchanging looks of pure glee with Nori.

Dori would not be discouraged.

“There’s nothing like the whisper of silk against the skin.”

“I don’t want my clothes whispering, Dori. People think the Durins are mad enough as it is.”

“You might meet someone to whom you wish them to whisper.”

“Dori!”

“You need someone shorter than you. Someone light on their feet.”

“Dori, I’m a little busy running the kingdom right now.”

“They say that’s when it happens, when you aren’t looking for someone.”

“Since when are you channelling my amad? Besides, I have an heir.”

There was a deep silence and Ori held his breath, though he didn’t know why.

“Thorin, dear,” said Dori gently, “it’s not just about the kingdom.”

Ori could all but hear Thorin thinking before the king said, “You know, that pink thing isn’t so bad. It’s very pale, and the breeches are very dark maroon.”

“Why don’t you try them on, Thorin?”

“Fine.”

There was a rustle of cloth and Dori all but cooed.

“Now then! You see, you look-“

“Like a vicious, heavily armed cranberry.”

Ori had a session of his own with Dipfa. The clothes she had created and laid out for his inspection were beyond whatever he had thought of the plans. He could think of no other word than ‘costume’ to describe them.

All over the bed were outfits made of cotton and the linen ‘seersucker’ she had called it. They were either white or left undyed. Most had tiny stripes. The vertical stripes were either palest lavender, palest green, or palest red. Ori looked them over and murmured that they needed ironing. Dipfa said that seersucker looked like that and the wrinkles made it nice and cool to wear.

He was standing in front of the mirror, slightly horrified, dressed in the seersucker with pale red stripes. It was nicely cut as a long plain tunic and pair of matching breeches tucked into a pair of pale grey canvas boots.

“Yes, a seer sucker,” said Ori. “I see it now.”

Dwalin barged in and stopped short, staring at him.

“Captain!” Dipfa greeted him in delight. “Master Ori’s summer holiday wardrobe.”
Dwalin continued to stare then a slow grin covered his face.

“More like winter, our Dipfa.”

“Winter?” she repeated, confused.

“Aye, with them long stripes an’ th’ white, he looks like a Yule candy. Very tasty, love.”

Ori blushed and giggled. Looking back he could see that he did look like the peppermint sticks that were passed out to badgers during Yule. Dipfa walked around him, obviously deep in thought. Ori had a horrid premonition that when Yule was near he would receive clothing that would be themed on various Yule sweets and decorations.

“Dipfa, he said quietly.

“Yes, Master Ori?”

“If you make me a suit in dark Fundin green and decorate it with shiny colored baubles and include a star-shaped hat, I will not wear it.”

Her face fell. Dwain chuckled and went to the wardrobe, the open door obscuring him.

She frowned again.

“Back to this one, it won’t do. I see that now. I had hoped to banish the juxtaposition but it does not answer. You cannot wear white and red with the color of your hair. Try the green stripe.”

Ori did and it looked quite nice, but

“Dipfa?”

“Yes, Master Ori?”

“I do like the cut and colors but not all together. Perhaps the stripes with plain breeches?”

Dipfa ruminated a moment then whipped him around, pulled everything off him and threw on the lavender stripe, rummaged through the pile and retrieved a pair of matching lavender trousers. Ori looked at these and liked them very much.

Dipfa then began holding other swatches of material up to him under his chin, muttered about a little spot of pale blue and smiled.

“I shall have twenty of these ready for you and a couple of nicer ones by the day after tomorrow.”

“Twenty?” Ori gasped. “Dipfa! We’re only going for a couple of weeks.”

“Yes, but you might get wet or covered in sand. And you need a couple of nice things for dinner,” she said, closing the subject. “Now, Captain Dwain.”

“Wha’, our Dipfa?”

Dwain came from behind the wardrobe door. He was dressed in a tan colored kilt. Dipfa stared open-mouthed.

“Perfect,” she declared. “You will wear pale colored canvas kilts. I will have canvas boots made for you and a few plain cotton shirts. Bright colors.”
“How bright?” Dwalin almost growled.

“How bright?” Dwalin almost growled.

“Very select. No orange or yellow… And I don’t think pink will suit you.”

She turned away and didn’t see Ori grinning maniacally at his husband. Dwalin shook his head at Ori mouthing *not a word*.

Dipfa bowed and left with her cart piled high with the rejects.

“Don’t worry,” she called back. “I haven’t forgotten the bathing costumes for you both.”

Silence.

Ori stared at Dwalin

“Bathing costumes?”

There were two weeks before the Royal Withdrawal from Final Mourning. The emotional support party for the grieving family had been chosen. The regents for the king-to-be’s absence were also chosen. The final preparations of ruling in absentia were finished and the kingdom told to rely upon Binni assisted by Oin and Gloin. Gridr and Granny Klak would take care of the guilds. Librarian Brur would serve as royal scribe.

The withdrawing party was the Durins, the Fundins, the Princess of Dale and young Gimli. Ori was almost trembling with excitement. The kittens, their bat, the badger and Nori, Bofur and the ferrets were being readied. Ori was in a rush to finish the work Brur had set him but the librarian assured him it would be there when he got back and he should be preparing himself to assist the Durins with their emergence form mourning. This last part had been said with a broad wink, so Ori was left to decide what he wanted to take to read, how many sketching books he might need and any number of pens, graphite wands and paints.

A week later Dori announced he was having another tea party. Ori was appalled at this announcement and thought it might be a bit much but Dori was adamant and charged an amused Roac with delivering gilt edged invitations, all written in his own round hand.

The day arrived. Thorin installed himself in the study with Balin and once more left the door open for entertaining listening. Dwalin claimed he had work in the stable to do and Gloin, Nori, Jani, and Bofur declared they would be helping. Dis and Gridr attended as did Binni. Granny Klak promised to make her famous ginger cake and the rumpus of preparations in the kitchen was paramount to a military campaign.

Ori, in pure merriment, took stock of the wealth to be served.

There were going to be three different kinds of tea, a carafe of blackcurrant cordial, a platter of hard boiled eggs, halved and the yolks taken out, beaten with powdered red pepper and milk then piped back into the whites. A basket piled high with bacon scones sat by a hot platter of beef, ground and mixed with onions and bread crumbs, moulded into tiny balls and swimming a savory sauce, each with a tiny silver pick for ease of eating. There were thin sandwiches some, containing cucumber, some cream cheese, and others shaved ham and mustard, or smoked fish or lettuce.

A plate offered small cakes each daintily iced with pink frosting. A golden syrup sponge, a very
large peach pie and the ginger cake finished the repast. The cake was magnificent. It had been baked in a pan shaped like the mountain. The cake was placed in the middle of the table, its peak and several crags covered in white icing and the rest dotted with dyed green powdered sugar. These were complimented with bowls of soft salted butter, butter mixed with honey, sour cream dotted with herbs, and several bowls of elderberry jam and gooseberry jelly. Balin came in with box from the bakery in Dale. He beam at Ori and Sigrid.

“Can’t have th’ ladies doin’ without their er…iklars.”

Ori was able to divert Sigrid with the story of the last tea.

Ori, dressed in deep Fundin green suit with lilac trim, kept Sigrid company while they waited. Sigrid fidgeted nervously. Mistress Dazla had fetched her to Fundin house yesterday after dinner and bullied her into having her hair done. This had involved Dori, Gridr, and Mistress Dazla taking the poor girl in hand. Sigrid had been subjected to a scented bath in effervescence water redolent with lavender petals and a mix of mint, summer savory, and wintergreen leaves. She had been rubbed and massaged with rose oil, powdered, then sent to bed with her hair tied up in rags.

Now she was dressed in a white blouse covered by a sky blue overdress trimmed with white lace. Her hair was a mass of silky ringlets. the top kept out of her face by a circlet of silver with tiny aquamarine chips. The rest of her hair fell loose down her back except for two long ringlets from her front hair that were curled together at her throat and fastened with a clip that matched her circlet.

“I’ll spill tea down my front like an idiot. First sip.” Sigrid muttered.

“No, you won’t,” Ori said. “You’ll be fine, just smile and nod. Mistresses Margr and Vi do most of the talking anyway.”

Gridr swirled in. She looked a picture of dwarrowdam beauty. Her scarlet dress was exquisitely cut and she wore rubies in her hair and beard and gold rings on her fingers and gold cuffs dripped from her ears.

Dis was in Durin blue velvet, starched petticoats held her skirts out like a bell and she was decorated completely in silver.

Granny Klak was a sunbeam of bright yellow. Her dress was in the fashion of two centuries ago, the dress tightly moulding her form and drawing the folds to the back of her waist, where the golden satin was gathered and poufed out to fall to her feet in a small train. The cuffs and bottom hem were trimmed with intricately crocheted brown lace.

Sigrid whispered to Ori and he shook his head as he didn’t know how in all of Arda she was going to sit down in that.

Granny Klak had her grey hair rolled up on the back of her head indicative of a widow and one who did not intend to marry again. On top balanced a mat of brown silk with lace edges. Her beard was tightly braided and also rolled up under her chin. Ori was horribly amused she had decided to present herself as a widow, but she had cast off her husband’s family, so perhaps it was the correct move.

Binni wore a simple hooded robe of pale green embroidered all over with ivy leaves, his hair and beard were woven through with a bright orange silk ribbon and the toes of his orange boots occasionally peeped from beneath his robe.

Dori whispered in. This time there was no cloud of foaming material, but a severely cut suit of
grey, though every seam was fringed with three-inch silk tassels of lilac. His hair was so intricately braided, Ori knew that it must have taken Balin over an hour to complete. Dori’s ear cuffs and the few pins in his hair carried lilac tassels. Today, he was Lord Dori and Ori was horribly reminded of a lampshade.

   Mistress Dazla was clad in deep grey with a blindingly white starched apron. Her assistants were similarly dressed and looking ready for anything.

   Anything arrived through the breakfast room in the shape of Lady Galadriel gowned in her usual white. Behind her were Legolas and Tauriel in white and palest blue and Thranduil in all his magnificence, complimented by a robe of pale copper and a crown of blossoming hawthorn.

   Dori smiled delightedly and cooed over his guests. At sight of the elvish prince and captain, Dis and Gridr disappeared and returned with their offspring.

   Fili dressed in grey and a golden surcoat. He looked relaxed and at ease until he clapped eyes on Sigrid. Then he lit up and swaggered over to greet his fellow guests with an elegance that befitted an heir to the throne.

   Kili was in Durin blue and eager for both food and mischief. His eyes popped open at Tauriel in a gown. The bodice was fitted and the skirt flared only a little.

   “Like a watercolor Durin dam,” he sighed.

   He glued himself to Tauriel’s side and the pair of them removed to the meadow for some archery practice.

   Gimli was not quite dragged into the room by his mother. He looked as though he had been washed speedily and violently and his clothes were freshly pressed. His sulk was amazing but quickly melted away when Legolas came to his side to make conversation.

   At Lady Galadriel’s request, Ori produced Mask and Nori-Pori and their bat mother from his room. He came back and found that Powder was already ruling the room from Dori’s lap. The elves were very interested in how Kihshassa had adopted the kittens. Thranduil voiced disgust when Ori described the ‘sea-spider’ and Galadriel frowned and said that it was best Master Vobwi kept the creature in a small tank as if given unlimited space the creature would continue to grow in size. Binni shuddered, mumbled something about Khazad-dûm and stepped out briefly for some air. When he returned, Ori was describing Balin and Brandy much to everyone’s amusement.

   A moment later Mistress Dazla stepped in, gave Dori a speaking look and went out to the receiving room. At the sound of Margr and Vi’s voices, Fili and Sigrid both turned pale and instinctively clutched each other’s hands.

   Mistress Dazla returned and announced the latest guests.

   The sisters had foregone plaid for a seasonal violent yellow and lime green print of enormous flowers, each having dyed her hair one of those colors to match, each wearing a giant fake flower of the opposite color on the top of her head. They wore beard beads carved like flowers, each trailing a tiny string of tinkling bells from their centers.

   “Vi, Margr,” said Lady Galadriel, “another triumph of fashion.”

   “Ah, there yeh are, yer ladyship. Charmin’ as always.”

   “Wherever did you find the material?” Galadriel asked.
“The latest fabrics from Bree,” said Vi confidentially. “Smart dressers, them hobbits, and Margr’s ever so handy with th’ needle.”

Ori couldn’t decide if they looked like tuffets or exotic, flowering shrubs.

Margr and Vi cast their eyes on Thranduil and froze.

He rose and bowed deeply.

They caught up quickly, as they were now quite used to ‘mixin’ with th’ quality’ in their new social circle, and dropped credible curtseys.

Vi said, “Beggin’ yer pardon, yer ladyship. That’s quite a becomin’ frock.”

“Thank you,” said Thranduil, the deep voice alerting the sisters that they’d made a bit of a social stumble.

“Er, beggin’ yer pardon,” said Margr.

She winced and Vi squeezed her forearm in distress so hard Ori was sure it would leave a mark.

Dori, who had been watching this whole exchange with ill-concealed amusement, took pity on then.

“Mistress Vi and Mistress Margr of Steam Alley, this is King Thranduil of Erys Lasgalen.”

“Charmed, we’re sure,” said Vi, curtsying again.

“Sorry about the whole ‘ladyship thin’, yer majesty,” said Margr.

“No harm done. Though I hope this doesn’t mean you disapprove of my frock.”

“Oh, no, it’s quite becoming, ain’t it Vi?”

“It is, it is. And them twiggy things on yer head. Very nice. Lovely touch.”

“Thank you, I change the ‘twigs’ to match the seasons.”

Vi nodded vigorously and Margr said, “Clever of you to accessorize.”

Lady Galadriel leaned in and said in Sindarin, “Yes, lovely twigs today, Thranduil.”

“Hush,” Thranduil admonished.

Vi said to Margr, “Ooo, that mus’ be some o’ that elf talk.”

“Yes,” Margr said airily. “Simperin’ they call it.”

Thranduil opened his mouth and closed it and Lady Galadriel appeared to be coughing delicately, her shoulders shaking slightly.

Dori quickly introduced Princess Dis, who made every appearance of being delighted to further her acquaintance with them and introduced Gridr and Binni. Dori brought forward Granny Klak, who delighted the sisters by telling Lady Galadriel in a stage undertone that the sisters were two lovely young dwarrowdams.

“My son, Prince Legolas,” Thranduil intoned. Legolas bowed and murmured a greeting in
perfect calmness but his eyes were as wide as dinner plates. Gimli harrumphed next to him, but bowed politely when presented and grunted as was expected of a well raised young dwarf. Fili and Sigrid were equally gracious and personably friendly.

“Tea?” said Dori.

The elves chorused, “Thank you, yes.”

Once around the table, Margr started in on the eggs and the local news. The brewery had tapped its first barrel and it was declared excellent. Cider would soon be available. Apparently, there was a recipe for cider with honey and another with raspberries.

The bakery was doing well and iklars were a hit. Vi inquired if Thranduil had experienced this confection. On hearing he had not, Dori immediately passed the tray and Thranduil used the tongs to help himself to a plump one. He examined it interestingly.

“Chocolate covered pastry,” he observed.

“Aye,” said Vi. “Full o’ cream, funny thing to call it an iklar, eh?” this with a lascivious wink. Thranduil looked at her then the most evil smile came to his face. He took a good hold of one end and licked up the frosting, savoring it openly, then put one end into his mouth. His cheeks hollowed then he pulled the tip out of his mouth licking his lips. He grinned at Vi.

“You’re quite right. It is full of cream. You do have to suck hard to get it out, don’t you?”

Ori could not believe that he had just watched King Thranduil perform oral sex on an iklar. He didn’t want to think about it. He never wanted to eat an iklar ever again. He glanced down to the other end of the table. Legolas looked like he wanted to crawl under it.

After a single shocked moment, the dwarrow population of the table howled with laughter. Lady Galadriel gave Thranduil a look.

“Now I understand,” she smiled.

“Understand what?” Thranduil purred.

“Why you were not my son-in-law.”

Thranduil frowned.

“Why?”

“Because I had a daughter.”

Thranduil’s cheeks colored ever so slightly but he also chuckled.

“I do have sons, milady,” he pointed out.

“Yes,” she said in Sindarin. “You must tell me how you found time to birth all of them.”

Ori wondered what, if anything, he should tell Buj. He wondered if he should tell him that Thranduil was a Bearer. He wondered if all elves could simply reproduce or, if in fact, they were all actually one sex and just made themselves pregnant, like spontaneous combustion or something.
While he pondered this, Kili and Tauriel returned, Dwalin was with them, made his bows and sat beside Ori. Mistress Dazla brought through ale and the conversation continued.

“Really?” asked Lady Klakuna of Mistress Margr. “Someone simply broke into your house?”

“Oh, yes, years ago now. Still, gave me quite a turn,” said Margr, “and I don’t scare easy, not after three husbands.”

“Did you know the dwarf who broke in?” Ori asked, horrified.

“No, I don’t know every dwarf in Erebor no matter what me sister tells yeh.”

“Aw, Margr,” said Vi, “now that’s a fib.”

“Says yeh. Anyways, it was dark an’ it hardly mattered, did it. Even if it was my Rogi and he was drunk off his ass he’d said, ‘Oi, Mum, it’s me.’ when he come in. I didn’t know this dwarf, so I didn’t let him get no farther than me front room. I broke both his legs so he couldn’t run, then I broke his arm and bashed in his teeth, knocked him down and sat on him. Then I screamed fer help.”

“Then you screamed for help?” asked Dis.

“Well, it’s the city patrol, isn’t it. Yeh never know what’ll arrive all wrapped up in a nice beard and a pretty bum.”

Vi nodded.

“Aye, could be husband number four.”

Dis and Gridr exchanged glances and Gridr murmured, “Best to plan these things in advance.”

Dwalin broke in.

“That was four years ago, eh? I remember that. Had a good laugh over it.”

Margr chuckled.

“That’s right. I never ferget a nice bum.”

And she hoisted her ale to him in salute before knocking it all back in one gulp.

Dis, down the other end of the table, said, “I remember you telling us about that!”

Kili’s eyes grew even larger than usual.

“That was you, Mistress Margr? You were my hero!”

Margr looked truly touched at this.

“Aw, yer sweet,” she said, then assured him, “If yeh was only a couple hundred years older, yeh’d be a shoe-in fer husband number four. Then again, yeh do have a taste fer older dams and such.”

Tauriel raised an eyebrow and Margr laughed.

“Not t’ worry, me dear, I’m not goin’ t’ pinch him from yeh. It’s obvious he’s arse over heels fer
The young people managed to eat almost everything on the table and excused themselves for a refreshing turn about the courtyard. While Mistress Dazla and her assistants restocked, Vi leaned over to Lady Galadriel with an air of intrigue.

“We wanted t’ tell yeh, we found out th’ answer t’ yer burnin’ question.”

“Which one?” Lady Galadriel asked, while her spoon stirred her tea on its own.

“Well! We was invited t’ tea at Master Tin and Mistress Ondr’s house, yeh know, them that’s in so tight with Lord Zark and Lady Kadis.”

“Ah, that burning question,” said Lady Galadriel with a twinkle in her eye. “And what have you to report?”

“Well, our Gladdy, yer not goin’ t’ believe this.”

Ori and Dori exchanged horrified looks.

Our Gladdy?

Thanduil didn’t seem to know where to look.

“By the by,” Margr cut in, “we mentioned yeh was keepin’ well.”

“Thank you,” said Lady Galadriel. “I don’t believe I’ve been introduced to them.”

Margr assured her, “Mistress Ondr always asks after yeh. Not t’ worry.”

Ori reflected that after conversing with Margr and Vi, Mistress Ondr must feel she knew the elven lady rather intimately.

Vi continued.

“I had to excuse meself to the bog t’ powder me nose, an’ that’s past the bedroom an’ th’ door jus’ happened t’ be a little ajar.”

Ori wondered how many doors Vi had jarred before she found the right one.

“An’ there, lo an’ behold, was a great heap o’ cushions an’ rugs an’ furs laid out before th’ fireplace, a veritable sea o’ debowchrey!”

Lady Galadriel looked philosophical, “One should probably be comfortable when embarking on… debowchrey.

“That’s just what I said meself!” Vi cried, clapping her companionably on the forearm.

Lady Galadriel giggled.

“Excellent.”

“Hmph, Lord Zark,” put in Lady Klakuna, pausing to select a hardboiled egg. “Last time I saw him, he was walking like he was half turned to stone. Guess this Mistress Ondr must be something of a lava point.”
“Let’s hope he’s got a geyser to take care of it,” Gridr commented idly, making all the ladies cackle.

“Oh aye, milady,” Margr agreed. “When she was a young dam it were said she could light a cold forge jus’ by squattin’ over it.”

Klakuna snickered, “if she’s over Zark, that’s a squat that’ll pop a badger out in a flash.”

“Good thin’ then she’s past th’ age a’ poppin’,” Vi agreed. “Or th’ town won’t hear th’ end a’ it f’r a twelve month.”

Ori thought, Especially if you have anything to say about it.

Dori poured more tea. “Well, if you’re going to bubble you might as well get some fizz while you’re at it.”

Thranduil snorted out a laugh and then seemed to look absolutely horrified with himself.

When the younger set returned the party had adjourned to the comfortable furniture around the fireplace. Dori had gone off to his rooms and returned bearing the flimsy, sparkling accoutrements of his first courtly triumph.

“This was my presentation robe,” said Dori proudly.

Vi said to Lady Galadriel, elbowing her lightly, “No wonder King Thror kicked it.”

“You wore this in front of the entire kingdom?” Thranduil asked, not even bothering to hide his surprise.

Ori could sympathize.

Dori cooed, “Of course I did. The Durins shouldn’t have to endure rumors of a false Bearer, and what I did was in keeping with the Bearer presentations of old. In fact, I might have been rather overdressed.”

Binni nodded. “Before the reign of the original King Nali, Bearers traditionally wore only jewels and mithril to their presentations. Certainly the robes instituted afterward could hardly show a Bearer to best advantage.”

“And you wore such a robe?” Thranduil asked.

“I was never presented,” said Binni. “There was no money for one thing. Then by the time we had to flee Khazad-dûm and I was no longer… fertile.”

It was the most Binni had ever spoken about himself as a Bearer in Ori’s presence. Ori was torn between asking all the questions a scribe should ask and invading the privacy that Binni kept around himself like a fine cloak.

Thranduil reached for the robe.

“May I?”

“Of course,” said Dori, handing it to him.
“What kind of material is this?” Thranduil asked, fascinated. “I’d love a robe made of this.”

“No!” Legolas shouted. They all turned to look at him. “I mean, really, ada, it’s not your color.”

“Really?” Thranduil asked, tilting his head as if it were empty. “You think it would not look becoming on me?”

“Er, well…”

Bard walked in at that moment and Thranduil grinned evilly.

“Perhaps we should ask King Bard.”

“Ask King Bard what?” the man ventured warily.

Thranduil held the material up to himself.

“What do you think?”

“I think if you wore it, your arse would be hanging out in the air,” said Bard frankly.

“Well! I never!” Mistress Margr shrieked gleefully and she and Vi cackled so hard they had to hold each other up. Vi said, “Oh, King Bard, yer such a naughty feller!”

Dori said, “Yes, I suppose we would have to lengthen the hem.”

Finally, at the close of the party, Thorin and Ballin emerged from the study, where, no doubt, they had been working hard, and greeted the sisters warmly, bowing over their hands, then Galadriel’s. Thorin eyed Thranduil’s with a wicked grin.

“I wouldn’t,” said Thranduil dryly.

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” Thorin promised.

“You are wise indeed,” said Thranduil.

“Yes, I know you bite.”

Thranduil turned to Dori.

“Thank you for a most… instructive afternoon, Dori.”

“I live to serve,” said Dori, fluttering his lashes.

“Yes, somehow I very much doubt that.”

**IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT!!**

*Now available is the Glossary for this extravagant tale.*

*Posted today and, as people and…things arrive, they shall be added.*
You can refresh your memories faster than ever before and,

like Mistress Margr, construct a family tree

or a guilty-by-association tree for all the lovely characters mentioned here.
Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Yes, it’s summer holiday time and to get you in the mood, here’s a little song.

http://www.perfessorbill.com/pbmusic_songs2.shtml - scroll down to: “By the Beautiful Sea”, Harry Carroll (M), Harold R. Atteridge (L) - 1914. Don’t forget your bucket and spade! And a nice sun hat, too! Ready? Off we go! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Next day dawned beautifully. Ori was awake at first light and jostled Dwalin, peppering kisses on his face.

“Wake up, wake up! We’re going to the Inn!”

Dwalin chuckled, grabbed Ori and held him still for a long ‘good morning’ kiss.

They didn’t linger, as Dori was already at the door, knocking.

Ori giggled as he raced Dwalin to the table in the breakfast parlor.

“What is this?” Ori asked, bumping into his seat as Dori put down his plate. Whatever was on it smelled wonderful and came out of one enormous pan in intriguing layers of varying color, texture and scent.

“Gondorian breakfast bake,” said Dori. “The latest thing, according to Margr. She got it from Dal’s foreign aunt.

“Soak bread in egg and milk, lay it in a large buttered dish, cover it with sharp cheese, sliced mushrooms, thin slices of ham, sliced tomato, another layer of the egg-soaked bread, bacon, grated dried cheese and finely chopped parsley and bread crumbs. You season it all with salt, pepper and nutmeg.

“And to drink, hot xocolāt brewed with milk.”

While they ate, Mistress Dazla was outside supervising the loading of luggage and hitching up of ponies.

Once fortified, everyone dressed in the pale grey of final mourning and adjourned to the courtyard.

Gimli climbed to the seat of the baggage cart where Bofur waited for him, still snacking on ham ends left over from breakfast. The baggage towered over them.

“Dori,” Ori said, “how many of us are going?”
“Why do you ask, pet?”

“Because judging from what we packed, I’d say all of Steam Alley was joining us.”

“Oh, no, pet, that’s just my lingerie.”

Ori tilted his head at Dori, who laughed.

“I’m joking, pet! Really! My socks are in there, too.”

Balin handed Dori into the shay, and after her, Mistress Dazla, who sat on a nicely cushioned seat behind. A basket rested at Dori’s feet with Kihshassa, Mask and Nori-Pori. Powder reposed regally in Dori’s lap while Brandy rode in Balin’s.

The rest mounted their ponies and with them a small detail of armed dwarf warriors, including Targ and a few others of Ori’s acquaintance.

From the battlement above them, Nori called down to Bofur.

“Oi! Sure yeh don’t wanna take Assault and Battery with yeh?”

“I’ll give it a pass,” Bofur called back. “Don’t want yeh t’ be lonely!”

“Don’t worry,” said Binni to Thorin. “I promise the mountain will be standing when you return. Oin will make sure I don’t get too out of hand.”

“What is ‘too out of hand’, Binni?” Thorin asked with a grin.

“Chintz is probably out,” the Bearer replied, “but I’ve always thought the main audience chamber could use a scattering of dainty velvet tuffets and chaises.”

“Try to keep them in Durin blue, if you would.”

Gloin stood behind his brother-in-law and looked stalwart and dependable.

“Of course, of course, Thorin. It will be very economical as we already have several hundred bolts already in stock.”

Kili said, “Well, that’s a relief!”

Dis smacked his leg.

“Let’s go,” Thorin called, and they rode out, Thorin at the head of the line on Minty, Queen of All Ponies. Roäc perched on Minty’s head, Minty obviously less than pleased with the extra passenger.

Dwalin rode on one side of Thorin, Garnet on his shoulder, and Ori rode at Thorin’s other side, Honda for once dancing about as playfully as Harley.

“You behave, you silly thing!” Ori scolded lightly.

Honda snorted, but did calm to a romp.

It was first rest day, so not many people were up and about to see them go. By the time they reached Bard’s home in Dale, the sun had fully risen.
Sigrid, and her father and brother, and a very sleepy Tilda, awaited them on the front steps.

Fili dismounted and bowed, handing Mistress Dazla down and Sigrid up into the shay, Fili and Sigrid giggling and pink.

“Right,” said Bain, “that’s done. I’m going back to bed.”

Thorin and Bard shook hands as men did, and Bard waited to wave them along. Tilda already sagging back into her father with a snore. Tilda took Mistress Dazla’s arm almost in her sleep and they turned to go back into the house.

Then the party was on the main road and Dale behind them. Suddenly they were farther from home than Ori had ever been in his life. He swallowed and gave Dwalin a nervous grin. Dwalin winked. Behind them Fili, Kili, and Sigrid chattered like magpies with Gimli throwing in the odd commentary when it was most likely to cause confusion.

“Lovely day for this,” said Dis, though she looked back wistfully, patting her pony, Sage. Rutile crawled out of her pocket and made her way up to settle in Dis’ hair, just above her ear.

Ori thought it was good that Honda was so patient with him. He turned to admire all around him, trying to see everything and failing. It was all so new. The road was wide and well paved. On either side trees grew and dappled the morning sun across them. Beyond the trees were farmlands, some with livestock, others sown with foodstuffs.

In the pastures, Ori saw the cows of Dale, beautiful animals almost deer-like in appearance and their coats in shades of cream and fawn, still rough and thick from the winter. These were said to give the best and richest butter and milk. They had been specially bred by a woman named Guernsia Aldernay.

As they continued along the road, the farms gave way to woods, thickets, and meadows. Birds of every kind twittered and sang. In amongst the trees, Ori occasionally saw rabbits, squirrels, and deer with their little speckled fawns.

Every now and then a wagon, horses or people walking passed them and exchanged greetings. There were a few dwarrow from other lands coming to trade or settle in Dale and Erebor. These were personally greeted by Thorin and he told them who they needed to see in the mountain to settle or negotiate trade. All condoled with Thorin and Dis for their loss.

After about an hour on the road, Thorin called a halt and they all drew off to the side. Ori was glad to slide off Honda and hurry to the treeline as his bladder was telling him it was time.

When he returned there were three gaudily painted wagons drawn up beside theirs. Everyone was laughing and chatting with the newcomers, men and dwarrow traveling together.

“Who are they?” Ori murmured to Dori who was handing out rolls filed with fried ham and egg to everyone.

“A group of travelers. They go from town to town all over Arda and entertain.”

At Ori’s wide-eyed stare, Dori smiled and shook his head.

“No, pet. Your father wasn’t a traveler. He was playwright, remember. They only went to dwarrow kingdoms. These people visit and entertain everyone.”

The soldiers had apparently leapt to their feet at the approach of the caravan, but Thorin waved
them off and now they stood down, smoking or gambling or chatting with the newcomers, who were not only different races, but also varied in their skin colors and features.

Thorin was speaking to a tall man with black hair and almond-shaped eyes when two children ran up to them, calling the man ‘Da’. At first, Ori thought they were very young, then he realized the girl was obviously adolescent. Looking closer, he saw she had a bit of a neatly trimmed beard and the fine, large ears of a dwarf, ringed with cuffs.

Oh.

They were of mixed blood. He wondered if…

The man’s wife, a tidy dwarrowdam with hair like black wire, came up then, talking with Sigrid, and introduced her husband and children. Sigrid’s bright smile only brightened as the woman, talking rapidly enough to make Margr and Vi proud, patted her arm and said something that made them both laugh.

They had a merry time as everyone removed from the road and sat together on a grassy knoll nearby. The ponies grazed, the kittens and Brandy played in the grass watched over by Kihshassa, everyone talked and laughed and exchanged food and drink.

Ori looked back at the travelers’ wagons. One was a very vibrant red and on the side, amid swirling pictures of stars, crescent moons and sparkles, a painted banner proclaimed:

'Fortunes told! The Great Woudini - Oracle to the Crowned Heads of Arda'

“How does one tell a fortune?” Ori asked.

“Aaaaah,” the tall man with the black hair and almond eyes grinned at him. “You wish to see your future, young dwarf?”

Ori stared. Was this man a wizard like Tharkûn?

“How…how does one see the future?”

The man laughed, jumped up, and went into the wagon of the Great Woudini, a few moments later he came out again. He wore an very shiny pale blue cape edged with gilt and a great deal of shiny red material wrapped about his head and held together with a huge green brooch.

He was carrying something under his arm. He stopped before the group and bowed very deeply to Ori.

“Greetings, young dwarrow,” he intoned in an altered voice. “Shall I, the Great Woudini, peer into the magic Crystal and reveal your fortunes?”

“Yes!” chorused Sigrid, Ori, Fili, Kili, and Gimli all terribly excited.

The Great Woudini waved his hand dramatically.

“One at a time. You,” he pointed at Ori. “You asked first, so you shall be first.”

The Great Woudini sat down cross-legged and opened the bundle he had carried. In his lap rested the largest blue glass ball Ori had ever seen.
“Sit opposite me,” commanded the Great Woudini.

Ori did so and looked up at the man, wondering what he was going to do. Fili, Sigrid, and the others sat near him.

“Now close your eyes a moment, and let your third eye open.”

Ori wasn’t sure which race the Great Woudini thought he belonged to that he would have a third eye.

“Very well,” said the Great Woudini. “I sense you have prepared yourself. Now let us gaze into the Crystal and inquire to the spectral powers of the ether.”

The Great Woudini waved his hands over the glass ball and chanted.

"Wum-zigga-wum-zigga… Great Crystal tell us the fortune of this young dwarf…Wum-wum-wum. Eeny-Meeny-Gelateeny, the spirits are about to speak!"

The great Woudini leaned over and stared into the glass ball. Ori looked at it, too, but only saw the Great Woudini’s face reflected upside down.

“Mmmmm, interesting, interesting,” The Great Woudini commented.

“What? What do you see?” Sigrid asked excitedly.

“C’mon, tell us,” Kili encouraged.

“This young dwarf will return to his mountain soon,” The great Woundini lilted slowly. “And there he shall spend many moons searching in the deepest caves for a single mysterious flower to give to the love of his life and… and…” The great Woundini trailed off and squinted. “No, the Crystal has gone dark. That is all the Crystal will show. Next.”

Sigrid wiggled in, pushing Ori over.

The great Woudini repeated his performance.

“Aaah, my beautiful young lady. A fairy tale is for you. Your father shall be bewitched by a magical woman who will become your step mother. She will not like you nor will her four spoiled children. She will make you do housework from dawn to dusk, but worry not for you shall be rescued by a handsome prince and he shall carry you off to this castle where he will marry you and you will live happily ever after.”

Kili snerked.

“Handsome. I guess that leaves Fili out.”

Sigrid giggled as Fili jumped on him and the two wrestled, shouting.

The Great Woudini leapt to his feet and commanded them, “Halt! The Great Woudini must deliver a great proclamation to the dark-haired one.”

“That’s me!” Kili yipped.

Dis muttered under her breath about bread and butter for brains.

Kili disentangled himself from Fili and sat before the fortune teller, closed his eyes so tight his
face wrinkled and shouted, “Ready!”

The Great Woudini raised an eyebrow at him, but sank back to the ground and looked into the Crystal.

“I see… I see…”

“What?” Kili cried impatiently.

“I see a swift end to the seeing if you are not quiet.”

“Oops. Sorry.”

“I see… Ah! Young dwarf, by the turn of the year you shall be married!”

“Mahal!”

“To an ent.”

“Huh?”

Ori burst out laughing.

Kili asked, “What’s an ent? Amad, what’s an ent?”

“Someone who will make your current height problems seem minor indeed,” said Dis.

“Better stock up on fertilizer,” Thorn added helpfully.

“What’s an ent? Some sort of freakishly tall gardener?” Kili demanded.

“Next!” the Great Woudini cried.

“What’s an ent?”

Ori ran to Dwalin’s side, where he lay stretched out on the grass, his pipe in hand. Ori grabbed Dwalin’s free hand.

“Dwalin, get up. Come, you must do this, too.”

“Dwalin cracked an eye and regarded Ori, amused. He sighed and rose fluidly to his feet.

“A’righ’ love, if yeh wan’ me, to.”

“You!” The Great Woudini had risen and was pointing at Dwalin. “You are the one the great Crystal has chosen to reveal its next prophecy.”

“Oh goodie,” muttered Dwalin as Ori pulled him to sit in front of the Great Woudini.

He took another draw on his pipe and made a show of closing his eye for a moment then opened them, winked at the Great Woudini.

“Aye, righ’, I’m ready, laddie. Me third eye’s all attention.”

The Great Woudini folded his mouth and glared into the glass ball. Ori thought he looked as though he was trying not to laugh.
“Aaaah, mighty dwarf warrior. You shall perform the heroic feat! The largest bird ever seen on your mountain will fall from the sky and you shall stand firm and catch it.”

Dwalin looked at the Great Woundini.

“For serious. lad?”

The Great Woundini nodded, smiling chummily at him.

“Yes indeedy-do. I just saw it happen in the Crystal. Huge bird, squawk, falling, bam, you catch it, plonk on the ground, cheers all ‘round. Next.”

“Tha’s it?”

“Well, that and I see a lot of baked goods. Next!”

Dwalin rose and put his arms around Ori, who was giggling.


At this point another man who had been walking by stopped and came over. He looked over the wagons of the travelers and turn to the dwarrow.

“You all know this is fake, yes?”

“Fake?” asked Dis.

“They just make things up, tell you rubbish, then charge you a lot of money for it.”

The Great Woundini cast the man a supercilious sneer.

“I told you, you were a shitty gambler. Did you listen? No.”

The man spat a curse and stomp off. Thorin rose, tamped out his pipe and smiled around at everyone.

“We should be getting along. I’m sure Bombur has started wondering where we’ve got to, Bofur.”

Bofur was finishing the last roll and chatting up a rather pretty young girl among the travelers.

“He knows it’s jus’ a nice relaxin’ trip. He’s expectin’ us, when he sees us.”

“You!” shouted the Great Woundini, pointing at Thorin, a delighted grin on his face. “You are the next and last one the Crystal wishes to communicate with today.”

Fili and Kili all but dragged Thorin over, hanging off his arms and grabbing at his legs.

“Get off!” shouted Thorin. “This stopped being cute when you turned forty.”

They managed between the two of them to haul him over, though, really, he didn’t seem to be resisting very strenuously.

He laughed.

“All right! All right!” He sat and waved his arm at the Great Woundini in a manner of tribute. “Please, Master Seer, I beg you proceed.”
The Great Woudini bent over his glass ball and this time, made several more whooo-ing noises and mumblings to the specters of the ether.

“Great dwarf, at your destination you shall meet a mysterious beardless dam, you will fall passionately in love and marry her. In your future, I see you and she happily together surrounded by your nine children!”

Thorin shouted with delight and threw up his hands, falling back on the ground, laughing.

“Perfect! I can’t think of anything better!”

“Wait,” said the seer. He frowned and pulled back his shoulders. “Not nine. Seven. There are seven. But she still doesn’t have a beard.”

Dis shrieked.

“Oh Mahal, you’re going to be changing an awful lot of diapers, brother dear.”

“Ah,” said Thorin breezily, “when I get back I’m going to put Dain and Buj in a small room on rations until they come up with a diaper-changing mechanical.”

Dis shook her head.

“Too much trouble. We’ll just get Kili to change them all.”

“Amad!”

“You’ll need the practice, what with your ent.”

“Will somebody please tell me what an ent is?” No one did as the Durins and the travelers were picking up their scattered food containers and other belongings and packing them back into the vehicles, all joking. Thorin paid the Great Woudini handsomely for his family’s hospitality and Bofur and another traveler started playing their pipes.

Sigrid and Fili hung back, giggling. Ori glanced at them in time to see Fili seize Sigrid’s hands and begin to whirl them about in a jig to the music, making Sigrid shriek and laugh.

They set off again waving to the party of travelers who were heading to Dale. Ori wondered if Loli and Omi or maybe Buj would get their fortunes told. He wondered what would happen if Bard found out he was going to be bewitched by magical woman and marry her. Ori choked as he remembered Thranduil teasing Bard. He decided he wasn’t going to think about it anymore and returned to admiring the scenery. Dwalin and Harley came up beside him and with a smile, Dwalin took his hand.

“Yeh had a funny look on yer face, love.”

“Did you hear what the Great Woudini said to Sigrid?”

“Aye, he was havin’ a grand time with yeh lot.”

“Do you think he er… ‘saw’ Thranduil?”

Dwalin roared with laughter.

“Mebbe, but neither o’ us’ll tell, righ’?”
“Right,” Ori agreed firmly.

The road wandered through meadows and down into a forest of fine tall trees. Funny little green things floated down from them. Ori caught one and looked it over. It reminded him of the clothes hangers on which Dipfa had brought his clothes. He realized this was how the trees spread their seeds. He grinned. It was so beautiful to be riding through and suddenly a flurry of spinning green seeds drifted passed them.

“What kind of trees are these?”

“Sycamore trees, laddie,” said Balin

Ori looked about.

“Well, I hear birds but I really don’t see any bees. Shouldn’t there be bees?”

Dwalin, Balin, and Dori all looked at him.

“Why bees, pet?” asked Dori in that gentle tone he used when he thought Ori had a fever or might be getting a tummy ache.

“Your song, Balin. The bird and the bees and the sycamore trees.”

Balin choked and then began to laugh.

“Laddie, yeh’ve got a memory like a lock box.”

“Oh, he does,” Dori concurred swiftly. “You have no idea how hard I had to go on at Nori not to use bad language in front of him. We were having dinner, fortunately just the three of us, and I put down Ori’s supper in front of him and said ‘What do you say?’ and he smiled up at me and said ‘Fuck you’.”

“I never did that” Ori shouted, horrified. Balin and Dwalin were thoroughly enjoying the story.

“Yes, you did, pet. I was horrified, but said ‘No, dear, you say thank you. Where did you hear that word?’ and he looks up at Nori and says ‘That’s what Nori says to all his friends when they give him things.’ Oh, I gave Nori a piece of my mind after Ori had gone to bed, I can tell you!”

Once his mortification died away, Ori realized just how funny the story was. That he, in sweet innocence, had said ‘fuck you’ to Dori was actually rather wonderful. He giggled to himself a little and caught Dwalin’s eye.

“I think that was the only time in my entire life I’ve ever even thought of saying the word ‘fuck’ to Dori.”

“I’d a given a sack o’ gold t’ have seen it, love.”

“See what?” Dis asked. Thorin was also looking back at them and the younger set had drawn nearer. Thus having a most appreciative audience Dori re-told the story with gusto and was even kind enough to allow Ori to deliver his famous line. After the raucous laughter calmed, Kili commented.

“Well, no wonder Oin said Nori’s head was an irregular shape. What did you hit him with?”

“What didn’t he?” Ori said in sotto voce.
“Oh, come now,” Dori protested lightly. “It’s not as though it had any effect. All that hair! Do you remember how long it took to do his hair on wash day?”

Ori giggled.

Dori lamented, “Oh, the fuss he made when I stuck his head in the sink and scrubbed it.”

Dis shrieked with laughter.

“All that hair fit in the sink?”

“That was the problem,” Ori told her.

They emerged from the forest and the road wound on around a grass covered hill. A few deer grazed on it, with a group of fawns jumping and playing together. At the sounds of the party approaching, they all stopped and stared. A couple of the fawns stepped forward curiously. Ori could see their noses taking in their scent. Kili groaned about a perfect shot.

"Let ‘em eat an’ get nice an’ fat f’r winter, laddie,” Balin advised.

“Oh, yes,” Dori agreed. “They’re too sweet and pretty now. Hello, little one,” he cooed as one fawn came to the edge of the grass to get a better look. Thorin chuckled and nodded. Roäc and Garnet swooped over and frightened the fawns back to their mothers.

“Better they stay away from people.” Fili commented.

They came around the hill to a splendid vista. Thorin halted and they all drew up to look.

“There we are!” Bofur cried proudly. “The Inn on th’ Lake.”

Ori sighed with pleasure. They left the main highway for a wide road of yellow brick meandering to a long, large house. The lawn had grass scythed short all about it and set with flowering plants and shrubs. Graceful birch trees lined the property, clustered about the house and waved at the slightest touch of breeze. Beyond the Inn was the lake. Ori had never seen so much water in one place before. It looked like a huge river without a far bank. The sunlight danced over its waters, smooth and shining!

The house was of two levels but looked as though it was several houses put together. There was a wooden walkway and platform attached to the house, with seats and tables to one side. The platform looked as though it continued on around the side of the house. At the other end of the house sat an enormous stable. Then pastures fenced with wooden rails painted sparkling white behind which a few different animals grazed freely: horses, ponies, several Dale cows, goats and some others Ori wasn’t sure about.

The house was white washed and criss-crossed with dark timbers with a roof of heavy thatch. There were so many windows all open and Ori could see sheer white curtains floating and fluttering.

“It’s lovely!” Sigrid said.

At their approach, Bombur and Erda emerged from the inn with a herd of badgers.

“Oi! Bom! Erda!” Bofur cried. “We made it!”

Ori thought Mistress Erda looked just the same as always. She was as tall and wide as her husband, all smiles and rosy-cheeked. Her beard was a mass of tiny ringlets all gathered above her
bosom with a large green bow. The beard was as red as Bombur’s, her hair mostly caught up in a becoming cap edged with lace. A few curls escaped this as she hurried forward.

“Welcome, welcome! Oh, you must be tired after your journey. Bofur, you looked famished! Go into the kitchen, pet, our Isi and Neti will find you something. Oh, your majesty!” She curtsied to Thorin and then clasped his hands. “My Bom told me everything. Such a fuss and to-do for you, you must be worn to a thread. Come away in and we’ll get you comfortable.”

“Thank you, Erda. You’re too kind.”

Fili started, “The ponies-”

Erda anticipated him.

“Vali and Edi will see to them. Here they are.”

Two strapping dwarrows, red-haired, older than the princes, descended and set about unhitching. Fili and Kili went to help and soon the four were talking companionably.

Erda called out, “Kali, Randi, Jaki!”

Three more strapping dwarrows arrived, slightly younger versions of the first two, and unloaded the cart, with practiced efficiency, each taking far more at a time than Ori could imagine, and moving even more quickly than the royal servants who had laden it.

“Let me help,” Sigrid cried, hurrying down to grab a hold of the handle of one of the largest trunks. Randi grinned appreciatively and Fili’s eyes widened while he watched the muscle in Sigrid’s arm flex as she easily hefted her side of the heavy wooden chest.

As they filed by Ori noticed someone had thought to tag each piece of luggage with the name of its owner.

The three dwarrows disappeared upstairs, though the youngest gave Ori a wink and a sassy grin as he passed.

Ori followed Dwalin into the front hallway. It was almost a receiving room, dark wood and white wash like the outside, but there were exotic plants everywhere, and old mirrors, paintings and other works hanging on the walls. The hall ran the depth of the inn and Ori saw the platform outside on the back, and a swath of green grass, and a gravel path and then the shore and the lake. Even from here he saw sunlight dappling the water.

He wished he had his paints and canvas right this moment. He wanted to capture this sight with great urgency, as if it might evaporate. He tried to imagine seeing this every day and didn’t think he could ever grow tired of it.

Mistress Erda shepherded them all up the wide stairway to a long hall. Many doors opened off of this on each side.

“We’ve given you the lake-facing rooms,” she said. “Here we have Ori and Dwalin.”

The room was all white wash with dark wood wainscoting, doors and window frames. An old wardrobe stood in one corner, a dresser with a mirror on the other, and between an enormous bed with snowy white linens. The windows and the door to the little balcony had been thrown wide and a fresh breeze stirred the lace curtains. Off under the eaves Ori saw a tiny water closet. He had been in awe to hear that each room had its own.
“Oh, Dwalin,” said Ori. “This is amazing!”

Dwalin gathered him up from behind.

“If I’d been able t’ do thin’s right, we’d’ve come here f’r a honeymoon.”

Ori looked up at him with a little smile.

“Better late than never. Isn’t that what they say?”

“Aye,” said Dwalin with a smile, “tha’s wha’ they say.”

Ori turned in his arms and they were just about to kiss when Dori’s voice echoed down the hall.

“Where did all these trunks come from?”

“The cart, mistress,” said one of the young dwarrow. “They all have your name on them.”

“Well, aren’t I an overachiever. Thank you, my dear.”

“You’re welcome, mistress.”

Fili rushed by the door with Sigrid, hand in hand, Kili following and Gimli on his heels.

Dis called after them, “Not too long. We’ll be having tea soon.”

“We won’t miss that,” Kili assured her.

Erda laughed.

“You’ll hear the bell for meals! Not to worry, you’ll not go without!”

“We’re goin’ t’ look at th’ lake,” Gimli explained as he passed their door. “Are yeh comin’, Ori?”

“You go on,” said Ori. “I’ve got something to do first.”

Gimli snorted, but with a merry smile, and pounded down the stairs after his cousins.

Ori and Dwalin spent a few more moments agreeably occupied, then decided they would be brave and see what Dipfa had deemed they should wear, happy that the great reveal would take place at least two hours from home.

Dwalin rifled through his trunk.

“What the bleedin’…”

“What is it?” Ori asked, coming over.

“Our Dipfa!”

“Well, she did say bright colors.”

“Bright, no’ blindin’!”

“Look, she included a manifest,” said Ori, picking up the parchment from the case and snorting. “Ten sleeveless short tunics in the following colors: Buttercup.”
“Oh, Mahal’s hairy arse.”

“Yes, apparently she changed her mind about the oranges and yellows. I suppose she thought your tattoos would throw them into sufficient relief.”

“I’m no’ relieved.”

“Beet Soup, Apricot, New Grass, Eggplant, Pine Tree - obviously she was thinking of Fundin green - Polished Sapphire, Cyclamen, Mulberry - oh, and for dessert, Dandelion Seed Ecru.”

Dwalin groaned.

“Dipfa! Why d’ yeh hate me!”

“Seriously? She wanted to dress me like a Yule tree!”

“Did she pack me any britches or kilts, or am I t’ go about with me arse out t’ throw th’ tunics ‘int’ relief’?”

“Ten taupe kilts.”

“Fine, I kin go topless.”

“Ah. Found the parcel tagged ‘bathing costumes’.”

“Yeh goin’ t’ open it?”

“I’m afraid.”

Dwalin chucked it onto the top of the wardrobe.

“We’ll look when we want t’ go bathin’.”

“Oh, did you not want to go bathing right this moment?”

Ori blinked at him.

“Only if it’s skinny dippin’,” Dwalin growled.

“I’ll go lock the door.”

In a little bit, they changed into their holiday clothes, Ori in a white tunic with green stripes and matching green trousers, and Dwalin with his kilt and cyclamen red tunic. Ori thought it showed off his arms to advantage.

He went out to the hall just as Dori came out of the room in his. Dori wore a seersucker suit like Dipfa made and Ori refused, and the pieces matched: white with pale blue stripes. Dori smiled sweetly.

Ori said, “Just a minute!” leapt back into his room, slammed the door and leaned back against it, panting.

Dwalin said, “Wha’s wrong, love?”

Ori gasped, “Dori! His summer clothes! Mahal! He looks like a mattress!”
Ori slid down the door, stuffing his sleeves in his mouth, choking with laughter.

Dwalin lifted him, parking him on the bed, went and opened the door and there was Dori.

“Bloody fuckin’ Mahal!” Dwalin barked. “He does look like a mattress!”

“I beg your pardon!” Dori cried. “I do not look like a mattress!”

Ori bounced to Dwalin’s side and looked out again, as all the rest of the doors in the hall popped open and the rest of the party peered out.

Dis said, “Dori, what are you doing with that mattress?”

Dori turned in fury.

“I am not a mattress.”

Dis gasped, choked and darted back inside, slamming her door.

“Stop laughing at my summer holiday wardrobe,” Dori commanded imperiously.

Thorin muttered, “Maybe it’s not the worst thing to look like a cranberry.”

Dori whirled on him, just as Balin arrived, caught sight of his darling and stopped dead, staring.

Dori turned and pinned him with his eye.

“Do you think I look like a mattress, betrothed?”

Balin took a deep breath, summoned a smile and said, “Beloved, I think our tailors miscalculated th’ tint an’ size o’ th’ stripe in tha’ charmin’ ensemble.”

Dori calmed.

Thorin said, “Nice save.” and shut his door.

Ori looked up at Dwalin and they withdrew, but Ori could hear Balin smoothing Dori’s ruffled feathers.

Ori went back to the bed and buried his face in the pillows, giggling.

“I’m gonna be seein’ tha’ in me sleep,” said Dwalin, dropping down beside him. “I’ll be runnin’ and screamin’, chased by a ferocious mattress with a plate o’ eggs an’ bake.”

Ori rolled over.

“This inn will now be haunted by an angry mattress, screaming at people for laughing at its stripes.”

He shrieked as Dwalin caught him up and rolled him over, looking down ferally.

“No’ t’ worry, I’ll save yeh. Yer safe with me.”

“Uh huh. I love how you define ’safe’.”
They went downstairs, admiring as they went, to find Balin and Dori sunning themselves at a long table on the ‘deck’ as Erda called it, sipping lemonade with chunks of ice.

Dori had changed into a caftan of rich jewel purple. His hair was loosely dressed with a few purple ribbons tipped with amethyst.

Ori went and kissed him.

“You look very lovely, Dori.”

“Not as mattressy?” Dori asked archly.

Dwalin broke in, “Nah, bu’ still very plush.”

“Don’ help, brother,” Balin muttered.

Down on the beach, they watched Sigrid and the younger dwarrow disport themselves, their boots cast off, running into and out of the shallows and laughing and shrieking. Sigrid kicked a little water in Fili’s direction and he rushed her and grabbed her, threatening to drag her into deeper water. She screamed delightedly as she struggled to escape.

A bell rang from the end of the deck. One of the young Urs was summoning them to tea.

They assembled with amazing speed, all dressed in their gay holiday clothes.

Thorin looked more relaxed than Ori had ever seen him, and far more casually attired. He wore only a kilt of Durin blue and his boots. His long hair was unbound and hung over his broad, inked shoulders and his nipple rings shone bright silver against his dark-furred torso. Ori had never noticed it before, but the raven that adorned his arm and shoulder held the right nipple in its ‘beak’. Rather cheeky, actually. Ori would never have imagined he had it in him.

Thorin grinned at Dis and Balin and said, “If any beardless dwarrowdams are spotted by Bombur and Erda, tell them to send them in, for I am quite at leisure.”

Erda emerged from the house with the teapot, followed by the oddest looking person Ori could imagine carrying an enormous platter of cakes and sliding it onto the table.

“Here we go,” said the…

Ori realized this must be a hobbit, his utter beardlessness balanced by the golden brown hair on his very large, bare feet and the matching cap of curls on his head. He was even shorter than the dwarrow, though not perfectly round as Ori had expected. His face was quite cheerful, broad and pink-cheeked and graced with mischievous brown eyes.

“I’ll just bring out the sandwiches and we’ll be all set,” said the hobbit in a beautiful western accent.

He bowed slightly and darted back inside.

Ori felt other eyes upon him and turned his head in time to catch a smaller, darker-haired version of the hobbit’s features disappear back behind the door frame. While he watched the face slowly reappeared, all blue eyes and a little grin.

Ori smiled and winked.

The hobbitling squeaked and whisked back out of sight.

“Frodo, are you behaving?” asked the older hobbit as he returned with the sandwiches. A tiny voice reached them from inside.

“Yes, Uncle Bilbo.”

“You wouldn’t be fibbing now, would you, my boy?”

“Nuh-uh.”
“That’s a relief. Come into the kitchen. The ginger biscuits are out of the oven.”

Instantly the whole, small hobbit bounced into view and attached itself to ‘Uncle Bilbo’s’ leg, only to peer around again at Ori.

“You are the worst little flirt,” said Bilbo.

“What’s a flirt?”

“Keep batting your eyelashes. I’m sure it will come to you.”

After they’d gone, Kili said, “That’s the smallest badger I’ve ever seen, at least the smallest who wasn’t still crawling.”

“Are those hobbits?” Fili asked Ori.

“Yes,” said Ori, “but they’re far from home. Have you ever seen one, love?”

Dwalin shook his head. “Nah, I didn’t think they ever left th’ Shire. Never heard o’ one workin’ f’r a dwarf.”

“That’s Bilbo Baggins,” said Bombur. He had emerged from the inn without his apron and in full host mode. “He doesn’t actually work for me. He’s a scholar of languages.”

“Really?” Ori asked, suddenly very interested.

“Yes, published and quite famous, apparently. He’s spent every high season here helping me and Erda in the kitchen for years. Grade ‘A’ ore sort of fellow, do anything for you.”

“Thank yeh f’r accommodatin’ us, Bombur,” said Balin. “We didn’t realize it was already yer busiest time.”

“It’s not. He is early this year, arrived a week ago, and for the first time with a pebble in tow. I get the impression there’s more to the tale than he’s told me, but he’ll get around to the rest in time.”

Bombur chuckled at a private joke. “He always does.”

Dwalin nudged Ori’s foot, then chucked his chin over to Thorin. The king sat looking down at his plate studiously, but not eating, his cheeks and ears bright scarlet.

Mr. Baggins returned and Bombur introduced him. When he got to Thorin, Mr. Baggins bowed sharply and grinned.

“Your servant, King Thorin.”

Thorin sat transfixed. Finally, slowly, he rose to his own feet and gave a profoundly deep bow in return.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Aaaah, jolly holidays! Sunshine, a lovely lake, and …? Oh, and we’ve prepared a lovely dinner for our dear characters, so you may want to have a little something to comfort you while you read. And a shout out to our #TamerLorika! Be careful what you comment, dears. Your sneaky authors may use it! Please do join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Bilbo took in the gravity with which Thorin bowed and the corners of his mouth practically curled around in loops. Ori got the feeling Master Baggins was mischief incarnate.

“That,” said Bilbo, “is the finest bow I’ve ever been afforded. Careful, your majesty, your breeding is showing.”

Dwalin leaned close to Ori and whispered, “Considerin’ wha’ Thorin’s wearin’, tha’ ain’t all that’s shown’.”

“Hush!” Ori giggled, trying vainly not to be heard.

Bilbo nodded once more to the company and returned to his duties in the kitchen, greeting Bifur as the dwarf entered.

“Very pleasant fellow,” said Balin.

Bofur snorted.

“He’s got a tongue like a razor when he wants.”

Bifur lightly smacked him in the arm and signed in inglishmek, “He’s good with the badgers, especially getting the youngest pebbles to bed at night, telling them stories until they fall asleep.”

Erda nodded, “A regular blessin’ tha’ is. Why, Thorin, you haven’t touched your food.”

Thorin looked up, startled, as if he was miles away.

“I beg your pardon Erda, what did you say?”

Dwalin snickered.

“She says yer neglectin’ yer sandwich, an’ after Master Baggins slaved in th’ kitchen t’ make ‘em fer yeh!”

Thorin raised a brow, but Dwalin was not finished.

“Aye, jus’ imagine him, workin’ his wee hands through all tha’ dough. kneadin’ it, workin’ it,
watchin’ it risin’ slowly, plumpin’ up t’ his satisfaction.”

Everyone else at the table started to cough. Fili and Kili looked gleefully fascinated and Sigrid horrified.

Ori gave Dwalin a look of reproof, which he feared made him look like a sullen chipmunk.

“You hush. He can’t help it if he’s struck.”

Thorin cleared his throat.

“Thank you, Ori, but I’m perfectly fine.”

Dis noted, “You look like a tomato.”

“Yes, lovely, Dis,” said Thorin. “Thank you as well.”

“His little hands smoothin’ an’—”

“Fuck you, Dwalin,” Thorin growled.

“Not me job anymore, lucky fer yeh.”

“We’ll put in in th’ marriage contract,” said Balin brightly, “under Other Duties as Required.”

Ori choked on his tea and considered sliding under the table. He was glad Thorin and Dwalin were so close. Nori and Dori would be nose to nose right now, just before Nori stormed off for a day or twelve.

Dori, predictably, called them all to task.

“That is enough. Let Thorin be now. It’s hardly his fault Master Baggins is such a handsome fellow, and such curls! Indeed, if my own dresser had the styling of his hair I shouldn’t be ashamed to be seen with him anywhere.”

“I don’t think he’d want to sleep with his hair in rags and sugar water,” said Ori.

“I wouldn’t know about that, pet, my hair has a natural wave.”

“Aye, an’ soft as a cosset,” Balin sighed.

He and Dori kissed and for a moment their eyes were off Thorin, except for Ori’s. Ori watched as Thorin sagged a little, the brief, carefree air gone, and in its place a rare unguarded look of bewilderment.

Thorin saw Ori looking his way. Ori smiled and nodded encouragingly.

Thorin returned the smile, tired as it was, and shook his head.

Everyone was lounging about after tea.

“Dwalin?” Ori asked. “Might we go down to the lake?”

“O’ course.”
“When you’re ready. It’s just… I’ve never been to one.”

“Well, then,” said Dwalin, smiling, “best bring yer sketchbook. There’s lots t’see.”

Ori sincerely hoped Dwalin didn’t mind spending his afternoon with a puppy with no attention span. That’s what he felt like.

“What’s this?” This was a small heap of fish vertebrae, bleached white from lying in sand and sun.

Then:

“What’s this?”

“Bivalve shell.”

“So pretty. Look at the colors!”

Then:

“What’s this?

“Driftwood,” said Dwalin.

“Yes, but why does it look like that? Where did all these grooves at right angles come from?”

“Worms in the lake most likely, burrowin’ through.”

“There are worms in the lake? I thought worms drowned in water.”

“The land ones do, these are different.”

“Oh, do you suppose Bombur has—“

“Books abou’ them? Aye, he does.”

Ori cast him a mock-sour eye.

“You’re just making fun now.”

“Wouldn’t make fun o’ books, love. I know which side me bread’s buttered.”

“So, why are the grooves at right angles?”

“Mebbe th’ worms’ve got a geometry fetish.”

“Oooo, what’s this?” He hunkered over a rock with a hole straight through it. “How did this happen?”

“Bigger worm.”

Ori paused a moment, thinking, then peered up at Dwalin.

“Rubbish,” he pronounced.

“No, no, bigger’n yer forearm.”
“Entire sack of rubbish.”

“How’m I supposed t’ get anythin’ past yeh now?”

“You’ll just have to cope. Do you know how this really happened?”

“I kin guess. If this was in the surface of the lakebed and a smaller, rounder rock got stuck in a bit of whirlpool and spun in place, it would carve a hole.”

“Like a drill. I see. Shall we wander?”

Ori picked up the stone, went to put it in his pocket.

Dwalin removed a small leather bag from his and held it out.

“A good soldier’s always prepared,” said Dwalin.

“For walking on the beach with their attention span-challenged spouse?”

“Yeh.”

“Can I put my worm fetish stick in there?”

“Don’t think it’ll fit. Here’s a smaller one.”

They wandered around the beach, Ori exclaiming over everything so that he thought it must drive his husband mad. It couldn’t be helped. Everything was so new. All this, and only two hours from home? What else had he missed?

They stopped to peer over the edge of the dock. The water was shallow enough here and clear to the sandy bottom. Ori saw tiny fish Dwalin called minnows, but he also saw strange creatures scuttling around in the sand. They looked like enormous insects with pincers and antennae.

“Crawfish,” said Dwalin.

“That’s a fish?”

“After a fashion, I guess. Watch this.”

Dwalin took up a small stone and dropped it through the water. It landed in the midst of the crawfish, which darted away almost faster than Ori could see.

“They move backwards?” Ori asked, amazed. “How do they know where they’re going?”

Dwalin shrugged.

“I dunno. Maybe they jus’ know th’ neighborhood. Anyway, they’re good eatin’.”

Ori gave him a dubious look.

“How?”

“Steamed, sometimes mixed with spices an’ served with rice, sometimes made int’ pie. Th’ shells’re boiled f’r soup stock.”

“I suppose it’s better than vegetables. What’s this?”
It was a very pale, very still version of the darting creature from the lake bed.

“Tha’s an old crawfish shell. They molt like spiders as they grow.”

Very carefully Ori picked it up and put that in his bag as well.

“What’re yeh goin’ t’ do with tha’?”

“Draw it. I’m going to draw all of it!”

“Well, leave some of it on th’ beach fer the next dwarf.”

Ori stuck out his tongue.

They walked back toward the water’s edge. Ori picked up wind flowers and interesting grasses. A flapping motion caught his eye and he turned to watch an enormous white bird, wading through the shallows on long stilt-like legs. Ever so often it darted its head down toward the water, picked up a minnow or small frog or crawfish in its beak and gobbled it down. It moved in a regal manner, deliberately, biding its time to strike.

“Egret,” said Dwalin.

“What’s that big, round leaf on the water?” Ori looked at the trees above the lake, but none of them had leaves like this.

“Lily pad. It grows out of the lake bed.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Not rubbish?”

“No’ rubbish.”

They stood for a while looking out over the lake. Dwalin gathered him close from behind as they took it all in.

“Look at the lake. I’ve never seen this color, Dwalin. I wish I could bottle it and use it as ink.”

“Yeh’d have t’ if yeh wanted t’ keep it. Th’ lake changes color as th’ season goes on, dark blue goes t’ blue an’ green, then th’ green kinda fades an’ th’ blue fades an’ it’s very light like th’ sky, an’ yeh kin see through t’ th’ bottom even in th’ middle o’ th’ lake.”

“Why does it do that? Water doesn’t have a color. It can’t be just reflecting the sky.”

“If I had t’guess? Th’ water’s cold ‘cause it comes from th’ mountain by th’ River Runnin’, an’ in th’ spring th’ river gets rougher, an’ takes a lot o’ loose rock an’ dirt with it. I think it’s th’ bits o’ different minerals we’re seein’, ‘cause they make th’ lake rise until summer, then th’ lake levels off an’ there ain’t as much comin’ in.”

“So, the bottom of this lake was once in the mountain. They’re connected that way. But…”

“But?”

“Remember when you showed me the fossils of the fish and insects and things the miners are
always finding in the mountain?

“’Aye.’

“Where did they come from?”

“We think - an’ it’s just a thought, mind - we think th’ whole thing was under water once.”

“The whole mountain? Is there even that much water in Arda?”

“Dunno, mebbe at th’ time it was more’ve a mountain in trainin’?”

They were descended upon by screeching lake gulls in force enough that Ori feared Dwalin
would have to jump in front of him to protect him like a warrior with a helpless maid from one of
Shire’s novels.

"What do they want?" Ori asked. "What are they saying?"

"They're no' magical like ravens. They're just greedy an' vicious. If they were t' say somethin', it
would be on th' order o' Gimme all yer food."

Sure enough, when it was apparent dinner was not forthcoming the gulls retreated back out onto
the water.

"Mahal!" Ori muttered. "At least you can tell the ravens to push off."

He picked up his bag, which he had dropped, and found the gulls had left some white feathers
behind. He picked up three and put those in the bag as well.

They walked a well-worn path that Dwalin said eventually circled the whole lake. It was cool
among the trees, though Ori found himself dividing his time between staring around him in wonder
and looking out for roots to stumble upon. A strange bird made ‘whooHOOwoowoowo’ noises. Ori
snickered when he thought of The Great Woudini.

“Tha’s a loon,” said Dwalin

“It certainly is,” Ori agreed. He sighed happily and felt that welcome sensation he only got when
he had learned much more than he could digest, a sort of intellectual gluttony signaled not by his
stomach, but by the feeling of his brain swelling to fit tight in his skull from all the information he’d
stuffed in.

He walked here with his One, with beauty all around them and with new learning in his head.

This was bliss.

“So, yer gonna paint it?”

“Yes, I’m going to try. I’m much more experienced with graphite pen and pen and colored ink,
but I want to develop my skills with colored pigment. Painting was always a rare pleasure because
the supplies are so expensive.”

“Yeh’ve the resources now, yeh shouldn’t ever have t’ worry abou’ tha’ again.”

Ori laughed.

“Yes, but now I have another problem. I know how much they cost and I don’t want to waste
“Aye, righ’, I ge’ it. It’s like a new knife from a great craftsdwarf. Yeh wonder if yer worthy of it.”

“Yes! Exactly!”

“But there’s only one way t’ tell if yeh are, isn’t there?”

“For good or ill, yes.”

The sun sat much farther down the sky by the time they returned to the beach.

Dori, Balin, Thorin and Dis lounged on the deck with cool drinks. Dis' hand seemed to be bobbing in the air, and then a small, dastardly creature leapt after it and Ori realized she must be dangling a long string for the kittens to attack. Dis said something over her shoulder to Thorin. Whatever it was hit home because he sprawled back with his arms outflung, as if he had been struck and she laughed.

Mr. Baggins returned to the deck to bring a large pitcher of something to drink.

"I'm dying to speak with him," said Ori. "I've actually heard of him. He's a published scholar and it's rumored that he speaks seven languages, including the sylvan dialect of the elves, which is a very difficult language to learn."

"Bit of any overachiever?"

Dwalin bent and picked up a stone and tossed it side hand across the water. Ori was amazed to see it hop across the surface several times before eventually sinking below.

"What are you doing?" Ori asked.

"Skippin' stones. Here."

Dwalin picked out a very flat, round stone and held it so as to surround it with his thumb and forefinger. He pulled back his arm, snapped it forward ‘sidearm’ and released it over the water where it bounced off the surface once… twice… thrice… five times in a row before it lost momentum.

Ori hunkered down and carefully rested his hand on the surface of the water, but it just felt like water, without even the buoyancy of the salt pools they sometimes visited under the mountain.

“Is it a special kind of rock?” he asked.

“Nah, jus’ a rock. Here, pick a flat one that’ll fit in yer hand.”

Dwalin adjusted Ori’s grip on the stone.

“There, now toss it.”

Ori did so, as he had seen Dwalin do, but it only skipped twice.

“Did I do it wrong?”
“If yeh’d done it wrong it’d’ve jus’ hit th’ water with a big splash. Some of it’s luck, some of it’s the righ’ stone, some is jus’ knowin’ when t’ let ‘er fly. Try it again.”

Ori did so and managed five skips!

“Well done,” said Dwalin, laughing.

"I wonder if I could do that with my slingshot," Ori mused.

"Speakin’ o’ overachievers," Dwalin teased.

They picked through the stones at their feet, looking for likely ‘skips’.

"Dwalin, do you think Master Baggins is Thorin's One?"

“How could he be? Mahal didn’t make him.”

“Maybe Mahal and Yavanna collaborated, like Narvi and Celebrimbor collaborated.”

Dwalin's grin widened.

“Narvi an’ Celebrimbor were makin’ doors f’r Khazad-dum. Though I can see th’ similarities between th’ doors an’ Thorin. He’s just as likely t’ start talkin’ t’ th’ hobbit as those doors are. Sometimes I really wanna shake him til he pops.”

“Now, now, no shaking the monarch. And speaking of the monarch – the tattoo? Great Mahal, how long did that take? And how much did it hurt?”

“A long time an’ I kin only imagine it hurt a lot. I was there when he got it an’ he jus’ sat there like stone, th’ whole time. He was tryin’ t’ burn off some anger after Thrain died an’ Thror was bein’ … Thror. He calls it his ‘Fuck yeh, udad, an’ th’ warg yeh rode in on’ tattoo.”

“Rather beautiful for such a terrible reason.”

“Aye, it put a bit of a pinch on our rollin’ around together f’r quite a while.”

Ori straightened with his left hand filled with stones. He was about to be quite forward, but this was Dwalin, after all, and the worse he might do was tell Ori it wasn't his business, and not even in a nasty way.

“Dwalin, if you didn’t have a heartsong, would you have become Thorin’s consort?”

“Probably, though I wasn’t necessarily lookin’ forward t’ it. Why?”

“Do you think Thorin was in love with you?”

“He an’ I never talked much abou’ thin’s like ‘feelin’s’. It was mostly abou’ th’ sex.”

Ori shook his head.

“No, do you think he was in love?”

“Ahh, I see. ‘Cause if he was-“

“It would make things difficult for him with anyone else.”

“Nah, I don’ think it’s like tha’. Though, I would’ve married him if he’d asked. Not very
romantic, but if old Thror had really lashed out like we feared, at least I’d’ve bin close enough t’ protect him. But tha’ is neither here nor there. Yer me One, an’ Thror’s no’ a threat anymore.” Dwalin sighed as if he was very tired, and shook his head. Ori put his hand on Dwalin’s arm.

“Are you alright?”

“Bleedin’ Mahal. I’ve only know him me whole life. I’ve seen him in every possible mood. He’s even had a major lust a time or two. But I’ve never seen him react t’ anyone like tha’. Now I’ve got a minute t’ think on it, I think th’ idjit’s fallin’ in love a’ fuckin’ first sight.”

“But Master Baggins didn’t seem more than flattered,” said Ori, tossing a stone. “I’ve always read hobbits were lustful creatures, but I don’t know if they can even feel love.”

“Yer worried abou’ Thorin.”

Dwalin took his turn and they traded tosses with words quite companionably for such a heavy subject.

“How can I not be worried?” Ori asked. “He has – all of you have - done so much for me. I wish I could do something for him. If he was a neighbor back in Steam Alley, a blacksmith or a carpenter, Dori himself would have fixed it immediately, trapped them someplace they couldn’t easily escape and force fed them tea and biscuits until they talked to each other. But with the king of dwarrow, you don’t have that option, do you? I know the law. There’s nothing requiring him to marry a noble, or even someone wealthy, but I’m not sure he gets to pick someone out of sentiment, either.”

Dwalin chuckled.

"Love, we’ve gone from love a’ first sight, t’ lust, t’ royal matrimony in less than five minutes. Tha’ has got t’ be some sort a’ record.”

Ori giggled to himself, feeling ridiculous.

“I guess I am an overachiever,” he confessed. “I suppose we should at least observe them in the same room for more than a minute before we start sending out wedding invitations, shouldn’t we.”

Ori flung a stone and began to count. At nine his jaw dropped. At ten it hit the water next to a lake gull and the bird exploded in a storm of angry shrieks and flying feathers.

Ori winced and called, “Sorry!”

The gull shot him a look.

“Ori of Fundin, Lake Menace,” he said with a sigh. “Maybe it’s time to move on.”

“Yeh did very well, love!”

“Dwalin!” he cried, scandalized.

Dwalin laughed.

“Aw, g’ on. Yeh miss him.”
“Yes, though I can’t think why.”

“Yeh’ll see him at th’ coronation.”

Ori groaned.

“You haven’t seen Dipfa’s ‘improvements’ to the royal scribe’s traditional coronation robes.”

“They clash with yer hair?”

“Everything clashes with my hair. No, apparently she’s hoping to ‘reconcile the past solemnity of the Thror era with the current political climate, whilst striking a color chord to project the maximum joy warranted by the occasion’.”

“Yeh wrote all tha’ down, didn’t yeh.”

“She’s killing me.”

Dwalin nudged his shoulder.

“Yeh could join th’ city guard. Dress uniforms mean never havin’ t’ worry about lookin’ like a fashion experiment gone wrong.”

“Maybe if I could lift an axe. I’m too scrawny to intimidate anyone.”

Dwalin drew back his head and looked at Ori.

“Yer no’ scrawny, love.”

“You’re sweet.”

“Aye, I am tha’, bu’ I mean yeh haven’t looked at yerself in the mirror in a while, have yeh. I mean, when yeh weren’t tryin’ on one o’ Dipfa’s ‘creations’.”

“I haven’t had time lately to do much more than brush my hair and splash water on my face.”

Dwalin tugged him close and kissed the top of his head. “Yeh’ve been workin’ too hard.”

“We’ve all been working too hard,” Ori admitted. “It can’t be helped.”

Throwing on something ‘cleanish’ and mended went by the wayside when he started dashing after Thorin everywhere, attempting to look competent, professional and smart. Clothes with tears, holes and stains went back to Dipfa to be remade into something else. Even now, back in Erebor, he had a whole weeks’ worth of clothes picked out in advance, so that he knew they would be clean and would match without him having to think about it. He hadn’t been seen in public in a cardigan in weeks.

Ori went into the water closet and washed his hands and face. He peered into the mirror and saw that his freckles were very prominent. It was the sunshine he remembered, he chuckled and went back out. He changed his tunic for a plain lavender one that matched his breeches. Dwalin had also changed his shirt for the dark green one.

They went downstairs, hand in hand, and Bilbo met them in the receiving area.
“There you are,” he sang out. “Follow me. Dinner’s ready and the dining room is this way.”

They followed him through and entered a large open room. A long table was set for the entire party and almost everyone had come in. Gimli, Fili, Kili, and Sigrid were already seated together. They were chattering but they looked tired. They all had changed clothes but their hair was still damp. Sigrid had braided and pinned hers around her head like a crown. Both Fili and Kili had tied theirs up in messy buns on the backs of their heads. Gimli’s head merely looked like a pile of roving left out in the rain.

Dori and Balin had no need to change as they had enjoyed their time on the deck with Dis and Thorin.

Bofur was clean and relaxed, and all the badgers were in attendance. Little Frodo romped among them just as though he was yet another of Bombur and Erda’s. Thorin had put a tunic on. His relaxed calm had returned but his mind appeared to be elsewhere. Ori thought it was likely with the fascinating hobbit.

Bombur came through and bid them all to the table. In the center sat a strange floral arrangement, as well as three large pieces of wood like triangular pods, then several round fibrous balls. A few had been broken open to reveal a white interior. There were tiny bowls of different seeds and herbs and through all this were scattered large trumpet like flowers of brilliant hues. It all rested on two long, flagged, shiny green mats.

When everyone was seated, Bilbo, Bombur, Erda, and the grown badgers began to serve. The first course arrived in a vast tureen of a savory smelling, golden soup.

Ori took his bowl eagerly and sniffed. It was like nothing he’d ever smelled before. He could see a few unknown herbs floating and though the broth looked creamy there were tiny shavings of something among the herbs. He sampled it and was all but overcome with the spicy heat. Bravely, he tasted it, let it roll over his tongue but still didn’t know what was in it. He recognized a vague, nutty flavor.

“Bombur! This is amazing,” Thorin enthused.

“Yes,” Dori agreed, “whatever is it made with? Are there nuts in it?”

“Indeed,” Bombur smiled. “What we have made for you tonight is a meal from the Islands far to the south. The Firebeard clans who traveled there mixed with the menfolk and now have these delicious dishes. What you are eating is a soup made of a nut called a coconut.”

“You can see,” Erda continued, “there are sections of two leaves from the tree on the table for the decoration.”

Everyone in the visiting party leaned forward to examine the ‘green mats’.

“Those are leaves?” Fili asked as he took in the size.

Ori stared the leaf was almost as tall as he was.

“No, dear prince, this is a leaf.” Erda said with a smile to Kali. The young dwarf winked at the two princes and disappeared only to return with another leaf. He held it up.

To Ori, it was a giant fern, as tall as Kili, who had risen to stare. Kali handed it to him.

“Careful, lad, them edges get sharper as they dry.”
Kili took the leaf up and weighed it in his hands.

“It’s almost like wood,” he said wonderingly.

Thorin rose also and came to his nephew’s side, closely followed by Balin. Ori caught himself moving and Dwalin nudged him.

“Go on, love, yeh know yeh want t’.”

Ori padded over and after Thorin had looked his fill he handed it to Ori. Ori was fascinated by the strangeness, it was both light and heavy at the same time.

“What does the tree look like?” he asked Bombur.

“Very tall, one great long trunk then the leaves on top. The leaves are called fronds.”

“Come and sit down, dears,” Dori admonished them. “This lovely soup will get cold.”

They all returned to the table. Erda gestured to the huge pods.

“That is what the nut looks like when it’s on the tree.”

“That’s the nut? What are the round things?” Sigrid asked, scraping the bottom of her second bowl.

“No, this larger part is called the husk. The trees often grow in the shores of the seas and if they fall in the water, they can float for miles and then once washed ashore they can take root and grow.”

“That’s a bloody tough husk,” Dwalin observed.

“Aye, “ Bofur nodded. “Yeh need a large knife ‘r ax to open it and inside’re the nuts; those brown balls, an’ yeh break ‘r slash ‘em open, yeh can see the nut flesh. When they’re new there’s a deal of what’s called milk inside.”

“We used this to make a kind of cream,” Erda added, “and that is the broth of the soup.”

“How very wonderful!” Dori enthused. “And so delicious.”

The soup disappeared quickly, the bowls and spoons piled up, then older Urs brought out the next course.

The scents made Ori’s mouth water.

Bilbo and Jaki brought bowls of mountained white rice, buttery and fragrant with an unknown spice. Long baskets covered in cloths reached them next, and the cloths unfolded to reveal large rounds of warm flat bread. There were dishes of something dark green with what Ori thought was cheese in them. He really didn’t want to eat that, suspecting it vegetableish, but resolved in himself to, at least, try it. This was a royal summer holiday and he must open himself to all new experiences.

The main dish looked like chicken stew of some kind, Ori detected onions, mushrooms, black pepper, salt and tomatoes. He knew the taste now of the coconut which he liked. He found small pieces of another nut. Erda explained to Dori that these were called groundnuts by some and by others peanuts as the plant often resemble a pea plant.

Erda was still exploring the possibilities of it. She had found that the oil from the nuts was excellent for cooking and if the nuts were ground fine and mixed with a little oil and a pinch of sugar
made a lovely spread for bread.

The stew was warm from the stove but it was the heat from the spices that made Ori breath out through his mouth. It was so delicious, he couldn’t stop eating it, but at the same time it made his eyes water, he felt his face and after a few moment his entire body break a sweat. He looked up and saw everyone in the royal party were experiencing the same thing.

He screwed up his courage and took a small scoop of the ‘green food’ and put it over his rice as he saw Erda had done. He gave Dwalin a sideways glance. Dwalin was watching him closely.

“Can’t a dwarf have a moment of privacy?” Ori teased.

“Wasn’t sure yeh wanted t’ be alone with tha’. Looks dangerous.”

It was, in fact, delicious, and Ori was only in danger of eating the entire platter of it.

“Creamed spinach,” said Erda.

“This is spinach?” he asked, shocked. Who knew it was edible if you only beat it into submission first?

“And the white cubes are new cheese from cow’s milk,” Erda said.

The cheese helped a little but the spinach, despite being green, was also highly spiced and had a sharper bite than the chicken dish.

Dis and Dori laughed and fanned themselves with their napkins. Fili and Kili shoveled food in with tears pouring down their faces, grinning foolishly. Sigrid took a mouthful, swallowed and fanned her open mouth.

The Urs roared with laughter at them.

“Oh, Erda, Bombur,” Dis enthused. “I would happily roll around naked in this rice!”

Bombur leaned over to Erda.

“Remind me to order another bag, dearest.”

Erda passed plates of sliced cucumber and radishes with a white creamy spread. Erda said it was made from milk and called yogurt.

When the plate came to Ori, he put several radishes and spoonfuls of the spread on his side plate. The yogurt was tangy but the burn of the spices melted away as he ate some. Dwalin copied him and grinned at Ori. They laughed at each other all red-faced, teary-eyed, and sweating. Ori ate some cucumber and realized cucumber was very good.

“I hope you notice, husband, I’ve eaten green food and will fully admit I like both.”

“What’s that?” Dori gasped.

“I like this green food. Only this,” Ori pointed at the spinach and the cucumber. “And just like this. This specifically, Dori.”

Dwalin slung his arm around Ori’s shoulders and pointed at the spinach then the cucumbers.

“Specifically this, our Dori.”
Dori laughed and turned to Erda.

“My dear I shall have to fairly prostrate myself upon your kindness for those and only those recipes. For you have done what I never was able.”

Bombur came back in with a tray with a large pitcher and glasses filled with ice. He poured a thin milky potion into each glass and popped in a thin yellow spear of what Ori guessed was fruit. These were passed out and Ori drank. It was more yogurt sweetened with honey and flavored with the rich yellow fruit which Neti told them was called mango.

All the burn from the spice melted away from Ori’s mouth, leaving it cool and refreshed. Ori thought he could feel the spices warming from his belly into his blood and heating him through.

Sigrid couldn’t get enough of the mango drink and Fili wasn’t far behind. Dis asked if Bombur and Erda shared their kitchen secrets.

Erda and Bombur chuckled and promised to produce all the recipes from the dinner.

“And my dear Dis, I shall advise you on the spices as my Bom tells me that you are the negotiator for trade.”

“Yes, please!” Dis said eagerly. “Perhaps tomorrow we can sit down and discuss this.”

Erda smiled and Bombur concurred.

“Of course, of course. We shall tell you of all the products, the names of the traders, their guild masters, and where they come from.”

“Thank you,” Thorin said and wiped his face with his napkin, sniffed then grinned at them. “That was a truly wonderful meal.”

“It’s not done yet!” cried Poli. “There’s dessert! Me and Isi made it! Mam had to help us fry them but we made them up.”

“And very nicely they turned out,” Bombur praised. “The syrup is perfect, my badgerlings.”

The dinner platters, dishes and plates were scraped so clean, Jaki and Randi naughtily thanked their guests, saying they wouldn’t even have to wash the dishes, just put them right back into the cupboard, making their mother scold and chase them out to the kitchen. Bilbo grinned over to Ori.

“I enjoy the food from the southern islands but I have to admit I was worried that Frodo might not care for them having only had food traditional to the Shire.”

Ori glanced over at the hobbit badger. Frodo was licking his fingers after using them to ‘clean up’ any of the sauces left on his plate. He was flushed and obviously quite enjoying his meal.

“He shares your taste, Master Baggins.”

“But not my manners, alas.” He took up his serviette and wiped Frodo’s chin.

“Uncle Bilbo!”

“What? Were you saving it for later?”

The dessert arrived. Bombur carried them in on a wide tray and little Poli was allowed to put a bowl before everyone. Ori thanked her and Dwalin winked, making the badger giggle.
In the bowl sat several small globes, golden from being fried and swimming in a light syrup. Once everyone was ready, they all tried them.

Ori almost squeaked in delight. The dainty things were not donuts nor were they cake. They were so good and the syrup was flavored and scented with roses.

Sigrid all but moaned with delight and Dis and Dori gushed over the taste. Thorin had a look of bliss on his face.

Balin asked, “Bombur, what are these?”

“Dried milk, a little flour and cream,” Bombur chuckled.

“That’s all?” Dori asked in shock.

Erda nodded.

Soon, everyone was of an elegant sufficiency. Thorin and Dwalin exchanged a look. Dwalin grinned, took in a breath, and intoned:

“All Hail to Mahal—“ before he ran out of burp. There were shout of laughter, followed by various attempts. When it was his turn, Ori did his best.

“All hail to Mahal and the seven stars of Durin—”

There was a cheer and Ori looked at Thorin. Thorin cleared his throat, rose, held out his hand as though he was on stage and about to burst into song.

“All hail to Mahal and the seven stars of Durin shining bright! Hic!”

There was a roar and Fili, Kili, and Gimli grabbed the bowls of seeds and tossed the contents towards Thorin. Thorin grinned and bowed again, and was obliged to resort to his drink to stop the bad case of hiccups this effort had caused. Everyone else was scooping up seeds and tossing them around laughing and applauding in between. Bilbo shook his head and rose.

“Uncle Bilbo, can I try?”

“No, my boy, you’ll explode. Thus the valar-given gifts of royalty.”

“It’s true!” shouted Kili.

“Yes, it is, and now you may help clear up,” Dori declared.

At that everyone got up and began clearing the table and carrying dishes and platters out to the kitchen. Both Erda and Bombur started to rise but Thorin shook his head.

Only Dori, Balin, Thorin and the Urs remained seated.

Carrying though a pile, Ori saw that Dis had stationed her sons at the sink and the younger Urs only had to organize and tell them where things went. Sigrid and Gimli returned to the dining room armed with brooms and dust pans. After disposing of a few crumbs and scraps into the bucket for the pigs, Dwalin told Kali to show him where it went and the pair went out.

Ori and Bilbo dried dishes and Ari, Muri and Buri put them away. It wasn’t long until the kitchen
was clean and returned to order. Edi filled the biggest kettle Ori had ever seen and put it on to boil for tea. Dwalin returned chuckling and talking with Kali.

They trooped back into the dining room to find Erda herding the rest out to the deck.

Soon all were seated in chairs with very long seats, so they could put their feet up.

The older of the Ur’s progeny arrived with two large teapots and several cups. A light tea was served with honey and lemon and a delicious milky spicy sweet tea as well. After that they ran down to play on the lawn with the youngest badgers.

“They seem to have a great deal of energy still,” said Thorin.

“It’s the spices in the food,” said Erda. “They heat the blood. Best to burn off a bit of energy before you turn in or you’ll find you’ve a little trouble sleeping.”

“Yes,” said Bilbo. “Of course, everyone has to find their own best method for doing that, burning off energy, that is.”

He turned his head and looked directly at Thorin and said, “You need to burn it off or, who knows, you might just burst into flames.”

Thorin opened his mouth as if to speak, but seemed to lose his nerve on the way.

Dis muttered, “Great Mahal, Thorin could read by the light of his own cheeks.”

Dori said, “No, no, dear Dis, Thorin’s just a true son of the line of Durin. Lava runs in the blood.”

“Is that so, Mr Dori?” Bilbo asked. “Very interesting indeed.”

Ori curled up on Dwalin’s lap with his third cup of spice tea and relaxed.

The faint trails of the sunset were fading. The lake was still moving a little, Ori could hear the wavelets lapping at the shore. There was strange calls of birds. Ori picked out the noises of a screech owls and the large barn owls.

There were bats flitting about above them. Feasting on the insects the lights attracted. Ori gasped when a luxurious moon moth landed on his arm. Palest green and with long tails off its lower wings, the elegant creature rested, uncurling its long tongue and tasting him.

“Look a’ tha’, love,” Dwalin murmured, watching the moth.

“If it would give me my arm back I’d draw it.” Ori whispered in reply.

“Yeh’ll have t’ do it from memory, love.”
Canoodling, costumes, and cautionary tales

Chapter by Stevie Foxx

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Such summer time delights we have in store for you this charming chapter. It’s warm and sunny here at Long Lake, so don’t forget your sunblock! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori thought he would sleep immediately and peacefully. Instead he fell into a long dream where he was writing a letter on commission but he couldn’t get very far because he didn’t know how to address it.

His employer asked, “Who? Who?”

“I don’t know,” Ori said in his dream, “you have to tell me. It’ll go much faster if you do.”

“Who?”

“Please, be reasonable. I can’t help you otherwise.”

“Whoooooooooo?”

This went on endlessly until he woke in the early hours of the morning in total confusion. The windows all hung open, with a stiff breeze, but he was warm enough beneath the covers with Dwalin.

A voice outside the window called, “Who?”

“What in the name of Mahal’s blesses arse?” he muttered.

“It’s an owl,” said Dwalin in the dark.

“I’m sorry, Dwalin. Am I keeping you from sleeping?”

“I’m more concerned abou’ yeh. Whoever yer workin’ f’r in tha’ dream, I’ll wipe th’ floor with ‘im.”

“You’re so good to me. It’s so strange to hear one so close.”

“Aye, they don’ come so high up th’ mountain, ‘nless they’re deliverin’ messages. Yeh want me t’ shut the window?”

“No, now that I know it’s an owl, I can just tell him to go suck a lemon.”

When Ori woke again the first thing he heard was birdsong, then a door closing somewhere in the
house and murmurs of low voices in khuzdul. The ceiling was white, as were the lace curtains flapping at the edge of his vision.

Just for a moment he had no idea where he was, but it was beautiful.

The inn, of course, and this spectacularly comfortable bed and the warmth of his equally spectacular sleeping husband.

The sun eased around the edge of the windowsill and he watched for while as the fingers of light moved up from the foot of the bed.

Dwalin's breathing changed and he raised his head.

"Mornin', love," he said. "Sleep well?"

"Except for the giant cabbages chasing me through the halls of the library."

"Giant cabbages," Dwalin repeated levelly. "I see. G'on."

"I finally lost them in the collected minutes of the weekly miners' guild meetings volumes 320 through 8,336b."

"Lemme guess, it was so dry th' cabbages wilted?"

Ori giggled.

"Aw, you spoiled my library joke."

"Sorry, love, it was self defense."

Ori slipped from beneath the covers.

"Where yeh goin'?"

"Answering the call of nature. I'll be right back."

He did so, then paused to examine his hair in the looking glass above the sink. He looked like someone had dangled him by the hair and spun him around.

"I couldn't do that myself if I tried," he acknowledged.

He reached to smooth it out, then decided against it.

Dwalin appeared in the doorway.

"Should I leave it for the day?" Ori asked, pointing to his hair.

"Our Dori'll have apoplexy."

Ori shook his head. "If Nori hasn't managed it yet, there's no chance I will."

He went back out to the bed, considered straightening it out and getting on with the day, but decided to climb back in. From his knees he fell face first into the down comforter. The bedding poofed up around him like clouds of whipped cream and he laughed.

"Now tha'," said Dwalin, "is a temptin' target."
Ori didn't even have time to answer before Dwalin pounced on top of him.

It wasn't all Dwalin's weight, happily. If it were, Ori was pretty sure there'd be nothing left of him but his squeak.

The weight itself was comforting and arousing at once.

He sighed happily as Dwalin rubbed against him, rubbed him into the mattress.

"Yeh are jus' way too much a treat f'r one poor dwarf," Dwalin said in his ear.

"I could say the same thing about you," said Ori.

"Nah, a big ol' buffalo like me?"

"I'd shout it from the rooftop," said Ori, grinding back against him, "except I'm pretty sure we'd hear Nori being sick from here."

Dwalin chuckled, lifted up a little and turned Ori to face him.

"I apologize in advance f'r th' mornin' breath."

"I couldn't give a fuck about morning breath," said Ori emphatically, and kissed him.

There was no destination in mind, just rolling around, kissing and laughing and sometimes licking a spot that caused a breath to hitch. Ori discovered that the crook of Dwalin's elbow was softer than chamois and deliciously sensitive under his mouth. Ori developed a theory while his tongue played and Dwalin's eyes lost focus.

"Dwalin?"

"Mm?"

"Roll over for a minute."

"Righ'."

Dwalin did so, leaving the backs of his knees on full view and vulnerable, and the evil scribe pressed full advantage.

"Mahal's hairy arse!" Dwalin gasped.

Ori giggled and darted his tongue against Dwalin's skin over and over.

Dwalin groaned and buried his head under a pillow, his body trembling harder with the passing moments.

Without warning he snapped up with a roar, seized Ori and rolled the scribe under him, kissing his face and neck in a merciless, sticky barrage. Ori shrieked with laughter, trying half-heartedly to defend himself, but mostly struggling to breathe. Dwalin drew back, teeth bared, face screwed up in a lampoon of ferocity and panted like a ravaging predator.

Then he dissolved into laughter like Ori, resting his forehead on Ori's shoulder until they eventually calmed themselves.

"Are you as hungry as I am?" Ori asked finally.
"I could be convinced," Dwalin conceded. "Wha' d'yeh think? Should I wear me pink drawers down t' th’ dinin’ room?"

"As if there's anyone who hasn't seen your pink drawers!"

"Oooooo, tha's underhanded, librarian. Foul! Foul!"

"You're just pouting because you didn't think of it first."

"Aye," said Dwalin, kissing him, rolled over, and looked out at the window, the sun was high in the sky, the winds lazier than yesterday.

“Love, I’m thinkin’ it looks like a good beach day.”

Breakfast was set up in the dining room as a buffet, to free the Urs and Bilbo to do other important chores around the inn.

The meal was everything comforting and hearty, eggs and sausages, bacon, porridge with cream and fruit, toast with butter and jam and huge pots of coffee, tea and xocolātl. While Ori happily ate his fill, he could have sworn he saw Thorin keep looking up from whatever he was doing. Ori suspected Thorin’s eyes sought the hobbit.

After he was through, Ori took his drawing supplies out to the long table on the deck to sketch his lake treasures from the day before.

He placed the empty crawfish shell on a block of wood in the middle of the table so the sun shone through it. His other findings were set carefully in a pasteboard box Jaki had found him. Ori removed his inks and paper then sat down to sharpen his quills.

A movement caught his eye as Rutile scuttled out at the top of the door jam, leapt from there to the chair opposite him, ran across the table, paused to look at the shell, then scurried toward Ori, taking in the ink and paper.

“Hullo, Rutile.”

She ruffled the edge of his paper.

“I’m going to draw,” he told her.

She paused, her eyes and upper body cocked up at him, so he assumed she was listening, and continued his explanation.

“I’m using the ink and paper to express what I see. In this case, it’s the crawfish shell.”

She bounced enthusiastically, bending her first set of knees.

“You want to try? Here.”

He set up a large piece of paper and poured out a saucer of ink.

Ori took his time with his own drawing, aware of people moving to and fro around him, coming out into the sunshine with plates of food and mugs of tea, though he wasn’t interrupted. The sunlight shining on the vaguely transparent shell was both beautiful and alien. It turned the shell from sickly yellow to a light tan with minuscule touches of dark.
Seeing it closely, it was as though the little creature had wore armor as fine as any made by his people. He made several small sketches in black then took out his colors. He had to water down a few of his colors to capture the light.

Finally, when he had worked to his satisfaction, he looked up to see how Rutile fared.

As it turned out, she had finished as well. At least, he thought she had.

All the pieces of the crawfish were represented fully, each eight times in a row. The lines were, for want of a better word, spidery. He peered closer, then closer still, aware Rutile was waiting for him. Finally, with his cheek nearly on the paper he realized the lines weren’t actually lines, but words in khuzdul runes, describing each part. One leg, for instance, was eight continuous repetitions of the word ‘leg’.

Ori jumped up and cried out, “Dis!”

Everyone at the table stared at him and Dis came to the door chewing a slice of toast.

She swallowed.

“Ori, what the matter?”

“Look!”

He pointed at the paper.

This brought everyone, so that it was hard for anyone to actually get a good look.

Balin flicked open his magnifying lens and examined the work, chuckling.

“Very good, laddie. Very clever.”

“This isn’t mine, it’s Rutile’s!”

Dis cooed, “Oh, Rutile! How beautiful!”

She snatched up the lens by its cord, which was, unfortunately, still around Balin’s neck, and examined the drawing minutely.

She cried, “How clever you are, my darling!”

Rutile leapt to her shoulder and cuddled under her neck, chirping.

Dwalin, looking over Ori’s head, said, “Don’t look now, love, I think yer crawfish exploded.”

Thorin turned to Dis, “I suppose you want it under glass for your chambers? Or perhaps over the fireplace at Fundin House?”

She kicked his ankle.

“Thorin! Your niece’s first artwork. You should be proud!”

The king closed his eyes and looked pained.

Dwalin choked.

“She’s not my sister!” Kili exclaimed.
“Don’t be rude, Kili,” Dis admonished. “You’ll hurt her feelings.”

“He’s just jealous, amad,” said Fili. “He couldn’t do that.”

“There are master scribes who couldn’t do that,” said Ori. “She might put us all out of work!”

“Finish yer drawin’, love?” Dwalin asked.

“Yes, it’s here.”

Dwalin looked it over.

“I like yer’s be’er.”

“I think you might be a little biased.”

“No, no, pet. I like yours better, too. Such pretty colors.” Dori said in an unnecessarily soothing tone. Ori made face at him. Dwalin put his arm about Ori’s shoulders.

“C’mon, love. We’re all goin’ bathin’.”

There was a combined shout from the younger set and they exited the deck in a pounding herd. Ori snickered. “I’ll put these away and be right up.”

Ori came up and saw that the doors of Fili’s, Kili’s, and Gimli’s rooms were left open. Sigrid’s was closed. Curious, he knocked.

“Sigrid? Are you coming down to the lake?” Ori asked through the door of her room.

“No!”

“What?” He really wasn’t expecting that. It was meant as a sort of five minute warning to get her sun hat and join them. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t leave this room wearing this…this bathing costume.”

Ori raised an eyebrow.

Really, how bad could it be?

Well, it was Dipfa, so Mahal knew, Sigrid could look like a duck.

“Is it really, really ugly?”

“I feel naked!”

“Naked? Did she skimp on the cloth?”

“I’ll say.”

“What does it look like?”

“Not enough.”

“Let me in, Sig.”
The door opened, a hand reached out, grabbed him by the tunic and yanked him into the room with amazing force.

Be careful what you ask for, Ori thought.

And there was Sigrid. And there was Sigrid’s bathing costume.

But the first thing Ori thought wasn’t: Oh, the poor thing, she’s practically nude.

The first thing he thought was: I didn’t know they made polka dots that big. Or that orange.

On closer inspection, the dots were actually printed oranges, punctuated by lime green leaves on a cerulean field. She looked like a fruit crate label.

“Mahal,” Ori breathed.

“You haven’t seen the hat!” she wailed.

He steeled himself.

“Show me the hat.”

She put it on.

“Put it away. Please. Now.”

It was little satin plush fruits, stuffed and sewn together, attached to a green ribbon band that went around her head. The pile of hat rose a good foot over her head.

“Maybe…” he started, then he just stopped. There was no salvaging this. “Just the bathing suit.”

“My tummy shows!”

The costume consisted of a tight, sleeveless shirt that ended beneath her breasts, and then a short skirt around her hips and under that, narrow bloomers to her knees, all matching, if that was the word. Orange bows accented the knees and neck, with two larger bows, one on top of each cerulean swimming slipper, which were like little cotton socks, but they laced with lime green ribbons from the toes to a little below the knee.

“I don’t think anyone will be looking at your tummy, Sig.”

“Does yours look like this?” she demanded.

“I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“I’m afraid to open the package.”

She crossed her arms.

“Go on. I’ll wait.”

Because, Ori thought, misery loves company, of course.

He went to his room.
Dwalin stood in the middle of the bedroom, dressed in the bathing suit Dipfa had made for him. The breeches were short, very short. They only came down to his mid-thigh. It was a single item affair that went from the thighs to just above his nipples then narrowed to a pair of finger wide straps that went over his shoulders. The whole thing was white and dark green in wide, horizontal stripes.

There were lake shoes in matching dark green.

“Really?” Ori asked, stifling a laugh.

“I wouldn’t wear this as a joke, love. Promise,” Dwalin snickered.

Ori picked out a cloth from among the open packaging and examined it. It looked like a large white handkerchief that had knots tied in it at all four corners. Dwalin took it and fitted it on the top of his bald pate. He struck a soldierly pose. Ori giggled. Dwalin grinned at him, turned back to his reflection and paused.

“Wait here,” he said and disappeared into their bathroom.

Ori waited impatiently for what felt like a long time. Dwalin emerged. He struck a new pose. Ori shrieked with laughter. Dwalin had waxed his mustache thickly and turned the ends upward and round in a curl. Ori fell on the bed and lay there gasping with laughter.

“You…you look ridiculous!” he managed.

Dwalin made a show of admiring himself in the mirror.

“Nonsense. A fine figure o’ dwarrow masculinity. I think I’ migh’ be sayin’ ‘I say’ an’ ‘frightfully’ a lot.”

“Why?” Ori managed still grinning.

“Donno. Jus’ this getup makes me think I should. Get yers on, love.”

Ori’s was cut in the same style but was a solid bright purple, a very bright purple, the hems were trimmed in thin lines of cream satin.

“Oh,” said Ori. “Sigrid isn’t going to like this.”

“Why no’?”

“I thought I had figured out where the rest of the cloth went from Sigrid’s suit, but this isn’t the same cloth. At least there aren’t any oranges.”

“Er… love.”

Ori froze.

“Where?”

“One on each arse cheek.”

Ori twisted to look in the mirror and burst out laughing.

“This will make her feel better. Maybe the oranges’ll distract the others from her suit, too, though I rather suspect Dipfa put them there for your benefit.”
Dwalin nodded.

“Sensible, our Dipfa. Lass’ll get a hefty tip f’r tha’.”

The lake shoes matched and there was a straw hat. The hat was bleached to a creamy white, had a moderate brim with a two finger high crown covered with matching purple ribbon and then was flat on top. Streamers from the ribbon trailed off to nearly the middle of Ori’s back.

They looked at each other again and snorted with laughter.

Ori picked up the snack basket Dori had sent up to them and Dwalin picked up the towels to sit on and the large canvas umbrella to plant in the sand to shield them from the hot sun. Dwalin put the towels over one arm and swung the closed umbrella to his shoulder and offered Ori his other arm, which Ori took.

They went to Sigrid’s room and Dwalin banged on the door.

“Alrigh’, our Siggy. Time t’ face th’ world.”

She opened the door with a scowl, froze, and fell back laughing.

“Oh! Oh… that’s…. What did you do to your… Eru preserve us. I don’t feel so bad now.”

“Come on then,” said Ori. “Let’s see what other delights Dipfa created.”

They sailed down the stairs, all three arm in arm, and out to the lovely deck. They crossed this and stepped down to the grass which soon gave way to the sandy shore. The late morning sun was very warm.

Ori saw that Balin and Dori were already there in low chairs under an enormous white and blue umbrella with a fringe shading them. They wore white dressing gowns and sandals on their feet. Balin’s hair stood on end. A thing that looked like it might once have been a hat sat on the sand by his side; apparently Brandy had decided to use it as a comfortable place to nap. Balin read through small, half moon spectacles and Dori languorously fanned himself, his hair loosely caught up by the red ribbon threaded through it.

“I say, I say, I say. Frightfully, frightfully!” Dwalin rattled off loudly.

Balin peered over the spectacles, speechless, and Dori looked up. Ori raised his silly hat to his brother.

Dori gave a scream then collapsed in laughter.

Thorin was standing ankle deep in the water, looking out at the lake. He had pulled back his hair into a messy ponytail and his suit, in Durin blue, ended very abruptly just below his bottom, and apparently only had one strap.

“Ummmm, Thorin?” Ori started. “Aren’t you cold?”

Thorin turned.

The only decoration to his suit was the crest of the house of Durin, embroidered in sliver thread across his abdomen.

“In case I forget who I am,” said Thorin dryly.
“Was there a hat?” Ori asked.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not wearing it.”

“Shaped like a crown, right?

“Studded with paste gems, yes.”

“Sporting!” Dwalin shouted.

Thorin stared at him.

“What the fuck did you do to your face?”

“Frightfully, frightfully!” said Dwalin through a toothy, maniacal grin.

“Yes, that is the word I would have used,” said Thorin. He looked around Dwalin with a frown.

“Sigrid? Why are you hiding?”

“Tummy,” she whispered, apparently shy once more.

“She’s afraid you’ll look at it,” Ori helped.

“Why would she be afraid of that?”

“My tummy hasn’t been seen by anyone except my parents since I was born!” Sigrid said, acutely embarrassed that the king would see her tummy.

“A little sun will do it some good then,” Thorin observed.

She groaned.

Ori turned to her.

“Wait, Sigrid, you learned how to swim, didn’t you?”

“Of course. Working with my father on the barge, if we fell overboard we had to know how to save ourselves.”

“Weren’t you naked or wearing skivvies or something?”

“No, we had to learn to swim fully dressed. it’s not like we were roaming around the barge naked.”

There was a shout and the next moment had Fili saying, “There you are Sigrid!”

She jumped and turned with a look of a small animal caught in a trap.

“We match,” Fili announced with every appearance of pleasure.

Fili wore a pair of breeches of the same material as Sigrid that stopped above his knees and he was otherwise bare except for the lake shoes also like Sigrid’s. He also wore the most enormous hat Ori had ever seen. It was straw-colored with a brim so wide it shaded his entire body and the crown rose high above his head. The sole decoration consisted of tiny stuffed fruit strung and swinging off the brim.

Sigrid shrieked with delighted horror.
“Aüle!! That’s awful! You look like an umbrella!!”

“You didn’t get a hat?” Fili asked quite seriously.

“I-I did but—”

“Where is it?”

“It’s in my room. It’s horrid—”

“I’ll get it,” Fili shouted in his wake as he tore back to the inn.

Sigrid stood stock-still staring, then began to laugh heartily.

“Oh well,” she managed. “If Dipfa wanted us to match so badly, who am I to spoil it for her?”

Ori grinned up at Dwalin. “I’m going to draw everyone in their bathing costumes. Just for Dipfa.”

“Wait,” said Sigrid. “Fili didn’t look at my tummy.”

“Disappointed, Siggy?” Dwalin asked.

“He was admiring your arms,” said Ori. “You do have very nice, strong arms.”

“He admires my arms?” Sigrid asked, bewildered. “It’s not like he hasn’t seen them before.”

“He’s an ‘arm’ dwarf,” said Ori.

“And that makes you, what, a ‘bum’ dwarf?” she teased.

Dwalin gave a low, filthy laugh.

“Aye, an’ so’m I. Look a’ those wee oranges!”

Ori squawked, as Dwalin grabbed his ass, and he hopped away.

“Bad bum-dwarf! “ he shouted, laughing. “No arse cheeks for you!”

“Old horned dwarf,” Thorin said snidely.

“Not an old goat?” Ori asked.

“It’s still summertime,” Thorin replied.

Kili and Gimli rushed up out of the water where they had been busily dunking each other. Dis trailed up after them in a suit like Sigrid’s but hers was black and dotted with red cherries. Gimli’s costume was white with accurate, exquisitely embroidered axes crossed on the belly. With his bright red hair in a heap on his head, he looked like a lit match.

Kili’s suit appeared to be stitched together green leaves, from the single shoulder strap down to mid thighs.

“Like watching a holly tree attack a snow bear,” Dis commented.

“Kili, yeh look like Ori’s worst nightmare,” said Dwalin.
“I do feel the need to sell vegetables,” said Kili, “though I don’t exactly know why. I hate broccoli, but in a sense, I am broccoli.”

Gimli stared at Dwalin, struck.

“Wha’ happened t’ yer face?” he demanded.

Ori answered him, “Oh, that’s just his ‘beach mustache’. Go on, Dwalin.”

Dwalin obliged by grinning evilly and talking through his teeth.

“Frightfully, frightfully!”

“Aye, it’s frightful, alright.”

From the blanket, Kili picked up a clump of green cloth. It opened into a hat the shape of a rowboat which sat upside-down on his head. A little red feather perked out the back.

“Dipfa says it’s the sort of thing archer’s should wear,” said Kili. “Dipfa is strange.”

“Frightfully, frightfully!” Dwalin agreed, then laughed at himself.

“Where’s your hat, Gimli?” Ori asked.

Gimli looked surprised then waved a hand in the direction of the lake.

“Somewhere out there. Blew away. Pity. Was goin’ t’ stick it on that elf’s head. He’d look dead funny in it.”

“He would,” Kili agreed eagerly. “It looked like a white upside-down flower pot and had a silver tassel hanging off the top.”

Fili returned with Sigrid’s hat, which she donned with much less reluctance, since she saw Fili didn’t have an issue wearing his.

“We’re a perfect matching pair of idiots,” she said.

“As long was we match, then it’s perfect,” Fili replied. They admired each other then blushed in unison.

Along with Kili and Gimli, they started to gather their towels and blankets.

“Where are you going?” Ori asked.

“Over to the kettle well,” said Kili. “We thought we’d give you some space to learn to swim.”

“What’s a kettle well?” Ori asked.

“A very deep spot in the lake, near the shore. There’s a rope swing.”

“The rest of the lake shore isn’t deep at all,” said Ori. “Did someone dig it out on purpose?”

“Nah, love,” said Dwalin. “Remember yer rock, with th’ hole in it? Imagine a boulder rolling over a huge, flat rock, except the rock’s the actual lake bed.”

“I see,” said Ori.
Thorin followed the group heading to the kettle well and Dis, after wringing out her hair, dropped down on her towel and pulled an enormous round straw mat over her face. She gave every appearance of being settled for a nap. The mat was decorated with a black ribbon bows and cherries at the middle. Ori decided this ‘mat’ was Dis’ hat designed by Dipfa.

Dwalin dropped his burdens aside, pitched the umbrella and took the basket from Ori.

“Yeh ready f’r a swimmin’ lesson?” Dwalin smiled.

Ori was not ready, in fact, and now that he stood here, feet from the edge of the water he wasn’t sure he ever would be. He gave his inner self a good smack across the back of the head and told it to behave. He was doing this thing. The others knew how to swim. He needed to learn.

“Yes, I’m ready,” he said, hoping he didn’t sound like he was going to the chopping block.

“Come on,” said Dwalin, taking his hand. “We’re goin’ t’ th’ dock.”

Ori wondered what boats had to do with this, but Dwalin walked past the boats to the end of the wooden boards, dropped Ori’s hand, and stepped off feet first into the water. He surfaced quickly, since the water was only about chest-deep on him. To his amusement, Ori realized Dwalin’s wet hair and beard clung to him, smooth and straight, but his waxed mustache remained stubbornly curled.

Ori thought of the crawfish and who knew what else on the lakebed below.

“It’s safe enough,” said Dwalin. “Wouldn’t usually jump in from a dock. Too much garbage, fish hooks an’ wha’not in th’ water. Bombur’s lot’s more careful ‘cause o’ th’ badgers.”

Ah. Of course, Dwalin thought of these things.

“Water’s freezin’,” said Dwalin said helpfully. “Best t’ jus’ jump in.”


“So yeh don’ look like tha’,” said Dwalin, chucking his chin over at the beach where Dori stood at the very edge of the water, touched a toe to it, shrieked, shivered, laughed and tried it again with predictable results.

Dori tossed aside his dressing gown and Ori could not believe…. Alright, this was a Dipfa design. He could believe it. The suit was red and draped, the shoulder straps gathered into graceful folds and secured with silver brooches shaped like shells. A matching belt of silver shells cinched in loosely at the waist. The tunic fell to the mid thigh with a band of silver shells over a hem of delicate red ruffles. The wind shifted to show matching red short breeches beneath. His red lake shoes closed with silver ties.

Ori was sure he wouldn’t look so adorable. He’d just look like a git.

Balin stood and removed his own dressing gown to reveal a suit identical to Dwalin’s except with red stripes instead of green.

He took Dori’s hand and they waded together in the shallows up to their knees.

Balin released Dori and continued on to the depth of his waist. Then he returned to Dori, picked Dori up, carried him back out waist deep, Dori squealing and flailing, and fell backward into the water, dunking them both.
Dori emerged, shrieking.

“You naughty creature! Look what you’ve done to my hair!”

“Look what th’ water’s done t’ yer suit,” said Balin with an satyrish leer.

He snatched the ribbon from Dori’s hair as they returned to the shallows.

Dori grabbed for it, but Balin held it out of reach, waving it like a banner, laughing.

“Give me that, you evil, evil dwarf!” Dori cried, and proceeded to chase Balin over the sand, the two of them giggling like badgers.

Rolling his eyes, Ori took a breath and walked off the end of the dock.

The iciness of the water could best be described as astounding. He would have said so if he could have said anything at all around the scream as he surfaced.

As it was, the first intelligent thing he uttered was,

“MAHAL’SFUCKIN’ARSE THAT’S COLD!”

Dori looked over in horror, Balin chuckled.

“Aye, it is,” said Dwalin. “Yeh goin’ t’ be alright?”

“Yes, I think so. Once I start moving.”

It was a comfort that he could put his feet flat on the bottom and still keep his head above water.


“Sorry, I’m trying to concentrate.”

“Nah, don’ do tha’. Tha’s no’ relaxin’.”

“Sorry!”

“An’ stop apologizin’.”

“Sorry!”

Dwalin sighed.

“Wha’ d’yeh think is relaxin’?”

“Concentrating.”

“Ah. Think abou’ yer crawfish drawin’. See, there yeh go.”

“What do I do now?”

“Jus’ hang abou’.”

“For how long?”
“How long d’yeh hang abou’? Depends how long yeh wan’ t’ no’ sink.”

“I mean, how long an interval before the next figure?”

“Figure?”

“Position.”

Dwalin laughed.

“Pretend yer a boat.”

“Are my arms the oars?”

“No’ tha’ kind’ve boat. Alrigh’. When yer comfortable, turn ov-“

Suddenly Ori was bumping to a stop on the lake bed, which was not as smooth as it looked.

Dwalin lifted him to his feet.

“I did it wrong!” Ori announced, coughing a little.

“No, yeh jus’ didn’ let me finish. Yeh turn over slowly, gen’ly. Turn over fas’ an’ yeh’ll sink.”

“I noticed.”

“A’righ’, try it again.”

After about an hour, Ori had a handle on the floating thing and could even doggy paddle a little.

Dwalin looked tired but happy, and that was all Ori really wanted.

That, and not drowning.

With Dwalin’s help, he managed to swim the shallow diagonal back to the beach where Dori awaited, holding out a big, fluffy towel as if Ori were one of Shire’s shipwreck survivors, having barely made it through the storm tossed waters to shore.

The sun felt good. Dwalin’s arms around him as they sat in the sand felt good. The doze he sunk into felt even better.

He came back to the sound of distant screams.

Dwalin smirked.

“Fili an’ Kili challenged Thorin t’ a water figh’. They’re goin’ t’ die.”

“Did they make a suicide pact or something?”

“Nah, they jus’ can’ stop ‘emselves from doin’ it.”

“And Thorin went along with it?”

“Aye.”

“He’s hiding from Master Baggins, isn’t he?”
“Aye.”

Ori’s stomach growled, making Dwalin chuckle and reach for the basket they’d brought.

“Here, love, some a’ th’ goodies Dori packed f’r us.”

“Oh, so, if Fili and Kili are going to die, does that mean we can eat their shares?”

“I’ve already eaten them,” said Dis, still lounging on the sand, her olive skin glowing in the sun.

BIG NEWS

We have just posted the Appendix.

Now you can see what we're babbling about and probably figure out how old we are.

Mind, some of you know and if you make fun of us we'll yell at you to get off our lawns.
The sunshine eased Ori from his doze. He could still hear laughter and splashing in the distance. On one side of him snoozed Balin and Dori and the other his husband lay on his stomach, arms folded to rest his head. Dwalin was not asleep but he looked relaxed and calm.

“Yer lookin’ so tasty in this sunligh’, love.”

Ori giggled, rolled over and nuzzled his face in Dwalin’s hair, warm and rough across his back. There was a splash. Ori turned but saw nothing.

Then, as he watched, a very large fish leapt out of the water and plunged back in.

Curious, Ori rose and went to the water’s edge. The water was clear and sparkling. He bent and examined the sand and the water lapping a little on it. Something caught his eye. He picked it up a strange stone. It was flat and a foggy blue and was light for its size.

“Wha’ yeh found, love?” Dwalin was at his side.

“I don’t know. Here.”

Dwalin took it and looked it over.

“It’s ‘n old piece o’ glass. Been in th’ water f’r many years rollin’ over stones an’ th’ water movin’ it abou’ makes th’ edges soft like this.”

“It’s beautiful,” Ori stated honestly.

Ori waded in further, half bent and peering down at the lake bed. He moved slowly. A tiny crab wiggled from the sand and sidled away. Ori stood still. Minuscule fish gathered about his ankles and nibbled at them, eliciting a chuckle. He tried catching one but it proved fruitless.

“Too small f’r eatin’, love.”

“But they would be fun to draw.”

“Be righ’ back.”

Ori nodded vaguely, too caught up in his investigations. There were the tiny fish, there were more little crabs and more crawfish. Strange grasses waved languorously under the water along with the occasional slimy, weedy plant. He knelt down and crawled along the sand, the water not far from his face. The stones beneath the water were tumbled smooth and showed off their muted colors.

The sound of laughter recalled him. He looked up. Dwalin stood next to Balin and Dori. All three watched him, considerably amused.

Dwalin put something down beside them and came out into the water. Ori pretended to be miffed and, rising to his knees, used both hands to send a respectable amount of water Dwalin’s way. It was then he realized his mistake. Dwalin’s face turned delightedly feral and he pounced at Ori, who leapt to his feet and slogged through the water to escape. Dwalin didn’t follow, but dove out into deeper water. Ori looked for him in all directions. Nothing. He turned and looked out at the lake. The waters gave no hint. He looked back to the inn. Everything was quiet. He didn’t know what to think.

He was grabbed around the waist and plunged down into the water before he could even scream. His eye opened reflexively and Dwalin’s grin was in his face. Ori wrenched forward and kissed that
grin hard. They resurfaced, still locked in the kiss, and Dwalin set him down.

“I was almost going to worry,” said Ori finally.

Dwalin chuckled evilly.

“Jus’ when yeh though’ it was safe t’ go int’ th’ water, eh?”

Ori caught his hand and Dwalin pulled him toward the shore.

“C’mon, love. Yeh kin do yer drawin’ on th’ dock.”

Ori followed willingly. Dwalin stopped near Dori who tut-tutted at Dwalin for being ‘rough’. Ori giggled.

“It was fun, Dori.”

“Well, “ Dori began then shrieked as Ori leaned over to drip on him. “Go away, you horrid badger! It’s cold!”

Balin reached out to smack Dwalin’s butt with his book.

“Off wi’ yeh! Pair a’ wee pests!”

Dwalin laughed and scooped up a large, clear demijohn. He grabbed Ori’s hand and they returned to the end of the dock where Ori had leant to swim. Dwalin put his burdens down. Ori was delighted to see that Dwalin had brought his graphite pens, his sketch book and Balin’s magnifier.

Dwalin grinned and dropped back into the water, disappearing with the jar. Ori sat down and got his tools ready. Dwalin reappeared and put the jar before Ori. Now it was full of water and silt. The silt sifted down and Ori saw a couple of tiny fish as well as other creature. Ori plopped down on his stomach and peered into the jar.

“Now yeh kin draw ‘em.” Dwalin rested his chin on his folded arms on the edge of the dock.

Ori leaned forward to kiss him.

“Thank you, my dearest buffalo.”

Dwalin chuckled and watched as Ori frowned and quickly set to work, drawing the tiny fish.

Looking through the magnifier he could see their gills and caught almost invisible sparks of color on their scales. A crab had stuffed itself into a shell. Another creature looked like a large ant but was dragging a pile of debris that was somehow glued to its back. The sand held bits of mica that caught the sunlight and sparkled. Pieces of plants floated slowly to the bottom.

To Ori’s delight, when he finished drawing everything in the jar, Dwalin took it, dumped it out and disappeared again to refill it with other things that dwelt near the shore of the lake. Ori saw so many lovely, interesting creatures he had never known existed. He was utterly absorbed.

The light was changing, Ori realized and he looked up. Clouds had gathered, though it was still warm. Dwalin looked pleased and calm. He seemed to be quite happy watching Ori draw.

“Doesn’t this bore you?” Ori asked.

“Nah, it’s brilliant watchin’ yer hands jus’ flick about an’ there everythin’ is. Perfect like as life.”

Ori stared.

“My sketches aren’t perfect, silly!”

“Well, mebbe I ain’t th’ bes’ judge, bu’ they’re fine lookin’ t’ me.”

Ori blushed hotly, staring at his husband who was watching the sketch pad as one fascinated.

Dwalin looked up.

“Wha’, love?”

Ori sputtered then shook his head.

“I think I’m the luckiest dwarf in all Arda.”

“Nah, love, tha’s me.”

Ori laughed, “Shall we have a huge argument about it?”


Ori was about to reply when there was a sudden sharp breeze. He looked up. The clouds had darkened further.

“Uh-oh,” Dwalin said.

Ori gathered up his materials and offered Dwalin a hand as Dwalin hauled himself up on the dock. Dwalin poured the jar contents over the edge and rinsed the jar quickly.

“I think it’s going to rain,” Ori said, looking about. The breeze was more insistent now. Dwalin
motioned with his chin. In the middle of the lake, a grey curtain had fallen. He and Dwalin hurried to the beach to gather their towels and umbrella.

Dwalin grabbed Dis’ foot.
“Up yeh get, lass.”

Dis cursed and peered out from under her ‘mat hat’. Dwalin pointed to the now swiftly moving rain coming at them.

She leapt to her feet and gathered her things.

“Brother,” Dwalin barked.

Balin’s eyes shot open.

“Beloved.” Balin caught Dori’s hand, waking him. Dori saw the rain marching toward them, squawked, and leapt up.

They were all hurrying up the grass to the deck when the cold rain caught them. Dori gave a squeal louder than Chopper ever could and scampered on his toes toward the inn. Dwalin snatched the sketch book from Ori and lobbed it with amazing accuracy, spinning over Dori’s head, safely into the inn. Dis growled with disgust as her hat became a tent and kept her from running. She ripped it off and her hair was instantly flowing with water.

The four of them pushed into the inn, almost bursting the door frame as they all tried to squeeze in at once. Ori tumbled to the floor and sat there giggling until Dwalin hoisted him up. Balin took Brandy out of her bowl and put her into his dressing gown pocket. The kittens and their mother were around them instantly, the kittens mewing and licking drops off their feet. Rutile scurried over to Dis and bobbed about her, avoiding the water. Dis burst out laughing as Erda hurried in.

“Oh! Yer all soaked to the skin.”

Dis looked down at herself and shook her head.

“I don’t understand how I can be more wet than I was in the water.”

“Wait a moment, dearie. We’ll have you dry in a tic. Jaki! Kali! Isi!”

Erda summoned her badgers and they arrived, armed with fresh towels to rub down their bedraggled guests.

There was shouting from outside and Ori turned to see the kettlewell crowd moving towards them. They were not moving very quickly, as if they had given up any hope of outrunning the rain. Gimli and Sigrid carried towels and baskets and other accoutrements. Thorin carried Fili and Kili.

Perhaps carried was too nice a term.

He had Kili ass-backward over one shoulder and was towing Fili pretty much around the neck.

“Don’t worry!” Thorin called. “I saved them!”

“Idad Thorin!” Kili objected.

“Let me…I can walk myself…Idad!” Fili sputtered. “This stopped being funny when you were a hundred forty!”

“On the contrary, sister-son,” said Thorin grandly. “This never stops being funny.”

Some of the costumes weathering the dunking and subsequent storm better than others. Fili’s and Sigrid’s suits were colorfast for all their brightness, but Kili looked like a bunch of overcooked spinach. Gimli arrived holding a towel around his waist. Given that Ori could see every hair on Gimli’s belly, he could just imagine the suit had become transparent. Legolas would likely approve.

Thorin turned to Gimli with a towel in hand.

“Come here, our Gimmers. Let’s dry your hair before that wool starts to shrink.”

“Baaaaah,” said Gimli, but he allowed Thorin to sponge off the worst of it before Gimli turned to go upstairs.

Dori winced.

“We’re terribly sorry, Bombur. We seem to have tracked the lake through your foyer.”

Bombur laughed.

“A little water and a little sand? It’s nothing!”

Erda agreed. “In this house, anything tha’ don’t include a nose bleed with a split lip on top is very minor indeed.”

“We apologize in advance, however,” said Bombur. “The way the wind is picking up, any
nearby travelers will likely stop here for the night. You may have to share the dinner table.”

Dis was scolding and toweling off Kili somewhat violently.
Thorin chuckled, tucking Sigrid into a dry towel and nudging her toward the stairs.
“As long as we don’t have to share our beds.”
“And here I was, rather hoping,” said Bilbo.
Ori had not heard the hobbit enter, but suddenly he stood close behind Thorin with a towel draped over his arm.
Obviously Thorin had no heard him either. He turned and looked down, startled.
“Hullo,” said Bilbo. “I’ve brought you a majestically large towel. Even matches those pretty blue eyes.”

Before Thorin could react, Bilbo stretched the towel over Thorin’s shoulders like a cloak.

“You’re welcome,” said Bilbo. He winked and turned back toward the kitchen. Frodo darted toward him in a panic.

“Uncle?” he asked, sticking his fingers in his mouth like a much younger pebble.
“Yes, my lad. They’re all back, safe and sound.”
When they had gone, Bombur said, “You know, Thorin, you can always tell Bilbo not to talk to you like that. Especially as, if you don’t, he will likely continue to do so.”
Thorin shook his head.

“He… It’s just… He shouldn’t startle a warrior that way.”
“I’d venture to say, if he thought for a moment that you’d hurt him, then he wouldn’t.”
“How can he know that?”
“Bilbo reads people very quickly and very well. It’s probably why he’s still alive.”

Ori retrieved his sketchbook from beneath the reception desk.

"And dwarrow don’t," Bofur was fond of saying.

Ori started looking at random and realized he would probably do so all the rest of the afternoon if he didn't pick something and sit down with it.

Bilbo and Frodo sat at a table in the next room with large notebook open in front of them. A rather odd stuffed animal sat on the table, supervising.

"Where did we leave off yesterday? What did I write?"
Frodo peered at the book with a grave expression and read aloud:
"Mr. Underhill went to the market, because he wanted apples for pie."

"Very good. And what did you write after that?"

"On the way he dropped his yellow basket."

"That doesn't bode well, does it."

"As he bent to pick it up, a faunt took it an’ ran down the road."

"Gracious! She stole his yellow basket!"

"Uh huh!"

"Then what happened?"

"Mr. Underhill sat down and cried. Poor Mr. Underhill. He cried and cried. Then he got
hungry. He went to the market and bought another basket and apples and went home to make pie."

"Very good," Bilbo praised. "And I see you drew an illustration to go with it. Though… this isn't Mr. Underhill, is it?"

"No, that's the monster that ate the naughty faunt."

"Ah. Those aren't terribly thick on the ground in the Shire."

"It was there 'cause it got lost."

"In the Shire?"

"It could happen."

"Yes, we shall just have to suffer a difference of opinion. Now, here is your next sentence."

Bilbo wrote across the top of the facing page. "What does this say?"

"Two ponies grazed in a field. The sun was high in the sky. They decided to look for shade."

"You can take it from there, I trust?"

"Yes, Uncle Bilbo."

"Good lad."

Bilbo looked up at Ori and smiled. He rose, patting Frodo on the shoulder to encourage him, and left the faunt alone with the pen and ink.

"Mister Ori, please come and have a seat."

Ori joined him at two comfortable old chairs in the corner with a small table between. The numerous rings in the wood tabletop spoke of years of guests curling up there with a cup of tea and a good book.

"That's a very novel approach to teaching reading and writing," said Ori. "Certainly more interesting than copying."

"He likes stories. Besides, we don't always have access to a lot of printed books when we're on the road, but we always have a notebook. Since we got here, he's been asking me to teach him read khuzdul. I think he may be getting a little ahead of himself."

"You read khuzdul?" Ori asked Bilbo, agog. "It's always been against khazad law to teach khuzdul to anyone but a dwarf. Up until now anyway."

"Things have changed, have they? Glad to hear it. Anyway, I can't speak it, only read and write it. I love dwarven epics, but westron translations aren't widely available. Once I had read all the translations, I had to do something, didn't I."

"But, who taught you to read and write it?"

"I did. Language is my gift."

"So you taught yourself khuzdul? Great Mahal!"

"Language is a code to unravel like any other. Once you have the key, you unlock the code. There were just enough bits of knowledge for me to gather to make the key."

"That sounds like a lot of work!"

"What would you have done?"

Ori thought about it, then grinned.

"Taught myself khuzdul. I like codes as well."

"Exactly. Nothing stops a scholar."

"Did you want to learn to speak it?"

"I'm not entirely sure. I'd sound ridiculous, like a mouse trying to yodel. With my luck, I'd hail some great strapping dwarf like Mister Dwalin in the street and accidentally call him a doorknob."

They laughed and Bilbo shook his head.

"Besides, I've only ever translated the language for my own edification. I have no way of knowing how good it is. I should hate to be examined by a true proficient."

Ori went to the shelf and took down a book at random. He handed it to Bilbo.

"Can you translate this?"

Bilbo read the spine and his eyes sparkled with recognition.

"Oh, but this is hardly a test, is it? I love this story. 'I found myself in a dark wood wandering.' Down and down he goes into the earth, and finally finds That Which Cannot Be Named embedded in the ice, awaiting the great battle to signal the remaking of the world."

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Ori was impressed. As far as he knew, this book had never been translated. The original was kept in Brur's office, having been hand-carried from Khazad-dûm. Only one, untranslated, copy had ever left dwarf hands as far as Ori knew, unless there was suddenly a thriving black market for dwarven literature.

"Lord Elrond let you translate his copy at Imladris?" Ori asked. "He had sworn never to attempt it himself, since it's actually a prophetic text. It was given as a gift because he admired the illustrations."

"Oh dear!" Bilbo said. "I beg your pardon, I seem to have overstepped. I didn't actually ask for permission to translate it. I had no idea it was a restricted book. You may have my copy, if you wish, but please don't destroy it."

"I wouldn't destroy a book!" Ori yelped.

"But is that not what is proscribed in the Great Law of the Khuzd? 'Better destroyed than in the hands of the outsider'?"

"That is one translation," Ori admitted, "but the word the scribe used for 'destroy' can also mean 'put away' or 'make vanish'. It's not the emphatic word you would use to mean 'obliterate'."

"Ah, I see. 'Obliterate your enemies, don't just make them vanish.'"

"Exactly. Though, I wonder what was going on all that time ago to make the scribe choose that word. Dwarrow aren't usually so coy when they mean business."

"It does rather sound like someone was building a loophole, doesn't it."

Ori looked up and saw Thorin and Dwalin stood in the doorway and he realized they had likely heard the entire conversation. By the size of Master Baggins' eyes, Ori thought he'd just realized it as well.

Bilbo scrambled to his feet, bowing.

"I beg your pardon, your majesty. I hope I have not give fatal offense."

Thorin looked like he wanted to say something reassuring but simply couldn't get the words out of his mouth. Dwalin rescued him.

"No need fr beggin', Master Baggins. Thorin was just sayin' it's flatterin' t' think yeh'd go through all tha' jus' t' read dwarven stories. Yeh enjoyed them, then?"

"Oh, very much so! Truly, I think, as you've decided to be more open with your literature, they should be translated by a native speaker and printed. My publisher, Mr. Denethor, is always on the search for new material. And now I'm going to stop talking, if that's all right with you."

Ori laughed.

Bilbo stared at him.

"Said I something amiss?"

"You sound like me!"

"I'm sure you don't babble at King Thorin!"

"Constantly. And when I'm not, I'm babbling at Dwalin."

"I like yer babblin'," said Dwalin.

"I...," Thorin started, then paused, clearly amazed to find himself expressing an idea to Bilbo, with whom he couldn't even make eye contact without blushing and stammering. He cleared his throat and continued, looking at Ori the entire time. "I have doubts as to the widespread desire for our works in the non-dwarven world."

"I like them," said Frodo brightly from the table.

Thorin smiled down at the faunt.

"Do you? What do you like about them?"

"I like hearing about how Durin goes away, but keeps coming back to help his people. He never goes away forever."

"Oh, Frodo," Bilbo sighed.

"Not like Mama and Papa," Frodo continued, biting his lip. "Uncle Bilbo says they're looking out for me, but it's not... They can see me, but I can't see them."

Thorin nodded.

"Not terribly helpful, is it? I wish when I spoke to my parents I could hear their replies."
“Are they with Yavanna?”
“They’re with her husband Mahal. You would say ‘Aüle’.”
Frodo frowned.
“If Yavanna and Mahal are married, don’t they live together? Do they not like each other or something?”
“That’s a good point,” Thorin conceded. “Maybe it’s like living in the same house but wanting to have your own rooms instead of having to share.”
Frodo giggled.
“They used to sleep in bunkbeds!”
“Yes, that would make them want their own rooms. That way they don’t have to fight about who slept in the top bunk.”
Frodo grabbed up the stuffed animal.
“This is Gorgo. He’s a lion and a dragon and a pigeon.”
Thorin went forth to be properly introduced.
“Well met, Gorgo. So, Frodo, Gorgo both hunts and breathes fire?”
“And coos.”
“I see.”
“My mama made him.”
“He’s a rather fearsome beast.”
“He’s meant to keep me safe at night but, when you think about it, a lion and a dragon in your bed isn’t really safe at all. Plus, the pigeon would poop on the sheets.”
“The mess would be dreadful,” Thorin agreed.
“I like you,” Frodo announced. “You’re smart about things.”
“Not always, but thank you anyway.”
“My Uncle Bilbo is smart, too. You should marry him. Do you have bunkbeds?”
“Aye,” said Dwalin helpfully. “We’ve bunkbeds aplenty in Erebor. We’re dwarrow. We kin make anythin’.”
Ori had a horrifying realization of himself at Frodo’s age.
Oh, great, Mahal, he thought, the poor pebble’s me.
How did Dori cope?
With a great deal of patience, he could only imagine.
The sound of thunder rolled through, and on its heel the inn’s front door opened and they heard a very loud, very commanding, very familiar voice.
“Master Bombur, we have arrived.”
Then Bombur’s smooth tones.
“Your majesty! Always a pleasure.”
Ori went to the doorway.
Thranduil, his cloak streaming water, stood in the foyer, looking majestically mussed. Legolas and Tauriel entered behind him, no better off.
“We will require accommodations, Master Bombur. We seem to have miscalculated the ferocity of the incoming storm.”
“Of course, of course. We’ll stoke the fire in the grates in your rooms and perhaps some warming soup and wine.”
“Your lake-facing rooms will do, Master Bombur,” said Thranduil, completely ignoring the self-made puddle in which he stood.
“I’m afraid all those rooms are taken, your majesty,” said Bombur pleasantly.
“No matter,” said Thranduil, “tell the occupants to move.”
Thorin stood in the doorway beside Ori.
“I’ll arm wrestle you for them,” he said.
Thranduil whirled around, spraying drops in a wide circle, a look of surprise on his face for less than an instant before he pulled his shoulders back and peered down from his relatively great height.
“Oakenshield. What a treat.”
Behind him Legolas rolled his eyes and gratefully accepted a towel from Jaki.
“It’s good to see you again, King Thorin. How are you keeping?”
Thorin returned his sly smile.
“I’m keeping well, Prince Legolas, thank you.”
Thranduil accepted a towel, but did not dry himself. Ori supposed it wasn’t becoming to blot oneself in front of the peasants.
“So this,” Thranduil observed, “is where you have chosen to break mourning.”
“As you see,” replied Thorin with a smile. “Can you think of a more beautiful spot for it?”
Ori counted down from three and, on cue, Dori swept in with a little cry of delight.
“Thrandy!”
Thranduil’s face and posture underwent startling transformations.
His shoulders lowered and he gave a lazy, sideways grin.
“Ah, Dori, I see Oakenshield had the good sense to bring you.”
“He’s clever like that,” Dori cooed, took the towel out Thranduil’s hand and began blotting him with gusto. “Whatever are you doing, standing there in wet clothes? Naughty things! Elves weren’t meant to catch their deaths of cold! Come, there are plenty of free rooms upstairs. Erda and her dearest little badgers are preparing them as we speak. Let’s get you dried off.”
Almost in spite of himself, Thranduil was carried upstairs on the tide of Dori.
Ori thought, They probably don’t have any dry clothes with them. I wonder if Dori will let Thranduil borrow his mattress?
Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Hungry? Yes, so are we after such rompings in the last chapter. We’ll happily wait while you get a snack before beginning. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

And….. Cinder1013 seems to be stalking us and seems to know exactly what goes on in this chapter! Shout out to Cinder for incredible prescience!

Ori and Dwalin came downstairs from changing for dinner. Dori had insisted they dress up as they ‘had company’. Ori had been more than pleased with the pale lavender tunic and breeches. They were simply cut but decorated with silver accents. Dwalin looked wonderful in a black sleeveless tunic and a grey kilt. Ori’s stomach rumbled rudely and they entered the dining room. The younger set were already there, larking about like yesterday.

“Ori, “ called Sigrid. “Come and see what Fili’s found for you.”

Exchanging a smile with Dwalin, Ori went over to look. The something turned out to be a framed water color on the far wall. Ori looked it over. Fili pointed out that it was, as Kali had told them, a picture of the palm tree. There was a man painted beside it to show the size. Ori was amazed and tried to imagine how such a plant, a tree, he corrected his brain, could weather storms. The long trunk with only the fronds at the top were alien to one who had grown up only seeing the forests around the mountain.

“I know,” Sigrid elaborated. “It’s a wonder they don’t just fall down all the time.”

There was shout. Ori turned and saw that Kili, Gimli, and the younger Urs had started a game of pop the whip, away from the long dining table. All the younger set had stayed barefoot and it was just as well. That many sets of boots all at once would sound like an orc invasion.

Ori made his way over to the group at the window seat and stood next to Dwalin who leaned against the window frame. Thorin, Dis, Dori, and Balin lounged there and they were chatting idly, occasionally commenting on the storm outside, and sipping something golden out of small wine glasses.

Dori was radiant in a powder blue robe, a twin of the one he had wore to his first tea party. This was accented with a deep blue, “Meridian,” he announced when Ori asked. Balin’s suit was in meridian blue with the tiniest stripes of powder blue. Dis was cool and summery in a lovely form-clinging dress of fiery orange. Thorin wore a pewter shirt and deep maroon breeches. Ori stifled a smile and snickered to Dwalin about ‘heavily armed cranberries’.

Unfortunately, Thorin’s hearing was excellent.

He shot Ori a look of horror. He stood abruptly.
“Ori, where did you hear that?”

“Um… I don’t seem to… er.”

Thorin stalked over and Ori was reminded how tall Thorin actually was. Especially if the king was looming over one with a frown.

“Were you listening at the keyhole?”

Ori took a big step behind his husband. In a very small voice Ori squeaked, “Sort of.”

Thorin walked around Dwalin, who had started to laugh, standing up from the window frame.

“And was anyone else ‘sort of’ listening as well?”

Ori stepped in front of Dwalin. He was not going to stop moving now.

“Well…”

“It was Nori, wasn’t it,” Thorin said, grasping him gently by the shoulder to make him stay put.

“Kind of,” said Ori, glad that he wasn’t Fili or Kili, or he was sure Thorin would have had him by the ear.

Dori scolded Ori. “Horrid badger! You never learn your lesson!”

Balin and Dis were as useless as Dwalin by now.

“I didn’t write anything down!” Ori cried in his own defense.

“That hardly signifies, does it, pet?” Dori asked.

Thorin shook his head.

“It does for scribes,” said Thorin then groaned. “And Ori’s done it again.”

“Done what?” Dori asked.

“Got me defending him without asking me to defend him,” said Thorin, throwing his arm around Ori’s slight shoulders and giving him a quick, and not at all painful squeeze.

“Sorry,” said Ori.

“It’s his gift, Thorin,” Dwalin finally managed.

“Yes,” said Thorin dryly, “most likely from Mahal.”

At that moment Thranduil swept in. His posture and movement were majestic but the effect was completely spoiled by the clothes that had been found for him. The elf king was barefoot and clad in a simple white robe. Its design led Ori to think that Bombur and Erda had hastily sewn together two sheets. This was further enhanced by the trim on the bottom of the robe with its thicker edge and tiny stripe of white satin ribbon. This ensemble was bound at the waist with a dark red satin rope ending in tassels that looked remarkably like the cords tying back the curtains.

_Hmmm_, Ori thought. _How like him to accessorize. He saw it in the window and just had to have it._
Legolas and Tauriel entered behind the elf king. They were similarly attired, but as well as white sheets, the inn appeared to possess sheets in pale blue and pale green, respectively.

Dori rose immediately and, going to the elf king with both hands outstretched in welcome, drew Thranduil to come and sit with the group at the window. Balin filled another glass and offered it.

“Sherry, yer majesty?”

“Oh, do, dearest Thandy,” Dori urged. “I’m sure it will warm you right up. What a dreadful downpour to be caught in.”

“Thank you,” Thranduil said graciously.

Kili shouted a welcome to Tauriel and Legolas and in moments the two elves were forcibly involved in a game they had never played and did not understand.

Ori glanced at Fili and Sigrid who had come over to join them. Both were trying to stifle giggles.

“He looks regal even in bedding,” Sigrid murmured.

“Well, at least this way, he doesn’t have to change before going to bed.” Fili agreed. “Actually, if you think about it, he’s in bed no matter where he goes.”

“Hush,” Ori hissed. “Elves are supposed to have very acute hearing.”

At this moment, Bilbo and Frodo entered. Frodo whispered loud enough for all to hear:

“The elves have such tiny feet! How do they keep from falling over?”

“Eru holds them up by the tops of their heads,” Bilbo replied and the dwarrow tried not to snort in unison. Master Bombur sailed in and politely introduced Bilbo and Frodo to the elf king and his entourage of two, who had somehow detached themselves from the game.

Frodo bowed gravely.

“Mae Govannen,” he said.

Thranduil looked down in amusement. The faunt reached a bit past his knee.

“You speak Sindarin, do you?”

“Only a little, to be polite, your majesty. Lady Galadriel taught me.”

“Of course she did.”

“She was nice. She shared her elderberry jam with me.”

“Is that so?” said Thranduil, turning to speak to Balin.

Legolas knelt down next to Frodo.

“Ada is jealous. The lady never shares her jam with him.”

“Is it because he’s naughty?”

“Yes. Very.”
Ori thought Thranduil must have heard all of this but didn’t deign to acknowledge it. Ori turned his attention to the table. He was surprised to see that it was set completely differently than last night.

The entire table was covered by a heavy cream-colored linen cloth. The place setting consisted of a single bright red folded napkin beside a golden painted wooden charger with a blue bowl placed on it. To the right of this was a porcelain cup fired to a shiny crimson with gold figures on the sides. At the top of the setting lay, what looked like to Ori, a pair of plain brown pin-straight twigs and a strangely shaped blue and white spoon.

Ten large brightly colored thick mats lined the middle of the table and these were interspersed with small bottles and bowls which Ori decided were condiments.

Great loops of red velvet swag festooned the ceiling above the table, hung with the most beautiful gold and frosted glass lanterns, all painted with tiny scenes Ori could not quite make out. There were red tassels hanging at all points and a long tassel at the bottom of each.

It was very beautifully arranged and entirely foreign to him.

Erda entered and announced grandly, “Dinner is served!”

There was a general scramble to the table, except for Thranduil who moved gracefully and Dori, who took his arm with one of his, and Balin’s with the other.

Ori sat between Bilbo and Dwalin and facing Tauriel, Kili, Gimli, Legolas, Fili and Sigrid.

Bombur stepped aside and the tureens of soup arrived, steaming.

These were placed on the table and the lids lifted off to great clouds of spicy scents.

To Ori’s surprise, teapots arrived next and tea was poured into their cups, a dark, slightly bitter brew, different from the teas of last night, and drunk without honey or milk.

Ori sipped. It was nothing like the tea he was used to, but he couldn’t say he disliked it.

They began to help themselves to the soup, though the puzzlement grew as they saw what they were helping themselves to. It was a golden brown broth with small, white cubes, slightly discolored from the broth.

“Hot and sour soup,” said Bombur with a rather mischievous smile.

“What’s in it?” Gimli asked suspiciously.

“Something with a bite,” said Bombur unhelpfully.

Gimli peered at his bowl from a bit of a distance, as if he expected something with teeth to pop out and nip him on the nose.

Erda swatted her husband lightly with a serviette.

“Honestly, dearest! You’re worse than the badgers! It’s a spicy soup with sliced pork and peppers and some ginger and various other ingredients, none of which can taste you back. So dig in!”

With what? Ori wondered.

He peered up at Dwalin who looked around the place setting, shrugged and picked up the strange
spoon. It seemed to be made of some sort of ceramic and the broad bowl was flat along the bottom. However, in practical terms, it worked just fine.

The soup was hot in both senses of the word, but once Ori got past the heat the broth was velvety, and he could detect sesame and other tastes completely new. Unfortunately there was no raita to calm this heat.

“Is this a flower?” he asked, scooping up the item to show Bilbo.

“Yes, it’s a day lily.”

“So, it’s edible.”

“A lot of flowers are.”

“Really?”

He didn’t know what he was expecting. He supposed he thought it would be like eating daisies or something, but it was nothing like that.

“Care to munch on the centerpiece?” Dwalin muttered.

Ori elbowed him without looking up.

“You stay out of this.”

“Uncle Bilbo! Stop!” Frodo cried.

“I wouldn’t have to swab you down at all if you could only find your mouth the first time.”

Ori leaned over and said to Frodo, “Be thankful he doesn’t clean you off with spit.”

“Ewwww!” Frodo cried, though it gave Bilbo time to finish his work.

“Or jus’ lick yer face,” said Dwalin helpfully. “Tha’s wha’ goats do.”

Bilbo said. “See, there are lots of worse things I could do.”

Frodo stared at them as if they’d all lost their minds, but quickly went back to eating.

“Don’t want my face licked,” he muttered around a mouthful.

The soup was cleared away and bowls of rice appeared in their place. This was a different kind than last night’s, white and fragrant, but unspiced.

“Is this to eat by itself?” Ori asked.

“No, this is the base for the dish,” said Bombur.

The platters arrived next with a sort of stew consisting of tangy sausage slices, mushrooms, some sort of greens that looked rather like celery with much darker, slightly thicker leaves, diced onions, ginger and garlic. There were also rounds of a slightly sharp, white vegetable, rather like a tuber, Ori thought.

“That’s bamboo,” said Bilbo. “Most fascinating. It’s actually a kind of grass. The inner bark is edible.”
“I don’t really like green food,” said Ori.

“It’s not green, it’s white.”

So there, Ori thought.

“How do we eat it?”

“Scoop some on top of the rice.”

There were scoops for the rice. There were scoops for the stew. There was no way to get this combination to his mouth.

“Ummm, Bilbo…”

“Sticks.”

“Sticks.”

He reached over and picked these up. They weren’t raw twigs, but actually very thin, turned wood, a matched set, slightly thicker at one end, tapering to a rounded point at the other.

“How?”

“Oh,” said Frodo. “Like this.”

And he picked up his sticks, put them in his hand like a pair of scissors and started shoveling food into his mouth at a rate that would do Fili and Kili proud.

Ori felt something that might have been a tiny whine escape his throat.

“Here,” said Bilbo. “Think about it like you think about drawing with two graphite pens in the same hand.”

“Oh,” said Ori.

Bilbo constructed and deconstructed the proper arrangement in Ori’s hand, then in Dwalin’s. The size difference between a hobbit’s hand and Dwalin’s was almost surreal, but Bilbo worked very efficiently. When he put the sticks back together he said, “Now, this top stick is the only one that moves. The other one is stationary. You move these together like pincers.”

Dwalin did so in the air and then raised an eyebrow, but he seemed to understand pincers well enough and he could make the proper stick move in the appropriate manner.


“Now you pick up food with it and put it in your mouth,” said Bilbo with a teasing look in his eye.

Dwalin managed to pick up a single grain of rice and looked at it, then looked at Bilbo and said, “This is goin’ t’ be one fuckin’ long meal. I migh’ need a knife, love. It’s a bit too much t’ put in me mouth all at once.”

Ori couldn’t think of a reply he could say in front of Dori and blushed hotly.

Dwalin roared with laughter.
Ori very gingerly dipped his sticks into the bowl and raised a grain of rice on his own.

Bilbo shook his head, chuckling.

“Really, we don’t want you to starve. Look.”

He held the sticks very close together and scooped up some rice and stew on it and put it all in his mouth neatly without dropping a grain.

Ori nearly collapsed in relief.

“Thank you! I think you just saved my life.”

Thorin said, “Bombur, where is this food from?”

“The Ice Bay of Forochel, far to the north and west. They mainly grow root vegetables and hunt, but they trade extensively with other cultures to round out their diets. The foot is complex, I think in part because they don’t have a great deal of any one thing.”

Ori very earnestly tried to use his sticks as he was taught, though it was slow going. Dori, Dis, and Balin had seen Bilbo’s ‘shovel’ method and were getting along but only just.

Thorin looked extremely pleased with himself as he had retained his soup spoon and was making sure Dwalin saw just how much he enjoyed his dinner. Dwalin seemed to have got the hang of using the sticks properly by watching Bifur and Bofur with eagle eyes, and was sneering at Thorin.

Sigrid and Fili had copied the youngest Urs and Frodo and brought their faces down almost level with their food and were managing better but were giggling at each other too hard to get much food into their mouths.

Gimli had gone with a stick-in-each-hand method, to little effect and Kili had given up any pretense of civility and was merely stabbing at the food randomly, sticks held together in one hand like a knife.

Tauriel watched Kili do this, at first in silent but growing amusement. Finally, she put a gentle hand on his ‘stabbing’ wrist.

“Let me help you with that,” she suggested.

Finally, when ten minutes or so had passed and only a few of the guests had made much headway with the stew, the Urs took pity and Jaki was sent out to bring back forks.

“Thank Mahal,” Kili groaned, clunking his head on the table. “I’m so hungry!”

Tauriel giggled. “I’m pleased, I thought I was going to have to hand feed you.”

Ori watched as this thought struck Kili fully. He looked up at Tauriel, grinned, and ‘accidentally’ pushed the fork off the table and onto the floor.

“But I didn’t get a fork.” He gazed up at her, his eyes wide and puppy-like and a winsome smile.

Tauriel gasped then tried not to giggle, failed and took up her sticks.

“No matter, dear dwarf. I am proficient with these. You may have my fork.”
The full show of Kili’s bottom lip was truly magnificent.

“Thank you, Tauriel,” said Dis. “I was afraid that at any moment he would simply eat with his hands. Again.”

“A-MAD!” Kili cried out, horrified.

Dis was not impressed.

“Please, I remember when you tried to eat your own feet. When that proved impractical you went after Fili’s.”

“His food?” Tauriel asked.

“His feet,” Dis clarified. “Fili still has a scar at the back of his right heel.”

Fili frowned, glanced down at his foot.

“I thought I cut that on iron or something.”

“It’s distinctly tooth-shaped, I assure you,” said Dis.

This led to all kinds of acrobatics as Fili tried to look at his heel without falling out of his chair.

After the forks arrived, dinner picked up pace. The stew gave way to platters of sliced roasted duck and chicken with a complex, salty glaze, and bowls of sliced carrots and another white-ish vegetable Ori couldn’t identify. This vegetable was cooked, but somehow still crispy.

“This isn’t bamboo.”

“No, it’s called hikama,” said Erda. “You can also eat it raw and it tastes completely different.”

Ori had reached the point where he couldn’t protest the vegetables much more, especially as he kept putting them in his mouth. He couldn’t decide if it was the strange vegetables, the strange gravy on the vegetables or that he was almost humiliatedly grateful for a decent eating utensil.

When these platters were empty, Bombur sent for dessert.

The younger set cheered. Their elders looked surprised.

“I don’t think I could put another bite in my mouth,” said Thorin.

Bilbo opened his mouth to say something, but settled for just chuckling in a filthy manner.

“I think you’ll like this,” said Erda. “It’s very light.”

Dessert arrived much as the fried globes the night before, in pretty footed bowls. But this dessert was cubed and white and… wiggled with the slightest movement.

“That is vaguely disturbing,” said Thranduil.

“Now, dear,” said Dori, patting his wrist. “We’re all going to try it.”

It was cold. Ori supposed he should have expected that. It tasted like almonds.

“It’s so light!” Dori cried delightedly. “What is it?”
“Flavored gelatin,” said Erda.

“Calf’s foot?”

“Agar. I’ve hung my last bag of calf’s foot jelly to seep,” Erda vowed. “This I buy from a peddler and it’s ever so easy. Calf’s foot just takes forever.”

“It’s what?” Ori asked.

“Agar” said Erda. “It comes from seaweed.”

Ori sighed. He was doomed to eat green food even when he couldn’t see it.

Dessert was consumed and once more the younger set got up and cleared the table. Ori noticed that Dori had Thranduil well in hand, so the elf king did not notice that his youngest son and guard were helping to carry away plates and platters to the kitchen. Kili and Fili took up their station at the sink as before. Sigrid taught Tauriel how to properly dry dishes with Ori. Gimli handed Legolas a broom and Ori hoped Thranduil wouldn’t notice that either.

The young Urs supervised, put away, and cleared things that were beyond the ken of their guests. They finished quickly and went back out to the dining room. Dwalin, Jaki, and Kali were seen to be rearranging the furniture. Except for the chairs and couches at the window seat, all other seats were pushed back against the far wall.

Bombur, Bifur, and Erda entered. Bombur carried his large drum, Bifur brought his pipes, and Erda had a balalaika, though not as large as the one Jani had brought to the mountain. Ori’s heart jumped. If there was going to be music, there might dancing and that meant he would be dancing with Dwalin. He looked over at his husband who winked back.

“Oh, Master Bombur,” cried Dori. “What a wonderful notion to while away the evening.”

There were shouts of agreement from the younger crowd as they began milling about. Fili and Kili disappeared upstairs in search of their fiddles.

Ori caught Dwalin’s eye and the warrior crossed the room, bearing down on him in a purposefully manner. Ori’s skin tingled and snippets of their times together flitted through his mind. Dwalin caught him up and Ori laughed.

“You’re going to shock Dori,” Ori warned his husband.

“Naah, he’s doin’ th’ pretty, keepin’ tha’ elf in a good temper. C’mon, I’m off t’ ge’ me viol.”

Ori went with him happily. They reached the stairs just as Balin came down them.

“I’ve our viols, brother,” Balin greeted them cheerfully and disappeared back into the dining room.

Ori grinned at Dwalin, who gave him a look then grabbed Ori around the waist, lifting him and shoving him against the wall next to a bookshelf. Ori squawked and snickered as his husband attacked his neck lustfully. Thus occupied they both looked up when Bofur passed them, saying,

“Oi! Get yerselves a room.”

“Fuck yerser’, Bofur,” Dwalin replied genially, as he slid Ori to his feet.
“Well, that answers that question,” Ori commented idly.

“Which one?” Dwalin asked, looking amused as he accompanied Ori back into the dining room.

“Well, before I climbed into the bath with you, I spent some time trying to think up ways to seduce you.”

Dwalin choked on a laugh.

“Oh aye? Wha’ yeh come up with?”

“I thought of leaving you a trail of clothes from the door to the bedroom where I would be languishing nude, but with my luck, Dori would have picked them all up then come in and scolded me for courting a cold.”

Dwalin nodded.

“Aye, yeh got ’im pegged. So, yeh thought o’ seducin’ me?”

“Why wouldn’t I? But every time I did think on it, all I could do was think how it could go wrong. Then I wondered about accosting you in the armory. You would shove me again the wall and I’d be there with my breeches down and someone would walk in. What do you say to someone in that situation? Now I know. You’d say, ‘fuck you’. I had an endless number of disastrous scenarios.”

“An’ wha’ changed?”

“I stopped thinking.”

Dwalin snickered and threw an arm around his shoulders. They crossed to the group at the window seat.

Balin was discussing the preparations for the coronation to Thranduil, who obviously liked ceremony and was listening with both interest and attention.

“Yes, I received my invitation. Both the paper and ink were most elegant. Your scribes have excellent hands.”

“Aye, ‘e does.” Dwalin grinned lecherously down at Ori.

Thranduil ignored them.

“Thank you,” Thorin managed to remain grave, “but you are better off thanking Ori. He managed the affair with the head librarian, Master Brur. I believe you met him at the funeral.”

“Ah,” The elvish king nodded. “A most fascinating conversationalist.”

The silvery eyes lazily found Ori and rested on him.

“And how did you find your management of the affair?”

“All those invitations?” Bilbo added. “That must have taken a small army of scribes.”

Ori grinned at Bilbo.

“There were ten of us. We were given the special paper. Parchment with silver threads run
through and gold ink to inscribe them.”

“Seriously?” Bilbo asked. “Gold ink?”

“Mahal, yes!” Ori replied. He and Dwalin sat on the couch by the window seat, Dwalin leaning back with his arm behind Ori across the top of the couch.

Bilbo poured them each a glass of lemonade and put down the pitcher next to a bowl of ice on the table.

“They had to be in gold,” said Ori. “They were the invitations to the king of Erebor’s coronation after all. I thought I’d have a nervous collapse. What if I should make a blot? And worse, I had to supervise the other scribes, so I had to look confident, as if I actually knew what I was doing!”

“Yeh did know wha’ yeh were doin’, love,” said Dwalin.

“Yes, but I didn’t know I knew… or something,” said Ori, frowning. “Then the inevitable happened and I made a blot and I was almost hysterical and Master Brur told me to calm my arse down. Er… I mean.”

Bilbo chuckled and shook his head.

“I’ve heard the word before, Mister Ori.”

“Right. Of course you have. So, Master Brur took the paper and put it aside and said, ‘We’ll burn out th’ paper an’ extract th’ gold later, yeh silly badger’. And I thought: what a shalehead I am. We’re dwarrow! Of course we will!”

“Master Brur saves the day!” laughed Bilbo. “I meant to ask, because Frodo asked me, and it’s a good point actually. How do you see inside the mountain? Do you all have especially good eyesight? It must be terribly dark and enclosed.”

“Oh, no, it’s huge and filled with light,” said Ori. “Really, it’s like being outside except it’s… inside.”

“Inside,” Dwalin seconded, nodding.

Bilbo turned to Thorin, who had been watching the setting up and general malarky going on in the middle of the room and keeping Ori and Dwalin between him and the object of his anxiety.

“Inside, eh, King Thorin?”

“Grch,” Thorin replied politely.

Ori sighed inwardly and reflected that Fili must get his smoothness from his father, because, when it came to chatting up potential lovers, the upper line of Durin had their tongues sewn in wrong.

Thorin made a noise that sounded roughly like, “Excuse me.” and, to be blunt about it, fled.

When Ori caught up with him, Thorin had his eyes tightly closed and his forehead flat against the woodwork in the entryway.

“How about you, Thorin?”

When Thorin opened his eyes, he saw Ori watching him. “I am an idiot,” Thorin pronounced. “Mr. Baggins must think I am the most inane, inarticulate… orc in Arda.”
“He’s heard you talk, Thorin, just not to him.”

Thorin groaned. Ori continued.

“He knows you aren’t inarticulate.”

“That leaves inane and an orc. Which would you suggest I work on first?”

“I’d suggest going back to the common room before he comes looking for you.”

Thorin stood poleaxed for a moment before he sighed.

“Lead the way. I’m a king. I should be able to face this.”

“Bravely on, my king?” Ori teased.

Thorin took a deep, readying breath, his face a ridiculous mask of dignified resignation.

“Yes.”

When they returned, Dori was in the middle of room, ordering everyone about to make up sets for a circle dance. Bombur, Erda, Bofur and Bifur were tuning up with Kili and Balin. The younger Urs had been divided between the guests, except for Gimli who resolutely went over, seized Legolas by the hand, and dragged him into the far group.

Thorin sat firmly with Thranduil, Tauriel, Bilbo, and Dwalin.

Frodo arrived and cajoled Bilbo to dance with him and Ori smiled at Dwalin, who came over and offered his hand.

Dori passed them, busily telling Tauriel to “go and keep Kili in order” and took Thranduil’s hand and all but towed the king out to the middle and proceeded to demonstrate the figures to be performed. Thranduil’s surprise melted immediately into studied amusement and he acquiesced to gracefully step and twirl with Dori.

Ori glanced over and was relieved that Thorin had taken up Fili’s fiddle and was reading himself to play, Fili being occupied with helping Sigrid find out which holds were most comfortable to her.

They were so taken up with their experimental ‘holding’, Dori stamped over to poke at them, advising them loudly to leave room for Mahal’s hammer between them.

“I thought it already was,” said Sigrid, giggling.

“Yes,” said Fili. Then it hit him what she’d said. “What?”

The older set snickered a good deal over this. Fili only made it worse by stating roundly he didn’t think he needed Mahal’s hammer to dance. This brought more laughter his way when he recalled the other things that could carrying the name of “Mahal’s hammer”.

Bombur struck the drum and they started off in a country dance. The sets spun and rollicked about. The musicians teased the dancers, quickening and slowing the beat. Ori was dizzy from laughing and racing about by the time the tune came to an end. The dancers clapped and demanded more. They were indulged and all partners changed.

Ori found himself dancing with Isi. They had an enjoyable frolic, laughing at the sight of Dwalin ginning maniacally and swinging Gimli around dangerously. Gimli was equally determined to match
his instructor. His hair whipped around and he leapt in time and speed.

Legolas danced with Sigrid. They were having a bad time as they were both too busy watching Gimli dancing as though he was decapitating a legion of orcs.

Fili and Kali attempted to dance perfectly in sync with each other as mirror images while Kili cat-called at them. Erda danced around her husband. King Thranduil, with Frodo in his arms, twirled gracefully, seeming quite pleased with the faunt, who squealed delightedly at being so high up.

Bilbo and Poli jumped around their set with abandon. Thorin watched Bilbo and made Fili’s fiddle sing in a most delightful way.

Two more rounds dances and the musicians required a rest and some refreshment. Kali, Jaki, and Vali disappeared then bounced back into the room with a large music box and the stiff punched paper to play in it.

“Here we are!” Jaki shouted.

Bifur gave a mighty moan and made as though he was going to enclose his head into his pipes carrying case. Bofur begged Erda to fetch every one ear plugs.

“Stop!” Isi cried. “It’s wonderful!”

The guests looked at each other in puzzlement.

“When everyone’s rested we’re going to teach you all a new dance,” Kali announced eagerly.

“No,” Bombur said, shaking his head.

There was an outcry from his children, which made their doting adad finally say that it was only those who might wish to learn need participate. The eldest boys set up the music box while the rest came to cajole as many of the guests as possible to come and try the new dance.

As Ori suspected from the start, it was the dance Omi and Loli had mentioned.

“This is the latest new music from Gondor,” Kali explained. “The group of musicians call themselves the White City Bang Crash. This piece of music is called “Ghostriders through Anórin’. Are we all ready?”

Despite the older Ur’s disgust, all the guest stood prepared to learn. Kali wound the box’s handle vigorously for a few moments and adjusted the enormous horn that was attached.

“What’s that for?” asked Sigrid.

Jaki grinned, “It helps the sound come out.”

The noise that issued was, to say the least, rather confusing. There was great deal of percussion mixed up with pipes and strings. For Ori, it soon resolved into a sort of bouncing melody. The younger Urs were already bobbing to this strange sound.

“Now,” said Kali purposely, stopping the machine. “This is the basic dance that goes with it. Isi, come here. Now, we stand like this.”

They stood side by side. On a count of three, they both slanted their bodies to the right and pointed their left toes, then repeated this move on the opposite side. Then they both twisted their bodies back and forth, while shoogling their shoulders as they sank into a squat and twisted back up
again, which required the butt to shake around as well. There was a right kick and then a left kick. They turned faced each other. Kali bent forward towards Isi who bent back, then Kali bent back and Isi bent forward. The shoulder and butt movement was constant. After that the entire sequence was repeated.

“There,” Isi cried. “That all there is to it! It’s called the Beleghost body wag. Now, let’s do it to music.”

Jaki gave the machine a couple of more winds for good measure. Ori glanced at Dwalin, who looked as though he was trying desperately not to laugh. The music started and everyone gamely tried the ‘body wag’.

Ori didn’t have much of a problem doing it as the steps were next to nothing. The ‘wag’ was just so different and Ori was quite sure he looked as ridiculous as everyone else. Gimli and Legolas laughed and teased each other as they twisted up and down.

“No,” shouted Vali, “Add some hand movements. Any kind you want!”

Isi and Poli energetically waved their hands and arms above their heads as though signaling distant armies. Kali pinwheeled his own as he wagged with gusto. Thranduil, who had been gracefully rising and sinking, looked momentarily appalled. Kili and Tauriel threw themselves into the wildest flailings, so Fili and Sigrid had to duck away and scold them between shrieks of laughter.

Dwalin caught Ori’s hand and they wagged about. Ori realized that this odd dance worked extremely well with the music. Balin and Dori were both wagging their bottoms in a most energetic way. Thorin was grinning like a fool as he wagged with Frodo. Frodo was not as coordinated but very enthusiastic. Ori had to admit the king was quite good at the wag.

“We-“ Ori gasped around laughter, “we all looked like we’ve stood on wasps’ nests.”

“Or we’re all despera’e f’r a piss,” Dwalin agreed. This made Ori laugh harder which made it difficult to ‘wag’ properly.

The music finally ended leaving everyone laughing and panting.

“Oh, cried Dori. “That is the silliest dance I’ve ever done.”

“Isn’t it fun?” cried Poli.

“Aye, aye, great fun for all,” Balin agreed and patted the badger on the head.

Thranduil retired to the window seat with remarkable speed and was indulging in lemonade. He seemed determined to act as though he had never participated in such odd behavior not only on sight of, but in company with, dwarrow. Kili and Tauriel were still wagging as they crossed the floor. Gimli and Legolas faced each other, arms folded, and jiggled in seriously competition. This had caught the attention of the badgers who bounced around them calling and encouraging. Thorin had swung Frodo to his shoulder and the faunt was chattering nineteen to the dozen. Dis and the older Urs had watched the entire debacle from the window seat. Thorin handed Frodo to Erda.

“Did you see me dance with King Thorin?” Frodo said. “We did the Beleghost body wag!”

“And very good you were, pet.” Erda praised.

Dis regarded her brother with a sparkling eye.
“You wag well, nadad.”

“Thank you, namad.”

Dwalin barged Ori to the table and handed him a glass of lemonade which Ori was glad to have. He looked about. The younger set was still out on the floor and Bilbo was now ‘body wag’-ing with Poli, and managing quite well.

“Oh, look at that, Thorin,” said Dori brightly. “Master Baggins is so light on his feet.”

Thorin grunted at him.

When the music ended the young ones fell about laughing, attacking the lemonade pitchers on the dining table.

“Ahem, well,” said Dori. “Perhaps now we older folk might enjoy something more tuneful?”

The musicians struck up a country dance and nothing could save Thorin as Bilbo approached and held out a hand.

“Shall we dance, King Thorin?”

“Er…”

Balin, ever helpful, said with a twinkle, “His majesty doesn’t do country dances. He plays f’r ‘em.”

Ori gaped. That wasn’t true at all! Thorin might not be a sprightly, capering fool, but he wasn’t clumsy either.

Bilbo looked up at Thorin from under his brows with a slight, challenging grin.

“He doesn’t do country dances,” Bilbo said to Balin, never taking his eyes away from the king, “but he will do them.”

Fili choked and Kali whispered, “Mahal!”

Thorin looked at Bilbo’s hand, licked his bottom lip thoughtfully, then accepted it and moved to take his place in the set.

Ori watched as Thranduil looked between the hobbit and the dwarf and an evil gleam lit his eyes.

Ori said, “If you say a single thing to either of them you will never take tea with Dori again.”

Thranduil’s eyes flew open and he stared.

“For such a seemingly meek person, you do go right for the throat, Master Ori.”

“I’m protecting my family, you majesty. One weapon’s as good as any other.”

Thranduil chuckled in amusement.

He bowed however slightly and said, “I take your warning in the spirit you intended. My amusement will remain my own.”

Dwalin led Ori off to the dance, and they had a merry time, but afterward, Ori felt he had a duty
to perform. He went back to the group at the window seat and crossed to Dori.

“Dori.” Ori climbed into Dori’s lap. Dori huffed out his breath and arranged Ori a little.

“Pet?”

“I warned King Thranduil, he’s not to tease Thorin about Master Baggins or he’ll never be invited to your tea parties again.”

“Rather forward of you, pet,” although Dori’s mouth was twitching.

“Was I wrong?”

“No, you did right, pet. I shall reinforce.”

He patted Ori’s bum to get him off Dori’s lap and Dori rose. Ori slid back and curled in the warm hollow Dori had left in the cushion. Dori sailed forth, calling out, “Thrandy!”

Ori took great pleasure in watching the drama unfold. He didn’t feel the least bit guilty about ratting out the woodland king, and had the pleasure of returning Thranduil’s nod of acknowledgement over Dori’s shoulder. He felt like the power behind the throne.

They danced quite a few country dances, but slowly the youngest Urs and Frodo, then the older Ur offspring wandered off to bed. Their elders retired from the dance floor and chatted a while, but soon Bombur and Erda said their goodnights, followed by Bifur and Bofur.

“Mornin’ll come pretty early f’r us,” said Bofur, sweeping them a bow as he went.

Ori noticed his new hat already seemed a bit nibbled around the edge.

“Well, love?” Dwalin asked.

“Yes, let’s go upstairs,” said Ori, smiling up at his husband. “You need to kiss the other side of my neck.”

“Aye, wouldn’t want yeh t’ be lopsided,” Dwalin agreed.

A loud crash split the night, startling them from sleep, then they heard a pounding of feet like a herd of oliphants had decided to sprint down the hall. Dwalin was at the door in an instant with Grasper in his hand, Ori right behind him. Dwalin flung the door open, then all the doors whipped open and the guests stared out into the hall…. which was empty, and had fallen dead quiet.

Thorin had managed to find his sword at least, and suddenly a squad of soldiers made the top of the stairs, Erda right behind them with a cudgel.

“Yer majesty?” Targ asked as they all looked about, uneasy.

“Be ready,” said Thorin.

Then the pounding began again, from the unused room at the front corner. Dwalin put his free hand behind him to warn Ori back.

Suddenly, the intruders burst forth, yowling their war cries, and thundered past the startled inn guests.
The last beast slowed to a stop, noticing he was at the center of attention, and meowed.

Balin said, “Oh, dear. We seem to have left the door loose on its latch.”

Targ’s beard twitched and he said to Thorin, “Permission t’ stand down, yer majesty?”

“If you truly believe the danger has passed,” murmured Thorin dryly.

Brandy and the other kittens circled back, looking about them as if they had never seen people before. Or they weren’t acknowledging people at the moment, except for Nori-pori, who trotted up to Thranduil, took a flying leap and landed with his claws out, hooked to Thranduil’s shirt and rapidly climbed what was obviously the tallest tree in this hallway.

Aghast, Thranduil very carefully detached him and held him up. The kitten batted his nose and looked smug.

Thranduil held out the perpetrator to Dori.

“I believe this is yours.”

Dwalin snorted.

“Sure yeh don’ wan’ t’ keep ‘im?”

The kitten purred on cue.

“Don’t start that,” Thranduil warned him, walking out into the hall with his nemesis at arm’s length. “I already know what sort of orcspawn you are. No use trying to cover it up.”

It was then Ori got a good look at King Thranduil and his… night clothes. Ori slapped his hand over his mouth. They look terribly familiar, which meant they also looked terribly short on him, the pants ending at the knees, the sleeves at the elbows. At the same time, they were so voluminous they sagged on his frame.

Thorin did a double take, his mouth widening in delight.

“Dori!” he shouted. “Thranduil stole your mattress!”

“It’s not a mattress, you horrid creature!” Dori snapped, stamping his foot in deepest umbrage.

“Oakenshield,” said Thranduil with great dignity. “Kindly do not disparage my pajamas.”

To his credit, Thorin did not. He was on the floor laughing too hard to breathe.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. A new day at the inn and lots of adventures await. And we have a most delicious dinner planned. Do enjoy! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The dawn’s light woke Ori. He was very comfortable and cozy spooned with Dwalin snoring behind him. He didn’t move, just let the bird song drift through the window and the usual noises of the morning coming up from downstairs. Behind all this was the light sound of drizzling rain, the vestiges of last night’s storm. He sighed, snuggled down then grinned at a waking up noise from his husband. Dwalin’s arms tightened around him. A whiskery kiss was planted on his shoulder.

“Yeh ’wake, love?”

“Yes, sort of. It’s still raining.”

“Aye. Mind, Bom says it’ll be clear a’ fore noon, though.”

“Good, I want to draw. Master Brur and Balin thought I should do some drawing by the river and the lake.”

“Then yeh’ve go’ work t’ do, m’love.”

There was a low rumble. Ori, realizing it was Dwalin’s stomach, chuckled and turned over.

“Someone needs breakfast.”

Dwalin kissed him lingeringly.

“Aye.”

Ori rose and, thinking on the last night’s happenings, tucked a couple of things into his pocket.

Washed and dressed they went hand in hand down to breakfast. Thorin came down behind them. Ori tugged on his sleeve and Thorin paused. Dwalin gave Ori a look, chuckled and went on into the dining room.

Thorin smiled.

“What is it, Ori?”

In spite of himself, Ori looked around to make sure they were alone. He slipped the red ribbon and a white gull feather from his pocket into Thorin’s hand.

“For Yavanna,” said Ori, with a small shrug and a grin. “It worked for me.”
Thorin hugged him.

It was startling, but comforting. Thorin was a good hugger, Ori decided. He hoped Thorin got some comfort from it himself.

“Thank you, Ori. You’re right. It won’t hurt.”

They went in and joined the others at breakfast. Dori and Balin were enjoying tea and sharing a pipe. Thranduil sat at the breakfast table, reading a periodical and dipping dry toast in his tea. Dis, seated catty corner to the elf king, had finished her food but was savoring her tea. Tauriel and Kili chatted with Fili and Sigrid further down the table while Legolas watched Gimli eat with great amusement.

Ori seated himself beside Dwalin and poured out three cups of tea. Thorin sat opposite them. Dwalin drank back his entire cup and, patting Ori’s shoulder, went off to the buffet table. Ori saw him pile up two plates before bringing them back. Thorin wandered over and inspected the food before filling his plate with a large amount of ham.

Dwalin returned and put one of the plates in front of Ori.

“There yeh are, love.”

“Thank you. Oh, it smells good.”

Ori tucked into ham, scrambled eggs, and apples and onions fried together. Dwalin, like Thorin, had covered his plate in ham but had added a pile of eggs to go with it.

Ori finished and regarded the shield brothers. They were almost mirror images of each other as they ate. Thorin only had to say one word and Dwalin answered, often in the same taciturn fashion.

“Targ?”

“Perime’er.”

“News?”

“Nowt.”

“Letters?”

Dwalin looked up as Bombur came in with a letter. It was for Dis and as she blushed a little when she opened it, Ori guessed it was from Jani. Ori poured more tea for them. Thorin gave him a smile and Dwalin stretched and belched. Thranduil grimaced but never took his eyes from his reading. The giggling and whispers had risen in volume with the younger set when, as a whole, they leapt to their feet, yelling that the rain has stopped and the sun was out, and rushed off shouting and laughing up the stairs. Thranduil stared after the retreating forms of his son and guard with one eyebrow raised.

“What in Mahal’s name was that about?” Thorin asked.

“I don’t know,” Thranduil said quietly. “I have never seen my little leaf behave with such a lack of particularity.”

“Yer li’le leaf’s sproutin’ ou’, yer majesty,” Dwalin commented, putting his arm across the back of Ori’s chair and pulling out his pipe.
“I take it, then, Thranduil,” Thorin observed, “that Legolas has not had time to lack particularity for many years.”

Thranduil smiled at his thoughts.

“He was always much more of a handful than his brothers. Always curious, always getting into things he had no business getting into.”

“And making his da, or rather his ada, climb trees after him?” Thorin suggested. “Pity we never traded for a day. I would have had a quiet time watching a fawn take a clock apart and you would have been worn out chasing a couple of badgers who thought their sole purpose in life was to break anything in their path, yell at the tops of their lungs, and run everywhere as fast as they could.”

Thranduil choked on his tea, which Ori wondered how he could stand drinking as it must have been full of crumbs.

“Then I shall consider myself truly blessed we did not, Oakenshield.”

“Here,” Dwalin put in. “Was’ as though we were any differen’. Got inta lots a’ scrapes.”

Thranduil regarded Dwalin. “Rather like hiding under a council table and pouring yellow ink on the floor?”

Both Thorin and Dwalin roared with laughter.

“Mahal, we were a couple a’ rotten wee badgers.”

“Were?” Thranduil asked sweetly, a teasing smile on his lips. Dwalin and Thorin looked at each other. Dwalin moved his arms to hug Ori into his side.

“Here, love, next time yeh see her ladyship ask her ‘bout Master Fancy here. We’ve no ammunition here as these tree shaggers live longer than rocks.”

“Certainly.” Ori promised faithfully.

The result was delightful. Thranduil’s eyebrows hit his hairline and he looked horrified then quickly schooled his features back to bland insouciance.

“Yes, well, I doubt my late father said anything uncomplimentary of me to her.”

“Oh, aye, a’ course no”, Dwalin agreed, grinning.

“Certainly not,” Thorin seconded this.

Ori giggled and looked forward to Dori’s next tea party, quite certain ‘Our Gladdy’ wouldn’t hesitate to provide Thorin and Dwalin enough ‘ammunition’ to last several lifetimes.

Bilbo came back in and greeted everyone. Ori offered tea and Bilbo seated himself on Ori’s other side. Thorin pushed the milk and sugar over to him.

“Good morning, Master Baggins,” he rumbled.

Bilbo looked up from the tea and smiled.

“Good morning, King Thorin. Had you a pleasant rest?”
“Yes, very pleasant, thank you. And you?”

“Oh, I slept like a dream. The beds here are wonderful. I’m glad you’re getting the chance to experience them.”

Footfalls thundered on the stairs and the younger set bounded in. They were all paired off and dressed in their bathing costumes once again. Ori stared.

Sigrid and Fili had switched theirs. Sigrid wore her halter top and Fili’s shortened breeches. Fili was decked out in her bloomers and short skirt.

Kili wore a different pair dark green short breeches with a knot at his waist and Tauriel was in his bathing suit complete with hat. Kili’s suit was extremely tight on her and very short; fortunately there had been green short breeches with this, so she was clad but only just.

Legolas had donned Gimli’s suit. It was too short, so shoulder straps had been cut and lengthened with some knotted white material. The embroidered axes sat nicely right above his quite noticeable crotch. Gimli wore Legolas’ drawers. Ori knew this because dwarves made fun of what elvish males wore for drawers and referred to them as ‘tightie-whities’. Gimli was a good deal wider than Legolas and thus the tightie-whities were very tight indeed and gave Gimli the look that he was wearing white string with nothing but a coin purse for his cock.

“Look!” shouted Fili. “I can do that spin-y thing lasses do with their skirts.”

He spun wildly and the skirt frantically tried to keep up. Sigrid shrieked in delight. Dwalin and Thorin roared with laughter. Balin fell back on the window seat with a laughing groan. Dori tut-tutted. Dis rose, staring at Kili.

“Kili, son of Vili, are those your new green combinations?”

Kili grinned brightly.

“Yes, amad! See? They match perfectly.”

“You cut them in half and the legs off!” Dis wailed in despair. “How could you?”

“Scissors, amad.” Kili stared back at her, confused by her question.

“What are you going to wear for underthings, then?” she demanded.

“I have others and, besides, Idad Thorin doesn’t wear any,” Kili answered in a perfectly reasonable voice.

Thorin snorted and dropped his head into his palm.

“Yes, idiot,” he mumbled.

Bilbo was almost overcome by his tea.

Dis opened her mouth to scold then threw up her hands in defeat.

Ori glanced over to see how Thranduil was taking it. Thranduil leaned his elbows inelegantly on the table, his brow in his hands.

“Your majesty?” Ori asked.
“My dear Master Ori, “ Thranduil groaned without moving. “Would you be so kind as to asked Master Bombur to bring me some dorwinian wine and to follow it up with all he has in the house.”

By now Thorin and Bilbo were both laughing so hard they all but had tears running down their faces. Dwalin rose and clapped the elvish king roughly but kindly on the shoulder.

“Go raised badgers, eh, laddie? That why me an’ me husband have cats.”

Thranduil raised his eyes to Dwalin.

“You are a very wise dwarf, captain. Very wise indeed.”

Ori drifted down to the beach to sit with Dori for a while. Balin, Dis and Thranduil were also there. They had moved the long deck chairs, as Erda called them, out to the sand and pitched the large umbrella to shade them from the sun beaming down. Dis and Dori and Powder appeared to be sound asleep and Balin was reading, Brandy curled in his lap

“You do not go to the kettle well with the others, Master Ori?” Thranduil asked idly stroking Nori-pori who had taken up residence on his chair arm.

“I only just learned to swim, your majesty. I’m not really comfortable in the water unless my feet can touch the bottom.”

From where they sat they had an excellent view of the younger set at the kettle well.

Sigrid flew out over the water on the rope and sailed through the air to land with a great splash. She broke the surface, shrieking.

“Cold! I forgot how cold it was!”

Fili went next, with a battle cry.

“Du bekar!” he shouted, and pulled his knees up to his body and his arms around them as he flew free, purposely making as large an impact as possible.

Thranduil shook his head.

“I hope my own son is a little more decorous than that.”

Legolas took to the swing.

“Oi, Legs, let’s see wha’ yeh go’!” Gimli encouraged.

“Ha! Just you wait!” Legolas replied.

He leaped up extra high on take-off and let go at the top of the arc, screamed like a hawk, flailed spread-eagle through the air and snapped straight at the last moment, slicing through the water with nary a splash.

His golden hair broke the surface.

“Mahal’s hairy arse!” he cried. “It is cold!”
Ori peered up at Thranduil and suppressed a smile.

“Alas, sometimes we hope in vain, King Thranduil.”

Thranduil sighed and shook his head.

“‘Mahal’s Hairy Arse’ out of the lips of my son, Prince Legolas of Erys Lasgalen. This never happened before we became friendly with you dwarrow once more.”

Ori murmured so only Thranduil could hear.

“I imagine you never sucked off an iklar before then either.”

“Indeed, Master Ori,” Thranduil fixed him with an amused look. “I presume that, since this also never happened before you arrived at Erebor, I may lay the fault at your door.”

Ori grinned sunnily up at the elvish king.

“No, your majesty. It was Nori’s fault.”

Thranduil laughed.

“Yes, we’ll blame your brother Nori. That will do very well.”

By noon the sun shown down bright and hot and a light breeze blew across the grass.

“What’re yer plans, love?” Dwalin asked as they stepped back out onto the deck after lunch.

“I was thinking I would like to take my sketchpad out and try my hand at the scenery.” He smiled shyly. “Would you mind terribly if I disappeared on you just until supper?”

“O’ course not,” said Dwalin, kissing him.

Ori found a hollow with the trees making a perfect frame for a flower-dotted meadow and sat on a rock. As he was unpacking his kit, little Frodo skipped along and hunkered down over a muddy puddle where a toad had sunk himself to the eyeballs.

“Where is your uncle this afternoon?” Ori asked conversationally.

“Writing. S’ important. Mr. Denethor’s waiting for the pages.”

“Who is Mr. Denethor?”

“He’s at the printing house in Minas Tirith. He’s in high dud… dungeon.”

“Your uncle’s scholarly works are printed?”

“No! I mean, yes, but these are the other books, the ones I’m not allowed to read yet.” Frodo looked up from the puddle with an impish grin. “They have kissing in them.”

Frodo turned back to the puddle and frowned.

“Aw. Mr. Toad hopped away when I wasn’t looking!”

Frodo then saw a large bumblebee and decided it was his duty to follow it. Ori made a rough
drawing of the lake and the shore. He went from this to detailed cartoons of various insects and flowers. He leaned back a moment and wondered if he was about to nap.

Out of the corner of his eye, in the distance he saw Thorin kneeling at the base of a large old oak tree and the flash of sunlight off metal. He smiled to himself sleepily.

After sitting up again, Ori continued to sketch, but his mind wandered and he couldn’t quite rein it in. Soon the pencils were tracing quite a different subject than the more mundane views around him.

Time stretched on and the sun moved without his noticing it. When the bell rang for tea he came back to himself, he had drawn Bilbo Baggins busily working at his desk, quill in hand, teacup nearby with a half-eaten scone in the saucer.

But this wasn’t some hobbit hole or even an inn as far as Ori could tell. By the ornamentation, he thought it must be Erebor, more specifically Thorin’s shared office with Balin at home.

Ori’s hand was cramped and he got a queasy feeling as he lay down his now much-shortened pencils and stretched his fingers. With a shiver he turned back a page, and another, and another. There were at least five full pages of sketches Ori did not remember doing, but the subject matter left him no doubt from whence they sprang.

Frodo sat on Balin’s knee as they poured over a huge book on the Fundin’s dinner table.

Bilbo leaned over an open oven door in the Fundin’s kitchen, pulling out a loaf of bread while nearby Dori frosted a cake.

Thorin stood at the great gates of Erebor in a crown and full ceremonial robes, as if to meet an honored guest. Bilbo stood at this left, and Fili at his right with Kili at Fili’s elbow. They all three wore crowns as well. Ori had the oddest feeling the dignitary they awaited was Dis. Yes, they didn’t look quite serious, though Bilbo glared up through his curls as if he could see his crown and was not impressed with it.

The last picture showed Bilbo curled up asleep in Thorin’s arms.

Ori felt his face warm, even though he had drawn them under a blanket. It wasn’t so much the subject as the looks on their faces.

Oh.

Oh….

“Wha’ yeh got there, love?”

Ori screamed and threw himself forward over his sketchbook.

“Nothing! Absolutely nothing! Nothing at all! Oh, shite! Mahal is making me draw rude pictures!”

“Mahal’s wha’?”

“I was just minding my own business, drawing the landscape, and when I looked down I’d drawn this.”

Ori thrust the book at Dwalin.

“Yeh drew Dori frostin’ a cake?”
“Not that one! This one!”

“Ohhhhh. Tha’s nice. Couldn’t’a shown a little more skin?”

“Don’t give Mahal any ideas!” Ori cried. “How am I supposed to look either of them in the eye? I don’t even know where this came from. I’ve certainly never seen this look on Thorin’s face.”

“If yeh had, I’d’ave t’ clobber him f’r no’ askin’ permission firs’.”

“What is Mahal telling me? That I’m supposed to be some kind of cosmic dwarf matchmaker?”

“Nah. Look, none o’ th’ other pi’tures’re like tha’. It’s jus’ life under th’ mountain. Mebbe Mahal’s sayin’ tha’, if it come t’ it, it’d be a good thin’. Or… He wants yeh t’ be a cosmic dwarf matchmaker, a’ leas’ f’r those two. No’ like Thorin’d get there on ’is own. He’ll overthink it ’til Bilbo runs off with Furh’nk.”

“No, I think Furh’nk will run off with Loli, or Loli will run off with him.”

“Oh, aye. What’ve yeh heard?”

Ori clicked his tongue.

“You’re as bad as Dori, digging for gossip!”

“Nah, jus’ lookin’ after th’ welfare o’ me soldiers. Captain’s duty.”

Ori raised a brow.

“Bat shit.”

“Aye, but it calmed yeh down.”

“Sneaky and a gossip!”

“An’ hungry. Bom’s rung th’ bell f’r tea, which is why I came lookin’ f’r yeh.”

Ori sighed and packed up his supplies.

“Yet another notebook I can’t show anyone.”

“Wouldn’t mind looking’ at more o’ tha’ sort o’ thin’.”

“Oh, really? You find cake that interesting? Of course, baked goods! What a truly great seer The Great Woudini is.”

“Funny.”

Dwalin tucked him under an arm as they walked back toward the inn.

On the deck sat Dori, Balin, Dis, and Thranduil. Mixed sandwiches, cakes and pots of tea were on the table. Thorin and Bilbo were discussing a map of Arda.

They called greetings as Ori and Dwalin approached. Dori asked after Ori’s work and Ori was able to show innocent bits of landscapes and insects. Dori praised these, as did Balin. Ori sat down and snatched up a bacon sandwich, his ear immediately tuned into Thorin and Bilbo’s conversation.
“Why is Erebor up in the north and the Shire and Gondor in the south?” Bilbo asked, puzzled.

“Erebor is in the east,” said Thorin, “as on all maps.”

“So, east is at the top on dwarven maps.”

“Of course.”

“I see. No other maps in Arda have east at the top.”

“They’re all wrong,” said Thorin.

(Of course. You’ve never considered, say, bringing your maps into alignment with everyone else’s?)

Then the dwarves maps would be wrong, too,” said Thorin with a smirk and, hearing a shout, he turned. "Ah, here come the ravages of the water wars."

The younger set dragged themselves up from the kettlehole, still bright-eyed and chatty, but obviously tired.

Ravenous, they decimated the sandwiches and cakes even before they sat.

Thranduil sat up and looked appalled at Gloin’s son.

“Wha’?” Gimli asked.

“Can’t you put that away? We’re trying to enjoy the vista. It was bad enough earlier but the water has made the material transparent.”

“Put what away?”

“What should be covered by your bathing costume but is not.”

“Why’re yeh looking’ at it, laddie?” Gimli challenged, flopping into a chair. Legolas sat gracefully beside him.

Thranduil sputtered.

“Sigrid is right there!” Thranduil said stridently.

Sigrid shrugged.

“I’m over it.”

“That is not the point!” Thranduil barked and Legolas buried his head in his arms and was heard to murmur, “My ada is going to kill my boyfriend.”

“Now, Thrandy,” said Dori, “don’t tease the boys.”

Thranduil looked like he might say something, then thought better of it.

Dori tapped him in the arms with his fan anyway.

“I can just hear you thinking, naughty creature.”

Thranduil smirked.
“Can you?”

“Really, Thrandy, you aren’t that opaque,” said Dori with a giggle.

Thranduil sat back, placated.

Ori turned to Bilbo, who was still looking at the map and shaking his head.

"Master Baggins, do you think you might spare me a little of your time at some point during our visit? I’d love to discuss your work on the sylvan and quenya languages."

Bilbo’s eyebrows shot up.

"You've read my books? Great Eru, you really are a scholar to slog through all that! I was just going down to the kitchen to start the sauce for dinner. Would you care to join me?"

"That sounds wonderful!" Ori cried, ignoring the dubious looks of Fili and Kili and the eye rolling of at least one or two young Urs. “I need to go wash my hands. Otherwise I’ll be leaving graphite handprints everywhere."

“I’ll meet you down in the kitchen, then,” said Bilbo.

Edi appeared in the doorway.

“Your majesty, the messenger has arrived from the forest with your clothes.”

“Thank you,” said Thranduil.

“Sent them out to be cleaned?” Thorin asked.

“Just enough to tide us over for the rest of the week,” said Thranduil.

“The week?” Thorin asked, clearly horrified.

“As Master Bombur has the rooms, we’ve decided it is our royal duty to stay and help solace your grief,” cooed Thranduil.

“You are too kind,” said Thorin in his dryest tone,

“Dearest Thrandy!” Dori cried. “You are too good! Your sweetness and disinterested are truly of the valar. As stalwart as your forest itself. Ah! I am all aflutter.”

“Stalwart?” Thranduil echoed, then laughed and laughed.

Thorin turned to Dwalin.

“Does Ori talk like that?”

Dwalin shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“How very poetic," Thorin ribbed him.

“I’m married t’ a scholar,” Dwalin snorted, kicking Thorin's boot. "Me life is poetry, yeh nut sack."

With that, Dwalin picked up Ori's kit and, with an arm around Ori, took his giggling husband upstairs.
"You and Thorin are so funny," Ori observed.

"Nah, we're jus' know each other too bloody well."

"Hmm." Ori turned as Dwalin shut their bedroom door. "Do you think when you and I know each other better, we'll call each other nut sacks?"

Dwalin grinned and wrapped Ori in a hug.

"I'd rather eat yers than jus' talk 'bout it."

Dwalin went to the wardrobe and opened the door. The shirt he had been wearing he hung over the top of it and Ori thought he must be routing around for a clean one.

"Dwalin, I'm a little worried about Thorin. Do you think he needs you?"

"F'r wha'?"

"To, you know, shag him."

Dwalin slowly leaned back from behind the wardrobe door with a look of surprise.

"Why d'yeh think tha'?"

"It's an option. You know him far better than I do. Sometimes, he just seems so...so, I don't know, so alone. And he shouldn't be alone. He such a good, kind dwarf and he never thinks of himself, he's always looking after everyone else. When we were in the mines and he gave his word to the badger, he meant it with all his heart. When he sent you to scour Dale, he promised you that if you were killed he'd marry me. Me! ...and I wondered if he needed some, well, someone to, well, to take care of him a little. You are his shield brother and you know him, know what he likes and needs. He shouldn't be left- I know it's summer, but left out in the cold. I've got you, Balin has Dori, everyone in the company's paired off except him. I know Bifur is single but Dis said that Jani said that he's craft wed. Thorin isn't craft wed. And he's not bloody wed to the mountain either. I don't care what he says. And Lady Galadriel agreed with me when I told her what he said about being so." Ori stopped, having run out of steam and obviously breath. A horrid thought occurred to him.

"I-DON'T-MEAN-I-DON'T-LOVE-YOU-I-DO!!" Ori bellowed and flung himself at Dwalin.

"Oh, love," Dwalin said, chuckling and holding Ori, rubbing his back. "I know that. I know just why yeh said what yeh did. I love yeh more'n I could ever tell yeh an' then some. I'd much rather shag yeh an' let Master Baggins see t' our Thorin. It's a lot more fun t' shag yeh and, t' be honest, I'm far past th' tween urges stage."

Dwalin kissed the top of Ori's head. Ori sagged in relaxation. They held each other a moment. Dwalin chuckled again and murmured into his ear.

"Unless yeh askin' 'cause yeh want t' watch."

Ori drew back his head in surprise and gaped up at his husband.

That had never even entered Ori's mind and it must have been obvious to Dwalin as well because he grinned sheepishly.

"Well, tha's an option, too."
Ori nodded, swallowing, face hot.

Watching other people have sex?

He had barely gotten used to watching himself have sex with his own husband.

He knew it was 'done' among dwarrow, even commonplace, but, of course Ori knew that was something grown dwarrow did, not-

Oh, well, that was worse, wasn't it.

Suddenly he was sitting in Dwalin's lap on the bed.

"All right, love?"

"Yes... but... right now, I think I'd just rather watch me and you."

"If yeh had yer 'druthers?" Dwalin teased gently.

"Aye," said Ori, "if I had me 'druthers."

Dwalin laughed again and kissed him lingeringly.

Ori drew away.

"What in Arda am I to wear? I don’t think we’ll be expected to dress up. Dinner is supposed to be very casual."

"Wear what yeh got on, ‘r if yer tha’ worried ‘bout getting’ messy, wear yer bathing suit."

Ori shot him a dirty look but couldn’t stop a smile.

"Silly buffalo."

"Snort snort."

"No, not right now. I’m going to go meet Bilbo before he changes his mind and then we have to go and eat messy food."

"Aye, love, then after tha’, yeh’ll be my messy food."

The kitchen and larders and passage to the cold cellar beneath ran the entire length of the inn, with stone walls and flagged floors.

"A spring flows beneath the floor," said Bilbo. "Keeps the place nice and cool all summer, even with the ovens."

Shelves and hooks lined the walls, bearing all manner of implements, skewers, knives and roasting forks. At first glance the arrangement seemed a jumble, but there was a sort of logic, one based on the height of dwarflings as they grew. The smaller, lighter items, the wooden spoons and such, sat closer to the floor, the sharper objects sat at about Ori’s shoulder level.

Pots lined up along the lower shelves, while pans hung from the ceiling. One pan was as wide as Ori was tall, and shallow like a bird bath, with two metal handles. He couldn't imaging what you
might cook in that. He only knew he needed to get Dori down here and soon.

There were no windows, but the doors and bulkheads to the kitchen gardens were propped open. Ori stared out in amazement. The herb garden was obvious, but a vast vegetable garden was actually hidden from the view of the inn by a dip in the landscape. From the doorway Ori saw row upon row of identical green sprouts.

"Carrots," Bilbo explained.

"All of them?" Ori asked, astonished and a little horrified.

"Well, there are other plants, too, particularly the tomatoes, the onions, garlic and greens."

"Potatoes?"

"Potatoes not so much."

Ori felt a shiver go up his spine.

"Why did you plant so many carrots?"

Bilbo shrugged.

"It just seemed to me I should."

"Lady Galadriel didn't say anything to you?"

"About carrots? No. Why?"

"She seemed to think it would be a bad year for them and it would drive the price up."

"Considering that most of Bombur's carrots come from the farmland around Hobbiton? She's probably right."

"Something's wrong with the farms in Hobbiton?"

"No, the farmers," said Bilbo. "Help me get this pot onto the stove, will you?"

Bilbo didn't seem inclined to elaborate, so Ori assisted Bilbo in setting a pot the size of a bathtub on the hob, next to an equally large pot filled with heating water. Nearby Isi was slicing onions in huge quantities, the pile reaching over her head.

"D'you think it'll be enough, Idad Bilbo?" she asked.

"Oh, well done, Isi. That's perfect."

"Neti an' Buri already have a bucket of mashed garlic, oh, and the basil's finally tall enough to cut."

"Did you-"

"Put in water to keep it from wilting before you could chop it? I seem to recall doing that, idad," Isi teased. "I learned from the best."

"I should know to never doubt you, my dear," said Bilbo.

He dragged a stool out from under a work table beside the stove. Ori thought he was going to sit
on it, but instead Bilbo climbed on top, took a can from the table and poured a generous quantity of
the contents into the pot.

"Oil for the onions and garlic," he explained. "Please, take a seat."

"You don't need help?" Ori asked, dragging a chair from the work table.

"Oh, no, I'm fine. Tell me, what interests you about elven languages? Do you speak the
dialects?"

"My sindarin is very good, my quenya not so much, but my sylvan is non-existent. I've never had
the opportunity to hear it, and the only place I've ever seen a written version of it was in your
analysis of the Ballad of Gil Galad contrasting the formal sindarin with the eccentric rhyming meter
of the sylvan."

"The chaotic meter really does reflect the sylvan elves' less formal and much more realistic and
violent take on the events. Once you've heard sylvan, you're in no doubt these people mean
business."

Isi, Neti and Buri moved the chopped onions to the pot and Bilbo emptied the mashed garlic in
after it.

What are you cooking?" Ori asked.

"The sauce for tonight."

"So early?"

"It's the kind of sauce that has to cogitate."

"Ah."

It was so easy to talk to Bilbo, Ori found himself dashing from topic to topic. Bilbo matched him
at every step. The pair of them grew increasingly loud and animated, even as Bilbo took a wooden
spoon not much shorter than himself and began to fry the onions and garlic.

"That smells like Yavanna's perfume."

"Doesn't it? Wait until I add the tomatoes," said Bilbo.

"Do they come by caravan?"

"Oh, no, these are ones I put up last year. You'll notice right now the menu at the inn is quite
varied and exotic. That's because most of the farthest traveling caravans arrive at the beginning of
our warm weather, but it's been summer for them for months already. As the season goes on the fare
at the inn becomes rather more traditional to the dwarven palate. Or it has been. With the new trade
routes opening up east of Erebor, even that's becoming more complex and experimental."

Isi, Neti and Buri carried in huge glass canning jars full of tomatoes, handing them up to Bilbo to
pour into the pot one by one and taking away the empties to clean.

"Oh, Mahal, that's wonderful!" Ori said. "Can I bathe in that?"

"It is supposed to be good for the skin," said Bilbo. "Buri, lad, will you stir while I chop the
herbs?"
“Yes, Idad Bilbo.”

The piles of greenery swiftly fell beneath Bilbo’s merciless kitchen knife.

“Do you have a choice of weapon, Master Baggins.”

“Bilbo. Call me Bilbo. I do have what passes for a sword on a hobbit, but is really more of a letter opener. It belonged to my mother. I’m not exactly the terror of Arda, but I can use it without chopping off my own hand. And yourself?”

“I do carry a knife, Nori insisted, but really I’m only good with a slingshot.”

“Don’t disparage the humble slingshot, Mister Ori.”

“Please call me Ori.”

Bilbo nodded.

“Ori. In hard winters hobbits have been known to fill the stewpot with squirrels and rabbits by virtue of their slingshots.”

“Really?”

“When you insist on eating seven meals a day no matter the circumstances, you can’t afford to be picky.”

The younger Ur helped Bilbo push the pot of sauce to a more temperate spot on the stove. Bilbo gave it a last good stir.

“That will do for now,” Bilbo declared. “Thank you, my loves.”

While the sauce burbled, Bilbo pulled out a chair and sat. He had taken an apple from the bin and peeled it.

Ori watched as he managed to do this in one long skin.

Bilbo looked at the peel, and looked at Ori with a grin.

“Shall we find out the first initial of the lucky soul I’ll marry?”

“With an apple peel?”

“Foolproof method. Ask any tween lass.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Throw it over my left shoulder with my right hand.”

He did so.

“Can you see it?” Bilbo asked, not turning around.

Ori leaned to look over his shoulder,

“What does it look like?” Bilbo prompted.

“Like the rune for ‘laundry’.”
Bilbo laughed.

“Story of my life.”

He got up, retrieved the peel and tossed it into the compost bin.

“Ah well,” he sighed. He cut the apple into pieces and they shared it between them.

“Do you know the Great Woudini?” Ori asked.

“Lovely fellow. His wife knits like a hobbit, and that’s the greatest compliment I can conjure right now.”

“You knit?” Ori asked, suddenly quite excited.

“I do, yes, almost all of us learn. And yourself?”

“Before I became terribly high-class, I used to knit almost all of my own jumpers and scarfs and mitts. Nowadays, I don’t have a lot of time for it, and when I do have spare time I spend it with my husband. I’m terribly behind in my reading. I did want to ask more about your work with the sylvan language, though. I understand you drew some ire for constructing a written language for it.”

“I didn’t exactly make myself popular with some of the more conservative sindar scholars. They can be a bit inflexible.”

“Do you regard the critics who say writing down the sylvan dialect could stunt the evolution of their language?”

“I don’t see how it could. It’s not like the silvan themselves are reading it.”

“They don’t really need to, do they,” Ori reasoned. “It’s for our benefit, not theirs.”

“Exactly. Their oral tradition is robust, as is their sense of themselves as a culture. It’s detestable how some scholars think the sylvan are less sophisticated than the sindar, just because they don’t have a written language.”

“You’re thinking of Gallut of Gondor.”

“The most horrifying person you can imagine. The soul of self-important bombast, and believe me, it takes one to know one.”

“His work is extremely influential and his arguments are quite persuasive.”

“More’s the pity,” said Bilbo with a snort. “He would have us believe that every meeting of cultures ends in the death of one or the other. When cultures meet on equal footing, they can produce something new and wonderful. It’s this insistence that one culture is superior to the other that leads to trouble.”

“Or that one map is superior to the other?” Ori teased.

“Precisely,” said Bilbo with a sniff. “This insistence on due north being due east is obviously a signal for the end of the world… or at least a lot of very lost dwarrow.”

“It’s worse that you think,” said Ori. “Most dwarrow have a horrible sense of direction aboveground. Separate us from the stone and we could wander in circles forever.”
“King Thorin wouldn’t happen to be one of these unfortunates, would he?”

“Dwalin says he gets lost crossing the street.”

“Oh, Yavanna. That’s ridiculously endearing. And speaking of the endearing,” Bilbo teased Bombur as he entered.

Bombur bowed and did a fascinating little shimmy of a dance.

"Thank you! Thank you! Oh, really, you're too kind," Bombur cried, raising his arms as if he was the toast of a huge and cheering crowd. "Ori, you're just in time."

"I am?" Ori asked. "I hope you don't expect me to sing or juggle."

Bombur chuckled.

"No, no, not going to put you on the spot. Actually, I wanted to show off my latest acquisition, a little something I picked up from the Orocarni traders when we were last in Erebor."

He took a device from the shelf. It looked like a steel box, perhaps a foot square, but Ori could see it had slots in the front and back, and a knob on one side and a crank on the other. The whole contraption reminded Ori of a laundry mangle.

"What does it do?" Ori asked.

Bombur's eyes sparkled.

"Marvelous things."

While Ori watched, Bombur combined flour and eggs on the work surface and mixed and kneaded it by hand until it was a ball of dough. Then he took a piece of this, adjusted the knob at the side of the box, fed the dough through the back slot with one hand and turned the crank with the other. When the dough emerged from the other side it was not longer a ball, but a flat sheet.

Then Bombur adjusted the knob and fed the sheet through again. This time the dough was even thinner than before.

Bombur continued to do this until the dough was almost thin enough that Ori thought he might be able to read through it.

"Now," said Bombur, "magic."

He turned the knob one more time and the sheet of dough emerged as many, perfect long ribbons.

Neti had been setting up long wooden racks, the kind which usually held freshly washed skivvies to dry before the fire, but instead of drawers and socks, Bombur draped the dough strings.

"We leave them to rest for a bit," he explained, "then we drop them in boiling potato water. Once they're cooked we strain them out, top them with sauce and serve it. Though, mind, it's better not to wear your best clothes to eat it."

Ori asked, "Did you just make really skinny dumplings?"

"They're called noodles," said Bombur. "And, yes they are rather like dumplings in that they take on the flavor of whatever you pour on them."
Then he took some more dough and made a sheet with it, but this time he didn't slice it to ribbons, but used a knife to cut it in two. He lay one half down and spooned a mixture of soft, loose curd cheese and herbs in long, even rows. Then he placed the second sheet over this, ran his finger around each mound to seal it and used the knife to cut it into equal pieces.

"Filled dumplings!" Ori cried. "Bombur, do you have more dough?"

"Yes, yes. Why?"

"Dori has to see this!"

As Ori predicted, Dori was impressed by Bombur's demonstration.

"My, they must certainly be running out of ideas by now!" Dori cried.

"But you aren't," Ori prompted.

"Oh, no, pet, and this is only giving me more of them."

Bombur apologized to Ori as they sat at table.

"This meal is usually begun with a salad of raw green vegetables," he explained.

Ori pulled his shoulders back and he took a deep, grounding breath.

"I am ready. Bring on the green food."

Erda came through and clucked at her husband.

Really, Bom! Here, Ori, I made this up special. Don’t worry, I removed the pits."

Erda placed a plate in front of him holding black olives and a sliced, thick cheese that reminded Ori of the cheese they had with the spinach stew. It had some sort of herb-speckled oil drizzled over it.

"The cheese is of a different milk than you’re used to. It’s from an animal called a bavlo. The dressing is made from pressed olives, same as on the salad."

The noodles came out of the kitchen in steaming bowls with odd, fork-like utensils in them, and more bowls filled with the sauce now a deep red and flecked with herbs. The smell of the sauce made his mouth water. He would happily have eaten just the sauce if it was the only thing on offer.

The noodle fork made it easy enough to move the noodles into his plate and the sauce was ladled on top. A container of dry cheese made its way around the table to shake over that.

Ori was ready to eat the table, actually, never mind what was on it.

The appetizer had merely made him want the noodles all the more.

There was only one problem.

Ori asked, "How, exactly…"

That was something that hadn't occurred to Ori before. The noodles were wonderful, but how to
eat them?

To his horror, he looked around for the 'sticks' from last night, but there was only a fork and a very large spoon.

Thorin raised an eyebrow at Bombur.

"Will you please demonstrate for us?"

Frodo piped up, "I can show you, King Thorin! But you have to tuck your napkin under your chin like me."

"Ah," said Thorin, doing so. "Please proceed, Master Frodo. We eagerly await your instruction."

Unlike Ori, Frodo showed no qualms about being the center of attention.

"So… so, you put your spoon in your left hand and your fork in your right."

"Do I use the side of the fork to cut this into small pieces?" Thorin asked.

"No! Wait!" Frodo cried.

"Please," Bilbo prompted.

"Please wait! We're not there yet," said Frodo.

"Well done," Bilbo praised.

"You put the spoon flat in the noodles," Frodo continued, "and sort of scrape a noodle onto it with your fork and twirl the fork and the noodle around and around in the spoon until it looks like a yarn spindle. Then you can eat it."

"I see," said Thorin, attempting this with only partial success. The moment he lifted his fork his noodles fell back into the bowl and he dripped sauce into his beard. "That didn't go as planned."

"Your noodle wasn't wrapped tightly enough," said Frodo.

Dwalin muttered, "Story o' 'is life."

Ori snorted but elbowed Dwalin on principle.

"Try it again, please," Frodo encouraged.

Dis watched her sons closely.

Fili had it figured out quickly. Ori thought that, after learning to wield two swords at once, noodles on a fork must seem easy. Kili managed the twirling but was less successful at delivering it to his mouth.

Meanwhile, Gimli was terribly excited.

"At last! Food I kin spill on me beard wi' impunity!"

Legolas laughed.

"What do you mean 'at last'? When has food ever stopped you?"
"Come t' think on it? Never."

Kili leaned closer to Ori, his face a study.

"Ori!" he whispered, "Are they feeding us worms?"

"No, it's just long dumplings. I watched them make it."

"Oh, that's alright, then. What's in the sauce? That's not worms, right?"

"Yes, Kili, it's worm guts. Enjoy."

Tauriel giggled around a mouthful.

"Ada," said Legolas quietly.

When Thranduil looked up, Legolas indicated Thranduil had sauce on his chin.

"Don't make me use King Thorin's napkin on you."

"Impudent fawn," Thranduil sniffed loftily.

"Besmudged monarch," Legolas replied, grinning, as Thranduil blotted his chin lightly.

As the meal went on, Ori observed there was a great deal of sauce left over after the noodles had gone. It was wonderfully flavorful, full of basil and another herb called oregano, onions and garlic and mushrooms. He eyed his spoon, wondering if it was meant to be eaten like a soup.

"How do I eat this?" he asked.

He could just imaging drinking it from the bowl. That sounded like an invite to disaster.

"That's what the bread is for," said Frodo.

Baskets of hearty bread sat on the table along with carafes of a red wine thick enough to chew, something that looked like iced green fruit juice and water.

Frodo put his now unnecessary spoon aside and began to push the sauce onto a chunk of bread with his fork

They all found their own technique. Gimli used the tried and true method, dunking his entire chunk of bread into the sauce, folding it to hold as much as possible then putting the whole thing in his mouth at once.

He eyed Legolas.

"Will yeh no' try it?"

Legolas laughed.

"I learned my lesson with the stew. I'm not sure I'd survive being a 'trencher'. Certainly my clothes wouldn't."

Soon everyone was sitting back in their chairs in various dazed states of food satiation. Once more Dori and Balin shooed the elf king to the window seat while the table was cleared, the dishes washed and the floor swept. This time Thorin and Dis joined the cleaning crew. Dis, in the larder
with Erda, discussed meals and Thorin, perfectly at ease, dried dishes with Ori and Bilbo. Ori tried desperately not to think of what he and Dwalin had discussed upstairs.

Bombur shooed everyone out, declaring that he was going to prepare coffee. When Thorin raised an eyebrow, Bombur laid his finger beside his nose.

“This is a most particular type of coffee, your majesty. It has a touch of this and that in it.”

Ori came back in to find that the furniture had been move about again. The dining table had been pushed back against the wall as it had for the dancing but all the comfortable furniture was clustered about the window seat. Oddly enough a few items seemed to be randomly scattered about the room.

Ori went straight to Dwalin and parked in his lap.

“Are we going to be dancing again tonight?”

“No, pet,” Dori told him. “Master Bombur and Mistress Erda said that tonight they are going to be teaching us a new party game.”

“From Gondor? Is wagging involved?”

“Don’t be naughty, pet.”

Dwalin hugged Ori harder and buried a snicker in his neck.

Master Bombur arrived with a large tray. On this were many beautiful cups, they were made of glass, had scrolling handles and pedestal bases and were tall and thin. Behind Bombur, Kali and Edi carried a large steaming canister. This was placed on the table. Bombur set down the tray and his sons set their burden down nearby. Bombur poured milky coffee into each cup and topped it with a dollop of cream and a sprinkle of cinnamon. Ori sniffed eagerly the combined scents were delicious.

Bombur came over with a tray of filled cups. Bilbo passed them out to Dis, Thranduil, Thorin, Dori, and Balin.

Dis sipped and smiled.

“Master Bombur, this is delicious!” she sighed happily

“Indeed, “ Bombur concurred. “A hobbit invention, a Mistress Glanbia Baileys from West Farthing, I think you said, Bilbo?”

“Yes, I believe she was a great, great aunt of mine.”

Thorin took a swallowed and all but purred.

“My compliments of your late aunt.”

“Thank you, your majesty.”

Kali arrived with another tray and Ori took his cup. He sipped carefully. It was a hot, sweet, heady mix of coffee brewed in cream and liquor.

While they enjoyed their coffee, the younger Urs, directed by Bofur and Bifur were re-arranging the furniture again.

I thought we were going to play-” Bombur started.
“Minnows,” Bifur said firmly, then chased Poli off by tickling her and making her shriek.

“Minnows?” Thorin asked.

“Minnows is a delightful, silly game,” Erda explained. “What we’re going to do is get the furniture set up, then we are going to put all of you in the hallway. We will send one person, the minnow, back into the room to hide. Then put out all the lights in this room. And because we all have excellent sight, we shall blindfold all of you as well.”

Everyone gasped and chattered. Erda held up her hand and continued.

“Then we will let you all back into the room. You mustn’t speak. What you have to do is find the minnow.”

“Without seeing?” Sigrid cried.

“Yes,” Erda laughed. “If you find someone, whisper to ask them if they are the minnow. If they are, they will whisper they are. You must then stay and hide with them. The game is over when everyone has found the minnow.”

Everyone laughed and chattered again.

“Now, “ Bombur smiled around them. “Who would like to be the minnow?”

This brought general suggestions and teasing until Thranduil, having been nudged several times by his ‘little leaf’, finished his coffee, sighed and said,

“Behold, I am your minnow.”

There was a cheer from the younger set and everyone finished their coffees also. The cups and urns were removed and they all went out to the hallway. Thranduil regally returned to the dining room with Erda and Bombur and the door closed behind behind them. Kali and the younger Urs busily passed out blindfolds and helped their guests put them on.

Ori let Dwalin blindfold him and he stood waiting, hearing everyone around him giggling and shifting. Ori heard the door open again and Erda and Bombur helped everyone back into the room.

Ori wasn’t too sure how he felt about moving about a room unseeing. He paused, pondering. They were looking for Thranduil, so he would be limited by his height. Ori shuffled over to the wall and slowly made his way along it, by running a hand on it. He carefully explored each of the curtains as he came to each window and ran his hand over the window seat and any other furniture he came across. He could hear everyone else wandering about and bumping into each other and stifling giggles. There were several squeaks and ‘ooo’s’ as certain people met other certain people and ‘indulged’ themselves.

Ori finished his circuit without finding the elf king or minnow. He tried to recall the rest of the room but tossed that thought aside as there had been noises of furniture moving while they were in the hallway. He found the door again and took a long step sideways to cross the room slowly. His hip came in contact with the table edge he had skirted before. A thought struck him. He ran his hands all over the table. Nothing. He considered, then shrugged and sank to his knees and slowly crawled under the table, sliding a hand on the edge. He got to the far side and was about to rise and continue when his hand found something. He took ahold of it. It was a leg.

“Minnow?” he whispered.
“Yes,” Thranduil murmured.

Ori bit back a triumphant noise and shuffled over to sit beside the elf king.

“You can take off the blindfold,” Thranduil breathed.

Ori did so and now he could see the other figures moving about the room. There was a shout and a crash.

“Got you!” Kili yelled. “Hang on to ‘im, Fi!”

“Get off me, you two idiots,” Thorin growled.

This brought laughter.

“Sorry, idad,” Fili said unapologetically.

“Whichever one of you is sitting on me, is going to be thrown out the window…as soon as I find one.”

With his blindfold off, Ori could make out the boots moving beside the table. He kept as quiet as possible but he knew Dwalin would find him and he was delighted by the idea. Dwalin had excellent hearing. Dwalin’s hands touched over the table and then he dropped to a squat and paused. Ori held his breath. Dwalin pounced forward and grabbed him. Ori clapped a hand over his mouth to stop his squeal. They had a brief scuffle on Thranduil, who hissed like an angry cat. Dwalin settled beside Ori, and arm around him.

“Yer minnowship.”

“Shut up.”

They settled then there was a shout of triumph from Gimli.

“Hah! Knew I’d get me some elvish arse. Got yeh, Master Minnow!”

“Gimli,” Tauriel’s usually patient voice had slight edge to it. “That is my ‘arse’! And if you don’t un-‘get’ it I’ll tie your beard in a knot. Several knots.”

There was a snort then a bright, “Ups-dpsy-daisy! Sorry, lass!”

“Gimli,” Kili roared. “Whatever you’re doing to Tauriel’s arse, stop it! I’ll kick you in the lake!”

“I’d like t’ see yeh try, laddie!” came the return volley.

“Stop both of you,” Thorin growled. “We’re looking for the minnow.”

“Fuck the minnow, Ki! I’ll have yer heed!” Gimli roared.

“Not even with yours!” Kili shouted.

There was terrible stamping and puffing and yelling as the two combatants tried vainly to find each other, followed by whoops of laughter as they happily mowed everyone in the way aside.

There were squeals as the youngest Urs dove for the door to leave but ended up under the table
with the Minnow.

Poli shrieked in delight, starting Isi, Neti, Ari, Muri and Buri to exclaim at their luck of finding the minnow so soon.

“Found you! Found you!”

“Hush,” Ori tried in vain.

“Hang about, love,” Dwalin rose and moved toward the shouts of Gimli, Kili, Fili, and Sigrid, who were causing a melee.


“I’ve got you, our Gimmers!” that was a shout from Legolas.

Gimli shouted a war cry above the elf’s snickering.

“Hah, Got you!” Kili tried.

“Nah, laddie, yeh go’ me.”

In the dimness of the room Ori saw Dwalin hoist the younger prince like a sack of potatoes.

“Idad!”

“Throw him out the window, Dwalin” Thorin helped.

“Amad!!”

“Dwalin!” Dis shrieked

“Wha’?” Dwalin grumped.

“For Mahal’s sake,” Dis barked. “Open the window before you throw him out. It would be rude of you to break any as the Urs have been so kind to us.”

“Fiiiiiiii!” Kili bellowed, figuring his brother was his last hope.

Sigrid shrieked and started laughing.

“Fili, go help your brother.”

“And get caught by Captain– Oi, leggo of my hand.”

“I don’t have your hand! Stop pulling!”

‘What is this?’

“Let go!”

“I can’t. Right.”

Ori headed Fili give a grunt of exertion, there was the sound of tearing cloth and Sigrid shrieked again.

“Are you alright, Sigrid?” Tauriel demanded
“Yes,” Sigrid managed gasping between laughing. “I’m all right. I- I-”

“What the-,” Fili started. “Why do I have material in my hand?”

“What material?” Dis demanded.

“I don’t know.” Fili replied.

Sigrid continued to giggle helplessly. Ori heard her gasp something to Tauriel who started to giggle, too. At that moment, Ori heard Dori murmur.

“Finally a place out of the way and peaceful.”

“And now, m’dear,” replied Balin in a low, lecherous whisper. Ori gulped as he heard the pair slide onto the table top.

The table above them creaked menacingly.

“Oh, no,” Ori mumbled he seized the Ur badgers as a group and bodily shoved them out from under the table as the legs gave way.

“Sweet Aüle-fucking, goat-shagging, malignant, useless, blasted, dwarrow!” Thranduil raged, trapped under the table and Dori and Balin supine across it.

“Ada!” Legolas cried, clearly horrified by both his father’s predicament and rudeness.

The door flew open and Bombur, Erda, Bofur, and Bifur rushed in with lights.

“Get them and this ill-built excuse of a table off me!!”

Dwalin lifted Dori off and gave Balin a hand up while Dis and Thorin rescued the angry monarch. It took a good deal of brushing down, back patting and comforting words to soothe Thranduil, but Thorin and Dis showed themselves to be remarkably good at it.

Thranduil looked simmeringly at Dori, who was brushing himself off daintily.

Dori looked up, cleared his threat, and said candidly,

“If it’s all the same to you, Thrandy, dear, I would prefer that neither of us ever mentioned this little incident to dear Lady Galadriel.”

Dori cocked an eye at Thranduil with a tiny smile. Thranduil stared, then his lips twitched and he chuckled.

“Oh Dori,” the elf king groaned. “You are the most maddening, teasing, utterly lawless creature I’ve have ever met. No wonder you make everyone, including me, adore you. I demand your pity instantly.”

Dori laughed delightedly and skipped over to hug the tall, willowy monarch. Thranduil leaned over and swept his arms about Dori and kissed his cheek.

“Revilting, ravishing creature,” he chided.

Fili was examining the piece of material he held.

“Is this another bathing costume top?” he asked Sigrid, holding it out to her.
She snatched it away.

“No, you idiot. Dipfa made it. It’s an abbreviated under bodice.”

“What?” Fili was appalled.

“Yes, you ripped off the top half my underpinnings while in the same room as your mother. Good thing it was dark!”

Fili closed his eyes as though in pain and turned beetroot. Kiil and Gimli started to cackle. Thorin and Dwalin face-palmed in unison. Dis went to Erda and dropped her head on Erda’s shoulder. Erda patted her consolingly.

“Where did I go wrong?” Dis groaned.

Erda and Bombur laughed at her. Bofur and Bifur were re-lighting the lamps and making snide comments.

“I’m so sorry,” Fili mumbled.

Sigrid giggled and nudged her shoulder into his.

“Silly. It was funny.”

The furniture was put to rights and the Urs offered draughts, cards, and backgammon.

Dwalin plumped back into the couch and Ori sat beside him. In a few moments, Poli and Neti pushed a small table in front of them and fetched over Thranduil and Frodo. Thranduil sank into a winged chair and took the glass of wine Kali offer him. The lasses and Frodo sat on stools at the little table. Poli shuffled a pack of cards then began to deal them out.

“Wha’ we playing’, lassie?” Dwalin asked, amused.

“Rummy,” Poli informed them.

“Rummy?” Thranduil raised his brows inquiringly.

Poli proceeded to give him a quick run down of the rules. Ori tried not to smile as the elf king seemed to absorb the instructions and lifted his seven cards to look at them. The cards were sized to badgers and look tiny in the elf’s hands.

Ori hadn’t played in years and the game was lively enough with the three badgers taking their collections and discards very seriously.

Five games later, Bilbo rose from his seat where he had been talking with Balin, Thorin and Dis.

“Alright, Frodo, time for all good faunts to be abed.”

“I want a story, Uncle Bilbo! Please!”

The young Urs all echoed him. It was obvious Bilbo was not going to get away story-free.


They all cheered, games suddenly at and end.
“About Uncle Bu’ror,” said Frodo.

“About great-great-uncle Bullroarer. Hmmm. And, would this be the story about the trolls?”

“Yes!” Frodo cried. “The troll snot!”

“The candor of youth,” said Bilbo, picking up the faunt and sitting Frodo on his knee. “Oof! You are getting heavy, my lad. You know, I’ve told you that story so often, I think I’d like you to tell it to me for a change.”

The faunt pulled back, shocked.

“I can’t do that!”

“No? And why not? You know it, don’t you?”

“Yes, but that’s just wrong!”

“It can’t be all that wrong. I’ve seen you playing it for pretend out in the garden.”

“That’s just play!”

“But you do it so well. How about this? I will tell the story, but you have to help me make the troll sounds.”

“The really disgusting ones?”

“Especially those.”

Frodo nodded.

“Alright,” he said, “but you have to start.”

After the badgers were tucked off to bed, the elders sat about still talking.

Ori watched as Bilbo poured himself some water and added a few drops of wine into it.

"D' yeh no' like the wine, Master Bilbo?” Balin asked.

"I like it just fine, but I try to stay present and accountable if Frodo is off-step. He tends to have nightmares."

"You think he's ill?" Ori asked.

Dis nodded. "His eyes were just a little too bright."

"He gets overtired and overexcited," said Bilbo "He's still a little fellow and it's easy to forget when he's in company and chattering."

"He's certainly taken to us all quickly enough," Dori observed.

Bilbo and Bombur exchanged grins.

Bombur said, "That's because we're all hobbits. Did you not know?"
"Beg pardon?" Dori asked.

"When we arrived," said Bilbo, "Frodo saw a jolly fellow with a jolly wife and a dozen well-fed offspring and a tray of ginger snaps had just come from the oven. He wanted to know why the big hobbits wore boots and why they were all wearing such odd red scarves."

"Oh no!" Dori cried.

"Oh, yes," said Bilbo. "He adapted easily enough to days of cooking and cleaning and hospitality-by-herd. That's what it's like back home. Or, at least what home used to be like."

He frowned into his water, then abruptly snapped out of it.

"Time for that special dessert, Bombur? Now all the pebbles are abed?"

Bombur's eyes twinkled.

"I do believe you're right. A midnight snack for the grownups. "Tea?" Bilbo asked Ori.

"Yes, please!" Ori enthused.

He expected a pot of tea to materialize. Instead Bilbo poured out a cup of what Ori had taken for fruit juice.

Ori was horrified.

"Why is it green?"

"It's green tea."

"Ah." He narrowed his eyes at Bilbo. "You're not having me on, Bilbo?"

"I never joke about tea," said Bilbo. "My ancestors would come back to haunt me. Besides, wait until you add milk and honey."

"I shall reserve judgment," Ori promised.

It was well worth the self-control he found.

"It's really good! It tastes like it should be fruit."

"Melons?" Bilbo asked.

"Yes! How did they do that?"

"I'm fond of melons myself," said Dis.

"What kind?" Bilbo asked.

She smiled in such a way that Ori knew she was thinking of Jani.

"You know," said Tharkûn, suddenly sitting on the end of the couch near Frodo's empty seat, "melons are supposed to be terribly good for the digestion. Not to mention whetting the appetite."

"Gandalf!" Bilbo cried.
Dessert and a dazzling announcement

Chapter by Stevie_Foxx

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Tharkûn’s back. Put away the valuables and hide the candy. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

“Ah, Tharkûn,” said Bombur, not all surprise. “Just in time for dessert as usual.”
“Master Bombur. As you know, my valar-given mystical powers allow me to know exactly when dessert is being served everywhere in Arda.”
“Wait,” said Ori to the wizard. “Are you Gandalf, too?”
“It’s one of my names,” said Tharkûn. He leaned in closer and said confidentially, “When you have my reputation, an alias is useful.”
“You’re not exactly anonymous, Master Tharkûn,” said Ori.
“I beg to differ, young master, I think I blend in seamlessly with any room.”
“Except a really short one,” said Dwalin.
Bombur and Erda passed out little dishes, and served up coffee in tiny cups.
Ori found out why the cups were so small when he tasted it.
“Mahal! That is strong!”
Bombur assured him, “It’s what goes best with this dessert, and it is Tharkûn’s favorite.”
“Tha’ explains a few thin’s,” said Dwalin.
Ori looked at his dessert, a cross between a small square of cake and a cube of firm pudding, saturated with the scent of coffee and chocolate. The top was dusted with powdered chocolate and topped with cream and a plump strawberry. He took a mouthful and was delighted by the combined tastes. It was almost as though he was eating coffee liqueur soaked cake mixed with whipped cream.
Someone made a sexy noise, though no one would own up to it, and Dis said, “Should I be about to die, I demand someone shove a piece of this in my mouth immediately.”
Dwalin smiled at Ori and thoroughly licked off his spoon, leaned in very close and whispered, “Nice an’ creamy, jus’ like you.”
Ori squeaked unintentionally and squirmed away, latching onto the first thing that occurred to him.
“Did you ever find Notathain Shire, Master Tharkûn?” Ori asked, his voice rather higher than usual.
“How did you know I was supposed to be looking for him?” Gandalf replied, eyebrows high as he lit his pipe with the snap of his fingers and blew rings of smoke.
“Lady Galadriel wondered if you knew he was missing. She did say Gandalf and now I know that means you, I remembered her mentioning it.”
“Ah, yes. Well, I did know, in fact, it was why I left Erebor when I did. It certainly took Eru’s own luck to find him.”
“So, you know where he is?” Ori asked excitedly.
Everyone in the room sat up and stared at him.
“I do,” said Tharkûn.
The cacophony was marvelous.
“Where? Where is he?” Dis demanded.
“Is he alright?” Ori asked.

“He seems perfectly fine,” said Tharkûn. “A little harassed, not surprising, given the circumstances.”

Thorin said, “If he’s in difficult straits, he’s welcome to come to Erebor.”

“Indeed,” Dis agreed.

Bilbo looked up from fiddling with his pipe.

“That’s very generous of you, King Thorin.”

“He brings our people a great deal of pleasure, the Durins are no exception.”

“But do you know why he disappeared? What horrible things he’s supposed to have done?”

Bilbo asked. “He is a stranger to you, after all. Do you think the populace would be quite safe?”

Dwalin snorted, “Well, if he’s skinnin’ wargs alive an’ eatin’ orcs with hot sauce, I’m sure we’d’ve heard of it. In fact, we know naught o’ wha’ he’s supposed t’ have done. D’ yeh?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” said Bilbo, “though eating orcs with hot sauce isn’t on the list as far as I’ve heard. Think you’d rather deserve some sort of medal for that, really.”

Bombur cleared his throat and wiped his mouth, turning to Bilbo saying seriously,

“You don’t have to do this, if you’d rather not,”

“Eat orcs?” Bilbo commented lightly. “As a matter of fact, I would really rather not.”

“You’re Shire!” Ori cried.

An electric thrill shot through the room.

Bilbo calmly lit his pipe from the candle on the table, puffed it into life and smiled.

“Guilty.”

Silence.

“Tell us she doesn’t do it!” Sigrid cried.

Bilbo looked startled and puzzled.

“What?”

“Estrella! Tell us she doesn’t run off with Squire Harsh!”

“Of course she doesn’t! That would be silly. She’s far too smart for that.”

“And how,” Ori jumped in, “can Captain Cockrell be a pirate lord and king of something or other and not be smart enough to tell her he loves her?”

Bilbo said, “Ah. Well, kings do tend to be rather dense when it comes to declaring their love.”

Balin and Dwalin were suddenly seized with coughing fits.

“But, why did you disappear?” Ori piped, somewhat in awe. “If you don’t mind me asking, Master Shire?”

Bilbo laughed.

“I’m not Shire. Shire is a brilliant, well-travelled, scandalous figure of legend. I’m Bilbo Baggins, erstwhile country squire and, unfortunately, a little too well-off for my near relatives’ liking. I wish I was Squire. Bastard would probably have just run them all through and been done with it.”

Dwalin chuckled.

“Yer great-uncle Bullroarer seems t’ have stayed in yer blood.”

“If he could see how badly I ride a pony, he’d disown me, I’m sure,” said Bilbo. “Really, I’m mainly spectacular for my ability to antagonize people.”

“Yeh didn’t strike me as a dangerous criminal,” said Dwalin.

“Perhaps not a violent criminal, but I am a filthy perverter of public morals. To amuse myself I took commissions to write pornographic works. My patrons were all wealthy hobbits who didn’t mind waiting for their stories, since I transcribed them, illustrated them and bound them by hand. Very few people knew of my little sideline.”

Dis considered.

“Whereas everyone knew of your wider fictional works, at least in the Shire. Things seemed to have come to a tipping point, Master Baggins.”

“Yes, last autumn. Frodo’s parents died and I adopted him and named him my heir. Suddenly, a good many people who expected to benefit from my death no longer had expectations. That was what set it off, and it wasn’t the ‘good stuff’ that they targeted as proof of my depravity, but the
largely harmless stories I published under a pseudonym that were widely read all over the Shire.”
“All over Arda,” said Thorin quietly.
“Master Baggins,” Balin said, thoughtfully. "Yer fellow hobbits seem t’ have mistaken legal prosecution f’r literary criticism.”
“Indeed, Mister Balin, and what I find most galling is that my wealthy patrons are the ones who bray loudest about me producing extremely cheap, extremely mild versions of that for which they paid top gold. When my fellow hobbits started making noises about seizing my property and my heir, I felt it best for Frodo and I to absent ourselves. I could have gone to Tuckborough and stayed with my Took relatives, but they’re mad as mice and I’m only half-mad.”
Ori’s brain worked through this entire line of reasoning and came to a startling end.
“Your mother was the adventurer Belladonna Took.”
The Durins murmured amongst themselves. Belladonna Took was not an unknown figure in Erebor.
“She was,” said Bilbo “She probably would have run them through, too.”
A ghostly figure appeared in the doorway. It was Poli in her nightshirt.
“Mam? Frodo’s having nightmares.”
Bilbo abandoned his pipe in the ashtray.
“Excuse me,” he said absently.
He took Poli’s hand and brought her back up to bed.
People began to tidy up and Dwalin yawned and gave Ori’s knee a shake.
“C’mon, love. Bedtime?”
Ori nodded.
“Yes, I feel like I’m ready to sleep for a week.”
Bofur made an odd noise which he turned into a cough when Erda glared at him.
Upstairs Ori shucked his clothes off and pulled his nightshirt over his head. Dwalin got into the huge bed and Ori piled in beside him.
“’Night, love,” Dwalin murmured.
“G’night.” Ori kissed him and they settled down. Dwalin lay on his back with Ori curled beside him, an arm across Dwalin’s belly. Ori fell asleep.

Ori was awake.
He was wide awake.
He stared into the depths of the night, and sighed.
The coffee had not been entirely overcome by the liquor.
In the dark, Dwalin chuckled.
“Well, here we are. Wha’ d’yeh wan’ t’ do?”
His voice was leering and suggestive, but all Ori could think of was, “Let’s go outside!”
“Really?”
“Yes!”
“All right. Let’s go.”
“Should we get dressed?”
“Nah. If this is good enough f’r our Thrandy, it’s good enough f’r us.”
As they made their way toward the stairs, the door down the hall opened and Fili slunk out, closing it noiselessly behind him. He turned toward Sigrid’s room and had taken a step when he realized he had been spotted. He froze, he grinned and it froze.
“Thought I heard her calling me,” Fili explained, turning back to his room.
“You did,” replied Sigrid’s disembodied voice.
Dwalin and Ori walked past the young prince.
“Be’er do somethin’ about’ tha’, lad,” Dwalin commented with a smirk.
They continued down the hall to the sound of snoring. Following it to the source, they found Gimli’s door open and, tucked up in bed, Gimli himself flat on his back, snoring hard enough to
ruffle the curtains.

Legolas sat crosslegged on the end of the bed in total puzzlement.

“I poked him twice,” said Legolas. “He didn’t even stir.”

“Wha’ d’ye pok him with, laddie?”

“Apparently not the right piece of my anatomy,” Legolas said, rather disgruntled.

Balin and Dori’s door was closed tight, but they were obviously not asleep. If not for Gimli’s snoring, Ori was fairly sure they would have been audible down in the kitchens.

Downstairs, in the sitting room, Thorin and Bilbo shared a pot of tea. Dis poured out a cup and said, “It could have been worse, Master Bilbo. He wasn’t sick to his stomach.”

“Oh, we’ve been through that more times than I care to count.”

“When Fili was about that age, he went through a period where he was terrified to sleep because he kept having nightmares about my husband’s death.”

“And Kili?”

“Kili was far too small to know what was happening. Of course, as he got older he had a habit of calling every male dwarf he met ‘adad’. When he started calling all the dams ‘adad’, we knew we had to straighten things out.”

As Ori and Dwalin passed, Thorin waved to them.

The front door was propped open and Bombur and Erda sat on a bench just outside, giggling and holding hands.

Erda smiled up at them.

“It’s such a nice night, so we decided on the coffee.”

Bombur chuckled.

“With predictable results.”

Erda added, “Careful if you’re going to take a wander by the lake. Kili and Tauriel started down that way a little while ago.”

Ori snickered and Dwalin said, “Aye, off shaggin’ his elf.”

“And is Gimli shagging his?” Bombur asked.

“He can’t wake Gimli up,” Ori told them. “Gimli is just snoring at him.”

“You’d think a clever lad like that would go about it a different way,” Bombur commented, thoughtfully, totally ignoring the fact that Legolas was least two thousand years older than him.

They heard voices in the back of the inn, young voices raised high in excitement while still others hushed them.

“Oh, stuff it,” barked Edi. “It’s not like anyone’s still asleep.”

Ori tilted his head over in the direction of the kerfuffle.

“The very youngest are in bed; as for the tweens, they don’t really need coffee, do they,” said Erda.

Ori and Dwalin wished them good night and wandered hand and hand toward the flower beds. Someone had been working at them recently. Ori tried to step carefully among the dirt mounds, feeling the irrational need to apologize when he trod too close to some planting of another.

Finally, he pulled Dwalin out onto the grass.

The lights from the inn only cast a faint glow here, and the moon was new. Ori looked up into the night and gasped.

“Look at all the stars!” he said. “I would never have thought there were so many.”

“More than anyone kin count.”

“So beautiful,” said Ori.

Dwalin wrapped arms around him from behind.

“Shoulda brought a blanket or somethin’. Better t’ see it all lyin’ on the grass.”

Ori cocked an eyebrow and looked up at him.

“I’m guessing that’s not the only thing that’s better on the grass.”

“Hmmmm, could be.”

They had rolled around in the park that time late at night, but roaming around a pasture in use at night had seemed a plan for disaster. Here the animals were pastured on the other side of the inn,
beyond the barn. Ori couldn't help wishing he'd planned out this moment. He wouldn't mind rolling around on this hillside with Dwalin. The air here was different than under the mountain, the scent of the green grass present, the stone a little further away. The soft air had cooled just enough to make cuddling back against Dwalin even more decadent than usual.

He rubbed back against his husband.
"Fresh air got yeh a little frisky, love?"
"It's really delicious, isn't it."
"Delicious? Do tell, me little hedonist."
Ori opened his mouth to reply, but just then he was seized by this moment, possibly by Yavanna and most definitely with the surge of too much coffee in his blood.
He leaned forward, grinning, peering out into the night.
"Can you feel that?" he asked.
Since Dwalin's hands were roaming his chest and shoulders through his nightshirt at the moment, it wasn't surprising to hear, "I kin feel quite a few nice thin's."
"But, this is-"
Ori darted forward, entirely on impulse, flung off his nightshirt, and whirled around with his arms out as though he embraced the world.
"Dwalin! Can you feel it?"
"Feel what, love?" asked Dwalin, chuckling.
"The hills! They're alive!"
Dwalin tilted his head, frowning.
"Are yeh goin' t' sing?"
"Why would I sing?" Ori asked.
"Ne'er mind. If they are alive, yeh be'er come back here before they eat yeh."
Ori laughed and started a silly, skipping dance.
"Look! I'm an elf!"
"Aye, I kin see yer ears growin' from 'ere."
"Come on!"
"Yeh want me t' dance like an elf?"
Ori held out a beckoning hand, still skipping about as though he were mad.
"Aw, wha' th' fuck," Dwalin muttered.
He flung off his own nightshirt and grabbed Ori's hand, though the closest he could get to skipping was to jump in place.
Ori thought that looked like fun, so he jumped, too, the pair of them stark naked, jumping in tandem, laughing hysterically, until Dwalin slipped in the dewy grass and down they went in a heap, still laughing and still holding hands.
Gasping for breath, Dwalin said, "I'll ne'er live tha' down."
"I won't tell a soul," Ori promised.
"Th' same can't be said f'r Targ over there, walkin' th' perimeter."
Ori squawked. He sat up and leaned over his husband.
"Oh, Mahal! Dwalin, I'm so sorry! I shouldn't ha-"
Dwalin put a finger to Ori's lips.
"Love, if I was worried about wha' Targ thinks, I wouldn't've done tha'. Or this."
"What?"
Dwalin pounced on him and rolled him over onto his back.
Ori swallowed.
"What did you have in mind?"
"Jus' a little canoodlin'."
"Mmmm. Canoodle at will."
Ori slipped his arms around Dwalin's neck and drew him down for a kiss. It started off rather shy and teasing, but it was soon apparent his mouth was not all Dwalin intended to devour.
"Dwalin, that tickles!"
"Yer ears must be oversensitive from growin' like tha'."
Dwalin peppered him with kisses, so fast and all over, Ori couldn't really do anything but laugh and try to writhe away and Dwalin wasn't letting him go anywhere.
"S-stop," Ori giggled. "I can't breathe!"
"Faker," Dwalin accused, but he rolled over and let Ori curl up on him. "I'll give yeh a breather, but after tha', I make no promises."
"Merciful Mahal!"
"Sorry, th' hills tol' me t' do it."
After a moment, Dwalin lifted his head to peer down the length of his own body. With his free hand he grasped his cock and raised and lowered it carefully.
Ori laughed. "What are you doing?"
"Makin' sure I didn't sprain it with all tha' jumpin' around. Ah, it starts up just fine."
"Well, that's a relief!" Ori said, snickering. "When we first met, I would never have have imagined you'd do something this silly. You always seemed so... I guess stern is the wrong word, you're not a school marm."
"That's f'r the best, I'd look terrible with wha's left o' me hair in a bun."
"Anyway, I had no idea you'd ever jump around naked in the middle of some field at night, pretending to be an elf."
Dwalin snorted.
"The day we met, what I really wanted t' do was bounce around yeh like an overexcited puppy."
"Really?"
"I'd been watching' yeh so long. I knew just who yeh were th' moment I clapped eyes on yeh. When we got married I wanted t' pick yeh up an' spin yeh around, but since I'd pretty much forced yeh int' marryin' me, I didn't think it'd go over too well."
"Why do I get the impression that wouldn't have stopped Dain?"
"Because he's an even bigger Durin turnip than I am. Best I could hope f'r was yeh'd take a likin' t' me one day."
"I already had taken a liking to you, about three years earlier."
"Aye, well, timin' is everythin'."
As they lay there, floppy as noodles, a star broke from position and sped across the sky in a blaze and was gone.
Ori sat up in surprise.
"What was that?"
"Shootin' star. Make a wish, but don't tell any wha' it is."
There were so many competing wishes in Ori's brain, he couldn't just think of one. He had everything he ever could have wanted, but he knew others were struggling.
A baby for Dori and Balin?
Happiness in love for Thorin?
Oh, just a million things.
Finally he settled on: I wish everyone could be as content as I am right now.
As the lights of the inn went out one after another, and the night deepened, he finally thought he might be ready to sleep.
"We should go inside," said Ori drowsily.
"I think yer right." Dwalin stood and gave him a hand up. They turned toward the inn, but Dwalin held back.
"Just a mo."
He went and retrieved their nightshirts, ghostly white patches on the dark ground, now soaked through.
"Let's put these on th' dryin' rack," Dwalin said, chucking his chin to where they left bathing costumes at the end of the day. "Shouldn't leave our whatnots strewn about th' place. Got t' keep things tidy f'r th' quality."
“And what will we wear to go back upstairs?” Ori asked slyly.
“We’ll just have t’ take ’em at a run,” said Dwalin, grinning.
Everyone else had long since gone back to bed and Erda and Bombur had left the bench. The door was closed but the light above the door shown a soft, welcoming beacon.

That little, disaster-fixed voice in Ori’s head wondered what they would do if the door was locked. He could see the pair of them circling the house, desperately looking for an open window, inevitably running into Dori as he searched for a late night snack.

The door was not locked, however, and opened on noiseless hinges.

They stood in the hall, looking up the stairs.

"Ready t’ make a run f’r it?" Dwalin asked.

"Let’s do this,” said Ori. "We can't possibly make more noise than the cats did."

There was a certain thrill to it, as they could be discovered at any moment. Nudity wasn’t a problem for dwarrow, but running through the halls of a public inn naked might raise a few eyebrows.

Ori himself was loathe to display his freckled arse to the entire dwarven world.

They had a perfunctory wash, so as not to muddy the sheets, but he and Dwalin curled up together, still naked, pulling up the quilt from the end of the bed.

The last thing Ori thought of before he drifted off was to wonder how Thranduil had spent the night.

Probably enjoying his pajamas, Ori thought, giggling, and eased down into sleep.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. This
chapter is quite the mile-stone thus we have prepared a truly wonderful dessert for your
delectation! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time,
same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori woke just before dawn and slithered out of bed to look out the window. The lake was dark
and still. The birds had not yet begun their morning chorus. He thought he saw fireflies before he
realized it was the wrong time for fireflies. He rubbed his eyes.

On the lawn between the lake and the Inn, Lady Galadriel was dancing blithely, flitting through
the grass. To Ori’s surprise, a bare headed Tharkûn was galumphing along with her to some music
only they heard. Ori shook his head. He must be dreaming and crawled back into bed.

He woke again later when Dwalin kissed him. They lazily washed, dressed, and wandered down
to breakfast. Balin, Dori, Dis, and Thorin were already there.

They were drinking tea.

Ori and Dwalin greeted them and sat down. Ori looked about.

“We don’t help ourselves?”

“No,” Thorin replied, shaking his head. “Apparently Bombur has something special planned.

Tea?”

“Yes, please.”

“It’s not as strong as usual,” Dis laughed. “I think Erda is going to let us all get some sleep
tonight.”

“I hope so,” Ori commented. “Not sleeping makes me see weird things.”

He had only meant it as a light comment but everyone at the table turned and looked seriously at
him.

“What?” he asked.

Dwalin put his arm on the back of Ori’s chair.

“Wha’ yeh see, love?”

“Well,” Ori hesitated. “Don’t mention it to anyone but-”

“But,” Dori encouraged.

“I woke before dawn, or thought I did, and looked out the window. I thought I saw Lady

Galadriel and Tharkûn dancing on the lawn before the lake.”

Thorin and Dis choked on their tea in unison.

“Well, well, well!” Balin murmured, eyes twinkling. “I always did wonder. She only had one
badger by tha’ lord o’ hers. He never seems t’ be o’ much use. I suppose one such as herself requires
many…friends.”

“Oh really,” giggled Dori. “Has she offered her ‘friendship’ to you?”

Balin laid a finger alongside his nose.

“I interpreted it as f’r both of us. Since I didn’t have time t’ speak t’ yeh ‘bout i’, me beloved, I
politely turned her down”

“Hmmmm,” remarked Dori, pretending to be in serious thought but smiling naughtily.

There was a rumble on the stairs and the Durin brothers, Gimli, Sigrid and two younger elves
trotted in and greeted everyone. All, except Gimli and Legolas, looked happy and refreshed. Legolas looked like he’d been laughing too hard and Gimli was red-faced and sulky.

King Thranduil swept into the room moments later and cast his eyes about.

“How very late you all are. I assure you the dawn was beautiful.”

Ori looked at the king, one eyebrow raised.

“I didn’t see you.”

Thranduil looked confused for an instant then smiled sweetly.

“You should have come and enjoyed the dawn.”

Ori grinned naughtily.

“Thank you, but Dwalin and I thoroughly enjoyed the starlight.”

“Yes, I’m sure you did.”

This exchanged brought snickering and a few blushes from the younger set.

“I didn’t do anything!” Gimli shouted, feeling persecuted.

“And I shall vouch for you, in that.” Legolas assured everyone.

Bombur bustled in with various family members and begged everyone to be seated.

“This morning we have for you another Orocarni meal. Today, we have sweetened rice, pork in a spicy sauce and fried plantains.”

Erda carried in a vast platter containing steaming small rounds, fried golden and smelling wonderful.

Ori, after sampling one of the plantains, dumped a good amount on his plate. They were mealy yet smooth and delicious. The rice was very slightly sweetened and very sticky, the grains much smaller than usual. The pork had fallen apart in the sauce and the tastes combined made Ori sigh with contentment. There were a few plates of cut fruit which looked a little like a peach but was, Erda told them, a similar fruit called an apricot.

Thranduil declined the pork and only had a small spoonful of the rice but after everyone had helped themselves to good portions of the plantains he took the platter, now two-thirds empty, and transferred all the remaining contents to his own plate. Even Thorin looked impressed as the slender elf ate away the entire pile with a smile that reminded Ori of a hawk dining on a rabbit.

Tharkûn arrived at that moment and Thranduil smirked at him.

“You’re just in time,” said the king, nodding to the empty platter.

“You majesty,” said Tharkûn with great dignity, “you are an utter bounder and a piglet.”

“What’s a bounder?” Frodo asked, entering with Bilbo.

Balin replied, “Someone who leaps about and capers.”

Everyone snickered, but Frodo eyed Thranduil with naked skepticism.

Thorin smiled at Frodo.

“How are you feeling this morning, akunith?”

Frodo shrugged and wandered over to him.

“I’m fine, I guess. What’s an ahkoonith?”

“It mean ‘boy who is young’.”

“In khudz… khuzdul?”

“Yes, very good.”

Frodo beamed up at Bilbo.

“I learned a word!”

“You did indeed,” said Bilbo. “Well done! Come and eat second breakfast.”

The table as one turned to Bilbo.

“Second breakfast!” Gimli cried as if he’d never heard something so wonderful. “You eat two breakfasts?”

“Yes,” said Bilbo, “and Frodo slept through the first.”

Erda arrived with a second platter of plantains and very deliberately placed them close to Tharkûn and Frodo and further away from Thranduil, who put on a puppyish frown that would have done Kili proud.

The remains of first, and second, breakfasts were consumed without undo ceremony.
Frodo knelt up in his chair and helped stack the breakfast dishes onto the tray with a practiced hand, Erda lifted it and Frodo followed her out.

The younger set bounded off to don their bathing suits, threatening each other with further water wars.

Bilbo went out, promising more tea and Tharkûn, sitting at his seat one moment, was gone the next.

Thranduil blotted his mouth with his serviette and mentioned something about perambulating the lake on his way out.

Ori put his nose back in his tea cup, wondering what, if anything, was planned today.

“Have you grass stains on your nightshirt, pet,” said Dori idly.

Since Ori wasn’t actually wearing his nightshirt at the moment, he was taken by surprise.

“How do you know?”

“You left it on the drying rack where anyone can see. I suppose this means I’ll have to do a wash.”

“You’re doing a wash here? On holiday? I mean final mourning?”

Balin chuckled and Thorin rolled his eyes.

“I can’t let you go about in dirty clothes, pet,” Dori continued. “You’ve always been…”

Dori went on, as Dori often did, but all Ori heard was: BlahBlahBlahBlah, Badger, BlahBlah…Ori was a grown dwarf, in fact did his own laundry back in Steam Alley. Dori obviously needed a distraction. Any distraction. Ori didn’t even think about what he would say before he said it.

“Dori, please just go get pregnant,” he cried, exasperated.

“Oh!” Dori gasped. “Did I raise you to be that ill-mannered, young dwarf?”

Ori collapsed into his hands, not quite pulling his hair. He hadn’t meant that to spew out the way it had.

“I’m sorry, Dori, but, my laundry? You surely have better things to do than take care of a full grown dwarf with a messy nightshirt. There’s the lake and Balin and the sunshine and Balin and…” Ori paused and looked pointedly at his brother-in-law.

“And Balin!”

Balin winked at Ori and put a hand on Dori’s shoulder.

“The lad does have a point, beloved. We should certainly put our energies into that, plug away at it, so to speak.”

Dori giggled, distracted by such a delightful notion.

“Aye, go plug,” said Dwalin, finishing his tea.

Dori looked flirtatiously at Balin, as he rose. “Well, my heart, are you coming?”

“I certainly hope t’, me beloved.” Balin followed him, patting Dori’s bottom. “Lead the way, as yeh always do.”

Dis and Thorin snorted.

Ori groaned and dropped his face back into his hands.

“Oh, why did I say that? I am such a bad brother!”

“You’re not a bad brother,” said Dis, rolling her eyes. “You’re just a frustrated brother. If he goes on about it again, just blame Dwalin.”

She smirked at him and Ori thought it made her look very much like Thorin.

“Aye,” said Dwalin, “yeh kin blame me. I don’ mind, if it’ll make yeh happy.”

Bilbo came in with the teapot.

“What’s happened, Ori?” Bilbo asked.

“Dori was going on about the grass stains on my nightshirt. I mean…”

Bilbo raised a saucy eyebrow.

“Ahh hah. And, pray tell, how did those get there?”

“We went out t’ muck about…t’gether,” said Dwalin. “We found muck.”

“Yes, Mister Dwalin, thank you,” said Bilbo, “but I had apprehended that much. I was just having Ori on. Do try to keep up.”

Dwalin grinned evilly. “When yeh go’ a young hubby like mine, lad? I’m keepin’ it up mos’ a’
“Dwalin!” Ori cried.
Bilbo chuckled.
“Yes, very good. Very well done. Married him for his subtly and charm, Ori?”
“And his cute butt,” said Ori.
“Aye, “ agreed Dwalin. “Bu’ mostly f’r me butt.”
Bilbo leaned back to inspect ‘the butt’ then nodded.
“Yes, that explains everything.”
Thorin poured Bilbo some tea and very deliberately placed it at the empty seat next to him.
“Do have a seat, Master Baggins,” he rumbled. “Perhaps your presence will keep the
conversation on civilized terms.”
“No fear,” Bilbo replied as he seated himself and Thorin poured the exact amount of cream Bilbo
usually took.
“Thank you.” Bilbo glanced around the company at the table. “I notice we had some very early
risers. The dew on the lawn towards the lake was quite disturbed.”
Ori considered.
“Have you seen Lady Galadriel lately?”
Bilbo’s eyebrow flew up.
“Yes, when I awoke and came down, she was in the kitchen with Erda. She consumed an entire
loaf of bread, fresh from the oven and went through a whole pot of elderberry preserves doing it.”
“Ahhh, dear Lady Galadriel,” Thorin said with a suppressed smile. “She does seem to be rather
fond of elderberries.”
“Is she still here?” Ori asked.
“No, she disappeared off right after.”
“Didn’t she even pay her shot?” Dis teased.
“Yes,” Bilbo said meditatively. “The peas are ready two weeks early, all the herbs have grown
two inches, and I think we may have several rows of onions ready to pull. Quite unusual, as we
planted them not even a week ago.”
Thorin looked sideways at Bilbo.
“Really?”
Bilbo nodded. “Yes, onions take their own time. Mind, I’m not sure if I’m pleased that she left the
tomatoes to my care or not. Having them suddenly ready would be lovely but I am most particular
about my tomatoes.”
“That sauce last night was wonderful, Bilbo,” Dis complimented.
“Thank you. They were from last year.”
“I was amazed at how sweet they were,” Dis went on. “Usually you have to pop in some
sweetening as they can be rather acidic.”
“If you’re sweet to them while they grow, they are sweet at harvest,” Bilbo stated.
“Is that a local saying in the Shire?” Ori asked, wishing he’d brought a notebook with him.
“No,” Bilbo smiled. “That was the deep secret imparted to me by my late father, Bungo Baggins.
He always won the prize for the best tomatoes. And, up until now, I followed in his footsteps.”
“If it’s any comfort t’ yeh,” Dwalin said. “Their loss ’s our gain.”
“And we don’t particularly fancy sharing,” Dis added, leaning forward on her folded arms and
looking pointedly at Bilbo.
Bilbo actually colored a little and thanked her.
“Uncle Bilbo!”
Bilbo turned at Frodo’s shout and rose.
“Duty calls,” he said and went out.
Thorin stretched and stood.
“It’s a strange thing to have time to do whatever you fancy,” he said. “I keep thinking I ought to
go and check on Fili and Kili but I imagine that’s the last thing they’d want.”
“If you offered to take them on again in a water fight, I’m sure they would greet you with
absolute delight,” Dis replied.

Thorin paused then a slow grin started.

“Perhaps a sneak attack from both of us, namad?”

Dis squeaked, threw aside her napkin, and ran out after him.

Dwalin shook his head and kissed Ori.

“I be’er go an’ check up on the lads.”

The princes or our guard?” Ori teased.

“Th’ guard, smar’arse.”

“Make sure poor Targ isn’t traumatize?” Ori suggested.

“That, too.”

Dwalin went out and Ori rose and wandered to the window where he could see Bilbo and Frodo walking into the garden. Frodo, suddenly quite excited, ran out of his view. Bilbo chuckled and, placing a box of tools and some plants on the ground, knelt and started to dig in the dirt.

Bilbo took a potful of deep violet flowers, carefully removed the entire contents, dirt and all, and placed it in a shallow hole he’d made in the ground. Then he filled in around the dirt with even more dirt, so that the flowers and stems sat exposed. He patted it all into place and then he took up a can with a spout and poured water around the plant. All the while he was working he seemed to be talking to this plant in a way Ori had seen him talk to Frodo. Then with a final pat at the ground he took up another pot with another plant and did the whole thing again. Ori had a vague idea about plants. Sigrid kept pots of different herbs at the papered over window in her kitchen, where at least there was warmth and a little light. He’d never seen someone take one of those plants and put it back into the ground. A vague idea struck him that Bilbo was somehow taking apart a necklace and putting the gems back into the mine. He watched Bilbo turn and speak over his shoulder to someone Ori couldn’t see, then laugh and go back to his work.

Ori drifted out toward the garden, admittedly curious.

“Really, Gandalf!” he heard Bilbo snort. “I’m amazed he didn’t slam your nose in the door!”

Tharkûn’s familiar chuckle answered and the wizard said, “Given that it’s Celeborn, I’d be amazed if he wasn’t aiming for something besides my nose!”

Bilbo knelt up from where he worked among the flowers, and Tharkûn sat on a bench nearby.

“Ah, Ori,” Bilbo teased. “Revisiting the scene of the crime?”

“What are you doing, Bilbo?”

“Just putting in some flowers for Bombur and Erda. They thought it would be nice, seeing as they’re getting more and more elven guests. Elves know their flowers as well as hobbits do, and you certainly don’t want your flowers to say the wrong things.”

Ori cocked his head.

“I don’t understand. Do these plants talk? Is that why you’re talking back to them?”

“They don’t literally talk to us, no, though I imagine they gossip up a storm amongst themselves. I’m referring to their intrinsic meaning, the things they say symbolically.”

“Plants have meanings? There’s a language to them?” Ori asked.

“Yes, of course.”

Ori felt a shiver of excitement.

“And all hobbits and elves know this?”

“I don’t know if everyone knows it, but it was part of my ‘ground’ education, that is, all the things faunts’ parents teach them even before they can read and write: cooking, keeping house, gardening, manners, the traits and skills hobbits value most.”

“So, it’s not just you who has to be careful what you say. Your garden has to say the right things as well.”

“Yes! Exactly! Especially the front garden, of course, but even your kitchen garden out back should have an order to it. Marjoram, for instance, means ‘happy marriage’ and should be closest to the door. Cilantro is often kept in pots in the kitchen window, since it protects the gardener and brings peace to the home.”

“What about other herbs, like bay, parsley or basil? Those are common in dwarven cooking.”
“Bay and parsley are fine right behind the marjoram. Bay is for ‘glory’, parsley for ‘festivity’, but you might want the basil a little farther out, since it means ‘prosperity and happiness’, but can also mean ‘I hate you’."

"It can mean both?"

"Oh, yes."

Tharkûn chuckled.

"Bilbo, I think you may have created a minor uproar in Master Ori's world."

"Yes!" Ori cried. "Yes! He has! Bilbo, would you mind terribly if I wrote this down? It’s not a race secret or anything?"

"If it is, I’m the last person to say you can’t know about it.” He leant forward and reminded him rather primly, “I am a dangerous criminal, you know.”

“Very, very dangerous,” said Ori, sitting crosslegged in the grass. He pulled out his ever-present notebook and a graphite pen and sharpener.

Ori composed himself, letting his brain fall into the pattern required for gathering knowledge in an oral tradition.

“So, when dealing with plants you also have to be aware of ambiguity. How common is that?”

“Very,” said Bilbo, sitting back on the grass with his pipe. "Almost any flower or plant might have a double meaning, mitigated or enhanced by the flowers around it. Giving a bouquet of flowers has to be planned like a military campaign. The colors of the roses alone can set families to feuding for generations."

"I thought roses were only red; they’re common enough in westron stories, and I did understand they were given as love tokens, usually to pretty females."

"Oh, roses come in many colors," said Bilbo. "Most of them have complimentary meanings, but even the way they are presented has consequence. Offering any color of rose 'thorns first' indicates contempt."

"Might we back up a moment? I wasn't aware hobbits feuded."

"Just like any other race. Of course, until recently that meant refusing to divulge your great grandmother's gooseberry tart recipe."

"Will you please give me examples of plants with double or ambiguous meanings?"

"Of course. Dahlias are cultivated flowers, grown on purpose. They mean ‘instability’, but also ‘dignity’ and ‘elegance’. Yarrow grows wild, and it can mean ‘good health’ but it can also mean ‘this is war’. Almost all plants have at least one positive message, except for lobelia." He snorted to himself bitterly.

"What does lobelia mean?"

"Malevolence."

"Ah. And, will you please tell me, has anyone speculated on the origin of this plant lore?"

"Oh, sometime before the founding of the Shire, certainly, so before written hobbit history."

Ori blinked at him.

"The hobbits did not originally come from the Shire?"

"No."

"You didn’t come from Kingdom of Arnor, just outside the Shire?"

"No, but when Arnor was a kingdom, we did pay some allegiance to their king. It was part of the agreement when we arrived and settled from the east."

“But, that’s not what our history books relate in Erebor."

Bilbo’s eyebrows shot up.

“What do your history books relate?"

“That hobbits descended from the men of Arnor."

“Oh, for fuck’s s- I beg your pardon, Ori. No, hobbits are not descended from men. Considering some men I’ve met, I’m not sure it’s possible for anything to descend further than that. With apologies to any of your far more civil mannish associates."

“So, where did hobbits come from?"

Tharkûn raised his eyebrows.
“I’m afraid, young master, anything more specific than ‘from the east’ is rather forbidden knowledge.”

“Yavanna grew us out of the ground,” said Bilbo matter-of-factly, “in a fertile little vale between mountains and a dense forest, which I’ve always suspected was Lothlorien.”

“Bilbo!” Tharkûn cried, obviously appalled. “Your father would have fits if he could hear you telling hobbit secrets.”

“Since he’s dead, I’m assuming he can hear me,” Bilbo said dryly. “Considering the insane lies I’ve heard about hobbits in my travels, I’d rather at least the dwarrow knew what was true and what was just hogwash. I’ve heard myself described as ‘part bunny’ so many times I can’t count. My ears are not that long, thank you, and I do not have a fluffy little tail. Ori is a scholar and, I believe, sincere in his curiosity.

“Please, Ori, proceed.”

Ori was actually breathing hard when he finally made it back to the inn where Dwalin sat chatting with Bofur on the deck.

“Dwalin! You have to hear this!”

“Hear wha’, love?” He put his hand to Ori’s face and caressed it.

“I was just talking to Bilbo! You wouldn’t believe what he told me!”

“Go on, then.”

“He hasn’t got a tail!”

Dwalin and Bofur looked at each other, and then back at him.

Ori shook his head, “There was more to it than that!”

“That’s a relief,” said Bofur.

Ori grabbed Dwalin’s hand and pulled him to his feet.

“Come here, let me show you!”

He dragged Dwalin to the dining room and on the main table, he laid out the pictures he’d drawn of all the flowers Bilbo had planted or described and Ori sketched. Alongside were their possible meanings and notes as to color.

“They’re more like us than I would have ever thought!”

Dwalin looked at Ori, then at the pictures.

“Love?”

“The flowers aren’t just flowers. Like minerals aren’t just minerals”

When Dwalin still looked a little askance, Ori swept up the stones from a solitaire game on the table. Each stone was flat, smooth and blank on one side, and each was different. He picked up a ruby, an opal and so on, one next to another under his drawings of the flowers.

"This is a yellow rose," said Ori, pointing out one of the drawings. He’d sketched it from Bilbo’s description, since roses weren't common in this part of Arda, but Bilbo had assured him it was accurate.

"Roses are red," said Dwalin. "At least in every book I ever read."

"Actually, they come in different colors, each color with a different meaning, but in this case it can mean friendship, just like this does."

Ori tapped the red stone.

"Just like a ruby?" Dwalin asked.

"Yes. And if you take lupine, which is this plant, and an opal..."

"Opals mean a lot o' things, love," said Dwalin.

"In this case, both the lupine and the opal symbolize the imagination."

Ori could see the moment Dwalin understood.

"They're different, but th' same. Wha's this one called? 'Day lily'?"

"Like snowflake obsidian, it can mean purity. The real difference isn't what they symbolize, but how they're used. Stones are direct."

Dwalin snorted. "Like dwarrow."

"Exactly: this is what I want and this stone is my focus for getting it. Combinations of stones
amplify the meanings of the stones themselves, but plants are more subtle. They can have good and bad meanings, and their combinations are used to say things polite people don't say out loud."

"Sneaky buggers, those hobbits."

Ori grinned. "You don't know the half of it. This same yellow rose can also mean jealousy, even infidelity. So, if you sent someone a bouquet of yellow roses and, say, forget-me-nots, it might be a warning about breaking a vow."

"Or: yeh blew it an' I won't f'rget?"

"I don't think hobbits ever forget. Anything."

"Let's hope Thorin realizes that."

Ori took a deep breath, feeling how bold he was about to be.

"I think... I believe this knowledge may grant us insight into the way the hobbits see their world, and possibly give us greater clarity in how we dwarrow see our own."

Dwalin gave him an evil smile.

"Love, are yeh sayin' tha' th' hobbits are throwin' our emotions int' relief?"

Ori giggled.

"Yes! Dipfa would be so proud! Oh! But there’s so much more than that! When I asked if it was true that hobbits were descended from the race of men he snorted and muttered - and then apologized for foul language - and then he said they certainly were not. He said they came from a valley between Lothlorien and the mountains."

“But, they came from Arnor,” said Dwalin.

“No, they came from the valley. That’s where Yavanna grew them from the ground.”

“But the valley between Lothlorien and the mountains, that’s Azanulbizar. Mahal’s hairy arse,” Dwalin muttered. “Is it possible Bilbo’s just having’ yeh on?"

“I thought he might be teasing too,” said Ori, “but Tharkûn was there and he just stared at Bilbo and said he couldn’t believe Bilbo was telling anyone who wasn’t a hobbit about such things. Then Bilbo said that, no, it’s important to tell a scholar because scholars have to be accurate. And, oh, Dwalin, when we get back, Master Brur is going to have to move those works on hobbits to the folktales section. At the very least they’ll have to be extensively annotated!”

The tiniest flicker of emotion crossed Dwalin’s face before it disappeared. Absently Ori noted it might be worry, but he was already off on another idea.

“I need paper! And colored pigments! And ink! I have to start transcribing this! I can work on it right here!”

He dashed up to the room for supplies and when he returned, Thorin had come back from the lake, and was busily toweling his hair and Dwalin was saying to Thorin, “extensively annotated!”

Thorin stared at his shield brother in disbelief.

“What did you just say? Extensively- Those are two words I never imagined coming out of your mouth."

“Fuck yerself, Thorin. I’m married t’ a scholar.”

Then Ori had another idea, and it nearly made him giddy because having one grand idea after another like that was a new and thrilling experience and he like it very much.

“Thorin! Have you ever considered sponsoring a non-dwarf scholar in Erebor?”
“No, but the idea has merit. Did you have someone in mind?”

If Thorin was teasing Ori certainly didn’t have time to note it.

“Bilbo! You have to invite Bilbo to Erebor! This could change the entire course of the dwarrow’s study of other races.”

Thorin opened his mouth but Dwalin beat him to it.

“It’d sure change wha’ Thorin studies.”

The king shot him a filthy look and went upstairs with the towel on his head like a hood. From the top of the stair, Ori heard him shout.

“Extensively annotated, Dwalin! Extensively!”

“Fuck yerself,” Dwalin replied without heat.

Ori sat at the lunch table, salivating. Everyone had come together on the deck to eat to in the sunshine. He had worked hard that morning and he was very ready for food.

A large bowl of cold, filled noodles dressed with a creamy sauce made its way to him and he served himself a healthy portion to eat with his glass of iced fruit juice.

The filled noodles were mixed with finely diced purple onions and green grapes. He had the noodles in his mouth, had bitten down on them, when he heard Dori said, “Bombur, these are delicious spinach dumplings!”

Ori squeaked, rather trapped. He couldn’t spit it out, but he couldn’t quite make himself swallow.

Dwalin leaned over and said, “Swallow it’ with a mouthful o’ juice.”

“Mm-hm,” Ori murmured.

He did so, relieved that it went down with very little trouble.

But, now he had a full plate of traitorous food in front of him.

Then he thought about it. He had tasted a sort of grainy, milky cheese, and there was another flavor he recalled. It was like a stew they ate the first night with the cubes of milk but with different spices. These spices were more like the seasonings from the noodles last night.

And, he liked it.

He huffed out a breath of surprise, shrugged and continued to eat. Why did green food at Bombur and Erda’s inn always taste so good when it was always disgusting when he was a badger? The food here was fresh and seasoned… He blushed a little. Poor Dori never had the money to buy good things and their seasonings had been the simplest. He felt like an ingrate. What a picky badger he had been. Frowning, he made a mental list of the green food he had been exposed to when young. Kale, okra, mustard greens, and those large yellowish green beans. The leafy greens had never been fresh picked and were usually a bit wilted and bitter. The beans had always been so dry, no matter how long they were cooked. No wonder they hadn’t tasted good. Poor Dori. He sat forward.

“Mistress Erda, I don’t know how you do it, but all your green food seems to be good.”

Erda chuckled and Dori shook his head and said,

“It’s all fresh from the garden, pet. Not like the markets under Calmar.”

“I think I might actually try kale or okra from the Ur’s gardens,” Ori stated bravely.

“Okra?!” Kili said, making a face. Almost all the Durins had a similar expression.

“You are truly brave, Ori,” said Thorin. “It just tastes slimy to me.”

“I don’t really use okra as a vegetable,” Erda nodded. “I only have a couple of recipes that use it as a thickener. They are simmered for a long time and the sliminess is cooked away.

“Kale we use also, but either in soup or roasted crisp with seasonings or dried and powdered.”

“Big beans?” Dori offered.

“Only when very young,” Bombur stared firmly
“I might like them, then.” Ori reflected and went back to enjoying the spinach.

After lunch, Ori hurried up to his room with a new sense of purpose. He rooted out his painting supplies and a new canvas. He put the supplies into his satchel. He took a deep breath and turned.

“Ori!” Kili shouted from the hall.

“Yes?” Ori answered.

Kili burst into the room and slammed the door behind him.

“There you are!” cried the younger prince. “I’ve got to talk to you!”

Ori raised an eyebrow. Kili was flushed and very excited, so he couldn’t be in that much trouble.

Ori folded his arms at Kili.

“What have you done?” he asked in mock seriousness.

Kili grinned hugely and thrust a piece of paper at him.

“Read this!” he commanded.

Ori turned the paper right-side up and looked at the somewhat messy runes.

“O slender as a willow bow
O clearer than a diamond
O sapling by the River Running
Fair Greenwood’s daughter
O bat-silent, raven-clever, fox-haired damsel
O wind on the waterfall,
How I love her laughter.”

“Um…What is this?” Ori asked carefully.

“A poem, but it could be a song,” Kili replied eagerly.

“Yes,” Ori replied, he was not sure where Kili was going with this and decided to proceed cautiously, very cautiously. “I see. Where did you find it?”

“I wrote it,” Kili informed him proudly.

“Oh.” Ori had a terrible premonition as to where this was going and didn’t want anything to do with it.

Kili grinned at him eagerly, saying,

“Can you translate it?”

“Translate it?”

“Yes. Into sindarin.”

Ori did not groan as he knew his premonition had been horribly right and wrestled wildly with his thoughts.

“I’m not sure if it will scan,” he said doubtfully. “Why?”

“It’s for Tauriel,” Kili admitted, blushing.

Now Ori was sure it would not scan.

“But you’ve said willow saplings aren’t good for bows when they’re all yellow and bendy,” he added, casting vainly for a way to talk the ardent princeling out of what he privately thought would be a sure-fire way of hearing the elf captain laugh to the point of tears and at Kili.

“The older wood is great for bows. But that’s not the point!” Kili cried. “It’s poetry!”

Ori wasn’t sure this little verse could be classed as poetry.

“Please?” Kili turned large puppy pleading eyes on him.

Ori sighed.

“I’ll do my best.”

“Thanks, Ori-mate! You’re brilliant.”

Kili rushed out, slamming the door after him.

Ori sighed, put his satchel and canvas on the bed. He might as well get this over with. He took
out a notebook and graphite pen and started working on the ‘poem’.

Dwalin came in and looked surprised.

“Love, when I said me life was poetry, I didn’t think yeh’d rush righ’ out t’practice.”

“I can assure you, this is not my work.”

Dwalin sat next to Ori on the bed and read over his shoulder.

“Tha’ looks like Kili’s scrawl.”

“It is Kili’s scrawl. Unfortunately, it’s still legible.”

“Bat silent an’ raven clever? Oh, Mahal he’s got i’ bad as our Thorin.”

“Yes, and Kili’s sharing. I’m supposed to translate it into sindarin and have it make some sense.

I’m afraid he’s going to have to pick one or the other.”

“It’s better than T’dillah’s.”

“His hands are just as sweaty at the moment.”

Dwalin snickered and rose, collecting up Grasper and Keeper.

“Don’t be staying inside all day, love.”

“I won’t. I’m going to finish this and get my painting kit together.”

Dwalin kissed him.

“I’m goin’ to spar with our Gimmers. See yeh later?”

“Yes. Love you!”

“Love yeh, too.”

But just as Ori had finished the poem, a knock came at the door. Ori knew it wasn’t Kili as Kili didn’t knock.

"Please, come in," said Ori said putting the poem into his notebook and closing it.

It was Thorin.

"Ori."

Thorin closed the door behind him and leaned on the jam.

"Tharin?"

"What do you know about hobbits?"

"A bit. They aren’t as secretive as we are, just usually more elusive." Thorin was looking everywhere except at him.

"What is their custom concerning the taking of a mate?"

"In regards to their laws, their traditions or their biology? Oh, by the way, they aren’t bunnies.”

Then Thorin did look at him.

"What?"

"They don’t have fluffy little tails."

"Good to know," said Thorin. "But do they have heartsongs?"

Before Ori could haul his jaw back up, Thorin pushed off the door and continued briskly, pacing and gesturing as he often did when consulting with Dain or the Fundins, as if his heart was a matter of arranging companies on a battlefield.

"I understand they might use a different term for the same thing, or not use any term for it, or not understand the concept, which probably doesn’t exist between persons of similar gender or there wouldn’t be so many of them. In fact, the concept may be completely abhorrent to most of them, and even if it is not, who is to say what qualities they expect in a mate? They might-

"Tharin, are you in love with Bilbo?" Ori decided to interrupt.

The king lurched to a halt, something like fear in his eyes.

"I never expected this to happen," said Thorin. "I really did think myself craft wed, with my craft being my service to my people. It's all I ever thought I would have."

Ori smiled gently.

"I noticed that sometimes the valar have other plans," he said.

Thorin ran his hand down his face and sighed.

"I haven't felt like such a fool since I was a badger."

Ori filed through everything he knew about Thorin. It still wasn't very much, he thought, though lately they were together constantly. Then he searched his own feelings on the matter.
It would do no good to encourage Thorin to simply do this for his own happiness. That would just shut him down. Too many other people depended on him.

"Maybe it's meant as a way to get people used to someone besides a dwarf as a royal of Erebor," Ori said. "Maybe it's what Mahal wants."

Slowly Thorin sat on the edge of the bed, eyes wide.

"What do you know?"

"Do you trust me?"

"With my life."

A simple 'Yes' would have sufficed, and been a lot less likely to give Ori a nervous collapse.

"I was sketching the scenery yesterday and I lost time somewhere. It was noon, and then suddenly it was a lot later. I think Mahal was there, because when I looked back through my book I found I'd sketched pictures of life in Erebor. Bilbo and Frodo were in them."

"Doing what?" Thorin asked.

"Balin was showing Frodo one of the tomes from his library. Bilbo was making bread in the kitchen at Fundin House."

That was as far he would go toward telling Thorin he had drawn the king and a hobbit in bed.

"So, you think this a command from Mahal?" Thorin asked.

"A command? No. I think it's more of a gentle nudge, and I don't believe Mahal would encourage you toward anyone if it would make you unhappy, or for an alliance. You've said yourself, dwarrow don't just arrange marriages like business deals."

"But I am the high king."

"But you are still a dwarf."

Thorin breathed out slowly, casting about, perhaps for an answer.

"I am at that. Of course, I have no idea what Bilbo wants, besides the obvious."

"He's not exactly coy, is he," Ori mused. "But you'll never know if he wants more than that if you don't take pains to speak with him."

"Without sounding like a pedagogue or a belch of forge gasses? So far the most natural conversation we've had, has been about Frodo."

Ori sat up.

"There's an idea," he said.

"What is?"

Ori hopped off the bed and headed toward the door.

"I have to make some arrangements! I'll tell you what I did after dinner!"

Back in his room, a short time later, Ori, feeling much better, quickly finished his work on translating Kili’s poem and then took out a new piece of paper and a bottle of pale green ink. He sharpened a quill and wrote out the translation in sindarin script with a few flourishes.

At the bottom, he drew a small stem with willow leaves and then added a few dainty pink flowers to the work and wrote the title as ‘To Tauriel’. He sanded and blew on it to dry the ink. A flash on intuition made him fold it up into a paper bird. Satisfied, he picked up his satchel and canvas and went out. He came through the reception and went to the deck. Kili was fidgeting with the candle holder on the table. He jumped up when Ori arrived and silently handed the ‘bird’ to Kili. Kili’s eyes widened in delight as he examined it.

"Ori-mate! It's beautiful! You put flowers on it, too. Elves like flowers. You’re so bloody smart."

Kili looked up, grinning hugely. "Ori-mate, I can’t thank you enough. You’ve made this perfect! If I can-"

"Give it back to me and I’ll fold it up." Ori cut him off, feeling himself starting to blush with the
praise. He quickly put it back into its bird shape and handed it to Kili.
   “There, go and give it to her. I hope she enjoys it.”
Kili grabbed Ori and squeezed him in a rough hug.
   “You’re the best, Ori-mate,” he crowed then let Ori go and sped off.

With a deep breath for courage, Ori set out the easel on a drop cloth on the lawn over looking the lake, then set the pots of colored pigments and solvents on a small utility table he’d borrowed from the barn. He opened the box of new brushes and worked them a little until he was happy with their shape and ‘give’ and picked up his palette.

   In front of him, on the stretched and prepared canvas, he had created a light cartoon with the graphite pen that represented the general shape of the landscape and the features he wanted to emphasize.

As he mixed the paint, thinking about the process, the sounds of the inn faded away. He watched the colors develop, the shades of blue, the little edges of jade green, the barest yellow-white and the deeper yellow and even the blue-white for the sun on the water. It occurred to him, that many of the same minerals in the water were also mixed into the paint base. Funny how he’d never thought of it before.

   The other thing that occurred to him was that if this didn’t turn out perfect, he might not be happy, but it wouldn’t be fatal either. He could do this however he liked, as many times as he liked. He had time now. He vowed to himself, he would make time in the future.

   Several hours passed. He knew this by the movement of the sun and the slight pain at the small of his back from standing and moving over and over in the same space, the tiredness of his arms from painting and holding the palette and the collection of paint smears on the old kitchen apron he used as a smock.

He looked at the painting, the palette, the brush and realized he was finished. It was finished. He made his sigil in the lower left corner with the date. He was proud of that sigil. Every king’s scribe created their own. It was how they signed their work. It was cut on the seals they used in the wax of official documents.

Snickering, he realized they were also used to sign rather abstract renditions of mountain lakes.

Sigrid came outside with a pitcher and glasses on a tray.
   “Here, I brought lemonade, and some biscuits I rescued before Kili devoured them all.”
   “That’s a really good haul.”
   “I stared him down as they were coming off the cooling rack. They have xocolātl chunks in them.”

She looked over the canvas.
   “Ooo, that’s nice.”
   “You think so? I only see mistakes.”
   “Time for Master Oin to look at your eyes.”
   “I beg your pardon! I don’t want him hooking up my thighs!”

Sigrid laughed.
   “You’re terrible! Accurate, but terrible.”

Ori capped his paints and set his brushes to soak in the tin of solvent before he wiped his hands and grabbed a bikkie. They sat on the grass as Sigrid poured.
   “Oh Maha’ this’ goo!” he exclaimed with his mouth full.
   “I know, right? No wonder Bombur and Erda are so round. I wish I could cook half so well.”
   “I’ve never heard your family complain.”
   “Bain eats too fast to taste anything and Da’d eat an old boot if I put it in front of him. I dread what Tilda will say when I get home and I hear what delights Mistress Dazla has cooked up. And speaking of Tilda.”

Despite the ‘immodest’ bathing costume, Dipfa had produced some very nice clothing for Sigrid. The sleeveless, sky blue tunic fell straight into extremely wide-legged pants, cinched at the waist with a cloth belt lined with pockets. She took a folded slip of paper from one.
“Pockets! Finally!” said Sigrid. “Why did it take so long for someone to figure this out? Did they think women wanted to pin pockets to their aprons all their lives?”

“She’s working on creating fashions that are ‘sleek and chic’,” said Ori. “I think she’s getting up her gumption to submit some designs to Vug Magazine. She’s already done a couple of small articles.”

“Then I’m flattered she’s trying them out on me, but I’m not exactly shaped like a dam.”

“Dipfa has an eye to a larger market than Erebor. She went on about ‘coordinating separates’, which I suppose means everything can be worn with everything else.”

“Yes, I suspect I’m supposed to wear a shirt under this,” said Sigrid.

“But then Fili wouldn’t see your fine arms,” said Ori.

“Exactly!”

“Rather brazen of you, your highness.”

“Go soak your head.”

“So, Tilda wrote you?”

“No, Mistress Dazla. Poor Tilda. This is the first time I’ve ever been gone overnight in her whole life.”

Considering how often Ori was left alone at that age, he was rather jealous.

“How is she?”

Sigrid sighed.

“Oh, that’s not good,” said Ori.

“I left Tilda in charge of the chickens. This morning she went to feed them and one was missing.”

“I’ll kill him,” said Ori.

“Who?”

“Nori.”

“Why do you assume it’s Nori?”

“It just saves time.”

“Anyway, poor Tilda was in hysterics. She feels like she let me down. As if she can stand guard over a chicken coop all night! Chickens disappear. It happens.”

“I’m sure Mistress Dazla distracted her with something else soon enough.”

“Yes, but I’m sure I haven’t heard the last of the Great Dale Chicken Emergency.”

“So,” said Ori, pouring them both out a little more lemonade. “How are things going with Fili? Have you seen his bare butt yet?”

Ori had his answer when Sigrid’s cheeks turned bright red.

“Ah-hah. Congratulations. If your da knew he’d have apoplexy.”

“I certainly have no intention of sharing it with Da’,” Sigrid assured him.

“Um… Sig, are you playing safe?”

“Yes, luckily Fili’s a gentledwarf. In fact, he was such a gentledwarf I had to lead him a little astray, strumpet that I am.”

“Shocking!”

Sigrid laughed.

“To tell the truth, it didn’t take much leading. The first time I put my hand on his crotch his cock went rock hard and the rest of him turned into puddle of dwarven goo.”

“I can see that happening,” Ori agreed. “The princes are amazingly good-natured, considering what trouble they might get into.”

“With an amad like Dis and an imad like Gridr? I think unrestrained wenching is out of the question.”

“Do you love him?”

“I think I’m a fair way to it. It’s nice we had this time together to talk about something other than the fate of Erebor. That sort of talk is essential, but not romantic. It’s amazing what we’ve found that we have in common. We both hate tripe in any form. We agree that Thranduil could be as hilarious as Dori if he would take the stick out of his ass, and we both think the smell of the rain-soaked rocks is the best.
“Actually, I’m rather surprised at myself. I’ve indulged in tunic rippers from an early age, and admired Fili’s butt nearly as long, but I always knew my fate was to marry a man like my father and be his wife and keep his house. My father would make sure my husband was a good, fair man, of course, but nothing out of the ordinary. Now I’m contemplating marriage to a dwarf prince, who is the perfect definition of a good, fair man and, most importantly to me, we can make each other laugh. That turn in the path came up rather unexpectedly.”

“Sometimes those turns lead to someplace pretty wonderful,” said Ori.

They clinked their glasses together and drank.

“May I join you?”

Ori shaded his eyes and looked up at Tauriel.

“Please, come join us. There are biscuits left, and you can share my glass if you don’t mind dwarf spit.”

“If I did before, I can hardly complain of it now,” said Tauriel. She knelt in the grass with the grace of a doe. “I take it the order of the day is shameless gossip?”

“Mainly about ourselves,” said Sigrid. “Remember what I told you about Fili?”

“Oh, yes!” said Tauriel, her eyes brightening. “How did it go?”

“He was quite agreeable and, you were right. It’s just the right size without making me choke.”

Ori nearly spit out his lemonade, but he supposed it was inevitable. He knew from Sigrid that dams said far more among themselves than most males could imagine.

“No wonder Fili’s smiling so much,” he said. “Are things proceeding apace with Kili?”

Tauriel smiled fondly.

“You wouldn’t expect it, I suppose, but Kili is more the hand-holding and star-gazing sort. We’ve kissed, but he’s very gentle. I long to tell him that, really, as a soldier I’m not likely to break for a little groping, but I don’t want to rush him, either. I have time. I can wait. Not that it makes me any more patient. But I can wait.”

“And what of Captain Dwalin?” Sigrid nudged Ori’s knee with her bare foot. “How does he measure up to your expectations?”

Ori felt quite secure in telling them, “He has the most adorable arse in all Arda.”

Sigrid giggled.

“You are such a love sick pup! Look at your face!”

“I admit it,” said Ori, “I’m ridiculously happy, and very well satisfied, though I’m sure we haven’t done a quarter of the things in bed he would like.”

“He doesn’t pressure you?” Tauriel asked, suddenly quite Stern.

“Oh, no, he’s a lot more patient with me than I am with myself. It’s just that, he’s not just more experienced than me, he’s also a lot… larger. His prick is beautiful, but also a little intimidating.”

Tauriel tilted her head, obviously thinking very seriously on this.

“You have no one you trust you might ask about such things?”

“Oh, I might ask,” said Ori, “but it won’t do me any good if I’m so embarrassed that I burst into flames before I hear the answer.”

“Perhaps a book? You do work in a library, don’t you.”

Ori blinked. I had never occurred to him, but, yes, he did work in a library and there were books on all subjects. He even had a general idea where to find the ones he wanted.

“I’m a complete shalehead,” he said. “Thank you, Tauriel.”

“Errrr… you’re welcome?”


“I’m sorry, Sig,” said Ori. “I forget you’re not a dwarrowdam. Yes, they do exist.”

Sigrid bit her lip.

“I don’t suppose there are books on sex between different races?” she asked.

“Ooo, that would be useful,” said Tauriel.

“You’d have to peek for me, Ori,” said Sigrid. “I don’t think I’m allowed in the Great Library.”

“You should be,” said Ori. “Everyone should be. I need to talk to Thorin about that.”

“Really?” Sigrid asked. “You’re going to ask Thorin to let non-dwarrow in the Great Library?”
“Yes,” Ori continued. “Well, and he’ll have to ask Master Brur. Thorin is the king, but Master Brur is… Master Brur. As far as he’s concerned, that’s his library to defend to the death. But I don’t think it’s a problem. Master Brur says knowledge is for everyone. He even told Tilda he’d hire her as a scribe when she grew up if she kept up her studies.”

“Did he?” Sigrid asked. “Was that at the military coup disguised as Princess Dis’ tea party for the people of Dale?”

“No, when she came into the library.”

“When was Tilda in the library?”

“She came in with Furh’nk once. She already has her desk staked out, right next to mine.”

“I wondered why she was suddenly so interested in her studies. She never has been before, but now she seems so determined. She chatters constantly about starting school in a few weeks.”

“King Bard is going to let her go to school with the other badgers?” Tauriel asked.

“Yes, the East Dale School. It’s not that far from his, er, office? The place he meets people to talk business. I believe they’re going to call them council chambers. Anyway, there are three schools to start with. Luckily, some of Calmar’s richer cronies graciously handed over their well-kept houses to the King of Dale.”

Both Ori and Tauriel snorted at this.

“But, will Tilda not have a guard?” Tauriel asked. “She is a princess.”

“We have a small squadron of volunteers among the men,” said Sigrid. “Furh’nk has them training with his soldiers, though so far it looks like a bunch of badgers fighting over candy at a Yule party.”

“Besides,” said Ori, “she knows every one of Thorin’s royal guards by name. Anyone who so much as looks at her in a threatening way is going to get a pike up the nose.”

“Excellent,” said Tauriel, “I approve,” and swiped the last biscuit. Sigrid picked up the empty tray and pitcher, putting the glasses inside. Ori gathered up his bits and pieces. Sigrid took the table and cloth and Tauriel took the painting canvas carefully in both hands and they all went into the inn.

Bombur met them in the hallway.

“Ah, Ori!” He smiled. “How did the painting go?”

“I really enjoyed myself but, as to the painting, I only see mistakes and Sigrid tells me I need my eyes looked at.”

“May I see?” Bombur asked.

Ori nodded and Tauriel held the canvas up for display. Bombur looked the painting over, his eyebrows slowly rising.

“Master Ori, I’m no expert, but I like this very much.”

Ori blushed. “Thank you, Master Bombur. It’s still wet, though.”

Bombur looked about the reception hall then went and removed a large cloth hanging from behind the desk. He rolled up the hanging, came back, gently took the painting and carefully hung the canvas by its edge on the ready hook. He stood back and eyed the painting.

“There. It can dry nicely here.”

“Master Bombur!” Ori cried.

That someone had immediately hung his painting in a place anyone could see it was almost overwhelming.

“It looks wonderful!” Sigrid enthused going to stand next to Bombur. Ori and Tauriel walked to their sides. Ori looked at his painting anew. Here in the inn, it wasn’t just a wet canvas. Having it on the wall made the painting quite different. He looked again and felt a small seed of pride in his heart. He had done a good job.

“My Erda,” Bombur called.

Erda’s voice caroled back from somewhere and she appeared from the stairwell.

“Yes, my Bom?”

Bombur gestured to the painting.

“Oh!” Erda cried and hurried forward. “Wherever did you get that, my love? It’s lovely and so true to life!”
“Our Master Ori just finished painting it, my plum. Right out on our lawn.”
Erda turned to Ori, delight in her eyes, and embraced him.
“It’s beautiful, Ori dear.”
Ori felt his face flame.
“Th-thank you,” he stammered. “It’s the first time I’ve ever painted a full, complete canvas. Do you really like it?”
“Master Ori,” Bombur said formally, “I will pay you handsomely for it.”
“No, no!” Ori gasped. “You won’t, please! Really, if you like it that much, you may keep it!”
Erda embraced him again, this time with a small gush of tears.
“When it’s dry,” Bombur said, thoughtfully, “I shall have Edi look through the wood store and find some strips of birch, I think, and stain them. We’ll put it in a very nice frame and it will stay right there.”
Ori thought his head would go up in flames.
“I’m honored Mistress Erda, Master Bombur.”
Dori and Balin came in through the front door at that moment.
“What’s to do?” Dori asked seeing them all gathered. Erda gestured Ori’s painting. Balin and Dori looked.
“That is an excellent work,” Balin nodded. “Is it still wet?”
“I just finished it.” Ori explained.
Dori and Balin stared at him.
“Yeh did tha’, wee brother?” Balin looked amazed and delighted.
Dori stared open-mouthed at Ori.
Ori nodded, a little sheepishly.
Dori looked at the painting again, burst into tears, and threw himself on Ori.
“Ooooh, my clever little badger! It’s so beautiful! I knew you were very talented but never dared dream you would make anything so wonderful! I’m so proud of you!”
Ori patted Dori’s back and buried his face in Dori’s shoulder.
“Do you really like it, Ori’s Dori? You and Balin aren’t just being nice?”
Dori pulled away.
“Being nice? Don’t be silly, pet. It’s lovely!”
Thorin, Dwalin, and Gimli came in from the deck. They looked at what was on the wall.
“That’s new,” Thorin observed. “Excellent work! Your artist has a talent with presenting light. Where did you find this?”
Tauriel beamed and Sigrid pointed at Ori.
“Talented artist, right there.”
Thorin turned and looked at Ori.
“You did this?”
Ori nodded, red-faced. Dwalin gave him a look that made him want to dance, burst into song, and hide under the bed for a week.
“I knew yeh had it in yeh.” Dwalin said simply, crossed to Ori, and wrapped him in his arms. Ori hugged his husband as hard as he could. Gimli rushed to the door to the deck and bellowed for the others.
“Ori, this is amazing.” Thorin added, staring at the painting. “It really is.”
“We’re keeping it.” Erda put in, a teasing light in her eyes. “Ori said we could. As soon as it’s dry, we’re going to have it framed.”
Thorin turned and regarded Ori with an amused look. “Well, in that case he’s just going to have to paint me another one. I think I rate a such a marvelous reminder of the lovely time we’re having at your inn, Mistress Erda.”
Ori buried his burning face and unstoppable grin of pride into his husband’s chest. Dwalin’s arms tightened around him. Ori felt his chuckle and hum of pride.
Dis, Bilbo, Fili, Kili and Legolas came in, trailed by the elf king.
“Ori, that’s magnificent!” Dis praised.
“Told you he was a genius,” Kili said with authority. Legolas and Fili nodded their agreement. Thranduil came over and gave the painting an appraising look.

“You just painted this, Master Ori?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” Ori mumbled.

“Hmm,” he mused. “King Thorin, perhaps when you could spare him, you shall send your scribe to me. I have a section of garden of which I am particularly fond. I believe he will do it justice.”

Thorin didn’t reply, just grinned proudly at Ori.

Bilbo came from the kitchens and looked rather surprised at the amount of people in the hallway.

He looked at the painting.

“Very impressive, Ori.”

“Thank you,” Ori managed.

Thranduil turned back from the stairway and pinned Ori with a look.

“I think you should consider painting portraits as well, Master Ori.”

Ori slowly put away his supplies in his room. Dwalin was watching him. Ori straightened.

“I’m so puffed up yet so embarrassed, I don’t know whether to offer to sign autographs or hide in a pantry cupboard.”

Dwalin laughed and took Ori in his arms.

“I’m so bloody proud a’ yeh, love. I was wishin’ I could’a watch yeh th’ entire time, bu’ I know how yeh are when folks are staring at yeh workin’.”

“Did you like it?” Ori looked up, resting his chin on Dwalin’s chest.

“I think it’s brilliant. Looks like a mirror was pu’ up in th’ garden.”

Ori pushed his face harder into Dwalin chest.

“I love you,” he mumbled.

“I love yeh, too, me ghivashel, I love yeh, too.”

Ori squeezed hard again and let go. His body reminded him of the prosaic.

“I’m hungry.”

Dwalin laughed.

“Well, yeh better get yehsel’ washed an’ tidied up. It’s almos’ th’ dinner hour.”

Ori and Dwain headed into the dining room. Almost everyone was there and seated at the window or messing about as usual.

Gimli and Legolas came in after them.

Dori waved Ori and Dwalin over and Balin passed them each a glass of sherry. The decanter on the table was down to the dregs now and Thranduil and Dis were conversing quite merrily.

Ori tasted the amber liquid. It was thickish and strong, leaving a pleasant burn down his throat. Ori nibbled from a bowl of roasted and salted peanuts while drinking his sherry. It was making him hungrier.

Erda came in and called everyone to the table. Ori went to his usual seat and looked at his place setting. There was a wine glass on his right, a red leather mat on which perched a small plate. Beside the plate on the right were several forks. At least they looked like forks, with long handles but only two tines and these were thin, long, and quite sharp.

On the left sat a second plate and a spreading knife. Ori looked up at Dwalin, who had picked up one of his forks and was testing the sharpness.

“Guess we’re t’ poke our food t’ death a’afore we eat it,” he suggested.

Ori considered the fork.

“We must be eating mice.”

Dwalin snorted appreciatively and gave Ori’s knee a squeeze.

Again the seating was arranged as sets of four. On the table, for each set, three small contraptions held a wide dish over a wide, flattish candle with three wicks. Erda lit them all. Poli, Ari, Muri and Jaki came in and set platters of meat, chicken, crawfish and vegetables, some raw and some cooked,
around each setting of four. Then Bombur, Bilbo and the rest of the Ur badgers followed bearing wide, cast iron, lidded bowls. They set three bowls on the contraptions and a fourth, which was cool, in a space nearby, and lifted the lids.

“Tonight,” Bombur announced, “we have another dish from Angmar. There it is called Fondue or Dips.”

“Why is everyone looking at me?” Kili demanded, bringing chuckles from around the table.

“The three hot dishes are sauces for the meat, chicken, fish and cooked vegetables, and the cool one is for the raw vegetable. There is a beef broth, a creamy white sauce flavored with parsley, and a hot smoked cheese sauce. The forks are for spearing what you wish to eat and then you dip it into the sauce. The heated ones will take a few moments to warm the food through. The small plates are for catching the sauce when transferring the food from the pots. Please enjoy your meal!”

The babble of talk started again as Bombur and Erda seated themselves as did their offspring. Ori looked at Sigrid seated opposite him and they both inspected the food offered. Ori speared a pink crawfish firmly and gingerly put his long fork into a bubbling cheese sauce. There were little notches along the edges of the bowls and these held the forks in place. Dwalin speared a piece of beef and stuck it into the boiling broth. Sigrid took a crawfish, too and popped it in beside Ori’s. Fili took up a stick of raw carrot and swirled it through the cool sauce. He tried it then grinned.

“This is good sauce. It’s like the dressing on the lunch salad but thicker and with more spices and flavor.”

Sigrid speared a thick chunk of cucumber and tried the cool sauce as well. She hummed in delight.

“Mmmm, this is good. Ready Ori?”

She grinned and caught hold of her fork. Ori grabbed his and using the little plate to catch the drips, brought the crawfish to his mouth. The crawfish was as delicious as Dwalin had said. Firm and tasty and warm from the cheese sauce. Ori turned to Dwalin.

“The crawfish are good.”

Dwalin nodded around the chunk of beef in his mouth.

“Aye. Try this beef with th’ broth, love. It’s broth bu’ almos’ gravy I don’t know wha’ our Bom put in, but it’s th’ best I’ve e’er had.”

Ori tried it and it was wonderful. The meal was enjoyed by everyone. Ori caught sight of Dori as he waved a veggie at Thranduil.

“Do try the smoked cheese sauce, Thrany, dear. It’s quite lovely!”

Thranduil looked sideways at Dori, who fluttered his eyelashes.

“Why Thrandy! Do I sense refusal or caprice? I ask you in all confidence: Do you… fondue?”

Thranduil look playfully down at Dori and took Dori’s fork, dipped it into the cheese and ate it before returning the fork to Dori. He seemed to consider then smiled.

“Quite tolerable.”

“Oh! You naughty creature!” Dori was quite satisfied and looked around for another victim.

“Thorin have you tried the beef?”

Dis made as though to help her brother to some.

“No, no thank you,” Thorin said quietly, gesturing his sister’s offer away.

“What’s wrong?” Dis demanded. “It’s very good. It’s lovely and thick and—“

“Just, no.” Thorin interrupted.

“Thorin,” Thranduil started.

“I’m sorry,” Thorin said quickly. “It… I used to change Kili’s nappies often and it…”

Dis shrieked with laughter and there were various cries of “Eww!” Unfortunately this idea put most of the older set completely off the beef but the younger set thought it hilarious and demanded the bowls be sent their way to eat.

After dinner was finished along with the clean up, Bifur directed the moving of furniture and Bofur brought out a large white canvas which he laid out in the middle of the floor. The cloth was painted with rows of large circles. There were six lines of six colors, a row in each color consisting of blue, red, yellow, green, purple and orange. The Ur badges were very excited about this and began urging
their guest to come and gather around.

Thorin and Dis looked at the cloth and exchanged glances. Balin and Dwalin snickered at each other.

“Now,” Bombur began. “Tonight, we have another game. It was quite popular when many of us old folk were little badgers, but may be new to some of you as it fell out of fashion, being considered silly and somewhat rude. It must be played barefoot.”

Fili fixed his mother with a look.

“Amad, you know about this?”

Dis snickered.

Thorin groaned.

“Yes, Fili, your mother and I used to play it with the Fundins until your great grandfather ordered it banned. And, yes, we have spent the rest of our lives hiding our game pieces from you.”

Bombur chuckled and continued.

“The game is called ‘shimmy’ and requires six people and one other to roll the dice. The game ends when the last person falls down.”

“Falls down?” Tauriel repeated.

“Precisely,” Thorin smiled.

“Is this required?”

“More like inevitable.”

Erda beckoned.

“Well, since you and the Fundins already know how to play, come and show us the first round. Fili, Kili you can make up the set.”

The Durins and the Fundin brothers all pulled off their boots and socks, dumping them in a pile, and lined up, three to a side at opposite ends of the cloth. They were then instructed to place one foot on a red circle and one on a blue. This required some hopping around but when everyone was situated.

Ori was requested to sit at the side and throw the dice.

Ori willingly did so. Bombur showed Ori the two die One die showed color choices and the other showed pictures body parts, these were right foot, left foot, right hand, left hand, butt, and forehead.

Ori giggled and shook the dice in their box then dumped them out.

“Right foot, green,” he announced. The blue dots were on the far side of the cloth and soon there was a line of Durin and Fundins all with their right feet firmly planted on green dots. Ori shook the dice again and looked at the result.

“Left hand, purple,” he announced. There was a struggle as the players reached across the rows of dots to place hands on the purple. All the spectators laughed. Delighted, Ori shook the dice again.

“Right foot, yellow,” he called. There was a good deal of laughing among the players as they had to keep their hands on purple dots and hopped their right feet over to the yellow. The players were now bent, one foot and one hand held aloft.

The game progressed with both players and watchers laughing harder and harder as the players twisted themselves into ridiculous and convoluted stances, arms and legs stretching to all points on the cloth.

Kili and Balin were declared out first as the two became hopelessly entangled and Kili was laughing so hard he collapsed on Balin’s stomach. Dori and Tauriel rushed to help them and the two managed to crawl off to sit snickering at themselves. Dis and Fili got entangled and fell over each other next.

Thorin and Dwalin were left to almost wrestle each other, egged on by the teasing spectators. Ori called that butts had to be on green while right feet stayed on stayed on blue, while the left feet had to touch orange. The shield brothers faced each other, slowly stretching to park their butts on the middle dots. Dwalin, being only slightly taller than Thorin, was able to sit with a toe on the other two dots.

Thorin stretched and started to laugh so hard he snorted which set Dwalin off.

Fili, on all fours, leaned his cheek to the floor and declared that Dwalin’s ass was touching the green and both his toe and heel were on the other two colors.

“C’mon nadad!” Dis called.

Thorin hissed through his teeth and stretched.
“Mahal!” he wheezed. “Bloody good thing I already have an heir!”
“Stretch idad!” Kili shouted.
“Du bekar!” roared Bifur.
Thorin huffed and fell onto his butt and although his right toe stayed put, the left toe flew free.
“Ohhhhh!” grieved the princes.
Thorin dropped forward onto his face and shook with laughter. There was more laughing and
cheering. Thorin rolled off the mat and lay face down, snorting into the floor. Dis, Balin, and Bilbo
helped him up. He rubbed at his inner thighs. Ori went to Dwalin, who was also soundlessly shaking
with mirth.
“Are you alright, Captain Champion?” Ori asked.
Dwalin relaxed back against him, his legs slowly closing.
“Sorry, love. No nooky f’r yeh t’nigh’. I think I may’ve sprained me crotch!”
Ori dropped his head on Dwalin’s shoulder.
“You’re so silly!”
“I dunno if I kin stand up, love.”
“Stop laughing and you will,” Ori told him, giggling, starting to tug at his shoulders.
Dwalin didn’t and, with a snicker, Thranduil came to their rescue and easily hauled the captain to his
feet. Dwalin grabbed his savior by the neck and gave him a friendly forehead thump.
“Thanks, lad!”
Thranduil was left to ponder the implications of being called ‘lad’ with true affection for the first time
in, perhaps, millennia.
Dori encouraged Thranduil to play next, and eventually he acquiesced, along with Legolas and
Tauriel, Gimli, Sigrid, and Bilbo. Bofur threw the dice for them. He threw them and snatched them
up so quickly Ori suspected he was making up a few moves just to add to the silliness.
Sigrid and Tauriel dueled to a draw long after everyone else had collapsed. Thranduil accused Bilbo
of employing treacherous tactics, constantly pulling silly faces at the elf king when he tried to
concentrate. Legolas claimed Gimli tickled him but Gimli protested loudly he wasn’t responsible for
what his beard did.
The next round called for Ori, Dwalin, Bifur, Dis, Thorin and Bilbo to take to the cloth mat. Fili and
Kili fought over the dice. Ori struggled vaiently but it was too silly and trying to crawl over or under
his fellow players and not collapse giggling was awkward to say the least. He was almost grateful
when Dwalin ‘accidentally’ sat on him, declaring them both ‘out’. Dis and Bifur seemed locked in
combat with each other while Thorin and Bilbo pursued each other over the cloth. Dis emerged the
winner, though Thorin complained she had burped in his face on purpose. Dis smirked and didn’t
deny the accusation in the least.
The younger set went for another round with the Ur badgers while Erda set out a smaller round table
at the window seat with more chairs around it. There she seated Thorin, Bilbo, Ori, Dwalin,
Thranduil, Dori and Balin.
Tharkûn appeared on the end of the window seat, declaring he was going to watch.
Bombur brought eight wine glasses and a large decanter of brilliant yellow, cloudy wine. Bombur
poured it out and Ori tasted. It was a vibrant citrus, cool and smooth, almost like lemonade. It was
just as well Ori reflected, if Dwalin was slightly incapacitated, he was likely to be drunk.
Erda passed out blank pieces of paper and graphite pens to each and said they were going to play
‘Consequences’.
This was played by everyone writing a male’s name at the top of the paper, folding it over to hide the
name then sliding the paper over to the player on the right. Then they were to write a female’s name
and repeat the passing. A place name followed to serve as a meeting place. Then something that the
male would say, then something for the female to say, something to happen and then something to
finish as a ‘consequence’. After passing the papers a final time each paper was unfolded and read.
The first round resulted in seven strange little stories.
Thranduil read: “A male named ‘Calmar’ and a female named ‘Lobilia’ met in ‘Mordor’. He said
‘I’m wet’. She said ‘Fuck off’. They had a battle’ and the consequence was that ‘A group of hobbits
threw potatoes at them’.

This was greeted with amusement and Dis read out:
“A male named ‘Vors’ and a female named ‘Galadriel’ met in ‘Erebor’. He said ‘Enjoy the starlight’. She said ‘I want carrots’. They made a cake and the consequence was that ‘they fell in a hole.’

This called for another round of paper and wine.

Among other stories, the second round produced: “A male named ‘Celeborn’ and a female named ‘Margr’ met in ‘Gondor’. He said ‘I have whizzbangs’. She said ‘I am married to an onion.’ ‘They danced beside a stream’ and the consequence was that ‘they flew away’.”

Three more rounds were played before the players’ invention gave out and it was declared that the younger members among the shimmy players ought to be in bed.

Legolas, Tauriel, Gimli, and Kili put away the shimmy objects and Fili and Sigrid came over to join the window seat group.

When Kili and his cohorts arrived there, they were allowed to read the silly stories from the game. These put them into whoops of merriment until Bombur arrived on the scene again followed by Erda to once more shuffle their guests into a group that was obviously ready for dessert.

Bombur turned to Thranduil and grinned. “I’ve prepared your favorite, you majesty.”

Thranduil smiled in a way Ori thought bode only ill. “Master Bombur! How good you are to me.”

The promised dessert arrived, served individually in flat-bottomed bowls.

It seemed to consist of a thickened whipped cream propping up something tall, narrow, white and obscene, topped by a candied cherry. Ori knew it was inevitable that all of it was meant to be eaten.

Bombur said nothing, but in short order each guest had been served their own nicely presented penis.

No one dared speak for a moment, then Thorin said, “Really, Bombur, you shouldn’t have.”

That broke everyone up.

Dori fanned himself with his serviette, giggling.

“Oh m-y-y-y-y,” he said in a low, deep voice.

Sigrid looked a trifle pale.

“Er… what is this?”

“Candle pudding,” said Thranduil merrily.

“That’s not what it looks like,” said Sigrid.

“I know, but I thought you were ‘over it’, my dear.”

“I might be all right with seeing them, but I’m not going to eat one in public.”

Thranduil laughed and clapped his hands.

“Well done, Princess Sigrid! Well done!”

Meanwhile, Fili was on the floor. Ori peeked down at him. The prince lay twitching, laughing so hard, and so silently that he couldn’t breathe.

“Oh, Bom… what sort of… what is this thing… sticking up?” said Ori.

“It’s a fruit called a banana, quite like the plantains but smoother and sweeter,” said Bombur. “Its skin is actually bright yellow but it has to be peeled before it’s eaten to get the full flavor.”

“A banana,” Tharkûn smiled. “Subtle as an orc and more delicious than cake. The perfect fruit.”

“Like other things,” said Erda, dragging a lazy finger through the cream and then feeding the dollop to Bombur.

Bifur murmured something in khuzdul about ‘pebble number fifteen’.

Ori breathed out slowly. He couldn’t even look at Dwalin right now. Dwalin’s hand on his thigh did nothing to help this.

“No’ quite th’ righ’ color,” Dwalin snickered.

“Hush!” Ori murmured.

“Certainly nothin’ t’ yers.”

“Dwalin!”

Kili looked up at Tauriel, grinning naughtily.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“It’s certainly… interesting,” she allowed.

“It’s a prick in a bowl,” said Gimli. “No gettin’ around it.”
“Is it? Hadn’t noticed,” Legolas teased.
“Lad, if yeh don’ know wha’ yer looking’ at …”
“Your spoon, King Thorin,” Bilbo said politely but with a twinkle in his eye. Thorin graced Bilbo with a sweet smile but eyes full of mischief. He removed the glazed cherry from the top and looked at it. Ori noticed, that though candied, the stem was still attached. Thorin popped the cherry, stem and all, into his mouth. He chewed, dropped the stone into his palm, and tossed it on the saucer. He had a humorous look in his eyes. Fili, who had managed to climb back in his seat, and Kili nuded each other and waited eagerly. Bilbo glanced at Ori, who shrugged.
Thorin swallowed then removed the stem from his mouth and held it up. The stem was tied in a perfect half hitch. Fili and Kili cheered. Thranduil looked appalled. Bilbo was very pink.
“And I thought my party trick was spectacular,” said Tharkûn with an audible “Hrmph.”
Thorin inspected the candle pudding with an unimpressed eye. He put his hands on the little table, leaned forward and took the entire fruit into his mouth and chewed it easily down. His tongue came out to lick the cream off his lips. He dabbed his mouth with his napkin.
“Nadad!” Dis cried in horrified delight.
“A very satisfying dessert,” he commented. He looked up, catching Bilbo’s eyes and smiled with utter wickedness.
Bilbo’s smile to Thorin in return made Ori rather warm himself. Burying the gift to Yavanna and his chat seemed to have broken the ice for Thorin and, Ori thought, everyone would be watching the king’s new pursuit of the hobbit. Indeed, if Nori were here he would be making book in front of everyone present.
Dori leaned over and put his hand on Thranduil’s forearm.
“Best save that one for King Bard.”
Thranduil blinked.
“Why would I do that?”
“Only polite to feed him before you eat him.”
Legolas choked.
“Ada! Are you and King Bard involved?”
“Certainly not!”
“Yet,” Dori sang merrily.
“Bearer!” Thranduil tried to sound stern, but he soon broke into laughter. He and Dori leaned against each other in mirth.
Ori thought it might be time to change the subject. Dwalin’s hand was creeping up his thigh with extreme lack of subtlety.
“Where does this er…dessert hail from, Master Bombur?” he asked quickly.
Bombur chuckled and Erda grinned evilly.
“Me,” said Erda. “I made it for Bom on our wedding night.”
Nope, not a change of subject at all.
Cinnamon Rolls, Muffins, and Fruit Wine
Chapter by Stevie Foxx

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. The making of more food, a special letter and, well, alcohol. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

And a shout out to Our #Arel for the help with dinner!

In the morning at breakfast, Ori was in the middle of his plate of bacon and a large, delicious pastry Bilbo had made, called a cinnamon roll, when Kali came in with a letter. He handed it to Ori, grinning. Ori frowned down at the folded sealed parchment in his hands. The parchment was dyed black.

“Who writes on black paper?” Kili demanded.

Ori shrugged and opened the missive. It was then he recognized the swirling hand in shiny silver ink. Dipfa was full of news. At the behest of all at the table, he read aloud:

Sir, she began formally.

I do hope you are successfully Assisting his Majesty in Recovering from his Great Loss.

Everyone snickered at this. Thorin groaned.

Things here in the Kingdom are running as Usual. Master Binni is Greatly Involved in refurbishing the Throne Room.

“We’re doomed,” Fili laughed. Balin looked vaguely annoyed and Dori intrigued.

It is very Impressive and conveys a deep Emotional Sense of Comfort that is Thrown into Relief by the Height of Durin Tradition which is being Extremely Upheld.
“'Comfort’ for whom?” Thorin wondered aloud. Bilbo came in with more tea and Thorin drew out the chair beside him.

Indeed, at one point the shocked Interior Designers from all the Guilds in the mountain did fan themselves and shriek, “Have MERCY!” And standing before the Throne Master Binni’s Honorable Husband, Lord Oin replied in a Great Voice, "Hang nursey? Why? Have any of My assistant Healers Killed anyone they're Not supposed to?"

The younger set burst out laughing. Dwalin was grinning like a well-fed warg and Dis had her head on the table.

In the Dale, the Men are Painting everything and Fixing some things. Their choices in Paint are Genteel enough, but not to my Tastes. I am attempting to advise King Bard of Such Things and my beloved Bu advises His Majesty on All Things Mechanical.

“If I find King Bard hiding in my forest,” Thranduil inquired reflectively, “shall I convey him back to you, Thorin, or give him refuge?”

“Poor da,” Sigrid giggled. “I can just see him sitting in his chair, staring wildly at those two. I hope Mistress Dazla can protect him a little.”

“She’ll need a whip an’ a chair,” Dwalin added, making Ori snort before he continued.

My beloved Bu tells me All things at the Great Library are going well. Master Brur has lately received a letter from The Lord of Rivendell. My beloved Bu tells me the Elvish Lord asks whether the New Regime would consider a Westron or Sindarin translation of The Infernal Adventures of Durin the Deathless, a Prophecy in Three Volumes.

“Apparently it’s killing him not to know what the ancient dwarrow said of him,” Thranduil snarked. All the dwarrow at the table looked at him askance, and Legolas openly stared, obviously astonished. Ori thought about calling kettles black, but instead he read on.
My beloved Bu means to inquire of you, My Lord Ori, if you would consider approaching His Great Majesty King Thorin II to find out whether or not he would consider the matter.

Thorin shrugged, “If Master Baggins is agreeable, we can use his copy of the book.”

Bilbo choked and rearranged his countenance.

“Ahem, well, it’s a very rough sort of copy, really. I—”

“Master Brur will be happy to assist you with any small nuances you may feel you have missed,” Thorin assured him. “I will speak to the librarian myself about the matter but only when it is officially brought to my attention. I am neither Oin or Ori and to give the impression that I am capable of prophecy, would be more than I could deal with.”

The listeners around the table all chuckled and Ori went back to Dipfa’s letter.

Lady Klakuna and Lord Nori are very much in each other’s Company. My beloved Bu tells me that They always sit Together at Family Meals and Lady Loli and Lady Omi say Lord Nori is quite Lady Klakuna’s dearest great GrandChild.

“Granny’s precious bah-jer,” Ori snickered at that, setting Gimli and Kili off again.

“Now, pet,” Dori admonished.

“Dori, she’ll spoil him rotten.”

“Just like he says I’ve spoiled you rotten, no doubt,” Dori said loftily. Ori snorted and fluttered his eyelashes at Dori, who pretended to look severe.

“Go back to the letter, pet.”

Lady Loli is somewhat put out because Lady Omi spends, in her words, an inordinate amount of time ‘mooning’ over my Associate, Master Pika. If this is so, Master Pika is also ‘mooning’. He accidentally mixed his Correspondence and young Lady Omi received Master Pika’s Copious Notes on the Proper Weaving of Tweed and our poor Master Mahrdin received an Ardent Letter which made him Very Red and caused him to avoid My Associate’s company for Three Days.
Even Dori cackled at this.

“Me poor Mahrdin,” sighed Balin. “I’ll have t’ give him quite th’ tip f’r this. Havin’ witnessed those two chattin’, Mahrdin’s feelings must a’ bin quite out a’ curl.”

“Those two are shameless!” Dis cried. “Do they really think no one can else understands Iglishmêk?”

*On the subject of Lady Loli, at my last Visit with her, she seemed in Low Spirits.*

*After some Talk she Revealed that she was somewhat Prostrate as Your Lordship’s Mighty Husband, the Great Warrior, Captain Dwalin-

Ori had to stop as Dwalin was laughing so loudly, no one could hear any more.

“Love, remind me t’ give tha’ lass more business.”

“May I continue, Mighty Warrior?” Ori teased.

Dwalin snorted again but subsided.

...Dwalin did Command a most Excellent Soldier -And So Loyal to His Great Majesty King Thorin II!- by the name of Furh’nk to take Captain Dwalin’s part in Dale in the Great Captain’s Absence. Thus, the Worthy Furh’nk is far too Taxed to Attend her.

“Well,” Dwalin chuckled. “What a shockin’ Great Warrior I am, deprivin’, our Loli o’ her Light o’ Love!”

“And what a Shocking Great Majesty I am to be the cause of It!” Thorin agreed.

“I wonder if Furh’nk knows?” Ori pondered aloud.

*Lady Loli thoroughly states that the Stalwart Furh’nk is her Heartsong. I have given her Every Assurance that Time will Pass. And that She will soon be Reunited with her Fine Soldier.*

“If he doesn’t know by now,” Thranduil reflected. “No doubt he will, when Captain Dwalin returns once more.”

*My beloved Bu’s Excellent Master Brur takes Lady Omi and Lady Loli, my beloved Bu,*
and Young Princess Tilda wherever he goes as Master Scribe to His Great Majesty King Thorin II in Your Lordship’s Absence. Master Brur, my beloved Bu tells me, tests Princess Tilda often and She is Most Interesting in Her Details of what should be noted as a Royal Scribe.

“Oh no, “ Sigrid laughed. “I can just imagine what Tilda finds interesting. Those poor dwarrow who have to speak in front of her. She notices every blemish!”

“She’ll have plenty to choose from,” Fili added.

I must Close now as Time does indeed Pass quickly and my beloved Bu awaits to Escort me to his Family home for Dinner. I hope my designs have served Your Lordship successfully and Look Forward to hearing Your Distinguished Opinions.

Respectfully At Your Lordship’s Service,

Dipfa

“Wait a moment,” said Bilbo. “Ori is capable of prophecy?”

“I’m not as good as the Great Woudini,” Ori protested.

“Few people are,” Bilbo soothed.

Ori squirmed and admitted, “I have accidents.”

Bilbo raised a brow.

“No!” Ori protested. “Not that kind! I seem to stumble onto things that… happen.”

Dwalin said, “He reads fire runes.”

“What are fire runes?” Bilbo asked.

Ori looked up, wild-eyed.

“Dwalin!”

“They’re th’ word o’ Mahal,” said Dwalin. He looked down at Ori and smiled. “Best he knows wha’ he’s gettin’ inta now.”

Dis grinned at Bilbo.
“Ravens herd him like their own personal kid goat.”

“That was only once!” Ori moaned. He klunked his head on the table. “Doomed.”

Fili put in, “And he vomits on treasure.”

“How is that prophecy?” Bilbo asked, laughing. “How do you auger vomit?”

“The ravens do,” said Thorin, perfectly seriously.

“They do not!” Ori cried.

Thranduil sighed.

“I’m glad you said that, Master Ori. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life thinking about ravens augering last night’s dwarven dinner.”

Balin shook his head.

“Over th’ edge an’ around th’ bend once more.”

“I’m sorry, Bilbo,” said Ori. “I won’t be angry if you’d rather not associate with me.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Bilbo. “I’ve known Gandalf all my life. If I can tolerate him… well, what’s a little prophecy between friends?”

Kili piped up, “The Great Woudini said Dwalin’s supposed to catch the biggest bird in all Arda! It’s going to fall out of the sky right into his arms.”

“I rather liked th’ bit about th’ pastry meself,” said Dwalin with a shrug.

Dis said, “And Thorin is supposed to meet a beardless dwarrowdam and have seven children.”

“I don’t see how he’s going to do that and keep his youthful figure,” said Bilbo.

Thorin snickered appreciatively.

“And I’m supposed to marry an Ent,” said Kili, frowning, “but no one will tell me what that is.”

Bilbo opened his mouth and closed it again.

“And neither shall I,” he finally settled.

“Someone is going to have to spill their guts sooner or later,” Kili grumped.

“I’ll make you a deal,” said Bilbo. “If you ever do meet an ent, I’ll tell you.”

At that point Legolas and Tauriel wandered in. They had been out practicing archery. Ori saw Kili go white as Tauriel withdrew Kili’s paper bird from her pouch. Legolas examined this and said in sindarin,

“Where did you find this?”

“I didn’t, Prince Kili gave it to me. Isn’t it cunning?”

“I smell ink.”
“I know, but from where?”

“Unfold it.”

Tauriel looked a little doubtful but did so. She stared wide-eyed at the paper and Legolas read over her shoulder.

“It doesn’t scan,” he said, outright.

Tauriel frowned. “It’s poetry. It doesn’t always have to scan.”

“I’ve never thought of you as being as silent as a bat. Bats are rather noisy, squeaking about the place, hunting bugs. Of course, I’ve never seen you hunting bugs.”

The blond prince’s grin turned feral.

Thranduil’s eyes flew open when his captain smacked her prince around the head with her quiver.

“Ouch!” cried Legolas mockingly, between laughter.

“There, now you know how I hunt bugs!” Tauriel announced in westron. She crossed to table, dropped her quiver on the end, and bent over to wrap her arms around Kili.

“Thank you, mel nin, you have a beautiful spirit of song.”

Kili glowed.

Breakfast had been cleared away and lunch was bubbling to completion when a small corner of the kitchen became an impromptu classroom with Master Frodo presiding over a class of one rather nervous royal pupil, Master Frodo’s silent partner Master Bilbo pouring tea for he and his associate Master Ori at the table nearby, but not interfering.

Thorin scooped up the flour and made to dump it into the bowl.

“No! Nonono! Too much!” Frodo cried.

“It’s a cup,” Thorin pointed out.

“It’s too much of a cup! See, like this.”

Frodo grabbed up the kitchen knife and used the dull edge to scrape across the top of the cup, dumping the excess back into the bin and leaving the contents of the cup level.

“Now it’s a cup,” said Frodo.

“Is it alright to put it in the bowl?”

“Yes, now is good.”

“How many of these are supposed to go in?”

“Five. See, that’s why you have to put in just the cup, or how would you know when you got to five for real?”

“Ah, I see. You know, this is an awful lot of work for muffins.”
“But they’re really good muffins,” Frodo assured him.

They continued in this vein for quite some time.

“Now,” said Frodo, “we add the milk and we stir, but not a lot of stirring, because then they’ll be tough.”

“Tough?”

“To eat. Just mix it until everything is wettish. Yes, that’s good.”

Finally the muffins went into the oven and Bilbo spoke.

“How fares your pupil, my boy?”

“He’s fine,” said Frodo, scraping down the counter, “but I need a nap.”

Thorin looked down at him.

“Really? You want a nap?”

“Yes, teaching you something is really hard.”

Frodo finished his clean up with practiced efficiency, directed the washing up of the implements, checked the muffins, pointed out their degree of doneness to the bemused Thorin, and finally pulled them out to the cooling rack before sighing and trotting out.

Ori concentrated on his tea, Bilbo’s jaw was clamped shut hard enough that the muscle flexed.

Thorin said, “If it helps, running a kingdom is easier than making muffins.”

Bilbo and Ori burst out into giggles and Dwalin leaned in the doorway, chuckling.

Finally Bilbo said, “Practice makes perfect, King Thorin. They do look good. Just put on the kettle for more tea we’ll sample them, eh?”

“Tea sounds wonderful.” Thorin managed. “Though, I’m … er… not much for making it myself.”

“Making tea isn’t a bad habit to cultivate,” said Bilbo. He gave Thorin a sly, sideways glance. “You do know how to make tea?”

“To my own satisfaction. I’d hate to inflict substandard tea on a hobbit.”

“Oh, that’s just rot. Here, put the kettle on. You can boil water, can’t you?”

“I … believe so, yes.”

“Then there’s hope for you yet.”

“Love,” said Dwalin.

Ori grinned up at him.

Dwalin continued, “Fancy a pony ride?”

Ori narrowed his eyes.
“Which of my ponies should I saddle up?” Ori asked.

Both Bilbo and Thorin snorted.

“The four legged one rather than the three,” Dwalin teased in turn.

“Get out!” Thorin ordered, wearily. Ori laughed and, bidding the king and the hobbit goodbye, put his hand into Dwalin’s and they turned to go out.

“Wait! Wait!” Bilbo cried, suddenly bustling about. “You’ll miss luncheon! Here, let me make you up something.”

‘Something’ as hobbits saw it turned out to be quite a bit larger than as dwarrows saw it.

They took muffins, of course, about six each, and a loaf of rustic bread, butter, cress and ham. Then apples and soft cheeses and pot of fruit preserves, knives to pare and cut up or spread all of that, and a sort of loaf of dried meat pounded with berries and, to drink, a flask of tea and a flask of beer and somehow it all fit into a latching basket that would hook to a saddle.

“Do you think it will be enough?” Bilbo asked, considering this very seriously.

“If not, we’ll be back in time for dinner,” Ori assured him.

Rather than asking one of the Ur badgers to saddle the ponies, Dwalin taught Ori to do it for himself. Ori turned out to be rather good at this, once he saw the entire process and recognize it as such. They went out to the field beyond where there were a few barrels and small jumps. Together, Ori and Honda learned to leap short branches and tiny rocks. That was scary enough, Ori discovered, and much harder than it looked.

Then they saddled Harley and went off for a leisurely ride along the lake.

While the ponies grazed, they played ‘tag’ on a secluded beach. There was far more tagging than actual running, and their version seemed to include a great deal of sand in their britches. From time to time the ponies would look over at them, swish their tails and snort. Ori could only imagine what they said to each other. He thought the talk must include references to those two git dwarrows, always jumping around like it was spring.

After stopping to take some lunch, because not even Dwalin could eat all of that, even with Harley and Honda helping with the apples, they saddled up again and practiced galloping in the meadows.

“Makes a nice change from gallopin’ through reception rooms,” said Dwalin.

Ori laughed and leaned over Honda’s mane and she lit out for the stables.

With a shout Dwalin and Harley were after them.

Though smaller, Honda was faster, and Ori lighter, and he just had time to slide from the saddle and act bored before Harley and Dwalin arrived.

“What kept you?” Ori asked, examining his nails.

Honda ruined his act by chewing on his hair.
“You’re a shithead, love,” said Dwalin with a smile.

“I am, yes, thank you for noticing. I still beat you here.”

“An’ I’ll never hear th’ end o’ it, I know,” said Dwalin.

Then Ori learned to unsaddle his pony, rub her down, brush her and let her out to the pasture.

“Never put a pony away wet,” said Dwalin. “They get sick, and cranky.”

“Sounds like Nori,” said Ori.

“He gets put away wet?”

“One time he fell in a muck puddle and Dori had to scrub him in the wash tub in the kitchen. He whined and struggled so much, Dori could barely towel him off before he was dashing for his room. At least, that’s what Dori says.”

“What’s yer take on it?”

“He was already grown up when I was born and Dori was never really specific about when this supposedly happened, though if I was to guess, I imagine Nori was at least sixty.”

“I only remember Balin havin’ t’ do tha’ t’ me once,” said Dwalin. “An’ Thorin an’ Dis as well. Mahal, we were mucky pups.”

“Did you get all dirty sparring?”

“Mud pie fight.”

“You must have been just wee badgers.”

Dwalin chuckled.

“Nah.”

“Omi, Loli and I had one once and we were still badgers. It wouldn’t have got so out of hand if Loli hadn’t tried to feed Omi a ‘pie’. Dori threatened he would scrub and throw us over a hedge to dry before we’d ever be clean again. Luckily, in Dale, hedges were in short supply.”

Coming out of the stable, toward the inn, they heard shouting.

Fili and Kili were making the most noise, roaring and shrieking, though Frodo’s small, high commands were in the mix.

“What are they doing?” Ori asked.

“Sounds like they’re playin’ ‘dragons’,” said Dwalin. “They always used t’ argue about who got t’ play th’ dragonslayer.”

“They both wanted to be the dragonslayer?”

“They both wanted t’ be th’ dragon.”

Dwalin and Ori arrived on the lake facing side of the inn. Frodo brandished a toy sword and rushed after a roaring and bellowing Fili and Kili, slaying them with great vigor. The funny thing
about these dragons was they kept being slain and then coming back to life to be gleefully slain again. Frodo had, it appeared, a brave squire in Rutile. The spider leapt gamely at the ‘dragons’, jumping on their heads while slayer Frodo killed them. The dragons each and every time died in exquisite, noisy agony.

Kili resurrected - as a horrible snow dragon, he announced - and rushed, hooting maniacally, at the slayer. Frodo frowned terribly and pointed his sword at the creatures, ordering his squire to jump. Kili was prepared and dodged the eight-legged attack. Undaunted, and most likely carried away by the moment, Rutile whisked over Kili’s head and let fly with both her spinnerets. Kili stumbled face first into the grass, bellowing in quite a different way this time.

“Aaaah, Rutile! My mouth was open and everything! Yuck!”

Fili bent double laughing, completely forgetting to be dragon-ish, and trotted to Kili’s side. Kili knelt in the grass wiping frantically at his face and mouth.

Ori turned at the continued sound of laughter to see all the guests and the oldest Urs sitting about comfortably on the deck. Tauriel bounced up and went to see to Kili, grabbing a pitcher of water on her way. Sigrid saw Ori and Dwalin and waved.

“You missed the terrible battle!”

“Lass, I think we saw th’ bes’ part.” Dwalin answered, making Ori giggle.

Dori leaned over the rail of the deck and called out.

“There you are, pet! Time to wash and change for dinner.”

Dwalin murmured, “Good thin’ yer nightshirt’s clean.”

“Arse.”

Once everyone was seated at table, Bombur beamed on them all.

“Tonight we have something light and slumber inducing.”

He attempted to look bland but everyone chuckled and commented.

“Now,” he continued. “I have requested, and our Bilbo has kindly agreed, to create for you all a light summer dinner as is served in the Shire.”

There were eager noises and everyone was alert, interested and hungry-looking.

Ori smiled as a savory, thick soup was set before him in a small bowl. The broth was lavish with potatoes, fried onions, and mushrooms. Dots of bacon and parsley floated on top. Ori was delighted with it, as were the rest of the guests. Dori looked at Bilbo speculatively.

“Do tell me, dear Bilbo, do you share your recipes?”

“Why, of course, dear Dori. If I didn’t, you wouldn’t be having any now.”

Dori gave Bilbo a sideways look.
“Indeed.”

The elves were served a delicate chicken broth with snips of chives sprinkled daintily over the surface. This, Thranduil declared to be quite good.

When the bowls were removed, many covered platters were brought out and laid on thick cloth mats as the steam warned of hot things inside.

Bombur nodded to Bilbo.

“Here are some different dishes,” Bilbo smiled on them, his thumbs hooked in his braces as he rocked back and forth on his large feet.

“One is called a roulade. These have cabbage, minced beef, garlic and onions, flavored with caraway seeds. This is served with potatoes with browned butter sauce.”

Murmurs of approval went around the table. Ori was immediately starving again.

“We also have potatoes and eggs, boiled and served with dill sauce.”

There were eager noises from the elves and Ori was ready to start. Bilbo gestured to the other dishes on the table.

“These are potatoes pancakes—”

“Potato pancakes?” Sigrid said a look of delight on her face.

“Yes, indeed. Comprised of both cooked and fresh grated potatoes mixed to a nice dough. We hobbits call them ‘bambes’. They are fried and served with any number of sides, but I’ve chosen mine and Frodo’s favorites.”

Bilbo grinned at his nephew, who bounced in his chair.

“The bambes on this plate are plain and come with apple sauce. On this plate, the bambes have basil and garlic and come with a sauce we call tzatziki, which is yoghurt with chopped cucumber, garlic, salt, olive oil, a touch of dill vinegar and, of course, dill!

“This final one has bacon mixed into it and comes with—” Bilbo’s eyes twinkled around at them. “—surprisingly enough, bacon.”

Ori blushed as he and Dwalin automatically groaned happily at the same time.

“Also from the Shire, a light beer, not too hoppy and with just a hint of lemon. Enjoy,” Bilbo finished and returned to his seat.

Ori dug in with everyone else. The roulades were hot, savory, and the caraway gave the meat a different flavor that complimented the buttery potatoes. Ori sampled all three of the different bambes and their sides. He didn’t blame Bilbo and Frodo for having three favorites. He knew he would never be able to decide which of them he liked best.

Thranduil showed a marked enthusiasm for the bambes. Ori half wondered if the woodland king would be fighting with his captain and son for the apple sauce or the creamy sauce sides.

Dessert, with a mild black tea to drink, was almost paper-thin slices of a rich chocolate cake filled with sweetened cream cheese and cherries.
After the usual clearing away, the elves went to look out at the starlight, and Kili and Gimli went with them. Bilbo went off, Ori presumed, to put Frodo to bed. Dwalin and Thorin went to the sitting room to play cards. Almost everyone else begged off to bed early.

Ori didn’t feel as tired as he should. He tried to read a book from the hall shelves but his mind wasn’t on the text. Thinking he couldn’t do it justice he put it back and followed the sound of laughter to the other side of the reception hall. This was the inn’s bar and he hadn’t had cause to frequent it thus far. The liquor served with dinner had generally been sufficient.

Curious, he went through and found a pleasant pub. There was a beautiful bar of polished pale wood. Glasses of all kinds hung above the area behind the bar in easy reach for the tapsters. There were leather padded stools with shining tables, and a huge fireplace with a small fire burning brightly, making the whole place cozy and welcoming. A few dogs lay snoozing at the fireplace.

Off to the side was a wide arch through which he could see a smaller ‘snug’ with soft, comfortable chairs clustered about, and another fireplace for quieter conversations. Looking around, he discovered where the royal military detail had been spending ‘off time’, for a crowd of dwarf soldiers stood around a table, jeering and laughing, and Targ lit his pipe at the fireplace.

“What’s happening here?” Ori asked.

Targ turned and grinned, pulling another chair over. Ori seated himself.

“Spar just challenged that hobbit feller t’ a drinkin’ contest."

Tharkûn, who sat comfortably at the fire on his own, smiled a fatherly smile and couldn’t seem to hold back a giggle.

“What he really?” Tharkûn asked.

“What?” Targ appeared offended. “Spar’s the best we got.”

“Oh, I’m sure, but, you know, I wouldn’t actually recommend it. Heh. No, not at… Spar’s not on duty tonight?”

“Naw. Captain’d have our beards f’r drinkin’ on duty. Don’t have t’worry about it ’till tomorrah.”

“Perhaps you should start planning for that right now,” said Tharkûn.

Ori searched his pockets and found Dwalin’s other pipe and Tharkûn generously passed his pipe weed pouch over.

“Old Toby,” said the wizard. “Excellent leaf from West Farthing.”

Ori settled to watch the spectacle, scribbling and sketching in his notebook.

Later, as the soldiers carried away their oblivious comrade, Tharkûn chided, “Really, Bilbo. You are a menace.”

“I did try to warn him,” said the hobbit, counting his winnings. “Granted, I didn’t try very hard.”

Bilbo turned to Ori.
“I wonder, Ori, if you would do me a favor.”

“I will if I can, Bilbo.”

“Here, take most of this coin and give it back to young Spar when he sobers up. Best not to leave him with nothing and his cronies seem the types to ‘borrow’ without asking.”

“Torq not so much, but Varil definitely,” said Ori. “I’ll take care of it.”

“You’re very good, Ori, thank you.” Bilbo turned back to Tharkûn. “And how does young Frodo this evening?”

Tharkûn pulled back his coat to reveal the sleeping faunt tucked into his side.

Bilbo sighed fondly.

“Just like a top. Thankfully, apart from the occasional nightmare, he’s always been a good sleeper.”

“Shall I tuck him up for you?” Tharkûn asked.

“Would you? You’re very good.”

“I know you don’t often get a night to yourself. You should probably make the most of it,” said Tharkûn.

He put the faunt to his shoulder and went out.

Ori looked back at the table, buried under a mountain of empty tankards, and then to where Tharkûn had gone, and wondered what Bilbo did when the wizard wasn’t about.

“I don’t spend a lot of time drinking in pubs,” said Bilbo with a wink. “Books don’t write themselves, you know.”

Bofur came to clear up and looked down at the littered table with a click of his tongue and a grin.

“Up to yer old tricks, Bilbo?”

“Sorry for the mess, Bo. There’s coin here to pay for it, so don’t let Master Nori get him to pay twice.”

“I resent that insinuation,” called Nori from the fire in the snug.

“Do you really?” Bilbo asked.

“Naw, not really. Got t’ keep up appearances, is all.”

Ori grinned, scampered over, and tumbled over the back of the sofa to hug him.

“Nori! When did you get here?”

“Oh, I been here watchin’ the show this whole time. I come t’ collect Bo and bring Dis a-”

Dis shrieked in delight someplace upstairs.

“-present,” Nori finished with a grin. “I figured Jani’d be happy t’ see her and so forth.”
The brothers came through to the bar and Nori patted Ori fondly on the head.

“The lake is so nice,” Ori said, then asked, “You’re staying for a couple of days?”

“Not much f’r swimming’, chick. Musses up me hair. We’ll be gone t’morrah mornin’.”

“Have you seen Dori?”

Nori winced and Ori laughed, saying,

“Oh, you are so going to die if you don’t at least show yourself tomorrow at breakfast.”

“I suppose,” said Nori, pouting.

Assault and Battery stuck their heads out of his hair and he absently gave them sips from his glass of ale.

“Starting young,” Ori noted.

Bofur wiped down the table and put a tall green bottle and a glass on the table in front of Bilbo.

“Right, we’re off,” Bofur said. “Y’ want an extra glass?”

Bilbo turned to Ori.

“Join me in a potent libation, Ori?”

“You want to drink me under the table, too?” Ori asked. “I warn you, I’m not much of a challenge.”

“When it comes to fruit wine, neither am I,” said Bilbo. “I’m actually immune to the effects of grain alcohol. Hobbits are, you know, but don’t spread that around.”

“Rather naughty!” Ori cried.

“Indeed.”

Ori sat. Bofur put down the second glass and he and Nori bade them goodnight.

“One glass of fruit wine and I’m in rather a happy place,” said Bilbo, pouring Ori a glass. “Now, tell me about this research of yours on mine songs.”

Dori found them about four glasses of fruit wine in.

“Doriiiiiiiiiiiiii!” Ori shrieked in delight.

The dogs at the fire side raised their heads in alarm.

Dori was also, apparently, alarmed, though Ori couldn’t think why. The inn was a perfectly lovely oasis of… loveliness.

“Mr Baggins!” Dori cried. “You are a terrible influence on my badger!”

Bilbo blinked.
“You have a badger? Is it a pet?”

“Ori! Ori is my badger.”

Bilbo looked over at Ori, who was not inclined to interfere.

“He looks like a dwarf.”

“He’s a young dwarf. We call them ‘badgers’.”

Bilbo’s face fell in horror.

“Oh! I beg your pardon, Mr. Dori! I didn’t realize he wasn’t of age!”

“He is of age, technically, but to me he will always be-“

“Underage?”

“A badger,” said Dori very patiently.

Bilbo looked relieved.

“That’s alright, then.”

“Alright that you led my Ori astray?” Dori demanded.

“No, that you don’t keep badgers as pets, except for Balin’s, but I don’t think of her so much a pet as an accessory. If you did keep more of them, I’d have to send Frodo out to play wearing steel gauntlets. Aggressive creatures, badgers, prone to bite and so forth.”

Dori opened his mouth and closed it. Finally he settled on, “Ori, what will Dwalin say?”

“I’d say it’s probably time t’ bid Master Baggins good night,” said Dwalin in the doorway, with Thorin beside him.

“Ah, Mr. Dwalin, King Thorin,” said Bilbo, “perhaps you might clarify for me.”

“If we kin, Master Baggins,” said Dwalin.

“Why are dwarflings called badgers? Or is that a dwarven secret?”

“They both bite,” said Dwalin.

“Each other?”

“Er…” Dwalin turned to Thorin. “Yer on yer own.”

Instead he went to his husband.

“Yer drunk, love.”

“Oh, yes. Very.”

“Gonna throw up?”

Ori giggled.
“Dunno. Is Nori still here?”

That was so funny he rocked back on his stool with laughter, tipped over and Dwalin intercepted him on the way to the floor, which made Ori laugh harder.

“We’ll get some water, love.”

“From the lake? I can’t drink from the lake. It’s cold. And dark.”

“In a glass, love.”

“I can’t swim in a glass.”

Bilbo said, “Perhaps it’s a large glass. Perhaps it’s in a pantry Bombur’s never shown me.”

Ori giggled.

“It’s the size of the lake.”

“The glass?” Bilbo asked.

“The pantry,” Ori replied.

The pair of them went off in peals of laughter.

Thorin and Dwalin exchanged smirks that said, Oh, we are in so much trouble.

Ori beadled his brow, or tried to. His eyebrows were uncooperative right now.

“What’s funny?”

“Yer a funny dwarf, love,” said Dwalin.

“I’m funny? Bilbo, I’m funny!”

Bilbo lifted his now empty glass to Ori with solemn countenance.

“We. We, my friend, are funny. I venture to say we are fucking hilarious.”

“Hurray!” Ori shouted. “All hail to Mahal and the seven stars of Durin shining bright!”

He frowned and added, “Oh, I forgot to burp.”

Bilbo giggled in delight.

“Oooooo,” said Ori, so excited he nearly flailed out of Dwalin’s arms. “Thorin’ll like that.”

“Like what?” Bilbo asked.

Dwalin leaned against the bar, trying to managed both his husband and a sudden attack of hysterical laughter.

Dori cut in, “Master Baggins is a menace!”

“No! Nooo!” Ori protested. “Lobelia’s the menace!”

“What’s a lobelia?” Dori asked.

“She does sound like a menace,” Thorin managed.

“She’s an inconsequential twat waffle,” Bilbo pronounced.

Thorin’s smile slowly widened.

“She’s a twat waffle?”

“Yes, and not the good kind. I say, King Thorin, come here for a moment will you?”

Thorin carefully approached.

“Well, for pity’s sake, lean down,” said Bilbo. “I’m too drunk to talk to a pine tree.”

Thorin leaned down until they were face to face.

“Yes, Master Baggins?”

“You… are the most adorable fuzzy morsel I’ve ever seen in my life.”

He took his forefinger and tapped the high king of the dwarrow on the end of his nose.

“Boop!”

Thorin turned scarlet to his ears and laughed.

“Ah, Master Baggins, if only your sentiments remained unchanged when you were sober.”

“Those are my sober sentiments, King Morsel. You’re just too pretty for me to say that out loud.”

“You just did.”

“Ah, so I did. So I did. D’you know, I’m awfully tired. I think I’ll go have a lie down. Care to join me?”

“Not tonight, thank you, but I will help you upstairs.”

“Why not tonight? Are you tired, too?”

“Yes, very tired, Master Baggins. Perhaps another time. Come along.”

“Why, thank you, King Thorin. What a gentle dwarrow you are. Or is it a gentledwarrow? Wait, wait. Dwarf is singular. You are a most singular dwarf.”

“Thank you, Master Baggins.”

As Thorin helped Bilbo from the room, Ori shouted, “Yes! Yes, Master Baggins, Thorin is single. You need to do something about that.”

Dwalin sighed.

“C’mon love, let’s go t’ bed.”

“Why? Are you going to play the bugle of Mahal?”
Dori sputtered indignantly, opened his mouth to say something, closed it with an impatient noise and threw his hands in the air, making for the rest of the inn.

“Mistaking my Ori for an animal! He’s perfectly potted!”

On the way out he passed Bombur, who was taking his final sweep through the inn before bed.

Bombur laughed and shook his head.

“Dori, Bilbo knows what a badger is. He’s spent every high season here for years. He was having you on.”

“But he’s very drunk.”

“But he’s still Bilbo.”
Muzziness, Married, and Morsels

Chapter by Dollypegs

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. In this chapter Gandalf is going to meddle and Nori and Jani are here, and smut happens. Rather a lot of smut happens, actually. If you don’t like smut, skip from where Dwalin and Ori go upstairs with cake until “Time passed”. If you like smut, enjoy. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Shoutout to Shinigami24, whose comment inspired the opening scene!

Ori couldn't even be blamed for it. He was in bed, asleep. He was certain of it. He was lying down. It took time for him to figure this out, though, since he thought it might be just him and the wine but, no, Dori, Nori and everything else in the dimly lit inn kitchen only looked sideways. If they really were sideways they'd likely have fallen to the floor by now. Or the wall. Which, if the room were on its side would, technically, then be the floor.
Anyway, Nori sat at the table, eating an enormous pile of chips and Ori felt jealous. Dori was fidgeting around the room, talking and waving his arms in consternation. Nori wore a nightshirt, which Ori though must be Bofur's, since he couldn't recall Nori ever wearing one, never mind a lime green plaid one with little pickaxes embroidered all over it.

Then he heard his name and he wasn't really concerned about the floor or the wall anymore. Though he still rather fancied the chips.

Dori was saying:

"My little Ori has never-"

"He ain't our 'little' anythin', Dor," said Nori, who on closer inspection looked rather morose. "He's outta the nest. He's grown. It's over."

"Don't say that!"

"Say what? Truth is, he's been of age now for years. We ain't been doin' him a favor, keepin' 'im tied t' the kitchen table in Steam Alley."

"He was safe there. He's always been so impressionable."

"An' who's fault is that? Ours. There's plenty o' dwarrow younger than him out in the world already, masters o' their craft, or married and poppin' out badgers."

"Maybe, in a few years-"

"Dori, you ain't listenin'. As usual. Go take another look at the paintin' over the desk. That ain't the work of a badger drawin' pictures t' hang on the larder door."

"No! I will not listen to this nonsense! You're the last person anyone should take advice from on badger raising."

"I'm still alive and got all me fingers."

"Good for you. I am still not having this conversation right now."

"Have it wif me now, or have it wif 'im later. That little 'to-do' wif his nightshirt oughter have told you that's comin'."

"Heard about that, did you? Of course you did. Then you know what he had the gall to say to me."

"Keep pushin' 'im, Dor, that'll sound like a love song compared to what you'll get next."

"I raised him better than that."

"Raised, Dori, past tense."

Silence. Then,

"What did you just say? Past te-"

"Don't look at me like that. Can't live wif a scholar for eighty years an’ stay a total shalehead.
"S'matter?"

"Just remembering something Dwalin said to Thorin about the same thing. I never thought about it before, but Ori has... influence."

"And not just wif shaleheads. You ain't been listenin' t' those scribe badgers back in Erebor. Whole time Ori's been here they've been askin' each other 'What would Ori say?', 'How would Ori do this?', and me personal favorite, 'If I mess this up, Ori's gonna slaughter me'."

"I never imagined him the slaughtering kind."

"Yeh, no, me neither, but the upshot is, they care what he thinks. Apparently, as scribes go, he's somethin' of a bad arse."

Ori and Dori snorted in unison. Luckily, Ori's brothers couldn't seem to hear him. Of course they couldn't. He was upstairs asleep.

"G'wan and laugh. Those badgers look up to 'im."

"Of course they do, he's older."

"They're all more of less the same age, Dor. Even him being married only takes it so far, though I have heard more about th' cuteness o' Dwalin's butt in the past few weeks than is stric'ly necessary."

"Nothing to Bofur's 'dumpling' butt, I take it?"

"No one's is, Dor. No one' is."

Dori sighed and sat, folding his hands in his lap. He looked so dejected, Ori wanted to hug him.

"I don't know what to do about Ori," he said.

"Nothin' for us to do," said Nori. "He'll always be our Chick, but he ain't a chick no more."

"Not what I wanted to hear."

Then the kitchen faded out and suddenly Ori was stuffed in an empty barrel, slammed too and fro as it was hurled about in the rapids of a flood-swollen river. He registered 'cold', 'wet' and 'no chips'. Then someone said something about jam bags. Then he knew nothing else until the morning.

Ori could have sworn his eyelids creaked open. The sunshine was sparkling, the bed was warm and he was muzzy headed. He tried to organize his thoughts. He remembered drinking fruit wine with Bilbo. He sighed. He doubted Dori would offer his remedy as Ori had done this to himself. He snuggled into the warm space beside him. The warm space. He sat up suddenly, mumbling, "Hey!"

He looked around.

"Wha’s goin on, love?"

Dwalin stood in the washroom doorway, drying his face.

"Oh, there you are." Ori relaxed.
Dwalin chuckled and went back into the washroom. Ori heard water running. Dwalin returned, bringing him a large glass of water.

“Drink up, love.”

Ori winced.

“I'm not sure I can stomach it.”

“Believe me, yeh’ll feel better f'r it.”

Ori did so, being very thirsty. He was surprised at how refreshing it was. He was also sure it wasn’t just water.

He drained the glass and licked the lingering flavor off his lips.

“How did you get ahold of Dori’s ‘remedy’? He didn’t give it to you, I’m sure.”

“I go’ it from Oin. I figured he knew it.”

“But, how did you get it here so fast?”

“Had it all along, love. Remember th’ dwarven credo ‘Be prepared’.”

“I thought that was just for warriors.”

“Battlin’ a hangover counts.”

Ori sighed.

“You’re wonderful.”

Some time later, Ori with a patient - yet, he suspected, very amused Dwalin - made their way to the dining room. Ori availed himself of toast and jam. Bilbo breezed in to put a plate of ham and eggs on the table before Dwalin. The hobbit was sober and fresh as ever.

“Good morning, Dwalin, Ori… King Morsel.”

Thorin snickered into his teacup and Ori had to pat his back.

“Something wrong, King Thorin?” Bilbo asked, blinking saucily.

Ori rather thought Frodo was not the only incurable Baggins flirt.

“No, nothing whatever,” Thorin rasped.

Bilbo gave him a saucy wink and retired to the kitchen.

It was late in the morning, Ori noticed. All the others had gone off to the lake or other enjoyments and it was just he and Dwalin and Thorin at table. Thorin looked preoccupied, and Ori got the feeling the king had been there the whole time, waiting for them. He also thought Thorin hadn't minded waiting, not as long as Bilbo was guaranteed to come and go with tea.

“Well?” Dwalin prompted. “Spill it.”
I was summoned to one of Tharkûn’s meddling sessions. They’re very rare,” said Thorin dryly.  

Dwalin snorted.

“It seems,” Thorin continued, “that Master Baggins under spoke his exile from the Shire. His property was seized by his relatives and he was banished until such time as they might see fit to forgive him his transgressions, which seem to include corrupting the morals of his underaged readers and generally smearing the good name of hobbits everywhere. The legality is rather vague, but the pitchforks were extremely sharp.”

“They banished ‘im even though he’d a badger?” Dwalin growled.

“Bilbo left with Frodo in the middle of the night when the same relatives who claimed his home started making noises about Bilbo as an unfit guardian.”

“Wait. We’re talking’ about th’ same badger who killed Fili an’ Kili over an’ over yesterday? Aye, he looked miserable.”

“Whether he looked miserable or not, he has a sizable inheritance.”

Ori winced.

“They mean that Bilbo’s an unfit guardian for Frodo’s money.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Thorin. “They didn’t do their research. The money’s in trust until Frodo comes of age at thirty-three. Frodo’s guardian gets Frodo, that’s all.”

They observed a moment of silent glee for Bilbo Baggins’ stupid, greedy relatives.

“In case you were wondering, Ori,” said Thorin, “Tharkûn agrees Bilbo would make an excellent visiting scholar for Erebor.”

“I didn’t talk to him about that,” said Ori, puzzled. Then he thought about it and shivered. “Wait, we didn’t need to talk about it, did we?”

“No,” said Thorin. “I see you understand Tharkûn already. In fact, Bilbo wasn’t initially happy to see the wizard here, since he was afraid Tharkûn had been sent by Bilbo’s grandfather to collect him. Turns out Tharkûn had been sent, but to warn Bilbo to stay away.”

After lunch, Ori felt curiously unambitious, but he took out his paints and easel anyway. The light over the lake was different right now, and varied moment to moment. It would be an interesting challenge to catch it on canvas. Then, when he’d finished that to his liking, Sigrid came over to chat with him again and they sat on the grass looking out at the lake. Ori smiled at his friend as she sat, legs half folded leaning on an arm. She was in another of Dipfa’s creations. This time a pretty frock of sky blue. Apparently, Dipfa had decided it was her color. Ori had to admit, it did set off her curls and the Durin blue Fili would inevitably wear. The frock had only straps over her shoulders and the hem stopped at her knees. She was barefoot and her hair was loose. He had an idea.

“Do you mind sitting just like that while I paint you, Sig?” Ori asked. “I’ve never painted a person, just scenery. I promise I’ll try not to make it look like you have three noses and both your eyes on one side of your head.”

“Who would paint that?” Sigrid asked, appalled.
“Don’t know. It would be interesting, but if I ever do decide to try it I’ll ask Nori to sit for it.”

“As you wish, milord,” said Sigrid.

For a while he worked in silence, then he said, “I can’t believe we’re almost ready to go home.”

“I know. I’m afraid this experience has totally spoiled me. It’ll be hard trying to get supper on the table when I know I could be sunning myself on the deck with a cold drink.”

Ori sighed. “And Bombur’s cooking.”

“And Bombur’s cooking, though Dori’s cooking is nothing to laugh at either. But I’ve never eaten such a variety of foods. I don’t think even a princess of Dale will have easy access to some of it. Noodles. And tomato sauce.”

“And banana pudding,” said Ori slyly.

“Not something I would ever dare put in front of Da. I think that will remain my little secret, at least until Fili and I are married.”

“You’ll have to eat quite a lot to catch up with Erda.”

Sigrid winced.

“Dwarf babies. I don’t imagine they’re as easy to birth as man babies, and that’s almost murder in itself.”

“You need to talk to someone who’s done it. There have to be some women in Dale who have.”

“Rather a sensitive topic.”

“You just need to find the woman version of Vi or Margr. Then you’ll get more detail than you’ll ever need.”

“I’m trying to imaging what such a woman would look like,” said Sigrid.

“A furnished room,” Ori replied.

“Too bad I didn’t have more time to chat with the Great Woudini’s wife, Ruelis. She was so kind. Her sister in law is a woman with a dwarf husband. They all travel together. If she’s anything like Ruelis, I’d love to talk to her, too.”

“Yes,” Ori said thoughtfully, wondering how the group had been received in Dale. “Maybe they’ll still be there when we get back.”

“That would help,” Sigrid agreed. “I wonder if Tilda got her fortune told by the Great Woudini?”

“Most likely,” Ori nodded. “She’s be a great battle maiden with a penchant for writing books about everything she’s ever killed, with illustrations courtesy of herself.”

“I believe it.” Sigrid concurred. “And Bain will catch the biggest fish in Arda and teach it to talk.”

“What will it say?” Ori asked.

“If it’s big enough, it can say whatever it wants.”
Ori guessed, “Feed me?”

“Or ‘Put me back in the water, you git.’ That’s what I’d say to him.”

“You mean you haven’t already?”

After a light lunch of toast, various cheeses and a delicious paste made from beans which was from the south and called hummus, Ori and Bilbo sat in a corner of the big kitchen each with a cup of tea and a lovely slice of the cherry chocolate cake from last evening. The cake was still so moist, it might as well have been a brownie. The filling of tangy cream cheese was nearly as firm as the cake.

Frodo and Wilibur played in the corner with their toy animals.

"I like this room," said Ori. "It reminds me of the kitchen in Fundin House."

"What is Fundin House?" Bilbo asked, addressing his own slice of cake.

"It used to be just the House of Fundin, that was Dwalin and Balin's father's name, but now we all live there, so I guess it's the royal residence."

"You all live in the same house? That must be... loud." Bilbo’s eyes twinkled and Ori chuckled.

"I love it there. It used to be just my brothers and I in the house in Steam Alley, but then I married Dwalin and we found out that Dori was Balin's heartsong, so he came to live with us too."

"What is a 'heartsong'?”

Ori considered, then remembered Bilbo was also privy to Fire Runes and proceeded.

"A dwarf or dam's heartsong is the perfect partner made for them by Mahal. That's not to say the partnership always works out, but if they can negotiate what life throws at them together, they'll be happy in each other."

"How do you know when you meet your heartsong?"

"We're all born hearing a certain music and we hear it throughout our lives, in times of great stress or happiness. When we meet the one who can sing our heartsong, then we know."

"Rather sad for people who are tone deaf, don't you think?"

Ori raised an eyebrow at him and they laughed.

"Anyway," Ori continued. “Thorin's family and Gimli's father's family used to each live in a house to either side of Fundin House, but we all spent most of our time there. A lot happened in a very short time before King Thror died. Afterward it was just natural to remain together. Thorin considers us all his kin."

Bilbo nodded.

"Thorin seems to enjoy his family. I've watched you all together and I'm quite envious. I was an only child."

Ori gave a wry grin and a laugh.
"Believe me, having siblings growing up has its own… nuances."

"Very discrete of you," Bilbo teased.

"Anyway, Dori arrived at Fundin House and immediately took over the kitchen."

"Rather unusual for the spouse of a dwarf lord, isn't it?"

"Maybe, but Dori, Nori and I weren't raised as nobles. Our own kitchen means everything to us."

"The heart of the home," said Bilbo with a wistful smile as he glanced over at Frodo and Wili. "So you were raised playing on the kitchen floor as well?"

"Underfoot at all times." Ori smiled into his tea. "If I was out of Dori's sight for more than a minute he tended to fret. I'm still trying to detach myself from that, but at the same time honor Dori's feelings. He raised me, more my mother than my own mother."

"Dori is both male and female." Bilbo stated quietly.

Ori hesitated.

Bilbo shook his head.

"If I've stumbled onto a forbidden topic, feel free to tell me so. Some things are kept hidden from outsiders for a reason."

"We don't have much that we keep hidden anymore, actually. Thorin says our secrets have just caused others to mistrust us. Dori is a Bearer, physically both male and female, yet fertile, a gift from Mahal from a time when we were few in number. Even now, only one out of three dwarrow is born as a dam, at least in body. Bearers are few and special, and considered close to Mahal." Ori grinned. "Mind, Dori would tell you he was close to Mahal no matter what. Are there any hobbits like that?"

"No, but considering a married male and female hobbit can easily produce ten children, we really haven't needed the help."

"Ten…?"

"Bombur and Erda do have fourteen."

"They're the only dwarrow ever known to have more than six, and that's in a race where two is a blessing and three is extraordinary."

Dwalin found him, then.

Ori looked up at him, grinning, "Dwalin! Look, there’s still cake!"

Dwalin approached at a moseying slouch.

"I won’ refuse tha’. A temptation from a temptation."

"Tease," Ori accused, feeding him a healthy mouthful from his fork.

"Mmmm," said Dwalin, closing his eyes, his mouth curled in pleasure, and when he opened his eyes again he looked straight into Ori's.
Baked goods indeed!

Ori swallowed.

"Ah," said Bilbo, slyly. "Perhaps you would like to take another slice with you."

"Uh huh," said Ori, barely noticing when Bilbo offered another slice.

"Try to remember to bring the plate back," he teased.

"Eh!" Dwalin took the slice of cake in one hand and Ori in the other, leaving a snickering Bilbo with the empty plate.

As they left the kitchen, Ori all but floating, he heard Frodo say, "Where are they going?"

"To be alone for a while. It’s spring, you know."

"Oh," said Faunt. "It is, isn't it. Old people are funny."

"Really?"

"You aren't though, Uncle Bilbo."

"I'm not old?"

"You're not funny. Not like that, anyway."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"I dunno. I think you could be funny, but you have to ask King Thorin."

Upstairs, Ori and Dwalin finished the cake in bed, feeding each other left over bits of cream.

With Dwalin's large, blunt finger in his mouth, Ori was glad they had left their clothing aside.

"Dwalin…"

"Aye?"

Ori gave the finger a nice, cleaning lick before he continued.

"Would you like me to play with your cock?"

Dwalin's eyes shot open in surprised, then narrowed in a hungry leer.

"Tha' sounds tasty."

"I… really want to," said Ori, forcing himself to speak his own mind.

"Take whatever yeh like, love."

As they were already lounging naked, the whole feast was on display before him.

Ori leaned over to kiss his husband, rolling atop him with a squeak when Dwalin lay back.

As they kissed languidly, the breeze blew the curtains around. They heard laughter from the beach. A door slammed somewhere in the depths of the inn. Peaceful as home.
Ori tangled his hands into Dwalin's hair, finer than his own, softer and feathery. He rubbed his fingers over Dwalin's scalp and ears and whiskered jaw and traced the lingering taste of cream from his lips.

Dwalin hummed his pleasure, nearly spanning Ori's middle with his hands, large and strong even for a dwarf.

How Ori loved those hands.

He pulled back and smiled and impulsively kissed the tip of Dwalin's nose.

Dwalin laughed in surprise.

"Shall I proceed?" Ori asked.

"At will, milord."

Ori had no idea what he was doing. He stuffed his nervous thoughts to the back of his head with a stern word for himself and set to work kissing and licking, under Dwalin's beard, enjoying and exploring his neck tattoos, and into the crease of his shoulder.

Dwalin's hands roamed his back, his sides and shoulders, soft and encouraging.

Ori's mouth found every scar and traced it, mapped each swath of ink, including the newest, where the artist had pierced Ori's name in runes above Dwalin's heart. All those hours apart, spent preparing for this trip, had not, it seemed, been Ori's burden alone. In that time the new ink had healed over, dark and sharp.

"Yeh like it?" Dwalin asked.

"I love it. I love you."

"Love yeh, too, ghivashele."

Ori spent long moment over each nipple, playing with the silver rings and tugging at them gently. Dwalin's breath hitched and then deepened. Ori felt Dwalin's cock stir against his hip.

He was ridiculously proud he had discovered this thing that aroused his husband, a piece of knowledge to file under the heading "Dwalin - sex research". He wondered how Master Dezimahl would code that and giggled.

Dwalin gave a gentle laugh.

"Yer so damned cute I kin barely stand it."

"Flatterer."

He gloried in Dwalin's belly, with its generous pelt of grey-brown fur, warm and spicy from soap and skin oils. Ori ran has face and hands through it over and over. He found he could not stop himself, even when he began to feel a little guilty because he was getting so much pleasure just from touching and tasting when it should be Dwalin he was seeing to.

His cock, always slow in rising, woke suddenly and almost painfully, shocking a gasp and a moan from his throat.

His senses overloaded and he had to pause just to breathe.
He looked up at Dwalin, apology on his lips, and froze. His husband was utterly overthrown, mouth open and eyes closed. He looked like a dream. Slowly Dwalin's eyes opened and they gazed at each other in perfect, lustful happiness.

Ori felt his ears grow warm as he looked back down and pecked a kiss at Dwalin's navel, which shook in silent laughter.

Lower now, the heated belly, the fur grown coarser and the cock slowly rising toward it. Ori buried his face in the crease of Dwalin's leg, licking and purring, one hand kneading the outside of the hip, the other grasping the thickening length. Ori moved his head to meet it, slid his bearded cheek up and down, then turned his mouth to kiss it.

"Ori," Dwalin breathed.

The syllables shivered right down his belly and into his crotch.

He swallowed hard, shifting restlessly, even as he ran his tongue up and down the purpling flesh. He had no idea how to proceed. He knew this thing was not going to fit into his mouth. Even at the beginning he might have put his lips around it, but not much of it and not for very long.

Perhaps sensing his hesitation, Dwalin ran a hand through Ori's hair.

"I know yer no' always fond o' veg, love, but if yeh could make an exception f'r me?"

Ah.

Ori mouthed lower to the dwarf's jewel sac and fondled it, sucked it, licked and kissed it as it tightened in his grasp, drawing up as Dwalin gasped and the cock in Ori's other hand shuddered.

Another packet of knowledge for Master Dezimahl.

He couldn't yet look lower than this, to his embarrassment and a bit of shame. Perhaps Dwalin wanted to be touched there, but Ori had no idea how. He'd never even touched himself there.

Later, he told himself firmly, got up on his knees and focused on the task very much at hand.

The head stood out from its sheath, leaking, and Ori's mouth watered. He swiped his tongue over the tip, sealed his mouth to it and thrust his tongue into the slit.

Dwalin convulsed on the bed with a shout, knocking Ori loose and back on his arse on the bed with a yelp.

"Ori!"

"I'm fine! I'm fine!" Ori cried, burning with embarrassment and fear. "Did I hurt you?"

Dwalin laughed, his head falling back onto the pillow.

"No, yeh didn't hurt me, but if yeh want t' do th'a', yeh'll have t' tie me up first."

"Seriously? I mean… oh, Mahal."

Dwalin smiled fondly and crooked a beckoning finger.

"Come back here, love. I need seein' t'."
"Alright," Ori agreed, ducking his head a little.

First he went back up to the headboard and kissed his husband again and rested their foreheads together for a long breath. As he traveled back down he trailed his fingers through the fur, over the tattoos and scars, and finally he knelt between Dwalin's thighs once more and took the trembling cock in both hands.

He bent his head and kissed it, licked it, traced the bulging veins, lapped up some of the spunk and used still more to slick his hands.

"Aye, just like tha'."

Ori watched how Dwalin moved as Ori moved, remembering that Dwalin liked a tight hand as he reached his climax. He experimented with closing his hands with increasing pressure, even as his mouth picked up speed. Ori's face was wet, his mouth full and still he moved, watching Dwalin's fingers put a death grip on the sheets.

The big body trembled under Ori's command and the truth of it left him baffled. He was doing this for Dwalin. He was making Dwalin feel these things.

Dwalin's whole frame went rigid beneath Ori's hands, his breathing changed, almost startled. The big fingers held his shoulders, just this side of painful.

"Comin'," Dwalin hissed.

And he did, copiously, in glorious white sprays as Ori pumped him to the end, laughing as Dwalin swore in one long, creative breath.

"OhMahal'sBlessedBleedin'HairyARSETha'sSoGood."

Ori lapped the thick whiteness from his hands, from Dwalin's cock and lower belly. He had no idea what it was supposed to taste like. He secretly had sampled his own just once and thought it rather salty. This was spicier, with just an edge more salt.

Ori held down a snort. It was rather like Dwalin himself, wasn't it.

He squeaked as Dwalin grabbed him under the arms and whisked him up for a fervent kiss.

This display of strength did nothing to ease his own want, urged on by more kisses, his hand playing in the stickiness setting in Dwalin's belly hair. Ori trembled violently, right on the edge.

Dwalin's breath evened out. He kissed Ori's face, slowly and deliberately, ending at his cheek and whispered in Ori's ear.

"Ori, will yeh jerk yourself off?"

"You want to watch?"

"Aye."

Vaguely embarrassed, but aroused past the point of caring, he knelt up and took himself in hand, the precum mixed with Dwalin's spunk making for delicious slickness as he throttled his prick, eyes heavy but focused on Dwalin, aware of Dwalin's sparkling gaze, aware he was given Dwalin something his beloved husband wanted while giving himself pleasure.

Almost unaware, he slid his free hand up his belly to his nipple, grasped it and twisted it hard.
His hips bucked violently and he nearly toppled over with surprise at the sudden sharp, accelerated pleasure. He rubbed his nipple in time to the rhythm of his full hand, hard nearly to the point of pain, panting now in cries, eyes tight shut as the pleasure tore through him, coming and coming and still hard, still wanting more. He twisted his nipple again and it felt like his pelvis burst and he fell.

Strong hands caught him and laid him down as he groaned and cried out into something warm and furry.

Time passed. The pleasure eased but it didn’t end. He felt like he had left his body, but perhaps he’d only dozed.

When he came back to himself, the shadows on the wall had traveled. A solid arm held him close, sprawled and boneless, draped over Dwalin in shameless abandon.

"Ori, love, yeh with me?"

"Uh? Have we missed supper?"

Dwalin chuckled.

"No, we haven’ missed supper, though, tha’ was quite a feast yeh put on fer me."

Ori turned his face into Dwalin's chest, embarrassed, then abruptly not.

"You liked it?" he asked slyly, happily.

"Yeh were amazin’."

Ori looked up at him and beamed.

They had washed and dressed for dinner, evening light pouring into the room. Ori sat on the bed while Dwalin brushed his hair.

"Got somethin’ fr yeh,” said Dwalin

He put a silver hair clasp into Ori's hands, decorated with emerald chips, to match the marriage bead he could finally take out of its box.

"Dwalin! It's beautiful! Thank you!"

"Wanted t' give it t' yeh before, but we barely saw each other."

"It's alright. We were all so frantic, Dori never even mentioned my hair. It was in my eyes! Can you imagine!"

"Terrible!” Dwalin agreed, grinning. "Hope yeh don't mind. I wanted t' be th' one t' put it in."

"Will it make my head will look less like a muffin?"

"Yeh'll always be edible t' me,” said Dwalin, winking.

Dwalin pulled the topmost tresses of Ori's hair up and back, left out a sizable hank and clipped the rest together, leaning in to kiss the side of his neck. Ori shuddered happily.
Then, even without Balin there to supervise, Dwalin put in Ori's braids of family and accomplishment with perfectly competent hands, making Ori wonder how much the first braidmaking session they'd all shared had been for the benefit of teasing Dwalin's brother.

Finally, Dwalin put in his marriage braid, and the bead Ori had missed most, and chucked his chin over in the direction of the dresser.

"Have a look in th' mirror. Wha' d'yeh think?"

Ori went and gaped.

"That's amazing."

His shorter journeyman's braid slid over the top of the sleeked hair and the family and marriage braids hung properly beneath it. The Durin braid, with its mithril bead, hid per tradition under his hair at the back of his neck.

"That's… That's really me?"

"Aye, an' now I kin see yer pretty ears, too, which is where these're goin'."

Dwalin took a matching set of earcuffs from his bead box. Ori returned to him to look at this new treasure. They were mithril, studded with emeralds, with many delicate silver chains to fall behind the ears, each chain ending at a different length and capped with teardrops of emerald and obsidian.

"These belonged t' me mam's mam," said Dwalin. "They been sittin' in tha' box waitin' f'r yeh all this time."

"Oh," Ori breathed as Dwalin put them on his ears, kissing his neck on each side as he did so. It had become a sort of ritual between them, when Dwalin put his beads and jewelry on, he kissed Ori's neck lingeringly.

Ori trailed his fingers down the chains.

"Oh, Dwalin, thank you!"

Ori threw his arms around Dwalin.

"Love you so much!"

"Love yeh, too. Will yeh put me beads back in?"

"Yes! Yes, of course!"

Dwalin's braids were more numerous and complicated than most people realized. His marriage braid went into his beard in part because the rest took up most of his available hair. There was the Durin bead, of course, and the bead of the Fundins, and the complicated braids of a warrior, which was how they counted rank. The beads were woven into the strands and clasped with gold: the first braid, the simplest, for a recruit, then that of a soldier, then of a battle-tested warrior. This bead, which Thorin, Balin and Bifur also wore, was jet with marcasite-studded caps, for those who had survived Azanulbizar. Dwalin's final bead bore a gold sword set in lapis under a tiny diamond star, marking him not only as captain of the city guard, but in the service of the crown prince.

"Will you have to change this bead?" Ori asked.

"Dunno. Thorin an' I talked about it. He's supposed t' give me another after th' coronation, when
I take me oath, bu' I'm still captain o' th' city guard, an' we're both fond o' this one. The 'king's servant' bead is black an' gold."

"Ah." Thror's colors, of course. "Maybe this one is best."

Dwalin nodded.

“Aye, Thorin’s bin talkin’ t’ Fili about designing’ his own as crown prince.”

Ori snickered

“Well, the black and gold won’t show well against Fili the Golden’s hair and complexion.”

Dwalin snorted and took his hand as they left the room to go downstairs.

When they went down to the dining room, Ori received nothing but compliments and gentle teasing, except for Dori who said, "Well." and put his nose back in his glass of sherry.

Ori let it lie and was not discouraged. He knew all was well. If Dori hated it, he would have said so immediately.

Thorin and Fili entered from the sitting room, Thorin sedate and amused, Fili excited and grinning, all but bouncing like a badger.

Dis, seated with Dori, Balin and Sigrid on the window seat, tilted her head at him with a smile.

“Well, someone is certainly in a good mood!”

“I beat him, Amad! I beat Idad Thorin at chess!”

Thorin sat and nodded in the couch opposite with Kili, Tauriel and Thranduil.

“Thrashed me soundly. Very well done, Fili.”

“IbeathimIbeathimIbeathim,” Fili all but sang under his breath.

Sigrid laughed.

“Fili, you act as if-mmf.”

Fili had seized her by the shoulders and kissed her hard.

Then he pulled back, realized what he’d done in company, cleared his throat and sat in the chair off to the side of her.

“Yes, well,” said Fili, “I did.”

Kili said to the mystified elves, “No one ever beats Idad Thorin, except Balin, and Balin taught him.”

Abruptly, Dis threw her hands in the air and cried out, “Oh, rapturous day! To think, Mahal let me live to see it!”

“Amad,” Fili snerked.

She rose and fell to her knees before him, hands in front of her.
“No, no, say nothing, inudoye. Just let me bask in this perfect moment.”

Fili’s eyes grew very large and round, and Kili didn’t know where to look.

“The bards will sing of this day, o prince of Durin!”

She half rose and, lofting her arms over and over in tribute, backed out and around the corner of the book hall and was gone.

“Who is this dam and what has she done with our amad?” Kili asked.

Dis shrieked.

They heard a slap of skin on skin and a filthy laugh.

“Jani!” Dis cried.

“Well, yeh can’t offer me such a temptin’ target an’ expect I won’t take it, lovely.”

Once again the table was set up in fours, each place with a woven grass mat, a small plate and a napkin, with little red earthenware bowls of condiments, including one bowl of what Ori could swear was mashed up chile peppers.

"Well, if you were a scholar of green foods, I'd say this was your final exam, Ori."

Ori raised an eyebrow as Bilbo put a heavy bowl made of volcanic rock down for their set of four diners.

Inside the bowl was, without a doubt, the greenest food Ori had ever seen. The thick, chunky-looking mash was nearly fluorescent.

"Seriously?" he asked. "This isn't a joke?"

"I would never joke about gwakas, my lad."

"I wouldn't either, probably, if I knew what they were."

"They're yummy," said Frodo, visibly holding himself from falling headfirst into the bowl, at least until everyone else had been served.

"Why don't you tell Mister Ori what's in this, my boy, while we make sure everyone else has some, eh?"

Frodo nodded.

"It's gwaka sauce. It's mashed up gwaka fruit and lemon juice and onions and bits of tomato and hot peppers, and cilantro, which is like parsley, but tastes kind of like soap, but it's better than soap because you can eat it."

"And how do we eat it?" Ori asked.

"With our mouths," said Frodo, puzzled.

Ori thought he did have a point.
"I mean, what tableware do we use? A fork or a spoon? Not sticks?"

"Oh, no, we use corn wafers, that way we can eat them, too."

Poli set a basket of fried yellow wavers beside the gwaka soup… sauce… something. They were still hot from the oil, and the smell of salted, fried corn enveloped Ori with a seductive caress.

Dwalin swallowed audibly and said, "Mahal's blessed boots."

Across from them, Tharkûn chuckled and Frodo looked down the table, sharply watching for the very moment when everyone had some and the food massacre could begin.

As Bilbo passed, Ori leaned back and whispered, "Fresh tomatoes?"

" Came up from the Shire with the cilantro via a dwarf trader," Bilbo muttered, "but I won't tell Frodo if you don't."

Randi, Jaki and Ari carried in trays of ice-filled glasses and jugs brimming with cut up fruits swimming in a deep red liquid.

"Splendid," said Tharkûn. "I happily wait all year for Erda's zingria!"

"Fruit, fruit juice, wine and spices," said Randi pouring out a glass for Ori. "You'll love this. Mam's is the best."

"Yes, yes," said Erda, waving her hand, "no one can cut up fruit like I do."

"But it's made with love, my Erda," said Bombur, kissing her cheek in passing, "and that's the best ingredient of all."

Different jugs came out of the kitchen with a lighter orange mix of just fruit, spice and juice for the badgers, though Erda did add a few tablespoons of the original zingria to each.

Ori looked over and Dwalin, then down at the gwaka sauce and grinned.

"Ready"

"If yeh are. We'd best get t' it, before Frodo eats it all."

Eating this sauce with the corn wafers really didn't make it that different from eating chips, Ori thought. In fact, he thought this sauce might taste pretty good on chips. In fact, he thought this sauce would taste pretty good eaten right out of the bowl with a spoon. The gwaka chunks all but melted into a cream on the tongue. They were so soft, Ori was amazed they could keep their shape in the bowl. The onions and peppers gave it a little bite, and the tomatoes and lime juice added nice, contrasting zip. He had been wary of the cilantro, having once been warned off swearing with the threat of a chunk of soap in the mouth, but this was just different enough and just complimentary enough, to make it a nice bit of the whole.

The sliced fruit in the zingria turned out to be apples, grapes and rare and costly slices of citrus from the southeast.

It was not the first time at the inn that Ori had felt he was feasting like a king.

The atmosphere was very relaxed, they lingered over the crumbs of the corn wafers.

"This," said Bombur, "is one of the most exotic and unusual meals we have ever served. Some of
the dishes we have seen and tasted before and some of the ingredients are common place, Obviously corn, wine, tomatoes, onions, are not unknown in this part of arda, but gwakas are from lands so far south and east that they are barely listed even on maps. If you were in any doubt as to the rewards of your work, Dis, this should certainly silence them. This meal could not exist without you.

"More than that, your willingness to take on my lad Randibur as a trading apprentice is boon we could have hardly foreseen." Bombur gave a mock-appraising eye to fourth son, who was helping clear the table and who, at seventy-eight, should have been beyond blushing, but wasn't.

Dis held up her glass to Bombur and Erda.

"If he works half as hard for me as he does for you, I will have nothing more to ask."

Balin chuckled.

"An' if he gets six words in during any conversation it'll be a miracle."

She blew him a kiss and an evil smile.

Ori wasn't as startled as he might have been by this new development, nor did he have a moment to ponder it, as more earthenware vessels, these covered, arrived at the table.

The rice was unexpected, though only slightly different than they had before, flecked with a red seasoning he suspected was ground chile, which seemed to be a current running through this meal. He wondered how many cultures in arda cultivated rice. It seemed to come from all corners of the world. There were also very dark beans mixed with kernels of corn, and more plantains, which he made sure he secured before Thranduil commandeered their platter as well as his own. Then the top came off the largest vessel and he saw cutlets of something, perhaps chicken, enrobed in the darkest red sauce he had ever seen.

It flitted through his brain that it might be a blood sauce, such as they made in the iron hills and among the Blacklocks, but it didn't smell quite right for blood. There was a lot of spice, he knew, some of it familiar.

He caught Sigrid's eye and tilted his head toward the dish. Sigrid shrugged helplessly.

"There are some toasted seed over the top," she said. "I recognize them, but I've never had them before."

"Sesame," Thranduil supplied. "They're also used to make oil."

"Oh, thank you."

Erda gave them a mischievous smile and said, "I'll tell you right now, the thing that gives the sauce it's rich, dark color is xocolātl, but you have to guess the rest."

Ori speared a cutlet, which turned out to be chicken after all, and poked at it gingerly with his fork. Everyone around him seemed to be wearing the same expression of total bewilderment, except for Kili, who bravely took his spoon to the sauce in the earthenware pot and shoved the entire sampling in his mouth.

He made a small, distressed noise, his cheeks turned bright red and he finally took the spoon from his mouth and said, "That does not taste like xocolātl. It tastes like smoke and heat."
"It's not soup, dear," said Erda, chuckling. "The sauce is just an accompaniment and it really is xocolāṭl, it's just not sweetened."

There were some larger and softer round versions of the corn wafers. Ori took one up and propped it on the edge of his plate, almost like a shield for his tongue. He was certainly going to try the unsweetened xocolāṭl sauce. He wasn't going to be outdone at this table by Kili.

It was wonderful. It was hot and sweet and spicy and it made him tear up.

"Onions, chiles… clove?" Dwalin guessed

"Very good," said Erda. "Anyone else?"

"Thyme, cinnamon, anise," said Dori confidently, then with consideration, "Hmmm, rather a sharp little bit. Pepper."

"Excellent," said Erda. "Keep going."

Kili yelped, "There's more?"

"Yes, over a dozen ingredients, and this is a very simple version, and perhaps a little unorthodox. The authentic sauce has over forty. Let me help. What usually goes into a red sauce?"

"Tomatoes," said Thorin.

Balin said, "I kin safely say we've tapped th' last o' th'a' vein. What else, Erda?"

"Lard at the base. Ground nuts, raisins and a little corn meal."

Dori was impressed.

"And this is the simple version."

The beans and corn were actually served chilled, with a sort of vinegary dressing and bits of an herb, much milder than even dried mint.

"I don't know what this herb is," he admitted.

"Ebzawti," said Bilbo.

"It's very light."

"It's not actually there for what it promotes as what it prevents. Let's just say, the foods we're eating tend to promote digestion."

"They make you fart," said Frodo.

"Really, Frodo?" Bilbo asked, sighing.

Tharkûn started to giggle.

"He's definitely a Brandybuck, Bilbo. There's not much you can do."

"No, but I keep trying."

"What's a Brandybuck?" Ori asked.
"My mama was," said Frodo.

"One of the three main clans of hobbits," said Bilbo, "along with the Baggins and Took clans. Bagginses tend to be respectable, upright and priggish. Tooks are outgoing, daring and foolish. Brandybucks are plain spoken, practical and, at times, tactless."

"Yep," said Frodo, helping himself to more rice.

Balin said, "Ori, I saw yeh an’ our Sig on the lawn earlier. Yer paintin’ her?"

"By way of experiment," said Ori.

"You’ve taken my advice then," said Thranduil.

"It’s just an exercise, your majesty. I wouldn’t want to excite any anticipation. If it comes out well it’ll be down to Sigrid being so pleasant to paint. I’ll likely work on it in pieces and finish it in Erebor, if Sig and I ever find the time."

"It’s a very interesting process," said Sigrid. "I never realized, but he puts down base colors in different shapes and sort of… I don’t know, molds the other colors onto them. It’s like he’s growing the picture."

"That is what it feels like, too," said Ori. "It’s sort of like building a cake."

"On that note," said Bombur, "we have dessert. Not cake, actually, but a sort of pastry from the same regions as the sauces and spices."

The luscious scents of something mouthwatering, sweet and fried proceeded the platters into the room. When Randi put the platter on the table, Ori had nothing to compare exactly to its contents. They were deep brown like doughnuts, long like iklars, and covered in cinnamon and sugar like fancy butter biscuits. A large pot of melted xocolātl nestled in the middle of each piled platter.

"J’ros," said Randi. "Careful, they’re habit-forming."

Kili looked askance at the pot of xocolātl. Obviously, having been fooled by the sauce over the chicken, he would not be taken unawares again.

The evening was so beautiful most people went outside to sit on the deck and chat or wander. Ori took Dwalin’s hand and they went down to the lake shore again. Here they took off their boots and socks and rolled up their britches so they could walk in the shallows.

"I can’t believe we leave here the day after tomorrow," Ori commented idly. "Sigrid and I were taking about it. Things will seem rather flat, I suppose."

Dwalin laughed.

"With the coronation comin’ up, all the kings comin’ t’ swear loyalty, we’ll be run off our feet, love."

"You’re right. And we have all the mines and guilds to sort. I’m glad Thorin’s had this rest. He’ll have a lot to do to get the kingdom sorted and Dale. I mean help Bard sort Dale."

"Mmm," Dwalin agreed. "Bard’ll have t’ star’ leanin’ on Sigrid a good bit. Th’ lass’s go’ a good head on her shoulders. She an’ our Fili will be perfect t’ rule when th’ kingdoms’re combined when
they’re crowned.’

“I know,” Ori said happily. “I think Sigrid will make an excellent queen. She looks like one I think.”

“Aye, she’s growin’ int’ it fine.”

They walked on as the moon rose. Ori sighed. He was so happy.

“I love you, Dwalin,” he said, which seemed to sum up everything. Dwalin loosed his hand and put his arm around Ori’s shoulders.

“Yer me One, love. Sometimes I just want t’ stay in one place, all still, with me eyes closed an’ listen t’ yer song in me heart.”

Ori slid his arm about Dwalin’s waist and squeezed a little.

“I know.”

They paused a moment and stood looking at each other. Dwalin bowed his head and rested his brow against Ori’s.

Ori sighed as his eyes stung with happy tears. This was better than anything. It was better than chips. Chips.

Ori frowned. Dwalin looked at him.

“Why, love?”

“I had the strangest dream last night,” Ori said, as hand in hand, they continued to wander along the shore. “Nothing prophetic I think, but odd. I dreamed Dori and Nori were in the kitchen late, talking about me and eating chips. I listened in and, Mahal, I wanted those chips.”

Dwalin threw back his head and laughed.

They say anythin’ yer goin’ t’ sort ‘em out on?”

“No, just Nori telling Dori I’m a grown up and stop coddling me. He thinks the nightshirt incident is a pale harbinger of what I’ll do next if Dori doesn’t stop fussing over me.”

Dwalin looked down at him.

“Is it?”

“No, “ Ori protested. “I love Dori and I doubt I will ever stop snuggling up to him and being cute to get my own way.”

Dwalin choked and laughed again. Ori cast him a sidelong look.

“Dwalin, you must have noticed I am rather spoiled. I know I’m perfectly capable of wrapping Dori around my finger. I can do it to Nori, too, but I have to be sly about it.”

“Aye, but yeh don’t do it all th’ time.”

“Of course not! It’s mean.”
“An’ yeh know tha’.”

“Well, yes, but—”

“An’ yeh don’t do it unless yeh know tha’ either o’ them’re th’ only ones t’ fix a situation, right?”

“True…”

“Yeh don’t think Thorin and I don’t do th’ same t’ Balin?”

Ori stared up at him again.

“Really?”

“Aye, Dis, too.”

“I suppose that’s the way families are,” Ori reflected.

“Aye, it is. Mind, yeh know well yeh’ve jus’ go’ t’ pink an’ I’ll toss gems at yer feet.”

Ori laughed.

“Careful, love. Yeh’ve a mighty power. I think if yeh asked I migh’ try writin’ yeh poetry.”

Ori cocked his head, a speculative gleam in his eyes,

“Really?” he cooed.

“Prob’ly.”

“Hmmm.”

“Love?”

“Make up a poem for your dear, darling husband.”

Dwalin groaned and Ori went off in another peal of laughter. Dwalin frowned playfully.

“Yeh think I can’t?”

Ori grinned. Dwalin watched him a moment then took a breath.

“Me an’ me love walked by th’ lake
We were ponderin’ ‘n action t’ take
We though’ we’d dive in
And ‘ave a nice swim
Bu’ it were too bloody cold, f’r fuck’s sake.”

Ori shrieked and nearly fell over he was giggling so hard. He recovered and applauded wildly.

“That was brilliant! I’m going to write it down!”
“No yeh ain’t.”

“Oh yes, I am. A completely off the cuff poem from you! I’m unworthy! I shall pop it in my journal as soon as we get back.”

Ori grabbed Dwalin hand and pulled him back the way they came, both chuckling.
Hugs, Hide, and Go Seek

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Oh sorrow, oh woe, as all good things come to an end this is our dear dwarrow’s last full day at this charming Inn. In this chapter we have done our level best to make it truly memorable. Enjoy. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori wandered downstairs, as Dwalin had stopped to talk to Thorin.

Ori was surprised as the inn was very quiet. He knew he and Dwalin had woken early but he hadn’t expected to be the first one downstairs. He could hear a few noises from the kitchen but no one was in the reception hall or any of the public rooms. He wandered out to the deck and there he found Dori by himself on a chair in the deck, weeping.

“Dori! What’s wrong? Did you and Balin fight so badly, you had to kill him?”

It wasn’t as far fetched an idea as it could be, unfortunately.

“No, pet, nothing of the sort. I believe he’s still abed. I was just out here… remembering.”

“Remembering what?” Ori asked, sitting beside him.

Dori opened his hand to reveal a short length of extremely stained and ill used amethyst-colored ribbon.

“What is this?” Ori wondered, though he had a sinking feeling he already knew.

“The ribbon I used to bind your first braid when you were just a new badgerling.”

“Was my hair really that thin?”

“No, it used to be longer until you got hold of it one day and ate about two thirds of it.”

Ori winced.

“Sorry, Dori.”

“It’s alright, I always suspected Nori of putting you up to it. Really, I’ve always suspected him of putting you up to everything short of stealing Thror’s crown off his bedside table.”

“Do you think he ever-“

“No. I doubt it was kept out in the open like that. It’s just that… I was thinking how all grown up you are. You were right about your hair, pet. It’s quite becoming this way. It suits you.”

Ori smiled gently.
“I know it takes more than a new hair style to make a grown dwarf, Ori’s Dori.”

“It wasn’t so much the style as the one who arranged it for you. Isn’t that what it means to be married? To have your One braid your hair?”

“As Balin braids yours?”

Dori sniffed and looked up, a smile playing about his mouth, still a little misty-eyed.

“Yes.”

“And you wouldn’t change that for anything?”

“No…”

Ori grinned then stood and pushed Dori’s arms aside and plonked himself down in Dori’s lap.

“Ori’s Dori!”

“OH-Umph! Pet!”

Ori laughed and Dori joined in and they giggled together. Dori wrapped his arms around Ori and Ori put his head down on Dori’s shoulder and they sat that way enjoying the dawn breaking as the sun slid upward and crossed from the side of the house then scooped its way across the lake.

Sometime later Balin and Dwalin came out and found them.

Breakfast was nothing like what they’d had before, but it certainly excited other possibilities.

It was a beautiful, warm day and the table and chairs were set up on the deck. The ingredients for breakfast were laid out as well, but it seemed like such a random jumble of ingredients, Ori had no idea what he was supposed to do with them.

Fortunately, Poli was there to guide them through the construction process.

Ori took a round of the bread from last night, put in a scoop of scrambled egg and rolled it up into a tube. Then he spread it with some left over heated xocolatl sauce, shredded cheese and mashed chiles.

The aromas of the mixed food were likely to kill him with bliss.

“There’s juice left, too,” Poli said slyly. “Don’t worry, it’s not the zingria.”

“Awwwww,” said Ori. “I suppose I’ll have to muddle through somehow.”

The kettle well contingent arrived to table dressed in each other’s bathing costumes as before, wanting to get as much time in the water as they could on this last full day at the inn. They fell on the food like starving wargs.

Jani and Nori disappeared upstairs right after breakfast. Dis sat and lingered over her plate, smiling mysteriously to herself.
Ori found out why when Jani returned wearing a bathing costume.

It was black, and undecorated, but otherwise identical to Thorin’s.

It only had a strap across one shoulder and left half Jani’s chest bare.

Actually, Ori thought it was a good look for her.

Dori shot to his feet.

“My dear!” he cried. “That is simply shocking!”

The elves looked shocked at any rate. Thranduil was concentrating very hard on his juice and not at the breast which appeared to be watching him.

“What was Dipfa thinking?” Dori continued. “You’re so light-skinned, you’ll be sunburned in minutes!”

“I’ll take me chances,” said Jani, plopping herself down next to a very pleased-looking Dis. “That get-up our Dipfa made me’s just foolishness. I don’t object t’ a little lace every now and then, long’s it ain’t scratchy, but all that lace an’ frippery! Mebbe it’s fine fer Omi an’ Loli, but I ain’t wearin’ it.”

“I think it looks lovely,” said Dis, practically glowing with pride.

“No one is surprised, namad,” Thorin teased.

“Jani, this isn’t your suit?” Dori asked.

“Naw, it’s Nori’s. He’ll be down in a mo’.”

“If this is his suit, what is he wearing?”

“Here I am!” Nori announced. “Ready ’r not!”

The costume was cut much like Sigrid’s, with a cropped bodice, a skirt and bloomers, though Nori had forgone the hat and swim shoes. The material hung on him a little baggy, since Jani was a well-grown dam and Nori tended toward leanness.

It was hot pink with turquoise, yellow and lime green hearts of varying sizes all over, and the neckline, skirt edge, leg openings and bodice hem burdened with row upon row of burnt orange lace.

“You’ve certainly been thrown into relief,” said Ori.

“Nori, you look like a birthday cake,” said Bilbo.

Dori shook his head.

“Completely clashes with your hair.”

“Aye, but I can do that spiny thing the lasses do wif their skirts!”

He demonstrated.

“Done it already,” Fili sniffed, unimpressed.

“But not better’n me,” Nori declared.
“We’ll see about that, shall we?” Fili challenged.

Nori got that gleam in his eye.

“Yer gonna make it worth me while? Remember, the lace give me the edge.”

Chittering from the region of Nori’s skull interrupted them.

Nori frowned and looked upward.

“Well, come on down then if yer dizzy. You ain’t upchuckin’ in me hair.”

The ferret kits skittered out and down to the deck, a little woozy on their feet already.

Frodo drew a deep breath and grinned, bending over them, obviously in love.

“They’re so cute! What are they?”

“Ferrets,” said Bofur. “This one’s Assault an’ this one’s Batt’ry. Nori named ‘em.”

Bilbo cocked an eyebrow at Nori.

“What a surprise.”

“Do they bite?” Frodo asked.

“Yeh,” said Bofur, hunkering down, “but not too hard at the moment. They’re still babies.”

Assault and Battery jumped up on Bofur and quickly climbed to his hat, nibbling at the flaps.

Bofur sighed.

“There goes another one.”

“They love yeh,” said Nori.

“T’ death, probably,” said Bofur.

“Oi, Jani,” said Nori, “suit looks good on yeh!”

“Ta’,” said Jani. “Too bad our Dipsey didn’t have time t’ embroider th’ ferrets on it.”

Looking at Jani now, with her broad shoulders and powerful arms and legs covered in luscious hair, Ori wondered how Frerin had even dared approach her. His ego must be monumental for him to think he’d gain the attention of such a dam, even if she did have interest in males. Jani and Dis made quite a handsome pair.

Dori shook his head.

“I still say you’ll get terribly burned on your right side, dear.”

Dis said, “No, I have the perfect solution.”

She plopped her enormous straw hat on Jani’s head.

Dori pursed his lips.
“I suppose that will do.”

“I think I’d rather risk the sun than wear a campaign tent, lovely,” said Jani.

Dori humped and Thranduil sighed deeply, eyes closed and fingers to his temples in pain.

“You alright, Thranduil?” Nori asked.

Thranduil looked up at him, astonished.

Ori could see why. It was not as though Nori cared much about the elf king’s well-being, not to mention his ‘delicate’ sensibilities.

“I believe I’ll recover, but-“

“Swell, you’ll judge the contest!” said Nori.

“I’ll judge the what? The spinning contest? No, no, I’m afraid I’ll have to demure,” said Thranduil.

“No, no, no, Thandy dear, you cannot use that excuse,” said Dori, “that one’s mine. Unfortunately it never works on Nori anyway.”

“Oh, very well. Let us get this out of the way.”

Bofur muscled in.

“Right, right, the odds are about even. They both done this before, but our Nori’s got the slight edge due t’ th’ lace. Place yer bets!”

Legolas said to Gimli, “You dwarrow really will bet on anything.”

“Told yeh,” said Gimli with a shrug. “My f’r Nori. He’s got lace, an’ he can put a nice little wiggle in his walk when he’s feelin’ slutty.”

Legolas also bet on Nori.

Sigrid, Kili and Taurel loyally bet on Fili.

Bofur turned to Thorin.

“Yer majesty?”

“I’m not getting involved, thank you. If Nori wins I’ll have to deal with a mopey heir and if Fili wins I’ll never be able to close my eyes again.”

Ori said, “Well, how do you think I feel? Nori’s my brother!”

Nori turned and pointed at Ori.

“Stay outa this, Chick.”

Ori smirked. “Twenty on Fili!”

“Little shit,” Nori muttered.

“Who will go first?” Thranduil asked.
“Let them go at the same time,” said Bilbo, “then you can compare them side by side.”

“Yes, and it will be over with that much sooner,” Thranduil agreed. “You may commence when ready.”

Fili and Nori leapt into place before the elvish king. Bofur bellowed a countdown then everyone shouted encouragement. Both contestants spun madly.

“Lookit me lace!” Nori shouted.

“I’m on one leg!” Fili roared in return. Sigrid shrieked in delight.

“Fuck yerself!” Nori yelled. “I’m spinnin’ faster!”

“So ’m I!” Fili hollered.

The two spinning dwarrow, Ori realized, were fast becoming uncontrollable juggernauts. He had a horrible feeling that this was going to end badly.

It did.

They collided most spectacularly and fell to the deck, sprawled on their backs.

“Fuck,” said Nori.

“Why is everything still spinning?” Fili groaned. “I’m lying on the ground!”

Thranduil sighed and shook his head.

“No, no, no! What a pitiful showing! If you’re going to spin, you should do it with panache, like this!”

And Thranduil spun, arms outstretched, face radiant with glee, hair flowing in the breeze, robe rising to just about mid-thigh level in a great, white circle.

Ori suspected Thranduil had his robes specially tailored just for that reason. He seemed to have put in lots of practice.

“Like that!” Thranduil said, spinning to a stop and his robes wrapping around him in perfect twists for a moment before falling back exactly into place.

Fili and Nori looked at each other.

“I’m out,” said Fili.

“Me too,” said Nori. “Pot’s all yers, mate.”

“Oh!” said Thranduil, rather pleased. “What have I won?”

Bofur scratched his head beneath his cap, disturbing Assault, or possibly Battery, who had been napping. “We didn’t really get to the terms, did we.”

“You made bets, but didn’t decide with what you would gamble?” Thranduil cried. “What’s wrong with you people?”

Thorin had to excuse himself for a moment, his shoulders already shaking. Legolas was as pink
as Nori’s swimming costume and nearly turning blue with holding in his hilarity. Tauriel rested her head on Kili’s shoulder and shook it, muttering about never getting the image out of her head as long as she lived.

“Me neither,” Kili commiserated.

“Biscuits,” said Frodo. “I’ll make you a batch of xocolatl biscuits.”

“That’s an idea,” said Thranduil. “I like how you think, fauntling.”

“Yes, and I get the ‘burnt’ ones.”

“Of which there will likely be plenty,” said Bilbo dryly.

“Well,” said Dori, “I, for one, thought it a brilliant display, Thrandy dear.”

“Thank you, bearer.”

“We’ll get you into that gossamer presentation robe yet.”

“Oh, I do have the accessories to go with it,” said Thranduil.

“We’ll have to have the hem lengthened, so we don’t discomfit Bard with your bottom on display. Not that it won’t be anyway, but somehow I hardly think it will matter if it’s yours.”

Once breakfast was completely finished, the younger set headed back to the beach again. Ori followed them, sketchbook in hand. He found a pleasant place in the sand with a large boulder at his back and watched the races and water fights and rough housing. He thoroughly enjoyed drawing his friends as they romped.

Sigrid galloping after Fili for stealing her hair ribbon. Kili and Tauriel leaping in abandon as they let go of the rope swing to land in the water. Legolas and Gimli sitting in the lake edge, creating fantastical buildings out of wet sand, twigs, and pebbles. Jani and Dis wandering hand and hand through the shallows. Dori and Balin resting under their umbrella, relaxing and babysitting the kittens, Brandy and Kihshassa. Nori and Bofur lying in the grass, busily teaching the ferrets weird tricks.

On the deck Thorin and Thranduil sat in a deep discussion both were obviously enjoying. Bilbo supervised a ball game with Frodo and the younger Urs and Tharkûn stretched out on one of the long deck chairs, his hat over his eye and his bare feet sticking out from under his robe to absorb the sunshine.

After a light luncheon of cress sandwiches, stuffed tomatoes and creamed eggs, Ori and Bilbo sat shelling peas in the door to the back garden. Out among the plants, Frodo had Thorin by the hand and was talking diamonds to dozens about every single one. The big dwarf merely nodded and gave an occasional ‘I see’ but was otherwise not getting much of a word in at all, though he didn’t appear distressed in any way.

“Sometimes I worry that I did the wrong thing, taking Frodo away from the Shire,” said Bilbo.

“He seems happy enough,” said Ori.
"He should be starting school with his age mates, and rolling down hills and falling out of trees."

"You're teaching him quite well, and he has plenty of friends among the Ur."

"And when we leave here? What then?" Bilbo wondered.

"What did you do before? This can't be the first place you've taken him that wasn't the Shire."

"Oh, no no, we wintered in Imladris, where I might add Lord Elrond, Lady Galadriel and every other elf in the place spoiled him rotten. He was ill when we first arrived, from traveling in the rain, you know, and the little imp was waited on hand and furry foot. I can only imagine Elrond understated the extents to which the elves went to keep him entertained."

"You weren't there?"

"I was sick as well, far worse even than Frodo, which is why my publisher didn't get his pages and Middle Earth was cast into uproar. Over a story? Can you imagine?"

"Umm... yes, unfortunately, I can."

"Valar bless you for saying so, Ori, and for blushing on my behalf. Oh, then we went to Gondor by way of Rohan. The Rohirrim and the Gondorians also spoiled him. All that candy? I'm amazed he has any teeth left in his head. We were going to stop at Ered Luin on our way here, since it's settled now, but Aragorn warned me that the new king is an asshat."

Ori snorted so hard he nearly choked.

"You know he's Thorin's brother, don't you?" Ori managed.

"I heard something to that effect. I also heard he was a waste of skin, so we gave it a miss and arrived here early. They can take it up with Denethor if they want copies."

"Who's Aragorn?"

"That's King Elessar's given name. His father's given name was Arathorn. Don't know why they don't just stick with their names. I think King Aragorn would have been brilliant, but it's not my dynasty, so there you are."

Ori shook his head.

"Why do they not consult you on these things?"

Bilbo sniffed. "Their loss, I suppose."

"I read your description of Minas Tirith in your last travelogue. Just the description of the banners rippling in the wind made me swoon."

"Now that is flattering, but it's not difficult to cast Minas Tirith in a glorious light. It really is that beautiful. Even the poorest inhabitants have plenty, and that's coming from a hobbit, someone with very strict notions of 'plenty.'"

"I think he and Thorin may get on well, then."

"Frodo absolutely loved him. Truthfully, their mutual admiration was over the top. Just for a moment, when we were leaving, I was afraid Frodo was going to hide in Aragorn's spare boots and we'd never find him."
All at once Bilbo looked troubled.

“Frodo told me he is happy as long as I don't leave him, but every time we depart from someplace he's grown accustomed to, it's like I'm tearing him out by the roots. He doesn't sleep well for days before we leave, or days after we arrive, no matter how felicitous the destination. Even visiting here had to be negotiated like a treaty between kingdoms. We could only come to the inn if I promised he didn’t have to go near the water and that I wouldn’t either.”

“He’s afraid of water?”

“His parents drowned.”

“Oh, Bilbo, I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you. Damned inconvenient of them. The point is, I’m rather at ends as to what I’ll ultimately do with him.”

Ori stared at him.

"You aren't thinking of leaving him?"

"No, no, no. He's my lad now, that's fixed. Just as soon cut off my own arm. I'm thinking in terms of if I would ever settle down, and where. Even if the Shire were suddenly a friendly place, I don't really have any home of my own to go back to. I ceded my position as the head of the Baggins family to Frodo’s father long ago, and now I suppose it's in the hands of one of my other charming relations."

"I take Frodo's father was more suited to the life of a country squire?"

"While I just wasn’t the sort to stay in one village for the rest of my life, listening to my tenants bicker over drops from apple trees on fence lines. Too much like my mother, I suppose.”

Ori had a startling thought.

“Bilbo, are you a nobleman?”

“Hobbits don’t have those, but I was the heir to The Baggins and I did give it up, and happily,” Bilbo threw a wilted pea pod over to where Nori-pori and Mask played and Powder napped with her back pointedly to all of them. The pod bounced on the ground and Nori-pori and Mask suddenly became fierce predators, tossing and pouncing on the unfortunate legume while Powder virtuously slept on.

“Over the years I’ve slept in palaces and haylofts, even in a convenient tree in a pinch.”

“But you can’t do that with a faunt,” said Ori.

“No, I can’t.”

"Can you afford to settle?"

"Oh, yes. It's not a matter of money. I don’t need much beyond a roof at night and a meal or six in my belly. The stories fund all that. The Gondoreans are very faithful about remitting to wherever I post. If it was just about me ... but it's not. Frodo needs someplace to call home, a kitchen to grow up in, or what sort of hobbit will he become?"

"It doesn't seem to have hurt you to grow up on this road."
"I get what you’re saying, but Frodo isn’t me. He’s more like Drogo, his father. More like my father, come to think of it. Good, solid, dependable hobbits, with no strange ideas about scantily dressed maidens at the mercy of pirate kings."

“Where did you ever come up with that?”

Bilbo chuckled. “When I was a fauntling younger than Frodo, I met my first elf. He was quite drunk, dancing in some filmy party costume with a glass of wine still firmly in his hand. Even then I had more hair on my feet than he had on his entire body. Except his head. That was covered in the most beautiful fall of silver hair.

“Only lasses in the Shire have hair that long, and even then it’s always curly. I loudly asked Mama why the elf’s hair was white but her brows so black and why she had no bosom to speak of and—”

“Mahal!”

Ori clapped his hand over his mouth while Bilbo laughed at his wide, startled eyes.

When he could speak again Ori said, “That wasn’t him, was it?”

“King Thranduil? Oh, yes.”

“How will I ever look him in the eye again?”

“That’s the advantage of being our height. You never have to.”

“But if he finds out?”

“Actually,” said Bilbo, “I’m sure he already knows.”

“How do you know? Did he say something?”

“No, but when we met again, years later, at Imladris, his glare could have curdled milk. But then, if he admits to knowing, he would have to admit to reading my books, wouldn’t he.”

“He would never do that!” Ori cried.

“Exactly.”

Thorin came over and threw himself into a chair with a tired sigh and a wry expression.

“Had you an interesting conversation with Master Frodo?” Bilbo teased.

Thorin huffed out a laugh.

“At that age, the conversation is guaranteed to be interesting. With Fili and Kili so close in age I used to get it in both ears at once.”

“Please let me know if he’s bothering you. He can be a bit much. Takes after me.”

“As long as he doesn’t ask me where babies come from.”

“He already knows.”

“Already?”
“Really, King Thorin, we are hobbits.”

“You know, when I’m at home with family, I’m just ‘Thorin’.”

“And I’m usually just ‘Bilbo’. Shall we proceed from there?”

Thorin grinned, and ducked his head a little.

“I think that’s an excellent idea.”

“Good. I’ll save ‘King Morsel’ for special occasions.”

Thorin sputtered and Bilbo laughed.

“You’re terrible,” Thorin pronounced.

“Oh, you love it,” Bilbo teased.

Frodo swooped in, apparently pretending to be a bird, and went right up to Thorin and said, “Come play hide and seek, King Thorin. Please?.”

“Just the two of us?” Thorin asked.

“Fili and Kili will play if we ask them!”

Ori said, “King Thorin has to rest, Frodo. He’s been very busy.”

Frodo considered.

“Mm. Old people get tired fast. Will you play with us?”

“Frodo!” Bilbo cried.

“I’d love to,” said Ori, and looked pointedly first at Bilbo and then Thorin. “We’ll leave the old people here to rest. Together.”

While Frodo counted to one hundred, Ori desperately looked for a place to hide. He overheard Fili and Kili talking about the roof, but he could just see himself getting all the way there and then being seized with mortification that he couldn’t get down. Yes, he was a grown dwarf playing hide and go seek with a small hobbit, but he still had enough pride that he wished not to need saving like a kitten stuck in a tree.

It wasn’t as though Kihshassa was strong enough to fly him down.

They had the whole house except the kitchen in which to play, surely he could find someplace suitable, yet not life-threatening.

He ducked into an unoccupied room where the eaves of the house made a little space at the join of two walls where someone had constructed a boot cupboard.

Perfect!

It was warm and quiet and actually fairly comfy, since someone had removed the boots and
replaced them with pillows. Apparently this was someone’s hidey hole, hopefully not Frodo’s.

Yes, very comfy.

Very-

He had no idea how long he slept, but by the time he woke, he could tell by the light through the grill in the door that the sun had definitely gone round the other side of the house.

Oh, bugger.

He could just imagine the uproar it could cause if the Durins thought he’d disappeared yet again.

And where was Frodo? Shouldn’t Ori have been found by now?

He was about to crawl back out when the door to the room opened and a pair of furry feet were evident through the grill in the cupboard door.

The problem was, they were the wrong hairy feet, and they were followed by a pair of familiar boots.

Oh, Mahal’s hairy arse.

This was the time and the place Thorin chose to get Bilbo alone?

But, of course it was.

Ori stifled a sigh of frustration and closed his eyes and put his hands over his ears.

Not his business. Nonono. Not something he should be privy to, certainly not something he should watch. He supposed, where the king was concerned, voyeurism was a capital offense. Unless the king was an exhibitionist.

And the king’s scribe was a nosey little warg pup.

He could hear it through his hands, so he gave it up.

“-may I see you again?” Thorin asked.

“Do you want to see me again?” Bilbo replied.

“Desperately. Would you and Frodo spend the winter in Erebor as Ori suggested? You’d have your own quarters, and the royal library would be open to you.”

“And your quarters?”

“If you wished it,” said Thorin very quietly.

“You know hobbits are far worse hedonists than dwarrow, or they used to be anyhow. I’d take you on this bed right now if you wanted me. I’m not sure your people would like the idea of a foreigner fiddling with their king.”

“I think you would be very well received. If they haven’t wanted to dethrone me for encouraging my nephews to court a woman and an elf, I doubt my courting a hobbit would cause a ripple.”

Bilbo breathed in with surprise.
"You want to court me?"

"I am willing to go as far as you want me to go. I don't know your heart. If you wanted to share just your body, I would take it and be grateful for the gift."

"Don't sell yourself short, Thorin. Perhaps I don’t know you well, but I believe your heart is already engaged or you wouldn't speak."

Ori swallowed hard.

Apparently Thorin had decided that he would jump with both feet, and once Thorin decided something, he saw it through, no matter the consequences.

"My heart is engaged," said Thorin.

Bilbo gave a soft, self-deprecating laugh.

"Mine, too. Shall we see where this leads?"

"Right now, I'd like it to lead to a kiss."

"I believe that can be arranged."

There followed unmistakeable sounds, from the floor, to the bed, the covers moving, an article of clothing was tossed aside with enough strength to smack the cupboard door.

"Ah," said Thorin quite audibly, "Ori spoke true. You don't have a tail!"

Bilbo laughed low and said teasingly, "How very grateful you must be to have Ori around to point out these vital facts to you."

"Ori is indeed very valuable." was Thorin reply.

Ori dropped his face in his hands. Not only was his king attempting to play 'what's in the mine shaft' with Bilbo, but they were talking about him!

Fervent whispers, the bedsprings creaking.

Ori sighed, curled back up and prayed for oblivion.

Oh, he hoped they locked the door.

He could tell what they were doing just by the noises. To his horror they spoke in low, heated, perfectly intelligible voices: "Oh" and "Yes" and "More".

Of course, they were more experienced than he was, and if the escalating moans were any indication, apparently quite skilled.

Ori felt his body respond to it and he bit the inside of his cheek hard, trying to distract himself with the pain. He desperately recited Doowhee Dezmal's code in his head, at the back of which he could hear a low chuckle and a sparkling giggle and he realized Mahal and Yavanna were laughing.

"Sorry, dearest," came the unbidden thought in a feminine tone. "Laughing with you, not at you."

"Or we would be, if yeh were laughin'," Mahal completed.
He was startled awake again by a loud rap of knuckles on the door. Not the cupboard door, but the door to the room.

“Ori!” Dori cried. “Are you in there? Open the door, pet. You mustn’t go on disappearing like this! I’ve been worried si-“

The door creaked open.

“He’s not here, Dori,” said Thorin.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, Thorin. When did you switch roo… Ah."

"And a pleasant evening to you as well, Dori," said Bilbo chipperly.

"Well, Thorin, I see the silk whispered."

"Yes, very amusing. I'm going to get dressed now," said Thorin.

The door started to close when Dori apparently remembered why he had knocked in the first place.

"Have you seen Ori?"

"Not since lunch," said Thorin.

Bilbo laughed and said, "Dori, I'm sure he'll turn up when the dinner bell rings."

"But-"

"Is Dwalin worried?"

Dori snorted.

"He and Gimli have been bashing each other with sticks all afternoon."

Balin's voice came from up the hall.

"Beloved, have yeh seen me scarlet kilt? Brandy's taken a fancy t' it an' I'm afraid… Ah, Thorin, lyin' down on th' job, I see."

Dori said slyly, "But not alone."

"Aha," said Balin. Ori could just imagine the twinkle in his eyes. "Hullo, Master Bilbo."

"Good evening, Mr Balin."

Thorin said, "I'm closing the door now."

He did so, but not before Balin and Dori burst into excited whispers as they went back down the hall.

Thorin sighed.

"Well, the bat's out of the mine now."
Bilbo got up and started rooting around for his clothes.

"Do you really mind?" he asked.

"No, but you had better prepare for eighteen different versions of the 'shovel talk', even if there isn't a lot to shovel."

They stood so close to the cupboard that Ori could have bashed their ankles with the door.

Ori heard kissing, now more leisurely than before, and Bilbo's happy hum.

"So, more of a ladle talk, really. That's alright. I can handle a ladle."

"I suspect you can handle a great many things. You do know you're not under any obligation to me? As I said before, you'll have your own chambers at Erebor. They don't have to be in the vicinity of the royal residence, if you prefer."

"No, I want to be there. I find I'm a little in love with this family already."

"With all the noise and chaos?"

"Rather like hobbits actually."

Ori waited a good twenty minutes after they had left before he eased open the cupboard door. He was rumpled and dazed and he desperately had to pee. Even so, he was amused to see Bilbo had stripped the bed on his way out. Ori suspected he would also launder the sheets and remake the bed.

After a quick wash and a change of clothes he was just ahead of the dinner bell. When he entered the dining room Dori seized him by both shoulders.

"Ori! Where have you been?"

"I was playing hide and go seek with Frodo and I fell asleep."

"An' so did Frodo," said Erda, bringing in the bread. "I guess it's hard work countin' t' one hundred when there's soft grass an' th' shade of an apple tree."

When Thorin and Bilbo entered the room hand in hand, everything stopped. Dis raised an eyebrow and several bags of coins not-so-discretely changed hands, some being brazenly chucked across the table.

"So, Master Bilbo," said Dis lightly. "I take it you'll be joining us in Erebor this winter."

"I have been invited, yes," said Bilbo, "and it's not an invitation I would refuse."

"We're going to Erebor?" Frodo asked, his whole face lighting up.

"If it's quite alright with you, my lad," said Bilbo.

Frodo nodded furiously.
Ori was amazed that this meal was just as spectacular as all the others they had had here. But this one was strangely almost ‘normal’. It started with crayfish battered with coconut and fried, with marmalade sauce as a dip. Bombur explained that the main dish was twice baked potatoes: large potatoes in their jackets with their insides deliciously mixed with spring onions, bacon and cheese then broiled. There were dishes of new peas, new carrots and tiny onions all steaming and glistening with melting chunks of butter. The meat was large, perfectly done fried steaks. Ori wondered if this was the surprise. He wasn’t sure what beast it was from but the meat was dark and rich. Erda poured out the inn’s own brew of dandelion wine which, though light was delicious with the meat.

“This steak is excellent!” Thorin managed around a mouthful. Dwalin grunted and nodded equally enjoying his own. Ori kept tasting carefully but around the salt, pepper and flour and butter he could not place the meat.

During the course of the meal, Thorin turned to Ori.

"Sleep well?"
"Er... yes, thank you."
"Are you alright? You seem a little out of sorts."
"I think my brain is still halfway in a dream."

Dwalin put an arm around him and kissed the top of his head.

"No pullin' a 'Furh'nk' an' fallen asleep at th' table."

“No, indeed,” Dori agreed. “This is our last dinner here as poor dear Thorin’s mourning is at an end.”

At a sly look from Jani, Dis swallowed the last of her wine.

“I didn’t mourn,” said Dis. “Udad was an ass.”

Jani snickered and refilled Dis’ and her own wine glasses.

Thranduil cocked his head at Thorin.

“And have you mourned to your own satisfaction, King of Dwarrow?”

Thorin swallowed his mouthful, looked sneeringly at Thranduil, belched, and put another piece of steak into his mouth. The table erupted with laughter. Thranduil joined in, snickering.

“Yes, I suspected as much.”

The dishes from the main course were removed to the kitchen in their usual highly polished condition.

The dessert was brought out. The guests groaned in delight as bowls of sugared strawberries, small cakes to eat them with and whipped sweetened cream. There was also an enormous pie, filled with preserved cherries in their syrup. The steam holes in the top crust were cut out in the shapes of hearts. Ori tried one small serving of each kind of dessert and sat back. His tummy felt tight in his skin and he almost wanted a nap.

“Bombur, Erda, yeh’ve surpassed yerselves beyond everything!” Balin praised.
There was a round of agreement.

“But I cannot place the meat,” Dori finished. “Do, please tell us what it was from and what it is, or rather was?”

Bombur and Erda exchanged glances. Bofur commented,

“Don’ look at me, lads I never had it in me life.”

“The meat tonight was graciously supplied by the troupe led by the Great Woudini,” Bombur began.

“The Great Woudini?” Balin and Thorin chorused.

“Yes. It seems when they were far to the south in tropical climes, they were given an egg.”

Ori shivered involuntarily.

Thorin stared blankly at Bombur.

“Master Bombur are you about to tell us we’ve dined on dragon meat?”

“No, no, your majesty.” Erda comforted as the younger Urs giggled. “Though some do call the creatures ‘false dragons’. They are like lizards, with craggy, rough scales and huge long mouths full of dreadful teeth. They inhabit swamps and pretend to be logs floating in water to surprise their prey.”

“False dragons?” repeated Dis.

“Yes. They kept the egg warm and it hatched and they had for some time what they all agreed was a delightful little creature. Their badgers affectionally named it Smeg. Usually, they called it Smeg-head. Unfortunately, it grew quite quickly into a rather large, sharp-toothed, foul-tempered beast that, within a few miles from here, attempted to eat one of their ponies.”

“Mahal’s balls!” muttered Dwalin.

“Are those the creatures known as alligators?” Thranduil asked his brows high in shock.

Bombur nodded.

“Those,” Thranduil went on, “can grow to enormous size! I have heard of several reaching the length of eighteen feet, by the reckoning of men.”

“Yes, The Great Woudini said theirs had reached twenty-one feet. As said, they had to kill it to save the ponies and, from the tussle they had with it, probably themselves.”

“Then what happened to it?” Tauriel asked.

“Well,” said Bombur, “when I asked them the same question, they handed me these steaks and broke into this little song-”

The younger Urs shrieked and sang loudly.

“Yongling Broody Grumpy Dragon,
The guests roared with laughter. Thorin fell back in his chair, hand to his head.

“In the next age, they will say we ate a real dragon!”

“Durin dragon eaters!” shouted Kili.

Thorin sighed and turned to Bilbo.

“And you heard the Durins were merely crazy.”

Ori begged off the after-dinner socializing.

“I’m sorry, I’m a little wrong-footed right now. I think I’ll just turn in.”

Dori looked alarmed.

“You aren’t coming down with something, I hope.”

“No, I-“

“You’ve always been of a delicate constitution, pet.”

Ori swallowed a groan.

“No, really, Dori, I’m fine. I just need a rest. If I’m better in a half hour or so I’ll come back down. Excuse me, please.”

He was startled when Dwalin got up to follow him. He supposed he really should have expected it.

In their room, Ori stripped down and crawled into bed, pulled the sheet up to his chin and his pillow over his face.

Dwalin climbed in to lie beside him.

"Yeh goin’ t’ tell me wha’ happened? Did yeh no’ really take a nap this afternoon?”

"I did. I fell asleep in the boot cupboard in one of the empty rooms. At least it was an empty room when I got there, but just as I went to leave, Thorin and Bilbo came in."

The bed springs creaked as Dwalin sat up.

Ori slid his pillow aside.

"Love," said Dwalin, "did they find yeh?"

"No! First they were talking and I couldn't interrupt that. The mortification alone would make
Thorin mute for the rest of his life. Then…"
"Then?"
"Um. They didn't leave."

The silence dragged on and Ori couldn't see Dwalin's face, but he didn't really want to, not if Dwalin was angry with him. Ori should have left the cupboard when they entered.

Really, would it have startled them at all?

Nori was forever popping out of trash barrels and falling out of crawl spaces. He rarely got a second glance.

Ori should have-

The bed shook.

Ori reached up and put his hand to Dwalin's chest.

"Are you laughing?"

Dwalin roared and fell back on the bed in gleeful hysterics.

"It's not funny!" Ori hissed. "Mahal and Yavanna were laughing at me."

Dwalin rolled over and buried his face in Ori's abdomen, still laughing so hard Ori feared he would hyperventilate.

Finally, after several minutes, Dwalin calmed enough for only the occasional snort and chuckle.

"Me wee scribe pervert," Dwalin wheezed. "Did yeh at leas' ge' a cock stand out've it?"

"Yes," said Ori in a small voice.

Dwalin gathered him up and rocked him.

"Ah, love, I'm sorry. Never mind yer ridiculous husband."

"I'm just glad you aren't angry."

"Why th' fuck 'ud I be angry? Yeh did wha' yeh though' best. Nobody was hurt."

"You won't tell them?"

"Mahal's hairy arse! No! Yer righ’. Tha' it'd jus’ drive Thorin back int' silence. Las’ thin’ we want, now tha' he's at leas' fiddlin' with Master Baggins."

"I think it's more than fiddling. Thorin told Bilbo he wants to court."

"Holy fuck! Thorin, th' Grea’ Silen’ Gloom Biscuit o’ Erebor, actually used th' word 'cour'?"

"Yes! I almost gasped out loud and got myself found."

Dwalin chuckled again then said, “Fancy a walk?”

“You know me so well.”
Ori led the way downstairs, he was surprised by the quiet. Had everyone gone to bed early? He realized that this was their last night at the inn. He had a feeling people were, no doubt, making the most of this charming spot.

He and Dwalin went silently out to the deck. The moon was heading quickly to new. The night of the new moon would be Thorin’s corona
tion.

“Well, we’ll be busier than ever when we ge’ back t th’ mountain.”

Ori nodded as, hand in hand, they stepped off the deck and automatically headed to the lake.

“We’ll have to be careful,” Ori said. “We don’t want to fall over anyone also er… enjoying the moonlight.”

“Oh aye?” Dwalin teased. “Who’re we goin’ t’ fall over then? F’r five coppers, who’s on first?”

“Probably Kili and Tauriel, they-”

A log-shaped lump in the middle of the grass revealed itself to be Kili and Tauriel lying cheek to cheek their legs out in opposite directions.

“That is the fixed star,” Kili said, pointing upward suddenly. “We call it the Amrâlimê. You’re my Amrâlimê, Tauriel.”

“An’ th’ pair a’ yeh need t’ go ge’ a room,” Dwalin commented as he and Ori went passed.

“Go away,” Kili growled hotly and Tauriel giggled.

“Five,” Ori said stifling a laugh.

“Fine. An’ nex’?”

“Hmm,” Ori pondered. “Fili and Sigrid, probably.”

“Right. Another five on Fili and Sigrid,” Dwalin agreed. They headed north along the shore this time. The only sounds were the lapping of the water at the lake’s edge and the occasional night bird.

“Then Dis and Jani next,” Ori decided. Then either Gimli and Legolas or Balin and Dori.”

“Righ’, we’ll keep an eye ou’ f’r Dis an’ Jani.”

They wander on. Kihshassa swished passed them before circling up to head back to Bombur’s fruit trees and berry bushes. The sandy shore narrowed and the trees gave way to large rocks and behind this an upsweep of meadow. Ori could see deer grazing with some cows. Fawns and calves frisked together in a way no man farmer would ever see.

They heard a scuffle behind the rocks.

Instantly Dwalin pushed Ori behind him.

“Alright, whoever yeh are, come on out!”

Someone let out a startled shriek and Fili appeared, rather in a state of undress, with Sigrid
hunkered down behind him, holding her bodice up over her breasts.

“Oh, fer th’ love o’ Mahal’s hairy arse!” Dwalin barked, deflating from his imitation of a mad grizzly. “What’re you two doin’?”

They looked at him blankly.

“I mean, I know wha’ yer doin’, but why here?”

They continued to look at him blankly.

By the light of the moon they seemed to glisten - more brightly than would seem possible just for rolling around on the sand.

“You’ve been skinny dipping!” said Ori.

“Aye, an’ now yeh got sand in yer drawers. Or yeh would, if yeh were wearin’ them.”

Fili stumbled about, “I … I… It’s a lovely evening, isn’t it.”

Sigrid cringed.

“Ori!” she begged in a tiny voice.

“We didn’t see anything. Did we, Captain?” Ori said rather forcefully.

“Eh?” Dwalin looked all around, everywhere except at the young couple. “Aye, nice night.”

Dwalin and Ori walked on hand in hand to the sound of two people very hurriedly tidying up behind them.

Ori got a full fifty paces before he started to giggle. He looked up at Dwalin who wore a rather crooked smile himself.

They rounded a huge clump of boulders and Ori fell over a driftwood log and went sprawling. The driftwood cried out and brandished a knife.

“Ori!” Dis cried, dropping the blade just as quickly. “Don’t do that! I could have run you through!”

From the ground Jani snorted. “Looks like someone already poleaxed him.”

Dwalin heaved a great sigh of exasperation.

“Dis! What’re yeh doin’ lyin’ in the path?”

Dis and Jani looked at him blankly.

He threw his hands up to forestall them.


“You owe me fifteen coppers,” said Ori.

“I heard that!” Dis cried.

“Gimli and his elf next,” Ori murmured.
“We all heard it!” Gimli shouted from somewhere in the darkness ahead, Legolas’ bright laugh followed right after it.

Ori giggled.

“Now you owe me twenty! I think we need to find some rocks before they’re all taken,” said Ori wryly.

“Bloody dwarrow,” Dwalin growled. “Clutterin’ up th’ place.”

“Really?” Ori wondered “Who’s next?”

“Who’s left?” Dwalin asked. “Seems a rather crowded spot.”

“Balin and Dori next,” he remembered.

“Aye? No’ Thorin an’ Bilbo?”

“No, Thorin would take him to the hayloft.”

“Yeh know, at this rate, no one’s finished th’ cherry pie an’ th’ inn’s go’ t’ be fairly deserted. We could take th’ pie up t’ bed an’ we wouldn’t have t’ worry about th’ sand.”

“You have the best ideas,” said Ori.

And they turned back toward the inn.

When they got to the kitchen they were surprised to find the lights lit and the younger badgers sitting around the end of the kitchen table.

They were eating the cherry pie out of the pan with spoons.

“Aw,” said Dwalin. “We were goin’ t’ eat tha’.”

He looked so forlorn, Ori wondered if he wouldn’t stick out his bottom lip.

Frodo looked at Dwalin, down at the pan and back up again.

“You can still have some.”

“We haven’t licked out the pan yet,” said Wili brightly.

Ori waved that off graciously.

“No, we wouldn’t deprive you of it. There’s still strawberry shortcake. Er… Isn’t there?”

Poli said, “There is. We were going for that next, but we can spare you some.”

“Yer all goin’ t’ have such bellyaches,” said Dwalin.

“But it’ll be fun while it lasts,” Isi reasoned.

Ori couldn’t argue with that.
When they got back to their room, Dwalin offered Ori a handful of coins.

“Here. Twen’y copper.”

Ori looked askance and gave him a mischievous grin.

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather have twenty kisses.”

Dwalin chuckled.

“Before th’ cake ‘r after?”

“During.”

“Ah. I get yeh. Tha’ can be arranged.”
There … and Back Again

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. One last inn brekkie, one last dip in the lake and, at the very least, one more embarrassing situation for Ori. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrown tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

They breakfasted again on the deck and Ori was amazed to find he was hungry, given that he’d eaten cake, strawberries and whipped cream not that long ago.

It was very traditional fare and quite comforting: toast and a choice of apricot, cherry, raspberry or orange jam, with or without lashings of butter. Fried eggs glistened in a tempting pile, the whites thick and the yolks done to a perfect solid, not too dry but not too runny. He couldn’t choose between the bacon or sausages, so he chose both. Bowls of yet more fresh strawberries sat by jugs of thickened cream. The black tea tasted strong and slightly citrusy.

They were almost all assembled, and everyone present was stuffing their faces, when Bombur and Thorin arrived.

As they walked out onto the deck, Thorin said, "Only if it's all right with you, Bombur. I know it's a lot of work, not just us, but the guard detail, not to mention the special Durin brand of chaos."

"Believe me," said Bombur, "your chaos isn't all that chaotic. During the last Gondorean delegation visit someone left open the back door of the inn. Nothing like waking to a kitchen full of goats."

Balin looked up from his tea.

"I've bin called an old goat many times, but there's only ever been one o' me. What's th' to-do, laddies?"

Thorin smiled.

"It all depends on what's happening in Erebor, of course, but if all is well, the Durins will return to the inn next year."

"Really, nadad?" Dis asked, obviously thrilled.

"We'll see," said Thorin. "You know how it goes, but after running trade negotiations into the spring, I know you'll be ready for a rest. Or, whatever it is that we actually do here."

Thranduil seemed to ponder and finally announced, "Yes, I believe I can arrange to be here."

Thorin did a double-take.

Thranduil laughed.

"You don't think the Durins will be rid of me so easily after this?"

"Oh, yes, Thrandy dear," cried Dori. "You all must join us again! Musn't they, Thorin?"

Thorin threw up his hands in defeat.

"I suppose you'll want the lake-facing rooms," he grumbled at Thranduil.

"I am willing to arm wrestle you for them," Thranduil cooed.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ori saw Fili and Sigrid shyly exchanging smiles and he had a feeling that at least one room would be opening up next year.

Oh! But the extra work involved, just clearing away for this visit! He'd have to start next winter at this rate!

As if reading his mind, Thorin turned to him and said, "You know the position of king's scribe comes with a staff, right?"

"A staff?" Ori asked, now completely confused. "Like Tharkûn's? Am I supposed to hit people
"I suppose that depends on whom you hire and if they like that sort of thing."
"Hire?" Ori asked, the situation suddenly, horribly clear.
"It's true, you'll have to hire and train them, but you'll have a year to do it. I wish I could have put everything in place before, but I'm only the presumptive king, and I'll be mending walls with the scribe's guild as it is."
"But, I'm too young!"
"You're young, yes," said Thorin, "but you're already doing the job."
"Aye," Balin added, "an' perfectly well."
"But, that would make me the youngest king's scribe in dwarven history," Ori realized.
"An' only one o' three t' take th' post before they earned their mastery," said Balin, shrugging.
"Are you sure you don't want someone with more experience?" Ori asked Thorin.
Thorin came and lay their foreheads together.
"You have experience, remember? Gather your team. We have work to do. Oh, and don't forget to write up your own contract."
Thorin gave his nape a gentle squeeze and released him. He turned to accept a cup of tea from Bilbo and sat down beside the hobbit.
"No' t' worry, laddie," said Balin. "I know all th' particulars. We'll work it out together."
"He's serious," said Ori.
"He's bin tellin' yeh so f'r th' las' three months," said Balin. "Now we can make it official. Jus' tidying up."
Immediately, Ori's mind went to Omi, Loli and Buj, but he would also need scribes from the guild, ones who didn't mind taking orders from a dwarf not yet a century old.
Mending walls indeed!
Dwalin hugged him.
"Congratulations, love," he said.
Dori burst into proud tears and hugged him next.
Nori brought him toast with jam.
"Keep your strength up," said Nori with a wink.
Sigrid poured Ori's tea, humming a gleeful little tune. Fili put an extra fried egg on his plate. Dis kissed the top of his head.
"He really thinks I can do this," Ori said to her.
"Of course," said Dis, as if it were perfectly clear.
"You'll be brilliant, Ori-mate," Kili assured him, throwing an arm around his shoulders.
"I will?"
"Of course, you're a Durin. Brilliance is our watchword."
"That, too," said Kili.

After breakfast they lingered on the deck with Ori's 'official' sketchbook, the one with which Mahal had not helped, and laughed over all the sketches Ori had made of everyone in their bathing costumes, including the 'double portrait' of Fili and Nori spinning like lasses in their skirts and even Thranduil demonstrating the 'proper' spinning technique.
Dori sighed.
"Nori's legs always did look like twigs."
Dwalin snorted and replied, "They work jus' fine, ask anyone who's had t' chase 'im."
Ori turned the page and Dis shrieked.
"Thorin! You wore it!"
In the picture he wore the crown-like hat Dipfa had made as well as his bathing suit.
"Only for this picture," said Thorin. He cleared his throat with great dignity. "I know how vital it is to the future of Erebor."
"Hmm, yes," said Bilbo, leaning over his shoulder. "I can see that picture’s destined for the throne
Then they were all shrieking.

Ori had drawn Gimli with his back turned in the picture, but he was grinning over his shoulder coquettishly in his incredibly sheer suit. His hat, which Kili had described to Ori, perched at a rakish angle on his head.

"Me best feature," said Gimli archly.
"Your shoulder or your grin?" Legolas teased him.
"Yeh get t' take your pick. Here's th' one o' yeh."

In his portrait, Legolas also wore the infamous diaphanous suit, though he held a quiver in front of his crotch, his face bright with a dashing smile. Tauriel stood next to him in Kili's costume, her eyes obviously cut toward him and full of disbelief and Thranduil sat nearby, glass of wine in his elegant hand, pretending not to notice, while Nori-Pori climbed the hem of his 'bed sheet' robe like a furry little assassin.

Thranduil looked from the picture to Ori with a raised eyebrow.
"I hope that's a Dorwinian vintage," he said dryly.
"Always, your majesty," Ori assured him.
"Hey, Ori-mate," said Kili, "where are you in all this?"
Ori giggled.
"Don't worry, I'm here."

Dwalin appeared in all his bestriped and mustache-waxed glory, striking a 'he-dwarf' pose with one arm curled up to show his muscle.

Off the side and behind stood Ori, with besotted expression, hands clasped to his bosom and little hearts drifted up from his hat.

"Brilliant!" Fili proclaimed.
"Really, pet," Dori protested, but his lip quivered on the edge of mirth.
"Righ' down t' th' freckles," Balin chuckled.
Sigrid shook her head and laughed.
"You drew yourself looking like a toothpick next to him!" she cried.

Ori leaned close to her and whispered, "He can put me in his mouth anytime."
She fell into gleeful, scandalized laughter.
"Here," said Ori, "I have a different one."

Dwalin and Ori wore their bathing costumes, but Dwalin stood behind Ori with his arms wrapped around Ori's shoulders and Ori held his sketchbook and a graphite pen.

"We stood in front o' th' mirror upstairs," said Dwalin. "He drew us both in a snap!"
"It was the only way I could get us both in the picture," said Ori. "Though, now that I've done it once, I think… No. Well…"
"Yeh think?" Dwalin prompted.
"I think I could probably draw us both together from memory, like my hand would remember how to draw it."
Nori nodded.
"You been doin' that for years, Chick, with one thing or another."
"I don't know why I thought it would be different with people," said Ori, genuinely puzzled.
"Maybe I just had to grown into it."

At the end of this, Thorin suggested a last swim at the kettle well.
Kili groaned.
"Idad! You've thrashed us into next week already!"
"I was thinking this time it would be you and Fili and I against everyone else."
Kili sat up straight and Fili grinned and almost yelped, "Really?"
"Really," promised Thorin. "I'll even wear my funny hat. Hopefully it will join Gimli's at the bottom of the lake."

Kili looked around like a maniac and demanded, "Who's in?"

Gimli, Legolas, Tauriel and Dis were definitely in. Nori begged off because he said Assault and
Battery would get water logged and Jani said she'd just hang out on the shore and wait for Dis to slog out of the water in a clingy wet bathing costume.

"Y'know what?" said Bofur. "I'm in!"

He hopped out of his trousers and down to his skivvies right there. Ori was not at all surprised to see they were a familiar lime green plaid with little pickaxes embroidered on them. He had a feeling he already knew what the rest of Bofur's underpinnings looked like. He was also afraid that if Dipfa found out, they would suddenly be all rage among the chic of Erebor and possibly plastered all through Vug Magazine.

Bofur's dwarf fur was blue black and so abundant, Ori couldn't see if there was a tattoo anywhere on his exposed skin. Ori felt rather jealous. The Ur were obviously quite fuzzy in a way the Ri were not.

Ori turned to Dwalin.

"Are you going?"

"Nah, I'm goin' t' stay on th' shore an' watch th' mayhem. Hold hands with me, love?"

Dwalin winked and Ori felt his cheeks color.

"Shall we still put on our bathing costumes?" Ori asked.

"O' course. I'll even wax me mustache fer th' occasion."

The younger kettle well set raced upstairs to change. Thorin made to follow before pausing and turning toward the elf king.

"Thranduil? Can we interest you in a little friendly exercise?"

"You really don't want to give up those lake-facing rooms next summer, do you," Thranduil replied with a smirk. "I haven't a costume. Elves don't wear them to bathe. Of course, we usually bathe in private. If this week has taught me anything, it's that dwarrow do nothing in private."

"You can say that again," Ori muttered.

Dis said, "Come now, Thranduil, you've already worn bed linens. You can't have many secrets left. If you're really that shy, I'm sure Bombur and Erda can find you something."

"The tea towels, no doubt," said Thranduil.

"Wear my mattress, Thrandy dear," said Dori, with a teasing look at Thorin. "If you're lucky it may shrink a bit."

As they were all heading inside the inn, a leaf from Ori's sketchbook slipped free and skittered across the deck. He wasn't worried, because he had put anything terribly incriminating away. He reached for it, but Thorin nabbed it before it slid over and out onto the lawn.

Thorin looked at it, then looked closer at it, his eyes growing wider by the moment.

Ori got a sinking feeling.

He'd put all those pictures away. He knew he had.

"Ori," said Thorin, "is this a hobbit commission or wishful thinking?"

He turned the picture to Ori and, indeed, it was Thorin and Bilbo in bed.

"Ummm..."

Dwalin said, "It was a sort o' commission, bu' no' from Bilbo. Someone's wantin' Ori t' be a cosmic matchmaker."

"Someone?" Thorin asked, pointing up into the universe.

"Yes," said Ori. "That Someone."

"Oh," Thorin inspected the picture again then made to hand it back to Ori with a naughty grin. "It's very nice, but you could have shown a little more skin."

"Why don't you keep it," said Ori. "At least then I'll know where it is."

Thranduil was a cunning foe, but in the end he and all challengers were vanquished and when he slogged out of the lake, wringing out his hair, he wore a smile he couldn't hide.

"They're positively vicious," he said to Dori.

"I could have told you that, dear. I certainly wasn't going to go in myself and muss my hair."

The dwarf king and his heirs shouted their war cries in triumph, hugging each other all at once and laughing.
Thranduil accepted a towel from Randibur and watched them. His expression didn't change, but something in his eyes softened.

"They aren't so different from us," Ori heard him say. "Nor is he his grandfather."

Up in their room, Ori had just closed his trunk with a final, exasperated slam when Bilbo knocked at the open doorway.

"Hello," said Ori with a sigh.

"Finished repacking?" Bilbo asked.

"Just about. I told Dori if he ever packed my things for me again I was going to jumble all his hair and beard accessories. That was a bit vicious, I admit."

Dwalin stuck his head around the bathroom doorway and snorted.

"Had t' be done, love."

"It had to be done," Bilbo agreed with a sympathetic smile.

Bilbo and Ori sat on Ori's trunk. Dwalin came in and locked the trunk while the lid was held forcibly closed. He kissed Ori and went back to finish getting his things from the bathroom.

"I wish you were coming back with us," said Ori to Bilbo.

"I do, too," Bilbo smiled. "But I have to finish out at least the next week here. With the coronation coming up, we're booked to the roof. In fact, we may have to put a few bunks up there. Then I have to bring the last of my manuscript pages to Gondor. Denethor doesn't do a lot of editing, but they still have to be typeset and I have to see the printers' galleys. That will leave me just enough time to catch the caravan of my own books back east to Erebor before the passes are closed by the snows."

"The autumn publication," said Ori.

"I daren't miss this year's deadline. Mr. Denethor is far too large a fellow to be wroth with me."

"He wouldn't try to hurt you?" Ori asked, alarmed.

"Oh, no, no. He's a bit of a tyrant, just ask his sons, but he isn't much for violence. Besides, King Elessar is too fond of Frodo to let him be orphaned again."

Somewhere in the depths of the inn a great deal of crockery smashed at once, followed a long, feminine wail.

"Oh, dear," said Bilbo. "I believe duty calls. I'll see you outside."

Dwalin came out with the last of the toiletries in a kit and put them in his own trunk which, tellingly, Dori had not touched.

Kali and Randi came in just then, took both trucks away with them, and it was just Ori, Dwalin and the rumpled bed.

"I'm going to miss this place," said Ori. "I know. Why state the obvious?"

"Who wouldn't miss it?" said Dwalin. He sat on the bed and Ori sat on his knee with Dwalin's arms around him. "We made th' most o' th' time we had."

"And we've eaten some incredible food!" said Ori, pillowing his head on his husband's shoulder.

"Aye, our Dori'll despair keepin' us fed now, but mebbe tha's fer th' best. If I ate like this all th' time I'd never fit in me armor."

Bifur came in, shaking his head, and they stood to greet him.

"Is everyone alright?" Ori asked.

In khuzdul Bifur said, "Poli was carrying a tray of dishes into the kitchen and did trip over one of the dogs. She is well. The dog is well. The dishes, however, nary a one did survive."

Ori winced.

"I'm so sorry."

Bifur shrugged.

"Erda hath oft expressed a wish for new plates. Behold, I bringeth something for each of thee."

He handed each of them a tiny, finely carved figure, much smaller than his own hands.

Ori took his and his breath caught.

"Dwalin! Look!"

"I know," said Dwalin, holding out his own prize. "It's me."
They were miniature wooden copies of themselves, Ori's with bright red hair and a book under his arm and a wee scarf. Dwalin's wore his bathing costume, but carried a war hammer in each hand.

"Bifur, these are wonderful!" Ori cried. "Thank you!"

He hugged Bifur, which caused the toymaker to chuckle as he hugged back.

Ori let go and said, "Wait! Wait!"

Dwalin also embraced Bifur as Ori grabbed his sketchpad from his satchel and tore out a picture he had sketched of Bifur carving, surrounded by chattering badgers.

Shyly, he held it out to Bifur.

"It's not quite an even exchange. It's not even in color, but if you'd do me the honor of accepting this?"

Bifur took it and grinned.

"T'is a wondrous thing, Ori. It is I who am honored."

They looked at each other for a moment before breaking into laughter.

"M'lord," said Ori with a smart bow.

"M'lord," Bifur returned with a flourish.

"Well, don't I feel li'e a goat's hind end," said Dwalin.

They went out onto the deck where Erda was putting two very thick letters in Dis' hand.

"This one is for Omi, an' this is for Loli," said Erda. "Sorry, dear, but Wili kept comin' up with pictures he wanted me t' send them. He really does miss them terribly."

"At that age, it does no good to tell them he'll see them soon, does it," said Dis.

"None whatever. He an' wee Frodo will just have t' prop each other up."

"Where is Frodo?" Dis asked.

Erda chucked her chin over her shoulder. "Clin' like a little vine."

Thorin and Bilbo sat together on a bench in a corner of the deck, speaking in low, serious tones. They couldn't sit very close together, though, since a faunt sat between them with his face buried in Bilbo's waistcoat and would not look up for anything, but kept shaking his head when Bilbo spoke to him.

Finally, Thorin leaned down and said something which caused Frodo's blotchy face to separate from his uncle's side.

Bilbo handed Thorin his handkerchief, which Thorin used on Frodo with the deftness of a dwarf who had helped raise two snot-filled princes.

As he wiped, Thorin spoke gravely to Frodo, who then hopped up off the bench and tried to stand up straight and pull his little shoulders back, though occasionally still snuffling.

Balin and Bombur walked up to Erda and Dis. Balin said to Bombur,

"Yeh'll be at th' coronation then, laddie? Yeh an' Erda both?"

Kali, pouring iced fruit juice, laughed and handed Balin a glass.

"They will be, Master Balin."

"Oh, Kali, I don't know," said Bombur ponderously. "Such a burden to leave on your shoulders. You're only sixty."

"I'm ninety-eight, Da, and you know it."

"Are you really?" Bombur asked. "Oh, in that case, you're on your own. Your mother and I will see you in the spring."

"Riiiiight," said Kali. "If you're away for more than a week, you start hyperventilating. Seven days is plenty of time for Lord Bombur and Lady Erda to hobnob with the quality in Erebor."

Bombur chuckled.

"Alas, you're too right. We will attend the coronation, though, Balin, and gladly."

"Excellent!" said Balin. "I'll personally make up yer bed. Then yeh kin take it apart an' do it over right."

That left Bombur and Erda laughing.

All the Urs turned out to see their guests off.

A boat came into sight, whisking at speed across the lake. It sailed quickly and silently up to the
“Until your next invitation for tea, dear Bearer,” Thranduil smiled, bowing, then turned to the dwarf king and did the same. “Thorin.”

“Thranduil,” Thorin said breezily, returning the bow. “We look forward to receiving you at my coronation and, as always, at tea.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do,” teased Thranduil. He turned to speak to his son but perceived Legolas on one knee in a fond embrace with Gimli. Then elf king turned to speak to his guard and perceived her locked in an open-mouthed smooch with Prince Kili. He looked at the royal party in annoyance and with a swirl of his robes, went down to the boat. Half-way along, he shouted back.

“I’m leaving!”

Tauriel and Legolas extracted themselves giggling, from their loves and rushed after him.

The boat soon was heading back across the lake, all the dwarrow shouting and waving at them.

The wagon was declared ready. Jani and Bofur said their farewells to their kin and got on their ponies to accompany the royal party back to Erebor. Off they went, all the ponies eager to be out and about, swishing their tails and tossing their manes as they took to the yellow brick road. The dwarrow were mostly occupied in turning back and waving and trading shouts.

Once they turned onto the main northeast road, the party moved briskly along. Ori glanced about at everyone. The company was laughing and chattering and all dressed in bright summer clothes. What a difference from the drab gray they had worn on their way to the Inn. Dis rode up to Ori and handed Erda’s letters to Ori.

“Here,” she said. “You’re more likely to see them first.”

“Of course,” Ori promised and pocketed the missives. Dis winked and fell back to ride with Jani again.

As they rode into the forest, Ori nudged Honda into a bit of a trot until they were even with the king.

"Do you think Frodo will be all right?” Ori asked.
"He'll be fine. He has his orders. I have no doubt he will dispatch his duties to the best of his abilities."
"You gave him orders?” Ori asked, mystified.
"I told him to look after his uncle and to make sure they were both safe in Erebor by the first snowfall. Also, I vowed that upon their safe arrival, I would ennoble him."
"Bilbo?"
"No, Frodo. He will the Lord of the Muffins."
"That would make him the first hobbit noble in… well, ever. Shall I draw up the appropriate documents?"
"No question about it," said Thorin with a grin. "I keep my word."
"Um, Thorin, I was thinking. We all want Bilbo in Erebor, but we didn't ask Master Brur's permission to let him use the library. I mean, I know as king you let anyone you want anywhere you want..."
"But it doesn't help to run right over people, especially in their own realm. Not to worry."
He took a folded piece of paper out of a his belt pouch and handed it to Ori. It was obvious from the weight of paper and Roäc's familiar beak marks that this was a letter.
"Should I read this?” he asked.
"You'll have to file it anyway," said Thorin with a shrug. "It does fall under 'official business’.”
"You already wrote to Master Brur."
"As soon as you mentioned the idea of Bilbo as a visiting scholar. Roäc's been loafing among the treetops at the inn all week. I thought he should feel needed."
Ori snickered.
Thorin continued,
"He returned the very next morning."
Ori read the letter, growing more astonished with each line.
…I look forward to finally meeting Master Baggins face to face. We have been corresponding for a decade now and to finally be able to invite him to the library would be gratifying for me and most flattering for the library itself…

"He actually sounds excited," said Ori, amazed.
"Apparently it only takes one hobbit to make some people happy," Thorin said, raising his brows.
Ori folded up the letter and put it away, smiling.
"One hobbit. Who would have guessed?"

They came upon the place where they had lunched before and there, in the road heading toward them, were three familiar, cheerily colored wagons.
“Look who!” shouted Kili.

The two parties met and everyone dismounted and greeted each other. The Great Woudini was in fine fettle and Ori followed as Thorin went straight to the seer.
“We thought you were going on to Dale,” said Thorin to Woudini.
“We’ve been! It was only a brief engagement. That is to say, they’re far too busy to pay us much mind, so we’re off to, hopefully, more golden opportunities.”
“But, you can’t leave yet. You have to attend my coronation.”
Woudini’s eyebrows flew up in true surprise.
“What? I beg pardon, I meant to say: What, your majesty?”
“As my guests.” Thorin’s face was quite sober but his eyes twinkled mischievously. “You should stay with us at least until after the coronation. It will leave you plenty of time to head south before the autumn festivals down there.”
“Let me consult the Infinite,” said Woudini. He turned to the wagon. “Dearest?”
Ruelis stuck her head out the open half door.
“Yes, my love?”
“Do you fancy hanging about Erebor with the royal family until after the coronation?”
“What do you think, silly man? You’re the one with the crystal ball.”
“I am, aren’t I. Well, then I’d say, the Infinite says, yes, we’d like to stay very much, especially if there’s a place to pasture the ponies.”
“That is easily arranged. Then you’ll really be able to say you’ve met the crowned heads of Arda.”
Ruelis called out to the next wagon along.
“Oi! Zendi!”
A woman Ori suspected was Woudini’s sister popped her head out the window.
“What’s my brother done now?” she asked tartly, but with a smile.
“Got us invited t’ the coronation in Erebor. Tell Rueri an’ Kib t’ turn the wagons about.”
“Who invited us?”
“The king. See, over there. Best wave. There’s a lass.”

The caravan was turned about and the entire party, laughing and chatting together, headed on toward Erebor. Thorin turned to Woudini, who was up on the box of the wagon, driving the ponies that pulled it.
“We were thinking of you last night,” said Thorin, “while we were eating Smeg steaks.”
Woudini threw back his head and laughed.
“At least something good came of that beast. Who would have thought he’d be so tasty?”
“Oh, and as to your prediction,” Thorin continued, “it wasn’t a dwarrow dam, and the beard was there, just on his feet.”
“His…”
The Great Woudini looked puzzled, then brightened.
“Oh! You met Bilbo! Where is he?”
Dori muttered to Ori, “Does everyone know your friend?”
“He’s still at the inn,” said Thorin. “And he has a faunt with him.”
“After a week?” Woudini raised his eyebrows to their fullest height and playfully affected a shocked look. “I had heard hobbits were prolific, but you certainly move quickly, your majesty. When are we to expect the other six?” Thorin laughed and shook his head.
“His nephew, O Great Seer, I’m sorry to disappoint.”
“Quite all right.” Woudini teased. “I don’t get them all either.”
“And I haven’t met an ent yet!” Kili added from the far side of Thorin.
“Do you know what an ent looks like?” Woudini asked.
“No,” Kili admitted.
“Then how do you know you haven’t met one?”
Kili opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked completely disgruntled that he didn’t have an answer, but he also looked like he would keep trying. Ori rather feared he would hurt himself in the effort.
To the surprise of all, an enormous warg stuck its head out the window behind Woudini and gave him a slobbery nuzzle that made him chuckle, even as he grimaced.
“Really? Must you?” The animal rested his massive chin on Woudini’s shoulder and sighed in adoration.
“A warg?” Dwalin asked.
Woudini patted the beast and it leaned heavily against him, tongue lolling and with all the air of a devoted dog.
“My daughter found the pup abandoned,” Woundini explained. “Bring ’em up with the family and they’re as loyal and loving as the best dog you could imagine.”

As they rode into town Ori couldn’t help but notice things were quite a bit tidier than when they left, almost as if the whole of Dale had been treated to a front step scrub and a lick of paint.
Bard came out of the house, Tilda just behind him, hopping up and down with excitement and even Bain looked happy to see them.
Mistress Dazla followed after Tilda and put her hands on Tilda’s shoulders, though they were much the same height.
“You see, Tilda,” said Mistress Dazla, “here we are again, all the same.” When Fili handed Sigrid down from the carriage, Tilda made sure she was the first to try and hug Sigrid off her feet.
“Sigrid!” Tilda squealed. Then she became very serious and contrite. “I’m sorry about the chicken.”
“It’s fine, Til’, it happens all the time. I’m not angry.” Tilda let out a huge sigh of relief.
Bard stepped forward, hugged her and then immediately said, “Thank Eru, you all came back.” Thorin dismounted and went to clasp hands with him.
“What’s happened?”
“Dippy and Boo-boo happened.” “Dippy…”? Sigrid asked.
Bard waved his arms in frustration.
“There are two of them! One looks like a paint warehouse exploded on her and her goat and the other looks like a ball of tar.”
“Buj and Dipfa,” Ori immediately clarified. His heart sank but at the same time he wanted to laugh. Bard would never understand them.
“Whatever!” Bard raged. “He wants to build a flying boat and she wants to make my boat into a ‘royal barge’ as she calls it! Blue trimming and gold sails, she says! She wants to paint the hull pink! Pink! It’ll scare the fish!”
“Now, King Bard,” Mistress Dazla said, comfortably. “They’re just encouragin’ you. No one will force you to paint your lovely boat pink.”
“Yes, “ Ori couldn’t stop himself adding fuel to the fire. “But with your coloring I’m sure it would throw the hull into fantastic relief.”

Dwalin snorted and Dori gave them both a stink-eye.

“That’s what she said!” Bard didn’t quite yell and waved his arms around again, clearly unable to deal with the unusual couple.

“Bard, I’ll have a chat with them,” Thorin cut in, his tone gentle and soothing. “Don’t give it another thought.”

Bard deflated immediately.

“Thank you, King Thorin.”

Ori glanced around and was pleased to see that while Bard had been thus engaged, Fili and Sigrid were able to kiss sweetly and whisper their goodbyes.

As Bard turned to his daughter, Fili stepped back and made a great show of patting his pony’s nose.

“Sigrid,” Bard asked, frowning, “what are you wearing?”

“Just some of the holiday clothes Dipfa made for me. Aren’t they wonderful!”

“Your arms are showing.”

“What! My goodness!” Sigrid cried. “What happened to my sleeves!”

“I think it looks nice,” said Bain, then suffered a scowl from his father and immediately shut up, though the corners of his mouth twitched rebelliously. He disappeared back into the house.

“You can’t show your arms!” Bard argued.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s too much temptation for some… people.”

“The people involved wouldn’t happen to be Fili, would they, Da?”

“You aren’t married!”

“Da, they’re just arms.”

“King Bard,” said Mistress Dazla, “did you not tell me that you used to hide under the carts when you thought Mathilde would walk by, just to catch a glimpse of her ankles?”

“You did what, Da?” Tilda asked with great interest.

“That’s different,” said Bard. “That was my wife.”

“Ah, but she wasn’t at the time,” said Mistress Dazla with a sly smile. “And you were not her husband.”

Bain brought Mistress Dazla’s bag out and put it in the baggage cart.

Ori watched as Dazla took a few steps to the side, as if to make sure they did so properly. She reached to nudge it a little, and Bard immediately went to assist her, which meant he wasn’t watching Sigrid, who squeezed Fili’s hand, then skipped off into the house.

Thorin said, conversationally,

“It’s good to see you again, Bard. The place seems rather cheerful.”

“The people are already preparing for your coronation.”

“My coronation?”

“They’re all very excited, which is perfectly fine with me, since the more attention they pay to your crown, the less they’ll pay attention to my lack of one.”

Dis teased, “You’re so averse to wearing one?”

“I’ve heard stories of the crowns my ancestors supposedly wore. I’m not walking around with a candelabra on my head.”

“That would definitely scare more than the fish,” Dis agreed.

Bard looked up again, then frowned slightly.

“Er… King Thorin, why is the circus back in town?”

Thorin smiled.

“Because the Durins are back in town.”

They took their leave. Mistress Dazla, safely ensconced in the seat in the shay, informed them of the latest uproar. Apparently, a large sea bird had flown in with a letter from King Frerin. As she
was about to elucidate, Roäc glided down from the heights with a letter in his beak, alit on Thorin’s
shoulder and spat out the missive into Thorin’s palm.

Thorin stopped the party and they gathered around as he opened it, rolled his eyes and handed it to
Balin, who sighed. Dis got it next and read it, grinding her teeth as she thrust it back to Thorin. Ori
was itching to know what Frerin had done and dreading it all at once. He wasn’t kept in suspense
for long, however.

Thorin read aloud,

“Brother,

“I received the invitation to your coronation, but I regret I shall not be able to
attend on the date you suggest, for my duties in raising my own kingdom do not
allow me to travel at this time. In order for me to attend, I think it best you resend
the invitations with a date put back by at least two months.

Cordially,
Frerin, King of Belegost.”

“Tha’ little shit!” Dwalin barked.

“How dare he!” Dori cried.

Fili, who had apparently been working through the consequences, said, “If he doesn’t attend, he
can’t pledge his loyalty to the new king.”

Ori shook himself free of the red cloud of anger that was floating dangerously before his eyes.

This was not a time for rage, this was a time for planning.

“We can’t put this off, Thorin,” he heard himself say.

“No,” Thorin agreed, his countenance cool and serene. “We will not. Balin?”

“Aye, lad?”

“When we get home, pull all the genealogy tables. Find someone related to the noble clans in
Belegost who is still here and still loyal to me. Whoever this is, they will stand for Frerin and
pledge loyalty to me. If you cannot, and Frerin will not relent, then Frerin will find himself alone and
with trade embargoes from all who swear loyal to me at the ceremony. I will not tolerate any
undermining whatsoever.”

“As you wish, my king.” Balin said accompanied by murmurs of angry support, including those
from the Great Woudini’s troupe.

“The crust!” Ruelis said angrily.

“Do you need us to do anything, you majesty?” The Great Woudini called.

Thorin smiled, shook his head, turned and led the way forward.

It was the dinner hour, so they managed to make it to the mountain without further interruption,
but they were not going to go into it without greeting about five or six hundred dwarrow who stood
between them and the gates.

“Look! There’s the king!” someone shouted.

Ori nudged Honda a little closer to Harley, not sure if this was a welcoming or a mob.

Vi and Margr had fought their way to the front, and Ori recognized most of the Steam Alley
neighborhood at their backs.

“Hail to the king! Hail to the king!” Margr and Vi bellowed in unison, and the crowd took it up in
a roar.

“Good to see yer majesty!” called Ondr, Tin’s wife. “How’re yeh keepin’?”

“Don’t you worry, King Thorin!” Margr shouted. “We’re with yeh, even if yer ratbastard of a
brother ain’t, pardon me sayin’ so.”

Similar shouts accompanied this.

Thorin and Dwalin exchanged looks. Ori realized that somehow the entire population of the
mountain knew the contents of Frerin’s letter as Mistress Dazla had intimated.

“We’re all agreed,” shouted Vi, nodding, “he can’t get away with snubbin’ our Thorin.”

“Tha’s right!” Margr loudly agreed, and so did several dozen other dwarrow in her near vicinity.
“Yeh jus’ say th’ word, yer majesty, an’ we’ll go out an’ fetch him f’r yeh!” came another shout. Ori had a vision of an angry horde of dwarrow tearing across the land to Belegost, all probably hoping to surprise Frerin, the faithless villain, in his nightshirt and drag him back to Erebor.

Thorin stood up in his saddle and held up his hands.
“Calmly, my people, calmly.”

The crowd parted for Granny Klak’s open carriage and the old dam shouted.
“The little shit wants you to put off the coronation until it’s more convenient for his sorry arse!”
“Yes, I am aware of that, dear Lady Klakuna. Have no fears,” Thorin assured her, and by extension, everyone else. “We’ll not be waiting on the King of Belegost. The coronation will go on as planned.”

This brought even greater merriment.
“See,” called Margr, at volume, sniffing, “told yeh th’ wee shit wouldn’t get th’ best o’ our Thorin.”

Thorin, perhaps realizing he was going to have to devise his own exit, held up his hands again.
“I’m so happy to see you all, and so touched by this display of loyalty. Thank you! You have entirely solaced all of my remaining grief.”

There was some snickering and coughing here, then Thorin continued.
“However, it is the dinner hour, and I won’t keep you from your trenchers another moment. Besides, Captain Dwalin gets cranky when he’s hungry.”

Miraculously, the now laughing crowd parted to let them through, with well-wishes and greetings and a few calls of “Oi! Ori! Nice hair!”, “Yeh look lovely, pet! So grown up!”, and “Shows off tha’ big, han’some nose t’ advantage, tha’ does!”

If Ori weren’t on Honda he’d have sunk through the ground.
Honda turned her head and winked at him.
“Hush you,” he muttered.
Her snort sounded suspiciously like laughter.

On seeing the wagons behind the royal party, people began to cheer.
The Great Woudini had organized, and several of his troupe had got up on the roof of one wagon and there was a sword swallower, a pair of ladies juggling knives back and forth and Woudini and Ruelis’ daughter Floris, who was dressed in armor, valiantly defended herself against terribly fierce warg who was obviously enjoying this wonderful game with his young mistress.

“Look! The king brought performers for the coronation!”
“I want my fortune told!”
“The king must have an official fortune!”
“They have a warg prisoner!”
“It’s so fierce!”
“How brave!”
The party managed to gain the royal courtyard, finally, and Binni and Oin were there to meet them, Binni looking smug and Oin grave. Omi, Loli, Buj, Gridr and Gloin stood along side them and all the servants lined up behind, completing the greeting party, and Granny Klak’s carriage pulled up just then and Balin went and handed her down.

Binni called gaily, “The asshat has struck again!”
“So I read,” said Thorin, dismounting. “Ah, Binni, I see you left the mountain in one piece.”
They bumped foreheads, then Binni looked around him.
“Where’s Bilbo?”
Thorin choked and Dwalin roared with laughter.
“How do you know about…” Thorin glared at Roäc, who was still perched on his shoulder.
“Never mind. Master Baggins will arrive sometime this fall, after he concludes his business in Gondor.”
“Oh, he’ll miss the coronation!” Omi cried.
“Come in, come in,” Binni encouraged them.
“Aye,” said Oin, “food’s no’ gettin’ any hotter.”
"Our Gimmers!" roared Gloin.
“Missed yeh, too, Adad,” said Gimli, hugging him before being snatched into his amad’s fond embrace.

"Tha' little shit sent his letter in a bloody ugly pelican” Oin bellowed. “No’ tha’ it wasn’t a perfectly courteous sort o' bird.”

"Frerin did have th' sense t' wrap th' letter in an oilskin pouch,” Gloin put in.
“I thought it smelled vaguely of fish,” said Thorin. He turned to Ori, rather apologetic. “I’m afraid my correspondence archive is going to be smelly.”

“Never mind,” said Ori. “I keep Frerin’s letters in a separate file. They already smell.”

Thorin greeted all the servants by name and thanked them for their loyal service. Mistress Dazla was soon ordering her minions to unload and stable the horses while Dori gushed over them all, getting in the way until Binni rescued them by escorting Dori in. Balin had already disappeared, Ori suspected, to his office to start looking for a loyal relation to stand for Frerin.

Granny Klak graciously organized the troupe to take up residence in the former home of Thorin and Dis and, at Dis’ request, a small squad of servants whisked over to care for their guests.

“How was your trip?” Loli cried, grabbing Ori into a hug, Omi not far behind her.

“Lovely!” Ori said eagerly. “Your family is all well and I have letters here from your mother.” He withdrew the missives from his pocket and both sister snatched for them. Buj came forward and formally clasped arms with Ori.

“My precious diamond and I are most pleased to welcome you home, Lord Ori. You look well rested.”

“Buj,” Ori grinned, yanking his friend forward to knock heads with him. “If you call me Lord Ori again, I’ll hit you! Where’s Dipfa?”

“My precious diamond will be joining us soon. Did you enjoy yourself and fully solace King Thorin’s grief?”

Ori snickered.

“Yes, and I have some sketches for you. I studied some rather interesting lake creatures. I’ll show them to you presently as I remembered you talking about fish flying through the water.”

“You met Bilbo, then?” Omi butted in.

“Yes, “ Ori was delighted by the turn of the conversation to his new friend. “We had some wonderful conversations and he brought his nephew, Frodo, with him. Such a sweet badger, er... faunt.”

“Mam said he’d brought him,” Loli was agog for further information as they hustled Ori inside.
Ori sighed. He’d had a wonderful time but this felt like home, so much more than Dori’s old place in Steam alley. This beautiful old house was his home, his and Dwalin’s.

Dwalin followed him in and brought with him the basket with the kittens, Brandy and the kittens' bat-mother.

The three young scribes followed Ori through to his and Dwalin's bedroom, talking.

“Is it true, what Mam says about Randi? He’s going to apprentice with Princess Dis?” Loli asked.

“Yes,” Ori managed as he picked up Brandy and freed the kittens. The kittens rushed around the room. Kihshassa went to the stand, flipped herself up and settled to close her eyes.

"We won't be able to get away with anything once he gets here!" Omi groaned.
Ori dug through his satchel and found his ‘safe’ note book. Dwalin thanked the servants and herded the scribes back through to the sitting room.

The scribes sat on the floor with Ori as he opened the book to show his drawings.

Omi and Loli were soon shrieking with laughter over the bathing suits and Buj almost had his nose to the pictures of gulls and fish. Ori ran back to his room for his bag of souvenirs. Omi and Loli were familiar with lake creatures and lake side debris. Buj studied a piece of driftwood as though it was a rare gem until he sat bolt upright and rushed out of the room. Omi told them he’d gone to get Dipfa.
Ori looked up. Dori buzzed about with Mistress Dazla and Binni seemed set on getting dinner on the table. Fili and Kili watched the scribes from the sofa. Both princes looked a little sleepy. Gimli and his family reappeared through a new door in the sitting room. Ori grinned. Binni had been busy.

Thorin came in followed by Jani and Dis then Nori and Bofur. Balin entered from the private hall, hands, clasped behind his back, smirk in place.

"Found it, laddie," he said to Thorin.

“And?”

“Ideally, th’ closer a noble t’ Frerin we kin get t’ express loyalty, th’ better. Th’ best representative would be a Rikanta.”

“Dori?”

“Dori can’t represent th’ Rikanta,” said Balin. “He’s related through Lady Klakuna, who divorced her husband an’ renounced her name. Dori is a Durin by birth an’ will be a Fundin by marriage an’, really, th’ founder o’ his own line. We have, however, one distantly related Rikanta still among us.”

“And this one is?” Thorin asked.

“Buj.”

The silence went on for several moments before Thorin’s mouth curled into a delicious smile.

“Mahal is kind, isn’t He,” said Thorin.

“And, thankfully, is very fond of our Ori,” said Thorin finally. “Does Buj know he’s related?”

“No, it wouldn’t, would it. Is he around?”

“He’s gone to escort Dipfa here,” volunteered Ori. “But you could probably ask him when they get here.”

“Is he likely to go along with it?”

Ori and Omi laughed.

Ori said, “If it could, in anyway, upset his brother Wobr? Instantly.”

Dori called them all to table.

“Where’s Granny Klak?” Ori asked.

“She is dining with and entertaining our er… circus.” Thorin told him. “They will join us after dinner. This gives them a chance to settle themselves and enjoy the old royal household.”

“I told Klakuna to be sure to show them all that hot spring downstairs,” Dis added smiling. “I’m sure they will be very happy to have some time together to eat and rest. Their ponies are in the meadow with ours.”

Nearly everyone was seated when the sitting room door opened again and Buj and Dipfa entered and Buj bowed to them. Dori cut short any speech Buj was about to make by greeting both he and Dipfa and ordering them to sit up at the dinner table.

It all but groaned under the weight of the food: a roasted goose with a marmalade glaze, chestnut dressing, potatoes mashed with cream, salt and garlic, and dishes of peas and carrots in butter sauce. It tasted wonderful.

Buj,” said Thorin while they were all digging in.

“Yes, your majesty?” Buj was instantly seated at attention.

“Are you aware of the circumstances raised here by a letter from the king of Belegost?”

Buj frowned.

“Yes, your majesty. If I may be so bold, I think him remarkably foolish.”

"And what would you have me do about it?"

“You majesty? Since you ask, the obvious solution is that you will appoint someone here who is loyal to you that remained here from his house to stand for him, or simply ignore him and he will be cut off completely, no doubt with trade embargoes on his head.”

“Exactly,” Thorin said gravely. “Lord Balin has researched the tables and we have found such a
“Very good, your majesty. This person must be interviewed thoroughly and have a private loyalty
swearing ceremony with you before the coronation. Do you wish me to draw up such a private
ceremony contract?”

“Yes,” Thorin smiled. “Tell me Buj, are you loyal to me as High King of all Dwarrow?”

Buj almost fell out of his chair

“Yes, your majesty, always! I’m sure I-”

“Good,” said Thorin. “Do you swear this loyalty to me for your life?”

“Of… of course, your majesty, I always-”

“Good. That’s that taken care of. Do write up the contract.”

Buj frowned and seemed puzzled. Dipfa stared.

“Your majesty, are you saying my beloved Boo is this person you seek?”

Thorin nodded.

“Yes?” Buj squeaked. Dipfa gave a cry of delight and embraced Buj.

“I shall make your coronation robes, beloved!”

“I am the last loyal representative?” Buj wondered. “But I... I’m the youngest child…”

“You are here,” Thorin said, “and loyal to me as you have just stated.”

Buj rose so quickly he knocked his chair over and rushed to Thorin’s side. He fell to his knees.

Thorin rose and waited politely for Buj to recite the ancient khuzul oath of loyalty, which he did so
rapidly it was almost garbled. Everyone eagerly watched. Buj came to the end and was left panting
for breath.

“I’ve always wanted to do that,” he observed as an aside.

Thorin leaned down and offered his hand to Buj.

“Rise Lord of the Rikanta, most steadfast of retainers. I accept and treasure your loyalty.”

He raised Buj and clasped his wrist. Everyone applauded. Dipfa burst into tears and threw herself
into Thorin’s arms, causing laughter among the older set.

“I pledge my loyalty, too, your majesty. I shall forever serve you with my art as my beloved Boo
will with his inventions!”

Thorin patted her back and thanked her. He took her hand and Buj’s and clasped them together.

“When you both are ready, I shall consider it an honor to perform your marriage ceremony.”

Buj bowed and Dipfa curtsied. This brought another round of applause and both Binni and Dori
shed tears. Buj led Dipfa back to Oin and Binni where they were embraced and fussed over.

Omi sniffed, misty eyed.

“It’s so romantic! We should tell Shire, I mean, Idad Bilbo. Perhaps he could put in one of his
novels!”

“Oh, yes,” breathed Loli.

Ori rather thought all the things the Durins got up to, would provide Bilbo with a life-long wealth
of material.

After a very sweet and cinnamon-y apple crumble, Binni escorted the company out through the
breakfast parlor and into the meadow. Ori looked about. The paving stones now extended outward
to almost double the previous size and Binni had invested in several cushioned deck chairs, like at
the inn, and a wide copper brazier was set in the middle. This was soon lit and everyone settled to
enjoy the evening.

Ori suspected that Binni and Mistress Dazla had planned this to keep Dori and everyone else
occupied and out of the way while the unpacking and such was taken care of.

Shortly Mistress Dazla came out with a tray and lemonade and many glasses. She went to the far
side of the new stone deck and gestured.

Thorin called a welcome as Lady Klakuna appeared leading Woudini and his troupe from that
side. Dis and Dori made sure all in the troupe were comfortably seated and provided with drinks.

Ori made room where he was seated with Dwalin on one side next to Thorin and Omi, Loli and
Buj and Dipfa on Ori’s other side. Floris, Woudini’s and Ruelis’ daughter, joined them, her pet warg
following, tail wagging happily. Floris introduced the warg as ‘Biscuit’ due to the coloring of the beast’s fur. Ori patted Biscuit and was surprised at the rich softness of the coat.

“I thought warg fur was only like this after it had been cleaned and treated.”

“Oh, I do that,” Floris explained. “Biscuit gets a bath once a week and I brush him every day. We all had a wonderful time in the hot spring Lady Klakuna showed us and she had the loveliest dinner for us all. She’s a very kind woman. Biscuit spent most of the time jumping in and out of the spring and running around. He’s so good and clever. You saw how I’ve got him all trained to act like a furious monster when we perform. He’s got lots of tricks.”

Floris snapped her fingers.

Biscuit immediately sat up on his back haunches.

“Count to three, Biscuit,” Floris told him.

Biscuit barked three times.

Floris made a move as though stabbing Biscuit.

“I run you through, villain,” she ordered. Biscuit wobbled then collapsed dramatically onto his side and lay still, tongue out.

“Hugs,” Floris said with a laugh. Biscuit leaped up and threw himself in delight at his mistress, almost knocking her and the chair over, yipping and licking her face.

“That’s a fine animal,” Dwalin said thoughtfully. Biscuit leaned toward him and sniffed the hand Dwalin held out. He came forward, tail wagging, happy eyes beaming as though all dwarrow were his dearest friends. Dwalin gave the ears a good scratch and Biscuit melted to the deck and rolled over, a tacit request for a tummy rub. Dwalin laughed and obliged.

“Where’d yeh find him, lass?”

Apparently if orcs don’t like the size or coloring of the pups, they move on, forcing the mothers to abandon the pups. Sometimes when the litter is found quickly, one or two have survived. If you take them then, they make the best pets. Only some people keep them, most just kill them ’cose their wargs.”

Dwalin nodded absently. Ori wondered if he should ask Master Vobwi if he came across any orphaned warg pups, to keep one for Dwalin.

The rest of the evening past in perfect tranquility.
Queens, Crowns, and Startling Pictures.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. And we’re back and back to normal. What is normal, but a setting on an old clothes dryer, as these are Durins, after all. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dward time, same dward tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori woke the next morning when Dwalin kissed his shoulder.

"Time t' get up, love. Bofur an' Jani'll be down in a mo'.'"

Ori sucked in a deep breath.

Right. Erebor.

He rolled onto his back to kiss his husband, who was already dressed.

"You're looking particularly sharp this morning," Ori said, smiling.

"Hafta go ransom me post back from our Furh’nk. Don' wan' t' go lookin' like a beggar. He might get th' idea t' chuck me out."

"Not a chance," said Ori, giving him one more quick peck before scrambling out of bed. "He needs time to pay court to Loli. Remember?"

"Ah, tha' s right. No' goin' t' be a lo' o' time f'r tha' in th' next few weeks."

"True love will find a way," Ori sing-songed, fluttering his lashes.

Dwalin tapped him lightly on the nose.

"Scamp."

While Ori washed his face in the basin, Dwalin took the robes Ori had predetermined out of the wardrobe and laid over the back of the chair.

"I'm so glad I don't have to decide what to wear," said Ori. "My brain is still at the lake."

"Long's yer body's still here wi' me," said Dwalin. "I need t’ go get a jump on brekkie, love."

"Save me a seat?" Ori teased.

"Always."

Ori smiled down at the deep green robe with its jewel-tone scarlet piping and cut work. The robe was heavy, the cutwork velvet. Luckily, it was always cool and dry inside the library. It made wearing a tunic and an over-robe a lot more comfortable. In Dale, late spring was growing toward sweltering summer, but among the books it might as well be the middle of autumn.
The cuffs of the robe were darker green, almost black. Dipfa protested making them that dark, something about not enough relief, but Ori had to be at least a little practical. He did work with ink all day. He thought about Master Brur, who favored yellows and oranges, in his constantly ink-stained robes. They were largely ink-stained because he cleaned clotted up pen nibs on them. Ori knew if he did that, Dipfa would kill him in his sleep.

Idly, Ori wondered if Master Brur had a tailor, or if that person had torn out their beard long ago and vowed to become a hermit.

He went to pull on his tunic and found it was a little snug.

No surprise, he thought, since he'd done nothing but eat and lounge for over a week.

It wasn't painful, or unbecoming, so he left it on. Mahal knew, after a few days of chasing Thorin around, he'd soon be back to his old, spindly self. Today, however, he was due at the library after breakfast. Loli had agreed to fill in for him with Thorin. Ori thought it would be good practical experience for her. She was actually quite competent, she just needed to see that she was.

Ori snickered to himself.

He was probably the last person who should judge someone as under confident.

This evening he was supposed to meet with Balin to draw up the draft of his contract as royal scribe. They would have just enough time to get his official seal cut, the one with his sigil, before the coronation. The oaths of Thorin's under-monarchs were recorded on paper as they were spoken. Thorin would sign and seal them, and Ori would sign and counterseal them. They had to be perfect.

He could hear Bilbo's voice in his head: No pressure there, my lad, none at all.

Ori took his place next to Dwalin at the table just as Dwalin poured him his tea. Dori, perfectly turned out at usual, put a split, hot roll in front him, slathered with butter and blueberry jam.

Ori was instantly in love this roll. It was love at first sight. He planned a very brief, passionate affair with this roll.

He felt eyes on him and looked up at Gimli, who was grinning. Gimli had a similar roll before him and was obviously planning a similar affair.

Bofur, Jani and Thorin sat hunched over some sort of plan at the end of the table. Loli sat with them, taking notes, and Fili stood looking over Thorin's shoulder.

Bofur said, "If y' think that zinc mine's creepy when there's folks workin', that's nothin' t'when it's empty."

Jani shot Bofur a look.

"That why you kept sneakin' back behind me and shoutin' 'Boo!' the whole time?"

"Aw, you weren't scared," said Bofur.

"Not after the twentieth time I wasn't, lummox."

"So, what do we have?" Thorin asked, bringing the conversation back from the realms of sibling squabbles.

Bofur said, "About the first third of the mine, startin' in Dale, is completely rotten and it oughter
be filled in. That's where the water seepage start, at about the same level as the wells in that part o' Dale."

"Middle third's wet because the water's runnin' in from above," said Jani.

"There's no water seepage at that point?" Thorin asked.

"Naw, no seepage," said Jani. "It's wet because it's deeper than the first bit, so the water starts t' sluice. It's gonna take more'n rubble t' seal that off. We're thinkin' a wall o' molten slag. Once it's dry, we can go back an' see if the middle's salvageable, but don't get your hopes up just yet, the bracing's garbage, like they put in temporary chocks an' just left 'em."

"An' no rails around the deeper pits," said Bofur. "Er…"

"Tell me," said Thorin.

Bofur scratched the back of his neck and looked apologetic.

"Master Tin says there's been losses. At least three badgers have toppled over the edges."

"Of course," said Thorin grimly. "Now I'm wishing I'd made Vors' exit more lengthy and painful. What of their families? Were there other casualties?"

Jani and Bofur exchanged glances. Jani shrugged as if it couldn't be helped.

She said, "That low bit where those badgers, Caris and that crew, were workin'? Just before y'get there, there's a bit that's suffered three small scale cave-ins. The bodies were all recovered, but they were mostly from one family. Master Tin's son, his son's wife and her brother."

Fili looked over Thorin's shoulder and shivered.

"And they were forced to send their badgers back there to work. Mahal."

"We're doing what we can for them," said Thorin. "It won't bring their family members back, but we can ease the burden for the survivors. At least we know Master Tin has gone back to brewing. What else?"

"Last third of the mine's actually stable," Bofur continued, "but that's 'cause it's mostly a narrow passage to the escape elevator. The stone tells us there's plenty o' zinc there, an' we got a chance t' do this right if we take care o' the other business good 'n' proper."

"Which we will," said Thorin. "Who do we employ to do the bracing?"

"Thaldis' crew is the best," said Jani. "They're booked solid the next five years, but I'm thinkin' they'll make room for the crown, if y' ask nice."

Thorin looked uncertain.

"I don't want to delay anyone else's business just for me."

"Considerin' what it's for?" Jani snorted. "I think they'll forgive you just this once. What's goin' to be interestin' is gettin' workers down there t' do the job. Once we seal up that first section, the only way up or down's the elevator behind the textile market. The merchants'll love that."

Bofur continued,
"We need to excavate for a lifts anyways. For now we could tunnel through from the Emerald Mine an' piggyback on their lifts, if we can cut a deal."

"Lady Kadis owns that," said Thorin. "Zark's wife."

Bofur nodded.

"Her family dug the original shaft. She might let us share the lifts if you make it worth her while."

Thorin looked over at Dis.

"What do you make of Lady Kadis?"

"Socially, she's always been a little standoffish. She's very much aware of her lineage, though according to Vi and Margr she's learned to 'mix' with all kins. Business-wise, she's no-nonsense. The Emerald Mine's books are always up to date."

Bofur snickered.

"She came t' me about mine inspection before I ever called on her. Truth t' tell, I'm more 'n a little afraid she'll up an' eat me."

"Nah," said Jani, "she'll just nibble your hat a little."

"Funny."

"Speaking of Lady Kadis," Dori said, stirring his tea with portent. "Margr said Ondr -you know, Tin's wife - is staying home now to raise their son's badgers. She once worked scrubbing floors in the palace."

Dis said, "We've been home less than a day and you've already met with Margr?"

"This morning she rode in on a cart that was coming through Dale to bring us produce from the west."

"Vi wasn't with her? Can she even talk if they two of them aren't in the same room?" Dis teased.

"Vi was already queuing up at the Gondorian bakery. It's become quite popular, so you have to be there early to get the best selection."

"Has Mistress Ondr's pension gone through?" asked Thorin.

"Yes, though I'm not so much worried about their circumstances as I am about some of the others." Dori lofted his brows. "I believe they've moved to Lord Zark's house under the mountain in Mithril Square. It may have started as just a bit of fun, but apparently things have turned a little more serious."

"Apparently," said Thorin. He turned to Fili. "The empty townhouses passed inspection?"

"Yes," said Fili. "While we were, eh, in mourning, we had the various trades go through all the houses left by the nobles who went to Ered Luin. We didn't want any surprises."

"We're off this morning to take a look at the current living conditions," said Kili. "Since there's not a lot to be done, the worst off will be moving to Copper Placer in about a week, but almost everyone should be in by midsummer."
"I don't want anyone turned away," said Thorin. "Man, dwarf, anybody."

Fili grinned. "Considering that there are only twenty houses, but each is equal in size to Fundin House? Even dividing it into slightly smaller living quarters, every dwarf or dam who lives there will have room for a pony."

Omi and Ori chattered as they walked to the library.

"I can't believe Mam and Da didn't tell us Idad Bilbo was Shire!" said Omi. "We've known him for years!"

"Maybe they didn't want you bugging him for his autograph," said Ori with a smile.

"I never would! Well, maybe once," said Omi. She shifted a little closer to him and said, in a slightly lower voice. "So, what's it like?"

Ori laughed.

"Depends what 'it' is!"

"What's it like to have your One comb your hair?"

That took him aback. He had to think about it. He was pretty sure Omi and Pika were fooling around. If their Englishmak conversations were anything to go by, they were fooling around a lot. But combing and braiding someone's hair if you weren't related to them by blood or somehow committed to them was frowned upon. It just wasn't done.

"It's wonderful," said Ori honestly. "It's like… not like being fussed over like Dori fusses over me, more like, Dwalin is taking care of me and I'm taking care of him, like we're taking care of something precious. He's so patient about working the knots out of my hair. It's amazing how such a big, strong dwarf can work so delicately."

Omi sighed.

"It does sound wonderful. I can see Pika looking at my hair and beard and it makes me feel all squiggly inside."

"That feeling doesn't go away," said Ori. "Or, if I'm lucky, it never will. But as for combing my hair, he uses a brush. A comb will not go through my hair. Dori used to swear over all the broken combs. He even bought metal ones."

"And you bent the tines, right?" Omi nodded. "That's the curse of 'good' hair, isn't it, never mind that ultimate wooly texture that Gimli's got."

"And he doesn't even take care of it!" Ori agreed. "Though, I imagine after a while Legolas will be seeing to that."

"I hope he doesn't go too crazy," said Omi. "Gimli with straight hair? If Legolas can unravel all that, Gimli'll be tripping over it!"

Ori found that being back at work was almost a novelty after the inn.
Though he had sworn he would keep his promise to himself, Sigrid, and Tauriel about all their sexual educations, Ori spent his break swithering around the biology texts, which were adjacent to the sex manuals. He was a grown, married dwarf, but he still didn’t want to have to explain himself to anyone, never mind his coworkers and friends.

As he sidled over a little, reading the spines out of the corner of his eye, he saw Oin’s name on a rather ponderous black-bound text book: Sex Habits of the Ereborian Dwarf

Looking around, Ori saw only the page shelving books three sections away and so he slid out Oin’s book and opened it at random.

… engaging in the sex act by mutual friction or by penetration. Either is used, but particularly by mutual friction

in the case of genital disease on the part of one or other, resulting in…

Ori put the book back.

He had a feeling that sentence didn’t end well. Nor could he imagine wanting to read about sex if he could only hear Oin’s gruff, loud voice as narration.

He retreated without looking further, berating himself as a spineless coward.

At the end of the day, Ori returned from Reference to his own desk and grabbed his satchel, surprised to find it weighed more now than it had at lunch.

He lifted the flap to find two new small books and one large. The covers were nondescript, but the titles on the spines of the smaller ones told him they were sex manuals.

Where had they come from? Why were his cheeks hot enough to fry an egg?

He carefully closed and secured the flap, looking around as if his mysterious benefactor might be lurking amongst the dictionaries.

There was only Master Brur, who glanced up from a crumbling scroll and very deliberately winked at him.

All right, forget frying an egg. He was going to burst into flame.

“Ready to go, Ori?” Omi asked.

She had gathered up her own satchel and Buj waited for them at the door.

“Er, you go on. I have some work to finish up.”

“Alright. Are you sick or something? You look feverish! Should we send for Oin?”

“No! I mean, no, I’m a little overly warm is all. I’ll meet you at home for dinner.”

He gave them a decent lead before he started for home, carrying his illicit burden tucked against
his body and supported in a firm grip. He kept imagining what would happen if he dropped his satchel on the pavement and it ripped open, strewing titties and arses across the public street.

Everyone would know he was carrying them!

Everyone would know he needed sex manuals!

Everyone would know he was having sex!

Since he was a properly married dwarf, maybe they already knew that last part, but the other parts were just embarrassing. Bad enough his boss knew.

When he arrived at home it was just Dori having tea in the kitchen.

Ori begged off the offer of a cuppa, saying he was rather tired and just wanted a bit of a nap before everyone else arrived.

Then he went to his and Dwalin’s room and locked the door, leaning his back against it. He knew he was acting as if this was some top secret spy mission, but privacy was at a premium at Fundin House. Even if it seemed like he was alone, Nori always lurked in some drainpipe or laundry hamper. It was ridiculous to think that he had been more assured of being alone in the tiny house in Steam Alley than in this vast mansion in Erebor.

For once, though, he knew it was just him, Dori, and the animals in the house, and even Kihshasssa was out flying in the dusk while Dori watched the kittens and Brandy in the kitchen.

Right.

He set his shoulders and slid the books out of his bag. Brur had provided quite a range of material in so small a selection. Thank Mahal for librarians.

Anything had to be better than Oin’s medical text, which might be accurate, but made him think of faulty plumbing.

He took up the first volume, a very large but nondescript book with reddish brown covers embossed with a sprinkling of silver diamonds, but no title or author anywhere. He opened to the title page and read in some ancient scribe’s most flowing hand:

Queen Kivi’s Book of Glittering Diamonds.

Alright, maybe not anything was better than Oin. Casting his mind back, he could only think of one Queen Kivi, if indeed this was the same dam and not a pseudonym. She was the wife of King Durin III.

My Dearest Ones, be Assured that I have done my Utmost to insure that No one who casually observes you perusing this Tome will have the Slightest Inkling as to its Contents.

In return, please promise me Before You Proceed that you are a dwarf or dam Fully Grown and Married,

for you would not wish to bring me such Pain as knowing you cut short your Innocence.
Ori snorted.

Then he turned the pages and he could rather see her point.

Queen Kivi’s prose might have fallen from the perfume flask, but her illustrations were perfectly
clear and cheerfully filthy.

He turned the open book sideways at a particularly instructive diagram, blushing furiously even
though he was alone.

“That is not physically possible. Really? Are you having me on, your majesty?”

_I assure you this position is Fully Obtainable provided you stretch well your limbs Before You
Proceed._

He was inclined to disbelieve her. He was also inclined to think she attended orgies and sketched
and described what she saw… and did. He could imagine her, beard and hair immaculate, wearing
nothing but her jewels as she cried out in well-modulated and decorous ecstasy.

Apparently being married had done nothing to slow her down.

She was ruthlessly inclusive. Ori found pictures and descriptions for dwarf, dams and
everyone along the spectrum in every combination. There was even a chapter on sex with other
races.

He had a feeling Brur would be slipping this to Gimli in the coming years.

“Once he is a dwarf Fully Grown and Married,” Ori snarked.

He didn’t doubt Fili and Kili had already sought out this book for themselves. Or perhaps the
Durins had their own copy. The author was an ancestor of theirs. He wondered if their copy was
inscribed and giggled to himself.

Curious, he turned to the back pages and indeed there was an index of topics. Scanning down the
columns was an education in itself.

His eye lit on the topic ‘Size Difference’ and he swallowed as he turned to page one hundred
forty-two.

_Difference in Anatomical Size is an issue that Must be Dealt with Directly and Explicitly
between and among

partners to ensure the Blessings of Conjugal Felicity._

Fair enough.
As I have already instructed, penetration without thorough preparation is Highly Inadvisable for the novice and well-seasoned alike. Unless the participants Prefer Pain, in which case, see Chapter Twelve.

Ori thought he would give Chapter Twelve a miss.

Being Well Prepared is ever so much more important when the Receiving Partner is of smaller stature than the Delivering Partner(s).

He thought the plural was a misprint until he saw the illustration of one ‘Receiver’ and more than one ‘Deliverer’. That was instructional and, frankly, terrifying.

“I just want one up my arse at a time. That’s too much like mounting an elm tree.”

After a while Ori began to recognize the lilting, poetic tone Kivi used. It seemed familiar somehow.

He recalled Omi and Pika’s erotic inglishmek conversations and he realized that they were quoting Queen Kivi.

They certainly weren’t married!

“Am I the only dwarf in Erebor who hasn’t read this fucking book?”

Ori heard a dirty great crash from the kitchen and Dori cried out in surprise and alarm.

In an instant Ori was through the door, across the hall and into the kitchen. A tableau fit for the stage lay frozen before him.

Dori stood on one slippered foot in a circle of broken ceramics. The other foot hung in the air with Mask attached to it by his front claws and mewling piteously. Dori held Powder against his chest with one hand. With the other he balanced a tea tray upon which stood Nori-Pori, busily and unconcernedly lapping up spilt milk.

While no one was looking, Brandy had stuffed her face into the open biscuit jar.

The crash had apparently been the teapot, strewn in pieces across the kitchen floor.

“Hold on! Hold on!” Ori cried.

He ran and put on his boots, then ran back, shoving the shards aside with his boot until he could rescue Mask from dangling peril and Dori could - finally - put his foot down.

Ori took the tray, on which Nori-Pori had finished the milk and now fastidiously tidied himself, and slid it onto the table. He grasped Brandy by the nape and pulled her out of the jar with a ‘pop’. She had finished the biscuits but apparently gotten her head stuck.
Dori, eyes very large, used his now-freed hand to pry twenty tiny, needle-sharp claws out of his chest.

“Thank you, pet,” said Dori.

“What happened?” Ori asked, grabbing up the broom.

“I had just finished tea and stood with the tray when Nori-Pori, the little bas- monster, leapt from the counter and upset the pot. Mask tried to jump after him and missed.

“Are you bleeding?” Ori asked.

“Poor little Powder,” said Dori, cuddling the frantically mewing kitten. “Nothing a little soap and sticking plaster won’t fix. Won’t it, my love?”

Dori was addressing Powder, who licked his nose.

Ori’s heart rate slowed and he quickly gathered up the shards and checked to be sure he had not missed any under the table or chairs.

“I’m sorry about your teapot,” said Ori.

Dori huffed at Nori-Pori in annoyance.

“It was my favorite, naturally,” said Dori. “Nori would destroy nothing less. Oh, well, there are others, and it isn’t one of Balin’s or Dwalin’s favorites.”

Ori had just placed the broom back in the corner when he remembered he had left the bedroom door open and his books on the bed. He wracked his brains, but could not recall hearing the front door open, so he heaved a sigh at the near-miss and returned to his bedroom.

Where Dwalin, who had come in through the chimney door, was standing by the bed, leafing through the Book of Glittering Diamonds.

“Er…”

Dwalin looked up and smiled as if Ori were not the worst husband who ever lived.

“There yeh are, love. Have a good day?” Dwalin frowned and peered closer. He put the book down on the bed and went to him. “Yeh alright, love? Yer pale as an egg.”

“One of Dis’?” Ori asked faintly.

“What’s happened?”

“Oh, er, Nori-Pori broke Dori’s teapot. Shards everywhere. I was helping clean up so the kittens wouldn’t get cut.”

Dwalin hugged him and kissed the top of his head and Ori prayed to Mahal that the topic of that book on the bed was closed.

Of course he wasn’t that lucky.

Dwalin started to strip out of his uniform. He was fastidious with it, which no one who knew him only distantly would ever guess.
“So, Queen Kivi, eh?”

“Yes,” said Ori in a small voice. “I’m sorry.”

Dwalin peered at him, put down his tunic and went back to hold him very gently by the shoulders.

“Why th’ fuck’re yeh sorry, love? It’s a good book t’ learn from, though she sounds like she chugged down an etiquette manual with her ale.”

“You don’t mind I didn’t just ask you?”

“It’s no’ like I know everythin’, love. Yeh migh’ want somethin’ I know naught abou’.”

“I might?”

It had never occurred to him.

“Aye, isn’t tha’ why yeh look a’ such things? T’ learn? Well, an’ t’ get a thrill.”

“Yes, but, it wasn’t for me. I mean, I thought if I knew more about it, then we could do things and I wouldn’t be so unsure. I would be better at making you happy.”

“Tha’s sweet, but if yeh do it, do it fer both a’ us, love.”

“Us.”

“Both a’ us, right? That’s why I’m goin’ t’ go through it meself. I been over it a time or two, an’ I still don’ think Illustration 20’s possible, no matter how much yeh stretch firs’.”

Ori giggled.

“Neither do I. I’m relieved you don’t want to try it.”

“Sex shouldn’t land yeh in th’ infirmary.”

“Where you have to explain how you got hurt in the first place. Can you imagine? The healer looks you over and says, ‘Oh, aye, yeh tried Illustration 20, did yeh?’.”

They both laughed.

Dwalin hugged him close then drew him back to look at him.

“Our Kivi’s righ’ ‘bout quite a few thin’s, love. Yeh have t’ talk ‘bout wha’ yeh want, an’ yeh have t’ be prepared f’r it, ‘less yeh like it rough.”

“That’s Chapter Twelve. I didn’t go there.”

Dwalin grinned.

“I figure when yer ready t’ do th’ fancy stuff we’ll jus’ start with yeh as th’ … Deliverin’ Partner.”

Ori straightened his shoulders in surprise.

“You’ll let me do that?”
“It’s no’ ‘lettin’ yeh do anythin’, love. I want it, if yeh want it.”

“Will you even feel anything? I’m not exactly huge.”

“Yer not exactly tiny either. Besides, mind what our Kivi says. Size ain’t much without skill. Not enough t’ just push it in an’ shake it a little.”

Ori had an idea and asked shyly,

“Would you read this with me?”

“Aye, a’course. Tha’ way we kin make fun a’ th’ pi’tures. Some o’ ‘em are dead sexy an’ others, well, me spine don’ bend tha’ way.”

“Let’s hope no one’s does.”

Ori put the book back on the bed and turned at the sound of talking in the sitting room.

“Ori!” Tilda called and they heard her footsteps coming along the corridor. Ori seized the book. Dwalin, grinning, held up the pillow and Ori shoved it into hiding. He hopped up to peck a kiss on Dwalin’s cheek and went to the door.

“Hello, Tilda what’s-”

“Dori says to get ready. Dinner’s soon,” Tilda announced with authority.

“Thank you, Tilda. We’ll be right there.”

She marched off. Ori shut the door and stifled a giggle.

“Lookin’ after them chicken’s makin’ someone a bit bossy,” Dwalin snickered.

“It’s not the chickens, I think, but following Master Brur while he does business in the mountain.”

“Tha’ll do it.”

They went through. King Bard, Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda were in attendance, as were The Great Woudini, Ruelis and Floris, who had brought Biscuit. Tilda and Biscuit were seated on the floor before the fire with Brandy and the kittens. Biscuit was clearly fascinated by Brandy, who made the most interesting squeaky-growly noises every time Biscuit licked her. Nori-Pori sat on Biscuit’s head.

“Master Woudini,” Ori greeted the man.

“Please call me Jim.”

“Of course, er…Jim.” Ori knew this would be strange as the man would always be The Great Woudini to him.

Ruelis was seated on the couch with Sigrid and Dis, talking quietly. Ori hoped Sigrid was getting some useful information. Dori called them all to table.
The roast beef was perfect and everyone was delighted with it, the last of the season’s ramps, and potatoes roasted in their jackets and fluffy with butter and chives. Ruelis and Jim kept the company roaring with tales of their adventures and misadventures all over Arda.

Ori sat back and wiped his eyes from laughing so much. There was a tug at his elbow sleeve. He leaned down to Tilda.

“I never noticed,” Tilda whispered.

“Noticed what?” Ori asked.

“It’s a special dwarrow thing, isn’t it. Nori’s hair has eyes.”

“No,” said Ori, “Nori’s hair has ferrets.”

She leaned in closer.

“Does he know?”

“Yes, I gave them to him.”

“You gave Nori his hair?” Tilda shrieked. “It’s a wig?”

“No, it’s his hair, I just supplied the ferrets.”

“Ohhhhh,” said Tilda. She called out, “Da!”

“No!” Bard replied.

“You didn’t even hear what I was going to say.”

“No.”

“About Nori’s hair.”

“N–. What about Nori’s hair?”

“It’s got ferrets in it!”

Bain bounced out of his chair, rushed over and stared into Nori’s hair, to Nori’s amusement.

“Fuckin’… Da! Nori’s got ferrets in his hair!”

Bard sighed.

“I think I’ll have another cup of ale.”

After dessert Dori invited their guests to repair to the patio and enjoy the evening again.

Ori gave a nod to Dwalin and grabbed Sigrid by the wrist. They slipped away and Ori hauled her through to his bedroom.

“What is it?” Sigrid asked as he hurried to where he’d hidden Queen Kivi’s book.

“Something from the library.”

“You’ve never found–? Already?”
They perched on the side of the bed and Ori handed the volume to her.

“I can’t read this.”

“Just look.”

Sigrid gasped and blushed beetroot.

“Eru! Is that—? Not even—! More than one person at a time?”

Ori felt himself blushing.

Sigrid got to Illustration 20.

Sigrid looked up at Ori, “Really? That’s even possible?”

“Apparently, if you stretch first.”

“Maybe for dwarf,” said Sigrid. “I don’t think all the stretching in Arda would let me do that. Even if I could, I’d be too busy worrying over snapping in half to enjoy it.”

“Dwarrow aren’t any more flexible than men. We’re made of stone, remember? Either Queen Kivi’s a contortionist—”

“Or she’s having us on,” Sigrid concluded. “It is really interesting, though.”

“There’s a chapter on sex between the races.”

Sigrid’s eyes opened wide.

“Really?” she whispered, even though they were alone in the room.

“I thought you might at least like to look at the diagrams. I can translate the text, too, although I think the two of us will probably explode just from embarrassment.”

“When has that ever stopped us?” Sigrid asked.

“Never,” Ori acknowledged with a grin. Then he sobered. “Sig, if you’re really going to marry Fili, I don’t want you to go into it ignorant and scared.”

“You were?” Sigrid asked, biting her lip in sympathy.

“I was, but I was also very lucky. I have a husband who didn’t force the issue. Not that I think Fili would attack you like a Durin’s Day roast, but if you want to attack each other like Durin’s Day roasts, you should both go in armed with the right cutlery.”

Sigrid laughed.

“Are all dwarrow obsessed with food, or is it just the Durins?”

“I’d say it was built into the blood.”

Sigrid considered.

“You know, Dori was the one who explained to me where babies come from, and afterward about my monthly. I didn’t think it strange at the time that he knew so much about the race of men. When I finally asked him, he said my mother had explained it to him, knowing he would be the one
“to tell me.”

“And not Bard?”

Sigrid snorted.

“Da? I remember when Tilda asked him where babies come from and he turned sixteen shades of pink, sputtered and went round to your house, looking for Dori. Good thing he was home. Da would probably still be wandering the streets, wondering what to say.”

“Did Dori ever get around to explaining sex?” Ori asked.

“Well, yes, when it was obvious I was serious about Fili, but Dori was rather short on technical details and a lot longer on possible consequences.”

Ori groaned and shook his head.

“Dori!”

“What did he tell you?” Sigrid asked.

“He was rather short on technical details and long on consequences.”

“I always thought that was strange, and now that I’ve seen him dancing naked in front of the entire kingdom, I think it’s even stranger.”

Ori shook his head.

“Nudity isn’t much to dwarrow. The fact that his hair was loose and unbraided was more erotic than anything else.”

“Aha,” said Sigrid. “That explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“I was talking to Fili in the kitchen and I’d been running here and there and everywhere to get it ready because I was late. I like to have dinner on the table when Da comes in, or my larder will look like it tried to withstand a protracted siege. My hair was in my eyes, so I took it down right there at the stove, re-braided it and put it back up. Fili’s mouth fell open like an oven door. I suppose it was as if I waved my breasts at him.”

“Just about,” said Ori.

“I think I need you to translate this book for me, Ori. If Fili asks how I know all this should I disavow your part in it?”

“Fili won’t care.”

“Dori would have kittens,” she said.

“He already does. Besides, he has to get over the idea of me being a corruptible dwarfling. I’d like it to be before my fiftieth wedding anniversary.”

“If you don’t mind, I think I won’t tell Da.”

“Please! He can go on thinking I’m a corruptible dwarfling. I don’t want to be skinned alive.”
The next morning Ori woke early to find Dwalin had already gone. When he emerged from the bedroom, he found only Balin and Thorin at the breakfast table, Balin was his usual calm self, Thorin, on the other hand, was grim and on edge.

“Must this be decided right now?”

“Th’ time’s come, laddie. Coronation’s upon us. Yeh can’t go bare-headed, and the crown you wear now—”

“Is an everyday coronet, I know. I know that. Please, Balin, go down to the treasury. There are dozens of crowns in there. Just pick whatever looks right to you.”

“As you wish, sire,” said Balin with a smile.

“Oh, Mahal’s hairy balls. Don’t call me that! It makes me sound like I associate with barn animals.”

Balin’s eyes sparkled as he patted Ori’s shoulder in passing.

“Thorin?” Ori asked warily.

The king’s smile was weary but genuine.

“Ori. How are you?”

“Well, thank you,” Ori said. “I wouldn’t want to go down there either.”

“I can’t,” said Thorin. “Not yet.”

Ori nodded.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” he offered.

“As you wish, sire,” said Balin with a smile. “Would you like me to find you the medicinal brandy?”

Ori giggled. Finally he said, “Let me pour you another cup of tea. I wonder where Dori keeps the medicinal brandy?”

“Ah, yes. Buj took me aside last night and very gravely asked me if I might petition you to ask Roäc if the, and I quote, ‘mighty and mysterious king of all ravens’ would allow Buj to study his wings.”

Thorin raised his eyebrows and looked a little flummoxed for a moment then shrugged.

“Actually,” said Thorin with a grin, “give me an update on Buj’s experiments.”

Ori giggled. Finally he said, “Let me pour you another cup of tea. I wonder where Dori keeps the medicinal brandy?”

“Ah, yes. Buj took me aside last night and very gravely asked me if I might petition you to ask Roäc if the, and I quote, ‘mighty and mysterious king of all ravens’ would allow Buj to study his wings.”

Thorin raised his eyebrows and looked a little flummoxed for a moment then shrugged.

“We could, or we could just ask his mighty and mysteriousness if he’d mind.”

Ori giggled in spite of himself and drained his cup. He reached for the pot. It was rather light.
“More?” he asked.

Thorin shrugged and finished his cup.

“If you’re going to make more, Ori. I’ll not say no.”

Ori had just come back in from re-filling the teapot when Balin returned and wordlessly handed Thorin a bundle of cloth.

Thorin slowly unwrapped it. He peered down at the crown, then up at Balin, who looked slightly apologetic.


“Only the one,” Balin stressed.

“Roäc picked this out, didn’t he?”

“He may have nudged me toward it,” Balin confessed.

Ori thought he heard rough chuckling in the distance, though he couldn’t tell from where.

“Is it really that bad, Thorin?” he asked.

Thorin handed it to him.

“Take a look.”

Ori looked.

It was so simple compared to Thror’s crown, just a mithril circle of ravens in flight, cast in profile. When he turned the crown, Ori saw that each raven’s visible eye held a different shiny stone: lapis, ruby, tigereye, snowflake obsidian and fire opal.

Ori hoped it fit. It wouldn’t do for the king to wear something like a thimble on his head.

Balin said, “Bes’ try it f’r size. Gridr still has time t’ make adjustments tha’ way.” Reluctantly Thorin took the crown as Ori handed it back to him and put it on.

“Those little bastards,” he muttered.

It fit perfectly.

“It’ll do,” said Balin, looking far happier than Thorin, “even with th’ new braids.” Thorin took it off and handed it to Balin, who smiled impishly.

“I’ll just polish it up for yeh, lad.” Thorin threw him a dirty look and sighed.

“I don’t suppose we know who wore this first?” Thorin asked.

Ori said, “I can look into it at work. I’ll make time on my lunch hour. If it was made for a royal, the official image and any concept sketches will be in the library archive.”

When Ori did find the crown’s history in the archive, he instantly regretted that offer.

Dinnertime arrived. Ori wished Dwalin were here, but he and Nori were absent, on missions known to only themselves and possibly the king.

Lady Klakuna had joined them as, she reported, Jim and his troupe had taken an early dinner and were rehearsing their various entertainments for the coronation party. Ori got the impression that Granny Klak was rather indignant she hadn’t been allowed to stay and watch.

Dori and Binni produced roasted lamb with apples and turnips mashed together, new carrots, and a large platter of mushrooms fried in bacon.

Ori attempted to keep a low profile while the company laughed and talked.

By the time they got to the pound cake, raspberries and whipped cream with tea to drink, Ori thought he was safe. He should have known better.
Thorin glanced up from his cup.
“Did you have a moment to look into the crown, Ori?”

Ori forced himself not to wince.
“Yes, Thorin, I did. It’s quite old.” In a small voice he added, “It was originally made for Kivi, wife of Durin III.”

Everyone stopped eating and stared at him, then at Thorin.
Ori forced himself to hold Thorin’s gaze.
Thorin put down his cup, expression terribly blank.
“Ori, are you saying those overfed, yapping chickens picked out a crown fit for a queen?”
“Um, yes? Apparently she had quite a large head for a dam.”

He said the words in an apologetic rush. Only when they’d left his mouth, did he realize the implications.
“Oh! I don’t mean to say you have a large head!”

Then he realized that wasn’t much better and had just determined to drown himself in the gravy boat when Thorin’s eyebrows and the corners of his mouth rose in unison and he laughed, obviously delighted. The tension was broken, though amid the laughter and general comments about Thorin’s fat head, Ori tried again lamely.
“There’s always time to pick out another.”
Thorin shook his head.
“No, no. This is perfect. If I’m going to turn everything upside down I might as well start as I mean to go on.”

Ori giggled, finally. Thorin actually got up from his seat to lean in and bump foreheads with him.
“Thank you,” said Thorin with dignity. “You have rendered a great service to the ‘head’ of the House of Durin.”

“Wait a moment!” Kili shouted. “Queen Kivi? Queen Kivi with the racy book?”

Dis whirled on him.
“How do you know about Queen Kivi’s book?”

Fili rolled his eyes.

“Nice going, cram brain.”

Kili sputtered. “Idiot Thorin gave it to me.”

Dis stared her brother down.
“You did what? Thorin! Why would you… I thought you said you were going to give them ‘the talk’.”

“No, you said I should give them ‘the talk’, but Dis, what was I supposed to talk about? They’re interested in dams, a subject about which I know precisely nothing. At their age, I was rolling around behind the ore bins with Dwalin.”

“Thorin!” Dis cried, gesturing with her chin toward Ori.

Dori cried out in wordless outrage but was, alas, sitting too far from Ori to clap his hands over Ori’s delicate ears.

Thorin’s mouth snapped shut abruptly, then opened again in a groan of embarrassment.

Fili turned to Kili.
“You’ve been upstaged.”

“I don’t mind,” said Kili. “This is really interesting.”

“Oh, Ori, I’m sorry,” said Thorin. “That’s not how you should have heard about that.”

Ori shrugged then giggled.

“He told me, and before that, I’d guessed. I’m a scholar, remember? I know what ‘shield brothers’ means.”

“Still, I apologize for announcing it so abruptly.”

Balin shook his head.

“Does anyone else have any secrets they’d like to spill tonight?”

Bofur wiped his mustache.

“Nori an’ I got married this mornin’.”

Dori and Jani jumped to their feet and cried nearly in unison, “You did what?”

“Got married,” said Bofur cheerfully. “Seemed to be the thing to do now that he’s semi-respectable.”

A voice from the ceiling said, “Ha! I told y’ that you couldn’t keep it a secret for even a day.”

“Hush, you,” said Bofur, taking off his hat.

Indeed, he sported a marriage braid and a rather fine gold bead of antique style.

Jani seized the braid with a delighted shriek, nearly yanking Bofur out of his chair.

“Oi, our Jani! That’s attached, that is!”

Thorin, apparently happy to cede the center of attention, went back to his chair and raised his cup first to Bofur, then toward the ceiling.

“Congratulations! The bead looks perfect, Nori.”

Dori sputtered, “B-but you didn’t even ask me for permission. Does no one here have the manners to ask anymore?”

Ori leapt up and conked foreheads with Bofur.

“Welcome, brother!”

“Thank y’ kindly, brother!”

Ori shouted to the ceiling.

“Congratulations, Nori!”

“Thanks, Chick!”

“I didn’t even get to make a cake!” Dori wailed.
“Now, me beloved, yeh kin always make a cake,” said Balin, patting his arm.

“Nori, get down here right now!” Dori demanded.

A cupboard up along the wall above the counter swung open and Nori slid out onto the floor without disturbing a single dish.


“I’ll ‘polite’ you, you little shit!” Dori growled.

He seized Nori and hugged him.

“Congratulations,” Dori said. “My wedding present to you is that I won’t thrash you to within an inch of your disrespectful life.”

“Awww, love you, too, Dor.”

Dori released him and turned to Bofur.

“Well, stand up and take what’s coming to you, brother thief!”

Bofur did so, looking brave and resigned.

Dori hugged him, too.

“You’re very welcome, my dear. You’re better than he deserves.”

“Oi!” Nori cried.

“And certainly better than we ever thought he’d get, which was the chopping block.”

“True,” Nori conceded.

Fili muttered, “Idad’s company is getting more incestuous by the moment.”

Jani hugged Nori, then turned and grinned at Bofur.

“Bom an’ Erda’re gonna slaughter you! They didn’t get t’ make a cake either!”

Dori stood stock still, frowning then whirled on Lady Klakuna.

“You knew about this! You were there, weren’t you!”

“Hmmm? What is that dear? Oh, possibly. You know, when you’re as old as I am, a lot of things just slip your mind.”

“I’ll slip your mind,” Dori muttered, then refilled her teacup.

“Thank you, darling,” she cooed. “And don’t hiss, dearest, you’ll uncurl your beard braids.”

Dori stared down at her, his bosom swelled then he deflated, smiled and said quite docilely, “Yes, Grandmamma.”

“Granny’s precious badger,” Ori whispered.
Dori reached over and slapped his knee.

Later Ori approached Thorin by the fireplace.

“Those beads didn’t come from the treasury,” said Ori.

Thorin gave a rueful grin.

“They came out of my bead box. They belonged to Thror’s mother.”

Ori sucked in a breath.

“Thorin! Does Nori know that?”

“Yes. He was there when I took them out. I’m fairly sure Bofur won’t hock his, and you know they aren’t really worth anything if they don’t go as a set.”

Ori laughed and Thorin’s grin became genuine.

Ori said, “Dori’s never going to forgive you for knowing about Nori getting married before he did.”

“Nori felt he had to tell me first, because he thought it might affect the way the company operates.”

“Will it?”

“Right now, only for the good I think. Every union binds the company closer, but down the road that means every break will be that much more damaging.”

“Are you worried?”

“Depends when you ask. I never thought I would have a large family. For good or ill, the company has become the family, it has become the House of Durin, and I’m far more sentimental about it than I’m sure Nori will ever be.”

“You’d be surprised.”

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*Note, the stones on Thorin’s new crown and a few of their meanings and uses:*

Lapis lazuli - truth, wisdom, awareness
Ruby - vitality and royalty
Tiger eye - Relieves doubt
Snowflake obsidian - Focus amid chaos, dispersal of negative emotions, including greed.
Fire opal - Optimism, confidence, joy of the heart, can stimulate sex organs
Yes, the ravens are being little shits.
Letters, Liaisons, and Loudness

Chapter by Stevie Foxx

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. And now we are in full swing preparing for Thorin’s coronation. Ori’s so busy he doesn’t know what could possible happen next. Rest assured, plenty will! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The next day Ori had been excused from the library to work with Thorin. At first, it was rather enjoyable. Thorin and Balin waded through the usual work, much of which had been already dealt with by Gloin, Binni and Brur. Most just required Thorin to sign and send off. Birds of all kinds, and all sizes of bats, perched or hung from the wooden racks in Thorin’s and Balin’s office.

There were piles of letters of congratulations, a few sparsely sprinkled with condolences. Every dwarf king had replied and expressed excitement at coming to Erebor but mostly at the chance of seeing Thorin. Ori could tell Thorin was deeply touched. Thorin told Balin to set these aside as he would answer them personally.

Many nobles and many, many other folk had written, too. There were cards from people of all races and ages. Thorin laughed delightedly at a very brightly colored card from a place called Bagshot Row. The picture he showed to Balin and Ori was, at best, a stick figure drawing with a large yellow blob on its head and with huge dark brown scribbles all over.

“Mahal,” Thorin observed. “Being crowned seems to have set my beard on a complete rampage. Who knew it was so excitable?”

Inside were some squiggles

“Ah,” Thorin went on, “here’s a translation on the inside left, provided, no doubt, by the kind parents. Dear High King. Happy Coronation Day. I hope you get lots of presents. I get presents?” Thorin grinned teasingly at Ori and Balin. “How nice. I didn’t know that. Lots of love from Master Samwise Gamgee. Why don’t I get lots of love from my loyal dwarf kings? Ori, will you kindly reply to Master Gamgee? Use the invitation paper, please. If you might, do fashion it as a card and draw him a picture, too. I’m sure he’d like that.”

“A picture of you?” Ori snickered.

“I leave it to your discretion.”

Ori caught up a sheet of the stiff, cream paper trimmed with gold, halved it and ran the wooden folding wand down the edge, making the fold clean and straight. Picking up his pen and taking up a bottle of Durin blue ink, he composed a gentle thank you note inside the card. While waiting for the ink to dry, he pondered for a few minutes. He smiled to himself and took up the black ink. He quickly drew a picture of Thorin, wearing his new crown, with Roäc on his shoulder reading the card. Ori looked at the badger’s card again and drew in enough detail that it was clear the king and
his raven were admiring Master Gamgee’s card. In the top right hand corner, he stamped the royal crest. He carefully sanded the picture. He passed it back to Thorin.

“Will this do?”

Thorin took it and Balin lean over his shoulder to look.


Thorin smiled at Ori.

“I like it.”

“I’m in it?” Roäc croaked. He hopped over. Thorin passed both the card and the reply across the desk to the raven. Roäc cackled over the badger’s drawing. He cocked an eye at Ori’s drawing.

“Nice. You can draw any raven you like and me, too!”

Thorin chuckled, “Better ask him while he’s in a good mood, Ori,” as he signed the card with a flourish and stamped it with his signet ring.

Ori stared, then,

“Oh yes! Roäc?”

The raven turned to him.

“My friend Buj is attempting to build an apparatus which will allow him to fly. He said he would very much like it if you would grant him some time to study you.”

Roäc dipped his head slightly and Ori thought that if the raven had been wearing spectacles he would be peering at Ori over them.

“You know, to look at your wings and their shape….I suppose, “ Ori added by way of an explanation.

Roäc cackled.

“Yes, tell that egg I am quite at leisure.”

Ori reflected that yes, this had all been very pleasant, but now it wasn’t. Everything was dealt with. Everything except for Frerin’s letter. Thorin had been in a very good mood. Except now he was livid.

“The idiot!”

“The question, laddie,” said Balin in his calm voice, “is what do yeh think best t’ do. Ignore him or send another letter tellin’ him t’ get his arse here.”

Thorin growled and paced, the birds and bats wriggling a little as his agitation filled the room. Ori realized that this office provided Thorin with a place to vent his anger. Unlike when they had first read the letter at the entrance to Erebor after the inn. It was good that he could do it here and in private. Ori reminded himself that Thorin was angry with Frerin not him, although his gut reaction was to quake in his boots. Thorin came back to the desk and snatched up a plain piece of paper. Ori
pushed the quill and the ink to him quickly. Thorin wrote hard against the paper. Ori craned to read.

_You have four days._

_Get here._

Thorin swiped his signet ring against a candle and slammed the wax seal beside his signature. He folded the note roughly and barked,

“Roäc.”

The raven looked up at him.

“He won’t do anything except be glad he’s made you mad,” Roäc offered.

“I don’t care. Take this to him.”

“He’ll just ignore it.”

“Roäc!”

“Thorin, all you’re doing is feeding his pride and -”

“Roäc. Take this note and deliver it.”

The raven hopped over, inspected the plain folded paper in Thorin’s hand, then cocked his head at Thorin.

“Deliver it. That’s all?”

“Yes, Roäc, just deliver it.”

“Fine.”

Roäc snatched the note from Thorin and skimmed out of the window, heading east. The raven capitulated too suddenly for Ori’s liking. Ori felt the skin crawl on the back of his neck.

Thorin growled.

“There, it’s done. He’ll get his giggle but it won’t last when he finds out what’s been arranged.”

“All for the best, laddie.” Balin agreed.

Ori stared out of the window where Roäc had flown. He knew something was in the air other than Roäc himself but it wasn’t a bad something. More of a small twist that would alter the fabric of their lives slightly but not in a bad way. His gut assured him it was not in a bad way.

“Ori.”

Ori turned back. Both Thorin and Balin were regarding him solemnly.

“What?” he asked.
“Laddie,” Balin began but Thorin interrupted,

“What is Mahal telling you, Ori?”

Ori blushed.

“I don’t know if it’s Mahal but I… This will be fine, but there’s going to be a -” Ori floundered for a way to express himself. “I don’t know - a surprise, but a good surprise…”

Thorin raised an eyebrow, then came and clapped Ori on the shoulder. “I like good surprises. Maybe Frerin’ll send me a present.”

Both Balin and Ori chuckled over that.

“Better open it outside then, laddie,” Balin advised, tidying the desk. “It’ll no doubt stink a’ fish.”

He picked up a royal note.

“Ah,” said Balin, “Chat’s replied.”

“Who’s Chat?” Ori asked.

Thorin huffed out a laugh.

“King Snur of the Broadbeams, the King of Ered Luin. He’s been called ‘Chatty’ since we were pebbles.”

“Because he talks or because he doesn’t?” Ori asked.

Balin said, “More the way he talks than anything else.”

“What does he have to say?” Thorin asked.

Balin read, “Have the beer ready. Chat.”

“Doesn’t mince words, does he,” Ori observed.

Thorin chuckled, “Imagine Bofur, drunk, ruling a kingdom.”

“Oh, dear,” said Ori. “Is he a good king?”

“He’s an excellent king,” said Thorin, filing through the rest of the correspondence he wanted to reply to himself, obviously with more alacrity than he had with Frerin. “When the mines of Eren Luin played out, he reinvented his kingdom as a deep water port. A lot of the food we had at the inn that came from the far northwest? That came through Ered Luin.”

At that, Dori stepped into the room, arrayed in pale lilac and moonstones and her hair loosely dressed without braids.

“Beloved,” Balin greeted his One, eyes shining with pride.

Dori looked coquettishly at him, then turned to Thorin.

“Dearest Thorin, it is long past the noon hour. I insist you come and have a luncheon. You keep working like this, you shall fall into the sulks before tea.”
Thorin regarded Dori with a sapient eye.

“Indeed. And, speaking of tea, will there be guests?”

Dori widened her gaze innocently.

“Your majesty, one never knows!”

“Quite.” Thorin finished. “Thank you, Dori, we shall be through directly.”

Dori fussed at them as they seated themselves in the breakfast parlor. There was ale, bread, cheeses and cold meats and Dori insisted they fill their plates. Dwalin and Nori came in and Dori order them to eat.

Dwalin seated himself by Ori and kissed him.

“Business get done, love?”

“Yes, Roäc took a letter to Frerin telling him to get his arse here.”

“Good. With any luck he won’t come an’ our Buj kin stand f’r ’im.”

Thorin snorted.

“He’ll never make it in four days. But if he defies me again, no one will question my actions in cutting him off without allies. My real concern is for the people who went there originally.”

“If they ‘ave good sense they’ll drop trou’ an’ come ‘ere,” Nori put in with his mouth full. “That’ll leave ‘im wif nought.”

“Exactly,” Thorin agreed. “When Roäc returns, I’ll have him put out the word that any loyal subject there are welcome in Erebor where they may pledge their loyalty to me.”

Dori smiled as she brought through a huge platter piled high with xocolātl chip biscuits.

“And with things going so well here, there will be plenty of housing and work. I imagine many will come anyway. How nice.”

Balin chuckled and kissed Dori’s hand as Dori seated herself.

“Aye, beloved, they will come as soon as they hear the legends of your tea parties.”

Dori laughed.

“Well, Hmmm, I wonder…”

Ori knew that look. Dori was going to suggest something outrageous yet completely sensible.

“Perhaps, King Thorin,” Dori said sweetly. “Since mid-summer is a month after your coronation, we should help the people of Dale celebrate their old festival. It really hasn’t been properly done since the last master ruled Dale.”

Balin considered.

“We never had much to do with the festivals there. Thror didn’t like to ‘mix’ as he said. Tell me,
beloved, is there a way to find out if we would be welcome and how they would like us to participate?”

Dori giggled charmingly and patted Balin’s hand.

“Leave it all to me, my heart.”

“Speaking of festivities,” Thorin said looking amused at Dori. “Do we know what is the plan for my coronation?”

“Oh,” Dori brushed this aside. “Of course, of course. Binni and I have it all settled. Dearest grandmamma is in conference with the Great Woudini as to what they would like to show us.”

“I’m all aflutter with excitement.” Thorin said gravely though his eyes twinkled.

“Hmph.” Dori replied and sipped her tea.

There was a thundering racket coming from the sitting room. They all heard the hidden door in the wall crash open and the sound of a gigantic mass erupt into the room. A loud oink sounded.

“Halt, Chopper!” bellowed a deep voice, pitched to the battlefield.

"Hullooooo! We're arrived at LAST!” the female version caroled after.

“Brother! Sister!” Dori shrieked in delight and rushed from the room.

“And so it begins,” Thorin said, rising with the others.

Ori came into the sitting room to find Dori embracing and being heartily embraced by Dain and Sculdís.

“Cousin Dain,” Balin called coming forward. “Delighted t’ see yeh again, lad.”

Dain released Dori to swoop over and thump his brow to Balin’s. He and Thorin cuffed each other and then Dain grabbed Ori in a bear hug with a shout.

“Here’s me wee scribe brother!”

“Welcome back, brother!” Ori said hugging back. He was delighted to have this new but huge brother back in their home. Dain held him at arms’ length and looked him over.

“Yer lookin’ well, pet. I see our dumplin’s fatten’ yeh up.”

Ori laughed, “That was our week at the Inn on the Lake. I would swear we did nothing but eat and lounge around.”

“Excellent. Gotta get all tha’ mournin’ out o’ yeh!” Dain chuckled with a sly wink and a finger laid alongside his nose. With a grin he pushed Ori to his right and converged on Nori. Ori turned and hugged Sculdís.

“There now, pet,” she cooed, patting his hair. “Don’t yeh look lovely. I do like th’ way yer doin’ yer hair now. So grown up!”

“Thank you. Is Stonehelm with you?”

“Aye, pet. He’s off stablin’ th’ ponies.”
Ori raised his eyebrows at her

"Why, sister? You’re not all riding pigs this time?"

Sculdis laughed and gave his bottom a spank. Dori fussed them all to their rooms upstairs and waved at Ori to go and see to things in the kitchen. Ori went and found Mistress Dazla was setting up the tea tray. She smiled at Ori

"Don’t worry, Master Ori. Our guests’ meal is all ready. We’ve got a good soup on to go with a lunch like we gave you earlier. And Lady Dori made a lemon fluff this morning."

The idea of Dain consuming lemon fluff made Ori snicker.

"Thank you, Mistress Dazla. Shall I clear the table?"

"Already done, Master Ori."

"Set the table?"

Mistress Dazla smiled and shook her head. "Now, Master Ori you either go and enjoy your family or get back to your work."

"You’re amazing, Mistress Dalza."

"Off you go, now."

Ori went upstairs and followed the sound of Dain’s voice telling Dori how pretty she looked today. Ori stood in the open door of the large bedroom Dain and Sculdis had occupied last time. Miss Oqizla, Mistress Dazla’s youngest daughter, was waiting on the Ironhills monarchs and she was busily helping Sculdis and Binni unpack. One of the two wardrobes was already full. Dain had his arm around Dori at the window and Dori was telling him all about their stay at the Inn on the Lake.

"Mistress Dazla says lunch is ready," he announced.

"Capital!" Dain foghorned. “Always be on time for a meal, I say. Me precious gem, are yeh hungry?"

“Aye, hungry enough t’ eat the whole larder."

“I’ll finish here, marm,” murmured Miss Oqizla.

“Aye, thanks so much, m’dear,” Sculdis replied and patted the lass’s cheek.

Dain came over to escort his queen and Ori saw a flash of gold as Dain tipped the servant with a smile.

Once more in the breakfast parlor, Dain and Sculdis tucked into lunch. Stonehelm came in,

“Ponies are set, Adad."

“An’ yeh cleaned yersel’ up, too,” Sculdis noticed. “Good lad, come eat.”
Thorin came in, ruffled Stonehelm’s hair and sat down.

“We’ve heard from every monarch in Arda. All are coming.”

Dain turned frowning,

“What’s this shite abou’ Frerin cryin’ off?”

“We have someone to stand for him, no matter.” Thorin looked very pleased and helped himself to bread and cheese.

“So help me, cous, I’m taking myself t’ Beleghost and choppin’ his fool head off,” Dain growled.

“An’ brin’ it back on a pike,” Sculdís added.

Thorin shrugged, “Why bother? He’s getting his comeuppance.”

“Aye, who yeh got t’ stand?” Dain asked, very interested.

“Buj.”

“Buj?”

“Buj.”

“That daft scribe always wears nothin’ but black?” Sculdís’ eyebrows had mixed with her hairline.

“That’s the one,” Thorin assured her.

“Fuckin’ eh!” Dain opined.

“He’s loyal?” Sculdís asked.

“Oh yes,” Dori told her. “As soon as he was informed he was to stand, he positively threw himself at Thorin’s feet and said the entire oath in under half a minute!”

“Indeed,” Thorin went on. “His betrothed, Dipfa, has also sworn loyalty and I have promised to conduct their marriage ceremony.”

Dain seemed to ponder, tapping his teaspoon against the table.

“He’s th’ youngest of that family who abandoned him f’r Beleghost, isn’ he?”

“Yes,” Ori said bitterly.

Dain smiled.

“Aye, he’ll do nicely.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent with Ori and Balin finishing the correspondence with Thorin. Dain sat in the office with them and regaled them with the latest gossip from around Arda.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Ori is having stuff happen he never dreamed of. Who knew there were such interesting people in Arda? Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The next day, around noon, Ori went to the building in Dale where Bard had set up his office, the one that had once been the detached kitchen of a mansion. A busy squad of dwarrow stone masons was building what looked like a stout enclosure in the ruined walled garden off the side, as well as shoring up the walls themselves and putting in a gate.

Bard sat on a crate, looking perplexed and harried, while a stout dam with a great pouf of strawberry blonde hair on the top of her head and another at her chin loomed over him and pointed out this and that on a large, unfurled scroll.

"Bard!" Ori called.

They looked up at Ori, the dam said something quietly to the king and bowed before marching off toward a knot of workers chipping away at a massive chunk of stone. Ori presumed they were making adjustments to fit it snug into the rest of the wall.

"What's happened?" Ori asked.

Bard ran his rough hands through his rough hair, leaving it sticking up all in points.

"You remember where Calmar's house was?"

"How could I forget?"

Bard winced.

"Sorry. Anyway, it's a vacant lot now. We were scavenging useful materials through the ruins yesterday. We kept finding all these stone statues Calmar had - of himself. We thought they'd come in handy for filling in the cellar hole, and they did, once we emptied them."

"They were hollow?"

"Yes, as we discovered when we went to lift one and the head snapped off and a fortune in gold coins and gems spilled out of the neck. Between that and what we caught him with when he was trying to flee, we have the makings of a tidy treasury. Or we will have, once they finish building the treasury."

He gestured behind him at the workers.

"Is the treasure safe?" Ori asked.
"It's in Gloin's vault in Erebor."

"That's all right then," said Ori. "I thought you were going to tell me it was stuffed in the mattress in your house."

"That would make the bed even lumpier than usual," said Bard. "Not that we're going to be living there much longer."

For just a moment Ori got a sinking feeling that Bard's family had been evicted from their home, then he remembered there wasn't anyone left to evict them.

"Where will you go?" Ori asked.

"You're standing in it, or at least near it, or you will be. I have to meet with a completely different dwarf from a completely different guild to discuss it before lunch. Why don't you go on in? Sigrid's there, and if she doesn't tell you what happened last night I'm pretty sure she'll pop."

Ori went around the building.

Two guards armed with halberds stood, one at each side of the door, to the right a grizzled old dwarf, to the left a very young man who didn't look terribly fierce, or all that comfortable holding a 'pointy stick'. Ori thought this pale, scared-looking youth couldn't be any older than Bain.

The youth peered at Ori as if Ori might bite and slid his gaze over to the dwarf, who gave a tiny nod of encouragement.

"Er… Greetings, Master Dwarf," said the youth. "What is the… er… nature of your business with King Bard?"

Sigrid came to the door - which was propped open - and said, "It's fine, Ivo, it's just Ori from Steam Alley, remember?"

"Oh, aye," said Ivo, relaxing visibly. "I seen ye some once 'r twice."

After a moment's hesitation, the dwarf guard bowed and Ivo awkwardly followed suit.

"Thank you," said Ori, hoping to be encouraging, though he really wanted to giggle. "Very kind of you."

As they passed into the house Ori heard the dwarf tease Ivo, "Well, wha'd'yeh know? Yer still alive!"

Ori had the strangest sense of having done this before, when Sigrid grabbed his wrist and dragged him into the room.

"Sigrid! Wha-"

"Wait until I tell you!"

"Bain's eloped with Furh'nk?" he asked, looping his satchel on the back of one of the mismatched chairs around the table.

"What? No!" said Sigrid, busily stirring a pot of something mouthwatering at the stove. A batch of chips fried in a kettle full of oil nearby. "He's definitely not Bain's type."

"Bain has a 'type'?"
"I'm just kidding! Wait until I tell you! We were having dinner last night and guess who happened to dropped by? King Thranduil!"

"Thranduil! Dropped by your house! But he just went back to Mirkwood."

"Didn't waste any time, did he. Not only that, but judging from Da’s’s blush, he wasn't unwelcome! Wonder what those two will get up to?" she giggled.

"Discussing the latest fashions," Ori mused. "Do you think Thranduil’s really trying to court your father?"

"Court might be too strong a word, but Thranduil certainly didn't come to the arse-end of Dale at night to see me. Not that the usual lowlifes would survive a meeting with him. I know Dori was teasing Thranduil about lusting after Da, but what if they should become serious? I can’t see King Thranduil as stepmother material."

"He does have the wardrobe for it," said Ori, then, "Do you think he will make you do housework from dawn to dusk? I know he has three sons. Legolas is perfectly nice, but where are the other four spoiled children?"

They looked at each other and burst into giggles.

"So, Bard said you're going to live here?" he asked.

"Not in this room, but not too far from it, either. Wait until you see the plans."

"I thought you'd just move into one of Calmar's cronies houses?"

"Half of them were in such bad repair we'll have to pull them down. Fili, Kili and I talked about it with the builders and we decided it was best to just use those houses for scrap, to repair some of the homes in town that are still in salvageable shape. It's good all those houses came open under the mountain. I think the whole of Coil Road and Spring Close is moving there next week."

"What about the other emptied buildings in Dale?"

Sigrid sighed.

"A lot of them were booby trapped. Not surprising, really. They were owned by criminals."

Bard entered with a dwarf who might as well have been Pika in another fifty years. Ori didn't recognize him, but he did know the braid of a master builder. After the miners' guild, it was the largest, with trade guilds like plumbing, heating and stone masonry under it. This dwarf wore his iron grey hair and beard braided in circles together, around his face, over his head and back down under his chin. Except for his short, well-beaded braid, not a stray hair escaped.

"Teilnar, son of Tahlnar, at your service, Lord Ori," said the dwarf, bowing.

Ori bowed in return.

"Ori of Fundin, at yours and your family's, Master Teilnar. You can just call me Ori."

"Then you should just call me Teilnar," said the dwarf. "I hear great things about you and your work."

Ori was saved from having to sputter when Teilnar turned to the table, stood up on a short step Bard supplied, and unrolled another blueprint nearly the length of the table. Ori saw from the way it
was laid out, it was the plan of a square, roomy building with this kitchen at the center, sitting in a
fainter outline of the building and grounds as they once stood.

"This kitchen's the bloody sturdiest building in Dale," Teilnar said without preamble. "It was
dwarf-built, of course. The house around it had a dwarf foundation, but a wooden frame. You'll
note, the house isn't here anymore. It went in the quake with Isildur's ring. I'm thinking the original
foundation's still here if you want it."

"I'm more concerned with just a sturdy house that's warm in the winter and where I can fit more
than four people at a time without falling through the floor."

"A very modest request, your majesty."

"It's more than I have now," said Bard. "I've been living in a house the size of this room since I
was first married."

"What? With three active pebbles? Mahal keep you. I think we can do better than that! I've had
dowsers out looking for the old pipes, which are still intact and run right under this kitchen."

A thick finger traced a silver line from beyond the garden wall, under the kitchen and out even
further than where the old house once stood.

"What were the pipes for?" Bard asked.

Teilnar blinked at him.

"Running water, your majesty."

"Running water…"

"Aye, there used to be baths, fountains, all kinds of things."

Bard glanced at Ori, looking momentarily lost.

"Running water. That's…"

"It'll take a few weeks at least to map it all out, get down into the tunnels, inspect the pipes and so
on. No promises, but you could have most of the district up in about a month."

"Not just this kitchen, that's what you mean?" Bard said, as if he were trying to work it all out.
"There will be running water in town?"

"Aye, hot an’ cold. Say the word, it's done."

"Yes, please," Bard rasped.

"I'll work out a plan and an estimate, then."

He briskly rolled up his document, bowed smartly to Bard, and then to Sigrid and said,
"Afternoon, Ori." on his way out the door.

"What just happened?" Bard asked.

"I ask myself that every day," said Ori.

"I need to get a message to Gloin," said Bard. "I'm not negotiating a municipal water system by
"Has Gloin been helping you while we've been away?" Ori asked.

"Yes, thank Mahal."

Abruptly, Bard seemed to realized what he said and added, quickly, "And Eru! Thank Eru, too! Oh, fuck it. I can thank Mahal if I want. I swear he sent Gloin just to save my arse. Gloin was here pretty much the week you were gone. He gave me a crash course in the finances of an entire city and he taught Tilda how to hamstring someone with her bootknife."

"Aw. He missed Gimli," said Ori.

"Hope you've worked up an appetite," said Sigrid, approaching with a tray. "Chips, cheese and chicken gravy!" said Ori, nearly swooning.

"This is a business lunch," said Bard with a grin.

Sigrid placed three full bowls on the table beside the pitcher of beer.

The hot chips and gravy were already melting the thick chunks of curds.

"Where are Bain and Tilda?" Ori asked.

"Bain's down at the boat, doing some repair work," said Bard, pouring out a cup of beer for Ori. "He has a pasty so he's not going hungry, but he'll be coming home ravenous. Tilda is taking lunch with Master Brur."

"He really likes her," said Ori. "What will she do when school starts?"

"He and I talked about that," said Bard. "Thanks to you, she already knows how to read and write in westron far better than her peers. She'll spend the morning in the East Dale school, learning to figure sums and whatever, and the afternoons at the library – learning to read and write khuzdul. The other badgers will learn it, too, but Brur thinks she really does have the makings of a scribe."

"Mahal!" said Ori. "That's amazing."

Indeed, it was. He could only have dreamed of such opportunity at that age.

Not that his life wasn't flooded with more opportunity than he could handle at the moment.

As they ate, the sound of playing badgers grew louder. Since the badgers could no longer use the ruined garden, they were playing on the other side of the house in yet another vacant lot.

A cry went up. A pigskin ball bounded through the open window and bounced down the middle of the table. Bard caught it in one hand without looking and tossed it back out.

Ori heard cheering and a young voice say, “Thank yeh, Mister Bard.” Then quarreling, and the same voice said, “Thank yeh, Mister King.” This was followed shortly by, “Yer such a spud.” Then, “I know yeh are, but what am I?” And, finally, “Thank yeh, King Bard!”

“You're welcome all three times,” Bard called back.

When they finished eating, Sigrid went out, promising to return shortly.
"A little early to pick up Tilda?" said Ori.

"She's gone to speak to a Mistress Annis in Steam Alley," said Bard, while he rinsed the dishes. "Dori said she might know a trustworthy soul who'd wouldn't mind keeping the house for us. Sigrid is going to be a little too busy helping me run all of Dale to keep my shirts washed."

When they had done with the dishes, they sat at the table sipping beer.

"So, are you ready?" Ori asked.

"As I'll ever be," said Bard.

"You know there are seven dwarf clans. At the moment there are six under-monarchs, plus Thorin, the high king. Thorin and Dain are both Durin kings, but Dain is also nominally head of the Firebeards, or at least half of them."

"And Frerin is also a Durin king, but he's an asshat, yes," said Bard.

"Then there's King Snur, he's the king of Broadbeams, but also rules over the remaining Firebeards."

"The Firebeards don't get their own king?"

"There really aren't enough of them to warrant an entire kingdom anymore. They were wiped out."

"Was it a war?"

"They were, er, bad."

"The Firebeards were bad."

"They sacked the elven city of Doriath in the last age."

"That qualifies as bad," Bard agreed.

"So the other dwarf clans slaughtered the ones most responsible, including their king. I wouldn't mention the Firebeards in front of Thranduil. He was an elfling in Doriath at the time."

Bard whistled. "Thank you for telling me that."

"Anyway, Snur is also called King Chatty."

"Tilda used to have a doll named 'Chatty'."

"I guarantee the doll didn't drink like Snur. Then there's Gheir, King of the Stiffbeards. Sometimes he's called 'Father Stiffbeard'."

"Because he's old?"

"Because he has fifteen wives and thirty-two children and he's about sixty years older than me."

"Sounds like it's not just his beard that's stiff," said Bard.

"Don't worry, he's only bringing five with him."

"Badgers?"
"Wives. He tends to provide his own entertainment." The pair of them snickered then Ori went on.

"Gheir's big rival is Queen Hild of the Blacklocks. Unlike all the other dwarf kingdoms, the Blacklocks have a matriarchy. Hild's regarded almost as a valar. She'll be arriving with General Aris."

"Her bodyguard," Bard guessed.

"And shield sibling, field marshall and consort. Hild doesn't believe in cluttering up the place with extraneous bodies. You probably won't have to worry much about Hild, though. The only males she willingly talks to are Thorin, whom she actually likes, and Gheir, because the two of them bait each other constantly."

"That just leaves the Stonefoots and Ironfists."

"King Ahkn and King Ulf. You probably won't have to worry about them, either. They'll be too busy trying to beat the tar out of each other to do much socializing."

"They don't like each other," Bard surmised.

"They're best mates. It's just how Stonefoots and Ironfists say 'I love you'."

"Good to know."

"Dwalin says the two of them should just get a room and be done with it," said Ori.

"Ah," said Bard. That seemed to sum it all up. "So, those are the dwarf monarchs, and they'll all be here, except, probably, the asshat."

"Yes," Ori grinned. "Can you name them all? There'll be a brief quiz after class."

"Name them, yes, but that's about it."

"And then there's what The Great Woudini would call 'the rest of the crowned heads of Arda'. We'll start with the elves you're likely to run into. You know Thranduil and Legolas. Thranduil also has two other sons, but the elder won't leave the forest and refuses to talk to anyone who isn't an elf. The middle son is studying esoteric healing in the Undying Lands. Thranduil is cousin to Lord Celeborn, he's husband to Lady Galadriel of Lothlorien. You may have seen or met him at Thror's funeral."

"Oh, aye, I remember seeing him. He's the one Dori calls her 'useless appendage'?"

Ori snickered.

"Nobody says that, at least not in front of him. No one except Thranduil, anyway, but they grew up together. To Celeborn's credit, he did give her a daughter, their only child, Celebrían."

"Wasn't Thranduil a suitor of hers?"

"Yes, but she married Lord Elrond of Imladris instead. You'll notice Thranduil and Elrond are civil, but cold."

"Because Elrond married Celebrían?"

"Because Celebrían and Thranduil's wife ran off to live together in the Undying Lands."
Bard paused.

"Lived together? Do you mean, they're sharing a house?"

"Yes, but also, they're lovers."

"Ah. I wonder if the chill between Thranduil and Elrond isn't at least half mutual embarrassment," Bard mused.

"More like ninety percent," said Ori dryly.

"I thought elves only loved once, like dwarrow."

"I think Elrond loved Celebrian, I'm not sure if it was mutual."

"And Thranduil?"

"He picked a suitable spouse for his station and title, but that's all. It must have worked on some level. She gave him three elflings, including Legolas. At least, she waited until they were grown before she took off."

"Poor Thranduil. Poor Elrond, when it comes down to it," said Bard.

"I'm not feeling that sorry for Thranduil," Ori sassed.

"Right," said Bard. "We'll see. What about Elrond?"

"Oh, rumor is he's carrying on with his steward, an elf named Lindir. Lindir is supposed to run Elrond's house, but I'm willing to bet Lindir will come with him to the coronation."

"Does Elrond have any children?"

"Three children, all adults. There are twins Lords Elrohir and Elladan, and a daughter, Lady Arwen Undomiel, who's engaged to King Elessar of Gondor."

"Does Elrond still speak to his daughter?" Bard wondered.

"Of course. Why wouldn't he?"

"Aren't elves touchy about their offspring marrying men?"

"Elessar is a Numenorean, a mixed race people descending from Elrond's twin brother Elros and a mortal woman. Their own mother was also a mortal woman. Elrond is sometimes call Peredhil, Half-Elven."

"So, are there any actual men coming to this coronation besides me?"

"Theoden King of Rohan, that's the horse kingdom closest allied with Gondor. I've never met him. Dwalin said he's a lot like a tall, blond Dain."

Bard grimaced.

Ori said, "Just don't get caught standing between them."

Bard chewed his bottom lip thoughtfully.

"You've written all this down for me, haven't you?"
Ori pulled a thick sheaf of paper from his satchel.

"Right here."

"You're wonderful, Ori."

"Very kind of you to say so."

"Without you I'd never know any of this, and I'd be sticking my foot in my mouth constantly."

"I know all of it and I still do," said Ori. "Your best bet is to stay close to Dori if possible, or Thranduil. You'll hardly have the chance to misstep with them. You'll hardly get a word in edgewise."

Ori considered a jagged scar on the table, then ventured, “How are things with you and Thranduil?”

"He came to visit last night."

"So I hear."

Bard reddened.

"Yes. He doesn't waste a lot of time."

"No, he doesn't. Bard, are you all right?"

The man looked down into his beer and shrugged sheepishly.

"I suppose. A year ago I couldn't imagine ever being free of the Master. Now I'm the king of Dale. The crown prince of Erebor is courting my daughter and the elven king of Mirkwood is making advances - toward me. What am I supposed to say to that?"

"Yes or no, depending on whether you think it would be fun?"

Bard shook his head.

“When you have children to worry about, it’s never that simple. Even if I didn’t have them, Thranduil’s obviously mistaken me for someone with a clue. It took me six months to get up the nerve to speak to Mathilde and I’d known her all my life. Thranduil’s a lot less approachable.”

"I don't think it's a case of you having to approach him. He's approached. And you're seriously considering it, aren't you."

"Fool that I am? Yes! Who wouldn't?"

"Thorin?"

"All right, besides Thorin, though, it would be pretty funny- Argh! Now you have me doing it! I wouldn't know the first thing about bedding another male. He is male, right? Are elves even built like men? Eru! Do they even keep their business down there?"

“‘Their business?’” Ori had a momentary image of a pushcart before reason set in. “Oh! Yes! Look, if you decide you want to have sex with him, you’d better make sure he knows you’re inexperienced and - er - I have a book you may want to borrow. Also, you might not want to call it your ‘business’. You’re going to be confused enough. Look at Elrond.”
Bard stared at him.

“What about Elrond?”

“Never mind, ask Balin.” Ori pushed out his chair and rose.

“Ori! So what am I supposed to call it?”

“That, you can ask Dori.” Ori grinned

“Fine!” snapped Bard. “Does he have a dick?”

At that moment, Teilnar returned.

“Should I not be here?” he asked.

“No, no, I was just leaving,” said Ori.

He gathered up his satchel.

As he stepped out the door he heard Teilnar ask Bard, “Anyone I know?”

It was close to the first afternoon hour, when Ori had taken leave of Bard. Honda cantered them back to the mountain and Fundin House. He smiled to himself and leaned over her mane. She gave a delighted squeal and took off galloping. She slowed to a sedate trot when they approached the great entry gate. It was wide open and birds whisked merrily in and out. Some carried messages, others chased each other or insects. Ori squinted up. Mud and hay lined the crevices of all the columns and statuary as swallows had decided to build their nests there.

Ori greeted the guards and made his way to the roadway that led up through the city.

At Fundin House, he left Honda with Mokrah and ran indoors. Ori went back to his bedroom. He washed and changed into formal robes and regarded himself in the mirror, lamenting his sparse beard, his journeyman’s braid. He had been dreading this meeting ever since he had realized it was inevitable. He was the king’s scribe and he must meet with the seven heads of the guild of scribes. He had to speak with authority in front of master scribes all far older than himself.

He felt sick for a moment, so went to his satchel and withdrew the small, thick book Dori had given him when he first started his lessons. These were the rules set down by Durin the Deathless on how to take notes, how to set them formally to document history, how to file them and everything else to do with a scribe’s craft. Ori had learnt this book by heart by the time he was fifteen. He stroked the spine, the book fell open. Ori read.

“The First Duty of a Scribe is to Record the Truth of the Eyes and Ears as Given by Mahal.”

Ori’s stomach settled. He took a deep breath. He put the book back in his satchel. He intended to go right back out, but after a moment’s deliberation he stopped at Balin and Thorin’s office. The door was open and the king at his desk, idly turning in his hands a flat, wooden disk about the size of a dinner plate. It was painted silver with a blue, vaguely animalish figure at the center.

He looked up and smiled.
“Ori.”

“Thorin, do you have a moment?” Ori asked.

“Of course, Ori, come in and have a seat.”

He stepped into the office and pulled the door shut behind him. “What’s that?” Ori asked, still looking at the object Thorin was holding.

“Fili’s toy shield. I found it when I moved the couch from my old office.”

“Oh, so that’s … a dog? A horse?”

Thorin laughed.

“It’s supposed to be a lion.”

“Oh,” Ori smiled a little. “That explains all the points sticking out of its head. The lion of Erebor?”

“At the time he was more the lion cub of Erebor, but yes. What can I do for you?”

Ori took a breath.

“I need to ask your advice, and I need you to be honest.”

Thorin nodded, so Ori continued.

“I’m thinking about translating Queen Kivi’s book into westron.”

“I think that’s an excellent idea.”

“So do I, but that’s not why I need the advice. I need to know, should I move to Gondor before Dori finds out, or Rohan?”

Thorin laughed. Then his eyes got a far away look. “You miss Bilbo,” said Ori.

“I do. That certainly happened fast, like a tree growing overnight.”

“Maybe that’s just what happens with your One.”

Thorin looked wary.

“How can he be my One? Mahal would have to forge my other half. Trees and stones don’t exist in one being.”

“But they do,” said Ori. “Amber, remember? It’s the blood of trees turned to stone.”

Thorin’s eyebrows raised, but he processed this quickly and nodded.

“Perhaps. This doesn’t feel like a shallow attraction. It feels older, somehow. Well-established. I hope I’m not just making a fool of myself and everyone around me.”

“If one of us sees Bilbo doing something that would hurt you, or the kingdom, we would say something.”

“But would I listen? Am I already too far gone? What if he’s like the arkenst-“
“Thorin!” Ori cried, startled by the sharpness of his own voice.

It must have sounded sharp to Thorin as well. He looked very surprised.

Ori sighed. He couldn’t stop now. He’d as much as told the high king of the dwarrow to hush his royal mouth.

“Thorin,” Ori began again in a more civil tone, “I have been up close and personal with that horrid thing. I can assure you with my whole being that Bilbo Baggins is not an arkenstone.”

“And you would know. Of course,” said Thorin.

“I apologize for raising my voice to you, your majesty. I just don’t want to see you hurting yourself, or hurting Bilbo, for no reason.”

Thorin grinned.

“The office door is closed. We’re in private. I’m not anyone here except Thorin.”

“You still deserve respect.”

“Dwalin would just tell me to pull my head out of my arse,” said Thorin.

“But I’m sure he would respectfully tell you,” said Ori.

“No, he wouldn’t.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” Ori agreed.

“Where are you off to?” Thorin asked looking Ori over.

“I have a meeting with the heads of the scribe’s guild at second hour.”

Thorin leaned back in his chair, grinning.

“Have a fabulous time.”

Ori stuck out his tongue.

Ori headed out to the stable where Mokrah had Honda waiting. Kihshassa swooped down and landed on Ori’s back. She sorted herself out by laying her wings across his shoulders and down his arm while she clung to his tunic.

The Guild Hall of the Scribes was not far from the library. Like the library it was built into the wall of the mountain. There was little in the way of decoration. There was a square courtyard. Seven steps rose to a great door above with runes carved in ancient Khuzdul

“Mahal’s Eyes Read Our Truth”.

He turned Honda into the courtyard and she trotted up to the steps. Kihshassa peered over his shoulder and squeaked a little. It was a plain enough courtyard but off to the side there was a small garden with a fountain and a circle of stone seats.

At the top of the steps, before the doors, paced a dwarrowdam. Her gray-sprinkled hair was piled
high on top of her head and her beard was tightly braided into a straight line down to her waist. She looked to be in great agitation.

“Pardon me, I-“ Ori said, getting down from Honda.

The dwarrowdam whirled around. At sight of him, she paled and half screamed before she swallowed, scuttled down the steps and bowed low.

“Do I-” she started in a quavering voice. “Do I have the great honor of addressing Lord Ori of Fundin House?”

Ori stared. Kihshassa licked his ear and he gathered himself and bowed to her.

“Um…yes. Yes, I’m Ori. I’ve been requested to meet with the heads of the guild of scribes at second afternoon bell.”

The dwarrowdam bowed again.

“Yes! Yes, indeed, Lord Ori. Please allow me to escort you. We are so honored you’ve condescended to meet with us. So very kind and attentive of you.”

Ori didn’t know what to make of the dam.

“And you are, please?” he asked.

She stood still, mouth open

“Who am I?”

“Yes?” Ori wondered for a horrid moment if she was someone he should have known immediately.

“I’m….“ The dwarrowdam shook herself and bowed again deeply. “I am Podvu, daughter of Mayvu of the house of Vors. I achieved my mastery one hundred and thirty years ago and I have sat as a guild head for fifty years, my Lord Ori. It has always been my life and solemn oath to serve the House of Durin.” She bowed again.

Kihshassa squeaked politely.

Ori gulped. He could understand a little of her nervousness. If she was related to Vors, she probably imagined that her loyalty was suspect. Still, a master scribe of a hundred and eighty years and a head of the guild shouldn't act like this to him. He wasn't anyone to fear. Something was wrong here. Very wrong.

He recovered himself and smiled.

“I’m delighted and honored to meet you, Lady Podvu.”

He offered his arm. Lady Podvu stared at his hand like it was a strange object then slowly clasped his wrist. Ori felt terrible. She was trembling.

“Lady Podvu, please tell me what’s happened. What is upsetting you? Is it because I’m so young and -”

“Nonono, Lord Ori! We are very delighted you’ve decided to meet with us, please do come in and be welcome.”

She ushered him into the hall. Kihshassa snuggled a little more firmly into the back of his tunic.
The hall sat square in the stone and rose over about twenty levels. There was this reception area and a door off to the right, but otherwise the one, great room was dominated by a huge staircase with wrought iron railings that went up and up. Every wall, floor and ceiling, every stair tread and riser, everywhere Ori looked, was covered in large squares of white and black marble, like a draughts board. There was no other ornamentation.

Kihshassa wiggled and gave a slight squeak.

Ori looked about. It made him a little dizzy. He decided this was the ugliest place he’d ever seen. A dirty hen coop had more color to it.

Lady Podvu twisted her hands together, knuckles white.

“It’s hideous, isn’t it,” she barked, her voice almost broke. “It was redone by Lord Sikar forty years ago. Before that it was built and blessed by Durin III and his queen. It was turquoise and blue topaz with gildings of labradorite and fulgurite, but Sikar said black and white was the way of the scribe. Things are either black or white. The word of the king or not.”

“That’s stupid,” Ori said before he thought.

Kihshassa clicked her teeth in a worried way.

The words of his book came back to him. “‘The first duty of a scribe is to record the truth of the eyes and ears as given by Mahal’.”

Lady Podvu turned and gazed upon him with the most beautiful smile and shining eyes.

“You know,” she whispered. “You remember. But how can you?”

“What?” Ori asked, confused.

Kihshassa licked his ear and made a chit noise.

Lady Podvu opened the black door nearby and ushered him in with a cry of, “He has come!”

Ori looked around, expecting to find Thorin had somehow arrived, but he was quite alone. He turned back around.

The room was also black and white marble. Before a table stood two dwarrow and three dwarrowdams. They all looked to be of the age of Lady Podvu except for one of the dams who was gray to the point of silver and her face was deeply lined.

She stared at Ori with a look of almost utter hopelessness.

The two dwarf males looked rather alike and their hoods matched and another dwarrowdam stood beside them. They seemed even more nervous than Lady Podvu. The final dwarrowdam stood slightly away in her own pool of despair.

Ori caught himself and bowed.

“Good afternoon. I am Ori of Fundin House, at your service.”

Kihshassa squeaked loudly and bobbed her head against Ori’s ear.
All the guild heads bowed very low. Lady Podvu hurried forward and presented him to the first master on the right.

“Lord Ori, this is Kacuho, son of Grouho. He achieved his mastery one hundred years ago and has sat as a guild head for twenty years.”

Kacuho bowed deeply again. He was a slender dwarf with light brown hair twisted neatly under a cap that reminded Ori of the one he’d had to wear to Thror’s funeral. His nose was round with a bump on the bridge. He was clothed plainly in maroon.

“At your service, Lord Ori,” he murmured in a soft, high voice.

Lady Podvu gestured the despairing dam over.

“Lord Ori, this is Ubqim, daughter of Mugwim. She achieved her mastery one hundred and fifteen years ago and has sat as a guild head for ten years.”

Ubqim bowed deeply, too, but couldn’t bring herself to raise her eyes to Ori. Her ‘at your service’ was mostly a moan. Her scribes braids in her mousey hair were bound with pale green thread but the rest was loose and looked rather like Gimli’s when he woke up. She was dressed in pale green robes that had scalloped edges everywhere they could possibly be put. Although she was perfectly dry, Ori thought she looked like she had been caught in a rainstorm.

“Lord Ori, this is Rouho, son of Grouho, Kacuho’s older brother. He achieved his mastery one hundred and fifty years ago and has sat as a guild head for seventy years.”

Rouho regarded Ori through spectacles that looked as though they had been cut from the bottoms of wine bottles. They were even slightly green. His dark brown beard was sprinkled with gray and bound similarly to Lady Podvu’s. He wore brown, which suited him. He was as bald as Master Brur except for a few threads on the left side of his head which he had carefully combed to cover the rest of his head very thinly.

“Lord Ori, this is Nodun, daughter of Brodun. She achieved her mastery one hundred and five years ago and has sat as a guild head for twenty-two years.”

Nodun peered at Ori. A tremulous smile came to her gray eyes. Ori automatically smiled back. She nodded at him, looking pleased. She was plump and wore a becoming shade of turquoise. Her hair and beard were fashionably styled with beads of fulgurite.

They finally came to the elderly dam. Ori saw she stood with the aid of a carved cane of labradorite. She didn’t wait for Lady Podvu’s introduction but bowed stiffly, denoting back trouble, and said immediately,

“Ori…Ori… You are the one of the Brothers Ri of Rikmha?”

“Yes, “ Ori told her. “I’m now married to Captain Dwalin of Fundin House.”

“You did your apprenticeship and journeyman under Khujik?”

“Yes!” Ori said happily. “I enjoyed training with Master Khujik. How do you know of him, Master…er…?” Ori realized they had not been introduced.

She bowed again.

“I am Jansad. Mistress Dazla is my great grand niece. I’m the only one left of my house, so I am
“I’m honored to make your acquaintance, Master Jansad.”

“Khujik was my last apprentice. I’m glad you enjoyed your time with him.”

Ori yanked his jaw off the floor.

“But… but he never mentioned you! He never spoke of it! Why did he—“

“He refused to follow the new scrivening laws put in force and was turned out of the mountain. Thus, neither of us were allowed to speak of one another.”

“Mahal!” Ori gasped. “That’s terrible!”

Jansad snorted and looked about her.

“Part of me wishes I’d gone with him. Don’t look at me like that, Podvu. Lord Ori, I am Jansad, I achieved my mastery two hundred years ago and have sat as a guild head for ninety years.”

“I’m honored, Master Jansad.” Ori put out his arm. Jansad snickered and clasped his wrist in a surprisingly strong grip.

“I like you.” she stated. “My friends call me Sadi, so you will, too.”

“Of course, Master Sadi. Mine call me Ori.”

“Shall we be seated?” Lady Podvu suggested.

The look on her face told Ori she not only hated the hallway but the entire place.

“Perhaps,” he said hurriedly, “we will all talk and think more easily in the informal setting. You have a pleasant seating area in the front garden. It looks to be…er… soothing.”

There was a communal sigh of pleasure and Lady Podvu led the way out. Master Sadi took the arm Ori offered her and hobbled gamely at his side until he assisted her to a stone seat near the fountain. Sadi patted a stone seat beside her and Ori sat. Kihshassa clambered down and nibbled at the flower buds on a shrub nearby.

The other set themselves about and looked at him expectantly.

“Lady Podvu,” he began casually as he thought it would be for the best.

“Yes, milord?”

“You said earlier that I ‘remembered’. What did you mean?”

“You remember Durin’s first book of scrivening ‘Elements of Scrivening’ by Durin the Deathless’ first two royal scribes, S’tuk son of Dutuk and Whilf daughter of Nililf.”

“Well, of course,” Ori said in surprise. “My eldest brother Dori gave me his copy which he brought from Ered Luin. I knew it by heart before I was twenty! If any of you wish to test me, I will be happily to answer.” He smiled, eager to be questioned by these masters. He could recite that book in his sleep.

Sadi sighed.
“Laddie… Ori. You’re too young to remember, and if your brother was in Ered Luin, he would not have known. That book was declared unfit for scrivening by order of the First Chair of the Guild of Scribes which came down from King Thror.”

“What?” Ori squawked. “It was ordered and approved by Durin. It was the manual and style guide for khuzdul. Ancient khuzdul! Our language is our birthright!”

Ori needed to move and, without a thought to the heads of the guild, flew to his feet and paced about before them.

“Khuzdul is our birthright and I also believe that it must be shared. How else can other races understand us if they don’t experience our language?

“Food and clothing and trinkets are all very well. Khuzdul is our literature, it’s our poetry. It’s who we are. We are made by Mahal. He is proud of us and we of him. We honor him by using the language he created for us. We write to express the truth Mahal gave us. It’s like the decorations that used to be in the Guild Hall. It was made and decorated with the stones that stood for truth and communication.

“Blue Topaz reminds us that the best discussions are had without the heat of anger. It’s clearness and quality dissipates any anger. Turquoise is the very truth of the stones themselves. Labradorite is the dark deep color of strength that brings order out of chaos. Fulgurite is made by the lightning striking the sands creating beauty; the communication of Mahal to us. The shining truth of Mahal.

“Black and white marble is used for kitchens and hallways as they show where to clean. It’s to do with storage and food not writing.”

Ori paused for a breath to find he was wearing a path on the soft moss and his arms tingled from waving them around.

His brain grabbed at the obvious. He snatched up his satchel and scribbled a note to Thorin.

Thorin,

Things are in a horrible state at the Guild Hall of Scribes. I’m sorry to write in this way but I’m so angry I can’t think straight. I need your advice as soon as you’d care to give it.

-Ori

Ori turned and Kihshassa sat up. He folded the note quickly and Kihshassa snatched it in her teeth. Ori lifted her up.

“Take it to Thorin as quick as you can,” he whispered then tossed Kihshassa high. Suddenly aloft, the fruit bat spread her wings, swooped, and was gone in a moment.

He went back to pacing. The hall needed to be put back to the way it had been under Durin. At the moment Ori was so angry he wanted to have a lava tube opened and turn the whole thing to slag and ash. He remembered well Lord Sikar and his slimy ways. Good thing the little bastard had
thrown in his lot with Frerin. Ori knew that if Sikar was still around Ori would be at his house and punching him in the nose right now.

Ori forced his brain into the things that could be done. Tearing the horrid black and white out would be easily achieved. Talk to the construction guild, order the work. With what he made as Thorin’s scribe and working at the library he could probably cover that now. The rest he thought he could pay by increments. He stopped his brain. Thorin’s permission was first. He would ask Balin and Dori about getting the materials to put the guild back in order. Dori could haggle a better than any Ori knew. Of the four scrivening stones, fulgurite was the hardest to get, but they would have to find significant amounts of turquoise and the other stones as well. The other things, like the examples of writing of all members and the heads of the guild could be gathered. He wracked his brain to try and remember everything Khujik had told him about what the guild hall looked like.

“What happened to all the original interior furnishings?” Ori heard himself ask.

“It’s all in my brother’s cellar,” Lady Podvu said faintly.

Ori looked at her and she quailed a little.

“Why?” he asked.

“Well, you see, Lord Ori,” began Kacuho, “Lord Sikar ordered the reconstruction and Lord Vors offered his workers to do it.”

Ori rolled his eyes.

“Exactly,” Kacuho agreed. “However, the head of the project was Lady Podvu’s brother.”

“Yes,” Lady Podvu continued. “He knew how I felt about it and everything was removed very carefully. Pity to spoil good craftsmanship he said and together we contrived to smuggle it all away into his big cellar.”

“Well, at least it’s not all lost,” Ori nodded. “Master Sadi, what can we do about the manual?”

Sadi shook her head sadly.

“Every copy in the place was tossed to the forges.”

“What?” Ori almost screamed this time. “You must be joking, they cannot have done that! It’s wrong! It’s morally repugnant! That was-”

Ori couldn’t find the words he wanted at this point. Anger was seething in his brain and he wanted to hit something. He wanted to hit a lot of things.

“Mahal! It’s the king!” cried Nodun.

“What?” Ori snapped and turned on his heel to glare in the direction she was pointing.

Ori was greeted with the sight of a squad of guards led by his husband, with Thorin and Balin all in the courtyard getting off their ponies.

Ori made a bee-line for Thorin.

“Thor- Your majesty I have to take Honda and borrow Dwalin’s axes and go to Belegost. I’m going to find Sikar and chop him into pieces and then chop those pieces into smaller pieces and then chop them again until there’s hardly anything left and then I’ll…I’ll piss all over them! And then.."
and then I’m going to set them all on fire!”

Ori panted for breath. He could hardly see through the red fog in front of his eyes. His breath came back and he felt himself cool as Dwalin’s arms came about him.

“I hate Sikar!” he shouted. “I hate him!”

Thorin blinked and gently laid his hand on Ori’s shoulder.

“It’s alright, Ori. Tell me what’s happened and we will make it right.”

Ori puffed his breath and felt himself settle. Dwalin kissed his cheek.

“ ‘M here, love.”


Ori took a deep breath and turned in Dwalin’s arms and put his face into Dwalin’s beard.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

“Don’t be,” said Thorin gently and turned Ori to face him again. “Now, what’s happened? You came here to meet with the heads of the guild, yes?”

Ori straightened himself.

“Yes, yes I did- Oh, hello,” he said as Kihshassa landed in his arms.

He put her across his shoulders again and looked over to where the heads of the guild stood in a line and Sadi was hobbling her way over to them. Ori got his wits back and brought Thorin over to meet them.

“You majesty, this is-“

“Master Jansad,” Thorin put in. “It’s wonderful to see you again after so long. You look well.”

“Shite, I look like an old hag and I am one, too, thank you very much. I do like this Lord Ori of yours, your majesty.”

“Thank you,” Thorin said and cocked his head at Ori. “We like him, too.”

Ori was calm enough now to remember his manners and politely introduced the other heads of the guild to the king. Lady Podvu looked terrified but Thorin spoke to her kindly and after she swore her oath of loyalty to him almost three times, he assured her that he accepted it and would not send her to Beleghost. She had shown her loyalty by preserving the old building materials.

This completed, Ori went to the next problem.

“Thor-your majesty, Sikar gave it as an order of King Thror that the original manual was not to be used anymore and had all the copies burned.”

“The manual?” Thorin asked politely.

“Yes,” Ori said vehemently, “the S’tuk and Whilf.”

Thorin looked at Balin, who closed his eyes, shaking his head.
“Elements of Scrivening from Durin’s time,” Balin explained. “I’d’ve kept me own copy if I hadn’ lost it when I was in Ered Luin.”

“You lost it in Ered Luin?” Ori asked.

At Balin’s surprised nod, Ori groaned and went to his satchel. He pulled out his manual and handed it to Balin.

“Is this it?”

Balin took the book and leafed through, staring.

“Aye, it is! This is me own copy!” Balin grinned joyously at him. “Laddie, how came yeh by this?”

“When you met Dori there, was Nori around?” Ori asked.

Balin stared and shook his head.

“I was given it as a name day gift by Dori,” Ori told him. “When I started writing and made my first poem. I was five.” Ori explained.

Behind him, Ori heard Dwalin palming his face. Thorin and Balin looked at each other, then burst out laughing.

“Nori pinched it from you?” Thorin suggested.

“Nay, laddie. I think me One pinched it. An’ me while at it. Cunnin’ little minx. I’ll have t’ have a wee chat with me beloved when I get home.”

“I’m sorry, Balin, I don’t mean to make trouble for you both, but-“

Balin interrupted, patting Ori’s shoulder. “It’s all f’r th’ bes’, wee brother. It might have been lost f’r good. Yeh mind?” Balin raised an eyebrow at Ori and handed the book to Sadi.

“You’ll have it copied again?” Ori asked her.

Sadi smiled down at the book in her gnarled fingers, her eyes moist.

“I’ll copy the first myself,” she promised softly. “After that the scribes can begin to make others. You’ve brought us a treasured gift, Lord Ori.”

Embarrassed, Ori immediately insisted Thorin inspect the guild hall. Thorin went in.

“Mahal’s hairy balls and arse!” he exploded. “What in all of Arda is this supposed to represent? It looks like an upside-down coat closet!”

Thorin’s voice rose at each demand, but Ori realized that, though angered by the situation, Thorin was making a racket for a reason. On every floor of the hall, doors popped open and scribes of all levels peered out over the railings to see what was going on.

“I’ve met orcs with better taste in decor than this!” Thorin boomed out. “Where are all the samples of the guild heads’ handwritings? Where are the plaques with all the master scribes’ names?”

Thorin turned to Ori, who realized all the head guild members were standing behind him. Thorin
said with kingly authority,

“After the coronation ceremonies, Lord Ori, you will see the scribes move themselves to the old royal residence. There they will do their work until this—this travesty of a building can be made to look like a guild hall for scribes once more. I’m sure Lady Podvu and her brother will ably assist you in all the arrangements. Lord Balin will transfer payments for the royal coffers. See to it, Lord Ori.”

Thorin turned on his heel and went out. Ori gasped and all the guild heads behind him gasped, too. As soon as the king had left the building, the talking, shouting, and cheering began throughout. Ori went out, the guild heads on his heels.

“Thank you, your majesty,” he said.

Thorin smiled and turned to him. Ori bowed and the guild heads bowed, too.

“And now,” Thorin said. “I’m sure you will find excellent stone masons both here in the mountain and in Dale to help you with all the work that needs done. I recommend adding to the decor sodalite for clear thinking and some new jade for healing. Is there anything else, you need my assistance with, Lord Ori?”

Thorin asked gravely but with a twinkle in his eyes. Ori swallowed a smile and turned to look at the guild heads.

“Is there anything else?” he asked them honestly.

They all shook their heads. Sadi was grinning and the rest stared at him in wonder.

“I believe we’re all set, your majesty,” said Ori. “Thank you for coming so speedily. I hope we didn’t interrupt anything important.”

“Not at all,” Thorin said, obviously trying not to laugh. “I was quite at leisure.”

As the king’s party rode away, Sadi turned to Ori with a wry grin.

“So, laddie, I suppose you shit diamonds, too.”

“What? I just sent a note to the king. He’s the one who shi— I mean, he’s the one who set things to right.”

Sadi snickered. Rouho removed his spectacles and cleaned them with a large handkerchief. He was fighting a smile.

“Amazing, “ he commented, “just amazing. In all my life I have never seen a king deign to visit the scribes’ hall.”

“King Thorin came here once before when he was—” Ubqim started.

“He was a prince and he came with Lord Balin,” Master Sadi corrected. “Prince Thrain was with him. Neither were kings.”

“True,” Ubqim agreed, her eyes went far away. “Prince Thrain was so handsome, such a charming, well-spoken dwarf.”

Lady Podvu frowned.
“And Princess Freris so lovely, you remember Ubqim? His wife!” Lady Podvu’s tone bordered on the scathing. Ubqim was lost in her happy remembrance of a handsome prince and Podvu huffed.

“Perhaps Lord Ori,” began Nodun, “We should consult with Lady Podvu’s brother, Pahvu, about the reconstruction of the guild hall?”

“Yes, please,” Ori said immediately. “And be sure to tell him the king suggested the stone masons from Dale to be included in the project. You should probably begin preparing to move to the old royal residence for the interim.”

“It shall be seen to it at once, Lord Ori,” chorused the two brothers bowing.

“Things should continue as best as possible during this time, “ Ori pondered aloud. “Are Lord Balin’s assistants part of the guild?”

“I-I’m not acquainted with Lord Balin’s assistants,” Lady Podvu put in.

Ori, thought back on the invitation-writing ‘party’ as Master Brur had called it.

“There was myself, Buj, Omibur, Lolibur, Pafwi, Cypah, Naliu, Fuilan, Anbde and Vibr, “ Ori said slowly bringing all the names to mind.

“Ah,” said Kacuho. “Naliu and Fuilan began as apprentice scribes and then went to the library. They must have transferred from there to Lord Balin’s service. Vibr, I believe came with Lord Balin on his lordship’s return from Ered Luin. I have not met the others.”

“Loli, Omi and Buj work with me at the library,” Ori explained. “Pafwi and Cypah were sent from the Iron Hills to do their journeyman with Lord Balin. Anbde started under the accountancy and banking guild then transferred to Balin’ service.”

“That explains it,” Sadi said.

“Tell me, “ Ori said, an idea forming in his brain. “What duties do each of you as heads of the guild perform?”

Sadi shrugged. “We used to be the scribes to the king but once Sikar was in the first chair of the guild, we weren’t really needed he said. We teach and make sure the guild runs well. But that only require about two or three of us.”

“Who is first chair now?” Ori asked quickly. He presumed it was either Podvu or Sadi but he had to make sure.

“We don’t have one.” Sadi snapped. “Sikar was the first chair. He made no provision. The first we learned of his so-called retirement was when Nodun saw him leaving with Frerin, may that nasty piece of work rot. Besides, you are the king’s scribe now so that makes you the first chair. Am I right?”

Sadi grinned at her fellow heads. They all smiled and nodded.

Lady Podvu bowed with a flourish. “What are your commands, First Chair?”

Ori stared at these smiling dwarrow, put his jaw back in his face and gasped.

“I can’t! I’ve not achieved my mastery!”
“You’re good enough for the king,” Rouho pointed out, “thus you are obviously good enough for us.”

Ori sputtered a moment then blushed.

“Well, I-I really don’t know how things run, but if you are all quite sure this is what you want I... I shall rely on your advice.”

“Excellent,” Sadi beamed at him. “Perhaps Kacuho should summon the guild members?”

“Certainly.” Ori felt rather out of his depth but thought that this feeling was pretty much the order of his life now.

Kacuho went purposely to the fountain and lifted the sculpture in the middle out. This he opened in half and removed a beautiful silver horn, engraved all over in ancient khuzdul.

Kacuho brought it to Ori. Ori took it and admired it. The writing was the poem of Durin the Deathless calling all dwarrow to learn the language Mahal had given them. Ori handed it back to Kacuho.

“It’s beautiful,” he said honestly.

“Yes, indeed,” murmured Ubqim. “As it is the call to language, it is known as the Bugle of Mahal.”

Ori choked violently and ended with a fit of coughing. He turned his face away. All he could think about was being in bed with Dwalin and Dwalin offering to “blow the bugle of Mahal”.

Rouho, Nodun, and Kacuho started laughing, Lady Podvu turned scarlet, and Master Sadi cackled.

“Yes, Lord Ori, we all know the joke.”

Ubqim blinked and looked confused.

“What joke?”

“It’s your favorite quill to tickle yourself with,” Nodun told her.

“Shut up!” Ubqim yipped. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m craft-wed!”

“Yes, dear,” Lady Podvu comforted. “If you please, Kacuho.”

Kacuho blew the bugle. It made a high clarion call. Silence fell then there was a rumble of feet and all the guild members poured out of the doorway to gather on the steps.

“Scribes, Lady Podvu announced in a ringing tone. “We have the great delight and honor to introduce Lord Ori.”

There was a cheer.

“Let me finish,” snapped Lady Podvu. The crowd settled again but most were grinning. Ori felt himself redden a little.

“Introduce Lord Ori of Fundin House and Scribe to King Thorin presumptive as the new First Chair of the-”
The cheering and yelling drowned out the rest of her introduction. The scribes roared down the steps and Ori was surrounded with them. He was congratulated and patted on the shoulder and generally exclaimed over by all. He tried desperately to remember names and faces but it was such a jumble he couldn’t manage. This went on for a bit then Sadi called them all to order.

Lady Podvu outlined the plans of renovation to them and instructed them to prepare for the move to the old royal quarters. This brought squeals and cheers of delight. Lady Podvu stepped back and looked at Ori. Ori swallowed.

“I’d like to thank all of you for your forbearance during this time of- “ Ori paused, made himself not cuss out Sikar and continued. “Time of great difficulty. I know the move will upset routines and other duties but I’m quite sure you will all do your best.”

There was another cheer and Lady Podvu bowed to Ori and made a shooing motion with her hands. The teachers and older scribes herded the others all back inside, all talking about what had to be done, how wonderful it was that Sikar was gone and how much fun they’d all have at the old royal residence.

Ori turned to his fellow guild heads and remembered his previous idea.

“Which of you enjoy teaching and running the guild administrative duties most?”

“Podvu,” Sadi said immediately. The lady nodded with a small smile.

“Yes,” agreed Rouho agreed. “I’ve been head of the teaching staff since my mastery was achieved. Ubqim teaches poetry, musical composition and calligraphy.”

“Good,” Ori said, delighted his plan would work. “Lady Podvu you are in charge of administration. Master Rouho you will continue as head of the teaching staff and Master Ubqim will assist you with her side of the teaching.”

“Excellent,” Rouho smiled and took the bugle back from his brother.

“Poetry is the true language of Mahal and is the voice of my soul,” murmured Ubqim. Ori took this as her assent. He turned to the other three.

“The king presumptive has told me that I must gather a team of scribes to serve the king. I have three others from the library of whom I told you earlier. Master Sadi, will you and Master Kacuho and Master Nodun work on my staff along with your usual duties here at the guild?”

Nodun and Kacuho both squealed in delight and hugged each other. Sadi beamed at him with tears in her eyes.

“Thank you, Lord Ori we will do so and happily.”

“Good,” Ori said grinning back. “We should all meet again soon so I may present you as scribes to King Thorin and Lord Balin. I shall ask Tho-King Thorin what time would be best for him and will send a message to you as soon as I know.”

Rouho gave the bugle to Ubqim so he could hug and knock heads with his brother. Ubqim stroked he bugle, smiling over the writing.

“We will all be here, Lord Ori,” Nodun assured him. “We look forward to hearing from you!”
There was a yell from Rouho as it appeared that Ubqim was set on making off with the bugle.  Nodun went to assist and there was quite a tussle until Rouho managed to snatch the bugle away from Ubqim while Nodun sat on her. Ori forced himself not to laugh and turned back to Podvu, Sadi, and Kacuho. Kacuho was snickering. Lady Podvu was horrified. Sadi just grinned at Ori.

“Ah” Sadi gloated, “to be scribe to the king at his side as Durin the Deathless insisted his scribes be, instead of just copying notes a cheese monger told us were the laws.”

Ori chuckled remembering what Thorin had told Bofur.

“Sikar’s father was a cheese monger,” Master Sadi told him.

“I know, “ Ori said blithely, before he thought about it. “He used to prop his feet up on the table and pick his teeth with his fingernail during meetings. He was ennobled because he promised King Thror free cheese for life.”

“Why am I not surprised,” Sadi replied flatly. “I swear that dwarf was constipated for at least fifty years.”

Ori swallowed a giggle, adjusted Kihshassa on his back, and turned to Podvu. “Is there anything else I need to be doing here now?”

Padvu smiled serenely.

“We are about to prepare to follow yours and King Thorin’s orders, Lord Ori. Lord Rouho and I shall move forward and perhaps in three days you would be kind enough to stop by and see what we have done and if it is to your satisfaction.”

“I’m sure it will be,” Ori replied. He went to Honda. Nodun went to Honda’s head to hold the reigns and Kacuho offered Ori a hand up to mount. Ori settled himself, took the reigns and turned Honda.

“Thank you all,” he said. The heads of the guide stood to see him off. He rode out the gate and turned and waved. The guild heads were bowing but they all smiled and waved back.

Ori turned and saw the end of the part of town where he had visited Master Vobwi’s emporium so long ago and had brought home Kihshassa, Assault Battery and Brandy. A stab of guilty caught him. He had promised to return and pay for Kihshassa if she had prospered. And that was weeks ago! He urged Honda to a trot.

Not too long after, Ori slowed Honda to a walk. Kihshassa clicked in his ear.

“We’re only going to show Master Vobwi how well you are,” he told the fruit bat. Kihshassa wiggled again and licked his ear.

Outside the Animal Emporium, Ori dismounted, looped Honda’s reigns over the rail and went in.

“Master Vobwi?” he called out.

The proprietor came out of the back and his eyes lit up at sight of Ori.

“Welcome, young dwarf. How do your kittens fare? Did they enjoy their toys?”

“Very much thank you,” Ori grinned. “I’m very sorry I didn’t return sooner but things have been
rather busy. I thought you’d like to see Kihshassa.”

Master Vobwi looked curious and Kihshassa hopped from Ori’s back to the counter and chirped at Master Vobwi. Master Vobwi stared at Kihshassa.

“Young master, is this…Is this the same fruit bat I gave you?”

“Yes, she is.” Ori said, happily. “She adopted my kittens right away and the badger, too. I’ve found she is very fond of raspberries.”

Master Vobwi looked Kihshassa over and scratched behind her ears.

“Great Mahal, young master, I’ve never seen a finer looking fruit bat in my life. She looks wonderful. She’s positively fat and glossy. I’m quite startled. If you hadn’t told me and brought her, I wouldn’t have believed it. Marvelous!”

“So how much do I owe you?” Ori asked.

“Owe me?” Master Vobwi asked in a puzzled way.

“You said, “ Ori went on, “You told me if Kihshassa and my kittens took to each other and prospered, I would come back and we would talk gold.”

Vobwi polished his spectacles a moment.

“Don’t really want t’ charge yeh, lad. I didn’t think she’d last a day after yeh took her.”

“But-“

“Tell yeh what lad. If yeh’ll allow me t’ stop by and see yer kittens and th’ wee badger, we’ll call it even.”

“Are you sure?” Ori asked. This seemed such an odd request.

“Aye. I can barely believe this’s the same bat. I need t’ see her circumstances.”

Ori laughed.

“Alright, do stop by. I’ll let my family know as I cannot guarantee I’ll be at home. I’m a scribe and do a lot of running about.”

“I look forward t’ see yer family, lad.” Master Vobwi helped Kihshassa back on to Ori and followed him out to Honda. Ori swung up and grinned.

“Thank you for your patience, Master Vobwi.”

Master Vobwi, grinned, “An’ thank yeh, lad. Where will I be findin’ yer home?”

“Fundin House in the royal cavern,” Ori said and road away.

As he passed the Scribes Guild hall again there were lights in every window and he could see people rushing about inside. He smiled. He hoped they were all happy. The weight of all that had happened surged back into his brain and he felt very tired. Honda seemed to sense his need to be home and cantered the rest of the way.
Ori, exhausted and still shocked, dragged himself through the door of the sitting room at Fundin House. As it was the end of the day, the sitting room was full. Everyone was home, and Jim and his troupe were there as well, Jim and his daughter juggling precious Fundin heirlooms back and forth over the sofa from across the room.

“There’s th’ conquerin’ hero,” said Dwalin.

He ducked a ceremonial dagger as he met Ori halfway across the floor and Ori sunk against him with his face in Dwalin’s beard.

“Love?”

“I’m the first chair of the scribe’s guild,” said Ori.

Dwalin took him by the shoulders and pushed him back gently.

“What’?” he asked.

“The heads of the scribes’ guild decided I’m the new first chair of the guild.”

Dori and Binni came from the kitchen with platters and tureens full of dinner.

“What’s this, Dori’s Ori?” Dori asked.

“Are you alright, pet? Come and eat, you must be ready to eat a warg. No offense.”

Biscuit raised a brow at him, but didn’t otherwise budge from his spot on the hearthrug which he was amicably sharing with Chopper and the rest of the household animals.

“I’m the new first chair of the scribe’s guild,” said Ori.

Dori shrieked. Dain raced over and seized Ori off his feet and even Nori looked well satisfied.

“Yep, I knew it,” Nori drawled.

“It’s a mistake!” Ori wailed. “They only want me to be the head of the guild because they think Thorin will save me when I scream.”

“You don’t scream all that much,” said Thorin, sitting at the table. “Congratulations, Ori.”

Ori, aware he was still dangling off the floor, groaned.

“I’m so proud o’ yeh!” Dain bellowed in his ear. “Knew yeh had it in yeh!”

And now, to add to Ori’s troubles, he was deaf in one ear.

“Thorin,” Ori called, hoping this would get Dain to put him down. It half worked. Dain gamely carried him over and plopped him on his feet, clasped his shoulders and went back to the the kitchen doorway to tease his wife.

Thorin pulled out the chair next to him and Ori flopped into it.

“Well done,” Thorin said to him quietly.

“Thank you,” Ori replied. “Thorin I may have overstepped.”

“In what way?” Thorin asked, appearing amused
Ori sighed and told of all his arrangements with the guild heads.

“Excellent,” Thorin said simply. “Jansad is a legend. She assisted with Balin’s training, I had hoped at one point she would be one of my tutors but Thror wouldn’t have it. Nodun, I hadn’t met but her father Brodun was the senior editor of Vug magazine. She took over after his death and now her daughter runs it. She is an amazing artist.”

“So, I should introduce her to Dipfa?” Ori asked. Thorin laughed.

“Why not. It might be fun to watch.”

Ori looked at Thorin’s smile and said archly.

“Bilbo is a terrible influence on you.”

“Yes,” Thorin nodded then turned, his smile now a grin. “But Mahal seems to approve, so what are we to do?”

Ori giggled and went on.

“What do you know about Kacuho?”

“I saw Rouho more than his younger brother. Grouho came from a long line of weavers. Their family is responsible for all the arrases throughout all royal residences.”

“But now both brothers are scribes,” Ori said thoughtfully.

“Yes, but their younger cousin Laliho, has taken over the family craft. They call her sister as her parents died in the battle of Khazad-dûm and she was adopted by Grouho and his wife Moila daughter of Doila, who runs the great kitchens. The brother were very loyal to Thrain or at least my mother.”

“Would you be willing to meet my er… team of scribes?” Ori asked a little shyly.

“Of course,” Thorin nodded. Tomorrow morning?”

“What time?” Ori asked.

“Tenth morning horn volley?”

“Thank you, “ Ori said eagerly, “I’ll write notes to-“

Thorin looked around, as if on cue Roäc flew in and landed in front of Thorin’s plate. Thorin offered him a sausage which the raven devoured in three gulps.

“Roäc, would you please go and tell Master Jansad, Master Kacuho, and Master Nodun of the Scribes Guild that they are to present themselves at Fundin House tomorrow at the tenth morning volley.”

Roäc cocked his eye at Thorin.

“There’ll be two sausages when you come back.”

“Tenth morning volley,” Roäc smirked and flew off.

“And you’d better have delivered that letter,” Thorin muttered.
Ori, after considering, asked anyway.

“Ubqim is a little er… strange. Do you know her?”

Thorin frowned.

“Ubqim is daughter of Mugwim,” Ori suggested.

Thorin thought for a few seconds then shook his head. “I’m sure I’ve heard the name but can’t place it. Do you think she will be problematic?”

“No…no, she’s just,” Ori searched for a good word then, “Drifty. She teaches poetry, musical composition and calligraphy.”

“That Ubqim?” Thorin choked. “She’s a guild head?”

“Yes,” Ori began but Thorin threw back his head and roared with laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Dis asked as she sat down opposite Thorin. Dori began to serve out the sausages. Ori helped himself to steamed mushrooms.

Thorin recovered and managed,

“Mistress Ubqim is one of the scribe’s guild heads.”

“Ubqim?” Dain barked. “She’s got jelly f’r brains an’s daft as a rooster in a rainstorm!”

“Ubqim,” Thorin said looking at Ori, “in her youth was considered one of the most interesting of the young dams presented at court. She didn’t dance so much as strike poses. She would be found singing songs to whatever object she might find in a room and at a royal ball fell completely and utterly in love with my father.”

“Oh dear.” Ori said. “That sounds more that just awkward.”

“What?” Fili and Kili shouted.

“It was extremely awkward as the ball was in honor of the birth of Dis. At the sound of the music starting, Ubqim rushed into the middle of the room, performed the most interesting gyrations, then flung herself to the floor before the dais and declared her undying love for my father,” Thorin explained.

Fortunately, she was snatched up by family and declared extremely drunk. This was upheld by everyone including Ubqim, who wrote a charming letter of apology to my mother for being so intoxicated on such a special occasion and vowed never to allow alcohol to touch her lips again. She complimented King Thror on having a son who so impaired her inner poetical turn as to make her mistake him for Durin the Deathless, and then she announced herself craft-wed.”

“It were quite a scene f’r a few days,” Balin agreed.

“I wonder,” said Jim idly. ‘There’s a comic play, supposedly based on a maiden who fell in love with some southern prince and acted very like how you describe this Ubqim, except she went and locked herself in a tower.

“She cut off all her hair and threw it out the top of the tower’s one window. The hair watered by her tears grew into a huge bramble forest. She stayed there the rest of her life. Many handsome young swains tried to find and rescue her from her tower but they all got caught in the briars and
“That’s a comedy?” Jani asked.

“Yes, because she was rescued by a young handsome pig herder. He got through because his devoted pigs ate the briars. They then got to the tower and he went through all kinds of things to try and climb the tower. He eventually did so by persuading his pigs to stand on each others’ backs so he could climb up. When he got there he found the lady, now old and fat. They had a discussion and while they did, the pigs leaned against the tower. The tower was very old and fell down. The herder and the lady were saved because the pile of pigs stood firm and they climbed down the pigs and went home where he told everyone in his village she was his long lost aunt and they lived quite happily ever after. He married and had a family and she wrote poetry about the brave pigs.”

Everyone laughed. Dain drained his tankard and regarded Jim.

“Tell me, laddie how in Mahal’s name di’ yeh perform tha’?”

Jim laughed.

“Carefully, your majesty, very carefully.”

“Tell us!” Kili demanded.

“Please tell us, Jim dear.” Dori added refilling the man’s drink.

“Thank you, Bearer. Very well, we have a prop we put together as a tower. It’s about eight feet tall. The day before we perform one or other of us goes down to the pub and picks out ten able bodied people to dress in our pig costumes. The way the pig tower works is having six people on all fours then four people on all fours on their shoulders, then two on top of them then one pig on top to assist the herder and the lady.”

“That sounds ridiculous!” Gloin guffawed.

“It is,” Jim assured him. “That’s part of the comedy. The volunteer ‘pigs’ are often drunk and the pile frequently falls over while being built and they try all different ways of building something to reach the window with a great deal of silly piles of people all over the stage.”

“Will you be performing this play at the coronation?” Fili asked.

“If the story is based on Ubqim’s behavior,” Thorin said, “Probably not, but if you would be so kind as to give a private performance, I’m sure you’d have plenty of volunteers to be pigs.”

There was a loud ‘oink’ from Chopper.

“Aye, laddie, aye, if we ge’ a performance, yeh kin be in it,” Dain promised lovingly.
Regalia, Royalty, and Ribaldry.

Chapter by Stevie Foxx

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Wardrobe time and people are starting to arrive! Which thrusts the burning question upon your loyal authors! What should they have for breakfast? Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrows time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori snuggled into Dwalin’s back and sighed. The bed at the inn was huge and nice but this was his and Dwalin’s bed. He kissed the skin his cheek was pressed against. Dwalin rumbled in his sleep. Ori sighed happily. Dwalin was his One. He was happily married to his One. Nori and Dori were with their Ones and they were all happy and comfortable. Ori kissed Dwalin’s back again and slid an arm around Dwalin’s waist. He tangled his fingers in Dwalin’s belly fur. Dwalin chuckled and his hand covered Ori’s.

“Mornin’, love.”

“Good morning, husband mine.”

Ori tightened his arm around Dwalin’s waist.

“You are my prisoner,” Ori hissed in what he hoped was a scary way.

Dwalin strained against him but not enough to break free.

“I’ll be free a’ yeh soon!”

“No, you won’t,” Ori told him. “I am so much stronger than you. I’m a fierce pirate king and I shall steal all your treasure.”

Dwalin struggled valiantly, then, “Bloody pirate! Yeh’ll never ge’ me treasure!”

“Hah!” Ori growled as best he could, rolled Dwalin over, and straddled his waist.

“You, my fine dwarf, are going to be tortured until you tell me where the treasure is!”

“Never!” Dwalin barked, frowning terribly but the sparkle in his eye made Ori delight in their little game.

“Yes, my fine dwarf, you shall know the terror of the great suffering of-”

“Breakfast!” Dori called through the door.

Ori snarled in frustration as Dwalin burst out laughing.

“Go away Dori,” Ori shouted. “Dwalin and I are - are in the middle accomplishing Illustration 20!”
There was a snort from Balin and Dori replied coolly.

“If you were doing that, pet, you wouldn’t be able to talk.”

“Fuck,” Ori grumbled.

Dwalin was still recovering.

“How do you know?” Ori fired back.

“Practice makes perfect, pet. Now hurry up.”

“Rubbish,” Ori said, then he leaned over Dwalin and kissed his nose. “Are we going to have to wait until we go to the inn again to get any peace?”

“Nah, we’ll find time, love.”

When Ori and Dwalin entered the breakfast parlor they found Nori shoveling eggs into his mouth and Balin shaking a finger at Dori.

“It was to remember you by,” Dori protested with a winsome smile.

“And t’ give t’ yer wee brother,” said Balin.

“To remember you b y. Besides, I didn’t have my Ori yet.”

“Yeh had Nori.”

The two dwarves looked at each other and burst out laughing. Nori shot them both a filthy look.

Eventually, when the two of them had calmed down, Dori said to Balin, “Darest, you’re not very angry, are you?”

Nori snorted.

“Please! If you chopped his hand off, he’d still be makin’ excuses for you.”

“I’m no’ angry, me beloved,” said Balin, taking Dori in his arms. “Considerin’ how it’s all turned out, mebbe it’s how Mahal meant it t’ be.”

Nori muttered something about resting his case.

Ori sat down and Dwalin dropped into the chair beside him. Dori poured tea and ordered them to eat. Ori helped himself to fried eggs, crispy bacon and fresh, still hot scones. There was a tureen of porridge, thick with nuts and dried red currants.

“Dori,”

“Yes, pet?”

“I went to see Master Vobwi on the way home yesterday to pay him for Kihshassa. He said he would like call and see the kittens and Brandy. He was very pleased with Kihshassa. He said he hadn’t thought she would last a day.”

Dori nodded.
“I shall tell Mistress Dazla, so whomever is home when he calls, they can show him the little ones.”

Fili and Kili bounded in and pounced on the food. Thorin followed, reading a letter, Roäc on his shoulder.

“What’s th’ news, laddie?” Balin asked as Dori poured tea and made a plate for Thorin.

Thorin thanked Dori and smiled.

“Bilbo wrote to say Tharkûn has made sure that Bilbo and Frodo have arrived safely and extremely quickly in Gondor. Mr. Denethor has been mollified and is quite delighted with the finale of ‘The Heaving Bosom of the Ocean’.”

Everyone in the room snickered.

“I hope Estrella sorts things with Captain Cockrell,” Ori grinned.

Thorin looked sidelong at Ori.

“I’m sure she will and they will live happily ever after as pirates sailing the high seas.”

“You don’t think he’ll take back his kingdom and settle there?” Dori asked.

Thorin considered.

“Very likely, but I’m sure when the king needs a holiday, they will go and be pirates again.”

“Or go off and stay in a fancy inn,” Kili observed to Fili who, as his mouth was full, could only nod in agreement.

Dis bustled in.

“Sorry, I can’t stay. I’ve a meeting with the guild of weavers.”

Dori poured her tea and created a bacon and egg sandwich with a couple of scones. Dis threw back the mug of tea, bumped foreheads with Dori and disappeared out again, breakfast in hand.

A few moments later Dain and Sculdis blew in. Sculdis was leading Dain by the hand as Dain was busy reading the house copy of the The Heaving Bosom of the Ocean. He crashed into a chair and mumbled thanks as Dori handed them each tea.

“Mornin’ all,” Sculdis said cheerily. “Don’t expect too much from me hubs this mornin’. He found tha’ when he got up in th’ dead o’ night f’r a tinkle an’ bin readin’ ever since.”

“It’s a good story,” Ori told her.

“Aye, quite Shire’s best,” Balin agreed.

“Shire’s missin’!” roared Dain.

Thorin raised a hand.

“Calmly cousin, he’s been found and is currently in Gondor delivering the rest of the tale to his publisher.”
Dain stared open-mouthed at Thorin. Ori had never seen his eldest brother so shocked. Thorin took a sip of tea and glanced at Dain. Thorin was obviously thoroughly enjoying himself.

“How in Mahal’s name d’ye know tha’?” Dain demanded.

“Tharkûn’s ways are mysterious.”

“Bah,” Dain muttered. “Wizards, they cause trouble. Shire better watch his arse.”

“Considering Shire must get ideas for his writing from things he’s heard about or seen, I imagine he’s perfectly capable of handling himself.”

“Mmm,” Sculdis opined. “Yeh finished wi’ that, love?”

Dain handed over the book and Sculdis put it in her pocket.

Bofur came in.

“Mornin’ all. Nice t’ see yer majesties back from the Iron Hills. Keepin’ well, ma’am?” and tipped his hat to Sculdis.

“Bofur!” cried Sculdis. She rose out of her chair to cuff him.

Bofur grinned, sat by Nori, and started filling his plate before Dori could get to it.

Dain drank back his cup of tea. Dori refilled it and Dain drank that back, too, slammed the cup down gently, and glared at Nori.

“Wha’s all this ‘bout yeh gettin’ married, our Nori?”

Nori grinned maniacally and Bofur looked pleased.

“Thanks f’r yer felicitations, melud,” said Bofur. “Thought it best t’ make an honest dwarf a’ him. Dori write ya?”


Thorin chuckled.

“I thought it best to allow them to explain themselves to Bifur.”

Bofur and Nori exchanged glances and Bofur paled a little.

“Aye, we’ll hafta go int’ hidin’,” said Bofur. “Our Bifur might be a tad displeased not gettin’ a chance to be at a weddin’. He pulled all the stops out f’r Bom and Erda’s. Bought ’n roasted ’n ox.”

“Roasted ox,” Sculdis said dreamily.

Dori smiled serenely. “I believe there will be six roasted ox for the coronation dinner.”

“Tha’ takes care a’ Dain,” said Sculdis. “Wha’ a’ th’ rest a’ us?”

“An’ none a’ th’ family there t’ witness it,” Dain continued at Bofur and Nori as if ox were no object.

“Not true,” said Nori. “Granny Klak was there. I’m her favorite.”
Dori and Ori looked at each other, then at Nori and chorused, “Gran-ny’s Precious Ba-dger!”

“That’s right,” said Nori, satisfied.

“Now, my love,” said Klakuna swooping into the room to wipe the egg from Nori’s chin. “You know I don’t play favorites.”

“Grandmama!” Dori cried, pouring her tea.

“Good morning, all!” Klakuna sang. “Ooooo, bacon.”

A raven flew in and landed in front of Ori.

“Eggr, I be,” the raven announced.

“Hello, Eggr.” Ori wondered why Brur’s raven had come. The raven stuck out a foot and Ori carefully removed the slip of paper tied around it.

“Wee brother?” Balin asked and Ori read the note.

“Brur says to meet him at the library front steps at the first afternoon bell.” Ori told them.

“Well, you better finish your breakfast and get a wiggle on, pet,” said Dori, “you’ve only an hour until you’ve got your meeting with your royal scribes.”

Ori thanked Eggr and gave him some bacon. After polishing this off, the raven flew out.

“Where would you like us to meet, Thorin?” Ori asked.

“We can meet in the office,” Thorin replied, finishing his third scone. “Might as well start as we mean to go on.”

Mistress Dazla entered with Miss Oqizla and young Master Agirb to restock the table. Shortly after, the Groin household came in. Omi, Loli, and Buj bounced over to sit near Ori. Gloin and Oin bellowed welcomes to Dain as Gridr and Binni rushed to embrace Sculdís.

“Oh, my dear, I can’t wait to show you what I’ve done with the throne room!” Binni cried.

Ori swallowed. Binni’s redecorating had completely slipped his mind, though he couldn’t see how.

“Oh!” Binni cried. “I forgot those fabric samples for the bathroom. Be back in a shake!”

Ori wondered if Binni had already eaten breakfast, and if so, what had been in it.

“Dori, tell me he’s not thinking of upholstering the toilet.”

“Of course not, pet,” said Dori. “The bathtub, however, may not be as lucky.”

Thorin passed Ori the butter.

“You haven’t seen the throne room yet,” said Thorin.

“How much damage could Binni have done in a week?” Ori wondered.

“I’m not sure it’s actually ‘damage’ but I’ll certainly be the first Durin king whose throne is covered in throw pillows.”
"Throw pillows?"

"Oh, yes, in the various official 'colors' of my loyal retainers. Apparently Binni and Dipfa collaborated."

Ori drew in a breath of horror.

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes. You haven't lived until you've seen rhodochrosite and jade plaid wool with russet silk fringe. The jade's the only thing that keeps them from looking like they're made of bacon."

"I suppose there are red and pine green plaids, too?" Ori ventured.

"Stripes. In satin. As bolsters."

Ori couldn't see Thorin lounging over such pillows, eating xocolatl truffles while deliberating the fate of some noble evildoer. Binni had somehow mixed up Thorin with Dori.

"Go on, tell 'im wha' else," Dain prompted Thorin. "He's strong enough. He can take it."

"Binni actually admitted to me he'd sat on the throne itself. Just to get some idea of the layout, of course."

"Of course," said Ori.

"He said he immediately saw the problem, and so set out to fix it."

"And the remedy was?"

"Snowbear pelts draped over the seat and back. He said the pelts were mithril-colored enough to lend a regal air, but they would also alleviate how cold the throne is against one's family jewels."

"Oh, Binni," Ori groaned.

"Yes, apparently he sent to my charming cousin," Thorin eyed Dain, who chuckled to himself and muttered about 'decor', "and Dain was more than happy to oblige."

"I was ecstatic t' oblige," Dain confessed merrily.

"Those considerations aside, Binni said the most important thing was that Bilbo have a comfortable place to sit," said Thorin.

"Awfully sure of himself, isn't he," said Ori dryly.

"I suppose I can see his point," Thorin mused. "Everything in the throne room is balanced just so. It would throw off the symmetry to put another throne on the dais."

Ori reflected that the queens and consorts of the Durin kings had never even had thrones upon which to sit. When their presence was required they stood to the left of the king.

"He's small enough, cuz," said Dain, eyes twinkling. "sitting up there, he certainly wouldn't crowd yeh."

"But, at the coronation all the under monarchs have to approach the throne to swear loyalty," said Ori. "Can everything be put back in time for their arrival?"
"I have no intention of having it put back," said Thorin.

"Balin, you must be having kittens!" Ori cried.

"He does go rather grim-mouthed whenever it's mentioned," said Thorin. "Ah, see, there he goes now."

"You just want to see how the other kings and queen react!" Ori accused.

"I already have a good idea of how they will react. I'll bet any money that Chat, at least, takes one look at it and laughs himself sick."

"It's possible I might be sick."

"Don't get sick yet, I haven't even told you what Binni did to the dais itself."

"What has he done?"

"Apparently, he took his cue from the ceiling of Balin and Dori's bedchamber."

"There are mirrors on the ceil-!" Ori abruptly shut up, wincing. He had a feeling he'd let the badger out of the basket. "Sorry, Dori. Sorry, Balin."

Dain raised an eyebrow at Sculdis. They both raised an eyebrow at Balin. Bain turned redder than his own robe. Dain threw back his head and laughed.

"An' ye said ye didn't like mine! Said it was tacky!" Dain cried. "Rascal! I feel like such an inspiration!"

"Er... there are a lot of mirrors in their bedchamber," said Ori to Thorin. "Binni didn't replace the entire throne room ceiling!"

"Of course not."

"Thank Mahal!"

"Even for dwarrow that would take weeks. No, he faced the stone blocks of the dais with mirrors at strategic points along the entire height. Other blocks are faced with lapis, jade and amber, ruby and opal. I was actually surprised how well it looks. It could have come out like a warg's breakfast."

Ori didn't quite trust the sanguine look on Thorin's face.

"Um... Thorin, are you feeling well?"

"I haven't felt this well in almost a century. I've been dreading the coronation my entire life. Now it's here and I'm going into it better prepared and better supported than I ever thought possible."

"Aye, an' now he's go' a flashier throne room than me," said Dain around a mouthful of egg.

"You've been served notice, cousin," said Thorin. "Time to step up your game."

Ori decided he'd try conversing with his fellow scribes. It seemed like a safer bet, especially when Binni came bounding back through with something that looked like strips of pink fish scales.

Buj was calm but both dams were in equal tizzies over the fact that both Pika and Furh'nk had
Omi and Pika had walked in the meadow while Loli had talked to Furh’nk on the deck. Ori wondered if Furh’nk got a word in edgeways but decided that Furh’nk would be happy enough to sit, listen, and admire.

Loli turned to Ori, her mouth full, managing,

“Is it true Master Jansad is going to be working with us?”

“Yes,” Ori confirmed, still a little dazed over the events of yesterday. “Masters Jansad, Kacuho, and Nodun will be joining us. I do hope we will all work well together.”

Omi squeaked.

“So exciting! Oh, I do hope they don’t think I’m a dolt!”

“I am looking forward to informing my precious diamond that I will have the privilege of working with Master Nodun,” Buj volunteered. “My precious diamond tells me Master Nodun’s artistic skills are formidable.”

“Yes,” Ori agreed. “Thorin told me that, too. Her father was the editor of Vug magazine and she was the principle artist before she went on to become a head of the scribes guild.”

“Are you finished, pet?” Dori inquired.

“Yes, and I’m off to get dressed up, Ori’s Dori,” Ori smiled, Kissed Dwalin’s cheek, and excused himself. He went to his room and made sure his hair and ears cuffs were properly set and put on a dark green duster before catching his satchel. He returned to the table for a final cup of tea.

A few minutes later, Mistress Dazla came in and announced that the three head scribes were coming through the royal cavern entrance in a shay. Thorin, Ori and the other three rose and went through to the receiving room. The front doors were open to the new day and Ori saw the small cart being taken in hand by Mokrah as Kacuho and Nodun assisted Jansad down from the vehicle.

The three masters came in and bowed to Thorin.


Ori introduced Loli, Omi, and Buj to the masters. Kacuho and Nodun looked amused and Jansad looked very pleased with them.

They repaired to Thorin and Balin’s office. Balin had their contracts to be scribes to the high king waiting. Jansad looked almost feral as she signed hers. Ori considered that, after what the scribes’ guild had been through with Sikar, it was quite a triumph for the three of them to be personal scribes to the king. The high king of dwarrow at that. Sikar would squirm when he found out. Ori smiled at this thought in vicious pleasure.

He looked forward to writing that missive himself. Perhaps there were some advantages to being first chair after all.

After a short meeting, Jansad asked after the preparations for the coronation. Buj announced that his precious diamond was seeing to his scribe mitts. Ori swallowed his shock as this was the first he had heard of such.
“The coronation robes are kept in the archives,” Nodun stated. “Perhaps, Master Brur might be requested to assist?”

Thorin glanced at Ori.

“I have a meeting with Master Brur this afternoon,” Ori said. “I will be sure to ask him to help.”

“Yes,” Nodun agreed. “The mitts are quite legendary. Your precious diamond has tailoring experience, Master Buj?”

Buj swelled but Ori hopped in.

“Yes, she is assistant to Master Mahrdin, son of Greneeld. She is one of the dressers to the royal house.”

“Oh, yes,” Kacuho looked interested. “Who is she?”

Ori looked at Buj wth a smile.

“My precious diamond,” Buj intoned, “is Dipfa of the House of Fa. Fa is her father and her mother rejoices in the name of Dip. They combined their names for their daughter in the symbolic union of their true love.”


Buj sat like a happy tar bubble ready to burst. He positively beamed at Nodun. She smiled and slid a look at Kacuho, who was also rather amused. Jansad had an eyebrow cocked.

“Was Master Mahrdin responsible for the Bearer’s presentation robe?” Jansad asked.

“Yes,” Thorin confirmed.

“Fuckin’ eh.” Jansad muttered under her breath.

After lunch, precisely at first bell, Ori presented himself at the library.

Master Brur cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Yer lookin’ f’r copies o’ th’ S’tuk an’ Whilf?”

Ori should have been beyond surprise that Brur’s first words weren’t “Good Afternoon” or “How’re yeh keepin’?” or even “Eh, yeh again.”

“It’s good to see you too, Master Brur,” said Ori with a sunny smile, just to turn the knife.

“Bah, c’mon then.”

Instead of going to Brur’s office, they went to a nondescript door in a nondescript hall and the door opened onto a stairway which, while lit, appeared to plunge into the guts of Arda.

“Archives,” said Brur, shortly. Then he continued, “I knew when tha’ Sikar weasel started lookin’ f’r th’ scribes’ guide it stunk like an orc’s breath. I took every copy I could find an’ shoved ‘em in a box under me desk.”
“You have a desk?” Ori teased.

Brur started to descend and Ori followed him.

“It’s tha’ largish heap in th’ middle a’ me office,” said Brur. “No one finds anythin’ in me office unless it’s me. I call it ‘job security’.”

“So, everything Loli, Omi and Buj know—“

“I taught th’ silly badgers meself. They learned more fr’m me parcelin’ it out than they would’ve under a guild master nowadays.”

About fifteen minutes later, after Ori lost count of the number of flights and landings, they made a sharp turn into a hallway which lit, mysteriously, as they passed.

Ori said, “How is that accomplished?”

“Ghosts,” said Brur. “Kiddin’.”

A few more steps along the corridor and then,

“Here it is,” said Brur.

They were deep in the archives now, deep in Brur’s domain. Ori had expected it to be dark and perhaps covered in cobwebs. It was dark, because constant light would damage many of the more fragile objects. Dwarrow were perfectly capable of making fragile things, they just preferred objects that were large, hefty, useful, and, if possible, nigh unto indestructible.

Rather than dusty and dank, however, the place was disturbingly clean and cobweb-free.

“This is… tidy,” said Ori.

“Part o’ th’ archivists’ jobs.”

“We have archivists?” Ori asked. “I thought the pages ran back and forth.”

“They do. Archivists stay down here. Don’t like light. I swear they’re part mole.”

Ori looked around for mole-like dwarrow, but he supposed they scattered at the sound of approaching feet into whatever bolt-holes they could find.

By the instant lamplight, lighting their path and extinguishing behind them, they passed by looming statues of warriors and scholars, glass-fronted shelves crowded with seals and badges and a few things Ori really couldn’t identify. A small brass box, almost spiked with jagged fingers of amethyst, nestled among the debris.

“What is that?” Ori asked.

“Balls of Durin IV,” said Brur.

“What?”

“Jus’ havin’ yeh on, try an’ keep up.”

“Is that a bowl of warg teeth?”
“Aye, they were used as game pieces.”

“For what game?”

“No idea.”

“Pen nibs?”

“O’ Durin th’ Deathless. No barrels, though. Apparently he used t’ chew on ‘em ‘til they were less than toothpicks.”

They walked on.

The air grew colder, as if they were descending deeper into the mountain.

“Take a look,” said Brur, gesturing toward an open door way.

They stepped into a vast room lined with shelves filled with clear glass boxes. The light flashed on and the walls sparkled. The light reflected off the glass, and off the rainbow of colors within. Ori blinked until he could focus on what he actually saw.

“This,” said Brur, “is th’ great Bead Room o’ th’ Durins.”

The Durin beadmakers were obviously overachievers.

“May I?” Ori asked.

“Just wipe the drool off ‘em when yer done.”

Ori was aware time was limited, but he couldn’t help himself. It was like candy when he was a badger, except not edible. In fact, he had to restrain himself from licking every bead he saw. Oh, the cobalt roundels and amethyst barrels! The jet and marcasite double ended faceted and the carved lapis tubes! The-

He took a deep breath.

“All right, I’m overloaded. Let’s move on.”

They went down a long corridor where portraits hung down each side of the hall, some a thousand years old. Ori felt as if he were watching the entire evolution of dwarven painting, starting with slightly mannered and simplistic shapes and slowly evolving toward realism until they nearly looked like the real things.

“Kings an’ queens o’ Khazad-dum an’ Erebor,” said Brur.

He knew Queen Kivi before he even read the name plate. He could swear she winked at him.

As they reached the end Ori stopped and looked up at a stern, pale, black-haired dwarf with one eye patched and the other very blue. Ori cocked his head, thinking he’d met this dwarf before, but he couldn’t think where.

“This looks like Dwalin,” said Ori. “But also like Gloin and Thorin.”

“Tha’s Prince Thrain, Thorin’s adad. He did have those Durin features.”

“He doesn’t look very happy.”
“Yeh kiddin’? Tha’s him fit t’ bust out laughin’. He was th’ original Gloom Biscuit o’ Erebor. An’ then there’s his wife, Princess Freris.”

A dark-skinned dam glared out at them from across the hall. The beads in her yellow hair and beard showed the same apple green as her eyes. Her mouth was a thin, hard line.

Ori looked back and forth and, honestly, could not imagine these two dwarrow in the same room, never mind married.

“Was she his Heart Song?”

“Nah, she was his shield-siblin’, daughter o’ barge-dwarrow from th’ Orocarnis, Blacklock, and Firebeard bloodlines.”

“Her parents ran a barge.”

“Aye, sound familiar?” Brur chuckled. “She was rather like Dwalin in her ways, nasty as Mordor on th’ battlefield. Thror kept pressurin’ Thrain t’ marry, give him an heir. Canny o’ Thrain t’ pick someone who actually loved him. Whether she liked him, well, tha’ changed day t’ day. Sometimes hour t’ hour.”

“She died when Frerin was born.”

Brur snorted.

“She popped him out an’ was back on patrol a week later, an’ th’ midwife had t’ practically tie her down t’ get her t’ sit still tha’ long. She died th’ next day, takin’ down a stray orc pack by herself.”

“She didn’t wait for help?”

“Wha’ d’yeh think?”

“I guess that’s a ‘no’.”

“I swear she was part Durin, too.”

They moved on until they reached a metal door with the rune for ‘scribe’. Brur picked out one key from a ring of about five hundred and fit it into the lock. Ori had no idea how Brur chose just the right one, they all looked the same to him.

“Take care o’ this room meself,” said Brur.

The lamp flickered - and failed.

“Wha’ th’ fuck?” Brur demanded.

A familiar voice in the dark said, “Your housekeepin’ ain’t up t’ snuff, pardon my sayin’ so.”

“Nori!” Ori cried.

Indeed, one tiny light in the ceiling blinked on and it was Nori, perched upon a steel and glass case.

“Yeh! Out!” Brur growled.
“Aw, now that’s no way to treat a guest.”

“Nori,” Ori warned. “I wouldn’t.”

Nori sighed.

“Oh, alright. Spoil me fun.”

He rolled over backward into the shadows and was gone.

“Sorry about that,” said Ori.

“Never mind, I’ve dealt with worse. Long’s he left things where he found ‘em.”

An ornate silver candlestick flew through the dark and Brur caught it.

“Thank yeh. An’ while yer at it, put on th-“

All the lights in the room glowed to life.

Ori swallowed.

The case where Nori had perched held a mannequin wearing ancient and ornate robes.

“That’s them,” said Brur.

They were velvet, cut in the oldest style, a metallic grey overtunic to about the knee under a meridian robe with voluminous sleeves to the elbow, then closer cut from the elbow to the wrist. A hood of plum with a dagged edge topped the robe and the tail of the hood ended in a tassel of seven silver stars.

“Mahal!” Ori gasped to Brur. “I’m supposed to wear that?”

“Well, not just tha’. Yeh do have t’ come up wi’ yer own tunic, hose an’ underpinnin’s.”

“Hose?” Ori held back a giggle.

“I s’pose yeh could go barelegged,” said Brur, “bu’ yeh’ll find it awful drafty.”

“How about leggings, and we’ll leave the rest in the lap of Mahal?”

“Now yer spoillin’ me own fun. Yeh go f’r yer boots yet?”

“Yes.”

The bootmaker had made him a pair of tall boots in deep plum to match the robes.

When Ori asked how the bootmaker knew how dark to make them, she had turned to him with a raised eyebrow and said, “Our family’s only been making them for a couple thousand years, m’lord.”

“And have yeh gone t’ th’ glovers yet f’r yer mitts?” Brur asked.

“I’m going to ask Dipfa.”

Brur shuddered.

“She knows they got to be white kid, righ’? An’ she knows why?”
“I’ll insist they stay white, beyond that, who knows. I have to give her something to play with. She was upset when she found out she couldn’t make the scribe’s coronation robes. Or make over the robes, anyway. I can just imagine, orange-red fur around the edge of the hood with a Fundin green velvet band to back it.”

“Speakin’ o’ mitts.”

The next case over housed a macabre collection of hands sticking out of the platform. They were actually alabaster marble, left and right, and on each pair, a set of white, kid mitts, the oldest yellow with age, but all of them blotched with black ink and finally each signed in the palm by the original wearer and the date and king’s name of the corresponding coronation. The oldest had come from Khazad-dum when the Durin kings settled in Erebor and had blurred with time, but the set from Thror’s coronation were still crisply legible.

Ori swallowed.

“I’m really going to do this,” he said.

“Aye, yeh really are,” said Brur.

Ori pulled his shoulders back.

“I am going to do this,” he said firmly.

“No one who knows yeh has any doubt,” said Brur. “Let’s get th’ robes an’ get our arses outa here. Those hands always give me th’ creeps.”

Brur took a large lump of canvas from a chest and unfolded it into a sheet. Together he and Ori undressed the mannequin and carefully folded the robes, placing them on the canvas. This done the canvas was wrapped securely around the robes and Ori took up the package and followed Brur out. Brur locked the door and they headed back along the corridor.

“I guess we’d better start climbing,” said Ori, looking up the stairs.

“Yeh kin, if yeh want,” said Brur, “but I’m takin’ th’ lift.”

“There’s a lift?”

“Aye, I’m too old t’ be sloggin’ up tha’ mess.”

“Then why did we come down the steps?”

“Figured yeh could use the exercise. Besides, nothin’ atmospheric about a lift. No romance.”

“And we all know what a romantic you are, Master Brur.”

“Aye, just ask Master Sadi.”

“I - what?”

“Nice a’ yeh t’ make her a scribe t’ th’ king. Too bad she’s goin’ t’ kill me when she finds out I had those guides.”

“You didn’t tell her? You deserve to die!”

Brur chuckled.
“I know.”

The lift was quite utilitarian, just metal walls and ceiling and floor, but of enormous size. Ori thought it must be handy for moving statues and crates.

“How long have you two been… friends?” he asked Brur as they ascended.

“Depends on how yeh define ‘friends’. We’re each craftwed, bu’ we been flirtin’ f’r at least a century. Then old Thror popped off, and I met her again at the funeral.” The grin on Brur’s face was positively filthy.

“You fooled around with her on the day of Thror’s funeral?”

“Don’t be nasty, badger. We waited until after midnight. Yeh an’ Dwalin didn’t, I suppose.”

“I passed out drunk at the feast. I don’t even remember midnight. i don’t even remember how I got home.”

“Ah, t’ be tha’ young an’ foolish. I don’t have tha’ kind a’ time t’ waste. Queen Kivi servin’ yeh?”

“I’m still reading it,” said Ori, positively refusing to blush. “Thank you for lending it to me. I’ve decided I need to translate it into westron.”

“Really? My! Aren’t we full a’ surprises. That goin’ t’ be yer mastery project?”

“I keep running into people I know who could use it!” Ori went on, ignoring Brur’s comment. “Besides me, I mean. The chapter on inter-species sex alone would be invaluable.”

“We do seem t’ have quite a bit a’ fraternizin’ goin’ on, don’ we,” said Brur with a chuckle. “It’s f’r th’ best, I say. We keep goin’ on like this, there won’t be anymore dwarrow t’ keep goin’ on like this, an’ if there are, they’ll all have six toes on each foot an’ an ear in th’ middle a’ their foreheads.”

“I wouldn’t just be translating it for the young and foolish,” said Ori. “We have plenty of older people who need it. Look at Thorin and Bilbo. Look at Bard and Thranduil.”

Brur slid a grin of scandalized glee at Ori.

“Thranduil? Thranduil th’ elf? Th’ one tha’ looks like he was born suckin’ a lemon an’ enjoyin’ it? Tha’ Thranduil?”

“Do you know any other Thranduils, Master Brur? I thought you’d enjoyed a conversation with him?”

“Nah, I did. I jus’ like sayin’ nasty thin’s about him. He’s good f’r rememberin’ thin’s, though. I am a bit shocked, come t’ think on it. I thought Bard had better taste.”

“Oh, Thranduil’s not a bad sort, once he, um, takes that stick out of his arse.”

Brur laughed, actually laughed in a deep, booming voice that bounced off the lift walls.
Ori rode to Mahrdin’s establishment on Honda with the long package across his knees. He went in. Dipfa came out of the back room and hopped over in delight at the sight of him.

“Lord Ori! Whatever are you doing here? Have you something special there?”

“Yes, Dipfa, look.” Ori showed her the parcel.

Dipfa squeaked and took it from him to lay it on a long table. She carefully unwrapped it and gushed.

“Ooo, Lord Ori! The coronation robes of the high king’s scribe. How well you’ll look in these!”

“I suppose. Master Brur says I have to come up with my own tunic, hose, and underpinnings. What do you think? The idea of hose makes me feel a little weird.”

Dipfa pursed her lips, regarding the robes and pondering possibilities.

“I think we should dispense with hose and instead make a snug pair of breeches of that black green satiny material you wore at our dear Bearer’s presentation. I’ve been working with a leathersmith on a matching belt with an emerald-studded buckle to go around the grey tunic. I picked up your boots yesterday and will bedeck them with cords capped with diamonds and emeralds, to complement the tassel of the diamond stars on the hood. How glad I am I picked just the right shade of blue.”

“Blue?” Ori asked.


Ori hoped he didn’t do anything that would make him lose his breeches as the blue underwear would blind everyone.

“I’ll sponge and iron these and bring them right up to you,” Dipfa went on. “Really, I don’t think they will take much tailoring, perhaps a tuck here and there. I’ll bring them over with your mitts later this afternoon.”

“Oh,” said Ori, “I was going to ask you about those. Now I don’t have to. Thank you, Dipfa.”

He left her murmuring lovingly over the robes, smoothing them, completely absorbed.
Ori rode home and, after caring for Honda and turning her out to frisk in the meadow, went in. He entered the sitting room to find Lady Dori holding audience with an overwhelmed Master Vobwi.

“Oh, my dearest Ori is so good with all our little furry babies,” Dori was saying. Dori was a cloud of pale primrose gauze and her hair was loose and flecked with beads of gold. Her neck was wrapped in a beaten gold collar from chin to shoulders. Her arms bore beaten gold wrist and upper arm bands. Her fingers were covered in gold rings. Her feet were bare but for a dainty golden chain of tiny bells on each ankle. Ori thought Dori had Mistress Dazla cast some gold dust over her before she received her guest.

Ori glanced at Master Vobwi. The dwarf was wide-eyed and fascinated by the Bearer.

“There you are, pet,” Dori cooed and pattered across the sitting room to enfold him in a filmy yellow embrace.

Ori hissed “You’re terrible!” in Dori’s ear, eliciting a giggle. Dori took his hand and led him over, while Ori brushed the gold dust off himself.

“Here is my darling badger, Master Vobwi.”

“Good evening, Master Vobwi,” Ori said politely as the bewildered dwarf stared blankly up at him.

“Yes, yes,” Vobwi managed. “I…er…I-”

“Master Vobwi was just admiring our precious kittens and dear, sweet Brandy,” Dori explained. “He was agreeing with me that Kihshassa has done a wonderful job with them, thus restoring herself to perfect health!”

Ori rather thought Master Vobwi would agree if Dori suggested they nail the sitting room furniture to the ceiling.

“Indeed, indeed,” Vobwi tried, but lost himself in staring at Dori again.

“Such a nice time we’ve had, pet,” Dori said, smiling charmingly down at Vobwi. “Do drink your tea, dear Master Vobwi. You musn’t let it get cold.”

Vobwi jumped visibly, drank down his tea and hurriedly ate the slice of cake on his plate.

Dori fussed Ori into a chair and served him tea and cake. Ori looked at the very yellow cake with yellow icing and took a bite. It was sweet, moist, and lemony. Ori enjoyed his cake while Dori chattered about how adorable the house animals were.

“And my dear younger brother, he’s between my Ori and myself, so enjoys his baby ferrets. Such darling, naughty creatures, I do declare! He and his husband are quite diverted by their antics. Why the sweet things keep trying to eat his lovely husband’s hat. Have you ever heard anything so amusing?”

Vobwi blinked but Dori didn’t stop to see if he would say anything.

“And our own Brandy. She is the most precious thing, you simply cannot imagine! My dear betrothed combs her fur everyday. Her black stripes are coming in and she is going to be quite beautiful! And she’s growing so fast as you saw for yourself! Why she might become the biggest badger ever seen. I’m all a-flutter of excitement when I think of it.”
Ori finished his tea and decided it was time to rescue Master Vobwi.

“Master Vobwi,” Ori raised his voice slightly and it was enough to drag the dwarf’s attention from Dori.

“Shall we talk gold?” Ori suggested.

Vobwi pulled himself together and shook his head.

“No, no, Lord Ori. Certainly not. I still hold tha th’ fruit bat’s return t’ health is on this side of a miracle an’ havin’ visited your home, I can readily see why.” He rose and bowed very deeply to Dori.

“Blessed Bearer, it has been the greatest honor to wait upon you. An honor and a privilege.”

Dori giggled charmingly and rose, extending her hand to Vobwi.

“You are far too kind, dear sir. You have been charming company and I am so grateful you found these dear little creatures to share our home with us. I shan’t forget, you know.”

Vobwi saluted Dori’s hand, bowed again, and Ori escorted him out through the receiving room.

Mokrah had Vobwi’s goat ready in the courtyard as they exited the house.

Vobwi turned and looked at Ori.

“Mahal’s hairy balls, everything they say about Bearers bein’ magic’s real. I feel like I’ve been bloody enchanted.”

“Are you alright?” Ori asked.

“Aye, aye, ‘m fine. All I kin think ‘bout is wha’ I wan’ t’ give th’ Bearer f’r presents. Mahal, what an amazing experience. I feel like I’ve become a better dwarf f’r it. Thankee, Lord Ori, thankee very much.”

“You’re most welcome,” Ori said, though he really had no idea why.

Master Vobwi rode off and, as Ori watched, he passed Dipfa and Poot-poot heading towards Fundin House.

Dipfa steered Poot-poot into the drive and got down. Mokrah greeted her and took Poot-poot’s bridle while Ori came to see what Dipfa would have to say. She was obviously carrying his dress robes and there was a net bag on her wrist.

“Ah, Lord Ori,” said Dipfa. “I have your mitts, as ordered.”

She held out a box.

“That was certainly a swift job, Dipfa.”

“Oh, at the atelier we’ve all been bent on preparing our clients for the coronation. We really do have the finest clothiers the guild can offer.”

He took the box, opened it, nearly sighed in relief to see they were still white, kid mitts.

Then he got to the cuffs.
They were also white, but they were silk and crocheted into the Ri family pattern with the finest edge of tiny ruby and emerald beads.

He raised an eyebrow.

"I hope you don’t mind," said Dipfa sunnily. "I figured they’d be hidden by the sleeves of your robe."

"Yeeees. Until they go on display for all eternity in the archives," said Ori, shaking his head.

She bit her lip. He sighed and bumped their foreheads together.

"They’re lovely, Dipfa. You’ve done a wonderful job."

"I live to serve the Durins through my art, Lord Ori," she said, blushing.

"Do come in," Ori invited and took the net bag as she refused to surrender the robes.

As they crossed the receiving room, Ori murmured, "Dori is in high fettle. She just received Master Vobwi."

"That explains it," Dipfa nodded. "I said ‘hello’ to him and he said ‘Goldfinches or canaries? How does one decide?’”

"He’s overcome by Dori and wants to give gifts," Ori explained.

Dipfa giggled.

"I hope our dear Bearer likes birds."

They came into the sitting room and Dori bustled through from the kitchen with a large mug of tea and a sizable chunk of cake on a plate.

"There you are, our Dipfa," she cried. "I know you’re busy but I’m sure a tiny piece of cake and a little tea will do you a world of good. You are staying for dinner aren’t you. I’ve told dear Mistress Dazla to set you a place."

Dipfa shot Ori an amused glance and bowed.

"You are too kind, Bearer, I would be delighted."

Dori followed them to Ori’s bedroom and put the tea and cake down on Dwalin’s desk. Dipfa laid her burdens on the bed and unwrapped them. The coronation robes looked amazing. Ori swallowed. Somehow Dipfa had created the belt she had described and the boots were likewise decorated as she had planned. She unwrapped another parcel.

"I had the sewing assistant run you up the breeches." Dipfa grinned.

Dori hurried over and together they grabbed Ori and he was naked in seconds.

"Dori!” Ori protested.

Dipfa shoved him into the screaming blue underclothes. Ori caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and groaned. He looked like an angry indigo bunting.

A few more moments and Dipfa turned him again to face the mirror. Ori gaped. He could hardly
believe what he saw.

The robes fitted him perfectly. Seeing them on a mannequin was one thing, but seeing himself wearing them was another. He stared. In a matter of months, he had changed from a scruffy little back alley scrivener to a royal scribe to the high king of all dwarrow. He wondered if he’d grown taller. With his new way of doing his hair and the robes, he looked older. He came to himself again at the sound of Dori bursting into tears.

“Oh, my darling badger. You look beautiful. So grown up. You look like everything I’ve ever dreamed for you. I’m so proud!”

Ori leaned forward and clasped Dori’s forehead to his own.

“You should be proud of yourself, Ori’s Dori. You are responsible for all of it.”

“Dearest badger,” Dori murmured, pressing hard but with restraint. It would not do to embrace Ori, thus covering the robes with gold dust.

Dipfa sniffed loudly and had to apply her handkerchief.

Dori and Dipfa stood back and began to critically scrutinize Ori’s ensemble.

“Walk about, pet,” Dori ordered. “Are the boots comfortable?”

Ori walked about the room. The boots were the most comfortable he’d ever worn. The robes rippled around him. He felt rather royal wearing them. He grinned to himself and executed a spin like King Thranduil had at the inn. Dipfa shrieked in delight and Dori laughed.

“Now, pet. Don’t you go trying to be all elf-y over these robes. Whatever will your husband think?”

“He’ll think ’is husband looks a treat,” Dwalin said from his place in the doorway.

Ori ran over and hugged him. Dipfa squeaked about crushing the tunic.

“What do you think?” Ori asked, grinning up at Dwalin.

Dwalin smiled softly at him.

“I think yeh look bloody brillian’, love.”

“Right,” Dori was all business. “We need to get you out of this finery and set it aside for our Thorin’s big day. Run away, our deary. We have to get my badger back into his everyday clothes.”

Dwalin came in and shut the door. Dori huffed but didn’t voice any objections. Ori snickered at Dwalin as Dori and Dipfa stripped the robes off him.

“Wait until you see the under clothes,” Ori warned.

“I’m likin’ them britches, love,” Dwalin grinned.

The blue underclothes went on display and Dwalin roared with laughter.

“I’m thinking I’ll use them as a bathing costume next time we’re at the inn,” Ori stated.

“No, you won’t,” Dori and Dipfa chorused and hurriedly got him back into his own
underclothing. Dwalin whistled rudely anyway.

Once he was back in his everyday clothes, the entire party went back into sitting room again.

“Gondorians have sent a forward party,” said Dwalin. “They’re comin’ through Dale now.”

“How do you know it was them? Were they wearing the Gondorian colors?” Ori asked.

“Nah, they stopped at th’ bakery. Comin’ out front t’ meet ‘em with me?”

Ori followed him through to the front door.

Shortly, a knot of five riders entered the royal cavern, each on a fine horse and all equally rumpled and dirty from travel. Dwalin and Ori descended the steps as the riders dismounted in the courtyard and the lead rider approached.

He was tall and lean, handsome in a mannish way, perhaps a little younger than Bard. His dark brown hair fell just below his shoulders and framed his beard, neat and trimmed as in the way of men. His eyes were bright blue and he had an open smile. He alit from his horse and murmured to it,

“Mae carnen, Brego. Mellon nîn.”

He wore dark brown clothing, a large sword at his hip and his leather cloak was fastened at his throat with a leaf of Lórien brooch. About his neck was a chain that ended in a mithril pendant with white gems.

An elf woman descended neatly and the man held out his hand to her with a smile. She took it and they came forward. She was dressed in dark green and leather, a great war bow across her back.

“Yeh King Elessar’s herald then?” Dwalin asked, looking the younger man up and down.

“I’m King Elessar,” he replied, proffering a tidy pink box. “I brought eclairs.”


Ori bowed with great respect, all the while half expecting Elessar to trip over the idea of two married males, but Elessar only looked delighted and bowed in return and drew forward the tall elf woman.

“My intended, Lady Arwen Undómiel of Imaladris.”

Ori hadn’t expected to see such a highborn elf lady heavily armed and spattered with mud. She was dark haired and eyed, very beautiful in the way of elves. Ori recalled she was considered to be the image of the great elf lady Luthien, but she had a terribly familiar smile.

She curtssied to their bows.

“A pleasure, Captain Dwalin, Lord Ori. I’ve heard so much about you from my grandmother Lady Galadriel and her… er… friends Mistresses Vi and Margr.”

“You’ve met them?” Ori asked, shocked.

Elessar looked pained and Arwen snickered.
“They introduced themselves at the bakery,” said Arwen. “They were quite out of breath. Apparently they had run the entire way?”

“I believe it,” said Ori.

“Then they complimented my bottom,” said Elessar.

Dwalin lost hold over a snort and Arwen lofted her eyebrows with a little smile.

“It is quite decorative,” she teased.

"If you say so, dearest,” said Elessar. "I haven't seen it recently. Captain Dwalin, Lord Ori, this is Boromir, son of Denethor, captain of my royal guard.”

This other man looked about the same age as the king but he was built on thicker lines, his beard and hair blond. The great horn of Gondor hung from a lanyard about his neck. He was dressed much like his king, but with a great scarlet cloak. He shook hands with Dwalin and bowed to Ori.

“This is a great pleasure, Captain Dwalin,” said the man. His voice was rough, rather like Dwalin's, Ori thought. Must be all that growling orders through a dangerous smile. “I've long heard of your exploits.”

Dwalin laughed.

“All th’ way out in Gondor? Yeh don’t have much t’ talk about amongst yerselves, then.”

“May we impose upon you to stable our horses?”

"Aye, Gibi there'll help with the horses. Right now I'll take his majesty and her ladyship inside, an’ when yeh an’ yer men’re ready, Lady Klakuna’s waitin’ t’ show yeh around t' th’ guest rooms.”

Elessar looked a little startled.

"They're staying in guest quarters?” he asked.

"Yes,” said Ori, “in Durin House.”

“Are there enough rooms?” Elessar asked.

“There are two hundred rooms,” said Ori. “King Thorin says it's a pity to let them go empty. Is that satisfactory, King Elessar?”

Elessar grinned.

"That's perfect! Ha! I wonder if Celeborn knows yet."

Arwen nearly hopped with glee.

"Grandfather will be so shocked! He might even change expression!"

Ori thought he would sweeten the deal a little.

"There is also a troupe of traveling performers staying with us, The Great Woudini and His Court of Miracles."

Elessar chuckled.
"Arwen, isn't he the one who told King Thranduil that his son would marry a dwarf?"

She put her hand on his forearm, practically agog.

"I believe it is!"

"Oh, Mahal's hairy arse," Ori breathed.

"Add our Vi and Margr t' th' mix an' it'll be a circus on its own," said Dwalin. "Yer majesty, yer highness, if yeh'll come with me."

"You go on, dearest," said Aragorn. "I'll help with the horses and join you in a moment."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, go and have fun. Who knows? Maybe Mistress Vi and Mistress Margr will arrive to admire your bottom as well."

"Are they likely to do that?" Arwen asked as Dwalin and Ori led her toward the house. "Arrive, I mean. My bottom is rather flat. We can't all be as lucky as Elessar. Anyway, will they?"

“Aye,” Dwalin grinned. “Th’ sisters’re always underfoot come time f’r one o’ Dori’s teas. Quite chummy with yer gran. They call her ‘Our Gladdy’.”

“Oh, Grandmother didn’t tell me about that,” said Arwen. “Wait until I see her. Imagine her holding out on me! Is Bearer Dori at home to visitors? I would like to pay my respects. I also hear the tea is excellent.”

“If you didn’t come to tea,” Ori told her, “Dori would never forgive you and no one would ever hear the end of it.”

“Including me,” said Arwen, knowledgeably.

They went ‘round to the front door and then Dori was upon them, having ‘freshened up’. Ori supposed Mistress Dazla’s ‘little bird’ had told Dori everything. Dori now wore customary plum, a long silk duster, and an equally long scarlet tunic beneath, embroidered all over with plum roses, the petals of which were perfectly cut amethysts.

“Lady Arwen! You naughty thing! You should have sent a message ahead and we would have been out to greet you properly! Our deary, why is our esteemed guest coming out of the stables? Really! And where is her intended?”

Ori whispered, "And where are my eclairs?"

“Bearer Dori? I’m so happy to meet you at last!” Arwen cried. “I’ve heard so much about you from Grandmother, I feel like we’ve already met!”

They embraced rapturously.

“Ah, dear Lady Galadriel! I feel as if she and I are sisters!”

“May I call you ‘auntie’ then?”

“Of course, my dear, of course! Ooo, you’ve brought pastry! How nice!”

Dori and the elf lady disappeared into the house and shortly thereafter, Elessar exited the barn,
grousing back, apparently at his soldiers.

"All right, all right. I know when I'm not wanted."

"Yeh seem t' have been left in the gutter, yer majesty," said Dwalin wryly. "Yer intend's been spirited away by our Dori. Don't know if they'll even notice yer missin'."

"I'm used to it," said Elessar, grinning like a fool. "Care to bear me company, Captain Dwalin?"

"I know it well," said Dwalin.

"No, you don't!" Ori cried, scandalized.

"With such a pretty husband, I'd say I do," said Dwalin fondly.

Ori snuggled up to Dwalin and said to Elessar, "Had you a pleasant journey, your majesty?"

"Actually, we did," said Elessar. "We just weren’t expecting the mud from the building project."

"Building project?" Ori asked as they turned to go into the house.

"Beaver dam. Rather embarrassing for a former ranger."

"Yeh at least get a couple o’ hats out’ve it?" Dwalin commented making the king laugh again.

The moment they entered the house Mistress Dazla pounced.

"Ah, your majesty, please follow me."

"Of course.” Elessar grinned at Dwalin and Ori, then followed the housekeeper upstairs to be shown into his room.

Ori looked about. The receiving room fires were lit and burning bright. The furniture was being rearranged around the room.

He slid his hand into Dwalin’s hand.

“So the kings are staying in our house and their parties are at the old royal residence? Is that how it was in the old days?”

“Nah,” Dwalin chuckled. “When ol’ Thror were king we an’ Gloin an’ Oin housed everyone an’ they had t’ go visit the king. Bu’ I were jus’ a lad back then an’ it were only dwarf kings tha’ visited.”

“So,” Ori mused, “Thorin really is turning everything around. Kings of all races will stay with us.”

“Aye, Thorin ain’t gonna keep folk apart an’ if there’s a chance t’ talk trade, it’ll happen.”

“And they can thank Thorin for it.”

They were now in the sitting room. Dori was deep in earnest conversation with Binni.

Ori heard something about lace and spangles and decided he didn’t want to know.

Dipfa sat on the floor by the fire place talking with Floris, who was cuddled up against Biscuit. Chopper sprawled on the sofa, snoring. It appeared that Dipfa had disposed of her tea and cake by
then.

Dori came over. “There the both of you are. We’re getting the receiving room ready to sit in as there’ll be a lot of people soon.”

How d’yeh know tha’?” Dwalin asked. “There’ve been messages?”

“Oh no,” Dori breezed off. “I can just feel the tingle of excitement in the air.” Dori and Binni disappeared into the kitchen. Dwalin and Ori looked after them then looked at each other.

“Think Dori’s pregnant?” Dwalin asked.

“If she isn’t,” Ori replied, “she’s definitely working on it. Mind, sometimes Dori just knows things. Maybe it’s the maternal side of being a Bearer.”

“’R jus’ bein’ Dori,” Dwalin observed.

“Welcome to my life,” Ori said dryly.

Dwalin laughed and kissed him.

“Come help me get me glad rags on, love.”

Hand in hand they went through to their bedroom. There Ori dressed himself in his purple suit and Dwalin put on his dress uniform. They took time to do each others hair and jewelry, before heading back to company.

When they returned, the sitting room was empty but for Chopper still snoring on the sofa. The door was wide open to the receiving room and Ori could hear Dori chatting.

Clean and well-rested, Arwen was dressed in a long pale green gown with filmy sleeves and trimmed with white lace. She stood before the fire and Dipfa was involved with her clothing. Ori heard Dipfa telling Dori that she thought that a simple, long, red velvet gown with a short, black velvet surcoat would show the elf lady off to great advantage. Arwen looked amused and intrigued.

Elessar wore a light brown shirt and breeches all covered in a rust colored surcoat. He relaxed on the couch with his pipe in hand. Floris sat on a stool beside him. He watched her put Biscuit through his paces. Brandy was attempting to copy the warg. Mask perched on Elessar’s knee cap. Powder was curled in Dori’s lap and Nori-Pori and Kihshassa supervised Dipfa and Awren.

“There you are, pet, our deary,” cried Dori. “Come and have some tea.”

The company were on their third cup of tea each when Thorin and Balin finally arrived with a jovial Bofur, and a rather annoyed Dis. The knuckles of her right hand were wrapped in a bandage.

“King Elessar, Lady Arwen,” said Thorin, bowing, as the royal couple came forward. “I bid you welcome to Erebor, and I apologize for my late arrival. I was engaged in keeping my sister from cold cocking the grand master of the miners’ guild.”

“Was your endeavor successful, King Thorin?” Elessar asked.

Bofur chuckled. Balin looked amused. Thorin seemed to be composing something politely innocuous to say. Dis was having none of it.
“He was still laid out when we left.”

“My sister, Princess Dis of Erebor,” said Thorin, catching up.

Elessar’s eyes sparkled.

“Congratulations, ma’am, if they are in order.”

Dori took Balin’s hand and introduced her darling intended, then introduced “Lord Bofur, unfortunate husband of my brother Nori.”

“King Elessar, Lady Arwen,” Dis interrupted, giving a graceful curtsey. “I accept your congratulations, gladly, in order or not. If you’ll excuse me for a moment, I have to find some ice and a needle and thread. I cut myself on the Master Eyarn’s tooth jewelry.”

In a mild tone, Dori said, “How very shocking, my dear. Let us see what can be done.”

“Ha!” said Nori from somewhere underneath the couch. “I won twenty gold on that. Never bet against Dis!”

Elessar looked around, but said nothing.

“My brother Nori, husband of the ‘unfortunate Bofur’,” said Ori. “To the furniture he said, ‘Nori, it’s King Elessar and Lady Arwen.’”

“Ah! Top o’ the whatever t’ ya both!”

Elessar grinned.

“And to you, Lord Nori.”

Somewhere below them a door slammed, then the rug rose up and hand extended from under the edge. Elessar went and bent over the rug, shook the hand gravely and watched as it vanished, the rug sinking flat once more. Thorin and the Gondorian couple sat down and Dipfa began lurking around Elessar, muttering about deep blue gray.

“People come and go very quickly here,” said Ori, pouring Arwen another cup of tea.

“Indeed,” Arwen agreed. “Oh, please pass the… er… iklars?”

They both giggled.

“We have these in Gondor. How did the recipe get here?” Arwen asked.

“Dal, son of Lal, the baker? According to Margr and Vi, he has an aunt who’s a foreigner,” said Ori. “You know, from Gondor.”

Arwen grinned at Elessar.

“Do you hear that, my dear? We’re foreigners!”

“Perhaps I should wax my mustache and affect a funny accent,” he replied.

Ori shook his head.

“You’d need a silly hat.”
“Frightfully!” Dwalin commented making Ori burst out laughing.

Dori and Dis returned shortly.

Dis nabbed an iklar out of Thorin’s hand and ate it in two gulps.

"Dis!" he complained.

"Don't whine. I can count and I know you've already had three."

"I'd best put on more tea," said Dori. "Vi and Margr should be here momentarily."

"You don't think they've run here straight from Steam Alley?" Ori asked.

"If they thought it was necessary, I'm sure they would, pet, but in this case I sent Mokrah with the carriage for them."

"You didn't!" Ori cried with a grin.

"Of course I did. Do you think we'd be forgiven if they weren't invited to the center of the chaos?"

"I'm amazed they haven't moved in here yet," said Ori.

"I did offer them one of the newly emptied noble house under the mountain, but they declined," said Dori.

"Why?" Ori asked. "Those houses are a lot more solid than anything back in Steam Alley."

"Think about it, pet. Would you rather be a lady in waiting under the mountain, or an empress in Dale?"

"Ah, I see."

"Waiting up in the parlor for Lord Balin’s coachman to call for them? Riding through the neighborhood back and forth in style? Besides, between them and their brother, they know more about the comings and goings there than anyone else.” Dori giggled delightedly. "Oh, and they don't just live in those two rooms anymore, either. They took the whole upper floor."

"The whole floor? Really?" Ori was rather amused. Dwalin rolled his eyes and made a face at Elessar, who widened his eyes.

"And," Dori added, "pay their landlady to clean for them and to cook for them out of her kitchen in the basement. They are quite the dams about town."

“How very elegant,” Arwen observed with a secret smile for her betrothed.

There was the noise of a door through in the sitting room.

"Aragorn! Arwen!" Legolas cried. He entered the receiving room with Gimli.

The royal couple rose to welcome them.

"You're late, Greenleaf!" Elessar barked and they embraced.

"No," said Legolas, "just like a wizard, I am always just where I should be when I should be.
You, however, are unfashionably early."

"Shockin'," Gimli agreed.

Elessar's eyes lit up.

"Are you who I think you are?"

"Depends on wha' yeh think I done," said Gimli.

"That's my line!" Nori cried from the ceiling. "And they call me a thief!"

"Good day to you, Nori," said Legolas to the ether before turning back to Elessar.

"Aragorn, Arwen, this Gimli, Gloin and Gridr's son."

"Ah, so you're the famed Gimli Gloinul!" Arwen said, curtsying.

Gimli gave Legolas a stinkeye.

"Wha're yeh tellin' people abou’ me?"

"I've been telling absolutely everyone about how short you are," said Legolas, hugging hello with Arwen.

"Fuckin’ tree-shagger."

"I have never actually shagged a tree," Legolas informed all present.

"Does sound painful," Elessar shook his head.

"Mahal's bloody arse," snapped Gimli. "Now I got one in each ear. Or, I beg yer pardon, I would if I were tall enough."

"I like him," said Elessar. "I'm thinking he could probably spit nails."

"Swallow them, rather," Legolas snickered. "He certainly wouldn't waste all that iron."

"Tha's it!" Gimli roared. He seized Legolas by the torso and effortlessly flipped him upside down. Legolas giggled. Really, he could put his hands down flat to the ground if he chose to, but obviously that wouldn't be any fun.

"Don't drop me, Gimli! I'll break a nail!"

"Yer arms won't save yeh if I drop yeh hard enough."

"Should we be worried?" Arwen asked, leaning over and cocking her head, so she could see Legolas properly.

"If we were outside, perhaps," said Legolas, crossing his arms in total unconcern. "Gimli isn't going to splatter my brains all over Dori's nice clean floor."

Gimli sighed and tumbled Legolas over and onto his rear on the slate, then muttered something about revenge served cold.

"There he goes again," said Nori, sounding disgruntled from behind fireplace.
"Legolas, where is Tauriel?" Arwen asked slyly. "I wasn't aware you were old enough to wander around without your nanny."

"Ha. Ha," said Legolas. "You aren't that much older than me, Arwen. What's a few centuries?"

"The thing that allows me to torment you for being the youngest. Is she with this Prince Kili I hear so much about?"

Legolas looked down his nose at her, as much as he could, anyway.

"Possibly," he said.

Thorin rose as a cloud of ravens flew in the open front doorway. They immediately converged to perch on Thorin as if he were a park statue, all of them chattering to him at once.

"I don't suppose one of you could talk at a time?" Thorin shouted.

The din continued unabated until Roäc, on top of Thorin's head, gave a particularly loud, rude caw.

"Ahem," said Roäc.

"Roäc," said Thorin.

"What? You want them to be noisy again?" the raven asked.

"No, but I'd like to be able to talk to you where I can see you," said Thorin.

"Oh, all right. Si'down," said Roäc. "Make a space, you lot. I'm coming down."

He did so, hopping to a stop on the table covered in tea things, preening unconcernedly and looking around the room until his gaze alit on Elessar. He flapped over, landed on Elessar’s arm and strutted along it with a happy caw.

"You made it!" he cried.

"As you see, King Roäc. May I present my intended, Lady Arwen? I believe she was off visiting her father when you delivered your original message."

"The one about the asshat." Roäc bobbed at Arwen. "Milady."

"Your majesty, it's a pleasure to finally meet you," said Arwen.

"Ooooo, you have manners," said Roäc. "Quite a novelty with this lot."

"Excuse me, you ungrateful, gibbering turkey," said Thorin. "I believe there were messages to deliver?"

"Yep, keep your crown on." Roäc flew back and landed on Thorin’s shoulder. "Theoden King is about a half hour away, skirting Dale since he has fifty riders with him. You'd think horsey people would travel light, but no. Next?"

Garnet hopped forward.

"King Thranduil and his eldest son approach from the forest. They will be here by sundown and the elfling's having a major sulk."
"Great Eru!" Legolas laughed. "Ada dislodged my brother from his tree? That's going to be one very grumpy owl."

Thorin grunted.

"Something to look forward to, anyway. I've had a few cases of the best Dorwinion wine brought up from the cellar for your father. Should hold him at least through dinner."

"Next," Roäc cued.

There was a bit of a scuffle to be next, but finally Beryl hopped forward, spitting some feathers from her beak to drift across the table.

"There's my girl," said Dis.

Beryl puffed up her chest.

"Lady Galadriel says..." Abruptly, Beryl's voice changed into the elf lady's smooth, lilting voice, 'We'll be popping in once Celeborn's hair is dry.'"

"He washed it?" Thorin asked. "What an honor for us."

In her own voice Beryl said, "Lord Elrond's sons dumped a bucket of green gelatin over his head."

Arwen groaned.

"Would you guess those are my older brothers? Oh, well, I suppose this is what Grandfather gets for refusing to play with them when they were tots."

Mica, obviously not thrilled at being bested by Beryl, winged everyone else aside and said, "Tharkun's taking a bubblebath down the hall. He says to wake 'im once the food is ready."

Ori said, "This time he really isn't dressed for dinner."

"Does anyone else have any news?" Thorin asked. "Such as, when the other dwarrow might arrive?"

Sapphire piped up, "King Snur's about a day away. Ahkn and Ulfr will be here first thing tomorrow."

"What about King Gheir and Queen Hild?"

"They'd already be here if they hadn't stopped for a fistfight in the Orocarni foothills," said Sapphire. "At this rate I'm guessing they'll be here some time next week."

"Wonderful," said Thorin. "The two of them can spend their visit in our infirmary."

"You have quite the information network," said Aragorn to Thorin. "Very thorough and loud. Do you even need to use dwarf agents?"

"Oi!" Nori cried from the fireplace flue. "I resent that besmirchment upon me professional skills!"

"My apologies, Lord Nori," said Aragorn.

"Yep, well, just buy me a pint."
"How exactly does he do that?" Arwen asked. "The walls must be riddled with tunnels."

"If they are," said Balin, "they're from before me udad's day."

Legolas watched the tapestries flutter, as if tracing Nori's passage. He leapt up and pulled the last away from the wall, but there was no one behind it, no passage, not even an alcove or doorway.

"That's not possible," he said. "There's literally nowhere for him to go." The elf prince began running his hands over the stone wall, intrigued.

A moment later, Nori walked through the door to the sitting room with a jam sandwich.

"Lookin' fer me?" he asked, grinning.

"Nori, how did you get into the kitchen?" Legolas asked.

"Went 'round through the passage behind the curtain, naturally."

Everyone in the room started at him and Ori shivered.

Legolas held away the arras.

"What passage?" he asked.

"Whad'ya mean' what passage'? Use yer eyes. It's right there."

"Show me."

Nori shoved the rest of the sandwich into his mouth, wiped his hands in passing on a chair back, walked past Legolas - and vanished through the wall.

Gimli made a slight choking noise but other wise the room was silent.

Legolas reached and rapped his knuckles against the solid stone.

Dwalin swore as Nori's head reappeared.

"You comin' or not?" he asked Legolas testily.

"I don't think I can," said Legolas.

He moved his hand to just above Nori's shoulder and knocked once more.

Ori said, "Nori, I don't think there is a passage. I think you walked through the wall."

Just for a moment, Nori's face registered shock and fear before his mouth curled into a ravenous grin.

"Oh, just think what I can do wif this!"

"What about Assault and Battery?" Ori asked in a panic.

Nori glanced up as if he could see his hair. Perhaps he could, Ori thought. Nori whistled sharply.

Two little, furry snouts and two pairs of shiny black eyes poked out.

Elessar jumped and Arwen "Eeped" with surprise, then got hold of herself.
"I beg your pardon," she murmured.

The ferrets scrambled out over Nori’s shoulders, down his arms, and started burrowing through the various pouches on his belt.

"How sweet," said Dori dryly. "Like father, like sons."

"I'll have you know they're daughters," Nori sniffed.

Dori marched over to him and smacked him in the head with a tea towel.

"Oi! What was that for?"

"For wiping your filthy paws on my clean furniture. Get out of there."

Nori shrugged and stepped forward.

"Have you always been able to do that, Nori?" Ori asked.

"I dunno. As far as I can tell, there's always been a tunnel there." He narrowed his eyes at Dori. "Mebbe one o’ them ‘Bearer spillin’ over’ things happened."

"Well, there goes that project," said Thorin. "I was hoping you'd be able to remap the tunnels."

"Maybe there is a limit," said Dori. "Nori, did you not say you tried to get into the room when I was trying on my presentation robes, but couldn't?"

"Aye, couldn't figure it out," said Nori. "I'd used that tunnel lotsa times."

Dori smiled and nodded, pleased.

Bofur slid around her and patted Nori about the chest and shoulders.

“Here, what’re you on about?” Nori asked.

“Makin’ sure ya still got all yer bits an’ pieces.”

“No worries,” said Nori with a leer. “The most important bit’s still there.”

“So you’ll be in good shape if we have to run away from home.”

“We already got married,” said Nori.

“Not to elope, Nori, to flee. Bifur, remember?”

“Oh, aye. Bound t’ be a little a put out, I suppose.”

“My hubby’s the master o’ understatement,” said Bofur. “One little axe in me cousin’s fore’ead don’t mean he can’t still use that boar spear, y’know. Shove it right up yer-”

“Lo!” came the bellow from the front doorway.

Bofur choked.

“Mahal’s bloody arse, it’s Bifur!”

As if conjured by invoking his name, Bifur was in the room. He didn’t have his boar spear but he
didn’t really need one to look terrifying.

“Bofur, Son of Scur!” Bifur roared in khuzdul. “Without even asking permission!”

Bombur strode in behind him, face as red as his beard.

“And without even a cake!” Bombur cried.

“Da, please,” Randibur pleaded, holding on to one arm while Erda had the other. “Let Idad Bifur handle it.”

“Da! Mam! Randi! Idad Bifur!” Omi and Loli cried, bursting in from the sitting room and rushing them like a miniature pack of orcs, effectively blocking any action beyond hugs.

Bifur, however, was loose and, Bofur and Nori having the sense to flee, he gave chase.

Ori could see the guests were just mystified.

Bifur shouting in khuzdul did nothing to clarify the situation.

The Durins watched the scene unfold with interest.

Dori turned to Arwen.

“More tea, dear?”

Bifur chased Bofur and Nori around the room, over the furniture, and finally backed them into a corner, advancing with menace.

Nori grabbed Bofur by the wrist and yanked him through the wall.

Bifur’s mouth slammed shut with a crash and he managed a whispered, “What in Durin’s fuckin’ name?”

“They’re through in the sitting room,” guessed Ori, rising.

“They are what?” Bifur demanded, whirling on him.

“They’ve gone through the wall into the sitting room,” Ori clarified, then realized exactly how that sounded and gave up on explaining. “Come on!”

Bofur and Nori sat on the floor, Bofur with his eyes huge and staring, his hand clutched hard in the front of Nori’s tunic.

“Darlin’,” said Nori, “y’ got me chest hair there.”

“I know,” said Bofur in a small, rasping voice.

“Righty-o,” said Nori, trying without success to unclasp Bofur’s fingers.

“What goes on here?” Bifur demanded, yanking them both to their feet by the shoulder.

“Me new trick,” said Nori. “I can walk through walls.”

Bofur said, “Did you know you could take me with you?”

“Well, no,” said Nori. “Not exactly. I figured Assault and Battery were safe enough.”
Bofur growled, “What d’ya mean ‘not exactly’?”

“Calm down. You’d’ve been left on the other side o’ the wall anyway. Bifur’s less likely t’ kill you than me.”

“And if you’d let go o’ me while we were in the rock?”

“Er, we won’t think about that, right?”

Nori didn’t have to worry about Bifur. Bifur had to keep Bofur from sluggin’ his husband.

“Oi! Bo! Calm down!” Nori cried, making a strategic withdrawal behind Bifur.

“You moron! That was just like a fuckin’ mine collapse! Ever been stuck in one?”

Nori groaned.

“Aww, Bo, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize. I can’t even see the rock, obviously.”

Bofur huffed out a huge, shivering breath of air.

“Nori, we’re never doin’ that again. Ever.”

Bofur took another breath then sighed and grabbed Nori into his arms.

“Don’t bloody scare me like that, love.”

Nori wrapped his arms around Bofur and hugged him, he muttered in Bofur’s ear and Ori hoped it was apologies. Ori decided he would withdraw back to the receiving room. Bifur followed him muttering about ingrate badgers.

“Welcome, dears!” Dori greeted Bombur and Erda, who by now had thoroughly hugged their daughters. The Urs were introduced to the guests and given tea. Bifur repaired to the fireplace bench and began carving something. Soon Nori and Bofur came through the door and Nori flipped into a chair and sat Bofur in his lap and Assault and Battery sat in Bofur’s lap. Ori sat down beside Thorin, feeling strangely tired for a moment.

Captain Boromir soon entered, was introduced and enjoyed a conversation with Bombur and Erda. General chatter resumed for about five minutes.

Jani came in and was greeted with the usual chorus. The miner bumped heads with her family and kissed Dis, then gently grasped her by the wrist, inspecting the bandages.

“Oi, our Dori,” said Jani, “why’s Dis’ hand wrapped up and why’s our Bofur grayer than granite?”

“Oh, Dis socked Master Eyarn at the miners’ guild meeting and Nori pulled Bofur through the sitting room wall.”

“Is that all?” asked Jani, smirking at Dis. “I hope yeh laid ‘im out, lovely.”

"Hel-lo!” a voice bellowed from the receiving room door.

Ravens scattered, cawing.

"Ah," said Dori. "Vi and Margr have arrived."
"Oh, Mahal," said Thorin, "we've eaten all the iklars."
“We brought iklars!” cried Vi as the sisters burst into the room, identically dressed in clouds and billows of pink and orange taffeta with dyed, hot pink bird plumes in their hair.

Elessar rose politely. Roäc ducked between Thorin and the arm of his chair and rasped, “My fanny feathers’re in danger.”

“Roäc, no one wants your fanny feathers,” said Thorin. “They aren’t poofy enough,”

“Are you saying my fanny feathers aren’t what they ought to be?”

“Calm down, Roäc, you’re a raven, not a snowy egret.”

Thorin rose and bowed.

"Ladies, welcome. We’re just brewing a new pot of tea.”

“Ooo, yer so kind, our majesty, ain’t he, Vi.”

Vi was already fixated on the newcomers.

“We come t’ see if tha’ nice foreign king feller an’ his elf lady made it all this way without bein’ robbed on account a’ their pastry. How’re yeh keepin’, yer majesty? Yer highness?”

“Very well, thank you, mistresses,” said Arwen, rising to curtsey.

“Oh, that’s right, Vi, we ain’t been properly introduced, have we?” Margr brayed.

Dori, knowing her part only too well, glided forward.

“Mistress Vi and Mistress Margr of Dale, I am pleased to present Lady Arwen of Imladris. She’s Lady Galadriel’s granddaughter.”

The room was instantly engulfed in the cooing of very large, blindingly colored pouter pigeons.

“OOooooooOooo!” they shrieked in unison.

Biscuit raised his head in alarm, Assault and Battery darted back to the safety of Nori’s hair. Chopper was heard to moan from the sitting room. Boromir, who had slid silently into the room after
the sisters, crossed to stand behind Elessar and watched the sisters with a fascinated air.

Margr and Vi descended upon the elf lady in a storm of words and fluttering. To her credit, Arwen only looked momentarily terrified before plastering a gracious smile on her face. Really, her part was easy, simply to be pretty and agreeable and murmur ‘Most kind’ whenever a pause offered, which wasn’t very often.

“So very like yer gran.”

“Yer king feller certainly has an eye, don’t he.”

“Now, yeh’ll tell us if he’s no’ a perfect gentleman, won’t yeh.”

“Aye, an’ we’ll sit him down right quick f’r a little chat.”

The two of them gave Elessar ‘the eye’.

Ori thought, Mahal above, your majesty, don’t laugh.

Elessar merely bowed and said, gravely, “Understood, mistresses. I am devoted to my lady’s happiness.”

Margr and Vi were giddy with this response but turned their attentions back to Arwen.

“Well, we’re just that dee-lighted yer here, lassie!” Vi told her.

“Oh yes,” Margr agreed. “Now do let us give you a kiss.”

Arwen leaned down to each dam and received a resounding smooch on the cheek. Legolas snorted and Arwen shot him a look that spoke of revenge.

“You’re so kind, mistresses. It’s just as Legolas said. He was just telling us how he’d missed you both terribly while he was away.”

“Oooo!” cried Vi. “How sweet!”

The two rounded on the startled prince and instantly surrounded him.

“Let us give yeh a kiss then, too, laddie,” Margr threatened.

“Ladies,” he said, bowing and thus at the right height to receive smooches, which they bestowed noisily.

“Such a nice, sweet-faced lad,” said Vi.

“But so thin! Our Dori, can yeh no’ get him fattened up?”

“Never mind, laddie, yeh’ve a nice, shapely bum, which our Gimmers will appreciate.” Vi punctuated her statement by patting the shapely article.

“Already does,” Gimli grunted but made a strategic retreat as Ori saw Gloin and Gridr enter from the sitting room and greet the Urs. Dori introduced the Gondorian royalty to them and Gloin latched onto Elessar and pulled him aside to talk trade with Balin. Boromir followed with a grin to Arwen.

Oin and Buj came in and were presented. Buj immediately went to his precious diamond and they soon had their heads together over something. Ori presumed it was either Buj’s flight ideas,
Dipfa’s ideas about making the queen presumptive of Gondor a new wardrobe or both.

Upon hearing where Lady Arwen was from, Oin frowned.

“Here, our Dori you shouldn’t say such things. I’ve got great respect f’r Elrond as a healer but t’ say his daughter comes from bein’ ‘in a mess’ ain’t nice. Mind, I’ve heard things about those boys of his.”

Fortunately for Arwen, Oin moved away to speak to Bifur. Ori watched as the poor elf lady tried in vain to school her features but couldn’t. Arwen choked. Binni smiled up at her.

“It’s adorable, isn’t it. After all these years, I still haven’t figured out whether or not he does it on purpose.”

“Really?” Ori couldn’t stop himself from asking. Binni nodded serenely and Arwen giggled into her hands.

“He does have a point,” she managed. “After what Grandmother said about my brothers.”

“Yes,” Binni went on, “by the way, your ladyship, what is your dear grandfather’s favorite dish?”

Arwen looked a little surprised then said,

“There’s a bread he always talks about that was very yellow, made with eggs and braided but he doesn’t know what it’s called. He’s also very fond of fresh radishes but Grandmother doesn’t like it when he eats them.”

“I can understand that quite readily,” Binni smirked. “We do have some of that bread. Excuse me, I shall tell Mistress Dazla to make sure we have it at dinner and to have plenty of it during his stay.”

Binni drifted off to the kitchen and Dori bustled over.

“Now pet, Arwen dear, have you had enough to eat? We’re clearing away the tea things to get ready for dinner and I have to dress. If you like, Arwen dear, my pet can take you out to the meadow. I know how you elves do like to be outside.”

Ori led the lady out through the sitting room. Arwent glanced oddly at the sofa where Chopper was lying on his back, snoring.

“That’s King Dain’s battle-boar,” Ori explained. “He’s very fond of him.”

“He’s very large,” Arwen said in a rather awed tone.

“He’s also very intelligent,” Ori told her. “But unlike the ravens, he can’t speak, which is probably a good thing.”

Arwen digested this.

“Auntie is going to change?” Arwen asked as they entered the breakfast parlor. “I thought the lavender and red was lovely.”

“Yes,” said Ori with a snicker, “for the third time today. I wonder what she’s got for a dinner costume?”

“Costume? Oh, this is beautiful,” Arwen enthused looking about the meadow and far out over
the protective barrier. Mirkwood was a dark shape and the River Running bounded down to the Dale to laze its way to the Long Lake. The ponies grazed in the meadow, which was now nearly covered in blossoming wild flowers, while the goats, who could easily hop over the barriers, were leaping and running up the mountain. Ori giggled to himself. He knew he shouldn’t, but Gnasher and Grinder looked funny having being shorn for the summer.

“Grandmother!” Arwen cried. Ori turned and saw that the Lady, King Thranduil, a sulky looking younger elf and Celeborn had appeared in the middle of the meadow. Arwen ran lightly to them. Thranduil looked amused. Celeborn bowed his head with his hand over his heart which Legolas had told Gimli was how elves traditionally hugged. Lady Galadriel smiled sweetly and opened her arms to her granddaughter. She looked up at Ori. He waved and hurried indoors.

“Dori,” he called when he reached the receiving room. Dori looked up from her conversation with Binni.

The tea things had disappeared and Dori had changed remarkably quickly. She was now dressed in what looked like a sheet of gold wrapped about her, making a long robe and shoulder scarf. Once again her hair was loose and the gold jewelry she had worn for receiving Master Vobwi was back in place.

Next to Dis, Jani was dressed as she had been when Ori had first met her at the Durin’s old household. Jim and Ruelis had arrived and were chatting with Elessar and Boromir.

“What’s going on, pet?” Dori asked. “Did Arwen fall down?”

“No, Lady Galadriel, Celeborn, Thranduil and another elf are here.”

They came in with Arwen at that moment.

“Thrandy!” Dori squealed and rushed over in a cloud of gold dust to embrace the king. Thranduil opened his arms and swept down to one knee to receive the delighted Bearer. Galadriel looked amused and Celeborn and the unknown elf appalled. Everyone else in the room rose and came to greet them.

Dori also embraced Galadriel. Celeborn looked confused as to what he was to do, so Dori politely held out her hand. Celeborn bent to kiss it and bowed civilly to everyone else.

“Oh, I’m ever so pleased you’ve all come. Thrandy! Margr and Vi-”

“Yer majesty! Our Gladdy! So lovely t’ see yeh!” The sisters bellowed and pounced on the elves. Galadriel managed an eager squeal of delight to see them and Thranduil complimented their gowns. When the entry noise had calmed a little, Thranduil turned and motioned the unknown elf forward.

“King Thorin, Princess Dis, Blessed Bearer, may I present my eldest son, Prince Aewandínen.”

Prince Aewandínen bowed politely. Thorin and Dis bowed and welcomed him.

“Oh, how lovely, dear Aewandínen,” Dori enthused. “Do come in and be comfy. Perhaps a snack?”

“Oh aye, our Dori,” chimed in Vi. “I’m sure our Wandi could do with a bite.”

“Aye, he’s lookin’ peckish.” Margr agreed.
Aewandínen looked as though he’d swallowed his tongue at the eager butchering of his name. Thranduil made a noise as though stifling a snort. Dori shooed Celeborn and Aewandínen to the sofa. Legolas grinned maniacally at his elder brother from the chair where he was sitting on Gimli.

Aewandínen looked disapprovingly then curious.

“*Brother, that is a strange belt,*” he said in Sindarin.

“It’s not a belt,” Legolas replied in Westron. “It’s a Gimli.”

Gimli stuck his head around Legolas’s arm and glared at Aewandínen.

“That’s disgusting,” snapped Aewandínen making Ori bristle.

Gimli cocked an eye up at Legolas.

“He says, ‘hello’,” Legolas told Gimli.

Distrusting this translation, Gimli glared at Aewandínen again

“Fuck off,” he replied politely.

Ori looked about. Everyone except for Aewandínen and Celeborn were chatting and mixing happily. Celeborn looked relieved when Mistress Dazla brought the tray around with glasses of Dorwinian wine. Aewandínen declined and put his nose in the air. Mistress Dazla laughed and said, “Suit yerself, badger.” before giving Thranduil his glass.

“Ahhh, Mistress Dazla. Dowinian, second age, how very kind of you.”

“Aye, well, his majesty’s got in a couple of cases with your name on ‘em, so you give me a shout when you need,” she winked at the elf king and turned to Dori with a raised eyebrow.

Dori giggled and said,

“Dear Mistress Dazla, would you be so kind as to check on our resident wizard? We can’t have him coming to dinner all pruney.”

“Of course, dear Bearer. Not that any would notice,” she replied comfortably and floated off.

“Oh, Thrandy,” Dori sighed. “I don’t know what I’d do without her. Princess Dis has given me a treasure.”

“No, I didn’t,” Dis replied. “Unless you include letting my entire family move into Fundin house a treasure.”

“Oh, but I do!” Dori assured her.

“Ah, you’re all living here now?” asked Galadriel.

“Yes,” said Thorin. “That way we all have instant access to Ori.”

“Very important,” Lady Galadriel observed.

Ori giggled, but was a little confused by the lady’s comment.

“Speaking of access to me, where’s my husband?”
“Dwalin went down with a cadre to escort Theoden King,” Thorin told him. He cast a look at Elessar, “Which is what we would have done for you, if we’d had word.”

Elessar smiled and said, “Sorry, we thought you’d prefer eclairs. Pardon, I meant ‘iklars’.”

Nori’s disembodied voice piped up from the wood bin, “Arsehole.”

All the elves laughed, except Aewandínen, who looked about, incensed.

“Good evening, Nori,” said Thranduil pleasantly.

“Evenin’, yer majesty. Who’s the elf wif the sour mug?”

“My eldest son.”

“Can you still get your money back?”

Dwalin appeared in the front doorway, turned his head and said, “Oi, yer majesty, I’m supposed t’ announce yeh.”

“I’ve never needed that before,” said a deep, laughing voice.

“Humor me, if yeh please,” said Dwalin, who wore a look of exasperation and said to the room at large, “Theoden King of Rohan, and his son Theodred Prince.”

A large, dashing, blond man swaggered into the room, followed by a slightly smaller, but still swaggering miniature. Both were dressed in traveling clothes.

They gave identical bows and Thorin stepped forward to welcome them.

“King Thorin, is it?” Theoden boomed. “Well met, your majesty!”

“Well met, Theoden King. Do you need a place for your soldiers to billet?”

"Thank you, but they've already set up camp on the plain between the mountain and the forest. Being underground like this is uncomfortable for them. Reminds them of sieges."

"Because of Helm's Deep," said Ori, half to himself.

Theoden spun around in surprise.

"Aye, because that's where we wait out sieges. And you are, sir?"

Theoden was very tall, and very broad, and the way he leaned over it was rather like having a parapet threaten to fall on one.

Thorin said, “Theoden King, this is Lord Ori of Fundin, my royal scribe.”

“Your majesty,” Ori bowed.

“M’lord. How is it you know so much more about Rohan than I do about Erebor?”

Ori blushed.

“Rohan and Helm’s Deep are written of extensively in the histories of middle earth. The great horn, the parapets. It's quite fascinating, and really quite similar to how things are handled in Erebor, except we find the stone comforting.”
Theoden smiled and nodded. “If we can’t be in the longhouse, most of us prefer to be under the stars with the horses.”

Ori bowed again and scurried back to Dwalin, holding back an ‘eep’ at his own boldness. Dwalin hugged him.

“I shouldn’t put myself forward like that.”

“Yeh didn’t run up an’ scream ‘Da’!’ I think he’ll live.”

“Should I save that for Bard or Elrond?”

Dwalin snickered and hugged him hard.

Thorin said to Theoden, “A llow me to introduce you to the company.”

Theoden looked about with a gleam in his eye.

“Ladies first, if it’s proper, your majesty.”

“Oh, blessed Mahal,” Jani groaned. “He’s not serious!”

“Shhh,” Dis hissed, giggling.

Behind Theoden, Theodred rolled his eyes.

“I can see you rolling your eyes back there, Theo,” said Theoden.

“Yes, father.”

In quick order, Theoden was introduced to Dis, Gridr, Erda and her daughters, Dipfa and Jani. He bowed to Lady Galadriel, with whom he was already acquainted, and then Theoden’s eyes lit on Dori and his smile gained brightness exponentially.

“And this is your Bearer?” Theoden bowed over Dori’s hand. “A pleasure, ma’am.”

“Likewise, my dearest Theoden,” said Dori.

“And, if I may ask, how many children have you and Thorin now? Will they be present this evening?”

Dori flickered her lashes and said, “I beg your pardon?”

“Unless, of course, it is a matter dwarrow do not mention in company,” Theoden said quickly.

Dori smiled sweetly, “I think you’re a little confused, dear.”

“Oh, so, you do not bear exclusively for Thorin, but for any dwarf who requires a dwarfling.”

Bofur went off on a coughing jag, Gloin blessed Mahal’s hairy arse and Balin actually bellowed, “Oi!”

“I… No,” said Dori.

“I beg your pardon, ma’am,” Theoden hastily explained, reddening a little. “I have tried to get as much information on dwarven culture as I could, but I find myself woefully ignorant.”
In the corner, into her wine glass, Lady Galadriel murmured, “Oh, woe is you.”

“It’s quite all right, Theoden dear,” said Dori. “Let me explain. I’m not a household appliance. I’m merely both male and female, you see. In fact, that sternly red-faced but stunning dwarf in the corner is Lord Balin, my intended.”

“My mistake,” said Theoden, giving a charming bow in apology. “I thought Bearers were dwarfs…er…dwarrow females, unusual but extremely prolific. You are wearing a gown, after all, and it is lovely.”

“Thank you, my lady parts are in charge today.”

“Ah,” said Theoden. “Are all … dwarf ladies … built in the same way?”

“Oh, no, bearers like myself are extremely rare. There only two in Erebor. Dwarrow do not grow out of rocks, like in those funny stories men tell. We have many ladies, called dwarrowdams. For instance, my friends Mistress Vi and Mistress Margr signaling me madly behind you, are quite female in every way.”

“Aye,” said Margr, “we got our lady parts in charge every day!”

Theoden turned to discover them actually standing much closer than he expected, and very pink.

“Ladies,” he bowed, as far as he could.

“Oh, so yer one o’ them horse fellers,” said Margr, looking him up and down appraisingly.

“Aye,” said Vi. “We hear yeh lot are always stiff in the saddle.”

They held out their hands simultaneously.

Margr said, “Go on, Vi, age before beauty.”

Vi insisted, “In that case, you go first.”

“I beg pardon, ladies, I assumed you were twins,” Theoden gasped, looking to Elessar for help. The Gondorian king merely admired the ceiling.

“Oh, no, no,” said Vi, batting his forearm coquettishly with bruising force. “Dwarrow don’t have twins.”

“No, we’re only sisters, though, mind, we do share everything.”

Theoden glanced over to see where his son was, but the young prince had made a strategic retreat and was talking to Legolas and Gimli.

Mistress Dazla appeared at Theoden’s elbow and offered him a large mug of beer.

He took it gratefully.

“Thank you,” he said.

Dain blew in the front doorway and roared, “Elrond! And ‘is steward an’ sons an’ some other bloke!”

Elrond entered with three other elves, two of whom were identical and looked much like him.
The third Ori thought was a little older than the twins, but younger than Elrond, though that could merely mean he was five thousand years old rather than six thousand. He was quite handsome in a vague, elvish way, though his eyes darted about, taking in everything as if assassins lurked behind the couch. He had a perpetually worried expression.

Elrond swept forward. He and Thorin bowed to one another.

“Welcome, Lord Elrond,” said Thorin. “I’m very happy to see you again.”

“Likewise, King Thorin. This is Lindir, my steward.”

“Your majesty,” Lindir bowed.

He looked slightly uncomfortable. Ori wondered if that was because he was usually dealing with Elrond’s robes and dishware and not with strange, short people with beards. Out of the corner of his eye, Ori saw Nori’s face appear next to the fireplace implements. It was obvious Nori had immediately found in Lindir a worthy target.

Elrond turned to present two young elf males behind him.

“Here are my sons, Elladan and Elrohir.”

The twins bowed in unison, greeted the company then romped off to greet their sister.

“I have brought another friend,” said Elrond. “He is seeing to the horses at the moment, but he’ll be in presently.”

Sculdis flew down the stairs.

“Dain!”

She flung herself into his arms as if she hadn’t seen him in months.

They kissed noisily.

A great squeal erupted from the sitting room and Chopper burst through the doorway and threw himself at Dain as if he hadn’t seen him at months.

“There’s me laddie!” Dain hollered, hugging his pig in rapture.

Lindir’s mouth fell open and Aewandínen winced in disgust.

Theoden used this pause to retreat, but Vi and Margr admired from the rear as he went. He made it safely to the corner where Ori was moving to talk with Arwen and Elessar and the sons of Elrond.

“We have a signaling system and an oath, Gondor,” Theoden groused at Elessar, who grinned.

“You didn’t light a beacon fire on top of a mountain.”

“I’ll light a fire for you! Look at them! They’re terrifying,” Theoden hissed.

“And quite determined,” said Elessar, nodding back to the sisters.

Theoden turned.

“Why are they flipping a coin?” he asked.
“To see who gets first crack at you,” said Ori.

“What?”

Jani broke in, “Aw, they’re goin’ easy on ya, laddie. They usually team up.”

Theoden paled.

“No wonder orcs fear your race.”

Elrond’s sons clotheslined Elessar and threatened to drag him off.

“Where are you going, Legolas?” Elessar asked as the elf left for the steps. “I could use some help.”

“Light a beacon,” said Legolas over his shoulder.

“Go on with you, you little orcs,” said Elessar, struggling to free himself.

The elf twins laughed.

“You’re no fun,” said one or the other, or possibly both in unison, and went to chat up Jim.

Ori wondered where Legolas had gone. He decided the elf prince must know Lord Elrond’s other companion. He noticed that Celeborn also watched Legolas leave, but his face was grim and he shook his head ponderously.

Ori turned to Arwen for more information

“I’ve never been able to find much about Celeborn’s history.”

“Oh, that’s because after Doriath, he changed his name.”

“Ahh, may I ask what is was before?”

“Yes, it was Teleporno.”

Ori froze, blurted, “Mahal, he had cruel parents.”

He slapped his hand over his own mouth, mortified.

Theoden mouthed ‘Teleporno’, shrugged, and drank back his beer.

Arwen just laughed.

“To tell you the truth,” said Arwen, “I’ve always thought so.”

Ori shrugged,

“I’d change my name, too. What was he called when he was a badger, er... fawn? Tele? Porno?”

“Only by King Thranduil, I’m sure,” said Arwen. “Elves don’t give nicknames. With Sindarin, there’s too much room for, er, creativity.”

“Like ‘Grumpy Owl’?” Ori asked.
Theoden snorted.

“Especially that,” said Arwen, “though I can’t say I’ve ever met anyone with a more appropriate nickname. He’s always been like this. When we were fawns, he was a little rat.”

Ori looked over at Aewandínen.

“That’s sad. Maybe something will happen, so that like his father when he was at the inn and finally…” Ori searched for a polite way of saying what he thought.

Arwen’s eyes sparkled as she glanced at Elessar then grinned at Ori.

“ Took the stick out of his ass?”

Ori gasped then snickered.

“Precisely. And then he will be good company.”

“I hope I live long enough to see that,” Elessar commented dryly. Theoden nodded sagely.

Legolas came in again, grinning and eyes brimming with laughter, and headed over to Ori and his little group. Gimli bore down on them at speed.

"Wha’s go’ yeh in such a tickle?” Gimli demanded.

"Lord Glorfindel arrived with Lord Elrond and Lindir. Ada hates him."

"Why?"

"Watch."

The largest elf Ori had ever seen strutted through the front doorway. He stood at least seven feet tall, with a land bridge-wide set of shoulders and masses of long, golden hair. Glorfindel sported a full set of shiny, white teeth, displayed to advantage in a wide and terrifying smile.

The elf looked about and his gaze locked onto Thranduil and he shouted,

"Thranduil! My friend!"

In a heart beat, he crossed the room, seized the horrified monarch around the middle and snatched him from the ground, rocking him so violently that his long legs swung back and forth like a pendulum.

"Glorfindel, put me down," Thranduil demanded.

Glorfindel stopped rocking, but he didn't release the struggling king, merely smiled wider and bellowed, "I'm so happy to see you!" and kissed Thranduil wetly and audibly in the middle of the forehead.

Then he set Thranduil down and went off, doubtless to greet some other hapless victim.

Thranduil brushed himself off, bright red in the face, collected his dignity and whirled about - to face Thorin, who didn't even bother to hide his grin.

Thorin threw his arms open wide.
"Thranduil! My friend!"

"Don't go there, Thorin," Thranduil warned.

"What? I don't get a hug?"

"You want a hug? Fine!"

"Uh-oh," said Legolas gleefully. "Ada's using the 'f' word!"

"F-word?" Theoden repeated.

"Yes, 'fine'." Legolas told him.

Thranduil grabbed the laughing Thorin around the waist and lifted him, shaking him violently from side to side.

Ori was impressed. Dwarrow were not light weight.

"Thranduil," Thorin groused, "you're doing it wrong!"

"What?"

Thranduil stopped. Thorin wrapped his legs around Thranduil's waist and locked his ankles together, then kissed him.

Thranduil squawked like an enraged goose, struggled, but could not dislodge Thorin no matter what he did.

Ori had to thump Theoden between the shoulder blades as the horse monarch was on his hands and knees choking on beer and laughter. Ori looked up to see Jim was assisting Captain Boromir in a similar fashion.

Bard and his children entered the room to find the two kings thus. When Thranduil turned to Bard in horror, Thorin released Thranduil's neck and let himself fall back until he was clinging upside-down by strength of his legs alone.

"Evening, Bard," said Thorin merrily.

Thranduil face-palmed and Bard's mustache twitched with one, violent tic, before he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

Tilda shrieked in delight then ran to greet Lady Galadriel, who caught up the little girl for a joyous hug. Bain rolled his eyes and went to Stonehelm and the young Urs to be introduced to Theodred. Sigrid, Fili, Kili, and Tauriel brought up the rear and snickered at Thranduil’s situation, before joining the younger set.

Thorin let go with his legs, caught himself by the hands against the floor and flipped over, favoring Thranduil with a bow and flourish.

"Thank you, your majesty," he said grandly. "You've been a wonderful dance partner."

Thranduil groaned.

"How much have you had to drink?" he demanded.
"Nothing," said Thorin. "But the night's still young, and there's still a case of Dorwinion wine with your name on it."

"Oh," said Thranduil, his hackles lowering. "I hope it's as decent a vintage as the last."

"I consulted Lady Galadriel, so I'm afraid that depends on how she felt about you at the moment."

"Of course," said Thranduil, resignedly. "All my reliance is on Mistress Dazla."

Ori said to Dwalin, "Why do I get the feeling there was more in Bilbo’s letter than Thorin read to us?"

"I kin guarantee it," said Dwalin, cuddling him from behind. "He probably sleeps with th’ thing. I wouldn’t touch it now."

"Eww! Dwalin!"

Tharkûn entered the room. He looked the same as always except for having pinker cheeks. Ori thought perhaps he had polished his hat.

Mistress Dazla pushed passed Tharkûn before he could say anything and announced,

"Dinner."
Dinner, dessert, and drinks

Chapter by Stevie Foxx

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. There’s nothing like a good dinner and a quiet evening at home with the family. Dolly and I are rather proud of this chapter as it took an entire evening (we stopped for dinner with Dolly’s spouse), the laptop, and a lot of paper and pens to organize this dinner party. Hopefully we didn’t leave anyone out! And there are more people coming to the coronation!! If there was only a GPS for imaginary rooms and Tolkien characters! And it’s all through Ori’s eyes and ears!! If you do see an ‘oops’ please let us know. We felt like wedding planners! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The party was shepherded into the sitting room, which was dominated by the long dinner table, since all the comfortable furniture was now in the receiving room. Dori welcomed everyone again and assured them that this was a family meal, so there was no standing on ceremony with the seating.

Ori was amused to notice that the table seemed to divide itself by age. The Durin princes played host to all the younger people at the foot. Elladan and Elrohir included themselves in this group with Legolas and Tauriel. The Gondorian couple planted themselves in the middle. Boromir sat with Margr and Vi on either side of him. The older Durins, Tharkûn, and the rest of the elves sat up toward the head of the table. Tharkûn seated himself comfortably opposite to Ori, who went straight to the point with the wizard.

“And how were Bilbo and Frodo keeping when you left them?”

“Oh, very well indeed,” the wizard smiled. “Frodo was delighted to see the king and the queen presumptive just before they left to come here, and several of his little playmates. Bilbo was fawned over by Denethor. It seems that publishing quite the cliff-hanger last time nearly doubled the sales. The pre-orders for the concluding chapters are guaranteeing at least twelve print runs of a thousand.”

“Oh excellent,” Ori said eagerly, happy to hear such good news of his friend. “Bilbo did write that you had brought he and Frodo to Gondor very speedily. How did you do that?”

“Ahh!” The wizard was pleased Ori had asked. “I was most fortunate while at the inn to find the company of the king of horses, the mighty Shadowfax. He kindly consented to carry the three of us to Gondor.”

“Shadowfax,” Ori breathed. “I’ve only read poetry of him.”

There was a shout of laughter from the other side of Tharkûn where Margr and Vi were keeping Boromir in stitches about their infamous housebreaker. This included a great deal of arm waving and descriptions of teeth flying around the room.

Mistress Dazla entered with her minions and great tureens were set on the table. These were followed by small dishes of butter and great loaves of bread partially sliced. The bread was very
yellow inside and was baked in a braid. Ori peered over at Celeborn who looked startled and pleased.

Dori lifted the cover of the closest tureen and peered in.

“Carrot soup with oranges, Bearer,” Mistress Dazla informed for all the guests to hear. “Flavored with cloves.”


Everyone did and they were thoroughly enjoying it when Kili shouted out.

“This soup is great. Is there bacon in it?”

Lindir went white and dropped his spoon.

“There’s bacon in your brain!” Fili roared.

There were further yells from the younger group. Tauriel attempted to strangle Kili with her napkin while the others threw pieces of bread and spare spoons at him. Theodred and the twins found this a wonderful pastime and helped out to the best of their abilities.

Theoden looked at Dori, who giggled and said,

“Such silly little badgers. How amusing they are. Playing their funny pranks.”

“I’m ready to swear I found Kili in the poison mushrooms,” Dis grumped.

Glorfindel was enjoying the antics and threw a roll that way while he was at it. Thranduil waited until Kili recovered and was looking pleased with himself. Thranduil tore the center out of a piece of bread, wrapped it around a chunk of butter, rose and whipped it down the table perfectly beaning Kili in the forehead.

Elessar, Arwen, and Aewandinen gasped in shock. They glanced at the older Durins, who just laughed. The younger set cheered and Kili rose, missile still stuck to the center of his forehead. He looked glowingly at Thranduil.

“Excellent shot!” he cried, delighted. “How come we never see you with a bow?”

“I prefer a sword,” the elf king replied sweetly. “Oh, Kili dearest?”

Kili leaned forward to better see the elf. “Yes, idad Elf?”

“You have a…” Thranduil tapped his forehead.

Kili removed the buttery ball from his brow, looked at it, shrugged, and ate it, sitting down again.

The table roared with laughter, except for Celeborn, who looked pained, and Aewandinen who looked furious.

Thranduil groaned and muttered, “Uncle Elf? Were did he get that epithet?”

“Well,” Jani said around a mouthful of bread. “He’s our Gimmer’s cousin and yer lad’s courtin’ with him.”
“This is true,” Thorin remarked, leaning back in his chair at the head of the table, regarding his guest. “Cousin Thranduil.”

Thranduil eyes slew over Thorin.

“I hate you,” he said, lightly.

“Thrandy!” Dori chastised.

Lady Galadriel snorted in her drink and was left coughing. Celeborn gaped at his wife. Mistress Dazla returned to clear off for the next course.

The younger set of Erebor and Dale rose immediately to assist with the removal of the soup bowls, which brought their closest guests to follow suit. Elrond watched his sons with a soft smile on his face as they happily lifted tureens off the table and follow the rest through to the kitchen. Theodred was a little confused, having never done such a thing in his life, but Tilda stayed by him and coached him in dish handling.

The next course was beef steaks grilled and painted with savory sweet sauce. For the elves, Mistress Dazla produced deep cavern mushrooms. These were each as large as any steak served, and were grilled and dressed in the same way. Ori groaned. He loved both.

“Here, take a steak,” said Dwalin, “an’ I’ll take a mushroom, we’ll split ‘em in half an’ take a piece each.”

“You have the best ideas,” said Ori fondly, and kissed him right there.

Celeborn, perhaps attempting to be polite in the face of all this bread, asked, “And, how long have the two of you been married?”

“Since just after the winter,” said Ori.

“They eloped,” said Dori with a sigh.

Dwalin shrugged.

“We wanted t’ do it before I popped out our first puppy.”

Celeborn opened his mouth, as if to congratulate them, then frowned.

“Jus’ jokin’, yer majesty,” said Dwalin. “We’re both male.”

“We do have kittens and a bat,” Ori added.

“I’m only responsible f’r th’ kittens,” Dwalin explained.

“So, yer majesty,” said Vi to Thranduil, while Celeborn tried to untangle his thoughts. “Have yeh decided wha’ twigs yeh’ll wear on yer head t’ th’ coronation?”

Arwen, suddenly seized with a coughing fit, covered her mouth with her napkin.

Without a flicker to betray his horror, Thranduil replied, “I was thinking of flowering hawthorn.”

“Oh, how well that’ll look!” cried Margr.

“We was just sayin’ tha’ th’ other day, in th’ market, weren’t we, Margr?” said Vi.
Ori was sure they wouldn’t know flowering hawthorn if it was served to them as cake.

Thranduil merely inclined his head regally.

“I see we are of one mind, mistresses.”

Margr nodded.

“If yeh want t’ curl yer hair, f’r th’ coronation, yeh know, just let us know.”

“Aye,” Vi agreed, “all tha’ hair’d look a treat in ringlets.”

“Thank you, ladies, I’ve planned my outfit and twigs around my hair dressed as it is.”

Margr nodded and Vi said, “Right, pays t’ plan th’ accessories ahead.”

Ori could just imagine King Thranduil sleeping with his hair in rags and sugar water.

“But, perhaps for my son’s wedding,” said Thranduil, cocking an eyebrow at Legolas.

Jim and Ruelis snorted and after exchanging glances, concentrated on their food.

“I’ve never had a mushroom like this,” Elrond said hastily as the oldest elfin prince looked as though his frontal lobe was going to explode. “They’re quite delicious.”

“As far as we know,” said Thorin, “they’re only found in our mountain caves. They are wonderful, but have to be eaten fully cooked.”

“What are they called?” Elrond asked.

“It would be better to tell you when you aren’t eating them,” said Thorin.

“Ah. Perhaps later.”

Accompaniments included chips, and a modified version of breakfast bake that included spinach, asparagus and grated carrots instead of meat.

“The breakfast bake’s got green stuff in it,” Kili announced.

“That’s spinach, you twit,” Fili replied.

“It’s veggie bake, darling,” said Binni. “Breakfast bake is for breakfast. Hence, the name.”

“I like these things,” said Theoden, spearing a chip on his fork. “What are they?”

“Chips!” said Ori. “Fried and salted potatoes. They’re the perfect food.”

“Now, pet,” said Dori, “you know they aren’t good for you all the time.”

“I know they aren’t good for me all the time, but they are perfect!”

There were apples and onions fried together, which Arwen partook of heartily as did many of the elves.

Glorfindel ate three steaks and two mushrooms and Gimli was impressed. Glorfindel didn’t even get any down his front.
Margr’s and Vi’s voices rose again.

“An’ he wrote an’ said they had t’ put off th’ coronation ‘cause he couldn’t be bothered t’ come then.”

“Aye an’ we an’ everyone in th’ entire mountain were tha’ upset. Everyone was sayin’ He can’t do tha’ t’ our Thorin!”

“That’s completely disloyal!” Boromir looked angry on Thorin’s behalf, but Margr grabbed his forearm and went on.

“Oh, but they fixed him good, gettin’ tha’ Master Buj t’ stand fer Belegost. Bit odd, he is, but a reg’lar genius. They says he’s figured out how t’ fly.”

Ori glanced down the table but Buj was involved with a discussion with his precious diamond and appeared not to have heard the comment.

“Let’s hope he’s better at it than King Dain. I remember it well. Me mam was washin’ clothes in th’ fountain when th’ goat knocked him in.”

“I remember tha’!” Dain shouted. “It was bloody Thorin an’ Dwalin’s fault! They bet me five coppers I couldn’t ride it.”

“You rode an untamed goat for five coppers?” Thranduil asked.

“Would you do it for ten?” Thorin asked.

Thranduil reached to knock over Thorin’s goblet but the king grabbed it and chuckled.

“I hadn’t heard Dale had a king,” said Theoden to Bard. “How long have you ruled?”

“What time is it?” asked Bard.

“Da!” Sigrid cried.

Thorin said, “Bard is the grandson of King Girion, who was unlawfully deposed by a criminal headman called Calmar, who then called himself Master of Dale. That was until the people ran him out of town this spring.”

“King Thror didn’t do anything?” Boromir asked.

Thorin glanced at him and said,

“Ask Elrond about my grandfather.”

“You were not raised to rule?” Theoden asked Bard.

“I was raised to fish and pilot a barge,” said Bard.

Glorfindel asked with great interest, “How’s being king working out for you?”

“Let me get back to you in about six months,” said Bard. “We’re still rebuilding.”

Theoden echoed, “Rebuilding?”

“As Thorin said, we had a heavy criminal element,” said Bard. “A lot of Calmar’s cronies. They
came in from all parts of Arda. After Calmar was gone, they left a large portion of their properties boobytrapped. I’ve already had workers hurt trying to disarm them. It’s easier and safer just to pull everything down.”

“But our Bard’s a wonderful king!” Vi announced. “I’m sure when his beard’s as long as Thorin’s, he’ll look real majestic.”

Ori watched Bard contemplating his fork with longing and he feared the man was thinking of doing himself an injury.

“Not sharp enough,” said Ori. “Besides, you haven’t had dessert yet.”

“Aye, those rotten bastards a’ Calmar’s,” Margr groused. “By th’ way, our King Bard, yeh ain’t invited us t’ tea yet.”

Both sisters cackled at Bard’s blush.

“My dear ladies,” Bard managed. “I would never dream of soiling your excellent reputations by inviting you to tea as I’m a widower.”

“Well, we’re widows, too,” Vi pointed out. “Ain’t we Margr?”

“Both of you?” Boromir asked.

“Aye, there was tha’ ol’ bugger, wha’s’s name-“

“Nah, love, yeh chased him down th’ street with th’ cleaver, yeh didn’t actually kill him ‘r nuthin’.”

Elessar sat close enough that Ori heard him say to Theoden, “Cheer up, within the first two hours I’d arrived they patted my bottom and gave me the ‘shovel talk’.”

“Sigrid’s got a cleaver!” Tilda piped up.

“That’s a dwarven honeymoon tradition,” Stonehelm told her. “The bride chases the groom with a cleaver.”

“That’s right! Kili corroborated. “She has to run down the main street!”

“Sig, are you going to chase Fili down the road with it?” Tilda asked.

Dis looked pained. “I’m beginning to wish I’d taken a cleaver to my husband after I had Fili.”

“Now, my dear,” said Dori, “if you had, what would poor Tauriel do?”

“Indeed,” Elrond commented.

“Her guard job,” Thranduil muttered.

“I am doing so, your majesty,” said Tauriel respectfully. “Did you not order me to keep your youngest son from harm?”

“I believe my order was to keep him from cutting off his own fingers,” said Thranduil.

“Ada!” Legolas cried, as this was obviously the first time he’d heard this.
“We knew it!” shouted Elladan and Elrohir.

“You did not!” Arwen argued back.

“You weren’t really very graceful as a fawn,” continued Thranduil. “If anyone could have shot himself with his own bow, it would have been you.”

Kili cried, “Idad Thorin used to say that about me! This is a great dinner! We have men and elves and dwarrow and look at all we have in common!”

“Yes, all our young are idiots!” Fili finished with a grin at Sigrid, who smacked his elbow.

“Yes, Kili,” agreed Thorin. “And already we’re creating our own, new traditions.”

“Going to Bombur’s and Erda’s inn!” Kili cried. “Remember, Idad Elf? You won the spinning contest.”

Galadriel batted her lashes.

“Thranduil! I had no idea you spun!”

“Did you use flax or wool, your majesty?” asked Theoden trying desperately to keep up.

Before Thranduil could say anything, Kili jumped back in.

“Oh, no, Theoden King. He spun in place and his robes went flying around him! Woosh! It was a contest!”

Glorfindel grinned at Thranduil.

“You spun around in a contest at an inn?” he asked.

“He wasn’t really in the contest,” Kili said. “We told him, he was the judge. Fili and Nori were wearing Sigrid and Jani’s bathing costumes, with skirts, you know, and Nori had the advantage because his costume had great gobs of lace, but King Thranduil said they weren’t doing it right, so he showed us all how to do it and so we all decided that he won! Only, we had forgotten to figure out what the prize would be.”

Bard stared at Fili in horror.

“You wore Sigrid’s bathing costume?”

“Not while she was in it,” said Fili.

Bard opened his mouth, but settled for, “And what was Sigrid wearing?”

“Mine,” said Fili simply. “It was more comfortable and it covered her better.”

“Oh,” said Bard, unable to protest more coverage rather than less.

Dipfa was not as easily appeased.

“You wore Princess Sigrid’s skirt? You must have had to twist it out of shape!” she practically yelped.

“Let’s not tell her about the pajamas, shall we,” muttered Thranduil.
Thorin sputtered into his ale.

“No, you should tell her,” said Dori airily and loud enough for Dipfa to hear, “then she can make you more pajamas, Thrandy dear.”

Dipfa opened her mouth, as if in outrage, then closed it in obvious confusion.

“I don’t recall making you any pajamas, your majesty,” she said politely to Thranduil. “Does the atelier have your measurements on file?”

“They were the ones you made for Dori, Mistress Dipfa,” said Thranduil carefully. “She was kind enough to lend them when my son, Legolas, Tauriel, and I were caught out in a storm with no change of clothing and had to take refuge at the inn. They were certainly short on yardage, but the most comfortable pajamas I’ve ever worn. When I bother to wear any at all.”

Bard busied himself with his chips, red to the ears.

“I don’t believe I made pajamas for the Bearer, either.”

“The blue and white ensemble, dear,” said Dori.

“The mattress,” Kili helped, nodding.

All the young people, who had been at the inn laughed.

Dipfa appeared deep in thought, then a change swept across her face and her mouth dropped open.

“That’s why the material looked so comfortable! Oh, Mahal’s dimpled knees! Bearer, I made you look like a mattress! I’m so sorry!”

And she burst into tears right there.

Buj tried to comfort her, but she seemed inconsolable.

“But it was a brilliant mattress!” Kili tried to be helpful. “It looked great on King Thranduil! And he didn’t have anything else to wear except the bedsheets!” The young set heartily agreed with him but it was to no avail.

Glorfindel howled, “You wore the bedsheets! Was this before or after the spinning contest?”

Elrond coughed as he seemed to have inhaled his wine.

“Kili!” said Sigrid.

“Yes, Sig.”

“Please stop talking!”

“If you like,” said Kili, jubilantly.

“Kili is right,” said Thranduil. “They were quite delightful. I would happily order more.”

“You w-would?” Dipfa sobbed.

“Did I not just say so?”
Dori got up, went around the table, and patted Dipfa on the shoulder and wiped her eyes.

“You see, my dear? It turned out for the best. Mahal blessed you with a brilliant idea when you made that mattress… er, ensemble.”

Elrond, who seemed to have recovered, said, “When did all this happen?”

“About a week ago,” said Dori.

“And we’re going again next year,” said Thranduil.

“My nephews and I won the water fight. We get the lake facing rooms,” Thorin reminded everyone.

Thranduil frowned and Ori thought he may have tried to kick Thorin under the table.

Elrond thought about it and said cheerily, “I believe I can arrange to be there.”

There were cheers from Elladan and Elrohir. Lindir balked slightly, then appeared to be taking the idea into consideration. Arwen and Elessar exchanged grins.

Thorin muttered something about leaving for the Sea of Rhûn.

Ori had a feeling the inn was going to be very crowded next year.

Just then Mistress Dazla entered to clear away for the next course and the young people again rose to lend their assistance.

Dessert was brought forth, a choice of apple pie or hot, mixed-berry crumble with either sweetened, cold cream or hot custard.

Everyone happily dug in to one or the other or both, the conversation dwindling to the sound of chewing and lip smacking. Mistress Dazla was just bringing in more coffee when the ravens in the courtyard erupted in caws. The guests all exchanged glances but Ori knew by the tone, it was a welcome to a known personage. A moment later,

“Aye, I’m here,” said a merry voice at the door. “Where’s the beer?”

A short, rather slight dwarf with coal black hair in an explosion of curls peered around the sitting room doorjamb. He was about Bofur’s age or a little older, Ori thought, and had the same mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

“Chat!” Thorin cried, rising in amazement. “We weren’t expecting you until tomorrow!”

“Should I go away and come back then? Ooo, is that pie?”

“Sorry, Chat,” said Dain, “it’s gone. We ate it all.”

“Says you, yah wing nut,” the newcomer replied.

“All right, we’ll do this expeditiously,” said Thorin. “Everyone, this is King Snur of Ered Luin. Please introduce yourselves as the opportunity arises, and, for your own safety, keep your fingers away from his plate.”
Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. The elves, the men and King Snur - ‘Chat’ or ‘Chatty’ to his friends - are all here and there’s more to arrive! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Dori rushed forward. The moment Snur caught a glimpse of her, he smiled with pleasure. “Yer that Bearer I been hearin’ about.” He bowed in a very courtly manner and said, “Yer quite the happy little eyeful, pardon me sayin’ so.” “Thank you, King Snur,” said Dori with a twitch of her lips. “Or shall I call you Chat as Thorin does?” “Chat’s fine,” the Broadbeam monarch grinned as Dori patted his arm and said, “Would you like to freshen up and we’ll make you up a dinner plate?” “Yep, I should prob’ly wash half a’ Arda off me hands before I eat with ‘em. Don’t worry about the meat if you’re short - Ha! That was funny! I’ve had enough beef jerky to plug up the plumbin’ til’ Telphor’s Day.”

Elrond and Thranduil choked in unison but pretended it hadn’t happened.

Bifur and his family rose from their seats and bowed to Snur. “Well, all the Urs’re here t’night, thankya,” said Snur approvingly. “When’re yah comin’ f’r a visit, then? I got at least a dozen a’ conies with y’r names on ‘em.”

Jani said with a grin, “I’ll be ridin’ back in yer saddlebags if that’s the case, yer majesty.” “There’s room,” he assured her.

When King Snur returned from his ablutions, Ori couldn’t see they had made much impact, though he was wearing a clean tunic.

Thorin came forward to smack foreheads with him and they embraced. Balin fetched another chair and Thranduil moved a little to allow Snur to sit with King Thorin. It took a moment for Aewandínen to realize he was being shoved down to make room for a dwarf and he complied with little grace, not that Snur noticed.

Mistress Dazla came in and set a large bowl of soup and a loaf of the bread before Snur. Snur looked profoundly grateful, grabbed Mistress Dazla’s hand, and kissed it. She giggled flirtatiously and smacked him on the head with an empty cream pitcher. Snur laughed and Mistress Dazla carried the broken pitcher out.

“Now, our Thorin,” said Snur. “I never expected to see such a look on yer face,” “What look?” Thorin smirked.

“That thing in the way of a smile. Are ya cured a’ bein’ the Great Gloom Biscuit a’ Erebor, then? Did ya fall an’ hit yer head?”

Thranduil cackled delightedly.

“Who says I’m not allowed to be happy?” Thorin challenged him, lazily.

“Oh, yer allowed, but I wasn’t expectin’ yah t’ take advantage of it, if yah get me meanin’. Can’t imagine what it would take t’ make Thrain’s son smile.” Throats were cleared around the table.

With a sly grin, Dori revealed, “It was just the matter of a hobbit.” “A hobbit? What? One a’ them little, furry-footed fellers? Where’s he hidin’, then, Thorin? In yer pocket?”
“At the moment, he’s in Gondor, publishing a book,” Thorin responded loftily.
“So it’s the bookish types ya go f’r, is it? Glad ya figured it out.”
“He has a lot of facets to his character,” said Thorin.
“He’s good in th’ sack, in other words,” grunted Snur. “Really, who could blame ya?”
Tilda whispered at volume, “Why is someone in a sack?”
Snur looked startled, then peered down the table at Tilda. He was clearly mortified.
“Oi! Pardon me, little mistress. Didn’t realize there was a pebble in th’ room. I meant he must be
good at sack racin’, ya know. Our Thorin’s fond a’ games.”
“Sigrid says he won twice at Shimmy.”
“Shut up, Til’ dear,” said Sigrid through a tight smile.
Mistress Dazla came in with Miss Oqizla, to bring Snur his meat and remove his first course.
“Thank you Mistress Dazla, Miss Oqizla,” said Thorin. “Chat, what is that in your beard?”
“What ain’t in me beard? I could hide a mine cart in there.”
“May I?”
“Help yerself.”
Thorin carefully reached in, watched by a fascinated Thranduil, and extracted a tiny, bright purple
bow.
“Ha!” Snur cried. “Th’ cheeky little things! I was takin’ a nap an’ me pebbles thought they’d
gussy me up a bit. I thought I’d found ‘em all.”
“Would you like to keep it as a souvenir?”
“Nah, you go on. Have it bronzed t’ remember me by.”
“Ah!” Dori said, in a reminiscent tone. “I remember when I used to dress my little Ori’s hair with
those.”
Lady Galadriel relieved Thorin of the ribbon and giggled as she examined the tiny thing.
“Whadaya put in her hair now?” Snur asked.
Ori rolled his eyes and wanted to slide under the table. He could feel Dwalin silently chuckling at
his side.
“His husband does it now,” said Dori with a gusty sigh and a smile at Ori, who although
mortified, stood and bowed.
“Ori of Fundin, your majesty,” he said.
“Please t’ meetcha. Wait, aren’t ya th’ one who married that lummox Dwalin?”
“Th’ lummox is right here, Chat,” Dwalin growled without heat.
Snur pretended to squint at him and jump in startlement.
“Oi, Dwalin, sorry, I barely recognized ya. Yer shorter an’ wider since last we met.”
Dwalin cracked his knuckles.
“Nope. Yer thinkin’ a’ Balin.”
Balin cocked an eyebrow and said, “Wider, no’ shorter, an’ sharp enough f’r th’ both a’ us, thank
Mahal.”
“Yeh weren’t so sharp when our Ori took yeh prisoner an’ chained yeh t’ yer own desk.”
“Dwalin!” Ori hissed.
“What?” Dwalin asked him, grinning. “Yeh were very brave.”
“I was very stupid.”
“Nah, yeh just didn’t know.”
Ori noticed that the table had gone silent. Bard, his children and all the visiting royals were
completely agog.
“When was this?” Bard asked.
“Oh, I think we was married, wha’, two days?” said Dwalin carelessly.
“Yeh weren’t so sharp when our Ori took yeh prisoner an’ chained yeh t’ yer own desk.”
An oink of outrage reached them from the fireplace.
“Ohhh, aye, I’d just come back from Gondor,” said Balin, leaning back in his chair, warming to
his story. “There was a storm an’ I was muddy from beard t’ boots…”
Balin told the tale with gusto and, by the end, everyone was laughing, even Ori, because with time
and distance he realized how ridiculous it was.

“I can tell this is yer favorite story, Balin,” Snur gasped for breath. He looked at Ori. “I’m goin’ t’ stay on yer good side.”

“Are you afraid I’ll smack you with the flat of a dull sword, your majesty?”

“Lad, it took brass t’ do what ya did, defendin’ yer family home. No wonder yer Dwalin’s One.”

Now Ori felt his cheeks heating. He turned his face into Dwalin’s beard, which always brought him comfort. He wondered if he’d ever have the chance to return the favor. He wondered if he’d ever have a real beard.

Dis asked, “Forgive me forgetting to ask before, Chat, but how is your wife? Raising two children is an exhausting endeavor.”

It was then that Ori remembered to whom King Snur was married, and who she was supposed to marry, and who she ended up trying to seduce by accident.

“Dwalin,” he hissed, “tell Bard not to mention what Queen Givris did to Elrond. Tell him I’ll explain later!”

Dwalin breathed out, turned, and quietly spoke to Bard. Ori hoped he remembered to include everything.

Snur was expounding on his badgers and family.

“So I said, ‘Me dear, why’d’ya want a lake when we’ve all this water at the back door?’ And she says ‘Reasons.’ an’ smacks me over the head with the great seal o’ Ered Luin. Good thing it’s made o’ granite.”

“Good thing your head is made of granite,” Thorin teased.

“Aye, ’tis at that.”

All the elves around them, except the eldest prince, chuckled appreciatively. Mistress Dazla came back in with coffee and dessert for Snur. He finished the dessert at speed, put a huge blob of the sweetened cream into his coffee, stirred, and drank it back with a sigh of fullness.

Bard was now talking with Theoden King about Dale cows and the fact the horse people only had huge steppe oxen. Ori wondered what a cross between a steppe ox and a dainty Dale cow would look like.

The younger set at the foot of the table were shouting and laughing and flicking glops of custard and dirty spoons at each other.

Dori, seeing that everyone was of elegant sufficiency, suggested they retire to the receiving room. The younger set stayed behind to clear up the mess and wash the dishes.

Ori followed Dwalin through and Bard came over to them.

When Bard reached Ori, Ori grabbed him by the front of his shirt and all but yanked him down to his height.

“I forgot to tell you,” Ori hissed. “Remember when I told you that Balin was supposed to marry Queen Givris, the Firebeard dam, then he walked in on her trying to seduce Elrond? Don’t mention any of that. She’s King Snur’s wife.”

Bard stared at him.

“Bard?”

Bard swayed slightly.

“Oh, Mahal!” Ori hissed. “Dwalin!”

Dwalin lunged and caught the king before he actually went over like a felled tree. At that moment Sigrid came through, ostensibly to ask Dori something, but hurried over to bolster Bard up.

“Ori, did you overload Da’s brain again?” she demanded.

“Sorry, Sig.”

“Everyone all righ’?” Dain boomed. “Anyone need a faintin’ couch?”

“Yes! I mean, no! We’re fine!” said Ori. “We’ll be with you in a moment.”

Sigrid and Ori led Bard back to the sitting room where Elladan and Kili were mopping the floor. There was singing and splashing coming from the kitchen. Ori conducted Bard though to the bathroom where Bard could splash cold water on his face. Ori watched him, concerned with what he’d wrought.
“Blunt the knives and bend the forks—” Gimli’s, Fili’s, and Sigrid’s voices rose above the noise of the clean up.

“Wait a minute,” said Bard. “Didn’t you tell me the Firebeards didn’t have a king or queen?”

“Smash the bottles and burn the corks—” Stonehelm, Elrohir, and Kili shouted back.

“Not a real one. She used to be known as the ‘Bandit Queen’. A while back Thror tried to reinstate one of the old king’s descendants, hoping to bring the Iron Hills Firebeards under his heel and out of Nain’s control. But it didn’t take.”

“Chip the glasses and crack the plates!—” Bain, Tilda, and Elladan joined in.

“Lovely dwarf. I’m so sorry I never got to know him.”

“That’s what Mistress Dazla hates!” All the younger group chorused.

Ori heard Mistress Dazla telling the jolly cleaning crew she was going to crack their heads.

Bard looked up, listening to the raucous song in the kitchen.

“Cut the cloth, tread on the fat,
Leave the bones on the bedroom mat!”

“Please tell me they won’t do any of that,” Bard said as Ori chuckled at the lyrics.

“Pour the milk on the pantry floor,
Splash the wine on every door!”

“Oh, no, they’re just teasing. When they finish, everything will be exactly as she likes it. We cleaned up for Bombur and Erda while we were at the inn.”

“Dump the crocks in a boiling bowl!
Pound them up with a thumping pole,
When you’re finished, if they are who-o-o-o-le!
Send them down the hall to roll!”

There was the merry sound of Randibur’s flute and more shrieks and giggles.

“That’s what Mistress Dazla hates!” came the final combined shout.

Ori walked through, Bard on his heels. They went to the kitchen door and looked in. Mistress Dazla was inspecting her perfectly clean, shining kitchen with a satisfied smile; her underlings applauded and thanked the young people, who had done all their chores for them. The young people, proud of themselves and somewhat messy and damp, bowed in return.

Bard looked down at Tilda, who was hugging him around the waist.

“Look what we did, Da!”

“Should have brought you a change of clothes, young lady,” he said, with a huff of a laugh.

“Oh,” chirped Loli, “we’ve got to get something from our imad’s house, so we’ll put her in a dry dress.”

Bard raised an eyebrow as the two young dwarrowdams took Tilda’s hands and led her away followed by Randi. Mistress Dazla patted Bard’s arm.

“Don’t you worry, our Bard. I’ve got a couple of her dresses here, just in case. I’ll make sure she’s fit for company before I send her in.”

“Thank you,” Bard sighed in relief.

Ori and Bard followed the rest of the youngsters back into the receiving room.

“The dishes are clean and conquered!” Kili shouted by way of announcing their entrance.

Elladan went and sat on the arm of his father’s chair. “I now know how to mop a floor, Ada. Aren’t you proud?”

“Was it up to Mistress Dazla’s standards?” Elrond asked, dryly.

“Indeed it was, she praised my work and said Elrohir is a ‘dab hand’ at putting leftover food away.”

“Then I am proud of both of you…I think.” Elrond chuckled. “Mind, I have no idea how to do either.”

Ori watched as Fili brought Sigrid over to Elessar and Arwen. They chatted for a bit then Fili said something and Sigrid blushed and gave him a shove. Arwen laughed and leaned down to kiss Sigrid’s cheek and Elessar exchanged a handshake with Fili.

Boromir, Dwalin, and Dain stood in the center of the room, Dwalin facing off with the Gondorian
captain. Ori thought there was a bout starting but just as Dwalin lifted his axes, he frowned and barked something to Boromir. Boromir looked confused and cocked his head.

Dwalin passed his axes to Dain, went over and corrected the man’s ready stance.

“Here, laddie,” Dwalin took hold of Boromir’s hip and shoved him back slightly. “Yer center’s up here. Yeh wan’ t be a little forward t’ spring, ‘cause yeh want t’ drive ‘em back.”

Dwalin went around behind him and forced Boromir’s other knee to bend slightly.

Boromir’s eyes widened with surprise.

“This is much better!”

“Aye, yer pushin’ forward, remember.”

As Dwalin was giving the impromptu lesson, Dain took the part of the aggressor and soon Boromir was delighting in new moves and feints.

Gimli and Legolas stood near watching and occasionally mirroring what Dwalin was teaching. Glorfindel, Margr, and Vi shouted encouragement at the clashing of steel.

Dori held court on the comfortable couches at the fireplace near the great stair. Theoden, Galadriel, Bard, Thranduil, Snur, Elrond and the older Durins enjoyed themselves there. Roäc and his harem of females perched around them. Theoden kept looking over his shoulders at the ravens, who preened and stared right back, saying nothing, but cawing occasionally.

As far as Ori could see, the conversation was mostly the guests getting to know Ruelis and Jim. Floris put Biscuit through his tricks. At the end, Lady Galadriel was moved to put out her hand.

Biscuit, directed by Floris, offered a polite paw. Galadriel was charmed.

Bifur and Tharkûn sat on a bench near the fire and smoked their pipes.

The youngsters gathered at the far fireplace near the entry door, now closed and bolted for the night, playing with the Fundin House animals with Chopper and a few of the ravens who consented to play along.

After some time, which Ori spent admiring his husband, there were raised voices and Gridr crossed to where her nieces and nephew were coming in. Tilda was resplendent in a white dress with puffed sleeves and the hem dropped almost to her ankles. There was foaming white lace at her throat, her sleeves and the hem of her skirt. She wore white kidskin boots, tied with lace ribbons.

Ori clamped his hand over his mouth. Omi and Loli had popped Tilda into one of their West Farthing dresses that they wore when the Urs came to dinner with the Durins that first time. Ori smiled to himself. What a long time ago that seemed. They were all just being introduced and getting to know one another. Now, in a matter of a couple of months, they were a close-knit family.

Tilda skipped over to Bard by the fireplace to show off her finery. Bard pretended not to recognize such a grown up young lady, rose, and bowed over her hand, requesting an introduction. She shrieked, blushed, and hugged him hard. Everyone nearby laughed and complimented Tilda.

Dori brought her over to sit with herself and Galadriel.

Loli and Omi and Randi converged on their imad, talking at the same time and at volume until Gridr shouted for quiet and told them they must ask the Bearer’s permission.

Dori looked up eagerly.

“Oh, my permission is required? Is someone getting married?”

Loli, Omi, and Randi hurried over to Dori. Randi carried a large, deep basket. Ori had a premonition as to what that basket contained.

Thranduil looked into it, as did Dori. Dori laughed heartily and Thranduil face palmed, much to Celeborn’s surprise.

“Very well,” Dori said, magnanimously. “But only for those who would like to participate. You are going to have to ask our deary to move his battle training over a little, if you’re doing that.”

The young Urs cheered which brought the rest of the youngsters over to Randi. Fili and Kili shouted excitedly as they saw the contents of the basket.

Randi put the basket down and lifted up the large music box from the inn.

Bombur, Erda, and Bifur rose and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” Thorin asked teasingly.

Bombur gave a weighty sigh. “To make azzip and fruit soda water.”
Loli bounced up to Elessar and Arwen.

“Would you like to lead the dance?”

The couple exchanged glances.

“Certainly, “ Arwen said brightly. “What dance are we doing?”

“The wag!” Loli stated importantly.

The Gondorian couple looked at each other again, both shook their heads and Elessar smiled to Loli.

“My lady and I are not familiar with that dance-”

“But it’s from Gondor!” Loli insisted.

Dipfa came over and elucidated.

“The musical troupe is called the White City Bang Crash. They are famed for their invention of the dance the Beleghost Body Wag and the current favorite of their tunes is ‘Ghostriders through Anórin’.”

Buj nodded wisely and added, “The troupe is considered to be on the ‘cutting edge’ of music and most educated musicians refer to it as ‘musical graffiti’.”

“Musical graffiti…” Elessar managed, his eyes widening with glee and Arwen fought to control her face.

“Oh by all means,” the elf lady said in a tone shaking with laughter, “do show us how to…er…wag.”

The Ur badgers grinned hugely at her and the rest of the younger set began to try and cajole the elders to join in. Thorin rose and grinned at Thranduil, who rolled his eyes and glided to his feet.

“C’mon, Chat,” Thorin called. “Dancing is good for the digestion.”

“I’m game,” Snur hopped up.

Lady Galadriel rose and, taking Bard’s and Tharkûn’s hands, led them out to the center of the room. Since Dwalin had called a halt to the battle training, Dain, Sculdis, and Boromir looked intrigued. Glorfindel and the sisters came over immediately at the word ‘dance’.

Theoden stayed with Dori and the others elders at the fireplace, though they did move the furniture around to watch.

There was a quick lesson, which Ori remembered well, grinning up at Dwalin. Loli, Omi, and Randi demonstrated. Arwen and Elessar nearly collapsed in giggles but tried their best. A laughing Boromir fell over but Margr yanked him unceremoniously to his feet again. Buj and Dipfa wagged with great solemnity and dignity. Floris had Theodred under control and they wagged enthusiastically. Kili, Fili, Tauriel, and Sigrid wagged with the ease of experience, coaching Bain and Stonehelm. Elladan and Elrohir started improvising.

The music was put on and everyone commenced wagging in earnest.

“I like this!” shouted Chat, his arms pinwheeling wildly.

Thorin, Ori and Dwalin wagged, laughing at the others. Tilda was squealing and Bard was not having any luck with shoogling his shoulders and hips at the same time. Lady Galadriel wove about like a willow twig in the breeze. Tharkûn had to be helped away, holding onto his hip and Elrond took him in hand. Elladan and Elrohir linked arms with Legolas and Gimli and began to add high kicks.

Lindir rose from his seat to watch and seemed intrigued enough to join in while Glorfindel, Margr and Vi wagged and stamped so hard the furniture shook. Biscuit barked loudly, running among the dancers, trying to join in. Chopper roared over and tried to dance with Dain and Sculdis but there was no real physical way for the pig to wag successfully.

The music ended and there was a rousing cheer from the participants and applause from the audience, which was laughing too hard to pass any commentary.

Glorfindel put an arm about each of the sisters’ shoulders.

“That was an excellent dance! Thorin, my friend, will we be doing this dance at your coronation?”

Thorin shrugged, “I imagine so. White City Bang Crash has been invited to play after the feast and Jim’s troupe’s performance.”
The young people cheered and shrieked with delight.
“You didn’t,” Thranduil looked at Thorin. Thorin grinned and exchanged a wink with Roäc. The raven looked very pleased with himself.

There was the sound of a bell and Fili went and opened the entry door. Granny Klak bustled in, greeted everyone, told them all to call her Granny Klak as Dearest Dori was her great grandchild then went to kiss Nori and Bofur and make a fuss over them.

“Granny’s precious badger,” Ori cooed.

Lindir who had come forward, lost hold of a snort and blushed. He glided over to examine the music box and Randi happily showed him how it worked.

“Is Nori his granny’s precious badger?” Arwen asked as they pulled a couple of couches together and Elessar, Arwen, Dwalin, Thorin and Ori sat there. Dain and Sculdis joined them.

“Oh yes,” Ori said and explained his family lineage.

Elessar seemed to ponder this for a time then exchanged a look with his lady.

“King Thorin,” he began.

“We’ve done the ‘wag’ together, I think Thorin is fine.”

“Then please call me by my family name which is Aragorn.”

“What is it, Aragorn?” Thorin encouraged.

“Suits yeh,” Sculdis commented, tucking up her feet and snuggling in under Dain’s arm.

Ori looked at Aragorn as he seemed to be picking his words carefully. Ori felt a rumble of approval in the back of his mind and relaxed.

“I really should have given you my personal condolences when I first arrived—”

“Please don’t,” Thorin sighed.

“May I ask in what way your late grandfather died?”

Thorin’s eyes narrowed but his tone did not change. “I didn’t stick a knife in his ribs, if that’s what you want to know.”

“I didn’t mean that—” Aragorn started as Dain half rose, snarling.

Ori turned to Thorin.

“It’s alright, Thorin. Aragorn is a good man and Arwen can be trusted. We can tell them.”

Both Dain and Thorin looked at Ori.

“You’re sure of this?” Thorin asked.

Ori nodded. Sculdis pulled Dain back.

“If our Ori says it’s alright, it’s alright, yeh great lump.”

Arwen looked at Ori a moment then said softly, “Grandmother said you were a seer.”

Ori shrugged and blushed.

“He’s th’ instrumen’ a’ Mahal,” Dwalin announced, gravely.

Ori rounded on his husband. “You make one bugle joke and so help me.”

Dwalin grinned naughtily at him. Dain and Sculdis roared with laughter and Aragorn and Arwen giggled.

“Wonderful,” Thorin groaned. “Now I need to go and scrub my ears out with soap. I’ll never unhear that.”

The Gondorian couple became solemn again. Quietly, Thorin told them the story of Thror’s madness, his death at the presentation, then the strange funeral, and finally the arkenstone.

“It was a dragon’s egg, Aragorn,” Thorin finished with a sudden look of remembered horror.

“What in all Arda would have happened if—”

Arwen reached over and placed a firm hand on Thorin’s arm.

“It didn’t. You averted the danger to your people.”

Thror snorted. “More like I did as Ori told me.”

“And I did what the ravens told me,” Ori put in.

Thorin leaned back and closed his eyes, then sat up, composed again, and smiled.

“And now we can begin again and give my people and Dale the help they need to prosper. That is my foremost duty. To see my people prosper.”

“You have a noble mission,” Aragorn said with a smile. “I hope I may be a staunch ally, so that
both our peoples may prosper and know peace.’”

“I did mean to help you with that mess in Mordor,” Thorin reminded him.

“You did,” Aragorn smiled. “I’m glad I now know what happened. Roäc dropped the arkenstone into Mount Doom. The eruption came out of nowhere as we were on the field.”

Arwen shook her head. “Father and I were in the main encampment tent and we felt it. We ran outside and there it was. It looked like the whole of Mordor exploded. Fires burning all along the walls and the black gate. Aragorn was out in the front battle line with the armies and they stopped fighting and raced to help any who were fleeing. The orcs either stood about or ran back to Mordor and their fell master.”

“What happened to him?” Thorin demanded. “If you need to root him out, I’ll gladly-”

“There’s no need, thank you, Thorin,” Aragorn said with a smiled. “Elrond, Galadriel, Saruman, and Glorfindel found him and he has been despatched to be judged among the valar.”

“Good.” Thorin looked relived. “I was holding that thought to discuss with all of you later but I’m glad none of us need worry about it.” Thorin paused, frowning, then, “No offense, but I never cared for Saruman.”

“None taken,” Aragon shrugged. “He’s gone off to the Undying Lands. He said he could no longer stay in Arda. He feared he would end up like Sauron. Too much temptation to meddle.”

Arwen turned to Thorin,

“May I tell my father?”

“If he asks, yes,” Thorin allowed.

“Thank you. I know he will respect your privacy.”

“We’ve trusted him with a copy of the Infernal Adventures of Durin the Deathless for this long. I wouldn’t doubt his word.”

“Bilbo loves that book, you know,” Arwen smiled.

“Yes, he told me. He has translated it into westron. When he found out from us it was a forbidden volume he was suitably horrified.”

“Oh no!” Arwen said clearly shocked.

“He didn’t know. And it will be rather useful when it’s published.”

Aragorn looked startled.

“You intend it to be published?”

“Seeing how being completely insular has profited us, I rather think it might be a good idea,” Thorin answered dryly.

There was shout from the sitting room door and the Urs and Mistress Dazla and her help trailed into the room bearing large round trays, glasses, pitchers, small plates, and bundles of napkins.

Bifur brought some over to Ori and his group. Thorin and Dain pulled a low table into the middle of their seating and Bifur put down two trays. The first held a circle of roasted dough, covered in a tomato sauce, a great deal of cheese and smoked meats. The second was devoid of meat but smothered in cheese, basil leaves, and caramelized rings of onions. The rounds were sliced across into plump triangles. Miss Oqizla set down two large pitchers of fizzing fruit soda water. One was bright orange and the other dark red and smelling of black currant.

Everyone was soon enjoying the azzip. The elves were quite taken with the caramelized onions. The fizzy fruit drink was approved of. The younger group were all sitting on the floor back at their fireplace and Floris was feeding chunks of meat to Biscuit.

Chopper tore across the room toward Dain, stopped a couple of yards away and slid up to Dain’s elbow on his butt. Chopper oinked eagerly and, with a nod from Sculdis, Arwen fed Chopper a slice of the basil and onion.

Chopper ate gently from her hand and Aragorn watched, amused.

“That has got to be the biggest pig I’ve ever seen, Dain,” Aragorn observed idly.

Dain grinned proudly.

“Aye, he’s a fine wee lad, isn’t he.”

“There’s nothing ‘wee’ about him.” Thorin objected.

Ori had two slices of azzip and drank a glass of black currant. He settled back against Dwalin’s
shoulder and blinked.

Dain and Sculdis appeared to have turned into Chat and Dis. Ori shook himself. This wasn’t a vision, he was falling asleep.

He sat up to excuse himself but everyone was piling up the tableware and moving about setting the furniture to rights.

Mistress Dazla and her loyal subjects came in with the bedroom candles. She and the others tenderly escorted their yawning royal guests away to bed. Dwalin put his arm around Ori.

“Sleepy, love?”

“Mahal, yes.”
Cake, Kings, and Queening it over all

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Breakfast is early today as there are monarchs (an’ we ain’t talkin’ ‘bout th’ butterflies neither!) arriving. Everyone’s very eager to pop that crown on Thorin’s head! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori slid from his dreams and smiled. Dwalin was licking the end of his nose with the tip of his tongue. Ori giggled. It surprised him that the tip of Dwalin’s tongue was so rough. Ori frowned and blinked. Mask was licking the end of Ori’s nose.

Ori smiled again and pulled a hand from under the covers and patted the kitten. Mask was getting big. Mask purred and bumped Ori’s chin with his head. Ori stroked the kitten. Mask was getting big and a bit fat, too. Through the gloom of the dark bedroom, Ori could see that the moon had set but dawn was still not there.

Ori sighed contently. He was cozily spooned into Dwalin. Dwalin’s face was buried in Ori’s hair and Dwalin’s arms were about Ori’s waist. There was a flutter of wings. Ori glanced back. Garnet landed on the covers on Dwalin’s shoulder. The raven looked Dwalin over, plucked at the covers and walked on Dwalin’s skin. Dwalin grunted.

“Wake up,” Garnet said in her grating voice.
“Fuck off,” Dwalin muttered.
Garnet pecked the torn edge of Dwalin’s ear.
Dwalin grunted and squeezed Ori.
“Someone be’er be bleedin’ t’ death, lass.”
“Dori’s coming.”
“That’s Balin’s problem.” Dwalin snickered into Ori’s ear. Ori giggled and looked at an exasperated Garnet.
“What’s going on, Garnet?”
“Dori’s busy and so are the Urs. You two have got to put in an appearance.”
“Fuck,” Dwalin muttered again. “Give us a minute.”
Garnet sighed and flew up to the head board and settled there. Ori rolled over and laid his brow against Dwalin’s. Dwalin kissed him and they settled back for a few minute’s peace.

Ori heard knocking, peeled open an eye, realized it was still dark and shut his eye again.
“Fuck,” Dwalin hissed. “Not even five bleedin’ minutes.”
But the knocking persisted and Dori, unreasonably chipper, called out,
“Pet! Our deary! Time to get up now.”
Dwalin rolled onto his back and groaned.
“Our Dori! It ain’t even th’ arse crack a’ dawn.”
“Our guests will be up after the arse crack,” Dori replied. “We have family business to tuck up before then. Hurry up.”
The door opened and Ori heard Dori say,
“Oh good you’re here! Please get them dressed. Thank you so much, dear Agirb.”
Agirb came in and set down two large pitchers of steaming water and a basket of towels.
“Good morning, milord, captain.”
“Good morning, Agirb,” Ori replied rubbing his eyes. He levered himself onto his elbows.
“Dwalin, do you smell cake?”
“Aye,” Dwalin agreed, “an’ no th kind yeh eat f’r breakfast.”
“It smells like the inn,” Ori said in disbelief, sitting up and swinging his feet to the rug.
Dwalin rose from the other side of the bed and stretched.
“In tha’ case, I be’er put me britches on.”
Agirb poured water for them to wash.
“You’ll wear, captain?”
Dwalin turned.
“Since when do yeh dress me, Agirb? I ain’t a royal fart.”
Agirb smiled, “It’ll go quicker, captain.”
Dwalin shrugged.
“If yeh like, lad. Grab me a shirt and kilt, thanks. Love? What’re yeh wearin’, seein’ Agirb’s askin’.”
Agirb looked pained.
“You want me to handle Lord Ori’s clothes? Is that an order, captain?”
“Yeh got a problem with-” Dwalin started angrily, but Ori had a flash of intuition.
“Has Dipfa threatened you, Agirb?”
“Yes, milord. She said if I ever touched your clothes, she’d kick me downstairs as I …er… ‘don’t understand the depth of the harmony of your wardrobe’.”
Dwalin laughed and clapped the suffering Agirb on the shoulder.
“We won’t tell her,” Ori promised. “Will my dark green with currant berries do for whatever Dori has in mind, Agirb?”
“Yes, milord.”
The young servant had everything laid out by the time they finished their ablutions. He set out their brushes, combs, and bead boxes while they dressed, bowed as they thanked him, and left.

The company had gathered in the kitchen, all in various states of wakefulness and dress. Only Dori, as usual, looked immaculate in her rose colored silk robe now trimmed with diamonds instead of gray, and Granny Klak, who had apparently never gone to bed at all but stayed up all night gambling at cards with Theoden, Jani, and Boromir.
“Did you take the whole pot?” Nori asked.
“Of course I did,” Granny Klak told him, patting his cheek.
“I wouldn’t ’spect anything less.” Nori kissed her hand and Ori saw the money bag pass from her hand to his.
“Happy day, my pet,” she cooed.
Nori grinned and pocketed the ‘present’.
Ori looked his brother over. Nori was dressed in his ‘good clothes’, the set Dori had forced upon him, if only for family occasions when his underworld cronies weren’t likely to see him. He wore velvets of garnet and amethyst, and Ori was amazed to find they didn’t clash with his hair.
At his belt, Assault and Battery lounged in open pouches. The baby ferrets had red velvet bows around their necks. Nori’s hair was down and loose and Ori was struck again by how long it was. No wonder Dori swore every time he had to help Nori wash it in the sink back in Steam Alley.
“Nervous?” Ori teased.
“Why would I be?” Nori reasoned. “We’re already married.”
“When you got married the first time, there wasn’t a committee gathered to pulp you if you did it wrong.”
“They won’t pulp me. It’d upset Bo, an’ he’s already been upset enough.”
“Has he forgiven you yet?”
“Yep, can you believe it? I guess he figured Ones are hard to come by.”
“He certainly waited long enough for you,” Ori observed.
“That’s what I don’t get,” said Nori, frowning. “We grew up together. I never heard the Music that whole time. The Urs moved away, still not a single note, not until I seen him again here at the
“I can see little red hearts if I want. I’m a shit, but I’m a romantical shit, at least wif Bofur.”
“Then, all of a sudden it was springtime and cute little red hearts.”
“Cute little red hearts?” he giggled.
“Maybe sometimes you do,” Ori said thoughtfully. “A lot of things changed the day I married Dwalin. We’ve all changed. Even you’re different. Not better, of course, but different.”
“Mebbe I’ll just smack you upside the head and be done wif it,” Nori muttered.
Ori stuck out his tongue and grabbed Nori in a hug.
“I hope you’re happy forever, Nori,” Ori said.
“Aye, well, if I am, blame Bo.” But Nori was grinned hugely.
The Urs arrived, dressed much like they had been the night of that first party that felt so long ago. Bombur and Erda looked proud, Bifur somber, and Jani half-asleep, resting her head on Dis’ shoulder. Omi and Loli had resumed their fine Shire fashions, but Randi had simply donned his clothes from last night, not even bothering with his boots.
Ori half expected Bofur to appear in his plaid nightshirt with the pickaxes, but the miner was quite formally dressed, his mustache spiffed and his hair loose. Ori thought he looked odd without his hat, but he did have very nice hair. It wasn’t very long, but thick, black, and glossy.
Thorin arrived, dressed in Durin blue, and looked around the company.
“Are we ready?” he asked with a smile for Nori and Bofur.
There were nods and murmurs of the affirmative.
Thorin led the way out to the patio.
It was still dark but the starlight was there, with the barest hint of the dawn beyond the mountain. Nori turned to Ori.
“Here, Chick, hold these if ya would.”
He handed Ori the marriage beads Nori and Bofur had been wearing. Up close they were even more exquisite than Ori remembered.
Thorin, with his beautiful voice, sang the first verse of the old khuzdul blessing song and then everyone joined in. Without instruments and in the open air, it echoed all around the meadow.
As the last notes faded, Bofur and Nori joined hands and recited their oaths together in khuzdul, and Ori wasn’t amazed that Bofur could speak it so beautifully. What surprised him was how fine an accent Nori had. Ori wondered how long Nori had been practicing for this. Then it occurred to him that Dori had probably forcibly shoved it into his brain as he had done with Ori back when they were badgers. Just in case, Dori used to say. You never know when the Music begins. Ori felt vaguely sorry for Nori. Ori had known the deep, comforting growl in his heart all his life. He turned his attention to the ceremony. He intended to put it to paper and ink later.
“As Mahal has forged us for each other, let us seek to make each other happy. Let us forge a new family and a new life together, as did our ancestors.”
Except, Ori was fairly sure he heard Nori say, “as did a couple’ve our ancestors”.
Binni, Bombur and Bifur sniffled through the rest of the ceremony. Oin patted Binni’s hand but was obviously amused. Erda kept Bombur supplied with a steady series of handkerchiefs.
Gridr had provided two fine, silver brushes for them to use on each other’s hair. Nori looked at his appraisingly.
“Don’t you dare,” Dori hissed.
“Suspicious, ain’t ya,” said Nori. “Look on the bright side, me hair’s Bo’s look-out now, not yours.”
“Thank Mahal,” Dori intoned piously.
“Believe me, I am,” said Nori.
In the back of his head, Ori heard a snort and he giggled.
He leaned back into Dwalin, smiling. Dwalin kissed the top of his head.
Bofur said to Nori, “Ya want me t’ do your braid first?”
“Awright, let’s bash on wif it,” said Nori with a grin.
“Is there enough light to actually do the braiding?” Omi asked.
Jani said, “We’re miners. There’s enough light to paint our names on our toenails.”
“It’s so romantic,” sighed Loli.
“Toenails?” Randi asked.
“Shut up,” she said happily.
“Just leave me eyebrows out’ve it,” said Nori to Bofur.
“Aw, yer no fun,” said Bofur, separating out the hair for the braid.
“I suppose I could bead me eyebrows before I tuck ‘em back up,” said Nori.
“They strong enough?”
“Dori pulls me around by ‘em, so, yep.”
“Only when you are naughty,” said Dori, “which is all the time.”
Bofur took his time with the braid, actually plaiting in love knots.
“Rather fancy for th’ likes o’ me,” said Nori with a grin.
“Looks like a braided copper bracelet like this,” said Bofur.
He took the bead from Ori to clasp it into Nori’s hair.
Bifur, astonished, said, “Bo, from whence came these beads? They be worth a king’s ransom! Nori?”
“I didn’t steal ‘em,” said Nori, rolling his eyes. “They was a gift.”
“From whom?”
“Me, actually,” said Thorin with a smile. “They belonged to Thror’s mother.”
Bifur made a noise which caused everyone to look at him with alarm.
“Such things shouldst stay within thy family,” Bifur insisted.
“They did,” said Thorin.
Bifur hugged him hard enough to lift him from his feet.
Thorin said something no one but Bifur could hear and patted his back. It took Bifur a moment to compose himself so Nori could braid Bofur’s hair.
“Sorry, Bo,” said Nori, “I’m sorta throwin’ off the symmetry. Now you got two braids on one side, an’ just one on the other.”
“S’allright, I’ll just list off to the right and bump ya into a lot o’ walls.”
“Ah, romance,” said Balin.
For the hand binding, they used the ferrets’ velvet bows, which had a few chew marks on them but were otherwise serviceable.
Dori sighed, but Nori said, “Nah, that’s just love.”
Thorin opened his mouth to pronounce the final blessing, but Roäc beat him to it.
“Malah loves yeh, now go be married!”
Ori turned. The ravens had lined the mountain side, the walls and sills of the house within, and all gave a roaring caw of approval.
Nori and Bofur looked back, Nori laughed, Bofur bowed and called out, “Thanks, lads! Ladies!”
Determined to have the final word, Thorin smiled and said, “You may now kiss your ferrets.”
And so they did, and the air was filled with flying gold dust and the cheers of ravens.

Everyone except Bofur and Nori went back to their rooms and changed into everyday clothes, Ori came out with Dwalin to find that Dori, now in an incredible dark Fundin red robe trimmed with gold which daintily showed her pale shoulders to great advantage, and Mistress Dazla was overseeing last night’s dining table move through to the receiving room and set for a breakfast buffet like they had enjoyed at the inn.
The other great table that had been used at the dinner party after the scouring of Dale was set up with chairs and place settings.
Mistress Dazla seemed to have surrendered the kitchen to Bombur, Erda, and Bifur and assigned them helpers.
Huge urns of coffee and a massive samovar for making tea were settled on the end of the buffet. Nearby sat a freshly tapped keg of light ale. Large, rectangle basins filled with hot coals and charcoal were set out on thick pads on the table. More metal basins were brought from the kitchen, these filled with hot, delicious-smelling food. They were fitted carefully over the heated ones.

Ori looked eagerly to see what was available. There were flapjacks and fruit in one basin, another held light, fluffy scrambled eggs. A large mound of hash towered over the edges of a third basin, while another held potatoes fried with onions, tomato and garlic. Next came lovely pile of toasted egg bread and a three enormous crocks, one of marmalade, another of mixed berries and the biggest of elderberry jam. A vast basket cradled hot scones straight from the oven. There was a basin full of freshly grilled bacon and one of steaming sausages and at the end sat a great joint of cold, roasted beef.

Theoden and Theodred came down the stairs, Theoden ostensibly admiring the house but Theodred obviously following his nose to the food.

Dori greeted them and bade them to help themselves and be comfortable. Theoden headed straight to the beef and ale. Theodred wandered the entire length of the buffet table and took a sample of everything. Dwalin helped himself to buttered toast and a great deal of bacon. Ori took four slices of buttered toast and made sausage sandwiches for himself.

Thorin filled his plate with eggs and beef and sat opposite Theoden. He nodded to Ori and Dwalin who seated themselves near, Dwalin beside Thorin, and Ori opposite, beside Theodred. Thorin, after watching Theoden drain half his tankard of ale and put away a few slices of beef, thoughtfully passed the man the mustard. Theoden raised his eyebrows, mouth full.

“Try it,” Thorin encouraged. “It’s very different from the smooth mild stuff you men make.”

Theoden took the small crock, peered inside, sniffed, knifed up a dollop and spread it over a slice of his beef. He shoved the slice in his mouth and his eyes lit up.

“This is wonderful! Such flavor!”

“You should try these flapjacks, Father,” Theodred said, obviously having the same flavor party in his mouth Theoden was enjoying. Theoden took his fork and helped himself to some from his son’s plate. He nodded, smiling.

“You dwarfs, sorry, dwarrow, certainly know how to cook!”

Thorin smiled.

“I understand you have great herds of steppe cattle.”

Theoden laughed.

“Yes, we do. Bard and I have an idea about crossbreeding with the Dale stock. But if you want the plain beef, we’ll certainly set up trade.”

“Well, we do like our mustard and now so do you,” Thorin teased.

“Nothing like a good steak,” Dwalin commented, mouth full. Ori nodded his agreement.

The guests began filing in one by one in various stages of spiffiness and all yawning.

Celeborn and Galadriel were immaculate and ethereal as always. Elrond looked relaxed and Lindir pensive. Greeting were exchanged lightly and the guest were directed to the food.

Elrond filled his plate with the flapjacks and a pile of potatoes. Lindr went with four scones with different jam on three and a small spoonful of egg on the last. Both elves partook of tea.

Lady Galadriel was still hovering over the loaded buffet. Celeborn had two scones with marmalade and took a cup of tea. The lady finally arrived at the dining table carrying one plate with several slices of toast, another plate entirely covered in bacon and the crock of elderberry jam tucked in her elbow. Celeborn brought her a cup of tea. The lady stared at the tea then looked at Celeborn with an eyebrow raised in faint disgust. Celeborn put the tea beside his own and, with a sigh, went back to get his wife a tankard of ale.

Jani came in with Dis and Jani patted the lady’s shoulder.

“That’s a lass! Set yerself up f’r the day. Always like a proper breakfast. Love?” She looked around for Dis, but Dis was already half way to the buffet. The Sons of Groin’s household came in, helped themselves and settled at the table around those already there. Conversation flowed from all sides. Ori noted that Buj drank several cups of coffee but ate only potatoes. Ori wondered how Buj
managed to live on such a strange diet for a dwarf. The last time Ori had eaten only fried potatoes for a meal as a badger, he had spent most of the night in the outhouse.

Halfway through, Binni, Dori and Bombur carried the promised cake out to the receiving room, to the amazement and delight of the party.

Ori had no idea how they managed to move it. The cake was a pink and white tower of gradually smaller layers and, being at least five feet tall, swayed dangerously back and forth over the platter. When they finally set it down Ori saw a tiny spot on the top where perched two ferrets made of marzipan, wearing marzipan crowns.

“Xocolatl, with raspberry frosting and whipped cream,” said Bombur.

“Mahal!” Ori gasped. “Bombur, it’s beautiful! This must have taken all night!”

Dori said, “If you had asked permission, pet, you could have had one like it for your wedding dinner.”

“We had bacon and spiced scrambled eggs,” said Ori. “Dwalin made them, and then he soaked bread in the leftover egg and fried that. It was brilliant! The next day we had steak and chips!”

“I would never say our dearly isn’t an excellent provider,” said Dori.

“Thank yeh,” Dwalin replied, giving Ori a hug.

Dis managed to stop Kili from actually face-planting in the cake, but looked like she might be tempted herself.

Nori and Bofur traded knives to each cut a slice of cake and make a wish. Dori had insisted these not be their boot knives, but Ori was sure he would eat this cake off his own boot knife and not think twice about it.

The happy couple fed each other a bite of cake, though the way Bofur’s finger lingered in Nori’s mouth actually made Ori blush and Thorin and Dwalin snicker.

“Knock it off,” Dori hissed. “There’re badgers in the room.”

Ori looked around.

“Where?”

Dori raised an eyebrow and Nori said, “Let it go, Dor, he’s a grown dwarf.”

Ori made a face at his brothers.

“That’s right!” he declare, saucily. “I’m grown, have my journeyman, and I’ve been married longer than both of you, elder brothers!” Ori remembered his first thoughts about the contract and decided to be kind. “Mind,” he said smiling a little. “When Dwalin and I got married, I didn’t realize that’s what we were doing at first. All I saw with a big, long contract. I thought I was being adopted.”

“Or,” said Nori, “maybe not.”

“Shut up, Nori,” Ori snapped, blushing furiously. “Hurry it up with the cake slicing.”

“Cake!” Galadriel cried. “Oh, darling, isn’t it luscious!”

“Cake for breakfast?” Celeborn asked.

“Nori and Bofur got married this morning,” Ori informed them.

“I thought they were already married,” said Galadriel, wonderingly.

“Properly this time,” Bifur grumbled.

“And supervised,” Dori sniffed.

“Ahh,” Elrond observed. “Very wise.”

He nodded sagely at Bifur and the old warrior came over to the elf lord and they solemnly shook hands.

“Well,” said Nori, “we’ve had a weddin’, we’ve had cake. Come on, Bo, time for the weddin’ night.”

“No, you don’t,” Dori said indignantly.

“What?” Nori challenged. “We can’t go around all… whatyacall… unconsummated.”

“You’ve consummated enough for this life time,” Dori maintained. “You’ve used up your allotment. Besides, we have guests coming. Kings.”

“Why do they get to come an’ not us?” Nori asked.

Bofur snorted into his shoulder.
“Not another word,” Dori snapped.
“Wouldn’t think o’ it, our Dori,” said Bofur.
Ori had no doubt they wouldn’t give it any thought. He suspected the moment Dori’s back was turned they’d be gone without any thought at all.
Bard and his family arrived and helped themselves to breakfast. Ori looked over at Lindir, who having finished his repast, had gone to the couch, apparently worse for a night's sleep, rather than better. Ori went over with his tea.
"Are you all right, Master Lindir?"
"No, Lord Ori, I don't believe so. I was up all night listening to the most wretched noise."
"I offered you a sleeping draught," said Elrond, coming sit on the other side of Lindir. "I slept quite well."
"I didn’t realize they would be at it until dawn," said Lindir. "Where does he get the stamina? I suppose he's that tall for a reason."
Ori had a sneaking suspicion, and he was afraid to say anything, but he didn't have to, as Glorfindel swaggered down the stairs with Vi and Margr, one under each of his arms, looking like well-fed cats.
They smacked him, giggling, and bounced over to Dori, putting their heads together, the better to tell her every terrifying detail. Glorfindel threw himself down in a well-used chair, pointed at the sisters, and roared, "Now those are DAMS!"
Lindir whimpered.
Marg and Vi turned to wave and blow kisses, which the huge elf returned.
Ori was about to excuse himself when Dain descended the stairs with Sculdis, smacking her on the bottom, and then she went over to join Vi and Margr, doubtless to tell Dori much the same things as they had done. Stonehelm made a bee line for the food. Dain threw himself down on the couch beside Lindir, nearly launching the much lighter elf, the couch groaning beneath the Iron Hills king.
Ori smirked into his tea.
"Sleep well, nadad?"
"When I got t' it!" Dain replied. "Poor Chopper! I had t' send 'im off t' sleep in with th' Stonehelm. He was livid, I can tell yeh."
"Stonehelm?" Lindir asked.
"Chopper," said Dain, “Thanks, lad,” as Stonehelm brought his adad a plate piled with flapjacks and a tankard of ale. Stonehelm went off. Dain used his fingers to shove half a flapjack in his mouth. "Doesn't like it when he can't hog th' bed. Ha! Tha' was a good one!"
"Isn't Chopper a pig?" Lindir asked.
"Nah, his manners're better than mine."
"No doubt," said King Snur, cake in one hand, tea in the other.
"Yer lookin’ better, Chat," said Dain.
"It's been a few years since the port opened," said Snur. "We're all back t' eaten three squares a day. Thanks f'r the supplies, by the way. Saved our sorry arses."
"T'was nothin'," said Dain. "Burns me t' think folk're goin' hungry when I kin do somethin' about it."
Snur sat on Dain's knee and they continued to eat and talk, though there was nothing flirty about it.
Ori thought it rather like when he sat on Dori's knee. It occurred to him these dwarrow had known each other longer than he had been alive. Looking through Balin's genealogical tables, Ori found that Snur and Dain had a common Firebeard ancestor and weren't more than third cousins. In fact, all the dwarven monarchs were related more closely than he had believed. Even Thorin and Hild were related through their mothers.
The sheer magnitude of their shared history fascinated him. Add all the connections growing out from there and it was no wonder poor Bard had nearly fallen out.
Ruelis, Jim, their son Fior, and Floris, with Biscuit at their heels, arrived and greeted everyone before attending to the serious matter of eating. Fili, Kili and Stonehelm sat with them. Ori noted the
all three had decided to break their fast with cake first.

Thranduil and Aewandínen descended the stairs. Thranduil came to the sofa and greeted Dori with a kiss on the cheek while Dori scolded him to go and eat. Thranduil did so, then returned and stood near Elrond and Lindir with a tankard of coffee. Aewandínen looked over what was on offer for breakfast and settled for a slice of dry toast.

He returned to his father and said in a bored manner,

“I am trying my best, honored Ada, but these walls, all this stone, they inspire nothing in me but thoughts of melancholy.”

Gimli, after helping himself to another plate piled high with flapjacks and hash with a side of cake, while Legolas sat watching fascinated, looked up and grunted at the eldest prince.

“Well, yeh should’a brought him with you then, shouldn’t yeh.”

Surprised into conversation, Aewandínen stared at him. “Brought whom?”

“’S not like any’d mind,” Gimli went on. “The Fundin’s’ve got load of animals an’ there’s Dain with his pig and our wee Floris with Biscuit there.”

The warg lay on the floor behind his little mistress, gnawing on the bone from the beef.

“Pardon?” Aewandínen was now confused.

“Yer dog,” Gimli clarified and shoved the cake in his mouth. Legolas and Thranduil were instantly fascinated by the discussion.

“I don’t have dog,” Aewandínen protested.

“Yeh jus’ said yeh did!” Gimli growled thickly in an incensed manner, but his eyes twinkled. Ori had a horrible feeling this was going to end in a lame joke but he couldn’t figure it out.

“I most certainly did not.”

“Aye, yer did! Yeh just told yer da, an’ we all heard yeh, yeh missed yer dog.”

“Perhaps,” Aewandínen said icily, “you misheard me around the food in your mouth. I told my father I had thoughts of melancholy.”

“Exactly,” Gimli agreed.

“How did you think that was a dog?” Aewandínen demanded. “Have you not fully mastered the westron language?”

“I’ve mastered it fine. Yeh said yeh had thought’s o’ melancholy. ‘Mellon’ is th’ elf word f’r friend and ‘collie’ is a dog. Yeh missed yer friend dog.”

Aewandínen’s mouth fell inelegantly open. Legolas stared, his brain obviously doing gymnastics. Thranduil looked struck. Elrond groaned and covered his face with his hands. Gimli put more food in his mouth and stared peaceably at Aewandínen.

Ori closed his eyes. That was the worst pun he had ever heard and at the same time it was surprisingly good. He wondered if Gimli had been cultivating it for years or it had been a flash of inspiration.

Dain and Snur brayed with laughter then went back to their discussion.

“Young Gimli,” Thranduil said in a slightly breathy voice. “Until now no one has every been able to make a pun using any elven language.”

“Aye, well,” Gimli grinned up at him. “As they say, live an’ learn.”

Thranduil sat heavily down on the nearest sofa which was opposite Elrond. “Melan-choly, “ he murmured. “Friend dog. That is amazing.” Then Thranduil looked at Elrond who seemed to be in linguistic agony. Thranduil fell onto the sofa seat near Elrond and laughed.

Legolas hugged Gimli’s head. Gimli groused that he was eating. Thranduil laughed until the tears ran down his cheeks.

“Friend dog!” he hiccupsed occasionally.

“Ada!” Aewandínen cried, horrified to see his regal father in such a state. “It’s not funny!”

Thranduil just laughed again.

“It isn’t funny,” the elf king gasped. “It’s fucking hilarious! Mellon collie! Friend dog!”

“Ada! I don’t have a dog,” Aewandínen protested.

“I’ll have Bard get you one,” Thranduil giggled helplessly. “Your very own melancholy.” Aewandínen stormed off to the tea urn.
“That was actually very clever,” Lindir admitted.

“Thank yeh!” Gimli grinned naughtily at the steward.

“Did you just think of it?” Lindir asked.

“Nah,” Gimli admitted. “I’ve had that one sittin’ in th’ back a’ me brain for, ohhh, mebbe ten years now.”

“You sat on a joke like that for ten years?” Elrond looked amazed.

“Course,” Gimli said, loftily. “Way a’ dwarrow. Gotta hammer th’ nail jus’ righ’ or th’ work won’t last.”

“You are a genius,” Legolas told Gimli fondly from his seat on the arm of Gimli’s chair, where he had been helping himself to Gimli’s plate and tea.

“Aye, well, I coulda told yeh tha’,” Gimli reflected proudly then frowned at his empty plate.

“Now I gotta think up another. Hope it won’t take ten years again.”

“I’m so glad I’m immortal,” Legolas told the room happily. Gimli growled and elbowed him in the ribs.

“I admit,” Lindir said reflectively, “I am now rather looking forward to the next one. Are you?”

He turned to Elrond, who was smiling and shaking his head.

“It was always said,” Elrond mused, “that it couldn’t be done.”

“And now you’re unhappy you didn’t think of it?” Lindir teased gently.

Elrond raised a brow at him.

“Don’t do it,” Snur advised Elrond. “Let wifey have the upper hand. Makes f’r a happy marriage.”

“Lindir isn’t my wife.” Elrond stared.

“Ah,” Snur corrected himself. “Then let yer lassie, Linda, have her joke. It’ll make gettin’ hitched quicker, right, our Rhonda?”

“Lindir,” Elrond corrected then, “I’m Elrond.”

“Sorry, lassies.”

“We are male,” Elrond hurriedly explained.

Dori came back from sorting out Jim and his family and settled on the sofa near Thranduil and patted his hand fondly. Arwen and Aragorn came with Dori and seated themselves on the bench by the fire.

“Oh,” Snur looked Elrond and Lindir over again then, “Ya are kinda pretty in a dwarrowdam sort’ve way.”

Elrond looked startled and recovered enough to say, “Thank you.”

“Right. If ya just had a beard ya’d be quite a bonny lass, as they say.”

Lindir snerked into his cup.

“I’m cutting you off,” said Elrond aside.

“From tea?” Lindir replied with an arched brow.

Dori cried, “Oh, Lord Elrond! I have just the frock for you! Should you ever want to be a bonny lass.”

“Thank you, dear Bearer. Unfortunately I cannot grow a beard. My brother could, but, alas, the gift was denied me.”

“Poor lad,” said Balin aside as he brought Dori another cup of tea.

Arwen was biting her lip so hard, Ori thought it must hurt.

Bard, Sigrid, and Fili came over and Sigrid broke in, “You don’t need to grow one, Lord Elrond. I got one.”

He didn’t quite seem to know what to say.

“I didn’t actually grow one,” Sigrid assured him. “But I got one all the same.”

“I thought it looked fetching,” said Fili.

“You’re sweet,” said Sigrid. “But you think I look fetching with fruit on my head.”

“You thought I looked fetching while I was doing that spinning thing in your skirt.”

“I won that contest,” Thranduil announced as Kili and Tauriel arrived to hear the gossip.

Ori was waiting for the brave soul who would argue the matter further. He was disappointed there
were no takers, so he threw in,  
“I did some great drawings of it! I could go get them.”

He started to rise but Elrond said, “Oh, please, don’t trouble yourself, Lord Ori, we’re all certain they’re beautifully… rendered.”

“I want to see them and so does my dearest!” Arwen cried just as Thoeden, Thorin, and Theodred joined them.

Thorin smiled into his cup.
“Shall we put it to a vote?”

“Get the pictures!” Fili, Gimli and Sigrid shouted together. Legolas and Tauriel burst out laughing.

Grinning, Ori went to his room.

Ori, after thoroughly checking his notebooks twice for naughty drawings, brought them back through. They were parked on the large low stone table and everyone gathered about.

Thoeden, Theodred, Bain, and Tilda laughed themselves sick over the bathing suits. Bard got a chuckle out of them once he saw Sigrid quite properly covered. Arwen and Aragorn kept exchanging glances and nodding at each other.

Gloin and Gridr wanted to keep all the ones with Gimli in them. Glorfindel seized the one of Thranduil in the bedsheets and demanded a framed copy. Without even a pause, Thranduil threw a teaspoon at him. Glorfindel was delighted.

Margr and Vig gushed over the bathing suits, declaring them ‘dead fashionable’. Jim and Ruelis looked through, snickering and marveling at the same time. Dipfa stood near and watched the people looking at the drawings as well as the drawings themselves. Ori wondered where she would find the time to design new wardrobes for them all.

Elrond and Lindir studied the lake creatures with great interest. Buj joined them and the two elves seemed to thoroughly enjoy their discussion with Buj.

Celeborn was fascinated by Rutile’s drawing. Dis produced the spider from her hair and the three of them sat back at the breakfast table with paper and a saucer of ink. Celeborn watched Rutile draw more things. Balin went over and handed his magnifier to Celeborn, delighting the serious elf, who, after polite inquiry, examined Rutile closely. Dis basked in the attention given to her favorite and Rutile showed off dreadfully.

“King Thranduil,” said Tilda from his side, where they were all still looking at Ori’s pictures, but Tilda was looking at the elf king.

“Yes, Princess Tilda?” he said with a lazy smile.

“Do you stab yourself with your ears when you try to brush your hair?”

“Tilda!” Bard cried, horrified.

Thranduil had been lazing on the couch, eyes half closed, now he sat bolt upright.

“What?”

“Your ears look sharp,” said Tilda.

Bard groaned.

“Tilda, they’re ears, not bottle openers. Apologize to King Thranduil.”

Thranduil snorted and laughed.

“It’s alright, Bard, she’s just curious. No, little one, I don’t cut myself with my ears.” He gestured the child closer and leant down. “Here, take a look. You can touch them, just don’t pinch.”

Aewandimen, incensed, stomped out of the room, though not forgetting his teacup. Thranduil barely noticed.

Tilda very carefully touched the tip of the proffered ear.

“Oh, they’re just like real ears, only pointy.”

“Yes,” said Thranduil dryly, but with a smile.

“You should pierce them like the dwarrow do. They’d look so pretty with mithril rings.”

“Thank you, but it isn’t the custom among elves. Also, I’m afraid any ear jewels would clash with my hair… twigs.”
“Oh, I see,” said Tilda. “I do believe you’re right.”

Ori rather thought Tilda had been spending too much time with Dori and Brur, as she was fast picking up their speech patterns.

Tilda sat herself on Thranduil’s lap in a proprietary manner and made further study, with Thrandui’s full indulgence.

“You’re very pretty,” she announced. “You’re the prettiest man I’ve ever seen, or you would be if you were a man, not an elf. Isn’t that right, Da?”

Bard didn’t know where to look, but finally murmured, “Yes, it is, Til, but it’s not good manners to go around saying such things.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Thranduil. “Feels rather freeing, especially as you say you agree with her.”

Bard cut his eyes at Thranduil, who lofted his brows at him saucily.

“They’re flirting!” Tilda leaned over to whisper loudly at Bain.

Bain rolled his eyes and went back toward the cake.

Roäc winged through, and fluttered to a stop on Thorin’s arm.

“Swells approachin’ on the road,” Roäc announced.

“How far?” Thorin asked.

“Just the other side of Dale. I’d know Gheir’s fat head anywhere.”

“Charming,” said Thorin.

Theoden and Theodred turned and looked at him, alarmed.

“Not to worry,” said Thorin. “He usually keeps his fat head to himself.”

“No,” said Theoden, shaking his head. “That bird…”

Roäc cocked his head.

“And you are, sir?” he asked archly.

“That is Theoden King of Rohan, as you well know,” sighed Thorin. “And your manners are atrocious, as usual.”

Theodred blurted out, “That bird talked.”

He suddenly looked very young.

“Oh, I see. I’ve been remiss,” observed Thorin. “You haven’t been introduced. Theoden King and Theodred Prince, this is Roäc, King of the Ravens of Erebor.”

Roäc bobbed his head at them. “Pleasure’s mine. So, are we going to look?”

“Do all the birds in Erebor talk?” Theodred asked.

“Mostly just us ravens,” Roäc answered him in a tone of disinterestedness. “We’re birds, but we’re not birds, if you get my meaning.”

Theodred nodded, rather awestruck.

Thorin turned to Ori. “Shall we go to the parapet above the front gate and gawk?”

The younger set poured out the front door after Thorin. Dwalin and Ori held hands as they followed. Thorin led the parade out to the courtyard then through a small side door Ori had never noticed, up some steps and through the back passage to the great gates of Erebor. This was a long, narrow corridor, not meant for the soldiers to use, but to keep the occasional visitor from clogging up the halls as the warriors went about their guard duties along the walls. Ori had seen those rosters in Dwalin’s office and he couldn’t imagine having charge of that many people, never mind the entire army of Erebor.

His stomach fluttered at the thought of just the number of royal scribes he had to place in and around the throne room for the coronation. He was not ashamed to say he had leaned on Master Sadi in that, since she had actually been there for Thror’s coronation.

Who did Dwalin lean on? Ori didn’t know what he could do about this thought, other than hold his husband’s hand a little tighter. Dwalin pulled him close.

They came out to a long narrow balcony overlooking the great entrance to Erebor.

“Oh,” said Thorin, peering over the wall. “I see Hild won the fist fight.”
“What do you mean?” Ori asked.
“She’s approaching first.”
“They fought over which of them would approach Erebor before the other?” Ori was horrified.
“That seems rather… extreme.”
Dwalin shook his head.
“Those two’ll fight over anythin’. Doesn’t take much.”
A gaily colored column wended into sight on the road. Ori squinted, then Dwalin handed him a
spyglass to use. The soldiers appeared first, rank upon rank, five abreast ahead of the parade
He saw archers on the outsides, then halberd-bearers with a sword-bearer in the middle.
Five heralds followed, blowing an announcing volley, then at least a dozen standard bearers
carried the scarlet, orange and black on gold poles, proceeding a party of riders dressed in vibrant
finery, scarlets and oranges and golds but also twilight blue and metallic blue-greens like the
dragonflies at the inn, and so layered with jewels that they glittered with every movement, every
motion of the wind.
More soldiers brought up the rear, five abreast again. Ori felt sorry for them, having to follow the
horses.
“Look at that,” Kili shouted. Tauriel leaned to over the rail and shaded her eyes.
“Queen Hild always does everything in style,” Fili agreed with his brother.
“Look at the flags!”
“Look at the colors!”
“Look at the heralds and their long gold trumpets!”
“Is that all just Queen Hild’s party?” Ori asked quietly amid the hubbub from the younger set.
“Aye,” said Dwalin with a sigh.
“Do you think they’ll all fit in Durin House?”
“Can’t be tha’ many of ‘em.”
“Not yet,” said Ori. “I’m just waiting for the jugglers, the trained oliphaunts, the dancing maidens
and the strongman with the gong.”
Thorin and Dwalin turned and stared at him, then laughed.
Ori grinned.
“I must speak as I find,” he said. “Or, at least as I can only imagine. Too bad Bilbo isn’t here.
Oh, what he could do with this. Or would Hild send an assassin when she recognized herself in his
new book?”
“Yeh ain’t met her yet,” said Dwalin. “Knowin’ Hild, she’d pass out autographed copies t’
everyone who crossed her path.”
As Hild’s party paraded down the road into Dale, the men and dwarrow of the town rushed to
watch them pass. Out of the corner of his eye, Ori saw a much smaller party racing along around the
edge of the city. There might have been a dozen riders, dwarrow on ponies, obviously armed. They
were riding as if on a desperate mission.
"Dwalin," said Ori. "Look. Are they enemy soldiers?"
He handed Dwalin the glass. Dwalin looked then snorted and chuckled.
"It's Ulfr an' Ahkn. Look at 'em ridin' like all o' Mordor's on their arses."
"What are they doing?" Ori asked.
"They're movin' a whole lot faster than our Hild, aren't they," said Dwalin. "An' travelin' light."
Thorin grinned.
"Looks like they'll be here first. This ought to be cozy."
Nori stuck his head out of the wall and peered into the distance.
"I'll give ya good odds on Ulfr an' them makin' it here before Hild, but I ain't touchin' th' odds o' Hild killin' 'em all when she finally does get here. That's a sure thing."
"All this just to be here first?" Ori asked. "Is this normal for the other dwarf monarchs?"
"I don't think the word 'normal' applies," said Thorin.
"I'm jus' glad they're doin' this outside th' city," said Dwalin. "I'd skin 'em if they put people in
danger, kings, queens or no'.
"Ah, that flash of blue," said Thorin. "I wondered when he's show up. Ori, it looks like you'll get your wish."

"What?" asked Ori.
Dwalin handed him back the glass.
Ori saw a lone rider in bright turquoise… on a massive -
"That's an oliphaunt!" Ori shouted.
"Where?!?" Both Theodred and Bain yelled, pushing up behind Ori and snatching at the spyglass.
"Exactly right, Ori," said Thorin.
"I've only ever seen drawings of them!" Ori surrendered the spyglass but pushed the two young men out of his field of vision.
The beast and rider trailed Ulfr and Ahkn by perhaps a hundred yards, but they were gaining.
"That's King Gheir, isn't it," said Ori.
"Yeh recognize his colors?"
"No, he was the only one left."
Thorin said to Dwalin, "He gets it."
"An oliphaunt," Ori marveled, "an actual oliphaunt!"

Sigrid was astride the balcony rail with Fili holding her safe. Kili had hoisted Tilda on his shoulders, so she could see. Gimli was half scrambling up to the rail but Bain and Theodred were cemented there.

"What's happening out there?" he grumbled. Legolas snickered.
"Hmm?" Gimli asked, looking up at Legolas.
"Or would like me to find you a box?"

Gimli snickered, then swore, making the elf laugh and offer him a boost. In a moment, Legolas had Gimli firmly around the waist as the young dwarf stood on the rail, shouting.

Roäc gave a very ravenish snort of dismissal.
"They all sent their birds ahead to say they'd be first."
Dain appeared on the parapet and asked, "Which o' th' idjits is in th' lead?"
Nori said, "Ulfr an' Ahkn're neck an' neck, wif Gheir gainin' on the outside."
"They certainly are flying," said Ori.
"Don't let Buj hear you say that," said Thorin, grinning.
"They'll be in the courtyard in a couple of moments at that rate!" Kili shouted.
"I must see the oliphaunt," Ori decided and, scooting behind the crowd leaning over the barrier, gawking and chattering, sprinted down the stair that led to the courtyard at the front gate. He rushed out and to his delight, there stood the oliphaunt.

It was enormous. It was all shades of gray and its legs were covered in long gray fur. It was at least fifteen feet tall and Ori drank in the sight. He had never seen anything so amazing in all his life. Its ears were huge flaps of skin, fanning in and out and waving. It had the most gigantically long nose which curled and moved about, taking in its surroundings. Around the nose, jutted six tusks, each about three feet long.

Ori went over to it and stood, staring up, lost in admiration. He went on his tiptoes but that didn't help much. The oliphaunt looked down and regarded him with some interest. Ori jumped a little, then, regressing to his days as a toddler, reached his arms up and out.

"I want to hug it," he announced. "But I don't know how!"
The oliphaunt gazed at him with obvious amusement and slowly, ponderously, lowered its front end to its knees, eliciting a yowl of rage from somewhere on top of it. Ori trotted forward and, filled with happiness, laid his cheek against the big head. He sighed and looked up. A large dark eye rimmed with long black lashes contemplated him fondly.

"Look at its big eyes!" Ori cried. "Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?"
The oliphaunt wrapped its trunk around Ori possessively.
"It's hugging me with its nose!" he cried in delight. He hugged it again, spreading his arms as far
as they would go across the oliphaunt’s cheek. He vaguely overheard people talking around him.
“How… ad-Ori-ble!” Arwen giggled.
Legolas groaned and Arwen laughed.
“You’re just upset you didn’t think of it first.”
Ori was aware of someone crawling off the top of the marvelous beast and sliding clumsily down its side.
The rider approached Thorin, wiped his face with his scarf and bowed.
“King Gheir appearing as you requested, sire.”
Ori realized he’d forgotten he was supposed to be a scribe. That was, he was supposed to be writing this down.
He turned and looked pleadingly around. Kacuho was there and he smiled at Ori.
“I’m on it,” he said, waving his paper and graphite pen. Loli and Buj flanked him.
“Thank you!”
Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Nodun standing near, drawing the oliphaunt. Ori returned to hugging the oliphaunt as best he could.
“You’re the most wonderful oliphaunt I’ve ever seen,” he told it. “You’re the only oliphaunt I’ve ever seen, but you’re wonderful.”
The oliphaunt made a deep rumbling noise.
“It’s purring!” Ori cried in delight. “I think it likes me!”
He turned to see Dori hovered nervously, but almost everyone else had backed away. Dwalin tried to hover nonchalantly, but failed.
“Yer majesty, is tha’ safe?” he asked Gheir.
“He’s not wearing any armor, so the beast can’t shell and eat him. It saves that for me!” snapped the Stiffbeard king grumpily.
“I want one!” Ori cried, utterly charmed by the marvelous creature.
“No!” Dori shrieked.
“Love, I don’ think it’ll fit,” tried Dwalin.
“Pet, it could hardly be housebroken!” Dori reasoned.
“An’ it’s big enough t’ break the house,” Jani said decisely.
“Aye,” said Gheir, “and only just ten years old. She’ll grow another twenty or thirty feet over time. Drat the beast.”
“Alright,” Ori capitulated, rather disappointed, “then I want to visit one often!”
“Where am I goin’ t’ find him an oliphaunt t’ visit?” Dwalin wondered.
“The fact that you’re even thinking that-” Thorin said with a laugh.
“‘Course I’m thinkin’ it. Weren’t yeh listenin’ t’ th’ vows this mornin’? We’re supposed t’ make each other happy!”
“Of course I was listening. I just don’t recall the part of the ritual where you swap large animals.”
Ori clutched the oliphaunt but felt terrible for upsetting Dwalin. He saw Jim approach.
Jim patted Dwalin’s shoulder.
“Let me see what I can arrange, eh?”
He went over to Gheir and bowed, said something in a low voice and Gheir barked, “You want this thing? Here, take it! I wish you luck! I’m staying with ponies from now on. This thing’s savage!”
Jim glanced at the savage animal cuddling with Ori, but merely bowed and said, “Your wish is my command, your majesty. I believe I’ve got just the right pony to get you safely home.”
“Oi, Jim! What are you doing out here?” Ruelis called from the gate.
“My sweetie darling, I have something for you,” Jim cooed.
Ruelis lit up like the sun and jumped up and down, clapping to herself.
“Oh, dearest! You didn’t!” she squeaked.
“Apparently, I did.” He turned to Gheir. “What’s her name?”
“Name? Why would it have a name?”
“Fanny,” decided Jim.
“What?” Gheir demanded.
“That’s what we’ll name her.” He said and turned to Ruelis. “With your permission, my darling?”

“Oh, perfect! And then our Ori can see her whenever we pass through town!”
Dwalin practically deflated with relief. Ori sent a thanks to Mahal for making Dwalin happy and buried his cheek back against the wonderful oliphaunt holding the creature as best as he could.
Ruelis approached and patted the oliphaunt’s shoulder, or as close as she could reach.
“Now all we have to do is find you a nice boy oliphaunt once you’re of age.”
Detaching Ori from the oliphaunt proved hard to achieve, he couldn’t take his eyes off her.
Jim had taken over the care of Fanny and, after he and Ori and a few others had removed the ornate wooden saddle that was fastened around her with painted leather straps, Jim said, “Right. First thing to do is get you some water.”
“Here,” said Gheir and passed a stout wooden goad to Jim. “You’ll need this to get that thing to move.”
“No! Don’t hit her!” Ori, cried, horrified.
Jim looked at the goad, then at Fanny, who seemed to shrink a little. Jim broke the goad with his knee and tossed the pieces into one of the two braziers that always burned on either side of the great gates.
“Precisely how much water does such an animal require?” Buj asked, obviously making a thorough study.
“A lot,” said Jim.
“There’s a fountain in the center of Dale!” Ori cried. Addressing Fanny directly, “Go down this way,” Ori said, pointing towards the Dale. “Right across the square, and then take another right at the green gate, then on straight until you get to the burned out space where the Courtyard Produce stand used to be—”
“I’ll help her find it,” said Jim with a laugh in his voice.
“Thank you, Jim! I wouldn’t want Fanny to get lost on her first day in town!”
He gave Fanny’s trunk a final hug, went and hugged his husband, and turned to find his brothers laughing so hard they couldn’t make a sound, only rest their heads on each other’s shoulders and struggle for breath.
“What?” he demanded. Then it occurred to him, he had someplace to be and scooted forward to take his place back. He pulled out paper and graphite pen and said to Thorin, “Ready?”
Thorin seemed to be struggling with a grin, but King Gheir only looked confused. He was handsome in the dwarvish way, with lucky gold hair and creamy brown eyes. His beard was divided in the middle and braided back into his hair below his ears. Alas, he wasn’t showing to best advantage, sporting a black eye and a busted lip.
“Who’s he?” Gheir demanded of Thorin as he looked Ori over.
“Lord Ori, the royal scribe,” said Thorin.
“Good thing for him he’s so cute,” Gheir grunted.
“Is the rest of your party expected imminently?” Thorin asked. “Or is it just you and the oliphaunt? And, for Mahal’s own sake, don’t call me ‘sire’, you’re older than I am, Father Stiffbeard!”
“The rest of my party is about five miles back and should be here by this evening. I apologize, Thorin, I’ll be around for business, but we can’t stay long at the festivities. Zavis is getting late in her pregnancy. She doesn’t have easy births and I need to be there when it happens.”
“It was good of you to come in person,” said Thorin. “You could have sent a representative, you know. Family comes first.”
“How often do you get to pledge your loyalty at a coronation? Besides, that blot of a brother of yours won’t be here. And, I heard a nasty rumor about you smiling and I knew I had to confirm it for myself.”
King Snur squinted at the Stiffbeard king.
“Hullo, Gheir. I see ya lost another fight t’ Hild.”
“Up yours, Chat,” Gheir growled.
“Not even with yours,” replied Snur with a chuckle.
Gheir bowed to the company and followed Targ inside to be handed off to Mistress Dazla at Fundin House.

As he disappeared into Erebor, Ulfr and Ahkn and their party thundered into the courtyard.
Even before he had dismounted, one of them shouted, “Oliphaunt boy here yet?”
“Oliphaunt boy is here,” said Thorin, “and the oliphaunt’s gone to visit the town fountain. Good to see you, too, Ulfr. You still have the social skills of sandpaper, I see.”
“Aye, whatever,” said Ulfr, waving his hand dismissively.

The king of the Ironfists was shorter than average, round as Buj, with a shock of white hair, braided randomly and the braids dyed varying colors, blue and purple and green. Eccentric runes marched across his face and every other inch of exposed skin in similar hues that shimmered in the sunlight, even through layers of travel dust.

King Snur called out to him, “Ulfr! How are ya keepin’, ya sorry shitarse?”
“Up yers, Chatty,” grunted Ulfr without heat.
“Lot o’ that goin’ around,” Snur commented with a grin.
“Aye, well,” said Ulfr to Thorin, executing the smarmiest bow Ori had ever seen, “yer majesty, I have answered yer summons an’ me an’ me sandpaper are here t’ serve.”

A younger dwarf, opposite to Ulfr in almost everything, down to his somber brown clothing, dismounted and followed to stand beside him.

“Me son Arne,” Ulfr said shortly. “Yeh won’ recall him. He’s just of age.”
“Prince Arne,” said Thorin, bowing.
Arne bowed in return and murmured in khuzdul, “Your majesty. A pleasure.”
“The pleasure is mine.”

Arne gave him a smile that Ori would have sworn was gratitude, but he didn’t have time to worry about it, since Arne had noticed Ori and his face lit up like a Durin’s Day bonfire.

Thorin watched this with amusement.

“Prince Arne, this is Lord Ori of Fundin, the royal scribe.”
“Aye, I know,” Arne said, still in khuzdul, and remembering at the last moment whom he addressed. “I mean, yes, your majesty.”

Ori bowed and smiled.

“Your highness.”
“I - I’m a scribe, too, you see,” said Arne. “I’ve heard a lot about you. We-”
“Alright’, enough a’ tha’ f’r now,” said Ulfr. “Yeh can chit chat when he’s off duty.”
“Yes, Father.”

Father and son bowed again and Ulfr led the way into the mountain.
Ori and Thorin exchanged troubled looks, but there was no time for discussion.

A dwarf, well-lined and white-haired, limped over to Thorin and bowed stiffly.

“Your majesty.”
“Are you alright, Ahkn?” Thorin asked.

“Ulfr’s a menace. I’m getting too old for this racing across the countryside nonsense,” he said.
“How’re you keeping, Thorin?”
“I’m keeping well, Ahkn, and you’re perfectly young enough for this nonsense.”
“Pfft! Go on with you. You know I’ll be two hundred and twelve come Durin’s Day. Old enough to know better.”
“But still too young to care,” Thorin said, pleasantly.

“Ah, you young people give me a pain. There’s Dain, there’s Chat. Hullo, Chat!”
“Morning, Ahkn. Yer movin’ at the speed a’ me amad’s busted hip. Make sure Ulfr gives ya more liniment. Ya need t’ be able to dance the Beleghost Body Wag at the coronation feast.”

Ahkn made a rude gesture and shambled inside, talking with Dain.

They heard the parade coming long before it appeared. Even as the queen arrived at the gate, the parade was still filing toward it, now slowed by the sheer volume of the crowds which had gathered.
One of her personal guards rushed forward to hold her pony’s head as she dismounted and approached.

Ori realized the dam shadowing Hild must be General Aris. She immediately fell in just behind and to the right of her queen. They wore the most beautiful light armor Ori could have imagined. The Blacklocks were known for their armory, both practical and ceremonial.

The queen was no older than Thorin, beautiful and terrible, with glittering violet eyes in her dark face. She wore her ebony hair and beard in the ‘million braid’ style of the Blacklocks, the most complex and work-intensive hairstyle of any dwarrow. It was studded with beads of lapis and amethyst which set off her eyes to advantage. Her mouth was straight, her brows were straight, but a gleam in her eye told Ori she could be mirthful if she chose.

Aris was a little older, her hair peppered with gray, braids pulled back from her face and her beard gathered at her chin. Her skin was slightly lighter than Hild’s, and her eyes glinted pure amber.

They bowed in unison, which the Durins returned, somewhat less uniformly.

“Queen Hild, you and your party are welcome to Erebor,” said Thorin.

She approached and they bashed foreheads.

“Thorin! You look brighter than polished pyrite! Now if only we could fatten you up,” said Hild. Her voice was rich, with a hint of a laugh.

She and Dis embraced and Hild bowed to the company.

“I’m sorry you didn’t arrive first, Queen Hild,” said Dis.

“Quite alright. I’m fit to be seen and they are not. Which I predicted. Didn’t I, Aris?”

“Yeh did indeed, yer majesty.”

Ori could have predicted Aris’ gravelly voice, too. It seemed to be a warrior thing.

Hild’s eye fell on Dori and the corners of her mouth curled with appreciation.

She bowed.

“Honored Bearer.”

“Queen Hild,” Dori returned the bow with amusement.

“How’s it hangin’, Hildy?”

Hild turned to Snur with a cocked eyebrow.

“At the moment it’s not, it’s packed away neatly with the luggage. It’s good to see you haven’t changed, Chat.”

“Nah, I’m too lazy. I’d need a new wardrobe or some other foolishness. Too much like work. Y’know, that Rhonda and Linda are here.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it and turned to Thorin.

“Is there a translation key?”

“Lord Elrond of Imladris and his steward, Master Lindir,” Thorin informed her.

“Ah.” She leaned closer to Thorin. “Are they an item?”

“They only needed one room, so unless one of them likes to sleep on the floor, I’d say yes.”

“Well, well. Gheir owes me fifty gold. As usual. Aris, please note that.”

“Already noted, me queen.”

Ori noted it as well. In a completely business-like tone he asked Hild, “Does he have a running credit, your majesty, or is he prompt with payment?”

Then he looked up, absolutely horrified, and lamely added,

“In the interest of the historical record, of course.”

He blushed, wanting to sink into the stone. He was certain he could hear Thorin and Dwalin stifling chuckles.

“In the interest of the historical record,” said Hild, “no one in their right mind extends him credit. Ahkn holds all the funds. And you are?”

“A complete dolt, your majesty, whose older sibling is bemoaning my total lack of manners.”

Hild closed her eyes and obviously struggled to control a smile.

“I mean, what is your name, my dear?”

“Oh! I’m Ori of Fundin, your majesty,” he said, completely flustered and bowing without grace.

“I’m the royal scribe and, as usual, I should have been gagged before I went on duty.”
“Ah, so you’re Ori!” she said, and her eyes lit up in such a way that Ori was afraid she might gobble him up.

Behind her Aris grinned at Dwalin and mouthed, “Yeh lucky shit.”

“Captain Dwalin,” said the queen, acknowledging him graciously. “You are, indeed, a lucky shit.”

She inclined her head once more and, taking Thorin’s arm, allowed herself to be escorted into the mountain.

“Dwalin!” Aris greeted him.

“Aris!”

They smashed foreheads with a crack that caused even Roäc to flinch.

“Queen Hild’s still got eyes on th’ back a’ her head, I see,” said Dwalin, laughing.

“With a daughter like ours, it’s a good thing.”

“Arivett’s still at home?”

“Aye, we thought it would do her some good t’ try t’ run thin’s herself f’r awhile, now tha’ she’s of age.”

Dwalin turned and drew Ori forward with an arm around his waist.

“This is me husband, Ori.”

“Lord Ori.”

“Oh, please just call me Ori, General Aris.”

“Then yeh should call me Aris. An’ don’t worry abou’ Hild. Her eyes’re bigger than her stomach.”

Ori’s mouth fell open and wondered if Hild wasn’t the only one who could, apparently, read minds.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. The gang’s all here, time to get the show on the road and settle our new guests. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

This chapter is especially for #Jakquill Well, our Jakquill dear, we hope the trim is everything you could wish for and more!

Ori was amazed at the grace and expediency with which Mistress Dazla and Granny Klak got the dwarf monarchs settled in Fundin House and their entourages in the old royal residence. Dis personally escorted Hild and Aris to their room with Dori along for the gossip. Even from downstairs, Ori could hear the laughter.

The elves and men came back to the receiving room from the meadow where they had been relaxing and enjoying the sunshine. The young set milled around in a herd, waiting for the monarchs to come down.

Hild, on Dis’ arm, came down with Dori and Aris following. Dis brought them immediately to present Hild to Lady Galadriel.

Hild looked rather fascinated by the elf lady, who was very gracious and friendly to the queen. Celeborn was spared a nod.

Elrond and Lindir made the queen chuckle when they were presented. It wasn’t until Elrond colored slightly that Ori realized the queen obviously knew of Givris’ ‘accident’.

Thranduil was utterly charming to Hild, which made the queen raise an eyebrow. She obviously didn’t care about Aewandínen but watched Legolas and Gimli keenly. She was mildly interested in Theoden, Theodred and Bard. She deigned to cast a critical eye over Bain but muttered to herself. “Too young.”

Princesses Sigrid and Tilda were a huge hit with both the queen and her general. Tilda, seeing the two as relatives of Thorin, welcomed them both with open arms, hugs, and exclamations about their armor being the ‘prettiest ever’.

Hild took this in stride, but Aris lost control of her eyebrows.

Tilda turned to her horribly embarrassed father and said, “It’s really hard to hug someone in a breastplate, isn’t it.”

Bard looked apologetic.

“She’s very young,” he said, “and I never expected to be king.”

Hild said, “She’s charming. She’s wholly unspoiled.”

“Thank you, I’m afraid she’s prepared to be charming all over everyone she meets,” said Bard.

“We have towells,” said Hild.

“Er….”

“I’m joking, King Bard. Please try and keep up.”

“Yes, ma’am, I mean, your majesty. It’s just so early in the day and I’ve already lost control of my children.”

Aris breathed, “Aye, we know how tha’ goes.”

“Have you tried tethers?” Hild asked Bard.

“That’s a joke, right?”
“Ah, there’s hope for you yet, King Bard.”
Dis presented Fili and Kili to the queen. Ori noted they were on their best behavior. He also noticed Dis had each of them by the back of the tunic right up until the moment they bowed.
“They are well-grown, Princess Dis,” Hild allowed. “Both already engaged, are they?”
“Something like that,” said Dis.
“Very good,” said Hild, inclining her head, dismissing them, and turned to talk to Aris.
“Why do I feel like I just lost a cattle judging contest?” Fili asked, on returning to the younger set where Ori was standing.
“Moo,” Kili agreed.
“Both you bullocks did very well,” Dis praised.
Sigrid asked, “Princess Dis, why would she be judging them?”
“She has an unmarried daughter who is of age,” Dis told her. “Not all dwarrow do things as we do in Erebor.”
“You mean, she’s trying to arrange a marriage?” Sigrid asked, horrified.
“Not exactly,” said Dis. “She’s checking on potential candidates for suitability and sturdiness.”
“And obedience,” added Fili.
“That lets me out at any rate,” said Kili.
Sigrid looked at Fili, plainly troubled.
“I don’t like it that she treated you like a piece of meat,” she said.
Fili smiled and took her hand.
“I’m used to it, Sig. It’s just how things are. Amad and Idad taught us very early not to take it personally. Besides, she nodded and sent us away directly. That means she acknowledges and respects the matches. She won’t press a suit for Arivett.”
“Which is a good thing for us,” said Kili. “She’s bloody terrifying.”
“But what about poor Arivett?” Sigrid asked.
Fili and Kili snickered.
“Don’t worry about Arivett,” said Fili. “She’s about as biddable and delicate as Ori’s oliphaunt.”
“Fanny’s Jim’s oliphaunt,” said Ori.
“Nah,” said Kili. “Jim’s just keeping her for you so you can visit once a year.”
“I hope she doesn’t forget me,” Ori said wistfully.
Dis smiled and tucked a loose lock of hair behind his ear.
“Oliphaunts never forget, Ori. She certainly won’t forget Gheir in a hurry. He’d best stay out of her way.”
Kili said, “If he doesn’t, he might become Father Flatbeard. All those widows!”
“Hmmm,” said Dis. “Then Arivett could take her pick.”
“What’s Arivett like?” Theodred asked.
“Sort of Hild-in-training,” said Kili.
“Whomever she marries, they’ll have to go and live in the Orocarnis with the Blacklocks,” said Fili. “It’s a matriarchy.”
“Oh, good,” said Theodred with a sigh. “That leaves me out. Father would never consent to that.”
“She’s a warrior,” continued Fili, “equally skilled with the sword and the axe, but she also plays three musical instruments, composes poetry and arranges rock gardens.”
“Bit of an overachiever,” said Theodred.
“Her mother expects a lot from her,” said Fili.
“Her mother expects a lot from everybody,” said Kili.
“She might do for my Cousin Eomer,” Theodred commented reflectively. “He’s always galloping around the Riddermark, slaying orcs and chasing the occasionally bandit.”
“Does he use a horse?” Kili asked.
“Of course! He has the best six horses in the royal stable. He’s my father’s finest warrior. He gets all mushy about romance and he has a great singing voice.”
“She’d eat him alive,” said Fili. “Luckily for me, she thinks I’m an idiot. I was relieved.”
Theodred snorted.
Kili said, “We met her when we were just badgers. She thinks I’m an idiot, too.”
Fili added, “I think, at one point, Hild was hoping for Dwalin.”
Dwalin, nearby, choked on his beer and winced.
Ori turned and looked at him.
“Really?”
“Too young,” said Dwalin. “An’ I ain’t leavin’ Erebor f’r that. ‘Sides, her mum’s th’ kind who’d choreograph yer weddin’ night, right down t’ which of Queen Kivi’s illustrations t’ use. Then supervise.”
Arne burst out laughing. Theodred looked mystified.
“Queen Kivi’s sex manual,” said Fili off-hand, then realized to whom he was speaking and said, “Beg pardon, Theodred. I forgot you’re not just a particularly tall dwarf.”
“Sex manual?” Theodred asked, looking horrified and fascinated by turns. “Your parents don’t tell you how to do it? You… um… don’t just put it in and your wife has a baby?”
Sigrid rolled her eyes.
“It’s a little more complicated than that, Prince Theodred, or it had better be, unless you want your bride storming off in the middle of the wedding night.”
“I think I may be too young to have this conversation,” said Theodred. “I only stopped thinking girls were yucky a few years back.”
“Perhaps you’re right,” said Dis. “Let’s turn the subject, shall we?”
Fili leaned in to speak to Theodred.
“You might not want to mention sex manuals in front of your adad.”
“No worries,” said Theodred.
The group quietened down as, having completed her circuit being introduced to everyone, Hild stood nearby and exchanged pleasantries with Dain and Sculdis. Sculdis was doing the talking, while Dain stood beside her, grinning maniacally, in a marked good humor.
“What? Our Stonehelm no’ in th’ runnin’, our Hild?” Dain teased loud enough for all to hear.
Ori watched as all the color drained out of Stonehelm’s face. Kili hurriedly took his hand to comfort him and nodded to Tauriel who automatically reached and took Stonehelm’s other hand in hers.
“Far too young.” Hild replied loftily. Her eyes found Stonehelm’s and lanced a look at him.
“Aye, it’s just as well,” Dain brayed jovially. “I was thinkin’ o’ savin’ him f’r Tilda.”
Ori almost choked and Stonehelm swayed on his feet a little.
“Please shut up, beloved adad,” he breathed.
Tilda was not so subtle.
“I’m craftwed,” announced Tilda, “and boys are icky.”
Stonehelm said in delighted recovery, “Yeh hear tha’, Da? I’m icky!.”
“S’all right. Yer mother thinks I’m icky, too.”
Bard looked confused.
“What does Tilda mean, she’s ‘craftwed’?”
“Lots of people are,” said Tilda airily. “Master Brur was, until he took up with Master Jansad.”
Bard still looked a-sea, so Tilda took a deep breath and explained patiently, “Craftwed means you’re married to your craft, not to another person. It’s much better than having babies. Babies smell.”
“I see,” said Bard. “You know, you may change your mind in a few years.”
“Nope,” said Tilda.
“What about my grandchildren?” Bard asked.
“Bain can do that and Sig is going to marry Fili, so they can give you grandchildren, or granddwarrow or… I don’t know what you’d call them. A man and a dwarf? A morf?”
“A dwan?” Kili helped.
“How about a marf?” Elladan suggested.
Thranduil tugged on Bard’s elbow.
“Come along, dear. Let’s get some fresh air, away from the idea of smelly babies.”

Ori stared as Bard allowed himself to be led away. General Aris and Queen Hild looked at each other then at the retreating backs of the man and the elf. They looked at each other again and giggled delightedly.

“Note this, Aris,” Hild said, “one hundred and fifty gold that Thranduil and Bard are married by next high summer.”

“Noted, your majesty.”

Nori’s voice sounded, muffled by the tapestries.

“What’re your odds on who wears the gown?”

King Ulfr came down next. Both he and his son were arrayed in gold. Somehow, this played up the gold highlights of Ulfr’s face tattoos. Thoroughly washed, Ulfr was fancy. Not Margr and Vi fancy, of course, but Ori doubted Ulfr wore a lot of hot pink.

Arne looked rather glum, and chastened.

Ori leaned over to Tilda.

“We should ask Arne to come over with us, shouldn’t we,” he suggested.

“Yes, we should,” said Tilda. “He looks like a bird pooped on his head.”

Thranduil and Bard had returned and Thorin was presenting them as Tilda went and curtseyed prettily in her white dress for Ulfr and Arne, then took Arne in tow by the sleeve and said, “You need to come play with us over here.”

“Arne, where are you going?” Ulfr demanded.

“Apparently, to play with them, over there, father.”

“Behave yourself,” Ulfr warned. “Uhm. I’m afraid that’s entirely up to Princess Tilda.”

They were halfway across the floor when Fili called out, “Oi! Arne!”

Ulfr looked incensed, but Hild waved him off dismissively.

“He’s with that lovely little man-child. Pay it no mind.”

Arne arrived and Kili rattled off everyone’s name.

“What are you drinking?” Fili asked Arne, as they headed to the table full of refreshments.

“What do you have?” Arne asked in khuzdul.

“Raspberry soda water, ginger beer, and something greyish I’m afraid to try, but’s probably good for us.”

“We should avoid things that are good for us at all cost,” Arne mused as the party made its way to the loaded table.

“Does anybody know what that grey stuff is?” Kili asked.

Fili smirked. “Why don’t you stick your finger in it and find out?”

“Because I’m afraid my finger will disintegrate. An archer without fingers faces uphill challenges.”

“Oh, get outa me way,” said Gimli. “I’ll try it.”

He did so, sticking his finger in his mouth, making an odd face.

“Mashed bananas? Somethin’ milkish an’ sour like that yogurt-y stuff. Skinless pulverized grapes?”

“Aha!” Bifur cried, approaching. “I did wonder whence that went!”

He made to down the whole concoction direct from the pitcher, then recalled his manners.

“Wouldst like to try this libation?” he offered.

“No,” said Fili carefully. “Thank you, you go ahead.”

“Well,” said Arne, “that was a close call.”

“Er, I’m afraid my khuzdul isn’t good enough to let me converse in it, Prince Arne,” Sigrid said apologetically. “Fili is teaching me and he’s very patient, but so far my best effort is ‘Me targe’.”

Since this meant ‘By my beard!’, everyone agreed that, yes, this was less than helpful.

The prince looked around, noted his father was across the room and turned back to her.

“I-I’m ter-ter-terrib-b-ble a-a-a-at we-wes-wes-tron,” managed Arne quietly.
“Oh, thank Eru. I don’t feel so bad now,” Sigrid sighed with relief.
“We mix them together anyway,” said Fili with a shrug.
“I-I c-c-an sing-g wi-wi-withou-ou-t t-this st-st-stammer.” He proceeded to sing: “But it’s very hard to take me seriously when I ask you to pass the buttohUHHHHHtttermrrr.”
The others stared for a moment before they burst out laughing.
“That’s great!” Kili cried. “You should do that at dinner!”
“What’s wrong with singing?” Tilda asked. “Elves sing all the time. Maybe you’re just a really short elf. We could make you some paper ears.”
“You could be Gimli and Legolas’ love child,” Kili teased.
“Oi!” Gimli groused. “He’s older’n me!”
“Ah, well,” said Legolas, “it was a lovely dream.”
“More a bloody nightmare,” Gimli growled but Elladan and Elrohir cackled maniacally.
Ulfr, having overheard Arne’s solo, was stomping over when Ori caught Dori’s eye and nodded toward the peeved monarch.
“Arne, what’ve I told y-“
“King Ulfr,” said Dori, linking an arm through his as he passed and whirling him around to face her little coterie of Vi, Margr, Dis, Jani, Gridr, Binni, and Granny Klack. “Have you met my dear Great Grandmama?”
“Er, we did meet, bu’ a very long time ago,” said Ulfr. He bowed. “Lady Klakuna.”
“Ah, King Ulfr, you’re even more colorful than I remember. You’ve perfected that skin ink, I see. As I recall, formulating the red and orange was giving you fits.”
“I have, milady, thank yeh. An’ may I offer yeh condolences?”
“For what, dear?”
“Yer a widow?” he asked, indicating her rolled beard.
“Oh, no, no, it’s not my loss, it’s his. He didn’t die, I threw him away.”
“But first she punched him,” said Dori gaily. “Right before my presentation. It was charming.”
“And how is your lovely wife?” Granny Klak asked Ulfr.
“She’s… er… lovely,” said Ulfr. “She all but kicked me rear end rushin’ me outa me own mountain t’ get here.”
“I do like that dam,” said Klakuna. “I must write her a letter. You will carry it back for me?”
“Aye, milady, o’course.”
He looked over his shoulder at Arne, but Ori noted Arne and the others were having far too much fun to notice him. They were working their way around the refreshment table.
Arne said something that caused everyone to groan. Kili told him he was an inspiration and Sigrid hit Arne over the head with a pillow from a nearby chair.
Granny Klack sighed happily.
“I’m sure your wife will be thrilled to learn how well your Arne is fitting in with the others, won’t she? It’s good for young people to socialize. Why, someday Fili will be his liege and Stonehelm and Kill and the others will be his peers. For them to become friends at a young age will benefit all of them.”
“Certainly it will build his self-confidence,” said Dis. “He seems rather shy and loathe to speak. I can’t understand why. He’s obviously holding his own with my little goblins.”
Ori let out a pent up breath and went and sat on Dwalin’s lap.
“Well done, love,” said Dwalin. “Separatin’ th’ pair of ‘em.”
“I don’t understand Ulfr’s problem,” said Ori. “So Arne stammers. Bifur can’t speak westron at all, and he gets on fine with ancient khuzdul.”
“Look at it from Ulfr’s point o’ view. He doesn’ want th’ lad t’ look weak, or give anyone cause t’ ridicule him. Also, Ulfr’s folk are a lot more traditional than th’ Durins. They still don’ like folk who ain’t dwarrow t’ hear khuzdul. Everytime our Siggy opens her mouth t’ try it, Ulfr flinches.”
“He’s afraid.”
“Aye, he’s afraid.”
“That’s sad.” Then Ori brightened. “Imagine if he heard all those little Dale badgers calling
Master Brur ‘Idad’.
“We’ll have Oin standin’ by with th’ smellin’ salts.”
Ori sat up and grinned maniacally.
“So, I guess this isn’t a good time to tell him I’m planning on translating Queen Kivi into westeron?”
Dwalin grinned back.
“Oh, I dunno. Maybe save it f’r dinner.”
“Where is Tharkûn?” Ori asked looking around. “He’s already missed breakfast.”
“Dunoo, wizard business, he always says. Prob’ly in the bathtub again.”
Ori snickered and watched as nearby Thorin and Hild met up again, Aris shadowing her queen as always.
“So, King Thorin,” said General Aris, “have yeh considered our latest proposal a’ marriage?”
Ori took the ‘our’ to mean Aris and Hild’s. They we’re most certainly a package deal.
“I was seriously mulling it over, General Aris,” said Thorin, “then I heard my Heartsong.”
The two dams gaped at him, then Hild cried, “Congratulations! No wonder you’re so happy!”
and actually hugged him.
“We wish yeh well,” said Aris, “an’ hope yeh have many pebbles t’ fill yer house.”
“According to the Great Woudini, I’m going to have seven,” said Thorin.
“Who is the Great Woudini?” Hild asked.
“Jim.”
“Oh! Is he a seer?”
“Sort of,” said Thorin.
“And where is your One?” Hild demanded. “When are we to expect an introduction?”
“He’s in Gondor at the moment, publishing a book. I hope they’ll be back by Durin’s Day.”
“They?” Hild asked.
“He has a young nephew.”
“I’m guessin' he’s a Broadbeam, me queen,” said Aris. “Th’ house is quite filled t' th' brim with 'em.”
“Mmm, yesss,” said Hild. “That adorable miner with the hat.”
Nori’s voice emerged from a decorative urn by the table next to Ori, “Oi! Keep your hands t’ y’rsell, your graciousness.”
Ori discreetly kicked the urn as hard as he could.
“Aye, yer majesty,” said Aris to Thorin, “if yeh aren’t going t’ marry us, at least give us some consolation.”
“He’s a hobbit actually.”
“What?” Hild asked. “Did you say he’s a hobbit?”
“Yes,” said Thorin, “one of the children of Yavanna.”
“I didn’t know they heard Heartsongs,” said Hild.
“As far as I know, they don’t,” said Thorin. “But they seem to have other standards for such things. And he’s as cute as a gold nugget.”
Aris gasped and snickered. Hild shook her head at Thorin fondly.
She looked around expectantly and Aris grabbed a glass of wine off a passing tray and placed it in Hild’s hand as if on cue.
“Love this Dorwinion,” said Hild. “Who knew the elves had such excellent taste in wine?”
Encouraged by Thorin, the queen and general went off to the refreshment table where they were joined by Aragorn and Arwen. The four sat down at group of chairs about a small table and conversed.
Just then King Ahkn came down the stairs with King Gheir. Ahkn shouted a joyful greeting to the entire room on behalf of himself and Gheir, and Gheir looked a little put out at not having the due pomp and ceremony he usually enjoyed among his own people. Thranduil came over with Dori and engaged the two kings in light conversation. Ori watched as Glorfindel came to Thorin’s side.
“That’s quite a dam,” said Glorfindel indicating Hild with his chin.
“Don’t even think about it,” said Thorin. “You wouldn’t last five minutes.”
“I’ve battled and killed a Balrog.”
“You had to slay it,” Thorin commented. “Hild would just glare at it, then eat it whole.”
“That isn’t the way to talk me out of it,” Glorfindel grinned.
“Then think of what Margr and Vi would do to you, if you dropped them for Hild.” Thorin replied pleasantly.
“That’ll do it,” Glorfindel nodded.

After a pleasant luncheon, Bofur took all the elves and men off for a tour of the forges. They looked askance at the masks he handed them, but donned them willingly enough to check for size, when he explained that “the fumes’re alright for dwarrow, but they’ll knock you lot stone dead.”
Tilda was delighted there was a mask for her and once on, she refused to take it off and marched forward with one hand in Bard’s and the other firmly in Thranduil’s.

Thorin, Binni, and Balin brought the dwarrow monarchs to the throne room to show them Binni’s improvements and let them prepare themselves for the oath-taking. Ori went along, supposedly to record the event, but, since he hadn’t seen the room yet, either, he was terribly curious.

The throne room was a cavernous affair, mainly because it had been coaxed from a single natural granite cavern, which had once been the original mine of Erebor. Ori experienced a reminiscent shudder as the great doors to the throne room opened from their place at the center of the entry hall from the great gate. The last time he had entered this room was for the presentation of Dori and Thorin had dropped dead.

Except for the dais itself, the room was perfectly level and the floor highly polished, with the aisles from the various doors picked out in lapis and white granite inlay. The room itself was mainly one open space, with neither pillar nor chair. Columns ran down each edge, supporting galleries above, which had also been left largely in their natural state. In daytime the cavern was lit by sunlight bounced down from mirror to mirror through a huge window on the southern face of the mountain. On overcast days and at night the throne room was lit with torches, centuries of which had left the rock behind and above them dark with soot. This was never removed, as now and again a gifted seer could read these shapes as well as they read fire runes.

Ori, aware of this, tried to ignore them.
Thorin walked to the foot of the dais, turned and asked the others,
"What do you think?"
Dead silence fell over the room while the visitors stood, either stunned or grasping for words.
Ori couldn’t blame them. Words were his work, but they seemed to have failed him.
"That's... well... Is the throne trimmed in... scarlet fringe?" Gheir asked.
“Fuckin’ aye,” said Ahkn quietly.
"Indeed," said Hild, nodding. "All the way to Mordor and back."
"It's marvelous, isn't it?" Binni enthused. "It's just what the place needed, a little color, a little texture."

Hild turned to Binni.
"And you were involved in this... this decorating scheme, Bearer?" she asked carefully.
"Yes, well, I had expert assistance, but we did work from my initial inspiration," said Binni, glowing with pride. He bowed in Dain’s direction. Dain beamed in reply.
"It certainly makes an unforgettable impression," said Hild.

Gheir said, "And I thought it was Dain who got his sense of taste from the Firebeards."

Dain snorted. "If it was Firebeards there'd be restraints attached t' th' throne f'r entertainment purposes."
Ulfr said, "At least this way Thorin's arse'll be comfy."

"I like it," said Snur. "Livens th' place up. All that gray was too much like a funeral, wa'n't it. Durins don't always have t' be gloomy. It's not a law, right?"

He turned and shot Ori an inquiring look, as if Ori somehow had mental access to the complete
'gloom' bylaws of Erebor.

"I don't recall coming across such a rule, your majesty," said Ori. "But Balin might be know."
Balin muttered, "Thanks, wee brother, tha's one I owe yeh."
"Any time," Ori replied out of the corner of his mouth.
"And to go with all this," said Thorin, "a new crown. Binni?"
"Here it is!" Binni cried merrily.
He handed Thorin something that Ori first mistook for a metallic jockstrap. Thorin put it on and Ori slapped his hand over his mouth.

It was a band of silver lame, strung along the edge with masses of vermilion ball fringe. It fell down in front of Thorin's face and over his shoulders and his beard and onto his chest. He crossed his arms

"What do you think?" he asked with great dignity.
"You are joking," said Hild. "Arent you?"
Dain snickered.
"Looks like a skirt tha' Dipfa lass would make."
Snur added, "Or a skirt one o' them fancy hoochie dancin' dams'd wear."
Thorin chuckled and removed it.
"I am joking. It would be rapturous though, wouldn't it."
Ulfr let out a pent up breath.
"Thank Mahal. I couldn't come up with anythin' nice t' say about it, 'cept I was glad th' balls weren't blue."
"It's not a crown, but it will be used," said Thorin. "See the benches in the aisles under the galleries?"
"Those are new," said Gheir. "Of course, everything's new if you haven't seen it in a century."
Indeed, they were new, and rather comfy looking, actually. They were all slightly different. Some were like fainting couches, with a sort of arm rest at one side. Others were overstuffed and tufted like sofas. All of them had skirts of ball fringe in various colors.
Thorin said, "Binni realized there was no place to sit in here unless you were the king."
"No one is supposed to sit in the presence of the king," said Hild with great dignity.
"Not unless he allows it," said Thorin. "And I'm not going to tell a heavily pregnant dam with swollen ankles or someone past their third century mark that they have to stand through my entire coronation. Of course, this means whoever sits has to be very careful that their outfit doesn't clash with the upholstery."
"Dreadful notion," said Binni. "I tried to ensure we had variety on that score alone."
Ori wondered where Vi and Margr would sit.
"You succeeded," said Gheir to Binni. "Am I to understand all this was made in a week?"
"Only the upholstering," said Binni. "Long ago these benches were placed much as you see here, but then they were put in storage for some reason. And they were just bare wood. Oh, there were some plain stone ones, too, which would be fine for the garden on a nice day, but it's already cold enough in here to freeze your gems off."
Gheir bowed.
"Just as you say, Bearer."
Binni winked at him.
"Say, Thorin," said Snur, "are those pillows made o' bacon?"
"They've been dyed to resemble rhodochrosite," stated Binni, "which denotes release of sorrow and attracts unconditional love, happiness really."
"Bacon always makes me happy," said Snur by way of approval.
Ori took notes while Thorin walked the kings around the hall, explaining the structure of the ceremony. The great doors to the entry cavern would be flung wide open, all the doors would, in fact, between the great gates and the throne room. The visiting monarchs seemed a little surprised but didn't comment. Ori rather thought this 'extension' of the throne room was a good idea. It was likely that all of the mankind in Dale and surrounds would attend, along with every dwarf in the near
vicinity. Sigrid had told him about the frantic rush of the people of Dale to deck themselves out in the finest clothing they could afford. The excitement and energy nearly overshadowed the rebuilding projects.

After they took in the throne room, an ornate carriage with seating for all arrived, pulled by Gnasher and Grinder. The visiting monarchs were treated to a tour of the City of Erebor.

Ori was glad to see the mouth of the royal cavern before them. It had been a long day. The ride itself had been comfortable, and many of the people of Erebor had turned out to see the other dwarf monarchs. Ori waved to the people he knew but concentrated on noting down everything that passed between the kings and their liege presumptive. All seemed to truly appreciate the tour. The library had elicited gasps from the monarchs, as they had never been shown it before. Ori had the feeling that Thror had merely fed and stabled them, heard their oaths, and sent them on their way. Hild and Ahkn seemed ready to hop down and start shopping. Gheir and Ulfr made noises about seeing the forges. Thorin told them they would be treated to extensive tour of the forges and metal crafting areas the day after the coronation. Hild almost drooled at this promise and Gheir wasn’t far behind.

As they rolled into the royal cavern, all the visiting entourages were turned out in uniform to greet them. Gheir was delighted to see that his train of coaches and horses had finally arrived with five of his wives.

The royal party exited the vehicle and were processed into Fundin House again. Ori noticed right away that Dori was presiding over a fabulous tea party.

All the furniture had been drawn around low stone tables loaded with teapots, cups, saucers, and platters of delicious looking dainties. In attendance were Tilda, Sigrid, Tauriel, Dis, Marg, Vi, Gridr, Erda, Ruelis, Floris, Galadriel, Arwen, and five dwarsoodams Ori did not know, in obvious high humor, thoroughly enjoying themselves.

They were all richly dressed in traditional Stiffbeard clothing: a loose white or tan translucent shirt, under a black or blue vest, colorfully embroidered. Instead of skirts or leggings they sported wide-legged and poufy pantaloons in a silk material, secured with a sash. This usually matched or complimented the vest, and the scarf worn in their hair about the neck and shoulders. They wore short, calfskin boots for riding.

They stood as King Gheir entered with the touring party.

Each dam was a beauty, olive-skinned and honey-eyed with dark hair and lashes, the oldest with her tresses liberally streaked with silver. Their hair was elaborately braided back from their faces in a single line from forehead to the nape, left long among younger dams and tucked under by the older. These braids shone with lines of bright jewels along their entire lengths. Gheir proudly introduced them:

“Mavis I, Mavis II, Mavis III, Mavis IV and Mavis XV.”

They curtseyed gravely in turn, except for Mavis XV who curtseyed with a nervous giggle and didn’t quite know where to look. Ori had a feeling that Mavis XV might be technically of age, but should really still be at home with her family. From the expressions of the older Queen Mavises, they thought so as well.

“Why are they all named Mavis?” Ori asked Dwalin in a whisper.

“It’s Gheir’s mother’s name,” said Dwalin quietly

“Ew!”

“Nah, that’s just th’ traditional name a th’ queen a’ Stiffbeards.”

This was actually news to Ori. He realized he must have been remiss when it came to the culture of the Stiffbeards, though, even in casual reading, he seemed to recall more variety in queenly names than that. Ori wondered if the queens had all been named at that birth, coincidentally, or if they had to assume that name upon marriage or if every Stiffbeard dam who might conceivably become queen was named Mavis for tidiness’ sake. Ori looked up at Dwalin.

“I’m going to think about that later.”

Dwalin grinned.
“I don’ let meself think a’ it at all.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. You may want to get a snack. There’s a banquet in this one. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori stared into the mirror as Dipfa moved around him, tweaking various bits of his new clothes. He was dressed in green, all shades of green. His boots, a soft leather, were Fundin green, open at the front to show socks with varying stripes so that they could be mistaken to match. The lacinings were a paler green. His britches were a bright green with lines of emeralds traveling up and down. His sleeveless tunic was a blinding green with a Fundin green belt with a silver buckle set with diamonds and more emeralds. Beneath it was a thin cotton shirt of the palest green. The sleeves puffed out loose and the cuffs were closed with emeralds and diamonds.

Dwalin had done his hair and ear cuffs before they’d got dressed and his ears felt funny with the weight of the jewelry. His front hair was pulled back and clasped with the one Dwalin had given him at the inn.

He glanced to his right. Dwalin stood there smiling proudly and looking him over. Dwalin was in his dress uniform with his kilt.

“Yeh look grand, love.”

“Thank you. So do you. I know I shouldn’t be nervous but I’ve never been to a private royal banquet.”

“It’s nothin’. Can get fun, if they start gossipin’. Or pretty funny, if they get arguin’. The food’ll be brillian’.”

Ori chuckled, “Oh, I’m not worried about the food. I overheard Dori and Bombur talking about it with Binni and Mistress Dazla. There’s going to be a gravy course. That’s how I knew Dori was making it really fancy.”

“Aye, it’s bin bloody torture smellin’ it f’r mos’ a’ th’ day. Thanks, our Dipfa.”

Dipfa bowed, then frowned at Dwalin, went over, and used the end of her sleeve to polish one of his buttons. Dwalin snickered at her. She looked offended and sniffed. She made a point of dropping Ori a deep curtsey and flounced out.

“Me name’s mud with our Dipfa,” Dwalin mused idly.

“You know she takes it all very seriously and you teased her.”

“Aye, I’m ’n ill-mannered beast.”

Ori went and put his arms about Dwalin, who pulled him into a tight hug.

“You’re my beast,” Ori stated, rubbing his cheek against Dwalin’s shirt.

“Always, ghiyashel, always.”

Ori stayed there, his head against Dwalin’s chest, listening to the steady heartbeat that matched and sang to his own.

“Dwalin, when can we just have a quiet evening together? I miss knitting, while you play the viol.”

Dwalin’s arms tightened and he kissed Ori’s hair.

“When this bloody ceremonial rubbish’s over. An’ if it’s too loud in th’ sitting’ room, we’ll sit in here. I ain’t forgotten yeh promised t’ read t’ me.”

Ori squeezed.
“I love you.”
“I love yeh, too.”

They arrived in the receiving room and Ori looked about. The two great tables had been joined end to end and third and smaller table was set against the middle of the two long ones, giving the entire affair a ‘t’ shape.

They were covered in a great Durin blue cloth with a border of silver thread and the seven stars of Durin embroidered at each corner. Down the middle of the tables was a runner of Fundin green tartan. Both the fireplaces were roaring, all the torches were lit and all the ornate silver candlesticks lining the middle of the tables brightened the room to almost daylight. All the places were set with silver flatware and white porcelain, so thin it was almost transparent, thus taking on a blue tinge from the cloth.

Ori gasped at the finery. Dori was inspecting the room with Binni, Dis, and Granny Klak, Mistress Dazla in their wake.

Dis was dressed in Durin blue. The dress was swathed skin tight around her and a final long length of cloth was tossed with careless elegance over her shoulder to trail down to her feet. Diamond and sapphire studded shoes peeped from her hem. Rutile perched at Dis’ shoulder, legs ringed with diamonds, stone still, and appearing only to be a lovely brooch. Dis’ top hair had been dressed high around a tiara of diamonds and sapphires with the rest pouring down her back.

Binni wore the scarlet of the House of In with red boots. His breeches were poufed and tucked into his boots and his shirt was also poufed like Ori’s, but the cuffs were clasped about his wrists with wide gold bracelets.

Granny Klak looked regal in a misty blue gown with a wide scooped neckline and fitted tight to the waist then spilled down. She had a white silk under-skirt covered in mist blue net embroidered with silver flowers. As always her hair and beard were rolled in the style of a widow though there was a swirled silver brooch set with aquamarines on the left side of her hair, holding three fluffy blue white feathers to stand six inches above her head.

Dori was a dream in Balin’s Fundin red. The robe was in the style of old traditional Bearer’s presentation robe with a high neck and skintight to the chest then flowed all around them.

Dori saw Dwalin and Ori and hurried over.

“There you are, pet, our deary. Oh pet, how well you look! That green just makes you eyes shine and brings out your hair. Our deary, I do admit I like this way you have of dressing my Ori’s hair. So very grown up and distinguished!”

“Aye, our Dori, he does look a treat.”
Dori looked Dwalin over and nodded.

“You look very handsome, our deary.”

“Thanks, our Dori.”

Dori stood on tiptoes and kissed Dwalin’s cheek then caught Ori close in an embrace.

“Are you ready, pet?”

“I think so. Dori, how will this work?”

Dori opened their mouth but Thorin entered with Balin and Dori was instantly lost in admiration of Balin. Balin looked every inch a dwarf lord. His hair and beard were so white, they were almost mithril like Dori’s. His hair was brushed to stand on end in a soft cloud around his head. His beard was snowy and looked as soft as silk, the ends curling perfectly.

His robes were deep red like Dori’s and accented with silver. His boots looked as though they were made of silver and the toes curled upward and flickered with a diamond on each tip.

Thorin wore dress uniform with his kilt, all in Durin blue, his hair left loose and flowing from the circlet of the crown prince. Ori knew it was the last formal occasion he would wear it before it was passed to Fili or Fili wore his own design.

Thorin smiled as he looked around the room, then came to Dori’s side and kissed their hand.

“Thank you, Bearer.”

Dori giggled. Dis and Binni approached and inspected Thorin.

“You look well, nadad.”
Thorin bowed over her hand and kissed it.

"Thank you, namad, as do you. This room is perfect. Your work is much appreciated."

Dis laughed and hugged him. Thorin turned to Binni and once more bowed.

"What? I don’t get my hand kissed, too?" Binni asked slyly.

"Of course," said Thorin. He kissed Binni’s hand, making Binni giggle. "Thank you for your work, Bearer."

"Just you wait until you get to the food," Binni teased.

Thorin laughed, "I’m already impressed. It’s been smelling delicious all day."

Fili and Kili appeared at the top of the stair with Theodred, Arne, Stonehelm, Bain, Legolas and the twins.

"Mahal!" Kili shouted, looking about. "This looks fantastic!"

"Thank you," Dis called, "now come down and say that properly."

The group moved forward but Kili hoiked himself onto the bannister, slid down, and hopped agilely off the end. Delighted, the rest of the group followed suit.

Thorin and Dwalin snickered and Dis face palmed.

"Ah, c’mon, Dis," Dwalin laughed, flicking her shoulder, "Like we didn’t bloody do that every time we could."

"Yes, but we knew when formality was called for."

"Yes, “ Thorin reflected. “And then we did it without holding on with our hands.”

Dis glared, “Do not help, nadad.”

The young males greeted everyone with great courtesy, perhaps inspired by their fine clothes. Fili and Kili, brought up with such occasions, looked relaxed even in dress uniform with kilts of Durin blue and circlets of mithril and diamonds on their brows.

Bain looked fairly disgusted with having to dress up, though quite dashing in brown velvet surcoat with yellow pantaloons and a yellow shirt. His knee-high brown boots thumped across the floor.

The top of his head was covered in a red velvet kerchief knotted at the back, denoting he was an able skipper of sailing boats.

Stonehelm wore his family colors, a gold circlet on his brow. Theodred resettled the collar of his long surcoat about his shoulders, jarred from his sudden landing. The rust colored linen was trimmed with copper to compliment the gold and copper twisted together in a torc about his throat. He eagerly looked around. Ori didn’t know if he was excited about the room or excited because he could smell food. Likely both, he decided.

Legolas and the twins were arrayed in white and silver with circlets of silver and peridot on their heads. They looked strange and mystical in such finery. Ori reminded himself they had all been doing the wag together last night, but now they appeared far distant from that.

Arne wore light blue trousers and dark blue boots. His shirt was dark blue and over this he wore a sleeveless tunic, white with hexagonal blue embroidery. He looked happy to be among males his own age. He spoke quietly in westron to them. Ori noted how all waited patiently while he fought with his stammer. Even when he told a joke, and he had several good ones, they all eagerly awaited the punchline and laughed uproariously. Ori noted that the more relaxed Arne became, the easier westron came to him. Having his listeners simply enjoying his conversation and not rushing him helped, too.

Dis and Thorin had time to chat with the young people. Theodred was a little shy at first, but warmed up quickly assisted by Thorin’s smile.

Gimli strode in, bellowing for Legolas.

“I’m here, mellon nin, not fifty miles away,” Legolas grinned at him. “By all the leaves of the forest, you do looked well, my friend.”

Gimli was certainly spiffed up. His front hair was gathered to the back and hung in a long braid topped by a gold clasp. Brushed and braided, his mustache and beard were longer than Ori’s. His shirt was gold with ruby fastenings and sat long on him. A scarlet leather belt with a ruby studded buckle circled his waist and his trousers and boots were scarlet with gold trim. Not being a prince, he didn’t wear a circlet on his head, but his beard had gold threads braided into it.
Gimli looked Legolas up and down and grunted, "Very nice, laddie, yeh clean up fine."

The rest of the inhabitants of the House of In arrived. Gloin looked terribly proud, completely covered in scarlet and gold trimming, with Gridr on his arm in matching colors. Her dress of gold cloth had scarlet silk fringe trim that shimmered at every move. Rubies and gold ribbons spangled her high-dressed hair. Oin wore his usual brown robe, but it was silk and there were rubies scattered about his person. His mustache and beard had scarlet ribbons twisted into them and were quite intricately done. Theodred stared openly, impressed, but this turned to a different sort of stare as Loli and Omi followed their aunt and uncles through.

Omi, stunning in a strapless dress of pink rose silk, quite impressed Ori. The dress fit tight to her bosom and down to her waist, then the skirt bowed out with layer upon layer of silk circles in various shades of pink. She appeared to be wearing an upside-down rose. Her hair and beard were pomaded, shining and decorated with tiny, silk pink roses.

Ori was anxious for a glimpse of Loli’s dress. Dipfa had shown him the materials of white, scarlet, and gold, but was mum about the design.

Dipfa had triumphed.

Loli wore a plain white blouse, and over this a skirt of long, alternating panels of scarlet and gold velvet. The top band of the skirt clung tight from just beneath her breasts and flowed down snugly to just above her knee, where it became loose and flowed as she walked. The skirt was held by oversized, scarlet velvet braces sporting large, ornamental buttons of gold. The braces crossed over her back. All her hair was pomaded, pulled to the crown of her head and wrapped in a gold tube, the rest falling in a long braid down her back. Her mustache and beard were also pomaded and smoothed tightly to her chin then braided and wrapped with gold.

The sisters enjoyed walking over to the crowd, as it was obvious the younger males were watching them. After they had curtsied to the elders and greeted their friends, Ori asked, "Where’s Randi?"

“He’s coming with adad and amad,” said Loli. “He was helping in the kitchen earlier. They’ll be through in few minutes with Idad Bifur and Idad Bofur. I think Idad Nori is with them.”

“Makes a change,” Ori admitted then saying in Loli’s ear, “I half expected Nori to be spying on our guests.”

Loli giggled and adjusted one of her braces.

“What do you think of my dress?” she whispered. “Dipfa brought it over two weeks ago. I’ve been afraid to wear it. It’s so different.”

Ori chuckled, “It certainly fascinated Prince Theodred.”

“Really?” Loli almost squeaked, then in her usual voice, “Not that I care as I’m devoted to my dearest Furh’nk, but it is always nice to know one can fascinate people. Speaking of which, Master Pika made Omi’s dress for her.”

“Did he?” Ori raised his eyebrows, then turned to look at little ‘Moth’ again. “It’s very lovely. He has certainly made every use of her favorite color.”

“I know. She’s a perfect rose. What a pity Master Pika couldn’t come. They’re not properly betrothed yet so…” Loli trailed off with a shrug. “Oh look,” she breathed turning to the stair.

King Bard descended with Sigrid and Tilda. Bard was in somber black but for a red shirt beneath his tunic. He wore a kerchief like Bain but his was black with red trim denoting an experienced captain of large ships and there was a single hoop of gold in his left ear that stated he had sailed the length and breath of the Long Lake as well as negotiating the deadly rapids at the south.

Tilda wore a dainty purple frock with white embroidered flowers all over.

Sigrid looked regal in a long, plain, white dress heavily embroidered with red thread in patterns of ovals interlinked. Her golden hair flowed out from under a red velvet kerchief saying she, too, was an able skipper. The forward tresses on either side of her face had been secured beneath her chin with a white ribbon held in place by a ruby. Ori head Fili gasp and sigh.

Thorin, Dis and Dori and Balin stood in the middle of the room and welcomed Bard and the girls. Bard stayed talking and Tilda made a running beeline for the younger set. Sigrid grinned and
scooted over. Fili smiled up at her, his whole face alight at the sight of her. She blushed and
grabbed his hands as he offered them. He kissed both.
“You look beautiful, amrâlimê.”
“Thanks. I’m that nervous and I don’t know why.” She pulled away a little and looked him
over. She giggled.
“I like the kilt.”
“You have a thing for me wearing anything resembling a skirt don’t you,” he teased. She blushed,
giggled, and gave him a playful nudge. Fili looked proudly up at her and put his arms about her
waist and drew them together. Sigrid rested her arms about his neck and sighed.
“Those other dwarf kings think we’re crazy.”
Fili looked around at his companions. “Do any of you think Sigrid and I are crazy for being in
love?”
Bain rolled his eyes as Theodred shrugged.
“I t-t-think…it’s…it’s b-b-eauti-f-ful.” Arne said with complete honesty.
Kili made a rude noise.
“You’re crazy? What do you think they make of me and our Gimmers?” He stuck a pose and
narrowed his eyes and said in a lofty, hissing tone, “Cons-s-s-sorting with Elves-s-s-s-s!”
Legolas and the twins laughed delightedly and Gimli began mimicking Kili and then it turned into
a hissing-face-making contest between them, which soon had Sigrid at ease and laughing.
The Urs arrived, resplendent in their browns and coppers, Nori with them and Randi made his
way over to the younger set immediately.
Thranduil, in robes of silver and pale blue, wafted down the stairs like a lazy snowflake.
Aewandínen, dressed in dark green, marched decorously behind him, except for the times he turned
back and frowned at Tauriel in her uniform, who looked bored as Aewandínen was adamant she
walk six paces behind him while he followed four paces after his father.
Thranduil greeted Thorin warmly and kissed Dis’ cheek. He also greeted Dori with a kiss and
spoke with Balin. Thranduil turned, noticed no one was beside him on either side, and looked
around. Aewandínen stood very correctly four paces to his father’s right and his expression was
what Ori remembered Marg and Vi describing as ‘restin’ bitch fiz’.
“What are you doing?” Thranduil asked. “We are guests, not standing on parade. Tauriel, do
come here and make your bow before heading over to the younger set. They look as though they
will pop if they have to wait longer for you.”
Tauriel made her bow to Thorin, who chuckled, and Dis drew the elf captain down to kiss her
cheek.
“Off you go, Kili’s bursting to tell you something.”
Dori kissed Tauriel’s cheek, too, and said, “Probably one of Prince Arne jokes. He has quite a
store of them and all equally dreadful as the next.”
As soon as Tauriel was ‘shooed’ to the younger set, Aewandínen bowed civilly and was greeted
politely although Ori noticed that Thorin and the other three looked rather amused with
Aewandínen’s behavior.
Kili rushed over and met Tauriel halfway across the room, grabbed her hands, spun her about,
making her laugh, and then dragged her over to the others. Sigrid hugged Tauriel with apparent
relief and Tauriel admired her dress. Then she stared, amazed at Loli’s and Omi’s dresses.
Theoden, Aragorn and Arwen arrived together, with Boromir at their backs. Arwen turned and
laughed over her shoulder at something her father had murmured as he and Lindir followed them.
Glorfindel swaggered down with Margr and Vi, one on each arm.
The dwarf kings and the Stiffbeard queens made their appearance, Mavis II on Snur’s arm, trying
to remain dignified, though he was talking at speed, cheerfully, about nothing.
Jim and Ruelis arrived with Floris and Fior. As performers, they were often gaudily dressed, the
easier to attract the eyes of the audience, but this was different. Jim and Fior wore cropped jackets of
slick, black hide, and long, straight kilts of the same material, tied closes with sashes beaded with
smooth, buff-colored shells. Ruelis and Floris wore lengths of the same dark material, wrapped to
cover them breast to feet, and draped in the front where they were pinned closed at the top with a brooch and fibula. They wore hooded shawls of the same material, the hoods pointed at the back. The hoods and dresses were fringed in dangles of the same smooth shells. The kilts, dresses and jackets, everything was adorned with scalloped patterns, row upon row, painted in whites, ochres and blues. A random figure or other shape appeared between rows.

They wore bangles of some white material around their wrists and ankles. Ori didn’t think it was stone.

Thorin and Dis approached and greeted them warmly.

“Thank you for taking the time to come and eat with us,” said Thorin. “I know you’re busy with rehearsal.”

Jim gave him a mysterious smile.

“Ah, but you see, I foresaw the invitation and so planned for it.”

Ruelis snorted.

“Says the man who spent the last half hour tearing the inside of the wagon apart, looking for his left ankle bangle.”

“I did consult the infinite to find it,” said Jim, “but the indications were cloudy.”

Ruelis said to Dis, “He was already wearing it.”

Finally, only the Blacklocks were left.

Hild made her entrance at the top of the stairs, paused and looked around as every head turned, and then every male who was not a dwarf or elf quickly turned away. Aragorn was the exception. He smiled and said, “Very well done.”

She had pulled her beaded beard back in two sections. She secured it over her shoulders to show that she wore a dragonfly blue velvet collar, and from this a long, openwork bodice of finest filigree netting to just below the breast, displaying her back, shoulder and chest hair decorated in luxuriant swirls painted with gold. From there, the teal gauze dress fell to her feet, tight only from forearms to wrist and cinched at the waist in with a wide corset of blue velvet, studded along the hems with malachite and embroidered with stylized dragonflies. She wore matching sandals. Her hair had been left loose in its braids, decorated with green velvet ribbons and teal and gold dragonflies.

To the eyes of the men, she was, essentially, naked.

“Nice fireplace,” Theodred muttered.

“It is, isn’t it,” said Bain. “I could stare at it all night.”

Sigrid said, “Eru!”

“Don’t her boobies get cold?” Tilda asked.

“Dwarrow don’t usually feel cold,” said Sigrid, “not unless it’s extreme.”

“Oh, that’s all right, then. She’s very beautiful. Isn’t she, Sig?”

“Yes.”

“Can I-”

“No.”

Aris, all in black velvet, walked behind her queen as Hild descended. Dori and Dis met the Blacklock queen at the foot of the stairs and gushed over Hild’s dress.

Dis said, “Hild, is that Gheir’s metalwork in your hair?”

“It is,” said Hild. “I concede it is the best. Watch.”

She nodded her head and the translucent wings of the dragonflies vibrated as if they were flying.

“Oooooo,” said Dori appreciatively.

Thranduil looked intrigued.

“Yes,” said Hild dryly. “They only cost an entire suit of ceremonial armor. I’m not the only one who’s exacting.”

Margr and Vi wore what Ori was sure were matching couch cushions, probably from West Farthing materials. Their dresses of brown and mustard had enormous splotches of abstract yellow flowers and doubled collars, with one set sticking straight up around their ears and the lower set long enough to brush the hems of their dresses. The dresses sported belts of the same material, with tourmaline-encrusted gold buckles, each the size of their heads. They wore crisp green leggings and
matching velvet boots, and the entire effect made them look like malicious flowers. They presented themselves front and center to Hild, curtsied, and Vi said, “Ooooo, look at our Hild, Margr, all shined up. Mahal, love. Yeh could wear a bloody cheesecloth an’ make it look good.”

Margr concurred.

“Aye, she could. She’s that bonny. Ooo, I hate yeh, our Hild! Give us a hug.”

Hild, laughing so hard she could barely breathe, did so.

Vi reached back, grasped Glorfindel by the belt and yanked him toward them.

“Here’s our Glorfy,” she said.

“Now, our Glorfy,” said Margr. “Make your bow to our Hild. There’s a lad. She’s a queen, yeh know.”

Hild managed to return the bow, biting her lip.

“And, may I ask, Lord… Glorfy, is it?… how tall are you?”

“I’m seven foot and two inches, your majesty,” Glorfindel obliged.

Hild grinned at the sisters. “Three and a half feet for each of you. Quite convenient.”

“Mahal, yes,” said Vi. “An’ all o’ him very sturdy.”

“Aye,” agreed Margr. “T’ain’t true what they say ‘the higher up they are, the less there is down there’. He’s got ever such a big one!”

“Do you share?” Aris asked the sisters.

Glorfindel’s eyes grew quite large. Apparently, he was used to actually participating in such decisions.

Vi shrugged.

“If our Glorfy wants. Just let us know if you’ll be home for dinner, our Glorfy.”

Hild waved her hand elegantly.

“Oh, the invitation is open to you and Margr as well.”

“Four dams at once,” Glorfindel mused. “I’ll have to work that out.”

“Feel free to bring a friend,” said Hild.

“Yes, we’ll be here all week,” said Aris. “We have plenty of time.”

Vi nudged Margr’s ribs.

“Aye, just a matter o’ knowin’ how t’ fill it.”

“Oooo, our Vi, I know I’ll be serving up somma tha’ veal they got on sale in the market!”

“Aye, an’ we’ll stuff some mushrooms!”

“I just love a stuffed mushroom!” Hild added and all four dams laughed heartily. Glorfindel wore a look on his face Ori doubted anyone had ever seen there before. It was the look of someone who had bitten off more than they could chew.

Ori had overheard Dori and Binni planning the seating for this dinner. It was far too formal and important for a buffet. They spent nearly an hour on it, as if they were seating people at a wedding, the difference being that Dori and Binni matched up seat-mates for maximum explosive potential.

Formal, they were, but gleefully rotten, as well.

Ori obligingly made up place cards in his best westron calligraphy and waited for the games to begin.

The games began with crawfish or dough rolled in shredded coconut, fried and served with marmalade. The elves partook of the fried dough in great amounts.

“What are we eating?” Dain asked. “Tastes good, nice jelly, but it’s sorta snappy an’ chewy all a’ once.”

“Feels like somethin’ made o’ rubber,” Ulfr noted. “Did it used t’ be alive or did it ooze out’ve a tree, d’yeh think?”

Bifur said in ancient khuzdul, “Alive.”

Tharkûn enthused, “Yes, aren’t they delicious! They’re from the Long Lake.”

Boromir said, “This is fish?”

Gheir said, “It’s crawfish, shelled. We used to think they were just water bugs, but they taste
really good.”

“Water bugs!” Mavis XV giggled hysterically.

Ori looked around just in time to watch Kili hurl one at Buj, who used two forks to carefully dissect and examine it.

“Fascinating texture,” he observed.

“You gonna eat that?” Nori asked, seated next to him.

“Eat?” Buj asked questioningly.

Nori took it and stuffed it in his mouth.

“Decision made,” he muttered.

Fortunately for Buj, a bowl of fried dough reached him and he partook of that.

Soon those bowls were empty and next course arrived: Freshly sliced tomatoes with bahvlo cheese and large platters with rolled up, paper-thin slices of beef to eat with it. The elves exclaimed over the cheese. Elrohir took a roll of beef and peered through it like a spy glass. Elladan slipped beef to Biscuit.

“Don’t feed him too much,” Floris warned him, “he’ll sleep through his performance and Fior will have to pretend he’s a warg again. I mean, he can be a little warg, but his teeth aren’t that sharp.”

“Sharp enough to leave scars in your ankles,” Fior growled under his breath.

“I love cheese!” Mavis XV cried. “I mean, I love a lot of different things, because I’m not shallow, or anything, but this is just the best cheese!”

“That’s nice, dear,” said Binni, patting her hand.

“What’s it like to be a Bearer?” Mavis XV asked. “Do you have to have lots of babies? Do you pee standing up or sitting down?”

“It depends on my mood,” said Binni. “Bearers have many moods.”

“Ooooooooh,” said Mavis XV. “I’m told I’m moody, but that’s not the same thing, is it.”

“No, dear,” said Binni.

Down the table, Ulfr sighed.

Ori nudged Dwalin.

“Am I moody?”

“Nah, occasionally feisty, but no’ moody,” Dwalin muttered. “Mahal, she makes bloody T’dillah look clever.”

Ori began to lose track of the courses, busily taking in the conversations around him.

As the soup arrived, he heard Boromir exclaim to the Stiffbeard king.

“You have thirty-two children?”

“Yes,” said Gheir proudly.

Even Thranduil looked impressed.

“How many boys and how many girls?” he asked.

“Twenty-four boys,” said Gheir, then looked slightly uneasy. “Eight girls. My oldest daughter, Zavis, is due with her third child. We’re hoping it’s a girl this time.”

Hild rolled her eyes.

“So, you have all these princes you will have to marry off to local dams, but you have fewer and fewer local dams, for whatever reason. Where, exactly, will you get these dams for your sons?”

Gheir looked defiant.

“All our dams stay at home, ready to be married, so there will not be a paucity when the time comes.”

“And you thought only ponies wore blinders,” said Hild.

Gheir growled and slowly rose out of his chair, reaching for his sword.

Thranduil laughed rudely and looked down his nose at them, saying,

“Really, Thorin, are we going to have to separate the children?”

Gheir and Hild glared at him. Thorin said nothing, but his eyebrows lofted with his amusement.

“At the very least,” Thranduil continued in a kinder tone, “you should take that outside.”

Gheir barked a laugh and sat back down.

“Over that? I’m not missing out on dinner for that. She’s just getting started.”
“Yes, I have to at least have the gravy course before I begin to breathe fire,” said Hild.
“What kind of soup is this?” Ahkn asked, obviously puzzled and not necessarily in a good way.
“Watercress,” said Dis.
“What exactly-“
“It’s a leaf vegetable. Not to worry, your majesty, here is a bowl of crumbled bacon to decorate it.”

“Excellent!” Ahkn approved.
“Beautifully seasoned,” Arwen praised.
“I don’t…” Lindir hesitated. “Is that sesame? You know, I have allergies-“
Glorfindel heaved a sigh.
“You don’t have allergies, you’re just a fussbudget.”
Lindir screamed and recoiled.
Elrond shot to his feet and went to him.
“What is it? What happened?” the elf lord asked.
“A face!” Lindir gasped. “A face suddenly appeared in my soup bowl!”
Oin exploded out of his chair.
“Is it a sign?” he demanded.
“Guess he really doesn’t want to eat that soup,” said Glorfindel.
Ori saw Nori’s seat was empty and groaned. Dori arrived next to Elrond and looked annoyed.
“I apologize for my brother,” Dori offered graciously. “We can’t take him anywhere, or even expect him stay in one place through the gravy course.”

“You… brother?” Lindir gasped.
“Nori!” Dori said sternly, “you apologize to Master Lindir!”
Nori’s head popped through the tabletop, right through Lindir’s bowl.

“Heh, sorry about that, lad. Sometimes me tricks get the better o’ me - an’ everyone else.”
Assault and Battery shot out of Nori’s hair to wave and chitter at Lindir for good measure, then the whole lot sank back through the table and Nori appeared in his seat and resumed eating as if none of it had happened, except for the filthy grin on his face.

“Naughy badger!” Granny Klak scolded adoringly.
Dis said soothingly to Lindir, “Please don’t mind him. He just found out he can walk through solid objects.”

“Really?” Elrond asked, clearly impressed.
Arwen said, “It gave me quite a turn, too, Lindir, but those little creatures in his hair are so cute!”
Glorfindel enthused, “I’d pay gold to see that again.”
Lindir gaped.

“You want him to appear in your soup bowl?”
“No,” said Glorfindel, “yours. Nice to see you have a pulse after all.”
“Glorfindel,” said Elrond reprovingly.
“If the bones aren’t too small…”
“Bass isn’t exactly a delicate fish, dear.”
Theoden, apparently thinking the madness could be contained, pushed back his chair and called over to Nori. “And, how did you come by your talent, Lord Nori?”

“Eh, our Dori spilled over,” said Nori.
He held up a piece of bread to his hair and little hands grabbed it and whisked it away.
“Ya’ll have crumbs in there again,” said Bofur. “I’ll spend another hour brushin’ ’em out.”
“As long as they’re bog-trained, I’m good wif it,” said Nori.
Theoden said, “Would you… might I… is it permitted to ask what you mean by ‘spilled over’? Is the top of the Bearer’s head open?”

“Nah,” said Dwalin, “though it does blow off from time t’ time.”
Theoden looked over at the returning Dori, who smiled sweetly.
“Not literally, dear.”
Bard said to Theoden, “Just another dinner with the Durins. Have some more of this soup, it’s really quite good.”

Soon the servants carried in three great platters of lake bass. Roasted whole, each fish was six feet long.

There were murmurs of appreciation up and down the table.

“Our King Bard was kind enough to supply this lovely fish,” said Dori, nodding regally to Bard.

“And you caught them yourself, didn’t you.”

Bard looked embarrassed but indicated that yes, this was so.

Mavis XV cried, “My, you must have an enormous rod!”

“I used a net,” said Bard, now red for a different reason.

“A triumph either way,” said Thranduil, saluting Bard with his wine glass.

“Thank you,” said Bard in a grateful tone.

The fish was served with parsley sauce, rice and new peas.

Ori thought the elves were giving the dwarrow competition as lusty eaters. He didn’t think they were up for a food fight, but he couldn’t rule it out, either.

He glanced down the younger table and noticed a few of his fellow diners were, indeed, flicking peas at each other.

Theodred and Fior and the twins seemed to delight in this activity and soon were attempting to hit each other’s open mouths.

A shiver of excitement went up and down the tables as the fish course was removed and big, black tureens with the royal seal were carried into the room in great state.

The smell was so delicious, Ori thought he might swoon, but then he might miss the food, so he settled for squeezing Dwalin’s hand tightly and bouncing a little in his seat.

Mavis I sighed in delight.

“How elegant!”

“Is that mushroom?” Elrond asked, intrigued.

“Yes,” said Thorin. “It’s quite versatile, and this is one of our favorite dishes.”

The two-handled bowls were soon filled with this simmering elixir of the valar.

Thorin and Dis and Fili demonstrated lifting the bowls by the handles to sip directly from the vessels.

The elves and men gamely followed suit.

Hild laughed.

“Every time I have this, I ask for the recipe, and every cook who makes it tells me to take a royal jump.”

“It is excellent,” Galadriel agreed.

Boromir said, “I’ve never been to a dinner where you had soup twice.”

“It’s gravy, Captain Boromir,” said Dori.

“Really?” Boromir asked. “Don’t you have gravy over meat?”

“Of course, but this way you get to truly savor it. Besides, it’s a mushroom gravy, so our elf friends can enjoy it as well.”

“Oooo, a gravy course!” Vi cried. “I do so like a gravy course.”

Ori reflected that she’d probably never had a gravy course in the whole of her life. He hadn’t himself until he was married.

Margr said, “Oh, our Dori, leave it t’ yeh to make it all so posh!”

“So, this is a gravy course,” said Thranduil, raising an eyebrow at Thorin. “You are honoring us.”

“Just don’t let word get out,” Thorin teased.

This was followed by a goat and two lambs, roasted whole, with grilled yams in maple syrup, mashed potatoes dripping with butter, candied carrots, roasted brussels sprouts doused in garlic and butter, cold pickled beets, beans with almonds, grilled cavern mushrooms, roasted apples in a blanket of melted cheese and gravy boats filled with mint sauce.

Dori threw Nori a sharp look.

“No,” was all Dori said.
Nori smiled sweetly and bowed his head, finished the contents of his wine glass and refilled it from the gravy boat in front of him. He toasted Dori wordlessly and down the whole thing in a gulp. Then he wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

Dori sighed, but Nori said, “Oi, didn’t want to dirty yer nice table linens again, Dori. Ain’t I a good brother?”

“No, you’re a very bad brother. Be quiet.”

Intrigued with Nori’s display, Elladan poured himself a glass from the gravy boat and drank it. His mouth full, his lips pursed, and his eyes got very large and round and there was absolutely nowhere for him to go. The table of the younger set roared with laughter.

Nori barked, “Just swallow, lad.”

Bravely, Elladan did so.

Floris and Loli passed him their wine, which he took gratefully. When he was at last able to speak he managed, “That was horrible. That’s mint-flavored vinegar.”

“Good for the digestion,” said Nori.

“Yes, especially if you never drink it,” said Elladan.

“It’s to go with the lamb,” Omi told him. “Never copy Nori. You’ll either vomit or die, or vomit and die. Either way, it’s not worth your life.”

“Lesson learned,” he noted.

The men enjoyed the meat, while the elves decimated the grilled cavern mushrooms once again. Lady Galadriel treated herself to a teaspoonful of mint sauce. When Theoden raised an eyebrow at her she smiled sweetly and said, “It’s good for the digestion.”

This led almost everyone to try it.

Ori thought Nori looked proud enough to burst his tunic. Dori, on the other hand, looked like they would burst the vein their forehead. Balin wiped his mouth, rose, and made a special trip down the table to pat their hand.

The goat and lamb was removed and everyone given a small plate containing a slice of toasted egg bread, with a spoonful of spiced, scrambled eggs on top. Ori suspected this had been planned to give the men and elves a little room to digest. He himself was still peckish.

Then arrived two roasted geese stuffed with clove-studded oranges, accompanied by bowls of buttered noodles and bowls of caramelized onions. The elves couldn’t get enough of the caramelized onions. Theodred and Bain played with the noodles. They had never seen them before and Bain started to make rude commentary about tape worms but Sigrid threw a spoon at him and smacked him hard between the eyes.

“Your aim’s really improving,” Fili noted approvingly.

“Indeed,” Tauriel agreed.

“I realize not everyone is fortunate enough to be able to aim a spoon,” said Sigrid modestly.

“How hard can it be?” Legolas asked, throwing a spoon at Tauriel and smacking Stonehelm in the ear.

Cutlery briefly filled the air over the table, until Dori barked that they would have to wash each and every piece before they ate dessert. That stopped things instantly.

Stuffed beef, and for the elves, chips, cheese curds and gravy arrived next, though Ori was more than happy to partake of the chips himself. Everyone munched happily on these offerings, except for Aewandinen, who didn’t seem to do much more than glare at his barely-daube plate, and Gheir’s youngest wife, who looked truly puzzled.

“What is this?” Mavis XV asked.

“Beef olives,” said Binni.

“I don’t see any olives.”

“There aren’t any.”

“Oh.” She looked puzzled. “I don’t understand. Is this another Bearer thing?”

“Yes,” said Binni, turning back to his food.

Bombur gently explained that the beef had stuffing in it, the way olives were sometimes stuffed with peppers, and they were the same shape.
“I’ve never seen an olive that big,” she said.
“Yes,” said Bombur, turning back to his food.
Oin picked up the last part.
“I’ve never seen an olive the size of a pig either, m’dear, so not to worry.” He patted her hand and addressed himself to his food.

“May I be excused?” Mavis XV asked, popping up from her chair.
“Where are you going, my dear?” Gheir asked from down the table.
“Oh, you know, away,” said Mavis XV. “Be right back!”
“Oh, don’t do that, dear,” Dori cried. “We have dessert next.”
“Dessert?” Mavis XV chirped, and sat down again.
Celeborn was heard to ask plaintively, “Dessert?”
“Perhaps some tea, Lord Celeborn?” Dis suggested.
“That would be lovely, thank you,” said Celeborn.
Dain leaned over Jani and said, “Told yeh tha’ yeh shoulda had a spoon a’ tha’ mint sauce.”
Jani cackled.

The table was fully cleared, then xocolātl pound cake, raspberry preserves, and bowls of xocolātl pudding were brought out with accompanying whipped, cold cream.

Tharkûn took lavishly of the pudding. Aragorn went for the pound cake and Dis giggled as Arwen filled her bowl with raspberry preserves and dolloped cream on top. Theoden and Boromir were enchanted with the pudding, neither of them having ever tasted anything quite like it. Ori noted the pudding tasted of hints of cinnamon and a bit of hot pepper, amazing in contrast with the cold, dark brown pudding itself.

The eating finally slowed down and Dori smiled around at them.
“Is everyone of an elegant sufficiency?”
There was a resounding ‘yes’ all around.
Positions, Pudding, and Perturbations.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Aaaaah, and now that we are all of an elegant sufficiency how about a nice, quiet evening at home? Not. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Dis and Thorin rose and everyone followed suit. Mistress Dazla and her minions entered. A few carried tea and coffee things to the far fireplace and set them up on a large, low table. Dori and Thranduil headed over, and those who wished tea or coffee followed. Bifur and Tharkun sat nearby, smoking their pipes in companionable silence.

Mistress Dazla and the rest of her team started to clear.

"Would you like us to help you with that, Mistress Dazla?" Kili asked.

She lifted an eyebrow at him.

"In those clothes, your highness? I don’t think so. Give yourself the night off."

The table was cleaned off at speed, leaving the chairs close to one end for conversation. Thorin, Dis, and Balin went to the sideboard where a couple of the servants were setting up glasses and bottles of sweet after-dinner wine. Most of the younger set quickly headed back to their usual fireplace to plop down on the cushions and chatter.

Dwalin poured Ori a cup of wine as they watched the guests separate into various groups. Ori could guess the conversation of the party who stayed near the table. Every race was represented, and all with some link to commerce.

Bard sat next to Gloin. The man said something and Gloin laughed. They might have been thrown together to keep Bard from drowning, but they were becoming fast friends.

Aragorn and Arwen sat side by side, holding hands. Ori could already tell they were partners in everything. They would rule Gondor the same way.

Fili and Sigrid were about to sit and Thorin said, "You take the night off, too, Fi. I'll catch you up if something important happens."

"Yes, Idad, but…. um…"

Bard shook his head.

"You can go with him, Sig, it's all right."

"Thanks, Da," said Sigrid. She kissed Bard’s cheek and headed across the room with Fili, hand in hand.

"Does Thorin need me?" Ori asked Dwalin.

"Nah, it's just trade talk, bore yeh shitless. I'm stickin' with Thorin, Loli an' Buj'll take notes."

"All right, then I’m going to wander a little," said Ori.

He got up on his toes and kissed Dwalin’s cheek.

Dwalin whispered in his ear, "Soon, love."

"I'll hold you to that," Ori replied.

Ori looked about the room, noticing the various encampments. Everyone was gathering and mingling and having a great time… except for Prince Aewandinen of Erys Lasgalen.

Aewandinen sat by himself in the corner with neither tea nor wine, and looked disgruntled.

Ori had noted what the prince ate during this entire meal: A spoonful of marmalade, a slice of tomato, a spoonful of cress soup, three peas, a taste of gravy, two candied carrots, one brussels sprout, a corner of toast, a noodle, one chip and a spoonful of raspberry preserves.
Ori thought he must still be hungry, which certainly wouldn't improve his mood. He approached and asked, kindly, "Would you like some tea, your highness?"

The prince looked further annoyed at having being disturbed, but deigned to answer coldly, "No, thank you, I have come here to be alone with my thoughts. I am composing a poem."

"Oh! Let me bring you some ink and paper, then," said Ori.

Startled, Aewandínen could only manage, "Please."

Ori went to his own desk in the sitting room and pulled out the necessary supplies. He presented them to the prince, who thanked him in a dismissive manner. Ori was almost glad for it. Aewandínen made him uncomfortable on several levels, not just because the elf was a total prat. Ori didn't like the way he looked at Legolas, for one thing. Aewandínen looked up sourly whenever the younger prince laughed, and scowled when he saw Legolas and Gimli together.

Ori enjoyed his wine and drifting though the conversations of others. He passed Lindir and Aris pouring over the small, leather-bound book Aris wrote in whenever Hild wanted something noted.

"It's quite handy," said Aris. "It's divided by days, then hours, then fifteen minute blocks, unless it's a council meeting day. Then it's in ten minute blocks."

"That is clever," said Lindir, "but ten minute increments? How do you keep the councillors and petitioners to such strict schedule?"

Aris showed him a device on a cord around her neck.

"Stop watch."

"A what?"  

"A watch that signals when the minutes have elapsed. Everyone has exactly ten minutes to say what needs to be said and get out."

"And they all adhere to it? Even, say, King Gheir when he visits?"

Aris smiled ferally.

"From what I understand, he never takes more than ten minutes to finish anything."

"How insufferably dull," Lindir giggled.

A burst of laughter rose from the trade table and Aragorn and Arwen stood.

"Hold that thought, please," said Aragorn.  

"We're just going to get some tea," said Arwen.

Snur sat with Galadriel on an island of couches in the middle of the room, laughing about something, probably something inappropriate Galadriel herself initiated. Snur cast an eye at Aragorn as the Gondorian passed. Specifically, he peered at the sword at Aragorn's hip.

"Beggin' your pardon, Aragorn, but, is that Anduril?"

"It is," said Aragorn. "Arwen, will you go on? I'll be right there."

"I'll bring your tea, dearest," she said.

"This is Anduril, Flame of the West," said Aragorn. "Lord Elrond reforged it from the shards of Narsil."

"Aye, I know. Me ancestor, King Telchar, forged Narsil."

For a moment Ori was afraid Snur wanted his sword back, but the Broadbeam only asked, "Did he keep the original pommel, grip, an' guard?"

"Yes. Lord Elrond told me he tried to remain faithful to the original. You've never seen it, have you."

"Nah, only the concept drawin's. Dwarrow're obsessive about keepin' records. Amazin' how many torn out pieces o' sleeves an' tunics with drawin's all over 'em're stored in the archives."

Aragorn unbuckled his sword, and held it out.

"Please, take a look."

Snur stood and took the sword with a grin, slowly and carefully examining the work of his ancestor and even critiquing waggishly,

"Lord Elrond didn't lengthen that grip?"

"No, it fit my hand perfectly."

Snur chuckled.

"In khuzdul, that's a sly way o' sayin' ya enjoy your own company."
Aragorn barked out a laugh of surprise and delight. Arwen returned with the tea.
"Would you like to see the blade, too?" Aragorn asked Snur. "Or is that too rude for this room?"
as he took the tea Arwen handed him and had a sip.
"Ah, now, see, you're catchin' on. I would like to see this blade, though, not yours."
Arwen glanced over the rim of her teacup.
"They're both lovely, I assure you."
Snur roared and bowed.
"I stand before superior wit, milady."
"It's not wit," said Arwen. "It's just intimate knowledge I have that you don't have. Probably."
"Still, I surrender."
Aragorn blushed and Elrond pretended he wasn't anywhere near the conversation.
Ori moved on. As he passed the tea table, Dori leaned toward him.
"I don't suppose you've seen your brother and Bofur recently?"
Ori realized he hadn't since dinner. Ori bit his lip and Dori sighed.
"Off consummating, I suppose. They only have one set of manners between them."
"Where's Granny?" Ori wondered.
"She disappeared off. I imagine she's either gone to bed or," Dori cleared his throat, "gone to bed."
"How are things going?" Ori asked, fighting a blush.
"Oh, just lovely. Even with all this tea, I'm fairly sure we've all eaten enough to make us sleep for
a week."
"Don't go to sleep just yet, Bearer," said Hild. "I need to ask you a question."
The way she said 'question' made Ori nod to them and swiftly retreat toward the younger set.
They seemed to be playing some sort of guessing game. Legolas and Gimli, however, sat together
on a couch nearby, apparently in a world of their own.
"I am content to wait, Gimli," said Legolas.
"Are yeh?"
"All right, not 'content'. More like 'resigned'."
Gimli chuckled.
"It may no' be tha' long, anyways. Even if I lack a few years, a warrior's braid will mean I'm
settled now in life t' marry formally an' set up house-keepin'. I'm thinkin' me bead'll look a treat in
all tha' golden hair."
Legolas colored and dropped his gaze, but Ori could see the elf was pleased.
Then Legolas looked off to the left suddenly and frowned. Ori followed his gaze to Aewandínen
still on the couch, who wore a mask of cold fury to rival one of Thranduil's own.
Legolas lifted his chin in defiance and turned back to rest his head atop Gimli's. The young dwarf
put an arm around Legolas' waist, and Aewandínen was dismissed.
The elder elf prince shot to his feet and stalked down the hall toward the meadow.
Ulfr, standing nearby with his pipe, gave Ori a gimlet eye.
"It's like someone lit candles in here all of a sudden," he said. "It's brighter, yeh know?"
"I shouldn't say what I'm thinking," said Ori.
"But yeh kin think it all yeh want, laddie," said Ulfr. "Mahal's inky bum! We all are!"
Dori leaned over and cast a critical eye over the group at the trade table.
"That's enough business for tonight. I'm sure you could all do with a nice turn about the room, or
there's a lovely patio that overlooks the meadow. And I'm sure several of you need either tea or
coffee. Go on now. Shoo."
The business was left with promises to continue later as they all rose, some went for tea and
others to refill their wine glasses.
Ori followed most of the others out through the breakfast parlor and out into the night, if nothing
else to make sure no one got in Aewandínen's way, but the elf prince had disappeared into the
darkness. Ori could only hope the unpleasant prince would slip on some pony dung.
It was a lovely night, and quite a few people had elected to carry their tea or wine out onto the
patio. In this wide-open space, voices carried, spilling secrets.

“… think about our Hild’s offer,” said Vi.

“I am a seasoned warrior,” said Glorfindel, “but four dams at once?”

“P’raps tha’ lovely King Theoden could help, our Vi,” said Margr.

“Bit skittish, tha’ one,” said Vi. “Wonder if tha’ Mister Boromir is free.”

Glorfindel laughed. “Aye, let us see if he’s ‘up’ for it!”

Ori walked on until he saw two figures off in a sheltered corner. It was hard to tell in the shadows, but they seemed to be facing each other, one of them sitting on a low stone bench. The seated figure held out their arms in the universal symbol of helplessness.

"I don't know what to do," said Bard.

"You don't have to do anything," Thranduil replied.

"And if she falls pregnant? How can she hold up her head among men?"

"The same way she would among dwarrow, I believe. Dori raised her just as much as you did."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying she thinks like a dwarf. As far as the dwarrow are concerned, if Sigrid and Fili plan to marry anyway, it doesn't matter when the dwarfling comes. And you know as well as I that many a noble woman has produced her first little miracle a scant few months after her wedding."

"And the rest of the children each take nine months," Bard acknowledged.

"They will marry, Bard. They are already as good as engaged. Your blessing would mean much to them, but if it is not forthcoming, they will still be welcome in Dori’s house."

"And such a fracture in the family would hurt all of us," Bard sighed, then made a startled noise.

"Did I just say 'family'?"

"Possibly. One's hearing begins to go after the first few millennia."

Thranduil sat next to him.

"You know, I have lived in this part of the world for so long, I remember when your ancestors arrived here. They lived very differently than the Dale men do now, more like Theoden's people do, in extended families. It wasn't a perfect system, of course. Bad blood led to spilled blood more often than not, but when it worked, it carried them through good days and bad. For many, it still does."

"Are you saying we should go back to living that way?"

"I believe I'm saying that dwarrow still do."

"That's a relief. I like Vi and Margr, but I don't think I want to live close enough to hear every wheeze and moan."

"I agree. That would be icky."

Bard laughed.

"Did you just say, 'icky'?"

"Blame the dwarrow, or, better yet, Tilda, Princess Charming."

"I'm sorry about your ears."

Thranduil waved it off.

"There's nothing lurid in her interest. Better now than when she's grown."

"What? When she's 'craftwed'?” Bard snorted. "She will be the death of me."

"Oh, nonsense. When you are grey haired you will look back and tease her about it, especially if she's married with several little Tildas of her own."

"I can wait," said Bard. "I have time."

"That's my line, you thief."

"Too bad."

There was a pause, a rather tense, expectant pause, and then Ori heard the unmistakeable sound of lips meeting and a sigh.

His first though was: How sweet!

His second thought was: Where is my husband?

Alas, Dwalin was still back at the table, listening to Dain talk about the wonderful adventures of His Son, the Pig, and Delicate Jewel of a Bride, sloshing wine everywhere, and Dwalin could do nothing more than wink as Ori smiled, passing the table again.
Ori drifted back toward the tea table, where it was just Dori and Hild now. Hild was standing rather closer to Dori than previously, and her voice had altered huskily.

“Are you sure you want Balin? Aris and I could be so good to you.”
“Very generous, your majesty, but he is my One.”
“Ah, that’s quite unfortunate for us, then. He does have the nicest beard, doesn’t he.”
“It’s quite strong, too,” Dori purred.

“Really?” Hild asked with a loft of her brows. “You know what they say about the strength of a dwarf’s beard.”

“Completely true, my dear Queen Hild. Completely true.”

“Oh, you know, you could bring him along.”

“We’ll take it under advisement,” Dori promised, patting Hild’s arm.

Ori watched this entire exchange with a sort of horrified astonishment. There were entirely too many pretty people at Fundin House right now, and they seemed to be playing a game he didn’t want to participate in if it involved his brother. He went and stood near King Snur, who was amiable, and rather handsome, but not overwhelming in his beauty.

“Oh, aye,” said Snur to Lady Galadriel. “Gheir wanted t’marry Hild once. They say he took his pants down and she realized she had better and longer in the drawer at home.”

Ori decided he would go to the kitchen and hide in the larder. He actually had the larder door open when he heard Bofur moan and Nori say, “Stop thrashin’ about! I can’t keep a grip!”

Ori went and hid in his room.

This was fine as far as it went, but Sigrid and Tauriel found him out within ten minutes. Tauriel must have been taking her cues from Kili, though she knocked before she barged in.

"Ah, there you are," she said. "Sigrid and I want to see Queen Kivi’s book!"

They sat on the bed, so there was no escape.

He handed it over, bright red to the ears, and Tauriel opened it, shrieked with laughter and fell back on the comforter in peals of giggling.

It was inevitably Illustration 20.

When she could speak, Tauriel said, “Not for all the gold in Arda!”

“Wait a bit,” said Sigrid, grinning. “Ori, stand up with me for a moment.”

Ori raised and eyebrow, toed off his boots and did so. Sigrid doffed her fine dress to a short chemise and kicked off her shoes. Otherwise, they stood on the bed, fully clothed.

“Alright,” said Sigrid, now put your left hand here, and wrap your knee around… that’s it. Now, I’ll do a backbend. I hope I still remember how. Does it look right, Tauriel?”

“It does, but you can’t possibly be comfortable like that.”

“I’m fine at the moment. Now, Ori, stretch.”

“Stretch what?” Ori squeaked.

Sigrid laughed so hard she collapsed on the bed, taking him with her, and he rolled off her in such a rush they both tumbled to the floor.

“I don’t think you’re doing it right,” said Tauriel.

A fallen pillow flew over the edge of the bed and smacked her in the face.

“You think you can do it better?” Sigrid challenged with a laugh.

“I am more than willing to give it a try,” said Tauriel. “come back up here.”

“This is worse than Shimmy!” Ori groaned, crawling back up on the bed.

“Just close your eyes and think of Erebor,” said Tauriel.

“That sounds like an invitation to a broken back,” said Ori. “I think I need to see what we’re doing. Not that I believe what we’re doing. Not that we’re actually doing anything, are we, except tumbling off the bed.”

“Let Sigrid and I try,” said Tauriel.

Ori was more than happy to cede his position. Tauriel and Sigrid were closer to the same height,
though the illustration didn’t make it clear if that was a better fit or a worse one. Tauriel slid off her
boots and unbuckled her weapon belt before climbing up on the bed.

Ori coached them into the form. He had some vague idea both of them were putting their hands
places that might cause Kili or Fili to chop them off, but Ori wasn’t particularly titilated by any of it.
He frowned down at the illustration again. Sigrid had piled the pillows up and still couldn’t stop
giggling. Tauriel’s set scowl of concentration made her look like she was going into battle.

“I don’t think this works unless you’re really relaxed,” said Ori.
“True,” said Tauriel. “Wait a moment, please.”

She disentangled herself, shook herself in a peculiar way which seemed to involve the
rearrangement of muscles, and re-entangled herself all in about ten seconds.

“Much better,” she said.

“For who?”

He was so shook up he couldn’t remember if that was grammatically correct.

“I can’t feel my leg,” Sigrid announced.

Ori consulted the book again and after a search found the leg Sigrid was complaining about.

“You have to put it up here,” he told her.

“I can’t move.”

Ori put the book down and attempted to move the leg.

“Careful,” Tauriel said. “Your elbow is a little too near my eye.”

Ori stood up to lean over them both, still trying to adjust Sigrid’s leg.

“That’s attached,” Sigrid reminded him.

“Wait a minute.” Ori went back to the book and studied the picture again.

“Tauriel, you need to bring your knee over here.”

“Where?”

Ori took a hold of the offending knee and pulled. Tauriel fell forward and Sigrid rolled off the
bed with her, the covers pulled Ori after and they were in a heap.

“Where’s the book?” Ori demanded.

Two people who were not in the heap and certainly not any help, lost hold of their laughter.

Ori tumbled off the pile and looked up.

Fili and Kili leaned in the doorway laughing themselves to the floor.

“We weren’t doing anything,” Ori shouted.

“Except attempting to strangle each other,” said Fili.

“Don’t just stand there,” yelled Sigrid. “Help!”

Fili staggered over.

“Help you do what?” he managed.

“Shut up and get me off this floor.”

“How?” Fili snickered.

“Grab my hand.”

Fili grabbed a hand.

“That’s mine,” Tauriel told him.

Kili came over.

“What were you doing?”

“We were looking at Queen Kivi’s book and were trying to figure out Illustration 20,” Ori told
him honestly and started to try and untangle the two women. Still chuckling, the princes finally got
Tauriel and Sigrid unfankled and back on their feet.

Ori rescued the book and put it on the bed. He frowned at the illustration again.

“You know I really don’t think this can be done. I don’t care what Dori said.”

“Dori says it can be done?” Fili asked taking Sigrid’s hand and kissing it. He then found her
shoes for her while she popped her dress back on.

“He said, ‘practice makes perfect,’ ” Ori said vaguely.

“Huh,” Fili replied. “Maybe it’s a Bearer thing. Only Bearers can stretch that much.” He tied
the laces of Sigrid’s shoes for her while she sat on the bed, making sure her hair was no longer
“I pity Balin then,” Ori said a little waspishly.

“Let’s go back to the party and see if there’s any food left,” Kili said and grinned up at Tauriel as he held her weapons for her while she put her boots on. Tauriel giggled and put her hand in his.

Ori stuck the book back under his pillow and they headed back out to the reception room. Someone had refreshed the platters of finger foods. Kili and Fili collected a pile of various goodies onto a platter and they went over to the far fireplace and sat down before it amid the chattering younger set.

Tilda called out, “Queen Mavis!”

Five sets of eyes turned toward her and Tilda swallowed, stood, and curtsied, probably because she couldn’t think of anything else to do, and specified.

“Queen Mavis XV, please come and sit with us.”

Young Mavis looked pleadingly at Mavis I, all the while biting her lower lip.

“Go on, dear,” said Mavis I, flicking her fingers to shoo her over.

Young Mavis grinned and all but skipped over to join them. Ori watched the older Mavis queens exchange looks of complete exasperation. He caught a low, “… told him not to marry the child…” and “…another pair of pretty eyes…” and “…out of the schoolroom…”.

Mavis XV arrived and curtseyed before plopping down between Tilda and Sigrid and looking around nervously.

Fili said, “Your majesty? Would you care for something to drink?”

“Oh, please, just call me Mavey, your highness. That’s what they call me at home. I mean, that’s what they called me when I lived with my parents.”

Ori watched her eyes flicker from Fili to Kili to Stonehelm, then to Tauriel’s pointed ears and then she looked under her lashes at Theodred, but her gaze never settled anywhere. He wondered how many young males Mavey knew. He wondered if she had ever met anyone who wasn’t a dwarf. He rather knew the feeling.

“So, Ori-mate, let’s see this book you’re so taken with,” said Bain.

“Can’t,” said Ori. “You have to be of age. It says so in the book. You have to be married.”

“What book is this?” Mavey asked.

Ori reached and put his hands over Tilda’s ears and said over her protests, “It’s a sex manual.”

“Sigrid and Tauriel aren’t married,” said Bain.

“Close enough,” said Ori.

“I’m married,” said Mavey slyly.

“Go ask Mavis I if you can see it,” said Ori.

“Oh, she’s no fun,” said Mavey. “I suppose I wouldn’t be either if all I did was scowl and run the kingdom while our husband is making more babies.”

She clapped her hand over her mouth, her eyes huge and finally murmured around her fingers, “You didn’t hear that, right?”

“Hear wha’?” Stonehelm asked, batting his eyelashes to ridiculous effect.

Floris arrived with Biscuit and they plopped down beside Mavey.

“What did I miss? We were putting last minute touches on the costumes for the performance.”

“Queen Mavis would like to be addressed as ‘Mavey’,” said Fili.

“Sure. Did you leave any iklars?”

Biscuit raised his head, looking hopeful.

“None for you,” said Floris. “Xocolatl isn’t good for you. Remember last time?”

Biscuit sighed and flopped back down in crushing disappointment.

“Aw, poor pup,” said Mavey. “Does he mind being pet?”

“Are you kidding?” Floris asked. “You can pet him, but I’m warning you now, it’s a lifetime commitment.”

Mavey started behind Biscuit’s ears and soon the great beast was on his back, smiling coquettishly for a tummy rub.

“You are shameless,” said Mavey.
“So much for vicious wargs,” said Kili.
Mavey shivered.
“I’ve heard about them, horrid beasts that rip out your throat for fun and without provocation.”
The group got very quiet.
“Er… Mavey,” said Kili, “have you ever seen a warg?”
“No.”
“You’re petting one.”
Mavey stopped petting. She looked at Floris askance, then laughed.
“You’re all too good at joking.”
“Sh-sh-sh-she’s n-n-not j-jok-king,” said Arne.
“What do I do?” Mavey asked, frozen.
“Go back to petting him,” said Fior, “before th’ big puddin’ starts whining like a lost soul.”
Biscuit’s tail thumped enthusiastically on the carpet and his tongue lolled out and to the side.
Floris heave a sigh.
“Really, Biscuit? How is it that Chopper is a pig, yet you’re the bigger ham?”
Miss Oqizla came to refresh the platters on the table. She gave Stonehelm a long look, then walked away with a little wiggle in her step.
“She thinks your cuuuuuuuute,” Bain teased.
“She does not!” Stonehelm shot back. “Go soak your head!”
“She does, too. I’ll go ask her.”
Bain jumped to his feet, but Stonehelm grabbed him and pulled him back and the pair of them wrestled, endangering the refreshments. This was all the encouragement Arne and Theodred needed, and Gimli wasn’t going to be left out.
Floris looked indecisive.
“I’m thinkin’ I’ll just let ‘em bruise each other this once,” she said, winking at Mavey.
“You fight with the males?” Mavey asked, round-eyed.
“It’s not really a fight if I can beat them from here to Mordor, is it?” Then Floris laughed. “Oh, I dunno if I can or not, but I do know we rehearsed for five hours today, plus gave a short performance in town. I’m thinkin’ this carpet feels really good on my arse about now.”
She brushed her hair back from her eyes and Mavey stared at the red swirling design on Floris’ wrist.
“That’s beautiful,” she said. “Is it a henna design?”
“No, that’s permanent. The shad-zo did it when I was little. It’s supposed to protect me from evil spirits.”
“What’s a shad-zo?”
“A priestess among the borjeval men. That’s where my father is from, up in the ice fields.”
“He’s a long way from home,” Mavey observed.
“No, he’s not,” said Floris with a smile. “He brings it with him wherever he goes.”
“I mean, he’s far from his own people.”
“There aren’t all that many left. Another clan wiped them out when he was a boy.”
Mavey drew back, mouth open and working, with no sound coming out. Finally, she managed, in a horrified whisper,
“That’s terrible! I’m so sorry!”
And she burst into tears.
Floris looked mortified, and everyone else looked stunned. Even the wrestling stopped.
“Er… it’s alright?” Floris tried. “It was a long time ago?”
She awkwardly patted the Stiffbeard queen’s shoulder.
Fili leapt in with a napkin off the table for Mavey to cry into while he looked wildly around the room.
Finally he turned to Ori.
“Dori?” he asked.
“Hold on!”
Ori leapt to his feet, but there was no need, as Dori was upon them. Floris made room for the Bearer and Dori leaned over the distraught dam. “Oh, my dear, what has upset you?”

“P-poor Master Woo-Woo-din-i-i!” Mavey gasped.

“Great,” said Arne under his breath in khuzdul. “Now I have someone else doing it.” Biscuit wiggled around to Mavey’s other side to lick her face and Floris was still trying to help.

“It was a long time ago? He wasn’t even there when it happened?”

“It’s alright, Floris,” Dori crooned, though speaking more to Mavey than the stout younger dam. “You come along with me, Queen Mavis. We’ll go to the kitchen and make you a nice cup of tea.”

Mavey hiccupped, sniffled and said, “With honey?”

“Yes, dear, with honey, and I think there are still some lovely scones from this afternoon.”

Mavis followed Dori like a lost puppy, which, Ori reflected, she rather was. The younger group rose to refresh their platter and looked at what was still on offer.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” said Floris glumly as she emptied a small plate of fudge onto the big platter.

“You didn’t know she was so sensitive,” said Fili, adding a pile of xocolātl chip cookies. “I mean, it is really sad.”

“I cried when Da told me, too,” said Floris, “but I was only a badger. I couldn’t have been more than fifteen. She’s a married dam! And older than me!”

“N-n-not b-by mu-mu-mu-much,” commented Arne, dumping a plate full of bacon and dill scones and a huge clump of sharp cheese to their platter. “She-She’s sh-sh-shelt-t-tered.”

“Most Stiffbeard girls are nowadays,” said Mavis I, who had arrived unnoticed and was looking over the refreshment table with a frown. “They don’t go out and play with the male badgers, because they could get hurt. We’re raising a generation of weak dams, and all on my husband’s orders.”

“Don’t you like Mavis XV, your majesty?” Tilda asked.

Mavis I’s hard features softened as she helped herself to three xocolātl chip cookies off their platter.

“She’s a sweet little thing, never a mean word on purpose, but she’s far too young and naive. She’ll do herself a mischief one day, you mark me. If we don’t look out, she’ll take the rest of us with her. Is that fruit soda water? I never! Well, not for a raven’s age, anyway.”

The younger set, platter overflowing, went back to their hearth seats. Ori followed slowly, listening in at other conversations.

On the couch nearby, Snur showed Galadriel portraits of his dwarflings which he kept in a slim folding frame in a pocket.

"She's goin' t' be just like her mam, I can tell," he said to Galadriel. "She was barely out o' nappies herself when she started followin' me here, there, an' everywhere else. 'What's this, Da?', 'How does this work, Da?', and always, 'Why? Why? Why?'."

"Oh, she's reached the 'why' stage," said Galadriel with a grin. "Celebrian went through it for a good ten years."

"No offense, milady, but I think I'd've sewn me own ears shut after the first two."

"It was very tempting. 'Why is the sky blue, Nana?', 'Because Eru made it that way, dear', 'Why?', 'I don't know, dear, you can ask him when next he's over for tea.' "

"Ya didn't say that! Did ya?"

"Not the part about Eru coming to tea. I just thought about that, then went and screamed into a pillow."

Slowly, the guests began to drift back upstairs to their rooms. The talk at the table coupled with the wine had devolved into outrageously exaggerated tales of warrior prowess.

Off on the couch, Snur had fallen asleep with his cheek against Galadriel's arm and she was desperately trying not to laugh and wake him while Celeborn tried to extract her, also without waking him.
Abruptly Snur sat up, snorted, looked around and said, "Where th' fuck are we now?"
Galadriel lost hold of her laugh and Celeborn said, "Erebor?"
"Oi, that's good," said Snur, yawning hugely. "We didn't miss that coronation, did we, Celly-mate?"

Celeborn, obviously startled to be called 'mate', never mind 'Celly', simply said, "No. It is tomorrow, or, rather, later today."

"Right," said Snur, patting Lady Galadriel on the knee with affection. "Nice talkin' to ya, your ladyship. Ya don't need any beauty sleep, but I can use ever minute I can get." He rose, stretched, burped, and trotted off to his bed.

Dain and Scudis were helped from the table by Stonehelm. Seeing as how the young dwarf was in some difficulty, Aragorn came over and gently hefted the Iron Hills monarch over his shoulder while Arwen put her arms about Queen Sculdis and lifted her. Boromir looked at Stonehelm with a laugh in his eye and the young dwarf grinned. Boromir stooped and the young dwarf leaped up for a piggyback ride. Chopper trotted after this entourage with great dignity up the stairs.

Ori went to where Dori was standing staring pensively into the fire. Dori looked troubled.
"What is it?" Ori asked.
"According to Mavis XV, she married Gheir because he was the first one who offered when she came of age and, after all, he is the king. She has no craft, and was never one for studies, so her parents said 'yes' because they thought this was the best they could do for her."
"She does make Tilda look worldly," said Ori. "She makes me look worldly!"
"I'll tell you something else. She doesn't want to be married, but she agreed to it because she thinks it's all she's good for."
"What will she do?"
"Go on being married, I imagine, unless something is done. I need to speak to Gheir, right after the coronation."

When all the guests were tucked safely in bed, Gridr, Dis, Jani, Dori and Binni went off to the baths with a xocolatl cake and red wine. Thorin thanked Mistress Dazla and her crew for all their amazing work that evening and told them they had their own free time until mid morning tomorrow.

The Durin males gathered around the kitchen table, eating the rest of the pudding.

Ori sat on Dwalin's lap, alternating feeding a spoonful to Dwalin and taking one for himself.
"We'll never sleep again," said Ori.
"I couldn't sleep anyhow," said Thorin. "I might as well enjoy being awake."
"It's no' even me own coronation an' I'm as jumpy as a pup," said Dain, who, on finding himself being tenderly put to bed, had shaken off his stupor, and come down to the kitchen with Stonehelm in tow. "Worse 'n me weddin' night."

Thorin raised an eyebrow.
"She agreed to marry you, even though she already knew what you looked like. I'd think the rest would just be gravy."
"Hardee har, funny dwarf," said Dain.

Chopper grunted a sleepy agreement at his feet.
Dain shrugged. "Besides, she'd already seen me with me trousers down. If tha' didn't drive her away screamin', nothin' would."
"There's a tradition among some men," said Ori. "that the groom is not allowed to see the bride before the wedding."

"Are they secluded or something?" Kili asked.
"No, they haven't met yet. They meet at the wedding itself."
"Why would you agree to marry someone you'd never met?" Kili asked.

Dain snorted. "Money. Power. Stupidity. If all yer lookin' for is someone t' squeeze out an heir or get filthy rich, y'r no' as picky. With men, it's not always a matter of 'agreein' t' marry. Yer folk say: yeh'll marry this one, and it's fixed."
Kili shook his head.

"It just sounds wrong. I mean, I really like Sigrid, and I think she'll make a brilliant sister, but I wouldn't want her to marry Fi just because Bard said so."

Fili rolled his eyes.

"If he just gives his blessing, I'll be happy. He's already hit me with the shovel talk, the plow talk and just about the catapult talk and I'm still not sure he even thinks it's a good idea."

"He sounded fairly certain to me," said Thorin.

"Did he?" Fili asked.

"Yes, but don't tell him I told you that. I think he's trying to keep you on your toes."

"It's working," Fili grumped. "It's going to be difficult enough paying her the proper attentions during the coronation. I'm not engaged, so I'm pretty much 'fair game' to all those dams looking for husbands. You'd think with the number of dwarrow compared to the number of dams, they'd spread out their search a little, especially considering I look like a badger's rag doll."

Kili said, "I guess a prince is a prince, handsome or not. You do have that 'lucky' hair going for you. And a beard."

"You'd have one, too, if you stopped shaving it off," said Fili.

"Wait a minute," Ori, said, shocked. "Kili, you can grow a beard?"

"Sure I can. It's not as nice as Idad Gloin's, but I'm in the direct line, so I can't expect all that much."

"But... but you shave it off?" Ori was seized in turns by horror and fascination.

"It would get tangled in the bow string," said Kili. "Believe me, Ori-mate, you never want to have your beard ripped off your face in one swift go."

Ori winced.

Thorin said, "But it's a family secret that he shaves it off, Ori. Not that he's terribly good at it."

"I always thought that was part of my charm," said Kili impishly.

"I would never say anything," Ori promised, "but, Kili, all those people saying nasty things about your lack of beard!"

Kili shrugged and gestured with his spoon.

"It's more important to me to be a good archer than to worry about what people say about my beard. I could grow one and wear an archer's mask, but those things are really ugly." He snickered.

"Fi, remember when Idad gave me my first bow?"

"Udad Thror turned purple," said Fili with great satisfaction. He deepened and graveled his voice and put on a sneer, "It's unbecoming for the prince of the House of Durin! I will go and have a majestic sulk!"

Thorin raised his eyebrows.

"You do that really well," he said with a slight laugh in his voice.

"If you hear it every day of your life, it's not that difficult," said Fili.

"I'm sorry I couldn't protect you from that."

"You couldn't protect us from being a blacksmith's sons, which is what Udad Thror thought was wrong with us."

"That seemed to be a trend with him," said Thorin. "He didn't approve of my mother, either."

Dwalin chuckled.

"Only he never said anythin' t' her, prob'ly because she scared th' shit out'v him."

Thorin smiled and shook his head.

"She wasn't exactly nurturing, was she. Remember when I fell and ripped my arm open? Instead of taking me to the healer she staunched and cleaned the wound and stitched it herself."

Fili and Kili looked horrified.

Thorin continued, "She spent the whole time telling me to stop crying and pay attention because she was only going to show me how to do it once. When adad found out they had the first fight I ever actually heard. Then he brought me to see Oin."

Oin snickered.

"I thought th' top o' his head'd pop right off when I told him it was a perfect stitchin' job an' there
was naught f'r me t' do."
"You actually gave me something for the pain," said Thorin.  "Amad wanted me to tough it out."
"How old were you?" Ori asked.
"Fifteen.  I remember because I had just started training with the sword."
"Fifteen?" Stonehelm echoed.
The badgers Dwalin put through their first paces had to be at least twenty, Ori thought.
"Durins start young," said Thorin.
Apparently right after their umbilical cords were cut.
Though, now that Ori thought about it, Nori had begun to teach him how to use his boot knife
around that age.  Not that anyone expected Ori to defend a kingdom, or even Steam Alley.
"Aw," said Kili, "I think we finished the pudding."
"What else is there?" Stonehelm asked, looking hopefully toward the larder.
"I could do us a fry up," said Gimli.
"Hollow legs," said Gloin.
"Aye, an' heads nearly th' same," Dain teased.
A great crash echoed through the sitting room.
All of them were on their feet instantly, fumbling for hammers, axes and swords.
"I secured th' house doors meself," Dwalin growled, already pounding through the sitting room.
At the doorway to the receiving room, he grabbed Ori, shouting, "Down!"
Ori had a vague impression of firewood flying over their heads and then he heard Legolas
screaming in Sindarin.
"Take that back!"
"I'll not take it back!" Aewandínen snarled, "because it's true!  She left because you were such a
disappointment, she couldn’t stand to look at you!"
Gimli growled something that sounded suspiciously like, “Fuck yeh, yeh fuckin’ orc!” and Gloin
grabbed him before the fiery redhead could leap in.
"It’s a family matter, our Gimmers.  We haft’ let it be!”
The brothers grappled, spitting and cursing each other.  The furniture was knocked every which
way.
"No’ t’ worry,” said Bain.  “It’s quite sturdy.”
Aewandínen picked up Legolas and slammed him onto a side table which gave way in a hail of
splinters.
"Usually.”  Balin clicked his tongue.  “And they say we’re hard on furniture!”
Then Thranduil swept down the stairs in his cloak and, oddly, a nightshirt.
Ori had the feeling he’d grabbed the cloak for effect.
Aewandínen screamed, “I lost my mother because you were a nothing of a son!  Now you’re
driving away father, too!”
"What is the meaning of this?" Thranduil thundered.
But the brothers fought on, rolling on the floor, though Aewandínen was stronger and heavier and
Legolas was getting the worst of it.
"Just a mo’, your majesty,” Mistress Dazla appeared in her own robe and pin curlers.  She handed
Thranduil an enormous metal bucket of water.  “This isn’t my first go-round.”
Thranduil took the bucket and emptied it over the combatants.
There were ice chips in the water, which certainly got their attention.
Aewandínen rolled to his feet.  Legolas rose slowly to his knees before climbing the rest of the
way, dazed, his lip split.
Elrond and Lindir appeared at the top of the steps and Elrond quickly took in the scene.
"Is anyone hurt?” he asked.
Thranduil turned and looked like he might bark something caustic, but he abruptly sighed and
said, “If you would look to Legolas, Lord Elrond?  He isn’t as big as Aewandínen and I fear he got
the worst of it."
“He never bothers to train,” snarled Aewandínen, catching his breath.
Thranduil whirled on his eldest son, and he was suddenly ever inch a king. Ori could swear the temperature in the room dropped thirty degrees as Thranduil stalked over to his eldest son, his long, hard hand whipped out and he caught his heir by the face and slammed him against the wall.

Aewandínen’s eyes bulged, but he wisely did not struggle as Thranduil hissed in his face.

“If you ever say such a thing to your brother again, I don’t care if you are my son, I will gut you and throw you to the orcs. Do. You. Understand?”

Thranduil’s grip made speech impossible, but Aewandínen could still nod his head a little, which was, apparently, enough.

“Get out of my sight,” Thranduil growled and shoved Aewandínen toward the stairs, which the prince wasted no time in scaling.

The dwarrow came into the room and, giving Thranduil space to talk to his son, set the furniture to rights.

Thranduil turned to Legolas who sat, damp and forlorn, on one of the couches, hands clasped on his knees. Elrond stood next to him with a hand on Legolas’s shoulder, surrounded by a faint, blue glow. Ori thought Elrond might be channeling healing energy.

Thranduil knelt before his son, his anger evaporating. In Sindarin he asked, “My leaf, are you all right?”

Legolas answer the question with a question in weston. “Father, is it true? Did Mother leave because of me?”

Thranduil swallowed and looked up at Elrond, who nodded. “No, my son. She and Lord Elrond’s wife fell in love and left together for the Undying Lands. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Legolas looked up at Lord Elrond in horror. “I’m so sorry, milord.”

Elrond sighed. “It’s just as well this comes out now. They loved each other all their lives, but they were nobles, so they did their duties, raised their children, and waited long years to be together. It has nothing to do with you or me or your father or anyone else. There, the truth is told. Let it rest.”

Thranduil nodded and agreed. “Let it rest.” Then his put a hand on Legolas’ face and asked, “Have you spent all this time thinking you were to blame?”

Legolas fell into his arms and wept. The Durins looked at each other. Dwalin sighed and shook his head. “Lemme go, Da,” said Gimli plaintively.

“I am so sorry,” said Thranduil, rocking Legolas as though he were still a fawn. “In my arrogance and my anger, I never spoke of it. My silence has hurt you deeply.”

In time, Legolas drew back, red-faced and disheveled. Gimli came over and plopped himself down next to Legolas and took a handkerchief, which Ori was surprised he owned, and wiped Legolas’ face. “Now then, laddie. Yeh see, it’s all right.” He put the cloth to Legolas’ nose. “Blow,” he instructed. Legolas stared at him, mystified, and blew a breath out of his pursed lips. Gimli rolled his eyes. “No’ tha’ way, yeh great, silly elf. Blow yer nose.” “Oh.”

“Aye, yer funny. Here.” Gimli pulled a bun out of his pocket and shoved it at him. Legolas took it, brows raised, brush off the pocket lint and ate the bun, washed down with a glass of water brought by Mistress Dazla.

“Now, off t’ bed with yeh,” said Gimli, getting to his feet. Thranduil looked amused.

“Are you saying my presence is no longer required, Master Dwarf?”

“I’m no’ sayin’ nothin’ o’ th’ kind, but I’d like some sleep myself.” Gridr, in the doorway in her dressing gown, sighed.

“Take him back t’ yer room, our Gimmers. I doubt there’ll be much more bouncin’ around t’night. An’ yeh make sure his hair’s dry or he’ll catch a chill.”

Thranduil raised an eyebrow and Gloin opened his mouth, but Gridr stood with her hands on her hips and glared at each of them in turn.

“Right, me dear,” said Gloin.

“As you say, milady,” said Thranduil.

Gimli rose and offered his hand to Legolas, who took it.

“Let’s go, amrâlimê,” said Gimli. “Time f’r all good li’l elflin’ s t’ be in bed.”

“Are you going to read me a bedtime story?” Legolas teased.

“I’ll give yeh a story,” Gimli grumped.

Thranduil and Elrond went back up the stairs. Dis, Jani, Dori, and Binni came in after Gridr. They looked questioningly about the room and were told quietly what had happened.

On the promise of tea, they all went back to the kitchen. Dori had just put the pot on then there was another loud noise from the receiving room. Dwalin went out, rolling his sleeves up as he went. They heard him yank open the door then bark a laugh.

“An’ here we though’ yeh lot were off consummatin’ with others.”

They heard the bolt shot back into place and, into the kitchen came Nori, Bofur, and Granny Klak disgracefully late and even more disgracefully drunk.

“Granny!” Dori cried. “Are you alright?”

Granny Klak reeled in his direction, laughing, “Ooooh, don’t worry, my darlings, we’re fine! The night watch caught us.” She turned to Dwalin and shook her finger at him. “They let us go as I told them I was your great granny-in-law.”

Dwalin face-palmed as Thorin burst out laughing. Ori wanted to crawl under the table. Dori grabbed Nori by the ear, making him yelp.

“You got my great grandmother in trouble!”

“Our great grandmother didn’t need any help!” Nori yelled and pointed at Klakuna. She reeled around once more and beamed at Dori then leaned in to pinch his cheek and got a nostril by mistake.

“Nonono, darling Dori, we met in the courtyard and then we went to this lo-o-o-ovey pub-bec-pub-pub and there was such a cha-a-a-armin’ dwarf behind the bar and Ooof!” Granny Klak cupped her hands around what looked like a nice trim dwarf male’s buttocks.

“How was I to know his wife didn’t share?” she asked, pouting. “Now, don’t you worry, my loves, I told them to send us the bill for the damages.”

Bombur appeared in the kitchen door in a soft orange nightshirt embroidered with spoons, forks and ladles. He shook his head and, taking Bofur’s collar in one hand and Nori’s in the other, marched the two off to bed. Balin and Dori assisted by Dis and Jani, shooed Granny Klak off to hers.

Ori yawned and bumped his head against Dwalin’s shirtfront.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Yes, this is it! This is the chapter Thorin will be crowned. Let the festivities begin!! You may want to get snacks etc., as this is a long chapter. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The sunshine through the bedroom window woke Ori. He was pillowed across Dwalin, who was lying back with a book in his hand. He looked up when Ori shifted to kiss him.

“Why did Dori let us sleep so late?” Ori asked.
“Everyone go’ t’ bed late.”
“I take it there weren’t any more fights, then?”
“Nah.” Dwalin chuckled and reached over to the bedside table. “Tea?”
“Yes, please,” Ori said gratefully.

They drank their tea in blissful peace. Ori leaned against Dwalin’s shoulder as Dwalin’s arm was about his waist. This was lovely. The quiet of the room was only disturbed by the sounds of Kihshassa hunting up Nori-Pori and Mask and giving both a thorough wash.

Garnet flew in the window, perched on the footboard, preened then croaked, “Today’s the day.”
“Yes, “ Ori agreed. “It’s amazing to think about.”
“An’ abou’ bloody time a’ tha’,” Dwalin agreed.
“Everyone in the Dale is running around,” Garnet went on. “You’d think they were rabbits with hawks on their tails.”

Ori and Dwalin laughed at that.
“Have you seen Fanny today?” Ori asked.
Garnet cocked her head and Ori rather thought she was amused.

“Your oliphaunt spent yesterday wandering the Dale, being fed fruits and vegetables by everyone, and snored the night away in the long grass next to main gate.”
“Oh good,” Ori said. “I’m glad she’s alright.”
“Dori’s setting up breakfast for the family in the breakfast parlor,” Garnet added.
“Anythin’ else?” Dwalin asked.
“We’ve all been checking around the city and Dale. Nori’s been looking around as well.”
“Rumors?” Dwalin rumbled.
“Other than some ladies worrying they may see another wearing the same dress?”
“Aye, besides tha’.”

“Everyone’s talking about whether or not the throne room has been covered in mirrors or if Thorin will, after he’s crowned, immediately marry Lady Galadriel.”
Both Ori and Dwalin burst out laughing.
“Poor Celeborn,” Ori teased. “Whatever will he do?”
“Apparently,” Garnet said reflectively, “he’s going to be a concubine to Queen Hild.”
Dwalin and Ori laughed again. Dwalin gave Ori a squeeze.
“Guess we be’er go an’ make ’n appearance a’ breakfast.”
“Yes,” Ori agreed and clambered over Dwalin and shrieked when he was tickled. “Come on, I’m hungry.”
Ori felt almost defiant as he pulled an old cardigan over his nightshirt. There was no use getting dressed just yet. They were all going to have to wash and put on their finery soon anyway. Dwalin, clad only in his scabby old pink drawers, picked up the tea tray and they headed to the breakfast parlor. Nori-Pori and Mask skittered after them and Kihshassa swooped along the hall with Garnet.

In the breakfast parlor, the doors were propped open to the meadow and a lovely cool breeze blew through.

Dori and Balin, in fabulous matching dressing gowns, presided. Powder presided over Dori’s plate.

“There you are, pet, our deary,” Dori cooed. “Come and have some coffee.”

Ori presented himself, kissed both Dori and Balin, and was given a large mug of fragrant coffee liberally graced with sugar and milk. On his way to his seat, Ori looked out over the meadow dotted with the grazing animals and rampant with flowers and realized there was a large rock in the middle of the space that hadn’t been there the day before. Then the rock shifted slightly and he recognized it.

“Dori, Beorn is here.”

“Where, pet?”

“He’s asleep in the meadow with the ponies.”

“Well you can go wake him in a little while, but be careful, pet. He might be a total ‘bear’ in the morning.”

“Dori! That was terrible!”

“Wasn’t it, though?” Dori practically sang. “I’ll be sure to bring out the big teapot and have a cuppa with him. There’s a porridge of oats, fruit and nuts on the stove. He’ll like that. He certainly won’t want what we’re eating.”

“Is it just us today?” Ori asked.

“The guests are having trays brought up to their rooms, pet,” said Dori as Mistress Dazla and her minions brought out platters of delicious smelling food. “They’ll want to sleep in, too, and have time to pretty themselves up at leisure.”

“Wonder wha’ Hild won’t wear t’day?” Dwalin said dryly, making Ori giggle and Dori frown. Balin was torn between the two.

Thorin came in, stretching and yawning, wearing nothing but a pair of pajama bottoms. He grinned at Dwalin. Dwalin grinned back and went to him.

“My king,” Dwalin said simply. They embraced and held each other for a moment. Ori’s heart melted at the sight. They released each other but stayed, brows resting together briefly. Then Thorin came to Ori and enveloped him in a hug. Ori tried to say something but only choked. Thorin squeezed him and ruffled his hair before putting him back into Dwalin’s arms. Thorin turned, Balin and Dori were there to salute him as king and greet him lovingly. Thorin dropped in his chair and Dori made up Thorin’s portion and put it down before him with a pat on the hand.

Thorin gaped at his overflowing plate.

“Steak and eggs, Dori?”

“You need to fortify yourself.”

“Isn’t it bad luck to eat anything bigger than your head?” Thorin asked.

“It’s your coronation day, dear. Today, nothing is bigger than your head.”

“I hope the crown still fits,” Thorin muttered.


“Like a pill on an oliphaunt’s bum,” Dwalin helped, making Ori giggle.

“Fuck you, Dwalin,” Thorin said with a smile.

Dis and Jani came in greeting everyone, pausing to hug Thorin as he tried to eat and before he could get out of his chair to greet them properly. Fili, Sigrid, Kili, and Tauriel arrived on their heels. Thorin managed to get out of his chair to embrace his nephews, an arm about each.

“This is the best day ever!” Kili shouted eagerly, making his uncle laugh. The boys stepped back and both said, “My king,” bowing in perfect unison. Ori wondered if they practiced or things like this just happened with them. He suspected the latter.
Sigrid hugged Thorin, too. He kissed her forehead and told her she was a bonny lass, making her blush. Tauriel came forward, bowed, and greeted him in Sindarin, “Hail, mighty king of all dwarrow.”

Thorin acknowledged this then held out his arms to embrace her. She leaned down to hug him and he kissed her forehead as he had Sigrid and said, “I’m glad you are here, Captain Tauriel.”

“Come and eat,” Dori commanded.

The households of In and Ur arrived and greetings were exchanged again and, again, Thorin was saluted as king. Legolas was with them, looking much improved, rested, and holding hands with Gimli. Gridr bossed them to chairs and settled them with food, fondly kissing the tops of both heads. Gloin looked quite satisfied with the arrangement now. Binni was delighted and Oin placid. Loli, Omi, Randi, and Buj settled themselves near Ori, helping themselves to food as Dori ordered.

Thranduil arrived and came forward immediately to greet Thorin. They bowed formally to each other then embraced somewhat awkwardly, chuckling as they did.

“You have many things to be proud of, King Thorin,” Thranduil said as he went to greet Dori with a kiss and a hand on Balin’s shoulder.

“I hope that counting you as an ally and good neighbor may be one of them,” Thorin responded easily.

Thranduil smiled and inclined his head.

“I rather think that was set in stone the day I arrived at the inn,” Thranduil commented as he nodded to Bombur and Erda. “Strange dwarven enchantments seem to linger there. Very dangerous.”

“Always cook love into the food,” Erda said with a smile. “Amazing results appear.”

Thranduil chuckled. He briefly rested his fingers on Tauriel’s shoulder then on Kili’s. When he got to Legolas, he bent and laid his hand over Legolas’ heart. Legolas leaned against his father’s arm.

“Ada,” he murmured.

“My little fawn,” Thranduil said softly. He patted Gimli’s hair, then seated himself on Legolas’ other side.

Bard came in next, followed by Bain and Tilda. Bard looked about, saw Sigrid sitting next to Fili and gave her a filthy look. She deigned to notice, but tossed her hair and went on eating, refilling Fili’s coffee cup as she did. Bain was in wide-eyed curiosity, as he had never seen such defiance in his sister or such impotent rage in his father. Tilda was gleefully unconscious of all enmity. Bard greeted everyone politely and shook Thorin’s hand, offering congratulations. Bain followed suit and Tilda happily hugged Thorin, then everyone else.

Bard seated himself next to Thranduil and muttered darkly. Thranduil twitched his face away from amusement to gentle concern.

The meal progressed and Ori glanced around.

“It’s so quiet with just the family at table!” Ori said, watching as Kili cut the yolks out of two eggs and looked through the whites at Tauriel, making her chuckle.

Thorin looked about the table. “Yes, but not really surprising since your eldest brother hasn’t arrived yet.”

The sitting room door crashed and they all heard Dain bellowing ‘good mornings’ to Mistress Dazla and her minions.

“Well, you can kiss your quiet away now, Ori,” Sigrid giggled.

Ori snickered.

“Not to worry. It was so fleeting, I doubt I’ll miss it.”

This amused the table and Thranduil cocked his head at Ori.

“Are we being complimented or maligned? I shall remain silent while presented with such uncertain ground.”

Dain exploded in and launched himself on Thorin, nearly knocking the pair of them sprawling across the table top.

“Yer king t’day, laddie. Yer gonna be th’ bloody High King a’ Dwarrow. This’s bloody
brilliant!" Dain enthused. Once he released Thorin, Sculdis took her turn, hugging Thorin so hard, she nearly lifted him off his feet.

Thorin laughed, turned and greeted Stonehelm with a hug as well. Dori told Dain to sit and eat. Whereupon Dain plowed over to Dori, picked them up out of their chair and treated them to a bear hug with a good deal of shaking involved. Dori squawked and, having no other weapon handy, began ineffectually smacking Dain’s head with a teaspoon.

Dori oversaw the Iron Hills family settled and eating, then rose as Mistress Dazla arrived with a tray loaded with a teapot, a cup, a tankard of new milk, a serving bowl filled with hot porridge, a bowl of cream, and a platter of toasted bread with pots of honey and plum jam on the side. Dori withdrew to the meadow, delighting in wishing good morning to Beorn, who sat up, blinking, and inviting the skin-changer to breakfast. On seeing Dori, Beorn smiled and shambled over to sit on the patio paving stones.

Ori sighed. It was amazing that, in his element, Dori swept dwarrows, men, elves, and skin changers off their feet. With perfect grace, Dori seated themselves down on the brightly colored cloth Mistress Dazla placed over the paving stones and set the tray by Dori. Dori chatted pleasantly while Beorn ate, listening happily.

Ori, now of an elegant sufficiency, as Dori called it, looked about and allowed his brain to move towards practicalities of the day.

“When should we start getting ready, do you think?” Ori asked Thorin, who had also finished except for enjoying a cup of tea. “I have to meet with the other scribes before the ceremony, but only for a moment.”

“We have time,” said Thorin. “I have to go to the tombs after breakfast to leave the offerings, but that won’t take very long either.”

“We’ll go get dressed,” said Dwalin.

It was a very small party of mourners. Unlike a king's funeral, this was a more personal devotion, and far less formal. In the end, only Dwalin, Ori, Fili and Kili accompanied Thorin to the tombs, the guard detail following at a discreet distance.

"Are you expecting trouble?" Ori asked.

"Just a precaution," said Dwalin. “I know wha’ Garnet said, bu’ beloved king or no', if anyone wanted t' make a statement, killin' Thorin on his coronation day'd do it.”

Ori shivered.

The monuments lay deep in the mountain, below the forges, close to the mourning chamber. The party rode to the central lifts, then left their ponies with a guard. Once again Ori felt his stomach rise to his throat with the speed of their descent.

He had never been to the royal tombs, though he understood the layout was an orderly wheel of monuments, radiating in spokes from a great, central anvil and hammer of obsidian. He expected a dim, damp and rather sinister dungeon, with giant warrior statues, weapons at the ready, looming out of the shadows.

When the doors opened he realized he had read too many novels.

These were dwarrows, after all.

Every tomb was carved from a single block of alabaster marble. Each massive, oblong sepulcher differed in decoration, but each sat atop a bier surrounded by statues of armed warriors on permanent honor detail. Only the lids of the sepulchers were individual, some of different stone, or inlaid with mica and polished pyrite so they shone in the copious light that made the miraculous, long journey from the surface.

As they passed each tomb, Ori had to force himself not to stop and sketch it.

The only unnerving thing about the place was the ready stares of the stone warriors guarding each bier, perfect down to the folds of cloth and buckles on the armor.

"Each is carved from th' likeness of a guard who was servin' a' th' time, or o' family members," said Dwalin.

"Are you in here?"
Dwalin gave a soft laugh.
"Six times at last count. Yeh kin tell th' age a' th' tomb by how much hair I have left."

Thror's tomb, the most recent, was ringed with people Ori knew: Targ and Furh’nk among them. Even Frerin was represented.

"Tha's me mam an' da on either side o' Frerin," said Dwalin. "Thror asked 'em t' be there, since me da was his personal guard. They grew up t'gether."

"How did they manage all this since he died? This is unbelievably detailed," Ori asked.

"Th' figures're 'sketched in' when th' tombs being carved. Somethin' like this takes years. They've been workin' on Thorin's f'r a good fifty years already."

Thror's tomb was empty, Ori knew, except for the late king's second best armor and sword, the best having gone with him into the chasm.

But they didn't stop at Thror's tomb, as would have been traditional, but went to Thrain's instead. This tomb was empty as well, save for Thrain's second best armor and the pieces of his shattered sword, the only thing that Thorin had been able to carry back from Dimrill Dale. The warriors were all people Ori knew. He saw Dwalin immediately, as he must have looked before Ori was born, painfully young, with a great coxcomb of hair on his head. Ori bit his lip and turned his face into the real Dwalin's beard.

Dwalin stroked his hair.
"It's a'right, love."

"It's so sad."

"It's just hair, love."

Ori pulled back and stared at him. Dwalin winked.
"I know," said the warrior. "I'm a shithead."

"My shithead," Ori murmured, smiling up at him.

As they walked around the end of the tomb, they came to the figure of Thrain himself, not armed, but holding out a large tray. The tray was darkened in spots, with soot, and held offerings of polished stones to denote visitors. Kili brought a stone bowl filled with copal chunks, the incense the dwarrow had favored since it first came from the east about two hundred years before. He placed it on the stone and lit the incense, saying the offering prayer under his breath. Fili opened the box he had been carrying and pulled out a stunning metal wreath.

"That's beautiful," Ori breathed. "Thorin, did you make this?"

"Fili made it," said Thorin with a proud smile for his heir. "And I can't imagine anything finer."

Fili dipped his head, abashed.
"Thank you, Idad."

Every offering wreath was different. This one was quite eclectic, with a central open circle of interlocking, multi-rayed stars, radiating out to a ring of ravens, and each ravens held in its beak a small, many-spiked twig. Ori vaguely recalled seeing that twig shape somewhere, but couldn't place it. The whole wreath was fabricated out of varying tones of gold, and every flat surface was chased with geometric designs. It was quite substantial, though it was only about fifteen inches across.

"What are those bits in the raven's mouths?" Ori asked.

"Sprigs of rosemary, dipped in liquid gold," Fili replied. "Bilbo told me rosemary means 'remembrance'. When hobbits go back into the ground, mourners drop rosemary into the grave before it's filled in. It sounded like such a pretty custom, so I just 'dwarrowfied' it to make the sprigs permanent."

He handed the wreath to Thorin, who placed it so the incense-filled bowl sat in the middle of the opening. The smoke would eventually stop, the fire burn itself out, but the bowl and wreath would stay and the bowl be used again, whenever someone visited.

Thorin stood a moment longer, then laid his hand on the tomb and whispered something, then he stood back and turned to them, smiling.

"Let's go. It's time to put on funny clothes and act royal."

Ori and Dwalin bathed together and washed each other's hair. Ori sighed and reflected they could
have had quite a lovely time if they weren’t on a schedule and both their heads weren’t full of duties. Dwalin chuckled him under the chin.

“Soon, love.”

“I know. How busy it is, being royal.”

Dwalin laughed.

“Aye, c’mon, I’ve got t’ get me soldiers in place an’ yer hair needs doin’.”

In the bedroom, both still naked, Dwalin lovingly put Ori’s hair in order and wove in all his braids with the bead and cuff boxes laid out on the dresser. Ori returned the favor and they took a moment to admire each other.

There was a knock and Dwalin sighed.

“Ready?”

“Yes. I love you.”

“Love yeh, too.” Dwalin smiled, kissed him, and headed to the bed to put his underwear on, calling, “C’mon in.”

Dipfa and Agrib entered. Agrib went forward and assisted Dwalin into his dress uniform. Dipfa looked Ori’s hair over, sighed rapturously, and went to the other side of the bed which had layers of white dust cloths on it. Under the first were the screaming blue underpinnings.

Ori walked gingerly out to the sitting room. Dipfa had shown him all the pockets in the scribe’s robe and helped him organize his tools, so they would be ready. Gridr had made him his own little waist desk as well. It was the same model as hers but she added in the things Ori had told her about. His desk was of a pale birch wood and the metals were of silver and decorated with emeralds. Ori admired it, as he strapped it into place, but he was nervous.

Omi and Loli came in and squealed with delight at the sight of him. They were in the scribe robes of the same cut as Ori’s except, where his had a plum hood, theirs were gray and had only one sliver strand ending in a star.

Mistress Dazla ushered into the sitting room Master Sadi, Master Kacuho, Master Nodun, and Miss Pafwi, who was substituting for Buj. Master Sadi crossed to Ori’s side. She bowed and smiled mistily at him.

“You look perfect, First Chair.”

“Thank you. I know we’ve discussed this at length and planned everything, but I’m still nervous.” Master Sadi laughed.

“Honestly, so am I. I was only an apprentice at Thror’s coronation and instructed not to dare put anything to paper as I was too untrained to notice such.”

Ori felt his brain focus.

“It is not to be that way this time. This is Thorin’s coronation. Any scribe may make notes or drawings and submit them.”

Master Sadi turned and flashed a look at Master Nodun and Master Kacuho. Both spoke to their ravens, who were gone immediately.

“Podvu will see to it,” Master Sadi assured Ori.

“Thank you,” said Ori. “This is a sight for all of us and the more eyes focused on it, the better the historical record.”

Loli, Omi and Pafwi beamed at him. Master Nodun was delighted and Master Kacuho had to apply his handkerchief to his eyes.

“I knew you were the right choice for First Chair,” Master Sadi grinned. “Shall we be on own way, First Chair?”

Despite feeling like he had transformed into a piece of furniture every time Master Sadi addressed him, Ori nodded and all headed out to the courtyard where Gibi held their ponies ready.

The main gate was wide to the day and banners for the coronation hung everywhere. Durin blue and silver bunting festooned the walls and statues. Ori entered the throne room and gaped. It was already packed with almost every dwarf and resident of Dale and the mountain. The furniture Binni
had lovingly created was covered with elders and any with pains. There were several stools in the
front for those who were hard of hearing and every dwarving and manchild was seated on the floor in
the front so they would be able to see.

Ori caught sight of Mistress Dazla and her team hurrying about. He decided she must know a
secret passage there, as she had been in the house when he and the scribes left it.

In the vestibule, Master Podvu handed out boxes of pens, bottles of ink, graphite pens, and
notebooks to every scribe in the guild and sent them all over to watch, take notes and sketch. Ori
went and thanked her. She grinned hugely at him and continued her frantic work. It was obvious
she was loving every minute of it.

Master Sadi came to him.
“Ready, First Chair?”

“As I’ll ever be,” he replied. His heart was pounding, his nerves had vanished, and he only felt
pure excitement. It was happening. Thorin was going to be crowned High King of All Dwarrow. It
was happening right now.

He turned and nodded to his group. They formed up behind him as they had practiced. Master
Sadi followed Ori. Behind her were Kacuho and Pafwi, then Omi, Loli and Nodun.

Master Brur stood at the entry way to do the announcements. Ori blinked. Brur looked very
bright as he was dressed in silk orange robes with citrine.

“Master Brur, you look… well,” Ori greeted him.

Brur snorted.

“It’s all Sadi’s fault.”

Master Sadi turned to him with a cool, dubious look.

“A’right,” said Brur, “it’s me own fault. Happy?”

“We’ll see,” said Master Sadi.

“What happened?” Ori asked.

“I promised t’ wear clean robes with no ink on ‘em an’ she promised t’ f’rgive me no’ tellin’ her I
still had copies a’ th’ scribes’ guide.”

“Eventually,” said Sadi.

Ori looked around once more and there, in the back corner, sitting on her haunches, was Fanny.
She wore a jaunty cap on her head that sported three tall, bright pink feathers on the top and tied with
pink ribbons under her chin. Ori giggled in spite of himself. Thorin would be crowned with an
oliphaunt present. Fanny was looking all about. She was quite intrigued by the cavern and all the
goings on around her. She turned her head and saw Ori. Ori instinctively waved to her. Fanny,
good oliphaunt that she was, didn’t move. She did however widen her eyes in joy and open her
mouth. Her trunk raised, straightened, and the most impressive trumpet blast Ori had ever heard
came out of her. The room was dead silent in an instant.

Ori blinked and after a quick glance behind him and seeing Master Sadi’s nod, Ori led the way to
the dais. It was a very long way to the dais, Ori felt. His velvets whispered around him and his
boots were deliciously comfortable. He enjoyed the feel of his heavy beads and braids, and the gems
from his ear cuffs sparkled in the corner of his eyes, the chains swinging with every step. He felt the
reassuring weight of the tassel of his hood, which was down around his shoulders. All the other
scribes wore their hoods up, but there were privileges as well as burdens to his position. He giggled
to himself. Apparently, showing off his ear jewelry was a perk of his job.

People turned and craned all around to look at the party of royal scribes arriving.

Ori processed to the dais, very glad they had worked out their placement ahead of time. The main
level, three feet above the floor, stretched from one side of the hall to the other at the back, but
narrowed to the center front to about half that width, with steps at every angle, flowing up from the
floor and sometimes converging along their edges. The front edges of the dais were bejeweled
facing the audience. Facing the throne, they were covered in angled mirrors. This gave Ori and Sadi
- and the king when enthroned - a chance to easily watch all the events form both sides. Where the
stairs met, about halfway up the side of the dais, the meeting places created miniature platforms
where Dwalin posted guards, handy and secure, but also out of the line of officials climbing and
descending the dais. Even with a second platform for the throne, two feet above this, it left a lot of territory for the scribes to cover.

Nodun stopped about ten feet from the main dais and signaled to someone in the gallery. The artist’s chair was winched down on its sturdy chain to land gracefully before her. Nodun detached the desk from the seat, seated herself, fastened the lap belt and attached the desk to the arms. She waved again and was winched upward for the perfect overhead view.

Loli and Omi stayed on the ground floor, at the front and center of the dais, to either edge of the red carpet which ran the length of the hall.

Kacuho went to the front furthest side of the main dais on the left and Pafwi opposite him on the right.

Ori and Master Sadi stood beside the steps to the throne itself, Sadi standing to the left, while Ori went to the right, giving them raven’s eye views of all that happened from the throne all the way back to the door and along each side of the hall and into the galleries.

He had been concerned about Master Sadi climbing all those steps with her cane, and he even asked if she wouldn't prefer to be in the artist’s chair and let Kacuho or Pafwi take the left of the throne. Master Sadi stared him down like a hawk over a field mouse and he never mentioned it again.

When he was finally settled, he looked down and each scribe gave him a smile to signal their readiness. He saw Master Podvu had also posted at least two scribes in every gallery. He was so pleased. He knew she would know exactly where to place them. Ori saw many other scribes scattered through the crowd, marked by their distinctive hoods.

The trumpets played their volley.

Theoden, Theodred and three of their guard, entered the main gate on horseback. They dismounted at the entrance to the main hall. Brur standing at the doorway, bellowed their entry.

“All hail Theoden, King of Rohan, and his son and heir Theodred, Prince of Rohan.”

The crowd applauded and stared at them with great interest. Theoden nodded, smiled, and waved, every inch the seasoned, well-liked king as they processed up to the dais. They were followed by eight guards, the first of whom carried the standard of Rohan, which was a simple field of dark green with a stylized white horse.

All the children and badgers gaped at them. Theoden had a wonderful time waving to a few and patting the heads of those closest. His guards seemed to find the whole thing hilarious, their lips quivering as they climbed to the main dais and took their place upon the far left side of it, just short of Kacuho and a bit to the rear of him.

Theoden had looked a little askance at the arrangement, until Thorin explained that Kacuho needed to draw the front of them, not their backs.

Master Dubb brought the standard of Rohan up to stand behind the throne.

A moment or two passed then the trumpets sounded again and Brur’s voice boomed.

“All hail King Elessar of Gondor and his bride-to-be the Lady Arwen Undómiel, Daughter of Lord Elrond of Imladris, and they are accompanied by Captain Boromir, Royal Guard of Gondor.”

Aragorn rested one hand on Andúril, the other arm slightly extended for Arwen to place her hand as they paraded up the aisle.

Aragorn was dressed in light armor with a red velvet cloak swinging from his shoulders. The crown was a wrought plain band of gold with tall stylized feathers and the white tree at the front. Like Theoden, he had the air of a good, friendly king.

Arwen was in the palest green gown like the newest leaves on a birch. Her sleeves were pale green gauze tight to the elbows, then falling to great bells. The neck was a wide scoop with a tiny thread of glittering silver bordering it. Her hair was loose and waved. On her brow was the emblem of the star of the evening held with strands of silver about her head. Many long silver threads fell from it, weaving into her dark hair. Ori realized that her title of ‘The Evenstar’ was appropriate.

Captain Boromir followed them. He was also in light, golden armor, the great horn about his neck, his red velvet cloak matching his king’s and he was grinning from ear to ear. In his other hand, he carried the standard of Gondor, a great black flag with the silver of the White Tree of Minas Tirith.
shining on it. As they drew near, Arwen glanced up. She obviously saw Nodun’s chair but other than a brief look of confusion she continued to process with Aragorn.

They arrived at the dais and took their place upon the right side of it, nearest Pafwi and opposite Theoden. Ori glanced over at Arwen. Aragorn and Boromir were leaning slightly, probably listening to whatever she was telling them as Boromir handed off their standard to Dubb. Arwen glanced upward again. Both men glanced up discreetly as well. Arwen spoke quietly to Master Dubb, who grinned and Ori saw him mouth the word ‘scribe’.

Ori looked up and nodded to Nodun. Covered by his desk, he signed to Nodun in iglishmêk to show her sketch pad to the Gondorians. Nodun looked amused and peered over at the confused royals. All three looked up at her. She turned her large pad which had the beginnings of a sketch of the dais.

Ori tried not to giggle as the realization came to the three and then they nodded to each other, seeming impressed with the idea. Aragorn caught Theoden’s eye and nodded upward. The king of the horse nation tried to turn and glance up subtly, but his eyes widened as Nodun once more showed her sketch pad. Ori could tell she was giggling by now.

The trumpets sounded again and Fanny joined in.

“All hail Lord Elrond Peredhil of Imladris, his sons, Elladan and Elrohir, Master Lindir, and Lord Glorfindel,” bawled Brur.

Ori watched as Lord Elrond walked forward, looking pleased and a little amused. He wore long robe of purple on purple brocade with matching trousers beneath and black boots, over all was a long sleeveless gold vest. On his brow was a band made of twisted gold strands and at his throat was a similar gold brooch, the strands forming the emblem of the River Bruinen.

Elladan and Elrohir were dressed similarly to their father, but their robes were plain silver except for where the cuffs of the long sleeves folded back and showed silvery blue patterned linings. They were thoroughly enjoying themselves and looking around with great interest. Lindir, dressed in burgundy velvets, followed his lords, serenely bearing the standard of Rivendell, a blue field with the emblem of the evening star. Glorfindel swaggered after, clad in gold armor with a great sky blue cloak, his ornate golden helmet in his left arm. He grinned at everyone and waved to any and all.

When they reached the dais, Glorfindel stopped, looking up.

“Madame?” he called in a booming voice. “What are you doing up there?”

“Sketching the ceremony,” Nodun shouted back.

“Excellent!” Glorfindel approved loudly and followed Elrond, now looking tired, to their place beside Theoden who nudged Elrond and snickered. Elladan and Elrohir were intrigue by the sight of the highly placed artist.

Lindir attempted to hand Dubb his standard, but Glorfindel took it and told Dubb not to worry about it. Glorfindel held the pole of the standard point-first like a spear and it sailed over the throne to thunk perfectly in place in its stand.

Vi and Margr cheered, Elrohir and Elladan cheered. Lindir looked sick and Elrond closed his eyes tightly and sighed.

The trumpets and Fanny sounded.

“All hail Lady Galadriel of Lorien,” roared Brur. “And her husband Lord Celeborn.”

Ori stared. Lady Galadriel had forgone her usual white for a wreath of red roses in her hair and a long trailing gown of diaphanous blue with red roses on the bodice. She shifted up the aisle, smiling graciously on all. Celeborn was in white as usual and looked a trifle flummoxed by the sight of the oliphaunt sitting in the far corner. Haldir followed them carrying the flag of Lorien, a field of spring green scattered with golden leaves.

They went to stand beside the Gondorians.

Haldir held out his standard to Dubb, who muttered, "O' course, m'lord, unless yeh'd like t' try tossin' it?"

"I'll pass, thank you," said Haldir dryly.

The trumpets gave a double blast with Fanny’s help and Brur bellowed.

“All hail His Majesty, King Bard of the Dale, his daughter, Crown Princess Sigrid, his son, Prince
Bain and his daughter, Princess Tilda. With them, His Majesty, King Thranduil of Erys Lasgalen, his sons, Prince Aewandinen and Prince Legolas, accompanied by Lady Tauriel, captain of King Thranduil’s guard.”

Bard and Thranduil appeared together, each followed by their offspring.

Bard wore a long, buckskin coat with brass buttons and a green suede collar and cuffs, and boots to match. Even his facial hair was spiffed up for the occasion, but Ori thought that, except for his gold earring, he was otherwise unadorned. Then the light caught the flash of metal on Bard’s finger.

When Thranduil appeared, the other elves all stared with huge eyes before quickly reassembling their usual calm expressions. Thranduil’s crown was plain enough, his raiment simple and understated, all the better to show off the necklace of starlight gems that fell down from his throat and over his shoulders and chest like a shiny collar. It seemed to Ori that Thranduil had altered his eye color to match.

Sigrid was radiant in a Durin blue floor-length underdress with elbow-length sleeves trimmed with gold and a rounded neckline, also trimmed with gold, and a sleeveless gold overdress that was open on top and closed just under the breasts. The overdress was trimmed brown silk cord and opened to flair out over her underdress. Her shoes were gold with tiny bows.

Bain, dressed like his father, was clean, his hair brushed, and his face told everyone he wanted to be somewhere else. He certainly didn’t seem to enjoy the attention as his father’s standard bearer. It was a very simple design, just a black arrow on a white field with a black border. Bain appeared to be hiding behind it, to no avail.

Tilda appeared in a golden brown dress with an orange pinafore and deep plum boots with her boot knife. Tilda’s braids, far more ornate than the two she generally wore, were threaded with ribbons of plum and threads of gold. She swanned down the aisle with her chin up, very much aware she was being watched by everyone in two cities and liking it.

Aewandinen, in silver, looked as though he’d rather be back in the forest. Legolas and Tauriel wore their uniforms. Tauriel carried the flag of the Greenwood, a field of spring green with a circle of silver leaves above a silver stag.

Margr and Vi, standing in a prime spot, on the aisle behind the children, squealed and clapped. “Ooooo, it’s jus’ like a weddin’!” Margr cried.

“Ooooo, and King Thranduil all in white! An’ them twigs and sparkles! Yeh cleaned up well, dear!”

Thranduil smiled sweetly and bowed. “Thank you, my dears, as did you!”

Margr and Vi roared with laughter and elbowed each other. “Such cheek!” Margr gasped.

“You both look lovely,” Thranduil asserted, his eye alight with humor.

“Don’t encourage them,” said Bard wearily.

“Oh, and King Bard! Very nice! Very smart, indeed.”

Brur, at the door, cleared his throat as if he were coughing up a lung.

“To continue,” he boomed.

Thranduil chuckled and he and Bard stepped up on the dais, Bard and his family just to the right of the steps and Thranduil and his sons just to the left of them. Bain looked very happy to surrender his burden to Master Dubb.

“All hail the House of In and the House of Ur,” Brur boomed

Oin came first with Binni on his arm. Ori was impressed. Binni was barefoot and wore a diaphanous scarlet robe, with nothing underneath. Clusters of rubies ostensibly obscured his bosom and crotch, but actually highlighted them. His hair was pulled back into one long, loose coil that spilled to the ground, the mithril tresses dotted with rubies. His finger and toenails were encrusted with opals surrounding solitaire rubies. Oin, in black velvet with rubies, matched Binni. Ori was quite sure that no one minded that they couldn’t see through Oin’s outfit. On Binni’s other side marched Bifur in his old armor and his great boar spear decorated with pennant of Durin blue with the seven stars.

Gloin followed with Gird on his arm. They were dressed in scarlet and gold. Gloin’s great axe
hung on his back and Gridr’s gown trailed at least three feet behind her. Beside them were Bombur and Erda. Bombur looked amazing in a suit of copper colored velvet embroidered with golden branches and trimmed with rubbed leather. Erda was in a cloud of lace that looked as though it was made entirely of golden leaves.

Bofur and Jani followed, both with their mattocks strapped to their backs. Granny Klak walked between them, in a very conservative, deep blue gown that covered her from neck to wrists to shoes, her beard and hair severely rolled and a blue lace cap on her head. She carried a large, blue velvet fan tipped with feathers. Bofur wore his wedding clothes and Jani was in black with copper trim. Gimli and Randibur brought up the rear. Gimli somehow looking finer than he had at the dinner party. He also had a magnificent axe at his back. Randi looked a little nervous but he was well dressed in his family colors and his apprentice braid to the diplomatic trade guild was new in his hair, making Ori grin.

The two houses, joined by their relations with the House of Fundin and Durin, came forward and took their places on the left side of the throne, between Elrond’s party and Bard’s.

Ori saw Beorn come to the entrance, look around, then start to walk toward the dais.

Brur bellowed from slightly behind him,
“All hail Beorn, Lord of the Carrock!”

Beorn, not expecting this, reacted as though attacked. His shoulders hunched and the biggest bear ever seen in Arda stood on hind legs, snarling horribly.

“I told yeh, yeh had t’ be announced,” Brur argued.

The bear huffed with ursine exasperation, then dropped to all fours and moved up the aisle to the dais. Arriving there, he was instantly invited by every child and badger to sit beside them. The bear settled on the right side on the aisle and stretched out, allowing a large amount of young things to sit next to and on him.

The trumpets gave a great blast and Brur shouted.
“All hail Bearer Dori and Lord Balin of the House of Fundin, Advisor and Chief Diplomat to the High King of Dwarrow in Erebor.”

A cheer went up. Ori stared. He had never seen Dori or Balin look so fine as they did now, smiling and escorting each other up the great aisle.

Dori shimmered in a diaphanous white robe striped with tiny gems of every color possible. Their mithril hair was loose and full of tiny gems. A rainbow of gems decorated the fingers, wrists and arms, with mithril threads connecting them. Dori was barefoot with mithril anklets with bells. Ori almost giggled when he realized that Dori’s under-robe had been dampened to show off.

Balin, beaming with pride, was resplendent in his plum robes, hair and beard dressed with all colors of gems to match Dori. They processed up to the dais, smiling and greeting friends as they came forward. They went to the right of the throne and nodded around at everyone.

The drums began, a low rumble sounded beneath the buzzing of the crowd. The trumpets gave a fanfare this time.

Master Brur looked outside the room, made an extremely strange noise, and roared out.
“Representing the King of Beleghost and Head of Clan Rikanta. All hail Lord Buj and his betrothed, Mistress Dipfa of the House of Fa, Journeyman to Master Greneeld.”

Ori was expectant. Dipfa had told him that she had designed and made Buj’s coronation robes as well as her own. She had proudly told him hers would be a tribute to the woodland elves and their forest for the materials traded to the tailoring guilds.

Ori and everyone else stared.

Buj was arrayed in the royal colors of black and gold. There any resemblance to history and tradition ended.

Buj’s suit was all one piece, gold silk and velvet top to bottom, with black velvet trim. Over this he wore a short gold cape with a huge, long collar, the cape edged and fastened around his shoulders with thick gold braiding. His breeches were gold and tight-fitting to his knees where they sported side inserts of black satin so they belled out over his pointy-toed, gold boots. The hems of his breeches were trimmed with tiny hematite bells.
Around his stomach sat an enormous black belt with a huge gold buckle, studded with diamonds. His hair was blacked as usual but had been brushed into a high, rounded single curl that bowed way out from his forehead and the end curl bouncing on the back of his head.

Ori had barely recovered from this vision when he was assailed by the sight of Dipfa at his side. She was dressed entirely in paper. The paper was cream, embedded with leaves, flower petals, and grasses. The main dress was a large cone, all trimmed with dried flowers from the mountain, with sleeves of gold gauze with hematite carved bells. Her beard was a pyramid of rosettes in paper. Her hair was caught up in a tall paper spiral the top of which has one large gold paper rosette.

Ori glanced around the dais. The royal guests gaped at one another, openly stunned, the Ins and the Urs rumbled and elbowed one another, obviously pleased, and everyone else in the great hall sat and stood in a confusion of awe and disbelief.

Buj held his arm out straight from his shoulder and opened his hand. Dipfa laid her hand in his palm and they paraded forward with deep solemnity.

People stared and then began to cheer and clap. Whenever any complimented the pair, Buj answered in a loud clear voice of great depth.

“Thank you, thank very much”
“What is she wearing?” Bard hissed across the aisle.
“She’s wearing paper,” Thranduil hissed back. “She wearing the paper we use to pack fabric.”

The elf king’s eye slewed back at Ori.
“Did you know of this?”
Ori shrugged and whispered.
“She only said hers would be a tribute to you and your people.”
“Then it would depend on whatever color she thought would throw the burlap into symmetrical relief.” Ori didn’t giggle but he really wanted to. He thought she looked like the clapper in a bell, the wide hem swinging side to side. He had no idea how she would sit down in that thing. She’d crease terribly, and he didn’t even want to think about the paper cuts.

The fascinating pair arrived upon the dais and stood politely on the right side, by Balin and Dori, bowing in greeting to all. Tilda snuck away from her father and across the carpet to go and touch Dipfa’s dress. Dipfa was delighted and Buj nodded profoundly.

At the entry, Ori heard Dain’s voice.

The fanfare went off and Brur opened his mouth. Dain beat him to it, clad in gold armor with his huge gold helm on his head, striding in grandly with Sculdis on his arm.

“Good af’ernoon all! I’m Dain. I’m here from th’ Iron Hills with me delicate jewel of a bride, me Queen Sculdis!”

Sculdis dressed in brown furs, and velvets of gold and pink, her formal boar’s head hair-do topped with a crown of gold and rhodochrosite. She waved to everyone and shouted, “Hulllllloooooo!!”

“Aye,” Dain agreed at volume. “An’ we brought our wee Prince Thorin Stonehelm, yer Princes Fili’s an’ Kili’s own cousin!” Stonehelm, with a coronet of gold on his brow, looked resigned and amused.

“Come along now, our Chopper!” called Dain and they marched up the aisle. Chopper trotted after, oinking in delighted, his tail flapping happily. Attached to Chopper’s back was a contraption that fixed a tall pole, topped by the pennant of the Iron Hills, a brown field with a boar’s head on it, all sides edged in pink and gold striping.

Ori peered closely, then remembered.

The boar’s head stood out from the brown field in three dimensions. Ori had learned the head was salvaged from a hooked yarn rug that once graced Stonehelm’s crib as a blanket.

Dain took the opportunity to play politician, nodding and greeting everyone the length of the aisle. Queen Sculdis waved and called out to friends.

“Afternoon. Aye, I see yeh. Tonis, keepin’ well as usual.”
“Oi, King Dain!”
“Z’at yeh, our Gorr? I ain’t seen yeh in a raven’s age. Yeh look terrible!”
“So d’ yeh, yeh great puddin’!”
“I know! Ask me wife!”
They reached the dais and went up the steps.
“Bard, yeh clean up well,” Dain announced and patted all the Bardlings on the head though he did rather have to stretch with Bain.

“King Dain,” Bard managed, but everyone could hear the barely suppressed laughter in his voice.

“Woodland sprite,” Dain greeted Thranduil.

“Ugly goblin,” Thranduil replied with a teasing smile.

Dain roared with laughter and clapped the elf king on the elbow. Dain insisted on going ‘round and greeting all the people on the dais. He ended by springing up to the throne platform, bowed to Master Sadi, then ruffled Ori’s hair, but only a little, and planted a loud kiss on the top of Ori’s head.

“Yeh look a treat, wee brother.”

“Thank you,” Ori snickered.

Dain went to his place with his family. The standard was placed against the wall behind the throne and Chopper went down to the side opposite of Beorn the bear and received due tribute in petting and attention from the little ones.

The fanfare clarioned.

Brur called out,

“All hail King Gheir of the Stiffbeards and his Queens, Mavis I, Mavis II, Mavis III, Mavis IV and Mavis XV.”

King Gheir, resplendent in shades of turquoise and silver, marched forward, followed by his queens in a line of five followed by five soldiers, the middle one bearing the standard of the Stiffbeards which was a turquoise field with a silver hammer on it.

They were half way up, when there was a horrid noise then shouts of mingled disgust, rage, and laughter.

“Fuckin’ eh!” someone yelled in annoyance. “Some ane tell th’ bleedin’ oliphaunt no’ t’ fart in ‘ere!”

A brief look of rage crossed Gheir’s features, but he schooled himself quickly and smiled and nodded at the welcoming clapping going on.

Ori wanted to sink through the floor and laugh hysterically. He glanced around and saw that most people on the dais shared his problem. Galadriel had a hand over her mouth as her eyes danced in delight. Ori wondered if he should accuse her of talking Fanny into it.

The fanfare went off again and this time it was King Ahkn. He shouted greetings and rude remarks to all and gamely tottered up to the dais, where Thranduil solicitely gave him a hand up the steps.

The next trumpet blast announced King Ulfr and Prince Arne. Ulfr was pleased with the welcome but annoyed with the appreciative noises and offers of marriage made by several single maidens and dams towards Arne. Arne looked pleased and a little pink.

Snur was next and there was a cheer from the crowd for this popular king who waved, applauded his audience, and called greetings. Many of the Broadbeams in attendance had once left the Ered Luin in search of work and never gone back. They were delighted to welcome their king.

The trumpets sounded and Brur announced,

“All hail Queen Hild of the Blacklocks.”

Hild wore jewels, only jewels, all strung on a net of mithril silver, in the shape of a caftan from her bare shoulders to floor, cinched at the waist with the scabbard of the Black Tooth, the curving, obsidian ceremonial blade of the Blacklocks.

Ori knew from descriptions that the gown was an heirloom of her house, a mosaic of opals, moonstones, jet, and from her hips, front and back, a constellation of tiny black, blue-green, and turquoise stones, with a river of diamonds flowing through. Her braids had been plaited into one great braid that wrapped around her head like a crown in itself, moonstones and diamonds placed
A dam on the aisle turned to her friend and said, “Our Thorin gettin’ crowned or her?”

Aris followed in black armor covered in silver eternal knots. She came bare-headed, hair pulled back and up in topknot, which was a Blacklock warriors’ usual and only concession to the fact that this wasn’t intended to be bloodbath. She wore a great axe at her back, her helm clipped to her belt, and she carried the standard of the Blacklocks, the scarlet, orange and black.

They processed in great state up to the dais and took their places. This accomplished, everyone on the dais took five steps back.

Ori felt the entire room take a breath. Everyone was silent waiting, waiting.

Ori saw Tharkûn pat Brur on the shoulder, then scuttle off to stand beside Fanny. Ori had a feeling the old wizard was up to something but it must be something good. Perhaps he had invited some of his wizard friends to come and give their blessings on Thorin.

Ori grinned in delight as Princess Dis stepped forward and stood in the center of the entryway. She was radiant in a Durin blue tight sheath dress covered with a diaphanous black filmy material embroidered all over with mithril spiders and set with diamonds. The traditional black crown rose from her gathered hair like an open-work fan, draped with strings of diamonds, Rutile perched among them, likewise bejeweled, waving shamelessly with as many legs as she could spare without falling right off.

Dis was smiling, but tears sparkled in her eyes.

Ori peeped over and found Jani was smiling, too, but probably for a completely different reason.

Kili followed Dis, dressed in Durin blue and a green leaf trim which suited him very well. His bow and quiver rested on his back. On his brow he wore the crown of the second heir, a circlet of gold with emeralds. He grinned and held himself proudly.

Behind him came Fili, also in Durin blue with gold trim. His hair was loose but for the braids of the heir, and Thorin’s old crown of the mithril circlet with sapphires was on his head. He wore it now as Thorin had worn it the night before.

The trumpets sounded three times and,

“All hail to Dis, Princess Royal, and Prince Kili and Crown Prince Fili, the heirs of Durin!” thundered Brur. Cheers rang through the cavern and echoed off the walls.

Fanny trumpeted in delight, making them laugh as they processed up the aisle. They took their places beside the throne and Ori felt his heart jump as the trumpets began the Call to Kingship.

Above this clarion call, Brur roared,

“All hail to Thorin II, son of Thrain, direct in the line of Durin unbroken. All hail to High King Presumptive of All Dwarrow. All hail!”

“All hail!” roared the crowd and the cheering began anew. The noise was so loud this time, it drowned out the trumpets and Fanny.

Thorin walked forward. He wore a Durin blue velvet tunic and leggings under a metallic blue breastplate decorated with the anvil and seven stars. Over all this he wore a generously cut black coat. The coat was his prerogative, instead of a cloak, since he was a sword wielder and preferred to keep his arms free. His sword, in its sheath, hung at his hip. His tunic collar and hem and his coat cuffs and tails were embroidered with mithril threads into stylized spider webs. He was bare-headed, his hair hung loose and unbraided. He wore no jewelry, but for a single iron ring, and not even his signet. Ori had learned the iron ring was one of Fili’s earliest efforts in the forge.

Dwalin followed, carrying the standard of all dwarrow, his eyes flicking all about the room, alert to everything.

The noise was so loud, Ori half wondered if Thorin had to push against it to reach them. Thorin smiled and nodded to all. As he came to the dais, he stopped and bowed to all the children on one side then the other. Ori heard him say, “For all of you are also all our heirs. I salute you.” He greeted each of his royal guests and turned to stand a few feet before the throne. Dwalin planted the standard of Erebor in its stand carved into the floor before the throne. Dwalin then stood before it, both axes drawn as the protector of the throne of Erebor.

The cheering was still going on. There were appreciative yells, shouts of blessings and many
dwarrow had broken into songs of the greatness of the line of Durin. Balin finally stepped forward
and waved his arms to quieten everyone down. As the noise petered out, Thorin said, “Thank you
all.”

Someone called, “Very nice, our Thorin, suits yeh.”

Thorin chuckled and called out, “Thank you.”

Thorin turned to Balin. “Are we ready?”

Balin nodded and-

There was the most terrible screeching noise at the entrance of the mountain and everyone turned.

The noise was a sledge, careening up the entryway toward the throne room and pulled by the
largest rabbits Ori had ever seen. It slewed to the cavern’s entrance and scraped to the stop.

The tiniest man Ori had ever seen jumped from the sledge, dressed in a mix of brown clothing and
bits of tree, waving a staff of miraculously leafy oak with a crystal atop.

Before the guards could react, Tharkûn hopped over to the entryway with a shout of “Radagast,
my old friend, you made it!”

“Of course, of course! Why do you always doubt me?”

“Because you’d forget your own head if it wasn’t sewn on.”

“True, yes,” called Radagast. “Now, where was I? Oh, yes. King Thorin!”

“Master Wizard?” Thorin asked for all to hear, a little uncertainly.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that! I’ve brought you a present.”

He reached into the sledge and pulled out a wriggling package of red and green, lifting it high into
the air.

“Idad Thorin!” Frodo shrieked from Radagast’s arms and waved to them. In a dream, Thorin
waved back, his face alit with joy.

Radagast popped Frodo on his feet as Tharkûn helped Bilbo out of the sledge.

Brur looked them over and grinned wider than Ori had ever seen him do.

“Professor Baggins?”

Bilbo pulled straw from his hair.

“Yes, you have the advantage of me, sir.”

“Brur, Librarian a’ Erebor.”

“Well! I never! It’s an honor, Master Brur.” He bowed.

“Honor’s mine. Please, allow me t’ announce yeh.”

“By all means, Master Brur. Very kind.”

Brur turned and roared out,

“Tharkûn the Gray, Radagast the Brown, Professor Bilbo Baggins, late a’ th’ Shire, an’ his
nephew, Frodo Baggins.”

They came forward followed by all Radagast’s rabbits.

“An’ a butt load a’ bunnies,” Brur finished.

At the name ‘Baggins’ the crowd gasped and whisperings became buzzing and Margr’s and Vi’s
voices could be heard. People started casting gold dust over them as they walked. Someone called
out “Hobbits like flowers!” Flowers came unbound from hair and hats and flew through the air to
land – mostly – at the hobbits’ feet. A few weeds and things sail over them occasionally.

“Wow, this is a really long room!” Frodo said, looking about.

“Eh?” Radagast asked. “Hold up.”

He picked Frodo up and plopped him on the back of the nearest rabbit.

“Now, hold tight.”

Bilbo said, “Radagast, what are you-“

“Giddyap!” Radagast shouted and smacked the rabbit on the rump. The rabbit, and Frodo on its
back, bounced off toward the dais.

“That can’t be safe!” Bilbo cried. “He’ll fall and break his head!”

“These are Roscobal Rabbits. Would never happen!”

“Never?”

“Maybe, on occasion.”
Fortunately for Bilbo, as the rabbit skittered to a halt at the top step of the dais, Thorin swept forward and rescued Frodo from his bunnyback ride. Frodo shouted his delight at seeing Thorin again and Ori knew it was pure reflex that Thorin laughed and swung the faunt high over his head before bringing him to his shoulder.

Bilbo came running up the rest of the aisle, a shower of gold flying out behind him like a cape while yet more gold dust cascaded over him. He was quite speedy, Ori realized. Of course, those feet weren’t just for show. Bilbo skidded to a halt before Thorin and looked up at him, slightly out of breath from running and from relief. Thorin automatically extended his hand to welcome Bilbo up on the dais.

“Bilbo.”

“Hullo, Thorin,” said Bilbo. “You’re awfully shiny.”

“Welcome to my coronation. I see you’ve been er…blessed.”

“Yes. Peculiar custom you Erebores have. Do this to everyone, do you?”

Vi’s voice sung out over the crowd.

“Only f’r th’ future consort!”

The assembled crowd began to cheer again and shout about the ‘Consort of Erebor’. Bilbo stared up at Thorin and hissed, ‘What?’

“Not my fault.” Thorin whispered desperately. “I didn’t say anything to them.”

“Then where did they get the idea?”

A caw swept over them and Roäc landed on Thorin’s other shoulder.

“So kiss already,” said Roäc, rolling his eyes.

Frodo stared at the raven.

“Uncle Bilbo, it talked!”

Thorin closed his eyes tightly.

“The trick is getting him to Shut. Up.”

“Now, be nice,” said Roäc. “I am a king, too.”

“King of pain, yes. Bilbo, Frodo, this is Roäc, King of the Ravens of Erebor. Roäc, Bilbo and Frodo Baggins, not your next victims.”

“May I pet you?” Frodo asked, already half reaching for the raven.

Roäc craned his neck to look over the faunt and seemed to shrug.

“Cute nestling. Go ahead. Don’t muss any feathers.”

“You’re beautiful,” said Frodo.

Roäc preened.

“Thank you for saying so, I rarely get noticed.”

Thorin coughed in surprise and disbelief. Bilbo chuckled.

Fili said, loudly, “Roäc does have a good point.”

“Yeah,” agreed Kili at volume, “kiss already.”

“Kiss,” shouted Glorfindel in chorus with Margr and Vi.

The crowd took up the shout, which turned into a chant.

“Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!”

Thorin looked horrified.

Bilbo started to giggle.

“I didn’t mean this to happen,” Thorin said helplessly under the shouting.

“Well, there’s only one way to get them to stop,” said Bilbo.

“Sudden elopement?”

“Nothing that neat, I’m afraid. You’re a little shiny to just sneak away. You’ll just have to kiss me.”

Thorin bent his head, Bilbo leaned up and they did so. Frodo cheered and the crowd followed suit.

Radagast said to Tharkûn, “This is the most entertaining coronation I’ve ever attended. Will there be jugglers next?”

“I believe they’re scheduled for dinner,” said Tharkûn.
“Oh, good. I do like jugglers!”
Bard said, “I’m glad I don’t have to kiss anyone at my coronation.”
Thranduil smiled sweetly. “Wait.”
Bard turned pale.
Ori swore as he broke yet another pen nib and grabbed up his fourth. He signaled Omi to find him a new box of nibs. She grinned and hauled one out of her satchel, waving it triumphantly, before chucking it to him. He caught it and fixed the new nib in place and continued to write.
Thorin held Bilbo a little away from him and smiled, “I thought you would miss this day. I have never been so wrong.”
The cheers rose anew. Balin waved his arms again, almost flapping in his impatience. Dis took Frodo on her hip and Dori put an arm about Bilbo and drew the hobbit to stand with the family, all the while whispering, “Plenty of time to snog later, dear.”
Balin stood at the front of the dais and beckoned Thorin forward. Thorin stood and faced his people. Balin placed his hand on Thorin’s shoulder and Thorin sank to his knees before all assembled.
“Thorin, son of Thrain, Second Thorin of the line of Durin unbroken,” intoned Balin, “you place yourself before us to be crowned High King of Dwarrow. By the unbroken line of Durin and Mahal, our maker, and his beloved wife, Yavanna, do you swear to uphold the honor of your people?”
“I so swear.” Thorin answered clearly.
“Do you swear to follow the ways laid down by the first Durin, Durin the Deathless, given to him by Mahal, and lead your people in them?”
“I so swear.”
“Do you swear that all children of Mahal shall be precious to you and be under your protection as their king?”
“I so swear.”
Balin nodded to Dori. Dori stepped forward, carrying the new crown. Dori stopped beside Thorin, opposite Balin, and touched the crown all over and murmured over it, casting the Blessings of the Bearer, Ori decided. Dori paused, looked at Thorin then back at Bilbo then fixing their eyes on Thorin’s, leaned over the crown again, where only those on the dais could see, licked, then put the entire fire opal into their mouth. Balin colored a little as did Thorin. Pleased with this effect, Dori, with a fluttering of eye lashes, held the crown above Thorin’s head and, with Balin, placed it on Thorin’s head.
Silence punctuated by soft cries and gasps as, slowly, Balin and Dori raised Thorin to his feet. Everyone stared round eyed and stunned at their new king.
“Thorin II of Erebor, High King of All Dwarrow,” announced Balin.
Thorin smiled and bowed to all.
“I salute you, my people. I am forever at you service.”
There was a roar of cheers, weeping, and shouts of “Long Live The King!” and “Long Live King Thorin III!”
Ori couldn’t stop himself from cheering, too, as he scribbled maniacally. Dori and Balin braided Thorin’s hair into the two braids of the high king. Dis stood by, holding the bead box; she was laughing and crying. Thorin beamed at her and leaned over to kiss her cheek. Fili and Kili stood next to her, grinning and wiping their eyes on their sleeves.
Ori noted that the visiting rulers were also very touched by the ceremony. Theoden King blew his nose like a foghorn and Bard seemed to have something in his eye. Aragorn and Arwen embraced each other, her head against his cheek, both their face’s tear-stained. Dain and Snur cried like badgers, leaning on Sculdis, who was sniffing a great deal. Hild looked like she was melting into a happy puddle. Gheir was mopping his face with a handkerchief and all the Mavi were in tears. Ahkn and Ulfr and Arn were singing an old khuzdul prayer. Elrond, Thranduil and Lady Galadriel seemed to be shimmering.
Everyone by the throne stepped back and Ori felt the vague hum and vibration from under the
floor as a block of tiles separated from the rest, sunk and slid aside and the first anvil of Durin, called
the Great Forge of Durin, rose on a plinth of pinkish sandstone. The plinth was about a foot high,
three feet across, and inscribed upon the surface was the single rune mark ‘Durin’.

This was the original first ‘door’ carved into Erebor to begin the mining.

Thorin, now before the throne in the center of the dais, drew his sword and laid the point upon the
anvil before him. He spoke the ancient words.

“I hereby swear upon this forge, my oath to serve and protect the children of Mahal. Those who
would stand with me and hail me their king come forward and give me your oath of loyalty.”

Kili was neatly lifted out of the way and aside and Fili more or less run over as Dain bounded
forward first.

“Outa me way! I been waitin’ me whole life f’r this, an’ I ain’t playin’ nice!” He hefted up his
great axe and brayed, “I, Dain, son o’Nain, o’ th’ unbroken line o’ Durin, hearby swear upon His
forge, me oath o’ loyalty t’ Thorin II, High King o’ Erebor an’ All Dwarrow. An’, laddie, I give yeh
me personal oath o’ friendship an’ loyalty as yer kin.”

The blade of his great axe rested on the anvil.

“Thank you, Dain, son of Nain,” said Thorin with a twinkle. “Your oath is accepted, and your
loyalty is as treasured as your friendship is annoying.”

“Aye, then me duty here’s done,” Dais remarked genially.

Snur was next in line, though he looked like he wasn’t sure he dared cut ahead of Hild.

“Ladies first?” he asked.

“Oh, just move your arse, Chatty,” Hild sighed with exasperation. “You’re holding up progress.”

“If ya insist, and I know ya do.” He stepped forward his mattock at the ready. Even from where
he stood, Ori could see it was a real and well-used tool, polished for the occasion.

“I, Snur, son of Orur, King o’ Broadbeams, hearby swear me oath ta serve an’ protect all o’ Mahal
upon Durin’s forge. I give ya me oath o’ loyalty, Thorin II, High King o’ Erebor an’ All Dwarrow.”

Snur rested the point of his mattock on the anvil.

“Thank you, Snur, son of Orur, your oath is accepted, and your loyalty treasured.”

“What, I’m not as annoyin’ as Dain?” Snur teased.

“Practice makes perfect,” said Thorin without missing a beat.

“I, Gheir, son of Jheir, King of Stiffbeards, hearby swear my oath to serve and protect all of Mahal
upon Durin’s forge. I give you my oath of loyalty, Thorin II, High King of Erebor and All
Dwarrow.”

Gheir rested the point of his sword on the anvil and Thorin accepted his oath.

“I, Ahkn, son of Dohkn, King of Stonefoots, hearby swear my oath to serve and protect all of
Mahal upon Durin’s forge. I give you my oath of loyalty, Thorin II, High King of Erebor and All
Dwarrow.”

Ahkn rested the point of his warhammer on the anvil.

“I, Ulfr, son of Mofr, King o’ Ironfists, hearby swear my oath to serve and protect all of Mahal
upon Durin’s forge. I give you my oath of loyalty, Thorin II, High King of Erebor and All
Dwarrow.”

Ulfr rested the blade of his fighting axe on the anvil.

“I, Hild, Daughter of Zild, Queen of Blacklocks, hearby swear my oath to serve and protect all of
Mahal upon Durin’s forge. I give you my oath of loyalty, Thorin II, High King of Erebor and All
Dwarrow.”

The point of her curving obsidian blade rested on the anvil and, as with all the others, her oath was
accepted.

Buj stepped forward and then seemed to realize, along wth everyone else, that he did not have a
weapon. With unshaken calm, Dipfa stepped forward. Digging in her matching paper satchel, she
fished out the dagger Dain had presented to Buj on their first meeting. Somewhere along the way it
had gained a crocheted leather thong sheath with a foot-long, multicolored chain tassel at the tip. Buj
thanked her solemnly and she stepped back, Buj took the dagger and laid the silver tip on the anvil.
“I, Buj, representing the King of Belegost and Head of Clan Rikanta of the unbroken line of Durin, hereby swear my oath to serve and protect all of Mahal upon Durin’s forge. I give you my oath of loyalty, Thorin II, High King of Erebor and All Dwarrow.”

The cheering started again as the oath-takers all bowed deeply to Thorin then smiled at each other, clearly enjoying this moment. The cheer stopped abruptly as Aragorn stepped up to the ring of dwarrow monarchs. He drew his sword and saluted Thorin with a bow.

“I, Elessar, King of Gondor salute you Thorin, High King of Dwarrow. May our people always come together in friendship and give one another help and succor when needed. You have my sword, my friend.”

Thorin’s eye lit up and he bowed to Aragorn, even as the people murmured in amazement. No one had heard such words as these under this mountain.

“I, Thorin, High King of Dwarrow, salute you, Elessar, King of Gondor. May our people always come together in friendship and give one another help and succor when needed. Your war cries will be followed with the sound of Du Bekâr, my friend!”

Theoden King bounded forward next with a bow and a raised shield

“I, Theoden, King of Rohan salute you, Thorin, High King of Dwarrow. May our people always come together in friendship and give one another help and succor when needed. You have my shield, my friend.”

Thorin was grinning now.

“I, Thorin High King of Dwarrow, salute you, Theoden, King of Rohan. May our people always come together in friendship and give one another help and succor when needed. Your war cries will be followed with the sound of Du Bekâr, my friend.”

Thranduil stepped up on the dais, smiling. The undercurrent of murmuring from the crowd rose to a wave.

“I Thranduil Oropherion, King of the Sylvan Elves of Erys Lasgalen salute you, Thorin, High King of Dwarrow. May our people always come together in friendship and give one another help and succor when needed. You have my bow, my friend.”

“I knew he’d choose the bow,” Kili cried in the background.

Thranduil grinned and bowed, 

“I, Thorin High King of Dwarrow, salute you, Thranduil, King of Sylvan in the Greenwood. May our people always come together in friendship and give one another help and succor when needed. Your war cries will be followed with the sound of Du Bekâr, my friend.”

Lady Galadriel came forward and smiled on Thorin

“I, Galadriel, Lady of the Golden Wood salute you, Thorin, High King of Dwarrow. May our people always come together in friendship and give one another help and succor when needed. You have my wisdom, my friend.”

Thorin bowed to the Lady. “I, Thorin High King of Dwarrow, salute you, Galadriel, Lady of the Golden Wood. May our people always come together in friendship and give one another help and succor when needed. Your war cries will be followed with the sound of Du Bekâr, my friend.”

Bard was the only one left. He cleared his throat as he stepped forward and bowed.

“I salute you, King Thorin, as Bard, King of the Dale. You’ve already saved our skins more than once and are being more than kind to us. Most monarchs I’ve ever heard of would have just taken over, but you didn’t. We thank you for this and hope that we will always be the best of friends and neighbors. If you need anything, well, you know where we are.”

Thorin smiled,

“King Bard, your words mean a great deal to me. We are good friends and neighbors and, I think, border on family. And, Brother King, if you need anything, you know where we are.”

Beorn rose carefully from his place on the floor, so as not to dislodge any of the badgers. He bellowed and grunted sincerely to Thorin, nodded, and lay back down.

Thorin bowed.

“Thank you, Beorn, I will strive to be worthy of your faith.”

Ori realized every royal guest who was not dwarrow had pledged friendship to them. This was
huge. This was the greatest thing that had ever happened anywhere. He had just seen all the major rulers of Arda come together and declare friendship and assistance to the high king of dwarrow. He was almost panting as he wrote.

“Hurray,” shouted Frodo and this set off the cheering again and the shouting and the singing. On the dais, there was a great deal of hugging, clasping of arms, bowing, and hand shaking. Dwalin knelt before Thorn and gave his oath as the king’s protector. His gruff voice choked a little over the words. Thorin clasped his shoulders, raised and embraced him. Ori took a moment from his notes to descend the steps and clench Bilbo in a warm hug.

“It’s so good to see you again, Bilbo!” Ori cried. “I’ve so much to tell you and loads of things I want to ask you!”

Bilbo laughed. “And I’ve got plenty to ask and tell you, too!”

Thorin finally freed Dwalin, nodded to Ori and reached for Bilbo and swung Frodo onto his back, where Dis helpfully used a scarf from one of the scribes to form a little sling seat, so the faunt would be comfortable. Dwalin slid his arm about Ori. Ori, still writing on the lap desk, stood on tip-toe to kiss his husband’s cheek. They exchanged a look of love then Balin called out.

“All those who wish to pledge their loyalty may now do so.”

Protocol dictated that Thorin turn and ascend to the throne, to sit and hear the oaths from the people at the foot of the dais.

Ori gasped.

Instead of ascending, Thorin, with Bilbo at his side, stepped down from the dais to greet anyone who wanted to approach him on the same level. Dwalin swore under his breath and in a trice was behind Thorin with Targ and Furh’nk. They didn’t hold people away, just made sure Bilbo and Thorin were not crushed by the enthusiasm shown them. Ori realized his place, leapt from the dais, slithered under Dwalin’s arm to stand next to Bilbo, pen at the ready, taking down names of loyalties pledgers and watching Bilbo’s face as he was slyly referred to as ‘Consort’.

Someone wormed their way up to Thorin, someone obviously so small that Ori couldn’t see who it might be. He could follow their progress by the jostling and laughter of the older dwarrow in their path. Thorin paused and waited for the figure to arrive.

There stood a dwarf badger, a dam. Ori thought she looked familiar. Unlike everyone else she was not dressed to the nines, she was in the uniform of the new primary school that had opened in Dale. She looked up very seriously at Thorin. Ori drew in a tearing breath as he realized who she was. Thorin looked her over then smiled.

“Greetings, Caris daughter of Nadaris. Thank you for attending my coronation.”

Caris nodded and held out her hand. Thorin offered his own, open palmed. Into this, Caris dropped the mithril bead Thorin had given into her keeping as his promise to her people back in the mines.

“You kept your word,” she said simply, then looked up, her eyes full of tears. “Thank you. Mam isn’t hungry and hurting anymore.”

She began to sob, Thorin dropped to one knee and embraced the badger.

“It is my life work to see that none of you are hungry and hurting any more, Caris. Ever though you have decided our bargain is done, I will never stop working on this. Thank you for reminding me of who I am.” He patted the badger and rose. Bilbo applied a hankie to her face, murmuring gentle nothings. Thorin bowed deeply to Caris. “I am always at your service.”

Caris smiled.

“What is this you’re wearing? Bilbo asked. “I do like this shade of blue.”

“It’s my school uniform, sir.” Caris gave a toothy grin. “I’m the best speller in my class.”

“Spelling is very important,” Bilbo acknowledge gravely. “Well done!”

Caris grinned again, became suddenly shy, giggled, and plunged back into the crowd. Thorin really didn’t have to move much as the crowd had sorted itself into orderly lines on both side of the aisle and, after they spoke to Thorin, moved off to admire and, if they felt up to it, greet the other rulers.

Ori was thoroughly enjoying this when suddenly a horrid, scraping female voice screeched,
“Let me in! I demand to see him!”
Frodo screamed and tried to clench his arms about Thorin’s throat. Thorin whisked him to his front and held him close to his chest as Bilbo clutched Thorin’s left arm in cold fear. Thorin drew his sword.
There, in the opening of the great doors, stood a tiny, hideously dressed figure, face like a storm. “Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, what are you doing here?” Bilbo shouted. She laughed in nasty triumph. “I was invited!”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Yay, Thorin’s king and Bilbo’s here and what in Mahal’s name is Lobelia doing here? Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

“Great Mahal!” Binni cried. “What is she wearing?”
“Lake gull vomit,” called Nori’s voice from somewhere behind the throne.
“Clash, clash, clash!” Binni raged.

The ravens descended on her in a mass.

Ori remembered what happened to Frerin, and was surprised when, far from smashing the hobbit to the ground, they seized her in their talons and swept her, screaming, up into the air.

It was quite a spectacle. The ravens did swoops and banks and loop-the-loops under the high ceiling of the throne room, flying in an amazingly tight formation and quite oblivious to what Lobelia was calling their mothers.

A strange male hobbit bumbled through the doorway and ran about under them, waving his finger at them ineffectually, demanding they stop this instant and put his wife down or he would be forced to become quite cross.

The assembled dwarrow and men clapped and cheered. Every elf had their eyebrows at their hairlines. This was something they simply were not prepared to deal with no matter how many thousands of years old they might be.

One dam turned to another and said, “First the Bearer dances an’ ol’ Thror drops dead, then there’s an animal act at the funeral and the king goes careening down into the ground to his reward, an’ now ‘n oliphaunt an’ flyin’ hobbits!”

“The Durins put on th’ best shows!” her friend agreed.

Ori thought he was going to pass out. Bilbo arriving suddenly was delightful but this mess was going to throw everything out of kilter and off schedule.

Fili and Kili jumped up and down, cheering along with the other young royals, while the older dwarrow royalty looked as though they were developing headaches. Thorin, sword still at the ready, held Bilbo, who clutched Frodo, who was trying to see what was happening. Dwalin and his guards stood ready, all arms at point but unflustered as the ravens seemed to have things well in claw.

While Lobelia was tumbling end over end, something fell out of her mouth and plummeted to the ground. A black, blockish thing landed like a hunched spider. It was about the size of a gold ingot, with dozens of little tentacles, none of which seem to help propel it in any direction. The crowds drew back, disgusted by whatever it was but Tharkûn hurried over and squished it flat with his staff. It dissolved with a squeak like a leaky wineskin.

Silence.

Thorin, still with his sword at the ready, came over with Bilbo and Frodo, the guards shadowing them.

“What is that thing?” Bilbo asked, grimacing

“That was a barrowwight,” said Tharkûn.

“What? That?” Bilbo leaned over it, obviously not convinced. “It looks like a sad little oil slick. Barrow-wights are huge monsters in flowing, tattered cloaks.”

“No, those are just costumes.”
“Costumes? Really?”
“Costumes, Tharkûn?” Thorin had an eyebrow raised in disbelief.
“Of course!” Tharkûn snapped, annoyed at the lack of trust in his dictum. “How frightening would they be if everyone knew that they really looked like melted xocolatl bars?”
“Xocolatl bars look good,” Kili protested, arriving on the scene with the other royals. “Who’d pick up that and eat it?”
Tauriel tried and failed to maintain her soldierly decorum. She gave it up in a fit of giggles.
The ravens circled once more then swooped low to drop Lobelia unceremoniously on the floor, a little away from Thorin and Bilbo. Ori saw Loli and another scribe leap forward and immediately sketch the unconscious hobbit female.
Oin blustered forward.
“Is it safe to touch?” he growled.
“Oh, yes,” Tharkûn said. “Just fainted for now.”
The wizard leaned over the small mess on the floor, and touched it with the point of his staff. It burst into a puff of flames and vanished away.
Oin stamped over to Lobelia, followed by Granny Klak, who, intrigued, proffered her vinaigrette.
Oin stuck this roughly under Lobelia’s nose. The hobbit lady squawked, then slowly came to as Dori and Galadriel hurried forward, giggling, and sprinkled drops of water on her face as Granny Klak fanned her vigorously. Lobelia made a disgusted noise and rolled over on her side.
“She’s alright,” Oin said and went away, no longer interested.
Lobelia sat up, staring at Galadriel then Granny Klak then Dori and looked utterly confused. She turned her head and saw Bilbo.
“Oh, cousin! The last thing I - Oh!”
“Ohh!” cried her husband, and he ran behind a thick curtain of bunting and was audibly ill.
“I beg your pardon, Bilbo,” Lobelia said, rather muddled. “I have no idea where I am.”
She was assisted to her feet by Lady Klak, who told Dori in no uncertain terms that a Bearer shouldn’t touch it.
“I canoodled with a barrow-wight!” the husband groaned, staggering back to them.
“Oh! What are you talking about? I don’t spank you that hard.”
“Mrs. Sackville-Baggins, what is the last thing you remember?” Tharkûn asked.
“Scolding Lotho - that’s my son - for wandering off with his friends. Delinquents! Every last one of them! They were gone for days. I was frantic. Then they came skipping back, bold as you please, tracking all that dirt into my smial and he still wouldn’t tell me where he went. He just smirked and bent all my teaspoons!”
“My teaspoons,” Bilbo muttered dangerously.
“And then he dumped out the sugar bowl on the floor and told me my tea tasted like dirty washing-up water!”
Bilbo winced.
Frodo, owl-eyed, gasped, “That’s so naughty!”
“And when I scolded him he opened his mouth impossibly wide and that’s the last thing I remember.”
“Your mouth was open?” Tharkûn asked.
“Of course it was,” Bilbo said, aside.
“Where did you say we are?” Lobelia asked, looking around in distaste.
“Erebor, the Kingdom of the Dwarrow,” Tharkûn said, “in the north of Rhovanian.”
“Never heard of it,” she sniffed. “And you are?”
“I’m called by many names, some of them rather impolite. Here, I am called Tharkûn.”
“Are you a lord or something?”
“I’m a wizard.”
Lobelia drew back a little. Never taking her eyes off Tharkûn she asked, “Otho, where is Lotho?”
“Perfectly safe, my flower. I left him with his Grandmother Bracegirdle.”
Lobelia and Bilbo shuddered simultaneously.
“I wouldn’t call spending time with my mother ‘safe’,” said Lobelia. “How did we get here? Did we hire a carriage? Do you suppose we’ll be home by tea time?”

Otho patted her hand.
“Best not to inquire too closely about how we traveled, dearest. I doubt your delicate constitution would bear it. Mine certainly hasn’t.”

“But,” she ordered, “straighten your weskit and go brush your teeth.”

Bilbo said, “So, Gandalf, am I to infer that all this misery was caused because Lobelia was possessed by a barrow-wight? One that had first possessed her son and then, vacated the premises, so to speak, when a better situation – er - opened up?”

Lobelia threw him a filthy look, apparently taking exception to being described like a furnished room.

Tharkûn shrugged.
“It happens. I suppose I’ll be off to the Shire shortly to sort the rest of them out. I don’t know if there’s more than one of those creatures. They don’t tend to travel in packs or anything. I like to think there’s a reason for the rest of the hobbits to go along with her insanity other than being pathetic sheep.”

“Do you think there is?” Bilbo asked skeptically.

“Would any hobbit in their right mind skip tea to march on their neighbors with torches and pitchforks?”

“I see your point,” mused Bilbo. “Besides, the torches would make their weskit’s all sooty.”

Galadriel smiled sweetly at Tharkûn.
“I’ll go with you, Mithrandir.”

“Very good of you, my lady,” said Tharkûn.

“Yes,” said Celeborn dryly. “Her goodness is unbelievable.”

“But not before we’ve finished here.” Lady Galadriel beamed at Thorin and Bilbo.

“Righty-oh,” Tharkûn agreed, then “Radagast, old fellow, once the hobbits have finished visiting, would you see them home?”

“Eh? Absolutely. Plenty of room in the sled.”

Lobelia said, “A sled? In this weather?”

“It’s a bunny sled,” said Frodo, still partly hiding behind Thorin’s beard.
“Two sleds pulled by rabbits?” gasped Lobelia.
“I’m allergic to rabbits,” Otho whined.

Radagast looked amused at the two out-of-place hobbits and wandered off, singing under his breath

“Dashing through the grass,
In the bunny sleigh.
O’er the fields he rides,
Sneezing all the way!”

Tongue in cheek, Ori wrote this down.

Bilbo quickly introduced Lobelia and Otho to Thorin, who, after slowly and deliberately sheathing his sword, was polite in words, but completely threatening in manner. Otho, in all but in total fear for his life, managed,

“We really were invited. See.” Otho took a battered invitation out of his weskit pocket. “We had no idea what it said, the… er… courier read it to us.”

Balin took the invitation, fished out his magnifier and looked at the invitation closely.

He nodded.

“Real enough, laddie,” he said to Thorin. “Just one problem. It’s not for them. It’s for Frerin.”

Thorin stared at his chief advisor.

“But he got his invitation.”

“This isn’t the first one we sent him, it’s the second one, insisting he attend.”

“I thought it was quite decorative, really,” said Otho. “The designs on the front are very nice.”
Thorin took the envelope and examined it.  
“Those aren’t designs. That is khuzdul; dwarven writing. In fact, it’s my brother’s name. How…?” Thorin’s face went very, very blank and pale before he turned back toward the throne and bellowed,  
“Ro-äc!”  
Frodo jumped at his shoulder.  
“Sorry,” Thorin apologized immediately, and patted the faunt’s cheek.  
If ravens could be said to fly in a leisurely manner, Roäc practically sauntered down to land on Thorin’s other shoulder, perhaps counting on the fact that Thorin did have his hands full.  
“Yes, O King of Erebor?” he inquired politely.  
Ori would have sworn if Roäc had large eyelashes, he would have fluttered them.  
“Yes,” said Otho, “that’s it… him… the courier.”  
“What have you done now?” Thorin asked Roäc wearily.  
“You said to deliver the invitation. You didn’t say to whom.”  
Frodo giggled.  
“He’s a smart raven.”  
“He’s a smart something,” said Thorin.  
“It’s not like you wanted him here anyway,” said Roäc.  
“And you thought Lobelia Sackville-Baggins was an improvement?”  
“Things had to be done.”  
“And they had to be done on my coronation day?”  
“At least it’ll be memorable.”  
“Thank you,” said Thorin dryly. “And they had to be done on my coronation day? Lobelia stopped staring at Thorin for a moment and frowned up at Frodo. “Bilbo, why is your nephew’s here? Is he going to attend a dwarf school? Keep him out of my tomatoes.”  
“We aren’t in the Shire,” Bilbo reminded her.  
“Then keep them out of other people’s tomatoes. He’s quite naughty that way, but otherwise a perfectly decent faunt.”  
Frodo looked to Bilbo and asked, “Did the ravens drop her on her head where we couldn’t see?”  
“No, she was possessed by a barrowwight. It made her very mean. But the wight’s gone now, and she’s just plain, fussy, grumpy Lobelia,” said Bilbo.  
“Oh. Does that mean I have to kiss her?”  
“Absolutely not,” said Bilbo.  
Thorin whispered to Frodo, “You never know what you’ll catch.”  
Frodo giggled and Ori snickered from his place behind Thorin and added that to the record. Gridr arrived with a glass of water for Lobelia, who drank it gratefully while Otho told her what had happened.  
“You mean I was up there, flying around?” She sighed. “Good thing I’m wearing clean bloomers. I’ve absolutely misplaced my hat.”  
“Don’t worry, if anyone finds it, they won’t touch it,” Dwalin drawled as he fitted Grasper and Keeper back in their harnesses.  
Ori folded his mouth. At the far side of the dais, he saw Thranduil pick up the hat, examine it at arm’s length, and plop it on his own head at a coquettish angle, posing for Bard. Even at this distance he could hear Bard’s roar of laughter.  
“You mean I was up there, flying around?” Lobelia asked.  
“What oliphaunt?” Tharkun asked.  
“Cousin,” she addressed Bilbo, “may I have a word? Please?”  
Thorin obviously didn’t want Bilbo going further than an arm’s length away from him, but Bilbo merely murmured something to the king and patted his shoulder before going off to consult with Lobelia.
Bilbo’s face made an interesting and mobile study. Ori was sure he’d hear what she said sooner or later, so he chafed in silence.

Finally, Bilbo dropped his face in his hands and gave a groan of pain.

“No, Lobelia, they will not,” he said. “I can't imagine that would taste at all pleasant. Sleep well.”

Bilbo turned and strode back to Thorin, shaking his head.

Mistress Dazla appeared, seemingly out of the floor like the furnishings and curtsied to the Sackville-Baggins’.

“Ma’am, sir, if you’ll kindly follow me. We’ll take you to a place of quiet where you may refresh yourselves.”

Lobelia stared at the dam’s beard and swallowed, but followed Mistress Dazla’s lead.

Thorin looked up toward the ceiling and tilted his chin in the direction of the retreating hobbits. Ori could have sworn he heard Nori’s snicker from all the way down here. Thorin was taking no chances.

“Where are they going?” Ori asked Dwalin.

“Old royal residence, prob’ly,” said Dwalin. “Dazla’ll make sure they’re settled and there’s guards enough on duty t’ attend their needs.”

“So, the Sackville-Baggins won’t have to lift a finger,” said Ori thoughtfully. “Or leave their rooms.”

“Exactly.”

“What did Lobelia say to you?” Thorin asked Bilbo.

“She wanted to know if you were going to roast them and eat them at your barbarian feast. Hold up a mo’. I need to write that one down. I can use that.”

“Got it,” said Ori.

Bilbo grinned at him.

“Ori! You know, now that I’m having a proper look at you, you’re finer than a blazing plum pudding at a Yuletide feast!”

“Um… thank you?” Ori asked.

Bilbo laughed and embraced him as carefully as scribe finery and accoutrements allowed.

“It’s so good to see you again,” said Bilbo.

“Everything’s well in Master Denethor’s world?” Ori asked.

“Yes, which means Arda can sleep soundly tonight.”

Thorin and Bilbo settled themselves to go back to their greetings and hearing oaths. Dwalin and his guard arranged themselves and Ori stepped up to Thorin’s side. He looked carefully at Thorin’s coat front.

“Are those silver acorns?” Ori murmured up at Thorin as Bilbo turned to speak to Dis.

Thorin just grinned.

“I suppose,” Ori teased, “Dori thought the silk underwear wasn’t quite loud enough. Didn’t Bilbo have silver acorns on his waistcoat?”

“Hush,” said Thorin, his grin widening into a smile.

“So apparently Bilbo would be represented at the coronation whether he was actually here or not?”

Thorin turned to Dwalin.

“Call him off, why don’t you,”

“Can’t. He’s the one who calls me off.”

“I’ve never called you ‘off’, I always call you, Dwalin.” Ori giggled, then squeaked as Thorin and Dwalin poked him from either side.

“Thank Mahal, Thorin’s beard’s grown out,” said Dis, averting Ori’s imminent doom by calling attention to Thorin’s appearance. “But, all the silver in it! See what happens when you cut your beard!”

Thorin leaned close to his sister then smiled.

“Look, namad, we match now."
“That’s different!” she barked. “I got those from your nephews, you’re just old.”

Dwalin stifled a laugh.

“I’d better take your arm, dear Thorin,” Bilbo commented, naughtily. “In case your extreme old age causes you to stumble.”

“I’m not too old to deal with you, master hobbit.”

“How very grumpy you are,” Bilbo cooed. “Is your rheumatism acting up?”

Dis shrieked with laughter and left them to continue their greetings.

Ori was amazed that Thorin stood and talked with every single dwarrow who wanted a word. He went to the seats for those who were hard of hearing and greeted each of them then proceeded up the stairs to all the galleries. Every single dwarrow there and any people of Dale had a chance to speak to him. Ori had to signal Podvu five times to send other scribes to bring him more paper, pens, nibs and ink during the progression. And for them to take away his work to deliver it to Podvu then to be given to Balin.

When the greetings were finished, Ori followed the royal party down to the main level again via some stairs at the far end of the upper most gallery. As they emerged on the floor there had been quite the re-arrangement of furniture.

The throne and dais had disappeared into the floor and a great table was there instead. Before this table, a huge space was left, ringed with tables and benches. The audiences from the galleries filed down by either lifts or stairs and their seating had been removed from the galleries and brought down to the main cavern floor. The kitchen staff were back on duty and rolling huge hogsheads into the chamber. A table against the wall held piles and piles of tankards stacked high.

Hijl stood before the great table, grinning at Thorin as he approached. She bowed deeply and Thorin took her place and smiled around at his subjects and guests.

“Everyone, please fill your tankards and make merry. Let the celebrations begin!”

Renewed cheers answered him and Dain broached the first barrel with his axe. Tankards were lofted into the gush of ale and shouts and laughter abounded. People filled their vessels and passed the rest around overflowing until all had one and the hogshead was almost empty.

“T’ Thorin! ‘R King!” Dain roared raising his tankard high. Everyone shouted this and drank. For a moment the only sound was the guzzling of ale as every one knocked back the first tankard in one go.

Dain threw his tankard high and belched.

“All Hail to Mahal and to the Seven Stars of Durin-” before he ran out of breath and caught the tankard easily.

Every dwarf gave it their best. Most of the dwarf monarchs got to ‘Durin’ and Hild made it to “Stars’. Everyone cheered as Tauriel managed “All hail-” and Legolas got to “All Hail to-“ before he choked. Lady Galadriel gamely tried but only managed to give herself a terrible case of the hiccups which was only made worse by a bad bout of giggling. Aragorn got to ‘Mahal’ and Theoden did also. Bard stuck to what he knew worked and recited the weston alphabet through to ‘L’ before he ran out and laughed.

Beorn still in his bear form also took a tankard but only gave the great belch of a large predator which did ring to the walls and everyone cheered for him.

The new king smiled around at his audience, gave Frodo to Bilbo, then drank back the contents of his tankard. Everyone almost held their breath.

“All Hail to Mahal and to the Seven Stars of Durin Shining Bright!” Thorin belched.

The cheering turned to a roar of triumph and the party began.

Brur stepped forward and shouted,

“The Kings of Dwarrow now present their gifts to their High King. An’ ‘is Consort.” Brur added winking at Bilbo, who blushed.

There was rather a lot of scuffling as the monarchs had their gifts, several of which were very large but obscured by cloths, and tried to be first.

Snur bounced out first and pushed two largish items into the center. Thorin came forward wth
Bilbo and, at Snur’s nod, pulled the enshrouding canvas off the items. They were a desk and chair. The desk was large and wide, the main part of it a strange looking gray stone. The legs and sides were encrusted with shells that had been lacquered so they shone softly in the light of the cavern. Frodo went close and carefully touched the shells. There was a matching chair upholstered in gray leather to match. On top of the back of the chair were two huge rounded shells. Thorin looked up at these.

“What are those, Chat?”

“They call ’em nautilus. They really are that big. An’ rare. Took me years a’ walkin’ the beach every day t’ find two.”

“This is amazing” Thorin said. He went and sat in the chair. “And comfortable.” He rose and let Bilbo try it. Bilbo scooted it up to the desk then frowned, leaned forward and sniffed the desk. Ori and Loli and three other scribes hovered around taking all of it in.

“Smell it,” Bilbo told Thorin with a huge grin.

A little non-plussed Thorin did so and looked puzzled. “What is that scent?”

“The great sea,” Bilbo told him.

Thorin stared at Snur.

“How did you…?”

“The stone’s a piece of onyx,” Snur happily explained. “When we were working the stone to make the deep water port, we removed quite a bit. This came away in one piece. Yeh kin see by the color it’s been under water for a number of ages. Soft as a pebble’s bum.”

Snur reached over and pulled open top of the three drawers on the left side. He lifted out a strange looking contraption that looked like a lot of shells strung together.

“Yeh hang this in yer window, an’ let the wind catch ’em” Snur said. “The shells make a noise like the wind on the sea and these strips o’ metal here,” He indicated some long twisted strands of a silvery metal. “Sound like the surf against the shore.”

Thorin went and clasped Snur’s arm, then embraced him.

“It’s beautiful, my friend, I shall treasure it, and make good use of it, too!”

Snur grinned and he stood aside with Thorin and Bilbo as a group of guards and Mistress Dazla’s team came forward and took the items to the far side of the room where everyone could examine and admire it.

Ulfr came forward and waved his guards to bring out a large flatbed on many small wheels. The canvas cover was whipped off and there lay piles and piles of glass circles, in varying sizes across from the size of a hand to several feet, but all about an inch thick. Thorin and Bilbo came to examine this. Ulfr grinned maniacally. Several scribes crowded around to draw and detail what was there.

“Me latest invention,” he crowed. “Free standin’ light which isn’t phosphorous.”

Frodo craned to see the circles better. Ulfr picked a small circle off one of the piles and handed it to Frodo.

Frodo held it and looked it over with a slight frown.

“Tap it against yer hand, laddie.” Ulfr urged.

Frodo did so and the circle immediately lit up with the most beautiful clear blue light. The faunt and the crowds gasped in delight.

“Ulfr?” Thorin asked, taking the circle and looking it over. “It’s cool to the touch.”

“Aye,” Ulfr bragged. “Each is filled with a couple a’ gasses I found. When sealed in th’ glass an’ bumped together they glow different colors. Knock ’em gently again an’ they go off. Last almos’ f’rever.”

Bilbo picked up a circle and tapped it against his palm. It burst into a brilliant orange glow.

“Well,” Bilbo said, “These will be wonderful.”

“Aye, There’s a number a’ white light ones f’r explorin’ r minin’ an’ loads a’ colors t’ decorate with.”

“How delicate are they?” Thorin asked.

Ulfr snorted.

“How delicate are we? Th’ glass’s tempered, suitable f’r handlin’ by oafs.”
“Ulfr, you are a true genius, my friend” Thorin praised. He clasped Ulfr’s arm and pulled the chemist into a hug. “Thank you.”

Arne offered Thorin a covered something. Ori guessed it was a painting of some kind as it was on an easel.

Ulfr chuckled, “I’m thinkin’ th’ lad painted yerself as he’s been’ botherin’ me f’r brown a lot.”

Arne blushed hotly and Thorin pulled off the cover.

It was indeed a painting.

“It’s Minty!” Thorin shouted in delight.

The painting was a gorgeously rendered portrait of Thorin’s pony. Ori was very impressed. The brown paint had horse hair mixed into it, both short and long, as well as ground tourmaline, and caught the light beautifully. The pony’s eyes were perfectly smooth curves of tourmaline and settled into the paint to shine. It was very lifelike.

“Arne!” Thorin turned with an open smile. “This is wonderful. It looks just like her and so real! How did you know?”

Roäc winged a bit to land on Arne’s shoulder.

“So, I got it right?” Arne asked.

“Perfect!” Roäc acknowledged before flying to perch on Thorin’s shoulder again.

“It’s fuzzy!” Frodo cried.

“May we touch it?” Bilbo asked intrigued.

Arne nodded and Frodo stroked the mane.

“It feels just like a pony’s mane, Idad Thorin,” the faunt cried in delight.

“This a masterpiece, Arne,” Thorin told the prince. “I shall hang this in the sitting room for all guests to see. Thank you from my heart.”

Thorin embraced the young prince, who looked as though he might burst with both pride and embarrassment. Ulfr looked proud and a little nonplussed as it wasn’t what he’d thought it was and was much more personal to Thorin than his own gift. Ori thought this was going to give Ulfr quite a different perspective of his son.

Again the group of guards and Mistress Dazla’s team came forward and moved the items to the far side of the room next to Snur’s gifts for all to see.

Ahkn came forward next with three enormous wagons, two piled high with great vats and the last with sacks.

“I’ve heard that the Inn on the Lake treated you to many different flavors during your stay there. These two,” Ahkn indicated the vats, “hold oils. There’s coconut oil, orange oil, lemon oil, olive oil, peanut oil, sesame oil and quite a few others. The sacks’re of spices; pepper, nutmeg, cinnamon, allspice, cardamon, turmeric, za’atar and, you name it, spices of all kinds!”

Thorin looked over the bounty on the wagons.

“Ahnk,” he said, “excuse me if I start drooling all over your boots. Mahal, I can smell them even through those well packed sacks.”

Frodo shamelessly stood tiptoes on a wheel with his face buried against a sack that bore the title ‘cinnamon’.

“Sensible lad,” Thorin mused and put his arm across Ahkn’s shoulders. Bilbo was busily looking at the oil vats.

Ori thought he could hear the recipes jostling for position in the hobbit’s head as he watched another scribe drawing Bilbo’s portrait with the thoughtful look on his face. The smell of the spices was making Ori almost drool, too! He automatically wiped his mouth on his sleeve and continued to write as these gifts were put to the side in readiness for more.

Gheir and the Mavi came forward, Gheir beaming. Each Mavis bore a large porcelain jar with a lid. Ori recognized these as ones used for keeping incense. Mavis I gave Thorin hers, it contained copal resin, redolent and refreshing. Mavis II offered frankincense. Mavis III gave myrrh. Mavis IV offered something she called cedar. Ori found it a very soothing smell. Mavis XV gave one called nag champa, which was pleasant and light. Thus finished, the Mavi stepped back and Gheir strutted forward with a wave to his guards and servants.
They brought forth twelve covered items which to Ori looked like rather large cages. As they neared, Ori heard very strange sounds, somewhere between the guttural sounds of a grouse and a raven clacking its beak.

Gheir’s chest swelled and he rocked on his boots, seeming to taking pains to present Kacuho with his best side.

“My king, never mind your hens, geese, turkeys, and other nesting birds. In my kingdom, we have developed the ultimate egg-laying and feasting bird. I give you a beginning flock.”

Gheir waved his arm again and the covers were pulled off. Ori stared.

Inside the cages were the most extraordinary creatures. He could see the nearest in full. At first look, it was twice as big as a turkey and enormously fat. Its legs were short-ish but extremely powerful looking. It was covered in all colors of gray down. On the tips of the almost negligible wings were little puffs of curly white feathers and the tail was a pouf of large similar puffs of curly feathers. Its face seemed to be made up of its huge beak. Large round bright yellow eyes peeked about and the beak stuck straight out about a foot, a wide tube with quite a vicious little hook at the end. It scratched the floor of its cage with its three toed feet and, Ori saw, an equally large back claw.

Everyone stared.

“What is it?” Bilbo asked.

Gheir looked very pleased

“We call it a raphcuctus bird, like the noises it makes. They flock in the wilds near my kingdom and we found them to be most useful.”

Thorin turned to Ori.

“Lord Ori, what was the name of the gentledwarf from who you brought Kihshassa, Brandy, and Nori’s ferrets?”

“Master Vobwi,” Ori supplied.

Thorin looked about the hall and called out, “Master Vobwi?”

Master Vobwi hurried towards them from where Ori guessed he would be - with Fanny - and bowed deeply to Thorin.

“Your majesty, consort. Congratulations on your coronation.”

Thorin thanked him with polite amusement and Bilbo looked as though he was getting used to it.

“Master Vobwi, Lord Ori tells me you deal in exotic pets, particularly birds, and take orders for flocks.”

“I do indeed, your majesty,” Vobwi agreed and bowed again.

“Who in Erebor or Dale would you say would be the best person to care for the bountiful gift of… er…raphcuctus birds?”

Master Vobwi went close to the nearest cage and stroked his beard in contemplation then said.

“Bring it out, let’s have a proper look.”

One of Gheir’s guards unhasped the cage. The raphcuctus stepped out and looked around. It continued to make the weird noises Ori had heard. It tapped the floor with its beak loudly and scratched at the stone. It looked about, pulled its head back and the tail flashed out into a defiant display of pink and blue feathers.

“Here,” said Vi, “I got married once in a dress looked jus’ like tha’. It could be me frs’ born.”

“Never mind, hen, yeh wouldn’t want t’ try breastfeedin’ it,” said Margr.

Master Vobwi went over and examined the bird. The raphcuctus stood up straight, staring back at him, and gave the impression it was rather offended at being looked over.

“Male or dam?” Vobwi asked.

Gheir looked confused and Mavis I stepped forward.

“His majesty has brought a manual for their care. It is often very difficult to tell the sexes apart.”

Queen Mavis gave the book to Thorin and he and Bilbo looked through it.

“Here we are,” said Bilbo. “It reads ‘Females are identified by their blue tongues.’ A blue tongue, how unusual.”

“Do they eat a lot of blueberries?” asked Frodo. “That’s how I turn my tongue blue.”
“So do I,” Thorin agreed.
Master Vobwi gamely opened the beak and looked in.
“This one’s male. Tongue’s pink,” he announced then roared in a mix of anger and pain as the
annoyed bird rapped him sharply on the top on his head with its beak.
“Bugger yerself, numpty of a fowl!”

The raphcuctus made a loud noise between a honk, a quack and a caw. Having said its piece, it
went over to Thorin and eyed him with a speculative air.
From Thorin’s shoulder, Roäc suddenly puffed up all his feathers and shouted,
“Back off, ugly! He’s mine!”

The raphcuctus pulled its head back and looked up at Roäc, then snorted and walked around to
look at Dwalin. Dwalin regarded the bird without much interest and the bird walked away. It
inspected Aragorn and Elrond. It went towards Lady Galadriel but continued past her to Celeborn,
who was talking quietly with Haldir.

The raphcuctus stopped and examined Celeborn, first with one eye, then the other. It took a
beakful of the elf lord’s hair and very gently tugged. Celeborn swung round annoyed, then looked
down. The raphcuctus looked up and cooed at him like a pigeon. Celeborn’s eyebrows hit his
hairline. The raphcuctus waddled forward and laid its head happily against Celeborns’s stomach
where it stayed, cooing comfortably.

Master Vobwi, rubbing his head, turned and looked at the raphcuctus who’s head was now glued
to Celebom’s belly.

“Well, I think that one now belongs to that elf, there. Lord Kelbr?”
“Yes,” Thorin agreed exchanging a wink with Lady Galadriel, who was delighted with the bird’s
devotion to her husband. Thorin continued. “I agree, that one is quite taken with Lord Celeborn and
it would be a great pity to part them. What about these?”

Thorin gestured to the other eleven cages, each with two or three mumbling raphcuctus birds.
Master Vobwi peered at each then returned to Thorin.

“If his majesty would allow, I would recommend Mistress Guernsia of the old Aldernay Farm.
Her ancestor, Guernsia Aldernay, who bred the original Dale cow, specialized in animal husbandry,
the current Mistress Guensia works with egg-laying and meat birds. I get my flocks from her.”

“Thank you, Master Vobwi,” Thorin nodded to him then raised his voice once again.

“Mistress Guernsia of the Aldernay Farm?”

There was a delighted shriek and a plump woman with a riot of brown curls about her face and a
beribboned cap hurried forward and curtsied to Thorin.

“Your majesty,” she grinned eagerly.

Thorin chuckled and offered his hand in the style of men.

“You would like to care for this wonderful gift of King Gheir, madam? I can send you help, if
you require.”

“Oh, your majesty, I would love to look after your royal raphcuctus. I have my husband and
children to help, and with my younger sister and her husband, we’ll be plenty to care for them.”

“Excellent,” said Thorin kindly. “Are they with you?”

“Oh yes!” She turned and beckoned with a flapping hand. Immediately her family came forth.
Thorin and Bilbo were introduced to her six children, her sister, and brother-in-law, and their four
children. Ori thought Mistress Guernsia’s children were pale skinned and very tall compared to their
cousins.

“Your husband?” Thorin asked.

She took a breath and straightened then turned and gestured again. From the crowd a male elf
stepped forward and came to take his wife’s hand. He bowed to Thorin.

“Here’s my Hathor,” Mistress Guernsia said.

“Thank you, your majesty,” Hathor said, quietly. “We are honored that you trust us with this
care.”

“Halir?” Thranduil asked, approaching.
The elf sighed and bowed to Thranduil.
“Your majesty.”
“I knew you’d gone wandering an age ago. We had thought you lost. I had no idea you had returned so close to the wood.”

The elf turned to his wife and smiled at her.
“I found someone worthy of settling with and took up a man’s name of Hathor.”

Thranduil looked on Mistress Guernsia and the children gathered close around their parents. He smiled.
“Perhaps while we are here you would consider regaling some of us with the tales of your travels. Naturally, if you prefer to write and send them to us, that, too is acceptable. Remember that the Wood will always be open to you and your kin.”

Hathor looked amazed, didn’t quite let his mouth drop open, and bowed.
“Thank you, your majesty. You are most kind.”

Then with ease of professional bird handlers, the family with the help of the servants and guards gently moved the crates and their feathery contents to the side. Mistress Guernsia and Hathor were already pouring over the manual and directing their family to set up a low barrier and gather food and water for the now freed raphcactus.

Lord Celeborn’s new friend, however, would not be separated from him.
“It’s all right, my dear,” said Lady Galadriel. “Our Kelli can come sit with us.”
“Our what?” Celeborn replied. “Your Kelli, you mean.”
“Mm-hmm, whatever you say, my dear, though he does take after your side of the family.”
“It’s the nose,” said Thranduil, nodding sagely.

Celeborn shot him a filthy look.

Queen Hild came forward and favored Thorin with an amused smile.
“I am afraid I am not so generous and nice as my brother monarchs. However, I do know well that here in Erebor you have the greatest variety of different trades and guilds. Because of this, I have brought you a substance that is used by the men in our area. They use it to seal their roofs, but it seems to me much more could be done with it. Also, with your connections with the elves, they may know many things about it, as the substance is the sap of a tree.”

A great dray was rolled forward, covered with many metal barrels and also baskets of different sizes, holding trees in various states of maturity. A couple of vats were unloaded and the lids removed. Ori peeked in.
“As you see, it can be dyed many colors.” Hild went on.
Ori stared at the weird, shiny stuff in a beautiful shade of orange. Bifur came forward and examined it. He then turned to Bombur.
“Giveth me a little of thy oil, cousin.”

Bombur raised an eyebrow but drew a small vial out of his pocket and uncorked it. Bifur held out his gloved hands and Bombur pour a small puddle of oil into Bifur’s palm. Bifur rubbed the oil all over his gloves and reached into the orange and withdrew a handful. He rolled this into a ball and blew on it.
“It dries very quickly,” Hild told him. He nodded then grinned at them. Suddenly he raised his arm and threw down the ball hard against the floor. The ball smacked the floor and bounced straight up three times higher than the crowd. Shrieks of delight came all over. The ball came down and bounced again. Someone caught it and threw it again against the floor. The orange ball bounced all over the room. People caught it, bounced it, threw it to each other.
Bifur took a small copper pipe out of his pocket and coated the end with more oil. He scooped up another, larger glob, of bright green this time. He shoved one end of the pipe into the glob and held out the clean end to Bombur, who took a huge breath and blew into it. The glob inflated like a bladder into an enormous, green ball. Bifur stopped Bombur when the ball was as tall as Thorin and gave it a quick twist to tie it off from the pipe. Bifur gave the ball a quick rub of oil and tossed it up lightly, then smacked it with the palm of his hand. The huge ball sailed over the crowd. More shrieks of delight burst forth as the guests tossed the ball about the room with great enthusiasm.
“Well,” Thorin turn to Hild who was watching with a bemused look on her face, “I’m delighted to
announced that as well as sealing the roofs of men, this makes wonderful bouncing balls and likely other toys. I will let you know if we discover anything else, but you may have to send more.”

Hild burst out laughing and gave an extravagant bow.

“My king.”

“My turn,” Dain bellowed as the dray was moved to the side with the other presents. Bifur and Bombur went with it, providing more giant balls for the crowd.

Dain bellowed to a few of the staff who, with Chopper pulling, guided a long wide cart out to the middle of the room. On the back were four hogsheads of the Iron Hills’ famous broom flower ale.

“Dain this is most generous,” Thorin thanked him. “I know you only make a few of these a year.”

“I ain’t done, cuz,” Dain sniggered. He yanked a cover off whatever else was on the cart.

The whatever turned out to be an enormous rhodochrosite bed set with fire opals.

Thorin face-palmed and groaned. Bilbo composed his face but his eyes were dancing with amusement. Almost everyone was laughing and cheering and the dwarrow made occasional lewd remarks.

Snur sighed.

“Imagine sleepin’ in bacon.”

“Is that the same stone as Dori… caressed?” Bilbo asked.

“Yes,” said Thorin. “Fire opals.”

“Meaning?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

Bilbo chuckled.

“Never mind. I’m not that dense.”

Ori walked around the huge piece of furniture. The stone was cunningly incised and sculpted. The head and footboards with their large posts at each end were carved with runes of restful sleep and happiness and many other calming and relaxation runes. The huge slab on the inside to hold the mattress was covered in the most lewd and naughty phrases in runes from poetry and quotations from Queen Kivi’s book.

“How in Mahal’s name are we going to get this-” began Thorin and Dori pounced. “Now, don’t you worry about a thing, dear. It’ll all get sorted tomorrow or so.”

Thorin raised an eyebrow.

“And how long have you know about this, Bearer?”

Dori fluttered winsomely,

“Oh, you know, it’s just one of those adorable little Bearer things, dear.”

Dori turned and Margr and Vi were there to second the remarks with wise nods.

Ori finally had a chance to get a good look at the sisters. He was horrified.

They really had clad themselves completely in Durin blue, from their brightly dyed, elaborately teased globed hair to their beribboned shoes. Their Durin blue satin dresses sported high collars and puffed long sleeves and wrapped their impressive figures down to their ankles, generously padded to perfect roundness.

Bilbo stared at them in something that bordered on alarm.

“Are those really daggers in your hair?” he asked.

The sisters grinned in delight,

“We’re vicious, heavily-armed blueberries - get it?!”

“How did they find out about that?” Thorin asked.

“I didn’t tell them!” Ori wailed as beside him, Dwalin started to laugh. Dori fluttered his eyelashes coquettishly and Thorin groaned. Balin had the good manners to blush a little but he was grinning.

“King Theoden!” Margr cried as the king came alongside to admire the amazingly carved bedstead.

Theoden bowed, obviously at sea as to who they were.

“It’s us!” Vi added, helpfully. “Remember? We was all at our Dori’s last night?”

“Aye,” Marg added, “an’ th’ other night yeh slipped away before we could call ‘heads’ or ‘tails’, naughty thing!”
“Ahhhhh, Mistress Vi and Mistress Margr?” he asked, still unconvinced and properly horrified. Margr laughed and smacked his arm.

“Bad man! A’ course! We’re still willin’ t’ have a go.”

“If you’re ‘up’ f’r it,” Vi added slyly. “We kin get our Glorfy to come along, too, if yeh fancy.” The two of them dissolved into cackles.

“Hello,” Lord Glorfindel helped as he arrived and put an arm about both sisters.

“Why is your hair blue?” Theoden asked, obviously too shocked to process what ‘our Glorfy’ might have to do with anything.

“T’ go with our outfits, a’ course!” said Margr.

“We wanted t’ do our faces, too,” said Vi, “but we ran out a’ time.”

There was no escape for Theoden now. The sisters each threaded an arm through his and steered him toward the ale with a proprietary air.

“Come along now, chuck,” said Margr.

“Aye, plenty a’ ale t’ be had over there” Vi added.

Lord Glorfindel bowed and winked at the royal party as he followed in the sisters’ wake.

“That was weird,” Frodo observed.

“Aye, well, welcome t’ Erebor, wee ‘n,” Dwalin said as the bed was taken to the side.

Elrond approached with Lindir and the twins. Elrond carried something long, wrapped in fine silver silk.

“Hail, Thorin, High King of All Dwarrow,” the elf lord said formally, then smiled. “As you are a sword wielder, we have brought you a gift we hope will serve you well.”

Lindir unwrapped the silk coverings and Elrond held out a great sword to Thorin.

“We bring you Orcrist, the goblin cleaver, forged in lost Gondolin, and wielded by heroes of our race.”

Thorin’s eyes lit up as he came forward and graciously accepted the sword.

The scabbard was jeweled, though not overly-so, suiting a weapon meant to be used, not merely seen. It was larger than his current sword, forged to be worn at the back.

To the delight of the warriors present, he immediately drew the blade and held it aloft. Ori was impressed, despite being forged by elves the weapon was high by even dwarf standards. The shining blade was long, swelled to an impressive width and curved wickedly at the perfect point, and with the hilt in the shape of a dragon’s tooth Thorin handled it with the expertise of long experience. In his hand the blade flashed and whirled with deadly speed. Thorin turned back to Elrond with a grin of pure enjoyment.

“The balance is perfect! I shall be proud to bear this, Lord Elrond.”

Elrond bowed and looked rather pleased with himself.

Thorin sheathed the sword, handed it to Dwalin and immediately unbuckled the sword he wore.

“Fili,” he called.

Fili and Kili came forward eagerly to inspect the new weapon. Thorin held out his own sword to the crown prince.

“Crown Prince Fili, you will now bear the sword of your Great, Great Grandmother Theris. Use it well.”

Fili bowed low, grinning, and took the sword. Kili helped his brother attach the sword to his right hip and moved the old one to rest over the crown prince’s shoulder.

Thorin removed his sword belt and adjusted the straps and Dwalin buckled it across the King’s back and settled Orcrist there. Everyone cheered.

Thorin bowed to Elrond again and then grinned at Dwalin.

“We try it out tomorrow, I think.”


Elrond stepped away leaving the area open for Aragorn and Arwen to come forward followed by Captain Boromir and three others carrying a covered flat something that was the size of the kitchen table top at Fundin House.

It was set on edge and Arwen stood beside it.
“King Thorin,” Aragorn smiled. “My lady has made you a gift in honor of this great occasion and we both hope you will enjoy it.”

“Lady Arwen,” Thorin said with a bow.

The item was uncovered to reveal a beautifully woven tapestry of Erebor seen from a distance. The colors sang together as there the Lonely Mountain stood in all its grandeur against a blue sunny sky. The tapestry edge was bordered by Durin blue with the dwarven rune and elven script for the word friendship. There were gasped and ‘ooo’s and ‘aaaah’s’ from all around.

“This is wonderful, you ladyship.” Thorin praised in obvious delight. “Such detail. When have you seen our home before?”

Arwen laughed and blushed a little.

“I fully admit, your majesty, until I arrived here, I have never laid eyes on your lovely home. I used an ancient painting for reference. I realize now neither do it justice as I never dreamed how wonderful it was until I visited.”

“You have done it justice, my lady,” Thorin corrected her. “This is magnificent. Would the ancient painting be the one done by Celebrimbor in his youth?”

“Yes,” Arwen cried in delight. “You know of it?”

“I do. He is said to have painted a smaller twin of it and gifted it to Narvi at the beginning of their friendship before they forged the doors of Moria.”

Elrond and his family were immediately on the alert,

“Is this so?” Elrond asked. “The original painted was lost along ago and only copies are seen in rare books. There is another?”

“There is, “ Balin confirmed. “Unfortunately the second, too, was lost with that great kingdom.”

“But it is brought back to all of us by Lady Arwen,” said Thorin and went to the elf lady, bowed over her hand and kissed it.

“Thank you, madame. You have given us a great gift. It will hang here in this room so all may remember the friendship of our dear ancestors Celebrimbor and Narvi.”

The cheering commenced again and it took some time to calm everyone down again. The tapestry, Thorin ordered to be set against the wall before all the standards of the visiting monarchs.

The area opened for Theoden King to come forward. The horse king looked rather amused.

“Congratulations, Thorin High King of All Dwarrow. It has been an honor and a joy to be witness here to these festivities. I do assure you that when I decided upon my gift to you, I had no notion it would be something I would be in trade talks with you and King Bard about almost immediately.”

“Oh?” Thorin asked

Four of Theoden’s soldiers came forward, leading a pair of the largest, most pure white cattle. They were easily the biggest bull and cow Ori had ever seen. From each animal’s head rose horns of a great size and sharpness.

“I give you a cow and bull of our own cattle. We call them aurochs. Do let me know how any interbreeding with the famous Dale cattle goes.”

Thorin grinned.

“King Bard, your thoughts?”

Bard came and stroked the bull’s forehead and scratched it on the poll between the horns. The bull closed its eyes in happiness and rumbled. Bard turned and called out,

“Mistress Guernsia, who would you recommend?”

Mistress Guensia looked up from where she was stroking two raphcactus birds.

“Old Master Hallow from the Windy Poplars farm, King Bard.”

“I’m here!”

There was a shout from near Fanny and a middle-aged man hurried forward. Ori noted that though he was brushed and formally dressed, his face and arms were dark and lined with the sun and his hands when they reached to touch the beautiful cattle were rough with callouses.

“King Thorin, I would be honored to care for these beautiful creatures. Theoden King, when does the cow need milking?”
“Not now,” the horse king said with the easy familiarity of a man well-versed in caring for animals. “She’ll need to be served later this month.”

Master Hallow nodded and with a hand on the head of each animal led them over to a new enclosure Mistress Guensia’s family was setting up.

There was a murmuring through the crowd as King Thranduil swaggered forward. He was followed by his sons and Captain Tauriel.

“King Thorin.”

“King Thranduil,” Throin replied with a smile.

“Congratulations and thank you for inviting us to attend this most charming ceremony.”

“As charming as the gravy course?” Thorin teased.

Thranduil smirked.

“This is charming, a gravy course is incomparable.”

“Sounds delicious,” Bilbo commented, intrigued.

“There’ll be one at the feast,” Thorin promised.

Thranduil bowed his head slightly to Mistress Dazla, who blushed and curtsied. Thranduil turned back and raised his voice to all could hear.

“In the Greenwood in the tops of the trees there lives this lovely creature. They do not live long and, when their wings drop to the forest floor, they are much prized by my people.”

The elf king opened his hand. There in the palm was a large butterfly. Ori was amazed. The butterfly was the exact shade of Durin blue. It fluttered away from the elf king’s hand and floated around, eliciting gasps of amazement from dwarrow and men alike.

Legolas and Tauriel came forward at Thranduil’s nod.

“I know you are a sword-wielder, King Thorin, but perhaps for formal occasions you will consider wearing this cloak I have had made.”

Thranduil turned and, as Tauriel and Legolas carefully lifted away the silk, Thranduil took up a Durin blue cloak that was iridescent. Ori gasped along with several others. The cloak was long enough to trail behind Thorin and it was made entirely of butterfly wings. Thranduil came forward. Bilbo helped Thorin out of his long coat and Thranduil placed the amazing cloak about Thorin’s shoulders. Everyone murmured and sighed as Thorin moved away slightly and the cloak shimmered in the light. Half a dozen scribes honed in and began sketching madly.

Thorin turned and smiled at Thranduil.

“This is magnificent, my friend, I shall wear it proudly. Thank you.”

Thorin stepped back, laid his hand over his heart, and bowed his head to the elf king. Thranduil was visibly touched by this gesture and mirrored it. Thranduil nodded to Tauriel and Legolas who came to Thorin’s assistance and the cloak was taken to the side with the other gifts. Mistress Dazla had at a frame set up and the cloak was immediately displayed over it. People crowded around to look over the beautiful item.

Thranduil smiled at Bard.

“Your turn, I think.”

Bard came forward to Thorin, looking a little embarrassed.

“Congratulations Thorin. Kingship suits you much better than it does me.”

There were shouts from both dwarrow and men form the Dale vehemently suggesting otherwise.

“I don’t have anything magnificent to offer you….”

“King Bard,” Thorin interrupted. “My Brother King, please know that I value your friendship far more than any gift that could be offered me.”

“Yes, well,” Bard went on. “I decided that since we will be spending a great deal of time together in the assistance of our peoples, I thought something personal that we could do together might be acceptable.”

Thorin looked interested.

“Do?”

Bard flushed slightly.

“I don’t often have time since my youth but there was one sport that I much enjoyed and, I hope,
you will as well. It could be something we might take time to do together.”

Bain came up to his father with a grin. He was carrying a long thin, pole of willow, Ori decided, and a small, stout box with a handle, and a hand net. Bard offered the pole to Thorin, who gamely took it and examined it. Thorin grinned up at Bard.

“You, my friend, are going to teach me to fish with a pole.”

Bard nodded.

Thorin laughed, “I have read many tales of how this activity leads to long thoughts and mighty ponderings. Are we going to consider our kingly duties while we fish off the dock or you boat? Do we royally dig worms first or shall I bring some cavern ones when we go?”

Bard laughed.

“You, my friend, are going to teach me to fish with a pole.”

“Actually, neither. This is a very specialized rod and it only used a fly as bait.”

“We shall royally capture flies?” Thorn teased, making people laugh.

“I’ve have already made our flies, most royal ars…friend of mine,” Bard corrected himself. He gestured the box which Bilbo held while Frodo reach up and opened the lid.

Inside were many tiny compartments and in each were fishing hooks of different sizes decorated with brightly colored threads and metal beads. Some were made in such a way as to look like dragonflies.

Thorin picked one out.

“You made this, Bard?” he demanded, staring at the tiny artifact.

“Yes, the making is called ‘tying flies’.” Bard explained. Ori sensed a seed of pride in the man.

Thorin looked up at Bard.

“I am amazed you’re not blind, my friend. These are beautiful and most cunningly wrought. They could double as jewelry.”

Bard colored a little then looked hopefully at Thorin.

“So you would like to come fly-fishing with me?”

“I most certainly would!” Thorn said immediately. He passed the gear to Balin and Binni standing near and went immediately to Bard, holding out his hand. “I shall be honored to be your pupil in this sport of men.”

They shook hands and Bard leaned over a little awkwardly as Thorin pulled him down to knock foreheads as a brother.

The dwarrow nodded and muttered their approval as the menfolk all began to applaud again.

As Bard’s gifts were settled beside Thranduil’s, Thorin thanked and embraced each of Bard’s children, taking a special moment to gently bump foreheads with Bain and clasp his shoulder in the way of a fond idad. Bain blushed and looked pleased as the crowd vociferated its support.

Lady Galadriel glided over to Thorin and the room hushed to silence to witness the giving of the final coronation gift.

The lady looked solemn and in her hands she held a little box of plain gray wood, unadorned save for a single silver rune upon the lid.

“The contents of this, I once foresaw I would give at a time when a quest stood upon a knife’s edge and that it would be held in trust by one who knew and deeply valued the elements within. It relieves me that this time did not and will not come to pass. You are not the one who will care for what is within, but I know you have about you those who will, thus you will come to know the value of it. I have walked about your mountain and the lands surrounding it. It is good and shall bring forth what will be placed in its keeping.”

Thorin bowed slightly and everyone else looked at each other in puzzlement as it was clear no one present had any idea what the Lady of Lorien meant.

She opened the box. Ori looked in and saw what appeared to be dust and three silver nuts.

Thorin and Bilbo peered at the contents and wonder came over Bilbo’s face.

“Lady Galadriel, is this…?”

“There is soil from my own orchards that will help yours and King Bard’s lands. The silver seeds are of the mallorn trees of Lothlorien. May they bless your Kingdoms with their beauty.”
Bard came and looked at the soil and nuts doubtfully, but he bowed with Thorin in thanks.

“Finally,” said Galadriel in greater seriousness. “I give you this,” she handed Thorin a small crystal phial: it glittered as she moved it and rays of white light sprang from her hand. “In this phial,” she said, “is caught the light of Eärendil’s star, set amid the waters of my fountain. It will shine still brighter when night is about you. If you ever need, may it be a light for you in dark places, when all other lights go out.”

Thorin received the phial and frowned slightly.

“My Lady Galadriel, I have said my duty and wishes are to see my people restored and in happiness and plenty. I have no plans to go back to recover the kingdom of Khazad-dûm.”

“So you have stated,” she replied. “And you speak the truth. But should you need this phial it is yours.”

Thorin bowed again, thanked her and kissed her hand.

Everyone burst into applause as Thorin made a gracious speech of thanks for all the gifts once more. People had more ale, talked and admired the gifts.

There was a shout and Jim waved his arms for everyone to clear out of the middle of the room. He and several of his troupe brought a huge wagon so long it had eight wheels, into the chamber. It was covered by an unknown material which, when pulled off the wagon, resolved itself to be a huge black tub, at least thirty feet across. It had tall sides of about three feet. Around this the troupe placed great stanchions to hold the round shape. Ori looked in. The blackness was shining. Ori touched it and his hand came away with a slick of grease. He sniffed, big bean oil. The entire inside had been oiled! Ori looked up. Jim directed the huge wagon alongside the container. The members of the troop used a winch to upend the wagon, dumping its contents into the black container. Ori stared. It was mud.

Another shout from Jim brought a huge pipe from a far wall which, when it reached the container, was opened and warm water gushed out, filling the container to about half a foot. The mud and water swished around and gurgled. The pipe was withdrawn and Jim hopped upon a platform held by two stanchions.

“Greetings everyone!” Jim shouted. “And a wonderful Coronation Day to all. Now we have a game of chance for you all to participate in!”

The crowd cheered.

“We have here,” Jim took from Ruelis something covered in a cloth and unwrapped it. Ori was confused. Held high in Jim’s hands was a very sweet-looking pale pink piglet.

“The prize has been donated from King Dain! And is a lovely little farrowing piglet! She’s three months old and will be a beautiful addition to any herd or a wonderful starter for a new one! And once started, imagine the delicious pigs you will be able to live off of!”

The crowd cheered and came forward to gather about the container.

“There’s just one hitch,” Jim grinned at all of them. “You have to catch her.”

Everyone present laughed. Bilbo looked at Thorin.

“Pigs are hard to catch, but what’s the mud for?”

Thorin shook his head and Jim barked out again.

“For the price of one copper, you get a chance to catch this lovely little princess of a pig! Who’s up for it? Come on, you’re not all afraid of getting a little mud on you, are you? Take off your boots and have a go. One copper!!”

At that, men and dwarrow started taking off their boots. Several dwarrow just shouted and stripped down to their combinations. The men started stripping off as well. Old women and dams came forward in nothing but their shifts. Ruelis held a box for the coppers to be dropped in. Jim showed the pig to any who passed him and from his platform the players hopped down and slogged through the mud.

“Up against the sides of the pit, ladies and gents,” Jim called. “Everyone’s getting a fair chance.”

Ori started to giggle as he saw Bain and Stonehelm encouraging Theodred. Margr and Vi were already in their petticoats and Glorfindel, down to his tightie-whities, marched over and gave their coppers. Thorin and Bilbo were invited to stand on the platform with Jim, where they wished good
luck to all who were getting into the pit. The dwarf monarchs and the visiting royals were at the pit sides all eager to watch. Ori got a glimpse of Nori and Bofur working the crowd, making book. Fanny was behind the crowd, but could see over all.

Dain was on the floor near the platform with his arm slung around Sculdis, who was cheering the players. Chopper stood on his hind legs, the front ones hooked on the side the pit. Ori quickly boosted himself onto the platform and sat on the edge for a good view. Dwalin came over and stood behind him.

Bard leaned on the pit side and chuckled as Thranduil stood beside him. At a sudden cheer from Bain, Arne, and Stonehelm, Theodred cursed and threw off his garments and handed the bundle to his father before hopping up. Theoden face palmed and Aragorn gave him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

“Anyone else?” Jim called. The sides of the pit were all but completely obscured by people.

“Any one at all?”

“Legolas!” squawked Thranduil as the young prince shoved his clothing at Gimli and leapt up lightly to deposit his copper in the box and take his place in the pit. There was a cheer from the younger set and Elrond and Lindir attempted to stifle their laughter, until Elladan and Elrohir leapt after him. Elrond came to Thranduil and Bard’s side.

“How does this ‘game’ work?” Elrond asked.

Bard lit his pipe and snickered.

“Wait and see.”

“Right,” Jim shouted. “Everyone ready?”

Shouts came form the pit and the players flexed their knees and hopped a little.

“Are we ready to win this lovely piggie?” Jim teased, stirring the crowd.

Cheers answered him.

“Then let’s get this little piggy-wig ready,” Jim called.

Fior and Floris held out a large bucket to him. Jim dipped the piglet into the bucket and lifted it high. Ori stared, the piggy was squealing with delight and shining from her quick bath in big bean oil.

“On three!” Jim ordered loudly as he leaned down and lightly popped the pig down into the mud.

“One!” shouted Jim.

She hopped around and scampered a little, her tail wagging madly.

“Two!” Jim intoned. The crowd surged a little, eager to see what was going to happen.

“Three!” roared Jim. “Catch her and hold her to win her! Catch the ‘Greased Pig’!”

The players rushed forward. The piglet squealed, as running was a game she obviously loved, and took off at full speed. The mud and water mixed with the oil on the bottom of the pit had half the players skidding into a huge pile of bodies in a few moments.

“Stars!” Thranduil cried in horror as the wave of bodies rushed by his side of the pit and skidded again as the piglet doubled back and ran under their legs, collapsing them all into another heap.

Glorfindel gave a battle cry and leaped forward landed on his chest and grasped the piglet. Oily as she was, she slid out of his hands like a loose bar of soap in a bath. She rushed forward then stopped, looked at the mud covered elf, oinked in joy and ran off again. The roars of encouragement and cheering from the crowd all but lifted the ceiling.

Ori was now laughing so hard he couldn’t hold his pen very well to sketch the roiling mess in the pit. The players were themselves laughing which hindered their efforts as well. The little piglet was so quick and so slick, none could hold her. Margr and Vi attempted to corner her by holding out their petticoats to corner her but the piggy just oinked and ran under their legs. Legolas and the twins attempted team work but even their speed and dexterity was no match for the little grease ball.

Chopper oinked and bellowed at the piglet. She looked up, oinked back and sped to the wall of the pit and the players bounded after her. They missed gloriously as the piggy, using her speed, managed to run along the side of the wall, zooming past those trying to trap her. This game went on for quite some time until there was a huge crashing of bodies in the middle and everything stopped. The players got up. There was no sign of the piglet. The players stepped away, looking around.
“We have a winner,” shouted Jim, pointing. Ori saw a young Dale lass, sitting in the middle of the puddle, her arms and legs around the piglet which was oinking happily and nuzzling her face.

Everyone cheered and the lass was lifted as she was, holding the pig, and carried to the platform. Thorin and Bilbo congratulated her as her parents came forward and Jim helped the lass put the piglet, now looking like it was ready for a nap, into a loosely made rush basket with a cover.

Mistress Dazla, her minions and some guards escorted the besmirched combatants to the far side of the room where the pipe had entered. They were instructed to stand still as warm water was poured over them and flowed into the grate below their feet. Assorted family members stood by, holding the bathers’ clothes and the minions distributed towels and spare underthings.

While people relaxed and dried, Thorin called once more for their attention, “My dear friends, when you are back in your grandeur, please join me in a feast!”

A great cheer rose.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Time for drinking toasts, eating, drinking, singing, drinking, dancing, drinking. It’s a dwarrow party and dwarrow are getting plowed. Ori learns all kinds of things and so do you. Get you gossiping ears on and here we go! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Every musician in Erebor and Dale gathered at the entrance and began to play, some solos, some groups, and sometimes all together.

Meanwhile, Mistress Dazla’s army of minions, the mountain maintenance guild, and the royal kitchens’ staff swept through, setting tables, replacing empty hogsheads, helping haul the pig arena outside and turning the gift animals out in the grassy area by the main gates to graze and otherwise hobnob. Groups took turns playing shepherd.

As the tables were prepared, the guests filled them. At the high table, the royals sorted themselves into companionable clusters. Someone had replaced Thorin’s chair with a noticeably wider model, suitable for hobbit perching, but not so wide that someone couldn’t rest his hand on someone else’s thigh with impunity. Frodo sat on Thorin’s knee. Apparently, they were going to share a plate.

Ori couldn’t wait to see how this worked out. As he recalled, Frodo often missed his mouth. Of course, Dis had told him that Kili had also shared a plate with Thorin at that age. He couldn’t find his mouth either. Ori reflected that Kili really hadn’t improved that much, though he seemed to have turned it into amusement for his fellow diners, especially Tauriel. Eventually he did eat everything, even if it meant sucking gravy out of his tunic.

Ori glanced about from where he was standing with Fili, Sigrid, and Tilda. He supposed they ought to go and claim their places soon. Sigrid suddenly huffed then growled and unfastened her outer golden dress.

“I have to get out of this thing. It’s quilted and I’m roasting in it.”

Fili helped as she shrugged out of it, catching it so it didn’t hit the floor. Underneath, the bodice of her Durin blue dress left nothing of her shape to the imagination. Bard gaped at her, his head whipped around at all the appreciative noises and even low whistles, and he tore off his coat and draped it over her front.

“Da! What are you doing?”
“Sigrid! You can’t.”
“What? My dress has sleeves,” Sigrid grouched, pulling the coat off.
“Yes, it does. It also looks like you could serve breakfast balancing the tray on your…” he gestured to her person in general, rather red in the face.
“My breasts?” she asked pointedly, blinking at him.
“My breasts?” she asked pointedly, blinking at him.
“You need to put those away!”
“Da, I can’t send them around back.”
“Are you sure you can’t flatten them a little?”
“No! They don’t deflate.”
“Where did you even get such a dress?”
Dori materialized beside them.
“Oh, yes, that did turn out well, my Sig,” said Dori. “Very striking. Yes, lovely.”
“Thank you, Dori, I love my name day present!” said Sigrid, stooping a little to kiss Dori’s cheek. Bard opened his mouth, closed it and bowed slightly.

“Yes, thank you, Dori. It was kind of you.”

“Binni designed it,” Sigrid told him brightly.

Bard swallowed.

“Binni? That’s amazingly restrained for the same dwarf who decorated the throne room.”

“D’you like me braids, Ori?” Tilda demanded.

“They are very nice. Did Dori put them in for you?”

“No, she was dressing Sigrid’s hair. Queen Hild did me braids herself!”

Ori gaped, but recovered quickly and said, “That must have been quite an honor.”

Tilda thought about it.

“D’you think she was honored? She must handle quite a lot of braids. An’ I made sure my new boots had a sheath for me knife!”

“Tilda,” muttered Bard, “you aren’t a dwarf warrior. You don’t need to go everywhere armed.”

“Scribes never know when they’ll need t’ sharpen a nib, Da,” said Tilda.

Bard groaned and went away.

“Your father is wearing a ring?” Ori finally remembered to ask Sigrid about the flash of gold he’d spotted from the dais.

“He wasn’t going to, but I bullied him into it,” said Sigrid. “Calmar took that ring off my grandfather’s finger on the night he died, and that was sheer spite, because it isn’t of great value.”

Ori hissed in sympathy.

“Did Bard find it in one of the statues?”

Sigrid nodded.

“It’s not much, but it means everything to Da.”

“Yes,” concurred Dori. “As Sigrid said, it belonged to dear Girion. Very plain ring, just a gold band with an oval cut carnelian stone, I believe, Sig dear, your great grandfather got it from his cousin, who had sailed the great sea. But I doubt our Bard would wear anything flashier.”

“Dale males tend to be pretty plainly turned out,” Ori observed, half to himself.

Dori made a moue, looking after Bard.

“I’ve always told Bard he could do better with himself. His facial hair is quite respectable, his nose isn’t too small. He wouldn’t disgrace a diamond or two.”

“Maybe he’s just letting Thranduil be the diamond for the moment.”

Dori looked down at him and grinned.

“Clever, pet. Very good.”

Sigrid giggled.

“If it’s any consolation, Dori, when he’s actually crowned he’ll have to have his other ear pierced. It’s traditional.”

Dori sighed.

“Plain gold hoops, I suppose. Still, we have to start somewhere.”

Ori could only imagine what Bard would look like if Dori had his way. Bard would be so dripping with jewels and spangles that he might as well be a heroine in a Shire novel. Ori suppressed a giggle, imagining Bard and Thranduil trying to outdance each other in filmy costumes.

Ori and his small group went up to find their seats at the high table. Ori noticed that Lady Galadriel sat on the other side of Thorin. As Ori passed, Galadriel peered at Thorin’s crown and her face was swept with a soft look of nostalgia.

“Ah, dear Queen Kivi. I remember her with great fondness.”

“You were acquainted?” Thorin asked.

“We used to get drunk together on occasion.”

“Milady, I simply can’t imagine that,” Thorin teased.

“I remember when she was doing research for her famed book. She was quite thorough, and slightly esoteric. You know, even I can’t do Illustration 20, and I’ve been alive for a very long time. Do you know how long Elrond spent with the healers after he tried Illustration 20? Or was it
Celeborn?

“Or was it Tharkûn?” Bilbo asked with perfect complacency.

She shrieked with laughter.

“Oh, Master Bilbo, you’re terrible!”

“Yes,” Tharkûn agreed dryly, sitting on Bilbo’s other side. “Though, now that I’m here, perhaps I’ll find friendlier company with the oliphaunt.”

“Oh, stop sulking,” said Bilbo. “You’ll miss dinner. You’re as likely to skip a meal as I am.”

Fili sat with Sigrid just beyond Tharkûn and Ori sat next to them. He saw Dwalin heading his way and patted the seat next to him. Dwalin arrived and sat, kissing the top of Ori’s head as he did.

The food began to arrive. Dain saw this, cut off his conversation with Gheir, and leapt nimbly up onto the head table.

“Th’ food’s arrived!” Dain shouted. “Let’s sing it in properly!”

“Sit down!” Dori cried, smacking his real leg, to no effect. “You’re treading dirt into the nice table linens!”

“Here we go!” bellowed Dain. “A rousin’ chorus ’r twelve o’ ‘Me Zeydis’.”

All the dwarrow cheered, except for Thorin, who groaned.

“You don’t even have an excuse, Dain. You aren’t drunk yet!”

“Jus’ yeh wait!” Dain promised him, then called, “I’ll star’ out, an’ mind yer cues!”

Aewandínæn, shot up from his chair to storm off. Gloin grabbed him by the arm and yanked him back down without even looking or putting down his ale. Ori smothered a smile. If Gloin was getting bossy with Aewandínæn, it meant he was serious and approving of Gimli and Legolas’ relationship and was already planning their wedding.

Dain waved a hand at the dwarrow musicians, who gave him a starting bang on the drums then got a steady dance beat going - Tap-t’tapTap, Tap-t’tapTap!

“Oh! Me Zey-dis!” bawled Dais at the top of his lungs. “Me Zey-dis!

Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailor.

“Once again now!” Dain called to the assembled.


Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailor.”

Dain howled out the next verse,

“My Zey-dis found her Fancy One
when I broke the belt across my tum.

Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailor.

“Everybody!” Dain called.

“Me Zey-dis!” A few of the Dale residents had picked up the chorus and gave it their all. “Me Zey-dis!”

Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailor.”

“Sing along with Jim now!” called Dain.

Jim hopped up on another table and led the chorus while waving his arms for emphasis.
“Me Zey-dis! Me Zey-dis!
Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailor.”

“It’s all most too sad to tell to you,” sang Dain.
“She took seven boxes of emeralds, too.
Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailor.

“Everybody!” shouted Dain.

“Me Zey-dis!” Almost everyone was singing and Glorfindel’s, Legolas’, and the twins’ beautiful voices sailed over the top of the general noise. “Me Zey-dis!
Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailor.”

“Once again now!” Dain called.

“Me Zey-dis! Me Zey-dis!
Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailor.”

Dain bawled out, “That tailor he really hurt my heart
he made my drawers smell like a fart.
Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailor.

“Everybody!” shouted Dain

“Me Zey-dis! Me Zey-dis!” Everyone at the head table sang, except Aewandínén. Or, they sang if they could around their laughter.
“Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailor.”

“Once again now!” roared Dain.

“Me Zey-dis! Me Zey-dis!
Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailor.”

“Members of the plumbing guild!” Dain yelled. A large group filling two tables immediately drank back their ale and gargled through it.
“Me Zey-dis! Me Zey-dis!
Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailor.”

“Everybody!” Dain shouted.

“Me Zey-dis! Me Zey-dis!” The hall rang with the music, the people bringing in the food had joined in and were dancing as they brought in their burdens.
“Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailor.”
“Oh, why did she have t’ go away?” Dain sang,
“I ain’t see her since Durin’s Day.
Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ th’ tailor.

“Everybody!” Dain shouted

“Me Zey-dis! Me Zey-dis!
Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailor.”

“Everybody!” Dain hissed

All the voices dropped to a hiss.
“Me Zey-dis! Me Zey-dis!
Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailor.”

“EVERYBODY!” Dain bellowed for the finale and everyone roared at the top of their lungs.

“Me Zey-dis! Me Zey-dis!
Me Zey-dis! She hocked me pickaxe
an’ ran wi’ the’ tailorrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
“Ladies, gentlemen, bearers, children of all ages! I, your master of ceremonies, present for your pleasure, excitement, wonder, and thrills, the Court of Miracles!”

Everyone cheered.

“And now,” Jim cried with great flair, “mind your plates, petticoats, and beards as we perform for your delight, The Drama of the Lady Warg-Slayer!”

Everyone cheered again and leaned forward eagerly as there was a great crash of drums.

Kib stalked into the room, brandishing a torch in one hand and a sword in the other. He was painted entirely green with lurid red and orange stripes, he wore a bright pink breech clout, and a single spiked horn jutted from his forehead. From somewhere among the musicians, there was a jangling like falling metal and the deep, ominous beat of a drum.

Abruptly Kib turned to the right and seemed to bring the torch to his lips, breathing out a tongue of flame over the shrieking audience and chuckling evilly. He breathed fire to the left, brandished his sword and stopped, screamed, and Biscuit charged out to stand beside him, hunkering down almost on his chest, growling and snarling, his fur all combed on end and his mouth slathering with what looked rather like the syrup they used to make blackberry fruit soda water. The warg rolled his eyes and thrust his head to the sky and gave a chilling yowl.

Together they charged one side of the audience, roaring and gibbering, stopping just close enough to make the audience flinch and the youngest squeak and hide behind their elders, then giggle nervously. Then he did it to the other side and Kib blew fire high into the air and screamed something about eating their livers.

Their savior arrived in the form of Floris, dressed in sparkling armor, shouting her challenge to this apparently hungry evildoer and his pet.

Kib threw back his head and laughed, ordering the warg to attack.

Biscuit snarled and leapt, knocking Floris to the ground where the two of them rolled in apparent struggle for life and death.

The audience was shrieking and cheering, swept away by the spectacle.

But the warg would not prevail!

Floris leapt to her feet and thrust her sword at it, seemingly piercing the creature through the chest.

"I slay you!" she cried.

Biscuit staggered back, as if mortally wounded, though Ori saw there was no blood on the sword, which he had on good authority was a collapsible prop.

The warg milked this death for all he was worth, listing off to one side, then another, stumbling, rolling his eyes, lolling his tongue and finally falling to the ground, flopping onto his back and sticking his legs straight in the air before collapsing in a heap.

Everyone watching cheered. Kib cried out in rage, smashing the sword and the torch together with a resounding metallic clang. His sword was real.

He lunged at the young hero, breathing fire and thrusting and slashing his blade as she danced and dodged, even darting around him and tumbling over his back to box his ears. He dropped the sword and torch, which immediately extinguished, and clapped his hands over his wounded head. She grabbed the sword, he spun, leaning forward, opened his maw to scream, and she shoved the sword right down his throat, then yanked it away.

Everyone in the room screamed, including Ori.

He had never seen them even rehearse such a thing.

Kib gave a dying performance to put Biscuit's to shame, falling to his knees, staggering to his feet, falling and rising, and finally giving a rattling moan and falling on his face at her boots.

Floris planted a foot on his fallen form and raised her sword with a shout of triumph, then Biscuit leapt up, Kib leapt up and the three of them bowed to the audience who went from stunned to frenzy in an instant.

Under the noise Ori overhead Ulfr saying to Thorin, "I know tha' Jim knows his business, but should a badger tha' age be doing tha'?"

"Shoving swords down people's throats?" Thorin asked.

"An' allowing a warg t' attack her, no matter how well it's trained!"
"She raised that warg from a pup," said Thorin. "And she's not a badger. Relatively speaking, she's a little younger than Gimli."

"Hard t' tell with blood that mixed. Don't even know how it was done."

"Exactly the way your adad told you it was done, Ulfr. When the adad and the amad love each other very much-"

"Fuck yeh, Thorin," Ulfr said, laughing. "Yeh know what I mean. Even if a live pebble comes from such a mix, I was always told th' halfbreeds were sickly an' wan."

"No offense, Ulfr, but I think if you accused Floris of being sickly and wan, she'd let Biscuit eat you."

Ulfr shook his head.

"A warg named Biscuit."

"Azog's warg was named Creampot."

"He didn' name his warg, 'Creampo'!"

"No, but the warg answered to it."

Ulfr sighed.

"I don' know Thorin. Aye, she's obviously a fine little dam, certainly strong enough, bu' does she consider herself of dwarrow or of men?"

"Does it matter?"

"It does matter. Who made her? Mahal or Eru? Did th' valar have t' collaborate?"

"She's a person, not piecework," said Thorin.

"An' tha'as another thin'. Practically speakin', is her loyalty t' men or t' dwarrow?"

"I've never asked," said Thorin. "It doesn't seem that important."

"Yeh'll think better o' tha' if yeh ever have a mountain full a' half-dwarrow an' a few thousand angry, armed men on yer doorstep."

"Are you really giving it this much thought, Ulfr, or is this just your gut talking?"

Ulfr's sighed.

"I'm too old f'r all this change, Thorin."

"Now you sound like Ahkn."

"No call t' be nasty. So yeh approve a' tha' Princess Sigrid an' yer Fili, then? An' yeh think yeh'll get a living heir out a' it?"

"Sigrid is a fine woman and she'll be a great queen. She's strong and stubborn, just like any dam. I don't see why not."

"What can she know of our ways?"

"Her mother died when her sister Tilda was born. Dori helped raise all of Bard's badgers."

"Ah."

"Dale is an interesting place. A few good things did come out of Thror's neglect. I doubt Sigrid would be so confident among the dwarrow if she wasn't raised by one."

"Certainly, she's a snappy dresser." Ulfr considered. "I still don' know, Thorin. It's fine f'r th' Longbeards, I suppose, an' if it's a command, well, yeh are me king."

Thorin shook his head.

"I'm not ordering anyone to marry or mix with anyone else. You make your own decisions about what's right for the Ironfists. Do what your heart tells you. Fili and Kili are happy, and I think it's because they're following their hearts."

"And Kili's flirtin' with tha' elf. Tha' the next thin' we'll be digestin'?"

"Possibly. She does find him hilarious."

"We all do, Thorin, f'r various reasons. He'll be a good second f'r Fili, certainly better than th' Asshat was f'r yeh."

He said that with a twinkle in his eye.

"So," said Thorin, "no commentary about my consorting with hobbits?"

"I'm no' worried about hobbits takin' over yer bloody mountain. Actually, I hear th' cake is really good."

The musicians started a tune which was mysterious and slightly menacing. Someone tossed a
smoke bag and when the purple fog cleared there stood The Great Woudini.

He wore a very shiny deep blue robe spangled with astronomical symbols and a matching tall conical hat with a rolled brim.

He bowed to all and came to the head table. He was carrying something under his arm. By the shape, Ori knew it was the blue crystal ball under a black cloth. Woudini stopped before the table and bowed very deeply to Thorin.

“Greetings, Most High King of All Dwarrow. I felt the shimmering of your coronation in the great ether and have come to prophesi,” he intoned in an altered voice. “And now I, the Great Woudini, shall peer into the magic Crystal and reveal your royal fortune.”

He pulled the black cloth off the blue glass ball and the crowd oooo-ed’ and ‘ahhhh-ed’ at the sight of it.

Thorin sat forward and gave Frodo a wide-eyed gaze with an amused twinkle. Frodo was completely intrigued.

“He’s going to tell you the future, Idad Thorin!” the faunt piped in amazement.

“Indeed,” Thorin agreed gravely. “We had best pay heed to his wise and mysterious words.”

Woudini didn’t bat an eyelash at this and waved his hand about in what Ori supposed to be esoteric and magical passes. “Now close your eyes a moment,” Woudini ordered in a sing-song voice, “and let your third eye open. Now let us gaze into the Crystal and inquire of the spectral powers of the ether.”

Frodo promptly clapped both hands over his eyes and Thorin, fighting a grin, closed his briefly as well. The crowd murmured and whispered, delighting in this new show.

The Great Woudini waved his hands over the glass ball and chanted.

‘Wum-zigga-wum-zigga… Great Crystal tell us the fortune of this mighty dwarf king…Wum-wum-wum. EenyMeenyGelateeny, the spirits are about to speak!”

The great Woudini leaned over and stared into the glass ball.

“Mmmmm, fascinating. So very regal,” The Great Woudini commented, then bent over his glass ball again, this time he made several more whooo-ing noises and mumblings to the spectres of the ether.

“Great dwarf, yours shall be a rule of bounty and happiness. Your people will adore you, as you will be a king who is gentle, powerful, amusing and the stuff of legend. Your royal household shall be one of joy and noise and joyful noise. Your love is as devoted to you as you are to your love. And finally and, as before, in your future I see you both happily together surrounded by your seven children!”

“Seven children?” Bilbo squawked. Thorin laughed delightedly and rose, standing Frodo on the table.

“O Great Woudini, thank you for your deeply spiritual words. You are the only wizard I know who is capable of speaking with such clarity!”

Tharkûn made a rude noise, which Thorin ignored, and continued,

“I shall heed them and endeavor to live this ethereal truth you have shared. I only asked that my people assist me in this.”

There was a resounding cheer from all around and people began toasting the Great Woudini for his prophecy and Thorin as already being a gentle, powerful, amusing and stuff of legend kind of king.

The Great Woudini covered his crystal and bowed deeply to Thorin who return the bow and reached out his hand. The Great Woudini came forward and shook it. Frodo put out his hand, too. The Great Woudini shook it, bowed again, rose and tossed little glittering clouds over Thorin Bilbo and Frodo three times.

“Do I want to know?” Bilbo inquired.

The Great Woudini winked.

“Fairy dust, Master Baggins. Doesn’t it run in your family?’

“Oh, sod off!” Bilbo snapped, red as a beet.

Thorin laughed and Frodo examined the glitter now all over himself. The Great Woudini bowed
to all and headed for the exit amid cheers.
He was almost out the door when Kili shot to his feet and yelled.
“Wait! You have to tell me!! What’s an ent?”
A lot of people laughed and chatted. Galadriel frowned and looked at Kili.
“Child, why do you ask such a question?”
Kili looked at Tauriel then explained.
“The Great Woudini said I was going to marry one by the end of the year. But now that I’ve met Tauriel, I don’t want to.”
Celeborn choked and dropped his wine, getting dark red stains down his front and on the table. He recovered, threw back his head and roared with laughter. Galadriel looked at him with wide-eyed delight. Ori wondered if this was why Galadriel had married him. Wreathed in laughter and joy, Celeborn was not a haughty elf lord but more like Glorfindel, handsome and openly friendly.
Celeborn regained his composure and turned to Kili; he was smiling and his eyes twinkled.
“My dear dwarfling. You think you’re going to marry an…” Celeborn swallowed carefully, “an ent?”
“It’s what the Great Woudini said the first time we met him,” Kili related truthfully.
“And you don’t know what an ent is?”
“No, sir.”
“Oh dear,” Celeborn began to chuckle again.
“What’s an ent?” Kili demanded.
From behind Kili, Dis shook her head vehemently at the elf lord. Celeborn drew himself together and tried to look severely at Kili. Ori didn’t think it was a very good attempt.
“My dear dwarf prince,” Celebron explained solemnly. “Ents are ancient beings. I lack the words to initiate your intellect to fully comprehend their beguiling fascination. I believe the only way for you to come to appreciate them, as they are strangely natural yet cryptic in their almost omniscience, would be to meet one.”
“Oh,” said Kili, who, with the ale he’d drunk, was having a little trouble with such a mound of adjectives. He sat down again, his face full of confusion. Tauriel returned with two full tankards, put them on the table in front of Kili and climbed into his lap. Kili grinned and hugged her, all thoughts of natural yet cryptic omniscience forgotten.
Fanfare blared and Ruelis ran to the center of the room, opened her arms wide and exclaimed, "Now yeh'll see th' strength of a dam!"
She had braided her beard into a single plait and bound in a loop of thick leather strap at the end. Slowly, she turned in place, then gained speed, faster and faster until she was only a sparkling blur. With a shout, Fior raced in from the entry way, grasped the leather strap as it whipped past and jumped.
The crowd gasped and the dwarrow roared as Ruelis spun Fior round and round by her beard, and when they thought she could go no faster, she put on a burst of speed and Fior abruptly let go of the harness. She spun to a stop, but he flew through the air in somersaults, hit the floor with a handspring, turned another and another. Jim appeared in Fior's path and cupped his hands. Fior turned one more handspring, landed with his foot dead in the center of Jim's palms and Jim tossed him high in the air, where he turned another somersault and landed solidly on Jim's two upstretched hands.
"Ready?” Jim shouted, though it seemed more for the audience than for his grinning son.
"Ready!”
Jim tossed, Fior leapt, seemed to fold in half in the air and landed upside down, his hands in Jim's, balanced there.
Slowly, Fior shifted his weight to one side, then another, then withdrew his left hand until he was balanced upside-down on his right.
Jim hunkered slightly, then sprang up, tossed Fior into another flip, and caught the dwarfling as he landed on a single foot in Jim's palm.
They did this again and again until Jim shouted, "Going to puke yet?”
"Dunno! Let's see!" Fior replied.
"Yah, I've had plenty of that, thanks," said Jim.
Fior gracefully tumbled to the ground and they bowed to the cheering crowds.
Jim and Fior ran off to the side as Ruelis and Zendi entered, juggling hatchets, tossing them back and forth.
"Finally!" Radagast cried. "I love jugglers!"
"Oi!" Ruelis cried. "I got an itch!"
While she ostentatiously scratched her own arse she continued to toss the hatchets back and forth with her free hand.
Zendi shouted, "I know what you mean! We must have fleas!"
And she started to scratch her back with the handle of each hatchet before tossing it off, a complicated pattern of catching, twisting her wrist to shove the handle end down her back, and twisting it again to toss it away.
Ori swallowed. If she mixed up the ends she would slice herself open, and everyone in the room knew it.
Floris popped in, carrying a great axe, and seemed to throw it carelessly into the mix. Then she joined them, the three of them tossing the hatchets and one great axe to each other, dedicating one hand to the partner to their left, the other to the partner to their right.
Floris yawned.
"Tired, love?" Ruelis cried. "Why don't yeh take a nap?"
"Good idea." Floris replied, and closed her eyes, and dropped her head to the side, continuing to juggle.
One by one the hatchets were retired and Zendi and Floris slipped away until it was just Ruelis, holding the great axe tenderly.
"Alone a' last," she cooed to it.
Jim and Fior returned with drums and started a slow, steady beat. Ruelis held the great axe aloft, bowing to King Ahkn, who gave her a nod and a smile that was all ferocious teeth. The drums grew louder, the beat faster, and Ruelis danced.
Every dwarf and dam in the room roared at once, causing nearly everyone else some alarm.
"What is she going to do?" Bilbo asked.
Ori grinned, turning to a fresh sketching page and grabbing up a new graphite wand.
"Stonefoot Axe Dance! I've always wanted to sketch it."
"Should she be - " Bilbo sucked in a breath. "Should she be swinging that around like - Yavanna preserve me!"
"It's a very ancient dance," Ori said, having to shout above the now chanting dwarrow. "It came from our ancestors acting out how they chopped off the heads of orcs, one after another."
"Ah, I see," said Bilbo, looking around nervously, obviously for Frodo.
Frodo sat on Thorin's knee, the two of them watching the dance in fascination with mouths identically hung open.
The warrior dwarrow in the crowd commenced to stomp in time with the drums. Many of their warrior guests were caught up in the excitement, and Glorfindel bellowed his approval.
Dain shot to his feet with a whoop. "Spin it, lassie!"
Sculdis, at his elbow, yelled, "Make tha' axe sing!"
Ruelis tossed the spinning axe in the air, caught it in and tossed it again and again.
The guards around the room moved to the edge of the performance floor, facing the crowd, their own weapons drawn.
"Are they afraid the dwarrow will attack her?" Bilbo gasped.
"Sometimes the dance makes dwarrow a little excitable," said Ori, rapidly turning to a new page, "and the younger ones can be a little rash. This dance is usually done outside."
By Ruelis' bow many of the dwarrow tweens were bashing foreheads, burning off their nervous energy, and more than one dwarf was heard to shout, "Now there's a dam worth killin' f'r!"
Thorin finally sat Frodo on the table, stood and held up his hands.
"No dying tonight, my friends! There's still dancing to be had!"

As the entertainers cleaned up, a far more sedate group took their place, with flutes and viols to calm the highly charged air. Thranduil had been fascinated, though in a less excitable state than the dwarrow. Lindir had to be brought outside for fresh air.

Galadriel enthused, "That's the best axe dance I've seen in centuries!"

When Jim's performers had rested, washed and changed, they returned to the room to great applause. Thorin thanked them profusely and sat them at the royal table with the Durins.

After they had eaten, the musicians went for an ale break and Elrond nodded to Lindir, who was apparently sufficiently refreshed. Lindir stood and a small group of visiting elves gathered and formed up in a line behind him. They went to the middle of the performance area and faced the head table. As one, they bowed to Thorin.

"Your majesty," said Lindir, "we present to you this token of our esteem and we hope that you enjoy it."

Lindir stood back in line with the others and cleared his throat. The elves nodded to him each in turn to signal their readiness and Lindir sang out in a high, warbling note and held it. He was joined by another elf with an equally lofty note, and then another and another until Lindir's tone shot up perilously high and he called out,

"Yo-de LAY hee HOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

And one at a time, the rest followed suit.

There were no actual words, not that Ori recognized anyway, only increasingly higher and lower pitches of those tremulous notes in intricate harmonies that swooped around one another in perfectly beautiful, startling sounds, faster and slower and faster still.

Ori sighed. Dori sighed. Even Oin sighed.

Bard fell out of his chair, laughing and choking.

Thranduil regarded him cooly.

"Do no laugh so hastily. We adapted this from the specialized songs of your own ancestors."

"My ancestors were calling cattle!" Bard cried.

When the elves had done, they all heard a chorus of bovine lowing from the meadows outside.

"Still works," said Balin, nodding.

"Oh, do get up," said Thranduil to Bard, who sat on the floor with his knees drawn up, supporting his forehead. He was laughing so hard, tears rolled down his cheeks.

The dwarrow, on the other hand, were moved to genuine emotion.

"I've never heard anythin' so beautiful," said Sculdis. "Oh, sing it again!"

The rest of the dwarrow all called out for more. Bard used this uproar to excuse himself. Chopper went with him.

When the next rest came, any leftover food was moved to tables off to the side and replenished with cakes, sweets, cookies, and desserts of all kinds. The remaining tables occupied by guests were likewise moved to make a larger floor for dancing.

People were full of food. They were also full of drink, and getting fuller.

Dain and Theoden had been matching each other drink for drink for at least a half hour, and though Theoden was getting the worst of it, it certainly didn't dim his jovial mood.

Theoden wove over to the table followed by Dain, who looked ready to be amused, as Bard returned. Theoden elbowed Bard with what Ori imagined was supposed to be a friendly nudge.

"Your daughter, is she marriageable?" he asked, considerably louder than he would sober, Ori decided.

Bard cut his eyes at Theoden.

"Pardon?"

"Your Sigrid. She's quite a fine chunk of woman flesh. I'm free m'self."

Ori wasn't sure what, if anything, he should do. Dain was trying not to laugh.

Bard ground out to Theoden, "Excuse me."

He stalked over to Sigrid where she now sat with Fili, Thorin, Dori and Dis and announced, "I
“Da?” Sigrid asked.
“I approve. Of your—” He violently waved his hand between Sigrid and Fili.
Dis swallowed and carefully placed her glass on the table.
“Bard? Are you all—”
“I approved of your engagement to Kili - I mean Fili!” Bard shouted with more vigor than necessary.

The room grew silent and everyone turned to watch.
Fili ventured, “Thank you?”
“The sooner you marry, the better!” Bard barked. The crowd cheered and toasts were now drunk to the suddenly betrothed couple.
“Da,” said Sigrid, “what happened?”
“King Theoden called you a fine chunk of woman flesh!”
Dori stood, absolutely incensed.
“Of course she’s a fine chunk of woman flesh! I did an excellent job.”
All the dwarrows within earshot agreed that, yes, this was so.
“Aye,” Balin said. “Yeh did an’ she is.”
“Da!” Tilda said plaintively from his side where she had appeared from under the table with Roäc, “do I get to be a fine chunk of woman flesh when I grown up?”
“No, you don’t and no, you won’t. Grow up, that is. Unless you become a scribe, and then you’ll be boarding in the library.”
“How long?” Tilda asked, bewildered.
“Until you’re forty or I’m dead, whichever comes first.”
“Pretty strict,” Roäc opined.
Sigrid sighed and stood.
“Da, if that bulging vein in your head is anything to go by, I’d say the ‘dead’ part could happen at any moment.”

Thranduil swept over from across the room and caught Bard up to sweep him back toward the door.
“Come along, my dear. It’s a lovely night. We’ll watch the stars. The air is cool. You can stand on the hill and survey your kingdom and reflect on your accomplishments.”

Dwalin muttered into his drink, “Try t’ keep th’ hickeys where he kin hide ‘em, laddie.”

Theoden shrugged.
“Time fer another drink. Dain?”
“Aye, try an’ stop me. Will yeh join us, Bilbo lad?”
“A drink?”
“Of beer. I know yeh hobbity fellers have tha’.”
“I may have sampled some a time or two, yes.”
“Grand! Care t’ make a bit o’ a wager?”
“Well, I don’t know…”
Ori groaned and hid his face in his hand.
Bilbo, you are my friend, he thought, but you can be a true arsehole.
The dwarf, the man and the hobbit headed to a newly arrived hogshead and Dain began pouring out for them. Ori turned back and went to the table where Thorin lounged in his chair with Frodo out cold against his coat.
“Your Bilbo,” Ori accused, “is off to drink Theoden King and Dain under the table, the chair, and possibly the floor.”

“Is he?” Thorin sat up. “Excellent. Let’s watch.”
Sigrid sat back down with an annoyed sigh.
Fili put an arm about her shoulders and said, “I don’t understand how people can mix up Kili and I. I’m blond, he’s dark. We don’t even look that much alike! My beard is excellent.”
““I heard that!” Kili cried.
“You were meant to, shalehead,” said Fili.
“I knew that.”
“Don’t worry,” said Sigrid with a smile. “I’ll never accidentally call you ‘Kili’ in bed.”
Fili did a spit take.
“Promise?”
“Pinky swear.”

As this was all taking place, dwarrow from the mountain maintenance guild began to set up some kind of structure at the far end of the room. Ori watched and realized it was a stage. He frowned, turned to Thorin, who winked, and Ori remembered.

Frodo was wakened from his nap and told he needed to be ready.
“For what?” he asked.
“Anything,” said Thorin mysteriously.
“Oh. All right.”

Thorin stood. Immediately he had everyone’s attention. Ori thought that might be a useful skill to have, then he realized he’d probably die of mortification on the spot.

“My dear friends,” said Thorin, “first I’d like to thank all our musicians for sharing their art with us. Now, I know many of you young people have different standards for music, unlike us old fogies, so I have researched this topic, and I understand you enjoy something called the… wag?”

The youngsters in the room screamed and cheered.
“I guess I said that right,” Thorin mused. “Then, I looked into it a little more closely and found that the name of the… er… band? Band?”
“Yep,” said Frodo helpfully.
“Thank you. The band who developed this new form of music was called the… White Castle?
White City! That’s it. The White City Bang Crash.”
Screams of delight affirmed this was so.

Thorin smiled.
“This is my coronation. My friends, The White City Bang Crash.”
Thorin gestured as the band mounted the stage.

The band tuned their instruments and attempted to thank the audience numerous times, but it was a while before they could make themselves heard.

Dipfa swooned.
“Oh, look at their costumes!”

Except for the drummer, who was dressed in black with a black hood, they wore identical white jumpsuits with the wide legs tucked into bright orange, calf-high boots with stacked heels. They were all young women and men, except for an elf with a base guitar.

Glorfindel gaped.
“Elbereth! It can’t be!”
“Can’t be?” Ori prompted.

Ecthelion spotted him immediately.
“You didn’t!” he shouted back. “What in Arda are you doing here?”
“I made too much noise, they sent me back!”

“Hah! I’ll give you noise, my friend!”

The elf turned to the drummer and waved.
“Drum!” hollered the drummer and slammed his sticks down for the beginning of ‘Ghostriders through Anórín’.

The first chord blew hair back across the room.
Everyone, young and old, began to pack the floor and they wagged!
"Queen Mavey!" Floris cried. "Come dance with us!"
Mavey turned to Gheir, all excitement.
"Let's go and dance, husband!"
Mavis II barked a laugh, which turned into a cough.
Mavis I said, "By all means, husband, let's!"
Gheir looked like he would really rather not, but since even Ahkn had decided to attempt it, the younger king really couldn't refuse.
"Why not?" Gheir asked, rising. "Perhaps all my beloved wives will join in?"
Mavey practically jumped up and down.
"Oh, yes! All my sisters should try it! This is going to be so great!"
She grabbed Gheir's hand and, in a very unqueenly fit of giggles, yanked him into the thick of the crowd where he proved to be quite adept at wagging and shoogling.
Ori thought it must be all that practice.
Mavey threw herself into the dance with all the spring of youth, looking happier than Ori had ever seen her. When the song ended, Gheir and the two eldest Mavi returned to their table, but the others kept dancing. Mavey danced with Floris, with Bilbo, even with Galadriel. Gheir looked on benevolently, until she started dancing with Arne.
Suddenly Gheir didn't look so indulgent, or at all happy. He watched with unease as Mavey danced with Theodred, with Tauriel, then with Ellodan. Then she started to dance with Hild.
Gheir shot up and stormed the dance floor, grasping Mavey by the elbow in mid-gyration.
It didn't look like a punishing grip, but it was enough to stop her.
He hissed something.
Mavey looked confused and Hild exasperated.
Mavey shook her head at him, protesting, but he led her firmly back to the table, seating her between himself and Mavis I with grim finality.
Mavey looked stunned.
Mavis I shrugged. Ori overheard her saying, "You're Gheir's queen now, dear. You can't just go frolicking with anyone, particularly anyone named Hild."
Mavey turned to Gheir who continued to glare obstinately forward.
The young queen sat, bewildered and miserable.
Dori, who had witnessed the whole thing, approached their Stiffbeard majesties and said, "Queen Mavis XV? You look rather fatigued, my dear. Perhaps you would care to take a turn about the courtyard?"
"If my husband permits it, Honored Bearer," said Mavey. "Though I know he wouldn't want me to flaunt myself with you."
Gheir drew his head back, enraged. Dori rested a quelling hand on his arm.
"I'm sure he realizes you are perfectly safe with me. Don't you, your majesty?"
Not even Gheir could hold that particular gaze for more than a moment.
"Of course, Bearer. You do us honor. Go along now, Mavis. We'll send a page if you are needed."
The celebrants wagged and drank and partied far into the night, until even Glorfindel seemed to sag with it. Ori did his share of dancing, but he was still very wound up when the Bang Crash took their first break, and he realized he was hungry once more.
Ori went to get himself a snack, and as he passed the table where Glorfindel, Bofur and Nori were sprawled, he heard Glorfindel say, "Not as much fun being reborn as you'd think."
"Really?" Ori asked. "May I please write all this down?"
"Suit y'self," said Glorfindel.
Ori sat and took out his notebook and a graphite wand. He wasn't even going to attempt ink in this state.
"So, what was so bad about coming back?"
"They buried what was left of me after the Balrog got through with me. I wouldn't'a minded, but they buried my sword, too, and all my other gear. On top of a mountain! Took me forever to dig my "Awkward," said Bofur.self up."
Nori took a deep swallow of beer.
“How were y’ lookin’?”
“Not so good,” said Glorfindel. “In fact, mighty crispy.”

“Aye,” said Glorindel with a sigh.
“Time for another round,” said Nori, scouting for the closest barrel. He spied one, wove to his feet, grabbed for his mug and missed the first two times.

Glorfindel swept up every cup on the table in one hand and said, “I’ll go with you.”
“Aye, me too,” said Bofur.
“Suit yerselves,” said Nori. Obviously, he was bent on the direct route to the barrel. Of course, there was a pillar between him and that barrel.

Ori followed along, hoping against hope for more facts about being dead from Glorfindel.
Nori walked through the pillar.
Glorindel didn’t.

The sound of face smacking stone made Ori queasy, but that was nothing to watching all seven feet and two inches of Glorfindel fall back and hit the ground like an elm tree.

Ori thought, Great, he’s dead again.
But then Glorfindel groaned and sat up, rubbing his face.

“What hit me?”

Bofur leaned over him.
“You damaged the pillar!”
“I damaged my face!”
“Well, you’ve paid each other off, then. C’mon, up ye get. Don’t know why y’ wanna walk into pillars anyway.”

Nori turned to watch, and turned back again and was nearly face to face with Radagast the Brown, who had to be among the shortest non-dwarrow he’d ever seen.

“Well then,” said Radagast, “and who are these fine ladies?”

Nori stared at him, looked down at himself, back up at Radagast and said, “One word, mate: spectacles.”

“Oh, not you, silly dwarf! Come to Uncle now!”

Assault and Battery leapt out of Nori’s hair and landed, clinging, to the front of Radagast’s shirt, chittering with excitement.

“Oi!” Nori cried, enraged. “You leave my girls alone, daughter-thief!”

“Lot of that going around,” said Bard who had apparently aired himself out to his own satisfaction.

“Who’re good girls, then? Who are good girls?” Radagast crooned as the ferrets went through his pockets. “No, no, dear, not that one. You’ll wake Arthur and he’s in a grumpy mood. Here you go, have some treats.”

Bofur whacked Nori’s arm and, pulling Glorfindel along, went to the barrel. Dain was there with Theoden and Bilbo. Dain greeted them with loud joviality then went to the nearest table and climbed up on it.

“T’ me cousin, Th’rin!” he roared raising his tankard to Thorin, back at the table.

Everyone looked his way and cheered.

“I ‘ave a third pressieswessie f’r ya, me ol’ cuz, me ol’ pain-in-th’-arse, me ol’ fruit an’ nut!”

“Bring out the third present!” came the shouts from around the room.

“I’ve written a song f’r yeh,” Dain bellowed. “An’ I’m gonna sing it!”

“Sing the song!” the crowd roared back.

Dain opened his mouth,

“O me luve f’r Thorin’s like th’ red, red nose
Tha’s newly sprung fra ale;
O me luve f’r Thorin’s like th’ sneeze
Tha’s sweetly comes fra a hay bale.
So drunk are me, me elder cuz,
So deep me cups am I;
An’ I will luve yeh still, me cuz,
’Til a’ th’ ale barrels go dry.
’Til a’ th’ barrels go dry, my cuz,
An’ ‘r heeds melt wi’ th’ booze,
I will love yeh still, me cuz,
While th’ beer o’ life make us wooze.
An’ raise yer cup, me fav’rite cuz!
An raise yer cup, as king!
An’ I’ll drink wi’ yeh again, me cuz,
As it helps us all t’ sing!!!”

Dain bowed deeply, almost fell off the table, then raised his tankard again. Cheers and laughter greeted him. Thorn raised his cup in appreciation.

“Touching, Dain. Truly.”
“Yeh wan’t t’ hear it again?”
“No.”

Ori realized he wasn’t going to get anything remotely sensible out of any of them and, after having a couple of ales with them, weaved his way back to the head table.

When he got there Dori was talking to Thorin with the sincerity of the truly plastered.

“Thorin, dear, now your beard’s grown back in so nice, I don’t suppose you’ll do something different with it? That single knot hanging from your chin won’t do.”

“It’s perfectly serviceable,” said Thorin.
“It’s too plain. A single knot! You can do better.”
Kili chirped up, “A double knot?”
Dori wouldn’t even dignify that, but Thorin said, “There you go, Dori, the perfect solution.”

“I’m not listening!” Dori cried.

“Then how did you know what Idad said?” asked Kili.

“Actually,” said Thorin, “I was thinking I’d leave it loose and undecorated. Udad Thror had all those gold bars decorating his beard, but he had a strong enough face to carry it.”

“Not to mention a strong enough beard,” said Dis.
“I think my hair and beard collide nicely,” said Thorin. “I rather like how it looks.”
“I’m rather fond it myself,” said Bilbo, returning from the ale barrel.
He leaned over Frodo and looked up at Thorin.

“Someone needs to be put to bed,” said Bilbo.

“The king got to his feet with Frodo in his arms. The room fell into bleary silence.

“My friends,” said Thorin, “I’m retiring for the night, but please stay and enjoy our hospitality for as long as you like. Thank you all for joining us today.”

He bowed and a cheer rose, followed by several very loud and not so discrete well-wishes.

Five minutes later, Bard didn't seem all that concerned when the first ale cup flew over his head. When the first full ale cup sailed past a minute later, he turned to Bain.

"Son, Tilda's out cold. Would you please bring her up to the rooms and put her to bed?"
Bain said, "Yes, Da.’” immediately, though he looked mortified.

Ori could guess why. None of the other kings seemed to even notice the dwarrow were growing increasingly rowdy. The other princes were not being sent away for their own safety.

Abruptly Stonehelm stood and turned to his mother.
"Mam, I think I'll go with 'em, if yeh don't mind? I'm startin' t' feel less than chipper."
Sculdis nodded and squeezed his shoulder.
"Aye, go an' get some sleep. T'morrah yeh'll be well-rested when th' rest a' us are no doubt followin' princess protocol."
"Durin protocol!" Dis barked from the other side of the table, rolling her eyes.
Bain shot Stonehelm a grateful look, kissed Bard, picked up his sister and the three of them left.
"I feel like a total hypocrite doing that," said Bard. "When I was his age I was drinking and fighting alongside grown men."
"But that's not what you want for him," said Ori. "Is it hypocrisy or just knowing better?"
"Dunno. Maybe sometimes it's the same thing."
Ori pondered this and refilled his tankard. He drank and stared at the contents, then chuckled at himself. He’d filled it with wine not ale. He wanted more ale but he had to get rid of the wine first. He shrugged and drank the wine. A keg was rolled across the table and he happily refilled his mug with ale. He stared down the table and there was Aewandín, not drinking, eating, or having any fun. He just sat there, like a sack of potatoes, except, Ori knew from his wide experience of them that potatoes were delicious, so it had to be a sack of something else as he was quite sure Aewandín was not in anyway delicious.
Ori drank back his ale and marched over to his husband.
“Husband.”
Dwalin grinned at him.
“Aye, love. Yeh drunk?”
“Very and I’m not going to throw up.”
“Good t’ know, love Wha’ yeh goin’ t’ do instead?”
“I’m going to have talk with that silly, grumpy owl.”
“Oh, aye?”
“Yes, I am. I wanted you to know in case he decided to throw me out the upper window.”
“I’ll keep a watch he don’t, love.”
“Thank you,” Ori said gravely and marched away. He stopped and thought that, since Dwalin was his husband, he ought to have kissed him. He went back, grabbed Dwalin by the beard, yanked him down, kissed him thoroughly, and turned to march away again.
Aewandín was seated next to his father, looking disgusted, at the other end of the long table. Ori climbed onto a chair, up onto the table, and walked down the length of it. He politely greeted his friends as he passed. They were all laughing and smiling. It was quite proper for them to do so, as this was a party. He reached Aewandín, King Thranduil and the older Durins sitting near to him. Ori crossed his arms and looked frowningly down at the eldest elf prince.
“Listen, you silly, grumpy owl, you and I are going to have a little chat.”
“Oh, are we?” Aewandín curled his lip at Ori.
Ori sat down on the prince’s empty plate, hooked his feet under the arms of the chair and wrenched the chair and prince forward.
Aewandín gasped and glanced at Thranduil. Thranduil looked rather intrigued, as did all the Durins.
“You,” Ori said sharply and pointed his finger very close to the prince’s nose, “are acting like Thorin’s younger brother Frerin. Do you know what happened to him?”
Aewandín looked bored and sighed.
“Yes, I heard. He wasn’t able to attend the coronation so that funny fellow, Buj, stood for him. What of it?”
“Yes,” Ori agreed a little louder than he intended. “Do you know what everyone calls him?”
“Frerin, King of Belegost?” Aewandín replied sarcastically.
“Maybe, but most dwarrow and men and elves refer to him as King Asshat.”
“Asshat?” Aewandín stared at him, utterly confused. “Asshat? What does that mean?”
“Exactly what it is - Ass-Hat.”
Such a thing is as stupid as it is senseless. There is no use for such an item. Why is—"
Aewandínén trailed off as Ori nodded at him.
Real anger flashed in Aewandínén’s eyes.
“How dare you! Do you know who I am?”
“Yes, “ Ori said slowly, “but you seem to have forgotten.”
“Pardon?”
“You are the eldest son of the king of the Greenwood and sindarin and sylvan elves. Should you
conduct yourself as you have been?”
“What?”
“You represent your people. You want all the people here, from all over Arda, feeling sorry for
your father because he, Legolas and Tauriel are the only ones of your family who aren’t asshats?”
“I am my father’s heir, and the sanctity of—“
“Sanctity—shmanctity,” Ori said with some difficulty. “You are your father’s heir. Your father is
immortal. Sauron is gone and in the hands of the valar to be judged for his behavior. Your father is
well able to deal with any orc packs. Unless he plans to go to Khazad-dûm and wake up the Balrog
again or go north to hunt whatever dragons might be left, he’s not going to die.”
Aewandínén stared at Ori.
“What do you like?” Ori changed tactics as he was suddenly interested.
“Like?”
“Yes. What do you think of when you open your eyes in the morning?”
“I don’t know. That’s a strange question and—”
“Well, what do you think if you’re standing in your father’s throne room looking at your people?”
Aewandínén snorted
“That there are several who could have spent more time on their hair,” he said petulantly.
“There,” Ori rejoiced. “You like hair.”
“Of course I like hair,” Aewandínén snapped. “I’m an elf, part of our beauty is our hair and how
we arrange it.”
“Beautiful hair?”
“Yes, dwarf.”
“You like arranging hair and making it beautiful? Then, why don’t you do that?”
Aewandínén stared at him, completely at sea.
Ori turned and looked around. His eyes lit on Dis, who was watching his exchange with
Aewandínén with great interest.
“There,” Ori pointed at Dis. “Princess Dis has lovely hair. What would you do to make it more
beautiful?”
Aewandínén stared at Dis, who blinked in surprise.
“I… Well, I suppose I would pomade it, then cut the front and curl it so she had curls framing her
face and ringlets down lower and put a few in her beard.”
Dis touched the wisps on her forehead and looked thoughtful.
“I would also take hair at the crown of her head and gather it into a top knot and let the rest fall
free. It would be high and show about her coronet with more curls.”
Ori nodded, enjoying the movement of his skull. His eye lit on a very elderly Dale man.
“What about that man over there?”
Aewandínén leaned his chin on his elbow, studying the elder.
“I would first tidy his beard, then divided it in two and have each part set to braids. Perhaps with a
ribbon threaded through. His hair must be washed thoroughly to bring out the white. He is balding,
but has a great deal at the nape of his neck. This should be braided to hang neatly down his back.
Perhaps a cap of some kind if he works outside to protect his skin from the sun.”
Ori found another person and gestured. Once again Aewandínén suggested improvements.
Ori pushed Aewandínén’s chair back a little and unhooked his feet. He slid his bottom off
Aewandínén’s plate and crossed his legs and tucked them up.
“Tell me, Aewandínén, do you know how bad the infestation of head lice is in the poorer parts of
“What?” cried Aewandín, clearly horrified. “They must be treated immediately. I know exactly what solution should be prepared. The lice will make their heads itch and they will scratch them and the children doubly so and the scratches may get infected!”

“That’s already happening,” Ori told him.

Aewandín stood quickly. “I must find King Bard and speak to him immediately!”

“Yep, I’m over here,” said Bard from the other side of the table.

Aewandín ran up to him and started talking at speed.

Bard raised an eyebrow and interrupted.

“I’m rather drunk. Do you want to have this talk now, or when I’ll remember it?”

“We’ll have it twice!”

“Rapture,” said Bard.

Ori uncurled his legs. He felt very pleased with Aewandín. He looked over at Thranduil. The king smiled tenderly and laid his hand upon his breast and bowed his head.

“Thank you, Ori.”

“You’re welcome,” Ori chirped.

Ori was tired. He curled himself around and lay on his side with his head on a pile of napkins and closed his eyes. He only just heard Dori saying,

“Ahhh, he’s just like a little rump roast.”

Ori woke when Dwalin got out of bed and went to the fireplace door. It opened a little, there was a brief conversation, then Dwalin sighed and returned and started to pull on his trousers. It was still dark, Ori noticed, with just a phosphorous lamp for light.

“What is it?” Ori asked muzzily.

“Mavis XV has defected t’ th’ Blacklocks.”
Brawls, Beans Spilled, and Breakfast

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Stiffbeards, Blacklocks and bickering! Oh my! What a shocking development! And where in all of Arda did Aewandín disappear off to? Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori sat bolt upright, causing the room to heave and swirl around him.
“So… so… that means-” Ori’s brain fumbled itself into some kind of order.
“Aye, Gheir’s tryin’ t’ lay siege t’ Hild’s quarters wi’ a squad o’ soldiers, and Hild’s defendin’ her quarters wi’ a squad o’ her own.”
Ori groaned.
“Blessed Mahal. In Fundin House. Where practically every head of state in Arda is in harm’s way.”
“Aye, tha’s about it.”
Ori took a deep breath, grit his teeth, and threw back the covers. As he swung his legs over the side of the bed, he willed himself to function. That went well, so he thought he’d try standing up.
Oh, alright. He could stand. He could see one of everything. He could see his husband suddenly right in front of him, grasping both of Ori’s shoulders in worry.
“Where’re yeh goin’, love?”
“With you. There has to be a scribe present.”
“No” really, love. I kin always tell yeh lat-” Abruptly, Dwalin stopped talking. “Yer goin’, ain’t ye.”
“Yes. I don’t feel like throwing up right at the moment, so now is my chance.”
“Yer goin’ t’ stay behind me, righ’?”
“Pinky swear.”
Ori copied Dwalin and pulled his breeches up over his night shirt, put on his boots, grabbed his scribe’s kit, and followed Dwalin into the hall.
Dori appeared in a dainty dressing gown of blue and silver patchwork.
“What’s happened?” Dori immediately demanded. “Should I make tea?”
Dwalin snorted.
“Laced medicinally.”
Balin poked his head out around the door jamb.
“I suppose yeh need me t’ be diplomatic?”
“Yeh might say tha’, aye,” Dwalin groused. “Gheir an’ Hild’re abou’ t’ turn th’ upstairs hall int’ a battlefield.”
“Oh, dear,” sighed Dori, sounding more exasperated than worried. “It’s Mavey, I suppose. Of course it is. I’ll get dressed.”

The din could be heard long before Dwalin, Ori and Balin reached the particular hallway where the royal guests were quartered. It was a long hallway, and Dori had purposely put Gheir and Hild and their parties at the far end of it. In the lamplight hunkered a dozen heavily-armed and pointy dwarrow, weapons drawn, and their royal majesties almost nose to nose in the midst of them.
Aris stood behind Hild with Ahkn. Mavis I stood behind Gheir. Neither Aris nor Mavis I looked particularly angry. Ahkn wore his nightshirt, and otherwise looked like a dwarf who was involved peripherally, if not accidentally.

Snur, Dain and Ulfr lounged in the hallway itself, obviously still drunk, while puzzled men and elves stuck their heads into the hall at random moments. Bard had come out and leaned against the wall behind the dwarf kings. It was obvious he was also still drunk and having trouble focussing his eyes. Stonehelm appeared and yawned at his father, who patted his head.

“Yer scheming she-orc!” Gheir shouted. “Dancing wasn’t enough! You had to have all of her!” “She is safe in a private room in my quarters of her own free will,” Hild barked. “Where, no doubt, you and Aris will go because you want someone to watch!” “Neither Aris nor I have not touched Mavis, nor will we, you filth-minded goblin. She is under my protection.” “She’ll need protection from you!” yelled Gheir. Hild sneered deliciously. “She asked for protection from you.” “That is a lie!” “She’s afraid of you, you three-legged worm.” “I have done nothing to make her afraid,” he scoffed. “That is a lie!” she mocked.

Gheir drew back, a crack in his fury widening into fear. “Where is she? I want to talk to her.” “But she doesn’t want to talk to you. She has cast her lot with the Blacklocks. I will protect her as one of my own.” “She is not yours.” “She’s certainly not yours, Gheir. With all those wives, I’m amazed you noticed she was missing.” “You couldn’t handle the same number of wives as I do!” “I don’t need to. I have Aris, she is my One and she is enough. Whereas, you simply can’t make up your tiny mind.”

Dwalin strode past Dain, scattering the visiting royal guards with a snarl then, drawing his hammer and Grasper, smiled at the two combatants, who looked at him, growled, and turned back to each other. “Evening, yer majesties,” said Dwalin with a bow, but never taking his eyes from them. He returned to his full height, which was half a head above both. Dwalin leaned on his hammer, swinging Grasper in a menacing manner. Dwalin motioned with his chin as Balin arrived and bowed to the two angry monarchs with his best palliating smile. “Pardon us interruptin’, yer majesties, but it’s me duty t’ remind yeh tha’ Fundin House is full o’ innocent, intoxicated royal guests. Yeh kin draw yer swords, bu’ only on each other. Otherwise, all a’ yer heads’ll be decoratin’ pikes in his majesty’s courtyard. I trust I’m bein’ clear on that.” Gheir snorted, Hild gave a curt nod. “Very good. Carry on, then,” said Balin, who gave another gracious bow and drifted back to stand back by Ori.

Gheir drew his weapon. Ori thought, Oh, he prefers the sword. It occurred to him this was the dwarfiest thought he could possibly have in this situation. Hild smirked at Gheir and didn’t even bother drawing her own.

“What d’ya reckon?” Snur asked Dain. "One a’ us should jump in," said Dain. "How drunk're yeh?" "Not drunk enough to want Hild mad at me." "Righ’. Stay here, then. If she chops me balls off, save ’em f’r Sculdis. She’ll have ’em bronzed.” "Got it."
Dain strode over to stand beside Gheir, who grunted and nodded in acknowledgement. "What is he doing?" Bard hissed to Ori, who was busy noting down who was present and which loyalties had been honored.

"Dain’s just evening up the sides," said Ori, still writing a a furious pace. "Ahkn has to stand with Hild. They have a pact, and Ahkn is Arivett's father. Besides, Ulfr won't fight Ahkn because they're best mates. That only leaves Dain or Snur to stand with Gheir."

"Couldn't they just opt out of the whole thing and leave Gheir and Hild to sort it between themselves?" Bard asked.

Ori glanced up at him in surprise.

Bard rolled his eyes.

"Of course not," the man muttered. "Think like a dwarf, bowman."

Boromir came out into the hall, sword in hand, naked, and bleary-eyed.

"What's going on?" he grumbled.

"Gheir's youngest wife defected to the Blacklocks," Bard explained. "She's in Queen Hild's quarters. Gheir swears Hild seduced or kidnapped her. Either way, he wants her back."

"Should I consider calling in troops?" Boromir asked.

"Mahal's hairy arse, nah," chuckled Dwalin, gracing the Gondorian captain with a wink. "It's goin' t' be a tight fit in here as it is. If thin's get messy, there's a wall panel in yer sittin' room t' th' right a' th' fireplace. Slide it t' th' left. There's a passage down t' th' kitchen."

"And from there?"

"Yeh could have yerself a snack," Dwalin suggested.

"Thanks, but I think I would just explode."

Boromir smirked and went back into his chambers.

"So," Bard continued. "They really have to do this now? When everyone's still muzzy from drink?"

"An old dwarven tradition," said Thorin as he appeared at the turn of the hall to the royal chambers. He was clad in trousers, boots and a tunic he'd pulled from the laundry pile inside out, but he was happily carrying Orcrist and the blade shimmered in the candlelight.

He peered at Dwalin in amusement.

"Everything under control?"

"Aye," said Dwalin, sounding bored. "I got a squad on either end a' th' hall. There mebbe some blood shed, but I'll make sure it's only dwarf blood."

"I have complete faith in you. Just keep the warcries to a minimum. I have a faunt who needs his sleep."

"An' a full-grown hobbit yer tryin' t' keep awake," Dwalin teased.

Thorin grinned and sighed.

"He's awake. I, however, have finally hit a battlement. Just as well. Frodo's sleeping at the foot of the bed."

Thorin turned and headed back to his rooms.

Bard asked, "Doesn't he want to know what's going on?"

Ori said, "He already knows. Roäc's been and gone."

"And he's not concerned?"

"Of course he's concerned, but Dwalin and the other soldiers know how to do their jobs. Besides, Thorin can't choose sides."

"Because that would be showing favoritism," said Bard.

"See," Ori chirped brightly, "you're getting it."

"Lucky me," said Bard. "I'm going back to bed. Unless there's a secret panel in my rooms I should know about?"

Dwalin said, "Fourth wall panel in the washroom, behind the tub."

"Does it lead to the kitchen?"

"Leads t' King Thranduil's quarters," Dwalin replied dryly.

"Does he know that?"
Dwalin lifted an eyebrow.

"Go ask 'im."

"Right, better not," said Bard. He turned, froze, turned back to Ori. "Did you say Ahkn was Arivett's father?"

"Somebody has to be," Ori replied, his eyes and ears mostly focused on the two combatants.

"Hild's good, but she's not that good."

Bard returned to his room, but a sweep of cloth from down the hallway told Ori that an elf was approaching.

"This is charming entertainment." Thranduil delivered his opinion. "Shall I fetch Mistress Dazla and her bucket of ice water?"

Balin looked up in amusement.

"With those two, yer majesty?" he said. "I'm afraid th' water'd jus' turn t' steam."

Thranduil shrugged and remained where he was, playing the part of an indifferent observer. Ori wondered if he had seen Thorin leave and decided to step in for him.

Meanwhile, Gheir and Hild were still in full volley.

"What was I supposed to do?" Hild challenged. "Leave the poor thing crying out in the hallway?"

"Why would she come to you before her own people? You seduced her away!"

"Unlike you, Gheir, I know a dwarving when I see one."

He opened his mouth, closed it, and then said, rather defensively, "She was three years above majority when we married. She was perfectly ready."

Behind him, Mavis I rolled her eyes.

Gheir said, more strongly now, "Her parents groomed her to be a good wife."

Hild smirked.

"Maybe she could have used a little more grooming before she had to say yes."

"She had a choice!"

"Did she?"

"I did not pressure her!"

"I wasn't thinking of you. What else could her parents have done with her? What other choices do young Stiffbeard dams have? Did you give them money?"

"Of course I gave them money! It would help with the loss of a-"

"You bought yourself a wife, Gheir!" Hild looked disgusted. "You've turned your dams into chattel!"

Gheir gaped at her.

Snur said, "Oops."

"No' th' best o' moves," Ulfr agreed. "Oi, Gheir, mebbe yeh ought t' have thought this through."

Faced with censure on all sides, burning red to his ears, Gheir huffed and spun back to Hild.

"What have y-"

She held up her hand to cut him off. She didn't even look at him before she said, "This conversation is now over."

Hild turned on her heel and swept majestically back into her chambers, Aris after her, the door shutting with a click of finality.

"So that's what that looks like," Thranduil mused.

Ori had a feeling the conversation was more postponed than really over. Mavey was still in Queen Hild's rooms. Gheir and the oldest queen still stood outside them, Gheir looking increasingly dismayed.

In a few minutes the door opened again and Aris stood there, bemused. She looked around, then spotted Dori, serenely arriving and carrying a loaded tea tray.

"Honored Bearer?"

"General Aris," Dori smiled placidly. "How may I assist you?"

"Queen Mavis XV would like to speak with you. If you would be so kind as to follow me."

"Of course, dear."

Ori watched Gheir's expression go from anger to surprise to wariness, as Aris stood aside and Dori
floated through the doorway with the same brazen confidence as Lady Galadriel herself. Balin followed with a merry smile and a nod to Aris.

Ori shrugged, leaned his back against the wall, and slid down to sit on the floor. He began sketching as well as noting any muttered conversations he heard. He drew Gheir in full roar, Hild with her dismissing hand in Gheir’s face, Snur standing asleep against the wall with his eyes open. A good forty minutes passed.

Boromir came back out, this time in a nightshirt, and Bard reappeared and they chatted idly with Ulfr and Thranduil. A few minutes later, Arwen arrived yawning. Boromir and Thranduil explained the situation. The Evenstar rolled her eyes and left, throwing her hands in the air and Ori heard her mutter, “Dwarrow. Go raise dwarrow. I swear it’s all our Lady Yavanna’s fault.”

Boromir shrugged again and said he was going back to bed. Bard and Thranduil looked at each other. Bard blushed hotly. Thranduil smiled like a cat and Bard disappeared into his own chambers. Thranduil bowed slightly to the group of dwarrow and wandered back to his own chambers. Ori rather thought his whistling the refrain of ‘My Zeydis’ tasteless considering the circumstances. Ori began rendering the departure of the Evenstar.

The Broadbeam king had begun to snore loudly when Dori and Balin reemerged, both looking thoughtful. Balin turned to King Gheir and Queen Mavis I and said, “If yer majesties’d accompany us down t’ th’ kitchen?”

"Of course, Lord Balin, Bearer,” agreed Gheir. “What has happened? Is she all right?”

For a moment Ori thought he was asking about Hild, then his brain set itself to rights. “She is not in any danger,” Dori said soothingly. “Pet, will you lend me a piece of paper and your pen?”

Ori got to his feet and did so. Dori wrote a hasty note, folded it shut, wrote on the outside. “Our Furh’nk?”

"Yes, Bearer?” The soldier emerged from the squad closest.

"All the pages are abed. Would you please carry this to Durin House for me? Apologize for waking them. I would not do so if the need weren’t so dire."

"Yes, Bearer." Furh’nk went off to fulfill his commission.

"What can I do to help, Dori?” Ori asked.

"I’ll make the tea, if you’ll make the toast. I think I may have a solution for Mavey."

After three cups of tea and a very enlightening conversation, Ori followed Dori, Balin, and the Stiffbeard rulers back up to the hallway and watched as Dori was once more admitted to the Blacklock chambers.

Shortly thereafter, Mavey emerged, followed by Dori, Hild, and Aris. Ori felt quite sorry for the young dam as her face was streaked with tears, her nose very pink and her eyes downcast. She shuffled over and stopped before Gheir, who looked neither angry nor afraid, merely resigned.

“I am so sorry, my king,” Mavey whimpered. “I’ve disgraced you and I’ve disgraced my family and I wish I was dead.”

Gheir, horrified, grasped her gently by the shoulders.

“Dearest, don’t say such things. If anyone is in the wrong here, it’s me. I took you from your parents.”

“Oh, I wasn’t really happy there, either. I can’t go back after what I’ve done. I’m your wife!” Mavey started sobbing wetly.

“You are,” Gheir attempted to speak in a comforting way, “but it doesn’t follow that you have to come right home and be my wife.”

“It doesn’t?” Mavey sniffed loudly and raised her face to look at him. “What do you mean?”

“Are you with child?”

“No, my king.”
He breathed out. Ori thought it sounded like relief. Mavis I passed Mavey a handkerchief.

“Master Jim and Mistress Ruelis, Bearer Dori, Lord Balin, and I were talking, and we wondered if you might be willing to join the circus caravan for a few seasons.”

Mavey looked startled, then intrigued.

“To… what end, your majesty?”

Gheir cleared his throat and schooled himself to look royally thoughtful.

“I find the Borjeval people fascinating, and I’d like to learn more about them, but running the kingdom and playing with the dwarflings leaves me little time for study.”

“You want me to gather information for you?” Mavey asked slowly. “I’m not a scholar, my king.”

“But you can read and write,” Gheir’s tone was encouraging. “Don’t most dams your age keep a diary?”

“So… so it would be like that? Like keeping a diary of what I learn?”

“Yes, exactly like that!” Gheir praised.

“For how long, my king?”

“For as long as you like.” Gheir waved his hand grandly. “Your board is paid and you’ll continue to receive pin money. You can send me updates if you think of it, and,” he paused then took a deep breath. “And if you decide not to come back at all, I will understand.”

She cried out and hugged him. He held her and smiled a true, gentle smile.

“Go and get some sleep now, my dear,” he said gently and rubbed her back. “We’ll talk more of it tomorrow.”

She stood up on tip-toe to kiss his cheek and scampered back down the hall to her rooms in obvious excitement. He watched her go.

Mavis I sidled up behind him.

“Lesson learned?” she asked, meaningfully.

“Lesson learned, my love,” said Gheir with a sigh.

“Good, now come to bed. You’re looking more like Grandfather Stiffbeard by the moment.”

“Damn,” said Aris.

“Indeed,” said Hild. She almost sounded impressed.

Ori honestly thought this was the end of it. He watched his husband dismiss Furh’nk, who sent his squad to escort the visiting soldiers back to their quarters. Ahkn tried to wake Snur, couldn’t, shrugged, hoisted the Broadbeam king over his shoulder and carried him off to put him to bed. Dain yawned cavernously and followed. Ori went over and took Dwalin’s hand, ready to return to their room, when Ulfr looked around and asked, “Has anyone seen Arne?”

Stonehelm, making to follow his father, stretched and said,

“He left the feast with Master Nodun a few hours back. He said-”

Ulfr froze and whirled on Dain’s son, his face so red, his tattoos actually disappeared.

“Where did they go?” Ulfr yelled.

Stonehelm was not intimidated by Ulfr, but Ori thought it was possible Stonehelm didn’t understand Ulfr’s level of paranoia when it came to his son or, like his own father, didn’t care.

“They planned to go to Master Nodun’s temporary quarters to-”

Ulfr’s boots barely touched the ground as he shot down the hall, headed for the stairs.

“Dwalin,” Ori sighed.

“Righ’. On it.”

Dwalin took Furh’nk in tow and Ori moved hard on their heels. Ulfr was already out of their sight, but it wasn’t hard to follow him, as not only did his boots slam against stone but he bellowed like an enraged bahvlo. He was headed for the old royal residence. It was obvious he knew they followed him, for he threw over his shoulder, “What floor is it?”

However, he didn’t wait for a reply, nor answer when Dwalin demanded, “Come back here, yeh idiot!”

They crossed the courtyard and slammed open the front door.

They ran down a random hall, Ulfr shouting for Arne.
Dwalin muttered to himself, drawing both Grasper and Keeper this time.
Ori feared Mistress Dazla would be scrubbing Ulfr’s brains from the hall floor tomorrow, but Ulfr
and his pursuers were brought to a skidding halt. A door up ahead had opened, and a young serving
dam was, in a word, fleeing.

They heard Otho Sackville-Baggins whining, “Please, dearest! Please spank me harder!”
“You know the rules. Bark like a dog!” said Lobelia.
“Arf! Arf!” Otho obliged.
Ori shuddered.
Ulfr shook himself, seized the dam by her shoulders, and demanded directions to Nodun’s
chambers.

“Leave her be,” Dwalin growled. “Or I’ll toss yeh in lockup meself. The rooms’re righ’ up here.”
They went to the bend in the hall, Dwalin made to knock, but Ulfr turned the handle and went in.
The front room was deserted, but behind the door to an antechamber, they heard Nodun’s voice.

“Oh, that is sooo good,” she moaned. “You have the perfect touch.”

“Thank you,” said Arne in khuzdul, “I don’t often hear that.”

“You should, that’s positively delicious.”
Ulfr roared and battered the door open with a shoulder.

“A’righ’, wha’d’yeh think yer up t’?”
There sat Nodun and Arne… at a table, surrounded by paper, nibs and bottles of colored inks,
blinking up at him.

“Da?” Arne asked. “What the fu- what are you doing?”

“You… er… weren’t in yer rooms. An’ yeh shouldn’t be here in a dam’s chambers alone. Wha’
o’ her husband?”

“Her husband is right here, trying to get some sleep,” said a naked, bedraggled dwarf at the door.

“Kindly remove yourselves, and, for the love of Mahal, shut up!”

He turned and left. They heard another door open and slam shut.

Arne said to Ori, “If I thought Da was going to toss his scree like this, I would at least have drawn
some nudes.”

“You’ve no cause t’ be fresh,” Ulfr scolded. “No’ even tellin’ me where yeh were goin’.”

“You were busy drinking,” said Arne. “Besides, I left a note on your bedside table. I told
Theodred and Stonehelm where I was going, in case you asked. Should I have sent a raven?”

“Er… no… that’s probably no’ necessary. I’ll be turnin’ in now. Mind yer in bed by dawn.”

“Yes, Da.”

“An’ mind yer company.”

“Yes, Da. Goodnight.”

Ulfr retreated out and Dwalin and Ori followed him. Ulfr looked at them. Ori stifled a yawn and
Dwalin put away his axes and grunted,

“Happy?”

Ulfr swore at them and strode off back to Fundin House.

Ori looked up at Dwalin.

“Can we please go back to bed now?”

His legs felt weighted.

“Yeh seemed t’ have sobered up quite a bit,” Dwalin teased.

“Yes, which is odd, considering that I should be face-down on the carpet by now. I’m not looking
forward to rereading my notes, though. I have a feeling they look like Fanny took them.”

“We’ll get yeh some water, an’ tuck yeh back up, love. Worry about th’ notes t’morrah. I’ll help
yeh decipher ‘em. I’ve always been good with codes.”

As they entered the receiving room at home, they saw Ulfr mounting the stairs to his rooms.

Dwalin and Ori exchanged a smile and returned to their own.

The sunlight woke Ori along with the scents of breakfast. He blinked and there was Garnet
perching six inches from his face, looking at him intently.
“Is anyone dead?” Ori asked, as it was the first thing that came to his head.
Dwalin, spooned behind him, grunted,
“If there is, tell Roäc he’s go’ me permission t’ eat ‘em.”
Garnet gave the raven equivalent of a laugh. Ori giggled and said,
“As long as it’s those Sackville-Baggins. I don’t care.”
“Arf-arf-arf,” Dwalin muttered in her ear. Ori laughed and pushed away from his husband.
“Don’t, it’s just icky.”
“Ickier than canoodlin’ wi’ a barrow-wigh’?”
“I’ll barrow-wight you!” Ori threatened, rolling over.
Dwalin laughed,
“Hop in,” and opened his mouth wide. Ori stuck in a finger and ran it up the roof of Dwalin’s mouth making the warrior gasp, pull away, and sneeze. Kihshassa came winging over from the window and landed on Dwalin and peered up into his face, making querulous squeaking noises. Ori laughed, kissed Dwalin thoroughly and pranced off to the privy.
He came out into the hall feeling more awake and happy in himself as he didn’t feel in the least bit hung over. Bain came from the sitting room and saw him.
“Good morning,” Ori greeted him, only to be seized by the arm and pulled over to a corner. Bain glanced around then muttered at him,
“So, y’know, don’t say anything to Da, but I kissed Stonehelm last night.”
Ori smiled at Bain and said quietly,
“I won’t say anything.”
“Thanks, you know he’d just pop a major vein.”
“He has been getting cozy with King Thranduil,” Ori pointed out.
“But, that’s him, not his kids. He’s really protective of us, especially now, when people might take advantage. I don’t think Stonehelm counts, but Da may think he does.”
“So, what did you think of kissing Stonehelm?” Ori couldn’t stop himself teasing.
Bain shot him a wary eyebrow.
“Not for the historical record,” Ori promised.
Bain let out a breath.
“I kinda liked it, but I think I’d like to kiss Floris, too, so what does that make me?”
“A curious adolescent?”
“Aye, I think that’s about right,” said Bain. “Eru, I hope Stonehelm doesn’t tell his da. Then everybody in Arda will know.”
“Stonehelm isn’t famous for getting a word in edgewise. Really, he doesn’t talk much at all.”
“He talked last night,” said Bain, grinning. “He’s really got a filthy mouth when he wants.”
“It’s always the quiet ones, isn’t it.” said Ori, lofting his brows.
Bain gave him a sly look.
“That’s what Dori said when he found out you’d run off with Captain Dwalin.”
“We didn’t ‘run off’,” Ori protested.
“Uh-huh,” Bain snickered. “Sure, you didn’t. As if half of Dale didn’t notice that the pair of you fancied the pants off each other for ages.”
“We didn’t, and I didn’t know he liked me then.”
Bain snorted before heading to the breakfast parlor.
“For a scholar, you’re dense some times.”
“I never had to be forcibly put in the tub to make me bathe when I smelled like week old dead fish,” Ori retorted.
Bain flung back a rude gesture and disappeared. Ori snickered to himself and turned. Dwalin came out of the privy.
“What were tha’ all ‘bou’.”
“Bain is growing up.”
Dwalin snorted.
“Did somethin’ t’ drop ‘is balls las’ nigh’?”
“I am a most silent confidante,” Ori avowed.

Dwalin opened the door of their room and closed it after them. He grinned at Ori. Ori sprang forward and grabbed Dwalin around the waist.

“If I wasn’t so starving, I’d push you back into bed!” Ori groaned.

Dwalin threw back his head in laughter.

“Me poor, wee starvin’ scribe. No’ t’ worry, when all this bloody official nonsense is over, we’re gonna be spendin’ a day ‘r two on our own, pref’rably in here.”

Ori held Dwalin tight and looked up, resting his chin on Dwalin’s chest, smiling.

“I’d like that. We do have serious research to conduct.”

“Aye, under th’ tutel’ge a’ our Queen Kivi.”

“That right.” Ori affirmed, then, “Are you hungry?”

“Aye, an’ I wan’ yeh f’r desser’!”

Suitably attired, Dwalin and Ori exited their bedroom and it was at that moment that Arne approached, looking shy.

"May I talk to you for moment, Ori?"

"Of course," said Ori. He grinned at Dwalin. “I’ll catch you up. Keep me a seat.”

“If I don’t, yeh kin sit in me lap, love.”

Ori stuck out his tongue and turned back to Arne.

"In private?" the young dwarf asked, a little pink.

"Certainly."

There had been a dressing room on the far side of Ori’s old bedroom that had long ago gone for storage. Ori staked his claim on it to use for ‘official business' that shouldn’t be discussed in the sitting room, though, so far, nothing had come up. At the moment, the room was outfitted with a few old chairs and a table dragged in from who knew where, though Ori had plans for turning it into his private library/study/painting room.

He ushered Arne in and closed the door behind him.

"Have a seat," he offered. Arne sat and Ori sat facing him, asking gently in Khuzdul for Arne’s ease, "What's happened? Are you all right?"

"I think so," said Arne. “Last night, when I was in Master Nodun's room, after you three left? Master Nodun and her husband went to bed and I ... went with them.”

Ori forced his face to remain passive.

"Ah," he said. "I take it this was the first time you’ve done that."

"With two people at once? Yes. I didn't even stay around after that. I washed, and crept back to my room like a thief. Da was snoring like a raven with a head cold. He didn't even wake up when I got dressed to come down. Mind, he'd probably just give me some vague warning about minding my company, so no one gets the wrong idea."

The two dwarrow blinked at one another, then snickered.

"Are you planning on telling him?" Ori asked.

"Uri's bloody temper! No! I'm of age, so that's not an issue. It's just that I don't know whether he'll try to throw me out of the house or, worse, congratulate me and give me a lecture about making him a premature grandfather. I might tell Mam some day."

"She doesn't get terribly upset?"

"Someone has to balance my father," Arne heaved a big sigh. "Thanks for listening to me, Ori. I feel better now that I've spilled my guts."

"As long as you don't want any advice," said Ori. "I'm afraid my experience is rather limited. I've only ever been with my husband."

"Really?" Arne looked surprised.

"I was very sheltered up until my marriage. Not as sheltered as poor Mavey, but enough that tunic rippers and drawing naughty pictures were my guiltiest thrills."

"I thought you were, at least, having sex with King Thorin as well."

Ori tightened his jaw to keep it from falling open and, that managed, spoke in what he hoped was
a reasonable tone.

"No, our relationship isn't like that, though I know he is very fond of me, for which I'm grateful."

"Being his shield brother's husband would be difficult if he wasn't fond of you," said Arne.

"It would be impossible," said Ori. "Sometimes I think I have the opposite problem. He holds me in such high esteem, he's bound to be disappointed when I inevitably fail him."

"No one is perfect, he must know that," said Arne. "He's the high king and still his expectations seem a lot more reasonable than...some people's. I suppose if nothing is expected of you, it takes the pressure off. I'm not sure I'd survive being Lord Gloin's son. It sounds exhausting, being that amazing."

"Yet, Gimli struggles through so valiantly," Ori agreed with a grin.

"The most amazing thing about Gimli is that he doesn't have an ego bigger than Erebor. He's so... normal. You all are."

Ori laughed.

"You're seeing us on our best behavior. Though, Dori says the Durins aren't like other noble families."

"I don't know a lot about other families," said Arne. "Father kept me shielded from a lot as I was growing up. Not as bad as poor Mavey, but I don't think the stakes for her were so high. The courtiers back home aren't quite as well... controlled as they are in Erebor."

"The worst went to Beleghost with King Frerin," Ori said, reflectively, "Thorin made it very clear he wouldn't tolerate the sorts of things Thror tolerated."

"Father isn't quite as particular, but he doesn't much deal with courtiers anyway. That's my mother's job. She was the one who persuaded father to let me train as a scribe, that way I'm learning how to be king, but I'm very much in the background. I could never do what you do. You talk all the time. King Thorin seems to expect it of you."

"Most of the things I say are just good for a laugh," said Ori.

"I think you're wonderful."

Ori blushed and stammered, "I'm a dolt, a very lucky dolt. If I served a stricter king, I hardly would have reached my present position so painlessly. I probably wouldn't have reached it at all."

"I know why you reached it. I read the dispatches King Thorin sent Father about the coup. You missed nothing. They're so precise, yet they read like novels. The descriptions from Princess Dis' tea party had me craving blackberry jam for days."

"It wasn't hard to write about that, believe me," said Ori. "I ate ten of those rolled cakes at one sitting. I'm amazed I didn't burst. What I can't believe is that King Thorin wanted me to send those dispatches instead of simpler bulletins. It took four ravens to carry each one, dividing the pages between them. I had only intended that level of detail for the Ereboorean archives. No one but scholars read those."

"Maybe there's always been a reason only scholars read them."

"They are rather dry, aren't they? It's frustrating. They say everything but what actually happened."

"I suppose it's all about the face the king wants to show the world, the appearance, not the substance. King Thorin seems to simply tell the people everything."

"Not everything," said Ori. "For a long time Erebor had two armies: the acknowledged army under King Thror's command and Thorin's private army, loyal to him, only it was called the City Guard of Dale. If Thror had lived much longer, Thorin would have had to use his army to try and force Thror out."

"Civil war?"

"Civil war."

"What changed?" Arne asked. Ori shrugged.

"According to Oin's readings of the signs; Dori."

"So really it was you. By marrying Captain Dwalin and bringing Dori into Fundin House?"

"Well," Ori said, idly, "if you want to pursue that line of thinking, then it's all Nori's fault."

Arne laughed.
Together Arne and Ori went to the breakfast parlor. The table was still being set out and loaded by Dori and Mistress Dazla’s team, with Bilbo breezily helping and chatting to everyone. Ori thought that the table had been lengthened considerably. Buj and Dipfa were there looking bright-eyed, and Bain was stuffing his face.

Dori fussed over Balin, who looked rather rough and sleepy, but pleased with being cajoled to food and tea. Thorin was enjoying his own tea while Frodo slept against his arm.

“He slept through being dressing and washed?” Ori asked.

Thorin chuckled.

“No,” Bilbo supplied. “He woke us at dawn and got everything and everyone started and as soon as we sat down, he was out like a light. But we’ve both got breakfast out of it.”

“Fortunately,” Thorin added.

Gloin and his family barged in and settled themselves near where Dipfa and Buj sat whispering. Dwalin had empty seats on either side him and Ori and Arne had just sat down when Oin and Binni arrived. Oin went immediately to Buj and patted his head. Binni leaned down and kissed his cheek.

“Did you get some sleep, my little researcher?”

Buj grinned up at both of them.

“Yes, I did. Thank you. My precious diamond and I are patiently waiting for Master Brur and Master Jansad to bring the rough copies from the coronation.”

“Indeed,” Binni smiled and kissed Dipfa’s cheek, also. “Good morning, dear. Did you get any sleep?”

“Oh, yes, Bearer. It is as my beloved Boo says. I am so looking forward to see the fashions captured.”

Binni went down the table to the seat Oin had pulled out for him. It was next to Ori. Ori thought Binni looked more serene than usual.

Ori asked in a low voice,

“You two seem to have adopted Buj rather Gloin and Gridr doing so.”

Binni chuckled.

“Yes, Oin dotes on him. He’s quiet and studious and we don’t have to change any nappies. His dietary requirements are somewhat odd, but we understand he’s doing an experiment, so that’s fine and he likes snacks, as long as they’re ‘light’. He seems to be quite the child Oin and I would naturally have had if I had been able bear him one.”

“I’m happy for all three of you. Buj is a good deal less…er..frown-y now that he’s with you both.”

“Yes,” Binni grimaced a little. “The dwarving was quite aware he was not what his parents wanted in a child. From what I knew of them, it was quite incredible that either of them could create such an intelligent creature as our Buj. His mother didn’t have a thought in her head and his father was worse.”

The elves arrived together with Aragorn, Arwen, and Boromir. Ori realized that this was why the table had grown. They all seated themselves and exchanged greetings with everyone. Dori immediately brought out two large crocks of elderberry jam and put one beside Galadriel and one beside Thranduil.

“No fighting,” Dori teased.

“Hers is fatter than mine,” Thranduil replied, pouting his lip.

“You must hear a lot of that,” Galadriel snarked back at him.

“But yours is taller, now hush both of you,” Dori ordered in a parental tone and stalked off, leaving the elves to giggle amongst themselves.

Sculdis breezed in, almost singing greetings, Stonehelm trailing her, and a few moments later, Dain crawled into the breakfast parlor and scalped the side of the chair to sit.

Bilbo bustled about, filling cups and chattering and, perhaps to turn the knife, began to whistle.

Dain opened one, horrifically bloodshot eye and croaked.

“Yer ’n arsehole. ‘R yeh immune t’ grain alcohol ‘r somethin’?”
Bilbo pretended to give this serious contemplation.

"Hmmm. Could be."

Suddenly Dain sat upright, his face cracking open in a huge smile.

"Tha’s brilliant! We need t’ travel t’gether. Think o’ th’ money we’ll make."

"No," chorused Sculdis and Thorin, neither raising their eyes, one from her breakfast and the other from his tea.

"Alas," Bilbo chuckled. "Nori’s ahead of you. Should I ever decide to embark on a life of iniquity, he’s got first refusal as my companion."

Dain peered around the table and his eyes lit on Buj and Dipfa.

Buj was in his usual black but Dipfa wore poofy green trousers with a bright pink tunic and yellow boots with orange laces.

Dain groaned and looked away.

Bilbo said, brightly, "My gracious, Miss Dipfa. How well you look! That is an ensemble that would do any hobbit lass proud."

"Have some more breakfast, my dears," said Dori. "With the reviewing of the rough notes you’re going to need your strength. Besides, you’re in shape to stomach, unlike some people."

Dain stuck out his tongue.

Dipfa said, "Oh, no, thank you, Lady Dori. I believe both my beloved Boo and I are of an elegant sufficiency. However, I do need to pop in and check for any work that needs to be done on the royal scribe’s robes before they’re sent back to the archive."

She curtseyed in Ori’s direction and skipped off down the hall, singing to herself.

Ori had a vague memory of Dwalin helping him take them off and maybe Dwalin had hung them over the chair? He didn’t think Dwalin had just dumped them in a heap on the floor.

In the distance, Dipfa screamed.

Everyone at the table jumped up and sped to Ori and Dwalin’s room where the artist knelt on the floor, wailing and clutching a wad of varied-colored velvets.

"My precious diamond!" Buj cried, rushing to kneel by her side and rubbing her back. "What has occurred to cause you such woe?"

"Food stains!" she howled. "Lord Ori, you got food stains on the scribe’s coronation robes! How will I ever remove them?"

She buried her face in the cloth and sobbed.

"Oh Mahal," Ori groaned. "How did I get food stains on those?"

"Yeh did sit in our Wandi’s dinner plate, love," said Dwalin.

All right, that Ori remembered.

"I thought it was empty!"

"Technically it was, as he’d just finished dinner. Then yeh passed out across th’ half-empty tray a’ roasted oxen an’ a plate a’ butter."

"Oh Dipfa! I’m so sorry!" Ori cried, kneeling on the other side of the inconsolable dam. Awkwardly he patted her shoulder.

She sat up abruptly, her face suddenly stoic and determined.

"I will find away, Lord Ori. I will bend my entire will to the cleansing of these garments!" She turned to Buj. "We have vital work to do, my Boo. We must find the solution that will overthrow these stains and restore these garments to their true glory."

"You could ask King Ulfr," Ori suggested. "He’s a chemical engineer."

Buj jumped up.

"I shall fetch him immediately!"

"Buj." Thorin stopped the young scribe gently. "You may want to wait until at least this afternoon."

"But, your majesty, this is a matter of state!"

"I can guarantee Ulfr’s state is ‘hungover’. Unless you want to try to get blood stains off the tapestries, it’ll have to wait."
Leaving Dipfa and Buj to minutely discuss fabric cleaning, the rest of the party returned to breakfast. They had just seated themselves again when Fili, Kili, Tauriel, and Sigrid arrived. Kili looked as though the sun had risen in his eyes and Tauriel seemed rather pleased with herself. Fili looked happy but sleepy. Sigrid was pink and happy, but peered about the gathering furtively. She relaxed, but Bain grinned maniacally and spouted out,

“Siggy, I was going to call you to come to breakfast but you weren’t—”

Thranduil caught ahold of the lad’s face and inserted his napkin into the young man’s mouth. Sigrid and Fili both blushed. Dori and everyone else greeted them and offered food and tea. Kili looked at all the food on the table, but his gaze didn’t seem to rest anywhere, and kept coming back to Tauriel, who serenely stirred her tea.

Thorin raised an eyebrow at his nephew and Kili blinked saucily.

Ori heard Thorin mutter about Kili being lucky his mother was sleeping it off under a feasting table.

Buj and Dipfa walked back in, Dipfa fully recovered from her woe. They heard Master Sadie’s voice in the hall.

“Mind out, deary. I told yeh t’ leave all tha’ haulin’ t’ th’ young, springy types.”

“Just a flesh wound, love,” said Brur, his voice particularly gravelly this morning.

Ori thought it was probably a combination of announcing and then downing copious amounts of ale.

“We’ve brought th’ coronation materials from th’ scribes’ guild,” announced Sadie as she entered. A dozen young apprentices followed, each towing a cart with an enormous box.

Ori stood up, agog.

“That’s not everything just from yesterday,” he said.

“Every last scrap an’ scribble,” said Brur at the door. Once again he was dressed in ink-stained robes, and he could have carried shelves full of books in the bags under his eyes. “Except th’ lot bein’ horded by the king’s scribe.”

“Mee-ow,” said Nori, swaggering past Brur, Bofur in tow.

Neither Bofur nor Nori looked much worse for their busy night. Ori wondered if Nori had somehow glommed on to Dori’s anti-hangover recipe, ‘glommed on to’ meaning stolen, of course.

The moment Nori and Bofur sat, Assault and Battery flew down from Nori’s hair and face-planted into the marmalade.

“Nori!” Dori screamed. “Get those rodents off my breakfast table this instant!”

“What? Yer nieces are growin’ girls.”

“Then get them a bowl, you scapegrace, and they are not my nieces.”

“Oh!” Nori objected “Don’t ya go hurtin’ their feelin’s!”

“Oi!” Nori objected “Don’t ya go hurtin’ their feelin’s!”

“Or, aren’t they sweet!” Lady Galadriel cooed.

Assault and Battery heard her dulcette voice and immediately scampered down the table to attach themselves to her ladyship. They sat in her lap and she fed them toast and elderberry jam.

“Fickle,” Nori pronounced.

“Don’t knock it, duck,” said Bofur. “Good sitters’re hard t’ get.”

Brur and Sadie sat and ate heartily, and the apprentice scribes were herded into the sitting room with the promise of tea and scones. When it looked as though no one else would be arriving before noon, the breakfast things were removed and the cloth taken up, the table wiped and dried thoroughly and the coronation materials were unpacked. Ori went and retrieved his own, amazed to find how much more he had collected since he’s gone to sleep the first time last night. Most of it was even legible.

He looked at the pile of paper on the table and despaired.

“This is an awful lot of material to go through, Sadie,” said Ori.

“This is just what we call the ‘roughs’,” Sadie told him.

“How old will we be before it’s smooth?” he asked.

“Oh, aren’t they sweet!” Lady Galadriel cooed.

“Once it’s in some sort of time order it’ll go quickly,” said Sadie, bracingly. “All the materials will have to go into the archives, o’ course, but we can be more selective with the bound official
“We jus’ though’ yeh’d like to see th’ damage,” Brur explained with a wink. “I figured tha’ lot through in th’ other room could sort out th’ written notes an’ yeh lot could go over th’ pictures.”

Ori grinned and the well-fed scribes, who had been joined by three of Balin’s secretaries, were called back in. They removed the written notes and the table was soon awash with pictures; some simple sketches, many portraits, and others fully rendered and in color. These were passed about and there was much admiration and a good deal of laughter.

“Here’s Thranduil helping Ahkn up to the dais,” announced Arwen.

Thranduil reached for it only to have Celeborn snatch it away.

“Cousin, how can you be so generous in manner and yet keep your nose in the air?” Celeborn asked with failed gravity.

“At least, I have manners,” Thranduil replied coolly and plucked the paper out of Celeborn’s hand, and looked it over.

“Good one, idad elf!” Kili shouted.

Thranduil gave him a gracious nod, then,

“This is quite good. My robes are perfectly drawn.”

“You’re screaming at Legs in this one,” Kili informed him, waving a paper in the air.

Thranduil raised an eyebrow.

“He’s jumping into the pig ring,” Kili went on.

Celeborn craned his neck.

“Yes, a perfect likeness.”

Thranduil snorted and picked up another piece of paper.

Thorin drew Bilbo to him and smiled. Ori craned his neck and saw it was a beautiful picture of Frodo riding bunny-back.

Gloin was grinning as he and his son happily pawed through the pictures. Gloin drew one out and passed it to Brur.

“Oi, king o’ Gondor, take a look,” Brur passed the paper to Aragorn and Arwen. As it went by, Ori saw someone had used colored inks for a fine portrait of the betrothed couple.

Aragorn leaned forward to look down the table.

“Thorin, my friend, may we either keep this one or -”

Thorin grinned,

“We’ll see what’s here. There may be another you like better. If not, the scribe mark will identify who did it, if you’d like to offer them a commission.”

“Thank you. I think I might.” Aragorn smiled lovingly at Arwen, who blushed a little.

Dwalin snickered and nudged Ori. Ori looked. Someone had sketched Dain in full roar singing while standing on the head table. They had added a verse from ‘Me Zeydis’ and added musical symbols around the words. Ori rose and passed the paper to Sculdis, who shrieked with laughter.

“This one needs t’ be framed!”

Dain had a look.

“Aye, a’ course, my gem. Whatever yeh fancy.”

Stonehelm took it and snickered.

Here one of your pig,” Legolas stated and passed it to Dain, who almost melted in paternal pride.

“What a great lot of pictures of Lobelia laid out in the throne room,” Bilbo commented. “Perhaps we should save one and have it framed to give her for Yule.”

“This one is awfully nice,” said Buj, passing it over. “It looks as though she’s just taking a nap. You wouldn’t want one of these here. They’re from her backside and all you can see of her is - well - her backside.”

“It’s also her best side,” said Bilbo.

Kili said, “Here’s one of her hubby, running around, scolding and wagging his finger. What’s he saying?”

Ori said, “Perhaps he’s barking.”

Dwalin laughed. Everyone else at the table looked a-sea.
“Never mind,” said Ori, reddening.

Leafing through the piles, Ori found a picture of himself seated on Aewandínén’s plate. He had a vague memory of doing this, but little to nothing else about it. He was shocked at how snarky and superior he looked, even compared to the elf.

“What’s all this about?” Ori asked.

Thorin said, “That’s when you told Aewandínén off.”

“I told Aewandínén off?” Ori gaped at his king.

Everyone in the room roared with laughter.

“Oh, aye,” said Brur. “Yeh gave him what’s fer.”

Ori gaped at him.

“What in Mahal’s hairy arse did I say to him?”

Buj looked up from a very nice picture of Dipfa and said, “I do have the full transcript of the conversation.”

He took a black notebook out of his black pocket and flipped through.

“Ah, here it is,” said Buj, handing Ori the book. Ori read, his stomach turning.

“I did not say… oh, I didn’t! Oh, King Thranduil, I’m so sorry.”

“I’m not,” said Thranduil. “Now he has a mission, and who knew he would be obsessed by so simple a thing?’

“Where is he?”

I think he is still down in Dale,” said Thranduil.

“When did he go to Dale?” asked Ori.

“At dawn. After you told him off so thoroughly he went into a storm of activity. He scampered down the mountain to delouse the populous. He’s working his way through the scalps of Dale. He’s already sent to the Greenwood for reinforcements.”

“Reinforcements?”

“The elves who formulate and supply him with haircare products. I find, Lord Ori, that I am in your debt.”

Thranduil rose and bowed to him.

“Uh… you’re welcome, your majesty.” Ori looked at Dwalin. “You don’t think Aewandínén’s going to get himself hurt or anything?”

Ori was actually thinking the word ‘murdered’ would be more accurate, but probably disturb the new-found peace between the elf king and Thorin.

“I asked Master Dubb to keep an eye on him,” said Thorin.

“I hope he’s good with elflings,” Thranduil murmured.

Bilbo murmured about second breakfast and the papers were moved away from the center of the table and coffee and a couple of platters of scones filled with bacon, egg and cheese or cheese and chives.

Everyone was careful not to dirty the pictures as they continued to look and discuss them.

The door flung open and in darted Aewandínén, already talking at speed. His hair was tied back, braided tightly. His tunic was soaked and plastered to his front, the sleeves were rolled up past his elbows and the rest of his clothing quite disheveled. Ori was amazed to note it was the clothing he had worn to the coronation ceremony.


The other elves stared at him. Ori had never heard anyone talk so fast and yet enunciate every word perfectly.

“Would you care for some breakfast, your highness?” Dori asked.


Thranduil asked, “My son, how much tea and coffee have you consumed since you left for Dale?”
“I can’t recall exactly. Every time I was admitted to a house I was offered it of course and since I was about to discuss someone’s personal scalp infestation I thought it would be a show of good faith to accept. I’ve only done the south side of Dale though and I’ll have to go back after breakfast and begin on the east side.”

“How many homes did you go to, my son?”

“I don’t know Ada. I lost count. Fifty?”

“Fifty. Perhaps accept only glasses of water after this, my son.”

“That is lovely idea, thank you Ada.”

Dori brought out a plate of veggie breakfast bake with a side of fried tomatoes and another plate of buttered toast and put them down in front of the prince, making sure there were no pictures anywhere near him.

“Your highness,” Dori cooed. Aewandínen immediately thanked Dori and started tucking in with gusto. Ori stared. The once haughty prince was stuffing his face in a manner worthy of Fili and Kili. The elf prince looked up the table at Thorin and said, a little more slowly, “I hope I didn’t overstep, your majesty, but I have a supply of hair preparation coming up from Erys Lasgalen via a large flock of ravens, whom I found quite obliging. They should be arriving this afternoon and have planned to alight on the patio.”

Thorin wiped his mouth with his napkin. Ori thought this was to give himself a moment to swallow a laugh. Then the dwarf king said, “Of course, Prince Aewandínen. If it’s to help the people of Dale, I see no reason why they shouldn’t.”

“Thank you. You know, I was feeling somewhat fatigued, but all this exercise has certainly reenergized me. This veggie bake is delicious, Bearer.” Aewandínen’s eyes sparkled with excitement and his smile was constant.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” said Dori with a twinkle. “Another serving?”

“Yes, please!”

Dori went out and Aewandínen finished the plate of toast with liberal helpings of marmalade. Dori returned and refilled the prince’s plate and Mistress Dazla followed with another plate piled high with toast.

Noises in the hall heralded the arrival of some extremely amused people. They burst in.

“What do you think?” Glorfindel asked, filling the doorway.

Everyone stared at the elf. Margr and Vi stood behind him, laughing and hanging on each other, hysterical.

Glorfindel’s hair was in ringlets. All of it.

“I’m thinking of keeping it,” announced Glorfindel.

Aewandínen looked up, mouth full and narrowed his eyes. He swallowed, rose and crossed to Glorfindel’s side, a slice of marmalade loaded toast in one hand and his teacup in the other. He regarded the new hairdo from every possible angle and nodded approvingly.

“We will call it the ‘Ulwe,'” he pronounced, licking any remaining marmalade off his fingers. “Since it’s a mass of waves.”

“Thank you,” Glorfindel declared, buoyantly. “I’m suddenly seized with the need to become a pirate. In fact, I think I’ll start right now.”

He whirled, snatched Margr and Vi up, one over each shoulder, and strode away.

Margr shrieked, “Oi! Vi, here we go t’ have our ships scuttled again!”

“Glorfy! You naughty thing!” Vi cried. “We ain’t even had our tea!”

Dain, leaning on his hand, muttered, “I don’t suppose yeh could have it in yer room. Nah, I’d prob’ly still hear yeh.”

“You think?” Bilbo teased.

“A’ this point I could hear ‘em in me sleep. I swear, righ’ now I kin hear light”

Ori had finished eating and, in a playful mood, shot forward to his eldest brother’s side, notebook at the ready.

“Can you describe it for me?”

“I don’t think so, wee brother.”
“Can you make something up?”
“Ori!” Dori scolded.
“I’m just kidding, Dori,” said Ori, laughing. “Hearing light sounds like something Buj studies.”
“What am I studying?” Buj asked abruptly, from deep in conversation with Dipfa.
Dwalin said, “He must’ve heard his name.”
Mistress Dazla was heard talking and she entered.
“Honored Bearer?”
Dori rose and went to her.
“Oh, there we are. Wonderful! Do come and join us, deary. You must be desperate for your breakfast.”
Dori went to the door and drew Mavey into the room. The older Durins greeted her placidly and the rest followed suit. Dori placed Mavey next to her and helped the young dam to tea and food.
The conversation around the table went on. Ori was too busy, torn between listening to all the gossip and committing it to memory as he couldn’t really take notes at the informal party, and taking in all the pictures.
After about twenty minutes, Jim and his family strolled into the breakfast parlor and greeted everyone. Floris rushed up to Mavey with Biscuit at her heels, warg and damling equally excited.
"Mavey! Is it true? Yer coming on the road with us?"
"Yes," said Mavey brightly.
Floris all but squealed and Biscuit started to bark which almost put Dain under the table.
"I have a million things t’ show you!” Floris gabbed. “Can ya juggle? Never mind, I’ll teach ya!”
Floris grabbed two bacon filled scones and she and Mavey went off into the meadow arm in arm, chattering like birds.
Dori looked up at Jim.
"Thank you for doing this, Ruelis, Jim. I’m aware I may have upset your mine cart."
"Nah,” said Jim, waving dismissal. "It was getting too quiet. You need new blood to keep things fresh. Not to mention an oliphaunt."
Ruelis snorted, though she gave her husband a fond look.
"No’ t’ mention savin’ me from havin’ t’ squeeze out more badgers. Twin daughters? Yeh an’ yer predictions!"
Dori conducted the pair to seats and filled their plates and cups. Fior parked himself next to Arne and helped himself to everything within his reach.
Theoden King, Theodred, and Bard came in. Theodred was fine, Theoden and Bard looked like death warmed over. Balin helped them to their seats and Dori arrived on the scene with three cups of his restorative. Mistress Dazla brought more scones and a keg which Thorin immediately tapped and filled three tankards. Theoden drank the restorative, made a disgusted noise and took the tankard of ale Celeborn passed him. Theoden drank this back, too and sighed, thanked Celeborn and looked around the table with a smile.
"Honored Bearer, I would pay you in our finest horses for that potion.”
Dori fluttered and said, “nonsense” and passed the plate of cold beef Agirb brought in.
Bard sat staring at the cup. He sniffed it and grimaced.
“Drink it, dear,” Dori encouraged. “You’ll feel much better.”
Dori gave the final cup to Dain who swallowed it in one and sighed in happiness. Bard observed this, groaned and downed the mix then sucked down a cup of tea.
“Oi, brother,” said Dain, “have yeh had tha’ this whole time an’ made me sit here, prayin’ t’ die anyway?”
“I was attempting to teach you a lesson,” Dori said, imperiously.
Thorin barked out a laugh.
“Sorry, Dori, you’re at least a century too late.”
“Besides,” said Dori, “it takes time to make these things.”
“How much time?” Dain asked suspiciously.
“However long I feel like it,” replied Dori airily. “Then it has to cool.”
“Yeh can’t make it up ahead o’ time?”

“Oh, you know, I never thought of that,” said Dori, placing a finger to her cheek.

Aewandínen wiped his mouth and offered to ‘fix’ Gimli’s hair for Legolas, which Legolas politely demurred while Gimli turned purple. The young dwarf was only restrained in his seat by Legolas half-sitting in his lap.

Aewandínen whisked out. Gimli glared after him, red as a beet as Gloin and Gridr tried to stifle their mirth.

“Think tha’ barrow thing jumped in his mouth an’, him bein’ an elf, made him all kinds a’ nice?” Gimli demanded.

Legolas cringed and shot his father a guilty look, then requested Gimli to join him in a walk in the meadow.

Galadriel, Elrond and Celeborn all burst into giggles and Thranduil tried to frown but couldn’t quite manage it.

“If only I had realized earlier what the poor thing needed was a quest,” said Tharnduil. “But this sort of quest would never have occurred to me.”

“Ah well, lad,” Gloin said gruffly, but kindly. “Yeh do yer best, but sometimes yeh jus’ have t’ let th’ badgers find their own way.”

“Thank you,” Tharnduil said quite gravely, but his eyes twinkled at Gloin, who chuckled.

Frodo woke up and looked around.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “Oh look! Floris brought her warg!” The faunt was off and out to the meadow before anyone could speak.

At that minute, Dubb arrived, huffing for breath and with sweat running down into his beard.

“Yer majesty,” he bawled out and stomped over to Thorin, “with all due respect, I am retired, an’ fuck yeh, yeh fuckin’ arsehole!”

Thorin laughed so hard, he fell out of his chair.

“It’s no’ funny!” Dubb wheezed. “I haven’t run so much since I had t’ do fuckin’ calisthenics, an’ now I’m running’ abou’ after tha’ nutter o’ an elf, poppin’ in an’ outa people’s houses whether they’re awake an’ takin’ nourishment an’ offerin’ tea or still drunk asleep, it don’ matter t’ him. He goes over an’ jus’ yanks some poor sod’s heed over th’ edge o’ the bed an’ starts washin’ his hair, and then as he’s runnin’ out th’ door giving ‘im a lecture abou’ cleanliness and he’s off t’ th’ next, an’, oh, did I mention before? I am retired!”

Thorin very obviously could not breathe.

Dwalin stretched and said, “Let th’ prince go, Dubb. He seems jus’ fine on his own.”

“Yeh think? Yeh always were a bright spark. Pair o’ prize idjits, th’ both a’ yeh.”

Dori swept up,

“Oh, you poor thing! Dear Master Dubb, do come and have something to eat. You must be famished. I’ll get you some tea.”

“Don’ mind if I do.”

Dubb, having caught his breath, looked around the table, realized he was surrounded by the crowned heads of Arda, bowed curtly, sat in Aewandínen’s abandoned chair and proceeded to chow down.

Moments later, Legolas came in from the meadow with Gimli.

“King Thorin? Why are you on the ground? Are you alright?”

Legolas bent and, with Gimli, helped the new high king up and Legolas started again.

“King Thorin-”

Thorin’s eyebrow shot up.

“King Thorin? My nephews address your father as ‘Idad Elf’ and I’m King Thorin?”

“Idad Dwarf?” Legolas asked.

“Better. Yes, my nephew?”

Legolas grinned.

“Are you expecting a wagon train?”
Everyone went out to the meadow. Thorin took the spyglass Dwalin handed him.
“They’re on the old north road,” Legolas informed him. Thorin nodded thanks and, standing on one of the benches, put the spyglass to his eye and trained it out to the north.
“Looks like the soldiers we sent with Frerin,” Thorin said meditatively. “I don’t see any banners, so he’s not coming to my coronation. They appear to have a lot of wagons, so, likely traders came with them. They won’t be here until late this afternoon at the pace they’re going.”
Thorin dropped lightly down and handed Dwalin the spyglass.
“Why would traders come with your soldiers?” Frodo asked.
“It would keep them safe from bandits or orcs,” Thorin smiled down at the faunt.
“Oh,” Frodo considered. “Uncle Bilbo and I were very safe with Radagast and his rabbits.”
“Yes, you were,” Thorin agreed, then grinned. “That reminds me.”
The king went indoors.
“Where’s Idad Thorin going?” asked Kili coming out and brushing the crumbs off his front.
“He didn’t say,” Bilbo replied, watching Frodo, who was studying a butterfly which had just landed on a forget-me-knot nearby.
Thorin returned, carrying Orcrist in its scabbard. He looked amused and was followed out by everyone else.
“Gather around, please,” Thorin requested in a formal tone.
Everyone exchanged glances and did as they were asked.
Thorin gestured Frodo to come forward. Frodo went to stand in front of Thorin, looking rather puzzled. Bilbo stood behind the faunt.
“Young Master Frodo Baggins,” Thorin said, gravely. “Do you recall the discussion you and I had before I left the inn?”
“Yes,” Frodo said, also grave. “You told me that it was now my duty to look after Uncle Bilbo and make sure we were safe in Erebor by the first snowfall.” The faunt brightened. “And we’re both fine and we got here early! I did take care of you, didn’t I, Uncle Bilbo?”
Frodo looked up and back at a rather amused Bilbo.
“Indeed, you did, my lad. You took very good care of me and certainly followed King Thorin’s orders perfectly.”
Frodo looked back at Thorin, who nodded wisely.
“Indeed you have.”
Thorin drew Orcrist and beckoned Frodo forward again.
“Kneel before me, Frodo Baggins.” Thorin intoned.
Ori didn’t know how Thorin was keeping a straight face, as he was having difficulty not giggling. Frodo looked puzzled but did as he was told.
“Frodo Baggins,” Thorin stated in a ringing tone, “for the brave discharge of the task I set you, and for your diligent and patient baking lesson, I dub you a lord of Erebor.” He carefully touched Frodo’s right shoulder with the flat of the blade then the left shoulder. “Arise, Frodo, Lord of the
Muffins.”
Everyone cheered and applauded.
Frodo, still kneeling, hissed to Thorin, “May I stand up now?”
“Yes. That’s what ‘arise’ means.”
“Oh.” Frodo hopped to his feet and turned to Bilbo. “Uncle Bilbo! I’m a dwarf lord!”
Bilbo hugged him and said, “Yes, I can already see your beard’s growing in.”
“Is it?” Frodo cried excitedly and ran his hand over his smooth jaw. “I think you’re right!”
The party heard squawking and rattling and turned to witness a raphcuctus bird bouncing
gracelessly down the roof from the mountain side. Gnasher stood at the roofline, watching, and Ori
could swear he was laughing. The bird rolled to a stop in the grass near the patio, shook itself
thoroughly, then hopped up on its feet, seeming a little dizzy.
“Oh, poor Kelli landed on his head!” cried Galadriel.
“Yes,” said Thranduil smoothly, cutting his eyes at Celeborn. “Rather like-”
“Stop,” Celeborn warned through his teeth.
Thranduil clicked his tongue.
“You never were any fun…, laddie.”
Gloin snorted.
“What did you just call me?” Celeborn asked in astonishment.
Gloin nudged Thranduil’s hip.
“Now, don’t tease.” Gloin went up to Celeborn. “Just think, laddie, if yeh get tired o’ th’ great,
oisy bird, yeh can always roast him. I’m sure he’s good eatin’.”
“I can’t roast him,” Celeborn all but purred. “He’s my cousin, and Legolas would be most put
out.”
Gloin brayed with laughter and all the other dwarrows said, “Oooo!”
Sculdis nodded, “Good one, our Cel.”
Kelli spotted Celeborn, instantly exploded into clicks, honks, and squawks, and came bounding
over, legs in a blur of movement. For a moment Celeborn looked to be in fear of his life, but as the
raphcuctus bird drew near, it was obvious the bird was cooing.
“Oh, Elbereth,” Celeborn sighed in exasperation as the bird rubbed its cheek against his belly.
He patted the bird’s head reluctantly. It seemed he was an elf who recognized when the situation
was hopeless.
Grinder leapt down with yet another raphcuctus bird on his back. This one waited until the goat
slowed a little and slid off neatly, though bouncing several times anyway.
Thorin said, “Ori, please send a raven to Mistress Guernsia and say her birds have staged a
breakout.”
Balin ran a hand down his beard and looked up where the goats had come through.
“I think tha’ may be th’ lot, Thorin, but best t’ let her know anyways tha’ she’ll come up short on
her head count.”
“I’ll tell her.” Garnet called and flew off.
The new raphcuctus bird very casually waddled over, looking about the meadow with interest.
This one was not quite as tall as Kelli, but quite a substantial specimen.
Since no one seemed inclined to stop its progress, the bird walked right up to them and surveyed
them curiously.
“Pretty bird!” said Frodo.
The raphcuctus swung its head around and approached Frodo. Ori could swear it had cocked an
eyebrow as it looked down on the faunt.
“Keep your fingers away from its head, my boy,” Bilbo instructed.
But the bird was not snappish, only extended its beak over Frodo’s shoulder and gently drew him
forward against its huge feathered breast and clucked fondly.
Gimli sighed.
“One less bird f’r th’ pot.”
“It likes me!” Frodo cried, someone muffled, his face still in the feathers. He announced, “It’s
“It would seem you have gained an attachment,” said Bilbo.
Frodo pulled back and looked at him with a frown.
“I thought it was called a raphcuctus?”
“So did I,” said Kili.
Bilbo shot Kill a look and turned back to Frodo with a smile.
“What are you going to call it, Frodo?”
“Posey.”
“Why?”
“Look at the tail! It’s a bunch of posies.”
They turned to go back into the house, except for Dwalin. Gnasher had bashed him across the
rump in a playful manner and it was obvious that, for the dwarf warrior, there was no escape.
“I’ll be inside in a bit!” Dwalin called behind him, laughing and pitting his strength against the
goat’s, arms against horns.
“Don’t get flattened!” Ori called back.
“I won’t. We been doin’ this since he were a kid!”
At the doorway Ori glanced back once more to see that Dwalin had flipped the goat onto its back
and was giving Gnasher a tummy rub with both hands and his face. Gnasher waved his legs and
bleated happily.
Grinder grazed nearby, apparently above such things.

The rest of the party returned to the table, which was still covered in pictures. Some time was
spent helping Jansad and Brur decide what order they should go in and with what. They were
finishing, when Mistress Dazla entered and said,
“You majesty, the… er… Bang Crash… request an audience.”
“Excellent. Please bring them in.” Thorin looked amused, while the younger set traded looks of
utter glee and excitement.
Ecthelion entered in black leather, the same midnight color as his hair. The rest of the band
traipsed in behind him, dressed in the bright colors of traveling balladeers, except for the shortish
fellow who entered last, wearing a black hood that covered his features and carrying the drum sticks
at the ready, in case the need came up to drum something.
Thorin bowed his head in greeting.
“Ecthelion, you and your… band… are very welcome. Would you care for some breakfast?”
“Second breakfast,” Bilbo suggested helpfully.
“Elevenses!” Frodo corrected.
“Aauk!” said Posey.
The elven lead singer glanced at Posey, raised an eyebrow, and thanked Thorin.
“We’ve eaten and are shortly to be on our way. We came to take our leave.”
All the younger set made disappointed noises.
“When are you coming back?” asked Omi.
“Can you come back soon?” Loli added.
“We are quite at King Thorin’s leisure,” said Ecthelion graciously. “We don’t often get fed quite
this well. Or this much. Or garner such a big crowd.”
“You’re welcome anytime you’re passing through the area,” said Thorin.
The band members looked at each other.
“Yes, well, we thought you should understand there are unique circumstances before you invite us
again.”
“Circumstances?” Thorin asked. “Do you need to meet with me privately?”
“Oh, no… well… “
“Drum!” shouted the drummer, startling the raphcuctus and everyone else. “Drum! Drum!
Druuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!”
Thorin looked at the drummer and back at Ecthelion.
“Your circumstance, I presume.”
“Er, yes. Drum, come here.”
“Drum!”

“Yes, come here,” Ecthelion encouraged, his voice gentle and soothing. “It’s alright, Drum.”
Thorin turned his chair and gestured for his guests to make a little room. They did so and
Ecthelion steered the drummer forward by the shoulder to stand before Thorin. Ecthelion muttered
something, the drummer gasped and started to breathe heavily. Suddenly Ori had a feeling this
wasn’t just a very shy musician with a drum fixation.
Ecthelion drew back Drum’s hood and Ori, for the first time, saw an honest to Mahal orc.
“Fuck me,” barked Dain, as every warrior reached for their weapons, half rising.
Thorin raised his hand.
“Stop! Everyone calm down. Ecthelion, explain.”

“Stop! Everyone calm down. Ecthelion, explain.”
“He’s harmless,” the elf started. “May I tell you the story?”
“Please,” said Thorin. The king nodded to Mistress Dazla and more chairs were brought.
Thorin cleared his throat and gestured for the band to sit as well. The breakfast party slowly
settled back down, though no one looked particularly relaxed.
Ecthelion remained standing before Thorin, with his arm around Drum’s shoulders and began.
“About two years ago we came across a slain party of orcs on the road. From the spears, we
thought they must have been done in by soldiers from Rohan. We didn’t think much of it, since
there didn’t seem to be a threat, but for the next three days we got the feeling we were being
watched. We presumed it might be a Rohan scout. On the fourth morning after that we woke to find
one of our drums and a set of sticks were missing.
“We looked around, but we didn’t see anything, but then, in the distance, we heard the drum being
played. It was the backbeat to the new song we had just begun working on the night before. So we
followed the noise and found… him. He was obviously terrified, backed right away from us and the
instrument, but the whole time he kept saying ‘Drum-Drum-Drum’.
“He was such a pitiful fellow, we weren’t afraid of him or worried about being attacked. We just
took the drum back and moved on, but once we’d settled down and started practicing that night,
there was a rustle in the bushes and we heard him out in the dark saying ‘Drum-Drum-Drum’.
“Well, I confess we had been drinking, so we started talking about it and we figured: Why not?
He was there anyway. We invited him join us and offered him the drum. We went on practicing
and he played for us. When we stopped for dinner, he refused all offers of food or drink. When we
woke the next morning we found him eating the grass around camp. Over time, we realized grass is
the only thing he ever eats. His upkeep is practically nil."
“Oh,” said Galadriel.
“We were concerned at first, going into towns and villages with him, but he’s never harmed
anyone, nor does he steal,” Ecthelion went on, “Still, it’s better to keep him cloaked, so he doesn’t
frighten anyone off. Or tempt someone to kill him. He’s the best drummer we ever had.”
“Oh,” said Celeborn.
Dwalin came in, looked around, took in everyone’s stunned expression, took in Drum, and turned
to his king.
“Oi, Thorin, did yeh know there’s an orc in yer breakfast parlor?”
Balin sighed.
“Aye, brother. Thank yeh.”
“You’re not afraid of him?” Frodo asked Dwalin.
“Him? Why would I be afraid of a porter?” Dwalin asked.
“A porter?” Balin asked.
“A porter, a lackey, someone who gets kicked a lot. Look, he’s just a bitty thin’. An orcs ain’t
inclined t’ cringe this much, especially when they feel threatened.”
“That’s quite true,” said Thorin. He rose and approached Drum, looking him over. Drum backed
into Ecthelion, staring fearfully at Thorin.
“Look at all the old scars on his head,” Thorin said, quietly. “Those aren’t from bladed weapons.
Those are blunt force. His skull is more dented than any orc’s I’ve seen, and I’ve seen quite a few. Orcs crave meat. When has an orc ever eaten any kind of vegetation? This one, as you said, only eats grass.”

One of the females in the band asked sadly, “You think he’s been knocked about?”

Thorin answered with a question, “Has he ever said anything more than ‘drum’? Has he spoken black speech or any other language?”

The band members all shook their heads.

“If he’s reduced t’ eaten grass,” Dwalin observed, “he’s been knocked t’ th’ point he don’t have black speech, ’r much else.”

Drum said, “Hmmm” then grinned. He didn’t have any teeth, either.

“Yes,” said Thorin.

“Poor Drum,” said Frodo.

“Never thought I’d feel sorry f’r an orc,” said Dain.

“Indeed,” said Thranduil. “He’s lucky he ran away, as any survivors from that raid in the Riddemark you saw, would have eaten him.”

“Ew!” chorused the younger set.

“Icky, indeed,” Thranduil agreed.

Thorin sighed, turned to Lord Elrond and asked, “Is he in any pain?”

Elrond approached and rather gingerly touched the orc on the forehead. There was a flicker of bluish light. Drum giggled. Elrond’s eyebrow flew up.

“I could relieve a little cranial pressure. Other than that, he’s survived in reasonable shape. His aura is also calmer than those of most of my relatives.”

“Elrond, really!” Galadriel cried in mock sternness.

“What’s in his head?” Dwalin asked. “Nuthin’ ‘bout goin’ back t’ his masters?”

“Drum drum drum drum drum grass drum,” Elrond intoned.

“Really?” Thorin’s brows rose.

“It’s not subtle,” Elrond seemed rather surprised. “He has banished all thought and memory of his old life. He’s completely in the moment. He has no thoughts beyond drumming and eating grass. Actually, he’s remarkably content. He’s no danger to anyone or anything beyond people’s lawns.”

Elrond cocked his head a moment then, “He doesn’t like flies.”

“I wondered,” said Ecthelion. “But why?”

“The buzzing throws off his timing,” said Elrond.

The dwarrow and the men and the elves all looked at each other then began to laugh.

“Would Drum like some refreshment?” asked Dori as Mistress Dazla returned with a loaded tray covered with a very large coffee carafe and a platter of xocolātl chip biscuits.

Ecthelion grinned and, folding Drum’s cloak over a chair, pointed out to the patio.

“Drum? Eat?” he said with a smile.

“Drum!” shouted Drum, rushed outside, and was soon gazing happily with the ponies and goats.

Everyone sat in silence for a moment, watching the tiny orc sitting on his haunches, tearing off the tops of the grasses and stuffing them in his mouth.

“Aauck,” remarked Posey.

“Indeed,” responded Thorin, seating himself once more. Dori poured out coffee for everyone.

Brur and Sadi gathered up the carefully sorted pictures, discussing the order. Ori was finishing a sketch of Drum, when there was a racket from the sitting room.

Glorfindel bounced through the doorway and flung himself on Ecthelion.

“My friend,” Glorfindel shouted. He released Ecthelion, now choking for breath around laughing.

“King Thorin,” Glorfindel said in an off-hand manner. “Why is there a tiny orc eating your meadow?”

“He’s hungry,” stated Thorin, casually.

“He only eats grass,” added Dain in the same tone.

Glorfindel looked at them all, one eyebrow raised. Thranduil shrugged.
“He pays the drums. He need all the nourishment he can get.”
This serene discussion was spoiled by all the younger set bursting into giggles.
Elrond looked a trifle embarrassed for a moment.
“I wish you had let us know you lived, Ecthelion,”
The old hero shrugged disinterestedly.
“As far as I could tell, I didn’t die. The fountain waters merely held me in sleep until about five
years ago. I woke, swam to the surface and climbed out only to find myself in the ruins of
Gondolion. There was a broken down stone that read that I had died here. I gathered what I could
find and set out for where I thought Lorien lay. It was a few days later when I fell in with this band
of wayward wanderers.”
The band members all grinned at him and he at them.
“Needless to say,” Ecthelion went on, “they filled me in on all that had happened since my
supposed ‘death’. I thought perhaps I would make a new life for myself in this future Arda as a
musician. I’m good at singing and not bad at the flute.”
This made all the elves laugh.
Ecthelion turned and grinned at Thorin.
“Take good care of Orcrist for me. It’s a fine sword.”
Ori gave himself a mental slap. How could he have forgotten?
“I beg your pardon, Lord Ecthelion,” said Thorin, visibly mortified. “Your sword!”
“Keep it with my blessing, and may it serve you well.”
“Thank you, Ecthelion. I will keep it as my own and it shall continue in the Line of Durin.”
“I like that, Ecthelion chuckled. “I have no more kith or kin. Orcrist should be a family sword.
Thank you, King Thorin!”
“Excellent!” Glorfindel concurred.
The band took coffee and biscuits, and told exciting and hair-raising tales of their travels until they
head Drum belch long and loud, shout ‘drum’, and rush back in to join his fellow band members.
Drum butted his head against each band members’ knees, yipping “drum, drum”. They all chuckled
and rubbed Drum’s head, making Drum jump up and down.
The horn player laughed and played with Drum’s ears, making the orc giggle like a pebble, the
man looked up at the party, saying,
“He thinks he’s people,”
When Drum snatched up his sticks and began tapping out a rollicking beat on the table, Ecthelion
rose and the band took their leave of the High King and his family and guests. Glorfindel went out
with them, still talking to Ecthelion.
“That was bloody fuckin’ weird,” Brur commented idly.
“Yes,” Sadi agreed and regarded Thorin, speculatively.
“I think the Great Woudini was more than correct in his prediction that you, King Thorin, will
make your rule the stuff of legend.”
Thorin snickered,
“At the rate I’m going, Master Jansad, it will be legend, as no one in their right mind would
believe any of it.”
“You do have extraordinary things happen about you,” Lady Arwen added.
“When one’s household is blessed by the presence of an instrument of Mahal,” Thorin said with
overly-dignified pomposity, “One learns to deal.”
Ori blushed and Dwalin slid his arm over Ori’s shoulders, kissing his hair.
“What do you have planned for this first day of official kingship?” Celeborn asked, draining his
coffee cup. “Will you be touring your kingdom?”
Thorin snorted.
“The first thing I have to do is put things away.”
“What things?” asked Thranduil.
“All those presents,” replied Thorin. “Balin, Ori, will you take memos and make things happen?”
“Aye.”
“Certainly.”
“I would like to have a household portion of the incense taken out of those jars from the Mavi and the rest sent to the burial chambers for the free use of any who visit. All those spices and oils Gheir brought need to be dispensed fairly about Erebor and, Bard, with your permission, the Dale also.”
Bard stared. “You’re very generous, Thorin, thank you.”
“And,” Thorin inclined his head to Bard and went on, “divide that …er…goop Hild brought between all the guilds and tell them to see what use they may find for it and to let me know, if they do.”
Balin chuckled and Ori wrote busily, reflecting that Thorin was very clever to send his gifts to his subjects.

“Next, lad?” Balin asked with a smile. Thorin grinned and lifted Frodo back into his lap.
“We have already dispensed with all the livestock,” Thorin reflected. “What those birds will be useful for, Mahal only knows, but I’m sure Mistress Aldernay will make extra money with people coming to look at them. Bilbo and I did a little perusing of their care manual before we sent it courier to Mistress Aldernay. They only lay one egg a week. It will be over a year before anything in the way of trade or commerce can be done with them. So, for now they can be a local attraction and, I suppose, if Bard and I, or any one in the family, go and inspect them occasionally, it will keep people interested. Master Hallow will, not doubt, be consulting Mistress Aldernay on the cross breeding of those amazing aurochs you gifted us with, Theoden. I will ask her for updates as they see results and let you know.”
“I’d be most interested, Thorin,” Theoden nodded. Thorin turned and nodded to the elves.

“The cloak, Orcrist and mallorn seeds are already taken care of, and I shall take the greatest care of the light of Eärendil’s star, I assure you, Lady Galadriel. Do you advise that it should be locked away or kept close by?”
The lady looked far away for a moment then said, quietly, “Keep it hidden. Keep it safe. It will be needed within the year.”
“So, stick it in an envelope and keep it up on the mantle?” asked Bilbo.
“You foresee a danger to Erebor, milady?” Thorin asked.
She turned to the party and her smile glowed. “It will be a glorious purpose, King Thorin. Do not fear for your people.”
A cold shiver went up Ori’s spine, for a flash of a moment, the room shifted and he stood in a huge cavern holding the shimmering light of Eärendil high. The image vanished and he gasped slightly. The room was busy with talk and Thorin considering matters.
Thorin then nodded and smiled at Arne.

“Next, I need that lovely painting of my Minty hung up in my office.”
Arne blushed and smiled.
“I’m glad you like it, your majesty.”
“You majesty?” Thorin said with a raised brow. Arne grinned.
“Idad Thorin?”
“Better.”
“Snur’s gift needs to replace my current desk which I shall relinquish with pleasure. Bilbo, if you’d like to try it and see if it meets your needs for the time being.”
“Certainly,” Bilbo called back on his way to the kitchen
“Ulfr’s lights…hmmmm… The white ones need to go to the miners. Will you see to that, Lord Bofur?”
Bofur choked then chuckled,
“Aye, will do.”
“The pretty colored ones should be strung up in the streets over any night market areas. Make it even more festive for future traders to disport themselves at. The Gondorian Tapestry does need to be in the throne room. I think it should hang behind the throne but high enough for all to see.”
Thorin nodded to Aragorn and Arwen, who looked pleased.
Ori scribbled the orders down, half his brain still with the sudden image and the other half working
on Thorin’s decisions.

Thorin winked at Bard.
“I shall keep my fly-fishing tools-”
“Tackle,” corrected Bard.
“Tackle,” Thorin repeated then grinned at Bard. “You know that means something different
among dwarves.”
“I do know. Shut up,” Bard grumbled, a stripe of color on his cheeks. Bain and Sigrid giggled.
“I shall keep it near to hand, in case we find some time to begin my training.”
“Here I am!” Tilda burst into the room.
“Where have you been young lady?” Bard demanded, lifting his daughter onto his knee.
“Nowhere,” Tilda replied and took a biscuit. Bard rolled his eyes and sighed.
“And,” Dain rumbled at Thorin from down the table.
Thorin looked teasingly down at him.
“ ‘And’? What could you possibly be referring to, dear cousin?”
Dain growled and pretended to sulk.
“Thorin, dear,” Dori rescued her elder brother deftly, “when would you like to use the new bed?
I’m sure it will be much more comfortable now that you have company.”
“Terribly discreet of you, considering our guests are sitting right here,” said Thorin.
“Oh, tosh! It’s not a secret. I’m sure all our friends wish you a good night’s sleep… and other
things.”
“I don’t even know how I’m going to fit that in my room, seeing as it’s the same size as my
room.”
“That shiny, baconish thing?” Bilbo asked. “Bit to take in all at once, isn’t it.”
“Not t’ worry,” said Dain. “I designed it t’ be disassembled and set back up anywheres.”
“Besides,” Dori informed them all, “it’s not going upstairs.”
“I knew it,” said Thorin. “You’re planning on making me sleep in the meadow.”
“Hardly! Besides, the weather would do dreadful things to the linens! You, at least, are
waterproof.”
“That makes me sound like an oilskin cloak,” said Thorin.
“Hush, dear, I’m trying to give you your coronation present from Balin and I. The bed isn’t going
upstairs. It’s going into a suite of rooms on the main floor of Fundin House.”
Thorin and Bilbo looked at each other, then back at Dori.
“Were you two planning on moving out?” Thorin asked.
“No, you silly thing, there’s a whole other suite of rooms on the far side of the kitchen larders that
hasn’t been used in at least an age. We think they may have been used by… er… concubines.”
Bilbo face-palmed.
Thorin sighed.
“As long as they didn’t leave their personal effects,” said Thorin.
“They’re very nice, actually,” said Dori. “The rooms, dear, not the concubines. I’m not as old as
that.”
Nori coughed and Dori shot him a look before smoothing her features once more.
“The rooms face onto the meadow, but can’t be seen from the outside unless one is right on top of
them. The windows were covered over, but they are actually glass. Mistress Dazla and her people
are still scouring out the entire suite.”
“To be filled with what?” Thorin asked. “I have a bed, a chair and a dresser.”
“And a new desk,” Balin put in.
“No, that’s going in my office. The old desk, then. And how are we to get to these rooms? Is
there still a passage?”
“The suite used to connect to the rest of the house through the door in the sitting room. It simply
has to be uncovered.”
“You mean Dain’s favorite secret passage?” Thorin asked.
“You do have to cross that passage to get to those rooms, yes. Alas, I’m afraid Dain’s secret will
have to be sacrificed in favor of a real hallway and door.”

“Bollocks,” Dain grumbled.

Dori turned and peered through the door to the kitchen. She waved and Mistress Dazla swept through, smiling.

“Dear Bearer, is his majesty wishing to see the new suite?”

“Well?” Dori smiled on Bilbo and Thorin. The two exchanged glances and Bilbo laughed.

“Oh, why not. If we’re going to be living there we’d best make sure they’re tolerable.”

Thorin said very deliberately to Bilbo, “You still don’t have to share rooms with me if you don’t wish it. Everyone seems to have determined we’re already married, but I don’t harbor any illusions.”

“Let’s see how this works out,” said Bilbo. “We’re both terribly involved in our own work. We’ll likely spend most of our free time with the family. I don’t think either of us is in danger of feeling suffocated.” Bilbo grinned and ran a hand down Thorin’s arm. “Besides, I like sleeping next to you.”

“Considering the size of the bed, I don’t think we’ll feel suffocated there, either. We’ll be lucky if we can find each other by beacon.”

Thorin and Bilbo rose and so did everyone at the table. They followed Mistress Dazla and trooped through to the sitting room. Brur and Jansad took the pictures to the table still full of scribes, sorting, collating, and eating snacks. Brur waved Ori on to follow the king.

The doorway that had been almost invisible in the sitting room was fully opened. A sill and lintels had been put in to exactly match any other door in the house. The biggest differences were that the jamb was silver and the door itself paneled in lapis of perfect Durin blue.

Bilbo gaped.

“That wasn’t there when we went out to the meadow,” he said.

“Dwarf work very quickly,” Dori told them loftily.

“Especially when they’re being utterly sneaky,” Thorin remarked.

“Stealthy, dear, stealthy,” said Dori.

The handle was silver. Thorin nodded to Frodo who reached up and opened the door. Beyond there was a pleasant, airy passage. Half way along was door to the left and another painted dark brown door at the far end.

“See, Dain, they gave you your own door,” Thorin called to his cousin.

“Good to know, good to know,” the Ironhills ruler commented. “I’ll be sure t’ tell our Chopper when t’ stop, so I kin open it f’r ‘im.”

“Your majesty. Shall we panel this hallway with wood?” Mistress Dale asked. “The honored Bearer suggested we consult you before putting on the finishing touches.”

“We’ll think it over,” Thorin promised.

Frodo shrieked and laughed.

“Uncle Bilbo! Idad Thorin! Come look at the giant funny door!” the faunt cried. He was jumping up and down beside the huge left side door.

Ori admired it. He had only read of such doors as they were difficult to make and had fallen out of fashion several hundred years ago.

“Look at that,” Bilbo admired. “I never thought I would ever see such a door.”

“Frodo,” Thorin said, smiling down on the faunt, “this sort of doorway is called an ogee arch.”

“Ogee arch,” repeated Frodo, committing it to memory. The faunt grabbed the handle and pushed.

“It’s locked.” Frodo was crestfallen.

“No, no, akunith, like this.” Thorin took Frodo’s hands and placed them on the brass handle shaped like two clasped hands and drew them apart. The doors slid into the wall, sunshine appeared from the window on the other side.

“They go into the wall!” Frodo squeaked excitedly.

“We call them pocket doors,” Thorin told him. “Very useful, easy to hide, and a rather graceful way to enter a room.”

“But impossible t’ slam,” said Dain sorrowfully.
Frodo hopped in and Thorin stood back for Bilbo to enter. Ori followed after, his hand tucked in Dwalin’s. Dori, Balin and Mistress Dazla came after. The rest of the party traipsed in behind and looked around.

They had entered a large, high ceilinged room. Despite the wall being rounded, it was wainscoted with birch to the domed ceiling which was painted as a beautiful blue sky dotted with cottony clouds. Song birds flew through the firmament, some obviously singing and others carrying flowers in their beaks.

Sunshine poured through the far wall which was entirely paned with glass formed in the lava chambers deep in the mountain. The glass was re-enforced with silvered lattice which wound across the edges as flowering, fruit bearing vines.

The wall opposite the windows held an ornate fireplace shaped as a half moon. It was so large Ori could have stood inside it. The mouth, like a half moon on its side, was trimmed in cast iron feathers, and the plain mantle was surrounded by an entire population of ravens in the same material.

Thorin went to the far windows and threw them open. Ori observed that they were like the Fundin House breakfast parlor windows being doors that opened out to the meadow. Both Frodo and Posey trotted out. About six feet out, Frodo called back.

“I can see the patio!”
Thorin turned and smiled on Bilbo.

“It seems we will have some privacy and Frodo won’t get lost.”

Bilbo chuckled and crossed to an open door to the left. Though it was a square opening, the top lintels were decorated with a silver filigree of leaves and flowers making an arched entryway.

“That is the kitchen, Professor Baggins,” explained Mistress Dazla. “You can see there are plenty of cupboards and counter space. We’ve had the carpenters in to install kickboards around all the counters and the sinks.”

Bilbo raised his eyes in question. Mistress Dazla hurried forward and tapped her toe to the strip of wood beneath a cupboard. It popped out, making a comfortably sized step. Bilbo stood on it and the counter was now at the perfect height for him to work. Bilbo smiled and shook his head.

“You dwarf are amazing. This is wonderful.”

“Aye, we’re all bloody geniuses,” Dain agreed. Gloin chuckled and nudged Thranduil, who went and looked out the beautiful half moon window over the deep double sinks.

Ori turned and saw through the rounded archway at the opposite end, where there looked to be a pantry and, at least, four larders. Bilbo and Dori were in deep conversation. The kitchen was painted a pale blue and accented by white tile and with beautiful, pure white marble counters.

Bilbo glanced at Thorin. Frodo was holding Thorin’s hands and jumping up and down on Thorin’s boots. Frodo stopped a moment, giggling, then Thorin lifted his foot and took a step. Frodo squeaked and Thorin raised his other foot much higher and took a larger step. Frodo laughed and hung on. Fili and Kili watched, delighted with the sight of their uncle playing with someone so young.

The two princes looked at each other then rushed out of the room, seizing their aunt as they went. Gridr squalled and swore at them, but was borne away.

Bilbo returned to the first room and looked about.

“Well, I’m sure we can curtain off the back part for bedrooms—”

“This way, dear.” Dori took Bilbo’s arm and headed toward the fireplace. It was when Dori turned right that Ori realized the fireplace hid a curve in the wall which was a hallway. Following them, he saw this opened out to a small room.

“This can be used as a meeting room or whatever you like.”

Bilbo took in the velvety rose-pink walls with their turquoise accents and domed ceiling tiled with rose quartz and lined with still more chips of turquoise. Bilbo raised his brows.

“What would you suggest?” Bilbo asked as Thorin smirked.

“This looks like the big bathroom up at Buck Hall,” Frodo said.

“We can repaint,” Dori said, quickly. “As said, these were the concubines rooms and quite the love nest. We removed all the…er…suggestive decorations.”
Bilbo looked at Thorin, who was trying and failing not to chuckle. "I hope they were saved," Bilbo said in a mock serious tone. "I imagine Master Brur would be quite annoyed if such historically important items were destroyed."

Dori snorted. "They've been put away for the moment." Dori then looked down his nose at the royal couple. "If you'd both like to go through them later to decorated your own room, I shall have them held at the ready. Come along."

Dori led the through the far arched doorway. This was a plain anteroom, empty like the other rooms. This had one doorway on the right which contained only a large empty room made entirely of maroon marble with a domed ceiling of rusty orange tile lined with rubies. "It is a rather ugly color scheme," Dori mused, "but you can have it redone."

"Obviously where they put the naughty concubines to punish them," Bilbo murmured. "There's only one door in or out."

Thorin shook his head ponderously. "There was no escape."

They exited and went on to large passageway tiled in pale green jade and through another arched doorway was a antechamber tiled in white marble with black and gold filaments thread through. This room had two doors. One room was an office space, done in blue lace agate and birch wainscoting with graceful built-in bookshelves.

Ori watched Dori's mouth widen into a secretive smile which he knew from long experience meant there was a truly wonderful surprise in store. She threw open the second door revealing a large oval room paneled in black oak with four doors. On the left was a large, airy room. As Dori opened this door she said, "Bilbo, I believe we may have to send guards in to pry you from this room at tea time."

"Really, Dori?" Bilbo scoffed. "You do know I'm a hobbit?"

"Entirely, my dear," said Dori, stepping out of the way.

All the walls were covered in ornately carved black oak bookcases. This room's domed ceiling was pure white marble set with tourmaline tree branches and emerald leaves, and a myriad tiny points of real sunlight filtered down among them from pipes on the mountainside.

Bilbo wandered inside looking around with his mouth hanging open. "This is amazing," he said. "If I were to design my own library, it would still be nothing to this."

Beside this room was doorway which held a bathroom, decorated in all shades of pale blue tiny glass tile work. The floor was also pale blue tiles but was inlaid with colored stones to make a mosaic of underwater animals. Frodo delighted in the huge turtle that 'swam' in the middle of the floor.

At the far door opposite the bath was a little room with large windows looking out at the sitting room’s windows and the meadow.

The last door was once more an ogee arch and contained a large rounded room with a stripe of windows along two thirds of the room. This room was amazing in that the floor was enamled to look like grass, dotted with occasional wild flowers, the walls were iron wood panels minutely carved with muntins, cartouches, pilasters, and bosses. The domed ceiling was a cream color that the accented the ironwood timbers carved with flowers and fruit to the midpoint of the ceiling. This was crowned with an upside-down fruit that Ori recognized as a pineapple.

"Oh Bilbo, I do like this bathroom," Lady Galadriel sighed.

Ori glanced over and saw that the Lady had gone to the far side of the room and was peering into another. Ori went in and saw the large round, domed bathroom was entirely tiled to look as though it was underwater. Plants waved in a supposed current and brightly colored, bejeweled fish swam about. In a small alcove was the privy. Most of the room floor was taken up with a huge pool, large enough to swim in. Ori could see tile fish and plants in it, most hiding little pipe openings, so the bath could have sprays of hot spring water burst through.

The elves were left to stare in avarice, while the rest of the party returned to the main bedroom. In the middle of the room stood the huge shiny, bacon-ish thing, as Bilbo had called it. It was not
made up yet but still piled high with mattresses and pillows. Frodo gave a shout of delight and rushed forward. He nimbly climbed the footboard, turned around, flailed his arms and cried out, “Wheeeeee!”

He fell back onto the feather mattress with a resounding ‘poof’, the down lofting up all around him like whipped cream.

This had the effect of Tilda, Bain, Gimli, and Legolas throwing themselves onto the bed, laughing and shrieking. It quickly devolved into a pillow fight which was broken up by Bilbo and Dori scolding and Dwalin, Dain, and Thranduil dragging the antagonists off. Frodo struggled up to sitting position.

“Uncle Bilbo!”
“Yes, my boy?”

Frodo clambered to the edge where Dwalin grabbed him by the seat of his trousers, hefted him off, and put back on his feet.

“Do I get one of these, too?” Frodo asked.

Bilbo shot Thorin a look of mischief.

“I don’t know, my boy. It may be that in Erebor the younglings sleep out on the front steps.”

“I didn’t last night.”

“That was a special occasion.”

“Idad Thorin?” Frodo tried.

Thorin nodded judiciously, “I’ll have Dwalin check the dungeons for something suitable.”

This made Bilbo snort and Frodo frowned at both of them and folded his little arms.

“I’m telling…” Frodo paused and tried to think of a suitable person to threaten his uncles with.

“Imad Dis,” the faunt decided.

“Good luck findin’ her,” Dwalin said, ruffling the faunt’s hair. “She ain’t back yet.”

“Oh,” Frodo looked discouraged. Dori pushed Dwalin out of the way and scooped the faunt into her arms.

“Nonsense, my little pet. You shall have a lovely bed of your own. We just need a bit of time to find it. Don’t you worry.”

There was some crashing noises and the din of Fili and Kili’s voices cursing each other. It sounded as though something was bumping every wall along the hallways.

Everyone turned to see as they arrived loudly in the open area before the bedrooms. The elves came through attracted, no doubt, by the racket. Ori stared at the piece of furniture the two princes had been half rolling, half dragging. It appeared to be a huge bowl made of cast iron rods braided and matted together like basketry. The princes turned it over and Ori realized it was an enormous nest.

“Frodo’s bed!” announced Fili.

“Imad, Mokrah, and Oqizla are bringing the bedding,” Kili told them.

Everyone came over and to admire and exclaim.

“It’s a nest!” Bilbo said in delight. “That’s adorable!”

“Every Durin royal child’s first proper bed,” Thorin stated with a sentimental tone.

“Were you hatched?” Frodo asked.

“No,” Thorin said. “I promise.”

“Only Kili,” said Fili, earning himself a smack.

“Little Durins sleeping in raven’s nests,” mused Thranduil. “I had no idea you dwarrow made such captivating things for your offspring.”

“You have no idea,” muttered Stonehelm as Dain barked a laugh and grabbed his son’s face to plant a loud kiss on it.

Many willing hands up ended the ‘nest’ again, and rolled it into Frodo’s room. It was put near a window. Gridr, Oqizla and Mokrah arrived and the mattresses and bedding were made up. Frodo laughed and jumped into the middle of it. Like the down mattress on the other bed, he sank into it and shrieked, flailing his legs in the air.

Thorin smiled, laying a hand on Bilbo’s shoulder.
“It’ll last him a good long time as he’s smaller than I when I was given it. It’ll be easy enough to attach a small pipe from the forges. The iron is solid except for small oil reservoirs all through, so it can be kept nice and warm for the winter months.”

“That is the cutest bed I’ve every seen,” said Bilbo, shaking his head in wonder and leaning back against Thorin.

“Idad Thorin,” Fili said, “Should Kill and I look out the rest of the stuff?”

“Stuff?” Bilbo repeated.

“What kind of stuff?” Frodo asked.

“I’ll need to discuss it with Bilbo first, then talk to your amad,” Thorin told his nephews.

“Well,” said Dori now arm in arm with Balin. “Do you like your present?”

Thorin laughed and Bilbo went and hugged Dori then Balin.

“We love it. Thank you both so much.”

Balin chuckled. “We jus’ need t’ find yeh both some suitable furniture. P’haps the’ pair a’ yeh kin make us up a list.”

“Oh my!” Bilbo said looked a little a-sea. “I’ll have to think it through. Frodo and I have spent the last six months sitting on other people furniture or doing without. I have to admit that kitchen is all I can think about at the moment.”

Dis arrived, looking rather well for someone who had slept on a throne room floor.

She carried a box into the room, looking around, she saw Frodo and smiled.

“Come, akunith, I have something for you.”

Frodo sidled over and peered inside, squeaked and started to pull out toys.

“Hey,” said Kili, “that’s my mechanical Dwalin!”

“What?” Ori cried, running over.

Indeed, it was a miniature version of his husband, seated atop Gnasher, both wearing identical scowls.

“You’ll love this, Ori-mate,” said Kili. “Watch!”

He wound a key on the side of the goat, under Dwalin’s boot, and set the contraption down. The goat trotted a half dozen paces, stopped, and bleeted. Dwalin shook his head and grunted.

Ori thought he would lose it right there.

Dwalin didn’t do himself any favors when he came to peer over Ori’s shoulder, spotted the trotting goat and rider, shook his head and grunted.

“The likeness is amazing,” Ori teased.

“Fuckin’ Dain,” said Dwalin. “It’ll only be funny till he makes one a’ yeh.”

“Here’s my toy raven,” said Fili. “I wondered where that went. I looked all over the place for it.”

“You couldn’t find it because you actually put it away,” said Dis.

“I can play with these? Really?” Frodo asked, eyes huge and grin wide.

“As much as you like, Frodo,” said Dis. “I know you didn’t bring anything with you except Gorgo.”

“Gorgo will like his new friends,” said Frodo, sounding quite positive.

“I have no doubt,” said Dis, ruffling his curls.

“And, much as I would like to stay and play as well,” said Thorin, “Miss Oqizla tells me that the undermonarchs have finally stirred from their lairs and are up and taking nourishment.”

“Dori took pity on them,” said Dis.

“Dori took pity on me,” said Thorin. “It’s impossible to try meeting with six people in various stages of wanting to die. And since they’re going to be meeting with you, dear sister, tomorrow, then Gheir’s leaving, then the shopping trip—”

“Shopping trip?”

“With Dori and Binni. Ahkn and Hild already have the route planned out. They’ll be out of your hair for a while if you want to take care of any pressing business.”

“Bollocks,” said Dis, “I’m going with them!”

The party went back out to the empty sitting room where Mistress Dazla was talking with a team of servants, armed with all kinds of cleaning equipment. Thorin and Bilbo went and thanked them
Once back in the sitting room, they found that the scribes had finished and were packing things away carefully. Brur looked pleased and Sadi was all but salivating.

“My king,” she addressed Thorin, “Everything is in order and will be given a loose bind, then be sent back to you for review. The pictures you have already approved will be inserted with the full name of the scribe who rendered it.”

“Thorin-” Aragorn began.

“Yes. The portrait.” Thorin remembered. “Master Sadi, the color portrait of the Gondorian royal couple. Would you please find the scribe responsible and request them to attend his majesty of Gondor.”

“At once, my king.” Sadi promised.

The scribes took themselves and their paper booty out.

Ori heard voices in the receiving room and in came Miss Larit with King Ulfr in tow.

“Ulfr, are you conscious?” Thorin greeted the monarch.

“Aye I’ll do,” the dwarf stretched and yawned then spotted his son.

“Arne, what you bin up to?”

“Looking at all the images drawn at the coronation, adad. You missed a treat. Someone got a lovely sketch of you dancing on the table with Ahkn.”

“I’m keeping it,” Thorin grinned. “I’ll have it framed and sent to you for Yule,“

“Fuck yerself,” Ulfr chuckled.

Dipfa was suddenly at Thorin’s side, looking up at him, urgency burning in her eyes.

“Ah,” said Thorin. “King Ulfr, I present to you, young Miss Dipfa. She is Lord Ori’s dresser and fashion designer.”

“Miss Dipfa,” Ulfr nodded.

“Miss Dipfa is in great need of your chemical knowledge,” Thorin elaborated.

“Oh, aye?” Ulfr cocked his head, a grin starting. “Somethin’ to do with Lord Ori in the royal scribe robes sleeping table top in the leftovers?”

“Yes!” cried Dipfa, “Would you please give me the benefit of your advice, your majesty?”


Dipfa led the way and Buj followed closely, notebook at the ready.

Hild and Aris came in, greeted everyone, and looked around.

“This is a most pleasant room,” Hild observed. Tilda spotted the queen and rushed over for a hug.

“Everyone thought my braids were great,” Tilda informed the Blacklock queen.

Hild laughed and patted the child’s cheek.

“I’m glad, pebble.”

Hild turn to Dori, “Any chance of tea or are we too late?”

Dori took the queen’s arm and led her out to the kitchen, Tilda in tow. Aris sighed and Dwalin gestured with his thumb to a chair and Aris dropped thankfully into it.

“Yeh get some sleep after all tha’ malarky wi’ Mavey?”

“Some. I’ve never been more grateful our Arivett was born with a functioning brain.”

Dwalin laughed. Ori came forward, saying,

“Mavey and Floris are out in the meadow now. They seem to have become sisters. When I last looked Floris was teaching her to juggle.”

“Good,” Aris sighed. “I’m too old to raise any more bloody badgers.”

“Dwalin and I are sticking with kittens,” Ori said with a smile as Dwalin slid an arm about his waist. Aris looked up at them and snickered.

“Yeh look a right love-sick pup, our Dwalin.”

“Aye. Ge’ used t’ it. I ain’t changin’ any time soon.” Dwalin gave Ori a squeeze.

Ahkn and Gheir strolled in, talking.

Gheir saw Aris and raised an eyebrow.

“‘Cording to our Ori, she’s out in th’ meadow learnin’ t’ juggle.”
“I wish her luck,” was all Gheir had to say on the matter.
Ulfr entered with a radiant Dipfa and a scribbling Buj.
“T’m telling’ yeh, lass. Two parts a’ th’ lightest gas an’ two parts purified air mixed with a bit o’ liquid soap and a good dash a’ salt mixed with a three part carbon as a paste. Rub it on an’ anythin’ll pop right out. No damage t’ cloth. Just’ clean ’em an’ press ’em as usual an’ yer all set.”
“That was wonderful, your majesty and so easy,” Dipfa gushed. “I know my beloved Boo has the formula you taught us and will mix as much as I shall ever require. If I have any other questions, may I...?”
“Send me a raven, lass. You, too, laddie,” to Buj. “Yer a clever pair. It’s good t’ chat with other’s who like th’ sort’a work I do.”
Both Dipfa and Buj smiled eagerly at their new hero and Ulfr looked quite well-satisfied to find new acolytes to his chemical genius.

In Thorin and Balin’s office, Ori watched, amazed, as the housekeeping staff removed great swaths of one stone wall and assembled the pieces into a long, rectangular table in the middle of the room. Chairs were carried in and set up, Thorin's chair, at the head of the table, faced the door, with a second, rather non-descript door behind him. This opened onto an antechamber with a variety of boltholes and passages that ultimately led outside the mountain. Dwalin had told him the deepest passages had been built for wholesale escape of the royal family if necessary, but nowadays were mainly used for wine cellars and cheese caves.
In the office, the porters from the royal kitchens set out a keg of beer and platters of cheese, breads and coldcuts on a side table. The fire in the grate was encouraged just enough to make the room cozy, but not enough that several large dwarven bodies would turn it into a forge.
It seemed to Ori that putting at least Gheir and Hild in the same room would be incendiary enough.
Perhaps the meadow would have been a better choice of venue.
Thorin entered and watched the proceedings over Ori's shoulder.
"Just a nice, informal chat with the undermonarchs," said Thorin.
"But you still need a scribe."
"Oh yes. This is the first time in eighty years I've been in the same room alone with all these lunatics at once. If we start calling each other names it should be recorded for posterity. It's also possible someone in this room may come up with something brilliant in the next two hours, and I can actually read your handwriting."
"I think I'm going with the first possibility," said Ori dryly.
"If weapons are actually drawn, Dwalin's going to be standing right behind me at the antechamber door. No heroic measures, just scoot out and let him take care of it. No more jumping between me and danger, right?"
"Yes, Thorin," he said primly.
The two of them snickered.
Fili entered, straightening the cuffs of a formal tunic and looking around, bewildered.
"The horde hasn't arrived yet?" he asked. "I thought at least Chat would be here early for the beer."
A voice bellowed from the outer hall.
"Is that barrel tapped yet?"
"I swear he heard me say 'beer',' said Fili.
Dain, Chopper at his heels, swaggered in with Snur, followed by Ulfr and Ahkn with Arne bringing up the rear.
They could chart Gheir and Hild’s approach by the volume of their still venomous bickering. Ahkn sighed and lowered himself into a chair.
Ulfr took the one beside him and said,
“Do yeh suppose they’ll let us sit at th’ same table with them, an’ bask in their royal glow?”
“Really, it’s getting tiresome,” said Ahkn. If they didn’t have dwarflings, I’d tell them to fight to
the death and be done with it."

He looked back down the hall and barked, "You two, I'd appreciate it if you'd either kiss or kill sometime in the next decade. I'd like this to be over by the time I die."

"Fat chance," said Snur.

He turned his own chair at the table backward and sat.

Then Hild and Gheir spent a good three minutes insisting the other proceed them into the room, and finally entered at once.

During this entertainment, Thorin simply sipped his beer and looked quite prepared to wait. Eventually, everyone had food and drink and settled.

"So," said Ahkn said to Thorin, "are you going to tell us what happened to your grandfather?"

"You decided to jump in with both boots," commented Thorin.

"I'm too old to beat around the boulder. We got your reports that he died at the Bearers' presentation, after the Bearer danced."

"He did. I assure you it was a timely death, and not of my own planning."

Ahkn shook his head wearily.

"Bloody Durins. Personally, I thought the account was a little too much like the plot of a Shire novel, but now that I've met Bearer Dori, it doesn't seem so strange."

Hild asked, "I recall Thror as a bahvlo of a dwarf, certainly not one to be overthrown by a dance, no matter how mystical. Had he been weakened by sickness?"

The energy in the room shifted. Ori could have sworn all the undermonarchs leaned toward Thorin to hear his answer.

Thorin said, clearly and directly, "Thror was mad, and at the time of his death I was on the brink of having to depose him."

Snur nodded.

"Just what we thought, then. Ya coulda axed for help, Thorin. We had all pretty much agreed to liberate Erebor if the asshat became king."

"You did?" Thorin asked, startled.

"Well, we don't spend all our time diddlin' ourselves when we ain't here."

"Good to know," said Thorin. "Dain did bring me a nice army, but, happily, I didn't need it."

"Was it the gold-sickness that got him?" Ulfr asked.

"No, the arkenstone."

The undermonarchs gaped and gasped and Snur said, "Well, clean my ears with a pickaxe!"

"Please don't," said Hild dryly.

"Thror found the arkenstone?" Gheir asked. "It exists? You're sure that's what it was?"

Thorin sipped his beer, considering.

"Yes, we're sure. For what it's worth, it was a dragon egg, and Tharkûn assures me it was ready to hatch."

Arne swallowed a cry and everyone else sat in stunned silence until Ulfr found his voice.

"How'd yeh get rid a' the bleedin' thin'?"

"Ori found it and gave it to Roäc, Roäc dumped it in Mount Doom, Mordor exploded. You know, the usual discretion and subtlety of the Durins."

The dwarrow all looked at Ori. He wanted to sink through the floor, but he just gave them a weak smile and shrugged.

Hild looked him over anew.

"You Ri are full of surprises."

"Mostly we surprise ourselves, Queen Hild," Ori said quietly.

He hoped talk would turn to something innocuous, if only to take attention off himself, but this was not the crowd for small talk.

Ulfr said, "Oi, Thorin, I seen at th' coronation yeh had men as well as dwarrow takin' oaths a' loyalty t' yeh. Slipped me mind while I was drunk off me arse, but now I'm recallin'. Yeh holdin' 'em t' tha'?"

"Insofar as we're joined with the Kingdom of Dale, yes," said Thorin. "In the city, men and
dwarrow have lived side by side for over a century. Now there are men living under the mountain as well."

"Yer serious about this alliance, then. Have yeh considered what it means fer th' blood o' th' Durins? Are yeh no' worried yeh might be makin' a mistake?"

Ori thought Fili showed remarkable restraint by not leaping across the table for Ulfr's throat. Had it been Kili sitting there, Ulfr would likely be suffering a face full of angry dwarf right now. Instead, Fili kept silent, though he and Arne exchanged looks that might have devolved into eye-rolling anywhere else.

"The men are more fertile than we've ever been," said Thorin.

"Aye, an' they die off like mayflies," said Ulfr. "Yeh might make better men with this mad scheme, Thorin, bu' yeh may just end up with inferior dwarrow."

Hild fixed Ulfr with wicked smile. "Are you saying we'd be better off intermarrying with the elves?"

Ulfr sputtered and Dain snerked into his beer. Hild continued, "At least if we intermarry with the elves we can't possibly get more arrogant than we already are. You seem rather warmer to the idea of interbreeding than you were when last we met, Thorin."

"The last time we met I was only eighty years old," said Thorin with a grin. "I might be forgiven a little youthful arrogance myself."

"I dunno, Thorin," said Ulfr. "I don't care if there's outsiders in Erebor, a' course, or dwarrow in Dale. Yeh can call 'em all yer subjects if yeh want. It's yer perogative. I got a mountain full a' traders an' craftpeople meself, from places in Arda we don't even have on a map. But I don' put 'em on th' same footin' as dwarrow."

"So, if they marry dwarrow, do you put their offspring on a half-footing?" Thorin asked. Ulfr stared at him, then brayed out a laugh.

"I never thought o' that! I'll have t' take that under advisement! Arne, write that down."

"Yes, addad."

"I used to be against all of it," said Snur jovially. "I didn't even want anyone but dwarrow in Ered Luin. I thought dwarrow should keep with dwarrow and that our kingdoms should be isolated, for outsiders' good as well as ours. Let's face it, I'm a Firebeard as well as a Broadbeam and those Firebeards are real stinkers. An' I married one."

Dain chuckled and nodded. "It's true."

Snur continued, "But if we hadn't opened our port to the Borjeval traders we'd have starved a long time ago. The mines o' Ered Luin are played out. Ya can't eat rock. The only thing we got goin' for us is a deep water port. After we figured that out, I suddenly found outsiders a sight more tol'rable."

"But would you want one marrying your daughter?" Ahkn challenged.

"Wrong questions," said Snurr. "We both got daughters, Ahkn. We don't even want 'em marryin' dwarrow, now do we?"

Ahkn chuckled and nodded. "No one will ever be good enough."

Gheir leaned back and crossed his arms.

"I still say the answer is increasing the birthrate among dwarrow."

"Unlike you, Thorin has a point," said Hild. "If we were more fertile we wouldn't be in danger of dying out,"

Gheir made a rude noise.

"It can't just be a matter of fertility. If our dams were properly wed and stayed home with their pebbles, out of danger, they'd have more time to devote to raising families. None of this craftwed business and running around."

"And all your dams are happy this way?" Thorin asked quietly.

"I admit, marrying Mavey was a mistake. She was far too young, but there are plenty of fully grown dwarrow dams who are-

"Running to the Orocarnis as refugees as fast as we can take them in," said Hild. "If they were
happy, then they wouldn't be on my doorstep and you wouldn't have to hire out for competent crafts-dwarrows."

"That's a lie. Just because you don't see our dams on the street."

"How would you know? When was the last time you left your bedchamber?"

"I leave my bedchamber!"

"Only so you can do it on the kitchen table! I'm offering them good lives, which is better than you do, you over-sexed orc," Hild shot back.

"I'm over-sexed?" Gheir snarled. "I'll be Aris uses that little book to keep your bedmates straight."

"I've never had any complaints, especially not from Stiffbeards," she shot.

"It'll be your fault if we die out," Gheir snarled. "You're bleeding us dry."

Gheir lunged. Hild lunged.

Their armor crashed and clattered as they tossed each other around the meeting room, the air full of their shouted insults.

Snur sighed, but otherwise the dwarf monarchs continued as if two, heavily-armed warriors weren't attempting to slaughter each other not ten feet away.

Ori glanced at Thorin, hoping to convey his concern over the impending mutual regicide.

Thorin gave him a small, encouraging smile.

Ori was not all that encouraged.

When Ahkn and Ulfr joined in the mayhem, apparently because they could, Thorin did start to look a little concerned.

A chair flew across the room.

The chair was made of marble.

Still Thorin waited.

Only when Dain made to get up did Thorin react. He glared at his cousin and said, "Don't. You. Dare."

"Aw, yeh never let me have any fun," Dain grumped. Chopper heaved a great breath of agreement and grunted.

Ori wrote like a mad dwarf until he heard something at the corner of his attention which was not violence.

"Psst! Psst!"

Ori turned to the door from the antechamber behind Thorin's chair. The door was now ajar and Frodo peeped in around it, hissing in an odd manner Ori supposed was a hobbit's way of gaining someone's attention if a polite throat-clearing couldn't be heard over the din.

A harassed looking Targ stood just behind him, shrugging apologetically when Frodo held up what looked suspiciously like a toy horse.

Frodo didn't even give the brawling dwarrow a second glance.

Thorin, who couldn't see Frodo behind him, frowned a silent question to Ori who mouthed 'Frodo' and gestured to the pebble with his chin.

Thorin peered around the back of his chair.

Targ bowed to Thorin and was about to herd Frodo back out when Thorin said very clearly and loudly, "It's all right, Targ, let him come in."

Dain slammed his empty tankard down on the table and bellowed to the battling monarchs.

"Knock it off, yeh ijits. There's a pebble in th' room!"

Instantly everything was quiet and calm. The four dwarrow on the floor sat up. All eyes were on Frodo and the monarchs wore goofy, welcoming smiles. Frodo bowed to them, which made even Hild chuckle, and then he went right to Thorin.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, idad, but you said I should if it was important, and this is really, really important."

Frodo held up a mechanical horse, one leg of which was clearly bent the wrong way at the torso.

"Ah," said Thorin calmly. "How did she sustain this injury?"

"Lord Glorfindel sat on her," said Frodo. "It was an accident. I didn't even tell him because I
didn't want him to feel bad."
"Very good of you," said Thorin, taking the horse.  He held it up to Dain.  "What do you think?"
"Lemme see," grunted Dain.  He held the tiny toy in his huge hand and turned it this way and that.
"Good design f'r a badger to play with, nice, clean lines, screws countersunk.  Where did it come
from, cuz?"
"You don't recognize it?" Thorin asked, amused.  "You made it for Kili about seventy years ago."
"No wonder it's such a fine piece o' work," said Dain.  "I'm a genius."
He pulled a miniature screwdriver from somewhere behind his ear and opened the body of the
horse, which came apart in four equal portions, each of which concerned one of the legs.  Then he
carefully unfastened springs which attached the head and tail to the movements of the limbs.
Ori thought it was quite beautifully made, the workings dizzyingly complicated and elegant.
"It's no' so bad, laddie," Dain assured Frodo.  "It's just this pin bent, yeh see, an' some bits of metal
bowed out along th' joinin'.  Easy t' fix.  I just need a ratchet pin."
"I've got some," said Gheir, pulling a handful from his belt pouch with one hand while staunching
his bloody nose with the other.  "Take a look, they're all different sizes."
Bilbo arrived, slightly out of breath, with Jim in tow.  Both of them looked dumbfounded by what
they saw, and even more so when Dain got up to take the offered pins and sat on the floor with the
others.
"Ta," said Dain.
Bilbo looked at Thorin.
"What exactly-?"
Thorin put a finger to his own lips and winked at Bilbo.
"Watch," he said quietly.
Dain sorted through until he found a pin to his liking and started bending the metal back by way of
experiment.  "That's a sharp flange.  Goin' t' need t' work tha' back in place first."  He showed the
offending item to Frodo, who frowned and studied the piece in Dain’s hand.
"Give the pieces to me," said Hild.
They made a circuit, hand to hand until they reached her, Frodo following them.
"I've got a box kit of small gauge hammers and pliers," said Gheir, "but I don't have a jeweler's
anvil with me to work the curves on."
"You don't carry it around with you anymore?" Hild asked.
"No, I carried it in my pocket one too many times and smashed myself in the crotch.  Stop
laughing!"
"I'm not laughing!  I'll laugh later."  She cast around her.  "Ah, never mind, the table has a bull-
noise edge."
To Ori's amazement, the queen did not walk back over to the table, but rose up and scooted over
on her knees.  Frodo went with her, entranced by the goings on.  She skillfully worked the dents out
of the damaged parts and repaired the fold that had opened into the sharp edge.  She surveyed her
handiwork critically, fitting the leg and quarter together several times and making small adjustments.
"This will do," she pronounced, showing it to Frodo.  "Nice, eh, pet?"  She shuffled back.  "But
the lacquer along the damaged portions will need to be sanded and painted before it's reassembled."
"I go' it," said Ulfr.
"You carry lacquer in your pocket?" Hild asked.
"It's in bottles, Hild," said Ulfr.  "It's no' sloshin' around loose in there."
Ahkn said, "If you do that now it'll take forever to dry."
"Ah, but there's where yer wrong," said Ulfr.
Ahkn drew back his shoulders, clearly offended.
"Are you saying you perfected it and you didn't even tell me?"
"Ha!  I waited f'r th' guild patent t' come through before I told anyone, especially yeh."
"Some friend you are."
"Aw, stop before I bust out cryin'.  Chat, gimme a drop o' tha' beer."
Snur raised his brow.
"Y' are jokin', mate?"
Dain rolled his eyes.
"Like yeh don't have yer own keg up in yer room," said Dain.
"Oh, all right," said Snur. He grabbed up some bread and cheese, brought over the pitcher and plunked it down in front of Ulfr, then sat with a thump beside the others to watch. He sat Frodo on his knee and fed him the bread and cheese, which Frodo ate willingly.

Ulfr took bottle after tiny bottle from his pockets. Still chewing avidly, Frodo leaned in to watch. It was like a magic trick, as if there was somehow more room in the pockets than was physically possible.
"Nah... nah... Mebbe... with this."
"It's supposed to be brown, cram brain," said Ahkn, "Not green."
"Who's th' chemist here?" Ulfr grumbled. "Color blind mine engineers!"
Ahkn snorted.
“What’s so amusin’?” Ulfr growled.
“Weren’t you the same dwarfling who was sent to scrub the throne room floor as a punishment and accidentally blew up the Great Throne of the Ironfists?”
“There wasn’t any one sittin’ in it! And, in me own defense, water and nitroglycerin are both clear liquids. Here, make yerself useful with th' sandpaper. Course grit first, then-.
"Fine grit second. I know. I know."
In a tiny bowl from yet a different pocket Ulfr mixed powdered colors, then a few drops of beer, then a rusty-colored liquid which Ori could smell the moment the stopper was removed. Frodo made a face but stared eagerly at the tiny bottles.
“What’s that?” Frodo asked.
“It’s paint, me pebble. Now pay attention and I’ll show yeh.”
A paintbrush appeared by slight of hand and the paint was applied with a flourish. It did look green, for about three seconds, before fading to a perfect match with the rest of the paint.
"There, tha’ s better," said Ulfr, offering the pieces back to Dain. Frodo followed the toy to Dain.
"How long before it's dry?" Dain asked.
“It looks like new!” Frodo marveled.
Dain did so.
"Mahal's bloody boots, yer almost as big a genius as me!"
Dain fit the pin, reattached the springs, gave a few experimental prods at the limbs and handed it back to Frodo.
"Here, try it out."
Frodo took it and set the horse down on all fours in the middle of the group, pushed it from the top until its belly touched stone, then released it. The horse suddenly trotted to life, head bobbing and tail swishing with every step as it crossed the floor toward Gheir.
Frodo cheered.
"Thank you, Cousin Dain!"
"Great Yavanna!" Bilbo cried. "Frodo, that's hardly respectful!"
Dain laughed and said, "Cousin’s fine. We're practically family already."
"Oh," said Frodo. "Really?"
He got to his feet, went to Dain and rubbed his tiny nose against Dain's enormous one.
“That's better, then,” said Frodo, giggling. “You're really fuzzy!”
"Fuzzy, am I!" Dain cried.
He seized Frodo by the waist, picked him up and blew burfles into his belly. Frodo shrieked with laughter.
"An' there's fer yeh, wee scamp. Go on with yeh now. We still got borin', grown up stuff t' talk about."
Snur sighed and fell back to lie prone on the floor.
"Do we have to? Can't we just stay like this for a while? This rug is really comfortable."
"That's the tail of my coat," said Ahkn.
"Well, surely you're not goin' anywheres just yet?"
Frodo went to Hild and gave her a thank you and hug. The queen beamed and wrapped him up in an embrace and chuckled.

“Sweet badger,” she murmured and Frodo went to King Ulfr and hugged him, too. “Thank you.” Frodo said. Ulfr laughed and ruffled the faunt’s hair. Frodo gave Ahkn, Gheir, and Snur hugs, too and thanked them. The kings were obviously delighted by the faunt. Ori wondered if it was to Frodo’s size. He was so small compared to badgers his age. Ori glanced up.

Bilbo shook his head.
"Thorin, does this always happen when they're all together?"
"What? They quarrel like badgers?"
The smile on Thorin's face slowly faded into bewilderment.
"What's wrong?" Bilbo asked.
"One...two... three... Oh, Mahal's hairy arse!" Thorin hissed. " With Frodo, I have seven children!"
Thorin looked about wildly.
"Jim!"
"Oops," laughed Jim. "I think I hear my wife calling me. Seeya at dinner!"
Ori wrote furiously.
Dori swept in and looked about.
"Is this mighty meeting finished?" she demanded. “It’s tea time and I don’t fancy having my buns get cold.”
Dori swept out, leaving the monarch gasping.
"They’re going to be really good buns,” Frodo told them. “They’re puff pastry with apples and lots of cinnamon and brown sugar. Dori’s going to put icing on as soon as they come out of the oven, so it’s all melty. I helped make them.”
“I’m going to tea,” announced Thorin and pushed his chair back.
“Race yeh, cuz,” Dain was on his tail, Chopper grunting excitedly. Hild rolled to her feet, leapt over Ulfr and followed. Ulfr shouted and raced after her. Gheir shot forward to land on his face as Ahkn had him by the tunic and Snur was sitting on Ahkn’s coat tails. Gheir swore, got to his feet, and moved forward like an over-weighted plow horse. Fili and Ori followed watching as Gheir sweated and roared while Ahkn and Snur shouted with laughter and occasionally yelled things like 'giddy-up’. They burst into song, calling “Pull for the shore, Ulwe, Pull for the shore, Waaay-haaay, pull for the shore!”
Gheir gained the sitting room, used the jamb to propel himself in, and bawled out “Get these idiots off me and gimme my fuckin’ buns!”
The Mavi rose, Mavis I looked him over, glanced at the other three and turned to her husband.
“Any particular fucking buns, your majesty, or shall we flip a coin?” Gheir looked horrified.
“I would never say such to any of my dearest wives!”
Snur and Ahkn pressed their advantage and pushed past him to find seating and get to the goodies on the offering.
Bombur, Erda and Bifur had arrived and were busy to-ing and fro-ing from the kitchen.
Mavis I took Gheir’s arm and conducted him to the couch where the other three Mavi were seated. They moved and Gheir sat down, sandwiched between two wives on either side. Ori thought he looked like a recalcitrant little badger made to sit with his elders until he could behave. Ori curled up on a far chair observing and scribbling. Aragorn and Arwen were deep in conversation with Thranduil, Bard and Dain. Hild, Aris and Theoden had their heads together with Binni and Dori playing moderators. Ori felt a prick of an idea that the possibility of Eomer and Arivett’s lives were being discussed. Oin, Thorin, and Elrond chuckled as Ulfr told the infamous tale of Ori’s robes.
There were sudden noises of entry in the receiving room and the two wizards rushed in.
“Good afternoon,” said Tharkûn.
"What?" Radagast asked then, "Ah yes, I remember. I’ve come to take my leave of you, King Thorin."

Radagast doffed his cap in respect. The hedgehog on Radagast’s head also nodded civilly.

"Thank you for coming and bringing my… presents," Thorin teased.

"Eh, they weren’t any trouble. Hardly weigh anything at all. Besides I’ve always wanted to assist an elopement. This is the closest I’ve ever got."

"Tea, Master Radagast?" Dori offered.

"Er, I’m going to be ferrying Professor Baggins’ cousins home. I was hoping for something slightly more bracing."

"Is that safe?" Dori asked.

"It’s safer than me trying to do it without the encouragement," said Radagast. "So many ditches, so many opportunities."

"Ah, yes," said Dori. "I’ll get you some ale."

"Much obliged."

Mistress Dazla appeared at the door, looking far more beleaguered than Ori had ever seen.

"Er, Professor Baggins? Your cousins have arrived to take leave. Should I show them i-"

"No!" the room shouted as one.

"Good choice," approved the housekeeper. "Shall I tell them you’ll be with them shortly? Or, better still, you’ll meet them at the front gates?"

"Yes, please and thank you, Mistress Dazla," said Bilbo.

She gave a curtsey and a grin of wry amusement then went out.

Bilbo sighed.

"I suppose there’s nothing for it."

"I’ll go with you," Thorin promised.

Little Frodo squared his shoulders.

"I’ll go, too, Uncle Bilbo."

"Thank you, my boy, that’s very brave of you."

Ori followed them out into the courtyard and down the lift to the viewing balcony, then down the steps to the main gates of Erebor where the rabbit sledge sat waiting. One of the grooms held the head of the lead bunny, though it was obvious the animal was humoring the dwarf.

Lobelia and Otho stood by, ready to take their leave. Their clothing had been cleaned and mended, the couple had been fed and cosseted and given every comfort.

Ori reflected that at least one of them had barked like a dog.

What else could they ask for?

"I never did find my hat," Lobelia announced.

"If we find it, we’ll send it along," said Bilbo.

Privately, Bilbo had told Ori that they would burn it, provided they could pry it out of Thranduil’s grasp, as he seemed to have taken a shine to it.

"Oh, well, that Mistress Dazla had us perfectly adequate one sent to our rooms," said Lobelia, adjusting what Ori immediately recognized as the one from Fili’s bathing costume. The tiny fruit danced merrily in the breeze. "It will keep me from freckling up until we get home."

Otho looked at the bunnies, who looked back and were less than impressed with him.

"It does seem a little late in the day to be starting out, my dear," said the hobbit nervously.

"It’s a perfectly good time to be starting out," said Lobelia. "We’ll be home after dark, and no one will see us pull up to the smial in this… conveyance. Mind, if we were in a proper cart or walking I would insist on slowing down in front of number 26. I want her to see my hat."

"Of course, my dear," said Otho, though he looked as though he’d much rather walk.

"Cousin," said Lobelia, blowing Bilbo a kiss.

"Cousin," said Bilbo, not returning it.

Otho helped Lobelia aboard, then jumped in himself and promptly sneezed. Radagast came scurrying through the gates, gulping down the last of his ale. A call of farewell went up from the viewing platform, where the royal household and guests had gathered to watch them depart.
Radagast threw over his shoulder to Tharkûn, "Wonderful time, thanks for the invite!", thrust the empty tankard at Ori, jumped up to take the reins and with a 'giddyap' the sledge bounded away. They heard Otho sneezing continuously and Lobelia scolding Radagast not to speed so. Suppose the sledge should be upset?

They passed the first large wagon of the incoming caravan like traders traveling together, swerved dangerously around it, and got nothing from the driver but a polite raising of his hat.

The party on the balcony came down to watch the caravan arrive

“I swear, if they’re bringing Frerin back,” Thorin muttered, “his head’s going up on the courtyard pike.”

Dwalin, Dain, and Snur took the hoods off their axes and offered then in perfect tandem.

Balin considered.

“I suppose, since Hild thinks so highly o’ her, yeh could put tha’ girl o’ her’s in as governor o’ Belegost. She’d whip em int’ shape.”

“She’d just whip them,” said Thorin.

Bilbo frowned, watching the lead wagon as it lumbered toward them, weighed down under any number of large items, all under tarps. There was at least one person up front with the driver.

“Bilbo?” Ori asked. “Are you alright?”

“I just had a feeling I’d seen this before.”

“The wagons?”

“This particular wag-“

Bilbo’s jaw dropped open and he shook his head. Thorin put a hand on his shoulder.

“Bilbo?”

“Thorin, what do we have for leftovers?”

“Breakfasts, lunch, or tea?”

“All. Those are hobbits. In fact, that’s-”

“Sam!” Frodo shrieked.

“Sam?” Ori asked.

“Wee Sam Gamgee,” said Bilbo. “Not driving, of course. Not yet, anyway. That would be Hamfast Gamgee. And his entire family!”

Thorin turned to Ori.

“They really liked your card.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Haha, we’re early this week as Stevie has company over the weekend and Dolly has to help bake!! The Gamgees have arrived. The big questions are why are they here and what did they bring? Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori said, “But, the whole family? Did they get an invitation, too?”

“Not unless Roäc has learned to write,” said Thorin, “which I wouldn’t put past him.”

As they watched, outriders pulled up alongside the front wagon, wearing familiar armor with blue surcoats.

Dwalin said, “Those’re th’ soldiers who escorted Frerin’s lot. Wha’re they doin’ wi’ all this stuff?”

Tharkûn said, “Frerin decided they weren’t loyal enough, so he hired his own army and sent these back.”

“By way of the Shire?” Bilbo asked.

“I requested a bit of a favor, my friend. I’m sure you won’t mind.”

“Would you care if I did mind?”

“Not particularly.”

Dori sent ravens to warn Mistress Dazla that more guests had arrived, then bustled back inside with Binni to supervise

the construction of a mighty brunch.

“Hullo, Mister Bilbo!” called the hobbit driving the front wagon, waving his hat.

“Hamfast Gamgee! Hello! What, in Yavanna’s name, are you doing here?” Bilbo called.

The wagon pulled up, even more massive than it had seemed in the distance, creaking to a halt.

Ulfr looked past Thorin.

“Remember when I said I wasn’t worried about bein’ overrun by hobbits?”

“It’s fine,” said Thorin, “I’m sure they brought cake.”

“Oh, Mister Bilbo, I’ve brought yer favorite cake!” cried the lady beside Hamfast. “Carrot!”

Thorin and Ulfr looked at each other and exchanged satisfied nods.

“Thank you, Bell,” said Bilbo, visibly overwhelmed.

It occurred to Ori that Bilbo had never expected to see these people again.

The moment Hamfast set foot on the ground, Bilbo seized him and they slapped backs and pretended they weren’t both tearing up.

Dwalin stepped away to speak to a guard at the gate, who hurried off, and all the soldiers arrived and dismounted.

“Lieutenant Arb,” Thorin stated loud enough for his voice to carry to the other soldiers, now lined up for inspection behind Lieutenant Arb. “You and your fellow soldiers have done excellent work. I thank you for the service you have done for Erebor. You are all dismissed to your homes and families. Rest, eat, and you are to report back in three days time.”

There was a cheer. Lieutenant Arb gave the order to march and the ranks filed in, past their king, who greeted each of them. As they went in, another detail came out and, with an order from Dwalin, took charge of the wagons.

Hamfast was telling him in great detail about the carrot crops. In quick order, Bilbo introduced
Hamfast, his wife Bell, the two older Misses Gamgee, Lavender and Snowdrop, the two oldest Masters Gamgee, Hamson, and Halfred, two tween girls, Daisy and May, and babe in arms named Marigold and finally Samwise. Wee Sam, who Ori thought looked like a small boulder with curls, was very involved with checking Frodo over and demanding a full account of his health.

"Hamfast," Bilbo managed to get away from family names and carrots, "it's not that I'm not overjoyed to see you, all of you, and looking so well, but what are you doing here?"

"Waahll, Mister Bilbo, it's like this. That night you and wee Frodo disappeared, Bell, she woke up an' saw you two leavin'."

"So much for my stealth," said Bilbo.

"Bein' a mother, she can hear a faunt steal a biscuit from six smials away. She woke me, and me and Hamson, an' our lot saddled up and rode like mad things over t' the Great Smials. Halfred and Lavender went t' Brandy Hall. Me an' Hamson roused the Tooks and told 'em what was up. Well, Old Gerontius Took and Gorbadoc Brandybuck were at the mayor o' Hobbiton’s house at the bang a' dawn.

"Told that mayor, you was off on a walking holiday, as folk were bein' so rude, an' Bag-End was under their care 'til you came back. Them Sackville-Baggins weren’t best pleased, I tell you. So, the house was locked up. Them Tooks and Brandybucks'v been bickerin' over it with them Sackville-Baggins ever since. Well, until she got an invite a' some sort and flounced off.

"Mister Gandalf showed up with all them dwarf soldiers. They told us you’d moved here to git married - and I do give you the felicitations of me and me family, Mister Bilbo, time you was married at any rate, so my Bell says.

"Well, them soldiers were very nice, very nice indeed, very obligin’. And since it seems the Gamgees aren't welcome in the Shire no more - being o' service to you and yours all this time, we thought we'd see if we could be o' service to you here. If his majesty don't mind us hangin' about?"

Thorin looked startled for all of three seconds before saying, "On the contrary, Master Gamgee, you and your family are very welcome to Erebor."

"Thank'ee kindly, your majesty," said Hamfast, tugging his forelock.

"But, Hamfast, what will you do?" Bilbo asked.

"I've brought me plow an' livestock an' such, Mister Bilbo. I imagine I'll just carry on here as I did in Hobbiton."

"I don't actually have a garden, Ham," said Bilbo gently.

"It seems to me you might have if you want it, sir. There's lots o' field that could be under cultivation around the mountain. Though, you'll pardon my sayin' so, th' couple I do see, well, I can practically smell the soil needs amendin'."

"That's not my soil, Ham," Bilbo explained. "It's not even Thorin's soil. That belongs to the people of Dale, which is the city down there."

"What? With all them roads and such? They might as well be livin' in the middle o' Bree." Bard cleared his throat.

"Excuse me, Master… Gamgee?"

"Aye, that's me," said Hamfast, turning to Bard.

"I'm Bard, the king of… all them roads and such."

"Oh! Not to cast 'spersions on your arrangements, your majesty, but how long've your folk been farmin'?"

"No offense taken, I'm just trying to get this straight. We need to do what to the soil?"

"That answer's that question," said Hamfast. "Yavanna bless you."

Bard was engaged with Bilbo and Hamfast. Thorin had gone to the first wagon, where he and Arb were in conversation with Bell Gamgee. She was certainly having her say, but Ori could not hear what she was telling the two dwarrow. Thorin’s and Arb’s expressions were becoming increasingly sly.

"Send it all up to the royal cavern, Arb," said Thorn, grinning. "You know the way."

"Aye, yer majesty!"

"Few of us are actually farmers," Bard went on. "Most of us make our living from the lake or the
river, or via trade that comes along the road to Erebor. Many of us farm to supplement what we can’t buy. Food is expensive."

Meanwhile, Ori noticed that Dain, Ahkn, and some particularly bold dwarrow were peeking under a tarp on one wagon.

"Wha’d’yeh think?" one asked.
"How does it go? Steam?" another conjectured.
Bell looked down from her seat in the wagon and said, “The plow? Cows pull it, o’ course."
"We kin certainly improve on tha’, lass,” said Dain and Ahkn nodded.

Ori followed Bilbo and Thorin as they exited the lift out to the courtyard. Thorin, with an arm about Bilbo, waited by the open front gate of Fundin House. Ori saw Mistress Dazla making sure the receiving room doors were thrown wide. All the royal guests were milling around, intrigued by the goings on. Eight of the over-filled wagons rolled into the royal cavern and drew up before the house. Gib and Mokrah came out and helped Hamson, and Halfred led Hamfast’s livestock out through the stable to the meadow.

Lieutenant Arb, who Dwalin introduced to a bewildered Bilbo, shouted to his men and the wagons were uncovered. The first wagon had a rather large green object at the front.

“You brought my front door!” Bilbo cried in disbelief.

The other wagons contained piles of furniture and household goods. Frodo squealed from atop the Gamgee wagon, which he had ridden up to the cavern. Wee Sam had his arm about Frodo and, jumping down, insisted on helping his ‘Mister Frodo’.

Bilbo went from wagon to wagon, staring at his entire household piled high but securely wrapped and held.

“You brought all this? How?” Bilbo asked Arb, his voice full of wonder.

“All th’ ravens were chattin’ ‘bout th’ king findin’ his One an’ that wizard told us yeh’d left yer thin’s an’ could we brin’ ‘em along. Them Gamgees were real helpful.”

“You brought my window boxes…?” Bilbo’s speech wavered. “Aye, an’ yer plants, yer mailbox, yer gate an’ the floorboards and the winder glass. We can go back f’r the tree if yeh’d like.”

“No, no, no,” Bilbo cried. “This is already as much kindness as I can take without weeping. Thank you! Thank you, so very much!”

And he flung his arms around the startled lieutenant, who patted his back nervously, glancing sideways at his very amused king and captain.

Frodo assured Arb, “He’s like that.”

“It was our pleasure, Pr’fessor Baggins,” growled Arb, bracingly. “We particularly enjoyed widenin’ the front doorway t’ get yer cookstove out.”

“You took the stove?”

“Aye, it’s around here somewheres. Nah, no’ tha’ one, tha’s where we put th’ bathtubs.”

“Bathtubs?” Bilbo was beyond dazed.

“Aye, an’ all tha’ nice copper pipin’.”

“The plumbing…”

“The wainscotin’ an’ th’ mouldin’.”

“Did you leave the hole in the ground?” Bilbo asked.

“Oh aye, an’ we did leave ‘em some firewood, as we don’t use it here. That lovely Missus Gamgee took all th’ food from the larders that could travel. We left th’ rest. That nice gentlehobbit Gerontius Took—“

“That’s my grandfather,” said Bilbo weakly.

“Aye? Splendid feller. Told us we’d done a grand job an’ he was goin’ by th’ mayor’s office t’ tell ‘im tha’ th’ place was all ready for some bitch’r other t’ move in. Oh, an’ them pictures a’ yer parents, Missus Gamgee said they were yer parents, ’re packed on me pony. Fine lookin’ pair. Yer amad looks like she got dwarf blood in her.”

“Belladonna Took,” Kili informed them. “You know, the great adventurer!”
“Oh, she was a rare one!” a soldier commented in passing.

“So, there’s nothing left but rotten food and a pile of firewood?” Bilbo stared at Arb. The dwarf grinned. Bilbo turned and looked at Hamfast and Bell, who were trying in vain not to laugh.

Ori reflected that Lobelia was in for a very rude homecoming, but at least she’d be warm.

Arb cleared his throat and blushed a little. “Me soldiers did relieve yeh a’ th’ candy yeh had about th’ place.”

“I certainly hope they did and you got some, too,” Bilbo stated.

Arb winked.

“Oh, aye I got me share, Pr’fessor Baggins.” Arb suddenly frowned and dug in his pockets.

“That reminds me. That Tharkûn went off while we was packin’ up, and when he come back he handed me these, told me t’ hang on t’ em an’ t’ make sure there’s always twenty-four of ‘em.”

The soldier withdrew a leather bag and from this extracted a cloth packet, which he handed to Bilbo. The hobbit took it with a confused frown and unwrapped the cloth. Bilbo burst out laughing.

“My silver teaspoons! Gandalf! Did you pillage the Sackville-Baggins house?”

“Just long enough to retrieve your property, dear fellow. I did have to ‘repair’ them, of course. Master Otho did, as the faunts say, quite a number on them.”

Mistress Dazla started giving orders and Dori hustled Bilbo inside to oversee the moving of his household into his new quarters.

Loli and Omi came out of the house, trailed by Buj and Dipfa. At Dori’s request, they immediately became welcoming hosts and escorted the Gamgees to rooms in Fundin house and helped a couple of servants with the Gamgees’ overnight bags. Ori overhead the promises of baths and naps, and, when they wanted, refreshments in the parlor. Bell sent her family on their way and, with Marigold on her hip, marched in after Mistress Dazla.

Ori idly sketched the piles and the army of servants and the guests carrying things in. A metallic clank made him look up at the courtyard gates. Aris, Dwalin, Aragorn, and Dain were up to something as Hild, Arwen, and Mavis I egged them on. Ori went over as the group stood back to admire. Ori giggled. They had attached Bilbo’s mailbox to the pillar of the gate.

Thorin and Balin were discussing the contents piled in one wagon. To Ori, it looked like a huge heap of very nicely turned and polished wood. The first chair of the carpentry guild roared in on a goat at the gallop, followed by a couple of dozen workers. They left their goats to wander and were all soon peering in and examining the wood. Thorin went in then came back out with Bilbo.

Ori watched happily as Thorin, smiling down on the hobbit, discussed the wood. Bilbo was all but crying with happiness. Thorin gave orders to the guild and they each took an armful and marched in. Curious, Ori followed. Around the doorway to Bilbo and Thorin’s new quarters was a hive of activity. The wainscoting from the Shire was being installed in the passage. Ori admired how well it looked there.

Ori wormed his way along, careful of the carpenters working like a swarm of bees. Gheir and Balin were looking things over with the carpentry guild’s first chair. Ori rather thought this project would be finished before nightfall. The ogee door neatly covered Bilbo’s round green front door, with its shiny brass handle exactly in the middle.

“That way,” said Kili, “you can open the ogee doors, but if you’re visiting you still have to knock on the round door.”

Ori went through to find Dori, Elrohir, and Thranduil organizing the setting up of Bilbo’s furniture in the sitting room. Fili and Sigrid sat on a couch, cooing over little Marigold as Lindir supervised. Zendi was talking to the betrothed pair.

He followed Bilbo into the kitchen where Bell Gamgee, Dori, Sculdis and Bomber were all hard at work. Up close, Ori saw Snur on his back under Bilbo’s cook stove, rearranging and installing things, while Sculdis worked on the pipes from the forge coming out of the wall. Mavis II, Margr, and Ruelis were unpacking dishes and cookware and putting them away. Jim, Fior and Boromir rolled in with the ale and wine casks from Bilbo’s old cellar, making the hobbit laugh.

Ori continued through the house, watching everyone help Bilbo settle in. The library was also full of people. Elrond and Celeborn were placing Bilbo’s books carefully on the shelves as Larit, Vi,
and Glorfindel organized the furniture.

Celeborn said, “Really, Elrond, you can’t put the erotica next to the books on second age mill technology.”

“They are all about grinding,” said Elrond slyly.

“You’ve been spending too much time with Glorfindel,” said Celeborn.

“There’s no such thing,” said Glorfindel.

The turquoise and pink room was now the dining room. Binni, Gridr, Elledan, and Mavis IV were unpacking fine china dishware and crystal glasses and putting them into the side boards as they were bought in by teams of soldiers and servants.

The office had gained Thorin’s old desk and chair from Fundin house and what Ori supposed to be all Bilbo’s paperwork and such.

The maroon room had become a cozy parlor under the auspices of Gloin, Erda, and Ulfr. Bilbo’s furniture clashed with the walls, but seemed to be winning the fight. Ori went through to Frodo’s room. Frodo and Wee Sam watched and squealed from their place on Frodo’s bed in a pool of faunt and badger toys as Kili, Tauriel, Gimli, Stonehelm, Bain, and Theodred set up furniture and hung pictures.

Ori was amused to see that, although they were mixed together on the wall, he could easily tell which had come from the Shire and which ones were from the princes’ badgerhoods. There was a beautiful, bright green chest of drawers that, instead of plain drawer pulls, had different animal heads gaily painted and quite life-like. In the main bedroom, Ori found Thorin and Mistress Dazla supervising the placement of the furnishings while Miss Oqizla, Galadriel, and Agirb unpacked and put away clothing. Tharkûn and Aewandînen argued loudly over the arrangements in the master bathroom. Aewandînen only had a quarter of the population of Dale left to treat and had stopped in for a snack. According to Agirb, the people in Dale were already referring to him as Mister Wandi, to which the elf prince rejoiced.

Ori trotted over to see what a bathroom could possible give Aewandînen and Tharkûn anything to argue about.

“Blue is restful,” Tharkûn insisted. “The water should be blue.”

“Green is traditional for hobbits,” said Aewandînen. Tharkûn stood at his full height glaring at the Prince of Erys Lasgalen.

“With all due respect, your highness, you wouldn’t know hobbit tradition from a coal scuttle.”

“What’s a coal scuttle?”

“Exactly! And witness your choice of scented candles.”

“What’s wrong with my choice of scent?”

“The candles need to give the feeling of comfort. The scent needs to be floral, like lily-of-the-valley or rose.”

Aewandînen frowned, shaking his head.

“This is Erebor and this is a new life for Bilbo. I’m thinking with the marble, glass and the colors, the candle scents need to be an even mix of broom flower, that sandalwood those Mavi brought, and a touch of cinnamon. There should probably be an anchor scent of bergamot.”

“Aewandînen snorted and tossed his hair exactly like his father.

“This is a big bathroom, honey. They’ll be wagging more than washcloths!”

“Young you have a p- Honey?!” Tharkûn looked aghast

“Rather more respectful than ‘toots’,” Aewandînen cooed.

Ori decided to take himself away just then. He didn’t want to be here to see how this would turn
out, though, at least the room was washable.

He went back to Fundin House proper in search of his friends, and found them making
sandwiches in the kitchen and setting up for tea in the breakfast parlor.

Ori went out to the patio to organize his notes and finish some drawings. It had already been a far
more eventful day than he could have imagined. At this time yesterday, Thorin was just being
crowned.

He heard a muffled call, then the doors to the stable opened and Fanny ducked through into the
meadow.

“Fanny!” he cried.

She trumpeted her greeting and Ori ran and hugged her. He pulled his chair to the edge of the
patio and she lay down in the grass next to him and they had a companionable chat. Ori read her his
notes, which she approved, then he set about sketching her in more detail than before. She posed for
him quite patiently.

Eventually, Ori heard the chatter of small voices from the breakfast parlor and realized Frodo and
Wee Sam had come through, which heralded the arrival of the rest of the Gamgees. Wee Sam
glanced out at the meadow, his mouth falling open.

“Mister Frodo! Mister Frodo! Look! We didn’t bring that!”

“That’s Fanny. She’s an oliphaunt.”

Frodo said this so casually, as if he had seen an oliphaunt a day his entire life, but Sam was quite
agog.

“Mam! Mam! It’s an oliphaunt!”

“Now, Sam, what have I told you about fib- Oh, that’s an oliphaunt.” Bell’s tone was neutral but
her eyes widened quite a bit.

Wee Sam crept out the door and approached Ori, never looking away from Fanny.

“Mister Ori, sir? Can we pet the oliphaunt?”

“Please,” Bell prompted.

“Please?” Sam repeated, looking longingly at Fanny.

“I’ll ask her,” said Ori. He turned to Fanny. “What do you think? Would you like to have the
Gamgees pet you?”

Ori could swear she shrugged.

“She says it’s all right,” Ori translated. “Just don’t pull her ears or anything.”

Despite his not being anywhere near the eldest, Sam gamely tip-toed forward and patted Fanny’s
trunk, then giggled and darted back behind Frodo.

The rest of the Gamgee faunts tried to head out to play with Fanny, but their mother called them to
order, and they sat down to table for tea.

Three platters of sandwiches and two entire sugared hams, a chocolate cake, the carrot cake,
buttered toast, marmalade, blackberry preserves and six kegs of ale later, Bell approved of all the
children seeing Fanny again. Fanny stayed lying down until Ori had boosted all seven with Frodo at
the front at Fanny’s head. She rose slowly and carefully to her feet and calmly walked the length of
the meadow and back. Her burdens squealing with delight.

“And they all petted her,” Frodo reported to Bilbo, “but Sam did it first, because he’s the bravest.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Yes here’s another round of chewing, confusions and confustications. The visiting dwarrow are confused, Jim’s out to bemuse, and Ori is amused. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori went to his room to dress for dinner. Agrib had already been through, and his and Dwalin’s clothes were laid out and their bead boxes stood at the ready. Ori plumped down at the end of the bed and sat blankly for a few moments. He felt as though he had been running at high speed for the last few days. Mask clambered into his lap for attention. Ori idly stroked the kitten. He flopped back onto the bed.

Masked jumped away and swatted at Ori’s hair beads.

Ori wished everyone would go away, so it could just be himself and his family. Of course, his family was the Durins, which meant the Groinuls and the Urs as well now. He sighed. He would never want to be away from them. He loved them all so much. He wanted…

Dwalin opened the door and came in.

“Alrigh’, love?”

Ori sat up, ready to demure but held out his arms to his husband. Dwalin was at his side in a moment, gathering him close. Ori knew this was everything he wanted right now and sighed into his husband’s beard.

“I’m fine. I just… I miss you,”

“Mahal, love, an’ I miss yeh, too. Too many bloody guests in th’ place f’r too bleedin’ long. I told Thorin I was ready t’ chuck th’ lot a’ ‘em out.”

Ori giggled.

“Did you? What did he say?”

“He offered t’ help an’ Bilbo gave him a scold.”

They looked at each other then laughed. Dwalin gave a particular whistle and Garnet floated in.

“I suppose you want me to tell you when you have to get yourselves together?”

“Aye, me fav’rite.”

Garnet reached forward and plucked at Dwalin’s beard.

“Good thing I like you. Take care of your pretty mate. I’ll be back.”

Garnet floated out the window and Dwalin smiled.

“Well, love?”

Ori pulled Dwalin back to lie on the bed with him. They lay looking at each other for a while, then Ori pushed Dwalin over onto his back and kissed him. He felt Dwalin’s body relax completely beneath him.

“I love you,” Ori whispered and nuzzled Dwalin’s neck.

“Me ghivashel,” was the rumbling response.

“I wish we could just steal some leftovers from the kitchen and stay here tonight. I know, it’s not a thought worthy of the king’s scribe.”

“Th’ king’s personal guard was thinkin’ th’ same thin’, so we’ll be in disgrace t’gether.”

Ori rubbed his face in Dwalin chest fur and sighed, then froze.
“Wait.”
“Am I hurtin’ yeh, love?”
“No, Mask is standing on my arse. Get off there, you! Ow! Bad kitty! No claws!”
Dwalin snerked and carefully removed the protesting cat, who was desperate to remain anchored.
“He’s gettin’ big,” Dwalin observed. “If I put ’im down on th’ floor, he’ll just climb back up.”
“Then we’d best be wriggling around when he does, so he doesn’t have such an easy place to settle.”
“Yeh’ve become quite th’ strategist.”
“These are desperate times.”
Dwalin detached Mask’s teeth from his thumb and gently put him on the floor. When the warrior looked up again he was decidedly pink in the face.
“Glad t’ know I’m no’ th’ only one who’s desperate,” he muttered.
“Should we? We only have an hour before dinner.”
“A lot kin happen in an hour.” Dwalin’s eyes twinkled wickedly as he reached for Ori.
There was something about Dwalin’s hands sliding down Ori’s back and then up under his tunic and down his trousers. It was always so slow and deliberate and there was no mistaking what his husband was doing. Dwalin grasped his butt cheeks and boosted him up so they were eye to eye, Ori giggling as they lay their foreheads together.
Ori kissed Dwalin on the nose, and then they slotted their mouths together.
As often as Ori had fantasized about doing this with Dwalin - With anyone! - before he was married, the reality was so much finer, and the erection far more intense. He felt how much he had missed this, and in only a few days.
He let his legs drop to Dwalin’s sides, his knees resting on the mattress, giving him leverage to rub against Dwalin’s belly.
“Please, hold me tighter,” he whispered.
The heat from Dwalin’s palms and fingers lent a lovely edge. As the long fingers curled into his arse crack, Ori jolted with the intense sensation.
“Mmmm, do that again.”
Dwalin readily obliged.
Ori buried his face in the crook of Dwalin’s neck as Dwalin rubbed gently against his opening.
“Alrigh’, love?” Dwalin murmured.
“Uh-huh.”
“I won’ go further than tha’ righ’ now.”
“Just don’t s-stop.”
“Ooo, yer likin’ this. I kin feel yer prick like an iron poker against me belly.”
Ori groaned, rubbing his face, his mouth against Dwalin’s neck. Dwalin’s lips were right at Ori’s ear, the breath hot and moist.
“If yeh like this, wait ’til I get some oil on tha’.”
“Mmmmm.” Ori skipped a breath.
He ground against his husband, desperate for more.
Ori could only imagine he looked like a mad dwarf, contorted with pleasure. He didn’t care.
Dwalin thought he was beautiful.
“I wan’ t’ cum all over yeh, then lick yeh clean.”
Ori buried his cries in Dwalin’s beard, pushing his face harder as the cries rose, as he came, fully clothed and sobbed because he wanted these spasms to go on forever.
“D-dwalin?”
“Aye, love?”
“Rub yourself off on me.”
“I want yeh under me, on yer belly.”
“Oh, that sounds wonderful.”
Even as the words left his mouth, he thought they sounded silly, but he was feeling rather dazed
and silly. As Dwalin shifted him over onto the bed, onto his stomach, he hooked his thumbs into the waist band of his own trousers and pulled them down, offering his bare bottom to his husband.

“Oh, Mahal,” Dwalin breathed.
Ori shook his behind and giggled.
“Yer a nut,” said Dwalin, laughing.
“You love it,” Ori snickered.

Then Dwalin was on top of him, his very hard and very naked prick slotted and rutting in Ori’s crack.

Ori breathed in sharply, then sharper still as Dwalin craned down to suck hard on his neck. The bed rattled under them. Ori had a brief, horrible thought about Nori walking in through the fireplace and vomiting on the rug, but Dwalin’s first moan swept everything away, everything but his very large, very turned on husband, pushing on his arse.

His brain went everywhere at once, from the ecstasy of his nerves, his muscles stretched taut, to Dwalin’s increasingly loud and incoherent cries, to the poor slob who would have to wash these sheets.

He told his brain not to think about housekeeping at a time like this. This was-
This was his husband coming hot and hard all over him.
This was Ori coming a second time with a yip like a startled pup, then the pair of them lying still, gulping for air, Dwalin a lovely blanket of muscle and fur all over him.

Ori felt Dwalin’s mouth on his shoulders, a long line of kisses from one side to the other.

“Mahal, I just want more an’ more o’yeh,” said Dwalin. After a moment, the warrior pulled away, getting up from the bed.

“Where are you going?” Ori asked.

“Get some water an’ a cloth t’ wash yeh down. Not enough time t’ take a whole bath. I like yeh this way, but I’m not sure Dori’d approve of such obvious debauchery at his table. No’ in fron’ o’ th’ ‘quality’, anyway.”

Ori laughed, then hissed as the cloth touched his back.

“Sorry, love, it’s a little cold.”

“S’alright.”

Ori stretched languidly as Dwalin worked, then rolled over and onto his elbow to watch Dwalin tend to himself.

“I want to say horrid things about our guests,” said Ori
Dwalin burst out laughing.

“Oh, aye. Go on then. Get it ou’ a’ yer system.”

“Gheir’s an ass.”

“Certainly is.”

Ori grinned at Dwalin’s agreement and was encouraged.

“Ulfr need Oin to perform an emergency surgical removal of the big stick in his ass.” Dwalin choked at that.

“Hild need to calm the fuck down.” Ori decided. “Whether she likes it or not, she is not, and cannot be, the next Queen Kivi. Kivi was and is one of a kind.”

Dwalin frowned and thought this over for a moment.

“Yeh know, love, I ne’er though’ a’ it like tha’. Wonder if she really does fancy hersel’ as Kivi?”

Ori considered a moment. He shook his head.

“No, if she was Kivi she would have charmed Gheir to bed, broken his spine, neck and mind with illustration 20, and she’d have done it years ago along with taking over his kingdom and his wives.”

“Good point,” Dwalin agreed in all seriousness. He rang out the cloth, swabbed himself down with a towel and climbed back into bed, pulling Ori against his chest. “Go’ an idea, if yer up for it.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Yeh’ve ne’er bin t’ th’ nigh’ market, have yeh?”

Ori nearly jumped with glee.

“The night market? Really? May we go?”
Dwalin chuckled.
"Yeh kin go anytime yeh want, love, remember?"
"But it’s different if you come with me. It’ll be like walking out together!"
"Tha’ makes us sound li’ naughty tweens, sneakin’ ou’ after hours."
"That might be fun, actually," said Ori with a grin.
"Too bad we live on th’ ground floor,” said Dwalin. “No’ much call fer throwin’ pebbles at th’
bedroom winder, ‘r haulin’ escape ladders about."
"This will be like going out courting together for the first time."
"It will, won’ it. I always though’ it’d be nice t’ go walkin’ out wi’ yeh. Didn’t realize we’d have
t’ be married firs’."
"Does it really matter in what order we do it? Dipfa would encourage us to be trend setters!"
"Dipfa’d encourage us t’ wear lantern shades on ‘r heads."
"As long as they threw us into sufficient relief. But, Dwalin, I just thought of something else.
Can we both get the time off to go out at once? What if Thorin needs one of us?"
"I have i’ on good authority tha’ Thorin intends t’ take Bilbo ou’ there as soon as possible. Dori
an’ Balin’ve promised t’ badger-sit."
"Won’t Thorin need you to guard him?"
"Arb’s already volunteered. Says he feels it’s th’ least he kin do f’r Belladonna Took’s son. I
think he’s go’ a wee crush on hobbits in general. Him an’ tha’ Boromir."
"So, when will we go?" Ori asked, thinking he sounded rather like Frodo, excited squeak and all.
Dwalin laughed.
"When most’ve the guests’ve left. Gheir an’ th’ Mavi, an’ Jim an’ Ruelis’ lot leave t’morrah. Ulfr
an’ Ahkn’ll probably be gone th’ day after, though, Thorin tells me our Arne’ll stay on for a while."
"Really? How did Ulfr agree to that?"
"Ulfr’s wife agreed t’it. Apparently, our Dori sent a raven."
"The sneak!"
"Aye, all boiled down t’ doin’ special projects in th’ library fer Brur, an’ bein’ o’ service t’ his
king an’ th’ crown prince."
"Cow shit, in other words."
"Oh, I dunno as I’d say it’s all cow shit. Th’ way Arne’s droolin’ over th’ library, he’ll need t’ go
abou’ with a bib."
"So, that will leave Chat and Hild and the men."
Dwalin chuckled.
"Yer no’ plotting’ t’ put ‘em all in a mine cart an’ drive ‘em off a cliff?"
"No! Not subtle enough!” said Ori. “Joking! Just joking! Anyway, we’re not likely to see much
of Hild. She’ll be out shopping and have sex."
"An workin’ out trade with our Dis."
"So,” said Ori, businesslike once more. “We’ll go to the night market on the next first rest day?”
"I believe it’s possible,” Dwalin teased.
"Can you rearrange an entire army by then?"
"It’s no’ like I need t’ pick each one up an’ move ‘em abou’. Even a’ attention, they’re far too
wiggly."

Hand in hand, Dwalin and Ori wandered through to the receiving room. Several people were
already there. Ori looked over at the far fireplace and saw that the Bardlings, the Durin princes,
Arne, Gimli and Legolas were already there.
"G’wan," Dwalin murmured. "Yeh need t’ catch up on th’ goin’ s’ on."
Ori grinned, they kissed, Dwalin gave his butt a pat, and Ori went off to the younger set.
"There you are, Ori!” Sigrid said eagerly. “Guess what?’"
Ori sat down beside her.
“Tell me.”
“It’s the best!” Kili added.

“Shut up, Kili,” Sigrid continued. “Note that neither Floris nor Mavey are here.”

“So where are they?” Ori asked, he had a sneaking suspicion they might be involved in some evening entertainment he had overhear Dori and Binni talking about in the kitchen. “Jim and Ruelis said they had a special performance for us. I bet it’s something to do with that comedy they told us about. And Mavey and Floris said earlier they had lines to learn!”

Ori grinned, remembering,

“If it’s the one Jim told us about I wonder who he’s got to play the pigs?”

There was a snort and Ori glanced up. Gimli, Kili, Legolas and Bain were all trying hard and failing to not laugh. Tilda had both hands clamped over her mouth.

“You sneaks!” raged Sigrid.

Tauriel came over and folded herself into Kili’s lap.

“Did you know Kili was being a pig?” demanded Sigrid.

Tauriel looked at her swain and tried not to smile. “I’m not always a pig!” Kili laughed and kissed her collar bone.

“Yes, I know,” Tauriel admitted, “Theodred and Stonehelm are going to be in it, too.”

“Those elf ears of yours are going to end us all,” groaned Fili then he cocked an eye at Tauriel.

“Who else?”

“What else do your elf ears hear?” Sigrid teased.

Tauriel pulled a face. “I didn’t hear that part. I only know there’re going to be thirteen princes who die in the briars and thirteen pigs.”

“That’s right!” Tilda cried and was promptly shushed by Legolas and Bain.

“I’ve written a few lines for various players and edited others,” Arne put in. “I know my limits and would pass out if I had to be onstage.”

Kili nodded.

“We don’t have too many lines, so that’s good. I told Jim I wasn’t very good at acting but he just laughed and told me to go as over the top as I liked. I haven’t even seen the costumes yet. Did any of you?”

Bain, Legolas, and Gimli shook their heads.

“No,” Bain said. “We were just told to throw ourselves into the parts.” Bain grinned evilly.

“Legolas has to practice oinking really loud.”

“I’m not accustomed to oinking,” Legolas replied, thoughtfully.

Ori turned as he saw Theodred and Stonehelm coming toward them from the stairs.

“Perhaps those two know more,” Ori alerted the others to the coming presences.

The two princes inveigled themselves into the group and sat down. Bain immediately demanded information.

“Other than us,” Stonehelm revealed, “we don’t know. There’s seven of us, so Jim has to have got six others.”

Ori wondered idly. Tilda was picked for the fun of it, he was sure. Gimli, Legolas, Bain and the others were picked for their willingness to overact and strength to climb on each other as a pile. Jim needed six others who were as able bodied and also with an inclination to act the fool. Ori sighed, that could be anyone from Thorin to Bilbo to Galadriel to Aragorn. He would just have to wait and see like the others.

The front door opened and in came Master Brur. Ori’s heart leaped to his mouth. If all the heads of the scribes’ guild were going to be here, it was going to be extremely embarrassing. Fortunately, Brur only brought Sadi and a rather annoyed looking Granny Klak.

Knowing his duty, Ori rose and went forward to greet them. Brur was all amusement as usual and ready to have a good dinner. Sadi grinned malevolently at him and asked in he’d any more notes she should see. Ori laughed and made some vague excuse. She pretended to glare at him. Ori kissed Granny Klak’s cheek.

“I haven’t seen you in ages, Granny. Where have you been?” Ori asked, expecting to hear that
she’d ruined several noble houses by getting them to gamble away all their fortunes.
Granny slewed a look at him and tapped his nose.
“You’ll just have to wonder, my little nestling. Where is my other great grandson?”
“The good grandson or the naughty grandson?” Ori asked primly, earning himself a spank.
“My most recently married one, bratty dwarfling.”
“Yes, ma’am. I have no idea. Probably upstairs being recently married with his husband.”
“Sensible lad,” Granny approved and went forward to greet a delighted Dori.

As soon as everyone slowly gathered, Miss Oqizla circulated with glasses of a light wine. Gheir and the four Mavi were present and Ori looked up to see Hamfast and Bell coming downstairs with their faunts trailing after. Halfway down, Sam raced the rest of the steps and hurried over to where Bilbo and Thorin were seated with Frodo on Thorin’s knee. Posey roosted at the fireside, with Chopper, and the kittens and Brandy played on the rug.

Bell looked very pretty and calm in a pink flowered dress with puffed sleeves and edged with tiny ribbons of white lace, while Hamfast fidgeted in a smart red leather weskit and a green silk kerchief about his neck. The faunts were all happily brought over to where Dori and Balin sat in state with Thorin and Dis. Bilbo welcomed the Gamgees and made formal introductions. Thorin talked easily with all the faunts and then encouraged Frodo to introduce them to Posey and the other animals. Snowdrop was instantly taken with Chopper, sat down beside him and wrapped her arms about the huge battle boar. Chopper didn’t mind this loving attention in the least.

The Gamgees were settled on another couch. Ori noticed Sigrid and Fili baring down on them. Bell saw them, too, and smiled to herself. When they arrived and greeted the Gamgees, she immediately spoke to them,

“Oh there you are, princess, dear. May I impose on you to take Marigold for a few minutes? She is gettin’ heavy.”

Wreathed in grins, the betrothed pair happily took the baby. Fili laughed and lifted Marigold high above his head making the baby crow with delight. Sigrid made fishy faces and played peek-a-boo as Fili cuddled her.

Ori looked back at Dis. She was smiling with damp eyes. Bell patted her hand.
“When is the weddin’?”
Dis turned her attention to the hobbit lady and blinked.
“Oh, they were just officially betrothed the other day. They have been dear friends ever since they met.”
Ori reflected that the pair had been in love ever since they were introduced, having admired each other long before that.
“We might look at a last harvest or a mid-winter wedding,” Dis considered.
“Both ideas’re lovely,” Bell agreed. “I’m sure it’ll be a wonderful affair. They certainly look as though they’ll be very happy. Men are a good deal like hobbits in that babies often come quickly after the weddin’. I know one lady who had her baby full and ready to be born only two to three months after her weddin’. All the rest take, at least, nine months.”
Dis and Bell looked at each other and giggled.
“Yes, I’ve heard that, too.” Dis agreed. “Mistress Zendi is Master Jim’s sister. She is married to a dwarf and was telling them such can happen.”
Bell nodded wisely.
“Good for ’em to have someone to talk to who knows. The worst thing is to go in all unknowin’. Everythin’ gives a fright. Now, at least, Prince Fili can have nerves for the both of ’em.”
She and Dis exchanged twinkling grins.
“Asters,” said Hamfast.
“Oh, Ham,” said Bell, “I don’t know if they’ll still have flowers way up here by then.”
“Flowers?” Dis asked.
“For the weddin’ crowns,” said Bell. “When is last harvest?”
“The leaves turn first,” said Dis, “and it will be several months at least. Not even the damp trees
“Damp trees?” Hamfast asked.
“Don’t know what they’re called in westron.”
“Maples, dear,” said Dori. “Remember, I used the sap the elves brought us to make the pie and
the iced custard.”
Dis’ face lit up in glee.
“Oh, yes! That was lovely.”
A small knot of faunts ran by in a noisy herd, being chased by Boromir pretending to be some
monster or other, making Thorin laugh.
From his seat near the fire Ori sketched and scribbled notes. He was rather pleased with his quick
drawing of all the faunts scampering away from a fierce captain. Frodo was mounted on Posey who,
despite the short legs, was capable of a good deal of speed. The herd rushed by again and Thorin
asked,
“Captain Boromir, what in all Arda are you supposed to be?”
Boromir stood up, grinning madly.
“I’ve got the ends of my cloak as you see. I’m being Roäc!” He turned, flapped, and called after
the faunts. “Awk, awk! I’m going to eat you!”
Shrieks of terrified delight were all his reply. Thorin raised and eyebrow.
“You’re not vicious enough, Boromir.”
Boromir laughed and ‘swooped’ off to chase the faults again. Thorin smirked then scowled as
Roäc, who had been perching on the back of Thorin’s chair, tweaked his ear. Thorin frowned and
Roäc glared back. Thorin returned his attention to Aragorn as the western king sighed and smiled.
“I’m sorry, my captain loves children and turns into one as soon as any are present.”
“I feel you pain,” Thorin nodded. “My captain is in love.”
Thorin turned to his captain standing nearby.
“Dwaaaaalin?”
Ori felt his cheeks color and he peeked under his lashes to meet Dwalin’s steady gaze. His
husband winked.
“Dwaaaaalin?” Thorin’s voice came again. Ori watched as Dwalin turned
“Eh?”
Thorin sighed,
“As said, Aragorn, I truly feel your pain.”
This made the Gondorian pair chuckle.
Thorin idly watched the chase around the room and smiled.
“So small. You know, we dwarrow are used to being the smallest people in the room.”
“Mister Bilbo told us faunts… er, dwarflings’re quite rare,” said Bell, her face all sympathy.
“They are,” said Thorin, “but dwarflings are larger and more solid than faunts. Though, I’d say
your Wee Sam would make quite a respectable dwarfling.”
“He should,” said Bell wryly. “Birthin’ him was like birthin’ a cobble. He got the Goodchild
skull. Bald as an egg, big as a boulder.”
Dis winced in sympathy.
“Kili was like that. We couldn’t even get his head through the neck of the traditional name-day
shirt, and mithril silver stretches! Something I should warn Tauriel about.”
“Not straw flowers,” decided Hamfast. “Not pretty enough.”
“Calla Proudfoot had them, remember?” Bell reflected. “She decorated ‘em with crystals to look
like ice drops and put in some dried red roses.”
Hamfast shook his head.
“Don’t see why they didn’t marry in the spring, or even early summer. Lots of flowers to choose
from then.”
“Because the fauntling was due just after Yule, dear. She wanted to wear her gown before she
looked like a set tea table.”
Hamfast grunted and nodded.
“Yer right, m’dear, o’ course.”
The elves arrived and greeted the Gamgees with great affability. They were soon followed by Theoden, Bard, Akhn and Snur all talking. Ulfr came through from the sitting room where he’d been deep in discussion with Dipfa, Buj and Oin, who were soon joined by Elrond.

Binni floated in with all the rest of the descendants of Groin, who had Nori and the Urs in their midst.

Hild and Aris swept in from the meadow with the Ironhills monarchs, Sculdis and Hild in laughing conversation. Dain, with an arm clamped across Aris’ shoulders, roared and joked, while Aris couldn’t get a word in edgeways.

Ori rather thought Aris was used to this.

Mistress Dazla came through and informed Dori and Dis that dinner was served.

Ori was relieved to see this was very much more of a casual affair that the previous dinner there. People wore everyday clothes and sat wherever they pleased.

Hamfast was soon pulled into a discussion with Bard, Akhn, Mavis I and Celeborn about farming and orchards.

Bell, Dis, Buelis, Bombur, Mavis IV, Difa, and Gridr chatted with Fili and Sigrid, who traded Marigold back and forth.

“Oh, she’s wet,” said Fili.

“Give her her,” Bell ordered quickly, “I’ve go a spare nappie.”

“That’s alright,” Sigrid laughed. “I’ve changed a brother and a sister. We’ll take care of it.”

Bell snickered.

“Be my guest. You young people’ve gone right round the bend and I don’t mind a’tall.”

Granny Klak and Elladan played moderator as Hild and Theoden spoke urgently, heads together again.

Aris argued with Dwalin, Dain, Arwen, and Aragorn about armaments and strategy. Aewandinen, Gheir, Elrohir, Sculdis, and Bofur discussed jewelry and the making of such. Lindr spoke quite amicably with Binni, Bifur, Mavis II and Mavis III, Jani, and Erda. Thorin and Bilbo had Galadriel, Snur, Dori, Thranduil, Buj, Arne, Balin, and Brur near them and as best as Ori could surmise they were discussing history and traveling.

Nori with Gloin, Elladan, Sadi, and Tharkûn, were in discussion over the possibilities of something Nori was calling a casino.

Kili, Tauriel, Boromir, and the younger set sat at their end of the table with their cohorts, helping entertain the Gamgee faunts and Frodo, while Posey, Kelli, Chopper, and the other beasts ran around the room, playing. Ori reflected it was the weirdest herd he’d ever seen.

Dinner was excellent, starting with fish chowder, followed by Celeborn’s favorite bread, tomatoes roasted with melted balvo cheese. The main dish was the goat stew which Dori had given Dain on his first visit. Dain roared his approval at this, then looked stunned as the exact same dish made with cavern mushrooms instead of meat was brought out for the elves’ delectation. There was also a side of noodles in butter and parsley sauce.

This was swiftly eaten and Ori chuckled at the eldest elf prince, who was taking two helpings of everything.

Next was a choice of beef patties mixed with minced onions and other seasonings or grilled morels and all served with green bean casserole and great platters of corn, tomatoes, yams, new potatoes, new beans, new carrots, onions, and apples all roasted together.

Gheir finally turned from his conversation about jewelry to smile benevolently on Bilbo.

“You must be very relieved to be here at last with Thorin,” observed Stiffbeard king. “What a terrible time you’ve had of it. I’m sure you will be delighted to be able to drop this uncle business and be safe at home with your badger and your husband. I dare say you will be delighted to don your gowns again.”

“My what?” Bilbo asked. “Pardon?”

“Your gowns.”

Bilbo, taken aback, said, “Never worn one myself.”
“Oh, I beg your pardon. With Mistress Gamgee present, I simply assumed it was the way of all hobbit dams.”
“It is,” said Bilbo. “But, I’m not a dam.”
“Come now, Professor, you have no further need for pretense. It’s obvious Frodo is Thorin’s son.”
Bilbo’s face slid into slyness which Ori was beginning to know quite well.
“There is a remarkable resemblance, isn’t there,” said the hobbit, leaning on his elbow.
Ulfr nodded.
“Aye, th’ spittin’ image. No mistakin’ th’ Durin eyes.”
Ahkn added, “Very good of you to acknowledge him, Thorin. Will the succession stay with Fili?”
Bilbo turned to Thorin, who had been following the conversation in complete bewilderment.
“I don’t know. Thorin, what did we decide? Shall Fili still be king after you, or will we chuck him out?”
“Ahkn,” said Thorin, “Bilbo and I only met a month ago, at Bombur and Erda’s inn.”
“A month!” Gheir exclaimed. “Your son is only a month old? I heard hobbits were fertile, but this must be unprecedented!”
Hild cocked an eyebrow at Gheir, then glanced at Frodo, who didn’t look any more clued in than Thorin.
“And, apparently, they mature quite quickly. A month old, eh, my badgerling?”
Frodo frowned.
“I’m ten years old!”
Thorin turned to Bilbo and, in a tone of measured wisdom, said, “I believe Fili should be regent if necessary until Frodo is of-age, then, of course, Fili will be prince consort of Dale under Queen Sigrid. Dale is a matriarchy, you know.”
“It is?” Bard asked.
“Well, you are a woman,” said Thorin.
“I’m a what?”
“Thranduil told me.”
The woodland king patted Bard’s hand.
“Now, my dear, we can have no more secrets among family and friends.”
Fili piped up, “It’s all been settled. Except, Sigrid’s agreed to chain me to the front of the throne, not the back, as is traditional.”
Bard coughed.
“Very good of her.”
Kili added, “Then, Tauriel and I are going to run off to find a nice ent and have lots of dwentflings.”
Gheir looked around at them and said, “I have a feeling you’re not being entirely serious.”
Mavis I rolled her eyes.
“Do you think so, dear?”
“Gheir,” said Thorin, “Frodo is not my son, though the resemblance is lovely. He’s not even Bilbo’s son. Bilbo is a male hobbit. Frodo is the orphaned son of Bilbo’s cousin, Drogo Baggins and Drogo’s wife, Primula Brandybuck. Bilbo is Frodo’s guardian.”
“Of course he is!” Gheir blustered. “I was just having you lot on. It’s not my fault you can’t tell a joke when you see one.”
“Better than you know,” said Hild dryly.
Thranduil turned to Tauriel.
“So, I shouldn’t expect any… dwentflings… to add to my kingdom?”
“My profound apologies, my king,” said Tauriel, bowing her head.
Thranduil sighed.
“I suppose I shall bear the disappointment, now that Bard and I are expecting a little blessing of our own.”
“Which of us gets to wear the gown?” Bard asked archly.
“I have several in which you’ll look fetching, my dear.”
Bard muttered darkly to himself and shook his head.
Snur turned to Dwalin.
“So, when’re ya due?”
Dwalin’ eyes got really big.
“Shite!  It’s comin’ now!”
And he slid under the table.  When he climbed back up again he was holding Mask in his arms.
“Oi, tha’ was quite easy.  Look, he’s already go’ a beard.”
“Yes,” said Ori, “all over his body.”
“I’m good,” said Dwalin with a grin.
Elrond said to his steward, “Do we have anything to add to that, Linda?”
“No, Rhonda, I believe we’ve all said enough.”
Mistress Dazla appeared in the doorway.
“Dessert?”
Dessert was a chantilly cake with berry tarts, and syrup sponge.  Ori licked his spoon clean of syrup and looked about. Boromir had his hands full wiping faunt chins as all had elected to eat as much dessert as they could without their mother’s eye on them. There was a knocking at the front door and Mistress Dazla swept up and opened it. She giggled then turned to the table where everyone was looking at her in curiosity.
“Your majesty, the Court of Miracles would like to come in and prepare for this evening’s entertainment.”
Mistress Dalza was obviously holding back a laugh.
Thorin rose.  “Of course, please, let them come in.  Should we all excuse ourselves to the meadow?”
Jim ambled in and waved a welcome.
“No, no my king.  We’re just going to commandeer this side of the room.  All we ask is that you pay no attention to what goes on behind the curtains.”
The guests all laughed and rose. Some followed Thorin and Dis to the sideboard for sweet wine and others followed Dori and Binni to the fireplace for tea and coffee. The Court of Miracles immediately set up free-standing railing taller than even Glorfindel and hung great swathes of green velvet curtains trimmed in gold fringe.
The younger set sat on the floor, having been ousted from the far fireplace and played slap-cards with the older faunts. Despite being amused by their game, they all keep turning their heads to look at the curtains which swirled and waved as people moved about behind them. There was a good deal of noise coming from there. Dain and Akhn had to be chased away twice from trying to peek.
Elrond, Celeborn, and Galadriel now had Hamfast in conversation, which from what Ori could pick up was about the benefits of honey and the careful handling of its makers.
“I brought Shire bees,” announced Hamfast.  “Proper queens.”
Dori murmured, “As if we’d run out.”
“The hives would best be set up at the base of the mountain,” Lady Galadriel said, thoughtfully.
“The River Running is there and the flowers and trees are quite wild.  There will be plenty for them.”
Ori smiled at his sketches. He thought he had very good ones of everyone present and in very relaxed looking poses. Hild and Theoden King seemed to still be locked in discussion. Ori wondered what they could be talking about so much. Surely just arranging a meeting between a daughter and a nephew, no matter how royal, couldn’t take this long. Ori wondered if they’d gone past this and were planning the wedding, the lives, the number, and the education of all offspring. He hadn’t seen Aris, so it couldn’t be that they were considering joining their kingdoms via the three of them.
Ori looked around. Aris didn’t appear to be in the room. As he did a quick head count, he found that not only was Aris missing but so was Dain, Mavis IV, Aris, Elladan, Glorfindel, and… Dwalin.
At that moment, Jim came around the curtain and winked at Kili, who immediately leapt up and
was followed by Theodred, Stonehelm, Legolas, Gimli, Bain, and Tilda. Ori gulped. Was Dwalin involved with this play? Ori thought Dwalin would make an excellent prince…. Ori swallowed a shriek of mirth. Dwalin as a pig?

Jim came back out a few moment later. He was dressed in his Great Woudini robe but the hat and other accouterments were not there. He went to the center of the curtained area, cleared his throat to catch everyone's attention then bowed deeply.

"Your Majesties, Lords, Ladies, Bearers, Gentlemen and Children of all ages. We, the Court of Miracles, wish to entertain you this fine evening with a tale that is supposedly based on an event of a maiden who fell in love with a handsome but wicked prince and what happened to her. It is my very great pleasure to be your Narrator. So please bring your seats forward, let the little ones sit on the floor, and enjoy our dramatic reproduction of this charming tale of anguish, greed, sorrow, bravery, a stalwart heart, and the triumph of true love over all, with our presentation of The Tale of the Heartbroken Princess and the Brave Pig Herder."

All the sofas and chairs were pushed forward to where Jim directed them. Cushions were popped on the floor in front for the remaining younger set, the faunts, and animals. Ori watched, amused, as the guests and family had mixed themselves together. There was no awkwardness as dwarrow, elves and men all sat together in groups. Amused whisperings and chuckling about what this play might be about were all around. Ori overheard heard Hamfast tell Celeborn this was his and the wife’s first ever time at a the-ayter.

Mistress Dalza and her cohorts placed a screen before the fireplace and snuffed all the lights except for those near the curtains.

Ori had placed himself on a front couch next to Aragorn and held his pens and paper at the ready. There were lights lit behind the curtain and they slowly got brighter. There was a lovely trill of a pipe. Jim as The Narrator stood to one side with a very long scroll in his hand that rolled down to the floor. He cleared his throat again. Everyone clapped and he bowed then began.

"Once upon a time, a long, long time ago and in a land far, far away, there lived the most beautiful Princess ever known."

The curtains slid back to reveal Mavey dressed in a sky-blue satin gown with impressive décolletage, a flaxen wig and a tall conical hat with a ribbon floating down from the top. She strolled slowly across the stage area. She stopped and picked up a flower, sniffed it, and went on.

"She was very happy and her life was perfect," The Narrator told them.

Mavey heaved a huge sigh, smiled at them all and said with clasped hands and great feeling,

"My life is perfect."

Gheir and the Mavi applauded and cheered loudly. Mavey blushed and dropped a tiny curtsey. The curtains closed, there was a flurry of moving things.

"She was now of marriageable age and was sent to the court of the local ruler," The Narrator continued.

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The curtains slid back to reveal Mavey dressed in a sky-blue satin gown with impressive décolletage, a flaxen wig and a tall conical hat with a ribbon floating down from the top. She strolled slowly across the stage area. She stopped and picked up a flower, sniffed it, and went on.

"She was very happy and her life was perfect," The Narrator told them.

Mavey heaved a huge sigh, smiled at them all and said with clasped hands and great feeling,

"My life is perfect."

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"She was now of marriageable age and was sent to the court of the local ruler," The Narrator continued.
“The Princess fell completely in love with the Prince.”
Mavey clasped her hands to her décolletage, sighed gustily and fluttered her eyelashes at the Prince.
“Oh come on, love, you can do better!” shouted Theoden King, making Hild and several others shriek with laughter.
“But the Prince was wicked, and liked to toy with the affections of princesses,” The Narrator told them.
The Prince lofted his eyebrows and snickered evilly.
“Mean ol’ prince!” cried Frodo, quite swept away by the story. Many in the audience agreed and there were shouts of “Booo!” and much hissing.
“Moo-ha-ha-ha-ha!” taunted the Prince and twirled his mustache at them mockingly.
“The Prince held a fine ball.” The Narrator told them.
Golden pillars swagged with more red and gold velvet slid onto the stage and courtiers wandered on, all finely dressed. Ori recognized Glorfindel, Elladan, and Legolas by their height but the rest were completely obscured by fine clothing, piles of hair, hats, and beards.
“It was the ball where the Prince would announce his engagement,” The Narrator intoned.
The Prince stood on a step and beckoned the Princess forward.
“This is the ball where I announce my engagement,” said the Prince, loudly. All the courtiers clapped and cheered. The Prince showed the Princess to everyone. Then the Prince said,
“Moo-ha-ha-ha, dearest Princess, I am in love with you. Do you love me?”
“Oh yes, yes, yes!” cried the Princess.
“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’,” said the Prince.
“Don’t do it, Princess!” Sigrid cried, making Bilbo snort and calling up a chorus of warnings from the audience.
“Shut up, you lot!” snarled the Prince.
“No maligning the audience,” ordered The Narrator.
“They maligned me first,” the Prince snapped.
“Yours is the next line, wicked Prince.” The Narrator scolded.
“Oh, yes. Righty-o!” The Prince got back into character and leered at the princess. “I love you, too. And I’m going to ask you to marry me.”
The Prince winked very rudely at his courtiers, who all winked back.
“My life is perfect!” cried the Princess, hands clasped in ecstasy. “I can’t wait to be your beloved bride!”
The Prince winked around at his courtiers again and they all winked back.
The Prince smiled at the Princess.
“Well, you can’t, you little fool! For, nay, I love another!” shouted the Prince.
The Princess and the audience shrieked.
“Myself!” cried the Prince. “I’m prettier, and I’m a snappier dresser.”
“O, thou hast slain me!” she wailed, and with that she clutched her heart, staggered backward, lurched to the left, and gracefully swooned. “My heart is broken!!”
The Princess fell to the floor and began to sob wildly and very loudly.
“Boo-hoo-hoo-hoo!”
The Prince and his courtiers laughed rudely and pointed their fingers at her.
“Chock up another broken heart for me!” shouted the Prince.
“Boooooo!” yelled the audience.
“The poor Princess,” The Narrator said sadly.
“Poor me!” wailed the Princess from the floor.
“She did the only thing she could,” The Narrator sighed.
“What was that?” The Princess sat up and looked expectantly at The Narrator.
“She ran away.”
“Oh, that’s right.”
“Off you go,” said The Narrator.
He nodded to the Princess who hopped up and rushed off stage, the curtains closing as she did, there was a whisking about of props and the curtain opened again. The Princess ran back on stage, where the ball room had turned into large trees surrounded by several strange looking bushes made of wildly varying shades of green.
“The Princess ran far, far away and into a dark, dark forest.”
“What a dark forest,” the Princess observed as the lights plunged into darkness. “Not that dark!” The lights came up again, to a suitable dimness.
“Sorry,” said a voice offstage.
The Narrator continued, “And in the dark, dark forest there was a dark, dark path.”
“What a dark path in this dark forest,” noted the Princess. “I am in the depth of despair, so I shall follow it.”
“And at the end of the dark, dark path was a dark, dark tower,” The Narrator said as some trees politely moved aside to reveal a tower construct.
“The Princess decided to spend the rest of her life in the dark, dark tower, at the end of the dark, dark path in the middle of the dark, dark forest.”
The Princess turned to the audience and flung out her hand.
“I shall spend the rest of my life in that dark tower, weeping my heartbreak,” she vowed. “I hope the larder is full.”
She went to the tower and slipped behind it. A moment later she appeared in the large window at the top and pretended to weep and pouted her lower lip out.
“Her distress was so great, she cut off all her hair and threw it out of the tower’s one window.”
The Princess threw the hat out first and then the flaxen wig. Under it, she wore a scarf that matched her skin. She went back to weeping, this time in a large handkerchief.
“The briars that grew about the tower, heard her grief, and felt sorry for her.”
The cloth bushes shuffled closer to the tower. Ori gave a little gasp as he realized these were people in bush costumes. He scribbled hurriedly. This was better than any play or puppet show he’d ever seen in the Dale.
“The hair and brambles were watered by her tears,” The Narrator said, sorrowfully as the Princess wrung out her hankie like a sodden mop, “and grew into a huge bramble forest.”
Prop brambles were handed in from the wings, and the brambles held these up around the tower.
“Years pass,” said The Narrator. “Over time, many handsome young swains tried to find and rescue her from her tower but they all got caught in the briars and died.”
The Princess had disappeared from the window, but her voice was heard from off stage, singing,
“Aroma, Aroma,
Where is the aroma of the sweet briars?
They are beautiful!
They feed me by the fruitful!
If you rescue me, please dooooooo,
Tell me of love trueuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu.
The thorns will slay all liiiiiiars.”
And the brambles sing-songed,
“Liars, liars, liiiiiiiiaarrrrs!”
“The First Prince approached,” The Narrator announced, looking expectantly off-stage, for the prince to enter. Nothing happened.
Voices off stage were heard to bicker,
“I’m going to die the best!”
“No, I am!”
“No, me!”
The Narrator cleared his throat.
“Ahem! The First Prince approached. It says in the story ‘approached’, not ‘bickered’.”
“Hold off a mo’,” said a voice, sounding like Dain. “Me sword fell apart.”
Another voice - Aris - said, “Are you arguing with The Narrator?”
“I still say I’ll die the best,” said the first voice.
“Fine!” The Narrator growled. “We’ll bring in a special guest judge.”
“Special Guest Judge, please!” hollered The Narrator.
Thranduil abruptly stood up from the audience, a large sheaf a papers in his hands and sang:

```
Now, we shall see
who dies the beeeeeeeest!
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“I shall!” The First Prince cried. “I shall die the beeeeeeest!”

Tilda, as the First Prince, ran on hard at the ‘plants’, bounced off, coughed, choked, lost hold of his sword, put his clasped hands over his heart and dropped.

```
Not hard-leeeeee!
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Thranduil sang, scornfully and checking through the paper pile.

```
I could do better as a faun!
Yes, I could do better as a faun!
```

The dead prince sat up, arms crossed and stuck out his tongue, then dropped back again. People dressed in gray with a stretcher ran on to lift him and carry him off ‘in state’.
“Next!” Thranduil cued.
Elladan, the Second Prince, ran forward and slid onto his knees, singing,

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Ah me! Ah my!
This is the day
That I shall die!
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The day you die?” Thranduil scoffed.
“Let us seeeeeee!
```

The Second Prince leapt up and attacked the plants, which grabbed his sword and ran him through with it.

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Ack! Blech! Ouch!” the Second Prince cried, and fell on his face on the floor.
```

Thranduil gave a ridiculously exaggerated yawn.

```
I confess!
I’m unimpressed!
I see no way it’s you who dies the bessssst!
Next!
```

The Third Prince - Glorfindel - jumped forth with a gigantic axe.

Thranduil sang,

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No, but no!
you are disqualified.
```

“But why?” demanded the Third Prince.

```
You have already died professionally. Next!
```

The actors ran on to carry off the Third Prince and he threw his hands in the air

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Fine! I’m dead! I’ll go take a nap!
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He climbed on the stretcher and was borne away.

Hamfast said, “You know, I’ve really been missing somethin’ never goin’ t’ the the-ayter!”

Bilbo laughed.

```
I doubt this is what you’d find on the stage in Bree.”
Things tottered on in this vein for the next nine princes, one of whom - Kili - didn’t even get as far as the vines. He tripped upon entering and fell on his own sword. Two of the princes, approaching in tandem, accidentally ran each other through. The giggling corpses revealed themselves as Stonehelm and Theodred.

As they were carted off, Theoden called sternly from the audience,

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“We’re going to talk about this, Theo!”
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“Yes, Da!” the dead prince replied, quite cheerily as he was carried off.
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Finally, the Thirteenth Prince - Dwalin - arrived on the scene, looking like a metal hedgehog, with tall spikes all over his armor.

The brambles tried to grab him, but leaped back, stabbed by the spikes.

“Oi!” cried one of the brambles. “That’s cheatin’, that is!”

Ori sat up as he recognized Nori, dressed in green, made up green and with his hair standing on end in tendrils, slicked with a greenish gunk. He looked otherworldly, rather nasty, and was probably playing the role of a lifetime.

Bofur was going to have fun washing all that out of his hair.

“Nyah!” The Thirteenth Prince stuck out his tongue, and started to climb, the vines pulling him back down, only to have to release him at the bottom. “Taste o’ yer own medicine, yeh green numpties!”

Finally, Nori-the-plant stamped on the Thirteenth Prince’s foot.

The prince howled in pain, staggered across the stage one way, then another, clutching his own head, then his stomach, then fell to the floor on his back, warbling off-key,

“I’m dyin’!
Oh I’m dyin’!
Oh I’m dyyyyyyyyyyin’!”

He shook a leg and let it fall with a clunk.

He lay still for a long moment, and just when they though he was dead, one arm shot up and flailed.

“I’m dyyyyyyyyyyyyin’!”

Then the leg again
“I’m dyyyyyy- ack!”

And he lay absolutely still, except the hand over his heart twitched and red liquid gushed everywhere.

Ori realized it was a tomato.

The vines sang,

“We’re impressssssssssssed!”

Thranduil rifled through his papers in annoyance before finally singing:

“What a mess! You horrid pest!
I suppose it’s you who dies the beeeeeeeest”

And he threw his papers in the air to rain down on the audience.

Instead of an honor guard to arrive and carry him away, Aris entered, sighing in annoyance, and grabbed the Thirteenth Prince by the ankle, starting to drag him off.

“Oi!” cried the Thirteenth Prince, “where is everybody?”

“Down th’ pub,” Aris growled. “Jings, yer heavy! No more xocolatl puddin’ for yeh!”

“Aw, yer jus’ pullin’ me leg,” said the Thirteenth Prince.

“Tryin’ t, anyway.” Aris shot The Narrator a look. “Gives us a hand, laddie.”

“Oh, I suppose,” said The Narrator.

The two of them dragged the dead prince off-stage while he waved to the audience and the faunts all waved back shouting “Bye!”, and The Narrator returned to his duties, drinking out of a pint glass and holding a ham sandwich, which he perched on his own shoulder and picked up the scroll one more.

“Where were we? Ah, yes. So, this went on for many years, so much so that the neighbors complained because all those skeletons piling up on the lawn looked most untidy and the Princess never washed her front stoop. Finally, everyone decided the forest was haunted and moved away.”

A group of people carrying sacks walked across the stage and one stopped to put down a sign.

They went off stage and the sign read 'Haunted Forest! Beware! (it smells!)

“Then, one day, a Handsome Young Pig-herder happened by, driving his pigs to market.”

The Narrator peered down at the faunts.

“That’s your cue to call the pigs.”

They all began to call ‘Suuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu! SUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU!”
The Thirteen Princes had become the Thirteen Piggies, complete with ears, snouts and curly tails, and what looked like pink, padded long combinations and crawling on hands and knees. Ori peered at them all but didn’t see Dwalin. Where had Dwalin gone?

Three of these pigs, played by Legolas, Theodred, Elladan, and Glorfindel, looked like they had far outgrown their pink ‘skin’, which ended at their elbows and knees.

“Where did you four come from?” The Narrator asked them.

“Our Mam was an elk,” said the first large pig.

“And our Da was ambitious,” said the second.

The third oinked and oinked for all he was worth, finally hissing out at the audience, “Was that a good one?”

“That’ll do, pig,” said Thorin.

“Thanks! I’ve been practicing.”

“Yooohooo!” a high voice cried from the tower. The Princess was unseen, but a lace hanky the size of a table cloth was fluttered out the window to attract the Handsome Young Pig-herder.

“Don’t worry, Princess! We’ll save you!”

The pigs attacked the vines, gobbling and oinking and throwing bits of green cloth everywhere until most of the vines lay sprawled, vanquished. The Nori vine tried to sneak off the stage on tip toe, but the pigs seized him and piled atop, eating and eating, and when they stood, wiping their snouts with their hooves, Nori was gone. Ori had a feeling he was strolling through the stone under the stage on his way to the kitchen for a snack, still dressed as a plant.

Reaching the Princess proved quite a different problem to solve. The pigs lined up on hands and knees, shoulder to shoulder at the base of the tower, but they were wildly different sizes, and the pigs who tried to line up atop them toppled like skittle pins all over the stage.

Even when they managed to make a respectable triangle, the Handsome Young Pig-herder proved a less than proficient climber, though quite springy, tumbling over and bouncing to his feet again and again.

In his attempts, the Handsome Young Pig-herder stepped on thick skulls and at least one pig bit his ankle.

“Watch where yer goin’, lummox,” said the Gimli pig. “’R go where yer watchin’.”

The Narrator said, “Yes, get a move on, would you? We only have the room for another hour.”

“I’m tryin’!” shouted the Handsome Young Pig-herder.

Tharkûn called out, ponderously, “Do, or do not. There is no ‘try’.”

Finally the Handsome Young Pig-herder reached to top of the tower, grasped the end of the fluttering hankie and pulled - the Princess tripped gracelessly through the window in a storm of innumerable petticoats, each a different pattern, and a very large, frilly pair of boomers. Still connected to the herd by the handkerchief, she fell down the pigs and upset the pyramid, which collapsed in all directions. She rolled on the floor, sprang up and called, in perilous falsetto, “Here I am, dearie!”

It was Dwalin.

It was Dwalin wearing a hideous, tall white wig and one of Vi or Margr’s gowns. The bosom nearly reached the audience.

Thorin choked.

“Great, blessed Mahal,” he whispered.

“Ther’e is!” shouted Vi. “Yeh look lovely! That pink nightie a’ mine suits yeh!”

The audience howled. Ori sat stunned for a moment, then immediately scooted down to sit with the faunts, drawing pad and pen at the ready. It was rough going, sketching this, since once he started giggling, he honestly thought he would pee himself.

The Princess scowled at their laughter, jamming her fists to her well-padded hips.

“Don’t yeh laugh, dearies! None of yeh’l ever be half th’ woman I am! If yer lucky!”

There was a scream as Sculdis roll off her seat and lay on the floor laughing. Galadriel was wiping tears from her eyes and Elrond was holding his sides. Bard was curled forward choking and Sigrid uselessly tried to pat his back.
“My eyes, my eyes!” wailed Fili.
“We wouldn’t dare try, ma’am,” Aragorn called out.
The Handsome Young Pig-herder, still sprawled on his arse on the stage, looked aghast.
“You’re really, really old!” he blurted.
“Well!” The Princess delicately placed her huge hand on her huge bosom in a posture of scandal that would do Dori proud. “Did yer Mam raise yeh t’ be so rude, young man!”
Kib the Handsome Young Pig-herder, winced.
“Sorry…. miss… didn’t meant t’ say that out lou- I didn’t mean t’ say that! Er… nice day, ain’t it.”
“It’s hotter’n in a forge an’ I ain’t had a pint in fifty years. Gather up th’ piggies, an’ let’s find a nice, rowdy pub.”
“Oh, that sounds good, actually.”
“I’m in,” said the Glorfindel pig.
They and the vines all trooped from the stage, each green thing carrying away a piece of the tower and other scenery.
As they went out one side of the stage and, after a very brief pause, entered from the other, the vines now dressed as farmers and herders. They carried in scenery, which they set up in an instant town. The Handsome Young Pig-herder, the Princess, and Mavey-as-farmwife entered after them, Mavey and the Pig-herder arm in arm followed by all the pigs, now with a shiny medals on ribbons adorning their necks.
The Narrator concluded,
“The Handsome Young Pig-herder went home, where he told everyone in his village that the Princess was his long lost aunt. He married and had a family. The Princess….aunt wrote poetry about the brave pigs and they all lived quite happily ever after.”
The pigs and The Handsome Young Pig-herder, the Princess, and The Handsome Young Pig-herder’s wife linked arms and sang:

“Oink! Oink! Oink, brave pigs
Eating every vine!
Chew! Grunt! Chew! Grunt!
These piggies are sublime!”

Everyone on the stage turned to the audience and intoned solemnly:
“SuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!”
And bowed.
The curtain closed and the audience shrieked and clapped and gave ovations.
Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. People are starting to go home but that doesn’t make things any less busy for the Durins or Ori. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Quick shout out to #TheQueeninMourningHasASecret for correctly guessing the interaction between Frodo and Posey.

Ori was still giggling as he seated himself at the table in the breakfast parlor. He’d brought his sketches from last night through. Dwalin parked beside him and gave him a nudge, which set Ori off again. Dori looked reprovingly at Dwalin.

“I am deeply mortified.”

“Yer ’n inspiration, our Dori.”

“Hmph!” was all Dori was going to say on the subject.

Dwalin nudged Ori again and Ori nearly dropped his teacup.


“For what, Dori?”

The Bearer held up the Coronation Issue of Vug Magazine.

Ori took it, admittedly curious. The lead article covered the various fashions of the royals and their entourages, examined in minute detail, with sketches provided by the tailors’ guild or by Master Nodun herself. He turned the pages idly, reflecting that he had no idea there were so many kinds of lace. There was an extensive joint interview with Vi and Margr about their ‘new, whirlwind lives among the royals’, and their westron had never been so precise. Ori wondered if the magazine had hired a translator.

Then Ori turned the page and found… himself.

Young and Noble, Fundin House’s Fashion Forward Style Icon

Alright, perhaps he should have been expecting at least one picture in among the royals. The coronation costume of the king’s scribe was so rarely on display, people did deserve to see it.

He didn’t expect an entire article about himself, featuring a picture of each new outfit he had worn since his marriage and including the wedding clothes of the Fundins. Thank Mahal for small mercies.

He turned pages this way and that, amazed to find the pictures were all the work of a single, familiar hand, though no artist was credited.

These weren’t Dipfa’s or Nodun’s sketches. Dipfa sketched everyone stretched out to look like an elf. Nodun’s drawings were always finished and mechanically precise.

These were quite nice, actually, though it gave him a creepy feeling to think someone had studied him so closely.

On one hand, he had about a dozen notebooks full of pictures of Dwalin, all drawn before they had ever met - unless he counted the times he had to go bail Nori out of the lockup.

On the other hand, he’d been in love with Dwalin, and these didn’t look like the handiwork of a lover, though certainly by someone of great talent who was inclined to make Ori much better looking than he actually was.
Omi or Loli?
No, their work on lettering was quite fine, but they stuck with illuminating borders.
Buj wouldn’t be able to resist diagraming Ori and making tiny, precise notes over every inch.
He considered Master Brur for an instant before actually laughing out loud.
No, this had to be someone he had known at least that long, someone who knew his naked figure
and the drape of cloth…

“Dori, why did Pika draw me?”

“Because, whether you realize it or not, pet,” Dori told him, “you are a fashionable young public
figure who wears his clothes well. Also, under Thror, the guilds didn’t often mix with each other.
You talk to everyone and have made friends among the library, the clothiers’ and the scribes’ guilds.
Dwalin’s soldiers always speak well of you, as do all the miners, many of whom knew us in Steam
Alley. Besides, I think Pika has a bit of a puppy crush on you, though nothing to threaten his grand
passion for Omi.”

Ori looked at the pictures in despair. They had been hand-colored. He couldn’t imagine the effort
or the expense.
“I don’t suppose there’s time to go out and buy every copy they printed?” Ori asked.
“Balin seems to be on that mission. You’ll note that I am in there, too. Really, that dwarf will be
the death of me.”

“At least you’ll die happy,” Ori commented idly.
He sighed. This had all happened so fast. When he ran out of the house in Steam Alley all those
months ago in his ratty cardigan, it was not with the intention of becoming a fashion model.
“Yeh look grand, love, an’ our Dori’s righ’ yeh know.”

Ori briefly leaned his head on Dwalin’s shoulder before going back to flipping through the pages.
Dori’s picture in their coronation day robe was printed large over a single page, with text and an inset
image of the presentation gown on the facing one.
“You do look very glamorous, Dori,” he said.
“Mahrdin knows how to design for the lighting in that room,” Dori shrugged casually.
Thorin entered, talking, with Bilbo and Frodo glued to his sides. Dis followed with Randibur at
her heels, in well-cut, understated new clothes. Dis had commissioned them from Mahrdin, and
insisted on paying for them herself as a name day present.
Thorin peered, grinning at Ori.
“So, what’s it like to be a style icon?” Thorin teased.
“Like someone made my combinations ten times too small,” said Ori making Dwalin and Bilbo
laugh.
“Ask Dori,” said Thorn. “Someone as pretty as you has to get used to it.”
“I don’t wear combinations,” said Dori, affronted. “They do nothing for my figure.”
“I’d like to be known for my works as a scribe,” Ori mumbled, plaintively.
“I believe you’re justifiably famous for that already,” Bilbo told him, and thanked Dori for the cup
of tea.
Dori made Frodo a bowl of hot porridge and poured honey and cream on it, before placing it in
front of the faunt. Frodo lit up at the cream and honey and thanked Dori politely. Dori made
another and placed it in front of Randi, who thanked him profusely, then tucked his napkin under his
chin.
“I suppose,” Thorin looked playfully at Ori, “I shouldn’t tell you what Nori heard on the street this
morning.”
“What? What did you hear? Are you or Bilbo in danger?”
“Ori, calm down. No one is in any danger, except of dying of mortification. The badgers in Dale
have a new game of make believe. They pretend they’re us.”

Bilbo, Dori and Dwalin chuckled.
“Oh, do tell, my dear,” Bilbo encouraged.
“Us as in you and Dwalin and Dis?” Ori asked Thorin.
“Us as in the entire family, including someone who has to play Chopper when someone else plays
Dain."
"Thankless job, being a pig," Dori mused.
Ori raised an eyebrow.

All right, he could imagine someone wanting to pretend to be Thorin, the dashing king, or Dwalin, the mighty warrior, or Dis, powerful, gracious, yet terrifying, an ideal to which young dams aspired.
But, a scribe? Did they even know what that was?
"What does the poor badger have to do who gets stuck playing me?" Ori asked.

Thorin leaned over from his seat with a wicked smile.
"Don’t you realize that you are my wizard?"
"I think that escaped me. Has this happened since sunrise?"
"From what Nori understands, I cast spells to ‘fix things’, but the spells don’t have any power until you dip your pen in your magic, glowing blood and write them down."

Ori gaped at him.
"What’s in the well water in that part of town?"
‘I admit, I was rather flummoxed when Nori told me. Then I started to think about it. There were badgers in Vors’ zinc mine, and it was so dark, even you needed to keep your waist desk open to see where you were going."

"The phosphorescent panels," Ori realized. "Every time I opened my desk, they glowed."
"And you dipped your pen in the inkwell, which was in the desk."
"Great Mahal! My bellybutton has become a magic, glowing inkpot!"
"Shocking, isn’t it?" Thorin asked, though it was obvious he was far more gleeful than shocked.
"I can’t believe this," Ori groaned and gave the magazine to Bilbo, who had his hand out for it.
"You’ll cope fine, wee brother," Balin assured him, walking in with a stack of Vugs. He placed them on the table for all to grab as they wished.

Ori groaned again and reached for whatever Dori was passing to him.
Bilbo was already deep in Vug and snickering.
"What’s on today?" Ori asked, digging into his plateful of eggs, bacon, and fried tomatoes.
"Binni and the sons of Groin have a special request," Thorin told them. "Buj has asked them if they would consider adopting him officially. He, Binni, and Oin have quite fallen in family love with each other. Oin and Binni are delighted to the point of tears with the honor, as they called it."
"That’s wonderful!" Ori managed, mouth full.
"How lovely!" Dori sighed. "Dear little Buj desperately needs a family to love him like he ought to be loved."
"Indeed," Thorin agreed. "I have told them to come and see me at any time convenient."

Beorn walked into the room.
"There you are, dear Beorn!" Dori cried, leaping up and embracing the skin-changer around the waist. "I haven’t seen you since the coronation. Tharkûn said you were busy and you missed two dinner parties, you naughty thing!"

Beorn roared with laughter and swung Dori high then settled them at his shoulder.
"Little Bearer. I’m not much for all the silly charades of the various peoples of Arda. I have been exploring the heights of your mountain."

Thorin looked up.
"Inside or out?"
"Outside." Beorn nodded to him. "I admit, it is something I had always wanted to do, but I was too busy with my own lands. This mountain is excellent and very strange."
"Strange?" repeated Dori, who was wiggling about. Beorn put them down and Dori handed the bear man a tankard of milk.
"Yes," Beorn commented after a good swig. "It grows many different plants which should not grow here, and the earth is scented with many minerals which should not form together. I also smell lava."
"Yes," Thorin gestured for Beorn to seat himself. "That is the primary reason we are here and why this is the seat of the high kings of dwarrow."
“Your people thought it would be a good idea to live in a volcano?” Beorn’s eyebrow lifted, but he looked amused. “You do like to live dangerously.”
Thorin laughed.
“Well, we are dwarrow and lava is in our blood, so it’s said. But, honestly, we’ve always known how the lava works and when to allow it to pour forth from the mountain. You have, no doubt, seen the eastern side where there are many old flows.”
“I did. I like the way you seem to have controlled the flow. I do not normally approve of such meddling with the works of the earth, but yours appear to be in perfect tandem.”
“And the warmth of those old flows does encourage the growth of some strange plants rarely seen up in this climate.” Thorin went on.
“Really?” Bilbo asked, suddenly very interested. “I must go and look.”
“I shall take you tomorrow,” Thorin promised.
“Thank you,” Bilbo smiled and Frodo bounced in his chair.
“Beorn,” Thorin looked back at his large guest, “despite our strange ways, I hope you have enjoyed your time with us.”
Beorn grinned.
“I have. I had thought dwarrow odd, greedy folk, but you, King Thorin, have changed my mind. You are good to your people and care for their prosperity. Your only wish is for their happiness. I like you.” “Thank you, Beorn,” Thorin inclined his head at this tribute. “I hope we shall, one day, go beyond formality and simply call one another friend. I have already instructed any of my folk traveling the roads to respect your boundaries, unless you choose otherwise.”
Beorn chuckled.
“That, I appreciate. Though sometimes I do like guests, to hear their tales of the world outside my home.” Beorn rose and stretched, his hands patted the ceiling.
“Good, solid stone. I must take my leave of you.”
“So soon?” Dori lamented. “May we not convince you to stay and see more of our city?”
“No, Bearer,” Beorn smiled and leaned over to return the Bearer’s embrace. “I have been too long already from my lands.”
“May we convince you to accept any leaving taking gifts?” Thorin asked. Dis added, “Would you like a raphcactus bird of your every own?”
“Dis!” scolded Dori. Dwalin and Balin ruined the moment by falling into chuckles. Ori tried hard not to giggle as Dori swept him a passing glare.
Beorn side-eyed Dis, who looked blandly back.
“No, princess. I care for all living things like ravens and my own animals but those birds are…” Beorn considered, then, “those birds are too weird to live with my creatures. I thank you, no.” He shook himself and nodded round to them all.
“Farewell, Durins. If you ever travel my way, you are welcome to bed and board.”
Thorin rose and offered his hand, which was immediately engulfed in the skin-changer’s.
“And you are always welcome here among us, Beorn.”
The man shivered away and the bear bobbed its head and went back out. Roäc and a few of his flock flew down as escort.
“I’ve finished, Uncle Bilbo,” said Frodo. “May I please get down?”
“You’ve finished your milk?”
“Yes.”
Thorin asked, “And what are your plans for the morning, akunith?”
“I can see Posey jumping up and down in the meadow,” said Frodo. “Go on then,” said Bilbo, pushing Frodo’s chair back. The faunt hopped down and ran off into the meadow, squealing.
“And mind you’re neat and tidy when I call you for second breakfast,” Bilbo called after. “The Gamgees will be coming to table.”
“I will!”
Dori sat down with a plump on his chair and looked ready to pout.
“I hate leave-takings.” Dori flicked a shining nail against the handle of their tea cup.
“Never mind, me beloved,” Balin said comfortingly. “Besides, as much as I’ve enjoyed ‘r time wi’ our visitors, it’ll be lovely just t’ have th’ family again.”
“Yes.” Dori smiled immediately “At home with the family, nice and cozy.”
“Dori, you sound like a hobbit,” Bilbo teased
“Well, you do have several sensible ideas,” Dori approved. “I suppose we shall just enjoy our guests while we have them.”

A moment later, Elrond, Lindir, and the twins entered. Immediately, Dori invited them to have breakfast.

Thorin pulled out a chair beside him for Elrond to seat himself.
“I regret, Thorin,” Elrond began and took the cup of tea Dori gave him, “that we must be leaving you today.”

Dori made a moue of discontent. The Lord of Rivendell smiled.
“Indeed, Bearer. We would like to have stayed some time longer but duty calls us home.”
“Of course,” said Thorin. “We hope you have enjoyed yourselves.”

The twins burst out laughing and the elf lord and his steward smirked at each other.
“Well,” Elrond’s eyes twinkled merrily, “my wife Linda and I have been most amused.”
“And where is Lord Glorfindel this morning?” asked Dori archly.

“With Margr and Vi, where else?” said Elladan. He and Elrohir exchanged mischievous looks.
Lindir smiled into his teacup.
“You won’t be missing him, will you.”
“He’s a little hard t’ miss,” Dwalin put in. “Big target.”
“No, I mean, you’ll be seeing him again very soon,” said Lindir. “He’s escorting us back to Rivendell to tidy up a few details and he’ll be returning within the month. To Dale, not to worry. You won’t have him at your table every night.”

Bilbo said, “Better to ask: Doing who?”
Elrohir and Elladan groaned.
“Aw, Professor Baggins,” said one.
“You stole our joke,” added the other.

“Which,” said Elrond, “is not as much of a joke as it could be. You should be hearing from King Bard shortly. Since Glorfindel will be in town anyway, he’s volunteered to help keep the peace in Dale, or at least in Steam Alley.”

“Keepin’ th’ peace ‘r disturbin’ it?” Dwalin asked with a grin.
Thorin frowned.
“Does Bard seem pleased with his presence, or does he feel he needs to accept the help because of who Glorfindel is?” He shook his head. “Sometimes I fear I push my influence on Bard too much myself.”

Dori sniffed.
“Don’t trouble yourself too much over our Bard, Thorin. I know he’s happy for your help, and he’s a grown man, he’ll tell you if you’ve overstepped. Of course, overstepping seems to be Glorfindel’s hobby.”

Bilbo said, “But he has every reason to take his role as protector seriously. He has family there now. Oh, I say, Ori, that velvet outfit does look dashing.”

“I like it,” said Dwalin, putting an arm around Ori. He leaned in close and whispered, “Bu’ I like wha’s underneath better.”

Ori turned his face into Dwalin’s beard, resting for a moment, hoping to get his equilibrium back before he burst into flame.

Mistress Dazla came through.

“Your highness, the kings are ready.”

Dis put down her cup with a look of absolute avarice on her face. She rose, shook out her skirts and composed herself. Randi swallowed the last of his porridge, wiped his mouth, caught Ori’s eye
and pointed to his beard.

“All clear,” said Ori

“Thanks, Ori-mate,” said Randi.

“Don’t eat them, namad,” Thorin teased.

“Nadad, you’re no fun a’tall.” Dis sassed and swished out, Randi in hot pursuit.

“Are they going to be in the receiving room?” Ori asked. “Should I be there?”

Thorin snickered.

“You could, but it would spoil all Master Jansad’s fun. They’ll all be closeted upstairs in some rather fine meeting rooms.”

“I wouldn’t dream of that.” Ori replied and leaned back against Dwalin’s arm.

At loose ends, Ori gathered his notes and took them out to the patio. Fanny had reclaimed her spot, lying down on the very edge of the grass, as if she waited for him. Binni and Oin had claimed two of the lounges nearby, Binni having thrown off his boots and rucked up his robe and tunic to above his knees, wriggling his toes in the warmth of the sun. Oin lay with his healer’s hood over his face, his barrel chest rising and falling in even, peaceful motions.

"Hullo," Ori greeted him.

"Hello." Binni looked up from Vug Magazine with a smile.

Fanny gave a little cry of delight and her trunk sniffled Ori’s head and shoulders the moment he got into range.

Ori giggled and plunked down beside her.

"Meetings all done for the moment?” Binni teased.

Ori rolled his eyes.

“For the moment. I was going to just look through my notes. Why do dwarrow always talk all at once?”

"Because each of them knows no one could have anything as important to say as they do. Would you like some tea?”

"That sounds wonderful!” Ori took the glass Binni handed him and looked at the contents.

"What's this?”

"Just an experiment of sorts. It's iced, and extremely refreshing.”

"Oh, in that case, hold on.”

Ori ran to the kitchen came back outside with a large pan of fruit for Fanny and a tin of biscuits for Binni and himself.

"Ooo, what are these?” Binni asked, exchanging the glass for the tin. He lifted the lid. "Xocolatl crinkles!”

"It's my private stash," said Ori. "Dori always puts aside a tin just for me and a tin just for Nori, though my tin is bigger, of course.”

"Of course! Dori's pre-cious badg-er!” Binni sing-songed.

"Without a doubt.” Ori sipped his tea. Mmm, that was good. He nabbed a few of the blackberries Fanny hadn’t sucked up and put them in his mouth, chewed and took a swig of tea. That was even better.

“Thank you, actually, I’m making a list.”

Ori looked all around. "It's so quiet!”

"Now, you hush if you want it to stay that way," Binni warned, giggling.

"It's just so strange. It feels like we've been entertaining guests for the coronation for months!”

"In a way, we have been. All that ball fringe! I'm seeing it in my sleep. It all turned out gloriously, though, the usual Durin insanity and all.”

Ori looked to see Binni had folded the magazine to show Dori's coronation robes. In graphite wand, he was making notes in the margin and there were arrows and sketches of patterns.

"What's this? I didn't know you designed clothes as your craft.”

"It's a bit of a sideline. I'm certainly not in Dipfa's class, but Dori looks gorgeous in practically
anything."
    Binni beamed at him.
    "You're proud of Dori, aren't you," said Ori.

    "They're certainly everything a Bearer should be. They picked everything up so quickly, so
easily. The confidence of coming to it as a grown dwarf, I suppose, along with tons of natural
talent. For myself, I find I'm much better as a Bearer-Sib than I was as an actual Bearer."

    "What's a Bearer-Sib?"
    "When there were more of us, young Bearers learned tradition and display from older Bearers,
called Bearer-Sibs. There was once a great deal expected of us at court, seeing to the needs of the
king's guests, entertaining at banquets, keeping the feuds among the concubines from spilling out into
public. Among men, the queen does all that, but long ago, dwarrowdam queens were always
warriors first."

    "I never realized there was so much to it," said Ori.
    Binni looked wistful.

    "A great deal has fallen by the way. There are so few of us anyway, and, of course, the center of
our culture was lost with Khazad-dûm. I still remember how beautiful it was, the sweep of the silk
dancing robes, the pearl and opal floor inlays in the entertainment chambers."  Binni considered a
xocolatl crinkle with an expert eye.

    "You know," said Ori gently, "we don't have to talk about Khazad-dûm if it upsets you."

    "You're a dear," Binni sighed. "But I don't mind talking about it now. The fall of the
Dwarrowdelf was all a very long time ago, and, truthfully, my life in Erebor has been very, very
happy."

    "I get the feeling, as beautiful as it was, that life in Khazad-dûm was…"
    "Less than blissful?" Binni gave a laugh that had nothing to do with humor. "As hard as Dori's
life has been, they were fortunate they didn't present as a Bearer until after they'd been reunited with
their One. I come from a line of Bearers going back to the founding of Khazad-dûm. I was getting
marriage proposals before I was even born."

    "Was there a lot of pressure on your parents to marry you off young?" Ori asked.

    "Yes, luckily they were quite honorable people and wouldn't sell their dwarfling no matter the
price. Beyond that, well, growing up I certainly did take to the Bearer culture eagerly. Who
wouldn't want to wear beautiful clothes and move with exquisite grace and slit someone's throat in
perfect silence?"
    Ori stared at him.
    "Really? Assassination?"

    "Well, we were still dwarrow, and a knife is a lot easier to hide in your bodice than an axe."
    "Point taken."

    "Thank you. Yes, it did have its advantages. There was only one problem. I didn't want to have
dwarflings of my own."

    "Oh, that would put a crimer in things," said Ori.
    "Rather. But the choice was taken out of my hands. When I fled Khazad-dûm with my parents, I
took a wound to the belly. Not deep enough to spill my innards, but the blade was filthy and there
was no one to treat the wound. By the time we arrived at Erebor, I was delirious with fever. The
only way to save my life was to remove my inner-forge."
    Ori blinked.
    "Healers can do that? Really?"
    Oin snorted from under his hood and pulled it aside.

    "They can an' do. Up until then, however, th' rate a' fatalities from th' surgery alone was ninety
percent, an' th' rest died from infection tha' set in afterward. Surgery was quite primitive, an'
traditional wisdom said it didn' matter if th' healer's hands were filthy. As dwarrow, if we were so
weak as t' fall down dead from thin's tha' killed men, well, mebbe it was best we died, rather than
pass on weak blood t' th' next generation."

    "That sounds … extreme," said Ori. "I'm beginning to see why there are so few of us."
Binni said, "Fortunately for me, I was treated by a healer with radical notions about things like cleanliness. Her name was Tiris, and she was part of a rebellious little cabal of journeymen healers who were long overdue for mastery, but were constantly being denied because their methods ran afoul of the orthodoxy of their guild."

"Aye," said Oin. "We couldn't so much as change a bandage without our master t' supervise. When dwarrow started pourin' in from Khazad-dûm, there weren't enough master healers t' go around. Th' guild chairs went on insistin' they alone should do th' cuttin' an' splicin'. Old Thror really tossed his scree tha' day. I kin still hear him: 'A' course yer journeymen are goin' t' operate, yeh dumb fucks! We're arse-deep in wounded an' they're bleedin' all over th' rugs!""

Binni blinked at Ori. "Can you tell that's his favorite story? Tiris saved my life and we became good friends. Then one day she introduced me to Oin. He was my heartsong right enough, but I dreaded telling him who I was, or had been at any rate."

Ori turned to Oin. "What did you say when Binni told you?"

"Aw, now tha's Binni's favorite story."

Binni made a face at Oin. "When I said I was a Bearer he got this 'standing in the path of an oncoming mine cart' look, then he sighed and asked, 'Well, how many badgers d'yeh want, then?' and I said, 'None, and it doesn't matter anyway since I can't pop any out.' And he sort of deflated in relief. It was horribly comical."

"It would have been more awkward if he'd been your healer, I suppose," said Ori.

"Mm, yes. Not very romantic to walk out with someone whose entrails you'd recently stuffed back into their belly."

"Now, there's an image," said Ori.

Binni laughed at him.

"So," said Ori, "your parents survived as well?"

"Yes, and lived to ripe old age. My father was quite deaf at the end of his life. He and Oin would chat and I'd get whiplash trying to follow the conversations. I say conversations because there always ended up being twelve or so at once. Oops, now we're back to dwarrow talking over one another again aren't we."

"That's all right. Have another biscuit."

Oin sat up with amazing spryness.

"There's biscuits?"

Ori was deep in his thoughts when Dwalin’s hand slid onto his shoulder and was followed by a whiskery kiss on each side of Ori’s neck. Ori sighed with pleasure and turned to look up at him. "Yeh wantin’ lunch?" Dwalin asked with a grin.

Ori opened his mouth to answer but his stomach rumbled a reply for him, echoing Fanny’s snore. Hand in hand, they went in and through to the receiving room. Ori saw that it was once more set up as a buffet. There were piles of food of all kinds. There was nothing too fancy, just comfort food for each race. Jim and his entourage were present as well. As he ate, Ori observed everyone. There was no longer any stiffness between the races. Everyone was chatting and laughing. Mavis I had one arm about Mavey the other about Floris and was talking to them seriously. Both young dams were nodding enthusiastically. Jim and Ruelis were chatting with Gheir and the other three Mavi, making them all laugh.

Aewandínen was busy with Hild and Galadriel and Sigrid. Hild had let the elf prince examine one of her braids and Aewandínen was taking full advantage of studying the components of the braid and the texture of her hair.

Hamfast, Snur, Celeborn and Elrond were deep in discussion again.

Thranduil was doing an elf circle dance with Tilda, Boromir, Frodo, and the Gamgee faunts.

Aragorn, Arwen, Scudis and Dain went around the buffet table for the third time.

Thorin and Bilbo moved among their guests with smiles and conversation. Ori loved seeing Thorin like this. He was regal as always and looked his usual majestic self, but he was surrounded
by an aura of happiness.

Lunch closed and Gheir sighed, then cleared his throat.

“Forgive me, my king, but we must take our leave of all of you.”

“You know, Gheir,” Dis said, with an arm about Mavis IV in an assuring hug as there was were several disappointed noises from around the room. “You don’t have to rush home right now,” Dis went on. “You are welcome to stay another night, that way you can all leave at first light.”

“Thank you, Dis,” stated Gheir, nodding around at those who had wished the Stiffbeards to stay longer, “but I’m anxious to get back to my daughter. I’ve had a raven that all is well, but I do worry about her.”

“She’s a strong lass,” Mavis II said in an encouraging tone. “She’ll bear this one same as she bore the others, but, aye, I miss her, too.”

Gheir looked glum.

“I miss all the badgers,” he went on dolefully. “They grow and change so quickly. I remember how surprised I was to find that each had their own little personality. Before I had my own pebbles, I assumed all badgers were pretty much the same.”

Dis looked at Fili, then Kili.

“But, there are often frightening similarities,” she commented, eliciting chuckles form Gridr, Bell, Aris, and Elrond.

The Stiffbeards made ready to go, bidding all other guests farewell. They stepped out to their wagons, which had been repacked and stood ready for the southward journey. Mokrah brought a pony out, pulling a cart. In the cart sat two largish wooden crates.

“What’s this?” Gheir asked.

Thorin grinned.

“This bigger one is a box of toys and games for your badgers,” Thorin’s tone was of great solemnity.

“And the smaller?”

“A box of toys and games for you and your wives,” said Bilbo slyly. “Don’t mix them up.”

Gheir chuckled.

“I won’t. I promise. Permission to take leave, your majesty?”

“Only if you promise to come visit soon,” said Thorin. “I shall.” He bowed and the Mavi followed suit.

When he straightened again, Thorin embraced him.

“You are always welcome to Erebor,” said Thorin. “Just try to keep the bloodshed to a minimum.”

Everyone came out to the courtyard and waved as the Stiffbeard entourage moved slowly out of the royal cavern.

Thorin and the rest of the Ereboran royalty went out onto the platform to wave the Stiffbeards on their way. Ori noticed that, not only had a great number of the mountain’s population followed the Stiffbeards out, but their shouts of farewell and general cheering had caught the notice of nearby people of Dale.

Thus there was quite a crowd through Dale to wave and cheer the Stiffbeards off. Ori wondered idly what Gheir and the Mavi made of being cheered and wished good journey by a city of men. Bells in the city were rung and the parade was seen on its way.

The royals and the remaining guests returned to find that the wagons for the Court of Miracles were now gathered in the courtyard. Ori sighed. He had enjoyed the travelers’ company very much and they had certainly added a great deal to the coronation and all the parties. He felt sorry that they had to go, and worse that Fanny would be leaving as well, but he fully realized that, as much as he loved Fanny, she would be much happier traveling with the Court of Miracles. She would be loved and cared for, and would see many lands and other wonderful things. Dis had told him that oliphaunts didn’t forget people and the Court would be back to visit and he would see Fanny again.

Thorin signaled to a team of Mistress Dazla’s minions and they steered three more large wagons hitched up to be drawn by four ponies each.
Jim looked these over and grinned at Ruelis, before turning to Thorin.

“Dare we asked, your majesty?”

Thorin laughed and looked around at all the members of the troupe.

“My dear friends, you have done so much to make this coronation one of great joy and, no doubt, of legend. You have our thanks and a permanent open invitation to come and stay with us as long as you wish. Should any of you ever tire of your travels, there will always be a place in Erebor for you to live out your days.

“Since you provided us with such magnificent amusement, we have decided to return your kindness in our own poor way by gifting you with a few …er.. props and costume possibilities.”

The troupe went to the wagons and the cover was lifted from the first.

“Where did all this come from?” Ruelis asked and pulled out something sparkly and rather sheer.

“Those are all the clothes from the old concubines’ quarters,” Dori explained. “Also, when Frerin and his court left, they abandoned other such clothing and furniture, so we’ve popped it all in. You’re so good at making your props, we thought you would make the best use of all this.”

Jim drew out a blue velvet suit, which Ori recognized as Frerin’s best.

“The holes are rather different,” Jim commented.

“Frerin annoyed the ravens when he last wore that,” said Dis.

Her comment was loud enough for all to hear and giggles rippled through crowd.

The troupe just had to peek at a few of the things packed in the wagons and flew into gales of laughter over what was in them.

Ori glanced about and noticed that Granny Klak was standing with Kib and she had her hands on her hips.

“So, will I be seeing you again?”

“Oh, of course, my darling, I will always return to your blessed arms.”

“You honey-tongued bastard!”

“You’ve met my parents then?” The man laughed.

“Don’t change the subject. I’m making sure you’ll come back. You’re a lovely roll in the sheets, you naughty young man, you.”

Kib laughed again, dropped to his knees and wrapped Granny Klack into his arms.

“And you are a deliciously evil dwarrowdam with hips like a vice. I’ll always be back for you.”

“Fine.” Granny snapped, obviously elated by this description of her charms. “Be off with you then. The sooner you go, then sooner you’ll be back.”

She attempted to pull away but Kib hugged her tighter and rolled them down to the stone, kissing her noisily. Granny squawked and tried not very hard to beat him off. She was giggling so much, it wasn’t much of an effort. Ori felt himself blush at this display by his great grandmother. There was no doubt in his mind whatsoever that this was definitely Dori’s bloodline.

Of course, her noise made everyone turn and look at them.

“Kib!” yelled Ruelis. “Get off the ground!”

“Granny!” shrieked Dori. “Is that horrid young man trying to divest you of your virtue?”

“What virtue?” Granny squalled with delight. Kib was trying to get a hand up her many voluminous skirts.

“Yeh go, girly! There’s a lass!” shouted Vi.

“Aye, our Klaky!” concurred Margr at volume. “Ge’ ‘em when they’re hot, I always say!”

“Good technique,” Glorfindel murmured admiringly.

“Granny!” cried Dori and rushed over to beat at Kib with an ancient concubine’s brassiere.

“Bad, bad, wicked man! Stop debauching my innocent great grandmother this instant!” Pink feathers of great age broke off and puffed about the rolling pair as Dori attempted a rescue.

“Jus’ sit on ‘im, our Dor!” yelled Nori without much interest.

“Don’t help,” Bofur chided.

Dori sat on the lovers, making Granny employ some rather interesting language and Kib moan for help.

Jim went over and hauled Kib up. Kib staggered a little, bent double.
“Ruelis, my darling,” Jim sang out. “Be a love an’ bring our Kib a cloak. He’s gone and made himself unpresentable again.”
Ruelis rolled her eyes.
“Oh, just pick him up and throw him in a wagon.”
“Yes, dear.”
Dori helped Granny Klak to her feet, the old dwarrowdam giggling foolishly. Dori applied a vinaigrette to her nose, making her swear.
Thorin cleared his throat and Jim and Ruelis came back to him, grinning.
“We thank you very much, you majesty,” Ruelis said sweetly.
“And,” said Thorin, “this,” he indicated a rather large chest Dwalin and Bifur placed into the front wagon, “is for Ori’s own little Fanny’s upkeep and a small something for your work here.”
Jim cocked his head. Ruelis peeped in. Ori saw the gleam of gold.
Jim and Ruelis looked a bit taken aback by the amount and both bowed soberly.
Thorin raised them and embraced both.
“Thank you all again. Return whenever you wish.”
The troupe was embraced by everyone and invited to every kingdom in Arda represented.
Kib, now recovered, came through from the stable, bringing Fanny. Ori hurried over and embraced her knee. Fanny’s trunk wound around his waist and they held each other. Ori looked up. He knew he had tears in his eyes and he knew he was silly but he didn’t care.
“Don’t worry, Fanny. I’ll be here when you come back and you can tell me all your wonderful adventures!” he promised. Fanny made her loving hoo-hoo noise.
“Want to ride her down?” Ruelis asked.
“May I?” Ori gasped.
Ruelis giggled and Jim came over.
“Ready to ride, Fanny,” Jim chirped and patted the trunk about Ori.
Ori felt the trunk tighten and he was gently lifted up. Fanny easily placed him, straddling her neck. Ori leaned over and hugged her head, then sat up. Dwalin was looking up at him and at Fanny, arms folded.
“No runnin’ off wi’ him, now,” he told Fanny. “We’re each other’s One.”
Ori giggled and whispered to Fanny.
“You!” Dwalin yelped as the trunk snaked around him, he was lifted easily and settled behind Ori.
The faunts cheered. The Court boarded their wagons. The younger set shouted and called to Fior, Floris, and Mavey, who sat on the roof of the first wagon with a madly barking Biscuit held between them. Chopper squealed a farewell as Biscuit gave a last howl. Thorin yelled that whichever scribe was present had better be drawing this. Dwalin flipped off his king as Fanny happily followed the wagons out of the royal cavern.
“Yeh told her t’ grab me didn’t yeh?” Dwalin hissed into Ori’s neck, then kissed it.
“You wouldn’t have missed this for the world, admit it,” Ori giggled and leaned against Dwalin. He felt his husband chuckle.
“Aye, love. Wave t’ th’ library folk, now.”
Ori waved to his fellow scribes, making whomever was outside shout and wave back. This continued as the Court of Miracles entourage made its way slowly through the mountain to the main gate. There were a few acts on the wagon roofs while others in the troupe played music and people came out to shout and cheer. Fanny waved her head about and stepped in time with the tune. Ori felt terribly proud of her.
They finally came out into the courtyard and Fanny lifted down Ori, then Dwalin. Ori embraced her again and she held him tight with her trunk. She hugged Dwalin, too, and made several snuffling noises to him. Dwalin chuckled.
“No, t’ worry, lass. I’ll take good care a’ him.”
The Court of Miracles moved off south to the festivals only delayed by a week. Ori and Dwalin waved along with everyone who had followed them out. Ori looked up and saw the platform was full of royals waving and calling farewells.
Ori sighed and found his face was wet with tears. Dwalin put an arm about him and turned to look at the stair to the platform, which the Rivendell elves were descending.

Their horses galloped over from their grazing down near the river, and trotted about the courtyard, whinnying and greeting their riders. Many of the other royals followed, and several of Mistress Dazla’s team brought their luggage.

The elves of Imadris were helped to saddle up their horses by the dwarrow, which the elves seemed to find both fascinating and charming.

Ori wiped his eyes just as Elrond came and laid a long hand on his shoulder.

“Farewell, Ori of Fundin. I do not have Lady Galadriel’s prescience, but I know you will have many things come before you that will require all your skills. If, at any time, you wish my council, please do not hesitate to contact me.”

“Um, thank you…I think…” Ori said warily. The elf lord smiled.

“I did not say such to cause you worry. If nothing else, perhaps you can influence Miss Dipfa to some gentler colors. Thus we shall not all be horrified this coming spring when we join you for the royal holidays at the Inn.”

Ori twinkled at Elrond. “I can try, my lord, but you must remember. Dipfa is a genius.”

“Good try,” Lindir murmured beside Ori, making Dwalin snicker. Elrond shrugged.

“Laugh while you can, my dear, just don’t blame me if she outfits you in pink lace.” Elrond turned. As he moved away, Dwalin nudged Lindir and hissed.

“If she does, lad, just switch the parcels.”

Lindir’s eyes lit up and he stifled a giggle.

Ori looked about to see that all the horses were ready, but Vi and Margr and Glorfindel snogged conspicuously off to the side, finally forced to unlock lips when Elrond and the rest of the party took the horses’ reins, beginning to mount up.

Glorfindel’s great white horse came forward, the bells on its headstall jingling, and nuzzled the tall elf.

“Here yeh are, love,” Vi cried, shoving something at the elf. “Some snacks f’r th’ road.”

Something was a hamper about the size of a pony.

“Thank you, my dears!” Glorfindel boomed.

“And carrots for th’ horsey,” said Margr. “Oh, now pull in tha’ lip. I’m sure Arsefellow won’t mind if yeh take one ‘r two f’r yerself.”

He embraced each of them again, the sisters rather teary eyed.

“I’ll be back before the trees turn, this I vow,” said Glorfindel. “And when I return, I’ll bring some quite excellent wine.”

Lindir muttered, “Oh, will you now.”

Glorfindel swung onto his horse, the snacks secured to the saddle behind him, as Margr and Vi started waving handkerchiefs in farewell, even though no one had gone anywhere yet.

Fili and Kili stood, talking quietly with the twins. Kili offered a long, flat box, and Elladan took it, opened it, and shouted with delight.

“How did you get these?” Elrohir asked.

“They shed them constantly,” said Kili. “They were happy to let me take them when I told them what I was planning to do.”

Elrohir lifted a long, perfect raven feather from the box.

“These will make excellent arrow fletchings! Thank you!”

The box was closed again, and the young nobles bowed to one another, then laughed and embraced.

Thorin and Bilbo bowed to Elrond and Bilbo proffered a package, carefully wrapped in paper for the journey.

“What is this?” Elrond asked.

“It’s a translation of the ‘Infernal Adventures of Durin the Deathless’,” said Thorin.

“It’s soon to be quite famous across Middle Earth,” Bilbo announced grandly. “Now, you can say you had it first.”
Elrond was stunned, then he smiled broadly.
"Thank you! I shall treasure this, especially since I can now read it. Thank you for having it translated for me, Thorin."

Thorin snickered.
"Well, that's not quite how it happened. Bilbo translated it in Imladris. He taught himself khuzdul to do it, too."

Elrond was obviously mortified.
"Thorin! I can only offer my sincerest apologies! I should have realized what would happen if I left it in the general library."

Bilbo snorted.
"You could have predicted a nosy hobbit would come along and ruthlessly translate it? I don't think so, Elrond."

"There is no harm done," said Thorin. "In fact, it is an excellent translation and I'm very proud to offer it to you."

"You're still sleeping on the floor for a week for telling," Bilbo hissed at Thorin.
"I'd best get used to it," said Thorin philosophically. "I'm going to be sleeping there a lot."

As the rest of Elrond party mounted their horses, Aris ran down the steps.
"Oi! Master Lindir! Hold up!"

Lindir turned, taking his foot out of the stirrup, and stood, smiling.
"General Aris! Have you come to see us off?"
"Go' somethin' f'r yeh. Somethin' tha'll come in handy."

She handed Lindir a small wooden box which closed with an elaborate hasp. He frowned, opened it, saw the contents and laughed.
"General Aris! This is brilliant!"

"Use it in good health," said Aris.

Lindir leaned down and embraced her, the two of them chuckling. When they separated they bowed formally to each other, but still snickering.

"Until next time, general."

"Until next time."

Lindir swung up.
Elrond, frowning, asked, "What have you there? Is that a watch?"
"Never you mind that now," said Lindir with a grin.

Elladan and Elrohir looked shocked. Lindir was never quite so forward with Elrond. He barely even spoke to them.

They moved out, trotting down the road from Erebor, but the wind carried Elrond’s and Lindir’s voices.
"It’s one of those timing devices!" Elrond cried. "I hope you’re not using that thing on me!"
"Oh, do be sensible," Lindir replied. "I certainly wouldn’t time you, in court or anywhere else."
"Then, when will you use it?"
"Whenever Haldir comes to give presentations in Imladris."
"Oh Mahal, yes! Excellent idea."

They could just hear the twins laughing and Elrond crying out in horror "What did I just say?"
"Not to worry, Ada."
"Yes, Eru can only strike you dead once."

People shouted farewells and once more they could hear the bells in Dale striking up. The Imladris party headed through town to the docks where one of Thranduil’s great sailboats was waiting to carry them across to the Greenwood and the road back to Rivendell.

They finally got back to the house and Mistress Dazla raised her eyebrows to Dori, code for asking if she should serve tea. From the talk Ori overheard, it seemed that most of the guests were planning on spending the evening out and about, exploring the sights, sounds and food offerings available in the great city of Erebor.
In the end, the only people who sat down for dinner in the breakfast parlor were the Durins, the Fundins, Boromir, the younger set and the faunts. Gridr and Gloin took the Gamgees, Bard, and Thranduil out to a ‘special’ place. Aragorn and Arwen were invited by Margr and Vi to somewhere they claimed the pair would ‘love’. Ori hoped they had more for dinner than pastry, and were offered something for dessert besides Margr and Vi.

Fili and Sigrid kept Marigold with them at all times and took turns eating their dinners. Kili, Tauriel, and Boromir amused the faunts.

The adults had quite the time with Dis, who was reporting back on her trade talks with the kings “Thorin,” said Dis, looking like a very pleased cat, “I’ve been talking to the Blacklocks about a possible Xocolatl supply and Hild was insistent that it would be cost prohibitive - for us - unless we could give them what they want.”

“Which is?”

“Zinc.”

Thorin grinned.

“We can get them zinc.”

“Yes, yes we can. Since Lord Vors isn’t sending the richest vein under Erebor to Mordor we have plenty. The Blacklocks can get us xocolatl, a steady supply of coffee, cinnamon, vanilla and a different kind of sugar made of a cane plant. They say it will make the xocolatl taste more traditional.”

“Then, I’d say, it’s just a matter of how much how often,” said Thorin.

“Mmm, rather like sex,” said Dis.

Nori’s voice wafted from the ceiling, “What’s like sex?”

“Where are you?” Dis called.

She got up and wandered about the room, looking.

All she got in reply was a fading chuckle. Just now Nori was sensible enough to get out of her way, especially when she wore that bright-eyed, predatory look on her face.

Dis finally came back to her seat and Dori served dessert.

After dinner they went through to the receiving room as the younger set cajoled Omi, Loli, and Randi to bring out the music box. This done, they taught the faunts to wag. Then they played shimmy and spent the rest of the time running races and chasing the remaining animals around, much to the animals’ amusement.

Marigold finally wailed that it was her bedtime. Frodo looked at her from his seat on Thorin’s knee.

“Why does she do that?” he asked.

Before Bilbo or anyone else could answer, Wee Sam snorted and growled, “She’s a baby. Babies are silly like that.”

“Why, Wee Sam,” Dori cooed, drawing the faunt close and giving him a cookie, “do you really think babies are silly?”

Wee Sam squirmed, then shook his head.

“She’s silly.”

“What happened that makes you think she’s silly?” Dori inquired gently.

Wee Sam frowned terribly then muttered, “She ate my card.”

“Deary me,” commiserated Dori. “Was it your very favorite?”

“Yes,” Wee Sam said defiantly. “It was th’ special card I got f’rm King Thorin! An’ she et it!!”

“Oh, Sam,” Frodo looked sorrowful and he reach out, took Sam’s hand and squeezed it as he’d seen the dwarrow do.

“It was special.” Sam’s lip pouted out and he looked ready to cry.

Thorin scooped Sam up and placed him on his other knee.

“Now, Sam. I fully understand that it was special to you and you’re very upset that it is gone. You do realize that Marigold is far too young to understand that.”
“I know,” mumbled Sam.
“And you really don’t think your little sister is silly, do you?”
“No,” mumbled Sam again and a tear dribbled down his cheek.
Thorin hugged the faunt close and wiped the tear away.
“Well, since your card suffered such a terrible accident, how about we ask Ori, who drew the card for you, to draw you another? A very special card this time.”
Sam whirled to look at Thorin.
“Really?”
“Oh course.”
Thorin smiled up at Ori, who shifted forward in his own seat next to Dwalin.
“Oh course, Sam,” Ori smiled at the faunt. “Do you want the same picture or a different one?”
“You can make a different one?” Wee Sam’s eyes were about to fall out of his head.
“Certainly. I can put anything you want in it. Do you want it to be bigger?”
“Bigger?” Wee Sam’s voice was almost a squeak.
Thorin laughed and settled back both faunts in his lap.
“There you are, Wee Sam. Why don’t you think it over and you can tell Ori what you would like tomorrow. How about that?”
Both faunts cheered and hugged Thorin.
“Alright!” Bilbo called out. “It’s time for a story before all good faunts are in bed.”
There was a rousing cheer from the other side of the room and all games were abandoned. The younger set picked up the playthings and put them away while the faunts crowded about Thorin and Bilbo, ready for a story.
Bilbo entertained everyone with a fascinating account of Bullroarer Took and his accidental invention of the game of golf. Thorin told of the time Durin the Deathless had a battle with a dragon, defeated the dragon then forced the dragon to serve him tea and cakes. Durin and the dragon had such an excellent conversation over tea, that they made a pact that dragons would never come to Erebor unless it was for tea.
Ori had never heard this one and it was obvious by the smirks on Fili, Kili and Gimli’s faces they hadn’t heard it either. Boromir told of the great journey that founded the City of Minas Tirth. Legolas recited a poem for elflings about wrens and flowers.
Ori noted all stories down in detail. He pondered the idea of a small book of childrens’ stories from all over Arda and put it away to think about later.
Dori told Fili and Sigrid to put Marigold in her basket by the sofa as she was fast asleep. Fili, Kili, Sigrid and Tauriel herded the faunts upstairs to bed. Gimli yawned, said good night and pulled Legolas off with him. And the rest of the younger set scattered to their beds.
Boromir woke himself with a snort and blushed, apologized and took himself off. Soon only Balin, Dori, Thorin, Bilbo, Ori, and Dwalin were sitting before the fire. Ori had brought out his knitting and Dwalin played the viol for them. Occasionally, Thorin would sing, sometimes alone and other times they all joined in.
The front door opened and the remaining dwarf kings and those they had gone out with returned. There was some talk, mostly about the sights and the food consumed. Mistress Dazla brought in mead. Aragorn, Arwen, and the sisters returned laughing, followed shortly by the Groinuls and the Gamgees. Dori reported on what the faunts had been up to all evening, then Hamfast and Bell took Marigold upstairs with them. This began a slow train of people yawning, finishing their wine and stories, then going off to bed.
Dori, Balin, Thorin, and Bilbo finally filed out, leaving only Dwalin and Ori. Ori looked about to check all was tidied away as Dwalin went and bolted the front door. Dwalin came back to where Ori stood at the fireplace. Ori looked up at his husband, smiled, and reached to tuck a stray lock back from his face.
Luridness, Letters, and Locks Let Loose

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Um… Aewandínén’s in this one. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Notathain A. Shire
Excerpt from: ‘Gonad, Savage Champion of the Ice Fields of the Frozen North.’

Champion Gonad glared fiercely into the flames of the longhouse fire. His frown pulled his frighteningly handsome features into a magnificent scowl.

He pondered the tantalizing tale of the undead wizard, who had appeared in his left boot at the inn.

A dragon! A dragon in the north! the non-breathing thing had gibbered.

Gonad lazily drew his magnificent sword, Old Swinger, and held it, admiring the perfect gleam from the thorough polishings he gave it every night.

The shining blade reflected the sublime form of the sultry damsel, who had brought him a cup of wine.

Gonad the Champion sheathed Old Swinger deep into his scabbard and turned to gaze upon the maid.

His flaming, magnificent eyes took in the flimsy garments that clasped her bosom like satiny hands

and the two perfect pumpkins of her bum.

“O most magnificent warrior,” she stammered flirtatiously. “I have brought this cup of finest wine for you to sip upon. Please seat yourself and I shall cast myself at your magnificent feet and rub your travel-worn toes.”

“Crumb,” intoned the magnificent paragon, invoking his mysterious and ancient god, taking the cup from her pale, dainty hands which trembled with need.

“Wench, I crave no wine, nor rubbing of toes. I and mine magnificent cock do prefer baser pleasures from thee.”

The maiden gave a great cry of delight and swooned in joy. Her nubile form fell daintily at the magnificent champion’s feet.

“Crumb!” the nonpareil gave a magnificent growl of great yet gentle ferocity. He did then cast the cup of finest southern spiced wine into the fire which flared in delicious heat from the alcohol and rare spices.

This immediately blossomed, turning the room into a bower of romance and tinged the air with sultry scents of lust.

Gonad knelt in a magnificent manner and tenderly swept the maiden into his arms.
“Wake thou now, o plump and pert princess of my chamber. Wake, so that I may tenderly ravish thee with magnificent perfection.”

“Oh, excuse us!” Thorin took a step back and Bilbo plowed into him.

Ori turned, furious; he had barely gotten to the other rug and misstepped, dropping Dwalin, who he had just managed to get into his arms.

“Seriously?” Ori demanded.

“Thorin, go fuck yerself.” Dwalin ordered, as annoyed as Ori that their game of acting out the story was now spoiled by the intrusion.

“Since when do you play the maiden?” retorted Thorin. “You’re taller than Ori and me, you ought to be Gonad.”

“Yeh always had me play Gonad,” Dwalin grumbled. He sat on the floor with his arms crossed, chin stubborn and lip petulant. “As yeh always wanted t’ be carried about!”

“You’d have been ridiculous as the maiden!” objected Thorin.

“I’m a fine maiden!” Dwalin barked. “An’ Ori’s a brilliant Gonad. Ain’t our fault yeh ain’t got much of ’n imagination.”

“I’ve plenty! But I’m also practical, you’re better as Gonad.”

“All I’m sayin’ ’s I got two perfectly good pumpkins o’ an arse goin’ t’ waste!” Ori blushed as he saw Bilbo watching this exchange, obviously trying desperately not to laugh.

“I’m sorry, Bilbo. We thought everyone was asleep. With all the arrangements for the coronation, Dwalin and I haven’t—”

Bilbo snorted and linked his arm with Ori’s.

“I can’t believe I just witnessed those two arguing over who would play such a dimwit as Gonad.”

“Well,” Ori reflected with a blush, “he’s a rather magnificent dimwit.”

“They usually are,” Bilbo agreed.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” Ori offered.

Bilbo beamed at him.

“I would love one, Ori, thank you. I take it you’re going to show me the secrets of the kitchen that I missed while helping this morning.”

“Certainly,” Ori said brightly.

He led Bilbo through from the receiving room.

“This is the sitting room. We usually relax here in the evenings. It’s much cozier than the receiving room.”

Bilbo looked about in appreciation.

“I certainly agree with you. This looks to be a most comfortable room.”

“I hope you and Thorin may join us sometimes,” Ori suggested.

“Oh gracious yes,” Bilbo squeezed Ori’s arm. “Thorin and I discussed it and both of us think family time is very important. We think it will help Frodo adjust quicker. He’s having a wonderful time exploring the house with Fili and Kili.”

“They’re so funny with him,” Ori chuckled, bringing Bilbo into the quiet kitchen. “Have you and Thorin set up all your things in your suite?”

Bilbo sat at the table and gave a happy sigh.

“For the most part. Thorin wants me to have my work desk in his and Balin’s office. I’m hoping there will be room for my parents’ chairs in the sitting room. I’ve a habit of sitting in my father’s chair in the evenings.”

“Having all your things here must be helping Frodo adjust well, too.” Ori commented as he filled the kettle and popped it over the flame.

“Very much so. He’s very happy to have his own bedroom furniture and his toys restored to him. His room remained perfect for about twenty minutes before it was covered in his toys. I think Fili and Kill helped in that also. Do you want me to help you?”

“No, thank you, though,” Ori smiled and put down four mugs and found a plate.

“We keep biscuits on this shelf. Ginger, oatmeal with xocolātl chips, or pink sugar?”
Bilbo considered then grinned.
“Isn’t there a saying about variety being the spice of life?”
Ori took down the three large porcelain jars and put a handful of each kind on the plate before
returning the jars to their places.
“I never realized you were so strong, Ori,” said Bilbo.
“Dori and I both are,” said Ori.
“I’m amazed at least Dori didn’t become a warrior.”
Ori imagined Dori, late for drill, running around the house, frantic, muttering, “Where’s my
sword? Where’s my sword? Nori, you’d best not have hidden my sword again!”
He shrugged.
“We were from Dale, and I’m not cut out for it. Really, I only found it useful for moving heavy
things to sweep under them.”
The kettle whistled and Ori made black tea. He was just setting the fat teapot down and Bilbo was
putting out the big sugar bowl and a small jug of milk when Thorin and Dwalin came in.
“Here you are,” Thorin said and seated himself next to Bilbo, who was fitting the cozy over the
teapot.
“Have a biscuit?” Bilbo offered.
“Thanks,” said Dwalin taking three and seating himself next to Ori.
“Did you finish your argument?” Bilbo inquired.
“What argument?” Thorin asked.
Bilbo and Ori looked at each other and giggled.

That morning, breakfast for all was made especially by Snur. He explained it was a traditional
breakfast of Ered Luin Ori surmised as he ate that it was wads of very eggy bread dough, deep fried
and topped with whatever you happened to want.
Jani’s eyes lit up the moment she entered the room.
“Are those mullis?”
Snur grinned.
“Smells like home, don’t it.”
Bifur entered after her, speaking animatedly in inglishmek, “Tell me we have granulated honey!”
Dori sniffed, placing a large bowl of fruit salad on the table.
“Of course we do! What do you take us for? Orcs?”
Ori topped his first piece with bacon and maple syrup. He thought, as he finished this one and
reach for another, that his decision had been excellent. This time he was going to have marmalade
and the fruit salad.
Fili, Kili, Sigrid, and Tauriel were silently filing their faces. The Groinuls were not far behind.
“I haven’t had this since I was a badger,” said Nori, grinning. He grabbed up a piece, tore tiny
shreds from it and held it up for Assault and Battery to take.
“That’s fresh out of the oil!” Dori protested.
“S’all right,” Nori said, “it’ll keep their fur shiny.”
“It’s not their fur I’m talking about! It’s yours!”
Frodo piped up, “Do dwarrow really have fur?”
Fili looked philosophically at the faunt, “Some of us do have more hair than most black bears.”
“That makes sense,” said Frodo, nodding. “It must take you forever to brush it every morning.”
Thorin said, “No, we put it up in pincurls every night before we go to bed.”
“Nuh-uh!” Frodo protested.
Bofur scooped half a pot of cloudberry jelly on his mulli.
“He’s just kiddin’, but sometimes I think it’d be a good idea.”
Ulfr and Arne arrived, Ulfr dressed for travel.
The Ironfist king said, “Mullis? Yeh’ve been cookin’ then, Chat.”
“Me last hurrah,” said Snur. “I even packed up last night so’s I’d have time this mornin’ t’ make
the dough.”
“You’ll both be missed,” said Thorin.
“Ah, we’ll be back t’ visit,” said Snur. “Ya’ll get sick a’ lookin’ at us by next Durin’s Day.”
The elves, the Gondorian monarchs and the Rohan royals came in, and fell on the mullis like wolves.
“These are so good!” Aragorn enthused. “I’m never going to fit in my armor if I keep eating like a dwarf.”
Bombur entered with Erda, and he chuckled.
“There are advantages to that, you know, at least for dwarrow.”
“I get new armor?” Aragorn teased.
“No. Well, yep,” said Nori, “but ya also get t’ look like Lord Sexy Dwarf here. Good thing he got married. He nearly dropped from havin’ all those young dwarrow an’ dams chasin’ him all the time.”
Bofur sighed.
“He got Da’s great personality and Mam’s good looks. Lucky chap.”
Bombur smirked at him.
“You managed quite well, nadad mine. You got Mam’s hard head for drinking. Two pints of ale and I could light my way home by the glow of my nose.”
Bofur said, “An’ Jani didn’t do too badly, either. She coulda ended up skinny like Da’. Stead, she’s a great, strappin’ wench.”
“I’ll wench you, stonehead,” said Jani, smacking him with her fork.
Arwen tilted her head.
“You know, I feel like I missed something. I think I knew you were all family, but I didn’t see the resemblance before.”
Dis laughed. “That’s because we were all running around like headless chickens. No offense, Nori.”
“That’s alright, if I find any, I’ll just feed ‘em to me girls. They need plumpin’ up.”
Mistress Dazla came through with another large platter of mullis.
“Thank yeh for the recipe, King Snur. Our lot will just make these vanish.”
They had a merry party, but all too soon it was time for Ulfr and Snur to leave. They reluctantly left the table and went out to the courtyard where Snur’s luggage and that of the Ironfist king sat waiting to be loaded.
“Got a swan,” began Snur.
“For dinner?” asked Kili.
“Only if I wanna sleep on the front porch for the rest o’ me life. It was from Givris, askin’ when I was comin’ home.”
“You can always bribe your lovely bride with all this,” said Dis.
A cart pulled up, loaded with sacks, packages, boxes, and animals roped behind. A second wagon was piled equally high.
“What’s all this?” Snur asked. “Did your spring cleaning, eh?”
Thorin snorted.
“I don’t usually keep livestock at the back of my dresser drawer, Chat.”
Dori elbowed Thorin and took over.
“Now, Snur, dear, we know your people need things, and Thror was not… helpful. So, we have long-lasting foodstuffs, warm cloth for clothing, a male goat, several female goats, a bull and four Dale cows.”
Snur turned to Bard, who was just coming out of the house with Tilda, who had jam on her face.
“These cows your doin’, Bard?”
“Never hurts to have milk for the badgers,” said Bard. “And their cream’s the best in Arda.”
“Thank ya kindly, Bard, Thorin, Bearer and everybody else inside the bloody mountain an’ out.”
Aragorn looked around.
“Where are you warriors, Chat?”
“Eh? Don’t have any. Got t’ get around to that someday. Not such great plannin’, I think. Don’t
know how I’m gonna get all that home though, mind, I’m leavin’ t’day ‘cause there’s a caravan goin’ back t’ Ered Luin. I wouldn’t look too out o’ place.”

Thorin gestured to the drivers of the carts, “Mrat and Bils are going with you, Chat, if you don’t mind. They have family to visit in Ered Luin.”

“Home grown, eh? Happy t’ have ‘em,” said Snur, nodding to the dwarrow.

They bowed their heads in respect.

Frodo ran up impulsively and hugged Snur leg.

“Bye, Idad Chat! Come back soon!”

Snur laughed and picked him up.

“I will, that’s a promise,” laughed Snur.

Ulfr’s warriors materialized from their billet in the old royal residence. They went to the stable and came out leading their ponies. Gib and Mokrah had saddled Ulfr’s pony. Ori saw Gib sneak her an apple.

Arne was quite calm and looked happy. Ulfr was a mess of nerves.

“I dunno, lad,” said the Ironfist king. “I’m thinkin’ it’s best I stay behind with yeh. Wha’ if yeh get int’ a fix an’ need help an’ I’m not there?”

Ori bit back an emphatic no. Arne did not look ruffled at all.

“Da,” he said, “I had no idea you were interested in scholarship. Did you want to come to work with me in the library? I’m sure you’ll love to while away the hours with the books and scrolls.”

Ulfr opened his mouth, closed it, and said, “Mebbe not. Yer among fast friends here. Just promise me yeh’ll mind yer company.”

“I will, Da,” Arne promised, embracing him, to Ulfr’s startlement. “Tell Mam I’ll be home by the first snowfall.”

“Er…. righ’.”

Thorin hugged Ulfr as well.

“Thank you for coming all this way.”

“Wouldn’t t’ missed it.”

Bilbo came forward, offering the first of two boxes.

“This is for your queen,” said Bilbo, “with our compliments.”

Ulfr opened the box, which revealed a dazzling assortment of jewelry, mainly emeralds in gold.

Ori was aware from speaking to Arne that stones for actual ornament were rare in Ulfr’s kingdom. Minerals had to work, just like everything else.

“Mahal’s hairy behind!” Ulfr cried. “Aw, she’ll like this. Thank yeh!”

Thorin handed him the second box, which he opened to reveal… rocks.

Ulfr’s eyes got very big.

“What are these?”

“We don’t actually know,” said Thorin. “We think they may be a byproduct of mining, or they may just be something so rare we’ve never seen them before. We figured you’d enjoy finding out.”

The gleam in Ulfr’s eye was nearly incandescent. Ori honestly thought Ulfr was going to put them in his mouth, he looked that ravenous. Then Ulfr seemed to come back to his senses, his eyes shooting around at the men and elves.

“Thank yeh, me king! I will send a full assay when I’ve figured ‘em out!”

They watched Ulfr ride off with his soldiers and Snur.

Thorin said, “Well done, Arne.”

Arne heave a huge sigh of relief and grinned.

“Thank y-y-you, idad.”

“Of course, he doesn’t realize he’s carrying something quite incendiary,” said Thorin.

“Dori’s and Lady Klakuna’s letters to your mother.”

“Ooo,” said Arne, grinning.

“There’s cake, too,” said Bilbo. “At least, he’ll have something to eat in exile.”

“Wh-what’s in those l-letters?” Arne asked.
Dori said, “This and that. Our compliments. Telling her how proud she should be of you, and about Thorin letting people who aren’t darrow live under the mountain and marry his sister-sons. Not to mention the hobbit.”

“Last, but certainly not least,” said Bilbo. “I put in the cake recipe, too.”

Once back in the house, Balin turned to Thorin with a twinkle in his eye.
“Yer Majesty, His Highness, Prince Aewandínen has requested a formal audience with yeh.”

“With me?” Thorin responded. Bard and Thranduil exchanged glances like an old married
couple, much to Ori’s amusement.

“Balin, has my son offended?” Thranduil’s tone had quickened in concern.
Balin chuckled, “Nah, laddie. He’s very serious an’ wants t’ put forth a pr’posal.”
The three kings all looked at each other.

“When?” Thorin asked.
“He’s waitin’ in th’ throne room corridor, lad.”
Thorin shrugged and went through the sitting room door and into what Kili and Fili referred to as
Bag-End East. Everyone overheard the faint conversation.

“Bilbo! Ghivashel, where’s my crown?”
“You’re wearing it, dear.”
“No, the fancy one.”
“On your dresser, dear.”
“I’m looking, it’s not there.”
There was a patter of feet, then,
“Oh, you great silly dwarf, that’s my dresser. Yours is on the other side, remember?”
“Sorry, my ghivashel.”
“Off you go and be kingly.”
Thorin reappeared, putting the raven circlet on his head. He looked up as Bard and Thranduil
regarded him with matching grins.

“What?”
“Shall I go and be kingly with you?” Bard asked, lightly. Thranduil made a noise suspiciously
like a suppressed snort.

“That or go bugger yourselves.”
Thorin, Dwalin in his wake, swept out, calling for Balin and Ori to accompany him.

“Well, here’s my first kingly quandary,” said Thorin.
He looked up at the throne, the only thing on the dais besides Ori’s desk.

“Maybe we should both stand?” Bard suggested.
“Considering how long he’ll probably talk? Remember, Thranduil is his father.”
“Take it easy, sit down and shove over.”
“And where am I to sit?” asked Thranduil archly. “I may be the father of the petitioner, but as a
king, I deserve a place of decent vantage.”

“Shall we get you some popped corn to eat while you watch?” Thorin teased.
“Go on, then,” snarked Thranduil. His eyes lit up at whatever was going on in his head, then,
“Oh, and never mind a chair.”
He perched on Bard’s knee. Bard ‘eeped’, but otherwise said nothing.
Thranduil blinked down at Bard and Bard turned to Thorin.

“Maybe not my best decision.”
“Too late to back out now. Good thing the throne’s made of granite.”
Ori went to his desk and readied his pens and paper. He glanced at Dwalin, who winked then
rolled his eyes. Ori smiled. His husband looked very fine, standing at relaxed attention leaning on
his war hammer, Grasper and Keeper on his back but the hoods removed. The axes sparkled in the
light drifting down.
The door at the entryway were opened by the two guards there.
Balin escorted Aewandínen in and up the aisle, followed by a small but very assorted group of men of different sexes, ages and sizes, and a dwarrow, but all wearing white cloths over their heads.

“Oh, dear,” said Ori at a whisper.

“Eru help me,” Bard breathed. “It’s not masquerade season yet!”

“I think they look quite well,” murmured Thranduil serenely.

Thorin nodded regally and beckoned the elf prince onto the dais.

“Prince Aewandínen, you are most welcome. Please let us hear your proposal.”

“King Thorin, King Bard, Ada.” Aewandínen bowed low then continued. “As you know, I have been treating the sad infestation that has swept through the heads of Dale.”

Ori thought this made it sound like each citizen had a small windstorm blowing through their skull. He ruthlessly quashed this thought, because now he was desperate to draw it.

“In light of this situation, I propose a long-term solution and an opportunity which may benefit not only the city, but the mountain and also prove lucrative in bringing outsiders to our valley. I propose to build a Palace of Beauty and Healing in the center of Dale.”

He paused, apparently waiting for either wild cheering or censure, but since neither was forthcoming, he continued.

“I understand there will soon be hot and cold running water in the city, and that there are natural mineral springs long covered over as well. Since the building which covered the springs are now rubble, and the largest spring is in the vicinity of the house of King Bard, this would be the ideal location for my proposed palace.”

Bard frowned.

“You’re already researched all of this? Since you ran off the other day to soak heads?”

“I find I have a great deal of energy all of a sudden. I have met and spoken to almost everyone in town while treating them. This included quite elderly men and dwarrow.”

Thorin leaned forward.

“Prince Aewandínen, I meant to ask you about that. You actually went into dwarrow homes and touched people’s hair and beards? If this is so, I’m not sure why you’re still alive.”

“Oh, I explained why I was there before I touched the hair on their heads, and only with permission, your majesty,” said Aewandínen. “For the beards, I simply left some product for them to delouse themselves. I am a bit of an… airhead at times, but I do have some sense of self-preservation. The men have far less scruples, and were dealt with rapidly, whether they were conscious or not.”

Bard sighed.

“You’re still lucky you weren’t killed. They aren’t as picky, but you still broke into their houses.”

“Most of them were still drunk or very hungover,” Aewandínen mused. “Either way, they weren’t moving at any speed, and to the ones who were conscious and mentally present, I explained myself to in short, rapid sentences. By the end, I had my explanation down to about ten seconds in length.

“But cultural taboos are, in fact, a reason I’ve asked for this audience.”

Thorin said, “You want to be exempt from the hair and beard taboo? That’s not something I can grant you.”

“Well, no, actually I doubt a dwarf who strictly held to tradition would so much as grunt in my direction. I’m assuming someone who voluntarily submits their hair to my ministrations is less observant and less likely to gut me at first sight.”

Thranduil coughed.

“My son, to whom have you been speaking?”

“Master Dubb, who was so kind as to escort me from house to house. He kept shouting miscellaneous facts and advice, as well as obscenities, at me as we ran about. Very good sort, I was sorry to lose his company.”

“Ah,” said Thranduil. “Please go on.”

Ori peeked at Dwalin who was frowning, but Ori knew he was trying not to laugh.

“Dwarrow hair is quite different from the hair of men and elves. It lends itself to all kinds of
styling, as you know. Some of this styling does include braids that do not have social or spiritual
consequence. Queen Hild herself often sports a style of braids that, while particular to the
Blacklocks, is worn simply because their hair texture allows for it.

“Also, I know there is a guild for such things, so putting in common and cosmetic braids isn’t
always restricted to family members. I can offer employment to guild members, if they are interested,
and then it would be dwarrow doing dwarrow braiding. Would you care to see some of my work?”

“Please,” said Thorin.

“Ah, yes.” Aewandínen turned to a fine looking Dale matron. Aewandínen nodded, She stepped
forward and removed the cloth covering her head. Ori could only describe the look of her lovely
auburn hair as a tall dome.

“Here we have what I have decided to name the ‘beehive,’” Aewandínen stated proudly. “It is an
updo and understated as fitting to her station but still shows her beautiful hair to advantage and is
tightly wrapped to allow for hair jewelry.”

The lady smiled and turned politely around to display a fetchingly tied bow that matched her dress.
She then walked back to her place. A young man child bounced up, grinning.

Aewandínen smiled and lifted a finger to stop the child snatching his cloth off.

“This poor innocent was badly infested on both sides of his head, thus he had to have that hair
shaved and I have treated it with a healing lotion. The remaining hair was dyed for his amusement,
while his scalp heals.” Aewandínen nodded and the lad tore off the cloth and looked delightedly at
the three kings. Ori swallowed carefully. The lad had obvious sores that were healing, but there was
a strip of hair from his forehead to the nape of his neck. Aewandínen had dyed this in sections all
different colors, then teased and pomaded the hair to stand on end.

“I call this the ‘pony-crest’ cut.”

Ori risked a look at the kings. Thranduil was biting his lower lip. Thorin sat frowning with a
hand clamped thoughtfully to his mouth. Bard made a noise that he turned into a clearing of his
throat.

“You like it?” he asked the child.

“It’s great,” the lad agree loudly and ruffled it, mixing all the colors. “Am I done?” he asked
Aewandínen. The prince nodded and the lad bounced back to his spot.

A young lady stepped forward. Ori remembered seeing her. She had been teased by young
swains for not having lovely hair, as hers was very thin and lank. Aewandínen beckoned her
forward and she skipped up with a blush and removed the cloth.

Ori stared. Her hair had been somehow brushed out, teased and the ends about her face cut short,
so it feathered back from her face.

“I call this the ‘wings aloft’. Her hair was very thin but, as you see form the washing and the cut,
it is now full of body and bounce.”

The maiden giggled, blushed and murmured, “Thank you so much, Mister Wandi.”

She spun lightly round to regain her place. Ori clenched his teeth, forcing himself not to make a
sound. The feathering ended at the back of her head made a perfect part….making the back of her
head look like a butt.

The next person on show was another, slightly older, Dale lad. He had also been afflicted but
only had two hanks of hair on in the top of his head and the other between the nape of his neck and
his left ear. Aewandínen had treated his scalp and dyed both hanks raven black before twisting them
out into points.

“This points up and down, thus earth to the sky. I call it the ‘astral’.”

This was admired and once again Bard asked the child if he liked it

“You bet,” the lad piped up. “Mr. Wandi glopped some stiffening stuff on them I poked my
brother in the tummy! He yelled. It was great!”

Dwalin grunted and bowed his head to scratch his nose. Bard twitched, Thranduil had to check
on something behind the throne for a moment, and Thorin had a small fit of coughing. The lad went
back to his place and Aewandínen excitedly gestured to the last person. This was an elderly dwarf
fellow. His cloth looked to be almost the size of a tablecloth. He marched up perfectly stone-faced,
but his eyes were twinkling with humor.

“And now,” cried Aewandínén. “My masterpiece! This dear dwarf had no affliction but was happy for me to experiment with his hair.”

Ori saw Dwalin give the elderly fellow a grin. The dwarf nodded.

“Nardix, son a’ Fardix at yer service,” rumbled Nardix. “Rope makin’ is me craft, I’ve always had me beard an’ hair braided up. Now I’m a pensioner, I figured, with a new king, might as well do sumfin’ differen’.”

“Thank you,” Thorin said rather dryly but he was obviously quite intrigued. Aewandínén pulled off the cloth with a flourish.

“I give you, the Wire Sphere!”

The dwarf’s salt and pepper, red-streaked hair stood completely loose and brushed on-end; it was now as long as he was tall. Master Nardix had the perfect dwarf hair: thick and coarse, and Ori saw the decades of wearing braids had rendered it ridged from scalp to end. His beard was also brushed out, resting on his stomach, leveling upward and outward, making a neat shelf of about three feet long from his chin.

“Fuck” admired Dwalin.

“That,” said Thorin, “is amazing. In fact, I’m quite envious. The direct line of Durin can claim occasional waves, even curls, but that is every dwarf’s dream.”

The rope maker bowed, his hair bobbing all around him like a gale tossing the leafy branches of trees.

“Thank yeh, yer majesty. Only thing I got t’ watch fer now is no’ torchin’ it in th’ pub lanterns.”

“So you see,” said Aewandínén, “there is the fashion side of the styling and cutting of hair and the medicinal side of my work with hair. The different cuts for the people afflicted compliment their faces and this way their scalps can heal, and I have lotions for that.

“In addition, I have also seen that not every house in Dale has a bath, and I wish to offer that as well, for a few coppers for simple cleanliness, up to a gold piece for perfumed and salted waters and a scalp massage.

“The hands, and particularly feet, I have seen in Dale are not in good conditions. I have found a disturbing array of er… vegetation between many sets of toes. Feet are important. How does one carry oneself day after day? Not on one’s hands, but on one’s feet.

“The three kings looked at each other. Bard gave Thorin a nod.

“Aye, yer majesty,” Balin replied smoothly. Aewandínén beamed and his helpers cheered excitedly.

“I assume,” said Thorin, “that you can work out the planning details with King Bard?”

“Yes, King Thorin. I would be quite honored to work with King Bard.”

Bard looked surprised and glanced around as if though might be someone else there named Bard to whom the prince referred.

“Oh, aye. Mister Wandi gave me a special kind a’ brush t’ use on it. Th’ hair wants t’ stick out anyway. This just keeps th’ tangles out. I still got me braids.” He lifted his hair to show them hanging behind his ear. “They’re just hidin’ out.”

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“And, this is a style you can maintain?”

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Bard looked surprised and glanced around as if though might be someone else there named Bard to whom the prince referred.

“Uh, yes,” said Bard. “I look forward to it. Thank you.”

“There’s just one more thing,” said Aewandínén. “Ada, have you seen my brother?”

“Why? asked Thranduil.

“I need to apologize to him.”

“For what?”

“Everthing.”
“Your very existence?”
“Yes. Ada, this entire visit has been an uplifting, eye-opening… existential experience for me. I am a new elf! Thank you for bringing me, Ada. Thank you!”

He rushed up the stairs, grasped his father, and sobbed all over him, startling Thranduil and squashing Bard. Amazed, Thorin glanced over at Ori. Ori shrugged helplessly and continued to write at speed.

“There now, my son,” said Thranduil, patting his back. “Am I to take it that, like your ada, you’ve come into your own since you removed that stick from your arse?”

“Yeeh-eeh-eehs,” sobbed the prince.

A moment later Aewandínen arose and stared about him in an aura of pleasure.

“Forgive me, Ada,” he said, “but I must do this.”

Thranduil merely smiled and waited for whatever explosion his eldest would bring forth next.

“King Thorin! King Bard! To prove my earnest desire to change to both of you, your peoples, and all of mine, I hereby renounce the name of Prince Aewandínen and all claims to the Woodlands of my father. I am now a mere peasant, who shall heal and beautify all who come to me. I shall be known only as Mister Wandi.”

Mister Wandi’s helpers cheered again and gave him a round of applause.

“If you aren’t a prince, where are you going to get the money to do all this?” Bard asked.

Thranduil said, “His renounced inheritance will go toward it. I think such broad thinking deserves a little largesse.”

The elf king rose and looked down at his son.

“You may have renounced your title, but I am still proud of you… Wandi.”

Mister Wandi looked startled. He recalled himself a moment later and added.

“I must speak to Master Gimli as well!”

“Must you?”

“Yes! I want him to find me a dog! I will call it ‘Friend’!” He giggled. “Then I shall never be melancholy again!”

“Is ‘e drunk, yeh think?” Balin asked.

Thranduil said, “I think it’s from inhaling hair care product.”
Acquirements, Applications of training, and Adoption

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Well, we get to some friendly interactions between the rulers still in Erebor and Ori has an adventure…of a sort. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori stepped down from the dais, his notes in his satchel. Dwalin came to his side and put an arm about his shoulders.

“That was …weird,” Ori decided as he watched Aewan- Mister Wandi traipsing out with his helpers, all congratulating him.

“T’ say th’ leas’. Yeh wan’ t’ come with us t’ th’ armory practice ring after lunch?”

“Yes!” Ori replied eagerly. “Are you going to demonstrate with your little badger warriors?” Dwalin laughed.

“Temptin’, bu’ Thorin, Aragorn an’ Arwen’re spoiling t’ try each other’s mettle. Theoden an’ Dain talked abou’ taggin’ along.”

“I’ll bring my sketching books,” Ori decided.

After a lunch of cold meats, cheeses, breads, and ale, a small group consisting of Ori, Dwalin, Thorin, Dain, Aragorn, Arwen, Sculdis and Theoden headed to the practice ring.

Ori and Dwalin looked down into the ring, which was empty, save for two armed and armored figures, one about two feet taller than the other.

"Yeh got all tha’ reach, lad! Use it!"

"But, Master Dubb," said Ivo, "you'll just duck under it and smack me again."

"Aye, bu’ yeh needn't make it easy f'r me," Master Dubb barked. "Try it again."

Ivo had filled out a bit since Ori last saw him, gingerly guarding the entrance to the King of Dale’s new residence.

His pointed stick had given way to a sword as he crouched in ready stance and faced off the dwarf warrior with his axe.

"This looks painfully familiar," said Aragorn, stopping at the railing beside Ori. "Except, I was the shorter one. Is this standard dwarf training?"

"Nah, we usually train in squads," said Dwalin, as Ori sketched rapidly. "Master Dubb picked Ivo out a' th' soldier volunteers from Dale. Bard's a scrapper, but doesn't have a real weapon, except th' bow, which is tough t' use f'r close fightin'."

"So, this youngster is training to guard Bard's back," said Aragorn.

"Aye. Ouch! There 'e goes, knocked on 'is arse again."

"Happens a lot, does it?"

"He's gettin' be'er. He used t' be knocked down th' second 'e lifted 'is sword. A' leas’ now it takes a few minutes."

Thorin arrived at Aragorn’s side and looked down as Dubb told Ivo loudly and precisely everything the lad had done wrong this time.

"Nice to see some things don't change," said Thorin. "Though, I think Dubb might be mellowing."

"Aye," said Dwalin. "He ain't called th' lad a shalehead once."

Dwalin and Thorin chuckled.
"I get the impression," said Arwen, "that the two of you are familiar with Master Dubb's teaching methods."
"You could say that," said Thorin. "He used to be the captain of the city guard of Erebor."
"I still got scars with Dubb's name on 'em," Dwalin agreed.
Arwen said, "I thought he made rather free to abuse you at the breakfast table the other day."
Thorin shook his head.
"Dubb is nothing but loyal, and what he said was pretty typical of older warriors dressing down younger. Besides, he knew me when I was in nappies, dragging around a wooden sword which, in fact, he gave me."
Aragorn shot Thorin a wicked smile.
"There's a portrait of you so-armed somewhere in this mountain, isn't there."
"Of course there is."
"I seen it!," Dain crowed. "Aye, it's a treat."
Thorin made a face at his cousin before turning back to Aragorn. "You sound like you speak from experience."
"Alas, I've never been able to pry it out of Lord Elrond's possession."
Arwen said, "Of course not, my love. He's saving it to display at our wedding."
"Another reason to elope," Aragorn sighed.
Down in the ring, Dubb had finished brow-beating his charge and sent Ivo off to the baths. Dubb took the smoothing plane to the sand.
"Awright," he growled up at them, "yeh kin quit gigglin' like a pack a' school damlin's an' commence with th' proper mayhem."
Dwalin and Thorin chorused, "Thank you, Master Dubb."
Dubb shot them a rude gesture and took himself off, presumably to wash.
Ori and Dwalin followed the royals down to the ring. Dwalin sat beside Ori on a bench. Scudlis and Dain sat on the next one with Theoden between them.
"You're not going to spar?" Ori asked his husband.
"Nah, I got patrol t'night, so I figured I'd spend some time loafin' about with me ghivashel. 'Less I'm encroachin' on yer artistic pursuits?"
Ori nudged him in the rib with an elbow.
"No critiquing the artist at work, but I'd rather you were here, too." Dwalin leaned down and kissed him before hunkering forward, forearms resting on his knees, intent on watching the matches.
Ori turned to a fresh page and honed his graphite wand on his sandpaper block to freshen the point.
This was a very different match from Ivo's and Dubb's, though the height proportions were the same.
The two kings circled each other, looking for an opening.
Aragorn feinted right and struck left, which Thorin easily blocked. They went back to circling.
Thorin swung overhead abruptly, Aragorn parried, but even Ori could see he looked surprised.
Then, Thorin and Aragorn grinned identical, ravenous grins and the two of them attacked each other at full roar.
Their first clash nearly jarred Ori off the bench.
Dwalin chuckled.
"So, it's goin' t' be like tha', is it."
Ori focused on capturing movement. He knew there was no way to catch details. The two kings moved far too fast, Aragorn pressing his reach, his amazing speed and agility, Thorin his dwarven strength and greater experience, as they ranged across the whole of the practice ring.
Dwalin rose and barked a hold. Both combatants stopped and looked at him in inquiry.
Dwalin crossed to Thorin, Arwen in tow, and set his king in a battle stance then went to Aragorn.
"On yer knees, lad."
Aragorn blinked then, after a glance at his betrothed, knelt. Dwalin arranged him then pointed at
Thorin.
“Now lad, battle stance.”
“Like this?” Aragorn asked, his voice bordering on laughter.
“I like this stance,” Arwen giggled.
“Look,” Dwalin ordered, his inner trainer not bothering with the humor in the situation.
Aragorn looked at Thorin. He frowned then took time to look Thorin carefully over. At Dwalin’s nod, Thorin made a couple of feints.
“Elbereth,” the Gondorian king said slowly and sat back on his heels, staring at Thorin.
“Now yeh see,” Dwalin grunted. “Easier t’ understand when yer a’ our level.”
“And you’re trained to not only fight with each other but an enemy taller than you.” Aragorn rose slowly, a grin spreading across his features. “That’s why you know how our reach works.”
“Smart lad,” Dwalin allowed. “Back t’ work….yeh shaleheads!”
To Ori’s great amusement, both kings looked at Dwalin and threw him the same obscene gesture.
Dwalin made his way back to Ori. Arwen gave a shout and the two kings leapt back at each other in the fierce joy of battle.
Theoden cheered along with the Ironhills monarchs, then turned to Sculdis.
“Watching your people battle is fascinating. Captain Dwalin instructing our friend Gondor, by placing him on his knees to practice, was something I would never have thought of.”
“Like our Dwalin said, it gives him a chance t’ see thin’s an’ understand our way. Yeh men’re so tall.”
Theoden snorted.
Sculdis laughed.
“An’ orcs taller still. Make yeh men look like hobbits.”
Ori wiped the sweat out of his eyes with the back of his hand, but it kept flowing down, stinging. His eyesight blurred. He blinked, frustrated. He could hear the fighting, but he couldn’t see it to draw it. He began to lose track of time. It felt like the sun was going down, which was impossible, and then it was nearing dawn, and he felt the weight of the sword in his hand as he crouched with the others, waiting. He was terrified, and angry. Out in the fog, warriors clashed. He heard the shouts.
“Du bekar! Du bekar!”
But he knew it was hopeless. They were all going to die.
And for what?

"Ori! Ori!"
"Huh?"
Ori looked up to find Dwalin kneeling before him, hands on Ori’s shoulders.
“What is it?” Ori asked mussily. His drawing hand felt cramped. "Did I fall asleep?"
The moment he said it, he knew it was wrong. Thorin stood behind Dwalin with Aragorn and Arwen, all of them sweating, filthy and looking terribly concerned. Dain, Sculis and Theoden stood nearby, peering at him.
Thorin held Ori’s sketchpad.
Ori groaned.
"What did I draw this time? Is anybody naked?"
Aragorn and Arwen traded puzzled looks.
"No," said Thorin, handing the sketchpad over Dwalin’s shoulder.
Ori turned the page to look and froze.
There was this… thing, armed with a rough mace, bearing down in full howl, saliva flying, blood pouring down from its wounded scalp. The bared teeth looked like rows of daggers, some with points jagged and broken off.
Ori flinched. The smell of something horrid lingered in his nose and throat.
"What is this?" Ori gasped.
"That," said Thorin, "is the first orc I ever killed."
Ori didn't know what to say. Really, what could he say? I'm really glad you killed it? I'm sorry I somehow crawled into your memory and drew it?
Wait.
"This is a memory?" Ori asked.
Thorin nodded.
"I've never done that before," Ori whispered.
His mouth kept working, but no more sound came out. He felt a tear run down his cheek, and he was mortified.
Thorin sat beside him, his shoulder against Ori's.
"Don't despair," said Thorin. "It wasn't the only thing you drew."
Ori braced himself and turned back a page. He looked. Then he looked again, frowning.
"What is this?" he asked, turning the page this way and that.
"My sister as a pebble," said Thorin, "looking up King Thranduil's robes."
"That's terrible!" Ori cried.
"Not really," said Thorin. "I was thinking of having it framed and hanging it in a guest room for when he comes to visit."

Completely drained, Ori found himself carried to the bedroom, and laid down on the bed fully clothed. Dwalin took off his boots for him and then Ori felt a cool, wet cloth sweeping over his face and neck.
At least it wasn't smelling salts.
"I'm sorry, Dwalin," he murmured.
"Wha're yeh sorry f'r, love?"
"I ruined the match."
"Nah, yeh didn't. They'd finished. Tha's when we noticed yeh'd stopped drawin' an' yeh was looking' out over nothin'."
"Who won?"
"Arwen." Dwalin snickered. "Thorin knocked Aragorn on 'is arse, then Arwen knocked Thorin on 'is."
"Really?"
"When yeh think about it, she's only got a couple a' thousand years experience on 'em."
"That makes sense. Did I draw them at all? I can't remember."
"Yeh drew up a storm."
"Why did I draw Thorin's memories? Why that memory?"
Dwalin lay down beside him and gathered Ori into his arms.
"Did yeh see somethin'?"
"Yes," said Ori. "I think… I think it was Azanulbizar."
Dwalin flinched, and muttered angrily. Ori heard, "Wha’ th’ fuck, Mahal?"
"If it was Mahal's doing, what does that mean?"
"Dunno, love. We're assumin' Mahal's go' plans, but, yeh know, he's no' real chatty."
A horrible thought crossed Ori's mind and he shivered.
"Love?" Dwalin asked.
"I think… I think it was an experiment."
"T' see if yeh could do it?"
"More like making sure you prime a pump before you use it, like it was something I already had and didn't know it."
"D'ye think yeh could do it a' will?"
"No, It's not about my will at all. But, why Thorin? Why not your memories or Dori's? There's something going on here, something important, and I feel like this is just the beginning of it. Oh, Dwalin! That orc! This could be terrible."
"Mebbe, but considerin' wha' else yeh drew? Somethin' tells me th' fate a' middle earth don't rest on wha's hidin' under Thranduil's robe. Thranduil might thin' it does, a' course."
"Like, maybe Mahal was telling me it would be all right?"
This seemed correct, soothing, so Ori clung to that until he fell asleep in Dwalin's arms.

He slept until Dwalin nudged him awake, Nori-Pori curled up on Ori's stomach.
"Time f'r tea, love."
Ori's stomach growled. His last meal felt like a million years ago.
Nori-Pori registered a meow of complaint as his heated nest tilted and gently dumped him to the mattress.
Ori padded over to the wash stand and splashed water on his face. He looked up into the mirror.
He didn't look quite as out-of-it as he felt, though his hair stuck up at alarming angles. He changed his clothes and Dwalin brushed, braided and rebeaded his hair.
"There yeh go, me darlin'," said Dwalin, kissing Ori's neck.
"Mmm. Thank you. Dwalin, does everyone know what happened?"
"Nah. Thorin, t' others, an' me agreed we should keep it t' ourselves. 'Course, tha' means Dori thin's yeh fainted from overwork an' all-but- threatened Thorin's life over it, an' Thorin couldn't say a word."
Ori sighed.
Little did Dori know, it was likely Dori's own 'overflowing' that was at least partly to blame.
"Listen, love, I need t' go out on patrol after Buj's ceremony. Will yeh stick close t' Bilbo an' Thorin 'til I get back? I'll be home around midnight."
"All right, but you'll be careful, won't you?"
"Aye, an' yeh'll stay way from th' fruit wine, right?"
"Hmmm, maybe," said Ori.
They made their way to the sitting room and food. Theoden and the Ironhills monarchs were talking. That is to say, Dain was on the sofa snoring his head off, Sculdís, in his lap, with her feet on Theoden’s knee, was chatting with the horse king.
Thorin came through with Bilbo, telling him about the practice.
"Arwen knocked me on my arse!" Thorin crowed. "It was excellent! Arwen, you must show me how you did that!"
The elf woman laughed delightedly and gave her promise.
Mistress Dazla came through and headed for the receiving room. They all heard the door open.
"The shopping trip is back," Bilbo announced, chuckling. "Shall we see if the contents of every merchants store is in your receiving room?"
They headed through.
Theoden rose and Sculdís scrambled off her husband. She nudged him. Dain grunted.
"Come see th’ shopping’?" she suggested.
Dain grunted again then mumbled,
"Wake me f'r tea, me gem."
Ori and Dwalin walked through with Theoden and Sculdís.
"I don’t wish to offend, ma’am-" Theoden began.
"Sculdis, Theoden dear. We’ve sung, feasted, witnessed battle, an’ wagged. I think first names’re long overdue."
Theoden laughed and stopped to look down at her. He bowed.
"Then I shall call you ‘sister’ and, in the way of my people, I would like to offer you my arm."
"Nah, I’ve already got two," Sculdís teased, but she reached up and tucked her hand in his elbow.
Ori stifled a giggle and they walked on.
"You were saying?" Sculdís reminded Theoden.
"Your people are deadly. Perhaps, sister, you and your husband king, or you, Lo- Ori, and your husband, if Thorin might spare him, would ever care to visit my home? I would consider it a great honor if some of my soldiers could be trained. It is not such a problem now that Mordor has fallen, but there are still evil things that roam our world."
"An’ yer folk can teach us t’ ride yer great big ‘orses,” Sculdís teased.
"If you like,” Theoden smiled.
“I have talked with Theodred about your home,” Ori mused. “He described the great rolling plains and the rocky outcrops. It sounds a beautiful place.”

Theoden growled

“Too us, it is. The land will be seen as rough and wild by your people, but the steppes with the great sky above… At night, you can lie on your back and see the stars hang so close. As a child, I would often try and reach up to pluck one.” The king chuckled. “Even now, if I sleep out on the plain during travel, I still feel the urge to do so.”

With Ori’s and Sculdis’ encouragement, Theoden described his home to them. They entered the receiving room to several piles of…things and watched the shoppers come in and start talking. Mistress Dazla’s staff helped them bring in even more.

Dori and Binni looking proudly around the piles, watching the elves and Hild and Akhn.

Galdriel was in transports over something in a large box as she showed it off to Thranduil. Akhn waved an object under Celeborn’s nose, talking volubly about it. Hild stood in the middle of swaths of cloth, holding one up to herself as Dis studied it. Aris pretend to study it, too, as she lit her pipe.

Ori went to Dori and embraced them.

“I see you had a successful shopping trip?” Ori teased.

“Hello, pet. I prefer to think our merchants had a very successful day.” Dori cocked their head at Hild. “I swear that dam bought Mahrdin out of all the silk in his warehouse. I thought he was going to break into song.”

“Was Dipfa there?”

“Yes, pet, she sang but only under her breath. She requested me to send you her compliments and let you know she has had a new idea.”

Ori shuddered visibly, making Dori giggle. Sculdis joined Hild and Dis with the material and Theoden went to keep Celeborn company and stare at the weird objects Akhn kept showing them.

“Celeborn,” Dori went on, “visited every bookstall in sight. Larit had a cart to carry all the books, but had to send to the house for another and now there’s a wagon full of them. There’s another wagon for Galdriel. Deliveries have been filling both all afternoon. What you see here was what we carried back with the help of the rest of dear Mistress Dazla’s staff.”

“Mahal,” Ori intoned in a whisper.

“Akhn bought three anvils bigger than himself. And cleared out the largest metal-working tool warehouse. He was like you, pet, at your first candy stall.”

Ori giggled.

“I am wordless,” Dori continued, “over what they all did in the jewelry and gemstone merchants. Thrandy was a perfect pig over the cut clear gems.”

“Oh, Dori,” Ori choked, “What a wonderful time you must have had.”

“Binni and I made sure they didn’t miss a thing.”

“Shall I go and ask about tea?” Ori offered.

“Please do, pet, I swear I’m ready to drop.”

Ori went through to find the kitchen table was covered in trays of cups and plates, and the great kettles were heating on the stove. Larit and Oqizla were slicing cakes and Agrib was piling cut sandwiches onto platters.

Mistress Dalza entered the kitchen and smiled on Ori,

“Take it our dear Bearer is ready?”

“Yes, Mistress,” Ori grinned, sniffing appreciatively. Mistress Dazla gave him a look and passed him a small bun off one of the platters. Ori thanked her and went out, eating. The bun was still warm and the custard inside creamy and delicious. Dwalin came through to find him. Ori put the last bite of the bun into his husband’s mouth. Dwalin growled, swallowed, and grabbed Ori.

“I want t’ be yer maiden - an’ yer Gonad - soon.”

Ori snickered and kissed him.

“Since you’re here, you might as well sit down,” Mistress Dazla told them. “I’m telling our dear Bearer, tea is ready when they’re ready.”

Ori pointed at a large easy chair in the sitting room. Dwalin went and secured it, while Ori fetched
his knitting. They were happily ensconced when everyone was called to tea.

The remains of the younger set, enlarged by faunts, put themselves on the rug before the fire. The animals joined them and people perched on sofas and other chairs provided. It was a little crowded, but comfortable. Ori and Dwalin were near enough to listen or take part with the younger sets’ conversations.

Bain sat close to Stonehelm with Theodred on his other side. Arne and Sigrid were talking, practicing their westron and khuzdul. Ori thought Arne was doing much better without his father’s eagle eyes on him. Sigrid tried valiantly to wrap her mouth around the harsh R’s and hard K’s of the language, patiently coached by Fili. Kili translated for Tauriel and Legolas, who were listening in and concentrating. Gimli leaned against Legolas’ back and ate treats.

Dori and Bilbo ran the conversations among the adults. This was mostly retelling of shopping adventures. Theoden and Hild spoke idly about their homes to each other. Aris asked minutely about the running of Rohan.

Ori glanced at Theodred, who was telling of a note his cousin Eowyn had sent along with an update to Theoden. Ori felt a crinkle go up his spine. Theo was obviously amused by what she had written, but there was something he wasn’t telling.

When the last cup was drunk, Thorin rose and smiled on Binni and Oin.

“Here? Or would you prefer somewhere formal or private?”

Oin got out of his chair with a grunt then offered his hand to Binni, who rose gracefully, saying,

“Here is fine, as long as no one minds,”

“I’m sure they won’t.” Thorin grinned around at his guests and asked for a little room in the middle of the group. Intrigued, everyone shuffled their seating about and waited to see what happened.

“Oin Groinul, healer of Erebor,” began Thorin. “Binni, dearest Bearer-Sib, you have been married many years and have served your king with the greatest loyalty.”

Ori thought this was quite a nice note, as it didn’t question their honor, but everyone knew they were loyal to Thorin before Thror. Thorin continued.

“You have requested that I recognize and formalize your hearts’ child as your son and heir. I am delighted and privileged. Please present him.”

Binni reached as Buj, red to his ears, rose and came forward to stand with them. Binni slid an arm about Buj’s waist and Oin dropped a large hand on Buj’s shoulder.

Thorin smiled on Buj, who was happy but somewhat embarrassed by being in front of everyone at a family gathering.

“Lord Buj,” Thorin addressed him, “Head of the Clan Rikanta and representative of the King of Beleghost in Erebor, is it my understanding that you wish to be adopted as the hearts’ child of Oin and Binni?”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“Oin, Binni hold out your clasped hands.” Thorin instructed. They did so. Thorin turned the hands upward and opened them slightly. He took Buj’s hand and placed it within their clasp.

“Lord Buj, do you honor Oin and Binni as your heart’s parents?”

“Yes, your majesty. And to show to all I do so, I shall happily bear the name Bujni in their honor.”

“I hereby recognize you, Bujni, son of Oin and Binni. You are a family of the heart and none can sunder this.”

Thorin nodded to Dori who came forward, laid his hands over the three clasped ones and murmured blessings on them.

Thorin turned to the gathering.

“My family, my friends, Oin and Binni present to you their hearts’ son, Bujni of the house of Oin and Gloin.”

The new family bowed to the assembled who clapped, cheered and offered congratulations. Dipfa blew her nose in a bright fuchsia handkerchief, obviously overcome with joy. Balin took the new little family to the table at the far end to sign the contract and all the copies.
As this delight went on, Thorin turned to Ori.
“Lord Ori, take a letter.”
Ori was about to rise to get paper but Loli passed him his waist desk. In an instant Ori had pen and paper ready.
Thorin cleared his throat and the room fell silent.
From the High King of all Dwarrow to the King of Beleghost.” Thorin announced. The room immediately fixed their attention on him.

“Frerin,
We could not oblige your request for a postponement as the bread for the feast was rising, thus we were committed. Do not allow this to cause you worry, for you were well-represented.
Please find enclosed the royal scribe’s official account of the proceedings, and also the portrait of your representative in his coronation-day finery. These are now in the hands of every dwarf monarch and courtesy copies have gone to all the known monarchs of Arda.
Also enclosed, find the document of adoption, signed today, three days after the coronation, pronouncing Lord Buj royal representative of Beleghost as the new-made scion of Lord Oin Groinul and the Bearer Binni, late of Khazad-dûm. Lord Buj has taken the name of Bujni in honor of his new parents.
Regards to your dear T’dillah.
Thorin.”

Thorin finished and, after a collective astounded gasp, the laughter started around the room.
“Cousin! You are positively shocking,” Hild crowed when she could manage speech.
“Very canny, laddie, very canny,” Ahkn agreed.
“Will he recognize this?” Arwen asked gravely.
“It doesn’t matter if he recognizes it or not. He has tried to usurp me,” Thorin told her, coolly.
“He didn’t come to the coronation to swear his loyalty. He must accept this or suffer the attendant consequences.”
Arwen nodded in agreement, as did Aragorn.
“If he does not, will you order his head?” Theoden asked as a matter of course. For an instant, Ori wondered if the horse king was considering overthrowing Frerin as a polite favor to Thorin.
“No, but if he is conquered and his head delivered to me as a sign of loyalty I will accept the new ruler.”
Ori felt a shiver go up his spine as he copied Thorin’s letter out onto the formal paper. He wondered what, if anything, Frerin would do. Rumors were flying with the ravens and they said the people of Beleghost were all but ignoring their new king and going on as they always did. There was also talk of strife in the new court.
Ori handed the letter to Thorin who re-read it, signed, then sealed it with his ring pressed hard into the prepared wax.
“Imagine if the hobbits take Beleghost from him,” Celebrom commented.
Bilbo snorted, “Really, Celebrom, hobbits aren’t interested in conquering places. It would make them late for dinner.”
Galadriel exchanged a look with Thranduil.
“If there were any Stoors left, they might have done it.”
“Maybe,” Bilbo conceded, “but unless he tries to bother the Shire, it’s likely they will ignore him. If he does try it, he will be chased away under a hail of sharp stones, and cast iron cooking utensils.”
Ori wanted to draw that, but instead looked about for Roäc. The king of the ravens swooped in and landed on Thorin’s shoulder.
“Want me to see to that letter?” The raven was all but salivating. Thorin grinned.
“I shall send you later this evening, if you like,” Galadriel offered. “You will be back before breakfast tomorrow.”
Roäc laughed and Thorin grinned.  
“I do like how you think, ma’am,” Thorin told her.  
“Let’s have a party!” Loli cried from where she and Omi were still hugging Bujni whether he liked it or not.  Randi, Stonehelm and Gimli were slapping his shoulders with gusto and occasionally knocking heads with him.  
Bombur and Erda rose as Mistress Dazla entered.  
“Azzip and fruit soda water, mistress,” Bombur announced.  “It seems we are going to have a party.”  
“Oh, excellent!” Mistress Dazla looked pleased.  “I’ve wanted to experiment with that recipe and the possible toppings.  I’ll prepare th’ receiving room for a nice little supper party for you all.”  
She curtsied to Dis and Dori.  
“With your permissions, you shall dine in two hours.” 
Bombur, Erda and Bifur went to the kitchen.  
“C’mon,” Fili ordered.  The younger set and the faunts immediately carried away the tea things and tidied up.  Hild and Ahkn stared after them.  As the noise of washing up started, Dori smiled at Dis and they giggled.  
“You know, it’s rather lovely that they all go off together and help.” Hild said slowly.  “I’m not sure I would trust Arivett with the dishes.  She is capable of delicacy, but such work would make her annoyed.”  
Thorin seated himself once more next to Bilbo.  
“It was Dis’ and my idea that the boys should learn never ask any to do something they were not prepared to do themselves.  Thror was not the finest example.  Without Mistress Dazla and her staff, the house and maybe the kingdom would grind to a halt.  Fili and Kili have had this drilled into their heads from an early age, no matter what Thror or Frerin said.”  
“Now they look on it as their duty,” Dis reflected.  
“And the others follow their lead,” Theoden nodded.  “And they don’t break the plates?”  
“Only when they juggle them,” said Dis with a laugh.  
“And who taught them to juggle?” Celeborn cocked his eye at Thorin, who shook his head and turned to stare at the Fundin brothers.  Balin attempted wide-eyed innocence, but Dwalin chuckled.  
“Aye, we’re both t’ blame,” Dwalin commented.  “Our mam taught us.”  
“No!” cried Dori looking admiringly at Balin.  “Did she really?”  
“She liked t’ throw Fundin’s weapon’s about,” Balin related.  “He had a thing abou’ droppin’ weapons.  She’d stand there wi’ his best knives, whetstones, an’ whatever else she could find, an’ chat t’ him with them all spinnin’ abou’ in th’ air.”  
Balin was encouraged to tell more stories of his and Dwalin’s youth, and a comfortable while was spent before it was time to change for dinner.  Dori assured everyone it would be quite informal.  
Ori bit into a slice of azzip covered in tomato sauce, farm curds, sliced sausages, chunks of onion, and mushrooms.  Stonehelm sprawled on the sofa beside him, deep in his ale, his feet on the table, while Bain nearly matched the Ironhills prince slice for slice  
Dain and Sculdis sat opposite, Sculdis talking with Arwen and Galadriel.  Arwen and Sculdis spoke while Galadriel put away at least one slice of every kind available.  
Ori was trying to decide which he liked best.  The hobbits were delighted with the azzip.  
“Slivers o’ garlic, bell pepper, an’ goat cheese,” reflected Hamfast dreamily.  
“Black and green olives,” said Bilbo.  
“Nah,” said Hamfast.  “Ya need somethin’ t’ balance ‘em.”  
“Perhaps more garlic in the sauce itself,” declared Bombur.  “I do have a sauce I mix with chiles.”  
“What are chiles?” Bell asked.  
Frodo enthused, “It’s like being on fire inside!  From your tongue all the way down to your belly!”  
The younger Gamgee looked very excited, while Hamfast and Bell didn’t seem quite as inspired.  
“Yes, well, ahem,” said Hamfast.  “Mebbe a little at a time.”  
“Dried tomatoes and bahvlo cheese,” said Bilbo.  “With a sprinkling of basil and paprika on the
“Oooooo,” said the faunts. “Yes, please!”

The elves were treated to their favorite of cheese and caramelized onions along with a basil leaf and cheese with a white sauce and another smothered in slices of fresh tomatoes and mushrooms. The hobbits enjoyed all the kinds and Theoden and Dain all but fought over the one with strips of beef, and bacon.

In the middle the fun, the front door burst open and Aewandínén - Mister Wandi, Ori corrected his brain - bounced into the room. He looked about and spotted Legolas sitting with Gimli, the Durin princes, and the rest of the younger set on the floor. To Ori’s shock, Mister Wandi flung himself across the room and enveloped his younger brother. Legolas was trapped sitting, and his confused face was on Mister Wandi’s shoulder as he was tightly clenched. The most anyone could see of Mister Wandi was his rear end as he knelt embracing his brother, yammering and sobbing on him. Gimli looked at Legolas with an unspoken question. By Legolas’ look of utter bafflement, they were equal in not having the least idea of what was going on.

Legolas finally managed to maneuver Mister Wandi to sit beside him. Ori was faintly annoyed that they conversed in Quenya, and when Legolas turned to translate to Gimli, he spoke too low for Ori to hear. Then Mister Wandi burst out in westron,

“Can you do this for me, dear Gimli? Surely you don’t want me to be melancholy!”

Gimli opened his mouth to say something cutting, but looking at the elf, the young dwarf’s face melted and Gimli grinned, showing all his teeth.

“Aye, sure, laddie. I kin get yeh a dog. In fact, I know a litter tha’s ready now. Be righ’ back.”

At that, Gimli darted out, leaving Legolas, Mister Wandi, and Thranduil staring after him. Conversation and play returned, but people kept glancing up at the door for Gimli’s return. Bard poo-pooed this, saying he had every faith in his Gimli.

About half an hour later, Gimli came back in, with his left arm tucked against his chest. He looked terribly pleased with himself.

“Here yeh are, laddie,” Gimli announced, as he crossed the room.

Mister Wandi and Legolas rose and looked down to see what Gimli was carrying. Gimli pulled Mister Wandi’s hands out and laid something small in them. Ori rose and went to see.

Mister Wandi stared down at a tiny, squarely built pup. Its body was covered in short, cream-colored fur, with its tail coiled tightly above its rump. Its black eyes glittered in its wide, flat, dark brown face. It yipped a little and licked Mister Wandi’s hands.

“Oh!” said Ori. “It’s a Dog of Dale.”

Mister Wandi cried out, transported, and buried his face in the puppy’s fur.

“My little mellon!”
Ori woke early. Dwalin was still snoring. He smiled. He vaguely remembered Dwalin sliding into bed last night and spooning against him. Ori decided to let his husband sleep as he slipped out to go and wash.

Ori arrived at the breakfast table, dressed for work. The table had a folded cloth and dishes piled on it. He could hear food being prepared in the kitchen. Larit came through.

“Good morning, sir. Tea?”

“Good morning, Miss Larit, yes, please, if it’s no trouble.”

She smiled and bobbed back into the kitchen. A moment later, Mistress Dazla arrived with a large, steaming mug.

“Good morning, young sir. If you’d like to step out on the patio, I’ll send someone through to set the table.”

Ori grinned at her.

“I can do it for you. How many places?”

She eyed him.

“We’ll do it together.”

In no time the table was done, Mistress Dazla thanked him and left him to sit down and put his face in his tea. He sat back, enjoying the line of heat as the tea threaded down and warmed his belly. He pulled out his sketch book and went through the pictures from the past few days. Looking critically at them, he noted his style was improving. Miss Oqizla came in and smiled.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning, Miss Oqizla.”

“We shall be serving once our Honored Bearer comes through.”

“That’s fine,” Ori grinned. “I may open the doors to the patio. It looks like it’s going to be a beautiful day.”

“It does look that way, sir,” she agreed, opening them before he could stir. “Sip, your pony’s coming to see you.”

“Oh,” Ori got up quickly. “I’ll go and tend to her. I don’t think I’d be popular with Mistress Dazla or Dori, if she trotted in here.”

He went out, taking his tea, and grabbing an apple from a bowl of fruit on the sideboard, leaving Miss Oqizla to giggle and return to the kitchen.

Honda nickered happily, her hooves sounding on the patio stone as they met. Ori held the apple for her and nuzzled her neck as she ate.

“I’m sorry you must stay out here. I know how you like trotting through hallways. Maybe one day, when everyone’s out, I’ll bring you in to see.”

He looked around and counted the windows. With his hand on her mane, Ori went down the walls and peeped in at a far one. He saw Dwalin still asleep on their bed.

He patted the window sill. Honda thrust her head through and snuffled.

“That’s where I sleep,” Ori told her. She withdrew her head and nodded wisely. Garnet flew out
and landed on Ori's shoulder. She tweaked his ear.

"Want me to wake him?" she asked.

Ori shook his head, "No, he was up late."

He made his way back to the patio, his boots shining with dew. A thunder of hooves came from the far end of the meadow. Harley and Minty were having a race. Honda's ears perked and, with another nudge to Ori, she galloped off to play.

Ori re-entered the breakfast parlor just as Dori swished through the door, immaculately dressed in light brown embroidered with gold.

"Pet, how early you are! What were you doing outside?"

Ori crossed the room and gave Dori a kiss on the cheek.

"Talking to Honda. I have work today and people are leaving, too. I wanted to be up early enough to say goodbye."

"Well, seeing as it will be the Blacklocks, the Lorien peoples, the Gondorian party and the Rohan, I think you’ve certainly over estimated their early-rising abilities."

Dori went to her usually chair and drew Ori to sit beside her.

"Where's our deary?"

"Still asleep. He was in Dale until late on patrol."

Seated against his husband's shoulder, watching Frodo and the Gamgees partake of breakfast, Ori had expected it would only be immediate family when Roäc returned, but just as Roäc arrived, in triumph, Lady Galadriel glided in. She kissed Arwen's cheek and patted Aragorn's shoulder.

"Ah, there you are, King Roäc," Galadriel looked up, smiling as the raven alit on Thorin's shoulder. "I hope all went well with King Ass—er... I mean, King Frerin?"

"I gave him the note," said Roäc, looking as pleased with himself as a raven could and taking the bacon Thorin offered. "He read it, turned purple, yelled at me. I called him an asshat and flew away. It was fun!"

This brought snickering from the Durins, the Groinuls, the Urs and the Gondorians.

"Excellent!" Galadriel cried. "Is that bacon?"

"My dear," said Celeborn, entering the room, not nearly as awake as his wife, "every day you become a little more... dwarfy."

"Thank you, dear!" said Galadriel. "I've been long and skinny for too many ages. I wish to be stout and sexy like dear Dori, or Margr and Vi. They have so much fun!"

Arwen swallowed a squeak and Aragorn stared fixedly at the tea pot, his mouth clamped shut. Celeborn smiled a crooked smile as he sat and said, half to himself, "There'd be more of you to love."

Bell cocked a look at the elf lady as though she would take on the challenge of making Galadriel fat.

"I was just thinking that," remarked Tharkûn, seating himself. Ori wondered where in Arda he had popped up from.

Celeborn helped himself to a roll and threw it at Tharkûn, knocking off the wizard's hat.

Fili and Kili cheered.

Frodo said, "Wow! He's a good shot!"

The faunts all 'hurrah'd' for good measure.

"Oh, yes he is," sighed Galadriel, gazing lovingly on her husband, whose expression was a mix of horror and pride.

Tharkûn picked up his hat, put it back on his head and growled, "Not in front of the dwarrow."

Kili yelled, "Hurray for Idad... Other-Elf!"

"Hurray!" cried Frodo and Fili.

Celeborn stared at his teacup, muttering, "Idad Other-Elf?"

He looked up at the young princes and said, "I suppose it's too late to get you to call me by my name?"

"Yep," said Frodo.
“Yep,” echoed Sam in frowning agreement.
Kili said, “Wait! What are we going to call Lord Elrond?”
“Yeh kin take a page from Chat’s book an’ call him Uncle Rhonda,” Balin suggested.
“Brilliant!” Fili shouted.
Thorin looked at Bilbo and said, “One dwarf’s family.”
Celeborn mused, “I suppose it’s better than ‘Uncle Kelli’.”
“Why would we call your raphcuctus bird ‘uncle’?” Kili asked.
Celeborn sighed.
“I’m going to stop talking now.”
Galadriel put her head on Celeborn shoulder and giggled.
“Try some bacon,” she said. “It’ll put hair on your chest.”
His eyes twinkled.
“Trying to fatten me up, too.”
“Imagine,” said Galadriel, “at whatever age we decide to go back to the Undying Lands, we’ll be the only fat elves in the entire world. And you might have a beard! And so might I!”
“Celebrian will be startled.”
“And envious, I’m sure,” Galadriel smiled and buttered a roll for her husband as he helped himself to bacon.
Balin gazed at Galadriel appraisingly. “Sapphires an’ starlight gems.”
“For what, Lord Balin?” she asked.
“Yer beard.”
Celeborn turned and looked his wife over with a teasing smile.
“You are quite right, Lord Balin, “ he agreed. “Starlight and sapphires would be perfect.”
Hild and Aris arrived at the table with Ahkn in tow.
“Any bacon left?” Aris asked.
“Just bringing more out, your generalship,” announced Mistress Dazla bringing a loaded platter.
“Lord Celeborn’s taken the last off the plate.”
Aris clapped Celeborn on the shoulder in passing.
“Good lad, put hair on yer chest.”
Celeborn looked up at her, but, unfortunately for him, his mouth was full.
Galadriel asked Aris, “Were you listening at the door?”
“No, milady. Why d’yeh ask?”
“Just wondering.”
“Well, Bearer,” said Hild, “we’re sorry to be leaving you and your wonderful table, but we can’t leave Arivett in charge forever. She might get to liking it far too much, and I still have most of my arms and armor in the store room.”
“We’d make yeh some more,” Aris commented, helping herself to bacon.
“I’d pout, and you hate it when I pout.” Hild’s lower lip plumped but her eyes twinkled merrily at her wife.
“Th’ poutin’, not so much,” Aris said, her eyes on her plate. “Th’ gettin’ stuff chucked at me head I could do without.”
“I never aim,” Hild replied with great dignity.
“No? I got a dozen dents in me skull tha’ say yer a lucky shot, then.”
“That’s why I live in my own kingdom,” Ahkn observed to Balin. “Please pass the cloudberry jam.”
“He never gets involved when we bicker,” Hild explained to Arwen and Gridr, who giggled.
“I’m far too old and far too wise for that shit,” reflected Ahkn.
“Your judgement is excellent,” said Celeborn.
“Thank you. It wasn’t achieved without a great deal of suffering.”
Hild stuck her tongue out at Ahkn. Ori sat up in surprise. He would have to draw that as soon as possible or he’d never believe she’d done it.
The Blacklock queen turned to Thorin.
“We are very sorry to take our leave, Thorin. I won’t ask if you’re sorry we’re taking our leave as I like to believe you’ll be just desolated without us.”
“II will,” stated Thorin. “But, no doubt Margr and Vi will come by for tea soon and soothe my pain and loneliness. Not to mention make sure I’m not oppressed with the silence.”
“Ouch!” laughed Bilbo. “Don’t you like the Steam Alley sisters?”
Thorin chuckled.
“I love them, as a matter of fact, but a little love goes a long way.”
“You’re going to love living with hobbits, then,” said Bilbo dryly.
“What’s not to love?” Thorin asked.
“Show up at my tea table with dirty fingernails and you’ll find out.”
As Celeborn finished his second bacon-filled, buttered roll, Galadriel smiled sadly and said, “Alas, we must also be on our way. I do feel we’ll all be together again soon, though. That’s not a premonition, by the way, that’s a threat.”
“Excellent!” said Gloin. “I never mind bein’ threatened by a pretty dam… er… elf.”
Oin turned to Binni.
“How does she want us to fret?”
“Hush, you. Drink your tea.”
Theoden and Theodred came in, dressed for travel.
“Oh, everyone’s here,” Theoden looked around. “Have we missed anything?”
“Roäc called my brother Frerin an asshat,” Thorin reported, idly buttering a slice of toast.
“Celeborn attacked Tharkûn’s hat with a roll. My sister sons now refer to Lord Celeborn as ‘Idad Other-Elf’ and we know more about the origins of the dents on Aris’ skull than we could ever wish.”
Theoden looked impressed.
“I apologize for my lateness. Theo, take that as a lesson in being prompt.”
“Yes, Da.”
Theoden turned and looked at his son, surprised.
“What did you just call me?”
“Da. Short for adad. You told me I should get to know the culture.”
Theoden rolled his eyes and sat, while Dori poured his tea.
“We love sharing,” Dori soothed, patting Theoden’s arm. “Have some breakfast.”
“Oh, yes,” Thorin went on, around a bite. “Lady Galadriel and Lord Celeborn have announced their new ambition. They are going to become fat and bearded like dwarrow.”
Theoden looked at the two elves while controlling his features.
“My felicitations,” he said, bowing with great solemnity.
Kili and Fili insisted Theodred sit between them for one last meal. The trio looked quite glum, Ori thought. Really, they had all known each other less than a week, but had grown very used to having one another around. Writing letters probably wouldn’t be enough.
Eggr flew in from the doors and landed in front of Ori.
“Hello,” Ori greeted the raven. “Is Master Brur ready for me to be at work?”
“No,” Eggr replied, pecking at the bacon rind Ori put in front of him. “He says take another two days, he’s getting a project ready for you.”
“Ah.” Ori wondered what this project could be. A shiver of excitement went up his spine.
Dis and Jani entered, with Thranduil not far behind. Ori noticed, to his amusement, Thranduil’s swagger had acquired a dwarfish edge - and Thranduil himself had acquired Bard, whose pace was slightly less harried as he followed, eyes on Thranduil’s swaying hips.
They sat. Dori poured tea. Jani, Bard and Thranduil chatted amiably with the others at table.
Dis frowned at her bacon.
Roäc peered at her, then the bacon, then back at her.
“You gonna eat that?”
Dis looked up at Kili with a dangerous expression.
“When were you going to tell me you were married?”
Kili, with his mouth full, stared back at his mother with bulging eyes.
Thorin sighed.  
“Namad, your timing is impeccable.”

Celeborn and Galadriel exchanged glances of dismay.

Kili took his time swallowing, then replied with a succinct and pithy, “Huh?”
“I presume,” Dis said, coldly, “that since you’re sleeping with Captain Tauriel, you must know you are now married to her.”

“Only in the way of the elves,” said Kili, nodding and refilling his mouth.

“Did you even speak about what this means, O Prince of Erebor?” Dis asked.

Jani glanced at her, began to talk, then erred on the side of breakfast.

Kili said around a mouthful of eggs, “It means a lot of things, actually.”

“You mean, you actually gave this some thought?”

Kili sighed and put down his fork. He and Tauriel exchanged looks.

“It means, Amad, that we have a formal relationship with the greenwood. Tauriel is King Thranduil’s foster daughter. It also means she’s given up her immortality for me. Also, if we have badgers, they’ll probably look like hobbits.”

Thorin muttered to himself, “Not a bad thing.”

Bilbo raised his eyes from his tea, “I had no idea Yavanna had such a sense of humor.”

Dis gaped at her younger son.

“You actually gave this some thought?” She was blatantly shocked.

“Yes,” Kili went on. “Besides, she’s my One. It’s not like I’m going against the will of Mahal.”

Celeborn cleared his throat.

“However, it doesn’t follow that you will be together forever. Dwarrow go to Mahal. Elves, should they die, dwell in the house of Eru. Look at Beren and Luthien, parted forever.”

Ori felt an irritation at the back of his mind, and suddenly the irritation said, “Tha’s a load o’ pony shit. Dead people ain’t filed away in boxes accordin’ t’ type. We ain’t gradin’ marble here.”

“Er…”

He looked at Dwalin in distress.

“Wha’s happened, love?”

“I need to say it word for word, but I may die of embarrassment.”

Mahal snorted.

“I’ll wait supper f’r yeh.”

Ori sighed.

He looked at Celeborn directly and spoke Mahal’s truth word for word, minus the warrior accent because, honestly, that would just be too weird.

Celeborn looked stricken, while Galadriel snickered into her hand and finally said,

“My dear Ori, you have just overthrown a major tenet of the spiritual life of middle earth.”

“Yer welcome,” said Mahal grumpily.

“Mahal says you’re welcome,” piped Ori.

Theoden wiped his mouth and said, “Do you actually talk to Mahal?”

Thorin shrugged.

“We all talk to Mahal. It so happens Mahal talks to Ori. It’s not always clear information. We don’t want people consulting Ori about what color tunic Mahal says they should wear today.”

Theoden nodded.

“Understood.”

This decided, Kili continued detailing his case to Dis.

“I figured we could do the fancy dwarf marriage thing later, since elves are - y’know - really - informal about this sort of thing.”

“That does not excuse the fact that you didn’t ask for permission to marry,” said Dis.

“Neither did you,” Thorin reminded his sister, with a look of pure mischief.

“That was different!” Dis growled. “Udad would never permit me to marry a blacksmith, even if he was my One!”

“So, you would give me permission because Tauriel isn’t a blacksmith?” Kili asked.
“Yes - I mean, no!” Dis replied.  
Fili practically levitated from his seat with excitement.  
“Brother!  You confused Amad!  I’m so proud!”
He lunged for his brother, knocking himself, Kili and Theodred to the floor in a heap, shouting and laughing.
Tauriel observed this serenely and turned to Dis.  
“I am very well aware our marriage will present certain… challenges, Princess Dis.  Some of them will even involve our species.” 
“An elf and a dwarf,” mused Dis, shaking her head.
Thranduil peered over at Tauriel.  
“You didn’t ask for permission, either.”
“It’s not usually required, my king.”
“I know,” said Thranduil, “I’m just trying on parental menace for size.”
Ori noticed that Sigrid and Bain were whispering to Tilda, whose eyes were the size of saucers.
They exchanged grins and Bain turned to his father.  
“Da?”
“Hmmmmm?” Bard was drinking his tea.  
“Does this mean you and King Thranduil are married?”
Bard’s eyes popped open and he clapped a hand over his mouth.  Thranduil cackled.  Sigrid leapt up, rushed over and embraced Thranduil from behind.  
“Then the Great Woudini was right!  Welcome to the family, Wicked Stepmother!”
“Yaaaay!” shouted Bain and Tilda.  “We have a wicked stepmother!”
The entire table erupted in laughter.  Bard managed to worry his mouthful of tea down and roared out.  
“That’s not!  I mean… Stop laughing!”
Bain and Tilda ran and hugged Thranduil.  Tilda climbed into his lap.  
“I love you, Wicked Stepmother!”
“I love you, too, Monster Child.”
Bard’s forehead clunked to the table.
Legolas and Gimli entered at that moment.
Bain turned to Legolas and shouted, “Brother!”
Legolas took a giant step back, toppled over Gimli and knocked them both to the floor.  Gimli roared with indignation and Legolas sat up and said, “Huh?”
Thranduil frowned at his son.  
“How many times must I tell you, my little leaf, not to make that noise?”
Bain offered Legolas a hand up, grinning hugely, while Bard sputtered and tried to come up with some sort of protest, but apparently couldn’t.
“It’s all right, Da,” Bain crowed.  “You don’t have to say anything, ‘cause it’s an elf thing, right?”
Sigrid loudly kissed the top of Thranduil’s head and proclaimed, “Dearest Wicked Stepmother!”
Thranduil patted her arm and said, “Dearest Ungrateful Daughter.  I hope you and Monster Child and Incorrigible Stepson will not live to regret your father’s… decision.”
“Ada,” said Legolas, grinning.  “What have you done?”
Celeborn snerked into his tea and Galadriel smacked his shoulder.
“Be nice.  He actually didn’t say a mean thing to you for the first fifteen minutes we were married.”
“His time’s about up,” said Celeborn evilly.
“What were we talking about?” Dis asked.
“You were upset because Tauriel and I didn’t ask for permission to marry,” said Kili helpfully.  
Dis sighed.  
“Never mind.  You can get married later.  Tauriel, welcome to the family.”
Tauriel rose and bowed, hand over her heart.  
“I am honored to be so welcome, Princess Dis.” She turned to Thorin.  “Is the permission of the
“For many weeks now, I have thought it a foregone conclusion, Tauriel, and you are very welcome. However, have you given any thought to where you will live? And, you are still your king’s captain of the guard and your prince’s personal guard.”

Thranduil snorted while Tilda tried to braid strands of his hair, but the strands would not stay.

“That might be problematic if Legolas were not also here most of the time. We will retire Tauriel as captain of our guard, retain her as Legolas’ personal guard and assume we will continue to live in one another’s arrow quivers as before.”

Thorin nodded.

“Sounds about right.”

Legolas, disentangling himself from Bain’s sloppy but heartfelt embrace, went to Bard and got down on one knee beside him.

Bard actually raised his head from the table.

“What can I do for you, Prince Legolas?” he asked wearily.

“You can call me Legolas, first off,” said the elf, smiling, “and allow me to congratulate you. This is a happy occasion. Isn’t it?”

Bard looked at Legolas, then at Thranduil, with Tilda still braiding diligently, and ran a hand through Legolas’ hair.

“It is, a very happy occasion. Thank you, Legolas.”

“A toast,” Thorin said, rising from his chair. “To the King of Dale and the King of the Greenwood, may their nuptials be blessed by all the valar and any other ethereal beings who know them.”

Everyone promptly raised their teacup and congratulated the pair.

Dwalin leaned back in his chair, his arm across the back of Ori’s.

“Looks like we’ve started a trend, love.”

Ori giggled. “Who would have guessed?”

“You know,” commented Theoden in a teasing tone, to his son, “I might just have to get married to keep up.”

Theodred snickered.

Sigrid said, loftily, “You may marry whomever you fancy, Theoden King, except me.”

Theoden sat back in surprise.

“Princess Sigrid! I don’t recall even broaching the matter with you or your royal father!”

Everyone at the table looked feral, except for Tilda, who was still playing with Thranduil’s hair.

Bard pinned Theoden with his eye and asked menacingly, “You don’t recall referring to my daughter, Sigrid, as a ‘nice chunk of woman flesh’?”

Theoden paled and sputtered.

“I never would!”

“You did,” said Bard, licking his lips in a way that would make Thranduil proud.

Theoden looked at Aragorn.

“You were drunk, Rohan,” said Aragorn. “I don’t think it’s binding.”

“You were extremely drunk,” Arwen assisted.

“My sincerest apologies, your highness,” Theoden offered Sigrid.

“Accepted, but it’s all right. It was flattering.”

Tilda piped up, “Then Da said I couldn’t become a nice chunk of woman flesh. I had to stay trapped in the library forever, or until he died, and Sig said judging by the vein throbbing in his head it’d be sooner rather than later.”

Bard said, “I don’t remember saying I would…”

He paused, then grabbed Thranduil by the shoulders, as if suddenly seized by a horrible realization.

“You’re going to die!” Bard shouted in the elf king’s face.

“Yes,” said Thranduil.
“But… but, you’re going to die!”
“Yes,” said Thranduil, “and so are you.”
“But your son is a hairdresser!”
“I have more than one, my love.”
“Legolas is becoming a dwarf!”
“I thought I felt rather short,” said Legolas, scooting back toward Gimli on his knees.
“I have a third son, remember, my love?” Thanduil asked. “Cemnesta is more than capable of watching the leaves turn colors in the fall and stalking around as if he owns the place. Which, he will.”
“Oh,” said Bard. “What’s his name again?”
“Cemnesta. He’s a healer. Right now he’s studying in the Undying Lands, but he’ll be back by the end of the decade. I shall send him a note.”
“So, what will happen to you when you die?” Bard asked.
“I’ll spend eternity mocking the populous of Eru’s halls and, according to Ori, you will spend eternity helping me do it.”
Bard thought a moment.
“I can live with that. Or not, as the case may be.”
“Are we all calm now?”
“I hope so,” grumbled Tilda. “You’re both squishing me!”
Celeborn turned to Galadriel.
“Really, who has to say anything?”
Farewells, Farming, and A Friendly Scheme.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Sigh, most of our dear guests are leaving but there are still a few surprises, and they are mostly Dain’s fault. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

After the momentous breakfast, the party went out to the courtyard. It was full of wagons, horses and ponies all hitched up or saddled and packed for travel. There were handshakes, hugs, kisses, and many promises of visiting to all parts of Arda. Thorin stood, proudly watching his guests and family. Bilbo stood next to him, their arms about each other and Frodo in front, standing on the toes of Thorin’s boots.

Ori reflected that all this camaraderie had happened because of Thorin’s coronation. Thorin had very simply introduced and forged relations with all the major crowned heads of Arda and secured bonds of friendship between them.

Theoden knelt to embrace the Blacklock Queen. Galadriel embraced Theodred. Aragorn and Dain and Sculdis exchanged hearty hugs and promises to stay in touch and visit. Ahkn and Bard and Thranduil chatted companionably.

Arwen was on her knees in Dori’s arms, Balin patting her back. Aris walked slowly with Fili and Kili, her arms slung about their shoulders, telling them something that had both princes shouting with laughter. Dis was hugging Celeborn fondly.

Dori swept up to Hild and bowed.

“I’m sorry Balin and I couldn’t accept your generous offer, dear Hild,” said Dori, “but perhaps this will soothe any fractured feelings.”

Dori handed Hild a folded piece of paper, which Hild opened. She shrieked and hugged Dori.

“Bearer! Thank you!”

“What do you suppose it is?” Ori asked Dwalin.

“Dunno, mebbe our Dori wrote ‘em a dirty story.”

But all such hopes were dashed when Hild turned to Aris and said, “Look! It’s the mushroom gravy recipe!”

“Tha’s champion,” Aris agreed. “Where’re we goin’ t’ get th’ mushrooms? They only grow in Erebor.”

“But they dry perfectly nicely,” Dori assured her. “We’ve included several bushels of the dried ones in your going-away present. Just remember to cook them in the same wine or stock in which they’re reconstituted to get full flavor.”

The Blacklocks went to the head of their wagons, and mounted their ponies, ready to go.

Ori turned and looked around for his husband. He saw Dwalin over by the Gondorian couple and went to them.

Dwalin said, “If yeh don’t mind, King Aragorn, Lady Arwen, Gnasher an’ Grinder an’ their friends wan’ed t’ give yeh a present.”

Arwen tilted her head.

“That’s very kind of them, Captain Dwalin. Aren’t they… goats?”

“Aye, but it don’t follow they got no manners,” teased Dwalin, nodding to Gibi.

“But of course not,” Aragorn agreed. “We’d be happy to accept a present from them.”

“They know yeh travel light,” said Dwalin, “but yeh’ll need a cart f’r this.”
“For the present?” Arwen asked as a packed cart pulled up. “What is it?”
“It’s wool rovin’.”
“Kazhmeer wool!” Arwen cried, suddenly very excited.
“That’s all wool?” Aragorn asked, agog.
“An’ there’s a lunch in there somewhere, too,” said Dwalin. “Mistress Dazla didn’t want any a’ yeh goin’ hungry.”
“Mistress Dazla made lunch?” Boromir asked, eyes bright.
“For all of us, Boromir,” said Arwen. “You have to share.”
Boromir put on a crestfallen look and simpered, “Yes, m’lady.”
“An’ don’t f’rget yer hats on th’ way,” said Dwalin.
“Hats?” Aragorn asked, one eyebrow raised.
“I’m sure th’ beaver dam is still there,” said Dwalin helpfully.
“Oh!” said Aragorn. “Of course. If we’re successful, shall we send you one?”
“Ah!” said Aragorn. “Of course. If we’re successful, shall we send you one?”
“Mistress Dazla didn’t want any a’ yeh goin’ hungry.”
“Yeh want a hat, too?” Dwalin asked.
“Sorry, we don’t have any left.” Dwalin said.
“Will you visit us?” Frodo asked, sniffling.
“I think, since our kings are friends, we’ll be visiting each other now and then.”
Rather than freeing the warrior, this just made the faunts cling tighter, until Boromir was sending looks of distress to his king, who could distract at least Frodo for a moment. Dain and Sculdis went over to assist.
Ori turned and saw Dori with the Lorien folks.
“Here you go,” said Dori to Galadriel. A large number of barrels had been loaded onto a cart for her ladyship. “Three of the barrels are cloudberry, but the rest are elderberry. Those things covered by the blanket are elderberry bushes for your orchard and here is the recipe for our Celeborn’s egg bread, and a few loaves to keep him happy on the journey.”
“You are so good to us, Dori,” said Galadriel.
“Well, you’re a sweet lass,” said Dori. “It’s not a chore to be good to you.”
Galadriel giggled and bowed to kiss Dori’s cheek.
Dori said in a stage whisper, “And that egg bread is quite fattening!”

“Excellent!” Galadriel cried.

Celeborn arrived, leading their white horses. A raphcactus bird perched prominently on the rump of one. The horse looked back at it continually with a sour eye, but had not bucked the bird off yet. Ori saw that Kelli had buried his claws into the saddle blanket. The bird’s body moved with the horse, but its head stayed maddeningly still.

“My dear, look what our Dori has gifted us!” called Galadriel, indicating the cart “It’s fattening!”

The lord slewed his eyes at Dain and said, “Capital! Capital!”

Haldir turned grey, but bowed politely to the assembled. Ori found himself wishing Vi and Margr were there to sneak up behind him and scream ‘Boo!’.

Bard and Thranduil arrived to exchange goodbyes with the Lorien. Thranduil looked from the bird to his cousin and grinned.

“Enjoy your fat bird,” said Thranduil merrily.

Celeborn turned to Bard and said, “I wish you the same.”

Galadriel smacked her husband’s arm.

“Behave, my lord,” she admonished.

“I am behaving,” said Celeborn. “I’m just doing it badly.”

Thorin and Bilbo exchanged bows with Celeborn and Galadriel, and Frodo jumped from Aragorn’s arms to Galadriel’s to hug and kiss her.

“Bye, Granny Glad!”

“Goodbye, Frodo dear. Now, remember to behave. Or, at least, don’t get caught. I’m sure your new cousins will be a great help with that.”


Dori went to the Rohan king and showed him the contents of the wagon packed for him. Ori was amused to learn most of it was a huge supply of xocolātl and recipes. There was a quantity of spices and also recipes for whipping up dwarrow mustard, which made the horse king roar with laughter. A lone box contained Theodred’s gifts of books: several histories of dwarrow along with music and poetry. Three Dale cows, a bull, and several goats stood tethered to the wagon.

Theoden thanked Dori and took his leave of the high king of all dwarrow. Ori stepped forward at Thorin’s nod.

“Theoden King.”

Rohan turned and smiled at Ori.

“Good of you to come and see us off,” he said.

“I would have in any case,” said Ori, “but I’ve been specially charged by King Thorin to put this in your hands.”

‘This’ was a book. It was written in khuzdul, but as it was an instruction manual for the arming up and saddling of battle rams, it was mainly diagrams anyway.

Theoden took it, turning the pages in obvious amazement.

“I’ve made notations in the margins in westron,” said Ori, “so some of the finer points aren’t lost.”

“This is for me?”

“Theodred assured me you can read. I know that’s not common in Rohan, since the spoken word is considered more important. Er… I hope you like it.”

Theoden got down on his knees and hugged him.

Ori thought Theoden was a very good hugger, just as Theodred had been.

“Thank you so much,” said Theoden. “You’ve helped make this one of the most important journeys of my life.”

Ori was stunned, but he managed a tolerable “Thank you.” into Theoden’s shoulder before he was released.

He smiled as Theoden rose to his feet and they bowed to each other.

Blushing, Ori glanced to where Kili and Fili were talking with Theodred. Fili handed the horse prince a long, loosely wrapped package.

“We had to do a little reforging,” said Fili, “but I think I finally have the length and balance right.
Kili made the scabbard.

Theodred gave out a startled breath as he drew the sword from the intricately tooled leather scabbard. It was a graceful, deadly thing, in the dwarven style, meaning it was double-edged, perfectly balanced, and heavier than it looked.

“I’ll have to work up to being able to wield this,” said Theodred.

“You’d better work at it,” said Kili with a grin. “You have until the spring to learn to knock us on our arses.”

Theodred admired the sword and thanked and embraced both the dwarf princes. Stonehelm, Bain, Sigrid, and Tilda came up for hugs, too. Bard and Rohan embraced over a hand shake. Sculdis pulled the horse king down for a hug via his belt and Dain slapped the man’s back heartily.

Ahkn bade farewell to the Rohan and the royal party of Durin, to Gloin and Gridr. Then Binni and Oin stepped up to the Stonefoot king and Oin thrust a small, milk-white bottle at him.

“Remember, rub this ointment int’ yer joints every night before bed,” Oin instructed Ahkn. “No skippin’ a night here an’ there, an’ don’t scrimp. I’ve already started another batch t’ send yeh. Keep usin’ it regularly an’ th’ next mornin’ yeh’ll be spry as a colt.”

Ahkn took the bottle, looking more than a little skeptical.

He opened his mouth, but Oin merely said a gruff ‘Yer welcome,’ before clapping him on the shoulder and stomping away.

“What Lord Warmth means to say,” said Binni, “is: Please take care of yourself. We’ll miss you.”

“Really?” Ahkn asked.

“It’s a loose translation. The ointment really does work, though. Oin uses it himself.”

“So, I’ll be spry, but I’ll become hard of hearing.”

“Only selectively.”

“Huh, not a bad idea, actually.”

Lined up behind his soldiers, Ahkn’s wagons fairly bulged with the goods he’d purchased, at least two of them carrying fashionable textiles, and a flock of goats were tethered behind.

The guests all mounted up and readied themselves. The Erebor royals stood back and, at a bellow from Aris, the whole the wagon train moved out of the royal caverns. There were shouts and waves, until the last wagon disappeared down the tunnel.

“Well, by all the blessings of Yavanna,” Bell said. “What a sight to be seen!”

Thorin chuckled. “Indeed, Mistress Bell, I can’t remember ever having so many visitors in the royal cavern or even in Erebor itself.”

“I’m glad it wasn’t just me, then,” Bard commented idly. “How we managed to keep them all entertained for so long is amazing.”

“Food and shopping, Bard, dear.” Dori replied. “Now, Bilbo, is it time for hobbits’ second breakfast?”

“It is indeed,” Bilbo concurred.

Once back in the house, Dori went into the kitchen. Bofur and Jani stood talking in front of the fireplace in the sitting room.

Judging by the amount of soot on Bofur’s nose, he had been down in the mines.

He looked up as Thorin entered.

“Zinc mine’s ready t’ reopen,” Bofur announced without preamble, “but the miners want the Bearer t’ bless it before they go to work.”

Balin did not look best pleased.

“It’s no place f’r me Dori in a zinc mine.”

Dwalin nodded. “Can’t say I disagree. Even properly braced, it’s dangerous, and there could be lots a’ yahoos in th’ dark. I’ll have t’ set up a security detail.”

“You will not,” said Dori in the doorway. “The idea! Wasting the warriors’ time on such a thing!”

“Yeh have a better idea, our Dori?” Dwalin asked.

“Of course I do, deary. Thorin, I’m going to borrow Ori after lunch. We’re going on a visit.”
Thorin laughed.
“I won’t be the one to stand in your way. Say hello for me.”
Ori looked between Thorin and Dori, frowning.
Thorin nodded to Balin, who went out.
Everyone else adjourned to the breakfast parlor where Bard, Thranduil, and Hamfast had seated themselves and were occupied in watching their children once more feeding their faces.
Ori had another cup of tea and a scone. Thorin had tea also.
After a short time, Thorin wiped his mustache.
“If you are both finished?” Thorin regarded the fathers with amusement. “Master Hamfast, King Bard and I would like your advice on agricultural matters.”
“Certainly, certainly,” Hamfast wiped his mouth again and got up from the table. Bard followed with a stretch.
“Are you coming along, Thranduil?” Thorin asked with a grin.
“Oh course,” said Thranduil, rising with a pat on Bain’s shoulder. “You require more supervision than our offspring.”
Bain and Legolas exchanged grins. Bain called after them,
“Bye, Wicked Stepmother.”
“Bye, Da!” Legolas added.
Ori and Bilbo fell into step as they followed through to Balin and Thorin’s office, where Balin had cleared Thorin’s desk. Ori arranged his tools on a side table, recording the meeting for both kings.
“Here’s a map of the outside of the mountain, Dale and the surrounds,” Thorin said as Balin unfurled a large scroll across the desk.
Hamfast looked over the map intently. He frowned and tilted his head.
“East is at the top,” Bilbo helped.
“As it should be,” said Thorin.
“As on all dwarven maps,” Bilbo added, poking the king with his elbow.
“Good to know, good to know.” Hamfast nodded.
“The lines are of elevation,” Thorin explained. “The Lake is listed at zero, features of the terrain ascend from that, thus we know the locations of the hills and valleys and their heights and depths.”
“There ain’t much land bein’ used,” Hamfast noted. “Looks like we’ve just got them few farms to the, er, south.”
“Yes,” Bard agreed. “This is the biggest, it belongs to Mistress Guernsia and is known as ‘Old Alderney Farm’ and deals in animals for the most part. This one is also quite large. It’s owned by Mister Hallow and is known as ‘Windy Poplars Farm’.”
Silence fell as Hamfast concentrated, muttered to himself occasionally, and finally judged,
“Looks t’ me your best bet would be here betwixt th’ mountain an’ these here ruins. It’s rollin’ meadows and in th’ lee of th’ north and west winds. The eastern ones’er usually warm and the land rises after so that’ll protect crops, too. The fields should be south-facin’ and I’m seein’ plenty a’ streams and th’ like f’r irrigation.”
“So, my people should start digging there?” Bard asked.
Ori could tell by his voice, Bard was completely at sea when it came to farming. Hamfast chuckled.
“Nah, I’ll get me plow out an’ get started. We’ll need t’ ask the farms f’r manure f’r the fields and then plow that all in. We kin use all a them fish guts from th’ docks, too. Prime fertilizer, fish guts. ’R so I’ve heard. We kin probably get a couple a late crops in an’ growin’ before winter sets in.”
“Really?” Bard was intrigued.
“What can you grow in that time which could be used as winter food for the area?” Thorin asked.
Hamfast stroked his chin.
“Definitely taters. Beans is fast growin’, we kin get squash an’ gourds, too. Mebbe onions. Too late f’r carrots, though. Neeps’ll go in, too.”
“Neeps?” Bard managed.
“Turnips,” Bilbo translated.
“Kale,” Hamfast commented. “Winter cabbages’ll do as well. Good thing I brought most a’ me crops with me. Go’ plenty a seed as well. With all that fish waste an’ such we kin probably get some good crops a’ mushrooms as well. We kin get the rest a’ th’ fields plowed an’ ready f’r next year an’ then we kin talk grains and th’ like.”

“You think we can grow grain here?” Bard demanded.

“Oh, aye. Mister Thorin, er... his majesty-”

“Thorin will do,” Thorin smiled.

“Mister Thorin tells me this here mountain has lava in it an’ that makes f’r grand soil t’ grow all kinds a’ things.”

Bard gazed at the hobbit for a moment.

“Mister Gamgee, would you and your family like a house in the Dale?”

“Aye, that’d be grand. I’ll have t’ talk t’ Bell about it. Bein’ in a mountain’s a bit strange f’r us. It’s a bit like a smial but th’ rock’s odd.”

“There’s a place near town that has land around it, if you like,” Bard offered. “It was an old fashioned dug out with a few rooms built on the front. My folk aren’t used to being underground, so it’s been empty for a number of years. I can get a few of my people to work on it.”

Thorin nodded and put in, “I can send a couple of craftsdwarrow down to make sure the underground parts are sound.”

“I’ll talk t’ Bell an’ see if she fancies it,” Hamfast agreed.

“Frodo will be rather put-off not to have wee Sam within arm’s length,” said Bilbo with a gentle smile. “But they’ll see each other often, and it’s certainly better than having the entirety of Arda between them.”

“Oh, I dunno, Mister Bilbo. I was thinkin’ it was best wee Sam an’ some of my tweens went t’ school. Mister Bard says there’s schools in Dale now, an’ Sam’s just old enough now to start.”

Balin, Bilbo and Thorin exchanged looks. Thorin nodded.

Balin said, “Actually, Master Gamgee, Thorin an’ Bilbo an’ I were thinkin’, if yeh don’t mind, tha’ I’d teach wee Sam here alongside our Frodo.”

Hamfast pulled back his shoulders, apparently in surprise.

“Ye want him t’ learn along with Frodo? To what ends?”

Bilbo said, “I believe Balin thinks he should start as he means to go on. Sam and Frodo will likely be spending a great deal of their lives in each other’s company.”

Hamfast nodded.

“Aye, I figured that. Our Sam was quite pinin’ for his Mister Frodo back in the Shire. Bell and I thought Yavanna must’ve meant somethin’ by it, since he’s the youngest son an’ not our eldest.”

Bilbo shot Balin a sly look.

“Of course, teaching those two magpies anything while they’re together will be quite the challenge of Balin’s life.”

Balin sighed.

“I thought a’ tha’. In terms of attention span, they could make Fili an’ Kili look like Ori, but I’m willin’ t’ work at it’

Dain blustered in with a sly look on his face, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

“Right, laddies. Yeh decided on where yer wantin’ t’ start plowin’?”

“Aye, Mister Dain,” Hamfast nodded. “Me plows still on the wagon. I’ll get me coos.”

“Wagon’s ready,” Dain told him. “Yeh won’t be needing’ th’ coos. I bin tinkerin’ wi’ yer plow an’ made some improvements.”

“Oh aye?” Hamfast cocked a look at the Ironhills king, who was grinning maniacally.

The group went out to the cavern, where Mokrah and Gibi waited with saddled ponies. Thranduil went through the stable to the meadow. Ori swung up on Honda. Dwalin got on Harley. Thorin went to a soft grey pony Ori hadn’t seen before and brought him over to Bilbo.

“Ghivashel, this is Vespa. He’s a very gentle creature and will carry you safely.”

Bilbo’s eyes lit up and he reach into his pocket and gave Vespa an apple. Vespa was delighted to eat this.
“Hello, Vespa,” Bilbo cooed, patting Vespa’s neck and stroking the nose. “I do hope we shall get on well.”

Bilbo turned back to Thorin.

“Thank you so much, my dear. My old pony, Myrtle, is retired now at Bombur and Erda’s inn. She has carried me all over Arda, lastly with Frodo. I was talking to the Urs and we agreed she has earned her right to spend the rest of her life in green fields and a warm stable.”

Thranduil came out of the stable, leading his elk.

“Ah,” said Dain. “I wondered where yeh were keepin’ yer deer-tree thing.”

“It’s an elk, King Dain,” said Thranduil. “As well you know.”

He leapt lightly to the elk’s back.

Dain snickered and did a little prance before bouncing onto Chopper.

Thorin held Vespa’s head while Bilbo swung himself into the saddle. Thorin mounted on Minty, Queen of All Ponies, and they all rode out.

They made their way, Hamfast driving the wagon with the plow covered in a large canvas tarp, out of the mountain and down to the area Hamfast had chosen on the map. Bard called to a few strong men lounging and they followed the party out of town.

It was a beautiful open area with only a slight rise as it extended toward the mountain.

Hamfast let down the wagon back hatch and removed the board skids he kept there. These in place, the plow, still covered, was rolled down to the ground.

At that moment, Mistress Guernsia and Mister Hallow rode up, both on horse back.

“Is this where the new plow is going to be tried out?” Mistress Guernsia called excitedly, dismounting in a hurry. Ori saw that her breeches were wide and flared, so it appeared she was wearing a long skirt as was traditional for Dale women. Mister Hallow rode toward them at speed. Dain grinned at the newcomers.

“Aye, here it is!”

Dain yanked off the tarp and there was the plow. Ori had see drawings of such. Hamfast’s was much larger. Ori looked it over.

On the ground was a steel square made up of four long steel shafts, each studded with rows of curved steel teeth. They were attached to a steel frame work that rose to a seat high in the middle with a large steel box in front. Off the box, and also attached to the steel frame, came great metal poles jointed and sitting on the ground making the whole thing look rather like a spider.

At the moment, it stood on four metal wheels on all four sides. Ori noted that the wheels were on pivots, which allowed them to turn anyway necessary.

“Where yeh wantin’ th’ field t’be?” Dain asked

“Startin’ here.” Hamfast reached down and yanked out a tuft of long grass. With the help of all the men, the plow was rolled over. The plow was set with the front teeth above the hole Hamfast had made.

“Now what?” Hamfast asked. “This here’s the weirdest thin’ I ever did lay eyes on, Mister Dain.”

“Up yeh get,” was Dain’s reply. Eyebrows raised, Hamfast clambered up and sat in the seat. He looked at Dain.

“See that’ handle in front a’ yeh? Give it fifty turns.”

There was a lovely metal handle, the end wrapped in wood, which stuck out the seat side of the box. Hamfast complied then waited.

“Now,” Dain went on, “see that lever next t’ it. Up, is to have it move; down, t’ stop it.”

Hamfast threw the lever. A loud ticking noise started and the plow’s spider legs ‘walked’ forward. The teeth dug into the ground and turned the earth into a furrow. The teeth behind turned it and again as did the third and fourth sets. The ‘legs’ drew the plow along.

The plow, once started, ticked along merrily. In fact, it began to pick up speed.

“This’s grand!” shouted Hamfast.

The assembled spectators cheered, Mistress Aldernay crowed in delight and Hallow grinned like a maniac.
“It’s a clockwork plow!” said Ori. He turned to Dain and hugged him. The ticking plow sped merrily away off toward the top of the meadow. The ticking slowed and the plow stopped.

There was a whoop from Hamfast. He turned back in his seat, looking at them.

“Oi, Mister Dain! How d’ yeh turn this contraption around?”

“Ooo,” Dain frowned. “Knew I’d forgotten sumthin’."

Thorin narrowed his eyes.

“You need a crank attached to the wheel frame.”

“Aye, cuz, I’ll put one on t’night.” Dain turned to the crowd. “Right, lads, who wan’s go down an’ turn our Hamfast ‘round?”

This brought a good deal of laughter and a few of the men jogged down the field and turned the plow. Hamfast could be seen cranking the handle at speed and, by the time he was set next to his first row, he threw the lever again and came ticking madly towards them.

“Champion, Mister Dain!” the hobbit roared. “Champion!”

The group of men who had turned him stayed where they were and shouted back to the rest to turn Hamfast when he got to them. After two more rows, Dain went up to the plow.

“Right, lad. Yeh got t’ hang a’ it?”

“Aye, I do, Mister Dain. I’ll have this field done before the afternoon’s half gone.”

“Well, we’ve got business an’ ‘re gonna leave yeh to it. Bring it back t’ the house when yer done and I’ll get somethin’ on so yeh kin turn on yer own.”

“Will do!” Hamfast nodded, threw the lever up and was ticking away from them once more.

Bard turned to Thorin.

“He’s mine, you know.”

Thorin laughed as the Dale king turned back to the rapidly appearing plowed ground.

“Coming?” Thorin asked Bard, who was now watching the plow fixedly.

“I’m going to stay and … supervise.” The man never took his eyes from the ticking plow.

“We’ll see you later then,” Thorin promised.

“Uh-huh,” was all they could get out of the Dale king.

“I’ll bring him back when he’s ready for a nap,” said Thranduil.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. We’re back to the business of the mountain and Dori has things to do. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

They arrived back at Fundin house. Dain and Thorin were still discussing how a steering mechanism could be attached while Bilbo and Ori chuckled over Hamfast and his new wind-up toy.

As they approached, they saw that the gates to the front walk had been propped open, funneling visitors to a smaller, rather familiar gate, whose posts kept the original gates stationary. No one could gain entry without passing through the hobbit’s little gate. The sign for the house had been changed to read in khuzdul ‘Royal Residence’ and beneath, in the Shire lettering, ‘Bag-End East’.

Ori and Bilbo laughed outright. Thorin rolled his eyes and shook his head. Dain looked pleased. “Capital, capital,” he approved. “Seem yer all moved in, lad.”

“So it appears.” Bilbo managed, his eyes twinkling with amusement.


“Then I suppose I shall accustom myself. It’s a sweet gesture.”

Gibi, grinning, opened the little gate to let them through.

“Master Gibi,” Thorin greeted the young stable hand. “Fili and Kili I presume?”

“No, sir,” Gibi was trying hard not to laugh. “The Fundin brothers.”

“Arseholes,” Thorin muttered around chuckles.

They came into the house and walked through to the sitting room where Dori greeted them and ordered them into the breakfast parlor for lunch. Dori was fabulous in their golden robe and loose hair dressed with clips of gold butterflies.

Soup, bread, cold meats and cheeses melted away. Company was thin as it was Dori, Balin and the Bardings, ‘Figrid’ and ‘Kiliel’ as Gimli started calling the four, with great pride, as both females automatically smacked him every time he did. After some whispering, Fili and Kili decided that Legolas and Gimli would be known as ‘Gigolas’, Gimli roared and Legolas laughed delightedly.

“Where’s Arne?” Ori asked. “I haven’t seen him in…in ages, it seems.”

Sigrid waved a hand. “He’s off after Master Brur. “You’ll need a chisel to part them.”

After lunch, Ori stretched and said, “I think I need a nap.”

“You only have a few hours, pet,” said Dori. “Best put them to good use. I’ll call you when I’m ready.”

Ori went to the bedroom and settled himself on the bed. He upended his satchel and went through the papers and drawings in it. He sorted these and copied a few out fair on his lap desk.

He finished and flopped back on the bed. It was late in the afternoon and he was really looking forward to going back to work tomorrow afternoon after the blessing of the mine. He wasn’t looking forward to tomorrow as Dain and his family were leaving. Ori stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. He was going to miss them terribly. Back in the spring, all he had were Dori and Nori. Now he didn’t have enough fingers and toes to count all his family on. He was part of the Fundins, who were related to the Durins and the Groinuls, and now to the Urs by marriage.

Bard and his little family had always been close to them, but since Fili and Sigrid were betrothed,
the family cords were tightening. Hild was a cousin of Thorin’s and her daughter Arivett was Ahkn’s daughter. It sounded as though Hild, Aris, and Theoden were hoping Arivett would wed Theoden’s nephew Eomer. Ori wondered about Eomer and Arivett. Would they like each other? He closed his eyes for a moment.

On the vast steppe, a handsome young man in a tall silver helm on a white horse watched the faraway forests and hills. Behind him, a small army of other men milled about on horseback. They, like the young man, were armored and carrying long spears.

Out of the far away forest, a squad of what looked like dwarrow approached on ponies. It was another small army, and in the lead a chariot driven by a dwarf warrior in magnificent armor. The dwarrow raced towards the horsemen. The young man gave a shout and his men rapidly formed up and galloped down the long hillside to met the dwarrow army. There was a great cry. The two armies stopped opposite each other. The young man swung off his horse with a grin. He strode across the intervening grass and the dwarf warrior stepped down from the chariot and came forward. They met and stood looking one another over. The young man pulled off his helm and tossed his long blond hair free. He was blue-eyed and his beard was respectable for a man. He spoke, laughed, and bowed deeply with a flourish.

The dwarf cocked their head and removed their helm to reveal a stunningly beautiful dwarrowdam. She was dark skinned, her beard wrapped in many cords of gold, her hair plaited into one great braid that wrapped around her head like a crown in itself, gold and sapphires twisted all throughout it. Her smile was feral as she bowed in return and offered her hand. The young man kissed it and looked up into her face as he did. She giggled.

The young man kept ahold of her hand as he called to his men. A few came forward. The dwarrowdam signaled to some of her followers, three came forward. The men brought a bejeweled drinking horn encircled with silver and, with it, a flask. The dwarrow brought a scroll, writing implements, and a stand. The dwarrowdam and the young man went over what was written on the scroll. They both signed it. The man turned and his second poured from the flask into the horn. The man knelt and spoke to the dwarrowdam. He raised the horn to her and drank then passed it to her. She laughed merrily and spoke, smiling at the young man. She toasted him and his men and drank the rest of the contents of the horn. The men and dwarrow armies cheered and the young man and dwarrowdam embraced and kissed hotly.

Tents were pitched and a great feast began. The couple reigned over the merrymaking.

Ori yawned and sat up. He heard the door open and Dwalin came in.

“Nappin’, love?”

“Just a little. Is it time for something?”

“Aye, Dori’s got tea goin’. Gonna be weird wi’ jus’ us.”

Ori giggled, “Just you, you mean. Dori’s said he and I are taking tea… out.”

“Aye, us being the Fundins, the Durins, and the Groinuls It’ll seem thin after wha’ we’ve go’ used t’ over th’ las’ few days.”

Ori led the way to the sitting room. While Dori fussed over Balin, making sure his plate and cup were full, Ori perched on the arm of Dwalin’s chair.

Ori considered that since Oin was present, he should mention his dream and said, “I had a dream about a dwarrowdam marrying a man from Rohan. Do you think it was prophetic?”

Everything in the room stopped.

Thorin, Dwalin, Dori and Oin all exchanged glances.

Oin leaned forward and said, “Tell me about this dream.”

Ori did so in exact detail.

“If it is in anyway prophetic,” said Ori, reflectively, “I think it’s about men and dwarrow getting along better, represented by the plans of Hild and Theoden.”

Dwalin coughed.
“Sounds like some of ’em’ll get along, anyways.”
Fili said, “Idad, when Theo got that letter from his female cousin, Eowyn…”
Thorin looked terribly amused.

“Either Hild is in for a surprise when she gets home or… I wonder what direction they rode off in
after the, er, honeymoon.”
“If they were just getting married,” Kili asked, “why did they need armies?”
“Maybe they were all gettin’ married,” said Gimli with a grin.
“They’re going to need a bigger tent,” said Ori.
“Come along, pet,” said Dori. “We don’t want to be late for tea.”
“Where are we going, Dori?”
“You’ll find out soon enough, pet,” said Dori with a mysterious grin.

In Steam Alley, a carnival atmosphere prevailed, most of it centering on the house where Vi and
Margr used to take rooms, and now had taken every room.
“I hope this isn’t all for us,” Ori whispered to Dori.
“I don’t think so, pet.”

As they approached the doorstep, they heard a shrill voice, raised in either pain or song, and then
they saw a block of a
dwarf, his long white hair and beard unbound in supplication and his hood in his hands, clutched to
his chest. He rested on one knee as he gave forth what Ori construed was some sort of love ballad.
When he finished, the windows above opened and the contents of a large scrap bucket cascaded
down and over him. The crowd leapt back, screaming with laughter and Margr’s voice trumpeted
over them.
“I said ‘no’, yeh great creep. I don’t want yeh back an’ I ain’t taken yeh back.”
“No, nor am I!” Vi’s indignant voice came tumbling out right after.
The shutters slammed shut.
“So,” said the besmirched balladeer, “I’ll take that as a solid ‘mebbe’ then?”
The shutters flew open again to reveal something very large and rather gaudily printed. At first Ori
was concerned it was
one or the other of the sister’s rear ends, but it soon became apparent it was the sofa.
“Oh, great Mahal,” Dori breathed. She flew forward, neatly skipping the vegetable peelings and
knocking at the door with dainty insistence. She called out gaily, “Margr! Vi! We’re here!”
The sofa halted in its passage and a gravelly female voice spat, “Oh, bugger! We’ve no place else
f’r them t’ sit.”

Back inside went the sofa.
Dori turned to the balladeer.
“I’d run a strategic retreat, my lad,” she hissed. “And for pity’s sake, go take a bath.”
Ori nodded and grinned at the dwarf apologetically, all the while edging around the refuse and up
to Dori’s side.
The city patrol, rather belatedly, dispersed the crowd.
“Awright, awright, nothin’ t’ see here. Move along.”
Ori heard the customary half dozen locks open and bolts shoot aside and the door opened to reveal
the sisters, smiles
wide and effusive in greeting and Ori realized they must have gotten a deal on the sofa covering.
The sisters hustled them up the narrow stair and into their apartment. Dori looked about as though
she had been tenderly escorted into the palace of the White City.
“My, but you have done the place up. It looks lovely!”
“Our pensions’ve come through at last,” said Margr.
“And Rogi’s back in th’ lockup, so he ain’t here t’ eat us out a’ house an’ home,” said Vi.
“What’s he done this time?” Ori asked, appalled.
“What don’t he do?” Vi replied, leading them to the table where the teapot stood fast by the tiny
kettle stove, used when
the regular stove would turn the whole flat into an oven by itself. “He’s always fancied himself the next Nori, yeh know, except f’r he’s never been a bit a’ good at stealin’.”

“That rather puts a damper on things,” Dori agreed.

Margr snorted.

“Day before yesterday he tried t’ pickpocket Lord Zark, missed an’ put his hand’s down Zark’s trousers.”

Vi laughed raucously.

“An’ so Zark says. Remember what he said, Mar?”

“Oh, aye. He’s standin’ there with Rogi’s arm in a grip an’ he says, ’Not those family jewels, yeh idjit! Th’ one’s in th’ house!’”

And they fell all over each other, all the while serving tea.

“Hope yeh don’t mind it’s a bought cake,” Margr said. “It’s not so bad now, but yesterday it was so bleedin’ hot I thought me tits’d run clean off an’ slide down me legs.”

The cake was strawberry, with pink icing.

“Is this from the Gondorian bakery?” Ori asked. “It’s really good.”

“Aye, we’re runnin’ up quite th’ account there,” said Vi.

“And if we keep it up, we’ll soon be running one with th’ cloth merchant, widenin’ our tunics,” said Margr.

They ate and drank and gossiped, and as time went on Dori said,

“Well, as we’ve always been good neighbors, I have a favor to ask.”

Vi and Margr looked at one another and swallowed, then Margr leaned over confidentially and brayed, “Yeh ain’t run short on coin?”

“Oh, no, no, but you know the zinc mine is set to open again and I’ve been asked to bless it tomorrow morning, if you can imagine such a thing. I mean, really, what does one wear?”

Vi poured Dori another cuppa.

“Yeh want t’ borrow some of our clothes? Dori, yeh’ll look like yeh wrapped yerself in th’ curtains. Yer far too slight fer tha’.”

“Oh, no, but thank you,” said Dori. “My tailor would be most affronted if I didn’t go with one of his designs. No, I was wondering if you both wouldn’t like to accompany me as my ladies-in-waiting?”

The shrieks of joy set dogs baying all over the neighborhood.

“Ladies in waitin’!” Margr cried.

“How well tha’ sounds!” Vi added.

They turned to each other, still shrieking and violently butted heads in delight.

“I take it that’s a ‘yes’?” said Dori.

“What’ll we wear?” Margr wondered abruptly.

“Should we have clothes made t’ match yer presentation robe, dear?” asked Vi.

“No!” Ori yelped, then said in a calmer tone, “I hardly think it’s necessary, do you, Dori? Think of the time involved. Master Mahrdin had to weave like a mad dwarf just to produce enough for you.”

“I will likely be wearing Balin’s Fundin red,” said Dori, “with a cloak edged in Durin blue. Bound to be rather chilly in the mine, after all. I do have a bit of a surprise for you ladies.”

“Yeh aren’t ever goin’ t’ make us guess!” Vi cried.

“I wouldn’t tease about something of this import,” said Dori loftily. “I’ve consulted with Miss Dipfa, my tailor’s apprentice, and she has been working on designs for you ever since you first met her. I believe, if you pop round to their shop in about an hour, you’ll find her ready to fit you.”

These shrieks put the last to shame.

“Oh,” said Vi. “Wait a mo’, Mar. How could we afford them designer things?”

Dori said, “I’ve asked Mahrdin to send me the bill.”

They pounced on her, still shrieking.
Ori was now seriously alarmed.
“Yer good as gold, our Dori,” said Margr, “aye, an’ better.”
In the carriage on the way home, Ori said, “Dori, don’t take this the wrong way, but have you lost
your mind?”
“I can’t have a few friends at my back to support me? Besides, your dearie is threatening to send
me out with bodyguards.”
“True,” Ori admitted.
“The ladies are less... official. Given what Margr did to the thief, I think I need have no worries.
Besides, Balin is fretting over me going into the mines at all. Too dangerous, he says. Silly dear
dwarf. As if I haven’t lived in a crime-infested shit hole most of my life.”
The driver choked but said nothing.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Dain has to get going and we’re off to bless the zinc mine, as everyone wants more xocolatl. And who could blame them! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori sighed as they got back to Fundin house. Nori was there to tell them Bofur and Jani would be back later. Dori thanked the stable hands and promptly told Nori, who was polite enough to hand Dori out of the coach, about Rogi’s latest exploit.

“Oh? Wha’d’he get?” Nori demanded.
“The actual family jewels, as he missed and put his hand down Lord Zark’s trousers.”
Nori groaned and rolled his eyes.
“It already has a bad name!” Ori pointed out as they entered the house.
“An’ no wonder, wif all these grease-fingered numbskulls about. What’s the world coming’ t’ is what I’d like t’ know?”
Nori huffed in annoyance and the subject was dropped as Dori led the way to the sitting room.

They went in to find Balin reading before the fire and Dwalin, with his feet up on the low table, sharpening Grasper. He glanced up with a grin for Ori.

“Yeh get th’ sisters t’ agree?”
“Oh yes,” Dori cooed leaning down to give Balin a kiss. “We shall take them up in my coach, I’ve decided on the teacup, tomorrow morning and we should be at the mine by sunrise.”

Balin sighed, “Very well, m’ beloved. If yeh insist, an’ I know yeh do. I admit I feel less worried with th’ sisters as yer guards. There’s no nonsense about ‘em, when it comes t’ takin’ care a’ yeh.”
Dori laughed and patted his One’s arm and fluttered away to the kitchen. Ori went and climbed into Dwalin’s lap. Dwalin gave a grunt of approval and tucked Ori close.

“How was th’ tea?”
“Margr and Vi are being courted by some poor sod,” Ori related with a grin. “He left when we arrived, after they dumped the scrap bucket over his head. He can’t sing.”

“With ‘r without’ th’ bucket?”
“I don’t think it would have mattered or been any improvement. The sofa was next, but Dori called up to them. They pulled it back in the window, when they realized we’d have to sit on the floor if they dropped it.” “Then I feel even better,” Balin reflected with a smile. “If they were willing t’ chuck a sofa, they’re exactly th’ sort t’ protect me Dori.”

The sitting room door to Bag-End East opened. Thorin and Bilbo came in, Frodo and Sam romping behind them.

“Ah, you’re back,” Bilbo smiled to Ori. “And how were the ladies?”
“Dwalin’s referring to the fact that when we arrived, they tossed out a bucket of scraps over their suitor’s head and were about to push the sofa out the window on him.”
“The sofa?” Bilbo asked, brows rising in alarm. “They were going to throw a sofa at a suitor? I must remember that.”
“Oh yes?” Thorin inquired. “Shall we be seeing the Mighty Gonad throwing sofas at his enemies?”
Bilbo gave Thorin a dirty look and poured them both cups of tea.
Dori came back through, giggling.
“I see my dear brother and sister-in-law are cooking for us again, tonight.”
“Aye,” Dwalin commented. “He said he’s gonna have somethin’ special an’ spicy.”
“Spicy?” Frodo was beside the chair in an instant. Ori grinned and Dwalin patted the faunt’s head.
“Aye, wee one, so yeh better leave a bit f’r us t’ eat.”
Frodo cocked his head, thinking. “Well, maybe.”
“Now, dearest Frodo,” Dori cooed and gathered both Frodo and Sam to sit with them on the couch. “I’m sure your idad Dain shall make plenty for all.”

Ori seated himself in the chair Dwalin pulled out for him. The table groaned under a plethora of covered dishes and many small bowls with different sauces and other condiments. As everyone got themselves seated, Dain and Sculdis came out with an enormous covered deep dish. They set this before Dori and whisked off the cover. The scent of the spices alone made Ori’s mouth water. The dish brimmed with little packages of filled fried dough.
“This is a Firebeard recipe we’ve kept up,” Sculdis explained. “They call ‘em samo’s, ‘cause after yeh have one, yeh gotta have some more.”
“Really?” asked Wee Sam.
Ori bit into the packet and moaned with delight. The spices burst on his tongue and warmed him through.
Hamfast and Bell exclaimed over the flavors and the faunts tucked in voraciously.
Bombur and Erda split open their packets, examined the contents, and guessed the ingredients, making both Dain and Sculdis laugh, and promise them the recipe.
Bofur and Jani sighed in unison at the sight of all the food. Nori patted Bofur’s back.
“Get yer chops ‘round that, love, ‘r the rest a’ these folk’ll leave yeh nuffin.”
“More in kitchen,” Dain mumbled comfortingly around a mouthful.
“Aye, an’ there’ll be more, once we don’ have yeh chuckin’ it all down, big bruv,” Nori teased.
“Yer as bad as tha’ hobbit, ‘r my granny.”
Dori and Nori stopped eating. Ori looked around the table. Granny wasn’t present. Ori tried to remember the last time he’d seen Granny Klak.
“Where is Granny?” he asked.
“Think she’s mopin’ over that Kib?” Nori asked. Dori frowned, pushed back from the table, and hurried away. Ori thought over the last time he’d seen his granny. She had been sorry to have Kib leave, but she hadn’t looked despondent. He frowned. He couldn’t remember seeing her since then. Had she shut herself in her room to hide her sorrow? It didn’t seem like her at all.
Everyone else around the table agreed the last time they saw her was when the Court of Miracles left.
They all heard a noise like an angry cat from upstairs. Dori stamped at high speed from the upstairs hall, down the back kitchen stairs, and out the pantry. Dori burst into the room.
“That ungrateful crabapple! After all we’ve done!”
“What’s happened?” Thorin demanded, on his feet in a moment. Balin caught the enraged Dori in his arms. Dori plumped down in his chair and threw a balled up piece of paper at the high king.
“Read that!” Dori stormed. “Just read that! Of all the nerve!”
Thorin opened the maltreated paper while Balin petted and stroked his mate. Bard and Thranduil poured wine and murmured soothing things.
“Whatever’s happened, brother?” urged Dis. Thorin blinked at the paper then sat down. He cleared his throat and read out loud.
“Dearest great grandchildren,
Your granny has decided to have a little adventure.
Don’t worry. I’m sure I shall be very safe in young Kib’s arms.
Back sometime.
Love to you all,
Granny Klak”

There was a collective gasp, then the giggles began. Ori choked and tried desperately not to laugh. Granny had run off with the circus!
The giggling grew into hearty laughter. Dori slowly unbent enough to simply look huffy.
“Of all the silly, badger-ish trick! Really, why couldn’t she have just told us? No one has any manners any more! Thrandy!’’
Thranduil swallowed his amusement and became stern. “I fully agree with you, dear Bearer. My own youngest son and my captain. No one asks permission any more. Courtesy has died an ignominious death. It is very sad.”
“Hey!” cried Sigrid indignantly. “You didn’t asked permission or tell anyone before you…” Sigrid searched for an appropriate word. “Before you deflowered our father.”
This made the amusement worse.
Bard found his tongue after gaping at his eldest and snapped.
“Your mother and I…deflowered each other many years ago, thank you very much.”
“Fine,” Sigrid frowned. “Then, re-deflowering our father!”
“Re-deflowering?” Thranduil looked delighted. “You mean I replaced his …er…flower? When shall we expect his flower to bloom?”
“He was bloody bloomin’ this morning,” Nori pointed out around a mouthful. Thorin and Bilbo coughed over their tea and Dori giggled.
“Shut up, Nori,” Sigrid scolded. “My sweet, innocent father has been besmirched.”
“Besmirched!” Bain echoed loudly.
“Totally besmirched!” Tilda piped up and went back to eating, utterly oblivious to what was going on.
“Really, Evil Stepmother!” Sigrid tried to look severe, but couldn’t quite manage it, while she wagged a finger at Thranduil.
“Ada!” Legolas gasped, eyes wide with mirth. “I never thought I’d live to see the day where you went about besmirching!”
“Legolas, don’t help!” Bard pleaded.
“Yes, Da.” Legolas cast down his eyes, demurely.
“Well,” Dori settled and served herself more stuffed grape leaves filled with rice, beef and spices.
“I suppose after living with that clan for so long, our granny needed an adventure.”
“Honored Bearer,” Bujni said solemnly, “as the new head of Clan Rikanta, I shall try and make things more exciting among us.”
“Thank you, Bujni dear,” Dori smiled sweetly at him. Legolas and Sigrid began to argue over who had been besmirched. Fili and Kili and Bain helpfully prolonged the argument.
Ori wondered when Granny would come back. She hadn’t been their granny for long. She had adopted Dori right at Dori’s presentation which had been a mere… Ori frowned at his thoughts. How long had he and Dwalin been married now? It was hard to think of life without his One, but it wasn’t that long.
“What’s go’ yeh frownin’?” Dwalin murmured, helping himself and Ori to something hot and wrapped in what Ori thought must be cabbage leaves.
“I’m sorry, Dwalin, I was trying to figure out how long we’ve been married and I can’t.”
Dwalin roared with laughter.
“We’ve been so busy,” Ori excused himself lamely. Dwalin gave his knee a squeeze.
“Jus’ glad I ain’t th’ only one who can’t figure it out.”
This made Ori giggle and Thorin raise an eyebrow at them.
“Me an’ Ori’re tryin’ t’ figure out how long we’ve been wed,” Dwalin explained. There were
various murmurs around the table.

“Don’t look at me, “ Dori said imperiously. “I wasn’t there.”
“Me, neither,” Dain took the same tone.
“I wasn’t either,” Thranduil chimed in.
“I think I was out fishing,” Bard put in his two coppers.
“I hadn’t been introduced to any of you then,” Bilbo helped.

Everyone took their turn pointing out that they had not been there until Gloin offered to go and check the date on the contract. He believed he had filed it, but Balin told him it was in the office as Dwalin was of royal birth. Thorin laughed and smiled down on Ori.

“Ori, you and Dwalin are each other’s One, thus you have always been married in the eyes of Mahal.”

“I like that answer,” Ori snuggled his head into Dwalin’s shoulder.
“Aye, works f’r me.”

“Thou can say thou didst wed in the spring.” Bifur decided.

“Yes, but if we don’t know any dates, how are we to have any parties?” Dori complained. Balin patted his betrothed’s hand.

“Beloved, yeh kin have any amount a’ parties yeh like as they’re always a great success.”
A toast was drunk to Dori’s ability to host wonderful parties.

“And a toast to Ori and Dwalin,” Thorin said, rising. “May your wedded lives be merry!”

Everyone cheered and toasted them. Ori blushed and glanced at Dwalin, who was staring back at him with the look that always made Ori’s muscles tighten pleasurably. He grinned, with all the guests gone and this business with the mine done, things should go back to their accustomed grooves and he would be able to spend this days in research and his nights with his beloved husband. It was a good thought.

The rest of the evening was concentrated on the Ironhills family as they were to leave after the blessing of the mine first thing tomorrow.

Breakfast was before dawn and a hurried affair.

Dori looked perfect and mysterious in a red on red brocade velvet gown that bared her shoulders and floated down to her feet, bare but for several slender mithril anklets. Her hair flowed down and only a few tendrils of mithril threads on ruby hairpins dressed it. She wore a few mithril bracelets and the late Lady Fundin’s sigil ring. Ori was dressed up in Dwalin’s green. Thorin was in his usual blue. Balin helped Dori into the gaily festooned teacup. Balin insisted on armored and armed Furh’nk driving and Balin’s own pony, Ducati was hitched up together with Dori’s new pony, Aprilia, a sweet, dappled gray creature with very hairy fetlocks that covered her hooves.

“Have you decided on why you will say?” Thorin asked the Bearer. Dori giggled delightedly, “No, I rely upon the divine to inspire me.”

Practically, there was no reason for Dori and Ori to ride to Steam Alley to pick up the sisters just to bring them back into the mountain.

“But it will make people happy to see it,” said Dori. “Besides, I want someone besides us to see this outfit in the daylight. Mahrdin worked hard on it and I think I look terribly well.”

The day, thankfully, had dawned cool and breezy. Along the way, Dori fanned herself lazily anyway, with a silk red folding fan on silver ribs. As they rode along, the streets grew increasingly full. Apparently word travelled faster than even Dori’s teacup. Dori nodded graciously at everyone who called to her. Had she been queen, Ori doubted she would be enjoying this more.

“You’re such a ham,” he murmured.

“Oink. Oink,” said Dori pleasantly, smacking him lightly on the arm with the folded up fan.

When they arrived in Steam Alley, a huge crowd had gathered to see them off. While they waited for the sisters, they chatted with their former neighbors. Ori was glad to see so many of them looking healthier and better fed than previously, even those who had taken refuge with Mistress Annis, who
was known to take it the poorest of the poor just to ensure they had a safe place to sleep. Mistress Annis gave them the pleasing news that the numbers seeking her protection were decreasing as work to rebuild Dale and pensions were coming through apace.

The door to the sisters’ house opened and Vi and Margr strode out on the stoop and stood side by side, opposite arms out to display their finery. The crowd oo’d and ah’d.

“Wha’d’yeh think, our Dori?” Vi asked.

“Ain’t it a treat?” Margr added.

They were dressed in loose caftans with whimsical, diagonally streaking lines of greens, blues, reds and purples across a gold ground, the cloth so cleverly cut that when they stood side by each like this, it looked like the lines started on one caftan and continued on the other. Their hair and beards had been likewise streaked and gathered up and stiffened to stand up in the same direction as the rushing colors of their caftans. It looked like someone had thrown cans of paint at them in a wind storm.

“That is amazing,’’ said Dori, in what Ori took as total honesty.

“Tha’ Dipfa lass’s a genius,’’ said Margr, as Furh’nk handed her in. “She knew exactly wha t’ do, didn’t she, our Vi?’’

“Aye, she said there was no point in close-fittin’ togs as caftans suited us. It’s like wearin’ air, ain’t it, yet all yer bits’s still covered. Most comfy tunic I ever wore. We’re gonna wear ‘em ’til they fall apart, says I.’’

“Betcherarse,’’ said Margr, waving to their guards, then, “Master Furh’nk! Good t’ see yer awake!’’

“What did Dipfa say the design represented?” asked Ori, because he knew it must mean something.

“She said we’re t’ represent th’ swirls o’ mystical energies o’ th’ universe as channeled by th’ Bearer, though made visible, or somethin’,’’ said Vi, poofing down on the carriage cushion with a giggle. “Oh, an’ we’ve had a note from our Glorfy, an’ he’s bringin’ us a bigger bed!’’

“It ain’t exactly comfy f’r him,’’ said Margr, “sleepin’ with his legs hangin’ over th’ edge o’th’ mattress from th’ knees down.’’

“Mind,’’ said Vi, as the carriage moved on and they all waved to the gathered crowd, “we’ll be takin’ over our Rogi’s room. It’s th’ only room that’ll fit such a big bed.’’

“You’re still allowing Rogi to live with you?” Dori asked.

“Aye, downstairs. Why? Yeh allow Nori t’ live with yeh,’’ said Margr with a shrug.

“With Nori, I’m not sure there’s any ‘letting’ allowed,’’ said Dori with a sigh. “If he can walk through walls, there’s really no use in locking him out.’’

“Oh aye,’’ said Vi. “Truth t’ tell, we was thinkin’ it were time f’r Rogi t’ get a place o’ his own, but there’s no point if he’s just in an’ out a’ th’ lockup anyway. Whenever he was out, he’d just be clutterin’ up th’ street ’til he was in again.’’

“We told him he could stay in th’ rooms downstairs, an’ as long as he don’t annoy Master Glorfy,’’ said Margr.

The sisters exchanged looks and giggled evilly.

“So, our Dori,’’ said Vi as they rode into the mountain. “Are yeh wantin’ us t’ do anythin’ in particular in the mine?’’

“Besides look imposin’, so yer hubby ain’t worried s’ much?’’ Margr asked.

Dori shook his head.

“That dwarf. I could have the entire army of Erebor guarding me, it wouldn’t make a difference.’’

Ori steeled himself as they prepared to enter to the mine lift. True, it wasn’t the same lift as he’d descended before, but they were ultimately going to the same mine, and the memory of the smells and sounds, the feel of the bowed and straining walls, had never really left him.

He glanced up at Thorin, who turned his head to give him a small grin of encouragement. Ori could do this. He had done it before.

The lift slid to a stop, and Ori was amazed at how quickly they had descended, and how
smoothly. But this was the way it was supposed to be, wasn’t it. The Emerald Mine was the oldest and best-equipped in Erebor.

The gate opened onto a large, well-lit antechamber, now filled with miners. Beyond the crowd, straight ahead, lay the adit to Zark’s mine. The temporary excavated passage to the zinc mine gaped open to their right.

Bofur walked out into the antechamber ahead of them and called out, “Bearer’s in the mine!” before turning right and leading them down the passage.

The nobles fell in behind him, Dori at the head with Ori beside her, and the sisters at their backs. They quickly reached the temporary antechamber to the zinc mine, with the adit ahead of them.

Bofur continued through without pause, Jani now beside him as they called out into the still-empty passages, “Bearer’s in the mine! Bearer’s in the mine!”

They weren’t only telling the other dwarrow, Ori knew, but also telling the ground itself.

Dori gathered her robes around her.

“Well, shall we proceed?” she asked, gesturing to the mine itself.

“How can ye no’ give th’ blessin’ from here?” Balin asked softly.

“Do you want me to bless the adit and sorting room, or the entire mine? Really, Balin, if the miners are to have any faith in the place, I should at least go where they’ll actually be working.”

She swept on with Ori in tow, Vi and Margr close in their wake. Ori glanced over his shoulder at them. The sisters looked like gold-clad warg versions of dwarrowdams.

Ori thought it was a good look for them, actually.

For all of Dwalin’s concerns about ‘yahoos in th’ dark’, it was quite bright in the mine. Ulfr’s glowing white discs had been strung along the tunnel, the floor of which was leveled, and widened to accommodate walking space as well as mine tracks. It was dry here, the walls well-shored, the smells that of stone and soil and nothing more. The thrum of well-made and well-kept machinery underlay everything.

About a hundred feet down the tunnel, at a large, open space where several tunnels would eventually meet, Dori stopped. The crowd continued to file in behind her, the miners all looking over each other’s shoulders to see, and no one made a sound. They simply waited.

Abruptly, the air in the tunnel thickened and charged.

Everyone except Dori, who turned to the right, walked across the tracks and put both hands flat on the rock wall. Ori scrambled to keep up, though the air was suddenly thick as suet. He moved as close to Dori as he dared, but could only get within about five feet of the Bearer, his pen moving across the page almost independently as his attention was caught and held fast.

Margr and Vi, as though drawn, went to bracket Dori and each put a hand on her shoulder.

A breeze Ori could not feel swirled around Dori, sweeping hair, beard and gown in an invisible storm.

So low he could barely hear, Dori started to chant. The words were in old khuzdul, such as Bifur spoke, but Bifur’s speech likely never had such an effect. The reds of Dori’s robe pulsed bright and dull, and then all the red drained out of the fabric in a rush, up through Dori’s arms and out her hands into the rock, infusing it and spreading along the walls as the chanting grew louder. Ori had never heard these words, but he found himself chanting as well, and Margr and Vi, then Balin and Dwalin, Thorin and the company, the soldiers and the miners.

Ulfr’s glowing discs shone red and beat like hearts to the chanting, which echoed through the tunnel.

Then, at once the tide flowed back through the walls, into Dori’s hands, down her arms and back into her gown, scarlet on red once more. As the last notes of the chant faded, the air began to lift. Through the air drifted a word they had not chanted. A deep, masculine voice breathed,

“Mizimel.”
Mizimel. Jewel of jewels.
Dori’s shoulders relaxed.
Margr and Vi’s hands went to their sides.
Dori’s hands went to her sides.
She shook herself, as if waking, and turned back to them all with a grin.
“Well, that's done,” said Dori, as if she had just washed the dishes. “I do believe it's time for tea.”

But first there was an unpleasant duty to fulfill. When they returned to the royal cavern, Dain and Sculdis had packed up and were ready to leave for the Iron Hills.

“Are you sure you can’t at least stay for tea?” Dori asked Dain, sticking out a lower lip.
Dain chuckled and patted her cheek.
“Yer cute as pie, me dumplin’, bu’ if we don’t go now, we may never go a’tall.”
Dori’s face suddenly brightened and Dain’s laughter boomed out.
“None a’ tha’, now. We’ll see yeh again at Durin’s Day.”
Dori sighed.
“I was afraid you would insist, so I’ve taken care to pack what we’ll be having for elevenses, lunch, and tea in baskets for each of you,” she said.
“I’d never expect anythin’ less.”
Sculdis, Gridr and Dis stood nearby over an open box on the tailgate of Sculdis’ wagon. The Ironhills queen shrieked excitedly.
“Oh, what beauties! Gridr, Dis, thank you!”
Dain turned to smile at his wife.
“Wha’ have yeh there, me nugget?”
“Chisels, files, pliers an’ hammers, all engraved with me name!” Sculdis cried.
Dain sighed.
“I suppose me borrowin’ one every now an’ then’s out’ve th’ question.”
“Try it an’ I’ll chop yer fingers off,” Sculdis promised happily, blowing him a kiss.
Chopper nudged Dori with his snout, looking hopeful.
“Yes, we have a gift for you, too, so don’t give me those piglet eyes. There are four barrels of yams and a demijohn of maple syrup for you, besides.”

Ori could have sworn Chopper smiled as Dori fondly patted the huge battle boar. Ori looked around for Dain’s other son and saw Stonehelm off in the corner, talking to Bain as they looked through a crate containing books on Sindarin, and Gondorian language and philosophy and one on the history of the people of the Riddermark, all by Professor Bilbo Baggins, the first cowritten with Lord Elrond of Imladris.

Bilbo had looked so proud when Thorin asked him to contribute these as Stonehelm’s going away present, especially when he heard that the young prince had his own, growing library. Dain’s personal library consisted entirely of technical manuals and treatises on engineering and mechanics. Sculdis’ was devoted to armaments. Stonehelm’s tastes were more eclectic.

Right now, the young princes looked grim. They spoke too low to be heard, but for once Stonehelm was more agitated than his friend.

It was none of Ori’s business, was it. Of course not!
“Th-they’ll m-miss each oth-ther.”
Ori spun around, heart beating furiously.
“Mahal’s bloody boots, Arne! You startled me!”
The Ironfist prince laughed as they embraced.
“Th-that’s w-what you g-et for-for drifting off.”
“You’ve been taking Master Brur’s example,” Ori accused. He stood back and pretended to survey Arne critically. “He doesn’t seem to have taken too many bites out of you.”
“H-he’s no w-worse than-tha Da,” said Arne. “And he d-doesn’t crowd m-me.”
“There is a lot to be said for someone letting you just bash on with your work,” Ori agreed. “Did you see Theodred before he left?”
Arne nodded.
“I- I made s-sure he g-got th-th b-books we t-talked about.”

“Thank you. I was being pulled in six different directions.”

Arne grinned evilly.
“Y-yes. I see y-you’re fam-famous n-n-now.”

“That’s right,” said Bain, approaching with Stonehelm. “Our Ori’s a fashion icon!”

Ori dropped his face into his hands and groaned.
“I wish I’d run out of the house that morning barefoot.”

Bain waved that off.

“Then all the cobbler’s in Dale and under the mountain would be after you for putting them out of business.”

Stonehelm added dolefully, “It’s very sad when cobbler’s riot.”

“Y-you’ll ju-just have t-to c-c-cope,” said Arne in a consoling tone.

The three of them shook their heads and looked mournful.

Ori rolled his eyes.

“You’re a pack of shitheads.”

The three of them pounced on Ori, hugging him and laughing.

“Aw, I’m goin’ t’ miss yeh, idadith,” said Stonehelm.

“Keep calling me ‘little uncle’ and neither I nor my slingshot will miss you!” Ori protested.

“Besides, we’ll see you at Durin’s Day, won’t we?”

“Whether you like it or not,” said Kili as he approached with Fili, Sigrid, and Tauriel. Fili asked,

“So, what has Imad Dori got in store for the Iron Hills contingent?”

“It’s a big secret,” said Ori. “Dori’s getting terribly melodramatic these days. I know what Thorin planned, which is why there are those hard-sided wagons, and four ponies pulling each.

The whole family drew in closer to say their goodbyes, just in time to hear Dain say to Thorin, “I already go’ as much pig shit as I kin handle, cuz.”

“Then it’s a good thing the wagons aren’t full of pig shit, isn’t it,” said Thorin. “There’s one wagon each of copper, silver, and gold.”

Dain’s jaw nearly hit the ground.

“Tha’s very generous,” said Dain, obviously overwhelmed. “Thank yeh.”

“You’ve earned every ounce of it,” said Thorin, embracing him. Bard nodded. He approached, extending his hand to shake.

“The mechanical spider plow alone is worth a wagon of gold. All of Dale thanks you, as well.”

“Aw! Tha’ was nothin’! Tha’ was fun!” said Dain.

He grasped Bard’s hand and yanked him down into an embrace.

“Please do not break my husband,” said Thranduil loftily. “I just got him.”

Dain released Bard, laughing.

“Just givin’ ‘im a taste o’ married life with yeh, then,” Dain snarked, bowing to Thranduil, who deigned to incline his head in acknowledgment, while ostentatiously dusting Bard off. Sculdis bounced over to the elf king. Thranduil leant down with a smile and embraced her.

There were hugs and farewells all around.

Dain turned to call Chopper from where he was snuggling with Tilda.

“Cho-PPER!” he called.

“There’s just one more thing before you go, nadadel,” said Dori as Balin stood beside her, holding her hand. “Balin and I gift you the right to name our first born.”

Dain stood stunned, opened his mouth, closed it, and burst into tears. He grabbed Dori and hugged her off her feet.

Sculdis darted forward.

“When’re yeh due?”

Dori smiled and said, a little breathlessly, “I’m not expecting yet.”

“We thought we’d give our Dain a little time t’ think it over,” said Balin. “There’s only one rule.”

Dain opened his mouth again, Dori tapped his nose and cut him off.
“You can’t name the badgerling after Chopper, or any other pig you’ve ever owned.”
Dain stuck out his bottom lip, then laughed.
“If yeh insist, wee sib. I’ll set meself t’ thinkin’ immediately. Thank yeh, a million times over.”
Dori laughed and hugged him.
“You’re entirely welcome.”
“Bring th’ pig shit next time, Mister Dain,” Hamfast called out. “I’ll be needed it f’r next years crops!”

Elevenses in the breakfast parlor was custard tarts and blackberry jelly buns, buttered toast, and fresh strawberries with cream, washed down with hot, black tea, or some of the green tea Bombur had brought and Binni brewed and poured over ice. The Durins all exclaimed over this, remembering it from the inn. The conversation was relaxed, so much so that the crash sent even Bilbo reaching for his sword.

The idea of Bilbo with a sword sat rather odd, but the thought was swept from Ori's mind by what happened next.
Roäc had smashed himself against the closed windows.
Thorin leapt for the door and threw it open. Roäc smacked into his chest in a storm of feathers.
"Roäc! What is it?"
The raven shot out a barrage of squawks, croaks and clicks.
"Slow down!” Thorin cried. "It's terrible when you stutter!"
Roäc took a deep breath, and started off yet again, though, apparently Thorin and Dis at least could understand him, because they gaped in amazement.
"Are they sure?” Thorin demanded.
Roäc gave a muffled scream, probably of frustration, and winged backward with one of Thorin's braids in his beak, as if he could pull the much heavier dwarf along with strength alone.
"Stop that!” Thorin ordered. "Go and tell Bofur I'm on my way.”
Roäc gave him a final, rather vicious, tug before flying back out.
Thorin turned to Ori.
"Will you-
"I'll get my kit,” said Ori, already moving. "What's happened?"
"The zinc miners have struck mithril,” said Thorin.
"My,” said Dori, "I am good."
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Dori is good and apparently quite talented, but Dori would have told you that anyway. Off we go with our Ori. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Word traveled faster than their ponies. Hundreds of dwarrows had gathered at the lifts to the Emerald Mine. Dwalin’s troops had to carve Thorin and Ori a path. Ori was glad the rest of the company had chosen to stay at home. Thranduil and Bard had immediately offered their help with anything that needed doing. Thranduil actually followed them out to their ponies and adjured Thorin several times to send Roäc if there was anything they wanted seen to.

Just the sight of the high king riding up on Minty seemed to set off the curious and the bewildered and the din of chatter rose to a roar.

Bofur met them at the lifts, worrying his hat mercilessly in his restless hands. Thorin was talking before he even alit from his pony.

"Bofur! Are you alright?"

The miner was the color of milk.

"I - I - I never seen the like!" Bofur cried, falling in step with Thorin as they walked to the lifts, Ori on their heels and already writing like mad. "We started scentin’ mithril right after Dori left. Jani got the idea we should dig where Dori touched and there was the vein, right below the surface!"

The lifts were speedy, but it seemed to take forever to descend.

"There’s no chance it’s been there this whole time?" Thorin asked.

"No, no chance," said Bofur. "We’d know."

"And you’re sure it’s in the zinc mine, not the Emerald Mine?"

"In the zinc mine. Remember, our Dori insisted on walkin’ nearly a hundred feet from the adit and Balin about tossed his scree with worry."

"He’s about to toss it for another reason entirely," said Thorin. "You said Jani found it?"

"Aye, but she’s already sayin’ she don’t want the finder’s fee."

Since this was five percent of the price brought by the entire seam, Ori thought her generosity worthy of the valar.

After their visit in the spring, Ori had never imagined he’d enter this mine again. Now he’d been here twice in one day and it was starting to look familiar.

As they walked from the lift, the scent hit his nose and palate, making him gasp.

Thorin stopped walking abruptly and rested his hand against the wall. Ori saw him struggle to keep his expression neutral. Ori had no idea how he could do. The smell and the energy of the mithril fired every nerve in his body, bouncing off and vibrating against the Durin bead in his hair, knocking against his spine.

"Blessed Mahal," Thorin breathed.

"Take a few breaths," said Bofur. "The miners’re waitin’ down there."

"You’re right," said Thorin.

He stood upright, and seemed to draw back into himself, with his face the mask of calm holding everything in place.

As often as Ori had seen Thorin do this, he still wondered how the king managed to keep the top of his head from blowing off.
Thorin turned to him.
"All right?"
Ori nodded, trying to convey more confidence than he felt.
The miners stood, absolutely silent, eyes huge.
Jani, closest to the wall, turned and stared at them.
She shook her head.
"At least she’s still standin’," Bofur said, "the fella who was with her when she struck it had t’ be carried out an’ up to the miners’ commons to recover."
Even in Ori’s limited experience, raw ore and precious stone looked nothing like what they would become once they were extracted and processed.
Mithril, however, looked like mithril, that same matte silver, in a continuous flowing seam like water, unmixed with other minerals. It was so hard, the entire seam had to be excavated as a piece. This had previously not been a problem, since it was so rare, and the seams so small, they never reached deeper into the rock than a single dwarf couldn’t excavate in a few hours.
"How far does the seam extend?" asked Thorin.
"Er… we ain’t found the far end of what’s just below the surface yet," said Bofur. "And we don’t know how deep it is, neither. It’s gonna take all of us t’dig it out," said Bofur. "We might even have to divert magma t’ break it right here. It’ll never fit in the ore lift."
"Do we have the infrastructure in place to do that?" Thorin asked.
"Actually? Yah, we do," said Bofur. "I… er… may’ve gone a little nuts makin’ sure everythin’ was shored up good an’ proper."
"Good thing you did," said Thorin. "Can you manage this? What do you need from me?"
"I can manage it, providin’ I can wake everybody up," said Bofur. He looked back over at the assembled miners, who seemed pretty much stuck in place. "We’ll need security. We’ll need t’ make sure folk aren’t followed home at the end o’ their shifts as if they got bulging pockets. Raw mithril don’t break into handy chunks like that anyway, but some folks don’t know that and they’ll be expectin’ miners t’ be carryin’ it around with ‘em."
"Yeh’ll want t’ take th’ old ‘escape’ lift behind th’ textile market, then a side passage t’ Fundin House," said Dwalin, approaching from the access tunnel. "Folk’re stormin’ th’ main tunnel t’ th’ royal residence, demandin’ t’ see th’ Bearer. They’re sayin’ it’s a miracle."
Nori’s head and torso popped down through the ceiling and he snorted.
"As if our Dori ain’t snooty enough already."
"Nori," said Thorin, "get Dori to the parapet over the main gate, make sure she’s guarded."
"Is that safe, Thorin?" Ori asked.
"Safer than her staying inside the house. If the crowd thinks we’re hiding her, there’ll be a riot."
"And not the good kind," said Nori, vanishing back through the rock.
Ori looked up at Thorin.
"This is insane," he said.
"I’m not disagreeing with you," Thorin replied.

So, Dori once more put on the blessing robe, and went to the parapet where the vast population of two kingdoms gathered. There was cheering, screaming, singing and crying. Through it all, Dori smiled serenely and waved. Mistress Dazla brought her a cup of tea, which she drank, which caused more cheering.
Eventually the sun went down, but the crowd was still there.
"You know," said Dori, though she had to shout to be heard over the roar, "I believe I’m growing rather fatigued. I can’t stay here all night."
Thorin stood in the doorway to the staircase and said, "Here, give me your cloak."
Dori did so.
Thorin gestured to have a weapon rack wheeled forward and draped the cloak over it. Then it was pushed to the parapet.
Ori got it immediately, but he wasn’t sure how many in the crowd would get it. It was such an
old-fashioned notion, and one that generally only applied to dwarf kings. The cloak was accepted as a temporary stand-in for the real thing. Even kings had to eat, sleep, and pee.

“Will it work?” Ori asked.
“I hope so,” said Thorin.

They all returned to the sitting room of Fundin house where Vi and Margr were lounging, drinking tea, and playing with the faunts.

"Well," said Vi, "here's a t-do."
"How're yeh keepin', our Dori?" Margr asked.
"I'm perfectly fine," said Dori. "Oin has given Balin a sedative and put him to bed. I'm going to check on him and put on something slightly less ceremonial."

She went down the hall toward the private rooms.

Thorin threw himself in a chair, with a groan. Bilbo brought him tea and sat on the arm of his chair. Ori spared a thought for his husband, who was coordinating security efforts on at least three fronts and would likely continue to do so for the duration.

Nori walked in through the fireplace and stood in front of Thorin. Nori looked worried, which did nothing for Ori’s confidence.

"Er… boss?"
"Yes, Nori?" Thorin asked wearily.
"We got another problem."
"Go on, tell me."
"There's a rumor started that you're Durin the Deathless Returned."
"Oh, fuck me," Thorin muttered. "Really?"
"Yep."

Thorin turned to Ori.
"Do you suppose Oin has more of that sedative?"
"So, Thorin," said Nori, strangely unsettled. "Are ya?"
Thorin laughed tiredly.
"I am not."
"That's aright, then," said Nori. "I take it my next task is to disabuse the populace o' their unfortunate misconception?"

"Just be gentle with them, Nori."
"Sure, sure." Nori vanished out through the wall.

"Durin… they think I'm… Oh, bloody Mahal," muttered Thorin.
Margr shook her head.

"Nah, no way yer Deathless," she said.
Vi added, “Durin’d’ve offed Thror an' Frerin years ago.”
“Happy thought, indeed,” Dori called from down the hall, making the elf king snicker from his seat on the sofa.

“There is nothing wrong with Dori’s hearing,” he noted.
“Dori’s ears go around corners,” Ori explained.

Bard sat beside Thranduil, holding the elf king’s hand. Tilda was happily in Thranduil’s lap, cuddling Mask.

“I miss Chopper,” she complained. Bard rolled his eyes.
“I don’t,” Thranduil answered her.
“Chopper’s nice,” she insisted.
“Chopper is a pig,” Thranduil reminded her.
“He’s a nice pig.”
Bard sighed, “Tilda, I’m sure you’ll see Chopper again soon enough. In the meantime you may not have a spider, or a goat or a pig or an oliphaunt.”

“Ori has an oliphaunt.”

Thranduil seemed to think he was helping when he said, “Ori’s oliphaunt is with a traveling circus and, therefore, not at home much.”
She opened her mouth. Bard cut her off.
“No, Tilda you may not have a traveling oliphaunt either. Besides, Bob will be jealous.”
“Bob’s yours,” Tilda argued.
“Bob?” Thorin asked.
“My dog,” Bard explained.
“Why did you call your dog, Bob?” Thranduil inquired. Bard grinned, but Tilda interrupted before he could get a word out.
“’Cose Da got him as a puppy,” Tilda explained. “He fell in the cistern and couldn’t swim and just floated there bobbing up and down so, Da said his name was Bob.”
Thranduil stared at Bard, who looked terribly pleased with himself, as all the dwarrow groaned.
“You, beloved husband, are extremely weird.”
“I suppose,” said Bard, “we’ll have to risk toddling home and being weird in Dale. Tilda has lessons with Master Brur tomorrow.”
Ori groaned.
“I was supposed to go to work today! Master Brur is going to fire me!”
Thranduil said, “No, I don’t think so, Ori. I think ‘act of valar’ is a reasonable excuse.”
“I should have sent a note!”
Bilbo said, “I sent one for you, while you were off blessing the mine.”
“How did you know I wouldn’t be able to go back to work?” Ori asked.
“You’re a Durin. I made a wild leap of faith,” said Bilbo. “Bard, we know we’re asking you to be terribly forbearing, but we would like you all to stay for supper.”
Bard grinned.
“Feed me and I’ll follow you anywhere.”
The door to the receiving room opened and Mistress Dazla announced, “Master Mahrdin, Mistress - er - Dipsy, Master Fa, Miss Dipfa and, well, you all know Lord Bujni.”
The quintet entered, looking harried, and all bowed to the king, who had only just managed to pry himself from his chair.
Mistress Dipsy said, “Well, those lovely folk out by the tunnel are quite rabid, though several of them are extremely well-dressed.”
“Mm,” Master Fa agreed. “Good that so many of our people know how to put together a well-balanced outfit.”
Dipfa’s parents were shiny. That was the best word Ori could come up with for them. They were ridiculously beautiful, with their beards ornamented to give even King Thror competition. Ori wondered how they didn’t just pitch over on their faces when they bowed.
Dwarrow were nothing if not sturdy, but these two were pushing the edge.
Dori reappeared and they bowed to her as well. She had changed into a batiked caftan, light blue figures on an orange ground. The whole thing seemed to vibrate. Then they exclaimed over the caftan and, Ori thought, bowed to it as well.
“Very good of you to brave the crowds,” said Dori, as if they had weathered a sale on dry goods.
“She’s just pulling the garlic bread out of the oven. Dinner will be served in a moment.”
“Do you need me to set the table, Dori?” Ori asked.
“No, pet, it’s all set up in the breakfast parlor. It’s such a nice evening. Alas, I’m afraid poor Balin will have to give it a miss. He’s still asleep.”
The visitors were introduced to King Thranduil, and bowed a third - or perhaps a fourth - time.
He acknowledged them with a regal nod, which Tilda imitated, and they were transported.
They tried to bow to Bard, but he just waved them off.
“No need,” he said. “That’s enough exercise for one night, especially before dinner.”
The meal itself took on the air of theater. It was obvious Dipfa’s parents were absorbing every word and gesture with delight. The Durins were not exactly shy dwarrow, and Thranduil amped up his royal attitude for the occasion. They all went so far over the top, Ori was on the lookout for nosebleeds.
“Ah,” said Thranduil. “Dori, I see you’ve acquired a noodle maker such as Bombur has at the
Dipsy and Fa’s eyes grew larger and larger as they viewed this exotic fare, surreptitiously glancing from under their eyelashes at the other diners to learn how such a thing was eaten. Ori had a sneaking suspicion that noodles were about to become the most ‘in’ of all the ‘in’ things under the mountain.

“So, these ain’t just really long dumplin’s?” Vi asked.

“Actually, very like really long dumplings,” said Dori, “but they hold the tomato sauce so perfectly.”

As a concession to King Thranduil, the sauce contained a medley of mushrooms, chunks of garlic and tomato, dotted with dried flakes of basil and oregano, but the tidbits of meat were presented in large basins so the others could serve themselves at will.

Finally, coffee was served with pots of fluffy, ginger-flavored cream, alongside platters of fresh fruit.

“Thranduil, you seem rather serious and a bit pouty this evening,” Thorin teased.

“I’m pouting because I didn’t get any elderberry jam,” said Thranduil. “Really, Thorin, it’s too bad of you to give the entire supply to Lady Galadriel and not save me a drop.”

“It’s not elderberry jam, but we do have a present for you,” said Thorin.

Thranduil raised an eyebrow and Thorin laughed.

“We promise, it’s not a copy of my bathing costume.”

“Well, in that case,” said Thranduil, with a perfectly blank expression, “I am delighted.”

They moved to the sitting room where Thranduil resumed his royal perch on the couch and gave a regal gesture.

“Let us permit the gift-giving to proceed.”

Bard rolled his eyes, but he was still smiling.

Dipfa brought forth a paper packet, about a foot square. Ori was amused to recognize the elven fabric-wrapping paper, perhaps left over from Dipfa’s coronation costume. Dipfa smiled at Thranduil, though the smile was a little nervous around the edges.

“Your majesty,” she began, “we hope you will accept this gift as a token of our friendship and respect.”

Thranduil’s features softened a little as he took the present.

“Thank you, Miss Dipfa, I’m honored.”

He unwrapped the parcel, the paper fell away, revealing yards of filmy cloth, like water flowing through his hands.

Ori gasped along with everyone else. It was the same material as Dori’s presentation outfit, but far more of it, and it fell open into a magnificent robe with a round neckline, notched at the throat, bell sleeves, and material gathered and pleated at the back into a train.

Just for a moment, Thranduil was speechless.

This, of course, wouldn’t last.

“This is incredible work. Master Mahrdin, you have outdone yourself.”

“You created this?” Thranduil asked the dam.

She colored violently, though it threw her into marvelous relief with her own outfit.

“Yes, your majesty,” said Dipfa. “I wove the cloth, designed the robe, and stitched it together.”

“I congratulate you,” said the elf king.

She curtseyed, whispering, “Your servant, King Thranduil.”

When she straightened she turned to Mahrdin, biting her lip.

He smiled at her fondly and said, “I believe this will do nicely…. Master Dipfa.”

She squealed and threw her arms around him, nearly knocking him to the ground with her excitement.

Then she ran from person to person, hugging them and receiving congratulations on her mastery, though she returned to Bujni every few hugs.
“My precious diamond, you are magnificent,” said Bujni, or he tried to, as she kissed him repeatedly, planting violet cosmetic kisses all over his face.

Dipfa’s parents look fit to bust with pride and her father blotted his eye with a tie-dyed handkerchief of aquamarine and lime, the same colors and pattern as the enameled beads in his hair and beard.

Thranduil turned to Dori with a look.
“You knew about this.”
“Of course, Thrandy dear. I approximated your measurements, but Dipfa did all the work. You’ll look divine in it, I’m sure. Won’t he, Bard?”

Bard looked up as if he’d been caught stealing apples from a cart. He’d been trying to congratulate Dipfa without actually looking at the robe.

Thranduil smiled crookedly.
“Dori, I must try this on. May I borrow your dressing room?”
“Certainly, Thrandy, dear. Right through here.”

They walked toward the private quarters, but Thranduil stopped at the doorway and looked back at the king of Dale.
“ Aren’t you coming to help me?”
Bard leaned down to kiss Dipfa’s cheek, and walked after Thranduil as quickly as dignity allowed.

Nori stuck his head out of the coal scuttle. “He’s gonna be comin’ t’ sumfin’.”
“Hush,” giggled Ori. Then something occurred to him and he thought he’d better ask now, lest he forget. “ Thorin?”
“ Ori?” the king replied in obvious amusement.
“ Why is it so terrible when Roäc stutters?”
Thorin snickered.
“ When Arne stutters in westron, you simply wait and what he says is clear. The raven language is made of repetitive clicks, caws and squawks.”
“ Oh,” said Ori. “ So if you change the number of caws or clicks…”
“ Yes, he was originally saying he’d found an elf in his drawers.”

Bard and Thranduil emerged some time later, Thranduil composed and perfect, with the robe wrapped back up, the packet under his arm. Bard looked rumpled and a little pink.

“ Well?” Dori asked slyly.
“ Did it fit, your majesty?” Dipfa jumped in. “ Do you need me to make any adjustments?”
“ No, Miss Dipfa, it’s wonderful,” Thranduil purred. “ Isn’t it, Bard?”
“ Yes,” said Thranduil. “ Bard and I both appreciate it.”
“ We… should be getting back home now,” said Bard.

Thorin chuckled.
“ One more thing before you go, Bard.”

Figríd, Kíliel and Gigolas had joined them, Kíli polishing off any leftover desserts. Fíli approached Bard and bowed, holding out a small lacquered box with metal edges, a tiny, perfect piece of art.

“ We hope you will accept this humble gift as a token of our thanks and esteem - not to mention a tribute to your bravery in the face of all our Durin chaos.”
Bard took it, lifted the clasp and opened the box. He smiled.

Thranduil looked over his shoulder and Tilda hopped up and down attempting to see for herself.
“ What is it, Da?”
Bard drew out a length of braided gold chain, finished with a pendant, a small hammer and anvil carved out of rich, deep orange stone.
“ Ooooo,” said Tilda. “ It’s a necklace!”
Bard looked it over carefully, obviously surprised and pleased.
“This isn’t just a pretty ornament, is it,” he said.

“It’s the protective amulet traditionally worn by dwarf kings,” said Thorin. “Carnelian is thought to cool the blood, something you may need when you’re dealing with less than cooperative subjects.”

“Or less than cooperative offspring?” Bard asked, with a smirk. “Do you wear one?”

“On open court days I’ve always worn two,” said Thorin. “Now that I’m actually king I’m thinking of having the throne remade it in.”

Bard asked, “Won’t that clash?”

“I’m hoping it will throw the rest of the throne room into considerable relief,” replied Thorin.

“Ah. Well, thank you very, very much for this,” said Bard.

Dis said, “You’re welcome, but we’re not finished. Fili?”

The prince smiled and said, “When you are ready to think about coronation, I would be honored if you will allow me to forge your crown. We will work together on the design, of course.”

“We promise,” Thorin added gravely, “no chandeliers.”

Bard laughed and hugged Fili.

“I would be honored if you forged my crown. Thank you.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Things are moving apace as they do among these Durins! And amazingly enough, Ori gets to go back to work in the library! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Early the next morning, Ori went off to work, even though the crowds gathered at the tunnel to the royal quarters showed no sign of abatement.

“Are you sure this will work, Nori?” Ori asked.

“Works for th’ ferrets,” said Nori. “Just hold me hand, don’t let go, an’ don’t open yer eyes.”

“Believe me, I have no intention of opening them.”

The passage through the walls was cold, and Ori imagined this was what it would be like to slog through old porridge.

Soon Nori said, “Right, chick. Ya can open ‘em again.”

They stood in the passage outside Master Brur’s office.

“Will you have to pick me up, do you think?” Ori asked.

“I’ll send a raven, if I hafta. Yer buffalo’s wranglin’ the crowd right enough.”

In fact, Dwalin had never come home last night and Ori was worried, even though Dwalin knew his job. What was one dwarf against a mob that wanted what lay behind him?

Nori smacked the back of his head lightly.

“Here, none o’ that foolishness. I’ll see t’ the buffalo. You see t’… whatever it is ya see t’.

Words, I suppose.”

And he turned and walked back through the wall.

Ori took a deep breath, straightened his tunic, and went to Brur’s office door. It was open, and Brur was giving Tilda dictation, the object of which was to increase a scribe’s speed and accuracy. Of course, most scribes were a lot older than Tilda. Nor were scribes usually treated to recitations of Brur’s misspent youth, dipping damlings’ braids in their inkwells at school.

“Oi, there yeh are, Ori,” said Brur briskly, rising and heading to the door. He barked over his shoulder, “Keep writin’. Make somethin’ up while I’m gone.”

“Aye, Master Brur,” said Tilda, eyes still to her paper.

“Be’er be interestin’.” Master Brur had the last word.

They took the lift down into the archives, then traveled on foot to a room Ori had not seen before. It was left as a rough cavern and it was lined with built-in trays, but the main feature was an enormous table. The end of the table was well lighted. There, on a stool, sat Arne, leaning over dozens of fragments of broken pottery that were covered in ancient dwarven writing, back to the First Age at the very least. Arne twiddled his pen between two fingers.

“Arne!”

The prince look up and waved, grinning.

“C-care to h-help m-me wi’ a j-jigs-saw p-puzzle?”

“Ostrakai!” cried Ori. “Is this the new project, Master Brur?”

“Thought yeh might like a challenge,” said Brur. “I got Omi up on the reference desk, an’ Loli followin’ Thorin around.”

“It’s so quiet down here!” said Ori.

“T-too quiet,” said Arne.
In the distance, from out in the shadows, came slow, hissing breaths, the rearrangement of furniture and the tinkling of glass or pottery.

“S-scary s-sons of b-basalts,” said Arne with a shiver.

“The archivists?” Ori whispered, then wondered why he was whispering.

“I-I hope s-so,” said Arne.

“Well, I’ll leave ye h t’ it, then,” said Brur, cheerfully whistling as he strolled back to the lift.

They watched him go and turned to one another.

“So,” said Ori, “shall we concentrate on our work, that way we’ll be caught unawares when they emerge to feast on our souls?”

“L-let’s b-bash on wi-with it,” said Arne with a nod and a shrug.

Time passed very quickly, and the archivists were quite forgotten as, side by side, Arne and Ori delved into the mysteries of their remote ancestry. It was apparent they had the scattered bits of several different handwritings, all fragmentary, though quite distinguishable. Arne owned that the one who wrote in silver in on black pottery shards what his favorite.

“M-makes m-me f-f-feel in-inadequate,” he muttered wryly.

As predicted, the majority of the shards contained marketing and ‘to do’ lists. One of them, in a tiny hand, seemed to be questioning: Silver? Copper? Opals?

The cirth for opals was underlined three times and followed by six question marks.

These shards were duly grouped, translated, and catalogued, then put aside to be researched for similarities with any possible matching handwriting in the vast collection.

The three remaining groups of shards were far meatier.

The largest group contained tantalizing excerpts of dirty poems or songs, mainly of the author praising the size of his own cock.

Arne and Ori referred to this mysterious balladeer as ‘Master Little Dick’.

The second group was harder to translate, the hand eccentric, the shards written over and crossed out and many chipped and broken in the middle of words, as if they had been hurled with great force.

As near as they could tell, these were the jumbled drafts of a love letter. Ori wondered if this person ever made progress, or was even now in the Halls of the Dwarven Ancestors, surrounded by broken pottery and piles of snapped nibs.

They referred to this writer as ‘The Lover’.

The group they saved for last was far older even than the others, the cirths more rune-like, though the hand was that of a gifted scribe.

It seemed to be a story about a king, though which king, or even if it was a dwarf king, were all unknowns.

Oddest of all, they kept finding a symbol like a stylized corona of the sun.

“Have you ever seen this before?” Ori asked.

“No, I-I h-hoped y-you had.”

“I’ve never heard of a dwarf king named after the sun, or about a king on a quest for the sun.”

Nor did it help that Someone lurked at the back of Ori’s mind, snickering.

“M-maybe it-it’s Eru?” Arne ventured.

The snickering rose to open guffaws.

“Something tells me it’s not Eru,” said Ori.

Arne looked over the shards as they had arranged them on the table, shifted a few tentatively and said, “I-I did pr-prel-prel- Oh, Mahal!” he snapped in Khuzdul. “I did preliminary work on these for Master Brur. The handwriting on all the other pieces matched bits we had catalogued before, at least superficially. These pieces don’t match anything and I. Hate. Stuttering!”

“You know I don’t care if you stutter, right?” Ori asked, squeezing his hand.

“But I care! Now that I have someone worth talking to, I just want to talk!” Arne winced and let out a deep breath. “Sorry.”

“Better out than in,” said Ori. “Master Brur will be really angry if you explode and smear yourself all over his stuff.”
Arne blinked at him.  
“T-that’s r-really gross.”  
“Yes, but probably accurate.”  

From the dark echoed faint, hollow chuckling. It seemed to come from everywhere at once.  
“A-and th-that’s r-r-really cr-creepy.”  
“Lunch?” Ori suggested.  
“R-race y-yeh t-to th-the l-lift!”  
Ori felt better the minute the lift started moving.

When the lift doors opened again, Ori stepped out and fell backward as a large, black blur shot right across his face.  
“Whoa!” Arne cried, catching him.  

They watched the raven bank the corner and disappear.  
“Someone’s in a hurry,” Ori said.  
“Wh-where’s h-h-he g-going?”  
“MAHAL’S BLESSED, BLURRY, BLUE BALLS!”  
“Master Brur’s office,” said Ori dryly.  
Brur himself thundered back around the corner toward them, Tilda at his heels.  
“You an’ you, come with me!” he shouted at them as he whipped by.  
“No lunch for us,” said Ori. “Come on!”  
He had no idea where they were going, but they exited the library to cadres of soldiers and a sizable cart, which Brur heaved himself into and Tilda leapt after him like a spring kid, leaving Ori and Arne no choice but to follow.  
“Afternoon, Lord Ori, Prince Arne,” said Arb at the reins. “Everybody hold on tight!”  
They zipped through a gap in the crowd still congregating at the entrance to the royal quarters.  
“Where are we going?” Ori asked.  
“Emerald Mine,” said Arb.  
“Did they strike mithril, too?”  
Arb laughed.  
“Dunno, but whate’er it is, it knocked Lord Zark on his arse so hard he still ain’t got up!”

The crowds had largely left the area around the mine, and so it was a work of the moment to get to the lifts and plunge down into the earth. When the lift stopped and they stepped out, they saw miners milling about the adit to the Emerald Mine and it wasn’t many steps beyond that they heard Lord Zark, voice strained with shock.  
“… just knocking in the wall for the new lift shaft! It fell right out at our feet!”  
Brur stopped abruptly in the open passageway. Tilda nipped around him, but Arne and Ori could see over his shoulders.  
An enormous iron crate lay on its side on the ground, the hasp broken, the top leaning open and, over the floor in a massive spill…  
“Those are ostrakai,” said Ori.  
Zark whipped around to face him.  
“They were buried in the wall! Do you know how long they’ve been here? This passage hasn’t been used since they stabilized the throne room floor!”  
“That’s… a while ago,” Ori allowed.  
“And you know what these things are?” Zark demanded.  
“Ostrakai. Pottery shards once commonly used as scratch paper.”  
Zark raised a brow.  
“Why would you write on pottery shards? Paper fits better in your pockets.”  
“If the pieces are as old as we think, they predate rag paper. Parchment was too dear to use for things like market lists. Even now, paper is common, but few working people can afford it. You have to pay for it. Pottery shards are still free.”
Zark shifted his neck and said, rather more quietly,
“I had no idea. My apologies, Lord Ori. It still doesn’t explain why someone hid a crate big
eough to hold a goat, and stuffed it full of ancient market lists, in my mine.”

Ori edged closer and bent over the pile. The pieces were mostly cream colored or very light brick
red. On one side the textures were pebbled, too rough to take ink or graphite or chalk. The other
side, which would have been inside whatever these were, was glazed and covered in runes.

“L-look at a-all th-th-p-pieces that m-match,” said Arne.
“I know,” said Ori. “There’s enough here for at least three whole pots. They were probably the
big vessels used to store cooking oil. The handwriting is classical. This is at least one massive text,
possibly more.”

Zark said, “Why do I get the feeling you’re going to tell me these weren’t broken accidentally?”
“If you wanted to hide what you were writing,” said Ori, “pottery shards are lowly and common.
No one would give them a second glance.”

“But why are they hidden here? And why are they coming to light now?”
“I think we’ll have to read them to find out,” said Ori.
“Can you read these?”
“A little, and there are many master scribes who could likely read a lot more.”

A fuss behind them in the tunnel produced Dwalin in full uniform, his eyebrows in a ‘v’ of
consternation.

“Ori? Yeh a’righ’?”
Ori lifted his hand to gesture Dwalin forward.
Dwalin frowned at the pottery shards on the floor.
“Someone’s gonna get a spankin’,” he said.
“We have to get these out of here,” said Ori, “but carefully.”
“We kin lay ‘em out on th’ tables in one o’ th’ empty meetin’ rooms at th’ library,” said Brur.
He had skirted the trunk and was using a small torch to inspect the now-empty hole in the wall.
“When can we start digging again?” asked Zark.
“Hold yer wargs, laddie,” said Brur. “I’m no’ missin’ a blessed thing.”
Tilda peered in after him. Dwalin caught sight of her and sighed.
“Til, yer da’s gonna explode when he hears yeh’ve been down in a mine.”
She looked back at him and tilted her head.

“Why?”
“It’s a long list,” he replied dryly.
Brur glanced over at her and swore under his breath.
“Keep f’rgettin’ she’s no’ a badger.”
“How are we getting these to the library?” Ori asked. “We can’t rattle along in the cart with them
loose. I’m sure we lost pieces just from the crate hitting the ground.”

“Wr-wrap-ped in w-w-ool,” said Arne.
“Good idea,” said Ori. “I know we have a whole storage room of wool roving back at Fundin
house. If we’re quick and careful we can get them to the library with minimal damage. Arb?”

“M’lord?”
“Will you please take the cart and have it filled with roving?”
“Aye, a’course.”
He saluted, turned on his heel.
It was then Ori realized he’d forgotten something. He wasn’t in charge.
Sheepishly, he turned to Brur.
“If that’s alright with you, Master Brur?”

“Why, yer so fierce, I don’ dare disagree,” said Brur with a snort, but he was smirking the whole
time. “If yeh lot will make quick work a’ th’ pottery, I’ll finish inspectin’ where it fell from. I don’
think there’s any more surprises waitin’ back there, but I didn’t know abou’ this one, neither.”

“Yeh want me t’ send f’r more scribes t’ help yeh, love?” Dwalin asked.
“Please,” said Ori. “Loli and Bujni, if you can get ahold of them. Bilbo, if he can spare the time.
I want these some place secure and comforting as soon as possible. They’re setting my teeth on edge.”

“They didn’t appear by accident, I’m presumin’.”

“No,” said Ori.

“Aye, I was afraid yeh’d say that.”

They had to bring in lights and more tables to lay the pieces out. They were jumbled, and apparently all inscribed by the same hand. The only thing that gave Ori hope was that the pots had been different shades.

“I think,” said Bilbo, “this is a single, massive text.”

Ori reached and carefully touched one piece dominated by the same round corona with narrow triangular rays all around it.

“This,” he said, “is not a dwarf symbol. It’s like the bits in the archive, but slightly larger.”

“It’s a sunflower,” said Bilbo.

“Don’t all flowers grow in the sun?” Loli asked.

“More or less. There are some that prefer shade or partial shade, but I shan’t go into that. There is a flower that is called a sunflower. I recognize this pattern because it’s the same pattern hobbits still sew on their clothes and linens.”

“Do you think they come from the time of the hobbits in Dimrill Dale?” Ori asked.

Arne stared at him.

“Hobbits aren’t descended from men,” Ori explained. “They grew out of the ground at Dimrill Dale, the land between Khazad-dûm and Lothlorien. Unless you really were just having us on, Bilbo?”

“Often, but not in this case,” said Bilbo. “Even though each race wasn’t prone to dealing with other races, it’s entirely possible that hobbits and dwarrow would have come into contact at least once or twice. The world was wilder then, filled with dragons and other beasts. And hobbits were made of much sterner stuff than they are now.”

“Y-you s-eem st-sturdy en-enough, Pr-pr-professor.”

“I manage,” said Bilbo with a smile.

Fourth bell tolled in the distance.

“You have to go,” said Ori.

“Much as I’d like to stay,” said Bilbo. “I have to rescue Master Targ from the twin terrors of Frodo and Samwise. He took them to watch the badgers training in the practice yard. Ah, and I believe you’re about to be carried off as well, Ori.”

Ori looked up and Dwalin leaned in the doorway, tired, but smiling.

“Care f’r a ride home, Lord Ori?”

“Um.” Ori glanced over at Arne, who laughed and shook his head.

“G-go on, th-they’ll b-b-be l-locked in o-overnight.”

“But you’re going to go and have supper, too, aren’t you?” Ori asked. Alright, perhaps it was more of a suggestion than a query. Come to think of it, Ori realized it was bordering on a veiled threat. That was rather rich, coming from him; he knew that, if Dwalin did not come to take him home, he would have been in danger of working here on the puzzle far into the night, going without supper and not even realizing it.

“G-going t-to eat wi-with M-Master Nodun and-and her h-husband,” said Arne. He blinked.

“Ah,” said Ori. “Say hello for me.”

Bilbo left directly, but Ori and Dwalin took their time, strolling down the halls hand in hand. If they found an alcove or two in which to kiss, no one passing by said a word. Eventually they made it to the library steps. The tunnel to the royal quarters was actually quiet, almost empty.

“You must be so tired,” said Ori as Dwalin helped him into the saddle. Gnasher sniffed at him a little, then seemed satisfied that Ori was the genuine article.

“I’m just enjoyn’ th’ quiet f’r now,” said Dwalin. “Anythin’ short a’ th’ remakin’ a’ th’ world’s Furh’n’k’s lookout t’night.”
Ori and Dwalin walked into the sitting room to find Dori setting the table, giggling and laughing to herself and occasionally dancing a little jig.

“Mebbe she’s got int’ th’ cordial,” Dwalin guessed.

Then Ori noticed Nori sitting by the fireplace with Bofur, Nori’s expression murderous and Bofur trying to tease and distract him to no avail.

“T’ain’t funny!” Nori barked at Dori, which only set her off in further storms of laughter.

“What’s happened?” Ori asked. “Nori, did you fall out of the ceiling again?”

Bofur chuckled.

“Nori found a grey hair.”

“No!” Ori cried, delighted and horrified. “Already? Let me see!”

He rushed up to Nori and started pawing his hair. Assault and Battery, who had been snoozing there, fell out with indignant squeaks and Bofur snatched them up as Nori starting smacking Ori’s hands away.

“Shove off!”

“Oooo, here it is! I’m saving it for posterity!”

“Oi! Don’t pull it out, it’ll just grow in more! - OW!”

“Got it! We’ll save it in the archives!”

Nori lunged for him but Ori had anticipated and whirled away with a jovial shriek.

“Gimme that!” Nori roared.

Ori did the sensible thing first and hid behind Dori, but Nori was in no mood for self preservation and chased him out and around the room and over furniture. Nori made a flying leap to tackle him but Dwalin was there to intercept and Ori jumped up and down on the couch, prize waving over his head.

“I’ve got your hay-er! Nananananah!”

“Ahem.”

Ori stopped and turned to the sitting room doorway where Thorin and Bilbo stood, the entire tableau on view. Thorin looked like he was trying to maintain his dignity and Bilbo wasn’t even making the attempt. Dwalin put Nori on his feet, still grumpy.

“Bilbo, welcome to my life,” said Thorin. “What’s happened?”

Bofur touched noses with Assault.

“Aw, Nori’s havin’ the fits ‘cause he found his first grey hair.”

“An’ me rat of a little brother took it an’ won’t give it back!” Nori snapped, still enraged

He swung at Ori, who held his prize out of the way.

“Uh-uh! Mine!” Ori cried and stuck out his tongue.

Dori giggled maniacally once more and muttered about what a beautiful day it was.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. A quiet evening with the Durins. Ha! Yeah, right! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same darrow time, same darrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Nori hopped aside as Mistress Dazla’s bird whipped through to the kitchen and the housekeeper came tearing out after it. Ori heard her open the receiving room door and start to scold and fuss. Fili sloshed through the door from the receiving room, water squidding from the tops of his boots, his tunic and breeches plastered to him, his teeth chattering.

Before Ori could even move from the couch, Dori sped through the door to the bedroom hallway and re-emerged with an enormous fluffy pink towel.

“Fili! What in Mahal’s name happened?” she cried.

The prince grinned and took the towel, swiping at his dripping mustache before wrapping the towel around him like a cloak.

“Thank you, Dori. I was inspecting the floodgates at the head of the River Running, just below the glacier. They’re the only things that keeps us from drowning in the spring and they hadn’t been inspected in decades.”

Dori didn’t look so much impressed as grudgingly happy the prince hadn’t drowned.

“Right into the bathroom with you, strip off and into a hot tub.”

Instead of being allowed to bring himself upstairs to his own chambers, Dori grasped him by the soggy scruff and all but carried him down the hall into the main bathroom.

Ori shoved the proof of Nori’s advanced age into his pocket and, while he helped Fili peel off layers of sopping cloth, Dori drew the bath.

Ori knew the water would be tepid at first, to allow Fili to warm up slowly. Dwarf he was, but even darrow weren’t impervious to glacial melt.

While Dori hustled Fili into the tub, Ori dumped the contents of the prince’s boots over the shower drain.

“Good thing these aren’t your dress pair,” said Ori.

“I tried to pick the ones with the least metal on them,” said Fili, “but, I admit, I wasn’t expecting a swim. At least the gatekeeper’s assistants got a laugh out of it.”

“What about the gatekeeper?”

“He died of old age when we were badgers and was never replaced. Luckily, his ‘assistants’ knew their work.”

Thorin put his head around the doorjamb, grinning at his heir as Dori upended a rather foofy looking bottle of bath soap into the water. It bubbled around Fili in glossy shades of blue, pink and purple.

“Do we need to promote one of the assistants?” Thorin asked, as his nephew was obscured in fluff.

“No, they work really well together,” said Fili. “What they need is money. They’ve been making repairs out of their own pockets and it’s come down to pine sap and wire.”

“That bad?”

“No, it’s just hit a critical place. They need materials to keep it going.”

“And, did you find the state of the floodgates to your satisfaction?” Thorin asked.
Fili snorted a bubble from under his nose and said, “Yes, I can say with great authority that there isn’t a crack in them. Anywhere.”

“Good lad, thank you. I’ll send Gloin up there to talk to them,” Thorin said as he disappeared out of the doorway.

Leaving Fili to be cared and fussed over by Dori and Mistress Dazla, Ori returned to the sitting room. Bujni and Dipfa bounced out of the kitchen.

“There you are, Ori!” Bujni looked relieved. “I require your assistance, my friend.”

“Certainly,” Ori smiled. “If you would be so kind, my friend. I have spent the latter part of this afternoon with my dear adad, Oin, in the processing rooms in the forges.”

“Oh.” Ori felt obligated to make some sort of a response.

“Indeed,” Bujni nodded. “After assessing my bodily weight both with and without clothing, we came back here and my precious diamond measured every inch of my person both with and without clothing. My dearest parent, Binni, chaperoning us, of course.”

“Of course.” Ori hoped either Bofur or Jani had seen the reactions of the population of the processing room to this venture. Then he wondered why he was being told all this. “With what do you need my assistance?”

“If you would kindly ask King Roäc if he is at leisure to allow me the honor of weighing and measuring his personage… er…ravenage?”

Ori smiled and headed back to check Thorin’s office.

The door was ajar, but Ori tapped on it anyway.

“Come,” Thorin’s voice invited.

Ori came in. Thorin was busy at his desk and Balin was sorting papers with him. Bilbo sat at his small, ornate desk near the window, writing. They all looked up when Ori came in.

“Ah, yer back, wee brother,” Balin greeted him. “Productive day at work?”

“Yes, we’ve isolated a repeating pattern of symbols that we’re currently investigating. They are quite unknown. Master Brur had Arne do the preliminary work.”

“Curiouser an’ curiouser,” Balin commented, obviously intrigued.

“Exactly,” Ori agreed. “If you’ve time after supper, I’d like to show you my sketches of it.”

“I’d love to see them, Ori,” said Thorin. “Bilbo’s been telling me about them.”

“Thank you, Thorin,” Ori went on. “In the meantime, Bujni wishes to know if Roäc is available.”

Thorin turned and looked at his chair back, where the raven perched, supervising.

“Well, Roäc?”

“What does that funny nestling want?” Roäc demanded. Ori swallowed and said as solemnly as possible,

“Bujni wishes to know if King Roäc is at leisure to allow Bujni the honor of weighing and measuring King Roäc’s personage… er…ravenage?”

Roäc cackled loudly and fluttered to Ori’s shoulder. “Why not?”

Ori came back through, the raven riding along, and saw that the group had moved to the kitchen.

Ori entered, and there were Bujni and Dipfa, who had been joined by Sigrid, Kiliel, and Gigolas. Ori shook his head, wondering what Bujni and Dipfa would become… BuFa? Dipni? FaBu?

“Ah,” Bujni cried in delight and bowed. “Thank you for joining us, King Roäc.”

“What do you want, nestling?” Roäc sounded rather amused as he hopped down on the table, where the others were sharing a plate of ginger biscuits and mugs of fruit soda water.

“Biscuit, Roäc?” Sigrid offered.

“Thanks, break it up for me, nestling.”

Sigrid laughed and crumbled one for him on a saucer. Bunji was fussing with the kitchen flour scales and Dipfa was preparing notes and her measuring tapes. Ori leaned over to see what was being written.

Roäc hopped over to Bujni.

“Well?”

“Yes, your majesty. If you would be so kind as to stand or sit in this dish.”
Bujni held one dish of the scale to the tabletop. Roäc gamely climbed into the golden bowl and remained still. Slowly and carefully, Bujni added the weights to the other side. Roäc waited patiently, watching as he rose gently in the air. At exactly five pounds, fifteen and three fifths ounces, Bujni declared the weight precise. Roäc hopped off, clattering the other dish to the table. Kili immediately started piling biscuits on Roäc’s vacated dish. Legolas and Gimli got down the other jars of biscuits to add to Kili’s pile.

“Hey, Roäc,” Kili said brightly. “You’re equal in weight to seventy-two biscuits!”

“Crumble ‘em up,” Roäc ordered. “Lemme see if I can eat ‘em in one sitting!” Sigrid, Kili, Gimli, and Legolas cheered and began breaking up the biscuits at speed.

“Roäc will be sick!” Tauriel objected.

“If you please, your majesty,” Bujni pleaded. Roäc turned around, gulping down a beakful, hopped over to the dwarf. Dipfa curtsied to the raven and, with great care, measured him from beak end to tail feathers, the size of each wing, the total wing span and girth of waist and chest. Every now and then, Roäc hopped away to eat more biscuits.

Fili came in wrapped in a thick cotton robe and rubbing his head with a towel.

“What’s going on?” he demanded.

“Bujni and Dipfa are measuring Roäc,” Sigrid explained, pushing her betrothed to a chair and giving him a drink and biscuit.

“May I inquire, your majesty,” Bujni asked, scribbling madly in his notebook, “how many feathers you have on your person?”

“Lots.”

“May I count them, your majesty?”

“We’ll be here until next week.” Roäc was, as always, blunt.

“Make an estimate,” Fili suggested.

“How?” Bujni asked.

“Take a square inch of his body and count those feathers inside the inch, then use the measurements you took.”

“An excellent notion!”

Dipfa carefully measured a square on top of Roäc’s head and marked the feathers with tailors’ chalk and Tauriel’s slender fingers quickly made the count.

Dipfa realized she hadn’t measured Roäc’s wings from the top, and requested the raven to stretch his wings out once more.

“What’s all this for?” Roäc asked, crouching down, holding his wings outstretched.

“I am attempting,” Bujni explained with grandeur, “to perfect my design of an apparatus that will allow me to fly.”

Roäc rose and fluttered his wings back to their folded position as Dipfa thanked him. The raven hopped over and looked Bujni over carefully.

“Try measuring a bat,” Roäc said, finally.

“A bat?” Bujni’s eyebrows rose to his hairline. “Why a bat, your majesty?”

“You don’t have feathers, nestling, and they would be almost impossible to make.”

Bujni frowned. “I thought I would gather up all the ones you and your people shed…”

Roäc shook his head.

“No, those’re for our bodies. The making of our bodies is very different from the making of yours.”

Bujni pondered deeply.

“Perhaps a bat would be easier to build,” Ori said thoughtfully. Roäc was right, Ori decided, the feathers would be almost impossible to make, as Roäc had said. How would one attach them in a way that they would not fall off?

Bujni, after putting the scale and weights away, slewed his eyes over to the elves, who had gone back to eating biscuits with the others, while watching the raven king attempt to eat his weight.

Bujni walked right up to Legolas and poked him aggressively and inquisitively in the side.

“You eat like us? Why aren’t you putting on weight?” He glared at Legolas accusingly. “Are
you getting taller?"
  “I don’t think so,” said Legolas, eyes sparkling with laughter.
  “Hmmm…”
Kili said helpfully, “Bujni has a theory.”
Bujni waved this away like so many gnats.
  “It was just a theory. I shall have to approach this scientifically, though I must leave in place the idea that hobbits are impervious to flatulence and diarrhea.”
  “I’m sure they would be happy to hear that,” said Legolas.
Bujni leaned down and examined Legolas’ feet.
  “Is it true you can walk on snow? Or do you merely wear shoes with extremely tall heels and soles to place yourselves above it?”
Hiding a smile, Legolas replied, “No, we are very light.”
In the throes of scientific discovery, Bujni seized the elf prince around the thighs and lifted. Legolas fought to remain upright as he was hefted off his chair.
  “Oi!” Gimli shouted around a messy mouthful of biscuits.
Tauriel stifled a noise between a shriek and a choke.
Bujni place the prince on his feet and glanced at Tauriel.
  “Are you alright?” he enquired solicitously.
  “Fine, thank you,” she replied in a strangled tone.
Bujni removed his notebook and scribbled silently for a moment.
  “Hmph,” he opined. “I shall have to fine-tune my ideas.”
He shut the notebook with a snap and cocked an eye up at Legolas.
  “Thank you,” he said, brusquely. “Though I may need you for further study.”
He collected his notes while Dipfa sketched wildly in her notebook.
  “Beloved Boo,” she began as they wandered out to the sitting room.
Kili huffed in annoyance and moved closer to Tauriel.
  “Well, he’s not going to study you,” he muttered vehemently.
  Tauriel giggled.
Mistress Dazla came in and shooed them all out of the kitchen as she said she had dinner to finish. She refused their offers of help as it was all but ready.
Ori traipsed through to his bedroom to put on comfortable clothes. Dwalin was seated in one of the chairs before the fire, going through duty rosters. He grinned as Ori came in and shut the door.
  “What’s goin’ on, love? Did our Bujni measure tha’ raven?”
  “Yes, then Bujni told Legolas he may need him for further research because elves are so light.”
Dwalin snorted. He rose, went to Ori and kissed his temple.
  “Then our Legs has me sympathy. It’s a wonder our Gimmers didn’t toss our Bujni on his arse.”
Ori snickered, “He was too busy with the biscuits. Roäc was trying to see if he could eat his weight, which is, for your information, Captain, exactly five pounds, fifteen and three fifths ounces!”
Dwalin laughed, “I’ll let th’ king know.”
Ori grinned and stood before the mirror while Dwalin put his hair in order for him. Dwalin paused and looked at Ori in the mirror.
  “‘R should I tell ‘im, ‘even pounds, fifteen an’ one fifth ounces?”
Ori snorted. “I wonder how long it would be before Roäc can fly again?”
They left the room, chuckling.

Dinner, served in the breakfast parlor, consisted of onion soup flavored with lemon, mint, cinnamon, and pepper, followed by ground lamb seasoned with nutmeg, onion and pepper with chopped plums, buttered rice and roasted tomatoes.
Ori helped himself to more rice and listened idly to the conversation.
Bujni was telling Thorin about Roäc’s measurements. Thorin and Bilbo were amused and Frodo fascinated.
Bofur looked up from his third helping of lamb and addressed Bujni.
“What were all the fuss down in th’ sortin’ room? Friend a’ mine said they saw yeh with O- yer da, fiddlin’ about with th’ scales. Said yeh got yerself all nakie.”

Ori watched the brows of the Durins rise alarmingly. He was delighted Bofur had heard about it.

“Aye,” Jani put in with a grin of pure mischief. “Me pal Elrah said she’d seen th’ sight a yeh, laddie. ‘Perantly yeh strip t’ admiration.’

Bujni, Lord of the Rikanta Clan, blushed to his neck while his precious diamond smothered a giggle.

“My dearest adad,” Bujni said carefully, with an eye to his parents, who continued eating placidly, “was assisting me in my research. A vital part of that is ascertaining my exact body weight.”

“Why worry about clothes?” Jani asked around a mouthful of tomatoes. “I kin well understand yeh kicking off yer boots, but yer clothes-”

“I must have exact information. It is necessary to have absolute exactitude.”

“Every ounce is important?” Bofur asked, with a twinkle in his eye. Ori sensed trouble.

“Yes,” said Bujni eagerly. “It’s vital! If I am to succeed in my research in developing a means to fly.”

“Didja take a piss before ya were weighed?”

Bujni opened his mouth to reply, and froze.

“Bugger!” he muttered, scribbling ferociously in his notebook. No one dared to laugh. Oin did, however, look rather amused and Binni folded his lips and drank a large amount of tea.

“Adad,” Bujni turned to Oin with a look of utter determination, “I would like to re-weigh first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Aye,laddie,” Oin nodded.

“And tonight, I’m going to need an enema.”

No one dared to breathe.

“Bilbo?” Legolas asked quickly, “from his research, Bujni theorizes that you hobbits are impervious to flatulence and diarrhea. Is this indeed a fact?”

Thorin choked over his tea and Bilbo helpfully patted him on the back.

“Not quite. But I fully understand your wish to fly, Bujni. I do miss it.”

Unable to look anywhere, Ori settled for glaring at Dwalin, who opened his eyes to their widest but said nothing.

“Fly, Professor Baggins?” Bujni’s voice trembled. “Do…Can hobbits fly?”

“Oh, indeed,” Bilbo said lightly, as though they were discussing the weather. No one could look at any one else but the fidgeting was blatant. Legolas looked a little confused, as he had not expected the discussion to head off in this direction.

“You…you miss it?” Bujni was on point, notebook and graphite wand at the ready. “How did your people do this?”

“You mean fly?” Bilbo asked, brows raised in surprise. “Oh, we’re born with the ability. Surely you’ve noticed that our feet are extremely large?”

“In-indeed, I have.” Bujni scribbled maniacally.

“Well, once we grow to adulthood, our bodies become too large and heavy.”

“For flight?” Bujni breathed. “How… Is flight achieved by …er…flapping as the birds do?”

“Oh, no-no,” Bilbo chuckled benevolently. “Frodo, my boy, have you a moment to assist me?”

Frodo swallowed the last mouthful of rice and nodded. His attention had clearly waned in the midst of the discussion. Bilbo rose and helped the faunt out of his chair. Wee Sam hopped down, too, a look of suspicion on his face. Thorin watched Bilbo like an amused bird of prey.

Bilbo drew Frodo around the table and Bujni leapt out of his chair to meet them. Everyone at the table craned to watch.

“Observe,” Bilbo said in his teaching voice. “The size of Frodo’s feet compared to his body.”

Frodo looked up at his uncle incredulously. Sam folded his arms and watch Bilbo with lowered brows. Bujni flung himself to his hands and knees, examining Frodo’s feet with the joy of learning.

“Yes, yesssss,” Bujni murmured, “they are considerably large for his body in comparison to
“Exactly,” Bilbo praised. “Thus, when we grow up, the ankles lock and we lose the ability. Faunts cannot run and hide as quickly as adults, so it is believed this was an escape mechanism.”

“Of course,” Bujni breathed. “Yavanna is divine in her wisdom.”

Ori frowned at the snicker in the back of his head.

Bujni leaned up on his knees. “So, flapping…?”

“No, lad,” Bilbo shook his head dolefully. “Spinning.”

“Your feet spin?” Bujni almost shouted.

“Indeed,” Bilbo bowed slightly.

Bofur laughed, “So yeh teach yer babies when danger threatens, t’ jump on their hands an’ their feet spin an’ they’re carried out a’ danger?”

“Quite so,” Bilbo gazed loftily at the miner. “And once they can run and hide as adults, they stop doing it. Thus the pivots in the ankles lock up and we lose the ability.”

“Is Frodo now too old to fly?” Bujni asked, still slightly hopeful for a demonstration.

“Frodo was never able to fly,” Bilbo informed him, sadly.

“Why not?” Thorin demanded. Bilbo allowed his gaze to wander to his mate and smiled.

“My dear, surely you must have realized, it’s because Frodo is a Brandybuck.”

Thorin cocked his head and smiled.

“Of course. How foolish of me not to remember!”

“Quite understandable, dear,” Bilbo said gently.

Bujni turned to Wee Sam, but Dori rose before he could open his mouth.

“I think its time for dessert,” Dori announced.

Ori shook his head and looked at Dwalin again. Dwalin had his arms folded and was looking at the ceiling. He swoled his eyes at Ori and winked. Ori nudged him.

Tea and dessert were brought out. Dessert was many-leaved pastry filled with a sweet mixture of finely chopped almonds, cardamon, butter, and rose water. It was still warm from the oven and they all tucked in happily.

“Yer majesty,” said Jani, to Thorin, “yer a sneak.”

“Oh?” asked Thorin, in a overly surprised tone. “In what way?”

“Th’ way in which ya made sure I took th’ finder’s fee for all that mithril, even though I said I didn’t want it.”

“I don’t recall signing an order for that. Ori? Did I sign an order for that?”

“No, Thorin,” said Ori. “You signed it all over to Bombur and Erda instead.”

“Sneak,” Jani accused, though she didn’t sound upset at all. Bombur and Erda exchanged glances and smiled sweetly at their sister.

Balin sat back with a smile. “We had t’ send th’ proceeds out from somewhere, lass. It’s bad enough t’ have tha’ much mithril under th’ mountain. It could attract dragons. We can’t send mithril, so we estimated the price in gold.”

“Given tha’ mithril is no’ quite as priceless as previously, we had t’ make adjustments in th’ estimated worth o’ th’ seam,” said Gloin. “As Vi an’ Margr would say, we’ve go’ mithril comin’ out’ve our arses.

Bilbo murmured, “That sounds terribly painful.”

“Besides,” said Thorin, “Bombur and Erda plan to use it to expand the inn, and we are mainly responsible for them having to expand it, given that they’re expecting a herd of Durins and most of the crowned heads of Arda next spring. They had to get a jump on the construction before winter. They can use the rest to set up their badgers with quite nice establishments when they marry.”

“Like crowned heads theirselves,” said Jani. She stood and went to him and rested their foreheads together. “Pardon me bein’ so forward, Thorin. Yer a darlin’ sneak.”

“Thank you, Jani. It was a pleasure.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Oh, look, the post has arrived. Let’s see who got married, got buried or got theirs. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarf time, same dwarf tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The next day dawned bright and clear, and far too early for a dwarf who had been missing his husband.

Ori groaned at the sound of Dori’s light rapping at the door.
"Pet, deary, time for breakfast."
Ori muttered, "Breakfast had better be fucking incredible."
"It will be," said Dori, "and mind your language, pet."
Ori pulled the pillow over his head. Beside him, Dwalin shook with silent laughter.
"It's not funny," Ori protested. "Why didn't I get ears like that?"
Dwalin kissed him and threw off the bedclothes.
"Yeh didn't raise a badger."
Nori's head popped up through the mattress between them.
"The buffalo's right. I can hear Assault an' Battery stealin' a biscuit from three rooms away."
"Go away, Nori," said Ori, whumping the pillow down and through his brother's insubstantial head.
"Yah never was a mornin' person," Nori groused in muffled tones.

Ori and Dwalin arrived at the breakfast table amid chatter, freshly baked rolls stuffed with jam or xocolātl, and a swarm of various birds from all over Arda.
Binni said to Bombur, "You're sure you can't stay a few more days?"
Erda laughed.
"We've already stayed so long, me Bombur's broken out in hives from th' panic."
"Not quite that bad," Bombur protested mildly, "but I'm afraid I do have to go and see how much of my inn is still standing."
Dori patted Bombur lightly on the arm in passing.
"I'm sure your Kali has things well in hand."
Dori had dressed in a tunic and breeches of grey on grey pinstripes, the cut of which told Ori his older brother was feeling masculine at the moment. It was a far distance from the foaming and flowing robes of the past few weeks.
Fili and Kili arrived, looking bereft, as Tauriel and Sigrid had decamped to Dale the night before. Fili perked up the moment he saw Dori's clothes. Kili perked up the moment he saw food.
"Dori, that is a beautiful suit," Fili enthused.
"Master Mahrdin had it tailored for when I was feeling like a lord, not a lady. Excellent choice, though I'm afraid it does make me look like the director of the royal tombs. I was hoping to do a little shopping in the central market this morning."
Thorin laughed as he entered with Bilbo by the hand and Frodo on his shoulders, the Gamgees in a train behind.
"In other words, you're in disguise," said the king. "I'm afraid it's going to take more than a new set of clothes for you to go about unnoticed."
Dori sighed. "Yes, well, being a public figure is a lot of fuss and bother, but I find I do enjoy the notoriety. And before you say anything, Thorin, Vi and Margr are coming with me, along with that cadre of professional bullies our deary insists I need."

"You'll be well-protected, then," said Thorin, lifting Frodo up over his head and lowering him into a chair.

"Are you Idad Dori right now?" Frodo asked.

"Yes, tiny pet."

"I like your other clothes better."

Dori chuckled and patted the faunt on the head, but Bilbo looked like he might have a migraine coming on.

"Frodo, my lad, do you remember the talk we had about the difference between being honest and being rude?"

"Yes, Uncle Bilbo," said Frodo, and then he proceeded to drink his milk.

"Perhaps a different approach," said Bilbo, shaking his head.

A raven Ori didn't know dropped a letter on Bilbo's empty plate.

"What's this?" Bilbo asked, then he read the direction and his eyes lit up. "Grandfather Took's handwriting!"

He slit under the seal with his butter knife and scanned the contents, his grin only growing.

"Is it terribly private, ghivasha?" Thorin asked, pouring Bilbo's tea.

"Oh, no, no. In fact, I think at least some of it should be shared," he said, and he proceeded to read aloud:

Dear Grandson -

I hope this finds you happy, healthy and well-fed. I also hope this raven is well-fed, or my letter may not find you at all. Awfully hard to read a letter in a bird's stomach, at least as I reckon it.

Life goes on here as usual.
The rain falls, the crops grow, Lobelia complains.
That, principally, is what I write to tell you. Now, before you think this is hearsay, or fourth hand, we got it straight from Otho Sackville-Baggins' mouth, as he had decided to go on a strategic walking tour of Tuckborough when his darling bride saw what your dwaarrow did to Bag End.

"Yer dwaarrow, eh, laddie?" Balin asked Bilbo with a twinkle in his eye.
"As opposed to the dwaarrow my grandfather keeps in a bin in his baking pantry," Bilbo said drily. "The letter goes on."

Apparently, their first conversation upon returning home ran something like:
Lobelia: "Where is the gate?"
Otho: "Ummm... dearest, I believe someone's taken the tub."
Lobelia: "Those rotten Gamgees, I'll wager! Well, we can get another tub."

Ori snickered as all the Gamgee faunts gave themselves a rousing cheer, Bell shook her head, and Hamfast stuck his thumbs under his braces and expanded proudly. Bilbo continued.

Otho: "Yes, but we'll also need to get more pipes."
Lobelia: "Oh! The nerve! This is giving me a headache! Dear, go into the kitchen and make me some tea."
Otho: "Er... well... about the kitchen..."
I haven't see it myself, but apparently that Master Arb fellow is nothing short
of thorough.
And speaking of dwarf fellows...


And speaking of dwarf fellows, what's this about you taking up with the king of Erebor? Not that we mind you being married to a king if he treats you kindly and doesn't lock you in a windowless tower or a dungeon or something. Just remember, we want to meet him and welcome him to the Took family in the proper manner.

"Run for your life, my dear," said Bilbo to Thorin.
"I'm perfectly safe," said Thorin. "I haven't locked you in a dungeon."
"Or a windowless tower," Kili added around a mouthful of pastry.
"The letter goes on about crop yields," said Bilbo, "which I save for you, Hamfast."
The letter was passed around the table until Hamfast got it. He gave it to Bell, who frowned over it, while the baby nursed and she drank her tea.
"I'd say it was nice your family approved of me," observed Thorin, "but I'm not sure from the letter if they do."
"Just make sure by the time we do see them that I'm nice and pink and fat." "Oh, that will be no problem at all," Dori assured them in a comforting manner.
Another bird, this one a large red-tailed hawk, arrived, alit on the table, looked around at all the beards, seemed to shrug and stalked over to stand imperiously before Kili, holding a letter in its beak.
The bird had a ring around one leg identifying it as 'Great of Heart' in the script of Rohan.
Kili took the letter very carefully.
"Where in Rohan did you come from?" he asked the bird, though it couldn't reply to him. "Who do we know who sends their letters via hawk? And what do we feed him? Or is it a her?"
"There's a chicken in the larder that we've been picking over," said Dori.
"I'll get it," said Binni.
"Thank you."
"Kili, don't open that letter until I get back!" Binni cried.
Binni was back so fast, Ori wondered if Mistress Dazla wasn't waiting behind the kitchen door with a tray to hand it over.
The chicken carcass was put down in front of the hawk with great ceremony. Binni plopped down next to Oin, hands folded, and said, "Go on!"
Kili slit open the letter. What he read surprised him into sitting up straight.
"What is it, inudoy?" Dis asked.
"It's from Theodred. Um... Arivett eloped with Theodred's cousin Eomer."
Everyone stopped eating. Even the birds stared at Kili.
Bofur whistled appreciatively.
Ori felt a little sick, and it wasn't just that he'd 'seen' it. Watching the hawk eat, Ori thought he would never complain about a raven's table manners again.
"Go on, Kili," Thorin broke the startled silence.
"He says, or wrote, or whatever, that Queen Hild sent Arivett a letter the night she and Aris arrived at Erebor, to tell Arivett that we were all either too young or already engaged, but that King Theoden of Rohan had a nephew, a great warrior among the Rohirrim who was... er... available. Hild, Aris, and Theoden intended to introduce them, but Arivett didn't wait for that. She wrote to Eomer that very day. She sent him a long letter and a nude. A nude what?"
"Picture of her pony, cram brain," said Fili, "go on."

"Eowyn told me Eomer got Arivett's letter when they were in the stables and he opened it and out fell a picture Arivett naked! With axes! Eomer had to go up to the hayloft for a while,
and Eowyn stood at the bottom of the ladder calling up to him: Brother? Are you alright? Is something turning blue? What are you doing?
He screamed and swore at her.
She hasn’t stopped laughing since.
I’m sorry I missed it, but I did have a lot of fun with you and the younger set in Erebor. I doubt any coronation I ever go to will top Idad Thorin’s. We’re still talking about it! I think Father misses all of you more than he’ll let on.
Anyway, I guess Eomer liked what he saw, because he immediately rode out with an entire squad of eorlingas to meet up with Arivett and her army. Eomer said something to Eowyn about ‘joint maneuvers’.

That brought a laugh to everyone but Frodo, who had obviously lost interest in all but breakfast. Dwalin chuckled.
"Wha? They're goin' t' canoodle in front a' a large audience?"
"Kinky," said Nori.
Kili frowned.
"Um… they didn't tell anyone what they planned to do after they met up, but Eomer said they were going northwest."
Dis gave Thorin a slightly more sober look.
"Nadad, where were they going?"
"Given how far the ponies can travel in a day?" He swore under his breath. "No."
That was when Roäc arrived, looking rather smug, and dropped a narrow folded letter into Thorin's lap. Roäc appeared to be… singing to himself.
Thorin tore open the seal. He read the contents of the letter, his breath suddenly coming faster.
"Oh, Mahal. She really did it."
Dis took the letter as he sagged back into his chair. Bilbo had him by the hand in an instant.
The princess read:

To King Thorin II Oakenshield, High King of All Dwarrow.

Hail!

This is to inform you that Prince Consort Eomer and I have claimed the throne of Beleghost. You will be gratified to learn there were no casualties. There wasn’t even a siege. The populace opened the city gates and welcomed us, since the mercenary army of King Frerin fled at our approach. We intend to affirm ties to the Blacklocks as well as to Rohan, and I will offer my allegiance to your majesty on paper or in person, at your pleasure.
May your beard grow ever longer!
Arivett, Queen of Beleghost.

A second, far less formal, note arrived attached to the official one:

Cousin, We found your blot of a brother and his dimwit wife hiding in an armoire. She's with dwarfling, so I merely exiled them, even if it was against my better judgement. I believe they are running off to Idad Chat to beg his help in reclaiming Beleghost. Fat chance, as Chat would say. Amad will be livid over the elopement, but Eomer is far too much temptation for one, poor dwarrowdam.
Love, Arivett.

The silence was shattered by the slamming open of the house doors, then the sitting room door. They heard Furh’nk call, "Yer majesty, it's - er -"
"Too late, laddie; take a deep breath," said a familiar voice.
Suddenly Hild was in the breakfast room, filthy from the road and wild-eyed. Aris walked in behind her, far more calm, and civilly shut the door behind them as Hild rushed to Thorin, who got himself out of his chair before she grasped him by the shoulders and cried,

"My damling has run off and overthrown a kingdom! I'm so proud!"

She threw her arms around him and burst into tears.

Thorin embraced her, rubbing her back, trying not to chuckle and failing.

Aris bowed to Thorin.

"We didn't even get all th' way home. Th' raven caugh' us on th' road. We've sent mos' a' our guard on t' th' Orocarnis."

Dwalin said, "I take it tha' Voundis is still steward?"

"Aye," said Aris. "Arivett wouldn't've left anyone else in charge. Thank blessed Mahal."

Hild pulled back and said, "Thorin, you must make them abandon this elopement nonsense and make sure they have a proper wedding!"

"Would you have waited to get married if I insisted?" asked Thorin. "Arivett is more like you than you could have dreamed, and, apparently, her craft is showing initiative. Sorry, cousin, you're a day late and a barrel of ale short."

"Oh, well," she said, practically giddy, smiling and nodding to everyone at the table who called greetings to her and Aris. Then she turned to Thorin with a brief grave expression, waved a hand impatiently and said, "Sorry about Frerin."

"These things happen," said Thorin.

Bujni stood from the table and cleared his throat.

"Did you need me to attempt to liberate Belegost, your majesty?" he asked. He made it sound as if he'd offered to pour more tea. "Technically, I am next in line after King Frerin."

"Thank you, Bujni, but I need you here," said Thorin.

"As you wish, your majesty," said Bujni with a bow, and sat back down.

Thorin looked over at Bilbo with a smile.

"We're planning on our making a royal tour next summer which will include the Shire. We'll be staying with Chat at any rate. If Arivett is inclined to pledge loyalty to me, I'll happily go to Belegost and see her."

"You will acknowledge her?" Hild asked, though Ori thought it sounded like more of a command.

"If," Thorin enunciated, his gaze piercing both Aris and Hild, "she intends to rule fairly and take care of the people then, yes, I'll gladly acknowledge her."

Dori rose and asked Miss Oqizla to bring two more place settings and more tea.

"Would you like some breakfast, your majesty? General Aris?"

"Oh, that would be lovely," said Hild, taking the chair Aris pulled out for her. "Thank you, Lord Dori."

Ori turned to Dwalin.

"What should we get them as a wedding present?" he asked.

"Somethin' sharp," Dwalin replied.

Hild mused, "I wonder what surcoat Arivett wore for the invasion."

"Um, maybe it's not the best time to mention it," said Ori to the table in general, "but I got a letter, too. I don't recognize the handwriting."

"Better open it now," said Thorin. "With the way things are going, it's probably from Mahal."

Ori broke the seal, opened the letter, blushed bright red and crushed it to his chest.

"Not unless Mahal's a dam," he squeaked.

"Wha' is it, love?" Dwalin asked.

"It's a love letter and it includes a nude, wearing mismatched socks."

"Oh," said Kili. "Fan mail. I get that, too, but I've never gotten a nude with socks. Lucky!"

"If you like, you can have mine," said Ori, wanting to cast the thing in the fire but feeling it would be rude. Dwalin took it and looked the picture over, made a considering noise, then turned it upside down.

"Not bad," he teased. Ori tried to snatch it back but Dwalin held it out of his reach. "I kin tuck
this under yer pillow, if yeh like, love.’”
“No! Don’t be gross!” Ori griped.
“I dunno, love. Them’s some fancy socks. If yeh wore a pair a’ those, I’d be ready t’ peel ‘em off yeh.”
“Dwalin!”
“Mmmm, that gold’d bring out yer eyes.”
“I’ll make you wear them!”
“Them tiny thin’s? S’pose I could put one on me prick- Mmmph!”
Ori climbed from his chair, onto Dwalin, and clamped both hands over his husband’s laugh.

Burying himself in work that day was almost a relief, except for Bard tearing through to try to murder Master Brur in his own office. Ori had thought Tilda was absent, but he didn’t realize the reason until Bard was shouting down at Brur, and Brur looked torn between wincing and defending his turf. Master Sadie arrived after about ten minutes. Ori suspected someone had sent her a bat or a raven, asking her to come sort this out. The upshot was, Tilda could remain Brur’s student, as long as she didn’t take anymore unauthorized field trips into the mines or to any other dangerous place. Sadie also offered to bash Brur over the head with her cane if he even tried such a stunt again. Bard surveyed the beat-up condition of Sadie’s stone cane and said he thought there was no need, but thanked her anyway.

Back home, after dinner, Bilbo brought the Gamgees and Frodo back to Bag End East, then returned to Fundin House. Mistress Dazla’s minions cleared the dinner table and brought out wine and coffee. There the company held an impromptu council meeting. Ori thought, as he arranged his scribe’s tools, that it quite apt that Bujni now sat at the table with them.

Thorin brought out a small stack of missives he had received and Ori discovered there was much more to the tale than there had been this morning.

“Dear Thorin,
Hope all's well. You're not going to believe this, but Frerin and T'dillah have showed up on my doorstep, begging for sanctuary. Don't know what I'm supposed to do with them, though I am in need of a good accountant. Can he account?
Best,
Chat

"Ori," said Thorin, "please take down this reply."

Dear Chat,
Sorry for the mess and the mess's wife. Frerin can, indeed, account. Business management appears to be his craft. If he gives you an ounce of trouble, please write and tell me. Pebble or not, you can ship him to Erebor in chains.

"Would you behead him?" Ori asked, amazed at his own casual tone.
"No, he would have an accident on the Great North Road. He's defied me and even tried to depose me, but I'm still not eager to throw my own brother's body to the mob."
"What about T'dillah?"
"That's the other thing I need to mention in this letter."

Should it come down to it, please be so kind as to keep an eye on T'dillah and the pebble for me. I will send gold for their upkeep.
The last thing Arda needs is T'dillah loose in the world with some vague idea of revenge.

Best,
Thorin

“Writin’ bad poetry at every poor slob she meets,” Dwalin commented reflectively. “Terrible way t’ die.”
“Not that she's likely to outlive her One for very long,” Thorin said grimly. "Theoden also sent me a letter."

Dear Brother King,

I find myself in a quandary over dwarfish custom. Hild and I were planning to introduce Eomer and Arivett anyhow, but what is the correct thing to do in the case of their elopement? I have taken Theodred to task - apparently he knew - but he remains unrepentant. My niece, Eowyn, is no help either. She can't stop laughing. I find myself down one nephew, fifty horses and their riders and, as King Bard would say, an entire clue. Please write.

Yours truly,
Theoden

Ori wrote as Thorin dictated his reply:

Dear Theoden Brother,

In this case, I would consider the assignment of the horses and riders as a wedding present and begin negotiations with the new Queen of Beleghost. I will acknowledge her oath of loyalty.

Best,
Thorin

PS: The ravens haven't stopped laughing, either.

“Then, we have Ahkn’s letter,” said Thorin.

Dear Thorin, Durins in general and everyone else cluttering Fundin House right now:

I suppose you must have heard our Arivett's all grown up and overthrowing kingdoms, which sounds positively exhausting. I'm glad I simply inherited mine.

I was wondering about all those nobles Frerin took with him to Beleghost. I figured Arivett would have their heads lining the battlements before lunch, but there weren't any nobles left by the time she got there.

Apparently, they've been offing each other at a respectable rate ever since they arrived in Beleghost. The only one who seems to have escaped the slaughter was a fellow by the name of Wobr. He decamped pretty quickly, though, to parts unknown.

Yours,
Ahkn

Ori said to Bujni, "I'm so sorry about your parents."
Bujni said with perfect composure, "My parents are right here."
"Roäc?"
"Thorin?"
"I have a very difficult assignment for you."
"Feats of danger and daring-do?"
"No, delivering a message and actually keeping your beak shut."
"Awww."
"I know," said Thorin, "I'm no fun, but neither is this."
Thorin took a scrap of paper, wrote on it, drew his dagger and cut his thumb. He pressed his bloody thumb to the paper.
Just before he folded it, Ori caught a glimpse of the message, just two khuzdul runes:

Last Chance.

"Greeeeat," said Roäc. "Now I'm going to drool the whole way there."
"You're not carrying this thing in your beak."
"I can still smell it if you tie it to my leg."
"If you can keep from eating it, there's a whole, dead rabbit waiting just for you when you get back."
Roäc cocked his head.
"Rotting?"
"If you insist," said Thorin dryly.
"And you know I do." Roac held out his leg. "Bung it on, then."
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. We’ve mentioned the night market a few times, so now it’s time to go and do a little shopping! Plus have a few adventures, of course, but little ones. And you’ll find out why the night market is only for grownups. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Dwalin was gone when Ori awoke on the morning of first rest day. That was the price of being a soldier, Ori knew. Rest days were few and oddly spaced. Dwalin had elected to ride with the city patrol on the day shift to have tonight free for their… Ori almost squeaked to himself, lying there alone in bed. They were walking out at the night market tonight!

In the meantime, Ori had the whole morning and afternoon to do whatever he wanted. That is, if Master Brur or Thorin or someone didn't need his help. In which case -

"In which case," he admonished himself, "you will stop thinking about working, you shalehead."

At any rate, breakfast was calling and Sigrid had arranged to come and sit while he put the finishing touches on her portrait.

"You'll have to tell me what the night market is like," she said, sitting out on the grass in the sun in her holiday dress as Ori painted from his seat on the patio.

"I'm sure you'll see for yourself soon enough," Ori replied with a smile. "Fili's bound to take you sooner or later, especially if you insist."

She laughed and shook her head.

"Every time I mention it he turns red and stammers about something my father said. Something about the night market and a shovel and Fili's head. My dearest Da is interfering again."

"But what does Wicked Step Mother say about it?"

"You mean my secret ally in debauchery? He keeps prodding Da about how Da doesn't have to protect my virtue anymore, all the while carefully skipping over the fact that I don't have a lot of virtue left."

"I think you're quite virtuous," said Ori. "I think you're patient to a fault."

Sigrid gave an unprincesslike snort and said, "You wouldn't have thought so the other night. If Da had gone to the kitchen sink and turned the hot water on and off one more time I was going to dunk him under it. Poor thing. He just can't believe we have hot and cold running water, that everyone has! Only the richest ever had that. Like you, we only had a spigot and you had to boil it before drinking it."

"Well, obviously, no one's announced the drowning of the king of Dale, so you must have found a solution."

"I sent Tilda over to him with a demand for a bedtime story. She hasn't asked him in ages. He seized his chance while he had one."

"That's the sort of creativity and foresight that wins battles, your highness," he teased.

"No fair quoting Balin at me."

"Not to mention, underhanded enough to make Nori proud."

"Much better," she said with a sniff.
Finally, it was time for Ori to bathe and dress to go out. As he walked through the sitting room, the door to Bag End East opened.

"Ah, Ori, there you are."

Ori turned to see Bilbo’s smiling face, which quickly became Bilbo’s laughing face.

"No fears, my friend," said Bilbo, "I'm not Master Brur, here to drag you back to the grindstone on your first rest day in… well, ever, I'm beginning to suspect."

Ori breathed out in a great, relieved sigh.

"Isn't it awful? I love my job! But I'm beginning to dream of huge chunks of pottery on little legs, chasing me through the halls of Erebor!"

"Time for a break, then," said Bilbo. "And I have just the thing to start it out on the right…. foot."

Ori winced.

"That was terrible!"

"I'm so ashamed!" Bilbo proclaimed.

"That's pigshit."

"Yes, I'm afraid it is, and it's going to become worse. Here, I think this should, er…, throw tonight's outfit into considerable relief."

Bilbo handed him a bundle of knitting, soft and thick, in a violent range of colors. The knitting unrolled into-

"Socks!" Ori cried.

Oh, they were hideous. One sock sported diagonal rust and green zigzags and the other blue and yellow horizontal stripes.

"These are great, Bilbo! Thank you!" Ori cried, hugging him impulsively. "You must have gone to a great deal of trouble."

"No, no, it was no trouble," Bilbo assured him, hugging back. "Dwarrow have such little feet, they hardly took any time or yarn at all. Besides, with all those dwarflings at the inn, I've had lots of practice."

"They don't go with any clothes I own!"

"Given that Dipfa is your tailor, I find that astonishing."

"Are you and Thorin going tonight as well?"

"Yes, Dori and Balin have agreed to faunt-sit, and Sam will stay over. Frodo will be kept well-occupied. I'm hoping he won't even notice I'm not there."

"He gets anxious when you go out without him," Ori guessed.

"The suggestion of it usually sets him to chewing on his fingers, but we can't exactly carry him around the night market. I understand it's not a place for faunts."

"So I hear," said Ori. "This will be my first time, too."

"Then, we shall both discover what delights await! Who knows, maybe I'll write a story where Gonad romps through the night market."

Ori snickered.

"That's one I want to read."

Dori practically pouted when he heard the four of them would not be home for supper.

"You need to fortify yourselves before you go out and carouse and eat junk!" he admonished them.

"Dori," said Thorin, placatingly, "we're not setting off on a twenty mile hike. One night of bad food choices won't set us up for anemia."

"Not you grown dwarrow, perhaps, but my Ori-"

To his credit, Dori didn't finish that sentence. Instead he went with, "Well, I'll go and see about the roast," and stalked out.

"Tha' was close," said Dwalin, winking at Ori.

"Let's go before Dori regresses again," said Ori.

They rode their ponies in tandem, trailed by Master Arb and his security detail, intending to go their separate ways once they reached the market. The number of soldiers on duty there had been
increased in advance of Thorin's visit, though they were all in plain clothes, the better to mix with the crowds.

The night market occupied the western quarter of the central market in the very center of Erebor, a vast city within a city accessible by many bridges from residential neighborhoods, the counting houses of the ministry of finance, the main miners' commons, and a dozen other places. In the earliest days of the settlement, it was the only place in Erebor where foreign dwarrow could trade, and time, different cultures and a multitude of uses had left their mark on the open stalls and narrow shops that lined hundreds of winding alleyways. Dwarrow thrived on planning, order, symmetry, everything the central market was not. Yet, the chaos worked.

The night market was far more crowded than the day market. Many of the night merchants paid a small fee to use stalls left empty when the day merchants left, but it cost nothing to spread a blanket or a carpet on the ground in a niche. For some, it was a way to supplement a meager income, for others a place to show off a secondary craft which might not be acceptable to their guild. Even in the worst times of Thror's greed, such lowly merchants paid little in the way of taxes.

They stabled their horses in the repurposed warehouses that used to cordon off the market. Here, Thorin and Bilbo went on, intent immediately on the Alley of Ephemeral Things. Ori and Dwalin wandered the outskirts of the market, where Ori recognized a few of the scribe apprentices hunkered down on a garish rug which was littered with piles of tiny booklets, no more than strips of paper folded in half and sewn with a knot along the fold.

Ori knew these on sight. They contained explicit little graphic stories, the longest no more than sixteen pages. Ori recalled Nori had a stack of them hidden away that Ori was not allowed to touch. "Did you ever read those?" Ori asked Dwalin.

"Oh, aye. They were great fun 'til I found meself an' Thorin rollin' aroun' t'gether 'n one. I donno who they write these thin's f'r, bu' even I know I don' 'ave a dick th' size o' a halberd. Fr'm wha' I understand, they're still producin' 'em."

Even a few days ago, Ori would have rested safe in the knowledge that he would never appear in one of those booklets. A few days ago, he hadn't been a fashion icon, either.

He tried not to let his brain dwell on it too much. Instead, he went with, "Doesn't it bother you or Thorin to be shown like that to anyone with two coppers to spend?"

"Nah. When they start showin' us bein' beheaded an' thrown t' th' mob, then I'll worry. Yeh never were tempted t' try yer hand at one?"

"Not for anyone else to look at. Even if we had the money, Dori would have never let me go to the night market, much less let me sell my work here."

They went along the edge, admiring the various things in stalls. There were the usual staples but now, at night, these had become more varied and with more interesting ingredients. There was an entire stall devoted to baked goods made with all different kinds of 'vision' mushrooms.

Another sold pipes made for smoking pipe weed, water pipes for smoking unusual mosses, charcoal burners for inhaling incense of divine inspiration, among other things. Ori was rather attracted to a small pipe carved of a single rose quartz. The proprietor told him it was for adventurous single dwarrow to smoke and dream of their Ones. Ori and Dwalin looked at each other, grinned, and the proprietor laughed and told them they didn’t need it. He did, however, have a new shipment of Old Toby pipe weed, which both Ori and Dwalin liked. He measured out a pouchful each, telling them the soldiers escorting the Gamgees had brought a shipment back with them.

"I'm hearin' that Mister Hamfast's doin' wonders down in the Dale farms. Any luck an' we'll be grown' our own weed here."

"Tha'd be grand," Dwalin agreed.

Another stall featured small runs of liquor made from things like parsley, beetroot, maple leaves, and lichens. Dwalin was impressed with the parsley wine but muttered to Ori that the lichen whiskey tasted too much like dirt.

Nearby stood a small stall with an elderly dwarrowdam seated in a rocking chair. She was
knitting, to Ori’s delight, until he looked about and realized everything, from hats and gloves to blankets and coats, was made with pictures of cats on them.

Further down from this they heard distant music and saw a large barrow in the middle of the street. A delicious smell wafted from it. Ori realized the dwarf running the barrow had a huge caldron in it and was making chips. A counter on one side of the barrow held large containers of salt, different vinegars, pickled tomato puree, several kinds of mustards, cheese curds, and a heated pan of rich brown gravy.

“Ohhh,” Ori groaned.

Dwalin chuckled. “I’ll get yeh some, love. Hang abou’.”

Ori looked around as Dwalin went on his mission. There were many, many dwarrow busy about the market but there were men and a few women, too. Ori notice a small group of young dwarrow had stopped to get chips. As a group they wandered his way.

The young dwarf at the front of this gaggle looked at him, then did a double-take.

"You!" he said, grinning. His hair was a wild shock of frizzy pink, which wobbled and mysteriously chimed when he moved his head.

"Pardon?" Ori asked.

"You're you!" the dwarf enthused.

"Um… yes?"

The stranger laughed and shook his head.

"I saw you in Vug. You're the king’s scribe."

The gaggle called out enthusiastically in greeting and began to talk excitedly among themselves.

"Ori of Fundin, at your service," he said, bowing.

"Hi! Buer, son of Uer, at yours and your families. Wow! This is so incredible! You're the one who turned me on to the whole sock thing!"

Ori looked down. Yes, the young dwarf’s boots were laced very wide apart, with the tongue removed, the better to show off the wildly paisleyed blue-pink-purple-green sock on his right foot, and the orange sock with chartreuse circles on his left.

"Those are nice," said Ori in spite of himself.

"Not as nice as yours," said Buer.

"These are new. My friend Bilbo just made them for me. Where did you get yours?"

"Second hand clothing stall," said Buer. "Some swell wears a pair of socks or a belt once and tosses them out. The maid fishes 'em out of the trash and sells them to the second hand merchant. This belt buckle supposedly belonged to Lord Zark."

"It did," said Ori. "He wore it to King Thror's funeral, though it had marcasites in it then."

"I traded the marcasites for lapis and moonstone Durin stones are really ‘in’ right now. Hey, a bunch of us are going down to the square to do the wag. You want to come along?"

"I'm with my husband," said Ori.

"Bring him!"

“Aye, bring ‘im,” the gaggle enthused.

"Where're yeh bringin' me?" Dwalin asked, handing Ori a cone of chips.

"We've been invited to wag in the square. Buer, this is my husband, Captain Dwalin Fundinul. Dwalin, this is Buer, son of Uer."

Rather than being intimidated, as Ori expected, Buer looked up at Dwalin with a huge grin and bowed.

"A pleasure, captain."

"Aye, same here. Did yeh want t' wag then, love?"

"Only if you wag with me," said Ori, peeking from beneath his lashes. "And only after I finish my chips."

They followed the chattering group slowly toward the beat of drums to an open square around a large fountain. Young dwarrow gyrated and wagged with joyful abandon. Around the perimeter, glass lights similar to the ones King Ulfr gifted Thorin, pulsed and swirled in rainbow colors,
echoing back the sounds of the drums, the whole creating a kaleidoscope of color and sound across the square.

Ori asked Buer, “Where did these lights come from? I’ve only ever seen them in solid colors and they certainly didn’t echo!”

Buer grinned.

“I don’t like to admit it, with the captain of the city guard right here, but I nicked one of Ulfr’s lights from a string in the Alley of Incredible Things and analyzed it. It was simple to improve on the colors, just a matter of adding different elements, though I did blow up my workshop more than once in the attempt. The echoing is my little secret. Oh, and Captain, I put back the original. I’m pitifully honest.”

“Guid lad,” Dwalin commented, around the chip Ori had just fed him.

The gaggle ran forward and threw themselves into the crowd, everyone screaming happy greetings to everyone else.

Dwalin raised a brow and turned to Ori.

“I got hangnails older than these badgers. Sure yeh want t’ be seen with me?”

“Oh, come on,” Ori cried, grabbing his hand. “Show them how it’s done!”

The young dwarrow were not content to wag the way they had back in the spring at the coronation. That was so First Age, and far too tame for the night market.

They danced in every combination, moving acrobatically, or gliding and swaying. One new trend was to dance tight to the back of a partner of similar height. This looked to Ori exactly what they intended: sex, fully clothed, in the street.

The more daring wagged this way in chains of three or more.

Dwalin whispered to Ori, “Our Kivi’d be proud.”

Ori gleefully noticed he was very politely not invited to participate and thought his huge, scarred dwarf warrior might have something to do with that.

After dancing for more than half an hour, Ori pulled Dwalin to the side, panting and laughing.

“I think I’ve had enough wagging right now.”

“Yeh want a fruit soda water ’r somethin’?”

“Yes, please.”

They waved goodbye to Buer and his friends and were answered with calls for them to come back any time.

“That was wild!” Ori enthused, “though, I’m not sure I want to dance with our beards braided together like Buer’s friends.”

“Nah?” Dwalin asked, grinning, as they strolled to a soda stand. “Tha’s shockin’, tha’ is.”

Dwalin bought them each a mixed berry soda and they continued along.

“You’d look great,” said Ori, “but my beard is so short that my feet wouldn’t touch the ground. I’d look like a mouse, desperately clinging to your beard as you capered about.”

Dwalin snerked, then laughed outright.

“Caperin’? Me?”

“You’ve capered,” Ori reminded him. “At the inn, remember? The hills were alive and I was pretending to be an elf and you didn’t break any important bits from all that jumping around. You even checked!”

“Aye,” said Dwalin with a leer. “Then later on, yeh checked.”

They walked on, then Dwalin took his hand.

“C’mon,” he grinned down at Ori. “There’s plenty t’ see down here.”

“Where’s ‘here’?” Ori asked eagerly.

“Th’ Alley a’ Miraculous Feats,” Dwalin said with a glint in his eye.

Ori was, indeed, impressed.

The first stand displayed an enormous boulder. Stuck deep within it, with only the handle showing, was a sword.

“Why the sword?” Ori asked the proud owner.
“This ‘ere’s th’ Stone a’ Destiny,” the proprietor expanded. “Found at th’ bottom a’ a lake way up in th’ north. There was a broken lake dam and the lake drained. Brought it back, me late udad did. Legend says if yeh kin pull the sword fra’ th’ stone, yer th’ rightful king o’ Gondolin.”

“Really?” Ori asked. “I suppose that’s amazing, but Gondolin’s gone.”

“Aye. Grea’ mystery tha’. S’pose th’ rightful king kin make it reappear. Fancy takin’ a chance, laddie? Three coppers for a pull. And one silver f’r five tries.”

Ori giggled but shook his head. He looked up at Dwalin, who snickered.

“Tried years ago, love. I ain’t th’ king.”

Amused, they went on. Ori saw a dwarf who looked quite normal. However, it turned out that for one copper he would lift up his hair, scalp, and the top of his skull to reveal his brain. He had survived an orc attack and scalping.

“Aye, had ’em put a nice gold hinge on me skull.”

“Your brain is so pink!” Ori squeaked.

“That’s ’cos every night I feed it strawberry jam.”

“I didn’t know brains liked strawberry jam!”

“Best thing for ’em. I started out giving it peach jam first, but it just made it dizzy.”

“I’ll keep that in ‘mind’,” said Ori, blinking.

The dwarf roared and handed him back his copper.

“That’s one I never heard before, and, laddie, I’ve heard ’em all!”

Next was Vi and Margr’s younger brother, Poczoh, who was taking out his fake eye, swallowing it, bringing it back up and putting it back in for a copper. Ori produced the copper necessary for Dwalin to see the trick and politely asked after Poczoh’s sisters.

“Our Margr’s invested some a’ her pension in the bakery, so now she gets her pastries once a week f’r free,” Poczoh told him as he gulped down his eyeball.

Both Ori and Dwalin laughed.

“Does she get anythin’ besides iklars?” Dwalin asked.

Poczoh burped loudly and produced the eyeball, slick and wet from his insides.

“Not always. Our Vi’s been pillagin’ the material warehouses, says they’re doin’ up th’ place f’r their elf.”

“Your brain is so pink!” Ori squeaked.

“That’s ’cos every night I feed it strawberry jam.”

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“Yes,” Ori agreed. “I heard he’s bringing back a bigger bed.”

“Aye, well,” Poczoh put his eyeball back in the socket with an audible squelch. “He’s a nice enough fellow. Mebbe Rogi’ll learn a few manners from ‘im.”

Ori and Dwalin thanked him for the eyeball trick, sent their regards to the sisters and moved off.

Further on, they met a dwarf who could lift great weights with his teeth. Another booth featured two young daughters of men, who were twins and were described as double-jointed. They could contort themselves into the strangest shapes and fold their legs behind their heads.

Another display was quite noisy as a large dwarf exhibited his strength by lifting your pony in the air for four coppers.

Dwalin greeted him by name and introduced him to Ori as Tukkaj. Tukkaj was retired from the military but was too bored at home, so did this for fun. Ori decided no to remind Tukkaj about the time Tukkaj had flirted a little much with Dori. Dori had picked him up, one handed, and flung him off the dock.

"Yeh seen Ib lately?" Dwalin asked Tukkaj. "Last I heard, he was eatin' a siege engine."

"Aye, he still is. He's managed t' eat th' whole thin' down to th' axles."

"Really? He’s persistent, I’ll give ‘im tha’!"

"Aye, though he almost quit halfway through. Couldn't take any more teasin' about how he should just swallow th' batterin' ram whole."

"Go’ his goat, did it?"

"Nah, made him horny f’r his husband. Had trouble keepin' his mind on th' job."

"Typical Ironfist," said Arne, approaching with Nodun and her husband, Tay, whom Ori almost did not recognize dressed.

"Arne!" Ori cried. "You escaped from the archivists!"
"As you see," said Arne, sketching a ridiculous, jaunty bow. He had abandoned his brown attire and wore a fashionable crimson tunic with black cuffs and banded collar, with gold buttons on the placket to match the cuffs on his ears.

Tay was given a more formal introduction, then Dwalin said to Arne, "Wha' did yeh mean, yer highness, when yeh said 'typical Ironfist'? I known lotsa Ironfists. Ib's th' only one I know who eats large wood an' metal weaponry."

Arne grinned at Tay, who laughed and draped an arm over Arne's shoulder. He had a very deep, pleasant laugh that Ori found quite appealing. He was nothing to Dwalin, of course, but he was quite decorative, his face tattoos shimmering in the brilliant colors of his people.

"It's because our Ib's a romantic," said Tay. "Ironfists in love go to the ends of Arda to prove themselves."

"You didn't eat a siege engine for me," said Nodun said, poking him in the shoulder.

"You know I'm on a low-seige engine diet," said Tay.

"Ah, forgive me, kurdu, I forgot."

"So," said Ori. "Master Ib is trying to prove himself to his husband?"

"Nah," Tay replied, "Ib's just weird."

"Oh. What?"

"I'm only teasing," said Tay. "It always surprises people when they see an Ironfist with their nose off their grindstone. They think we only do that when we have an axe to sharpen."

They said their goodbyes and wandered on, down alleys of tattoo artists and milliners and crafters of mourning jewelry. They explored rounded closes ringed in long, narrow shops in the Blacklock style. Tiny, colorful tiles coated these shopfronts in the complex, interlocking geometric designs Blacklocks favored. The shops specialized in the goods brought in from the eastern kingdoms. At a stand of exotic fresh and dried fruits, Dwalin bought a pinkish red sphere with a little jagged knob and handed it to Ori.

"What's this?" Ori asked.

"Tha'," said Dwalin, "is a pomegranate."

Ori cried out and hugged him.

Ori, caught up in the colors and noise, tried to look in all directions at once. It was like the market in Dale at Durin's Day, multiplied a hundred times.

He must have squeezed Dwalin's hand a little harder than he intended.

"Bit much, love?" Dwalin asked.

"Maybe a little," Ori admitted reluctantly.

"Let's turn down this way. We'll see if th' Moo an' Cluck's still open."

"The what?" Ori yipped with a delighted giggle.

"Place tha' does ale an' barbecue. If it ain't disappeared, it's open day an' night."

"But 'The Moo and Cluck'? Really? That's its name?"

Dwalin chuckled.

"I don' know, t' tell yeh th' truth. There's no sign outside. Tha' jus' wha' we've always called it."

They turned right down an alley wider than most, lined with actual shops, many shuttered for the night. The crowd thinned out and they turned right again into a much narrower way between two shops and down a flight of steps into a large, natural cavern filled with people, long tables, long benches, and the intoxicating scent of roasting meat.

Ori had to swallow to keep from drooling.

The tables and benches were communal. Ori recognized several of Dwalin's soldiers in the crowd, He and Dwalin stopped again and again on their way to the counter to greet friends, including Furh'nk with his arm around Loli, and Targ with his husband and wife.

A portly Blacklock waiter sliced through the crowd toward them, bearing a huge tray of beer glasses over his head.

"Orras!" Dwalin called to him. "Yer lookin' stout!"

"Thank yeh kindly, Captain Dwalin," said Orras. He set the tray down on the table beside them and expertly slid glass after glass down the surface toward a group of rowdy journeyman smiths,
who seemed to have an entire cow's worth of stripped bones littering the table where they sat. "Yer lookin' like one very lucky dwarf."

He winked at Ori, who grinned and ducked his head.

"King's out back with his new hubby," Orras went on. "Said if yeh showed up, t' send yeh along."

"We ain't even ordered yet," said Dwalin.

"I'd say no' t' worry, there's enough food on tha' table fer all four a' yeh, but th' way tha' hobbit feller eats, I'm no' so sure."

They made their way around the right edge of the long counter, down a passage guarded by a small knot of soldiers, several of whom Ori remembered from the inn and was able to greet by name. Then they came to a doorway guarded by Arb himself.

"All quiet?" Dwalin asked, bumping shoulders with Arb as he passed.

"Naught, but th' sound a' gnawin', Captain Dwalin."

'Out back' was a small side cavern with its own fireplace and a few small tables and chairs, no fancier than the bigger room, but noticeably quieter. Thorin and Bilbo had it to themselves.

For a moment before they entered, Ori saw them sitting at a far table, Bilbo in Thorin's lap, Thorin's head on Bilbo's shoulder, looking far happier and more content than Ori could ever recall seeing him before.

"Evenin!'" Dwalin barked. "Hope we ain't interruptin'... anythin'."

"Fuck you, Dwalin," said Thorin affably.

"No need, looks like our Bilbo's got yeh well in hand."

"No fair guessing," Bilbo muttered, then giggled. "Ori, you must come and have some of this beef rib. I'm all but swooning over the sauce."

"Whereas our Thorin's jus' swoonin'," Dwalin snickered.

He thumped down on a chair at the table and settled Ori on his knee, well within reach of the partially demolished platter of barbecue.

"Be nice," Ori admonished him gently, and fed him a rib. "Bilbo, have you and Thorin been shopping?"

"Shamelessly," said Bilbo. "And the great, royal lump is no help. He won't even tell me what half of it is, though I did get necklaces of pressed sugar and fruit roundels threaded on cord for Frodo and Sam."

"Are they for eating or wearing?"

"Both, conveniently enough. Oh, and you must go to the Alley of Ephemeral Things. When I'm not covered in sauce I'll show you what I got. Within three stalls, I had enough material to plot a new novel."

"Should I guess?" Ori asked slyly.

"Oh, go on, but you never will!"

Dwalin and Thorin exchanged looks of trepidation.

"We could nip out t' th' fron' room an' ge' a pint 'r five an' be back 'fore they noticed we were gone."

Ori turned to him and blinked saucily.

"I'm sorry? Are you still here? I hadn't noticed I was sitting on your knee!"

"See," said Dwalin. "There's yer proof."

Bilbo's haul from the Alley of Ephemeral Things included half a page of a partly burnt love letter written in Sindarin script, a handbill announcing the production of a long forgotten play and a merchant's receipt listing the purchased items: one box scented talcum powder; two ribbons: grosgrain, red; and a pair of manacles, size large.

"Mahal!" Ori exclaimed. "Bilbo! You're really going to make up a story with all that?"

"I don't see how I could be expected to resist," said Bilbo. "Care to join me?"

"Thank you, but I think I'd rather be surprised."

"Ah, well, the offer stands, should you ever wish to take me up on it. I can scarcely imagine the mayhem we might conjure up together."
After they left Bilbo and Thorin, they wandered hand in hand, through the Alley of Lanterns, and down the Alley of Spinning Wheels, where Ori got a serious case of the 'wants', passing stall after stall filled with wool roving and spun yarns in every color. There were knitting needles capped with sapphires and buttons of cast silver and gold, crocheted blankets with fibers a half inch thick and woven blankets of white silk upon which Ori didn't quite dare breathe.

At the Crossroads, at the meeting of the Alley of Lost Coin and Alley of Dares, Dwalin stopped and sniffed the air like a hound.

This was the gambling district in the night market. During the day the stalls were mostly coffee shops where old dwarrow pensioners played cards or diced for small change. At night, the coffee shops closed and reopened as serious gambling establishments, and possibly homes to unsavory goings on related to the exchange of enormous sums of money. The city guard of Erebor kept a close eye on these stalls. While gambling was legal, large numbers of shady characters offing each other was not.

They had to stop as the crowds had parted to allow the approach of an ominous looking dwarf, all in black, on a black pony. A shiver went through the crowd, though the dwarf on the pony looked neither right nor left, instead stopping at a very large open stall on the corner where hard-faced dwarrow bet money on a little ball that circled a wheel of fortune, waiting for it to land on black or red, and then which number.

An attendant trotted out of the stall to hold the pony, as the dwarf dismounted, and then took the pony, presumably to stable it. The dwarf stalked into the gambling parlor as if he owned it, which, in fact, he did.

Nori knew all the gaming bosses of Dale and Erebor, and so did Ori, at least by hearsay. Among the more horrifying were Marnik, son of Narnik, who wore an iron nose because an angry associate bit off his real one, and 'Lord' Taen, said associate, who was though to be the illegitimate son of Lord Sikar. That Sikar refused to acknowledge him only fueled Taen's considerable temper.

As terrible as they were, they were still afraid of this dwarf all in black, Master Ursith, who was colder than the waters of the Bay of Forochel from which he was said to hail. A quiet, intense, sneaky fellow, he had skulked on the periphery of the demimonde in Dale until the night of the Master's fall, then rushed in to fill the vacancy as the boss of all gambling with precision born of long biding and planning.

He wore his red hair in one long queue, wrapped round his head, so it resembled a ball of twine. Black tattoos of script fell down his face and neck and into his collar. On the back of his left hand he bore the rune for 'hate' and on his right the rune for 'death'. His grin, when he did grin, opened like a slit throat, with nothing humorous about it.

They said he was richer than the Durins, but his only adornment was a diamond ring on his right thumb, with its stone the size of a peach pit and the iron band in which it was set had grown flat on one side from years of him tapping it on the arms of his hard, wooden chair as he listened to some fool talk themselves deeper and deeper into a hole.

"I been tryin' t'get th' goods on 'im f'r decades," Dwalin muttered. "Slippery son of basalt."

"Come on," said Ori, tugging him along. "You're not working right now, remember?"

Dwalin turned to him and smiled.

"Aye, righ' yeh are, love. No workin' t'night. In fact, I go' somethin' fun t' show yeh."

The Alley of Divine Bliss smelled of perfumes, oils, and xocolātl. The air felt heavy and soft, which was odd, since it wasn’t that far from the Moo and Cluck. All the stalls along it were swathed in satin, all shades of pastel colors. Even the street was roofed with billowing gauzy cloth. Throw pillows were scattered everywhere. Ori felt like he was walking through a mattress. A large shop front was shrouded in black satin printed with red lips. Dwalin lifted the curtain and Ori went in.

Row upon graduated row of fake pricks in every shape and size and material from carved marble to glass to wood.

The glass items, on the very top row, were backlit to show off their swirling colors or the glass shapes or gems encased within them. Some were carved like dams or dwarrow or fantastical
“I’ll never look at corn on the cob the same way again,” said Ori.
Dwalin chuckled.
“Best yeh’ve been exposed t’ em gradually,” he said.
“This one had two ends? Why would…. Oh!”
“Dams just wanna have fun,” said Dwalin.
“That’s terribly clever!”
“Thank yeh.”
“I mean the prick.”
Dwalin’s grin deepened.
“Thank yeh.”
“Some dwarrows’ husbands!” said Ori, rolling his eyes. “So… are we here shopping for someone in particular? Or are you just threatening me with vegetables?”
“Nah, just wanted t’ see yer face when yeh saw ‘em.” “And, did I meet your expectations?”
“Always, love. Always.”
There was some jewelry under glass, which seemed to represent genitals. Ori couldn’t imagine wanting to wear a penis on a chain around his neck. What he thought was really interesting were the pieces that seemed to have both penis and vulva combined, either in coitus or just as if they were on the same person.
He wouldn’t wear those either, but he began to plot how he could get down here to buy one for Dwalin’s nameday.
Fili would know where he could get it engraved.

In the Alley of Charms and Mysteries they passed stalls filled with different stones, carved into runes for the drawing of luck, love, money, everything up to and including passing mastery critiques. In another stall, for a fee, you could pour molten lead into cold water and the seer would interpret the shapes it took.
This caught Ori’s curiosity. He pulled Dwalin over.
“Let’s try!”
Dwalin chuckled,
“Ain’t yeh chattin’ t’ Mahal already?”
“I want to know what she sees.”
“Fair enough.”
“You first,” Ori instructed.
The dam regarded them, expressionless. Dwalin put down the two silver and, as directed by the dam, put the small steel spoon into the lead and dropped the contents into the water. Ori leaned in, watching it bubble and spin for a moment.
The dam lifted it out and peered at it.
“Hmmm, it has the definite shape of a large bird, which I’ve never seen before. I do feel that it is exactly this. You will go on a journey where a large bird or a large number of birds will befriend and aid you.”
She passed him the lead item.
“Keep it with you as a talisman.”
Dwalin looked it over with Ori.
“I’m in luck,” Dwalin commented. “Don’t look anythin’ like them raphcuctus birds. So, we ain’t goin’ off t’ become keepers a’ tha’ sort.”
They all laughed, then Ori took his turn.
The lead was hissing as he lifted it and dropped the spoonful in. The water boiled wildly, so much so, they couldn’t see what shape the lead was taking for a moment. The dam rose, startled, and peered in as they did.
The water stilled. At the bottom of the glass container was a perfect sphere of shiny silver lead. Ori gamely pulled up his sleeve, reached in, pulled it out, and laid it before the dam, looked at her
interestedly.
The dam stared at it. She backed away slightly, then glared at them.
“Get out of my stall. Take your money and that…thing and go. I’ve never seen you. You’ve
never seen me. This never happened.”

Shocked, Ori backed into Dwalin, the tiny ball of lead in his hand. Dwalin pulled him away,
chuckling.
“C’mon, love. I think Mahal’s been’ pretty straight forward with that.”
Ori looked down at the lead in his hand.
“What could this mean?” he asked. Dwalin took up the tiny ball and waved it under Ori’s nose,
laughing.
“It means Mahal says ‘No peekin’!, love.”
Ori giggled and they went on.

One entire alley, as wide as a street, was given over to a permanent night market institution.

Master Axsin’s Cabinet of Curiosities! Rare Wonders of the World! Strange Beings and Tricks
of Nature!
The metallic gold letters topped graceful stone arches and wrought iron gates at each end of the
street. Just beyond each gate, a dwarfsdam sat in a brightly painted booth, selling tickets for
general admission.
Ori paid out two coppers for each of them and they started down the alley.
“Strange beings and tricks of nature,” Ori murmured, unsure as to what this meant. How strange
could they be?
As it turned out, the first being they met was Master Vobwi, and he really wasn’t any stranger than
the Durins.
“Master Vobwi!” Ori called.
“Eh? Oh, hullo there, Lord Ori, Captain Dwalin.”
The merchant stood in front of a largish stall which held a dozen mesh cages filled with spiders of
varying size, but all in brilliant colors.
“Those are pretty,” said Ori.
“An’ deadly as a pike through th’ eye,” said Master Vobwi cheerfully.
“Really?” Ori asked. “Do you sell them?”
“Oh, no, no, no. Though, mind, before King Frerin went off wi’ his entourage, I was fairly
swamped wi’ offers. No, I bring these down t’ show off in th’ night market every now an’ again, an’
Master Axsin treats me t’ a few rounds at th’ Moo and Cluck. He says me little darlin’s lend an air a’
danger t’ th’ proceedings.”
Ori looked around, wide-eyed.
“Is Kthulluh here, too?”
“Oh, I sent Kthulluh off wi’ a sailor, a while back, t’ put back in th’ sea where it belongs. Thin’
was beginnin’ t’ creep me out.”
“It didn’t seem terribly friendly,” said Ori.
“Friendly? That’s th’ least a’ it. I come in late one night, turned on th’ lamps, it was crawlin’
out’ve its tank. It crossed th’ floor, crawled int’ another tank, ate all th’ fish an’ crawled back, an’ I
swear it was givin’ me th’ eye like I was next. If it did tha’, wha’ else could it do?
“I thought: Fuck it. If it locks th’ doors an’ starts doin’ th’ accounts, I’m out.”
“I would think that would be a good thing,” Ori reasoned.
“I’d have t’ pay it! An’ it had a beak.”
“A beak? Where?”
“Underneath.”
“Under…”
“Imaging havin’ a beak in yer arse,” Dwalin said, idly.
“IT eats wi’ th’ beak,” retorted Vobwi.
“That would make dinner parties awkward,” said Ori.
They bade goodbye to Master Vobwi and continued down the row. They saw a live three-headed
A snake, and the mummified remains of a half-man/half-fish, a vast collection of skulls, many of which were of strange beasts which may or may not have existed long ago, a taxidermied hare which had antlers and was said to roam the fields of Haradwaith, a pair of extremely ornate, bejeweled shoes with pointed toes said to be cursed to turn the wearer into a strange animal every full moon, a mound of a dried, jelly-like substance with long, trailing tentacles said to carry venom enough to kill any being caught by it in the high seas, a glass bottle the size of a small shed which contained the pickled remains of what was described as the largest flower in the world, a mummified man’s forearm that had a steel hook where the hand should be and was claimed to have belonged to a notorious corsair named Short Tom Gold, and something that looked like the front ends of two taxidermied horses sewn together at the torso.

Ori refrained from asking how the animal relieved itself. Such mysteries were not for him to know.

At the end of the row they came to Axsin’s Cabinet of Curiosities.

In fact, it was a large cabinet with double doors, closed and secured with a ridiculously enormous ornate padlock. It sat back a little from the walkway, tucked into a niche covered in ceramic tiles with mottoes printed on them in ancient Khuzdul writing.

Ori leaned forward and squinted at one motto.

“It says: Remember to wash your face.” He looked at Dwalin, his head cocked. “I’m open to ideas.”

“It was th’ surround t’ an old wall fountain from Queen Hild’s last palace renovation,” said Dwalin.

“Let me guess,” said Ori. “It came with the palace and she hated it and couldn’t wait to get rid of it.”

“Right in one,” said an ancient dwarf, whose white beard braid swept the ground as he hobbled forward. He had bright green eyes and his eyebrows seemed to overflow his face, sweeping off to the sides where he had curled them in on themselves and used wax to keep them that way. The ends bounced whenever he moved his head. “Imagine! Queen Hild was just going to throw this out! Shocking! She let me have it provided I hauled it as far away from her as possible.”

“What’s in the cabinet?” Ori asked. “Is it something that’s going to spring out at us?”

Axsin’s eyebrows bobbed dangerously as his eyes widened.

“That’s something I never thought of! I’ll have to take that under advisement!”

“Now yeh’ve done it,” Dwalin murmured.

Ori nudged back with a gentle elbow.

“So, what is in the cabinet?” Ori asked.

“Costs you two coppers a piece to find out! Are you a gambling dwarf, Lord Ori?”

Ori stared at him.

“Do I know you? Have we been introduced?”

Axsin’s smile widened.

“After a fashion, m’lord. Once your image is all over Vug Magazine, you’ve pretty much been introduced to everyone.”

“Oh,” said Ori, then he felt rather silly for saying it. Instead he hurried on to the contents of the cabinet. He was fairly sure it wasn’t empty, and he did have the coppers.

“Yes, please,” said Ori, handing over the coins.

“Step in, please,” said Master Axsin.

They did so. Master Axsin closed the curtains and opened phosphorus lamps that brightened the tiny space. He took a key on his chain from around his neck and opened the cabinet with great ceremony.

Inside the cabinet, on the middle of three shelves, sat a single picture in a gilt frame.

This Axsin took down with great reverence.

It seemed to be a faded graphite drawing of the city of Dale over the edge of a battlement. It was quite light, rather yellowish brown, with a smudge in the middle of the sky which was not a cloud.

“Why is this drawing a curiosity?” Ori asked, expecting to be told it had been drawn by Thror or
“It’s a curiosity,” said Axsin, “because it’s not a drawing. It’s an image of the actual place, frozen in time, captured on special coated paper, like a memory.”

“Really?” Ori asked, not entirely sure he believed the dwarf. “What’s this smudge?”

“That’s a raven,” said Axsin. “The process for capturing such an image requires the paper be exposed to light for several hours, so much so that a bird flying across the image is barely more than a whisper. This object is called a sungraphic.”

Ori looked up at Dwalin.

“What do you think?” Ori asked.

“Is it th’ only one?” Dwalin asked.

“The only one outside of King Ulfr’s laboratory,” said Axsin. “Apparently he’s working on the process. This cost me a very valuable jeweled drinking cup made from the skull of an ancient dwarf warrior. More of a punchbowl, really.”

They thanked Master Axsin and walked on, out of this alley and down another alley that promised magical tattoos and cures for curses which seemed to be mostly eyeballs suspended in some greenish liquid sealed in clear glass bottles.

Finally they came to a stall with customers ten deep to the counter. There was much jostling and waving of arms. Whatever was on sale, it was very desirable.

“Can you see what’s going on?” Ori asked Dwalin. He himself was prepared to edge around it.

“Wait a mo’, love,” said Dwalin with a frown. Being so tall, he could see right over the heads of the crowd. His eyes narrowed, then his jaw fell.

“Mahal’s hairy arse.”

“What?” Ori asked.

“Look!”

Dwalin grabbed Ori by the waist and boosted him up to kneel on Dwalin’s shoulder.

“Ooooh, shit,” Ori muttered.

It seemed to be a souvenir stand, such as those seen all over at Durin’s Day or Yule, filled with cheap trinkets to sell to visitors from outside of Erebor. There were tea towels and plates and bells and tobacco pouches. There were tea cups and baby bibs and even lace-edged knickers.

And each and every piece bore a more or less badly drawn rendition of a very familiar face.

“Bearer souvenirs!” the merchant barked. “Get yer picture of the Blessed Bearer! Bring luck an’ plenty t’ yer house! Lookin’ t’ pop out badgers? Guaranteed t’ make yeh preggers within th’ year!”

“Rogi!” Ori bellowed.

And so it was, Vi and Margr’s not-so-darling boy, surrounded by the makings of the profitable scam of a lifetime.

“Clear off, yeh lot!” Dwalin roared.

The customers scattered and Ori launched himself from Dwalin’s shoulders without a second thought.

He hit the ground, hopped over the counter, and thundered down the alley behind - this, apparently, being Rogi’s planned escape route should business sour.

Rogi had a head start and he was not giving that up for anything.

Ori roared Rogi’s name, infuriated almost beyond belief, even as he realized he had no idea what he would do if he actually caught the little creep. Hold him down so Dwalin could pulp him, probably.

At first it was easy enough to follow, since Rogi wasn’t careful and he left angry merchants and broken glassware behind him as he bulled through the Alley of Colorful Lights, but then he turned into less crowded ways, moving left and right down passages Ori couldn’t even see. Nor was Rogi careful about knocking others to the side or down on the ground, something Ori would never willingly do.

Eventually Rogi pulled ahead and turned into a district filled with carpets and tapestries and disappeared.

Ori stood, panting, at the intersection of six crowded alleyways, with no idea where he was or
where Rogi had gone.

Never mind. Margr and Vi would know where Rogi hid out when he wasn't home or in lockup.

He turned. For an instant he saw Rogi hurtling toward him, not paying attention to his path, then Ori was laid out on a pile of carpets, staring out into the vastness of the cavern ceiling. He was almost certain it shouldn't be spinning that way.

He shook himself off and someone help him up. He said an absent 'thank you' as the world stopped whirling all around him and settled back into place.

A crowd had gathered around something or someone before him.

With determination, he approached and tried to put some force - or at least volume - behind his "Pardon me. Excuse me."

The dwarf who helped him up called out, "Oi, yeh lot! Lord Ori's tryin' t' come through."

The crowd parted, giving him full view of the unconscious Rogi, sprawled on the ground.

Apparently Rogi had run himself in a circle and ended up exactly where he least wanted to be, and with the person he least wanted to meet, and all the worse for it.

Rogi was a slight, gangly dwarf, it was true, but Ori doubted that he himself had suddenly turned into a stone wall.

An ancient dwarrowdam had somehow managed to hunker down over Rogi, prodding Rogi's skull with an arthritic forefinger.

Ori knelt beside her.

"He smacked 'is head on th' ground right smart. Silly badger."

"Will he be alright?" Ori asked.

"Dunno. Heads is tricky. 'Course, this bein' Rogi, it's prob'ly empty."

Rogi groaned. He sat up in a wibbly fashion and blinked up at them.

"Wha' th' fuck?"

"Aye, no damage at all," she said with a smirk.

Dwalin arrived at that moment to loom over Rogi and glare.

"I didn't do nuffin'!" Rogi whined up at him.

"Nothin' strictly illegal," Dwalin granted, "but shady as fuck. I'm tempted t' run yeh in anyway, fer interruptin' our evenin' out."

"I'll lodge a complaint!"

"I'll tell yer mam," Dwalin shot back.

Rogi gasped, eyes full of fear.

"It's all Nori's fault!" he squealed. "He talked me int' it!"

Ori rolled his eyes. He had no doubt Nori was somehow involved.

"And I'm sure he held a knife to your throat, too," said Ori. "Don't you think Dori should have some say before you put his face on a tea towel?"

"Awright, awright," Rogi relented as Dwalin yanked him to his feet.

Ori helped the old dam to stand up rather more gently.

"Thank ya, lad," she said. "Didn't know how I was gonna do that on me own."

He shot a look over at Dwalin, who was still browbeating Rogi. The dam patted Ori's arm, saying,

"Not t' worry. Here, I got Rogi's purse."

"You stole his purse?" Ori hissed.

Dwalin sent Rogi on his way with a warning to close up shop. "Well, I took, yers, too," she admitted, "but I was always gonna give yers back."

She tucked both into his hand.

"Thank you," said Ori weakly.

"Now, now, yer a good badger. Tell yer Dori that old Vusma, daughter o' Vus, says hello."

"I will," he promised as she hobbled away.

Dwalin came back to him, then.

"Yeh all righ', love? Yeh want t' head home?"

"We have something to take care of first," said Ori grimly. "Has the midnight bell tolled yet?"
"No' yet."
"We need to go back to the Alley of Lost Coin, and I have no idea where we are."
"It's no' tha' far. Come on."
Dwalin took his hand and led him around three corners and, abruptly, they were at the crossroad.
"I'd say I need to map this place," said Ori, "but I have a feeling the alleys rearrange themselves when nobody's looking."
Ori turned to Master Ursith's gaming tables. As the midnight bell tolled, Master Ursith cleared the games and shuttered the stall. Vast sums of money changed hands, but no one complained that the games had ended. One did not complain to, or - Mahal forbid - whine at Master Ursith.
The gamblers drifted down the alleys to other games, leaving the square oddly and ominously deserted.
Ori paused a few moments, then went to the door at the back of the stall and knocked.
"Scram! We're closed, yeh idjit," Ursith barked.
"Master Ursith," said Ori, "we need to talk."
The door slammed open. Dwalin leapt forward to grab Ori, probably to shove Ori behind him, but Ori didn't react, even when the gambling boss snarled,
"Yeh!"
"Uh huh," said Ori, slipping by Ursith, into the booth, grabbing the larger dwarf by the ear in passing and dragging him back inside.
Dwalin stepped in behind them, filling the doorway, obviously shocked and confused.
"Ouch!" Ursith hissed, as Ori gave a vicious tug on his ear. "Leggo!"
"We. Need. To. Talk," Ori growled.
"Well, tell yer buffalos t' close the door, chick."
Dwalin gasped, slammed the door shut behind himself and leaned on it.
"Nuisance?"
"O' course it's me, cram brain," said Nori, exasperated. "Lemme go, chick."
Ori gave one more vicious tug, for emphasis.
"You're luck you still have your kneecaps, you jerk," Ori growled.
Dwalin laughed. At first it was a chuckle, then it rose to a roar, which shook both him and the booth.
"Yeh mean t' say, all this time, forty years, I been tryin' t' catch Ursith out doin' somethin' illegal, and all this time he's just-"
"Shut up!" Nori muttered. "Can't yeh see I'm in disguise? I ain't useful t' Thorin if everyone knows who I am."
Dwalin swallowed his guffaws, but they still shook him.
"What's the big idea, chick?" Nori demanded.
"Why is Dori's face plastered all over a bunch of shoddy knickers?"
"Like he'd mind!"
"I think he'd mind having his face on some dam's bum."
Nori grinned with evil glee.
"Tha' one was Rogi's idea, I was more along the line o' tea towels meself. What? I gotta keep me hand in, chick. I got a reputation t' maintain."
"And making a tidy profit from your own brother's fame has nothing to do with it?"
"But I ain't."
"Oh, you let Rogi keep the money out of the goodness of your little heart," snapped Ori sarcastically.
Finally, Nori's grin faded.
"Look, don't say a word, but I been passin' on me share t' Mistress Annis in Steam Alley."
"How much of it?"
"All of it, ya little shit."
"Really?"
"Pinky swear."
"Let me see if your fingers and your toes are crossed and I might believe you."
"This getup ain't real conducive to the striptease, but it's true. Just don't say nuffin' t’ Dori, right?"
"I think he's going to notice, Nori, when he goes to tap out his pipe and his face is painted on the bottom of the ash tray."
"Not about the goods, chick, just what I'm doin' with me proceeds. Like I said, I got a reputation t' maintain."

Ori sighed, threw his hands in the air in surrender then hugged Nori.
"Here, wha' were that f'r?"
"To make up for the beating Dori's going to give you when finds out."
"Right," Nori snickered. "Better give me another o' them. I'm gonna need it."
After that, Ori dug in his pocket and handed Vusma’s ‘gift’ over to Nori.
"Here, add this to Mistress Annis’ ’share’. It’s Rogi’s purse. An elderly dam named Vusma gave it to me."
Nori cackled maniacally and pocketed it.
finally, Ori and Dwalin exited the gambling stall through the door. Ori suspected Nori would simply sink through the floor, or perhaps there was even something as prosaic as a trap door under a rug in there.
Dwalin was still shaking his head, but he didn't say anything about Nori.
"Time t’ go home, love?" he asked.
Ori smiled and said, “I want to go to the Alley of Sweetmeats, first.”
“Aye? Yer wantin’ a candy necklace like th’ badgers’?”
“Bilbo was telling me about this one sweet. It’s jellied rose petals covered in bittersweet xocolātl.”
"Tha’ sounds like somethin’ worth stayin’ f’r,” Dwalin agreed.
“Then, I want to go home, so we can go to bed.”
“Tired, are yeh?”
Ori snickered.
“No.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Finally Ori and Dwalin get a little private time together and then we have some breakfast. If you’re not into martial bliss, skip to the last few paragraphs. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

When they got home from the market, Ori looked up and down the hallway from the stable entrance, slightly paranoid that Dori might have waited up for them. Happily, the hall was in darkness, with just the small phosphorous pebbles running along the floor to guide their way.

“Th’ coast clear?” Dwalin whispered.

“Ye-EEEes!”

He turned, giggling, and swatted Dwalin’s hand.

“The coast is not on my behind!”

“Ooops, sorry!” Dwalin snickered, completely unrepentant.

“Can I trust you as far as the shower?” Ori asked archly.

“As far as th’ shower. After we get there, I make no promises.”

“Fair enough.”

They shut and locked the bathroom door behind them. Ori made sure they had a goodly supply of pink towels on hand, then stooped to unfasten his boots.

“Wha’ did yeh like best a’ everythin’ yeh seen?” Dwalin asked, yanking off his tunic.

“The chips, of course!”

“A’ course,” Dwalin laughed, flinging the tunic into the hamper.

“And we got to dance together! You dance divinely.”

“I dance like a buffalo.”

“But a divine buffalo,” Ori insisted, kicking his left boot into a corner. “What did you like best?”

“Th’ second bes’ thin’ was yeh draggin’ th’ crime lord aroun’ by ‘is ear. Tha’ were dead sexy.”

Ori hopped out of his right boot and went and rested his forehead against Dwalin’s chest and giggled.

“Once you got over the fact that he wasn’t really a crime lord, anyway. Thank you for not stopping me.”

Dwalin embraced him and kissed the top of his head.

“I’ve learnt it’s bes’ t’ trust yeh, love, even if it seems like yer goin’ t’ get yer throat cut. Yeh always have yer reasons.”

“You trust me?”

“A’ course I trust yeh. We trust each other, righ’?”

“Yes, but it’s sweet to hear you say it. I guess I’m still getting used to being a grown dwarf.”

“We’ve only bin married five months,” said Dwalin. “An’ it wasn’ planned. I’d say yer doin’ jus’ fine. At yer age, I wasn’t quite as promisin’.”

“Were you awkward?”

“I was a walkin’ hazard t’ meself an’ everyone else,” said Dwalin as he unbuttoned Ori’s tunic. “I had a chip on me shoulder th’ size a’ Erebor, always thinkin’ I had t’ prove meself.”

“Well, you don’t have to prove yourself to me,” said Ori adamantly. Then he frowned and said, “If that was your second favorite thing, what was your first?”
Dwalin's grin widened into wickedness. As he pushed Ori's tunic off of his shoulders, Dwalin leaned over and whispered in his ear.

“When we danced, I wished we were alone, 'cos I wanted t' lay yeh down in th' middle a' tha' square an' suck yer cock 'til yeh screamed.”

Ori’s cheeks and his crotch caught fire, for two very different reasons.

“Really?” he rasped, looking up at Dwalin with what he knew must be large, fascinated eyes.

“Aye! Yeh wiggled yer arse in me direction an' it was a very near thin’.”

“I… I didn't do it on purpose,” Ori stammered. “I mean, I wasn’t trying to tease you or anything!”

“Ori love, yeh never have t’ try,” said Dwalin.

They kissed over and over, quick, playful pecks.

Dwalin leered and said, “I can’t wait t’ strip off yer… socks.”

“You’re such an animal!”

“Someone got t’ be, or we’ll never get int’ th’ shower, never mind out’ve it.”

“Alas,” Ori agreed. “Shall I unfasten your boots for you?”

“Depends,” said Dwalin, “is this jus’ a pretense t’ look under me kilt?”

“I’m not proud,” said Ori, kneeling.

He was good to his word, though he did unfasten the boots before he turned his head and planted a wet kiss to the inside of Dwalin's left knee. He aimed the next a little higher up Dwalin's thigh, the third higher still, then he let his head fall back and sucked and nuzzled Dwalin's balls.

Dwalin swayed a little on his feet and breathed, "Tha's enough f'r th' moment, love, at leas’ 'til I got me back agains' a wall.”

"Aww," said Ori, giving the sac a quick kiss as a promise.

He rose to his feet to find Dwalin red in the face.

Ori fluttered his eyelashes.

"I'm being cute for you," he said vacuously.

Dwalin snorted and turned him very firmly toward the shower.

"Yeh'll be th' death a' me, scribe." "Ah, but what a way to go."

They did notlinger too long in the shower, though Ori did take his time washing Dwalin's back as well as his front. That first shower they took together months ago was forever fixed in Ori's mind. He couldn't pass up another chance to lather them each up thoroughly and glide across Dwalin's luscious muscles.

It made him so happy, yet he was hungry for more.

In the bedroom, Ori grabbed Dwalin's hand and pulled him to the bed. Dwalin willingly followed, chuckling.

"Come on," Ori cried, "I want to try this!"

As it happened, he meant the xocolātl they had bought at the market, but it didn't seem like Dwalin minded. They lay on the bed, face to face, with the box open between them, and Dwalin fed Ori one of the small, dark squares. "Mmmm," Ori groaned as the candy melted on his tongue, first the bittersweet, then the taste of something his brain processed as thick silk and the spring greening of the mountainside, but deeper and richer.

Ori smiled and sighed.

"So that's a rose."

"Lessee," Dwalin murmured, leaning in.

Their lips met, and Dwalin's tongue traced Ori's mouth. It opened to welcome him and they kissed.

"Ah," said Dwalin, pulling back with a little smile. "I'm wantin' more a' tha'.

"Do you really?" Ori teased.

"Aye, really."

Ori fed him a xocolātl, then his fingers. Dwalin licked and sucked the tips of those, then their entire lengths, one by one, then, holding Ori's gaze, the thinner skin between each finger. Ori shivered and giggled.
"Do you want more?" he asked shyly.
"I want whatever yeh'll give me, love."
"More xocolātl?"
"Oh, aye, tha', too."
Ori put a square between his teeth and leaned forward. Dwalin grasped the rest in his mouth and they kissed amid the flavor of xocolātl and flowers.

"More?" Dwalin asked.
"Of you, so you'd better move the box out of harm's way," Ori warned.
"Yeh plannin' somethin'?"
"Mmmmaybe."
Dwalin put the box on the table behind him, and turned back over.
"Rrrow!" Ori growled, and launched himself into Dwalin's arms.

"Oi! Th' beastie's go' me!" Dwalin cried out.
He laughed and rolled onto his back. Ori, atop him, kissed his face over and over and finally kissed his mouth long and hard.
Ori pulled back a little.
"What do you want to do?"
"I though' we'd do each other, actually."
"I was hoping for something slightly more specific," Ori admitted cheerfully.
"Mebbe yeh should kiss me some more an' we'll see wha' happens."
Ori smiled into a kiss, Dwalin's hands firm on his bum and a buzz of pleasure through his veins.
“"You know,” said Ori, “I really liked when you touched me between the cheeks that time.”
“"I didn’t have th’ oil t’ do more. But I do now.”
“"Maybe… we could try that?”
“"Layin’ like this, where I kin see yer face? Hold on a mo.’”
Dwalin reached a long arm and opened the drawer of the bedside table, extracting a bottle of amber liquid in clear glass.

“What is it?” Ori asked.
“"Just a little pressed oil. Nothin’ scented ‘r anythin’."
“"So my arse won’t smell like a linen closet?”
“"Yeh know, tha’s jus’ wha’ I was thinkin’."
Ori giggled nervously and kissed him again and again, gathering courage as he let his legs fall to either side of Dwalin’s torso. He knew how this was supposed to go, but reading about it and doing it were two very different things, even with Queen Kivi’s advice.

“This may be a Prelude to Penetration with the Penis or other Object(s), or may be a Game unto itself. The Delivering Partner should have a Light Touch at first, especially if the Receiving Partner is Inexperienced. Or, if the participant(s) prefer Rough Play, please consult Chapter Twelve.”

Even Kivi couldn’t prepare Ori for how it felt.
Dwalin rubbed the bottle between his hands to warm the oil a little.
“"No use tryin’ this cold,” he said. “Defeats th’ purpose if I have t’ peel yeh off th’ ceilin’ first thin’."
Ori buried his face in Dwalin’s beard, giggling. He heard the stopper opening and in a breath-stolen second felt the warm oil slide between his cheeks. Then he felt the closed bottle fall to the sheets and felt it roll into his calf, cool on heated skin.
When Dwalin’s hands cupped his arse again he shivered.
“Kiss me, love,” Dwalin murmured.
Ori raised his head and kissed him with abandon, as if kisses could chase the fear away.
Then Dwalin’s fingers smoothed across his opening and there was no fear, just a shivery gasp of pleasure and the need to move hard against Dwalin’s belly.

“A’righ’?”
“Uh-huh,” he said in a small voice.
“More?”
“Yes, please,”
“Yer so polite.”
“Now!”
“Tha’s better.”

Dwalin teased him, pushing a little into him, then sliding all his fingers up along the walls and back several times before returning to the core. Ori tried to relax into his touch there, but he wasn’t quite sure how, and his breath was already running away with him. He didn’t know if he could take much teasing, and he shocked himself when he growled as Dwalin moved his touch away.

It shocked Dwalin, too, apparently, into laughing, eyes wide.

“Dwalin, I’m—”
“I get yeh, I get yeh. No more fuckin’ aroun’ while we’re fuckin’ aroun’.”

Ori gasped and reared up as Dwalin’s forefinger plunged just a little deeper than before, pushing against the ring of muscle, but not breaching it, then pulling back, then pushing forward and through and entering him.

Ori cried out in surprise, eyes tightly closed, as Dwalin’s hand stilled.

“Yeh a’righ?”
“More,” Ori squeaked.

Dwalin resumed, slowly and carefully, as Ori clenched around his finger, unable to stop himself. There was no fear now, nothing but pleasure, from behind and from his prick, hard and trapped between them, giving off sparks along his nerves as he ground into Dwalin.

Ori stared into Dwalin’s eyes as his body did things far beyond his bidding.

“I love how yeh rub agains’ me when yer excited,” Dwalin purred. “I could come jus’ fra’ tha’, me fierce li’le ember.”

Ori huffed out a laugh of doubt and shook his head, breathing harder, no breath to spare for more as he moved back and forth, sensing his completion, seeking it, yet not wanting it to arrive. Not yet. Not when this felt so good.

Then he was rubbing harder and faster and the pleasure rose, sweat dripping from his chin.

“Do-don’t stop,” he pleaded.

“No’ stoppin’,” said Dwalin with a proud, feral grin.

Ori shook so hard, coming in time with his gasping breath, that Dwalin had to hold him on top. Long after Ori came, he lay, shuddering, across Dwalin’s chest, struggling for breath. And just when he thought he was through, a new shivery wave rolled through him.

Eventually, time and place returned. The room had grown terribly quiet. Dwalin’s hands rubbed soft, sticky circles around his buttocks and Ori said,

“So… um… is that how it’s supposed to work?”

Dwalin laughed so hard he nearly bounced Ori off him. He rolled them over and kissed Ori hard.

“It really couldn’t’ve worked much be’er,” Dwalin promised.

“What would you like?”

“Well, now tha’ yer greased like a fryer hen, I though’ I’d roll yeh over an’ rub off on yeh.”

Ori shivered and grinned.

Dwalin leaned down and bit his ear, licked it, and said, “I’ll take tha’ as a ‘yes’.”

“You want me on my hands and knees?”

“Naw, I though’ I’d stick a pillow under yeh an’ tha’ll give yeh enough height. I’m intendin’ t’ do this lazy an’ slow.”

There were always plenty of pillows on their bed. Now Ori began to think this was a good thing. He couldn’t see himself or anyone else sleeping on a cum-covered pillow. Though, he was almost sure Queen Kivi would have something to say about it. Probably somewhere in Chapter Twelve with the pain, or at least ickiness. He wondered at his own selective scruples. He didn’t actually mind sleeping on the wet spot, but he didn’t want to wake with his hair plastered against his face with it.

Then Dwalin was kissing him and he didn’t think about ickiness anymore, just Dwalin’s mouth on
his, still tasting vaguely of xocolātl. He twined his arms around Dwalin’s neck and gave as enthusiastically as he got.

Dwalin turned him on his stomach, kissing his neck and licking him between the shoulder blades, which got him a giggle and a poorly aimed swat for his troubles.

“If yeh don’ mind, I’m thinkin’ a’ olin’ meself up.”

“As long as you don’t get too slippery,” said Ori. “I’d hate for you to zip over me and smack into the headboard.”

“I’ll keep tha’ in mind.”

The mattress dipped on either side of him as Dwalin braced himself and eased down, seating his hard prick snuggly between Ori’s buttocks. He rubbed back and forth by experiment before dropped more weight on Ori’s pelvis, pushing Ori’s reawakening prick into the pillow.

“Oh,” Ori breathed. That’s nice.”

“Feels pre’y good fra’ here, too,” said Dwalin.

A little part of Ori still felt guilty that Dwalin couldn’t simply take him this way, as hard as his husband wished. After five months, was Dwalin really still satisfied to wait for that?

They heard Dwalin’s breath skip and guilty thoughts went right out in favor of bucking back, meeting strength with strength, gratified to hear Dwalin gasp in surprise.

“Keep tha’ up, this’ll be anythin’ but slow an’ easy,” said Dwalin.

“Should I stop?”

“… nah.”

Ori giggled into the mattress.

“Yer a menace, m’lord,” Dwalin growled.

“But I’m your menace.”

“Aye, yeh are,” said Dwalin in a low, dangerous voice. “It’s all I kin do t’ let yeh outa bed some mornin’s. W-want t’ cover yeh in xocolātl an’ cream an’ lick yeh clean fra’ head t’ toe.”

“Really?” Ori asked, more to see what would happen than anything else. He was not to be disappointed.

“If I could, I’d get down on me knees in open court an’ pull down yer britches an’ suck yer cock righ’ there.”

Great, blessed Mahal!

“Wh-what else?” Ori goaded, bracing himself, opening his legs a little more, letting Dwalin push against his opening with the length of his prick, which swelled with every pass.

“I’d take yeh on th’ battlemen’ in fron’ of th’ whole a’ Dale, bend yeh over th’ rail so they could see how pretty yeh look when yeh call ou’ me name, hear yeh moan when yeh come f’r me.”

“I want you, too,” Ori cried hoarsely. “Want you to take me on the battlement, want to feel your prick p-pound my hole.”

“Oh, Mahal,” Dwalin moaned, his breath and thrusts coming hard and short at once.

“Want you to swallow me down in… in the … the library! In the reference hall! Against the - the dictionaries!”

Dwalin came then, shouting, pressing Ori into the bed, Ori amazed that they hadn’t roused the whole house, and not really caring if they had because he was coming again himself, biting hard on the sheet, wishing for a pleasure-addled instant that Dwalin really was inside him.

They crashed to the mattress, laughing themselves breathless.

“Ori, love, ‘r yeh a’righ?”

“Dwalin! What in Mahal’s name did I just say?”

“It was hot enough t’ fry in, me pretty thin’,” said Dwalin, kissing his shoulder.

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Great, blessed Mahal!
“Yer wonderful.”
“I’m sticky, and I’m too sated to move.”
“We’ll jus’ have t’ be sticky t’gether.”
“Good plan. Love that plan. Love you.”
“Love yeh, too.”

Much later on.

"Love, I’ve a question," said Dwain into the dark. "How does Nori ge’ his tattoos on, so they're th' exac’ same ev’ry time?"
"He uses stencils, registered on tiny marks actually tattooed into his hands and face. The ink's permanent until it's removed with rubbing alcohol."
"Huh. Stencils. I gotta remember tha' one. Cuts his own, does he?"
"No, I cut them."
"Really?"
"They have to be the same and they have to be perfect every time."
"Yeh could've had quite a life a' crime if th' scribe thin’ didn't work out."
"That's the irony, isn't it," Ori mused. "If I had, we would have met sooner. You could have persuaded me onto the path of law and order, reformed me, and married me anyway."

Dwain chuckled and hugged him close.

Early next morning, deciding to let his husband sleep, Ori washed, dressed, and went through to breakfast. Dori was presiding with Balin. Thorin, Bilbo and Frodo came in shortly after Ori. They were all in the middle of the meal when Roäc returned, strangely subdued.

"Everything go all right?" Thorin asked him.

Roäc held out his leg, which bore a message.

"Better read this," said the raven.

Thorin unfolded the same scrap of paper he had sent out to Ered Luin. Whatever he saw seemed to set him aback for a moment.

Wordlessly, the king handed the note to Ori.

Beneath the bloody thumb print was a one rune, khuzdul reply:

**Understood.**

"Oh," said Ori.

"Indeed," said Thorin. "But that could mean a lot of things, couldn't it."

"It could," Ori agreed.

"Excuse me," Roäc croaked. "There's a hungry raven waiting for his rabbit here."

"As you approached, I sent for someone to pull it out of storage down in the cheese caves and meet you at your aerie with it. Will that suffice, your majesty?"

"Eh. It better be good and smelly."

Thorin sighed as the raven swooped out. Dori bustled off with Mistress Dazla.

"Should we worry?" Ori asked, quietly.

"I don’t intend to," Thorin muttered.

"But you’re doing it," Bilbo said gently, placing a hand on the king’s arm.

"I know," Thorin frowned.

Nori and Bofur came in. Nori settled next to Ori with Bofur beside to him. Bofur emptied the remains of the platter of bacon and Nori looked extremely pleased with himself. Ori decided to rectify that at once.

"Nori, you jerk!"

Nori furrowed his brow and looked around.

"Dori here?"

"With Mistress Dazla, upstairs."
Nori glared, “So what was-?”
Ori hugged him.
“Oi! Wha’ were that f’r?”
"Because I didn’t say anything.”
“Good lad.”
Ori poured some tea for Nori, who was filling his plate with a slice of toast stuck in his mouth.
Dori whisked in, kissed Ori’s cheek and flicked Nori’s ear.
“Oi!” Nori barked, “Wha’ were that f’r?”
“You’ll find out,” Dori replied ominously, returning to his breakfast. Ori decided a subject change was needed.
"Dori, do you know a Vusma, daughter of Vus?"
The Bearer abruptly put down his fork.
"She's still alive? Great Mahal! She must be well over three hundred years old!"
"Did you know her from Steam Alley?"
"Back further than that, pet. Back as far as Ered Luin, and then again here in Dale. She was a bit of a healer, a bit of a cook and, let's just say she taught Nori everything he knows."
"Really?"
"Yes, though I drew the line when she wanted to teach you."
Ori thought he would keep it to himself that Nori had done it for her. Good thing, too, or Balin might still be chained to his desk.
Ori felt a prickle fly up his spine. He glanced out and saw Legolas appearing at the secret door at the bottom of the meadow. The elf crossed the meadow in seconds and hurried in.
“King - Idad Thorin! My people have sighted an orc pack!”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Oh no! Orcs! Whatever shall our dwarrow do? Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori gulped. He’d thought they were finished with orcs.
“Where and how many?” Thorin demanded, rising from his chair, his face grim.
“Under twenty. They were spotted at the north end of the forest,” Legolas reported. “They are technically out of our boundaries, but they seem to be heading toward yours. I’m off to tell Ada.”
“Go,” Thorin excused him. He turned glancing about. Gloin entered with Sapphire on his shoulder.
“Sapphire,” Thorin ordered, “Find Dwalin, I need him here.”
“He’s still in bed,” Ori called as the raven vanished out.
“What’s to-do?” Gloin asked.
“Forgive me for borrowing your raven,” Thorin replied.
Ori felt he could almost see the plans forming in the king’s mind. He quickly formed plans of his own.

Dwalin was in no way thrilled with Ori’s plans.
“But, Dwalin, if I stay back and away from the fighting and stay hidden I can’t see the action, which is considerably different from the training ring and will give me practice in drawing movement.”
Dwalin sighed.
“Yeh know I’m jus’ afeert f’r yeh. I don’t want yeh t’ ge’ hurt, but a’ th’ same time I don’t wan’ yeh t’ think I think yeh ain’t capable a’ lookin’ after yersel’l. I ain’t Dori an’ I ain’t castin’ ‘spersions on our Dori.”
Ori laid both hands over his husband’s heart.
“I know, I know this, my love, and I doubt that you would try stowing me in a cupboard, if you thought there was danger.”
Dwalin raised an eyebrow.
“Did our Dori do that?”
“When I was very little, yes.”
Ori grinned at him as Dwalin rolled his eyes. He looked down at Ori, then sighed.
“A’righ’, me ghivashel. I can’t hold yeh where yer wantin’ t’ go. Just promise me-”
“I shall take every care I can, I promise.”
Dwalin yanked him into his arms and held Ori tightly.
Ori kissed the collar bone at his eye level and hugged back.
Dwalin released him and went to his weapons bench. He opened a large box and scooped out a handful of something. He closed the box and came back to Ori. Into Ori’s hands he placed a leather cloth piled with many polished and sharpened arrowheads. Ori nodded. He went to where he kept his slingshot and put the arrow heads into the pouch along with the several sharpened stones he used as ammunition.
They sailed in an elfin warship at midnight to the far shore of Long Lake to surprise the orc pack before dawn. Ori stayed curled up where Dwalin had tucked him, in a barrel, in case of rain or wind. Ori had a hard time not giggling hystically when he found that not only had Dwalin put a blanket in with him, but a few cushions so he would be comfortable and a pouch of dried meat and another of various snacks. Ori decided he would tell Bilbo, as this would be something Bilbo could use for his novels. It was so ridiculously romantic and comfortable that he was able, despite such cramped conditions, to get some decent sleep.

He woke with the sound of the elfin sailors quietly lifting the device they called the keel up through a vent and into the main part of the boat. The boat’s prow easily and silently slid up onto the shore. The dwarf warriors could disembark without splashing. Dwalin handed Ori up out of his barrel quietly and hissed, “Follow behind.”

Ori shook the feeling back into his limbs and scuttled silently after the troops.

They moved fast. Ori was glad he was a good runner. Dwarrow were natural sprinters and the squad moved at speed up the banks and through the grasses to where the elves had spotted the orc pack on the meadows between the Greenwood and the River Running.

Soon they were ensconced in a thicket of sumac and hemlocks. The canopy of leaves covered them and they could see easily between the skinny trunks. Ori stared. The pack was more in the lines of about fourteen orcs. The fire was dead and they lay about it in a large mess of bodies among swelling hillocks of earth. Unlike Drum, these orcs were huge, massively muscled, and made to be as ugly as possible to any other race Ori had ever seen. They made Drum look rather cute. A distance away stood their guards, one to the east and three others at the different compass points.

Dwalin put a hand on Ori’s shoulder and tucked him into the front of the thicket, so he could see. “There are only fourteen of them,” Ori said in iglishmêk. “Who attacks a mountain with fourteen people? For all they know, there might be a dragon in it!”

Ori was aware that in the back of his mind, it sounded like someone was choking on their ale. Across the meadow, a flicker of movement signaled that Tauriel and Legolas were in place with their troops, Kili and Gimli among them.

Dwalin grinned and kissed Ori’s cheek, then turned and gave orders in iglishmêk. A few soldiers slid silently out of the thicket. Ori watched, the darkness not bothering him in the least. The soldiers circumnavigated the orcs. They silently and easily disposed of the guard in the east, the north, and south. One of the hillocks rose and looked about.

Ori realized this was a warg.

He had heard of wargs all his life. He had even met one. No one ever told him they were supposed to be the size of ponies. Biscuit had been tiny. More of a toy breed, really. Silly of him not to realize, he thought with a silent, nervous giggle.

A few more wargs woke and looked about. Each of the first dwarrow soldiers dropped and froze. There was a breeze out of the northwest. The wargs sniffed. The thicket protected the dwarrow soldiers as did the breeze. The wargs looked about, then settled themselves again for sleep. “Why so few wargs?” a soldier asked in iglishmêk.

“Probably off pupping,” Dwalin signed back. “The elves said they had a couple a pregnant ones with them. Ready?”

Ori watched as Dwalin and the rest of his squad sidled in silence out of the thicket and took down the last guard.

Ori was sketching madly by now. Out of a far thicket Tauriel and Legolas drifted forward like smoke.

With a scream of discovery, the orcs leapt up and the battle began. The butchery was swift and vicious, but what struck Ori hardest was the noise, the shouting, oaths and battlecries, the ringing of metal on metal, all from this tiny skirmish. Ori filled page after page with gesture lines, split seconds of details burned into his mind. He used his sketchbook like a shield to keep from thinking about just what he was drawing.

To Ori’s horror, from the woods opposite appeared Loli, Omi, and Bain, wielding slingshots. They were definitely not part of Dwalin’s plan, and there was no time to warn Dwalin they were
Then he saw a huge orc flush Loli and her slingshot from her hiding place and light out after her. She shrieked and dodged off into the woods. Ori scribbled: *Helping Loli Meet at boat*, propped his sketchbook up against a tree and raced after them, arrow head and slingshot in hand, sick to his stomach. Fog had risen with the dawn and turned the wood into a series of jutting black columns. He tried to watch for silhouettes and follow the sounds, but he tripped on downed branches and tangles of vines and stumbled gracelessly into a small glade where a female warg was pupping. Another female stood near. Both were scrawny and wasted with lack of food. Three pups lay beside the mother. The females stared at him, then past him. A roar at his back spun him around with a shriek.

He raised his slingshot and let fly. The projectile sang and struck the orc through the eye, jutting grotesquely from the socket. The orc looked as surprised as Ori felt, but Ori recovered instantly to fire another missile into the orc’s chest. The orc roared, staggered, toppled onto its face and lay, nerves shuddering, its back impaled by two sharp stones and a familiar axe. Loli and Gimli stood, panting, at the edge of the glade.

Tauriel and Legolas appeared, Legolas with Omi and Bain each by the scruff.

“Hurry,” Legolas hissed. “The orcs are scattering.”

Ori scrambled forward, then through his memory flashed Thorin and Dwalin talking about how easily wargs were trained, and Floris with Biscuit.

“The pups,” Ori gasped. He turned to the mother who had birthed another pup and was growling. The other female was shaking but also growling.

Ori shoved a hand into his belt pouch and pulled out a few snacks, which he tossed to them. Abruptly the wargs stopped growling, and looked utterly confused, but in a moment they sniffed at the food on the ground and ate it. Ori reached again and tossed them some dried meat. They ate this, too, and looked up at him expectantly. Two mangy tails wagged querulously. Ori went forward, and, hoping he wouldn’t be eaten on the spot, offered each a strip of dried meat. The mother and the other female cautiously took the meat from him. The mother rose, trembling, and emptied out her afterbirth.

Ori handed the warg another piece of meat, and the other came over, whining, and butted him in the shoulder with its head, knocking him over. Luckily he already had another piece out to offer her. The wargs sniffed him over, and pawed at his tunic, obviously looking for more.

“What are you doing?” Tauriel whispered in shock.

“Putting my life in jeopardy,” said Ori, struggling to his feet.

The fighting seemed to have stopped, the dawn sounds of the meadow and thicket rolling over them.

“Bain,” Ori asked, “do you have a boat at the shore?”

“Of course,” Bain grinned. “We followed you in my father’s old fishing dinghy. It’s at the shore next to the elves’ boat.”

Ori felt a headache but banished it and beckoned Bain and Legolas near.

“We need to take the wargs with us. I’ll try to lead off the females, if you’ll take the pups.”

Both looked startled.

Legolas said, “Ori, we’ll have our throats ripped out.”

“I don’t think so,” said Ori.

“You’re not certain?” Legolas asked.

“I’d take them all myself, but they’re the same size as Frodo, and they’re floppy.”

Bain turned to Legolas. “Can’t you do some elf magic or something to enchant them?”

“And then what? Turn them into field mice?” Legolas asked.

Ori offered more meat to the two bereft females, who seemed resigned that their pups should be taken away from them so soon. They came tentatively forward, their eyes on Ori. Ori gave each a piece and backed away and held out two more pieces.

Slowly they led the two females down to the boat. A young male limped toward them, sniffing after the food, interested in spite of the strangers and a orc knife shoved into its left hindquarter.
Legolas offered it some meat. The male tottered forward. As it took the meat, Legolas whispered to it in Sindarin. The beast's eyes glazed over and he toppled. Gimli swept forward scooped up the huge beast and Legolas helped him all but drag it into the boat.

"Wha' was all tha?" Gimli asked Legolas. "Did yeh jus' say 'potato' and 'skivvies' over an' over?"

"I had to come up with words that sounded soothing for that to work," said Legolas.

"I suppose 'Good wargie' ain't soothin' enough?"

Once in the dinghy, Omi and Loli put down a blanket and the wargs all but fell on it. Ori fed the mother more meat and messily managed to pour some water into her maw. Gimli and Tauriel put the pups down at the mother's belly and helped them to latch onto her nipples. Ori hope there would be some milk; she was so pitifully thin.

Legolas crouched over the young male as Gimli tried to get some water into the bleary animal. Ori rose at the sound of a shout. The war party was marching triumphantly over the crest. Ori waved madly. A soldier waved back and shouted. Dwalin appeared, Ori's sketch book in hand.

"All safe?" Dwalin shouted.

"All safe," Ori called back.

Dwalin arrived beside them, then halted abruptly.

"Where did you lot come from?"

"It doesn't matter if we can't get back," said Bain.

"What's wrong?" Ori asked.

"With the wargs, we're too heavy to sail, we're in danger of taking on water." He looked out over the lake, then did a double take and hissed, "Oh, shit!"

Another, larger sailing craft crossed the lake at speed. In a moment, a familiar figure came into focus. It was Sigrid at the bow. She was dressed in black trousers tucked into tall black boots, brown leather surcoat with a green shirt. Her golden hair flowed out from under a red velvet kerchief. One hand held the forestay of the jib and the other clenched one of Fili's swords.

Ori saw Fili was at the helm.

The bow grated up onto the sand and Sigrid leapt off, landed on Bard's fishing dinghy, and clouted Bain on the head.

"You idiots! Idad Thorin's livid, Wicked Step Mother's not pleased, and Da's about to have a cow."

"We were helping Ori!" Bain snapped, enraged and rubbing his head.

"Get everyone aboard our boat," she ordered and tied the dinghy behind.

"What's th' rush?" Gimli asked.

"There may be more orcs, mutton head. The soldiers have taken prisoners. Any chance they get a touch at us and they'll have a huge advantage. Move!"

In a matter on moments, they were off and sailing across the lake. Ori reluctantly patted the warg mother. Her fur was filthy and alive with fleas and ticks and she had decided he was her darling of the moment, snuggling against his leg. He wondered if Oin would have any remedies for the poor things. This female was plainly exhausted. The pups appeared to be getting some sustenance from her. Despite their legendary ferociousness and their size, the wargs appeared to be nothing more than the pitiful, homeless back alley dogs of Dale, which Ori had occasionally seen cowering away from all who laid eyes on them.

Sigrid had taken the helm and was guiding them easily through the waves. Ori looked back. The warship was following them. Ori reflected he had preferred the first crossing, with the wind behind them. Sailing against it now, required them to 'tack' as Bain called it, to run slanted one way then switch the sails to the other side and heel off the other way. Despite this, they moved swiftly. Dale loomed closer, Erebor rising behind. Even at this distance, Ori could see that there were rather a lot of people waiting at the docks.

They slid up to the dock, Bain dropping the jib at Sigrid's shout, and the remaining thrust floating them up to the pier. Bard caught the rope Bain tossed out and made the boat fast. He gave them all
a cursory glance and turned. The warship slid along side the next pier. Several men came forward to catch the painters and make the ship safe.

Nori appeared at Ori’s side.

“Things’re ’bout t’ get right messy, Chick. Getcherself off home.”

“Is there a cart?” Ori asked. “The wargs can barely walk.”

“Yeah, over there.” Nori gestured with his chin.

Dipfa and Bujni pulled up to them in her cart, drawn by Poot-Poot. After a brief struggle and bribery with food the wargs were piled into the cart. Sigrid steered Bain homeward while Ori and his party sat along the sides of the cargo box and Dipfa urged Poot-Poot to trot quickly back to Fundin House.

Dipfa drove straight into the stable and out the back to the meadow. They all hopped out at the patio and Bujni ran indoors, calling for Oin.

Ori opened the back of the cart. Tauriel and Kill were fussing over the young male, Tauriel’s hand over the wounded hip. A faint green glow fell from her palm onto the warg’s flank, perhaps a temporary soothing of the pain. The other female and the mother stared down at the grass but made no effort to get out of the cart. Oin bustled out with Gridr, Dori, and Binni.

Dori opened her mouth to scold but her eyes fell on the wargs. Dori turned and went to speak with Mistress Dazla. Soon three large tubs were brought out and filled with warm water. Oin sifted powders and oils into each.

The adult wargs were put into the tubs. They were all a tight fit, as the wargs were so large, and they had to have their muzzles held as they lolled in the water, tired but clearly finding the water comforting. Next to the mother’s tub, Loli and Omi sat with the pups and a large basin, cleaning them up. Ori doubted the adults had ever had proper baths. They were quite disgusting.

And now, so was he.

Absently he scratched at his chest, wondering if Dori had a tub for him. He would like to go and bathe, but every time he moved a step away, the mother warg whined and started to panic.

Mistress Dazla brought out a platter of small strips of meat. These were fed to the adult wargs while everyone pitched in scrubbing them. Oin swore and went back inside but soon returned with some serviceable shears. Bilbo had come out and was standing with Dori. Frodo and Wee Sam stayed by the door as they had been instructed, but their eyes were glued to the enormous animals.

Out of the tubs and rinsed. Oin was obliged to cut away matted fur and oily knots of tar and filth that the orcs seemed to think made the wargs look good. In the end, Oin shingled all three coats to an inch long. Ori stared. Clean, watered, fed, their wounds tended to and with freshly cut coats, the wargs were quite as adorable looking as Biscuit.

The mother warg was the sparkling white of new-fallen snow, her eyes an icy blue-gray, the other female was a soft yellow with a pale yellow belly and brown ears. The male was reddish brown with large white and black spots. His feet were white, giving it the appearance of wearing boots. He also sported a huge red spot on the top of his head that looked just like a stylized heart. Kili burst out laughing.

Legolas came and snickered as well. Gimli patted the male, who’s tail instantly wagged furiously and the beast began eagerly licking Gimli’s face, knocking the dwarf on his backside. Gimli only chuckled and picked himself up to pat the head again. The male promptly fell over and rolled his belly up. Delighted, both Gimli and Legolas knelt and rubbed the exposed belly. Gimli hit the right spot and the right back leg began kicking wildly and the tail thumped the ground.

“With that spot on ‘is head—” Gimli said proudly, “we’ll call ‘im Romy.”

“What Romy?” Legolas asked.

“Short f’r ‘Romance’. He’s got a heart on his head!”

This amused everyone. Romy rolled over and took off, trying to run, despite his wounded leg. Romy lurched about half way down to the bottom of the meadow and then limped back. Gimli patted him, giving lavish praise. Romy trotted off a little to far side of the meadow, tottered on three legs across this then came back for more petting and praise. With short fur and the sunshine, his coat was almost dry. Legolas and Gimli immediately occupied themselves playing with Romy.
The mother settled on a blanket on the patio and Ori, Loli and Omi got all her pups to her side and feeding once more. The other female stretched out in the soft grass in the sunshine and was snoring almost instantly.

The mother looked up at Ori and he felt his heart lurch. The gratitude shone in her eyes. Bilbo brought another plate of meat and laid it near her.

“You know, Ori,” Bilbo murmured. “They seem pitifully happy to be with us. Those pups’ eyes haven’t even opened yet and she is fine with all of us handling them.”

“I know,” Ori replied. “Thorin and Dwalin said wargs are intensely loyal. And we all saw how wonderful Biscuit was.”

Bilbo chuckled,

“So what are you going to do with seven pet wargs, Ori?”

Ori considered.

“Um…” He watched as Gimli and Legolas seem to have successfully taught Romy to play a gentle game of fetch.

“They’re just as clever as Biscuit,” Ori mused. “Romy belongs to Gimli and Legolas. I wonder if Thorin would have a use for them. Kind of like the way men have guard dogs.”

Dori snorted, “Yes, but most men do not have dogs the size of overgrown ponies. Get in this tub, pet. Right now.”

Ori turned and saw that one of the tubs had been cleaned, refilled, and Oin was dumping various potions in the water. Ori wondered if this was how the wargs had felt as Dori made him kick off his boots then put him bodily into the tub, fully clothed.

Oin supervised while Dori scrubbed. Gridr and Binni arrived with towels and fresh clothes.

Ori was soon as spick and span as the wargs. Ori giggled and went over to the mother. She whined and her tail thumped as he sat beside her again. The pups had finished feeding and were asleep against their mother, at least three were asleep, one wiggled around blindly.

Ori picked up the pup. It was brindle with all colors of red and brown. It snuggled into his shirt. The mother gave the pup a lick but was not in any way disturbed by Ori holding it. Ori rose slowly and brought the pup over to Frodo and Sam. He made sure he was turned in such a way that the mother could see the pup. Frodo and Sam petted and cooed over the pup, quite enchanted by it. All too soon for the faunts, Ori took the pup back to its mother. He saw that Binni, Gridr, Dori, and Oin had brought out deck chairs and were settled in them. Balin came through and relieved Bilbo of Frodo and Sam, herding them back to lessons.

“Really, pet,” Dori teased with a frown. “I never dreamed you would go beyond Cluck-Cluck, Sassy and her kittens. What in all Arda are we to do with these creatures?”

“Well, I think Romy will be living with us,” Gridr pointed out to Binni, who giggled, watching Gimli and Legolas fuss over and play with the warg, Romy’s, tail going as he whined in delight.

“I still think they would be good guard dogs for Thorin,” Ori said, idly.

“Mmm,” Dori allowed. “We’ll just have to see what Thorin says.”

“That brindle pup, I’m giving to Dwalin,” Ori announced, watching it yawn, stretching its little legs out both ways, wobbling on its belly.

“I hope our deary likes it,” was all Dori would say.

“They’re in decent enough shape.” Oin put in. “They’ve been savagely beaten often as not, by th’ marks on ‘em. They’re all but starved t’ death an’ probably got worms…. Not that we can’t take care of that right enough.” The healer rose and went in the house, muttering about belly and heart worms and tincture of fish oil.

“That,” Binni reflected, “is going to be the cure for any worms, I believe.”

Fili, Kili Tauriel, and Sigrid were all sitting around the other female. She snoozed, her head on Fili’s knee, Sigrid’s hand stroking her ears. Gimli and Legolas came and joined them. Romy flopped down, so his body was across both Legolas and Gimli’s laps. Ori saw Oin had painted Romy’s injured hip with something, probably to keep down infection. It was going to have to work from the inside, because Romy had already eaten most of it.

Roäc winged through and perched on the back of Bilbo’s chair, with a shouted caw.
The wargs all lifted their heads and stared at the raven, ears perked.

“So that’s what wargs look like when they’re clean,” Roäc commented. “So ugly they’re cute.”
Romy staggered up and crossed to sniff Roäc in a rather personal manner. Roäc pecked at Romy, who dodged easily but continue to sniff.

“Go sniff someone else’s butt,” Roäc snapped peevishly.

“Where’s Thorin?” Bilbo asked.

“Right here, ghivasha,” Thorin answered, coming out to the patio followed by Dwalin and Nori. Thorin gave Bilbo a bit of a cuddle and a kiss before releasing him and looking around at the lazing wargs.
Romy stood still staring, ears on the perk, but did nothing. The other female and the mother rose and inched forward cautiously sniffing, but intrigued.

Thorin grinned, held out a hand, and made an encouraging noises. Both females came forward, tails wagging. Thorin petted their heads, cooing.

“There now. All safe and fed. There are my good damlings. Yes, who are my damlings? Who are my good damlings?”

Both females flopped down for belly rubs. Thorin tended to both, still mumbling fond nonsense. Nori stared as though he’d been hit upside the head but Dwalin just rolled his eyes, shaking his head, grinning.

Bilbo gaped.

“Did those wargs just destroy Thorin’s brain?”

“Dwalin,” Ori called softly and lifted the brindled pup. “Look, Dwalin, puppies! This one’s going to be yours. Isn’t he beautiful?”

Dwalin crossed to Ori’s side, kissing him lovingly.

“Ori, love, yeh said yeh’d stay in th’ thicket, no’ go out an’ round up pets!”

“I didn’t go out to find pets, I went out to help Loli… and found pets.” This, Ori reflected, seemed to be the dominating theme of his life so far. “And, anyway, Dwalin, puppies! You brought me kittens!”

“I know, love, they’re fine puppies, but please don’ do tha’ again. Yeh can’ go unarmed an’ inexperienced agains’ orcs.”

“We weren’t unarmed,” Omi piped. “We brought our slingshots!”

“That’s right,” Loli backed her up. “Bain had his knife, and Sigrid came, and she and Fili had swords.”

“Slingshots,” Dwalin groaned and wiped his face with his hand.

“Don’t underestimate slingshots,” said Ori. “We used them to kill an orc and wound quite a few others.”

Dwalin grinned at him.

“With yer slingshot? So them arrowheads came in useful.”

“They did very well, better than sharp stones any day. It’s all in where you strike them,” said Ori. “Do you think Nori would let me carry around an ineffective weapon?”

Dwalin looked to be considering and Ori imagined he was trying to find fault in that and couldn’t. Nori looked extremely proud of himself. Ori passed the pup to Dwalin, who lifted it, looked it over, then cuddled it to his chest.

“He’s a fine wee lad. We’ll call ‘im Killer.”

“Only you,” Ori laughed.

Thorin sighed, pulling his attention reluctantly away from the two wargs fawning over him.

“Dwalin’s right, Ori, please don’t do that again. Trying to manage him when he’s out of his mind with worry is worse than managing me when I’m angry.”

Dwalin snorted.

“Not even bloody close,” he muttered.

Thorin turned to look at Dwalin then at Killer snoozing in the warrior’s arms. A smile lurked at the corners of Thorin’s mouth. “But, it really is too bad, that Ori couldn’t get you a pup that was pretty like him and not ugly like you.”
“Fuck yersel’, Thorin.”
“I promise I won’t go off like that again,” said Ori. “I didn’t realize how quickly it would get out of hand. I was just worried when I saw Loli and Omi. It makes sense that Gimli would follow Legolas, but why would everyone else follow him?”
Dwalin cocked his head.
“Love, they weren’ followin’ Legolas ‘r Gimli. They were followin’ yeh.”
“Why?”
Thorin chuckled.
“Because they’re loyal to you, and because they trust you not to bring them into truly dangerous situations.”
Ori still didn’t get it, until he did.
“Oh,” he said, horrified.
“Yes,” said Thorin. “It’s a privilege and a burden. You have to think for them as well as for yourself. I have no doubt you can handle it. Now, I have to go back to Dale and appease Bard.”
Ori winced.
“Wait, Thorin, I’ll go with you.”
Bilbo caught Thorin’s arm.
“Lunch first, my dear.”

Changes were wrought in Dale while the Durins entertained the crowned heads of Arda. Ori, mounted on Honda and following Thorin on Minty, had no idea how much input Bard had, or was allowed, in the expansion of the original ancient kitchen. It had built up into a fine, large stone house of three stories, which the dwarf workers seamlessly grew from the one old room. The end result wasn’t a palace by any stretch, but Ori could not think of a person in Dale, who would not be happy to live in such a house.

Ivo, now in a uniform and looking considerably more confident in himself, saluted smartly and bowed them up the front steps. Master Dubb, bowing on the other side, looked to him with a veiled gleam of pride.

At the top of the steps, the old porch had been widened into an open veranda that ran the entire front of the building. The front door, of iron, was composed of vertical row upon row of cast arrows and opened into a sort of cloak room lined with hooks, and benches underneath them. A wood and iron-strap door in the back of the passage opened into the main room.

This was quite beautiful, though of course far too simple for dwarf tastes, an all-purpose throne room/feasting hall/living room with a hearth to the left on par in size with any under the mountain. The small window through which Bard had tossed back the badgers’ ball in the spring had been replaced with a huge, round one composed of many tiny panes of colored glass, set into the stone.

The colored glass cast a mosaic of light across the stone floor and across the table, which was new, larger than the last, and ringed in chairs, none more grand than any other. Bard stood at the far end studying a large number of papers.

Bard bowed rather stiffly when they met. Before Bard or Thorin could speak, Ori shot forward, his mouth already in motion.

“Please don’t be angry with Thorin, Bard. It was my fault. Omi, Loli and Bain were following me. I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?”
Bard sighed.
“Aw, Ori, stop looking at me like you’re a kicked puppy. You know I can’t stand that.” He turned to Thorin with accusation. “You brought him here on purpose!”
“He insisted on coming with me. How would I know you can’t resist those eyes anymore than I-” The two kings froze, looked at each other, looked at Ori, looked back at each other and laughed.
“We’re idiots,” said Bard. “We’re mushy idiots.”
“Yet another kingly quality,” Thorin agreed.
Ori thought the pair of them had lost their minds, or maybe it was just one more mysterious power he had that he’d never realized.
No, they’d lost their minds.

“Ori,” said Bard, “you didn’t do anything. You didn’t talk Omi and Loli into following you. You
didn’t talk Bain into taking the boat with them.”

“I still feel responsible, somehow. I’m guessing Bain’s been punished?”

“He’s grounded until he’s dead, yes,” said Bard dryly.

“I’m going to have to talk to the sisters. I mean, their loyalty is heartening, but rather terrifying.”

“Welcome to my world,” said Bard.

“I have a feeling,” Thorin said to Bard, “that you should expect Omi and Loli to visit to apologize
in person. As a favor to me, will you please not ask for their beards?”

Bard stared at him.

“Why would I want their beards? What would I do with them?”

Ori almost said: macrame, but instead he went with:

“He means, please don’t ask them to cut off their beards in penance for endangering Bain.”

“Bain endangered himself, and everyone in Dwalin’s party, including you, Ori.”

“But Loli and Omi are of-age, he’s not.”

“Oh,” said Bard. “Look, I suppose I could ‘make an example’ of them, but to what end? Tell you
what, make it a public apology and we’ll call it good. You want some coffee?”

“Yes, please,” said Ori.

“That would be most welcome, thank you,” said Thorin.

Ori realized that Thorin had not slept. Of course not. He wasn’t at the meadow, but he would be
worried for his soldiers, and he still had a part to play when they returned.

They went thorough a doorway to the side of the hearth and into what was now the kitchen, a cozy
room with brick-colored plaster walls, a large cookstove and a sink with two taps. The old table and
chairs had found their new home here. Bob, sprawled on his mat in the corner, pried open an eye to
peer at them, thumped his tail on the floor twice and went back to sleep. They sat while Bard
fetched mugs, plates and some bread and cheese. He took the pot from the stove and poured out
coffee for the three of them.

Ori blew on his coffee, sipped it, recognized the bitter brew Dale folk liked when they could get it,
and wished somewhat rebelliously for sugar and milk.

“Did you get anything useful from the orcs?” Ori asked. “What were they doing?”

“As it turns out,” said Thorin, “you were right. They were attempting to invade Erebor.”

“All fourteen of them?”

“Because, really, how much trouble could dwarrow be?” Thorin muttered.

Bard looked at him with a smirk, but said nothing.

Thorin continued, “When Mordor fell, it didn’t just kill a lot of orcs in Mordor. Apparently it
created a power void, and every orc who has any sort of pretensions to power is ruthlessly killing
every other orc they come across who won’t bow down to them. Apparently, Khazad-dûm is a
slaughterhouse. These particular orcs left there because they figured they couldn’t compete with
other orcs, but if they took Erebor, they’d have their own mountain.”

Ori didn’t like to think how Thorin had extracted this information, though he did think it was
possible the orcs were bragging.

Right. Sure.

“We coulda taken ya, too, if not for those shitty little scribes with their slingshots.”

“So,” said Ori, “what did you do with the bodies?”

“Dumped them in the lake,” said Bard. “I hope it doesn’t poison the fish.”
Pups, Politeness, and Pottery

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. The wargs are settling in, while the scribes are distinctly unsettled. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

When Dwalin and Ori arrived for breakfast, followed by Nori-Pori, Mask, Kihshassa, and Garnet, they found Thorin and Bilbo with Frodo between them at the table. Frodo was industriously eating porridge. Directly behind Frodo’s chair lay the mother warg. There was an empty platter before her and at her side, her pups feeding hungrily. The second female, sitting behind Thorin, looked on proudly, with her own empty platter nearby. Garnet swooped to land on the table and waited impatiently for someone to bring her the bacon. Balin idled over his tea and Dori bustled about with Powder sitting on his shoulder.

Dwalin squatted down near the mother and reached out to let her sniff his hand. Her tail wagged, she licked his hand and panted gently. Dwalin caressed Killer, who wiggled his tail and body, but went on feeding. Dwalin chuckled and ruffled the mother’s ears and patted the other female, who swiped his face with her tongue. Dwalin lifted Nori-Pori and stroked him as the mother watched interestedly. He then settled the kitten among the pups. The mother leaned her head forward, sniffed the kitten and gave it a lick then looked back at Dwalin.

“Guid lass,” Dwalin praised and repeated this with Mask. The mother accepted Mask and looked at Kihshassa. Dwalin patted the bat and it came over. The huge and tiny noses sniffed one another curiously. Seeming satisfied, Kihshassa crawled up Dwalin’s arm and leapt over to land on Ori.

The mother looked at Dwalin then put her head back to see Thorin. Thorin reached down and rubbed the ears and neck.

“That’s my good damling,” he crooned. “You’ll protect everyone in the family, won’t you, my sweet damling?”

The mother pushed into Thorin’s hand, licking it, and thumped her tail against the floor. Frodo stood up in his chair, pointing.

“The amad is Sugar and that mummy is Butter.”

“Oh, aye, laddie? Yeh name ‘em?” Dwalin asked, amused.

“Nope.” Frodo slid back into his seat. “Idad Thorin did.”

Dwalin snorted,

“In memory a’ Creampot?”

Thorin shrugged and sipped his tea. “The white coat, she might be a descendant.”

Ori glanced at Bilbo.

“He told you the story?” Ori asked.

Bilbo looked amused.

“Indeed he did. I thought it was very apt and rather hobbit-y. Unless you’re someone like old Farmer Maggot.”

“Maggot?” Ori gasped, delighted. “You know someone named ‘Maggot’?”

“That’s what I said,” Thorin told Dwalin. Dwalin went and got Ori and settled him beside Bilbo before seating himself and reaching for the coffee pot.

“I take it,” Ori said to Bilbo, “The war- Butter and Sugar were quite pleased to sleep in Bag-End East?”
Thorin nodded and Bilbo agreed.

“Yes, poor things. It’s probably the first time they’ve been in a cozy, comfortable room. We settled them before the sitting room fire with rugs and extra food and plenty of water before we went to bed. We woke up this morning and went through to get Frodo ready and both wargs were sleeping around his bed, the pups tucked with them.”

“They guarded Frodo and the pups all night?” Ori all but cooed, taken with the show of instant loyalty.

“Apparently so,” Thorin replied thoughtfully. “When Jim told us about Biscuit that first time I never thought he meant such a strong and instant bond. Rather makes me wonder if Dwalin and I could have been stealing wargs for years.”

Thorin turned with a smile for Butter and reached back to rub the huge muzzle. Butter whined lovingly and shoved her head onto his shoulder. Bilbo observed this and giggled.

“Not even the dogs in the Shire were this close to their masters so quickly. Mother dogs didn’t often let people touch their pups in the first weeks. We’ve all been handling them pretty much since birth.”

Mistress Dazla served omelettes and ham steaks.

They had just finished when there was a great knocking at the front door. Sugar and Butter leapt to their feet, snarling and barking loudly.

“Enough.” said Thorin sharply. Both stopped and looked at him expectantly.

“Sit,” Thorin ordered. Sugar and Butter looked at each other then back at Thorin. Thorin rose and put his hand on Sugar’s back haunches and pressed, saying, gently,

“Sit.”

Sugar sat down.

“There my good damling,” Thorin crooned and ruffled her ears and gave her a rasher of bacon.

Thorin turned to Butter

“Sit,” he ordered quietly. Butter sat down, tail wagging. Thorin praised and petted her as she received her rasher reward.

Mistress Dazla came through.

“You majesty, Master Vobwi is in the sitting room and he’s brought you …chow.”

They all rose and went through. Master Vobwi looked very pleased with himself but his eyes became saucer-wide as he saw Sugar and Butter.

Thorin commanded the wargs to sit which they did promptly, and Thorin greeted Master Vobwi.

“And how may I help you, today, Master Vobwi?”

“Well, your majesty, I rather thought I could help you.” He gestured to the large metal barrel beside him, then went and lifted the lid. He picked two large bowls out of his bag and scooped out a bowlful of whatever was in the barrel. To Ori, it looked like a pile of dried brown nuggets, but they smelled vaguely of meat.

“This was originally developed by the late grandfather of Mister Hallow for the feeding of his herding dogs. I have since worked to improve it for the needs of other kinds of dogs. It’s a mix of meats, vegetables, and grasses, concentrated and dried. A small amount will fill them up and there are other oils and granules that keep their fur glossy and repel worms and biting insects.”

“That sounds excellent,” Thorin smiled at the dwarf, who beamed and offered the bowls to Thorin. Thorin took a handful of chow out of each and offered them to the wargs. Sugar and Butter sniffed the chow with interest and ate the handfuls they were given.

As it turned out Master Vobwi had brought three barrels of the chow. Sugar and Butter soon had a bowl each in Bag-End East and a large basin of water. Dori made sure there was another feeding place in the breakfast parlor for when Thorin and Bilbo joined the family for meals. Thorin then sent Master Vobwi around to the Sons of Groin, so Romy would also be supplied.

Ori just had time to kiss Dwalin before he raced off for the library.

Once back in the workroom with all the shards, Ori, Arne, and Bilbo set to work. Bujni joined them a few moments later.
They started by laying everything out and numbering each piece, assigning it a general name along with a number and a sketch of the shape and the measurements of each piece.

Loli and Omi arrived looking a little embarrassed.

“We went and saw King Bard,” Loli explained.

“To get it over with,” Omi added.

“Was he v-ery an-angry?” Arne asked, worried.

Loli giggled a little.

“No, we went just in time to walk in on his morning council of all the local area members. We both bowed, begged pardon, and offered our beards. He got all red, sputtered, and thanked us for apologizing and assured us Bain could still keep company with all of us, then sent us through to see Sigrid and tell Bain he wasn’t grounded any more. We had breakfast with them and King Thranduil. I think King Thranduil was just out of bed. He was wearing the loveliest, blue striped pajamas.”

Ori and Bilbo exchanged gleeful looks.

Master Brur came through and looked at the dams.

“Did th’ Dale king chew yer faces off?”

“No, Master Brur,” they chorused.


Brur left them to it. They all looked at each other and giggled.

By lunch time, they had deduced that much of the writing dated from the rule of Regent King Nali in Khazad-dûm. The shards told of a political and a cultural upheaval that resulted in some drastic changes.

“This is really strange,” said Ori.

“Why?” Bilbo asked.

“The histories we learnt as badgers declared Nali’s reign to be quiet and prosperous.”

“But these shards report otherwise,” Bilbo mused.

Brur sent them out to the pleasant courtyard to eat. Ori hadn’t realized how hungry he was until he bit into the enormous beef sandwich with sharp cheese, pickled cabbage, and mustard. Dori had put in a bag of paper thin slices of potatoes roasted crisp in the oven with salt and pepper. It was so good!

Tay had sent Arne off with a cold, roasted partridge and raw turnip slices spread with soft cheese. Bilbo tore through three pork buns, half a dozen apples, and three flasks of tea and declared himself still slightly peckish.

Bujni, Omi and Loli scarfed down their large bowls of chicken, onion, and apple chunks in a milky dressing, and cheese rolls to go with them. Gridr had sent a baking of xocolātl cookies, with slices of almond in them, to share.

After dividing the last six cookies amongst them, they sat back, replete. Ori guiltily realized that it had taken them about ten minutes to eat everything. In the back of his mind, he could almost hear Dori telling him he was going to have a tummy ache.

“I didn’t realize I was famished,” Omi commented, looking at the dishes before them, all scraped clean.

“I did,” Loli put in, “my stomach’s been growling at me for an hour.”

“Yes, it h-has,” Arne teased.

Loli pushed him.

“There really isn’t that much history about Nali,” Ori reflected. “Mostly that he was a good king and Khazad-dûm prospered during his rule.”

“There was commentary that he was a great reformer,” said Loli, “but it was always in regards to corruption.”

“Yes,” Ori allowed. “I’ve come across that too. It was never really stated what the reforms were. They are never spelled out.”
“Tell me about this Nali,” asked Bilbo. “When did he rule?"

“He was a regent king between Durin VI and his son Náin I in Khazad-dûm. When Durin VI was killed by the Balrog - Durin’s Bane - Nain was still a dwarfling. Nali was Nain’s uncle.” He paused then went on slowly. “When I was working with Thorin on his reforms, everything was spelled out, what we were changing, why and how. You all helped with the copying. The copies were sent to each of the kings.”

“Indeed,” pondered Bujni. “One can search for such as regards King Nali, but only vagueness can be found. Do we suspect, my friends, that we are to uncover a great mystery?”

“T-there’s s-something a bit s-strange going on,” Arne put in, checking the partridge bones for any left over bits. “These s-shards are g-going to be f-fascinating.”

“But are they factual and valid?” Omi asked. “Or are they just the ravings of some angry people?”

Ori felt his scalp and spine prickle.

“No,” the voice in the back of his head supplied immediately. Ori frowned. This was not the hot boom of Mahal, but definitely someone near to Him.

“I think they’re valid,” Ori decided. “Why were they so hidden and kept in the manner they were?”

Bilbo swallowed the last of his cookie, nose twitching.

“Ori,” he said. “Do you remember the Infernal Adventures?”

“Yes, of course.”

“When was that actually written?”

“Longer ago than King Nali.”

“I wonder how old the version is that I read in Lord Elrond’s library.”

“Oh, that version dates back to… Oh. That version dates back to King Nali.”

Bilbo and Ori exchanged looks.

“Obliterate your enemies, don’t just make them vanish,” said Bilbo. “Remember?”

“We wondered why the scribe used that version of the word ‘to destroy’,,” Ori recalled.

“And we wondered if they weren’t building loopholes,” said Bilbo.

Loli finished off the fruit soda water in her flask and rose to go to rinse it at the small fountain near by. They all rinsed their dishes and put them away in their satchels. Ori frowned again. The largest mystery was why the chest had been discovered in the manner it had.

Ori glowered over the pieces before him. They were part of a larger piece, and when he fit them together, he didn’t like what they revealed. By his translation, Nali had been responsible for implementing the law that only Longbeards were to live and trade beneath the mountain of Khazad-dûm. Before his reign, although there had been various clans, all dwarrow were welcome there.

He could tell by the script, the way the pottery was formed, and the age when it last entered fire in the kiln, that it was from the reign of Nali.

“This is so weird,” Ori said aloud.

“You’re finding more st-strange things, too?” Arne demanded. Loli, Omi, Bilbo, and Bujni also concurred they were finding writing that defied what was deemed historically accurate.

Loli said, “You can tell it was written by trained scribes. The writing is in the definite style and proper formations as set out in S’tuk and Whilf.”

Ori sat up on his stool and stretched, glancing around. Everyone else was still bent over their pottery shards. He let his gaze wander over the room. His eyes lighted on the empty chest over in the corner. He got off his stool and wandered over to it.

He knelt down beside it and ran his hands over the open chest. The age of the wood matched the metal joins and findings. It was constructed as a new piece. He stared at the wooden bottom of the chest. It was solid and well put together. He laid his hand flat against the bottom and looked at the outside of the chest. He frowned and patted the bottom. Using his hand he measured the inside of the chest from the bottom to the top. He measured the outside. There was at least a five inch difference.

Ori sat back on his heels, staring. He climbed into the chest. It was large enough for Ori to have
lain down and had a comfortable nap. He braced his bum against the lid as he sat himself on the edge. He pulled his knees up to his chest, took a breath, and kicked out with all his strength.

There was a crash as the front panel of the chest burst off and made his friends nearly jump out of their skins. Ori hopped down, and dropped to all fours. His heart was in his throat as he squinted into the space revealed by the removal of the front panel.

Ori was aware of all his friends crowding around, chattering.

The door crashed open.

“What’s going on?” roared Master Brur.

Ori reached in his arm, the edges of the splintered wood catching on his sleeve. His hand found paper! He scrambled around, sweeping all the paper he could find out from the space. His friends pulled the papers away and someone put a light down beside him. The shutter was closed to a small circle. Ori used it to check for anything else in the space. Finding nothing more, he rolled away and Brur hefted him to his feet.

“What in Mahal’s name’re yeh doin’, lad?” demanded Master Brur.

“Look!” cried Omi. “Ori found papers!”

Master Brur snatched them away, staring and shuffling through the pile.

“Get t’ tha’ table over there!” Master Brur shouted. “I want these counted an’ checked through b’fore yeh do anythin’ else!”

There was a flurry of activity. Another vast table was brushed off and the lights about it lit.

Ori found he was as weak as an overcooked parsnip. Master Brur held him up.

“Yeh alrigh’, laddie?”

“I think so,” Ori managed. He felt as though the blood in his veins had started moving again. He shook himself. Master Brur released him and Ori went eagerly to the table.

“What does it say?” Omi asked.

“That th-this is b-box ten of twenty-six,” said Arne

They groaned in chorus.

“Where are the other twenty-five then?” Loli asked.

“Wait! Wait!” Ori cried. “This box is the most important.”

“How do you know?” Loli asked.

“Because it’s the only one with these papers in it,” said Ori, leaning over Master Brur’s arm.

“This box came to Erebor with twenty-five others. They all contained shards of top-grade pottery to grind down and mix with whatever clay they found here. Which was how they smuggled these shards out of Khazad-dûm. This was the only box with the key for them, but even if this one was confiscated, scribes would be able to puzzle out the shards from the remaining boxes.”

“So where are the other shards?” Omi asked.

Bilbo huffed out a laugh.

“I imagine generations of dwarrow have been pissing on the pottery from which they were made.”

"Charming,"

“We have done our best to assure that this history, our true history, will not be lost in the upheavals of King Nali’s reign. Truth has become a casualty of political expedience, and lives are being lost along with it. Our hope is that some day future scribes will unearth and decode these shards and use them as the key to open the door behind which is hidden the Flower of Durin.

Third assistant librarian, Floviq son of Druviq
Great Royal Library of Khazad-dûm
Rule of Nali, High King of all Dwarrows


“What’s the flower of Durin?” Loli asked.

“Whatever it is,” said Bilbo, “I’m willing to bet my mother’s doilies that it’s a sunflower.”
“What’s a doily?” Omi asked.
“Crochet,” Bilbo replied absently.
“Aye,” Brur grunted. “It’s a great game, if yeh got th’ balls f’r it.”
Ori started looking through the rest of the papers. Bujni and Bilbo spread them out over the table. Omi, Arne and Loli were close to growling over them.
“These translate the shards,” Ori reported. “We don’t even have to put all the shards together.”
“Though we w-will, at some p-point,” Arne stated.
Omi clicked her tongue.
“Of course we will! We’re scribes!”
“So what do the pages say?” Loli cried.
“Not here,” Brur barked. “It’s quittin’ time.”
Ori almost whined in his impatience to know everything immediately. Arne, Loli, Bujni, and Ori moaned in unison.
“Master Brur!” Loli and Omi cried. “Why not?”
“Bringin’ ‘em t’ th’ king,” said Brur. “Meet yeh there.”
Bilbo was the first out the door.
“I have to get back and rescue Balin from Frodo and Sam,” he said, and hurried out of the room.

Ori put Honda out in the meadow after he’d helped Gibi to brush her down and put away the saddle. He thanked Gibi and came in through the stable entrance. He went to his room, dumped down his satchel, and threw off his outer tunic.

He went through to the sitting room, and found Brur across from Thorin, his lips buttoned up. Thorin regarded him with amused intrigue. Sugar lolled at Thorin’s feet, her head planted on his boots, her pups snoozing beside her. Bilbo came out of Bag-End East, looking a little grave. Butter bounced along behind him with Frodo and Wee Sam. Bilbo crossed to Thorin and kissed him.
“What’s going on?” Thorin asked.
Bilbo looked at Master Brur.
“Over dinner,” Brur grunted.
“Yes,” Thorin smiled, “you are most welcome to join us, Brur.”
Bilbo muttered and glared at his king. Ori sat down and fiddled with the cuff of his sleeve. He looked up. Thorin was looking intently at him.
“Ori?”
Ori flinched.
“Ori, what’s going on?” Thorin asked in a quiet, comforting tone.
Ori, sighed.
“Honestly, Thorin, I think it would make more sense if Master Brur told the whole thing.”
“And why hasn’t Brur already told us the whole thing?” Thorin looked back at the head librarian, this time there was no humor in the king’s eyes.

Bilbo shifted uncomfortably.
“Want Balin, Oin and ‘is Binni here. They’d be the ones t’ remember most.”
Almost on cue, Binni and Oin strolled in, Bujni on their heels, and followed by Gloin’s family which now included Legolas, and Romy, who gambled along, his leg obviously much improved. The wargs greeted each other with tails going, yipping happily and knocking over Mask and Nori-Pori playfully. Master Brur rose and pulled Oin and Binni aside for a moment. Ori saw Binni turn pale.

The sitting room door opened and Dwalin barged in, kicked off his boots, stopped short and stared at the tableau before him. Ori rushed his husband and hugged him fiercely.
“Wha’s goin’ on, love?”
“We found papers,” Ori mumbled into Dwalin’s chest.
“Fuck,” muttered Dwalin and held him close. Ori felt himself relax.
Balin came through as Nori and Bofur arrived, followed by Arne. Dis and Jani came in from the kitchen stairway and Dori summoned them all to the dinner table in the breakfast parlor.
Dinner consisted of mutton steaks, roasted cavern mushrooms, mashed yams and carrots, followed by apple fluff and cream. Conversation was a trifle desultory until dessert was cleared for wine and Miss Oqizla fetched Ori’s kit to him.

Thorin leaned back in his chair, his right arm resting on and scratching Sugar’s large head. Romy and Butter frisked in the meadow with Frodo, Wee Sam, Posey, and the kittens. The ponies and goats grazed nearby.

Thorin reached down with his left hand and lifted Bilbo’s hand to his lips, kissing it. Thorin glanced at Ori. Ori had prepared his paper and ink and he gave a nod to let Thorin know he was ready.

“Then council is convened,” Thorin told them, then pinned his gaze on Master Brur.

“Announcements, old business, and new business are suspended for the moment. Brur, what’s going on?”

Brur sighed and gave everyone the run down of what was in the chest found in Zark’s mine, what had been found with the first translations, and Ori’s discovery of the papers. Brur pulled the first paper out of his pocket and read it aloud.

Turn by turn, Arne, Loli, Omi, Bujni, and Bilbo reported on their findings. Bilbo added in about his translation from Elrond’s library and the ‘loophole’ he and Ori had discussed.

Thorin finally turned to Ori.

“And your opinion? Is this truth or conspiracy?”

Ori swallowed. The not-Mahal’s voice urged: “Truth.”

“It’s the truth,” he said, holding his king’s gaze.

“Is it of Mahal?” Thorin, as always, cut to the quick.

“No, not Mahal,” Ori stated truthfully. “But someone close to him.”

“Who?”

“I-I don’t know. I didn’t know the voice. But I felt it was someone close to Him.”

At Thorin’s raised eyebrow, Ori shook his head.

“No, not Yavanna,” he clarified.

“You’ve spoken to Yavanna?” Bilbo gasped.

Ori blushed hotly. The only time he had ever heard Yavanna’s voice was the time he’d been hiding in the cupboard of the room when Thorin and Bilbo had had sex at the inn.

“Um... Not exactly. I mean...er...”

“Ori?” Thorin asked, head cocked at Ori. Dwalin gave a sudden snort and Ori knew his husband had remembered the incident.

“I...I only heard her laughing with Mahal once.”

“Why in all Arda would Mahal and Yavanna laugh at you, pet?” Dori demanded.

Ori wanted to sink through the floor. Everyone at the table was looking at him.

“I...I... washidinginacupboard.” Ori rushed to get it over with and buried his head in Dwalin’s shaking shoulder. He thumped his husband, ineffectually. “Quit laughing,” he grumbled.

“Why would you hide in a cupboard?” Legolas asked as one fascinated.

“Fuck it, our Dori,” Nori snapped. “I tolja t’ quit doin’ that when he was a badger. I tolja it’d muck wif his brain!”

“Don’t be silly,” Dori retorted. “There’s nothing wrong with my darling pet’s brain. Unlike you, he has a working one!”

“Oi!” Nori protested.

Ori raised his head, hoping that Dori and Nori’s argument would distract everyone. He found Bilbo was staring at him. Ori felt his blush deepen. Bilbo’s eyes lit up and he grinned feraly.

“I suppose it was a boot cupboard in a small upstairs room at the far end of Bombur and Erda’s inn?”

Ori moaned and scrunched down.

Bilbo snickered along with Dwalin. Thorin turned inquiringly to Bilbo, who gave Thorin a filthy grin. Thorin blushed and looked back at Ori.
“I don’t suppose you could have just left?”
“I couldn’t!” Ori gasped. “I was playing hide and seek with Frodo. It was a good hiding place, but I fell asleep.”

“So Mahal and Yavanna laughed at you in your sleep?” Thorin asked hopefully.
“No, I woke up when I…er…heard footsteps and voices.”
“Why didn’t you just say ‘excuse me’ and leave?” Thorin pressed, his cheeks still red. Bilbo was giggling helplessly.

“Because I didn’t want you to screw up!” Ori cried.

“Oh, my dear Ori,” Bilbo gasped. “You heard Thorin get screwed up and down!”
“I know!” Ori wailed. “I tried plugging my ears, but it didn’t keep the noise out! And Yavanna and Mahal laughed at me and Yavanna said they weren’t laughing at me but with me. I’m sorry!”

Thorin snorted and looked at Bilbo, who was almost in tears laughing.

“Fine,” Thorin finally said and looked back at Ori with mirth in his eyes. “At least, you had the satisfaction of knowing I didn’t screw up, well, not in the way you meant.”

“He did ge’ a cock stand ou’ a’ it,” Dwalin added helpfully. Ori thumped him a few more times.

Dwalin laughed and pulled Ori into his lap.

“Ah, me puir wee perverted scribe. Yeh go’ found ou’.”

“Ori!” cried Dori horrified.

“It was an accident!” Ori shouted over the roar of everyone else’s laughter as realization had permeated the entire council.

“I’m sorry!” he said again, looking pleadingly at Thorin and Bilbo. Thorin smiled, shook his head and winked at Ori. Ori felt better, at least until he remembered he was taking official minutes in an official meeting. Minutes meant to go into the permanent chronicles of Erebor.

He sputtered over his notes.

“I’ll put it in if yeh don’ wan’ t’, laddie,” Brur offered.

“I don’t want you to put anything in anything!” Ori cried. “Wait! I mean-“

The room echoed with laughter.

As soon as everyone calmed themselves, Balin politely suggested that Ori put in a notation that there had been a brief pause for a family joke that was of no importance to the minutes of the meeting of the king’s council.

Ori nearly collapsed with relief. Why didn’t he think of these things? He slid back into his own seat.

“What do we know about Floviq son of Druviq?” Thorin asked, getting back to business.
“I vaguely remember hearing of a Druviq descendent,” Binni said slowly, “I think he was also a scribe. His name was Aodviq. I believe he was lost in battle.”

Balin sat back, stroking his beard.

“I’m a bit intrigued by wha’ our Bilbo an’ Ori discussed about th’ translation of th’ Infernal Adventures. Brur, have yeh an older copy, preferably never translated?”

“I’ve go’ th’ original in me office,” Brur replied. “It were hand-carried from Khazad-dûm.”

“That will have to be gone through,” Balin decided.

“Yes,” Thorin concurred. “If things were being smuggled out during a political upheaval, there may be other hints in the book. This letter, and the rest of the papers you found with it, are the translations of the shards found in the chest, you say?”

“Aye,” Brur said. “I’m thinkin’ there must’ve been somethin’ goin’ on down there. Th’ histories about Nali’re scrupulously clean as all the books we teach with are. He’s listed as a reformer of corruption.”

“Thus our question,” mused Thorin, “is what was corrupt? Binni, do you remember hearing anything?”

“What we learnt at school was the same as here,” Binni replied.

“Yes,” Thorin agreed, “but what about when you were training for your court duties as a Bearer?”

Binni raised his eyebrows.
"Bearers aren’t usually involved in politics, Thorin. At least, not officially."

Thorin smiled, “True, I was thinking more of sudden changes to custom, new songs, or removal of certain arts that showed histories.”

Binni’s sight turned inward and everyone waited quietly.

“I remember being taught the dances, being instructed on the way we should dress. Everything was codified and precise, but I do remember some of the older sibs would sigh and mutter about ‘in the old days’ as if things were done differently. Bearers do not take kindly to people meddling with tradition.”

“Such as dancing naked, except for jewels,” Thorin said.

“Exactly!” Binni cried. “The Bearer was originally presented in such a way to emphasize the true jewel among jewels - the Bearer being presented. Covering that up is obscene! You might as well blindfold the onlookers and be done with it!”

Binni went suddenly quite still.

“Unless that was the point.”

Thorin asked, “You think the Flower of Durin was a Bearer?”

“No,” said Binni. “No, I don’t. I can’t think why Bearers should have been made to change at all. It couldn’t just be a proscription on nudity. Dwarrow in general have no issues with it.”

“Control,” said Balin. “Nali wanted control a’ every aspect a’ dwarven culture. As high king, he would have widespread influence on every clan in every center an’ settlement in th’ dwarven world.”

Thorin looked troubled.

“Balin, the high king doesn’t exercise that kind of power.”

Balin’s smile was grim.

“No’ nowadays, laddie, bu’ yer adad wasn’t Durin. Nain’s was.”

“So Nali used his power as regent to erase tradition before Nain could know?”

“Think abou’ wha’ was happenin’. Durin VI dug up th’ Balrog, hundreds were killed outright, hundreds more died of wounds or were lost, their bodies never found. Mebbe folk got t’ thinkin’ this last Durin wasn’t really a Durin, or if he was, mebbe the line itself had a fatal flaw, the Durins weren’t fit t’ rule. There’s been tha’ kinda talk b’fore.

“Nali had t’ do somethin’ an’ quick if he wanted t’ keep his crown an’ pass it t’ Nain. First thin’ he gets rid a’ anyone under Khazad-dûm who isn’t a Longbeard, then he starts t’ prunin’ th’ family tree, get rid a’ any ancestor with questionable ties.”

Fili frowned.

“Balin, that would mean getting rid of any ancestor who wasn’t a Longbeard, even if they were married to Durin himself.”

Thorin choked.

“No,” he said quietly, shaking his head. “No, he wouldn’t be able to … ”

“Idad?” Fili asked.

“The story has come down to us,” said Thorin, “that the dwarf forefathers - and foremothers - awoke in pairs under mountains throughout middle earth. Except for Durin, who woke alone. They were all paired off and produced children. Durin produced an heir, too. Who was Durin II’s mother?”

Kili said, “Well, everyone knows that…. Wait. Who was Durin II’s mother? Was she a Firebeard or something?”

“If she was,” said Thorin, “it would have been expedient to erase her from history long before Nali’s time. But, you’re on the right track, Kili.”

“I am?”

“Yes, whoever she was, she was someone equally unacceptable to Nali, she was most definitely not a Longbeard dam. I’m afraid the ‘corruption’ Nali ‘reformed’ was what he saw as the corruption of his own bloodline. Which is to say, ours.”

“Just as well we’re not in the Shire right now,” said Bilbo. “Such a scandal as this would have people giddy to the point of fainting. Imagine all those bodies lying about, cluttering up the market. Most untidy.”
“Shocking,” Thorin agreed.
In the silence, Dori mused, “I hope Granny took her vinaigrette with her.”
“Very well,” Thorin said. “Our scribes will work on those found papers. They will give us the rights of what’s going on.”
“Idad?” Kili put in, taking Tauriel’s hand and glancing over at Legolas. “Should you like us to ask Thranduil if he can remember anything? Elves and dwarf did not have much contact but they may have noticed something?”
Thorin considered then nodded.
“Yes, if the translations don’t explain things, we will discuss this with Thranduil, Elrond, and the Lórien people. We will let things rest for now. Anything else? Announcements? Old business?”
Heads all round shook.
“Right,” Thorin rose. “This council is dismissed for now. Fili, Ori, I need you both to join me in my office in a half hour for a meeting with the mithril masters. Thank you all for this council.”
Everyone rose and bowed. Ori snatched a kiss from Dwalin.

Ori replenished his kit and joined Thorin and Fili in the hall outside Thorin’s office.
“They’re all here,” said Fili.
“All of them?” Thorin asked.
“I was amazed, too,” said Fili. “Mistress Dazla had the room set up with the long table and fed them all cake and wine.”
“Mistress Dazla’s pay needs to be radically increased,” said Thorin. “Ori?”
“Got it, Thorin.”
“Thank you.”
Ori followed Thorin and Fili through the door.
Around the table sat five of the oldest dwarf Ori had ever seen. Next to them, even Oin looked like a youth.
They might have been carved out of the mountain crags, their hair and beards the color of powdered white marble. As they turned and saw Thorin, they struggled to stand and Ori swallowed, for their eyes were identical, silvery with sparkles of deeper, icy flecks - the eyes gained by decades, even centuries, of working mithril.
“Masters, please sit,” said Thorin with a smile. “We will not stand on ceremony.”
He sat at the end of the table and Fili refreshed the glasses of the visitors, poured wine for Thorin, Ori and himself, and sat beside his uncle.
Ori sat at Thorin’s desk, taking notes.
“You have all heard the stories,” began Thorin.
“And know them for the truth,” said the sole dwarfdam in the room, half her face wrinkled with age, the other damaged by battle. “We have struck mithril in Erebor.”
“I would not have dragged you all here for anything less,” said Thorin.
“You need us,” said a block-shaped dwarf with a reedy voice. “We’re the only ones left.”
“Who know the secrets of working the mithril, yes,” said Thorin. “We have tons of material on paper about working silver-steel, but the page has only so much wisdom.”
“Want us t’ train up some badgers, do yeh?” asked a great mop of wool roving sitting at the opposite end of the table. It laughed, shaking all over. “Don’t know as yeh noticed it, yer majesty, but we’re about ready t’ go back t’ th’ stone.”
The dam snorted.
“Mahal’s waited this long for me, maybe for this He’ll wait a little longer. Kir is right, though. We don’t have time to give someone a full apprenticeship. I’m claiming Prince Fili right now.”
Fili jumped in his seat. He stood and bowed to the dam.
“I’m honored, master, but I fear I’d never have the time to do your teaching justice.”
She waved a negligent hand.
“You’re already a journeyman metal worker in gold, silver, and alloys. I’m not starting with the first hammer stroke. And you think you’ve got a time limit? Ha!”
Fili sat, glanced at his uncle, then dropped his eyes.  
“You want this, don’t you,” said Thorin, smiling.  
“Yes, Idad,” said Fili.  “But you and Erebor need me, and I have other considerations now as well.”

Thorin nodded, but merely gestured to the page at the door, gave the dambling instructions Ori couldn’t hear, and sent her off running.

All the masters were willing to take on apprentices, even Kir, though he had become quite vain about having grown his hair and beard to such extents that it was impossible for most to tell if he was coming or going.

“Aye, I’m willin’ t’ braid it all back f’r this,” he said.

“Or you could get that nice Mister Wandi to fix it for you,” the darrowdam suggested with a twinkle.

“Fuck yeh,” the hairball snorted.

The registers of journeyman and master metal workers were brought forward and scoured for names of ten possible mithril artisans, two for each master. Ori bit his lip as he listened to the masters talk frankly about the merits and failings of each candidate, the names of whom were often well-known and respected under the mountain and beyond.

“Her?  Mebbe,” said Kir.  “Nah, no’ him.  Known him since he was a pebble.  Total shalehead.  Don’t even know how he got past his gold apprenticeship.”

Kili crashed through the doorway like a battle ram, startling everyone in the room who could still boast an ounce of hearing.

“Fi!” he shouted.  “You have to say yes!  This is huge!”

Fili shot Thorin a look before turning to Kili, the younger dwarf panting like hard-run sheepdog.  He’d obviously raced all the way from the target practice range beyond the training arena.  He looked all around the room, and seemed to realize he wasn’t the only one in it.

Fighting a smile, Thorin introduced him, “Masters, my younger nephew, Prince Kili, son of Dis.”

Kili bowed hastily to the masters before tuning back to Fili, who cut him off before he could speak again.

“Ki, I’d love to,” said Fili, “but I have duties to idad and-”

Kir chucked at Thorin.

“Where’d yeh get ‘im, majesty?  Out’ve one a’ Shire’s bloody kissin’ books?”

“Unlike Shire’s heroes,” said Thorin, “Prince Fili is sincere.”

“Go on, Fi,” said Kili.  “I’ve already taken on the Greenwood and I’ll be studying elvish stuff, so you won’t have to worry about that, and our Gimmers is ready to ride with the city patrol now, so you can trade off shifts with him.”

“And your beloved amad,” said Dis, slipping in behind Kili, “is already weak with pride that you’ve been accepted by such a respected master of the craft.”

Fili looked between Dis and Thorin, then at Kili, and even at Ori, who smiled apologetically and shrugged.

“No pressure,” Fili murmured.  Finally he grinned, stood once more and bowed to the darrowdam at the table.  “Master Minta, I would be most honored to learn all you can teach me.”

She laughed.

“I heard the Durins arrived at all decisions by committee.  Glad t’ have yeh, lad.”

Kili and Dis joined them and the list of candidates was whittled down to nine more respected metal workers who would be invited to apprentice with the mithril masters.  Afterward, talk turned far less serious.

Kir, sitting next to Kili, levered a great curtain of hair out of his face and squinted at him.

“Why, yer bu’ a badger, yer highness.  Are yeh even a’ age t’ be courtin’ yer elf lass?”

“Kir!  Don’t be a tease,” said Minta.  “You know perfectly well he’s of age.”

“Bu’ still young enough t’ blush, I see.”

Poor Kili looked like an apple with black stubble.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Ori has a very busy night, and by the morning he’s … ravenous. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori sat up in bed in the middle of the night, his eyes smarting against a glow at the end of the bed.

He glanced at Dwalin, who lay asleep, snoring, oblivious. Ori thought to wake him, but instead he turned and watched as the glow widened, then deepened. Shapes within it shifted and clarified until he was looking into a forge.

It was all so sharp, he could see the grain in the leather straps around the handle of the hammer leaning against the anvil. He smelled the sooty smoke of the quench bucket and saw that the fire burned as embers, yet he still felt the suffocating heat.

A huge, red-bearded dwarf stood over a rough bench in the middle of the room. It was covered in paper and tools. At first glance, Ori wondered if it was Dain, then the dwarf straightened and grinned maniacally.

This wasn’t Dain.

The door behind him opened, apparently at his will, and he boomed out in a familiar voice:

“Me dear, I’ve go’ it!”

A cool wind whipped Ori’s hair back and embers swelled for a moment, the fire tinged green. A feminine voice from beyond the door called,

“Got what, husband? Where are you?”

“In here, me petal! I have it!”

“Have what? Dear, close the door, the violets are wilting.”

“Th’ amethysts! Th’ matchin’ amethysts! I know wha’ I’m goin’ t’ do with ‘em!”

“Wonderful. Lovely. Oh, botheration! Dearest, the impatiens are on fire!”

“Come on in an’ shut th’ door.”

“The impatiens-“

“Er - Oi! Ulwe! Little assist?”

Water splashed somewhere in the distance.

“Ta! Come on in, me petal.”

“I can’t. I have to go and find a mop. Since there isn’t a valar of one! What is so important that you’ve decided to threaten my greenhouse?”

“Th’ matchin’ amethysts! Bearers! Twins!”

Horrified, Ori cried, “I don’t want to be pregnant!”

Mahal looked right at him and chuckled.

“Yeh, back t’ sleep. Yeh’ll be needin’ it!”

The two valar laughed and Mahal put a finger on Ori’s forehead. The forge retreated back into darkness.

Ori woke muzzy-headed in the morning. He kissed Dwalin and, after washing up, came back and sat on the bed while Dwalin did his hair. He returned the favor and rose to dress.

“Yeh sleep well?” Dwalin rumbled.
“Eh. Strange dream.”

Ori went to the wardrobe, he was looking for an undertunic to match the tunic he had chosen for the day. Things were not going well. For some reason, all his undertunics had fled in the night, or perhaps they were stuck in the wash, or possibly Dipfa had taken it into her head to remove them all to embroider six inches of lace on the cuffs and hems of each one. Whatever the reason, he could only find one, and he had not worn it since before they had gone to the inn. He recalled it was a little snug, but it was in perfect shape, so he shrugged and pulled it over his head, and that was as far as it would go.

"Dwalin? Can you help me with my tunic? I think it’s rucked up in back and I can’t pull it down."

Dwalin approached, surveyed the situation and laughed gently.

"Sorry, love. Three squares a day’s done th’ trick. You’ll no’ fit in this tunic now."

"Oh, no! I’ve barely worn this tunic. All that cloth gone to waste?"

Dwalin took hold of the hem and turned it over to examine the seam.

"Naw, love, Mahrdin’ll jus’ let it out. He’s planned fer it. He’s bin outfittin’ th’ Fundin brothers long enough to know his business. Yeh’ll jus’ have t’ pick another."

"There aren’t any."

"Eh?"

"I think Dipfa took them for some reason."

"Tartin’ ‘em up, prob’ly." Dwalin snickered. "Dis’ll have some undertunics Fili’s outgrew, probably like new. Color’ll be wrong, but they’ll do ’til Mahrdin resizes this’un an’ Dipfa brings back yer others."

"I’ll send Garnet with a message, I guess."

"Love, hold up a sec."

"What is it?"

"There’s a tattoo on yer back."

"What?"

"It wasn’t there las’ night."

"I don’t have any tattoos," said Ori. "Did I just sleep on an ink bottle by accident?"

"Yeh bring ink bottles t’ bed?"

"No, but I’ve fallen asleep on my work and woken up with script on my face."

"This ain’t script. This is a raven."

"A tattoo of a raven? On my back?"

It never even occurred to Ori that Dwalin might be joking.

"Aye, looks like it’s bin here a while. It’s all healed over. Fresh tattoos’re literally a bloody mess."

"Why is there a raven on my back?"

"Best guess? I’d say Mahal’s properly claimed yeh, now."

"I was afraid you’d say that. Claimed me for what? Does this mean I have to become a hermit or something and have squirrels living in my beard?"

"Wha’?"

"Because I don’t have much of a beard yet. It would have to be a very small family of squirrels."

Dwalin turned Ori to face him with exquisite care. The look on the warrior’s face did nothing to aid the situation.

"Tell me I don’t have another one on my face," Ori begged.

Dwalin backed him up and sat him on the bed. He knelt at Ori’s feet with a hand planted firmly on either Ori’s shoulders.

"Love, did yer brain just throw a cog?"

"Yes? Dwalin…"

"Are yeh gonna throw up?"

"I’m going to scream."

"Ah."
Ori did so and threw himself into Dwalin’s arms, panting like a hard-run horse and whimpering like a child.

The door crashed open and Dori, Balin, rushed in, weapons drawn. Nori dropped through the ceiling, brandishing a pair of wicked knives.

“What’s happened?” Dori cried. “Ori!”

“He’s no’ hurt,” said Dwalin hoarsely. “Balin, yeh need t’ come have a look a’ this.”

Balin, his hair and beard a hurricane of points, clambered behind Ori on the bed.

“Dori, m’dear, will yeh ligh’ a few more lamps?”

“What is it?” Dori demanded.


“Or somefin’,” Nori growled.

Dori crowded on Ori’s other side, holding him as closely as possible without obscuring the strange mark.

That left Nori to get the lamps, which he did, and far clumsier than Ori had ever seen him move.

“What’re we supposed t’ do wif this?” Nori asked no one in particular. “Shouldn’t we call someone t’ look?”

Balin, at a loss, replied, “Who would yeh suggest?”

It wasn’t as if dwarrow had clergy of any kind. Their spirituality was private and individual and their Maker omnipresent. When they called upon Him, they assumed they were heard.

“Dunno,” said Nori. “Binni maybe? Don’t he an’ Oin know about this s-”

“Go!” Dori commanded him.

Nori went.

Ori quieted to frightened gasps, clinging to his clearly baffled husband.

Oin and Binni arrived still in their night clothes. Nori had obviously roused them from their bed.

Oin examined Ori’s back and declared the tattoo “well-healed”, which they already knew, but he couldn’t say how it got there in the first place.

“Did you have any strange dreams last night?” Binni asked Ori.

“Yes, but I only remember bits, I mean, I-I-I dreamt something about a forge. Then I dreamt I got to work and wasn’t wearing my tunic, but I have that dream a lot.”

"We’ve all had that one,” said Binni.

“I haven’t,” said Nori.

“Shut up, Nori,” said Dori.

“Right,” said Nori. “Who’s for brekkie?”

They turned as one and stared at him.

“What?” he asked. “Ori, yer not hurtin’?”

“No.”

“Ain’t dizzy?”

“A little, but I think it’s just nerves.”

“Well, since Mahal ain’t risen outa the floor, pronouncin’ th’ reforgin’ o’ the world, it prob’ly won’t happen much before noon. Might as well fortify ourselves.”

“Dwalin?” Ori asked into Dwalin’s neck.

“What is it, love?”

“I’m freezing. Can I put on a tunic?”

“Oh, right. Er… will one o’ mine do?”

“What’s wrong with his own?” Dori asked.

“They all bu’ one’ve disappeared, an’ he’s outgrown it. Tha’s where this whole thin’ started. Here yeh go, love.”

It was a soldier’s undertunic, almost as long as Ori was tall, recently mended and meant for winter storage, but it would do for now.

Once through in the breakfast parlor, Dori shooed Dwalin to sit and Ori curled in his husband’s lap. It was always a safe place not matter what happened. Dwalin could do nothing about this weird circumstance but Ori still felt safe. Dori and Binni bustled about the kitchen. Through the open
door, Ori saw a confused Miss Larit enter in her nightgown, puzzled as to why work was starting so 
early. Dori sent her back to her bed.

Soon Oin, Binni, Dwalin, Balin, Nori, Ori and Dori had tea in front of them. Ori sighed as the hot 
teas slid comfortingly down his throat. Oin grunted and Nori went off through the walls.

After few minutes, Nori returned with Thorin, who was clad only in pair of pajama bottoms, 
Sugar at his heels. Thorin took in Ori’s pale face and extremely long undertunic, came over and very 
gingerly touched his shoulder.

“Ori, what’s wrong?”

“Dwalin can tell you,” he said quietly. “I’m not sick, I’m just a little off balance.”

Thorin sat and Dori poured him some tea. Fili, Kili and Dis came in.

“What’s going on?” Dis asked. “Is something wrong? Ori-?”

Mistress Dazla arrived on the scene, immediately provided them all with toast, butter and 
marmalade and turned to the kitchen to create something more filling.

Dwalin explained that morning’s adventure.

They chewed on this with their toast.

“We need help,” said Balin. “I’m sendin’ a note t’ Brur.”

Ori groaned and dropped his head in his hands, or rather the sleeves over his hands, which 
continued to lengthen no matter how many times he rolled up the cuffs.

“I’ll be late for work.”

“Laddie, right now it’s probably best yeh sit tight. Brur knows every inch o’ tha’ library an’ every 
book an’ scroll. If there’s mention o’ this happenin’ before, he’ll find it.”

“Why don’t we just asked Roäc?” Kili suggested around a mouthful.

Everyone turned and stared at him.

“What?” he asked, swallowing with effort. “He’s the messenger of Mahal, right?”

“Thorin, where is Roäc?” Dis asked. “Has anyone seen any ravens today? Beryl wasn’t on her 
perch this morning.”

“Neither was Garnet,” said Dwalin.

The king rose and went to the meadow doors. He opened them and gave the keening cry

particular to Roäc.

The great raven swooped in past Thorin’s head with a second, slightly smaller bird close behind.
The smaller bird had a white feather in its tail, the only one Ori had seen on any raven.

Roäc alit gracefully on the back of Thorin’s chair, while the other hopped to a springy stop on the 
table itself and looked around with keen eyes.

The raven king cleared his throat and grandly announced, “We have been to a convocation of our 
kind. We have decided that the dwarf Ori should be granted the honor of our company. I present 
Quartzite, fledged by Mica, sired by Roäc, and so a prince of the line.”

“Fi!” Kili cried. “He’s us!”

“I’m sensible of the honor, you majesty,” said Ori, “but I can’t think what I’ve done to earn it.”

If Roäc had an eyebrow, it would have been raised.

“Silly nestling, you’ve been chosen by Mahal.”

“I’m not sure what I did to earn that either.”

Quartzite looked up from studying the bits left on Fili’s plate and fixed Ori with a grave look.

Or perhaps he was smiling. Raven expressions were complicated.

“Many hear, some see, few write. You do all three. Plus, you’re cute.”

“Please tell me Mahal doesn’t think I’m cute,” said Ori.

“No, I do. Too bad you have no feathers, plus you’re already bonded. Sad for me.”

Roäc turned to Thorin and gave a disapproving croak.

“Offspring!”

Thorin eyed Kili, who was wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Mmm,” Thorin agreed.

“So, Prince Quartzite, what am I supposed to do? For Mahal, I mean,” said Ori.

Quartzite pecked at the platter of bacon.
“Quartz. Call me Quartz. Read fire runes, send messages, sometimes to people far away, so I’ll take them. Feed me.”

“By direction of Mahal?”

“By direction of my stomach.”

Oh. Ori thought that was something he could handle at least.

“What do you like to eat?”

“I’m a raven so, mostly deadish things. Mmm, you were right, Father-King. Good bacon here.”

Garnet flew in to land on the back of Dwalin’s chair and preen. She seemed to take no notice of the younger raven, but Quartz’s eye flew to her immediately.

“Ooooooh, Garnet!” he sighed.

He flapped over to land rather closer than was advisable.

She squawked and pecked at him viciously.

Dwalin ducked out of the way.

“Mebbe we should move th’ perches t’ th’ spare room,” he said. “I can see there’ll be blood on th’ walls.”

“So,” said Ori, once more winning back Quartz’s attention, “I don’t have to do anything specific, just write down when I see things.”

“Pretty easy,” said Quartz, making strategic retreat from the ruffled Garnet. He hopped back across the table to Ori. “Plus, you get nice ink to cover the no-feather bits. Good, right?”

“I’m going to have more tattoos.”

“Eh. Maybe.”

“Believe me, Ori-mate,” said Kili, “it hurts a lot less than getting them the usual way.”

Ori regarded Quartz for a moment then passed the raven a rasher of bacon. The raven disposed of this at speed.

“I suppose you know my bat and kittens?” Ori offered.

Quartz hopped close to Ori, then flitted to his shoulder and looked down at Mask and Nori-Pori in Ori’s lap where Ori had been slipping them tidbits. Mask mewed curiously and Nori-Pori immediately stood on his hind feet and reach out with a paw. Quartz cocked an eye at the kittens.

“Cute.” Quartz leaned down and Nori-Pori batted at the long beak. Quartz patted the furry head with his beak. Nori-Pori desperately tried to clutch the beak, but it was too smooth for the tiny claws to get a purchase.

Kihshassa eyed him sharply from where her chin rested on Ori’s other shoulder, and Ori would have sworn the raven swallowed nervously when he realized it. Quartz bobbed his head at her respectfully.

Bilbo came in sporting a marvelous, patchwork dressing gown and looked around.

“Do I want to know?”

“This is Quartzite, Quartz,” Ori said, tiredly. “And I have a tattoo of a raven on my back which appeared overnight.”

“Sounds as though you had a busy night without knowing it.” Bilbo came over and kissed his cheek, then settled beside Thorin.

Beryl smoothed in and landed on the table in front of Dis.

“There’s a party of riders headed here from Rivendell,” she reported.

Thorin sat back, putting his arm about Bilbo’s shoulders.

“Did you recognize any?” he asked the raven as Dis petted and fed her.

“There’s Rhonda and Linda, and Rhonda’s sons, and that other tall one with the funny name, who was here before. They’re escorting someone else. Looks like the elf king.”

Kili sat up.

“Maybe it’s Cemnesta. Wasn’t Thranduil going to write to him?”

“Tha’s true enough,” Balin nodded. “Cemnesta’s th’ heir t’ th Greenwood now. Must’ve finished up his studies right quick.”

“Makes you wonder what our Thrandy told him.” Dori poured more tea. “Ori, my pet, I think you need to rest today. Perhaps your nice, new raven would be kind enough to say so to Master
“Yes,” Thorin straightened. “If Elrond will be here, we must receive his party and I’ll need you here, Ori.”

Dori opened her mouth to protest but shut it again. Ori looked at his nice, new raven. “Quartz?”

“I’m on it.”

Quartz was gone out the door.

Mistress Dazla emerged from the kitchen, looking rather puzzled. “Er, begging your pardon, your majesty, there’s a great lot of undertunics in the scullery, draped over the brooms and drying racks.”

“Whose undertunics?” Thorin asked.

“Lord Ori’s, I believe.”

“They tarted up?” Dwalin asked.

“Yes,” said Mistress Dazla, raising a brow at the captain. Ori face palmed.

Thorin looked hopeful. “Ball fringe?”

“I’m not wearing ball fringe!”

“Ball fringe is beautiful!” Thorin insisted, teasingly.

“It’s ravens, actually,” said Mistress Dazla. “Raven buttons, lace with raven patterns along the cuffs and hems. The black hem lace is six inches long, I’m absolutely certain.”

“Me an’ me big mouth,” Dwalin muttered.

Ori groaned.

Kili said brightly, “Cheer up, Ori-mate. Could be worse. Could be buttons that look like Mahal’s hairy balls.”

“Please don’t give Him any ideas,” said Ori tightly, while the deeper voice in the back of his head mused, “Hm…”

At that moment Master Brur crashed in, wearing the previous night’s clothes and with his beard in knots from where he’d been unconsciously twisting it.

“Found it!” Brur announced.

“Good morning, Master Brur,” said Dori. “Would you like some breakfast?”

“Aye,” said Brur, thrusting his mug at Dori and hurrying to the table. He swiped a clear space in front of Thorin and plopped an ancient book down in front of him, open. “Read tha’!”

“You’re welcome,” said Dori snidely.

Thorin scanned the page. He looked up at Brur. He read it again.

“They don’t name her.”

“Nah, they don’. Bloody scribes.”

“What is it?” Ori asked.

“A passage that was removed from the newer translations of the Infernal Adventures,” said Thorin. “Take a look.”

Ori was shocked. The original text was just sitting here among the toast crumbs and jelly blobs. On the other hand, the original author had probably transcribed it at a desk covered in toast crumbs and jelly blobs.

The script, elegant and compact, was faded into a mellow, yellowish brown on a yellowed page, but still legible.

“…so Durin walked on without his light, the gold to his mithril, his Flower.”

“Th’ Flower a’ Durin,” said Balin.

“Aye, an no’ a word a’ who she was!” Brur growled.

Bilbo said, “The Flower of Durin was almost certainly represented by a sunflower.”

Oin considered, “P’raps she was a healin’ dam. There’s plenty a’ spores, molds, an’ fungus underground t’ promote healin’, but no healer worth their mithril’d give up th’ chance t’ see wha’
herbs an’ th’ like grew on th’ mountainside. Mebbe she were a dam who ventured out int’ th’ sun.
Sunflower oil does promote health. Th’ seeds ain’t bad eating’, either.”

Binni stirred his tea.
“And the first dwarven healer’s name has been lost to time,” he said. “Only the few precious
manuscript pages remain.”
“Aye,” said Brur. “Bottom lef’ drawer a’ me desk.”
“Of course,” said Dori, almost to herself.
Ori looked to Bilbo.
“What do sunflowers mean to hobbits?”
“Good eating, for the seeds, of course. Esoterically, if you cut a sunflower at sunset while making
a wish, the wish will come true before another sunset - as long as the wish isn’t too grand. You can’t
ask to win the tomato competition at the harvest fair, for example. If you sleep with a sunflower
beneath your bed, you’ll know the truth in any matter. And, of course, it wards off garden pests,
which is luck to any farmer.”
“Sunflowers bring the truth,” Ori mused. “So, are we really speaking about a person, or Durin
seeking the truths of Mahal?”
Thorn said, “He’d already sent down the truths of Mahal to us, so I think it’s a person.”
The not-Mahal voice in the back of Ori’s head said, “Yes!”
“Um, for what it’s worth,” said Ori, “my brain says you’re right.”
“Mahal?” Thorin asked.
“No, the other one.”
Brur had watched this exchange with increasing dismay.
“Yer hearin’ voices, laddie?”
Oin shot forward.
“Ori, take off yer tunic. Brur, yeh need t’ see this!”
The librarian’s eyebrows hit his non-existent hairline.
“This is all so sudden,” he snorted.
“Shut up!” Ori snapped. “I mean…. please, Master Brur. Sir.”
Dwalin wrestled him out of his tunic and the room went utterly silent.
Just for an instant, Ori wondered if the tattoo was still there, or if he was merely giving his soon-
to-be-ex-boss a free show.
Brur whistled in awe.
“Laddie, how long’ve yeh had that?”
“Since some time in the middle of last night.”
“Great, bleedin’ Mahal,” he breathed. “Never mind about th’ shuttin’ up. Yer entitled, if only this
once.”
Balin asked, “Is there any record o’ such a thing happenin’ before?”
Brur considered. Ori hoped he’d consider quickly. He wanted to put his tunic back on.
“No,” said Brur.
“Argh!” Ori shouted in frustration.
“I mean, there’s Durin who’s born with th’ anvil on his shoulder…”
The room had grown quiet again, this time with a sort of horrified tension.
“What’s the matter?” Ori beseeched.
Dwalin said, “Er, apparently Mahal fergot a star last night. He jus’ put it in.”
“How sweet!” cried Dori.
“Bollocks!” said Brur. “Ravens are the mouths of Mahal. Mahal’s gonna talk through him.
Means we’ll have to listen t’ everythin’ th’ lad says from now on!”
Ori thought he would leave out that Mahal already talked through him, and that He wasn’t the
only one.
A moment later Quartz arrived and hopped along Ori’s arm to tell them the elfin party had arrived
at the main gate.
Ori huffed out in exasperation.
“Thank Mahal! My mind needs a distraction.”
Varied company, Luncheon, and Closeted Skeletons

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Put on your hats and gloves and you best visiting clothes. Dori’s hosting another party and we’re going to have a good gossip…about dead people. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

At Dori’s excited cry, Ori went through to his room, put the undertunic back on and dressed a little more formally and washed his face again.

When he came through to the kitchen, Dori was helping Mistress Dazla prepare a fabulous luncheon. Ori was shooed out to the sitting room where Margr and Vi had arrived, all excitement because Glorfindel was back. Dwalin and Fili went down to the gate to escort the Rivendell party up.

Mistress Dazla’s bird swooped through and she hurried to open the door for their guests. Thorin came through from Bag End East with Bilbo, Frodo, and Wee Sam, all of them tidied up, the hobbits with smart new waistcoats. Kili, Tauriel and Sigrid bounced down the kitchen stairs and burst in. This set the wargs off barking and romping around the room until Thorin called them to heel.

Glorfindel plunged in and scooped up Margr and Vi, both sisters shrieking and squealing.

“Here are my darling dams!” he roared.

Thorin went to greet Elrond. The Lord of Imadris was the same as always, though a trifle travel-stained. Thorin and Bilbo welcomed him warmly. Frodo and Wee Sam accepted this arrival with calm. Elrond lifted his brows at the wargs. Thorin called them forward to greet the elf. Soon they were nosing around these tall people, looking for ear-scratches.

Lindir, Elrohir and Elloadan came in, smiling.

“Uncle Rhonda! Uncle Linda!” Kili cried. “And the trouble twins!”

Elrond looked amused. Both twins shouted with laughter and rushed over to greet the younger set, hugging and chattering.

Lindir shook his head as he rose from Dori’s embrace.

Elrond turned and said to Thorin,

“Your majesty, allow me to introduce Prince Cemnesta of the Greenwood. He is not long returned from the Undying Lands. Cemnesta, Thorin, High King of Dwarrow, and his betrothed, Professor Bilbo Baggins.”

Cemnesta came forward and bowed. Ori liked him immediately. He closely resembled his father, but he was serene, approachably calm, with a gentle smile, and his eyes held a twinkle of humor. He was simply dressed in white and gray robes. Ori felt he would be a good king for the neighboring elves.

Dori greeted the prince with a kiss before shooing their guests upstairs to wash and change for a meal. Mistress Dazla assured them they were all in their old rooms from the coronation.

Elrond chuckled,

“How strange it will seem with the house so empty.”

“Not to worry,” Dori comforted as she hustled him out. “The noise level will be just what you’re accustomed to, my dear.”

Roäc winged in.

“Bard and Thranduil are coming for lunch,” said Roäc. “I didn’t say anything but that elf looked
right suspicious.”
“He’ll get over it.” Thorin replied with a smirk. “Thank you, Roäc.”
“Better get out the best Dorwinian,” said the raven. “King Thrandy’s going to have the vapors.”
Cemnesta paused on his way up the stairs.
“King Who will have the What?” he asked delightedly.

The Groinuls arrived and soon Romy was in love with the twins. Legolas was all but beside himself to see his brother. Cemnesta looked up from Nori-Pori, who was swatting Cemnesta’s braids, carefully handed the kitten to Lindir and swanned forward, arms wide, right at Gimli.

“Brother!” he exclaimed. “You’ve shrunk!”
Legolas rolled his eyes.
“Right here, Nesta. Remember? The blond?”
“Ah, that’s right,” said Cemnesta, as the brothers embraced. He looked down at Gimli. “Sorry, I didn’t recognize you right off, Tauriel.”
“Grand,” said Gimli. “One brother’s just as bad as th’ other.”
“This is Gimli Gloinul,” said Legolas proudly. “Gimli, my brother Cemnesta.”
They bowed to one another.
“Yeh ain’t seen yer other brother yet, have yeh.”
“No, I understand he’s undergone a bit of a revolution in personality. Which is to say, he now has one.”
Gimli gave a bellow of laughter and patted the elf on the arm.
“I like yeh,” he announced.
“Hardly fair, Nesta,” Legolas chided him, with a laugh. “He did have a personality. He was grumpy.”

“Ah, yes, that’s right. So, it’s true, then? Ada wasn’t exaggerating?”
Legolas smiled wickedly. “Brace yourself.”
Thranduil swept in, his eyes darting left and right with suspicion.
Cemnesta bowed to Thranduil with his hand over his heart.
“Ada.”
“My fawn!” Thranduil cried, then fell upon Cemnesta and embraced him rapturously, while Bard, Bain and Tilda entered after him.
Released after a long moment, Cemnesta stared at his father.
“That was weird,” he said. “I got your letter. That was weird, too.”
Thranduil laughed and said, “Things are happening apace. Here, come and say hello to your stepfather.”
Bard, who had been trying not to fidget, allowed himself to be drawn forward.
“This is Bard, King of Dale,” said Thranduil proudly. “Bard, Cemnesta Thranduilion.”
Bard bowed in the elvish fashion. He did look dignified that way.
Cemnesta bowed as well.
“Ada… Um… Father.”
“Just call him ‘Da’,” Tilda piped. “We all do. We want hugs, though.”
“Ah, you’re my sister Tilda,” said Cemnesta. “I think I can manage hugs.”
Cemnesta hunkered down to hug Tilda, and straightened to hug a startled Bain whether he wanted to be hugged or not.
“Sorry,” said Cemnesta, pulling back. “I assumed Tilda was giving a blanket command.”
Bain grinned.
“She always does.”
“And where is my brother -er- Wandi?” Cemnesta asked.
“Finishing up a hair-do,” said Thranduil, airily. “And then Mellon needs his snack.”
“His friend? Does Wandi have a dwarf boyfriend, too?”
“I didn’t mention Mellon in my letter, did I,” Thranduil mused.
“No, and I’m willing to bet it was on purpose, Ada.”
Thranduil put his hand to his breastbone, fingers splayed. He looked shocked.

“My fawn! What are you saying about your honored Ada?”

“I see,” said Cemnesta slyly. “So, Mellon is an oliphaunt.”

“The oliphaunt belongs to Ori,” Tilda interrupted.

“Ori has an oliphaunt for a boyfriend? I thought Ori was married to a Captain Dwalin.”

Tilda shook her head, her braids flying.

“No, Ori’s oliphaunt is with the circus. Captain Dwalin is Ori’s buffalo.”

“Tilda!” Bard and Sigrid cried in unison.

“But he is,” she insisted. “That’s what Ori calls him.”

Ori turned red, and Dwalin bellowed with laughter.

“It seems,” said Cemnesta, “that the Durins are beset with animals.”

Bard muttered, “You have no idea.”

“We just have Bob,” said Tilda, “and Mellon sometimes. He’s sort of like an in-law. A dog-in-law.”

“Ah, so Mellon is a dog. I can’t imagine Wandi with a dog. It must be a morose, grim thing, somewhere between a bear and a jackal.”

“Oh, he’s the light of your brother’s life,” said Thranduil. “Mellon was a present from Gimli.”

“That’s very kind of you, Master Gimli.”

“Jus’ Gimli’s fine. See, I already though’ he had a dog, ‘cause he kep’ moanin’ abou’ bein’ melancholy. I though’ he missed his friend, th’ collie.”

Thranduil added, “And when Gimli found Wandi didn’t have a dog, he brought Wandi, Mellon. And now Wandi need never be… melancholy.”

“That’s horrible!” Cemnesta turned to gaze at the amazing son of Gloin. “Gimli, you must be very proud.”

“Aye,” said Gimli. “Grand, in’t it?”

Legolas folded his arms and cocked an eye at Gimli.

“Don’t be fooled, Nesta. Gimli knew all along. He admitted he had been sitting on that joke for ten years.”

“You are possessed of admirable restraint, not to mention patience.” Cemnesta looked teasingly down at Gimli, who grinned.

“Aye, canna waste a good ‘un like tha’!”

Celeborn and Galadriel appeared in the middle of the room, and Kelli with them.

Galadriel looked over at Cemnesta and said,

“Cemnesta, always a pleasure.”

“Aunt Galadriel.” He bowed to her, but she was already gone on to her hostess.

“Dori!”

“Lady Galadriel! Look at you!”

They embraced rapturously, already talking at speed.

Dori cried out, “How well you look!”

Galadriel giggled.

“I do believe I’ve put on flesh!”

“I believe you have! Let’s see!”

Galadriel stood with her arms outstretched. Dori patted her tummy.

“Oh, yes, my dear!” Dori agreed. “Turn around. Turn around.”

Galadriel did so. Dori patted her backside.

“Congratulations, my dear! You have a bottom!”

The pair of them squealed and embraced again. Mistress Dazla and Binni echoed Dori’s sentiments and Galadriel embraced each of them as well.

Cemnesta side-gazed at his father, who chuckled.

“Ada, what is in the water around here?”

“Hm? Why do you ask, my fawn?”

“The room is full of very short, very fast-moving people, like a great whirlwind, pulling in all
unsuspecting bystanders in its wake.”
“| You’ll get used to it. Have some more tea. |
| But, I shouldn’t like to walk into anyone. |
| Just have a care to mind out. |
“| I beg your pardon? Do what? |
Celeborn approached to pay his respects. He and Cemnesta bowed to one another, and Celeborn
said with a twinkle in his eye, “You haven’t been introduced to Kelli.”
“Who is Kelli?”
“Rawwwk!” Kelli exclaimed, waddling forward and looking up at Cemnesta with an appraising
air.
“What is that?”
Kelli offered a wing. Cemnesta carefully held out his hand, unsure of how to proceed. Kelli
politely patted his palm with three wingtip feathers.
“I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Kelli.”
Kelli hopped in place with a squawk of alacrity, then waddled off toward the laden tea table.
“I’ve just made the acquaintance of a bird.”
Celeborn said, “And quite handsomely.”
“Lord Ori!” Dipfa cried, bursting through the door in a cloud of purple and green plaid chiffon. “I
have come bearing undertunics!”
Everyone looked up as Dipfa arrived. She had a pile of cloth in her arms and stopped stock still in
the middle of the room, open mouthed. Ori saw that she was staring at the pile of tunics which
Mistress Dazla was carrying out of the kitchen.
“Mahal hid my other tunics and decorated them!” Ori burst out before his tailor-dresser could say
anything.
Galadriel turned and looked at Mistress Dazla. She closed the distance between them and lifted
the top tunic and held it at arm’s length admiring the raven trimmings.
“No, Ori dear, this is Yavanna’s needle. I’d know it anywhere.”
“Will they go through the mangle, marm?” Mistress Dazla asked worriedly.
“Oh yes,” Galadriel smiled. “Her work is very sturdy.”
“Thank you,” Bilbo commented aside, from where he was helping himself to cake and Frodo and
Sam to sandwiches.
Dipfa rushed to inspect, once satisfied, Mistress Dazla swept out. Dipfa turned to Ori, clucked,
and snatched at the tunic he was wearing.
“You are not wearing that at this luncheon, m’lord!” she ordered in a no-nonsense tone.
Ori started to turn back toward the bedroom when Dipfa decided to handle this situation herself
and immediately. Ori sighed heavily as she yanked off the tunic and the undertunic. He’d given a
show at breakfast, why not now?
Elrond, Cemnesta, and Galadriel were immediately towering over him.
“| When did this mark appear? |
| Sometimes while I slept last night,” Ori muttered. |
| You are to be congratulated, Ori of Fundin.” Galadriel’s smile was warm. “You are the Scribe |
| of Mahal.” |
Omi and Loli squealed with delight. Brur swore to himself and scratched the back of his neck.
“How do I mean,” said Ori as Dipfa shoved an undertunic over his head. “I think I’m fine with it now,
as I didn’t know what it meant.”
“It can mean many things,” Galadriel went on. Ori looked at her. She was approachable, yet
strangely distant.
“Does it mean: It is unwise to seek the council of elves. They will answer both yes and no?”
Her eyes widened, then she chuckled.
“The job of a scribe is to-”
“Seek knowledge and record the truth and-” Ori stopped himself. The pieces slowly falling into place. “I have to seek the Flower of Durin to find out what was hidden and why. This is all Jim’s fault!”

Ori found he had to step outside for awhile. Dwalin went with him to the meadow, rubbing Ori’s back as Ori simply breathed in the cool mountain air.

“I’m going to have to tell everyone the whole of the story, aren’t I,” said Ori. “Even about Mahal talking to me.”

“I’m sorry, love, but I think so.”

“Fine. Just, in a minute.”

“As long as yeh like, love.”

When they returned to the sitting room it was far more full of people than when they had left. Ori had no idea if this was Dori’s idea, or possibly Roäc’s. It might even be Quartz’s doing. Ori knew little about his new raven, but he was very aware Quartz was far more than an ordinary animal. He wondered what Mahal told Quartz. He wondered if it was permissible to ask. Ori might ask Quartz any number of things, provided the raven could be pried away from mooning over Garnet.

As he entered, the room went quiet and absolutely everyone was looking at him. He put his chin up and shoulders back and walked over to the tea table, making himself a nice cuppa, and one for Dwalin. Then Thorin beckoned him forward and Ori went to stand with him.

Before everyone, Thorin looked about and said coolly, “This private council meeting is now convened. I ask that all information discussed within this room remain here.”

The elves and Bard looked at one another and gave tacit agreement. Thorin bowed slightly and once more the story of the shards was told.

“It would seem,” said Thorin after Ori and the other scribes had finished, “that Nali pruned his family tree to the point where there’s no forking from Durin the Deathless. There is no name or mention of Durin II’s mother. For all anyone knows, Durin might have carved his son out of rock.”

“Perhaps,” said Cemnesta thoughtfully as Mistress Dazla and her team provided everyone with comfortable seating, “that is why the myth perpetuates that there are no dwarrowdams.”

Balin sighed. “We dwarrow’ve always been good at smackin’ our heads with our own axes.”

Thorin sat beside Bilbo on a love seat, so Ori took this as tacit permission to go and sit on his husband.

Kili turned to Thranduil, who was still at the table, deciding between a slice of iced gingerbread and a selection of new made candied fruit, and asked, is his best diplomatic tone, “King Thranduil, do you remember Durin the Deathless’ wife?”

Thranduil stared at him.

“Of course not! Why would you think that we’d met?”

“I know elves and dwarrow didn’t necessarily socialize much, but-”

“How old do you think I am?”

“I know you’re immortal, or you were.”

“Yes, but I did have a birthdate. That was before my time. Best ask Lady Galadriel.”

Thranduil made his way over, nibbling on gingerbread, and distractedly sat on the sofa next to Kir.

“Howdyeh do?” Kir asked.

Thranduil shrieked and jumped up, his eyes huge.

“It talked!” He turned to Thorin. “You’ve taught your wargs to talk?”

“Woof,” said Kir. “I’m no’ a warg, yeh great elfish numpty.”

Thorin grinned.

“King Thranduil, this is Master Kir, son of Lir. And the wargs aren’t usually allowed on the furniture as they’re far too large.”

“Oh, thank Eru,” said Thranduil. He bowed. “Well met.”

“Likewise,” said Kir. “Pardon me no’ standin’ up. I only got so much ‘stand up’ in me a day. I’m savin’ it f’r when I go’ t’ go take a piss.”

“Entirely reasonable,” said Thranduil, settling himself.
He jumped up once more as Lady Galadriel appeared, curled up, on his other side on the sofa.

“Ack!”

“Thranduil,” she said serenely.

Thranduil recovered admirably and put candied fruit in his mouth.

Kir’s grin was visible even under his hair as he leaned forward to speak to the lady.

“M’lady. Always guid t’ see yeh again. I shan’t bark at yeh.”

“Hello, Master Kir. Thank you. I trust you saved that pleasantry for Thranduil.”

“Go’ it in one, as usual, m’lady.”

Thranduil looked at Kir, looked at Galadriel, muttered something about conspiracies and sat.

“Lord Celeborn didn’t come with yeh?” Kir asked.

“Oh, he’s skulking about at the food. Here he is now.”

Celeborn came over with Kelli at his heel, though he stopped to speak to Vi and Margr along the way.

“How’re yeh keepin’, our Celeborn?” Vi asked. She and Margr sat, one on each of Glorfindel’s knees.

“Very well, thank you, ladies,” said the elf, “and I can see you are also … well-kept.”

The sisters screamed with laughter.

“Oi, wha’ a naughty thin’ yer turnin’ int’!” Margr chuckled

He bowed, arriving at last to incline his head at Master Kir.

“Master, you’re looking well.”

“How kin yeh tell?” Kir challenged playfully as Celeborn turned to Thranduil

“Cousin. You’re looking decrepit.”

“Cousin. You look like a git, as usual,” Thranduil purred.

“Lady Galadriel,” Kili started, admirably trying to rescue the council meeting, “do you remember Durin the Deathless’ wife?”

She frowned. Which was to say, a tiny crease appeared between her brows.

“I really have very few memories of the dwarrow of that time. I met Durin twice, but because of the Firebeard disaster, our peoples didn’t have much contact until long after Khazad-dûm was under construction. Later on, I was on friendly terms with Narvi, through Celebrimbor, of course. Oh, her yeast bread was so good! Light as a feather. But at the time dwarrow were far more secretive about themselves and their race than they are today.”

“Do you recall any stories?” Kili tried.

“You mean gossip?” she asked, with a smile.

“Malicious or otherwise,” he confirmed.

“I understand she was called the Flower of Durin, but I can tell you no more. It makes me wonder if there isn’t some scroll or volume about her, perhaps still hidden in the Great Library of Khazad-dûm. I understand dwarf librarians are inclined to hoard. Job security, I believe some call it.”

She lofted her eyebrows teasingly at Master Brur.

Binni shivered then turned to Ori,

“I’m sorry I can’t remember more.”

Ori smiled. Perhaps…” He paused then looked at Master Brur.

“Master Brur, did you bring all the papers found in the chest?”

“Aye, laddie, an’ though, for th’ most part, they’re like th’ work yeh an’ our Thorin did when he …er…inherited his crown an’ made changes, they’re bleeding short on actual histories.”

“You mean they wax cryptic on the Flower of Durin.”

“Exactly.”

“If the library of Khazad-dûm was still operating, then, like their translation of The Infernal Adventures, there might be hints in any item brought out with the refugees. Pity so much was lost.”

Ori muttered.

“Well,” Brur scratched his beard thoughtfully. “There is a catalogue of sorts.”

“There’s a catalogue of what’s come from the library at Khazad-dûm?” Ori demanded.

“Of course, these are librarians, the fussiest people this side o’ hobbits. Wha’ come over an’ wha’
remained. Every librarian knows what’s in every other library, in case they want to exchange. O’course, no one’s requested anything from Khazad-dûm recently. We do have some of the collection, a very small holding, because old Rivrur the Canny had a bit of a premonition and sent on what he could via caravans. And some of the earliest survivors brought what they could carry.”

“I’ll start digging t’marra,” Brur promised.

“Do you wish assistance?” Elrond offered. He and Lord Celeborn looked rather eager.

“If I do, I’ll stick th’ pair a’ yeh in me open stacks. No way on all Arda yer gettin’ t’ dig through me office.”

Celeborn and Elrond exchanged glances and shrugged; they had tried.

The sitting room door to the receiving room burst open and there stood Mister Wandi, resplendent in white robes and carrying Mellon, tucked under his left arm. Ori raised his eyebrows. Mellon was considerably larger and fatter than the last time he had see the dog of Dale.

“Your majesties King Thorin and King Bard, I do humbly apologize for being so dilatory coming to this event. Mistress Annis was undecided and Mellon sluggish with his biscotti.”

“Do come in, Mister Wandi,” Thorin invited, hiding a smile. “We are at council and would appreciate your reticence in discussing anything spoken of here.”

“Oh, of course,” Mister Wandi said eagerly and thanked Bilbo for the cup of tea he was handed.

“Of whom do we speak?”

“Dead people,” Fili answered dryly.

Mister Wandi’s face fell and he put Mellon on his paws.

“Oh. How dull…I mean, I am not intimately acquainted with any dead.”

“If you were, I would have brought a deal more potions than I did,” Cemnesta chimed in. Mister Wandi gaped at his brother then gave a delighted shriek, worthy of Dori, and pounced. Loli was near enough to seize the teacup mid-air without spilling a drop. Mellon made shrill yaps and waddled after his master.

Mister Wandi crushed King-to-be Cemnesta, then sharply shoved him away, gripping his shoulders, and running a critical eye over the younger elf.

“You won’t do as king of the woodland like this,” cried Wandi. “You’re far too skinny and these robes are completely second age and your hair, brother!” Wandi shuddered dramatically.

“I’m the same size and weight as Ada,” protested Cemnesta. “We have the same hair.”

“Mine is shiny and full of life,” snapped Wandi, pausing to tossed the extremely shiny tresses over his shoulder.

“I meant Ada.” Cemnesta argued.

“Exactly! In that gray, you look like a skeleton in the wind. I think a little feathering and some new slender braids, behind the ears. I just had a set of summer leaves made with green net cloth and painted with gold dust.”

Wandi turned as Mellon started to bark in earnest. Mellon barked fiercely at Sugar, Butter and Romy, who sat before the door, looking down curiously at Mellon. Mellon, Ori thought, was the size of an extremely plump sausage. He hoped Thorin would do something before Mellon suffered the fate of sausage.

Thorin swept over, scooped up a surprised Mellon and patted his head. He presented the yapping dog of Dale to Sugar. Sugar sniffed Mellon over then licked Mellon’s entire face in one swipe. Mellon stopped barking. Thorin repeated this with each warg, then put Mellon down. Thorin returned to his seat while Mellon stood undecided whether to yap anymore. Romy bent down in a playful crouch. Mellon barked. Romy leapt over Mellon’s head and stuck his large nose into Mellon’s butt, saying, ‘hello’. Mellon yipped. Ori winced, Romy’s nose was undoubtedly cold and wet.

Mellon barked at Sugar again. Sugar snorted and walked over to Thorin and flung herself at his feet. Butter cocked her head at Mellon then followed Sugar to sit near Frodo and Wee Sam at the fireplace in expectation of whatever was on their plates.
Mellon barked at Romy. Romy barked back. Mellon cocked his head at Romy. Romy turned three times around Mellon then sat on him. Mellon wiggled then twisted to look up at Romy’s huge face, panting gently, watching him. Mellon licked Romy’s nose and settled down for a nap under his new warm, if very heavy, blanket.

Now resupplied with his cooling tea and a plate of candied fruit and six xocolātl cookies, Wandi settled on the arm of the sofa near his ada, who was looking put out. Wandi peered down at Master Kir, who lifted a stray lock to glower at the elf with one eye.

“You are a worker in mithril,” Wandi announced. “You cannot work like that. Come to my salon tomorrow and I’ll fix it for you.”

Master Minta snickered.

“Cut it, laddie, an’ I’ll bit yer fingers off at yer toes,” Kir warned.

“Don’t be silly,” cooed Wandi, balancing his plate on his knee, so he could flap his hand expressively.

Wandi looked up and met his ada’s eye.

“I do not look like a skeleton,” Thranduil stated coldly.

“Of course, you don’t,” Bard comforted. “You’ve plenty of muscle. You’re long and lean by the standard of men.”

“Thank you,” Thranduil’s annoyance cooled a little.

“Who are we talking about?” Wandi wanted to know.

“Durin the Deathless’ wife.” Balin informed him.

“Before even Ada’s time,” Wandi stated and shoved another cookie into his face.

“What dwarf king did you hear anything about?” Kili prodded.

Wandi considered a moment.

“I remember nana speaking of Nain II. He was born with a horn in the middle of his forehead. They cut it off but you could see the bump.”

“He did not have a horn!” shouted Brur. “It was a wen!”

“I heard tha’, too,” Kir put in.

“It was all rubbish,” snapped Minta. “He was born with his hair twisted in a knot on top of his head.”

“Nana said-” Wandi started, Cemnesta laid a hand on his brother’s arm.

“It doesn’t matter whether he had a horn or a wen, a dozen horns or wens, or no horns or wens at all. Do you remember her saying anything else?”

Ori glanced at Thorin, who was sitting with Bilbo in a wide chair. Thorin was frowning with a hand over his mouth. Ori knew he was desperately trying not to laugh. Ori smothered a grin himself and snuggled closer to Dwalin.

Wandi frowned then,

“I remember her telling me that the only thing more precious to dwarrow than gems and gold was their history. She said that Celebrimbor and Narvi wove their magics together and placed sigils within the walls of the great library of Khazad-dûm which was why Durin’s Bane could not breech it nor the Watcher in the Water could destroy the door they made together.”

Ori’s mouth was in gear before he could process the thoughts he had at this news.

“Was Narvi a Bearer?”

Everyone in the room turned and looked at him. Ori looked at Dori who’s eyes were wide.

“Why do you ask that, pet?”

Ori shifted in his seat, not particularly liking the fact that this time he wasn’t the scribe but Brur, Balin, Loli and Arne were taking notes. Bujını and Omi were sketching.

“Well, Lady Galadriel told you that the touch of a Bearer is purifying. Maybe Narvi did some sort of purifying magic in the sigils.”

Most people shrugged and nodded except for Thranduil, Celeborn and Elrond, who looked shocked to the core and Galadriel, who looked as though she was trying not to giggle.

Dori did giggle.

“Pet, that would be suggesting that Narvi and Celebrimbor were lovers.”
“That’s annoying,” Kili commented. “I thought Tauriel and I were first.”

“So did I,” said Tauriel.

“Publicly, you are,” Dis comforted.

Ori looked at Lady Galadriel.

“Was Narvi a Bearer?”

The Lady shook her head.

“Celebrimbor was an elf male and Narvi was a dwarrowdam. I knew them quite well.”

“Were they lovers?” Ori asked. She slewed her gaze over to him but remained silent.

Ori sighed,

“If they were, I suppose, since it was so shocking back then and even now, you either discovered it or they told you and you promised not to tell.”

“She did promise!” Mahal’s hot boom assured him. Galadriel narrowed her eyes, staring into Ori’s. Ori heard Mahal chuckling then Galadriel’s voice sounded in his head.

“Am I now released from my promise?”

“Aye, lassie, yeh are.”

“Only one person in my head at one time,” Ori all but shrieked, uselessly clapping his hands over his ears.

“Fuckin’ eh!” Dwalin snarled, clenching Ori closer. “Th’ pair a’ yeh leave me husband alone!”

“Have you ever had people in your head?” Mister Wandi asked, excitedly.

“No,” Ori muttered. “Just Mahal usually. A couple of times it wasn’t, it was…. ” Ori pondered the other voice a moment. Someone who was close to Mahal yet wasn’t Yavanna nor any other of their sort.

“I wonder if that other voice is a dwarf, then,” he pondered aloud. “Someone dead, but close to Mahal.”

“Mebbe it’s tha’ Floviq wantin’ his secrets discovered,” Brur suggested.

“That would make sense,” Elrond agreed.

“The main point is why now?” Thorin put in. He looked about his expanded ‘council’. “Does anyone have anything else they remember that could help?”

There were head shakes and pensive looks all around.

“Master Brur, if you would fetch out the papers you spoke of earlier and bring them back in time for dinner and leave the ones from the chest here for Celeborn and Elrond to look over. We shall reconvene after dinner. This council meeting is in recess. I thank you all for your assistance.”

Brur vanished out, the younger set rose and went to the sadly depleted tea table to clear away. The elves, Bard and Thorin went to the other table to go over the papers Brur had grudging left in their care. Balin and Dori withdrew to the small Fundin library to look for something. Galadriel and Dis followed them. Oin seized Cemnesta and dragged him off, Bujni close on their heels, to visit Oin’s ‘lab’.

Ori turned over and hugged Dwalin. He sighed, he always felt so much better when Dwalin’s arms were wrapped tightly about him. They sat in silence for a while.

“I wish I knew where this is all going,” Ori finally murmured. “At the same time, I’m afraid to ask. It all seems to hinge on Thorin’s question of ‘why now?’”

Dwalin tightened his arms.

“Sorry, love, I’m at th’ point’ where I don’ bloody care, as long as folk, divine ‘r otherwise, stop worryin’ yeh.”

Ori smiled against his husband’s chest, then chuckled.

“What’s go’ yeh laughin’ then?”

“The fact that when you say things like that I feel safe and happy again and it doesn’t seem so frightening.”

Dwalin raised his chin with a finger and kissed him.

“Then I’m doin’ me job righ’.”

Dori came back through.
“Well, how fortunate my Balin has the old maps from Khazad-dûm along with a few others from around Arda from before the time of Nali.

“I have th’ mos’ recent as well,” said Bain. “I want t’ see if they rearranged anythin’ important while they were cuttin’ down th’ family tree.”

A shimmer went through Ori.

“May I see them?”

Dwalin chuckled and released him with another kiss. Dori raised an eyebrow and turned as Balin came through his arms full of scrolls. He carried them to the table where the other group was sifting through the ancient paper with great care. Bilbo with Arne, Loli, and Omi helped by translating for them.

Galadriel breezed in and seated herself beside her husband.

Ori crowded near, peering over Balin’s shoulder. Many of the maps showed old mine tunnel layouts, others showed plans for expansions throughout the area. He took up one scroll and looked at it. It was not the layout Khazad-dûm, but the outside of it. He frowned.

“What have you found?” Galadriel asked.

Ori put the map down in front of her.

“I know these are the Misty Mountains, but…”

“That is my home, Lothlórien. To the west, is the southern point of the Greenwood and further west within the Greenwood is abandoned orc fortress, Dol Guldor. South of Lothlórien was the old line of the ancient forest of Fangorn.”

“The old line? What’s happening in Fangorn?” Ori asked.

“Trees grow and have saplings. Fangorn grows toward Lórien.”

Ori cocked a look at Galadriel, she smiled enigmatically.

“Have I read much of Fangorn,” he murmured as the younger set came bouncing back in the room. “I have read that in Fangorn live the…er…”

Ori saw that Celeborn was paying attention to their conversation. He found a phrase that might do.

“In Fangorn dwells the Bane of Kili?”

The two elves giggled.

“Yes,” Celeborn said, low. “The trees have spread, the …er…Bane of Kili has been seen among the trees of Lórien and wandering the River Silverlode to Mirromere.”

“Mirromere,” repeated Ori. “Where Durin saw the Seven Stars reflected. How beautiful that must have been.”

“It still is,” Celeborn told him with a smile. “Perhaps when Bearer Dori comes to visit us in the spring, you will come among us and see it for yourself.”

“It seems odd to be speaking of spring in the summer,” Ori said idly. “If things are, well, calm by then I would love to come along.”

“Indeed,” Galadriel put in, “then we can all travel together to ‘holiday’ at the Inn by the Lake.”

Ori chuckled.

“I’d place your order for bathing costumes with Dipfa soon, then.”

“I want a pink one,” Galadriel said in a decided tone. “I shall try very hard to be fatter by then.”

“Will all the onions be ready all of a sudden?” Ori asked saucily.

Galadriel giggled and nudged his arm with her elbow.

“Must I wear pink to match?” Celeborn teased.

“You shall be in burgundy,” Galadriel murmured primly. “Then we shall throw one another into relief.”

Master Brur barged in, hauling a large basket on little wheels. It was filled with scrolls, piles of loose papers and books.

Oin and his party returned through their door in the sitting room. Oin looked terribly pleased and Cemnesta somewhat shaken. Bujni was busily recording whatever had happened.

Mistress Dazla came in and Dori told them all they had to have dinner before returning to their
The table in the breakfast parlor was expanded once more and everyone tucked into a roasted haunch of venison, roasted root vegetables, buttered noodles and white mushrooms with parsley sauce.

The conversation was mostly about when they would all go to holiday at the inn and what clothing ought to be packed before talk turned back to the maps and the lands around Khazad-dûm in relation to the papers Brur brought.

“I confess,” said Celeborn, “I was hoping the maps and papers would jog any memories, but it seems there aren’t any memories to jog.”

Thranduil snorted into his napkin. Celeborn turned and wrinkled his nose at his cousin.

Ori listened again as Galadriel and Celeborn spoke of how Fangorn had spread to Lórien and towards the Misty Mountains along the banks of the Nimrodel and Silverlode.

Thranduil assured the Lórien pair that his people had routed all the orcs out of Dol Guldor. It was nothing but an empty shell now and the forest would take it again over time.

Ori looked over at Elrond.

“Lord Elrond, Were you ever in Khazad-dum? If you were, do you remember anything about the library or the catalog Master Brur mentioned, that might have something about the Flower of Durin?”

“Now that I think on it, I visited several times, though the last time was extremely uncomfortable and it was obvious the librarian couldn’t wait to get rid of me. In fact… I remember thinking there were quite a few empty shelves.”

“When was this?”

“After Nain I. I don’t remember coming across anything about the Flower of Durin, but I am not as old as Galadriel or even as old as Thranduil.”

“But the shelves had been fuller?”

“Yes.” Elrond looked at Celeborn. “You were on that visit. What was missing?”

“Nosey elf,” muttered Brur.

“Besides every book on gold working I’d ever seen there?” Celeborn mused. “I believe there was much rearranging of materials. I went to look for a particular book of stories and found myself confronted with eight hundred years worth of minutes from weavers’ guild meetings. Not as compelling as you might think.”

Thorin and Bilbo exchanged glances.

Bilbo said, “Hobbits keep their history in their clothing. From what I’ve seen, dwarrow do as well.”

“We’ll have to keep that in mind,” said Thorin, “should we ever run across weavers’ guild minutes.”

“King Thranduil,” Kili started.

“What?” Thranduil raised his eyes to the young dwarf. “I’m not Uncle Elf anymore?”

“Uncle What?” Cemnesta cried.

“Uncle Elf,” said Fili. “Your cousin Celeborn is ‘Uncle Other Elf’.”

“And as I am used to being addressed as Uncle Elf, it’s too late to change it now.” He glared at Kili. “You wound me, your highness.”

There were giggles all around, then,

“Uncle Elf?”

“Yes?”

“Would it be …er… helpful to write to your uh… your sons’ mother?”

Cemnesta, Wandi, and Legolas all bushed. Thranduil looked rather amused.

“Unfortunately, no,” Thranduil replied. “I’m sorry to say Lady Elerrian of the Noldor didn’t think too highly of your people.”

“Sorry,” Legolas put in.

“Why?” Ori asked.

Thranduil rearranged his expression slightly.
“She was afraid of dwarrow,”
“Afraid?” Dori demanded.
“Yes, she always thought your people were going to bite her.”
Margr piped up, “Here! Only if she asked nice!”
Dessert consisted of warm raspberry upside-down cake, and sweetened cream. After this they returned to the table in the sitting room to further research the mystery of the Flower. Ori sat with Galadriel once more.
“So the er…you-know-what’s are along the Silverlode river?”
Galadriel giggled.
“Yes, the men from Rohan and the Brown lands refer to it as Birnam wood.”
“Why?” Ori asked. “You’d think they’d just think it was part of Lórien?”
“Different trees,” Celeborn said. The trees of Lórien and Fangorn are different sorts, thus in the eyes of men, a different forest.”
Ori supposed this made a strange sort of sense.
“Mm. Dunland,” said Bilbo, pointing to an area west of the Misty Mountains. “That’s where the Fallohides dwelt a while before traveling north, crossing the Greyflood and up the Greenway, crossing the Brandywine to where the Shire was founded.”
“Who are the Fallohides?” Kili asked. He threw a suspicious look. “They aren’t ents, are they?” Bilbo laughed.
“No, my dear boy, they were certainly not ents. They were the hobbits who became the Took Clan, which is my mother’s family.”
“Are they nice?” Omi asked.
“They’re nuts,” said Bilbo. “They’re mad as mice. Still, they’ve held it together this long, so they’re either doing something right, or just very, very lucky.”
Kili grinned.
“Which side of your family do you take after, Uncle Bilbo?”
“I like to leave people guessing,” said Bilbo, with a mischievous twitch of his nose. “If you’ll excuse me, I think it’s time to head back to Bag End East.”
“Aw!” Frodo cried, from where he and Sam sat in the corner, playing with the kittens. Thorin raised an eyebrow at Frodo.
“Now then?”
Frodo jumped up and said, “C’mon, Sam.”
They ran off toward the door to the passage home, Butter supervising, but Frodo did throw over his shoulder, “Night, everyone! Uncle Bilbo, you promised us a story!”
Bilbo looked up at Thorin.
“You’d best help me face down the savage bed-time beasts. There’s only so much one hobbit can do.”
Thorin turned to the company as he scooped up the basket of Sugar’s pups.
“We’ll be back soon. Or, soon enough. I hope.”
Ori went through the catalogue of books from Khazad-dûm which had made their way to Erebor.
Dwalin rose, picked him up and placed him back in the seat, kissing Ori’s head.
“Be back soon, love. Got some business t’ take care’ve.”
“All right,” said Ori vaguely, scratching notes with a graphite wand.
When he looked up again, Thorin was returning to the table, but the company had thinned out considerably. By the bell toll he realized he’d been deep in study for at least an hour. Dwalin had not returned.
He stretched and looked around.
“Has anyone seen my husband?”
“I believe he’s in the kitchen, Lord Ori.” said Mistress Dazla, bringing in fresh teapots.
He went to the kitchen and looked in to find his husband in the far corner, deep in conversation with Bilbo. Though he couldn’t hear what they were saying, it was obviously something quite important, intense even. He backed out, congratulating himself for not eavesdropping for once.
Even if not knowing what they were saying would kill him.
Dreams, Dreaming, and Durins

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. After all that food and talk we need to have a good solid sleep….Wishful thinking with the Durins, as you know. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same darrow time, same darrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

All the reading and discussions ended around midnight. Ori, exhausted, flopped into bed and was asleep instantly.

Ori dreamed he saw Mahal enthroned, or whatever passed for His throne; truthfully it looked like a leather upholstered couch, much safer than cloth for someone apt to be toting sharp objects. A great rough chunk of rock crystal sat on an ornate base before Him, and Mahal gazed into it.

Some stirring in the crystal caught both their attentions.

Mahal frowned at it and the stirring defined into a moving image.

It was an image of Dwalin outside in the meadow under the full moon, lighting incense and bearing what looked like…

Uh oh, thought Ori, is he doing what I think he’s doing?

Mahal’s eyes widened.

“By me own hairy arse! No, laddie, don’t do it!”

Dwalin was offering flowers and it wasn’t to the Smith.

“Mahal!” came a feminine cry of outrage.

“Oh, shit,” Mahal hissed.

And there was Yavanna, and was She angry.

Mahal tried for a conciliatory smile.

“Yes, me petal?”

“Don’t you ‘petal’ me, you gopher’s rear end. What are you doing to Ori?”

“Nothin’ he can’t handle, me darlin’.”

Yavanna, dressed only in flowers, looked like a gigantic hobbit version of Queen Hild. She glared over Mahal with Her arms crossed, and the green fronds and vines of Her hair tossed dangerously, as if by an invisible gale.

“We’ll see.” She gestured off to Her right with Her chin, and Ori realized, She was indicating him. “And so will he.”
“Yeh didn’t!” Mahal protested. “Aw, fuck.”
Neatly caught out, Ori could only offer a weak apologetic smile and a force out a chirpy, “Hullo.”
Then he was awake in his own bed. With a groan, he sat up and craned to look out the window, where Dwalin had apparently finished his petition and was walking back toward the house.

Ori grinned.
He arranged himself cross-legged, facing the door and, soon enough, Dwalin came through it, opening and closing the door quietly before turning and freezing as he realized his husband was awake.

“Er… Ori, love… wa’re yeh…”
“You’ve been invoking Yavanna,” Ori accused with a grin.
Dwalin sighed, and, shucking his clothes, crawled into bed. He crawled right at Ori and into him and Ori went down with a squawk as Dwalin pounced and kissed him.

Dwalin drew back.
“Hope yeh don’t mind too much. We’re all worried about yeh.”
“So Yavanna said. How did you know which flowers?”
“Lily o’ th’ Valley. Tha’ was our Bilbo. D’yeh know how hard it is to get a hobbit t’ swear t’ secrecy over somethin’ this juicy?”
“My poor buffalo. You must be exhausted.”
“Actually, I feel rather chipper a’ th’ mo. Must’ve been th’ flowers.”
“What did they mean?” Ori asked, as Dwalin kissed his neck and proceeded lower.
“Return a’ happiness.”
“Really?” Ori giggled.
“Aye… mmmmm, yer belly’s gettin’ nice an furry.”
“I thought this was supposed to put hair on my chest. I suppose that would mean I had a chest to put hair on.”
“Yer plenty enough fer me.”
Ori gasped and writhed and giggled all at once as Dwalin darted the tip of his tongue into Ori’s navel.

“Dwalin!”
“Yeh don’ like it?”
“I do like it! A lot! It really tickles!”
Dwalin chuckled evilly, and nipped Ori’s skin in a little line unerringly south.
In the throes of passion, Ori had a horrible thought.
“Dwalin! Dwalin! Wait!”
“What?” Dwalin asked, pulling back a little, looking dazed.
“What if they’re watching?”
“Who?”
“Them!” Ori waved his hand out into the ether.
“Let ‘em watch,” said Dwalin. “We’ll give ‘em an eyeful.”
Dwalin returned to the task at hand, but Ori shot a warning eyeful at the ceiling.
And he thought the worst he had to worry about was Nori!

Later that night, Ori had a very different dream.
At least he thought it was a dream. He was sitting up in bed again, but this time there was a large dwarf perched at the foot, regarding him with amusement. Ori supposed he should be afraid, or at least angry, but he felt only calm. A glance told him Dwalin was still fast asleep.

He looked back at the dwarf, whose eyes were unmistakable and profile terribly familiar.
“Er… may I help you?”
“Brur ain’t goin’ t’ find wha’ yer lookin’ f’r,” the dwarf rumbled. Ori recognized his voice immediately. This was the one close to Mahal. “Yeh want th’ box with th’ flower. It’s in an empty crypt in th’ chamber a’ Mazarbul.”
“Where exactly is - “
“Khazad-dûm, o’course. Yeh’ll need help. An’ a crowbar.”
“Th’ Flower of Durin.”
“Aye, th’ Flower a’ Durin.”
“I see.”
“Yeh want t’ go soon. Th’ orcs’re in disarray since Mordor fell, slaughterin’ each other f’r th’ right t’ rule. It’s no’ safe, but it’ll never be safer.”
“Oh, um, alright. I beg your pardon, but are you a Durin?”
The dwarf laughed.
“Aye.”
“You’re Durin the Deathless, aren’t you.”
“Aye.”
“I was afraid you’d say that. Are you suggesting I do this, or ordering me to do it?”
“I’m no’ Mahal. I can’t order yeh t’ do much a’ anythin’. I’d say I very much wish yeh’d go. Th’ flower shouldn’ stay hidden any longer.”
“Dori is going to murder me.”
“If he does, I’ll have a nice ale waitin’ f’r yeh.”
“Thank you. Any particular crypt?”
“Aye, it’s listed as third assistant librarian, Floviq son o’ Druviq.”
“In the crypt of third assistant librarian, Floviq son o’ Druviq in the Chamber of Mazarbul in Khazad-dûm,” Ori repeated and reached for his notebook and scribbled this information down.
“Busy for a third assistant librarian. Um… is he still using that crypt himself?”
“Nah, Floviq go’ et by th’ Balrog. Nowt t’ bury.”
“Anything else?” Ori inquired, rather politely, he thought.
“Tell Thorin t’ marry tha’ hobbit.”
Ori stared, then,
“Go find something in a crypt in Khazad-dûm or tell the king to get married. You know either one might get me killed. Which is more important to you?”
The legendary king laughed and shook his head.
“Khazad-dûm, laddie.”
“I will do my best, sir…er…sire.”
“I’m no goat, laddie, though I may look an’ act like one.”
Ori turned to put his notebook back on the side table and said,
“I.”
But Durin was gone.

Ori woke and looked around. The fire was low, Dwalin snored beside him and everything was as it should be. It was just a dream then, his shoulders dropped in relief. He glanced to the beside table. His notebook lay open. In his own handwriting, he read the words.

Wishes of Durin the Deathless
1/. - Go to Khazad-dûm to the chamber of Mazarbul, in the crypt listed as 3rd assistant librarian, Floviq son of Druviq. There lies the Flower of Durin.
2/. - Tell Thorin to marry Bilbo.

Ori knew he was not going to sleep after that.
He went to the kitchen and got down a large teapot and started the dry ingredients for Dori’s scones. Then it was still the middle of the night, so he made a cake. But it was still early, so he sliced the cake into three rounds, made a filling of plum preserves and then drizzled the whole thing with honey. The sun was making the faintest glow on the horizon, so he fried rashers of bacon and made another pot of tea. He made more scones, three varieties, and as he was popping them into the oven, Dori appeared.
“What are you doing up so early, pet? Are you ill?”
“No, but I’ve now had three pots of tea and I can’t stop moving.”
“What is the matter?”
Ori sighed.
“Let me go use the privy - again - I really need to wait until everyone is here to tell you.”
Dori seized him.
“Have you grown different ‘bits’ since you’ve been married to Dwalin? Do you think you’re pregnant?”
“No!”
Dori released him with a raised eyebrow and Ori fled to answer the demand of his bladder.
Feeling relieved, Ori washed his face and hands in the sink, then looked at himself in the mirror.
He took time to brush off all the flour that had attached itself to him. When he glanced up at the mirror again, Durin the Deathless winked at him from the glass. Ori yelped and the door burst open.
“Yeh alrigh’, love?” Dwalin demanded, standing half dressed in the doorway.
“I’m fine, sort of, I need to…Why are you awake?”
“Dori. Sent Nuisance off to get everyone up, too.”
Ori groaned, crossed to his husband, and flopped against him.
“I had another dream last night.”
“I’ll fuckin’ kill ‘im,” Dwalin growled, tucking Ori closer to him.
Ori looked up.
“I’ll figure somethin’ ou’!”
Ori thought for an instant his heart would burst. He loved his Dwalin so much! He wrapped his arms around his husband and squeezed as hard as he could. Dwalin chuckled into his hair.
“Aye, bu’ yeh’ve go’ a grip, love.”
They lingered a few more minutes, then Ori heard an array of voices. Dori and Nori between them had raised the entire household including their guests. Ori groaned.
“I’ll go get my notebook.”

When Ori and Dwalin entered the breakfast parlor, everyone was there. Only Frodo and Sam were eating. The adults looked at him. Ori noticed his and Dwalin’s usual seats were empty. He let Dwalin steer him to his chair and sat down.
Dori served and everyone began eating but the conversation was nonexistent. Halfway through his food, Thorin looked up.
“What’s happened, Ori?” he asked gently.
“Durin was here last night.”
“Ooo, a dead one?” Wandi wanted to know.
“A Durin?” inquired Elrond.
Thorin appeared to consider and finally settled on, “Which one?”
“The deathless one,” Ori answered. Now that they were actually talking about it and Dwalin was beside him he didn’t feel so agitated. Everyone else was amazed and excited.
“Durin the Deathless was here in this breakfast room?” Kili cried
“What was he eating?” Gimli wanted to know.
“Durin the Deathless was using my kitchen?!” Dori looked outraged.
“No, he was on our bed, Dwalin’s and mine.”
“He was in bed with us?” Dwalin yelped.
“No, he was sitting on the end.”
“An’ a good thing, I’d’a thought he was a prowler an’ kicked his arse.”
“It’s an awfully big arse, Dwalin.”
“I’ve kicked bigger. Trolls have bigger.”
“Maybe,” said Ori, shaking his head in disbelief, “but none so… formidable.”
“Why was Durin the Deathless on your bed?” Sigrid asked, then grinned. “Was he trying to
borrow your copy of Queen Kivi’s book?”
“Oi!” shouted Nori as Dori squawked,
“Where did you get a copy of that book, Ori?”
“Dori,” Ori blushed but couldn’t believe he was being grilled about his sex life at this moment.
“What does it matter?”
Dori sniffed, but still offered,
“I was planing on gifting my copy to you on your wedding day.”
“Bit late for that,” Bofur commented, shoveling more eggs into his mouth.
“Ah,” Balin teased. “I did wonder wha’ happened t’ mine after our night t’gether, m’dear.”
Dori pouted.
“An’ you call me a thief!” Nori was triumphant.
Dwalin growled and kissed the top of Ori’s head.
“Not t’ worry, our Dori. If it were Balin’s, we don’t want it anyway. It’d be all sticky.”
“Only from yeh borrowin’ it, brother.”
“Used Thorin’s,” Dwalin winked at Ori, making him giggle.
“Idad gave me that one,” Fili started, then looked at Thorin and Dwalin then screwed up his face.
“Ew! I’ll never be able to touch it again!”
“I’m not touching it either!” Kili reinforced.
“What’s sticky?” Frodo asked, turning from his serious and deep conversation with wee Sam.
“Nothing, my boy,” said Bilbo. “Would you like another scone?”
“Yes, please!”
“And no feeding it to Butter this time.”
“Awww. But she looks hungry!”
“She’s a warg. She always looks that way. If she eats our food, she’ll never eat her own.”
“She already ate her own. I think the wargs are part hobbit.”
“Ori?”
Ori turned to see his king looking at him.
“Yes?”
“What did King Durin have to say?” Thorin asked.
Bilbo poured Thorin and himself more tea, but his eyes were fixed on Ori.
Ori handed Thorin the notebook, open to the relevant page. Thorin stared at the writing. Bilbo gasped.
“What needs to be done?” asked Lady Galadriel.
“I have to go to Khazad-dûm,” Ori said with tired finality.
Deathless, Doom, and Don’t!

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Heavens to Betsy! Dead Durins, Khazad-dûm and breakfast! Oh my! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Everyone at the table was frozen in horrified silence for a moment, then bedlam broke loose. Thorin cleared his throat and everyone quieted down and looked at the High King of Dwarrow. Thorin raised the notebook at Ori.

“I take it this was the summary of your conversation with King Durin?”

“Yes,” Ori confirmed.

“These are his orders?”

“No. Durin said he couldn’t order me to do it, he isn’t Mahal. He just wishes very much that I’d do it as the Flower shouldn’t stay hidden.”

Thorin glanced down at the page again.

“And the rest?” The king’s eye held a teasing light and Ori couldn’t stop a smile.

“Durin said to tell you. I’ve told you,” said Ori, blinking.

“Hmmm,” Bilbo murmured. “I can’t imagine why Durin would wish that.”

Thorin’s eyes slewed over to his betrothed.

“You’re feeling quite certain you’re going to collect fifty gold off me from our discussion last night.”

Bilbo widened his eyes in shocked disbelief.

“My dear dwarf! I can’t even begin to—”

“Now, you’re positive you’re going to collect,” Thorin interrupted and leaned over to kiss Bilbo’s cheek.

“May we go out to the meadow?” Frodo asked. Bilbo checked the faunts’ plates and cups, and nodded his approval. Thorin lifted Frodo and Sam down and opened the parlor doors. Faunts, wargs, kittens, and Posey went tearing out.

“What did you bet on?” Legolas asked, running his finger around the rim of his plate to catch the last of the butter, making Thranduil lean forward and smack his youngest fawn’s fingers with a spoon.

“Stop it!”

“That,” Thorin replied to Legolas, “is unimportant… for the moment. What is important is how and if we should grant King Durin’s request.”

“If?” Celeborn stared at Thorin. “Durin is your first ancestor! He was the first of your people created by Mahal! He—”

“King Durin is dead,” Thorin stated with the power of the throne of High King in him. “Durin is asking that I allow one of my people to risk his life and the lives of any who follow. Durin is my ancestor, but his fourth incarnation dug too deep and released an ancient evil that is rumored to be under those mountains still. His reason for doing that boiled down to greed. I have seen enough of my people suffer and die because of the greed of the line of Durin. Never again. My peoples’ lives and safety come first.”

Ori sat still. It had never occurred to him that Thorin, of all people, would forbid this. He thought back on what Durin had said. Having accepted Durin’s word as law, he felt a little…a little let
down. He was the scribe of Mahal. Durin could not have appeared to him if Mahal didn’t want him to. Durin must have petitioned Mahal for the chance to ask Ori for this. Ori raised his head.

“But, Thorin, how is you marrying Bilbo endangering the kingdom and everyone in it?”

Thorin and Bilbo laughed outright.

“If Bilbo is willing, I have no problem in granting that part of Durin’s wishes.”

Bilbo smiled as Thorin raised the hobbit’s hand to his lips.

“I think I might be persuaded.”

“Of course, you will,” Dori assured everyone.

Thorin looked at Ori again, then his eyes narrowed.

“Ori, what are you thinking?”

Ori shifted ever so slightly nearer to Dwalin.

“I’m thinking that Durin didn’t ask you to do this. He asked me.”

Thorin sat back a little in his chair.

“No!” Binni cried, grasping Oin’s arm in panic. “No, you can’t go to that horrible place!”

“Absolutely not,” said Dori with thunderous finality. “I forbid it.”

Ori shook his head.

“Dori, it’s not your decision to make.”

Dori sputtered and turned to Balin who, looking rather ill, only cast down his eyes apologetically.

The Bearer turned to Dwalin.

“Tell him he can’t go!”

“It’s no’ my decision either, bu’ if he’s goin’, I’m goin’ with him.”

“You’ll come with me?” Ori asked.

“Oh’ course I’m comin’ with yeh. With th’ leave a’ me king.” He cast a hard glance Thorin’s way, then smiled back at Ori. “Always felt bad we ne’er go’ a honeymoon.”

“We had one, at the inn. Besides, this won’t be the most romantic of settings,” said Ori.

“No, but dark.”

Fili opened his mouth.

“No,” said Dis.

Fili closed his mouth.

Elladan and Elrohir didn’t even get as far as opening their mouths.

“No,” said Lindir.

Elrond blinked at his sons, looking rather smug.

Thorin settled back in his chair, his eyes still on Ori. Finally he said,

“We will discuss this later. After breakfast, I have duties in the throne room. No doubt, King Bard and King Thranduil will want to introduce Prince Cemnesta to the people of Dale. We’ll resume after lunch. If that is an agreeable time to you, King Bard?”

Bard and Thranduil exchanged glances and nodded.

Frodo and Sam burst back in.

“Come look!” Frodo cried. “It rained on the other side of the Greenwood and we can see two rainbows!”

Thorin smiled and rose.

“Come, ghivashel. After that news, we can all use something beautiful to look at and consider.”

Bilbo tucked his hand into the crook of Thorin’s elbow and they led the way out to the patio.

Ori was surprise to see that the faunts had not exaggerated. Two beautifully colored arcs curved over the Greenwood. Thranduil and Galadriel were suitably transported with delight and assured Cemnesta it was a sign that augured him an excellent reign. There was much laughter and chatter in admiration, as Ori leaned thankfully back against his husband’s chest.

He glanced over the family and guests to see Balin bow over Dori’s hand and lead him out to the grass into a country dance. They twirled about gracefully in the bright sunshine, making Ori grin.

Dori was so happy and beautiful and Ori’s heart swelled. Dori had finally received everything that Ori had always wanted for his brother-come-parent.

Balin danced Dori up to the patio to a smatter of applause from the gathered company. Dori gave
a sudden squeal as Balin unexpectedly whisked Dori up in his arms and pranced off inside the
house. The tone of Dori’s giggles told Ori, Dori was being borne off to the bedroom.

People wandered back into the house and Ori turned to Dwalin.
“Do you have some free time at the moment?”
“Aye, c’mon, love, we’ll chat in our room.”

They settled before the fireplace with cushions.
“I’m glad for one thing, you said you’d come with me. I admit I have, at this moment, no idea how I’m going to do this.”

Dwalin considered, frowning at the ceiling. Ori snuggled into his side and Dwalin stroked his hair.
“Organizin’ th’ thin’. Would it help yeh t’ have yer notebook?”

Ori squeaked, bounced up, fetched it back and flopped on his stomach. He quickly divided a page into three columns. Next to the page was Ori’s note from Durin.
“So, we need t’ break this down,” Dwalin decided. “There’s th’ journey t’ Khazad-dûm, th’ actions we need t’ do in there, an’ th’ journey back.”

Ori titled three columns.

“Who’ll go with us?” Dwalin said thoughtfully. “Durin says yeh’ll need help an’ a crowbar. So tha’ means strong backs an’ knowledge o’ stone. There’s th’ danger o’ orcs, so fighters.”

“Yes. It’s a good thing Balin found those old maps of both inside and out. How long does it take to get there?”

“Depends on th’ route.”

The morning slipped away as they worked diligently. They were finally interrupted by a knock at the door. They looked up as Elrond entered.

“What’s t’ do?” Dwalin asked.

“I have been dispatched by the dear Bearer,” Elrond looked amused, “to summon you both to lunch.”

Dwalin chuckled and rose fluidly to his feet, bringing Ori with him.

“Did yeh wake tha’ blot o’ a brother a’ mine?”

Elrond winced dramatically, then shook his head.

“On the contrary, the honored Bearer has been busy preparing our meal. I believe Lord Balin has been assisting your king.”

“Mmm,” Dwalin grunted.

Ori gathered up the papers and they followed the elf lord out and through to the breakfast parlor. Ori went to the kitchen. Dori was swirling about, humming a happy tune, stopping every now and then to kiss Balin, who was leaning against the counter, watching Dori with loving eyes.

Ori frowned. Dori looked like… Was Dori glowing?

“Dori, what’s going on? Are you alright?” Ori asked nervously.

“Of course, pet. Nothing’s wrong at all.”

She gave a mysterious smile which Ori was not buying in the least.

“Dori! What. Is. Wrong?”

“Nothing, pet.” Dori patted his arm. “You’re just going to be an uncle.”

Ori gave out the loudest noise any of them ever heard him make.

Dwalin was there in an instant.

“Wha’ th’ fuck?”

Ori spun around and leapt into his arms.

“Dori’s preggers!”

Dwalin cocked an eyebrow at Balin.

“Bout bloody time.”

Balin bowed low then flicked an obscene gesture at Dwalin.

The four of them returned to the parlor where everyone was seated and looking curiously at them. Dori swept a triumphant gaze around the assembled. Nori glared at Dori, his mouth stuffed full of roll.
“My dearest family,” Dori cooed. Galadriel gave a small squeak and looked eagerly at Dori. Dori took Balin’s hand. “My beloved and I wish to announce—”

“Bloody get on with it!” snapped Nori. “What’re you natterin’ bout, our Dori?” Dori spared a frown at Nori then her glow returned. “Balin and I are going to have a badgerling.”

The noise was phenomenal. Lady Galadriel rushed forward but Bilbo was there first, flinging his arms about Dori. Everyone had to hug Dori and Balin and exclaim and congratulate them.

“Fuckin’ A!” Nori cried. “For real?”

Balin raised a brow. He opened his mouth, but before he could make a sound, Nori gave a holler, and grabbed Balin around the waist, inflicting a truly monumental hug.

“Let me go, yeh maniac!” Balin demanded.

“Nooo!”

Frodo and Sam came in from the meadow with Bujni and Dipfa, and stared at the mob. “Uncle Bilbo, what’s going on?” Frodo wanted to know. People calmed and laughed things over. Bilbo turned and Dori came forward to embrace both faunts.

“You’re going to have another cousin soon, tiny pet.” Frodo considered this, then asked, “When?”

Everyone laughed and Bard ruffled Frodo’s curls, having to lean down to do so. “Practical lad.”

“Congratulations, ma’am,” Wee Sam said solemnly.

“Honored Bearer—” Bujni began.

“I must design your maternity clothing!” Dipfa cried out.

Roäc stuck his head in the room.

“What’s the to-do? You’re inside, you’re outside. A raven can’t keep track!” Thorin smiled at him.

“The Bearer is expecting.”

“Expecting? Oh… Ohhhh! Bearer’s going to have an egg! Congratulations! I hope it fledges well!”

“Er… thank you, dear,” said Dori, as Vi and Margr linked hands and danced around her, singing off-key. “Perhaps you’ll send someone to tell my brother D—”

“And there he goes,” said Thorin, following Roäc’s speedy rise and bank to the north. He leaned in to kiss Dori’s cheek, meanwhile dodging the ebullient sisters. “Congratulations, Dori.”

“Thank you,” said Dori with a twinkle. “I’m sure our Deary will make sure this badger has its very own professional bullies.”

“Already picked ‘em out,” Dwalin assured her.

Mistress Dazla entered.

“Beg pardon, Lady Dori. Luncheon is served.”

Dori said, “Mistress Dazla, please let the household know Lord Balin and I are expecting.”

Mistress Dazla squealed, then slapped her hand over her mouth, turned scarlet, bobbed a curtsey and finally said, “This is the best news, m’lady! Congratulations to you both!”

As they sat about the table, Vi and Margr waxed nostalgic.

“I remember havin’ me own badgers,” said Vi. “I remember havin’ me own badgers,” said Vi. “How many do you have?” Ori asked.

“I’ve two an’ Margr has three.”

Margr reared back, staring at her.

“No, I’ve two, it’s yeh who’s go’ three.”

“No, no, hen, I’d remember if I gave birth three times. Yeh don’ fergit tha’.”

“So, if yeh had two, and I had two… Lessee, there’s me Rogi ‘n wee Milgr, an’ yer Vidin - oy, wha’ a time we had potty trainin’ him. Regular fountain he was. And then Twmi yeh had second.”

“So, who was tha’ wee shit used t’ sit th’ other side a’ Rogi at table?” Vi asked.
“Search me. No! Glorfy, no searchin’ in public!”
Glorfindel withdrew his hand from her waist and pouted.
Ori looked from one sister to the other.
“You really didn’t know how many children you had?”
Vi shrugged.
“They used t’ sleep on th’ floor in a heap. Couldn’t tell whose arms ‘r legs was whose. Really, when there’s badgers underfoot, yeh just feed wha’ever mouth’s open. Like baby birds. Except, more likely t’ bite.”
“Oh, Mahal!” Margr groaned. “Took fer’ever t’ get Rogi off th’ teat.”
Ori thought that explained quite a bit about Rogi.
Vi said, “Well, whoever tha’ badger was, he’s shockin’ rude. No’ a word ‘r nothin’ since…
When, Mar?”
“Can’t recall. I get the feelin’ I should, though. I kin jus’ see his face, wee scrap’ve a thin’ with a face round as th’ moon. Never mind. Some time it’ll come t’ me. Probably in th’ middle a’ th’ night.”
Thorin cleared his throat.
“It’s occurred to me that perhaps we shouldn’t be announcing Dori’s… expectant state until the quest to Khazad-dûm is over. News of the quest itself is likely to upset some people, those who are not as calm as Binni.”
Dwalin mused.
“Aye, our Dori’d make a temptin’ target if someone had the notion.”
Dori sat bolt upright and glared at her king, then the captain.
“I beg your pardon! I’m hardly in danger. I have bullies!”
“Dear,” said Bilbo to Thorin with a wry expression. “Since we’ve seen fit to tell Roäc, I doubt secrecy is an option now. It’s possible that a few orcs living under a boulder somewhere will remain ignorant, but everyone else in Middle Earth will know by nightfall.”
“True,” Thorin said with a sigh. “We’ll put off a formal announcement, though.”
“Yes,” said Dori archly, “it will give me time to knit little armor-plated onesies for the pebble.”
Galadriel said, “Ooo! Blankies!”

After lunch, Ori found himself summoned to the living area of Bag End East, where he found Thorin, standing before the fireplace, glaring and muttering to himself. At Ori’s approach, Thorin looked up and said,
“Why would Durin ask you to do this?”
“He said it was for you, that it was important for you.”
Thorin closed his eyes as if in pain and when he opened them again he glared out into the ether.
“Thanks,” he growled.
Durin said to Ori, “Tell ‘im I’m sorry abou’ th’ greed thin’. Tha’ mithril was jus’ so… shiny.”
“Durin says to tell you he’s sorry about the - er - greed thing.”
“Greed thing…” Thorin repeated.
“Tell him: Live an’ learn,” said Durin.
“Really?” Ori asked.
“Go on.”
“He says: Live and learn.”
Thorin looked into the ether and said, “That is a lame arse apology.” To Ori he said, “Even if he’d ordered you, I’d still have trouble sending my beloved kin to their deaths on an errand just for me.”
“I have the impression it wasn’t just for you yourself, but also for you as king.”
“I don’t like this, Ori, but it is your quest. You are a gown dwarf and I can’t tell you not to go.”
“Oh, good. For a moment there, I thought you were going to tell me I had to be exiled until I came back successfully.”
“But if I could do it for you, I would.”
“Thank you, Thorin. I… do you want me to resign as royal scribe?”

“Don’t be ridiculous and don’t thank me until you’re all home safe and sound. You know it can’t just be you and Dwalin, right?”

“Dwalin and I have already begun to plan.”

“That’s for the best. You’re looking for something you might put in your pocket, or it might be large and heavy, and you may know where it is, but you have to get there and get out with it and get it home. If it’s the latter, you’ll need strong arms, someone with impeccable stone sense, someone who can figure and build the proper gear, and you need warriors to watch your back. Dwalin can help you organize it, but you’ll have to lead.”

Ori gulped. He’d been trying not to think about that.

“I’ll have to lead a quest.”

“Yes.”

Ori sighed and then gave Thorin a sparkling look.

“Dipfa will want to make me new clothes. At any rate, she’ll want to make me another hat, and we all know about Dipfa’s hats.”

Thorin shuddered and they both laughed.

“I had something brought up from the armory for you,” said Thorin. “I want you to wear it.”

He drew an object from a box on the side table. Then he turned and offered Ori a shirt of mail. It was obviously very fine, linked by a master armorer and probably weighed more than Ori himself.

Which was why he gasped when he took it and found it weighed almost nothing.

Then he gasped because he realized he held enough mithril to buy the entire Mountain of Erebor.

“Thorin! Where did this come from?”

“I wore it for my investiture as Thrain’s heir. It was the last piece my adad and udad worked on together. I was about fifty.”

“You should keep this for Fili or Kili or Gimli.”

“They won’t fit in it. As is, you’re just small enough. Another stone or so and it would have to wait for Frodo.”

“I…” Ori swallowed. “I’ll take good care of it, I promise.”

“I think the point is for it to take good care of you,” said Thorin. “Promise me you’ll wear it.”

“I promise, Thorin.”

Ori held it up and pulled on the shoulders experimentally. It stretched a bit, which was its saving grace. His arms and shoulders had grown along with the rest of him. He took off his outer tunic and put on the mail, then he looked down at the softly shining metal covering him. It was nice, not like mail at all. His brain went through all the knitting possibilities of mithril yarn. He could make Dwalin a long jumper, and a matching pair of socks.

Thorin crossed to the raven bedecked fireplace and took a bulky envelope from behind the foremost raven. He brought it over and, for a moment, Ori thought Thorin was giving him gold for expenses on the journey. Thorin opened the packet and drew out the small, crystal phial lady Galadriel had given him at his coronation.

“As you recall, Ori,” Thorin said, gravely, “this is the light of Eärendil’s star. I cannot think of a better purpose than it lighting your way through the caverns. Bilbo and I took it down to one a while back. It is extraordinarily powerful. It also seems to have the same light as Bilbo’s sword, Sting, so it will warn you if orcs are coming.”

Ori stared, and managed to nod as Thorin put the phial back in its envelope and handed it to him.

Ori didn’t know what to say. He paused a moment, then flung himself at his king and hugged him. Thorin’s arms were about him and they stayed that way for a moment.

“Oi,” Dwalin’s voice came from the doorway.

“Indeed,” Bilbo agreed in a teasing tone.

Thorin released Ori and turned to his betrothed and brother-at-arms.

“Dwalin, I’m counting on you to bring our Ori back safely. Successfully or not, I don’t care, but he is to return to us, unharmed.”
Dwalin chuckled and came to Ori’s side, kissing the top of Ori’s head. “I’ll see t’ it, even with me las’ breath.”

“No,” Bilbo interrupted. “We shan’t have that sort of talk. How well that mithril shirt becomes you, Ori.”

Dwalin inspected Ori with a soft smile. “Aye, grand lookin’, love.”

“Ori, you said you’ve started preparing?” prompted Thorin.

“Dwalin and I have started our lists,” Ori reported.

“Come, then,” Thorin said, turning with a smile. “The breakfast parlor should be clear. Dwalin, please help Ori remove the mail shirt and put it aside for now along with phial of Galadriel. Ori, would you bring your list and other notes? Amrâlimê, shall you and I collect Balin and his maps?”

They settled at one end of the table. Thorin looked over the lists Ori and Dwalin had worked on, nodding his approval. Balin rolled out his maps of both the outside and inside of Khazad-dûm.

Thorin pondered a moment then turned to Balin. “Would you please find Binni and ask him to join us for a few moments?”

Balin went out and Thorin hurrumphed, then, “I’m asking for Binni as he was among the last to leave. He would know of any changes that may have occurred to the east door above Mirrormere.”

“We’d better take copies of these maps in case that way is blocked,” Ori said thoughtfully.

“Perhaps while she’s here, we should ask Lady Galadriel about the journey.”

Thorin’s eyebrows went up and Ori went on.

“If we can arrange with Cemnesta and Galadriel, we could skirt the open lands and the River Anduin. Thranduil has assured Galadriel that he and his soldiers have cleared the orcs out of Dol-Guldur. If we stayed in the shadow of the Greenwood, we could then cross the open lands hidden from the mountains by Lothlórien. Galadriel speaks of the trees growing along the Silverloade and Nimrodel. Orc scouts have always given Lothlórien a wide berth. If we stay hidden for as long as possible, our chances are better.”

“Aye,” Dwalin agreed. “A small party kin get fra Lothlórien t’ th’ east door under cover a’ nigh’. Once we’re there we can see when an’ how often they change out their guards. Soon as a new watch appears we can pick ‘em off quick. Tha’ll buy us a good chunk a’ time.”

Thorin grunted an affirmative. Ori noticed that Bilbo was filling in for Balin, taking down their discussion. Bilbo glanced up and winked at Ori. Ori grinned.

There was the sound of stamping feet, the parlor door was ajar and a raven’s bill stuck itself through. “Bugger off, Alyne!!” Brur yelled. The librarian entered. Alyne flitted to the table. Eggr and Po remained perched on either of Brur’s shoulders.

“Got more maps wi’ proper measurement’s on ‘em.”

Brur sat down and looked at them.

“Yeh find anything more?” he asked.

Everyone looked at Ori. Ori sighed.

“Master Brur?”

“Aye, laddie?”

“I - I had a dream last night”

“Well, tha’s us bugged then.”

Ori retold his dream of Durin and handed Brur the notebook still open to the relevant page. Brur read it over.

“Well, shit.” he opined. “I suppose this means yeh’ll be needin’ a leave a’ absence?”

“Permanently, if we don’t plan this out right,” said Ori.

Balin entered with Binni, who looked pale beneath his beard, and Kili, Fili, Sigrid and Tauriel followed.

“Oh, Mahal’s hairy arse,” said Kili. “Did someone else die?”
“Not yet,” said Fili. “Idad? Do you need our help?”

“Since this involves you all to some extent or another, you should be here,” Thorin agreed.

Brur pulled out the floor plan of the library.

It was far larger than Ori had imagined. But, of course it was. It was one of the great libraries of the ancient world. It wasn’t a pantry or an airing cupboard.

“Where’s the crypt?” Ori asked.

“It’s in th’ floor,” said Brur. “Old librarians’re usually buried under th’ floor, because tha’ way th’ library don’t f’get their support.”

“In this case,” said Bilbo, “that seems to be quite literal.”

“I guess we’re really going to need that crowbar,” said Ori.

Kili tilted his head.

“Oh, so, the tombs aren’t right there, sticking up from the floor.”

Brur smirked.

“Got it in one, yer highness.”

“Well, think about it. All the tombs in Erebor are above the ground.”

“All the tombs in Erebor aren’t in the library either. What d’yeh think? They sat around th’ tombs, usin’ ‘em f’r tea tables?”

Kili looked offended.

“You can’t eat in the library. It’s against the rules. Maybe they’re, I dunno, study tables?”

Dwalin cuffed him.

“Tha’s enough out a’ yeh f’r now. Say we get this thin’ outa th’ floor. I hope they’re marked right, by th’ way. Diggin’ up th’ wrong librarian? Tha’d jus’ be embarrassin’.”

“Durin said it was marked,” said Ori. “And he described it as a box. I’m more concerned about how we’re getting it out of there. I have no idea how big or small a box it might be, but I don’t think we’re getting it across this bridge. I don’t even know how we’re getting us across it. Thorin? Should we ask Dain for advice? He’s the mechanical genius.”

“He is and we should,” said Thorin. “Just be careful what you ask for.”

Ori had terrible visions of Dain deciding they should cross the chasm via trapeze.

Binni said, “Let us all hope King Dain has a good idea. I recall crossing that bridge. Not much before or after, mind, but the bridge is etched in my memory.”

Ori said, “Would it be alright for you to tell us what it’s like?”

“Too narrow for more than one dwarf at a time, and it’s solid enough at either end, but the middle of the bridge is as big around as Bujni. I swear it was only the will of Mahal keeping it together.”

“Hmph,” commented Dwalin. “Think we should go wi’ th’ notion tha’ th’ bridge’s gone. Nice a’ these mapmakers t’ put in th’ measurements. We’ll need th’ makings of a bridge an’ a solid one a’ th’.”

“I agree,” Ori put in. “Anything that could be ruined will probably be so. That includes doors, I imagine.”

A little voice piped up from under the table, “Bring plenty of rope!”

Ori leaned over and looked beneath the edge of the table cloth, where Frodo and Wee Sam were stuffing their faces with xocolātl biscuits.

“Rope?” Ori asked.

Sam nodded furiously.

“That’s what my gaffer always says. Can’t have enough rope!”

“We’ll take that under advisement,” Ori promised.

Bilbo then stuck his head under the table and said, sternly, “You are neither of you to talk about this to anyone. Am I clear?”

“Yes, Uncle Bilbo.”

“Yes, Mister Bilbo!”

“Or no dessert for either of you until you’re thirty-three and can get your own.”

The faunts gasped in horror.

Thorin also looked under the table.
Perhaps you would like to take your picnic outside for now?"

"All right," said Frodo. He grabbed Sam’s hand and pulled him up. Neither were tall enough to bump their heads on the underside of the table. As they scampered out into the meadow, they heard Frodo say to Sam, “That was a lucky escape! In a minute Idad Thorin would have used ‘the eyebrow’.”

“Jings, Mr. Frodo!”

“The eyebrow?” Balin murmured in an awed fashion. Ori and Bilbo choked on giggles but Dwalin guffawed at Thorin. Thorin raised his eyebrow at his shield brother.

“Never worked on me then, lad, ‘r now.”

“Arse,” Thorin grumped. They returned their attentions to the maps.

Fili and Kili exchanged glances.

“Ori,” Fili said, “have you decided on your company?”

Ori sighed.

“Dwalin and I’ve been talking. We need fighters for any orcs and stonemasons for getting to the box. Everyone will need a mount.”

Kili took Tauriel’s hand and she smiled down at him. He grinned and turned to Ori.

“Tauriel and I volunteer. Wait!” he said as Thorin opened his mouth. “I’ve already spoken to amad. She doesn’t like it much, but gave her consent. Tauriel and I are both fighters and archers. We’re stealthy. We’re good for distance and Tauriel knows all the Greenwood and she’s visited Lórien many times. We can help. I can cook, too. We’ll need to eat. We’re willing, if you’ll have us.”

Ori gaped at the young prince. Thorin sighed and exchanged a look with Dwalin. Dwalin gave a curt nod.

“I don’t like it, either,” Thorin said, “but if you wish to go, you are of age and can make your own decisions. You must accept that Ori is your leader and you will follow his orders. If you would like Kili and Tauriel to accompany you, Ori?”

“Yes,” gasped Ori, “yes, thank you both. I’m sure we’ll need your help!”

“I’ll write up th’ contracts,” Balin said crisply.

Thranduil and Bard came in.

“Have you discovered anything else?” Thranduil asked, seating himself next to Tauriel.

Thorin looked up.

“Thranduil Oropherion, your foster daughter has volunteered to accompany my scribe on this quest.”

Thranduil turned and looked at Tauriel. He said something to her in Quenya. She bowed her head and also spoke. She turned to Ori.

“King Thranduil has requested that I give you my vow of service. I and my bow are yours to command, Lord Ori of Fundin.”

Ori smiled as the warm glow spread through him. He and Dwalin had help.

Dis and Jani came in. Kili rose and went to his mother.

“I must do this, mam.”

Dis clenched him close.

“I know, my little goat, but I still don’t like it.”

Jani scratched the back of her neck then tuned to Ori.

“Yeh said yeh’ll need stone workers. If yeh’ll have me, I’ll go along with yeh.”

“Jani!” cried Dis. Jani grinned and kissed the princess’ cheek.

“Aye, love an’ I’ll keep an eye on tha’ young cosset a’ yers, too.”

There were voices from the sitting room. Elrond and Lindir came in, followed by the sisters and Glorfindel.

Elrond seated himself gracefully.

“Has anything been decided?”

Balin cleared his throat and read back the notes he and Bilbo had taken.

“This is a momentous decision,” Elrond mused.
“And I shall accompany the party to Moria,” Glorfindel stated.
“Aye,” Vi agreed. “Won’t we, love?” This to her sister.
“We will,” Margr nodded. “Gotta make sure our Ori doesn’ go off an’ ge’ himself hurt ‘r nuthin’.”

“Glorfindel?” Elrond asked as Ori tried to get his jaw off the tabletop. Glorfindel gave his lordship a toothy grin.
“There may be a balrog. Can’t have dwarrow going off and meeting one of those.” Ori stared at him, horrified.
“I don’t want you to die again!”
Margr said, “He won’t be dyin’, will ‘e, Vi?”
“No, indeed!” Vi agreed. “We’ll be goin’ along t’ make sure!”

“Now, now, our Ori,” Margr cut him off. “Yeh need folk who kin move stone. What else’ve Vi an’ me spent our whole lives doin’?”

“An’ yeh’ll need stone workers,” Vi pointed out.
“Oh,” said Ori. He turned to Dwalin, who shrugged.
Galadriel came in with the rest of Groinuls, Legolas followed by Master Sadi, Cemnesta and Mr. Wandi. Galadriel seated herself gracefully on Dori’s other side and took her hand. Romy circled several times, waiting until Gimli and Legolas sat to park himself across their boots.

“Who’s goin?” Gimli asked baldly.
Ori said, “Dwalin and I will go, and Lord Glorfindel and Mistresses Vi and Margr, and Jani.”
“Tauriel and I are going, too,” said Kili.
“Then so shall I,” said Legolas. He turned to his ada, who sighed.
“Fine,” Thranduil said. “You’ll give Ori your oath of service as Tauriel has.”
“Happily,” said Legolas. “Lord Ori and his company must be protected.”

“Then I’m goin’, too,” said Gimli. He said this boldly enough, though he looked pleadingly at Gloin and Gridr.
“It’s no’ a pleasure trip, lad,” said Gloin. “Yeh don’t even have yer warrior’s braid yet.”

Gimli appeared to think about this very seriously before he spoke again.

“Then… let this be me test,” said Gimli. “Dwalin’d prob’ly be th’ one t’ test me anyway.”
Gridr and Dwalin exchanged glances, but didn’t look pleased.
“It seems yer t’ have th’ last word on this, Dwalin,” said Gridr. “Yer his fightin’ master. Is he ready?”

Dwalin regarded Gimli critically. To Gimli’s credit, he neither fidgeted nor whined, but held Dwalin’s gaze with complete composure.

“Aye,” said Dwalin. “We’ll see how well yeh follow orders.”
“Yes, Captain Dwalin,” said Gimli. “And thank you.”

“Heh, don’t thank me yet.”

Mistress Dazla entered, looked at the crowd around the table, and said, “Er… Lady Dori, tea will be served in the sitting room.”

“That would be lovely, Mistress Dazla. Thank you.”
They all rose and moved through to the sitting room. Ori’s mouth watered. Mistress Dazla had foreseen that hot food would be welcome and she was probably embarking on feeding up Dori. There was the usual fare of biscuits, scones and cake, but the additions included sausage rolls, fried dough around bacon-wrapped hard boiled eggs, and toast with a tangy mix of sharp cheese, mustard, and egg over it.

They were seated for exactly three seconds when there was a crashing sound of hooves and the door of Bag-End East slammed open. Chopper and Dain, with Sculdis pillion, filled the room.

The wargs shot to their feet, snarling.

“Sit!” Thorin roared. They did so, but remained watchful.
Dain bellowed excitedly as he vaulted off Chopper. Sculdis leapt off, too, as Chopper panted and staggered.
Roäc wobbled through after them, landing gracelessly on Thorin.
“Arsehole maniac fucking dwarf!” Roäc gasped.
Chopper threw himself down on the hearthrug, grunting a perfunctory ‘How’re yeh keepin’?’ to the startled wargs.
Dain hollered exultantly as he darted forward, seized Dori up, chair and all, and capered about the room, singing.
Bilbo wrung his hands.
“But, Dori’s delicate condition!”
Nori refilled Bilbo’s cup.
“Nuffin’ delicate about our Dori.”
Sculdis ran about the room, delightedly hugging everyone.
Cemnesta looked from the capering dwarf to the hearth rug and back. Finally, to Thranduil he said, “That’s a pig.”
Thranduil smirked.
“And Dain.”
“Which is which?”
“Does it matter?”
While Thranduil cackled at his own joke, Bard shook his head at his husband and explained, “The pig, by the fireplace, is Chopper. The loud, scary-looking dwarf is Dain, king of the Iron Hills. He’s the Bearer’s older half brother.”
“And the shrieking dwarrowdam with Fili and Kili each in a headlock?”
“That’s Queen Sculdis, Dain’s wife.”
“Ah,” said Cemnesta. “That explains… well, it doesn’t really go very far to explaining any of this.”
Dain stopped in mid-caper before the still-chortling Thranduil, and gave him a looking over.
“Pig herder,” Thranduil deigned.
“How’re yeh keepin’, our pixie?” Dain said affably, forcing Cemnesta into a most un-elfin princely snort of laughter.
Dori, still in the chair, said, “Oh, Dain, that’s Prince Cemnesta, he’s going to be king of the Greenwood since Thranduil married Bard and has decided to be mortal.”
“See yeh in th’ Halls, then, pixie. I’ll have a nice ale waitin’ f’r yeh.”
Cemnesta snickered, “Better make it a barrel of ale.”
Thranduil shot him a filthy look, Bard seemed to have something in his throat, and Dain roared with delighted laughter.
Sculdis relinquished her hold on the dwarf princes, bounced over, and embraced Cemnesta around the waist.
“Hullo, our dear. Are yeh jus’ arrived then?”
“No, I arrived about a week ago.”
“Lovely!” The Iron Hills queen moved off to greet Bard and Thranduil.
Frodo, torn between excitement and horror, said, “I just realized, I won’t be the youngest any more!”
Kili pulled Frodo closer, arm around his shoulders.
“Just think, you’ll have someone to teach everything I’ve taught you.”
Frodo thought about this and grinned.
“Sam, too?”
“Sam, too,” Kili promised
Thorin turned to Fili.
“Remind me to pebble-proof Erebor.”
“It’ll be years before we need to worry about the dwarving,” said Fili. “I’m talking about Kili.”
Ori turned to Balin with an imitation of Dori’s best withering look.
“At least, Dwalin married me, before we did any of that.”
Dwalin said, “Tha’s right. Fine example yeh are, brother.”
Balin grinned broadly.
“Fuck yerself, brother.”
Ori giggled as Dwalin drew him close and kissed him.
“Guess we know who’re th’ responsible ones in this family,” said Dwalin.
“Oh, aye,” said Balin. “Yeh’re responsible f’r all kinds o’ things.”
“Hear that, Nori!” called Ori, “We’re the responsible ones!”
“Well, that’s us buggered,” said Nori genially.
Dain returned Dori to his place. Sculdis refilled Dori’s plate.
“Tuck in, dearie. Yeh’re eatin’ f’r two now,” she exhorted him with a hearty kiss on the cheek.
Gridr turned to Oin. “And, brother, do try to do a better job than you did with our Gimli.”
“There’s nothing wrong with Gimli,” said Oin. “He still has all his bits. Didn’t do him a lick o’ harm.”
Legolas looked between Oin, who’s face had set like a goat’s, and Gimli, who’s face was the color of his hair.
“What did Oin do to you?” he asked.
“Nothin’!” Gimli growled.
“Nothin’?” Gridr protested.
“I never delivered a baby before!” Oin brayed in protest, glaring at Cemnesta, who looked interested in dwarrow obstetrics.
Gridr said, ‘He was so excited he didn’t even clean Gimli off before he went t’ hand Gimli t’ Gloin an’ he missed! Gimli landed right on his head.”
“He’s perfectly fine!” Oin shouted.
“He’s fine,” said Gridr, “but he cracked a brand new marble floor! I had Mahal’s own time finding a replacement from that same lode!”
Legolas dissolved into laughter and hugged Gimli.
“Aye, go ahead an’ laugh,” said Gimli. “Yer da probably picked yeh off a tree like a nut.”
Bujni leapt up, eyes blazing with the thirst for knowledge.
“Is that how elves come into the world? No wonder there are so many of you! You’re from acorns! How do you know when you’re ready for harvest? Oh, Mahal! I just realized squirrels are carnivorous! King Thorin, we have to kill all the squirrels before they decimate the elves of Mirkwood!”
All the elves stared at Bujni in a kind of fascinated horror, except for Galadriel, who had her napkin clenched to her face with both hands.
Binni stood and patted Bujni’s shoulder.
“Now, lad, sit down and rest yourself.”
Bujni wailed, “All that research ruined! I’ll never fly because I’m not a nut!”
No one at the table dared touch that.
“Oh, pass the sausage rolls,” Bujni cried, throwing himself tragically into his chair.
Plans, Pastries, and Plastered Plenipotentiary

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. It’s a bird! It’s a plane! It’s… okay, not really either of those things. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The tea was finally attended to, once all the excitement died down. Dain rose, mouth full, and with three fried bacon wrapped eggs in one hand, went to the hearth rug. Chopper snored loudly, but the wargs all sat up and watched Dain.
“Cous,” Dain commented at Thorin. “Wargs?”
“Yes,” Thorin replied with nonchalance. “Fine specimens, aren’t they?”
“Fine? These is wild orc animals gussied up like lap dogs.”
Thorin and Dwalin burst out laughing.
“You should have seen them when Ori first brought them here!” Bilbo cried.
Dain turned and stared at Ori. Ori grinned, but felt himself blush.
Dain groped for words, then,
“How in all of Mahal’s bloody arse hairs did yeh manage tha’, our wee scribe?”
Ori thought about reciting the entire tale but settled for brevity.
“Um, I had help. The wargs were dirty and starving, so I bribed them with meat and when we got here, they got baths and more meat. They like us.”
“Aye, or they’d’ve eaten yeh by now.”
Frodo approached and tugged on the side of Dain’s leggings.
“Cousin Dain?”
“Wha’? Oh, there’s me wee hobbit. How’re yeh keepin’?”
“I’m fine. Do you want to meet the wargies?”
“Wargies, eh? An’ yeh want t’ make introductions? Tha’s very polite.”
Frodo grabbed Dain’s hand and pulled him over to the hearth rug.
“And who are all these, then?” Dain demanded, examining the wargs with a grin. “Some o’ Creampot’s litter, by th’ looks.”
“This is Sugar. She’s the pups’ mama.”
“How d’yeh do?” Dain asked civilly.
“And this is Butter. She’s the other amad.”
“Butter an’ Sugar, eh?” Dain shot Thorin a look.
“And this is Romy.”
Romy thumped his tail once on the rug.
“And these are the puppies. Mostly they don’t have names yet, except for this one. He’s called ‘Killer’.”
“That’d be our Dwalin’s pup,” said Dain.
“Yes! How did you know?”
“Lucky guess.”
Dain slowly and carefully offered a hand to Sugar, who after a glance at Thorin, sniffed and licked it, then Dain handed up one of the dough balls, making Sugar wag her tail and gulp the treat down. Dain repeated his actions to Butter, who happily licked his hand right away and earned her tidbit, too. Romy didn’t wait to be offered a hand, he came forward and knocked his head into Dain’s,
ready for his snack from this new nice dwarf. This completed, all the wargs appeared to settle. The puppies, of course, went on noisily eating.

“Cuz,” Dain said, “were yeh plannin’ on raisin’ yer own herd o’ oliphaunts?”

“No,” Thorin grinned. “Oliphaunts are Ori’s bailiwick, not mine.”

Everyone stifled laughter as Ori blushed and glared at his king, who regarded him fondly. Cemnesta looked down the table and gazed at Ori, rather confused.

“Ori-?”

“I met an oliphaunt and…and was,” Ori hunted for a good yet vague word.


“I’d never met an oliphaunt before,” Ori explained to the bemused elf. “She was so huge and wonderful and huge and—” Ori realized he was babbling as he always did where Fanny was concerned. “I was overwhelmed.”

“Gheir, he’s the king of the Stiffbeard clan, came to my coronation riding one,” Thorin continued. “She was a rather young one and Gheir really didn’t like her much. It was mutual. Once she met Ori, Gheir was, er…relieved to give her away. Fortunately for Erebor, Jim, known as the Great Woudini, and His Court of Miracles adopted her on Ori’s behalf. Her name, incidentally, is Fanny.”

“Fanny the Oliphaunt,” Cemnesta murmured. “Yes, Ada, you did mention the Court of Miracles in your letter. Nana, Celebrian and I discussed it. We couldn’t understand what you meant.”

Legolas choked on a laugh.

“You read Ada’s letter to Nana?”

Cemnesta favored his youngest brother with a teasing look.

“Of course. Other than Glorfindel being sent back, I am the only one to leave the Undying Lands for Arda since the…the-“ Cemnesta looked at Galadriel.

Galadriel gave an annoyed sniff.

“The bickering over a couple of white gems.” She turned to Thorin. “Some of my people have the most ridiculous passions for white gems.”

Ori gaped at her.

“My lady, are you referring to the wars fought over the Silmarils?”

“Bloody messy business,” Brur commented, helping himself to his seventh sausage roll and politely giving two more to Sadi.

“Yes,” Galadriel shrugged. “Such a huge fuss. Arda has so much to see and explore, but never mind. Such times are in the past and… Cemnesta, you look as quite bereft. What has upset you, dear nephew?”

Cemnesta shifted then raised his eyes to Glorfindel.

“I fear I shall deeply pain Glorfindel with my other news.”

Glorfindel looked up, brows raised. Vi and Margr immediately took his hands and sat ready to comfort their dear Glorfy.

“What is it, my young friend?” Glorfindel asked gently.

Cemnesta sighed.

“I am grieved to tell you that your dear companion Ecthelion never came to Eru’s care. His whereabouts are unknown to us.”

Cemnesta sat horrified as everyone giggled. Glorfindel threw back his head and roared with laughter.

“His fountains held him in healing sleep until, he tells us, about five years ago,” Celeborn explained. “He now travels Arda a with his troupe of balladeers.”

“No,” gasped Cemnesta, eyes alight. “Truly?”

“Aye, our Cemy pet,” Margr cooed. “They’re ‘venturin’ abou’, callin’ themselves Th’ White City Bang Crash!”

“Indeed,” Mr. Wandi assured him, “They are quite the loudest noise in all Arda.”

“They’re brilliant!” shouted Kili and the younger set immediately began singing the praises of the group to Cemnesta, who after a few descriptions began to laugh. This led to everyone retelling the entire tale of Thorin’s coronation to Cemnesta. The younger set cajoled Dain, despite Thorin’s
pleadings, to sing ‘Me Zeydis” with their assistance.

Ori could hardly see for the tears of laughter in his eyes. The sight of the elves and men gathered at a dwarven table, helping to sing a barroom song as badly as they could was wonderful. In the back of his mind, he heard Yavanna’s giggle and the pleased grunt of Mahal, who said, “This’s how things oughta be.”

The extremely noisy high tea drew to a close with Cemnesta describing his mother’s and aunt’s gasps and looks of awed horror over the finer points of Thranduil’s letter.

Thorin rose, cleared his throat, and borrowed Bilbo’s handkerchief to wipe his eyes, still streaming with laughter.

“My friends, I apologize, but those interested in Ori’s quest must return to work in the breakfast parlor.”

As it was, everyone present followed Thorin and Ori through and seated themselves. Ori smirked to himself as Mistress Dazla had correctly assumed that this would happen and had provided seating for them all.

Wine and plates of tiny ginger biscuits were set along the middle of the table. Thorin seated himself at the head and Sadi took all Balin’s supplies and settled herself into the role of scribe for the session.

Thorin looked around as all were seated and stated to Sadi,

“We are now reconvened.”

“What’s all this?” Dain asked, chucking his chin at the maps and lists on the table.

“We’re planning a quest,” said Ori.

“I’m in,” said Dain, though he did look over at Sculdis for her nod of approval. “Me diamond?”

“O’ course,” Sculdis agreed. “Our Stonehelm is quite capable. Where’re we goin’?”

Thorin said, “King Durin’s charged Ori with a mission to Khazad-dum.”

“Aye? Ain’t he dead?” Sculdis asked

Ori said, dryly, “It doesn’t seem to make a difference.”

“Well, tha’s Durins for yeh. Goin’ t’ slay some orcs?”

“Only incidentally,” said Ori.

“Absolutely not!” Dori cried. “Ori, you aren’t trained! You will not fight.”

“Dori, I think I may safely promise you I will not fight. I’m leaving that to the professionals.”

Glorfindel grinned, sitting with Vi and Margr one on each knee.

“That’s me!” he announced. “I’m going! Who knows? I might get a chance to slay the balrog!”

“An’ we’ll be helpin’ yeh, our Glory!” Vi hugged her sister in excitement.

“Wait a moment,” said Bilbo. “Ori, are you really going to sneak into an orc-infested ruin with the four loudest people in Middle Earth?”

“Um… yes?” said Ori, fully realizing what had happened.

Bilbo turned to Thorin.

“And you’ve consented to this?”

“I suppose I have.”

“You’re going to be sleeping on the floor with the wargs until they all come back safe and sound.”

Thorin turned to Ori.

“Do what you must, but don’t tarry.” He grinned at Bilbo. “I suppose I shall have company.

Frodo and Sam would love to sleep on the floor with a pack of wargs.”

Bilbo frowned with a smile tugging at his mouth.

“You, my dear dwarf, are not a pack.”

Thorin then got back to the business at hand.

“Ori, what route to Khazad-dûm will you take?”

Ori took a breath,

“Your highness,” he looked at Cemnesta. The king-to-be smiled.

“Of course.”

Ori stared,

“You don’t know what I’m going to say, do you?”
Cemnësta laughed.
“‘No, but I imagine a journey west and a stealthy one, may start under the disguise of a visit to me. A diplomatic visit, of course. Whatever else you need of me, I shall happily aid you.’

‘Th-thank you,’ Ori swallowed then rose and pulled the largest map of Arda closer to him. ‘Very well, we can ‘visit’ you at Erys Lasgalen and, with your permission, travel through the wood, south to the eastern edge opposite Lothlórien. King Thranduil has assured us there are no more orcs or other such dark creatures in Dol-Guldur.’

People leaned forward as Ori traced his finger down and across the map.
“From there,” Ori continued, “under the cover of Lórien, with Lady Galadriel’s and Lord Celeborn’s permission—”

“You shall ‘visit’ us,” Celeborn added and Lady Galadriel said,
“We shall refresh you, replenish any further supplies you may need then conduct you along the River Silverlode in the shelter of the trees. When you move to enter the mountain, I shall join your party.”

She smiled at Ori, who was staring at her in shock.
“With your permission, of course, Lord Ori. And I do render my oath of loyalty.”

“My lady, are you…?” Ori had no words for such an amazing offer.
“I am quite sure.” Her sparkling eyes shone down on him.
“Grand!” Sculdis cried. “What a merry party we shall be,”
“Our Ori,” Dain bellowed, “Who all’s coming’ along f’r this merry party?”

Bilbo made a noise but turned it into a cough. Master Sadi banged her cane on the floor, rose and read loudly from her notes.

“The roster of the Quest of the Company of Lord Ori of Fundin to Khazad-dûm to recover the Flower of Durin as instructed by Durin the Deathless in a prophetic dream of Lord Ori is as follows: Lord Ori of Fundin House, leader of the quest; Captain Dwalin Fundinul warrior, first assistant and advisor to Lord Ori; Prince Kili of the House of Durin, an archer and warrior; Captain Tauriel of the Greenwood, an archer and a warrior; Janifur of the Broadbeams of Erebor, master miner; Gimli Gloinul, axe-wielder, journeyman warrior; Prince Legolas of the Greenwood, archer and warrior; Mistress Vi and Mistress Margr, hand-maidens to the Honorable Bearer of Erebor, stone masons; Lord Glorfindel of Rivendell, warrior; King Dain of the Iron Hills, warrior, master engineer; Queen Sculdis of the Iron Hills, warrior, master stone mason, engineer; Lady Galadriel of Lórien…."

Sadi paused and gave the Elf Lady and inquiring look.
Galadriel gave a charming giggle and said, “Decoration and master busy-body!”
Sadi quirked an eyebrow, then taking her pen made the addition to her roster and continued, “Lady Galadriel of Lórien, decoration and master busy-body.”

There was a cheer and Ori wanted to cheer, too, but now a worry had started. He was glad Dwalin was coming but the idea that he was now responsible for the lives of all these people whom he also loved as family smote him. Any loss was on his head, but the very idea of the loss of anyone nearly froze his heart to his ribs. He instinctively laid his head on his husband’s shoulder for a moment. The feel and scent comforted him, as did the heat of Dwalin’s arm sliding around his shoulders. He took a breath and looked up into Dwalin’s bright hazel eyes. Dwalin gave a nod and Ori rose.
“I-“ he began
“‘You’re welcome,’ Glorfindel said lightly.
Ori felt a flash of anger at what he perceived as dismissal.
“I’m not thanking any of you at the moment,” he snapped.
Eyebrows all round the table went up.
“Firstly, this quest came to me in a dream from Durin the Deathless. The point of this quest is that there is a vital part in dwarrow history that has been removed from all knowledge. It is the knowledge of our beginnings, the Flower of Durin, Durin’s wife, mother of Durin II. She was deliberately erased from all our histories. It is the wish of Durin that I find her history. Durin said that the evidence for her existence is in a box within the crypt of a third assistant librarian, Floviq son
of Druvëq in the Chamber of Mazarbul in Khazad-dûm.

“Secondly, Khazad-dûm also called among other people, Moria, the Black Pit, is known to be under the rule of orcs and perhaps a balrog. Durin said that the orcs are in disarray, fighting amongst each other, for dominance. It is not safe, but it will never be safer, thus I must go as soon as possible.

“Thirdly, this is not a badger’s picnic party! None of us may come back alive! We could be maimed or driven mad or all of us could die doing this!” Ori panted as he realized he had been shouting the last parts.

Silence.
Ori looked about and concluded quietly, “This isn’t a joke. This is my quest. I must do it. Dwalin is my husband and has chosen to live or die at my side. Perhaps, many of you might want to rethink your offer to accompany me.”

Ori dashed his hand across his eyes and forced himself to, at least, try and glare around the table. Thorin and Bilbo regarded him with sympathy. Dori was in tears on Balin’s chest. Nori glared at the table top, Bofur’s arm about his shoulders.

Dain rose and came around the table to Ori. Ori prepared himself for a dressing-down, but his eldest half-brother simply caught his neck and pulled his head to rest against Dain’s forehead.

“Me own wee scribe o’ a brother, everyone here knows th’ dangers, an’ we’re goin’ as we love yeh an’ we’re no’ lettin’ yersel’ an’ our Dwalin go it alone. Yeh have all our oaths on this. We’re goin’ t’ follow yeh, be it t’ triumph ’r th’ Halls.”

Ori fought but lost and burst onto tears on his brother’s chest. He sniffed after a moment, feeling Dain’s powerful arms about him and Dwalin’s large, loving hand in his hair. Ori recovered himself, wiped his eyes and looked back at assembled at the table.

“Still comin’.” barked Gimli.

There were agreements and shouts of willingness from everyone listed on the roster. Dain laughed, patted him on the head and returned to his seat. Ori leaned back against Dwalin’s chest and smiled, eyes blurry again.

“Thank you all. As Thorin always says, ‘Loyalty. Honor. A willing heart’. I can ask no more than that.”

“The new moon is in two weeks, Ori,” said Thorin after a long moment. “Can you be ready in that time?”

Ori glanced up at Dwalin.

“We can make it so,” Ori promised. He smiled at Dain. “Brother Dain, I must admit it’s wonderful you’re here as I was about to write to you for your advice.”

“Oh aye?” Dain lit his pipe and grinned.

“Yes,” Ori pointed to the map of the interior of Khazad-dûm around the eastern door. “This bridge. Binni says it is wide enough for one person to cross, but we are going with the idea that it will have been broken by orcs.”

“More’n likely,” Dain agreed.

“Will you set your mind to making something we can bring with us, assemble quickly, and cross safely with what might be something large and heavy?”

Dain snorted and tugged the map over to him. He and Sculdís, who had perched some small round spectacles on her nose, studied the measurements listed.

“Any idea how heavy this ‘box’ is ‘r th’ dimensions?” Sculdís asked, peering over the lenses at him.

“Durin didn’t elaborate,” Ori said. “It could be the size of my thumbnail or the size of this house. But since it’s in a crypt, it has to fit. So, maybe crypt sized?”

“Mmmph,” Dain opined, then, “Cous, any a’ tha’ new lode a’ mithril going a-beggin’?”

“Bofur?” Thorin said.

“Aye,” Bofur agreed. “We got a chunk th’ size a this table loose yesterday. It’s down the main floor a’ th’ forges.”

“O’l’ Master Kir still kickin’?” Sculdís asked.

“We have five mithril master still living, Kir’s one of them.” Thorin turned as Roëc and Quartz
flew in.
Roäc landed on the table as Quartz went to Ori’s shoulder and tweaked his ear.
“Ori, I’m hungry. Need a biscuit.”
Ori slewed his gaze to Quartz. He could have sworn the raven was grinning.
“Biscuits aren’t dead-ish,” he teased.
“No,” Quartz said and tugged on a tiny braid in Ori’s sparse beard, “but they are dessert-ish.”
Ori chuckled, broke a biscuit into chunks, and handed them up to the raven, who happily ate them from his fingers.
“News, Roäc?” Thorin asked. The raven snorted and helped himself to a biscuit, then,
“No good gossip. Ori’s quest is going forward?”
“Yes,” Thorin replied. “Roäc, Dain needs Kir, Minta and the other mithril miners’ help, first thing tomorrow morning.”
Roäc turned and cocked an eye at Quartz, who was gulping down the last chunk of biscuit. Roäc croaked at Quartz. Quartz made a huff noise, tweaked Ori’s ear again, and flew off.
“Next?” Roäc sassed. Thorin smirked then turned his attention back to Ori.
“Everyone will need a mount,” Ori said slowly, reading from the list he and Dwalin had written earlier. “We’ll need an estimate of the time it will take us to get to each stage.”
“I can supply your food,” Cemnesta said. “You don’t want people to know you’re carrying supplies like that to visit me.”
Tauriel made a face then said in Sindarin,
“Please, not just piles of lembas! I hate lembas.”
“I love lembas,” Legolas said, aside.
“If only one could coat them with xocolātl,” Mr Wandi mused.
“I promise it won’t just be lembas,” Cemnesta laughed.
“I dunno,” Vi said. “A good bit a roast lamb’s nice now an’ then.”
“Lembas,” Glorfindel explained, “is a kind of elfin way-bread.”
“I ain’t eatin’ elf cram f’r th’ entire time,” grunted Jani.
“I’ll take care of the food,” Kili put in, “I’ve already said I can cook.”
“Guid lad,” Sculdis said, “I’ll give yeh a hand, if yeh need.”
“Aye,” Margr put in, “Me an’ Vi’ll help yeh out, too.”
“Cemnesta,” Thranduil said, suddenly. “There are light tents in the armory, that will also hide the nature of this journey.”
Cemnesta nodded, then turned to Ori.
“I will also offer you an armed escort through the Greenwood, thus you can continue to journey under the guise of visiting Lothlórien.”
“And,” Celeborn added, “we shall have Captain Haldir and his guards escort you and my lady to Mirkormere. This will save your strength until you enter the mountain.”
There was a squawk and a huge pile of black feathers whirled in through the open parlor windows and landed with a disorganized thump in the middle of the table. This slowly unfolded itself into the biggest, fattest raven Ori had ever seen. Along with the usual amount of feathers, more stuck out every which-way. The raven appeared to have landed on its bottom.
Dain glanced up,
“Eh there, me Blu.”
Sculdis reached out as the raven righted itself and waddled over to her with a hoarse croak. She tickled the bird under the chin, making it coo happily at her.
“Blue?” Thranduil demanded. “Your raven’s name is Blue?”
Dain didn’t even look up from the map, saying
“Blu. Shor’ f’r Baluchistan. Wha’s wi’ yeh, Blu?”
“Stonehelm says t’ tell th’ bearer congrats f’r ‘im an’ he’s orderin’ th’ firs’ harvest t’ start t’marra,” Baluchistan grunted in a voice a full octave lower than Roäc’s.
“Guid. When yer up t’ goin’ home, tell th’ lad his mam an’ I’ll be here f’r a couple a weeks, mebbe a month.”
“Oh aye?” Baluchistan inquired. “Sounds intriguin’. Any nosh?”
“Biscuits.” Dain crumbled two in his fist and put the chunks before Baluchistan. Baluchistan eyed the biscuits a moment.
“Any ale?” the bird asked.
“Talk t’ th’ king,” Dain grunted.
“Though’ I was.”
“That king.” Dain looked up and pointed at Thorin, who was trying not to laugh.
Baluchistan looked at Thorin,
“Afternoon, king, any ale?”
“I’ll see,” Bilbo said, rising and heading towards the kitchen, stifling giggles.
Roäc hopped over and whacked Baluchistan with a wing.
“Brother.”
“Ro, me brother, yer lookin’ proper terrible,” Baluchistan said, genially. “Murder on th’ nerves these dwarrow.”
“Paff,” Roäc sneered. “You haven’t got elves and men tinkering about the place.”
“Whats an’ whats?” Baluchistan asked.
“Elves and men.”
“Where?”
“Here.” Roäc flapped his wings at all assembled. Baluchistan turned and looked about the table. He took in Bard and the elves.
“Eeee, so tall. Look like trees wearin’ clothes. Weird.”
Fortunately, Bilbo return with foaming jug, followed by Mistress Dazla bearing a tray of tankards and Larit with a tapped keg. Mistress Dazla, well acquainted with Baluchistan, put down a large saucer before the raven. Eyebrows raised, Bilbo poured an amount into the saucer.
“Come on now,” Baluchistan encouraged. “Don’t stint, luv.”
Roäc looked up at Bilbo.
“Fill it, please, Professor Baggins. My brother can all but drink King Dain under the table.”
Thorin glared at Roäc.
“He’s ‘Professor Baggins’ and I’m whatever you want to call me at the moment?”
“I like him,” Roäc explained.
Thorin stuck out his tongue.
Roäc replied in kind.
Bilbo looked amused, topped up the saucer, and set the jug down near Dain to provide Baluchistan with any refills the raven required.
Those who wanted ale were served and everyone settled back to the matter at hand.
Ori glanced at Baluchistan, who had seated himself once more on his bottom, and was drinking his ale like there was no tomorrow. Ori leaned close to Dwalin and murmured, “The feathers?”
“Gotta double coat,” Dwalin muttered.
Ori examined Baluchistan again. Baluchistan looked like a huge black chicken caught in a wind storm. How flight was possible, Ori didn’t know. He shook all thoughts of Baluchistan from his head and went back to the maps.
“Lady Galadriel, would you and Lord Celeborn give us an estimate as to where the new part of your forest lies?”
Ori pushed the map along and hands slid it down to the elves. Celeborn put down his ale and looked up at Brur. Brur pulled a leather box tied with twine and chucked it toward the elf lord. Celeborn caught it easily and opened the box, gave a noise of approval, and removed a graphite wand. He and his lady poured over the map, murmuring and marking it lightly.
“The new part of the forest has spread over the years,” Celeborn said. “The trees have not surrounded Mirrormere, but it would not surprise me if they did so in succeeding years. The men of Rohan refer to it as Birnam wood.”
“Why?” Bard asked.
Celeborn and Galadriel exchanged glances and smiled.
“Because,” Celeborn said, carefully retaining his composure. “A map maker from Gondor visited Rohan and he noticed it. Thus, as his name was Birnam, it was named for him.”

“Makes sense,” Bard allowed.

Ori still didn’t think much of this. Forests consisted of all kinds of trees, Lórien had its line and Fangorn its own. If Fangorn was spreading, it was still Fangorn. That was something for later.

“If we leave Erebor early,” Ori said, “we should reach Erys Lasgalen by mid afternoon, yes Cemnesta?”

“I will have a ship ready for you.”

“How long do you estimate it will take to travel to the edge opposite to Lothlórien?”

“Ada?” Cemnest looked over at Thranduil.

“Depending on the weather, two to three days.” Thranduil mused.

“Good,” Ori said, glancing needlessly at Sadi, who’s pen streamed across the paper, missing nothing. Ori overcame his need to write things down and went on.

“Lady Galadriel, how long will it take to cross Lothlórien to arrive at Mirrormere?”

“Again,” she smiled, “about two to three days, which includes resupplying your quest.”

Ori looked at Dwalin, who put his elbows on the table, setting down his tankard and wiping his mustache with the back of his hand. Ori felt a fission of admiration. His husband was such a big, capable warrior and his hands, so skillful in wielding any weapon, could hold Ori with strength and gentleness… Ori shook his head, feeling himself blush. He was not going to think like this right now. He faced his husband, who was grinning at him. Dwalin chuckled him under the chin and thudded a blunt forefinger on the map.

“When we ge’ t’ th’ edges near Mirrormere, we’re goin’ t’ have t’ take time t’ see wha’ th’ guard situation is. Once we learn tha’ we can pick off any a’ th’ star’ a’ their watches an’ tha’ll give us a window t’ go in an’ get this done. If yer Haldir, yer leddyship, kin give us any heads up on tha’, we’d appreciate it.”

Galadriel nodded.

“I will speak with him. Haldir has frequently kept a watch over Mirrormere and the eastern mountain side, known to the men of Rohan and the Brown lands as Dunsinane.”

“How long will it take us to get to the door from Mirrormere?” Ori asked.

Dwalin leaned back and pondered.

“At a good sprint, less’n ten minutes. Dain an’ I know where th’ door is an’ how t’ open it. I’m thinking’ we’ll need t’ leave th’ ponies wi’ Celeborn.”

Celeborn nodded, Dain grunted,

“There’s a trick t’ th’ door. I’ll brin’ a pick. Them’re th’ doors that fell on me leg, but th’ orcs may’ve rigged something there.”

“Ah, cousin, all you need t’ do is t’ provide our own Ori with a couple of pin shards an’ yeh’ll be through in no time,” Balin put in, laying his finger alongside his nose and with a sly wink at Ori.

The Durin and Fundins burst out laughing. Balin promised to regale everyone else with the ‘Story’ at a later time. Ori grinned at Balin, a flash of excitement went through him. The idea of picking the lock to get into Khazad-dûm appealed.

“Then there’s a quick bu’ dark sprint t’ th’ bridge,” Dwalin continued. “Our Dain, this is where we’ll need yer contraption t’ cross as we’re goin’ with th’ bridge bein’ gone. After tha’, righ’ opposite, there’s a tunnel t’ th’ Chamber a’ Mazarbul. Anyone r’member where th’ crypt f’r Flvioq is?”

Binni shook his head along with Celeborn and Elrond. Brur pulled the interior map to himself, counting and poking at it.

“I’m estimatin’ his crypt as t’ th’ rule a’ th’ last Durin. Th’ records were covered wi’ doors, so th’ room’ll be about so big, which’d park ‘im about here.”

Ori looked and nodded. Dwalin studied the placements and frowned.

“Pre’y close t’ th’ tunnel. Durin told me husband th’ crypt were marked, so we should be able t’ find i’ easy enough, even if them blasted orcs’ve wrecked any markin’s. How deep yeh think we’ll have t’ dig?”
“Usual,” Brur grunted. “One t’ two slabs about half a foot thick. Yeh’ll need some heavy duty crowbars and mattocks to hack ‘em up.”

Dwalin nodded, then looked up at Ori.

“Think Floviq’s gonna need reburyin’?”

“No.” Ori laid his hand on Dwalin’s arm, “Durin said the Balrog got him, so there was nothing to bury.”

“Canny t’ make him a grave anyway.” Dain helped himself, Sculdis, and Baluchistan to more ale. Baluchistan burped and looked around.

“Men, right? Where’s tha’ prince… Prince Whatsit?”

Roäc heaved a loud sigh.

“We’re kind’ve spoiled for choices, Blu. Which Whatsit?’

“Bail ‘r Tail ‘r Drain. Dunno. Prince a’ Dale.”

“Prince Bain of Dale?”

“Tha’s th’ feller. Got a note f’r ’im from Stonehead Junior.”

Bard reached out to ask for it, but Sigrid barged between them.

“I’m his sister,” she said. “I’ll look after it.”

Baluchistan rolled onto his back and stuck his leg in the air. In fact, he did have a message attached to his leg. Ori was less surprised that there was a message than the fact that the raven actually had legs and wasn’t simply entirely round.

Sigrid detached the message and stuffed it in her bodice.

Bard raised a brow at her.

“Da, you’re spending way too much time with Wicked Stepmother,” said Sigrid. She took her seat again beside Fili, but the raven remained on his back, both legs in the air. Baluchistan began to snore.

Quartz whizzed in and landed on the table.

“They’ll be here first thing–” He caught sight of the pile of feathers and shouted, “Idad Stan!”

Quartz hopped across to Baluchistan and yelled again. “Idad Stan, it’s me!”

The pile of feathers flew a foot in the air, spun, and Baluchistan landed on his feet, hissing and mantling his wings.

“Camaaahn, camaaaahn! I’ll fight yeh righ’ here! I’ll fight’ yeh wi’ one wing tied behind me back! I’ll fight yeh wi’ both–“

“Idad Stan!” hollered Quartz.

“Eh?” Baluchistan stared at Quartz. “Who th’ fuck’er yeh?”

“Quartz! Quartzite, of Mica and Roäc.”

“Ohhh, aye, aye, me wee laddie! Jus’ testin’ yeh. Yer lookin’ fine, laddie. I ain’t seen yeh since yeh were an egg. Yeh’ve grown, our Quartz.”

“Yes,” said Roäc, “and not quite so oval, either.”

“Aye, good t’ see yeh out from under yer mam’s arse.”

Quartz and Baluchistan tapped their beaks together then Baluchistan patted Quartz heavily on the head with a wing, almost flattening the younger raven.

Mister Wandi turned to Legolas.

“See, I could have been worse.”

“Yes,” teased Legolas, “your hair could be twice the size it is.”

“It would still be fabulous!” Wandi replied loftily.

Nori smirked across the table at Ori,

“See, I could have been worse.”

“You are worse,” Ori replied with a grin.

Bujni, meanwhile, watched Dain’s raven with rapt fascination.

“How does he even fly?”

Baluchistan turned to him, hopped over, scattering feathers everywhere, and said, very slowly,

“I. Flap. Me. Wings. Laddie! I’m a bird!”

“Yes, yes, of course,” said Bujni impatiently, “but you are an exceptional specimen. I’m
attempting to calculate how much lift you must attain to offset your bodily dimensions.”

“Language!” Baluchistan admonished him.

“I mean to say, you must be very strong as well as light.”

“Must be all the ale,” commented Roäc dryly with a glance at Bilbo, who snickered.

“I flap me wings, laddie,” Baluchistan repeated, unnecessarily loud. “Flap an’ fly, flap an’ fly. I don’ think about it. I jus’ do it. If I though’ about it, I’d… oh, shit! I’m never flyin’ again!”

Dain reached over, grabbed Baluchistan, and threw him straight up in the air,

“Bugger!” screamed Baluchistan, flapped wildly and floated easily down again. He waddled over to Dain and pecked his hand.

“Bastard.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” Dain barked.

“Aye, but it were startlin’. Don’ like t’ be start’ed. Bad f’r me health.”

“Yer welcome,” said Dain. “Yeh comin’ with us, Blu?”

“Fuck, no! I’m too old f’r tha’ shite. Th’ wee laddie kin go.”

“Where are we going?” Quartz asked Ori.

“What!” Quartz squawked. “I can’t go to Khazad-dûm! I’m too young to die!”

Ori rolled his eyes.

“Think about Garnet.”

“What say yeh an’ me do a li’le…nestin’,” Cemnesta choked, but held his countenance.

“A charming idea, but I am a trifle busy right now. Thank you all the same.”

“Righty-o , me pretty li’le tulip bulb!”

Undaunted, Baluchistan lurched his way around, inspecting Bard, Thranduil, Celeborn, then alighted on Galadriel. Baluchistan puffed out his chest feathers, which made him resemble an irate duster.

“Mel-l-l-lon, me lovely darlin’! Yer so…so…shiny.”

Lady Galadriel smiled over her tankard.

“Weren’t you just flirting with Cemnesta, Master Blu?”

“Who?” Blu blinked then glanced back at Cemnesta, “Oh aye, aye, lassie, bu’ -hic- here we are.”

“Number you are flirting with me? How fickle you are! Or are you simply ambitious? Two at a time? You know he is my nephew?”


Dain moaned and dropped his head to the table with a thump. Sculdis rose, went and hefted Baluchistan, and tucked him under her arm.

“Whoops!” Baluchistan warbled. “Cheerio, me lovely peahen! -hic- Don’ forget me in yer -hic- dreams!”

Sculdis sat down again, shoved Baluchistan into her tool pouch and returned her attention to the maps.

There was a muffled verse or two of an extremely rude drinking song that rapidly sank into snores.

“Well,” said Celeborn, taking his lady’s hand and raising it to his lips. “We must admit that raven
has excellent taste.”

“I like to think so,” said Cemnesta.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Despite the title and his popularity, this chapter is not about Baluchistan. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The next two weeks were brutal on Ori’s nerves. He felt like he spent all his time running from group to group, checking and updating his notes with the progression. The usual work of the kingdom went on around them, but hidden to all eyes, Fundin house was a-buzz with preparation. Dain and Sculdis divided the mithril masters between the forges of Fundin House and that of Durin. Fili, Gridr, Margr and Vi leant their aid whenever they could. The doors were closed to outsiders. How Bofur and Jani got the mithril there, Ori didn’t want to think about. He presumed everyone thought the royal family was taking the first part for family use. Dis occasionally joined them, as Randibur had taken to his position as her assistant with a passion and she was confident in leaving him with the usual guild meetings. Kili assisted Thorin in royal duties for Fili and Gimli took guard duty.

The elves all left for Erys Lasgalen to witness Thranduil’s abdication and his receiving the title of King-Father, and Cemnesta’s coronation as King of the Greenwood.

Brur took over a large table in the sitting room of Bag-End East and set Arne, Bujni, Loli, and Omi to work on compiling and preparing manifests, maps, and plans for travel. Balin joined them.

Dori, Binni and Mistress Dazla kept the household busy, furbishing traveling gear and preparing some food for travel. Dipfa, Pika and Mahrdin did their work at Fundin House.

Oin hunkered down in his lab, cooking up medical supplies in case of need.

Dwalin was in close conference with Furh’nk and Arb.

“Dwalin wants to be here to protect us, even if he isn’t here to protect us,” said Bilbo to Ori over a cup of tea. “Of course we all trust Furh’nk.”

“But Master Arb he doesn’t know as well.”

“Fortunately, my gut tells me to trust Master Arb. I wish Dwalin would take my gut’s word for it.”

Slowly and quietly, weapons were moved to the house. For Ori, the best parts were when he and Dwalin met up and went through the lists, checking on the preparations. This never took long and they often had a little time to spend in each other’s arms.

Ori had other duties to discharge before he left as well. He met with Bujni, Omi, Loli and Arne in his storage room-office.

“While I’m gone, you’ll have to work it out among yourselves to make sure Thorin always has a scribe at hand,” he said. “Master Brur has given us leave to arrange this as we wish, so he won’t be surprised if you’re absent from library work in turns.”

“We will endeavor to do you proud,” said Bujni. He rose, bowed and sat down again.

“You already do,” said Ori. “I have complete faith in all of you.”

As they filed out, Ori saw that Arne looked distracted, and more than a little worried. He leaned in closer to the Ironfist prince.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing wr-wrong exa-exactly. I got a l-letter from A-Amad. Instead of me ju-just riding home this fall, she an- and Adad are c-c-coming to collect me.”
They exchanged looks of heightened anxiety.
“D-don’t worry,” Arne promised. “I w-won’t let it af-affect my work.”
“I’m not worried about your work, I’m worried about you,” said Ori.
Arne smiled and shrugged.
“It was f-fun wh-while it lasted.”
Ori went to the scribes’ hall to survey the work in progress to restore it to its earlier glory and formally leave Master Sadie in charge in his absence.

Then he had to screw up his courage to meet with Dipfa, but she had actually created some very sensible travel clothing for him.
“This is great work, Dipfa,” he encouraged as she pulled tunics and leggings from their boxes. Dipfa pouted despite the praise.
“It pains me that your aura will fold in with that of the forest instead of bouncing off it, but I know your safety is paramount.”
He thought he would keep to himself that the socks he had knitted for the trip not only matched, but were largely brown.

“However,” she continued with more spirit, “you must realize your new bathing costume for the inn will have to be doubly decorated to put you back in harmony.”
“Of course, Dipfa, I had anticipated that.”
He hadn’t anticipated it with anything but terror, but that, too, would remain a secret.
Dwalin came into the room and looked at everything Ori had laid out on the bed with Dipfa’s help.

“Love,” said Dwalin, “yer th’ only firs’ time traveler I ever had t’ encourage t’ pack more f’r a journey than less.”

The day before they were to leave, Ori found himself in a small private meeting in Thorin's and Balin’s study with Balin, Thorin, Bilbo, and Dwalin. He had thought it was just tea with Balin, but instantly realized Balin was going to suggest something he wasn’t going to like.

“There yeh are, wee brother,” Balin said, passing the cup to Ori.
Ori politely thanked him, stirred it, took a sip, and set the cup down.

“Balin, what change to our plans are you going to propose?”
Balin raised his eyebrow and shot a look at Dwalin, who tucked his head down to hide a smirk.
Bilbo and Thorin tried not to grin and failed.
Balin opened his mouth, then closed it and smiled.

“Yeh know me too well, our Ori.”
“Yes, so what are you going to suggest?”
Balin chuckled and sat back in his chair, stirring his tea.
“This journey, laddie, is being veiled as a diplomatic visit to th’ elves t’ recognize King Cemnesta and then t’ pay a visit t’ Lady Galadriel as she’s visited us f’r Thorin’s coronation. As it’s a diplomatic one…”
Ori looked at his brother-in-law.

“Dori’s bullied you into coming,” Ori finished. “For the sake of form, of course.”
“Somethin’ like tha’. I’m supposed to be Thorin’s chief ambassador. It’ll look better.”
Ori thought this over for a few minutes.

“Yes,” he allowed. “It does make sense, but with all due respect to you as the first Lord of Fundin House, I don’t like the idea of you entering Khazad-dûm with us. Dwalin is coming, and currently both of you are the last of the line of Fundin. I don’t mean to say you are not a fine and capable warrior, but you are betrothed and have a child on the way.”
“I do, indeed, laddie, an’ I’ve no intention o’ enterin’ th’ mountain wi’ yeh. I’ll stay in Lórien wi’ Lord Celeborn.”
Ori paused, then looked at Balin with murder in his eyes.

“Dori’s coming with you, isn’t he?”
Thorin, Bilbo, and Dwalin all choked.
“Aye, laddie -“

“No one should ever bring the Honored Bearer of Erebor anywhere dangerous,” said Ori flatly.

“You know Dori won’t wait behind, demurely knitting badger booties while I’m-“

Balin held up his hands in a placating gesture.

“Wait, wait! Thorin, Nori, Oin an’ I have Dori’s oath tha’ we kin tether him bodily t’ a tree in Lórien, if he tries t’ follow yer group t’ Khazad-dûm.”

The image made Ori giggle, but he was quickly solemn again.

“I suppose it will look better. Dori going with us, I mean, not the idea of hog-tying Dori to a tree. Which, right now, I’m tempted to do.”

“Join th’ bloody guild,” Dwalin muttered.

“Exactly,” Thorin added with an imperious nod to his brother-in-arms. “I shall charge you, Captain Dwalin, to bring a small squad of soldiers to protect the Honored Bearer. Not too many to rouse suspicion, but enough to satisfy our people and Dale’s.”

“Yes,” Ori said slowly, “and Cemnesta and Galadriel have each promised an armed escort for us within their boundaries. As long as Dori stays out of danger with you, Balin, I suppose it’ll be all right. I might have known he’d find away to supervise me,” Ori finished dolefully.

Balin chuckled.

“Both Thorin and I’ve talked to him at length, quite often these past days. He’s promised to do his very best to be, as he puts it, a mere passenger.”

“I was thinkin’ more a’ lockin’ ‘im in a trunk with th’ baggage,” said Dwalin.

Ori turned to his husband.

“When did they tell you about this?”

“Bloody righ’ b’fore yeh walked in,” Dwalin growled, leveling a glare, first at his king, then at his elder brother.

“Typical,” Ori sniffed, haughtily, in a perfect imitation of Dori.

Somewhat later, Ori went to the kitchen where Dori was fiddling about with some crochet and humming a happy and self-satisfied little tune. On the table sat a pot of tea, two mugs, and a plate of scones, still warm from the oven.

“Dori,” Ori tried to sound stern, but Dori then put on such a guilty look, he was hard pressed not to laugh.

“Pet, do sit down and listen. I’m sure I-“

“Dori!” Ori pulled the fancy-work out of Dori’s hands and clambered into his brother’s lap.

“Ooof! Pet, I-“

“Ori’s Dori!”

They hugged for a few moments, then,

“Dori, I must have your promise you won’t under any circumstances enter Khazad-dûm.”

“I promise, pet. I don’t like it, but I do promise.” Dori frowned. “If you’re killed, I’ll be sending that buffalo of yours after you directly!”

“Did you tell him that?” Ori asked, with a smile.

“Yes!” Dori sounded put out. “He had the effrontery to tell me if you were, he’d be the first to follow you.”

Ori kissed Dori’s cheek and laid his forehead against Dori’s.

“I promise you, Ori’s Dori, I’ll do my very best not to be killed.”

“I petition Mahal every night,” Dori said, softly.

“Thank you. I love you, Ori’s Dori.”

“I love you, too, my own dearest badgerling. Always my own dearest, badgerling.”

“You’ll have another soon,” Ori teased.

“Yes, but it will be mine and Balin’s. You, pet, are my very own.”

Ori, planting another kiss on the top of Dori’s head, got up and gave back the fancywork.

“Stay here and talk to me,” Ori said, taking a scone from the plate. “I want to bake something.”

“Of course, my pet.” Dori replied, settling back. “What are you going to make?”
“Haven’t decided yet,” Ori said vaguely. He stuffed the scone in his mouth, idly going through cupboards and pantry.

Nori barged in.

“There you are!” he accused Ori. “You connivin’ li’le mole!”

Ori looked up and swallowed the scone.

“Squeak. Squeak,” he said, unimpressed.

They stared mulishly at each other. Ori had been expecting this. Nori encouraged him in all manner of adventures, but when it came down to the knife’s edge, Nori would fly off the handle at the last minute.

“I’m going, Nor,” Ori said, quietly. “This is my quest.”

“Bugger that!” yelled Nori at the top of his lungs. “I’ll bloody kill ‘im if anything happens t’ you! I’ll kill ‘im, then I’ll cut ‘im up, then I’ll boil ‘im in oil, then I’ll eat ‘im wif chips and then I’ll really get mad!”

“Durin is already dead,” Ori said, cooly.

“Not him! The other one!”

“You’re going to kill Mahal? How?”

“Not Him!”

“You’re running out of choices.”

“Yer bloody buffalo!” Nori shouted.

“I’ll be with him in th’ Halls, if he goes,” Dwalin commented as he came in.

Nori gave a roar and threw himself at Dwalin. Dwalin was too quick. He planted his large hand on Nori’s forehead and held him there. Nori swung punch after punch, bellowing, but Dwalin’s arms were longer and he held Nori away from him. Nori wore himself out and stood there, panting, then settled for shooting names and accusations at Dwalin instead. Assault and Battery stuck their heads out of Nori’s hair and joined in. Dwalin listened in silence, arms folded across his chest, withstanding the trio’s barrage. Dori went on crocheting and Ori decided on ingredients.

Finally Nori stopped. He glared at the larger dwarf then turned to Ori. Ori raised an eyebrow at him. Nori burst into tears. Ori went to him and held him.

“You’re me brother! I don’t want you goin’ off on some stupid fool’s errand an’ gettin’ y’self killed. You’re me li’le brother. You’re all me an’ Dori’s got.”

“Nori-”

“I’m comin’ wiff you!”

“No, you’re not, Nori.”

“Fine! I’m gonna bloody hate Mahal ’til He brings you back safe. Then, when I die, I’m gonna punch His lights out. An’ punch ‘Im again th’ next day an’ every day t’l the remakin’ o’ the fuckin’ world for it.”

In his head, Ori heard Durin say, “Da’s goin’ t’ be busy when yeh lot get here.”

“You keep out of this,” Ori muttered.

“I did not say a thing!” Dori protested.

“Not you, Dori. King Durin.”

“Well!” said Dori. “He’s abominably rude to eavesdrop on our conversation! He takes after you!”

“Or I take after him,” Ori reasoned. “Though I don’t see how, as you’re the Longbeard, not me.”

“Guilt by associations,” said Dori.

“Oi! We’ve got a drop ’r two a’ Longbeard in there...here...somewheres!” Nori protested.

Durin belched.

“Not translating that,” Ori warned, as he guided Nori to sit at the table next to Dori, who laid down his work and moved closer to put an arm about Nori’s shoulders, murmuring gentle platitudes.

Nori calmed down in a minute and, with Dori mopping his face with a handkerchief, mumbled a thanks to Dwalin, who put a tankard of ale in front of him.

Ori smiled at his husband and slid an arm about him. Dwalin tucked Ori close and kissed the top of his head. Bofur came in from his workday and looked about.
“Nothin’ like comin’ home after a long shift in th’ mines t’ th’ sound o’ yer honey yellin’ in th’ kitchen.”

“Noiri’s alrigh’ now,” Dwalin grunted.

Bofur looked to Ori, who shrugged.

“Our Ducky pissed ‘bout yer quest, Chick?”

Ori nodded. Bofur went over and kneaded Nori’s shoulders.

“Easy now, love. Our Chick’s all grown up an’ will come back safe in th’ shake of a pig’s tail.

He’s Mahal’s scribe. He’s gonna be fine.”

“I hate ‘Im,” Nori muttered.

Bofur looked up.

“Mahal,” Ori clarified. “Or Dwalin. Or both.”

Bofur sighed and went on working on his husband’s shoulders.

Ori decided he had everything he needed, the freshly baked cookies for Mahal and Yavanna, if she was there. Maybe they would share with Durin if he appeared, too. Incense, wine, a handful of differently colored feathers and the finest red silk ribbon he could find. He had his notebook and a couple of graphite wands just in case. But now he had a conundrum: where?

He couldn’t use the sitting room, someone might walk in, same with the kitchen and the rest of the house. He couldn’t go out to the meadow or the courtyard, someone would definitely see him. He considered the fireplace in the bedroom, but Dwalin would be coming to bed soon and he needed to do this before they left in the morning.

Dwalin came in, saw Ori standing there with all his accoutrements, and asked,

“Where yeh need t’ be, love?”

Ori sighed, then realized.

“Dwalin, would you please take me to the forge?”

‘Course, love. Now?”

“Yes, please.”

Ori prepared himself, while Dwalin hefted the chain of the trap door and let the lava pour into the trough. Once it was filled, Dwalin shut the trapdoor and came to Ori’s side.

“Yeh need me, ‘r yeh need t’ be alone?”

Ori stood on tiptoe to kiss his husband.

“I always need you, but this is something I must to do alone, if you don’t mind.”

Dwalin smiled and after giving Ori another hug went out, closing the forge door.

“I’ll be right’ ou’ here. Shout if yeh want anythin’ done,” Dwalin called back.

Ori placed his offerings on the anvil and took a breath. He waited, wondering what to do for a minute, but then as he watched, the forge grew up and out and became quite a different place, though a terribly familiar one.

The anvil, now enormous, still held Ori’s offerings, also grown to a colossal size. Mahal stood before it, hands on hips and wearing an indulgent smirk. Yavanna sat on the edge of the anvil, swinging her legs. Her hair was all flowers at the moment, and impossibly quick, tiny birds flitted from blossom to blossom.

Ori took a deep breathe.

“Hail Mahal and His Lady Yavanna. I come to crave a boon.”

“Rather formal for yeh, me scribe,” said Mahal.

“I’m asking for things, so I thought I should at least try to be polite.”

“Oh, aye? An’ wha’ thin’s would these be?”

“Everyone who goes on this quest with me has to come home safe.”

“Ah,” said Mahal, “I though’ yeh might ask.”

“So, that’s something You can do?”

“Bring everyone home safe?” Mahal looked troubled and Ori’s heart sank. “There’s a problem with tha’, see. Even if I protect me own dwarrow, I can’t guarantee th’ safety o’ elves. They belong
t’ Eru. I can’t interfere wi’ ‘em.”

“Oh.”

Ori had to think about that. He was used to seeing dwarrow and elves on the same level now, almost as the same people. But they weren’t, valar-wise.

“But, You could affect other things around them,” said Ori.

“Such as?” Mahal asked.

“Say the elves were trapped by orcs and… and standing on the end of a long rock across a boulder. You could smack the other end of the rock and they would go flying above the orcs and be safe. Well, safer. It’s up to them not to land in a mine pit or something, but I think they can take care of that bit themselves. They’re spry.”

“Send a bunch o’ elves flyin’ across th’ room t’ safety. Hm,” said Mahal, eyebrows raised and a smile on his lips. “Flinchin’ a bunch a’ elves… Oi, that’d put th’ wind up Eru’s-”

“Arse?” Ori suggested politely.

“Hush, lad! I would never say such a thin’! ‘Course I wouldn’t.”

Yavanna snorted as She leaned over and inspected the plate of cookies. She giggled to Herself and sing-songed under Her breath, “Wheeeeeeeeee!”

Ori worried he might have started something he shouldn’t have. He had to get this conversation back on track. He would have to make himself think of something besides airborne elves.

“No one can die,” he restated abruptly.

“Laddie, did I no’ jus’ say I can’t guarantee-”

“No one can die or… or… I’ll call off the quest!”

Ori folded his arms across his chest and stuck out his chin.

“I can’t-” began Mahal.

“I’ll call it off! “ Ori shouted. “And… and Durin will never have his Flower!”

“Hear tha’, Da?” Durin’s voice wafted up from somewhere out of sight. “I’ll be forever de-Flowered!”

“Hold yer whewist, yeh li’le shite.”

“No one can die!” Ori reinforced. “And If they do, I’ll wait until I get to the Halls and… and I’ll fight You.”


“Yes, I’ll kick You in the Shins! Every day! And… and I’ll hate You forever!”

Ori realized that made him sound like a badger who wasn’t allowed to go out and play, but he was grasping at whatever he could. What was the worst that could happen? Mahal could squash him like a bug, but that certainly wouldn’t advance the quest.

“Tha’ would be a tragedy indeed,” said Mahal. “I expect such decl’rations fra tha’ wee rascal Nori, an’ him t’ vow he was goin’ t’ punch me. Bu’ yeh, I’m thinkin’, when I made yeh I might’ve overdone th’ courage a wee bit.”

Yavanna gave a groan of impatience.

“Promise him you’ll do your best!”

Durin appeared and reached over to filch a cookie. She rapped him viciously across his knuckles.

“Those are mine!”

“Yeh kin spare one, Mam.”

“No, I can’t.”

She put a cookie in Her mouth with one hand and shooed Her husband into action with the wave of the other.

Mahal rolled His eyes, then relented.

“I’ll do me best t’ see yeh all safely through th’ quest. Tha’ is th’ most’ useful promise I kin give yeh.”

Ori nodded.

“Deal!”

He spat on his palm and held out his hand. Then he remembered: Oh, that’s right. Valar. I’m the size of His hand.
He wiped his palm on his trousers.

“Sorry,” he said with a wince.

The forge echoed with loud, raucous laughter.

“Go on wi’ yeh, now,” Mahal said, waving a hand and looking terribly like Dori for an instant.

“Yer husband needs seein’ t’ an’ yeh both need t’ sleep.”

Ori bowed.

“Thank You, Udad Mahal.”

As They faded back into the lava fires, Ori heard Durin say, “Jus’ one, Mam?”

“Oh, all right. No, take that one, it’s bigger.”

All the light went out of the room and Ori sat down hard as his knees gave way. He blinked and, as his vision adjusted to the low light of the phosphorous stones, he saw that the lava, all the offerings, their holders and containers had vanished. He looked around for the writing tools and paper he brought, but not used. They were missing, too. He climbed to his feet, then instinctively bowed low.

Dwalin was sitting on the ground in the hallway, back against the wall, grinning. He was suspiciously dusty, and Ori rather thought he’d been rolling around on the floor, laughing.

“Wha’ was all tha’ about?” Dwalin asked, climbing to his feet. He glanced into the forge, shrugged and made the door fast. They walked back hand in hand.

“What? You weren’t listening?” Ori challenged.

Dwalin put on a ‘Who? Me?’ expression.

“Fine! I told Mahal that if He couldn’t make sure everyone made it through the quest alive, I wasn’t going.”

“Oh, aye, tha’ all?”

“No. I also told Him I’d fight Him when I got to the Halls.”

“Fight Him…”

“Fight Him, kick Him in the Shins. Alright, I sounded like a badger…Nori, actually.”

“Yeh told Mahal t’ His face, yeh would fight Him, an’ kick Him in th’ Shins.”

“I’m aware I would need a step ladder to reach.”

Dwalin gave him a dazzlingly evil smile.

“I’ll put twenty gold on yeh t’ win.”

“You will?”

“ ‘Course!”

“Oh, that’s so sweet!”

Once back in the house, Ori realized he was going to have to explain to Dori that Mahal had appropriated Dori’s favorite serving plate. He went into the kitchen. Dori was making toast and Balin sat at the table with Nori, Thorin, and Bilbo. Except for Dori, they looked a little puzzled.

“Ori,” Thorin said as soon as he entered. “Your writing tools just…”

“Appeared in the middle of the table,” Bilbo finished.

“Oh,” Ori wondered what he should say and tried, “that’s good.”

Dori turned and put the platter of buttered toast down on the table. Nori reached to grab a slice, when something dropped from the ceiling and smacked Nori on the head, flattening his pointy coiffure.

“Ow!” Nori bawled and scrabbled to catch whatever had hit him.

“You be careful with that, Nori!” cried Dori, “That’s my favorite serving plate! What are you doing with it anyway?”

“It hit me!” Nori shouted, holding the plate out with both hands and glaring at it.

Dori snatched it away with an aggrieved huff and put it in the cupboard.

“At least, you had the decency to wash it,” Dori muttered.

“Ori! Lookit me hair! Good fing the gals’r off wiff Bofur.”

Ori giggled a little hysterically, but sat down at the table with Dwalin.

“Nori, I’m shocked! Your darling husband all alone and cold in your marriage bed!” Ori sassed.
“Eh, you know I can’t but sleep a few hours here an’ there,” said Nori, trying to salvage his points. “All me tossin’ an’ turnin’ill just keep him awake.”

“So,” said Dwalin, slyly. “Our Ori’s demanded tha’ Mahal bring everyone on th’ quest home safe r he’s no’ goin’. An’, worse’n tha’, when he gets t’ th’ Halls, he’ll kick Mahal in th’ Shins everyday.”

“Ori!” Dori cried. “Really! Such blasphemy! I expect that from Nori, but I thought I brought you up with manners!”

“I told Ori I’d put twenty gold on ‘im t’ win,” Dwalin added.

“I’ll double it,” announced Thorin with a grin.

“Ori,” said Bilbo. “If you don’t mind, I’m borrowing your writing materials for a moment.”

“You’re going to use this in a story?” Ori asked.

“Of course! I’ll put another twenty down of my own.”

Ori heard Yavanna call out, “Me, too!”

Followed by Mahal saying, “Aye, I believe it. Oi! Yeh’ve eaten’ all th’ cookies already?”

“I’ll make more,” Ori promised, to the confusion of his family.

“Snickerdoodles,” rumbled Mahal, “An’ don’ be stingy with th’ cinnamon!”
The Quest Has Begun!

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. And we’re off!! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same darrow time, same darrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori felt almost guilty that the people of Dale and Erebor accepted their ruse so easily. Cemnesta’s coronation had only been for elves, as elves didn’t have the connections to the outside that Erebor had. It was perfectly natural that shortly afterward, King Thorin sent a congratulatory delegation to the Greenwood. What could be more fitting than Thorin charging the Bearer to go and give blessings upon the new elf king?

And the new king, Cemnesta, was everything charming, even sending a ship to carry the delegation in style. He was, after all, Mr. Wandi’s own brother.

Despite the early hour, darrow and men lined the streets to wave and smile and call out well-wishes as the Bearer’s caravan passed on its way to the docks. Some even came forth with wrapped up packets of ‘snacks’, as most, despite the demonstrations given by Thranduil, Tauriel, and Legolas, still thought that elves only ate leaves or dust or air.

“Take care o’ yerself, love!” someone cried.

“Make sure them elves give yeh meat fer yer tea, no’ just weeds!” shouted another.

The Bearer was accompanied by Lord Balin and the Bearer’s elder brother, King Dain and his queen, Sculdis. Scribe Ori was there to make sure everything arranged by the Bearer was reported to the High King. The Bearer had the royal ladies in waiting Margr and Vi, with Captain Dwalin, Prince Kili, and Gimli Gloinuil, along with a small detail of soldiers. There were several large wagons, no doubt filled with luggage and proper food to keep the Bearer healthy.

The elven ship was lovely as it lay at the end of the dock, the gold sails glittering against the perfect dawn-touched blue sky. The crowd grew quite thick as they neared the shore, so the Bearer rose from her seat in the tea cup and, just before Balin handed her down, waved to the assembled darrow and men.

“Farewell, my dear friends! I will give all your regards to the king of the Greenwood! Until we meet again!”

And she blew a kiss.

The crowd, of course, was transported.

If the Bearer was surrounded by a squadron of soldiers even more heavily armed than usual, well, King Thorin certainly wouldn’t risk her safety. Dori and Balin boarded, followed by Dain and Sculdis, with Vi, Margr, Kili and Jani with Gimli just behind. Thorin turned to Ori.

“Do you suppose they even notice we’re here?” Thorin asked with a grin.

“With the ‘dear Bearer’ around?” Ori replied. “Certainly not!”

He hugged Bilbo, then Thorin, who then held him at arm’s length and gave him a fond, worried smile.

“Ori, when you return from Khazad-dûm…”

“Yes, Thorin?”

“Please don’t bring back any pets.”

“I shall try my best, my king,” said Ori with a straight face.

He and Dwalin stepped back and bowed.

To the cheers and farewells of the darrow of Erebor and the men of Dale, the ship glided away.
to the far Greenwood, an emerald haze in the west. Ori went straight to the bow, Dwalin shadowing him. Ori looked out towards the west, the breeze from the lake blowing his hair. Ori wore his lavender coat and breeches, he had new rugged travel boots and a new knife courtesy of Nori. He had his sling shot tucked in his belt with the pouch of arrowheads. There were several of these packed deep in one of Honda’s saddle bags.

Dori, to Ori’s chagrin, had bustled in first thing that morning and insisted on helping him dress. Dwalin made no demur, but pushed in to take care of Ori’s hair, which made Dori teary-eyed and murmur things like ‘my badgerling’ and ‘all grown up and married’. Dwalin slid his arms about him. Ori leaned back against his husband’s chest.

“This is it,” Ori murmured. “We’re off on our adventure!”

“Aye, an’ we’re goin’ t’ be quick abou’ this one. Know wha’ I’d like?”

“What?” Ori asked, turning to burrow himself in Dwalin’s furs. The leather belts criss-crossing Dwalin’s chest held Grasper and Keeper, and his warhammer to his back.

“T’ take yeh all ‘round Arda, visitin’ all th’ places our kings’r from, an’ th’ others who came t’ our Thorin’s coronation. See th’ world wi’ yeh.”

“That sounds wonderful!” Ori enthused. “We’ll see everything, then come home and settle in our lovely house and be happy!”

“Already happier than I ever dreamed, me ghivashel.”

“Me, too,” Ori said, hugging his husband tight.

“Yeh still worryin’, love?”

“I know it makes everything seem normal, but I worry about Dori being here. I’m terrified he’ll somehow come with us.”

“Tha’s Balin’s look-out. I know him well enough tha’ he’ll find a way t’ keep our Dori safe, or a’ least outa too much trouble.”

“Yes, I really don’t want to watch Dori pregnant and immaculately dressed, scolding the balrog for not wiping its feet.”

Dwalin choked, then,

“Aye, he’d do it, too. We’ll be sneakin’ in an’ out, so no thinkin’ abou’ th’ balrog, love.”

“I’ll have a talk with Glorfindel,” Ori said idly. “I have to convince him not to go looking for the thing. You know Margr and Vi would go with him.”

“Donno, if tha’ thin’ could survive th’ sisters.”

Ori pondered the question that had teased him.

“Dwalin, did you ever see…it?”

“No, we were too occupied wi’ th’ orcs. They were bad enough. Mind, rumor had it, th’ orcs used t’ worship it.”

Ori snorted, “Of course, give it a ’sacrifice’ now and again and it won’t bother you.” He giggled, “If they’d fed it more it might have liked them.”

Dwalin looked down at him with a terrible frown, but his bright hazel eyes twinkled.

“Here now, love. Yeh keep in mind wha’ Thorin told yeh an’ Dori an’ Mistress Dazla said-”

“No pets this time.” Ori finished. “No, I don’t want a pet balrog. I can’t even keep an oliphaunt. A balrog would definitely never fit.”

“An’ it’d burn down Dale.”

“True, but if it sat a bit away, it could keep the crops warm all year.”

“Love!”

Ori giggled and hugged his husband tight again, then grinned up at Dwalin as they released each other. Ori looked towards the stern. Erebor rose as comfort in the distance. He turned his back on the strong east wind. The ship had unfurled all its sails to the fullest and they remained at the prow as it sped across the lake.

Once more, Ori experienced the silent landing, the prow sliding up onto the sand of the Greenwood shore. This time, instead of a stealthy sprint to the shadows of a thicket, they were greeted by the sounds of elfin singing.
“Here come the dwarrow to Greenwood.  
Welcome, oh welcome to Greenwood!  
Cute beards and beads in Greenwood.  
Eat lots of leaves in the Greenwood!”

Awaiting them, a column of Sylvan elf soldiers stood on either side of a triple line of other elves, all dressed in long white robes, carrying bouquets of flowers and singing their welcome.

The Company was soon surrounded. The elves continued to sing while the dwarrow mounted their ponies, Dain on Chopper, while more elves caught up their luggage. Then an amazing palanquin appeared, all swathed in the most delicate of white lace and furnished with plump pillows of Durin blue velvet. Eight elves bore this forward and, still singing, tenderly installed Dori in it. Ori facepalmed at the sound of Dori’s delighted giggles and praise for those helping Dori settle in.

Thus gathered up, they were escorted back down the path the elves had arrived on, into the deep Greenwood.

“Welcome, Dear Bearer, to Greenwood.  
We’ve never had Bearer in Greenwood  
Please don’t give birth in Greenwood.  
We’ve no nappies stockpiled in Greenwood!”

And just like that, Erebor was hidden behind the trees and Ori couldn’t see it. He was out of sight of home for the first time in his life. They were in the center of the cavalcade of elves. The ones before the palanquin tossed down their flowers for the Bearer to be borne over.

“You get used to it,” said Kili, on Saki, just behind Ori on Honda and Dwalin riding Harley.  
“Hmm?” Ori turned back to look at the prince.  
“Erebor. If you concentrate on it, you can still feel that it’s there, even if you can’t see it,” Kili explained  
“It’s ridiculous to be instantly homesick, I know. Especially since it’s only been home for six months.”

Kili shrugged.  
“No, it’s not. I miss Fili and I’ve been gone for half a day.”  
“But you’ve been apart lots of times before this, right?”

“No.”

Ori felt a twinge of sorrow. He was about to apologize, then remembered that Kili had chosen this quest. Ori decided on a different tack.  
“Thank you again for coming with us.”

Kili grinned, “There was no way I wasn’t coming. Both Fili and I wanted to go, but Fili’s idad’s heir, so that’s the bottom of the slag bucket, isn’t it.”

Ori nodded, then Kili asked,  
“You’re going to write about this, aren’t you? And draw pictures of the things we see, right?”

“Oh yes!” Ori assured him. “I’m excited about doing it, too.”

“Good!” Kili said, eagerly. “If you’re writing and drawing it, I can be sure Fili will feel like he came with us!”

“Too much flattery, Ki,” Ori teased. “This is my first real adventure, other than the Inn, remember?”

Kili laughed.  
“Going to the Inn was a brilliant adventure, wasn’t it?”

Ori snickered.  
“A brilliant time for you and Tauriel!”

“Shut up,” Kili replied with a blush and an even bigger grin.
“Everyone’s happy in Greenwood.
Patter is snappy in Greenwood
Wits and words sharper in Greenwood
Don’t be a dolt in the Greenwood.”

The path wound around and in amongst the trees, Ori was able to make out a jumble of branches that might be a door.

“Dwailin’?” He leaned toward his husband. “I think I see a door, but where’s the building?”

“Yer lookin’ at it, love. Elves build t’ match trees an’ follow th’ lines th’ trees do. Takes a bi’ a’ lookin’ at b’fore yeh kin see it.”

Ori frowned and looked carefully at the trees above them, then back to where he’d seen a doorway. After studying the actual trees, he could properly see the strange looking palace before them. Soon he saw many, many elves all around them and in the trees. A new song of welcome began.

At least, Ori thought it was welcoming.

“Do you see what I see?
Do you see what I see?
“Dwarves!
“Dwarves!
“Riding in a line!
“We will serve them cabbage divine!
“We will serve them cab-bage divine!”

“Tha’s ‘dwarrow’, yeh daft woodland sprites!” Dain hollered to the sound of giggles and tittering.

“See The Dwarves!
“See the Dwarves!
“Shouting all the Waaay!”

Dwalin gave a grunt of annoyance.

“Bloody all th’ way to the palace. Tra-la-la-ing ’til yeh could jus’ puke!”

Ori giggled.

“It’s pretty, but you’d think they’d get tired of the noise!” Ori confided, low. “And they say we dwarrow are noisy! We may make noise but we don’t go on and on like this!”

“Aye. It’s livin’ in th’ trees. Gotta twitter like th’ birds all a’ time.”

“You know,” Ori said, thoughtfully. “Among the wild creatures, the finest songs and dances are to attract mates.”

Dwalin chuckled.

“Yeh sayin’ tha’ our quest’s a chance f’r all them elves t’ fuck?”

“No!” Ori cried, swatting ineffectually at Dwalin, who was too busy laughing at his joke. “Don’t be gross!”

“Ah, well, me love,” Dwalin allowed. “Mebbe it’ll put a good sparkle int’ our Kili’s an’ Gimmers’ eyes b’fore we get goin’. ”

“And Margr and Vi?” Ori teased.

“Like they need help,” Dwalin snorted, making Ori laugh outright.

“Oh Mahal,” Ori said, glancing back. “Kili and Gimli will be mooning with Tauriel and Legolas the whole way.”

Dwalin made an indifferent noise.

“Mebbe, but they’ll be serious once we’re at th’ mountain. Don’t worry yerself o’er tha’, me love.”

“Oh, I won’t,” Ori assured him as they rode under a tall stone archway, cleverly disguised as two
trees with intertwining branches. Actually, he hadn’t been worrying about them mooning so much as wondering what shape the mooning might take. They were supposed to be quiet and stealthy, after all.

Once through, the arched doors closed behind them. They alit and their mounts were led away and Dori was handed out of the palanquin. Dwalin gave Ori’s back a pat and Ori went forward to where a richly dressed elf stood waiting to welcome them up a short, but very wide stairway.

When Ori reached the stairway, the elf descended with much aplomb and bowed low, greeting him with a long welcoming speech in Sindarin. Ori, silently and profusely thanking Master Khujik, returned a graceful and very correct reply, in verse, perfectly accented, and with enough volume that all assembled could hear him. The looks of shocked amazement made him bestow a smile on the elf before him. The elf blinked, snatched back his dignity, and led them up the stair to be presented to His Majesty King Cemnesta Thranduil of Erys Lasgalen.

The throne room was smaller than Thorin’s, but the dancing light from the trees above rendered it lovely. The throne was perched on stone, carved to be three spreading branches, the center one, a stairway. There sat Cemnesta with Thranduil standing proudly behind him.

The elf announced them and Ori breezed passed him.

“Cemnesta, your majesty! You look wonderful with your crown and on that throne!”

Cemnesta laughed and, to the surprise of his people about the room, descended his stair at a run to meet them, dropping to one knee to embrace Ori, before Ori could bend in a bow.

“Ori, Lord Ori, my dear friend! You and your company are most welcome to my home. Please come in and be at your ease.” Cemnesta rose and smiled around the party. “I am delighted to see all of you!”

Cemnesta and Dwalin exchanged bows and an arm clasp. There was a squeal from Margr and Vi in the back.

“Lovely t’ see yeh, too, our Cemy, dear!”

Margr pushed forward. Cemnesta was wise enough to bend quickly as he was grabbed and pulled in for a hearty kiss on the cheek. Vi came for her due and patted his waist as the sisters looked him over.

“Eeee, lookit our Cemy, love. Ain’t he rich lookin’?”

“Aye, love, finer than a new copper coin. These folk takin’ good care a’ yeh, lovey?”

Ori turned from the fussing and there was Thranduil, dressed in brown and gold, looking amused and impressed.

“King-Father,” Ori greeted him.

“Lord Ori.”

“Are you really so surprised to see us?”

“No, I’m amazed that Cemnesta didn’t trip on his robes on his way down and break his nose. There’s a reason to move in regal state as you ascend and descend those stairs.”

“How many times did you break your nose?”

Thranduil drew himself up majestically, then sighed.

“Twice. And you? How do you fare so far?”

“I haven’t broken my nose yet, but I’m excited, nervous, and can’t believe Dori’s with us.”

Thranduil’s eyes shot behind Ori and the smile that bloomed was genuine. Ori snickered with Dwalin as everyone else was forgotten.

“Honored Bearer! What a delight. I cannot begin to tell you how happy I am that you decided to accompany your brother.” He glared at Cemnesta. “My son told me nothing of this.”

“Dearest Thranduil,” Dori cooed, trotting over to embrace the king-father. “I assure you I’m only coming along to see you and darling Galadriel. When I found out about this diplomatic visit, I beseeched my darling badger and my adorable husband to allow me to dangle after. I did promise I would be very good and biddable the entire time!”

“How dear that must have cost you, you naughty creature,” Thranduil teased, taking Dori’s arm and patting her hand tenderly.

“Oh, Thranduil, you are too odious to pretend such and put me to the blush before yours and your
son’s beloved peoples.”
“I’m gonna fuckin’ throw up,” Dwalin muttered to Ori.
“I may join you,” Cemnesta murmured. “Ada is bad enough with Bard, which I can excuse, but he is utterly ridiculous where Dori is concerned.”
“Dori has that effect on people,” Ori explained. “Fortunately, it’s paving the way for this adventure, so I’ll thank him for now.”
Cemnesta laughed and said loudly,
“And here are some people who have been waiting most anxiously for your party to arrive.”
There was a blur of red and green and Kili was high in the air, shouting with delight to be in his beloved’s strong arms once more. Ori grinned to see Tauriel clasping Kili to her, her face buried in his shoulder as Kili peppered enthusiastic kisses all over her head. Legolas came in another doorway, saw Gimli and gave a shout. Gimli roared happily and they collided in the middle of the floor, hugging, laughing, and insulting each other.
Glorfindel strutted into the room and was knocked on his elegant ass as Margr and Vi pounced, shrieking.
Elrond and Lindir entered, followed by the twins.
“Lord Ori!” Elrond smiled and came forward, hand on heart, then knelt to embrace Ori.
“Lord Elrond!” Ori was very happy to see the Lord of Rivendell again. “Master Brur sends greetings.”
“Does he?” Elrond’s eyes twinkled. “Are you sure he didn’t say to remind Lindir and I to ‘stay the fuck out’ of his library?”
Ori and Dwalin both chuckled at this.
“He tried to,” Ori told them, “but Master Sadi kicked him in the shin and he said to tell you ‘Hello’, instead.”
Elrond gave a shout of laughter as Ori reached to hug Lindir, who looked extremely amused.
Dain and Sculdís came up to greet Elrond. Dain looked very pleased with himself as he’d stopped to smack Thranduil on the ass and salute him with a bellow of “Yer lookin finer than a puddle a’ gravy, our pixie!”
Sculdis hugged Cemnesta and the Rivendell party. Dain gave Cemnesta a look over and told him he looked like a ‘proper elf king,’ before shaking hands with Elrond and Lindir and knocking brows with the twins.
After everyone was greeted and welcomed, Cemnesta dispatched the company to his ada’s care. Thranduil led the way with Dori’s hand in his, chatting happily up some stairs and into a lovely round sitting room.
Ori stared at the weird furniture that was all made of boughs and decorated with velvet leaves of green and gold. Like the breakfast parlor at home, there was a set of long windows which led to a large round balcony with more seating. The chairs or couches, Ori decided, were all long and thin. There were doors all around, opening onto a number of bedrooms. Dori squealed with delight, at looking in one, seized Balin, and bustled him in, slamming the door after. Thranduil snickered and opened the door next to the balcony.
“Lord Ori, here is a room for you and your captain to take your rest.”
Ori thanked him and went in. He instantly realized what had made Dori squeal. He nearly squealed himself. He had heard stories, but this was the first time he’d ever seen a bed for people of the tall races. It was an immense pile of white cushions. It was bigger than any at the inn, it was bigger than Thorin’s and Bilbo’s!
To Ori, it was just like when he was a little badger and it had snowed for three days and he saw the pile of snow in the middle of Steam Alley. Ori carefully removed his satchel, belt, coat, and boots. He ran like he had back then and leapt to land in the middle of the snowy piles of pillows and quilts. They hoofed all around him like the snow had. He lay there, face down, giggling maniacally. There was another pouf of pillows and quilts as he was bounced upward by Dwalin landing beside him. They lay there and laughed witlessly for a bit. Ori finally recovered and rolled close to Dwalin.
“This is the biggest bed I’ve ever seen! We’ll need a map to find each other in the dark!”
“I’ll find yeh jus’ fine, love,” Dwalin teased, rolling on top of Ori and kissing him soundly.

It was quite a struggle to get themselves out of the bed, as they were laughing too hard while they did.

They explored the room and went out onto the balcony from the windowed door in their room. Ori looked out over the balustrade. He rubbed his eyes and stared, trying to figured out what he was looking at.

They were in a deep ravine. The palace was carved into the rock face at one end. There were beautiful flowers and winding garden paths throughout. Elves wandered everywhere.

The bottom of the couloir was all hillocks with a lovely, winding river. This river flowed under the palace, and Ori realized it must come out the other side, then connect to the Forest River which drained into the lake.

Feeling a little more oriented, Ori went back in and found his company gathered, chatting with Thranduil. Three elves drifted in bearing cups, a small cask of wine and large platters of fresh fruit.

Shortly after this, Cemnesta arrived and smiled on Ori.

“My friend, as is traditional, I must have you, Lord Balin and the Bearer come to the soldiers’ courtyard and inspect the detail Tauriel, Glorfindel, and I have selected to escort you through my lands. Also, you should look over the foodstuffs, tents and other supplies, I have to offer you.”

Ori nodded and looked to Dwalin. Soon, Ori, Dwalin, Dain, Sculdís, Balin, Dori and Kili accompanied Cemnesta, Tauriel, Thranduil and Glorfindel down to an underground area. Ori was surprised the elves had seen fit to ready a detachment of about thirty soldiers for the escort to Lothlórien.

Inspection, Ori found, consisted of him walking beside Cemnesta, the others following behind, as they strolled in front of a mathematically straight line of beautiful soldiers with beautiful and identical profiles, all of them clad in beautiful armor. Their eyes were trained on something opposite them, and spears and shields at the ready.

Dori floated behind, complimenting and admiring.

“Oh, what a lovely shield. How tall you are. Such finely polished boots! Are you using them to peek up my robe, you naughty thing?”

“How d’yeh bloody tell one soldier from another?” Dwalin muttered.

“No idea,” murmured Cemnesta. “I haven’t been here long enough. I think Ada chose them for uniformity. All I know is that they come when I call.”

He looked to Thranduil, who raised his brows and said, “Don’t look at me. I didn’t choose them, my ada did.”

“They’re all… alike,” said Cemnesta.

“That’s the thing about woodland elves, isn’t it,” said Thranduil. “It’s not all long hair and cheekbones, but a lot of it is.”

“They look lovely, pet. Such nice elves to guard you. How relieved I am,” Dori said, loudly.

“And such snappy dressers,” Ori teased.

“That, too.”

They finished the line and Cemnesta led the way to the middle, so all the soldiers faced them. Dwalin turned and glared at the small detail of soldiers the dwarrow had brought with them.

“Targ, Spar, Varil, Torq” barked Dwalin. “Yer all assigned as a personal guard t’ th’ King-Father ‘til we return an’ he dismisses yeh.

“Du Bekar!” hollered the four, and shoved over to stand at four points around Thranduil, arms crossed and murderous expressions on their faces. Thranduil looked delighted.

Cemnesta addressed his own soldiers.

“You are now assigned to Lord Ori of Fundin House, scribe to the High King of Dwarrow in his seat at Erebor. Serve him well. Captain Dwalin Fundinul is now your captain until he sees fit to dismiss you from his command.”

All shields lowered, the spears went to the sides and the guards bowed to Ori as one.

Ori swallowed, then,

“I thank you all and your king for your generous service. I-I hope you will have a chance to enjoy
some of this adventure with us.”

The soldiers bowed again, but this time their eyes flickered in confusion.
“We’re so delighted to have all of you along for the fun! Such a lovely group of gentle-elves,”
Dori helped.

Dwalin came to Ori’s rescue by barking out, “We muster a’ dawn. Be ready. Dismissed.”
The line turned and marched out of the yard to somewhere else. Dwalin chuckled as the door
behind the soldiers shut.

“Brother?” Balin asked, Dori’s hand tight in his.
“Jus’ thinkin’ a’ Da’s face. Me, captainin’ a troop a’ elves.”
Balin chuckled.

“Good thing he’s in th’ Halls, brother, ‘r that would’a sent him straight there.”
Thranduil tried not to choke. The Fundin brothers looked at the king-father.
“I take it, yeh remember him, lad?” Balin asked.
“I do,” Thranduil said with a sly smile. “And you are right, the shock of seeing his younger son
leading a squadron of elves would have ended him.”

“Ah, well,” Dwalin looked teasingly at Ori, “seein’ as they’ve bin assigned t’ me husband by th’
king hisself, mebbe he might a’ jus’ fainted instead.”
Thranduil cocked his head and frowned thoughtfully at Ori.
“I wonder what Fundin would have made of the marriages of his sons.”
“Now, Thrandy,” Dori scolded, “are you suggesting that my late adad-in-law and I would have
not been delighted with one another?”
Balin snickered.
“No, me heart. Adad would have fallen utterly in love wi’ yeh at first sight. And that’d a’ left
Mam t’ adore our Ori.”

Ori tucked his hand into Dwalin’s.
“Do you think your amad would have liked me?”
Dwalin smile tenderly.
“Aye, love. She was a warrior an’ a scholar. She’d a takin’ yeh t’ her heart, righ’ off.”

Ori hugged Dwalin’s arm. He liked the idea of Dwalin’s mother. Dori could have handled
Fundin just fine.

Dori looked over Thranduil, surrounded by scowling dwarrow, then trotted over and kissed
Dwalin’s cheek.

“Thank you, deary, now my dearest Thrandy has his own professional bullies! And how chic!”
Dwalin raised an eyebrow, waiting for Dori to continue.

“Standing there like that, surrounding him, they look like a charm bracelet!”
Cemnesta led them to a great cavern. In this sat three large wagons. Dwalin, Balin, Dain, and
Sculdis looked over the tents and traveling supplies. Kili went through the food wagon, teasing
Tauriel with the supply of lembas that was mostly for the soldiers.

“They’re not that bad!” Kili called.
“They?” gasped Tauriel. “How many did you eat?”
“Four,” called Kili before getting back to his work.
“Four?” Tauriel stared. “One bite is enough to sustain an elf through an entire day!”

Kill bobbed up again.
“Really? We should feed them to Bujni and watch what happens.”
Tauriel went off into a peal of laughter.

Ori was pleased that Kili was taking his part seriously as the cook. The young prince counted
everything, went through several discussions with some elves who had packed it and, after quite a
time, declared himself satisfied. Kili bounced up to Ori with his lists and handed them over. Ori
looked through them briefly. Kili had planned several menus in case they somehow took over a
week to get to Lothlórien.

“I thought I’d best make sure we didn’t run short in case there’s bad weather or any weird stuff.”
“I’m glad you did,” Ori said. “Being prepared is always good.”
Cemnesta returned them to their chambers. Ori went through their plans again. Dwalin asked the elf page outside to send the captain of Lord Ori’s detail to them.

This captain arrived and was introduced as Omosuil. He was tall and blond, with high cheekbones, and he wore beautiful armor. Ori despaired he wouldn’t be able to tell Omosuil from any of the other elves, but he did have very sharp green eyes. Ori decided to just go with that.

Dwalin and Ori discussed the route with him. Omosuil was calm for the most part, but Ori saw his eyes often stray to look about at the company. Soon he was drawn into the discussion of the route and Dwalin questioned him on his military history. Omosuil had not seen the battle of Khazad-dûm but had trained with a soldier who had.

Ori asked about Dol-Guldur.

“It is perfectly safe,” Omosuil stated.

“Oh I know,” Ori said. “Thranduil assured us it was. I was just wondering, that if we are passing it, perhaps we could take a look at it. On the way back, of course.”

Omosuil gazed at Ori.

“Why?”

Ori swallowed the reply, ‘because it’s there and we can’, and tried,

“It may hold facets of historical interest.”

Omosuil considered this.

“Yes, but it has been inhabited by orcs for many decades. Orcs are destructive creatures, nor do they build or maintain anything that is outside of military use.”

“So the building itself is not longer viable?” Ori asked.

Omosuil didn’t seem to want to go on, but Ori couldn’t figure out why until Dwalin explained.

“Orcs stink.”

“But they’re not there now.”

“No, but the stink stays.”

Ori raised an eyebrow at his husband. Dwalin grinned.

“Orcs shit where they stand.”

Ori looked at Omosuil, who nodded.

“Oh,” Ori wrinkled his nose at the thought. “Yes, we should probably give it a miss then. Pity.”

An elf maid entered.

“Lord Ori, you and your company are invited to the feast.”

“Thank you,” Ori managed before Dori burst out,

“Oh! This minute? I can’t wear this old rag to dine with a king!”

The female elf smiled graciously and assured Dori they would be escorted to the feasting hall in half an hour.

In exactly half an hour, Dori was resplendent in a flowing gown of red-brown silk bedecked with emeralds. She was escorted by Thranduil on one side and Balin on the other. Ori went first with Dwalin, following the elf maid, who had informed them of the feast.

The feasting hall was fascinating. Ori realized that the tributary he had seen disappear into the palace from the ravine was now above them. The ceiling was glassed in. The river flowed across and the ground above had been removed allowing any light coming through the forest above to play about the room. The remaining twilight was lovely and coupled with the candlelight made Ori wonder if this was how it felt to be a fish.

They were all seated at a long table. King Cemnesta presided at the head and he placed Ori on his right and Balin on his left. Dwalin was next to Ori. Thranduil sat at the foot with Dori on his right and Sculdís on his left with Dain. The rest of the company sat as they chose. Ori wondered what in all Arda they would be able to eat of the feast, as elves mostly ate raw green food when they were at home, or so he had read.

He was relieved that the meal began with a pale green, but quite good, watercress broth. This was followed by individual bowls of chopped apples, celery, nuts and grapes in a sweet milky sauce. Ori
found this to be odd, but good. The main course was excellent, consisting of asparagus, steamed and served with a pale, savory sauce, a flavorful pudding of corn and a haunch of venison.

Dessert was a chestnut pudding and a jelly-ish liquid called fruit soup. Ori was of the opinion that this needed to be boiled hard and thickened, then served over a cake.

Conversation was mostly the company asking Cennesta how he was settling and filling Thranduil in on what had been going on in Dale. Vi and Margr kept up an undercurrent of gossip.

The party closed early and Ori was happy to settle in Dwalin’s arm’s in the exact middle of the giant bed.
Captains, Carapaces, and Capricious Cacophony

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Ori is in charge, Dori is having a wonderful time and everyone is along for the fun. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The singing woke Ori. It was still dark. Dwalin grunted and kissed him.
“C’mon, love. It’s time.”
They washed and dressed. Ori wondered why he wasn’t terrified, then reasoned he could wait to be terrified when they entered the mountain. Quartz flew in the window and perched on Ori’s shoulder as they made their way to the courtyard. He rubbed his beak against Ori’s cheek, which Ori found soothing.

As the first light flickered through the trees, the company and their guard took leave of King Cemnesta. The only mishap had been that Gimli’s pony managed, through frisking among the trees, to badly scrape his hock. Gimli gave the pony a scold. Legolas came to the rescue by saying Gimli could ride with him on the horse the people of Rohan had given him a few years ago. This large white horse, named Arod, with a slightly gray mane and tail, was not in the least bothered by having a dwarf added to Legolas’ weight on its back. Gimli didn’t look quite as serene at the prospect and had his arms firmly locked about Legolas’ waist.

Captain Omosuil on his brown stallion Bazweejin went first with a couple of other elves as the front scouts. Ori on Honda with Dwalin on Harley came next followed by Dain on Chopper, Glorfindel on Asfaloth with Margr pillion beside Vi, driving the first wagon, Sculdis driving the second, and chatting with Jani. Dori perched in her palanquin with Balin beside it on Ducati. Kili drove the last wagon as Tauriel rode her horse, Hoorachi, beside him. Saki, with Kili’s pack, trotted behind the wagon. The rest, surrounded by Omosul’s soldiers, traveled easily.

The elvish road through the forest was a good, well-maintained one and Ori was able to look about him, make notes and sketches in his book as they went along. Omosuil had said it was not yet time for stealth, thus pleasant conversation was possible.

Dori spent a great deal of time blowing kisses to Balin and engaging any elf soldier, foolish enough to be carrying the palanquin, in light chatter. Since Dori was keeping her hands employed by crocheting tiny clothing for the expected badger, most of Dori’s talk concerned babies. Did the current elf near her have children? Those who had, were thoroughly interviewed on their ideas concerning child rearing. No children, were they married? These were idly questioned on their courtship and encouraged to hold forth on the courtship adventures the pair had engaged on. Any unfortunate enough to be of a single status and not, by Dori’s skewed judgement, ‘craft-wed’, received Dori’s advice on ‘improving’ their love lives. Dori had plenty of suggestions for possible partners from among her friends. In this, she solicited Margr, Vi, and Jani’s help.

By lunch time, Kili and Tauriel were keeping a count on which soldiers were the most stalwart in the face of Dori’s attentive match-making. Ori sent a pleading look at Balin, who merely smiled and shook his head.

Nor was Omosuil exempt from Dori’s ‘assistance’.
“Captain Omosuil? Are you … em… unwell?” Ori asked, regarding the elf who had ridden away from Dori’s side and at faster pace than necessary.
“No,” said the elf slowly. “I was just in conversation with the Bearer.”
“He does have that effect on people.”
“I don’t understand. He? She? Your brother? Sister?”
“Just use ‘sibling’, if you’re not sure. It’s a Bearer thing.”
“Ah, we don’t have Bearers. Are there many in Erebor?”
“There aren’t many anywhere.”
“And you cannot tell them from the general population?”
“I think, if you asked Dori, he would say that would take all the fun out of it. If I might ask, what
did Dori say to you?”
“I made the mistake of admiring her needle work. I asked what she was working on and she said,
‘A onesie’. After she explained what that might be, she told me if I was a particularly good ‘lad’, she
would make me one to match my ‘pretty’ eyes.”
Ori snickered.
“Lucky you! Dori never offered to make me one!”
“Oh, just whenever Dori came to visit. Or, you could try to outclass King-Father Thranduil in his
pajamas.”
“The king-father wears… pajamas?” The grin which spread across Omosuil’s face could best be
described as evil.
“Yes. Shall I tell you about our time at the inn?”
“Please! I mean, if you would be so kind, Lord Ori. I’m sure it would help pass the time.”
Hours passed. The shadows slanted to the east and Omosuil was all but weak with laughter.
Once Ori began telling the ‘adventures of King Thranduil at the inn’, everyone in the Company had
to add to it. Kili went so far as to clip the wagon reins and give a demonstration of the spinning
contest. Ori was delighted to find that the forward party of elves had come back to crowd in and
amongst the dwarrow to listen.

The forest was dark and old, tangles of branches and vines wandered everywhere. They came
into what Ori thought was a clearing but turned out to be a large road set with cobblestones. The
bright afternoon sun was startling after so much time under the leaves in the forest, and Ori was
amazed to find he’d quickly gotten used to the strange, dappled light that constantly moved.
Legolas informed them this was the old Forest Road and was still occasionally used by traders
from the west.
They crossed the road and plunged back into the trees.
Legolas assured them they would meet with Haldir by next nightfall.
“I hope Haldir is ready,” Ori commented. “Thanks to you and your people, we’re a day ahead of
schedule.”
“He will be,” Legolas replied cheerfully. “The Lady will know.”
Glorfindel shouted out a laugh.
“Not to worry. Haldir always comes early.”
“Ooo, tha’s bloody selfish, tha’ is!” Margr objected.
Ori looked about. Despite his earlier misgivings, he was enjoying the cool darkness of the forest.
It was mid-summer, but everything felt curiously refreshed.
“I didn’t think a forest would be nice to travel through,” Ori commented.
“It’s much better now,” Tauriel said from further back. “Once Mordor fell, we were able to clear
out all the spiders.”
“Spiders?” Ori questioned, imagining all the branches covered in waving Rutiles.
“Giant ones,” Legolas elaborated. “Three times the size of your Honda and with extremely long
legs.”
“Are giant spiders usual to forests?” Ori didn’t like to think about this too much.
“No. They were dark beings.”
“Could you not tame them like we did the wargs?”
To be sure, Ori didn’t like the idea of riding a giant spider. Spiders walked on ceilings and he
thought it would be hard to spend the journey upside-down, clinging for dear life.

“No, they only wanted to eat anyone who got in their path,” Glorfindel supplied.

“Nasty,” Vi pronounced. “Any good cooked up?”

All elves present made disgusted noises.

A couple of elves appeared out of the trees. They, with Legolas and Gimli, went forward to Captain Omosuil. A few moments later, Captain Omosuil rode up to Ori.

“Lord Ori, since your people are curious and we are making good time, would you and your company be interested in seeing a spider? A carcass has been found close by.”

Ori nodded and Dwalin called a halt. The Company gathered with Ori, who had his drawing tools at the ready. Omosuil and two soldiers led them all through a few glades to a hollow.

Ori stared. Legolas had not been joking. The horrid creature was huge. It lay on its stomach, legs splayed out. Ori drew feverishly, while Dain, Sculdis, and Jani gamely went up and had a good look at the spider. Balin and the sisters helped Dori over to the body, so Dori could touch it and squeak in shock. Ori hastily drew the spider with the dwarrow nearby for a size comparison. Dain with Kili and Tauriel’s help, easily lifted off the back carapace. It was a huge, smooth, shiny basin.

“Me dumplin’!” Dain clambered down and balanced the carapace on end near Dori. “Lookit this.”

“Ew,” Dori opined, pulling her robe away.

“Noono, me dumplin’. It’s a perfect bowl. It’d make a grand crib.”

“No!” Dori cried. “Dain, my dear brother, are you entirely mad? Sleeping in that? My badgerling will have nightmares!”

“Admirable bathtub, then?”

“It can be lined wi’ somethin’.”

“No!”

“Mmmph.” Dain looked it over again then sighed. “Pity. It’s a good shape, too. Wonder what yeh could do wi’ it.”

Sculdis went and took it from Dain.

“Have a think on it, me love. We’ll leave it here f’r now an’ if yeh come up wi’ anythin’, we’ll pick it up on th’ way back.”

“Yer very wise, me diamond.”

Dain put the carapace back and they returned to the road. Ori noticed that at this point some of the soldiers smiling amongst themselves. Ori looked up at Captain Omosuil beside him.

“We are a funny people, aren’t we?”

The captain swallowed and gave Ori a shocked look. He seemed to debate with himself then, smiled.

“You are unlike any I have ever met, Lord Ori.”

Ori smiled back.

“Imagine using spider bits for baby furnishings.”

Omosuil lost hold of a snort.

“If I ever marry, Lord Ori, I wouldn’t dare to suggest such a thing to my lady.”

“Go back and talk to Dori,” Ori sauced. “If you want to be married, you know my brother will be delighted to find you a suitable mate.”

Omosuil chuckled.

“My soldiers are drawing lots as to who shall carry the palanquin and spend time with the Bearer next.”

“Kili and Tauriel are keeping count on who lasts the longest,” Ori told him dryly.

That made Omosuil laugh. His bright eyes twinkled down at Ori.

“Shall I send a message to have a squad follow us and fetch King Dain’s …er… bath tub back to the palace?”

Ori snickered, “Only if you want to see him try it out. With our luck, he’ll start wearing it as a hat.”
Omosuil retired, amused, to the front. Dwalin came and held Honda’s bridle while Ori got on.
yeh made ‘im smile, love. Wha’ yeh tell ‘im?”
“I told him if he wanted to be married to go and talk to Dori, then he offered to have that spider
bowl fetched to Cermesta’s palace for Dain to use as a hat.”
“Dain’d do it,” Dwalin commented, swinging himself onto Harley. “ ‘R he’d have Sculdis cover
it in jewels an’ sell it t’ Hild at ’n extortiona’e price.”
“As a hat?” Ori teased.
Dwalin laughed. They spent a few minutes suggesting possible uses Hild could put it to.
Ori thought that a mirror could be placed in it and Dwalin said she would put it on wheels and use
it as a tiny cart or attach a handle to perambulate her first grandchild in.
Dain rode up on Chopper and demanded to know what they were saying about him. They went
through their suggestions as to what he could sell the piece to Hild as, but Dain was enamored of the
idea of having it as a hat.
“It’d be brilliant,” Dain bellowed. “I could have it f’r ridin’ me Chopper in bad weather! It’d
keep th’ rain off both of us.”
Chopper grunted in agreement.
“Captain Omosuil,” Ori called.
The captain rode back, looking ready to be diverted.
“King Dain would like the spider bit sent back to your king’s palace. He’s going to use it as a bad
weather hat.”
Omosuil stared at Dain, who winked at him. Omosuil burst out laughing, sketched a bow from his
saddle, and returned to the front. Ori saw a thrush drop to the elf’s arm, then fly away. Quartz
fluttered to Ori’s shoulder. Ori looked and saw that the raven had a number of long hairs from the
spider. Ori removed these from Quatrz’s beak.
“What are these for, Quartz?”
Quartz looked very proud.
“Tiny points at the ends. Hollow. Use for drawing or writing maybe?”
Ori was touched and put a hand against the raven’s side and gently pressed the feathered body to
his cheek.
“Thank you, Quartz. I’ll try them out.”
Quartz settled down on Ori’s shoulder, nibbled at his hair and beard beads, and tapped his beak
against Ori’s nose.
When the road was shrouded in evening darkness, the elves led them off it to a pleasant glade with
a stream running along the edge of it. Captain Omosuil declared the water potable and the tents were
pitched.
Kili created a delicious vegetable stew. This was served with meat on skewers and soda bread
baked in the coals. The soldiers were quite surprised and praised Kili’s stew and the bread heartily.
They murmured to Tauriel that she was wise in finding a mate who was such a good provider.
After the meal, the dwarrow settled down with their pipes and mugs of ale from the small keg that
Kili produced from the pack wagon. They sang old songs and told stories, and toasted pieces of
pound cake in the fire. The elves gathered near to listen with wide-eyes. Dain and Sculdis all but
competed in telling ribald tales which made Dori scold and vainly try to cover Gimli’s ears, then
failing that, latched onto an elf she decided was the youngest. The elf tried to explain he was over
three thousand years old, but Dori insisted that since he was not four thousand and fifty, the stories
were unfit for his tender years. This left Glorfindel and Gimli rolling on the ground.
Omosuil looked as though he wanted to ask something. Ori nodded to him.
“What’s on your mind, Captain?”
“My soldiers and I are curious as to the nature of your quest. What is it you hope to find in
Moria?”
Ori briefed them on the box. The elves considered this then,
“How did you find out something was missing from your history?” Omosuil’s second, a dark
haired elf named, Nomiriel asked.
Ori considered, then quietly related Durin telling him in a dream then seeing Durin in the mirror. The elves seemed startled by this and muttered in Sindarin. They used a word Ori didn’t know and he asked the meaning right away. This was discussed and Tauriel finally said,
“I think you call them spirits or ghosts?”
Ori nodded.
“Yes. Something like that.” Ori frowned then asked quickly, “Is this something elves consider taboo to speak of?”
“Oh no,” Legolas assured him. “It’s just very unusual and sad as elves are immortal and ghost are of death.”
“Oh!” cried Dori. “What fun! Dear Thranduil can now haunt people, if he wants to!”
Legolas and Tauriel looked appalled.
“Aye, “ Dain agreed. “Our pixie’d never resist tha’ chance. Mind, if he ever comes an’ bother’s me on th’ bog, I’ll be having’ words wi’ Mahal an’ Eru!”
“No one bothers yeh on th’ bog, luv,” Sculdis soothed. “Too bloody frigh’enin’.”
“Oi, “ Dain objected. “I kept me weddin’ vow t’ yeh ne’er t’ eat a whole crock o’ salt-soaked beans in a sittin’.”
The elf squad tried desperately to maintain their serenity, most failed and tried to stifle giggles.
“I’ve seen a ghost,” Kili stated from his curled up seat on Tauriel’s lap.
“Who was it?” Gimli demanded.
“I was quite young. I was sick in bed and woke up. There beside my bed was an older looking dam. She smiled at me and patted my hand then smoothed back my hair. I felt better and went back to sleep. I told Mam in the morning and she said it was Umad looking after me.”
“That’s beautiful!” Tauriel said, her eyes bright. “She was able to come and see you even though she was in the Halls of Aü…er…Mahal.”
Kili grinned up at her. “See. It’s not always sad.”
“But still strange,” she said thoughtfully.
“It’s no’ that unusual, is it?” said Vi. “I mean, Mar an me’ve seen spirits off an’ on our whole lives.”
“Have you?” Ori asked, leaning forward with interest.
Margr snorted.
“Off an’ on ye callin’ it, our Vi? There were days when we was tweens, it was a regular parade a’ dead people through th’ house - nigh’ an’ day. No’ real surprisin’ when yeh grow up in a roomin’ house.”
Kili sat forward and poked the fire.
“Does that make a difference? Living in a rooming house?”
“Think abou’ it,” said Vi. “Folk comin’ an’ goin’, livin’ an’ dyin’, all th’ blessed time. When they die, it’s jus’ business as usual.”
“Did anyone else in your family see them?” Ori asked. “You don’t think your mother or brother ever saw them?”
Nomirliel hastily refilled Vi’s mug, obviously wanting to hear more.
“Ta, pet. Mam pr’bly did, but Brother? Don’t think so. Mam said lasses was more inclined t’ see ‘em for some reason.”
“Were you ever afraid?” Legolas asked.
The sister looked at one another and shook their heads.
“Nah,” said Margr. “Growin’ up in East Dale, it was th’ livin’ yeh worried abou’. Ain’t tha’ so, our Ori?”
Ori smiled and nodded.
“The dead don’t eat your food or ask for money,” he said.
“An’ they come in handy, don’t they Vi?”
“Come in handy?” repeated Omosuil in shock.
“Aye, luv. Tha’s how I go’ rid a’ me second husband. Oi, he was a stinker. Wouldn’ listen when I put in me two coppers f’r anythin’. Wouldn’t listen abou’ th’ spirits. Tol’ me I were crazy,
“all abou’ in me heed.”

Glorfindel looked incensed on her behalf and pulled her closer.

“I hope you threw him down a stairway.”

“Didn’t hafta,” chuckled Vi. “I told’ him th’ dead folk were comin’ t’ kill ‘im in his sleep, so’s he’d become one a’ them. He laughed a’ tha’, but he was gone by mornin’.”

“No loss,” said Margr. “Here our Vi, why’d yeh even marry ‘im?”

“Kept me happy in th’ bottom bits. If only he’d bin mute.”

Gimli wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Wha happened t’ yer firs’ husband?”

“Gimli!” Jani cried. “Tha’ ain’t poli’e.”

“Jus’ askin’.” said Gimli, “as we’re talkin’ on it, anyways.”

“Him?” Vi considered. “Him, I seem t’ have misplaced. No idea where he is, bu’ he was jus’ a wee thin’. I may’ve jus’ mislaid ‘im in me handbag.”

While the sisters and Sculdis snickered over this, Ori glanced at Omosul who looked as though he had been pinched on the bottom with hot tongs. Dori was looking over Omosuil with a critical eye. Ori wondered what would happen next. He didn’t have long to wait.

“You know,” Dori said in the throbbing accent Ori remembered from his badgerhood when Dori and the sisters had been talked into telling a scary story to Nori and himself, “it’s not the spirits of your own people you have to concern yourself with, but those of others.”

Dori shook his head. Ori saw him glance at the sisters.

“Eeee, lovey,” Margr agreed, “tha’ s th’ hones’ truth. Much t’ be afeart f’r an’ make yeh walk wi’ a care t’ yersel’,”

The elves all exchanged puzzled looks.

“What do you mean, ma’am?” Nomirliel asked.

“Yeh have t’ be careful once it’s dark an’ th’ spirits walk loose in th’ land, lassie,” Vi told her in a dour tone.

“Aye,” Dain agreed. “Th’ hobbits’ve their barrow-wights, an’ there’s plenty other thin’s.”

“The Darkness has left Arda with the fall of Mordor,” Legolas insisted.

“Oh yes, that darkness,” Dori said, loftily. “There are, you know, other things.”

“Other things?” echoed Omosuil, reminding Ori of himself as a badger.

“Yes, child,” Dori said with infinite patience. “You should be more careful, especially here in the wood.”

The elves laughed and wanted to know what could possibly be in the wood they that they wouldn’t know about. Dori pinned them with her eye.

“There are many things afoot. You perhaps do not fully comprehend the shockingly horrid creatures that roam the night.”

“Aye,” Vi agreed. “Terrible thin’s. It’s said there’s them evil blood-sucking worms tha’ lurk in dark pools.”

“Leeches?” Omosuil scoffed.

“No, no, laddie!” Margr chimed in. “Leeches is nuthin’ an’ quite medicinal. We’re talkin’ ’bout parasites.”

“Parasites?” Nomirliel stared.

“Aye, bigger than yer arm, luv.”

“They get in yer tubes,” added Vi in a dark tone.

“Tubes?” asked another elf, equally at sea.


“Poison?” Gimli started.

“Aye,” Dain concurred. “Bu’ yeh go’ t’ be careful.”

“I should think you would,” Omosuil gasped.

Dain nodded in agreement.

“Aye, it’s gotta be th’ righ’ poison.”
“How can you tell?” Omosuil demanded.
“Well, tha’ s th’ trick, ain’t it?” Vi told him. “That’s why yeh gots t’ be careful.”
Ori heard the elves muttering amongst themselves. They were confused as to whether these parasites existed or that the dwarrow really were aware of a danger they had not come across. It didn’t seem to occur to any of them that they were just being told ‘stories’.
“Then there’s th’ neccrocs,” Dain began.
“What are those?” Nomirliel asked.
“Terrible dangerous them lot are.” Margr shook her head. “Wouldn’ like t’ meet one a’ those. Gotta stay indoors ‘r they’ll getcha!”
“But what are they?” Nomirliel insisted.
“Like ‘n orc bu’ far worse,” Sculdis explained.
Since orcs were thought to be mutations of captured elves, the woodland people drew closer to the fire, and gave each other and the trees sideways glances.
“They don’t die when yeh kill ‘em,” Sculdis went on. “An’ when they’re supposed t’ be dead an’ re wanderin’ about’, an’ bits an’ bobs start t’ fallin’ off, they just replace ‘em with whatever weapon they got t’ hand.”
“Such as?” Omosuil asked skeptically.
“Suppose it loses a foot,” she elaborated. “An’ all it had t’ use was a… a…”
“Hook!” Dain supplied.
“Tha’s it!” Sculdis approved.
“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” said Omosuil. “Why would someone fear an orc with a hook for a foot? Would it not overbalance when it walked?”
“No, no, luv!” Margr said. “Can’t overbalance if yer dead. Sneaks up on yeh while yeh sleep an…”
She leaned close the grabbed his leg, shrieking “E get’s yeh!”
Omosuil pulled back and lifted a brow.
“Is this some strange initiation ritual to which the dwarrow subject their companions?” Glorfindel snorted.
“Yes, Omos. Soon, you’ll begin to grow a beard.”
“I told you not to call me that.”
“It’s better that what I called you as a fawn.”
“Not by much,” Omosuil muttered.
“‘Almos’?” Margr asked “Why would yeh call ‘im tha’?”
“Aye,” Vi agreed. “Wha’d e ‘almos’ do?”
Things grated to a halt at that point and Dori sent everyone to bed. Dwalin and Captain Omosuil had a brief argument about watches, before Dwalin escorted Ori to their tent.
Ori and Dwalin had put down the thick mat and undid the fluffy bedroll then put the second on top for a quilt. They stripped to their drawers and Ori settled to write up the day’s events in full. Dwalin lay down beside him, his head against Ori’s hip, looking through the sketches Ori had made during the ride.
“We’re a day ahead, so we’re doing quite well, yes?”
“Aye, love. Fuck, lookit th’ spider. Bloody ugly beast. Glad we didn’t have t’ deal wi’ ‘em. Fighting’ in th’ trees’s never easy.”
Ori finished and closed his book. Dwalin handed him his sketch book and lay back as Ori cuddled under the cover, next to Dwalin.
“That spider was horrible. I’m glad they’re all gone now. The elves must be relieved.” Ori had a bad thought. “I hope there won’t be any in the mountain.”
“Nuthin’ f’r ‘em t’ eat there. They ate th’ fores’ animals. Deer an’ th’ like.”
Ori looked up, the canvas above them moved slightly in the light breeze. It was then Ori heard all the forest noises, so many noises! He picked out the now familiar ones from the stay at the lake. Frogs, owls, a few night birds, crickets but the forest contained many more, including a few that were not of the animal variety. He lay looking up into the darkness, waiting for the noise to subside,
but the wind seemed to carry it closer, not further away. It went on and on.

Ori was at the point of marching out of the tent to have a word with whoever was on guard and pop them one on the nob for whistling. He hissed at Dwalin, who chuckled.

“Pine trees, love. The wind blowing th’ needles, make th’ noise.”

Ori groaned and buried his face into the bedroll.

“And the leaves rustling,” Ori muttered. “No wonder elves sing all the time. It’s to drown out the racket!”

Ori sighed and put his head on Dwalin’s shoulder. Quartz flew in and landed on Ori’s hip and gave him a saucy whistle.

“Hush, you,” Ori grumbled as Quartz chuckled.

Once Ori knew the noises to be normal for a forest, he was able to drop asleep.
Breakfast, Bastions, and Banding Together

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. We’re traveling through the forest and there’s lots to see, investigate, and talk about. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori groaned. Why was their bed hard? Forest noises reminded him and he sat up. The light was dim but the birds seemed to be shouting. Dwalin rolled onto his back and yawned.

“Dawn chorus,” Dwalin said.

“What?”

“Dawn chorus. Birds all start twitterin’ at beginnin’ a’ dawn.”

“Oh.” Ori leaned down and kissed his husband.

“Time to get up, then?”

“Aye.”

Quartz flew in and shook his feathers.

“Kili’s cooking. Smells good. Save some?”

“Of course,” Ori promised.

Ori stepped out. Kili was busy at the fire which he had rebuilt. He grinned at Ori.

“Porridge with fruit, fried ham, and baked eggs and bread. I’ve got a good jorum of tea. Don’t worry, I brought sugar and dried milk for it.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Ori enthused and, with Dwalin behind him, hurried to the stream to wash. Once dressed, Dwalin settled him at the fire and went to check in with Captain Omosuil.

Ori was grateful for the tea and busied himself with the map once more, Kili having refused his help with breakfast.

Dwalin returned with the captain and shouted for everyone to get up. Gimli shot out and was washed and dressed in seconds. Dain swore roundly and stuck his head out of his tent to glare at Dwalin.

“It’s bloody barely dawn, yeh fuckhead!” Dain growled

“An’ this ain’t th’ time t’ be fuckin’ around!” Dwalin barked. “We got t’ ge’ on. Move yer arse!”

“Oi! I’m a king, yeh shithead!” Dain hollered.

“Aye, an’ I’m th’ firs’ assistan’ t’ the leader a’ this comp’ny, so move yer royal arse!” Dwalin bellowed.

Dain chuckled appreciatively and disappeared.

Ori saw the elves and Captain Omosuil staring.

Tauriel grinned at Omosuil, saying in Sindarin,

“Welcome to the world according to dwarrow.”

“I thought they were going to kill each other!” Omosuil said, still a little aghast.

“Oh no,” Tauriel told him breezily. “That would have involved weaponry; if they’re just yelling and punching each other, it’s quite friendly.”

“Blessed Eru,” gasped the captain.

Ori grinned as the captain looked at him.

“Don’t worry, we’re all family in this company. And I do mean family, we’re all related by blood and marriage… and guilt by association.”

“You’re fluent in Sindarin?” a soldier gasped. “I thought you just knew a few words.”
“Yes,” Ori replied in a teasing tone. “So if you want to keep secrets, you’d better switch to Quenya.”

A few soldiers looked shocked, but others began to laugh quietly.

“Food’s ready!” Kili shouted. “Come and get it!”

The porridge and the bread and egg bake was a hit with the elves. Many came up to Kili and complimented him. Kili grinned and told them that at home, cooking was his way of getting out of washing the dishes. The soldiers, finding out that he was a prince, were amazed at his ability to cook and happily offered to wash the dishes for him. Kili soon had a group about him asking if this was something all dwarf princes had to do. Ori fed tidbits of meat to Quartz. The meal was eaten, dishes washed and everything repacked before the sun had fully risen.

The road wound on. Ori busied himself with watching the map and taking notes on what they saw. There was plenty to see. Deer peeked out at them. There were squirrels, rabbits, mice, birds of all kinds. Quartz fluttered about and often perched on Ori’s shoulder to tell him what he’d seen. Once a tiny shrew scurried into the middle of the path and challenged them with enraged squeaks.

Chopper came forward to see and the shrew left in a hurry.

They lunched under a cherry tree, helping themselves to the fruit as Tauriel and Legolas and a couple of other elves brought down more from the top. Kili repacked a few things, freeing up a pail, and this was quickly filled with ripe red fruit.

They continued on. Captain Omosuil came back to tell them they were making excellent time and Dol-Guldur was only two hours away. Did Lord Ori still want to see it?

“Will it set us back much?” Ori asked.

“Very little. Even if we go and spent some time there, we will still arrive at our meeting place with Captain Haldir this evening, a day ahead of what we planned.”

Ori grinned.

“And how badly does it stink?”

Omosuil quirked an eyebrow.

“Several weeks of spring and summer rains have rendered it… less stinky.”

“Seeing as we were to meet Haldir midmorning tomorrow…” Ori looked back at the Company.

He stood up in his stirrups.

“Does anyone have an objection to seeing Dol-Guldur?”

The shouts of interest decided him and Ori gave a nod to Captain Omosuil, who smiled and went forward once more.

The ruins appeared through the trees. Ori thought they looked extremely creepy. The wagons and ponies were left with five of Omosuil’s soldiers and everyone else went forward to see the old castle.

Dwalin, Sculdis, Legolas, and Gimli went first with Omosuil and a couple of others, Kili and Tauriel covered them, bows at the ready. Ori followed with the rest of the company and the soldiers. Everyone was on point, even though the place had been cleared out. Ori looked up and saw Quartz flying high, scanning the area.

Ori sketched like mad as they neared it. Rubble was scattered everywhere, making walking awkward. Glorfindel loped forward and, sword drawn, swept through the open doorway.

Ori went up two ruined steps and looked into the entry. It was dark but for some holes which were once windows. Weeds and other fast growing vegetation popped up in various places. Puddles from rain pooled where the flagstones had crumbled. The elves peered about, making Gimli chuckle and produce a torch he’d stuck in his belt. Dain dragged a flint box out of a pocket. The torch threw a strong light about. Glorfindel spotted the stair that led up and around the tower to the top. Glorfindel went up and declared the stair usable.

It was a long climb but they all reached it. Ori gazed out at all the forest around them, busily sketching the view. He looked down over the battlements. He could see outlines in the lumpy grass and plants where the old foundations had been. It was very quiet. A small herd of reddish-furred deer grazed in what had been a back courtyard. The main balcony was wide enough to hold a small
army. It was missing rather a lot of the balustrade.

“Have ya noticed?” Jani asked. “Th’ stones’re under a lot o’ pressure. They’re real angry.”

“I was trying to ignore that,” said Ori. “We aren’t going to be here very long, and maybe that’s a

good thing.”

“This stone’s weathered many a long year,” Jani commented. “When this was built, the trees must

a’ bin saplin’s.”

“Yes, “ Ori said, remembering his readings. “The historians spoke of the trees being nearly a mile

away. This tower could be seen from the Misty Mountains and from Rohan.”

“My!” Dori said, looking about, “Trees do grow fast, don’t they.”

As Ori watched, the trees faded from view. The vegetation retreated and the stones rose out of the

ground, and grew into walls, courtyards. The deer were replaced by soldiers at exercise. He heard

the sounds of shouting, talking, even the voice of a chorus singing. He smelled fires, cooking, pony
dung, wash water and freshly washed clothes. As he turned in a circle he saw the fortress as it had

been originally, in its prime, before the coming of Sauron. It would never be this way again. He

strained to store every sight, every sensation, in his mind, with the intention of recording it on paper.
Perhaps others would dismiss it as a folly, but he would know differently.

Between one blink in the next, it was all gone. The ruins returned, along with the vague,

nauseating smell of orc.

They all stood in silence for a few moments then all descended again. Dwalin stood peering into

an alcove which held a stair disappearing into the depth. Ori started over to join him, but recoiled at

the smell. He turned to his husband.

“Dw-”

Dwalin’s hand was over his mouth and at a signal from Dwalin, the dwarrow hustled everyone

out swiftly. Once they were back outside and halfway to the wagons, Ori asked for himself and the

puzzled elves.

“There was something alive down there, Dwalin?”

“Aye.”

“There are no orcs in there,” Omosuil snapped.

“Didn’t say there was.” Dwalin replied easily. “But as Mahal’s me witness, I know what a bear

smells like.”

Ori giggled in spite of himself.

“If bears are living there now, there are definitely no orcs.”

Omosuil blinked then looked at Glorfindel, who was a trifle red.

“I can’t remember encountering any bears before.” Glorfindel admitted. “I’ve never thought about

what they might smell like.”

“Oh, our Glorfy!” Margr scolded. “Leadin’ th’ Bearer an’ us innocent hand maidens int’ a bear’s
den!”

“Shockin’, our Glorfy, shockin’!” Vi teased.

“Righ’,” Balin said, “with yer leave, wee brother, I say back t’ th’ road an’ on our way.”

“Oh, yes,” Ori agreed. “I got some sketches done, so that will make Master Brur happy. Thank

you for bringing us to see this place, Captain Omosuil.”

“Oh, our Margr!” Vi cried. “Yeh’ve been ridin’ along with our Glorfy all this time! I’m takin’ a

shot at ‘im!”

“Yeh took plenty a’ shots at ‘im las’ night!” Margr replied, but graciously took up the reins of the

wagon.

They restarted their way along the road. Quartz landed on Honda’s head and looked at Ori.

“See a bear?”

“No, but I could smell it.”


“Great,” Ori muttered. “Quartz, if you see any more bears or wolves or the like, please tell us,
elves don’t seem to be concerned with them.”

“Yup,” Quartz promised. “See the fortress change?”
“Yup,” said Ori.

Ori led the way with Omosuil and Dwalin, the map open on Ori’s knees. He had been meticulous in marking their journey on it, numbering places, and describing each event in his journal and in his sketch book.

Everyone was now chatting and laughing together. Dain and Chopper, in a very friendly gesture, allowed a few of the elves rides on Chopper’s back. This made the elves giggle dementedly and Nomirliel nearly fell off when Chopper began frisking.

In return, Dain, with some difficulty, was boosted onto Omosuil’s horse. Dain crowed at the view and grabbed at the leaves above. When he had a large bunch, he hopped down easily and, with great ceremony, presented the ‘bouquet’ to his queen. Sculdis hooted, kissed her king soundly, and started sticking the leaves in his hair. Dain remounted Chopper, his leaf ‘crown’ fluttering, and rode on proudly. Any leaves that fell, he used to adorn Chopper’s head.

The trees thinned and there, in a secluded clearing, stood another squad of elves in formation. These, Ori noted, were dressed in silver and gold armor and were all blonde and stern. Captain Haldir, his helm under his arm, stood ready for them.

Omosuil rode forward and greeted the Lorien captain.

Ori listened in on the conversation conducted in Sindarin.

“Hail, Captain of the Greenwood.”
“Hail and well met, Captain of the Lórien wood.”
“You have discharged your service to your king and to my Lady. We shall bid you good travel as you return to Erys Lasgalen.”
“Your eagerness to relieve us of our charges is commendable. But we shall continue with the Company of Lord Ori.”
“You are not turning back to the palace?” Haldir asked with raised brows. “You are joining us on the road to Lórien?”
“Yes,” said Omosuil. “You might need our assistance.”
“Assistance? I believe we are certainly up to fighting any threat we might find in Lórien,” said Haldir haughtily. “Assuredly, better than anyone from the Greenwood would be.”
“Oh, not that kind of assistance.” Omosuil assured Haldir.

Ori thought Omosuil was enjoying this discussion far too much. Omosuil smiled charingly.

“You see, we have spent several days in close company with the Bearer.”
“And?”
“Should there be any cultural misunderstandings, we’ll be here to assist you.”
“Cultural misunderstandings?” Haldir stared, open-mouthed, at Omosuil.
“Oi! Our Diry!” Dain bellowed at Haldir. “Nice britches! They yer best? Er, tha’ is, yer new best?”

Ori could have sworn he heard Haldir’s neck crack as the blond head swiveled to catch sight of Dain and Chopper, still bedecked in leaves. Haldir’s expression was a study.

Ori rode up and dropped from Honda. He came forward and greeted Haldir in Sindarin.

“Hail and well met, Captain of the Lórien wood. We are honored by your lady’s offer to see us safely to Lórien under your escort.”

Haldir gazed down on him as though Ori was a bug in his wine. Ori smiled wider.

“Your Lady expects us on the morrow. My company is weary after our travel and we shall rest the night here. I’m sure this is perfectly acceptable to you, as it is to Captain Omosuil, whose soldiers have guarded us so carefully, for King Cemnesta gave him and his good soldiers to the service of my husband, Captain Dwalin Fundinul, until he sees fit to dismiss them from his command.”

A ghost of horror crossed Haldir face and disappeared as he groped to understand this.

Honda came forward and laid her head across Ori’s shoulder and stared at Haldir. Ori felt Quartz land on the top of his head.
“Hail and well met, Ourdiry!” shouted Quartz in ancient Khuzdul, apparently thinking this was actually Haldir’s name. Ori waited for Haldir to gather his wits.

The elf captain bowed.

“As you wish, Lord Ori of Fundin.”

Ori turned at called to his company.

“Time to camp!”

The company was instantly in a bustle of activity. The wagons were staged on three sides of the camp and the tents pitched. Wood was gathered and a large fire pit prepared. Omosuil’s soldiers gamely joined in and the camp was ready and dinner being prepared in minutes. Two of Omosuil’s soldiers brought Kili a brace of rabbits and Jani led two more soldiers off to the nearest stream with a net. They returned with a mess of perch flopping about.

Kili hopped up on a stone to embrace Tauriel as she returned with three pheasants for the pot. She carefully plucked them and saved the feathers, as Kili promised to fletch her arrows for her. Tauriel raised an eyebrow at him and he explained he would use the brightly colored ones, so her arrows would honor their targets, being beautiful as well as deadly just like her. Tauriel laughed and shook her head at her love in amused surrender.

Kili prepared food as Sculdís and Dain laid a large grate over the fire. Fish was wrapped in leaves and mud then thrust into the coals, the rabbits and pheasants, cut down one side and roasted on the grate. Kili made a slurry of eggs, rolled some slices of lembas in flour, then in the eggs, and back in the flour and dropped them in a pot of oil. He repeated this with thick slices of onions and put thick slices on cabbage on the grate then turned them and put slices of cheese on them. Omosuil and his squad ate heartily of these, and like the dwarrow, used their fingers and licked them at Haldir’s squad, who primly ate plain lembas.

A couple of Haldir’s squad tried the deep fried lembas and marveled at the delicious change in taste. Kili whipped up dried milk with water to a froth and poured it on sweetened scones smothered in a sauce of cherries, roasted in a pan with nutmeg and maple sugar. All of Haldir’s soldiers tried this dessert and praised it.

Haldir continued to eat his virtuously plain lembas. He looked like he wanted to order his soldiers to do so at well.

Ori thought Haldir must be racking his brains, looking for a way to reprimand his soldiers and for what.

Insubordinate eating?

Fraternizing with Dain and not scowling?

Once more there were stories and singing. Omosuils soldiers joined in the singing of the dwarrow songs and told a few stories of their own. Ori was amused that Omosuils’s squad made themselves perfectly comfortable; eating meat, chatting to Dori, and romping with Legolas, Gimli, Kili, and Tauriel as thought they had all been together since badgerhood.

Ori curled up in his and Dwalin’s bedding once more, feeling pleased with the journey so far, and looking forward to seeing Lady Galadriel and Lord Celeborn again.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Welcome to Lórien, where the elves are waiting and Galadriel has a new friend for the Company to meet. The Glossary and Appendix have been updated to help you keep track! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

They were on their way as the sun dawned, full of Kili’s pancakes smothered in butter and hot maple syrup served with sausages and fried sliced lembas with cheese melted on top. Haldir and his soldiers led the way and Omosuil’s mixed in with the Company.

Ori looked about as they came out of the forest. It was almost strange to be out from the trees and see the grassy plain before them. Straight to the west, was the golden haze that was Lothlórien.

Soon enough they crossed the River Anduin in small boats and reached the trees and once the trees became thick and very tall, Haldir called a stop.

“From here onward, you must all be blindfolded,” said Haldir. “Outsiders may not know the exact way to the heart of Lothlorien.”

The outcry was immediate and direct.

“Fuck yeh,” shouted Gimli. “We was invited.”

“Captain Haldir!” Omosuil barked.

Dain gave a bellow of rage and Ori was afraid Glorfindel would use the king as a battering ram.

Haldir was resolute.

“Now you have come thus far, you must be brought before the Lord and the Lady. They shall judge you, to hold you or give you leave, as they will.”

“Wait!” Ori said, surprised that the noise died as he spoke. “Quartz, please go and see Lady Galadriel and ask if these are her orders for my Company. We shall wait here for your return.”

“Wonder if she’ll have snacks,” Quartz muttered absently as he flew away.

Ori folded his arms and stood his ground before Haldir. Honda snuffed Ori’s ear. Ori felt Dwalin standing at his back and he didn’t need to look behind him to know that the entire company, including Omosuil’s soldiers, was standing just like him, but, unlike him, he sensed they were all glaring as hard as they could at Haldir.

Haldir looked determined, but Ori was sure the elf captain wouldn’t do anything rash. They were perfectly safe. All they had to do was stand there, in silence, and wait for word to come back from the Lady.

Yes, that was all they had to do.

Stand there, silently, and hope Haldir didn’t realize one of his own soldiers stood behind him, crossing his eyes at the back of Haldir’s head.

Giggling was also right out.

Bloody elves.

An odd ‘pop’ sounded and there stood Lady Galadriel with Quartz on her shoulder. She wore robes of silver over white, her fingers and toes twinkling with mithril rings and her ankles circled in tiny bells that tinkled musically whenever she moved.

Quartz cawed excitedly.

Galadriel laughed and scratched him lightly under the beak.
Ori drew a deep breath. At the same time he bowed and said, “M’lady. It’s good to see you again.”
“Lord Ori, you are a day early.”
Haldir also bowed and said, “M’lady, thank Eru you are here!”
She sighed and came to the elf captain. “Haldir, I owe you an apology.”
“I assumed from our talks that you would exempt Lord Ori’s Company from the laws under which
we govern peddlers, adventurers, and the hopelessly lost. Your diligence may someday be the death
of you.”
Haldir swallowed.
She smiled and patted his cheek. “But today is not that day.”
Then she turned and surveyed the glowering crowd at Ori’s back and put a delicate hand over her
mouth. Ori thought this may be the elf version of face-palming.
“I see,” she said finally, “that Cemnesta was wise to ask that we expand our accommodations.
Captain Omosuil, you and your soldiers are quite welcome.”
M’lady.”
She walked past him. “Where is my Dori?”
A squeal of delight called her to the palanquin and she came forward to embrace Dori while lifting
the Bearer from her well-appointed nest. Dori fussed over her and she giggled charmingly. Ori
watched Haldir’s squad, who were shocked and intrigued.
A saddled white palfrey wandered toward the lady, browsing unconcernedly at the lower greenery
as the friends all greeted one another again and Captain Haldir reassembled his air of authority.
Lady Galadriel replaced Dori lightly in the palanquin.
“Ah, there you are, Banbury,” said the lady addressing the palfrey, then she mounted, and they
continued on their way, chattering and laughing. Lady Galadriel, riding beside the palanquin, was
anxious to hear what they had seen and said and eaten.
“I’d be happy to fry some up for you, Lady Galadriel,” called Kili from his wagon.
“Don’t worry, I will hold you to that,” she said, turning to him with a smile. “It sounds like it
would go wonderfully with a tankard of good ale.”
They rode deeper and deeper into a different forest, a forest made up, not of the gold flowers and
silver trunks Ori expected, but by any number of different types of trees. He recognized them from
his time at the inn: oaks, elms, pines of different sizes and shapes. He was far more confident under
these trees than he expected.
Until one of them stepped into the path in front of them.
“Hoom!”
It cleared its throat. Through its mouth. Which sat under its long, knobby nose and large, black
eyes, shaded with mossy brows. Then it bent far down to examine them.
“Hoom!”
The Company ground to a halt, the ponies stamped and shied; Ori barely kept his seat, mainly
through desperate determination.
Behind him, out of deep silence, Kili said, “What. The. Fuck?”
“Ah, Treebeard!” Lady Galadriel cried, riding forward. Her own mount and those of the elves
seemed unaffected. “You’re in time to meet Lord Ori’s Company.”
“So… many…,” said the tree that was, most definitely, not a tree. “Dwarf… with… axes.”
“Oh, shit,” Dwalin muttered.
Gimli peered around Legolas, all the while pushing his own axe a little further down behind his
back.
On Ori’s shoulder, Quartz whispered, “Biggest tree ever.”
Ori mentally kicked himself in the ass and dismounted. He felt his legs shake as he walked forward, wondering if trees were vegetarians, or if that would make them cannibals.

He bowed, happy that Quartz’s talons could not pierce his mail shirt.
“Ori of Fundin at your service, m’lord,” he said, forcing his voice steady.

The tree looked him over for long minutes. Eventually other trees wandered up. Ori felt like he was being sniffed by a particularly large warg while the rest of the pack waited its turn.

“You… are… the… one…”
If he had the strength, Ori would have screamed.

“Ah,” he said instead. “You know Tharkûn.”

The creature, Treebeard, threw his head - upper trunk, branches, something - back and shook with laughter. Around him, shrubs tittered and the elm’s leaves rustled gleefully.

“You… are… the… one…" Kili cried, standing in his cart. “Those are-. I can’t-. I-. I’m not marrying that!” He turned to Tauriel, wild-eyed and shouting. “No! Just no! NO!”

Treebeard raised a shaggy brow, leaning over at him.

“Hmmmm… hoom… why… so… hasty?”

Kili was far too brave to scream, but he did whimper.

Ori stepped in.

“Because Prince Kili is already married to Lady Tauriel, Lord Treebeard.”

“That’s right!” Kili gasped. “I’m a happily married dwarf. Screw The Great Woudini! Very happily! To my One!”

“Ahhhhh… lucky… lad… I… was… married… once…”

He sounded so sad, Ori wanted to speak some comfort to him, but he didn’t know what comforted trees beyond water, sunlight and – above all – not being cut down, so he settled for, “I’m sorry.”

Treebeard regarded him again for long minutes. Ori was aware time was passing.

“Wind… through… the… trees…,” said Treebeard, finally straightening up. “You… I… like.”

The other trees – ents - whistled and hissed at each other over this hasty decision.

Lady Galadriel smiled up at Treebeard.

“I beg your pardon, Treebeard, but we don’t store water and minerals as you do. We must make our way to Caras Galadhon in time.”

The ents took giant strides, and would soon have left the Company far behind if the tall beings did not linger here and there, talking to some tree or other. Ori could only hear one side of these conversations, but they all seemed to involve ground water, lightning strikes and the possibility of rain.

Actually, they sounded like conversations Bilbo had with Hamfast, which was not so strange, as ents and hobbits were both children of Yavanna. He giggled to himself, thinking that they all shared the same family ‘tree’.

At a distance, Lothlórien appeared to be a forest much like Mirkwood, but when they walked alongside the Nimrodel, it revealed itself as anything but.

The sky disappeared, replaced by interwoven branches with gold leaves clustered around yellow flowers, which gave off a light all their own. The old leaf fall threw off a slightly mellower light, and the leaves did not crunch underfoot, but flew upward and flowed like dry, powdery snow and just as silent, around the legs of their ponies.

The trunks of the trees shone, not glittering silver, as Ori expected, but the buff of mithril.

Ori felt like he had entered a new room in a house he thought he knew well. As he watched, elves drifted into being around them, each intent on their own task, or happily idle, then faded from sight, only to be replaced by others.

They seemed to be speaking or singing, but were as silent as the fallen leaves.

Ori was formulating a question about them, when Vi said, “Spooky, ain’t it, how there’s no one but us about.”
Margr agreed.
“Aye. Here, our Gladdy, where is everybody? They canna all’ve been so naughty tha’ yeh sent ‘em t’ their rooms!”

Galadriel laughed, then turned to look right at Ori and said, “Oh, they’re around.”
“W-will we make it to the city by dark, Lady Galadriel?” he asked.
“No, though darkness and night aren’t mutually exclusive here.”
“Is that because we’re now outside of time?”
She shouted with delight.
“How clever you are, my dear!”
“Thank you,” he said, as the others stared. “But it was just a guess.”
Dain chuckled, “A shot in the ‘dark’, wee brother?”
Everyone groaned, including the elves.
“Or not, in this case,” said Ori.
Dwalin nudged Ori.
“Better write tha’ one down f’r our Bilbo.”
Dori said to Lady Galadriel, “At first I wasn’t sure I liked Professor Baggins’ influence on my Ori, but I’ve since found him to be quite the sensible sort who never lets anyone skip a meal.”
“Now, that is sensible,” Galadriel agreed. She peered a little closer at Dori’s handiwork. “Do you think you are carrying a dwarfling or a damling?”
“I’d say a damling, as the pebble is already quite active, and it can’t even be the size of a nugget yet. What do you think, Vi?”
Vi considered.
“Well, our Dori, yer ears do seem a bi’ larger, an’ tha’ says a damlin’, but it’s early days yet.”
“Aye,” Margr agreed. “Still plenty o’ time f’r yer hips an’ haunches t’ fill out, which’d mean a dwarfling instead.”

The elves within earshot had obviously tuned into this conversation.
Captain Omosuil looked at Ori.
“Do they speak in jest, mellon Ori?”
“Not in jest exactly, though there is some teasing involved. Dams and Bearers usually need extra lower body strength to pass a a male infant, because our heads tend to be larger and our skulls thicker.”
“Truly?”
“Yes, actually. I don’t know if ear size comes into it or not. Oin threw the runes, trying to scry if Dori’s pebble would be male or female, but the signs were inconclusive. Really, at this point it’s not either one.”
“Ah, it is only a walnut yet.”
Ori stared at him.
“Tell me you’re not speaking literally.”
Omosuil laughed.
“No, mellon nin, elves do not grow on trees. It is only a figure of speech.”
Ori gave an inward sigh of relief. He did not want to be the one to have to explain that Bujni’s hypothesis had been correct after all.
“What do elves do?” Ori asked.
“Do?”
“To guess the fawn..er…elfling’s gender?”
“We… don’t speculate. I don’t think it even occurs to most of us. Elflings are so rare. Prince Legolas is the youngest of our race, and he is already over two thousand years old.”
Gimli said smugly, “He’s very well preserved.”
In a few hours they approached a ring of trees around another, taller, ring of trees, and in the center of those, on the top of a hill carpeted with yellow and white flowers, stood the tallest tree of all.
“Hoom!” said Treebeard, apparently to this particular tree, “I… know… it… is… hasty…, but…
I… cannot… Hoom!… stop… to… talk. See… these… spry… little… saplings? They… must… be… herded… too!”

He said to Ori, “Rather… long-winded… that… one. Hoom! Comes… from… seeing… so… much.”

Ori couldn’t find the top of the tall tree, but he did see step-like fungus growing out of the trunk and spiraling around it, punctuated here and there by wider platforms.

Kili looked up, and up, squinting.
“‘We’re not at the city already?’”
“‘Oh, no,’ said Galadriel, ‘this is the Naith of Lórien.’”
“‘Does it have a top, or does it just keep going to the stars?’”
Galadriel smiled.
“It has a top, yes, but it would take the better part of a day to reach it. If you climb but a quarter of the way there is a flet – a platform – which overlooks the forest canopy, from which you may see across all of Arda.”

They passed this and traveled further amongst the trees. Dain spent a pleasant little while trying to wheedle the engineering secrets behind these platforms from the elves. He pretended not to believe the flets had been grown just like the steps.

Ori drew everything he saw, especially the ents and Kili’s reaction to them. He couldn’t wait to show those to Fili in particular.

A few hours later, Ori looked around at all the weary faces – dwarf and equine, not elven, of course. The elves looked fresh and clean and entirely too perky.

“We need to make camp,” said Ori to Captain Omosuil. “Is there a good spot nearby?”
“Oh, yes, I know where there is a spot with a deep, cold stream, excellent for bathing.”

Ori bit back a groan, remembering how elves reveled in frigid water. Dwarrow, not so much.

But, a bath was a bath, and Ori needed one. He felt grubby, though he hadn’t been sweating or rolling around in the dirt. His whole body felt distinctly itchy, especially his face. Really, that shouldn’t be the hardest part of his body to keep clean.

The dwarrow had used nothing but fallen wood for their fires since the day they arrived at Mirkwood. In Lothlórien, there didn’t appear to be any.

As he rubbed down Honda, he turned to Kili and said, “We can just eat something cold tonight.”
“After jumping in that river?” Kili asked with a grin. “At that point we’ll be willing to burn our tunics for a little warmth. It’s alright. There is a small supply of charcoal in the wagon.”
“You think of everything!”
“I think of things connected to eating.”
“I can attest to that,” said Tauriel. She gave Kili a wink, and he blushed scarlet and looked away with a grin.

After they had washed, shivered, dried off, and eaten, they settled around the fire.

Ori was grateful to find night falling after all, because he was still seeing the flitting figures of elves among the trees. He cuddled up against Dwalin and turned his eyes to the flames, only to find Durin popping his head up through them like Nori bent on mischief. Ori would never have guessed Durin could make so many funny faces. Ori sighed.
“What’s on yer mind, love?” Dwalin asked.
“Durin’s being a brat and there are tons of elves skipping through the forest around us that only I can see.”

Dwalin chuckled and kissed the top of his head.
“Are you laughing at me?” Ori looked up, giving him the squint eye.
“No, love, jus’ laughin’ in general. I can’t think o’ too many other couples who’ve conversations li’ this.”
“And you never think it’s weird?”
“Weird wen’ out th’ window six months ago, ‘bout th’ time I came home an’ found me brother shackled t’ his desk in his skivvies. Tell yeh one thin’, I ne’er imagined married life’d be this busy.”
“That sounds like a very polite way of saying it’s over the edge and around the bend.”
“Can’t be anymore over th’ edge than Dori and Balin’s. ‘R Nori an’ Bofur’s.”
“Mmm. Right. No ferrets.”
“If yer worried – abou’ th’ elves, no’ the ferrets – yeh kin always jus’ ask our Gladdy abou’ ‘em.”
Ori looked around the fire, but didn’t see the Lady there, just Vi, Margr and Glorfindel doing something they should really take into their tent.
Oh, well, they were all big dwarrow here. Or something. If Haldir was going to turn that shade of grey, it was really on the elf to speak up for himself.

He looked around the camp in general, and found Galadriel on the edge of the firelight, smiling at him.
“I’ll be right back, Dwalin. I think I’m being summoned.”

Soon he found himself walking with Lady Galadriel amidst the trees, guided by the light of Galadriel herself. She said nothing for a long while, and he didn’t know if it was because he was supposed to broach the subject, or if she was ‘communing’ with something or other and shouldn’t be disturbed.
As they walked by, a fair, familiar-looking elf bowed to them.
Galadriel inclined her head with a smile.
Ori looked up at her, wary.
“King Oropher,” Galadriel supplied.
“That’s Thranduil’s father?”
“Oh, yes, and that stick our Thranduil had removed from his behind was nothing to the sequoia tree that burdened his father.”

He snorted, then attempted to reassemble some dignity.
“Why am I the only dwarf who can see them?” Ori asked. “Is it because of Mahal?”
“In your case, I would say yes,” she replied. “Note, I did not say no as well.”
“Noted,” he acknowledged with a grin.
“I will add this: not all elves can see them, either. It seems to be a sense that comes upon us slowly as we age, hence Oropher’s acknowledgement.”
“But, what are they?”
“Just what they seem to be. We are seeing real elves, going about their own business in their own… times, my people would say, though it isn’t accurate.”
“Because we’re outside of time,” said Ori. “Everything that has ever happened here and will ever happen here, is really happening all at once.”
“You are an apt pupil, indeed, Ori of Fundin.”
Ori got a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.
“I hope I don’t run into myself.”
“If you do, I’m sure you’ll find yourself just as adorable as the rest of us do.”
Ori saw that Galadriel had brought them back to the camp and there she parted from him. Ori went back into the circle of firelight and climbed into Dwalin’s lap.
“Well?” Dwalin asked.
“Saw King Oropher. He nodded to Galadriel and ignored me.”
“Rude.”
“Nice actually, Galadriel said he once had a sequoia up his butt.”
“Tha’d make strollin’ dicey.”
“This is a weird place.”
“Yeh ain’t th’ firs t’ think tha’, love.”
Ori scratched his cheek for the third time in row and frowned. His face was obviously still filthy.
He was even beginning to appreciate Dori’s spit, though he wasn’t exactly sad Dori and Balin had gone off to sleep and Dori wasn’t here to supply it.
“Have to find a way to wash this gunk off my cheeks,” he said.
Dwalin ran a hand down his cheek appraisingly and suddenly smiled with delight.
“Yeh’ll no’ wash tha’ off, love. Yer beard’s growin’ in proper now.”
Ori squawked, drawing everyone’s attention.
“Now? Dwalin, I can’t grow a big beard now! We’re in the middle of a quest. I’m busy!”

The dwarrow in the circle called their congratulations. Dwalin sighed and pulled him closer.
“Yer adorable.”
“I’m irritated!”
“I love yeh anyway.”
“Good thing,” Ori sighed. “Gimli, when did yours come in?”
The young dwarf looked up at him with a laugh.
“Yer kiddin’, righ’? Mam says she gave birth t’ a beard with a dwarf attached.”
“That must have been really strange for her.”
“Considerin’ I weighed abou’ as much as one a’ her anvils, I don’ thin’ she really gave it much
though.”
“How big are your mother’s anvils?” Legolas asked innocently
Gimli did a spit take of his beer and Jani and the sisters brayed with laughter.
“Here, our Legs,” Jani said in a severe tone, which mocked her huge grin “It ain’t polite t’ ask a
lass how big her anvils are.”
“Yers’re bigger than his mam’s!” Margr commented, cackling with Vi.
“Oi, you leave me anvils outa this!” Jani threw a heel of bread at Margr.

Ori awoke in the middle of the night, disoriented, until he remembered he was in a tent, in a forest,
and he had to-
“Dwalin.”
“Love?”
“I have a problem.
“Aye?”
“I have to pee.”
“Just go an pick a tree.”
“What if I pick the wrong one?”
Dwalin sat up.
“Oh. Well. Knock firs’?”
“Lovely.”
It was almost impossible to navigate the camp in the dark, and Ori didn’t want to wander too far
from the tent. There were no torches, as the elves used many other senses than sight to keep watch
on the camp. Nor did Ori want to light up the entire camp with Eärendil’s star. He chose what he
thought was a tree, close to the tent, and very well rooted to the ground.
“Hoom?”
“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Ori cried. “I didn’t mean-“
“Not…to…worry,” said an ent he had never met. “Hoom. Hoom. Nitrogen. Good… for…the… soil.”
Another ent called out, “We… could… use… some… over… here!”
“No….here!” a third beckoned.
“What?” Ori cried. “You all want me to pee on you?”
The eeccccrrrrccclle of lifffiffife,” said a Quaking Aspen. “Ggggggo onnnnnnn.”
“Too much pressure!” Ori squeaked. “Great, now I can’t pee!”
“Think - ahum- watery… thoughts,” said the first ent.
“You can’t look at me.”
“Eh?”
“I’m not looking at you and you can’t watch me, or I’ll never be able to pee.”
“Hoom. Hasty-”
“I don’t have time to debate.”
“Very… well.”
“You’re not watching, right?”
“Not… watching,” said the ent.
Ori looked up at the stars and finally was able to pee.
“Shake it more’n twice an yer playin’ with it.”
“What! You said you wouldn’t l - Gimli!”
“Serves yeh right fer talkin’ t’ trees.”

Excerpt from Ori’s log:
“Adventures are supposed to be learning experiences. They’re supposed to be good for you. Trying to pee on a tree when it asks you to do so is not good. Your eyeballs could be floating. You cannot pee.”

Morning brought breakfast of black bread toasted with butter and elderberry jam, fresh fruit, and nut spreads provided by the elves. Ori stuffed his face with slices of bread covered in sweetened groundnut paste and jam.
“Hey, Ori,” said Kili, hunkering down next to him. The prince looked around, but everyone else seemed to be busy with chores of their own.
He offered Ori a small ceramic bottle sealed with a cork.
Ori took it.
“What’s this?”
“It’s an odorless ointment that’ll soothe you face. Gimli said you needed it.”
And Kili winked at him.
“Is this yours?” Ori asked.
“Yep, I use it when I butcher my beard and when new growth makes me want to tear my skin off. Which is fairly often.”
“Thank you!” said Ori. “Do you have some more for yourself?”
“I don’t need it right now. I’ve got plenty in Erebor.”
Kili rose, then turned back and said, “Oh, and don’t drink it. You’ll be shitting for days.”
“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Ori.
Kili went back to checking his supplies. Ori looked around, opened the bottle, shook out a little of the clear liquid and smoothed it on his face, sighing as it soothed the irritation. At the same time, he hoped this wasn’t also a practical joke. It would be hard to lead a quest with a purple face.

They traveled on and a stop was called mid-morning. Galadriel greeted her Lord as he arrived on his white stallion, the saddle now equipped with a ridged mat behind for Kelli, who rode serenely upon it.
Celeborn dismounted to salute his Lady. Kelli hopped down, bounced a few times, then strutted forward to inspect the Company.
“Lord Celeborn!” Ori called.
“Lord Ori. Welcome to Caras Galadhon!”
Ori peered about him, but he didn’t see anything that looked like a city.
He counseled himself to wait. With Galadriel, things were seldom what they seemed.
They rode on for a little ways, following Galadriel and Celeborn down an unmarked path among the mallorn trees. Ori watched the fallen leaves swirl around the legs of their mounts, then mysteriously fall back exactly where they had sat before.
He wondered why they ever felt the need to blindfold anyone here. He doubted a stranger who stumbled into this forest could randomly find an elven city, and, if they did, they would certainly never find their own way back.
“Ori, love,” said Dwalin quietly.
“Dwalin?”
“Look.”
Before them, in their path, loomed two huge statues, bowing up and inward, elfmaids with their foreheads nearly touching, their faces serene, their arms full of flowers, all carved from stone in a familiar style.
Around and above this arch, the mallorn forest grew tall from the flat terrain, but between the arches, the land suddenly changed. A road appeared, the landscape grew hilly, other colors popped among the gold and silver.

Ori swallowed.

He knew that if they rode around this gate the forest would go on and on just like the parts through which they had ridden.

Through the arches, however, was a different place.

“The statues were a gift from the dwarrow of Khazad-dûm,” said Galadriel. “They mark the entrance of the city proper.” “The great dwarf sculptor Klyodhrheit, designed and carved them,” Celeborn went on.

The name was familiar to Ori.

“The famous Furh’nk Klyodhrheit?”

“Why, yes,” Celeborn turned to smile at Ori.

“He is the ancestor of Furh’nk, who is a second to Dwalin. We know him well.” Ori promised himself he would sketch the statues for Furh’nk.

Ori urged Honda to follow the Lord and Lady through.

“Spooky,” Quartz commented. Honda huffed an agreement. Ori held his breath as they rode through, but he didn’t feel the jolt he half expected.

The first thing he registered was singing, many, many elves singing. He thought at first they sang in Quenya but he swore as they all arrived, it changed to Sindarin and Ori was able to make out some of the verses.

You’re out of the woods,
You’re out of the dark,
You’re out of the night
Step into the sun
Step into the light
Keep straight ahead
For the most glorious place
On the face of Ar-dah
Or the sky
Hold onto your breath
Hold onto your heart
Hold onto your hope
March up to the gate
And bid it open
Open!

The wild order of the mallorn trees gave way then. The Company followed Galadriel and Celeborn on a roadless route among fruit trees, branches laden and heavy. As they rode over the gentle hills, clumps of red and blue and orange flowers appeared. There were still no buildings, but suddenly they were no longer in the wild. Walls of stone and vegetation grew up around them.

He had heard the city of Galadriel was a garden. So far this seemed quite literal.

Ori’s experience of gardens was limited, of course, but if he took the flower gardens of Bombur and Erda’s inn, with their riotous colors and rock walls, and magnified them a million times, that was his point of reference for the beautiful elven city.

The ‘outskirts’ were made of endless rooms filled with statues and waterfalls, bridges bowing gracefully over brooks and rivers at every turn, with yellow flowers and leaves flowing through and swirling in gentle eddies. Some spaces felt like the gardens Ori knew, open to the golden branches, and others really did feel like rooms in a grand home, roofed over with tangles of vines, dotted with low furniture and sumptuous cushions of velvet and brocade. Some of the ‘inside’ rooms were curtained with sheer, lace panels, while tapestries of greens, golds and teals lined the walls.
Elves waved and called at them through windows and doorways, leading them along, dropping petals in their path and singing in Quenya, serene and mysterious.

Then, in the center of a wide lawn, stood a single, great mallorn tree. It was much of a height with the one at the Naith, but the whole trunk was wrapped in flets pierced with steps. Even in the middle of the day, the lights of its lanterns glowed bright and warm and the hum of voices washed over them.

“You live here?” he squeaked to the Lady.

Galadriel turned in her saddle and smiled at him.

“I don’t spend all my time eating iklars in Erebor. Though, that is one of my favorite things to do.”

Dori stuck her head out of the palanquin and nodded.

“Very nice, my dear. I love what you’ve done with the place.”

Ori and Dwalin were given a room on a flet nearer the ground, but on the back side of the tree, which seemed to be quieter. There were hot baths, to which they availed themselves happily.

Ori walked out into their bedroom with a towel around his waist, and was about to change into a clean tunic and breeches when he heard whispers and giggling.

He looked up to find the window that opened onto the wide flet was now filled with ogling elven faces.

They spoke in Quenya, but he didn’t have to be fluent to know they were talking about his body, and, of course, all the hair on his body.

“Dwalin!” Ori called.

Dwalin stuck his head around the corner of the doorway, saw they had an audience and grinned. Out he strode, naked.

“Wantin’ t’ see th’ hairy, dwarrow, eh?” he called.

The elves squealed, happily scandalized, and fled.

“Tha’ was fun,” said Dwalin.

“I’ll just bet,” said Ori with a smile. “Where do you suppose they’ve run off to?”

“I’m thinkin’ they’re off t’ find Tauriel an’ ask f’r more details.”

“She’ll enjoy that, actually,” Ori decided.

“Kili may no’ be as happy,” Dwalin pointed out.

“Kili would do the same thing you just did, and be just as happy about it.”

“If he does, then I’ll know I’ve taught him well.”

Ori slipped his tunic over his head. He thought he could forego the mithril shirt while he was here.

“I suppose I should ask Lady Galadriel what she has planned. I don’t know when dinner is, or what it is. Is the rest of the Company nearby?” Ori pulled on his breeches and socks and boots.

“Everyone except th’ ents.”

“Where have the ents gone?”

“Continuin’ t’wards th’ mountains. ‘Parently it’s no’ small thin’, herdin’ trees.”

They heard a knock at the doors.

“Bloody elves,” said Dwalin.

Still naked, he strode to the door and flung it open.

“Alrig, yeh-”

The tall, blonde young woman at the door looked down at him, all of him, and smiled crookedly.

“My uncle said the dwarrow were friendly, but this is above and beyond,” she said.

Dwalin cleared his throat.

“Love? Visitor a’ th’ door. I’m goin’ t’ get meself dressed.”

He bowed to the lady civilly, then took himself away.

Ori stared. The young woman was dressed in light armor of Rohan make, and her long blond hair was loose. She looked a great deal like Theodred and Theoden. Ori grinned and went forward to meet her.
“Lady Eowyn, I presume,” he said as the woman held out both hands to him. “Ori of Fundin. I’m delighted to meet you at last! Theo talks about you all so much, I feel like I’ve known you all forever. So, I’m not standing on ceremony!”

With that, she was down on her knees, wrapping him in a hug. Ori hugged back, saying, “How much have you teased your brother by messenger on his married state?”

She threw back her head and laughed merrily. “Whenever I can. And since he doesn’t come back and rip up at me, I know he’s ridiculously happy.”

She rose and Dwalin reappeared fully dressed. “My husband...who you’ve met...briefly,” Ori teased. “Dwalin, here’s Eowyn, Theodred’s cousin.”

Dwalin grinned at her. “Greetings, Dwalin,” she announced, dropping Ori’s hand to hug Dwalin. Dwalin chuckled and opened his arms to embrace her. “Hello t’ yeh, lass. Yeh look finer than a chunk a’ new ore. How’re yer uncle an’ cousin keepin’ then?”

“Very well. I think Uncle is planning to visit Erebor again soon. Theo has been practicing madly with the sword your princes made for him.”

“Guid,” Dwalin approved. “Fili’s the heir, so he ain’t here, bu’ Kili’s here f’r yeh t’ meet.”

The three of them stepped down from the flet to the grassy glade where some of the Company had gathered, Kili and Tauriel among them.

“Oi, our Kili,” Dwalin bellowed. “Here’s our Theo’s cousin, Eowyn.”

Kili bounced forward and hugged Eowyn. “Hello, cous! Come meet my wife, Tauriel.”

Ori couldn’t missed the pride in Kili’s words and eyes as he tugged her forward to greet Tauriel. Galadriel came from another glade, hand in hand with Dori. Celeborn and Balin followed, talking.

“Eowyn!” Galadriel scolded. “How could you present yourself without my introduction?”

Eowyn grinned, blushing a little. “I’m sorry, milady. But everyone was saying Lord Ori was here and I just couldn’t wait. I promise to be very proper when you introduce me to the honored Bearer.”

Galadriel looked amused and patted her cheek. “Very well. I will excuse you this time as Lord Ori is irresistibly huggable on first sight.”

“What?” Ori gasped, his face aflame. Dwalin laughed and slung an arm about his shoulders. “Sorry, love, but yeh’ve tha’ effect on folk.” Ori tried not to blush as his Company and Omosuil’s soldiers all grinned at him.

Lady Galadriel turned to Dori. “Dearest Bearer Dori, do allow me to present to you Lady Eowyn of Rohan, niece of dear King Theoden. Eowyn, this is the honored Bearer of Erebor, Dori of Fundin.”

“Oh!” cried Dori in fullest delight. “Eowyn! You are dear Theodred’s cousin. Oh, and your uncle is that very naughty man, Theoden. How perfectly lovely to meet you, my dear! Do come here, so I may give you a kiss.”

Eowyn embraced the Bearer rapturously then politely exchanged bows, clasped arms, then hugged Balin.

Lady Galadriel led the way to an open glade and they seated themselves upon comfortable chairs beside a murmuring stream bordered by purple irises.

“Margr, Vi,” Dori called, “Do come and meet Lady Eowyn. She’s King Theoden’s niece, that bad man. Isn’t she just the dearest thing!”

Margr and Vi pounced and gushed over the Rohan lady until she nearly fell off her seat laughing. Captain Haldir returned, bowed to his Lord and Lady then came to Eowyn and bowed to her. He took her hand and Ori thought he was going to kiss it. He tried but was slapped with Dori’s fan for his efforts.
“Go away, you wicked elf. How dare you flirt with this darling girl. At your age! And in front of me! Lady Galadriel!”

Omosuil left the glade in a hurry, Ori thought he would burst before he made it to the tree line. As it was, they still heard his hysterical laughter and Haldir looked put out.

“Captain Haldir?” Lady Galadriel said with perfect gravity.
“I was merely paying my respects, Honored Bearer,” Haldir said icily.
“Yes, and we all heard at the late high king’s funeral about your respect for my darling Thranduil!” Dori was puffed up like an angry Kelli.
Celeborn made a noise between a cough and a sneeze, and hastily asked about the guard detail at the north end of Lórien.

Ori and Eowyn walked away from the glade and up a gentle hillside full of the yellow star flowers Galadriel called eleanor and the white and pale green niphredil. A thought had niggled at him and he wanted to know the answer.

“Eowyn,” he started. “What brought you to Lórien? Has the news of this quest reached Rohan?”
“Oh, no,” Eowyn assured him. “Seeing you and your Company here was a complete surprise for me. The patrols of my people’s borders heard from the few men in the Brownlands that…” she paused, frowning.

“That?” Ori encouraged.

“It made no sense, but rumors are that the trees of Fangorn are behaving strangely. Despite the fall of Mordor and the removal of the enemy, people still fear that dark things may yet linger.”

“Oh.” Ori was relieved that his quest was still secret.

“Uncle kept getting reports of such but they were mixed and odd. I was at loose ends and Uncle was hinting at it being time for me to marry, so I volunteered to come here.”

He looked up at her with a mischievous smile.

“Looking for a dwarven mate like your brother?”

“No, m’lord,” she replied, making a face at him. “I merely came as a messenger, and to consult with the Lord and Lady of Lothlórien.”

“And what did her ladyship tell you?”
Eowyn laughed.

“Everything and nothing, as is the way of elves. I suspected she is well aware and perhaps, even involved in it.” Eowyn continued hurriedly. “I don’t mean to say I suspect the Lord and Lady are expanding their lands with a conquering purpose but…”

She paused again, frowning at the flowers. Ori led the way to a clear spot and they sat. Ori looked long at Eowyn and, becoming aware of his scrutiny, she cocked her head in question at him.

“Why a diplomatic visit now?” she asked. “I have heard nothing of you and your Company continuing to Rohan or Beleghost to see its dwarf queen and my brother.”

“That is not our object,” Ori said quietly.
“Your object is?” she bluntly inquired.
Ori sighed. “It is of the utmost secrecy.”
“I am trustworthy. I quite consider all of you to be well-known and dear friends of my family and Rohan.”

Ori sent a question mark into the ether and received a nudge of encouragement in return.
He shifted closer, and quietly told the White Lady of Rohan the tale of his quest. She listened intently and made no comment.

“So you see why I asked you why you were here at this time,” Ori finished.
Eowyn nodded and considered.

“Your quest is a noble one,” she said. “I know little of your people. Rohan is of a patriarchal line but we honor our queens. To wipe out such, is wrong in our eyes as well. May I ask what you suspect?”

“I’m not sure,” Ori admitted. “I am quite sure she was not of the Longbeard clan of the line of Durin. The forefathers of our clans woke in pairs with their queens. All the queens’ names are
preserved. The Blacklocks are a matriarchy, as they have been since the beginning, but they do not erase the names of the sires of their queens.”

“Longbeards are the line of Durin,” Eowyn mused. “Prince Kili is the most different looking of your Company.”

“Kili looks very like his idad, I mean uncle, King Thorin and so does his older brother Fili, though Fili is blond like their father.”

“Are your husband and his brother are Longbeards?”

“Yes, and of the Durin line. King Dain I was father to King Thror and Thorin is his grandson by Prince Thrain. Balin and Dwalin are from Dain I’s younger brother Borin, from Borin there was Farim. His sons were Fundin and Groin. Fundin was Balin and Dwalin’s father and Gimli is the grandson of Groin. So Balin and Dwalin are cousins to Oin and his brother Gloin, who’s Gimli’s father. Dori is also a Durin. He’s our Dain’s brother through Nain’s er…accident with our late mother.”

Eowyn grinned and asked, “Is that scandalous?”

“Oh yes! The Durins didn’t know about us, the Brothers Ri, until Dwalin and I married. Nor did I, for that matter.”

“An’ life’s bin topsy-turvy ever since.” Dwalin said, coming down to join them.

“You love it!” Ori accused.

“Aye, me ghivashel, I do.” Dwalin leaned in to kiss Ori. “C’mon th’ pair a’ yeh, dinner’s waitin’.”

Eowyn had no idea what dinner in Lórien would look like. He was sure it must be different from dinner in Erebor.

He just never imagined how different.

The lovely long table seated all the Company, Omosuil and his squad, Haldir and a few of his soldiers, and the Lord and Lady. The plates were white porcelain, so thin they were almost transparent, the only decoration a spider silk-sized thread of silver around the edge. The flatware and goblets were silver. There were crystal carafes of clear water or mead. There were three choices of food to begin the meal. Ori gawked.

Each was moulded in a ring. One was bright red and turned out to be cherries and walnuts in a cherry flavored gelatin. This was quite good though, to Ori, it was like having dessert first which he had no problem with. In the second ring, tiny orange sections spiced with cinnamon and cloves floated, suspended in an orange flavored gelatin with a different nut mixed in. This wasn’t as good as the cherry but still quite nice.

The third Ori was loathe to even try. He told himself he had tried everything when they visited the inn and had learned that green food was good. This however didn’t look good or smell good. It had only had the faintest scent of lemon and vinegar. It was vast ring of clear gelatin, floating inside were strings of green things and more bits of red and green things. Ori courageously put a small piece on his plate and stared at it. It looked like a slice of weedy pond water.

“What is it?” Dori asked, having also put a thin slice on her own plate. Ori watched as Dori popped a bite into her mouth.

“Perfections Salad,” said Galadriel. “What do you think?”

“It is certainly…. perfect,” said Dori. She reached for her goblet and drank down the contents.

“Perfectly what, our Dori?” asked Galadriel, blinking innocently.

“Don’t tease, dear.”

“It’s Captain Haldir’s favorite,” said Celeborn, apropos of nothing.

“Hmm,” said Dori. She turned to the captain. “Your life has been filled with disappointment, hasn’t it, dear.”

Ori bravely put a tiny bite into his mouth, regretted it immediately, and copied Dori, emptying his goblet to wash away the tasteless, gelatinous ick. Ori decided that flavorless gelatin, cabbage, and olives didn’t go together very well.

Eowyn had taken a slice and now poked at it in horrified fascination. Kili leaned his face in over
her plate, asking,

"Why does it wiggle? How did you make the vegetables float? Is that cabbage? Who ever came up with such a thing? Is it elf magic?"

"Evil magic, more like," Dwalin muttered.

"I think, I’m er… of an elegant salad sufficiency,” Eowyn tried, exchanging a worried look with Kili.

Haldir, slightly miffed at the Rohan lady’s confusion at his favorite dish, sighed and said,

“Just put it in your mouth, m’lady.”

Eowyn turned, one eyebrow raised then smiled sweetly.

“You aren’t married, are you, Captain.”

“No. Why do you ask?”

Margr sighed and patted his thigh.

“Our Diry, if yeh don’t know, yer beyond our help.”

Haldir chose to reply by helping himself to another slice of Perfection Salad and consuming it with evident enjoyment.

Once all the orange and red… things… were eaten, the dwarrow still looked askance at the other… thing.

Celeborn wiped his mouth delicately.

“Well, then. Who is for chips with rolls and butter?”

The entire Company and Eowyn cheered.

Vi cried out, “Phew! We knew yeh were jus’ teasin’ with tha’ other stuff. Yer a hero, our Celli.”

Kelli, sitting beside the Lord, acknowledged this with a civil squawk.

Dinner was cleared away and the maps brought out and unrolled across the tabletop.

“We have been keeping careful account of comings and goings at the doors of Moria,” said Haldir. “It has not been difficult. There have been very few.”

“Th’ orcs don’t set watch on th’ doors?” Dwalin asked.

“No watch on the doors - indeed, there are no doors.”

“Coulda told yeh tha,” said Dain. “Me old leg is under one a’ ‘em.”

Haldir stared at him in horror as he continued.

“The orcs do no organized patrols of the vale before the… doorway. Of course, there is not much of a vale any more, either. The battlefield of Dimrill Dale is grown over with trees and ents.”

“There’s no way to tell how many orcs are still inside?” Ori asked.

“No,” Haldir replied. “We know they still dwell there. From time to time, some orc or other shambles out amongst the rubble, but they keep close to the walls, as they all have, since the ents have been herding their saplings along the Silverlode to Mirrormere. If your company moves under the trees, we see small likelihood of ambush, or even resistance.”

Celeborn added, “They are not the only beings alive in the mountains. There are the usual predators and smaller animals. For decades now we have seen flights of enormous birds over the peaks. Our eyes are keen and we see they are shaped like scavengers, but they are centered in the skies above Caradhras and come no closer.”

Ori looked to Dwalin.

“What do you think?”

Dwalin considered.

“We want th’ majority a’ soldiers in th’ woods around th’ doors, close t’ th’ walls. Once th’ company’s inside, th’ last thin’ we need is f’r th’ orcs t’ creep out from some tunnel we can’t see an’ move around t’ th’ doors t’ ambush us from behind. A smaller detachment should set up just inside th’ doors t’ guard th’ bridge an’ handle th’ transfer a’ th’ box.”

“Captain Dwalin? Lord Ori?”

Dwalin and Ori turned to see Omosuil and his squad all looking at them.

“What’s on yer mind, Omosuil?” Dwalin barked.

“I and my soldiers are in your service and will remain so until you dismiss us, no doubt, when we
reached the court of King Cemnesta again. We are ready to escort your Company into Mo… Khazad-dûm.” The elf captain stumbled a little over the khuzdul, but his eyes and poise never wavered. Dwalin cocked an eyebrow then looked at Ori.

“The mountain is a dangerous place,” Ori began. He was worrying now. This was a change to his original bargain with Mahal. Mahal had promised to do His best for the Company. Cemnesta’s soldiers were not in the picture.

“We are soldiers,” Omosuil said firmly. “When we were assigned to you, we accepted the fact that we could die protecting your Company, Lord Ori. If we can spare the lives of your Company by doing so, we are willing.”

Ori paused. A hot boom echoed in his mind.

“I said elves, me wee scribe. Be it three ‘r thirty-three, I told yeh I’d do me best. An’ that goes f’r any more tha’ toss their lot in wi’ yeh.”

“Thank you,” Ori whispered then smiled at Omosuil, who was staring at him oddly. Lady Galadriel beamed and Celeborn’s eyebrows were at his hairline. Ori grinned up at Dwalin, who turned to Omosuil.

“Right, lad, yer all in. Stay sharp.”

Omosuil turned, eyes alight at his warriors. all of whom rose as one and shouted.

“Du Bekâr!”

Which brought the Company up shouting, cheering, and hugging each other.

Haldir looked appalled but the Lord and Lady laughed. Ori relaxed into Dwalin’s shoulder. Dwalin leaned close, murmuring.

“Mahal promised t’ do His best f’r em, too, eh?”

“Yes,” Ori whispered back. “But I’m a little leery now as He added that goes for any more that tosses their lot in with us. Dwalin, Dori is not coming no matter what!”

Dwalin snorted then leaned back in his chair. Ori watched as Dwalin caught his brother’s eye and signed in Iglishmêk that neither he nor Dori were to come. Balin bowed his head in acquiescence, but chuckled and threw Ori a wink. Dori turned at the end of this exchange and looked inquiringly at Ori. Ori frowned as hard as he could.

“You’re not coming, Dori!”

“Why, pet! I already said-”

“You’re still not coming.”

Dori made an angry noise and turned in appeal to Lady Galadriel, who laughed again.

“Beloved?” Galadriel said to Celeborn.

The elf lord smiled.

“You have my word, Lord Ori. Come the time you all set out, I shall shackle the Honored Bearer to my own wrist.”

“Dori’s very strong.” Ori said doubtfully.

“Then dear Treebeard will ask the great Mallon here to hang on to Dori,” Galadriel said merrily.

“Really!” Dori huffed. “I gave my word already!”

“Yes, my darling,” cooed Galadriel, “but as a mother myself, I know what it is to try and stop your child from going into danger.”

“Celebrian never did anything dangerous,” Celeborn noted aside.

“Yes, my heart,” Galadriel informed him, “but if she had, you know I would have gone to her aide. I would have walked into Mordor itself.”

“Good thin’ we ain’t walkin’ int’ Mordor,” Dwalin observed to Ori, who giggled.

“One does not just walk into Mordor,” Haldir said, severely.

“Laddie,” Balin replied, genial to a fault. “If there was a danger callin’, our Dori would walk into Mordor, complain about th’ furnishin’s, take what was needin’ protectin’ an’ stroll out.”

“I would, too!” Dori snapped. “Imagine if my Ori was in Mordor! He’d catch his death of cold!”

“Doreeeee,” Ori groaned. “We’re not going to Mordor! We’re going to Khazad-dûm. It’s not going to be that cold. Besides, it wouldn’t be cold in Mordor, anyway. It’s a big lava flat and probably too hot to go near yet.”
“Uncle has been told it’s still smoking,” Eowyn added helpfully, a naughty twinkle in her eye.
“There,” Ori added on. Dori sighed and lapsed into a pout.
Dawn found Ori, Dwalin, Dain, Eowyn and Haldir climbing the flets. When Haldir stopped them on one, Ori was stunned by the view. The fleeting fog of the night was pinkish in the first light and they had clear sight over the trees to the Misty Mountains. The peaks of Caradhras, Celebdil, and Fanuidhol towered above. Ori consulted his map and easily pinpointed the door of Khazad-dûm.

Dwalin removed a spy glass from his pocket and watched for a few moments. Dain pulled something out of his own pocket and grunted at Dwalin. Dwalin handed his cousin the spyglass. Dain affixed something else to the end of it and Dwalin looked out through it again.

"Nice one, our Dain."

“Aye, curved mirrors an’ lenses’re a wonder.”

Dwalin handed Ori the spyglass with a grin.

Ori trained the glass on the door and looked through.

The door of Khazad-dûm was right there, though it looked more like a simple pile of loose stone and rubble. Before this, there was a gap of several yards then the trees began. Ori could see the tops of the ents moving about. He handed the spyglass back to Dwalin, who handed it to Eowyn.

She stared through it.

“It’s true,” she muttered in disbelief. “All the tales and reports were true. Within this three miles, I can see it coming. I can see the grove moving. Birnam Wood has come to Dunsinane.”

Ori looked at Dwalin again.

“Then we’d best go.”

“Aye,” Dwalin agreed.

Dain grunted before commenting,

“The door of Khazad-dûm was right there, though it looked more like a simple pile of loose stone and rubble. Before this, there was a gap of several yards then the trees began. Ori could see the tops of the ents moving about. He handed the spyglass back to Dwalin, who handed it to Eowyn.

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Ori looked at Dwalin again.

“Then we’d best go.”

“Aye,” Dwalin agreed.

Dain grunted before commenting,

“An’ if there’s orcs, we’ll lay int’ ‘em an’ dead will be ‘im tha’ firs’ cries hold, enough!”

Coming down was achieved much faster than ascending, mostly because Dain and Dwalin chivvied each other, racing in great leaps from flet to flet. Ori and Eowyn rushed behind, hampered by giggles, while Haldir skimmed down with the usual vile elegance of elves.

Kili and some of the elves, who waited on the Lord and Lady, had breakfast laid out. Galadriel and Dori cozed pleasantly over cups of tea.

Balin looked up from enjoying a pipe and watching Celeborn feed pieces of egg bread to Kelli.

“Come an’ fortify yerself, wee brother. Orcs don’t like bein’ abroad in daylight much, so yeh’ve got the most of a day t ge’ this over an’ done with.”

“Yes, pet,” Dori agreed and started making Ori a plate, much to Ori’s embarrassment. “You need to go on adventures with your tummy full. I’ve had Kili make up little packs of snacks in case you’re not back by luncheon.”

Dori sounded like they were going on a picnic somewhere, so Ori decided that discretion was the better route and politely ate the hearty meal of hot oatmeal, fruit, and toast Dori set before him.

He finished and sat back, Dwalin’s arm was across the back of his chair, touching Ori’s shoulders. Ori felt better with his husband’s muscle at his neck. Ori took another sip of tea, straightened, and looked about at his Company. He was startled to notice his Company and
Omosuil’s soldiers immediately quieted and looked expectantly at him.

“We must first gather the things we need to get in, get the box, and get out. We’ll need our tools and weapons, but at the same time try and travel as lightly and quietly as possible for speed. As Balin said, orcs do not like daylight and so they would be asleep or, at least, not near the entrance where the daylight penetrates. We’ve come to Lórien with the appearance of a delegation, so it’s doubtful they will considered such a small band as ourselves a threat.” Ori pondered his cup in his hands. This adventure was real. It was happening. They were going to enter Khazad-dûm today and get the box.

“Thanks to the ents, Birnam Wood has indeed moved to Dunsinane and is within a few yards of the entrance. So our advance should be completely hidden until the shelter of the entryway. Our current action now is preparing ourselves to go in.”

“Right,” Dwalin barked. “Yeh’ve all heard th’ orders, get crackin’.”

The Company rose laughing and talking. Ori looked up at Dwalin, who kissed him and smiled.

“We’re gettin’ this done, love. An’ then we’re goin’ home wi’ yer box.”

Ori took a deep breath, then, “Yes, we’re getting it done.”

“Of course you are, pet,” Dori prompted. “Now hurry up and get ready. You’ve a lot to do.”

Ori grinned, rose and went to Dori’s side, kissing Dori’s cheek.

“Yes, Ori’s Dori.”

The armory wagon swarmed with activity. Everyone was arming themselves. Kili packed his and Tauriel’s quivers. They each had two. Tauriel sharpened and polished hers and Kili’s swords. Margr and Vi stood ready, their mattocks strapped to their backs. Dain was pulling tools about and turned when Ori came up.

“What in’ Durin’s beard is that bloody great chest fer, wee scribe brother?”

Ori looked into the wagon. There was a large packing box at the side.

“What’s in this?” Ori asked pulling the box forward. On it, in very official script, was stamped ‘Jumpsuits for Entering Khazad-dûm’.

“What’s a jumpsuit?” Kili asked.

Ori said weakly, “I hope it’s not something to jump in. If they have ears and little fluffy tails—“

“Then our Dipfa’s goin’ t’ th’ Halls sooner than she planned,” Dwalin griped.

They pried off the lid. The box was filled with clothing.

Ori lifted and unfolded a garment at random and was relieved to find it a one-piece tunic and leggings affair, along the same lines as Bujni’s coronation costume, but not nearly as bright.

“Stone colors, a’ leas’,” said Dain.

“There seems to be one for each of us,” said Ori, after passing out the ‘jump suits’ then looking back in the box. “Except, there’s not one for you, Lady Galadriel.”

“Guess again!” Dori sang. She walked forward waving a rather lot of material in each hand.

“Dori!” Ori cried.

“Don’t look at me that way, pet. Dipfa asked me if she could and I told her I thought it would be a lovely gesture.”

“Of course you did,” Ori mumbled as Dori wafted over to Galadriel.

“Now, darling, she wanted you to have a choice, so we have one that is very much like the others, and then this pretty pale green one with floaty, cloak-y things sewn onto the back.”

Galadriel clapped her hands together in delight.

“Oh, how thoughtful of you both!” Galadriel cried.

“And I made sure they were both roomy enough to flatter your more ample figure!”

“You think of everything!”

Galadriel shook the suit open. It was a very pretty pale green but Ori gaped as he saw what was attached to the back.

It was a project Dipfa had shown him once, made of material similar to that of Dori’s presentation robe but more opaque, with tiny iridescent threads running all through. Ori groaned.

Wearing it, would make Lady Galadriel the giant fairy of Dipfa’s dreams.
Galadriel held it up to herself and looked at Celeborn
“Isn’t it fun, my Lord. And such a nice summer-y color?”
Celeborn looked at his Lady and the jumpsuit and folded his lips. Kelli waddled over, inspected
the suit, made a loud clonk noise with his beak and strutted back.
“I agree with Kelli,” Celeborn said, majestically.
Galadriel looked the suit over again and gave a delighted cry.
“It has pockets! It has pockets everywhere!”
Ori looked his over and saw the suit did indeed have a great many pockets. There were pockets
on the chest, going down the sleeves, against the ribs, on either side below the waist, and others
going down the legs. The material was sturdily quilted but smooth to the touch.
“Ooo,” cried Vi, admiring her own suit. “They’ve all got lots a’ pockets!”
“Alright,” Dwali allowed. “I give one t’ our Dipfa. Lots a places f’r weapons ‘r tools, an’
warm, so we kin cut down on weight.”
“Aye this’ll do nicely,” Jani agreed. “I’m goin’ t ask our Dipfa f’r a few more. These’ud be great
f’r th’ mine.”
“Are you sure you want to wear the green one, ma’am?” Eowyn asked Galadriel.
“Oh yes, I like it.”
“Good,” said Eowyn. “I’ll wear the other one.”
They all turned and stared at her.
“You don’t still think I’m letting you go and do this without me, do you? If nothing else, I will
stand guard with the elves.”
Everyone turned to Ori and he wondered for an instant if he had ink on his forehead. Then he
remembered he was supposed to be leading this quest.
“Oh, yes, actually, that would be wonderful and I’m sure Master Haldir won’t mind the extra help,
if you prefer to guard.”
He looked over at Haldir, who waved a lackadaisical hand and said with resignation, “Why not?”
“I’m going into the mountain,” said Eowyn firmly.
“I brought spare contracts,” said Balin. “Kin yeh read, lass?”
“Oh, yes, in westron and in the language of Rohan.”
“Lessee. Westron,” said Balin, going through a sheaf of papers. “Aye, here we go.”
“We’re dwarrow,” said Gimli to Eowyn. “We’re prepared.”
Lady Galadriel, still inspecting her jumpsuit, said, “Oh, how sweet, she’s embroidered our names
one each one.”
Ori facepalmed. Indeed, they had on the left, just below the collar bone, each of their names
handsomely embroidered on a rectangle patch.
“Dipfa!” Ori groaned
Galadriel turned to one of her handmaids and held out the plain suit Dipfa had made.
“Can this be quickly altered to bear Lady Eowyn’s name instead of mine?”
“Immediately, Lady Galadriel,” said the elf maid. She curtsied and took the suit away.
“Haldir?” Galadriel called to him.
“I… don’t believe they’re my color, m’lady.”
“Alas. But no doubt that is why there isn’t one for you.”
Eowyn was glancing through the contract, she grinned at Ori and Balin handed her freshly dipped
pen.

Soon everyone was arrayed in their suits and repacking their tools and weapons into them. Tauriel
looked extremely amused while Kili checked her suit’s fastenings and adjusted the straps, asking her
every now and then if it fitted well and if she could reach her quiver without trouble. She returned
the favor. Sculdis and Dain matched perfectly and every pocket on their suits was filled.
Legolas sat cross-legged on the ground, inspecting arrows and filling a second quiver. Gimli
frowned as he carefully braided his elf’s crown hair into a braid, keeping any stray hair away from
Legolas’ eyes. Ori smirked when he saw their suits also matched, and each had a sewn-in stout
harness for their weapons. Ori dressed with Dori’s help while Balin helped Dwalin into his suit. Ori was glad he’d put on the mithril shirt that morning. It was safely hidden under his tunic.

“Now remember,” Dori scolded, kissing Ori’s cheek. “You leave the fighting to your professional bullies.”

“Yes, Ori’s Dori.”

Ori smothered a giggled. Dwalin wasn’t so subtle, as he snickered.

Glorfindel chuckled as Margr and Vi got him into his suit.

“I can’t wait for you to take it off me again,” he said.

Vi smacked his arse.

“So tha’s why yer no’ wearin’ yer drawers, is it?”

“This garb seems to fit better without them,” he said. “Besides, drawers are an evil invention of men, designed to keep our bottom parts from breathing as Eru intended.”

“Your bottom bits start breathin’, love,” said Margr, “an’ yer sleepin’ with th’ ponies.”

They fastened his halberd on and told him where they were tucking the rest of his weapons.

Dain passed out crowbars of varying sizes to everyone.

Captain Omosuil burst into the grove with his squad. They had all changed their raiment from the forest pine of the Greenwood to shades of stone gray, like the Company.

Galadriel reappeared with Celeborn. She made her jumpsuit look the height of fashion. Janni nodded approvingly and handed her a very large, long crowbar. Galadriel took it and brandished it like a sword. Celeborn groaned, took it, and put it in the long pocket at her shoulder and going down her back, as she giggled and teased him.

Dori tucked Ori’s sling shot into a pocket at Ori’s waist and put the pouch of arrow heads in the opposite pocket. Dori sniffed. Ori turned and grabbed Dori tight, hugging her.

Dori warned him, “I’m petitioning Mahal as soon as you enter that horrid place.”

“Do it before,” Ori said. “I want Him concentrating on us while we’re there.”

“I promise, pet. Remember, leave the fighting-”

“Yes, Dori, to my professional bullies.”

“Righ’,” barked Dwalin. “All o’ Lord Ori’s bullies ge’ fron’ an’ center.”

Captain Omosuil’s squad marched forward and surrounded the Company in formation.

“Seriously?” Ori asked.

“Bullies, reporting for duty, Lord Ori,” said Omosuil with a smirk.

“This is going to be fun,” said Kili, sending Tauriel into giggles.

Treebeard and a cadre of ents arrived.

Ori approached, bowing.

“Thank you for doing this, Treebeard. We really appreciate the help.”

A wind blew through the branches and Ori had the strange feeling that the ents were… well, not purring, that would be strange, but making pleased sounds at any rate. Apparently, a couple of days to think it over had brought them to the decision that they liked Ori and his Company as well.

“The… orcs… will… not… escape… us,” Treebeard vowed.

“Good, great,” said Ori.

He didn’t ask what Treebeard meant by that. He didn’t think he’d like the answer. He simply trusted that Treebeard and his companions knew what they were about. They must, if they had lived this long.

Celeborn turned to Dori.

“Bearer, I have a great favor to ask. I would like to go with the Company to the mountain, though not entering it, of course, and I would be much easier knowing that I left Kelli to your capable care.”

Dori’s eyebrow raised precipitously.

“My dear Celeborn, that’s quite a lot of well-intentioned pony shite, but I will do it, seeing you asked so prettily.”

She bowed and Kelli squawked and smacked Celeborn’s hip with his forehead.

The elf knelt down so he and the bird were eye to eye.

“You be good for Lady Dori, Kelli.”
Kelli cuddled against Celeborn.
“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’,” he said.
“Ready?” Ori asked.
On hearing that all were prepared, Ori turned to Treebeard.
“Let’s go.”
Treebeard lifted Ori and Dwalin each onto a limb, while all around them the other ents did the same, lifting dwarrow and elves and all their equipment before setting off in a traveling grove at high speed toward the mountains.
Ori heard a croak and the flap of wings and Quartzite landed on his shoulder.
“Quartz, what are you doing? You’re supposed to stay behind with Dori!”
The raven favored him with an unimpressed look.
“Going with you. You need me. Plus…”
“Plus?”
“Orcs are quieter.”
“Oi!” came a shout from Dain. “I resemble tha’ remark!”
“Mahal help us all,” groaned Dwalin.
“Tell yer hubby no’ t’ worry,” came the hot boom in Ori’s head. “I’m on it.”
They made it to the huge, over-grown doorway. It was in ruins but rocks covered most of it. Dwalin climbed up and signed in Iglishmêk the ‘all clear’. Ori stood by his side in a moment and there was an opening. Quickly, Ori signed this to the rest of the company and instantly everyone was busy removing the rubble and stones from the entry, preparing room to move the box through. Ori glanced back into Birnam Wood which had followed them to a few feet away. Eowyn did her best to help move the rock but she was not of the same caliber of Jani, Margr and Vi. She turned and kept watch above them, sword drawn. Galadriel helped by making the rocks cling together and emit no noise as they were dropped to the sides.

“Heh!” Dain snickered, holding up the remains of a leather something that had weathered a century in the rubble.

Ori signed, “What is it?”

Dain replied in kind, “The boot I was wearing when the doors fell on my leg.”

“Please tell me your foot isn’t still in it.”

“No, that’s gone, but, here’s my lucky gold coin!”

“How lucky could it be? You lost your leg!”

“Sure, it’s lucky. The doors could have fallen on my head!” He looked at the boot fondly. “I still have the match of this one at home.”

Sculdís snorted and signed, “No, you don’t.”

Dain looked incensed.

“What did you do with my boot?”

“I threw it away. Just like this one,” she signed, taking it and pitching it to the side.

Dain threw her a stink-eye but returned to removing rubble.

When the entrance was clear enough, Ori signed a halt. Quartzite fluttered out of the trees to land on his shoulder.

“You can stay out here, Quartz,” whispered Ori.

“Nope,” hissed Quartz.

“All right, then,” Ori muttered, somewhat relieved to have him there.

Following Ori, the company silently entered Khazad-dûm. Ori fished into his chest pocket and withdrew the phial Galadriel had given Thorin.

Slowly, he held aloft the Phial of Galadriel. For a moment it glimmered, faint as a rising star struggling in heavy earthward mists, and then as its power waxed, it began to burn, and kindled to a silver flame, a minute heart of dazzling light until the darkness receded from it, until it seemed to shine in the center of a globe of airy crystal and the hand that held it sparkled with white fire.

Ori gasped then looked about. The cavern was vast, reaching up the inside of the mountain.

This had once been a grand entrance. He could see beyond the filth and the rubble that empty niches lined the walls. Broken statues on the floor had their origins above the door lintel. In the floor itself, under the dirt, Ori picked out the shadows of a mosaic. From this, his gaze wandered down into the chasm yawning before them. He then vowed to himself that he would never do so
again.  The middle of the bridge was gone, as they had predicted, but the approaches on each side of the chasm showed Ori how high and how narrow it must have been.

Now he knew why Binni remembered this bridge.

Dwarves as a rule were not afraid of heights.  The narrowest walkways in Erebor were open and without rails, which were only used for decorations, or to surround pits in mines, where even dwarves might accidentally fall.

But only as a last ditch effort to save one’s life would a dwarf scoot across this.

He wondered how they got carts and animals and large numbers of soldiers through the eastern side of the mountains in the old days.

Service entrance, probably.

“A’righ’,” said Dain quietly, “let’s bring up th’ crate.”

“What is it?” Omosuil murmured.

“Jus’ a li’il somethin’ a’ me own design,” said Dain. “Lookee.”

Now that Ori was looking at it, Dain’s mithril crate, about six feet square, was not entirely featureless.  There was a switch on the back.

“Here, our Diry,” Dain motioned to Haldir.  “Come take a gander.”

Once Ori would have thought the elf angry or annoyed, but he was beginning to think this was just the elf’s normal countenance.

“How may I be of service?” Haldir asked with a slight bow.

“Yer goin’ t’ be in charge a’ th’ bridge, righ’?  Watch, real simple.  Flip th’ switch up.”

He did so and a motor clicked, then whispered into action.  Ori felt the ground beneath them yielding to mechanical pins as they screwed deep into the earth.  The front half of the crate shot soundlessly across the chasm, drawing out myriad cables as it traveled.  And where this part of the crate landed, almost out of sight beyond the far doorway, it forced down more screws and anchored itself tight.

Between the crate halves hung a miraculous mithril bridge, the cables so close together and strung so tight as to form a road that any three or four dwarves could walk across abreast.

“That… is amazing!” hissed Haldir.  “And you designed this?”

“Aye, I’m a genius.  Now, when we’re back across, yeh flip th’ switch down an’ it’ll pack itself back up.  Righ’?”

“Yes, yes, I believe so.”

If not, I will tend to it, mellon Dain,” Omosuil assured the king.

“Good lads,” said Dain, smacking Haldir smartly across the ass.  He turned to the rest of Ori’s company, with a maniacal grin.  “Let’s do this bastard.”

Ori felt the surge of excitement course through him.  They were doing it.  He was leading a Quest!  They were going to find the box of the Flower of Durin!

Ori held the phial aloft and marched across, his Company following swiftly with their gear.  With the Light of Eärendil gleaming ahead, they silently navigated the passages leading to the Chamber of Mazarbul.

Dain all-but chanted under his breath,

“Righ’, guid.  Righ’, ” as he checked their route for debris that might impede their return journey.  Ori tried to keep his mind on his goal and not be distracted by the ruined splendor around him.  But it was difficult.  His eyes caught flashes of mosaics, carved screens fine and thin as parchment, broken shards of colored glass from lanterns hanging far above in the shadows.

“Ugh, what a smell of sulphur,” Galadriel commented, under her breath.

All of it was filthy, and the stench made Ori pull the collar of his jumpsuit up over his mouth.  They turned left, then right, and at the niche featured on the old map, they turned into a chamber to dwarf the throne room of Erebor.

The Company slowed as they crossed the dark expanse, the room littered with broken tables and benches, burst casks and smashed cups, torn tapestries and bat shit aplenty.

“Dwalin,” Ori whispered, “where are all the bodies?”

Orcs take skulls f’r trophies, bu’ even they can’t eat bone.”
“But we can,” said a creaking voice.
Ori shivered and lifted the Light of Eärendil to find—
A bird.
“Oh, dear,” said Galadriel, which was the only way Ori knew he wasn’t hallucinating.
It was not the size of the great eagles, but easily the size of a dwarf, and perched on the back of a cast aside stone chair.
Its skull was large and close to the skin, with shrewd, sunken black eyes and a sheen of short, red feathers up the neck, mounting to a large crest of scarlet at the crown. The beak was large and powerfully made.
Ori waited for someone to say or do something. Then he remembered that he was the one who was expected to say or do it.
He stepped forward slowly and bowed.
“Please pardon us for trespassing. We mean no harm.”
The bird turned its head to focus one eye on him closely.
“Aren’t you a little short for an uruk?”
“We’re not orcs. We’re - most of us - dwarrow.”
“Hmm.”
As they stood there, Ori hoped no one would pull a weapon. Really, he hoped no one would as much as sneeze.
“You,” the bird finally pronounced, “are like the ones who were here before. You are like the statues.”
Other birds crept into Ori’s notice, crowding in to surround the Company. He could have kicked himself. Had he not already been in this situation? Except, these were not ravens.
That was what he got for assuming orcs would be their only problem.
The bird croaked at Ori.
“Why has your majesty returned?”
“Er… I’m not the king.”
“The king’s egg, then.”
“I’m not related to the king by blood, but I do represent him.”
The bird lengthened its neck and he was appalled to find how long it was. It examined his face and hair minutely, flicking the blunt beak on his marriage braid. Quartz scooted to Ori’s other shoulder.
The bird hissed in Ori’s ear,
“Only the most royal may wear the red crest. Your king thinks highly of you, to let you rub your head in the red clay.”
“Um… actually, my hair comes out of my head this way. See, my brother Dain’s hair is red, too, though he is a king.”
“Then we shall assume,” said the bird, head drifting side to side on the long neck, “that you are personages of equal importance to ourselves.”
The other birds croaked and squawked and it suddenly occurred to Ori that this bird was using the royal ‘we’.
“Forgive us, your majesty,” said Ori. “We didn’t realize we were in the royal presence. We must plead ignorance of your ways.”
The bird laughed.
It might have been in humor, but it was in no way a comforting sound.
“You are welcome to whatever we may claim as our realm. We are the Red Queen of All Bonebreakers. Alas, our people share this mountain with those other things far less pleasant. Egg stealers. Nest stompers. The largest hunt us. The smallest shake our eggs and laugh.”
“The orcs,” said Ori.
“Uruks,” said the bird distastefully. “Why did your king cede such a fine aerie to the likes of them?”
“We didn’t cede it, your majesty. We were beset by the fiery beast from the depths and then, when we were weak, the orcs attacked. They killed many of our people, and drove the others out.”

“Ah, yes, the dead. Their bones were far tastier than those of the uruk.”

Ori debated if it would tax the bird monarch’s patience, then finally said, “We are no friends of the orcs. It honors us that you cleared away our remains.”

The queen nodded in regal acknowledgement.

Ori continued, “We have only come seeking some treasures we thought lost to us, if we have leave to do so.”

“Is it bone?”

“No, your majesty.”

“Is it egg?”

“No, your majesty.”

“Then, take what you will, and, if you see any uruks, perhaps you will kill them and leave us the bones. Distasteful as they are, that is all we can eat, and now they are scarce.”

“Your majesty is kind. Are there any orcs nearby?”

“Who can tell? They move here and there, like ants. Sometimes they crash about, sometimes they crawl silently out of holes even we cannot see. They are always fighting each other, and not even over mates. They are stupid.”

Ori bowed, sensed the others of the Company doing likewise, and was more than relieved when the queen and her court flew off to who knew where.

No doubt she would leave a few scouts behind to watch them closely.

“Pleasant bird,” Quartz cracked.

Ori felt Dwalin’s hand on his shoulder.

“Well done, love.”

“Nice of ’em t’ tidy, I s’pose,” Vi muttered. “Still makes me wanna throw up.”

It took another quarter hour to cross the room, Gimli, Eowyn, and Dwalin in the lead with weapons drawn, Legolas, Kili, and Tauriel, bows ready bringing up the rear. Then, after a twist in the opposite passage, they reached their goal.

It lay behind the shattered remnants of some unassuming doors of the Chamber of Mazarbul.

Ori felt a little disappointed. This was, in effect, the entrance to the Great Library, but the doors could easily have concealed a broom closet. The door and rubble were not cleared enough for the bonebreakers to shift or squeeze through. Nor, apparently, had a orc bothered to claim their meals. He reached the light between broken panels and looked on a sight unseen for almost a century.

Battle had come to even this dusty crevice of the mountains. Books and papers littered every surface, some burnt, some spattered with ink, or possibly blood. The floor was strewn with the mumified bodies of long-dead scribes.

“This is it,” he said.

In a few minutes they had removed the rubble, the broken doors, and entered the room. It was square, lined not with shelves, but flat, metal walls, decorated with shields and devices. These were actually doors concealing the archives. The others looked about them, but Ori had eyes only for the dead scribes, their sunken faces, their vermin-ruined clothes. Some still held their pens in hand, others, further from the door, had drawn weapons in a last, futile, attempt at salvation.

He found himself standing over the body of a journeyman scribe, the rank evident by the remains of their hood and scattered beads on the floor by their head. The empty eye sockets looked to the ceiling. The fragile hands clasped a volume caked in dust.

“I’m so sorry,” whispered Ori.

“That’s alright. All over with now,” said a voice at his elbow.

He turned and did a double take. He looked at the body on the floor, then at the scribe at his elbow, and realized she was ever so slightly transparent. She reminded him of Omi and he tried not to think about that too closely.

“Teyan, daughter of Eyan, at your service,” said the scribe. “Been waiting for you lot. Durin
should have told you the crypt’s booby trapped. I like your turn out. Very practical. Shows your bum to advantage.”

“Thank you,” said Ori weakly.

“Anyway, if you’d take that book I’m holding? That was my master work. I spent four decades on the blessed thing. Someone ought to read it!”

“Of course,” he said.

He stooped to do so, horribly embarrassed when the two hands holding the book in place broke off at the wrist.

“Ooops!” Teyan said merrily.

“Love?” Dwalin hissed. “What’re yeh doin’ with tha’?”

“A dead scribe told me I need to take it.”

“Aye. Grand.”

“She also said I have a nice bum.”

“Tha’ yeh do. Any idea where Floviq’s hidin’ out?”

“It’s beyond that door,” said Ori quietly, and pointed at a pair of innocuous matching shield works.

“Yeh sure?”

“I think that’s him doing a jig in front of it it, so, yes.”

“A’righ’,” said Dwalin as he turned to the doorway. “Clear off, yeh. We got work t’ do.”

“Oh, and Teyan, the dead scribe, says the crypt itself is booby trapped.”

Dain chuckled.

“Planned fer tha’, wee scribe brother. Pickaxes a’ th’ ready?”

“I’ll leave you to it, then,” said Teyan, vanishing.

Ori and Dwalin went with Lady Galadriel to find the edges and latches of the doors disguised as walls. In silence the shield work was carefully removed. Lady Galadriel plied her crowbar and with Margr and Vi’s help the doors opened with the hiss of a long-sealed tomb. The Light of Earendil revealed a chamber thirty feet square, filled with shelves.

Kili Tauriel, Gimli, Eowyn, and Legolas stood outside in the main room, on guard.

Ori frowned, looking around in the smaller room.

“I thought it would be bigger. It is on the maps.”

“Oh, it is,” said Galadriel, taking Teyan’s book. She put it in one of her satchels. “It is the chamber proper and it goes on in other rooms for nearly a mile, but, judging from the spines and labels, I’d say this is everything the scribes held the dearest, items they most wanted hidden - and no elves allowed!”

Galadriel darted forward and flitted from shelf to shelf, her long hands plucking books decisively as she moved, putting mainly small, very ancient books into the satchels across her shoulders and even smaller ones into the pockets of her jumpsuit, her crowbar drawn and tucked under an arm. She hummed serenely to herself, punctuated by an occasional obscenity, the only indication of her concern.

Then she hissed out sharply.

“Mahal’s hairy balls! This is my mother’s diary!”

“Really?” Ori asked.

“Yes! No wonder I’ve never been able to find it!”

“Oh, well, this is a good thing then,” said Ori encouragingly.

“Do you know how much dirt there is on King Oropher in this? I’ll have enough to torment Thranduil for at least a century.”

“Oooo, our Gladdy!” Margr giggled softly from the outer room.

“How well that sounds!” Vi seconded.

Ori looked about Floviq reappeared and walked around a section of flooring. Ori grabbed a piece of charcoal and chased him, marking the floor where the ghost walked. Completing a rectangle, Floviq went to the middle, bowed and disappeared.

Dain, Sculdis, Vi, Margr, Janni and Glorfindel pounced forward and began work, chipping away,
loosening the stones around the crypt cover.

“A’righ’ yeh lot,” said Dain, “yeh kin stop diggin.”

“But there is only a little left to remove,” Glorfindel protested.

“Exactly.  Clear away, now.”

He hunkered down with a long-handled pick, figured for distance, and struck hard on the final five inches of stone.

The gap erupted explosively.  The dwarrow scrambled for cover as hundreds of blades flung upward to strike and ricochet off the ceiling.

“Shite!” Vi barked, looking out from behind one of the shield doors they removed.

“Elbereth!” Glorfindel agreed.

“Fanny feathers!” Quartz cawed.

Eowyn ducked through, sword ready.

“Is anyone hurt?”

“No, but so much for stealth,” said Galadriel, as she, Dwalin and Ori peered around a shelf to survey the devastation.

Glorfindel rose to approach the crypt, but Vi grasped the back of his jumpsuit.

“Wait a mo’, dearie,” said Margr, as she gestured Eowyn back outside.

They waited, and were rewarded with a second volley of blades.

Legolas swore and Jani groused, “Bleedin’ overachievers.  Is that it?”

“Let’s hope so,” Sculdis replied and Margr nodded.

Slowly, with the groan and scrape of hidden machinery long disused, the crypt lid rose and, under it, a massive wooden box.

It crunched to a halt with the top at about knee level, for a dwarf anyway.

Ori gaped.

He didn’t know what he had expected, though it wasn’t what amounted to a packing crate.

Actually, it was a packing crate.  Lettered on the side, a legend proclaimed:

**Premium Iron Hills Sheep Skins - Three Hundred Reams**

“That it?” Eowyn asked, over her shoulder.

“I think that’s done it,” said Dain.  “We kin lever off th’ top now.”

He approached with the crowbar.

“Are you sure all the booby traps are disarmed?” Ori asked.

“No,” said Dain unconcernedly.

“But, what if it takes off your leg or something?”

“Depends which one,” said Dain with a push of the crowbar and a grunt.  “Either way, I’ll jus’ have t’ hop aroun’ fer a bit.”

Ori winced.

He did not want to have to explain Dain’s missing leg to Dori.

“Er…” Dain said, finally looking up.  “Yeh may want t’ duck back down fer a mo’, just in case.  I kin replace a leg, I can’t sew yer heeds back on.”

He levered the bar under the stone lid and began to rifle it while the rest held their breaths.

Nothing happened.

Nothing happened.

Nothing happened.

Nothing happened.

It was amazing how high Dain could jump on his mechanical leg, and how quickly, skipping up on top.  The crowbar flew across the room with a hail of about a million nails that shot out horizontally into the walls.

Dain surveyed the damage from his perch atop the box.

“Sculdis, me jewel?  Will yeh bring back me crowbar?”

“I’m on it,” she said.

He jumped down and the stone workers and Glorfindel helped move the lid aside.  Dwalin,
Glorfindel, and Margr helped carefully and quietly prop it against a wall, though Ori didn’t see much point to the silence. If a full armory smashing around a stone- and metal-lined room didn’t bring every orc in the mountains, he didn’t know what would.

Once the lid was off, the box rose another five feet until its bottom was level with the floor. Dain leapt up on top, pried up a board and peered inside.

“Hullo? Anybody home?”

“Git yer arse back down here, funny dwarf,” said Sculdis.

“Is it the right box?” Ori asked.

“Lotsa lil’ boxes an’ whatnot. I’d say it is.”

They unpacked the pieces of the cart Dain had created and quickly assembled it. Within minutes they were ready to move the box onto it.

Ori grew increasingly nervous as time passed. They had moved as fast as they could, without stop, for what felt like hours. Their luck held, but they were only halfway home.

They easily moved the box with their combined strength, and it fit almost too perfectly into the cart.

“Are we ready?” Ori asked.

“Ready,” said Dain.

“Ready,” said Lady Galadriel.

She had appeared with two bulging satchels, one on either hip, strapped shut. Every pocket on her jumpsuit was stuffed to bursting. She looked extremely…bumpy.

“Eeeew our Gladdy,” snickered Vi. “Yeh look like yeh bin liftin’ weights f’r a lifetime.”

Galadriel glanced down at herself and flexed. The bulges popped like overblown muscles making the elf lady giggle. They replaced the doors to the library chamber, then she laid a palm on the wall and whispered, a halo of light around her hand. Tauriel and Legolas laid their hands on the wall near her, somehow added their strength to hers. Ori could almost feel the stone around the chamber growing tighter, growing into the metal doors, sealing everything in - and everything else out.

Eowyn breathed, “And so, these are elves.”

“We need a lookout,” said Dain. “See if th’ passage is clear.”

“I’ll go,” said Ori, and went before anyone else could even reply.

It occurred to him that he should have simply let someone else do it. Quartz, now back on Ori’s shoulder, could have easily done it himself, but it was just to check the hall. It wasn’t like a pack of orcs was waiting to spring out at him.

And they weren’t… waiting. They had been climbing up through a hole in the floor under the cover of all that noise, or perhaps attracted by it, and looked as surprised as Ori felt. Ori stepped back hastily, tripped on loose debris and sat down hard on the broken floor. Quartz flittered up frantically, cawing.

As Ori scrambled to stand, his hand closed around the handle of a weapon on the floor. The orcs howled and fell upon him.

Ori blinked.

He stood in a large, beautiful, empty stone chamber filled with reflected light. There were no orcs. There was no terrible stench of decay. He looked around at the sconces in their niches, circling the room just a little higher than the top of his head. The gold fixtures held crystals carved into frozen, glittering flames. Beneath his feet, a mosaic of lapis, moonstone and mithril picked out Durin’s anvil and seven stars in the light gray granite. Before him, lay an open doorway of immense size.

The air whispered around him and Quartz landed on his shoulder.

“Wow! Big, shiny aerie!”

Feeling rather queasy, Ori looked behind him at the huge metal doors closed so that only a dwarf would be able to find the opening. A dwarf, or a friend of a dwarf, anyway.

He glanced about and on his right, there stood a dwarf with a familiar face, who gazed with blue eyes that sparkled with humor. Ori wasn’t sure who this dwarf was. He looked like Thror, though quite a younger version of him, and hale and strong and good-humored.
“Hello?” Ori asked.
“Hullo, lad,” said the dwarf. “Welcome to the Halls of your Ancestors.”

Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!
Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Yes, we can hear you. Where is Ori? Where’s here? Dolly, Stevie, what’s with your promises not to kill anyone you like? We thought you liked Ori! What’s he doing here? All good questions and we love Ori very much. Not to worry, all these questions are to be answered…now. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

“Halls of my Ancestors?” Ori yelled. “Why am I dead?”
“Ori-” Quartz started.
“I didn’t do anything really stupid!”
“Ori-” Quartz tried again.
“Quartz, are you dead, too?” Ori shouted.
“Ori-”
“You’re not dead, lad,” the dwarf assured him with a worried look.
Quartz rolled his eyes. “Thank you!”
“Mind,” said the dwarf, “you are the first to come here and demand at the start to see the Grandfather of us all.”
“If I’m not dead, I will be soon, if my body’s lying there in front of a pack of orcs!”
“Your body isn’t lying there it’s…occupied.”
“And who, may I ask has…nicked my body?” Ori demanded.
“That would be Durin,” the dwarf explained.
“Who’s in Quartz’s body?”
“I am,” snapped Quartz.
“Durin said something about getting in some practice,” the dwarf managed to put in.
“I hope he intends to practice killing orcs along with practicing body snatching.”
“Yes, you are,” Quartz muttered.
“Er-…,” Thror began, “I was told to answer some of your questions and take you to other people who can answer your…other questions.”
“Where’s Mahal?”
“In His forge-”
“Where’s that?”
“Lad, you can’t just-”
“Fine,” Ori snapped again. “I’ll go find it myself! Who would have thought that in the Halls, you’d need an appointment to see Udad Mahal?”
“Would be polite,” said Quartz philosophically.
“Um,” Thror said awkwardly. “I was also told I could ask you some questions.”
That stopped Ori short. He really looked at Thror this time. The Durin blue eyes sparkled with warmth. He looked…friendly.
“You’ve changed,” Ori commented, lamely. “Um, I’m Ori, by the way, but you probably know
that.”

“So I’ve been told. That’s the whole trouble. I’ve been told what happened during my reign, but I don’t remember much about it. I have a vague recollection of Frerin as a wee lad, but nothing after that. They tell me I did horrible things because I was sick. Forgive me, Master Ori, but I don’t recall you at all. Did we know each other well?”

“Um, no, your majesty. I only met you a week or so before you …er… died. But, you did give a public blessing of my wedding.”

“Did I?” The late king beamed at him. “Well, congratulations! Who’s the lucky dwarf or dam?”

“Dwalin Fundinul, the captain of the city guard of Dale.”

“Fundin’s boy! And captain of the city guard! But, why Dale? Are there dwarrow living there?”

“It’s where I grew up.”

“And I see by your braid that you’re a scribe. Excellent! Dwalin was always sharper than Fundin liked, but why should a soldier not also be a thinker? Fundin’s since come around on that. Now, if it was so easy to repair his marriage. I think that may be lost.”

Ori didn’t quite know how to reply. Perhaps it was a blessing Thror couldn’t recall anything.

“Thorin’ll toss his scree,” Quartz whispered to Ori, who nodded.

They walked from the antechamber into a vast cavern, spanned by a beautiful marble bridge. It was wide, without rails as was the dwarven style, but lined with statues, each carved by a different hand. There were smiths, stone masons, glassworkers, and weavers, jewelers and bakers and scribes. The air was filled with ravens, circling and calling.

On the other side of the bridge, through a broad arch lined with stone and metal filigree, Ori saw dwarrow of every possible description, laughing, arguing, and singing.

“This is Khazad-dûm,” said Ori. “This is Khazad-dûm before the balrog. Durin patterned it after the Halls.”

“Can you think of a more perfect place?” Thror asked. “I grew up at Khazad-dûm, and seeing all this when I arrived was like coming home. Though, even I’ll admit this is a much better bridge. You mind a bit of a walk?”

“No, your majesty, of course not.”

“Call me Thror. We don’t have much use for titles around here.”

“Er, um, this is my raven, Quartz.”

Quartz shrugged.

“He knows that.”

Ori’s eyes darted everywhere, and he itched to take out his sketchbook and graphite wand. He did still have them, hanging from his shoulder in his leather satchel.

He was even wearing his old cardigan.

By reflex he put up his hand to ensure his marriage bead was in place. It was. Ori sighed with relief.

“Where are we going?”

“The great feasting hall. We spend most of our time there, er…”

“Feasting?” Ori supplied impishly.

“Whenever possible,” Thror agreed. “It’s not far, mind, but there’s some fountains and sculpture and what-not cluttering up the place first. I don’t mind the fountains so much. Great for soaking your feet. The statues are a little too first age for my taste.”

True to Ori’s original thought, he didn’t recognize anyone he knew. On the other hand, there were possibly millions of dwarrow here and he could easily pass a relative without ever knowing. He happened to glance over at a couple sharing a bench in a mosaic-ed alcove. Sitting, talking, holding hands, they were a very pretty pair, a handsome Blacklock dam and… and a compact, dark-haired elf.

“There are elves here,” he said, mostly to himself.

“Eh?” Thror asked.

“There’s an elf sitting there with that dam.”

Thror looked over, frowned, and raised his brow at Ori.
“Lad, get a grip. There’s no one sitting there but Master Narvi.”
“You can’t s-. Oh. Right. I must be muzzy from the trip. Wait. That’s Master Narvi? The one who created the western doors to Khazad-dûm?”
“Oh, yes. Bit of a celebrity around here. I try to keep a low profile myself.”
“Would you mind if I went to pay my respects?”
“No, go ahead. I’ll wait.”
“Thank you. Quartz?”
“I’ll just hang out here, thanks.” He hopped over onto Thror’s head.
Ori neared the alcove, feeling somewhat guilty for interrupting them, but he could hardly stop himself.
When they noticed his approach, he bowed.
“Master Narvi? Master Celebrimbor?”
“Aye,” said Narvi, a well-grown dam with massive shoulders, deep brown skin and aqua blue eyes, which narrowed at him questioningly.
“I’m Ori of Fundin. I seem to be… visiting.”
She startled him by rising to return his bow. All her beard beads jingled together, as they were tiny metallic hammers.
“At yer service, Lord Ori.”
“Yes,” said Celebrimbor, his eyes twinkling with mirth. “It’s quite an honor to meet the scribe of Mahal, especially when he isn’t dead yet!”
“Please, sit down, Master Narvi, I’m the one who’s honored.”
Narvi sat and grinned evilly.
“Lady Galadriel spilled th’ secret, didn’t she?”
“Mahal gave her leave to do so.”
“Guil! We want everyone t’ know. No more a’ this coy foolishness.”
“I also would like to offer my congratulations. I think it’s wonderful.”
“Thank yeh.” Narvi nodded. “Mebbe someday there’ll be more as feels th’ same as yeh. There’re others like us, they shouldn’t have t’ hide it.”
“Actually, Kili, the younger prince of Erebor, is married to Lady Tauriel, the ward of King Father Thranduil of Erys Lasgalen.”
Celebrimbor choked out a laugh, gripping Narvi’s hand.
“Dearest, just wait until King Oropher finds out. He’ll drop dead twice!”
Narvi agreed, “I’m amazed Thranduil hasn’t already kicked it once!”
“Oh, he’s much better since he took the stick out of his arse,” said Ori. They all laughed at that, then Ori said, “I’m sorry, but I can’t keep King Thror waiting. He can’t see you, Master Celebrimbor.”
“Call me ‘Brim’. He can’t see me, because he can’t accept the idea of elves being here.”
“I imagine he’s not the only one,” said Ori.
“And you would imagine right,” replied the elf.
Quartz returned to Ori’s shoulder and Thror took them on for a short while longer when Ori heard a soft and persistent buzzing, which he decided must be coming from down the passageway. The volume grew steadily and soon split into many different voices. The nearer they came to the great open doorway, the more it became apparent that there was an epic food fight in progress.
And that was hardly the only thing going on. There was gaming and dancing and snogging, and it looked like a cadre of Ironfists engaging a group of Firebeards in a little friendly mayhem off in the corner. A roll stuffed with pulled pork sailed toward Ori’s head. Thror caught it handily, took a bite out of it and nodded.
“No’ bad.”
He held it out to Quartz, who took a healthy bite.
“Mmm. No’ b’d,” Quartz agreed.
The feasting hall went on for acres in every direction. The long tables and benches ran endlessly
along either side of their path. From time to time Ori and Thror had to dodge the odd barrel of ale as it rolled itself to some destination or other, though as Ori watched, he saw the platters on the table refilling themselves with meat and root vegetables and pastries of every kind.

Thror turned abruptly to the right between two tables and continued three or four more until he reached a set even more populated and louder than any of the others.

“Thought you might like to meet the family,” said Thror. A substantial dwarf body flew across the table in front of them, and a second ran over the boards, chasing it, and screaming a battle cry. The two collided at the edge of another bench and the diners didn’t even react as the two young dwarrow proceeded to wrestle on the floor, intent on pounding each other into slag.

“Fundin! Groin!” a warrior barked. The two dwarrow broke apart, and the red-head grinned, while the brunet looked sheepish. Ori turned.

For one, mad instant he thought he was looking at Dwalin. Same armor, same axes, same forearms the size of Ori’s torso.

But this was a dwarrowdam, and she had all her hair, and her eyes were different. Balin had inherited them.

“Knock it off,” she admonished them. “We got company.”

“Yes mam,” the red-head sassed. Ori assumed this was Groin.

“Don’ yeh ‘mam’ me, yeh overgrown badger. I’ll fetch her here an’ she’ll kick yer sorry arse.” She turned to Ori, grinning.

“So yer me Dwalin’s Ori. Idris, daughter a’ Eenid, at yer service.”

“Ori of Fundin at yours and your families… mam.” Quartz whistled appreciatively.

“Nice beard! Nice ink!” he enthused.

“This is Quartz,” said Ori. “He’s very young.” Idris smiled crookedly. “No’ so young as all tha’, I think. Are yeh, master raven?”

“Mmmaybe.” She turned to the brothers.

“Oi. Fundin, Groin, clear off some a’ tha’ rubbish, so our Ori kin sit an’ eat!” Groin hopped to it immediately, but Fundin peered at Ori for a second longer. Uncomfortable, knowing Fundin’s history, he merely bowed. Fundin bowed in return and turned to help his brother make room for Ori. Ori sat.

“So,” said Idris, pouring mead into a cup that had appeared at Ori’s elbow, “yer married t’ me Dwalin.”

“Yes, mam. He’s my One.” Idris looked up at Fundin, who looked down at the table.

“An’ he treats yeh well, I kin see tha’ in yer eyes.”

“He’s never been anything but sweet to me. Maybe I shouldn’t consider that a great achievement, as we’ve only been married six months, but he’s such a good, honorable dwarf, and we’re so happy together.”

“Now, then, I don’ think bein’ married t’ Mahal’s scribe kin be terribly easy,” she said. “I’m… a lot of work, I think,” he admitted.

A plate appeared in front of him. Thror speared a chunk of roast meat from the platter on the table and started to fill Ori’s plate.

Quartz cleared his throat.

A second plate appeared next to Ori’s and Thror put meat on that one, too.

“Ta,” said Quartz. A helmet crashed to the table, startling Ori, and disturbing Quartz to let out a squawk.

“Wha’ did I tell yeh abou’ yer lame arse righ’ flank defense?”

“You try relearning how to fight with two eyes instead of one.”

“Whine whine whine. Yer like a pebble.”
"I’m older than you."
"Then why’m I still wipin’ yer snotty, pointy li’le nose?’"
"Ah,” said Idris. “An’ here’s th’ bloody floorshow.”
The floorshow consisted of two familiar, but startlingly large figures.
"Oi!” said the dam. “Tha’ him?”
"Aye,” said Thror. “Mahal’s scribe.”
The dam strode forward.
Ori stood, wondering if he should bow, but she offered her arm in the way of warriors and he clasped it automatically.
"Freris, daughter a’ Ardis, at yer service.”
"Ori of Fundin at yours and your family’s.”
"Good grip,” said Freris. “What’s yer weapon?”
Behind her, Thrain rolled his eyes.
"Slingshot,” said Ori truthfully.
Her blonde eyebrows shot up in her dark face and she laughed. It sounded like music.
"Mahal’s hairy butt, Freris,” said Thrain, pushing her aside. “Not everyone is a blade-obsessed maniac like you.”
"Aye, bu’ I’ll bet he kin duck,” she shot back, throwing herself down on the bench and reaching for a slice of roast. “Unlike some dwarrow.”
Thrain made a face at her, then turned to Ori and bowed.
"Thrain, son of Thror, at your service.”
And there were those eyes again, that sparkling Durin blue. Ori thought it was a shame Thrain ever had to lose one. “Ori of Fundin, at yours and your family’s.”
Thrain looked like he wanted to say something, but he schooled his features and gestured for Ori to sit again.
Ori did so and waited for Thrain to say what he wished to say. Thrain sat, considered the contents of the platter before him, and appeared to be waiting for the words to come.
Finally, the prince cleared his throat.
"Lord Ori, would you please tell me how fares my son Thorin? Is he a good king?”
“Oh, yes!” Ori reported happily. “He’s very determined, and his people love and respect him already.”
Thrain’s expression never changed, but a light came into his eyes that Ori read as pride.
“Excellent. I knew it would be so.”
“He found his sense a’ humor, then?” Freris asked around a mouthful of- Was that an iklar?
“He’s getting there,” Ori replied. “He can be quite a brat, especially when we’re all together in the family. I think Bilbo helps a lot.”
“Who’s Bilbo?” she demanded.
Oops.
“He’s Thorin’s betrothed.”
Silence.
Everyone stared at him in blatant amazement.
“Thorin? Thorin is betrothed?” Freris marveled.
“Not officially, but the people have already accepted Bilbo as the future consort.”
Thrain’s eyes drilled into his.
“Who are Bilbo’s parents? What clan is he?”
“Bilbo is a hobbit. He’s a professor of languages. He-”
The roar of laughter around the table startled him into silence.
“I knew it!” Fundin barked. “Did I no’ say it’d happen? Pay up, brother!”
Disgusted even in mirth, Groin threw a bag of something across the table. It sounded and smelled like emeralds.
“A lucky guess,” was Groin’s only concession.
“Go on,” Freris urged Ori. “Who is this Bilbo?”

“His last name is Baggins. His father was Bungo Baggins and his mother was—”

“Belladonna Took!” Freris shouted and shot to her feet.

Even Thrain looked amazed.

“Our Thorin?” he asked. “Our Thorin is marrying Belladonna Took’s son?”

“Yes, he—”

“Freris! Send a raven!”

“Already on it,” the warrior replied. She cawed into the air.

“You know Bilbo’s parents?” Ori asked.

Idris laughed.

“They were at this very table las’ nigh’. Mahal’s hairy arse, but’ tha’ were a guid cake!” A very large raven winged through the hall to land on Freris’ shoulder.

“You called?” the raven said smoothly,

“Carc, go find Belladonna an’ Bungo! They have t’ hear this!”

“Right-o,” said Carc.

“Grandfather Carc?”

Everyone stopped.

Quartz hopped across the table, bowing.

“Quartzite, fledged by Mica, sired by Roäc.”

The raven patriarch peered down at Quartz.

“You’re Roäc’s?”

“Yes!”

Carc heaved a sigh of what sounded like relief.

Ori giggled,

“Yes, King Carc, we all had the pleasure of meeting Baluchistan the other day.”

Carc cocked an eye at him.

“Who?”

“Baluchistan, Roäc’s brother.”

“His name is Blue,” snapped Carc. “His feathers were blue black when he came out.” The raven considered a moment then. “Who’s with him?”

“Dain,” Ori reported faithfully.

“Bloody fuckin’ Dain,” muttered Carc. “They’ll suit. Blue was always ‘n utter nutter. Mind, his egg was cracked before it was laid. What does Dain call him again?”

“Baluchistan,” Ori repeated.

“Sounds like a fuckin’ drain cleaner,” the old raven muttered before flying off.

Thrain stared at Ori.

“What does Dain call his raven? Baluchistan?”

“Yes. He molts a lot. The raven, I mean. Not Dain!”

“Easy mistake,” Thror muttered.

Ori cocked his head at Thror,

“So you remember Dain, do you?”

“Don’t think he’s that easy to forget. I recall he was about three foot square, and his hair was piled atop his head like a red pine tree and that was just when he was born. I remember something about pigs, too, but that’s more the stuff of nightmares. You related to him somehow?”

Ori considered and finally went with, “Yes.” Ori paused then, “Dain has a wonderful new battle boar named Chopper. Chopper’s very intelligent. Oh, and Dain is married to Sculdis, though I’m sorry, I don’t know her lineage.”

“No matter,” Freris said. “I do. Fine lass. She’ll keep him walkin’ th’ righ’ way. Was she yer connection t’ Dain?”

“No,” Ori said, slowly eyeing Thror aslant. “I’m related to him through my older …sibling.”

Thror looked back at him the same way.

“The way you say it, I can only guess that you’re related through an oliphaunt.”
“I have met an oliphaunt. Her name is Fanny,” said Ori, “but we’re not related that way. Um… I probably should just leave it that he’s related.”

Thrain and Freris exchanged glances.

“Good choice,” said Thrain.

“An’ me wee Dis?” Freris asked around a full mouth.

“Aye,” said another voice, a little further down the table. “Tell me a’ our Dis.”

Ori peered down the table, and a massive, blond dwarf with big brown eyes that smiled back, hands and braids of a master blacksmith.

“Kili has your dimples.”

Vili swallowed and chuckled.

“Long’s he means t’ give ’em back.”

“You are Vili, aren’t you.”

“At yer service. G’wan.”

“Dis is loved and feared by all the family.”

Freris nodded, obviously pleased.

“As she should be.”

Ori continued, “She’s Thorin’s minister of trade, and has taken an apprentice. She was very kind to me when I first came to Fundin House.”

Vili smiled, and looked so wistful.

“She’s no’ alone, is she? Tha’ would be a waste.”

“No, she has a lover, Janifur, daughter of Scur, who’s a miner.”

“Guid! An’ me lads?”

“Fili is the heir, so he’s back in Erebor with Thorin. He’s also betrothed to… er… Princes Sigrid of Dale. She’s the great-granddaughter of King Girion.”

“Aye? Tha’s wonderful!”

Ori swallowed a little.

“And Kili, he’s on the quest with us. He’s married.”

“Already?” Vili asked. “Who’s he married t’ then?”

“Her name is Tauriel.”

Vili cocked his head and frowned.

“Tha’s no’ a dwarf name.”

“No,” Ori said meaningfully, chucking his chin a little toward Thror. “It’s not.”

Vili snorted, then threw his head back and laughed.

Thrain rubbed his temples and Freris threw up her hands in helpless exasperation.

“Tha’ maniac! Vili, he mus’ take after yer side a’ th’ family.” She turned to Ori. “A’right, an’ wha’ a’ Frer’—“

A door that had not been a door a moment ago opened and two hobbits burst through, carrying a covered dish. Carc swept in after them and the door vanished.

“Freris!” the hobbit lady cried, “is it true?”

“Aye, we’ve jus’ had word!” Freris replied. “Sister!”

“Sister!” cried Belladonna Baggins. “Oh, hello, Udad Thror! Will you hold this while I hug Freris? Thanks! You’re a doll!”

Bungo shook hands with Thrain gravely.

“What is it?” Thror asked Bungo.

“Just some spice cookies,” said Bungo. “Sorry, we hadn’t baked anything yet today. And how are you, sir?”

“I have cookies,” said Thror. “How bad could I be?”

Carc and Quartz strutted to the middle the table and helped themselves to meat, croaking and cawing in low tones to each other. Ori presumed Carc was catching up on the gossip. While the hobbits and the Durins celebrated, Ori turned to Idris.

“Thror can see the hobbits?”

“A’course. He never even met a hobbit in his own life. He don’t object t’ them. It’s th’ cake he
cares about’."

Belladonna turned to Ori.

“Pleased to meet you, Mister Ori. I understand you know our Bilbo?”

“Yes, I consider him my friend. We all live in the same house, Fundin House. Bilbo has his nephew Frodo living with him.”

Bungo said, “Excellent! We’ll be able to tell his parents that he’s well looked after. They did worry that Bilbo would have a time keeping hold of him.”

Fundin peered down the table at Ori.

So far Dwalin’s father had not said much at all to anyone except Groin.

Now he said, “You all live in Fundin House? You and Dwalin, Thorin, Bilbo and Frodo, and, of course, Balin?”

“Well, yes, but the sons of Groin live there, too, with their spouses and sons, The houses are joined by tunnels now, and Balin is betrothed to my sibling, Dori—”

“Who is somehow related to Dain. How many people live in this house?”

“I can’t give you a number, but, let’s just say, sitting at this table feels very familiar.”

“And you’re all somehow related?”

“Yes.”

Thror laughed.

“That’s Durins for you, wrapped tighter than an owl pellet. Good cookies, Bella.”

Ori looked hard at Belladonna and Bungo. Bilbo closely resembled his father. But his eyes were his mother’s and Bilbo had something of her looks about him.

Ori decided she looked very like Frodo. He chuckled to himself. Belladonna turned to face him.

“Yes, Bilbo looks very like his father, doesn’t he? And I resemble the Tooks, as I’m sure Frodo does, despite being a Brandybuck.”

“Frodo looks so much like Thorin,” Ori said idly, “people still wonder if Thorin and Bilbo had an assignation in earlier years.”

Bungo gaped at him.

“Only dwarrows think it,” Ori clarified. “I don’t think hobbits have bearers, do they?” Ori offered.

“What’s a ‘bearer’?” asked Bungo.

Both Idris and Freris started to explain when Ori glanced over to the distant great fire place. There stood a dwarrowdam. She looked hale and hearty enough as the rest, all in their primes, but her face was as familiar as it was now loathed.

Ori rose without comment and crossed the floor to her. Within a few yards, she turned and looked at him. It took her a moment to recognize him.

“So, the runt has arrived. I might have guessed, last born, first to die. I suppose it’s for the best. My poor Dori, how silly that son of mine was to insist on keeping you.”

“I’m afraid I’m disappointing you again, am…Rikmha!” Ori ground out. “But I’m busy with a royal quest and am only letting Durin the Deathless borrow my body for a bit.”

“You rose to a common soldier? That’s more than I ever expected of you. Why so angry with me, pet? You love your mam.”

“I’m not your pet,” Ori kept his voice low and polite. “Dori was both my mam and da. You killed Dori’s baby.”

Rikmha brushed this aside.

“That’s a lie. He wasn’t pregnant. He wanted to be, so acted like he was. Stupid thing. He was fool enough to get himself involved with an old letch. That tea was the right thing to give him a tummy ache. It was for the best.”

“That old letch is Lord Balin of Fundin House.”

“What?”

“Oh, yes,” Ori was vaguely disturbed at how much he was enjoying telling her this. “Cousin to Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thror, who is now High King of All Dwarrow. Just think, if you’d followed Dori’s original plan, by now you would be spending your later years living in luxury in the royal caverns of Erebor, with all your loving sons about you.”
“Dain would have something to say,” she countered. “There would be civil war.”

“Nonsense,” Ori smiled. “Dain loves Dori. Calls us all his brothers. He gave Nori his father’s old watch.”

“Well, there wouldn’t have been a you, without my doings,” Rikmha smirked.

“If it had meant Dori and Balin and their child would have been happy, I would never grudge it to them.”

Rikmha looked him over.

“A journeyman scribe and married into Fundin house. So you married that old letch. What a cruel thing to do to dear Dori.”

“Dori is betrothed to Lord Balin. Dori is also the Honorable Bearer of Erebor. I’m married to Captain Dwalin, Balin’s younger brother.”

Rikmha snorted. “If he’s built on the lines I’ve heard…well, it’s your arse taking the poundings. If he keeps you in silks and furs then why should I complain?”

“Dwalin is my One. He is the most generous lover I could ever have dared to imagine. He’s never hurt me and he thinks I’m beautiful.” Ori paused, then grinned. “And according to Lady Galadriel of Lothlórien, I am irresistibly huggable on first sight to everyone.”

Rikmha stared, her mouth trying to say Galadriel then shook her head.

“My way was better,” Rikmha stated. “If I’d followed Dori’s ideas, everything would have gone to shit. I consider it my wise decisions that made sure my Dori and Nori are still alive. My Nori, arrogant little thief. So selfish! Never looked after his mam. Dori’s too fussy by half and has too soft a heart, silly badger. Too stupid to act the role of a true Bearer.”

“Act the role?” Ori questioned. “Dori is a Bearer.”

“Bearers are just a way for dams to hold power, silly badger,” Rikmha sneered. “I should know. I grew up in the Rikanta house. My mother schooled me in what to do. If Nain had been properly educated he would have known better. Dori is a male. If he’s told you otherwise, it’s a lie.”

“Dori’s pregnant.”

“Dori’s delusional. He was born with a cock and a wee flap. You don’t grow badgers in flaps.”

“Dori has been examined by the royal healer, had a proper presentation before Thror, and is pregnant.” Ori remembered. “Dori has bloomed.”

“Bloomed? He lied to you, you stupid little stone. I knew you’d be a half-wit. He’s lived his whole life as a lie, a silly daydreamer. He doesn’t love you or Nori. He’s only interested in making himself rich. Dori’s nothing, but a conniver and a fool.”

Ori saw everything through a haze of red. He reached for Rikmha, but hands, many hands and arms, twisted around him as he fought to reach her. She had hurt Ori’s Dori so horribly. He couldn’t move forward.

“Let me go,” he shouted at his oppressors. “She killed Dori’s baby! I hate her!”

“She’s already dead like th’ rest o’ us, laddie!” Idris’ low voice was in his ear.

Ori, his vocabulary and ability for speech failing him, snarled. He was immediately annoyed he sounded rather like Mellon facing off with Romy.

He felt a well-muscled arm curl around his belly and he was hefted off his feet. He yelled his fury as he realized his mother-in-law was carrying him like a sack of potatoes over her shoulder, back to the table followed by muttering relatives. He was sat down back in his place, and Idris sat on one side of him and Freris on the other.

“Smackin’ her won’t make her learn anythin’, pet,” Idris said, soothingly. “Pick yer battles.”

“You sound like Dw-”

Of course she did, Ori reflected, she was Dwalin’s mother.

“Fine,” he allowed. “But I still hate her. I used to love her but when I found out…” Tears started. “Poor Dori! He never lied to me!”

Idris’ arm around his shoulders helped. It felt a bit like Dwalin’s.

“Get a hold of yourself,” Freris ordered. “She’ll get another chance at livin’, like th’ rest of us.”

Ori looked up at her. There was tenderness in her eyes but also steel.

“Good,” he said. “Then I can find her and tell Dori and let him decide.”
Suddenly the ceiling swirled with fire. Ori stared in shock, while everyone else simply looked interested. Out of the whirlpool of flames Mahal’s giant hand reached down over Rikmha. Before Ori’s eyes, she stopped, stood stock still and staring. Her color faded to stone. The Hand scooped her stone form into Its palm and rolled it around. The stone became a round gray ball, bits of other stone floated out from the walls and melded with it. A sparkle of gems followed. All were rolled together as they twirled around and around in the huge Palm. The final round stone became a perfect sphere like a piece of pink granite. Forged and changed to something new. It shrank in size, smaller and smaller. Then a figure slowly formed. It was a badgerling, Ori realized.

“NO!” Ori howled. “Don’t make that Dori’s baby!”

“Hush, me wee scribe,” the hot Voice boomed. “Already made f’r our Dori. An’ it’s time f’r yeh t’ be gettin’ back. Ye’ve seen an’ heard all yer needin’ t’ this time.”

“Oh,” Ori looked around quickly. People and things were starting to grow fuzzy around the edges.

Ori side-hugged his mother-in-law,

“I love you, mam. Thank you for my husband and my new brother.”

Idris chuckled. Ori flapped vainly at the others.

“Mr. and Mrs. Baggins, I’m so glad I met you! I’ll tell Bilbo you like his betrothal! Prince Thrain, Princess Ffreris, I’ll tell Dis and Thorin you’re both pleased. I’ll tell Roäc you’re here, King Carc. King Thror, I’m glad you’re well now and I’m really sorry about your funeral.”

Everything faded to gray, the last thing Ori heard was raucous laughter and Thror bawling out, “What in Durin’s name happened at my funeral?”

“Ori! Ori! Yeh in there?”

The first thing Ori saw, was Dwalin’s face, creased with worry.

“Dwalin? What’s the matter? Are you alright?”

His husband gawped at him.

“I’m fine. I’m no’ th’ one sittin’ arse-deep in orc entrails.”

Ori looked down at himself, covered in sticky, black, evil-smelling muck. Then he looked up and around, seized at once by the sight and the smell of dozens of freshly-dead orcs. Later, he would probably be wretchedly ill, but right now he was too stunned.

“Dwalin! You killed all these orcs?”

“Nah, love,” said Dwalin gently. “Tha’ were yeh. With tha’.”

Ori looked down at the huge axe in his hand. His muscles remembered wielding it, but he couldn’t even say how it got there.

“It wasn’t me, exactly,” said Ori. “I’ve never held an axe except yours, to clean it.”

“Was it Mahal?”

“It was Durin. In fact… I think this is his axe.”

Dwalin’s eyes flared open, huge.

“Durin’s Axe!”

“Yes, but… Dwalin, I can’t open my hand to let it go. In fact… I don’t think I could lift my arm. Or stand up. How long have I been gone?”

“Three minutes or so.”

“How is that possible? I was in the Halls for hours.”

“You were in the Halls?” Dwalin’s voice came through rasping and slightly higher pitched than usual.

“Oh, and King Thror said to say ‘hello’ and congratulate you on our marriage.”

Dwalin paused, looked like he wanted to say something, but shook his head.

“Let’s get yeh out’ve here. Glorfy an’ me mopped up th’ last o’ th’ orcs an’ yanked th’ bodies out’ve th’ way. Eowyn, Kili an’ Tauriel are keepin’ watch in th’ cavern entry. Dain, Sculdis an’ Jani’re a few minutes ahead’ve us, an’ I sent Quartz wi’ ‘em. They’ve taken th’ box, as there were no orcs in this passage t’ stop ‘em.”

Ori giggled hysterically.
“Not anymore. Didn’t the others go with them?”

“Gimli an’ Legs’re keepin’ ’em covered wi’ th’ box. Th’ sisters, our Gladdy, an’ Glorfindel hung abou’ t’ cover th’ rear flank, an’ t’ help me find yeh an’ make sure yer still alive.”

“Your mam was lovely,” Ori commented, still dazed.

A throaty cry broke over them and the Red Queen descended to land on, and peck viciously at, a dead orc.

“Well! What a feast! Really, dwarf egg, you shouldn’t have!”

“I wish I could say I did, your majesty,” said Ori.

“Oi! Our Dwalin!” Vi called from the turn in the doorway. “Wha’s keepin’- Our Ori! Yeh look like yeh fell int’ an orc’s privy!”

Dwalin was unable to release Ori’s grip on the axe. He had no choice but to wrap the twin blades in swathes of tattered tapestries and lay it across Ori’s body as he lifted Ori and rushed back toward the chasm. As they ran, a tremor shook the mountains, and knocked them into the walls.

Somewhere up ahead, great chunks of rock cracked and fell.

“Ooo,” said Vi. “If tha’s a cave-in, we’re in fer a time.”

But the passage held. The rock had tumbled in and around the chasm. The chamber was filled with even more rubble than before, and a pile of it had fallen in a jagged mess between them and the bridge. The only flat place to stand was the thin ledge of rock, just a few feet in front of them, between their doorway and the fallen stone.

Ori was relieved to see that the elves and rest of the company had already crossed with the box. Dain stood in the middle of the span, where they could just see him.

“Move yer arses!” the king bellowed

“Move yers first, yeh maniac!” Dwalin answered.

Before they could pick their way over to the bridge, the ground shook, not from within, but as if something struck it hard. It shook again a moment later, and their uncertain, rocky path to the bridge grew to a small mountain of broken stone. They could barely see over it, now.

The heat rose around them.

The cavern blazed with blood-red light.

The balrog had come.

It flapped its enormous wings as it rose from the depths, and the only dark spot in the entire world at that moment was the balrog’s maw as it flung open its mouth and roared.

“Well,” said Vi, “that’s us buggered.”

“I’d hoped it was dead or asleep,” Ori cried.

“No,” said Galadriel, “it was dormant for a brief time, before the Enemy raised the orc armies that invaded Khazad-dûm, and the orcs worshipped it. Not that I think the balrog noticed, except to come up on occasion to snack on them.”

“Makes yeh wish it were a bit more peckish,” said Margr.

“Balrog,” said Glorfindel with a ravenous grin.

The creature swung its fiery whip in a circle about its head, and brought it down with a crash on Dain’s bridge, snapping it in two.

Then it laughed.

Dain, incensed, stomped to the edge of his ruined bridge, his voice quaking with fury.

“Yeh bastard! Look wha’ yeh did t’ me bridge! Yeh fucker! Yeh… yeh bashibazook!”

Sculdis grabbed her husband by the collar and the seat of his jumpsuit, hefted him over her head and bore him away, still bellowing.

Kili and the elves inside the doors fired volleys of arrows at the creature, to no effect.

Doom.

Doom.

DOOM!

Ori heard the drums of the orcs, closing in from behind.

“They’re going to attack now?” Ori demanded indignantly.

All around them he felt rock under enormous stress. It buckled and, deep in the mountains, it
broke. Each beat of the balrog’s monstrous wings shook the foundations of Khazad-dûm. The sheering of rock felt like breaking bones. He could tell by Dwalin’s shudder that his husband felt it, too.

The rubble before them rose to a small mountain and they could no longer see the other side of the chasm.

“How did Khazad-dûm even withstand this creature’s first assault?” Glorfindel cried.

“The kingdom was a lot sturdier then,” replied Ori absently.

Most of his consciousness was gripped by the breaking rock, the crumbling passages both natural and dwarf-made, the turmoil of lava streams far below them, the-

“Look a’ tha!” Vi cried.

She pointed to the wall off to the left. As they watched, it buckled outward dangerously toward the chasm.

“Tha’ can’t be good,” said Margr.

“That’s water,” said Ori. He felt it, and he knew they felt it, too. “All the walls breaking must have breached the aquifer.”

“Wonderful,” said Glorfindel. “We can drown instead of burning.”

Vi and Margr exchanged evil smiles.

“Glorfy, dear,” said Margr, patting his arm. “You stay here.”

“Where are you going?” he demanded.

“Just nippin’ along this path a ways. Be good!”

The two sisters, mattocks on their shoulders, moved quickly toward the bulge in the wall. Ori winced as they skipped lightly over breaks in the floor that overlooked only distant fires.

“The balrog will see them!” Glorfindel hissed, leaping up. “I’ll distract it!”

“Take the light!” Ori cried. “Dwalin!”

Dwalin fished it out of Ori’s pocket and thrust it at Glorfindel, who took it and jumped up onto a pile of rubble. His screams to gain the balrog’s notice, in Sindarin, and extremely rude, were ineffectual, but when he held the light aloft, he suddenly had the balrog’s full attention.

The horrid creature brandished its whip and Glorfindel leapt all about to avoid it, dancing with death.

Ori consigned Glorfindel to the care of Eru and looked around him.

Doom.

Doom.

DOOM!

“Dwalin, the orcs.”

“I hear ‘em,” said Dwalin, placing him on the ground against the wall.

Orcs crawled out of holes above them, up through the floors and poured at them from the tunnel from which the Company had just escaped.

Dwalin turned and drew Grasper and Keeper.

Galadriel came to stand with him, her hands glowing gold, then blue, then black.

It was a brave show, though they were outnumbered about five hundred to two.

Screams cut in under the balrog’s roar as the bone breakers filled the cavern, diving in a deadly ‘v’, straight at the orcs, talons and beaks at the ready.

The shrieks and splashes of blood were the least of the horror.

The bonebreakers were bent on revenge, and Ori was certainly not going to stand in their way.

Nor was he going to watch. He closed his eyes.

“Tha’s nasty,” said Dwalin.

“Mmm,” Lady Galadriel agreed. “The whole face all in one swipe?”

Ori would probably have vomited at that moment, had the sisters not suddenly come dashing back to them.

“Tha’s done it!” Vi cried. “Oi, our Glorfy! Quit playin’ around an’ get back here.”

Glorfindel did not hear her, he was concentrating on the balrog and the whip, but it hardly mattered, because he wasn’t in the trajectory of the great torrent of water that burst the wall, exploded
through the cavern, above the peaks of the rubble-

And swept over the balrog.

Glorfindel fell back, tumbling the last few yards and rolling to his feet over Ori.

A wall of steam bore down on them. Galadriel forced it back somehow.

Behind them, the orcs ran in full retreat, harried by the bonebreakers, the screams growing fainter and fainter in the distance. The roar of the falling water replaced the roar of the balrog.

The balrog had disappeared.

Or so they all thought.

They carefully approached the edge of rubble where water still fell in cascades, but a little closer to them, in the center of a wet, sooty ring on the stones stood the balrog - all ten, furious, dark grey inches of him.

In a tiny squeak of a voice, hands fisted at its sides, it told them off:

“Fuck you, you fucking fucks! Do you fucking know how fucking long it takes to absorb that amount of fucking fire! Thousands of fucking years! I’m older than fuck. I’m too fucking old to go through that shit again.” It stamped its tiny foot. “I’m short, fuck it! Of all the things you fucking orc-jambags could have done! What a world, what a fucking world!”

Vi came forward and said, “Oh, look, he’s jus’ a wee thin’.”

The balrog made an obscene gesture, now dancing up and down with rage, waving its tiny arms helplessly.

“Assholes!” screamed the tiny, evil thing. “Ugly Morgoth-fucking bug-eyed animal shit balls!”

“Oi, wha’ a mouth!” Vi scolded. “Yeh kiss yer mam wi’ tha’ thin’? I oughter give yeh a good spankin!”

“I’m not fucking afraid of you!” the balrog shrieked.

Margr prodded Glorfindel to his feet, since he’d fallen on the ground, shaking with laughter.

“Assholes!” screamed the tiny, evil thing. “Ugly Morgoth-fucking bug-eyed animal shit balls!”

“Oi, wha’ a mouth!” Vi scolded. “Yeh kiss yer mam wi’ tha’ thin’? I oughter give yeh a good spankin!”

“I’m not fucking afraid of you!” the balrog shrieked.

Margr sighed, hopped over the shattered stone, and stepped on it, squashing it flat.

“Well done, deary,” said Vi.

“Well, he would go on,” said Margr. She scraped her boot against a sharp stone. “Ooo, it’s mucky! We done here, do yeh think?”

“Aye, best be gettin’ on,” said Vi. “I think the rest o’ the walls’re goin’ t’ go, then th’ lava’ll go, then we’re fucked.”

Dwalin swiftly rearranged his straps and buckles.

“Dwalin?”

“Need me hands free, we got a climb t’ get over th’ res’ a’ tha’ rubble t’ reach th’ broken edge a’ the bridge.”

“And then what?” Ori asked as Dwalin scooped him up and bound Ori against his chest.

“We’ll think a’ somethin’.”

It was a short but perilous climb. Huge chunks and slabs of rock fell from the ceiling as the water crashed through rooms and mines, slamming its way toward the fires. The ground shook constantly, but the Company persevered. Glorfindel, determined as any dwarf, and Galadriel, who never really touched the ground, pointed out the easiest hand- and footholds.

Only when they reached the top of the rubble did they realize how hopeless it was. Even then, the long, upward-jutting slab of rock on which they perched was over balancing and would slowly tilt into the cavern, dumping them to their deaths. On the other side Dain, Sculdis, Jani and the elves were tying ropes to arrows, fully determine to create some sort of a means for them to cross. Lady Eowyn shouted for them to remain where they were as rescue was imminent.

“Lady Galadriel,” said Glorfindel, “save yourself.”

“I am not leaving without all of you,” said Galadriel with dangerous finality. “If necessary, we will die together.”

There was a crash and most of the main entryway burst open.

“Hasty!” Treebeard called, entering the cavern with other ents. “Hold… on…”

Treebeard strode to the edge of the chasm until he was face-down over the abyss. He was tall,
but not tall enough to reach the entire way.

A second ent - Leafbower, Ori thought was his name - strode out along Treebeard’s trunk, then lowered his crown branches to entangle with Treebeard’s. Much as Treebeard had done, but face up, Leafbower lowered his body over the chasm, and his roots touched the bridge buttress and sank in.

The two ents were plenty wide enough for the company to cross.

“Go, go, go!” Dwalin shouted.

Glorfindel grabbed Vi and Margr one over each shoulder and sprinted up the steep incline and hopped down onto the roots, and along the wide, smooth bole.

Ori worried about Leafbower. He didn’t want to step on the ent’s face. It seemed terribly rude. Before Ori, Dwalin or Galadriel could move to follow, a huge fall of boulders shaped like a fist slammed down on the upward end of the rock slab on which they perched.

They shot into the air with no time to scream, Dwalin curled around Ori, trying to protect him.

Treebeard reached up a branch and easily and gently caught Dwalin and Ori while Lady Galadriel had allowed the see-saw action to propel her upward, high into the air and, with her arms wide in her green jumpsuit, the little gossamer parts fluttering bravely, she looked exactly like a moon moth in the afternoon sunshine. Ori could have sworn he heard her cry “Wheeee!”

She landed with perfect grace on the other side of the chasm, straight into the waiting arms of her husband.

As the Treebeard and Leafbower reversed their gyrations, Ori watched the cavern mouth, then the scenery, tumble around him, then Treebeard carried them away, into the sunlight.

“Retreat!” Dwalin bellowed to the soldiers on the ground. “The lava’s goin’ t’ go!”

Ents abruptly picked up every elf and dwarf, along with Lady Eowyn, the Flower’s box, and all their gear, and lit out like a pack of savage trees toward Lórien.

The ground shook harder now, and constantly, and even through Treebeard’s enormous strides, Ori felt the turmoil build and rise beneath the earth. The lava would not simply ooze. It was far too late for that. They were well within the reach of volcanic destruction and nothing could be done.

Yet again he faced his death. Their deaths.

This had become an annoying habit.

The explosion hit them like a physical thing. It bent trees and would have thrown them to their deaths if not for Lady Galadriel’s protection.

But she could not protect them from everything.

The first volley of rock and ash and steam blew the mountains of Khazad-dûm asunder. The mountains heaved straight upward, exploding into billowing clouds of boulder, rock and dust. Darkness spread wide over the land.

Ori’s final, hysterical thoughts were that at least he and Dwalin would die together; he already had friends in the Halls.

Then-
Nothing.
Silence.
Then-
The nearby, gentle lap of water.
“Wha’ th’ fuck?” Dwalin gasped.
Cries of shock and disbelief poured out around them.
“What’s happening?” Ori asked into Dwalin’s beard.
“Look.”
Dwalin turned him around, facing the volcano….
Which was gone.

The massive dark cloud had vanished. The plumes of ash and the gasses which would kill anyone but a dwarf had simply evaporated. The burning steam fell from the sky as a gentle, warm summer rain….

Onto an enormous lake where the mountains had been.
“Mahal…” Ori breathed.

In his head he heard, “I’m a wee bit busy, righ’ now, laddie. Oi! Ulwe! Nice touch wi’ th’ rain!”

“Ta!” Ulwe replied in his gurgling voice. “Ahoy! Tentacles ho!”

Chunks and lengths of tentacles fell around them in great, disgusting profusion.

“It’s the Watcher from the West Door,” cried Legolas. “At least, it was…”

The ents batted the most threatening pieces away.

Quartz landed on Ori’s shoulder, his feathers in a shaggy, unpreened mess.

“Wowee!” Quartzed cawed. “Suppertime!”

“Don’t you dare!” Ori cried. “That’s probably as poison as orcs!”

“Awww.”

As they watched, trees uprooted and bent by the force of the blast began to straighten and reroot.

Ori heard Yavanna’s voice, “Up you go. Pines? Yes, good thing I made you so bendy. Aspens? Yes, you may commence quaking. Oh, you poor dear. Your trunk is here and your crown is on the other side of the lake, and that’s just you all over. We’ll have to restart you as a sapling. Oh, don’t pout. It can’t be helped.”

While they stood there, too stunned for further words - except for Dain, who muttered, “I’m goin’ t’ piss meself.”- the waters of the lake gave forth a tall, gleaming column of stone, taller than it had been before and remade in obsidian.

The Durin Stone.

Closer to shore, two other objects surfaced, improbably floating since they were huge and made of metal and inscribed with runes. They washed to the shoreline and rested there.

“These are Narvi and Celebrimbor’s doors,” said Galadriel.

Ori started to cry. He couldn’t help it. He was an idiot.

“D-Dwalin?”

“Everyone’s safe, love. Well, except f’r th’ orcs.”

“Thank Mahal.”

Mahal said, “Aye, well, a nice batch o’ xocolatl bikkies all me own wouldn’t go amiss. Wha’m I suppose t’ do with all this rock? Heh. Go’ a naugh’y idea.”

And Ori giggled.

They were alright. They were alive. Everyone was-

There was another, far smaller explosion in the distance, making them all turn. A plume of smoke drifted into the sky.

“What th’ fuck were tha’?” Sculdis demanded, from her perch in a sizable oak.

“Seeing how it is to the east of us,” said Celeborn, helping his lady down from a majestic black walnut tree, “I’m going to guess it was Dol-Guldur.”

Dain snorted, “Nice t’ have a hill fort fart a’ yeh, ain’t it.”

“Never liked tha’ place anyway,” Mahal commented in Ori’s head. “Wife want’s t’ put silver birches there. Can’t have bears bringing’ up their young in a smelly ol’ place like tha’.”

Treebeard placed them carefully on the ground as he and the other ents strode forward to help Yavanna with the trees.

“Look!” Eowyn cried, pointing upward, shouting, “The eagles! The eagles are coming.”

Ori looked up. Eight gigantic eagles whirled down towards them. Ori saw a familiar gray figure seated on the leader’s back.

The eagles landed and Celeborn went forward.

“Greetings, Gwaihir, King of Eagles. You are welcome among us. Mithrandir, what errand brings you to our home in the company of Gwaihir?”

Despite his great age, Tharkûn dropped lightly down from the eagle’s back and hurried over.

“I was told there was an adventure underway being taken by thirteen dwarrow and one other. I was overcome by the feeling I was supposed to be apart of it.”

“Nine dwarrow, four elves, and a woman,” Galadriel corrected him. “Nothing to do with you, dear Mithrandir.”

“Ah,” said Tharkûn, sounding relieved. “I’m glad I didn’t miss anything.” He looked around at
the huge lake. “Well, so there was an adventure then. How shocking I wasn’t invited. What has happened to the three peaks?”

“Mahal, Yavanna, and Ulwe decided to redecorate,” Dori said peevishly, pushing forward. “And my Ori has had quite enough adventure, thank you, Mr. Wizard.”

“Lovely view,” Tharkûn admired.

“We destroyed an entire mountain,” said Ori.

Dain said, “Three, if yeh want t’ get technical.”

“Oh, Celeborn, look!” Lady Galadriel cried. “Now we’ll be able to watch the sunset!”

“So it would seem,” said Celeborn, a bit awed and amused. He put his arm about her waist. She sighed happily and laid her head on his shoulder.

Celeborn looked down at her.

“My dear, why are you so very….bumpy?”

“Books,” she murmured gleefully.

“Ah.”

Ori got ahold of himself and said, “Quartz, please go tell Thorin we’ve made it out.”

“What? All the way back to Erebor? On an empty stomach? But, I’ll miss something!”

“You won’t miss anything! I’m sure they could see that explosion from Erebor.”

Dwalin said, “Go tell Garnet how brave yeh were.”

“Ooo! On it!”

Ori followed the flight with his eyes. He couldn’t quite turn his neck, but he could still feel all his muscles tightening. Ori sagged in Dwalin’s arms as Quartz swiftly flew away.

“Go raise nestlings,” he grumbled into Dwalin’s chest.

Suddenly, Dori was at Dwalin’s side, fussing.

“… do you mean, orc guts? That’s disgusting! He’ll catch a disease! And why did he-”

“Dori,” Ori interrupted the flow of sympathy and scolding. “You and Balin need to talk to the eagles. They have to get you two and the chest of the Flower back to Erebor as soon as possible.”

“I can’t leave you!” Dori cried.

“You must, dearest,” Galadriel had a hold of Dori and was drawing her away. Celeborn caught Balin’s shoulder leading the pair to the eagles.

“Gwaihir,” Celeborn called. “Forgive me, my friend, but I need you and your court to carry that box and these two dwarrows to Erebor with all possible speed.”

Gwaihir looked at the box and gave a majestic shrug.

Dain shouted, “Ropes! Chains! Bring all yeh go’!”

Omosuil and his squad rushed off.

Celeborn waved Haldir and his soldiers into action. Within moments the box was netted with rope and four long stout chains were locked on. Four eagles took flight then swooped to grab the ends they were thrown. The box whisked up into the air. Gwaihir, with Dori and Balin astride his back, whirled off into the lead. Dori’s hair flew loose in the wind like a mithril ribbon in the distance.

“The Durin Stone seems to have settled itself right here at the lake edge,” Celeborn went over and patted it.

“The doors?” Ori asked.

“We’ll need a bigger wagon for those,” Kili replied, coming up to them. “They weigh far too much for eagles or anything else that flies.”

“Where are we going to get a bigger wagon?” Ori asked.

“Let’s worry about’ tha’ la’er, love,” Dwalin stated.

“What do we do now?” Ori asked.

But it was Galadriel who replied.

“Right now, you are going to sleep.”

And he did.

Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Phew! What an action-packed time Ori’s had! Now, it’s time to rest and recuperate a little. Not that that has ever stopped mayhem in this tale before. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori awoke feeling far better than when he went to sleep. He was clean, for one thing, and the pain was a distant, hazy thing, though he knew better than to push it. He seemed to be reclining on enormous, down-filled pillows of marvelous jeweled velvets, embroidered in swirls of gold. He fervently hoped he hadn’t drooled on any while he was asleep. He was still exhausted.

“There you are,” Cemnesta’s soft voice greeted him.

Ori turned his head. The room was circular, and filled with trees and plants, some growing as pieces of the wall. He couldn’t see a roof, only a fluttering canopy of huge, green leaves far above. Sunshine dappled through this. Cemnesta sat on a low wall which Ori supposed was of a decorative fountain, since water flowed perpetually from a horn held by the statue of an elf maid on the far edge.

“Are we in Erys Lasgalen?”
“No, we’re still in Lórien. Lady Galadriel called upon me to attend you. I admit, I was terribly flattered.”

Ori had a hard time looking directly at Cemnesta. The elf king was shiny… and vibrantly arrayed in robes of purple, scarlet and orange plaid.

“Wh-what are you wearing?”
Cemnesta grinned.

“They were a coronation gift from Master Dipfa.”
Ori groaned.
Cemnesta chuckled.

“There’s no end to her reach, is there?”

“Is she here?”

“Oh, no, but I thought I should at least try these on. She sent them especially, with a note insisting I use them to bring light and happiness to my reign whilst throwing the foliage into relief. I think the foliage would be relieved if I didn’t.”

Cemnesta rose to his feet, drawing a pitcher of water from the pool. He poured out a measure in a small golden cup, placing the pitcher on a dainty table next to the bed, and leaned over Ori, helping him sit up to drink.

Ori sighed with pleasure. It was the most delicious water he ever drank.

“Where are we?”

“Oh, just a guest room on the forest floor, far below the busiest section of Galadriel’s palace.”

“The busiest section wouldn’t be where Mistresses Margr and Vi are currently holding court, would it?”

“Galadriel thought it best to leave them in charge of the social fascination for a few days. My aunt and the sisters keep talking about something called an iklar that I just have to try, then they give each other such filthy laughs that I don’t quite dare.”

“You’re showing kingly wisdom. Where’s my Dwalin?”
Cemnesta nodded and Ori looked. Dwalin was sprawled face down on the foot of the enormous bed. There was a blanket tangled around his feet. One pillow lay on the floor, another propped against the footboard and the third under Dwalin’s left armpit. He lay completely still except for the occasional snore.

Cemnesta sighed. “He refused to leave your side. He’s been here helping us tend you, since we laid you on the bed. I admit I slipped a sleeping draught into his drink some hours ago. It seemed the only way to make him rest.”

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Two days.”

“Two days?” Ori yelped, struggling to get out of bed and regretting it instantly.

The room spun violently, though his muscles barely complained. Cemnesta grasped him carefully by the shoulders and eased him back down, swearing under his breath.

“I should have warned you to move slowly. The medicine I gave you is very powerful. It mends the muscles and ligaments quickly, but it has to pull much of the energy to do it from the rest of your body.”

“Ah,” said Ori. Then he shut up because talking seemed to make the dizziness worse. His brain spun one way, his stomach the other.

Cemnesta smoothed a hand over his forehead, and the nausea and dizziness retreated.

“Thank you,” Ori breathed. “Lesson learned.”

Sleep crept up on him again, though he fought it. For some reason his mouth was moving independently from his brain and he said,

“There’s me love,” said Dwalin, reclining beside him on the pillows. “Dwalin!” Ori cried and tried to reach for him. “Is everyone all right?”

“Barely a scratch among us,” Dwalin promised, pulling Ori into his arms.

That was so nice. Ori felt the last of the pain leave his muscles and the nausea and dizziness roll back into nothing. He was still as weak as man-made ale, but that was nothing with Dwalin there to hold him. Dwalin had washed with the same, vaguely copalish soap that had been used on Ori, and Ori didn’t even blush when he wondered who might have been the party doing the scrubbing. Probably Dwalin. Possibly Dain. Thankfully not Dori, who must be safely back in Erebor by now in triumph.

“I’d love to stay here with you forever,” said Ori.

“But?”

“But, I have to pee.”

“Aye?” Dwalin chuckled.

“Then I have to eat. A lot.”

“Cemnesta’s been expectin’ tha’. Page’ll go for a tray.”

“I can’t pee on a tray!” Ori teased, euphoria surging through him at the sight of his smiling husband.

Dwalin shook his head and kissed him.

“Th’ food’ll arrive on the tray, silly dwarf. Th’ rest we’ll take care a’ now.”

Ori sat up against the pillows, his belly comfortably full. Dwalin handed the tray to the page outside the door. It had held a good meal now completely decimated. Dwalin locked the door, but instead of turning to pounce on Ori, he leaned his brow against the panels.

“Dwalin?”

Ori was truly worried. Dwalin was shaking.
“Dwalin, are you hurt?”
Dwalin crossed the floor between them and clambered onto the bed.
“No, love,” Dwalin’s voice sounded strained. Still shaking, he gathered Ori in his arms.
“Yer safe,” he managed.
Ori realized the great warrior was quickly losing his stony exterior.
“Yes, we’re all safe and we’ve won through our quest.” Ori kissed him and carded his fingers through Dwalin’s hair. Dwalin had no doubt been holding himself together until now. Ori looked into his husband’s eyes, which darkened, then the tears spilled over. Horrified, Ori clasped Dwalin’s head to his heart.
“We’re all safe, my husband. You protected and saved me. We’re safe.”
Dwalin tightened his grip around Ori. Ori forced himself not to wince and clenched Dwalin as he wept.
Dwalin recovered himself in a few minutes and managed to say into Ori’s chest.
“I couldn’t hear yer song. It jus’ stopped.”
Ori realized that Dwalin meant the time Durin possessed Ori’s body. While Ori had been in the Halls, Dwalin had only silence in his heart.
“Oh, Dwalin! Oh, my beloved! I never thought…! How horrible for you. I wished I’d known.
I-”
Boiling rage filled Ori.
“Durin!” he yelled
To Ori’s surprise, the large dwarf appeared, sitting at the end of the bed.
“Sorry ‘bout tha’,” the king said, sheepishly.
“Sorry?” Ori seethed. “I’ll ‘sorry’ you when I get to the Halls for real! After everything we’ve done for you!”
Dwalin raised himself, releasing Ori, and stared. Ori realized that Dwalin could see Durin, too.
“You orc’s ass!” Ori addressed the First Dwarf again.
“Wait, love,” Dwalin said gently.
Ori stared at Dwalin.
“After what you’ve been through? I’ll knock him-”
Dwalin sighed.
“He saved yer life, love, no’ me.”
“And let you hear silence?!”
“Didn’t think ‘bout tha’ part,” Durin put in, a little thrown. “I’m no’ me adad. I’m still learnin’. An’ I gotta admit, once I go’ t’ hunt some orc.”
“I believe yeh,” Dwalin agreed.
Durin looked remorseful.
“If yeh want, lad,” Durin addressed Dwalin, “I’ll give yeh me beard when yeh get t’ th’ Halls.”
“Er, no, bu’ thank yeh jus’ th’ same,” said Dwalin.
“Yer sure, laddie? Yeh could prob’ly weave a tent from it.”
“Fine,” Ori snapped, his anger slowly draining as Dwalin seemed satisfied to let things rest.
“Thank you for saving me but…well, you can understand. Being flower-less for so long.” Ori considered a moment. “She will be able to be with you when we discover her name, won’t she?”
Durin winked and vanished.
“I’m still mad at him,” Ori growled, more pissed that his question had not been answered. He had a lot of questions.
Dwalin gave a watery chuckle.
“It’s brilliant th’ way yeh shout at ‘r ancestors an’ valar. Mos’ a’ us’ud f’rget everythin’ an’ drop t’ our knees.”
Ori opened his mouth then closed it and blushed.
“Me brave wee scribe.” Dwalin’s eyes, though wet, danced with laughter.
“I love you,” Ori said, unable to think of anything else to say.
Dwalin chuckled again and wrapped his arms about Ori as they sank back against the pillows.
Ori settled Dwalin’s head against his heart once again.
“There.” Ori murmured. “Up against your ear. Better?”
Dwalin mumbled inarticulately and rubbed his cheek against Ori’s chest.
“So sweet t’ me ears an’ heart. There’s no singer ’r flute ’r fiddle ’r anythin’ that’d equal. Like bein’ able t’ hear mithril emergin’ from th’ stone, ’r looking int’ a gem an’ seen’ th’ light shinin’ inside. One time, as a wee lad, I watched a bu’erfly come outa its cocoon an’ take fligh’. Yer song jus’ sits in me heart an’ shines an’ glimmers in me.”
Ori felt his face burn.
“Warrior and a poet,” he teased, kissing the tattooed pate below his chin.
Dwalin soon moved upward so they were face to face.
“We did it,” said Ori, resting his brow on Dwalin’s. “We really did it!”
“Aye, we really did. An’ I’m proud enough a’ yeh t’ bust.”
“I’m proud of everyone,” said Ori. His cheeks grew hot with embarrassment. “I couldn’t have done this alone.”
Dwalin kissed him and they cuddled in the cool, quiet chamber. Birds sang in the distance. Then a brief shower pattered overhead while the sun still shone.
Ori sighed and rubbed his cheek, startled to find the new thicker hair on his face was at least a quarter inch long.
“I still don’t believe this,” he said. “I don’t believe it happened now, or this quickly.”
“Why? Once yer belly fur comes in, it’s usually only a matter a’ a few weeks.”
“Is it? Why didn’t I know that?”
“Best guess? I’d say our Dori was afraid if he said somethin’, it’d happen, and once it happened—”
“I’d be grown up! Oh, Dori!”
“Mesel’, I kin hardly wait f’r it t’ grow,” said Dwalin with a feral grin.
“Oh? Can’t you?” Ori teased.
“I’m goin’ t’ make a fetish a’ yer whiskers. I’ll never be able t’ keep me paws out’ve ’em. Jus’ like I can’t keep me paws off th’ rest a’ yeh.”
“I’d put my paws on you if I could lift them that long,” said Ori. “I’d love to see to you, and show you just how much I love you.”
Dwalin kissed his nose.
Ori wrinkled it and giggled.
“I was thinkin’,” said Dwalin, “th’ same thin’ abou’ yeh. I mean, th’ showin’ yeh part. I kin lift me arms jus’ fine.”
“Oh,” said Ori.
“If yer up t’ it.”
“Part of me is getting there. I wonder what Cemnesta would say about this.”
“Yeh wanna ask ’im?”
“Not particular-—”
Dwalin’s kisses were insistent, but gentle, on Ori’s mouth, along his jaw, nuzzling his neck. If Ori felt guilty that he could not reciprocate, that stopped when he heard Dwalin’s sigh in his ear.
“Yeh always taste so guid.”
“Going to eat me up?”
“Gonna do me best.”
“Oh. Oh, yes.”

Ori sighed as Dwalin helped him dry off.
“I wish the medicinals the healers put in the bathwater didn’t make me feel like a noodle,” Ori grumped. “I’m all floppy.”
“Good.” Dwalin approved and put the clean nightshirt over Ori’s head. He easily lifted Ori and carried him back to the bed. Ori flushed at the sight of it, newly-made with clean sheets and pillows. Dwalin wasn’t as subtle.
“Hope our Gladdy’s folk know how to get dwarf spunk outa th’ sheets.”
“Dwalin!” Ori scolded as his husband tucked him back in, sitting up against the pillows. There was a babble from the other side of the door that boiled closer. Ori looked up as Dwalin sat beside him and put his arm about Ori’s shoulders. The door burst open. Kili and Gimli shoved each other in.

“Ori, mate!” Kili shouted. “You were brilliant! Are you feeling better?”

“Bloody Idad Other Elf wouldn’t let us see yeh!” Gimli added, loudly.

The pair clambered up on the bed, Kili gamely jumping up and down on it.

“We did it!” the young prince crowed. “We got the Flower of Durin!”

Ori burst out laughing. Dain, Sculdis, and Jani pushed in after with the rest of the Company on their heels. Tauriel came over quickly and Kili bounced sideways and landed on her ready back, hugging her.

“Well done, me wee scribe brother!” Dain blustered as Sculdis came round the bed to lean over on it and give Ori a kiss on the cheek. Dain followed this up by ruffling Ori’s hair violently.

“Aye, our Ori,” Margr put in. “It were a grand adventure, wasn’t it, lovey?”

“It was, it was!” Vi answered. “The firs’ an’ best’ we’ve had! Ain’t tha’ righ’ our Glorfy?”

Glorfindel grinned down at Ori.

“Excellent explosion, Lord Ori.”

Ori groaned and flopped back.

“Explosions seem to happen with me.”


Eowyn giggled and climbed on the bed to sit on Ori’s other side.

“That was an amazing adventure, Ori. Thank you! Uncle will blow a vein in his head and Theodred will be so jealous!”

Celeborn came in and looked amused at the amount of people seated on Ori’s bed.

“I told them they might visit you one at a time,” the elf lord said gently. “Apparently, among dwarrow, that means one company at a time.”

“Of course it does, my love.” Lady Galadriel entered with a merry look in her eyes. “All for one and one for all!”

“Du Bekar!” Gimli roared in agreement.

“Lady Galadriel,” Ori said. “Have you heard from Erebor?”

Roäc flew in with Quartz.

“Hail, Conquering Hero,” Roäc croaked. “King Thorin’s chuffed with you. And so ‘m I.”

“Thank you for coming, Roäc,” Ori said, smiling as the raven king fluttered down to land on Ori’s bedding-encased knee. Quartz hopped up to the pillow behind Ori’s shoulder and tweaked his ear.

“The Bearer arrived,” Roäc said, “on the King of Eagles and the egg laying…er…pregnancy was announced. It is now being stated throughout Erebor and Dale that the Bearer has been served by Mahal.”

“Served…you mean everybody’s saying Dori was impregnated by Mahal?!” Ori straightened up, grimacing.

“Yup!” Quartz added.

Ori groaned. “Wonderful! We’re going to have to tell people to stop saying that, in case Yavanna, you know, Mahal’s wife takes offense. Offended Yavanna means no crops.”

“Nonsense,” the low laughter of a feminine Voice in his head told him. “I think it’s funny. It makes Him blush.”

“Mahal blushes?” Ori was surprised into saying this aloud.

“That’s an odd imprecation,” Tauriel observed. “I’ve never heard it used before. Is it common to dwarrow?”

“No,” Kili said. “Is that a new one you’ve invented, Ori?”

“No!” Ori said quickly. “I - I. Never mind. But Dori and Balin are alright, yes?”

“Of course!” Roäc grunted.

“Where is Cemnesta?”

“He was called home,” said Celeborn. “I believe he has the same problem to face as we do.”
“Is everyone well?”
“We’re quite well, and so are all the naked, full-grown elves who have been crawling up from the River Nimrodel and out from under the rocks all over Lórien.”
“What! I mean, where did they come from?”
“Our best guess is that they were the elves who originally were ensorcelled into orcs. The last thing most of them remember is crossing the Field of Celebrant, down into Dagorland marshes.”
“Great Mahal!”
“Indeed. Their table manners are atrocious.”
“So all those legends about the start of orcs were true,” Ori mused. “They must be happy to be free once more. I’ll miss Drum. Maybe he’ll find Ecthelion again soon and continue as the drummer.”
“I don’t think Drum was ever an elf,” Celeborn said. “And now, we must ready your Company for your triumphal return journey.”
Dwalin snickered into Ori’s hair.
“That was the best kind of adventure,” commented Jani. “Everyone safe, little ‘r no hurts, an’ no regrets.”
“Indeed,” Glorfindel agreed.
Ori thought this was almost correct.
“I think the only one who will have any regret or get mad at me would be Master Brur.”
“Why?” Tauriel demanded.
“Yeh got th’ box!” Gimli added. “He wanted tha’.”
“Yes,” Ori agreed, “but unfortunately along with three mountains, the great library of Khazad-dûm blew up, too.”
“Not all of it, Lord Ori,” Galadriel said in a teasing tone. “You all saw that I sealed it.”
“Sealed it?” Eowyn asked.
“The whole thing?” Jani added.
“No, the central core, where the scribes had hidden those items they treasured most, not to mention the diaries of ancient elf ladies,” Galadriel exchanged a loving glance with her husband. “I apologize if I missed any irreplaceable treasures.”
Ori stared at her a moment as everyone looked confusedly at one another.
“Lady Galadriel,” Ori said slowly, “where is the core of the library now?”
“At the bottom of the Misty Lake,” she said breezily.
“Sealed up?” Ori asked.
“Completely sealed against all the elements.”
“How can we get to it?” Ori asked.
The Lady smiled mysteriously at him.
“That must be discussed when we all return to Erebor.”
“I’m coming, too!” Eowyn stated, and squeezed Ori’s feet through the bed clothes. “I want to see Erebor and meet everyone.”
“A very good idea,” approved Galadriel. “I shall write to dear Theoden and say that I am making a diplomatic visit to recognize Cemnesta’s coronation and, of course, will look in at Dale to congratulate King Bard and King Father Thranduil on their engagement and visit the Bearer at Erebor to consult what she may need for her upcoming Event. Naturally, I shall bring you with me as my ward and introduce you. It will be very advantageous for you to meet any noble young males who might be lounging about at the three different courts.”
Eowyn laughed delightedly and rose to embrace Galadriel.
“Thank you so much, my lady.”
Galadriel patted her.
“If you are my ward, you must refer to me as your aunt, my dear.”
“Thank you, Auntie.” She turned to Celeborn. “Thank you, Uncle.”
Celeborn looked amused and inclined his head.
“Of course, my child.”
Kili shouted as Gimli biffed him with a pillow. Gimli then whacked Vi, who leapt on the bed, tackling the young dwarf. Kili vaulted on, armed with another pillow and Tauriel followed. Eowyn and Glorfindel shouted with laughter as they bounced to join in the rumpus.

Ori pulled his legs up and stayed in Dwalin’s sheltering arms as a tremendous noisy pillow fight waged all over the rest of the huge bed. Celeborn just shook his head, amused, arm in arm with Galadriel, who called encouragement to the combatants.

When it looked as though all adversaries were losing, Celeborn called a halt to the chaos and ordered everyone out.

Ori secretly felt relieved. He needed a nap.

“You’ll stay, won’t you, Dwalin?” he asked, afraid he sounded needy, but in fact, he felt very needy.

“I’m no’ goin’ anywhere righ’ now.”

“Ah, I shall amend my command,” said Celeborn. “Everyone out except Dwalin. Will that do, your lordship?”

“Yes, quite,” said Ori loftily, then spoiled his regal demeanor by giggling.

Ori had no idea how long he slept, though it was evening again by the time he woke.

“Impressive showing, dwarf egg.”

The Red Queen perched on the edge of the pool, peering down at them sharply. Two other bonebreakers perched one on either side of her, their crests not nearly as red as hers. They weren’t introduced, so Ori assumed they were not her heirs.

“I’m sorry we destroyed your majesty’s aerie,” said Ori. “I hope, at least, some of your people made it out.”

“Rest assured, we are all quite well. Eru warned us to flee and our hatchlings had fledged in the spring.”

“We also spoiled your majesty’s dinner. All those orcs! What can we do to help?”

He hoped she didn’t demand they sacrifice some of the Company or the elves to make up for it.

“We finished up any orc bones left on the sides of the lake. When you decide to leave, we are going back to Erebor with you,” Red Queen announced.

“Wha’? All a’ yeh?” Dwalin demanded.

Ori squeezed his husband’s wrist. A pathetic effort, but enough to warn Dwalin.

“Of course,” said the queen, apparently not deigning to notice this lack of protocol. “We seem to recall some nice red clay about the River Running.”

“And there are plenty of bones in Dale,” Ori said reflectively. “They leave them in piles.”

Red Queen blinked at him and craned her neck forward in fascination.

“Piles? Did you say there are piles of bones in this Dale?”

“Aye,” said Dwalin. “They grind ‘em up t’ make fertilizer fer their fields. Just make sure yeh poop over the fields an’ no harm done.”

Into Ori’s ear, Dwalin said, “Our Thorin told yeh no’ t’ bring home any pets.”

Ori squawked and Dwalin laughed.

“They aren’t pets!” Ori hissed. “And… and…. It’s not my fault!”

Ori nudged him in the ribs, but Dwalin’s laughter only grew.

Ori tried to get the conversation back on track.

“Of course, your majesty knows that the king of ravens already has his aeries at Erebor.”

“Old Roäc? Phht! We’re not afraid of him. Besides, our aeries are different from his. We nest closer to the ground. The ravens will pick the flesh, we will clear the bones. Yes, an elegant arrangement.”

Ori thought Roäc would disagree. He would also take exception to being called ‘old’, even if he was hatched when King Thror was a youth. The trick would be explaining everything to Roäc before he molted entirely. Ori doubted Roäc had the same regrowth ability as Baluchistan.

“Will your majesty allow us to escort you all to Erebor?” Ori ventured. “I’d like to send word on ahead, to let King Thorin know of your majesty’s arrival, so he can greet the bonebreakers properly.”
“Mmm, you have leave to do so.”
“Your majesty is gracious.”
“Yes, we are.”
The bonebreaker queen and her attendants flew away.
Ori groaned.
“I’m glad Roäc’s already flown home. I’ll need to think of a way to break this to him.”
Ori relaxed back into the pillows and curled against Dwalin.
“I wish I had planned this better,” said Ori.
“Love, we planned f’r everythin’.”
“The volcano?”
“Yeh couldn’t’ve predicted tha’.”
“This was a quest for the line of Durin. If there’s a volcano involved, it will erupt, or blow up, or become a pile of toothpicks. Something.”
“Tha’ yer theory?”
“I think it’s a physical fact. We were just lucky Mahal, Yavanna, and Ulwe stepped in.”
In Ori’s head, Mahal said, “I couldn’t have yeh kickin’ me shins everyday, could I?”
“I wouldn’t really have done that,” said Ori.
“Tha’ Mahal?” Dwalin asked.
“Yes.”
Mahal said, “I believe yeh’d’ve given it yer best shot. I did promise I would try, didn’t I?”
“Yes, but Yavanna didn’t, and I didn’t know Ulwe would help, either.”
“Yavanna won’t be left out a’ thin’s, no’ if she kin help it. And Ulwe… well, he runs hot an’ cold.”
Ori groaned.
“The valar of water runs hot and cold? That’s terrible.”
“But true,” Mahal insisted. “An’ his sense a’ humor’s somethin’ savage, bu’ he never misses a chance t’ gleek ol’ Eru.”
“They don’t get along?”
“Ulwe’s always resented th’ influence Eru exerts over the tides. Meddlin’, he calls it.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. It’s time to head back in triumph but it’s a long-ish journey, so let’s head out. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori rode Honda along the wildflower-strewn bank of the Anduin. He was still tired but his heart felt light. They had recovered the box. No one had been hurt. The balrog was destroyed. Yes, they had also destroyed the greatest dwarf kingdom ever known, three mountains, and made a lake, but everyone, so far, seemed quite happy about it. The ents were spreading themselves around the edges of the Misty Lake.

Dwalin rode beside him, close enough that they could hold hands as they rode. They had planned on using boats to sail up to Beorn’s, but the doors of Narvi and Celebrimbor made this impossible. Omosuil cantered up to Ori and Dwalin.

“Mellon Ori, we shall just follow the river north. We will be at the Master Beorn’s by nightfall tomorrow.”

“That’s good news, Omosuil. Are the horses managing with the doors?”

“Oh yes, having eight of them all pulling, none are feeling any strain.”

Ori glanced over at Galadriel, who was on her Banbury. Hers and Celeborn’s horse, Hennef, were a matched pair and, finding riding the pace of the ponies too slow, they romped and galloped in the fields nearby. Red Queen and her flock swooped lazily overhead.

Ori thought the vast field was the loveliest meadow he’d seen. The tall grasses waved silver and green in the morning sunshine. Tangles of purple vetch and red trumpet flower vines twirled through. Pale blue mountain poppies bobbed in the ghost of a breeze. Buttercups popped up, showing their golden bowls, and dark orange daisies grew everywhere.

Ori saw Galadriel put her hand in a small sack she carried and fling something in the air. At this distance, it looked like dust, but Ori rather thought it was seeds. He smiled, flowers of Lórien would spread.

He glanced behind. Kili drove one wagon. He had the reins latched, as he busily worked on a flower crown for his wife. He was already decorated with the one she had made.

Margr and Vi took turns driving the other wagon and riding with Glorfindel. Sculdis drove the new huge twelve wheeled wagon containing the doors of Celebrimbor and Narvi, all carefully wrapped for travel. Kelli rode on a cushion beside her as there was no way for Kelli to remain on Hennef while galloping. Gimli hung on for dear life and hollered as Legolas sent Arod cantering about, Dain on Chopper at their heels. Jani played her small balalaika and Omosuil’s soldiers sang to her music.

Haldir and his squad followed them closely. Haldir, on his horse Albarcas, constantly gave Omosuil a disapproving glare, and was constantly ignored.

Eowyn, on her own horse Windfola, rode beside Kili and Tauriel. Ori was so pleased she was accompanying them back to Erebor. Lady Galadriel had dispatched her note to King Theoden via goldfinch, to explain that everyone was fine and she was traveling to Erebor on a visit and was taking his dear girl with her.

“Why a goldfinch?” Ori had asked Lady Galadriel.

“I used to use a phoenix, but it kept incinerating all the messages.”
“Really?” Ori had gasped. “Like in the Shire novels? There really are phoenixes? Where do they come from?”

“No, I’m just making it up. I use whatever bird doesn’t mind the journey.”

“Oh.” Ori had been a little disappointed that there was no such thing outside of Bilbo’s novels.

“Good of you.”

“Thank you. Actually, it’s better to go with a small, stealthy bird. If you use a pigeon, the Rohan falcons eat them.”

Ori wondered again what King Theoden would make of the Lady’s message, never mind its mode of delivery. If anything, Theoden King would probably be sorry that he wasn’t coming along. Theo would just be annoyed to be left out.

Eowyn galloped her horse up beside them and turned a little to face them both.

“Auntie was telling me about your King Thorin and his consort. Was it a great romance like you find in those wonderful novels by Notathain A. Shire? I love his novels. Do you know of his works?”

Ori and Dwalin looked at each other and laughed until Eowyn demanded to know the joke.

“We know Shire,” Ori said in a mysterious tone.

“What is he like?”

“Very interes’in’ fella,” Dwalin said with a wink.

“Will he be there, while I’m visiting Erebor?”

“Aye. I stood there wi’ me mouth hangin’ open. If I were a dog, me tail’d’ve wagged itself off an’ gone flyin’ like a bird.”

“What did you do?” Eowyn asked, giggling.

“Nuthin’,” Dwalin said, “I could see he weren’t more than jus’ o’ age. I tried t’ think a’ wha’ t’d do ‘r say, when our Nuisance barged int’ me back an’ said if I’d business wi’ him then it were betwixt me a’ him an’ t’ leave his wee brother out o’ it.”

“He warned you away from me?” Ori cried.

“Aye, an’ then I knew who yeh was an’ where yeh lived. F’r handin’ me tha’ news, I could’a kissed him then an’ there!”
“Wait,” Eowyn interrupted, her face covered in confusion. “Ori, do you have another brother? Is his name really Nuisance?”

“Nah,” Dwalin grinned. “His name’s Nori. I call ‘im, Nuisance.”

“And you let him?” Eowyn asked Ori.
Ori shrugged.

“Nori is a nuisance. He’s between Dori and I. Together we were called the Brothers Ri. The first time I ever saw Dwalin was when I was helping Nori home. Nori was drunk. Dwalin came along and Nori started yelling at him. I was horrified as he was yelling at one of the Erebor guards. Dwalin just came across the street, threw Nori over his shoulder, and walked us home. He dropped Nori on the step, nodded to me, and went away.”

“You didn’t say anything!” Eowyn accused Dwalin.

Ori thought, then,

“Why didn’t you say anything to me, Dwalin?”

To Ori’s surprise, his husband blushed.

“I couldn’t believe I were walkin’ wi’ yeh. There yeh were, at me side. Beautiful an’ sweet, lookin’ up a’ me wi’ them lovely, big, brown eyes. I were as tongue-tied as a sheep.”

Ori and Eowyn laughed.

“At least, he didn’t bleat,” Eowyn teased.

“Why didn’t you say anything to me, Dwalin?”

“Nori is a nuisance. He’s between Dori and I. Together we were called the Brothers Ri. The first time I ever saw Dwalin was when I was helping Nori home. Nori was drunk. Dwalin came along and Nori started yelling at him. I was horrified as he was yelling at one of the Erebor guards. Dwalin just came across the street, threw Nori over his shoulder, and walked us home. He dropped Nori on the step, nodded to me, and went away.”

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Ori and Eowyn laughed.

“At least, he didn’t bleat,” Eowyn teased.

“I wouldn’t have noticed,” Ori admitted, blushing himself. “I was too much in awe of him. A big, handsome warrior of the king’s guard, helping me, a nobody from the back of Steam Alley. Inked, pierced, the best beard I’d ever seen, I was utterly in love. Dori thought I was sick as I couldn’t eat my porridge next morning. I was in a haze for weeks. I kept my eyes on every guard detail I ever saw, hoping to see him again.”

“And you did?” Eowyn helped.

“Of course,” Ori smiled up at his husband. “I spent years peeping at him around corners and from behind fences. When Sigrid was old enough, we saw him with Prince Fili in the guard. Sigrid fell head over heels for Fili. Sigrid and I talked about them endlessly.”

“Did you see Ori peeping at you?” Eowyn sent a teasing glance Dwalin’s way.

“Oh aye, every time, I think. Kept ‘im in me sigh’s.”

“Why didn’t you go and talk to Ori?” Eowyn demanded. “Are you both very shy? Theo didn’t give me that impression and having met you, I certain don’t think so.”

“I tried,” Dwalin defended himself.

“Did you?” Ori gasped. “I don’t remember you coming to the house to ask me to walk out with you! Was I not in?”

“Yeh always had yer brothers wi’ yeh. Dori were li’ a bleedin’ watchdog. Jus’ once I saw yeh down th’ lakeside dock, where th’ Master’s la’est kept her flowers fenced in, but le’ folk sit on benches t’ look at ‘em. Yeh were finally alone an’ busy sketchin’, I s’pose. I brushed mesel’ off an’ gave th’ beard a quick fluff an’ strolled over t’ say hello. I were halfway there then our Dori comes up an’ sits beside yeh. Mahal’s hairy arse, wha’ a glare he sent me way. Though’ me eyebrows’d burn off.”

“Dear Lady Dori glared at you?” Eowyn said, in disbelief. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Dori can glare,” Ori assured her.

“Aye, our Dori kin glare. An’ there he stayed, watchin’ yeh draw ‘r write, ‘casionaly playin’ wi’ yer hair, an’ glatin’ a’ me. He stayed there ’til yeh both walked off.”

Ori suddenly remembered that moment. He’d finally had a chance to go and sketch the flowers. He’d been doing his journeyman. Master Khujik told him to go and practice drawing from nature for a change. He’d found the perfect bench and set himself to work. Dori had got off early and found him there. He’d stayed by Ori’s side the whole time, which Ori had thought strange. When they’d got home, Dori took him aside and told him not to go down to the docks alone.

Ori nearly fell off Honda, laughing

“I remember that day! I was relieved I’d got all my drawings done as Dori forbade me to go back there by myself. When I asked why, Dori told me there were pirates at the docks and they might
steal me away!"

Eowyn giggled and Dwalin looked incensed.

"I ain’t a pirate. I’ve a bone t’ pick with our Dori, now."

Eowyn called them back to the story, so Dwalin and Ori told her of their Day of Fate months ago, making her laugh harder.

"So much for romance!" she managed.

"It was very romantic," Ori objected. "Dwalin was so kind and good to me from the first moment."

"All right, that bit is romantic," she conceded.

"Wha’ yeh lot talkin’ on?" Gimli demanded as Legolas brought Arod along the other side.

"Dwalin’s and my whirlwind romance," Ori told him.

Gimli chuckled.

"Aye, heard all ‘bou at tha’ from me mam an’ da talkin’. Mam kep’ saying Cap’n Dwalin needed t’ get hisself together."

"Eh?" Dwalin demanded.

"Everyone knew," Gimli said carelessly. "Imad Dis an’ Mam would talk on it. Mam though’ yeh ought t’ hurry up an’ Imad though’ yeh should brin’ Ori round f’r us all t’ meet before walkin’ out."

Dwalin snorted.

When evening drew in, they crossed the River Anduin at the old ford. The river ran wide over a bed of small stones, the water less than knee deep, tinkling and sparkling. The Company crossed with ease and traveled a little further north. Then the tents were pitched along the river bank. Kili had a good sized fire going and was busy with dinner. The elves turned the horses and ponies out on the grass to rest and graze.

Dain and Sculdis brought in several large trout while camp was being set up. Kili made the fried lembas as he’d promised Galadriel, with chips and served the last barrel of beer with them. For dessert, Kili dropped flattened pieces of dough into the pot of bubbling oil and once they browned, removed them and dropped them in a plate of sugar and cinnamon. These were handed out, still piping hot.

"Mmm, good mullis, Kili," said Jani. "Not as good as Chat’s, but still some good."

Kili smirked at her.

"Where do you think I got the recipe? Nothing’s missing. It tastes just the same."

"Ya left out the beard oil."

Ori wanted to laugh as Omosuil and his soldiers gorged on fried dough. He didn’t blame them, he decided, finishing his second and licking his fingers coated with sugar and oil.

Quartz made himself sick helping Ori with his fried dough. Dain provided some of the mixture he used on Baluchistan. This made Quartz better, but he burped obscenely for a few minutes then fell heavily asleep in Ori’s lap, sprawling, wings all skwee-wiff and his head hanging down off Ori’s leg.

Omosuil and Nomirliel badgered Margr and Vi to tell their ‘scary’ stories. With such an eager audience, the sisters sat, one on each of Glorfindel’s knees, and held forth on all kinds of ghosts, ghouls, creepy-crawlies, and things that, as they stated, go bump in the night.

Eowyn’s eyes were as round as saucers but Galadriel and Celeborn all but wept with laughter. This prompted Ori and Dwalin to regale them with their adventures in the Night Market. Eowyn begged them to take her. Tauriel assured Nomirliel the open courtyard dancing was better than any she’d ever attended. Ori tried to explain the lights to the Lórien couple. Dain and Sculdis snickered and dropped hints about what was available in the Alley of Divine Bliss. Gimli told Legolas they would go to the Moo and Cluck. Ori wondered if the Company would be descending on the Night Market as a whole. The idea was so funny, he flopped, giggling, into his husband’s chest.

"Let’s all go!" Jani said, her eyes shining. "It’ll be a celebration of our Company and success!"

"Ha," laughed Omosuil, "the celebration of the grand adventure of Lord Ori and his professional bullies!"

Ori, delighted, blushed and thanked everyone.
Dain called a toast to everyone as the Company of Lord Ori and His Bullies.
The laughter was just subsiding when the elves all sat up listening. Ori and the dwarrow fell silent. Ori strained his ears. Then he thought he heard hoofbeats. Everyone reached for weapons. Galadriel waved a negligent hand.
“There is no threat. It is Mithrandir.”
Kelli gave a profound squawk and everyone settled back. Ori wondered why the wizard was here.
Tharkûn trotted up on Shadowfax. Tharkûn patted the flank and dropped to the ground.
“Here you all are,” he said brightly, doffing his hat and bowing to Galadriel then to Eowyn. “I had hoped to catch up with you sooner.”
Kili rose to go to the fire.
“A nice cup of chamomile, Master Tharkûn?”
“Actually, I’d like a little red wine, if you have it?” Tharkûn smiled. Kili went to a wagon and rummaged.
“No real news,” Tharkûn said seating himself as Omosuil brought him a cushioned stool like the ones the elves had, the dwarrow preferring to loaf on the grass. “Everything seems to be perfectly settled. Treebeard sends his regards and says all the saplings, the new ones and the replanted ones, are doing well.”
“That is excellent,” Galadriel smiled.
“Here you are, Master Tharkûn,” Kili brought over a small goblet full of ruby liquid. “It’s got a fruity bouquet.”
“It has what?” Tharkûn asked.
“That’s what Dori always says. I don’t know what flowers have to do with anything,” said Kili.
There was a flapping of wings and Red Queen landed on the lowered tailboard of the biggest wagon which Kili had been using as a work space for preparing dinner.
“Your majesty,” Ori greeted her.
Red Queen gestured Tharkûn with her beak.
“Do you need him slain?”
“No,” Ori said quickly. “This is Tharkûn. He’s a wizard and a friend to all of us.”
“Ah.” Red Queen leaned her long neck forward and peered at Tharkûn.
“Tharkûn,” Ori slipped into his diplomatic role, “this is Red Queen of the Bonebreakers, late of Khazad-dûm. They are moving to Erebor now that Khazad-dûm is no more. Your majesty, this is Tharkûn.”
Tharkûn rose and bowed.
“I am delighted to make your acquaintance, your majesty,” Tharkûn murmured politely, though Ori was wary of the twinkle in the old wizard’s eye.
“Mmm,” Red Queen considered. “We know of you by the name of Gandalf the Gray. A cousin of ours informed us that in the Shire, you are called a Disturber of the Peace.”
Tharkûn drew himself up.
“If your cousin was referring to the incident of the removal of Mr. Baggins from the Shire, I was barely involved. All I did was give him a little nudge out of the door.”
The Company as a whole, burst into laughter.
“Oh, aye, lad,” Dain roared. “He lit out an’ yeh instructed a returnin’ squad o’ Thorin’s soldiers t’ clean out his entire home, takin’ th’ plumbing, an’ th’ panelin’ throughou’ with ‘em. They came back carryin’ th’ bloody front door!”
“He is a friend, your majesty,” Ori assured the large bird over the vociferous amusement of everyone.
“If he can be trusted to bring an entire nest of a family member of yours to safety, dwarf egg, then he is, indeed, a fine friend. We are pleased to meet you as well, Tharkûn.” Red Queen was gracious.
“Thank you, ma’am,” Tharkûn resumed his seat and sent a stink eye at Galadriel and Celeborn,
who were trying to stifle their giggles in each other’s shoulders.

Kili politely offered the scrap bowl full of fish bones to Red Queen. She seemed surprised at this, blinked, then upended the bowl in her beak and emptied it in one gulp.

Tharkûn turned to Eowyn.

“And you, lady, did your adventure meet your expectations?”

“It was certainly amazing. I’ve been rushed by murderous orcs before. I was taken aback when they ignored me.”

Ori gasped.

“You were attacked by orcs? Did they sneak around and come through the door behind you?”

“No,” said Eowyn, wide-eyed. “They came pouring through a hole in the ceiling over the doors, just as we got across the bridge with the box. We made ready to engage them. And they ran at us, and right past us and continued on into the forest.”

Nomirliel nodded.

“Yes, they must have been out of their minds with fear. I cut off the head of an orc as it passed us and the body simply kept running into the trees. Any of them that made it past us were mopped up by the ents.”

Eowyn shivered.

“I could have gone my whole life without hearing how ents deal with orcs.”

They made such excellent time the next day that it was mid-afternoon when they reached a broad wall of wood and stone. Behind this grazed a flock of sheep. All the sheep looked up at them, then bounded off.

“Shall we take th’ wall down, drive through, an’ build it back up?” asked Jani.

Ori looked at Galadriel, who smiled and dismounted with Celeborn.

“We will in a few minutes. We have reached the lands of Beorn. Those animal live with him and have gone off to tell him we have arrived.”

Ori stood up in his stirrups and looked. Dwalin’s hand steadied him. A figure appeared and headed their way at speed. Beorn shouted a hullo. Ori waved, sat back down, and got off. Everyone else dismounted and made the wagons fast.

Beorn vaulted easily over his fence, smiling and came forward to greet Ori. Ori gamely held out a hand, but Beorn caught him up and hugged him.

“Easy, lad,” Dwalin barked. “Me husband’s had a rough time in th’ mountain.”

Beorn looked at Ori now settled at his shoulder. Ori felt like a badgerling.

“From what I saw, the mountains got the worst of it.” Beorn chuckled and gently put Ori back on Honda. “I shall take you to my home and put you in my steam room. There I’ll rub you down with salt and beeswax mixed with white willow bark. With that and a good meal, you’ll sleep like a newborn lamb at its mother’s side.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Ori said simply. “Thank you, Beorn, I’m glad we came back this way.”

“Where’s Dori?” was Beorn’s next question.

“Dori had to go with eagles back to Erebor, so no one would think anything had happened to the Bearer.” Ori quickly explained. Beorn nodded then greeted Galadriel.

“Welcome to my lands, Elf Queen. Long have we been neighbors, but this is a first visit.”

Galadriel smiled and held out both her hands to skin changer.

“Indeed. With the darkness gone by the actions of Lord Ori, we need have no fears of any evil thing lurking to stop us seeing on another.”

Beorn took her hands and Galadriel stood on tip-toe to kiss Beorn’s cheek. Beorn then shook hands with Celeborn and kissed his cheek.

“And here we have my ward,” Lady Galadriel announced to Beorn. “She is King Theoden of Rohan’s niece. My dear?”

Galadriel took Eowyn’s hand as young woman came forward from her horse.

“Eowyn, my child, this is Beorn, Lord of the Carrock. Beorn, this is my ward, Eowyn, the White
Eowyn dropped a slight curtsey and held out her hand. Ori was taken by the sunny smile Eowyn gave the skin changer. He rather thought the White Lady of Rohan was going to make the most of her chance of being out from under her fond uncle’s eagle eyes.

“Lord Beorn,” Eowyn looked up. “I am honored to meet you. I apologize for being only able to present myself so travel stained as I am.” She placed her hand on his large one. Hers all but disappeared in his.

“White Lady,” Beorn rumbled. “You are as fair as your name and all the stories brought to me of you.”

Eowyn laughed and blushed.

“Being a neighbor to elves has made your tongue fair, sir.”

Ori thought Eowyn was hoping Beorn would do something else with his tongue and Beorn certainly looked as he would like to.

“Well met again, Skin changer,” bellowed Glorfindel in high humor. “It has been long since we last met.”

“Ah,” Beorn looked the elf hero over. “You.”

Beorn turned.

“Now here’s the one I’ve been looking forward to seeing again!” He moved toward Dain mounted on Chopper.

“Guid t’ see yeh, laddie,” Dain enthused.

Beorn ignored him and knelt, stroking Chopper’s face and scratching his ears.

“How are you, my fine boar friend? You look very well indeed.”

Chopper oinked politely and nuzzled Beorn. Dain craned over Chopper’s neck.

“Showin me up ‘re yeh, me lad? An’ after everythin’ yer mam an’ I’ve done f’r yeh!”

Chopper rolled his head back and guffed at Dain.

“He speaks lovingly of you,” Beorn said with a smile.

“I should hope so,” Dain snapped. “No dessert f’r yeh,” he scolded.

Ori realized that pigs could actually whine.

“Ah well, never mind, seein’ as yer sorry,” Dain allowed.

Beorn shook hands with Tharkûn.

“Good to see you kept the tip of your nose,” Beorn rumbled.

“It was a very near thing,” the wizard replied.

Ori looked from one to the other, than realized his imagination could supply anything leading up to this scenario except, perhaps, the truth.

Red Queen floated down. Beorn raised his arm, inviting her to land on his forearm.

“Bearman,” Red Queen croaked.

“Scavenger queen,” Beorn replied. Ori didn’t think they were very cordial until Beorn told her that a wolf pack had brought down an elk further up the river. Red Queen didn’t quite lick her chops, but she and her flock flew away at speed.

Everyone was greeted and stepped forward to help Beorn take down the wall, so they could drive the wagons through. The wall was built back up and they all moved easily through the meadows. Beorn led the way, showing them around. The sheep gamboled about the party as they came toward Beorn’s huge log house.

Eowyn admired it and Beorn walked beside her horse for the rest of the way.

There was an open area of neatly scythed grass sprinkled with forget-me-nots and purple thyme. Looking somewhat out of place in the middle, was large round marble pool in the center of which was a carved fish in the dwarrow style. From the fish’s upturned mouth spurted a sparkling fountain.

“Nice fountain,” Sculdis observed.

“Yes,” Beorn said, a curious note in his voice. “Day before yesterday it fell out of the sky and a spring bubbled up from the bottom. The animals like it, the water is better than that from my old well. Prettily made, too.”

“Yes,” Ori murmured to himself. “But a little too First Age for my tastes.”
Then he giggled hysterically as Dwalin helped him off Honda. Dwalin took Ori indoors, escorted by a large black dog that walked on its hind legs. The dog gestured with a forepaw to the fireplace and Dwalin helped Ori to a cushion by the hearth.

“Thanks,” Ori sighed, turned and looked at the dog. “Thank you.” The dog ducked its head slightly and went out through another door. “Yeh in pain, love?”

“No, just a little achy. I’m stupidly tired, though.” Beorn entered with the rest of the company and elves. Beorn waved people to make themselves at home.

“I’ll make my steam room ready.” Beorn leaned on his knees, looking down at Ori and Dwalin. “There’ll be a bed ready for you, until our evening meal.”

Ori was a little abashed as he lay on his stomach on a soft linen sheet spread over a large table. Dwalin stood, arms folded over his chest. Dwalin had stripped to his waist and was barefoot, leaning his arms on the table Ori lay on. Ori was naked. The timber room had a brazier burning sweet-smelling apple wood. Next to this sat a large bucket of water. The room was as hot as a forge. Beorn came in wearing nothing but a short kilt, and carrying a large bowl. He put the bowl on the table and threw another sheet over Ori, covering him from the waist down.

Beorn cast two ladles of water over the coals, which puffed steam about the room. He dipped his hands in the bowl and rubbed them. “Relax and take a nap, if you like,” Beorn rumbled. Ori tried to relax as Beorn’s hands landed on his shoulders and squeezed.

Sometime later, Ori felt Beorn covering him completely with a sheet. Ori couldn’t think. He was muzzy and his body felt like liquid. He was poured off the table into Dwaln’s arms and wafted somewhere. He registered a warm bed and Dwalin climbing in with him.

Ori cracked an eye open. Through a large window he saw the shadows of dusk. He rolled over into Dwalin who was looking through his sketch book. Dwalin grinned at him and kissed Ori’s nose.

“Better, love?”

“Wonderful. If I was a cat, I’d be purring. Which one are you looking at?”

“Th’ ane fra the journey t’ Lórien. Dead funny some a’ ‘em.”

“I hope Dain’s hat is safe,” Ori murmured, snuggling under Dwalin’s arm and settling his head against Dwalin’s chest.

“He’ll have t’ tie it on somehow ‘r it’ll be wobblin’ all over th’ place.”

“I can’t wait to see him wear it.” Ori snickered, then his stomach made a loud demand for food. “Guess we’re gettin’ up,” Dwalin teased.

There was a knock at the door, then Tauriel looked in.

“Dinner time?” Dwalin asked.

“Yes. Do you need help?”

Dwalin dropped out of the bed and grinned at her.

“If yeh grab his clothes, lass, I’ll get this one up, thanks.”

Ori, despite doing his best, was still a little wobbly. Between them Dwalin and Tauriel got him dressed and steadied him on his feet as they went through to the main room.

Kili and several of Omosuil’s squad helped the animals set up the dining table. Galadriel and Celeborn sat on a bench before the fire, Tharkûn and Jani on another opposite them. On the floor, Legolas frowned in concentration as he untangle Gimli’s hair, which was wet as Gimli looked as though he’d just come from a bath. Ori and Dwalin exchanged glances. This was not two warriors helping each other prepare for battle as before. If Gloin and Gridr had been present this time, they would have been shocked at such wanton behavior. Eowyn came in, her hair a sheet of gold, wearing a long dress of white with belled sleeves. She looked like a princess from a Shire novel.

“There you are, my child,” Lord Celeborn took Eowyn’s hand and seated her between himself
and Galadriel. “You have been in your role as a messenger of Rohan for some days, it is well to see
you as the Lady of Rohan. I’m sure your uncle would be most proud to see you now.”

“Have you heard from my uncle?” she asked.

“I have, my dear,” Galadriel told her, patting her hand. “He sent a falcon. Hopefully it didn’t eat
my goldfinch. Anyway, your uncle writes he was startled by the explosion but is quite satisfied with
my explanation and arrangements. He begs a letter from you when you have a spare moment.”

Eowyn laughed.

“He wants details. I shall give them, then tell him I was privileged to be counted among Lord
Ori’s bullies.” She twinkled at Ori, who stuck out his tongue.

“Honestly!” cried Ori. “This talk of bullies. It’s all Dori’s fault.”

Ori grinned as Dwalin settled him a well-cushioned armchair then got in beside him.

“How are you feeling?” Celeborn asked.

“Much better, thank you.”

“Well, our Ori,” said Margr. “Bullies may no’ be th’ soh-bree-kay yeh like bu’ yeh go’ t’ admit it
does have a ring t’ it. Bunch o’ bullies takin’ down a balrog.”

Ori did giggle at that.

“Ah,” said Tharkûn. “You all defeated him.”

“Well,” Ori admitted, “it was mostly Glorfindel and Margr and Vi.”

“Indeed,” Tharkûn observed. “In your usual manner, Glorfindel?”

“No.” The elf hero lounged before the fire, his head in Vi’s lap and an arm about Margr, who was
leaning on his chest. “My dear ladies, here, released the aquifer and melted him down to about a foot
high, then Margr squashed him flat with her boot.”

“Ah,” Tharkûn nodded. “You liquidated him.”

Ori nudged Dwalin, who was rolling his eyes. Jani, Gimli, and Legolas chuckled.

“Poor fellow,” Tharkûn murmured. “He made a foolish choice.”

“What’s wrong with our Glorfy’s choice?” Margr glared at the wizard.

“Oh no, dear lady. I meant the balrog.”

“Yer callin’ him a poor fellah?” Dwalin demanded.

“Oh, he was,” Tharkûn assured them.

“I didn’t know balrogs were hims or hers,” Eowyn put in. “Are there… balrogesses?
Balrogettes?”

Tharkûn smiled on her.

“Indeed, as there were only a few and were of no gender. I’m referring to this one as ‘he’, for I
was acquainted with him before he chose to become a balrog.”

“Became a balrog?” Legolas gasped. “I thought Morgoth created them all.”

“Oh, no, no, lad,” Tharkûn puffed on his pipe and sent a smoke ring shaped like a cow running
across to the fireplace.


Soon everyone was tucking into vegetables roasted soft and covered in a honey glaze, mashed
roots dripping with butter and cream, patties of crushed nut meats dipped in bread crumbs and fried
in butter. Loaves of many kinds of grains and nuts and seeds, butter and piles of cheeses, and for
dessert they had roasted fruit with mint leaves, and drizzled with honey and whipped cream. Beorn
served water, milk, and mead.

Everyone enjoyed this hearty meal and laughed and talked.

Kili looked up at his host.

“I was helping your animals with dinner and I noticed you have a lot of dwarrow-made
cookware.”

“Yes,” Beorn rumbled, nodding. “The basin of the fountain was full of it when it landed. Along
with the cookware there were rather a lot of glass pickling and canning jars and larger crocks for
storage. I have already begun to make good use of them. I had to fish it all out as the water started
coming up.” Beorn turned and mumbled something to one of the goats, which bustled back to the
kitchen then returned a moment later with a small saucepan.  
“They all have this same mark on them,” Beorn said and handed the sauce pan to Ori.  
Ori took one look at the design and began to giggle.  
“These carry the rune mark of the royal kitchens of Khazad-dûm.”  
“Oh,” Beorn considered. “Do you want them back?”  
“Oh, no, thank you,” Ori said quickly. “If they came with the fountain, then they are meant for you.”  
“Good.” Their host looked pleased as Ori returned the saucepan to the waiting goat, who trotted off with it.  
“But, Mithrandir,” said Legolas, “how did it come about that you know the balrog in Khazad-dûm?”  
The wizard sat back in his chair and drained his mead.  
“As you, or some of you, know balrogs were maiar who refused to obey and serve Eru. They went to Morgoth. Eru made a few of us—”  
“Yer one a’ them maiar?” Dain demanded.  
“Yes, King Dain, I am. Eru made a few of us to be wizards to aid him in Arda. I am Gandalf the Gray. You all know of Saruman the White, who has returned to Eru, and Radagast the Brown. There were also a couple of blue wizards but their whereabouts are unknown and their names escape to me. Eru made another, named Myron.”  
Dain snorted.  
“Myron the Maiar?”  
“Alas, King Dain, some of us suffer under life’s crueler alliterations. He wasn’t a bad fellow at heart.”  
“You knew him well?” Ori asked.  
“As I told you before, we were formed and trained at about the same time.”  
“Oh, I am so sorry.”  
“Never mind, young master. He never was much of a team player, though I can only lay half the blame on him. Eru wanted to make him the puce wizard, a color which in no way flattered him. Or anyone, let’s be frank.”  
“Is that a major impediment for successful maiar?” Ori asked.  
“Of course! Myron the Puce? Who would take him seriously? Not to mention the attendant self-esteem issues.”  
Galadriel smiled over her cup.  
“Not a problem you’ve ever suffered, Mithrandir.”  
“Indeed. Our friend Bilbo says I had to be shaped like Big Folk, or my ego would never have fit.”  
“So,” Ori said slowly. “Myron became a balrog and slept under Khazad-dûm?”  
“Balrogs like fire. They rest in it and absorb it into themselves, thus their great size.”  
“He was dead ugly,” Margaery mused. “Yeh’d think he’d a’ preferred bein’ puce than ugly.”  
“I believe it was the wings, he liked,” Tharkûn replied, shaking his head. “Myron always had a fancy for wings.”  
“Yeh maiar’re dafter than brushes,” Gimli muttered and helped Legolas to more fruit and cream. Legolas protested but Gimli silenced him by saying that he, Legolas, had better eat or Gimli’s mam would throttle Gimli for not looking after his One. Beorn roared with laughter at this.  

Once dinner was finished, they all rose and the table was cleared. Everyone did their best to help the animals with the washing up. When everything was pristine again, they found their host had gone out to his back garden where he was setting up tall torches all about with Eowyn’s assistance. Ori traded looks with Dwalin. Eowyn seemed intent on having a wonderful flirt with Beorn and he had no intention of refusing her.  
“Oi,” Vi commented, coming out to the back porch where Dwalin and Ori were standing. “That lass be’er have dislocatin’ hips, if she’s gonna be ridin’ tha’.”  
“She’ll be fine,” Glorfindel assured her. “She’s of Rohan. They ride horses all the time.”
“They ride ‘em, love. They don’ fuck ‘em. Don’t yeh know th’ difference?”
“One doesn’t always require a saddle?” Glorfindel teased. Margr hooted and Vi swatted Glorfindel. Ori and Dwalin moved aside to sit on the step and snicker. Glorfindel occasionally got a good one in on the sisters.

Beorn and Eowyn returned and Beorn invited everyone to come out and enjoy the evening. The animals brought comfortable seats and Jani came back out with her balalaika, making the elves call for a song. Jani obliged them.

Beorn enjoyed this and asked for something faster. Sculdis had found a small drum in the living room earlier and, now, brought it out to Beorn. He said it had been left there by a rude peddler along with a few other things. He didn’t play, but if she did, she was welcome to it. Sculdis and Jani sang a silly song making everyone laugh again.

Dain bounced up with a shout and barreled back indoors only to reappear with something all wrapped up in a woolen bag. He untangled it and held a weird bundle of sticks.
“I knew I brough’ me doodle sack f’r somethin’,” he bellowed.
Ori realized what it was and choked as Dain stuck the blowpipe mouthpiece into his mouth and his cheeks puffed out red as he blew. The bag under his arm inflated, emitting its drone and every sheep and goat on the land bleated in response. Kelli clunked his beak and crept under Celeborn’s chair.

Omosuil turned huge eyes on Ori.
“Mellon Ori, why is King Dain torturing that poor animal?”
“That’s not an animal. It’s a musical instrument. It’s properly known as a bagpipe, but Dain, for reasons only known to himself, calls it a doodle sack.”
Omosuil looked at him blankly.
“It does seem to be an instrument of some kind. Musical? Well…”
“One dwarf’s meat is another dwarf’s poison,” Ori shrugged.
“Oh, Great Eru!” laughed Omouil. “Is he using it to rid his tubes of parasites?”
Dwalin chuckled.
“If he had ‘em, I s’pose it’d get rid of ‘em quick.”
Satisfied with the drone, Dain caught the chanter and started with ‘There’s a merry old inn’, with Sculdis and Jani accompanying him. The dwarrow sang, as did Galadriel and Tharkûn.
Jani went into a well-known country round dance and most of the elves and dwarrows rushed out to the grass, made up sets and danced. Beorn offered a hand to Eowyn and she took it, laughing, and they joined in.
Ori leaned back into Dwalin’s chest. The dancing was wonderful. He wished he and Dwalin could join in, but his muscles weren’t ready for that yet.
“You can go dance, if you want,” he said.
“Don’t wanna t’ wi’ any bu’ yeh,” Dwalin told him, kissing his ear. Ori glowed. He settled to watch as he and Dwalin shared a mug of Beorn’s good, sweet mead.
The animals had joined the dance, leaping and jumping. Beorn occasionally swung one high in the air, when he wasn’t swinging Eowyn. The elves whirled and pranced. Tharkûn hopped about, quite spritely, his long beard pirouetting after him. Kelli hopped after Celeborn, fluffing his tail and clunking his beak the entire time. Gimli and Legolas were sometimes in unison and at other times seemed to compete. Kili and Tauriel twirled about and all around, dancing sometimes and chasing each other.
Red Queen landed beside Ori and Dwalin.
“Dwarf egg, is this a ritual?”
“Ritual?” Dwalin asked.
Red Queen looked down her beak at Dwalin. Ori hurriedly explained.
“Your majesty, Red Queen, this is Dwalin, he is my mate. And please called me, Ori.”
“Very well, dwarf egg…Ori. You may address me with familiarity.” She looked Dwalin over minutely. “Your mate is big and strong. May you lay many eggs.”
“Thank you,” Ori said gravely as Dwalin snickered into his hair. “What do you mean by ‘ritual’?”
“Sometimes the uruks would take torches and move and make other noises. They would chain a
group of other uruks together then go into the depths. Some time later the torch carriers would
return. The chained one were never seen again.”


“Balrog?” Red Queen repeated this in a questioning tone.

“The big creature of fire, ma’am It was referred to as a balrog,” Ori explained.

“Then what is your flock doing?”

“They’re…” Ori didn’t think Red Queen wished a detailed explanation of the concept of dance,
so he went with. “They’re celebrating our success.”

“Success?”

“We have succeeded in recovering the treasure lost to all the…er…dwarf flocks of Arda.”

“Ah.”

Ori thought quickly.

“If you and your flock have finished your dinner, you’re all welcome to join us.”

“We and our flock are roosting in the hay store in that big building,” Red Queen nodded at one of
Beorn’s barns. “We heard your flock’s noise and we came to see.”

“I hope we’re not disturbing you.”

“No, your noise is much more pleasant than any noises the uruk made. One may flap one’s wings
to it in a joyful manner.”

“That’s sort of the same as what we…my flock is doing,” Ori tried. “As I said, you and your
flock are welcome to…er… flap with us.”

Dwalin roared with laughter and Red Queen made a hissing sort of snicker.

“We call such flapping, dancing.” Ori tried to recover his dignity but couldn’t.

Legolas and Gimli did look like they were trying to become airborne at the moment.

Kelli bounced on his tail and then pranced. Red Queen’s eyes followed him.

“Oh what is that?” she demanded, gesturing Kelli with her beak.

“That’s Kelli,” Ori told her. “He’s a companion to Celeborn. He’s what is called a raphcuctus
bird. They are a type of flightless bird that comes from the far south.”

“He doesn’t look much like a bird,” Red Queen commented, a note of curiosity in her voice.

“He’s round and huge, and being a bird is to fly. If a bird can’t fly, then what’s the point?”

“I have no idea.” Ori admitted.

Kelli caught sight of them and paraded over. Red Queen stared. Kelli fluffed his tail, put his tiny
wings out and fluttered the ends, drew them back to rest on his belly and bowed with the studied
elegance of elves. He rose and regarded Red Queen a moment then clunked his beak a few times.

Red Queen inclined her head. Kelli bowed to Ori and Dwalin then strutted back and returned to
dancing.

“That was the oddest behavior,” Red Queen observed. “We can’t get our beak to do that noise.
How does he make that noise with his beak?”

“I don’t know that either,” Ori shrugged.

Red Queen stayed beside them, watching until the tune drew to a close and Jani called that the
musicians needed a break.

Kelli strutted off to the berry bushes to snack. Beorn went in to see what was in his kitchen. The
dancers chatted and either sat on the grass or came to the porch to sit. Red Queen headed to straight
to Dain.


Dain gazed stone-faced at her and farted.

Red Queen stared at him.

“The noise you make with that bag, not your smelly noise, fledgling. Focus.”

Sculdis rocked back, howling with laughter.

“Lassie,” she managed when she could breathe. “If yeh didn’t have feathers, I’d swear we was
sisters.”

Red Queen considered this and then hopped over to bat her beak against Sculdis cheek.
“Sister dwarf,” she proclaimed. Sculdis wiped her eyes and got herself together. “Lift yer wings,” she said. Red Queen looked puzzled and did so. Sculdis leaned in and wrapped her arms under the wings and hugged Red Queen. Red Queen caught on and folded her wings about Sculdis’ back.

They parted. Dain scooted a stool over and showed Red Queen his ‘doodle sack’.

Beorn and his animals came back out with more mead and platters of toast slathered with berry jams.

“Scavenger queen,” Beorn rumbled. “What brings you here?”

“We heard your celebratory noise and came to partake, Bearman.”

Beorn shrugged and passed out the food. Ori offered a slice to Red Queen. She sniffed it. “It’s good,” Ori told her. She examined the slice with both eyes, one after another, then opened her beak. Ori slotted the toast inside, mindful of his fingers, and she gulped it down.

“Do you like it?” Ori asked.

“Sweet, has some crunch. We like it.”

As if to reinforce this, she reached forward, using her right talons, and grasped another slice and shoveled it in.

Ori grinned up at Dwalin.

“She likes it.”

“Aye, bu’ keep her away fro’ th’ mead, love. I ain’t dealin’ wi’ a soused bird.”

“That,” said Ori, watching Margr help Red Queen to drink out of a cup, “isn’t going to be your problem.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Beorn is a helpful friend and Ori feels better. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori woke with the sun on his face, the snoring of his husband beside him, and a strange buzzing noise. He peeped over the bedclothes and a honey bee the size of Killer was standing on them. Ori swallowed and stayed very still, watching it. The bee, he realized, was not looking at him but at Dwalin. Every time Dwalin snored, the bee buzzed in return. Ori clenched his teeth and strove to stay still but the giggles were almost bursting from him. Dwalin grunted and shifted.

Ori hissed, “Good morning, husband. Please don’t move or anything.” Dwalin’s body stilled. An eye cracked and looked at Ori.

“Wha’s th’ problem? We abou’ t’ fall offa somethin’?”

“No. One of Beorn’s bees is visiting. It’s standing on us. It’s really big.”

Dwalin cocked his head down and looked at the bee, only two feet from his nose.

“Fuck,” Dwalin muttered.

“Bzzzz,” commented the bee.

Ori giggled a little and whispered,

“Every time you snored, it buzzed back at you. I was wondering what you two were talking about.”

“Let’s hope I weren’t cussin’ at it,” Dwalin reflected. He slowly brought out his arm and offered a finger to the bee. The bee crept forward and tasted his finger.

“Bzzzz,” the bee opined, then buzzed out the window.

“Fuck.” Dwalin rubbed his hand over his face and blinked, sitting up. “How yeh feelin’, love?”

Ori moved slowly and stretched. He felt much better. He was ready to get things done as usual.

“I’m better.”

He looked at Dwalin. Dwalin grinned.

Ori pounced, knocking his husband back amongst the pillows.

“Get yer arses up!” bellowed Dain, banging on the door. “Breakfas’s abou’ ready.”

“Fuck yerself, Dain,” Dwalin called cheerily back.

Ori got out of bed and went to the window. It was early and the garden was truly buzzing with bees, busy at the wild flowers that grew rampant all around Beorn’s house.

Once dressed, the pair of them went and washed their hands and faces at the wash room nearby then went to the main room. The table was set and Kili was helping to put food on the table. Kili had made sure there was hot tea to go with the milk Beorn usually had for breakfast. Through the wide open door, Ori saw Tauriel out in the garden, picking berries.

Ori and Dwalin seated themselves. Dain and Sculdís were already there. Beorn, on his way somewhere, told them to ‘get started’. Ori got started, he was starving. Kili, along with tea, had made a great pile of scones. Ori filled up on scones, Beorn’s good jams and cream. People began to trickle in. The sisters came in, tailed by Glorfindel. Jani dragged herself through, yawning. She grunted in greeting, poured herself a tankard of tea, added a trickle of cream, dumped in half a jug of honey and went outside to have a pipe and wake up.
Beorn returned and landed in his chair at the head of the table. He looked at Ori.

“So the Bearer is carrying?”

“Oh yes,” Ori grinned. “Having a nephew or niece will be fun. I helped Dori with all Bard’s badgers.”

“Same mother?” Beorn inquired. Ori realized Beorn was different from the men of Dale.

“Oh yes, Matilde was very nice. Sigrid looks a lot like her. Matilde died shortly after Tilda was born. Matilde and Dori were great friends. We were neighbors.”

Beorn nodded then, “Now Bard’s taking up with the elf king, hmph. Do the children like the elf?”

Both Ori and Dwalin laughed.

“They brats got Thranduil under their wee thumbs. They call ‘im, ‘wicked stepmother’,” Dwalin told Beorn. Beorn raised an eyebrow.

“Because,” Ori took up the story. “The Great Woudini told Sigrid she would have a wicked stepmother then a handsome prince would rescue Sigrid and take her away to live in his palace.”

Beorn snorted. “Nice the handsome prince lives a hop, skip and a jump away. Woudini is notorious.”

“His real name is Jim,” Ori said idly, running his finger across his plate to catch the stray crumbs, blobs of jam, and cream.

“He gives th’ weirdest predictions, bu’ it’s amazin’ how they work ou’ sometimes,” Dwalin allowed. He cocked an eye at Beorn. “He ever predict f’r yeh?”

Beorn looked at Dwalin, then chuckled.

“He told me once that I would burrow underground where I would be an honored guest at a great party and I would hear strange music that would render me unable to hear anything else for seven days after.”

Ori and Dwalin roared with laughter.

“Yes,” Ori gasped. “The White City Bang Crash was extremely loud. Your poor ears!”

“They were ringing for a good long time,” Beorn admitted with a chuckle. “He also said I would have a very short but mad love affair with a snowflake.”

“Was the snowflake’s name Eowyn?” Ori giggled.

Beorn grinned with a mouthful of rather sharp teeth, but he narrowed his eyes.

“Isn’t there a saying that one should never kiss and tell?”

“Best no’ t’, if yeh ever meet her uncle,” Dwalin observed.

“I certainly wouldn’t,” Beorn replied with a wink. “I like kissing too much.”

Eowyn came through. She wore a long brown smock over a bright blue dress. She looked happy and Ori noticed, happily sated. Beorn patted the seat beside him.

“Come and eat, my morning daisy. You look in need of food.”

Eowyn sat and helped herself to three scones, jam, and the cream. Beorn poured her a tankard of milk which she drained then put the tankard down for a refill. Beorn chuckled and did so. Eowyn gave an evil smile at Ori.

“Good morning, Lord Ori.”

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?” Ori teased.

Galadriel and Celeborn breezed in. Galadriel regarded her ward.

“You’ve bathed, good girl. It’s highly impolite to arrive at the breakfast table…glowing.”

Eowyn shrieked.

Beorn colored a little and remarked, “That explains why you two were running for the river before dawn.”

Celeborn laughed and raised his lady’s hand to his lips. Ori leaned back in his chair and frowned at Dwalin.

“I hate Dain. Why couldn’t he go wake up someone else?”

Dwalin chuckled and put an arm about Ori’s shoulders, while Dain protested around a full mouth.

Omosuil and his squad trailed in either from outside or the bedrooms. Tauriel came back with a basket full of berries which Kili took, thanking her with a kiss, and returned to the kitchen. Jani
returned smiling and refilled her tea.

Ori looked around.

“We are most grateful for your hospitality, Beorn.”

“Yes, well,” the huge man leaned his elbows on the table. “I admit I’m pleased you stopped to
stay. Having a nearby mountain range explode but leave little damage intrigued me. Your tales of
the event were excellent. I shall send you all on your way around midday. I have gifts I need to
gather for the Bearer.”

“That’s most kind of you,” Ori smiled, blushing a little at the generosity for Dori.

“I have plain cotton lengths,” Beorn went on. “They are soft and will do well for nappies and
small bedding. I shall also send herbs for teas and plenty of honey. I have several boxes packed
from my ice house to carry clotted cream, butter, and cheeses. When the Bearer runs short, perhaps
that young raven of yours will come and see me and I’ll send more.”

“Yup,” Quartz cawed as he whisked in and landed in front of Ori. Ori buttered a slice of bread
and put jam on it, before cutting it up in small pieces for Quartz to gulp down.

“You should get married and have cubs,” said Eowyn. “You obviously love children and this is a
marvelous place for some.”

Beorn grinned at her.

“What are you proposing, White Lady?”

“I’m not proposing,” she twinkled at him. “I’m merely offering some advice for the future. I’m
sure many travelers pass your lands and not all of them will be male. Many women have hard lives
and, in some places, are considered secondary beings to men. Someone like you would be nothing
short of miraculous. Some women also wish to have a basket full of children, which I don’t. Your
home and life here would be a fond dream come true for such.”

Beorn inclined his head with a teasing smile.

“You have my word that I shall see to it, ma’am.”

“Do,” Eowyn grinned. “I look forward to sending amicable ponies to you to care for and teach
your children to ride the steppes.”

Beorn roared with laughter, caught her hand, and kissed it.

“You speak with wisdom, White Lady. My quiet household is naught to a free spirit of the wild
wind that dances on the mountain crags of Rohan. As you advise, I shall seek one who shares the
call for solitude and the gentle kindness of the meadows and rich earth.”

“While I am visiting Erebor and the Dale,” Galadriel said with a bright smile, “if I should meet any
ladies I deem worthy, I shall direct them to travel this way.”

Beorn’s eyes widened a little and as he groped for something to say. Celeborn patted his wife’s
hand.

“I’m sure Beorn will manage nicely without any assistance from you, dearest….or Lady Dori.”

Galadriel pouted out her lower lip at her lord, but giggled.

“Lord Ori,” Celeborn went on. “What are your plans now?”

“We have to pack up and add in Beorn’s presents for Dori. Beorn say he will see us off around
midday.”

“I shall make sure you have foodstuffs, too,” Beorn added. “That young Kili seems to have a
good head when it comes to provisions. I shall also send your excellent king some of my mead and
berry wine.”

Dwalin leaned over and whispered to Ori, “I’m sure Thorin’ll love pourin’ ou’ a glass ‘r three f’r
‘is hobbit.”

“Hush,” Ori admonished with a grin.

Beorn went on, “I have more roving than I know what to do with. I’m sure your people will have
plenty use for it.”

“Beorn, we-” Ori began, but Beorn waved his words away.

“Your people have destroyed an evil maiar and an army of orcs. I won’t miss them trying to steal
my animals,” Beorn grinned at Galadriel and Celeborn. “And you have provided me with some
good neighbors.”
Ori went out to the meadow and called to Honda. She came at the gallop, Harley at her heels. She squealed to see Ori and bounced around in front of him. Ori laughed and, once she stopped, put his arms around her upper neck and hugged her as she nuzzled his back and huffed in his hair.

“It’s time to go, Honda,” Ori cooed at her. “Just a couple of days more and you’ll be back in your own stable with Gnasher and Grinder and the others. I’m sure you miss them all.”

Honda snuffled and nibbled at his tunic. Harley came forward and bumped his head into Ori’s shoulder.

“Come on,” Ori said and led the way back to the house a hand on each pony, scratching the manes. Dwalin came out with both their packs. He dropped them and folded his arms, chuckling.

“Lookit, yeh, laddie,” he teased Harley. “Followin’ after me love like a pup. Yer almost’ as bad as me.”

Ori went straight up to Dwalin and grabbed his husband’s beard and pulled him into a kiss.

“I’m so lucky,” Ori grinned as he came up for air.

“Aye, yeh kin get lucky wi’ me anytime, me love.”

Ori giggled but blushed as he saw Omosuil coming over to them.

“Mellon Ori, am I interrupting yours and the good captain’s mush?”

“Aye,” Dwalin said with a terrible frown but a twinkle in his eye. “We about ready?”

“Yes, Captain. The wagons are packed. Everything is ready. All who are riding are…hunting up their mounts.”

“Huntin’?” Dwalin repeated amused.

“Yesss…” Omosuil managed. “It seems the horses and ponies of the Lord of the Carrock household have been …er…telling our horses and ponies what a nice life they lead.”

Ori looked horrified at Honda.

“Honda! Don’t you like living with us?”

Honda gave a disgusted huff and put her head over Ori’s shoulder and pulled him to her. Ori hugged her again. Dwalin raised an eyebrow at Harley, who snorted and rolled his eyes.

Worried, Ori took Dwalin’s hand as they walked to the largest barn before Beorn’s house. To his relief, all the horses and ponies had turned up and appeared to be showing off to Beorn’s animals how well they could walk over and stand in their traces to be hitched to the wagons or saddled up, to the point where they walked around the wagons inspecting the wheels, picking up bridles and checking their saddle straps, nickering and nosing their riders to loosen or tighten them.

Ori carefully shook out the saddle blanket and folded it beneath Honda’s eye and arranged her saddle on it. He took the bridle from her mouth and held it, while she nodded her head down into it. When she was ready, he looked her over and hugged her again.

“You’re the best pony ever, Honda.”

Honda snuffed and tried to nibble at his beard, making him giggle. Dwalin led Harley over to them. Ori mounted up and looked about at his Company.

“Everyone ready?” he called out. Shouts of confirmation sounded and they set off. Beorn led the way.

“I will see you to the edge of the Greenwood. My lands end there and you, sylvan elves, will be in your own.”

“Thank you, Beorn,” Ori smiled at the huge man walking beside them.

“As I told you, you’ve done a great service to any living between the mountains and the Greenwood. I have had news that the goblins of the northern Misty Mountains have fled toward Ered Mithrin and Withered Heath. With the destruction of Moria and Dol-Guldur, they live in fear of Mount Gundabad, too. The rangers of the area have pursued many of their bands. Rumor has that a few have been seen fleeing to the Northern Waste. There will be more trade moving on the old North Road. We shall all benefit. You are the one we should all render thanks to.”

Ori blushed hotly.

“I had a great deal of help.”

“It were yer quest, love,” Dwalin told him, squeezing his hand. “Yeh led us.”
“And it was an excellent adventure,” Eowyn chimed in.
“Indeed,” Glorfindel put in. “I shall stay on in Dale as its protector but will inform King Bard that I intend to accompany you, Ori, on any further adventures you may take.”

Ori wished his face would stop burning.
“I don’t think I’d like another one like this. I don’t like bringing people into danger. Mind,” he smiled up at Dwalin. “I would like to see a little more of Arda. We have seen many beautiful places and met such kind people.”

“I hope you will come to Rohan,” Eowyn offered.
“Yes, I’d like that. I’d also like to see the White City of Gondor. First March Warden, Boromir, son of Denethor, told us much of it when he came as guard to King Elessar and Lady Arwen for Thorin’s coronation.”

“You’ve met Boromir?” Eowyn cried. “He’s lovely, but such a pain in the neck.”
“Yes. How did you meet him?” Ori turned to her.
“He’s been to Rohan often as a messenger of the king to be. He and Eomer were always up to some lark when he stayed, and he and I were always baiting and playing pranks on each other. He would stuff dried grass and heath down my neck whenever I rode out with them. I would get him back.”

“Oh?” Beorn wanted to know.
She laughed.
“Yes, once I put two field mice in each of his trews pockets before he put them on. The racket he made when he sat down to breakfast. He jumped up and danced all around. Another time I covered a large hole with bracken. He stepped on it and fell in. I’d thrown a slurry of horse shit in the bottom. Then once I sewed a few small crushed snails in the lining of his message bag. Lady Arwen wrote me, it was a year before he figured out why his favorite bag stank so badly, no matter how many times it was cleaned and by many different specialists. She sent hers and the king’s congratulations. She wrote that Elessar said he wanted me to serve on his council of war, if it ever became necessary.”

Ori was helpless with laughter and Beorn was wiping tears from his eyes.
“Yer a dangerous lass,” Dwalin complimented her. “I’ll be keepin’ on yer good side.”
“As I’ve seen all your sides?” she teased. Dwalin threw back his head in mirth.
“I’m going to introduce you to my brother, Nori,” Ori said decidedly. “You’ll like him.”
“Bleedin’ balls a’ Mahal, love. Though’ yeh loved us all,” Dwalin protested with a grin. “Don’t go givin’ our Nuisance a fuckin’ apprentice!”

Ori grinned. “He probably would want her as one, wouldn’t he? I’d better not. Bofur, that’s Nori’s husband,” he explained to Eowyn, “would never forgive me and I don’t want to think what Dori would do. Probably accuse me of corrupting an innocent princess.”

“Innocent princess?” Eowyn snorted. “Dear Lady Dori doesn’t know me very well. I have no wish for such a life as that. To me it would be as a cage. Only such as Arwen, I envy. She is an equal to her king. Her counsel, he gives great heed. This is strange to the ways of men. I swear sometimes it is to my sorrow to have been born a maid among men.”

“Come now, niece,” Celeborn adjured her. “You are strong in your spirit and I trust none shall imprison you in a life you do not desire. Indeed, my Lady and I shall counsel Theoden on your behalf, if you wish it so.”

“Oh, Eowyn,” Ori said quickly. “Dori would only say such in the same way he scolded Haldir for flirting with you! Don’t dislike yourself for being a female. Even if the way of your folk is to favor males, with Galadriel and Dori to speak out for you, there is no possible way for you to be run roughshod over. Having met you, I doubt any would dare try. And Dwalin and I would certainly have plenty to say to anyone who doesn’t think you are perfectly capable of doing anything a male of your people can do.”

“An’ if they don’t see sense in tha’,” Dwalin nodded. “I’ll happily thump ‘em f’r yeh, if yeh ain’t there t’ do it on yer own.”

Eowyn laughed again. “Thank you! I have, as you put it, thumped Boromir a number of times. I
am the equal to my brother in swordplay and a better rider, though I fully admit I lack his brute
strength.”
“T’ll have no criticism to make of your physical strength, White Lady,” Beorn murmured eyes
sparkling at her. “Nor any complaint at you being a lady.”
“Quiet you!” Eowyn commanded and reached out to smack him. He ducked and laughed at her
reddened cheeks.
“Eowyn!” Vi scolded. “Yeh naughty pet. Yeh only go’ introduced yesterday.”
“Has that ever stopped you or your sister?” Eowyn demanded.
“Tha’ ain’t th’ poin’, our lass.” Margr admonished. “Yeh ain’t passed yer bearin’ years.”
“Did that stop you two, before?” Eowyn poked.
“No,” Glorfindel grinned impishly. “And I bless Mahal and Yavanna everyday for it.”
“Here now,” Margr bellowed, obviously highly pleased. “We’re jus’ a couple a’ minin’ wenches.
She’s a proper lady and such.”
“If they are mining wenches, “ Eowyn asked Celeborn. “Does that make me a battle wench?”
“And if she is a battle wench,” Galadriel asked Celeborn from his other side, “Does that make me
a magic wench?”
Celeborn choked then gasped, “There shall be no ‘wenching’ done.”
“Sir,” Jani told him with a grin, “yeh ain’t no fun a’ all t’.”

They saw the tree-line very soon and Omosuil and his squad cheered and galloped forward.
“Just making sure all’s safe for you!” Nomirliel called back to Ori.
“Thanks!” he shouted.
“Aye, thanks f’r makn’ sure th’ trees don’ eat us,” Dwalin said to Ori.
“I think the ents ate the orcs,” Eowyn said with a grimace.
“Tha’d be some shitty fertilizer,” Dain replied.
“I suppose,” Ori said thoughtfully. “If the ents…er…consumed them, they were then able to
come out of the trees, rocks and the rivers as elves again. But I hope the trees won’t get sick from
it.”
“I’m sure Treebeard an’ Yavanna’ll take care o’ em, love,” Dwalin assured him as they rode into
the shade of the Greenwood.
Omosuil and his squad were waiting for them at the Forest Gate of the Old Elf Path. Here they
bade farewell to Beorn.
Ori dismounted and went to offer his arm to Beorn but Beorn knelt and embraced him.
“You are a good dwarf. I have learnt how you have wrought great changes in Erebor and were
instrumental in putting Thorin on the throne. He is a wise king and Bilbo will advise him well. I
shall look forward to meeting you often, Scribe to the Valar of Fire.”
Ori blushed and stammered something but then Beorn was clasping hands with Dwalin.
“I do not envy your care for this one, dwarf warrior, but your strength and stout heart will carry
you both.”
“Aye, tha’ yeh kin tie t’,” Dwalin responded, pleased.
Beorn chuckled then lifted Kili and tossed him like a badger.
“You are a fine provider, young one. Your lady is fortunate.”
“Thank you,” giggled Tauriel and caught Kili as Beorn tossed him to her.
“Look, I’m Bujni!” Kili shouted “I can fly!” He regained his footing and grinned at Beorn. “I
put our extra stores in your pantry. I baked you up a few batches of scones and showed some of
your goats the recipe. There’s a layer cake with jam and cream for your dessert tonight.”
“You baked me a cake?” Beorn’s eyes widened.
“You put up with us,” Kili countered.
Beorn laughed and ruffled Kili’s hair.
“You, I wish to see again. Perhaps when you and your lady go hunting in the depth of the
Greenwood, you shall visit me.”
“That would be lovely,” Tauriel glowed. “I shall remind Kili to bring his fiddle to play for you.”
Dain and Sculdis stood back snickered into each other’s shoulders as Beorn had a private conversation with Chopper then nodded farewell to them.

The sisters embraced Beorn and told him he was a ‘guid lad’ and promised to knit him some ‘nice, warm things’ for the winter. Glorfindel grinned maniacally at Beorn, who snorted and told him his ‘wives’ had improved him. He shook hands with Tharkûn and had a few brief words with Shadowfax.

He shook hands and kissed the cheeks of both Galadriel and Celeborn again. He said his farewells as they all passed through the gate into the wood, speaking to each as they all thanked him for his kind hospitality.

He saved Eowyn for last.

He lifted her up so her feet dangled off the ground and they kissed.

"Travel safe, White Lady, who blushes so pretty."

"I will, man sweeter than his own honey."

"Oi,” said Gimli on Arod.

Legolas sent back an elbow into his shoulder.

"Hush."

They rode deep into the pleasant cool and shimmering light of the Greenwood. For what was described as a path it was a good wide road that allowed them to ride easily in ever changing groups. At first, Ori and Dwalin brought up the rear, giving a final wave to the huge bear that loped back home across the meadow. They went slowly forward, checking in with each of their Company. The sisters were with the wagon bearing food stuffs and their packs. Vi drove and Margr rode in front of Glorfindel with Eowyn beside them

"You sure yer comfy enough t’ ride, lovey?" Margr asked Eowyn.

"Of course I am," Eowyn looked confused at the dam. “Why shouldn’t I be?"

“I would have thought yeh’d have t’ unhitch yer hips t’ get around a cock tha’ big.”

“It was too big, but there are other delights. The things that man can do with honey.”

“Ooo, aye?” enthused Vi.

“So, how big was it?” Margr wanted to know.

“I’m not saying.”

“Ooo, yeh wee stinker!” The sisters cackled delightedly.

Ori was pleased that they were moving smartly along. There were few others traveling the path, mostly, elves. Haldir was on high alert. Ori exchanged a look with Dwalin, who muttered to Celeborn and Galadriel. The lord and lady gently told Haldir that he really didn’t have a great deal to worry about as, after all, they were with Omosuil and he knew his home woods.

Haldir turned his attention to inspecting the Company. Wheels turned, horses and ponies trotted happily. Ori wondered if he ought to engage Haldir in conversation to put the elf captain at ease but Glorfindel came up from the rear, a huge grin plastered on his face, now with Vi ensconced on his lap.

"Ho, friend Haldir!” Glorfindel greeted Haldir with great affability.

Haldir turned and favored the elf hero with a frown as he drew abreast of him.

"Here, chook, have a nice ginger toffee,” said Vi, handing him a small square of candy in a waxed paper wrapper.

“Where did you find candy out here?” Ori asked.

“Peddler feller down th’ path,” said Margr as her wagon drew up beside them.

“You ran into a stranger, leagues from nowhere, and bought candy from him?” Ori asked.

“Where did you get the money?”

“T ook it outa Haldir’s purse,” said Vi. “No’ t’ worry.”

Needless to say, Ori did worry. Thus far, elf and dwarf had been getting on perfectly, and he wanted to keep it that way.

Haldir checked his hip and withdrew his purse. He stared down at it, puzzled.

“I did have some small coin in my purse, but I don’t recall having this much,” he said.

“Yeh didn’t, laddie,” said Dain as Chopper trotted back to walk with them. ‘Th’ ladies emptied it,
an’ I refilled it with a little extra.”

“Why?” Haldir demanded.

“I’d say ye earned it,” said Dain.

Haldir’s face turned a livid gray. His voice shook with rage.

“I am no mercenary! I do my duty as I have sworn!”

“It’s no’ pay fer soldierin’, our Diry,” said Dain.

“Then, what, precisely is it, your majesty?”

“It’s a wee pressie f’r bein’ such a good sport.”

“And what, pray tell, is ‘a good sport’?”

“Someone who don’t slit yer throat while ye sleep, even when ye’ve been a right pain in th’ arse.”

Haldir went from anger to horror in a breath.

“I can’t imagine an elf who would do such a thing!”

“I know several dwarrow who would,” Dain countered. “Go have yerself a pint on us.”

“I could have many pints on such a sum!”

“Yours t’ use as ye will.”

Haldir looked at Dain, then the purse. He sat at on Albarcas, silent, as the others traveled on in companionable silence.

Finally, at length, Haldir looked up and around at them, a wicked gleam came into his eye. He smiled a feral smile.

“Perhaps there’s even enough for a new pair of dress trousers.”

Everyone stared at him, and he shrugged, looking quite pleased with himself.

They all laughed, as much in surprise as mirth.

Vi patted his arm.

“There ye go, love, mebbe with some nice gold pipin’ along the sides.”

They stopped for an early tea in a pleasant glade. Ori was getting excited, they would spent the night at Cemnesta’s then repack and leave for Erebor! They lunched on bread, spread with Beorn’s good butter and Kili heated sausages to have with it. Tharkûn ate seven of these, then remounted Shadowfax and appeared to go to sleep.

They continued on their way and as the shadow deepened into the last of the sunset, lights appeared and singing followed. Omosuil and some of his soldiers rode forward calling to their kin.

Soon the path widened further and there in a large courtyard stood King Cemnesta, his face wreathed in a smile. The new king seemed to prefer the plain white robes of the healer, though he tied it with a silver corded belt and a circlet of mithril rested on his brow, adored with a single star gem. Behind him Thranduil awaited, regally amused and clad in sumptuous velvet robes of primrose embroidered with peridots.

“Welcome back,” Cemnesta called and hurried forward before Ori even dismounted.

“Your majesty,’ Ori greeted Cemnesta as the king reached him.

The elf king looked him over, gently feeling his pulse then smoothing a hand across his forehead.

“You looked well, Lord Ori. I’m glad.”

“And you look happily monochromatic. Is the foliage relieved?”

“Indeed, I can hear it sighing in relief. How do you feel?”

“I’m fine. A little hungry, but fine.” Ori grinned.

Cemnesta went to Dwalin next, who grunted, smiled and said, “Guid. Rested.”

“I like a dwarf who doesn’t mince words,” said Cemnesta cheerfully.

Thranduil wordlessly embraced Legolas, then turned, hesitating, to Gimli.

Cemnesta elbowed Thranduil in the ribs and cleared his throat.

Thranduil knelt and embraced Gimli as well.

Gimli cleared his throat and said, very politely, in sindarin, “Hannon le, ada.”

Ori said to Dwalin, “Well, that’s miraculous.”

“Ah well,” Sculdis commented. “If our Gimmers’s marryin’ tha’ Legs, our Thranduil’ll have to
broaden his horizons.”

“Seein’ as he’s in our Bard’s britches,” Dwalin muttered, “Bit broader than yeh’d expect.”

The bonebreakers alit in a flock all over wagons and surrounding trees.

Ori opened his mouth to introduce them, but screams of terror cut him off.

Several of the elves, who had joined Cemnesta in the courtyard stumbled backwards in terror.

“What is it?” Cemnesta asked them. “You know you are safe here.”

One of the elves shrieked, “She tore my face off!”

“Pardon?” Cemnesta asked.

Red Queen huffed impatiently.

“Because you were an uruk, silly elf nestling. No point in doing it, now.”

Cemnesta looked between the two and ventured, “You’ve met.”

“Mmm,” said Red Queen, still eying the remade elf.

Ori saw his opening and took it.

“King Cemnesta of the Greenwood, may I present Red Queen, High Queen of All Bonebreakers.”

“An honor, your majesty,” said Cemnesta, bowing.

She deigned to nod in acknowledgement.

Thranduil drifted forward and Ori added,

“King Father Thranduil Oropherion; her majesty, Red Queen of Bonebreakers.”

Red Queen and Thranduil acknowledged each other.

“You have a charming, nestling,” Red Queen cooed.

“Yes, I do, your majesty,” Thranduil smiled at Cemnesta. “Almost as charming as myself.”

Red Queen cackled and Cemnesta blithely continued.

“As we have had word of your arrival, a banquet of bones has been prepared for your people in the south courtyard. I’ll have my steward escort you.”

“No need,” said Red Queen “We can smell it. Our thanks, Greenwood king.”

The flock flapped off at a royal screech from Red Queen, who simply alit before Cemnesta.

“If you will be so kind as to show us our accommodations for the night.”

Cemnesta didn’t even blink.

“Of course, your majesty.”

Apparently the trees were fine for lesser bonebreakers. Or, maybe she was milking this for all she was worth.

Thranduil stepped forward.

“Do allow me, ma’am, I’m sure we have much to discuss.”

“I’m sure we do!” Red Queen took a leaf out of Kelli and the elves’ book and laid the tips of one of her wing feathers on Thranduil’s arm and they strolled off together.

“An interesting outcome,” Tharkûn commented.

“Well, that’s you arse deep in the shit,” Dain observed to Cemnesta, who snorted to cover his chuckle.

“Indeed, it appears so, mellon Dain.”

Cemnesta led them to the same rooms as their first night of the Quest. Cemnesta, with a mischievous smile, opened the door of Dain and Scudis’ room and Dain roared out,

“Me hat!”

Everyone laughed as Dain excitedly dragged the carapace out and balanced it on his head. It was ridiculously huge and wearing it, his head couldn’t be seen. It wobbled precariously.

“Bugger!” Dain observed. “I’m going t’ have t’ find a way t’ keep this thin’ on.”

“Hammer ‘n nails,” Dwalin suggested.

“Nah, if there was rain, it’d leak ‘round th’ nail holes,” Dain muttered, absorbed in his new project.

Everyone was able to wash up and change. Dain gave his ablutions a lick and a promise, then sat on the floor in the middle of the main room, busy with his ‘hat’.
The same elf maid as before arrived to escort them to dinner. She bowed.
“Lord Ori,” she said in a high, breathy voice. “May I take this moment to welcome you back to the Greenwood and congratulate you on your successful adventure?”

“Thank you, …er?”
“Maithuen,” she supplied, a little shyly.
“Thank you, Miss Maithuen. It’s very nice to be back.”
“What a terrifying explosion that was,” Maithuen went on. “We were all very shocked when the ground shook and the sky darkened.”
Ori grinned. “Not quite as shocked as we were being in the middle of it.”
“How horrible for all of you,” Maithuen commiserated, her brown eyes, wide. “I’m am deeply relieved you are all safe. Did you find what you went on your quest for?”
“We did, lassie,” Dain assured her. “An’ our Gladdy had herself quite a time.”
“The great Lady Galadriel accompanied you into that dreadful mountain?” Maithuen was astonished. “How intrepid she is and so majestic.”
“We were very glad she was there to help us,” Ori told her as she led them into the banqueting chamber and bowed to her king.

The room was just as beautiful as he remembered. Ori grinned at Cemnesta, who smiled and nodded to the table. Everyone piled forward. Cemnesta’s only sop to formality was to place Ori on his right with Dwalin and Thranduil at the foot with Red Queen on Thranduil’s right. Red Queen perched proudly on the cushion placed on the chair seat for her comfort. She glanced up and saw Ori looking at her.

“We decided that it was time for us to become accustomed to social interactions between many races, as dear Father King tells me Erebor is very diverse among its traders. He thinks I shall enjoy moving among its many peoples.”

“Father King is very wise,” Ori said, crinkling his nose at Thranduil, who was enjoying himself a little too much. Ori smiled at the Father King. “I’m sure you will soon be very well acquainted with King Bard of Dale. I’m sure Father King has told you all about his courtship with King Bard.”

Red Queen raised her long neck and stared at Thranduil.

“Why, no, he did not. How delightful, a new clutch of eggs is always pleasing. Are your courtship rituals and dances public?”

There was smothered snickering all round the table. Fortunately for Thranduil, the meal was served and Red Queen diverted by the sight of food.

The dinner was simple and excellent. Rabbit meat in a spicy sauce, roasted roots and nuts drizzled in maple syrup, and steamed wild rice. Red Queen was provided by Thranduil with a large spoon. She wielded this elegantly with her left leg and Thranduil and Sculdis on Thranduil’s left, kept the queen occupied. Everyone else chattered and laughed throughout the meal.

For dessert, fresh berries and cream in bowls were set before each. Cemnesta smiled to Ori.

“I thought simple and a good deal would be best.”

“Tasty,” Dwalin said with a smile. “By th’ way, lad, we’ll need t’ borrow Omosuil’s courtyard a bi’ la’er. Somone’s go’ t’ pass their initiation.” Dwalin looked down the table at Gimli who blushed, but managed a look of calm. Omosul and his soldiers looked around at each other then, “I hope you will allow us to accompany you to Erebor, Lord Ori,” Omosuil with great care. “I don’t feel the time is quite arrived for you and Captain Dwalin to dismiss us from our duty to you.”

Ori swallowed. He had forgotten that this was where Omosuil and his squad had joined them. Dwalin and Cemnesta burst out laughing.

“Oho!” Dwalin said, grinning at Cemnesta. “Someone’s wan’in’ t’ see this ‘dvventure t’ a close,”

“So it would seem,” The king replied with twinkling eyes at the elf captain. “We shall see. In the meantime, Omosuil, please see to it that your …er… courtyard is prepared as our Captain Dwalin wishes.”

“I shall make it so, your majesty,” Omosuil promised, his squad all nodding.

“After you finish…whatever you need to do,” Cemnesta went on. “Please take time to rest. At midnight, we shall rouse you and escort you to the ship wanting to take you all back to Dale and
Erebor. Father and I shall be accompanying you. Thus, we shall arrive at the dawn of the day of the full moon as you planned."

This brought on a round of cheers, as Cemnesta was popular with the Company and in Erebor and Dale.

“We will get your wagons back,” Ori put in quickly. “I’m afraid we had to …er… adapt one with another of Lady Galadriel’s to carry the doors of Narvi and Celebrimbor.”

Cenesta laughed.

“I’m sure you will, Lord Ori. There is no cause to rush. I do not often suffer a dearth of wagons.”

After dinner, Ori spoke a little with Cemnesta. The king had strolled with Ori out to a solitary balcony and once comfortably seated, Cemnesta asked for the tale of Ori’s time in the Halls.

“I admit,” Ori said slowly, unready to speak with any on the subject other than Dwalin. “Finding myself in the Halls of my ancestors was far stranger than anything I’ve ever had happen to me.”

“You speak of a feeling of unease, which is natural in your circumstance, I certainly would be shocked. Your Halls sound beautiful and your meeting with late family, pleasurable. I sense that something still troubles you.”

Ori sighed and related the incident with Rikmha.

Cemnesta listened with great attention. When he finished, Ori looked up at the king.

“Do you think me a fool?”

“No, I don’t. Not many of us have the chance to speak to those long past. The undying lands are not the same. We do not find out all. You found out, though by accident, what had happened to Dori and, your love for them, demanded that you confront your mother. I suspect that your elder brothers perhaps shielded you from her less than honorable side. I do not think you have anything to concern you further. As you have told me, Aüle…Mahal told you that He had already ‘made’ for Dori. Unless you think it needs to become your next quest to find her and interfere—”

“Oh no,” Ori assured him.

“Then it is not really your affair. She is now given to some dwarrowdam and will be born in…I forget the length of pregnancy in dwarrow…?”

“About six months,” Ori told him.

“Thank you. In six months, she shall be born. Unless you intend to track every female badger born around that time?”

Ori laughed.

“You’re right. I suppose I am being silly about it. But it was just so…. ” Ori search for the word. “Maybe disturbing, is the best way I can describe it.”

“Would it make you feel better to speak to your Dori?”

Ori mulled this over. “I’m not sure. I’ll have to consider it.”

Cemnesta rose and offered his hand to Ori.

“Then put it to the back of your mind for now. Shall we go and see what it is that your Dwalin has in mind for young Gimli? I have to admit I am rather curious myself.”

Cemnesta and Ori entered Omosuil’s courtyard. It had been cleared and rather a lot of people were gathered, shouting and cheering. Cemnesta and Ori crossed to Dwalin who was stripped to his kilt, leaning on his hammer, next to him stood Haldir and Omosuil. Thranduil and Red Queen lounged comfortably on an upholstered chair nearby.

“Dwalin?” Ori said, approaching his husband.

“There yeh are, love,” said Dwalin, nodding to Cemnesta and pulling Ori under his arm to kiss him. “Have a good chat?”

“Yes,” said Ori absently. He took in the scene before him.

In full armor, Gimli stood alone in the center of a large ring of armored dwarf and elf warriors, his axe at the ready. Ori recognized Kili and Tauriel with their bows, King Thranduil’s dwarf guard, Eowyn, Nomirliel, even Lady Galadriel with her crowbar.

Without warning, Torq who had been behind Gimli, rushed forward, his own axe high over his
head, but Gimli spun and deflected the blow, and Cemnesta’s practice ring rang with the sound of live steel. The pair battled at full strength, the dwarf warriors in the circle calling encouragement and ridicule toward one or the other.

“Oi! Torq! Yeh kin do be’er’n tha’!” shouted Targ
“Yeh goin’ t’ let th’ pebble’s wipe th’ ground wi’ yeh?”
“Wee Gloiniul’s s’ tiny, he kin barely hold up tha’ axe. Nothin’ t’ his ol’ da, is he!” Dain teased
“So they’re really trying to kill him?” Ori asked.
“No’ really tryin’, love, though a’ course it migh’ happen.”

Ori watched the fight, his stomach tightening with fear. The warriors fought dead silent, only the grins on their faces spoke of their enjoyment. They panted, circling each other, looking for an opening, and Gimli found it. He hooked the older warrior’s ankle with his boot and dropped him.

Gimli held his axe to the Torq’s throat.

“Yer dead.”
“Aye, bu’ they ain’t!”

Torq rolled away, and Spar and Varil took his place. Now Gimli was pressed by both at once and the shouting from the circle rose to double itself.

“He has to think on his feet, and plan for either opponent,” said Ori.
“Aye, yeh go’ it.”
“Are elves usually involved?”
Dwalin chuckled with Omosuil. Cemnesta smiled and even Haldir looked amused.
“No’ usually, love, but then, we been t’ battle t’gether. In this case, I’m sayin’ a warrior’s a warrior.”
“Um… Dwalin?”
“Aye, yeh kin draw it. It’s no’ a secret.”
“Thank you!”

Ori sat on a bench nearby and pulled out his sketch book and graphite wands, finally grinning himself. When he looked up again, he froze. Legolas stood high in a tree across the way, watching and visibly trying not to wince.

Gimli took a backhand to the head, which didn’t seem to faze him at all. Nomirliel looked surprised, which was when Gimli took her down.

“Aye,” Dwalin commented, “our Gimli’s go’ th’ Durin skull.”
No sooner had Gimli dispatched her when he dodged both Tauriel’s arrows and even broke Kili’s, smacking it aside with his axe as it sped toward his chest.

“Excellent,” Haldir allowed, nodding. “That is not the least of skills a warrior may have.”

Eowyn fell upon Gimli next, brandishing her sword, and Ori saw how highly trained a warrior she really was.

“She’s sparred wi’ dwarrow before,” Dwalin observed to Omosuil.
“Lady Galadriel did say she rode as security for trader caravans,” the elf replied.
Dwalin shook his head.

“Dwarf caravans are guarded by dwarrow. It’s rare to find a dwarf sell-sword among caravans of men or elves.”
“Unless they’re with the circus,” Ori said, drawing at a furious pace.
Then he seemed to realize what he said, and looked up to find Eowyn’s movements were very familiar.

Though, the last time Ori had seen them, young Floris had been pretending to slay her warg.
Dwalin chuckled.

“As long’s our Eowyn don’ announce she’ll smite our Gimmers an’ expect he’l roll over wi’ his tongue hangin’ ou’.”
“He only does that for Legolas,” Ori muttered, then looked up, eyes huge, and slapped his hand over his mouth.

Thranduil’s eyebrow seemed bent on flying from his brow, and Cemnesta didn’t even bother to stifle a laugh. Worse then that, Ori knew Legolas had heard him, because the elf’s face and hair
threw each other into violent relief.

“Sorry,” Ori squeaked, and turned back to his drawing, looking up to note movements, gestures, and expressions.

Despite their differing styles, they were evenly matched. She was quick, agile, he was methodical and determined. As they chased each other around every inch of the circle, Ori felt like he was watching two highly competitive siblings. This was confirmed when Gimli obviously let her duck around him and she smacked his rump with the flat of her sword. He howled like a badger.

“Oi! Tha’ hur’ me pride, lass!”

“Is that what dwarrow call it?” she teased back. “I’m calling this a draw, before I break a sweat.”

“Oooh! Tha’ stings!” Targ howled.

“G’wan wi’ yeh,” Gimli called back. “I’ll let yeh off easy this time.”

He barely had a moment to turn before Dain and Sculdis charged him from either side. Ori almost choked with laughter as it was immediately obvious Gimli had been taking lessons from Legolas. Instead of trying to engage either, Gimli leapt up and flipped himself out of harms way. Everyone winced as the Iron Hill rulers collided headlong. The crash rang against the walls and the two bellowing dwarrow rolled in the dust. They sat up and looked at each other, confused. Everyone burst out laughing. Dain turned to Gimli, then his gaze traveled up to the tree where Legolas perched.

“Yeh wee shit!” Dain roared at the elf. “Jus’ go’ teachin’ him yer sneaky elf way, why don’ yeh!”

“Sorry, not sorry!” Legolas replied merrily

Sculdis fell back shrieking with laughter.

“Our Gimmers, yeh wee scamp. I’m lettin’ yeh have this one f’r sure. I can’t figh’, laughin’ this hard ’r I’ll pee mesel’!”

Dain helped his hysterically giggling, delicate jewel of a bride to her feet. She shoved her weapons at him and ran out, grabbing an elf on the way to ‘show her th’ bog’.

The circle recovered itself and started teasing Gimli again.

“Think he’ll ever be able to fight more than other badgers?”

“Aye, well, give ‘im a century ’r so, mebbe.”

A bolt of blue lightning smacked the ground at Gimli’s feet and threw stones and dirt in the air. He hopped away smartly, then whirled and crouched to face his next opponent.

A shiver ran through the circle, as Lady Galadriel glided forward. She wore a tiny smile, shiny armor and an air of danger. The Lady held her crowbar in her left hand and fire in her right, and she was obviously ambidextrous.

Gimli, wisely, played to her left side, since that was the weapon less likely to smite him or turn him into anything unnatural.

Ori expected Gimli would keep his distance, at least, but the warrior did exactly the opposite, moving closer and closer even as he dodged great balls of fire.

“Goodness gracious,” said Lady Galadriel. “Am I dead?”

“Nonsense! It was handsomely done!”

She straightened, and as she did, three strands of her hair nicked by Gimli’s knife floated to the ground.

The babble of sindarin rose from consternation to panic.

Gimli’s jaw fell open and he bowed, sputtering.
“A thousan’ pardons, milady. I wouldn’t willingly harm a hair on yer heed, an’ here I’ve clumsily murdered three of ‘em!”

He reached to pick them out, but he didn’t quite touch them, torn between apology and embarrassment.

“It’s only hair, mellon Gimli,” Galadriel said, fetching them up herself.

“Bu’, yeh see, milady, I hold yer hair as sacred as a dwarf’s.”

She smiled on him.

“Sweet-speaking and deadly, too. If my locks are so precious to you, you may have these three to do with what you wish.”

The sindarin, if anything, grew increasingly frantic. She looked around at her fellow elves and laughed.

“It is my own to give as I will, and I choose to give it to my worthy opponent, and my good friend and comrade.”

Gimli and Galadriel bowed to one another and Gimli handed her back her crowbar.

“Thank yeh, milady. I will encase these in crystal, an’ keep ‘em as an heirloom a’ me house.”

She retired from the field, but Gimli’s initiation was not over. He was given a moment to braid the three strands together and tuck them away, as if they were a lady’s favor in a tournament.

Ori realized Gimli had no knowledge of the significance of the three strands of Galadriel’s hair. Nor did Ori know if it was wise to enlighten him. Certainly, Ori thought him worthy of the honor and chuckled at this subtle fashion of Galadriel cocking a snoot at Fëanor somewhere in the ether.

Still Gimli circled, waiting for whatever came next.

What came next, at full roar and fury, was Dwalin, who was about to find out if he truly taught Gimli everything he knew.

Gimli’s eyes narrowed and his mouth set.

Startled, because Gimli looked so unlike himself, Ori forgot to draw for a moment.

Then he got distracted by the ripples of Dwalin’s muscles, and the flash of his butt when his kilt flew upward.

The axes rang, several dwarrow swore creatively, Legolas caught a horrified breath, but Ori’s attention was entirely fixated on something less than sharp, but certainly just as interesting. He shook himself, trying to concentrate on mayhem, even concentrating on grimacing faces for as long as he could.

It wasn’t all that long a time, as it turned out.

Axes were cast aside for knives. These were cast aside for hand-to-hand combat. Gimli was shorter, but he was one solid muscle. Dwalin was older, but far more experienced. They spat and swore and threw dust in each other’s faces, eventually reduced to mutual beard-pulling, though neither would submit. All too soon they rolled across the ground, wrestling like a couple of badgers, yelling names and curse words around grunts and heaving breath.

“Really?” Thranduil mused. “What’s next? Thumb wrestling?”

A shadow fell over Ori’s sketch book.

“Nicely done,” said Cemnesta, “but aren’t you supposed to draw more of him than that?”

“Huh?”

Ori looked down at his pages and groaned.

Two entire facing pages filled with Dwalin’s arse cheeks.

Yes, they were expertly rendered, but it was still mortifying.

“Enough a’ this shit,” Dwalin barked.

Ori looked up.

The two dwarf warriors sat on the ground, grinning at one another.

“Tha’ do, captain?” Gimli asked, panting.

“Aye, it’ll suffice,” Dwalin replied.

The circle erupted into cheers and battlecries.

Legolas shouted something loud and triumphant, and vaulted from the tree, did three somersaults in the air and landed in the circle between them.
Gimli shook his head and struggled to his feet a moment before Legolas seized him and hugged him.

“Congratulations, meleth nin!”

“Yer goin’ t’ ge’ yer pretty leaves all mussed, elf,” Gimli grumped, but he was still smiling.

“Like I give a fuck,” Legolas growled.

Gimli’s eyebrows flew up and the dwarf laughed, the elves smirked and Cemnesta shook his head.

“I’m a terrible influence, I suppose,” said Gimli.

Dwalin ruffled his hair, then held up a few strands which stood on their own.

“Here, our Legs, take ‘im off t’ th’ baths, see if yeh kin find me enough unsnarled dwarf fur t’ pu’ a braid in.”

The two went off toward the baths, hand in hand, followed by most of Gimli’s other opponents.

Omosuil threw Dwalin a sideways smile.

“Prince Legolas has always enjoyed a challenge.”

“Guid thin’,” said Dwalin. He turned to Ori and smiled.

“I’m f’r th’ baths meself. Wan’ t’ join me?”

Cemnesta snickered.

“By all means, mellon Ori. It will give you opportunity to draw other… aspects of his anatomy.”

While Dwalin cocked a quizzical brow at the elf king, Ori shot Cemnesta a filthy look.

The baths, as it turned out, were communal, the elves having no concept of bodily embarrassment or privacy, Ori reflected, though at least Cemnesta had somehow added heated water to the bathing pools in deference to his non-elven guests.

They eventually reconvened in their rooms and Cemnesta flung open the door of the large room across the hall from theirs. Everyone came in laughing and talking. This room opened out onto a spacious balcony and an elf lady with a harp and another with a flute stood ready. Dain gave a delight shout and went for his doodle sack, dragging Sculdis and Jani with him.

Several barrels of ale had been tapped and bottles of dorwinian wine were set out. Platters of tiny cakes and other sweet dainties enticed and beside them little bite-sized, piping hot azzips with various toppings, and bread slathered in toasted cheese and mustard all served on salvers wrapped in cloths to hold the heat.

Sculdis and Jani came back in with drum and balalaika, followed by Dain fiddling about with his doodle sack.

“This is nice,” said Ori to Cemnesta, looking over the crowd of happy dwarrow and elves, eating and, above all, drinking.

“Yes,” said Thranduil as he swept by with a glass of wine dangling from his elegant hand. “And close enough to the guest rooms to drag off anyone who overindulges.”

“Most convenient,” Red Queen agreed.

Ori thought she must have found some red clay nearby, because her coif was spiffed and even more vivid than before.

“Alas,” said Ori. “We’re not going to be here long enough to be dragged off. Maybe next time.”

A shout rang forth and Legolas and Gimli entered, again hand in hand.

Gimli’s hair was as immaculate, or as immaculate as it could be. It hung loose around him in ringlets.

Ori found himself very glad that Dori wasn’t there at that moment to coo over them.

Dwalin strode forth to stand, arms folded, the other warriors opening the space between he and Gimli.

“Gimli, Son a’ Gloin, Son a’ Groin.”

The dwarf in question stood, calm and solemn, with this face the color of his own hair. He patted Legolas’ forearm.

“Be righ’ back, melleth,” he said, striding forward to face Dwalin. He crossed his arms, too, mirroring Dwalin’s glare.
“Yeh called, captain?”
“A’ leas’ yeh know yer own name. Yeh ready t’ swear yer oath? Yeh have t’ repeat it after me, an’ I’m only doin’ this once, so don’ fuck it up.”
“Understood, Captain Dwalin.”
“Tha’s miracle number two f’r the nigh’.”
Dwalin glanced around. Everyone had made a circle around them, dwarrow in front so they could all see. Ori had his graphite wand and paper in action.
“Gimli, Son a’ Gloin, son a’ Groin, yeh came t’ me trainin’ a wee badger w’ more temper an’ brute force than sense. I’ve seen yeh grow int’ th’ warrior tha’ yeh are now. Yeh’ve proved yersel’ t’ be counted among the High King’s finest. An’ t’day I say yeh worthy a bein’ called a warrior and t’ wear a warrior’s bead to show all who see yeh. C’mere.”
Gimli came closer and Dwalin removed from his pocket a small gold box studded with rubies. He opened this and took out a lapis bead set with a tiny diamond star. Dwalin then turn to Legolas and held out the box to him.
“Better come closer, laddie, as yeh probably gonna be puttin’ this in often enow.”
Both Gimli and Legolas blushed and snide comments were made from various point of the room. It fell back to silence as Dwalin slowly braided a lock of Gimli’s hair and attached the bead. Dwalin gruffly spoke the ancient khuzdul call to arms and Gimli muttered his responses. Dwalin stepped back and looked at Gimli.
Gimli looked back at Dwalin.
Dwalin grinned.
“There’s me lad,” was all he said before Gimli grabbed his captain in a bear hug.
The cheers were deafening.
Trips, Teasing, and Triumph

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. It’s lovely to be home and our Dearest Ori is busy as usual! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori waved back to elves standing on the shore. It was midnight, the moon was all but full and in the strong west wind, the ship moved swiftly out onto the lake. This vessel was much larger than before. Cemnesta explained they needed it to accommodate the additional weight of the doors. Once more Ori went to stand at the prow. Quartz fluttered to alight on the rail. This time Ori was straining his eyes for the sight of Erebor. He could feel it there in the distance in the star and moonlight. Dwalin joined him.

“We’ll see it soon now, love.”
“I know, well my brain knows, but my eyes want to keep looking.”
“How about yeh come an’ bed down f’r a bi’.”
Ori turned and grinned at his husband.
“With you?”
“No, wi’ Honda, she’s lonely f’r yeh.”
Ori laughed “No, she isn’t! She’s over there snuggling up to Harley. What should we name their colt?”
“Tyke? Tryke?” Dwalin suggested with a smirk. “‘R we could see wha' color it come ou’ as.”
“Hmmmm, “ Ori teased. “We could combine their names and call it ‘Harda’ or ‘Honley’?”
“I ain’t yellin’ Harda ’r Honley t’ anythin’ scootin’ around th’ meadow.”
“Scooter?” Ori suggested. Dwalin snickered.
“Aye, if they have ane, we’ll call it ‘Scoo’er’ f’r yeh. Comin’ t’ bed?”
Ori giggled, caught Dwalin’s hand as they walked to the middle deck, picked their way among the Company, all rolled in bedding next to the wagons, to where Dwalin had both their quilts laid out. Ori pulled off his boots and crawled between the quilts, snuggling up to his husband.

Ori woke at the first faint light of dawn. His eyes popped open and he sat up. Quartz hopped forward and tweaked Ori’s ear. The sails were full. Galadriel, Celeborn, Thranduil, and Cemnesta sat in a couple of seats at the stern, talking together quietly. A few elves were tending the rudder and rigging, moving carefully not to disturb the lines of sleeping bonebreakers on the railings. Glorfindel and Tauriel curled around their loves. Ori carefully unwrapped himself from Dwalin, but Dwalin opened his eyes and smiled. They got up, put their boots back on, folded the bedding, and Ori led the way as they headed back to the prow. His heart filled.

There before them towered Erebor. The huge mountain was a dark shadow in the distance. Taller than any in the Misty Mountain chain. Huge and alone, it rose, nestled in the gentle hills and lovely meadows of Dale and the surrounds. Mahal’s own mountain, Ori thought, in the valleys of Yavanna. Ori could see a point of light marking the braziers at the front gate. Little sparks marked the Dale and early morning risers. Ori almost squealed like an excited badger at Yule. He hugged Dwalin hard and kissed Quartz on the top of his head.

“We’re nearly home!” He had to struggle to keep his voice to a whisper. “I feel like we’ve been away forever!”
Dwalin squeezed him and nuzzled his face into Ori’s hair. Quartz snorted, hissing, “You have no idea of distance, Ori.”
“I’ve never been that far away from home, before. My longest journey before was to Bombur and Erda’s inn. Look, it’s getting lighter!”

There were faint waking noises from the company. Then Dain sneezed himself, and everyone else, explosively awake. The elves all giggled amongst themselves.

“We there yet?” Jani shouted.

“Soon,” Ori called back, delighted he could make noise. “I can see Dale and Erebor!”

There was a rush to the prow. Kili, Gimli, and the sisters cheered. Dain swaggered forward, inspected the view, and clapped Ori on the back.

“Best we star’ gettin’ ourselves ready f’r our grand arrival.”

“Dain!” Ori almost shouted. “Are you really going to wear that…that thing as a hat?”

‘Course I am!” Dain grinned maniacally. “An’ we’re all gettin’ back int’ them jumpsui’ thingies! Ain’t we?” Dain bellowed at the Company. Everyone cheered, the elves crewing the boat laughed and Galadriel swept up from the stern, arrayed in her green suit once more.

“Bullies of Lord Ori!” she cried delightedly. “Jumpsuits on!”

The Company scrambled into their suits, laughing and joking. The ponies were readied. Kili, Sculdís, Jani and Eowyn uncovered the doors.

“What am I supposed to wear?” Ori demanded, teasingly. “I don’t have a jumpsuit!”

“I had a new one made for you,” Celeborn called from the stern, hurling a parcel to Dwalin, who caught it easily. Ori giggled as he and Dwalin dressed and armed themselves.

“Right, love,” Dwalin grinned, holding Durin’s axe at the ready.

“How, in all Arda, do I carry that?” Ori asked.

“Go’ yeh a harness,” Dwalin answered cheerfully. He slung the belts around Ori, securing the great axe to Ori’s back. Dwalin and a giggling Jani had to help Ori get on Honda. The crew got the gangplank ready. Ori could now see in the light of the slowly awakening morning, distant tiny people were gathering at the Dale dock. He saw silvery sparkles of armor from Erebor. Standards were raised. Small boats were launched.

Under full sail, now with lanyards of the green pennants of Erys Lasgalen and Lothlórien raised to trim all the stays and rigging, the huge ship glided closer.

Little sailing boats whirled to the side of the ship. Ori grinned at the occupants, who either stared open mouthed at them or called welcome. The crew let out more rigging line, letting the sails flap, lessening the speed. They drifted up to the dock.

Ori got Honda to stand at the head of the Company. The axe was heavy and Quartz perched at the top of the axe, preening.

“Wanting to look good for Garnet?” Ori teased.

“Yep!”

Dwalin sat on Harley a little behind them. Everyone was placing themselves and snickering. Red Queen landed beside Honda and looked Ori over, while all the other bonebreakers alit along the railings and masts. Ori had a flash of an idea.

“Red Queen, the doors of Narvi and Celebrimbor are from your old aerie, would you like to present them to King Thorin?”

Red Queen’s eye twinkled. “Indeed, and the wagon will be far more comfortable for our flock to perch upon. We approve.”

She squawked and the bonebreakers swarmed all over the wagon after Glorfindel, Omosuil and some of his squad hurriedly covered the doors again. Ori grinned, it was going to be a surprise after all.

In the forefront of the huge crowd on shore, Ori saw Thorin, Bilbo, Dis, and Fili, mounted on their ponies, waiting for them where the docks and great pier met the port buildings of Dale. A wide space had been left for the Company to present themselves to their king. Bard and the Bardlings stood with the Erebor royal family. Dori’s teacup arrived to rampant cheering. Ori waved as he saw Dori and Balin rise in the coach to alight. He heard Dori’s shriek of delight. The Groinuls arrived
next, Gloin standing up in the coach, bellowing.

The ship slid up to the dock, where crowds of waiting arms readily caught the painters being thrown. The ship was tied up, the hawser set to hold the ship fast, the crew removed the side gunnel and the gangplank was settled into place.

Ori glanced back, Dwalin grinned.

“Let’s go to Thorin,” Ori murmured to Honda. Honda set out briskly, her hooves navigating the gangplank deftly, Dwalin on Harley behind. Ori kept his eyes on Thorin, but he felt his cheeks burning and he couldn’t stop grinning. People of Dale and Erebor oooh-ed and aaah-ed, cheered, or stood stock, still staring. Thorin looked serene but for a cocked eyebrow. A very amused Bilbo stood next to him. Frodo and Sam each clenched one of Bilbo’s hands and bounced in excitement.

Ori rode up and, with Dwalin’s help, dismounted. Dwalin removed the axe from the belt on Ori back and handed it to Ori. Silence fell. Ori went forward and formally knelt before Thorin. Ori raised his voice,

“We have succeeded in our quest, your majesty King Thorin, and I offer your majesty the Axe of Durin the Deathless.”

There was a collective gasp from the crowd. Thorin wordlessly took the proffered axe and looked it over, awed. He looked back at Ori and smiled.

“Lord Ori, I am pleased at the triumphal return of you and your company, and welcome you with great joy. For the service you have done to all dwarrow, I give you Durin the Deathless’ axe to carrying from now on, that all shall see and know that you are deeply honored by us. Welcome home, Lord Ori of Fundin House, Scribe to the High King of All Dwarrow. Rise and let me greet you.”

Ori got to his feet. Thorin came and embraced him.

“I’m so glad you’re safe,” Thorin said in his ear.

“I’m so relieved,” Ori murmured back. “Oh, Thorin, I’ve so much to tell you all!”

Thorin released him with a grin. “You’ll be telling us all when we get home. Now, for Mahal’s sake, go to Dori.”

Ori giggled and turned. Dori was right there and wrapped him in a cloud of gold and sapphires.

“Oh, my badger! I’ve been so worried! My precious badgerling!”

Dori burst into tears. Ori was vaguely aware of Dwalin embracing his king, then Balin.

Bilbo kissed Ori’s cheek over Dori’s arm.

“Ori, I want all the juicy details! Nice outfit.”

Ori felt Frodo and Sam hugging him. Gridr and Binni also kissed his head and Gloin and Oin shouted their welcome.

“Dori,” Ori managed around a face full of silk and hair. “Please don’t cry. I’m fine and I have to show Thorin the stuff I brought.”

Dori yanked him out to arm’s length, staring at him.

“Stuff? What stuff are you talking about? The box is here.”

Ori winked rudely and turned back to the ship and waved to his Company. Celeborn, Haldir with their soldiers, Cemmesta on horseback, with Thranduil surrounded by Targ, Spar, Varil, and Torq rode down the gangplank, came forward, dismounted and were politely greeted by Thorin. Then the Company came; Jani came first on her pony. She was followed by Glorfindel on his horse and Margr in his lap, Vi driving a wagon. Kili, Tauriel, Gimli, and Legolas were next with their wagon, piled high with gifts from Beorn on top. Dain on Chopper with his enormous hat, jogged down. Somehow Dain had managed to secure his hat to sit at an angle, so he could see and wave to people. Galadriel, Eowyn, and Sculdis came last with what looked like a wagon load of bonebreakers, all surrounded by Omosuil and his squad in their gray gear. Red Queen perched proudly next to Sculdis, nodding to the crowd regally.

Ori went to Thorin’s side as everything came to a stop in front of the royals of Erebor and all had dismounted. Everyone in the Company grinned at Thorin.

“Ori, what is all this…stuff?” Thorin gasped. “What, in Mahal’s name, is on Dain’s head?”

Ori grinned. Dwalin stepped in, winking at Ori.
“Yer majesty, King Thorin, we, Lord Ori an’ his Bullies, return t’ yeh.”
“Lord Ori and his…bullies,” Thorin managed, torn between shock and laughter.
“Professional bullies,” Dwalin corrected and turned to the Company.
“Lord Ori’s Bullies, Iron’ an’ cens’er.”
The Company, Lady Galadriel, Lady Eowyn, and Omosuil and his squad came into a close group and bowed. Thorin choked, then mastered himself.
“Bullies…of Lord Ori, I thank you all for your brave service and….and triumphal return.”
“You are quite welcome.” Lady Galadriel came forward, drawing Eowyn by the hand. “May I present my ward, Eowyn, niece of King Theoden, the White Lady of Rohan.”
Eowyn curtsied before Thorin, her eyes sparkling with laughter.
“You are welcome, Lady Eowyn, ward of Galadriel, niece of Theoden,” Thorin replied and held out his arms to her. She knelt, so Thorin could embrace her, shaking his head as he released her.
“Need I write to your uncle to inform him of your arrival?”
“Oh no,” she replied cheerfully, rising. “My dear Aunt Galadriel has already informed him of her intention to chaperone me on our travels to Dale and Erebor.”
“Oh how nice!” Dori cried. “Bard, dear, come and meet dear Lady Eowyn, such a charming girl. Sigrid, my love, come and meet your cousin!”
Sigrid and Eowyn looked at each other, giggled hysterically, and hugged each other.
“Sibling! Cousins!” bellowed Dain.
“Dain!” Dori all but screamed. “Take that disgusting spider thing off your head this instant! Your hair could get a disease or your head will wither and fall off!”
Dain swept Dori up with a noisy kiss.
“Now, now, me dumplin’. Hairless or headless, I kin still manage all me doin’s. Jus’ ask me delicate jewel o’ a bride. Don’t getcher self in a fuss.”
Ori nodded to Sculdís and Red Queen flew up to him.
“Your majesty, High King Thorin of all Dwarrow,” Ori announced. “It is my honor to introduce you to her majesty Red Queen of all Bonebreakers. Ma’am, this is my king, Thorin Oakenshield.”
Red Queen was only a head shorter than Thorin. She strutted forward, swept her wings open and bowed. Thorin mimicked the sweep and bowed as low as the Queen.
There was a flutter of wings. Thorin said, “Your majesty, may I present Roäc, King of Ravens of Erebor.”
Roäc bristled and hissed out,
“We’ve met.”
“Roäc! Dear!” said Red Queen, dripping poison sugar. “We have wonderful news for you. Though, it will keep.”
“You’re being deposed?” Roäc asked archly.
“No such luck.”
“Sister Queen,” Thorin broke in quickly. “I am delighted and honored to welcome you to Erebor,” Thorin smiled. Red Queen opened her beak in a version of a smile.
“Brother King, Your Ori has rendered our people great service by ridding us of the uruks, who shook our eggs and killed our people. We have chosen to accompany him here. At his request, we gift you with…these!”
Red Queen in the full enjoyment of her presentation, gave a great wave of her wing at the largest wagon. All the bonebreakers took flight, taking the coverings with them. The doors of Narvi and Celebrimbor shimmered and glinted in the dawn light. Everyone gasped.
Balin went forward to climb on the wheel of the wagon and stare.
“Wee brother…” Balin turned to gape at Ori. “Wha’ in all-”
“Those are the west entry doors of Khazad-dûm,” Ori announced gleefully. “They were created by the affiliation of Narvi of Khazad-dûm and Celebrimbor of the Noldur of Eregion.”
“We hope they fit.” Red Queen added, proudly.
“Gimli! Gimli! Lad, yeh made it!” Gloin bellowed, sweeping his son into a hug fit for a snow bear. “And yeh’ve the warrior’s head! Ah, inudoy, I’m fit t’ burst wi’ pride!”
“Da, I can’t breathe,” Gimli rasped. Gridr hugged Gimli as well, not quite dry-eyed. “Yer all grown up now! Why, it was only yesterday yeh was a tiny pebble.” She turned to Legolas. “Yeh’ve come through alright, pet?” she asked. He knelt down to embrace her. She squeezed him and patted his hair. “But yeh haven’t been eatin’ properly, neither o’ yeh! Yer so thin, pet!” “We’re fine, mam,” said Legolas, choking a little as Gloin knocked his brow against Legolas’. “Gimli and I took good care of each other.”

Tauriel coughed but was otherwise engaged, startled to be greeted by both Dis and Thorin. Kili was hugging Fili, the pair talking at speed. King Bard, red-faced, and to the delight of his people, kissed Thranduil. The bardlings swarmed in for hugs, loudly welcoming back their ‘Wicked Stepmother’. Tilda was delighted with Red Queen, who treated her to a hug and told Bard his nestling was cute. Bain was more interested in greeting Legolas and pelting him with questions. The royals chatted and embraced and the crowds cheered and surrounded the largest wagon gapin at the enormous doors lying within. Ori grinned, watching at celebrations. His heart was full. Despite the excitement, Ori could feel tiredness creeping up on him. He knew exactly what to do. “Ori’s Dori?” “Pet,” Dori swept him close again. “You look tired.” “I am tired,” Ori admitted, then grinned. “Ori’s Dori!” “Yes, my dearest badgerling?” “I’m hungry.”

In a remarkably short time the returning heroes, the royals of three kingdoms, and the luggage were marshaled into a long parade to Erebor. The bells of Dale rang out. The populous lined the streets and followed, cheering and singing. The bonebreakers rode on the biggest wagon again and soon enough they entered Erebor.

There was another triumphal march to the royal caverns. The entire household and the Guild of Scribes turned out to greet them. Mistress Dazla stood at the front, squealing like a damling. “Our Lord Ori! Yer home at last! Ooo, I’m going to give you a hug!” Ori scrambled off Honda “Please do, Mistress Dazla,” said Ori. “Kili’s cooking was very good, but I admit, I missed your apple crisp with cream.” “Oh, well, we can fix that right quick, can’t we. Get yourself settled and I’ll see about popping a batch in the oven!” “You’re very good to me.” “What’s not to be good to, I ask you?” And she hugged him again then allowed him to be welcomed and congratulated by the household. The guild chairs beamed on him as he exchanged pleasantries with them while the journeymen and apprentices looked on in awe. Ori blushed, remembering that not only was he the youngest first chair in Erebor’s history, but the only one to achieve it before his mastery. And now he had gone on a quest, returned with a treasure of dwarrow history, and bearing the Axe of the First Ancestor. He had never before thought of himself as a disgusting over-achiever.

When he was finally able to turn back Honda, he found that all the luggage and pack were being disposed of. Dwalin helped him out of the harnesses and Ori gave over the axe to Balin, who carried it reverently indoors. Ori sighed with relief as Gib pulled open the stable door and Ori led Honda inside. Ori, with the stablehands’ help relieved Honda of her tack then rubbed her down. Ori opened the back door and let her out to the meadow. Honda bounced off with a squeal. Ori squealed. There, in the middle of the meadow, stood Fanny.
Bath Time, Brunch Time, and Babble Time.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Home at last! Ori’s relieved and Dori is on a caring tear! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

“Fanny!” Ori yelled and rushed to the oliphaunt, who trumpeted joyfully and bounded toward him. Ori flung himself at her. Fanny caught him with her trunk and lifted him high then brought him close against her cheek. Ori spread his arms wide and hugged as much of her as he could.

“Oh Fanny, I’m so glad you’re back. I’ve missed you! I can’t wait to tell you about my adventures and hear all about yours!”

After a long hug, Fanny set him back on the ground and Ori stood back. His friend had grown considerably. Her tusks had thickened and lengthened and she seemed a little taller and a good deal plumper. Ori stood next to her leg and looked up. Yes, she had grown at least a foot taller. He reached up to touch her tusks. Fanny brought her head down, so he could span all six with his hands, they had all grown.

“Fanny!” Ori was delighted. “You’re bigger and you’re well-fed, too! This is wonderful!”

The breakfast parlor doors burst open. Frodo and Sam rushed out, shouting, “Surprise! Surprise!”

Sigrid, Omi, and Loli bounced out behind the faunts, dragging Eowyn with them. “Jim and the circus arrived last night!” Sigrid said, laughing. “We were all at sixes and sevens. I honestly thought Da’s head would pop off.”

Fanny followed Ori to the patio. Ori and Sigrid hugged each other tight. “Oh, Sigrid, I’ve so much to tell you!”

“I bet you do! Dori told us everything up until they came back on the eagles. Dori’s been a mad thing ever since. Bilbo’s had such a time as Thorin’s been an utter gloom bucket the whole time, worrying.”

“King Thorin, the gloom bucket,” Eowyn observed aside. “You have no idea,” Sigrid turned to her, letting Omi and Loli pounce on Ori. “We have to show you everything we’ve done since you left.” Loli said in one ear. “Bujni and Dipfa are being weirder than usual,” Omi said in his other ear. “Pet, you come in here right now,” Dori ordered.

Ori gave Fanny’s trunk another hug and waved to her as he was hustled inside.

There was a squeal as he came in and Floris and Mavey rushed at him. “There you are!” “Isn’t Fanny big!”

Ori hugged them both and looked Mavey over. She was tanned, pink cheeked, had put on muscle and weight and she was glowing with happiness.

“Fanny looks wonderful,” he told them. “Thank you so much for taking such good care of her.” “I have an act with her!” Mavey bubbled. “I have a teeny pink dress with lots of spangles. I dance and she dances with me and she puts me up on her back and I pose on her head when she stands on her back legs then she puts me on the edge of a big tub of water and I dance around the edge then I jump in then she lifts me out and I twirl while she blows a fountain of water all over us!” Mavey ran out of breath.
“Will you be showing us?” Ori asked eagerly.

“Oh yes,” Floris butted in. “We’re here for a bit, practicing new acts. We’re going to be here to work the night market for a while and then in the Last Harvest Festival. Professor Baggins says that’s a huge thing in the Shire and King Bard and King Thorin like the idea very much, ‘cose all the stuff Mr. Hamfast put in is growing like mad!”

“Come on.”

Sigrid pushed them all toward the sitting room. Ori entered. The sitting room was full. Ori sighed with happiness and went to drop into Dwalin’s lap in a corner of the sofa.

“We did it.”

“Aye, love, we did.”

Ori snuggled his head into Dwalin’s chest as Dwalin kissed the top of his head.

“O! Oriiiiii!”

A blaze of red hair streaked through the room, swept Ori up off his seat and danced him around in circles in the air.

“Nori! Put me down!”

Nori sang, “He’s a he-ro, he’s a he-ro!”

“The hero is going to puke on your head if you don’t put him down!”

“Hah!”

Nori swung him back down and danced him in circles, then abruptly stopped and peered at him closely.

“Heehee! Finally! A proper beard! We was afraid ye’d be stuck wif that puppy chin fluff forever!”

Nori began to yank on it and Ori slapped at him.

“Thank you, Nori,” said Ori dryly, managing to escape. “Any more grey hairs since I’ve been away?”

“Nary a one!” Nori said proudly.

“Because he dyed ‘em all out,” said Bofur, coming over to give Ori a hug.

“Snitch!” Nori muttered.

Bofur hugged Ori.

“Good t’ see ya, Chick. Bin awful quiet around here without ya.”

“Well, you’ve grown!”

Ori whipped around.

His great grandmother appraised him with a mischievous smile. She looked glowingly healthy, and as flamboyantly dressed as Dori ever could be, in a fitted gown of citrus colors with wild billows of ruffles at the cuffs and hem, a matching turban with a flowing train and ropes of gold and silver beads the size of apricots around her neck.

“Granny Klak! You came home!”

They embraced.

“Of course I did, my love! I said I would! Besides, I was out of vinaigrette.”

“Have you really needed your vinaigrette?” he asked her slyly.

She batted her lashes.

“It is good for the digestion.”

Dori then took over.

“Right, now that’s taken care of, you’re late for the bath. And those disgusting clothes are late for the forge chutes. Now, pet, where did you really get that axe?”

“I, um, picked it up in Khazad-dum. I was hoping Thorin might want it. It belonged to Durin.”

“Yeh were fer serious, wee brother?” Balin cried. “Tha’s really th’ firs’ Durin’s Axe?”

“Actually, I’m sure it is,” said Ori. “That’s what he told me, anyway.”

Thorin shook his head.

“Then it’s your axe, though, if you wouldn’t mind, I would like another look at it.”

“Of course. But, Thorin, I do think you should have it. What use have I for it?”

“Considerin’ how many orcs yeh killed with it? I say yeh done due diligence,” said Dwalin.
“Mahal forbid!” Dori cried. “Ori, you promised me you wouldn’t fight orcs!”

“That wasn’t really me!” Ori protested. “My soul was in the Halls while Durin used the axe.”

Dori shrieked and tottered back, hand over heart, while Balin leant support.

Ori lunged forward. “It’s alright, Dori, I wasn’t dead, just visiting!”

“Just visiting! Great, blessed Mahal.”

Ori decided he could say nothing useful and turned back to Thorin. “You’re the king, Thorin. You should have it. I can carry it, but I’d accidentally slay myself trying to swing it on my own.”

“Love,” said Dwalin, “it was th’ first axe yeh laid yer hand on, an’ it was sittin’ there all freshly sharpened f’r yeh, despite it had bin sittin’, molderin’ in th’ dark f’r a century.”

“Durin wouldn’t use a dull axe!” Ori protested.

“He hasn’t needed t’ use one f’re a couple thousand years, love,” said Dwalin. “He didn’t use it now just on a whim.”

Dis said, gently, “Ori, this is not making a great case for giving that axe away.”

Ori sighed.

“What would I do with it?”

“As I said,” Thorin smiled. “Wear it on state occasions. I’d say you’ve earned the right, even if you never slay so much as a slug ever again.”

Ori sighed. He glanced across the room. Thranduil was seated beside the table near Bard, who was talking to Eowyn and the Lórien couple. Thranduil held Gimli’s shoulder in one hand and his other hand was employed in picking flower petals out of Gimli’s hair and brushing gold dust out of it from the parades. Legolas was charmed and Gimli looked remarkably stoic.

Ori said to Sigrid, “Well, that’s miraculous.”

“It is,” she giggled. “Evil stepmother has become very maternal towards us and when Da brings him here, he’s the same with the younger set of the household, even Bujni. Da likes it.”

Tilda piped up.

“Oh, King Thranduil has to do what Da asks now, ‘cause he’s going to be our new mam.”

Legolas stared at his father.

“Really?” he asked, his voice breaking for the first time in almost two thousand years. “You will marry in the way of men, Ada?”

“You think you are the only one who can… broaden his horizons, my son?”

Dwalin muttered, “Bit broader than yeh’d expect.”

Ori huffed at him and said to Bard and Thranduil, “Congratulations! But, see what happens when I go away! Everything!”

“Not to worry,” Bujni announced. “I have logged all events whether large or small in strict date and time order. The wedding was announced precisely three days, sixteen hours and forty minutes ago.”

“How can you know that?” Ori asked, agog.

Bujni opened an extra flap across the front of his black tunic to reveal at least a dozen miniature watches sewn into a spiral on the fabric.

“My precious diamond’s latest creation,” he said proudly. “Only Master Brur says I can’t wear it while I’m at work. Apparently I tick too loudly.”

Dori, recovered, bustled to Ori again.

“Now, pet, dearest Wandi has prepared the bath for you and our deary. Off you both go.”

“Don’t worry, Lord Ori, “ Dipfa was by his side. “Agrib and I are here to take your jumpsuits and have them cleaned.”

Ori grinned.

“Those jumpsuits were quite a surprise, Dipfa.”

“Did they serve your purposes, Lord Ori?” she asked, all but wringing her hands.

“Yeh did excellent work, lass,” Dwalin told her. “Them jumpsuits were good work.”

“Yes,” Ori added. “Lady Galadriel looks wonderful in her green one and, as you see, Lady Eowyn had taken the other one. Your pockets were admired by all.”

Dipfa glowed, then she snatched at Ori’s jumpsuit.
“This isn’t my work! These aren’t my stitches!”
“No,” Ori hastily explained. “My jumpsuit was ruined in a skirmish with some orcs. The elves could mend the rents but they couldn’t get all the blood out. Orc blood,” he added at her horrified look. “They made me a rough copy for the return parade.”
“Oh,” she let go of the material and gave the rough copy an unimpressed once over. “Well, that was kind of them. I shall create another.”

The bathroom smelled wonderful. Mr. Wandi stood in attendance, dressed in a sleeveless white cotton tunic and loose white cotton trousers. He was barefoot and his hair was immaculate.
Jars and bottles crowded the small table. Another, larger table to the other side was piled with enough fluffy towels to dry all of Omosuil’s squad. Steam rose from the tub, which was filled the brim.
“Hair washing first, if you please!” Wandi said imperiously but with an inquiring look in his raised eyebrow.
Ori and Dwalin smiled at each other then came forward. They took a moment to remove each other’s beads and braids. Agrib held the bead box for them.
“And you’re going to have a first soak while I do it.” Wandi added.
“First soak?” Ori giggled. “Dwalin, we’re socks!”
“‘Long as nether a’ us shrinks in the wash, we’ll be alrigh’,” Dwalin teased as he and Ori were swarmed upon by Agrib, Dipfa, and Wandi. The two were stripped and hustled into the water. Ori sighed. This water was better than the bath water in Lórien. This was heated with lava. Agrib and Dipfa left with the clothes and bead box.
“Lord Ori?”
Ori glanced up. Wandi had a large crystal pitcher in his hand. The elf smiled and placed a hand over Ori’s face and poured the comfortably hot water over Ori’s head. Ori looked at Dwalin sitting opposite him in the tub. Water slopped onto the floor. Dwalin snickered.
“Don’t worry, Captain Dwalin,” Wandi cooed. “You’re next.”
Wandi’s hands, filled with creamy gunk, landed on Ori’s head and began to scrub. Ori kept his eyes and mouth closed as foam ran down his face. More water was poured over his head followed by another scrubbing. This was rinsed out and Ori opened his eyes. Wandi looked disgusted.
“I had a bath in Lórien. I’m not that dirty.”
“I wish they’d washed your hair properly,” Wandi snapped. “Look.”
Ori looked. The water had darkened a little.
“Oh.”
“Shall I treat your beard?” Wandi asked.
Ori looked at Dwalin, who gazed at him fondly.
“If Dwalin doesn’t mind you treating his, I don’t mind,” Ori replied.
“Go f’r it, love. Migh’ as well get th’ full medicamen’s as they’re bein’ given ou’.”
Wandi took this as acceptance and Ori was able watch his beard being thoroughly cleaned.
“That feels so much better,” he praised. “Now that it’s coming in properly, it itches.”
“I can commiserate with you,” Wandi said idly, massaging his chin. “As a very young child, I once got tree sap in my hair. It took forever for Nana and her servants to get it out. They pulled and tugged on my hair so much, I decided I hated it. Left alone, I took up Nana’s sewing scissors and cut it all off.”
“Mahal!”
“Mahal’s hairy arse!”
“Oh, yes, how it itched while it grew in. Nana and Ada were both properly horrified and I was strictly forbidden to be anywhere near any sharp objects for, oh, I don’t know, years.”

Dwalin and Ori gaped at each other.
“Go on and laugh,” Wandi chuckled. “I certainly do, now. I think it maybe why Ada never had me train with swords.”
Dwalin roared and Ori giggled.
“And maybe that’s why you like hair so much?”
“Certainly. I made sure I never got sap or anything else in it after that. Now you sit here and soak
while I’ll tend your hubby.”

Ori giggled again. Dwalin had to put his head back over the rim on the tub behind him as his hair
was so long. Wandi took more time scrubbing. He washed Dwalin’s bald pate and anointed it with
a something that looked like green whipped cream. Ori was kept in stitches as, once Dwalin heard
what was on his head, made some truly terrible faces. Wandi giggled the entire time he scrubbed
Dwalin’s beard.

Their heads declared clean, they were sent to the shower to wash. Wandi emptied the tub,
cleaned, and refilled it with more steaming water now redolent with foam and bubbles. Ori went
over as Wandi beckoned them. The water was thick with herbs, flower petals, oil, salts and, Ori
noticed, a remarkable amount of silver and gold dust.

“Wha’ in Mahal’s name is all this sparkly shit?” Dwalin demanded. “I ain’t gonna bloody glitter
about th’ place f’r th’ res’ a’ me days.”

Mr. Wandi sniffed. “Only if you don’t intend to bathe for the rest of you life. Get in, you’re both
going to soak in it for half an hour.”

Dwalin grunted and climbed in. Ori climbed in after and settled himself between Dwalin’s legs.
Wandi tidied up and went to the door. He turned back with a fulminating look.

“And please behave, the medicinals in that water are not improved by ejaculate.”

“I ain’t plannin’ on cussin’,” Dwalin teased.

“You know fine well what I mean, you horrid dwarf,” snapped Wandi, winking at Ori and closing
the door behind him.

They both snickered.

“I suppose we’ll just have to wait,” Ori mused, leaning back happily.

“Aye, any pain, love?”

“No, I’m just tired. We’ve been gone two weeks and I feel like we’ve traversed the world.”

“Well, maybe a good bi’ a’ it. Yeh’ve seen th’ Misty Mountains, love.”

“And destroyed three of them.”

Dwalin laughed and hugged him tighter.

“Me brave wee scribe. Yer so fierce.”

“Yes, I sounded like Mellon on a tear when I was in the Halls.”

“Yeh’ve only tol’ me a bi’ a’ that.”

“I know. I’m still thinking about it. Trying to…I suppose, process everything I saw and heard.”

“More foresigh’?”

“More like hindsight and pieces of puzzle.”

Ori decided, then said slowly.

“I told you I met my mother.”

“Aye, bu’ no’ much else. Did she know yeh?”

“Yes, she called me a runt.”

“Li’le shit. Does Dori know she spoke t’ yeh like tha’?”

No. I’m still not sure if I should mention her to either Dori or Nori. Nori would just cuss and tell
me not to worry about it. Dori…”

“Did she ask yeh t’ send ‘em word?”

“No, she was rude about them. She said Nori never cared for her and Dori was a conniver and
didn’t care about anything except wealth.”

Dwalin was silent. Ori turned a little to peer at him. He was frowning. Ori waited.

“She say anythin’ a’ use?”

“No, I accused her of killing Dori’s baby and she brushed it off then said Dori wasn’t a real
Bearer.”

“She sounds brain-addled.”

“Then I saw red and tried to attack her. Your mother grabbed me, chucked me over her shoulder,
and trundled me back to the table and told me that it wouldn’t teach her anything.”

Dwalin chuckled.
“Aye, sounds li’ me mam.”
“Then Mahal’s giant hand appeared in a swirl of fire and remade her right there. It was so strange. The Hand appeared, she tuned to stone, then He picked her up, rolled her around in His Hand. Other rock and gems came from the walls and she was rolled up into a baby.”
Dwalin sighed.
“Mebbe tha’s th’ only way.”
Ori frowned.
“What do you mean?”
“She didn’t learn anythin’ in her firs’ life so, she’s got t’ go back an’ try again.”
Ori thought about this for bit.
“Dwalin?”
“Love?”
“Your…your father was there.”
Dwalin’s body tensed.
“Di’ he speak t’ yeh?”
“Only once. He asked me how many people were actually living at Fundin House. Most of the time he just looked ashamed. He was with the family, with his brother Groin, but he didn’t say much. Your mother was lovely.”
Dwalin was silent again.
“So,” Ori went on. “Unlike my mother, he understands what he did was wrong. His treatment of you, Balin, and your mother was wrong. He knows this. My mother didn’t. That’s why she was remade in front of me, I think…."
Ori mulled this further.
“I was able call her to account. She was remade at that moment, so I could realize that she hadn’t learned anything so has to try again and I could….“ Ori smiled to himself. “So I could let go.”
“An’ come back an’ tell me an’ Balin, it were time f’r us t’ le’ i’ go, too.” Dwalin said, softly.
Ori squirmed around so he was across Dwalin’s lap, which was a tight squeeze in the tub. He settled to hug Dwalin closely.
“I’ll have to talk to Thorin, too. And Bilbo. Belladonna and Bungo were very sweet and Belladonna and Freris call each other sister.”
They rested another moment.
“Love?” Dwalin said. Ori looked up.
“Were Vili there?”
“Oh!” Ori realized his omission. “Yes, he was. He’s lovely. He hoped Dis wasn’t alone and approved heartily of her and Jani. Kili has his dimples. I can see why he was Dis’ One.” Ori paused then pulled a little away to look at his husband fondly.
“You, my Dwalin, look just like your mother.”
Dwalin laughed and colored a little.
“Aye, I do. ‘cept f’r th’ hair.”
Ori giggled.
“Yes, you are very like her. When she picked me up and carried me away from arguing with Rikmha, then sat with her arm about me, it felt like you a little bit. Oh,” Ori paused. “I forgot to tell her you’d given me her knitting basket.”
“I’m sure she knows, love.”
They relaxed in the heat.
“If this glitter shit ge’s under me skin, I’m goin’ t’ take me axe t’ our Wandi’s hair,” Dwalin growled.
The water had started as a myriad of different mixtures, and then turned a uniform sparkling bright pink.
“Pink does suit you,” Ori chuckled. “But it looks like we’re sitting in a raspberry cream dessert.”
“Yer always th’ bes’ dessert, me love.”
Ori chuckled and they kissed lazily. Ori was so comfortable. The last of the aches disappeared
under the press of Dwalin lips. He hoped the medicinal in the tub had finish their work, so he and Dwalin could become a little more active.

Wandi arrived.

“Oh Elbereth, I might have known,” was his greeting.

“We ain’t even go’ star’ed, our Wandi.” Dwalin grunted.

“Good. Get out and go rinse off, then we’ll get you dressed. Personally, my dear brother and I would prefer to send you both to bed for a couple of hours—”

“Sounds good.” Ori and Dwalin chorused then snickered at each other. Wandi stifled a chuckle and frowned terribly at them.

“However, dearest Bearer Dori is preparing a marvelous repast for you all and you’re both expected at table.”

Ori’s stomach loudly seconded this idea.

Clean and dressed in some old, comfortable clothing, Ori slopped out to the sitting room and presented himself to Dori. Rather than the approval Ori expected, Dori lunged forward with an outraged cry and grasped him by the jaw.

“Your beard grew!” Dori accused.

“Um. Yes, it did.”

“That’s almost as red as Gloin’s!”

“Is it? I haven’t closely examined it yet. Not clean, anyway.”

Dori pulled back to regard him, though not releasing Ori’s jaw.

“Great Mahal! You look just like your father!”

Ori didn’t know what to say to that, so he settled for, “I’m sorry?”

“I’m not blaming you, pet,” said Dori, though her frown didn’t ease. “I’m just a little startled, that’s all.”

“Alright,” said Ori. “May I have my face back?”

“What? Oh. Sorry, pet.”

Dori patted his cheek absently then shooed Ori and a snickering Dwalin out to the receiving room.

The room was full of people, animals, and barking wargs. Floris’ Biscuit was having a delightful time chasing Romy, who was galloping after Chopper, who was squealing. Mask and Nori-Pori clung to Chopper’s back. Kihshassa swooped around above them. The Gamgee faunts ran after Frodo, who was mounted on Posey. Ori noticed Posey now owned a saddle. He suspected Gridr had provided it.

Sam rode a mechanical pony, steering it by turning the head. Dain bounded after, shouting encouragement or winding up the key that was disguised as the pony’s tail. Ori rather suspected that if this had not originally belonged to Fili and Kili then perhaps their mother or uncle.

Ori and Dwalin were welcomed and congratulated by everyone. Jim and Ruelis were delighted to see him. Jim grinned maniacally.

“I’ve been hearing strange things about you, my friend.”

“How strange?” Ori asked, swallowing.

“I hear the evil creatures of Arda have retreated into the wastelands for fear of the dwarf king’s wizard.”

“What? Dwarrow don’t have wizards.”

“Hey,” said Jim, “I don’t make this stuff up. This is just the story going around the entertainment caravans. They say the dwarrow have a red wizard.”

“Red? Wh- What do think I’ll do? Write scathing poetry about them?”

Jim licked his lips as if he tasted something delicious.

“They say, if any dare oppose your liege, you’ll drop a mountain on them.”

“Oh, Mahal’s blessed boots! Really?”

“You’ve already done it twice,” Jim said.

“Accidentally! And the first time it was Roäc’s fault”

“If you can drop a mountain on someone, I don’t think your intentions are taken into account.”
“I’m not a wizard! I can’t even make a long-tailed rabbit from a handkerchief!”
“Oh well, that reminds me, find anything floral, Lord Ori?”
“The box of the Flower of Durin, you mean?” Ori teased.
Jim’s eyebrows went up.
“So that’s what that meant. Huh.”
“Have you spoken to Lady Eowyn?” Ori asked.
“No, should I?”
“I think she might have a comment about a snowflake for you.” Ori teased.
Jim frowned, mouthed ‘snowflake’, and looked around.
“There she is,” Ori pointed. “Go introduce yourselves.”
Jim raised his eyebrows, but Ruelis started pushing him over.
“Come along, dear. Time for you to be brought to book. I remember all about the ‘snowflake’. Lucky for you, he’s not here.”

The fireplaces blazed cheerily, the torches and lamps all lit. Two of the great tables were set for a meal, the largest table in the middle of the room with an array of food laid on it. There were platters of fresh and roasted vegetables, hot buttered noodles and great loaves of bread and wheels of cheeses.

“Welcome, Lord Ori,” Lord Elrond and Lindir came forward. Ori grinned. They embraced and Elrond looked him over and laid a hand against his cheek.
You’ve been talking to Cemnesta,” Ori accused him teasingly.

Indeed. You seem very well recovered,” Elrond smiled and turned as his sons came forward to greet Ori.

“We’re so glad you’re back!” Elladan told him with a grin.
“Very glad,” Elrohir added.

“Thank you,” Ori said carefully wondering what these elf versions of Fili and Kili were up to.
“Yes,” Elrohir nodded. “Ada and Lindir are driving us all to a mental infirmary. They’re both terribly excited about what you’ve discovered.”
Ori laughed then headed straight for the end of the buffet. There sat a steaming joint of roasted goat. Dwalin carved slice after slice for him. After piling the side of his plate with thickly buttered bread, Ori led the way back to the table and chose a seat at random. He sat and admired his meal. The meat was done to a turn and smelled delicious. Ori stuffed several slices between buttered bread and shoved it in his mouth with a moan of need.

The meat satisfied something he hadn’t realized he was craving desperately. He gobbled the makeshift sandwich as fast as he could. He looked up. Opposite him, sat Thorin looking extremely amused.

“Better?” Thorin inquired.
Ori nodded and swiped his sleeve over his mouth.
“Until I saw the meat I didn’t realize how much I was missing it. Needing it.”

Bilbo came and sat beside Thorin, which put him directly opposite Dwalin, who hadn’t bothered with bread or flatware, simply cramming meat into his mouth.

“You poor things,” Bilbo commiserated. “You dwarrow would never survive without meat, would you?”

“No,” Thorin agreed. “It’s necessary to us. All those jokes about parasites in tubes do, I imagine, have an origin in eating raw or badly cooked meat.”

Ori had a flash imagine of Durin ranging like a warg after a rabbit and shoving it whole, down his maw.

“And what’s amusing you, Lord Ori?” Thorin asked.

“Thinking of Durin on all fours hunting rabbits,” Ori managed somewhat thickly around his mouthful.

Eowyn arrived at Ori’s other side with a plate of meat as well. She tuck in immediately and sighed happily then looked ruefully at her plate.
“I’m ashamed to say this was one of the other reasons I couldn’t stay with Beorn. I’d eventually
steal his animals and eat them.”

“Oh?” Bilbo asked interestedly. “You made the acquaintance of Beorn, milady?”

Dwalin made a rude noise. Dain and Sculdis crashed down near Bilbo.

“Aye, she made his acqain’ance,” Dain grunted. “Spen’ th’ nigh’ a’ fore las’ fuckin’ his brains ou’.”

“Jealous?” Eowyn parried.

Dain stopped eating. He sat there, staring at her in dumb disbelief.

Eowyn glanced at Sculdis, who was sitting with her hands and lips primly folded but she was shaking with suppressed laughter.

“Eh?” Dain finally managed.

Sculdis gave a shriek of delight and roared with laughter.

Thorin rose and bowed to Eowyn.

“Madame, you have done the extraordinary. No one has ever startled my younger cousin enough to stop him eating. May I formally congratulate you?”

Eowyn rose, curtsied, and went back to her meal.

“And how fares the Lord of the Carrock?” Thorin asked.

“He’s fine an’ sent lots o’ pressies,” Jani reported as she arrived with a plate piled high with meat, and Dis at her side. Dis put Jani beside Thorin and seated herself on Jani’s other side.

“What kind of pressies?” Bilbo wanted to know.

Ori saw Nomirliel hesitating and flapped his hand to her. She smiled and came and seated herself next to Eowyn.

Ori swallowed his last sandwich and introduced her to Thorin and Bilbo. She almost rose but Thorin told her to eat as formality could come later and had she enjoyed her adventure.

Eowyn said, ‘presents’, around a mouth full of noodles. Nomirliel caught the hint and told about what she had seen Beorn put into the wagon.

Mistress Dazla appeared with another dish in her hands. When she set this on the buffet, Thorin rose and went to her. She laughed at whatever he said to her and they parted, smiling.

“Not to worry,” Thorin said as he resumed his seat. “The foodstuffs have been taken to the larder to keep cool.”

“And,” Ori said enjoying the feeling a tummy full of meat, “Beorn sent mead and berry wine.”

“Beorn’s berry wine,” murmured Bilbo with a nostalgic smile. “Not as fancy as dorwinian but such a pleasant, sweet wine. Best thing to get thoroughly soused on while on a picnic of a warm summery day.”

“Good to know,” Thorin teased. “I shall hold it aside for such occasions.”

“Greedy beggar,” Dwalin said, sliding his fingers around his plate to catch the remaining juices. Ori laughed and handed his husband his remaining slice of bread. Dwalin dropped it on his plate, wiped his sleeve over his mouth and grabbed Ori into a sloppy kiss. Ori was laughing too hard to kiss back. Dwalin pulled back and carded his fingers through Ori’s new beard.

“Dwalin!” Ori squawked.

“Oh!” Nori scolded, rising out of the center of the table to shake a finger at Ori.

“Ya li’le flirt!”

“Nori, get out of the table,” Ori replied.

Eowyn and Nomirliel stared open-mouthed at Nori. Nori saw their wide eyes and bowed.

“Ladies.”

Assault and Battery peeked out of his hair and chittered. He sank back out of sight.

Eowyn and Nomirliel looked at each other and shrieked with laughter.

Eowyn turned to Ori, still unable to speak.

“Yes, that’s my brother, Nori,” Ori affirmed.

“Nuisance,” Dwalin added, using the bread to thoroughly wipe his plate.

The meal finished with xocolāt pudding with an extraordinary amount of cream. Nomirliel
moaned with delight.
“‘If only it was polite to put your face in the bowl,’” she mourned.
“‘I’m tempted to anyway,’” Eowyn agreed.  “‘I wish I’d only eaten this, now.’”
“No, pet,” Dori arrived.  “You need your proper food.  You may be a soldier, but you’re still thin
and you need fattening up.”
“Like you fattening up my Aunt Galadriel?” Eowyn teased.
“Indeed!” Dori cried.  “And see how well she’s looking!”
They looked down the table where Galadriel and Celeborn were catching up with Balin, Elrond,
and Gloin.  Galadriel’s face was obscured by her ale tankard.  She set it down, obviously drained,
and Gloin gamely refilled.
Ori, Loli, Dipfa and Bujni strolled up to ask Ori if he was of an elegant sufficiency.  He kissed
Dwalin and got up to follow them back out to the patio.

Ori curled in the chair, Fanny at his side, her head near him, so he could stroke and pat the trunk
lying across his lap.  He grinned, watching his friends go through his sketch books, marveling at the
pictures from his adventure.
“This enormous spider is fascinating,” Bujni commented studying the pictures intently.
“And now King Dain is wearing it as a hat,” Omi added reverently.
Ori remembered and pulled up his satchel.  In a side pocket he found the spider hairs Quartz had
brought him.  He examined one carefully, only half listening to the chatter near him.  It was longer
than a quill, but thinner, and ended in a sharp point.  It was also hollow.
He reached into his satchel and removed an ink bottle, and a pine sap bung, from which he cut
two slivers.  He tossed the rest of the bung back and uncorked the ink bottle.  He inserted the sliver
to fit closely inside the bottle neck, effectively sealing it.  He turned the bottle upside down and the
bung stayed and no ink leaked around it.  He set the bottle on the arm of the chair and took up the
hair again and drew out his boot knife.  He cut the wider end to a slant with a point, then used this
point to pierce the bung.  He turned the bottle upside-down, filling the experimental pen with ink.
He pulled the hair free, righting the bottle at the same time, and set the bottle down on the ground
and corked it.
He covered the wider end of the hair with the rest of the pine sap and pulled out a note book.  Ori
used his boot knife with the greatest care, nicking off the tiny point of the hair.  He tapped the end of
the hair against the paper.  A tiny speck of ink appeared.  Ori snickered to himself and wrote his
name across the page.  The ink flowed easily and yet was the finest line he ever produced.
He scribbled a couple of verses of an old poem, delighted with it.
Quartz landed on his shoulder.
“Works?” the raven demanded.
Ori grinned at the raven.
“It’s perfect, Quartz.  Look”
Quartz studied the page.
“Pretty.”
“What have you got?” Loli asked leaning forward.
“A new pen.  Quartz got it for me.  Look how well it writes.”
The other three tried it out, exclaiming at the tiny lines.
“What is it made with?” Bujni asked, examining it closely.
“Giant spider hair.”
Omi and Loli screamed.  Bujni looked horrified and hurriedly gave the pen back.  Ori laughed at
them.
“Did you break them off?” Omi asked.
“No, I told you, Quartz got them.”
His friends looked askance at Quartz, who preened from his perch on Fanny’s trunk.  Ori took up
the sketch book with the pictures of the spider.  He held it up so Fanny could look at it with one eye.
She made disturbed noises and the end of her trunk came up to sniffed and touched the pen.  She
regarded Ori, then stroked his head gently with the end of her trunk.

Master Brur and Master Sadi arrived on the patio. The four scribes got up as the pair of them descended on Ori with welcomes and hugs.

“You did very well, Lord Ori,” Master Sadi beamed on him. “For a new first chair to go on such a quest is a very great thing. Your success was monumental.”

“Thank you, Master Sadi,” Ori blushed. “More like falling monuments.”

“Thank Mahal yer back, laddie,” Brur said, grasping Ori’s shoulders and shaking him a little. “Rhonda and Linda’ve been drivin’ me buggernuts.”

“What did they do?”

“Hoverin’ constantly while I clean up the Flower’s box an’ look f’r markin’s: D’yeh need help wi’ th’ box, Master Brur? D’yeh need me t’ adjust th’ lightin’, Master Brur? Clean towel, Master Brur? Wipe yer butt, Master Brur?”

“Really?”

“Awrigh’, no’ th’ las’ bit, but pretty close.”

“Well, perhaps we shouldn’t worry about it now. Please tell me,” Ori asked eagerly, “what did you find inside the box?”

“Eh? Ain’t opened it, laddie.”

“Why not?” Ori gasped, shocked. “Master Brur, are you telling me the box has been just sitting… wherever it is?”

“It’s f’r yeh t’ do, laddie. Yer quest. Yeh get firs’ crack at it. Whachacall th’ booby prize?”

“Where is it?”

“Locked up in the archives. Yer brother-in-law’s ordered an armed guard there ‘round th’ clock.”

“Oh.” Ori considered then his heart skipped. “Should we go now and…”

“Yer Dori’d have a fit, if I took yeh down there now. Let th’ moon get past full, we’re pullin’ in th’ past, lad. If I can get thin’s placed, we’ll do it t’morrow.”

“And I’ll have the guild heads there to record all the events,” Sadi added.

“Ooo!” Omi cried. “This is going to be so exciting! May we come, too, Ori?”

“Of course,” Ori replied. “I hope Thorin will be there. He’s the king and I think he really ought to do it. Thinking about it, if it’s all right, I’d like everyone who helped us to be there.”

“Even tha’ manchild?” Brur grumped.

“Which man child do you mean?” Sigrid asked, coming out arm in arm with Eowyn. They made a lovely picture. Eowyn had put aside her jumpsuit and was simply dressed in a white frock trimmed with sky blue ribbons. Sigrid was in sky blue with white lace.

Ori laughed.

“Careful, you two. Keep dressing alike and when you’re old and gray everyone will confuse you with Margr and Vi.”

The two young women looked at each other, giggled and Sigrid grinned at Ori. “That would mean Fili would be our Glorfy. Wonder what he’ll think of that?”

Eowyn chuckled delightedly.

“Go ask him,” she teased.

“Would either of you be interested in seeing what’s in the box we brought back?” Ori got down to business.

“Yes!” they chorused.

“Only if it’s allowed,” Eowyn added. “It is your people’s history, it might be something private.”

“I’ll ask Thorin,” Ori decided.

Sadi patted his shoulder, smiling.

Ori led the way back in after taking leave of Fanny, who rose to play with Floris and Mavey, who had brought Frodo, Sam and the other little Gamgees with them.

Ori found Thorin at the sitting room table with all leading elves, Bard, Balin, Bilbo, Dis, and Gloin. Dwalin was coming through from the receiving room. Ori thumped into him and hugged him hard.
“There yeh are, love. How’s Fanny?”
“She’s very well!” Ori squeezed his husband’s arm. “She’s getting taller and her tusks are growing, too, and she’s much plumper. She looks wonderful!”
“Never as wonderful as yerself,” Dwalin murmured in Ori’s hair.
“Wait,” Eowyn gasped, “Ori, do you really own that oliphaunt?”
“Of course, I don’t own her!” Ori swallowed his annoyance, remembering the ways of men.
“Fanny is my dear friend. Jim and Ruelis look after her and travel with her as she’s too big to live here in Erebor. Besides she is active and very clever. She would be bored here. Jim and Ruelis bought her back so Fanny and I can visit.”
“Thank Mahal,” Dwalin murmured.
Eowyn stared, then laughed.
“Oh, Ori! Galadriel was right. You are irresistibly huggable on first sight to everyone and everything. Red Queen, ponies, kittens, bats, and oliphaunts love you, too. No wonder Dwalin fell for you instantly!”
Ori looked up and grinned.
“Now that reminds me.”
Grabbing Dwalin’s hand, he hurried over to where Dori was talking to Balin, Eowyn gamely following them.
“Ori’s Dori,” Ori bounced up and clenched Dori’s arm.
“What is it, pet? Have you and dearest Eowyn been telling secrets?”
“Why did you always glare at Dwalin whenever he came around?”
Dori turned and stared at Ori.
“I never did any such thing! I have been very good to him here!”
“No, no, Dori, I mean before, when we lived in Dale.”
“I was not acquainted with the captain. I never noticed him.”
“Yes, you did! He told me the story of when I was drawing the dock flowers. The day you told me never to go there because there were pirates.”
“Nonsense, I was merely chaperoning you. There were several passersby, who were admiring you!”
“You glared Dwalin away!” Ori accused.
“I did not!” Dori cried. “I most certainly did not! I merely smiled encouragingly.”
“Bloody bared yer fangs a’ me,” Dwalin observed to Eowyn, who was clenching her hand to her mouth.
“I-” Dori paused then tossed her head. “Perhaps I was a little protective, but-”
“Yeh unsheathed yer knife an’ polished it a’ me,” Dwalin observed to Eowyn, who was clenching her hand to her mouth.
“A perfectly normal pastime! I’m sure you approve of the care and maintenance of weaponry!”
“Maybe the way we did get married was the only way it could have happened,” Ori reflected.
“Why, pet! That’s not true! I’m sure if Dwalin had called in a respectable manner and asked to walk out with you-”
“Hard t’ ask when yeh go’ a slit throat,” Dwalin put in.
Dori huffed in annoyance and glared at Dwalin. Eowyn and Ori giggled. Dwalin shot a grin at Dori, who had the grace to color slightly and cast murmur aspersions. Balin chuckled and took Dori’s arm and escorted the Bearer to a seat near Galadriel.
Eowyn and Dwalin looked at each other. Dwalin winked and Eowyn was finally able to let go of the laugh she had been bravely holding back.
“Now I believe Lady Dori is very fierce,” Eowyn managed.
“Yeh’ve no idea, our Wynny,” Dwalin grunted. “Yeh didn’t know us when we were dealin’ wi’ Frerin.”
“Who’s Frerin?” Eowyn asked, one eyebrow raised.
“Thorin’s and Dis’ younger brother,” Ori explained. “He’s an asshat and was sent to Belegost to have his own kingdom, but Arivett and your brother overthrew him. I think he’s being an
accountant to King Snur in Ered Luin…” Ori paused. “At least, that’s the last I remember hearing of him.”

“Oohhh,” Eowyn said thoughtfully. “So that’s where that whole asshat thing comes from.”

“Yeh majesty?” Furh’nk appeared at the front door.

“Yes, Furh’nk?” Thorin turned from his conversation with Omosuil and Gimli.


“Indeed?” Thorin grinned. “I suppose my letter of explanation to the king was not enough.

Probably Captain Boromir is his representative.”

“Fr’m th’ spy-glass, majesty, I’m thinkin’ it’s Elessar hissel’.”

“Then please prepare a welcome, Furh’nk, and bring his party straight here. Bearer?”

“I’m before you, Thorin dear, and Bilbo is already gone to the kitchen.”

“Thank you both. Furh’nk?”

“I’m on it, majesty.”

“Thank you.”

“Thorin?” Ori went to his king’s side. “Do you think everything’s alright? Surely Arivett hasn’t—”

Thorin chuckled and looked at Dwalin.

“Ori,” Thorin put an arm over Ori’s shoulders and brought him back to Dwalin’s side, “I don’t think it’s anything more than Aragorn and Arwen wanting all the juicy details.”

“What will we do? I haven’t had time to write up anything,” Ori worried.

“You and Dwalin are going through to the breakfast parlor,” Thorin instructed, steering Ori toward the sitting room door to the hallway. “Dori and Mistress Dazla are preparing it. I’ll gather the crowned heads and your professional bullies. We’ll join you and, by that time, Gondor should be here to gather with us. Then you are going to enthrall all of us with what, in Mahal’s name, happened.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Ori is back and ready to tell (almost) all! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Of special note: Has anyone run into any Eowyn/Beorn smut???? If not, why hasn’t anyone written it???? There’s a shockin’ lack a’ Beowyn out there!!!!!

Ori nodded and he hurried through. Dwalin said he’d be along in a minute. In the parlor, Dori was laying out his sketch books which she had wrenched away from Bujni. Mistress Dazla set out tapped kegs and let the bottles of dorwinian breathe. In the kitchen, Ori heard Bilbo busy with food preparation and instructing the staff on helping him.

“Now, pet,” Dori said. “You will sit at Thorin’s right, as you will be speaking.”

Ori paled. Dwalin entered carrying a wiggling ball of fur that had grown quite a bit. Ori forgot his nerves and laughed.

“It’s Killer!” he cried, going over to pat the pup. Killer was very fuzzy and very excited. The pup eagerly washed Ori’s face for him.

“He’s so sweet!” Ori giggled, wiping his face with his sleeve.

“Aye, he’s a grand wee thin’ ain’t he?” Dwalin grinned down at the little warg. Killer whined and yipped and made happy noises, tail a blur of motion.

Ori remembered his duty then and snatched hold of Dwalin’s hand.

“Yer fine, love. Yer jus’ tellin’ us abou’ our adventure. Everyone here’s like family.”

“That’s true,” Ori admitted, calming.

The Company and Ori’s other bullies filed in, followed by Thranduil, Bard, Mr. Wandi, and Cemnesta. Galadriel carried in her satchels and a large basket. Ori thought they must contain the other books she had ‘rescued’ from the crypt and stowed in her jumpsuit pockets. He went to the head of the table. Thorin strode in, flanked by Sugar on his right and Butter on his left. He sat and they circled several times before plopping down behind his chair, panting happily and sniffing around. Dis, Jani, Fili, Sigrid, Kili and Tauriel followed next, the princes assisting the six mithril masters in and settling them.

Kir lifted a lock of hair, peered around, grunted and folded his arms across his chest. Sigrid held out Ori’s other satchel to him and he took it gratefully.

Thorin waved for everyone to seat themselves. Bilbo came from the kitchen and seated himself on Thorin’s left. Ori was relieved that Dwalin sat down beside him, Killer snuggling into his lap and gazing up at Dwalin with worshipful eyes.

Kihshassa winged in and climbed on the back of Ori’s chair and settled herself there and laid her head on his left shoulder. Mask clambered up Dwalin and balanced on Killer, bravely standing firm as Killer slobbered him happy. Nori-Pori hopped on the table and sat in front of them. Eowyn and the others of the company, who had not been introduced to the wargs, stared at them.

Jim, Ruelis, Floris and Mavey came in and found seats. Nori and Bofur sidled in. Eowyn leaned forward, looking eagerly at Nori’s hair. Nori winked at her and whistled. The ferrets popped their heads out and leapt to the table and bobbled around sniffing and receiving pets and fondling from everyone. Eowyn was delighted and giggled when Assault took a tour around her neck under her hair.
Dain and Sculdis barged in next with Elrond, Lindir, Elladan and Elrohir, Glorfindel and the sisters, Celeborn, Kelli strutting beside him, Haldir, Legolas, Gimli, a barking Romy, and all the Groinuls. Everyone found seats. Haldir looked aghast at the wargs lying on the floor next to Thorin, but seeing as how Omi and Loli were cuddling Romy and Dwalin had a warg pup in his lap, Haldir chose not to comment. Tharkûn appeared from the ether, seated comfortably next to Glorfindel.

Finally Dori, Powder draped about her neck, came in with Brur, Sadi, Nodun and Arne, the scribes’ arms full of baskets of papers and ostrakais. These were laid out on the table before Ori.

Red Queen flapped down to land on the patio. Ori rose and greeted her. She followed him in and was introduced to everyone, including the household animals. She deigned to take the chair Thranduil pulled out for her.

Fanny came forward and lay down near the open doors, her ears flapped open wide to catch the discussion.

Granny Klak entered, holding Brandy, who had grown plump and fierce, but was perfectly happy to be cradled like a baby. Granny Klak sat beside Red Queen and they nodded to each other regally.

“What is that?” Red Queen asked.

“One of my great, great, grandbadgers,” said Granny Klak simply.

Roäc swooped in, and perched on Thorin’s chair back. Quartz darted after him and landed on Ori’s right shoulder.

“Gondor’s here,” said Roäc. “Aragorn, Arwen, and Boromir. Dazla’s helping them tidy up.” “Excellent. Any other news from your look-outs?” “All clear,” Roäc added and accepted the chunk of scone Thorin passed him. Everyone seated was being served with drinks and helping themselves to the snacks laid out on the table.

Aragorn and Arwen entered. Shouts of welcome ensued and Thorin rose to embrace them both. “Gondor, it’s good to see you again,” Thorin smiled.

“What happened to Aragorn, Thorin?” Aragorn laughed.

“I’m being royal for greetings.” “Not on my part you shouldn’t, we have wagged, as you remember.” Thorin chuckled and leaned forward as Arwen bent for them to kiss each other’s cheeks. Sugar and Butter rose, tails wagging for pats and praise.

Arwen and Aragorn went around the table greeting everyone and meeting others. They didn’t bat an eyelid as they exchanged pleasantries with Red Queen. Aragorn came to Ori and frowned terribly.

“Lord Ori of Fundin, I am deeply, deeply angered,” he growled, though Ori saw the twinkle in the man’s eye.

“Why?” he asked, more curious than anything.

“Because you went on an important quest and did not invite Arwen and myself to accompany you. We are very hurt.”

Aragorn laughed and embraced him.

“It was supposed to be secret!” Ori protested, returning the hug. “A secret?” Arwen teased. “Like blowing up Mordor?”

“I didn’t do that!” Ori argued.

“You gave the arkenstone to Roäc,” Arwen said, while Aragorn and Dwalin greeted each other and Aragorn was able to enjoy a face wash from Killer. Dwalin shared some Old Toby with the king and both lit up.

“I didn’t tell him to take it to Mordor!” Ori insisted, hugging Arwen.

“And then you blew up Moria.” “That wasn’t the plan. It was an accident. Mahal, Yavanna, and Ulwe made it happen.” “Don’t yeh go implicatin’ us.” A hot boom chuckled in the back of Ori’s head.

“I’m not implicating You,” Ori said aloud, accidentally, making Elrond’s eyes fly wide open and Galadariel laugh.

Eowyn and Arwen embraced, giggling as Arwen told the White Lady how jealous she was of Eowyn going on the Quest.
“You will call upon us next time,” Aragorn stated and drew out a seat for Arwen and seated himself beside her.

Boromir blew in, Frodo tucked under one arm and Sam under the other.

“Sorry, I’m late;” he crowed. “I was ambushed!”

“Mister Boromir!” shouts came from either side of the man.

The First March Warden grinned, then spotted Eowyn.

“Addled One!” he shouted in greeting.

“Bored Mouse!” she called back, laughing.

Everyone snickered at these pleasantries. Boromir sat down next to Dain and perched the faunts on his knees. Dain helped him to ale and the faunts to snacks.

Thorin lit his pipe, glanced around, nodded to Nodun, who had perched herself cross-legged on the sideboard with the drinks. She in turn nodded to Sadi. Sadi gave Omi, Loli, Bujni and Arne a look and they readied their pens and books.

Thorin rose to speak, the room dropped to silence.

There was a squawk and a huge pile of black feathers whirled in through the open parlor windows over Fanny’s head and landed with a disorganized thump in the middle of the table.

“Righ’!” bellowed Baluchistan. “I’m here, let th’ figh’ start.”

Dain reached out, grabbed his raven and yanked him into his lap, muttering, “Shuddup, Blue!”

“Whoops! Aye, laddie, I’m as mum as a goose.”

Thorin smothered a smile.

“The Quest of the Company of Lord Ori of Fundin to Khazad-dûm to recover the Flower of Durin as instructed by Durin the Deathless in Lord Ori’s prophetic dream has been successful. Lord, Ori will you please inform the assembled of your quest.”

Thorin sat and Ori rose. He opened his notebook and turn to the page where he had written in a dream state the request of Durin. He looked at it a moment. It almost seemed a lifetime ago.

Ori told of the ostrakai. The pieces were passed around the table and examined. Ori explained the symbol of the flower.

He told of his dream where Durin made his request and gave the location of the box. He told of the assistance he had received and thanked each person. He took up his first notebook from the sailing of the ship to Erys Lasgalen and Cemmesta’s assistance, their ride through the forest with Omosuil’s soldiers, the sketchbook with the pictures of the spider, the sketches of Dol-Guldur and the visions of the original buildings as he’d seen them. He explained the meeting with the ents and their leader Treebeard, then the reception Galadriel and Celeborn had hosted for them.

Dis smiled into her tea.

“So, you met ents.”

Kili’s head swiveled toward her and he said, “Yes. And no.”

She chuckled evilly under her breath.

Celeborn stared, fascinated, at the ceiling.

Ori sat down to let Dwalin tell of the battle preparations and the assistance they had received from Haldir and the ents. Ori drank raspberry soda water with great relief. He took over Dwalin’s pipe, the soothing properties of Old Toby relaxed him. He watched the scribes taking notes and Nodun sketching the meeting.

It was interesting to hear Dwalin’s take on their adventure. Dwalin saw it through the eyes of a battle strategist. Ori could easily see why Thorin trusted him completely. Dwalin missed nothing about their approach to Khazad-dûm, how the ents moved and covered their tracks, how the rocks around the entryway had to be watched and possible areas of attack spotted.

When he reached their entry of the mountain, Dwalin nodded to Dain and sat down. Dain handed a snoring Baluchistan to Sculdis, hauled out a folded sheaf of papers out of a pocket, which he chuckled to Thorin, rose and proceeded to explain his and the mithril masters’ work creating the bridge and how it had spanned the chasm. Thorin studied the papers Dain sent his way. He handed them to Dis and the papers made a slow trek around all the listeners.

Ori glanced about. Anyone who had not been with them was wide eyed. They went through the
sketches, staring and gasping.

Sculdis nodded.

“Me hubby’s no’ jus’ another pretty face, yeh know.”

Dain continued until they reached the first cavern then Dain nodded to Ori. Ori rose once more. He told of the meeting with the bonebreakers. He politely asked if Red Queen would care to add anything.

She took a moment to explain how her flock lived and the damage the orcs did. The huge bird actually apologized for not understanding black speech, so she could not advise the assembled on any plans the orcs may have had. Thorin thanked her and nodded to Ori.

Then Ori rather shyly told of his finding the skeletal remains of Teyan and her ghostly request to take her masterwork with him. Ori indicated the neatly bound book on the table. Brur snatched it up, read the title, roared with laughter and shoved it in his outer robe pocket. Ori frowned, then explain what the work was about. Gasps went round the table and Elrond glared at Brur.

Ori then told of Floviq showing them where the hidden chamber was. Dain took up the tale again, explaining the mechanics of the boobytraps, and how the box was raised. He turned and winked at Galadriel, who giggled and rose. She emptied her satchels and the basket on the table. Books slewed out all over. Brur, Elrond, and Sadi screamed in delight, and the scribes almost knocked each other senseless in the scramble. Thorin bellowed fora calm and Dain snickered at them as they all recovered themselves. Dain continued to the point where Ori said he would check the tunnel.

Everyone looked at Ori.

“Pet, you didn’t!” Dori cried.

“I did,” Ori admitted glumly. He told of the orcs, then sighed. This was the part he had dreaded telling.

“I opened my eyes and there I was with Quartz in the Halls of Waiting.”

“Yup,” said Quartz.

Thorin and Elrond leapt to their feet with the shout of, “What did you see?”

Ori sighed and carefully told of his meeting with Thror, then their passage to the feasting hall, and his meeting with Narvi and Celebrimbor.

“He ask me to call him Brim.” Ori couldn’t help himself.

Thranduil, Elrond, and Celeborn hung on his words. Galadriel giggled when Ori reported that they teasingly accused her of spilling the secret. She was obviously delighted they remembered her.

Ori faithfully related everyone he had met and what they had said. Dis, Fili, and Kili were in tears when Ori told them of Vili and the words Vili had said.

Ori grinned at Kili.

“You have your father’s dimples.”

“Tell him I’ll give them back when I get there.” Kili smiled with wet cheeks. “I wish I remembered him.”

“I’ve drawn you a sketch.” Ori turned to the place in one of the sketch books he’d used on the ride back. Kili grabbed it and stared at the picture. Dis looked around the hankie she was wiping her eyes with while Jani rubbed her back.

“That’s him,” she sniffed. “Oh, Ori, you draw so well. The picture looks ready to speak to you.”

Fili had his face buried in Sigrid’s neck as she stroked his hair.

“Fili looks so like him in this picture,” Kili said marveling. “All the others I’ve seen look so stiff. I do have his dimples, and his smile.”

The assembled politely waited for the three to recover themselves. Then Ori turned to Thorin. He tried not to giggle as he related Thrain’s and Freris’ interactions. Dis turned to the pages Ori indicated and gasped. Ori was pleased he had taken time to add some color to these portraits. Thorin rose and leaned over to see.

“Adad has both eyes,” Thorin breathed. “I’d forgotten how he looked with both.”

“Look at amad,” Dis put in. “Ori caught that little secret smile she had. Ori, will you?”

Dis looked up. Ori nodded. He could easily draw more portraits of all he had seen.

Bilbo peered around Thorin’s arm and then up at Thorin, and smiled.
“I like this portrait better than the official portrait in the archives. Though both seem to have the same aura of... seriousness about them.”

Ori nodded.

“Believe me, this is nothing to having him look right into your eyes with a purpose.”

“Does he do that eyebrow thing?” Frodo asked.

“I get that from my amad,” said Thorin.

“Oh.”

Ori went back to telling about how Thror remembered nothing. He took a breath and related his discussion and accidental dropping of Bilbo’s name, and Fundin and Groin’s bet on it, which sent Oin and Gloin into peals of laughter.

Ori told of Freris calling for a raven and how Carc had arrived. This made Roäc squawk, which woke Baluchistan in an explosion of feathers.

“Wha’ th’ fuck, brother?” Baluchistan yelled.

“Father’s in the Halls!” Roäc shouted.

“Father’s bloody dead!” Baluchistan shouted back. “O’ course, he’s in th’ Halls! Where else yeh think he’d be? In a fuckin’ fish bowl?”

“Ori and Quartz met Adad in the Halls, you idiot!” Roäc screamed. “Pay attention, fluff-head.”

“Oh, did yeh, laddie?” Baluchistan strutted across the table to question Quartz. “An’ wha’ did our da have t’ say t’ yeh?”

“He said Adad Roäc once got his head stuck in the keyhole to the treasury and King Thror had to grease his head with lard to get it out,” Quartz snickered.

“I did not!” Roäc yelled.

“Aye, yeh did!” Baluchistan argued.

“I - I must’ve been drunk. I don’t remember!” Roäc wailed.

“Drunk off yer feathery arse, brother!” Baluchistan croaked cheerily.

Ori waited for Thorin to stop laughing, so he could get the room under control once more. It took a few minutes but Thorin finally shushed the ravens and everyone else and invited Ori to continue.

Ori grinned at Bilbo as he related how Carc had returned with Belladonna and Bungo Baggins and how Freris and Thrain had celebrated with them.

“It is nice to have universal parental approval, even from beyond the grave,” said Bilbo.

“Yes,” said Thorin dryly. “But whether they approve more of us or each other, that is open to debate.”

“I was surprised King Thror could see the hobbits but not the elves,” said Ori. “Dwalin’s mam said King Thror didn’t object to hobbits. I think it had something to do with the hobbits bringing cake.”

Dis and Thorin traded delighted looks and laughed.

“That sounds like the udad we knew,” said Dis. “Once he was off his cake, we knew things had become serious.”

Ori paused a moment then skipped the part with Rihkma as it had no bearing, nor added to any information about the quest, and went on describing the remaking of a dwarf and then how things had faded.

He paused and took Dwalin’s hand. Dwalin took a breath and rose. Ori didn’t sit but stayed close to him, clutching Dwalin’s hand with both of his. Dwalin quietly related the few minutes of escaping the chamber and finding Ori and the axe.

“Did you know what had happened to Ori?” Elrond asked curiously.

“I only though’ th’ wors’ when his song in me hear’ stopped.” Dwalin’s grip tightened on Ori’s. Ori let go and shoved himself under Dwalin’s arm which clenched him tight.

Silence then Dis burst into tears again and Dori, Dain and both the sisters joined her. Thorin rose, came and embraced both Ori and Dwalin.

“Oh, my shieldbrother, the pain you must have felt.”

Dwalin took another breath and chuckled.

“Good thin’ it didn’t las’. Nex’ thin’ I know is him lookin’ up a’ me askin’ if I were alrigh’.”
Thorin touched brows first with Dwalin, then Ori, and returned to his seat.
Once they got to the part about the Balrog, nearly everyone in the Company had a part to tell. The reduction of the balrog made everyone burst into laughter. Tharkûn shook his head, murmuring about poor Myron.
Dain growled.
“Bloody Myron. Bloody, fuckin’ balrog! He destroyed me mithril bridge, th’ bastard.”
The mithril masters jumped up and exclaimed in anger and echoed his wroth sentiments, to the point where Kir tuckered himself out and had to sit down.
“Fuck,” Kir said. “I hope I don’ have t’ pee again soon.”
The listeners gasped and exclaimed and wondered at the final escape with the explosion of the mountains and the appearance of the lake.
Ori told of everything he had heard the valar say. Celeborn added the details of the explosion of Dol-Guldur. The Company and Haldir told about how everything had settled and the arrival of the great eagles.
Ori finished his tale with Galadriel sending him into healing sleep.
Dori flopped back in her chair.
“Oh, pet! Such danger!”
“I had to, Dori.”
“I know, pet. But I’m sure I would have fainted at the sight of such a horrid creature as the balrog.”
“Bugger!” Nori replied. “Sheesh, Chick, jus’ leave me an’ our Dori in shade. Make us all commonplace an’ shit.”
“Nori,” Ori said, teasing, “Dori is a bearer and you can walk through walls. Please explain to me how that could be in anyway commonplace.”
“Cheeky li’le mole,” Nori snickered.
“H-hold on,” Arne said. “Lady G-gladriel said she s-sealed the core of the l-library. Where is the c-core now?”
“Tha’s wha’ our Ori asked,” Gimli put in.
“In ‘er bloody handbag?” Baluchistan suggested.
“At the bottom of Misty Lake, sealed against all the elements,” Galadriel cooed, pointedly ignoring the raven.
“Let’s worry about that later.” Thorin raised his hand as Brur looked ready to roar. “So, how long were you asleep Ori?”
“Two days,” Ori answered. “I woke up to find Cemnesta with me.”
“And what did you find amiss with my scribe?” Thorin asked the woodland king.
Cemnesta cleared his throat and folded his hands on the table top.
“While Durin possessed Ori’s body, Durin seems to have brought his own strength with him and, from what Dwalin tells us, dispatched most of the orcs. Unfortunately, this possession resulted in his straining every muscle in Ori’s body. I can only guess that it was Durin’s strength that kept every bone from breaking as well. From what I could deduce from my examinations, as a living dwarf, Durin was quite likely twice Ori’s size.”
“He’s pretty big,” Ori confirmed.
“How dare he!” Dori cried.
“It’s alright, Dori,” Ori soothed. “He appeared when I woke a second time and Dwalin was with me. He apologized and he and Dwalin made it up.”
“I should hope so!”
“If Isildur ever appeared on the end of my bed, I think I’d pass out,” Aragorn said, wonderingly.
“I have encountered ghosts, but I think that would be a bit much for me.”
Arwen nodded, staring at Ori.
“Then what happened?” she asked.
Ori looked at Red Queen.
“You are right, Lord Ori, it is time for our announcement,” she hissed gleefully. She cleared her
throat and made a proclamation.

“Since we usually nest within or much lower on mountain sides than ravens do, and as we prefer bones rather than meat for food, and as Lord Ori tells me you haven’t any way of ridding yourselves of bones other than grinding them up for your fields, and as we are now without a home nesting ground, and as the River Running has some rather nice red clay on its banks, we have decided to live here in Erebor.”

Roäc screamed and fell off Thorin’s shoulder, into his lap.

“Goodness me!” Bilbo cried. “Roäc’s fainted!”

“Brother!” Baluchistan squawked. “Get ‘im some brandy!”

Granny Klak immediately offered her vinaigrette.

Thorin righted Roäc in his hand and peered at him, tapping the raven gently on the head. Thorin took the pipe Dwalin offered him, took a pull, and blew a little smoke at Roäc’s beak. Roäc coughed and flapped about, struggling to a perching position. Thorin stoked him. Baluchistan bumbled over, leaving his usual trail of feathers for Kili and the elves to pick up for fletching, and peered at Roäc.

“Yeh alrigh’, brother?”

“Brother,” Roäc said weakly, “that monster’s moving here.”

“Now don’ yeh go fussin’ ‘bou’ tha’,” Baluchistan soothed. “I’ll take care a’ her.”

Baluchistan gave his feathers a major fluffing. Bilbo picked scattered feathers out of the wine cups and off the plates, while Baluchistan strutted across the table to Red Queen.

Red Queen peered askance at Baluchistan and the trail of feathers on the table.

Baluchistan gave another fluff and waggled his tail, then drew himself up in the circle of scattered feathers. He winked lewdly and, grabbed Red Queen’s saucer of wine in his beak, downed it, and made a swinging bow, wings outstretched.

“Hello, me bebeh; hello, me darlin’; hello, me eggtime gal! How’s th’ River Runnin’ runnin’ f’r yeh?”

Red Queen cocked her head. Dain’s head hit the table with a groan and all the elves giggled.

“We believe the River Running runs as it always has,” Red Queen answered carefully, regarding Baluchistan with one eye, then the other. “What are you, exactly?”

Baluchistan hopped forward, so they were all but beak to beak.

“Lassie,” Baluchistan crooned, “I’m yer every wildes’ dream made flesh!”
Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. And now the continuing saga of Baluchistan…. No, it’s Ori’s story and he’s got more to tell. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori stared. Red Queen was his own height; seated at the table, she was taller. Baluchistan was a cross between a large chicken and a feather-stuffed cushion. Red Queen’s neck lengthened and she craned upward to stare down at the ball of black feathers bobbling about in front of her.

“I could eat you,” she hissed in warning.
“Oh, aye? Try it!”
Baluchistan waved his wings like a fighter brandishing his fists.
The assembled people shouted in alarm as Red Queen’s head flashed forward. There was an explosion of black feathers.

Nothing.
Red Queen spat out feathers and looked about confused.
“Brother!” Roäc yelled, jumping forward.
Baluchistan landed on his own rump on the table in front of Red Queen.
“Missed!” he taunted.
She snaked forward and again there was an explosion of feathers. She was left spitting black feathers out of her beak and choking on them.
Baluchistan smacked down on his head, rolled over, and snickered at her.
“Go on,” Baluchistan squawked. “Have another shot!”
“Baluchistan!” Sculdis bellowed.
Ori saw Roäc leap to the floor behind Red Queen’s chair as his brother hopped about and teased her.

Hissing in anger, Red Queen’s neck lashed out again. This time she stopped short, squalling. Roäc fluttered back up on the table, one of her splendid tail feathers in his beak.

“Ha!” shouted Baluchistan. “Welcome t’ Erebor! Home a’ th’ sons o’ Care!”
“Stop!” roared Thorin.

A different explosion of feathers, a great hooting and clunking erupted, and Kelli somehow leaped up on the table. He clunked several times, his tail feathers on end and his tiny wings flapped madly. He hooted at the two ravens.

Roäc and Baluchistan stared in shock. Red Queen was as startled as they were. Kelli drew himself up and began to intone in a stream of clucks directed at the ravens, flapping little wings for emphasis.

Celeborn got to his feet and tried to reach for Kelli. Kelli gave him a stink eye then clunked at the ravens again. Celeborn sat down.

“We were here first!” Roäc screamed. “Mahal put us here!”
“Bloody right!” Baluchistan put in.
Kelli clucked some more then glared at them. Roäc and Baluchistan glanced at each other then looked at Red Queen.
“I said,” Red Queen managed a cool tone, ruffling her feathers back into place. “We nest lower
on the mountain than you and we eat bones, nothing in the way of interfering with you and your aeries.”

Kelli clunked and nodded wisely.

“Fuck,” Baluchistan griped.

Roäc turned and looked all round at the people seated at the table. Quartz looked out from Ori’s shoulder and chirped.

Roäc huffed and croaked.

Thorin nodded gravely.

“Fine!” Roäc snapped. He cocked his head at Red Queen. “You assisted Ori and Mahal in the Quest. I thank you for that. If elves and dwarrow can share territory amicably, then so can we. If you need assistance settling, I’ll hold myself ready to assist you.”

“Bloody right!” Baluchistan put in with another paroxysm of feathers.

Kelli bowed judiciously to both ravens. He crossed to Red Queen and held out a wing. Red Queen stared, then carefully brought up one of her own wings to touch Kelli’s. Kelli bowed over her wing, touched his beak to the tips of the feathers, rose and bowed again then strutted to where Celeborn stood, then perched regally still as Celeborn gently lifted him back down to the floor.

There was a collective sigh of relief around the table.

Roäc strode back to Thorin and fluttered to the back on the chair.

Baluchistan swaggered over to Dain and Sculdis then flopped down on his butt in front of them. Sculdis bapped him on the beak with a finger, while Dain filled a saucer of ale to revive the raven. Dain put it down, muttering “idiot”. Ori had an insane desire to laugh, but realized that would not be a good idea.

Thorin cleared his throat.

“Ori, when you were well enough to travel?”

“Yes.”

Ori schooled his brain back to the end of the quest. The rest was fun. Everyone enjoyed hearing about Beorn, his fountain, and his new kitchen tools.

“If it’s the set I remember,” Binni said. “They were especially commissioned to cook for the Bearers residence. They were said to be divinely inspired.”

“They’re great to use,” Kili said. “No idea how they were made, but the food never sticks to them.”

“I noticed that,” Nomirliel argeed. “They seemed heavier than what Kili was using, but far easier to clean.”

Everyone had something to say about the party at Beorn’s

“Aye,” Dain added happily, “I ain’t had me doodle sack out in ages. Red Queen there liked looking at it.”

She gave a graceful nod of agreement.

Bilbo choked on his wine.

“You showed Red Queen your…doodle sack?”

“Aye, a’ th’ dance a’ Beorn’s.”

“In front of Sculdis?”

“In front a’ everyone. D’yeh wan’ t’ see it? I’ll jus’ go ge’ it.” Dain scrambled up from his chair.

“It’s detachable?” Bilbo gasped.

“Aye, I keep it in a sack.”

“You keep it in a sack?”

“Where else would I keep it?”

“In your trousers?”

Dain stood still, staring at Bilbo,

“Don’ fit, lad. Don’ be daft. Rather hard t’ play it in there.”

Bilbo turned and looked helplessly at Thorin, who was staring at the ceiling and twiddling his thumbs.

“Thorin!” Bilbo cried.
Thorin looked affronted.
“What have I done?”
“Doodle sack?” Bilbo demanded.
“I’m sorry, my treasure, I don’t play the bagpipes.”
“A doodle sack is a bagpipe?”
“Of course,” Thorin said lightly, then pretended to glare. “Why, what did you think it was?”
Bilbo huffed, and turned red. Dain dropped back in his chair and roared with laughter.
“Naugh’y hobbit!” Dain teased
“You hush!” Bilbo told him, and shoved an elbow into Thorin’s side.
Ori finished by telling Dori what Beorn had packed for the baby at which Dori sniffed and shed a few happy tears while Dipfa and Gridr looked excited.
Some of the guests looked puzzled.
Thorin rose.
“I’d like to formally announce that Dori, Bearer of Erebor, and Lord Balin of Fundin are expecting their first badgerling.”
Congratulations and happy exclamations filled the room. Several people hurried over to hug Dori and shake Balin’s hand.
Dori accepted the well wishes with perfect grace. Balin looked glowingly happy and still slightly dazed by the idea.
Oin slapped him on the back.
“Never too old, cousin. Look a’ me!”
Dori shot him a look.
“I hope the pebble will be slightly smaller than Bujni, at least at the birth.”
Oin looked at her this way and that and finally decided,
“Eh. Probably.”
When the merriment had subsided, Ori made a quick run down of traveling in the Greenwood, Cemneste’s reception and Gimli’s initiation and subsequent party.
Ori looked at Thorin,
“Master Brur thinks we ought to wait until the full moon begins to wane to open the past. If you think it right, we should open the box tomorrow. I would also like to request you, King Thorin,” then Ori looked about all assembled, “allow everyone here and those involved on the quest to be present.”
There were a few gasps from around the table.
“Of course, we would readily understand and respect your wish to deny this request,” Elrond said quickly. “It maybe that there are things from your history that you wish to remain private. I’m sure we would happily wait until you decided to share any of the contents with us.”
Thorin stroked his beard, his eyes went to Bilbo then to his family gathered there.
“Lord Ori,” Thorin said formally, then smiled. “This was your quest which came to you from Durin. It is for you to decide who you wish to be present.”
“Thank you!” Ori cried and was out of his chair before he could stop himself from throwing himself bodily on his king. “Thank you so much!”
Thorin patted his back and chuckled. Finally Ori released him and turned to beam around the gathering.
“You’ll all come, won’t you?”
The room resounded with affirmations and cheers.
Brur rose.
“I’ll’ve th’ room ready f’r after breakfast. An’, wi’ Lord Ori’s permission, wha’ th’ fuck’re these books?”
Ori laughed and, with Brur, Elrond, Glorfindel and several others’ help, the books were lined up and placed face up. Sadi helped herself to Brur’s pocket and brought out Teylan’s masterwork.
Brur looked at it again, then snickered, “So, who’s goin’ t’ defend’ th lass’ master thesis?”
“I will.”
Silence.
Everyone stared at Tauriel.
Brur raised an eyebrow at her.
“Yeh a scholar along wi’ bein’ a soldier, lass?”
“No,” she smiled, shaking her red locks. “This Teylan spent her time researching something very close to my heart.” She paused to look down and take Kili’s hand.
He grinned up at her. “I’ll help if you like.” Kili then turned and faced at Brur. Ori saw Vili’s strength in the prince’s face.
“I’m no scholar either, but I think it would be an incredible read and probably she’d think it funny if a married dwarf and elf defended it.”
“I’m certain,” Tauriel went on, “that Teyan’s work is sound and worthy of giving her the accolades of Master even in death. I don’t presume to think that Kili and I can give it the presentation she would, but we will both do our best.”
“Excellent,” Sadi stated.
“Aye,” Brur agreed “Lemme know when yer ready and I’ll set up the room f’r yer defense.”
Sadi slid the book over to Tauriel.
Dis beamed on her son and Fili grinned and ruffled his hair.
“On behalf on the late Teylan,” Thorin said. “I thank you both.”
Bard was leaning across the table peering at a small volume. Balin looked over, then with a glance at Bard, took it up.
“This’s in a language I haven’ seen,” Balin mused and passed the book to Bard.
“I have,” said Bard, his voice barely a whisper.
“Da? What is it?” Sigrid asked.
She rose and went to look over his shoulder.
“Oh,” she said. “That looks like—”
“It does, doesn’t it,” said Bard. “Ori, what is this?”
He slid the book to Ori, who turned it around and smiled.
“That’s a badger’s school book. It’s very old, but still legible. See, this is ancient Khuzdul, this is the old Noldor Sindarin. Oh, here is some Quenya or it might be Telerin and this is the runic that, I believe, became Westron. This… I don’t know what that is.”
Tilda hopped up on a chair and scooted over the table on her hands and knees around the half-empty plates and spilled feathers.
“It’s like Da’s book!” She spun to look at Bard. “It is, isn’t it!”
“I think so,” said Bard. “I could never read it.”
“I’m going to go get it!” she announced and barreled off the table.
“Monster child, you cannot run off through the streets of Dale,” said Thranduil.
She paused and peered up at him.
“’Cose it’s dangerous?”
“Little is more dangerous than you, admittedly,” said the king father. “However, I’m thinking even if you run, you won’t be back before dawn.”
“Furh’nk can take me on Puffball!” Tilda announced, and turned, grasping the startled soldier at the door jamb, by the hand. “C’mon, Furh’nk!”
“Er, with yer permission, yer majesties?” he asked, hanging back even as Tilda attempted to drag him forward.
“I doubt our permission enters into it,” said Thorin. “Bard?”
“Hm?” Bard looked up from the book.
“Do you mind if Furh’nk goes on a special mission with the Princess Tilda?”
“Oh, no, as long as Furh’nk doesn’t mind. Tilda knows what she’s looking for.”
Tilda barreled out with dwarf in-tow.
“Bard,” Ori asked, “is this your people’s language?”
“I think it is.”
“Sure you don’t want to wait until the full moon has past?”
Bard looked up at him with a grin.

“I’m afraid the top of my head will pop off if I do wait. We were always told we came from the far north and east of Arda, bordering the lands of the cold drakes. Later outsiders said we were akin to the people who became the Rohirrim, but nothing about their culture seems familiar to me. We did have a written language, not that I can read it.”

Bilbo hurried around the table and leaned over Bard’s shoulder to look at the book. Bard handed it to him. Bilbo murmured a thanks and returned to his seat. Bilbo paged through then chuckled saying,

“That may soon cease to be a problem. This school book features the same phrases in each language. They’re certainly interesting phrases. I didn’t know elves grew on trees.”

Thranduil raised a brow.

“What kinds of trees? Do we flower first or simply appear as giant fruit?”

Thorin looked up at Thranduil appraisingly.

“I always suspected those twigs were growing out of your head.”

Margr and Vi giggled.

Thranduil slid a gaze over at them, then turned to Thorin with narrowing eyes.

“Don’t tell them that! Now everyone will know from whence grows the royal line. I’ll have to swear you all to secrecy!”

Thorin shrugged.

“They do say: heavy is the head that wears the crown. Or at least the twigs.”

Samwise slid off Boromir’s knee and trotted over to look at Thranduil very closely, then said in a considering way,

“I’ve seen Dad prune shrubbery. I don’t think those twigs are attached.”

“Are you brave enough to find out, Master Samwise?” Thranduil challenged him, looming forward over the faunt.

Sam swallowed, then gave his braces a tug, looked to Frodo, who mouthed, ‘Do it!', and set his lips in a serious line. He reached up and very deftly plucked one twig from Thranduil’s hair.

“I was right!” Samwise cried.

“You were right,” said Thranduil gently, amusement on his face.

Meanwhile, his sons looked on the verge of apoplexy.

Sam frowned.

“If they aren’t attached, how do you get them to stay upright?”

“Magic,” said Thranduil, widening his eyes.

“Oh, well, I’ve heard elves do magic,” Sam allowed. He held out the twig. “Do you want this back, Mr. Thranduil?”

“If you don’t mind. I don’t like to break up a set.”

Frodo turned to Boromir.

“Told you Sam’s the bravest.”

“He is indeed,” Boromir agreed. “I would never have dared to do that. Well done, mate.”

Sam glowed under this praise, reset his braces and climbed back up onto Boromir’s knee, and shoved a cake in his mouth.

“Uncle Bilbo,” said Frodo, “are there any stories in that book?”

“Not as such, my boy,” Bilbo replied, “but there is quite a bit of material here. According to this, somehow hobbits both grow out of the ground and are part rabbit.”

As the grown dwarrow around the table showed degrees of embarrassment, Frodo had a deep ponder. Finally, he came up with,

“Are we roscobal rabbits?”

“I don’t think we’re big enough,” said Bilbo.

“Mebbe roscobals’re yer descendants,” Dwalin offered.

“Dwalin, don’t help!” Ori hissed, giggling then continued in a normal tone. “Bad enough we had to move all that hobbit ‘history’ over to the folklore section of the library.”

Bilbo sipped his wine.
“If it makes you feel any better, it was fascinating reading.”
Fili picked up a nondescript book with a blue cover, flipped it open, scanned the contents, turned raspberry and snapped it shut.
“What is it?” Sigrid asked.
“Poetry. Not for badgers.”
She grinned.
“Naughty dwarrow.”
“Um, naughty elves, actually.”
Lindir looked interested. Fili passed it over to him.
“Enjoy.”
Lindir perused a random passage and looked intrigued.
“I didn’t think you could successfully rhyme those two words.”
Elrond peered over his arm, then his face fell and he went almost as red as Fili.
“What is it?” Lindir asked.
“That’s my brother Elros’ handwriting! I can’t read that!”
Glorfindel deftly plucked the book from Lindir’s hand.
“I can.”
Thorin picked up a fat, square book with fine velum pages. The right hand pages were covered in a variety of finely wrought text. The facing pages each featured a curious, and curiously similar abstract blot of ink. He grinned.
“Roäc, something here for you.”
“Mm?”
The raven hopped over and peered into the book, then cawed and flapped excitedly.
“What is it?” Ori asked.
“My lineage!” Roäc exclaimed. “All the way back to Vrarhar and all the way forward to my sire, Carc. These are their talon prints.”
“What’s in the text?” Ori asked.
“Our greatest deeds!” Roäc crowed.
“And your worst missteps, I’ve noticed,” said Thorin, slyly. “Apparently Vrarhar nearly drowned in Deathless’ mead cup.”
“A bit of nothing. Youthful folly.”
Ori asked, “Roäc, what do you consider your greatest deed?”
“Saving Erebor.”
“And your greatest misstep?”
Roäc’s beak fell open in a raven version of a smile, “Saving Erebor.”
“What about you, Baluchistan?” Dis asked. “What great deeds do you have to your name?”
The raven cracked an eye at her.
“Lassie, tha’ book ain’t big enough.”
“And your greatest misdeed?” she teased
Baluchistan rolled an eye at Red Queen.
“Marryin’ ‘er.”
Red Queen’s neck lengthened to fullest extent.
“We are not married to you. Whatever you are.”
Baluchistan rose, spread his wings and bowed to the company.
“Then, I don’t have any misdeeds.”
He bowed a little too far, rolled over onto his back and laughed.
“That’s a good one. Hear tha’, our Dain?”
“Yer drunk,” said Dain.
“Yeh always were th’ quick ‘un,” said the raven, and he faded into a snore.
Galadriel turned to Bilbo,
“You say it’s a child’s book? Is the writing legible?”
“Oh, the instructor’s writing is perfect. I imagine the practicing of the lines would be on paper or
something similar to be long gone. What would the little scholar write on, my dear?”

Thorin turned to Balin, who shrugged.

“Slate shingle and chalk, I would think. Easy to wipe clean and reuse. I doubt paper would be wasted on ones so young and paper would be rather beyond the price of most. What are some of the examples?”

Bilbo turned a page.

“This is the same phrase over and over with a little variation: Elves grow on trees. Dwarrows grow from stone. Hobbits grow from the ground as bulbs. I had no idea I use to be a bulb,” Bilbo commented. “Probably the strange surmises coming from a people who would not have had much contact with any other races other than a little trade, perhaps.”

“I apologize for the added ignorance of my ancestors,” Bard said, shaking his head.

“Don’t,” Thorin chuckled. “There are still many who believe dwarrows spring from stone as they don’t realize dams can grow beards.”

Brur picked up a dainty volume. The paper within was pale pink vellum encased in covers which were once white silk. It had been held together by a pale pink silk ribbon which was now falling to pieces.

“This’s a pretty wee thin’” Bur observed. He opened in and peered at the writing. “Written by some lady elf.”

“That is my mother’s diary which I shall take,” Galadriel held out her hand for it. “Sorry,” Brur tightened his hold on the book. “If it came fra’ th’ library, it’s been cataloged.”

“Then you shall remove the entry,” she told him firmly. Brur shook his head.

“Canna do tha’. Don’t know who received an’ added it t’ th’ collection. Migh’ a bin a gift. I ain’t go’ th’ right’s t’ weed collec’ions I ain’t th’ bibliographer f’r.”

Ori rather thought this was bullshit as Brur was the Librarian of Erebor, and so he was entitled to weed any collection he wanted to.

“It’s my mother’s diary!” Galadriel started, in an aggrieved tone. “She was known as the Swan-maiden of Alqualaondë. Her name was Eäwen of Olwë, the Teleri of Aman. She married Finarfin of the house of Finwë.”

“Sorry, lass. It were in th’ crypt. It were a vital par’ a th’ collection. I canna jus’ discard such.”

“Who would have given it?” Galadriel demanded. “It was sent to me by courier when I married my dearest Celeborn. Nana sent it from her home in Aman, where I presume they still live. They traveled to Arda to see us when Celebrian was born, which was the last time I saw them.”

“Donno who gave it, bu’ it’s par’ a’ th’ collection a’ the Great Library o’ Khazad-dûm. It’s go’ t’ stay.”

“It’s mine!” cried Galadriel. “Eäwen…Nana gave it to me!”

Ori glanced at Thorin, who gave a quick nod.

“Master Brur,” Ori interrupted, “if an exact copy could be created, we could add a codicil to the catalog that it is a copy, so no discard need be made and the collection will remain intact.”

“Copied?” Brur barked.

“An exact copy, vellum and silk, everything reproduced.”

Brur growled.

“Will you accept a copy being made to keep the integrity of the collection?” Thorin asked.

“Who would make it?” Galadriel asked.

“I will,” Ori said before he could stop himself.

Galadriel smiled on him.

“Yes, if you create the copy, Lord Ori, I shall happily wait for it to be made and trust you to restore the original to me.”

“Good, that’s settled,” Thorin said.

Brur opened his mouth.

“It is settled, Master Brur,” Thorin chided gently. Brur hurumphed then settled back in his chair.
“Fine.”
“Lord Ori?” Elrond leaned forward, grinning like a mad creature. “How much would you charge to make another copy!”

Brur gave a shout and Galadriel whirled on her son-in-law.
“Fuck yourself, Elrond!”
There was a collective gasp. Lady Galadriel colored slightly.
“That was unnecessary, I apologize.”
Elrond folded his lips and shook a little, as he tried desperately not to laugh.
“Mahal’s hairy arse,” Dwalin commented. “An’ all o’ us though’ yeh were fierce facin’ tha’ balrog.”
That made everyone laugh even Galadriel.
“What’s in that diary that you put such value on it?” Thranduil asked, eyes narrowing.
Galadriel gave a feral grin.
“Dirt on Oropher and his predecessors to last a century!”

Every elf at the table lunged for Master Brur, who dove under the table.
Ori saw a hand stick the diary into his own satchel.
He looked up to see the chairs empty of elves and the sound of Master Brur roaring and bellowing under the table.

Frodo and Sam disappeared then popped back up.
“They’re tickling him and searching his pockets,” Frodo reported.
Thorin rolled his eyes, pushed back his chair, and bent to peer under the table.
“Enough!” he shouted, which started all the wargs barking and the birds squawking. Thorin rose and patted Sugar and Butter, who sat down again, tails wagging. Gimli grabbed Romy’s head and rubbed the ears.

The elves all crawled out from under the table, Haldir dragging a fiendishly giggling Brur. Lindir politely helped the Master to his feet.

“Where’s the diary?” Haldir demanded.
“I et it!” Brur cried, eyes a light with humor.
“Bullshit,” Glorfindel laughed.
“Brur,” Thorin said tiredly.
“I put it safely away, yer majesty,” Brur replied, regally.
“And they say we misbehave!” Roäc teased.
“Shockin’, brother, shockin’,” Baluchistan agreed. “Wouldn’ yeh say so, Queenie?”
“Shocking, indeed!” Red Queen hissed her version for a laugh. Kelli clunked at Celeborn and brushed his favorite’s robe with a wing.

Aragorn helped his giggling intended up into her chair.
“Safe,” Brur repeated.
The elves looked at each other then at Sadi. Sadi sneered at them and fingered her cane. No one moved.

“If the diary is safe,” Thorin said, icily. “I command that it be conveyed to Lord Ori for him to fulfill his commission. Now.”
“It’s in my satchel,” Ori told him.

“Of course,” Celeborn chuckled. “We should have guessed. The safest place in all Arda is in Lord Ori’s protection.”

“Hey!” Ori protested.
“Never mess wi’ th’ instumen’ a’ Mahal,” Dwalin teased, which brought more giggles.

Bard leaned back in his chair and looked up at Thranduil with a grin.
“What a fine example you are to our children, sweetie.”
Thranduil opened his mouth, blushed, and turned to look where Bard was pointing. Wandi,
Cemnesta, and Legolas had come out from under the table together and sat with Bain and Sigrid on their laps.

“Wicked stepmother!” Sigrid said in a reproving voice.
Bain, Gimli, and Tauriel snickered.
“Ada!” chorused Wandi, Cemnesta, and Legolas.
Mahal, Idad-elf!” Fili and Kili teased.

“Oh, hush all of you,” Thranduil muttered, seating himself. Bard put an arm about Thranduil’s shoulders and brushed at his robe.

“Is there a book here tha’ won’ cause a riot?” Balin asked.

Frodo knelt up and pulled a thick one toward himself. He opened it and shrieked with delight.

“Oh!” cried Dis, “Udad told us about that one!”

The book’s pages were several leaves of paper thick. When opened, a beautiful paper room folded upward. It was breathtakingly painted and studded with the tiniest slivers of precious metals and pinpoints of gems.

“That’s the throne room of Khazad-dûm,” Binni breathed.
“Indeed,” Tharkûn agreed. “Thorin, is this what is called a ‘pop-up’ book?”

“Yes,” Thorin smiled, looking fondly at the item. “They are tricky to make and quite fragile. We will have to have a master of such books copy this as well. It needs to be used in the schools.”

“I’ll see t’ it,” Brur promised.

The book was left to Sam and Frodo and, by force, Boromir, to look through.
Balin reach for a blue, slim volume and opened it, then started to laugh.

“What is it, my heart?” Dori wanted to know.

“Th’ legendary pocket book a’ Durin IV’s jokes an’ bad poetry.”

“Read one!” Fili and Kili shouted.

Balin flipped a few pages.

“There once was a lady fra’ Eregion
Who rode on th’ back o’ a lion
They returned fra’ th’ ride
Wi’ th’ lady inside
An th’ smile on th’ face a’ th’ lion.”

Everyone groaned.

“Ori?” Bilbo asked. “Did Durin strike you as the sort who would pen such a terrible limerick?”

“Yes,” Ori nodded. “When I was dreaming that he was sitting on the end of the bed, I told him Dori would murder me if I went on a quest to Khazad-dûm, he said he’d have a nice ale waiting for me.”

“Pet” Dori scolded.

“There’s a few in here dedicated t’ Duswi a’ th’ Orocani,” Balin added.

“Who?” Aragorn asked.

“Duswi,” Balin explained. “She was a master silver smith an’ came t’ train as a mithril master. Married Dain IV. Queen Duswi rather.”

“What does he write about her?” asked Fili.

“Duswi’s a pretty dam
She turns my heart to cram
I’d marry her
I’d carry her
On my head like a tam.”

Noises of disgust came from all around. Ori went into giggles. He leaned over and whispered in Dwalin’s ear.

“You did better than that on the shore at the Inn.”

Dwalin snorted.

“Any’d do be’er than tha’. Tha’s bleedin’ awful.”

Balin flipped a couple of pages.
“Righ’, here’s a couple a’ riddles.”
Silence greeted Balin as he resorted to his magnifier to read.
“How yeh stop a skunk fra’ smellin’?”
“Rug it all over with a tomato,” Bain said authoritatively. “We had to do that three times to Bob when he met one and got sprayed.”
Balin shook his head.
Cemnesta frowned then,
“There is a surgery some healers can do to remove the musk glands, but only if they are very young and to be raised as a beloved household pet.”
Balin shook his head.
“Wash four times in a water solution of lemon juice, cider vinegar, and lye soap?” Wandi tried.
“Yeh hold its nose.”
Everyone groaned.  Haldir sat still, staring then he roared with laughter.
“Hold its nose!” he wailed, sliding in his chair a little.  People started to giggle at him.  Haldir made no effort as he slid gracelessly off his chair under the table.  His laughter drifted up along with the occasional hiccups of “hold its nose”
“Another!” Frodo called.
Balin paged through.
“Right, wee laddie, here’s one; Why did th’ elf throw th’ clock out th’ window?”
Frodo frowned.  Ori had a feeling this would end in a vile pun.
“Sam?” Frodo asked.  Sam considered
“He didn’t like it?”
“No,” Balin said, “he wanted t’ see time fly.”
Both faunts giggled delightedly.  Boromir groused under his breath.
“Balin,” Elrond said, “how drunk do you think Durin was when he wrote these?”
Balin chuckled.
“He’s got a neat hand, so I’m thinkin’ he was sober, lad.”
“Aye, an’ now we know wha’ happened t’ him,” Dwalin commented, lighting up another pipe.
Balin turned to him,
“Aye, brother, he and his folk dug too deep an’ woke th’ balrog.”
“Aye,” Dwalin shrugged.  “They woke it, but bloody Durin wen’ down there an’ read his writin’ t’ it.  Th’ only way f’r th’ balrog t’ shu’ ‘im up was t’ eat ‘im.”
Ori choked on his fizzy water as everyone else burst out laughing.
“I believe you!” Galadriel cried.
Bilbo turned to Tharkûn.
“Speaking of horrors, Did you ever find out what possessed the hobbits in Hobbiton?”
“Yes, actually.  Apparently, it was Lobelia’s baked goods.”
“I always knew she was vicious, but I’ve never heard anyone complain about her scones.”
“It wasn’t the scones themselves, but what she added to the icing that made those who partook both easily suggestible and positively mean.”
Bilbo cut his eyes at the wizard.
“I don’t want to know, do I.”
“No, you do not.  I, for one, could have gone the length of my days happily without knowing.  Let us just say, the wraith was involved, so there are no worries about it now.  Not unless young Master Sackville-Baggins goes tromping through the downs again.”
“We can hardly stop him, or anyone else, from doing that,” said Bilbo.
“Hmmm.  Well.”
Tharkûn applied himself to his pipe and Ori realized the wizard had no intention of continuing with the subject.
Bilbo glared at Tharkûn.

“What did you do?”

“I may have planted some illusions along the border between the woods and the downs.”

Ori shot forward.

“What do they look like? Dragons?”

“No, Lobelia’s mother.”

Bilbo shuddered.

“Quite right, my friend. No one will ever go down there now.”

There was a distant crashing of doors.

“Tilda!” they heard Furh’nk bellow.

Tilda rushed into the room.

“What’d I miss?!”

“Bad poetry,” Bain said idly.

“Nothing then, good.”

Furh’nk appeared in the doorway, carrying a wooden box about twenty inches square and six inches high.

The room fell silent. Ori felt a chill go up his spine.

Furh’nk handed the box to Tilda, who placed it in front of Bard.

“Here, Da!”

Age and soot darkened the ornately carved wood, and fire had singed the edges, but for all that, Ori saw beautiful, stylized carvings of birds with long tail-feathers and tall crests on their heads. The birds faced off in pairs, perched upon long tree branches and surrounded by flowers with heart-shaped petals. Traces of red and yellow paint still showed in the deepest crevices.

Red Queen stretched her long neck to peer over Bard’s shoulder.

“What kind of birds are those?”

“No idea. Roosters, I think.”

“Ah.”

Bard drew a cord from around his neck and under his shirt. For an instant a fine dwarven chain flashed in the sunlight. Sigrid had told Ori that Bard never took off the chain and anvil pendant Thorin gifted him. The looped cord, long discolored, stood in stark contrast to the chain, but it held something Bard obviously thought as precious, a tiny key.

“Didn’t you used to wear that?” Ori asked Sigrid.

“Yes, but only to keep the Master from noticing it. By rights it belongs to Da.”

The key turned, the box opened on hidden hinges and flooded the room with a spicy scent.

“Sandalwood,” said Sigrid, “with a cedar inlay.”

Bard withdrew a linen-wrapped object from the box, laid it on the table and unfolded it to reveal a book ancient enough to draw even elven attention. The brown leather had age upon it, but no cracks that Ori could see. Instead it bore strange pock marks.

“Dragon skin,” said Thranduil. “That’s nearly unimaginable.”

“From time to time, my ancestors had to trap and slay a cold drake,” said Bard, almost like an apology. “Apparently, our people started out farther south than we ended up. There weren’t a lot of real flowers that far north, and the neighbors could be inhospitable.”

Bard wiped his hands down his shirt and carefully opened the cover.

The unexpected blaze of color squeezed a gasp from Ori’s throat. Every scholar and scribe in the room practically scrambled across the table for a closer look.

Ori smelled the precious stones that went into the pigments on the hand-decorated pages. Chief among them he recognized gold and lapis, but a dozen other scents wafted over him as well, from two facing pages that revealed a miraculous city-scape.

Bard rose, handed the box to Thranduil, and pushed the book further toward the middle of the table, so more could see.

Squat, arch-roofed houses, the largest graced with rounded domes, sat under a mantel of snow, and lines of smoke meandered into a cobalt-blue sky. Ori could almost feel the cold shimmer off the
Jewel-like colors swirled together in patterns on the domes, the walls, the pennants rippling from the dome finials. The largest building in the center of the city was not painted at all, but still honey-colored. Ori squinted, leaned forward, sniffed.

“That’s mosaic of the thinnest amber slices.”

“Apparently,” said Bard dryly, “amber was very big.”

Tharkun chewed on his pipe stem and considered.

“You can’t read this book?”

“No, though I have a general idea that it’s the history of this city, forward until sometime in the middle of the Wandering Days,” said Bard. “Mostly, I’ve just looked at the pictures and wondered how I could possibly be related to these people. If I wear more than two colors at once I start to itch.”

He moved further through the pages and closer in time and Ori saw what he meant. A king and queen, clad in gold and jewels, sat on gold and bejeweled thrones. The king wore layers of robes, each a different color than the last, and the queen seemed to wear billowing bloomers beneath layers of gowns with different patterned hems. Between the raiments and their jewelry, their ornamentation took up most of the page and it was obvious that the massive constructions they wore as crowns were not actually attached to their heads, but suspended from the backs of the thrones themselves.

Dipfa, Arne, and Nodun, who was now standing on the sideboard, sketched like mad things, though Ori feared Dipfa’s motives. He did not want to wear whatever Dipfa was designing. Instead, he turned back to the royals on the page.

Ori thought their features familiar, and not just because Bard had descended from them. Their skin was brown, their brows dark, their eyes almond-shaped with heavy lids without creases. They looked like-

“Bard, is your family part borjeval?” Ori asked.

“Not that I know of,” said Bard. “Their features do seem closer to Jim’s than mine, though, don’t they.”

Jim leaned over the page and grinned.

“I like to think my ancestors wouldn’t wear chandeliers on their heads, even if they had chandeliers, which I don’t recall seeing until I got to Arda proper. We were more the seal oil lamp types. You wouldn’t want to wear one of those on your head, either.”

Bard turned the page again. A very handsome young noble appeared to be slaying a dragon with his bow and arrow.

Bain said, “That’s the prince who got kicked out.”

Thranduil looked over at him with amusement.

“Incorrigible Stepson, do you mean he was exiled?”

“No, really, kicked out, on the point of his da’s boot,” said Bain earnest. “His da didn’t age really well, and he got nervous that his son was growing up and would overthrow him someday, so the king got rid of the prince, but that was really a bone-headed move.”

“The prince was his only heir,” Thranduil ventured.

“Not only that, but about ten years later, the kingdom was overrun by orcs, and since the prince had taken the best fighters with him, well, things went down the toilet really quick for the king. The prince’s people wandered around for decades, and eventually founded Dale. Well, they didn’t have a lot of choice. They were out of money and this is where they ended up.”

“The book,” said Bilbo. “Those divits on the cover. They don’t mark where jewels once sat, by any chance?”

Bard sighed.

“Our luck only ever changed to get worse.”

“May I?” Bilbo asked, gesturing to the book.

“Please. You’ll probably get more out of it than I ever could.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. Right now I’m examining it more from a book arts point of view. Elrond, look at this. Look at the stitching!”

Bard raised a brow.
“They always looked like plain old stitches to me.”
Elrond smiled gently.
“If they were just any old stitches, this book would have fallen apart long ago. Your ancestors were master bookbinders.”

“An’ master builders.”

Everyone turned to Master Kir now standing behind Elrond on the elf lord’s chair, had plastered back his hair to his forehead with one hand to get a better look as Elrond turned the pages. Elladan and Eolohir got Master Kir his chair and Elrond moved so the Master could be seated beside him.

“Thanks, laddies,” Kir nodded then glued his attention back to the book.

“Look a’ th’ vaults along th’ buildin’ foundations,” Kir murmured, his gnarled finger tracing the page. “Cold caches, probably, sunk int’ th’ ground?”

“I can’t tell you,” said Bard. “I can’t read the text, so the diagrams are of limited help.”

“Did yeh jus’ say ‘diagrams’, laddie?” Kir laughed. “Here, Pr’fessor Baggins, best translate this right quick. Our Bard may be sittin’ on priceless treasure.”

“I’m sure if there was anything valuable left when the orcs were finished, it was carted off long ago,” Bard protested.

Kir shook his head.

“It’s no’ jus’ gold as glitters, lad. Never know wha’ yeh’ll find.”

Bilbo and Bard grabbed their chairs over, the assembly sifted and soon they had their heads together, with Kir and Elrond over the book.

Arwen took up another which was twice a tall as it was wide. This proved to be a ledger for all trading agreements between the dwarrow of Khazad-dûm and Rohan people. Arwen passed this to Eowyn, who paged through and giggled.

“What did you find?” asked Dipfa.

“I don’t read khuzdul but whoever kept this ledger was quite the artist.”

She grinned and slid it over to Ori. Ori opened it. There were many detailed sketches of elves, men, and horses. Whomever the artist had been, they were obsessed with the height differences the races and their mounts. They had drawn what men wore and what women wore. There were several sketches of elves where the artist had noted that it was unknown where the elf was male or female, both or neither. The occasional name recorded in phonetic khuzdul noted that names gave no hint of sex either.

Ori giggled at this and passed the book to Celeborn and Galadriel.

Mistress Dazla entered and requested the Bearer to make room for her to serve afternoon tea.

Aragorn put down his tea cup as Arwen closed the pop-up book with a smile.

“It’s beautiful,” she told Thorin. Thorin chuckled and glanced down at the two snoozing faunts now in his lap.

“It is,” he agreed. “I’m sure making a few copies of this available in the other dwarf kingdoms, in Gondor, and other great cities, will bring back the handicraft.”

“Lady Eowyn,” Thorin turned his gaze. “Do you think such a thing would be popular among your people?”

She considered a moment.

“It is certainly amazing and something children would enjoy as it is like our tapestries. They and our songs hold the history of my people. I would like my uncle to see them.”

“I shall have a copy made and send it to him,” Thorin decided.

“That reminds me,” Aragorn said with a look at Arwen, who burst out laughing.

“Yes,” Arwen managed, “do tell dear Thorin about what happened the day after the Misty Mountains blew up.”

“What?” Thorin said a slightly worried look on his face.

“Well,” said Aragorn with a pause to thank Dori for another refill of tea. “We found the most enormous pile of weaponry, swords, and axes in the main courtyard in front of the palace.”

Thorin face palmed and everyone else chuckled.
Sandy blew in the open doors and landed on Aragorn’s shoulder, tweaking his ear and leaning over to tap her beak gently on Arwen’s cheek.

“Are you telling the story, King Sweetiepie?” she chirped. “It was such fun! King Sweetiepie wakes up and goes to the balcony and there’s an enormous pile of swords and axes in the middle of the courtyard. And he says to Darling Arwen, ‘Dearest, We need to write to King Thorin. The dwarrow have been at it again.’ And she starts to say, ‘How do you know it was the dwarrow?’ But then they just look at each other and laugh. Ooo, is that bacon?”

Dori put a plate full of bacon in front of her.

“Oh, and there’s Prince Quartzie-Wartzie! How are you keeping, your highness?”

Quartz twitched.

“Fine, cousin.”

“Lovely!” Sandy enthused, before massacring her bacon.

“Really?” Balin asked the Gondorian royals, tiredly.

“Oh yes,” Arwen corroborated. “That’s why we headed your way as soon as possible.”

“We left Boromir’s younger brother, Faramir, in charge.”

Arwen frowned a little. Aragorn nodded.

“Faramir,” Eowyn questioned, then turned to Boromir. “Have I met him?”

“It was that one time your uncle came with you and Eomer to Gondor,” Boromir replied. “I think we were all still in our teens.”

“Was he that quiet young lad, who watched us horsing around in the stable yard?”

“Yes,” Boromir grimaced. “I wish father wasn’t so hard on him. He’s a fine, studious lad and an excellent archer. He doesn’t lack fighting skills or bravery. He’s a good leader. I suppose father wanted another loud mouth like me.”

“Denethor,” Bilbo said coolly, “needs to stop expecting Faramir to turn into Glorfindel.”

“Thank you,” Glorfindel laughed. “There’s only one of me, thank Eru!”

“Thank Eru indeed,” Thranduil murmured, shifting slightly as Tilda sprawled on his knees, half asleep.

“What bring you here, Sandy?” Aragorn asked leaning forward to stroke the raven.

“Oh, King Sweetiepie!” Sandy cried. “Dear Fary ask me to come. Beastly has been bothering him at all hours of the day. The poor boy is trying his best to keep everything running, and he’s doing it very well as everyone likes him, but Beastly keep nagging him about Mr. Shire.”

Aragorn, Arwen, and Boromir frowned.

“Beastly?” Eowyn asked.

“My father Denethor,” Boromir grumped. “I wish he would leave Faramir alone for five minutes.”

Bilbo made an impatient noise.

“Why would Denethor have anything to say to me?”

Eowyn stared at him. She opened her mouth, then closed it, then turned to glare at Dwalin and Ori, who snickered.

Bilbo went on. “He knows perfectly well I received the printing proofs last week as I sent him a message saying so and he replied asking me to finish with them next month.”

“Oh,” Sandy said airily. “He wants Fary to bring an apprentice sized press to Erebor and teach some of the dwarrow here to assist the master printers, so Beastly can expand his holdings.”

“Indeed?” Thorin’s eyebrows went up. Boromir blushed, Arwen rolled her eyes, and Aragorn looked put out.

“Sandy,” said Aragorn, “when you are rested, please return to Gondor. Tell Faramir I am delighted to hear of his progress and am in no way surprised by it as I knew that he would do well. Tell Denethor that any expansions of his holdings require the proper trade agreements, just as they were required when he opened that press in Bree. He is to submit his plans and requests through the proper channels, as he is well aware. Until this is completed, neither I nor Faramir while he acts for me, are willing to pay heed to any such talk.”

“Goody!” squeaked Sandy. “I hate ol’ Beastly anyway. He’s no fun and he’s such an orc to
Fary.”
“Sandy,” reproved Arwen.
“Well, he is,” Sandy grumbled and flitted over to Aragorn’s shoulder, creep behind his head and settled herself in his tunic’s hood.
“Thorin,” Aragorn said, “I apologize that you had to hear that. As much as I respect Denethor’s passion for making books available to as many as possible, I do not hold with his encroaching behavior in regard to expanding his business.”
Thorin nodded to Dis, who smiled at the Gondorian king.
“When we hear from you about the trading requests, I shall be delighted to meet with Master Denethor.”
“Dis is my trade minister, as you remember,” Thorin grinned.
Aragorn swallowed a chuckle and inclined his head.
“I look forward to your meeting with Master Denethor, ma’am.”
“May I watch?” Boromir asked.
“You can guard him, if you wish,” Aragorn replied in a teasing tone.
“I’ll supply you with popped corn,” Thranduil offered, sending the younger set into giggles.
“Sister?” Thorin said.
“Yes?’ Dis smiled sweetly at him.
“Yes, and?”
“No punching him in the teeth.”
“Awww.”
Arwen looked around.
“Princess, did you not have a trade apprentice?”
“I do have one, yes. You’re wondering why he’s not here? He’s working. He does that. A lot.” Dis shook her head. “I’ve tried to get him to rest, or at least slow down, but he looks miserable if he’s idle too long.”
Bofur sighed.
“Yeah, he gets that from ‘is folks. Definitely an Ur thing.”
“Namad,” said Thorin, “You think he’s hurting himself?”
“I was worried before, but now I think he may be craftwed. He never looks tired and his work never suffers. He’s terribly happy just to add long columns of numbers and put together proposals. He also has a mean right hook, as several of our more recalcitrant guild heads have discovered.”
Eowyn looked alarmed.
“You really do hit each other at trade negotiations?”
Dis shrugged.
“We are dwarrow. Sometimes things get heated and devolve into a brawl. In some guilds, it’s almost a tradition.”
Before anyone could comment further, Great of Heart flapped in and landed in the middle of the table and shrieked at Thorin.
Bilbo sliced up a sausage and some bacon. He gave this on a saucer to Great of Heart, who ate placidly. Bilbo removed the attached letter case, opened it and held the letter for Thorin read it aloud over the heads of the sleeping faunts.

“Hail Brother King,
This missive come with wishes for you good health and happiness.
I have been reassured by the Lady of the Golden Wood that the eruption in the Misty Mountains was for the good of dwarrow and engineered by your Aüle.
The following morning, most of my lands within sight and reports from heralds around have stated that Rohan is now growing beautiful blue poppies and other mountain wildflowers. I shall presume this was also an act of your Aüle as they were fully growing and blossoming by dawn. We were concerned at first that the strange
flowers might prove poisonous to our horses. Instead, they're stuffing their faces with flowers and acting like frisky colts. We usually have only white flowers, or sometimes pink, but these are an exceptionally beautiful blue.

I have had further report that Helms Deep has acquired new bathing areas and kitchens fully equipped, deep within the hold and that they are fantastically decorated with beautiful mosaics and there are hot springs available throughout.

Would this also be an Act of your Aüle? If so, please advise us on how to render appropriate thanks.

I also understand my niece now visits you. As much as the Lady of the Golden Wood has my deepest respect, may I render the care of Eowyn to be shared by Princes Dis, your gentle sister and the Honorable Bearer, as well, so that like myself and Theodred, she may learn the correct manners and ways of Erebor and the Dale.

I hope to visit your splendid mountain again soon.

Cordially,

Theoden

—It may be sooner than you think. I fully admit I miss you and your family a great deal!"

Eowyn groaned and looked at Dis.

"Please, ma’am, I don’t need that much supervision!"

Dis snorted.

"I don’t have time to supervise you. Don’t agree to marry anyone you meet in a pub. Dori?"

Dis looked at Dori, who had taken Theoden’s letter when Thorin passed it to her.

"Mmm?" Dori glanced at Eowyn, vaguely. "Don’t slouch in your chair like that, dear childling, and don’t play cards with Nori."

"Oi!" Nori objected but winked at Eowyn.

"I’m rather good at cards," Eowyn tried.

"Nori cheats," Ori put in.

"Oi!" Nori shouted again as Bofur nodded at Eowyn.

"Eowyn cheats, too," Boromir commented to no one in particular.

Eowyn looked about her for something to throw. Fili grinned and chucked a scone to her.

Eowyn looked a little surprised but gamely threw it at Boromir. The March Warden had learned his dwarrow manners well, caught it easily with his mouth and ate it. The younger set cheered, waking Frodo and Sam, who cheered, too, not to be left out.

Dipfa trotted over and around the table to Ori’s side. She peered at Quartz, studying the raven intently then,

"If I may, I need to measure you, Prince Quartzite."

Quartz turned to her, and Ori could read the trepidation there.

"More Bujni experiments?"

"No, your highness, I simply feel remiss. You were the only one of the Company to enter Khazad-dûm who didn’t get a jumpsuit."

Quartzite screamed, then gathered himself back together.

"Generous, but not neces-.."

"With your name on a little patch on the breast."

"Really, I’m fine-.."

"It’ll be like a little shirt with spaces for your wings. It will tie down the back."

Quartz opened his mouth to protest, but simply sighed.

Dwalin gave his beak a light tap.

"Tough mornin’, our Quartz."

"Tell me about it."

Dipfa went contentedly back to Bujni, who politely drew out her chair for her.

"Well,” Dori put in. “It is far past time for our guests to go to their rooms and rest. It will be dinner in a couple of hours and I know we all want to relax and change. Nothing formal,” Dori
added hastily. “Just a nice family supper.”

Celeborn and Galadriel exchanged looks with Aragorn and Arwen.

“Did you skip breakfast this morning?” Celeborn asked.

“Yes,” Aragorn laughed.

“So did we,” Jani replied.

Cemnesta blushed.

“I knew I’d forgotten to pack something on board.”

“I think we were all too blasted excited t’ remember it,” Dain mused.

“Then this tea will tide you all over until dinner,” Dori said and rose. “I’ve put you all back in your old rooms, so you’ll be comfy.”

Mistress Dazla appeared and ushered the guests off with her upstairs.

“Now come with me, pet,” Dori took Ori’s hand and led him off to the small sitting room.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. What a long day Ori’s having and it’s not over yet. Poor dwarf won’t get to open the box until tomorrow and he still has to absorb the things still happening and a lesson in never trying to hide anything from the Honored Bearer. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

We would like to give a huge shout out to @papermachette on Tumblr and their beautiful little drawing “Dori-sees-these-two-and-thinks-maybe-this-time-he-won’t-leave”. It’s in her Tumblr archive under the date: August 1, 2013. It was the inspiration for a little scene in this chapter.

Dori put on the fire, lit some lamps and sat down where he had when Ori and Balin had first brought Dori to Fundin house. Dori patted the seat on the couch next to him.

“No, pet.”
“Ori did so, saying,
“I’m fine, Ori’s Dori.”
“I know, pet, but—”
Nori came in, shut the door behind himself, and sat down in front of them on the low table. Dori frowned at Nori, then,

“Pet, you said you were in the Halls?”
“Yes, I—”
“You wouldn’t have known any of our adads, but did you see amad?”
Ori’s heart sank. He had almost decided not to say anything to Dori or Nori about this.
“Well—”
“You did see her, then.” Dori knew him too well. “Did she recognize you?”
“Yes.”
“Did she speak to you?”
“Yes,” Ori hedged desperately.
“What did she say, pet?”
“Um…nothing really important.” Ori wanted to leave the room, but Dori was holding his hand and Nori was planted right in front and staring hard at him.
“What did she say?” Dori coaxed.

The jumble of Rikmha’s cruel words rushed back. Ori felt his anger rise and tears pricked his eyes.

“She’s horrid! Why did you always say nice things about her?” Ori demanded of Dori.
“Because I wanted you to have only happy memories. What did she say?”
It all came out in a rush.
“She was mean about you and Nori and she called me a runt and said that you weren’t a real Bearer and you’re delusional and only wanted money and it was all lies and Nori never looked after her and—” To Ori’s annoyance he began to cry. Dori’s arm was about his shoulders. Nori was growling. Ori’s words burst out of him again.

“She killed yours and Balin’s baby and she doesn’t care and she doesn’t even think you were
pregnant or a bearer and thinks we’re all bad children!”

“Pet, as I’ve always told you, you are my baby. I don’t missed the child I lost, because I have you.”

“I don’t care!” Ori cried. “Even if it had meant there was no me, and even if she didn’t believe you were pregnant, she had no right to do what she did to you!”

“Me an’ Dori’d’ve missed you, Chick,” Nori patted Ori’s head. “You know fine well, ye’re th’ glue that holds the Brothers Ri together.”

Ori curled around, pulling his feet up, half lying in Dori’s lap, put his face in Dori’s shoulder and sobbed.

“I hate her! She’s horrible and cruel and doesn’t give a stone or anything for us!”

He felt Nori sit on the couch, lifting his legs, and putting them on his lap.

“She’s dead, Chick. No point.”

“I don’t care!” Ori raged ineffectually. “She was so mean about you both and you raised me and were so good to me and I love you both so much! It makes me so angry to think she was mean to you. She doesn’t deserve either of you as a son!”

“Shhh, pet,” Dori soothed rubbing his back. “Nori and I have come to terms with it long ago, so it’s nothing to us.”

“’S right!” Nori agreed. “We knew what she was all about. We just never wanted you t’ know. Bein’ such a nice liddle fing that you are. Best you fought we’re all a happy family.”

Ori thought this over while Dori petted and cooed over him. Ori remembered he had just led a divinely ordered quest, returned in triumph, was proclaimed a Hero of the Realm and here he was crying like a badger into his older brother’s tummy. He sat up, wiping his eyes.

“I’m an idiot, I shouldn’t let that bother me.”

Nori snorted and Dori kept an arm about him.

“Now, pet. This is something from your badgerhood. Something you’ve always relied on. Nori and I only wanted to shield you from such a…an unnecessary hurt.”

“S’right, Chick. We didn’t fink it would ever come back t’ bite our arses.” Nori pondered a moment. “Leastways, not like this.”

Ori gave a watery giggle. Dori patted his back. Ori raised an eyebrow at Dori. Dori smiled serenely and continued to pat his back.

Ori waited.

Nori waited.

Dori waited.

Ori heaved a sigh and burped. Dori laughed and gave him a hug as Nori shouted.

“Clever liddle lad!”

“You’re both silly,” Ori pouted.

“Well, pet, I have to get back in the way of things. It’s been quite some time since I had to care for a wee badgerling.”

“So you’re going to practice on me?” Ori demanded, trying to be severe but giggling. “No, and Balin won’t either.”

Dori wrinkled his nose. “I do hope Balin will start getting in the way things. I try and talk to him about baby things but he just shakes his head and says there’s plenty of time. Silly dwarf.”

Ori took Dori’s hands and patted them overly carefully.

“Now Dori, you know he’ll start behaving properly soon enough. Won’t he, Nori?”

Ori turned to look at Nori, who was back sitting on the table.

“Yep, he will, don’t you worry yourself all over that, our Mother Goose.”

“Exactly,” Ori went on in a too soothing voice. “I know you’re worried, but do mind me and Nori in this case, because we both can assure you.”

“Yep, ’course we can,” Nori nodded wisely. Even having no idea what plan Ori had suddenly hatched, he played along easily.

“Assure me of what?” Dori demanded, an edge to his voice that told he was now well aware he was about to be pranked.
“That things are, you know, different,” Ori placated.
“Different?” Dori asked. “Different how, may I ask?”
“Different, dearest,” Ori cooed. “Aren’t they, Nori? Things are different, you know.” Ori paused before he delivered his punch-line. “When you’re married.”
“When you’re married proper, our Dori.” Nori corroborated.
“Why you wicked badgers!” Dori cried. His tone was scolding, but his eyes were alight with laughter. “You’re both quite, quite dreadful! I shall repudiate both of you. Yes, right this minute!”
Nori slid over and sat on one of Dori’s knees while Ori climbed on the other, shoving Dori back into the couch as they hugged Dori and each other.
“Get off, you silly pebbles!” Dori shouted. “You’re both too heavy to sit on me! I’m squashed!” They heard a knock at the door and Balin’s voice.
“Beloved?”
“It’s all right, dearest, you may come in.”
Balin entered, then pulled his shoulders back.
“Beloved, yeh canna keep yer brothers on yer lap any more.”
“I’m not keeping them! They did it themselves and they’re squashing me!”
“Ori’s Dori!” Ori cried.
He peppered Dori’s face with kisses.
“Nori’s Dori!”
Nori joined in, the pair of them giggling, while Dori was reduced to indignant squalls and Balin smiled indulgently.
“Good thin’ yer so sturdy, beloved.”
“Nori! Stop licking me!” Dori cried indignantly. “That’s disgusting! Stop slobbering on me, both of you!”
He heaved them both off his lap, Ori onto the couch, Nori onto his arse on the floor, the pair of them helpless with laughter.
Dori shot to his feet and tried without success to brush himself off.
“Look what you’ve done! I’m all wrinkled! You’ve ruined this tunic!” He grabbed them both under an elbow and whisked them to their feet. “Such behavior! And in front of Lord Balin! I thought I raised the pair of you better than this!”
Lord Balin snickered into his beard and waved an indulgent hand.
Dori said, “I tell you, Lord Balin, I did my best!”
Nori aped, “He did his best, Lord Balin.”
Ori added, “And who could blame poor Dori?”
“Hush, both of you!” Dori ordered. He released them and went to his husband to the chants of “Ori’s Dori!” and “Nori’s Dori!”
“Best get used t’ it, beloved,” said Balin, kissing Dori fondly. “We’ll have another underfoot soon enough.”
“That one I’ll raise properly!”
Dori flounced out with a backward look of love. Balin winked at Nori and Ori and closed the door behind him.
“Alright now, Chick?” Nori asked, ruffling Ori’s hair.
“Yes. I think so. Dwalin’s and Thorin’s mams were there, and Dwalin’s mam is lovely.”
“Did you punch ol’ Rikmha?”
Ori blushed.
“I tried.”
“Tried?” Nori’s eyebrows twitched. “If she hit you-”
“She didn’t get a chance. I went for her and Idris, Dwalin’s mam, grabbed me, chucked me over her shoulder, carried me back to their table, and told me there was no point as it wouldn’t teach her anything.”
Nori grunted, considered, then “Probably fer the best. Fer you, Chick.”
“Then the ceiling became fire, just like I said. And Mahal’s big Hand came through and remade
Rikmha, right in front of everyone. She was molded into a baby. I screamed that He better not make that Dori’s baby, but He told me to hush as He’d already made for Dori. I suppose she’ll be born somewhere soon."

“Huh,” Nori allowed. “May have t’ go find her an’ kill her.”
“No,” Ori frowned. “We’re the Brothers Ri and we’re better than that. She may never remember, but if she ever does, and we meet, we’ll show her we’re better than she ever was or could be.”
Nori looked fondly at Ori. Ori grinned.
“Yer a proper liddle rascal,” Nori said with a chuckle. “’Sides me Bo, yer th’ only one who kin smile and make me do whatever ya want me to. I’m a bloody fool. Serves me righ’ fer fallin’ fer ya when ya was nothin’ but a liddle froggy. Starin’ up a’ me in yer liddle purple onesie an’ gigglin’ all cute.”

“And grabbing your nose and pulling it?” Ori teased.
Nori laughed.
“Yeah, an’ me beard an’ me eyebrows. Grabbin’ everything’ in front a’ ya, ya li’il lizard.”
Ori blinked innocently then grabbed the end of Nori’s nose and pulled. Nori gave a yowl and Ori fled the room for the kitchen where he guessed Dori was. Nori gave a bellow behind him. Ori almost reached the kitchen when Nori bounced out of the wall in front of him.
“Ha! Got you, you liddle mole!”
Ori dove between Nori’s legs, scrambled up, plowed into the kitchen, and whisked behind Dori. Nori barreled in and yelled.
“That bleedin’ badger yanked me snoot!”

At the kitchen table sat Thorin, Dwalin, and Fili and Kili. Bilbo was helping Mistress Dazla as they flitted about the kitchen, making the final preparations. Fili and Kili gaped then exchanged confused looks. Thorin snickered and Dwalin roared with laughter.

Dori drew herself up and smiled reprovingly at Nori.
“Now, duck,”
Ori peeked around Dori’s shoulder and giggled. He stuck out his tongue at Nori, who moved to pounce. Dori made soothing clucks, forcibly pushed Nori to the table, and shoved a biscuit in the open mouth before Nori could say anything else.
Dori turned and looked at Ori with a frown over dancing eyes. Ori folded his hands behind his back and peeked up at Dori.
“Naughty badger,” Dori cooed and cuddled him. “How many times have I told you not to pull our dearest Nori’s little nosey.”
“Sorry, Ori’s Dori,” Ori tried to sound remorseful, but couldn’t keep the giggle out of his voice.
“Very good,” Dori said with too much gravity. “Now what do you say to Nori?”
Ori turned and looked at Nori. Nori was frowning horribly but his eyes twinkled. Ori blew a raspberry at him. Dwalin and Thorin laughed.

“Ori!” Dori said with mock severity.
“I’m sorry, Nori,” Ori grinned.
“And what are you sorry for?” Dori prompted, obviously stifling giggles. Fili and Kili had joined the mirth at this point, fascinated by the family dynamics on display.
“I’m sorry your nose is so pullible?” Ori tried.
“No,” Dori scolded, the laugh creeping into her voice. Nori frowned harder but started to shake.
“Sorry, I’ve got a good grip?”
“Ori!”
“Sorry, I pulled your nosey,” Ori giggled.
“Very good,” Dori praised and shooed Ori away with a spank. Ori went and climbed into Dwalin’s lap. Dwalin was still chuckling.

“Yer a menace, love.”
Ori looked at Dwalin, “Didn’t you and Balin go after each other like Nori and I do?”
“Nah, Balin’s more an age a’ Dori an’ I were always gettin’ int’ mischief wi’ our Thorin.”
Ori looked at the princes.
Kili shrugged.
“We fought plenty but I don’t think we ever pulled each other’s noses.”
Dis came in followed by Jani.
“Mam?” Fili turned to Dis. “Did Kili or I ever yank each other’s noses?”
Dis paused and stared at her sons a moment then managed,
“What?”
“When we were badgers. Did Ki or I ever yank each other’s noses?”
Dis rolled her eyes.
“Yes, but then you were both so full of remorse you held each other and cried and were covered in snot.”
Kili said, “Oh, that’s alright then.”
“Excellent,” Dis said rolling up her sleeves. “I’ve got a cake to make, so all of you who aren’t here to cook, get out.”
Ori hopped up and grabbed Dwalin’s hand.
“Come and see Fanny.”
“Aye, sure, love.”
The pair of them went out to where Bain, Tilda, Frodo and Sam were romping around the meadow with the younger Gamgees. They were deeply involved with knocking the First March Warden and the King of Gondor on their asses. Legolas, Gimli and Bard shouted encouragement, while Thranduil serenely combed Wandi’s hair for him. Ori could hear them murmuring in quenya.
Arwen, Eowyn, and Sigrid were lounging on the grass, sitting in the space between Fanny’s legs as the oliphaunt lay on her belly in the late afternoon sunshine.
Ori and Dwalin came over.
“Doesn’t she look wonderful?” Ori enthused.
“Aye,” Dwalin managed before Fanny’s trunk snaked out, seized him around the waist, and lifted him forward. Dwalin chuckled and bowed his brow against her huge one.
“Yer lookin’ well, lassie,” he said, giving the start of her trunk a rub.
Fanny rumbled happily and set him gently on his feet again.
There was a loud bleat and Gnasher galloped over. Dwalin snorted, turned, and rushed the ram.
Ori settled himself next to Sigrid.
“Wrestling time,” he commented at Eowyn’s surprised face.
She laughed and looked about her.
“It’s beautiful here,” she said simply.
“And instantly feels like home,” Arwen added.
“That’s Dori’s fault,” Sigrid told them. “You come in and Dori’s fussing over you like a mother and stuffing you full of food.”
“You’ve know Dori a long time, haven’t you?” Arwen said.
“All my life,” Sigrid answered, snuggling up to Ori. “Mam died when Tilda was born and Dori helped Da raise us. I think I’m so used to dwarf ways, being in the mountain with dwarrow feels as natural as being in Dale among men does.” She laughed again. “Probably why I fell so hard for Fili.”
Eowyn giggled. “He’s very handsome. It’s funny at first I thought that he and Kili were complete opposites, but sometimes now, it’s hard to tell them apart. They remind me of Lord Elrond’s twins. They do that…thing, you know.”
“Yes,” Ori agreed. “I think it sometimes drives Balin scatty. He was their tutor.”
“Poor sod,” Eowyn commiserated.

Ori settled happily at opposite Thorin in Thorin’s and Balin’s shared office. Balin sat at his own desk, sorting through papers. Elrond, Galadriel, Aragorn, and Arwen entered.
Galadriel immediately perched on Bilbo’s desk stool which was tall for the hobbit but a fine size for Galadriel to sit and draw up her feet to the second rung. She wrapped her arms about her knees.
and looked pleased. Aragorn and Arwen sat on the sofa and Elrond took the chair Balin indicated.

“It’s very nice to have my scribe back,” Thorin commented with a smile to Ori.

“It’s nice to be back,” Ori agreed. “I feel like I’ve been running around madly.”

“Just time t’ catch all a’ yeh up b’fore dinner, wee brother,” Balin said genially. “Here’s the main happenin’s while yeh were asleep in Lórien. Read ‘em aloud, Ori.”

Ori took up the first scroll and opened it.

From the Account of His Highness, Arne, Prince of the Ironfists
A great explosion rocked the world.
In Erebor, we felt the lava jump in its tubes, not just once, but five times, each time more violent than the last.

In the Great Library, books and scrolls fell from library shelves and all over the mountain bells tolled wildly; the stone foundations of the city twisted and strained as alarms sounded at the mines and dwarrow scrambled to raise the emergency evacuation lifts.

I was looking out over the vast, panicking throng as it fled the mountain, when Lord Nori arrived, grasped me by the elbow and pulled me. I do not understand where or how, only know that when he let me go I stood beside King Thorin and Professor Baggins on the threshold of the main gates of Erebor.

The king urged calm, even as the dwarrow swarmed past him.

Then, to the south, what seemed the entirety of the Misty Mountains heaved into the air atop a fountain of fire and smoke. The panic was indescribable, though the king and Professor Baggins merely joined hands as they watched, their faces set in resolve. Roäc, king of the Ravens of Erebor, alit on King Thorin’s right shoulder and waited there for what would come.

Then, all at once, the great plume of fire, rock and ash that should have destroyed us all, simply vanished and the rock below us stilled, and the lava deep in the earth continued in its channels as if nothing had happened at all. The horizon, though, looked oddly flat and wide, and for the longest time, everyone, dwarrow, men, hobbits and elves, stood and peered out at what seemed like floods of rainbows across the horizon.

A great commotion went up in the direction of Dale, and the crowds parted for King Bard and King Father Thranduil, riding the great elk at full tilt into the courtyard and up to the steps. King Bard leapt from the elk before it even stopped, and was shouting even before he alit.

I have tried to preserve the dialogue just as I heard it.
King Bard demanded of King Thorin, “How did you do that?”

“What?” King Thorin asked. “Blow up the Misty Mountains?”

“The statues!” King Bard replied. “They fell from the sky and planted themselves on every street corner in Dale!”

“What do they look like?” Professor Baggins inquired.

At that moment King Father Thranduil alit. In a voice completely calm, he explained,

“They appear as individual carvings of dwarrow, each on a plinth, and each with a street sign hanging from the outstretched, pointing hand and a crystal lantern looped around the thumb.”

“I mean, it’s very useful, obviously,” said King Bard. “We hadn’t gotten around to it ourselves, but, when did the craftsdwarrow have time? Did Bujni catapult them from the ramparts as a sort of practice run? And street signs?”

King Thorin, was visibly surprised, but he considered for a moment, then replied,

“Actually they had time over several thousand years. If they are as you describe, the statues once lined the approach to the royal throne of Khazad-dûm. The street signs seem to be a more recent addition. As far as I know, Bujni was not involved.”

“Oh,” said King Bard. “Well, pity to waste them I guess, but how did you move them?”

“We didn’t,” said King Thorin. “I believe it was Mahal.”

“What about the toilet, then?” asked King Bard.

King Thorin paused for several seconds, then ventured, “Toilet?”

“Thranduil came out of the bathroom and thought I was wonderful for commissioning him a toilet
“No, I did not,” said King Bard. “No matter the temptation. Is this also the work of Mahal?”

Professor Baggins agreed, “Bit out of His line, I should think.”

“Diamond,” King Thorin mused. “A diamond toilet seat and tank cover? Off white, rather bluish diamond?”

“Yes!” King Bard replied.

“That belonged to Nali, regent of to King Nain,” said King Thorin.

“No, I did not,” said King Bard. “No matter the temptation. Is this also the work of Mahal?”

Professor Baggins agreed, “Bit out of His line, I should think.”

“Diamond,” King Thorin mused. “A diamond toilet seat and tank cover? Off white, rather bluish diamond?”

“Yes!” King Bard replied.

“That belonged to Nali, regent of to King Nain,” said King Thorin.

“Why would I get that?” King Bard asked.

“I imagine it wasn’t for you particularly, but for Thranduil,” King Thorin replied.

“At my expense?” King Bard persisted.

“Revenge?” King Thorin answered. “Nali erased everything that wasn’t about dwarrow, particularly about Longbeards. Imagine his prized toilet seat going to an elf. And not just any elf. The elfiest elf who every elfed.”

At that moment, a tiny black dot emerged from the shifting colors on the horizon, and in time, out of the sky flew Quartzite, a prince of Erebor’s ravens. He alit on King Thorin’s left shoulder and squawked and croaked in King Thorin’s left ear while King Roäc seemed to be asking questions via the king’s right ear.

What King Thorin heard must have pleased him.

King Thorin turned to look at him in collective puzzlement.

Then Gwaihir, King of Eagles, and his court arrived, alighting in spots cleared by the awed and scattering crowds. Some eagles bore among them a huge wooden crate. The eagle king himself carried Lord Balin Fundinul and Lady Dori, Bearer of Erebor, upon his back. King Thorin handed down Lady Dori to the cheers of the crowds and stepped forth with Lady Dori on his arm and proclaimed that the Bearer was pregnant.

An old dwarf in the crowd shouted, “It’s Mahal! The explosion! It was Mahal impregnating the Bearer!”

Lady Dori snapped, “Don’t be ridiculous! Lord Balin impregnated the Bearer… I mean me!”

But the crowd had taken up the old dwarf’s words and deep as the panic that had ruled moments before, there was merriment in the streets.

Young dams and women approached with great reverence and asked for a touch of the Bearer’s hand, which she gave quite generously.

Meanwhile, Lord Balin explained to King Thorin about the appearance of the box and the eagles. King Thorin and King Gwaihir bowed to one another and King Thorin gave his thanks and ordered venison brought up and piled on the side of the mountain for the eagles to refresh themselves.

Master Brur arrived with wagons and librarians to bear the eagles’ burden into the mountain and down into the depths of the archive. I was bidden to follow.”

Ori rolled the scroll back up and put it in its labeled casing.

“Poor Arne!” he giggled. “I’m glad I asked Quartz to fly home and tell you.”

“As we all are,” Thorin mused. “I don’t know if I would have been able to contain the riot.”

“Yay,” agreed Balin. “Sendin’ me an’ me beloved on th’ eagles back here wasn’t a bad idea either.”

“I simply must call upon dear Thranduil and Bard,” commented Arwen.

“Indeed,” Galadriel smiled. “We simply cannot leave Bard and Thranduil without a visit to try their new…er… convenience.”

Ori picked up the next scroll.

From the Account of Omibur, Daughter of Erda, Journeyman Scribe
Having decided that the explosion was Mahal impregnating the Bearer, many dwarrow and people would not accept the truth, that the Bearer’s visit to Greenwood was a ruse to cover up a quest to the depths of Khazad-dûm - and that Khazad-dûm and the southern Misty Mountains were no more because of it.

Lady Dori was obliged to go by carriage with Lord Balin and myself beside her, block by block through Dale and market to market under the Mountain, to explain all that had happened. King Thorin and Professor Baggins rode their ponies to the right of the carriage. A man brought King Bard his horse, so that Dale could accompany the carriage as well.

Lady Dori was very patient with the crowds. She wore a caftan of Fundin red and green silk as the sun over Dale was quite hot, and she cooled herself with a fan of raven feathers. She seemed to enjoy the attention as she was fortified with flasks of strong iced tea and lavender sweet cakes.

By evening she declared herself fatigued and ready to return to Fundin House. It was then that the first ravens from outside of Erebor arrived to tell what strange changes had seized the peoples and landscape of Arda.

“Other changes?” Ori asked, staring at his brother-in-law and his king.

“Oh yes,” Thorin sat back in his chair. “Balin, do you have the letters and copies of my replies in the order they were processed?”

“Aye, lad,” Balin chuckled, putting a pile of smaller letters that had obviously been sent by raven in front of Ori.

“Yes indeed,” agreed Elrond. “I had a missive from Lindir’s assistant that my entire house and several others in Inmaldris are filled with roughly a thousand years worth of guild minutes from many different guilds in Moria. As far as he has been able to ascertain, they do contain some rather good gossip. I have ordered him to organize them by guild and dated order and, once I have the scribes to do so, we shall extricate the gossip for you, Thorin.”

“Thank you, I look forward to it,” Thorin chuckled.

“Did it fall out of the sky like Beorn’s fountain?” Ori asked.

“The assistant did not relay such,” Elrond replied amused. “From what I gather, people woke in the morning and there were the bound books scatter everywhere throughout houses, gardens, and upon several rooftops. Apparently my bath, fortunately empty, was full and piled high with the notes from the guild of woolen merchants.”

Ori swallowed, giggled, and took up the first from the open file folder titled.

*Letters received and sent by His Majesty, King Thorin II, Oakenshield Transcribed/Filed by Lolibur, Daughter of Erda, Journeyman Scribe.*

The first one was remarkably brief and to the point, as Ori read it aloud.

*From His Majesty, King Gheir of the Stiffbeards:*

*Thorin,*

*What in Mordor’s bloody name have you done? All my wives are pregnant at the same time! Except for Mavey, I presume, and I don’t know where she is! We heard and felt an explosion; we assume the Longbeards were responsible, as usual.*

*Best,*

*Gheir*

The second and third were lighter in tone and reflective of style of the writer, which delighted the group in the study.
From His Majesty, King Ahkn of the Stonefoots:
Dear Thorin and Brood,

You blowing up mountains again? Anyway, we hear Queen Arivett’s ‘expecting’. We don’t know what exactly she’s expecting, but that Eomer fellow doesn’t mess about. Hear about all Gheir’s wives being pregnant at once? Hope his diaper changing skills are up to it.

Best,

Ahkn

From His Majesty, King Ulfr of the Ironfists:
Thorin, where did all these fucking elves come from?
-Ulfr

Ori snickered delightedly at Ulfr’s single line of script, pressed so hard the runes were distinct on the back of the paper. He took up the first of Thorin’s replies. It was delightfully brief. Ori could tell Thorin had roared with laughter as he wrote, as everyone in the room was laughing now.

From His Majesty, King Thorin II, Oakenshield:
Dearest Ulfr,

Which fucking elves would these be? You have to specify. I didn’t order a gross to be delivered to you, if that’s what you’re saying.

Best,

Thorin

P.S. I assume the smoke coming from the direction of your mountain originated in your ears.

From His Majesty, King Ulfr of the Ironfists:
Thorin, Never mind.

From His Majesty, King Thorin II, Oakenshield:

Dear Ulfr,

?

Best,

Thorin

From His Majesty, King Ulfr of the Ironfists:

Dear Thorin,

Upon closer study, I’ve discovered that all these elves, who seem to have crawled up from under rocks all over my mountain, are actually reincarnations of some relatives of mine. This includes my parents, my maternal and paternal grandparents, my late brother and his husband, and my old maths tutor. Sucks to be me right now.

Best,

Ulfr

From His Majesty, King Thorin II, Oakenshield:

Dear Ulfr,

I swear, this is not my fault! I am, however, giggling like a lunatic. Enjoy yourself!
Seriously, I have no idea how this is possible without the will of both Eru and Mahal together. I have not had any other reports for surfacing elves, except for those in the elven realms who at one point had been turned into Orcs. Eru and I haven’t spoken recently, but I’m thinking Iluvatar lost a bet.

Best,
Thorin

“Mahal!” Ori gasped, staring and paging through the letters again. “And here I thought the only elves that had come back were elves who had been originally ensorcelled by Sauron to become orcs. Now there are elves who used to be dwarrow?”

“Indeed,” Thorin nodded, his lips held a ghost of a smile. “Apparently there will be more than just the meetings of friends in the Great Halls. People will experience not just a different life but a different people. More lessons to learn.”

Ori considered, then frowned.

“That must be very odd. If they are remembering their lives as dwarrow, but are now cast and remade as elves…” Ori swallowed again. “It must take a lot of getting used to. Elves are almost twice our height.”

“Imagine being that tall, and going back to your old home and having your legs hang out the bed from your knees,” Balin murmured.

“Elbereth!” Arwen got her breath back. “Dearest, can you imagine?”

“If any were warriors,” Aragorn reflected. “Their center of balance will be wildly off.”

“I was thinking more about forgetting to duck going through doorways,” Thorin replied. Ori choked.

“Poor Ulfr’s going to have to deal with a lot of elves with headaches and bruised foreheads.”

“Keep goin’, wee brother,” Balin said with an aloof smile.

From Her Highness, General Aris, Princess Consort of the Blacklocks:

Dear Thorin,

You must have heard about Arivett’s being with pebble. I was initially writing to warn you that Hild was on a tear, throwing things, screaming, and threatening to ride out to Belegost to rip off Eomer’s balls, but this will no longer be necessary. I discovered the magic word. Apparently, it’s ‘grandpebble’. Hild, Terror of the Orocanis, is going to be a granny, and so am I. I’ve pencilled ‘sweetness and light’ into Hild’s schedule, for the next five minutes anyway.

Best,
Aris

“Oh how nice,” Galadriel said. “I shall send her a congratulatory gift.” Elrond and the Gondorian couple agreed they should also sent presents.

From Her Majesty, Queen Hild of the Blacklocks:

Thorin,

Why is there suddenly a new mountain outside my bedroom window, a stone cairn in my throne room, and a pile of shale in my bathtub? The mountain completely blocks the view!
Don’t try to deny it, I know you Durins are responsible!

Hild

“Your Aüle seems to have a strange obsession with filling bathtubs with things that don’t belong in them,” Elrond said in mock complaint.

“Maybe Ulwe likes them,” Ori said, before thinking. “He does run hot and cold.”
Elrond stared at him.
“Ulwe? The Valar of Water, runs… That’s terrible.”
“That’s what Mahal said, anyway, and I think He meant it to be.”
Everyone snickered and Ori went back to reading.

*From His Majesty, King Thorin II, Oakenshield:*

_Dear Hild,_
_Oops._
_Love,_
_Thorin_
_P.S. Congratulations on the impending pebble._

*From Her Majesty, Queen Hild of the Blacklocks:*

_Thorin,_
_How did you know I was pregnant?_
_Hild_

“Great Mahal!” Ori exclaimed. “She’s pregnant, too! Aris will be completely gray-haired when we see her next.”
Thorin grinned evilly.
“Keep reading.”

*From His Majesty, King Ahkn of the Stonefoots:*

_Dear Thorin,_
_Queen Hild and I seem to have miscalculated a roll in the mines down memory lane. In the excitement of current events, we each thought the other had taken their tea, and neither of us had. Good thing Oin sent more linament. I’m going to be chasing a toddler again - and at my age! I’d say I was too old for this shit, but apparently, I’m not!_ _Best,_ 
_The Adad-To-Be_

*From His Majesty, King Thorin II, Oakenshield:*

_Dear Ahkn,_
_Congratulations! A lifetime supply of linament is on its way. I told you that you were not old._
_Now you see what you get for not believing me!_ 
_Best and Warmest Wishes,_
_Thorin_

*From His Majesty, King Gheir of the Stiffbeards:*

_Dear Thorin,_
_Did you hear about Hild? I am laughing through my tears. Oh, wait, the tears are because I’m laughing._
_I think that I’m allowed this moment of glee, since I’ll shortly be up to my ears in pebble shit._
_Best,_
_Gheir_

Balin handed Ori an official scroll bearing the king’s seal.
“Better read this before yeh go on, wee brother. It was distributed throughout th’ dwarven world, t’ be posted in all gathering’ places an’ announced by criers.”
From His Majesty, King Thorin II, Oakenshield
To: All Dwarrowdams, Bearers, and Dwarrow in the Dwarven Realms
Greetings. If you do not wish to produce dwarflings at this time, please drink the proper teas and take every precaution.
We are suddenly extremely fertile.
Blessings of Mahal upon you all.

“We’re having pebbles?” Ori yelped.
Balin raised a brow.
“Some of us’r havin’ pebbles. We’ve no’ all changed bits overnight.”
“But, yes,” Thorin added, “we are experiencing a sudden and definite boom in expectant parents. Everyone is claiming Mahal is responsible, but I think at least two other people were involved each time.”

From Her Majesty, Queen Arivett of Beleghost
Dear Thorin,

We got your letter and thank you for your warm wishes. I was expecting my honored amad to come riding in on her battle ram with an axe to chop off my husband’s bits, but I understand she was persuaded that being an umad trumped her plans for revenge.

I awoke the morning after half the Misty Mountains fell to discover an enormous marble arch, taller than the mountain of Beleghost itself, before the front gates of the realm. My beloved, while understanding my shock, couldn’t understand why I kept going on about the marble. Admittedly, not my most queenly moment:

“But, it’s marble!”
“Yes, my wife. I know what marble is.”
“No. No. It’s marble. It’s Khazad-dûm marble. It was only mined from one place in Arda - which is now a lake bed.”

Ori continued on through the stack of missives when he came upon letters in a different style and on different paper than dwarrow used. Everyone gathered was thoroughly enjoying the missives.

“Wait,” said Ori. “These are from the Shire to Bilbo.”

“Yes, and Bilbo graciously allowed us to enter them into the record,” said Thorin. “After he stopped laughing so hard he couldn’t breathe. Read on, Ori”
The first was in a childish hand.

To: Uncle Bilbo Baggins, Erebor
From: Merry.
Dear Uncle Bilbo,

Lobelia Sackville-Baggins is screaming all over Hobbiton because a dwarf statue appeared in her front garden that we’re not supposed to look at. We looked anyway, and it’s terribly naughty. Mrs. Sackville-Baggins’s face turned purple and everything. It was great fun. We were hoping her head would pop right off, but none of us really wanted to catch it.

When you marry King Thorin, are you going to have to wear a crown and behead people and things?

Best wishes,
Meriadoc Brandybuck
Son of Saradoc Brandybuck, Master of Buckland.
At the enquiring looks, Thorin smiled, saying, “Meridoc or Merry, as Bilbo tells me he is called, is a cousin of Bilbo’s but as he is closer to Frodo’s age, he addresses Bilbo as ‘uncle’."

The next was in a mature hand, but covered in blots and scratches, some ripping the paper, as though the author was extremely angry and writing in fury. “What exactly-“

Bilbo stuck his head in the doorway with a grin. “Has he found it yet?” Thorin nodded. “He’s just getting to it now. Read it aloud also, please, Ori.”

* Bilbo, 

_You tell your filthy wizard to get this disgusting statue out of my front garden immediately. Don’t deny you were involved, this is obviously a dwarf statue and in an indecent state of undress._

* Lobelia 

“Oh, look,” said Ori, “she included a sketch.” Bilbo said, “Yes. Who knew she had it in her?”

Apparently, Mahal had dropped the gigantic figure, arm outstretched and finger accusatorially pointed right at Lobelia’s smial door. That wasn’t the only part of it pointing. “Yes, it’s not bad,” said Ori. “I don’t recognize it, though it’s nice how it’s standing at attention. All of it.”

“Binni said it’s a fellow named Arr the Lawgiver,” Bilbo informed them. “He was reputed for the length of his… diatribes.”

Balin looked amused and held up a sheaf of paper. “Apparently tha’s no’ th’ only one. I’ve reports from rangers tha’ say a statue of a dwarf warrior marks each mile along th’ Grea’ North Road.”

The next letter to Bilbo looked to be official stationery, and the handwriting looped and swirled and appeared to roll its loops eccentrically left and right.

* From: Gerontius, Thain of Tooks, Great Smial of Tuckborough
To: Bilbo Baggins and Co., Erebor.

Dearest Bilbo,

Well, here is a to-do. Not the Lobelia thing. That’s just funny. This is different and a most perplexing predicament.

This morning I was awakened before first breakfast by a riot of some sort out in the courtyard. When I leaned out the window to look - and you’ll be happy to know I took my nightcap off first, since I was being official - I saw a lot of the young Tooks were chattering and yammering around something they obviously thought was important. Didn’t look like much going on to me. I thought with all that fuss, that at least the pigs had got into the garden. But, no, as it turned out, earlier that morning, a load of barrels rolled themselves through the gate and assembled themselves into a pyramid at the front door.

We figured them for dwarfish, as here’s the mark on them, but we’re afraid to open any of them.

My khuzdul’s not up to snuff, so we’re hoping you can tell us what we’re dealing with, and if it will explode. Please tell us soon, as they’re still blocking the door.

Best wishes,

Grandfather Took
From: Bilbo Baggins and Co., Erebor
To Gerontius, Thain of Tooks, Great Smial of Tuckborough
Dear Grandfather,

Thorin tells me the barrels are marked with the official seal of the High King of Dwarrow at Khazad-dûm. They contain dorwinion wine, at least a thousand years old. Either it’s really good wine or very interesting vinegar. You’re either going to be potted, or having a lot of salad, or both.

Love,

Bilbo

“Oh my,” Ori managed. “All that dorwinian. I hope no one tells Thranduil.”
“I propose we make a pact,” Elrond suggested.
“No need,” Thorin sighed. “He was here when the letter arrived. He informed us he prefers newer vintages. Keep going, Ori.”

From Her Majesty, Queen Hild of the Blacklocks:
Thorin,
The mountain outside my window seems to contain extraordinary amounts of metals and there a slim vein of mithril. Tell Dis we’re going to have to renegotiate the contract for less mithril and more clear gems.

Hild

“Can that be done over distance or should we expect another visit?” Ori asked.
Balin chuckled and stroked his beard, “It kin be done either way, wee brother, but we better hold ourselves ready f’r visiting’ jus’ in case.”

From His Majesty, King Ulfr of the Ironfists:
Thorin,
We started excavations in a fresh section of the mountains last week. Overnight, the newly opening caverns resealed themselves with solid rock. Cheeky things. The vibrations felt different than they had the day before, so we put a pike through one wall and a gas spewed out. We corked the hole up right quick. Not sure what this gas is but any who got a breath of it spoke two octaves higher than usual for a few minutes. There’s another gas we discovered, which we filled a bottle with. I put a tinder to it and it’s amazingly flammable.
This is amazing. I have a great deal to do.
Will write again when I find my eyebrows and mustache.
Ulfr.

From His Majesty, King Gheir of the Stiffbeards:
Dear Thorin,
After hearing about first my wives then about Hild the next morning I woke to find that the palace grounds now contain a giant walled garden with lots of stone shapes for badgers to play on.
The walls are covered with mosaics from which my historians inform me are from the nurseries at Khazad-dûm.
I am making the presumption this is some sort of Longbeard thing.
“Ehh, that must’ be a sigh’,” sighed Balin.
“I’ve heard about the royal nursery from Thror,” Thorin commented idly looking up at Bilbo, now seated on his knee. “He always said they were magnificent.”
“I imagine they would be,” Aragorn said. “Your Aüle seems bent on sharing out all the wealth of Moria.”
“There jus’ a couple more, wee brother an’ then we can head to th’ sittin’ room f’r dinner,” Balin encouraged.
Ori took up another brief note.

Our Thorin and family,
I’ll have to trot over for another visit some time or you can come visit. My wife is pregnant again and I woke up this morning to see my docks have been improved by a huge new pier of fine stone, inlaid with mosaics my queen tells me are from Khazad-dûm. The pier is twice the size of the old one, which was already respectable for a deep water port, and this new one has wrought iron lampposts twenty feet tall at the least, and there’s a lantern on each, lit with the brightest phosphorus stones I’ve ever seen.
You’re going to have to tell me all about this as soon as you can.
Love to you all,
Chat.

“I must write to Chat,” Galadriel mused. “Elrond, help me think of something I can send to amuse his children.”
“I don’t know about amuse,” Elrond smiled. “But your dried apple rings dipped in honey would certainly delight them.”
“Oh, of course,” she nodded. “Perhaps you could make a couple of those twig hoops you made for Arwen. She had such fun rolling those along the paths.”
Balin stretched.
“Aye, I had one of silver when I was a badger. Yeh have a matchin’ stick t’ smack it t’ keep it rollin’. Gave it t’ Dwalin when he got t’ th’ age I’d played with it.”
“Did he play with it, too?” Ori asked.
“Nay, his back teeth were comin’ through an’ he chewed it in half then flattened it. He kept it though.”
“I remember that flat silver stick,” Thorin said with a grin. “He took it everywhere. He would always poke things with it: rocks, hornet nests, visiting dignitaries he didn’t like. When he could get away with it, his adad.”
Balin rolled his eyes while everyone laughed.

From His Majesty, King Ahkn of the Stonefoots:
Dear Thorin and Brood,
I think the Valar had a mix-up. I’ve received a trophy that ought to be Gheir’s.
Two mornings after I first wrote you, my kingdom woke up to a new sculpture in the middle of my main square.
It’s a giant, white marble penis with diamonds seeming to drip down it.
As I said, I’m thinking it should be for Gheir. Oh well, I’ll bask in the reflected glory. It is glorious
and it does shine.
Best,
Ahkn
Ori fell back in his chair and laughed. Thorin grinned at him.

“And now you know what happened while you were away.”

“Thorin,” Ori recovered and sat up again. “This seems a trifle ridiculous. What in all Arda were
the valar thinking?”

“Well, Ori,” Bilbo said merrily. “You are the one who speaks to them on a regular basis, perhaps
you could ask on all our behalf.”

“I did promise cookies,” Ori reflected.
The door to the office opened.

“Why are you all still in here?” demanded Dori. “I’m ready to dish up!”
Feasting, Frivolity, and Fornication.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Ori has to catch up on what's happened while he was away and the guest have to eat! The last part has lots of sexy bits, so if you don’t like sex, you can skip it, the first part is fun because Nori-Pori and Mask are in it. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

And a shoutout to our @VacationPlease for the lettuce and mayo decorations!!

Ori rose, putting away the correspondence. He lingered as the royals went out. He looked up and saw Balin waiting for him to hand over the scrolls and papers.

“Balin?”
“Wee brother?” Balin smiled at him with a quizzing look.
“Are…are you…um…alright?” Ori wasn’t sure how to frame his concern. Balin’s eyes widened.
“Tha’s ’n odd question, laddie. Why wouldn’t I be?”
“I was worried,” Ori floundered. “The happenings in the Great Halls I told you about. Your parents.”
“Ah,” Balin nodded and smiled. He raised a finger and turned to stow the correspondence away before turning back to Ori.
“Laddie, I’m old. I’ve had a long time t’ consider. What yeh told us, gave me joy. Adad’s ashamed of himself. He’s learned what he didn’t in life, no matter how hard Dwalin an’ I tried to teach him. There’s a reason I became Lord of Fundin House an’ head of th’ family b’fore Fundin was killed in Dimrill Dale.”
Ori stared at Balin.
“You…you defeated him in a claim for the head of the family?”
“I did, lad. When he reached full recovery, Dwalin challenged him f’r me second an’ defeated him. Fundin marched with us a’ mine an’ Dwalin’s orders to Dimrill Dale. Even although Thror didn’t want him t’ go any more than he did himself.”
“Dwalin said he was alright,” Ori ventured. “I was just worried about you, brother.”
Balin chuckled and pulled Ori into a hug then released him, patting his shoulder.
“Yer a dear wee lad, Ori. I’m tha’ proud t’ have yeh in me family.”
Balin put his arm back around Ori’s shoulders and they followed the party through to the sitting room.

Dori and Mistress Dazla were shooing people to the long table that now took up most of the room. People crowded in, seating themselves with no real thought to formal arrangements other than leaving the chair at the head for Thorin and the seat on the left for Bilbo.

All the doors were propped open, to allow the warm breezes to flow through the room.

Dinner began with platters of thin toasted bread covered in either tomatoes and bavlo cheese or slices of cucumber or thinly shaved ham with soft cheese and tiny slices of spring onions. These were accompanied by potato salad and bowls of new peas dressed with a light oil.

Kili and Tauriel seemed to be competing to see how much bavlo cheese they could consume while Fili badgered Kili for details about the quest. Sigrid was telling the Dale news to Tauriel making the
elf maiden shriek with laughter.
Lindir and Elrond were aghast that Lady Galadriel had acquired a large crowbar.
“What are you going to do with it?” Elrond asked.
“Carry it with me,” she shrugged.
“What for? You can’t go about with a crowbar. What would you do with it?”
“You carry swords about all the time. I'll carry it like that. That way I can whack things with it.”
“What things?”
“Things that need to be whacked, of course.”
“I’ll engrave it f'r yeh, lass.” Dain promised.
“Thank you, dear Dain.” Galadriel’s smile sparkled.
Elrond gave up. Celeborn grinned at his son-in-law and Galadriel helped herself to more toast
with ham, cheese and onions.
This was followed by hot turkey slices dressed with parsley sauce, and a sheet tray with puff
pastry covered in cheese and asparagus, roasted golden. This was accompany by a pasta salad, a
new spinach salad and Mistress Dazla placed a large plate before Haldir.
“The Honored Bearer and I pressed dear Lady Galadriel for her recipe.”
To Ori’s horror, the plate held a perfection salad, jiggling on a bed of lettuce and decorated with
mayonnaise. Haldir smiled fondly at it and thanked Dori. Lindir’s and Elrond’s eyes lit up. Elrohir,
Arwen, and Elladan made disgusted faces.
Ori shoved turkey in his mouth. He finished his plate of that and Dwalin put a chunk of puff
pastry with asparagus and cheese in its place.
Dori was praising this and Bilbo was explaining it was his mother’s recipe.
Cemnesta had sent over for a haunch of venison which the staff had dressed with a lovely
blackberry glaze and Bard had brought a catch of trout, which had been lightly fried.
Ori did not squeak as Mistress Dazla bought out a great platter of chips.
Elrond, Lindir, and Haldir divided the perfection salad among the three of them as no one else
wanted anything to do with it.
Dessert made up for it as Mistress Dazla had made a xocolātl steamed sponge with a dark xocolātl
syrup to pour over and candied cherries and sweetened whipped cream to go with it.
There were several audible moans of delight as dessert was consumed.
After dinner the entire party adjourned to the patio. Drum, viol and doodle sack came out and
eventually post-food lethargy gave way to dancing. Ori only danced a while. He had nervous
energy to spare, but dancing wasn’t where he wanted to spend it.
He sat in Dwalin’s lap in one of the lounge chairs, watching their family and friends disporting
themselves. When the musicians rested, Ori began to think he and Dwalin had paid off any debt of
civility they owed.
“Do you think they’d notice if we just slipped away?” Ori asked.
“Yer Dori would.”
“We could plead tiredness.”
“That’d get us 'n invite t' a nice cup a' hot milk t' help us sleep.”
“You’re right,” said Ori, standing. He held out his hand to Dwalin, who smirked as he let himself
be towed across the paving stones toward Thorin and Dain, the two Durin kings talking animatedly
over a pitcher of beer.
When they arrived, Ori bowed and loudly requested of Thorin, “Permission to adjourn to our
chambers, your majesty?”
Everything stopped dead. As Dori darted forward, Thorin, with a twinkle in his eye, replied,
“Permission granted, m’lords. Sleep tight.”
“Night, everyone!” Ori cried, turned on his heel and towed Dwalin into the house behind him.
Inside the house, Dwalin asked, “Do we ge’ time t’ brush our teeth, Lord Ori?”
“I suppose we must,” said Ori with a long-suffering sigh.
“Yer gonna pay fer tha’, yeh know.”
“Who wants to live forever anyway?”
Ori tossed his clothes into the hamper and lay down, naked on his back in the exact middle of the bed, his arms and legs splayed, and wriggled against the sheets with a happy groan.

He loved this bed.

He worked his arse down into the mattress and arched his back to rub his shoulders into the pillow.

Impatiently, he whisked his hair from between his back and the bed, letting it spill over the pillows.

“Mmmm, yes,” he murmured. “That’s it.”

“Fancy yeh startin’ without me.”

Ori’s eyes flew open.

Dwalin stood at the foot of the bed, naked, grinning wickedly. Then Ori saw his hand gripping the bedpost, knuckles white.

“Ori.”

It was on Ori’s lips to apologize, but he fought that back and smiled up at his husband and held out a welcoming hand.

“Dwalin.”

In the next instant Dwalin loomed over him and pressed his mouth against Ori’s. Heat poured off Dwalin, a vibration of despair as well as passion.

Ori broke the kiss.

“You, my husband, need seeing to. Tell me what I can do.”

Dwalin pulled back, uncertainty in his eyes.

“Ori, love…”

“Dwalin, so help me, if you tell me it’s all right, you don’t need whatever you need, I will write bad poetry about you for a year.”

The warrior drew back in horror.

“No! No’ tha’!”

“Oh, yes. I’m quite evil, as you know,” he said archly, before the archness bled out to tenderness.

“Dwalin?”

Dwalin hesitated only another moment.

“I want yeh inside me.”

Ori bit back a squeak. His heart took off at a gallop and sweat broke on his brow. Right at that moment he would have gladly served himself to Dwalin with barbecue sauce.

When he was certain he had command of his voice, he said, “Tell me what to do.”

“I don’t think I could do anythin’ fancy. I’m too far gone.”

Ori mentally paged through everything he had absorbed from Queen Kivi.

“You want to ride on top? Then you can control how fast and hard.”

Dwalin nodded.

Ori wished he could wipe the uncertainty from Dwalin’s face. Then he thought of something.

He gave a little smile and rubbed his cock against Dwalin’s thigh.

“Just promise me you’ll kiss it first for luck.”

Dwalin’s mouth curled up naughtily and Ori felt triumphant.

Ori licked his lip, mouth suddenly dry.

“Do you still have the oil?”

Dwalin gave a quick nod before rooting around in the drawer of the bedside table.

Nori-pori chose that moment to tumble out of the basket, yawn, stretch in all directions at once and jump on the bed.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said Ori. “Get down!”

The cat flicked an ear at Ori, then skittered up to lick his face.

“Dwalin!”

“No’ t’ worry. Go’ somethin’ f’r ‘im.”

He drew a tiny stuffed mouse from the drawer and swung it by the tail, instantly drawing feline
attention.

“You keep that in there with the oil?”

“I put it where I was afraid we’d need it. It’s full a’ catnip.”

Mask, who had been lounging back in the basket, suddenly sat up with interest. Nori-pori got down into a crouch and wiggled his rear end.

“Go git it, yeh li’le hairballs,” Dwalin muttered, and flicked the mouse off into the corner.

Instantly the cats fell upon it, tearing it to shreds in a fragrant cloud of catnip. The cats rolled around in it ecstatically.

Great, thought Ori. I bet I looked like that five minutes ago.

“Um, what do we do now?” Ori asked.

“We court death,” said Dwalin.

He went to the door, opened it and whistled back, dangling a second mouse for the cats to see. The moment they moved he tossed the mouse into the hall, and when they went for it, he shut the door behind them.

“Alone a’ last.”

“Dori is going to murder us for that.”

“Aye, so we have t’ make th’ mos’ a’ tonight.”

Dwalin climbed back up onto the bed. He smiled down on his husband, and smoothed a hand up and down Ori’s torso, through the newly thickened hair.

“Yer li’ a great, ginger tom.”

“I’m not leaving, even if you throw catnip.”

“Guid thin’ f’r me.”

Dwalin took up the oil jar, tossed the cap back on the table and poured the oil over his fingers. Then he handed the jar to Ori and turned slightly, so Ori could watch Dwalin spread his own cheeks and slather the crack of his arse, massaging the opening. Ori was mesmerized. His body remembered the feel of Dwalin’s fingers on him there. He itched to try it himself, but Dwalin’s breath was already speeding up as he breached himself with a finger, moving in and out, and then slipping in a second before moving again, stretching his fingers apart and back, twisting them and spreading himself.

When he finished, Ori went to pour the oil into his own hand, but Dwalin stopped him.

“Wait a mo’. We’ve go’ a deal,” said Dwalin. He leaned down and pulled Ori’s cock gently toward him. They locked eyes as Dwalin kissed the head.

“Oh,” Ori breathed.

They smiled at each other and Ori felt his face burn, but the heat was pure happiness and the anticipation of pleasure.

Ori went a little crazy coating his cock with oil.

He raised a sarcastic eye to Dwalin.

“I’m not sure a gallon will be enough, are you?”

“I thin’ we’ll muddle along,” Dwalin assured him.

He took the jar and put it aside.

“Yeh ready?”

“I am. Are you?”

Dwalin’s smile only widened as he leaned over and kissed Ori’s mouth.

“Backward ‘r forward?”

Ori blinked at him, not sure for a moment what he meant.

“Backw- Oh! Forward, please. I want to see your face, not your backside.”

“No?”

“Maybe next time.”

Dwalin eased a leg over him, tall enough to clear the tip of Ori’s standing cock, and took the length in hand, guiding it to his entrance.

Terror seized Ori when he thought that Dwalin would simply drop over him and not even notice, but the moment Dwalin lowered on to him, Ori understood that was not going to happen.
Dwalin worked himself down and Ori in. Ori didn’t know where to look, at his own cock disappearing inside Dwalin, or at Dwalin’s face. His husband’s eyes were closed, his mouth open in a silent moan.

The grip of Dwalin’s body around him, the heat, the slickness of the oil. Suddenly Ori wanted to be inside him, all the way in. Fuck self-control.

He nearly giggled at that last thought, but it faded into a gasp as his cock breached Dwalin’s muscles and Dwalin slid down onto him oh so slowly, just a little ways, then stopped and pulled almost all the way off again.

Dwalin opened his eyes and breathed.

“Ori… Oh, Mahal’s hairy balls, this feels…”

He paused with Ori halfway in.

“Yeh alright’?”

“Yes,” Ori whispered. “Please go on.”

Dwalin’s thighs trembled with the strain, his prick huge and red and bobbing so temptingly, Ori wished his could suck it all down at the same time, even if he tried he’d end up broken in half. He put his hands on Dwalin’s thighs and felt the muscles flex and strain. He knew it would be a race to see who would last longer.

Ori fought to keep his eyes open. He didn’t want to miss a second of this, even as his pelvis tightened and his muscles threatened to thrust him up.

Dwalin smiled down on him.

“A’right’?”

“That’s… that feels amazing. How does this feel to you? I’m inside you!”

“Yeh feel lovely. I need t’ move. I’ll try t’ be careful.”

“You’re not hurting me. Take what you need.”

Dwalin lowered himself with a sigh.

“You’re beautiful,” said Ori.

Dwalin chuckled.

“If I am, it’s ‘cos yeh make me feel tha’ way.”

“I think I have to move, too. I’m sorry.”

“Don’ be sorry. We’re doin’ this t’gether. D-don’ know how it ends up.”

The pace quickened and the squeaking of the oil forced giggles from Ori’s throat. The bed springs squeaked, and this time not because Ori was jumping up and down on them. Rather, they were jumping up and down on them together.

He laughed.

“Wha’s go’ ye so tickled, me wee gem?”

“Does this make you Beorn? Or me?”

Even as Ori strained up into the tight heat, he felt pleasure stealing his control. He recalled Kivi had mentioned something about changing the pattern of his breathing to postpone climax, but the details eluded him and he wasn’t about to stop to look them up. Right now, he didn’t think they would help him anymore than Mr. Dezimahl’s numbers.

“Mahal! Dwalin-”

“Ohhhh. Grab me cock, love.”

That waylaid his climax. He slid his still slick hands up and around the cock he’d so desperately wanted to suck and throttled it in time with their bucking. He wondered if his grip was too tight, but Dwalin couldn’t tell him, head thrown back, mouth working in silent, delirious murmurings. Ori put his feet flat to the mattress for purchase and thrust without thought, throwing himself into the moment.

The journey went on and on.

Sweat poured down Dwalin’s chest in fascinating little rivers, a drop glistening from one of his nipple rings for an instant before flicking off. Pearls of precum beaded at Dwalin’s slit and oozed over. Abruptly, Dwalin changed his angle and thrust himself hard on Ori’s cock.

The warrior’s cry rose almost to a scream as he pumped without rhythm, He spent wildly over
Ori’s chest and belly, yet he never stopped moving, his grip around Ori’s shaft yanking Ori along with him to the edge of the abyss. Ori was forced to let go of Dwalin as his husband fell forward onto his hands and used the leverage to impale himself over and over.

Now Ori squeezed his eyes shut as pleasure took him, and he was a willing captive to Dwalin’s body. He gave up every illusion of control and let Dwalin carry him to completion.

As always it was ecstasy tinged with regret. The pleasure rolled though his blood, and he was sorry to see it end.

The stillness stole over him. Dwalin lay atop him, the pair of them panting like ponies. Ori felt himself slip wetly out of his husband as the tremors slowly faded.

“Dwalin?”
The warrior pulled back and looked down at him.
“Love?”
“You’re wonderful.”
“So’re yeh.”
“Did I see to you properly?”
Dwalin chuckled, leaned down and kissed him.
“Ghivasha, what do you think?”
“That these sheets need to be boiled and thrown over a hedge and so do I.”
“So, yeh want me t’ call our Wandi back?”
“Funny dwarf.”
Beverages, Breakfast, and the Box.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Yes, this is the chapter you’ve all been waiting for. Time for our beloved dwardor to… eat breakfast! Yes, and then open that mysterious box from Khazad-dûm! Be sure and have plenty of snacks and beverages on hand, this is a long one! And please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwardor time, same dwardor tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

We’d like to take this moment to say "Happy Birthday" to @Fangirl_Forever!! Hope it was wonderful!!!

Ori heard birdsong and, with difficulty, dragged his eyes open. The light of dawn peeped in the bedroom window and Ori couldn’t move. He smiled happily. He and his husband had become glued together in sweaty sleep. With his face against Dwalin’s chest, listening to his heartbeat, Ori had no desire to move. He could see that Kihshassa was asleep on the largest branch of the stand for the ravens. Garnet had her head under her wing and Quartz was preening.

Quartz caught Ori’s eye and fluttered to land next to Ori’s head.

“Two smell,” the raven teased.

“Well, don’t go trying to hold our noses,” Ori whispered in reply.

Dwalin mumbled and his grip tightened. Ori tried valiantly not to giggle.

“What are you going to do about that?” Quartz wanted to know. He gestured down the bed with a wing.

Frowning, Ori raised his head a little. He saw what looked like the top half of a barrel at the end of the bed.

“Who put a barrel there?” he murmured.

“Donno,” Quartz admitted. “I was up in the aerie for a bit last night. Came back, it was there, and you two were snoring.”

“Any marks on it?” Ori whispered.

“Can’t find any. Maybe up against the bed.”

“Hmm, well, it’s not doing anything, so we’ll just wait.”

“I want to know what’s inside,” Quartz whinged.

Ori giggled and Dwalin’s eyes opened.

“Mornin’, me ghivashel.”

“Good morning, my buffalo.” Ori teased. “And how are we this bright day?”

Dwalin’s grin became lecherous and his hands gripped Ori’s waist. Ori giggled again and leaned forward to kiss him. They both became very interested in this pleasant pastime until Quartz fluttered up on Ori’s backside and demanded.

“What’s in the barrel?”

“My dick,” Dwalin replied, moving his hands to Ori’s rump and squeezing.

“This whole room stinks of both your dicks, so I can’t tell what’s in there.” Quartz complained.

“Garnet,” Dwalin called.

The she-raven flew over.

“He’s right,” she opined. “I can’t smell anything but your dicks, either.”
“Lass, why doncha, take him on a fligh’?”
“I want to know what’s in the barrel, too.”
“Wha’ barrel?” Dwalin asked, suddenly alert.
“There’s a barrel at the end of our bed,” Ori told him, rubbing his face in Dwalin’s chest fur.
“Apparently, it appeared last night when we were asleep, according to Quartz.”
There was a shriek outside the door.
“What in all Arda is this mess?” Dori was heard to cry out. “Powder, get back on my shoulder! Don’t start licking that dust! Oh! Don’t eat catnip now, Powder! Look at your brothers! They’re all…”
“Lit like th’ mountain lanterns,” Balin’s voice finished. “Up yeh come laddies. No face-lickin’ now. Th’ pair a’ yeh are gettin’ chucked int’ th’ garden t’ sober up.”
Dwalin and Ori looked at each other and snickered.
“I suppose we better get up and dressed,” Ori sighed. “I’d love to stay here, but I’m hungry.”
“Tha’ makes two a’ us.” Dwalin replied.
They unstuck themselves and got up. Ori peeked out of the bedroom door. The hallway was devoid of people. He turned back to Dwalin.
“Race you!”
Ori let out the shriek of a badger as he bounded down the hall to the bathroom, Dwalin hot on his heels.
“Dori’s Ori! You put some clothes on before you come through!” Dori shouted from the kitchen.
Once washed and dressed, Ori and Dwalin took time to comb and braid each other’s hair and put in their beads. They stripped the bed and put the bedding in the hamper with several gold coins buried throughout as an apology to the cleaning crew, who would have to tend to it.
Garnet and Quartz flitted about the barrel, scratching and pecking at it. Kihshassa dropped from the stand and crawled over to climb the barrel and sit on top of it.
Dwalin turned and lifted Kihshassa off the barrel and Quartz went to Ori’s shoulder.
Dwalin hefted the large keg and stood it on the bed, looking at it. Ori frowned at the runes, as they didn’t make sense to him.
“What’s that?” he asked. “The runes look like brewers’ marks.”
Dwalin squinted, read the runes and laughed.
“It’s a Lost Keg! Durin hid three kegs of his best brew across Middle Earth, enchanted, yeh know, so’s not t’ skunk out. This is one o’ th’ three!”
Ori glanced up toward the ceiling. “Alright, thank you, that’s one for you.”
“Idad Blu will be happy,” Quartz told Garnet, who cackled.
Dwalin boosted the keg to his shoulder and took Ori’s hand as they headed out to the breakfast parlor.
Ori bade everyone good morning as they entered. The only ones present were Thorin, Bilbo, Balin, and Dori. Butter and Sugar lolled on the floor.
“You are not drinking that for breakfast,” was Dori’s first comment when they entered the room.
“Naw, it’ll wait,” said Dwalin. “Somethin’ this special yeh save fer Yule.”
Thorin sat back in his chair, peering at the runes.
“Is that one of the Lost Kegs?”
“Yes,” said Ori. “Nice to know Durin keeps his word. And I didn’t even have to die!”
Dori dropped the wooden spoon into the porridge tureen on the table and scolded.
“Really, pet, must you say such things?”
Dwalin put the keg on a stand near the side board and joined Ori at the table. Dori passed them bowls of porridge with dried berries and nuts poured on top. Dori twitched, rose, and left the room, muttering.
“Honestly, it’s far too soon for you to be sitting on my bladder like this.”
Ori looked at Balin who was looking after his mate with raised eyebrows.
“How far along do you think Dori might be?” Ori asked.

“How far,” Balin muttered. “I’ll get Oin to have a look.”

Bilbo took over the dishing up, then called Frodo and Sam in from the meadow where they cavorted with Fanny and the warg pups. Ori could see all of them running around Fanny, who occasionally tapped one or other with her trunk. At Bilbo’s call, they came scampering in and Thorin lifted the faunts into their seats while the pups piled in to be with their mothers, all except Killer, who went to Dwalin, whining to be picked up. Dwalin picked up the pup and set him in his lap. Dwalin patted Killer and Ori scratched behind Killer’s ear and got his face swiped wetly.

Bilbo set porridge bowls before the faunts and poured milk. Ori shoveled porridge into his mouth. Thorin was eating his porridge plain and he dipped each spoonful into a cup of milk beside his bowl. Bilbo put a teaspoonful of brown sugar on Frodo’s and Sam’s porridge then settled to his own, after pouring a little cream on top.

Mistress Dazla came through with a platter of poached eggs and a pile of sausages and black pudding. The Groinuls arrived, called greetings and seated themselves. Bilbo handed the serving spoon to Gloin to ladle out for his family.

Thorin finished and rose. Butter and Sugar bounced up and rubbed up against him, making happy noises.

Thorin went through to the kitchen and came back with the warg’s feeding pans filled with their chow. Thorin put these down. The wargs looked up at him expectantly.

“Come eat,” he allowed them, and they did, with noisy enjoyment. Thorin looked over at Gimli, who shook his head around a full mouth.

“We fed Romy already,” Legolas translated, reaching down between his and Gimli’s chairs where Ori saw, when he craned his neck, that Romy was snoozing.

Dori came back in and looked around to make sure everyone had food. Long minutes of munching followed.

Finally, Oin rose, wiping his mustache.

“Come here, luv. Yer Balin wants me t’ have a look at you.”

“Nonsense,” Dori protested. “I’m fine.”

Frodo and Sam having finished their breakfasts, Bilbo shooed them back outside.

Oin removed what looked three tiny cups attached by tubing. He stuck two in his ears.

“Open the tunic, luv,” he ordered.

“We’re having a meal!” Dori objected. Balin rose and gently turned Dori to face the wall and everyone looked discreetly away.

“Hmmmm,” Oin said.

“I told you I was fine,” Dori said.

The sisters and Glorfindel arrived. Glorfindel went to the table, but the sisters immediately went to Dori.

“Ooo, aren’t you plumpin’ up nice, our Dori!”

“Aye, I’m thinkin’ a girly, love.”

“Oin can hear my heartbeat and the baby’s heart beat.” Dori began to explain.

“I’m hearin’ three,” Oin barked.

Oin waved him over. Balin went as though in a fog. Oin stuck the ear parts into Balin’s ears and press the third against a small open area in Dori’s tunic.

Oin listened. Dori snatched one ear piece away and listened, too. Dori’s face was a picture of wonder then her eyes lit up and filled with tears.

“I have two in here, darling!”

Balin fainted dead away.

Gloin tutted and Oin said, “Aye, there he goes.”
Thorin, Dwalin, Gloin, and Glórfíndel lifted Balin to a chair and held his tea cup to his lips. Binni and the sisters sneaked and hugged Dori. Ori absorbed this news then flung himself at Dori.

“Ori’s Dori!”
The sisters moved so Ori could hug Dori. Dori laughed and cuddled Ori close.

“My pet, I seem to be making you an uncle twice over!”
Balin recovered and rose to his feet. Dori kissed Ori’s cheek and crossed to Balin. They embraced. Everyone else left them to each other and sat back down to eat.

Nori and Bofur came in, ferrets bumbling after them.

“What’s to do?” Bofur asked, glancing at Balin and Dori, but addressing everyone else. Ori rushed over to plow into Nori.

“Dori’s having twins!”

“What the fuck?” Nori got out.

Dori and Balin parted happily and Dori turned to Nori.

“Yes, Oin has just informed us I’m having twins.”
Nori stared.

“Rubbish! Yer havin’ me on!” Nori said and laughed heartily.

Bofur’s eyes slid to Dori. Bofur swallowed and said nothing. Dori huffed and flapped a hand at Oin. Oin came around, grabbed Nori, hauled him over to Dori, shoved the listening device into Nori’s ears and Dori put the other end to her belly.

“There a heartbeat!” Nori crowed. “And another liddle one an’ another…liddle one…?”
Nori backed off, staring. Dori raised a triumphant eyebrow. Nori threw himself at Dori.

“You got twins, our Dori!” Nori shouted, lifting Dori off her feet and dancing about.

“Put the Bearer down,” yowled Oin. “She’s in a delicate condition.”

“Ha!” Nori retorted. “There ain’t nuffin delicate about our Dori!” But he did put Dori down again and hugged her.

Dori returned to her seat beside Balin who had pulled out her chair, gazing at her rapturously.

“Congratulations, our Dori,” Bofur said. “May we send a raven t’ tell th’ family out at the Inn?”

“Ha!” Nori retorted. “There ain’t nuffin delicate about our Dori!” But he did put Dori down again and hugged her.

“Twins?” Sculdis gasped.

“Indeed, cousin!” Balin smiled.

Sculdis went back and picked her chair off the floor where she’d knocked it getting to Dori. “Twins,” Dain repeated. “Twins….” Dain fixed Balin with a fierce eye. “How many bloody times a nigh’ did yeh tup me siblin’ t’ put two in there!?”

Thorin came within an inch of a spit-take over the table and Dwalin choked on a mouthful of egg. The Groinuls tried desperately not to laugh but failed. Legolas looked confused. Oin rose and bellowed.

“That’s not how it works! How batshit crazy do you have to be to think that?”

“How, in th’ name a’ Mahal’s hairy arse, would I know?” Dain shouted back. “There’s never
been twins born t’ a dwarf!"
   “Elves, hobbits and men have twins, it’s all in—”
   “Mixed race don’t matter. It ain’t like any such as our Ruelis ever popped out two a’ once.” Dain barked. “Wha’ if Balin did somethin’ unnatural t’ me wee sib?”
   “Dain!” Dori cried. Balin facepalmed and groaned. Sculdis helped Dain to focus his attention on his breakfast. Baluchistan applied himself to a couple of Dain’s sausages.
   Dwalin recovered himself, kissed Ori, rose and went to thump his forehead to Balin’s. “Well done, brother.”
   “Thank yeh kindly, brother.” Balin shoved his chair out to reach up and give Dwalin a hug. Dwalin returned the hug and, with a silly grin, sat down on Balin’s lap. “Oof!” Balin objected.
   “Aaah, brother!” Dwalin said, in a sentimental tone. “T’ think a’ yeh makin’ me ‘n uncle an’ at yer age. Why, I remember when I were nothin’ bu’ a wee badger—”
   “Gettoff!” Balin struggled but Dwalin slouched, spreading his weight, never pausing in his oration.
   “Runnin’ about th’ place, gettin’ int’ trouble wi’ our Thorin there, an’ now yer settled an’ makin’ me an uncle.”
   Balin gave a mighty grunt and shoved Dwalin bodily off him. Dwalin slid to the floor, never stopping to tussle, went on, “An’… Oi!” Dwalin was on his feet, glaring at the couple, roaring. “Th’ pair a’ yeh aren’t married!”
   “I warned you, Ori’s Dori,” Ori chimed in merrily.
   “It’s shocking, I tell you,” Nori threw in his two coppers. “Fine example f’r our liddle Ori. No wonder he eloped!”
   “Thorin,” Dain bellowed, “marry this pair righ’ now! Think a’ th’ scandal!”
   Thorin was too busy trying not to fall out of his chair with laughter. Glorfindel put an arm about each of the sisters and watched the antics with a grin that displayed all his shiny teeth to admiration.
   “Of course,” Ori said half to himself. “That explains that dream.”
   The room fell instantly silent. “What dream, Ori?” Thorin inquired slowly.
   “Not another quest, pet!” Dori almost wailed.
   “No!” Ori said. “It was the night I got my tattoo from Mahal. I was dreaming I was in His forge and Mahal was telling Yavanna He had decided what to do with a pair of matching amethysts and then He accidentally set Yavanna’s impatiens on fire and Ulwe had to put them out and Yavanna said She had to go find a mop as there wasn’t a valar of mopping and Mahal said twins! I said I didn’t want to get pregnant and they laughed at me and put me back to sleep.”
   Silence.
   “Well,” Balin smiled at Dori and patted her belly. “We’ll be sure t’ have a good welcome f’r our wee amethysts when they arrived, won’t we beloved?”
   Dori beamed at him. Dwalin hugged Ori and muttered in his hair, “So bloody glad it’s our Dori an’ no’ yeh, me gem.” “Me, too!” Ori whispered back.
   Thranduil, Cemnesta, Bard, and the Bardlings came in. “What’s happening?” Tilda demanded over the greetings of her family. “We heard yelling.”
   “Dori’s pregnant with twins,” Legolas informed her as she romped to his side and clambered into his lap. “Oooo!” Tilda enthused and started to eat Legolas’ toast with gusto. He giggled and placed an egg on the left over piece for her. Gimli ruffled her hair, winked at her, and spread another slice of toast with nicely fried black pudding and added it to Legolas’ plate.
   Thranduil went to kiss Dori and pat Balin’s shoulder. Bard followed this and smiled on Dori.
   “I suppose it’s a last wish from Mathilde. She told me twins ran in her family.”
   “Oh, how very naughty of her!” Dori laughed. “Of course, she was so large and heavy with Bain,
we did think she might be having twins.”

Bard turned a teasing look at Bain, who had come to hug Dori as well.

“Yes,” Bard replied tousling his son’s head. “My mother-in-law always said Bain was so big, Mathilde must have been pregnant for a year.”

“Why?” Thranduil inquired, smiling down on Bain and straightening his tunic.

“He was born in late winter,” Bard explained. “Too cold to come out.”

“Clever lad,” said Balin, winking at Bain, who was blushing.

Sigrid kissed Dori’s cheek and hugged her.

“I’m so happy for you, Dori.”

“Thank you, my little childling. I do hope you might help me sometimes?”

“Oh yes!” Sigrid cried, delighted.

“I shall hold myself ready to assist you in any way, Honored Bearer,” Cemnesta added, also kissing Dori’s cheek.

“Sweet child,” Dori cooed to the elf who was several thousand years older then her.

“I suppose,” said Thorin philosophically, “this puts paid to our efforts to keep the people from thinking Mahal is the father.”

In Ori’s head, Mahal mused, “Should I print ‘It’s all Balin’s fault’ on each twin’s forehead?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Ori muttered out of the side of his mouth.

Galadriel and the other Lórien elves entered with Fili and Kili and Tauriel. The news was broadcast and there was more hugging, kissing, and congratulations. Galadriel, Gridr and Binni soon had their heads together discussing baby things. Dori sat serenely, basking in the delight of the family about her.

Ori smiled, it was so wonderful to see Dori so happy. Nori and Bofur were happy and Ori was perfectly happy with Dwalin. He decided there was nothing further to think about or attend to concerning his late…Rikhma. She didn’t matter. She was to be born elsewhere and learn her lessons again. The Brothers Ri were now part of a large, noisy, lovely family.

Ori laid his head against Dwalin’s shoulder. Dwalin kissed his brow.

“Wha’ go’ yeh smilin’, love?”

Ori turned and grinned up at him.

“You.”

Dwalin laughed.

Next arrived the Rivendell elves, and Aragorn and Boromir. They were also delighted with the news. Lindir told Elrond they would have to look out the baby things that had been used by Elrohir and Elladan. Elladan and Elrohir looked horrified that these things had been kept at all, which surprised both Fili and Kili, who asked if these nursery things had been used by Elrond’s parents.

Granny Klak came in with Jim and his family and was delighted with Dori’s news. Ruelis and Jim laughed and Mavey and Floris crowded around Dori, while Granny Klak shed a few proud tears.

Dipfa came in with Eowyn and Nomirliel. Dipfa look very proud. Eowyn was dressed in a short blue and tan striped tunic with front pockets, a pair of blue baggy breeches that dropped to just below her knees, and sported a pair of new, tall, tan colored boots with copper toes and flecked with little triangles of copper studs.

Nomirliel was clad in a white blouse heavily embellished with embroidery of varying shade of green leaves. At her waist was a wide white leather belt with a circular pewter buckle. Her long green skirt, embroidered with silver dandelion seeds, was actually a pair of baggy trousers, with side and back pockets, neatly covered her new green velvet slippers with tiny heels.

Everyone complimented these new fashions and Dipfa was given a round of applause. Dori and Balin’s news delighted both Eowyn and Nomirliel and sent Dipfa into a fever of drawing baby garments while she ate.

Red Queen flew in. Mistress Dazla fetched out a platter holding a nicely roasted ham bone, marrow still melting out.

Red Queen consumed this with relish and magnanimously offered Dori some of her own down
feathers for the nest and inquired when Dori would begin laying.

Nori and Ori glanced at each other and grinned at Dori.

“Aye,” Nori said, thoughtfully stirring a spoonful of blackberry jelly into his tea. “It’s past time you an’ the brother-in-law got started building that nest. I’m sure there’s some choice twigs down by the River Runnin’.”

“Don’t be silly Nori!” Ori got out before Dori had a chance. “Dori and Balin don’t want twigs for their nest, they want velvet cushions.”

“Velvet cushions’re no good,” Nori argued. “Velvet ain’t gonna sop up any mess!”

Red Queen’s head went from one combatant to the other in fascination.

“Neither will twigs!” Ori put in, clenching Dwalin’s hand as the big warrior fought a losing battle with laughter.

“Enough!” cried Dori banging her serving spoon on the table.

“We’ve already go’ a crib,” Balin put in smoothly, taking Dori’s hand in a comforting way, thus stilling the spoon. “Haven’ we, beloved?”

“Oh, yes!” Dori cried in delight. “Dearest Red Queen, I must show it to you when we’ve all finished here.”

“Indeed,” Red Queen inclined her head. “We are most eager to see all your preparation. The first egg laying can be a delicate affair. If you wish it, do summon us to your side when it commences, we shall be happy to coax you through it. Until that time, we advise you to practice relaxing and clenching the orifice.”

Galadriel, Gridr, Dis, and Binni all did spit takes and Bilbo dropped his toast in his porridge bowl.

“Hear that, our Dori,” Nori shouted. “Get a wiggle one an’ clench that orifice!”

“Clench them all!” Ori encouraged.

Omi and Loli shrieked. Bujni blushed and Fili and Kili looked like they wanted to slide under the table.

Eowyn nudged Boromir with her shoulder.

“I’m clenching mine right now!”

“Shut up!” Boromir grimaced and shoved his plate of eggs away. “You’ve put me off my food.”


“Aaaagh!” Boromir yelled and slapped his hands over his ears, “I don’t hear you! La-la-la-la-la!”

Aragorn put his face in his hands and moaned.

“I’m clenching, too!” Arwen cooed, leaning her head against her betrothed. She looked up at him vapidly, fluttering her lashes.

Elrond and Lindir looked appalled, while the twins and Legolas and Gimli roared with laughter.

“Very good!” sang out Granny Klak. “If you got one; one-two-three: clench!”

“Clench and relax!” shouted the sisters.

The shrieks of female laughter erupted all round the table.

“Look, Da!” called Tilda, “I can clench two orifices at once.”

Bard took a horrified look at his daughter, who was holding her nose. Bard turned green and looked helplessly at Thranduil, who had gone remarkabley pale.

“You’re very shiny,” Tilda called from the far side of the table.

“Yes, my dear. It takes some getting used to.”

“What happened?” Thorin demanded looking the wizard up and down. Ori thought Bibo was going to giggle or at least make a snide remark.

“Oh,” Tharkûn said dismissively. “I availed myself to one of Mister Wandi’s special mud baths.
Nice, warm mud. Relaxing. I confess, I fell asleep. I had a dream that the valar had gathered round to
tell me I’d done a good job in Arda, so I was being promoted to Saruman’s former position as head
of the order. When I awoke, I was Gandalf the White.”

“That must have been shocking!” Granny Klak commiserated.
“Not as shocking as finding they’d done away with my hat. I rather liked that hat.”
“What did Mr. Wandi say?” Legolas asked, eyes twinkling at his eldest brother.
“I said,” Mr. Wandi replied, “Hon, the valar gave you a dye job.”
“He calls you ‘hon’ now, doesn’t he,” Thorin said, politely.
“Better than ‘toots’,” the wizard sighed.

Mistress Dazla entered from the kitchen, her brow furrowed in consternation. She went right to
Thorin.

“Your majesty, there’s a visitor in the sitting room.”

Thorin rose.
“I wasn’t expecting visitors. Did anyone hear the front door?”
“I don’t believe the front door was involved, King Thorin. I was just tidying up there and King
Theoden appeared on one of the couches.”

Thorin shot out of the breakfast room door in an instant, Ori and Eowyn close on his heels,
followed by the rest of the herd.

It was Theoden sure enough. He sat, looking confused, wearing trousers, an under tunic, and a
pair of house slippers. He sported a napkin tied around his throat and held a knife in one hand and a
slice of buttered bread in the other.

“Theoden?” Thorin ventured.

“Ah, Thorin,” said Theoden. “Good morning, all. Eowyn! You look well.”

Eowyn rushed to kiss his cheek and sit beside him.

“Uncle? Are you all right?”
“I’m probably better off than your cousin right now.”
“What happened?” Eowyn pressed.
“Someone said something about opening a box, and suddenly I’m here. I suspect I vanished
before Theo’s eyes.”

Ori growled into the ether, “Kidnapping? Really?”

“No’ t’ worry, me scribe,” said Mahal in Ori’s mind. “I’ll put ‘im back soon enough.”

“His son must be having a fit right now!”

“True enough. Here.”

Theodred appeared on Theoden’s other side with wild eyes. He looked all around himself, still in
his nightshirt, and finally he said, calming, “Oh. Dwarrow. Hullo, Idad Thorin.”

“Good morning, Theo.”

“Great,” said Ori. “Now we’ve kidnapped the heir as well as the king. What are his people to
think?”

“D’yeuh wan’ me t’-“

“No!” Ori shouted. “Please leave the population of Rohan where it is!”

“An’ wha’ would yeh have me do?”

“I don’t know! Tack a note on the throne: Back in five minutes? We should at least tell someone
in charge that they’re here.”

Despite getting only half the conversation while finishing his bread, Theoden had the jist of Ori’s
concern.

“My door warden, Háma-”

A liveried man of Rohan with a small beard and quantities of red hair appeared before the couch.
Dori said, “At least he’s fully dressed.”

“Theoden King!” The man shouted, sword drawn. “Where are we?”

“Erebor,” said Theoden. “Put up your blade, Háma, we’re perfectly safe. Apparently the prince
and I have some business to attend here, and we’ll be sending word about when we’ll return.”

“Er… yes, my king.”
And he was gone again.
Theoden rose and peered at Thorin.
“I know people come and go quickly here, Thorin, but is there something else we should know about? Do you know why we’re here? Oh, hello, Gondor, Lady Arwen. Bearer Dori, I understand congratulations are in order.”
Theoden bowed and embraced Dori.
“Thank you, Theoden dear. We’ve just discovered we’re expecting twins. Thorin, perhaps we should return to the breakfast parlor? I’m sure our new guests could use breakfast and a cup of tea. And perhaps some medicinal brandy.”
“Breakfast?” Theodred perked up. He disentangled himself from Bain, Fili, Kili and the rest of the younger set. “That’s the magic word!”
Ori asked the ether, “I don’t suppose you could magic up some clothes for them?”
Jim said, “We should have something in the caravan. I’ll just-”
“Sit down an’ finish eating,” said Ruelis, “while I pop out t’ get it. I’m not sure King Theoden’d be happy in a sequin leotard.”
Mavey shook her head.
“He wouldn’t fit in my outfit.”
“And it’s not his color anyhow,” said Floris.
While they sat down to eat, Ruelis and Miss Oqizla ran out to find some appropriate clothes for their unexpected guests, who seemed far more happy to be there than disturbed at how they arrived. Theoden and Theodred didn’t even bat an eyelash when introduced to Red Queen, who, after greeting the king and prince and exchanging a few pleasantries, flew off to oversee the arranging of her new aeries still being carried out.
Dori put a cup of tea in front of Theoden, who beamed at her. Dori patted his shoulder. Mistress Dazla announced the Gamgees who trooped through and partook of their second breakfast. Bell and Hamfast were delighted to see King Theoden and Theodred once again.
“And, so?” Theoden asked Thorin.
Thorin turned to Ori.
“And, so?” Thorin asked.
Ori weighed his words, but there seemed to be nothing for it.
“You majesty, I believe you’re here because Mahal wants you here.”
“I didn’t think Mahal would regard us men one way or the other,” said Theoden. “What’s happened?”
“We’re about to open a box which will reveal the origins of the house of Durin, and, by extension, all dwarrow of Longbeard blood.”
Theodred chewed thoughtfully and swallowed.
“But, we’re not dwarrow. Are we, Da?”
Theoden shook his head.
“Not as far as I know.”
Lady Galadriel swirled her toast around her plate to pick up every trace of elderberry jam.
“Race doesn’t seem to enter into this,” she said. “Ori, I get the impression that more is at stake here than whatever is in that box.”
“I do, too, Lady Galadriel. But the voices are oddly silent about such details.”
Durin snickered.
“Oh, jus’ yeh wait.”
“That isn’t comforting,” Ori muttered.
“Wasn’ meant t’ be.”
“Do you want me to open this box or not?”
“G’wan. Th’ only way t’ keep yeh from openin’ tha’ box would be t’ handcuff yeh t’ th’ desk in th’ other room.”
“Funny.”
Kili piped to the startled Theoden, “The valar are much chattier with our Ori these days.”
“Durin isn’t a valar,” said Ori pointedly to the ceiling. “He’s a pain in my… Stop giggling, Durin! Now you’re just creeping me out.” Thorin shook his head.

“Maybe we should apply ourselves to our food for right now. For good or ill, I want to see what’s in that box, too.”

Ruelis and Oqizla quickly returned and the Rohan pair got properly dressed.

“This tunic’s nice, and, Ruelis, how much do you want for these boots?” said Theoden. Ori studied the burgundy leather thigh-highs, liberally fringed along the length, with a short black heel. He wondered if Dipfa had long lost family practicing fashion design in the horse country.

The entire party being dressed and fortified, they all travelled down the lifts and through the corridors in the deepest archives, where the oldest and rarest manuscripts were kept. Ori squinted out into the dark, looking for signs of the archivists, but they were oddly silent. Or perhaps they just couldn’t be heard for the noise of dozens of people strolling through their corridors.

The Durins, their families and friends from all over Arda, Ori’s Company and his bullies, had been joined by the chairs of the scribes guild and at least twenty or thirty scribes. The younger set wheeled the mithril masters in a parade of old touring chairs, Master Kir last of all, muttering that he should at least have been given a flag for his.

“Yeh young dwarrow have no sense a’ occasion.”

Hamfast commiserated and politely tied his red and white polka dotted handkerchief about the top of Master Kir’s cane. This made the ancient dwarf chuckle and hold his makeshift standard high. Roäc, Quartz, Garnet, Mica, and Sapphire fluttered above them.

They all stopped at a nondescript door, the seventh in the row of such doors.

Brur handed Ori the key and Ori felt almost ravenous as the door swung open and the light flashed on in a huge room, revealing book cases filled with books of all sizes, writing implements from all the ages, and ancient scrolls from before the binding of books. On one work table lay some precious few shards of ostrikai. Ori thought some scholars must be hard at work on them, judging by the reams of notepaper and bins of broken nibs.

As the party made their way through the chamber led by Brur, Ori glanced over the translations and realized that so far what they had uncovered were grocery lists and recipes for jelly buns.

Normally it would be hard for Ori to keep himself from leafing through every book he saw. Actually, it would be hard to keep himself from licking every book he saw, but now he only had eyes for the crate, larger than he remembered, sitting like an island, in the middle of the empty floor, with a low scaffolding around it, since the dwarrow wouldn’t have been able to see inside of it otherwise.

All of the other work tables had been cleared and covered in clean white cloths to hold whatever they found in the box.

“This is a remarkably tidy crate,” said Ori, looking it over.

Omi giggled.

“We had to do something, Ori, the anticipation was terrible!”

“Don’t worry,” said Loli, “we were careful to check for inscriptions, but there weren’t any. I hope this is the right box.”

So did he. It would be awful to have risked all their lives for a box of old Imad Gisis’ dented cookware, but he doubted Mahal wouldn’t have let them leave without the right one.

The masters were wheeled up front as the party formed a wide circle around it. Elrond, Lindir, and Celeborn hovered eagerly. Lady Galadriel perched on a scholar’s stool, her arms around her knees. She looked terribly pleased. Theoden, Theodred, Hamfast, and Bell looked over the box curiously as Thorin explained what it was and how it had come to be here beneath the mountain.

Frodo, the Gamgee faunts, and Tilda examined the box all around, supervised by Boromir, joined by the eldest Gamgee daughter, Lavender, and Floris and Mavey.

Ori shivered. He grabbed Dwalin’s hand and drew him forward, drawing strength from his buffalo.
“Ready, love?” Dwalin asked, kissing the top of his head.
Ori climbed the scaffolding, put his fingers on the top of the box and sent out a wordless prayer.
The room shifted around them, the plain, smoothed stones and leveled floor grew rough and grey
with the soot of a thousand fires, and the heat and smell of the forge swept over them. Apparently,
they were no longer under the mountain, but wherever Durin kept his forge, but the air and heat was
tempered so that the non-dwarrow could survive it.

There, Durin sat on his work table, swinging his legs back and forth, looking immensely pleased.
When all the ravens squawked as one, Ori realized he was not the only one who could see him.
“King Durin?” Thorin asked.
“How’re yeh keepin’, our Thorin?”
Thorin did not seem to know where to look.
“Well, thank you. And yourself?”
“Calm down, our Thorin. Yeh get any more polite, yeh’ll pull a muscle.”
The elves and men stared in great curiosity. The other dwarrow bowed.
“Who’s that?” Tilda asked Thranduil, pointing at the huge dwarf. Thranduil gently covered the
finger, taking the child’s hand and turning her to lean against his legs and watch.
“Durin! What are you doing here?” Ori asked.
Durin winked at Tilda thencocked his head at Ori.
“Waitin’ f’r yeh t’ open me bloody box, yeh numpty. Yeh did go on this quest f’r me.”
“Mahal’s hind end,” Kili whispered, “he really is… dwarfy, isn’t he.”
“Ori,” Fili urged, “maybe we should open the box now.”
“Open the box!” Frodo and Sam shouted excitedly. This was immediately echoed by Gimli,
Legolas and Eowyn.
This galvanized Ori’s attention back to the box.
“Right, let’s open it,” Ori said, forgetting Durin and reaching for the lid.
“Y’ think it’s booby trapped?” Nori asked from the shadows.
“No,” Ori and Durin chorused.
“We did that bit already,” Eowyn put in.
“Y’ sure about that, Chick?” prodded Nori, ignoring the first king
“Yes,” Ori said, without hesitation.
“Hush up, our Nori,” Durin added.
“Right. Hushin’ up.”
Everyone in the room was focused on the box as Dain, Dwalin, and Vi and Margr used small pry
bars to loosen the nails. The wood creaked, old and dry.
Dain grunted.
“We won’t be able t’ ge’ th’ lid off in one piece, nadadith.”
“It can’t be helped,” Ori decided. “If you can, save the nails for Gridr.”
“That’s me chook,” laughed Gridr.
The top came away in three large sections, but there was nothing on the underside but a tiny mark,
burnt into the wood.
“Das, Daughter of Tas,” Ori read as Loli made notations. “It must have been depressing to have
to make something this plain and simple.”
“She probably threw this together in fifteen minutes,” Thorin commented, “which means it could
have held up one end of the mountain for at least a thousand years.”
Ori motioned his team. Arne, Loli, Omi and Bujni followed him up, Brur assisting Jansad after
them.
Loli did a fast sketch of the contents as they had been packed in the box. Everything inside was
wrapped carefully in linens, some of which were embroidered, the colors in the threads still vibrant.
Jansad nodded her approval.
“These are scribes we’re talking about,” she said. “Even the way they packed it could have
meaning.”
“Where do I start?” Ori asked.
“Same way you read, I think,” said Jansad. “Right to left, up to down.”

It made sense, but Gimli said, “Wait a mo’. Lemme see tha’ sketch?”

Loli handed it down to him and Gimli scowled at the drawing, then he laughed.

“See th’ dark cloth among th’ light? Yeh can just pick it out. It’s a rune.”

“Yes,” said Ori, giggling. “It’s the rune for: ‘You found it!’

“Cheeky bastards,” Balin said with a grin. Durin snorted and there were giggles from several people.

Ori lifted the linens away, aware of every snag of dry skin against the delicate fabric. He and Arne handed the pieces down to Podvu, Kacuho, and Rouho, who laid them out on a table with Ubqim’s, Ruelis’, Arwen’s, and Lindir’s assistance. Some of the pieces were fragile, but still supple, and others so embroidered with figures as to be nearly inflexible. Frowning, Bilbo glanced at the fabric then turned his attention back to the box.

There were bound canvas parcels of varying sized, and boxes upon boxes, big and small, oblong, on occasion round, all placed with exquisite care, and, if what they’d seen was any indication, packed that way, too.

They pulled the first wooden case from the second tier, right corner. It was heavy, the contents slightly shifting. Ori didn’t think these were books or even scrolls. He carefully set it down on the side of the box. It had an inset latch that popped open at a touch.

“Something new for you to study, Gridr,” Ori called out.

He heaved it over to her and, with Gloin’s help, she carried it out to the corner and started to remove pieces further wrapped, this time in emerald velvet.

“What in Mahal’s blessed boots?” she asked.

“What is it?” Ori asked. “They’re too large t’ be earrings, unless they’re f’r orcs ‘r somethin’.”

Gloin held up a few crystals for all to see. The gems sparkled, etched and shaped like diamonds, but gleaming poisonous green, purplish pinks and sulphur yellow. Jim and Granny Klak each took one and examined them.

“Must be dozens jus’ in this box,” Gridr considered. “Some sort’ve an ornament. Look, here’s some little silver, rose gold and gold discs. They all have eye-hooks embedded in the tops, so they must’ve dangled from somethin’.”


“They’re not so bad,” Bard put in as Thranduil looked over his shoulder, brows raised. Sigrid held up two baubles to her ears, making Nomiriel and Ruelis giggle.

Not knowing what they were looking for, never mind what they would find, Ori began to pull out the first layers of bundles at random.

“Master Brur, I seem to have come upon a cache of books,” said Ori.

“Aye, go’ th’ catalogue righ’ here. Wha’re we lookin’ a’? Kin yeh read ‘em?”

“This is nice,” Ori commented, opening a rather well polished brass box and looking in.

“The Book of Bearers’. They seem to be a set of seven, none of them have an author’s name, but the covers are black velvet.”

“Naturally,” Binni sniffed.

Dori nodded in agreement.

“Go on, pet. What does it say?”

“This is just the first volume. It’s entitled: Decoration.”

“Of what, pet?”

“A lot of different things. The chapter on Bearers’ chambers is one line: Don’t get in their way.”

“Tha’ explains our washroom,” Balin said philosophically.

“Then there’s a volume that seems to be mostly dance music.”

Ori passed this box of books to Arne, who reached down to Brur, but Binni’s arms were longer.

“Thank you, Ori,” said Binni, while Brur grumbled.

The books were a mixed lot. There were several boxes of books containing diagrams, apparently designs by Durin himself.
“Look, here’s his axe,” said Ori as he paged through.
“Wha’d we do with it, love?” Dwalin asked.
“It’s under the bed. Perfectly safe.”
Durin choked.
Ori and Arne and Dwalin heaved out these books and many hands reached forward and Jansad conducted the helpers to lay these out on one table.
Ori reached in again and removed something cached in a small leather portfolio decorated with strips of birch bark. He untied the leather thongs and opened it. He immediately realized what he was holding.
“This is a sketchbook of Celebrimbor’s,” Ori reported. “I recognize the style. Oh. Um. Lady Galadriel?”
“Yes, Ori?”
“Could you take this?”
“Oh!” Brur bellowed.
“Sorry, Master Brur,” grinned Ori. “You’ll see why in a moment.”
“Well!” Galadriel declared with a grin. “And not a stitch on either of them! Apparently when Celebrimbor said he was interested in hardware, he didn’t just mean door hinges.”
Jansad knocked Brur out of the way.
“Lemme see! By my beard! Oh, give it t’ Kili an’ Tauriel.”
Galadriel blinked.
“You think they need any suggestions?”
“They’ll be defending Teylan’s thesis! This is an exhibit to go along with it!”
Galadriel giggled as she handed Kili the portfolio. Kili looked in at a page. He frowned, then turned it sideways, then upside down, and finally said, “Oh!” He thought for a moment before adding, “I suppose it could work that way, too.”
He handed it to Tauriel who looked in, assisted by Normiriel and Granny Klak.
Dis leaned her head against Jani’s shoulder, mumbling something about raising badgers. Mavey and Floris whispered to each other and giggled.
Meanwhile, Master Brur was practically purple.
Noting this, Ori grabbed a rather fat, important looking volume at random and handed it down to the librarian.
Brur snatched it as if it were in danger of elf-appropriation and opened it triumphantly. Then his eyebrows plunged.
“I dunno, lad. I really didn’t think there’d be tha’ many recipes fer cram.”
“It’s a cram cookbook?” Eowyn asked in disgust.
“After a fashion, I suppose,” Brur shrugged.
“Burn it!” shouted Jani sending Dis and Thorin into a peal of laughter.
“Here’s another book,” said Ori quickly before Brur could scream about the folly of book destruction.
Brur took it and leafed through it.
“Aye, tha’s more like it. Nice recipe f’r cavern mushrooms righ’ off th’ bat. Mebbe a copy f’r Bombur an’ Erda next Yule.”
While Brur was thus distracted, Ori pulled out the final book in the cache.
The cover was studded in real diamonds. He didn’t even have to open it to know what it was.
“Wha’ yeh go’, laddie?” Brur asked over his shoulder.
Ori held up the item, almost sobbing with laughter.
“Queen Kivi!”
“That’s the original!” Brur roared
Someone had long ago set the marker ribbon to a specific page and Ori opened it knowing exactly what he’d find.
“Mahal’s hairy fucking balls,” he hissed.
“Now, Chick, language.”
“Shut up, Nori,” he said to the ceiling.

The illustration of Position 20 was not just a right hand page, but the left hand page was folded over, and when he unfolded it, there were more figures on those pages as well.

“We only had a third of the diagram!” Ori cried. “There are one, two… five other people in this position!”

“Sounds like a party,” said Dwalin.

“No wonder the directions don’t make any sense! You’d need a crane to do this with only two people!”

Sigrid and Tauriel looked at each other and laughed.

“That’s why,” Tauriel said merrily, passing it with a naughty grin to Theoden.

“This is a book of pornography!” the king shouted.

Boromir and Arwen snatched it from him.

While the adults passed the book around, Ori pulled out the plain oak panels where the books had rested and handed them over the edge to Gimli, who put them aside to be later dismantled and examined.

Ori looked back into the box to find the books had rested on more bundles of linens, pieces much like the others they had found. Carefully he lifted out the piles and handed them down to Bilbo. Under these, Ori found some odd, net-like circles, about the size of dinner plates.

“These look familiar,” said Ori, “but I can’t say where I’ve seen them before.”

“I have,” said Bilbo, reaching for them. “They’re doilies.”

“Why are they in this box?” Kili asked.

“Because, they go with the rest of the linens,” said Bilbo. The hobbit sent a look at Durin, adding, “Mithril doilies, my word.”

Ori looked over at the table where the hobbit and his nephew spread the pieces of wrapping cloth flat on the table, rearranging them. They were embroidered all over with a multitude of undwarflike figures.

“I don’t recognize this flower,” said Frodo, pointing as he hooked his chin over the tabletop.

Thorin picked him up and settled him on a stool.

“Mountain whites,” Bilbo supplied. “That’s what the design is called, anyway. The flower is supposed to stand for daring and courage, but this symbol for them is ancient, from the wandering times, I doubt anyone in the Shire has even seen a real one.”

“We call it eldwis,” said Oin. “It grows in mountain meadows, where we graze our goats.”

“Here’s crocuses,” said Frodo, “and snowdrops.”

“Married in the early spring then,” said Bilbo.

Thorin leaned over the table.

“You know what this is, ghivashel?” he asked Bilbo.

“Yes, it’s a hobbit marriage quilt.”

“If it’s bed linens, why is it in pieces?”

“Because it’s stitched together over time, like the marriage itself,” said Bilbo. “Every significant event in the marriage is commemorated with a new addition, a symbol, and flowers to represent the time of year. This is the top of the quilt. See the edging? That’s the same material that would have been used for the wedding gown. This is woven, and rather plain, but as time went on the materials and the threads grew richer. When you get here, this is the birth of a son. I don’t even think that thread is spun fiber.”

Thorin looked closely.

“No, it’s mithril thread.”

“I don’t get it,” said Omi. “Why is it in pieces?”

“Why is it even in this box?” Loli asked.

“The quilt is taken apart when both marriage partners have died,” said Bilbo. “Nowadays the scraps are given to family members as remembrances, but in the old days, when we buried our dead with their worldly possessions, the scraps were used to wrap grave goods. But these scraps are in perfect shape.”
“Maybe they’re still wrapping grave goods, after a fashion,” said Ori. He reached into the space in the box left by the material and found two more objects. Ori unwrapped a plain brown leather book, the edge bound with cord. There were no markings, no decorations or words across the entire cover, and when he opened it, he found pages of different sizes and shapes, some crisp, almost perfect, and some ancient to the point of crumbling, nearly every one in a different hand, as if they had come from a variety of works over time.

“Love?” Dwalin asked.

Ori’s hands shook as he turned the pages, reading. There was no continuation of text from one page to the next, but they all had one thing in common.

“It’s her,” he whispered. The room went quiet and every eye was on him. “It’s her.”

Dwalin eased over and peered down at the book. Ori leaned back against him. It felt so good.

Brur squinted.

“Th’ pages—“

“All torn out of other documents,” said Ori.

Now his heart pounded. These were stories, the history of his race from nearly the birth of Durin, and there was the story of Durin’s romance and marriage. Ori looked up at the first Durin, who beamed down on him, nodding.

“Oooo!” Omi squealed. “What is her name? What is it?”

Ori gave a watery giggle.

“It’s Sunflower.”

“A’ course it is!” Brur roared.

“And there’s a portrait of her,” Ori cried.

The scramble was the stuff of skirmishes. Durin chuckled at them as everyone in the room tried to climb up on Ori’s shoulders.

Dwalin, of course, could see it first, and he roared with laughter and shook his head, and roared some more.

“And?” Fili demanded. “And?”

Ori looked up at Thorin.

“Would you like to see, my king?”

“I would be happy and thrilled and honored, Lord Ori,” said Thorin.

Ori handed him the book. Thorin looked. Thorin snickered.

Thorin turned to Bilbo and said, “I owe you fifty gold.”

Bilbo grinned.

“I was never in any doubt.”

Thorin held the book so Bilbo could see it, then Bilbo looked over at the quilt and giggled in perfect glee.

“Malahl help you all, my dears, but I’m afraid you are Tooks.”

“W-wait,” Dain said in a choked tone, “are yeh sayin’ th’ mother a’ Longbeards, the queen a’ Durin, was a hobbit?”

Ori nodded like a maniac.

“Yes! Yes, she was!”

The surprise and jubilation and laughter was universal, except for Frodo, who looked at them in total confusion.

“Why is everybody so surprised?” Frodo asked.

“The Durins just discovered they’re related to hobbits,” said Bilbo.

Frodo giggled.

“I knew that!”

Again everyone fell quiet and looked surprised at Frodo, except for Durin, who giggled mischievously.

Kili got down on one knee and asked, “How do you figure that, Frodo?”

“You look just like mama, Kili!”

Kili’s mouth fell open and there was a few snickers around the room.
“Ummm,” said Frodo, perhaps realizing what he’d said, “But, you know, as a boy.”
Balin mused, “Makes sense, when yeh think on it. Th’ big, round eyes, th’ high cheekbones an’ smaller noses.”
“The hairy feet,” said Kili, standing.
“We’re dwarrow,” Fili pointed out. “We have hairy everything.”
“I wish I had access to my genealogical books,” said Bilbo. “I can only trace back to the founding of the Shire for written records, but before that, such things were remembered through stories, and those were recorded as well. The designs on the wedding quilt are definitely Tookish, however. We still use them,” Bilbo trailed off, then smirked. “I wonder if that’s where… Oh, but that’s rich.”
“What’s rich?” Ori asked.
“Fauntlings grow up hearing the tale of the little hobbit who lagged behind her family on their wanderings.”
“She got lost?”
“She got eaten by a mountain.”
“She got eaten by a mountain?” Thorin cried.
Durin roared with laughter.
“At least, she didn’t get eaten by a dwarf,” added Bilbo.
Nori stuck his head through the ceiling and opened his mouth, then apparently thought better of it as Durin sent him a stink eye.
“Your mother actually told you this story?” Thorin asked.
“No,” said Bilbo. “My mother wasn’t much for cautionary tales. She heard the story when she was about Frodo’s age and decided she would go find this mountain, slay it, and rescue the girl. She got lost in the old forest and they found her two days later, sleeping in a tree.”
Durin chuckled and lit his long very fancy pipe.
“Which apparently,” remarked Balin dryly, “th’ apple doesn’t fall far from. Bu’ why do we find all this ou’ now?”
“Maybe the ribbon,” said Ori. “I made an offering to Yavanna and buried a red ribbon under one of the oaks at the edge of Dale. Sigrid and I both did it. No dwarf has done that in a very long time.”
“Well done, lad,” Durin praised, releasing twelve smoke rings, one after another making Tharkûn look annoyed.
Thorin turned to look at his betrothed with a grin, Bilbo stood on tiptoe and kissed him.
“Silly dwarf.”
“But,” Durin continued, “yer only par’ way t’ th’ answer.”
“Durin! Are you through yet?” called a merry, unknown female voice. “Your supper is getting cold!”
Sunflower appeared, dressed in her namesake colors and wearing an apron which had obviously dueled a batch of spice cookies to the death and triumphed.
All the dwarrow bowed and Bilbo gasped, then beamed.
“Well, aren’t you a polite lot,” said Sunflower. “Obviously you got it from my side of the family.”
Frodo and Sam edged forward, mesmerized.
“You really are a hobbit!” Frodo breathed.
“And you smell like spice cookies!” Sam squeaked.
“So I do!” she cried. “Hmmm. Let’s see.”
She reached behind her back, toward nothing Ori could see, and when she pulled it forward again, she bore a trayful of cookies.
“Hope you don’t mind I borrowed your tray, Lady Dori,” she sparkled. “It’s just the perfect size!”
“No, no, not at all,” said Dori, “as long as you don’t break it over Nori’s head, it’s just fine!”
“Oh!” Nori cried from somewhere in the ceiling.
“Here you go,” said Sunflower. “Plenty enough for everyone.”
She turned to Ori and her smile grew fond.
“Spice cookie, Lord Ori? I’d say you’ve earned it.”
Her eyes were gold, her face rosy and freckled.

“Thank you, your majesty,” he said, even as he felt his cheeks burn.

Thorin said, “Queen Sunflower, we are honored by your presence. Welcome home.”

She reached over and patted his cheek. They were the same height, though she was soft and round, as a hobbit should be.

“I’m very glad to be back, my dear. Now you take care of Bilbo.”

“As often as I can and to the best of my ability, your majesty.”

“Oh, you Durins are so naughty!” giggled the first queen of dwarrow.

Durin reached a hand in to grab a cookie and she raised a brow, which caused him to draw it back.

“Honestly!” she cried. “As if you don’t have an entire jar waiting on the kitchen shelf!”

He blinked at her, as if seeing her for the first time, instead of just her cookies.

“Wait. Sunny?”

“Yes, love, I’m back.”

The room was filled with shouts and cheers as Durin, his eyes bright with love, embraced his wife and queen. The kisses were loud and desperate.

The ravens flew in circles around them, shrieking and cheering.

Dori and Galadriel caught the tray of cookies as it was flung in their direction.

Ori grinned at Thorin, who had tears in his eyes. Bilbo pounced on Ori, “You clever thing,” he laughed, hugging Ori tight. Ori hugged back and felt Dwalin’s arm about his waist. Dwalin and Thorin drew closer, resting their brows together as they embraced both each other and their beloveds.

Ori sighed happily. The lights of the room mingled and sparkled with the firelight of Durin’s forge. All about the reunited First King and First Queen of all Dwarrow’s embrace, Ori saw glimpses of the celebrations.

Omi and Loli caught Frodo’s, Sam’s and Tilda’s hands and danced around with Tharkûn.

Dori and Binni burst into tears and were petted by Oin and Balin with Celeborn’s help and Galadriel’s, who had popped the tray on a nearby table, half a cookie still hanging from the corner of her mouth.

Theoden put his arms about both Dis and Jani, who were crying, Mr. Wandi supplied handkerchiefs and smiled benignly on the Rohan king.

Theodred and Bain laughed and hugged Fili and Kili, who were hugging Tauriel and Sigrid.

Bard busily shook Bofur’s and Nori’s hands and Thranduil was throughly hugged by Sculdís.

Haldir, Glorfíndel, Elrond, and Lindir hugged and congratulated Brur and Jansad.

The twins pounced on Dipfa and Bujni, Elrohir swung Dipfa high as she shrieked.

Legolas and Gimli and Aragorn and Arwen laughed with Dain, Gridr and Gloin.

Baluchistan, who had been snoozing in Dain’s pocket, stuck his head out and squinted blearily.

“What’s all th’ noise abou’?”

“Queen Sunflower’s returned t’ Durin,” said Dain.

“Really? Bloody finally!”

He turned back over and went to sleep.

Cemnesta, Normiriel, Omosuil, Jim and his family, the Gamgees, and the other dwarf scribes held the mithril masters up while they embarked on a circle dance with the heads of the scribes’ guild and the rest of Lord Ori’s bullies.

Ori heart was full. The Quest was a success, they had found Queen Sunflower, and Dwarrow history would be put to rights. He looked back at the box. His brain wondered what else it held, and if the wood should be taken apart or the box should be kept together and cataloged as a single kit or as single pieces, each a three dimensional object. Thorin, Dwalin and Bilbo freed one another.

Ori remembered he’d seen one more thing on top of the linens besides the book. He padded over to the box again and looked inside.

He reached in and pulled out a cloth covered, plain wooden box, about the size of a pastry box, without markings or ornaments. Ori picked it up and looked it over. It wasn’t so much of a box as it
was a small dresser drawer, then he removed the cloth.

“Socks?” said Ori.

Ori stared at them and came back down to Thorin, Dwalin, and Bilbo.

“Socks?” Dwalin asked, peering down over his shoulder. There were at least a dozen pair. “Aye, bu’ sadly plain socks. Jus’ white.”

“At least they’ve been washed,” said Ori and crossed to the table that held the quilt. He placed the box on it and ran his hands over the socks then lifted a few to see the plain, wooden bottom of the drawer. He felt around among the socks.

Thorin mused aloud, “The ancestral socks of the Longbeards. That’s very… underwhelming.”

“Wait,” shouted Ori, causing instant silence to fall over the room. Everyone looked.

“There’s something else in here. Another box.”

Ori snatched up a sock with something small and square stuffed in it.

People converged to see. Ori vaguely heard Durin laugh and Sunflower scold him for putting things where they didn’t belong.

This box was woven strands of beaten rose gold, but otherwise plain. Ori lifted away the top and the chamber was filled with light.

As they blinked and shaded their eyes, the contents of the box reabsorbed most of the glow.

Two large oval stones sat nestled in a gold velvet lining. Ori thought they looked like starlight gems, but something told him these were different. Not evil, like the arkenstone, but not benign either.

“No!” Lady Galadriel cried, abruptly standing over Ori and the box. “It cannot be!”

“Dearest?” Celeborn asked, coming to her side, face set with worry. “What is it?”

“Oh, them,” said Durin, carelessly. “Aye, those’re them silmarils.”
Temptation, Temptation, and Temptation

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. May we tempt you with another chapter? Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

“Why do you have the sacred stones of the elves in with your socks?” Ori gasped.
“Durin!” Sunflower said with a giggle in her voice.
“Seemed like a safe enough place f’r ‘em.” Durin didn’t appear to be that interested. He was busy gazing lovingly at his wife.
“Pardon me, King Durin,” said Galadriel. “But how did you end up with them?”
“Eh?” Durin looked up.
“Galadriel wants to know where you got the stones,” Sunflower prompted.
“Found one when a volcano burped it up at me feet,” Durin shrugged.
“It didn’t burn you?” asked Lindir.
“It were a wee thin’ hot, but, I am a dwarf, after all. Then, later on, I was walkin’ a’ th’ edge a’ th’ sea, looking for carnelians for me Flower, an’ th’ other one washed up a’ me feet. Pretty thin’. I tried t’ give it t’ her-”
Sunflower laughed.
“I have no use for such shiny things and they’re so bright, we couldn’t sleep with them in the room!”
“Aye, “ Durin agreed then said thoughtfully. “I seem t’ recall there was talk a’ three Simarils, but’ I only ever found two.”
Elrond rasped, “Still in the sky.”
“There yeh go. Prob’ly no’ goin’ t’ find tha’ one soon.” Durin was genial. “A’ least yeh know it’s tucked up somewhere safe. Don’ know wha’ else t’ do wi’ these. Give ‘em t’ me mam?”
Galadriel considered before speaking.
“She’s meant to end up with them anyway. A lot of things have to be rearranged before then, of course. There must be the Dagor Dagorath, the Final Battle, when evil is at last defeated and my Uncle Fëanor is released from the Halls of Mandos to retrieve them. We have no idea when this will be, of course.”
“Final Battle? Oh, aye, already done tha’. ”
Galadriel’s mouth fell open.
“I beg your pardon?”
“When th’ wee raven blew up Mordor, eh?”
“That’s… that wasn’t much of a battle,” said Galadriel.
“Excuse me!” Roäc muttered.
“We’d only just started the first assault,” Aragorn commented lamely to Theoden, who was trying not to laugh.
“I liked it,” said Durin, shrugging.
Dain piped up, “Wasn’t exactly fair, was it. Yeh took out all them orcs an’ lef’ piss-all f’r us.”
Sculdis reached over and covered Dain’s mouth with her hand.
“Hush, m’ dear.”
Ori spoke, finally.
“Maybe all this time we’ve been looking at the Last Battle the wrong way. We were expecting huge armies and war. Maybe it wasn’t that kind of struggle. Maybe it wasn’t a battle of armies at all.”

Durin chuckled.
“Go’ it in one, wee scribe! Very guid!”

“The balrog?” Ori asked. “Was that part of it?”

“When dwarf, elf, an’ man joined t’gether t’ defeat ol’ Myron? Excellent job, ladies, by th’ way.”

He winked at Vi and Margr, who blushed and giggled like maidens.

“An’ Lady Galadriel, no’ only are yeh deadly, bu’ yeh looked a treat in tha’ jumpsuit.”

She inclined her head to acknowledge the compliment. Dipfa almost swooned in the tacit flattery of her work.

“Wait,” said Thorin. “Durin?”

“Aye, lad?”

“Did you just say the world had been remade?”

“Ask yer scribe. I canna remember tha’ far back. Oh, aye, well, I thin’ I must’ve done; th’ room’s gone awful quiet, an’ yeh look li’e yeh swallowed a toad. Wha’ was it f’r? Th’ remakin’ a’ th’ world? Surely yer Balin must’ve taught yeh, unless yeh slep’ through th’ lesson, too.”

Fili and Kili hooted in delight.

Kili said, “Now the truth comes out!”

“The remaking of the world,” said Thorin, pointedly ignoring them. “It means different things to the different peoples, obviously, but for dwarrow, it means, the Second Music, where we’ll have a hand in rebuilding what was lost. It means, we dwarrow will find our place as acknowledged equals to all the other races of the world.”

Durin snorted and looked around the room.

“And?”

“Ah,” said Theoden. “Now I know why Eowyn, Theodred and I here, at least. Thorin, you have nothing but my respect, and I’m sure you have Bard’s as well. You are an excellent king, and we are, at the very least, equals, though I prefer to say good friends.”

“You certainly do have my respect,” Bard added with a smile. “Your efforts saved Dale from Calmar and we will be in-laws soon enough.”

“Dwarf and elf are equal,” said Thranduil. “It’s true. Annoying, but true.”

Thorin inclined his head to acknowledge these words and Sugar whined and rolled over on Thorin’s foot, looking for a belly rub.

Thorin automatically hunkered down to obey, making the tail wag madly and Sugar whine with delight.

“So this,” said Thorin wonderingly, “is why all these things have happened now. This is the why.”

Everyone was looking questioningly amongst themselves when Galadriel suddenly said, “Wait, what do we do with these stones in the meantime? I refuse to have them anywhere near my wood.”

She drew away from Ori.

Celeborn took a large step back with his lady.

“Elrond?” he suggested.

“I don’t want them!” gasped Elrond, also backing away, Lindir and the twins with him, shaking their heads.

“Certainly not,” Thranduil, Cemnesta and Mr. Wandi chorused, each pulling their robes away and stepping back in the same manner.

“Those stones caused the first kin death and many wars,” Arwen said as she and Aragorn also drew away. Aragorn turned.

“King Durin?”

“Seein’ as they were in me sock drawer,” said Durin absently, while he and Sunflower giggled together, as she sat on his knee. “I think I’ve had ‘em long enough.”

“Someone has to take them,” said Thorin.
“Thorin, why don’t the dwarrow keep them for now,” said Galadriel, quickly.
“Excellent notion,” concurred Elrond. Thranduil and Cemnesta murmured their agreement.
“But, they don’t belong to dwarrow,” Thorin protested.
“They belong to Yavanna, actually,” commented Tharkûn. “But until she comes to collect them, Erebor seems to be the safest place for them. It’s not like Lady Galadriel’s uncle…er…half-uncle is going to come and look for them.”
“Do you think…,” Thorin began, then pulled himself together. “Would they prey upon a dwarf’s mind, as they did some elves’?”
Lady Galadriel countered with, “Do you feel any pull toward them?”
Durin snorted derisively.
“No,” said Thorin, “and, frankly, I’ve seen prettier rocks.”
“Then, I’d say you’ve answered your own question,” Galadriel teased.
Thorin huffed a sigh and took the box from Ori, tucked it into one pristine white sock, looked at everyone in the room, and said, “Fëanor will search for the silmarils, that is his quest and we will respect it, until Yavanna advises us otherwise. Ghivashel?”
“Yes, dear.”
“Please keep these for us until then.” Thorin held out the stuffed sock.
“Really? Why me?” demanded Bilbo.
“You’re a child of Yavanna.”
“What am I supposed to do with them? I don’t have a sock drawer! Or for that matter, socks!”
Bilbo stared at Thorin, then blew out a breath, took the box, and shoved it into his jacket pocket.
Immediately, the elves in the room seemed to sag with relief.
Dain looked about, grinned maniacally, and called out, cheerily,
“Y’know, I’ve never seen a silmaril. Anyone else here ever seen one?”
“Eh?” Tharkûn asked with a teasing smile. “Whatever are you all talking of, my dears?”
“Nope,” said Nori.
“Nary a one,” Bofur added.
“They are the stuff of legend,” pronounced Celeborn.
“Indeed, they are,” Elrond agreed. “Only to be found by Fëanor. It is his destiny.”
Thranduil looked down his nose and sniffed.
“I never thought they existed.”
“Personally,” said Theoden, “Gondor and I have no idea what you’re talking about.”
Aragorn and Arwen looked at each other grinned then turned to shake their heads at Theoden.
“Does anyone else know what they’re talking about?” Aragorn asked of the assembled.
“Nope!” piped Sam.
A resounding chorus of ‘no’s’ echoed around the room.
Lady Galadriel giggled.
Eowyn went over to peer into the crate.
“There’s more stuff in here!” she called out.
“Back to work,” bellowed Brur.
Everyone pulled their attention back to see what else would appear. Ori removed the last of the linens and looked in. The next layer was a mass of octagonal boxes perfectly fitted. Nodun came over and they waited while she made a detailed drawing.
Ori took out the first one, lifting the lid. There was a whisper of the scent of flowers from ages past. Layers of tissue paper covered something. Ori took this to the table and the light, almost transparent layers of papers were removed one by one. There was a circle of embroidered quilted silk which hid a blown glass domed box. A mithril fastener marked the middle where the globed lid could be opened.
Ori didn’t have to open it. He could see the contents perfectly. He laid it out on the table. There was a sigh of admiration. Within lay a flower crown. It was ivy decorated with wild roses, eldwis, snowdrops, crocus and violets. Despite their great age, they still held faint traces of their original colors. The crown rested on a second crown. It was a copy of the first but made of mithril and
gems. Bilbo and Thorin looked at each other, then Thorin turned to the first rulers.

“Your wedding crowns, your majesties?”

They nodded and smiled. Thorin looked at Bilbo, who chuckled.

“My dear dwarf, these are too delicate to use but I’m sure we can make passable copies for our
own wedding.”

“Yes!” Dori jumped on the idea of weddings. “Yes, Thorin you must. Just think how very
auspicious it would be.”

“Aye!” Vi cried. “Very suspicious!”

“Suspicious as anything!” Margr seconded.

“Indeed,” Thorin murmured.

“Where will you put this?” asked Theoden. “This is really too beautiful and precious to be hidden
away.”

“Valid point, laddie,” Balin agreed.

“Is there a place where they’ll be protected from fading yet be seen by your people?” Elrond
inquired.

“Perhaps the hall where all the picture of dwarrow kings are,” Ori said thoughtfully. “Maybe with
a small table beneath each portrait to hold some of these artifacts?”

“That would be lovely!” Dis agreed.

“It would be, yes,” said Thorin. “If we had portraits of both of them. Are you volunteering yet
again, my scribe?”

Ori smiled.

“In this case, I think it would be time well spent.” He held up his sketchbook. “I’m already doing
the studies for them.”

“You’re way ahead of me as usual.” Thorin turned to the head librarian, considering. “Master
Brur, I think all those portraits need to be moved to the old royal residence. It’s not the royal
residence anymore, more a place to lodge visiting diplomats or our guests when Fundin house spills
over during parties or celebrations. Perhaps it can also be made into something of a museum as well,
open to all who wish to see our histories.”

Dwalin looked pained.

“Yeh wan’ th’ whole a’ bleedin’ Arda loose in th’ royal caverns whenever they fancy? Glorious.”

But the idea was already rampant among the scribes.

Jansad said, “I’m sure we can get your scribes and ours to curate such exhibits.”

Brur nodded, his eyes held a calculating look.

“We c-could show off the ostrikai!” Arne said eagerly. “With all the n-notes and translations!”

“Indeed,” Podvu added. “The guild hall of the scribes is almost finished and when we are once
more in residence there…”

“Good,” Thorin said. “Brur, Jansad, Podvu, I rely on you. Ori?”

“I can’t wait to see the scribe’s guild hall again,” Ori enthused. “Is it-“

He looked at Podvu, who beamed.

“Yes, First Chair, it is almost fully restored to its original grandeur.” Podvu looked pleadingly at
Thorin then Ori. “I do hope you will impress upon his majesty to conduct the re-opening and
blessing?”

“Of course,” Thorin nodded.

“That will be so amazing!” Bain enthused, surprising his father and wicked stepmother. Bain was
too busy with his thoughts to notice. “Master Brur, Master Podvu, may I help? Please?”


Bain whirled and looked imploringly up at Bard and Thranduil. The two exchanged glances and
Bard gave a surprised nod.

Thranduil smiled tenderly.

“Of course, incorrigible stepson. Be sure to report to Master Brur whenever he requires you,
but-” Thranduil paused to glance at Bard, then turned back with a severe look. “But you are not to
enter any mine or other dangerous tunnels under any circumstances. I’m sure you will respect this
stipulation, Master Brur?"

Brur sniggered and nodded, reaching up to ruffle Bain’s hair as the lad glowed at his parents.

“Thanks!” Bain managed.

“Now,” Thorin broke in, “what else it in this box of yours, Ori?”

Leaving the scribes to sketch and examine the crowns, Ori went back and, with the help of Arne, Boromir and Normiriel, hefted out a strange long sack. It felt and smelled like metals. They put it ungracefully on a clear table.

Many hands helped with the unwrapping. Everyone stared at what was revealed:

Large pieces of metal tubing of all shapes and sizes. Each was wrapped in silver, rose gold, and gold wire. There were straight tubes, curly cues, and s-bends. These were all laid out.

“What is this?” Thranduil asked. “It was wrapped together but the shapes have no real relation to each other.” Gridr walked around the table, looking. Dain and Sculdis went the other way round.

“I suppose…” Dain began.

“Gridr!” cried Sculdis.

“I see it!” Gridr said, beginning to giggle.

“Is that a—” Thorin started but Gridr and Sculdis made shushing gestures.

“We’ll put it together, cuz, an’ show it t’ yeh proper,” Sculdis promised. The pieces were wrapped up again and Gridr and Sculdis carried them to the other table with box of odd gems Gridr had taken charge of.

Ori and his team of just about everyone went back to the crate.

Out came several of the octagonal boxes, intricately carved with sunflowers. Ori looked at the queen and she nodded, grinning.

These were set out on the cleared table and opened. Groups of people opened them, while a couple of scribes supervised and made notes.

“What is this? Oh! Teaspoons!” Arwen cried. “They are gold and look at the lovely work; the spoon bowl is a poppy and the handle’s stem has engraved leaves on it.”

“Here’s the rest of the flatware and serving items underneath,” Boromir added, looking over Aragorn’s shoulder as the king lifted out item after item.

“Oooo!” Binni and Dori chorused as they lifted an object out of their box.

“Is that a mithril teapot?” Galadriel asked.

“Yes, with elven designs engraved on the handle and over the lid.” Minta looked at the teapot, squinting through her spectacles.

“May be a trade item?” Balin asked.

“Or a dwarf copy of one,” Minta replied. “I don’t think our earliest ancestors had either the contacts or, if they did, the desire to buy tea. The elves would already have both.”

“There’s a very nice set of boar-bristle brushes,” Thorin announced as he, Bilbo and Frodo dug through another box.

Balin cocked his head.

“One has a handle, th’ other is entirely rectangular wit’ a strap across th’ back.”

Bilbo picked up the handled one and said, “Head brush.” then the strapped one and said, “Foot brush.”

“Yeh have a brush jus’ f’r foot hair?” Gimli demanded, looking up from the box, he and Legolas and Eowyn were going through.

“Of course!” Bilbo said in a shocked tone. “It’s disgusting to use one brush for the other.”

There was a squeal from Tauriel as she lifted out a marvelously carved jade pendant. The box she, Fili, Sigrid and Kili were inspecting held smaller boxes of jade, topaz and sapphire beads, all these jewels carved into flowers, with gold and mithril findings. Most were loose, but some had been strung into complicated, heavy ornaments.

“The pieces have survived marvelously intact,” Fili noted. “They could literally be taken out of their cases and worn right this second.”

“What is this?” Thranduil asked, raising an item from the box he, Bard, Theoden and Tilda were looking at. “It’s odd-looking for a brooch. It doesn’t have a pin to make it fast, just a flexible
“That’s a hair ornament,” Bell said, taking the item as the father-king offered it to her. “See, the flange is hinged. Once it’s bent inward toward the back of the piece, it stays closed. I’m guessing a lot of the jewelry will be of this nature?”

“This box is packed with similar hair ornaments,” Bard observed, watching as Tilda lifted one to the light and squeaked. It was gold with tiny tourmaline bunnies running across the top.

“Yes,” Thorin said thoughtfully. “Truthfully, once we started uncovering jewelry I expected more bracelets and necklaces.”

Bilbo laughed and slid his arm about Thorin waist, hugging him. “My dear dwarf, they’d just get in a gardener’s way. Hair ornaments, headbands, beads for braids, perhaps earrings if they sit close to the ear. Mind, earrings have a sexual connotations.”

“Really?” Boromir asked then blushed. Floris and Mavey giggled and nudged Lavender Gamgee, who cocked her head, inspecting the First March Warden of Gondor with a speculative eye.

“Hobbit ears are very sensitive,” Bilbo explained. “Allowing a lover to put a hole through one’s ear is an act of trust, the piercing itself is an erotic act.”

Hamfast, beetroot, cleared his throat loudly and Bell, a little red, exclaimed, “Mister Bilbo Baggins! Really!”

“Now, Bell,” Bilbo replied in a comforting tone. “I’m sure there will be other interracial marriages. These are cultural peculiarities and it’s important for people to know, so embarrassment can be spared.”

“Oh, I suppose,” Bell allowed. “A little embarrassment now’ll save a heap later.”

With one glance she seemed to sweep up both Boromir and Lavender, and with another, convey them to her husband’s eye. He lifted his brows, and gave a chuck of his chin to say he understood.

Ori watched this exchange with admiration, wondering if he and Dwalin would be able to do that someday.

He reached for a box, lifted it, opened the lid, turned red himself, and closed it, aware everyone was watching him.

“Ori?” Thorin asked. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, fine,” said Ori.

He carried the box over to Thorin and handed it to him.

“But these probably shouldn’t go on display.”

Thorin took the box and opened it, snickered and handed it to Bilbo.

“My,” said the hobbit. “They were certainly busy little collectors.”

“What is it?” Tilda perked.

“Kissing things,” said Bilbo.

“Oh,” said Tilda, with a moue of distaste. “I thought it was something interesting.”

Bilbo called upon Furh’nk, who was standing guard at the door, and handed him the box with directions to bring it to his study in Bag End East.

Nori stuck his head in through the wall.

“Goin’ to study ‘em, eh?”

“Closely,” said Bilbo with a wicked smile. Then he seemed to think better of it and turned to the first couple cooing and kissing on Durin’s work table. “Ahem? If that’s all right with you, your majesties?”

Without looking up, Sunflower waved her hand in the universal sign of ‘whatever’.

“Thank you,” said Bilbo civilly.

Now that there was room to stand easily in the box, Gridr handed up several hefty-looking packages to Elladan and Elrohir, who untied the twine and pulled away the canvas covering each.

“Is it a mithril table?” Legolas asked.

“It has four legs, but no top,” said Elladan.

“So It’s more of a suggestion of a table,” said Elrohir. “At any rate, it’s wide enough, but too short for even a hobbit to sit at comfortably.”

Dain and Sculdis wandered over for a closer look.
“No’ a table,” said Sculdis. “I’d say a frame, Gridr?” 

Gridr handed out a small bundle, about the length of her forearm, wrapped in identical canvas.

“I’d go with that, love. Here, lads, turn it over. An’ this seems t’ be a go-with, an’ there’s another largish lump of something here still that goes as well, ‘bout th’ size of a decent hassock.”

The smallish packet held four substantial springs of a mithril alloy.

As Ori drew, he saw there were spaces at the ends of the legs - now obviously uprights - where the springs attached.

“Th’ mystery deepens,” said Dain, chuckling. “Oy, Udad Durin! Care t’ give us a hint?”

“I’m a wee bit busy, nidoye. Better use the brains Da gave yeh.”

Dain scowled.

“How d’yeh like tha’!”

Legolas piped, “Queen Sunflower seems to like it quite well.”

“Yoohoo! Remember me?” Gridr called. She had balanced a large, tuffet-shaped affair on the edge of the box. “Take it ‘r catch i’, makes me no nevermind.”

Dain opted to take it. The twins groaned in disappointment.

“Hold yer whewist. It wasn’t yer head she was aimin’ f’r.”

The bundle unfolded in layer upon layer of canvas, which had been treated with a preparation that carried the scent of something between cedar and pine, with maybe some raisin thrown in. When the last of the cloth came away, they saw why.

“It’s Chopper!” Tilda cried, the faunts agog all around her.

It was, indeed, a battle boar, about half-size and apparently cast in mithril, but still miraculously bearing gem-studded leather saddle and bridle both. A master hand had inscribed the finest hairs on the torso, and placed citrine embedded in white marble orbs for eyes, giving the creature a roguish demeanor.

“Mister Frodo,” said Sam, “it’s smilin’!”

“I’d be smiling, too, if I got let out of that box,” said Frodo. “It must’ve been terribly dark in there.”

“Terrible,” Sam echoed, shaking his head in pity.

Sculdis said to Dain, “Are yeh thinkin’ wha’ I’m thinkin’?”

Dain said, “Aye, Durin’s an’ Sunny’s kids was spoilt rotten.”

Everyone gathered around as the Iron Hills monarchs studied the boar, then the uprights, and then attached them via the springs. It looked like the boar was leaping in the wide center of the uprights.

Dain looked around, caught hold of Frodo and lifted him onto the boar’s back.

“Now hold on, lad,” said Dain.

He carefully pushed the boar’s snout down about three inches, then let it go. Frodo grasped the reins in a deathgrip as the boar rocked back and forth, and bounced up and down, and every youngling in the room rushed forward, squealing, all begging to try it at once.

Hamfast shook his head.

“They’l all have sick stomachs and dizzy heads t’night.”

“Aye,” Margr agreed, “but it’ll be fun while it lasts.”

“It was built t’ withstand badgers,” said Dain. “I don’ think hobbitlin’s’re strong enough t’ push it int’ real mischief.”

Bilbo said, “Now you’ve done it.”

Meanwhile, Vi, Theoden and Jani had wrangled another large object from among the rest of the contents of the box. It was also wrapped, but not as carefully, and when the canvas fell away, Ori saw why. This was also mithril. At first he thought it looked like a handleless teacup for a giant, as it was round and the sides flared toward the lip, then he recognized the shape.

“That’s a flower,” he said.

“Yes,” said Thorin, terribly amused. “I believe it’s a buttercup, which represents new beginnings and joy.”

“That’s a good thing,” said Jani

“Yes, but among farmers, the buttercup can also indicate ingratitude, hence, the sprays of sapphire
forget-me-not’s inlaid in the outside surface. Those mean true and undying love, remembrance
during parting, loyalty despite separation. I think they neutralize any of the negatives of the
buttercups.”

“I’d say they obliterated ‘em,” said Vi.
Ori grinned up at Thorin.
“Is this self-defense, my king?”
“I know on what side my bread’s buttered,” said Thorin. “Given my new in-laws, anything less
would be catastrophic.”

Bard, who had been puttering about with the ghastly crystal ornaments, said, “They’re not just
your in-laws anymore, Thorin. If you’re looking for advice on dealing with a strange, new family,
I’m quite at leisure.”

“Da!” Tilda cried. “Wicked Stepmother isn’t that strange!”
“Thank you,” said Thranduil dryly.
“Wandi’s pretty odd, though,” she concluded.
Mr. Wandi shrugged and said, “I prefer to think of myself as unforgettable.”
Gimli muttered, “In so many ways.”
“I like our family,” Tilda decided. “We aren’t at all boring, are we.”

Thranduil picked her up and set her on his hip.
“We are certainly not boring, and you, my dear Monster Child, have to stop eating rocks.”
“Da says I’m growing like a weed,” she said unconcernedly.
Dori gave a cry of delight as the base of the buttercup appeared.
“It’s a cradle! Balin, look! Isn’t it darling!”

Thorin said, “You’d best claim it right now, Dori. You’re going to need two, after all.”
Dori squeaked, actually squeaked, and hugged Thorin off his royal feet.

“Wicked Stepmother?”
“Yes, Monster Child.”
“What kind of weed were you?”
“I beg your pardon?”

“You’re so tall, you must have grown like a weed and just kept growing.”
Bard bent his head right down into the box, as though he were studying the contents closely,
though his shaking shoulders betrayed him.

“I am not a weed,” Thranduil insisted with dignity. “I am a mighty oak.”

Tilda studied him this way and that.
“I think you’re more like a willow tree. You’re very tall, but very bendy.”
Bard could no longer hold in his laughter.
He leaned back against the table, tears running down his face.
Thranduil raised an eyebrow and asked Tilda, “And what kind of weed is your da?”
“He’s a thistle,” said Tilda with great certainty. “He’s pretty and spiky.”
“Really?” Thranduil purred. “Tell me more.”

Bard returned to his side and put Tilda on her feet.
“There you are, young lady,” he turned to Thranduil. “Later, sweetie.”

Thranduil displayed a magnificent pout.
“What’s this?” Celeborn said, lifting something out of the battle boar’s wrapping.

Ori looked over. Celeborn was holding a small metal cylinder painted with bright red and white
stripes. Theoden went to his side and looked.

“There’s a lid, I can see the line, Celeborn. Open it.”

Celeborn frowned as he was forced to struggle with it. Theoden frowned, too, then said,
“Here, let me try. I’ve got calluses from working with horses, might give me a better grip.”

Celeborn handed it over and Theoden struggled with it a moment.

“Eru, what’s in this,” Theoden muttered. “Those elf rocks put paid to it being anything earth
shattering.”

“Here,” said Celeborn, “I’ll hold it and you twist and lift.”

“}
“Right,” Theoden gave it back to Celeborn who gripped both hands around it and held it steady. Theoden squared up to the little can, spat on his hands, rubbed them together, wiped them on his hips and took hold of the lid.

Ori glanced over at Durin and Sunflower. Durin watched the man and elf struggle with a maniacal grin and Sunflower rolled her eyes. Ori looked back at Celeborn and Theoden.

“I felt it move!” Celeborn shouted making everyone turn to watch. “Keep turning and lifting, mellon Theoden!”

“Right!” Theoden bellowed and gave the lid another twist and yanked it back. There was a metallic sproing noise and something shot out of the can over Theoden’s head.

“Fucking-shit!” the horse king yelled, falling back to avoid getting hit.

“Kill it!” Celeborn roared, leaping at Theoden, his hands lifted to catch whatever had flown out. He slammed into the king and the pair of them crashed to the floor.

There was a shout from Glorfindel and a yell from Gimli as the pair leapt over to slay what had flown from the can, sword and axe at the ready. They stopped and stared down. Gimli grabbed it and shook it at Durin.

“Durin, yeh rotten…” Gimli paused, realizing, then, “er…sneaky ancestor…” he finished, lamely.

“What is that?” Glorfindel demanded.

Ori groaned.

“I had one of those,” Fili cried. “It’s an iron spring wrapped in material to look like a snake skin. You stuff it in a can or a box and it’s to surprise people.”

“Yes, dear,” said Dori. “Delightful.”

Durin roared with laughter as everyone else stared at the heap on the floor which didn’t seem likely to move.

Finally, a gruff voice drifted up.

“They told me elves were light.”

A second voice replied, “They told me men were soft.”

Graladriel drifted to the heap on the floor and leaned over them.

“Dearest, should I become jealous?”

Possibly, my dear. I can’t get up. In fact, neither of us can.”

Thranduil grinned evilly.

“Cousin! I thought I was the one who was supposed to be decrepit!”

“I’m not decrepit, chestnut brain, I’m stuck.”

Theoden burst out laughing, then cried,

“Lord Celeborn! I never knew you cared!”

“Then, King, Tempter, I can no longer resist your charms!” Celeborn shouted and hugged the man on the floor. They rolled across the floor a few times. Everyone laughed and cat-called them. Celeborn landed on top again and stretched his neck.

“Beloved a little help?”

“You’re that enfeebled?” Thranduil asked solicitously.

“Shut up, bark brain,” Celeborn snapped. “Something’s stuck.”

“Sounds like a personal problem,” Bard observed to Thranduil.

“Stow it, fish breath!” Theoden bellowed at Bard. “My belt’s snagged on his robe.”

Dwalin took one of his big axes down.

“This calls f’r drastic action!”

“I’ll get the sticking plasters,” said Ori.

“You bring that axe anywhere in the vicinity of my belt or my crotch, Fundinson, and I’ll—”

“Hold still, you silly things,” Bilbo interrupted Theoden as he squatted down beside them and plunged his hands between the man and elf. Celeborn made a rather undignified noise.

“It’ll go much faster if you don’t wiggle,” said Bilbo sweetly. “One, two, there we go!”

Celeborn rolled off and sat on the floor, looking startled.

Theoden snickered.

“Who knew hobbits were so… handy,” he said, then snorted with laughter, ending with a wince.
“If I might humbly ask for a hand up?”

Vi and Margr grinned at each other and approached.

“Aye,” said Margr.

“Here yeh go,” said Vi.

Theoden yipped and sprung to his feet like a man half his age. Dwalin looked him over, bottom lip out.

“Nice. Yeh let th’ hobbit near yer crotch an’ no’ me. Well, there’s love f’r yeh.”

Theoden flipped an obscene gesture at him, grinning and then looked at Celeborn. Celeborn and Theoden turned and looked at Durin. Durin snickered. Man and Elf looked at one another.

“They are truly his descendants.” Celeborn observed.

“They don’t descend that badly,” Theoden replied.

Durin slapped his thigh and roared again.

“Enough!” shouted Brur. That crate ain’t emptyin’ itself.”

Durin sing-songed, “Yessss, Master Brur!”

“Enough outa yeh! Yeh ain’t too big, I can’t… a’righ’, yeh are, lucky f’r yeh.”

Another box of books came out and they were laid out on the table. One was a large volume on the cultivation of cavern plants and included farming any fish found in underground lakes.

Another on how to care for and wash opals, one on drying cavern lake plants for medicinals, several on the mining and working of mithril which the old masters took gratefully.

Bujni had sat himself firmly at a table corner, reading from a leather-bound notebook. One eyebrow was cocked at an angle of incredulity and he seemed to be muttering to himself about scientific observation. Ori noted that his clothes and the book were the same color and wondered that Dipfa did not grab the book away and replace it with one that would throw him into relief.

“What do you have, Bujni?” he asked.

“Apparently, the notebook of Marvyn, son of Kevyn, a dwarrow merchant who travelled beyond the Ororcarnis. He had made an important discovery and wrote of it to benefit his descendants. It is called A History of Men.”

“Oh, dear,” said Sigrid.

“Obviously, this dwarf was not a scientist,” Bujni sniffed. “He doesn’t seem to have approached the men, merely observed their behavior from a distance. His conclusions are mainly unsubstantiated conjecture.”

“Shockin’!” Dain cried.

Theoden and Bard exchanged glances and Bard said, “Go on, Bujni. Does he say we came up out of the water in a fishing net or climbed out of a trolls cooking pot?”

“I shall read a telling passage,” Bujni allowed.

“They are tall, like elves, but incredibly clumsy. On the other hand, they have rounded ears, though smaller than ours, and their voices are very loud, also like ours. I can only conclude that they were an experiment by Eru to create his own race of dwarrow, but He wasn’t quite successful, being less deft than Mahal.

“Only the males grow facial hair of any amount worth mentioning. The young are largely hairless, and on the grown people there are some tracings of body hair in the appropriate patterns, but no where near the necessary perfusion. This accounts for their being subject to extremes of heat and cold.”

Thranduil coughed delicately and turned to his husband.

“I suppose this is why you’re such a blanket hog.”

“Forgive me, sweetie, but you know we men aren’t built to withstand the slightest breeze.”

“I did notice you are more delicate than a hothouse flower. I’ll have to start calling you my petal.”

“Please don’t.”

“Of course not. Well, not in public.”
Bujni continued,

“That do work with stone tools. Not very well, but they are managing. Again, it’s possible Eru
did not have the deftness of craft to give them. This is regrettable. They aren’t likely to last very
long, I’m afraid, unless they can learn to adapt.”

“Shall I continue?” Bujni asked.
“Please,” said Bard.

“There was a big event today, the men met elves. Here is my observation of the event.
“There wasn’t any bloodshed, at least.”

“I don’t recall you being horrified when we met,” said Bard.
“We’ve learned to internalize,” Thranduil replied, with an evil grin.
More, a Meal, and Musings

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Yup, Ori and the herd’re still emptying out that box! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

“Bujni,” said Dis. “I think we can dispense with Marvyn, son of Kevyn’s, observations for the moment but I’m sure if you translate it, Master Brur will be happily to shelve it among the comedies.”

“Indeed, your highness,” Bujni said solemnly. “That would be the best place for this oddity.”

“More stuff!” called Gridr. “There’s a board we thought might be the bottom but it isn’t.”

Bundles of all shapes and sizes were handed out. These were wrapped within an inch of their lives, and rightly so, as they filled another table.

“A flute,” Bilbo stated, opening a small one.

It was intricate, with many attached handles that would hold down stops when played. Bilbo handed it to Bofur.

The first silvery notes brought silences and stillness. Bofur, entranced, played a soft melody. As the last notes drifted away. Galadriel sighed.

“Bofur, I think Ecthelion would be proud.”

Bofur nodded and reverently passed the flute back to Thorin.

“When Ecthelion returns to us, we shall gift this to him,” Thorin murmured. “It appears it’s not the only one amongst these.”

There were several flutes and larger wind instruments. There was a viol so big, it had to propped on end to be played. It produced the deepest notes any had ever heard, but was in dire need of tuning. Kili peeked inside then asked Fili for some light.

“This was made by a dwarf named Ztradahvaris,” Kili reported.

The scribes wrote this name down for further research.

There was a brass horn that was a long, concentrated 'S' form and made a weirdly appealing sound. Another had a very large horn and the pipe wound in a few tight circles with all sorts of knobs and stoppers.

Everyone sighed as a perfect harp was uncovered. The frame was black walnut, inlaid with abalone and mithril. Thorin touched the strings. It needed tuning also but the notes were true.

Around this were packed many very thin harps with three strings.

“What are these?” Elrond asked, lifting one. It was made of birch but the mithril strings were tight as if newly made.

“Those, laddie,” Master Brur explained, “were f’r hangin’ in an air vent. Any breezes will cause ‘em t’ play.”

“How lovely,” Lindir breathed. “Such a beautiful idea.”

Thorin handed one to Elrond, then another to Cemnesta, then a third to Celeborn.

“Here, please take these. You can use these to copy from.”

They thanked him profusely. Cemnesta noted, “We can hang them in the trees!”

Next came more solidly wrapped bundles of various sizes and shapes. A beautifully wrought silver case opened to reveal the first ceremonial crowns of the king and queen of dwarrow. They shone and sparkled on the table.
“These,” Thorin said, “we will wear at our wedding, Ghivashel. I will put the flower decoration of them in your charge.”

Bilbo inspected them.

“Oh yes, these will be very easily decorated.” He turned to Ori. “And perhaps somewhat complicated to draw?”

“Not as long as I see them first,” Ori promised.

Bell nearly fainted at the next parcels. Durin had made sure his queen had every kind of baking pan or mixing tool she would ever need. There were many pans in the shapes of flowers and animals. Tilda and Frodo clamored for someone to make Radagast a cake in the large pan shaped like a rabbit. There were cast iron pans to pour batter into shapes of vegetables, flowers, and more animals.

“You could bake a bouquet or an entire farm!” Hamfast admired.

Beneath this lay more tools.

“These are for working with mithril!” Fili cried.

The masters shambled to his side as quickly as they could, and cooed over the tools as though praising grandbadgers.

“Here’s three proper anvils f’r jewelry work,” Gridr called.

Dain snickered.

“Keep one a’ these set up f’r our Hild when she visits. She’ll no’ be in any shape t’ be scootin’ abou’ on her knees f’r quite a while.”

“An’ look here’s another board!” Sculdis cried.

Beneath this board they found clothing in great variety. There was a mithril mail shirt like the one Thorin had lent Ori. It was too big for any dwarf and too slender for any man. Thorin draped it over Galadriel’s arm.

“For your assistance with Lord Ori’s quest and preserving of the library,” he said simply.

Galadriel stared at it in silence then dropped to her knees to rapturously embrace Thorin.

“I shall think of a way to reach that library,” Bujni was heard to say.

Dori gave a shriek as quantities of beautiful embroidered baby clothing appeared.

A collection of water color paintings and etchings came to light from beneath the onesies. Galadriel stared.

“This is Lórien, before Celeborn and I came to dwell there. Your work, Queen Sunflower?”

“Yes,” giggled the queen. “The etchings are my dear hubby’s copies.”

“What’s this?” Bilbo withdrew a strange piece of work. It was a large board wrapped in black velvet. An elvish schooner was outlined in silver nails and many colored threads wound from nail to nail, criss-crossing into wondrous designs.

Durin groaned and Sunny laughed.

“Look darling,” she crowed. “It’s your string art.”

“I dunno how t’ work wi’ fiber,” Durin grumbled, clearly embarrassed that his ‘art’ had been preserved.

Ori lifted the end of a long, well-wrapped roll of what he presumed was material. He handed it out to Theoden and Celeborn helped him carry it to another table. There it was unwrapped and everyone sighed again.

“It’s Erebor,” said Thorin. “Seen from a distance.”

“Celebrimbor’s painting!” gasped Nodun.

The colors sang together as there the Lonely Mountain stood in all its grandeur against a blue sunny sky.

Thorin grinned.

“Aragorn, Arwen, would you care for this? I am rather enamored of my tapestry.”

The pair stared and then glowed at each other.

“Thank you, Thorin,” Aragorn said warmly

“Yes, indeed,” Arwen added. “We shall have it framed and it will look beautiful in our private sitting room.”
The canvas was rewrapped and set aside.

“Here’s the bottom!” called out Gridr. Everyone rushed to see. Gridr and Ori lifted out a folder which contained notes. Ori read them curiously. They appeared to be chemical formulas with the titles of blue; red and yellow; sparklers; pinwheels. Ori frowned.

“Did Durin teach you how to make your fireworks, Tharkûn?”

“Whyever do you ask?” Tharkûn said suddenly, his eyes wary.

Ori waved the folder at him.

“These are chemical formulas for them.”

“Oh, I’ll take that!” Tharkûn said quickly. Thorin grabbed the folder and handed it to Dain.

“Science for the scientists,” Thorin explained cheerily.

Dain, Bujni now glued to his side, paged through, all but salivating.

Tharkûn looked put out.

Ori turned and peered down into the box. He could see the bottom, but he and Gridr were separated from it by rows and rows of small canisters. Ori bent and lifted one up. It was labelled.

“Contents,” he read aloud, “two thousand count: plantains.” He shook the canister, there was the rattle of tiny somethings.

“I think these are seeds,” he said in disbelief.

“Seeds!” shouted all the hobbits at once. Gridr and Ori started passing out canisters.

Thorin read the contents for all.


“I’ll get a-plantin’, Mister Thorin,” Hamfast panted. “If Mister Bard there can build me some forcin’ houses. They’ll weather the winter just fine.”

“I hope they’re still viable,” murmured Thranduil.

Durin rolled his eyes.

“A’ course they’re still viable! Pu’ th’ same mark on ‘em I used f’r th’ los’ kegs!”

“Is it empty?” Dori asked hurriedly. “There’s lunch to be had and these badgers are squashing my bladder again.”

“Empty as an orc’s head!” sang out Elladan.

Durin laughed again and he and Sunflower and the forge vanished to the noise of the faunts and Tilda shouting, “Bye!”.

Dori hurried out, Margr, Vi and Galadriel at her side.

Thing that were to be take up to Fundin house were gathered and packed into wheel baskets. The rest was left for the study of scribes.

Ori followed the crowd out, but lingered with Arne.

“What was in Teyan’s book?” Ori asked.

“The g-gathered marriage c-contracts between elves and-and dwarrow throughout the h-history of K-khazad-dûm,” Arne said with a little laugh.

“Not easy to find,” said Teyan, looking over Arne’s shoulder.

He spun around to stare at her.

“Boo!” she cried.

Arne’s eyes cut toward Ori, his mouth slightly open.

“It’s all alright,” said Ori. “It’s her book.”

“Oh,” said Arne. He sketched a bow. “Arne, P-prince of Ironf-fists, at your s-service.”

“Teyan, daughter of Eyan, at you and your family’s,” the ghost giggled. “Anyway, they weren’t. Easy to find, that is. I spent years snooping around the archives after the librarians had gone home. They hid the records, but they were too conscientious to destroy official documents. I found most of them between the pages of mining assay journals between eight hundred and thousand years old.”

“Thorough,” said Arne.

“You have no idea.”

“So,” said Ori conversationally, “are you going to come back to life with the others?”

“Eventually,” Teyan said, looking around the room. “Udad Mahal said I could come back as an
elf if I want. I’ve always wanted to be tall! But, you know, I’d never left Khazad-dûm before, and I’m really liking this ghost thing. I think I’ll stay here and haunt the library for a while first.”

Ori and Arne exchanged naughty looks.

Ori said, “Do us a favor? Go down and haunt the archivists.”

“Are you kidding?” Teyan squawked. “The way they scuttle around in the dark? They scare me!” and with that she vanished.

Arne and Ori looked at each other and laughed.

“You know,” Ori said as they head after the others, Brur locking up after them. “I think this library needs a nice ghost scholar.”

“Wha’ yeh ravin’ abou’?” Brur demanded. Ori and Arne blinked innocently at him. Brur growled and stomped off in the direction they came.

Back in Fundin house, all the wheeled baskets were set around the large table in the sitting room. Their contents were piled on the table. Dori fled to her chambers with Balin, muttering that she was bursting. People either went to their rooms for relief or milled about talking. Dori reappeared looking radiant and as soon as everyone was gathered, Mistress Dazla announced lunch.

Once more everyone gathered in the breakfast parlor. Great platters of grilled duck smothered in oranges were set down with dishes of fried new corn, wild rice and basil. Several salads accompanied the plentifulness.

“Aye, Mister Thorin,” Hamfast announced looking proudly at the bounty. “All the crops’s growin’ like weeds.”

“This is excellent,” Thorin agreed.

“It is,” Bard added. “Hamfast, you and your family have worked wonders. Between the fishing and your fields every adult in Dale has employment and the left over gold from Calmar is making it possible to pay good wages.”

Thranduil smiled on Bard, “Indeed, my dear, Dale can almost be said to be prospering.”

“I’ve had word from the plumbing guild,” Dis put in, “by the end of this week the pipes and hot springs from the mountain will be ready so you’ll be able to flush the streets as we do every night.”

“When?” Bard asked. “We’ll have to warn people.”

“In the mountain, we have it done at midnight,” Thorin explained. “Just let the master of the plumbing guild know what time you wish it done.”

“Not to worry, Bard,” Glorfindel grinned. “I shall fulfill my promise as Protector of Dale by making sure there’s no one on the streets when it’s time.”

“Thank you.” Bard mused, “I imagine folk will be fascinated to see streams of water flowing through all the streets every night.”

Thorin and Dis glanced at each other.

“Bard,” Dis said. “It going to be more in the nature of a torrent blasting through. It will peter out at the swamp land to the south at the edge of the lake.”

“Should I order the swamp drained?” Bard asked, wide eyed.

“No, no, Mister Bard,” Hamfast cried. “You want a good swamp!”

“I do?” Bard looked a little asea.

“Aye,” Hamfast said eagerly. “All them minerals for th’ water plants in a big swamp? It’s very good for the lands around and a great nursery for water birds and fish!”

“Elk and other animals will come to drink at the swamp,” Thranduil reflected. “They will also enrich the earth there.”

“Then a swamp we shall have,” Bard chuckled. “Maybe we could start growing some rice as well.”

“Already planned for it, Mister Bard” Hamfast rejoiced. “You’ll be over-flowin’ in rice, water fowl an’ good land by next year.”

“My dear fawn,” Thranduil turned to Mr. Wandi. “How fares your palace of health and beauty?” Wandi glowed around a mouthful of duck.

“We shall open officially in two weeks. Mister Hamfast, it will be quite sultry in the palace, do
you think we would be able to support some of these seeds from faraway hotter lands in my palace?"

“To be sure, Mr. Wandi,” Hamfast expanded with pleasure. “You need to pick out some good sized urns, they’ll need t’ have a hole at the bottom, to drain and a large sort of a saucer to sit on. We can get some of those seeds from your box, Mister Ori.”

Ori looked at Thorin, who was pouring more milk for Frodo. Thorin caught his eye and smiled.

“Certainly, Mister Hamfast. We will put all those seeds in your care immediately,” Thorin paused. “Mr. Wandi, I suggest you and Hamfast visit the pottery guild and have them design what you need...er...envision for your palace.”

Mr. Wandi beamed at the word ‘envision’ and Hamfast exchanged a look with Bell, but they both bravely did not giggle.

“I think that is an excellent idea,” Lady Galadriel approved. “Bard, Thranduil, what about the forcing houses? Will they be possible in Dale?”

“They’ll work,” Sculdis replied, licking orange sauce off her fork. “We have quite a few attached t’ our mountains. They get th’ heat from inside an’ th’ glass roofs allow th’ plants t’ get sunshine year round.”

“You might grow your plantains,” suggested Tharkûn, mashing the last remaining grains of rice with his fork to get all of them.

Everyone who had been at the inn chuckled. Ori remembered the fried plantains at the inn and thought it was a good thing he was eating as he would start drooling just talking about the delicacy.

“A forcing house, if it is very large,” Aragorn mused, “could be quite an attraction for those visiting from other realms. We have large ones in Gondor, referred to as botanical gardens and arboreums. Visitors to the city often take pleasure in walking through them. Occasionally, any staff working there will take a sizable group of people through and explain the workings and about the plants.”

“We did that,” Eowyn cried.

“We did,” her uncle agreed. “Most interesting I found it, too.”

“There’s an idea,” Bilbo said. “Bard, aren’t there a few more old warehouses that need to be taken down between Mr. Wandi’s palace and the docks and shore?”

“There are,” Bard said, his mind obviously busy. “We could take those down, re-use the materials for repairs and such then have a botanical garden going right down the lake.”

“How beautiful,” cried Dori, “there could be a great swath of grass between the glassed-in garden and the lake and perhaps there could be a shop or a restaurant for people to take tea or have a meal. In the summer, there could be a special dock made for parties and dancing!”

“Yer a genius, me dumplin’,” Dain shouted, “jus’ like me!”

Bard looked at Thranduil then Hamfast,

“Could this be done?”

“Course it can,” Hamfast encouraged. “Take a bit o’ time and funds, but it can be done.”

“The forcing house will have to be quite tall for the trees,” murmured Thranduil. “You dwarrow can make clear and colored glass and there’s mica as well.”

“The frame could be copper or iron,” Galadriel put in. “It shall be a fairyland, Mister Gamgee!”

“I’m liking this,” Bard said with a smile.

“I always thought of Lórien as a fairy land, Lady Galadriel,” Dipfa said, dreamily. “And you and Celeborn are the fairy king and queen. That’s why I was so happy to hear you had worn the green jumpsuit!”

“If you like, Dipfa,” Ori said. “I’ll draw a picture for you of Lady Galadriel flying through the air at the falling of the mountain. She looked just like a green night moth!”

“Ooo!” Dipfa enthused. “Yes, please, Lord Ori!”

“That means,” Omosuil said with a huge grin, “Haldir is a fairy captain.”

Haldir grimaced as some people giggled and others tried to restrain themselves.

“Fairy? Elf?” said Gimli, poking Legolas, who poked him back. Gridr grabbed her son’s hands before things devolved into a poke war.

This did not stop Gimli from adding, “This means yeh ain’t elves, mebbe Felves or Evairies?”
“Evairies?” Celeborn said blankly.
“Captain Haldir cannot be a fairy captain,” Dipfa frowned. “He’s much too frowny to be a fairy. Really, he’s almost as grumpy as a dwarf.”
“And tall like a man,” Tilda shouted “He’s a Dan!”
Haldir blanched, groaned, then dropped his face in his hands. Dain rose and went around the table, grinning hugely and clapped Haldir on the shoulder
“How’re yeh doin’ there…Danny-boy?”
“Shut up, Dain,” Haldir said with a red face, but it was obvious he was trying not to laugh.

The younger set rose and cleared the table and everyone else returned to the sitting room. After a few minutes of dish washing, the younger set returned.

Ori noticed that Kili had a thoughtful frown on his face as he and Tauriel seated themselves on the cushions near the fireplace with the younger set and the animals. The younger prince had been oddly quiet during the entire meal. Kili looked up at Tauriel and said,
“That book by the dead scribe, the one with all the elf and dwarf marriages?”
“Yes, mel nin?”
“I wonder what it says about their offspring.”
The room fell silent, everyone stopped talking and looked at him.
“What?” Kili asked. “I mean, um, pardon? It does seem like an obvious questions. They’d have badgers.”
“Yes,” said Thorin, “and so would those badgers.”
“And so forth and so on,” said Bilbo, “down to the present day, most likely. Which means…”
“They’re descendants would still be alive, right,” said Kili. “That’s a good thing. Isn’t it?”
Thorin smiled mischievously.
“It’s a very good thing, sister son. Here’s the question. How many of them know they aren’t just elves or just dwarves?”
“Oh,” said Kili. Then the implications struck him. “Oh! Mahal’s blessed bum!”

Miss Oquizla came in bearing a tray of tea things, Mistress Dazla carried in the pot and Dori followed.

“Now then,” said Dori gaily, raising a plate which balanced a large, four layer xocolātl cake with xocolātl icing and decorated with fresh raspberries. “We have a nice little cake for dessert!”

That was the last thing Ori heard before he found himself again in the Halls.
This time, he was not at the door where Thror had found him, but at a table in a cozy kitchen with windows looking out into vast, lush gardens, where birds sang and bees buzzed around the flowers that framed the windows outside and threatened to spill over the sill into the kitchen itself. The ceiling hung with dried plants, none of which he recognized, and crockery threatened to overflow the cabinets on every wall. The air smelled of warm butter and cinnamon and a pot of fragrant stew simmered on the hob of a big, black stove. On the table, on a cloth embroidered with flower baskets, sat a mithril tea set. A familiar, grinning hobbit lady sat across the table.

“Queen Sunflower,” Ori said, bowing his head.
“Hullo, master scribe,” she said.
Ori finally got a good look at her as she was very near him this time and not bouncing around, greeting everyone and talking. He had been rather stunned when she first appeared.

She was tall for a hobbit, and round, built along the lines of Bell Gamgee, with beautiful, graceful fingers, adorned but not overwhelmed with rings of mithril and serpentine.
“Tea?”
“Yes, your majesty.”
“Oh, just call me Sunny, everyone does.”
That seemed appropriate, because her eyes were the most startling gold.
“And you’ll call me Ori?”
“Whether you like it or not, yes,” she said with a teasing smile. “Sugar and cream?”
“Yes, please.”
“Excellent choice. I prefer it this side of syrup myself. It’s been a long time since I’ve had any,
and now I can have as much as I want and I will. Rather like sex.”

Ori stirred his tea. He tried to keep from snickering, he really did.

“Oh, go on and laugh. After everything you’ve been through, it must be a relief. Ooo, where are those xocolātl scones?”

They appeared on the table on a serving platter than looked familiar.

“Hopefully Dori won’t mind if I borrow it again,” she said with a naughty grin. “I should just make my own, I know.”

“Can you? Make your own?” Ori asked.

“Oh, yes. I was the one who set up the first kiln in Khazad-dum. Metal is wonderful, but I wanted something warmer, at least for mugs and things.”

They drank their first cuppa in companionable silence.

“So, who’s in my body right now?” Ori asked.

“Mahal.”

“Mahal’s in my body?” Ori repeated then sighed. “I hope I don’t pop. And Durin?”

“Sleeping. Poor dear is worn out, for some reason.”

“Smithing takes a great deal of energy,” Ori observed.

“Yes, all that banging and pounding.”

“Sunny, how long have you been back here since we opened the box?”

“About ten years.”

“You had a lot to make up for,” said Ori, nervously.

She giggled.

“Don’t worry, Ori. I’ve been back ten years, but you’ve only been missing from Arda for about ten minutes.”

Ori heaved a sigh of relief. He watched her stirring her tea. Looking closely, he saw that her hands were far stronger than they first appeared. The pads of her fingers were calloused in the same way as Bell Gamgee’s, the hands of someone who worked.

Ori considered carefully.

“From the time you died until the time we opened the box, you and Durin were apart?”

“No, were together through several cycles of life and death, but then came that mess with the balrog. I disappeared right before Durin’s eyes.”

“So, all the kings named Durin weren’t actually the Durin.”

“No, though it’s a very cute and somewhat painful idea,” said Sunny. “Durin II was hard enough to birth, never mind someone the size of Deathless. Sometimes, my Durin would come back as another king of dwarrow. He was Thorin i, in fact.”

“That’ll certainly mess with our histories,” said Ori. “So, you disappeared? You don’t remember anything of that time?”

“I remember all of it. I mean, I existed. I wasn’t suffering. I lived with the other hobbits off in Yavanna’s endless gardens, but no one had any idea who I was, including me. My identity had been taken away.”

Ori swallowed.

“I’m so sorry. Does that happen to everyone who’s forgotten?”

“No, just to those who are… forcibly misplaced. I understand Durin even came looking for me in the gardens, but couldn’t find me. Every time he was reincarnated, he hoped I would be, too, but I wasn’t. Next time will be different.”

“Then, it was all worth it,” said Ori. “And I had an adventure. And now Lady Galadriel and Lord Celeborn have a lake.”

They grinned at each other and raised their teacups in a wordless toast.

“Oh,” she said, as if she could hear something he couldn’t. “Finish up, Ori, it’s almost time for you to go and you still have someone who wants to talk to you.”

Ori drained his cup, stood and bowed to her.

“My compliments, your majesty, and please thank your good husband for the lost keg.”

“I hope you enjoy it. I brewed that ale myself.”
Ori saw she was growing fuzzy around the edges.
“I’ll send your compliments!” he cried.
“Please do! And kiss your husband for me!”
“Oh! Wait! I forgot to ask. Are you really a Took?”
“My dear, I couldn’t possibly be anything else.”
He was back at the door of Halls, where he had first entered. Prince Thrain stood waiting for him, and actually wearing a mischievous smile.
“I understand my son tried to be polite to Durin,” he said.
“Yes, your highness.”
“Yes, Thrain,” the dead prince corrected. “We’re not at open court or anything.”
“Yes, Thrain,” said Ori obediently, grinning.
“Total waste of time, being polite to Durin. He’s worse than I remember Dain ever being, and that’s saying something.”
“Dain’s only improved since then,” Ori assured him.
Thrain paused for a moment, apparently collecting his thoughts.
Ori waited.
Finally, Thrain said, “I have something I want you to give Thorin.”
“Of course, if it will actually make the journey back to Arda.”
Thrain hugged him, an all-encompassing embrace that made Ori feel safe and welcome.
How did the Durins always manage that?
“There,” said Thrain, releasing him. “I believe that will travel very well.”
Ori found himself exactly where he had been before his latest visit to the Halls. An empty cup and plate sat on the table before him, surrounded by a desert of crumbs, and his stomach was so overfull he didn’t dare move.
“Ori!” Dwalin seized him by the shoulder. “Are yeh alrigh?”
“I’m fine, I promise. Just, whatever you do, don’t squeeze me around the waist!”
Nori cackled knowingly and said, “Welcome back, Chick. Mahal really like that cake.”
“I was looking forward to it, myself,” Ori groaned.
Dori patted his arm.
“I saved you a piece.”
“Maybe in another ten years or so,” said Ori. He looked around. Everyone seemed rather subdued.
“What did Mahal say?” he asked.
Bujni cleared his throat.
“I have the complete transcript here, Lord Ori, if you would care to read it.”
Ori grimaced with pain and mirth.
“Bujni, are you ever just going to call me by my name, or am I going to have to start ‘milord-ing’ you in self defense?”
“Oh. Yes, I see your point, L- Ori.”
Ori took the black leather notebook. He read. He choked.

Lord Ori slumped in his chair and for a moment we thought he had gone to sleep, which was a shame, because we all so looked forward to the cake. As it turned out, he was not asleep, but absent from his body. Which is not to say there was no one in residence. When he opened his eyes again, Lady Dori shrieked and staggered, nearly dropping the cake, and even Captain Dwalin did not look quite calm.

Of course, discovering your husband’s eyes are on fire would be trying to the most stalwart soul. Yet Lord Ori was not in distress, nor did any further of his person catch fire, but he looked all around himself with interest.

Professor Baggins lifted and sat young Frodo and Master Samwise on each of his knees. Princess Tilda turned her face into King-Father Thranduil’s shoulder.
Captain Dwalin removed his arm from about Lord Ori’s shoulder and demanded to know who he was and where he had sent Lord Ori.

King Thorin seemed to put things together quickly, rose to his feet and bowed.  “Udadel Mahal.  This is an unexpected honor.”

“Aye, well,” said Lord Ori, in a voice that was not at all his own, but booming, and very loud, rather on the order of Lord Dain’s.  “Had t’ come an pu’ in me two coppers, didn’t I?  There’s a few thin’s our Durin lef’ ou’, though’ I’d better do i’ now, seein’s how wee Durin an’ his lady’s indisposed.  Those two cooshy-doos are off on a second ‘r third honeymoon.  Won’ ge’ two words a’ sense out a’ em now.  Is tha’ cake?”

Lady Dori recovered quickly.  “What have You done with my Ori?” she demanded, all the while cutting out a large chunk, while King Dain poured Udadel Mahal a healthy portion of ale.

“He’s safe enough, sent ‘im on a visit t’ th’ Halls,” said Mahal.  He ate the slice of cake in three large mouthfuls, washed down with the entire tankard of ale, and gave forth a hearty belch.  “Ahh, now tha’ hits th’ spot.  If yeh’d be so kind, Lady Dori?”

He held out his plate.  Dori’s eyes grew very large, but she didn’t seem to be able to refuse Him.  “Yeh all have questions, I kin see,” said Mahal.  “Yeh go’ me full attention, so now’s th’ time t’ ask.”

Lord Elrond looked to Thorin, who nodded, and the elf lord stepped forward and bowed.  “I beg permission to address Lord Mahal.”

“Wha’s on yer mind, Rhonda?”

Elrond looked startled, then smoothed over his features as best he could, but it was obvious he was trembling and, strangely enough, trying not to laugh.

“If I might inquire, has anything changed among the valar?”

“Yeh wan’ t’ know if ol’ Eru’s still loitering’ abou’?  Aye, he is.  No’ in charge anymore, but, aye.”

The elves and men all eyed each other nervously.

“Oi!” Mahal barked.  “Calm yerselves.  No need t’ get yer knickers in a twist.  He weren’t kicked out’re nothin’.  He’s a guid, honorable sort, so he kep’ his word t’ me.”

“About?” Lady Galadriel ventured.

“I were a wee bit cheesed off t’ have created th’ dwarf, only t’ have Eru say I had t’ put ‘em all t’ sleep ’cause he wanted his elves t’ be first.”

Gimli interjected.  “He tol’ Yeh t’ kill us off!  He only let us live ’cause He saw Yeh was humble.”

Mahal snorted.  “Aye. an’ there’s th’ Firebeard temper.  Two thin’s, inudoye.  First, I ain’t humble.  I’m a righ’ cocky bastard.  Jus’ ask me wife.  Second, all this talk a’ Eru bein’ in charge has got t’ stop.  He mighta been, once, bu’ it ain’t true now.”

Cemnesta inquired, “Has He been deposed by the other Valar, m’lord?”


“Thank You,” said Cemnesta, quite taken aback.

“Anymore a’ tha’ cake, our Dori?  Thank yeh.  Nah, he weren’t deposed.  Li’ I said, he’s a guid, honorable sort.  He really wanted his elves t’ be first, so we made a deal.  I pu’ me dwarrow t’ sleep while he messed with his elf project.  Turned ou’ t’ be a better deal’n I thought, actually.  Gave me time t’ make improvements.  Anyway, in exchange f’r his elves bein’ first, he agreed t’ step down as chief a’ th’ Valar a’ th’ remakin’ a’ th’ world.  Which He has.  Thorin?  Yer lookin’ li’ yer gettin’ yer courage up.”

“Yes, Udadel, I was just wondering if this means You’re in charge now.”

“Me?  Nah!  I haven’ th’ patience.  Tha’d be th’ Wife.”

Hamson Gamgee threw his fist in the air.

“Yes!” And when the entire room turned to look at him he stammered, “I mean, er, that’s grand, Your Lordship.”
Hamfast looked pained, but Mahal only laughed.  
“Brave hear’, Master Gamgee.  They do grow ou’ a’ it.  Some a’ ‘em, anyways.”
Mahal polished off his third piece of cake.  
“So,” said Thorin, “does this mean all the dwarrow from the Halls will be back at once, or just by the dozens or so?  
Mahal laughed.  
“Laddie, lets jus’ say, it’s a guid thin’ yeh go’ all those empty rooms.”
Kili said, “We’ll be up to our eyeballs in dirty nappies!”  
“I’d lay in a supply,” Mahal suggested.  “Anythin’ else?  I should be gettin’ back.”
“Yes, actually,” said Thorin.  “Grandfather, why didn’t You just tell Ori all this and he could tell us?”
“Yer kiddin’, righ?  Yeh don’ know wha’ it’s li’e in ‘is head.  It’s li’e th’ Grea’ Library.  One upset an’ he’s reshelvin’ th’ whole bleedin’ thin’.  After th’ ‘Sikar’ incident at th’ Scribes’ Hall, it looked li’e a mine collapse.  Reshelvin’ f’r days.”
Mahal took a final, vigorous swallow of ale.
“Aye, doesn’ do t’ spend too much time talkin’ t’ our wee scribe.  I’d be answerin’ existential questions ’til the next remakin’ o’ th’ fuckin’ world.”

Ori looked up from his reading.
“My brain is not like the Great Library!”
“I dunno,” Dwalin put an arm about his shoulders.  “I kinda like th’ dictionaries myself.”
Mistress Dazla bustled in and up to the king and Ori had the strangest feeling of having done this before, that morning in fact.
“Your majesty,” she said.  “You have a visitor.”
Thorin looked up at her as if at a loss for a moment.
“Did they arrive or appear?”
“It’s Lord Zark,” Mistress Dazla reproved him.  “His lordship requests a moment of your time and, er, he’s rather… agitated.”
“I see.  In the receiving room?”
“Yes, your majesty.”
Thorin pushed back his chair and rose.  He turned to Ori, who automatically stood, made sure he had his kit with him, and followed Thorin out through the door.  His stomach was still very full, but he felt better standing upright.
Lord Zark was dressed for the mine, his face was sooty and his expression made Ori wish that Dwalin had come with them.
The nobleman bowed at their approach.
“Good afternoon, Lord Zark,” said Thorin.  “What news?”
“I’m sorry to disturb you, your majesty.”  Zark’s voice was a little higher pitched than usual.
“We’ve found another box in the mine.”
Containers, Confusion, and Chats.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. More boxes, who knew! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori stared. He hadn’t been warned by Durin or Mahal about this. He sent his wondering to the ether but only received a distant feminine chuckle.

“Wait here, Lord Zark,” Thorin said and went back into the sitting room.

“Is it like the previous boxes, milord?” Ori asked. “The ones with the ostrikai?”

“No,” Zark said gruffly. “Bigger.”

Ori noted the dwarf lord was a little pale and asked if he would care to have a seat. Zark shook his head. Ori thought perhaps standing was the only thing that was actually keeping Zark upright.

Thorin returned with Dwalin, Balin and Oin in tow.

“Lead the way, Zark,” Thorin ordered.

In the now very familiar mine, Ori had his waist desk on and ready. Bofur and Jani had taken charge and were helping draw out not one but seven caskets made of crystal. Ori had arrived just in time to see Nori vanish into the wall, which explained how Bofur and Jani had got there so quickly.

Seeing Thorin, Bofur came forward.

“There’s seven, melud,” Bofur explained. “All containin’ dwarrow, who look like they’re sleepin’.”

“Why are they all in crystal boxes?” Thorin asked.

Jani snorted.

“Dunno, but I ain’t kissin’ ’em. Bo, yeh think they’re dead?”

“Nah, this one’s eyes’re blinkin’.”

The lid of the first box was carefully lifted away and the naked dwarf inside stared up at them.

“Where are we? Why is it so dark?” the new dwarf asked.

“S’ not really dark,” Bofur said, encouragingly. “Plenty a’ light t’ see.”

“Wait. Yes, it is growing lighter. Are we… in a cave?”

“Yer in a mine under th’ mountain o’ Erebor.”

“What?”

Oin bustled forward, automatically checking pulse points, feeling for fever and surveying pupil size.

“Don’t suppose ya remember yer name’re anythin’?” he demanded.

“I’m… no, not really. The last thing I remember, my comrades and I were crossing the Field of Celebrant.”

Thorin and Ori exchanged looks of horror, then a slow, sly smile crossed Thorin’s face.

“You wouldn’t, by any chance, be an elf, would you?” Thorin asked.

“Of course I’m an elf!” the new dwarf looked a little put out. “Do I look like I have a bear- I have a beard!”

Ori bit his lip, writing as fast as he could. The elf-now-dwarf stared down at his beard and stroked it like it was a baby animal.

“Look how thick it is! I think it needs a wash. I always wanted to be a red-head.”

Oin peered at the newly forged dwarf, eyebrows raised.
“Yeh dizzy, lad?”
The dwarf stared at him.
“I’m not a lad. You dwarves could never tell an elf maid from a…”
The dwarf looked at his crotch.
“Oh. That’s new. Help me stand up.”
Bofur and Jani looked to Oin, who shrugged.
They each grabbed the new dwarf under an arm and hoisted him to his feet.
Zark looked positively ill. He turned to Thorin.
“Why can’t you ever find these boxes in your own mine?”
“Technically, this is my mine. No, I am not asserting ownership! Please don’t set your wife after me!”
“Oh, Elbereth, I’m really short, aren’t I,” said the new dwarf.
“Actually, yer a good size f’r a dwarf,” said Jani.
“Am I?” The dwarf gazed at them, then all around, then looked at his feet. He wiggled his toes.
“That’s really… I just felt… Did I just… Dwarves are really sturdy, aren’t they. The moment I stood up, I felt right. Solid.”
Slowly Bofur and Jani let him go, he stood steadily on his own.
Thorin said, “It’s because you’re connected to the earth. Dig your heels down a little.”
“That is a fascinating sensation.” The dwarf giggled and jumped up and down. “Penises really do flop around, don’t they. How do you keep them from getting caught in things?”
Bofur snorted.
“Lad, ya keep it in yer britches until ya need t’ use it.”
“Of course.”
A cry of anguish echoed through the mine as another new dwarf emerged.
“Where is my penis?”
“I have it,” sang the first new dwarf merrily, “and I’m not giving it back. It was wasted on you, anyway,”
“Hey!”
“Enjoy learning to shoot around those breasts!”
Oin turned to Thorin and patted the king on the shoulder.
“They’ll be fine,” he said.
The first new dwarf frowned mightily, looking Thorin over.
“Are you Durin?”
“I’m a Durin. I’m Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thror.”
“Are you a miner?”
“I’m the high king of dwarrow, which is the plural of ‘dwarf’, by the way.”
“Ah. Er.” The dwarf put his hand over his heart and bowed. “Your majesty. Is there a reason we are here now and… short?”
“Yes, the world has been remade.”
The dwarf appeared to be digesting this under a cloak of myriad emotions. Ori thought Nori would say this one needed to work on his ‘poker face’.
Thorin continued, “Why don’t we go up to the house, you can wash and eat and I’ll explain.”
“Oh, Eru, yes. For some reason I feel the need to eat a piece of meat bigger than my head.”
The second once-elf barked, “Nothing is bigger than your head!”

The new dwarrow, covered with cloaks Jani borrowed from the miners common, had been brought in by the stable door and right into the breakfast parlor as Oin had suggested.
“They can’t go through that lot in the sitting room, the sight a’ that’d kill anybody!”
There had been a brief detour to the main bathroom for them to wash and wait while Mistress Dazla and the household staff rounded up some proper clothing for them.
There were seven new dwarrow in all, four of them dams. Except for the first two, they seemed to have come back whatever genders they had always been, but they were all of them bewildered,
hungry, and failing to negotiate food around their beards with any sort of finesse.

Fanny, Posey and Kelli, the ponies, goats and several ravens peered through the breakfast room windows at them, occasionally sniffing the air and looking perplexed.

“How can you even hold a spoon with hands this size?” asked the first dwarf, whom they had taken to calling Dree, just for convenience.

Dori, overseeing the dining mayhem, sighed and said, “Those hands, properly trained, can produce a chain as fine as a thread.”

“Right now they can’t even find my mouth.”

“Give yourself a chance to adjust, dear.”

“Seems a shame to have tidied my beard before I ate. It’ll need another scrub afterwards. At least these garments appear washable.” Dree looked down at himself. “I certainly couldn’t camouflage myself among the leaves in them, but they are surprisingly comfortable. Also, I believed the body hair would itch, but it’s far softer than I imagined.”

Dori paused, seemed to do an internal check and swore.

“Badgers are sitting on my bladder again. I’ll be right back.”

While Dori stepped out, Thorin watched them from the head of the table, cultivating an air of benevolence. Ori sat at the foot of the table, writing and nursing the teeth marks in his lip where he had bitten down too hard, trying not to laugh.

The second dwarf, now called Erris, looked up from her demolished plate and straight up at Thorin.

“I fail to see why the remaking of the world affected elves at all. Is Eru not Master of the Sky?”

“Eru is still Master of the Sky, but elves are no longer held as superior to all the other races of Arda. Apparently that was the deal Eru made in order for elves to be firstborn.”

The former elves protested mightily. Ori wondered if they realized their mouths were full.

“But, that is not true!” Erris cried. “Eru spared the dwarv- dwarrow when He saw that Aüle was humbled after His transgression, and so Eru allowed the Smith to put His lesser beings to sleep instead of demanding they be destroyed. This is fact.”

“Actually, Eru agreed that, in exchange for elves being first, dwarrow would be acknowledged as their equals at the remaking of the world,” said Thorin with a genuine smile.

“And who told you such a thing?” Erris demanded.

“Mahal did. He was here about an hour ago.”

“And I’m supposed to believe—“

A miniature volcano erupted from the middle of the table, oozed a quantity of lava down its slope, then transformed into an apple tart, leaving the table unmarked.

“This is insane,” one of the other elves pronounced.

“Welcome to Erebor,” said Thorin.

“Then, are the elf kingdoms no more?” Erris demanded, smashing her fist on the table, which was luckily quite sturdy.

“Have the elves been subjugated?”

Ori nearly fell out of his chair.

Erris had gone from elves being superior to elves being slaves as if there were nothing else possible. She stared at Thorin, her eyes were wild, like a frightened horse’s, though the new dwarrow around her continued to chew. The fear in the air was a live thing. Dwalin adjusted his grip on his axe and sent a wordless order to Furh’nk, who quietly loosened the strap to his war hammer.

Dree wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and belched, surprising more than himself.

Nori appeared, leaning on his elbows against the wall, his lower half still obscured by stone.

“Calm down, idjits. You elves’re the same silly gits you always was, tralalalyin’ all over the bloody place. Just means you need t’ share from now on.”

“You are not the only elves to return,” said Thorin. “Most of those who became orcs have so far been returned to their original forms. There is a matter of the seven dwarrow in the Ironfist kingdom who returned from death as elves. I think they must have your original bodies.”
Thranduil swept in, surrounded by his dwarven guards.  
“So, these are the unfortunates,” he said archly, but with a smile.  
The seven jumped up and bowed.  
“Prince Thranduil!” Erris cried. “Your highness!”  
Thranduil waved an imperial hand.  
“It was actually ‘your majesty’, though not anymore. Please, sit.”  
“Has your kingdom been overrun?” one of the dwarrow cried in anguish. “Have you been taken prisoner?”  
“No, these are my body guards. Impressive, aren’t they? My crown has passed to my middle son, Cemnesta. I have abdicated to marry the King of Dale and become mortal.”  
The seven stood, staring, in bewilderment.  
Thranduil bade them sit and eat.  
“And, for Eru’s sake, wipe your beards!”  
They looked at one another, obviously torn between obeying and running for the door. Except for Dree, who surveyed the room, shrugged, and sat back down to her food.  
“But… Cemnesta is a child…what has become of Prince Aewandínen?” Erris asked. “Was he executed by the dwarrow?”  
“Cemnesta is a few thousand years old,” said Thranduil. “Aewandínen is a hairdresser down in Dale.”  
“That makes perfect sense,” said Dree.  
“At least something does,” said Erris. “But, your maj- King Father Thranduil, what of the dwarrow? Are they not our new masters?”  
Thranduil snorted.  
“At water fights, perhaps.”  
“We won fair and square, Thranduil,” said Thorin.  
“And I am gracious enough to concede you did. Don’t push it, Thorin.”  
Thorin raised an amused brow.  
“All right,” said Thranduil. “Don’t push it more than you already have.”  
Dori swept back in, crying out a greeting when she saw Thranduil.  
“Thrandy dear! Thank you for tearing yourself away from the cake! Your silly fawns are all aflutter.”  
The new dwarrow watched in horror as Thranduil rubbed Dori’s shoulder affectionately  
“Thank you for taking them in hand, Dori. You are wonderful.”  
“I am, it’s true,” said Dori. She turned and made a shooing motion with her tea towel. “Go on now, silly fawns, your food is growing cold.”  
The rest of the new dwarrow slowly sat, but only Dree continued to eat.  
“This duck is excellent. Is there more ale?”  
While Dori poured the ale, Thorin looked at Dwalin and nodded.  
Dwalin went out, and in a moment they heard a roar of voices laughing, and furniture being shoved around. The door was flung open and the room invaded by youth, of varying descriptions. Fili, Kili, Gimli and Legolas crowded through, Bain following to shut the door behind them.  
“Ada!” Legolas called. “We bring news of our great triumph!”  
“Over what?” Thranduil asked, looking his youngest over. “Did you wrestle the cake?”  
“In a manner of speaking,” said Legolas cheerfully.  
Seeing the strangers at the table, they all came to a halt.  
Fili stepped forward and bowed.  
“Forgive us, we didn’t realize we were interrupting.”  
Thorin smiled with mischief.  
“You aren’t, really. These are new dwarrow. We just dug them out of the mine. Apparently, they used to be elves.”  
Fili’s eyes opened very wide.  
Kili said, “We have now officially gone round the bend.”
“Masters,” said Thorin, “my heir, Crown Prince Fili, and his brother, Prince Kili. This is Master Gimli Gloinul, son of my cousin, and Prince Legolas Thranduilion, and his stepbrother, Prince Bain Bardsson of Dale.”

Bain murmured to Legolas, “Did wicked stepmother plant them or something?”

“Imagine what those seeds would look like,” Legolas replied.

“Kiliii!” Frodo shouted, and shot through the doorway with Sam at his heels. “You’ll never guess!”

Kili gathered him up and lifted him against his shoulder, while Gimli caught up Sam under the arms and swung him in the air, the faunt giggling.

The former elves watched this with amazement, and some mirth.

“These are not dwarrow, nor are they elves,” said Dree.

“These are young hobbits, called faunts,” said Thorin. “The darker is Frodo, the nephew of my betrothed. The lighter is Samwise, Frodo’s companion and son of King Bard of Dale’s Minister of Gardens.”

“Don’t worry,” said Ori brightly. “I’m writing it all down for you.”

“I need a nap,” said Dree. “Does anyone else need a nap?”

Frodo tilted his head at the dwarrow at the table and leaned over to talk quietly to Kili out of the side of his mouth.

“I think you should,” Kili replied, placing him on his feet.

Frodo, and Sam after him, stepped forward and bowed.

“Frodo Baggins, late of the Shire, at your service.”

“Samwise Gamgee, late of the Shire, at yer service,” echoed Sam.

The new dwarrow looked at them, obviously on the edge of laughter.

Frodo cocked his head.

“It’s your turn,” he encouraged them.

“Er… we are new to these parts, Master Frodo,” said Dree. “Your customs are unknown to us.”

“Oh!” said Frodo, obviously willing to help. “You bow and say your name, and then you say: At your’s and your family’s.”

The new dwarrow all looked at each other, stood and bowed.

Dree said, “We are at your service, and your family’s, but we’ve unfortunately forgotten our real names.”

Nori threw in, “They was elves once, but the details’s fuzzy.”

Samwise perked up, “You were elves and now you’re dwarrow? That’s so neat! Do you think we’re likely to turn into somethin’ else, Mister Frodo?”

Erris snickered and said, “Master Samwise, I believe you may already be something else.”

In a short while the new dwarrow were ready to rest in their rooms at the former royal residence.

“I hope you don’t mind, dears,” said Dori, as Furh’nkn and Oqizla led them off, Nori disappearing into the wall, probably to shadow them. “It’s rather lonely down the hallway where you’ll be staying, but it’s quieter than the wing where the circus performers are staying, and, of course, the scribes get terribly loud when they’re debating punctuation.”

“Circus?” Erris murmured. “Scribes?”

Dree hissed, “You never had better manners than an orc. Thank you, Lady Dori, we’re sure the rooms will be perfect.”

“You always were a kiss-up,” Erris snapped.

The younger set took Frodo and Sam out to play in the meadow. Dori went to ‘freshen up’, and Thranduil went with her, which likely meant gossip and Dori changing clothes yet again. Ori had learned to read the signals. With the bodyguards marching after, that left only Ori, Dwalin, and Thorin in the breakfast parlor.

“What are we going to do with them?” Ori asked.

Thorin chuckled.

“i haven’t a clue.”

“It was a good idea to introduce them to only a few family members at a time.”
“Yes, I thought I’d save Vi and Margr for last.”
“But why?” Ori asked, blinking.
Dwalin chuckled.
“An’ they think they need a nap now.”
Thorin threw back the dregs in his tankard, looking weary.
“I’m ashamed to say I could use a nap myself.”
“A nap,” said Ori longingly. “But, you’re right. We have a duty to our guests.”
“I have a duty to my guests. I think you have a duty to yourself,” said the king, getting to his feet.
“But, Thorin—”
“No ‘buts’, milord. I’m not the one who was possessed by a valar this afternoon.”
Dwalin laughed, so there was no help coming from that quarter.
“I suppose,” Ori sighed, putting on the long-suffering look that Dori wore so well. He got up and pushed in his chair, the three of them walking out together, when Ori remembered. “Wait! Dwalin, will you leave us a moment? I have something to give Thorin.”
Dwalin quirked an eyebrow, but went out, saying something about leftover cake.
“Ori, you’ve given me quite a bit already,” said Thorin.
“This didn’t come from the box. This was something I got in the Halls. Your adad gave it to me to give to you.”
Thorin looked puzzled, then Ori hugged him. Ori felt and heard him gasp. Ori tried very hard to hug with his whole being. He wished he had Thrain’s stature, because it would probably be more effective.
They stood like this for long minutes, holding each other.
Finally, Thorin pulled away, his cheeks wet, and a smile on his face.
“Thank you, Ori.”
“You’re welcome, Thorin.”

Back in the bedroom, Ori flopped down on his bed, completely wrung out. Dwalin came after him and shut the door.
“Tha’ were quite th’ haul, love.”
“I know! Who would have thought there was so much and so many different things. I really believed it would mostly be literature about Durin and Sunflower.”
“An’ string art,” Dwalin added. They both chuckled over it. “Wonder where Thorin’ll have tha’ hung up?”
“In the museum with all the rest,” Ori giggled.
Durin’s voice in his head said, “In the privy, if he’s smart.”
Dwalin kicked off his boots and plumped down on the bed next to Ori. Ori rolled over and they kissed.
“Teyan, the dead scribe, is now haunting the library,” Ori told him.
“Good place f’r her.” Dwalin agreed. “She kin tattle on folk who try an’ nick any a’ th’ books.”
Ori snuggled closer and Dwalin took him in his arms.
“I’m so proud a’ yeh, love. Yeh went on a grea’ quest, stood a’ th’ center a’ th’ remakin’ a th’ world, an’ brought back all these treasures f’r all of us.”
“And I didn’t throw up once!”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Well, that was a very nice quest pretty much over and done with, so it’s back to normality…. Yeah, no such thing around here. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori wandered through to the sitting room, hand in hand with Dwalin. The nap had done him good, as had time alone with his husband. People were busy at the table with the books and oddities from the box. Dori was setting up tea on the stone table before the fire. Ori took note of everyone, then, “Dori, where is Granny Klak?”
“Drinking with her new buddies in the breakfast parlor,” Dori replied with an annoyed tone.
“Her new buddies?” Ori repeated.
“Margr and Vi,” Dori snapped.
Raucous laughter reached them from beyond the kitchen.
“They’ve been at it at least two hours. Red Queen joined them an hour ago. My own dear granny corrupting my handmaidens and a bird.”
Dori swept majestically back to the kitchen.
“Red Queen is drinking?” Ori asked worriedly.
They heard the bird monarch’s distinct voice, “No, no, no, I’m not going to attempt the cliffs right now. I can’t fly for shit when I drink. Pour me another.”
“You missed it,” said Thorin, over at the fire, with Bilbo tucked against his side. “Nori made the mistake of checking on them and ended up on Vi’s knee. And that is why I am staying right here.”
Dwalin threw himself onto the sofa and sighed.
“So wha’s next?”
Thorin grinned.
“Night Market.”
Dwalin sat up and Ori squeaked.
“Really?” Ori found himself hopping with excitement and didn’t care.
“I did promise Theoden at the very least,” said Thorin. “So, it seems we’ll be going in a herd, minus the soused quartet in the breakfast room, I imagine.”
Bilbo clicked his tongue and gave a roguish smile.
“Birds and dwarrow! When will they learn to hold their liquor?”
Ori pounced on him and poked his side like he would Nori’s. Bilbo ‘eeped’, jumped about six inches and burst into giggles, smacking at Ori ineffectually.
“Naughty dwarf!”
The pair of them engaged in a slap fight of less-than-epic proportions, since they were laughing almost too hard to breathe.
Thorin abruptly grabbed Bilbo around the waist and yanked him back.
“Thor-in!” Bilbo reproved.
“Er, ghivashel,” Thorin said. Then he whispered into Bilbo’s ear.
“Oh,” said Bilbo, snickering.
Ori tilted his head, confused. Then he saw how pink Thorin was, and realized that a bit of slap and tickle turned him on, even when he wasn’t doing the slapping or tickling. Ori smirked and
turned to Dwalin, then drew his shoulders back in surprise. Dwalin was even pinker than Thorin.

Oh, the conversation Ori knew he and Bilbo were going to have later on.

The party heading for the Night Market first went to the Groinuls’ house to watch Gimli and Legolas become officially betrothed.

The Groinuls’ sitting room was different from the Fundinuls’; it was like a long hall with massive fireplaces at each end and everything was stone except the ceiling, which had been paneled long ago in oak. The panelling and the beams had taken on the patina of thousands of years of woodsmoke and pipe leaf.

The ceremony was a simple matter of the blushing pair braiding the traditional courting beads of the House of the Groinuls into each other’s hair. The braids were in the elven style.

They exchanged their promises in khuzdul, then in sindarin. They both managed to get through it, though listening to Gimli raise the timber of his voice in musical syllables and Legolas growling through the hard consonants was almost surreal.

Oin and Binni sobbed on Gridr’s shoulders. Gloin sniffed bravely and Romy pranced round the pair, barking. Loli and Omi squealed in delight and Bujni and Dipfa stood proudly nearby.

Omosuil and his squad in their gray, with all the other elves, sang the traditional sylvan betrothal song for the new couple. Oin, Binni, Bujni, Omi, Loli, Gridr and Gloin then joined hands and danced around the couple, while all the dwarrow sang the ancient khuzdul rites of engagement song. Theoden gave the royal Rohirrim blessing with Eowyn singing the prayer to Eru for happiness and prosperity.

Many toasts were drunk to the new couple. Gridr and Gloin presented Thranduil and Cemnesta with the contract of engagement. Thranduil dutifully signed it, witnessed by Cemnesta, making Gloin burst into fond tears and seize the Father King around the waist for a long hug. Thranduil smiled with genuine fondness and patted Gloin’s hair.

Ori turned to Cemnesta.

“Are you going with us to the Night Market, your majesty?”

Cemnesta pretended to pout.

“Alas, I have been claimed by my brother Wandi for the evening. Apparently he wants my ‘input’ on his palace decorations. That just means he wants to show off.”

“Do you really mind?”

Cemnesta smiled and shook his head.

“It’s not a chore to spend time with my brother, especially now that he’s come into his own. I don’t think he was ever happy with the idea of being king. Now he’s where he wants to be. Ada is going along with you, though.”

Unlike most of the party, who had dressed in their jumpsuits, Celeborn wearing something green to match his lady and and Lindir and Elrond, Thranduil had foregone his usual robes and wore all black, trousers tucked into boots under a long tunic with a belt. Ori thought it looked very like Bard’s outfit when he was dressed up for a Dale wedding. Thranduil, however, would never be mistaken for a man. With his platinum hair loose and unadorned, he looked even less man-like than he had in his robes.

Tilda cried, “Wicked stepmother! Your clothes match your eyebrows!”

Thranduil scooped her up against his shoulder and said with mock severity, “Yes, and you’d best have a good look now, as you’ll be fast asleep by the time I return. If you’re very lucky, perhaps Lord Balin will tell you and the other fawns a bedtime story.”

“Aye,” said Balin, grinning, “I have a few thousand ‘r so, though me fav’rite’s the one where I was beset in me own sittin’ room by a fierce, dwarf warrior, who took me prisoner a’ swordspoint.”

“Oooooo!” the younglings all gasped at once.

Ori was horrified.

“Thorin, Bilbo, Dwalin, is it time to go yet?”

Dori bustled over.

“I have to go get supper on. Have fun. Don’t eat too many sweets.”
She bumped foreheads with Ori and then swept off with Balin and a miniature entourage in tow. Bujni, Dipfa and the rest of the younger set supervised by Elrond’s twins followed.

Ori sighed.
“I’m finally a grown up.”

Dwalin leered at him and took him by the hand.
“Aye, time t’ go do ‘grown up’ thin’s.”

“Oh. I thought we were going to the market,” said Ori, leering back.

“Tha’, too,” said Dwalin.
Bilbo and Thorin exchanged looks.
“Newlyweds,” said Thorin.
“Yes, my dear,” said Bilbo. “We’d best leave now before they change their minds about going at all.”

The guards around them had forgone their uniforms, and stayed a small distance away from the party as they entered the night market.

“The Durin’s Day decorations are out already?” Dis snapped, exasperated.
“I know,” said Thorin. “It gets earlier every year. Pretty soon we’ll be seeing them at mid-Summer.”

“At least the balladeers aren’t out yet,” said Fili. Sigrid rolled her eyes.
They followed the outlying path Ori had seen at his first visit. Eowyn, Arwen, Jani and Dis were immediately distracted by the naughty booklets. They perused several and Dis shrieked out,
“Nadad, you and Bilbo are in this one!”

“Oooo,” Eowyn called. “Who knew hobbits have such big ones!”

“Jealous yet, White Lady?” Thorin teased in his turn.

“Seriously!” Bilbo growled in exasperation. “What am I supposed to do with all that? Play golf?”
Theoden realized what the booklets were and, horrified, tried to take the item away from Dis, but desisted in shock when she growled at him.

“They do that,” Legolas reassured the horse king.

“Please tell me I’m not in one of them,” said Ori.

“You’re in this one,” said Dis.

“Oh, Mahaaaaaalll!”

“Don’t worry,” said Dis, “you’re fully clothed.”

“Then what am I doing?”

“Drawing them having sex.”

“I think that’s worse,” Ori wailed.

“Only if you’re hiding in a boot cupboard,” said Bilbo.

With a wink at Ori, Dwalin led the way to the stall selling small runs of liquor. Everyone gathered around to try them out.

Arwen, Eowyn and Tauriel drank samples of beetroot wine and stuck their tongues out at each other to see how purple they had become.

Aragorn tried the parsley wine, gagged and managed to get out, “It’s a little dry.”
Dain tried the same wine and muttered about paint remover.

Sculdis smacked him.

“Be nice! It’s ‘is livelihood!”

Kili sniffed at his sample of parsnip wine for quite some time and then said, “This one definitely does not have a fruity bouquet.”

Haldir, in a very congenial mood no one was used to yet, gamely tried the lichen whiskey. He idly did the sample as a shot. A moment passed as his face showed he was trying to sort out the taste, then his eyes bulged and he suddenly had the silliest grin on his face Ori had ever seen.

“Ooooo, this is great,” he burbled rather loudly

“Thank you. I make it myself,” the proprietor beamed.

Glorfindel snickered at Haldir.
“He was always a lightweight.”

Haldir shoveled the refilled sample glass at Celeborn with amazing violence.

“Try this!” Haldir shouted then blinked, “my lord.”

Celeborn did the shot and coughed, then his smile curled around his head.

“Thranduil, my dear cousin,” the Lord of the Golden Wood cooed. “You have got to try this shit.”

Thranduil snatched the glass as the proprietor handed it to him and downed it. He paused, then addressed the proprietor.

“Do you have more of this?”

“Four cases and my sample bottles.”

“Send all the cases to Fundin House.”

“All of them, m’lord?”

“Yes, all of them. Charge Lord Celeborn for them.”

“Shut up, bark brain,” said Celeborn. Then he relented. “Oh, alright. One for Lórien, one for the revered king-father, one for Greenwood, one for Rivendell. If that’s alright with you, Elrond?”

“Eh? Yes! Quite.” He turned to Lindir over his second ‘sample’ of the whiskey. “What did I just agree to?”

“Soaking your head,” said Thranduil. He hiccuped.

Bard sighed.

“That’s enough lichen whisky for you, sweetie.”

Theoden muttered to Dwalin, “I thought it tasted like dirt.”

“Tha’s wha’ I said,” Dwalin snickered, his arm tightening around Ori. Ori giggled, seeing the group of tipsy elves about them.

“We’re taking the rest of the sample bottles,” Thranduil announced, tossing the man a bag of coins.

“Thank you, m’lord! Here, take the cups, too.”

Galadriel said, “Thank you, but I don’t think that’s necessary.”

She snatched the bottle from Thranduil’s hand and swigged from it.

“Ooo! What a kick!” she cried. “What shall we look at next?”

Thorin, turned to Ori.

“Wandering the night market with a bunch of drunk elves.”

“Happy thought, indeed,” Ori replied.

Theoden and Bard exchanged amused looks at the effect the lichen whiskey was having on the elves.

Dwalin and Ori led the way to the chip barrel, as there was no way Ori was going further without chips. Ori glanced behind him to see the extremely drunken Celeborn, Galadriel, Elrond and Lindir all holding hands in a line and trying to skip after them. Haldir was unsuccessful in making Theoden skip as well.

“I do not skip,” roared the horse lord, torn between rage and laughter.

“First time for everything,” said Haldir, gayly.

Dain shouted, “It’s easy, laddie!”

He grasped Haldir’s hands in his own and skipped in circles with him.

Sigrid and Fili had disappeared, but Kili and Tauriel joined Dain’s circle and skipped with them.

“Where are Sig and Fili?” Ori asked Dwalin.

“Where d’yeh thin’? His mam’s still here wi’ th’ drunk elf parade.”

“They’ve popped down the the Alley of Divine Bliss, haven’t they.”

“Never yeh mind, or, at leas’, never tell. Chips?”

“Yes, please! With vinegar this time!”

“Yer such a risk taker!”

“I’ve grown bold through my triumphs.”

Theoden and Bard definitely wanted chips, and so did Aragorn and Boromir, and Glorfindel was not one to refuse.
“So,” said Aragorn to his march warden. “Where is Miss Lavender this evening? Have you already fallen out?”

“Haven’t even had a chance to fall in,” said Boromir around a mouthful of chips, gravy and cheese curds. “At least I know she’s of-age.”

Theoden raised a brow at him.

“Making inquiries?”

Boromir snorted. “I got three feet out the door of the library and I was suddenly getting the hobbit version of the shovel talk from every Gamgee in the place.”

Once they were all replete, Ori led them down the square, following the sound of the music. He saw plenty of dancers and plenty of lights, but no one was doing the wag.

“Oi, yer lordship,” said a young dam Ori recognized from Buer’s circle. “Come back f’r more?”

“And brought my ‘hubby’,” said Ori, “and a few other friends.”

Her jaw hit the ground.

“Is tha’ th’ king?”

Dwalin chuckled.

“Aye, an’ a bunch a’ soused elves.”

Ori looked out over the crowd. They hopped from foot to foot in long lines, the hopping varied and complicated in pattern, the music drum-heavy.

Everyone was stripped to the waist and there was a lot of hairy, jiggling flesh in motion, bathed in the strobing lights.

“Is that a new dance?” Ori asked.

“Roscobal Hop. It’s th’ lates’ thin’!”

“Is it always danced topless?”

“If possible. Yeh burn a lo’ more energy than yeh do wi’ th’ wag. Bu’ it’s no’ required, if yer friends wan’ t’ join in. An’ I guess they do.”

Omosuil and his soldiers had stripped to the waist and were hopping along with the young dwarrow.

“An’ there goes Lady Galadriel,” said Dwalin, chuckling.

The elf nobles quickly followed, along with the younger set, Boromir and Aragorn. Eowyn followed gamely, though she left her singlet on, probably to spare her uncle’s feelings. Glorfindel had no such scruples. With a brief flinging about of clothing, he rushed stark naked into the dance and joined a line, hopping madly.

Bard and Theoden, left holding piles of clothing, looked at each other and said, “No.”

Dwalin grinned over at Thorin.

“Wha’s yer pleasure, yer majesty?”

Thorin laughed and shook his head, “I’m on the fence about it. I am supposed to maintain a modicum of dignity under my own mountain.”

He looked to Bilbo, who was already entranced.

“Go on, ghivasha, I know you want to.”

Bilbo kissed him and made his way to the dance floor, weskit, shirt and neckcloth left in Thorin’s tender care.

The dancers shouted and cheered when he joined them, his long, springy feet proving well-suited to the dance.

Ori was impressed.

“He’s really good at that.”

“Yes,” Thorin purred, smile feral. “Yes, he is.”

Ori looked up through his eyelashes at Dwalin.

“Shall we?”

Dwalin shot Thorin an inquiring eyebrow.

“Go ahead,” said Thorin. “Best leave us old duffers to ourselves.”

Master Dubb snorted. He had insisted on coming along, even though, as he told everyone he met, he was retired.
“Speak f'r yerself,” Dubb spat, then, dropping his backpack, he was gone to the dance floor. Dwalin took Ori’s hand and they lit out after him.

Ori quickly realized why they were stripped. Between the dance and the energy given off by so many dwarf bodies in one place, he was soaking through his under tunic in minutes. It wasn’t so much the heat itself, though it was definitely of the forge, but more akin to the nearly-solid thermal wall that belted him when Dwalin first opened the lava gate.

Dwalin was obviously more than happy to help Ori remove the top part of his clothing, and his own, tying the upper parts of their jumpsuits about their waists as the others had.

The drum beat jolted through Ori’s chest and carried him along. The bodies in constant motion threw another layer of effect over the strobes, which he thought must have been altered since he was last in the market. It was easy to tell who the Ironfists were, because their already-iridescent face tattoos seemed to jump separately from their skin.

Nodun and Arne hopped by, Nodun waving, and Jani and Dis danced in a tight circle with Dubb and another dam Ori didn’t recognize.

Someone started a holler to the beat of the drums and then they were all hollering, bouncing up and down to the beat.

Ori turned to Dwalin, whose howls sent pleasant shivers up Ori’s spine. They grinned at each other in perfect joy.

The dance went on and on, but the drummers finally cried for mercy and someone brought them beer.

Ori found himself carried along with the crowd to the fountain, where they splashed each other in the cool water, washing away the sweat and generally misbehaving. Dwalin scooped up water to rinse off Ori’s back.

“Love, looks li’e yeh go’ another tattoo started.”

“Really? What is it?” Ori twisted around, but got distracted by the rivulets of water running down Dwalin’s chest. Suddenly, Ori was warm again. He bit his lip as he looked up at his husband.

He grasped Dwalin’s beard in both hands, pulled him down and kissed him hard to the sound of clapping and whistling.

“I love you,” Ori said.

“I love yeh, too, me fierce, wee scribe.”

“We need to stop right there, don’t we?”

“Sad, bu’ true,” said Dwalin with a sigh.

Dwalin led him back toward the edge of the square, where Thorin had found a towel from Mahal-knew-where and was sponging off his soggy, giggling consort. Ori supposed kings were never left wanting for towels when they needed them.

“Ori!” Bilbo cried. “You dancing wizard! You put us all to shame!”

They knocked foreheads, and when Bilbo pulled away he did a double-take and grinned.

“Gracious, but you are popular, aren’t you.”

Ori tilted his head in question.

Dwalin cuddled into him and said, “Take a look a’ yer side, love.”

Ori twisted to look. The blaze of colors startled him, along with the sheer amount of acreage. It was a big tattoo, even for a dwarf.

It was a sunflower, of course, though Ori thought the abstraction made it look like something else, too.

“That’s a doily, isn’t it,” he said with a sigh. “I have a tattoo of a doily on my skin.”

He sent a silent ‘thank You’ to the ether anyway. He wondered if he was supposed to be Yavanna’s scribe as well as Mahal’s now, and if so, how he would divide up his time and when he would sleep.

Yavanna’s voice flowed through his mind.

“No to worry, my dear. I already have a scribe.”

Ori wondered who it might be.

“That would be me,” said Bilbo with a wink. “I’m not just another hobbit conkers champion, you
know.”
Ori laughed in surprise.
“Of course you are!”
They embraced and Ori said merrily, “We’re doomed!”
“Yes, but at least we’ll be doomed together. Much more sociable that way.”
Ori looked up to find both Thorin and Dwalin staring at them as if they had lost their minds. He supposed that was to be expected when they weren’t hearing the whole conversation.
Bilbo looked back and up at Thorin.
“Scribe,” he said.
“Ah,” said Thorin.
Dwalin leaned back with his arms folded.
Thorin smirked.
“Don’t get your armor in a twist, I’ll explain later.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. The Night Market is a wonderful place, isn’t it? After so many serious adventures and discoveries, our beloved characters are long overdue for some seriously silly fun. You might need junk food for this chapter as it’s all Ori and crew are going to be eating and this chapter does go on relentlessly. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

A fruit water vendor had wisely set up his cart nearby, and Bard bought them all cups, while Theoden redistributed clothing to the now-cooled dancers.

“You’re all worse than my son,” he teased them.

Kili stuck his arms through the sleeves of his jumpsuit.

“It’s not like we could hang them up on a convenient tree,” he said. “You’re the next best thing to it.”

Theoden smacked him lightly with the sleeve of Boromir’s jacket.

“Rotten child. Finish dressing before you catch cold.”

While Ori sat on a bench, he saw the same dam he’d spoken to earlier.

“I’m sorry,” Ori said, “but I’m almost certain Buer introduced all of you.”

“Bu’ yeh can’ remember me name?” She laughed and shook her head. She had Broadbeam features, down to the freckles, and tattoos of picks and hammers in a necklace of ink, from her chin down to her breasts. “I’m no’ surprised. Our Buer talks li’e there’s no time t’ waste, then just expects yeh t’ remember. I’m Nugget.”

Ori blinked.

“Ori of Fundin, at your service.”

She laughed again.

“It’s jus’ me Night Market name. I have another, bu’ it’s terribly stuffy.”

“Where is Buer?” Ori asked, realizing he hadn’t seen the brightly-hued tinkerer yet tonight.

“Oh, he’s go’ a new thin’ goin’ near th’ Alley a’ Sweetmeats, right at th’ edge a’ where th’ Court a’ Miracles se’ up. Yeh know tha’ new cane sugar tha’ comes fro’ th’ East? He uses it t’ make spun sugar ‘r some such. He’s really int’ it! He started ou’ wi’ jus’ pink, then he added blue an’ green. Don’ know how he makes it pink, bu’ it doesn’t taste pink, anyway.”

Dwalin peered down at Ori and Nugget.

“Wha’ does pink taste li’e?”

“We’ll find out,” Ori quipped with a grin.

Dwalin sat down on his other side. Nugget was hailed by some friends and, with a cheery farewell, shot off to join them.

While they finished their drinks, Ori rested against Dwalin and closed his eyes. Beside him he heard Bard and Theoden talking.

“-wasn’t the way I was raised,” said Theoden.

“It wasn’t the way I was raised, either,” said Bard, “but this is their mountain and this is dwarven culture. As with the elves, it’s not nudity that’s important, but what you do with it.”

“They seemed to be doing quite a bit,” Theoden pointed out.

The dancing had recommenced and the flesh was sparking under the lights.

“They’re all of-age,” said Bard. “You’ll notice, there aren’t any children here. Besides, I don’t
remember hearing the Rohirrim described as a chaste people. All that rolling around under the blankets by the campfire.”

“Under the blankets being the operative words,” said Theoden. “It’s just startling to think they were such a closed society for so long, yet among themselves, so equally open. There’s so much to learn. I hope Princess Dis doesn’t hold it against me that I tried to take away her… er… book.”

“Dis will pretend it never happened, as long as you don’t do it again.”

“I think I’ve learned my lesson. But, none of this bothers you?”

“If it does, I look at something else. It’s not like there isn’t plenty to look at.”

Now curious, Ori opened his eyes and peeked at the two men. They stood together quite at ease. Ori thought they could pass for common men of Dale.

Theoden chuckled.

“I’m chanting inwardly that Eowyn is more than of age, and it’s not my business when and if she’s rolling in the hay with anyone. Is that how you’re thinking about your Sigrid?”

Bard squeezed his eyes shut with a look of pain.

“Yes, but I’m pretending my Sig is home with Dori. I do know fine well she’s slipped off with Fili as soon as my back was turned. I know she’s perfectly safe and she’s with Fili. They have two guards with them. So she is, no doubt, perfectly happy… Which is why I’m not going to wring his hairy little neck when I see him next.”

Theoden clapped Bard on the shoulder.

“My nephew’s married a dwarf queen and your daughter has herself a dwarf prince, we should congratulate ourselves, Dale.”

“We should, Rohan, but they’re always our wee ones, aren’t they?”

Theoden nodded, laughing, and the Company moved on, though Omosuil and most of his elves stayed on with Thranduil’s blessing.

As they wandered, Ori saw there were many more men and quite a few elves from the Greenwood than the last time he had been. He knew some had set up as vendors, though if they didn’t live in Dale or Erebor, they paid a fee to the crown for the privilege. Thorin used the entire income to upkeep the market itself, as it was open night and day.

They arrived at a large, open stall that was jointly owned by a subgroup of the weavers’ guild that sold sewing notions and fancy work. They were officially the Trim Guild, but were informally called the Buttons and Bows.

The guild members had leased their stall for night use to a group of dwarrow devoted to developing the strange bouncy substance gifted to Thorin at his coronation.

They seemed to have developed furniture with it. A lot of furniture: tables, chairs, sofas, benches, anything Ori could imagine, and all of it packed tightly into a sea of brightly colored, softly undulating shapes and a variety of sizes. Dwarrow, elves, and men wandered through in equal numbers.

“iKeyha,” Ori read off the banner they had strung over the entrance. “How did they even get it all here? Just one sofa must weigh a ton.”

Bilbo nudged him on the shoulder.

“Maybe not. Look.”

Hathor and Guernsia had chosen a big-person sofa of aquamarine. The elf pointed it out to the attendant, who was a dwarf. They had a brief conversation.

The attendant drew his knife and plunged it hard into the sofa.

They all flinched, but the blade merely bounced off the surface.

Hathor and Guernsia exchanged looks and she nodded.

The attendant picked up the sofa by one end and hoisted the entire thing easily over his shoulder. It was awkward, but certainly not heavy.

“Wha’ th’ fuck?” Gimli asked to no one in particular.

Guernsia said something and the dwarf nodded and put the sofa down. He opened a nozzle on the side and the sofa deflated into a flat patch before their eyes. The attendant folded the entire affair into something smaller than a pastry box and carried it to the counter.
“Dwalin, what did we just see?” Ori asked.
“Dunno,” said Dwalin, “bu’ I wan’ t’ see how they put it back.”
The attendant produced a small cylinder with a handle at one end and demonstrated re-inflating the sofa part way before deflating it again.
“Takes a li’le effort, ma’am, bu’ yeh kin re-inflate it in a tic. Be’er’n tryin’ t’ blow it up by mouth any day.”
“How much?” Guernsia asked.
“Sofa’s twenny gold. We throw in th’ pump f’r a silver.”
“How about trading the pump for a packet of coffee?”
She took the parcel out of her satchel and waved it.
The attendant’s eyes lit up.
“Yeh got more a’ tha’ wi’ yeh, ma’am?”
“I have three.”
“Tell yeh wha’. Gimme all three an’ yeh kin have th’ whole kit f’r fifteen gold.”
She held out her arm and they grasped each other’s wrist.
“Done and done,” Guernsia said.
“Done an’ done,” said the attendant.
Personally, Ori thought Dale coffee tasted like iron filings, which weren’t as flavorful as one would think anyway, but some dwarrow had gained a liking for it.
The couple took their parcel and greeted the king’s party in passing.
“King Thorin, you must come and see how the raphcuctus birds have settled in,” said Guernsia.
“King Bard was just saying that, Mistress Guernsia,” said Thorin. “We’ll be heading your way later this week for the Gamgee’s housewarming party. They want to do it now before the harvest starts in earnest. Would you be able to accommodate us next rest day?”
“Certainly! Hathor and I and all our family have been invited as well, as we’re their neighbors now. Fine couple, the Gamgees, very friendly and obliging. Our children go to school together.”
Thranduil gamely offered the lichen whiskey to Hathor.
“No, thank you, King-Father,” Hathor laughed. “That stuff doesn’t bother men or dwarrow but one glass can knock an elf into next week.”
Thranduil grinned evilly. “Yes, so we’re all finding out and deliciously so.”
The couple took their leave and the Company flooded into the stall.
Out of the corner of his eye, Ori had seen the attendant register who his next customers might be. The dwarf stood resolute in the dwarfish way, but if he were a little younger he would likely still be shuffling nervously. His braids marked him as an apprentice chemical engineer, the same trade as King Ulfr, but his bead and clasps were not the usual material. In fact, his reddish-brown beard had been gathered into one long strand, decorated and held every few inches with brightly colored material that did not appear to be string or metal.
He looked like he might just be of-age.
“Yer majesties, nobles, an’ er, everyone,” he bowed. “I’m a’ yer service.”
Thorin bowed.
“You are very good, Master Darnub.”
The youth’s eyes grew very wide.
Thorin laughed gently.
“You look just like your grandfather.”
“I didn’t tell ’im who yeh was,” said Dubb. “Git on wi’ yer pitch, lad.”
Darnub swallowed.
“Yes, udad. How may I be a’ assistance, yer majesties?”
“We’ve come to look,” said Thorin. “Is this the same tree sap that Queen Hild brought for the coronation?”
“Some o’ it, yer majesty. Th’ masters set us a task f’r our journeyman’s, t’ come up wi’ somethin’ made a’ this stuff. Said we could do anythin’ we wanted, bu’ it had t’ be useful. Turns out, there’s no’ a lot yeh can’t do with it.”
“Is that what your bead and clasps are made of?” Ori asked.

“Aye, Lord Ori. Take a look.” He stretched the lowest of the bands from his beard and removed it. “It’s jus’ a li’le tube a’ purple sap, bu’ it stretches an’ bounces back a treat. Sort a’ li’el a clasp, righ’? No’ as sturdy as a real clasp, an’ stretches out eventu’ly, bu’ when it breaks down, yeh pu’ it back in th’ meltin’ crucible an’ make y’rself a new ‘un.”

“That’s amazing!” Ori said, pulling and stretching the band in his fingers before handing it back.

“Has Mister Wandi seen this yet? Imagine what he could do with hair if he just had a few of these.”

The young dwarf looked struck.

“I never though’ a’ him! Ta, mate - er, milord - I’ll pop down there t’morrah an’ see if he’s interested.”

The Company had spread out through the space, throwing themselves on furniture and rebounding into more furniture and into each other. The elves especially laughed uncontrollably.

Darnub looked at them out of the corner of his eye.

Thorin said, “They’re drunk, not mad. Please send me a bill for any damages.”

“Shouldn’t be much, yer majesty. If it can wi’stan’ tha’, I’d say I’m set.”

‘That’ was Dain and Sculdis, bootless, jumping up and down on a bed, holding hands, and going for height.

Bilbo said, “That looks like a dangerous trend.”

“This is nothin’, perfesser,” said Darnub. “Jus’ wait until they ge’ t’ th’ Castle Bounce.”

“What’s Castle Bounce?” Bilbo inquired, an eyebrow raised.

Darnub grinned.

“Jus’ a li’le somthin’ me master built an’ sold t’ Master Woudini.”

“This ought to be good,” said Bilbo, “but we may end up buying one for Dain’s birthday.”

“If yer interested, perfesser, we do make hobbit-sized furnishings, too.”

“Ah,” said Bilbo, “such as that bright yellow sofa upon which King-Father Thranduil has so picturesquely arranged himself?”

Thranduil had indeed posed like a well-fed cat, to Bard’s and Galadriel’s amusement and Celeborn’s ridicule.

Galadriel giggled.

“You look like a bumblebee!” she cried.

“He always was a pain in the arse,” said Celeborn. “Cousin, you are never going to be able to get to your feet with any sort of dignity.”

They exchanged ugly faces, then Galadriel dragged her husband off to look at the beds.

Bard stood with his arms crossed, looking down at his husband.

“You can’t get up, can you?”

“Not with any sort of dignity, no. And I’m not even disgracefully drunk yet.”

“There’s only one thing to do, then,” said Bard. “Push over.”

“What are you doing?” Thranduil asked, laughing, as Bard flopped down beside him.

“We’ll be undignified together,” said Bard. “Wasn’t that what we promised? To do everything we could together?”

“I don’t think my ancestors planned for this eventuality,” said Thranduil.

“Then they were sadly unimaginative,” said Bard. “This is very comfortable. We should get one.”

“It is not going in our bedroom,” Thranduil said with dangerous finality.

“I would never dream of mucking about with your elegant arrangements, sweetie. I meant, for the family room, only ours will be taller and less blindingly colored. We bring it home and we let Tilda try to destroy it. If it can survive Princess Disaster and her Enchanted Boot Knife, it can survive anything.”

“Princess Disaster? I like that! Is it possible to add it to her titles?”

“I don’t know, is it? You’ve done all this king stuff before.”

“I’ve never officially bestowed such a title,” Thranduil confessed, “though when Wandi was
Theoden and Aragorn watched the two with interest, then Theoden said, “That’s almost as tooth-rottingly sweet as you and Arwen.”

“We’ve had longer to practice,” said Aragorn.

Bard and Thranduil waited until Celeborn and Galadriel had scampered after Aragorn and Arwen, off toward the Alley of Sweetmeats, before Gimli and Legolas helped pry them to their feet. Bard and Thranduil looked over a few taller sofa specimens in the same shape, and gestured to Darnub.

If the apprentice was startled to find the remaining Company following along with him, he didn’t show it.

Thranduil bowed to Darnub, listing only slightly, and said, “I apologize if we have frightened away any customers with our display.”

Darnub laughed.

“Nah, king-father, jus’ th’ opposite. If they hear th’ quality’s bin here, we’ll be swamped wi’ curiosity seekers. Some a’ em at leas’ll buy a piece ’r two.”

“In that case, I expect a cut of the profits. Joking! I’m joking! King Bard and I would very much like to buy the teal sofa off in the corner. Twenty gold and a silver for the pump, is it? And a bit more to have it delivered in Dale?”

“No need, yer majesty. I’m goin’ by Dale Hall anyway t’ visit Mister Wandi. I’ll drop it by then.”

‘Dale Hall’ was the default name the people had given to the house where Bard’s family now lived. Ori knew Bard had been hesitant to call it a royal residence or any such thing, but he had no objection to people naming it for him.

“Spun sugar next?” Ori asked Dwalin eagerly.

“Hungry again?”

“I need to fortify myself before I visit Castle Bounce, whatever that is.”

Dwalin looked out over the furniture and chuckled.

“Don’ suppose yeh’d mind a wee detour int’ th’ Alley a’ Divine Bliss on the way?”

Ori licked his lips.

“I think I might be persuaded.”

Dwalin seemed to gain Thorin’s attention through thought alone.

Thorin turned, Dwalin chucked his chin off to the left and Thorin grinned.

“Have fun.”

The first stand along was crowded with canvases and drawings, charcoals and pastels, oils and colored inks. The largest works depicted nudes in every media, light, and mood, sometimes alone and sometimes in groups, and the variety of races: dwarrow, men, elves, though no hobbits as far as he could see.

There was so much art in every square foot, and all of it so luscious, that Ori had to carefully pick his way through, wanting to lick everything he saw. He and Dwalin were alone in the stall with the dwarf proprietor, a mature, broadly built dwarf, with bright red curls and dark skin. His beads allied him with the Blacklocks and called him a master of fine arts, though, interestingly, he didn't have apprentice or journeymen's beads.

Ori bowed slightly in greeting and the bow was returned, somewhat nervously.

"If there's anything I might help you with, milord, captain, I am at your service."

"Thank you," said Ori, wishing he could find a way to relieve the dwarf of this deference.

Although, perhaps he was just intimidated by Dwalin, who seemed to take up the remaining room in the enclosure all on his own.

In a bin on a stand, Ori found smaller drawings and prints, upright on their edges in temporary frames. The first portrayed a simple nude of a dam. It looked like the study for a painting, but had been rendered in color, sensuous and pleasing, the work of the same painter's hand.

Curious, he flipped through.
The next print showed him a dam with a strap-on phallus, taking another dam from behind.
Oh.
Same coloring, same style, though the proportions were not as fine. The piece was dated a good
deal earlier than the last, which accounted for the looseness in technique, but the overall effect was-
What in Mordor's bloody name was he thinking?
A picture of two dams having sex in front of him and he was critiquing proportions?
Ori mentally face-palmed and flipped to the next, a picture of a male elf masturbating, as viewed
from above.
The ecstasy captured in the elf's features was nothing less than breathtaking, but the angle gave
Ori vertigo and he moved to the next.
In a pastel of soft greys, brown and blues, a dwarf and a man tangled together in a tender
embrace. They were both solid, well-grown, and exceptionally hairy.
"Nice they've gone in f'r variety," said Dwalin, looking over his shoulder.
"I was just thinking that."
"This appeal t' yeh?"
"Yes, actually. I don't think I could walk away from it, though I have no idea where I'd put it."
"In th' bedroom."
Ori looked up at him in surprise.
"Really? Do you like it, too?"
"Ac'ually, I thin' it's sweet, bu' don' tell anyone I ever used tha' word."
"'Actually'?"
"Smar' arse. I go' a -"
"A reputation to maintain, I know," said Ori, elbowing him gently.
"B'sides, tha' room's allus bin a li'l' bare, 'cept f'r th' swords 'n hammers 'n such."
"You're actually suggesting we decorate with something other than implements of mayhem?"
Ori fluttered his lashes before turning to the dwarf, who was trying hard not to hover and failing.
"Excuse me? What can you tell me about this piece?"
"These are all mine, Lord Ori. I work from life for the initial sketch, adding detail to the finished
piece as it appeals to me."
"Everything I've seen so far is magnificent, but this one is especially beautiful."
"Thank you, milord. I was pleased with it."
"How much do you ask for it?"
The dwarf looked startled and named a modest sum.
"Really? I think you need to raise your prices," Ori teased gently.
"I haven't had my mastery very long, milord. It's a bit daunting to ask even the price the guild
suggests."
"You should, as soon as possible," Ori encouraged.
The dwarf didn't know where to look.
"I know I should, milord, but, you see, I'm self-taught. Feels almost like a cheat to ask the same as
those who had proper masters."
Ori turned to Dwalin.
"Would you give me a minute, love?"
Ori thought this was becoming a habit. He hoped Dwalin didn't resent it.
Dwalin just gave him a knowing grin and said, "'Course. I'll be over a' th' next stall, lookin' over
th' new wibbly pricks."
Ori turned to the dwarf.
"What is your name, master?"
"Kyur, son of Myur, milord."
"Master Kyur, I've had some proper teachers, but only because my brother was willing to go
without to make sure I did. Not everyone is as fortunate. Your work is at least as good as mine, and
your grasp of shading makes me all but swoon. What was your craft before this?"
Kyur ducked his head.
"I still sell skivvies in the day market. I did so for about seventy years before I got up the money and the courage and found a sponsor in the guild."
"And they looked at your work and accepted you for mastery right away."
"Yes, milord." He looked horribly embarrassed.
"Yet, you don’t think you’re as good as the other masters?” Ori shook his head, but it was out of fondness, not censure. "This is what I'm going to give you for this piece."
He named a substantially larger price than what Kyur had asked. 
The dwarf gasped.
"Milord, really, it's more than kind, but if it’s just a kindness-"
"It's a little over guild asking price," said Ori, "and we both know it. Besides, if you take less, how will you make a living and pay your extremely attractive models?"
Kyur grinned and visibly relaxed.
"You have me, milord. They are a little tired of being paid in underpinnings, and my elf never knows what to do with them anyway."
As Kyur carefully wrapped the picture and promised delivery to Fundin House on the morrow, Ori asked, "Are you here every night, Master Kyur?"
"The night before rest days, and the nights of both rest days, milord. Skivvies don't make themselves, after all."
"Alas," said Ori, "it's true."
They parted cordially and Ori went on to find Dwalin at the stall where the faux pricks were displayed. The vendor had set up a new display of items made with the novel tree sap material. They swirled with color.
"Bu' how durable 'r they?" Dwalin asked the dam.
He held a lightning blue and gold specimen, shaking it by the base so that the generously proportioned length shot back and forth like a spring.
Ori snickered.
"Are you playing with that nice dam's penis, Dwalin?"
Even as the words came out of his mouth, he actually realized what he'd said and his face was hot as a forge.
Dwalin and the vendor turned to look at him. The dam snickered and Dwalin laughed out loud in surprise and delight.
"S' alright," he said. "She gave me permission."
"To answer your question, captain," said the dam, "they are very durable and very easy to clean. However, should they get nicked or cut, they will tear."
"So, lettin' th' wargs play wi 'em's out a' th' question?"
"I'm afraid so," she replied. "A shame, I know. This new material is quite something. It's as easy to mold as any glass or metals, and has a pleasant 'give' to it. We have a limited number at the moment, because they sell so well. I've heard they do have some drawbacks, though."
"Besides no' bein' warg-safe?"
"Yes. I don't know how it affects hobbits. Dwarrow and elves seem perfectly fine, but some of the men have reported rashes when the material comes into contact with sensitive areas."
"Ouch," said Ori. 
"Yes," said the dam. "I'm glad that was discovered before I sold any of these to the men. Now they can't say they weren't forewarned."
Ori frowned.
"The way the men see sex, do you have any as customers at all?"
She snorted.
"What the men say and what they do are often two very different things, milord. Though, I can see changes even now. King Bard's elf is one of my best customers, and he'll say so to anyone who'll hear it. He's as shameless as any dwarf, and quite popular in the city. Amazing what can happen when you take that stick out of your arse."
She excused herself to tend to another customer.
Ori looked up at Dwalin.
"I'm surprised Bard hasn't combusted from the embarrassment."
"He ge's back 'is own. Did yeh ever thin' yeh'd hear any call Thranduil 'sweetie'?"
“And live? No,” said Ori, looking idly through the cases, which also contained new items since
the last time they'd been.
Because he had been such a Faithful Reader of the Works of Queen Kivi, he now recognized the
contents of the case and, for the most part, how they were used.
He looked askance at the cock rings.
Usually, he was on the edge of passing out just from what he and Dwalin did now. Mucking
about with delayed ejaculation was too much to plan for, never mind to bear.
"It's kind of intimidating, isn't it,” said Ori. "All these gadgets."
"These 'r dwarrow we're talkin' abou', love. Lots've us go' a serious hardware fetish. No ma'er
wha' yer hand does, there mus' be somethin' t' do it be'er. Which ain't t' say none a' this has it's uses.
Bein' handcuffed kin be a pretty tease - so long's yeh've go' the key f'r 'em."
"Sometimes,” said familiar voice, "letting them think for a moment that you've lost the key adds a
little excitement."
"Master Tay!” Ori cried. "How are you keeping?"
Nodun's husband looked as perfectly well-dressed and groomed as he had the last time they met,
but Ori would never forget how he looked, bedraggled and naked, telling King Ulfr to shut up and
get out.
"Well, thank you, Lord Ori. Captain Dwalin."
"Master Tay. Doin' a little research?"
"I am on business elsewhere in the market, but I always drop in here to see what's new."
"Didn' hear yeh was much f'r novelties,” said Dwalin, conversationally.
"I'm not, professionally speaking, but despite my Ironfist frugality, I'm not above buying trinkets I
don't need. This, however, I think I'll forego."
"What is it?” Ori asked, peering into the case.
"A sterling silver reproduction of the penis of Durin IV."
Durin snickered in Ori's mind.
"Righ’. They thin' I posed f'r tha?" 
"Didn't you?” Ori muttered saucily.
"How would I even ge' tha' in me trousers?"
"It does seem a little large,” said Ori aloud.
"Obviously forged in the spirit of eternal optimism,” said Tay. "Supposedly it can be used as a
sex implement as well as a doorstop, but even I have my limits."
They wandered together into the next stall, which was a larger than most. It sold oils and
incenses, and was one of the shops that stayed open night and day.
Ori supposed Tay or Dwalin might be able to make sense of it, but all he saw were shelves upon
shelves of glass bottles, most clear with a variety of liquids, but some blue glass or brown, and
furniture like bureaus, but fitted with dozens of small drawers, each bearing an ancient, smudged
label in khuzdul.
He had noticed the slight scent of this place from several stalls down, but here it was as large and
present as the bottles and bureaus. He couldn't say it was familiar, but he rather liked it.
As far as Ori could tell, the bottles were not grouped or even organized in any fashion, though the
labels were easier to read.
"Oil of Peppermint. Isn't that what you put in cookies?"
"Yes,” said Tay, “but also very soothing for the feet."
"How does eating peppermint help your feet?"
Tay grinned.
"Eating or drinking it won't help your feet, though it might settle an upset stomach. No, you use it
to massage the feet."
"Well, I feel like a cram brain,” said Ori.
Dwalin kissed him on top of his head and Tay chuckled.
"Go easy on yourself, master scribe. The Great Library wasn't filled in one day."
"True," Ori relented. "We saw Nodun and Arne dancing at the square. Don't you dance?"
"When I can, but right now I'm on a mission. There it is. Oil of Cinnamon." He turned to the old dwarf behind the counter and peppered him with questions. "Do you make your own? Where did the cinnamon come from?"
Tay must have liked the answers he got, because he bought two large bottles.
"Is that good for the feet, too?" Ori asked.
"Good for the rest of the senses. Supposedly, biologically the males of mankind find it irresistible."
"Why?"
"No idea, but, really, who wouldn't want their lover to smell like pie?"
Tay had a wheeled basket of his own, which quickly filled with bottles and packets.
"I have to stock up," said Tay, "before bloody Wandi corners the market and drives up the price."
"Do you think Mister Wandi will really cut into your business?" Ori asked.
"Somewhat, though obviously I offer services he doesn't, and my currant scones will always be superior to his."
"How do you know?"
"I got my recipe from Dori."
"Really? I would have thought he'd give it to Wandi as a favor."
"I asked Dori about that. She said she didn't want to be seen playing favorites. But we all know how silly that is. It's obvious that you're her favorite."
"And I already have the recipe," said Ori.
After they bade farewell to Tay, they stopped for a nice cuppa and some almond-flour cookies with powdered sugar and lemon.
"This is nice," said Ori, cuddled up against Dwalin on the cushions at a Stiffbeard tea house. The little table in front of them was a sunburst pattern of tiny tiles and the cloth panels that provided temporary walls glinted with mirrors among the threads of the embroidery.
"Though 'yeh might' li'e a breather b'fore we head back t' th' herd," said Dwalin.
Ori sighed.
"It is tempting to just ditch the herd and stay right here, but I know we can't."
"We'll be back soon," said Dwalin.
The dam who ran the house carried her tiny pebble in a back strap. It was too young to do much more than stir and yawn. As the dam bustled among the customers, she was followed by a young dwarf who closely resembled her and who talked incessantly and in dialect, which she did her best to ignore.
Finally, the badgerling woke and started to cry.
Exasperated, the dam turned to the dwarf and said in westron, "Tell him to go fuck himself. I'm not going back, and I'm not sending the damlings back, either. He can cook his own damned dinner."
She sat, expertly moved the pebble to her chest, bared a breast and popped the nipple into its mouth.
"But, Nilis-"
"Don't you 'but' me."
Dwalin turned to catch her eye and chuck his chin at the youth.
"Naw," she said. "I can handle it. Ta."
The youth turned and left, taking all the tension with him. The teahouse settled once more into serenity.
Ori watched the baby feed for a moment. Its little chin whiskers bobbing up and down, and reflected that the infants of any race were adorable, as long as he didn't have to have one himself.
"Killer an' th' kittens 'r plenty f'r yeh," said Dwalin with a grin.
"You always read my mind. I think I'll be much happier as an uncle."
Ori leaned over and brushed the powdered sugar from Dwalin's beard. Then Dwalin brushed the powdered sugar from Ori's!

"Oh!" said Ori.

"F'rgot f'r a sec, didn' yeh?"

"Since it's stopped itching so much. I know it'll never be as nice as yours."

"I like it," said Dwalin simply.

The smell of sugar wafted over them at the entrance to the Alley of Sweetmeats. Despite the tea and cookies, Ori’s mouth watered.

He could see the rest of the Company cavorting among the stalls. Lady Galadriel wore three strings of fruit candy necklaces, which Lord Celeborn nibbled at, missing the necklaces themselves a good bit, but causing Galadriel to giggle and bat at him.

“Naughty!”

“Who could resist?”

“Apparently, not you.”

She kissed him, perhaps trying for a distraction, but it didn’t work and she didn’t seem to mind.

“What do you think of these?” she asked, lifting a tiny pair of legless drawers, which sparkled in sugar-covered candy colors.

Ori narrowed his eyes at the garment, then giggled, hiccuped and stepped back into Dwalin all at once.

They didn’t just look like candy, apparently, as Celeborn leaned in and took a healthful bite out of the crotch.

He chewed, swallowed, considered and said, “Ask if they have any in peach flavor. You know it’s my favorite.”

Ori looked up at Dwalin.

“Their stall is in the wrong alley.”

He wondered how many pair Sigrid had sprung for, and how soon he could corner her to ask.

The owner of the stall, who apparently was beyond any fear or shock, ventured, “And would the gentleman care to examine our line of similar garments for males?”

Galadriel squealed.

“Oh, yes, my dear!”

Theoden, standing nearby, studiously watched the operation of a clockwork taffy pulling machine, while Dain excitedly explained how it worked.

“Doesn’t the machine oil tend to leach into the taffy?” Theoden asked.

“Jus’ adds flavor,” said Dain, shrugging.

“I think I’ll pass,” said Theoden.

“Heh. More f’r me,” said Dain.

Thranduil had joined Galadriel and Celeborn, followed by a visibly reluctant Bard.


“I see it all now,” said Bard. “You’re trying to kill me.”

“With xocolātl penises? At least you would die happy.” To the vendor he asked, “Are they hollow or solid?”

“We have both, m’lord. The solid are always nice, but we can fill the hollow ones with the cream flavor of your choice.”

“Eru save me,” Bard muttered.

Thorin and Bilbo investigated a stall across the way, Thorin talking to the stall-keeper, a woman who was dark-skinned like a Blacklock, though her hair was coiled and clumped eccentrically, not braided.

“I see you’re getting on, Mistress Deneb,” said Thorin.

“Yes, it is very good,” said the woman, grinning. Her face bore rows upon rows of neat, tiny scars. “We sell many pastries, thank you, your majesty.”

Ori turned to Dwalin with a quizzical brow.
“Easterlin’s,” said Dwalin softly.
“Really?”
Ori went to the case and looked in.
There were lots of very interesting items, almost none of which he recognized.
Bilbo nudged him.
“You want to try that round one, with the molded designs. Dates stuffed with walnuts, in a solid pastry crust. Mahnl, I think they call it.”
“That sounds really good,” said Ori. “What about those? Is that custard?”
“Custard tarts. The crust is a little more crumbly.” He looked up at the woman. “Excuse me, ma’am, what do you call these?”
“Nataj, also very good, professor. Very… hmmm? What is… tasty.”
Ori bit his lip.
“Dwalin.”
“Love.”
“How many of those do you think a dwarf could eat before he explodes?”
“Ask Bilbo how many a hobbit kin eat an’ figure abou’ half a’ tha’.”
Bilbo nodded.
“Very wise, actually.”
Ori ended up with a sack of a dozen of both, since he knew he would eat at least three of either at a sitting, and he wanted to have one each to bring back to Dori.
They wandered on, sampling divinity and caramel and maple sugar molded into shapes, rounded bits of xocolātl with hard sugar shells of different colors, some plain and some with peanuts. There were sugared violets and rose petals, cakes made entirely of gooey caramel wrapped in solid xocolātl and curious, thin, dark xocolātl cookies sandwiching a creamy sugar confection.
The largest crowd gathered around a dwarf with a long, thin slab of marble for a counter, and a vat of melted xocolātl. He took up a small ball of xocolātl, or crushed, creamed nuts on the end of a skewer, dipped it in the xocolātl sauce, rolled it in ground cinnamon and left it to sit on the marble slab. Then, when he had a row of them, he dipped them and rolled each anew, in different ingredients, finally left to set in perfect rounds, which he decorated.
The entire process was mesmerizing.
Then the dwarf cut the finished products in half to show the layers, and they were just as beautiful that way as they had been whole. Then he passed the pieces out as samples, and the moans of pleasure bordered the obscene.
“Where do you even learn to do this?” Ori asked.
The dwarf grinned, never looking up from his work.
“I developed it m’self, m’lord. Lots o’ trial an’ error. O’ course, the best part o’ the error is, you get to eat your mistakes.”
The candies were steeply expensive, but seeing the work that went into them, Ori didn’t mind paying so much.
Kili was suddenly right there in front of Ori and he was terribly excited.
“Ori-mate! Did you taste this?”
Obviously, Kili had, because he had some powdered cinnamon on his chin. He held Tauriel’s hand in a deathgrip and was nearly jumping up and down. His pupils were very, very large.
“Yes, I did, Ki,” said Ori. He exchanged glances with Tauriel, who looked like she was about to explode with laughter before he continued, “What have you been up to?”
“There’s a vendor down the end of the alley who’s figured out how to turn coffee, sugar and cream into candy. I had some of those.”
“How many would that be?”
“About forty.”
“Ah. Perhaps some chamomile tea?”
“Why?”
“No reason. Forget I said anything.”
Kili latched onto Gimli next, and started the entire conversation again.
Ori asked Tauriel, “Are you alright?”
“I’m fine,” she said. “It’s a good thing I’m strong, though. When he crashes, I’m going to have to carry him upstairs and tuck him in.”
Dis snickered, feeding Jani some candied grapes.
“It’s not my job anymore, nathith. Sorry.”
Ori felt like quite the hedonist, for he bought a dozen of these layered chocolate creations, which the dwarf called truffles.
“Because they’re rare an’ beautiful,” he clarified, “not because they taste like dirt.”
Ori bought two each: ginger, cinnamon, hazelnut, jellied brandy, coffee, and pomegranate.
He felt like he’d committed a crime and everyone was letting him get away with it, which he supposed was part of the charm. He didn’t know if he should eat them or paint them and then eat them. They were just too perfect not to capture for posterity.
“I’ve lost my mind,” he announced to Dwalin.
“I’m thinkin’ truffles’ll do tha’ t’ yeh,” Dwalin replied.
Boromir and Eowyn had bought extra long licorice laces and were dueling dangerously at the edge of the crowd. Glorfindel and Legolas purchased the entire batch of machine-pulled taffy and were attempting to hold each other captive with it. Lindir and Elrond took turns nibbling at a mahml and taking swigs from the lichen whiskey, which Elrond declared imperiously to be a valar-inspired combination and wondered aloud how to impose it as mandatory fare at the Last Homely House. Arwen watched complacently, while Aragorn went on an errand for her - back to the stand with the edible skivvies, though he was having trouble gaining the vendor’s attention, since Dubb had taken a shine to her and was chatting her up.
Thorin and Bilbo watched the entire scene with perfect serenity. Bilbo made sure the guards were all well-supplied with an assortment of treats, which certainly didn’t make him any enemies.
They waited for Gimli and Tauriel to cut Glorfindel and Legolas from their mutual sticky prison before Thorin called the Company to order.
“Are we ready for the fun fair?” Thorin asked.
“I want to know what a Castle Bounce is,” said Bilbo.
“Thorin, can we stop on the way to see Buer?” Ori asked.
“Of course,” said Thorin. “Besides, there’s food involved.”

Buer’s stall was unmistakable.
It was fully lit around the top and down the sides with strings of Ulfr’s lights, but in miniature, which twinkled on and off seemingly at random without being touched. Buer himself had transformed his appearance since last they had met. His hair was purple, and twisted in a whirlwind up from the top of his head. It still jingled whenever he moved, and he moved constantly, over a large bowl of something fluffy, swirling a stick around the inside edge. When he pulled it out, it was encased in a globe of lovely spun sugar, bright blue in color.
Thorin looked over Ori’s shoulder at the throng around the stall and said, “Imagine, all those dwarrow, spoiling their dinners. Best not tell Dori.”
Ori snickered.
“What do you think, my king? What does blue taste like?”
“It’s just a guess,” said Thorin, “but I think it tastes like sugar. I am willing to test this hypothesis until we find a satisfactory scientific conclusion.”
When they reached the counter, Buer bowed to the king and took his order, then greeted Ori like an old friend.
“Ori! Hi! How’s the lording business?”
“Lately, extremely busy. We came to try out your new confection.”
“You’re in for a treat, and that’s not just me being modest,” said Buer.
“How does it work?”
“Come around and see.”
“Really?”
“Sure.”
Ori walked around the back of the stall and looked into the bowl.
“How is the air moving?”
“Foot pump. I adapted it from a bellows, but I have to keep changing feet or one of my legs would look like an oak tree and the other’d look like a sapling. The air spins the sugar into strands, all I do is keep the stick rotating and moving in a circle. There’s a charcoal caldron underneath to keep the sugar melted.”
“How is the air moving?”
“Where did you get the idea?”
Buer looked a little embarrassed.
“My sister and me were having a bit of a prank war down in the forges and things got out of hand. She was brushing sugar out of her hair with a wet brush and some of the sugar melted and stranded. From there I just worked backward.”
“Good thing you did,” said Ori. “I don’t think I’d want to eat spun sugar from your sister’s hair.”
Ori watched Buer supply the Company with treats. He took out his coin pouch.
“No worries. King Thorin’s already paid for yours,” said Buer, handing Ori his treat. “I kind of miss her.”
“Your sister? What happened to her?”
“Nothing bad,” said Buer, who was in constant motion while he spoke. “She’s gotten an apprenticeship in the stone masons’ guild and she’s gone off with her master to Ered Luin. Then amad had the new pebble and adad told me it was time I moved out.”
Ori breathed in sharply.
“That’s terrible!”
“Nah, it’s better this way. The house is about the size of this stall, so unless I wanted to listen to a pebble wailing all night, it was time to go.”
“Are you making a living?”
“Yep. I’ve got patents, sell my stuff in the day market, make up new gadgets for Master Axsin. I probably would have moved out a long time ago, but I never took the time to look for a place. I live in one of the flats in the old noble quarter. Doesn’t leave a lot of time for wagging or hopping, though.”
“We just hopped. It was incredible!”
“Isn’t it? Nugget’s a genius.”
“Nugget invented the hop?”
“Oh yeah. She adapted the wag, too, so you didn’t need a music box to dance it. Don’t be surprised if you see her at open court. She wants to petition the king to reestablish the guild of court dancers.”
Ori felt guilty about taking so much of Buer’s time, though Buer didn’t seem at all phased, dealing with customers and making spun sugar the whole time. Ori could see Dwalin waiting for him as the rest of the Company moved off toward the fun fair.
“I should get going,” he said reluctantly. “But I’ll be back.”
“Any time,” said Buer as they bumped foreheads.
As Ori left, he saw that many more people had queued up for spun sugar in the wake of the king.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. This is every circus, carnival, and county fair we’ve ever been to or read about! So grab yourself some funnel cake and candy! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

A gaily painted, temporary wall had been erected across the way, marking the edge of the Night Market proper, with a queue leading up to an entrance painted like an open mouth. Right by the mouth sat a bright red stall. People had lined up at it, waiting to enter.

Inside sat Helar, taking entry payment. When she and the others in line saw the royal party, they made to move away. Thorin went forward and handed Helar an entrance coin, which Dwalin told Ori, Jim had given him for their party. Thorin then looked back, counted everyone who had been in line and handed Helar a small bag. She poured out gold coins, squealed, and waved everyone through. It took some time, as all those who had been waiting, wanted to personally thank the king. Ori smiled as Thorin and Bilbo stood together, talking and exchanging pleasantries with any who wanted their attention.

They walked through the ‘mouth’, giggling a bit, then Ori gaped along with the rest of the party - the dwarrow and men in surprise and the elves because they were drunk.

Strings of Buer’s tiny colored lights swooped and blinked all round and over everything. There were brightly dyed canvas tents, gaudily painted stalls, and bunting looping from place to place. Dwarrow and men were everywhere walking, looking, and their offspring running around.

“Where did all these badgers come from?” Ori asked. “They aren’t allowed in the Night Market.”

“There’s a separate entrance to the fun fair. They’re allowed in until a certain hour,” Thorin told them. “Balin and Jim worked it out while you were…er…questing.”

Everything inside the gate was, to Ori’s eyes, a sparkling wonderland of swirling hues, music, voices shouting in delight, and delicious smells.

Haldir gasped and ran forward, arms open, and spun to face him.

“Oh, Lord Ori! It’s a fairy land!”

“Keep it t’gether, Danny-boy,” Dain called from the back.

They followed the crowd along the stalls on the right. A tall, lean man Ori knew to be of Jim’s group had a large stall with an array of knives laid out on the front counter and piles of fuzzy things which, as they approached, Ori saw were toy stuffed animals, specifically toy stuffed wargs, yellow and white wargs. Of course, ‘toy’ was a matter of proportion.

Ori, Bilbo, and Sculdis all squealed at this sight. The stall owner spotted them and shouted his carnival bark,

“Come on up! Come on up! Easy game! Three chances f’r two coppers! Very easy! Lots of fun! Win a toy of the king’s wargs!”

Ori rushed up before he could stop himself, Arwen and Eowyn on his heels.

Beyond the counter full of knives was an open area, then a far wall covered in targets. Each target had a cherry stuck to the center.

“Look!” Ori cried.

Dwalin swaggered over and looked. He glanced at Ori and tossed down two coppers to the man, who took them, shouting,
“Come on up! Try your luck! Lessee what the Captain of the King’s Guard can do, folks!”
Dwalin took up a knife, weighed it on his middle finger, flipped it into his hand and threw it with
deadly speed and accuracy. The knife split the cherry in the furthest target. The entire party and
anyone else watching burst into cheers. Dwalin followed with the other two knives. Each pierced
the same cherry, right next to the first knife, leaving a mess on the board.
“A WINNAH!” the barker announced. He grinned at Dwalin. “What’s yer ’druthers, my friend?
Butter ’r Sugar?”
“Well, love?” Dwalin prompted.
“Butter, please,” said Ori.
The barker handed over a yellow warg that was about two feet tall. Dubb removed the pack off
his back and took out a frame. This unfolded to a large wheeled basket. Ori stowed his prize in it
with a grin for Dubb, who looked patiently amused.
“I thought you were retired,” Ori teased.
“It’s no’ business,” said Dubb. “It’s pleasure. I’d join up again if it meant seein’ a bunch a’ drunk
elvess every day.”
Bilbo inspected the game and said, “You know, I’d very much like to try that.”
“I’ll have to find you something to stand on so you can throw over the counter,” said Thorin.
“No need.”
Bilbo rose up and balanced on the balls of his feet. This made him taller than Ori, though still not
quite as tall as Thorin, who looked as surprised as anyone.
“How long can you remain in that stance, ghivasha?” he asked.
“Indefinitely,” said Bilbo. “My feet lock in this position. If I need to, I can sleep standing up.”
“Ah. You’re teasing me,” said Thorin.
“Constantly, my dear, but in this case it happens to be the truth. Don’t tell Bujni.”
Bilbo slid his two coppers onto the counter.
The barker obviously recognized the hobbit and smiled indulgently at Bilbo, placing half a dozen
smaller knives before him.
“Right-o, perfesser, I’ll even spot you an extra three chances.”
Bilbo examined one of the daggers in his palm.
“Thank you, but I don’t think that will be necessary.”
He didn’t even hesitate between the blades, but threw them one after the other with impeccable
precision.
Thorin glowed with pride and kissed Bilbo soundly, while the barker struggled to pick up his jaw
from the counter.
“Well, who’d’ve fought! How’d yeh do that?”
“I was the All-Shire conkers champion fifteen years in a row. Good aim is required, you know.
You do develop a knack.”
“What’s yer pleasure, m’lord?”
“I’ll take a Sugar, please, that way Ori and I will have a complete set.” He accepted his prize with
a gracious ‘thank you’. “Frodo will love this. Hopefully we can keep the real wargs from using it as
a chew toy. The pups are at the teething stage.”
Thorin shrugged.
“I never liked my dress boots anyway.”
They bade the barker goodbye as his stall was now crowded with people who wanted to try their
luck at what the royal party had been doing. Bilbo popped his Sugar in to sit with Ori’s Butter.
Dubb arranged them on the edge so they could ‘look out’.
At the next stall, a lady showed off her pony, which she explained, was an exponent of
arithmetic. Curious, Lindir handed the lady his three coppers and rattled off a complex equation.
The lady repeated it to the pony, which watched her, then used its left front hoof to stamp out the
answer. All the elves, despite their rather soused state, were quite surprised that the pony had got the
right answer. Ori giggled behind his hand. He knew the trick and had watched Nori train a rat to do
such. The lady bowed and smiled and cuddled her pony, giving it a treat of some kind.
Next was a stall that was selling sweets. Ori and Kili all but drooled. Laid out were great slabs of what to Ori looked like two-inch-thick cake icing. The seller told them it was called fudge. There was a plate of little samples. Ori tried a small tan colored one. It was smooth and sugary and tasted of maple syrup.

“Mmm, Tauriel,” Kili said, turning to her. “Try this, it’s walnut!”

Ori spotted a slab of xocolātl with green and pink things in it.

“What’s that?” he asked, pointing.

“Xocolātl with candied rose petals, and nuts from the far south and east called pistachios.”

She gave him a sample.

Ori moaned in bliss.

“Good, eh?” Dwalin teased.

Ori grabbed Dwalin’s beard and pulled him into a kiss.

“Mmm,” Dwalin commented as they drew apart. “That’s a keeper.”

He fished a couple of silver out of his pocket and handed them over. The lady gave him a half pound box tied with a green ribbon. Dwalin put it in the basket.

“F’r la’er,” he chuckled with a nibble at Ori’s ear.

In the next stall sat a huge glass, pot-bellied bottle as large as Ori. It was full of the kind of marbles badgers played with. These were made of beryl and turquoise. Theoden raised his eyebrows.

“One copper!” the Barker of this stall cried out to them. “Guess the number inside and win the lot!”

The party went over and Elrond examined the bottle carefully and thought about it for quite some time. Ori supposed he was having a hard time thinking through the lichen whiskey.

“Yes,” Elrond decided. He put down a copper and the Barker handed him a slip of paper and a graphite wand. Elrond printed his name and his guess and the Barker popped the slip into a large wooden box with only a slot in the top.

“We’ll bring it over to you, if you win,” the Barker promised.

“Thank you,” Elrond said.

Thranduil handed him the bottle of lichen whisky the elves were working on. Elrond took another shot.

“What will you do with them?” Thranduil demanded.

“Do with what?” Elrond blinked at him, confused.

“The bottle of marbles,” Theoden coaxed.

“Oh!” Elrond smiled. “I thought I’d retile my bathroom with them.”

Dis and Arwen exchanged looks and giggled.

The next stall had a similar box and the game was to guess the weight of the rooster strutting about the counter. The rooster was large, with brilliant blue-black feathers, gray feet and a bright red wattle. The comb and the rooster’s face were hidden by a pouf of long, thin, black feathers. The elves stared owlishly, but Theoden marched up, handed over five coppers, and held the bird in his hands for a moment.

“Hmm,” he frowned. “Four pounds…three ounces.”

The stall keeper grinned and wrote this down.

“What shall I win if I’m right?” the king enquired.

The rooster’s keeper nodded at the rooster. The rooster crowed at Theoden. The party strolled on.

“What, in Eru’s name, am I going to do with that thing?” Theoden muttered in disbelief.

“Oh, uncle,” said Eowyn, “just put it in with the other chickens. The flocks need new blood and any chicks might have some pretty feathers.”

They traveled on, stopping at each stall to play at games or exclaim over strange things on display.

Kili ran up to a dam with a cart selling flavored, shaved ice and told her he wanted one of each flavor.

“I have fourteen flavors, your highness,” said the dam, amused.
“Yep. Uh huh,” he said, nodding furiously.
“Kili,” said Thorin, “you should really leave enough for the rest of the fair visitors.”
“Oh.” Kili frowned. “You’re right, Idad. Please give me a cone of whatever flavor will stain my mouth the freakiest color.”
She gave him a cone of ice with one side blue and one side green.
They all had to try this, though the elves poured splashes of lichen whiskey on top of theirs.
The dam cocked her head, watching.
“I never thought of that.”
They walked on, periodically sticking out their tongues at each other, until the ices were finished and they arrived at a large tent. Inside, hay was scattered everywhere and, at the center, sat a huge glass barricade.
Ori stared then laughed.
“Thorin! Bilbo! Look! It’s a Smeg!”
“Smeg th’ Second,” said one of the tent attendants, a man, coming to talk to the royal party.
“Interestin’ animal.”
Celeborn stared over the thick glass with Theoden.
“Alligator or false dragon,” Ori remembered.
Everyone crowded about and looked into the huge enclosure. Smeg the Second rested on piles of wet moss next to a great shallow water bath. Plants in pots decorated the area and the attendant boosted himself over the glass and walked forward.
“It’s huge!” Eowyn said. “I can see why they call it a false dragon. Where do they come from?”
“Down in the hot, swampy area to the far south and east,” was the answer.
Smeg turned to see the attendant. Smeg’s mouth opened revealing a very large snaggle-toothed maw.
“Elbereth!” murmured Galadriel.
Dain hung over the glass, his feet on Sculdis’ shoulders.
“Imagine takin’ that thin’ f’r a walk! Here, lad, how long is our Smeg?”
The attendant moved closer to Smeg, and said, “He’s quite unusually big f’r his kind, sir. Twenty-three feet, six inches, sir.”
“How heavy is he?” Arwen asked, staring.
“Eight hunnred an’ five pounds, twelve ounces, milady. Weighed ‘im this mornin’. Here Smeggy.”
The attendant offered Smeg a heavy wooden handle that was designed for an axe. Smeg leapt forward and the handle broke like a twig as the jaws snapped down on it with a deep threatening noise.
“Eru!” Bard gasped. “I’m glad they don’t live around here! What a set of teeth!”
“Bite a man’s leg clean off, sir.”
Smeg looked at the attendant again, who tossed a dead rabbit into the jaws. These snapped again. Then Smeg tossed up his head and swallowed the rabbit whole.
“How quick’re they?” Dwalin asked.
“They can move pretty smartly on land, deadly fast in the water, sir. Feet’re webbed an’ th tail ’s like a paddle. All muscle, they are.”
“Yer no’ worried he’ll jus’ gobble yeh up?”
“That’s why I keep feedin’ him, sir. So he don’t feed on me.”
The party thanked the attendant but he hopped out of Smeg’s domain and walked them over to another smaller container.
“Hatched like that,” he said with a grin.
Ori stared at the snake, which was also quite large. Its tummy was colored a pale yellow, giving way to a back striped with pale yellow and dark greenish blue. All along its body, the bright yellow stripe bordered with scarlet that faded to brownish purple. It had two heads, each brown with the edges of blue green. All four shiny black eyes blinked at them and two pink tongues flickered out. Everyone had a good look at this marvel as well.
“Can both heads eat?” asked Tauriel.

“Yes, indeed, milady. Often enough one will eat and the other keep watch.”

“Is it poisonous?” Thorin wondered.

“No, majesty. This one’s a squeezer.”

“Squeezer?” Sculdís repeated.

“They don’t bite prey an’ poison it, they wrap their bodies round and round then squeeze. Breaks all the prey’s bones then they swallow the meal whole.”

“How often does such a thing eat?” Bilbo asked.

“Depends on the size a’ the meal,” the attendant looked proudly down at the snake. “This one caught a rat once. Slept for two weeks after it. They take time to digest.”

“No second breakfast for you,” Bilbo muttered at the snake.

“Did you see it kill the rat?” Dis questioned.

“No, ma’am, found him with a big ol’ rat shaped bulge in his middle.”

“Durin’s beard,” muttered Jani.

There was a terrible scream and the attendant waved them to follow. In an area, containing a pan of water and a platter full of seeds, stood a beautiful bird not quite the size of a goose. Ori recognized it from his lessons. “Is that a real peacock?” he asked, smiling up at the attendant.

“Aye, young sir.”

“It’s feathers look like it’s dragging a beautiful cloak after it,” commented Thranduil.

“Watch what it can do with it, sir,” the attendant beamed then turned to the peacock. He hunched up his shoulders and opened his jacket. The peacock’s tail sailed upward and unfolded. The royal party gasped and exclaimed at how beautiful it was. The peacock strolled around, the tail feathers of bright green and turquoise, shimmering and trembling. The peacock opened its beak and screamed again.

“What a horrible noise for something so beautiful,” Bard commented, looking vaguely disgusted.

“We used to say that about someone else, back when,” said Celeborn with a smile.

Thranduil gave a death-glare.

“If I weren’t so drunk, I would make you regret that.”

“You won’t even remember it later.”

“Alas.”

The attendant gave a whistle and offered seeds in his hand. The peacock deigned to fold its tail, come over, and eat.

The party was led to another enclosure and everyone gushed in delight. There, calmly eating some hay, was the tiniest horse Ori had ever seen. Its head only came up to Bard’s hip. Theoden knelt, chuckling, and rubbed the face and neck, murmuring endearments. The tiny creature whickered happily and nuzzled the horse king.

“Where…? How…?” Theoden managed, looking up at the attendant. “Wee Mack here, is what’s called a miniature horse, sir.”

Galadriel giggled and leaned over the horse.

“Dear little thing,” she cooed.

Mack whinnied, stamped a minute hoof and looked up at her, ears perked forward.

Everyone took time to pet Mack, who bore all the attention with glee. He showed off, trotting and, when Eowyn held out her arms, making a hoop, he jumped through with ease. Eowyn was delighted and scooped Mack up and hugged him. Mack nickered, squealed, and nibbled at her hair.

“He’s lovely!” Eowyn cried.

Aragorn and Arwen laughed and ruffled the mane and stroked the little back.

“He’s a fine piece of horseflesh!” Aragorn praised.

Theoden rose and turned to the attendant.

“How much?”

The attendant laughed.

“No, sir. Mack an’ me are old friends. I can put you in touch with th’ breeder, if you’ve a fancy for one. She’s got several sired by Mack.”
“I do and I thank you,” Theoden said with a smile. “I’m staying up with King Thorin. If you’d come round, I’d like to speak about this breeder with you.”

“Indeed sir, I’ll pop round tomorrow in the morning. Now come and see my last little pet. She’s very young. Got her from a trader. Some wild beast killed her mother. She’s a sweet wee thing and gets on with Mack a treat.”

This enclosure was like Mack’s, except the creature in it was like nothing Ori had ever seen before. Even Dwalin gasped.

It was covered in short, shiny fur of pale yellow with big brown spots. It was not a miniature anything. There were four thin gangly legs, each taller than Bard and Theoden, a slanted compact body and a neck that stretched up, up to almost the ceiling of the tent.

Everyone stared.

“What… is that?” Elrond asked in an amazed whisper.

“That, sir, is what’s called a geeraph. They’re from the great grasslands beyond the eastern desert. Beautiful, ain’t she? Just a baby, too. She’ll grow to three times her present height.” The attendant looked proudly up at her. “You’re a lovely girl, ain’t you, my Merrymaid.”

Merrymaid blinked long lashes and leaned her head down to the attendant. He stroke her head and motioned them all forward. They took turns stroking the soft fur, being nibbled by huge velvet lips whiskered on the top, and gazed into the large, dark eyes, full of trust and sweetness.

Dis rubbed her cheek against Merrymaid’s

“She’s so lovely. I’ve never even dreamed such a creature existed.”

“She is, milady,” the attendant agreed. “I’ve done some askin’ around an’ they travel in a family group of ladies. She’ll eat leafy twigs, bushes, and fruit. Gentle thing, she is.”

They thanked the attendant, exited the tent, and moved to the next stall. The smell informed Ori that donuts were in the offing. There was an open stall with people making and frying the donuts, then icing them. In front were several clothes lines strung at various heights. Hanging from these on strings, were the fresh donuts, plain, iced, some were even dripping jam.

Gimli gave a shout and romped forward.

“What are these?” cried Legolas. “They smell and look delectable! Are they mullies?”

“Same idea,” Gimli laughed as he handed one of the owners some coppers. “Pick one an’ eat it, elf. Yeh can’t use yer hands, though.” Gimli trotted to one on a line designed for dwarrow and, hands locked behind him, took a huge bite out of a xocolātl one covered in powdered sugar. A small cloud of sugar snowed over his face, he coughed but went on eating.

Legolas was escorted by a helper to a line for tall folk and Legolas copied Gimli’s stance and bit into one. A blob of blackberry jam plopped out and landed on his chin then oozed down his front.

“These are delicious!” Legolas called.

Thranduil squeezed his eyes shut and groaned, while everyone else laughed.

Kili and Tauriel decided they both wanted the same donut, but the height difference was comical.

“Hold on a moment,” said Ori.

He did it without thinking, hurried over to the prince and lifted him around the hips until Kili and Tauriel were the same height.

“Whoa! Ori-mate!” Kili cried. “No wonder those orcs never stood a chance.”

“Hush, you,” said Ori, giggling. “Eat your donut. You’re still heavy.”

They did so, though they certainly took their time over it.

Ori clicked his tongue.

“If you’re sick, it’ll serve you right,” Dis scolded.

“I’m never sick, ma’am,” Glorfindel announced with a grin and emptied a whiskey bottle.
Thorin politely gave the attendant extra when she gently removed the bottle from Glorfindel.

Replete once more, the party moved to the next stall. This was open, too and, in front, was an enormously wide, waist high vat. It was full of water and floating apples. Bard laughed, tossed his coin to the attendant and handed his shirt to Thranduil.

“Are you going for a swim” Thranduil demanded.

“No, getting you an apple, sweetie.”

Bard swaggered over to the vat and, hands gripping the sides, plunged his head and shoulders into the vat.

Galadriel, Arwen, and Lindir shrieked and Eowyn cheered. Bard reappeared, an apple in his teeth and tossing back his soaked hair, took the apple and passed it to Thranduil.

“What kind of…?” Thranduil started.

“It’s called ducking for apples,” Bard explained. “Traditional harvest game in Dale when I was a lad.”

He took the towel passed to him by the attendant and bent over to rub his hair dry.

“Thank you,” said Thranduil. He looked bemused at the obvious chomp marks, then shrugged and started eating his apple.

“Well, that’s me,” said Theoden and, following Bard’s example, stuck his head in. It took him a little longer and considerably more bubbles before he emerged in triumph.

Dain and Scudis bounced up on the low bench for dwarrow and, holding hands, fetched out apples. Arwen and Eowyn thrust their hand forward. Eowyn’s hand was a fist. Arwen held out two fingers.

“Ha!” shouted Eowyn. “Rock blunts scissors! Shall I hold your hair for you?”

“Certainly not!” Arwen laughed, stripping off to the waist, leaving only her shift. “I know you, you’d chuck me in!”

Dis and Jani giggled.

“Off yeh go, love!” Jani said.

Aragorn caught up Arwen’s hair in his hand and tied a kerchief about it. Arwen went to the vat and leant over. Aragorn took the very ends of her hair in his hand and she plunged in. Eowyn stepped forward, Aragorn leapt at her, leaving Boromir to grab Arwen’s hair. Eowyn and Aragorn had a violent wrestling match. When Arwen emerged, apple in mouth. Aragorn had Eowyn upside-down and by the waist. He shook her vigorously, shouting.

“Hurl! Hurl!”

Eowen could only laugh helplessly.

Thorin and Bilbo quelled the noise and led the party onward. They played horseshoes, which won Theoden an enormous woven willow oliphaunt about the size of a small pony.

“Well done!” Bilbo praised.

“I had to win,” said Theoden. “The king of Rohan losing at horseshoes? How embarrassing! How I’ll get it home I have no idea.”

It disappeared out of his hands, to the amazement of everyone except Ori.

Theoden recovered and said to the ether, “Thank you. I’m much obliged.”

Mahal said to Ori, “Tell ‘im it’s waitin’ f’r ‘im back in Rohan.”

“Where?” Ori muttered.

Mahal just laughed, which didn’t comfort Ori in the least as he relayed the message.

Tossing balls into a far basket let Aragorn present Arwen with a stuffed raven that was made on the lines of Baluchistan and Dwalin to hand over a large stuffed bear to Eowyn, who blushed and promptly hit him with it.

Archery, more knife throwing and axe throwing allowed every member of the party to pile prizes into Dubb’s wheeled basket.
“Bloody over-achievers,” Dubb muttered, grinning.

They ate fried dough called funnel cake, roasted goose legs, and biscuits filled with minced beef patties, cheese, lettuce and a slice of tomato. They devoured fat sausages on wood skewers, the meat wrapped in dough and fried. They gobbled from paper dishes full of frozen custard decorated with hot xocolātl syrup, bananas, nuts, and candied cherries, with sweetened whipped cream on top, and small paper plates that held freshly baked rolls, buttered lavishly and filled with hot, salty chips. They nibbled from waxed paper pockets of popped corn rolled into balls held together with soft toffee, and spooned up royal gravy from tiny paper bowls. There was fruit soda water, lemonade, and ale.

“What are you going to do with all this food paper?” Celeborn asked.

Thorin pointed. A very large paper canister stood by each stall. People tossed their food and drink papers into it.

“When full, the canisters are taken down to the open lava pits, and put on sheets of metal over it to burn to powder. Then the powder is use by soap makers and some people use it to make body paint.”

They entered a tent displaying exotic plants and fish, all of which were for sale. Eowyn sniffed every bloom she came across, marveling at the different scents. Dis, Galadriel, and Jani discussed the display of what were called orchids. Ori took time to sketch these blossoms in his pocket notebook. They ranged from the huge and brightly colored, to flowers that seemed no more than a green spike with tiny faint yellow blooms with diminutive brown spots.

Ori glanced over to see the elves crowded around Bard and the tent attendant. The attendant held up a good sized clear glass bowl with a plant growing out of the top. Ori could see a small fish swimming beneath, among a few roots. Bard was talking about the fish. Wondering where Eowyn was, Ori looked about. She stood before a table that held bright lanterns and a tray of peculiar, straggly-looking plants. Ori crossed to her.

“Look,” Eowyn said. “These are the strangest plants I’ve ever seen.”

The plants were small, and not particularly interesting, but for what he presumed were odd flowers. The ‘flower’ sat at the end of a stem and opened like a boiled egg cut in half. This blossom was green on the outside, but of a deep brownish purple or rust orange on the inside, and funny little green hairs lined the edges.

As they watched, a small moth fluttered close, attracted by the light. It landed on a flower and rested. To Ori shock, the flower closed of its own volition and the little hairs interlocked, imprisoning the moth. Ori and Eowyn stared at each other then back at the plant.

“Ah,” said the attendant, startling them both. “I see you two have found the carnivorous plants.”

“Carnivorous?” Eowyn repeated.

“Indeed, milady. They’re found in hot, swampy regions and where the soil is poor, and so they grew to foraging. That there is a fly trap plant.”

“Moth trap in this case,” Ori murmured.

“Anything that’s fool enough to land there, sir. There’s a dew fern over there.”

Ori looked where the attendant pointed to see a fern like leaf covered in purple-y spines. Another moth landed on this and struggled, stuck. The leaf slowly coiled down over it while the spines wrapped the insect up.

“And just over there,” the pleased attendant continued, “is a jug plant.”

The jug plant had what looked like an empty space for a flower bud. The attendant picked up the plant and brought it close.

“See the liquid there at the bottom? Insects falls in, drown, and the plant absorbs ‘em.”

“How big do these plants get?” Eowyn asked, fascinated.

“All found so far, milady, are very small.”

“May I?” Ori asked, pulling out his notebook again.

“Certainly.” The attendant was only too pleased to hold the plant while Ori sketched. The attendant brought the fern forward and then the fly trap. Ori was transfixed and a little horrified.

“Yavanna!” his brain whined.
“Plants need to eat, too, my dear,” answered the soft tone.

“Is it poisonous?” Ori wondered.

“Yes, little scribe, they all are. You may want to add that to your notes as well.”

Elrond and Lindir bought a beautiful orchid with a three foot spike of white flowers with purple throats. Celeborn bought the fish with the plant and Glorfindel bought a fly trap.

“Does the apartment get a lot of flies?” Ori asked.


Glorfindel winked.

“Yes, but he doesn’t know that.”

Ori giggled as they went on to another stall.

It held row upon row of apples, covered in caramel, or hardened sugar, each with a stick jutting from the top.

“They’re upside down,” Legolas said.

The attendant lifted one by the stick and flipped it so the apple sat up at the top.

“It’s an apple pop,” said Legolas.

They each had one as they wandered.

Legolas looked down at Gimli.

“You have caramel in your beard.”

“Savin’ it f’r later.”

Another stall had a huge water trough with various little yellow toy ducklings floating. Ori thought they were made of the same stuff as the iKeyha furniture. This game involved toy fishing poles ‘baited’ with small rounds of metal. Each duckling had a magnet inside and whichever duckling got caught, the pole was lifted out and matched with a prize. Bilbo won Thorin a very pretty red sap ball that, though pocket-sized, bounced amazingly well. Arwen got Aragorn a packet of raspberry flavored hard candies. Jani won Dis a toy plush turtle and Bard scored Thranduil a paper conical hat like the one Mavey had worn in the play as the princess, Thranduil’s was a good deal fancier, having been painted purple with silica powder to make it sparkle, and pom-poms of pink paper. A light green gauze ribbon ran from the top and two gauze ribbons tied under the wearer’s chin.

Thranduil donned this and posed for Bard, who almost doubled over laughing. Celeborn rudely said it suited him. Aragorn and Boromir had to walk away, and hold each other up. Ori sketched madly and wished Sigrid was there to see her ‘Wicked Stepmother’.

Arwen and Eowyn didn’t see it was fair Thranduil got a hat and they told Galadriel it didn’t suit him. Galadriel took the whiskey bottle away from Lindir, had a swig and agreed with them, while Thranduil assured Bard that ‘they’ were merely jealous.

The next stall was long and very open. In the middle was a great table covered in an ample number of little stands, each with a familiar large, round nut balancing on top.

“Coconuts!” Kili cried. “Those are so good!”

The game was three coppers to throw a small ball and knock a coconut off a stand, thus winning the coconut. Everyone, having excellent aim, cleared the table of nuts and left the vendor with a good deal of money.

Tauriel shrieked to Arwen and Eowyn, and the three of them rushed up to the next stall. Three ladies were selling hats. These were not just ordinary hats but all were made with paper. There were hats like Thranduil’s, big hats, hats folded in such a way as to look like a bird or a flower or a boat.

Arwen popped on one that had a green brim and crown, then a great tube of yellow with a fringe on top.

“Look,” she giggled to Aragorn, who held her arm so she wouldn’t stagger. “I’m the biggest daffodil in Arda!”

“I solemnly swear I shall not say anything about you being daffy,” Aragorn said, widening his eyes and heroically not smiling.

“Uncle,” cried Eowyn, “Here’s one for you!”
She plopped a hat that looked like a horse’s head on her uncle’s head. One of the now giggling vendors offered Theoden a mirror. The king looked at himself, adjusted the head to a jaunty angle and turned to his niece.

“Will I do, young lady?”

Eowyn laughed and grabbed her uncle’s arm to turn him a little.

“Quick, Ori! Draw us!”

“I can’t, you don’t have a hat!” Ori teased her.

“I’ll get her one,” Theoden pointed to one and it was handed out. Eowyn squealed and pulled the hat on. Ori drew the horse king in a horse head hat and the White Lady in a daisy bonnet that framed her face with huge petals. Tauriel and Kili found ones that looked like Kili’s hat from the inn. She wore the green with the red feather and he had the red with a green feather.

Glorfindel chose an intricately folded blackberry bush with curls of paper coming out to purple paper knots as berries that bounced and swung whenever he moved. Dain and Sculdis whispered to one of the ladies, who winked and went to the back to rummage.

Thranduil insisted Celeborn wear a green cone with a silver pom-pom on top. Lady Galadriel was delighted with a ship. Bilbo and Thorin found crowns and one of the ladies quickly painted ‘king’ on one and ‘consort’ on the other.

“In case we get lost,” Thorin said gravely to Bard.

Just then Fili and Sigrid came up. Fili carried a satchel stuffed with prizes and they were sharing an enormous disc of hard candy on a stiffened paper stick.

“Oh, hats!” enthused Sigrid, hugging Eowyn and Arwen. Arwen swept Sigrid safely down then explained that his lady was drunk off her ass with all the rest of the elves via lichen whiskey.

“Wicked Stepmother are you-?” Sigrid got a good look at Thranduil and shrieked with laughter at the purple cone on his head.

Fili brought her a crown with ‘princess’ painted on and his had ‘prince’ on it.

Dain and Sculdis found matching pig hats and made Ori draw them.

Dwalin found himself a buffalo head and tried to chase Ori with the horns lowered.

“You are not wearing that to bed,” Ori gasped around giggles. Dwalin clapped a hat on Ori’s head and Ori bounced to the mirror and shouted with laughter. Dwalin had found him an ink pot with a huge quill sticking out of it.

The other vendor came back and grinned.

“And a proper hat for the King of Dale.”

Everyone laughed and cheered. It was a huge yellow cone with curls of paper coming off it.

“’S no’ a chandelier, lad, but I think she did a fine job,” Dain snickered.

Bard sighed and rolled his eyes while Thranduil placed the crown on his head and kissed him. Fili had to hold Sigrid up as she was laughing so hard she cried. She couldn’t see, much less walk.

They added Fili’s satchel to the wheeled basket and helping Dubb to his feet as he’d been on the ground clenching his sides and wheezing with mirth. They traveled on.

They visited a man who charged all of them a copper and set a large box on the table. The tiny curtain was drawn and there lay a diorama of circus acts. They all peered in, watching as things moved about and jumped. Ori did not believe for one minute this man had trained fleas to perform. He couldn’t see the man’s feet but he suspected filament was involved to move things about.

Theoden frowned and cock an eye. Eowyn was frowning, too but the elves stared bleary eyed and cheered for the ‘performers’. Bard looked at Ori and they nodded to each other.

The next stall sold paper rolls for music boxes. Fili and Kili immediately asked for anything by the White City Bang Crash. The gentleman had several, and chatted amicably with them all. Ori couldn’t take his eyes off the man. There was something strange about him, specifically his mouth. Ori nudged Dwalin.

Dwalin looked inquiringly down. Ori stood on tiptoe and whispered, “I think that man has two tongues!”

Dwalin frowned and looked at the man, too. Sigrid was thanking him for a roll for a song Dipfa
liked.
“Would you like an envelope to carry that, miss?” the man asked and turned to fetch one from
behind him, before she could answer, he faced her once more with the envelope. He did not have
two tongues, he had one which was bisected half way in. With these two pieces of tongue he held
the envelope. Sigrid gasped and carefully took the envelope. The man laughed and wagged the two
ends at them. Bilbo raised an eyebrow and Dubb came forward full of sympathy.

“Yeh war-wounded, laddie?”
The man laughed again. “No, sir, drunk off my ass as a youth.”
Elrond shook his head to clear it and came forward.

“Is it painful?”
“Oh no, sir. Great f’r parties.” The man wagged the ends and Elrond watched the two wiggle
independently.

“I suppose it’s a talking point,” he finally managed.
“Certainly is, sir. Makes me rare popular with the ladies,” said the man with a lascivious wink.

They stopped at the next stall which was selling slices of hot fresh azzip then went to the last tent
which had a closed flap but had the signs out advertising that inside the Great Woudini was reading
fortunes with his magic crystal, for one silver.

The party stopped and they all looked at each other.

“I’m going,” stated Lady Galadriel, drained the current bottle in use, relieved her husband of one
silver, and marched in. The rest stood about looking out over a wide open area. The circus acts
were here. Ori could see a wrestling ring with a huge, well muscled man with an enormous black
mustache that curled at the ends, standing in the ring, looking fierce while the barker called for
challengers.

In the middle, Ori saw Fanny doing her act with Mavey. He watched Fanny proudly. Despite her
size, Fanny moved daintily and sprayed water about so that it caught the lights and sparkled, to the
cheers of the crowd before them.

Galadriel emerged from Woudini’s tent. She returned to the party looking a little confused which
was extremely odd for her.

“What did he say, my love?” Celeborn asked.

“He said there will soon be a great shining light that will come out of my torso and then I will see
my parents.” She frowned. “I knew of many ways I could die, but I never thought I would
explode.”

Kili looked thoughtful.

“Better have some damp cloths handy. The stains would be terrible.”

Galadriel gazed at him, her eyes filled with awe. She whispered, “Yes. Yes, you are right.
Prince Kili, you are very wise.”

“She’s drunk,” Aragorn told Thorin. “At least I hope she’s drunk.”

“If she isn’t,” Thorin replied dryly, “then we are all in a lot of trouble.”

They passed the wrestling ring. Dwalin waved to the strong man then shouted.

“Oi, Yanni, yeh want me t’ come over an’ lay yeh ou’?”

The strong man’s eyes lit up and he roared back,

“Dwalin, son o’ Fundin! Git along, you ol’ goat. I ain’t lookin’ t’ git me ribs broken again, you
rotten dwarf!”

Dwalin drew Ori over the to ring with him. The giant of a man vaulted over the ropes and greeted
them. He and Dwalin embraced and clapped each other on the shoulder. Dwalin introduced Ori
with such pride in his voice, Ori blushed.

Yanni pumped Ori’s hand and told him he was honored as he’d heard about the quest and seen the
mountain blow up. They said their farewells and Yanni leapt back into the ring and snarled and
roared at the crowd the Barker was gathering.

They stopped and looked upwards to watch. Far above them, three young ladies in tiny, frilly
orange costumes swung from bars on ropes between two poles and caught each other, and swung
out to the opposite poles.
They arrived at the crowd around Fanny and Mavey. Mavey danced easily along the narrow edge of the huge vat of water. Fanny trod lightly around the other way, her trunk swinging to the beat of the three men playing music for them. Mavey’s pink dress looked as though it was made of Buer’s spun sugar. Fanny had a matching lace mat on her head that was held on by a giant bow of pink satin.

Mavey skipped forward and Fanny grasped the dam with her trunk and raised her high. Mavey struck a pose as she floated aloft. Fanny rose up on her hind legs and steadied herself, resting a front foot on the edge of the vat. Fanny then placed Mavey on her head. Mavey twirled and posed while the crowd gasped and cheered. Fanny stayed steady. Mavey jumped and landed in the vat with a great splash. Fanny reached her trunk in and scooped her out, Mavey sitting on the curve of the trunk, waved, as Fanny spurted water upward. Everyone cheered again at the beautiful tableau they made. Ori clapped until his hands tingled.

Fanny placed Mavey on the ground. Mavey hugged Fanny’s leg and, standing together, they bowed.

Once the crowd went on to the next show, Ori hurried forward. Mavey squealed to see them all and Fanny wrapped Ori in her trunk and lifted him to her cheek. Ori hugged her as best he could.

“Oh, Fanny you looked wonderful! I never imagined you could be so light on your feet! I could watch you dance forever. I watched you so hard I forgot to draw you, but I promise I will later.” Fanny rumbled fondly and squeezed gently before setting him back on his feet.

Mavey, having hugged everyone, apologized for making them damp and told them her act didn’t go on again for bit would they like her to show them around? Thorin and Dis smiled on the young dam.

“That would be lovely, Mavey,” said Dis, arm in arm with Jani. “Thank you very much!” Mavey glowed and led the way.

Kib was in his green paint with the red and orange stripes. He also wore the pink breech clout, but he had forgone the horn from his head. He smiled and bowed as the party approached. He went to the center of a black velvet mat where a single metal pole stood about nine feet high. He reached up and grabbed the pole with one hand and allowed himself to swing about the pole in a leisurely manner. He took the pole with both hands and held himself outwards from the pole, his body a perfect line parallel to the ground.

“Now that takes some true strength,” Theoden nodded as they applauded. Dwalin nodded.

“Nice t’ see our Granny Klak lef’ him in one piece.”

“Mmm,” said Ori, “No doubt the one she likes best.”

Kib grinned and easily hauled himself up the pole with his hands, his legs sticking out, toes pointed. At the top, he locked an elbow around the pole and spun gracefully upside-down to the middle. There he locked a leg around the pole and wound around to the bottom. Here he somehow kept his body flat against the pole and, using his hands, moved upward feet first to the top. He flipped himself up and stood on one toe, balancing on top. Ori gasped as, perfectly stable, Kib proceeded to spin and dance on the tiny top. He suddenly leapt high and with one hand grasping the pole, he spun rapidly down, dropped on his feet and bowed deeply.

Everyone applauded and cheered. Thorin and Kib shook hands and Thorin passed the man a fat little purse.

“You, sir, are amazing!” Bilbo offered.

Kib bowed again and thanked them all, winked at Mavey and suggested they visit the kindly gentleman sitting at a small table. Mavey giggled and led the way over.

The table was perfectly plain and not in any way decorated. The man smiled genially. His hands rested on the table. His sleeves were rolled to above his elbows and there appeared to be nothing unusual about him other than he was rather innocuous in the middle of the fair. It was then Ori saw the three familiar silver bowls and little white ball.

Ori giggled. This game had been the most honest job Nori ever came up with. Unfortunately, Nori had used it to get a hundred gold off a highly placed council man of Calmar’s. The man
complained and Calmar had immediately ordered that the game was illegal.

Glorfindel marched up, took a swig from the latest shared bottle of lichen whiskey, passed it back to Celeborn, and greeted the man at the table.

“Hail and well met, my friend. What game have you here?”

The man rose, smiled sweetly up, and gestured for the elf hero to seat himself in the chair opposite and examine the table to his satisfaction. Glorfindel picked up the chair offered, looked it over, and tested it. He gathered up the silver bowls and the table for scrutiny then patted the man down as well. Bard told Glorfindel to leave be, but the man assured Bard this was fine and he was quite willing to be studied as it was only fair.

Pleased, Glorfindel sat down.

“My friend, what happens now?”

The man gestured to the three bowls and the ball placed between them.

“Please examine these things to your satisfaction again, sir,” the man beamed. Glorfindel looked up as all his soused companions crowded around. Lady Galadriel reached through, scooped up the items then put them back.

“There is no sorcery involved. What must happen now?”

“What price do you charge to show me whatever game you play?” Glorfindel asked

“That, sir,” said the man looking cordially at the elf, “depends on how much you’d like to bet.”

Glorfindel stared. The man continued,

“You shall place the ball under one of these bowls. I shall move them about, then you tell me under which bowl the ball is. If you are right, you keep what ever amount you betted. If you are wrong, I keep the money.”

“Right,” said Glorfindel and slapped down a gold coin.

After losing five times, Glorfindel threw up his hands and got out of the chair. Elrond tried and failed as well. Theoden, Aragorn and Eowyn also lost. Bilbo refused to play as, he said, he hadn’t been able to figure out how the trick worked. In quick succession Thorin, Kili, and Dwalin also lost. Ori stifled his giggles and stepped forward as the party was declaring defeat and starting to move on.

“You sure, love?” Dwalin asked. “Don’t pay to play another’s game.”

“I want to try,” Ori grinned.

He sat down, pushed over a gold piece and the man went through his trick. He asked Ori to point out the bowl he wanted lifted.

“It ought to be the one on the right,” Celeborn said to Bard, who nodded.

Ori pointed to the one on the left and lifted it. There was the little white ball. Everyone gasped and the man looked keenly at Ori.

“Have we met, sir?”

“No,” Ori teased, “but you, I think, learnt this game from my brother, Nori of the Brothers Ri.”

The man laughed, clapped his hands to his forehead then offered a hand to Ori,
“I should have known those freckles and that nose!” he chuckled.

“If you’re the one I remember Nori telling me about,” Ori said, “I thought you had a trained rats game.”

“Oh, I do, sir, but my little ratty girls are currently working Castle Bounce.”

“Are they doing a trick?” Ori asked.

“No, no, they’re helping to work the bellows. They’re gettin’ cuddles and all manner of treats from our Floris and Fior. They think they’re playing. Here, I’ll split this take with you, if you promise not to tell that lot how I do me trick.”

Ori laughed, “And put my own brother out of business? Never, master, never.”

They bade the man farewell and moved on.

“Ori-mate?” Fili said. “Did Nori teach you that?”

“Yes. Go ask him if he’ll show you, but bring coppers.” Ori grinned at the crown prince. “Lots of coppers!”

Everyone laughed and followed Mavey and Fanny to a huge frame set up, with a vast black canvas stretched tight across held by many large, strong springs. A group of badgers, jumping high on it, shrieked and laughed. Thorin greeted the vendors, who were various members of the weaving guild and forging guild, and asked about the game.

“The frame and springs are from our guild,” the young dwarf explained and grinned at the dam close to his age beside him. “The canvas is from the weavers guild. They used the sap Queen Hild brought.”

The dam took up the story.

“We coated all the threads with the sap, set up the warp and the weft then coated them again, wove them together then coated them once more. You can see, with those wonderful springs, you can bounce very high.”

Ori could see that the coming together of the guilds to invent with the sap had allowed these two to meet. They both had the sparkling of diamonds in their eyes. Ori looked up, watching the barefooted badgers and children going for height. Above them, at about twenty feet, hung brass rings on thin cotton strings. A young dam managed a huge bounce and reach up, grasping for a ring. Bilbo saw them, too and asked.

“Oh,” the dam giggled, “Makhad, here,” she indicated the dwarf beside her, “thought there ought to be a prize.”

Makhad chuckled, “and Dahkr,” he smiled at the dam. “Came up with the idea of using weak cotton strings to hang the hoops. If you manage to grab a hoop, you win a prize.”

Dahkr pointed to a table nearby. “My sister, Lakhr, is in the culinary guild with pastry. She made all those. If you grab a hoop, you get one free.”

On the table there were varieties of biscuits, hand pies, and pieces of cake, all for sale.

“Oh,” Galadriel admired, “those do look good!”

They waited, watching the little ones bounce and shriek as their parents either stood by calling encouragements or bounced with them. Ori saw Guernsia and Hathor holding hands with two of their little ones, the adults bouncing hard and the little ones squealing as they flew high in the air. Hathor let go and, with a tremendous bounce, his family drove him high and he snatched a ring. Everyone cheered and clapped as Makhad went forward and called their time was up. He pulled up a set of steps, so all could get down to solid ground again. The families laughed and talked with the rulers of Dale and Erebor, while their offspring gobbled sweet things.

Makhad looked at the party. Eowyn, Sigrid and the other six females rushed forward, hopped about, pulling off their shoes and any weaponry, then danced up the steps to the springy surface. They stood ready and Makhad pulled the steps away and they all joined hands and, on Sigrid shouting “Three!”, started jumping. They bounced high in the air, squealing like the little ones. Tauriel let go and managed four flips in the air and grabbed two rings. Lady Galadriel spread her arms and the fairy wings on her jumpsuit fluttered about her. She and Eowyn changed sides with the next bounce. Then they bounced out of sync and Sigrid was thrown high enough to grab three rings. Jani and the rest bounced Dis high enough to grab another three rings then they all fell on their backs.
on the canvas and laughed and gasped for breath. They bounced less and less until the canvas stilled. They struggled to their feet and walked unsteadily or just crawled to the steps, their hats sadly askew.

“Nadad!” Dis panted, flushed and struggling not to giggle. “You must try this. It’s the best fun!”
“Da!” shouted Sigrid. “You and Wicked Stepmother have to do it!”
Sculdis just rolled to the side and let Dain catch her as she dropped off.
Aragorn laughed and barked out,
“Gentlemen, we are called upon!”
Aragorn and Boromir led the way followed by Bard, the dwarf princes, Gimli, Legolas, Dain and the other elf males. They removed their boots and any weaponry and climbed the steps. Legolas and Gimli rushed up and bounced about laughing and hooting. Gimli got Legolas on his shoulders and bounced higher.

“Look at me!” Legolas cried, “I’m flying!”
Haldir marched out and promptly tripped over his own feet and fell flat on his face then flopped about on the moving canvas. Boromir shouted with laughter and copied him but bounced right back to a standing position.

“Courage, lad!” Dain shouted and dragged Haldir to his feet. Haldir was too busy laughing to assist Dain. Celeborn looked slant-eyed at his cousin and bounced right behind Thranduil, who went down. Bard shoved Celeborn in revenge, knocking him into Elrond, who dragged Lindir and Glorfindel flat on the canvas with him.

Fili and Kili seized each other’s shoulders and bounced hard. They gained a good height by the time the rest of the males got themselves sorted out and bouncing with them. The combined weight of the group made the frames shake and shudder and the entire contraption started to bounce, too. The guild members rushed to the frame and tightened the holding straps at each leg, steadying it again.

Fili and Kili maneuvered to the middle. The rest of the males enclosed them in a circle. The circle bounced opposite the princes, sending them higher. With a last tremendous bounce, both Fili and Kili shot up among the rings, snatching all they could, and crashed down in a heap of shouting, hooting males. The canvas stilled as they all lay there in a laughing jumble of bodies and limbs. Ori drew maniacally.

Aragorn got himself up and slid over the edge. He was gasping and shaking his head. Thorin and Dwalin went over to help him off, and hold him steady until he was able to stop snickering and move to his lady’s side. The others crawled or staggered off via the steps, all hats ruined beyond repair.

Glorfindel stalked over to the attendant, said something, and the attendant pointed to a drinking fountain pouring into a large hole. Glorfindel marched to the hole and put his head in it. The water poured merrily over the back of his head and washed his hat away as they all heard him being loudly sick. Theoden, Gimli and Boromir cat-called him about his earlier declaration of never being sick. Celeborn, Fili, and Aragorn finally had pity on him, went over and helped him out and gave him handkerchiefs to wash his face. Glorfindel squeezed out his hair, took a drink, and walked back with them.

“Assholes,” Glorfindel pronounced when he neared them. Boromir and Theoden shouted with laughter and clapped him on the back.

“Ready?” Fili called to them. He and Kili were holding rings in their hands and Kili had stuck his feet through a couple as well. Mavey called to Fanny, who gamely came forward and lifted her trunk to make a hook. Fili and Kili shouted and began to toss the rings over her trunk. Fanny caught them all.

“How many?” Gimli roared.
“Seventeen!” Kili shouted as he and Fili knocked heads.
“One for each and two left over for Mavey and Fanny,” Bard chuckled as he was still helping Thranduil to stand upright.
Dwalin took Ori’s hand.
“C’mon, love.”
Ori hurried forward as he and Dwalin followed Thorin and Bilbo. Bilbo removed his paper crown and a pocket dagger. Ori took off his hat, kicked off his boots, and put aside his jumpsuit belt with his note book and graphite wands. He tied the arms of his jumpsuit around his waist as Dwain had, and rushed up the steps after Bilbo.

Ori had expected it to feel like the time he had jumped on his and Dwain’s bed, but the canvas was smoother and much bouncier. He and Bilbo bounced from sitting in the air down on their butts then back to standing. Dwain and Thorin joined them, Ori saw that everyone from their party was crowded about the frame, cheering them on.

Thorin smiled to Ori and Bilbo and said quietly, “Dwalin and I have a plan,” Ori and Bilbo looked at each other. “Does this plan,” asked Bilbo as the four of them began bouncing gently, “Involve Ori and I being naked?”

Dwalin snorted and Thorin grin was feral. “Not this particular plan, ghivasha, no.” Bilbo made a moue and Ori giggled. “Does it involved you and Dwain being naked?” he asked Dwalin reached out to tap the end of his nose. “Plans firs’, me love, naked later!” “Then,” Bilbo said as they bounced higher, “do share this plan, my dear dwarf!”

They shifted; Thorin behind Bilbo facing Ori with Dwalin behind. Dwalin clasped Ori’s waist as Thorin took hold of Bilbo. They bounced higher and higher. Ori watched, fascinated as the canvas bowed beneath them.

“Now,” said Thorin as they plunged down. The canvas sent them shooting upward and, at the highest peak, Dwalin and Thorin threw Bilbo and Ori upward. Ori yelled as he found himself among a forest of suspended rings. He grabbed at strings and plummeted. He landed in Dwalin’s arms and they bounced a few times more.

There was cheering all about as Thorin and Dwain somehow stilled the canvas beneath them. Dwain carried Ori off and down the steps, Thorin bearing a giggling Bilbo behind them. “How many did you get” Bilbo asked Ori as their Ones set them on their feet. Ori looked down at the mess of string in his arms. There was rather a lot of rings attached. Thorin counted Bilbo’s for him as Bilbo and Dwain untangled Ori from his stash.

“Bilbo managed eight,” Thorin informed them. Kili heard and shouted to everyone. Ori realized another group of fair goers had arrived and seen them bouncing. They were crowded around, the adults congratulating them and the children all around Fanny, patting or hugging her legs. Fanny remained still, looking them all over like an indulgent mother, and touching them all with her trunk while Mavey explained oliphaunts to the little ones.

Dwalin gave a shout of triumph. Ori had managed to pull away ten. The royal party cheered and surged forward to clap Ori on the back and tease.

Ori looked at Thorin then the badgers of two races gathered around Fanny. Thorin smiled, took Ori’s from Dwain, made a head count of the offspring and, with both Ori’s and Bilbo’s rings, went to talk to Mavey. Mavey sent a delighted look to Ori and asked Fanny to lie down on the ground. There were enough rings for every tyke to climb up on Fanny’s back and, at Mavey’s word, Fanny rose slowly and carefully. Mavey waved to them and Fanny trumpeted back to Ori as they walked off to give the little ones a tour of the fairground.

Bilbo chuckled as Thorin returned to them. “And there’s enough left, so we each get a dessert!” Dwalin looked at Ori, with a soft smile. “Yer every ane a’ me fondes’ wishes come true an’ twice over again,” Ori blushed and hugged Dwain, burying his face in his husband’s beard. Dwain wrapped his arms about Ori and laid his cheek against Ori’s hair. “Yeh jus’ give t’ every one, don’ yeh. All them wee ones gettin’ a ride. They’ll chatter ‘bou’ tha’
“Coming?” Thorin asked as Ori raised his head.
“We’re going to get cake,” Bilbo elaborated.
“Want cake?” Dwalin asked amused. Ori grinned up at him
“Definitely!”

They went over and joined their party still enjoying pastries. Ori looked at all that was on offer and chose a plain hand pie baked golden with big sugar crystals sticking to it. It had a familiar wonderful smell. He bit into it and moaned. It was still faintly warm and full of thick xocolatl cream, flavored with hazelnuts. He chewed and licked at the xocolatl cream dripping out. Eager for more he thrust his tongue into the pie and half scooped, half sucked the cream out, then licked all around the edge. He nibbled off every sugar crystal and licked the pie all over in case he missed any, then popped the rest in his mouth, it was so good. He licked his lips then saw that he was being stared at. Bilbo was smiling teasingly at him while Thorin looked first at Ori then Dwalin, who had flushed raspberry and was grinning like a fool.
“What?” Ori demanded.
“Shesee, Ori,” said Sigrid. “Just go have sex with your hand pie in public.”
“Better than having sex with your hand in public,” Fili helped.
“I did not!” Ori cried, blushing. “I’m not like Father-King Thranduil sucking off an iklar at Dori’s tea party!”
“What?” Fili and Sigrid demanded together. The guild members tried to hide their smirks but couldn’t. Bard grinned at them and shrugged,
“What can I say? My elf likes to eat.”
“Da!” hollered Sigrid.
“What?” Bard asked, turning his grin to her.
“Ew,” she replied.
“I never sucked Haldir’s dick,” Thranduil said forcefully and late to the argument.
“I’m not hearing this,” Sigrid put her hands over her ears and turned away to Fili.
“No one said you sucked Haldir’s dick, sweetie,” Bard said in a pacifying tone. “You sucked off an iklar at Dori’s tea party.”

“Who’s Iklar?” Hathor asked in passing. He and Guernsia were heading to the far side where the family door was. They each had an unconscious child in their arms.
“Not who, what.” Thranduil told him crossly.
“Come dear,” said Hathor with a chuckle. “We’re leaving.” Thranduil huffed.
“Wonderful, now Hathor will tell everyone he knows I sucked something that wasn’t a dick but I thought it was Haldir…” Thranduil frowned at his words, Ori rather thought they weren’t the ones he’d hoped to use.
“Sweetie,” Bard soothed, “Let’s just forget about Haldir and his dick.”
“My dick isn’t that forgettable,” Haldir objected loudly, apparently only hearing the part about his dick.
“O’ course it’s not, love,” Sculdis said comfortingly. “I’m sure yeh’ve go’ a perfectly respectable elf-y dick an’ yeh should be proud.”

Haldir swallowed another shot of whiskey and pondered aloud.
“Why should I be proud of my dick? My dick can’t take guard duty without me. Mind, I can’t take guard duty without my dick.” Haldir frowned and shouted after Dain. “My dick and I are attached!”

“Right,” said Thorin authoritatively at volume, “moving along.”

They thanked and bade farewell to the snickering guild members and headed off to the next attraction. This was a huge pole with a great round metal canopy on top. From the canopy hung double seats, each on two chains. The seat had a bar that went across the lap of the sitters. The whole thing was attached by a huge gear that tumbled a large bar that stretched across the ground to attach to another gear. This was affixed to a large winding capstan. Four lovely dark brown ponies
stood beside the winding pole. These were being brushed, petted, and fed carrots by the attendants. The ponies all had bright red leather harnesses and a tall plume of dyed bright red feathers on top of each of their heads. Ori thought they looked very festive.

One attendant came over and everyone gamely paired off and sat in the seats. The attendant went round and secured each bar and told them to hang on. Ori saw the other attendant hitching the ponies to the bars attached to the capstan.

“What’s going to happen?” Arwen called. The attendant tossed off a salut to her and rushed over and mounted his pony. This set the other three on their ponies and, with a shout from the first attendant and squeals of delight from the ponies, they galloped around, turning the capstan and the bar on the ground. This twisted the pole in the center but nothing else happened. Ori peered up at the top. Something up there was being wound very tight. He could hear the twisting noise.

“What’s going on?” Theoden asked Glorfindel next to him.

The elf hero shrugged, confused.

Dain peered up as did Sculdis.

They looked at each other.

“Shit,” said Dain.

“Hold on tight!” bellowed Sculdis.

The ponies stopped, one attendant pulled the bar free from the bottom of the pole and the seats began to move forward. They went around the pole at a merry pace the first time. The speed picked up and then seats and their helpless passengers spun wildly around the pole. Faster and faster they went, yelling and screaming the entire time. Ori flung up his arms and hollered into the wind.

Dwalin threw back his head, roaring with laughter. They were whirling almost horizontal to the ground.

All too soon for Ori, the wheels lost velocity as the twist unwound and the seats slowed and resumed their original upright movement. The attendants laughed, unhitched their ponies and set them loose to frolic then, came and freed the passengers. Ori, with Dwalin’s help, hoisted himself upright.

“That was so much fun!” he told the dwarf assisting them.

“Grand, ain’t it?” he agreed.

Ori turned and saw that not everyone had had as much fun as he and Dwalin. Dain and Sculdis were busily studying the pole and discussing it. Bard held his head with both hands and had his eyes shut. Ori thought he must still be a little dizzy. Thranduil just sat stock still in the seat with his eyes wide open but fixed on nothing.

The Lord and Lady of the Golden Wood sat on the ground in front of their seat and laughed hysterically at each other.

Fili, Kili, Sigrid and Tauriel stood together giggling and trying to sort out their hair.

Eowyn laughed at Boromir, who was a trifle green. Aragorn sat in a seat with his lady. Arwen had her head on his shoulder.

“I like this seat,” she said waveringly. “It so nice and…still.”

Theoden and Glorfindel stood on either side of their seat, clutching the chains for dear life. Dis was half lying in her seat, howling with laughter and Jani was splayed, face down on the ground, telling it how much she loved it.

Thorin and Bilbo came over to them, laughing and bright eyed. Bilbo’s curls were every which way and Thorin looked like he’d braved a windstorm. Ori felt his own hair and thought he must look the same. Dwalin’s hair and beard bristled out in every direction.


Thorin laughed and hugged Bilbo into his side.

“What’s next?” Ori asked.

“Off t’ the fun house,” the attendant said with a smile as Thorin handed him a roll of gold coins.

Ori looked over at the so-called ‘fun’ house. It has the facade of a house but was painted with so many colors and written over in so many languages that it was hard to give it a place anywhere in the definition of house. The languages stated things like Joke!; Joy!; Oops!; Got ya!; and many runes for
laughter. Happy faces were painted over in different colors. 

Bard shaded his eyes.

“Ugh, it’s like looking at Difpa too early in the morning.”

Arwen clenched both Aragorn’s and Boromir’s arms.

“I’m getting dizzy just looking!”

“Come on,” Bilbo sang out, already tugging Thorin’s hand.

Ori trotted after him, pulling Dwalin behind. Thorin greeted the lady standing before the house.

She wore a long dress, the bodice laced so tight the tops of her breasts bulged dangerously at the low neckline, and the skirt was held out with panniers. She crowned this with a very fancy bonnet with tall dyed feathers arcing out of the top and she carried a jaunty parasol. The ensemble was all the colors of the fun house.

Thorin indicated the entire gaping party and handed her a roll of gold coins. She curtsied and ushered them up the steps to a large octagonal door. Bilbo opened this and walked in.

Ori followed, looking about. It was a plain rough whitewashed hall. All along the walls were shuttered windows just the size of a head, each knob fixed to the shutter labeled ‘Open!’

The window were at a height for men but with a set of steps, so dwarrow and badgers could reach to see.

Bilbo went up to one, opened it and,

“Boo!” shouted a dwarf with an absurdly painted face on the other side. The shutter slammed shut and Bilbo almost fell off the steps laughing.

“Did you see that?” he cried.

“Let me see,” Thorin said. He jump up on the step and opened the shutter. A wooden box was in the space. It was completely painted black with a little black sign board with white lettering reading ‘Try Again!’.

Intrigued, Ori went to another. Ready to be boo-ed at, he opened it. There was another black box but this held a small paper cup filled with lemonade and decorated with a mint leaf. Ori squealed and drank the lemonade.

“Thank you!” he called into the box then closed the shutter again, still giggling. He turned to Dwalin, who was looking at all the shutters.

“You’re turn.”

Dwalin stepped back to one of the first shutters and opened it quickly. A man’s face painted completely orange with a giant false purple nose popped out.

“Bo-“ the man started. Dwalin was too quick. He leaned in and kissed the man on the mouth then slammed the shutter.

“Blaah!” came the yell from behind the wall. Dwalin snickered and wiped the residue paint from his beard. Thorin and Bilbo roared with laughter and Ori had to sit down to hold his sides.

The rest of the party barged in and looked about.

“Go on,” Ori said.

“What happens?” Sigrid asked, rightfully suspicious.

“I got a cup of lemonade and Thorin got a little sign telling him to try again,” Ori hedged, not wanting to spoil the surprise.

“Go one at a time,” Bilbo advised.

Lady Galadriel refreshed herself from the whiskey and opened a shutter. Inside the box was a plum.

“Oh how nice,” she cooed and started to eat.

Celeborn took heart and opened a shutter.

“Boo!” shouted a green face.

“Aaaaagh!” Celeborn backed up and knocked into Sculdis.

“It was a face!” Dain hollered and bounded to the end of the hall. He bounced up the steps and yanked open a shutter.

“Try again!” he grumped.

Everyone tried.
Thranduil got a cup of water, Bard a ‘try again’ and Legolas and Gimli scored a small poke of buttery salted popcorn. Boromir got a small wooden spoon, which he laughed at heartily. Eowyn got boo-ed at, but she seized the bright blue false nose before the shutter slammed closed.

Sculdis found a dogwood tree blossom, Arwen, a walnut and Aragorn, a toy rabbit. The rest ended up with ‘try again’s.

They gathered at the end of this hall and a sign shaped like an arrow pointed to the right.

This was a bigger hallway but one side was lined with tall mirrors.

Bilbo turned to the first one, looked at his reflection and chuckled.

“Thorin, look!”

“What is it, ghivasha?”

Bilbo gestured to the mirror. Ori could see the surface had been warped in some way so Bilbo looked to be ten feet tall.

“I see,” Thorin replied. “How does it feel to be tall?”

“Not all its cracked up to be, it seems.”

Haldir looked in the next mirror and discovered himself three feet in both directions and giggled, jumping up and down and watching the effects and giggling some more.

“Ori! Ori!” Galadriel called.

He turned and discovered the lord and lady of Lórien standing in front of a similar mirror with their hair wrapped around their chins.

“Look!” Galadriel cried. “We’re short and stout! We’re dwarrow! Ori, you draw us.”

“I’m far ahead of you, m’lady,” said Ori, sketching madly.

Everyone scattered through this hall, looking at themselves and each other, giggling, pulling faces and jumping and waving their arms. Dain and Sculdis did a jig in front of one.

They tried all the mirrors and were about to decide they were finished when they heard a voice coming from the doorway behind them.

“Woooooo-aaaaaaah! Boooooooo!”

“What in-?” Bard started.

A man appeared, dressed in a bright blue baggy jumpsuit with white pompoms down the front, a big white ruffled collar, red shoes several sizes too large for him and a silly little white cone as a hat. His hair consisted of two scarlet points sticking out from behind his ears. His face was chalk white and he had a red ball for a nose. He was hunched over and he crept around the door frame and peered in at them. They all looked at him. Thorin stepped forward.

“Good evening, sir. May we assist you in some way?”

The man sighed deeply and straightened up.

“Great, I get an entire group of trained warriors. I didn’t sign up for this job to die.”

Ori and several others chuckled.

“And what job are you supposed to do?” Thorin asked with a grin.

“See,” said the man, removing the ball from his nose, so he could speak clearly. “I sneak in and scare the children and chase them through here to that far narrow hall then they run through that and up the spiral stair at the end.”

“Ahh,” said Thorin.

“We can do that, Idad,” Kili said eagerly.

“Yes,” Fili agreed. “We came for the full fun house experience and we can’t let this poor fellow down, Idad.”

Thorin kept his countenance, but his eyes sparkled.

“Well, everyone, let us oblige this gentleman and let him frighten us and chase us to that other far hallway and up the stair.”

“I’m in!” Dain bellowed.

Ori grabbed Dwalin’s hand.

“I’m scared already, aren’t you?” he teased.

“I’m shakin’ in me boots, love.”

The man looked a little confused.
Glorfindel strode unsteadily forward and bowed, calling out at battle pitch.
“My friend, we shall be true to our word and run in terror from your ferocity. Please go back
through your door and begin again. We shall not fail you!”

The man looked at Thorin and pointed at Glorfindel. “Is he for real?”
“’Yes,” said Thorin, “and he’s extremely drunk just like all our elf companions.”

The man paused then looked at Thorin and his eyes flew wide open.
“Shit! I mean, I - I - I didn’t realize you’re the king! Sire, I-”

Thorin chuckled and smiled.

“We are merely a group of friends celebrating, sir, and we are now looking forward to your
performance.”

“Um…” The man came forward and Thorin shook hands with him. The man grinned, bowed,
and tipped his ridiculous hat to Bilbo then turned and ran back out, shoving his nose in place.

They all stood for a moment giggling, then Kili took charge.

“I don’t know, Tauriel!” he said loudly. “It may be called a fun house, but I think it’s creepy in
here.”

“I believe you’re right, mel nin. You’d better hold my hand. We should be on alert.”

“Aye,” Dain blustered. “Someone could sneak up on us!”

“Yes,” Sigrid helped. “Fili, I’m scared! Aren’t you scared, Arwen?”

Arwen stared, then when Aragorn nudged her, she said, “Oh yes, I’m very scared!”

“I’m going to faint with fright!” Galadriel announced, taking another shot and passing the bottle to
Arwen.

“Wooooo-aaaaaaah! Boooooooo!” came from the doorway.

“What was that?” shouted Boromir, as everyone bounced into each other in a huddle.
The man peered around the door way and smiled a horrible smile.

“I seeeeeee you!” he taunted, in what Ori thought was an excellent villain’s voice.

“Look!” shrieked Jani.

She turned to give the eye to every female. As one they all screamed. Glorfindel and Thranduil
looked at each other, looked at the man, shrugged, and screamed, too.

“Sweetie!” Bard said. “Take a damper, that was right in my ear!”

“I’m so sorry, my love,” cooed Thranduil and kissed the offended ear.

“I’m gonna get you!” growled the man in his blue jumpsuit, hunched over and creeping into the
room. “And I’m gonna eat you!”

Glorfindel turned and addressed them, shouting.

“My friends, this looks to be a true creature of darkness! We must flee! I suggest that corridor!”

“Quick!” yelled Kili. “To the corridor!”

“Run for your lives!” Dis giggled.

Thorin pushed Bilbo to Dwalin and Ori, who lingered, grinning. Thorin frowned a terrible frown
at them all.

“Fly, you fools!”

The whole group bounded off to the corridor, yelling and screaming like fiends in a Shire book.
Ori tried to yell, but he was too busy laughing and stumbled as he ran, clutching Dwalin’s hand as
Dwalin pulled him along.

They reached the narrow corridor. The man was close behind, but he was bent double and Ori
heard him give a snort of repressed laughter.

The corridor was odd and Ori realized it was only solid to the waist of a dwarf the rest of the wall
was fabric painted to look like a wall. Hands reach out of slits and touched them. Lindir, surprised,
fell back into politeness and cordially shook the hand plucking at his hair.

“Good evening, how do you do?”

Sigrid crowed with laughter and shoved him along.

“They aren’t saying ‘hello’, Linda, they’re trying to eat us.”

They hurried to the far stair, it was a very narrow, spiral affair that only allowed them to ascend
one at a time. They clambered up, giggling and shrieking the entire time. The man in the jumpsuit
reached them as Thorin coming last, got off the top step.

“Coming?” Thorin asked, genially as he, Bilbo, Ori, and Dwalin looked down over the railing. “Nope,” the man grinned. “Evil clowns like me can’t climb stairs, so you’re safe.”

“Alas,” Thorin teased, “you shall have to find others for your dinner.” The man laughed and said, “Hey, where’s that blond wench?”

Giggles came from behind them. “Which blonde wench does he want?” Sigrid called as she, Galadriel, and Eowyn came and leaned over the railings.

“We’re all blond wenches,” Galadriel called down, twirling the whisky bottle at him. “Which of us wenches are you looking for?” He pointed at Eowyn.

“Excellent choice,” Galadriel sang out. “Sigrid is courting and I’m married. Eowyn here is both lovely and single.” Eowyn leaned down over the railing.

“Please tell my aunt and chaperone what kind of a husband an evil clown makes.” The man snickered, shook his head, and grinned up at her. “Ma’am, since your party’s on the top floor, we’re going to let in another group and I’ve got to be behind my shutter in the first hallway.”

“What fun!” Sigrid enthused. “I hope you get to shout ‘boo’ to lots of people,” Eowyn smiled.

“Me, too, lady, but I need my other nose to do that.” “Oh!” Eowyn said, remembering and digging through her jumpsuit pocket. “Here it is! Sorry, I forgot all about it!” She dropped it down to him. He chuckled and waved. “Thanks, lady! You and the king’s party have fun.” “Thank you for scaring us,” Galadriel caroled after him.

Dwalin turned to Thorin as they heard the man’s receding guffaws. “Aye, jus’ makin’ friends an’ influencin’ folk all over th’ place, ain’t yeh?” Thorin flipped a rude gesture, bowed, then offered his arm to Bilbo.

Dwalin turned to Thorin as they heard the man’s receding guffaws. “Aye, jus’ makin’ friends an’ influencin’ folk all over th’ place, ain’t yeh?” Thorin flipped a rude gesture, bowed, then offered his arm to Bilbo.

They all entered yet another hallway off the landing. “There’s no furniture in this house,” Glorfindel grumbled. “How are you supposed to live in such a house? Where can you entertain guests and ask them to sit down?” “I don’t think this is that sort of house,” Celeborn replied and removed the bottle from the elf hero and took a shot.

He headed into the new hallway. As soon as his foot touched the floor, the board under his foot moved. Celeborn staggered, looked at the bottle in his hand and promptly passed it to Arwen. He took another step and the boards moved again. He stood still, staring at the floor. “It’s not me,” he said, confused to his lady. “The floor’s moving, Idad Other-elf,” Fili helped.

Elrond and Lindir stepped cautiously forward. The floor lurched under them as well and they caught hold of each other and staggered. Kili poked Fili and they grinned at each other. Fili grabbed Sigrid’s hand and Kili shouted, “C’mon Tauriel!” The four lit out across the floor, bouncing and dancing from board to board. Sigrid shrieked, “This is like jumping boat to boat in a wind storm!”

Tauriel squealed and giggled as she made it to the other side, Kili now riding on her back. “Hurry up you lot!” Kili cried, dropping off Tauriel. “It’s easy!” “Famous las’ words,” Dwalin commented.

“I thought those were ‘hold my ale and watch this’?” Ori teased. “Same thin’, love,” Dwalin said and took his hand. “Step, ride th’ liftin’ a’ th’ board, an’ step t’ th’ nex’ ane.”
Ori followed Dwalin carefully. It worked just like Dwalin said it would and they gain the far side soon enough. The elves and men staggered and stumbled as Jani, Dis, Sculdis, Gimli, and Dain kept them from falling flat. Thorin and Bilbo brought up the rear, skipping as Bilbo insisted.

“How does that work?” Theoden asked, squatting down to peer at the floor.

Dain escorted Sculdis over and she stood on a board. It lifted and Dain went down on all fours and looked beneath.

“Pressure locked,” Dain said, got to his feet and gave Sculdis his hand, so she could step down.

“Enough weight an’ th latch loosens an’ springs lift th’ board up.”

“ Ingenious,” Theoden said, impressed. Eowyn nodded.

“Onward to the next hall?” Aragorn laughed.

“Lead on, Gondor,” Thorin called.

The next hall was a huge, long, rolling tube, which fomented just as much disaster as Ori feared. It was soon clogged with drunken elves falling all over each other, taking everyone else down with them, all of them laughing too hard to move of their own volition. Bard skipped clear of all of them, having spent years on boat decks, but Celeborn tripped up Theoden and they went down in a heap.

“Theoden!” Celeborn cried. “I knew you couldn’t resist my charms!”

“Do something, someone!” Theoden shouted. “My virtue is in danger.”

Thranduil tried to crawl toward the end of the tube.

“Please get me out of here! I will be unwell!”

Bard darted in a hand, extracted Thranduil, and deftly sat him on a bench.

“Sit still, sweetie.”

“Ah, much better, thank you,” said Thranduil.

“Thranduil?” Thorin asked. “Are you alright?”

The elf looked up at Thorin.

“How did you get out here so fast?”

“I went through the door.”

“What door?”

“The door to the side of the tube marked ‘Exit’.”

“I didn’t see an ‘exit’ sign.”

“It’s at eye level. If you’re a dwarf.” Thorin grinned.

Thranduil stared, then sat back crossing his legs and then his arms. He glared.

“Well, fine. I’ll just sit here and pout.”

“Don’t do that,” Thorin said, offering the father king a hand up. “It’s time to go ride Ulwe’s Boat.”

“Ride Ulwe’s boat?” Thranduil tried to shake off some of the effects of lichen whiskey and failed. “Is that an actual thing or are you asking me for sex?”

“Wrong alley for that.”

With help, everyone was extracted from the tube and sat about giggling.

The exit from the fun house was an open balcony on the top floor. Between it and the ground curved a steep corkscrew of sheet metal, about four feet wide.

“We get to slide!” Gimli shouted. He grabbed Legolas’ hand and parked his butt on the top of the metal sheet. “C’mom, elf, sit behind me!”

Puzzled, Legolas sat down and Gimli arranged the long legs on either side of him.

“Now, hang on t’ me,” Gimli instructed and Legolas wrapped his arms about Gimli’s middle.

Gimli grinned back.

“Ready?”

“I suppose,” Legolas said.

Gimli grabbed the smooth sides of the metal and pushed them forward. They shot down and around, Gimli roaring and Legolas laughing and shouting. They hopped off at the bottom and waved.

“Do it, Ada!” Legolas called up. “It’s great fun!”

Glorfindel gave a shout and cast himself flat on the metal, face first and hurtled down. “Catch
him!” Dwalin bellowed to Gimli and Legolas. “He’ll break his bloody neck!”

They scooped the elf hero up at the last minute and righted him. Dis gave a squeal and Jani pushed her forward.

“Right, lass.”

“All the ladies together!” cried Dis.

The line of females, all sitting one behind the other and clutching each other, was sight Ori scribbled to draw. Dwalin Theoden and Aragorn and Thorin went to the last lady, who was Arwen, and put their hands to her back.

“Ready?” Dwalin asked with a laugh

“Now!” Dis shouted.

The males pushed and the females disappeared, shrieking, screaming, and laughing. They all tumbled off at the bottom. Thranduil corked the last whiskey bottle and called to his son. Legolas came near the wall and looked up.

“Catch,” Thranduil said casually and dropped the bottle. Legolas did and Arwen promptly took it away from him. Dwalin caught Ori close and sat him on his lap.

Ori yelled as they slid at speed round and round and down. They got off and Ori hugged Dwalin.

“That was fun, but not as fun as the swings.”

Dwalin laughed and held him close to his side.

Theoden appeared next, followed in quick succession by Boromir and Aragorn.

Boromir looked back up the slide.

“Too bad the faunts aren’t with us. They’d have a wonderful time with just this contraption.”

Dain slid down, half standing and leapt off.

“Brilliant!” he shouted and Sculdis congratulated him on his skill.

Bard arrived next with Thranduil and Celeborn hanging onto him for dear life.

Kili and Fili slid down, standing as Dain had, but hanging onto each other for stability.

Thorin and Bilbo came last with Bilbo laughing the whole way.

They reformed, called thanks to the lady in front and walked towards a larger round metal tent. As they got closer, Ori saw it was a bit like the swings but more complex.

“It’s clockwork,” Dain said.

The attendant turned at the sound of his voice and hailed him.

“Those lads helped me wi’ our Hamfast’s plow,” Dain said. “Looks like they’ve come up wi’ somethin’ t’ ride on.”

It was a round affair with a gaily painted, low coned top decorated with little lights and fancy gilt scrollwork. This provided a cover and beneath were small boats, smaller than the row boats used in the Dale. They were overly decorated, too, and were fixed to a stand. The stand was painted blue with wooden painted waves covering the base. Large gilt lettering on the front proclaimed ‘Ulwe’s Boat’.

They greeted the attendants. Thorin handed over payment and they were cordially invited to climb up and sit in the boats.

Once more the group paired off and Ori climbed into a bright red boat. There was a wide canvas cushion for two and it was almost like a much smaller version of Dori’s teacup carriage. Ori looked about as everyone settled and laughed and joked. In the center, a group of musicians smiled and waited for them to be ready. There was a dwarf with a large drum on its side, fastened to a smaller upright drum, which had a pair of cymbals attached. A man had a guitar and a dam, a pipe.

“Ready?” called the attendant, everyone shouted they were. Two of the attendants pushed a large lever on the side of the stand and the band began to play ‘Pull for shore Ulwe’.

Ori squawked as the boats began to move. They went in a circle but they rocked up and down, side to side and font to back.

Ori started to laugh. He could hear everyone giving their opinions and these were varied.

“Don’ look up, love” said Dwalin.

Suddenly water spurted from various parts of the ceiling and fountained up from the floor. The
little boats clanked their merry way around the band, who played with enthusiasm.

The song finished and the boats stopped. Everyone got out, splashed, damp and staggering with laughter.

“Lads,” Dain shouted as he helped his giggling wife out of their boat, “yer gonna rust this thing ou’ a’fore th’ moon comes t’ full again.”

“We’re working on that!” called back one of the attendants.

Galadriel turned to the attendant nearest her and pointed with the same hand that held the bottle. “This is not Ulwe’s boat. Ulwe’s boat never felt like that. This is pissed off Ulwe’s boat.”

The attendant beamed. “Yeh think, ma’am? That’s an idea. We may have t’ use tha’ one!”

They regrouped. The male elves were starting to look a little rough around the edges. All the ladies were now in the middle of a circle dance, Galadriel and Arwen stumbling a little.

“Is it over?” peeped Lindir.

“No!” cried Tauriel and Eowyn. Eowyn turned to Thorin “We don’t have to go home now, do we?”

“Certainly not,” Thorin teased. “But I think we have arrived at the ultimate fun fair attraction.”

Everyone looked where he was pointing.

Ori couldn’t swallow a shout of delight.

There before them was the biggest thing made of the sap. It was shaped like a castle out of a fairytale. It was colored like a headache, with bright yellow walls and turrets, embellished with the occasional purple, oblong patch like a paving stone. The front opened in a huge, arched doorway and they could see an expanse of blue inside. The entire thing was held fast with many, many ropes and it hummed.

To the side, a large, bright red tube joined a caster attached to a huge bellows with many tubes of many colors then more casters, bellows, and more tubes that all led up to more bellows and a stand decorated with bunting.

Floris and Fior stood on this, playing with things that ran around on the table before them. Ori went over.

“Ori!” cried Floris

“There you are!” Fior put in. “We were wondering if you’d make it!”

“We have,” Ori laughed. “The elves are drunk and dizzy from everything!”

“Perfect!” Floris giggled. “Come look.”

Ori climbed up the steps on the side and saw. There were at least a dozen beautiful rats scampering every where. They were all colors rats could come in and more, black ones, gray ones, pie-bald, even white ones with sparkling pink eyes. There were bowls of food and water and little toys. The rats pranced about, occasionally coming to the two youngsters for hugs and pets. They mostly played on small wheels made of metal; some of these were flat like dishes, others were on end, so the rats could hop in and run. The wheels worked some mechanism below the stand.

“What are they doing?” Ori asked.

“Oh,” said Floris dismissively, “the wheels turn little gears which turn larger ones and so on that work the bellows to keep Castle Bounce filled with air.

Ori looked down at the rats. The rats were having the time of their lives, running pell-mell in and on the wheels, rolling and playing with the toys, and each other. Ori put out his hand. A large gray rat bounced into it. He bought it to his face and cuddled it. The little tongue tasted his cheeks and the snuffly nose and small paws explored his beard busily.

“They’re so sweet!” Ori enthused.

“They belong to Master Bifinak,” said Floris. “He does the ball and bowls trick.”

“Oh, we met him!” Ori laughed. “He bilked Glorfindel out of five gold and a good deal more from the rest of our party.”

Fior and Floris snickered.

“Did he bilk you?” Fior wanted to know.

“No,” Ori giggled. “Nori’s the one who taught him the trick.”
“Get away!” Floris cried. “Really?”

Ori nodded. The rest of his party came over and took turns visiting on the stand. Fior had to come off the stand and open the side door of it to show the workings to Dain, Sculdis and Theoden. This completed, they took their leave of Fior and Floris and their playmates, and moved forward. Thorin passed a roll of gold to the attendant and they all once more removed their footwear and weaponry. Steps were placed at the entrance.

Bilbo and Ori rushed up them.

The steps showed the inside. It was one great square of blue, several feet below them. They would have to jump from the top step to land in it.

Bilbo offered a hand.

“Shall we?”

“Yes!” Ori cried, grabbing Bilbo’s hand and they leapt into Castle Bounce.

There was little or no way to stand steady, but Bilbo and Ori did their best to bounce like they had on the canopy. Castle Bounce was much less sturdy and they were flung about like they were jumping on a huge bed.

There was a shout and Boromir leapt off the steps in landed on his bum in the middle. Bilbo and Ori almost flew to the ceiling, shrieking with the rebound. Boromir scrambled away, rolling into valleys made by his own weight. More people leapt in and shrieked and yelled as they were bounced around and rolled every which way.

Being the smallest, Ori and Bilbo were tossed the highest but the elves were also flung about. Boromir, Aragorn and Theoden ended up rolling and struggling in a valley. Legolas tried to help them out but slid in also. Thorin quickly gathered Dwalin, Dain, Sculdis and the other dwarrow in and they bounced as hard as they could. The three men sailed upward yelling and politely landed on a very confused Glorfindel and knocked Bard and Thranduil into another valley with them. Fili and Kili tried to coordinate everyone but it was too difficult with people bouncing, rolling, and falling all over. Jani and Dis rolled into the boys and they went down in a heap, then Eowyn screamed as she and Arwen got their bottoms wedged between the floor and the wall.

Everyone staggered and fell trying to get them out, but this made the mess worse. Slowly and inexorably the rest of them were driven by the amount of bodies in one place, and ended up together in one valley struggling mindlessly, laughing, roaring and helpless!

Ori and Bilbo had been the last to fall and no amount of effort could get them out.

Ori heard laughter from outside.

“Aye, that’s the lot a’ them stuck!” someone shouted from outside. Then there was a weird popping noise and the rush of air. The floor deflated and they were left on the ground. Ori climbed off Kili and Fili and got unsteadily to his feet. The mass of bodies sorted themselves out.

“Come on, sweetie. Up you get.”

“I can’t. Theoden’s lying on my legs.”

“Sorry, King-Father!”

“Jani! Do something!”

“Like what, love? I can’t see anythin’ but our Rhonda’s behind.”

“Oh, do excuse me!”

“Wheehee!” Eowyn called from somewhere.

“Quite squirming, Addled One, I can’t get Sigrid out!”

“Tough tiddles, Bored Mouse!”

“Help me!” Arwen cried plaintively. “I’m at the bottom and I have to pee!”

This galvanized everyone to scramble to their feet. Arwen was rescued and she, Sigrid, and Tauriel rushed out in the direction one of the attendants pointed.

Once outside, Ori giggled some more and hugged Bilbo as he came out.

“I’m still a little dizzy,” he confessed.

“I’m still squashed!” Bilbo laughed in return.

“So, have we enjoyed ourselves?”
Jim came up, followed by Mavey and Fanny. Ori went and hugged Fanny.
“Jim!” cried Sculdis. “Yer a wretch!”
Jim looked delighted with this.
Thorin came forward with Dwalin.
“Jim, that was extraordinary. I’m amazed at what you and the guilds have created.”
“And I still have plenty of ideas, you majesty,” Jim bowed.
“Lad,” Dain said, throwing his arm about his queen. “If me Stonehelm was ready, I’d step down an’ retire here t’ make f’r yeh. There’s ‘n excellent amoun’ a’ thin’s t’ tinker with.”
“Aye, plenty t’ build,” Sculdis agreed, her eyes once again taking in the mechanism to the side.
“Oooo!” Mavey enthused. “Would you come on the road with us?”
“Nay, lass, but we’d be building f’r when yeh’d return. Our Stonehelm need’s t’ get his feet proper stuck in and settled b’fore we start talkin’ tha’ way f’r serious.”
“I would love to have both of you with us, Sculdis, Dain.” Thorin leaned in and knocked brows with both.
Ori bounced forward and hugged Dain.
“That would be wonderful, but if I were you, I wouldn’t say anything to Dori yet.”
“Mahal’s balls, lad!” Dain bellowed around laughter. “Never yeh fear! He’d be nailin’ our boots t’ th’ kitchen floor b’fore th’ next dawn.”
The three ladies returned, chattering with Ruelis, and Jim escorted them all to a far set of tables and chairs.
The chairs were pulled into a group and people sat, grateful that these chairs didn’t appear to be able to move under their own volition.
“Now, my friends,” Jim said with a grin, and started pouring out paper cups of ruby red wine, and passing them out. “Opinions, problems, suggestions?”
“That bastard with the ball and bowls took me for five gold,” Glorfindel bitched, “and I still can’t figure out how he did it.”
“Magic, my friend, maaaagic,” Jim poured a cup for Ruelis and one for himself. They raised them to the company, who raised theirs in return.
“To celebrations!” Ruelis said.
“To a fine group of good friends!” answered Thorin, smiling round at everyone.
Everyone was happy to drink to this.
Legolas looked down at himself, damp, wrinkled, and food stained.
“And for making me the messiest I’ve ever been in my entire life.”
The rest of the elves looked at themselves and at each other. All were in a similar state.
Lindir looked at him.
“Thank you, mellon Theoden. I think that exactly sums up what we look and feel like.”
Galadriel laughed and looked at the last bottle of lichen whiskey. She took a drink and passed it to her husband. There was just enough for each elf to have one last shot. Aragorn, Bard, and Theoden exchanged looks and chuckled.
“So?” Jim prompted.
“The swinging machine was wonderful!” Ori enthused.
“The acrobats far above were breath-taking,” Elrond put in.
“The evil clown was the funniest thing out!” Fili declared.
“Right, said Ruelis, “more acrobatics and more clowns.”
“Clowns doing acrobatics,” Dis suggested. “He was ever so funny.”
“Such wonderful games.” Sigrid added. “The prizes were so silly but just right!” “You could probably convince a few more people to sell within the fair itself,” Thorin pondered. “The food went well, but having the little ones here, you might do well with toys, supplies for games, and such.”
“Noted,” said Ruelis, pausing to refill the cups, Bilbo demurred, still nursing his first. Ori
snickered, remembering Bilbo and the effect berry wine had on him. Ori had no such qualms. They were safe in Erebor and having a party.

“Any problems?” Jim asked.

“Glorfindel was sick in the drinking hole,” Boromir tattled with a grin.

“Mmm,” Jim opined. “Few more places with potable water with room to barf. Good to know, good to know.”

“Yes,” giggled Eowyn, “and maybe places to relieve oneself?”

“That’s easily accomplished,” Ruelis said. “The mountain is amazing and adaptable to almost any situation.”

“Excellent animals,” Aragorn added. “I’d never seen or heard of a geeraph before.”

“Food plants as well as flowers,” Jani put in. “All that stuff coming north with the trade route open will be good.”

Jim nodded and poured another round. Ori cuddled against Dwalin. He was now pleasantly muzzy and enjoying it.

“Here now,” Dain said, “I’m thinkin’ there ought t’ be a bi’ a’ th’ engineering guild devoted t’ making’ stuff f’r yeh lot. Me an’ me delicate jewel of a bride have some grand ideas.”

Thorin chuckled.

“You both can approach the guild heads yourselves. Mind, they may also insist you run that group.”

“We’ll hunt ’em up t’morrah.” Sculdis vowed.

The cups were filled again and the talk became varied as people reflected, or attempted to, through lichen whiskey and now wine. Ori looked around at his friends. He had so many now. He had gone on an adventure and now they were celebrating and everyone was having a wonderful time. Ori finished his latest cup and Dwalin refilled it and his own as the new bottle was passed about.

“Dwalin?” he said.

“Me love?”

“I’m going to give my Butter to Frodo. I think having you and Killer and the rest are going to be enough in our bed.”

“I’m thinkin’ yer righ’, love.”

“Dwalin?”

“Aye, love?”

“I think I’m getting drunk.”

“Then yer in fine company wi’ th’ res’ o’ us, me lovely darlin’.”

Ori hugged Dwalin’s arm and turned his blurry attention back to what was being said.

“The place with all the candy,” Theoden said, “was unbelievable. The taffy pulling machine! I had no idea such things could be contrived.”

“Those truffles,” murmured Dis.

“I’m hungry,” Kili announced.

“I’m positively ravenous!” Bilbo agreed, sitting up.

“My poor hobbit,” Thorin teased. “You can’t have had more than five meals today.”

“Very true, my dear dwarf,” laughed Bilbo. “My question, then, is what do you intend to do about it?”

Thorin tossed back his wine and rose.

“Ruelis, Jim, we all thank you and your performers for a wonderful time. Be in touch with the guilds for whatever improvements you’d like to make. You have my full approval.”

Jim and Ruelis bowed, grinning.

“My friends,” Thorin smiled around at the Company, “it’s time we availed ourselves of a sit-down dinner.”

There were cheers all round.

“Righ’,” Dwalin rose and offered his hand to Ori. “T’ th’ Moo an’ Cluck.”

“The what?” Haldir managed.
Meals, Merrymaking, and Meandering off to Bed.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. And now since we fed you all that junk food last week, here’s a proper meal, although if you don’t eat meat, you’re going to have to wrestle Celeborn for the coleslaw. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Orras had set aside the private room for them, but they still had to make it through the main dining area, where they were received properly as heroes. It didn’t hurt that now they were almost as drunk as most of the patrons. Several dams banded together to tell Glorfindel he was a fine chunk of elf flesh and Lindir wept openly after receiving several offers of marriage from dwarrow and dams, who kept calling him Linda, thinking he was a maid.

“Thank you, thank you,” he repeated over and over. “Really, you are too kind, but I wasn’t on the quest. No, I only lent moral support and made sure the privies were clean.”

“Linda is with me,” Elrond bellowed at an unusual volume for him. Lindir raised an eyebrow and Elrond squared his shoulders, put a proprietary arm about Lindir, and strode to follow Thorin. Lindir grinned over his shoulder as he was swept on.

“Thank you all very much!” he called, waving with the delicacy of a debutante dam. Arwen and Eowyn, arms linked, walked behind them and giggled.

“My!” Arwen cried. “Isn’t Ada feeling ’manly’ tonight.”

“Let’s hope he doesn’t start spitting and scratching inappropriately,” said Eowyn, setting them both off in peals of laughter.

“Oi!” someone cried. “Oi! It’s Lord Ori!”

A knot of miners jumped up on their table and started chanting.

“O-ri! O-ri! O-ri!”

He waved, completely abashed, and turned his face into Dwalin’s side.

“Get me out of here, dear husband.”

“Righ’,” said Dwalin.

He picked Ori up, draped him over his shoulders like a hunting trophy and strode proudly through the cheering crowd.

“This isn’t what I meant,” Ori hissed.

“Sorry, yeh didn’ specify,” said Dwalin. “Too late now.”

“I am going to die of embarrassment.”

“Ain’t happened yet.”

Dain was not one to be deterred either. He jumped up on the nearest empty chair and roared,

“Three cheers f’r our Lord Ori an’ his Bullies. Champions a’ th’ Quest t’ Khazad-du’um!”

All the diners stood up and cheered, whistled and hollered. The cooking staff came through and joined in.

At Thorin’s signal, Orras passed out a round to the members of the Quest and everyone lucky enough to be there. They all drank a toast to the heroes on the king’s purse.

This achieved, the entire party was hustled into the back room.

Unlike before, the room had a massive long table for all and, as soon as everyone found seats, Orras and his staff started loading the board with food. This was the cue for everyone to pile up their plates with the sweet, sour, delicious barbecued meat, cool, milky coleslaw and chunks of buttered
They were all starting when Haldir drank off his flagon of ale and slammed it down on the table. Everyone looked at him.

“I think I ought to say a little word,” said Haldir, seeing he now held their attention.

It was obvious his eyes weren’t focussing, but he looked determined.

“Yes, Haldir?” Galadriel prompted.

“I think you’re all beautiful people, and I’m glad I know you. I’m delighted with my new dress trousers, and I do believe this is the best meal I’ve ever eaten.”

Which he then fell face first into, and began to snore.

Gimli motioned to Legolas, who lifted Haldir’s head. Gimli took the plate away. Bilbo brought over a pile of napkins and put it on the table, then Legolas, wiping off Haldir’s face, rested Haldir’s head back down gently upon it. Gimli poured the contents of Haldir’s barely touched plate onto his own. Gimli looked up as everyone stared.

“Wha’?” Gimli bellowed. “It ain’t li’e he’s gonna eat it.”

Ori found himself sitting between Fili and Dwalin, with Kili and Tauriel across from them. An idea percolated through his brain, something he meant to ask about, but was now too muzzy with his fourth ale to remember.

Something about…

Was it…

Oh!

Suddenly he was a bit more sober.

“Fili!”

“Huh?”

“Easterlings!”

“What about ‘em, Ori-mate?”

“Where did they come from?”

Fili raised an eyebrow.

“The east?”

“Besides that. How did they get here?”

“They walked.”

“Pardon?”

“No, really, Ori, they walked the entire bleeding way, right through the Orocarnis.”

Fili walked his fingers across the table, hopped them onto the edge of the plate and through the sauce to grab up another rib and tear off a chunk of meat.

Ori watched this process in fascination.

“Why?” he asked at length.

“Cult of Morgoth or some such, broke up when Mount Doom went splat.”

“Splat,” Kili agreed, nodding solemnly.

Ori flicked his gaze to Tauriel, who was perfectly composed, even though she wobbled slightly.

“Splat,” she agreed, then fell into a fit of giggles.

Kili gestured toward the east with his pork rib.

“Fi said there’s fifteen of ‘em, mostly women and badgers. They get points for herding all those badgers, you know.”

“They got here about an hour after you left on the quest,” said Fili.

“And no one told me?”

Kili shrugged.

“That’s how it is with Durins, Ori-mate. Everything happens at once.”

“It’s a rather important detail. You’d think someone would have gotten to it, since I’ve been back over-. Oh. I’ve only been back a little more than a day.”

“See,” said Kili. “Told you.”

Fili cast an empty rib bone into a low paper box on the table, looked askance at the bowl of coleslaw at his elbow, and took another chunk of meat from the platter.
“That was a bad scene, when they got here.”
Ori turned to Dwalin.
“Did you know about this?”

“Thorin tol’ me las’ nigh’, since it were a security thin’. Lads’re righ’, though. Easterlin’s didn’t know they were at Erebor. They walked righ’ int’ a patrol. Th’ dwarrow though’ we were bein’ invaded, the’ easterlin’s though’ they were goin’ t’ be executed.”

“What happened?” Ori asked, with rising alarm.

“Luckily, Arb had th’ sense t’ send a raven t’ Thorin, an’ Bilbo rode ou’ with him.”
Fili seemed to remember something that gave him a great deal of glee.

“Alright, spill it. I’m too drunk to be patient,” said Ori.

“It was brilliant, Ori-mate. Bilbo knows about five words of easterling, and one of them is this welcome/you’re safe/we won’t eat you-type of thing, about five miles long.” Then he seemed to lose his train of thought. “Did you know the easterlings don’t speak in sentences? Bilbo says it’s all an idea in one word and they just add syllables and endings on to fill it out. Imagine learning to speak that.”

“I’d still be a mute,” said Kili.

“But what happened?” Ori persisted.

“It worked,” said Fili.

“Saying ‘hello’ worked?”

“It’s not just ‘hello’.” The crown prince licked the sauce off the back of his wrist. “It’s this majick spell that means: If I break my hospitality oath, the sands will swallow me.”

“Bilbo knows how to say that?”

“Yep.”

“In easterling?”

“Yep.”

“Belladonna?”

Fili nodded.

“Yep.”

Oh, Ori could just imagine.

“Bilbo’s mother went to the Orocarnis, met and befriended members of the Cult of Morgoth and learned words in their language?” he surmised.

Kili looked to be struggling.

“I’m too drunk to follow all that, Ori-mate, but you’re usually right, so, yep.”

Bilbo, sitting on Thorin’s knee at the end of the table, hopped to his feet and came charging over.

“There’s more to it than that! Honestly, boys! My mother wasn’t some wizard easterling-charmer.” He pushed Fili and Ori’s plates apart and jumped up to sit on the table. “As it turns out, hobbits look like an ancient, pixieish spirit they worshiped from the time before Morgoth.” He crossed his ankles and swung his feet back and forth. “The spirit was short, round, and had big feet and pointed ears. It mainly protected children and women, and was vicious when its people were threatened.”

“Basically,” said Ori, “your mother.”

“Indeed. I’m not conversant in easterling, but at least it calmed everybody down. It calmed the easterlings, anyway.”

“What happened?”

“The masses of dwarrow acted like a million easterlings had come to plunder the mountain. Panic in the streets.”
Ori felt his head spin.

“Someone told them that?”

“They told each other that, Ori-mate,” said Fili. “There were fifteen of them, someone heard there were fifty, someone else assumed that meant fifty thousand and that this was just an advanced scouting party.”

“Oh Mahal! What did you do, Thorin?”
“I sent for Binni,” said Thorin, who, as usual, was not quite as drunk as everyone else. “Binni, Dis, and I brought Deneb and her older daughter all over under the mountain, then to Dale, where they took tea with the king and king-father and Mister Wandi fawned over them and gave them manicures and iklars.”

“Great Mahal! You weren’t attacked?”

Bilbo waved one impatient hand while reaching for a rib with the other.

“We brought Butter and Sugar just in case.”

“That bought us some time,” said Thorin. “Then, we were almost overcome by disaster.”

“After all that? What happened?”

“Dipfa,” said Bilbo.

Ori swallowed, aghast.

“She tried to clothe them.”

“Yes,” said Bilbo. “I honestly thought the poor people would be forced to flee. She danced all around them, attempting to drape fabric on them. Bujni rescued them by removing her. She didn’t seem to mind so much after he carried her off over his shoulder. Who knew he was so strong? Or so demonstrative?”

Ori eyed Dwalin, who was wearing a ‘who? me?’ expression, and batting his lashes.

“Imagine that,” said Ori. “But, the people in the Night Market didn’t seem bothered by them.”

“That’s because Dori came home, pregnant,” said Thorin.

“And spread a little Doriness far and wide,” Ori guessed. “One Bearer holds them at bay, the other charms them into making nice. By example, of course.”

“Of course,” said Bilbo.

“Pastries?” Ori prompted.

Thorin shook his head, his expression sad even under his smile.

“They arrived with nothing, just the clothes they were standing in. I offered them sanctuary, but Deneb insisted they would work to earn it. We had a long talk about what Deneb and her family could do.”

“Thankfully,” said Bilbo, “her westron is far better than my easterling.”

“And then,” said Thorin, “Granny Klak came home with a box of pastries from the Gondorian Bakery.”

Ori nodded.

“What do immigrants do when they arrive someplace new?”

“Exactly,” said Bilbo. “They eat as if food could take them home. Deneb’s Aunt Ara is a talented baker.”

“They had no money for the ingredients, so I bought them,” said Thorin. “I made sure they understood it was a long-term loan, not charity. I don’t care if they pay me back or not, but I wouldn’t tell them that. They use one of the kitchens at the Oakenshield Inn to produce the baked goods.”

“The what?” Ori cried as the Durins broke up laughing.

Fili said, “That’s what Mistress Dazla calls the old royal residence. The way things are going, it’s not far from the truth.”

“Beg pardon,” said Theoden, looking around, “but has anyone seen Eowyn and Boromir? They seem to be missing.”

Dis shrugged.

“They cleaned their plates like good badgers. They said they’d be back sooner or later.”

Arwen drained her tankard and reached for another rib.

“Surely you aren’t worried the two of them will do something unseemly,” she teased.

Theoden looked pained.

“Whenever those two start hatching a plan, it’s time to lock up your horses and hide the best ale. They’ve always been that way.”

Lindir yawned and leaned against Elrond’s shoulder.

“Falling asleep?” Elrond asked.
“Just resting my eyes,” said Lindir.
“Tha’s fuckin’ adorable,” said Dain.
“Thank you,” Elrond replied dryly. “We planned it especially for your entertainment.”
“How long’ve yeh bin rehearsin’?” Dain asked with a wink.
“How long’ve we?” Sculdis tweaked him.
Orras stuck his head around the door jamb.
“Ready f’r puddin’?”
“Yes!” Kili perked up immediately.
Most of the elves looked horrified, and even Thranduil shook his head, but the dwarrow were all on-point.
Orras and some assistants carried in several great platters piled high with balls of xocolatl frozen custard, mixed with chunks of fudge, ribbons of caramel, studded with marshmallows and sporting curls of spun sugar over the top, like pink, green, and blue streams. These were laid all along the table within easy reach for everyone.
“An’ spoons,” said Orras.
“Aw,” said Kili.
“No face-planting in the pudding, inudoy,” Dis chided lightly. “Save some for the rest of us.”
“If I must, amad,” he said, obviously much put-upon.
“You must, or you’ll be forced to arm-wrestle Lord Celeborn for the rest of the coleslaw.”
Celeborn looked up from the big bowl, fork in hand, and put a protective arm around his prize. He growled, or tried to, but it set him off snickering.
“Guid effort,” Gimli encouraged.
Arwen laughed, shocked.
“Grandfather!”
“What?” Celeborn replied. “I have claimed this coleslaw for the elves of Lórien and Greenwood. I should think you’d muster some elvish pride in support!”
“I’m supporting this spoon into this dessert,” said Arwen. “Grandmother isn’t the only one who can put on flesh. If I’m messy enough with it, maybe someone will mistake it for a beard on my chin.”
Aragorn sputtered into his own custard while Glorfindel clapped his hands and cried, “Here, here! That’s the spirit, m’lady!”
He picked up his own spoon and looked at it in dismay.
“Do you think they have larger ones?”
“Think of it as a challenge,” said Legolas. He looked down at his tunic. “My challenge is to find my mouth five times out of six.”
Thranduil sighed.
“I’ve quite given up on you, my darling fawn who can’t find his mouth. You’re regressing.”
Thorin’s eyes gleamed with mischief.
“That’s what happens when you catch a beard. Didn’t you know?”
“Alas, there were some unfortunate holes in my education. I suppose this is grounded in scientific fact?”
“I don’t know. I’ll have Bujni look into it.”
“Perhaps Marvyn, son of Kevyn has made commentary?”

At length, they stayed so long and ate and drank so much, they had to wait there while the streets were being cleaned. Most of the other patrons had left and the staff was cleaning tables and mopping the floor. Kili and Ori gamely offered to help but Orras shooed them off to stand at the far end near the entrance doors which were thrown wide open. The debris had been thrown out the door onto the street to wash away.
Thorin brought Bard to the street door to watch the water flow through, the rest milling about around them.
“Oh,” said Bard. “Yes, I can see why we want everyone off the streets. They’d be parboiled.”
“And they’re not even good eating,” said Thorin.
“Oh, I don’t know about that,” said Thranduil with a wicked grin.
Bard turned to him, incredulous.
“Sweetie, you’re very drunk.”
“I’m not drunk enough to forget that. In fact, you taste—”
“Thranduil!” Bard cried plaintively.
The king-father clicked his tongue.
“Spoil my fun. Wicked man.”
“Lord Ori!”
They turned as Orras bustled up to them, visibly upset.
Ori’s mind flew instantly to Dori and the pebbles.
“What’s happened, Master Orras?”
“Master Ursith is here, demandin’ t’ speak with yeh!”
“Oh,” said Ori, chuckling in relief. “Is that all? Where is he?”
Belatedly, he realized he should have looked afraid and clutched at Dwalin’s forearm, but it was
too late now. Orras, the remaining customers in ear-shot and even Thorin’s guards stared at him.
“I’m a scribe,” Ori said with a shrug at them. “What possible threat am I to him or he to me?”
“Er… yer a scribe t’ th’ king,” suggested one of the cooks.
“I suppose I could write a letter to Thorin for him.” Ori offered.
Everyone looked at each other and went about their work again.
“He’s in me office, milord,” said Orras. “I don’ know how he go’ there, with th’ streets full a’
boiling water, but I only lef’ f’r a moment - I even locked th’ door behind me - an’ when I returned,
he was sittin’ in me chair with his feet up on th’ desk.”
Ori clicked his tongue in disgust.
“That’s terribly rude! I’m so sorry! Did he say anything else?”
“No an’ I don’t know what t’ do. I don’t want t’ endanger yeh, bu’ if yeh leave it too long, he’ll
come ou’ here lookin’ f’r yeh.”
“Tha’ would pu’ everyane off their beer,” Dwalin rumbled.
Thorin stepped in.
“Lord Ori, perhaps, as Ursith didn’t specify you should come alone, it would be best if you
brought Captain Dwalin with you.”
“Yes, my king,” said Ori.
“A’ course, me king.”
Ori waited for Dwalin to walk in front of him, then followed. He figured it made him look more
cautious, and helped him ignore some of staff still gawking. Also, he could watch Dwalin’s bum
better from here.
Like everything else at the Moo and Cluck, the door was solid.
Dwalin banged on it, and Ori heard the echoes vibrating off the steel.
“Wha’d’yeh want?” Ursith snarled.
It would have come across threatening, if it didn’t sound like it was rising out of a tin can.
Dwalin shoved the door open wide.
“Evenin’, Master Ursith.”
“Why’e yeh here? I sent f’r th’ scribe.”
Ori followed Dwalin in and shut the door behind him.
In a quiet, reasonable voice, Ori offered, “You shithead, you’ve about scared Master Orras to
death.”
Nori sighed and shook his head.
“I do have a rep—“
“A reputation to maintain.” Ori looked back and forth between his husband and brother. “The
two of you! Honestly!”
“Listen, you little mole,” said Nori, “as soon as the streets’re empty, you need t’ come an’ take
possession o’ your two western pals.”
“Which pals would these be?” Ori asked.
“Boromir and Eowyn! They’ve been cheatin’ the whole time they been at me card table. They about cleaned me out. I’m just lucky they was the only two left by the end.”
“Oh, mahumb,” said Ori, scrubbing his face with his hands. He was definitely sobering up, and quickly.
“You know what’ll happen if somebody catches on they cheated Ursith and got away wif it?”
“You’d have to kill Ursith off and replace him with someone worse,” said Ori.
“Ooo. There’s an idea,” said Nori. “Never fought o’ that.”
“Look, you let them win as a welcoming gesture and to show your approval of King Thorin. Maybe he’ll do you a ridiculous favor you can show off about. Will that do?”
“I like it,” enthused Nori.
“Righ’,” said Dwalin, “message delivered. Ge’ yerself gone b’fore I have t’ rough yeh up f’r threatenin’ me wee scribe terror.”
“I’m outa here,” said Nori, vanishing cleanly through the floor.
Ori rested his head on Dwalin’s chest.
“Let’s go and collect my sticky-fingered ‘pals’.”
“Then, home?” Dwalin asked, cuddling him close.
“I think we’re about at the end of the evening. I’m going, even if no one else is.”

Ori thought it miraculous that they found Boromir and Eowyn close to the scene of their latest crime. He was sure they would have wandered off by now, perhaps to purchase Durin IV’s penis. “Uncle!” Eowyn cried, brandishing a heavy purse. “Let’s go buy you one of those inflatable chairs!”
“Of course. I’ll use it to replace the throne,” said Theoden. “You realize, I’d never get Theodred out of it.”
“We’ll buy him one, too. A little one, for a king in training.”
Alas, the iKeyah had closed for the next couple of hours, and the group was forced to face the journey home.
“What did you buy, Omosuil?” Ori asked.
He and Dwalin found themselves walking with the elf and his lieutenant.
“I spent most of my pay on truffles,” announced Omosuil, clearly unrepentant.
“I’m very proud of you,” Ori said.
“Thank you.”
Ahead of them, Glorfindel had the unconscious Haldir over his shoulder. Elrond was torn between skipping with Lindir, who had got his second wind, or making Glorfindel promise to actually put Haldir to bed when they got back to Fundin House.
“In his own bed,” Elrond specified. “Kindly, do not leave him where he can be squashed, pickpocketed or otherwise besmirched. Or my mother-in-law will turn you into a toad.”
“She can’t do that,” Glorfindel scoffed. “Can she?”
“Do you really wish to find out?”
Thranduil, initially far ahead of them, walked slower and slower. By the time they reached the dancing square, he had stopped entirely, with his wrist draped over his forehead.
“Alas!” he cried. “I cannot go on! Leave me! Save yourselves!”
“You have to go on,” said Bard. “I don’t think you want Dain and Sculdis to carry you.”
Thranduil looked at him, momentarily startled, then,
“I want you to give me a piggyback ride.”
“What?”
“You’re certainly strong enough.”
“Seriously?”
“Just until we get to the stables and the elk can carry me the rest of the way.”
“You’ll look ridiculous.”
“I’m too drunk to care.”
“Fine. Ori, please sketch this. I want some sort of proof for our grandchildren.”

Sigrid called out, “Did you hear that, Fili? Da wants grandchildren! What can we do about that right now?”

“Run while he’s weighed down?” Fili suggested.

Happily, Bard was strong enough, and sober enough, not to lose his footing and send himself and Thranduil careening off into a chasm. Then Eowyn jumped onto Boromir’s back and it became a race.

Bard just managed to edge Boromir out, but Eowyn complained that Bard had an unfair advantage, since elves were so light.

“Not when they’re drunk asleep,” said Bard, happily letting Theoden take Thranduil from his back.

“He’s not asleep,” said Theoden. “His eyes are open.”

“He’s asleep all right,” said Bard. “Elves do that.”

“I never knew that!”

“Neither did I,” said Bard dryly. “I wish someone had explained it before I woke up next to him like that the first morning and thought he was dead.”

“Eru!”

“I imagined I’d killed my new husband before I’d even broken him in. I shouted, or gargled or something, and that woke him up, which made me scream.”

Ori winced.

“Sorry, Bard,” said Ori.

“You can’t think of everything, Ori.”

“That’s a big one to miss.”

Theoden held up the royal elf and looked worriedly from Thranduil to his elk.

“Is he likely to break his neck when he comes tumbling off that?”

“Let me get on first,” said Bard.

He turned to the elk and said something quietly in sindarin.

The elk sighed, and hunkered down on its knees to allow Bard up onto his back.

“Astride or sidesaddle?” Theoden asked, looking down at his unconscious burden.

“What’s ‘sidesaddle’?” Bard asked.

“Something he’d likely never live down.”

“Tempting,” said Bard, “but I need to be able to control the shift in weight.”

“Tha’s impressive,” said Dain as Bard called the animal to its feet. “Yeh couldn’ do tha’ las’ time we was here, our Bard.”

“I didn’t have hot and cold running water, either. Amazing what you can get used to, even at my age.”

Bard, with Theoden and Aragorn’s help, got Thranduil across Bard’s knees. The Father-King’s hair was hastily tied up with a couple of handkerchiefs.

Everyone mounted up rather slowly. Ori noted that someone had sent to Fundin House for Dori’s teacup. The elves were boosted into this and lolled inelegantly over the cushions, their mounts tied to the back. Boromir gave his horse’s reins to Eowyn and drove the teacup.

Ori needed help from Dwalin to get on Honda. She kept looking back at him over her shoulder and Ori could have sworn she was laughing at him.

They moved off quietly through the silent city, silent until the next lot of miners came up for dinner and the party in the Night Market would start again.

Celeborn hung dangerously over the edge of the cup and reminded Glorfindel that Haldir had to be safely put to bed.

Dain chuckled,

“Aye, lad, an’ extra points if he kin convince me Chopper t’ sleep in th’ same bed.”

Dwalin offered to pay Dain to do it.

Boromir looked over his shoulder at his inebriated cargo.

“Great Eru, I look like I’m collecting the bodies of plague victims.” He raised his voice to call,
“Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!”

Lindir stirred and grumped, “We aren’t dead.”
“You’re not fooling anyone you know,” said Boromir. “You’ll be stone dead in a minute.”

They finally got back to Fundin House. It looked beautiful. There was light showing through the raven and bat bolt holes. Ori squirmed at the thought that Dori was waiting up for them.

After helping the sleepy stable boys tend the mounts, they all walked around to the receiving room door. Bard carried Thranduil across his shoulders and Aragorn cradled his lady. Thorin opened one door quietly and ushered Bilbo in. Theoden and Boromir helped Eowyn steady the rest of the drunk elves as they followed. Kili assisted Tauriel to weave her way through the entryway, while Fili and Sigrid giggled at them. Theoden and Dwalin helped Dubb get his weighted wheeled basket over the threshold.

Once everyone was in, Thorin closed and bolted the door. Ori sighed. It was lovely to be home after such a wonderful evening.

“There you all are,” Dori said, sweeping in from the sitting room to frown at them. She wore a gold, quilted wrapper that trailed behind, making Dori look like she was gliding. Ori was glad Dori had kept her voice lowered with the lateness of the hour. Her clothes were quite loud enough.

“Can you read by the light of that robe, Dori?”

“Don’t be rude, pet! Honestly, I…. What have you done to my dearest Galadriel?”

“Darling Dori!” Galadriel managed and stumbled over to collapse in a heap on the Bearer. Dori stood firm and patted her back as she lay, now snoring, over Dori’s shoulder.

“She’s drunk,” Dwalin stated.
“Elves don’t… How much wine did you give her?”
“Very little, Dori,” said Bard, setting Thranduil down and holding the sleeping elf against his side. “It seems that only a shot of lichen whiskey is enough to get an elf soused.”

“Lichen whiskey?” Dori repeated. “Ugh, that stuff tastes like dirt.”

“Lichen whiskey and mahml are going to be the official food of the Last Housely Home,” announced Elrond, swaying dangerously. Boromir grabbed him.

“Then I shan’t be visiting you any time soon,” Dori vowed and began to shoo the guests upstairs.

Sculdis and Dain assisted Glorfindel getting Haldir up and, giggleing, disappeared around the corner. Ori thought he could hear Chopper oinking.

Balin, dressed in a red plaid flannel nightshirt with matching night cap, herded the rest of them into the sitting room. Bilbo landed on the couch and lay there, giggling a little. Thorin came around to the front of it and Bilbo held out his arms.

“Carry me. I’ve fainted dead away, my delicious dwarf.”

“Or something,” Thorin teased, then turned to Balin. “Where are my faunts?”

“Snug in their beds, laddie. Looks t’ be time f’r yerself t’ be headin’ that way.”

“No problems?”

Balin smiled fondly.

“All been as good as gold, me king.”

Ori imagined that they had been indulged to the fullest of Dori and Balin’s efforts. All were probably dead asleep after too much romping, stories, and sugar. Dubb steered the wheeled basket to the center of the sitting room, bowed jauntily to his king and the Bearer, and Dwalin went with him to the front door.

As they went, Ori heard Dwalin said, “Sure we can’ temp’ yeh int’ stayin’, Master Dubb?”

“Riiigggggghhh,” said Dubb. “Tha’s a ‘no’. I’ve had me dose a’ weird f’r t’day. Besides, I’m re-”

“Retired, aye.”

Dori returned and Thorin handed her a well wrapped package and murmured something. Dori took it, giggling, and went through to the kitchen.

Lavender Gamgee arrived and looked them over as Boromir, Dwalin, and Eowyn came through from the receiving room, snickering.

“Haldir’s all tucked in,” giggled Eowyn, “with Chopper snuggled up to him.”
Thorin and Balin snorted.
“I need a drink,” Boromir sighed, throwing himself on a chair.
Eowyn laughed outright.
“Thought you were sobering up?”
“After putting a boar in an elf’s bed, I’m not sure I want to be sober when he wakes up.”
“You,” Lavender addressed the First March Warden with a stern look, “will have a cup of chamomile tea.”
Boromir grinned, but bowed his head, saying contritely, “Yes, ma’am.”
Lavender smirked and swished out.
“Well, that’s you caught,” Eowyn teased. “Hope your daddy likes her.”
Boromir winked.
“Miss Gamgee would throw Father off the parapet if he annoyed her.” “She would, too!” agreed Bilbo, suddenly alert and sitting up.
“Just like her mother,” Thorin put in.
“She so cute,” Boromir said to no one in particular.
“Caught like a moth in a fly trap plant,” Ori observed to Eowyn.
“She’ll be havin’ him f’r breakfas’,” Dwalin added.
“In every one of his dreams,” Eowyn leaned over the chair back to rattle her knuckles back and forth across his head.
“Piss off,” Boromir grouched.
Lavender came back in with a steaming mug and gave it to Boromir. Dori brought in a tray with a large teapot and cups. They all seated themselves and took tea, which Ori was grateful for.
“Well?” Dori wanted to know.
“It was wonderful,” Ori said simply.
“We went to the wine merchant almost first thing,” Eowyn reported, “and the elves bought all the lichen whiskey right off. I think it’ll be delivered tomorrow morning.”
“In a few hours then,” Balin commented dryly.
“There will be a number of deliveries,” Thorin added. “There will be a few people as well.”
Dori raised a brow.
“And will there be anyone besides me awake to greet them?”
“That remains to be seen,” said Thorin. “Supposedly, elves don’t suffer hangovers. But, that too remains to be seen.”
Ori went to Dubb’s basket and guddled about. Soon he found what he was looking for.
“What’s all this?” Dori asked coming to look. Ori handed Dori the boxes of candy and pastry he had bought in the Alley of Sweetmeats.
“Oh, my!” Dori was delighted and popped a piece of nataj into her mouth. “Mmm, delicious! Deneb is so talented.”
“This one is truffles,” Ori said, handing out another box. Dori sampled one and gave a blissful sigh. Ori found the box of fudge he’d got for Dwalin and himself.
“And that is?” Dori teased.
“Mine,” Ori grinned, then opened it and gave Dori a piece.
“Lovely,” Dori enthused then giggled. “Oh well, I didn’t think I’d be getting much sleep this night after all. I—”
Dori stared as Ori began handing her coconuts.
“Why did you buy all these?”
“We didn’t,” Ori chuckled. “We all won them. And this is my Butter. Dwalin won her, and this is Bilbo’s Sugar. He won that. Aragorn won this raven for Arwen and Dwalin got this bear for Eowyn.”
Kili came over and peered in.
“Ori-mate, you find my coffee cream candy?”
Ori dug out another box. Kili looked in it.
“Nope, these are popped corn with caramel.”
Ori retrieved several more and Dori stared as Fili and Sigrid helped to go through, Fili’s sack of purchases disappearing discreetly the moment it surfaced, but there were still piles of things in the carriage.

There were funnel cakes, donuts, the sausages on sticks, more candy, some of which was claimed as Bard and Theoden came through. Gimli and Legolas arrived again with their parents and Romy. Gimli found their candy. He passed a box of truffles to Gloin and Gridr, who were delighted and giggled over the two coconuts they received with it. Fili found his mother’s plush turtle and tossed it to her.

Ori found his scroll of music and backed away from the basket to watch. He glanced over and saw that Lavender had perched on the arm of Boromir’s chair. He was smiling up at her and handed over a small wrapped packet. She took it with a lifted eyebrow, then squeaked as she removed a truffle. She bit into it and closed her eyes in delight. She ate half then popped the rest in Boromir’s mouth. They sat talking quietly and gazing into each other’s eyes.

Ori looked over at Bilbo, who had seen the whole thing, and grinned at Ori. Ori laughed to himself and then felt Dwalin’s arm drift around his waist.

“Aren’t Boromir and Lavender sweet?” Ori murmured up at his husband.

“Ne’er as swee’ as yeh,” Dwalin whispered back, kissing one ear, then the other.

“I’m exhausted,” Ori admitted and turned to hug Dwalin.

“Then it’s bedtime f’r us,” Dwalin replied.

Dwalin drew him to the couch where Thorin was sitting with Bilbo’s feet on his lap, Sugar lolling on his boots, and Butter with her head on the couch’s arm, receiving ear rubs.

“We’re off,” Dwalin told his king.

“Yes, I’m going in a minute,” Thorin replied and then turned to Ori. “Sleep well.”

“Thank you,” Ori said as Bilbo waved to them. “Good night to you both.”

Ori turned to the hallway and Dwalin snapped his fingers at Killer, who bounded after them like a loose mine cart. As they walked down the hall to their bedroom Ori looked at the warg pup.

“He’s growing like pigweed, as Bard would say,” Ori observed.

“Aye,” Dwalin agreed, proudly, ruffling the ears that now reached his waist. “He’s a grand wee thin’.” They entered the bedroom and Quartz winged in, closely followed by Garnet. Kihshassa squeaked from her pole and climbed right side up to look at them.

“You look messy,” Quartz said, landing on Ori’s shoulder and tweaking his ear.

Ori laughed.

“I suppose I’m too messy to give you dried bacon cooked in maple syrup then?”

“Said you were messy. Didn’t say it was a bad thing,” Quartz argued. “Just need to preen a little.”

Ori pulled the small packet he’d bought in the stall next to the truffles and fed the raven a piece.

“Dead and sweet,” Quartz managed around a piece. “Dead sweet, this is.”

Garnet rubbed her head on Dwalin’s head, then leaned toward Ori with her beak open. Ori obligingly popped a piece in. Dwalin told Killer to sit. The warg did promptly and Dwalin gave a piece to Killer, who swallowed it instantly.

“Yeh didn’ even bother tastin’ it!” Dwalin teased. “F’r all yeh care, I could’a fed yeh a sock.”

“He’d eat it,” Ori giggled.

“I’ll jus’ nick some a’ yers,” Dwalin teased. “Then, as none a ‘em match, I’ll be fashionable.”

Ori stuffed the bacon packet back in his pocket and pushed at Dwalin, who laughed and pushed back. They had an enjoyable tussle and ended up with Ori flat on his back on the bed.

Ori leaned up to kiss Dwalin’s nose.

“Let me up, I’ve got to get out of this jumpsuit.”

“Nah, jus’ gonna tear i’ off yeh.”

“Dipfa will kill you, if my special jumpsuit gets torn.”

“Bugger,” Dwalin muttered and got up.

Ori undid the fasteners and struggled out of the top part. He was very tired. He tried to kick off his boots but Dwalin
kneel and pulled the boots off and tossed the socks aside as well.

“Thank you,” Ori managed around a huge yawn. “I’m so sleepy…”

Ori opened his eyes and noticed Dwalin was now in his old faded pink skivvies.

“Oh, you’re wearing my favorites.”

“Always f’r yeh, me love.”

Ori pulled off his under tunic and crawled up to get under the covers.

“My buffalo, come to bed. I can’t keep my eyes open and I want to kiss you.”

Dwalin climbed in beside him as Ori flopped down on the pillow.

“We have the best bed in the whole world,” Ori murmured and slid an arm about Dwalin’s neck.
Domesticity is Not Pretty…but It Can Be Funny.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. The Night Market is over, but the fun goes on, and on, and on… Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori woke to the sounds of snores and the feeling of being delightfully trapped. He blinked. Dwalin was spooned behind him, with Killer draped across both their waists. Kihshassa had flopped on their feet, Nori-Pori was lying across the tops of his and Dwalin’s heads on the pillow, Mask was curled next to Ori’s tummy, Garnet slept on Killer’s back, and Quartz was under Ori’s chin. Ori grinned. The whole family was asleep but him. Ori looked down at Mask. He and Nori-Pori were almost full grown. Nori-Pori was a long string bean of a cat and Mask was turning into a large ball of fur.

Ori was about to doze off when he heard a sniffing noise. He opened his eyes again and, at the corner, he could just see the end of Fanny’s trunk reaching through the window casement. The full length of the trunk arrived and sniffed about the room. It touched the wardrobes and bureaus. There was a long sniff, then it found the pitcher and basin. The trunk went inside the pitcher and the sniffing echoed in the porcelain. Ori tried hard not to giggle. Quartz ruffled his feathers and stood up, blinking at Ori, then turned at the noise. Ori grabbed Quartz’s beak before the raven squawked.

Killer snored louder. Quartz looked reproachfully at Ori, who took his hand away and stroked the feathers in appeasement. Fanny’s trunk came out of the pitcher and rose high in the air.

Garnet stirred and looked.

“Fanny,” Ori murmured under his breath.

The trunk’s end swiveled and a rush of air came through it. Ori shook slightly in silent laughter. The air came again, this time accompanied by a low ‘hoo-ing’ noise.

The cats’ and the bat’s heads shot up. Killer snorted, rolled off them, and curled next to Dwalin’s back. Dwalin made a waking up noise and tightened his grip around Ori. Ori felt a whisker-y kiss pressed to his ear.

“I kin feel yeh gigglin’, love,” Dwalin rumbled in his ear.

Fanny hoo-ed again a little louder. Dwalin rolled over to look.

“Fuck me,” he muttered.

“I can’t,” Ori teased. “We’re covered in animals.”

Dwalin snickered.

“There’s ‘n excuse I ain’t heard b’fore.”

It took a little time to free themselves of furry bodies, but they were finally able to get up. Ori trotted over and patted Fanny’s trunk.

“We’re up, Fanny. I’ll meet you in a bit on the patio.”

The trunk withdrew and Ori grabbed Dwalin’s hand as his husband led the way to the bathroom.

They emerged, washed and dressed, to a line of two cats, a bat, and Killer, tail wagging madly.

“What lovely children we have,” Ori grinned up at Dwalin, who snickered.

“Aye, guid thin’ they canna talk.”

Ori leaned over, grasping Killer’s head and said in a silly, growly voice, “I’d say ‘I love you, adad’.”
“Great,” Dwalin laughed. “If he star’s askin’ t’ borrow me war hammers, that’s righ’ out.”
“We could tie one to my tail, adad!” Ori tried, nuzzling the puppy’s head. Killer wiggled and
slobbered to lick Ori’s face.
“C’mon, yeh rascal,” Dwalin said with a swat to Ori’s ass. “I’m thinkin yer needin’ food t’
straigh’en yer head out.”
Ori giggled and hugged Killer, then took Dwalin’s hand. Killer bounced up and put his forepaws
on Dwalin’s shoulders and licked his face.
“Blaaaagh!” Dwalin snarled, rubbing Killer’s ear. “Git down, yeh numpty. I washed me own
face just fine. Don’ need yeh re-doin’ it! Sit!”
Killer sat obediently and looked lovingly up at Dwalin, tail sweeping the floor. Dwalin smiled
and rubbed the pup’s ear again.
“Sittin’ room,” Dwalin ordered.
Killer took off at a run and the cats tore after him. Kihshassa climbed Ori and settled herself as a
short cloak on his back and they went through.
They arrived to Dori scolding Killer, who was racing around the long table at high speed. Ori
grabbed an apple from the table, called Killer to follow, went through the breakfast parlor and out to
the patio. Killer scamped after and dove into some long grass. Ori gave the apple to Fanny and
hugged her leg. Kihshassa took flight and swooped over to where the brambles grew next to the
rock wall, the bushes now covered in berries.
Ori heard the faunts and Tilda playing in the meadow over near Bag End East.
When he came back in, he saw that only Thorin, Bilbo, Balin and Dori were sitting at the table, so
he went and hugged Dori.
“Now, pet, you sit right down and have some breakfast. After that you can go outside and play
with your doggie.”
“My doggie?” Ori said, releasing Dori and looking down at her with a cocked eyebrow. “Go
outside and play with my doggie?”
“Oh,” Dori flushed. “You know, I mean… I do have badgers coming, pet. I’m getting into
practice.”
“Of course,” Ori teased. “Can’t have you falling behind.”
“Here.” Dori pushed a plate at him piled with fried ham and a large serving of egg bake. “You
need to eat.”
Ori giggled, planted a wet kiss on top of Dori’s head, and went to sit with Dwalin.
Thorin’s eyes twinkled at him and Ori grinned at Bilbo, who was staunchly not laughing.
“Anythin’ happenin’ yet?” Dwalin questioned his king.
“Nothing thus far,” Thorin replied, finishing his last mouthful of ham. “But time will tell.”
“Why, our Thorin,” cried Dori, “whatever are you hinting at? Are there going to be more guests
coming?”
Thorin spread marmalade on his toast and shot a mischievous smile at Dori.
“As far as I’m aware, Honored Bearer, we need only expect four cases of lichen whiskey, an artist
who specializes in nudes, the owner of Smeg II and Wee Mac, the miniature pony, and, if Elrond
guessed correctly, an enormous bottle of marbles, and, if Theoden guessed correctly, a rooster. If
there are more, I have not been informed.”
“A rooster?” Dori’s eyes widened considerably.
“Yes,” Thorin confirmed. “A rather fetching one with black feathers, a red wattle, gray legs, and
the most elegant pouf of black feathers obscuring its crown. I dare say, the veritable king of fowl.”
“Laddie, yeh makin’ tha up?” Balin asked.
“Who wouldn’t want a royal cock?” Bilbo wondered idly.
Dori looked at Balin, then they both turned to Thorin.
“I used to ask myself that question every day,” said Thorin cheekily, “before we met.”
“Flatterer,” Bilbo teased
“To answer your question, Balin, indeed I am not,” Thorin replied, finishing his toast and thanking
Bilbo for refilling his tea cup. “We all saw it. I wouldn’t recommend asking any of the elves for
confirmation as they were drunk.”

Mistress Dazla came in and gave Dori a significant look. Dori excused herself and followed the housekeeper out to the receiving room. Balin regarded Thorin, who had helped himself to another slice of toast.

“Yer f’r serious, lad?”

“I am.”

They all heard Dori cry, “Oh, for Mahal’s sake!”

Thorin dropped his napkin on the table and went through, Butter and Sugar at his heels. Ori popped after him to watch.

In the receiving room stood the brewer with a large dolly. Four big crates were piled on it. Dori was in a slight huff, the brewer wearing a huge grin and Mistress Dazla was giggling. The brewer saw Thorin and bowed low.

“Good morning, Master Brewer,” Thorin greeted him, offering his arm. “The lichen whiskey, I presume?”

“Good morning, your majesty.” The brewer looked askance at the wargs, but seeing them fawning over Thorin, persevered. “Yes, all four as requested, majesty.”

“Thank you for coming so promptly,” Thorin smiled, amused. “Will it keep better here or somewhere cool?”

“Cool, majesty.”

Thorin turned to Mistress Dazla, who had recovered her poise.

“Is there room in the larder?”

“Certainly, my king. If you’ll kindly follow me, master?”

Ori went back to his seat and Mistress Dazla led the master with his dolly through to the kitchen. When he returned in a few minutes with the dolly empty, Thorin offered him a fat purse and Bilbo offered him breakfast. The brewer took the purse with a bow and politely demurred to join the breakfast crowd, though he looked tempted, then Mistress Dazla showed him out.

Ori giggled in spite of himself and Dwalin speared up more ham slices with a fork and dumped half of them on Ori’s plate. Thorin took his seat again.

“Thus it begins.”

“Wha’ yeh goin’ t’ bet’s comin’ next?” Dwalin asked.

“Me,” said Eowyn at the door. She went around the table to greet Dori with a kiss.

“Oh aye, lass?” said Balin, “an’ who delivered yeh?”

“My mother’s midwife, silly dwarf,” she teased, kissing his cheek.

“Mark that one f’r th’ lass,” Balin conceded, patting her cheek. “Where’s yer poor idad?”

“He’s right here,” said Theoden as he entered with Theodred. Following his niece’s example, he went to Dori, saluted her cheek and shook hands with Balin and Thorin and bowed to Bilbo.

“Do sit down, all of you,” Bilbo said. “You must be starving.”

Theo nodded as Dori released him and Balin finished patting his back.

Theoden parked himself in the chair opposite Ori and Dwalin, and Eowyn and Theo sat on either side of him. Balin loaded their plates with ham while Dori added bake. Mistress Dazla came through with pilsner glasses and Agrib followed with a tapped keg.

“So what did you all see last night?” Theo wanted to know as his father and cousin tucked in.

“Theoden,” Bilbo said, by way of an answer, “Theo really must see the fair.”

Theoden chuckled.

“Only if the Honored Bearer doesn’t mind us cluttering up the household a day or so longer.”

“Of course not!” Dori cried. “We all adore having you here, no matter how you arrive. What a pity dear Eomer and dear Arivett couldn’t come with you.”

“I have yet to meet Arivett,” Theoden commented.

“Exactly,” Dori pursued. “What a nice place this house would be for you all to meet and get to know one another.”

“Erebor does serve as neutral ground for the other rulers, if the bickering gets out of hand.” Thorin told Bilbo.
“It ain’t likely t’ be tha’ middle a’ th’ nigh’ stand off between Gheir an’ Hild,” Dwalin commented.

Theoden laughed but Eowyn and Theodred looked puzzled.

“Remind me to tell the two of you about that sometime,” their uncle said.

Balin rolled his eyes.

“Nonsense,” Dori insisted. “Eomer and Arivett are in love.”

“Mornin’,” mumbled Bain as he trailed in.

“There you are!” Dori cooed and took up a plate to fill. “Come here and I’ll make you a breakfast. I’m sure your tummy must be quite empty!”

“Thanks, Dori,” Bain brightened at the mention of food. He carried his full plate over and sat beside Theo.

“Dear Theoden,” Dori said, fixing the horse king with an accusing eye. “What is this our Thorin has been telling me about a rooster?”

Theoden sputtered in his ale, recovered, and burst out laughing.

“Dori,” cried Eowyn, “it’s just the prettiest thing.”

“I may have won a rooster,” Theoden corrected. “We don’t know yet.”

Theo stared at his father.

“How can you win a rooster? Did you play cards or something?”

“No,” Eowyn butted in. “It was one of those ‘guess the weight and you win’ games.”

“Oh.” Theo paused then, “Da’s good at those.”

“We’ll just have to wait and see,” Theoden closed the matter.

“Are you going to buy your uncle an inflatable throne?” Bilbo asked Eowyn, apropos of nothing.

“How do you inflate a throne?” Bain asked.

Bilbo polished off his cup of tea.

“Carefully, if King Ulfr is anything to go by.”

“He didn’t inflate his throne,” said Thorin, refilling Bilbo’s cup. “He blew it up.”

“Very dwarfy of him, I’m sure,” said Bilbo.

This was being thoroughly discussed as Sigrid, Fili, and Boromir walked in.

“Blessed Bearer,” Boromir threw himself on his knees next to Dori and kissed her hands. “I have been following my nose to that ham and bake since I woke up.”

“Silly boy,” Dori scolded, highly pleased.

She withdrew her hands, made him a plate, and shoved a slice of toast in his mouth. He managed a grateful noise and went to Dwalin’s side and sat down, chewing. Theoden kindly passed him a glass of ale. Sigrid kissed Dori and Fili accepted plates for the pair of them.

“Did you win the rooster?” Sigrid wanted to know.

“No word yet,” Eowyn told her.

The contents of the Groinuil residence came in and greetings were exchanged and food dispensed. Romy went to the food bowls near the fireplace and finished what was left. Sugar and Butter lolled behind Thorin’s chair, full and asleep.

“Where are the puppies?” Eowyn asked.

“Romping in the meadow at the moment,” said Bilbo, “learning about why one does not bother the rams, or the ponies for that matter.”

“Is that safe?” Eowyn asked. “Aren’t the faunts back there?”

“Furh’nk is keeping watch,” said Bilbo.

“The pups don’t need their mother?” asked Theodred, looking at Romy, who was looking lovingly at Theo’s breakfast plate.

“They’re weaned,” said Thorin. “Apparently, they only get fed for a few weeks, and then they have to fend for themselves. Or in this case, find the food bowl in Bag End East for themselves.”

“Are you planning on breeding them?” Theodred asked, apparently trying to push Romy off by the power of his will alone.

Romy wasn’t buying it.

“We have to decide that, and soon,” said Thorin. “I’m aware that not everyone in the two
“Idad Stan’ll hate that!” said Quartz, fluttering to rest on Ori’s shoulder and tweaking an ear.
“Where have you been?” Ori asked.
“Errr, well…”
“Well?” Ori prompted.

Then Garnet flew in and hopped to a stop at Dwalin’s plate, but instead of digging in, she made eyes at Quartz.
“He-llo, Quartz,” she cooed.
“Hullo, Garnet,” the raven replied, ducking his head beneath his wing, under the pretense of preening.
“Hail the conquering hero,” Ori whispered at him.
“Shu’ up,” Quartz replied.

Lavender came in with Frodo, Sam, and Tilda, their cheeks rosy from the sunshine and their hair windswept.
“Second breakfast,” Lavender announced.
“Yay!” the faunts and Tilda cried in unison and ran toward the table.
“Ahem,” said Lavender.

The younglings bumped to an abrupt halt and bowed to the Company.
“Good morning,” they chorused, though in a rather singsongy way that obviously told Lavender they were humoring her.

“Fine,” she said with a sigh. “Barbarians. What will I do with you?”
“Feed us,” said Frodo.
“Silly me,” said Lavender.

Boromir rose and pulled out her chair for her.
“Thank you,” she said simply as she sat.

“Blatant fav’ritism, that is,” Nori grumped.

Dain arrived with Sculdis and they shouted greetings to all. Dain gave Dori a hearty kiss on the cheek and a hug which almost knocked Dori out of her chair. They seated themselves and Theoden began asking about the machines they’d seen the night before.

Baluchistan stirred from his place in Sculdis’ hood, but she merely fed him tidbits of ham over her shoulder and they all heard munching and an occasional ’Nummy!” from him. Ori hoped Sculdis washed her hood out thoroughly after this, but then he reflected that the raven would likely leave not a morsel of food, only a mattress-worth of loose feathers.

Bard, Thranduil, Galadriel, and Celeborn wandered in, followed by Aragorn and Arwen, and the other elves trailed after, except for Haldir. No one really expected him much before noon. The elves greeted everyone and were delighted to receive great helpings of ham and bake from Dori and began to eat as if there could be no sickness from drink at all.
“Bloody elves,” said Nori.
“I should like to announce,” said Dori, “there are four cases of liquid dirt in my larder.”
“Ah, the lichen whiskey arrived,” said Celeborn. “Excellent!”
“I suppose someone had to think so,” said Dori. “As long as it’s leaving with you, I have no qualms about storing it for you.”
“You are so good, as always, dear Dori,” cooed Galadriel.
Perhaps there was some sign of drink after all, Ori thought. Though, in blithe spirits, she was even more pale and ethereal than ever, and not quite solid around the edges.
“Auntie,” Eowyn said, “are you … glowing more than usual?”
Galadriel looked startled and bent her head to examine herself.
“You are,” Celeborn stated.
Elrond said, “I can’t remember you glowing like that before.”
“How odd,” Galadriel murmured. “I don’t feel like I’m going to explode in the least.”
“You’re not making a hissing noise either,” Kili observed around a mouthful of bake. “You usually hear a hissing noise before something explodes.”
“That’s very true,” corroborated Fili.
Galadriel raised her head, her eyes shining, and with a smile of delight.
“Oh,” said Galadriel. “I’m pregnant.”
Celeborn and Kelli slowly turned their heads to gape at her. In Kelli’s case, it could have been because her eyes had literally just sparkled, but Celeborn was truly struck.
“You’re what? Dearest?”
“No, really! It’s just like with Celebrian.”
He let out a whoop of joy, which startled everyone, and hauled her into his lap to cuddle epically.
The room rang with calls of congratulations and Dori bustled over to give her a kiss.
“We’ll be pregnant together!” Dori cried. “When do you think you’ll be due?”
“About a year and a half,” said Galadriel.
“We’ll be pregnant together for a little while,” Dori amended.
“I should write to my parents, I suppose.” Galadriel said idly, snuggling in her husband’s lap while he rained down kisses on her.
“Do,” he encouraged. “Perhaps they will come for a visit as they did when Celebrian was born.”
“That would be lovely. We can bring them to Erebor and Dale for a visit. I want them to meet all my dear friends.”
“Of course you must, my dear!” Dori cried. “They will be very welcome at Fundin house. Perhaps we’ll have a little party.”
Balin caught Ori’s eye and shrugged helplessly.
Galadriel paused, frowning, then laughed out, “So that’s what Woudini meant. I’m glowingly pregnant and my parents will visit us! I’m not going to explode at all. He’s so esoteric!”
Ori thought this was odd, coming from her, but he held his piece.
Gimli frowned up at Legolas.
“What’s ‘esoteric’ mean, then?”
“I think it means he’s full of shit,” Legolas replied. “But Ori could probably give you a proper definition.”
“Nah, I li’e yer’s jus’ fine.”
Bombur and Erda’s raven, Cookie, arrived with a letter, which Bofur read at the table, squawked and snorted with glee.
“I never! But apparently, they do,” say Bofur.
“What’s doin’, me dear?” Nori asked.
“Bombur and Erda send their congrats to our Dori an’ Balin on their expectationin’. Erda’s pregnant with her fifteenth pebble.”
“Well!” Dori cried. “I’ve been upstaged!”
Balin patted her hand.
“There’s no catchin’ our Erda, though, mind, she should stop tryin’ t’ populate th’ entire dwarven
world by herself. No need anymore.”
“How very fecund we’ve all become,” Dori giggled.
“Yavanna is blessing everyone in sight,” Bilbo said, amused.
“Oh!” Dori stopped then looked over at Thranduil. “Dearest Thrandy. I think three is enough and adopting three more at your age. I hope you are taking your tea.”
“Every morning, dear Dori,” Thranduil smiled, blinking innocently.
Bard started to laugh, checked, then seemed to think better of saying anything at the moment.
Thranduil gave him a side glance and said, “Not going to happen, dear.”
“Thank you,” said Bard, visibly deflating.
Haldir entered, his arm around Chopper.
“Dain,” said Haldir, “I wish to announce that Chopper and I are deeply in love and getting married.”
Chopper oinked and looked up at Haldir tenderly.
Dain jumped to his feet and flung himself at Haldir,
“Son!” he shouted and seized the elf about the hips and hoisted him, off the floor.
“Adad!” Haldir replied rapturously, laughing as Dain hopped about, jostling him.
Sculdis pretended to burst into noisy tears, waking Baluchistan from his post-ham roost in her hood.
“This is th’ happiest day a’ me life!” she cried.
“Wha’ th’ fuck?” Baluchistan demanded fuzzily.
“Haldir and Chopper are getting married,” said Quartz.
“Bugger th’ f’r a lark,” said Baluchistan. “Me nephew’s marryin’ an elf?”
“Now, now,” said Gloin, carefully patting his head. “This is no time f’r jealousy.”
Tilda looked askance and turned to Sigrid.
“Is Mister Haldir really marrying a pig?”
“Think how convenient it’ll be on market days, Til,” said Sigrid. “Chopper can carry all the shopping home.”
“True,” said Tilda.
Bard said to Thranduil, “Did you not have a… er… thing with Haldir?”
“Once or twice out of desperation.”
“Now we see where his desperation took him.”
“I think I’m being maligned,” said Thranduil.
Tilda asked, “If they have children, will they be elflets or pelfs?”
“Pelves,” Thranduil corrected absently. Then he looked startled and asked Celeborn. “What did I just say?”
“I was rather wondering that myself,” said Celeborn. He turned to his captain. “Haldir, are you sober?”
“Absolutely, my lord. Fruit soda water all night.”
“Horse shit,” Celeborn muttered.
Haldir grinned nervously.
“I believe I must be sober now, my lord. Waking with a battle boar in your bed will do that to one.” He looked down at Chopper. “And such a fine specimen you are, my love.”
Chopper demurred, butted Haldir gently in the hip and trotted over to where Miss Larit was putting down a bowl of mashed yams and maple syrup on the floor by Dain’s chair.
“He’s always bin a wee bi’ fickle,” said Dain.
He took Haldir by the elbow and led him to the table.
“Is he actually craft-wed and simply toying with my affections?” Haldir asked.
“Bi’ a’ both, prob’ly. Ah, well, we’ll have t’ postpone th’ weddin’s all. How’s yer tum?”
“Fine, actually. My head is a little muzzy, but it’s not pounding.”
“Bloody elves,” said Dain admiringly.
“Only,” said Haldir wistfully, “I’m sorry I didn’t get to eat that fine dinner last night.”
Dori patted his shoulder.
“They saved you a plate, our Diri. Would you like it for breakfast?”

Haldir’s eyes lit up.

“Yes, please, milady!”

Dwalin muttered to Ori, “He looks li’e Killer when yeh offer ‘im a treat.”

“Let’s hope he chews it instead of just gulping it down,” said Ori.

“Aye, he will. It’s no’ a sock.”

Mistress Dazla, no doubt hearing Haldir’s voice, stuck her head around the door jam of the kitchen and raised a brow at Dori, who smiled. Mistress Dazla bobbed away, then entered with a covered dish, and a chilled bowl heaped with coleslaw. She set these down before Haldir and removed the lid. Haldir sniffed eagerly at the steaming pile of ribs before him and thanked her profusely. She chuckled and patted his shoulder. Boromir passed him the bread and butter.

Having cleared their plates, the faunts and Tilda were free to romp with the animals in the meadow after breakfast. Boromir and Lavender went out with them.

Bain and Theodred remained at table with the younger set, indulging in thirds.

Mistress Dazla entered with a wry smile.

“Beg pardon, your majesty, but a Master Kyur has arrived.”

“Ah, the artist,” said Thorin. “Excellent. Please send him in.”

The housekeeper seemed to be rolling words through her head, amused and somewhat at a loss.

“Perhaps, your majesty, it might be a kindly and kingly gesture to meet him in the receiving room. He has several parcels, and it would be a struggle to get them all through the door at once.”

Ori looked at Dwalin and Dwalin shrugged.

“We weren’t that drunk,” said Ori. “Was the picture we bought actually a ten by ten foot painting or something?”

Bilbo polished off his tea, stood and brushed himself off.

“I recall that the one Thorin and I bought was nicely and heavily framed.”

Sigrid said to Fili, “Ours was only about five by five inches.”

Bard whipped around the stare at her. Thranduil turned him forward again.

“Remember, grown-ups, dear.”

Dain said to Sculdis, “Ah, tha’s th’ feller with our pretty pi’ture.”

“Among other things,” said Thorin.

“You, too, nadad?” Dori gave Dain the stink eye. “As if you needed any suggestions.”

Master Kyur looked startled at seeing the large number of dwarrow coming to meet him. Given that he had several largish, awkward parcels with him, perhaps he shouldn’t have been, Ori thought.

The artist bowed to the king and Company and Ori chirped, “Good morning!”

“Good morning, Lord Ori. I hope I’m not interrupting breakfast.”

“I believe we’ve all reached an elegant sufficiency,” said Ori. “Anyone who hasn’t, is still stuffing their faces.”

“I seem to have been visited last night by just about everyone in your party. If this was your doing, I thank you for it.”

“I didn’t actually say anything,” said Ori. “Your art spoke for itself.”

“And rather loudly,” said Theoden, looking askance at all the parcels.

“Beg pardon, m’lord, I don’t think we spoke,” said Kyur.

“We didn’t,” said Theoden distractedly. “While many of the others visited you, I believe King Bard and I were off looking at the oddities at Master Axsin’s. Those contortionists! Eru forbid!”

“And the fellow who stuffs metal spikes up his nose!” Kyur exclaimed.

“He must have a permanent headache,” Theoden agreed. “Er, Theoden, king of Rohan, at your service.”

Kyur’s jaw dropped, but he got hold of himself quickly.

“Kyur, son of Myur, at yours and your families.”

“So, Master Kyur, are these all nudes and such?”

“Yes, your majesty.” Kyur tilted his head at Theoden, obviously taking his measure. “It is a treasured subject among dwarrow, but I understand it may not be to everyone’s tastes.”
Mistress Dazla saved him having to grope for further conversation. "Beg pardon, Theoden King," she said, "but there's a gentleman here, asking for you. I believe he has a chicken coop."

"Ah! I won my rooster! Excellent!" Theoden said, bowing and excusing himself. Dwalin leaned in and said to Ori, "Saved by th' cock."

"Hush, you."

"Oh, I believe that's mine," said Thranduil, picking up a square parcel wrapped in linen. "That is yours, m'lord," Kyur affirmed.

Bard stared at him. "You bought something?"

"While you and Theoden were off being wholesome. Now, don't look at me that way. I'm not about to leave them on the breakfast table where the fawns might see them."

"Them?"

"The prints seemed to be part of a series. Some dam was off on a grand adventure."

Thranduil unwrapped and flipped through them as Bard looked on. "I didn't know you were interested in-. Oh. I suppose beauty is where you find it."

"And you must admit, she is quite beautiful."

"She is," said Bard. "Perhaps we can examine them more thoroughly at home."

"Yes, after we've inflated the sofa," said Thranduil wryly.

"You remember buying the sofa?"

"Yes, and I remember you promising we wouldn't have it in the bedroom."

"I'm nothing if not well-trained," said Bard. "I don't suppose you remember the piggy-back ride?"

"I gave you a piggy-back ride?" Thranduil cried, horrified.

"No, I gave you one, sweetie, you insisted."

"I most certainly did not!"

"I have witnesses," said Bard, "and Ori drew a picture of it for our grandchildren."

Thranduil whipped his head around to fix Ori with his eye.

Ori took out the pocket notebook and waved it merrily. "I'll give you six hundred gold for that picture," said Thranduil.

"I'm not strong enough to avoid being flattened like lembas, but thank you anyway."

Once everything was sorted, Kyur was sent away with a packet of the rolls that had just come from the oven.

"Here we are," said Theoden loudly and Theodred and Eowyn yipped in delight. The rooster crowed as Theoden lifted him out of the basket.

The faunts appeared, intrigued by the sound of a rooster inside. "Why's Mister Theoden got a rooster?" asked Wee Sam.

Romy bounced in, tail wagging, and looked eagerly at Gimli and Legolas. "No," they chorused. The tail slowed slightly then Romy bent in a playful stance. The rooster squalled and flapped lightly to gain Theoden's shoulder. It crowed again.

"What are you going to name him?" Tilda asked.

"Cockrill, after the captain in the Shire story!" Eowyn announced.

She grinned at the shouts of laughter that accompanied this. Bilbo bowed to her. There was
another knock at the door. Aragorn politely answered it, then gave a laugh and threw the door open.

“Lord Elrond!” he hooted, “you have callers.”

Everyone turned as four dwarrow dwarhandled a small cart into the room and yanked off a tarp, revealing a giant bottle of marbles. Everyone chuckled, Argrib arrived with glasses of ale for the tradesmen to refresh themselves and Elrond went to examine the bottle.

“This is most impressive,” he said wonderingly. “But what has it to do with me?”

“Yeh won tha’, m’lord,” said one of the dwarrow, handing him the slip of paper from the night before. “Yeh guessed how many was in there.”

“Elbereth!” Elrond gasped. “How close did I come?”

“Yeh guessed it exactly, m’lord,” said the dwarf. “No ane’s ever done tha’ b’fore!”

“Yes, well, I suppose you have to be drunk to do it,” said Elrond. “The question is, what do I do with them?”

Ori piped up, as he sketched maniacally, “You said something about retiling your bathroom.”

“Oh, excellent idea. Apparently, drunk me is a genius.”

“Lovely,” said Lindir with a sigh. “I’ll find someone I despise to install them.”

Elrond gave him a mischievous look.

“The Lord of Privy Perfection isn’t going to do it himself?”

“I’m still trying to catalog all those meeting minutes,” said Lindir. “And I thought elves couldn’t shut up.”

The bottle was set in a corner of the receiving room, the dwarrow who had brought it, enjoyed their round of ale, and then went off, quite happy to be relieved of their burden.

There was a brief pause while Elrond examined the bottle, looked at his guess, frowned and scratched his head. The faunts gathered around to press their noses to the glass.

The door sounded with another knock. Cockrill crowed and Romy barked.

Theoden pushed in front of Aragorn and pulled the door open. Mistress Dazla giggled and opened the other door and pushed the door stop against it, while Aragorn followed suit on the first door.

“Aha!” Theoden said in obvious pleasure. “Come in, come in! I’m glad you’re here.”

Ori recognized the man from the tent with Smeg II in it. Wee Mac bounced in first and gave a whinny. The result was instant.

“Oh! It’s a tiny pony!” Dori cried.

Wee Mac trotted over immediately and bounded around her like a colt.

“What a darling little lad you are, yesss. Yes, you are!” Dori cooed, delighted, patting Wee Mac and scratching his little mane.

The man looked on, grinning.

“He likes any female who’s going to drop a foal. He thinks they’re all his.”

Balin gave Wee Mac a mock stern look.

“No such luck, laddie.”

Meanwhile, Dori continued to lose her mind.

“Who’s a lovely pony? Yes, you are! Yes, you are! Oh! Just look at your little tail! It’s so flappy!”

Ori said to Bilbo, “Next she’ll be telling it to go outside and play with the doggies.”

The faunts and Tilda made excited noises and hurried over. Wee Mac thoroughly enjoyed their attention. Bain and Theodred came through to see.

“That’s the tiniest horse…” Theo began, staring.

“He’s a miniature horse,” Theoden smiled. “His name is Wee Mac and his owner, Mister Przewalski, has stopped by to put me in touch with the breeder, who specializes in them.”

“Are you going to breed tiny horses, Da?” Theo gasped as Bain continued to goggle at Wee Mac.

“I haven’t decided,” Theoden grinned at his son, “but I think having at least one is my duty as the King of Rohan.”

“Oh, yes!” Eowyn agreed.
Dain regarded the pony with a chuckle, but Chopper turned up his nose. “Now, don’ be li’e tha’, our Chopper,” Dain reproved him. “He’s no’ comin’ home wi’ us, so it’s up t’ yeh t’ be th’ bigger pig abou’ it.”

Chopper sighed and consented to go over and touch noses with Wee Mac. “See,” said Dain, “No’ so bad.”

Mister Przewalski regarded the two animals, who eyed and sniffed each other curiously. “I’m sure they’d get on famous with a little time,” he said.

“I know th’ feelin’, lad,” Dain commiserated.

“Good morning?” said the voice of the gentleman from the tent with all the plants, as he peered in uncertainly at the door.

“Mister Brassica,” cried Bard. “Here you are!”

The man grinned and entered carrying a large tray, on this was the orchid Elrond and Lindir had purchased, the plant with the fish Celeborn had chosen and a small fly trap plant.

Celeborn and Galadriel hurried over to relieve him of the plant with the fish. Lindir, in close pursuit, to get his hands on the orchid. They spent a brief time in conversation about the care of them. Celeborn picked up the fly trap, looked it over, sighed, and promised the merchant he would see it safely put into Glorfindel’s hands.

Mister Przewalski shook hands with Theoden and Theodred, then took leave of Dori, bowing over her hand. Dori flattered him on his gift for raising such a lovely creature at Wee Mac and embraced the tiny horse once more. Ori caught a glance of Thorin putting a purse into Mister Przewalski’s hand and saying something about tolerance. Frodo, Sam and Tilda all hugged Wee Mac and waved as the miniature horse and his daddy went out.

“Someone else is coming,” Sam announced.

Ori went to look out, then waved to Darnub, who was strolling up the path, his hands in his pockets, whistling. Darnub quickened his pace, giving a jaunty wave and came in.

“Hello,” Ori greeted him.

Darnub peered about.

“Udad here?”

“No, you’re safe,” Ori teased.

Darnub looked relieved and embarrassed.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Darnub confided. “Udad’s grand, but he don’t like seein’ me with my hands stuffed in me pockets. Says it makes me look disreputable.”

“Nah, nah, nah,” Nori assured him, patting Darnub on the shoulder. “Makes you look ready t’ pull money outa your pocket an’ spend.”

“Aye, well,” Darnub lifted a brow at Nori. “I’ll be leaving’ yeh t’ tell ‘im tha’.”

“What may we do for you?” Ori asked politely.

“There’s tha’ Darnub, now!” bellowed Sculdis and trotted over.

Darnub bowed and, taking off his back pack, handed out of it a small, square packet of something made of sap and dyed a charming shade of pink. “Here yeh are, our dumplin’,” Sculdis called, waving it above her head.

Dori scooted over and took the pink square wonderingly.

“Thank you! What is it?”

“Jus’ you wai’, our dumplin’,” crowed Dain, “Where’d yeh like a nice comfy chair?”

“Oh my!” Dori said looking about. “I… I suppose in the sitting room.”

“Sittin’ room, it is,” Sculdis declared. “Come along wi’ us, our Darnub.”

Dain and Sculdis bustled poor Darnub off to the sitting room, Bard and Thranduil in pursuit.

A battle-pitched shout of ‘good morning’ from the top of the stair announced that Glorfindel was ready for the day and Margr and Vi on either side of him looked in fine fettle. They bounced down the stairs and greeted everyone.

“Now, pet,” Vi nabbed Ori. “Where’s our Dori then?”
“Through in the sitting room,” Ori said eagerly and was pleased to see them bustle off to the other room. There were shrieks of greeting and delight at the chair. The elves, Glorfindel, and Bard went back up the stairs to put away their purchases, except for Elrond’s bottle which remained in the corner.

“One more comin’ along,” Dwalin said to Thorin.

“Good,” said Thorin. He smiled, putting an arm about Bilbo, who hugged him, grinning.

“That should be the gentleman supplying your ‘going away’ presents for everyone.”

As the gentleman entered, Ori recognized him as the truffle maker.

“Ah, good morning, Master Uberaceae,” Thorin greeted him.

The dwarf smiled and bowed low.

“You majesty, good morning. Professor, your lordship.”

“Were you able to complete my order or have you brought me a partial shipment?” Thorin asked, looking regal yet approachable.

Mister Uberaceae grinned and removed the rectangular basket from his back and opened it to display several uniform gold paper boxes tied with a silk ribbon of Durin blue. Mister Uberaceae opened one to display a tempting arrangement of about two dozen truffles of all varieties.

“Perfect,” Thorin approved. “If you don’t mind, Master Uberaceae, please take them through to Bag End East. Bilbo, ghivashele?”

“Come right this way, Master Uberaceae,” Bilbo said and led the way through.

“Just so you know, professor, they should be kept cool, but in no way should be put in a cold cache or come into contact with ice.”

“Good to know,” said Bilbo. “I’m much obliged.”

After breakfast, the visitors went their own ways for a while, intending to return at lunch. Thorin and Dwalin carried off their parcel to Bag End East.

“I should have known you’d find Kyur,” Ori teased Bilbo.

“Thorin and I went just after you and Dwalin left. The artist mentioned you had been. He asked me if I knew any hobbits who might want to pose for him.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, actually, but they all live in Tuckborough. Bit of a jaunt for a casual drop-in.”

Dori, who had apparently been waiting for them to come back out, sashayed over and said, “Really, pet! Must you indulge in such things?”

“How do you know what we indulged in, Ori’s Dori?” he asked with a grin.

“I can well imagine, given your husband is a dwarf of the world. You’re not putting that up in the sitting room.”

“Dori, you don’t even know what it is! It’s a moot point anyway, it’s going on the wall in our bedroom.”

“Suppose I don’t care for the subject matter?”

“Then, I guess you could stay out of our bedroom, couldn’t you.”

Dori heaved a sigh of the much put-upon.

“Go raise badgers!” she muttered primly, and flounced off.

“At least I don’t have a mirror over my bed!” Ori called after.

“Mouthy badger,” said Bilbo with a grin.

“I’m so ashamed,” said Ori with a happy nod.
Supper, Scampering, and a Surprise.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. The dwarrow have guests, and you know what that means: Even more food than usual! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori heard laughter long before he reached the sitting room. He was ready for some tea. He felt he had made a good deal of progress organizing his notes that afternoon.

Cemnesta and Wandi had arrived, and so had all the once-elves from Zark’s mine.

The only ones who didn’t look happy were Erris - and Haldir, who sat off by himself, seemingly reading a book, but actually looking over at the group from beneath his brows. Whenever Wandi looked his way, Haldir seemed very much interested in his book.

The book was a livestock manual in khuzdul entitled ‘Tips on Breeding’.

Ori doubted Haldir would be amused by the irony, even if he could read khuzdul, which Ori was sure he could not, as the book was upside down.

Wandi turned to say something to Cemnesta, and Haldir’s gaze drifted over the top of his book again.

Ori found this fascinating, especially given Haldir’s history with Wandi’s honored sire.

The conversation, in sindarin, tended toward the catching up of the once-elves on the doings of the past age, and attempting to tease Erris out of her gloom.

“But, we’re going to die, don’t you understand?” Erris pleaded. “We’ve lost our immortality.”

Dree snorted and toss back the contents of his cup. “We just spent the past few thousand years at the bottom of a bog. We weren’t getting much out of it anyway.”

Ori heard Dori puttering about in the kitchen and went through. The counters were piled high with food, including a huge platter of xocolātl chunk cookies on the surface behind her.

“Dori?”

“Yes, pet?” said Dori, as she and Binni de-stemmed what looked like about a hundred cave mushrooms.

“The once-elves and Haldir, Cemnesta, and Wandi are out in the sitting room, unsupervised.”

“Yes, pet.”

“And Haldir is trying very hard to pretend he isn’t looking at Mister Wandi.”

Dori didn’t look up, but she grinned. “Yes, pet.”

“I should have known it wouldn’t escape your notice.”

“Nothing ever does, pet. Nori, if you touch even one cookie, I’ll cut your fingers off.”

The insubstantial hand jutting up through the counter froze. Nori cursed and the hand withdrew.

“So, you have a plan?” Ori asked.

“Naturally. It may be a little difficult to maneuver, as we’re having a barbecue on the patio, but I will arrange for them to sit somewhere close together.”

“And then you won’t let them escape, will you.”

Binni cackled and Dori looked offended.

“Of course they won’t escape, pet. I haven’t lost my touch!”

“I have every faith in you,” said Ori.
He went through to the patio. Honda whinnied excitedly at him and Ori met the pony part way for mane scratches and general silliness. From where he stood, Ori could see the entire length of the patio, where the family and many of the guests had already gathered for lunch, indulging in fruit salad and cold meat sandwiches and all good things.

Dwalin and Balin were trying to light the cookfire, so it would be ready to roast that evening’s dinner, but mostly they squabbled about the proper way to do it. A grill sat to the side, waiting to be put over a wide bed of short flames.

“Yer worse than an old woman,” Dwalin groused as Balin fiddled with a small starter fire.

“Th’ point is t’ cook th’ food, no’ char it t’ bricks, yeh maniac,” said Balin. “Slow an’ low.”

“Why d’yeh talk abou’ yersel’ tha’ way?” Dwalin cracked.

“Funny dwarf. Yer way, yeh’ll char th’ food an’ lose yer eyebrows again!”

“An’ yer way, we’ll be eatin’ some time in th’ next age. Look.”

Dwalin picked up a bucket of fuel and the word ‘Don’t!’ was not even out of Ori’s mouth before the warrior doused the fire and it exploded into a fireball bigger than Fanny.

Theoden stepped out onto the patio and admonished him.

“That will never do for a beacon. It needs to be set up higher on the mountain and be much larger.”

“We ain’t signalin’ Gondor,” said Dwalin. “We’re cookin’ dinner.”

“With a fire that size? Are you insane?”

Balin looked smug and Dwalin disgusted.

“Fine!” Dwalin grumbled. “Yeh two ‘experts’ ‘r in charge a’ makin’ th’ cookfire. We’ll eat in another decade ‘r so. Mahal, Yavanna, an’ Durin, wha’ kin yeh do?”

He stalked off toward the other side of the patio, where Bilbo, Thorin, and Fanny supervised the tapped keg and a vat of fruit soda water. At their feet, the faunts, Tilda and some young easterling children were cut throat and out for marble-playing mayhem. A very elderly easterling man sat on one of the receiving room chairs, next to Bilbo, bolt upright and looking around himself quite excitedly, as if he had no idea how he’d come to this pretty pass.

Fanny kept patting first his left shoulder, then his right, with her trunk, as if teasing him, and he laughed delightedly every time.

The old man turned and said something to Bilbo, who smiled encouragingly.

In the back of his mind, Ori heard Durin say, "He thinks he's fallen int' a wakin' dream, li'e his folk always tell abou'. Tha's some importan' goin's on if yer easterlin'."

"He looks thrilled," Ori murmured.

"Tha's some importan' goin's on if yer easterlin'."

"He doesn’t seem afraid at all. Is he unhinged?"

"Nah, he believes our Bilbo’s there t’ protect him.”

“Does Bilbo know that?”

Durin chuckled.

“No.”

“Wouldn’t Yavanna tell him?”

“No’ necessarily. His job’s diff’ren’ from yers.”

“Am I allowed to tell Bilbo? Will a tree fall on me or something?”

“Nah. Well, mebbe, bu’ Da’d bring yeh back.”

“What a relief,” Ori sassed, walking across the patio.

“Ah, Ori,” said Bilbo, “please come and let me introduce you to this gentleman.”

Bilbo stood and put his hand on Ori’s forearm.

“Rigel-chuh, this is Ori of Fundin. Called ‘Ori’. Ori, this is Rigel-chuh, that is, the Honored Rigel.”

Ori smiled in what he hoped was a warm manner and bowed.

“Pleased to meet you, Rigel-chuh.”

The old man’s mouth bent into a gape-toothed smile and he nodded with great civility, then chuckled. He reached out a gnarled hand as if to indicate Ori’s face, then pulled it back toward his
own. He was lighter-skinned than the other easterlings Ori had seen, and his skin was dotted with freckles.

“Oh! We match!” said Ori.

Rigel wore many silver rings attached to his nostrils and septum and together they looked almost like a mustache. Ori thought it quite fetching.

“Westron?” Ori tried, raising an inquiring brow. Rigel-chuh just smiled and looked at Bilbo.

“No,” Bilbo nodded to Rigel-chuh. “He doesn’t speak it, but he does understand introductions and the like.”

The smallest child toddled up to the old easterling, pulling on the wrap he wore, which hung from his waist to his ankles like a long kilt. He had very little body hair, but an impressive collection of scars.

He turned to speak to the child, who pointed to the oliphaunt.

Rigel lifted the girl on his lap with some effort, and Fanny snaked her trunk around the child’s waist, setting her off in giggles.

“Bilbo,” said Ori, “Durin says this gentleman expects you to protect him.”

“I suspected as much,” said Bilbo. “Luckily, I’m a spirit with many minions to do my bidding.”

“I’d like to go and sit with my husband. Is that going to cause trouble?”

“No. He knows Thorin and I are together.”

“And he isn’t upset?”

“I think he simply believes the world he’s arrived in is upside down, so it’s to be expected.”

Ori sat close to Dwalin, who put an arm around him and kissed him.

“How ‘r yeh keepin’, love? Been a busy few days.”

“Actually, it’s not any busier than I expected,” said Ori, grinning.

He took out his sketchbook and graphite wand and idly drew images of the badgers at play, of Fanny and the tot, of Rigel sitting close to Bilbo, smiling like the sun.

Gimli and Legolas burst out of the breakfast parlor doors, with Romy bounding out after them.

“Speaking of the unexpected,” said Thorin.

The elf and the dwarf threw a ball back and forth over Romy’s head and he leapt mightily, trying to catch it. Then Legolas purposely threw the ball far over Gimli’s head and Romy went after it, whipping excited slobber everywhere.

The young ones all watched this, the easterling children chattering. They seemed to be saying the word ‘tiavli’ over and over.

Ori raised a brow at Bilbo.

“It means ‘elf’,” Bilbo explained. “Well, actually it means ‘demon’, but apparently demons aren’t all they’re cracked up to be.”

Butter rolled over on Rigel’s feet and Sugar rested a chin on his knee like a big numpty, looking for ear scratches. Rigel happily patted both, beaming down on them and talking gently as though to children.

Balin and Theoden were busy piling coals on the fire which caught and glazed beneath. Even with the mountain breezes, it was in no danger of going out.

Dwalin snorted and Balin sent him a dirty look, making Theoden snicker.

“Do you and Balin always go on at each other about fires?” Ori teased, looking up. Dwalin grinned down at him.

“Aye, love, every chance we ge’. Which is why I always have th’ propellent ready before we even ge’ star’ed.”

Ori giggled and snuggled closer.

“It’ll take a bit t’ ge’ goin’ so we’ll be eaten’ dinner in a couple a’ hours or so,” Dwalin told him, satisfied. Ori smiled, tucked himself a little more firmly into Dwalins side and went back to sketching.

After some time, Binni came out on the patio and nodded to Lavender, who began gathering the badgers.
“Come on,” Frodo called to the others.
“What are you going, Frodo?” Ori asked, as the little herd bounded onto the patio.
“To take a nap!”

Not at all what Ori expected.
Wee Sam cried, “Mister Bilbo, an’ Mister Boromir, an’ Lavender are taking us to the fun fair this evening, Mister Ori!”

“Ah. I see,” said Ori. “Very wise of you to shore up all your energy.”
Thorin looked up at Boromir with a grin.
“The guards are at your disposal, but, by all means, call for the city patrol if you need rescuing.”

“With Professor Baggins there? I have no fear,” said Boromir. “But, just in case, we’ve conscripted two of our finest to assist us.”

Boromir grinned at Bain and Theodred.
The youths looked suitably horrified.
Boromir laughed.

“Not to worry, boys,” he said. “I just need you to meet me by the eighth bell at the Fun House to mop up and carry the whole crew back home.”

“We can do that,” said Bain.
Theodred nodded furiously.
Theoden approached his son with a raised brow.
“You will stay within the fair itself, won’t you, Theo?”
The prince tried to bury a look of exasperation. He really made a valiant effort.
“Yes, Da.”
“Excellent.”
“You’re going, too, Bilbo?” Ori asked.
“Yes, the toddler will stay here with Rigel-chuh, but Deneb said her other little ones could go, provided I was there.”

“You’re taking the easterling children to the Fun House?”
“The oldest one. I think the younger ones will spend a great deal of time in the Castle Bounce. Those are not nightmares for which I want to be held accountable.”
“I suppose Deneb’s oldest daughter is working?”
“Unfortunately, yes, but we’ll be sure to bring her home a treat.”
“Better bring a cart for your ill-gotten gains,” said Ori mischievously.
Boromir laughed and said, “We have Master Dubb’s. Hopefully he won’t mind we’re borrowing it. Are you coming along, Addled-One?”

Eowyn snorted and linked arms with Arwen and Sigrid, Tauriel grinning at Sigrid’s other side.
“We’re having a bit of a hen party. You go and see how married life suits you.”

He made a face at her and she returned it, but his face lapsed into glee at the faunts flooding inside, heading for Bag End East.

The meat was done and the other things all ready and piled on the table inside the breakfast parlor when the badgers bounded in, fresh from their naps, and dressed in miniature jumpsuits of different bright colors.

“Where did those come from?” Ori asked.

Bilbo grinned.
“I commissioned them from Dipfa. They’re loose-fitting, so they would be sure to fit, and even the easterling children will get a little wear out of them.”
Tilda’s was turquoise, with special silver piping, “‘Cos I’m the oldest,” she explained.
Eowyn was not so sure.
“How will they relieve themselves without having to get undressed?”

“See the front leg seams?” said Bilbo.
“Yes, I thought that was rather odd.”
“They unfasten that way.”
“Oh! Of course, they wouldn’t unfasten behind because the faunts’ll probably be scooting about on their bums.”

“And they’re easier for the faunts themselves to reach. Dipfa was hoping they could give them a go and Lavender could let her know if the design needs improvement.”

Lavender gave what Ori would only describe as an efficient nod, as if acknowledging her marching orders, and turned her attention to dishing up food for the chattering little ones.

Wandi and Cemnesta filled their plates and Cemnesta sat near his father and Wandi went and sat with Haldir to share one of the deck chairs. Ori though Wandi looked as though he had decided his prey was suitably trapped. Haldir looked as though he had just received a Yule present.

Ori leaned his back against the house wall. He was very content to sit and eat and watch with his Dwalin beside him.

Erris had cheered up a good deal since talking with her once-kind, and was now busily shoveling food in her mouth.

Ori was amused that the once-elves had very quickly adjusted to eating without getting most of their food stuck in their beards.

Dain and Sculdis had partially deflated Dori’s chair, brought it out and re-inflated it. Dori and Balin had somehow managed to shove themselves into it and were feeding each other from one plate. Ori tried not to laugh when he wondered how they would get out of it.

Most people had chosen to sit on the grass before the patio, Fanny was sneaking fruit and tomatoes every now and then, which made all the badgers giggle.

There was mutton, chicken, and mushrooms from the grill, bowls of different salads, cheeses and breads of all kinds. Ori enjoyed a mouthful of cold cooked wheat with peas, berries, bits of bacon, and herbs. He had been told it was a salad, but it wasn’t like any he had seen before. Dwalin gnawed what was left of chicken leg as most of the meat had ended up in Killer’s belly. Killer snored on Dwalin’s boot.

Ori noticed that all the wargs were in a similar state.

Butter and Sugar snored at Bilbo and Thorin’s feet. Romy was on his side, flat on the grass asleep. Legolas and Gimli were talking and using the warg as a pillow. The badgers stood in a group before Lavender, who was brushing crumbs off them and wiping the faces that needed wiping. Boromir herded the boys off to the bathroom in Fundin House, Everyone could hear him being encouraging.

“Great Eru! No, put your jumpsuit back on! What’s Mister Rigel going to say to me if you run off to the Fun Fair in your skivvies! There we are. Well done, lad!”

Aragorn and Arwen looked at each other and giggled.

Lavender checked over the girls and took them in after Boromir returned.

Ori heard Lavender say, “I don’t care if you don’t have to go, you’re going to try.”

Soon all the little ones were assembled in the receiving room and Lavender and Boromir herded the younglings out the door, down the steps and up into the largest of the Durin carriages. A few of the adults had come to see the party off.

Thorin gave Bilbo a hand into the carriage.

Bard called up to Bain and Tilda, “Have fun. Behave yourselves.”

The siblings looked at each other, then Bard, and chorused, “Yes, Da!”

“Cheeky brats,” Bard muttered.

Rigel limped out into the courtyard, leaning on his stick, to admonish the young easterlings. To Ori it sounded like:

“Have fun! Behave yourselves!”

And an answering chorus of ‘Yes, Da!” punctuated by mad giggling.

Rigel caught Bard’s eye as he turned back toward the house. They sighed in tandem and shook their heads as they went in.

It started out as a quieter evening than Ori expected.

Master Kir and Master Minta arrived, and after Rigel-chuh adjusted to the idea of a giant ball of
hair that spoke, the two settled down to a game of chess. The game wasn’t played exactly the same by easterlings and dwarrow, and they muttered at each other on occasion, but then simply adjusted and went on.

Ori thought maybe it was better that they didn’t understand each other. They seemed to get on quite well that way.

The easterlings didn’t drink ale or wine, but they appreciated good tea, and iced tea seemed to be a novelty. Kir drank ale and between them, they decimated the remainder of the xocolātl cookies.

The dams and women had gone off to the hot springs, leaving most of the males to play cards, or chat. Theoden quickly showed that he was a superior card player, and unlike his niece, he didn’t have to cheat. Oin and Gloin were livid they were barely keeping up with a man, and, since they were playing for xocolatl-covered coffee beans, there was quite a bit at stake. Nori walked around the table looking at everyone’s cards and snorting rudely. It was all he could do as he had been told he was not allowed to play.

Ori had thought to disappear for a while this evening, to try to get some work done, as he had to return to the library in a few days, but that didn’t feel polite, with all their friends visiting.

He decided he should simply give up on splendid isolation and brought his notes out to his desk in the sitting room.

Before settling he peeked out through the breakfast parlor. The elves and Gimli remained out on the patio, enjoying the night and idly roasting more mushrooms over the coals of the cookfire. At Dori’s suggestion, Wandi tried out new styles for Haldir’s hair while Mellon lay on his back close by, snoring, and Romy watched the dog of Dale in fascination.

Ori returned to the sitting room, here he found himself quite productive, writing away as Dwalin played the viol, accompanied by Thorin on his harp.

Dori herself sat on her new chair in the sitting room, near the sofa, having changed into a deep maroon robe of watered silk to set herself like a jewel. Ori was sorry he missed Dori and Balin escaping the chair while it was on the patio.

Fili and Kili played with the toddler, fed her, changed her and attempted to rock her to sleep in the easterling carrier/cradle contraption, but she fought sleep at every turn.

Thorin watched them with undisguised glee.

“Good practice,” he assured them, before snorting into his ale.

Dori sighed at their fumblings and finally gave in to charity.

“Lads, bring her here.”

Kili lifted the tot as if she were something slightly poisonous that might strike at any time and deposited her gently in Dori’s arms. Dori rocked the child and sang to her, and the toddler still didn’t sleep, but at least she was quieted.

“Dori, how did you do that?” Kili asked.


She stood with the tot in her arms and went through to the kitchen herself, having sent the servants off earlier.

Eight bell sounded, and Ori thought he had a fairly good draft outline for narrative of the quest, and had begun a list of people involved who would need to be interviewed for their perspectives. He started on a catalogue of artifacts which would need presenting and which then must be drawn in detail for the accompanying document. Dain had already promised to provide diagrams for his mithril bridge, as well as speculative drawings of the mechanisms which raised the box from the tomb and several of the box’s contents.

Given Ori’s official duties, his job at the library and his due to his family, if all went well, he figured he would be finished in about twelve years.

Well, mahumb all the way to Mordor and back. He could sleep when he was turned back to stone.

He felt a familiar, fuzzy buzzing in this brain that told him Mahal was there.

“Keep up tha’ pace, an’ it’ll be sooner rather than later, laddie.”

“I know,” Ori muttered, hunched over his work, hoping no one else overheard. “But what can I
do? You made me sturdy.”
“Aye, bu’ yer no’ the footin’ of a bridge, either.”
“What would You have me do?”
“Go tell Brur yeh need some time off.”
Ori sputtered.
“Seriously?”
“Aye. I need yeh t’ make yer presentation. Wish I could’ve done th’ same f’r poor Teyarn.”
“Was Teyarn Your scribe?”
“Aye, bu’ she was th’ las’ f’r a long time.”
“I’ll think about it.”
“See tha’ yeh do. I swear, someday yeh’ll worry me t’ anemia.”
Ori swallowed an obvious reply.
“I hear and obey.”
“I’m outa here. I kin hear a keg callin’ me.”
Ori wrote down a few more notations, then put his pen down, stretched and turned.
And froze.

The room had taken on a reddish cast. Everyone else in the room had frozen in place, though Ori could still hear them talking and moving around, the elves carousing on the patio. It was like listening from under water. His eye was drawn to the hearth, where a valar he did not recognize walked out of the fire and stood, looking around in obvious confusion.

At least, Ori assumed it was a valar. It was shaped like an easterling man, but men did not have beards of fire or robes of ever-shifting lava. The valar regarded him with raised brow, looking over him, and the room, and everyone in it, before returning to Ori, who had no clue what he was supposed to do.

Screaming didn’t seem all that helpful.
Instead he took a very deep breath, and bowed low as he would to Mahal.

The being in the corner inclined its head, and Ori hoped that would be the end of it, when Nori, suddenly standing next to him, said, “Who the fuck’s that?”
“You can see him?” Ori asked through the side of his mouth.
“O’ course I can see ‘im. He’s a little hard to miss, ain’t he. I’m amazed the rug ain’t on fire. Mahal’s balls, I’ll be amazed if our Dori don’t drag ‘im out by the ear.”
“Nori,” Ori warned. “He can hear us.”
“Bloody Dori, spillin’ over,” Nori cried in disgust.
“Nori!” Ori snapped, then got ahold of himself and continued more quietly, though just as urgently, “do me a favor and bow to him and shut up.”
“Will do.”

Nori gave a credible bow.

Instead of acknowledging it, the being raised a mighty finger and, looking puzzled, traced the contours of Nori’s hair in the air.

Ori said into the ether, “Durin, I don’t suppose you’d care to weigh in?”
“No’ a guid idear, our Ori.”
“How about Mahal?”
“Tha’ would be worse.”
“Lovely.”

Dori, babe in arms, chose that moment to return. She caught herself up when she saw the valar, and pulled back her shoulders, black affronted.

“Whoever you are, you were not invited! Get out of my house this instant!”
The valar reared back, obviously surprised.
“Told you,” said Nori.
“Go on,” said Dori. “Out!”

She stepped forward, and the valar actually took a step back, looking around in disbelief.

He raised a hand filled with fire as if to hurl it.
“No!” Ori cried. “Dori!”

“Don’t. You. Dare,” Dori growled at the valar. “You put that away, or I’ll shove that fireplace poker right up your jacksies.”

Ori grabbed up his sketchbook and brandished the open book at the valar, and not-so-coincidentally stepped between him and Dori.

The being looked, cocked its head, looked some more, then, finally lowered its arm and vanished. The room returned to its normal colors and volume.

The brothers, apparently, had been the only ones to notice anything amiss.

Thorin looked up at Ori, expression growing concerned.

“Ori? Are you alright?”

In a very small voice Ori replied, “Just a moment.”

Ori turned and marched to the privacy of the bedroom and closed the door.

He dropped his sketchbook on the table, still open to the drawing of Rigel and Bilbo sitting close together on the patio, with the children at their feet.

“Durin,” said Ori, “you have some explaining to do.”

Durin appeared sitting on the bed. Nori-pori, who had been napping, immediately jumped up onto his massive thigh and curled up, purring.

“Er… well, tha’ was a god,” said Durin.

“What’s a god?”

“Sort’ve a flimsier version of a valar. Tha’s wha’ folk have outside a’ Arda.”

“So, a version of the valar who created everything else in the world?”

“No’ exactly. They tend t’ come an’ go. Their power relies on how many folk worship ‘em an’ where.”

“Who created them? Eru?”

“Nah, folk make ‘em up as they need, then se’ ‘em aside when they don’. Since ol’ Morgie went an’ branched ou’ to th’ East, their gods haven’ been abou’, bu’ Sauron’s gone now, so they’re back.”

“And that was one of them?”

“Aye, tha’ were th’ easterlin’ sun god. He an’ Da’ve never got on. There ain’t room enow’ in Erebor f’r th’ two of ‘em an’ their egos.”

The hearth suddenly burst forth in fire and the ground rumbled.

“Aw, cu’ it ou’, Da’, yeh’ve said so yersel’.”

The rumbling stopped and the fire vanished.

“And, are there more of these things around?”

Durin looked apologetic.

“Sorry, tha’se th’ problem wi’ openin’ yersel’ up t’ th’ world. Sometimes yeh ge’ uninvited guests.”

“Could he have really hurt Dori?”

“If he could’ve, I imagine he would’ve. I thin’ he jus’ felt cornered.”

“Someone threatening to shove a poker up your bum’ll do that. How did he even get here?”

“Da’ says tha’ Rigel feller’s go’ more t’ ‘im than even he knows.”

“He conjured up that god? How?”

“He prob’ly muttered ‘oh god’ ‘r some such.”

“I suppose we should be glad he didn’t mutter ‘holy shit’,” said Ori savagely. “Durin, I can’t always be around to wave pictures of hobbits at every god who might show up in Arda.”

Durin listened for a moment, then said, “No worries. Th’ hobbits bein’ here’ll keep folk protected. Tha’ was why yeh shoved tha’ pi’ture under tha’ god’s nose, righ’?”

“Yes, I’m just grateful I’m not a sculptor.”

Dwalin entered the room, nodded at Durin, and said, “Love, yeh alrigh? Nuisance was jus’ tellin’ us an’ interestin’ story.”

“It’s all true, except for the part where he scared the being away by flashing his dick.”

Durin laughed and Dwalin looked impressed.

“How’d yeh know… aye righ’, ‘course he would’.”
Ori turned and hugged him. With his face buried in Dwalin’s tunic he said, “Durin, go away, I want to snuggle with my husband for a while.”

“Yeh may wan’ t’ hold off on tha’, lad.”

Ori turned and all but exploded.

“No’ another one!”

“No’ another god, bu’ somethin’ possibly worse.”

Durin vanished. Nori-pori yowled in outrage at suddenly finding himself back on the mattress.

Ori and Dwalin exchanged horrified looks and they were out in the sitting room within moments, just as Tharkûn appeared.

Thorin greeted the wizard off handedly and Ori watched as Tharkûn suddenly fixated on Rigel, who was still staring down at the chess board.

Tharkûn approach Rigel slowly and smiled as Rigel looked up at him. Rigel turned his attention back to the game then frowned and shook his head.

“Lad?” Kir asked.

Rigel got to his feet and clasped his head in his hands.

Thorin exchanged glances with Oin and both rose.

Rigel stared at Tharkûn for a long moment then said slowly, “Olórin?”

Tharkûn beamed.

“Pallando, my old friend, how are you?”
Maiar, Memories, and Midnight.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. The coach and four hasn’t turned into a pumpkin, but that’s about the only thing our brave hero is sure of tonight! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori gulped, his mind racing. He knew that name, but only by vague mentions in old stories and the occasional note in history books.

Glorfindel sat up and looked at Rigel, who seemed to be trying to clear his head.

“Yeh know him, love?” Margr asked.

“Only in passing,” Glorfindel rose and crossed the room. “Mithrandir, is this truly one of your council members?”

Tharkûn smiled and laid a gentle hand on Rigel’s shoulder.

“Glorfindel, please call Cemnesta in. I require his assistance.”

Glorfindel shrugged to the sisters and went out.

Ori went over to Rigel and looked at the old man. Rigel was still blinking and frowning, but his gaze rested on Ori.

“Oh-chuh,” he said slowly.

“I’m here, Rigel-chuh.”

Oin walked around Rigel, inspecting, then proceeded to count his pulse. Cemnesta came through quickly, took one look at Rigel, then put an arm about the man’s shoulders, sat him down again, and laid a smooth white hand gently on Rigel’s face. Rigel stilled under the elf’s touch. Glorfindel stood by, politely interested.

Ori could see the blue energy moving beneath Cemnesta’s hands and rippling into Rigel. Oin took out a magnifier and peered into Rigel’s ear.

Ori felt Dwalin’s hands on his own shoulders and relaxed. He watched as Rigel slowly straightened his back and become less frail-looking.

Galadriel, Celeborn, and Elrond entered and stood looking. Then Galadriel came and laid her hands on Rigel’s head. Ori felt the powerful swirl as her energies joined with Cemnesta’s. Elrond followed suit.

After a moment they drew away. Oin grunted approval and folded his arms.

“What’d’ye see?” Gloin asked, coming alongside his brother.
“Nothing,” said Oin. “I was hopin’ I’d at least get a look at his brain.”

Rigel blinked as though waking from a long nap and looked about him. He fixed on Tharkûn.

“Olórin, my old friend!” Rigel laughed, suddenly speaking perfect westron. “How glad I am to see you. What a great time it has been…” Rigel looked about, taking in the sitting room now full of dwarrow, elves and men.

“Where are we?”

“Rómestámo,” said Galadriel. “Is it truly you?”

Rigel turned to look at her. He smiled, stood, and bowed.

“Why, if it isn’t Fínaefin’s little lass! How you’ve grown, my dear.”

Galadriel laughed and pressed his hands.

“It has been so long, I did not recognize you.”

“Well,” began Rigel, then looked down at himself. “What in all Arda am I wearing?”

Dori came over, carrying a sleepy toddler, who immediately held out her arms for Rigel. Rigel took her automatically and began petting her and cooing in the easterling tongue. She giggled, then cuddled to sleep at his shoulder. Rigel looked up, worried.

“Olórin, we must have help, the easterlings are strong, but-”

“The last battle has been won and the world remade,” Tharkûn laughed.

Rigel looked closely at him.

“Olórin, why are you in white? That is for Curumo to wear,”

“He has gone back to Valinor,” Galadriel said, quietly, “with Morgoth and all his minions. The black forts and towers have all been thrown down.”

“That is wonderful news.” Rigel chuckled. “What a pity I didn’t get to see it. Who engineered their fall?”

Elrond chuckled and Galadriel smiled at Ori.

“This lovely, talented, and very brave young dwarf.”

Rigel looked down at Ori, who stammered and blushed.

“I’m just a scribe! I’m-”

“Th’ Scribe a’ Mahal,” Dwalin finished.

“That’s right,” Dori chimed in. “My dearest badger is the hero of the day.”

“Oh!” said Rigel then to Ori’s horror, bowed low to him. “We are all in your debt, gentle dwarf.”

“I couldn’t have done it without help,” Ori babbled.

“Got everyfin’ goin’ our Ori did,” Nori butted in.
“Shut up Nori,” Ori managed. “We had a quest, everyone helped. Roäc threw the egg into Mount Doom.”

“A noble quest is a wonderful thing,” Rigel beamed at him. “Who is Roäc? Where did you quest to?”

“Khazad-dûm,” Ori managed.

“Ah, “ said Rigel. “Yes, this room is of dwarf design. Are we in Durin’s keep?”

“No,” Dwalin said, loud enough to make everyone turn to him. “Yeh, me lad, ’re in th’ royal household a’ Thorin II, High King a’ all dwarrow, in his seat a’ Erebor.”

Thorin had come to Ori’s side. He was still dressed as he had been, but someone, Ori suspected Nori, had fetched him his crown. Everyone drew away from Rigel and Thorin came forward.

“King Thorin,” said Tharkûn gravely, but with a merry twinkle in his eye. “May I present to you my colleague and dear friend, Pallando, also known as Rómestámo, the East helper? He is one of the Blue Wizards.”

Pallando bowed formally. Thorin smiled benignly and offered his arm.

“You are welcome among us, Pallando. Please be seated and make yourself comfortable. We would hear your story.”

“Thank you,” Pallando bowed again.

“An’ I’m Roäc,” announced Roäc, fluttering to Thorin’s shoulder and looking majestic, too.

“Your majesty,” Pallando allowed Roäc a bow as well, which was acknowledged with a ravenishly pleased look.

Roäc tweaked Thorin’s ear.

“See, he figured out I was important right away!”

“Honored Bearer,” Thorin said, turning, and handily ignoring the raven.

“Wait’l I tell Blu!” Roäc cackled as he flapped away, checked Scudis’ hood, found it empty, then winged out.

“Yes, dear Pallando,” Dori cooed, sweeping forward. She took the Blue Wizard’s arm, drawing him to one of the armchairs. “You sit and be cozy. Would you like some tea?”

Pallando stared, then gasped.

“Honored Bearer? Why, I only hear vague tales such beings exist. This is a great honor!”

Pallando saluted Dori’s hand, making her giggle.

“Oh fiddle-faddle! You sit right down and I shall make you a nice glass of iced raspberry tea. Sweet or plain?”

“Er…sweet, if you please,” Pallando managed.

Dori bustled off and Pallando sat down carefully as the child still snoozed on him.
The other elves came in from the patio, Romy trotting beside Gimli and Legolas. Romy trotted over and sniffed the child, licked her bare foot, then went and sat on the hearth rug with Chopper, while Cemnesta quickly explained to the others what had transpired.

Thorin went to the chair opposite Pallando and everyone seated themselves where they could. Dori returned with the promised tea in a sweating glass, garnished with a slice of lemon and some mint leaves. Butter and Sugar wandered in and flopped beside Thorin.

“Well,” Pallando said, looking about at them all. “This is a merry meeting. Even the wolves that the dark lord corrupted are back to their old selves. This is wonderful. Are you all living together in this mountain?”

This made everyone laugh.

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Thorin smiled and waved this off.

“Not quite,” said Tharkûn. “But I imagine our dear King Thorin may feel that way sometimes.”

Thorin smiled and waved this off.

“Our home is always open to those who come in friendship. Please, tell us how you came to be among us, Blue Wizard?”

“Certainly, your majesty,” Pallando enthused.

Ori thought he was a bit like Tharkûn in liking to tell a good tale.

Pallando looked around noticed the occupants on the hearth rug and cried,

“What an enormous pig!”

“He’s a battle boar,” Dain explained. “Very clever our Chopper is.”

Chopper lifted his head to look at Dain, winked, then oinked at the wizard before going back to sleep. Dain and Sculdis beamed and Pallando looked impressed then turned his attention back to matters at hand.

“But, first, may I asked the date?”

Ori, who had seated himself on the footstool next to Thorin, looked up from his graphite wand and notebook and told him.

“By the Great S— Hmmm, thats not right. Why would I invoke an sun god? How strange. Well, it has been a very long time and I vaguely remember being just an old man among the easterlings whom I thought of as my people. As to myself, I was captured and tormented by the Dark Lord. It was terrible. He sought to corrupt my mind and make me his servant.”

Pallando shuddered and Cemnesta was once more near him, resting his hands on the blue wizard’s shoulders.

“Aaahhh, thank you,” Pallando murmured. “Yes… he kept trying. I fought with all my might. I was left in the southern desert to die….”

Then Pallando smiled. “I was found by a group of the easterlings. I remember now. The last spell flung at me when I fell. It was to destroy my memories of who I was. I don’t think it worked as he intended. I don’t think it destroyed them, merely buried them very deep. I didn’t recall anything until just now. I have wandered with the cult of Morgoth until…until… my dear Ara and I
set out for friendly lands.”

Pallando looked at the child in his arms then all about.

“Here is little Dalim, but my Ara and Deneb, the others, we numbered fifteen! We-

“Are all safely here in our mountain,” Thorin interposed. “Currently Ara and Deneb have a bakery. You all arrived about two weeks ago.”

“Erebor,” Pallando said thoughtfully then his eyes flew wide. “We walked from our lands to Erebor? Erebor is the great lonely mountain beyond the Greenwood of King Oropher!”

Thranduil said, “My honored sire was taken away to Mandos long ago.”

“Ah! King Thranduil! I salute you!”

“Thank you, but I’ve given up my throne and my immortality to marry my husband,” said Thranduil. He smiled at Bard. “This is King Bard of Dale. I am now addressed as King-Father.”

“Oh. Well met, King Bard. Er, King-Father Thranduil, did you ever marry a… Do you have…” Pallando didn’t seem to know how to phrase the question delicately.

“Yes,” Cemnesta said gently, but Ori could hear the laugh in his voice. “I’m Cemnesta Thranduilion, at your service.”

“A pleasure, your majesty. Wait!” Pallando cried. “Where is my Alatar?”

“That we do not yet know,” said Tharkûn solemnly. “But fear not, my friend, we shall find Alatar.”

“What do you remember of the last time you saw Alatar?” Thorin asked politely.

Ori froze, then babbled.

“Oh, Mahal’s blessed balls! Durin, not another quest! I just got back!”

“Calm yersel’, lad, Alatar ain’t far off.”

Ori realized everyone in the room was staring at him, and he could feel his cheeks burning.

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly. “Just pitching a fit at the first king of dwarrow.”

Pallando started to open his mouth but Dori bustled over to Ori.

“No more quests for you, pet! Stay right there and I’ll get you some nice cookies and mi-. Oh, bugger! Go pour yourself some ale.”

Everyone chuckled at that as Dori daintily curled herself back in the pink chair slightly behind Thorin.

“Aiwendil?” Pallando asked. “Tharkûn, is he-?”

“He tends his animals and plants in the forests east of Imladris,” Tharkûn informed him. “Thus we must only account for Alatar.”

“An’ who’s Aiwendil?” Balin asked.
Tharkûn chuckled.

“You know him as Radagast the Brown.”

“Radagast is fun,” Ori put in, scribbling down information as fast as he could.

“Does he still have the rabbits?” Pallando asked with a wince.


“Oh dear,” said Pallando with a sigh. “Perhaps there was something to Curumo complaining that he ate too many mushrooms.”

Mistress Dazla came through.

“The revelers have returned,” she announced cheerily.

“Revelers?” Pallando asked.

“Some friends of ours and Professor Baggins took the young easterling children to a Fun Fair in the mountain,” Thorin said, rising.

“Baggins?” Pallando muttered.

Thorin’s eyes twinkled as he turned to follow Mistress Dazla.

“You might have met his mother. Her name was Belladonna Took.”

Pallando stared.

Ori pattered after Thorin. He was torn between following, or staying and taking notes, but his first duty was to note down anything the King said. He knew Balin would probably keep accounts of everything the wizards spoke of.

The revelers drew up in the courtyard of Fundin house in the Durin carriage. The badgers were covered in every substance known to carnivals and floppily unconscious. Deneb and Ara and Deneb’s eldest daughter, Eridani, rode on the ponies drawing the carriage.

Bilbo handed Frodo down to Thorin, waiting until the king had a firm grip before warning merrily, “Be careful. He’s sticky.”

“Yes,” said Thorin. “I suppose it’s a lot harder to drop him this way.”

Sam didn’t even stir as Boromir carried him in. Sam looked like he had a little beard, but it was mostly blue spun sugar.

Bain and Theodred were awake, but barely, grinning, with stains on their tunics and candy in their hair.


She rolled over and said, “Carry me.”

“You’re getting kind’ve big for that.”
“Then ‘m sleepin’ here.”

Bard stepped forward and scooped her out.

“Come on, Til.”

“Aww,” said Thranduil, “her little jumpsuit is all food stained. Just like Legolas at that age.”

“My jumpsuit was food stained?” the prince asked archly.

“Yes. It was white lace. Quite fetching on you,” sighed Thranduil with a dramatic gesture worthy of Dori.

“I remember that jumpsuit!” said Cemnesta with a grin. “It had an adorable neck frill.”

“Don’t help me, Nesta,” Legolas grumped.

Gimli poked him in the side and simpered, “Awwww, how cunnin’!”

Deneb smiled on them all, her eyes bright. She bowed to Thorin and handed him a fat purse.

Thorin smiled and nodded his thanks. Fili came out and Thorin passed Frodo to him and most of the party moved into the house. Thorin stopped Bilbo and beckoned to Deneb and Ara. Their eyes widened with immediate worry, but Thorin smiled encouraging.

“Our little one and friend are fine, mistresses,” he said, immediately.

“You tell us something?” Deneb asked.

“Yes,” Thorin looked at Bilbo. “Help me, my love.”

“What’s going on?” Bilbo asked.

“Tharkûn is here.”

“Oh dear, what has he done?”

“It seems our friend, Rigel-chuh, is in truth the Blue Wizard, Pallando. Tharkûn recognized him and, with the help of Cemnesta and Galadriel, Pallando remembers who he is. Apparently, he resisted the Dark Lord to the point where Morgoth instead of making his a follower, tried to destroy his memories and cast him out into the desert to die.”

“Great Yavanna!” Bilbo gasped.

“I’m not sure how to explain this to Deneb,” Thorin finished. He turned to Deneb. “Mistress Deneb, do you know any one called Rómestámo?”

Deneb and Ara looked at each other, then shook their heads.

“Perhaps Pallando?” Thorin tried.

Deneb frowned.

“Old story. Very very old. Pallando, person of the…mmm, the Sun. Powerful. Dark One killed to take…mmm…be king of easterlings?” she tried.

“Pallando,” Ara said sorrowfully “Alatar!”
“Yes,” Thorin said.

Deneb put her arms about her aunt as the woman began to sob.

“We don’t know. The word…mmm…name, Alatar, gives her great, great sad. Always.”

Ori looked at Ara.

“Perhaps, my king, Pallando could explain. He does speak their language.”

Thorin nodded.

“It may be the best way. I don’t want to trouble them too much while they are still settling in and becoming part of the mountain.”

They turned and entered the house once more and made their way to the sitting room. Somehow, probably due to Tharkûn, Pallado was now more wizardly looking in a long robe of sea blue. He smiled at Deneb and greeted her in the easterling tongue. Deneb and Eridani listened, wide eyed, then Eridani began to giggle. Pallando pretended to be shocked and smoothed the front of his robe. Deneb glared at her daughter, then smiled and shook her head. She reached back and drew Ara forward.

Pallando and Ara stared at one another.

Ori gasped.

“Go’ it in one, me scribe,” Mahal’s hot boom chuckled at the back of Ori’s head.

Pallando smiled as Ara raised a trembling hand to touch his face.

“Yes,” Palando said with a choke in his voice. “It’s me, my wonderful Alatar.”

Galadriel, Cementa and Tharkûn hurried forward and laid their hands on the newly revealed Alatar. After a few moments she frowned and blinked as Pallando had.

“My beloved?” she looked at Pallando.

“It is indeed, I-”

“The easterlings!”

“All your group is safely here in Erebor,” Thorin said again.

Alatar turned and caught Deneb’s hands, speaking earnestly to her. Eridani stared, then made a comment, looking stunned. Deneb huffed and Alatar laughed. Bilbo snickered.

Ori looked at Bilbo.

“Cheeky faunt. I believe Eridani said she knew Ara was old but not that old.”

“Pallando, Alatar, Deneb,” Thorin addressed them. “It’s late and, no doubt, your young ones need to be..er…scrubbed and put to bed. There is no need for hasty decisions at the moment. Deneb, you have a home here in Erebor for as long as you wish it. For now, please remain calm and carry on as you were. This purse proves you have had a most successful day and I am pleased and proud of you. Succeeding at your craft is one off the highest honors among dwarrow.”
Alatar related this to Deneb, while Pallando beamed on them.

“Well,” said Deneb through Alatar. “Your majesty has been most generous and we have made a good start. With your help.”

She paused and Ori piped up.

“I was just a scrivener in the slums of Dale and look where I am now with Thorin’s help, Deneb-chuh. Everyone needs just the right spot for their talents to shine. Your pastries are so delicious.”

This was conveyed to Deneb and she laughed and pointed something out that made Alatar chuckle.

“She says,” Alatar replied giving Deneb’s smile a reproving look. “She learned from the best. But I wasn’t the one who suggested mixing mint and lemon.”

The easterlings declined tea as they had sticky children to wash, took their leave and headed back to Oakenshield Inn. As they left, Ori overheard Alatar laughingly asking Pallando what he’d done to his nose.

Everyone else stood about talking. Thorin and Bilbo went to Bag End East, taking Ori and the wargs with them.

In the bathroom of the master bedroom, Ori sat on a small stool while Thorin ran a bath, then helped Bilbo undress Frodo and Sam. While they did this, Thorin and Bilbo quietly discussed the situation of the easterlings and Ori took notes of their observations.

Butter and Sugar took their motherly duties seriously, trying to help by washing the faunts. Obviously, the candy and whatever else covered them was too sweet or highly flavored for the wargs’ tastes. Ori giggled, flipped over a page and drew the expression of faint disgust on Sugar’s face as she busily washed Frodo’s hand.

Frodo woke up enough to complain he didn’t need a bath. Sam never stirred and flopped about in Thorin’s hands as he was scrubbed clean.

“How, in Mahal’s name, did Sam get toffee in his hair?” Thorin murmured. “He’s worse than Kili, and he and Fili threw food at each other.”

“Kili’s taller,” Bilbo chuckled, “and hobbit hair is curly, so it holds everything.”

Ori drew as Thorin, now shirtless, cradled Sam in one arm and took the soapy washcloth to scrub Sam’s feet. Thorin rubbed at the hair on Sam’s feet for a bit, then sighed and put both feet back in the water to soak. Bilbo flapped a hand at Ori, who passed him a large towel. Bilbo scooped Frodo out and swaddled him then laid him on the mat in the bathroom. Bilbo then tended to Sam’s feet and likewise wrapped him up.

Thorin and Bilbo each took a faunt. Ori rose and pulled the plug in the bath, the draining water a distinct shade of gray. Ori grinned and followed Thorin and Bilbo to the bedroom. In front of the fire, the king and consort-to-be combed out curls on heads and feet. Thorin said, “Bags,” to the wargs. They disappeared out, then returned with two plush animals, one an oliphaunt in Butter’s mouth and the other a battle ram in Sugar’s, and dropped them next to Bilbo.

Thorin bestowed praised and ear scratches on Sugar and Butter, while Bilbo unlaced the tummies of both plush toys. Ori saw that these were convenient places to keep nightwear.
Soon the faunts were settled fast asleep in Frodo’s raven nest bed. Butter and Sugar settled themselves beside the bed.

As they left, Ori asked.

“Do Butter and Sugar always sleep next to Frodo and Sam?”

“As soon as they’re put to bed, “ Thorin said, “yes, but later, during the night, she and Butter will trade off so there’s alway one with Frodo and Sam and one with us. The pups are now tending to sleep on the foot of our bed, so there will be more room when they move on to stay with their new… er…parents,” Thorin finished, amused.

“It’s wonderful how smart they are.” Ori observed.

“I’m amazed myself,” Bilbo admitted. I wonder that the orcs ever realized just how intelligent the wargs really are.”

“A good thing for us they didn’t,” Thorin teased. “But you are right, Ori, teaching them tasks or having them stand guard is amazingly simple. They worked out the strategy of taking turns guarding Frodo during the night themselves.”

Bilbo laughed out as they reentered the sitting room.

“Just the other day I heard Frodo trying to scold Sugar. I found Sugar blocking Frodo’s bedroom doorway. Frodo was trying to come for first breakfast without brushing his hair. Sugar had the brush in her teeth and wouldn’t let him out of the room.”

Ori laughed at that.

“I must ask Gimli and Legolas if they’ve had a similar experience with Romy.”

In the sitting room, Dori was holding court. Everyone was avidly discussing the sudden return of the blue wizards.

Wandi and Haldir danced around each other, talking and flirting. Thranduil never turned his head, but his eyes followed their progress around the room, his face a picture of mirth tinged with horror. Ori snickered to himself and went to join his husband who was talking with Legolas and Gimli. Romy snored on their feet. Killer had worked himself between Dwalin and the back of the sofa and lay there happily wagging his tail as Dwalin used him as a cushion. Killer wiggled and whined until Ori sat down next to Dwalin and ruffled Killer’s ears while Killer industrially washed his face.

“Gimli,” Ori asked, “have you or Legolas notice that Romy is really smart?”

Legolas fell back, laughing.

“Aye,” Gimli grumbled in a pleased way. “Disgus’ingly so. Ne’er lets us sleep-in if there’s sumthin’ t’ do an’ nags th’ life outa us when it’s bedtime. If I make th’ bleedin’ mistake a’ sittin’ on th’ bed fully dressed, th’ bloody animal goes and yanks me boots off with his teeth!”

“It’s true.” Legolas said, looked fondly down at Romy. “Gimli kept reminding me I need to replace the strap on my quiver and I kept putting it off. Gimli was showing me the new leather strap he’d made me and Romy went over, brought my quiver to our feet, and proceeded to gnaw through the old strap, so I had no choice but to repair it then and there.”

“Mam says our Romy’s a jewel,” Gimli added and scratched Romy’s belly as Romy snorted and
rolled over, half asleep but still looking for attention. Legolas leaned against Gimli, smiling happily and playing with the dwarf braid in his hair.

Dwalin looked speculatively over his shoulder at Killer.

“Oi, Killer,” Dwalin said.

Killer was on his feet, gazing eagerly at Dwalin in an instant. Dwalin’s eyes twinkled. Ori wondered what in all Arda Dwalin was going to ask Killer to do.

“Give me Ori a kiss,” Dwalin ordered. Killer whipped ‘round, swiped Ori’s face with his tongue, then turned back, eager for more. Ori giggled and wiped his face with his sleeve while Gimli and Legolas laughed. Dwalin’s grin became feral.

“Go fetch our Nori-Pori.”

Killer leapt into action and disappeared into the hallway. Killer reappeared moments later, an extremely annoyed orange cat born gently in his jaws. Ori laughed out as Killer delicately dropped the wet cat in Dwalin’s lap. Nori-Pori hissed and swiped at Killer’s nose. Killer licked Nori-Pori, who hissed again in disgust then proceeded to lick his own fur back into place with a look of utter revulsion.

Ori grinned around at their companions. Dori was sitting comfortably drinking tea, Powder in her lap and Balin seated next to the pink chair, an arm tucked into Dori’s.

Dori paused as though listening. Ori swore that if Dori had antennae they would have been twitching and searching. Dori put aside her tea with a smile, patted Balin’s arm, and rose. Ori watched curiously as Dori marched purposefully to the sitting room door leading to the receiving room. She positioned herself, turned the handle silently, then flung open the door and shrieked dramatically.

“Captain Boromir! What do you think you’re doing to my poor little Lavender?!?”

Aragorn and Arwen stood beside Dori in an instant, giggling and peeking through.

“Lavender dear,” teased Arwen, “whatever has happed to your bodice ribbons?”

“Oh!” Lavender cried from the receiving room, “If you don’t know, my lady, then Aragon isn’t doing a proper job of courting you.”

“Take notes, my king,” Boromir laughed.

“Lavender, you get in here this minute,” Dori scolded, striding into the receiving room. “And as for you, Captain. Come here!”

“And let you grab ahold of my face, Honored Bearer? Never.”

“Wicked creature!” Dori shooed both through.

Arwen clapped hold of a flushed Lavender and they giggled together. Ori snickered as Eowyn drifted over to Boromir, who was rather flushed himself.

“What would your honored sire say?” she demanded.

“Nothing, if he doesn’t want my Lavender to bash him with a frying pan.”

“She’s perfect for you,” said Eowyn.
“I know,” said Boromir, grinning.

Ori found himself lingering long after their guests and most of the family had turned in.

“Love?” Dwalin asked.

“Do you want to go outside and sit on the patio with me?” Ori asked. “I know I should be exhausted, but I don’t think I could sleep just yet.”

“Sounds guid,” said Dwalin.

He took Ori’s hand and led him back out into the night.

The cool air felt lovely on his skin, and a breeze rustled the grass. With the house lights down, the dome of the sky was washed with stars.

“That’s amazing,” said Ori.

“Aye, jus’ li’e me husband,” said Dwalin.

“You’re sweet.”

“An’ yer blushin’.”

“Of course I’m blushing!

Dwalin sat on one of the patio chairs and leaned back, Ori climbed into Dwalin’s lap, and wrapped in his husband’s arms, hummed softly to himself.

“Someone sounds happy,” Dwalin said.

“I am happy,” said Ori. “I don’t know what I thought Erebor would be like after the quest, but it’s just like it was when we left. Chaos.”

Dwalin laughed.

“A’ leas’ it’s a guid sort a chaos.”

“It is. At the same time, it feels like something’s ending, and something else is beginning. I know I’ll be driving everyone crazy soon while I worry about whatever it is, but right now, I’m content to let it come. It’s going to come anyway, whether I worry or not.”

“Wise a’ yeh t’ realize tha’, love,” said Dwalin.

“Now, if only I’d realized it seven months ago.”

“Hindsigh’ bein’ wha’ it is?”

“Even for the scribe of Mahal.”

“No ma’er wha’ happens, yeh know I’m behind yeh, righ’? Even if I’m no’ standin’ with yeh?”

“Yes,” said Ori.

He turned his face and kissed Dwalin.
“Yes,” he repeated, giving him another kiss.

“Yes,” he said again and kissed him.

“Third time’s th’ charm?” Dwalin asked, teasingly.

“Third time for luck,” said Ori. “Fourth time because I love you.”

They did kiss, again and again, and cuddled, until finally Ori nodded off -

And startled awake with a shout as Fanny trotted out into the meadow from her new area of the stable, with a happy trumpet of welcome.

Ori found himself sitting on the ground with Dwalin standing over him, knife drawn as if to defend them, then visibly relaxing and laughing as Fanny approached, snuffling at them and hoo-ing excitedly.

“Fanny! Hush!” Ori hissed, laughing, as Dwalin lifted him to his feet. “You’ll wake Erebor!”

Fanny wasn’t having any of it, and thus they patted her and told her how darling she was until finally, she settled down beside them and drifted off to sleep.

***** The Appendix and the Glossary have been updated for your reading pleasure! *****
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Life in Erebor, as always peaceful and chaotic. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The next morning, at the breakfast table, Theoden made his apologies.

“I’m afraid Theo and I need to start back for home,” he said. “It’s been a wonderful, if completely unexpected, visit.”

“But, Theoden, dear,” said Dori, “how will you get back?”

“Cemnesta has offered the loan of some of his horses.”

“Shall I drop you off instead?” Galadriel asked.

“Thank you, m’lady, but it’s a bit out of your way, isn’t it?”

“On my way to where?” Galadriel asked.

“Lórien?”

“Oh, no, we’re stopping here for a while longer. It would be a round trip for me.” She twirled her fork in the air. “Pop. There. Pop. Back. All sorted.”

Theoden looked to be struggling.

“Thank you,” he said finally. He turned to Theodred, who had just downed his sixth rolled blackberry cake, these chasing a steak, three eggs over easy, breakfast potatoes and a tankard of ale. “Theo, are you of an elegant sufficiency?”

“Yes, Da.”

They disappeared.

“That wasn’t me,” Galadriel announced firmly.

“Oh!” Dori cried, rather cross. She shouted at the ceiling. “Don’t they even get a chance to say a proper goodbye?”

The room was swept with a sigh, and the Rohirrim returned to their seats.

“That was weird,” said Theodred.

Dori bustled forward to embrace them.

“I told our Mahal that you needed to say goodbye!”
Theoden nodded.

“Of course—You asked Your Mahal?”

“Scolded, actually,” said Ori, looking worriedly toward the ceiling.

“Either way,” Dori dismissed. “Give us a kiss, Theoden dear. Wait, how will you get Captain Cockrill home?”

“Taken care of,” said Mahal, sounding long-suffering.

Ori said, “Mahal says it’s taken care of.”

“And the truffles?” Dori asked archly.

“Dori!” Ori cried. “Don’t push it!”

“Truffles, too,” said Mahal. “Anythin’ else th’ Bearer migh’ require while I’m here?”

“Do You really mean to want to ask?” Ori muttered.

“No, no’ really.”

“Good choice.” Ori remembered who he was conversing with and blushed. “Er… good choice, M’lord.”

Mahal chuckled in his head.

So Theoden and Theodred got to say proper goodbyes, and Theoden was obviously quite moved when he finally looked up at the ceiling and said, “Hello? Lord Mahal? Are You quite ready…er…Sir?”

Apparently He was, because they once again disappeared.

Dori nodded after and said, “Thank you, Dearest Mahal. Much obliged.”

“You’re welcome,” said Mahal wryly.

“He says ‘You’re welcome’,” Ori translated flatly.

“Oh, how sweet!” Dori cried. “That’s why He’s our valar!”

Ori rolled his eyes and said to Bilbo, “Because our valar would have perfect manners.”

“Yes, He would, indeed!” Dori cried. “In the dwarfish way, of course, because He invented them.”

In the back of his head, Ori heard Yavanna cry, “Ha!” and the hot boom of Mahal’s laughter.

Nearly everyone else had decided to stay the week through, so as to attend the Gamgees’ official housewarming party. Luckily, they were the sorts of guests who could easily amuse themselves while the Durins conducted official business.

Most of the elves, and Binni, and Gridr went shopping, visiting, or sight-seeing, except for Elrond
and Celeborn, who had been given the run of the Great Library, with the caveat that they stay ‘ou’ a’ me hair’, per Master Brur.

Lindir divided his time between the library and shopping. He spent an afternoon with Mr. Wandi and came back with an experimental hairstyle. His hair fell straight and unbraided to his shoulders, with bangs bowed out to just above his brows, and the locks at the back of his head bumped up to an enormous degree.

“What do you think?” he asked Elrond.

“It’s stunning,” said Elrond.

Ori couldn’t agree more.

Dori only occasionally accompanied the shoppers, as ‘Bearer-mania’ was a hobby all Erebor and the Dale enjoyed. Dori couldn’t go about very much without people swooping around, congratulating and thanking the Bearer for blessing them all, and pressing upon her exquisitely made baby clothes, toys, and any other pebble paraphernalia. Dori was approachable, benign, and all charm to any who spoke to her, and always returned with at least three wheeled cart-loads of things. Dori kept the occasional one or two items she liked best or the ones she knew would help the creators whose work would be worn or used publicly. The rest she went through meticulously, made up packages for new parents and then sent them to Mistress Annis to dispense to those who truly needed the supplies.

“Given how our population is booming,” explained Dori, “I don’t think we’ll lack for ‘takers’.”

Aragon and Arwen found the ways of dwarrow, hidden for so long, fascinating and Balin thoroughly enjoyed discussing law with both during the evenings. During the days they spent half their time with Dis at the guild meetings and the rest shadowing Thorin in all his doings.

The visit to the weekly miners’ guild meeting only devolved into a brawl once.

At tea that afternoon, Aragorn wondered aloud what had even sparked the violence.

“Nothing. They were just showing off for you,” Dis sniffed.

Randi nodded his agreement and soaked his bruised knuckles in ice water.

“How… flattering,” said Arwen.

Nori stuck his head up through the tea table.

“How… flattering,” he opined.

Eowyn and Boromir rode with the Dale city patrol with Dwalin and Furh’nk and accompanied them to Dale Hall to meet with Bard and Glorfindel as they coordinated the combined security for the mountain and city. It was the first such official meeting, and Gloin and Targ were there, as well as Master Dubb and Ivo, Tauriel and Sigrid. Bard had invited Thorin and Ori attended to take notes for both kingdoms.

Ori was impressed with the way Dale Hall had developed. The private, upstairs meeting room was not ostentatious, but it was roomy and comfortable, with large, south-facing windows and a hearth at each end. The three windows each sported a deep sill, large enough to sit on, and two sets of shutters, one set just behind the glass and another between the sill and room.
“Those are wonderful,” said Eowyn, “but they must weigh a ton.”

“Not all that much, actually,” said Bard. “Take a look.”

Eowyn was amazed to find that the shutters were far lighter than they looked.

“An alloy of iron and mithril,” said Bard. “Fili’s latest project for Master Minta.”

Thorin said nothing, but he practically glowed with pride.

“What were the old shutters made of?” Boromir asked.

“These are the originals,” said Bard. “Except for the main room downstairs, none of this building existed four months ago.”

“It looks like it’s been here for centuries!” the Gondorian said.

“That was the architect’s idea,” said Bard. “She thought it would put me at a disadvantage if it all looked too new. Tilda designed the andirons.”

“Tilda!” Thorin cried. “Really?”

“Oh, yes, with Thranduil’s encouragement.”

Ori went and inspected the andirons and shouted in amazement.

They were miniature Romys, each sitting on a miniature Mellon.

He wondered how Bob felt about it, then he thought that Bob could care less, as long as his mat was still comfortably close to the kitchen stove.

Ori surveyed the rest of the room. He suspected the cowhide chairs and maple slab table were Thranduil’s idea. A sideboard of matching wood held ale, plates of cold cuts and bread and cheeses, and even sliced vegetables. That was probably the king-father’s doing, as well.

They chatted as they served themselves.

“This is quite a challenge,” Boromir ventured. “How do you insure the security of a city with no walls? Minas Tirith was laid out from the foundation to be orderly, with regular roads and squares. I don’t think there’s a sharp angle anywhere in this city.”

“It wasn’t planned at all,” said Bard. “It was originally a rich woman’s villa and lands, then it lay abandoned and over grown for centuries, then, when my people arrived, it became a refugee camp, then a fishing village on the edge of the Long Lake, and it grew out from there toward the mountain.

“Then, about thirty years ago, Calmar started knocking out buildings and erecting walls and whatever else suited him.”

Ori reflected that Dale was far more fluid than the cities of the West, and, thanks to Calmar, a good deal messier in its set up. Dwalin always said it was a challenge to patrol.

On the table Bard rolled out the current map of Dale. They all gathered around, chewing and studying.

“Something wrong, Captain Boromir?” Bard asked.
“I thought the mountain was to the east of town.”

“It is.”

“What’s it doing at the top of the map?”

“East is ‘up’,” said Bard, “as on dwarven maps.”

“Th’ righ’ way,” Gloin nodded.

Bard chuckled.

“Think about it,” he said. “The dwarrow maps have east at the top. If Dale maps had north at the top, how would our soldiers communicate? It would take way too long to figure out where everyone should be.”

“Ah,” said Boromir. “It certainly will put any invaders at a disadvantage.”

“We don’t really fear outside attacks,” Bard said. “With a mountain full of rampaging dwarrow nearby, no one in their right mind would even bother. Our problems usually come from within. A few of Calmar’s thugs stayed and are trying to bully people, but this shall stop soon enough.”

He grinned to Glorfindel, who nodded feraly.

“I vow I shall catch out that Ursith!” Glorfindel swore.

Thorin and Dwalin exchanged glances, then looked at Ori. Ori shrugged, as it was a private meeting. Ori looked up at Bard and Glorfindel.

“Make sure you always just fail a little bit. Ursith is Nori.”

The mouths fell open.

“Nori, as you know,” Thorin explained, “is my spy master. Thus, by his, or rather Ursith’s, ruling any criminal element, I always know what’s goin on.”

“Oh,” said Bard, somewhat flummoxed.

“Of course!” Glorfindel enthused. “I shall harry him and fail at the last hour.”

“Thank you,” Thorin said gravely, with a twinkle in his eye.

Eowyn and Boromir burst out laughing.

“I really ought to talk to Nori about disguising myself as a criminal and running my king’s underworld,” snickered Boromir.

“You’re too innersent lookin’ f’r that,” Nori commented, dropping down through the ceiling.

“I’ll never get used to that,” Ori heard Bard murmur to Boromir, who shook his head in agreement.

“Anything I or Bard should know?” Thorin asked.

“Yup,” Nori reported. “A couple a’ dumbasses’re tryin’ t’ organize a heist o’ mithril. Th’ small store you got in th’ river warehouse. Ursith’s authorized that little party fer two bells b’fore dawn.”
Make sure yer there, Glo, but all accidental an’ such. There’ll be five men an’ free dwarrow. They got ‘nother escape route outta ol’ Feesers basement.”

“Feeser back runnin’ a game?” Dwalin asked.

“Pretendin’,”

“Guid t’ hear he’s up t’ his ol’ tricks in service t’ th’ crown. Th’ watch’ll ferget ‘is place t’night. Set up a bar figh’ t’other end a’ th’ docks.”

Nori nodded and cocked at look at Bard.

“I’ll be unusually awake, if you need me.” Bard promised.

Glorfindel and Boromir looked delighted.

“You know, King Thorin,” said Boromir, “you’re well established if you ever wanted to run a criminal empire.”

“Fortunately, my schedule doesn’t allow for it,” said Thorin.

“I run it fer ‘im,” said Nori, drinking ale from the pitcher, probably, Ori thought waspishly, because Dori wasn’t there to smack him.

“Yes, running it right into the ground,” Thorin chuckled.

Dubb, deeply impressed with Eowyn’s prowess as a warrior, politely asked her if she would care to help him train Ivo.

Eowyn agreed, for she was as adept at training soldiers as her brother or her uncle.

Faced with Eowyn in the practice ring, Ivo goggled at her, demurred at fighting a woman, then, when Dubb told him not to be a bacon-brain and lift his weapon, he did so, striking a pose that said he wanted to show off a little.

Ori realized right off this was a poor decision, as Ivo was put on his mettle as never before. Ori sat quietly in the stands, watching as Eowyn circled and then, with a swing of her broadsword, knocked his shield edge so hard, it flew away from him.

Ivo started looking more than a little worried as Eowyn pressed the attack. He was fighting as hard as he could, panting, with rivulets of sweat dripping from his forehead. Eowyn didn’t even appear to be using half her strength. Ori reflected she could hold her own against Dwalin, or Dain, or Thorin.

Eowyn eyed her opponent, then slashed downward, striking his sword guard, forcing him to drop the weapon and stumble to his knees, her swordspoint held unshaking to his throat.

Ivo looked slowly up the blade to the White Lady of Rohan, who stared impassively down at him. Her bright hair shone and rippled in the breeze.

Ivo caught his breath and gasped out loud enough for Ori to hear him clearly.

“I love you! I want to marry you! Please marry me. I’m not rich, but I’m sure me mam’ll like you, and I’ll love you forever. I promise!”
Ori groaned.

Eowyn rolled her eyes and sheathed her sword.

“Thank you, young Ivo, but no.”

Ori could tell that Eowyn was desperately trying not to laugh.

Dubb smacked Ivo across the back of his head.

“Tha’s no’ th’ way yeh go abou’ makin’ a dam ’n offer, yeh pony’s arse.”

Ori reflected that perhaps there was far more for Dubb to teach Ivo beyond the ways of the sword.

Ori walked Eowyn back to Fundin house after the bout. Eowyn looked displeased about something and Ori didn’t trouble her until she chose to speak.

She did so only after she joined Ori and Dori in the kitchen, washed, her hair in a towel. She sat dejectedly in a chair, dressed only in her shift, nursing the tea Dori had poured out for her.

“Imad Dori?”

“Yes, my love?”

“I think I’m craftwed.”

“Nonsense! You just haven’t met the right one.”

“But, they’re all either craftwed, or idiots, or married to each other and they don’t want a third!”

“The best way to find someone, is not to look.”

Eowyn cocked an eyebrow.

“Have you been talking to my uncle?”

“No, dear, why?”

“You sound like my late aunt, Elfhild.”

“Then she was a sensible woman, for it’s a fact, dearest.”

Ori piped up, “I tried to look at Dwalin, but every time Dwalin looked back, Dori growled at him.”

“Pet, that is hardly helpful,” Dori admonished. “What’s happened, dear?”

Eowyn told her.

Dori’s lips sat in a line across her face. She appeared to consider, but Ori knew she was trying not to laugh. Finally Dori offered, “Well, it just goes to show, dear, you really haven’t met the right one yet.”
Ori took a few days to himself. It bothered him that he should be working, not sloughing off, but he was still recovering from the rigors of the quest and all its amazing consequences.

He rested, finished his picture of Sigrid and embarked on the initial sketches for Thorin’s official portrait, which Ori had been dithering over for quite some time.

Ori found it was best to have several paintings going at once, giving each a chance to dry between his efforts.

One afternoon, he spent a pleasant few hours in the meadow, flipping through sketch books from the time back when he was just married to the present. Fanny was off working with the Court of Miracles, but Honda lazed nearby, one rear leg slack as she napped.

In the way of scribes, Ori was meticulous about dating his work, no matter how seemingly trivial. Every master he ever had enforced this idea. He also never abandoned anything. When he tore something out to give away, he noted that, too.

So, as he worked his way from the beginning, he watched Thorin change. The king’s rigid posture relaxed, and even when he wasn’t smiling, a light had come into his eyes.

Ever so gradually, Thorin’s lean frame filled out, his chest widening, his hair growing and curling eccentrically.

It seemed to make his nose look longer, even sharper than before, and his beard and mustache had white streaks now that suited him.

Ori frowned.

He went back to the beginning and started to look again.

Roäc began to appear in them around the time of Thror’s death, but increasingly the raven perched on Thorin’s shoulder. Finally, Ori arrived at yesterday’s dinner. During dessert, Thorin turned to say something to Bard. Roäc sat on the back of Thorin’s chair, rolling his eyes as only Roäc could.

The resemblance was not Ori’s imagination.

Thorin was becoming a raven.

Which was not to say he would sprout wings at any moment, or build a nest in the throne room, and he certainly wasn’t going to collect shiny obj-

“What have you there?”

Ori shrieked and whipped around.

“Bilbo!”

The hobbit grinned down at him.

“Really, Ori, you make it far too easy.”

“I know,” said Ori, exasperated. He gestured with his sketchbook. “It’s not what you think.”

“How do you know?” Bilbo asked, plopping down beside him. “I think a lot of things.”

“You think this drawing is naughty.”
“Figured me out already, have you?”

Ori showed him what he had discovered.

“By my buttons! Ori, I believe you’re right. He’s a little more raven-ish every day. Though, mind you, I haven’t seen him viciously peck someone in the head yet.”

“Do you think he notices?”

“Thorin doesn’t seem to think much about himself, unless it’s in conjunction with his people. I understand from Dori that he wore the same color and cut of clothing every day of his life up until the time he went to the inn.”

“He did!” Ori cried. “Oh, if you had only been there the day Dori tried to get him to wear pink!”

“With Thorin’s complexion, he could pull it off.”

“That’s just what Dori said.”

Bilbo chuckled.

“How much of this conversation did you hear?”

“A great deal of it.”

“You realize, this compels you to tell me the whole story?”

Ori did so, and Bilbo laughed until his face turned the same color as his coat.

“Ahh, now that remark about the silk whispering makes sense. Dori really said Thorin’s underwear should whisper? What an extraordinary idea.”

Ori peered out from under his lashes.

“Does it?”

“I don’t know. He hardly bothers to wear any. I’m amazed his tailor isn’t prematurely grey.”

They went back through the books randomly, and Ori pointed out significant personages and told Bilbo stories about them.

“This is the asshat, isn’t it,” said Bilbo

“How did you know?”

“He might as well have the word printed on his forehead. Sugar water and rags in his hair every night before bed?”

“I always thought so! Though, we can’t all be as lucky as hobbits. You all have such beautiful curly hair.”

“Yet, as a lad, I longed for perfect, pin-straight hair like an elf’s. We all want what we haven’t got, don’t we.”

“You aren’t going to cut yours, are you?” Ori asked in alarm.

“Certainly not! Hamfast and his sons do so like proper hobbits, but Hamfast isn’t attached to a
dwarf king. I wouldn’t shame Thorin that way.”

“How attached are you?” Ori asked. “You can tell me to push off if you like, I’m being very dwarfy just by asking.”

Bilbo smiled, pink to his ears.

“I was afraid to think too hard about it when I first met him, but I may have already been a little in love even then. Hobbits don’t have ‘Ones’, but that doesn’t mean we don’t recognize our match when we meet them.”

“Thorin would put his braid in your hair today if you asked.”

Bilbo laughed and nodded.

“Yes, I know. I also know such a thing will throw two kingdoms into an even bigger tizzy than they already are just from the Bearer being pregnant.”

“Dwalin and Thorin call it Bearer-mania.”

“Exactly! How much can one expect people to take before they’re all laid out with nervous prostration?”

“That’s an awful lot of vinaigrette,” Ori mused.

“Nori would have a stomach ache for a lifetime.”

“Yes, and Dori would say it served him right,” said Ori.

“You know, I was an only child. I find sibling dynamics exotic and amazing.”

“Siblings can be amazing pains in the arse,” said Ori, “but I couldn’t wish for better. I couldn’t have done all I have so far without them.”

“Then, I envy you,” said Bilbo. “I’m glad the Durins live like this. It gives Frodo the family he should have had. He’s a properly spoiled faunt.”

“Thorin is very attached to him as well.”

“They seem to be very attached to each other. Dis told me that Frodo is a lot like Fili was when her One died. Fili clung to Thorin like a baby opossum to its mother. At least Frodo’s hair seems to be growing down and not just out like mine.”

“Your hair is fascinating,” said Ori, truthfully.

“My head looks like a forsythia bush.”

“But it’s a nice forsythia bush.”

“Thank you,” said Bilbo dryly. “Do you actually know what a forsythia bush looks like?”

“No, but I’m sure it’s lovely.”

Bilbo snorted.

“Don’t tell Mr. Wandi. It’ll become the latest style.”
Then they flipped through Ori’s pocket notebook of all the sketches from the night market and
laughed.

“These are wonderful, Ori. I see you’ve decided to give some of them a bit of polish.”

“I think such an event should be preserved for posterity, don’t you?”

“Thranduil wearing a shiny ‘princess hat’ should be, if nothing else.”

The breeze picked up. Already it held a whisper of coolness that warned summer on the mountain
was on the wane.

“You should soak up as much light as you can, Bilbo. Winters this far east are very long and
dark.”

“I’ve wintered hereabouts before,” said Bilbo. “It’s not me I’m particularly worried about.
Deneb’s family has never experienced snow. The Gamgees will need to keep an eye on the faunts.
The snow will pile up quickly over their heads.”

“And the pipes beneath the streets of Dale don’t go all the way out there to keep the farm road
clear,” Ori mused. “I need to talk to Bard. I think the heat from the lava vents beneath that section
of Dale can be redirected, so even if they don’t put in the road by winter, at least the Gamgees won’t
be snowed in.”

“Is there anything dwarrow can’t do?” Bilbo asked.

“We can be serious cram brains when it comes to things like emotions, and we’re dead stubborn
when we think we’re right, even after it becomes obvious that we’re wrong.”

“Hopefully I can work my way around the stubborn part this winter. It may seem like a big
enough mountain—”

“Until you’re cooped up with a sulking Durin?”

“Exactly. He missed you all very much while you were away. The true gloom biscuit of Erebor,
according to Dis. How fortunate I’m fond of biscuits.”

“Even gloomy ones?”

“Especially those.”

They lapsed into silence as Ori cast about for a way to broach the subject.

“So…”

“So, Thorin and Dwalin were terribly aroused by our rather pathetic combat,” Bilbo opened the
conversation with a teasing twinkle in his eye.

Ori giggled.

“Neither of us is a born warrior.”

“We’re lovers, not fighters,” said Bilbo. “That may be the point. They think we’re cute as
kittens.”

“I suppose between the two of us we’re suitably fuzzy,” Ori mused. “The question is, how far
should we take it?"

“However far we wish,” said Bilbo, smiling. “Are you interested?”

Ori thought about it.

“Whether I’m interested is secondary to the fact that I can do very little about it. I don’t have much experience. Dwalin hadn’t even taken me yet, and we’ve been married over seven months, which is just embarrassing.”

Bilbo shook his head.

“He’s careful with you because he cares so much. His adoration is nearly a physical thing.”

Ori nodded.

“He might decide what we do most of the time, but he always lets me say how far we go.”

“Such a considerate lover is a fine, rare thing.”

“But it doesn’t follow that anyone else would be as patient,” said Ori. “I’m afraid you would be bored, and maybe frustrated.”

“If all I was after was sex, perhaps,” said Bilbo. “This is more about giving each other pleasure while tempting our mates than it is sexual gymnastics, with all due apologies to Queen Kivi.”

Ori laughed.

“No, Queen Kivi talks about that, too. I think she must have been part hobbit. Is it true that hobbits are as sexually active as rumor says?”

“We don’t have sex morning, noon, and night,” Bilbo protested. “Even for hobbits of leisure, that would hardly leave time for seven meals a day, marketing, gossiping, cooking, gardening, and a nice cup of tea and a pipe in front of the fire. That said, we do become sexually active as tweens, but we aren’t actually fertile until our late twenties, which is why age of majority is early thirties.”

“So, by that time you’ve been rolling around behind the coal bins for over a decade!”

“In a manner of speaking. We don’t have coal bins, but we do have plenty of flowery meadows and hay lofts. The average healthy young hobbit does not lack for opportunities.”

Ori considered. He was terribly fond of Bilbo and was only slightly intimidated by his experience. Ori didn’t let himself think about being intimate with Thorin, or at least he didn’t think about it closely. That seemed a bit too much too soon.

“Maybe,” Ori said, “we should just stick with teasing our mates for right now. If it excites them, then at least they would each have an outlet for it, that is, us.”

Bilbo nodded.

“Your logic is quite sound.”

“But I’d like to test something out first,” said Ori, looking over his shoulder at the house.

“As you will,” said Bilbo.
Ori took Bilbo’s face in his hands and kissed him. It wasn’t open-mouthed passion, but it wasn’t a brotherly peck, either, and Ori was startled to find Bilbo kissing him back.

At what felt like a natural juncture, Ori pulled away.

Bilbo ran his tongue over his bottom lip, his eyelids heavy.

“Well?” Bilbo breathed. “Was your experiment a success?”

“Yes, it was lovely.”

So they did it again.

It was odd for Ori to kiss someone so close to his own height, and so beardless. He thought poor Bilbo must be suffering beard burn all the time. But the hobbit’s mouth was soft and moist and, it seemed to Ori, so ridiculously well-made for kissing. Bilbo didn’t immediately set fire to his bits like Dwalin did, but Ori felt a more leisurely pleasure, like the coziness of a fire in the hearth instead of lava flowing into the forge.

By the time Ori felt his prick stir and reluctantly pulled away, they were clutching each other rather intimately.

“If I go any further, I’ll hurt myself when I stop,” said Ori apologetically.

“It does seem rather dangerous to continue,” said Bilbo. “But now we know.”

Ori grinned.

“Now we know.”

“So, if I pat your bum at odd times in front of Thorin and Dwalin, you won’t slug me into next week?”

Ori let himself fall sprawling on his back, and laughed at the sky.

“We should probably warn them, shouldn’t we.”

Bilbo poked his belly, convulsing Ori into giggles.

“Come now, Lord Ori. What fun is that?”

Ori and Bilbo exchanged looks then laughed again.

“You and Dwalin will be having dinner at Bag-End East tomorrow,” Bilbo announced.

“Yes, Professor Baggins,” Ori teased in a contrite voice. “What are your orders?”

“My orders?”

“What would you like us to bring?”

“You yourselves, silly dwarf.”

While Ori saw Bilbo’s point about not warning Dwalin and Thorin about intermittent bouts of slap and tickle, he did feel he should tell Dwalin that he wouldn’t mind at the very least the odd make-out
session with Bilbo. As an adult dwarf, Ori wasn’t under obligation to tell his husband anything, but Dwalin had told Ori all about his adventures. Perhaps, at last, it was time to talk about the possibilities of Ori’s own.

He felt almost positive Dwalin would simply nod and encourage him, especially since Dwalin was part of the intended audience.

Wouldn’t he?

Ori mentally slapped himself about the head.

He would.

Ori was a big dwarf now, and he would proceed as big dwarrow did.

Dwalin was absent at dinner, off on patrol with Ori’s ‘western pals’. The elves had decided to return to the Moo & Cluck, Haldir being determined to go and actually remember the experience. Ori thought he wouldn’t really see much beyond Mr. Wandi, but Ori was a hopeless romantic.

“He’s quite civil when he relaxes,” said Fili. “He’s still kind of a dol dornog at times.”

Tilda looked up from her coconut spiced chicken.

“Did you just call Mr. Haldir a doorknob?”

“Oi!” Dain scolded them. “Tha’s me wee lad yer on abou’.”

“Not ‘doorknob’, Fili said, refilling Dain’s flagon. “Dol dornog. Dol being sindarin for ‘head’ and dornog-“

“Oh! I know this!” Tilda cried. “Dornog is khuzdul for a tossing stone.”

Thorin looked at one nephew, then the other.

“Am I missing something?”

Kili said, “You won’t if you go on day patrol, idad. Those badgers who go to school together are learning in two, sometimes three languages.”

Fili laughed and put on a high-pitched damling voice.

“Ikhuz, dum dumel! It’s all shandabied.”

“Dumdumel?” Thorin asked.

Bilbo patted his arm.

“Dum dum of all dum dums, my dear.”

“What have we done?” Thorin asked. “Ikhuz means stop. Shandabi means agreed. What were the little rock rats agreeing to do?”

Kili shook his head.

“Uh-uh. Wouldn’t tell you even if we knew. That would be like ratting out our younger selves
and we’re not doing it.”

“There is a sort of honor in that, I suppose,” said Thorin.

“Thus, language evolves,” said Bilbo. “You’ve taken your language out into the daylight, and now it’s going to grow.”

“Yup!” said Frodo, nodding.

Dain sat back in his chair with his flagon in his hand and an evil smile on his face.

Sculdis gave him a side-eye.

“What’s going on in the crowded skull of yours?”

“Oh, just thinkin’ what Ulfr an’ the other staunch traditionalists’ll say, next time they’re in town and some street urchin calls them dumdumels. I wan’ t’ be here for that.”

Ori asked Bilbo, “Do you think it will qualify as a dialect?”

“Oh, I’m certain it will,” said Bilbo. “Frodo here is going to establish it in literature.”

“I am?” Frodo asked.

“Even if you don’t want to commit yourself to it full time, I’m sure you’ll want to toy with it a little.”

“Maybe I’ll come up with new words,” Frodo pondered. “I’m not as good as some of the others. Idad Balin doesn’t use a lot of v-vern… what do you call it, idad?”

“Vernacular, laddie.”

“Ver-NAK-yoo-ler,” Frodo tried out.

Sam said, “That sounds like the noise you get when the axle snaps on your cart and you keep driving!”

Ori took a good, long bath, reading a paper copy of a Shire novel he’d just purchased. He wondered if bathtub reading wasn’t really what was behind these cheaper editions after all. He certainly wouldn’t bring a one-of-a-kind manuscript into the tub. If this copy got soaked and was irreparable, he would simply send it with the other unofficial papers to be turned to ash and used again without a loss to literature. It would be a sad turn of events, but not catastrophic.

Afterward, he lay in bed, thinking about a million different things, but mostly just waiting for his husband to return, which he did in the course of time, freshly showered and smelling delicious.

“Dwalin?”

“Still awake, love?” Dwalin asked, moving cats and a warg pup aside on the bed to make room for himself. Nori-Pori meowed piteously at being relocated a foot to the left.

“Hold yer sauce, yeh silly thin’. Yeh ain’t bein’ murdered, nor shaved for the stewpot. Some people’s cats!”
Dwalin finally managed to get beneath the covers and turn on his side to kiss Ori.

“Dwalin,” Ori started again.

“Aye, love?”

“I have something to tell you.”

“G’wan.”

Ori took a deep breath and said all at one,

“Bilbo and I were talking about how much you and Thorin liked us messing about together and we decided we want to do something about that so we’re going to be teasing you a bit from now on and I wanted you to know I kissed Bilbo and I really liked it.”

He hid his burning face in Dwalin’s chest fur as Dwalin laughed.

“I know.”

“You know?” Ori echoed, pulling back in amazement.

“Garnet an’ Quartz tol’ me.”

Ori shot a look at the perches where the ravens pretended to be asleep. Of course, they were also pretending to snore, and this was punctuated by occasional snickering.

“Nosey bird brains!” Ori spat.

“Aw, now don’ be li’e tha’, love.” Dwalin gathered Ori up against him for a cuddle, a twinkle in his eye. “Must’ve bin cute, th’ two a’ yeh canoodlin’ in th’ meadow on a nice summer’s day. Sorry I missed it!”

“You are?”

“Aye. Yeh’ll jus’ have t’ do it again so I kin watch!”

“Dwalin!” Ori cried, tugging his beard smartly. “I’m trying to be serious here.”

“A’righ’, a’righ’, Lord Serious. Wha’s ailin’ yeh?”

“You really don’t mind?”

Dwalin rested his brow against Ori’s.

“Whether I do, ’r I don’, it’s no’ me business, is i’?”

“I’m not talking about manners, Dwalin. I’m talking about your heart.”

“So, why’re yeh doin’ it, then?”

“To turn you…o-oh!”

Dwalin laughed.

“I don’ thin’ I’m bein’ shortchanged, love.”
“But it’s more than that, isn’t it! I’m doing it because I like it, t-oh. But, what if you aren’t there and I still want to do it? Will you be upset?”

“Nah. We jus’ worked it out between us, didn’ we?”

“I guess we did. That’s good.” Ori let the conversation soak into his brain. “So, I know it’s not my business, but, would you tell me if you wanted someone that way?”

“Would yeh wan’ me t’?”

“It isn’t necessary, but I’d say I’d like to know, even after the fact.”

“I kin do tha’. See, all sorted.”

“Queen Kivi would be so proud of us,” Ori murmured.

He slid forward and kissed his husband and found himself rolled over and happily, arousingly squished into the mattress.

As Dwalin pulled back, Ori sighed and said, “I liked that.”

Dwalin kissed him. Ori sighed happily into Dwalin’s mouth, which soon wandered to his cheeks, his nose, his chin and finally, to Ori’s ear where he whispered.

“I figured, as long as we’re tryin’ t’ impress her majesty, we’d see if we could go two f’r two.”

Ori’s first day back at the library proved very quiet, and it was just as well. Ori spent most of it going through the incredibly large pile of scrivening work his friends had done while he was away. He was terribly pleased with the quality of their work and he told them so.

The scribes were gathered at their desks, doing some end-of-day copying when Master Brur came bursting out of his lair and hollered,

“A’righ’! Who moved me samich?”

The scribes looked at each other, then at Master Brur, who was purple about the ears with rage.

“I don’t think any of us did, Master Brur,” said Ori, feeling as though he had been deputized to speak.

“Don’ gimme tha’! I pu’ it down, I turned aroun’, an’ when I turned back, it’d moved exactly six inches to the left!”

Ori could only imagine Brur took out a ruler and measured it.

“Is it possible you nudged it with your elbow when you turned around?”

“No, it is no’. I don’ even have a stain on me sleeve. No’ a new one, anyway.” He narrowed his eyes at Ori. “D’yeh think it were a certain sneak we both know?”

Ori shook his head.

“If it was him, he would have eaten your sandwich.”
“Guid point. Mebbe them elves?”

“They’re in the topmost closed stacks,” Ori reminded him.

Teyan appeared behind Master Brur. She did a little dance and held her hands up behind his head to give him ‘elk antlers’.

The scribes didn’t dare react beyond their eyes growing very large.

“Wha’t’re yeh all gawpin’ abou’? None a’ yeh’ll confess?”

“I did it!” Teyan shrieked.

Brur swung around to stare at her.

“Who th’ fuck’re yeh? Yer no’ one a’ mine!”

“I’m Teyan, daughter of Eyan,” Teyan announced. She slipped down through the floor and appeared behind him again. “Yoooo-hoo! Right here!”

Brur turned again and glowered, opened his mouth, closed it and frowned.

“Why’re yeh all blue an’ wispy?”

“I’m dead,” she said merrily.

“Yer a ghost,” said Brur.

“Yes!”

“So yer tha’ Teyan. Did yeh muck with me samich?”

“Uh-huh!”

“Yeh pu’ tha’ blue shite on it?”

“Mmmm-hmm. When I licked it.”

Omi whispered, “Ewww!”

“I see,” said Brur. “Yeh plannin’ on doin’ tha’ again?”

“If I do, will you scream and yell and turn purple and jump up and down?”

“No.”

“Oh, well. I’ll have to think of something else.”

“Aye, guid luck wi’ tha’.”

He turned and marched back into his office and firmly closed the door.

Teyan turned to them with a frown.

“Tough rock to break!”

Omi said, “You don’t know the half. So, you’re the dead scribe who helped Ori?”
“I think I’m more like the dead scribe Ori helped. Do you mind?”

“That you helped Ori?”

“That I’m dead.”

“No, it’s not the strangest thing we’ve ever seen,” said Omi.

Loli added, “Maybe not even the strangest thing we’ve seen this week.”

“I can confirm that,” said Bujni. “Perhaps, Miss Teyan, you could spare me some time to answer my inquiries about your current non-physical state?”

Teyan considered and then shrugged.

“Sure. I’ve got plenty of time. Then, if you don’t mind, I have lots of questions about your coronation apparel. Was Miss Dipfa really wearing packing paper? How did she sew the seams securely? Were there rivets involved? Was there really an oliphaunt in the throne room? Who made her cap?”

While Bujni adjusted to being on the other end of the questions, Ori looked worriedly toward Master Brur’s office.

“G-go on, Ori-m-mate,” Arne encouraged. “You c-can do it.”

Ori went to Brur’s office door, took a deep breath, squared his shoulders and knocked.

“Piss off!” Brur barked.

“It’s Ori. May I come in?”

“If yeh mus’.”

Ori did so.

Brur sat at his desk with Eggr, Alyne, and Po, all of them looking down at Brur’s now-blue sandwich.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Master Brur.”

“Yer th’ only one who says tha’, an’ I believe it’s sincere.”

“Er… thank you. I’m afraid I-”

“Need another leave a’ absence.”

Ori pulled back his shoulders in surprise.

“Yes. Given that I just had one, I would fully understand if you asked for my resignation.”

“Orc shit,” said Brur. “Yer no’ goin’ anywhere. I already tol’ yeh, I knew I’d be sharin’ yeh with Oaksheild.”

“But this isn’t about my official duties.”

“Aye, it is. No’ yer duties t’ th’ king himsel’, bu’ yer duties t’ Mahal. I’m no’ fool enough t’ mess with Him. ‘Sides, He wrote me a note.”
“A note?

Brur gestured absently behind him. What Ori had taken for some stone work he must have forgotten was, in fact, a note. In a sharp, angular hand, Mahal had carved:

Dear Master Brur,

Please excuse Ori of Fundin from his library duties for the duration of his getting his quest materials together.

You can have him back when he’s finished, pinky swear.

Sincerely,

Your Maker.

“Seriously?” Ori asked.

“Aye. This is goin’ up in th’ scribes’ hall wi’ th’ rest a’ th’ samples.”

“You’re going to let someone come into your office to pry out the wall?”

“Yer kiddin’, righ’? I’m doin’ it meself. Don’ tell Sadie!”

Ori thought Sadie would probably know by some dwarf sixth sense, but he had other business to tend.

“So,” Ori started. “I can have some time off?”

“Yeh was involved in this remakin’ a’ th’ worl’. I thin’ I kin give yeh a month ‘r so t’ ge’ yer thoughts together.”

“I’m afraid it may take at least that long to get the presentation ready.” Ori sighed. “It’s a toss up whether I’d rather do the presentation or face more orcs.”

Finally Brur looked up at him, and his hard features morphed into something terrifyingly like a smile.

“Lad, promise me yeh’l do’ try t’ do this all yersel’. Yeh go’ good folk, talented folk, willin’ t’ help yeh.”

Eggr poked at the sandwich with his beak and drew back with a ravenish ‘ick’ face. The other two ravens laughed at him.

“I realize and appreciate that fact, Master Brur,” said Ori. “In fact, I was hoping you would read through the final manuscript and tell me what you think.”

“Oh, aye. I’ll be doin’ tha’ if yeh’d asked ‘r no’.”

That evening, Dwalin and Ori arrived at Bag End East to an all-enveloping scent of fresh
blackberry tart.

Ori stuck his head around the door jamb into the kitchen.

“That smells wonderful, Bilbo.”

“Oh! There you are! Yes, mountain blackberries are Thorin’s favorite, and they’re finally ripe for the picking. Dwalin, have you come to lay siege to the cookie jar, or can I interest you in dinner, first?”

“I kin postpone th’ siege,” Dwalin assured him.

“Quite forbearing of you. Where is that dwarf? Thorin was supposed to be on hand to greet you and make sure you were well-supplied with drink.”

“I’m here, ghivashel,” said Thorin, crossing the sitting room. “Fili was up in arms about mithril.”

“Isn’t he usually?” Bilbo asked, shooing them out of the kitchen.

“There’s some controversy as to whether mithril workers belong to the jewelers’ guild or the smiths’ guild.”

“Let me guess,” said Bilbo. “They both want to lay claim to all that mithril?”

“And Kir thinks the mithril workers should be their own guild, as they were in Khazad-dûm. He’s told the heads of both the other guilds he’ll fight them over it. Fisticuffs, apparently.”

Bilbo rolled his eyes and returned to the kitchen, muttering about people with dented skulls and little feet.

Ori was horrified.

“Master Kir can barely stand up!”

“But there’s nothing lacking in his upper body strength,” said Thorin, leading the way to the overstuffed furniture by the fireplace. “Minta’s afraid he’ll fall over and shatter into a million little pieces. Fili is trying to get him to go for arm wrestling. At least that way he’ll be sitting down.”

Dwalin flopped onto the sofa, Thorin went to the sideboard. Ori followed him.

“Thorin, I wanted to give you these before I forgot.”

He held out the Light of Eärendil.

“Oh, thank you, Ori,” said Thorin.

He took it and moved to the mantel, where he took down the original envelope, put the light back into it and replaced it among the iron ravens.

“Why do you leave that there in an envelope?” Ori asked.

“Keeps it safe enough,” said Thorin. “That’s what Bilbo says.”

Bilbo shouted from the kitchen, “It’s good enough for the simarils!”

“I’m not contradicting you, ghivasha,” Thorin promised.
Ori held out the mithril shirt of mail and said, “Dwalin helped me clean it and everything. It’s really hard to get dried orc blood and stink out of all those little rings.”

Thorin took the shirt, looked it over, and handed it back with a smile.

“You keep it, Ori. You earned it.”

For a moment Ori was speechless, then he was horrified.

“You think I’m going to need it again, don’t you.”

“You’re a Durin. I’d say it was inevitable. And now, even if you outgrow it, we have the mithril to add more rings.”

“Thank you - I think,” said Ori.

Dwalin and Thorin exchanged grins.

“He’s jus’ tryin’ t’ keep yeh safe, love,” Dwalin said.

“From myself, apparently,” said Ori in dismay.

Bilbo called them to the table, which was laid out for just the four of them. Ori wondered what Bilbo had in mind or if it was just a chance for a quiet evening. Frodo and Sam now shared the three main meals of the day with the entirety of the family in Fundin House, and the intermittent hobbit meals were given to them by Bilbo in Bag-End East.

Thus Dori and Balin had the strange joy of spoiling the faunts, the younger set and even the easterling children while their parents worked at the bakery.

Alatar did not stop her duties in the kitchen and Pallando was often there with her.

Bilbo served thick slices of tomatoes roasted under little blankets of bahvlo cheese, generously garnished with slender ribbons of fresh basil.

This was follow by tiny, cheese-filled dumplings under a sauce of sour cream redolent with chives, and caramelized onions.

After this, when they were deep into the beef and vegetable stew, Thorin said,

“Ori, I propose that you take a leave of absence from your royal scribe duties.”

Ori’s stomach hit the floor.

“Alright, Thorin,” he said meekly. “If that’s your wish.”

Thorin raised his eyes to the ceiling and muttered, “This is all your fault, you ancient git.”

Then he looked back at Ori and continued.

“Ori, it’s not because I’m displeased and want to replace you. It’s because, right now, the Quest and where it led is more important.”

“It is?”

“Yes, and you have to make the presentation, possibly to a roomful of marble-headed dwarven
“That had occurred to me,” said Ori, nodding, “but, Thorin, this could take months.”

“If you have to follow me every time I go haring off, it’ll take a lot longer than that.”

Ori thought about those particular dwarven idiots. The scholars might listen, and might believe what Ori had to say, or not. A little thing like blowing up a mountain range was a debatable occurrence. Dwarf scholars weren’t even unanimous in the belief that elves existed, though elves appeared in Erebor in increasing numbers. Ori heard a scholar recently say something about mass hallucination.

“This could go terribly wrong, Thorin. You have my preliminary account. It reads like a Shire tale with a lot more gruesome bits.”

“Which I intent to steal, by the way,” announced Bilbo.

“We knew tha’,” said Dwalin.

“What if I can’t get any of them to believe me?” Ori asked. “I can’t expect Mahal to pop up to save my arse whenever I run into trouble. I don’t want to make you look foolish.”

Thorin put down his tankard of ale, went to wipe his mustache with his hand, saw Bilbo being brave and opted for his napkin instead.

“Ori, these are some of the same people who accept the Infernal Adventures of Durin the Deathless as fact.”

“But Durin isn’t a weedy little scribe from the wrong side of Dale.”

“No, but neither are you. You are a member of the royal household, and a hero several times over. You have no idea how well you’re regarded.”

Ori looked down at the table and mumbled.

“I only did what had to be done.”

“I see,” said Thorin. “And, were you afraid when you did all these things?”

“Anyone would be! Anyone with sense. Well, there’s Glorfindel, but I don’t think he counts. I don’t think he feels fear.”

Bilbo agreed, “Returning from incineration will do that.”

Thorin sat back, regarding Ori fondly.

“You were afraid, but you did all these things. Why?”

“For my family, for the Durins, for you. That’s why I’m so afraid I’ll destroy it, everything we’ve built, all the good will the crown has earned.”

“A few weeks ago I escorted an easterling lady and her daughter all over Erebor, and pledged myself as protection for them, and accepted the consequences should the people find my actions despicable.”

“It was the only thing you could do,” said Ori. “The only honorable thing.”
“It was, but that didn’t mean my head wouldn’t be on pike if enough dwarrow objected. I was lucky Dori returned when she did. There are no guarantees, Ori-mate. You’ve been brave all those times. You can be brave again.”

“Sides,” said Dwalin, “me an’ Thorin an’ Bilbo’ll be righ’ there. ‘Specially me.”

Ori leaned into him, though he almost overset his chair doing it.

“It’s true, I always feel I can do anything when I’m with you.”

Dessert was the meltingly sweet blackberry tart served warm with frozen custard. Ori and Thorin had a big chunk each and Bilbo and Dwalin all but fought over the rest of it.

After dinner, Dwalin and Thorin had the effrontery to talk ‘business’.

“Really!” Bilbo sighed.

“They’re obsessed,” Ori teased.

“I believe you’re right, m’lord,” said Bilbo, linking his arm through Ori’s. “Come along. We’ll leave them to themselves. I want to show you what I did with the ‘mauve’ room.”

“Nailed it shut?”

“Wish I’d thought of that first,” said Bilbo.

Bilbo and Ori wandered through the house, Ori relieved and happy that Bilbo had seen fit to paint over the mauve room in a jewel-tone aventurine with lacy medallions of deep plum around the upper border. Mauve was far too timid a color for a dwarf, never mind a hobbit.

“I hope you don’t mind,” said Ori, “but I told Dwalin about yesterday in the meadow.”

“And he said it was fine with him and was sorry he’d missed it.”

Ori stared at him.

“I talked to Thorin yesterday and Thorin predicted it. Of course, now we’ve excited their anticipation.”

“Which is just what we wanted!” Ori cried.

“Exactly. We can’t disappoint them now.”

In the bedroom, Ori admired Kyur’s painting of the origins of the Stonefoot axe dance, orcs dead everywhere at the warriors’ feet, though he hoped the original dancers hadn’t been quite so naked and aroused at the time.

“Master Kyur’s work is quite something,” said Bilbo.

“I feel like an underachiever,” said Ori. “All my models are doing is a little erotic cuddling.”
“Tenderness can be as erotic as anything else,” said Bilbo. “By the way, of the three of us, you came out looking best.”

“Best where?”

“In the dirty booklet Dis bought.”

“She bought that?” Ori nearly shrieked.

“She thought Thorin and I might like it as a betrothal present.”

“That’s really odd.”

“Of course it’s odd! Imagine getting a present on your betrothal instead of giving one.”

“Wait, are you officially betrothed?”

“We will be as of tomorrow,” said Bilbo with a grin.

“Really?” Ori gasped.

“The private betrothal anyway. The public betrothal will have to wait until we can make a ridiculous number of arrangements.”

“Congratulations!”

Ori hugged Bilbo right off his feet.

“Sorry,” said Ori gleefully.

“You can’t be that sorry,” said Bilbo. “My toes still aren’t touching the ground.”

“Oops,” said Ori, still not letting him loose.

“Very funny, Lord Ori.”

Ori did put Bilbo down, but he didn’t let go of him.

“Who else knows? Does Dori know? What about Dis? Do you know what will happen if Dori isn’t allowed to make a cake?”

“Dis knows, or she guessed. Terrifying dam. I don’t think I’d survive meeting her mother.”

“Your mothers adore each other.”

“Perhaps the most terrifying fact of all,” said Bilbo. “We’ll make the general announcement tomorrow at breakfast.”

“Cake?” Ori prompted.

“Is this in the interest of my welfare or do you just want cake?”

“Both,” said Ori, nodding.

“Dwarrow! Dori can make as many cakes as she likes before or after the day of the official betrothal. As the party whose hand was requested, it’s my right to make the betrothal cake for my prospective in-laws. Reasonably, this could mean everyone in Durin House and beyond and
including the elves and men, so the cake will be quite large.”

“Xocolatl?”

“Naturally! I’m not unaware how well that’s to be received, though I will be making layers of carrot cake and lemon cake as well.”

“Can I tell Dwalin?”

“Thorin planned to tell him t-”

“Yeh sneaky bastard!”

“-onight,” Bilbo finished. “Shall we join the festivities? I bought some lovely berry wine for the occasion.”

Bilbo and Ori sat in front of the fireplace, unravelling a skein of yarn, sipping berry wine, and growing increasingly giggly while Thorin and Dwalin serenaded them with harp and viol.

Bilbo said, “You know, Ori, you have the nicest beard.”

“I do?” Ori asked.

The hobbit grinned and ran his hand through it lingeringly.

“Oh, yes, what a lovely texture. I could play with it all night.”

“I could let you play with it all night,” Ori admitted, sighing. He leaned into Bilbo’s hand.

The music had stopped, for some reason.

Ori and Bilbo turned to discover their respective mates, bright red and staring.

“Oh,” said Bilbo, “but this is going to be fun.”
Fans, Fury, and Fatigued by family.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Ori finds time to help out, as usual, and things happen strangely ... as usual. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The next morning, Ori woke at his usual time. Dwalin had rolled out of bed and was pulling on his trousers.

“Wha’ are yeh doin’ awake, love?” asked Dwalin.

“It’s time to get up.”

“Though’ yeh migh’ wan’ t’ sleep in at leas’ one day.”

“No, I want to do this right. Besides, Thorin and Bilbo are supposed to make their announcement this morning! I’m not missing that!”

“An’ t’ morrh?”

“I’m getting up the same time, no matter what. Unless we’re both here on a rest day. Then I’m staying in bed with you. When I’m working, I’m even going to get properly dressed.”

“Really?” Dwalin teased.

“Alright, I’m going to wear my cardie. I miss it. You’re not wearing a uniform today?”

“I promised our Dori I’d take her t’ th’ market, help her pick ou’ yer name day present.”

“You’re taking Dori to the Alley of Divine Bliss?” Ori blinked innocently.

“Funny dwarf. It’s no’ worth me skin t’ even suggest it. Though, f’r Balin’s nameday present, I was thinkin’ a’ buyin’ him Durin IV’s penis.”

“You could have it engraved.”

“Aye, ‘A dick fr’m a dick’. Perfect.”

“He’d use it to prop open the bedroom door and torment us. You know, my birthday isn’t until a month or so after Durin’s Day, right?”

“I have all tha’ information by heart. Dori insisted. Yer favorite color’s amethyst. Yeh could read b’fore yeh could walk. Yer afraid a’ wasps, bu’ no’ bees ‘r spiders.”

“Wow, Dori did insist.”
When they were sitting over the pitiful remains of toasted wiggs, spicy scrambled eggs, and sausages, Thorin cleared his throat and he and Bilbo stood and held hands.

They immediately had everyone’s attention.

“We’d like to make a little announcement,” said Thorin, visibly abashed.

“You’re preggers,” said Nori.

“Y- No! Nori!” Thorin cried in exasperation.

Dori smacked Nori in the head.

“Hush! He’s struggling with his emotions as it is.”

Thorin groaned and rubbed his face with his free hand. He looked at Bilbo imploringly.

“We are engaged to be married,” said Bilbo simply.

They were immediately buried in the embrace of ecstatic, shouting dwarrow, men and elves. Dori put her hand dramatically to her heart and declared it was all she could wish. Fili and Kili seized Bilbo and tossed him in the air, demanding to call him ‘uncle’. Bilbo cried that they were lovely idiots and they’d best put him down. Thorin was danced around in turn by all his kin, by Bard, even, at one point, by Thranduil. Butter and Sugar forgot all obedience and bounced around the excited family like puppies. Frodo heaved a long-suffering sigh.

“Finally!” he cried. “Keeping secrets is really hard!”

Dori laughed and hugged him.

“You are quite forbearing, my tiny pet.”

“Yep, I am,” said Frodo. “What does ‘forbearing’ mean?”

“It’s what I have suffered through, every day! It means you are patient in the face of suffering!”

Ori stared and Nori snorted into his cup.

Dori shot him a look.

“Hush! You’re ruining the moment!” She turned to Thorin and Bilbo. “When are you announcing it to the people?”

“A week from first work day,” said Thorin, “at open court.”

“But you’ll do the braiding now,” said Dori.

It was not a request.

Thorin grinned.

“Yes, Bearer, we will do the braiding now.”

Thorin reached into his pocket and handed a box to Balin. Balin opened it and Dori peeked in, squealed, then closed her eyes.
“Ya gonna fall out, our Dori?” Nori jibed.

Dori’s eyes flew open as she frowned.

“Hush! I’m opening my consciousness to the ether for the blessing of Mahal and Yavanna on these beads!”

Ori heard snickers in the back of his head.

“Like they bleedin’ need ‘em,” Mahal chuckled.

“Oh hush,” reproved Yavanna. “You heard Dori. Your Thorin is struggling with his emotions.”

“They’ve already fucked. It’s me who’e strugglin’ here.”

“Darling, blessings now, fucking later.”

“Righty-o, me gem.”

Ori almost groaned.

Dori looked glowingly serene and daintily fluttered her fingers above the beads and then leaned over the box in Balin’s hands and kissed each bead. She stood back, looking pleased with herself and flapped her fingers at Bilbo and Thorin. There was a polite round of applause as no one had a ready reaction to the Bearer’s blessing.

Nori said, “Best clean the spit off ‘em before you use ‘em, our Thorin.”

“At least my breath doesn’t smell like vinegar,” Dori hissed.

Everyone wanted a look at the beads. Balin very kindly showed them around the table before bringing them back to Thorin and Bilbo.

They were miniature treasures of openwork mithril, studded with sparkling diamonds, and inside, a curious grass green stone with traces of yellow veining.

“Is that a type of jade?” Ori asked.

“Yes, a long time ago, Hild sent me a block. It’s been in my secret stash this whole time, apparently waiting for a child of Yavanna to wear it,” said Thorin.

Bilbo shook his head and chuckled. Everyone else groaned.

Roäc chided, “Thorin, that’s sappy even for you.”

“Aye,” Baluchistan commented from Gridr’s hood. “Yeh mus’ be very proud, our Thorin.”

“As a matter of fact, I am,” said Thorin. He turned and smiled at Bilbo. “Shall we begin?”

Ori expected the vows to be in khuzdul and westron. Instead, Thorin seemed to be speaking a third language Ori had never heard, a string of soft consonants and rounded vowels that gave Ori the shivers. With Thorin’s deep, smooth voice, the words sound almost erotic. Ori was dying to ask, but he knew he had to wait until after the ceremony.

Bilbo’s hair was stubbornly curly, and not easily woven for the right braid, so it had to be modified a little, using a method common for badgerlings, whose hair was not quite long enough for
anything else. Expertly, Thorin wove in strands from each side of the braid as he went.

Everyone leaned in when Bilbo braided Thorin’s hair, and spoke the words in khuzdul. His accent was impressive, and his fingers were quite nimble, even though the braid was not as even as it would someday be. A little imperfection in the betrothal braid was charming.

“Done and done, my king?” Bilbo asked with a twinkle in his eye.

“Done and done, ghivashel.”

Dain huffed impatiently.

“Bloody kiss already!”

The pair obeyed and there was a shout of cheers.

Then Bilbo sat and put Frodo on his knee and Thorin said something entirely unexpected, in khuzdul, while adding a Longbeard braid and Durin bead to the hair at the nape of the faunt’s neck. Sam leaned against Bilbo’s side with Bilbo’s arm around him and watched with wide eyes.

Of course. Frodo was being adopted.

When Thorin was finished he pressed his forehead to Frodo’s and smiled.

“It is done,” he said.

Frodo squeaked and threw his arms around Thorin’s neck, as everyone cheered again.

Thorin lifted Frodo up and held him, laughing.

“That braid must be powerful. Your grip is already getting stronger.”

“It is, isn’t it!” Frodo agreed. He rubbed his nose against Thorin’s. “Thank you, idad!”

“You are most welcome, o lord of muffins.”

“Oh, wait. Doesn’t Uncle Bilbo get a braid like this?”

“He will at the wedding, I promise,” said Thorin.

“Your turn’s up, idad!” Kili announced.

“Hand over the cousin,” Fili demanded. “He’s officially ours!”

Frodo was seized, tickled, dangled by his ankles and was quickly laughing too hard to breathe. Thorin leaned over and kissed Bilbo while the Durins and their guests called their congratulations.

“Well done, my dear,” said Bilbo.

“Well done, Mister Thorin!” Sam cried.

Fili threw Frodo over his shoulder, Kili swept Sam up onto his hip and the four of them lit out for the meadow with warg puppies right on their tails.

Dis embraced Bilbo rapturously. Ori thought the pair of them looked a little teary-eyed. Dis removed Frodo from her sons and proceeded to keep him and Sam on her lap for the rest of the meal. Jani was amused.
“No contracts?” Ori asked Balin as he sketched. On duty or not, Ori wasn’t passing up on the opportunity to record the event.

“They’re all drawn up, but folk’ll wan’ t’ see ‘em signed,” said Balin. “We’ll do tha’ next open court.”

“If Bilbo’s already wearing the braid, we’d better prepare for the place to be overflowing with people.”

“I’ve already warned Master Tin an’ Lord Zark we’ll be consumin’ large quantities a’ their finest now through Yule at leas’.”

Ori waited until the newly betrothed couple had accepted everyone else’s well wishes except his and Dwalin’s.

“I still say yer a sneaky bastard,” Dwalin told Thorin as they embraced then knocked brows.

“I didn’t think it qualified as a secret,” said Thorin. “Apparently every dwarf, man and elf in three kingdoms knew before I did.”

“Should’ve listened t’ yer drawers when they whispered,” said Dwalin. “Tha’ll teach yeh t’ go wi’ou’ yer skivvies.”

Ori hugged Thorin and then Bilbo. Bilbo laughed and said, “Go on and ask before your skull pops off.”

“Was that a hobbit language?” Ori asked. “Is it a secret like khuzdul was? When did it develop? Did Yavanna give it to you like Mahal gave khuzdul to the dwarf?”

“I did ask for it, didn’t I,” said Bilbo. “It’s a sort of cradle language most of us speak before we venture out beyond the front garden on our own. It’s very old, obviously, and it doesn’t have a written form, or even a name. The men of Angmar called it ‘hobytlaschpek’, but I think they were borrowing from the Numenoreans.”

“It’s very beautiful.”

“Especially the way Thorin speaks it,” said Bilbo, leaning into the beaming king.

“I had very good teachers,” said Thorin. “Truthfully, it was a lot easier to learn than baking muffins, no matter how well those muffins turned out.”

“That’s settled,” Dori approved. “Now, as we’re speaking of baked goods, what kind of cake would you like?”

Bilbo said, “Actually, I was going to ask for your help with that, our Dori. As the party whose hand was requested, it’s my duty to make the betrothal cake, but since it has to feed the entire family, if I were to do it myself, and I wanted it in a week, I’d have to start now.”

“Well blessed Mahal, we can’t have that!” Dori cried. “I would very much like to offer my assistance!”

“Thank you, Dori,” said Thorin.

“Yes, thank you,” Bilbo echoed. “Things will go far smoother with you there.”

Dori embraced them tenderly. Bilbo winked at Ori from around Dori’s arm and Ori grinned.
“What?” Nori groused. “No abuse on them not askin’ her ladyship’s permission to marry?”

“Permission? Why, I practically arranged it!” cried Dori. “What better permission is there than that?”

Balin smiled proudly.

“None better, beloved.”

Nori muttered about Balin knowing what side his bread was buttered.

After breakfast, Ori went to his office and started getting his materials together. He had just settled down to sort through all his quest notebooks when he heard a scratch at the door.

“Please come in,” he said.

Mistress Dazla entered, looking apologetic.

“Beg pardon, Lord Ori, but Mistresses Vi and Margr have come.”

“But Dori’s away at the market.”

“They actually asked for you.”

That set off alarms in his gut, but he was too honest to claim to be indisposed.

He sighed and stood.

“I’ll go put on a proper tunic. Please tell them I’ll be right there.”

“I’ve put them in the sitting room, milord.”

She curtsied and went out.

Doffing his cardie in the bedroom, he laughed at himself. As if Vi and Margr would be offended by his knitwear. It spoke to how well-trained he had become.

“There’s our Ori,” clamored Vi.

The sisters sat at the table in front of the fireplace with tea and jelly buns. They wore old shifts and had kerchiefs on their heads. Their beards, unadorned, ran in single plaits from their chins.

Something had riled them enough to make them leave their home without first ‘gussying up’. They kept a gig now, with a pony to pull it, which was likely how they had arrived.

He bowed to them, which set them off in snorts of laughter.

“Sit yer arse down an’ have a cuppa,” said Margr “We need your help.”

He did so, though he forewent drinking all of it before he asked what he could do for them.

“This come in th’ post this mornin’,” said Margr.
She slid an envelope across the table to him. It was addressed ‘Mistresses Vi and Margr, Dale’.

“An’ we can’t read it, a’ course,” said Vi. “Glorfy’s on patrol an’ our Milgr’s off keepin’ house f’r our Bard.”

“I’m honored you came all this way to ask me,” said Ori. Margr and Vi exchanged nervous glances.

“We couldn’t stand t’ wait,” said Vi.


It occurred to Ori as he looked over the envelope, that they had never received a letter in their lives. This must come as quite a shock.

“Do you know anyone in the Shire?” he asked. “This is hobbitish paper, and definitely hobbitish handwriting.”

“No’ a soul,” said Vi.

“If I may?”

Ori took his boot knife and slit open the envelope. He scanned the contents quickly, his eyebrows climbing his forehead.

“Oooooo whatever is it?” Margr asked, clutching Vi’s arm. Vi clutched back, looking terrified.

“Is someone we don’ know dead?”

“It’s not bad news and death isn’t mentioned,” Ori assured them. The sisters deflated with relief.

“Bu’ wha’ is it, then?” Vi asked. “Read it out loud, our Ori.”

To: Mistresses Vi and Margr, Dale

From: Misses Petal and Daisy Berrybuckle, West Farthing, Shire

Dear Ma’ams,

We just received the Coronation issue of Vug Magazine from traders as come through, and we are all in a rage to

tell you how excited we are at your Amazing Fashions!!! We have been just squealing and agog!!! Such Colors and

Patterns!!!

We are now eagerly saving our coin to buy Dwarven material to make similar frocks for
Enclosed, please find drawings we have done to show how such would look on hobbitish figures. We realized you are Terribly Busy with the Bearer and their Majesties, but if you find a moment, if you would please write back to tell us what you think and offer further suggestions as to different Colors, Additions or Subtractions

We Are Sincerely Yours,

Petal and Daisy Berrybuckle

PS. We think you are Fabulous!!!

PPS We are sincere and not making fun, as we are not Mean.

The sisters sat, stunned, for a moment, then fell all over each other, screaming with laughter.

Ori turned to the next page and there were, indeed, drawings of young hobbit lasses wearing Vi and Margr’s vicious blueberry costumes and all the others that had appeared in that issue of Vug.

“They must have gotten a special edition somehow,” said Ori. “There were some that were hand-colored, but they cost so much more than the regular edition.”

Vi, wiping the tears out of her eyes, but still chuckling, said, “By th’ time it go’ t’ th’ Shire, it was likely righ’ pawed over. They couldn’t ask all tha’ much, surely.”

Ori handed her the drawings.

“They’re actually well-done. They must have worked very hard on them.”

“Ooo, Vi, would yeh jus’ look a’ tha’,” said Margr. “Th’ cunnin’ wee thin’s!”

“Clever lasses,” said Vi. “They took our beard ornaments an’ turned ‘em int’ necklaces an’ such.”

“Do you want to reply to the letter?” Ori asked.

They looked at him, stunned.

“Reply?” Vi echoed. “We never wrote a letter before, or had one writ f’r us. Wha’ would we even say?”

“Probably what you just said. Thank them for writing, tell them that they’re talented artists, and compliment their cleverness with the necklaces.”

Margr turned to Vi.

“He makes it sound so easy.”
“It’s his job,” Vi replied.

“We can do it right now, if you’d like,” he offered. “I’ll ask Quartz if he’ll take it.”

“F’r serious?” Margr asked. “Wha’d’yeh thin’, our Vi?”

“Surely we’ve the coin f’r it,” said Vi. “Why no?’”

Ori smiled and shook his head.

“I’m not charging family members just for writing them a letter. We’ve practically already written it.”

“Yer a guid dwarf, our Ori,” said Margr, solemnly.

“Aye, yer sweet as… as truffles!” Vi avowed.

“Thank you,” said Ori, ducking his head. “I’m going to get some paper and ink.”

“Wha’ colors’ve ink yeh go’?” Margr asked.

Ori did a double take, then grinned.

“How about a nice bright purple?”

“Ooooono!” the sisters chorused.

While he wrote, Vi and Margr watched in fascination.

“Look how them letters jus’ come ou’ a’ his pen, our Vi. It’s li’e majick.”

“We should ge’ aroun’ t’ learnin’ one a’ these days,” Vi agreed. “Readin’ an’ writin’. Bein’ retired, an all, we’ve th’ time t’ learn. Then we don’ have t’ wait f’r our Milgr t’ read us our Shire’s.”

“And you can read and answer your mail,” Ori encouraged.

They stared at him.

“Surely, we won’ ge’ another letter,” said Vi.

“You might. I promise, if you do, I’ll read them for you until you can read your own. But, I can’t promise I won’t blush if you get marriage proposals.”

“We wouldn’t mind those,” said Margr. “Lo’ less noisy than idiots yowlin’ love songs from th’ street. Be’er f’r th’ furniture, too.”

Ori had just finished and they were squeezing the pot when the front door burst open then the sitting room door, and Dori exploded on them, overfilled cloth sack in one hand, and Rogi by the ear with the other. Dwalin moseyed in after them, obviously amused. Dori wore a severely cut purple pinstriped robe, looking very unfeminine and extremely angry.

“Margr! Vi!” Dori cried. “Good, you’re here! Look what I found in the market!”

He upended the sack on the table, loosing a landslide of shoddily-made knickers painted with a vaguely-familiar face.

Margr facepalmed.
“Rogi! What’ve yeh done?”

Vi shook her head.

“Should’ve let him in th’ coal scuttle a’ th’ pub as a pebble.”

Bilbo and Thorin, who had been lurking in the relative safety of the office, came out to see what was to-do.

“Dori?” Bilbo ventured. “Are you alright?”

“No, Professor Baggins, I am not! Look at this! Look what I found this little rock rat making and selling in the market!”

They looked. Then they looked again, aghast.

Thorin prodded the pile of underpinnings with the ornamental fireplace poker, obviously speechless.

Bilbo, however, was not.

“They’re not even well-done,” he judged.

“I’m ’n artist!” Rogi protested. “Ow! Dori! Leggo!”

Bilbo remained unimpressed.

“A cock-up artist, perhaps. Which, considering your product-“

“Professor Baggins!” Dori cried. “Please! I venture to say you’d not be making jokes if it was your face painted on these abominations!”

“What makes you think it hasn’t been?” Bilbo asked.

Dori opened his mouth, then apparently thought better of it. Instead he bellowed, “Nori!”

“Don’t look at me, our Dori,” said Nori’s voice from the kitchen. “You wouldn’t catch me workin’ a trick like this twice.”

Dori turned to Dwalin.

“Our deary! Isn’t there some reason in all this to throw Rogi in the lockup?”

Dwalin surveyed the pile.

“Bein’ a bad artist ain’t a punishable crime.”

“My face is on these knickers! It’s- it’s vandalism! And… and….”

“Slander?” Ori suggested.

“Yes! It’s base slander! Thorin! You must have the authority to order punishment!”

“If it’s supposed to fit the crime,” said Thorin, “what are my alternatives? Make him take painting lessons?”

“Let go o’ me ear!” Rogi whined. “Yer majesty, ’e’s had a gripper on it the whole way from the
market! I can’t feel it no more!”

Thorin stabbed him with a cold look.

“I’d keep quiet if I were you. You’re lucky he brought you here instead of dropping you into a bottomless mine pit.”

Rogi mewed piteously.

Thorin appeared to mull over his options, then came to a conclusion.

“Our please take this down.

_I hereby proclaim that, for the length of his lifetime, Master Rogi Margrul is banned from possessing articles of dam’s underpinnings, either owning, selling or wearing them, and that all dwarrow, dwarrowdams, women or men living within the dwarven realms of Arda are forbidden from selling such articles to him, or to any of his family, friends or business associates. Anyone caught doing so will be fined no less than three thousand gold, or forfeit their beard for life._”

“Got it,” said Ori, finishing with a swirl of ink, leaving space for Thorin’s signature and rapidly adding the time, date, and place.

“Please give it to Balin to close up any loopholes I may have opened with the verbiage. I’ll sign it and we’ll have it distributed. Will that do, Dori?”

Dori was not appeased.

“What’s to stop him from simply buying underpinnings in Dale, or some other realm of men?”

“I can’t enforce an Arda-wide ban on knicker distribution,” said Thorin, then paused and raised his brows thoughtfully. “Now there’s something I never thought I’d say. Dori, I’ll write to the crowned heads of Arda, not currently present, asking them to make the same proclamation as a courtesy to me.”

“Ra shandabi!” said Dori. _And agreed._ “But what do we do with this weasel in the meantime?”

“Turn him over to his mam.”

“No!” Rogi shouted.

“Tol’ yeh wha’d happen, didn’t I,” said Dwalin unconcernedly.

“I’ll scrub th’ royal privy! I’ll stand a’ th’ night market nekked with me knickers on me head!”

Nori jeered, “It’s a punishment, not somefin’ you’d do anyways for a larf!”

Bilbo stared stonily at Rogi. “What makes you think that Thorin has only one privy?”

“King Thorin!” Rogi appealed.

“I have spoken,” Thorin pronounced ponderously.
Margr took Rogi by his other ear. Luckily, Dori let go on his side before the angry dam dragged her ne’er-do-well son back out the door, threatening him with every breath.

“Yeh’ll be muckin’ ou’ after our Glorfy’s horse f’r th’ res’ a’ yer miserable life, an’ tha’s if yer lucky!”

Ori was about to excuse himself to return to work, when Mistress Dazla’s little bird shot in as the dams were heading out, and a moment later, Mistress Dazla appeared from the kitchen.

“Beg pardon, your majesties, but King Ulfr is at the gates, come for a visit.”

Thorin and Bilbo looked at her, then each other, completely stunned.

“Great Mahal!” Dori cried. “I have to change! Nori! Clear this rubbish off the table!”

“What do you want me to do wif ‘em?”

“Send them down the chute to the forges,” said Dori. Over his shoulder he threw, “And don’t you dare keep any!”

“I didn’t get word from Ulfr,” said Thorin. “Mistress Dazla, is he coming with an entourage?”

“A very small one, your majesty, a few soldiers and his wife with him, all on ponies. There’s not even a baggage cart. They look like two bandits on the run!”

“I’ll throw on a uniform, an’ go meet ‘em,” said Dwalin, kissing Ori on top of the head.

Ori resigned himself to not working again today.

“I’ll go change, too,” he said.

“You look perfectly fine, Ori,” said Thorin. “I don’t think this is a state visit.”

Bilbo said, “We should send a bat to Arne.”

Ori groaned.

“Poor Arne. He was hoping they wouldn’t be here until after Durin’s Day.”

Not long after this, Dwalin returned and announced the visitors.

Ulfr staggered in, looking like he’d been on a long march, barefoot, through Mordor. His queen, though clearly worried, was not nearly as harried.

“Sorry abou’ this, Thorin, perfesser,” said Ulfr. He bowed and then dumped himself onto the couch, practically deflating with exhaustion. “Thank th’ valar f’r this blessed couch.”

“Something I can get you, Ulfr?” Thorin asked.

“Whiskey. Laced with cyanide.”

Thorin seemed to struggle for a reply, then gave up and turned to the queen.

“Yizaris, how are you?” Thorin asked.

“A bit fatigued, Thorin, but it’s good to see you again, and looking so well.”
She was a gorgeous barrel of a dam, a great beauty built on the lines of Erda, with masses of lucky gold hair, wrapped around the crown of her head in a neat coil of braids for travel and her beard in a plait from her chin.

“This is Professor Bilbo Baggins, my intended. Bilbo, this is Yizaris, queen of the Ironfists.”

“Your majesty.”

“Professor.”

They bowed to one another.

“You must be exhausted, Queen Yizaris,” said Bilbo. “Would you like to be shown to your rooms to freshen up? We’ll have ale and some nice roast pork brought up to you, if you’d like.”

“That sounds divine, professor. I hope you don’t mind, but I don’t think Ulfr will be moving from the couch any time soon.”

Ori wasn’t expecting Thorin to turn to him.

“Yizaris, this is Lord Ori of Fundin. Ori, this is Queen Yizaris, daughter of Yizari.”

He bowed.

“Your majesty. It’s a pleasure.”

She returned his bow.

“Lord Ori, it’s an honor to meet you.”

Ori clenched his jaw to keep it from falling open.

“Thank you, your majesty.”

She went away directly, following Miss Oquizla to the guest rooms.

Ori shook his head.

“Perhaps a disguise. Nori could help me.”

Thorin nudged him with his elbow and grinned, then went to sit beside Ulfr.

Bilbo said quietly to Ori, “If you want to go back to work until dinner, I’m sure everyone would understand.”

“I feel like I need to be here when Arne arrives.”

Bilbo blew out a breath.

“Yavanna preserve us all. That’s going to be interesting.”

“So, Ulfr,” said Thorin, “running away from home?”

“Aye.”

“Seriously? I was joking.”
“I ain’t.”

“Still upset that your family came back as elves?”

“Pissed off tha’ they came back at all! Natterin’ a’ me day an’ nigh’, fuckin’ Da thinks he’s still king, me brother an’ his husband’ve turned the royal residence int’ non-stop debauch’ry. Mam’s still tellin’ me I made a lousy marriage an’ it’ll never last.”

“You’ve been married to Yizaris for a hundred and twenty years.”

“The lot’ve ‘em ‘r drivin’ me int’ th’ bleedin’ stone.”

“So you came to Erebor?”

“I needed a break, b’fore I did somethin’ I regretted.”

“For the peace and quiet?”

“Aye.”

“Oh how nice,” Dori cried, floating in, resplendent in filmy pink silk and taffeta roses. “You and dear Yizaris can accompany us to the Gamgees for a lovely little party. Oh!” Dori turned at the sound of Mistress Dazla scolding, “Thorin dear, please get your doggies out of the kitchen!”

“Butter! Sugar!” Thorin turned toward the door. “I think their food bowls are empty.”

The wargs skittered out, looking quite mischievous as Mistress Dazla swatted them with a broom. Butter clenched a large section of pork in her jaws. Sugar tried to pry it away and the pair of them went down, snarling and growling, and still unwilling to let go of the prize, they rolled right past the couch, past Ulfr, on toward the door.

“Fuck me,” said Ulfr. “Figures.”

Thorin chuckled and went over to the tussling wargs.

“My damlings,” he said, gently. The tussling stopped immediately as both turned, panting and tails wagging.

“Give that to me,” he ordered. Butter rolled over and Sugar promptly deposited the spit-covered meat into his waiting hand. He looked at it, then both of the wargs, and using his boot knife, sliced it in half. He chucked the pieces back and they were immediately devoured.

“I’m filling their bowls,” Bilbo called from the breakfast parlor.

“Thank you, my love,” Thorin called back and, wiping his hands on his breeches, went back and seated himself near Ulfr.

“You were saying?”

“I can’ remember. Where did yeh ge’ those?”

“Ori brought them back from a raid.”

Ulfr glanced at Ori.

“Who were yeh raidin’, lad? An’ did yeh leave anythin’ f’r th’ rest a’ yer party?”
Before Ori could protest, Killer shot through from the kitchen, chasing Nori-pori and Mask, around the sofa, over the chair, taking a lap around the coffee table. The cats went scampering away, but Killer got distracted by this new dwarf, barked excitedly, jumped up on the couch and started licking Ulfr’s face ecstatically.

Dori shouted ineffectually, “No! Bad! Down!”

From under the couch, Nori said, “Ha! Didn’t work on me, neither.”

“Killer!” Ori cried. “Get off King Ulfr! You weren’t invited!”

At that moment the door to the receiving room swung open and Arne walked in.

"Da? Everything alright?" he asked gingerly.

"No, it is no’!" Ulfr barked. "I'm bein' slobbered on by Morgoth's own mutt. Ge' off, yeh daf' thin'!"

"Killer!" Dwalin commanded.

Killer paused in mid-lick and jumped down on all fours on the couch, clocking Ulfr in the face over and over with his rapidly wagging tail.

"Here," Dwalin called him.

Killer came.

"Sit."

Killer sat.

"Guid boy," Dwalin praised, scratching Killer's ears with both hands.

Killer looked desperate to jump up, prancing his front feet paw to paw, but never quite leaving the ground.

"We need t' work on yer manners," Dwalin admonished him. "Sorry, yer majesty. We're still in trainin' so as no' t' drown visitors with slobber."

Dori handed Ulfr a towel and a flagon of ale.

"I'm sorry," she cooed. "We're fresh out of cyanide. I had to use strychnine."

"If yer tryin' t' make me go with a smile on me face, it won' work, bu' thank yeh anyway."

"Da!" Arne cried.

"Oh, now stop yer fussin', lad," said Ulfr. "There's naught wrong with me tha' abdication won' fix. Tha's a joke, son."

Ori was amazed to see them touch foreheads. He thought Ulfr must be feeling quite caught off guard to do so in public. The Ironfists didn't have the greatest reputation for warmth.

"Is amad here?"

"Upstairs, takin' a nap. She'll be down soon enough. Wha 'r yeh all dressed up f'r?"
"I was at work, in the library."

"Oh, aye, tha' thin' yer doin' f'r old Brur. Yeh kin go back, now. We're set. No need t' discomfit yer master over us."

Arne didn't look like he knew where to turn. He had been so obviously dismissed.

Thorin looked over at Ori, then cut his eyes at Arne.

Ori said, "Arne, have you had lunch, yet? I was going to the kitchen for a snack and then, I have some quest notes I wanted your opinion on."

"Of course, Ori," said Arne. "I could use some of that nice egg bread Binni makes. Do we have any?"

"I think so," said Ori.

He waited until Arne had approached, then turned to Thorin, who anticipated him.

"I'll send a bat to Brur," Thorin promised.

"You know, Ori," said Bilbo, "I believe I'll join you, unless three is, indeed, a crowd."

Arne smiled.

"Please. If it's alright with Ori."

They went into the kitchen, where Ori arranged a snack for the breakfast parlor, dodging the servants and their early preparations for dinner.

The three of them sat and Arne let his forehead thud to the tabletop.

Bilbo winced and Ori sighed.

"Sorry, Arne."

"I-It's all right, Ori," Arne replied to the table. "It's j-just bl-bleeding fabulous."
The next morning after breakfast, people were moving about getting themselves prepared for the evening party at the Gamgees. Dori had said she’d been told it was just a gathering of a few friends. Bilbo had smiled and said that among hobbits that could mean any number between five and fifty guests. Dori had frowned then,

“Now, Bilbo, what does one gift a hobbit for a housewarming?”

Bilbo looked at Dori, puzzled.

“Nothing. You get presents.”

“Ooo whadawes get?” Nori asked. “I know. I know. 'Shut up, Nori’.”

Bilbo continued, “It isn’t much. Usually just mathoms.”

“What’s a mathom?” Dori asked. “How much does it eat?”

“A mathom is an ornament or little gift, pretty and generally useless. You can display it on your mantel when the giver visits. If you want to bring some wine or some cookies, that’s always appreciated.”

“What? No lichen whiskey?” Dori asked archly.

Nori’s voice came from the wall, “Tastes like dirt!”

Dori huffed and flounced off to the kitchen.

Ori gathered his scriveners satchel. He knew the party was of a casual nature and before they went the entire lot of them were traveling out to Windy Poplars farm to see the aurochs and then the Guernsias’ to visit the raphcuctus birds. It was quite something of a royal outing and the entire mountain and Dale were buzzing with gossip about the sights to be seen.

Master Hallow looked a little flustered as the royal entourage arrived. Ori reflected that they had made quite the stir. Thorin and Bilbo leading the way, mounted in Minty and Vespa. Butter and Sugar padding beside them, resplendent with Durin blue dyed leather collars about their necks held with a mithril royal insignia. Between them rode Bard and Thranduil, Bard on a horse and Thranduil on his elk.

Dwalin and Ori followed, with Killer bouncing between them. Killer sported a Fundin green dyed leather collar with the family insignia of brass on it. Dwalin was mounted on Gnasher and Ori rode Grinder. Grinder was very patient with Ori. Riding a ram was quite different from riding a pony. The saddle was nearer the shoulders and Grinder’s great horns were rather close. Ori rather
thought Grinder was getting a good chuckle at his expense.

Glorfindel, Eowyn, and Boromir on horseback trotted along side as honor guard, followed by the Honored Bearer, Lord Balin, Crown Prince Fili and his betrothed, the Crown Princess of Dale, the Lord of Muffins and his loyal companion, Wee Sam, in the teacup that was festooned in gay colors, with Aragorn and Arwen on their horses on either side. A small cadre of soldiers brought up the rear.

There was a crowd waiting there and burst into cheers as they swept up before the farm. They all alit and Bard strode forward to greet Master Hallow. Master Hallow bowed over Thranduil’s hand, much to the elf’s amusement. Bard then presented Thorin and Bilbo to the all Hallows.

Master Hallow and Mistress Hallow were beyond delighted to meet the Dwarf King again. Ori watched as Thorin and Thranduil appeared to thoroughly enjoy meeting the entire family and all the hands available. The youngest girl was dressed very prettily and she handed a bouquet of flowers each to Dori, Arwen, Eowyn, Sigrid, Thranduil and Bilbo. Dori was delighted, Arwen and Eowyn gracious, Sigrid a little embarrassed, and Thranduil charmed. Bilbo was a hit with the farmer and his laborers.

Eventually, Hallow was all but bursting with pride as he led them over to a scrupulously tidy fenced barnyard. There was the auroch bull. He was beautifully tended. His coat was brushed and he looked very well fed. A few of the Dale cows stood nearby the far fences, receiving pets and love from the crowd which had moved forward to hang over the fence.

Hallow crooned at the bull, which came forward and hung its great head over the fence to sniff at the royal guests. To the delight of the crowd, Dori patted the bull’s head. The bull appreciated Dori cooing and scratching him behind the ears.

Hallow went through the barnyard gate and separated out two Dale cows and brought them over. Both were seen to be pregnant. Hallow announced they had been served by the auroch bull, and the aurochs cow, which he pointed out to them in a meadow, had been served by one of his own Dale bulls.

“They look very healthy and this bull looks remarkably pleased with himself,” Thorin observed politely, but loud enough to be heard by the crowd, who chuckled and clapped at the royal humor.

“They should be calving not long before Yule, yer majesty,” Hallow beamed.

Dori bustled into the yard to pat the cows. She gushed and blessed them while the bull snacked on her flowers.

The royal party inspected the barns and all the out buildings. Hallow’s gaggle of large gray geese followed them and passed comment occasionally. One of the barns was devoted to Master Hallow’s pigs. The back was open to a meadow where thee pigs could forage and roam. These pigs were unique in that they were a beautiful reddish brown but for a wide belt of white hair that encircled their middles. These were referred to as ‘Poplar’ pigs, well known in Dale for their docility despite their enormous size, amounts of piglets each sow could produce, and the excellent flavor of their meat. Boromir had to go into the fenced area and pat one of the pigs. Sigrid and Fili gamely followed him and scratched all ears that came to them.

Near to this stood a smaller barn that held Hallow’s special goats. These were bred for their size. They were tiny. Master Hallow had bred them for their meat to be for smaller parties where a full grown goat would be too much. The goats were adorable. They were all the colors goats came in. They had a small meadow of their own, this was decorated about with boulders and small objects for
the goats to play with. The goats pranced and leapt about on their tiny hooves. They jumped on top of and around of the boulders and ran through and climbed on the various other things in the meadow.

“They’re very active,” Hallow explained. “Very friendly and easy to train, but they’ve got a bit of a tic I haven’t been able to train ‘em out of. Must be somethin’ to do with their size as no goat’s ever behaved like it.”

“A tic?” Bard questioned.

“What do they do?” asked Thorin.

Hallow moved forward and gave a sudden great shout. Every goat froze and fell over on their sides. Feet straight out like little prongs. After a moment they all got back to their feet and went back to whatever they had been doing. Everyone stared.

Hallow shrugged.

“It’s plain weird. Every time they get startled, over they go.”

Sigrid made a ‘eep’ noise and Fili gasped. Eowyn, Arwen, and Dori stared to giggle then the rest of them dissolved into laughter. At the merriment, Sugar gave a loud bark. All the goats promptly fell over again. Thorin was about to apologize but Hallow scooped one goat up and showed it to them. It was as stiff as a board. A few moment passed and the goat was wiggling to get down.

“Strangest thing,” Hallow said again.

Thranduil looked as though he was going to suggest something but thought better of it.

They went on and Ori enjoyed looking at the sheep with coffee-colored wool and the flock of bright orange chickens which wandered about. He learned a great deal about winter feed, gathering the deep brown eggs these chickens laid, milking animals and how geese made excellent guards.

Butter and Sugar were exceptionally well-mannered around the geese. Killer hid behind Dwalin, his eyes huge.

“Yer twice th’ size a’ one a’ them,” Dwalin teased him.

Ori murmured to Dwalin, “It’s not the size, it’s what you do with it.”

He fluttered his eyelashes for effect. Dwalin gave him a look that made heat flush all through him.

Mistress Hallow invited them into the house where, in her sunny sitting room, they partook of a light luncheon. Master Hallow discussed cheese making with Bard, Thorin, and Wee Sam, while Arwen, Eowyn, Thranduil and Dori were taken off by Mistress Hallow for a tour of the rest of the house, the kitchen, pantry, and the dairy beneath the house.

Two hours later, they were back on the road returning toward Dale, giggling about the tiny goats occasionally. Bard directed them to a road that veered off to the right. This was a pleasant country lane and, at the end of it, was the Guernsias’ farm.

This was a good deal larger than Windy Poplars and all the meadows that were not growing feed were decorated with Dale cows happily grazing in the sunshine. The near perfect barnyard was bracketed with large open pens. Inside wandered many different kinds of chickens and a few other
birds Ori wasn’t sure about. He picked out quail and grouse then in a very large pen that included trees, strolled the raphcactus birds.

Ori watched them. They looked out of place here as much as they had in the great throne room of Erebor. They just weren’t bird-ish.

“They are very strange,” Bilbo said at his elbow.

“I wonder which of the valar made them,” Ori replied.

“A bloody drunk one,” Dwalin replied sliding an arm about Ori’s shoulders. Ori and Bilbo chuckled.

“I do think I agree with you, Captain,” Bilbo said coyly.

Eowyn stared.

“You know,” she began slowly, “I honestly thought Theo was teasing me when he described these. Meeting Celeborn’s Kelli was just something you expect of elfin magic…”

Dwalin roared with laughter. She blushed and pushed him.

“It’s just so odd to see a group of them.”

Guernsia arrived with Thorin and the others.

“They seen vey calm,” Dori observed. “I suppose it’s because they’re bigger than all the other birds.”

“They are,” Hathor agreed, then frowned. “I imagine the reason they are rather rare is that they are extremely bad parents.”

“Bad parents?” Bilbo asked as Ori scribbled.

“Very,” Hathor replied in a tone of disapproval. “There’s a hot box in the barn where we put the eggs. They’ve begun laying about once a week. The eggs are large but the birds don’t bother with nests. One or two of the fawns have to spend every morning hunting up any that might be laid overnight.”

“They prefer shady areas,” Guernsia said. “We’ve had saplings of the trees they usually like and a shipment of the fruit. Fortunately the trees are fast growing.”

“Indeed,” Hathor agreed. “We’ve weeded out a few little saplings near the main ones as they spread quickly. We’ve put those in pots and are keeping these safe against the first ones not surviving the winter.”

“You still have your touch with the trees,” Thranduil stated in a satisfied tone.

“Why, yes, King-Father,” Hathor’s eyes twinkled. “It works on many different plants.”

“I have a lovely vegetable garden and we had to rebuild my second larder into a place just for herbs,” Guernsia slipped her arm through Hathor’s as he grinned down at her. Their children had gathered as well. There were six, three boys and three girls. Ori, getting a better look at them than he had at the coronation, thought they were children of men as all were sturdily built, but their eyes showed the elfin blood and every ear was delicately pointed.
Hathor led the way to one of the barns, inside was a large area that looked as though it used to be about three stalls. In the middle was a stone structure covered by a glassed-in top about four feet high. Ori went over and looked with everyone. The stone structure was hollow. Inside the stone was a complex coiled arrangement of copper pipes. Ori could feel the heat rising from it. He looked at it the glassed in area. The middle, which had a glass cover, was getting the most heat was a pile of torn paper and rags, nestled inside were several large eggs. Everything outside this cover sat open to the air. Among hay and pans of water and grain walked raphcuctus chicks. They were ridiculously cute. They were balls of white fluff dotted all over with pink and blue spots.

“No bleedin’ wonder they’re rare,” Dwalin said, incredulously. “Any predator could spot ’em a mile away!”

“Apparently there aren’t any large predators where they occur naturally.” Guernsia told them. “The woods they like are said to be scant of game and so they flourish there.”

Hathor reach in and scooped up one of the chicks. It didn’t struggle, just looked inquiringly at him. He stroked the fluffy head and, with a smile, handed it over to Dori.

Dori cooed over it and it was passed from hand to hand as everyone wanted to pet it. The chick wasn’t the least bit bother by this and luxuriated in the attention.

“Where does the heat come from?” Thorin asked.

“We used to have a wood furnace here for the chickens, when we had too many,” Guernsia explained. “Once King Bard started on the buildings down in Dale, we requested hot and cold water pipes.” She smiled on Thorin. “Your people are wonderful. We have a constant temperature steam pipe for the hatchery.”

Thorin incline his head, regal but his eyes held a distinct twinkle.

“You and your family are gracious enough to care for my precious raphcuctous birds. Anything that will help, you know you have but to ask.”

The Aldernays giggled and led the party on to tour the rest of the farm, before treating them to a cup of tea with herb scones and pavlova with newly picked strawberries. Frodo and Sam stayed to play with the chicks under the supervision of Hathor’s brother-in-law, Alden.

Ori was intrigued to watch the interactions. Bard, Thorin, Bilbo, and Dori discussed the needs of the farm while Balin made notes. The two eldest children took Boromir, Eowyn, Sigrid and Fili over to where the quail were foraging in the extensive vegetable garden. The quail were as docile as the raphcactus chicks. They made no objection to being lifted up, cuddled and given grain. The eldest son, a mischievous youth named Thorson, teased Fili by teaching Sigrid how to hold the quail up properly, so it would take the grains she held between her lips. Thorson was discomfited as Sigrid immediately went to Fili and teach the trick to him. Thorson’s sister, Aldera snickered at him mercilessly.

The dinner hour was drawing near when Dori called them all to order. The two kings thanked the Aldernays for their hospitality and traveled on to the Gamgees for the party.

The Gamgees garden was everything Ori imagined a hobbit’s garden should be. Late in the summer, heading toward fall, the beds were filled with orange and yellow flowers in every shade.

“Asters and marigolds,” said Bilbo as they approached. “You’ll want to be up very close to draw
them, especially the marigolds. The flowers are densely packed with petals.”

A stone fence surrounded the whole of the garden, with a round, wrought-iron gate at the center, depicting leafy vines. Stone pavers, perfectly flush to the ground, led up to a neat stoop with benches on either side of the round door with its center knob. The door picked out a particularly vivid yellow from the flowers, and the earthen wall grew back seamlessly into the hillside. Round windows bracketing the door reflected the late afternoon sun.

They could already hear music and laughter from the back garden, even if they couldn’t see it over the hill.

“Are stone fences usual?” Ori asked Bilbo.

“No, but there are a lot of stones here and not so many trees.”

Ori already knew how he would start the record of this evening’s events.

“In a hole in the ground lived a family of hobbits,” he mused.

Bilbo chuckled.

“I can’t think of a better way to put it myself.”

“Thank you, Professor Baggins.”

“Not at all, Lord Ori.”

They glanced at each other and giggled.

“Here we are! Here we are!” Bell called, opening the door. “Welcome!”

She wore a party dress in the hobbitish style, a soft pink scattered over with dark blue flowers and festooned with bows, her hair loose from its workday bun and rippling down her back. Lavender stood behind her in what looked to be an adapted dwarvish tunic of lemony yellow, the long sleeves removed in favor of puffed caps and the straight hem replaced with billowing ruffles.

“Mister Thorin!” Bell cried. “How good to see you! May Hamson take your mounts back to the pasture or will they eat him?”

Thorin dismounted and approached with a bow.

“Thank you for having us, Mistress Bell. If Hamson would be so good as to help with the ponies, Fili and Kili will take care of the rams. Less chance of hobbits being snacked upon that way.”

Ulfr and Yizaris arrived at that moment, riding up with Gridr and Gloin, Elrond, Lindir and the twins. Celeborn and Galadriel followed, but they lagged behind, very obviously chatting and looking into each other’s eyes as their horses bore them forth.

Thorin gestured to the visiting Ironfists.

“Mistress Bell, you remember King Ulfr? And this is his wife, Queen Yizaris.”

"Of course! Good o’ ye to come and visit, King Ulfr. Not to worry. There’s carrot cake in the offing."

Ulfr grinned.
"Yeh know jus' wha' t' say, Mistress Gamgee."

"An' Queen Yizaris, come on in. Let us get ye a cold drink an' such."

"Thank you, Mistress Gamgee," said the queen. "My husband had mentioned the fine hospitality of hobbits."

"Oh, how you do go on! Such a becomin' color, that dress. Matches the face tattoos somethin' lovely."

Ulfr and Yizaris had been to see Master Mahrdin with Balin’s recommendation, having brought no finery with them from home. Clothing sold ‘ready to wear’ may have been beneath some nobles, but Ironfists were only concerned with looking tidy. Yizaris wore a pale lilac gown with a geometric trim. Ulfr wore a reddish-brown tunic and leggings with a black belt and boots. He had washed and rebraided his hair. Without travel dust, it was the same color as Yizaris’ gown.

While the party stood chatting, the wargs were already nosing about the flowers. Butter actually went as far as to open her mouth over one before Thorin cleared his throat and Butter desisted, obviously annoyed. She sighed.

“I know, I know,” said Thorin, scratching her behind the ear. “It’s a difficult thing to be a beast.”

The house ran in a straight passage from front to back, with rooms on either side. The tall ceilings were a left-over from the men who built it, and the woodwork followed the same patterns as that of Bag End East, with wainscoting and ceiling beams. However, the open doorways and central passage showed a distinctly dwarfish angularity. The rooms at the front, the parlor, dining room and kitchen, were interconnected on the left. A large, informal living room rambled open to the same length, on the right.

“Bell! Windows on both sides!” Bilbo enthused. “That’s splendid.”

“Isn’t it just, Mister Bilbo? I never seen the like in Hobbiton.”

“Here you go, Mistress Gamgee,” said Dori, presenting her with a nice bottle of berry wine. “May you be happy always in your new home.”

“Oh! Yavanna bless me! Aren’t you a sweetheart!” Bell cried, embracing her.

Ori looked over at Bilbo.

“Do hobbit holes usually only have windows on one side?”

“Yes, those are considered the best rooms,” said Bilbo. “The landscape in the Shire is different. The older smials don’t have central heating, either, so it’s better to have fewer windows. Fortunately, here it’s not a problem.”

“A blessing that is!” Bell agreed. “We’re quite spoilt here, I’m afraid.”

She pointed out the bathroom, with its large tub, round in the dwarfish fashion.

“Like havin’ your own swimmin’ hole in your house! I used to have a terrible time getting my tweens into the washtub. Now I can barely get them out.”

They passed through the open doorway into the back garden, a wide expanse of grass with tables and benches on the periphery, and a fire pit off to one side. The trees were decorated with hanging...
lanterns and one of the tables sagged under the weight of more food that Ori could remember seeing short of Thorin’s coronation banquet. This was just as well, since he thought there might be at least a hundred people here to eat it.

“Comin’ through!”

They moved aside to allow Hamfast and Bain to bring out even more kegs of ale, and a great, galvanized bucket of ice, which must have come from the mountain.

The scent of roasting meat wafted from the fire where Dain was tending a huge side of beef, the spit turning by virtue of one of his clockwork machines.

“Hope yer all hungry!” he called out merrily. “I can’t eat this all by meself.”

Thorin crossed his arms, grinning.

“You’re slowing down in your old age,” he teased.

“Not a’tall,” said Dain airily. “Where d’yeh’ thin’ th’ other side a’ beef went?”

“Into th’ smoker before dawn. Don’t let me big puddin’ fool yeh,” said Sculdis over the top of her tankard.

“There yeh go, ruinin’ me fun!”

Sculdis stuck out her tongue.

“Suffer!”

“Evil dam.”

“Bilbo,” Ori asked, “how does this work? Do we eat first and then dance?”

“It’s less formal than that. The musicians play most of the evening, with breaks for snacks. Everyone else grazes around dancing and socializing.”

Ori stared.

“Did you just say ‘graze’?”

Bilbo chuckled.

“Must be all those cows we just saw. Actually, it’s similar. You simply eat whenever you like. Buffet with dinner music.”

“Wish I’d brough’ me viol,” said Dwalin.

“Uh-uh,” said Ori. “Tonight we’re dancing. I want to show you off.”

“Oh, really?” Dwalin asked, raising a brow.

“Yes, I intend to flaunt you shamelessly,” said Ori in a grand voice.

“I suppose I can survive bein’ flaunted from time t’ time.”

Ori looked over where a quintet of musicians, men and dwarrow, were taking out their instruments and tuning up. The two dwarrow and one of the men looked familiar.
“Bilbo, look.”
Bilbo looked.

“Those musicians are the band from Ulwe’s Boat!”

“Apparently,” said Bujni, arm in arm with Dipfa, “That is the name of their ensemble as well.”

Ori did a double-take.

Bujni wore a hot pink summer tunic and trousers with teal trim, and his hair bore a teal stripe. Dipfa wore a frock of rust orange with lime-colored embroidered… limes. The pair were almost painful to the eye.

“Bujni!” Ori cried. “You’re very bright!”

“My diamond is conducting an experiment in color dynamics between courting couples.”

“I see,” said Bilbo.

“An’ so does everyone else,” Dwalin muttered.

Ori nudged him with his elbow, then felt the tickle of voices in the back of his head.

“Mahumb!” Mahal swore. “Wha’ is he wearin’?”

Yavanna piped up, “He looks like a bunch of petunias next to a bowl of forget-me-nots.”

“It’s abou’ struck me blind!”

“Why are you so surprised? You did make them!”

“I’m no’ takin’ responsibility f’r tha’.”

“Isn’t that what you said about Dain?”

“Aye, well, d’yeh blame me?”

Bilbo looked like he was struggling to breathe and Ori choked.

Dwalin leaned toward him.

“Yeh alright?”

“Mahal and Yavanna are providing commentary.”

"Hullo, there, Mister Bilbo!" Hamfast called.

The farmer wore a formal, long waistcoat over his white shirt. The curls on his head and his feet had been teased off to either side, laying flat and they bursting out toward the edges in crisp curls.

"Hullo, Hamfast!" Bilbo replied.

The two embraced.

"How’re ye keepin’?" Hamfast inquired.
Bilbo chuckled.

"Settling in, are you, Ham?"

"And so're ye, if rumor's true. Lookee, there t'is. Betrothal braid, eh? Yer mum'd be thrilled."

"She is," Ori murmured.

"Come an' get yerself a cold glass a' beer. Fortify yourself for the dancin'!"

Hamfast was equally happy to see all his guests, though he did give Boromir a lingering, enigmatic look. Boromir and Lavender held hands as they walked out, Boromir leaning a little to the side, for Lavender's comfort.

Dis and Gridr had gone off with Yizaris 'to catch up'. Ori assumed this meant gossip.

Ulfr, left to his own devices, looked askance at the musicians, and made straight for the buffet.

"Feeling better, Ulfr?" Thorin asked, sidling up to him before he could even reach it.

Ori had heard Thorin and Dwalin talking about Ulfr earlier in the day. They agreed that, under no circumstances, should Ulfr be allowed to socialize in this crowd without escort.

That proved to be wise, as the next thing that Ulfr did was find himself beard to beard with Erris, the once-elf

"Er… " Ulfr didn’t seem to know where to look. He went with, “Ulfr, King a’ Ironfists, at yer service.”

"Erris," said the once-elf. “At yours and your family’s.”

When it was obvious no more was forthcoming, Ulfr said gallantly, “An’ how’re yeh keeping, lass?”

“I was keeping much better before I lost my penis.”

Ulfr winced.

“War wound, lass…er…Bearer?”

“Some elf out in the Orocarnis has it now.”

Ulfr seemed to mull this over before bowing and saying something about ale. He turned, right into the path of Dree, screamed and backed up quickly.

Dree stood his ground, though he did look startled.

“Pardon? Do I have something nasty in my beard?”

“Math!” Ulfr gasped.

“Never seem much use for it myself,” said Dree. “Unless it was for counting how many orcs I had to kill.”

Ulfr squinted.
“Yeh was an elf once, lad?”

“Yes, though I don’t remember many particulars.”

“I know who has yer old body. Me maths teacher, returned fro’ th’ dead.”

“She can have it with my blessing. Shorter is better, in my opinion.”

Dree bowed and took his leave.

Thorin grasped Ulfr gently by the elbow.

“Come on, Ulfr. Let’s sit you down and get you some ale.”

They did so.

Ulfr downed one tankard, then another, and appeared to be somewhat at peace.

“Evenin’, Lord Ori,” he said at length. “Don’t suppose yeh’ve seen me Arne abou’ t’night?”

Ori had, in fact, seen Arne, and Nodun, and Tay, but a tiny and unworthy part of his brain wanted to tell Ulfr to go look up his bum. Fortunately, he was spared as the trio approached, dressed in summery oranges, golds and reds. Ulfr looked Arne over with a raised brow.

“Bi’ over th’ top, inudoye,” Ulfr rumbled.

Arne looked to be biting the inside of his lip and simply said, “Adad, you remember Master Nodun.”

Ulfr rose and bowed to Nodun very politely.

“Master Nodun, yeh look well.”

“King Ulfr, this is an unexpected pleasure. I’m sure you don’t remember my husband Tay.”

“No’ clothed, no,” Ulfr admitted wryly and also bowed to Tay.

“Your majesty,” said Tay. “What brings you to Erebor?”

“More li’e wha’ drove me fro’ me mountain. Short ‘r tall, they’re still me relatives an’ they’re still drivin’ me mad. Add me old maths teacher, an’ it were time f’r a wee break.”

“It’s been forever since I’ve been home,” said Tay. “Do Garg and his family still sell fried dough at the gate of the rock garden near the palace?”

“Alas, old Garg returned t’ th’ stone, bu’ his lad Narg’s married an’ raisin’ his own badgers in th’ business. Yeh never go home, lad?”

“I don’t have family there anymore. My idad raised me. When he died, I went traveling and ended up here, met Nodun and married. Now I have a successful business and it’s a mighty effort to take a week off.”

“Hard work never hur’ anyone,” said Ulfr, but he said it with a bit of a twinkle.

Arne had told Ori that this old saying was drilled into Ironfist badgers from the moment they opened their eyes. It was a common stitched sampler in Ironfist homes and the first thing young
scholars learned to write.

“An’ wha’ business ‘r yeh in?”

“I run a teahouse,” said Tay pleasantly.

Ori watched Ulfr’s twinkle extinguish.

“Quartz ‘r cobalt?”

“Cobalt. I did my full training under idad’s instruction and had my mastery before I left home.”

Ulfr didn’t seem to know where to look, and Ori could guess why.

Tea houses with quartz doorknobs sold tea and cakes. Tea houses with cobalt doorknobs offered other services as well.

Anyone with the baking skills and business acumen could open a quartz tea house. It wasn’t the province of any one guild, though many master bakers did own at least one. Only masters of sensual pleasures could run cobalt tea houses. The guild was among the most ancient, equally as old as that of the miners, and very well-respected. The requirements for mastery dizzyingly high.

In fact, it was a longer apprenticeship than even that of a chemical engineer.

Ori looked over at Bell Gamgee who was playing supreme hostess.

“Mistress Bell, I didn’t realize you knew Master Nodun and Master Tay.”

“Oh, such lovely people,” said Bell. "Master Tay’s tearoom is decorated finer than any in Michel Delving itself, and his tea blends are among the best I’ve tasted.”

“You went for tea?”

“We didn’t realize there was anything else on offer, not the first time we went anyway.”

“I see,” he said, grinning.

“We aren’t in the habit of spending coin on ourselves, of course. What with all these faunts, that’s where the money goes. You can only patch the rump of a pair of trousers so many times before there’s nothin’ left to patch. But it was our anniversary, you know. When I think on it, I should have known there was something more to it when we arrived and he told us he’d be happy to see to us, as he didn’t have further appointments that evening.”

“Talkin’ about our Master Tay, me dear?” Hamfast asked, cuddling up to her. “Yavanna bless me, but that dwarf has a pair a hands. He found knots in me shoulder muscles where I didn’t even know I had muscles!”

“I think,” said Ori, “that someone should warn other hobbits who might come to visit that they need to look closely at teahouse doorknobs.”

A bustle of movement caught Ori’s eye.

“Buer!” Ori cried.

The inventor edge though the doorway with a basket heaped with fresh spun sugar.
“Oi! Ori!”

“Evenin’, Mister Buer,” said Hamfast. He and Bell went over arm in arm to greet him. “What’ve ya there?”

“A treat for later,” said Buer, shrugging modestly. “I can put it anywhere you want, as long as it’s cool and dry. This stuff’s very sad when it melts.”

Hamson was summoned to bear away the basket.

Bell went to the buffet and returned with a tall, sweating glass.

“Berry soda water, am I right?” she asked, proffering it.

“You remembered! Thanks, Missus Gamgee!”

Ori looked between them.

“I didn’t realize you knew each other.”

“Buer did all the lighting in the house!” Hamfast said proudly. “All those glass-touch-lights-up things. I don’t miss candles and lanterns a whit.”

“Safer for the faunts, too,” said Bell.

When the Gamgees went off to mingle, Bujni and Dipfa swept in to greet the new arrival.

Ori excused himself when he saw Ivo looking through the crowd.

“Hullo.”

“How’re you keepin’, m’lord?”

“I’m keeping very well. Sorry about the other day.”

“What? When Lady Eowyn handed me my arse on a platter?” Ivo grinned. “Actually, that’s why I’m here. I need to apologize. I know I should do it in private, but I’m not likely to be in private with her, if she has anythin’ to say about it. Also, I only got so much time. Master Dubb’s arranged for me to go out tonight on patrol with Lord Glorfindel.”

“Really?”

“Aye, I’m supposed to learn how to handle drunks and other idjits, and also, where to look for folks as passed out in the gutter, so we can move ’em before the streets is flushed. Master Dubb says it’s a great opp-er-too-nity for me. I’m such a git, I had to ask him what that meant.”

“It’s not the worst word you could learn.”

“No, but I’m not meant to sound scholarish. I don’t know nothin’ about it, and me mates’ll be saying I’m putting on airs.”

Ori thought about this, then finally said, “Master Dubb’s not a scholar, and he still knows what it means. Do you think he’s putting on airs?”

Ivo opened his mouth, then closed it, then said, “I got to think about that before I answer.”
“You already know the answer,” said Ori with a grin.

“You’re right. I’d rather have the cram brains mad at me than Master Dubb.”

“Good choice.”

“Oi! There goes her ladyship. See you, m’lord.”

Ori looked around. Bilbo had moved in to watch over Ulfr. Thorin had been roped into a conversation with Buer, Dipfa and Bujni. Buer was beyond excited, waving his arms, which caused his hair to chime incessantly.

“King Ulfr? Wow! He’s a legend.”

“In his own mind,” Thorin murmured.

“He invented the foam that extinguishes coal seam fires! He invented sungraphics! He’s so… so, you know?”

“Yes,” said Bujni. “I know exactly what you mean. It is very difficult to express his greatness in the field of chemical engineering. Perhaps, your majesty?”

Thorin looked amused.

“Buer, would you like to be introduced to King Ulfr?”

“Really?” Buer all but squeaked like a badger.

“I think it can be arranged. Please come with me, Buer.”

Ori followed over to where Ulfr chatted, somewhat awkwardly, with Bilbo. It was obvious Ulfr found Bilbo a challenging conversationalist.

“King Ulfr, excuse the interruption.”

“Wha’cher, Thorin?”

“This young dwarf is a scientist and engineer here under the mountain and has requested an introduction.”

Ulfr chucked his chin up in ascent, and Thorin obliged.

“Buer, son of Uer, this is King Ulfr of the Ironfists.”

“Your majesty,” Buer bowed.

Ulfr looked him over, pausing for a moment at his hair. Buer was so excited, it rang in its full range of chimes.

“How’re yeh keepin’, lad?”

“Very well, your majesty.”

Thorin tried to grease the way.

“Buer was just saying he admired your work with sungraphics, among other things.”
“Do yeh, now?” said Ulfr, a bit more animated. “Produced one a’ yer own, have yeh?”

“Several, actually, King Ulfr. This is my latest.”

Buer took a notebook out of his coat pocket. The notebook was stuffed with stray sheets of paper, drawn over with diagrams. With this incidentally came a coil spring, and three small phials labeled ‘sandalwood’, ‘sulphuric acid’ and ‘bacon grease’. He managed to catch the half-eaten meat sandwich and his pen knife before they hit the ground.

“Sorry,” said Buer, reddening.

Ulfr snickered.

“We jus’ won’ tell th’ wife. Me own pockets ‘r worse. She’s always after me abou’ leavin’ paints and solutions in me pockets when th’ clothes are sent t’ th’ wash. Only, yeh migh’ wan’ t’ keep yer samich in different pocket fro’ yer chemicals.”

“Point taken, your majesty. Here it is.”

Ulfr looked, then looked again, gaping. Ori flickered a gaze over the print, which wasn’t even protected with glass or some blotting paper. The brilliant colors of the late sunset glowed across the surface and a flock of ravens flew by, captured in such perfect clarity that Ori could pick out the white feather in Quartz’s tail.

The Ironfist king was speechless for long moments.

Finally, he managed, “How long’ve yeh been tinkerin’ wi’ sungraphics?”

“About six months, but not constantly or anything. The first were pretty bad, not even in color.”

“Lad, in six months yeh’ve perfected wha’ took me sixty years to create.”

Buer nodded excitedly, his multicolored hair rippling like long blades of grass in the wind.

“That’s the point, right? You laid the foundation, did the trial and error, the figuring and dirty work. All I did was build on your research. That’s how it’s supposed to work!”

Ulfr shook his head.

“Even if yeh had th’ patent documents laid ou’ in fron’ t’ yeh, yeh’d still have t’ understand how it all works, and extrapolate from there. Yer a bleedin’ genius an’ I’m proud t’ know yeh.”

Buer yelped delightedly and hugged him.

Immobilized, Ulfr laughed in spite of himself while Thorin gestured away Ulfr’s bodyguards from slaughtering the young scientist.

Finally, Buer realized what he had done and was brighter red than the strands in his hair.

“Forgive me, your majesty, I’m so sorry.”

Ulfr waved it off as if he was swatting a fly.

“Wha’s yer guild, lad? Yeh’ve no bead. None I kin see, anyway.”

Buer shrugged.
“When I was of age to join a guild there was no money for me to pay my entry or dues. Just as well. I saw other dwarrow in their different guilds and I realized, I would never be able to make my choice even if I could pay. The guild system is great, if you have a very narrow focus, but I found the parameters of each to be waaay too constricting.”

“Yeh mus’ step on a lo’ a’ toes,” said Ulfr.

“Even guild members step on a lot of toes, right? Can’t be helped. If I’m going to get into a fistfight anyway, I want it to be because I did something intentionally, not because it was an ‘oops’. And my gadgets and whatnots are usually too strange for any guild to want to make a claim anyway.”

“F’r instance?”

“So, I have this patent on the machine for spun cane sugar. I designed and fabricated the machine myself, and I actually make the product and I sell it. So, that’s the engineers’ guild, the welders’ guild, the sweet makers’ guild and the merchants’ guild, and that’s just something I do for a side gig at night.”

“Gig.”

“Gig. You know, a job that you do now and then. Depends what else you’ve got going.”

“I see,” said Ulfr. “An’ how many ‘gigs’ d’ yeh have goin’ righ’ now?”

“Eleven. Twelve if I can convince Mister Wandi to let me demonstrate my new system for curling hair.”

Ulfr regarded the young dwarf in naked amazement.

“An’ yeh sleep when?”

“Sleep?” Buer asked, then laughed. “I manage. I’m not suffering.”

All the while they had been chatting, Buer never looking away, he had been sketching something on the hem of his tunic in graphite wand.

Ulfr frowned at him, calculating something by the looks of it.

“Are yeh an Ironfist, lad?”

“My adad is. Amad’s a Longbeard.”

“Uer… Uer… Son a’ Tuer, who was th’ son a Tuaris?”

“Yes!” said Buer, surprised.

“Aye, tha’ makes us cousins, lad. Me umadel an’ Tuaris was sisters.”

Bilbo looked from one to the other.

“And I thought hobbits were all related.”

Ulfr threw out, “Turns ou’ yeh an’ I ‘r related, too, perfesser. Tha’s besides th’ point. Buer lad, come over an’ have a drink wi’ me. I wan’ t’ hear abou’ yer research.”
Ori watched them go and turned to find Arne standing not three feet away. Ori sucked in a breath of horror, but the prince only looked relieved as Ulfr and Buer walked over to the keg, talking animatedly.

Arne seemed to be mouthing, “Yes, please, go.”

Nodun bit her lower lip to keep from laughing, but Tay looked between Ulfr and Arne with a little crease of worry on his forehead.

Gloin kept looking up in the direction of Dale, though they couldn’t see it over the hill.

Legolas and Gimli had not appeared.

“How are those lads?” Gloin muttered. “If they’re off canoodlin’ behind some boulder when they ought t’be here-“

“I’m sure they’re on th’ way, love,” Gridr soothed. “An’ yer own da’s wrath never stopped us from a bit a’ canoodlin’.”

Gloin grinned naughtily.

“Remember when we-“

“That’ll do,” Gridr admonished, lightly smacking his bum.

“Da! Mam! We’re here!” Gimli announced.

“Bloody finally!” Gloin cried.

He turned as Gimli and Legolas exited the house. The party plunged into shocked silence.

Legolas’ long, straight blond hair now sat in a huge halo of tight curls about his head, and Gimli’s mad rippling tresses flowed down straight as a pin, loose all the way to his knees.

“How d’ye thin’?” Gimli roared excitedly.

“Grch!” Gloin opined.

Truly shocked, the older dwarf could only gape, while almost everyone else roared with laughter.

“Yeh look like yer heads was attacked!” Dubb crowed.

Gridr, however, cocked an eyebrow at them.

“By a mad hairdresser, I’ll bet. That’ll all wash out, I hope.”

“Aww, mam!” Gimli wailed. “Yeh ruined th’ joke!”

“Better’n killin’ yer adad, yeh daft thin’!”

“But, what do you think?” Legolas asked, kneeling to embrace her.

“When I get over it, I’ll tell yeh,” said Gridr.

“It’s no’ permanent?” Gloin managed.
“No, Da,” said Gimli, bumping foreheads with him. “It’s just f’r tonight. I promise”

“Guid, ‘cause yeh look a righ’ pair a’ numpties.”

Legolas laughed, turning toward Thranduil.

“Hear that, Ada? I’m a numpty!”

“You must be very proud,” said Thanduil dryly.

Gridr cuddled up to Gloin.

“See, there are worse thin’s than canoodlin’.”

“Yer righ’, as always, mizimel.”

They heard Tilda shouting, “Legolas! I want to touch your hair. Kneel down so I can reach. Oooo, it’s solid!”

“It’s not that bad, Til,” Legolas protested, laughing.

“Smells funny!”

“You weren’t there when Wandi put it in. It smelled like shellac.”

“Legolas! Gimli! There ya’ are!” Hamfast called. “What’d ya do to your hair?”

“Look! Look!” Tilda cried.

Ori craned his neck to see. Tilda had pulled one of Legolas’ curls straight and let go. It bounced back like a spring. Tilda shrieked in delight.

“Da! Nana! Look! Legolas has boing-boing curls!”

“That’s impressive,” Hamfast allowed.

Bard shrugged.

“Naturally. My son-in-law is a genius.”

Thorin snickered.

“I don’t think there was anything natural about that.”

“I feel like an underachiever,” said Kili. “Fi and I never even thought of doing that.”

“You tried to curl your hair with hide glue as a pebble,” said Thorin.

“I don’t remember that.”

“And I can’t forget it.”

“Aaand, there’s the guilty party,” said Bofur. who had arrived with Nori from somewhere beyond the food tables.

“Mister Wandi,” said Hamfast. “And Mellon! Good a’ ye to come! How’re the plants?”
“Growing very nicely, thank you, Mister Gamgee,” said Wandi. “Your daughters do such a marvelous job, far better than I could.”

He wore a leaf green silk robe with gold braiding, and Mellon sported a matching collar.

Thranduil muttered, “I swear that dog has a bigger wardrobe than I do.”

Sigrid linked arms with him.

“But not a bigger wardrobe than Tilda, Wicked Stepmother. Funny, but I don’t recall ordering all those clothes for her that arrived this morning.”

“A princess must look the part,” said Thranduil loftily.

“She has fourteen pairs of leather boots and a pen knife that coordinates with each.”

“Seemed like a nice, round number,” said Thranduil with a sniff.

There was a great noise of flapping wings.

“We have returned,” Red Queen announced, alighting in the garden with six of her court. “The rejoicing may commence.”

The faunts sent up a mighty cheer.

“Yaaaaay!”

She nodded to graciously acknowledged them before strutting over to her hostess.

“Mistress Gamgee, we were honored by your invitation.”

Bell curtsied.

“And we’re honored by you’re acceptin’ it, your majesty. We put aside the best bones from the pulled beef just for yourselves.”

“Ehhhxcellent,” Red Queen enthused as she followed Bell to the feast heaped on a huge silver platter, borrowed from Erebor’s royal kitchen.

Haldir came through with Hansom as escort.

“Haldir? You’re dressed rather officially for a garden party,” said Thranduil.

“I wanted everyone to see my new uniform trousers, king-father.”

Ori thought Haldir especially wanted Wandi to see his new trousers, which were made snug, almost like hose, and incredibly flexible. Haldir bowed and turned to greet Eowyn.

“His new trousers?” Thranduil asked, “or what he has stuffed inside them?”

Bard arrived and handed his husband a glass of Dorwinion from the cask Thorin had provided.

“Given your favorite diaphanous robe, sweetie, perhaps it’s best not to pursue it.”

“It’s a good thing they’re both immortal,” Galadriel observed. “Long distance relationships are nothing to such.”
"I'm interested in what other changes Haldir plans on making to his uniform," Celeborn chuckled, stroking Kelli's head resting against his hip. The twins larked off to the food and the dwarf princes. Their laughter was soon heard.

"Ham," Bell called. "Perhaps it's time. Before the band get's goin'."

"Aye, me sweet. Just let me get me cap."

He went back into the house and returned, talking over his shoulder to Bain.

"They've done a beautiful job with the buildin'," said Hamfast. "An' me Bell's always made sure our home was comfortable an' welcomin'."

Hamfast approached Bard with his cap in hand and gave a bit of a bow.

"Now, King Bard, I pledge meself as a good tenant, never late with me rent, an' always ready t' give satisfaction."

Bard stared at him, wordless, for so long, the hobbit family became uneasy, looking at each other with sickened expressions.

Very, very politely, Hamfast asked, "Have I given some offense, King Bard?"

Finally, Bard roused himself.

"Of course not, Hamfast! It's just, you aren't my tenant. I'm not renting this house to you. It's yours."

Bell gasped and the older Gamgee offspring whispered among themselves, filling the air with nervous energy.

Hamfast considered and finally managed, "An' the garden around it, King Bard?"

"Yes, that, too. I'm sorry, I should have put it in writing. Ori? Will you help me?"

"Certainly. Hamfast? Would you like me to draw up the contract between you and the crown?"

Hamfast rocked back on his heels and Bell darted forward and clutched his forearm. Lavender had grasped Boromir's hand and leaned into him, while her sisters held each other about the waist and Hamson looked proud enough to burst.

"That would be mighty kind o' ye, Mister Ori. I never expected this. I never even come up with a name."

He looked to Bilbo, who grinned and said, "Well, Hamfast, it's your choice now, isn't it."

Hamfast looked to his wife and she shook her head.

"Up to you, my dear."

Ori had no idea what they were talking about. He figured it must be something sensibly hobbitish, so he held himself ready to do anything short of standing on his head in the manure pile.

Hamfast, red-faced, finally straightened his spine and said, "Gardener. The family name will be Gardener."
"Excellent choice," Bilbo encouraged.

"If I get too big for me britches, yeh'll tell me?"

"If you insist, Hamfast," said Bilbo, "but I don't think you're in any danger."

"Thank ye, Mis-… Thank ye, Bilbo."

Finally, obviously, Bard had reached his limit of curiosity.

"Thorin, do you know what's going on?"

"I think Bilbo could tell us," said Thorin.

Bilbo looked at both of them, and finally the shoe dropped.

"Oh! Of course. I'm a complete biscuit head. Bard, by granting Hamfast his own home and lands, you've have entitled him as a gentlehobbit."

"I thought he already was," said Bard.

"He is, in terms of his manners. Don't look at me like that, Hamfast. You've always had the cleanest fingernails of any guest I've ever had at my tea table. I can't even say that about all the Tooks."

Frodo nodded furiously.

"It's true! They're cleaner than mine! And he washes his face without anyone telling him, too!"

Bilbo gave Frodo a wry look before continuing.

"Bard, you've elevated Hamfast's station in life. Even if he never so much as rents some tenant an acre of land, he is now the Baggins' social equal."

"An' I'm obliged t' ye, King Bard," said Hamfast, bowing.

Bard grinned down at him.

"I'm the one who's obliged, Hamfast. We all are."

The contract was quickly drawn up, with Bilbo's input, and signed.

"Never been so glad I learnt to read an' write," said Hamfast.

He turned and kissed his wife and the guests erupted in cheers.

Thorin nudged Bard's hip.

"Sometimes it's good to be king."

“Especially now it is," Bard agreed.

But not everyone was as happy.

Sam looked at Frodo, his lower lip trembling.

“Sam?” Frodo asked. “What’s wrong?”
“This means ye ain’t me ‘Mister Frodo’ no more!”

Sam seized Frodo into a crushing hug.

“Of course I am!” Frodo protested, hugging back. “Only now, you’re my ‘Mister Samwise’, too.”

Sam hiccuped, pulled away and gazed at Frodo with his head cocked to the side as he worked this out.

“Jings!,” he said finally. “I didn’t think about it like that.”

Boromir grinned at Bilbo.

“‘Mister Frodo and Mister Samwise’ makes them sound like a couple of old men, sitting on the stoop, talking about the good old days.”

“The very thing to which most hobbits aspire, Captain,” said Bilbo. “The front porches of the Great Smials of Tuckboro are fairly chockerblock on a fine spring evening.”

“I’d like to see them someday,” said Boromir. “Is that even possible?”

“Marrying a Gamgee will certainly gain you an invite at least to tea when you’re in that part of the world. The Gamgees are well-liked by both sides of my family. Just watch your head. The ceiling are a good bit lower than you’re used to.”

“Indeed,” said Tharkun, walking over with a plate of pulled beef and tomato and cucumber salad. “I have a permanent flat spot on my forehead and a hunched back from Bag End alone.”

Rigel-chuh walked up after him and snickered.

“Your forehead is flat because you got stinking drunk one night with Tom Bombadil and the two of you pretended to be mountain goats: Baaaaaaah! Crash”

As everyone else laughed, Tharkun shot the blue wizard a look.

“Don’t you have a ritual to attend?”

“You’ll recall, my favorite ritual was always embarrassing you, Gandalf, the Great and Powerful Wizard of Arda.”

“How unfortunate that all your memory returned.”

“Yes, it’s terrible,” Rigel agreed merrily.

“Ah, there you are, Mister Rigel,” said Bell. “And you’ve got yourself a plate. Wonderful. Oh! The watermelon! The faunts will be clamoring for that. Come t’ think on it, Hamfast’ll be right up front.”

“Oooo,” said Bilbo. “Watermelon seed spitting contest!”

He gamboled off after her.

Ori smiled up at the blue wizard.

“Hullo.”
“Good evening, Ori-chuh. How are you keeping?”

Ori laughed.

“Fine, thank you! Are you still called Rigel, then?”

“I like it best of all my names, I think, so I shall keep it, along with anything else my esteemed colleague comes up with for me.”

Tharkun raised a brow and gave a ‘humph’ worthy of Master Brur.

“I think I’ll go visit Radagast for a decade or so.”

“Go on then,” said Rigel. “Ori-chuh and I will leave a candle in the window for you.”

“A white one,” Ori confirmed, “to match your robe.”

“And don’t forget to bring back some mushrooms,” Rigel completed.

Dwalin looked between them and Tharkun and chuckled.

“Yer doomed, laddie. Give it up now.”

They had been sticking with round dances, since it was a form familiar to all races of middle earth, but now the hobbits called for something different.

“Give us a ‘follow th’ leader’, if ye will,” Hamfast asked the band.

The musicians stared at him, completely asea. Which, Ori supposed, was perfectly apt in their case.

“Follow the… What kind of dance is that, Mister Hamfast?” asked one of the dwarves.

“It’s a dance done in two rows, partners facing each other.”

“Oo!” the man cried. “Yeh mean ‘Strip th’ Willow’.”

“I imagine so,” said Hamfast.

They played him a few bars of something springy.

“Aye! That’s it! That’ll be grand!”

As soon as Ori heard the musicians start, he turned to them, gaping.

“Seriously?”

“What is it?” Bilbo asked.

“I suppose the tune is right, but it’s an old Firebeard song. The refrain goes: ‘If I were king of pleasure, and you were queen of pain, you would love me’.”

“Oh, dear. Though, it is rather catchie, isn’t it.”

“I’m sure it’s the perfect rhythm for flogging,” said Ori. “What do we do? Is it really like strip
“Yes, you form up in two lines, partners facing each other, and do exactly what the couple before you does. Nothing simpler.”

“Do we get to ‘race the band’?”

“Now you’re being naughty,” said Bilbo.

“Aye,” said Dwalin. “He though’ he’d beat yeh t’ it this time.”

“Here we go! Here we go!” Hamfast called them. “Pick yourselves a partner an’ mind your toes!”

Ori saw firsthand what that meant as Hamfast and Bell led off, hands joined, skipping sideways down the middle of the dance, then spinning in place, skipping back up, then each skipping behind a line of dancers to take new places at the bottom of the rows. They were quite graceful, as they somehow managed to dance solely on their big toes, barely touching the ground as they twirled.

They made it look so simple, and it would have been simple, Ori supposed, if they were all hobbits, or at least near the same height. Somehow they struggled through the first round, and then grew a little more comfortable. Given the events, Ori would later say they had gotten a little too comfortable. At that moment, Ori could only giggle as he and Dwalin went up and down the dance and he could barely meet his husband’s eye, as the last time they’d done such as sprightly hopping up and down was at the inn. They had been naked, and pretending to be elves.

The real elves seemed to take this new challenge with the grim seriousness of battle, except for Glorfindel, who danced with both Margr and Vi at once and jumped with an eye to height.

“Whoop! Whoop!” he called with every leap, like a huge, blond crane.

The younger set took this up themselves, and the first time Dwalin did it, Ori lost step. Killer decided he wouldn’t be left out of the fun and ran in to jump and yip with them.

“Ah,” said Red Queen, “so it is a ritual after all. Allow us to assist.”

The bonebreakers strutted around the periphery of the dance, beating their wings and echoing every ‘whoop’ in a screeching chorus.

Ori completely lost his composure and could barely finish the round, never mind the dance, which threatened to go on and on in marathon fashion.

Dori and Balin dropped out early, as she was running to the privy. It was just as well. By the time she returned, there was something of a massacre going on, with bodies strewn across the lawn. The band hadn’t entirely stopped playing and the instruments straggled to a halt all at different times.

“I knew we were tempting fate,” said Dori with a decorous sigh. She sat on a chair the Gamgees had provided her.

Red Queen fluttered over and surveyed the wreckage with avian satisfaction.

“Excellent,” she pronounced. “Lots of bodies. There will be many bones on which to pick through in the coming year.”

Hamfast stood with his hands on his hips, surveying the damage, as Bell buried her face in his
shoulder, shaking with laughter.

“Awright,” said Hamfast. “Let’s try it with two separate groups. It’s too dangerous with tall folk fallin’ every which way like trees.”

“I suppose,” said Thranduil, straightening his twigs as he climbed to his feet, “that there is a limit to all this togetherness.”

“Yeh think?” Ulfr asked, spitting strands of Elrodan’s hair out of his mouth. “Yizzie? Yeh a’righ’?”

“I’m fine,” said Queen Yizaris, brushing off her skirt, “but I’m not sure poor Master Lindir can say the same. I’m terribly sorry I fell on you, Master Lindir. I hope I didn’t do lasting damage to your skull.”

Lindir peered around in confusion as Elrond and Cemnesta helped him to sit up.

“Not at all, your majesty. Lord Glorfindel would tell you I have an extremely thick skull. Takes one to know one, I suppose.”

Butter and Sugar licked Thorin’s face as he lay sprawled on the ground, laughing too hard to move. He sputtered and tried to speak, but he just kept collapsing again.

“My dear?” Bilbo asked, crawling over to him. “Are you in danger of drowning?”

Thorin threw his hands up in the universal sign of I-have-no-idea.

“Da,” said Lavender. “Maybe we should let the band take a break.”

Ori and Dwalin sprawled in the cool grass, taking a break from the endless rounds of rowdy hobbit circle dances.

“Who’d’a’ though’ they had i’ in ‘em?” Dwalin chuckled. “They’re like machines whose springs never loosen.”

“I did warn you,” Bilbo said evilly as he and Thorin brought over cups and a pitcher of cold beer.

While their elders continued to dance, the faunts were called away to the edge of the garden to play a curious game. A streamer-festooned object hung at the end of a rope looped over a branch. It was vaguely star-shaped. The hobbit faunts chattered excitedly as Halfred brought out a big stick, similarly decorated, and Lavender waved a red kerchief which made made the chatter even louder. The man badgers and dwarflings looked mystified.

“Ah,” said Bilbo. “It’s nice to see the old traditions aren’t lost.”

“What are they doing?” Ori asked.

“Something I rather wish I could still do myself,” said Bilbo.

Boromir and Eowyn joined them with their own beer, and eagerly watched the proceedings.

Lavender drew Sam forward and covered his eyes with the kerchief, and checked to make sure he couldn’t peek. Halfred gave him the stick and went to the end of the cord looped around another branch to anchor it. This he loosened, gave a few experimental tugs, and the star-object bobbed up
and down.

Sam was spun around and around like a top, then Lavender patted him on the back and he rushed forward, swinging the stick wildly in the general direction of the bobbing star.

The faunts goaded him on, and soon the others joined in.

Sam never came anywhere near the thing. Eventually, Lavender stopped him, and it was someone else’s turn.

After several faunts and man badgers tried, one of Furhnk’s nephews got a chance and whacked the thing so hard, it burst, and the faunts were showered with candy.

“Yay!” they all shouted at once, scrambling on the ground after the sweets.

Dwalin nodded.

“I kin see th’ appeal. Lo’s a bludgeonin’, followed by a snack.”

Ori could also see the appeal. He would like to give it a try himself. Perhaps such a thing could be arranged for Bilbo and Frodo’s shared birthday. The faunts could have one, and the grown-ups could have another. The prizes would vary in each. He tucked the idea away to discuss later with his husband.

Boromir watched Lavender as she helped the younglings gather their treasure, made sure the smallest got a fair share and that she got a share as well.


“Be nice, Addled One,” said Boromir. “You’re not beyond the reach of love yourself.”

“I think I may safely promise you I’ll never look at anyone the way you look at Lavender Gamgee.”

Thorin coughed, turning red.

“So, Boromir,” said Ori, “you’re going to continue to court Lavender Gamgee after you’ve returned to Gondor? I am a dwarf. Nosiness comes with the beard.”

Boromir grinned.

“I’m going to try.”

“That’s a long way to travel when you want a cuddle.”

“Only to the other side of Minas Tirith, actually. Lavender’s agreed to go with Lady Arwen, to be her lady-in-waiting.”

“She doesn’t already have one?”

“No. She has someone to wash her skivvies, of course, but she’s never been the kind to need help with her knitting.”

“But, this way Lavender has a job and a secure place to live,” Ori surmised.

“In case everything goes to Mordor, yes. Lavender’s an excellent housekeeper, learned at her
mother’s knee. She’s spent her whole life a stone’s throw from Bilbo Baggins, so she’s not afraid to take chances. She’d make a proper soldier’s wife.”

“And she’s pretty as a new-polished gem,” said Ori slyly.

Boromir grin grew from ear to ear.

“Yes. Yes she is.”

“So,” said Bilbo, “how many faunts are you planning?”

Boromir choked on his beer.

“I don’t know. I was leaving it up to her.”

“So, a dozen or so?” Bilbo asked.

“I’ve just realized,” said Boromir. “I don’t know how long hobbits carry.”

“Depends on how much rain we get,” said Bilbo. “Joking! I’m joking! It’s nine months, as for men.”
Unions, Ursith, and Underhandedness.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. The party winds down, but the Durins are still ready to rock n’ roll! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dawairow time, same dawairow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends.

They were all winding down. The older guests sat in the grass, the youngest danced and the set in the middle seemed to have vanished. From what Bilbo had told Ori, this was not a surprise.

Nori and Bofur approached the Gardeners and Ori was amazed that Nori thought enough to bow to them.

“We need to be gettin’ on,” said Bofur. “Thank ya f’r doin’ all this. We’re pleased to have ya here.”

“What he said,” said Nori with a grin.

As they passed, Ori rose, gave Nori a hug and murmured, “Time for Ursith to put in his appearance?”

“Yep, got some evil stuff needs doin’.”

“Have fun,” Ori teased. As he hugged Bofur, the miner clapped him fraternally on the back.

Nori grinned wickedly.

“I always do, Chick.”

The musician still played as Boromir and Lavender continued to dance with the faunts and the elves. Haldir held Wandi’s hand as they twirled. Wandi was laughing and the look in his eye was that of hunter returning from a full trapline.

Rigel and Tharkûn looked to be trying to out jig each other, much to Galadriel’s and Celeborn’s amusement.

Hamfast may not have been drunk, but the beer didn't make him less bold. He turned to Aragorn, who was lying on his stomach in the grass, attempting to teach Arwen to play a tune on grass blades.

"Boromir's yer captain?"

"Yes, Mister Hamfast.” Aragorn rolled over and grinned at Hamfast

"Ye trust him?"

"I have known him all his life, and I trust him with my own and, more importantly, with Arwen’s.”

"He much given t' wenchin'?"
Arwen choked a little but kept a serious look on her face. Aragorn smiled, but replied quite evenly.

"No. In fact, before he met your daughter, I had assumed he was what the dwarrow called 'craftwed'. He gave himself solely to the sword. I suspect his younger brother will have something choice to say on the matter."

"Has a brother, does he?"

"Faramir. A well-trained warrior. He acts as my steward when I'm from home. He has often pestered Boromir to at least consider marriage, given Boromir's advanced age."

"The way ye say it, I can see there's a joke in there somewheres."

"Boromir is only five years older than Faramir."

Hamfast chuckled.

"Sounds like brothers."

Then he sobered.

"An' that's another thing. How long can me Lavender expect her husband to live? She maybe could live another seventy years. If I'm a judge o' men, Boromir's at least middlin' forty."

"He's fifty-five."

"Remarkable well preserved," Hamfast mused.

"He's Numenorean, as am I, descended from Elros Halfelven, brother of Lord Elrond. Boromir will likely live another seventy years himself."

"Elf blood? Mis- Bilbo never told me he kept such interesting acquaintances."

"Really, Ham," said Bilbo. "It's not like I hid cannibalism or somethings equally dreadful."

"Waahl, I don't like it, o' course, Lavender bein' so far away, but I started it, ye might say, movin' us so far from the Shire. An' she's of age."

"We tol' her, give it a year. If y' ain't happy, come home. 'Course, that don't mean we won't be checkin' in from time t' time, an' she'll send us a raven, keep us up on what's doin'."

"She's a sensible girl, Hamfast," said Bell. "An' she'll be with Mis- with Bilbo's friends."

"They're still different, m'dear," said Hamfast, as Lavender and Boromir approached. "I don't want her t' go skippin' meals or such."

"Dad," said Lavender, laughing, "I can promise you I won't be skipping any meals."

"Ye always was a good girl," said Hamfast.

"Besides, Boromir likes me plump," she said, grinning evilly.

Hamfast nodded, smiling wryly.

"Aha. Go on with ye, ye little minx."
It was late when they thanked the Gardeners for their hospitality. The Gardeners promised to bring Frodo and Sam back some time the day after tomorrow, the faunts having been sent to bed a while ago. Ponies, horses, rams and the teacup were brought around and hitched up. The royal party, now swelled by the other guests of the Fundin household, made ready to leave.

They had a pleasant ride back to Dale where Bard and his family took leave of them with the promise to meet at breakfast. The Durins and their guests continued up the road to the mountain. Ori looked up. The sky was full of stars and he could hear behind him Tauriel and Legolas telling Kili and Gimli all about them. Elrond and Galadriel helped occasionally.

“Yeh have fun, love?” Dwalin asked.

“It was lovely,” said Ori tentatively.

“But?”

“Did you feel that? The rock shifting? Like Khazad-dum, except without the water.”

“Aye, happens time t’ time.”

“This is different.”

“Thorin!” Dwalin called. “Hold up a mo’.”

Ori sighed. He hadn’t meant to turn a vague concern into a circus, but he supposed it couldn’t be helped.

“Something wrong?” Thorin asked, riding back to them.

Abruptly, Minty shied and reared, and the other ponies followed. Grinder jumped and dodged. Ori was caught off-guard and nearly tumbled from the saddle. The older wargs growled and Killer bayed.

Somewhere, far below them, tons of rock buckled downward and broke. The dwarrow winced and cried out.

“What in Yavanna’s name?” Bilbo cried. “Thorin?”

“That’s was a mine collapse!” roared Thorin. “Ride!”

Bells clanged all over Erebor.

“Tha’s th’ warnin’ t’ ge’ off th’ street, give way t’ th’ sappers an’ th’ mine rescue.” Dwalin shouted to Ori as their rams thundered along in the wake of Thorin and Bilbo.

Balin took the majority of guests back to Fundin House.

“Where?” Thorin demanded as Roác wheeled beside him.

“A pit off a side tunnel near the central market. It’s been closed for decades, but there was a cadre of gleaners, working it independently.”
“Blessed Mahal,” Thorin growled. “Do we know how many?”

“No,” Roäc answered, pulling ahead of Minty. “Quartz and Garnet are up ahead finding out.”

The party raced forward toward the damage.

Red Queen swooped above Thorin’s head.

“What shall our people do to help?”

“Send a messenger to King Bard. Tell him his people are not in any danger. Neither is your aerie!”

Red Queen squawked to her followers and soared away.

They shot around the corner and Thorin stopped Minty short and Grinder had to hop smartly to avoid a collision. Ori clung to the new-grown wool and stayed in the saddle.

Miners sat and sprawled all over the passage. They were covered in dirt, and only their wild eyes were distinguishable. Oin and some of his healers hovered over a few, who appeared unconscious, but the others were simply wrapped in blankets, in a state of shock.

“Where did they come from?” Thorin demanded in general, leaping off Minty. Bilbo, Ori, and Dwalin followed. A glance back told Ori that Fili, Kili, Tauriel, Gimli, Legolas, and Cemnesta had followed them. Dis rode up with Jani.

Oin nudged the healer closest to him as he called for stretchers.

The healer, a young dam, swallowed, stuttered, then pulled herself together.

“They come from the mine, your majesty.”

“How did they get out?”

“They come through the wall, sire.”

“Through? Through the wall?”

“Aye, never seen the like!” Her measured tones rose in youthful bewilderment. She obviously forgot for the moment to whom she spoke. “Sappers should’ve been digging half the night just to reach ‘em!”

“It was Ursith!” A dwarf spoke up from a pallet. “He grabbed me arm an’ next thing I knew I was out here.”

“Aye,” chimed in another, sitting nearby. “I saw him dive through th’ wall. We allus knew he wasn’ natural!”

“Is there anyone left inside?” Thorin demanded.

“No, your majesty,” said the healer. “The dam we’re working on now’s the worst of ‘em.”

“Thank you. Please return to your duties.”

Cemnesta glided over to Oin, offering his services.
Bofur extracted himself from the chaos and approached, Jani went to him immediately.

“How’s it look?”

“The walls went,” said Bofur, pale beneath his dirty face. “But the floor didn’t fall, an’ that’s what saved ‘em, else they’d still be fallin’. Pit’s a total loss.”

Ori grabbed his arm, already on the verge of hyperventilating.

Nori!

“Where is he?”

“Dunno,” Bofur said under his breath. “I can’t leave here t’ look, neither. I know he’s alive, but he could be down in the mine, passed out.”

Ori tried to think where Nori would go and how fast he could move. The answers to that were: anyplace and very, very fast. But after pulling a stunt like this, he was bound to be tired, wasn’t he? Ori had no idea what kind of energy it took to do what Nori did.

Quartz winged through the passage and landed on Ori’s shoulder, addressing Bofur.

“Go home,” said the raven.

Bofur said “I can’t-“

“Go. Home.” Quartz flapped a wing. “Go on. Shoo!”

Thorin snorted.

“I believe his highness has dismissed you, m’lord.”

“But.”

Jani smacked his arm.

“I’ve got this, cram brain. Get outta here.”

“What’re ya gonna do?”

“Oh, I dunno. The mine engineers and sappers are all here. I thought I’d put in a half-bath. Lovely?”

Dis hooked her arm through Bofur’s.

“Come along, Lord Bofur. Don’t make the ravens peck you.”

“Don’t make me peck you,” Jani muttered.

Thorin looked over his shoulder at Ori.

“Dwalin,” said Thorin calmly, “please take Ori wherever he feels it’s best he go.”

“Aye, yer majesty. Arb! Yer up.”

“So are we,” Fili announced with a glance back to Kili, Tauriel, Gimli, and Legolas. The four gave sharp nods and moved forward, ready to work.
“Thorin,” Bilbo called. “Do you need me?”

“Always, ghivasha, but I think right now Ori needs you more.”

Dwalin grabbed up Bofur and Ori and Dwalin sent their rams galloping homeward, Bilbo and Dis following behind. They skidded to a stop in the courtyard and Ori leapt off as Gib jumped forward to handle Grinder.

Ori scrambled for the front door, Bofur hot on his heels.

“In yer privy, pukin’ his guts out,” Durin helped.

Ori arrived to find Balin holding towels outside the privy’s threshold. Ori heard Nori groan.

“Easy, me love,” Bofur crooned, pushing past Balin. Ori looked in. Nori was leaning over the privy, Aragorn had one hand full of Nori’s hair and the other around his waist, holding him up. Celeborn stood on the other side gingerly holding Nori’s beard.

Nori got back on his feet with Bofur’s and Aragorn’s help. Balin silently handed over a wet facecloth and Bofur took his husband in hand.

“You alright, Nori?” Ori asked.

“Ugh! ‘M doin’, Chick. Remind me never t’ do that shit that fast ‘gain. Bugger, all tha’ lovely cookin’ o’ Missus Gard’n’r.”

Ori remembered Nori returning home from three day benders, hungover, beaten up, bleeding and staggering.

He had never seen Nori look two inches from dead.

“Lead the way,” Boromir arrived and scooped Nori up.

Nori sighed.


Bofur and Aragorn assisted him in taking Nori through to the kitchen.

Bofur set the kitchen chair next to where Aragorn and Boromir stripped Nori to the waist, Ellodan started using a cloth wetted with a little rubbing alcohol and, with Galadriel’s and Arwen’s help, soon had half Nori’s face tattoos wiped away.

“’M fine,” Nori grumbled, as he finally manage to sit.

“He certainly will be,” Dori said, her house shoes pattering in from the pantry, Elrond, Bilbo, and Lindir in tow. Dori was stirring something in a glass.

“Drink this, you silly billy goat.”

Dori’s words were scolding, but her tone gentle as she held the glass to Nori’s lips and patted his back as he drank the blueish milky stuff down. Elrond laid a pale hand on Nori’s shoulder, frowning. Nori sighed then gave Dori a saucy grin.

“Not bad, our Dor,”
“Tummy better?”

“Is now,“

They knocked brows gently. Elrond shrugged to Lindir, who rolled his eyes.

“Nori,” Ori interrupted quickly before Dori decided to lecture. “We’ve got to start damage control right now.”

“Why?” Nori demanded.

“You, I mean, Ursith, was seen rescuing people. He was noticed dragging someone free then disappearing back into the wall.”

“Shit,” Nori opined, then patted Bofur’s shoulder. “Hey, our Bo.”

Bofur nearly knocked him over just hugging him, then pulled back, horrified.

“What happened? You’re all… thin like.”

Granny Klak nodded, as she came through. “That’s just what I said.”

“He looks th’ same t’ me,” Dwalin noted, while he put the cleaning bowls and cloths in the sink, before filling it from the boiling water spigot.


Ori hugged Nori.

“Hey, Chick.”

“They’re right!” Ori cried. “It’s like you’re a stretched out like old chewing gum.”

“Ta,” said Nori sourly.

“An’ his eyes’re lighter!” Bofur said, clutching Nori by the shoulder.

“They are!” Ori shouted.

Nori winced.

“Chick, I’m right here.”

Ori turned to Dori and said, “Dori, you have to spill over more and put them back.”

Dori rested a hand over her belly.

“I’m a little busy right now, pet. I think most of my energy goes into these two.”

“An’ spittin’ on beads,” said Nori. “Don’t worry, Chick. I’m fine. At least, I won’t get away wifout Oin pokin’ me in all me bits.”

Granny Klak rubbed Ori’s shoulder.

“Not to worry, my love. There’s other ways to build him back up.”

Nori grinned excitedly.
“They wouldn’t involve food, would they?”

Balin and Bofur exchanged amused glances.

“Aye, he’s fine,” Balin chuckled.

They were in the sitting room and Dori was bringing through tea when Thorin and the rest arrived.

“Nori,” said Thorin.

“I’m—” Nori began, rising to his feet.

“Are you alright?” Thorin asked, coming forward.

“Huh? Oh, aye, aye, came home, barfed, gonna drink tea. All good.”

Thorin sighed then clasped Nori’s shoulders and touched his brow to Nori’s.

“Don’t you ever do that again without help.”

“Yessir, but, um, not like I had time t’ ask ’r nuffin’.”

Thorin waved for everyone to seat themselves, then took a chair wide enough for Bilbo to squirm in beside him. Thorin nodded to Ori, who dropped down on the footstool to the right of the king. Dwalin drew up Ori’s desk chair and sat behind Ori. Dori made sure everyone had tea and, at least, a biscuit before curling up on Balin’s lap in the pink chair, once more just behind and to the left of the King.

“Nori,” Thorin opened the discussion. “As Ori’s already informed you—"

“How’d you know that?” Nori asked with his mouth full.

“You’re talking about my scribe and the Scribe of Mahal, Nori.” Thorin lifted a teasing eyebrow.

“Crud,” Nori said and shoved his third biscuit into his mouth.

Ori blushed, but kept talking notes.

“We need to decide how Ursith and I are going to smooth through this,” Thorin continued.

“Nori…er…Ursith was nice to my ‘Gondorian pals’ and wants you to like him?” Ori offered.

“Nice?” Boromir laughed. “We beat his britches off.”

“I’m not Gondorian,” Eowyn put in.

“Let’s go with the current story, dears,” Dis said and shook her finger at the pair.

“Neither Eowyn nor Boromir meant to cause you difficulties,” Aragorn put in.

“I know,” said Thorin. “Nori has mentioned that it would be a good idea for Ursith to be able to report to the crown somehow.”

“A gambling incident with a Gondorian and a Rohirrim will not serve to turn such as Ursith to good works,” observed Elrond.
“Ursith wants to build his casino,” Elladan said.

“Urisith wants to go straight and have a royal casino,” Elrohir added.

Nori’s eyes glowed.

“Me casino!”

“That,” smiled Thorin, “will do nicely.”

“Aye, “ agreed Nori with a wicked grin. “Anythin’ else comes up we’ll find a way t’ blame it on th’ Bearer!”

Dori smacked him.

Ori fell back against the bed. His hand was cramped from writing and it was far past midnight. Dwalin got into the bed beside him, took Ori’s sore hand, and wrapped it in a bulky cloth. Ori sighed as the coolness from the ice chips folded into the cloth soothed the pain.

“That’s wonderful,” Ori murmured. Dwalin put an old leather glove over Ori’s hand and settled beside him. Killer snuggled up into the small of Dwalin’s back and Nori-Pori curled up on the pillows. Mask folded his furry face in half with a yawn and burrowed into the covers near Ori’s stomach.

“Yeh get yer rest, love,” Dwalin said, as he lay down, spooned against Ori’s back. “Yeh bin busier than yeh should ha’.”

Ori giggled.

“You know, I remember Nori talking about a casino when I was just a badger.”

“If he kin make it work, our nuisance’ll rule th’ underworld fra here t th’ Dale an’ beyond.”

“If anyone can do it, Nori can,” Ori stated sleepily as his husband and their ravens chuckled.
Guests gone, Goals, and Gambling dens.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Oh, Nori what are you up to this time? Nuffin’! Absolutely nuffin’! I swear! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The next morning, which was the first work day, Mistress Dazla informed them over breakfast that most places of business were closed. When Ori questioned this, Dori merely laughed and said Thorin’s open court days were already the stuff of legend.

Bard arrived for breakfast promptly at the seventh bell.

Bilbo grinned up at him.

“A man after my own heart,” he said.

“I could smell the pancakes from Dale,” said Bard.

As they sat, stuffing their faces with cakes and syrup, Galadriel and Celeborn announced that they must take their leave. Dori looked as though she was going to pout.

“Now, my Dori,” said Galadriel, “we’ll be back before Durin’s Day. You know we wouldn’t miss that.”

Kelli clunked in agreement.

Dori only sighed gustily instead and asked what sweets and such would Galadriel like to take with her.

“At least fortify yourself before you blink out or zap or pop or beam or whatever elves call it,” said Dori.

“I think I’ll have at least thirds before I zap,” Galadriel promised.

“Zap,” said Celeborn, chuckling.

Aragorn and Arwen agreed it was time for them to return to Gondor as well and they would be leaving the day after tomorrow.

“I’ve promised to help Lavender pack,” said Arwen. “And we’re spending some time with Bell, too. She’s a rock, but even she’s having some trouble with her daughter going off so far away with odd strangers.”

Bilbo sneered into his tea.

“As opposed to staying here with odd strangers?” he asked, wiping his damp chin.

“You’re not joining us for Open Court?” Thorin teased.

Aragorn choked and glanced at Nori, who looked none the worse for his adventures and was eating with gusto.

“I don’t think I want to lay eyes on Ursith while he asks you for his casino,” said Aragorn. “I doubt I’d be able to remain serious. I’ve seen the wig Ursith wears and I don’t think I could be in the same room with him.”

“I know I couldn’t,” Arwen giggled. “Honestly, Nori, not to cast aspersions on your hair color, but that wig looked like the ugliest basket in all Arda. Where did you find it?”

“Made it,” Nori said proudly around a mouthful of egg.

Arwen and Aragorn looked at each other then went off into peals of laughter.

“Oi!” Nori objected.

Ulfr and Yizaris breezed in.

“Mornin’ all,” Ulfr barked.
His grin made Ori worry.
“Yizaris, Ulfr,” said Thorin, raising his cup in greeting.
“Thorin—” Ulfr began, but Dori shorted him out by greeting the queen and inviting them to seat themselves and eat.
“Er…Yes, thank yeh, Bearer,” he said, before turning back to the king. “Thorin I’ve go’ a proposition f’r yeh.”
“I’m sorry, Ulfr, but I’m betrothed to Professor Baggins.”
Ulfr choked, Yizaris snickered, then Ulfr recovered and brayed with laughter.
“Aye, an’ congratulations t’ both a’ yeh. No, no, I’ve had an idea.”
“You terrify me,” Thorin teased.
“Arsehole, listen. How would yeh feel abou’ me Arne staying with yeh a bit longer? He’s enjoyin’ th’ library an’ his work there. Me Yizaris had a long chat with him an’ Master Nodun at th’ party last night an’ he’s doin’ great work with her. Be a pity t’ take him off now.”
“Indeed it would,” Thorin agreed. “We would be delighted if he was willing to stay. Why does that engender the word proposition?”
“I’d like t’ take tha’ Buer lad back with me. Tha’ badger’s a bleedin’ genius. Mahal’s hairy balls, th’ thin’s I could start tha’ lad with. He jus’ runs with anythin’. Go’ a brain like a lit fuse, tha’ one.”
Ori hoped silently that Buer’s brain would not explode in the excitement of Ulfr’s invitation. Then he realized Ulfr’s brain was more likely to explode and Buer would find away to put him back together, so instead of having a mechanical leg like Dain, Ulfr would have a mechanical head. Ori’s own brain provided a helpful sketch of how that would look.
Thorin sat back in his chair and regarded Ulfr thoughtfully.
“That would be for young Buer to decide. If he wishes to accompany you and be your apprentice—”
“Bollocks!” Ulfr grunted. “Th’ lad’s practically a master in anythin’ he turns his hand t’. I’d be callin’ him a colleague.”
“As a colleague then,” Thorin went on, “it is still his decision.”
Roäc hopped down from Thorin’s shoulder and took the piece of bacon Thorin offered him.
“I’ll go hunt him up,” the raven said and flew off.
“Thank you,” murmured Thorin.
Ulfr watched him go.
“Thorin, I swear tha’ Roäc jus’ ain’t natural sometimes.”
“The ravens are the messenger of Mahal,” Thorin replied simply. “What is more natural than that?”
Ulfr swung round and peered at Ori.
“Yer th’ Scribe a’ Mahal, I hear. Them birds talk t’ yeh ‘bout thin’s?”
Ori turned to look at Quartz, perching on the back of his chair. Quartz winked at him. Ori winked back then looked at Ulfr.
“Every day, your majesty.”
Yizaris nudged Ulfr’s elbow.
“Maybe if you didn’t spend so much time in your lab, then come out stinking of Mahal knows what chemicals, the ravens might talk to you once in a while.”
Ulfr frowned, considering, then went back to his meal, pausing only to swing a fist as Dain and Sculdis entered and Dain patted him on the head.
Dain and Sculdis were dressed for travel.
Dain smooched Dori’s cheek.
“Sorry, me dumplin’, bu’ I’m afraid it’s time we ge’ back home, see wha’ our lads lef’ a’ me kingdom.”
Dori huffed indignantly.
“Really? You’re going, too? This is just too much!”
And she burst into tears.
“Awwwwww, now, dumplin’,” said Dain, hugging her. “We’ll be back soon. Whether me royal
“I’ve never had any say in the matter,” said Thorin with a grin. “But, you’re going to miss open court, too!”

“Aye, well, Lady G’s offered t’ drop us home. An’ I seen th’ braidin’. Sides, I’ve go’ no fancy clothes t’ impress the folks a’ court. Yeh know I li’e t’ make a good showin’.”

“Oh,” said Thorin, “so that’s what you call it.”

Dori abruptly stopped crying and took charge.

“You’re not going anywhere without a good breakfast. Sit, sit, sit! I’ll see what else we have in the larder.”

She swept out.

“King Ulfr,” said Bilbo, “what did you mean when you said you and I were related?”

“Heh, well,” said Ulfr, pointedly ignoring Dain who was bent on annoying him, “it’s no’ li’e Ironfists pay a ton a’ attention t’ anythin’ neither chemistry nor engineerin’, bu’ when I go’ Thorin’s letter abou’ the Fallohides, I wen’ on a expedition through th’ archives an’, yep, there they were, lurkin’ in th’ side passages a’ th’ old family mine. Turns ou’, no’ all them hobbitish folk went wes’ to th’ Shire after all.”

“Ah-hah!” Bilbo cried. “Welcome to the family, Cousin Ulfr!”

Balin regarded them skeptically.

“Tha’s hardly a close connection, laddie.”

“These are hobbits we’re talking about, Balin,” said Bilbo. “As these things go, King Ulfr and I are practically twins. Queen Yizaris, please remind me to add you to my Yule card list.”

“Of course, Professor Baggins,” she said, inclining her head regally with a giggle.

Buer arrived and Ori watched a bizarre transformation take place.

Ulfr was at least three times as enthusiastic than he had been the night before, in fact, was nearly jumping around Buer like a happy puppy. The two of them came to an agreement instantly, and then went on to talk business.

“... lights,” Ulfr said.

“Oh, those,” said Buer. “I’ve been working on making them really, really small, like match head sized, but I think I could extrapolate and do exactly the opposite, too.”

“What’ d’ye have in mind?” Ulfr asked.

“I was thinking I’d try to replicate the brilliance of the sun.”

“A’ course yeh were,” Ulfr praised.

Ori sat with Bard and Thorin at the table as they went through the dockets of that morning’s open court.

The morning petitioning time was booked ahead, blocked, and limited, so the king could be briefed ahead of time, and because tempers were likely to flair or arguments to drone on. Afternoons were held open, petitioners arriving early to give Brur their names and a brief idea of what they wanted. Brur passed a copy to Balin. Another copy went to Arne, marked for him to do any quick research.

“Ori,” said Thorin, “you know you don’t have to do the scrivening for open court. You are working on other projects.”

“And miss being the scribe to record your betrothal announcement?” Ori raised an eyebrow.

“Seriously? I love my colleagues, Thorin, but I wouldn’t give up this assignment for all the emeralds in Arda.”

“Forgive me, m’lord,” said Thorin. “I didn’t think before I spoke.”

“Just don’t let it happen again,” Ori sniffed.

They looked at each other Ori giggled and blushed and Thorin chuckled.

“Finish your tea, Lord Ori, you have a mighty task before you.”

“Yes, your majesty,” said Ori and did so.

Ori turned to Queen Yizaris, who lingered over her own tea.

“Your majesty, may I speak with you in private?”
She gave him a mysterious smile.  
“I had a feeling you would ask.  Let’s top off this excellent cuppa and I am all yours, however briefly.”

Ori’s office had become much more an office and much less a closet recently.  He was able to offer the queen a chair that matched the other chair at his work table, and didn’t even have to move supplies of ink and paper for her to sit in.

“Does Arne know, ma’am?” Ori asked.

“Yes, and I haven’t seen him this happy since he received his scrivening apprenticeship.”

“But, Ulfr is almost replacing him with Buer, even if it’s only for a little while.  I mean, Arne is the crown prince.”

Yizaris ran a light finger around the rim of her teacup.

“And he will always be a prince, Ori, forgive me for plain speaking, but, Arne will never sit on the throne of the Ironfists.  He and I both know it.  The way things are right now, his own family would eat him alive.  He’s a diplomat, a servant to warriors, but not a warrior himself.  His sister, however, I’ve been able to encourage in her natural… crustiness.  Ulfr doesn’t know it, but I have every intention of shoving Zaris and Buer together as often as possible.”

“You’re not concerned with Buer being harmed?”

“Buer is dangerously close to being a force of nature all on his own.  I think his influence on the court could only be a good thing.  And, should he get out of line, Zaris would happily smack him back into it.  It’s all conjecture right now, of course, but at any rate, Arne will be here, happy and safe.” She sipped delicately.  “Then he can get married.”

Ori eyed her.

She laughed.

“Ulfr is the clueless one, m’lord.  My Arne could do far worse than a master scribe and a master of the sensual pleasures.  His mind and body will be quite satisfied, as well as his spirit.”

“And when King Ulfr does find out?”

“He’ll do what he always does.  He’ll rage and bluster, then get over it.  It’s one of his better qualities.”

Ori swallowed as he proceeded with the royal family and their guests through a doorway to the right of the dais and into the crowded throne room.  It looked like nearly as many people had squeezed into the room as for the coronation, though they were not as formally dressed, which was not to say they dressed soberly.  Open court had become quite a social and exciting special occasion.

Dwarrow, men, elves and hobbits of all stations and from all over the mountain and Dale, mingled casually under the watch of a detail of Dwalin’s soldiers.  Standing on the lower right platform of the dais, Targ caught Ori’s eye and winked at him.

Ori grinned back and looked around.

Binni had been busy with the decorations.

There were even more couches in the galleries above and around the edge of the room and the Durin blue bunting of the coronation had given way to velvet swags of rust and red, colors picked out from the upholstery, as a nod to the waning summer.  The swamp maples out in Dale had begun to turn.

Even Ori’s desk, to the left of the throne, had not escaped a swaddling of cloth around the pedestal, and the throne itself sported new throw pillows.  Several warg-sized cushions lay on the floor around it.

The wargs sat bracketing Thorin.  They drew wary attention from the assembly, but no one outright panicked at the sight of them.  Butter and Sugar for their part sat still, their heads even with the king’s.  It would be impossible to pass them off as anything but wargs, even with their matching blue collars, but they watched the goings on placidly enough.

Thorin scratched each warg behind the ears.

“See, my damlings?  Idad Binni takes good care of you.  No cold stone for you.”
“Nice material,” said Dis.
“Namad,” Thorin chided with a grin. The tails wagged in unison. Butter bent her head to lick his hand, and a murmur flooded the crowd as Thorin idly played with one white fang.
Ori turned to Dwalin quizzically.
“Th’ curtains from Frerin’s old chambers,” said Dwalin. “Pity t’ waste ‘em.”
Dis snickered.
“There are still some left if Thranduil wants to make himself some pajamas.”
Thranduil had already arrived, Bard having said something earlier about him waiting for delivery from Dipfa. Bard was now at his side.
Ori mentally face palmed. In dressing elven nobility, Dipfa had found enthusiastic patrons.
Thranduil wore a pale blue sheath under a long-sleeved, open surcoat of overlapping alternate layers of slightly darker blue beaded fringe and silver bells. Smaller bells and chains draped his birch twig hair ornaments.
Ori thought he looked like an icicle. And how would he comfortably sit on all those bells? Unless, like Lady Galadriel, he never quite touched the ground. He wondered if Thranduil’s arse would float just above the cushion of the chair and made a mental note to ask.
Beside the king father, Bard looked positively sober. He wore what Dipfa called a frock coat of deep pine green, over a snowy white shirt and tan trousers tucked into brown leather boots. As he strolled and stood next to Thrandui, Ori thought the trousers must be rather more snug than Bard was used to. The man looked distracted by them, and so did Thranduil.
Bujni, Omi and Loli worked in the galleries, sketching and recording comments. Ori could not look directly at Bujni, who wore under his open scribe robe, a tunic, leggings and boots entirely encrusted with jet and sapphire beads, dusted with diamonds and moonstones. The entire suit must have weighed a hundred pounds. Dipfa flitted about on the main floor in a long, conical poncho of concentric circles of citrine, carnelian and yellow amber; the low hem at her ankles kept its circular shape by virtue of a hoop. Ori reflected she had a thing about looking like a bell. With her hands stuck through slits built into the front of the poncho, she wielded a sketchbook of her own. She stopped periodically, looked over some dwarf or dam in a striking outfit, and sketched madly before going on to the next unsuspecting subject. Ori realized she was making notes of various styles of clothes and hair.
Doubtless he would be seeing her handiwork in a coming issue of Vug.
“Not so much an open court as a fashion show,” said Thorin merrily. “My grandfather would blow a vein.”
“I may blow a vein,” said Ori. “Look.”
Vi and Margr entered, one on each of Glorfindel’s arms, though he was somewhat obscured by their court clothes, which appeared to be entirely made of silk ribbon, all in the form of bows. There were rings upon rings of large bows attached together to make their voluminous skirts. Slightly smaller bows edged the sweeping hems at mid-calf and girded their middles as belts. A third size of bows provided their fitted blouses, with small capes of bows over their shoulders, and the sleeves were puffed caps in the hobbitish way, ringing their brawny biceps. Hundred of tiny bows studded their upswept hair, and their beards were caught up in long braids, punctuated every inch with bow-shaped gems. Each of their diamanté-covered boots bore a black leather bow.
Vi wore primarily shades of orange and Margr shades of blue. As far as Ori could tell, no two bows were exactly the same shade and the vibrations of the warring colors seemed to cast an aura around them.
Glorfindel, perhaps seized by the spirit of the occasion, wore one large, jaunty scarlet bow around his neck. He looked like the largest, proudest lapdog who ever lived.
“Mahal wept,” Thorin gasped.
“I wouldn’t be at all surprised,” said Ori.
“Can’t, ’m bloody struck blind,” muttered the hot boom in the back of Ori’s head.
They could hear the sisters receiving compliments and replying in kind, while Dipfa practically danced with glee. It was obvious from their comments that Dipfa was the perpetrator.
Dipfa’s just founded her own atelier,” Ori said. “She’s taken her first apprentice and she’s much in demand.”

“No coal dust gathering on her,” said Thorin. “It doesn’t cut into Mahrdin’s business? Wait. What am I saying? It’s not like she attracts the same sort of customer, is it?”

“Bilbo says he can’t wait to see what she comes up with for Harvest masquerade.”

“Looks like she’s already practicing,” said Thorin, “though I don’t suppose I’m the best judge of fashion.”

Ori stared at him.

“Alright,” Thorin conceded. “I’m no judge of fashion at all. Unless East Dale assassins are suddenly fashionable.”

“I’m feeling rather drab at the moment myself,” said Ori.

“I know Vi and Margr are doing well for themselves,” said Thorin, “but I never imagined they’d invest in high fashion.”

“Nor did I. They’re still startled to have enough money to hire a scribe to read and write letters for them. I used to do both for no more than a copper, and that was if I thought the person could even afford that. Dipfa?”

The designer turned in her wandering and ran up to Ori and Thorin in rapture and bowed.

“M’lord! Your majesty! Don’t they look incredible? Of course, I had confidence in my design, but they simply bring my creations to life!”

Thorin gave her a genuine, fond smile.

“Well done, Master Dipfa. And, I understand congratulations are in order? Your own atelier is quite an achievement.”

“Oooo! Thank you, your majesty!” she piped. “I’ve been planning and saving my whole life for this.”

“Are Vi and Margr working for you?” he asked.

“Not as such. They are the best models I could wish for, though. They carry off the fashions in such a bold spirit. I lend them the prototypes to wear out in public. They come back and tell me how people react and whether I need to make adjustments to the patterns, and then they keep the test pieces if they like them.”

Ori was impressed.

“So, this isn’t commission work? You’re going forward with the ready to wear lines?”

“Yes! And I’m so, so nervous, yet so, so excited. Think how the bold and subtle colors of the clothes and the hues of nature will resonate! At the same time, the new lights invented by King Ulfr completely alter the look of the same colors! You have two different hues just between candlelight and touch lights, and a third just by going out under the sun! Mahal bless me, but it’s opened my mind to so many new possibilities that I can hardly sleep for ideas!”

A young dam with a wide, pale face and straw-colored beard and a notebook of her own, padded up shyly.

Dipfa turned and gave her a fond look.

“This is my apprentice, Miss Grk. Miss Grk, this is King Thorin, and this is Lord Ori.”

The dam’s round mouth drew up rounder into a silent ‘Oh!’

She wore a hat - Ori hoped it was a hat - of raw, pale white silk. It sat like a fat sack on her head, with a sort of twisted stalk at the top. Her dress widened out alarmingly under her breasts, and then gathered sharply just above the ankles. It was the same color and texture as the hat. Ori thought she looked like two bulbs of garlic, one slightly smaller and atop the other.

Yet, somehow, she managed a bow.

“An honor, your majesty, m’lord.”

She had a tiny, breathy voice, as if she were conveying a secret.

“The honor is ours, Miss Grk,” Thorin assured her.

“Master Dipfa,” Miss Grk urged, “I believe there is an issue with Lord Bujni’s tunic.”

“Oh!” Dipfa turned to look up at the gallery, then turned back. “We must beg leave, your majesty. My beloved Bu requires my assistance. He’s forgotten to flip the switch.”
“The switch?” Thorin asked.
“Something I was working on with Buer. He’s a genius, isn’t he?”
They bowed again and were gone.

Ori watched Dipfa zipping through the crowd, which largely gave way as she sped by, probably wondering exactly what she was. An upsidedown orange tornado, perhaps? Grk followed placidly in her wake.

Dwalin appeared at Ori’s elbow.
“D’ I wan’ t’ know how our Dipfa even climbs th’ stairs in tha’ ge’up?”
Thorin smirked at him.
“Why don’t you go and ask? Don’t worry, we’ll wait.”
“At th’ rate she talks? Yeh’ll be waitin’ ’til next res’ day.”

The Durins and their friends watched as she popped up in the gallery and somehow slipped through the crowd. Bujni turned to her, smiling, as she spoke urgently and seemed to adjust the back of his tunic beneath his scribe’s hood.

The clear gems on his clothing flickered on and off in a continuous random pattern of twinkling lights.

“Oh,” said Thorin.
It seemed to sum up everything nicely.

Elrond looked up at the couple in dismay. He seemed on the verge of speaking several times, then gave up.

“Yes,” said Thranduil, as if reading his mind. “Who needs the Two Trees when we have the sun and moon right up there.”

Legolas looked over his shoulder with a grin.
“Fitting, Adad, as you look like a stream flowing through new-fallen snow.”

Lindir muttered, “And everyone is always saying that I’m flakey.”

“Ouch!” Elladan cried.

“One for our Lindir!” Elrohir agreed.

Tilda ran up all excitement, Bain chasing her doggedly, warning her to stop and wait for him.

Under her emerald pinafore with large pockets all about the waistline, Tilda wore a fancy jumpsuit of pine green, matching Bard’s coat, and the whole of her outfit was studded with amethysts in swirling patterns, matching the color of her boots and, not so coincidentally, her boot knife. As she stopped next to Thranduil and Bard, Ori thought she looked like a bramble bush in a woodland setting.

“Adanana!” she cried up at Thranduil. “You look so pretty!”

“As do you, my Monster Child. Shall we?”

“Let us proceed.”

“Princess Tilda Bardsdatter,” she said solemnly. Carefully, she curtseyed.

“King-Father Thranduil Oropherson,” he intoned, and bowed.

“Excellent,” he said when she straightened.

“I didn’t even fall on my bum that time!” she enthused.

Thranduil continued as if he hadn’t heard, though the corner of his mouth quirked rebelliously.

“And now?” Thranduil prompted.

“Oh! That’s right!” She put her hand over her heart and bowed in the elvish way. “Mae Govannen.”

“Mae Govannen. Very nice. And now?”

She bowed in the dwarfish way and said, “Tilda, daughter of Mathilde, daughter of Skia, at your service.”

He returned her bow and said,

“Thranduil, son of Oropher, at yours and your families.”

“Did I do it right?” she asked Ori, in a quite audible aside.
“Perfect, Til,” said Ori.
“I wonder what hobbits do when they meet?” Tilda mused. “Besides hug and invite each other to tea, I mean.”
“I don’t think they do that to complete strangers, Til,” said Ori. “You’ll have to ask Professor Baggins.”
“Good idea! Where is he?”
Thorin said, “He’ll be here after the lunch break, Tilda. He’s frosting the cake he and Dori made.”
“I’ll have to remember, then. Da, don’t let me forget.”
Lindir unexpectedly turned to her.
“You don’t have your book, princess?”
“Oh! I do! Thank you, Mister Lindir!”
She pulled a smaller version of Lindir’s schedule book from her pocket and slid the tiny graphite wand from the pouch on its side, flipped open the book with practiced ease and made her note, snapped the book closed efficiently, replaced her graphite wand and the whole of it went back into her pocket.
“All sorted,” she said briskly.
Ori, nonplussed, looked over at Dwalin, who had his hand across his mouth and cultivated a pondering air.
“Ah, I see Binni arranged that prettily,” said Dori, of the throne platform as Balin escorted her up to the royal crowd at the vestibule.
Instantly, every head turned and the chatter fell silent.
The assembled witnesses and petitioners bowed,
“Well!” Dori cried. “Aren’t you sweethearts! Blessings on you!”
When they straightened again, Ori saw many of them looked dazedly happy.
Thorin took stock of the room.
“Master Brur?”
His voice carried across the silent room, to Brur at the door.
“Aye, yer majesty. Ready.”
“Then let the games begin.”
Ori would never get used to being announced, by Master Brur or anyone else.
But particularly by Master Brur.
“Lord Ori a’ th’ House a’ Fundin, Firs’ Chair a’ th’ Guild a’ Scribes.”
Happily, this wasn’t the coronation, so the list of titles was brief, and he wore court robes, but they were his own, and without the weight of the entire history of dwarrow attached. True, Dipfa had gone a little far with the cut gems and embroidery, but at least he didn’t look like a celestial body.
As he arranged his tools on the desk, Master Brur announced the guests.
“King-Father Thranduil Oropheron, late a’ Greenwood, an’ King Bard a’ Dale, accompanied by Bain, prince a’ Dale, an’ Tilda, princess a’ Dale.”
They climbed the steps and arranged themselves on Binni’s comfy furniture.
“Lady Dori, Bearer of Erebor, and Lord Balin of Fundin-“
The rest of Brur’s introduction drowned out under the cheers of the crowd.
Ori looked at Dori again. Here, on the dais, with the torches throwing light about the room, Dori looked like an allegory of Spring. The mithril hair was left long and loose but for a few pins of peridot leaves. About Dori’s shoulders bright white lace foamed like a line of clouds. From this fell innumerable pale mint green satin ribbons to the floor. Dori’s wrists and ankles were encircled with mithril bangles touched with sparks of peridot. There with mithril rings with peridot on Dori’s fingers and toes. When Dori moved, all the ribbons fluttered about his legs and hints of creamy skin showed.
Once they were comfortably seated, Brur bellowed out.
“His royal majesty, King Thorin II, and her highness Dis, princess royal.”
Everyone rose and bowed low as Thorin walked arm in arm with Dis up to the dais. Ori felt terribly proud to be a dwarf. What a magnificent king Thorin was! He was as always simply
dressed, but the new crown shone in the golden light and the pommel of Orcrist sparkled at his
shoulder. Dis, cultivating her own house colors now, wore a deep purple gown, edged in Durin
blue, Rutile waving from her fan-like crown.

Thorin seated her among the guests. He unbuckled Orcrist and took the throne, laying the
sheathed sword across his knees. Butter lay down directly, but Sugar went round back of the throne,
and Ori heard water being lapped. Then Sugar returned, licking her jaws, and plumped down on the
side opposite Butter, sighing contentedly.

Roac wafted down from the heights to perch on the back of the throne, preening.

And, damned if Binni hadn’t been right all along. Thorin didn’t look decadent, as Ori had feared,
but rather like a portrait of himself. Ori felt electricity shoot through him. He finally had the right
setting for the royal portrait! He owed Binni a batch of cookies!

Thorin held up his hand, everyone settled and silence fell. Ori felt the shiver of excitement go
through everyone present. Thorin declare the Court of Erebor open to announcements and petitions.

Thorin gestured to Balin, who stepped forward.

“Lords, Ladies, Bearers an’ all youth, it’s me pleasure t’ inform yeh, as requested by our neighbors
the Lord and Lady a’ th’ Golden Wood, tha’ they’re expectin’ their second…er..fawn.”

This brought a bellow of congratulations, applause, and cheers.

“The nobles of the noble couple,” said Thorin, “I thank you, and will convey your

congratulations.”

“Next,” Balin said when the noise died down again. “On behalf of the Firs’ Chair Lord Ori an’
th’ Masters a’ th’ Scribe Guild, th’ Guild Hall has been renovated an’ will be dedicated on th’ next
new moon. All are invited to bear witness.”

Thorin, his face flushed and exuberant, stated, “Refreshments will be served.”

“Another, much louder round of applause and noise resulted.”

Balin continued.

“On th’ second rest day a’ Second Harvest, everyone’s invited t’ join the Royal family in
celebratin’ th’ birthdays a’ our Professor Baggins an’ his nephew, Frodo, lord of the muffins.”

Ori blushed and bowed to his guild heads, who beamed at him.

“The hubbub of excitement started and it didn’t quieten until Thorin called everyone to order.

“More details will be made available closer t’ th’ time,” Balin continued. “King Thorin and King
Bard announce that Captain Haldir, Princess Eowyn, the White Lady of Rohan, Captain Omosuil
an’ his squad will be trainin’ an’ takin’ patrol duty with our own soldiers an’ those a’ Dale. You
may seek them in their capacity as part a’ our guard.”

Someone in the gallery cried, “We’ll know where t’ find Captain Haldir righ’ enough!”

“Thank yeh,” said Balin. “Movin’ on.”

Balin then took the dockets out of one of his robe’s copious pockets and summoned the first
petitioners. There were several who had been scheduled in.

“Master Sindris, daughter a’ Sindri, head a’ th’ volcanics guild,” Brur announced from the front
entrance of the throne room.

Sindris was a remarkably young dam, largely Firebeard in blood, as were many in the guild.
Distantly related to Gloin through her amad’s family, she looked disconcertingly like Gimli with
breasts. Her breasts were obvious because, like many in her guild, she wore very little when she
wasn’t actually working with lava, and not much more when she was. As was traditional to the
guild, the hair on her head and her beard were burned short, and she had very little hair on her body,
so her permanently bronzed skin showed great swaths of red, orange and black tattoos, all prayers to
Mahal.

She approached the foot of the dais and bowed to Thorin.

“Master Sindris, always a pleasure,” said Thorin with a grin.

“Aye, likewise. Yer majesty, it’s time t’ bleed th’ mountain again. Bin lookin’ at th’ records.
Seismic activity’s risin’, an’ tha’ mine cave-in wouldn’t even a’ happened if th’ ground wasn’t
already on th’ move. If anythin’, it means push’s come t’ shove.”
“Understood, Master Sindris. I take it you already have a plan in place.”
She nodded curtly.
“We know exactly where t’ star’ th’ reaction. Thin’ is, lava exit’s under th’ hemp fields on th’ north slope. Paper makers’ guild’s given us leave t’ take th’ whole crop a’ once, bu’ they us’ally only take an acre at a time, so we’ll need help. We want it ou’ smart-li’e. This week, b’fore rest day.”
“I’m on it!” Hamfast called from the gallery.
Not to be left behind, Master Hallow and Mistress Guernsia echoed this.
Bard said, “Hamfast already has volunteers from Dale and Erebor lined up to harvest our own crops. Hamfast, do you think they’d be interested in starting a little early?”
“How many folks d’ye think ye’ll need?”
“If we have abou’ a hundred more bodies, we kin take it down in a day,” said Sindris in a raised voice. “Brin’ yer own blades if yeh go’ em.”
Thorin nodded.
“As usual, Master Sindris, you have things well in hand. Will you please coordinate with Master Hamfast?”
“Aye. Ta, yer majesty.”
She bowed and moved smartly off to meet Hamfast as he clambered down from the gallery.
Sindris had been allotted ten minutes to speak. She had arrived alone to represent her guild and was in and out in less than five.
Next came the owner of iKeyha, Master Vidag, with a dozen of his subordinates and a legal team, all of whom were rather pissed with the owner of the space which iKeyha was using for the sap furniture creations in the Night Market.
Master Vidag wanted have the shop there days as well as nights, and expand his most highly successful venture to date. The owner of the day market stall didn’t want to give way to him, and the Central Market was already cramped, with no large enough spaces left to fill.
Master Vidag’s legal team gently explained the situation and politely asked for the king’s opinion.
At the king’s gesture, the owner of the space, a Master Hocid, stepped forward and graciously explained his need for the space and added most courteously that Master Vidag was getting too bloody big for his boots.
Master Vidag pushed aside his legal team and respectfully outlined that his business was the cutting edge of furniture fashion and Master Hocid kept his brain in his socks.
Master Hocid civilly suggested the owner of iKeyha kept all his taste in his skivvies and the sap furniture was a fad and an ugly one.
Master Vidag gently suggested that Master Hocid was what was ugly and a fad and should strongly consider shoving his head where the sun didn’t shine.
These genteel exchanges were dropped for the dwarfishly sophisticated decision making-manner of a bout of fisticuffs. Thorin leaned back, crossed one leg over the other, as the combatants rolled about the floor before the dais. Dwalin watched without interest. The legal team and Master Hocid’s clerks made book with the next petitioners.
Ori took notes and noticed out of the corner of his eye that Bard was becoming edgy. Thranduil bounced Tilda on his knee while they played some sort of clapping game. Bain looked bored. Ori turned a page and did a quick sketch as Master Vidag ripped out the seat of Master Hocid’s trousers after taking a head-butt to the shoulder.
Bard stood up and hollered, “You could just take a smaller space, then open a branch in Dale!”
The dwarrow halted in mid-tussle and stared at him.
“Oi!” Master Vidag cried. “I was savin’ me best punch f’r next!”
“Sucks to be you,” snapped Bard.
The dwarf chuckled.
“Aye, it does a’ tha’.”
“Look,” said Bard. “I have more empty warehouses than I will ever need, and because they housed what the Master thought was precious, they’re in great shape. You could have your pick of any of a number.”
The dwarrow disentangled themselves, staring at Bard.
“Yeh do know how t’ take th’ fun outa thin’s, don’t yeh,” said Hocid.
“It’s my job,” Bard acknowledged.
“No one’s even go’ a bloody nose!” Hocid complained.
“So, King Bard, yeh got anythin’ close by tha’ beauty palace racket?” Master Vidag asked hopefully.
“It’s possible,” said Bard.
“Righ’. Who d’ I talk t’ an’ when?”
Tilda, with her little book, said, “Da, you can meet him tomorrow at nine bell, right after breakfast.”
Bard gaped at her, recovered and said to the dwarf,
“Nine bell, tomorrow, at Dale Hall. Only, remember, I don’t have the room for brawling that you do here.”
“Righ’, no brawlin’.”
“I mean it. I have badgers.”
“Aye,” said Master Hocid, chuckling. “I kin see tha’.”
“Don’t worry, Da,” said Tilda. “I have my boot knife. And Idad Gloin taught me how to hamstring someone.”
The petitioners all grinned at her.
“Lass after me own heart,” said one. “Reminds me a’ me mam.”
After an appearance of a great deal of thought and throat clearing, Thorin managed, “Thank you, King Bard. Your help is greatly appreciated.”
“No worries,” said Bard, and he sat down, looking a little surprised at the instant ending of the fight.
The audience gave a rousing cheer as the guild members bowed to Bard and to Thorin and took their leave. Thrandui looked amused that Bard was receiving adulations and Ori glanced at Thorin. Under the cover of the racket, Ori raised a questioning eyebrow at his king. Thorin grinned evilly.
“I know very well when to use diplomacy and when to simply let Bard yell at people.”
“Especially when it’s funny?” Ori asked.
“Of course.”
Thorin nodded to Brur.
“Next!” Brur roared.
Ori glanced at his notes; the head of the weaving guild, Master Rokju, and the head of the forging guild, Master Hipuf.
These two came forward leading a group which included young Makhad and Miss Dahkr. They all bowed and the two heads of the guilds stepped forward with the proposal for the founding of a new sub guild that would be overseen by both guilds. This would be called the Gummy Sap guild.
Durin’s voice in Ori’s brain bounced along in rhyme:
"We represent the Gummy Sap guild
The Gummy Sap guild
The Gummy Sap guild.
And in the name of the Gummy Sap guuuuuuuuil-
"You’re an arse, Durin,” Ori muttered out of the side of his mouth.
“I know,” said Durin proudly.
“We’ll experiment, combining the sap with other materials,” said Master Hipuf, “which would in
turn be used to develop new products and devices to ease the life of all in Erebor and Dale.”

One by one, the rest of the small group was introduced and each gave a short summary of what they were working on. As Makhad and Dahkr stepped forward and told about the bouncing mat they had made in the Night Market, they earned a round of applause from the audience and Ori noticed they had matching betrothal braids. Thorin noticed, too, and congratulated them. Dori jumped up and scampered over to bless them. They were almost overcome and the audience charmed.

Thorin asked the guild heads for the contract. Balin went and received it then brought it to Thorin, who inspected the two-foot-long scroll then gave it back to Balin.

“Lord Balin will peruse this. If he has any questions, he will contact you. When this process is finished, I will call on you to witness my signature of approval. Congratulations on the opening of your new guild, may it prosper with the blessing of Mahal.”

Thorin smiled on the soon-to-be new guild members, who were all but jumping and squealing at the thought. Master Hipuf and Master Rokju called them to order and they all bowed and moved away.

“Th guild o’ miners, th’ jewelers guild an’ the mithril masters.” Brur roared.

Ori sighed and readied a five-foot scroll and several graphite wands. He had been worrying about this one. Master Kir was rather frail and it didn’t look like there had been any preparation for arm wrestling.

Master Eyarn, grand master of the miners’ guild, stepped forth to explained why it was necessary for the mithril masters to work under the auspices of the mining guild. The jewelry guild master, Master Goyhr, approached to expound on how the mithril masters were traditionally part of the jewelry guild here in Erebor.

The six mithril masters remained suspiciously quiet through all of this, until a cranky old voice rang out.

“R yeh two badgers finished babblin’ over thin’s yeh know naught abou’?”

Kir hobbled forward on his sticks, supported by Fili.

“Listen, yeh idiots, th’ mithril masters’ve been stuck with th’ jewelers guild ‘cos mithril’d never been struck under this mountain before. We brought every ounce with us when we fled Khazad-dûm. Also, mithril’s mined like any other metal, an’ a mithril master’s only required once mithril’s taken ou’ a th’ ground.

He gestured at Goyhr and Eyarn with a stick.

“Even cram brains li’e yeh two kin do it.”

“Ooooooo!” the observers murmured.

“Minta rolled her eyes, exasperated.

“Well, tha’s jus’ spiffy, Kir.”

Goyhr leaned in until he and Kir were nose to nose.


“Oooooooo!” the observers cried, riveted.

From there, things escalated quickly.

Ori scribbled as fast as he could and made a nice cartoon of Kir. Arguing seemed to peel al least a hundred years off him, and he had amazing lung capacity, shouting at both guild masters at once, the three of them only growing louder the closer they drew.

“Yeh striplin’ weasels!” Kir cursed.

“Yeh orc shit-eatin’ bottle fly!” Goyhr spat.

“Yer mam!” Eyarn roared.

“Yer mam’s goat!” Kir roared back.

Eyarn threw the first punch. Fili punched back, breaking Eyarn’s nose with a sickening crunch.

“Nice shot, inudoye!” Dis shouted.

Fili showed no qualms about fistfighting in front of his mother and his king. Ori recognized Dwalin’s teaching and once more glowed with pride.

He just wondered why Eyarn continued to place himself in the path of angry Durins.
Most of the audience was making book and yelling encouragement. Despite their age, the mithril masters proved extremely nimble. Ori wondered how long the six of them had been spoiling for a fight. Kir whacked guild members left and right with his two sticks. Ori rather thought he had trained himself to make them weapons as well as walking aids. Minta smashed one opponent into another, taking them both down at once.

“Go on, lassie!” Brur bellowed from the doorway. “Show ‘em how it’s done!”

The mill took up most of the floor before the dais and the noise was impressive. The combatants slipped and slid as blood smeared the floor.

Bard shot Thorin an inquiring look, but Thorin only grinned at him and did nothing.

Kir bashed Eyarn’s head with his own and knocked him cold.

Minta yelled as Master Goyhr started forward, Fili tried to get in the way but Kir shoved him aside, hunkered down, snorted and was ready to charge. Master Goyhr realized he was the last opponent of the mithril masters still standing. He seemed to think this over as Kir roared insults about his parentage and he backed down.

“All righ’ then,” said Kir, straightening with an audible popping of bones. He huffed the hair out of his eyes. “Le’ tha’ be a lesson t’ respect yer elders.”

Thorin waited for the cheering to subside before he finally spoke.

“Quite a compelling argument, masters,” said Thorin. “I’d say you’ve carried your point.”

The mithril masters roared and the crowd roared with them.

“Du bekar! Du bekar!”

“Master Kir,” Thorin continued, “you shall uphold the traditions of our people from the times of Durin and reorganize the guild of mithril. Draw up your contracts and by-laws and give them to Lord Balin. He will make sure they comply with my laws here in Erebor. Shall you be heading the guild yourself?”

“Naw, lad..er..yer majesty.” Kir bowed, remembering where he was and who he was addressing. “Our Master Minta’ll be headin’ it.”

“Aye, I bloody will, yeh ol’ boar,” snapped Minta, waving Fili to stand behind Kir, who looked like he might tip over. “No’ to worry yer majesty. I’ll be keepin’ Kir in line after this. I’ve go’ all th’ contracts righ’ here.”

She came forward and Balin received them. He brought them to Thorin, who leafed through, coughed, and handed them back to Balin. It was obvious he was trying not to laugh.

“You may make your call for apprentices next first work day, Master Minta,” Thorin announced. “Congratulations on the re-opening of your guild, may it prosper with the blessing of Mahal.”

There was more cheering and Master Goyhr and Master Eyarn came genially forward and offered their commendations. A standing group from healers guild stepped forward and escorted the damaged parties away. Master Minta and her new guild shuffled off, Master Kir now snoring as Fili gave him a piggyback away from the dais. The standing party of the mountain maintenance guild swept by clearing up any spilled blood.

“A maintenance guild at open court,” said Lindir. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

Bain eyed him.

“Elves do a lot of fist fighting at your open court, Mister Lindir?”

“Only when Glorfindel is in residence.”

Brur called the next petitioner.

This brought new cheers and Jim, Ruelis, and the Court of Miracles came forward. Thorin greeted them and ordered them to proceed.

Ruelis gave over the contract they had made with the owner of the area where the funfair sat and petitioned for permanent buildings.

Jim had been wise to step aside and let Ruelis do the presenting. She had innate knowledge on how her peoples’ systems and laws worked. Ori listened eagerly as she described the plans for a new expanded fun house, plumbing and amenities for all the stalls which would be enlarged and more built. Ori was surprised there hadn’t been an uproar over the space now taken up by the Fun Fair. Now he saw there were plans to erect stalls on the fun fair grounds for the selling of a variety
of goods. It was obvious Ruelis meant to garner support by sharing the wealth.

The audience chattered and exclaimed excitedly and the heads from various guild came forward to say they had already agreed to do the work requested.

Thorin looked over the plans and contracts and nodded to Ori. Ori came over with the silver salver that lived under this desk on the dais. On this were the tools Thorin needed to sign the contracts. People craned to see their king sign into law the works to be done. Thorin smiled and looked at the Court of Miracles.

“It is done. May your venture prosper with the blessing of Mahal.”

The Court of Miracles retreated in triumph, Jim turning handsprings the length of the room.

Brur announced Master Gloin.

Gloin strode forward, nattily dressed, with his beard spiffed and newly-beaded for the occasion.

Ori remembered seeing pictures of lions in story books. He knew very well that the real thing didn’t look anything like them. However, Gloin looked like the ones in the story books, down to the purposeful stride.

“Yer majesty,” said Gloin, bowing.

“Lord Gloin. It’s been an age.”

“Aye. Righ’. Well, look, it’s abou’ them ugly buildin’s on th’ road t’ the treasury. That used t’ be th’ way t’ the financial district, b’fore it go’ so th’ minister a’ finance - which is t’ say, myself - wasn’t allowed in no more. Kin we please do away with all tha’ palaver? Give the buildin’ materials t’ someone who needs it? I’d like me office back, an’ Gridr would like me t’ stop doin’ the budgets f’r th’ mountain at th’ dinin’ room table.”

Thorin grinned.

“If you can restore it to the glory it was under King Dain I, I will happily pay for the workers to do so.”

“Well, tha’ was easy,” said Gloin. He bowed again. “Ta, ‘cous.,er…yer majesty.”

“You’re very welcome,” said Thorin with a teasing smile.

Gloin took himself off, out the door and presumably to start working the hammers and pickaxes.

Thorin gestured to Brur.

“Master Fowiv, an’ a bunch a’ gleaners,” Brur announced.

The gleaners, still looking a little rough, came forward hesitantly. The hesitation was one part awe and the rest embarrassment. Shifting volcanic ground may have pushed their mine to collapse, but it might not have done so, except for months of the gleaners digging without the proper shoring up of walls.

As Bofur had put it, “They got carried away. At least the collapse wasn’t under the market itself.”

Thorin nodded acknowledgment to the knot of nervous miners and, after some pushing one, presumably Master Fowiv, stepped forward.

“Yer majesty, gleanin’s a righ’ a’ all dwarrow, but we do apologize f’r puttin’ yer sappers an’ guards in danger.”

“Indeed it is, and I thank you for your apology.”

There was a bit more muttering and pushing. The dwarf spoke again.

“We’re jus’ a bi’ worried.”

Thorin raised a brow and nodded for the dwarf to continue.

“It jus’ tha’ Ursith migh’ wan’ sumfin’."

“I have no doubt he will,” Thorin said reassuringly to them. “So we shall wait and see if and when he decided to ask. Please do not concern yourselves further.”

The group bowed.

“And for Mahal’s sake, be more careful next time,” Thorin finished with a smile.

The group scuttled away. A door at the back banged open.

“Oi!” Brur bellowed from the door, glaring at the newcomer.

“I go’ a petition!”

Everyone turned to look. There in the doorway stood Ursith.
Aggression, Amusement, and Grand Announcement.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Oh No! It’s evil Master Ursith! Whatever shall our poor characters do? Hide the iklars! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ursith wore his usual black robes, but this time they were heavily studded with steel knobs, and his hair was as always, but adorned with a gem tied with a ribbon on the front.

Everyone gasped.
“If yer wan’ in’ t’ petition, get in line,” Brur barked.
“Wheres the line then?” Ursith growled.
Brur pointed.
The few dwarrow in line took a step back.
“Yeh first,” said a dam holding a chicken.
“Tha’s the first thin’ we’ve agreed on,” said a woman, who stared covetously at the chicken.
Brur looked up at Thorin inquiringly. This was not on the docket!
Thranduil sniffed, muttered something about bad influences, rose with Tilda in his arms and bowed slightly to Thorin, who nodded. Thranduil swept out, Bain’s shoulder firmly grasped.
Ori kept his attention ostensibly on his papers, but he slyly watched Nori having his moment. Ori was suddenly aware of a smell. It was tar mixed with mint and a heavy overlay of the scent men in Dale used when they were trying to impress or going courting, but hadn’t bothered bathing. They called it puchulay. Nori must had soaked himself and all his clothing in it.

King Thorin looked all the way down at Ursith as the crime lord bowed.
“And so, Master Ursith, you’ve finally come out of the shadows,” Thorin said pleasantly as he played with Sugar’s muzzle, tapping one of her huge fangs. Sugar’s tail swept the floor and she snorted happily, licking Thorin’s hand. “Good to see you looking so well, after your recent adventure.”
“Nothin’ t’ it, majesty. Went home, had tea, smacked around a few flunkies. Th’ usual.”
Sugar turned at the voice and stared at Ursith. Her head cocked to the side, sniffing. Butter sat up and peered at Ursith. She stood and moved around front of the throne to sit at Thorin’s feet. Thorin ruffled Sugar’s ears and slid a finger under Butter’s collar, scratching her neck.

“Tell me, Ursith,” Thorin asked, smiling at Butter. “How did you accomplish such a feat?”
“Smackin’ flunkies?”
“No, no, no, my funny friend. How did you manage to extract miners through solid rock walls?”
“Tha’s me own business, ain’t it.”
“Are you saying it’s a trade secret?”
“Tain’t sayin’ nothin’, bu’ wha’ I done, tha’s go’ t’ be worth somethin’ t’ th’ crown.” Ursith shrugged and tossed a friendly salute to Bard, who stared at him, dubiously.

“It is, in fact,” Thorin agreed nicely, “but not so much that I’m willing to give you the run of the city. Or more than you already have, at any rate. What is it you want?”

Ursith’s smile was pure hunger as he rubbed his hands with glee.

“I go’ a wee business proposal f’r yeh. Strictly above boards.”

“Indeed?” Thorin asked idly. Sugar stared hard at Ursith, then questioningly up at Thorin, who continued to pat her. “What could that gain you beyond what you already have?”

“I do live quite comfortable, it’s true, bu’ I’m tired a’ th’ shadows, as yeh so nicely put it. An’ I’m bloody tired a’ tha’ overgrown billiard ball a’ yours doggin’ me every step.”

Dwalin never moved, but he did glance skyward, as though reining in his temper. Ori could tell he was trying hard not to laugh.

“You want to run an honest business?” Thorin asked with a raised brow.

“Tha’s righ’, majesty. I wan’ t’ go legit.”

Whispers of awe and incredulity ripped through the audience.

“As what?” Thorin wondered. “A tailor? Perhaps an accountant? You are good at numbers, I hear.”

“Aye, I am. I’m proposin’ th’ gamblin’ house t’ end all gamblin’ houses. We’ll be partners, sixty/forty. Bring some real high rollers int’ th’ mountain.”

“Centrally located in the Night Market, I take it.”

“Exactly. I own a fair piece a’ tha’ ground, day an’ night.” Ursith stuck his thumbs in his belt and looked pleased with himself.


“Aye, well, I’ve star’ed as I mean t’ go on,” Ursith settled his shoulders, ready for business. “I go’ ane more thin’ t’ do, while yeh think on it.”

A couple of soldiers lunged forward as he swept up the stairs. Thorin gestured them back as Ursith bounded forward and swept down on one knee at Dori’s feet. Dwalin loomed behind him in an instant, Grasper at the ready.

“M’lady?” Ursith bellowed, untying the gem from his hair. Ori could see that the fat round sunstone surrounded by rubies was set on a tungsten ring. Ursith offered it to Dori.

“Beautiful, sweet, and honored Bearer,” Ursith crooned. “Yer presence’s inspired me t’ go licit. Will yeh do me th’ very grea’ honor a’ givin’ me yer hand in marriage?”

Everyone besides the Durins gasped. Ori could see Balin frowning furiously. Anyone who didn’t know him would think him ready to knock Ursith into the next age.

“I’ve more than enough loot…er…funds t’ keep yeh in finer robe than these ‘r nuthn’, if yeh fancy it, an’ I promise yeh a pack a’ servants t’ wait on yeh r’round th’ clock! An’ I’ll feed yeh fresh cherries an’ succ-oo-lent meat every day an’ worship yeh proper every night.”

Ori thought Nori was over-doing this to his own amusement and if Dori smacked him in front of everyone here, he wouldn’t be surprised.

Dori merely extended her hand for Ursith to salute, which Ursith did, long and loudly.

“Awww,” the on-lookers cooed.

Ori bit the inside of his cheek.

Ursith looked devastated, but quickly recovered.

“Aye, well, none kin say I didn’ try me bes’.”

He saluted the Bearer’s hand one more time before returning to his feet to face the king.

Sugar barked suddenly. Ursith jumped a little.

“Here, I ain’ done nothing yer wargs can eat me f’r, yer majesty! Call ‘em off.”

Thorin laughed.
“Now, now Ursith, calm down. Sugar’s just excited, aren’t you, my damling.”
“Charmin’! Don’ be keepin’ us in suspense, King Thorin. Yeh interested or no’?”
“Careful, Ursith,” Thorin warned with royal dignity. “Legitimate business dwarf keep a civil tone with their king.”
Butter rose and looked to Thorin for orders. Thorin patted and praised her lovingly. Butter sat back down again.
“Understood, yer majesty,” said Ursith, nodding, taking a step back.
Thorin continued.
“If you draw up a comprehensive plan, Lord Balin will meet with you to discuss it. That is the protocol every dwarf has the right to and as far as I’m willing to go at the moment.”
Without preamble, or waiting for leave, Ursith made a curt bow, turned and strode out, leaving the stunned citizens of Dale and Erebor to watch him go. Sugar barked again and Ori saw Nori quicken his pace ever so slightly.
Thorin sighed as the door slammed behind Ursith.
“At this juncture, we’ll break for lunch.”
Balin made the announcement, warning the petitioners to be back on the spot in two hours.

Ori took the servants’ passage and met Nori just as his brother walked out of the larder, turkey leg in hand. Washed and changed, Nori looked his normal self once more.
“That was great!” Ori enthused.
“I dunno as it would fool anyone with any street sense, Chick.”
“What do you mean?”
“Did ya notice? The wargs didn’t growl at me.”
“You stunk so weirdly, they didn’t know what to think. Sugar barked at you, though. I thought Dwalin was going to pop if he didn’t laugh soon! A billiard ball? Wasn’t that laying it on a little thick?”
“Yah, I may’ve gone a little far with that. But done’s done. What else we got to eat?”
Thorin entered with the Company as Ori set a big platter of cold roast beef and bread on the table, while Mistress Dazla’s team laid out other viands. The wargs made directly for their freshly-filled food bowls. Sugar stopped and sniffed Nori thoroughly, then swiped his face with her tongue, making him laugh.
The king doffed his crown and hung it over the back of his chair, grinning.
“Nori! What did I tell you?”
“What? I didn’t do nuffin’ you’d hafta behead me for. Them was your exact words.” Abruptly, Nori’s voice changed accent and timber, “Nori, please don’t do anything I’d have to behead you for.”
Ori shuddered, Nori’s mimicry was uncanny. Thorin laughed.
“You enjoyed that a little too much,” the king accused.
Dwalin entered and smacked Nori smartly across the back of the head.
“Oi!” Nori cried. “That’s Dori’s trick.”
“Billiard ball? I’ll knock off yer billiard ball, nuisance.”
Mistress Dazla entered, Bilbo following, the pair of them giggling.
“Really, Nori! You’re just giving me idea after idea,” said Bilbo. “A billiard ball?”
“It’s all Dori’s fault. Give ‘im the credit,” said Nori. “This bein’ heroic an’ famous fing’s just tirin’ me out.”
“Hamfast was already at open court,” said Thorin. “When is everyone else expected?”
“They’ll be here shortly, my dear,” said Bilbo. “We did promise them lunch. I’ve set out the suit of clothes Master Mahrdin made for Frodo.”
“Have yours arrived?”
“I was thinking of borrowing something from Dori. That primrose cloud affair is simply
Thorin frowned and walked around Bilbo in deep study.

“As you wish, of course, beloved, but I think Dori’s primrose would wash out your face even with those delightfully pink cheeks and adorable button nose. Perhaps Granny Klak would lend you that charming gown of citrus with all the ruffles.”

“Thorin,” Bilbo raised an eyebrow at his intended. “I was joking and I shall presume you were as well.”

“Just as you say, ghivasha,” Thorin laughed.

Bilbo tried to frown but couldn’t manage it. Thorin clasped him close and kissed the top of his head.

“So you’re going to sit down?” Bilbo asked primly when Thorin released him.

“Of course, my love.”

“Here we are!” Bell called from the next room.

Frodo ran in and straight to Bilbo and Thorin. Bilbo caught him up and tossed him, shrieking, to Thorin.

“Hi! Did you miss me?” he shouted.

Fili entered, looking happy, and weary.

“How is Master Kir?” Thorin asked, sitting Frodo on his knee and drawing Bilbo down to sit next to them.

“Out cold,” said Fili. “He has to get his own apprentice. He’s heavier than Dain.”

Ori chose not to ask how he knew that.

Dori swept in and glared at Nori.

“Marriage?” she snapped.

“Aw c’mon, our Dor. Had t’ give ‘em sumfin’ t’ fink on, ‘sides me petition. Gotta make up t’ the Bearer.”

Dori narrowed her eyes, then laughed.

“You looked ridiculous! Cherries and meat!? I’d have the runs every day! Thank Mahal, you washed that dreadful smell off. I almost couldn’t breath.”

“Butter and Sugar were rather confused by you,” Thorin chuckled.

“All f’r th’ good,” Nori said and parked himself at the table as everyone else came in.

“What did we miss?” Aragorn asked with a grin.

“A terrible smell,” reported Dori, as she greeted Arwen with a kiss then gave a cry of delight as the Gardeners and Boromir came in.

Aragorn looked quizzically at Balin and Thorin. Thorin chuckled and Balin rolled his eyes.

“Be glad yeh went elsewhere, laddie. It was a bloody performance.”

Everyone settled to a good lunch of carrot and ginger soup, breads, cold meats, cheeses, and fresh produce. While they ate, everyone helped Thorin tell the Gardeners and the Gondorians what had happened at open court, before Ursith’s arrival, which soon had them roaring with laughter.

Tilda and Bain grumbled about being taken out.

“I wanted to see the bad guy,” Tilda complained.

“Be glad yeh went elsewhere, laddie. It was a bloody performance.”

Tilda and Bain grumbled about being taken out.

“I wanted to see the bad guy.”

“Of course he does,” Dori cooed.
The merry meal continued until it was time to prepare for the afternoon session of open court.

Bilbo grabbed Ori’s hand and pulled him along to Bag End East with Thorin and Frodo and Samwise, Dwalin swaggering behind with a smirk.

Samwise was insistent that Frodo be helped into his new clothes. Thorin and Dwalin supervised, which mainly consisted of making sure neither faunt tripped or otherwise pitched over while Samwise ‘helped’.

Bilbo and Ori went off to the master bedroom. Bilbo fetched the new suit of clothes from the wardrobe.

“Aw,” teased Ori. “No primrose?”

Bilbo snorted.

“I wouldn’t wear primrose. Thorin is annoyingly right, as it makes me look as though my gall bladder was afflicted. Besides, that’s the Bearer’s color and Dori looks like a flower in it. Master Zindis was more than happy to design me something appropriately hobbitish, with a tinge of dwarfish.”

“Do the underpinnings whisper?” Ori asked with a flutter of his lashes.

“Of course,” said Bilbo, fluttered his own in return, which made them both snicker.

“You must be very proud.”

“I am a bit, yes. I’m going to get dressed. The chapter on the symbolism of the Took linens from the box is on the desk if you’d like to read it.”

“Already?” Ori yelped, practically lunging for the manuscript. His document was coming together quickly, mainly because he had so much help.

“It didn’t require a lot of extra research,” said Bilbo. “I’ve know about them my entire life. Bell also remembered a few things. There’s an awful lot of hidden naughtiness in the marriage quilt alone.”

There was indeed. In a very little time, Ori knew more about Durin’s and Sunflower’s sex life than he could ever dream. Or want, when it came right down to it.

“Bilbo, this is amazing!”

“Thank you. Your sketches will be the perfect accompaniment. What do you think?”

Ori turned.

“Oh, that’s lovely!”

Bilbo wore a white shirt under a long, cream weskit embroidered with gold leaves, and Durin blue hobbit style trousers. His neckcloth was white like his shirt, but for tiny acorns embroidered here and there. He wore only his betrothal bead for jewelry, and though it looked stunning against his hair, Ori was a little concerned that the assembled witnesses would think the hobbit half dressed. He didn’t know how to put that to Bilbo. He knew hobbits didn’t have much use for such things.

Suddenly, Ori felt something in his palm. He opened his hand. Queen Sunny’s rings sat there, winking up at him.

“Uh, Bilbo.”

“Those are very nice,” said Bilbo. “Were they a present from Dwalin? They look a little small for your hand.”

“They are nice, but I don’t think they were meant for my hand. They belong to Sunflower. I think they we’re meant for yours.”

“Ah. Well. I’ve never worn a ring. What is the protocol in this case?”

“I think it’s best Thorin puts them on you. I’m almost willing to bet they’ll fit perfectly.”

“Naturally,” said Bilbo, glancing into the ether. “I promise, You’ll get them back.”

“Ready, ghivasha?” Thorin asked, coming into the room.

He stopped short at the sight of Bilbo in such fine clothes, his grin widening.

Ori cleared his throat.

“Thorin, I think Sunflower wants Bilbo to wear these at your betrothal.” He dropped the rings into Thorin’s palm. “I’m pretty sure you know what to do with them.”

“Do we really have time for that?” asked Thorin with a wicked smile.
“You’ve nothing to boast of if they fit you there,” said Ori, with a grin and a salute. “I’m going to go find my husband. See you in the throne room!”

When open court reconvened, the throne room was full to overflowing, and jolly in a way it had not seen since the coronation.

The petitioners who awaited were surreally patient, because, of course, they weren’t just there to have the king hear their requests and grievances. The undertone of whispering voices filled every empty space like fog. Everyone expected a very important royal announcement.

“How long are you going to keep them waiting?” Ori murmured to Thorin in the doorway.

“We have a little business to take care of first,” said Thorin, “but after that, not a second longer than it takes to bring in the ale.”

From Thorin’s other side, Bilbo grinned.

“It’s not how long you wait, it’s who you’re waiting for. Ungrammatical, I know, but I beg you overlook that in favor of the sentiment.”

Ori rolled his eyes and sighed.

“I suppose. If I must.”

“There is cake to go with the ale,” Bilbo reminded him. “Do try to soldier on.”

Bilbo sat with Frodo bouncing excitedly on his knee, just out of sight in the antechamber, while Brur announced everyone else again, and included the Gardeners and Gondorians. Once Thorin was seated on the throne, he formally welcomed them to Erebor, then he declared open court in session once more.

Brur announced the first afternoon petitioner.

Ori continued to write, finding time to sketch and make notes, as most of the petitions had been common place, but at last Brur announced Mistresses Pidcu and Ugjep.

The two, one a woman the other a dam, had a hissed quarrel as they came up. A soldier walked behind them carrying a chicken.

Balin looked at the docket and stated that the dispute was over the ownership of the chicken. When asked to present their cases both immediately pointed out at volume who the chicken belonged to and whose parentage was the more shady.

After some bickering, Thorin raised his voice.

“You found this chicken wandering?”

“I did, yer majesty,” Mistress Pidcu bellowed

“Did no’!” the woman, Mistress Ugjep, cried. “Tha’ there’s mine.”

The protocol would be to let them fight it out, of course, but the chicken sat smack in the middle of bodily harm.

“Bring the chicken here,” Thorin sighed.

Balin looked horrified at his king.

Thorin’s lips twitched in amusement.

“Captain Dwalin,” he ordered, “bring me the chicken.”

“Aye, yer majesty.”

Dwalin descended with great dignity. The chicken was surrendered without incident.

“C’mon, chicky-wicky,” Dwalin crooned at it, as he carried it up the steps, stroking the feathers, the chicken perfectly placid, and placed it in Thorin’s hands.

The wargs perked up.

“No,” said Thorin.

The wargs sighed and lay back down.

Thorin looked over the bird, perhaps for some tag or dye mark, as there were some people who marked their stock that way. The chicken regarded him interestedly.

He looked down at the petitioners, who were actually very well dressed, and did not look like they tended a lot of chickens.

“Why did you need a chicken? Are there not chickens enough in the market?”

“We decided t’ start a flock, yer majesty,” said the woman. “Then, we couldn’t agree on anythin’
Ori stared at the chicken. It was a vaguely orangish-white, much like many in that part of the world. He saw a lot of chickens, every day, but there was something about the odd speckles on the side of this one’s head. He had seen it before, and he remembered, because even from a distance it looked like big toe.

That was one of Mistress Guernsia’s chickens.

He felt the prickle of energy at his ankle which told him Nori was around.

Quickly he scratched out a note and dropped it discretely on the floor behind the desk.

“Nori,” he hissed. “Bring this to Thorin.”

The note disappeared, and then reappeared under Thorin’s hand on the arm of the throne.

Thorin slid it over onto the seat and glanced at it.

He said to the women, “You say one of you found this while wandering?”

“Aye, yer majesty, I did.”

“No, I did!”

“Was all this wandering, by any chance, past Mistress Guernsia’s farm?”

The ladies’ mouths fell open.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” said Thorin. “Would someone please locate Mistress Guernsia? I believe she and Master Hathor have gone to Fundin House to look in on some Mistress Dazla’s animals.”

Mistress Guernsia was speedily summoned.

“Is this your property, mistress?” Thorin asked her.

She approached the throne with some trepidation, aware that this was a place few people were allowed.

“Yes, your majesty.”

“She can’t prove it!” the dam shouted.

“I could if someone hadn’t clipped her leg band off,” said Guernsia.

“Er… well… it didn’t have one,” the woman protested.

Thorin sighed.

“I am awarding this chicken to Mistress Guernsia. She may keep it, or she may sell it. If she sells it, I suggest it go to the highest bidder. This claim is closed.”

Thorin gestured to Brur.

“Tha’s th’ lo’, yer majesty,” said Brur. “I believe there’s one more order of business?”

Thorin smiled.

“Indeed, there is. Master Brur, if you would be so kind?”

The room buzzed with whispering, though a few dwarrow, impatient in their excitement, shouted, “Bash on with it!” and “Aye, let’s get t’ guid stuff!”

“I will if yeh’d kindly shut yer traps,” Brur barked. And when they had, he announced, “Professor Bilbo Baggins, son of Belladonna Took and Bungo Baggins, and his nephew, Frodo Baggins, late of the Shire.”

They arrived through the side door which the royal family used, and that in itself set some dwarrow off. Then Thorin rose and Bilbo and Frodo climbed the stairs and Bilbo took Thorin’s hand.

Balin waited while the shouting went on and on, then decided he was just going to jump in.

“His Majesty, King Thorin II of Erebor, announces that his overtures of marriage to Professor Bilbo Baggins have been accepted.”

The roars of congratulations and cheers all but lifted the ceiling. Balin swatted at the air, the volume lowered to catch the rest.

“The ceremony of the hobbit tradition will be this coming spring and the ceremony of dwarven tradition will take place this coming Durin’s Day and, by the will of Mahal and the traditions of the Durin line, Professor Baggins will be crowned Prince Consort of Erebor.”

Ori felt like he had to push his pen against the noise of the cheers.

Then, slowly, the crowd’s attention turned.

“What of the contracts?”
“Aye, they’ve no’ been posted!”
“Is this a hobbit thing?”
Thorin stepped forward, still holding Bilbo’s hand. The silence was immediate.
“We knew you would want to witness the signing,” said Thorin, “so we waited until today, so you could see for yourselves.”

The cheers erupted once more.

A table was brought, inkwell and pen. Balin presented three identical contracts, rolling out each one for Thorin and Bilbo to sign before moving off to the side so everyone could witness them signing. One of the contracts would be filed in the archives. Thorin and Bilbo each got one.

There would be many others, unsigned, of course, to be read aloud, then posted in public places. For the first time one would be read and posted in Dale, just outside Dale Hall, as Thorin and Bard had agreed.

The public contracts would quickly disappear as pieces were torn off for souvenirs.

When the signing was done, the table was taken away. Balin read the archival copy aloud, Ori quickly sketching, with details to be filled in later. When Balin was finished, the gold dust flew.

Thorin and Bilbo stood at the front of the dais, arms about each other smiling and waving. Frodo sat on Thorin’s shoulder and waved to everyone with both hands.

Ori blew a layer of gold dust off his scroll, happy that he wasn’t prone to blobs and blotting. He was aware he was crying, and that probably didn’t help, since it would track through the gold on his face and he’d look even sillier. His mind went to the maintenance guild who were going to be cursing by later tonight. He hoped someone had thought to give them a bonus over and above their usual pay and, oh, where was his husband because he was losing it.

People started shouting about arrangements and not much time and Dori shot to her feet and marched to the edge of the dais. Silence fell.

“What do you mean not enough time and arrangements to be made?” Dori scolded and shook her finger at the audience for good measure.

“What do you think Princess Dis and I have been doing since I came to Fundin house? Knitting? We all but arranged this entire affair. Everything is under our control and ready. All of you just need to dress suitably and attended, silly badgers!”

“Yes, Bearer,” said a majority in unison.

Yes, it was funny, and, yes, Ori was still crying.

“Will there be cake, Bearer?” a little voice asked.

“Cake for days,” Dori promised.

“Yay!”
SURPRISE! We're a day early this week. Stevie's got people-relatives and cat-relatives arrivin' imminently!

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Yay! Cake! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarf time, same dwarf tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Thorin and Bilbo bowed once more. Balin waved to a far door and members of the Palace kitchen guild made their way in. They were carrying a full size banqueting tray. It took ten dwarf to carry it in.

Ori stared at the enormous cake. It was at least six feet wide and eight feet long. It towered above to almost the height of Dwalin. The guild members set it down on the banqueting table the maintenance guild brought through and covered with a Durin blue table cloth. More members of the kitchen guild arrived bearing dishes, utensils, kegs and tankards.

The cake was beautiful, whipped cream swirled all over it and at every corner was a bouquet of sugared flowers.

There were ‘ooo’s’ and ‘aaah’s’ all around. Thorin looked at Bilbo and Bilbo stepped forward.

“Dear friends, thank you all so much for your congratulations. Thorin and I are most appreciative of your kindness and good wishes. I think at this moment we shall give thanks to the royal kitchens and the mountain maintenance guild for all their hard work to make this possible. That is a beautiful tableau.”

Ori heard Margr explaining to any dwarf seated in her near vicinity that this was the hobbitish word for table.

Bilbo started the applause and the members of the aforementioned guilds bowed and smiled, receiving the accolades from everyone.

Balin and Dori escorted the royal couple forward to the cake. Butter and Sugar tailed them, then Ori followed closely, scribbling as he went.

Dori blessed the cake then Bilbo cut a slice then Thorin cut a slice and they fed each other bites, the intervening ones going into Frodo’s mouth.

The head of the kitchen guild took over and slices were passed out in earnest.

Thorin and Bilbo stood at the end of the table, and laughed and talked to any who came and congratulated them. Frodo sat on the table with Sam and fed bits of cake to the wargs.

Ori sighed and realized the formal part of his job was over, as Bujni and Omi lurked near the royal couple and took notes.

Ori sat down on the edge of the dais and added touches to his sketches.

Dwalin looked over his shoulder, then seated himself next to Ori.

“Bet our Thorin’s happy he didn’t marry th’ mountain now.”

Ori laughed up at him.

“Do you think?”

Dwalin reached and swiped at Ori’s cheek with his thumb.

“Yer tha’ happy, love.”

“I am. I know you’re on duty, but-“

Dwalin leaned in and kissed him.

“I li’e t’ think tha’s th’ bes’ par’ a’ me job,” he said. “The worst parts goin’ t’ be gettin’ all this
“I know, the official record for today’s open court is going to be permanently, festively sparkled. Between Durin’s Day and birthdays and a wedding, it’s going to be a terribly busy few weeks, isn’t it.”

“It is, bu’ we’ll make time, love. I promise.”

“Thank you,” said Ori, sagging against him. “I didn’t even like to ask.”

“Yeh know yeh never should be afraid t’ask.”

Gridr brought them each a piece of cake.

“I know there’s another waitin’ f’r us at home, but have a wee taste a’ this f’r luck.”

“We’re already married,” said Ori, taking the cake anyway. “We don’t need to find the lucky gold piece. If one of us got it, that would just be embarrassing.”

“If yeh get it,” she said, “slip it onto me Gloin’s plate. I want t’ see his face.”

A cry from across the room grabbed their attention.

Lady Eowyn was holding up something.

“What’s this? Did one of the baker’s lose a coin in the batter?”

The dwarrow rushed to congratulate her, to her confusion, and then embarrassment when she realized it meant she was next to be married. Haldir laughed until the tears ran down his cheeks.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Captain Haldir,” said Eowyn. “I think I got your slice of cake by accident.”

The coin clinked as she tossed it lightly onto his plate.

“Oh, no-no-no, my dear lady,” Haldir snickered, tossing it back on hers. “This, White Lady of Rohan, is all yours.”

“Mmmm,” said Mister Wandi, “though, I can understand the mistake.”

Haldir nudged him lightly with an elbow, but he was still grinning. Ori watched them as they drifted through the crowd laughing and chatting. When Haldir saw Ori, he came to the dais.

“Lord Ori, Captain Dwalin, how are you both keeping?”

Ori cocked his head at the elf.

“Is that why you’re staying, Captain Haldir? Are congratulations in order?”

“It’s entirely within the realm of possibility,” said Haldir, with something like coyness. “At any rate, I’ve been given a leave of absence by my lord and lady, as I hadn’t actually taken one in seven hundred years. They told me they thought it would be enriching and gratifying for me to stay in Dale for a while.”

“Well, I hope you’ll let me know when the possibility has worked out,” said Ori. “I can enter the event in the chronicles of Erebor.”

Haldir looked surprised.

“Why would you want to do that? I am not a dwarf.”

“There are a lot of people in the chronicles who aren’t, remember? Besides, you were on the quest to Khazad-dûm. I need to interview you about your experiences, if you’re willing, and also, I should sketch a portrait for the official document.”

The elf straightened his spine.

“It would be an honor, Lord Ori. I will put on my new trousers for the occasion.”

As the elves walked away, Dwalin muttered, “Then our Wandi kin take ‘em off.”

Once Thorin and Bilbo had spoken with everyone, the royal family took leave of the party.

“The consort-elect needs his tea,” said Bilbo, as they walked through the corridors.

Bilbo and Thorin walked hand in hand, Frodo on Thorin’s shoulder.

The faunt called back and forth with Samwise, who rode along on Boromir’s shoulder, the two of them obviously headed for a huge sugar crash.

“Now, ghivasha,” said Thorin to Bilbo, “you have met everyone. Again.”

“Lovely people,” said Bilbo, “each and every one of them. Did we leave enough ale, do you think?”

“There will be no running dry, this I promise,” said Thorin. “And Princess Protocol will be in effect.”
“Durin Protocol!” Dis growled, while Jani laughed, and patted her shoulder.

“As you wish, namadith,” said Thorin sweetly.

One of Dis’ beads bounced off the back of his head, neatly missing Frodo.

The faunt hopped down as Thorin darted forwarded and scooped the bead up as it fell. He looked it over.

“This is a nice one. Thank you, namad.” Thorin put the bead in his pocket.

“Hey,” Dis cried and bounded forward. “Give it back.”

She lunged for his pocket but Thorin grabbed the bead out and held it high above his head, out of her reach. Dis snarled and snatched at his arm, as he laughed and teased her. She almost had it when Thorin flicked the bead high and behind him. Ori saw Nori’s hand dart out of the wall and grab it. Ori wondered if Dis would ever see it again. Then he realized she was searching everyone.

She would probably find it on her pillow, or possibly in tomorrow’s porridge, or never at all.

The Durins and their guests gathered in the sitting room for one more cake, this only a little smaller than the last.

This was the cake Bilbo and Dori made, and it, too, would go out into the throne room, whatever might be left when the Durins got through with it.

Mistress Dazla, Miss Oquizla and several others wheeled it in.

It was glorious, decorated in such a way as to suggest the mountain itself in buttercream.

There was a gasp of awe and silence.

Then Nori burst through the top of the cake, dressed like a courtesan

“Surprise!”

Frosting flew through the air and dripped off his face.

“Get down from there! You’ve ruined the cake!” Dori bellowed.

“Nope! Not finished yet!” Nori replied. “Binni?”

The Bearer-Sib stepped forward with a hand drum and began to play.

Nori was festooned with purple and Durin blue beads which twinkled and rattled as he moved.

He wasn’t wearing very much, just a scarf of some silky gold material low on his hips, and a sort of halter top, open weave lined all around with tiny gold bells. Incorporeal, he swept through the cake and seemed to descend invisible steps to the floor, where he began to whirl.

Ori was rather impressed with the snaky movements Nori wove into his steps. His hips shimmied and shook in time with the drum.

“He’s got my bead in his navel!” Dis cried.

Bofur grinned.

“Looks darlin’, don’t it? No worries, I’m sure ya’ll get it back.”

“Er, no, he can keep it,” said Dis, grimacing.

As the whirling grew frenzied, Assault and Battery jumped from Nori’s hair, skittered down his arm and held onto each of his hands with both their tiny ones, jabbering in time with the drum.

When his spinning was fastest, he dropped through the floor, still spinning, then sprang up again, threw his arms and legs around his king, kissed his forehead and shouted, “Congrats, your Thoriness!”

Nori dropped down and grinned maniacally.

Thorin licked his own icing-smeared lips, spattered with frosting from Nori’s hair and beard.

“Mmmm,” said the king thoughtfully, “good buttercream.”

“Uncle Bilbo,” said Frodo, “don’t you get a kiss from Idad Nori?”

“No, thank you,” said Bilbo.

“Really!” Dori cried, charging forward to smack Nori with a tea towel. “Look what you’ve done!”

“Oi! Most of it’s just fine,” Nori protested. He grabbed the tea towel and started to swab down his hair and any stray smears on the ferrets.

Ori thought this might be their last outing in Nori’s hair. They were now too large to fit comfortably in Nori’s coif.
Not getting satisfaction in one corner, Dori turned next to Binni, who looked terribly amused and satisfied.

“You taught him a sacred dance?”

Binni shrugged.

“Who am I to deny the furthering of someone’s thirst for knowledge?”

“Honestly!” Dori grumbled, throwing his hands in the air hopelessly.

Meanwhile, Mistress Dazla brought the knife for the cake cutting.

“The tea’s on, m’lady.”

“Oh, thank Mahal.”

That night Ori climbed into bed next to Dwalin, who sat propped against the pillows, reading the brief speech Ori wrote for the rededication of the scribes’ hall.

“What do you think?” Ori asked.

“Masterful an’ soldierly,” said Dwalin with a teasing grin. “Say wha’ yeh have t’ say an’ ge’ out.”

“As long as they don’t expect something more than that. I just don’t want it to sound dismissive.”

Dwalin handed him back the pages.

“Sadie said yeh didn’t t have t’ write anythin’ f’r the rededication. She’d’ve bin happy t’ do it.”

“But I’ll still have to present it as the guild’s first chair. I’m sorry, but that always makes me sound like furniture.”

Ori put the pages back in the drawer of his bedside table. Nori-pori had developed a taste for ink, so much so that Ori had to recreate manuscript pages from the quest documents.

Ori leaned back against Dwalin’s chest with a musing, “Hmmm.”

“Wha’re yeh thinkin’ love?”

“You’ll laugh.”

“No promises.”

“If you were a piece of furniture, what would you be?”

Dwalin laughed.

“Told you,” said Ori.

“An’ yeh were righ’. Furniture? I’d prob’ly be an armoire, massive ‘n no’ attached t’ th’ wall, so I’d fall an’ crush someone.”

Ori sat up and stared at him.

“You would!” he cried.

“Oi! Come back here!” Dwalin drew Ori close once more. “An’ yeh?”

“I’d be a footstool, small and useful and sitting in the dark, unintentionally tripping people up so they break their ankles.”

Dwalin gave a deep, booming laugh.

“An’ then yeh’d break yer own ankle, learin’ up t’ apologize!”

“It’s true,” said Ori, nodding. He warmed to the subject. “Nori would be a backless settee. Just when you got comfortable, you’d tumble off. Dori would be an overstuffed sofa, all soft and cozy. You’d sink down into the cushions. Then, you’d realize you were trapped.”

“Oh, aye. An’ then?”

“Then a tea trolley would appear out of nowhere, laden with goodies that you had to eat or you’d never escape. What about Balin?”

“Ornate, pigeonhole desk,” said Dwalin without hesitation. “All th’ knowledge in th’ world at yer fingertips, wrapped in a package with fancy-toed slippers. Thorin?”

“Ooo,” said Ori. “Let me think. There’s the throne, of course, but that’s too easy.”

“A’ course,” Dwalin agreed.

“Smartarse. Let me think. Bilbo?”

“Kitchen stove,” said Dwalin. “Efficient, warm, dangerous if mishandled.”

“I like it!” Ori agreed.

“Come on, then. Thorin?”

“Dish cupboard.”
“Dish cupboard?”
“One of those glass-fronted ones for your best dishes, which you never use.”
“How d’ye figure?”
“Most people are afraid to do more than look at it, because it’s so important and rare, but if you want it to do its job, you have to open the door and dare to handle what’s inside.”
“Ah, well, we won’t mention that’ t’ him. Guid thin’ hobbits’ve such a light touch.”
“And a love of dishware,” said Ori.
Dwalin kissed the top of Ori’s head.
“Yer no’ worried abou’ the rededication?”
“No, not really. Not now that Master Brur stopped threatening to bring back up the coronation robes. Dipfa’s just going to redo my hood and I’ll wear it with my court robes. It’s sort of a consolation prize for not getting to alter the coronation robes to match her vision. But, I’ve warned her, there can’t be any switches or pieces that light up.”
“Sometimes, yeh have t’ pu’ yer foot down, love.”
“I know. I’m ashamed to say, I almost caved in when her lip started to quiver. Happily, she has Vi and Margr who think she’s a genius and let her dress them in just about anything. It’s amazing how they seem to be in sync like that.”
“Those two’re strong enough t’ throw anythin’ int’ relief.”
Ori sighed happily.
“This is nice. We’ve been going non-stop since we got back from the quest. You were right, you know.”
“I usually am, but wha’ was I righ’ abou’ this time?”
“We don’t have a lot of time alone together, so we make the most of it when we do.”
“I wish it could be otherwise, love. I don’ like havin’ t’ pu’ an entire kingdom before yeh.”
“I have you right now. In fact, you could have me right now.”
Ori looked up at him slyly, proud that his cheeks felt only slightly warm.
“Oh, aye?” Dwalin asked. “And how would yeh li’e t’ be had?”
“Kiss me and we’ll figure that out.”
Dwalin kissed him. It was lovely, but the position made it awkward. Ori turned and sat astride Dwalin’s lap instead, and that was perfect, pressed together, Dwalin’s hands at his waist, Ori’s hands in Dwalin’s hair, playing with the sensitive outer edges of Dwalin’s ears. Dwalin had beautifully round, large dwarf ears, the chunk out of one was a touchstone for Ori.
When they rolled over, they woke Nori-pori, who climbed to his feet in disgust and went to sleep with Mask in the basket on the floor.
“Sorry!” Ori called gaily.
“Yer no’ sorry,” Dwalin teased.
“Shh! I don’t want to hurt his little feelings.”
“He’s a cat. His li’le feelin’s’ll be hur’ if yeh breathe on ‘im wrong.”
“And ‘wrong’ changes moment to moment, I know.”
“Mind if I breathe on yeh?”
“Please.”
Dwalin kissed his neck, then rubbed his beard across it
“I like that,” Ori sighed. “Let me try it.”
Through the thick skin of a dwarf, the roughest of beards felt like a caress, like dozens of tiny caresses across the body at the same time. It was something of a kink.
Now that Ori had a beard, it was time to see how well his husband liked it.
Dwalin all but purred.
“You changed the scent of your hair oil,” Ori murmured against his neck. “It’s even more delicious.”
“Li’le somethin’ Tay suggested.”
“Mmmm, new iron and… what is that?”
“Wood smoke.”
“Rather exotic. I like it.”
“I kin tell. Yeh kin keep on with tha’.”
“Any place in particular?” Ori teased, biting Dwalin’s earlobe. He lingered there while Dwalin’s breath stuttered.
“Me dick would be very obliged. I’ll even wash yer beard f’r yeh after.”
Ori laughed.
“That sounds like a bargain to me.”
They kissed again, lingeringly. The heat of Dwalin’s body warmed Ori’s front, while the cool air from the open window swept across his arse. Both made him shiver in pleasure.
“A’right’?”
“Mmmm, yes.”
Ori slid down his body, trailing his whiskers slowly through Dwalin’s dwarf fur. Kivi suggested that, since moving slower added to the anticipation. Also, snagging whiskers in body hair, though funny, could ruin the mood.
Ori’s mouth watered as he nuzzled Dwalin’s hip, then his inner thigh. With all the patience a scribe could muster, he used his beard like another tongue, licking, sucking and rubbing at the same, careful pace as Dwalin’s pleasure quickened.
Ori’s mind wandered into new territory, as he wondered what it would be like if Bilbo was helping him. The hobbit didn’t have a beard, but he had that clever mouth. The pair of them together could soon work Dwalin into a lather. He filed that away for some nebulous later.
Dwalin writhed beneath him.
“You like that?” Ori murmured.
“Oh, aye. More, please.”
Dwalin’s breath quickened and his writhing grew ever more desperate and still Ori did not speed his touches. If Ori thought for a moment that he was tormenting Dwalin, he would have pulled back. He trusted Dwalin would tell him to stop. Though Ori and Dwalin hadn’t talked a lot about pain yet, Dwalin didn’t seem keen. Ori admitted he was rel-
Ori laughed in surprise.
“Not stopping. Promise.”
The precum oozed from the head almost like a tease.
Ori licked it up, dragged his tongue and then his beard over the sensitive opening.
Almost without thinking, he swiped some up on his finger, and then ran it over Dwalin’s arsehole.
“Oh, Mahal!” Dwalin growled. “Do tha’ again!”
Now Ori wished he had thought of the oil, but he wasn’t going to stop to get it, not when his husband was so deeply in the thrall of pleasure. Slowly, he swiped his fingers back and forth, stopping only to gather more cum, which mixed with his spit as he languidly sucked at the head of Dwalin’s dick.
Dwalin’s writhing grew to thrashing, his growls to cries, as he twisted his own nipples with their tempting rings.
Slowly, carefully, Ori dipped his finger inside the hole a bit and pulled it out, swiping circles around the edge. His own memory supplied the sensation and he hummed around the cock head, and enjoyed the feel of his balls drawing up.
Dwalin came in three mighty arches of his back, thoroughly spraying Ori’s face and beard, and finally lay panting and shivering.
“Ori, love,” he gasped.
Ori threw himself up into Dwalin’s arms, and felt the diminishing echoes of climax shiver through his husband’s body.
“Love,” said Dwalin quietly, “yeh kin do tha’ any time yeh like.”
“I’ll take you at your word, you know,” Ori warned.
He lifted himself up and crawled further forward gingerly to kiss him.
“Yeh need seein’ t’,” said Dwalin.
“My beard needs seeing to,” said Ori with a giggle. “If it dries like this…”
“Aye,” said Dwalin, kissing him again, and again. “And yer no’ even a Stiffbeard!”
“Do you think that’s where the name comes from?” Ori asked, quite seriously.

“Considerin’ how many wives Gheir has? It’s an even bet.” Dwalin rolled them both over onto their sides and rested their damp foreheads together. ‘I’m carryin’ yeh off t’ th’ bath, an’ well see t’ yer beard and yerself, no’ necessarily in tha’ order.”

“Are you going to admire my perfect pumpkins, Gonad?”
“I’m goin’ t’ worship th’ li’le fuckers.”
He strolled out of their room with Ori in his arms, neither of them wearing so much as a stitch.

Dwalin growled and leered at him, and called Ori his bonny, buxom maid and threatened to ravish him, so as to ruin him for every other dwarf, elf or man.

“Oh, my king!” Ori simpered. “Please be kind, and don’t bruise my pumpkins too terribly! If they get all squishy, how will I ever sit down?”

“Yeh won’t, me blossom. Yeh’ll recline on a couch an’ I’ll feed yeh cherries.”
“And succulent meat?”

“Yeh’ve already had yer portion for t’nigh’,” said Dwalin with a wink.
Dwalin set him down on the bathroom stool and went and filled the bathtub.

“Remember to put the sparkles and fluffy pink dessert in the water,” said Ori.

“Lucky for our Wandi th’ sparkles dissolved,” said Dwalin. He poured a small measure of bath oil into the filling tub. “An’ I though’ th’ gold dust clashed with me uniform.”

“I thought they were quite fetching,” said Ori.

“Yeh been spendin’ too much time with Bilbo,” said Dwalin, grinning.
“No such thing,” said Ori with dignity.

“I kin see knowin’ him’s guid for yeh.”

“Dori’s still not convinced of that.”

“Tha’s wha’ convinces me,” said Dwalin.

Dwalin lifted him into the tub, and Ori sighed at the lovely, warm water. Dwalin climbed in behind him.

“We jus’ go’ t’ be careful gettin’ ou’,” said Dwalin.
Ori rubbed his fingers together and saw what Dwalin meant. If nothing else, their skin would be quite soft.

He squeaked as Dwalin picked Ori up and sat him straddling Dwalin’s lap. Ori’s back pressed to Dwalin’s front. Dwalin’s hands ran up and down Ori’s front.

Oh...
Dwalin kissed his neck and whispered, “I’m goin’ t’ stroke yeh off, if it’s a’righ’ with yeh.”
Ori’s flagging erection returned quite suddenly, so suddenly that he inhaled a sharp breath, bowed out with the jolt of pleasure. Dwalin held him, licking and biting his ear while gently, insistently twisting his nipples.

“Yeh li’e tha, don’ yeh,” said Dwalin.

“Mmmm, yes,” Ori murmured. He closed his eyes and quite literally put himself in Dwalin’s hands. “Love your hands. Love all of you.”

Dwalin rubbed his beard against Ori’s neck.

“Love yeh.”
Ori soon grew restless, straining against Dwalin’s touch as if he could somehow get Dwalin’s hands on every inch of his body at once.

“When I take yeh,” Dwalin said, “it’ll be here in this tub.”

Ori knew exactly what figure of Kivi’s that Dwalin meant.

“Will you take me on my knees?”

“Oh, aye. The warm water’ll go over the sides as I pump yeh. I’ll be moppin’ it up long after yeh’ve gone t’ bed.”

“Will you tuck me in before you mop?”

“Aye, ghivashele, I’ll tend t’ yeh an’ yer pumpkins guid an’ proper.”
“Dwalin, this feels so good.”
“D’ye wan’ me hand around yer cock now?”
“Please,” Ori breathed.

One hand grasped his cock, while Dwalin held Ori steady with an arm around his middle, those fingers plenty long enough to sweep up across his nipples in leisurely counterpoint to the lovely, brisk pace down below and the insistent nibbling of Ori’s neck, the perfectly sweet, filthy promises poured into Ori’s ear.

Ori was torn between laughing and sobbing.

“Don’ worry,” Dwalin promised, “I’ll hold yeh tight when I come inside yeah, so yeh don’ shoot ou’ an’ across the room an’ concuss. Don’ wan’ old Oin t’ come save yeh with his skull hammer.”

“H-how embarrassing!” Ori agreed, giggling. “We c-could be a chapter in his next s-sex guide.”

“At least we’l know tha’ no ane’ll ever read it,” said Dwalin.

Dwalin’s prick had reawakened with the friction, rising into the slot of Ori’s splayed legs, rubbing against his sensitive skin, and randomly across his opening. It was just enough to tip Ori over the edge, and his cries echoed across the tile as he drowned in the undertow of pleasure.

He lost track of time then. He sagged against his husband, who cuddled him, murmuring loving nonsense. He might even have nodded off from exhaustion for a moment. It felt like waking up anyway, as if the dimmed lights in the bathroom had extinguished and slowly kindled again. The water felt cooler, too.

In the shower, Dwain washed his beard, as promised, and the rest of him as well, then towed him off and tucked him into bed.

“I love yeh, me wee footstool.”
“I love you, my dangerous armoire.”
Chatting, Chanting, and Xocolātl.
Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. In case you
were worried the old royal residence was going to be stuffed with scribes forever….
Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same
dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!
Thanks to @clinicalherbalist.tumblr.com on Tumblr who alerted us to the fact that
Lobelia has another ‘common’ name (giggle)

“Hideeho me lovies,
We’re safely home and I don’t have to fight my wee Thorin to repossess my throne.
Me and my delicate jewel of a bride had quite the happy surprise when we arrived.
Like the rest of those sorry arseholes I call my fellow kings, there was a wee pressie
waiting for us.
Mahal, may His Name be ever blessed and hailed, saw fit to give me a copy of my bridge.
The old drawbridge we used to have was gone and in it place is a longer, bigger and shinier
one. Mithril all the way and sound as a clock.
Work of brilliance if I do say so myself. The open way retracts into my mountain but
the statues stay on, marking the way. The statues are perfect. None of this judge with big
ass penis or just giant penises. A long line a statues made of rhodochrosite. Each one a
twelve foot high battle boar on its hind legs. Brilliant.
The first boars face you as you step on and as you travel forward, each one is slightly more
turned than the previous. When you get to the front gate they’ve turned a full circle.
I asked our wee Thorin if he got to see the work happen, but no they woke up three days
after the quest was done and there the whole things was. Not even a dirty great crash
to let them know what had happened.
Ah well, our wee Thorin kept things going along nicely and me and my delicate jewel of a
bride are designing and planning a new throne room. Tell Binni we’re going to give him a
run for his money.
Love to you all and we’ll see you at Durin’s Day!
Dain, Sculdis, Thorin and Chopper.
xoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxo ”
Thorin finished reading the letter aloud and passed it to Dori.
“That must be a sight,” Kili commented. “All those giant pigs. No wonder Dain sound so
pleased.”
“I wonder what he’s planning for his throne room?” Dori pondered. “He didn’t say they have
mithirl in the iron hills, so likely he won’t be redoing it in that.”
“Maybe it’s all rhodochrosite,” suggested Ori.
“Nah,” said Dwalin. “It’s all ready like that.”
Ori thought about this then giggled.
“Dori, our eldest brother has a pink throne room.”
“Augh!” cried Dori. “With his hair color?”
“Clash-clash-clash,” agreed Binni.
“What’s the upholstery?” demanded Dori.


“Black and gold,” answered Thorin after a sip of tea. “Jus’ li’ lookin up our Queen Kivi’s skirt,” Dwalin said.
“How?” asked Fili.
“Black hair and only wore gold,” Ori replied before he thought. “That’s enough,” Dori said, leaning to make sure Frodo and Sam were at the other end of the meadow.
“Aren’t you ready, Ori?” Bilbo asked.
“As ready as I’m going to be,” Ori murmured. “The rededication of the scribe’s guild hall is at tenth bell.”
“We’ll all be there, pet,” Dori assured him.

Ori urged Honda along toward the renovated guild building. Dwalin, with the honor guard, preceded the party. Thorin had insisted that Ori, as first chair and scribe of Mahal, should ride at the king’s right side. Bilbo, as usual, rode on Thorin’s left. Fili and Kili rode behind them with Tauriel.
Ori thought they all looked quite grand, dwarrow, elves, ponies, goats, and all.
Except, possibly, for Kili, and Ori would never say anything aloud about the prince’s latest tunic. Kili designed it himself to look like two giant leaves sewn together. Ori supposed this had been fine in theory. In practice, Kili looked like he was encased in a giant peapod.
Fili clearly didn’t feel the same need for restraint.
“It looks like you’re wearing a broad bean.”
“They’re leaves,” Kili insisted.
“There’s your problem right there.”
“How is that a problem?” Kili challenged.
“When the weather gets colder, your tunic will turn all gold and brown and fall off you.”
“Go soak your head, Fi.”
“Better you go soak your tunic, so it doesn’t wilt.”
Ori was very comfortable in his court dress of the black, shimmering with the darkest green. The red thread with garnets caught the light, as did his black boots with tassels of dark green silk and emeralds. Dipfa had seen fit to make him a black hood with a dagged edge sewn with red thread, the seams studded with garnets and emeralds. The tail of the hood ended in a tassel of seven silver stars.
He shook his head just to feel the delicate chains of his favorite ear cuffs tickle his neck. The feeling always reminded him of Dwalin, his fingers, his lips and his whiskers, and the joy he felt the first time Dwalin put the jewelry on him.
“Cut it out,” said Quartz on Ori’s shoulder. “Makes me dizzy.”
“How can you tell the difference?”
“Funny.”
Ori was eager to see the new Scribes Guild building. He hadn’t really seen it for several weeks, when it had looked as it did when he first visited. But for the last few weeks, the outside had been covered in curing cloths and scaffolding. The royal party rode up to the edge of the square courtyard. The building was still covered, but this time with a new cloth, ready to be pulled down when the rededication was over.
In front of the covered steps sat a ceremonial podium of solid slate. It was very large and covered with ritual necessities. In the middle perched the decorative ink pot ready to smoke with pleasant incense. Ancient books dedicated to scrivening were placed about, intermixed with all kinds of paper and parchments and pens and other tools. A spectrum of colored powders were cast all over the podium.
The guild chairs stood in front of this and all the scribes from every corner of the mountain and Dale were present as well as quite a few onlookers. Everyone was moving about, talking and laughing excitedly.
“They went all out,” Thorin observed to Ori.
Ori looked about. The small rock garden had been expanded and redone. Ori could see more benches and great carved urns filled with lichens and decorated with crystals. The fountain pool was
now a huge octagon with sizable scroll worked basins at every angle. The fountain spurted upwards to a respectable height and each corner basin sported its own, smaller fountain. The sculpture which had once housed the Bugle of Mahal was gone. Ori wondered where the Bugle was now and hoped someone had guarded it from Ubquim.

There was a shout, and then everyone was bowing and greeting the royal party. All too soon for Ori, the chairs were welcoming them and Podvu was calling for everyone’s attention.

Ori hurried back to the teacup and Dori handed over the wrapped platters. Ori sniffed the cookies. They smelled even better now than when he had made them that morning with Dori and Bilbo’s help.

Ori went to the podium and laid each platter and uncovered it. One of snickerdoodles and two of xocolātl chip.

Loli bounced to his side apropos of helping.

“You made cookies for us?”

“They are for Mahal. I promised.”

“You promised cookies to the Grandfather of all Dwarrow?”

“Yes,” said Ori. “I was being rather demanding at the time, because of the quest. I thought it was the least I could do.”

“So you made snickerdoodles.”

“He asked for them. I guess He likes snickerdoodles.”

“With extra cinnamon,” said Mahal in Ori’s mind.

“Do you think He’d mind if I just had one?” Loli asked with large, pleading eyes.

“Naw, I kin share. Yeh kin allus make more.”

“Mahal says He’s willing to share.”

“But, now yeh mention it, Eru’d like some as well.”

“What kind?” Ori asked, silently.

“He likes oatmeal, with xocolātl instead a’ raisins.”

“Dori says raisins prompt digestion,” Ori observed, then at Loli’s surprised look, realized he had spoken aloud.

“Raisins when yer expectin’ xocolātl’s a let down.”

A different voice, sounding far away, said, “I do not eat cookies for my digestion!”

“He knows tha’, yeh numpty. Don’ ge’ yer knickers in a twist.”

“Don’t wear ‘em myself,” said a bubbling voice.

“More information than we needed, Ulwe. Ta.”

“Who are you talking to?” Loli asked around a mouthful of cookie. “Just the right amount of cinnamon, by the way.”

“Mahal.”

She stopped chewing.

“Right now? Here?”

“It’s not like He can’t come and go wherever He pleases,” Ori reasoned. “Technically, it is His house… or something.”

“I’m thinkin’ a’ puttin’ in more a’ tha’ blewed up furniture, act’lly,” said Mahal. “Think they’d make a couch big enough?”

“Yavanna will have to provide more sap,” said Ori.

“There’s not enough sap in the world,” said Yavanna merrily. "Oooo. Xocolātl chip!"

A healthy portion disappeared from the platter.

Loli gasped.

“Was that the Hand of Mahal?”

“No, that was the Mouth of Yavanna.”

“Mahal!”

“No. Yavanna,” Ori teased.

“I know that! I’m just say- you’re terrible, Ori.”

Ori blinked, all innocence.
“Time to start now?” he asked pleasantly.

“Indeed,” cried Podvu. Rouho stepped forward and blew the Bugle of Mahal.

“I’m righ’ here, laddie,” Mahal chuckled.

Everyone quieted down. Thorin and the other royals stood behind the podium and the guild chairs on either side of it. Podvu went to the podium itself. She cleared her throat and began by thanking the king for his assistance in the rebuilding, and housing the scribes in the old royal residence, then politely asked Ori if he would like to make a few remarks.

Ori stepped forward and faced the crowd. For a moment he was nervous, but then he saw faces of those he knew. They all looked eager and ready, so he settled and spoke.

“Thank you all for coming. I am delighted to be here to see the rededication of this great edifice, and I am overjoyed that we are renewing our own dedication to the word and truth of Mahal. Now that the Elements of Scrivening has been rediscovered, we can read and convey that truth plainly. Khuzdul is our literature, it’s our poetry. It’s who we are. We are made by Mahal. He is proud of us and we of Him. We honor Him by using the language He created for us. We write to express the truth Mahal gave us. It’s all laid out in the decorations of this Guild Hall, the stones that stand for truth and communication. Blue topaz reminds us that the best discussions are had without the heat of anger. Labradorite tells us that the strength of our commitment will bring order out of chaos. Fulgurite remakes sand into stone and reveals beauty; the communication of Mahal to us. The shining truth of Mahal.”

Having said all this, Ori hoped that the guild had not decided to redo the whole building in slate. He was surprised by a crash of applause. Ori turned to Thorin who, along with the royal party, was also clapping.

“Excellent,” Thorin mouthed.

“Well done!” Mahal boomed.

A hand tugged on Ori’s boot. He looked down to see Nori’s hand jutting up from the ground with a ‘thumbs up’.

“Not now!” Ori hissed, blushing. He was rescued by Sadi arriving with a lit taper. She thrust it into the incense, releasing a rather attractive puff of honey colored smoke.

Ubqim began the chant for Mahal’s blessing on the building and all scribes who study there. All the scribes present joined in.

As the last notes dies away, Dori stepped forward and pulled the chords that released the drapes around the building.

The whole edifice had been redone in turquoise mosaic, highlighted with fulgurite and labradorite. New jade framed the windows and doorways. The steps had treads of sodalite and risers of blue topaz. “Mahal’s Eyes Read Our Truth” was now picked out above the front doors in mithril.

Everyone cheered and admired, and Ori was signaled to lead the way up the steps and throw open the doors.

He held is breath as the doors swung back, but there was not a checkerboard in sight.

“Hope yeh don’ mind, laddie,” said Sadi beside him. “We kept th’ ugly floorin’ fer th’ kitchen cupboards.”

“Good place for it,” Ori giggled. “Is it right, Sadi? Is it just like before?”

“Jus’ right,” Sadi approved. “With a few, necessary changes.”

They led the way in, Ori wondering the entire way, and when he turned back to the door, he saw what she meant. Master Brur’s ‘note’ from Mahal had been installed over the doors for the entire world to witness the valar’s ‘pinky swear’.

“Oh, no,” Ori cried, then laughed. “Did it really have to go there?”

“Brur insisted,” said Sadi. “He’s so shy, yeh know. He mus’ come out’ve his shell.”

“I think it’s grand,” said Brur, approaching. “Very elegant hand. Brief, t’ th’ point.”

“Jus’ like th’ one on yer head,” said Sadi with a smile.

“Aye, ju- Oi!”
Ori left them to their easy bickering as he looked eagerly at the writing samples of the masters on the walls. He turned as a familiar voice called his name. There stood Khujik, his old master.

Ori gave a shout and rushed over to throw himself on the aging dwarf, who laughed.

“Always knew yeh’d do well, lad,” he enthused, “an’ here yeh are married int’ th’ royals an’ th’ firs’ chair a’ th’ guild. Yer flying high, our Ori!”

“I was just admiring your writing sample, Master Khujik,” Ori said with a grin.

“Aye, were yeh now, ‘cause I was jus’ admirin’ yers.”

Ori cocked his head, then laughed.

“I’m too old to fall for that now, sir.”

“An’ I’m too old t’ be lyin’, as I’ve always told yeh. Take a look.”

Ori turned with a frown and looked down the row of familiar and unfamiliar handwriting, the very best the masters of the guild could offer. He had always hoped someday, when he gained mastery, his own would join them.

Apparently, he didn’t have to wait until his mastery.

“But, I’m not a master scrivener!” he exclaimed, scandalized. “And, what in Mahal’s name is that?”

Thorin peered over Ori’s shoulder.

“You don’t recognize it?”

“I recognize my own handwriting, but that’s all.”

“It’s a page from the notes you took the first time we went down into the mines.”

Ori was horrified.

“But! But! But! It’s all blotted!”

“I think it’s beautiful,” said Thorin, “and Sadi and Khujik agreed with me.”

“Aye, lad,” said Khujik. “No’ every scribe kin write ‘across’ li’e tha’, an’ no’ have it look like an orc’s breakfast.”

“Yeh did a grand job writin’,” Sadi put in, “and what yeh wrote is more important.”

Ori looked closer. He had written about Thorin’s contract with Caris, Thorin’s promise and his giving the Durin bead to her. Ori gulped. In this case Thorin was probably right to have it here for everyone to see. Ori looked back to find Thorin, Sadi and Khujik smiling fondly at him. He choked but couldn’t find words. He wanted to hug Thorin, but wasn’t sure if he should.

Thorin took the decision out of his hands by stepping forward first and embracing him. Ori did not cry. Sadi and Khujik took their turns at hugging him.

“I always knew yeh’d be th’ best a’ all me scholars,” Khujik managed, then held Ori at arm’s length, looking him over. Khujik gave a great sniff and resorted to his flag of a handkerchief. Ori choked a little and blinked hard. He though he was going to cry but the warm, strong arm of his husband slid around his shoulders.

Ori took a deep breath and smiled.

“Thank you all, so much, for having this much faith in me. It’s humbling.”

Sadi snorted.

“Please, lad. Yeh have enough humbleness for yeh an’ Brur both. Thank Mahal, or he wouldn’t have any at all. An’ it gets tirin’ fer an old dam like me t’ always be tryin’ t’ beat it int’ him.”

That made Ori giggle.

“I’m jus’ tha’ bloody proud a’ yeh,” Dwalin murmured in his ear. Ori squeezed Dwalin, then remembered his manners.

“Master Khujik, this is my husband Captain Dwalin.”

“I know, laddie,” Khujik snorted and offered his arm to Dwalin. “It was all over Dale in two days. Mind, by th’ time I heard it, the captain had broken down th’ door t’ yer house, popped Dori one, an’ carried yeh off in naught by yer skivvies.”

“I was wearing clean skivvies, at least,” Ori mused. “But the rest was a little exaggerated.”

“A wee bi’?” Khujik snickered. “I mus’ ask our Dori, then.”

Khujik melted into the chattering crowd before Ori could do anything. He turned to ask Thorin but he was busy listening to Podvu outline the running of the guild. She was in charge of the
administration of the guild, while Master Rouho headed the teaching staff assisted by Ubqim. Master Sadi, Master Kacuho and Master Nodun taught, but also assisted Ori as scribes to the King.

Ori turned and looked at Dwalin.

“Did you know it was all around Dale you stole me in my skivvies?”

“Leas’ they were clean, love,” Dwalin teased and turned to signal Furh’nk to guard Thorin.

Ori cocked his head.

“Are you planning on seducing me in a coat cupboard, captain?”

“Mebbe later. I know yer wantin’ a look aroun’. See if they’re still hidin’ any checkerboards about.”

Quartz squawked regally.

“I already ‘checked’.”

“Thank you. That was terrible,” said Ori.

“Yes, my work’s done,” said Quartz. “Refreshment table’s calling.”

He flapped off.

Ori gave into his curiosity and pulled Dwalin along to explore the rooms upstairs. The main library took up most of the ground floor along with the meeting and administrative rooms, but a secondary book room sat just above the library, connected with a lift that continued all the way up to the top floor. The rest of the rooms on the second level and several levels above were classrooms. Two floors above that housed large studio rooms for figure and object drawing and painting, and a storage area with stocks of ink, paper, minerals, canvas and a thousand other things that made up the tools of a scribe’s trade.

Ori stood in this room with his eyes closed and simply breathed.

“Yeh goin’ t’ swoon, love?” Dwalin teased.

“Only if you’ll catch me.”

Dwalin did catch him up and kissed him breathless.

“Mmm,” Ori sighed into his mouth. He pulled away. “Between the art supplies and you, my body is getting ideas.”

“Prob’ly no’ a good idea righ’ now,” said Dwalin.

“No,” said Ori, with equal reluctance. “But soon.”

“Aye?”

“We wouldn’t be the first, at least according to Sadi.”

“An’ she would know, wouldn’t she.”

When they went back out into the hall, Ori heard someone calling.

“Ori! Dwalin!”

Ori looked up to see Arne hanging over a railing a dozen floors up to the chairs’ quarters, and beckoning to them. Ori rushed up the stair, Dwalin hot on his heels. Arne welcomed them with hugs, then pulled them to a door. This opened into the huge living area of a furnished corner flat. Tay’s hand was obvious everywhere. There were two enormous rectangular windows, topped with arches that had decorative stained glass circles. Both window were festooned with heavy red velvet curtains trimmed with gold tassels. Nodun’s desk and easel sat in front of the window that looked out over the front of the building. Arne’s desk and easel looked out the other toward the Royal caverns.

The floor was smooth, soft slate, and four decorative rails ringed the top of the entire room, each lined with beautiful tea sets and plates.

The furniture was also red velvet and gold, overstuffed and welcoming, but not overwhelming given the size of the room itself.

Arne showed them about the room and the lovely compact kitchen and a small bedroom which was filled with an enormous brass bed with black satin sheets. A still life of a laden tea table hung over an ornate black marble fireplace.

“Arne, I’m so happy for you,” Ori said and gave his friend another hug.

“I-I’m rather happy f-for myself,” Arne laughed. “Tay and Nodun talked me into m-moving in with them. It didn’t take m-much talking.”

“That’s what I thought,” Arne chuckled.

“I’m really sorry about your adad, Arne,” said Ori,

“Thanks, Ori, but I-I’m not.”

In fact Arne looked like he has been handed about a ton of mithril and the deed to a diamond mine.

“You don’t mind that your da has practically adopted Buer? He will take someone else back home with him?”

“I talked t-o amad last night. I’m staying in Erebor at least through the winter. You and I can work on the quest d-ocument and I’m doing projects f-full time for Master Brur.”

“That’s wonderful!” Ori hugged him impulsively.

“It is,” Arne agreed, hugging back. “Tay wants you and Dwalin t-o come for supper on second rest d-day.”

“We’d love to! I need to check Dwalin’s and Thorin’s schedule’s though.” Ori put on a lofty tone. “The crown never rests!”

Then he dissolved into giggles.

They were just in the door from the rededication, when Vi and Margr’s carriage whipped around the corner from the tunnel on two wheels and skidded to a stop at the steps.

Margr waved something over her head.

“Oi! Ori! We go’ another one!”

Ori frowned, another what? Fashion statement? Son? Husband? He looked again as they all but bounced up the steps. Margr shook a piece of paper.

“It’s another letter from th’ Shire!” Vi shouted.

“Really? That was quick,” said Ori. “Come inside. We’ll have tea.”

The letter was in a slightly different, but familiar hand.

As he read the address, Ori got a sick feeling.

It was from the Shire, all right. It was from Bag End.

“Quartz?”

“Yep.”

“Could you please find Bilbo for me?”

“Sure.” Quartz gave a raven-ish shrug and flew off.

“What is it?” Margr asked.

“Oh! Is it bad news at last?” Vi cried.

“If it’s from who I think it’s from, it’s always bad news,” said Ori.

“Found him!” Quartz croaked as Bilbo and Thorin entered from the receiving room.

“Is that Vi and Margr’s… I guess it is,” said Bilbo. “Hullo, ladies. Ori? What’s the matter?”

Ori held up the letter.

“Lobelia.”

Vi and Margr gaped at him, then Margr ventured.

“What?”

Ori explained, “It’s from Bilbo’s cousin, Lobelia Sackville Baggins.”

“She had cruel parents,” said Vi. “Our Mar, isn’t lobelia tha’… whatchacallit?”

Margr snorted.

“It’s what them hobbits call pukeweed.”

Thorin and Bilbo stared at them.

“It’s what?” Bilbo asked, brightening considerably.

“I remember as me mam tol’ me once,” said Margr. “A lobelia plant, tha’s th’ fancy name fer it, bu’ plain folks call it pukeweed.”

Bilbo laughed.

He sat and laughed so hard, his feet stamped the ground in unison and he held his sides.
Vi asked. “But, what would this Pukeweed Baggins want with us?”

Thorin shrugged, sitting next to Bilbo, who went roaring off afresh.

“There’s only one way to find out. Would you mind if Bilbo and I stayed through the proceedings?”

“Course no’, our Thorin,” said Margr. “Mebbe this Pukeweed wants somethin’ hobbitish we don’ know a thin’ abou’.”

Every time someone called Lobelia ‘Pukeweed’ it set Bilbo off again, and Ori feared the hobbit would asphyxiate before he could contribute anything helpful.

Gamely, Ori slit open the envelope with his boot knife and removed the folded letter.

This paper wasn’t torn and blotted with anger like Lobelia’s last letter. Idly, he wondered if she ever managed to move that statue and its erection out of her garden.

He read:

“Dear Mistresses Vi and Margr,

Ladies, it has come to my attention that you are among the most fashionable and highly placed dams under the Mountain of Erebor. We have seen your magnificent gowns in Vug and, indeed, one can scarcely go to gatherings of any size without hearing your names. The younger generation of hobbit ladies admire you and your clothing perhaps far more than any other dwarf or dwarrowdam of which our people have ever heard.”

“How many dwarrow do you suppose that is?” Ori asked Bilbo.

“At least three,” Bilbo replied. “Please proceed.”

“My reason for writing you is to let you know that you have a great opportunity here in the Shire, one which you can scarcely afford to pass up. If you were to design clothing expressly for hobbit ladies, and import them here to the Shire, or even set up shop to have them manufactured in the Shire, your fortune would far outstrip even your fame.”

Vi turned to Margr.

“Wonder how much she wants.”

“Oh, only abou’ ninety percent, I reckon,” said Margr.

“Should I go on?” Ori asked.

Vi waved a negligent hand.

“Oh, aye.”

“I propose a two-prong plan of attack. First, as esteemed fashion icons, you should immediately feel out the situation here in the Shire and, second, find a way to publish a version of Vug magazine especially edited for the West. You could call it Vug - West Farthing! Think of how glorious it would be! Face wigs for hobbit women! Caftans for Summer - the next best thing to wearing nothing at all! As your exclusive agent here in the Shire, I would, of course, require a modest fee for doing the greatest share of establishing you here.

“If you will kindly write to affirm your interest, I will reply as expeditiously as one may, and hopefully, the missive will reach you before the snows close the mountain passes of Eriador.”

Bilbo snorted.

“It’s amazing, all you have to do is wave money under her nose and suddenly she’s a wizard at geography.”
“Well? What do we do?” Vi asked.
Ori replied, “Are you interested?”
“Sure,” said Margr. “Don’t know anythin’ abou’ business an’ th’ like, but if them lasses are keen? I don’t particularly mind. Really, it’s Dipfa she wants to talk to. We just act as her - whatehecballit, Vi?”
“Mannequins,” said Vi. “Makes us sound like wee men. Oh, here’s our Dori. Dor, yeh’ll never guess!”
“Wait,” said Thorin. “Ori, is there any more to that letter?”
“Flattery, mostly,” said Ori. “She does say it would be entirely up to Vi and Margr what sorts of fashions they wanted to present, and, of course, they would have to come up with a name for the line.”
Ori handed Dori the letter.
“Isn’t this from that horrible Shire person?” she asked.
“Which one?” Bilbo asked
“The one with a face like a rat’s arse,” said Dori.
“That’s the one,” said Bilbo.
“Well, let me think,” she said. “She does seem eager for her share, doesn’t she?”
“Her greed is predictable,” said Bilbo.
“Is it?” Dori asked pleasantly. “Is it really? I wonder… How far would she go to get her piece of this particular pie?”
Ori knew that look. He nearly squealed with glee, but contained himself. Barely.
Dori mused, “Bilbo? What do you think of this?”
“I could care less, really, but you’ll have my complete approbation if you’ll name the clothing line after me.”
Dori’s smile curled round at the edges.
“A caftan is sort of like a bag, isn’t it. Like wearing a bag. You could call it BilBags.”
The sisters shrieked, kicking and screaming with laughter.
“Dori,” said Thorin, “that’s beautiful.”
“I think so, too,” said Dori. “What do you think, Bilbo? Is your cousin greedy enough that she’s willing to put your name on her clothes?”
“I have every faith in old Pukeweed,” said Bilbo.
Dori was setting down the first basket of breakfast scones and crocks of butter when Ori arrived.

“Pet! What are you doing up so early!”

“Dwalin was on patrol with Fili last night. I never sleep well when he’s away.” Ori sat at the table, with only Thorin and Balin yet for company. It was barely dawn.

“Nerving yourself up over his safety will make you sick, pet,” Dori fussed.

“I can’t do anything about his safety,” said Ori. “I have to be ready if a soldier comes to say I’m needed.”

Balin shook his head. He grasped Dori’s fluttering hand and kissed it.

“Our wee brother’s a soldier’s husband, me dear. There’s naught f’r it.”

“There are several cups of chamomile tea for it if he keeps that up.”

Ori was beyond the point of worrying about pots of chamomile tea. He merely smiled and shrugged apologetically. For a moment Dori looked terribly disappointed, then bustled back toward the kitchen, muttering about ham.

Kili and the ham arrived at exactly the same moment.

“It’s a gift,” Thorin said to Ori.

“Morning!” Kili cried, filling his plate while still in motion.

Kili sat down at the breakfast table, then he suddenly stopped and said, “Oh. Right.” He stood half way and took a folded piece of paper out of his pocket, looked at it as if it might bite him, and thrust it at Balin.

“I wrote the treaty with us and Dale and Greenwood.”

Balin swallowed his ham, put down his utensils and accepted the sacrificial offering.

“Did yeh, lad? Well, let’s see.”

Thorin rested his elbow on the table and his chin in his hand in expectation. Of what, it was impossible to say.

“So,” said Balin as he unfolded the paper, “yeh didn’t sleep through all yer lessons after all.”

“Well, yes, I did, so I had to think about it a lot, then think a lot more, and then I thought, it’s mostly a mutual aid agreement, really. It’s to say properly what we’ve already said. So, I thought: who else has a treaty like that? Then I remembered, Gondor and Rohan do. And it’s brilliant really, the way they spell it out, but in a nice way, that they’ll come to each other’s defense, but they won’t help if the other kingdom just goes and starts trouble somewhere else. So, that’s mostly what this says.”

“Aye, nearly word f’r word,” Balin affirmed.

“Then I cobbled together the rest with things from our treaties with the under monarchs, the trades and markets and stuff, which isn’t the main point, right? So I put that at the end, and, I know I shouldn’t’ve done it, but I asked Tauriel and Sigrid to read it. Yes, I know! I know! They aren’t whadyacall ‘disinterested parties’, but I didn’t think, in this case, that was so bad, and they liked it!” Balin read the paper over again and handed it to Thorin.

“Aye, in this case, it was probably harmless, lad. It’s a good treaty, actually. Mebbe yeh were givin’ me half an ear in yer sleep, as it’s essentially wha’ I would’ve written meself. Thorin?”
“Really, Kili, this is an excellent first try,” Thorin pronounced. The prince beamed. The king continued, “Your handwriting is still atrocious.” “It’s true,” said Kili, nodding vigorously in agreement. “But we’ll clean up the language and you can present it.” “Really?” Kili yelped. “Yes, really,” said Thorin, “only, you’ll have to copy it over before Ori puts it on parchment.” “So he can read my messy handwriting. I get it. Yep.” “No, because I’m having this copy framed and hanging it on my office wall.” Kili’s jaw fell open. “Like when we were badgers and drew you stuff? That’s… an honor.” He threw himself out of his seat and glomped onto Thorin with no regard for eggs, ham or tea. “Thank you!” Thorin laughed, hugging him back. “You’re very welcome. Good job.” Tauriel arrived with Legolas and Gimli. Kili flung himself at her next, shouting, “Tauriel! They liked the treaty!” She laughed and said, “Of course they did, mel nin! Of course they did!” Then Kili ran off in the direction of the sitting room, shouting, “Mam! Mam!” Fili and Dwalin entered from the stable as Kili left through the kitchen. The pair were just in from early morning patrol. Though they’d had a wash at the barracks, they both still looked tired. “Morning,” said Fili. “Where’s Ki going? He hasn’t yelled for Mam like that since the day he ripped the arse of his trousers and his smalls at the same time.” “Your brother has written his first treaty,” said Thorin. “And it was quite a success.” “Knew it,” said Fili, as he slugged back his first cup of tea without cream or sugar and refilled his cup “I told him so.” Dwalin settled beside Ori with a kiss and a cuddle. “Mornin’, love,” he rumbled. “Good morning. Was it a quiet patrol?” “Amazin’, bu’, aye,” said Dwalin, heaping his plate with eggs. “Glorfindel’s been goin’ through th’ streets a’ Dale jus’ a’fore midnigh’, movin’ drunks out a’ th’ gutters, gettin’ folks used t’ bein’ off th’ streets f’r when th’ cleanin’ flood comes through. Makes f’r a quieter patrol.” “How are the preparations going for the street cleaning?” Thorin asked. Fili poured and drank his third cup of tea. “There was so much worthless refuse and effluent obstructing the drains, it took far longer than we first thought. Master Teilnar says the trap mechanisms for the waste water will be up today and the cleaning can begin tomorrow night. I know you’re busy, Idad, but you might want to drop in on Bard at some point. He’s still not entirely convinced cleaning the streets in Dale every night is possible. He understands how it’s supposed to work, yes, but Sigrid says he still doesn’t trust that water will come through the taps at his own house every time he opens them.” Thorin nodded, looking troubled. “It’s the least I can do, given that the Durins’ neglect has made that possible. That’s a debt I’ll never repay, but I’m going to try. Fili, not that I’d begrudge you, but that’s your fourth cup of tea. Are you alright? When will you be able to get some sleep?” “This afternoon, probably. We’re inspecting the last of the old noble residences this morning, making sure they’re ready for some Dale folk to move in, the last of the dwarrow and men who were living at Mistress Annis’ rooming house.” “Is she going to stop taking borders?” Ori asked. “She was so good to me and Dori and Nori when we had to leave our old boarding house and didn’t have anywhere else to go. It would be a shame if she wasn’t there for people any more.” “I don’t know about that. She’s going to be in charge of the meal program that Bard’s planned for the Dale schools,” said Fili. “Even if the badgers’ parents drink their pay, the badgers’ll still get one
good meal a day.”
Fili grinned into his tea and continued.
“The best part is that the seed money for it is coming from the treasure Calmar was hoarding.
Eventually, Bard wants to go with Hamfast’s idea to start gardens to supply the schools directly.”
Balin chuckled.
“That’s excellent.”
Thorin got a dangerous gleam in his eye.
Dwalin smirked.
“Wha’ now, o high king a’ all dwarrow?”
“I think,” said Thorin, “that Bard has been working very hard, and he deserves a reward of sorts.”
“He wouldn’t accept one,” said Fili.
“I know,” Thorin replied. “Which is why I’m going to offer it to Thranduil. Ori, may I have your pen and paper a moment?”
“Oh course,” said Ori, and slid the items over.
They watched as Thorin scratched out a message, blotted it, then leaned back and called out the window for Roäc.

Early the next morning, Ori clambered into the cart with Bilbo, who took up the reins. Honda and Vespa were in harness and moved forward when Bilbo clicked at them. Thorin and Dwalin, on Minty and Harley, trotted on either side of the cart. Roäc perched on Thorin’s shoulder. They had swallowed a quick breakfast, much to Dori’s disgust.

In the beginnings of dawn, they made their way out of the stable and across the meadow. At the wall, Thorin took out a key. He open the small door Ori knew Legolas and Tauriel once used. Ori realized the small door was an insert in a much larger door, which Thorin opened and Bilbo drove the cart through and Dwalin followed with the ponies. Thorin shut the door and locked it.

Here was a low anteroom, opposite was another small door which led to the far side of the barrier. Thorin turned to Roäc. Roäc fluttered forward and fitted his talons against the anteroom wall on the left. Roäc inserted his beak into a niche and twitched his head.

Ori watched as another large door opened silently and revealed a substantial lift. They entered the lift with the cart and ponies. Thorin nodded to Roäc, the raven turned the mechanics again and the door slid shut, leaving them in the soft light of phosphorus.

Ori turned a quizzical eye to Thorin.
“He’ll meet us outside. These things make him jumpy.”
“How will he get down?” Bilbo asked. “You locked the door after us.”
“There’s a raven bolt hole in the ceiling,” Thorin explained.
Dwalin pulled the lever on the side of the wall and they dropped slowly and smoothly downward.
“This is amazing.” Bilbo admired.
“Old escape hatch,” Dwalin told him. “This goes down ‘a path leadin’ t’ the river.”
“Very convenient,” Bilbo agreed with a smile.
The lift slowed and Ori saw a locked grate before them. Dwalin unlocked this and pulled it aside. There were bushes and trees close by, and an enormous boulder hid it from prying eyes. Roäc peered down from a tree.
“All clear,” Roäc announced, “Bard and the elf are at the river bank.”
They exited the lift, locked the grate, and Thorin pulled a lever. The boulder lifted upward and they rode out into smooth meadow grass. Roäc fluttered back, there was the sound of the mechanism, and the boulder dropped back into place.
Ori saw the river in the distance. It was fast-moving and splashed and sang over stones. Thranduil’s elk jogged toward them. Ori would have sworn it was smiling.

Bard was all business. After explaining to Ori, Bilbo and Thranduil that they needed to be still and talk softly, he opened up the tackle boxes and instructed Thorin and Dwalin on all the pieces and parts of the contents and the poles. Bard had brought an extra one, so Dwalin joined the fishing
tutorial.

In their oldest boots and breeches, Bard, Thorin, and Dwalin waded out into the stream until they were waist deep for dwarrow and Bard went further. Bard demonstrated casting.

Ori watched with interest. The flicking of the slender, bendy poles caused the ‘flies’ to dance lightly over the surface of the water. Under a huge umbrella, rather like the ones at the inn, Thranduil and Bilbo sat on folding willow chairs in the sparkling shallows, they paddled their feet and chatted idly about elves they both knew.

Ori studied the twitching lines. Bard’s fly danced and whirled, then a fish leapt out of the water and snatched the fly out of the air. Thorin and Dwalin stood ready. Bard tugged his line a few times to ‘set’ the hook as he said. Bard then wound the line in quickly. Down in the depths, the fish wasn’t having any of it and tugged back. Bard let the line run, then, when it was slack, wound it in furiously. This back and forth went on for a time until Bard was able to wind the line in fully and gestured wildly. Dwalin chucked him the hand net. Bard scooped deep in the water and the three fishermen returned to see the prize.

Bard carefully removed the hook from the fish’s mouth and put it in a large openwork basket that lay in the water, secured by a rope to a tree on the bank. Thus the fish would be fresh and alive when they finished fishing for the day. The three went back out and returned to working their poles.

The sun was high as they loafed on the bank, eating the goodies Dori had packed. Bard abruptly turned to Thorin and asked, “You didn’t know a mine collapse was imminent? I’m being nosey like a dwarf. I do have a beard, after all.”

Thorin tossed an apple core at him.

“Yes, I can see you shrinking now. Go on. Ask.”

“I thought dwarrow could feel the rock shift.”

“We can,” said Thorin, “but for most of us it’s like background noise. It’s always there. Only very gifted dwarrow can read critical stress fracturing. Like Ahkn, they tend to be mining engineers.”

“I wondered why those dwarrow got themselves trapped. What were they doing in a played out mine?”

“Gleaning,” said Thorin.

“Yes, the miner at open court said it was a right.”

“For dwarrow, it is. Once a mine’s abandoned, it becomes a sort of universal property. Anyone can work it for whatever they might find in the walls or mine tailings. But it’s dangerous, because those mines aren’t inspected or maintained.”

“You can’t order them closed off?”

“Most of them are already inaccessible for one reason or another, partially collapsed or filled in to keep badgers from getting lost in them. Early on, my ancestors tried to keep track of active and inactive mines by drawing onion-skin overlays to survey maps, but after a dozen layers of overlays, things start to get rather murky.”

“An’ they never included little side caverns where yeh migh’ find small seams a’ ore,” said Dwalin. “Those aren’ really mines.”

Dwalin lazed with his head propped up on Ori’s thigh as Ori fed him grapes. Ori watched as a squirrel bounded out of the trees, seized the apple core and ran off with it.

“There’s more to it than that, of course,” said Thorin. “You can’t keep a dwarf from mining. It’s what we do. If the average khuzd thinks there’s something shiny in that closed off mine, they’ll find a way to get to it. Best you can do is remind them, we’ll only go so far to rescue them, and we don’t recover bodies.”

“Takes ‘you break it, you bought it’ to a whole different level,” Bard mused.

Once they finished, Bard, Thorin and Dwalin returned to the river.

Ori went with his sketchbook and graphite wand and sat down on a rock, changed his mind, and he clambered over to the fish basket and studied the fish. He admired the shimmering fish that Bard called a rainbow trout, due to the color that speckled along the sides of the plump body. It explored
its new home and ate any water beetles foolish enough to skate among the imprisoning strands.

Ori settled himself and carefully drew the fish from all different angles as it swam about. Bard return twice each time with a nice, sizable fish.

“How are Dwalin and Thorin doing?” Ori asked softly with a grin.

“They’re trying their best.” Bard tried not to snicker.

There was a gasp and a squeak form Bilbo. Ori looked up, as did Bard. Thorin had obviously caught something on his line. Bard hurried back to help. Thorin copied the tightening and play of the line as Bard had done. He gave a great yank and a huge fish leapt clear of the water, Thorin’s line in its mouth.

“Sweet Eru!” gasped Bard. Thorin wound in the line, holding himself solid against the fish’s struggling. Bard brought the net out and Thorin’s fish was captured.

Bard helped him bring it to the shore and lifted it out of the net. It was also a rainbow trout, but was almost as long as Thorin was tall.

“My love,” Bilbo cried and splashed out to Thorin’s side. “What an enormous fish! I’m so proud of you, and at your first try.”

Bard stared, grinning, and shaking his head.

“Beginner’s luck!” Bard managed. “That’s got to be the biggest trout I’ve ever seen outside of the lake!”

“Righ’ lads,” Dwalin said with a laugh. “Let’s be havin’ ‘em, seein’ tha’ they’re likin’ th’ bait.”

Bard caught three more, Thorin got four more, but three of them had to be freed as they were too small. Dwalin caught two good sized ones and Ori hugged him.

They stopped for tea and naps. Ori drew the river playing about the rocks. He collected some pretty flowers growing on the bank, and made a large sketch of the entire scene. Thranduil and Bard went further up the bank for a ‘little walk’ as Bard had suggested. Thorin and Bilbo napped side by side among the wood flowers. Dwalin snoozed on Ori’s back as he lay on his stomach drawing the water flowing over a boulder, the stones, and a ladybug, stuffing its face with aphids on a small plant.

The fishermen did go back out one last time as the sun was getting low but nothing was caught and the fishing devolved into a water fight. This was stopped when several ‘stray’ splashes nearly soaked Thranduil and Bilbo.

“Come along, or we’ll be late for dinner and we’re bringing it,” Bilbo called. The cart was repacked. A large wash tub was filled with water and the fish basket placed in it. Thranduil took Bilbo up behind him on the elk, while Ori drove the cart with the soaked fishermen in the back laughing, talking, and flicking water at each other.

The elk trotted happily back into Dale and they were soon at Dale Hall. Bard said he was just going in to change, but they all came in with him. The entrance hall was amazingly bright with light. There stood Gridr, looking pleased with herself, and a giggling Fili with the Bardlings were all waiting. Bard stared up at the ceiling. Ori clapped his hand over his mouth.

Hanging from the ceiling was a weird contraption with familiar large pieces of metal tubing of all shapes and sizes, each wrapped in silver, rose gold, and gold wire. The straight tubes, curlycues, and s-bends were now all fitted together. It hung form the center of the ceiling like a spreading metal flower. From nearly every curl hung familiar gleaming poisonous green, purplish pink and sulphur yellow gems. Many of Buer’s tiny lights were tucked in next to every gem. Bard stared at the light and the sparkles of colored spots of light cast all over the room.

Ori thought the light flower looked rather like the ancient crowns Bard’s people wore long ago.

“What do you think?” asked Thorin with a grin. “You’ve been working with such ardor, I thought you’d like a present and Thranduil agreed with me.”

Bard laughed so hard he dropped down into a nearby chair.

“I think you’re all arseholes,” he finally gasped, “but I love it. Thank you!”

The Bardlings pounced on him and Thranduil came over and laid a white hand on Bard’s shoulder.

“You liked it so much when it came out of the box, I had to ask Thorin about it.”
“Oh, really?” Bard cocked an eye at the King-Father.
“Indeed, fortunately for me, Mistress Gridr already knew what it was.”
“Besides,” Girdr chuckled, “while I worked on it, I found the old contract plate. It was for ordered for some man king. As near as we can sort out, one of his descendants ended up here, so we think it ought to be yours.”
“Thank you all again! It’s amazing and I’m proud to have it hanging here.”
“I like it, too,” giggled Sigrid. “Now if we’re to get any dinner, I need those fish cleaned and ready to fry.”
“You’re going to cook?” Bard asked.
“With Gridr and Fili’s help, yes. I do remember how.”
Ori followed Bard, Thorin and Dwalin out to the shed behind the kitchen. He was intrigued by the idea of Bard teaching the two to gut fish. He was disappointed as, being soldiers, both knew how to forage and deal with fish. The difference lay in the ways of doing it. Bard scraped the scales off, then sliced the belly open. Dwalin and Thorin just cut the fish on the belly, from mouth to tail. They had a huge noisy argument about which way was better as Bard said they should be cooked without the scales on for eating and Dwalin and Thorin saying that anyone who tried to eat the scales, shouldn’t be eating fish in the first place. Ori left when they started to see who could eat the most fish eyes.

He went into the kitchen. Gridr diced cucumbers fine, while Thranduil measured oil, vinegar and herbs, and chatted to Bilbo. Sigrid was making chips and dumping them into a roasting pan in the oven that kept them hot. Ori helped himself to a few to ‘make sure they were alright’.

When everyone was clean and the food ready, Thranduil conducted them all to the dining room. Ori admired the room, it was fine wood and airy white curtains and table cloths. A long walnut table seated them all comfortable and there was a merry party over the delicious fresh fish, salad and chips. Thranduil looked happily serene as he sat at the foot and Bard at the head, Thorin sat on Bard’s right and Bilbo on Thranduil’s left. Gridr explained how the light, which she said was called in Westron, a ‘chandelier’ from the older form of candelles, or many candles, was put together and how it was decorated with gems to brighten the lights, just as dwarrow did with shards of quartz or mica on theirs.

After dessert which Gridr had brought, a delicious pound cake served with raspberry syrup and frozen custard, Thranduil brought them upstairs to the sitting room.

This was obviously designed by Thranduil, with soft green walls, and the large windows curtained in filmy palest green lace. Plants grew everywhere and the lighting was lovely. Every table or stand held a wide bowl where round candles floated.

The furniture was woven willow reeds and full of cushions. The teal sofa Bard and Thranduil had bought from iKeeha held pride of place before an ornate fireplace. Once they were settled, Thranduil closed the windows against the cooling breezes off the lake. He smiled on Bard.

“We may talk freely now, my enchantments have made anyone outside unable to hear us.”

Thorin raised an eyebrow and Nori, dragging Balin after him, slid up through the floor. Balin brushed himself off.

“Our Nori, f’r all this may be easy f’r yeh, it’s no’ th’ bes’ way a’ gettin’ abou’.”

“Gotta do what a dwarf’s gotta do.” Nori shrugged then turned to Thorin. “We got papers ta show you.”

While Gridr played an odd game with Bain and Tilda, which Tilda called balrogs and basements, Ori took notes on what was discussed.

Balin and ‘Ursith’ had been very busy.

Ursith had ordered the renovation of two of the warehouses he owned in the center of the Night Market. They would be joined together and the open floor was going to be full of gaming tables, with rat races and cricket racing at the sides.

On either end would be restaurants and areas for musicians, dancing and shows. The upstairs would have meeting rooms for high stakes games which would be secretly equipped with spaces for ravens to enter unseen and listen.
The rest would be a fancy hotel attached via a bar to what had been in King Nain’s time, the old brothels. These Ursith planned to clean up, make fancy and this would become Bliss Street, which would have an entrance to the alley of Divine Bliss. Balin and Binni would hire owners and staff from the pleasure guilds and all would be in service to the king as spies. This would become a very expensive side of town, for anyone with criminal tendencies to gather there. Ursith had also offered a similar arrangement to King Bard for three warehouses near the docks in Dale.

Thranduil and Bard laughed uproariously as Nori explained all his plans. Ori glanced up from his notes and smiled to see Nori eagerly outlining everything. He had not overlooked a single thing as Thorin and Bard questioned him on how things could go wrong. Ori felt proud of Nori. Nori’s dream of being the reigning crime lord of Dale and Erebor was coming true and Nori was absolutely loyal to Thorin as the Spymaster.

It was near midnight when they finished. Ori tidied his notes and saw Gridr curled in a chair, knitting. Bain and Tilda were asleep on the floor beside her.

Thranduil bade them all good night and lifted Tilda easily. He looked about to lift Bain, but Bard laughed softly and shook his head.

“He’d never live it down,” said Bard.

He knelt and shook Bain awake.

“Time for bed, son.”

“Uh? Oh, alright.”

He nodded blearily to the company as Thranduil bore them off to their beds.

Bard escorted the company downstairs. Nori vanished off somewhere. Gridr had made sure the cart was pulled into a hidden area, so Balin lay down in the bottom of the cart with the empty baskets, covered with the picnic blanket and Gridr sat next to him with Fili. Bilbo drove the cart with Ori seated next to him and Thorin and Dwalin rode beside them through strangely silent streets. The statues of dwarf nobles and warriors that held the street signs and lamps made the place lovely and welcoming. They met the night-watch at the edge of town. Glorfindel was excited to see them and assured them the streets were cleared of people and they had just enough time to get on the mountain road.

Once they gained the road home, they stopped and looked back. There was a roar of water as the geysers from the mountain were released and flowed at high speed throughout Dale. Ori could see people hanging out of windows watching the water.

“Come,” said Thorin, “Dori will be waiting up.”

He was answered by a snore from Balin buried in the back.
Ori eats everything.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. As Dollypegs put it, “Exactly like it says on the tin.” Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Despite his late night, Ori was in his office at home in the early morning. He worked on an outline for his presentation of the Quest. His sketches were collected in their books at the corner of his desk. These had been copied by several other scribes for the library and the archives. He had a full manifest of the contents of the box complete with detailed drawings of every single item it contained.

He had the lists and descriptions of all the books Lady Galadriel had rescued and a letter from her that gave her report and opinions for the quest. She had included Celeborn’s preparations as well.

Another letter contained Dain’s and Sculdis’ reports on it along with all the diagrams Dain had left in his care.

Omi and Loli were off interviewing the mithril masters for their views on the building of the bridge.

Bujni and Dipfa were working on their own report of the events and the jumpsuits Dipfa had created for them.

Omosuil and Nomiriel had submitted their report within days of their return. Elrond and LIndir written up their observations. Eowyn had given her report and added a letter from her Uncle with his royal opinion on the contents and history revealed during his time as well as his interesting traveling arrangements. Ori had Dwalin’s, Balin’s and Gimli’s and Legolas’ reports. To his surprise, Kili and Tauriel had turned in a report as well. Dwalin had rigorously interviewed Haldir and the elf captain had also submitted a gracefullly written report. Quartz, in an act of amazing bravery, had offered to go with Balin and interview Red Queen.

He slowly began building these together with his own notes. Re-reading these, he shook his head. So much had been done and prepared and the entire adventure had taken from a new moon to full.

He sat back. He had been married in the spring and now it was the beginning of autumn. He had been married, become part of the royal family, seen the death of King Thror, Thorin’s coronation, had his own adventure, and now Thorin’s betrothal. So much had happened to him. He’d been a journeyman scribe working for coppers and now he was the scribe of the king.

“An’ mine,” the hot boom reminded him.

Ori ducked his head and smiled. He set himself to work. This was for Mahal as much as anyone else.

He was surprise by a knock on the door and Dori came in with a tray and shut the door behind him.

“Make a little room, pet.”

Ori moved a pile to the other side of his desk and Dori put down the tray, on it was a small plate of several buttered scones, a jam pot and two cups and a squat little teapot. Ori looked up at Dori with a grin.

“You saw me eat my breakfast, Ori’s Dori.”
“Elevenes,” Dori explained, pulling a chair to the side of the desk and pouring out hot, sweetened xocolātl with cream. Ori watched, waiting for Dori to tell him whatever he intended to.

Dori put jam on a scone and gave to him. Ori nibbled this gratefully.

“Pet?”

“Yes, Ori’s Dori?”

“Have you and Bilbo discussed the hobbit side of things that came out of the box?”

“Yes, but there are a couple of things I need to clear up.”

“Would you care to do so after this?”

“Certainly. Is he ready?”

“He did mention such earlier and I’d like him…well, out of the way. I have a meeting with a few people in one of the upstairs rooms.”

Ori cocked his head. That didn’t sound usual. Dori smiled.

“We’re planning Bilbo’s and Frodo’s birthday party, pet. It’s all over the mountain and Dale how auspicious it is that the consort-to-be was born right around Durin’s Day.”

“Oh!” Ori laughed. “In that case, shall I attempt to keep him as long as I can?”

“Thank you, pet. I knew I could count on you. Eat up, I remember how you are when you get deep in your studies.”

Ori took the third scone Dori offered.

Dori looked about the piles on the desk.

“Is it going well?”

“Yes,” Ori said. He was pleased with the progress he had made so far. “All the information is here, I’m organizing and weaving it together, so to speak.”

“You are always so good at that, pet. Have I told you how proud I am of you?”

“Thank you, Ori’s Dori. I’m proud of you, too. Sometimes I think you outdo Thorin in royal popularity.”

Dori waved this away.

“I’m a Bearer, we make what the king does holy and we create a sense of occasion for our people.”

“It’s more than that, Dori. If the king was Thror, I think you would have either bullied him into mending his ways or simply taken over.”

Dori blushed and shrugged.

“Taken over? Pet, really! I think I would have gently pushed Thror to abdicate and encouraged him to crown Thorin.”

“And the arkenstone?” Ori teased.

“Oh, Nori would have stolen that quite easily.”

The brothers looked at each other and laughed.

“Yes, and now he’s going to be king of the underworld as Ursith,” Ori pointed out.

“Yes,” Dori sighed. “It’s good for him to have something to keep him busy and look out for our Thorin, he’s far too clever for his own good and this is the sort of thing he likes.”

Dori rose and pour Ori another cup of xocolātl.

“You finished that up, pet, and then pop through to Bag End East.”

“Thank you, yes. Dori?”

“Yes, pet?”

“Did you ever imagine we would be where we are now?”

Dori paused, then,

“I knew you and Nori were made to do great things. Myself? I knew a Bearer would not be left doing nothing in the hind end of Dale. How it would come about I had no idea.”

Dori went out with the tray and Ori pondered what he had just learned.

A few moments later, satchel on his shoulder, he was knocking at the door behind the ogee arch.

Bilbo took a pie out of the oven and put it on a metal rack on the table. It was obviously blackberry.
“That looks really good,” said Ori.
“For dessert this evening. I’ve been canning berries all day. I just couldn’t stand to look at another glass jar. Though, if you are hungry, there’s a different one I’d like you to try.”

Bilbo went to the larder and brought out something that looked like heaps of lightly singed marshmallow on a crust.
“What kind of pie is that?” Ori asked.
“Lemon meringue.”
“Really?”
“Yes, quite exotic, I know. Deneb gave me the recipe, and I’ve been trying it out. It’s like lemon curd under a blanket of baked egg whites. I thought I would serve it when Lord Zark and his family come to dinner this week.”
“That looks amazing,” said Ori.
“I haven’t tasted it yet, I have no idea if it’s any good. Are you willing to chance it?”
“I’ll try to be brave,” said Ori.
“That’s the spirit.”

Bilbo got down plates and forks and a pie slicer and server. A cross section of the pie was even more intriguing.
They sat down with a pot of tea to taste. Three minutes later, the slices were demolished and they were cutting second helpings.

“Lord Zark and his family are coming to dinner at Bag End East?” Ori asked.
“Yes,” said Bilbo, “they have some sort of business proposal for the crown, but there’s no reason they shouldn’t get a good meal out of it as well, and the grandbadgers are just a little younger than Frodo, so they can play out in the meadow after dinner, while the grown ups talk about boring things. Bard will be there as well. Would you and Dwalin like to join us?”
“When?”
“Two nights hence.”
“I think Dwalin is on patrol, but I’d love to. Does Thorin need me to take notes?”
“No, no, no, you’ll be here as a guest. If anything needs noting, I’ll do it. I think if it were more official, or more public, they would simply have requested a business meeting and we’d be eating cold cuts and beer. Not that there’s anything wrong with them, but it makes pie seem so much less necessary.”
“That would be a sad state of affairs,” Ori agreed.
“So, has Dori finished planning my and Frodo’s birthday party yet? I take it that’s why you’re here. Keeping me busy and out of the way?”

Ori crowed out a laugh.

Bilbo chuckled.
“He’s no more subtle than my Aunt Donnamira. Whenever she invites you to someone’s surprise party, you always bring presents to give because you know it’s for you.”
“All the same, could you at least pretend to be surprised?”
“I always do,” said Bilbo. “It would be impolite not to.”

He looked down at his pie, studying it. Then he ran his finger through the meringue, and drew it across Ori’s lips.
Ori darted out his tongue to lick up the meringue, and caught the tip of Bilbo’s finger in the process.
Slowly, holding Bilbo’s gaze, he sucked the finger into his mouth and swirled his tongue around it.
He was not blushing. He was NOT.
“You’re adorable when you turn that shade,” said Bilbo.
Alright, he was blushing. He gave the finger a last lick.
“Do we have the privacy?”
“Frodo and Sam are at lessons for the afternoon. Thorin is touring the Dale schools with Bard. Also, all my doors lock from the inside. I admit, at first I thought the level of security in our quarters
was a bit of overkill, but now I’m beginning to see the advantages.”

“So, what are the potential venues?” Ori asked formally.

“I have a bed the size of a small island. The bathtub is always nice, because you get dirty and clean in the same place. I often fancy the library. There’s some ridiculously large, cushy furniture in there.”

“Fooling around among the books,” Ori mused. “That sounds positively wicked! I don’t suppose you have any dictionaries?”

“A few. Why?”

“Odd quirk of mine.”

Bilbo offered his hand.

“Shall we?”

Ori took it, and knew he was grinning foolishly.

“Let’s.”

They almost ran to the library, giggling. The door slammed and locked behind them. Bilbo tore down his braces, Ori kicked off his boots and flung off his tunic and they grasped at each other, kissing and rubbing, clumsily, desperately, unfastening each other’s trousers. Still half-dressed, they dropped down onto the leather couch, and onto each other.

Ori lay on his back, with Bilbo a lovely, hot weight atop him, the two of them licking and kissing messily. Ori delved his handed down the back of Bilbo’s trousers and kneaded his arse.

“Oh, your arse it lovely. It’s like warm rolls from the oven.”

Bilbo laughed into his neck.

“Such flattery!”

“I must speak as I find,” said Ori.

He found Bilbo’s mouth again and they enjoyed each other for long minutes, snickering, sighing, and growing increasingly hot.

“Is there… anything… I shouldn’t do?” Ori panted between kisses.

“You can lick my ears, but don’t bite them.”

“Oh, Mahal!”

Bilbo sucked at his neck from jaw to collar bone, nuzzling his skin. The skin of Bilbo’s nose was actually a different texture than the rest, almost silky. Ori traced the edges of Bilbo’s ear with the very tip of his tongue and felt Bilbo shudder. Bilbo’s ear twitched and he sighed.

“Yes,” the hobbit breathed. “Just like that.”

Bilbo’s shirt was tossed to the floor. Ori’s undertunic quickly followed.

Ori rolled over so Bilbo was under him.

Bilbo laughed.

“And to think I’ve always thought this couch ridiculously large,” he said.

“You and Thorin don’t have sex on the couch?”

“He’s more of an armchair dwarf.”

Ori kissed and licked his way across Bilbo’s torso.

“Do you like your nipples played with?” Ori asked.

“Yes please.”

“Oh, they’re sweet.”

“I don’t put powdered sugar on them or anything.”

“Not that kind of sweet, silly,” said Ori, as he ran his tongue in circles around one and pinched the other.

“Mmm, yes, like that,” said Bilbo.

He thrust them up to give Ori better purchase. They were more sensitive even than Dwalin’s. Ori took his time, sucking gently on each as Bilbo’s breathing quickened and he writhed, muttering. Bilbo’s cock hardened against Ori’s thigh.

They rolled over one more and flailed in thin air and hit the rug, still tangled together.

“Ooops,” said Bilbo, happily on top.

“You feel so nice on top of me,” Ori confessed.
“As long as I don’t accidentally break your ribs falling on you.”
“Dwarrow are made of stone, remember?”
“I know at least one part of you is.”
“I need to take off my trousers.”
“Allow me. Oh, what adorable smalls.”
Ori face-palmed. They had been a gift from Dwalin. They were amethyst with little pink hearts embroidered over them.
“I’ll give you fifty gold, if you promise never to tell anyone else I own these.”
“I’m feeling compassionate right now. Wait until you see mine.”
That had to wait, however, as Bilbo unbuttoned and pulled back Ori’s smalls and his cock sprang forth.
“What an eager fellow,” Bilbo teased. “Is he friendly? Does he like to be petted?”
Ori was far too red and flustered to give a coherent answer, but it was just as well.
Bilbo took hold of his cock and ran his lips over the length, and Ori couldn’t think of anything to say at all.
He watched himself disappear by inches into Bilbo’s mouth. That clever mouth, so right for kisses, was also perfect for something else.
Ori groaned, then hissed as Bilbo swallowed.
“That’s… oh, that’s so nice,” he moaned, and let himself fall onto his back so savor it.
Bilbo smiled around him and hummed.
Ori’s muscles tightened as his pleasure rose. He twitched at every little, wet click of Bilbo’s tongue on Ori’s skin. His eyes closed almost involuntarily.
And then Bilbo was gone.
He half sat up, staring, as Bilbo kissed the head of Ori’s cock and grinned.
“You know,” said Bilbo, “if you turn around, I believe we’re the right height to do this to each other at the same time.”
Ori knew just which figure Bilbo meant. He’d often wished he could do it with Dwalin, but Ori would have ended up sucking on Dwalin’s navel. Now that he thought about that, it did have some appeal.
Even as he considered that, he shifted around.
Bilbo’s trousers were already down around his knees and his smalls...
White lawn with red and yellow embroidered flowers and green vines.
“They look curtains,” said Ori.
“I’d say they’re ready to open,” said Bilbo.
“Yes, I can see someone looking around the opening now.”
Bilbo was not anywhere near as big as Dwalin, but he was certainly plump and inviting enough.
Ori couldn’t help himself. He felt a voracious hunger that precluded subtly, as he popped the head into his mouth and sucked.
“Oh, great Yavanna!” Bilbo cried.
Ori pulled back, chagrined.
“Sorry. I’ll go slower.”
“It wasn’t a complaint, I promise,” said Bilbo.
Nonetheless, Ori set about exploring at a more leisurely pace. Bilbo’s foot hair, though sparser on his shins, grew thicker again over his knees and all the way up his crotch. It was also a different texture than dwarf fur, very soft. Ori could only wonder if this was where the idea of bunnies started, because it was just like rabbit hair.
“Soft,” he said. “And warm.”
“If you say cozy, you’re finishing this on your own,” said Bilbo with a laugh.
So they began in earnest, sprawled over each other, and Ori had no destination in mind except pleasure, drawn out as long as possible. Bilbo tasted rather like pumpkin pie, a fact which Ori was sure would make harvest dinners difficult for years to come. As his mouth worked, one of his hands took up the hobbit’s sac and rolled it around, as much because it was so pleasing to touch as because
it made Bilbo’s prick shake a little harder.

When Ori felt Bilbo’s finger at his hole, he tried to relax. The slow, steady exhilaration of the mouth around his cock made it difficult. It was all he could do to keep his mind on his work, as it were. When the second finger breached him, slick with spit and precum, he stiffened and cried out, the cock falling from his lips as Bilbo steadily sucked and pumped at him.

Ori’s breath came in hard, heavy breaths, rising higher and higher into cries. He buried his face in Bilbo’s hip and rode the pleasure.

“Oh please oh please oh please oh please…”

He stretched taut, toes to eyelids, as he strained into his completion. He cried out and shuddered as he came, his cries and shudders diminishing each time until he was still.

“Was that alright?” Bilbo asked, petting his hip.

Ori chuckled.

“Yes, that was lovely. Give me a moment and I’ll… well… you know.”

Bilbo’s prick was hot and hard in his palm. He gripped it lightly and pulled, then slackened his grasp, tightened it, and did it again.

“You like that?”

“Yes,” said Bilbo, rolling onto his back. “Do go on.”

Ori turned and lay next to him, as they watched Ori stroke him off.

“Hold me,” said Bilbo.

Ori put an arm around Bilbo’s shoulders and cuddled him close. Bilbo slipped his arm around the back of Ori’s neck and kissed him.

The kisses deepened as the pace increased. Bilbo moaned into Ori’s mouth, then broke the kiss abruptly, and buried his face in Ori’s neck and moaned.

Spunk sprayed into the air and pattered down onto their skin and Ori continued pumping until, little by little, Bilbo relaxed.

They lay there, blissfully breathing, dozing off and on. Ori hadn’t realized he was so tired. Now that all his muscles were relaxed, they seemed to have no intention of being anything else.

“Sticky,” said Bilbo.

Ori laughed.

“I guess, eventually, we’ll have to move again, won’t we.”

“If not, we will waste away from lack of food,” Bilbo reminded him. “Or, maybe I’ll just eat you.”

“Too late,” said Ori with a giggle.

“I’m going to go fill the tub.”

“Which one?”

“The one in attached to our bedroom,” said Bilbo.

He didn’t move.

“Alright.”

Bilbo didn’t move.

“Bilbo?”

Bilbo snored.

Ori poked his side.

Bilbo laughed and squirmed.

“Faker!” Ori accused.

“Alright, alright, I’m going,” said Bilbo, finally sliding off and onto his feet.

He bent to pick up his clothing, very slowly and purposely.

“You’re so cute,” Ori said.

Bilbo shot him a saucy look over his shoulder.

“Cute?” He wiggled his arse. “Just cute?”

“Not just cute, but it is at the top of the list,” said Ori, nodding.

“Come along, master dwarf.”

Ori watched him go with regret, before he stood and gathered the rest of the clothing.
“Don’t go too quickly,” said Ori. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to find you on my own.”

“Funny,” Bilbo called from down the hall. “Follow the sound of the water.”

It occurred to Ori that he was walking through the king’s chambers naked.

Of course, he had also just had sex with the king’s intended.

And he felt happy. He felt satisfied. He even felt loved.

Ori had no idea why this was so easy with Bilbo, when he was so self-conscious at the idea of doing it with anyone else, other than his Dwalin.

Bilbo hummed busily as Ori followed through the bedroom and dropped his clothes next to Bilbo’s on the bench at the foot of the bed.

In the bath, he glanced over into the filling tub.

“So, the water is clear after all,” he said.

“Gandalf and Wandi can bathe in a punchbowl if they like,” said Bilbo wryly. “I prefer not to emerge blue, green or purple.”

“Did you enlarge this tub?” Ori asked. He slipped into the warm water with a sigh. “I swear it’s bigger than the last time I saw it.”

“It had to accommodate a whole house full of concubines,” Bilbo reminded him, dunking his head under the water. When he emerged, he shook his head, spraying droplets. His curls sprung out almost immediately. “Considering how many there were, this tub must have been crowded past the point of intimacy.”

“That must have been fun,” said Ori, “even to watch. They were all here voluntarily.”

“Figure 20 for days,” said Bilbo.

“I don’t think they could have done that in this tub.”

“The water would have added buoyancy,” said Bilbo.

“Now you sound like Bujini.”

“We won’t tell him,” said Bilbo.

He grabbed an enormous cake of soap and a cloth.

Ori sniffed.

“Is that coffee?” Ori asked.

“The grounds give it a nice smell and it’s quite a bracing feeling against the skin,” said Bilbo.

“So, instead of a punchbowl, this is more of a coffee pot.”

“It’s not that strong,” said Bilbo.

He began to wash Ori’s chest and shoulders. He stopped.

“Ori.”

“Not another one!” Ori wailed.

“Not another love bite?”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, I may have been a little aggressive.”

Ori laughed.

“Dwalin will tease me, but it’s alright. I’ll just add another scarf. You didn’t bit the rune for your name into my skin. Did you?”

“Not this time,” said Bilbo. “We’ll save that for later. Turn.”

He started at the shoulders, then started washing lower.

“I’m beginning to see the advantage of coffee soap,” said Ori. “Feels like someone’s scratching my back for me.”

“Relaxes and wakes you up at the same time,” said Bilbo. He traced the raven tattoo with his finger. “And you woke up with this on your back,”

“Yes. I didn’t take it well.”

“I don’t blame you. It must have been terrifying!”

“At least it didn’t hurt. Real tattoos are painful and bloody.”

“I’ve never regretted I don’t have one, but now I’m rather afraid it may be required.”

“Because of your title.”

“Yes, though Thorin has already told me I shouldn’t feel pressured. How would it look to the
people if I didn’t have the appropriate marks? I can only ride so far on my hobbitness, especially with a dwarf husband who’s part hobbit himself, no matter how distantly.”

“It is. very distant,” said Ori. 

“Yes, but it matters a great deal to Thorin. It angers him that someone could just cut pieces of his bloodline away, for any reason. He’s not about to grow hair on his feet, but he wants to understand who hobbits are, as a way to understand a little more about himself. And, also, because he wants to know what he’s talking about when any challenges come his way.”

“As they very well might during my quest presentation,” Ori acknowledged.

Bilbo grinned.

“It’s not going to hurt that the Honorable Bearer of Erebor can claim the same bloodline,” he reminded Ori.

“The pregnant Bearer of Erebor at that. Nori always wondered why Dori was such a stickler for good manners.”

“Anyone who can make a scone that good has to be a bit hobbitly back there somewhere,” said Bilbo. “We’ll finish up here, make some tea, and get to work on translating the quilt blocks, yes?”

“Perfect,” Ori sighed.

“Last block?” Ori said.

“Last block,” Bilbo confirmed.

At the dining table, they had re-examined each block of the marriage quilt and Bilbo interpreted the more subtle information in each and how they related to each other. Ori was stunned at the amount of detail and slightly put off by how much sheer gossip was contained within. Dwarrow wrote their history in stone, Elves wrote on living materials, and the men of Rohan sang their history. Hobbits made quilts, what brought them together in some way was tapestry and art.

“What has she to say in the end?” Ori asked.

“Not much,” Bilbo said, a note of sadness in his voice. “The Noldor are warlike and not always kind. Men wish to trade but they do not respect dwarrow or hobbits. She senses a shadow, coming over Arda.”

“And we all know what that was,” Ori sighed.

“True,” Bilbo commented, then he smiled. “And thanks to you and Roäc, we don’t have to worry about that anymore, do we?”

Ori sobered.

“Yavanna and Mahal certainly turned thing around. There was always danger outside the town and traveling was not usually thought of. People talked in whispers about what might be happening to the south.”

“Yes,” Bilbo looked thoughtful. “I wonder what’s happening down there now.”

“Gardening,” a low, feminine voice teased them.

“Now I’m curious,” Bilbo said.

“Me, too,” Ori agreed and giggled.

“One day,” the hot boom of Mahal told them.

“Oi.”

Ori and Bilbo turned to see Dwalin in the doorway, Killer dancing about him.

“Our Dori wan’s t’ know why th’ pair a yeh aren’t at th’ dinner table…Mahal’s hairy arse, love! Our Bilbo go’ a dinner table under there ’r is tha’ jus’ a pile a’ papers?”

Bilbo chuckled and Ori stuck out his tongue and gathered all his papers together.

“Lord Ori,” Bilbo said severely. “You have caused this hobbit to miss luncheon and tea! I shall faint with hunger.”

“Puir wee thin’,” Dwalin teased. “C’mon, love, let’s ge’ th’ sufferin’ creature t’ th’ table.”

Ori and Bilbo rose from the table and came to the door. Dwalin tossed Bilbo over his shoulder and took Ori’s hand.

“Put me down, you overgrown warg!” Bilbo cried. Killer barked and licked Bilbo’s feet, making the hobbit screech. They came into the breakfast parlor and Dwalin tossed Bilbo to Thorin.
“Here, this is yers.”
“Dwalin!” Thorin said and caught Bilbo gently and put him back on his feet. “Don’t turn the professor upside down like that! His knowledge might spill out and then he won’t be able to make you cake.”
“No cake for you!” Bilbo shouted around his laughter.
Frodo and Sam bounced in and squealed.
“Cake!”

They were in the middle of a marmalade glazed ham, potatoes in parsley sauce and grilled root vegetables, when a pigeon flew through the open windows and landed on the floor. Sugar picked it up in her jaws and brought it to Thorin. Thorin praised her and gave her a chunk of ham. The startled pigeon lay on its back in his hands. There was a tiny metal case fixed to one of the bird’s leg. Thorin detached this and set the bird on the table. Dori rose and went to the kitchen. Thorin unrolled the intricately folder rice paper and frowned at it. Dori returned with a saucer of water and a tiny bowl of cut oats. The pigeon recovered its wits and began to refresh itself.

“Who sends pigeon?” Yizaris asked. “They are excellent parents, but no good for much other than eggs and eating.”
“Denethor,” Thorin replied. “Namad, I believe he means this for you.”
Thorin passed it over to Dis, who took it and read it over.
“Well,” Dis looked amused. “Master Denethor wishes to send a press to Erebor and, under the supervision of his representative, train our people in the secrets of printing.”
“Secrets of printing,” Bilbo repeated incredulously. “I’ve seen color printing here. Perhaps you should send him the coronation issue of Vug!”
Thorin looked at Dis. Her gaze was far away, then an evil smile spread over her face. She blinked and looked innocently at Thorin.
“Dearest nadad, I think this is a lovely idea. How kind of dear Denethor to wish to teach us all about printing.”
Thorin, Balin and Dwalin all snickered. Bilbo stared.
“Dis?”
She grinned, making her look almost Thorin’s twin.
“Why not, nadad-to-be? Once we find out everything they know, we can either improve on it or go on with our own, knowing ours to be the better.”
“Dis is wonderful,” Yizaris giggled and scooped marmalade sauce on her veggies.
“Why, thank you, Yizi. Shall I send Beryl with my reply, nadad?”
“Please,” Thorin said, helping Sam to more potato.
“I’ll have it for you first thing in the morning,” she promised.
“Thank you, I’ll put my seal of approval on it. That should make him and Aragorn happy, should he be incline to boast of it to his king. Tell him we await his representative most eagerly,” Thorin finished. He glanced at Roäc who gave a croak, gulped down a last chunk of ham and hurtled out the open doors, heading southwest.
Dis cackled to herself and helped herself to more ham.

During dessert, Bilbo’s beautiful blackberry pie with frozen custard, Ulfr and Buer abruptly arrived, variously grey and brown-colored and smelling of chemicals and burnt cloth.
“Sorry t’ interrupt,” said Ulfr.
Yizaris looked up, surprised.
“We didn’t expect you this evening! Finished for the night?”
“Finished permanently,” said Buer, with a sheepish grin. “My landlord chucked us out. I guess I blew up the place one too many times. Although this is the first time I’ve ever blown one of my walls into the front courtyard.”
“Sounds brillian’,” said Dwalin.
“It was!” Buer cried. Then he sighed heavily. “Though, the landlord wasn’t as enthusiastic, of course.”

Ulfr shrugged.
“I paid ’im off, lad. He’s no’ sufferin’. He kin pull down th’ res’ an’ rebuild twice as big as before if he likes.”

Dori, who had watched the entire exchange with exaggerated patience, shooed them off upstairs to wash.
“If you want to eat at my table, I expect you to be clean and not smelling like an experiment gone wrong.”

Yizaris shook her head.
“If I made such a rule for my Ulfr, I’d never see him.”

“Um,” Buer started.
“Lad’s got his things out in a cart,” Ulfr butted in “D’ yeh mind, Bearer?”

“Why are his things still in a cart?” demanded Dori. “Take them upstairs and wash yourselves before you come to dinner.”

Dori bustled away to the kitchen and Mistress Dazla appeared with Miss Larit, and shooed Ulfr upstairs while Agrib, Gibi, Mokrah followed Buer out to unload the cart.

After dinner, Ori and Sigrid went to Ori’s work room for a good gossip.
“I need a favor,” said Sigrid. “But, I’m kind of ashamed to ask, you’re so busy.”

“Did you want me to build a wing onto your house?”

“No.”

“Then, everything else is on the table,” said Ori. “Ask.”

“I was wondering if you could draw me in miniature. Something simple, a gift for Fili’s name day.”

“How miniature?”

“Nothing beyond you. Not that there’s really anything beyond you, I believe.”


“I’m not picky. Just something he can carry with him,” Sigrid. “My mother had a little cloth bag with a lock of Dad’s hair in it. But I do like those little flat cases, dwarrow carry with pictures of family in them.”

Ori looked at her then had an inspiration.
“Shall we do it now?” he asked eager to start.

“Yes,” she grinned. “Where should I sit?”

“I’ll be right back,” Ori managed as he rushed out of his office. He heard Dori talking in the kitchen.

“Dori,” he called.

“Yes, pet, just a moment,”

“I just want to borrow a couple of your robes, is that alright?”

“Yes, pet, now my dear-”

Ori bounced into Dori’s and Balin’s bedroom. He ran to the dressing room. There were the robes he’d thought of. He snatched both off their stands and hurried back to Sigrid.

He burst in, saying.

“Right, let me put these down and we can move my desk a little.”

“Move…? Sure.”

Sigrid hopped up. They shoved the desk over, clearing an area of floor. Ori piled the other end of the desk with books and heavy things. Sigrid watched, intrigued. Ori grabbed the Durin blue robe, shook it out, and laid it on the clear area.

“Open up your bodice, so your shoulders are bare and just a bit of breasts, take down your hair, and lie on the floor,” Ori ordered, picking up the other robe.

“What?” Sigrid inquired with a strain of laughter in her voice.
“Just do it!” Ori was bursting with his idea. Sigrid arranged herself with Ori’s help. Ori looked down at her.

“Make you hair go all over the place,” he said with a frown. Sigrid sat up shook all her hair forward, then lay back again and let it flow where it would.

“Perfect,” Ori said. “Now lay one arm across your breasts, like you’re hiding your bits and put your other arm above your head across your hair.”

Sigrid choked on a giggle and did so. Ori laid the hem of the other robe trimmed with mithril lace and starlight gems across her arm.

“Tuck it under your arm, so it looks like that’s all you have on,” Ori ordered. Sigrid’s eyes lit up.

She grinned and rearranged herself. Ori walked around, looking down at her. He twitched the fabrics until it looked right, then adjusted a few lights.

“Good, now stay still,” he said and he went for his drawing kit. He climbed on the desk, sat on the edge and hooked his legs around the desk legs, so he all but hung over her. He started drawing.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter I’m upside down,” she teased.

“No. Now smile at me. Look directly into my eyes, that way you’ll be looking at Fili when he see the picture.”

Ori worked on the curve of her mouth then started sketching her eyes.

“Think dirty thoughts about Fili,” he ordered, looking for the right slant of the lashes. The sparkle he wanted appeared. He scribbled madly.

There was a knock at the door.

“No,” Ori cried, too busy with the muse lying on the floor below him. He vaguely registered the door opening.

“I’ll put them right back, Dori. I need them, they’re the right colors.”

“For what?” Kili’s voice asked.

“Don’t move!” Ori cried as Sigrid’s eyes flicked to the doorway. She stayed still and Ori turned, annoyed, to the door.

“What?” he demanded.

There stood Tauriel and Kili, same stance, same look of curious confusion, each head cocked to opposing sides.

“Ori, what are you doing?” Kili asked.

“Drawing Sigrid. Now, go away.”

Unfortunately, they did not go away, merely came forward to peer around him at Sigrid on the floor.

“You’re in my light,” Ori groused.

“Ooooo,” said Tauriel, peeking at his picture. “That’s pretty.”

“Oooo,” said Kili. “Ori-mate, could you do one of those of Tauriel?”

“If I say yes, will you leave?”

“Leaving!” Kili cried.

He grabbed Tauriel’s hand and they scampered out, just as Dwalin stepped in.

“Love, wha’ were - oh. Sorry. Don’ mind me.”

“Dwalin, I’m just sketching. But, now that you’re here, will you guard the door?”

“Yeh worried abou’ a protracted siege?”

“I’m worried about a certain elder brother of mine having apoplexy.”

“Guid point. I’ll be outside. Call if yeh need me.”

Dwalin went out, shutting the door behind him.

“Love you” Ori called as he scribbled maniacally, not wanting to keep Sigrid on the floor too long. In the background, he heard Dwalin talking to Dori.

“Now, our Dor’, he’s jus’ usin’ them robes a’ yers f’r th’ color. It’s no’ li’e he’s goin’ t’ wear ‘em.”

“I should hope not!” Dori replied. “They are so completely not his color!”

“Do you usually borrow Dori’s robes?” Sigrid asked.

“Not really. But he’s usually all right with it as long as I put them back on the right stand.”
“The right stand?”
“Oh, you have no idea. Dori’s closet is the size of the great library, and only the accessories are anything like stored away. Each of his outfits has its own stand and shoe tree.”
“Seriously?”
“I would never kid about Dori’s wardrobe.”
“Wicked Stepmother would be so jealous.”
Covenant, Cookies, and Coinage.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Things are gearing up for two special birthdays and Durin’s day. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori wished he had considered this sooner than one day left before Sindris and the volcanic guild bled the mountain. Honda trotted up the Dale House and, as Ori dismounted and tied Honda’s reins to the near by trough, Milgr opened the door and looked out at him.

“Good mornin’, Lord Ori. Is it King Bard yer wantin’?”

“Good morning, Mistress Milgr, thank you, no. Is Crown Princess Sigrid at home?”

Mistress Milgr chuckled.

“Aye, always f’r yeh, ‘bes’ friend’. Come away in.”

Ori stepped into the foyer, wiped his boots out of habit, and followed the housekeeper upstairs. A murmur of voices told him the king was busy with his council.

“It’s Lord Ori f’r yeh, lovey,” Mistress Milgr announced as she opened the door to the sitting room. Ori went in and Sigrid jumped up from a desk where a few books and some papers lay.

“Thank you, Mistress Milgr. Ori, I’m so glad to see you! Will you listen to me read some khuzdul?”

“Certainly, but I’ve had a thought,” said Ori as Milgr left and closed the door behind her.

“Did it hurt?” Sigrid teased.

“Almost.”

“Come sit.”

She laughed, grabbed his hand, and pulled him over to the couch where they both curled up.

“What?” Sigrid demanded.

“Well, I was thinking about the lava bleed tomorrow.”

“Oh, Idad said to Da we should keep indoors with the windows shut against the fumes. Masks have been distributed throughout in case.”


“Oh. Are you thinking Da should petition Mahal?”

“No, but I’ve found out that Eru likes oatmeal cookies with xocolātl chunks. I wondered if maybe you should petition Eru with those cookies for a good, strong southwestern wind tomorrow to keep all the fumes and such away from Dale.”

Sigrid stared at him.

“Do I want to know how you found that out?”

“I can tell you, but it’ll take a while.”

“How about you help me make the cookies and tell me?”

“Deal,” Ori grinned. “Alright if I go put Honda in the back garden?”

“Of course! Why didn’t you do that before?”

“I didn’t know if you were home.”

“I’ll meet you in the kitchen,” said Sigrid.

Ori came in through the kitchen door and took off his cloak and satchel. Sigrid had the oven heating and was getting ingredients out of the cupboards.
While she mixed things together, Ori told her all about the rededication of the guild and the cookie discussion with Mahal. Sigrid put the batter into the ice box in the back of the larder to firm up and made tea. Over this, they discussed the idea of petitioning.

Sigrid wondered whether she should petition Eru or Manwë, as Sigrid said Manwë ruled the winds and was Eru’s favorite.

“I mean I know Eru was the Father of Them All but I’ve only ever really prayed to Yavanna and that was over mother and Fili.”

“Yavanna liked the xocolātl cookies Erda taught you to make.”

“I should thank Her with some, but, oh Ori, I’m nervous about petitioning Eru. He’s such an abstract idea….”

Ori thought this over. He had a close relationship with Mahal as His scribe and, as Dori had always taught him only of Mahal and Yavanna, Ori hadn’t ever given the other valar much thought.

“I’m sure Eru’d love t’ hear fra’ her,” came the hot rumble in the back of Ori’s mind.

“Um, but you all revere Eru as the Father,” Ori pointed out.

Sigrid sighed.

“Eru is the ruler of men and the men of Dale. I suppose as the crown princess, I really should. Will you help?”

“Of course,” Ori promised. “I don’t know what men do as it was never anything we did.”

“I suppose it’s like Yule,” Sigrid mused. “It’s the shortest day, so we thank Him for a good year and promise Him we’ll cherish the new year He’s giving us. I suppose I could offer cookies and cherish the air and ask Him to ask Manwë for healing wind.”

“That sounds good,” Ori agreed. Sigrid nodded and went back to the larder and brought out the batter. Ori greased flat pans and Sigrid dropped spoonfuls of batter on them. These were put into the oven and they sat back down to wait.

“I’ll do it.” Sigrid declared. “I’m crown princess, I think it’s my job.”

“I think you’re right,” Ori encouraged.

“Let’s hope He listens.”

After Sigrid placed all the best looking cookies on a pretty plate, fetched candles, and dressed herself in white, they stole up to the top of Dale House and stepped out into the open bell tower on top. Ori had never been up here and the view was lovely.

He turned to Sigrid, who looked about, as she shut the small door flush with the platform. A ring was inset flat into the door. Ori suspected that was a dwarrow idea.

“This is nice!”

“It is, I usually come up here with Fili when we want to talk about important things. And I do mean just talk, master dwarf.”

She ducked under the big bell and Ori followed. He looked up and saw the huge clapper hung there. He stood on tiptoe and leaned back a little, then he could see the small hook fixed into the top from which the clapper was suspended.

“Just like little bells,” he murmured. “No one’s going to ring this any time soon, are they?”

“No, and I don’t intend to be up here long enough for anyone to get ideas.” Sigrid sighed and set the plate of cookies under the clapper. She set two small candles on either side, lit them, and smoothed down her dress.

“Shall I go?” Ori asked.

He moved to get out from under the bell. Sigrid grabbed him back.

“No!” she said emphatically, “I want you here in case anything happens.”

“Alright,” Ori said slowly, though he wasn’t sure what she thought might happen that he could do something about. He stood interestedly as Sigrid took a deep breath.

“Hail Great Eru, Father of all, May Your Name be ever praised. We are all grateful for the gifts You generously give us everyday. We praise You for this life we lead, no matter how rich or poor. Please hear the plea of a helpless maiden….”

Sigrid paused then continued hesitatingly.
“Um, the good children of Mahal...er...I mean Aüle are going to bleed...er... do maintenance on their mountain tomorrow and I humbly beg that You cajole Manwê, who is dearest to You and understands most clearly Your purposes, as His delight is in the winds and clouds and all the regions of the air. Send my plea to Him for a mighty wind from the southwest to protect all Your people here in Dale from the fumes, smoke and ash from the mountain. I offer this sacrifice of...um... “

Sigrid sent Ori a horrified look. Ori thought her invocation weird compared to the way he and Mahal spoke, but he didn’t think it was his business to interrupt. He made an encouraging gesture. Sigrid gulped and went on.

“Oatmeal and xocolātl chunk cookies....”
She seemed to fumble for words.
“...I hope You like them and will cajole Manwê to send us wind....”
She gasped and cried out,
“I mean fast moving air not a plague of farts! Oh no, Ori, what have I done?” she wailed and flung herself on him. Ori held his friend, he did not know what to do for her.

Suddenly the wind whispered around the bell. Sigrid raised her head, listening. Ori heard it as well, faraway deep male laughter.

Another gust of wind came and sang softly as it touched the edges of the bell. A third gust, blew out the candles and swept the cookies off the plate and out of the tower, where they promptly vanished in midair.

Ori and Sigrid sat down and stared at the empty platter.
“That seems like a good sign,” Ori said.
He helped Sigrid to her feet and fetched the platter for her.
“Thank You,” Sigrid called to the ether.
“You are most welcome, my child,” whispered a low voice from inside the bell.

Ori followed Sigrid to her room and looked out the window while she changed into her everyday clothes. Neither had said a word since Sigrid’s plea. Ori heard the sound of voices downstairs. They were rising in disagreement. Sigrid came to his side.

“Are you alright?” Ori asked.
“Yes, I just feel like I’ve been really silly.”
“You haven’t. Eru said thank you.”
“He laughed at me.”
“Only because you made a fart joke,” Ori reasoned.
“You know, if I actually had a brain, I would have asked High Priest Sven.”
“You have an excellent brain and who’s he?” Ori asked, mystified. He’d never heard of a high priest in Dale.
“He’s the spiritual leader in Dale. He’s that guy in the funny hat, who always petitions Eru on Yule, remember?”
“Oh.”
Ori did remember seeing the man at a distance waving his arms and chanting.
“Oh well,” said Sigrid. “I suppose he’ll be doing a petition anyway, so I guess what I did won’t matter.”
“Eru spoke to you, Sigrid.” Ori reminded her.

Sigrid sighed then, as the voices start to reach shouting pitch, she glanced at Ori and they hurried down. To Ori’s surprise, the council chamber door was opened and Bard was on his feet.
“Why are we still discussing this?” Bard demanded. “You have my answer.”
There was the man with the funny hat, High Priest Sven, Ori reminded himself.
“It is a possibly dangerous situation, your majesty. If we sacrifice a goat it might make the people more comfortable.”
“So you’ve said, over and over. And as I’ve said, over and over, you can always sacrifice a goat, if you wish to. You can sacrifice any goat you like, but if you want old Mistress Callin’s goat, you will ask her first, and you will recompense her for another goat that is as good as, if not better than,
the goat she has now."

“But Callin’s goat is a white goat!” another man, in fine robes, insisted. “Only a white goat will work! It’s for Eru!”

“Unger Jansson, you have six white goats. Use one of yours.” Bard said coldly and stared the man into stepping back.

“I need my goats,” whined Unger.

“Mistress Callin needs her goat as it provides her with milk and cheese to supplement her food and wool for the items she makes a living with. You are a lawyer and have six goats which you do nothing with except the ram you sell for stud.”

“But-“ Unger managed.

“No sacrificing Mistress Callin’s goat.”

“We’ll all died from the lava fumes tomorrow!” wailed Unger.

“Not if you wear the masks King Thorin has distributed to every man, woman and child in Dale. Now stop being stupid and go home, Unger.”

Unger left and Bard sighed. High Priest Sven patted his shoulder.

“It’s alright, lad. I have every faith in the dwarf-made masks. Lava is their business.”

“High Priest Sven, if you really want a goat-“ Bard started.

“Um,” Sigrid started.

High Priest Sven and Bard turned to her.

“Sigrid, Ori what brings you both here?” Bard asked.

“I-” Sigrid took a deep breath. “I’m sorry if I over-stepped, High Priest Sven, but I just petitioned Eru and offered a plate of cookies to keep us safe.”

High Priest Sven’s eyebrows went up. He stared, then blinked and smiled benignly on Sigrid and Ori. Ori felt as though the pair of them had been caught eating sweets before dinner. He expected to be patted on the head.

“That was a lovely thing to do, you highness,” High Priest Sven said, and looked down gently on them. “I’m sure Father Eru appreciates your sweetness. Well, young Bard, I must be off, you know my wife gets nervous, if I’m not on time for meals. I’ll get a kid from the market and do a quick sacrifice this evening. May Eru bless you all.”

High Priest Sven strolled off across the square.

“You did what?” Bard gaped at his daughter.

“It was my idea,” Ori interrupted.

Bard looked at him, then chuckled.

“You two never change. You’re always trying to take the blame from each other.”

“Da, if you want some cookies, I’ll make tea and Ori and I’ll tell you the whole thing.”

“I would love some tea and cookies.” Bard smiled warmly, put an arm about each, and took them to the kitchen. “You didn’t sacrifice a goat up in the bell tower, did you?”

“Da! Ew!”

Ori made it home in time to bathe and dress before he presented himself in Bag-End East for dinner. Bard arrived shortly after he did and proceeded to regale Thorin and Bilbo with the tale of Ori’s and Sigrid’s afternoon activities.

“Oh, my,” said Bilbo, snickering. “O deary me.”

Ori blessed the moment that Sugar barked at the door, announcing the rest of the guests.

Lord Zark and Lady Kadis, Master Tin and Mistress Ondr, Master Arim and a knot of badgers with freshly scrubbed faces entered and bowed.

“Dams, dwarrow, and Master Arim,” said Thorin, “a pleasure as always. Please be seated.”

“Thank you, your majesty.” Zark helped Kadis and Tin to their chairs, and herded the badgers to their seats while Thorin poured them out some ale. Zark waited as Ondr sat Arim down and said, “Now, dearie, there’s a plate in front of you, a fork to the left and a knife and spoon to the right. Just above the knife is your glass.”

“Who’m I sharing it with, love?” Arim asked.
“No one, all yours, just like at home.”
“My, I am getting spoiled,” said the old man with a grin. “Pretty soon I’ll be too high falutin’ to share with anyone.”

Bard, sitting next to Arim, asked after his health.
“I’m just fine, thank ye, your majesty. This is a comfortable room, Professor Bilbo. Feels cozy.”
“Thank you, Master Arim,” said Bilbo as he brought out the first course. “To hobbits, that’s a very high compliment, indeed.”

Bilbo had been cooking all day, and it showed.
Lord Zark looked at the bahvlo cheese with roasted tomato spread on toast. He said, uncertainly,
“This certainly looks interesting.”
Bilbo explained what it was.
One of the badgers piped, “So, it’s not bunny hearts, then?”
“No, not hearts. It’s a vegetable, but, don’t worry, there’s nothing green.”
Bilbo winked at Ori, who grinned back.
After this, Bilbo served a course of beef gravy with cave mushrooms, which Mistress Ondr exclaimed over.
“Oh! This here’s me favorite!”
Then Bilbo brought out the main course.
Ori snickered.
It was standing rib roast of goat, each rib topped with a frilly little white cover that always made Ori think of a hat.
“Why are they dressed with dolly hats?” another badger asked.
“They aren’t hats,” said Frodo, “but I’ve used them like that when one of my dolls is a cook. It’s to keep the ends from burning up, then it makes them less messy to eat. But, don’t worry, there’s still plenty of ways to get messy.”
“This certainly is a pleasure,” said Kadis. “Thorin, it’s nice to see you just to see you, and not because I have boxes of shards or once-elves in my husband’s mine. If nothing else, your reign is certainly busier than your grandfather’s ever was.”
“The excitement will keep you young,” said Thorin teasingly.
“The excitement will put me in the stone before next rest day,” she replied.
When the pie was eaten and the dishes were removed, the badgers and faunts released outside to play with the wargs, and wine poured, Thorin spoke of business for the first time.
“You had a proposal for me?”
“Yes,” said Zark. “As you know, we own an entire platform below and to the north of the central market.”
“Mithril Square,” said Thorin. He turned to Bilbo, “Because the platform is square, not because it’s on a square.”
“Oh, yes, I remember seeing it from the market.”
“We want to sell it,” said Kadis simply.
“Your ancestral home is on it,” said Thorin. “Are you planning on moving it?”
This was not as far fetched an idea as it seemed. Dwarrow would happily dismantle and move a house if the new site was more advantageous.
“We’re planning on moving out of it,” said Zark.
“We don’t need all those rooms,” Kadis explained. “It’s ridiculous.”
Bilbo asked, “Beg pardon, but how many rooms are there?”
“One hundred and forty-seven,” said Kadis.
“Ah.”
“Aye,” said Ondr, “and just try an’ find badgers who don’t want to be found at bath time! It’s like settin’ out on a quest without a map.”
Zark continued.
“We’ve purchased and decided to build on a piece of land on the waterfront in Dale. The house will be sound and spacious, and closer to the brewery and the West Dale School.”
“And the old, blind fellow is less likely to tumble into the abyss there,” said Master Arim.
“You’re really thinking of moving to the Dale waterfront?” asked Thorin. “As I recall, there’s not much out there except empty warehouses and some gambling dens.”

Bilbo frowned thoughtfully.
“I would think that a rather rough place to raise badgers.”
“That’s down the shore a bit,” said Zark, “but, yes, there are a lot of empty buildings, many of which have been marked for demolition. This means, there will be a large area to build around the brewery. We were planning a sort of beer garden attached to it in fine weather, and a snug for winter. Besides, with all the changes in Dale and rotten Ursith, may Mahal throw him in a pit, going to shove all his gambling concerns into that casino thing he’s building, it’s likely there won’t be much in the way of bad ‘uns round there much longer.”
“This sounds like something more on King Bard’s agenda than mine,” said Thorin.
“Zark and I have already settled our agenda,” Bard chuckled.
“It does involve you, your majesty,” said Zark, “since Mithril Square will sit empty. It’s the only establishment on that plateau, and it has the finest ornamental rock garden under the mountain.”
“And is your family home,” Thorin reminded him.
“My family home is where my family lives,” said Zark. “I’m not so rich and stuffy that I don’t recognize that. The point is, there is a large parcel, centrally located, in the middle of the mountain. I am giving you first right of refusal if you want to buy it.”
Without hesitation, Thorin said, “You may proceed.”
Zark slid a piece of paper across the table.
Thorin turned it over, considered the amount, thought for a moment, then said, “Do you want it in gold or gems?”
“Gold is easiest for businessdaarrow.”
Thorin nodded.
“I will meet with my council and discuss this, and give you an answer in two days, if that will suffice?”
“That is more than sufficient. Thank you, your majesty.”

As the carriage rolled out of the royal cavern, Ori said, “Thorin, I can hear you thinking from here. Are you planning on confining annoying scribes to Mithril Square when they blot their work?”
“Some would blot their work on purpose just to get a chance to sketch all the fine stone carving on one of the fireplaces. It was among the first houses in Erebor, carved out at the same time as the houses in the royal cavern.”

When they returned, the paper was still sitting on the table.
Idly, Bard turned it over, saw the figure and gasped.
“Thorin, that’s… is there even that much money in Arda?”
“There’s far more than that under this mountain,” said Thorin.
“I can’t even imagine this much.”
“For very real reasons, I wish I could say the same. I also wish I could say I was generous just because I’m a good person, but there’s a strong element of self-preservation involved. Once it’s in circulation, moving around, the gold isn’t as dangerous, but the way it is now, piled in one place, it just calls out for a dragon to come and claim it, not so coincidentally killing everyone in this mountain, and then probably everyone in Dale just for fun.”

Bard shuddered.
Thorin regarded Bard for a long minute.
“Would you like to see the treasury?”
Bard shrugged.
“I admit I’m curious. It’s true, it might put what you say in perspective. Would your ancestors strike me dead for trespassing down there?”
“You’re spending way too much time with Thranduil,” said Thorin.
“Oh, I don’t think so,” said Bard. “I know the treasury isn’t your favorite place, Thorin.”
“I can bring you,” said Ori. He had no idea why he said it. It wasn’t his favorite place, either. He waited for Thorin to ask if he was sure, but Thorin didn’t ask, merely gave him the keys.

“Roäc?” Thorin turned.

One of the iron ravens on the fireplace looked up.

“Hm?”

“Please let the guards know Lord Ori is coming with King Bard.”

“Yeah, I’m on it,” said the raven.

He flew off down the hallway. Ori could only imagine there was some raven-friendly passage Roäc might access to the treasury.

Or, like Nori, Roäc might simply pass through walls.

Ori once asked Quartz about how Erebor ravens got around so easily and received only a raucous laugh in reply.

When they got to the treasury, Bard stood in the doorway and just looked for a long time.

Ori had expected this. He went over to a sealed barrel holding who-knew-what and sat down to wait.

Roäc waded through the shifting treasure, croaking. Occasionally he kicked over a pile of coins.

Ori thought Lady Galadriel was right. Since Dori spread his energies there, the gold was still shiny, but Ori didn’t feel anything from it beyond its usual properties.

He took out a notebook and did a little sketching, but eventually he realized time was passing and Bard still hadn’t moved.

“Bard? Are you alright?”

Bard turned to him, completely speechless, and shook his head.

“I know,” said Ori. “It has that effect on people. Though, Dwalin says I’m the first to actually throw up on it.”

“Thror,” said Bard. “Thror sat on all of this.”

“While people starved around him, yes,” said Ori. “The high king of dwarrows holds the power of life and death in his hand. Thror chose death. Of course, he was insane.”

“I think I’ve seen enough,” said Bard. He looked around one last time and shook his head.

“Oh, Thorin, no wonder.”

“Would you like me to send for Thranduil?” Ori asked.

Bard looked so lost, and his ‘Please’ was tiny.

“Roäc!”

“Got it,” said the raven.

He shot through the open transom.

It was a very quiet ride back to the royal cavern.

Thorin was still at the table at Bag End East, sharing a glass of wine with his husband.

“Bard?” Bilbo asked. “Are you alright?”

Bard turned to Thorin and said, “No wonder you were so screwed up!”

Thorin raised his brow.

“Yes, thank you. That’s what Dwalin always says, too. We were emptying out our own troves as fast as we could. Still, mysteriously, the treasure grew.”

“The arkenstone,” Bard said slowly.

“Yes,” Thorin said tiredly. “It was down there for so long and Thror cared only for it. The gold grew. I’ve done a little reading up on dragon eggs. When they are placed in a treasure horde they do this. Dragons don’t brood over their nests, they just leave the egg. While some birds brood they pull feathers from their own bodies to as the saying goes ‘feather’ their nests. Dragon eggs ‘feather’ their nests with gold.”

“Why?” Bard asked before Ori could.

“Gold attracts people to dig it out, thus a ready supplying of food when it hatches and eventually another dragon, thus a mate.”

Bard slumped down in a chair and Thorin poured him some wine.

“Part of me wishes I hadn’t asked,” mumbled Bard. “No wonder you’re so eager to get rid of it.”
“I’m determined to have the treasury do what it should be doing, allowing people to live well and prosper. Fortunately, Lady Galadriel taught Balin and Dori to…er…clean it.”

“It felt completely different,” Ori confirmed quickly.

“Good, people need to be paid well for their work without having their minds poisoned.”

Bard snickered, “And they’ll think Ursith is hiding it all somewhere.”

“Yes,” said Thorin dryly. “He’s hiding it in the treasury.”

Thranduil came in at that point, patted the large warg noses thrust at him, and looked at Bard.

“Thorin, what have you done to my poor husband?”

“Thorin,” Bard replied, “graciously allowed me to have look at his treasury.”

“Did you vomit?” Thranduil asked.

“No,” said Ori quickly, “that’s my job.”

Thorin laughed.

“Yes and then Frerin wore it.”

Thranduil stared and Bard rose.

“Thank you for coming, sweetie. Thorin, Bilbo, Ori, it’s been enlightening.”

“Would you like some pie?” Bilbo asked, looking at Thranduil. Thranduil paused, then slid his arm through Bard’s.

“Thank you, Bilbo, but I think I need to get someone home.”

Bilbo hopped up, and headed to his kitchen.

“Just wait a moment then, I’ll wrap some up for you.”

“Will we see you and your family at breakfast to watch the bleed tomorrow?” Thorin asked.

“Yes, please,” said Bard. “Tilda’s been talking about it since Master Sindris mentioned it.”

Thranduil turned to Bard.

“You’re behaving oddly. That strange man you call High Priest Sven is in the square doing a weird dance. There are quite a few people watching him.”

“Who’s goat is it?”

Thranduil’s brows lifted.

“Now that you mention it, he was holding a small white goat. Not more than a year old.”

Bard nodded.

“Good. He’s promised Unger Jansson he’d sacrifice a white goat to Eru.”

“They’re going to what?” Thranduil said bemused, as Bilbo returned with a covered plate.

“Sacrifice a goat to Eru,” Bard said, taking the plate. “Thank you, Bilbo.”

“Why do they think Eru wants them to sacrifice a goat?” Thranduil wondered.

“It’s not Eru who wants it sacrificed, as far as I know. We haven’t spoken recently. Supposedly, a goat sacrifice will bring the Dale people safely through the lava bleed tomorrow. Unger wanted to appropriate Mistress Callin’s goat to sacrifice.”

“Mistress Callin is a weaver,” said Thranduil. “She needs her goat.”

“That’s why I told Unger that he couldn’t have that goat without Mistress Callin’s permission. Sven must have got a white goat from someone else.”

“Besides,” said Thranduil, “Eru made goats. It’s not like he needs another one.”

“Mahal made goats,” Thorin teased.

“And ponies and pigs,” Ori chimed in.

“That explains Dain,” Thranduil said dryly and herded Bard out.
Early the next morning, despite the strong southwest breeze, the air wafting up from Dale still smelled faintly of incinerated goat. The royal family of Dale presented itself at Fundin house in plenty of time for breakfast.

“There you all are!” cried Dori as Mistress Dazla brought them into the breakfast parlor. “I almost thought you’d be quite blown away! What a wind we’re having today.”

“It’s all f’r th’ best, Honored Bearer,” said Master Sindris, who had also been invited to breakfast. “It’s a guid, strong wind from th’ southwest, so tha’ll push mos’ a’ th’ gas an’ dross away fra Dale an’ th’ Greenwood. It’s cloudy as well, an’ any rain’ll cool th’ spill faster an’ make th’ ground more fertile. No’ t’ mention putting’ out any stray fires.”

Ori caught Sigrid’s eye and winked, she grinned and blushed a little.

“Will the whole top the mountain pop off?” Tilda asked immediately and she and Master Sindris were off, discussing ash and gases.

“Excellent pie, professor,” said Bain to Bilbo.

“You’ve already eaten a slice, have you?” Bilbo teased.

Bard gave his son a stern look, then ruined it by ruffling his hair.

“He ate the whole thing before anyone else was awake this morning.”

“I was hungry!” Bain protested.

“We shall sort that out instantly,” promised Dori.

They all stood behind a barricade of rock that had been the viewing platform in King Thror’s young days.

“My love, have you ever watched the guild do this before?” Bilbo asked. He kept a strict eye on Frodo and Sam, who peeked over the top of the barricade.

“I did, amrâlimê, but I was very young. It was before Frerin was born. Dis?”

“I’m here.”

The Princess Royal arrived, her arm tucked in Jani’s.

“Namad, do you remember the last bleed?”

“Only vaguely, Udad put me on his shoulders and Amad always said I shrieked ’again!’ after it finished.”

Ori checked the sky. The clouds looked strangely lumpy Ori thought, almost threatening. As the wind blew stronger the lumpy clouds began to swirl in a spiral.

Ori sat on top of the barricade with his sketch book and graphite wand, quickly drawing the mountain before the bleed. Dwalin leaned against the barricade, his arm firmly about Ori’s waist for safety.

“My love, do you remember it?” Ori asked as he turned to kiss the top of Dwalin’s bald pate.

“Aye, luv. It’s a grand sight.”

The rest of the royal party arrived and they all lined up against the barricade. Tilda and Bain were almost as excited as the faunts.
“Will the lava cover the whole side of the mountain, Idad Thorin?” she demanded. “Will it made a loud noise?”

Thorin laughed and gathered the children and faunts about him.

“Now, can you all see Master Sindris?” Thorin asked. At the noises of affirmation, he went on, speaking loudly to be heard above the increasing gale.

“Master Sindris will give a signal. It will go quiet. The dwarrow you see up there will run for cover, there will be a loud shriek of the gases, ash, and fragments escaping first. It must do first, as if it came with the lava, there would be an extremely dangerous flow that would kill everything in its path and ruin the mountain side. Then you will hear the rumbling of the lava moving up the escape tubes. Watch where those dwarrow are, that is where the tubes open. Now you must all put on your masks as it’s going to happen very soon.”

Any who were not dwarrow busily fitted on their masks and the dwarrow present assisted. The wind suddenly dropped to nothing. The lumpy clouds bulged and dropped lower.

As Thorin had said, Ori kept his gaze on Master Sindris. He thought she was keeping an eye on all of them as well. Everyone was peering over the barricade.

Master Sindris waved to her crew. The lava guild members fled the scene of the opening. Ori thrilled to the feeling of lava on the move. He knew every dwarf and dam could feel the surge. The men and elves looked curious. The ground rippled near the escape tubes.

“Look! It’s happening!” shrieked Frodo from the safety of Thorin’s arms.

White hot steam and black smoke mixed with ash and flaming debris screamed upward from the escape tubes in an enormous sheet. Then, lava in all shades of red, orange and yellow burped up in a wave and poured down the mountain side, painting it all the colors of fire.

The wind suddenly howled around the mountain. In a loud explosion, a fountain of fire, rock and lava blew high and far out to the northwest. Ori scribbled and breathed in the heady scent of the blood of the mountain. The clouds drew together and the middle of the cloud took the form of a long finger, with the narrow tip churning the rock and grasses on the meadows to the east of the mountainside, away from the farm lands. The finger moved north and reached for the smoke and fire and then Ori saw the flames and debris being sucked up into it, a strange roaring tunnel of wind. The finger pulled itself slowly towards the north and dragged the still pouring lava far along the ground and took fire, gases, and rocks through the air northward.

“Should we worry about Dain?” Bard asked, he had to shout to be heard over the noise of the winds.

“No, it’s going straight north now,” Thorin called back. “In all my life, I’ve never seen a cloud like that before.”

“Nor I,” commented Thranduil loudly. “Unusual weather we’re having.”

The lava slowed and then only smoke billowed up as a second funnel of wind licked down the entire bleed route then headed north, pulling more remains after it. The wind was so strong Ori clenched Dwalin and the rest of the dwarrow held onto their guests, adding their weight to keep all safe.

A sudden cold wind blasted them and torrents of rain and hail plummeted out of the sky. The royal party scrambled for the door to the inside of the mountain. They piled through and stood about the antechamber, laughing at themselves.

They watched the storm raging outside, A few flashes of lightning blazed, closely followed by a crash of thunder.

“I’m soaked through,” Dori gasped. “We must get home and have some tea before we all catch cold!”

Dwalin opened the lift door, they all crowded in and it dropped slowly and gently down to the royal cavern.

Soon they were all back in the sitting room, dry and sipping tea, while the younger set chatted excitedly about the bleed.

Mistress Dazla hurried through to the receiving room and returned with a jubilant Master Sindris.
“How are things?” Thorin asked her.

“How are things?” She beamed at them all. “Th’ wind took everythin’ we didn’t need an’ flattened th’ lava a treat. Rain’s still comin’ down on Dale, here, an’ th’ Greenwood. I estimate King Dain may be havin’ some as well. No stray fires anywhere. I think th’ scribes can write this up as th’ mos’ successful bleed ever.”

“I’ll be sure to, Master Sindris,” Ori said with a grin to Thorin, who nodded his approval.

After a long tea of discussing everything about the bleed, Thranduil and Bard questioning Master Sindris on everything they had seen, Sigrid pulled Ori aside and muttered,

“Can we talk in your office?”

Ori led the way and closed the door when Sigrid was inside. She stood in the middle of the floor and sighed, then shuddered.

“Ori, that was the weirdest cloud I ever saw. Do you-?”

“Yes, and you should be proud and ready. Lady Galadriel said to me a while back, that once the valar find a suitable vessel they tend to use it again.”

He pushed Sigrid into a chair and sat in another next to her. He took her hand as she stared into space.

“Siggy, you are the crown princess, you owe it to your people. You said so yourself.”

Sigrid sighed.

“I know.”

They sat in silence for a long while, then Dori opened the door while knocking on it.

“Pet, Siggy dear? It’s time to come back through. Lunch will be ready soon and Thorin and the others are pulling out decorations.”

Dori waited as Sigrid and Ori looked at each other.

“Oh!” Ori gasped, “Durin’s Day decorations. Already?”

“It’s going to be here before you know it, pet.”

“Ooo!” Sigrid grinned. “In this case, royal decorations.”

They hurried in Dori’s wake back through to the sitting room.

Thranduil and Bard sat on the sofa, with Tilda between them. Thorin came through followed by Dwalin and Balin, all carrying boxes covered in red velvet. Gloin and his family arrived as well, all carrying similar boxes. The small stone table was moved and the boxes were dumped in front of the fireplace.

“I knew they were in th’ storeroom,” said Dwalin.

Ori leaned forward on the couch where he and Sigrid had piled in next to Bilbo, who was knitting. Dwalin opened the lid and rummaged around, huffed in triumph and removed a mask of leather, accented with metal and jewels, in the shape of a goat’s head.

“That’s beautiful!” Ori cried.

Dwalin handed it to him and he examined it carefully. The maker’s sigil was burned into the back, along with the date, which made Ori gasp.

“It came from Khazad-dûm,” said Dwalin, “bout th’ time a’ Dain I.”

“I’ve never seen one so fine,” said Ori. “We used to make ours every year out of starched buckram. I decorated them with whatever shiny bits I could find.”

“They were all very beautiful, pet,” Dori put in.

“Those were fun to make,” Sigrid agreed.

“Dori,” said Bard. “I can never thank you enough for all you did for my children.”

“Oh, tosh!” Dori replied with a faint blush. “I promised Mathilde I would see to them.”

“And,” Thranduil put in with a smile, “they were raised to be suitably royal.”

“Now Thrandy,” Dori began to scold. Ori looked into the box again.

“Th’ costumes are long gone, a’ course,” Dwalin told him.

Bilbo rose and took the mask from Ori.

“Dwarrow are usually quite careful to preserve such things,” he remarked. He held the mask up, which completely covered his face, though his curls stuck out at all angles rather convincingly.

Thorin carefully put it first on Frodo then on
“Durin’s Day parties tend t’ turn rough by th’ end a’ th’ nigh’,” Dwalin went on. “Th’ costumes’re mostly meant t’ be worn once, made a’ paper or sometimes painted linen. Though, Balin’s still go’ most a’ his. Figures.”
“It’s so good to see these again,” Dis sighed, snuggling into Jani’s side. “We never celebrated much after Udad got sick.”
“Yeh’ll have t’ make up f’r it, then, love.” Jani kissed her cheek.
“Are all the masks of these three animals?” Bilbo asked, as he watched the variety being laid out.
“Forgive me, I know a bit about the legends of Durin, but the way dwarrow celebrate Durin is more obscure.”
“Ponies, goats, and boars are the most common,” said Ori, “because we believe Mahal made them especially for Durin, and so for us.”
Ori glanced at Thranduil, who winked at Ori’s grin.
“Let me guess,” said Bilbo, “Dain is always a boar.”
“Aye,” said Dwalin, “so he don’t even have t’ wear a mask.”
This made both Bard and Thranduil laugh. Balin put Tilda into a pony mask and she cantered over to Bard and Thranduil, making whinny-ing noises. They laughed and Bard helped her put the mask on Thranduil. Ori delighted at the sight of the king-father giving his youngest daughter a pony-back ride. Bard, Sigrid, and Bain shouted encouragement.
There were other things in the box, too. Long, light metal chains decorated with beads and tin silhouettes of the same three animals, as well as axes, hammers and swords. Gimli, Omi, and Loli busily showed everything to Legolas, who was delighted with all of it. Bujni held up table cloths while Dipfa examined them. Fili and Sigrid wreathed each other in the chains and danced around the room, giggling. Kili was dressing Tauriel in some as she laughed.
“Fi,” said Kili, “have you started on your Yule presents yet?”
Fili groaned.
“I haven’t had time. Amad, you’re getting one, because I finished it before everything when to Mordor. Ki, you’re getting a lump of coal, as usual.”
“Why do you always give me a lump of coat?” Kili asked. “I could never figure it out.”
“I don’t know. It just always seemed the thing.”
“Thorin,” Ori asked, “do the Durins celebrate Yule as a family?”
Thorin nodded. He pulled Sam and Frodo up, each on a knee.
“We always have,” said the king. “We sometimes exchange presents, but we don’t try to make presents for everyone every year. Just when we get inspired. And, of course, the presents have to follow the rules.”
“What are the rules?” Ori asked.
Dwalin cuddled up to him.
“There’s only three. First, th’ presents have t’ be handmade. Second, they can’t be a’ precious metal or jewels. Third, th’ recipient has t’ be able t’ lift it.”
Bilbo snickered.
“I imagine the third rule is the one where most gift ideas fall down,” he said.
“We are dwarrow, ghivasha,” said Thorin.
Ori looked up at Dwalin.
“What’s the most interesting thing you’ve ever received?”
“I go’ a lovely hair bead made a’ petrified goat poop,” said Dwalin.
“You don’t wear that!” Ori yelped. “Do you?”
“It was never meant t’ be worn. A’ least, I don’t think so. Thorin?”
“I had no intention of you ever wearing it, but we have been gifting it back and forth now for more years than you, Ori, have been alive. It even has a nice red, lacquer box with a silk inlay, for gift-giving elegance.”
Ori wrinkled his nose, looked over and realized Bilbo was wrinkling his nose, and the pair of them laughed. Ori pulled a box over to the sofa and as he looked through, he had a sudden, fabulous idea.
for Dori’s Yule present. He wondered if Thorin would be willing to help him with it.

“This is nicely done,” said Ori as he held up a tin pony silhouette.

“Aye, tha’s Gridr’s work,” said Balin and leaned over to have a look at it. “She even chased in th’ strands a’ th’ tail an’ mane. Yeh know she’s been in her shop, turnin’ these ou’ now f’r weeks.”

“For decorations?” Bilbo asked. “Does she sell them?”

“Nah, gives ‘em t’ folks t’ use as offerin’s t’ Mahal in Durin’s name.”

“Bilbo, do hobbits have anything similar?” Ori asked.

“For harvest, we make corn dollies.”

Ori had a brief image of dolls made entirely of kernels of corn, but he had no idea how such a thing would stay together.

“Corn as in grains,” said Bilbo, laughing. “We use some of the stripped stalks tied together to look like people, then we invest them with all the mistakes we made in the past year, and burn them at the last harvest bonfire.”

Dwalin nodded.

“Yeh start th’ year with a clean slate.”

“Yes. Do dwarrow do that?”

Ori and Dwalin looked at each other and laughed.

“No’ exac’ly,” said Dwalin. “We make a point t’ visit an’ apologize t’ any we feel we wronged in th’ past year, bu’ yeh kin only do so much a’ tha’. A dwarf’s ego’s a pre’y cumbersome thin’. Also, it’s tradition t’ share a drink ‘r twelve. Yeh star’ ou’ apologizin’, an’ end up brawlin’ anyways.”

They all spent a very amusing afternoon and evening decorating Fundin House, then the Groinuls’ home and the old palace. Mistress Dazla and her team all turned out to help as well and she kept everyone well supplied with hot spiced cider and ginger cookies. Dwalin and Gloin found more boxes than could ever be used, even after decorating the courtyard and entrance tunnel as well.

Anyone in the vicinity of the royal caverns saw the decorations going up and word spread through the mountain. It was close to dinner by the time they finished. Thorin had the rest of the decorations loaded on a cart and sent it away with Bard and his family after they ate.

Later, Ori worked on the sketch of Sigrid until nearly midnight. He composed a message for Nodun to send by bat in the morning. He had never worked with paint in miniature before, and he had some questions about materials. He wanted everything on hand when he started the actual portrait.

Or, maybe he was just procrastinating a bit, since he still hadn’t told Dwalin what he and Bilbo had been up to.

He wasn’t afraid Dwalin would be angry. They had that conversation already, and Ori took Dwalin at his word.

It was more about Ori’s own lingering shyness, with which he was increasingly annoyed.

By the time he had washed and made his way to the bedroom, Dwalin was already abed, propped up on the pillows, reading from Bilbo’s manuscript for the Infernal Adventures.

Ori smiled and admired his husband, naked but for his pink shorts and his dwarf fur.

“Dwalin, are you… sparkling?”

“Bloody decorations with mica paint,” Dwalin grumbled. “Stuff’s almos’ impossible t’ scrub off.”

“Do you think Mister Wandi’s bath stuff is made with ground mica?” Ori asked.

Dwalin shot him a wink.

“Probably some secret elf shit.”

Ori nodded at Bilbo’s manuscript.

“What do you think? It’s really good, isn’t it.”

“For someone who taugh’ hissel’ th’ language? It’s fuckin’ amazin’.”

“Dwalin? I went on a bit of an adventure of my own.”

His husband chuckled. He put aside the manuscript, and held out an arm to him.

Ori kicked off his slippers and climbed up onto the bed. He cuddled up against his husband.

“Did yeh have a Bilbo adventure?” Dwalin asked.
“Yes,” said Ori, ducking his head. “I though’ th’ two a’ yeh were lookin’ pre’y twinkly. Did yeh enjoy yerself?” “It wasn’t you, but it was lovely. We did Position Eight!” “I wondered. Sometimes, th’ difference in our height’s a pain in th’ arse.” “I don’t know about that. I had a thought. You know me: always thinking.” “Aye, I kin hear yeh tick. Wha’ this ‘time’ specifically?” “If we did it, I could suck and bite your belly and jerk you off with my hands.” “Tha’ sounds tasty.” Ori peered up through lowered lashes. “Would you like to try it now?” Dwalin leaned down and whispered into his ear, “Wha’ d’ yeh think?” Ori didn’t get the chance to tell him. The alarm bell sounded by the fire place. Ori groaned and laughed. Dwalin growled. “This be’er be orcs in th’ Nigh’ Market ‘r someone’s goin’ t’ die.” He kissed Ori and got up, pulling on his uniform trousers. “Sorry abou’ this, azyung.” “It happens when it happens,” said Ori with a sigh. “A’ least I warmed up th’ bed f’r yeh.” “Thanks,” Ori smiled as Dwalin went out. “Love you.” Quartz winged in, snickering. “What?” Ori asked. “Seeing the royals decorating, everyone else is, too, if they hadn’t yet. The whole inside of the mountain will be festive by tomorrow.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. So much to do! So much to do! Ori’s up to his ears being busy! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The next morning, Ori, Dori and Thorin went down to Dale to inspect the new Green at the request of Bard and Thranduil. Dori insisted on the teacup. Furf’nk drove Ducati and Aprilla. Butter and Sugar gamboled along side. Bard and Thranduil met them on the outskirts and led the way to the eastern side of the city.

Ori could see now what Quartz was talking about. On the way out of the mountain, he had a taste of what the people of Erebor had been up to. There was a regular migrating herd of shiny tin ponies, goats, and boars strung on chains between every lantern and swathing the shoulders and necks of numerous heroic dwarf statues along the public ways. Nor would Dale be outdone. Wherever dwarrow lived in Dale, decorations both bought and made fluttered in the autumn breezes, and the men would not be left out of it, either.

Along with all of this, Bilbo and Frodo’s birthday preparations were in full swing as well. Dori had insisted this would be surprise party, but Dori had never been able to carry off a surprise. For a dwarf who prided himself on his ability to keep a secret, his party plans were dismayingly transparent.

And he couldn’t quite grasp the idea of getting a present for a birthday instead of giving it.

“Just think of the party as your present, Ori’s Dori,” Ori told him as they rode down in the teacup.

“But, surely, that won’t be enough,” Dori fussed.

“I’ve seen the menu you planned,” said Ori. “Not even hobbits eat that much at once sitting.”

“It is a rather nice menu, if I do say so myself,” admitted Dori.

Hamfast had worked miracles to get the Green ready. The new grass was scythed short and soft. Saplings grew, encircling the entire Green, and a pleasant stream had been cajoled down from a gently rolling hill to run across the far side of it. Large rocks banked the stream and all manner of water flowers grew alongside. Hamfast looked very pleased at Bard’s and Thorin’s praise and Ori suspected Yavanna had helped considerably.

“An yeh’d be righ’, laddie,” Mahal’s voice affirmed.

Each sapling had its own ring of flowers and delightful benches were placed here and there for any visitors needing rest.

Ori was most impressed with the large tree in the middle of the Green. It was taller than some of the buildings in Dale, its branches spread wide, throwing an extensive amount of shade beneath, and its leaves were a shiny purple brown. Butter and Sugar tore around the grass and played like pups. Thranduil and Dori went over to admire the tree.

How Hamfast had managed get it there, Ori had no idea, so he inquired. Hamfast frowned a bit.

“Well, Mister Ori, I can’t rightly say as I wasn’t there t’ see, but I’ve me suspicions.”

“And they are are?” Thorin smiled.

"See, sir, I was telling that Mister Hathor about the Green th’ other day an’ how it needed a good tree in the middle. I was admirin’ a splendid one on his farm. He calls it a copper beech. I asked him if it would damage one that size to dig it up and cart it over. He said he’d think on it. Well, blow me if I didn’t come out here yesterday an’ find it sittin’ where it is. There’s all them old tales a’
elves wakin’ up trees an’ such, so I imagine he went an’ had a chat with it, then it up an’ walked on
over itself. We did have the hole all ready in case we found a suitable sapling, and there it was,
sitting in it. So I spaded in some manure, then filled in all th’ earth over, planted the flowers and had
tha’ nice dwarf from the plumping guild put in a pipe, so it could get a good drink durin’ dry
weather. That’s all I know ‘bout it.”

“Oh,” said Bard. “I think we need to send some of those seeds that came from the box over to the
Aldernay farm.”

“Jus’ wha’ I was thinkin’ meself, Mister Bard,” agreed Hamfast. “Splendid fellow that Hathor,
knows plants, he does.”

“You know, Hamfast,” said Thorin, smiling over at Dori, “perhaps I can persuade the Honored
Bearer to work with you to have a hobbit-stye birthday party for my consort. He has spoken about
such and how they had a ‘party tree’ in the Shire.”

Hamfast grinned.

“Yer readin’ me mind, Mister Thorin. That’s what I was hopin’ t’ talk yeh ‘round to do by
bringing’ yeh here.”

“Of course,” Dori fluttered, as she and the king-father had returned and overheard this. “I think
it’s a beautiful idea. Dear Mister Gardener, I shall apprise dear Mistress Gardener of the food
arrangements.”

Thorin laughed and Ori made notes. He sketched the Green and thought it a lovely place for a
party. It was certainly large enough for people to stroll and dance and eat.

“Hamfast,” said Thorin, “I gave Bard a few boxes of Durin’s Day decorations. Perhaps with
those and some decorations your family might have, this can be made ready?”

“Absolutely, Mister Thorin,” Hamfast expanded. “A few boxes, my hind foot! I seen tha’ whole
wagon load you sent. Decorate the town an’ Green it will.”

Bard chuckled.

“Mister Gardener, may I leave town and Green decorating in your capable hands?”

“Aye, sir, don’t you give it a second thought. My Bell already has plans an’ I tell her you said,
heave to on it.”

“Thank you Hamfast,” Bard nodded.

“Where is Mistress Bell now?” Dori asked.

“Down at the school south a’ Dale Hall, ma’am,” Hamfast reported.

“Come, Thrandy,” Dori grabbed the elf’s hand. “We must go immediately and speak with dear
Bell!”

Dori towed off Thranduil to the teacup. Thranduil turned to wink at Bard, who stifled a laugh.
Thorin turned to Bard.

“Where are Thranduil’s guards? He did have four to go about with him.”

“He decided he only needed them for ceremonial occasions,” said Bard with a chuckle. “Instead,
they make sure Tilda is safe and they’re teaching Bain to defend himself, which Thranduil tells me is
going very well.”

“You don’t watch, do you,” said Thorin.

“Not if I can help it,” said Bard.

In moments the teacup whisked away. Dori was urging Furh’nk, who was urging the ponies and
Thranduil relaxed against the cushions with his feet up.

“I suppose we shall be left on your hands until Dori finishes,” Thorin observed. “I hope you don’t
mind, Bard.”

“On the contrary, I’d like to show you about.”

They had a pleasant walk into Dale. Everywhere houses had been mended and painted. Many
showed new windows and doors. Shops had been cleaned, painted, and sported awnings unfurled
over their fronts. People shopped, talked, and walked everywhere. They bowed to the kings but
gave the wargs a wide berth.

There were so many new shops Ori marveled. He stopped dead at the corner of Steam Street.
The entire street was given over to book shops and stationary suppliers. Bard and Thorin laughed at
him and threatened to drag him away.  
“i must come back here!” Ori enthused. “this used to be pubs and pawn shops!”
“with Calmar’s ‘help’,” Bard snickered, “we’ve been able to do quite a bit.”
“This is wonderful Bard!” Thorin said, and looked about him. “i’ve never seen much of Dale, but I knew it was not prosperous. You’ve worked wonders.”
“I took your advice and got some councillors who actually want the city to grow. There’re a few old nobles, but they tend to toe the line, as they all know what happened to Calmar. Gloin helped me with building and finance. A lot of folk have excellent skills, but before now it was impossible to get anything done.”
Bard walked them past an open area with a single new building in it. All around the building was flagstone.
“Is this another new school?” Thorin asked. “we didn’t come here the other day.”
“This just opened,” said Bard. “there aren’t many people about until evening. Come and look.” Bard led the way in.
“stay, my damlings, stay.” Thorin told Butter and Sugar. Both wargs sat down to wait.
The vestibule was narrow, but long. Ori stared at the line of pegs in the walls. Some were at the height for dwarrow, others higher.
“For coats and boots in winter,” Bard said. He knocked on the inner door.
A pretty young lady answered it. Ori frowned, then remembered. He glanced at Thorin who nodded and mouthed “Miss Wings Aloft.”
Miss Wings Aloft, whose name was really Miss Sifian, was rather surprised, but this changed to delight as she welcomed them in.
Inside, at desks variously sized, sat grown men and women and dwarrow. They had slates before them.
They all turned and, seeing the kings, made to rise.
“Please, don’t mind us,” said Bard. “i just wanted to show King Thorin what we’re doing here.”
“We are practicing our reading at the moment,” beamed Miss Sifian. “Class, let’s go down the list again.”
She went to the front. There was an enormous piece of slate, almost covering that wall, and on it she had written a list of simple words in Westron, with corresponding runes in Khuzdul.
Miss Sifian took up a pointer and indicated the first word.
“carrot,” responded the class.
“Excellento,” said Miss Sifian. “And now the khuzdul.”
At the end of the reading of the list, Bard and Thorin applauded the work and the students looked delighted. After both Bard and Thorin had said encouraging words and lavished praise on students and teacher alike, Bard thanked them and the visitors went out.
“Bard?” Ori teased. “No uniforms for them?”
“I’m just happy they’re here,” said Bard. “People work so hard, days and nights. It’s a lot to ask of them to leave their families, even for an hour or two, to come here and work a little more. Not everyone was lucky like I was, to have parents who could teach them at home.”
Ori kept looking all round. The streets looked much better. The midnight cleanings had smoothed the ground and now there were ancient cobbles, just beginning to show.
“This street was once paved.” Thorin observed. “I never heard there were paved streets in Dale except for the wealthier areas. Ori, do you remember such?”
“No,” Ori admitted, “and I don’t remember Nori or Dori mentioning it. Bard, how…”
Bard shrugged, but there was a sparkle of pride in his eyes.
“Fili was kind enough to bring Master Kir down to see Dale. He got so excited, we had to take him to Mister Wandi’s to have his hair tied back. He calculates that the streets here were well paved with cobbles and within the inner part of the city, the streets are paved with bricks of granite so closely placed there is no need of mortar. We had to pick him up a few times as I swear he’d have crawled the length and breadth of Dale examining it all. The street cleanings, over time, Kir thinks about a year, will reveal the old roads. We were then forced to take Kir all around in a cart, so he
could see everything. I’ve never seen anyone get so excited about paving and building corner stones before. Mahal certainly made sure all the street signs and lights are perfectly placed. Must be a valar thing.”

Ori pointedly ignored the snickering going on in the back of his head.
“I think it must have been the first time Kir has seen Dale since he came from Khazad-dûm,” Thorin chuckled.
“It was,” Bard said. “He questioned me thoroughly about everything he saw.”
“I hope he didn’t make a nuisance of himself.” Thorin said, quickly.
“No,” Bard grinned at Thorin. “He’s a fascinating conversationalist. He doesn’t scruple to give his opinion.”

Thorin and Ori laughed.
“As long as he doesn’t start giving you orders,” Thorin said with a smile. “Sometimes I worry I’m pushing you.”
“You’re not,” Bard said firmly. “As I’ve always said, I was raised to sail a barge and be a fisherman, being a king is completely new to me. I worry I’m dumping my responsibilities on you.”
The two looked at each other.
“Shall I leave you alone?” Ori teased.
“At least, you don’t have a sassy scribe,” Thorin grumped with a terrible frown but his eyes laughed.
“No, ” Bard grinned. “I have a bossy daughter, who’s best friends with the sassy scribe.”
Ori blushed and pretended to admire a shop.
“That, and,” Bard added, his cheeks coloring a little, “I’m married to a king-father, who’s very good about teaching me diplomacy.”
“Oh?” Thorin asked with a grin. “And what constitutes ‘diplomacy’ in Thranduil’s world?”
“Not just punching the first idiot you can reach.”
“No?”
“No, you have to wait until at least the seventh or eighth.”

They walked through the main square and headed towards the docks. Bard pointed out improvements. They came upon a tall clapboard fence that framed a gathering of warehouses. This, Bard told them, would soon be Ursith’s Dale casino. There was a gate that was low enough for them to see the activity.

Ursith was there. Ori stared. Ursith was decking himself out as an ‘honest’ business dwarrow. He had forgone his blacks for robes of Durin blue of the shiniest material Ori had ever seen. These, from collar to boots, were liberally drowned in diamonds and Ursith was wearing a hat. The hat was Durin blue velvet. It had a flat brim that curled slightly at the edges. There was a broad band of black satin, then the crown rose like a stove pipe. In the band, Ursith had stuck a single peacock feather that waved languidly in the air. The hat sat on top of the huge mass of hair under it. Ori wondered for a moment if Nori had glued it on.

The work seemed to be going apace. Dwarrow and men toiled away. Ursith held a large piece of paper, obviously plans, and talked with a couple of foremen. One looked up and saw the two kings and gulped. Ursith spun, glaring, then his expression expertly melted to delighted avarice.

Thorin ordered the wargs to lie down at the gate and the kings and the scribe went forward to meet Ursith.
“Yer majesties!” Ursith bawled out and strutted over to them. He gave a great formal bow and swept off his hat.
“Yer majesties, as yeh see I’m keepin’ me vow t’ go straight! Lookee here a’ all me workers buzzin’ alon’ like bees! I’m payin’ ‘em well, too! I pay in gold, don’t I, laddie?” This to a foreman.
“He does pay in gold,” one foreman answered. “A good wage, too.”
All the workers who had seen them stopped to watch and listen.
Thorin smiled and raised his voice a little, so those all around could hear.
“Well done, Master Ursith. You are doing excellent work. Please remember that the harvest is
imminent and King Bard will need workers. Dale must have food for the winter."

"Ab-sol-lootly, yer majesty!" bawled Ursith, bubbling over with good will. "I shall, this very minute ask King Bard here. King Bard, if yeh’d most kindly let me know when th’ harvestin’s t’ be done, I vow I shall close down all th’ work here, so th’ guid people o’ Dale may harvest their crops. I’ll even trot out there myself t’ lend a hand! I want t’ see prosperity!"

"We all do, Master Ursith," said Bard flatly. "I’ll be checking with Mister Gardener, it’s likely to start next week."

"Wonderful!" burbled Ursith. "Here, yer majesty, think I’d’ve better luck purrrposin’ t’ me bee-oo-tiful bearer while there’s lots a’ food bein’ brough’ in f’r folk? I’ll show me hands kin get good an’ dirty!"

Ori wanted to hit Nori. Nori was enjoying himself as ‘good’ Ursith a little too much. Thorin smiled again, quite pleasantly.

"Well, Master Ursith, there really is only one way to find out."

They bade the workers and Ursith farewell and headed to the lake side.

"Fuck my life," muttered Bard, when they were out of sight and hearing.

"Thranduil’s job," Thorin replied.

They looked at each other then burst out laughing. Ori looked around quickly and, seeing no one about, said in a low voice.

"Dipfa would have murdered him for torturing clothing like that."

Thorin and Bard laughed harder.


Thorin dropped down on a pile of old lumber and went on laughing. Butter and Sugar came over to see and Sugar licked his face.

"I swear he’s determined to make me laugh at him," Thorin finally managed. "Little shit."

Ori shrugged and grinned.

"That’s him."

Bard sat down beside Thorin and pointed out to the cleared land running from the main docks southward.

"A-hem," Bard managed to control his voice. "That’s going to be another sort of green but there will be high-end goods for sale, coffee shops, and a couple of restaurants. Mister Wandi suggested that it would work well if there was a wide road leading from the main square down to here. It would show off his palace and all the oldest buildings which are being done up and be true to the old city. Down here would be another place for parties and, as dear Master Ursith says, genteel frolics."

"That is wonderful, Bard," Thorin said, looking out at the lake. "This is a beautiful place for a city."

"And safe," Bard chuckled. "Nothing like having a huge mountain full of dwarrow, all ready to come rampaging down on any who threaten."

"Of course," Thorin teased. "Not to mention rampaging down when there’s a party going on."

The two kings laughed again. Ori felt the warmth of his love for these two important people in his life. A movement off to the mountain road caught his eye. In the distance he saw the elk trotting back to Dale and the teacup racing away to the mountain.

"Um," Ori began.

"Wonderful," said Thorin and rose, "I suppose you and I have a long walk before us, Ori."

"I can’t believe Dori would forget us!" Ori groused.

"I can lend you a couple of ponies," said Bard and got to his feet. "Unless you intend to ride the wargs back."

Sugar gave a delighted bark, rushed over behind Thorin, shoved her head between his legs and lifted.

"Mahal!" bayed Thorin as he tumbled over onto her back and grabbed hold her fur to stop himself falling off. Sugar bent a little and he slid forward.

"Oh, now you want me off?" he demanded. Sugar shook herself and Thorin ended up sitting on her shoulders. She turned her head and panted happily at him. Butter came over and nosed at
Thorin’s legs, pushing them to lie against Sugar’s ribs. Butter then nosed one of Thorin’s hands and shoved it into Sugar’s ruff. Thorin took tight hold of the fur. Sugar walked about in front of Bard, tail wagging, and looked terribly pleased with herself. Thorin looked at Bard and Ori from his slightly crouched position on Sugar’s back.

“It appears we’re riding wargs home. Butter, my damling, get Ori.”

Butter pranced over and bent down on the elbows of her forelegs. Ori took a breath and mounted. Butter raised herself and Ori got himself placed as Thorin was on Sugar.

“Bard,” said Thorin, “thank you for the tour and remember, if you need anything—”

“I know where to find you,” Bard laughed. “Good luck!”

Butter and Sugar trotted serenely as they cleared the rocky area. Ori clutched Butter’s neck ruff for dear life. This wasn’t like a pony or a goat. Sugar gave a whuff noise and both wargs lit out for the mountain. Ori gasped as the mountain road jiggled towards him at high speed between Butter’s ears. Riding a warg was brilliant!

He laughed as Butter bolted up the mountain road. He looked over at Thorin, who was grinning maniacally. Thorin raised himself a little and called to the guards at the gate. Ori saw Dwalin come out to watch them.

The wargs bounded through the gateway and Sugar gave a leap, then skittered her claws on the polished stone, spinning around twice, before she stopped. Butter sat down and zoomed in on her rear. Thorin gave a triumphant shout and Ori couldn’t suppress a whoop.

Then Dwalin was lifting him off, Ori turned and hugged hm.

“Dwalin! You have to try it!”

“Liked tha’, did yeh?” Dwlin chuckled, hugging him close.

“Looks like yeh go’ th’ trick a’ ridin’ ‘em, majesty,” Arb said admiringly as Thorin dropped off and gave Sugar a hug.

“Lovely, my damling. Such a good damling.”

Thorin finished rubbing his face in Sugar’s ruff and turned to Arb with a grin.

“It’s between a pony and a goat. You feel the body run but without that hopping trot a goat has. Too bad Dwalin and I didn’t know how wonderful wargs are. We could have stolen a couple of packs by now.”

“Considerin’ how good we treat ‘em.” Dwalin commented, “I’m surprised we don’t have ‘em beggin’ at th’ doors t’ be adopted.”

The guards all had a good laugh, then Thorin mounted Sugar again.

“Come along Lord Ori. Time to go home.”

Ori was impressed with the speed they gained the royal cavern. Butter and Sugar made a game of leaping over things and people to the point that some dwarrow thought it would be fun to stand in front of the wargs just so they could be jumped over.

When they got to Fundin House, Thorin led the way through the stable and they got off in the meadow.

“Lord Ori?”

“Yes, your majesty?”

“See if you can adopt more wargs.”

Ori stared.

“From where?”

“Wherever you go,” Thorin teased.

“Are you going to have one for Bilbo?”

“Exactly.”

“I hope he takes to it as I did,” Ori mused. “When I first was on, I thought I was going to soil myself.”

“Just don’t wear the purple underwear with the pink hearts on it.”

Ori gasped, then smarted back,

“Better tell Bilbo not to wear the ones with orange and yellow flowers.”

Ori clapped his hand over his mouth, horrified.
Thorin just laughed.  
“T’im rather fond of his black ones embroidered with little anvils.”  
“Did Bilbo tell you?”  
Thorin gave him a look.  
“I was with Dwalin when he bought them.”  
“You…” Ori hunted for words but couldn’t find any.  “You don’t mind?”  
“Why would I mind your husband buying you pretty skivvies?” Thorin said gravely.  
“You know what I mean!” Ori cried.  
“Of course,” Thorin smiled warmly at him.  “He did tell me what the pair of you did and it sounded lovely.  I’m sorry Dwalin and I weren’t there to watch and, not to mention, help.”  
Ori didn’t know what to do, so he hugged Thorin.  Thorin’s chest shook and the rumble of his laughter made Ori feel warm and safe.  
Ori looked up.  
“You’re almost as wonderful to hug as Dwalin!”  
Thorin squeezed him.  
“Good to know I still have room for improvement.”  
“You know what I meant!” Ori scolded.  Thorin released him but kept an arm about Ori’s shoulders and drew him to the patio.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Yup, it’s time to have a Baggins’ birthday party. If you have a cake, eat it now. Yes, the whole thing. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori was awake before dawn, he couldn’t go back to sleep and decided not to wake Dwalin. He dressed silently, tiptoed out and went to his study. He sat down and stared at the materials and sketch for Sigrid’s miniature.

He decided he needed a cup of tea first.

Thorin was the only one at the breakfast table, though Ori heard Dori and Balin in the kitchen.

Ori sat.

Thorin pushed a cup of tea in front of him.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have any medicinal brandy on me,” said Thorin.

Ori sipped and waved an idle hand.

Thorin waited. The cup was drained. Thorin refilled it.

“Better?” the king asked.

“I’m awake. Good morning.”

“And good morning to you. You’re being awake is the important thing,” said Thorin. “I know you’re busy, but I want to run something by you.”

“Of course, Thorin. What do you need?”

“I have a rather far-fetched idea for Mithril Square.”

Ori raised a brow and Thorin laughed.

“I know. Far-fetched compared to what? Inviting an entire troupe of acrobats and their oliphaunt to winter under an active volcano?”

“Now that you mention it,” Ori teased.

“This is what I want to do. I want to turn that house into a center of learning for all the peoples of Middle Earth.”

Ori gasped.

“Thorin! That’s an amazing idea!”

“One of Nori’s better suggestions, I thought,” said Thorin.

Now Ori really was agog.

“Nori? Nori suggested that?”

“More like he inspired it. He was teasing me about how many ‘bad eggs’ his casinos will bring into Dale and Erebor. Even if they will be under surveillance night and day. He said I was going to have to invite a lot of people who didn’t gamble professionally just to balance them out.”

“I notice he didn’t say ‘nice people’,” said Ori. “So, scholars, then?”

“I didn’t miss the implications, either. It’s just a wild idea I had, but why couldn’t we? Why not just open up the whole mountain? Why not use the money to benefit as many people as possible? Not just published scholars, either. Anybody who wants to come here and learn?”

Ori smiled over the rim of his third cup of tea.

“Does Master Brur know you’re going to let ‘a bunch a’ yahoos run amok’ in his library?”

“I’m aware the path is fraught with peril,” Thorin admitted. “I’ve only discussed it with you and Bilbo so far, but this is what I would like. I’m also open to other suggestions for the property.”
“Something besides a casino?” Ori surmised.
“Yes, we will have plenty of those already. No matter what, I want to be able to discuss the purchase here at breakfast tomorrow.”
“I’ll definitely support your initial idea,” said Ori. “If I don’t, I’ll never get to see those fireplace surrounds you talked about.”
Thorin smiled.
“Thank you. Bujni, besides being determined to fly, is working on how to get the core of the ancient library of Khazad-dûm out of…er…Misty Lake. He and Buer are alike in their schemes, except Bujni plans carefully before he builds anything and Buer…”
“Blows things up,” Ori giggled. “I must ask Bujni how his apparatus is coming along. He’s been helping me with my presentation as well, and so has everyone else involved. I admit I’m curious as to how he’s going to get it to fly.”
Thorin refilled their cups.
“I have assured him that when he’s ready, a royal catapult will be at his disposal. Thank you for your support, Ori. Do excuse me. I’m just go and make sure the birthday celebrants are ready.”

About an hour later, everyone from the Fundin and Groinul households was at the breakfast table, ready to celebrate Bilbo’s and Frodo’s birthday. Thorin brought them through for their second breakfast. A cheer went up as they walked in and everyone had to have a turn at hugging the consort and Lord Muffin.

When they were all seated and Dori was ready to dish up the fried eggs and potato, tomato, and onion hash, Frodo stood on his chair and distributed the presents he had for all of them. Dori gushed over the pretty lawn handkerchief and Balin was delighted with a hand sewn pouch of Old Toby.
Ori was pleased with the new quill Frodo sharpened for him, and Dwalin hugged Frodo for the picture Frodo drew of him mounted on Gnasher. Ori didn’t recall Gnasher or Dwalin ever having fangs, but they did look suitably fierce.
Legolas and Gimli laughed over Frodo’s picture of themselves holding hands. Gridr got crocheted tool holders and an apron for when she was working and declared it was just what she needed. Gloin roared with laughter at his own gift. Frodo’s portrait of Gloin sported the most impressive beard Ori had ever seen.
“Where’re me eyes, lad?” Gloin asked.
“You’re looking through a pair of curls,” Frodo explained.
“Oh, so, the usual,” said Gloin, nodding.
Oin received set of small glass jars filled with herbs, and Binni, a slender belt of crocheted orange silk threads. Bujni and Dipfa solemnly accepted with great decorum, flower bulbs, held upright by tiny colored glass balls, planted in a glass dish. Bilbo told them they were grape hyacinths and would bloom at Yule. Ori was assailed by the vision of tiny bunches of grapes popping out of the bulbs.
Dis and Jani got a framed picture of a spray of flowers. They examined it and Bilbo explained he and Frodo had made it with thin strips of colored paper, curled into shapes, and that hobbits called such a craft, quilling. Fili received a packet of soft leather rags and a pot of polish for his weapons and Tauriel and Kili were delighted with their gift of a fat glass jar filled with dried rosebuds and the scent filled the room, when the lid was taken off.
Frodo, after admitting that Bilbo had helped, gave Thorin a baking of banana muffins with xocolātl chunks in them.
“Oh!” Thorin grinned and sniffed eagerly. “Shall we eat these now?”
“It would probably be for the best,” Frodo advised. “They were baked last night.”
“You can have them after you have your hash and eggs,” Dori put in. “And then you two have presents to open.”
Frodo looked up from Thorin’s shoulder, clearly upset.
“They want to give me presents!”
“Birthdays are just done differently here, akunith,” said Thorin. “You remember me telling you
“But don’t they like the ones I made for them?”

“Yes, they do. But they also want you to like the ones they give you. I’m afraid the best you can hope for is an even exchange.”

“Oh.”

“Is that better?”

Frodo frowned.

“I… guess. They’re as happy to give presents as I am to give presents?”

“I couldn’t put it better myself.”

“That’s alright, then. It’s still weird, though.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you,” Thorin promised.

Ulfr and Yizaris had each received a ginger cookie larger than their head as a present from Frodo. Yizaris hugged him and kissed his cheek. Ulfr wasn’t exactly an affectionate dwarf, but he did thank Frodo and attempt to make conversation.

“Where’s yer friend Wee Sam this mornin’?” Ulfr asked.

“He’s with his parents today. I think they were starting to miss him a little.”

“Yeh seem like guid friends an’ boon companions,” said Ulfr.

“He’s my One,” said Frodo.

“Beg pardon?”

“Only, he doesn’t know it yet, because he’s too young.”

“Oh, really. I see.” Ulfr shot a look of horror over Frodo’s head. Bilbo smiled serenely. Ulfr went on, “Well, plenty a’ time f’r tha’.”

“That’s just what I think,” said Frodo, nodding wisely.

“I’m glad we agree,” said Ulfr. “An’, may I ask, how old’re yeh?”

“Eleven today.”

Ulfr glanced at Thorin.

“About twenty for a dwarfin’,” Thorin supplied.

Ulfr’s eyebrows flew up in surprise.

“Bit precocious, aren’t yeh,” he said to Frodo.

“Yep,” said Frodo.

Thorin snickered.

Ulfr shot him a look.

“Yeh were a hundred times worse, as I recall. Cheeky brat.”

“I wasn’t that bad,” Thorin protested.

“No? I remember comin’ t’ see yer udad when I was on me honeymoon. Yeh followed me an’ Yizaris everywhere, making ‘kissin’ noises. Yer mam had t’ drag yeh away because all yer udad would do was laugh.”

Fili and Kili stared at Thorin, then at each other.

Fili ventured, “Idad had an evil twin. Someone we don’t know about.”

“That’s the only reasonable explanation,” said Kili.

Thorin looked gleeful.

“I was washing dishes for weeks, but it was worth it.”

“I daresay yeh wouldn’t want me followin’ yeh an’ th’ perfesser about, doin’ th’a’,” Ulfr admonished.

“Ulfr, I would pay gold to see that.”

After breakfast and presents, which Frodo enjoyed despite the weirdness, the rest of the morning saw Thorin and Bilbo with Frodo on his lap as they rode Minty and Vespa, followed by Dori and Balin in the teacup, and everyone else in the royal family riding behind, touring around the mountain, allowing everyone to give birthday greetings to the consort-to-be and Lord Muffin. The teacup was slowly loaded with gifts and Bilbo and Frodo gave out cupcakes to all.

Ori and Dwalin rode alongside, Dwalin on alert and Ori scribbling notes of gift givers, what they gave, and drawing places and people. They made it back to Fundin house in time for a very late
lunch. Bilbo had provided Frodo with snacks to tide him over during the tour.

Dori took charge of the presents, laying them out on the great table in the receiving room and discussing them with Bilbo and Mistress Dazla. As usual, Dori kept a few that were made by crafters who needed their work shown and the rest were sorted into bundles to be dispersed to people who truly needed clothing and foodstuffs. Jewelry was inspected to be either auctioned off or broken down to supply gems and findings at low cost to guild apprentices. Dori and Bilbo spent the time teaching Frodo about this practice and soon the faunt busily sorted any toys with the same focused energy, until he was sent through to Bag End East for a nap.

Ori noted where each item was sent and where. By the time this was finished, Dori declared with rather overdone innocence, that they now had to get ready as dear Bard and Thranduil had invited them to Dale Hall for a cup of tea and to wish Bilbo and Frodo many happy returns of the day. Ori sneaked a peek at Bilbo, who winked at him. Dori and Mistress Dazla bustled back to the living area of the house while Ori and Bilbo walked slowly after them.

“I take it there are more than just the royal family of Dale at this ‘tea’?” Bilbo asked.
Ori fluttered his eyelashes and Bilbo chuckled.
“That explains the several wagons that were smuggled out of here this morning.”
“Oh?” Ori asked naively “And what else did your hobbit ears hear?”
“Well, I do have sensitive ears,” Bilbo said, slipping his hand into Ori’s.
“Very. Remember you promised to act surprised.” Ori squeezed Bilbo’s hand.
“Why would I be surprised?” Bilbo asked, raising his eyebrows. “Dori just informed us, we are going for tea.”
Ori giggled and Bilbo kissed him.
“Tha’ looks tasty.”
Dwalin stood at the receiving room door, grinning at them.
“It was, captain,” Bilbo grinned. “What a pity you’re too late for the party.”
“Party ain’t star’ed yet, me nug.”
Dwalin spanked both Ori and Bilbo as they went into the sitting room, making both squeak.
Ori swung round and pounced on his husband.
“I’ll get you!” he cried.
“Anytime, me love,” Dwalin said ferally, “anytime.”
“Go and get ready, both of you!” Bilbo ordered. “Hurry up! I’ve got a king and a faunt to get dressed.”
“We hear an’ obey, yer highness.”
Dwalin swept Bilbo a grand bow. Bilbo huffed a laugh and raced off to Bag End East. Ori led the way to the bedroom, hand in hand with Dwalin.
“Bilbo is so cute,” Ori said as he closed the bedroom door behind them.
“Th’ pair a’ yeh’re sweet as mead an’ twice as heady,” Dwalin replied, took Ori in his arms, and dropped them down on the bed.
Ori wrapped his arms about Dwalin and kissed him. He was just thinking about putting his hands further southward when Dori called,
“Pet, Dearie, it’s time!”
Dwalin and Ori sighed in unison, then laid their brows together.
“La’er, love?”
“Later.”

The teacup bowled along merrily between Ori and Dwalin as they followed Thorin with Frodo on Minty and Bilbo on Vespa. The wargs gamboled alongside. The rest of the Fundin Household followed.

They were almost at Dale, when Dori cried out,
“Oh! Thorin, dear. I’ve just had a thought. We are a bit early. Why don’t we just have a quick run over to that lovely new Green dear Mister Gardener showed us yesterday! You know how our Bilbo talks about such things in the Shire.”
Thorin turned, looked at Dori, then turned to Bilbo.

“Ghivasha, would you like to see the Green?”

“I would love to see the Green, Thorin. How kind of you to think of it, Dori.”

Dori settled in the tea cup, looking pleased. Ori did his best to control his face as Dwalin winked at him. The entourage turned and circumnavigated the outskirts of Dale and headed for the Green. Ori sat up a little in his saddle. The Green was festooned with colored lights, paper lanterns, bunting, and ribbons. It was full of people as well as tents.

Bilbo turned in his saddle to look merrily back at Dori.

“The Green looks as though it’s a trifle full, Dori. Are you sure we won’t be bothering anyone by stopping by?”

“Oh, goodness no!” Dori replied airily.

They drew up to the edge of the Green and the cheers and shouts of “Happy Birthday” were all about. Thorin and Bilbo rode forward and dismounted with Frodo. Bilbo gave Ori a look. Ori hurried over and Bilbo shoved a wrapped narrow square box to him.

“Thorin’s gift,” Bilbo hissed and turned to talk to Bard, Thranduil and the Bardlings, who had arrived to welcome them. Hamfast and Bell with Sam, who rushed forward to hug Frodo and tell him everything that had happened since he had seen Frodo two days ago. Helping hands parked the teacup and turned the ponies loose to graze.

Gloin and Oin and their family arrived with a wheeled cart holding the presents Bilbo and Frodo had made to give people. Ori watched as Thorin and Bilbo and Frodo worked their way through the crowd of well wishers.

A wagon from the Court of Miracles arrived with Tharkûn sitting next to Jim. Soon there were performers working the crowd. Various little tents all around the Green held people baking, and cooking, and serving drinks. Some held party favors and others were from the Night Market, selling more family-oriented wares.

Ori almost giggled as Bilbo and Frodo passed out cupcakes to everyone who greeted them. They had made their slow progress to the single copper beech, which Wee Sam loudly declared was now to be The East Party Tree as the one in the Shire was in the West. Bard swung Sam to his shoulder and made the announcement. This was met with cheers and raised drinks to the tree. There was a festooned table with a bench and a step behind. Thorin gave Bilbo a hand to stand up on the table and lifted Frodo up beside his uncle. Everyone quieted.

“My dear men, dwarrow, and elves,” began Bilbo. “I am almost overcome by your kindness and, more importantly, your welcome to Frodo and myself. Neither words nor presents can express how happy Frodo and I are to be living among you. I don’t know half of you was well as I should like and all of you are essential to the happiness of this city and this mountain, and to the happiness of your kings. As you have all learned, hobbits give presents on their birthdays and I would like to give presents to your rulers. King Bard?”

Bard came forward and embraced Bilbo.

“Happy birthday, Professor Baggins, Master Baggins, may you both celebrate many more among us.”

“You are too kind, Bard.” Bilbo handed Bard a shallow box, prettily wrapped in red paper.

“Frodo and I made this for you.”

Bard looked amused and turned, so everyone could see him open it. Inside was a fine linen shirt, exquisitely embroidered with yellow silk threads and amber beads in designs of sun discs. The crowd exclaimed. Bard handed the box to Bain and took off the shirt he was wearing and put on Bilbo’s gift. The shirt fitted him perfectly and the amber caught the lights all around and the sunset, and shimmered as he moved. This brought another cheer.

Bilbo and Frodo had made lemon curd tarts for each of the Bardlings, and Thranduil received an apple completely studded with cloves. From where he stood, Ori could smell the delicious scent.

“It’s for your dining room,” Bilbo told him. “They keep for ages and the scent whets appetites.”

“It’s perfect, Bilbo, thank you,” said the king-father with bow and his hand over his heart. “My only regret is I can’t eat it.”
Frodo gave Bard and Thranduil a baking of apple muffins, one of which Bard promptly ate, then kissed the top of Frodo’s head.

Sigrid and Bain received pictures of themselves Frodo had drawn. Frodo gave Tilda a carved wooden boar.

“Mister Bifur carved it for me to give you,” Frodo explained.

Tilda squealed, hugged Frodo, and announced the boar’s name was ‘Choppy’.

“Thorin,” said Bilbo with a grin.

“Yes, ghivasha?”

Thorin climbed up on the table. Ori sidled up to Bilbo and Bilbo grinned as Ori handed up the box he’d been guarding in his satchel. Bilbo nodded and Ori put it into Frodo’s eager hands.

“Thorin, my love and my king, I hope you will like the gift Frodo and I have made for you. It’s a traditional gift among betrothed couples at festivals and is in keeping with the season.”

Thorin lifted Frodo to sit on his shoulders and took the box with a kiss from Bilbo. He opened it and stared at the contents. Thorin looked at Bilbo then at Dwalin. Dwalin looked evilly pleased with events. Thorin cleared his throat and said,

“Amrâlimê, my irakashat by betrothal, I would like you to know the captain of the royal military of Erebor is a conniving ass.” Thorin glared at Dwalin but failed with the grin on his face. “Captain, the gift I entrusted to you?”

“Righ’ here, yer majesty,” Dwalin barked and handed a similar box to Thorin with precision. The box was wrapped in the same paper as Bilbo and Frodo’s gift. Dwalin lifted Frodo off Thorin and Bilbo and Frodo opened their present from Thorin. Frodo squealed in delight and Bilbo looked blankly at Thorin, then turned to Dwalin.

“Captain Dwalin, you are conniving, but you’re also a darling.”

“’S true,” Dwalin agreed, and went to Ori’s side, and put an arm around Ori’s shoulders.

The crowd murmured with curiosity. Thorin took from the box Bilbo had given him, a beautiful circlet of autumn leaves and berries. Bilbo giggled and took out Thorin’s presents to himself and Frodo: two matching circlets of leaves made of copper and gold wire, set with ruby berries. The crowd went mad and Dori bust into tears.

“So sweet!” Dori cried.

“Shall we practice for Durin’s Day, ghivasha, my hobbit nephew?” Thorin laughed.

Bilbo grinned, but there were tears in his eyes.

Before everyone, Thorin crowned Bilbo and Frodo, then Bilbo and Frodo put their crown on Thorin. Wild cheering, applause, and tears greeted this. Thorin, Bilbo, and Frodo turned to the audience and Bard called out for the feasting to begin.

The tables of food were fallen upon.

Ori knew what Dori had planned for the menu, but he obviously hadn’t counted on what hobbits considered proper party food. Even the sumptuous spread at the housewarming party had only hinted at the feast before him. It covered ten long tables set end to end at one side of the green.

Binni’s cream cheese sandwiches alone ran to four varieties. Ori counted:

Slices of brown bread, each with half a fresh plum the middle.

Sunflower seed bread with cucumber slices and watercress.

Oatmeal bread with marmalade, raisins and chopped nuts, or with grated orange rind and chopped pecans.

Binni looked tired, but happy.

Other sandwiches from the Fundin’s kitchen held deviled eggs blended with crisp bacon bits, tomato slices and lettuce, or sliced chicken, paper-thin slices of onion and lettuce. There was even a hobbit ‘pub’ favorite: a cheddar and beer spread on dark bread, the platter of which already had to be refilled twice because the dwarrow immediately decimated them.

Omi and Loli had assisted Dori in baking popovers, seed cakes and cardamom rolls, herbed bread and brown molasses bread.

Dori made exquisite glazed pear tarts, and all the apple, blackberry, gooseberry, cherry and peach pies herself, then needed to go have a long nap.
Vi and Margr used that time and the Fundin’s kitchen to produce tarts of mincemeat and treacle, pound cake, and gingerbread.

The royal kitchen baked upside down cakes with pineapples, spiced layer cakes, and dark and light fruit cakes as well as producing several slabs of perfectly tender roast beef.

The elves raved about the grilled cave mushrooms, and the cob corn roasted in the husks and potatoes in their jackets, both cooked on hot coals.

They had brought venison, rabbit, duck and squirrel from the forests, but also prepared dishes they themselves enjoyed, including a salad of cooked beans, peas, potatoes, carrots, onions. Lindir himself presented a pile of fresh lettuce leaves stuffed with chopped apples, peanuts, and raisins. Both these recipes included a sweet/savory dressing.

Legolas and Gimli sat on the ground near the stream. The mountain of barbecued spareribs sitting between them did not stand a chance.

Bombur and Erda had arrived from the inn a few days before with their younger badgers and a cartload of ingredients. From their base of operations in the kitchen of the Oakenshield Inn, they turned out artichokes with melted butter, luscious, sticky plantains and rice, brown beans with baked onions and tomatoes, and oven dishes filled with strange, hollow curved noodles covered in a thick, pale yellow cheese sauce, spiked with crushed peppercorns. Nutmeg dappled their rich, creamy pumpkin soup.

Another of their covered dishes held something called tuna noodle casserole.

Ori has no idea what that was. It seems to be noodles and fish, celery, onions, and cheese, and he found it surprisingly delicious.

Pitchers of Erda’s zingria joined bottles of Bell’s finest homemade ginger beer in buckets of ice. Hard apple cider and ale in their casks joined apple juice and fizzy fruit water in six varieties.

In addition to broiled or baked fish, the men of Dale happily contributed their feast foods, many of which had not been seen in years: roast turkey, glazed carrots, corn pudding and a thick, dark purple soup of beets with sour cream.

Other Dale dishes had been modified to include foods previously unknown to them. Plantains added new texture to the roasted porcupine with red currant jelly. Regular peppers were replaced with hot chiles in the fish pie with hard boiled eggs, onion, tomatoes, and potatoes. Sigrid shyly added her pigeon pie with bacon and mushrooms to the offerings. Fili looked like he would burst with pride.

Not to be outdone, Haldir and Mister Wandi brought tray upon tray of tomatoes stuffed with ham, cheese, mushrooms and parsley.

“I got the recipe from one of my customers,” said Wandi.

Thranduil was obviously impressed.

“How did you manage this, my fawn?” he asked as Mellon ran in circles around his feet. “I never knew you to do much as heat water for tea.”

“Apparently, adad, I have unplumbed depths,” Wandi replied.

Thranduil raised his eyebrow at the blushing Haldir.

“Not for much longer, I’m willing to bet.”

“Sweetie,” said Bard with a smile. “Adults, remember?”

“Must you have such a good memory, my love?” Thranduil asked. “It’s positively-“

“Mortifying?” Bard asked.

“Not the word I was going for,” said Thranduil, “but it will do.”

Rigel, Ara and the Easterlings approached, looking startled for a moment by the enthusiasm of their reception.

Ori thought the dozen and dozens of mahml and nataj they brought must add to the crowd’s enthusiasm.

“Master Hamfast,” he called to the passing hobbit.

“Aye, Mister Ori?”

“This is incredible. Do hobbit birthday parties usually include such a variety of foods?”

Hamfast rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand. He held a tankard in the other.
“This much food, but not such an assortment, naturally. We may’ve gone a bit ‘round the bend here, but it’s for Mis- for Bilbo, ain’t it. He’s got friends from all over, an’ everyone wanted to help. Bell just had to get ‘em all lined up, make sure we didn’t have too much of any one thing.”

“That must have been a lot of work in itself,” said Ori.

“Well, Bilbo’s allus bin so good t’ us. She was happy t’ do it.”

When a majority of the party-goers seemed to be of an elegant sufficiency, the musicians struck up. Bilbo and Thorin danced with Frodo first, then with Bard and Thranduil, then pretty much everyone else. Frodo and Sam went off to play with the other children and badgers, supervised by the wargs.

Ori sat on one of the high tables which had held dishes, and drew the party, the dancing, the eating and drinking and the merry-making. Thorin and Jani danced a jig while Bilbo and Dis twirled near them, laughing. Bard and Thranduil led a round dance as Bain and Gimli bounded after them. Dori sat on her inflatable sap chair, rested, and told people to go and eat. Sigrid, Tauriel, and Eowyn swung each other around, shrieking. Mister Wandi and Haldir canoodled behind the Party Tree East.

The dancing and drinking went on for a bit. Ori drew the paper-covered stars that had been brought out again. This time they were not just for the children and badgers to break and gather candy. There were stars for adults, too. Dwalin broke one so hard the contents spray over most of the Green.

The stars for adults contained candy, but other things as well, like gold coins, tiny carved ornaments, or charms for prosperity, luck or love, or little canteens of spirits and potions. None of these canteens were marked, so any picking them up, drank and guessed at the contents, sometimes with embarrassing results. Fili drank one and sneezed fourteen times in a row. Kili tried another and it turned his tongue bright green and he immediately set on Haldir and threatened to lick him, making Mister Wandi giggle hysterically.

Ori watched Tharkûn and Jim exit a far tent and tie the door flap carefully. The tent’s edges were pegged tightly to the ground and the top was held high by four tall, sturdy poles. Ori’s curiosity got the better of him and, after stowing his satchel carefully beneath the bench, casually wandered toward the stream with his sketch book and graphite wand, pretending to draw. Tharkûn and Jim were soon mingling with the crowd and Ori saw Mistress Bell drag Tharkûn out to dance.

Ori walked slowly amongst a few tents and, once behind them all, he made a beeline for Tharkûn’s tent.

Suddenly, he heard familiar voices. He paused then, recognizing them, hurried over.

“Why, what strong arms you have, Captain Dwalin,” Bilbo teased in dulcet tones. “How well you can carry this poor, tired hobbit.”

Ori came around the tent corner to see Dwalin leaning against one of the tall posts, Bilbo lifted up against his waist.

“May I draw you?” Ori asked.

“Certainly,” Bilbo said with a grin. He looked as though he had been thoroughly kissed. Knowing what it was like to be thoroughly kissed by Dwalin, Ori felt himself warming.

“Dwalin, my love,” Ori asked in his most innocent tone, “is dear Bilbo so full of drink, you had to carry him to the privy?”

“Ori, dear,” teased Bilbo in his turn, pointing at the tent, “that’s not the privy, that’s Tharkûn’s tent.”

Ori grinned at his husband.

“How nice! Dwalin likes Tharkûn’s tents.”

“Does he?” Bilbo cooed. “Well, do let’s have a look at this one.”

“Guid idea, love. C’mon, wee nug.”

Dwalin hoisted Bilbo higher and grabbed Ori’s beard with a feral look. Ori realized why Dwalin like it so much when he tugged on Dwalin’s beard. He snatched Dwalin’s hand and towed them to the edge of the tent. He dropped to his knees, pulled out two of the pegs, and crawled under the canvas. In the vague glow from the party lights outside, Ori could see the tent was full of boxes
piled with brightly colored pointy things, but Ori wasn’t that interested.

He got to his feet, turned, and lifted the canvas. Bilbo and Dwalin rolled under, open-mouthed kissing. Ori knew he was going to draw that. It was wonderful! Dwalin got to his feet, still carrying Bilbo. Bilbo alit from the heights, drew away and patted Dwalin’s beard.

“Such a lovely beard. Very different from Thorin’s. All wild and fluffy.”

“Heartsa’, me love? I’ve go’ a wild, fluffy beard.”

“And he can do wild things with it,” Ori informed Bilbo.

Bilbo’s grin was predatory.

“Can he now? How very interesting. I’m sure you know what to do with it, Ori. I’d like to inspect another part of his anatomy.”

“Shall I help you with his belt?” Ori asked. “Warriors have complicated belts.”

“Fuck,” Dwalin groaned.

“Oh, not so complicated as all that,” Bilbo teased.

Ori giggled as he saw Dwalin’s cock straining against his breeches.

“W-weren’ yeh goin’ t’ draw, me wee scribe?”

“I can draw from memory,” said Ori, fluttering his lashes.

He knelt down in front of Dwalin and nuzzled him through his clothes.

“Yeh only ge’ one warnin’,” said Dwalin.

Ori looked over at Bilbo and licked his lips.

“We only get one warning,” said Ori.

“I can heed warnings,” said Bilbo and knelt down beside him.

Four clever hands navigated the ‘complicated’ belt with fascinating speed. Ori pulled the trousers down a little and pulled Dwalin’s cock through the gap.

“Great Yavanna!” Bilbo cried. “Dwalin! You’re an inspiration!”

“Oh, aye? Wha’ d’ I inspire?”

“Lustful abandon,” said Bilbo. He turned to Ori. “Would you say lustful abandon, Lord Ori?”

“Yes, Professor Baggins, I would say lustful abandon is the precise term.”

“Thank you, Lord Ori.”

“You’re most welcome, professor.”

“Enough wi’ th’ niceties!” Dwalin scraped. “Me cock is lonely!”

Bilbo and Ori exchanged evil smiles - and kissed each other.

“Oi!”

They drew apart, giggling.

“Shall we?” Bilbo asked.

“Oh, yes,” said Ori.

The two of them feasted on Dwalin’s cock, and it was just as Ori had imagined.

Their mouths roamed up and down his length, over his sack, stopping only to kiss each other.

Dwalin’s legs shook, gave out and he dropped down to his knees. The two of them never stopped.

Ori curled on his side and licked the slit gently, all the while holding Dwalin’s gaze. Dwalin’s eyes were mostly pupil as he gazed back, panting around a heart-stopping smile.

Ori reached up, and tugged his beard.

“Ooooh, Mahal. Yer both killin’ me. In a good way.”

“He’s still talking,” said Bilbo.

“We’re doing this wrong,” said Ori. “Will you see what you can do?”

“I’d be delighted.”

Bilbo stood and opened his trousers. Ori wiggled out of the way but never moved his tongue away from his husband’s cock. Bilbo straddled Dwalin’s thighs and, as he was at the appropriate height, popped his cock into Dwalin’s mouth.

“Will that do, m’lord?” Bilbo asked.

“You hobbits are so practical!” managed Ori around a mouthful.

“Mm-hm,” Dwalin agreed.

Soon, however, there was no more talking. When Bilbo started to waver, Dwalin grasped him by
the hips and held him up. A thrill shot up Ori’s spine at the casual display of strength. He remembered those hands on his own hips as Dwalin ground into him from behind and moaned.

“I thought I’d find you three here.”

Ori jerked up.

Thorin was just coming under the flap with a grin on his face. Dwalin was gagged and Bilbo busy, so Ori rolled over a little and held out his hand. With remarkable speed, Thorin scooped low over him and slotted his mouth into Ori’s.

Ori squeaked for about half a second, then he melted.

Ohh, Mahal. Was this what he was afraid of? Thorin was just as good a kisser as he was a hugger. He wasn’t solid like Dwalin, but his limbs were strong and supple and his hands were long and he wrapped Ori up and pulled him close. Ori twined his arms around Thorin’s neck and kissed back for all he was worth.

“Mmmm,” said Thorin. He pulled back just far enough to grin wickedly, and licked Ori’s lips.

“Dwalin said you had quite a knack and he was right.”

“Isn’t he always?” Ori asked.

“Of course. Just ask him,” Thorin murmured in that deep, smooth voice. “Is this alright?”

Ori shivered down his spine, around the curve of his arse and the length of his cock.

“It’s lovely,” he said.

“Good, because I’ve wanted to kiss you for ages.”

And he did again.

They tangled together on the ground, vying for the top, though, admittedly, Ori didn’t vie very hard, content to grind up against Thorin while the high king of dwarrow nuzzled and licked at his neck.

While Ori writhed and panted, Thorin pulled the lacings from Ori’s tunic and kissed down his chest. They could hear Bilbo strangling the moans of his climax.

In the near-dark, Ori saw Bilbo shuddering in Dwalin’s grasp.

“That’s… you’re… oh, my dear…”

And then a strangled scream.

Dwalin grunted and hissed, “Told yeh, yeh only ge’ one warning.”

“Lesson, learned.” Bilbo sighed.

Thorin had just pushed aside Ori’s tunic, when Dwalin cursed and grabbed all three of them to him.

“Dwalin!” Thorin protested.

“Shut it,” Dwalin muttered and held them all still. Thorin hissed in annoyance, then Ori heard Tharkûn’s voice and froze. Tharkûn was nearby but he was talking to Jim and Bard.

“Scram,” Dwalin ordered low.

“Where’s the flap?” Bilbo whispered.

“I’ll check,” Ori muttered and pulled out his flint box. He struck and the tiny light flared. He seized the loose canvas under which they’d got in.

“Put that out!” Bilbo squeaked, slapping the ember out of Ori’s hands.

“Shit!” hissed Dwalin.

“Did one catch?” Thorin asked urgently.

“One what?” Ori asked and Thorin and Dwalin pushed him to the flap.

Ori rolled out, pulling Thorin with him. Bilbo was shoved out at them and Thorin and Ori got Bilbo to his feet.

“Go!” Thorin ordered and pushed Bilbo and Ori to the darkness behind the tent.

“Dwalin!” Ori gasped.

Thorin held up the canvas as Dwalin rolled free. Ori saw he was carrying two brightly colored items, one small, and one large and mounted on a stick. Horrified, Ori recognized a burning fuse at the end of both.

Dwalin slammed the stick of the larger one deep in the ground and flung the smaller off in the direction of the stream.
“Run!” Dwalin growled.
They fled away from the party, colliding as they fell into what Ori decided was a leftover haystack. He sat up and turned at a loud splash. A bright greenizzle of sparks hissed upward from the stream. The large one blew skyward with a loud shriek, trailed by a streak of sparks. It exploded into a beautiful shower of pink lights, high above the party, then took the shape of a flower.

They heard the crowd cheer and the distant sound of Tharkûn swearing colorfully.

Dwalin fell back and started to snicker.

“Fuck it, Dwalin!” Thorin choked. “I thought we’d finished stealing Tharkûn’s stuff when we were seventy!”

“Fireworks?” asked Ori, moving around, until he got his hands on his husband. “Those were fireworks? I’ve never seen them so close and unlit.”

Dwalin yanked him into a hug, stifling his own mirth.

“Tha’ tent were full a’ ‘em, love.”

“I can’t believe I struck a light!” Ori moaned and dropped his head in his hands.

Thorin and Bilbo muffled their laughter in each others hair.

“I rescued our crowns,” Bilbo said, still giggling.

They all got to their feet and brushed each other off.

“To the stream,” Thorin said, decidedly. “We were strolling together and went to see what made the splash.”

“Guid,” Dwalin agreed.

“Wait,” said Bilbo. He stopped in his tracks.

“What’s the matter, ghivasha?” Thorin put his arm about Bilbo.

“I seem to be missing my trousers,” Bilbo stated with a laugh in his voice.

Ori gasped, looked down and, in the low light from the party, he saw Bilbo’s pale legs.

“Here,” said Dwalin and pulled out the item from the back of his belt. “Though’ it were love’s thin’s.”

“Yavanna bless you.” Bilbo sighed in relief.

He took them from Dwalin and shook them out. Ori brushed them helpfully and held them steady for Bilbo to hop into. Dwalin and Thorin belted their own breeches and straightened their tunics.

They were about to start out again, when Bilbo said, “No. Stop.”

“No’ yer britches, nug?” Dwalin asked.

“Mine, but on back to front,” Bilbo stated, giggling. Ori started to giggle, too and went to help as Bilbo dropped them and turned around. Ori and Bilbo snickered so hard, they couldn’t do much other than knock into each other. Thorin and Dwalin started to chuckle as well but they quickly took ahold of the pair and Bilbo was dressed and Ori helped to tie his tunic lacings.

“Hurry,” Thorin said and took Bilbo’s hand and started running toward the stream. Dwalin grabbed Ori’s hand and they tore after the king and consort. They ran in a curve, then down the hill towards the party. Bard came to them.

“Everyone alright, Bard?” Thorin asked with suitable gravity.

Bard laughed. “Someone got into Tharkûn’s fireworks tent and nicked a couple. Tharkûn’s mad, because he wanted them to be a surprise.”

“Oh, well,” said Bilbo comfortingly. “It was still a surprise and for Gandalf as well.”

Thranduil looked them over then with a teasing smile said,

“I shan’t ask what you four were doing up by the stream.”

“Best not to,” Bilbo replied.

He tucked his arm into Thorin’s, and they walked back to the party, while putting their crowns back on. Dwalin and Ori followed meekly behind, until Dwalin started whistling.

Glorfindel and Eowyn busily herded people to sit on the bank of the hill. Frodo and Sam rushed up to Bilbo and Thorin.

“Uncle! Idad! Gandalf brought whizz-bangs!”

Tharkûn stomped after them.

“It was supposed to be a surprise for your birthdays.”
“I’m both surprised and delighted, Gandalf,” Bilbo assured the grumpy wizard. Tharkûn cocked an eyebrow at the four of them then shook his head. Bilbo and Frodo were urged to the middle of the crowd. Gloin and Gridr called to them from a few blankets on the hillside. There they joined the rest of the royals.

“Where have the four of you been?” Dori demanded. “We were looking for you!”

“We went for a walk, Dori,” Thorin replied soothingly. “Bilbo wanted to see more of the Green and the stream.”

This pacified Dori, but Balin winked at them. Dis and Jani lay on their backs and looked up at the sky, as Tauriel and Kili pointed out stars. Sigrid lay on her back between Fili’s knees, her head on his chest, as they occasionally teased Kili and Tauriel. Oin and Bujni sat together, muttering about chemical formulas while Binni and Dipfa sat near them, arms entwined. Thorin settled down with Bilbo, and Sam and Frodo crawled into their laps. Legolas, Gimli, and the wargs crowded in and stepped on family members who pushed at them to make room. Dwalin drew Ori down and Ori arranged them, so they mimicked Fili and Sigrid, as Ori thought Sigrid looked very comfortable. He pillowed his head into Dwalin’s chest.

“Sorry I lit my tinder,” he whispered.

Dwalin squeezed him.

“Yeh kin ligh’ me tinder anytime, love.”

Tharkûn had set out his fireworks and soon Bard and Jim came to join the company on the hillside.

“Ready?” Tharkûn shouted.

There was an answering cheer and Tharkûn set off three rockets that shot up and out towards the lake and burst in fountains of brightly colored sparks.

There were ‘oooh’s and ‘ahhhh’s. Another one went up and blew into several fireballs that became goats running across the sky.

This was followed by an elven ship in red and yellow sparkles.

Animals and trees and warriors of various races followed. An orange dragon with green wings and a long, wavy tail swooped out and raced off southward.

Ori settled for just watching and not trying to draw the details, he merely noted the shapes and colors.

The ending was a long series of brightly-colored explosions of all kinds of things, then a final group that exploded to spell out ‘Happy Birthday’ first in westron, then sindarin, then khuzdul. There was a huge cheer and applause. The top of Tharkûn’s staff glowed and lit the entire Green as the royal family of Dale, several noble dwarrow and the Groinuls rolled out a cart with a huge cake on it. There were eleven candles in the top tier and a circle of candles on each tier beneath.

As at the betrothal, Bilbo helped Frodo cut the first piece and then Thranduil lifted Frodo, so he could blow out the candles on top. Children and badgers were lifted to blow out the rest. The cake was brought to an empty table where Dis and Sigrid led a team of people to cut and hand out slices. Ori almost drooled when he realized it was carrot cake with cream cheese icing.

Dancing began again and Ori and Dwalin enjoyed themselves. They stopped for a breather and Dwalin got into a discussion with Haldir, Eowyn, and Glorfindel.

Ori watched as Thorin and Bilbo, hands clasped, danced the figures of a country dance.

“Lord Ori.”

Ori turned.

“Nugget! How good to see you again!” Ori hugged her.

She hugged back, laughing.

“Are you standing aloof and being lordly?” Nugget teased.

“No, I was dancing with my husband but he’s been dragged into a business discussion.”

“The guard is always prepared.” Nugget smiled. “Dance with me?”

“Yes, please!”

Ori caught her hand and they rushed into the next set forming.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. What a lovely party! Now we need time to recover….or something. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori opened his eyes when raven feet landed on his face.
“Quartz?”
“Wake up,” rasped Quartz. “Garnet and I are hungry.”
“What time is it?” Ori mumbled.
“Time to feed the ravens.”
“Bugger,” growled Dwalin. Ori sat up as Dwalin rolled over. Ori heard the ninth volley and sighed. He caught the scent of bacon and his tummy made an interested noise.
“How can I be hungry?“ Ori said. “After the amount I ate last night, then cake…”
“Bloody brillian’ cake,” Dwalin commented and grinned at Ori.
Ori grinned back and leaned on Dwalin’s chest.
“Anything besides the cake?” he teased.
Dwalin pulled him onto his chest and kissed him.
“Bloody Tharkûn spoilin’ thin’s f’r us.”
Ori laughed.
“I never dreamed I’d kiss Thorin while you and Bilbo fiddled each other.”
“Yeh like it?” Dwalin asked.
Ori answered by leaning forward again to kiss his husband thoroughly.
“Ow!” Dwalin barked as Garnet tweaked his torn ear.
“Stop slobbering in each other’s mouths and feed us,” Garnet demanded.
Killer woke up and bounded up from the foot of the bed and started licking Dwalin’s face.
Ori sat up on Dwalin’s waist, patted Killer’s back, and frowned at the two birds.
“Stop slobbering in each other’s mouths and feed us,” Garnet demanded.
“Dori is frying bacon in maple syrup. We want some,” Quartz explained in a tone that conveyed he was being very patient with a couple of complete shaleheads. Ori and Dwalin looked at each other over Killer’s nose.
“We better get there before Nori does,” Ori said and they struggled out of bed at speed.
Killer barked, bounced off the bed, then the cats yowled as the warg grabbed their basket in his teeth and shook it. Kihshassa opened one eye, then closed it again.
They arrived at the table in ten minutes. Killer proudly trotted ahead with two ravens and two cats on his back. Kihshassa clung to Ori.
“Good morning,” Bilbo greeted them as he stood pouring tea into Thorin’s cup.
“Thank you, ghiyasha. Please sit down and eat.”
Bilbo kissed Thorin’s temple, went to the patio window, and called Sam and Frodo in.
Thorin poured tea for Ori and Dwalin and passed these over. The ravens fluttered to the table.
Nori-Pori and Mask gamboled outside, shadowed by Kihshassa before she winged off to glean the last fruit from the berry bushes.
Dwalin sent Killer off to the food bowls.
Dori whisked though with a large platter piled with bacon as the faunts bounded in and climbed
into their seats on either side of Bilbo and Thorin.

Balin came in and kissed Dori.

“Good mornin’, all,” he greeted them. “Thank great Mahal, it’s a rest day. Tha’ was quite th’
party las’ night.”

“It was fun!” Frodo cried. “I didn’t get to bed until midnight!”

“Midnight,” Sam affirmed.

“Good thin’ we don’t have lessons then, wee laddies,” Balin teased and ruffled both Frodo’s and
Sam’s hair as he went to his seat.

“Rinis and Rinid,” said Dori to Balin.

Balin shook his head.

“We’ve left th namin’ a’ th’ pebbles t’ our Dain, me dear.”

“And he hasn’t come up with a thing, has he,” Dori replied. “What is he waiting for? Their
coming of age party?”

Ori finished his cup of tea as Dori busily filled plates and passed them.

The room began to fill with people. Ori remembered then that Thorin had something to put
forward to the council.

Thorin’s concept of ‘council’ morphed from situation to situation, though it always included those
who stood with him at the Scouring of Dale. Now Bilbo was here, and very often Bard and
Thranduil came up from Dale if they could spare the time. Ori thought it was a tribute to Dori’s
cooking how often they did make the time.

This morning, extra leaves had been fitted in the table. The breakfast parlor was large, but a
few more councillors and they would be eating breakfast in the dining area of the sitting room,
possibly some of them with plates on their laps.

Omi busily took notes, while Loli attempted to ‘help’, mostly by looking over Omi’s shoulder and
making suggestions.

“Bugger off, Lo,” Omi muttered. “I know what I’m about.”

Thranduil, Bard, and the Bardlings arrived, though Bard looked rather peaked.

Thorin rose to pour Bard’s tea himself.

“Thank you for coming to breakfast,” said Thorin. “It wasn’t exactly an early night, I know.”

Bard waved his hand in universal signal of ‘whatever’, drained his cup, and held it out to be filled
again. Thorin laughed, went and retrieved a tankard from the sideboard. As he filled it, he called out
to the kitchen for more tea.

When they all sat, Thorin looked around him, and Ori saw how proud and happy he was. Ori
vowed to himself that he would work to keep that look on Thorin’s face as much as possible. Thorin
cleared his throat. Everyone looked up at him, though still chewing.

“I have an idea that I would like to run by all of you. You may know that Mithril Square, Lady
Kadis’ ancestral home, is up for sale. The family will be building in Dale, closer to the brewery.”

Gloin grunted.

“Auwful nice piece of real estate to be sitting empty in the middle of Erebor.”

“That’s what I thought when Zark and Kadis offered to sell it to me.”

Balín’s eyes twinkled.

“When do we move in, laddie?”

“We aren’t moving the royal residence,” Thorin promised, “but that doesn’t mean I don’t think it
would be of use. I will buy the property, yes, if only to keep that terrible Ursith from getting his
filthy mitts on it.”

Nori saluted Thorin from his place beside Bofur.

“And you will do what with it?” Thranduil asked, getting to the point.

“I propose, an institute of learning.”

“What kind of learning?” Ulfr asked, raising a brow.

“Primarily about dwarrow and our culture, but also about, and open to, all the people of Middle
Earth.”

Ulfr sucked in a horrified breath, but Yizaris looked perfectly calm and Buer exclaimed, “That
“would be so neat!”  
The Ironfist king frowned at him.  
“It would be?”

“Sure! Think of how much we have to give to the world! Think of how much we could gain in return! Look at just what Mister Hamfast has given all of us. Farming is hard, and it’s risky, but it beats starving if our trade routes are cut off. We’d never be as successful at it just struggling along on our own.”

Ulfr’s eyebrows climbed his forehead, he seemed to consider it, then he nodded.

“I see yer point.”

Ori wondered if the world had been abruptly remade for a second time. Arne was going to laugh himself sick when he heard this.

“Thorin,” said Ori. “Given how much of our knowledge is archived and where, does Master Brur know you’re proposing to open his library to a bunch of yahoos?”

Brur, at the door, said, “He does.”

The old dwarf escorted Sadi in and calls of greeting went up.

“F’r wha’ it’s worth,” said Sadi, “Brur an’ I agree with Thorin. Though, mind, it took a moment or two f’r we both t’ realize it.”

Brur eyed her sourly, and she smiled back at him like a poison apple.

“I like to think,” said Thorin, “that we do have a lot to offer, not just in mining, engineering, and warfare, but in our other arts, and our literature, and that, possibly, it might be of interest to more than ourselves.”

“I think,” said Thranduil, “that it’s an excellent idea. We have a varied experience just amongst our close acquaintance. My only question is, Thorin, when will you sleep?”

“When you’re teaching about regional wines,” teased Thorin.

“Good point,” Thranduil chuckled. “I might sleep through it as well, except for the tasting part.”

“The purpose,” said Thorin, “is not just a set curriculum. Yes, it would be important to teach khuzdul.” Ulfr choked on his bacon. Thorin ignored him and continued. “But, if we could offer a variety of subjects, we could draw a variety of scholars. Also, I’d like a place for our young who don’t apprentice in a craft to explore other options.”

“Wish I’d had that,” said Buer. “It’s tough trying to teach yourself everything from the bottom of the shaft up. I spent way too much time reinventing the cog. Then learning how to set it on fire.”

“I could lecture about finance,” said Gloin, “if yeh don’ think I’d put ‘em all t’ sleep.”

Dori and Binni exchanged glances.

“Court dancing or interior decorating?” Binni asked dryly.

Bofur said, “Combine ‘em. Ye’d have all them dancers flittin’ about the place like faeries, an’ when they was done, yer sittin’ room’d be up to its arse in chintz an’ lace.”

Dwalin snorted.

“In tha’ case, they ain’t dancin’ in me office.”

“The heart of the matter is,” said Thorin, “it’s something to work on over the winter. While we’re out and about, we could talk to the people, see if anyone has any suggestions.”

Dori turned Balin.

“Speaking of which, you don’t like ‘Balis’ for a damling?”

“Sounds too much li’e ‘ballast’, beloved.”

“True.”

“Doris?” Balin ventured.

“Sounds like someone who’s already two hundred years old.”

“Aye,” he agreed.

“Still trying to come up with names for the pebbles?” Bard asked.

“Yes,” said Dori with a sigh. “At this rate, we’re going to call them ‘Hey’ and ‘You’.”

“High an’ Low?” Bofur suggested.

“Here an’ There?” asked Jani. “That way, if ye have another, ye can call it ‘Neither’.”

“Frick and Frack,” Dis mused. “I wanted that for our pebbles, but Vili didn’t like the idea.”
"But whyever not?" Jani teased.
"He didn’t mind them for names as such, but what if we only had one? All Frick and no Frack?
Leaves you rather nowhere, doesn’t it."

Tauriel, sitting beside Kili, said, "You know, I think I would really like to teach sindarin. It’s not
as though I wouldn’t have time for it. Legolas doesn’t need me much, now that he has his own
attack dwarf."

"Am I your attack dwarf?" Kili asked.
"You’re my snuggle dwarf," she replied warmly. "At any rate, I’ll have to have something to take
up my attention for the next six to eighteen months."

They all look at each other, confused.

Thorin asked, "What are you doing for the next six to eighteen m…"

Thorin and Dis roared in unison.

Dis lunged at Kili, seized him by the shoulders and shook him.

"What have you done?" Dis shouted.

"Made my wife pregnant?" Kili tried.

Dori cried out and Balin seized her.

"Beloved? Is it time? Are th’ badgers comin’?"

"No! That’s another cake I didn’t get to make!"

Tauriel ventured, "It won’t be due for quite some time, Lady Dori."

Everyone froze, and turned to her. She blushed prettily and it occurred to Ori that they had
forgotten something, namely, Kili’s wife.

"Carrot, perhaps?" Tauriel suggested.

Bilbo bravely jumped in.

"Certainly, my dear. Dori and I can work on it together."

Abruptly, Dori beamed.

"That’s a wonderful suggestion!" she cried.

And all was well because Dori was happy again.

Dis dropped Kili into his chair and threw herself at Tauriel. Ori half expected Dis to find a way to
shake her, too, but the princess embraced her tenderly and awkwardly, and wept.

"N-nathith! This is w-wonderful!"

"Thank you, amad. I was afraid you would be angry."

Dis pulled back and smiled through her tears.

"Don’t worry, I spent it all on my rotten, irresponsible son."

Kili cringed as Thorin approached.

"Sorry, Idad?"

"Stand up," ordered Thorin.

Kili stood, Thorin embraced him.

"Congratulations," said Thorin, "this is wonderful."

Kili nearly collapsed against Thorin.

"Thank you."

The Company took this as permission to congratulate the pair in-herd. Fili and Kili knocked heads
hard enough that the crack echoed off the walls.

Ori mused, "A dwelf. A dwelf in Erebor."

A voice like doom from the bottom of a well asked, "Are you certain, Tauriel?"

All eyes turned to Thranduil, drumming his long fingers against the table.

"Oh, yes, king-father," said Tauriel.

"You glowed?"

"Briefly, but yes."

"And the… other things?"

"Yes, but don’t worry, I put out the fire immediately."

"Fire?" Thorin asked, visibly alarmed.

"It was confined to a very small area," said Tauriel. "I’m afraid I’m not as quick or controlled as
Lady Galadriel. The covers did get a little singed.”
“Scared the shit out of me,” Kili confessed.

Tauriel winced.
“I will, of course, replace the bedding.”
Thorin didn’t look upset. He snorted and shook his head.
“I’m going to be an idadel. I think I can spot you some sheets. It can’t be any worse than the time
Kili used his to try to make himself some new clothes.”
“They were comfy!” Kili protested.

Tilda turned to Thranduil.
“Are you excited? You’re going to be an grandadananananana. Or something.”
“Too many ‘na’s,’ ” said Bain.
Tilda frowned at Thranduil.
“Were they supposed to ask permission or something?”
Bard elbowed Thranduil.
“Well, were they, grandadanana?”
Thranduil rolled his eyes and sighed.
“You take all the fun out of it! I wanted to see if Kili would squirm a little more. Of course I’m
excited!”

He swept up from his seat, startling just about everyone, snatched Tauriel up into his arms and
whirled her around.
“King-father?” she giggled.
“Hush, child, I’m being royally ebullient.”

Sigrid ventured, “Da?”
Bard turned to her, white faced.
“I’m not pregnant,” she assured him.

Bard rubbed his face with his hand as Fili dissolved into laughter beside her.
“But I’d like to be,” said Sigrid, “so Fili and I would like to be married. Soon!”
“I’m not busy this afternoon,” said Thorin. “Are you busy this afternoon, Bard?”
“No!” Dori forbade. “Yule! You will be married at Yule. That will do very well. We can have
everything ready by then.”

Fili looked at Sigrid.
“We’re getting married at Yule,” he said.
“It will do very well,” said Sigrid.
They turned to the Bearer, simpering and chorused, “Yes, Dori.”

“Why am I not pregnant?” Legolas asked Gimli.
“Because yer supposed t’ be knockin’ me up,” Gimli replied. “I though’ yeh were workin’ on
tha’.”

“Ah, well, at least we have Romy.”
Kili turned to Ori.
“Hey, Ori-mate, aren’t you going to get pregnant, too?”
“I have a warg, three cats, a bat and a raven. I’m booked,” said Ori.

“More bacon?” Quartz asked.
Ori sighed and cut up the rest of the rasher on his plate for Quartz, who stared at it, then at him.
“What? It’s already got syrup on it,” Ori said.

“Not enough!” Quartz protested. “I’m a growing bird.”
“Oh! I beg your highness’ pardon!”
He grabbed up the syrup and poured it over the bacon pieces.
“Really,” Ori muttered. “Who needs to reproduce?”
Mistress Dazla bobbed in, raised her eyebrows at Dori, who giggled and nodded. Ori heard
Mistress Dazla’s heels as she went through to the receiving room.
“And who else might we be expecting?” Thorin asked.
“Mornin’ lovey!” Margr’s voiced caroled from the front door.
“That answers that,” said Bilbo merrily.
“F*ck,” Dwalin commented.
“Badgers, our dearie!” Dori scolded.
“Don’t say ‘f*ck’ ’til yer o’ age.” Dwalin told the faunts.
“Huh?” Frodo looked up from his discussion with Sam.
“Exactly,” Dwalin said and drank back his tea.
“Frodo, we say ‘pardon’,” Bilbo sighed.
“Pardon, Idad Dwalin?”
“Guid lad.”
“Here we are!” Vi burst in and rushed to embrace Dori. “Ooo, look, our Mar! Plump as a puddin’, our Dori. I’m laying’ gold on ‘em bein’ girlies!”

The sisters were greeted, seated, and provided with breakfast.

Dori eyed Tauriel and Kili, who were once more hand in hand. Dori flicked her fingers in the sisters’ direction.

“Go on, take your medicine,” she teased.

“Wha’s up, me muffins?” Vi asked.

“We’re expecting a badger,” said Kili.

“What!” Margr leapt to her feet and poked Kili in the breastbone with a hard finger. “You wasn’t savin’ yersel’ for me? Th’ crust!”

Then she hugged them off their feet, with one arm each, and Vi had to have her turn, and to kiss each of their foreheads for luck.

“When d’ yeh pop, lovey?” Vi asked.

Tauriel looked like she was using all her military training not to laugh.

“I don’t know, Mistress Vi. Dwarrow take six months, elves take eighteen.”

Margr smacked Vi lightly on the shoulder.

“Eh, call it a twelve-month. Give us time t’ knit up a blankie r’ two.”

“What bring you ladies here today?” Thorin asked. “You have news I take it?”

“Oooo, our Thorin!” Margr cried. “Wha’ with all th’ preggers ladies about, we nearly forgot!

Didn’t we, Vi?”

“Aye, an’ we got such news, we-”

Roäc blew in the open patio doors.

“I’ve had it!” Roäc squalled as he landed on the table with more noise than usual for a bird that weighed five pounds, fifteen and three-fifths ounces and dropped a small envelope. Thorin broke up a few rashers of bacon on a saucer, and put them in front of his enraged raven.

There was another flutter of wings, much larger this time. Ori looked up and Red Queen landed on the patio and strutted in. She was greeted and a chair pulled up and a dish of bacon put in front of her. She took a mouthful then gazed at Roäc.

“Roäc, you look ruffled.”

Roäc glared.

“I just flew in from the Shire, of course I’m ruffled. Give a bird a chance to preen, why don’t you!”

“We meant,” Red Queen said in a quieter tone, “emotionally.”

Thranduil accidentally choked on his tea and Bard patted his back helpfully.

“Our Roäc was delivering’ a letter f’r us,” Vi explained.

“Ever so good of him,” Margr agreed and passed a saucer of toast generously slathered in jam and cut into small pieces to give the raven.

“Did you encounter rough weather?” Thorin asked. He stroked Roäc’s back as Bilbo put down another saucer for Roäc, this one with tea in it.

“It’s not the weather,” Roäc grumbled. “I like deliverin’ letters to old Pukeweek. She screams an’ dances about. It’s funny. I’m just sick of her chasing me off with that bloody broom.”

“Broom?” Dori asked.

“Ol’ bog gas keeps trying to swat me with it,” Roäc complained, washing down the last of the
toast and jam with gulps of tea.

“That’s disgraceful!” Red Queen cried. “We will take the next letter!”

“What do you want?” Roäc asked suspiciously.

“Nothing. We’re just being neighborly. Besides, this Pukeweed creature intrigues us. We want to go and see her for ourselves.”

Roäc squawked out a laugh.

“I’m tempted to go along just to watch.”

“If you don’t mind, King Thorin?” Red Queen turned to him.

“Of course not,” said Thorin. “It’s very good of you to take the trouble.”

“Is that her reply?” Bilbo asked.

He nodded at the envelope, which lay untouched on the table.

Roäc made a disgusted noise and poked it with his beak. Bilbo took it up and looked at the sisters.

“May I?”

“Aye, sure, lovey,” said Vi. “We ain’t had a chance to get t’ them readin’ an’ writin’ classes in th’ Dale yet.”

Bilbo opened it and removed a letter written very blackly on pale yellow notepaper.

“Oh my dear ladies, you have screwed her to the wall most professionally. She’s sugar sweet but her tone is quite poisonous.”

The sisters cackled and knocked foreheads.

“My,” Bilbo went on, rereading the letter. “Remind me never to barter with you two. You’re taking her for about eighty-five percent of the profits. She writes that she wants to renegotiate before the end of next week or she won’t go with it. What will you do?”

“Nothin’,” Margr giggled. “We had a nice long chat with tha’ Master Dipfa. She’s ever such a smart lass. We’ll just le’ ol’ Pukeweeds stew. She’ll either give in or our Dipfa will organize a party for the next trade caravan out that way and she’ll sell to the Hobbits long distance. Tha’ll leave Pukeweeds out in th’ cold.”

“How very pragmatic of Master Dipfa,” Thorin commented and smiled into his tea around a sip.

“How will the hobbit dams know what Dipfa can do?” Ori asked.

“Ooo, our Ori,” Vi brayed. “That Dipfa’s ever so clever. She’s made up a whole magazine of color pic’res a’ all sorts a’ styles of stuff. She even named some a’th styles a’ dress after them wee lasses that wrote us firs’.” “Aye, an’ printed th’ lasses’ pi’tures. Calls ‘em concept drawin’s, an’ gave ‘em credit by name,” Margr added.

“An’ there’re all th’ colors an’ fabrics t’ choose fr’em,” Vi continued. “She’s callin’ it a fashion catalog!”

“Bu’ no’ t’ worry,” Margr broke in. “Ol’ Pukeweeds’ll give in. She’ll have nuthin’ to do but show th’ catalog off. If we find ou’ them lasses an’ all their friends ain’ seen it soon, we’ll send out a copy t’ em.”

Bilbo smirked.

“If you like, I’ll send one to my grandmother.”

Vi waved her napkin at him like a pennant.

“Oh, our Bilbo, we knew yer th’ righ’ one t’ talk t’. Yer that smart.”

“Excellent,” Dori approved. “Now that’s all straightened out. The wedding.”

Bilbo and Thorin looked at each other.

“Please, Dori,” said Bilbo. “How about we keep it simple?”

“Keep what simple?” Dis asked.

“Our wedding,” Thorin told her.

“No,” Dis and Dori chorused.

“Every ruler from Arda will be here,” Dori went on. “It will be wonderful.”

Bilbo’s teacup clattered to the saucer and Thorin groaned.

“Who invited….silly me.” Bilbo gulped and summoned a smile. “Will it be like your coronation all over again, my love?”

“Pretty much,” Thorin smiled. “Except Dain won’t pledge his loyalty and, with any luck,
Pukeweed won’t show up. Dis, Dori?”

“No, they haven’t been invited,” Dis confirmed as she tucked into another buttered roll full of bacon.

“But you have all the Durin’s Day preparations to arrange,” Bilbo tried.

Dis snorted and Dori giggled.

“Bilbo, dear, as we told everyone, Dis and I have been planning this since you two met at the inn. After the coronation, we just had to keep everyone informed as to when the date would be. All you two need to do is decide on your wedding clothes and be there.”

“And do we have wedding clothes ready?” Thorin teased.

“You’re going to be dressed as you were for coronation,” Dis decreed. “The only difference is we think it would be a nice touch if you wore that butterfly cloak Thranduil made you. Bilbo needs to decide on what he and Frodo would like to wear.”

Bilbo smiled and his face softened.

“I’ll go through that old trunk of my parents’. My father’s wedding shirt and braces are there. I’m not sure his buckskin trousers are still good, but they are very nice.”

“I’ll call for Zindis,” said Thorin. “When you’ve found them, she can have look and give them any care needed.”

“Thank you,” Bilbo nodded. “And Frodo will need a white shirt, brown braces, and dark blue trousers. I’m sure Durin blue would be perfect.”

Thorin reached over and kissed his hand.

“What about Sam?” Frodo asked. “What will Sam and I do?”

“Sam will be dressed just like you. Each of you will be carrying a small box,” Dis told them.

“Dwarrow exchange rings at weddings. Dori shot Bofur and Nori a withering look.

“At least they do when the wedding is planned properly ahead of time,” she said.

“Frodo,” Dis continued, “you will carry Bilbo’s ring and Sam will carry Thorin’s. Would you both like that?”

“Yes!” The faunts cried and wiggled excitedly.

“The food is all taken care of,” Dori went on. “The royal guests will arrive the few days before the wedding and Durin’s Day.” Dori looked at Bilbo a little apologetically. “I hope you don’t mind, Bilbo, dear, but I took the liberty of writing to your grandparents. It’s too late in the year for them to come but they promised to visit you in the summer. They’re very interested in meeting your betrothed.”

“Perhaps that’s for best, Dori,” Bilbo chuckled “took weddings tend towards the rowdy and Brandybuck ones take forever.”

“What about Baggins’ ones?” Ori asked.

“Very proper and every step and word has been the same for generations.”

“I rely on you telling me what you would like included. I will see that it is done,” Thorin said with finality.

“Well, of course!” Dori put in. “The royal kitchens and Mistress Dazla are ready to make sure you and Frodo have your favorite dishes.”

Bilbo suddenly laughed.

“Pity Nori’s not here any more to make book.”

Ori looked about. Nori had indeed gone.

“Make book on what?”

Everyone looked up as Nori’s head appeared through the ceiling.

“How soon Dain will arrive, of course,” Bilbo teased.

Nori chuckled and disappeared.
Harvest, Hugs, and Harried Scribes.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. The harvest is on and Ori is preoccupied! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement!
Same darrow time, same darrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Hamfast arrived just as the breakfast/council meeting finished and he announced that the main harvest was ready to begin in earnest. The ravens flew out as a flock and whirled everywhere in the mountain, summoning all darrow, who could to come. Thorin and the entire royal household rode out to Dale and the fields. Everyone dressed down for work.

In addition to the people of Dale and the darrow of Erebor, the fields were graced with the muscle of four kings, princes, princesses, lords and ladies, and a bunch of dwarven engineers, who studied the back-breaking labor involved and immediately began to design a machine that might, at very least, aid the process. Ursith strolled about occasionally picking up a potato or a carrot and loudly encouraging everyone else. He went so far as offering Dori a bouquet of carrots, still covered in dirt. Dori politely told him that since they were not his carrots, he couldn’t use them for proposing and they belonged in the wagon. Ursith bowed deeply and turned away. Balin accidentally smacked his ass with a shovel.

With the crops planted and Hamfast’s teachings and seeds and plants, the harvest yielded nearly three times the amount of produce Dale usually managed. The darrow, used to digging in rock rather than soil, were quickly instructed by the Gardeners, then threw themselves into the work with traditional vigor to the point that it turned into a competition as to who could fill the waiting wagons first. Hamfast had to race around telling the darrow not to dig too deep and not to damage any root vegetables.

High Priest Sven walked around all the fields, singing praises to Eru. Hamfast ordered grain stalks to be put out in the sun to dry.

Frodo and Sam, under Butter and Sugar’s watchful eyes, roamed through the surrounding trees, copses, and hedgerows, gathering mushrooms, nuts, and late berries with herds of children and badgers. Beryl and a small flock of ravens followed them to keep a lookout.

Hamson took a team of young lads down to the bee hives and, after soothing the queens and their armies, loaded the hives in the wagons and brought them home to shelter the winter in sheds of the Gardener’s, Aldernay’s and Hallow’s.

Halfred took another group out to pick up the fallen fruit which was taken to the Aldernay farm to be pressed into cider.

Fishermen went out with great nets and their haul was gutted, salted, and laid out in the autumn sun to dry.

Red Queen and some of her flock went out to the East with a group of hunters and culled deer, rabbits, and other game.

Dain’s improved plow was taken aside by Ulfr, Buer and Bujni, who quickly adapted it into a mower and it ticked at high speed across the meadows, eight razor-sharp blades slashing around wickedly, followed at a safe distance by farmers, who raked up the grasses, and put them up in huge hay stacks for the wagons to come and take them back to any who needed feed for their animals over the winter.

Snowdrop and a mob of Dale elders roamed the lands for the last of the simples and roots for
A great deal of the food was taken to the royal kitchen in Erebor and ‘put up’ under Bell Gardener’s direction, ready to be redistributed throughout Dale. Bard all but wept at the amount harvested.

Loli and Omi had an idea, which Ori heartily approved.

They gathered a small pack of apprentice scribes and they all went with their notebooks and sketchpads to the fields, to the barns, to the ovens and hobs of the kitchens, drawing everything and anything. They listened to and transcribed all the Gardeners said about growing and preserving food, asked questions, and were happily answered. Ori rather thought that the Gardeners were used to questions from their own faunts, and seemed to look upon the inquisitive scribes as more of the same.

In addition to what women and dwarrow knew about raising and preparing food, and along with sketches that Ori and others had made of the plowing, the planting, Hamfast tending the seedlings and irrigating the fields, they had a complete record of the local growing season.

“This is great!” Ori praised the blushing sisters.

Omi shrugged shyly and Loli said, “It’s not as glamorous as a quest, but it can’t hurt to have a sort of instruction book for this sort of thing, can it? I mean, we could keep adding to it as we learn more.”

“It may not be ‘glamorous’,” said Ori, “but it’s just as important. Well done!”

He wasn’t the only one who was pleased.

Brur, of all people, nodded with satisfaction.

“Yeh young scribes’ve th’ righ’ a’ it. There ought t’ be more t’ scrivenin’ than copyin’ ou’ some dead lord’s catalogue a’ his wargs’ tooth collection.”

“Does that actually exist?” Ori asked.

Arne looked up from his research and snickered.

“Yes! Unf-fortunately.”

“Firebeards,” said Brur with a snort.

With everyone there and working, within five days, the fields were bare, but for still growing winter cabbage, kale and huge pumpkins. Dori, dressed in bright orange, walked barefoot through all the fields, singing and blessing them.

Hamfast said the rest would hold until Last Harvest. Jim grinned evilly and said that there would be a festival to celebrate. Bell nodded and murmured something about pumpkin pie.

On the first rest day, Ori worked on his presentation until mid-morning then went to see if Thorin had come back from his meetings. He knocked on the office door which stood ajar and peeked in. Thorin looked up from his desk.

“Come in, Ori.”

Ori slipped in and closed the door and leaned against it.

“Thorin, I need a favor, but please don’t feel you have to oblige me.”

Thorin rose, came around the desk, and crossed to Ori. With a wicked smile, he took Ori in his arms and kissed him.

“Yes,” said Thorin.

Ori got his breath back and giggled.

“Thank you, but there’s another thing, too.”

Thorin laughed, nodded to a chair, and took the one next to it.

“What do you need?”

Ori clambered into the other chair.

“I’ve had an idea for Dori’s Yule present.”

A good ten minutes later, when Thorin had finished laughing helplessly, he agreed, and Ori bounced to his own office in triumph. He was back to his work, when he heard Quartz caw to him from the bedroom.

Ori hurried through, wondering at the raven’s call. He went in and looked at the stand which was
Ori!
He turned to see Quartz perched on the sill, looking rather frosted.
“Quartz? Are you alright? Did you ice up?”
He went the window and Quartz hopped onto his arm.
“Not ice. Flour. Need a favor.”
“Of course.”
Quartz heaved a sigh.
“Need a bath.”
Ori carried him to the bathroom, placed a shallow pan on the floor of the shower, and filled it full with warm water.
“Door locked?” Quartz asked.
“Yes.”
“Good. Embarrassing.”
Quartz hopped into the pan and rolled around, splashing violently. He sprayed water everywhere.
“Back feathers?” he croaked. “Can’t reach ‘em all to preen.”
Ori carefully separated the feathers and gently poured water from a cup across Quartz’s skin. He painstakingly cleaned away the flour.
“Ahhh! Better!”
“You couldn’t find a puddle or something on your way back?”
“Songbirds do that. Stupid. Unguarded. Dangerous. I tried to avoid clouds, though. Flour plus water equals grounded bird.”
“So, what happened?”
“Hee hee hee. Dry me off. I’ll tell you.”
Ori wrapped Quartz on a nest of towels and smuggled him back to the bedroom, put the fire on, and sat on the rug with him. Ori took out his notebook. Quartz rolled around in the towels.
“Well? How did you end up covered in flour?”
“Oh, so worth it! That Lumpy Suck bile person—“
“Lumpy—? Oh! Lobelia Sackville Baggins.”
“Whatever.”
“Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?”
“How? No lips!”
“It was a rhetorical question. Please go on.”
“Sneaking around after Da and Red Queenie in that Sickville house. Pie sitting, cooling on the kitchen counter.”
“Which you just had to taste, right?”
“Apple! So, yes! Snackbutt chased them out. Then, right back to the kitchen!”
“So you tried to hide.”
“In the flour bucket! She put the lid on!”
“You were trapped in the flour bucket?” Ori cried as he wrote as fast as he could.
“Panicked! Bashed my beak on the sides! Squawked! Beat my wings! Coughed! Off goes the lid! Shot up, out - bang! Right into a wall!”
“Oh, Quartz!”
“Not hurt! Well, my pride. Then, worse - bang! Right into Glumpy! Flew around the house half-blind, flour everywhere. Bumpy screamed about her new carpet - wish I’d pooped on it. Half-wit son came home. Pecked him on the head. Can she bleat!”
“But, you got away!”
“Heh! Half-wit son left the door open. You alright?”
Ori nodded, shaking with laughter as he patted Quartz’s back dry with the towel.
“My hero!” Ori cried and gathered Quartz up in a hug.
“Eh, you, too. Watch the feathers.”
Ori cradled Quartz on his back as Quartz preened his belly feathers. There was a knock at the
“Come in,” Ori called, thinking it was probably Dori.  
“What’s happened?” Thorin asked.

Ori looked up as he turned Quartz over and put him down to dry his back feathers. Ori held the wings up as he knew the raven was tired. He grinned at Thorin and gestured with his chin to his notebook.

“Quartz had an adventure.”
Thorin came and sat down beside them, picked up the notebook, and read through. He started to snicker, then choked on laughter.

“Quartz, you’re terrible.”
Quartz just cackled.

“Roäc and Red Queen have informed me,” Thorin said, “Lob…Pukeweed is capitulating to Vi and Margr’s terms. Red Queen also brought me a lovely map of the Shire. She said Lobelia wished me to have it for Bilbo. Bilbo recognized it right away as something she had pinched shortly after his parents died. Somehow neither of us think Lobelia ‘gave’ it at all.”
Quartz cackled again.

“Heard Queenie tear it off the wall. Heard Da knocking stuff around.”

“How much of the pie did you eat?” Thorin asked, so gravely Ori giggled.

“Not much. Just the middle. Best bit.”
Thorin sighed and lay back on the rug.

“Bilbo is still laughing about the map.”

“Good,” Ori approved. “Old Pukeweed is a nasty hobbit. Why, she gives hobbits a bad name.”
Thorin chuckled. Ori let go of Quartz’s wings as the raven hopped backwards then bent forward and splayed out his tail feathers to dry his butt. Ori turned to look at Thorin. Thorin winked at him.

“What have you been doing?” Ori asked.

“Reading over a proposal from the pleasure guild to re-open the guild of court dancers. Udad’s father shut it down in keeping with Nali’s reforms. The pleasure guild wants it back and Binni wants to teach.”

“Are bearers usually involved with it?” Ori asked.

“They invented the dances, so yes.”

“Dori’s backing Binni?”

“Naturally.”

“Nugget from the Night Market will be excited.”
Thorin looked to be thinking.

“She was that dam you spoke to when we were there, yes?”
Ori nodded then, “Nugget is just her Night Market name. I don’t know her family name.”

“If she’s who I think she is, her amad is the grand master of the pleasure guild.”

“That’s even better,” Ori enthused. “Nugget invented the Roscabal hop.”
Thorin chuckled and held out his hand to Ori. Ori glanced back and saw that Quartz was now sound asleep on the rug.

Ori grinned, curled around, and leaned on Thorin’s chest.

“What can I do for you, my king?”
Thorin eyed him.

“Why are you addressing me like that in this situation?”
Ori looked teasingly at Thorin.

“I think it’s funny.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Your king would like a kiss.”

“I can do that.”

A moment later the door opened and Dwalin came in.

“Now tha’s a temptin’ sigh’.”
Ori and Thorin sat up, amused. Dwalin offered them each a hand and pulled them to their feet.

Dwalin kissed Ori then swiftly bit at Thorin’s neck, making Thorin laugh.

Ori giggled at this. Dwalin and Thorin looked at him, then at each other and drew together, trapping Ori between them, two tall and handsome monoliths looming over him. Ori squeaked as Thorin chuckled and Dwalin growled in Ori’s ear.

“Looks like yer in some trouble, me wee scribe.”

Ori squeaked again despite himself. Thorin pulled Dwalin closer.

“Indeed, Master Scribe, you appear to be in peril.”

Ori felt himself heat up between the bodies of his king and his husband as they pressed in on him from either side. Dwalin’s hands slid around Ori’s front to cup Ori’s balls through his breeches as Thorin kissed him. Ori moaned into Thorin’s mouth.

“Dwalin,” Thorin purred, “he sounds needy.”

“Aye,” Dwalin growled, “lemme get these britches open.”

Dwalin’s hand quickly loosened Ori’s belt and Thorin dropped to his knees and drew out Ori’s prick.

“This is very nice, Ori,” Thorin murmured in his deep velvet voice.

“Tasty, too,” Dwalin told him, as he held Ori against his chest. Ori was grateful because he doubted he could stand on his own.

“Really?” Thorin asked of Ori, who was panting. “Shall I?”

“Meep,” Ori managed.

“Looks li’ we go’ ourselves a wee scribe san’wich,” Dwalin said as he nuzzled around Ori’s neck.

“Yes, I’m having the sausage,” Thorin replied and Ori gulped as he felt his cock in Thorin’s mouth. Ori thought he was going to pass out when he was slammed into reality by the sound of Dori’s voice caroling through the door, calling them to lunch.

Ori gasped and choked out, “We’ll be there in a few minutes, Dori-Eeeee!”

His face burned as Dori huffed loudly on the other side of the door. Dwalin snickered and Thorin looked up and winked at Ori.

“Fine!” Dori shouted and stomped off. “You had better wash your hands before you come to my table.”

“Ain’t using ‘em” Dwalin shouted back.

Ori had a tenth of a second to worry about the trouble this would cause, before Thorin swirled his tongue around the head of Ori’s cock. Ori groaned, torn between closing his eyes in pleasure and keeping them open to watch. He tilted his head to the side while Dwalin licked and nipped him from ear to collarbone.

“Yeh li’e tha’, love?” Dwalin purred. “Yeh li’e Thorin’s mouth around yer cock?”

“Oh, yes,” Ori moaned.

“He’s talented, is our Thorin,” Dwalin whispered. “He only ever had t’ beg a moment f’r me t’ allow him t’ suck mine.”

One of Thorin’s hands shot up in a rude gesture.

Ori giggled.

“I w-want to watch that,” he admitted. “But, not right now.”

“Righ’ now,” said Dwalin, “it’s all abou’ yeh.”

Dwalin’s fingers had inched back toward Ori’s arse, but stopped just short. He drew his finger in circles under Ori’s balls and Ori gasped and writhed so that Thorin had to hold him still.

“Found it,” Dwalin growled in Ori’s ear.

“Found what?”

“Sweet spot.”

Ori had only a vague idea of what Dwalin meant. Between the wet, tight heat of Thorin’s relentless mouth, and Dwalin’s busy fingers, Ori didn’t have a vague idea about anything beyond his own pleasure.

He was amazed to find his hands tangled in Thorin’s hair, to realize they must have been there this
whole time. Ori massaged Thorin’s scalp. An appreciative sound rose through Thorin’s chest, and out of his mouth, and surrounded Ori’s cock in echoing vibrations.

“Mahal,” Ori murmured, “that’s so good.”

“You want more?” Dwalin asked.

“Yessss - Oh!”

Dwalin’s touch firmed up and the pressure shot through the ‘sweet spot’, and right up Ori’s spine. He swore he grew three inches taller, and his cock at least that much longer. Thorin’s grip held him immobile and prevented Ori from ramming down his throat.

The cries started small, barely a whimper, but soon Ori couldn’t control them and he would be shouting loud enough to give the entire lunch table an earful. He turned his head and bit on the sleeve of Dwalin’s tunic. Thorin’s tongue lapped relentlessly and Ori was this far from begging Dwalin to take him right there, when his muscles locked and he came and came.

The intensity forced a scream through the material of Dwalin’s sleeve and then total euphoria flashed through him.

When his brain regained its proper weight, Ori lay sprawled on the rug in Dwalin’s arms and Thorin knelt between his legs, smiling.

“Oh,” said Ori. “I’m sorry about your beard.”

Thorin fell over onto his back and laughed.

“Ori, you sweet talker!”

“Tha’s me love, a master with words.”

Ori looked up at Dwalin, upside down, and said, “I’m an idiot.”

“Yer adorable.”

Dwalin pulled Ori up to sit on his knees and kissed him.

“Love yeh, azyung.”

“Love you, too, my buffalo. Thank you, Thorin…. You’re wonderful.”

Thorin rose and bowed to them. Dwalin released Ori and lifted them both to their feet. Ori sighed. He was still shaking and had to lean against Dwalin as his husband closed and belted his breeches for him. Ori wondered if his cock would ever recover. He had now stopped shaking, but there was still a tingle that ran through his body. He looked up and there was Thorin, who offered him a glass of water. Ori stared at it.

“I’ll have to undo my belt again, but I really don’t think sticking my cock in glass of water will help much.”

He looked up. Thorin regarded him with a raised eyebrows and Dwalin shook with laughter.

“What?” Ori asked, confused.

Thorin smiled.

“I thought we’d each like a drink, but if you want to stick your cock in it, that’s your business.”

“Oh!” cried Ori then blushed. “Sorry! I was… never mind!” He snatched the glass from Thorin and drank hastily, choked, and shoved the glass at Dwalin. Dwalin took it and kissed Ori firmly.

“Yer brilliant, love.”

Ori turned and buried his face in Dwalin’s tunic.

“I’m confused.”

“You are lovely, Ori,” said Thorin. Ori looked up. Thorin was at the wash basin. His beard was still damp as Thorin rubbed it with a towel. He turned and leaned against the dresser as he combed out his beard.

“Are we ready for lunch?” the king asked with a merry look at his captain and scribe. Dwalin went and put the glass on the dresser and kissed Thorin, who patted Dwalin’s butt. Ori walked slowly towards the dresser and looked at himself in the mirror. He was relieved to see he only looked a little flushed.

“I can walk and I’m not too… er… debauched looking.” Ori grinned at Thorin, then turned and saw Quartz now flat on the rug but tail still aimed at the fireplace.

“Quartz?” Ori said gently.

“I was asleep,” Quartz stated, rising and shaking himself out. “Ori, is there anything to eat?”
“C’mon,” Dwalin said and scooped up Quartz. “Th’ raven’s peckish an’ we all know what they’re like when they ge’ tha’ way.”

They went through to the breakfast parlor. Dori looked daggers at them.

“Sorry, we’re la’e,” Dwalin said cheerily, “jus’ had t’ finish a chat.”

“Oh?” Bilbo asked. “Should I have joined you? I’m afraid when there’s food involved, hobbits prioritize food.”

“Of course, my love,” Thorin said and sat next to Bilbo and kissed his cheek. “I shall fill you in after lunch.”

Dori’s frown turned to puzzlement, and then Dori dished out potato and leek soup for the late-comers.

After lunch, Dori and Binni went off to a meeting and Thorin took Frodo down to the Durins’ forge. Ori returned to his work. Some time later he tidied his papers and went through them slowly. He sighed and sat back. His first draft was finished. He didn’t think he could edit it any more without the critical eye of another. He decided it was time to ask Brur to read it. He scratched a note to the Head Librarian and got up. He went back to the bedroom. Quartz was sprawled on Ori’s pillow on the bed. Kihshassa opened her eyes from where she clung upside down on the stand and dropped down. Ori went to her and she climbed into his arms. He gave her the note and carried her to the front door and tossed her up. She swooped off down the passage.

He went through to Thorin’s office where Bilbo sat writing at his desk.

“Bilbo?”
The hobbit looked up at him with a smile, which faded into concern.

“Ori? Are you alright?”

“I just finished my first draft and sent a note off to Brur.”

“Ah.”

Bilbo set down his quill and capped his ink bottle.

“And now you’re about to hyperventilate?”

“Something like that.”

“Would a cuddle stave that off, do you think?”

“I don’t think it would hurt,” said Ori.

“How about a nice cuddle, and then we’ll go through and make some tea, and we can talk about it in the sitting room?”

Ori sighed in relief.

“Yes, please.”

Bilbo cuddled expertly. Ori clung to him and thought that this must be some innate hobbit thing. They looked cuddly, therefore they were cuddly. Except for Lumpy Sackbutt.

He giggled to himself.

He had a journal entry Bilbo needed to read. Bilbo headed to the kitchen while Ori excused himself to grab his notebook.

He arrived in the sitting room to find Bilbo coming from the kitchen.

“Kettle’s on. Here’s everything else.”

Bilbo set the tray down on the granite table and bustled back to the kitchen. He returned shortly with the teapot.

“That was quick,” Ori said, as he made a space for the teapot and shrouded it in a cozy. They sat down on the couch and Ori passed the notebook to Bilbo. Bilbo read through and they giggled over it.

“Poor Quartz,” Bilbo said when he could speak. “Lumpy Snackbutt! I’m torn in two trying to decide whether I want to call her that or Pukeweed!”

“Why can’t they be interchangeable?” Ori offered.

“Why not, indeed,” Bilbo snickered, “how clever you are, Ori. I’m so pleased with how the Bilbags line is going. Lobelia is no match for Margr and Vi. It’s quite delightful to see them cut her down like a scythe.”
“Is the map Red Queen got you still intact?”
“Very much so.” Bilbo leaned forward and poured out tea for them both. “Thorin said he would measure it and send a note to Bifur to have a new frame made. As much as I love my parents, the original frame was quite hideous.”

Bilbo passed the cup to Ori.
“Thanks,” Ori grinned. “A little too first age for you?”
“Naughty,” Bilbo laughed and settled back.

Mistress Dazla’s bird whisked through and disappeared into the kitchen. Mistress Dazla hurried out and went through to the receiving room. She returned with young Miss Konul.

“Lord Ori,” said Mistress Dazla. Ori got to his feet.
“Thank you, Mistress Dazla. Hello, Miss Konul. What may I do for you?”

Miss Konul stared around the room, open-mouthed, but she recalled herself and curtseyed.

“Master Brur sent me here to pick up a package of papers. He said you had something for him to read?”

Ori looked at Bilbo, who nodded encouragingly.
“Yes, I do,” Ori said and willed himself calm. “Please come with me.”

He led the way back to his office and went in, Miss Konul trotting after him. He gathered up the draft and forced his hands not to shake. It was just a first draft. It was supposed to come back to him covered in notes, passages crossed out and whole sections removed. Master Bur was going to help him make this presentable. He wrapped the papers firmly in a leather bag and handed to Miss Konul.

“Here it is,” he said with a cheery smile. “Thank you for coming for it.”
“Certainly, Lord Ori. It’s so exciting to see you again.”

“Here it is,” he said with a cheery smile. “Thank you for coming for it.”
“A little too first age for you?”

He flopped down next to Bilbo and put his head on Bilbo’s shoulder.

“It’s done. I just have to wait until Master Brur to tear it all apart and tell me to start over.”

Bilbo patted his hair.

“Don’t be silly. I’ve read it, remember? I thought it was rather good, your spelling and grammar are immaculate.”

Ori snickered and Kihshassa climbed into his lap.

They were squeezing the pot for last cups, when there was the sound of the front door, then Frodo talking excitedly and Thorin’s voice. The pair came into the sitting room.

“Uncle Bilbo! Idad Ori! Look!”

Frodo ran in holding up something flat and shiny, not much bigger than his own small hand.

“Let’s see, my boy,” said Bilbo.

He happily took the proffered object.

It was a battleboar of tin.

“That’s lovely, Frodo,” Ori encouraged.

“That’s lovely, Frodo,” Ori encouraged.

“Very nice,” Bilbo praised. He glanced up at Thorin, who stood behind Frodo with a slightly calmer demeanor. “Everything went well, I see. Frodo, you did exactly what Idad Thorin told you?”

The question was not actually directed at his nephew.

“I had to,” said Frodo. “I couldn’t hold up the tin shears by myself.”

Thorin leaned in to kiss Bilbo.

“The gloves are a little large for him,” said the king.
“I could have used one in a sack race,” said Frodo, nodding.
“I did the edge grinding myself,” Thorin promised.
“I could put my whole foot in idad’s glove!”
“And what will you do with this?” Bilbo asked.
“I have to leave it as a votive offering, so now I have to find a place to votive.”
“I think you mean you have to find a place to leave the votive offering.”
“Yes. That. Idad Thorin, do you think Lord Mahal will like it?”
“I’m sure He’ll be very happy to receive such a fine gift,” said Thorin. “Unlike my first offering, He’ll be able to tell what animal this is.”
“I could tell wha’ it was,” said Mahal to Ori. “I remember every single one. Th’ wife had t’ help me figure ou’ Dain’s though. I’m assumin’ it was a boar. Might’ve been a chicken.”
“We made something for Sam, too,” said Frodo. “He was really sad he couldn’t come down to the workshop with us ‘cause he’s still too little.”
“We made him a pony,” said Thorin. “Hopefully, it will make him feel better. By next year he’ll probably be old enough the come with us.”
Thorin, Bilbo and Frodo went back to Bag End East for some family time.
Ori carried the tea thing through to the kitchen to wash up but Mistress Dazla took them and shooed him out. He decided he needed to work on Sigrid’s portrait. He couldn’t put that off forever, and it was time he dwarfed-up and tackled it.
He reread Nodun’s letter, with all her advice. He felt equally assured and intimidated.
He double-checked all his materials and plunged in.
Happily, it only went wrong about eight hundred times and when he finally decided he had enough for that day, it didn’t look half bad. Another six months or so and it would be perfect.

Ori emerged from his office to find Binni, Dori and Nugget sitting at the dining room table, talking about court dancing.
“Well, I’m off,” said Nugget. She rose and turned to him. “Walk me out, Lord Ori?”
“Of course,” he said.
As they stepped out the front door, just to be polite, Ori asked, “Are you going to the night market?”
“No, just home. You want to come with me?”
“That’s kind of you, Nugget,” said Ori, “but I believe Dori’s already planning on me being home for dinner.”
“I could have you for dinner,” she said with a smile. “Or maybe, just for dessert?”
Ori thought.
“I might be able to cut out early. That would be lovely. What will we be having?”
She giggled.
“Each other.”
“Pardon? Oh. Ohhhhh!” said Ori, feeling like a complete idiot. “I’m sorry, I misunderstood.”
“You’re adorable,” said Nugget. “The offer still stands. Unless you don’t fancy dams at all?”
Ori wasn’t really in the way to know if he did or not. He didn’t think so, but it was very hard to focus on that just then.
“I’ll have to pass for now, but thank you,” he said. “It’s very flattering.”
“All right,” she said good-naturedly, “but if you change your mind, my flat’s at the old Vors place. Third floor, east corner. Send me a bat.”
She kissed his cheek and sauntered off.
For the life of him, Ori had no idea what just happened.
When he returned, Binni smiled, gathering the tea things.
“You’re not going along with Miss Nugget?”
“What? How did you know about that?” Ori asked.
Dori laughed and held out her open palm to Binni.
“Ahem.”
“Oh, all right,” giggled Binni, placing a coin in it.
“Dori!” Ori cried. “Were you making book that I was going to… go home with Nugget?”
She patted his cheek.
“I knew you wouldn’t, pet. Sit down and let me get you some sherry. If you turn any redder, your nose will bleed.”
Ori sighed. Was it worse that he hadn’t known what Nugget was about, or that Dori and Binni did?
Dwalin came in.
“There you are, dearie,” cooed Dori. “It’s good you’re home, I think your husband needs a lap and some cuddle time.”
As Dwalin reached for Ori, they heard a rumbling behind the wall.
“Halt, Chopper!” Dain brayed. “I’ve go’ t’ open th’ bloody door!”
Baluchistan, Badgers, and Babble

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. And thus spake Zar…. No not really, but the guest for the wedding are starting to arrive. Just when you thought things were going to settle down again! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

“Siblin’s!” Dain hollered as Chopper tromped up the hallway of Bag-End East.
“They’re heee-re,” Kili sing-songed as he came through into the sitting room. Ori grabbed Dwalin anyway.
“Wha’s happened, love?” Dwalin asked low.
“I got propositioned by Nugget and I didn’t realize it until she started plain speaking. I came back and Dori and Binni were making book on whether or not I’d go with her.”
“Yeh tell ‘em yer too busy wi’ yer husband, king, and consort?”
“Shhh!” Ori gasped. “I’m not ready to dig that vein yet!”
“Aye, me neither,” Dwalin muttered.
Dain exploded into the sitting room and snatched up Dori. Stonehelm and Sculdis burst in after him, Sculdís shouted greetings. Stonehelm grinned and looked around for his co-conspirators. Thorin opened the ogee arch and Frodo and Sam rushed out, shrieking for Dain. Bilbo followed with Thorin, hand-in-hand. Chopper oinked at the wargs, who padded through to sniff their old friend and lick his nose. Baluchistan swooped unsteadily in.
“Hic. I’m here, me lads and lassies! Th’ par’y kin star’! Roäc! Brother! Me ol’ fruit an’ nut! How yeh keepin’?”
“You started partying before you got here! As usual!” Roäc squawked.
“Where’s me ligh’ o’ love?” Baluchistan demanded.
“Idad Stan!” Quartz shouted.
“Eh? Oi, yeh ain’t her!” Quartz turned to Ori.
“Why am I not a girl?”
“Because you’re a boy?” Ori tried, not prepared for this discussion.
Gimli and Legolas bounced through from the door to their home, Romy on their heels. Family members arrived from all directions as it was close to suppertime. The Iron Hills royals were greeted and welcomed. All too soon Dori hustled Dain and family up to ‘their’ rooms and came scuttling back down to see what Mistress Dazla had put on for dinner.
Ori and Dwalin went through to their bedroom. Ori turned and hugged his husband tight.
“How was your day, my buffalo?”
“Well an’ guid, me love. Ivo’s training’ wi’ our Glorfy now an’ gettin’ be’er. Yeh work on yer presentation?”
“Yes, I finished the first draft and Miss Konul came and took it to Master Brur to read.”
“Tha’s wonderful, love.”
“I know, but I’m nervous about what he’ll think.”
“He’ll think i’s brilliant’,” Dwalin told him firmly.
They stood together for a moment then Quartz zoomed in from the window.
“Stop making kissy faces. Someone’s approaching from the North Road.”
“Aye, we’re comin’.”
Dwalin and Ori looked at each other then chuckled.
“Back t’ th’ chaos f’r us, love.”
“True,” Ori reflected. “But most of the time it’s fun.”

Then they arrived in the sitting room, Roäc and Red Queen whisked through from the breakfast parlor.
“Royal parade’s starting!” Roäc said.
“There’s a carriage!” Red Queen cried. “The very strangest carriage! Come, there’s such a sight to be seen!”
Ori, Bilbo, Dwalin, and Thorin made their way down the passage to the balcony over the front gate.

A curiously cobbled together carriage approached Erebor on the main road, pulled by two stout and shaggy ponies. Its odd appearance was only rendered odder by the curiously liveried outriders.
“Ah, Chat’s here,” said Thorin, spyglass raised to his eye.
“How can you tell?” Ori asked,
“The soldiers are wearing his house device.”

He handed Ori the glass. Ori peered through, wondering. Chat’s flag at the coronation had been one of his under tunics, which was unbleached linen with tiny crossed pickaxes. He’d forgotten to bring along anything more official.

Now Ori saw the pickaxes again, across the soldiers’ chests, this time much larger and, since they hadn’t been laundered hundreds of times, much brighter. The silver and brown pickaxes sat on a sea-blue field. A gold circlet rested around the head of one of the axes, as if someone had casually tossed it there. A single star topped all of it.

“Oh,” said Ori. “Are those curtains in the carriage windows?”
“He likes plaid,” said Thorin.
“Quite a lot of it,” said Ori.

“He’ll be at our front door in a few,” Dwalin commented. “Be’er go back up an’ see wha’s t’ do.”

Bilbo joined them at the front steps, Frodo and Samwise each clinging to a hand, as they watched the carriage enter the cavern.

Chat, up on the driver’s box, pulled back on the reins.
“Whoa, Winni! Whoa, Baygo!” Chat called.
The ponies shambled a few more paces, then stopped.
Two little heads popped through the curtains of the carriage.
“Idad Thorin! We’re here!”
Thorin waved.
“I see you!”

“Have you met them before?” Ori asked.
Thorin chuckled.
“No, but I’m pretty sure the crown gives me away.”

A raspy voice from within the carriage admonished them to mind out and the little heads popped back inside.

“Mornin’, Thorin! Mornin’, perfesser!” Chat called, climbing down from the box as Gib took charge of the ponies and the outriders dismounted.
They were all Blacklocks, by the looks of them.
“Good morning, Chat,” Thorin replied.
“Happy Durin’s Day,” Bilbo added.
Chat clasped wrists with all of them, but they also hugged. Chat lifted Frodo right off his feet.
“Happy Durin’s Day, Idad Chat!” cried Frodo around a mouthful of beard.

“Hullo, me wee scamp!”
When Chat put him down, Frodo drew Samwise forward.
“This is Samwise Gardener. Sam, this is King Snur of the Broadbeams. We call him Idad Chat.”
Sam beamed and bowed as he’d been taught.
“Happy Durin’s Day, yer majesty.”
“Happy Durin’s Day, laddie!” He threw Bilbo a quizzical look as he patted Sam’s head.
“Another nephew?”
“The son of my friends who are living in Dale now,” said Bilbo.
“Reg’lar hobbit invasion,” said Chat, chuckling. “Does Ulfr know about this?”
“Yes,” said Bilbo, “but we keep the carrot cake coming, so he doesn’t have time to think on it.”
“That’d have me own attention, right enough. Ready t’ meet me family?”
“As ready as we’ll ever be,” said Thorin, “but, Chat, what exactly is this thing you’re driving?”
“Camp on wheels,” said Chat proudly. “Built it meself, sleeps four, five if ya squash up.”
He went to the door, opened it, and flipped down a step. He handed down a wicked looking dam,
whose flame red hair stood straight out from her head, and her beard was plaited into hundreds of tiny braids, gathered together at her chin in an iron band. Her mustache curled up and around at the ends, over and over, nearly reaching the height of her black eyes. This was Givris, the former bandit
queen, also known as Elrond’s nemesis. She grinned when she saw them, and Ori felt his innards
retreating toward his spine.
“Here we are, me mizimel,” said Chat. Then he turned and lifted down a pair of giggling
miniatures of himself. “And here’s the cargo. Let’s go an’ say howdy t’ yer idads an’ yer cousins.”
Givris put her hand on Chat’s arm and he drew her forward, looking proud enough to combust. The badgers clung to her tunic, eyes huge. They were actually even younger than Ori had expected.
“Thorin, Bilbo, an’ company, this here’s Givris, Queen o’ the Broadbeams. Givi, m’love, this is
King Thorin, an’ his soon to be husband Perfesser Baggins, an’ young Frodo, that everyone thinks is their love child.”
She stopped in mid-bow to look at him and shake her head.
Chat continued blithely, “An’ this here’s wee Samwise Gardener.”
“Yer majesty,” she rasped, “perfesser, lads an’ lassies, I’m pleased t’ meetcher.”
“An’ this here’s me damlin’ Snis an’ me dwarflin’ Sni.” Chat looked as proud as a dwarf adad
could be. “Say howdy, yeh lot.”
They bowed.
“At yer service,” they said, more or less in unison.
Thorin and company also bowed.
“At yours and your family’s,” said Thorin.
While introductions were made, the soldiers had formed up behind, each in control of a pony.
“You got some soldiers, I see,” said Thorin.
“Aye, borrowed ’em from Arivett fer the trip. Impressive, ain’t they? Now what do I do with ’em?”
“The stable crew will take care of their horses. Mistress Dazla will show them where to billet.”
“Oh, right.”
He looked like he was about to go into the house, leaving the soldiers staring straight ahead, being
the well-trained, disciplined troops they so obviously were.
“Chat, dear?” Givris patted his arm.
“Aye, m’love?”
“Ya should give ’em orders an’ dismiss ’em.”
“Oh, right, otherwise, they’ll still be standin’ here at midnight.” He turned to the soldiers. “Yer dismissed ’til I call for ya. Go have fun. Don’t get into no trouble or me wife’ll have yer hides.”
One soldier stepped forward, and shouted orders to the rest. They bowed to the kings and nobles, and followed Gib over to the stable of the Oakenshield Inn, presumably to take care of their ponies.
“They’re oblin’ enough,” said Chat, “but a frownier-faced bunch I never seen.”
“They work f’r Arivett, dear,” said Givris. “Smilin’s a no-no.”
“Where is Arivett?” Thorin asked. “Weren’t you traveling together?”
“We were,” said Givris, “but she was a little what-cher call indisposed this mornin’, so she sent us
ahead. We the first t’ arrive?”

“Dain arrived a couple of hours ago,” Bilbo smiled.

“Yes,” Thorin gave Chat a look. “Ulfr’s here been here for a few weeks.”

“I’m perishin’ from excitement. Fleecin’ his dead relatives bein’ elves now?”

“Exactly. Don’t tease, he’s almost enjoying himself. Speaking of which,” said Thorin, “where is Frerin right now?”

“He begged off. Said somethin’ about havin’ to cut his toenails.”

“You left him alone with your kingdom?”

“Locked ‘im in his chambers. What? I’m lazy, not stupid. Best to put him somewheres with food an’ such, an’ his wife and impending pebble. Actually, that seems to be enough to keep him happy-ish.”

They reached the sitting room where Ulfr and Yizaris took tea with the Imladris elves under Dori’s supervision.

“Rhonda! Linda!” Chat cried. “Now ain’t this a nice surprise.”

It was for Lindir, anyway, Ori reflected. Lindir instantly knelt to hug him. Meanwhile, Lord Elrond took meeting with Givris again with grave restraint.

“You look quite well, Givris,” he said noncommittally.

“Ah, now don’t be standoffish, our Rhonda,” Chat coaxed. “How could Givris resist yer charms? Yer the prettiest dam who ain’t a dam who’s an elf I ever saw.”

He smacked Elrond across the arse lightly and went to greet the Ironfists.

“Oi, our Ulfr! Ya ain’t blowed up yet!” Chat cried.

“I’ll blow yeh up, yeh knot head,” Ulfr threatened, smiling. When he turned to Chat’s wife, his smile narrowed. “Ah, Givris. There yeh are again.”

“Ulfr,” they exchanged bows.

Ulfr turned to his own wife.

“Yizzie, yeh remember Queen Givris.”

Unlike Ulfr, Yizaris was more than happy to see her.

“Ah, Givi! It’s been an age,” said Yizaris, rising to greet her. They embraced a little more warmly than was comfortable, at least for Ulfr. Chat knocked heads with Yizaris.

“An’ here’s me little sprogs,” said Chat, drawing them forward. “This here’s yer Imad Yizaris. Say ‘how’d’ya do.”

They giggled, but did as they were told.

“I’d put ‘em down fer naps, but they’d just bounce back up again,” said Givris.

“Not sleepy, mam,” said Snis.

“No kiddin’?”

“Perhaps,” Bilbo said, “they’d like to go and play in the meadow while Miss Oqizla shows you your rooms and you settle in? They can have their tea when they’ve burned off some energy and might sit still for three minutes together.”

“Bless ya, perfesser, I think that’s a world-class idea,” Givris said.

“Frodo, Sam,” Bilbo turned to the faunts. “Why don’t you take your cousins out to the meadow to play.”

“Yes!” Frodo cried and grabbed Snis’ hand “Come on! We’ve got wargs!”

“Oooo!” Snis squealed and the faunts and dwarflings scampered out into the meadow.

“There goes a dangerous alliance,” said Kili. “Do you suppose Erebor will survive the visit?”

Thorin swung around and looked at him askance.

“It survived you and your brother, though just barely. I’d say we’re good for the next age at least.”

Yizaris rose and took Givris’ arm.

“I’ll help you unpack, dear,” she said.

“Obliged as always, our Yizzie,” said Givris.

They paused at the door to the receiving room, where Miss Oqizla stood waiting.

“Chat, me love,” said Givris, with a wicked smile. “Aren’t ya goin’ t’come unpack, too?”
“Beg pardon, all,” said Chat, and he scurried to follow them. Within seconds of their leaving the sitting room, there was bellowing from the receiving room. Obviously Dain and his family had met Chat’s. The shouting died down and Dain crashed into the sitting room.

“Oi Ulf! When yeh git here?” Dain demanded.

“Long a’for yeh, yeh great lump,” Ulfr greeted him as they knocked heads.

“Whossis?” Dain asked. He chucked his chin at Buer.

Ulfr was more than happy to introduce the young dwarf and in moments, they were perched in a corner discussing mechanical things. Ori hoped they would only blow things up outside of Fundin House. Dori popped back into the kitchen.

Elrond came to his side

“Ori, how is your work coming along?”

“Well, thank you,” Ori sighed. “I’ve sent it to Master Brur to tear apart.”

Elrond chuckled. “I’m sure he won’t destroy it over much. I saw some of your presentation and it read perfectly.”

“I hope so, I only see mistakes.”

“Come, my young friend, you are too hard on yourself.”

Ori shrugged then, “Have you heard anything from your scribes back in Rivendell?”

“The weavers’ guild minutes have rendered some excellent ancient insults, my favorite being ‘just because you wear the boots, doesn’t mean the cock matches the feet’.”

Ori choked.

“Yes,” Elrond smiled, “although I’m somewhat mystified on the reference.”

“Oh,” Ori said. “It used to be said you could judge the size of a male dwarf’s cock by the size of the feet. Big boots, big cock. Men sometimes use it to mean the same, although I have heard the men’s ears are sometimes used in place of feet.”

Elrond snickered and winced at the same time.

“As a healer, you have no idea how odd that sounds.”

“ Anything else?” Ori asked and gestured to the sofa, they sat and Ori scooted around to face the elf.

“Yes, an extremely strange little volume written by a dwarf healer named Baraselzus. He lived during early second age.”

Ori frowned. “I’ve come across a few medical texts that mention him. He styled himself as a healer. He was a bit crazy. He was not in any medical guild. It was said his mastery was in hat making.”

“I’m not surprised he was crazy,” Elrond sighed. “He seemed to think the best topical ointment was a cream made of tallow, pipeweed ash, oil from the three leafed ivy, and quicksilver.”

“Ouch!” Ori grimaced at the thought.

“That was my opinion as well. He tested it on himself and, I quote, found it ‘invigorating’.”

“He must have been crazy,” Ori said, and shook his head.

“Quicksilver is extremely poisonous,” Elrond observed. “Madness is a side effect.”

“Three leafed ivy stings worse than nettles,” Ori agreed, “and you can’t make soup out of it.”

Elrond stared at him.

“Nettles are a soup ingredient among dwarrow?”

Ori nodded,

“Nettles are a soup ingredient among dwarrow?”

Ori nodded,

“Yes, it’s easily gathered and plentiful, so you don’t need to spend any money. Dori used it as a tea for purifying the blood and in soup as he said it was good for us.”

“That’s pee-pee tonic,” Nori added as he and Bofur leaned over the back of the sofa.

“Ah, yes,” Elrond agreed. “It is an excellent diuretic.”

Ori squirmed round and knelt up, grabbing for Nori’s nose.

“Gitoff, ya liddle mole!” Nori bellowed. “Dor, th’ badger’s tryin’ t’ pull me snoot again!”

Dori came merrily back through.

“Pet, what did you do?”
Ori giggled then frowned,  
“Nori said a bad word in front of Lord Elrond.”  
“Pet, I’m sure Lord Elrond—”  
“And he maligned your nettle tea.”  
“Nori!”  
Ori was aware of Ulfr and Buer staring at them. The two had never seen the Brothers Ri ‘at it’ before.

“I didn’t mainline anyfin’!” Nori blustered, getting into the act. “That tea’s a medicament f’r makin’ ya piss.”

“In company,” Dori pronounced loudly, “you will say urinate.”  
“In my arse I will!” Nori shouted.  
“No, my duck,” Dori cooed, “that’s called flatulance.”  
“Nori farts!” Ori shouted and fell back on the sofa giggling.

Nori reached for him and Dori grabbed Nori.  
“Behave or I’ll spank you both!” Dori scolded around laughter. “Stop talking about rude things this instant!”

“Lemme go!” Nori yelled. “Oi, our Bo!”  
“Between brothers, me lad.” Bofur laughed.  
“Oi Dain!” Nori tried.  
Dain bounded to his feet and scooped up Nori.  
“I’ll spank this one iff’n yer wan’in’ t’ spank t’other, me dumplin’,” Dain offered cheerily. Dori tittered in delight and Nori rained insults from his prison on Dain’s shoulder. Ori fell off the sofa and lay on Elrond’s feet, giggling.

Balin leaned over him.  
“Alrigh’, wee brother?”  
“He’s fine.” Elrond peered down at Ori. “He has been misbehaving in the most shocking manner.”

“Aye, tha’s our laddie,” Balin hefted Ori to his feet.

“Dinner,” Dori caroled to the room and the herd followed her into the breakfast parlor.

Dinner was chunks of rabbit and cherry tomatoes or cavern mushroom and parsnip, both dishes skewered and roasted and served with cauliflower smothered in cheese sauce, lightly fried crayfish, and bowls of finely-chopped, pickled horseradish, cucumber and onions. Snis and Sni decimated the cauliflower and cheese. Their parents admired these sudden inroads on the once reviled vegetable.

“It’s amazing what a good cheese sauce can achieve,” Bilbo commented.  
“Aye,” Givris chuckled. “I’ll have t’ try it on them brussely cabbages.”  
“Sprouts?” Bilbo said. “Never boil them.”  
“How else ‘m I t’ get ‘em cooked?” Givris demanded.  
“Slice them fine and fry with pepper and onions and plenty of butter,” Bilbo told her.  
“Aye, I ‘member them from one a th’ dinners when I was here f’r our Thorin’s coronation!” Chat butted in. “Bloody brilliant. I’d a’ telt ya ‘bout it, me love, if I’d know that’s what they was!”

“Bit odd, eatin’ somethin’ so green,” Ulfr added, “green’s usually f’r elves.”  
“Actually, your majesty.” Bujni interposed, “up until the last two centuries, it was thought that elves only ate green plants because green plants live on air and that’s why elves are so light in weight.”  
“Makes sense,” Ulfr allowed.  
“Since Mister Gardener arrived, I have interviewed him on several occasions and have discovered the true purpose of plant roots.”  
“Holds ‘em in the ground,” Ulfr replied with finality.

Buer and Yizaris nodded.  
“That’s what I’ve always heard,” Chat agreed.

Every elf and man at the table froze and stared at the dwarrow. The Durins remained silent. Ori
was rather embarrassed for his people.

“The truth,” Bujni explained slowly and clearly, “is that plants have roots to take in nourishment and water from the soil.”

“Plants eat dirt?” scoffed Ulfr. “Pull th’ other leg, laddie, it’s go’ bells on!”

“I am most assuredly not teasing you, your majesty,” Bujni raised a disapproving eyebrow. “At Mister Gardener’s advice, I planted seeds, each in some soil pressed between two panes of glass and observed the seeds grow. Without light or water the seed does not grow. Without light, the roots grow but the seed does not sprout and then seed dies. With water and light, the seed grown properly and it takes nutrients and water from the soil. Thus in order for a seed to grow it must take nutrients. I measure the acids and alkalis in all. There was a change in the acidity level with water and with water and light. Soil is required. After all, there are plants that grown underwater.”

Bujni finished and once more applied himself to his dinner. Buer looked admiringly at Bujni while Ulfr and Chat were dumbfounded.

“Well,” Givris said awed. “Who’d’a thunk it! That’s real clever of ya, laddie.”


“Aye, well” Ulfr said, not quite convinced. “Yeh still got yer testin’ equipment?”

“I do, your majesty,” Bujni said and turned to fix his gaze on Ulfr. “I will happily repeat the experiment or furnish you with the necessary equipment and instructions to conduct it yourself.”

“Yeh think I could?” Ulfr chuckled.

“If you follow my instructions explicitly, yes,” Bujni replied.

“Well, Master Oin,” Ulfr turned to the healer.

“Eh?” Oin cocked a look at the Ironfist king.

“Yeh think I could replicate yer lad’s plant experiment?”

“Yer a chemist,” Oin griped, “yeh’d fuck it up in two minutes.”

Everyone laughed, including Ulfr.

“Me lad’s a genius,” Oin said, looking proudly on Bujni. “Engineerin’ an’ anythin’ else he turns his hand t’. Hands o’ a healer, th’ lightest touch.”

Bujni blushed as Binni and Oin beamed at him.

“Have you other experiments going?” Buer asked.

“Several,” Bujni replied.

“Tell us, lad,” Ulfr invited.

Bujni looked narrowly at Ulfr, then smiled.

“I don’t sell my ideas cheaply, your majesty!”

“Woooo!” Buer and Yizaris hooted in unison.

“So when kin we expect to see ‘em workin’?” Ulfr pressed.

“I shall be presenting my main project this spring,” Bujni revealed. “It is to be my mastery.”

“How exciting, dear Bujni!” Dori enthused. “Just when Lord Balin and I shall be married.”

Bujni rose and bowed to Dori and Balin.

“It will be a privilege to do so on the occasion of your wedding, Honored Bearer, Lord Balin.”

“We shall all look forward to it, Bujni,” Thorin said with a smile.

“Is your craft t do with plants or engineering?” Buer asked, curious.

“I’m a scribe, training in librarianship.”

“You get to see all the master theses!” Buer sighed in awe. “Lucky you.”

“Master Brur says learning’s for all,” Ori put in.

“For which I am most grateful,” Lord Elrond added. “I have been enjoying the historical stacks and between my library in Rivendell and Elessar’s library in Gondor, we could created a comprehensive history of Arda. I hope to speak with Rigel for the history of the Easterlings as well.”

“Tell me,” Thorin asked, “did anyone get access to the library in Isengard?”

“We did,” Thranduil replied. “Saruman gave the tower into the keeping of Gondor when he left.”

“Good,” Thorin approved. “Elrond, this information included in your comprehensive history will allow scholars to study the patterns of how evil rose to power. This will allow all of us to recognize the patterns and advise further generations.”
“Wise o’ ya, our Thorin,” Givris said slowly. She stared at Thorin, the respect in her face obvious.

“Spill all th’ secrets?” Ulfr growled.

“We cannot have evil rise in Mordor again, my love,” Yizaris advised. “If we had knowledge of Dol Guldor, Khazad-dûm may not have fallen.”

“Tha’ was one a’ them maiar,” Ulfr said.

“Which is why I feel Rigel and Ara need to be involved,” Thorin said.

“Why?” Ulfr asked.

Ori almost growled at Ulfr.

“It was in the last release of the royal notices, your majesty,” Ori said in a flat tone.

“Rigel,” Thorin said, “is the blue wizard formally known as Pallando and Ara is the other blue wizard formally known as Alatar. I wish to work with them, as trying to get information out of Tharkûn is like sitting next to a bucket of water and hoping for fish.”

That made everyone laugh and Mistress Dazla arrived with dessert, a steamed gingerbread pudding decorated with sugared ginger and served with frozen vanilla custard.

She laid the platter on the table, then stood with a frown.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ori saw the little bird winging through.

“Seems a bit late,” she murmured to herself. She turned to Thorin. “Your majesty, a party of travelers has just entered the royal cavern.”

“Someone’s arriving rather late in the day,” said Thorin.

He and Bilbo rose and went to the door.

Soon, Ori heard a booming laugh, echoed by a second, only slightly higher pitched.

The door burst open, and there stood Bombur and Erda.

“Look, my heart,” said Bombur. “We’re just in time for dessert!”

Bofur shouted and Jani shrieked, and flung themselves forward to both hug Bombur and Erda at once.

Then the crowd descended upon them, in a gale of greetings and hugs. Along with Bifur, the Urs had brought Poli, Buri and Wili.

“You planned this, didn’t you,” Thorin accused Bombur playfully.

“Guilty,” said Bombur, wicked and cheerful at once. “What’s for pudding?”

Bifur bowed to his king.

“Your majesty,” said Bifur in ancient khuzdul, “t’is time to chow down.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. And here comes everyone! Again! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

“Wake up, laddie.”
Ori sat up in bed. He could see from the window, it was barely dawn. Dwalin’s eyes flew open.
“Wha’ yeh need me t’ do, love?”
“I don’t know yet. Durin woke me.”
Dwalin was on his feet and, at the window, Garnet winged in and landed on his arm, croaking.
“Gheir,” she reported.
“An’ his usual folk?”
“No, just two soldiers.”
Dwalin frowned and turned back to Ori.
“Love, I’ve go’ t’ go meet ‘im. It ain’t like ‘im t’ travel tha’ ligh’.”
“I’ll go make some food,” Ori said. He climbed out of bed and began pulling on his clothes.
Dwalin got into his uniform and strapped on his weapons, while he and Ori came together in a kiss.
“Good morning,” Ori whispered. “I love you,”
“Love yeh, too, me mizmel. I’ll send Garnet t’ yeh t’ warn Thorin, if there’s trouble brewin’.
Back in a bit.”
Dwalin hurried out the chimney door, Killer on his heels, and Ori went to the kitchen.
He had the kettle on and was busily poaching eggs, while frying small rounds of blood sausage, when Mistress Dazla whirled in.
“Lord Ori?”
“King Gheir has been sighted in the distance. Dwalin’s gone to meet them,” Ori explained. The housekeeper nodded business-like, lit the ovens, and disappeared into the pantry for the bread dough that had been rising overnight.
“I’ll finish here, Lord Ori,” she said, “if you would care to wake the king?”
“Certainly,” Ori said before he thought.
He paused, before trying the door to Bag-End East. The ogee arch slid aside and the handle of the green door turned easily. He opened it and Sugar’s nose thrust through at his eye level.
“It’s just me,” Ori said and patted her head. Sugar licked his cheek and backed away to allow him to enter. She walked, glued to his side, as he padded quietly through to the bedroom. Butter peered out at him from Frodo’s room. He went to the master bedroom door. It stood ajar and Ori tapped on it, then peeked around it. Thorin, bare-chested, sat up and looked at him.
“What?” Thorin asked in Iglishmëk. Ori could see a lump of furs that was Bilbo, at Thorin’s waist.
“Gheir, alone but for two soldiers.” Ori signed in reply. “Dwalin’s gone to meet him.”
Thorin slid out of bed and Bilbo lifted his head, curls tousled from sleep.
“What’s going on?”
“Gheir’s coming,” Thorin told him with a kiss.
Bilbo turned over and saw Ori.
“Good morning, Ori. Why the stealthiness?”
“Gheir’s alone.” Ori explained.
“How very odd.” Bilbo frowned, then sat up and hopped out of bed. “I’ll come with you, Thorin dear.”
“Thank you, amrâlimê.”
Thorin went to a dresser, removed something, and handed it to Ori. It was Thorin’s spyglass.
Ori went back to the kitchen. Mistress Dazla nodded to him and returned to readying breakfast with Miss Larit and Miss Oqizla assisting her.
Ori slipped out of the house and ran down the small passage to peer over the parapet. He lifted the spyglass. Beyond Dale proper, he saw the Stiffbeard king. Ori focused the magnifiers. Gheir looked considerably run down and glum. He showed no sign of warfare, neither did his guards.
Dwalin on Harley bounded into view with Killer at Harley’s side. Ori watched as Dwalin and Gheir talked. Dwalin threw back his head in laughter, patted Gheir’s shoulder, and turned Harley to escort Gheir to the Mountain.
He saw Eowyn on Windfola meet them at the south end of Dale proper and, with Dwalin, she rode escort to the Stiffbeard king.
Ori put the glass in his pocket and hurried back to the house. He gained the sitting room, saw the door to Bag-End East was still closed rather than open for the day, and hurried through the passage. He knocked this time. He heard an odd noise as though Sugar was breathing heavily at the door. The knob turned and the door opened slightly. Sugar thrust her head through the crack and nosed the door further open. Her tail was going and she panted happily at Ori. Thorin entered the room and stared.
“Ori, did Sugar just open the door for you?”
“Yes,” Ori chuckled and patted Sugar. Sugar pranced over to Thorin and sat down in front of him. Her tail swept the floor vigorously.
Ori had a chance to look at Sugar and Thorin together. Sugar had filled out splendidly. Her muscles were defined and she was now half a head taller than Thorin. Her fur had grown in, thick, silky, and beautifully cared for. Ori thought she was the ultimate example of a warg. Except for her fuller face and huge jaws, she had almost returned to the images of mountain wolves of the northern wastes of legend.
“Did you see anything of note?” Thorin asked, bringing Ori out of his revery.
“Gheir just looks tired and grumpy. Dwalin met up with them on the outskirts of Dale and whatever he said made Dwalin laugh and commiserate with him. Eowyn met them at the city limit.”
Thorin considered as he tousled Sugar’s face and ruff, then grinned.
“I wonder, as all his wives are pregnant, if they may have become fed up with his ways and, ahem, cajoled him to go to Erebor.”
Ori giggled as Sugar flopped down and rolled over for a belly rub. Thorin beamed down at the huge beast on his polished floor.
“You are such a sweet damling,” Thorin cooed and dropped to his knees and buried his face in the warg’s tummy.
Frodo and Sam burst through, squealed to see Thorin thus occupied, and immediately set about helping.
Bilbo, shadowed by Butter, entered and smiled at Ori.
“Does Dwalin behave like this with Killer?”
“Yes, but I do, too.” Ori admitted, then he and Bilbo laughed.
“Come along,” Bilbo said, and adjusted one of Sam’s braces. “We’re having first breakfast in Fundin House.”
“Yay!” shouted the faunts and rushed out the still open door. Butter bounded after them. Thorin rose, as did Sugar. She licked Thorin’s face and followed Butter at a sedate pace.
Thorin came to Bilbo and put an arm about the hobbit’s waist and the other about Ori’s. He kissed their cheeks, one after another.
“Good morning, sweet scribes of the valar.”
Bilbo blinked at Ori.
“Your lordship, we share a title.”
“Indeed we do, your highness,” Ori agreed.
“May I felicitate you, your lordship?” Bilbo teased.
“Only if I may pay you tribute in return, your highness.”
“Why, thank you, your lordship.”
“It’s my pleasure, your highness.”
Thorin stood aside and bowed to them.
“Scribe of Mahal, you may kiss the scribe of Yavanna. Scribe of Yavanna you may kiss the
scribe of Mahal.”
Ori wrapped Bilbo in his arms and kissed him thoroughly.
Bilbo laughed, then turned to Thorin.
“And now, your majesty, you may kiss the scribes of the valar.”
Thorin put an arm around both again and kissed Bilbo, then Ori, making both giggle.
“Uncle! Idad!” came Frodo’s call from the Fundin sitting room.
Thorn released his scribes and offered each of them an arm. They went through and Balin arrived
with Dori.
“This is a bit early, lad,” Balin observed.
“Indeed,” Thorin replied, amused. “Gheir is in Dale and looking glum. We must cheer him up
with breakfast.”
“Fifty gold says his wives chucked him out,” Dori said merrily. “I shall go and see to his old
rooms.”
“I shan’t take that bet, Bearer,” Thorin chuckled, “as I think you’re right.”
Dori tittered and pattered out. Balin sighed and bowed his king towards the breakfast parlor.
They had time for one cup of tea before Dwalin strode in.
“King Gheir, yer majesty.”
“Welcome, Gheir.” Thorin smiled as Gheir bowed low, then rose. They knocked heads, and
Thorn embraced the Stiffbeard king. “To what do we owe this solitary pleasure?”
“Don’t ask,” mumbled Gheir.
“Ah, with all the Mavi expecting you are somewhat in the way?” Thorin suggested gently.
“Yeah.” Gheir brushed at his tunic, dusty from the road.
Dori arrived. Gheir bowed to the Honored Bearer. Dori curtseyed prettily and pounced on him.
“King Gheir! You are shockingly travel stained. Your room is ready. You shall bathe and
change before you sit at the king’s table. Come along!”
Gheir was removed at speed. Dwalin kissed Ori and sat down.
“Did Eowyn not accompany you?” Thorin asked.
“Nah, she’s headed off duty an’ t’ bed. Told her t’ tell Haldir an’ Glorfy there’d be more soon
enough.”
“Excellent,” said Thorin as Bilbo poured out a cup of tea for the captain.
Bujni and Dipfa arrived, they bowed deeply in unison and took their places.
“Good morning your majesty,” said Bujni, “your highness, lords and ladies, I understand we just
missed the king of the Stiffbeards. Do the Stiffbeard queens need the assistance of my precious
diamond?”
“They didn’t come,” Frodo said solemnly, while everyone else stifled laughter.
“Ah,” said Dipfa. “You see, my beloved boo, it is as I expected. Being full of expectancy, it is
too rigorous a duty for the queens to travel.”
Bujni lifted her hand to his lips.
“You are very wise, my precious diamond.”
“Shall we link up, my boo?”
“Indeed. Prepare to link, my diamond.”
Just for a moment, Ori looked wildly around the table, and noticed everyone else doing the same,
extcept for Bujni and Dipfa, who each lifted what looked like a sash they wore at the waist. The
sashes ended in a metal coupling, which they fastened, and joined their clothes together.
“We only do it when we’re sitting down,” said Dipfa. “I designed it as an expression of
togetherness, but we don’t want to get caught up in something while we’re moving. That would just look silly.”

Miss Oqizla came through with large pan piled with poached eggs and Mistress Dazla followed with a platter of blood sausage.

Everyone tucked in. Miss Larit came through and Floris and Mavey bounced in after her, before they could be announced.

“Oh, your majesty!” Floris cried.

“We came to see Master Dipfa,” Mavey finished.

“Please sit down and eat first,” Thorin said.

The two sat and filled their plates, and chattered about the circus being open after the wedding. Both had come for their new costumes from Dipfa. Floris was going to be doing her warg act and Mavey and Fanny had made up a new dance.

Dori returned. Thorin caught her eye and raised his chin toward Mavey.

“Mavey, dear,” said Dori, “you should know that King Gheir has arrived this morning.”

“Oh!” said Mavey startled. “I was just going to put a letter in the caravan for the day after tomorrow. I guess I can give it to him sooner. I’ve been very good. I’ve written every two weeks and told him everything I’d learnt.”

She frowned a little, then,

“He hasn’t written to me, so I suppose it was either too hard to know where to send the letters or maybe he’s glad I’m not chattering at him.”

She giggled. There was the sound of footsteps and Gheir came in. He was dressed casually and looked a good deal more cheerful.

“Blood sausage! Bearer, I-” He stopped when he saw Mavey and stared at her.

“Surprise!” Mavey squealed.

“Mavey?” he gasped.

“Yes, it’s me!” She jumped up. “Are you surprised? Say you’re surprised!”

She hopped to his side and he enfolded her in his arms.

“Yes, my dear, and what a lovely surprise it is!”

He held her away from him and looked her over.

“You look beautiful, dear. Are you happy?”

“Oh, yes!” Mavey cried. “Did you get my letters?”

“Indeed I did. Very informative. I must admit I was never sure where I might safely write to you. I hope you didn’t think I was neglecting you?”

“Oh no, I thought it was because I was traveling! You remember Floris?” Mavey tugged Gheir to the table and sat him between herself and Floris and they went through everything they told the company already.

Ori smiled to Thorin, who nodded slightly. Gheir was much better in the role of a fond uncle, bent on spoiling the young ladies talking his ears off. He ate seven patties of blood sausage and listened intently to the babbling going on either side of him. He saw Thorin looking at him and smiled. When he’d finished, the two dragged him along with them to go with Dipfa and see their new costumes.

“Shall we unlink, my boo?” Dipfa asked.

“Preparing to unlink, my precious diamond.”

Bujni remained, but the females carried Gheir away on a tide of excited noise. Ori thought Gheir looked perfectly happy.

Oin and Gloin came in with their families.

“I hear Gheir’s here an’ alone,” Gloin said immediately.

“Yes,” Thorin chuckled as he helped Frodo and Sam out of their chairs, so the faunts could bounce out to the meadow.

“Booted him ou’, did they?” Oin said, sat down by his son and patted him on the head.

“Yes, and now he’s off spoiling Mavey and Floris,” Dori said as she filled plates. “No doubt he’ll overpay Dipfa and buy them any frippery thing they take a fancy to.”
“Good,” said Binni, “he’ll be as avuncular as he likes without any responsibility. Jim can always use any jewelry to sell when they travel if he needs.”
“Considering how popular the circus is,” Thorin chuckled, “I doubt he’d ever need to.”
“Where’re Ulfr and Buer?” asked Gridr. “I’m sure Arne and his loves will be here soon enough. They will want to hear about the wedding.”
“Mistress Dazla?” Dori asked as the housekeeper bustled in with more food.
“King Ulfr and that young Buer woke and went straight to the old lab down in the Oakenshield Inn, marm. I hope to Mahal they don’t blow it up.”
“If they do, they’ll redesign and build a new one,” said Thorin comfortingly.
“If he does,” said Bombur as he came in with Erda and their badgers, “perhaps I can assist him with the kitchen.”
Jani and Randibur arrived with Dis.
“Mam! Da!” Randibur cried as he leapt into the pile of dwarrow, excited as a toddler despite his grown-up attire.
“Oooo, just look at you!” Erda crooned as she hugged him. “Doesn’t he look dashing, just like his adad.”
Randi blushed as he embraced Bombur.
“I’d need to put on a lot of flesh, and I still wouldn’t compare.”
Bombur bumped foreheads with him.
“Dis is teaching you all manner of sweet-talk, isn’t she.”
“Da!”
Elrond and Lindir arrived, looking brave in the face of all that blood sausage.
Thorin laughed at them.
“Don’t worry, we won’t insist. There’s eggs, and porridge, and fried plantains, and fresh-baked bread and jam.”
Elrond bowed.
“As always, you are too good.”
They were finishing their tea when Roäc winged in.
“Swells approaching from the northwest. And the south. And the west.”
Thorin sighed.
“When should we expect each party?”
“All at once. D’uh!”
“Oh, Mahal!” Dori cried. “Mistress Dazla! Mistress Dazla!”
“Roäc,” said Thorin, “please go get Jim.”
“Because he’s used to running circuses.”
The housekeeper swept in and she and Dori hurried out.
There was the sound of galloping hooves from above and Grinder hopped down into the meadow, with Frodo and Sam clinging to the back wool.
“The standard of Gondor is coming on a boat,” Frodo cried, “and I can see another flag really far away coming from the south!”
“Thank you, irakdashat,” said Thorin and rose. “Dori,” he called through the kitchen door, “prepare for a home invasion.”
They all heard Dori giggle.

Ori and Dwalin rode Gnasher up, following Frodo and Sam on Grinder. The Ur and Blue Mountain badgers watched in delight from the meadow. Ori looked through the spyglass and saw not only the standard of Gondor on the ship, but also the standards of Rohan and Lothlórien.
A large party approached on the road to the south of the mountain. Ori picked out the standards of Hild and Ahkn. Ori turned to the northwest and saw another party. He didn’t know the standard but he was sure it was what Arivett and Eomer had decided on: a green field with a tower crossed by a spear and an axe.
Ori watched as the ship moved to the great pier of Dale. Movement caught his eye and he turned the glass to Dale house. Bard and Thranduil, on horse and elk, rode towards the docks.

Ori gave the glass to Frodo and helped him look through it. After a couple of squeals of excitement, Frodo carefully gave the glass to Sam and helped him look through it.

“Th’ nevies’re so bleedin’ cute,” Dwalin murmured in Ori’s ear. Ori stifled a giggle and Frodo meticulously gave the glass back into Ori’s keeping. The goats hopped merrily down the banks and leapt into the meadow. The four made their way to the breakfast parlor.

“Rohan and Gondor’re landin’ at th’ docks. Bard an’ his lot’re meetin’ ‘em,” Dwalin reported. “Let’s hope someone’s told Eowyn her family’s here,” Bilbo replied as he pulled the cleared tablecloth to him in a mound, then went outside to shake it in the meadow. Several wrens and couple of bluebirds fluttered down to feast on the crumbs.

Ori looked down at himself.

“You and our deary have just enough time to change and wash,” Dori ordered. “Change an’ wash then come t’ th’ guest all nakkie, our Dori?” Dwalin teased then backed away laughing as Dori launched at him armed with the large tea towel.

“Stop being difficult, our deary! Go with Pet and do as you’re told.” Dwalin grabbed Ori’s hand and pulled him out.

“And no debauchery!” Dori shouted after them.

Ori and Dwalin snickered and went to the bathroom.

“I ain’t go’ much time, love,” Dwalin grumbled. “I know.” Ori grinned up at his husband. “But we have time to wash each other’s backs.”

Ori watched as Frodo, Sam, Snis and Sni, and the young Urs played a game called hopscotch in the Fundin front formal paths. The huge metal gates had been unhasped from the hobbit gate to stand wide and welcoming. The hobbit gate was swathed in flowers.

Thorin and Bilbo stood in the center, ready to greet their friends.

In the distance they heard the cheers of the dwarrow and the trumpets blared, announcing the arrivals. The sounds of many hooves crashed and echoed as the horses entered the royal tunnel, then the line of Bard, Thranduil, Aragorn, Arwen, Boromir, Lavender, Galadriel and Celeborn, Theoden, and Theodred rode in.

Thorin and Bilbo came forward, calling welcome, and the all riders alit, everyone shouted and welcomed all over. Ori grinned as Theoden embraced Dori, Aragorn fast in the grip of Dain and Sculdís. Fili, Kili and Theodred all talked at once. Bilbo and Thorin held Arwen as she knelt on one knee to hug them. Galadriel hugged Gridr and Gloin both at once and Oin and Celeborn talked excitedly at each other as Kelli hopped and squawked happily. The wargs and the cats ran through and around everyone.

Sigrid and Tilda pounced on Ori and Dwalin then rushed off to greet Galadriel.

“Hello, Scribe Ori!” Boromir bumped into him. Ori laughed at the sight of Boromir. The First March Warden had two faunts under one arm and two dwarflings under the other.

“I’d give you a hug,” said the man with a grin, “but these vicious beasts I’ve just captured might escape.”

“I’d eat ‘em now, while they’re still fresh, laddie,” Dwalin teased with a growl at the squealing little ones.

“Excellent notion!” Boromir cried and hefted his load around. “Hmm, how many minutes to the pound do you think, captain?”

“Aw, they’re jus’ wee,” Dwalin drawled. “Crunch ‘em up raw! It’s naugh’ bu’ a snack anyway. Probably hold yeh ’til dinner!”

Boromir curled an arm up and pretended to take bites out of Sni’s tummy. All the youngsters shrieked.

“Oi, our Gladdy! Our Cele!” shouted Chat, hurrying up with Givris in tow. “Come meet me family.”

“Oh, Chat!” cried Galadriel, “how lovely to see you again. Is this your queen? I’m charmed to
make your acquaintance, your majesty.”
“Aye,” Chat beamed. “Me love, this’s th’ Lórien lot I told ya ‘bout.”
“Queen Givris,” Celeborn laid a hand on his heart then swept down to embrace her.
“Howdido, Cele,” Givris greeted him, and bussed his cheek noisily.
Chat and Galadriel hugged then as the lady rose, Chat bellowed for his badgers.
“Oi, ya lot, leave off throttlin’ that feller an’ come say howdy-do to these folks.”
Boromir released the badgers, who started to trot up. They slowed to a walk as they approached
the Loriens, then halted a few feet away, with their mouths hanging open and their heads cocked all
the way back.
“This here’s Snis,” said Givris. “And this is Sni. They’re usually a bit more chipper’n this.”
Galadriel giggled and knelt.
“Is this better, my dears?” she asked.
Snis and Sni rolled their eyes toward their parents.
Chat laughed.
“They’re elves, silly badgers, just like our Linda and Rhonda. This here’s Lady Galadriel, and
this is her hubby, Lord Celeborn.”
Snis, apparently the braver of the two, turned to Galadriel and bowed.
Galadriel bowed her head civilly.
“How are you keeping, my dear?” she asked.
Snis edged forward, and darted out a hand to pat Galadriel’s cheek.
“No beard? It’s alright. Still pretty.”
Galadriel laughed and Snis giggled and ran and hid behind her mother.
Lavender came up, Sam was riding piggy-back.
“Look, Idad Ori!” he shouted.
“Hello Lavender,” Ori greeted her. “How was your trip?”
“Hello, Ori,” she said, giving his cheek a kiss. “We had ever such good weather and we stopped
over in Rohan for a couple of nights and then in Lórien. So many lovely places!”
“Lucky you,” Ori grinned. “Lórien is amazing, isn’t it.”
Ori turned at see Mistress Dazla herding the royal visitors into the house followed by her team and
the servants from the other lands coming through with baggage. Soldiers followed Gib, Legolas and
Gimli off to the Oakenshield Inn to stable their cattle and settle in.
Ori linked arms with Lavender and brought her into the amazing noise in the receiving room.
Dori and Mistress Dazla shoed guests up the stairs to ‘their rooms’. Sigrid tried to rein in Tilda,
who was determine to hug everyone. Dain talked to everybody at once, and Fili and Kili attempted
to organize a training ring where they and Stonehelm, Theodred, and Bain could try their mettle.
Lavender shook her head and went to extract Arwen from Lindir and her father to go upstairs and
change her traveling clothes to something more comfortable.
Roäc flew off to the outskirts of Dale, and quickly returned, announcing that the Gardeners would
soon be upon them.
Ori hoped this would mean Eowyn as well. He was right.
Eowyn breezed into the sitting room some twenty minutes later, followed by the Gardeners and
the Sisters.
“You look well,” Ori approved as Eowyn tossed back her cloak to reveal her armor and the
uniform of Dale, all black tabard but for the single brilliant white arrow on her breast.
“I think so,” she teased in return. “I hear my uncle has arrived with the people of Gondor, Rohan
and Lórien.”
Glorfindel as the Protector was similarly dressed, but the colors reversed. Ori wondered if he
ordered his foes not to bleed on his long white tabard, unadorned but for the sparkling black arrow of
jet beads. His white boots were immaculate
“Ooo, our Ori!” shrieked Vi. “Such a to-do! Our Thorin and Bilbo gettin’ proper hitched after all
this time!”
“Aye,” agreed Margr. “An’ t’ think th’ pair o’ ‘em shaccin’ up an’ in fron’ o’ our Dori. Where’s
“Upstairs sorting out guests,” Lavender replied as she came in. “Mam! Da!”

Lavender was swooped upon and hugged until she was breathless.

King Theoden arrived, shadowed by the smallest horse Ori had ever seen. It appeared to be a stallion, all black, even smaller than Wee Mac. It also appeared to be swaggering.

Eowyn bounced forward. Theoden stared as though he’d never seen her before.

“I know your face,” he said in a breathless voice, as if waking from a dream.

“Uncle!” Eowyn cried.

“Eowyn,” he said and smiled fondly.

“Uncle,” she said again with laughter in her voice.

Theoden chuckled and snatched her close. After a long hug, he held her out to look her over.

“Dale colors?”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“Married yet?”

“Uncle!”

“Betrothed?”

“Uncle!”

“Met any nice fellows?”

“Uncle!” the tone bordered on the dangerous.

Theoden turned and gestured to Haldir.

“What about him?”

“He’s misbehaving with Mister Wandi.”

Theoden sighed. “At this rate young lady, I swear I’ll go and have a chat with that Beorn fellow.”

“Who told you about Beorn?” Eowyn demanded.

“Nothing,” Eowyn gasped. “Isn’t it wonderful to visit Erebor again, Uncle! And I’ve so much to tell you!”

Theodred came in at this point and shouted at his cousin in greeting. Ori smothered a smile at the relief on Eowyn’s face when she saw Theodred. He caught the looks of sly humor exchanged by Haldir and Glorfindel. Eowyn had left a very wide flank open and there was no doubt in his mind that the two elves would attack it as often as possible.

Bell released he daughter and appraised her.

“Oh, my sweet child, you look so lovely and in the Gondorian style of long sleeves.”

“That Boromir treatin’ you right?” Hamfast wanted to know.

Lavender laughed merrily.

“Da! He treats me as though I was the queen and not dear Arwen.”

“Well, that’s alright then.”

Amused, Ori went through to the breakfast parlor again to find Bilbo and Dori laying out dishes and cutlery while Gimli, Legolas and Bujni put out seats on the patio. Ori grinned to himself. Once more Fundin house would burst at the seams with people and, best of all, they were his friends. Out in the meadow, Frodo and Sam, now in cahoots with all the badgers, the other faunts, and Tilda, attacked Fili, Kili and Boromir with gusto. The ponies frisked around them and Fanny hooted her amusement.

There was a trumpet blast from Dale and Ori knew that Hild and Ahkn were marching through. The group of warriors ignored it. The others had disappeared. Ori went back in and found both the breakfast parlor and the sitting room empty. He went to the receiving room and skidded to a stop as boots thundered along the top passage and Arwen and Aragorn raced Sculdis and Dain. They barreled out to the stair. Dain and Aragorn bounded down as Arwen and Sculdis whisked passed them, seated on the bannister. Sculdis thumbed her nose at the males as they flew down.

“Why didn’t we think of that?” Aragorn asked Dain.

“‘Cose they’re our delicate jewels of brides!” Dain roared and leapt to his wife’s side to kiss her
hand then noisily kiss all the way up her arm to plant a great smacking kiss on Sculdis’ cheek.
“Git awa’ wi’ yeh!” she shouted. “Wicked dwarf!”

Aragorn offered his arm to Arwen.

“May I escort you, my delicate jewel of a bride-to-be?”
“I’d be offended if you didn’t!” she laughed. “Coming with us, Ori?”

Before Ori could answer, Dain seized him and drew him out to the courtyard.

The soldiers arrived and Hild rode forward with Ahkn on one side and Aris on the other. Calls of welcome began and soon the hugging and greeting and shrieks of news began all over again. Once Hild had greeted Thorin, she gushed over Bilbo, then demanded to know where her daughter was.

Thorin was able to assure Hild that she had arrived before Arivett.

“Wonderful!” Hild cried. “Aris make a note. My daughter is late.”

“Noted, yer majesty,” Aris said evenly but obviously trying not to laugh.

“Where’s-?” Hild didn’t get a chance to finish before Theoden took his life in his hands, came forward and caught her by the waist, and swung her high with a joyous shout of “Sister! I’ve been counting the days to see you again!”

“Aaaak!” Hild cried. “Yes, dear brother Theoden, I’m transported to see you as well. Put me down before I vomit!”

Theoden did so, with a chuckle.

“Too high?”

“Too pregnant!” she responded.

“Congratulations, Captain Aris,” Theoden saluted her.

“It wasn’t her, you great plonker!” Hild fussed. “It was Ahkn, you know, Arivett’s father.”

“May I felicitate you?” Theoden teased.

“If you like,” Ahkn chuckled. “Didn’t know I still had it in me.”

“Neither did I,” Hild said. “Oh Mahal! I need to go inside.”

“Feelin’ sick, love?” Aris asked.

“No, badger’s sitting on my bladder again.”

Theoden looked around and called out,

“Bearer Dori, Hild needs your assistance.”

Dori bustled over and took Hild’s hand, and stopped short.

“That’s the smallest horse I’ve ever seen,” she said.

“This is Master Eorl,” said Theoden. “Master Eorl, this is Bearer Dori. Kindly greet her properly.”

Master Eorl nodded, then stretched out a hoof and bowed over it.

“That is adorable,” said Dori. “Is he-?”

“Housebroken, yes.”

“Perfect.”

“Dori!” Hild cried.

“Oh, my dear! I’m sorry, come along!”

Theoden turned his attention back to Ahkn.

“And how have you been keeping, brother king?”

“Sick as a dog every bleeding morning.”

“I’ve been fine!” said Aris with a toothy grin.

“I’ll take being ill over being in your shoes,” Ahkn taunted.

Another trumpet blast warned them Arrivett was on her way up.

“Ready to meet you new niece?” Bilbo asked Theoden.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Theoden replied jauntily as Ahkn and Aris hooted at him.

“Steady, man!” Aragorn dropped his hands on Theoden’s shoulders and massaged them. “Deep breaths. Think calming thoughts.”

“Piss off!” Theoden laughed.

“Have you prepared a speech?” Celeborn asked gravely, but with a twinkle in his eyes.

“You piss off, too.” Theoden replied.
“Stop flirting,” Lady Galadriel teased.
“King Theoden can’t resist grand-ada’s charms,” Arwen chimed in.
“Well, I am very charming,” Celeborn reflected.
“Grand-ada?” Galadriel asked.
“Grand-ada,” Thranduil snickered and Bard elbowed him.

The Blue Mountain entourage came from the tunnel with four horses in the lead. Ori saw Elladan and Elrohir on the right and a blond man and a dwarrowdam on the left. The man wore the helm of Rohan and the dwarrowdam had a helm like Hild’s. Ori bit his lip. They looked exactly as they had in his dream about their wedding.

Eowyn gave a shriek and bounded forward. Eomer swung off his horse and they slammed together, yelling and laughing and smacking at each other like badgers. Theoden strode forward and offered his hand up to Arivett.

“Well met, my new niece,” he said with a soft smile. “Shall I help you off that enormous animal my fool of a nephew has perched you on?”

Arivett had been sitting up straight and looking formal, but she smiled under this paternal attention and slid gratefully off her saddle into Theoden’s arms. He put her tenderly on the ground and brushed off her skirts.

“Nephew,” Theoden bellowed. “Where are your manners? Come, tend to your wife.”

“Uncle!” Eomer shouted and crashed into Theoden then turned him to Arivett.

“There she is, uncle!” Eomer’s eyes were shining. “My powerful, beautiful queen! Isn’t she the most beautiful lady you’ve ever seen?”

“Arivett, my dear. It is wonderful to meet you at last. Please excuse my nephew’s ill bred behaviors.”

Arivett laughed merrily.

“He may be ill-mannered, but he has all your charm and more, dear uncle. I’m so happy to meet you at last.”

She slipped her hand into Eomer’s as Eowyn bounced over.

“Sister!” Eowyn laughed.

“Sister!” Arivett agreed and Eowyn, now well used to the difficulties with height, dropped to her knees and threw her arms about Arivett.

“You made it!” Eowyn enthused. “I was ready to believe the Eomer would never bring you and hog you all to himself.”

This made Arivett giggle and, hand-in-hand they went forward to meet Thorin. Eomer followed, half-hugging his uncle, who ruffled his hair and told him he was a dunderhead.

“Cousin.” Arivett bowed to the High King, who smiled and took her in his arms.

“Arivett,” Thorin said. “It’s so good to see you again. Congratulations on both of your conquests.”

“If you wish to scold, I shall stand for it,” she offered.

Thorin laughed.

“Nonsense, now here is your new cousin. Ghivashel, my little cousin, Arivett.”

Arivett and Bilbo embraced. Arivett looked Bilbo over then turned to Thorin again.

“He’s perfect for you.”

“Thank you,” Bilbo teased. “I rather think so myself.”

There was a shriek from the front door and Hild shot out of it as though from a catapult.

“Arivett!” she screamed.

“Mam!” Arivett screamed and rushed at her mother. The two collided like armored boulders in the middle of the courtyard. Aris turned to Eomer.

“So, yer him, are yeh?”

Eomer turned, eyebrow raised, with a smile almost a broad as Glorfindel’s.

“General Aris,” he boomed and swept her a grand bow. “It is a great honor to finally meet you! Arivett has told me of your exploits and I am humbled.”

“Yer full a’ shit,” Aris spat and reached up, grabbed the neckline of his breast plate and dragged
him down to thunk brows. She released him and nodded.

“Yeh’ll do.”

Eomer turned to his guards, who were politely exchanging greetings with Eowyn, and shouted, “Hear that, lads? I’ll do.”

They all laughed and cat-called him.

“Aye, milord, every chance you get!”

“Eomer,” Theoden chided and turned his nephew to the High King of Dwarrow.

“Brother Thorin, may I present my nephew Eomer to you and Professor Baggins.”

Thorin offered his arm to Eomer, who took it and bowed over it as well.

“King Thorin,” Eomer grinned. “An honor to finally meet you, your majesty.”

“Eomer,” Thorin smiled. “How are you, my cousin? We have long awaited meeting you. Come and be welcome.”

“Mam.”

They all turned, Arivett was leading her mother by the hand to Eomer.

“This is my Eomer. Ghivasha, this is my mother, Queen Hild of the Blacklocks.”

Eomer cast his helm on the ground, drew his sword, fell to his knees, laid it at Hild’s feet, and kissed both Hild’s hands.

“Your majesty, Honored Madame, I cannot begin to thank you for this gift of the valar you have blessed my life with. To love and serve her is the greatest privilege I could ever hope to imagine.”

Hild stared at Eomer, then looked at Aris. She withdrew her hands.

“Young man, you are full of shit.” She smiled and patted his cheek. “You’ll do nicely.”

Ori saw Arivett give a happy little hop and she squeaked in delight and grabbed her husband. Elladan and Elrohir stepped away from greeting their father and Lindir, and arrived on either side of Arivett.

“Your majesty,” said Elladan, “Some water?”

“Your majesty,” said Elrohir, “A shawl?”

“Your majesty,” they said in unison, “A piss?”

“I’m going to kill both of you!” Arivett shouted. She turned to her mother. “They’ve been like this ever since they joined our party at the top of the Greenwood. Every bloody half an hour!”

“We are merely being solicitous of your health, your majesty,” Elladan said.

“Your majesty’s health is very important,” said Elrohir.

“Stop doing that!” Arivett yelled.

The two elves looked at one another and then back at her, opposing eyebrow raised.

“Stop what?” they chorused.

“That…that thing you do! That freaky same twin thing.”

“Identical twin,” corrected Elladan.

“Not same twin,” corrected Elrohir.

“That thing!” Arivett squalled, pointing at them.

“Not to worry, dear Arivett,” said Elrond. He came forward and laid a hand on a shoulder of each twin. “I shall attempt to control my freaky twins.”

“Elrond!” Hild cried. “How charming to meet you again! When did you arrive?”

“He never left,” said Elladan.

“He lives here now,” said Elrohir.

“He’s doing freaky elf things with Lindir,” they chorused.

“And we’re going inside now,” said Elrond.

“Yes, we are,” said Lindir.

Elrond and Lindir looked at the twins, then looked at each other.

“Inside,” they chorused.

“Freaky,” the twins said in unison.

The Rivendell elves went in. Hild and Arivett stared at each other, almost appalled.

“I believe that’s an elf thing,” Bilbo said.

“I believe it is,” Thorin added.
Bilbo turned and gave Thorin a naughty look.
“Stop it.”
Unpleasant Ulfr Unleashed.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. The gang’s reunited…and it feels so good! Reunited, ‘cause they understood…reunited…. OK, that’s enough of Stevie singing old 70’s hits. On with this long, tangly tale! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori lay with his stomach on the grass and his elbows on the patio, drawing everyone. Lady Galadriel, Dori, Hild, Arivett, and Tauriel sat in the long deck chairs with their bare feet in the sunshine. Lady Galadriel looked as though she was absorbing the sunlight into her skin. Dori snored softly. Hild seemed to be listing the contents of her larder and Arivett kept mumbling the question “Where’s my axe?” Tauriel watched her companions with fascination.

Fanny lay on her side, her head near Ori, her side covered in napping faunts, badgers, and Tilda. Fili, Kili and the younger set, which had expanded to include the twins, Buer, Eomer, and Boromir, sprawled on the grass with the wargs and cats, talking amicably together. The dwarrow kings sat in a group, reminiscing about their parents and relatives, and the rest of the family was gathered in chairs on the patio discussing this and that. Cemnesta had arrive just as they were finishing lunch and happily took his ease with his father and older brother.


Binni and Oin began explaining the traditions. Ori went back to drawing, but he didn’t miss the fearsome glare Ulfr sent Oin’s way.

Then Binni said, ”You’ll see tonight, when we go to the crypts.”

Ulfr turned and shot Thorin a look.

“Th’ she elf’s comin’ with us?” he hissed.

“Lady Arwen is coming with us to the ceremony, as are all our other friends. They were invited,” said Thorin. “Why do you think they are here?”

“Because yer gettin’ married?” Ulfr replied.

“Yes, that too,” said Thorin. “Ulfr, go get something to drink.”

Mistress Dazla came out and gently woke Dori. The youngsters traipsed in after Frodo to ‘play with his toys’. Fili and the older ones followed the kings indoors. Dori, Binni, Bombur, and Gridr went to the kitchen to consult with Mistress Dazla. In the sitting room, the kings settled. Ori perched himself at the dining table to sketch. He was busy with a charming drawing of Tauriel and Kili sitting together whispering. Kili had his hand resting on her belly. Frodo and Sam bounced through to the kitchen, plainly in search of treats.

Mistress Dazla entered, followed by Tay, Nodun and Arne. Shouts of welcome sounded and Ori noticed Arne was proudly wearing the apprentice bead of the pleasure Guild. Ulfr noticed it, also.

“What’s this?” Ulfr demanded, crossing to his son and peering at him.

“I’ve taken a second craft, father,” Arne grinned.

Ulfr’s eyelid twitched.

“That’s the pleasure guild apprentice bead,” Ulfr growled.

“Yes. Tay has agreed to train me. It’s not all that unusual.”

“Aye? An’ wha’ are yeh learnin’, may I ask?”
“At the moment, how to bake scones and make tea.”
Tay approached.
“That’s how you start, your majesty,” said Tay. “It’s how the son of King Urz started.”
Ulfr’s eyes darted about.
It was a sore point with him, Ori knew. The pleasure guild was as old as the miners and smiths
guilds, with traditions handed down by the second son the Ironfist king, Urz, brother king to Durin.
As a staunch traditionalist, Ulfr couldn’t protest, even though as a father, he was clearly incensed by
the idea.
“As long as it stays quartz an’ no’ go t’ cobalt,” he warned.
Arne bowed to his father, but said nothing, and he went to sit with Ori, while Tay and Nodun
walked off to talk to Thranduil leaving Ulfr to seethe quietly.
Ori met Dwalin’s glance and raised his chin toward Ulfr. Dwalin nodded in acknowledgment and
subtly began to follow Ulfr about the room.

Ori looked up at Ulfr’s bark of “It ain’t right! Durin’s Day’s f’r dwarrow! An’ only dwarrow! His
queen or no’, she wasn’t a dwarrowdam an’ we can’t be addin’ her in ceremonies as haven’t
changed in over a thousand years!”
“I get what you’re saying, Ulfr,” said Gheir, “but we know her name now. She was Durin’s
queen. It would be idiocy to go on pretending she didn’t exist just because her feet were large and
fuzzy.”
“Much as it pains me,” said Hild, “I agree with Gheir. Other races think dwarrow thick-witted
enough, let’s not ignore what is obvious.”
“No’ t’ mention,” said Dain, “if we knew abou’ her, an’ jus’ rejected her out a’ hand, it’d question
th’ legitimacy of every Longbeard line. We should have learned tha’ lesson from Nali.”
“An’ yeh, Chat,” said Ulfr as Chat refilled his tankard. “Yeh’ll just stand by an’ watch this
travesty?”
“Ulfr, don’t make me sit on ya,” said Chat.
“Don’t make me sit on you, either,” said Bombur.
Ulfr eyed him, and, not surprisingly, backed down a little.
“Thank you,” said Bombur. “Here, have a tart.”
“Ulfr,” said Thorin, “let’s talk about this. What do you think is going to happen?”
“Our heritage is precious!” Ulfr said around a full mouth. “Th’ outsiders don’ understand wha’ it
means. They don’t understand wha’ we’ve suffered an’ died f’r!”
“Because we’ve never told them,” said Thorin.
“Besides tha’!” Ulfr insisted, as he took another bite. “Bombur, these’re grea’.”
“It’s Bilbo’s recipe,” said Bombur gravely. “Pray do not complain about the outsiders with your
mouth full of their cooking.” “Oh, well. Thank ‘im f’r me.” He licked his fingers. “Thorin, they
can’ understand wha’ it means t’ be dwarrow. No amount a’ showin’ or tellin’ kin explain it. They
think they kin jus’ worship Mahal withou’ understandin’ who Mahal is. They can’t even stand in th’
gasses ’r heat.”
Thorin turned and called, “Bard, may we have a moment?”
“Right here, Thorin,” said Bard.
“See wha’ I mean!” Ulfr shouted. “This is exactly wha’ I mean!”
“What do you mean?” Thorin asked.
Ulfr shook his hand toward Bard.
“That!”
“Do I have something in my whiskers?” Bard asked dryly. “Or am I just being blatantly
manning?”
“Do yeh sacrifice t’ Mahal?” Ulfr demanded.
Bard rubbed the top of his chest, just below his throat, and Ori realized he was actually rubbing
the anvil on its chain beneath his shirt.
“Yes,” said Bard. “Along with Eru, and Yavanna. I hate to break this to you, but a lot of other
men in Dale do as well. We just don’t do it in front of High Priest Sven.”

Ulfr tried to stare Bard down, which would have been a good trick, even if Ulfr had been standing up.

“Consider yerself a dwarf now, do yeh?”

“No, for one thing, I’m not nearly sarcastic enough, though I am working on it. “

Ulfr let this pass.

“Why d’ yeh sacrifice t’ Mahal? Wha’ d’ yeh think it’ll get yeh?”

“It’s not that I think it will ‘get’ me anything,” said Bard. “It’s more that I should at least thank Him. He brought me the Durins. The Durins are the reason we’re free.”

“Bu’ th’ Durins’re also th’ reason yeh suffered f’r so long,” said Ulfr.

“Maybe later on,” said Bard, “but they didn’t start this mess. That wasn’t all about the Durins.

Our peoples have never been particularly close. Things might have been different if my father didn’t die before my grandfather, if my grandfather hadn’t been so sick and I hadn’t still been a boy when Calmar made his play for power. It’s a nasty storm of wha-ifs, and I can’t change any of it. I can’t erase old hurts, but men don’t live long enough to profit from holding grudges.

“And even though I don’t consider myself a dwarf, my grandchildren will consider themselves both. Sigrid and Fili are betrothed. They will marry. My family and Thorin’s family are now the same. Whether you approve or not, King Ulfr, it will happen.”

Kili and Tauriel looked at each other, then Kili declared, “My and Tauriel’s children will consider themselves both.”

That tore it. Ulfr leapt to his feet.

“Men and elves! Will there be no more true dwarrow in the line of Durin?”

Ulfr looked like he might lunge at Kili and Tauriel. Dwalin grabbed his shoulders from behind and slammed Ulfr back in his chair. Arne sat on one knee, Buer on the other, effectively immobilizing him.

“Ge’ off me, yeh young shits!” Ulfr bellowed.

“N-nope,” said Arne.

“Nossir,” said Buer. “If you go after any of the Durins, the people of Erebor will send you off down the chasm, to follow King Thror.”

“And- and y-you won’t en-enjoy it!”

“Yizaris!” Ulfr bellowed.

“Oh, for love of Mahal, Ulfr, the world has changed. Grow up or shut up.”

Ulfr stared at her.

“What?” she challenged. “As if I haven’t got a thought of my own or a brain in my head? Really! How long have we been married?”

“But wha’ if they betray us again?” Ulfr shouted.

“That’s the risk you take isn’t it?” Buer mused. His voice sounded wistful and his eyes looked far away. “Sometimes the ledge holds you and sometimes it crumbles under your feet.”

“But we’re dwarrow,” Arne said with a nod. “W-what dwarf could ever r-resist stepping out on a ledge?”

They smiled at one another in what looked to Ori like perfect understanding.

He could tell Ulfr saw it, too. He looked from one young dwarf to the other, his face a picture of bewilderment.

“Ulfr,” said Thorin.

The tone of his voice plunged the room into ice.

Thorin was on his feet, and he looked more coldly furious than Ori had ever seen. Ori wondered how Thorin could still speak.

“Ulfr, remember your oath,” said Thorin. “Will you abandon your loyalty to the Line Durin?”

“I… tha’ is… Your grandfather-”

“Ulfr, please come with me,” said Thorin.

It was worded as a request, but the underlying steel was not missed on anyone.

Buer and Arne slid off Ulfr’s lap, Ulfr stood and Thorin linked arms with him.
“Where are we going?” Ulfr asked.
“Treasury.”
An audible buzz rose in the room.
“Oh, fuck me,” Fili muttered.
“Twice,” Kili agreed.
Frodo tucked one hand into Bilbo’s and put the other in his own mouth. Sam crowded closer to them.
Dwalin stood at attention.
Hild and Gheir exchanged looks.
“Thorin,” said Gheir, “would you like the rest of the dwarf monarchs to come along?”
“If you wish,” said Thorin curtly. “Fili, you are in charge until I return.”
“Of course, Idad.”
The fact that Thorin reinforced the succession did nothing to soothe Ori’s fears. He glanced back and forth between his husband and Thorin.
Thorin looked to be struggling to keep his voice soft.
“Ori, will you please stay here with Bilbo and Fili?”
“Yes, your majesty,” said Ori.
He tried to put all the comfort he could into those words and he hoped Thorin heard it.

When they had gone, Ori looked about him, somewhat at a loss. Bilbo seemed to be straightening and re-straightening the silverware on the table, but not really seeing it.
“Are you alright, Bilbo? Where are Frodo and Sam?”
“They’re playing on the floor in the kitchen with Bombur’s and Chat’s broods. Sam is a little afraid, but Frodo is angry at Ulfr. He knows what it’s like when people are against you for what you are.”
“And at his age. What about you?”
“Oh, I’m ready to shove one of the fireplace andirons up Ulfr’s arse, though I’m pretty sure it’s worthless against such a tight fit. I have a good mind to put him in one of my books as a villain, but he’s not really that interesting.”
Ori smiled and put an arm around Bilbo and hugged him.
“I’m fine, Ori,” Bilbo said tiredly, “but I may need your and Dwalin’s help with Thorin later on.”
“We’re here if you need us, and we’ll be out of the way, if you don’t,” Ori promised.
“Thank you so much,” said Bilbo. “I think I’ll see if Dori needs any last minute help.”
Bilbo went into the kitchen and Ori drifted toward the younger set gathered at the fireplace. None of them looked particularly merry, but Buer looked stunned and sad.
“Is he really always like that?” Buer asked Arne. “Because, I don’t know if I can go back with him if he is. Yes, he’s been kind to me, but he’s so shut out from people who aren’t just like him. I mean, I have lots of friends who aren’t dwarf. And the Durins… without them, my family would still be slinking around in the back alleys, scrounging for food.”
“I-I shouldn’t say s-so about Adad,” Arne said, “b-but, he’s n-not the b-best d-dwarf in Arda. I d-don’t think he’s b-bad, just very l-limited. If it h-helps, b-being with you h-has really i-improved him.”
“That doesn’t sound encouraging,” said Buer.
“I-I’m more enc-couraged b-because of you than I- I’ve ever been.”
Buer laughed a little, and shook his head.
Ori frowned to himself. Arne’s westron had been steadily improving. To hear him stutter on nearly every second word, meant Arne was more upset than he was letting on.
Time dragged, Galadriel and Sigrid pressed Dori to go and rest on her bed. Dori capitulated when Balin took her arm and led her out.
Gridr, Binni, Margr and Vi vanished into the kitchen. Ori went out to the patio again and hugged Fanny’s left leg. The oliphaunt laid her trunk about his shoulders and made comforting noises.
“I know Thorin could throw Ulfr’s head off the mountain, but I’d rather Ulfr learned something and then he’d be a better king.”

Fanny snuffled and patted his head.

“Exactly. Ulfr needs to actually think about what he’s doing. He needs to think like a king. He’s just acting like people are after his chemical formulas. Aragorn doesn’t want his chemical things. He wants to be on amicable terms with Ulfr, so both their peoples can prosper. If Ulfr used his chemical knowledge to create something that would alert people to a secret threat, then it should be used to protect everyone. Aragorn would just thank Ulfr.”

Fanny rumbled thoughtfully, then moved and lowered her head to look at Ori. Ori looked deep into her wise eye. He sighed.

“I’m over-thinking things again, aren’t I?” Ori mumbled. Fanny made a noise that sounded like a chuckle. Ori hugged her trunk and went back inside.

“Ori,” Cemnesta met him in the breakfast parlor. “Are you alright?”

Ori grinned up at the elf. “I’m fine. I just had a talk with Fanny.”

Cemnesta’s eyebrows flew upward.

“And what did Fanny advise?”

“I’m over-thinking everything again.”

“Fanny is very wise.” Cemnesta chuckled and escorted Ori back to the sitting room. Here Galadriel and Celeborn were laying out a tea service on the dining table with Mr. Wandi’s help. Gridr and Vi brought out food. Ori didn’t feel too hungry, but he did need a cup of tea.

When the monarchs returned, Dori admonished them from the kitchen door.

“You have ten minutes to compose yourselves before I start dishing up.”

They gathered in the sitting area, steeped in heavy silence.

The tension was broken by Hild, who said, “Thorin, that’s not a treasury. That’s dragon bait.”

“It’s horrible,” Arivett added, her arms clenched around one of Eomer’s. The man looked to Bard, who closed his eyes and shook his head, taking Thranduil’s hand.

“Tha’ was insane,” said Ulfr, clearly shaken. “Tha’s no’ righ’. Wha’ was he thinkin’?”

“He wasn’t,” Thorin said. “He worshipped a dragon’s egg, not Mahal. He shut out everything, shut out the world, and kept himself hidden in a vault with all his gold and jewels, and he would not part with a single coin. Meanwhile, there were dwarrow under this mountain starving.”

Ori murmured, “Things weren’t so great in Dale, either.”

“Aye,” said Dwalin, “Thror was so insular, so stuck in himself, it’s amazin’ his head didn’t come ou’ his arse.”

Thorin grimaced.

“Yes, thank you for that image, Dwalin.”

“Anytime.”

Ulfr glared at his own hands as if they offended him.

“An’ I suppose Mahal come down Himself t’ have tea with yeh an’ tell yeh all this?”

“Now that you mention it, yes,” said Thorin.

Kili nodded, “He liked the cake. He ate almost a whole one Himself.”

“My tummy hurt,” said Ori.

Ulfr stared at him.

“If Mahal ate th’ cake, why would yer belly ache?”

“Because He was using my body at the time,” said Ori. “Forgive me for saying so, your majesty, but you really need to read the dispatches King Thorin sends you, not just skim them. The world is remade. Dwarrow are part of the second music.”

“Fine! Bu’ wha’ does tha’ mean?”

“It means,” said Thorin, “that we shall take our place as equals to all the other races in the world, but to do so, we must be part of that world.”

Ori turned back to Ulfr.

“Your majesty,” he asked, “why did Mahal send your relations back as elves?”
“T’ torment me?”
“Besides that.”
“’Cause He though’ it was funny?”
“I’ll give you that one, too. But, besides that? Perhaps,” Ori said gently, “it was so you could start to understand that things have changed?”

Ulfr shifted his gaze to Buer, who sat off in the corner with Arne, the two of them happily demolishing a leftover cake from tea all on their own.

“Yeh may be ont’ somethin’ there,” Ulfr acknowledged.

“Finally!” Dori cried. “Dinner is ready! It’s time to eat something besides cake.”

“Yeh’ve certainly never taken advantage a’ tha’.”
“I’m not that kind of dwarf, your majesty,” said Buer. “Rather make my own way, though, I thank you for the opportunities you’ve given me.”

Ulfr stared, then grimaced.

“Aye, well, fuck all this, then. Go an’ eat. I’ll just wash up, an’ I’ll be down in a minute.”

Ulfr regarded Buer.

“Ulfr-speak meaning he needs to go away for a while and think about it.”

Everyone was still seating themselves when Ulfr came back. He was still frowning. Ori took his seat, then a thrill of something went through him. He looked across the table. Durin was seated beside Ulfr and, on Ulfr’s other side, sat Sunny. Sunny wore a fashionable hobbit gown of pink and Durin was in Durin blue. Ori shot a swift look at Thorin and Dori. Thorin looked amused, and Dori, serene. Bilbo’s eyes twinkled with delight and Balin was non-committal. Ori took his husband’s hand and Dwalin’s fingers closed comfortingly around Ori’s.

“Shall I dish up?” Dori asked Sunny primly.

“Oh, please do!” Sunny cried. “I’m so looking forward to tasting the lamb. I never thought to put
Dinner was served. Dori, as usual, had cooked cavern mushrooms the same way as the meat and the elves were delighted. The lamb was served with roasted new potatoes, mashed yams, runner beans cooked in butter and sprinkled with almonds, and there were carrots baked in maple syrup.

Durin shoveled in a loaded fork and closed his eyes while chewing.

“Our Dori, yer a genius,” Durin rumbled around his mouthful.

Ulfur look a bit startled at the amount of food on Durin’s plate, then up at Durin again.

“No wonder yer such a size, lad."

Durin grinned.

“Ulfur, me lad, it’s time yeh an’ me have a wee chat.”

Ulfur looked annoyed until Durin pushed up his sleeves and thudded his forearms on the table, one right next to Ulfur. The mark of Durin, the reddish anvil, almost seemed to glow on Durin’s skin.

That mark had appeared every time Durin was reborn, the mark every newborn was checked for. Ulfur looked angry until his eyes fell on the mark, then Ulfur was as white as Thranduil’s hair. “What sort of chat did you have in mind, your majesty?” Ulfur managed to choke out.

“Bit of a guessin’ game. Let’s see how brigh’ yeh really are.”

Ulfur nodded. He looked a bit like a dwarfling who is in big trouble, can’t figure out why, exactly, and wonders what sort of hammer will fall.

“First off,” Durin said easily, “I don’ believe yeh’ve meet me lovely wife.”

Durin’s arm shot dangerously close to Ulfur’s head as Durin gestured to Sunny. Ulfur regarded Sunny like a scared rabbit.

“Hello,” Sunny greeted him, cheerily. “You should eat something before your dinner gets cold. You should never waste food, dear.”

Ulfur gulped and his eyes traveled back to Durin.

“Um….”

“So…laddie,” Durin said with emphasis. “What di’ yeh say makes a true dwarf? A beard?”

“Yes, and no,” said Ulfur, giving it some serious thought. “Other peoples have beards, it’s true. Though none take as much pride as we do in ours.”

Durin stroked his own beard, which put even Gloin’s to shame.

“So, th’ beard’s no’ th’ only thin’, eh?”

“No, no, though, it’s important, a’ course, ‘r Mahal wouldn’t’ve made sure we all had one, more’r less.”

Kili snorted.

“Yer no’ sorry, yeh wee shit,” said Durin. “Eat yer lamb. G’ on, Ulfur. Wha’ else make a dwarf?”

“There’s courage, fortitude, standin’ firm when all others turn back. There’s inventiveness, stubbornness. Good stomach f’r drink.” Ulfur looked a little ill. “Keepin’ yer oaths.”

“An’ no one else in Arda kin say they’re th’ same?”

“No one else kin say they’re built a’ mountains, yer majesty.”

“Aye, tha’s true,” Durin conceded. “Bu’ many kin say they’ve heads made a’ such. Now, courage. Our Bard there stood firm an’ fought f’r his folk under what’s-’is-ass an’ ended up in th’ lock up f’r it, bu’ he kept on fightin’. That’s courageous. Our Glorfy there took on a few a’ em bad maiar balrog thingies. Can’t say he ain’t go’ fortitude an’ standin’ firmness. Wee Tilda there, she’s willful ‘r our Brur’d never star’ed trainin’ her up. An’ she’s jus’ a wee lass. There’s yer stubbornness. Our Bilbo there, taugh’ himself t’ read khuzdul, an’ our Frodo there, kin hold his own wi’ our scholars an’ his khuzdul’s all bu’ fluent. There’s yer inventiveness. We all know our Thranduil there kin hold his drink, an’ be’er than his own folk when it comes t’ th’ lichen whisky, even if it’s only jus’.”

Thranduil had the grace to blush, but he looked amused. Wandi, Cemnesta, and Legolas stifled snickers. Galadriel and Celeborn had their napkins pressed to their mouths,
Durin pinned Ulfr with a fiery gaze.
“An’ our Thorin keeps his oaths.”
Ulfr shrank back.
Durin leaned a little closer. “Now gettin’ t’ th’ beards. Does our Bilbo have a beard?”
“N-no, your majesty.”
“Do our Rhonda and our Linda have beards?”
Elrond and Lindir looked resigned at their dwarf nicknames. Ulfr was beyond commenting other than,
“No, your majesty.”
“Does our Thrany have a beard? Beggin’ yer pardon, our Thranduil. ‘Thrany’s’ jus’ f’r our Dori.”
Thranduil raised his wine glass in salute.
Durin looked all the way down on Ulfr.
“Does he?”
“No, yer majesty.”
“Our Bard has a beard,” put in Sunny. “Ooo, it’s rather nice, isn’t it. I want to touch it, if you don’t mind, Bard?”
It didn’t signify either way, apparently, because she was out of her seat and fondling his whiskers before he could reply.
“Oooo, that’s lovely,” said Sunny. “It’s a different texture, so smooth, but quite nice. No wonder your husband’s always running his fingers through it during… running his fingers through it.”
“Thank you, Queen Sunny,” said Bard, red-faced as his children giggled.
“Yeh should grow it out a bit more, our Bard,” Durin advised. “Suits yeh.”
“Thank you, your majesty,” said Bard. Now he was tomato-colored and growing darker.
“And the hair, too,” added Sunny as she sat down again, nodding. Thranduil smiled in agreement, but his cheeks had a pink glow.
“Aye,” Durin agreed. “Back t’ th’ topic at hand, our Ulfr. Sigrid don’t have a beard. Who cares? Our Dori raised her and she knows our ways as any dam could. She’s as bonnie a lass as yeh’ll ever see. Our Tauriel don’t have a beard, an’ she’s bonnie, too, an’ as fine a soldier as any dwarrow. Our wee Ki, our Tauri, congratulations.”
“Thank you, Udadel,” said Kili, beaming.
“Thank you, your majesty,” said Tauriel. She bowed as well as she was able sitting down.
“None a’ tha’, lass, yer supposed t’ be eaten f’r two. Bash on with it. So, wha’ is it gonna be?”
“Ori says it’s going to be a dwelf,” said Kili.
A twinkle lit Durin’s eyes.
“No’ a dwentflin’?”
“Neither of us wants to have sex with a tree, Udadel,” said Kili.
“No matter what anyone says about tree shaggers,” Tauriel added with a snicker.
“Wise decision,” said Durin. “Splinters.”
Sunny threw in, “He still won’t tell me how he knows that.”
“Our Buer,” Durin called.
Buer, who was just now understanding who shared this table, swallowed and stammered, “Y-your majesty?”
“Yer beard’s just as good as our Ulfr’s, yeh ken? Jus’ as singed at th’ edge. Mebbe yeh could help ’im keep it tha’ way, if yeh would. As a favor.”
“A very great favor,” said Sunny. She nodded as she put more food on Ulfr’s plate. She looked up at Buer with a wink. “There’s xocolātl and ginger cookies in it for you, if you do.”
“Those are my favorites!” he exclaimed, then clapped his hand over his mouth and blushed as red as Bard.
“Yes,” said Sunny with a giggle. “I know. You really have to stop eating them in bed, dear. You’ll get ants.”
“Yes, your majesty.”
“Oh, call me Sunny, everybody does. Love the sock thing, by the way, even though I don’t wear them myself.”

Buer seemed to reflect, then looked over at Ulfr, then said slowly, “Sir, I have friends all over this mountain and Dale, dwarrow, men, and elves and now hobbits. They have all been very good to me. If it wasn’t for them and King Thorin’s family, I wouldn’t be able to do all I’ve done. Mostly, what they do is feed me, otherwise, I’d have probably starved. Maybe history has it that men and elves are mean to dwarrow, but I’ve never found them so. I’ve only found good people.”

“That’s because you help everyone with your inventions,” Ori told him.

Durin looked down at Ulfr and shook his head. Ulfr seemed to stop breathing for a moment. Durin sighed.

“Be kind, our Ulfr. If yer a guid lad, I’ll see wha’ Da kin do about yer dumb-arse relations. Oi, yer Zaris’s an inch from knockin’ ‘em all brainless, an’ she’s a lass who kin do it, too.”

“Elves are always cruel t’ dwarrow with no reason,” Ulfr grumped.

“Laddie,” Durin said. “I think th’ sack a’ Doriath’s a damn good reason. An’ Thror cheated our Thranduil here.”

“King Durin, Doriath was long ago,” Thranduil said, gravely. “And King Thorin delivered the goods ordered by me in Thror’s time. I bear no malice toward any dwarrow.” Thranduil gave a self-deprecating smile. “Indeed, King Thorin and his family assisted me in…taking the stick out of my ass months ago. I am indebted to them for my new, lovely family.” Thranduil took Bard’s hand and raised it to his lips. Legolas, his brothers, Tauriel and the Bardlings all giggled.

“An’ yer Legs, an’ ours, is makin’ our wee Gimmers ever so happy,” Gridr chimed in. Gloon expanded with pride and reached up to pat Legolas on the head.

“He’s a good lad.”

“Thank you, Da,” Legolas said with a blush.

“Sigrid will be our High Queen, Ulfr,” Fili struck in with a glare worthy of his grandmother. “If you choose to withhold your oath of loyalty at my coronation, keep in mind what happened to Prince Frerin.”

“Our current king looks healthy enough, yer highness,” Ulfr sulked. “I’ll likely be dead a’fore yer king.” “Be careful what you ask for, Ulfr,” said Thorin idly, as he helped Frodo to more yams.

“The universe has a way of giving it to you.”

Ulfr gulped and glanced sideways first at Durin, then at Sunny.

“I ain’t got anythin’ ’gainst hobbits.”

Bilbo raised a brow at Ulfr.

“This hobbit is tired of you brow-beating his husband and upsetting his faunts.”

Ulfr folded his arms and sat back in his chair. Ori was reminded of a badger badly in need of a nap.

“I’m feelin’ mighty attacked righ’ now,” Ulfr snapped.

Sunny patted his forearm.

“That’s because you’ve been rude and naughty and you’re being spanked for it. You can sulk all you want, pet, but the plain truth is you’re wrong, you know it, and things will be just fine after you own it and behave yourself like a proper dwarf should.”

Ulfr stayed silent. Mistress Dazla came in with a large, empty tray. The younger set rose and piled up plates and serving dishes on the tray. Ori watched as Ulfr observed the group of youngsters, dwarrow, elves, and men, assisted by two very young hobbits clear the table and help Mistress Dazla through with the dishes.

Miss Larit entered with a tray of dessert bowls which were placed at Dori’s elbow and the younger set put out several dishes, piled high with hard sauce, on the table. Mistress Dazla came in, beaming at them all over a big pudding so thick with fruit it was almost black and set in a pool of grain whisky.

“Ooo,” cried Frodo. “Plum pudding!”

“It’s getting to that time of year, wee one,” Mistress Dazla laughed.
“It’s not on fire,” Wee Sam observed. Durin chuckled and snapped his fingers at the pudding. Blue flames danced over the pudding making the younger set cheer.

Ori grinned as his piece was handed to him. A tiny blue flame still wavered on it. He doused it with a hearty serving of hard sauce on top.

Thranduil looked quizzically at the dessert,

“Won’t the flames make it too hot to eat?”

Tilda climbed into Thranduil’s lap and added a huge lump of hard sauce, then fed her adanana a spoonful.

“Isn’t it good?” she enthused. Thranduil looked surprised, then his expression melted into avarice.

“Yes, my monster child, excellent. Now go and eat your own as I have no intention of sharing!”

The dessert was devoured. Frodo and Sam leaned over their chairs and fed lumps of hard sauce to the wargs. Dwalin held his bowl out to Killer, who licked it with enthusiasm.

The ravens gathered in the middle of the table, squabbling over the leftover bits of fruit in the serving dish. Ori had Kihshassa in his lap as she ate bits of fruit from his fingers. Legolas and Gimli had moved over and Gloin perched one on each knee. Gridr and Galadriel teased them. Bard had his arm across the back of Thranduil’s chair and talked to Fili. Kili sat on Tauriel’s lap and chattered with Bain, Cemnesta, and Ahkn. Hild and Aris talked with Tilda as she leaned against Hild, who played with her hair with Mr. Wandi’s assistance. Arivett and Eowyn giggled together while Boromir and Gheir sympathized with Eomer. Dori looked perfectly pleased with the dinner and Balin surveyed the company with a calculated look.

Ulfr picked at his dessert. Ori noticed Frodo watching the Ironfist king intently.

“King Ulfr?” the faunt piped up.

Ulfr turned,

“Aye, yeh gonna scold me, too, wee one?”

Ori saw Bilbo take a breath but Frodo was in no need of assistance.

“No, I’m just feeling very sorry for you.”

“Yes,” Ulfr replied.

“Maybe you should pray to Mahal.”

“I don’t stop folk scoldin’?”

“No, to fix your eyes,” Frodo replied with perfect gravity. Everyone fell silent. Ulfr stared at Frodo.

“Wha’s wrong with me eyes, laddie?”

“When you sit here with us, all you see are separate races, who shouldn’t talk to or help each other. While everyone else here sees family.”

Ulfr looked around the table.

Durin sat back with a grin.

“So, King Ulfr, wha’s d’ yer dwarf eyes see now?”

Ulfr sunk into himself. He looked utterly defeated and sad.

“I see tha’ Mahal needs t’ fix me eyes.”

“Yes,” said Frodo. He nodded wisely. “See, you’re not such a bad fellow, and if you could see, you wouldn’t be such a dumdemel.”

Thorin groaned and Bilbo bit his lip. Ori giggled. The other monarchs just looked mystified.

“Lad, wha’s a dumdemel?” Ulfr asked. “Is it a hobbit thin’?”

“No, it’s khuzdul,” said Frodo. “Sort of. It means ‘dumdum of all dumdums’.”

Ulfr snorted, then he laughed and snorted some more.

Chat raised his tankard to Frodo, and Snis and Sni did the same.

“That’s brilliant, me lad,” said Chat.

“Brilliant,” Snis and Sni echoed.

Wee Sam looked proud.

“’Course it is!”

Durin rose and gave Sunny his hand.

“Well, me laddies and lassies, it’s bein’ a pleasure sittin’ wi’ yeh all. Our Dori, Mistress Dazla!”
Durin’s voice rose and the housekeeper came to the kitchen door and all of her team peeked out around her.

“Mos’ delicious meal we’ve had in Arda f’r ages, ain’t tha’ righ’, me sunshine?”

“Oh wonderful!” Sunny enthused. “Dear Dazla, it’s so nice you’ve inherited my touch with pastry. Just lovely! Thank all of you. You’ve all done very well!” She turned to the people at the table. “Now, off you go to your beds! The party starts at midnight and I’ve things to do! Off you go!”

Sunny flapped her hands at them all. She smiled at her husband. “Dearest, would you please?”

Durin chuckled, bussed her cheek, and clapped his hands like thunder.

Durin and Sunny were gone.

The table was cleared and its wood shone.

Mistress Dazla gasped and her team turned and squeals and shouts of delight sounded. Mistress Dazla burst out laughing.

“Ooo!” Miss Larit poked her head through again. “He’s washed all the dishes, put them away, and all the leftovers are packed up in the larder!”

Thorin smiled then bowed low.

“Udadel, Umadel, thank you both so much. It has been our honor to host you in our home!”

“For thank you,” everyone echoed and bowed. The men and elves looked at each other, realized what they’d done and giggled.

“You all heard, Umadel,” said Thorin and looked at the youngsters. “Off to bed. We begin again in the crypts at midnight.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. And now… Party time! Get some drinks and snacks this is a good long chapter. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel!
Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

They started down to the crypts to make sure they were ready by the dot of midnight. Which was to say, they went much earlier, because Thorin had expressly invited everybody, every dwarf in Dale as well as under the mountain, and he wanted to be there to greet them as they arrived.

The dancers of the pleasure guild dressed in filmy robes, their hair and beards hung loose, unbraided, with only a few strands of mithril mixed in, sparkling as they whisked and pranced about the crypts.

Thorin dressed as Durin, in the traditional battle dress uniform. His kilt had been embellished with sapphires and slender mithril chains that caught the light whenever he moved. His hair and beard were loose and flowed down his back and chest. His eyelids had been lined in dark blue charcoal and he was merry. Orcrist sat across his back, and the gems on his crown caught the light and flashed like stars. Ori stared. He could almost believe that this was the first dwarf of Mahal’s Hands. Thorin was king and he loved his people. All his people, he did not care if they weren’t Longbeards. Durin was the first, but he wasn’t the only dwarf to come from Mahal’s anvil.

The badgers, especially, were welcomed. Most wore their school uniforms, as these were their best clothes, and they were nearly as excited to be up in the middle of the night as they were to be here under the mountain. They clustered about the king, chattering and squealing as he laughed, ruffled their hair, and knelt for any who wanted hugs.

“Lots a’ badgers were afraid t’ come here at first,” Caris confided in Thorin, “They’re scared a’ ghosts and all tha’, but it’s not like we have to come down here two at a time by ourselves. With all these dwarrow, the ghosts are probably more scared than us!”

“And with better reason,” Thorin agreed with a laugh. “Remember, they were just like us once. If anything, they’re probably very happy to see us.”

Ori had plenty of time to roam through the passageways between the tombs, teased by the dancers as he wielded his graphite wand and notebook.

He glanced over at Freris’ tomb and was brought up short by Teyan. She made making a funny face at him from among the statues.

He stuck out his own tongue for good measure, and she ran off giggling.

As midnight approached, Thorin boosted himself up onto the great anvil, a feat in itself.

Ori wondered how Thror had managed it as he aged. He was weakened by the arkenstone, for one thing, and an aged dwarf wasn’t quite ‘bendy’ enough to climb it. Dwalin told him that Durin’s Day had not been observed in this manner for decades.

Bilbo looked up at Thorin and laughed. Bilbo wore the leaf crown Thorin had given him on his birthday. Zindis had cunningly dressed Bilbo in copper-colored trousers, a cream shirt embroidered with gold thread, and his braces were copper and gold mesh, studded with rubies.

Dwalin leaned down at the anvil’s base and cupped his hands. Bilbo put his foot there, and Dwalin tossed him up into Thorin’s arms.

They all heard Bilbo quite clearly when he grumbled, “Have dwarrow never heard of ladders?”
Thorin laughed as he set Bilbo on the edge of the anvil and sat down beside him.

“At least you didn’t choose to wear a gown, ghivasha.”

“Certainly not! At this height, the entire kingdom would be looking up at my bloomers!”

Ori thought it was obvious that the entire kingdom had just looked up Thorin’s kilt.

Even down in the crypt, they heard all the bells of the mountain erupt to announce midnight.

“Happy Durin’s Day!” they roared over and over, bashed foreheads, and wished each other well.

Then, as the last of peals faded, an expectant silence rolled over the crowd, and the dwarrow turned to the anvil.

“I am Durin!” Thorin announced at battle pitch, “Mahal made me from His forge on this day!”

The assembled dwarrow shouted, “All Hail Mahal, and his Seven Stars Shining Bright!”

A great cheer rose up. When it faded, Thorin continued.

“Let my brothers step forth and give me their oaths!”

Thorin raised a beckoning hand.

The musicians commenced a familiar tune.

Dwarrow standing for the six other original ‘kings’ of dwarrow appeared at the far end of the passage, each carrying a keg on one shoulder and a war axe on the other. Only the nimblest soldiers were allowed to do this because they had to dance over the axes, as Dwalin had done at the old royal residence all those months ago.

They marched forward, each in the traditional battledress of their clan.

Ori recognized Aris, Chat, Floris, Mavey, Tay, and after him, in the tartan of the Firebeards, marched Givris.

That most elves present didn’t look offended, spoke to the general ignorance of the dwarves’ traditions outside the dwarven world. Thranduil obviously recognized it, and kept his face so blank, Ori thought Nori would be proud. Celeborn and Galadriel went off a little ways to examine some sculpture. Elrond looked everywhere but at Givris, though Ori suspected that had to do with their disastrous history. The younger elves merely looked curious.

One at a time, as the ‘king’ dancers approached the anvil, they bowed to Thorin and placed their axes on the floor, so that all six together made a star. Then, in a show of daring, all six ‘kings’ danced over the axes at once.

They still bore the kegs on their shoulders.

Durin appeared sitting next to Ori on the balcony.

“How tha’s rich,” said Durin.

“What is?” Ori asked. He never took his eyes off the dance.

“Tha’ didn’t start out as a dance.”

“No?”

“No, tha’ was me gettin’ roarin’ drunk, slammin’ a full keg a’ Sunny’s best over me head. Go’ me head good an’ stuck, so I had t’ drink mesel’ blind so as no’ t’ drown, an’ staggered around, bumpin’ int’ everythin’, trippin’ over me own weapons an’ finally passin’ out. Oi, she was angry. I slep’ on me worktable in me forge f’r two weeks. Them hobbits kin hold a grudge.”

“She was angry because you wasted ale?”

“No’ a drop went t’ waste. She was mad ‘cause I didn’t share.”

Ori stopped then, and turned to him.

“Is that why, when you’ve wronged someone, you go to their house on Durin’s Day and have a drink with them?”

“Aye, bu’ drinkin’ wi’ hobbits don’ usually devolve int’ brawls.”

Sunny appeared on Ori’s other side, munching a gingersnap, with a plate of them in her lap. She wore a buttercup spattered dress of cream, girdled with a copper velvet sash and there were red ribbons in her curls.

“Have a gingersnap, our Ori. Can’t draw on an empty stomach. You’ll be doodling pictures of food in your margins.”

“Oh, thank you. How are you keeping, Sunny?”

“Very well, thanks. And you?”
“I’m very happy to be here.”

“Oi,” said Durin over Ori’s head, “yeh didn’t ask me how I was keepin’?”

“You had ten gingersnaps before we left the Halls,” said Sunny primly. “I can see you’re in perfect health.”

As the dance wound toward the end, one by one the dwarf kings picked up their axe, struck the haft on the ground and held it up to the high king in salute. Thorin-as-Durin acknowledged each with a smile and a nod, until finally the floor was cleared.

Under Miss Sifian’s direction, a chorus of young students from Dale and under the mountain stepped forth and bowed to ‘Durin’ and his queen. Then they sang the Hymn to Mahal, in khuzdul. Hathor’s fawns, much taller than the rest, stood in the back row, with faunts and badgerlings in the front.

Sunny giggled.

“Look at Ulfr’s face! I can see his scowl from here.”

“As long as he keeps his mouth shut,” said Ori. “Oh! He’s remembered and is nodding in time.”

Durin snickered.

“Half a’ me wishes he’d finish gettin’ his head out a’ his arse, th’ other half jus’ finds him fun t’ watch.”

“Maybe Buer will help him…er, speed up,” said Ori.

Durin cleared his throat and Sunny cackled maniacally.

“I don’t know, darling,” said Sunny. She batted her eyelashes. “What do you think?”

Ori looked back and forth between them.

“That was what Mahal designed Buer for, wasn’t it,” he said.

“No fair guessin’,;” said Mahal.

Ori giggled and elbowed Durin.

“Thank you for showing up at dinner earlier, I mean, last night. Ulfr needed a talking to and Thorin needed some encouragement.”

“We did get dinner ou’ a’ it,” Durin pointed out. “Love, why didn’t we think a’ lightin’ th’ puddin’ on fire?”

“Don’t ask me,” said Sunny. “When I lit the raisins on fire, you looked at me like I’d tossed my foot fuzz.”

“Why would you light raisins on fire?” Ori asked.

“Ask Bilbo,” she said coyly.

“So yeh didn’t mind I invited mesel’ t’ dinner?” Durin asked Ori.

“No, you’re always welcome.”

“Aye? Really? I would’ve though’ yeh’d be happy t’ see th’ back a’ me.”

“Well, you are a pain in the arse, but you’re my favorite pain in the arse.”

“Aw, didn’t know yeh cared.”

Sunny said, “Ori, you’ll have to tell him he’s a pain more often. We want him to feel needed.” Something occurred to Ori then, something that made his heart sink.

“Wait. Durin, the Last Battle happened.”

“Aye.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be king?”

“No need righ’ now, lad. Look a’ Thorin down there, happy as Dain in pig shit. Cleans up nice, too. Bloody shithed looks prettier than me! I go’ centuries before I go’ t’ worry abou’ tha’.”

“Really?”

“Unless he does somethin’ stupid, li’e gettin’ all tense an’ paranoid again. Yeh’ve all spent th’ past months trainin’ him out’va tha’. Me da made Thorin t’ be jus’ li’e he is now. Jus’ li’e he made yeh t’ be a sassy li’le sprat.”

“A sassy little sprat?” Ori echoed, then frowned. “What’s a sprat?”

Sunny shot her husband a look.

“It’s a baby fish.”

“What?” Ori squawked. “Durin!”
“Still don’ wan’ me goin’ away?” Durin teased.
“I’d tell you to go to Mordor, but I don’t know how you feel about gardening.”
Sunny nodded.
“They’ll have to come up with a new name for that patch of ground. It’s quite green now, and not just because it’s covered in orc snot.”
Ori groaned.
“That’s an image I’ll never get out of my head.”
As the last dulcet tones drifted into silence, the floor before the anvil was emptied. Stone and machinery moved beneath the middle of the floor and then, from pinpoints of light, Durin’s vision at Kheled-zaram burst forth as a giant crown and stars.
Ori blinked in amazement. He hadn’t expected this, nor had Dwalin mentioned it when he explained to Ori how the ceremony went. Ori found his husband in the crowd, still at his post at the foot of the anvil.
The big so-and-so grinned up at him in triumph.
Ori blew him a kiss, even as he blinked the spots from his eyes.
Thorin leapt to the floor and held out his arms. The crowd gasped as Bilbo laughed in delight, and sprang from the anvil. Thorin caught him, though Dwalin and Arb were there to make sure of it.
A slightly different tune struck up, less solemn and more sprightly, and in the empty circle of the floor, Thorin and Bilbo danced. In a moment, others joined in and soon the floor was covered in movement.
“Nice,” said Durin.
“Go on, our Ori,” Sunny encouraged. “You should be down there dancing, even if your buffalo is standing guard.”
“Aye,” said Durin as Ori bowed and headed for the stairs. “Mebbe yeh kin do the roscobal hop.”
At the end of the dance, they all cheered once more. New music started soft and far more solemn than the last.
Thorin stood at the foot of the anvil with Bilbo on his arm, and signaled.
Machinery hummed and the anvil slowly moved backward to reveal a round passage into the earth, spiraling down and down the steep walls. As Ori took his place with the family, he saw endless rows of phosphorous lamps swirling to barely-there dots of light in the gloom.
There was a lift, accessed through a false-crypt to the side of the anvil, but that was for the elders, the youngest badgers, the expecting, and the infirm, with room for a few pleasure guild dancers to accompany them. Everyone else walked. It was a wide enough path down, though without rails. Dancers twirled about the opening. Above and below the main path were smaller ledges where the dancers hopped in time with the music.
Thorin led the way. He kept Bilbo, Frodo and Wee Sam between himself and the wall, and for good reason. Ori noticed that the men among them looked nervous, and so did many of the elves, though they were used playing in the branches of tall trees.
Ori glanced about. Arivett had Eomer well in hand. The young horse lord’s face told of his discomfort. Ori saw Eowyn and Theoden attempting to be brave, so he went back to them.
“Here, I’ll walk on the outside,” he offered.
“Thank you,” said Theoden. “How embarrassing. I’m a king, for Eorl’s sake!”
“Yes,” said Ori, “but you aren’t a dwarf.”
“How do you handle this?”
“Handle what?”
“The possibility of falling to your death!”
“We all end up in the stone eventually. At least this way, I would be falling into the stone’s embrace.”
It was a long journey down to Durin’s Forge, an ancient lava tube sealed behind two iron blast doors five feet thick and twenty feet square. Durin’s crown and anvil and his seven stars were chased in endless, interlocking patterns across the surface. The rune of Durin sat in raised mithril letters in the middle of each door.
“You don’t think those doors will actually contain erupting lava?” Elrond asked as he approached.
“No,” said Thorin, “but the racket they make as they fly up the passage will certainly let us know there’s a problem.”
“Oh,” said Elrond.
“Better reseal your mask,” said Thorin.
“Yes, of course.”
The blast doors did sport handles, but they were purely ornamental and ten feet from the ground.
The dancers gathered and took up the drums piled off to the side and began a solemn beat, like the echo of a heart beat, the heart beat of the mountain and earth.
Thorin gave the order, Sindris worked the lever and hidden machinery popped and clanged in the walls. Slowly, the doors parted. Beyond stood a great face of rock, empty, but for a vast, rough opening. This was the tube down to the lava.
The men and elves stepped back a pace as the heat slammed into them.
To dwarrow, the heat was soothing, but it was punishing for the others, even though the tube went on for many miles before it reached the blood of the mountain. Ori saw that tube descended quickly into the depths. He could feel the churning lava, but he couldn’t even see a glow from it.
The dancers ran forward, spinning and laughing. Dori led the way as they flitted about the room.
A phalanx of soldiers brought forward a large, ornate box and Thorin opened it, lifted out his votive offering to Mahal.
The king’s offering differed from all others. Ori had heard Thorin and Fili discussing it, and he knew they had worked together, forging an ornate gold and mithril crown. Kili chased in the designs and Dis bejeweled it.
“In the name of Durin,” Thorin shouted, so everyone could hear him, “our first and eternal king.”
He dropped the crown into the tube and it instantly vanished from sight. The dancers sang out Durin’s name and tossed gold dust on each who made an offering.
Bilbo came forward, wearing a breathing mask and holding up a circle of gold with an irregular surface, dotted with jet.
Thorin called out, “In the name of Sunflower, our first and eternal queen.”
As Bilbo dropped the circle into the tube, Ori realized it represented a xocolātl chunk cookie. The dancers called to the queen.
Bilbo retreated back up the passage and the king beckoned Frodo.
“Quickly, mizimith.”
He picked up Frodo, who muttered out the offering prayer under his breathing mask as he tossed his tin animal into Durin’s Forge. Then Thorin sent him back up the passage with Fuhr’nk. He did the same with Sam and Tilda, keeping their time near the heat as brief as possible.
Dori broke away from the dancers and went to Balin’s side and together they stepped forward.
They each held a tiny gold circle with a small bump near one end.
Ori realized they actually represented babies, though he hoped the men and elves didn’t get the wrong idea.
“For Durin and Sunny when they return,” said Dori. “May their union be fruitful.”
Sigrid gave her offering alongside Fili, and Tauriel with Kili. So all the Longbeards and their partners followed about the opening and did the same: Dis with Jani, Oin with Binni, Bujni with Dipfa, Gloin with Gridr, Gimli with Legolas, who looked nervous approaching the open tube, as if he was unsure that Durin might not be offended and decide Legolas was part of the offering, too.
Ori heard Durin mutter in his head, “An’ wha’ th’ fuck would Da do with an elf, I ask yeh?”
Ori sealed his mouth absolutely shut. He was afraid if he opened it, he’d burst into the most profound case of giggles Arda had ever seen. Besides, he hadn’t given his offering yet.
Dwalin caught his eye and winked, holding up their joint offering in invitation.
Ori quickly put away his sketchbook and graphite wand and stepped forward with Dwalin.
“All for the glory of Durin,” they said in unison.
Down went the manacles that had bound Balin to his desk. Down went the sword Ori had used to
smack Balin across the arse. Dwalin had done a great job polishing and sharpening that.

Ori heard the laughter of the king and queen echo up the tube.

They stepped back and Bofur stepped forward to offer his pick-shaped pieces of tin. Ori saw a few gold coins flash after them and was happy Nori chose to participate, even if he couldn’t be seen. Bombur and Erda, with their children, gave tin votives shaped like pots and pans, and Bifur a fully jointed and painted toy horse.

Vi and Margr brought forth a pie.
“Here Yeh go, Dearie,” Vi shouted down the tube as they released it.
“It’s a nice meat pie, in case Yeh feel peckish,” Margr added.

Thorin raised a brow at them, though he looked quite pleased.
“Aye, well,” said Vi, “it’s th ‘mouth’ a’ th’ lava tube, ain’t it.”
“And it is an excellent pie,” Glorfindel remarked through his mask.

Thranduil and Bard approached. Ori glanced over at the crowd to see if he could spy Ulfr, but the Ironfist king was conspicuously absent.

Thranduil dropped in a bottle of fine Dorwinion wine. Bard sent a packet of papers. Ori thought it looked like a letter. He made a note to be nosy about that when they returned to Fundin House.

Once the king’s extended household had given their tokens, a long line of dwarves from Erebor and Dale, their guests, family and friends, stepped forward to give theirs, some alone, some in family groups. Those who lacked an offering of their own took one from the huge basket of tin shapes Gridr had worked with the help of Bujni, Dis, and anyone else among the Durins who had a moment to pitch in. Zark and Kadis and their grown children gave medallions of mithril. Tin and Ondr came forward with their grand badgers and old Master Arim and dropped in a fine pewter tankard.

Nadaris and her family gave rosettes worked from red silk cord, since Nadaris had joined the trimmings division of the tailors’ guild. Nadaris watched the items go, and gave a satisfied nod.

Soon there were crowds all around the opening casting in offerings. Out of the corner of his eye, Ori saw Wandi and Cemnesta go to the edge and bow, but he couldn’t hear what they said. Galadriel and Celeborn did as well, and Galadriel stretched her hands out and Ori saw a flicker of blue light.

It was many hours until everyone who had wished to give an offering did so. Ori didn’t realize until they started back up the passage, the last to leave, that he was exhausted. He was incredibly hungry as well.

Dori, at least, rode in a chair borne by Dwalin’s soldiers. If Ori was this tired, he worried that Dori must be infinitely more so. His answer came back in the form of soft snoring from the chair. The soldiers moved far more quietly than usual as they hurried towards the lift. A dwarf warrior on tiptoe was an amazing sight.

Dawn dyed the sky above Erebor bright pink. The glass at the top of the mountain had been opened and the mirror caught the light and poured it down through the city and on the people as they reveled in the streets, wishing each other Happy Durin’s Day.

Ori saw Mistress Dazla and her daughters near the park and waved to them as the royal family made its way back to Fundin house.

Once home, Dwalin, Thorin, Aragorn, and Gimli took care of the ponies. Dori ordered everyone else inside and to get into sleepwear, then come for breakfast in the parlor.

The Durin family meals for the day had been planned and assembled the day before, since the staff of the royal residence had Durin’s Day off.

The royal kitchen would present the wedding feast tonight, and those chefs were hard at work. Breakfast smelled delicious, Ori thought as he came through in an old night shirt left over from Dwalin’s fatal attempt at the wash. He smoothed the soft faded pink shirt and his rumpled old cardigan, the one he had worn to his wedding. It was pilled with age but still plush, and cozy.

People slowly arrived in sleeping clothes, as Kili fried up the traditional turnovers made of ground goat, onions, and spices, along with turnovers stuffed with mushrooms and cheese, accompanied by pots of sour cream mixed with dill, and pots of hot sauce. Pitchers of apple juice and ale went to the table to wash it down. Thick porridge studded with dried fruits had been
cogitating on the hob all night, and now Randibur and Bombur carried the huge pot into the breakfast parlor where awaited piles of bowls and spoons. Omi and Loli set out ewers of cream, pots of jellies and jams, and salt cellars while Erda and Binni made urns of tea.

Thorin and Bilbo arrived, Thorin in pale blue cotton trousers and Bilbo swathed in his wildly colored dressing gown.

“Where are the faunts?” Erda asked.

“We shoved some bread and jam into them and they fell asleep while we got them ready for bed.”

Bilbo chuckled. “I need more than that.”

Bofur came through in a night shirt of dark green tartan with tiny yellow stripes, with little pickaxes scattered over.

“Looks like a pajama party,” said Nori, who followed after.

He had stripped to his boxers, even though he had never put on finery that night to begin with. Thranduil, arrayed in his cotton pajamas with delicate blue lines, looked askance at the pattern of ferrets chasing one another across the mint green cloth.

“I’m not sure those count as ‘festive’,” said the king-father.

“I like ‘em,” said Nori. “We can’t all be wearin’ mattresses.”

Theoden and Theodred wandered in wearing plain white nightshirts and slippers. Theodred yawned.

“Thorin,” said Theoden, “I have a question regarding your battle dress down in the crypts.”

“Yes?” Thorin asked smoothly, with a glint in his eye. He poured out ale for the horse king and his son.

“Do dwarrow actually wear that little on the battlefield?”

“Not anymore,” said Thorin. “We generally wear armor now. We’ve grown rather attached to our bits.”

“So, at one time, dwarrow fought only in cloth?”

“No, of course not,” said Thorin. “We stripped down to nothing and fought.”

Theoden’s eyebrow shot up.

“Really?”

“Yes,” said Thorin. “If nothing else, the enemy got a good laugh before they were slaughtered.”

Balin chuckled.

“There’s more to it than tha’, laddie. Tell ‘im th’ rest.”

“It was a scare tactic, if it was an enemy we hadn’t met before,” said Thorin. “Imagine looking up the hill, expecting to see the usual soldiers charging down at you, and instead you’re beset by a horde of hairy, screaming boulders.”

Theoden laughed.

Arwen, in a sleeveless cream silk gown, and Aragorn in matching trousers and a sleeveless open shirt. He sat down while Arwen stuck her head into the kitchen and asked if they need their assistance. Gridr shooed her out.

Bard and the Bardlings dragged in, Bard clad only in cotton trousers of pale green with silver ferns scatter over them. Sigrid wore a long, opaque. Durin blue gown, with no sleeves, and Bard could say nothing, because Thranduil had commissioned it for her from Dipfa. Tilda cuddled in her Da’s arms in a orange cotton jumpsuit with feet. Bain tagged after, yawning cavernously. The buttons on the placket of his blue night shirt did not all sit in the correct holes.

Thranduil looked amused and prepared a large mug of tea for Bard. Bard plumped down, and kissed Thranduil’s cheek. Thranduil took Tilda and put the mug in front of Bard who moaned and took it gratefully.

Shrieks of delight erupted as Dwalin strolled in clad in nothing but his old pink drawers.

Theoden whistled wolfishly.

“Dwalin, you look wonderful in pink!” Bilbo praised. He turned to Thorin. “You’re coloring is close to Dwalin’s, you could wear pink.”

“Pink,” announced Dori as she swept through in a cloud of purple, “is not a Durin color, or so I have been informed.”
Thorin smirked at Dori.
“Well, if my husband likes it…”
“Fickle wretch,” Dori spat.

Celeborn, Galadriel and the Rivendell elves arrived dressed alike in long, white sleepwear.
Glorfindel followed the Sisters, all clad in matching sleepwear of bright blue and large white spots.

Dis and Jani came in shortly after. Dis wore what Ori thought was a brief cotton nightshirt, cream colored and covered in pink and red lip prints, until Jani followed her, clad in only the matching trousers.

“These are nice,” Gridr admired.
Dis grinned at Jani.
“They were a present. But someone can’t resist sharing.”
Jani fluttered her lashes.

Ori glanced over at the men. Bard and Theoden still looked everywhere but at the dams, while Theodred and Bain called out a greeting to the princess and her lover, as they came in, then shrugged and applied themselves to their breakfasts. Gimli, Legolas and the rest of the Groinuls wore variations of the same tartan pajamas. Legolas had adorned Romy with a tartan bow about the neck. Thus far the young warg had not eaten it.

Oin wore a long nightshirt with matching slippers and Binni wore a robe. Gloin’s suit featured attached feet of the same material.

Tilda and Gloin pointed at each other and shouted “Feet!”
Bujni looked down at his sleep clothing, then scribbled in his notebook, then looked down at his clothes again.
Ori had a feeling something vaguely scientific was in the offing. Thorin laughed, and Ori turned to see Frodo and Sam enter with Butter and Sugar, each warg adorned with a frilly mob cap with ribbons tied under their jowls.

“No so sleepy after all I see,” Thorin chuckled as Bilbo provided Frodo and Sam with turnovers. “Come here, my damlings,” Thorin beckoned them. Once the wargs sat beside him, Thorin used his pocket knife to cut slits in the caps for the wargs’ ears to stick out.

The faunts ate seven turnovers each. Tilda dragged Gloin off to slide down the long corridor in their slippery ‘foot’ pajamas. The younger set began making plans for sparring over the next few days.

“Bard,” said Ori quietly, “what did you sacrifice last night?”
“A letter to Mahal.”
“A letter?”
“Like I used to write to Father Frost when I was a kid.”
“You wrote to Father Frost to bring you toys,” Ori recalled.
“This was more of a ‘thank You’ note.” Bard looked around. “To tell the truth? I sometimes think of Father Frost and Mahal as the same…. person, being, thing. Big guy, big beard, big, booming laugh.”
“That makes sense,” said Ori. “You never do see the two of Them in the same place at the same time.”
“Besides, Father Frost makes toys in His workshop. It’s not that big a leap.”
“Did you ask for a toy boat?”
Bard biffed him lightly across the head.
“No. Besides, He already brought me one.”

All together, the company consumed every last bit of food, then everyone slept until at least ten bell.

Ori was just taking the last of the ginger cookies out of the oven when Dori came in, looking a little puffed as she had been out with the dancers again. Dain followed at her heels.

“He didn’t like ‘Balis’?” Dain asked.
“He said it sounded too much like ‘Ballast’.”
“Oh, aye, he migh’ve a point. Wha’ abou’ ‘Doris’?”
They heard a great crash, a squawk and a thud from the breakfast parlor and the three of them ran in to find Red Queen standing on the table. She shook her head, flinging shards everywhere, and she held Baluchistan to the surface of the table by a large talon on his neck.
Ori traced the shards back to the mica panes in the double doors.
“What in Mahal’s blessed name?” Dori demanded.
“This… this bezonian swooped and dove at us in a pathetic mating display!” Red Queen shrieked.
“M’ no’ bezonian, darlin’,” Baluchistan warbled. “I’m hun’rd percent pure raven love.”
“If we had not stopped you, the two of us would now be flattened against the side of this nest!”
Dain slapped his hand on his forehead.
“Blu! Yeh maniac!”
“We apologize for the destruction, Bearer,” said Red Queen, “but it was either the mica window or the solid door.”
“Should’ve gone f’r th’ door, sugar-baby, I li’e it rough,” Baluchistan burbled dreamily.
“We could peck you in the head,” she hissed, “but all that would happen is an escape of hot air.”
“Tha’s righ’, love! Threaten me wi’ a guid time.”
Red Queen looked up at Dain.
“He is quite mad. We have no idea what to do with him.”
Dain sighed.
“Let’s have ‘im.”
Red Queen stepped off Baluchistan’s neck and Dain gingerly picked him up.
“Blu, ‘re yeh hurt, lad?”
“Wounded! Wounded by th’ rejection a’ me melancholy birdie!”
“C’mon, yeh lovesick dope. We’ll check yeh over f’r broken wha’ ever.”
“Nothin’s broken bu’ me heart!”
Red Queen shook herself off and nodded to the assembled dwarrow.
“Excuse us, we need to go and clean all those black feathers out of our aerie.”
“Think a’ me as yeh pluck each one!” Baluchistan bleated as Dain carried him out.
Dori opened the remains of the door. Red Queen stalked forward and stopped to tap her beak against Dori’s cheek.
“Are you keeping up with your clenching exercises?”
“Of course,” said Dori with a bright smile and Red Queen flew away.
Ori fetched the broom and the dustpan, and they began to clean up.
“Oh, well,” said Dori. “The workers are coming soon to put in winter panes.”
“How will the ravens get around?”
“They’ll use inside passages,” said Dori. “Once it starts to snow, the ravens won’t be doing as much flying outside until the spring, beyond important deliveries.”
She considered the growing pile of debris.
“Shard? Splinter? Oh, I do hope Dain comes up with names soon. I know there’s time, but I’d like this settled.”
Ori cuddled up to Dori.
“Why don’t you let me finish this?” Ori asked. “Those cookies just came out and you could have some with tea.”
“With all these guests in the house, pet? I can’t justify that!”
“Dori, you’re pregnant and you’re the Bearer. I think you can justify a pot of tea. Or do I have to get my attack dwarf in here to sit on you?”
Dori giggled.
“Oh, all right. You’ve talked me into it. Shall I put out a cup for you as well?”
“You have to ask?”
“It’s a matter of form, pet.”
“Yes,” said Ori wryly, “form must be observed.”
Bilbo came in and looked at the shards then at Dori and Ori.
“I shan’t ask as I heard Red Queen and saw Dain with Blu. Ori, will you come with us?”
“Of course, Bilbo. Where are we going?”
“Back to the crypts for a few minutes. Thorin didn’t want to leave marriage offerings with the Durin’s Day ones. I think this is far more private to him.”
“Of course,” Ori replied immediately. He followed Dori through to the kitchen where he disposed of the rubbish, broom and pan.
“I’ll have tea for you when you get back, pet,” Dori called after him as he ran to join the group headed towards the front door.

Ori found the quiet of the crypts startling after he’d seen the cavern so filled with people. Of course, it was still filled with people, and though they were quiet here, no doubt they were partying it up in the Halls. Durin had promised Ori he would make sure they knew that today was the day.

The worshippers went first to the tomb of Freris. The usual figures of alabaster ringed the sepulcher, though the lid was snowflake obsidian, which Dwalin said had been her favorite. A bowl made of this stone already sat on the offering tray, but not a wreath. Ori looked up into the carved face of the dead princess and then swallowed and looked away.

On the rare occasions when Ori was a badger and did something egregiously naughty, he had dreaded that sharp expression on Dori’s face. What was it like for Thorin and Dis, whose amad apparently looked that way all the time? If they were truly being naughty, did Freris grow bloody fangs or something?

Fili handed Thorin the offering wreath. Ori recalled Fili had acted slightly flustered when presenting the wreath he made months before for Thrain’s tomb. Now he looked truly anxious.

“Careful,” Fili said to Thorin, “this one’s mithril, and it’s a lot sharper than the other.”

“How appropriate,” Thorin chuckled as he accepted it. “Another triumph, Fili. Thank you, it’s beautiful.”

“You’re welcome, Idad.”

This wreath combined a circle of swords alternating with wolf-heads, Freris’ personal device, and one Kili had adopted as his own. The device of the king’s line of Durin was the raven, though Fili’s would be the lion. Balin always looked askance at this notion, but Thorin said it was perfect that Fili broke with tradition - as long as the crown prince didn’t decide to use one as his messenger.

Bilbo lit the charcoal in the bowl and added the copal.

The hobbit said, in khuzdul, “Your highness, Princess Freris, I pledge my sword to the house of Durin, and on my honor to serve the hand and heart of your son.”

Thorin placed the wreath around the bowl and added, “Amad, I pledge my sword to the house of Durin, and on my honor to serve the hand and heart of my consort.”

They bowed in unison, then straightened and the party moved on to Thrain’s tomb.

Ori kept looking back at Freris’ tomb as they crossed the aisle. He felt like a foolish badger, afraid of the dark. He had already met Freris, and really, the thing he probably had most to fear from her was that she’d offer to arm wrestle him.

As they returned to Fundin House, Bilbo poked Thorin in the side.

“Enough of that, you silly dwarf. No brooding on Durin’s Day.”

“I still wish your beads could have come from my hand,” said Thorin.

“Your sister is the jewel-smith, not you,” said Bilbo. He ran his fingers down his own braid. “I’m quite fine with the ones you chose for me from the bead room. In fact, I’m glad you did, because I don’t think I could have focussed my eyes long enough on any one thing in that room to choose my own.”

“The first time Master Brur brought me down there, I wanted to lick every bead I saw,” said Ori.

Fili piped up, “The first time amad brought Ki and I down there, she spent the whole time taking beads out of his mouth. She didn’t even notice how many I put in mine!”
Dwalin smirked.
“No one’s surprised, lad. I though’ yer amad would die a’ pride when she seen all the beads yeh
managed t’ steal on tha’ trip.”

Thorin hugged Fili’s shoulders with one arm.
“We even got most of them back.”
“Most of them?” Ori asked.
“I did swallow a few by accident,” said Fili. “I offered to retrieve them, but everyone said not to
bother.”

They chuckled over this as Fili waxed eloquent about his and Kili’s adventure in the bead room.
Bilbo surreptitiously squeezed Ori’s hand as they returned to Fundin House.
“Get ready and come through to Bag-End,” Bilbo murmured.
“I’ll be quick,” Ori promised in a low tone.

Ori hurried to his bedroom to find his half-dressed husband watching Dipfa unpack a huge
garment bag on the bed.
“Yeh’ve go’ a new dashin’ outfit f’r th’ weddin’, love,” Dwalin told him as Ori came over for a
kiss and a hug.

He buried his face in Dwalin’s beard and took a deep breath. His Dwalin was washed and
dressed and smelled delicious. It was fun having the house full of friends but it also meant the pair of
them never had much time alone.

“Lord Ori,” Dipfa called his attention to the bed.

Dipfa beamed over a replica of his coronation robe, remade in his favorite shade of lavender, with
touches of Dwalin’s green. Emerald buttons, green laces for his boots and the hood tip was tied off
with the seven diamond stars, each with an emerald highlight.

“Dipfa! It’s wonderful!” Ori cried in delight.

“C’mon, love, let’s getcha int’ it. Can’t wait t’ see yeh.”

Ori struggled out of the breeches and tunic he’d thrown on for comfort and had a wash. Dwalin
helped while Dipfa fussied over the robes
on the bed. Once Dwalin finished with Ori’s hair, he and Dipfa helped Ori into the new robes.

“There,” Dipfa decreed.

Ori looked at himself in the mirror. He decided this was his favorite. He looked good. His hair
glowed with Dwalin’s care. His earcuffs and beads sparkled and his beard was getting thicker, with
a glossy sheen. He turned and grinned at Dwalin. Dwalin’s eyes shone as Thorin’s had when
Thorin had looked at Bilbo on his birthday, but this look was for him. Ori gulped and blushed.
“I look pretty good,” Ori pointed out.

“Yeh look bloody beautiful, amrâlimê,” Dwalin said with a tremor in his voice. “I can hardly
believe yer mine.”

Ori flung himself at Dwalin.
“Yours!” he said and kissed him.

Ori trotted back into the sitting room where the guests were busily congratulating the couple and
hurrying away to get dressed themselves.

Arne greeted Ori with a hug and they went to Bilbo.
“Arne, there you are, my lad,” said Bilbo.
“What can I d-do for you, Professor?”
“You can call me Bilbo, as we discussed,” Bilbo chided playfully.
“Yes, Bilbo,” Arne sing-singed.
“Cheeky brat. I was wondering, will you do me the honor of walking down the aisle with me as
one of my family members?”

Arne drew a startled breath, then threw his arms around Bilbo’s shoulders.
“Of course! I’m the one wh-who is honored!”

The room slowly emptied and finally Thorin, Bilbo and Ori were able to retire to Bag-End East.
In the sitting room, Balin entertained Frodo and Sam, reading to them from a large book. He
spoke in khuzdul then westron.

“Ah,” Balin said as he saw them enter. “There yeh are. All set, laddie?”

“Yes, Balin,” Thorin smiled, “all is ready.”

“Better start gettin’ yerself togged up then. I’ll call Zindis t’ yeh.”

Balin glanced over at his charges.

Frodo and Sam whispered to one another, looking as grave as a miniature hobbit could do. Balin closed the book.

“What’s troublin’ yeh, lads?”

Frodo said, “Idad Balin, we thought Idad Thorin and Uncle Bilbo were already married.”

“Ah. Well, I’ll tell yeh a wee secret, lads. By tradition, they were married when they braided each other’s hair. By law, they were married when they signed their contracts.”

“Then, what’s this for?” Sam asked.

“Remember wha’ else happens when a dwarf king marries?”

“Ah!” Frodo said. “Uncle Bilbo has to be made into the consort!”

“Aye, an’ folk wan’ t’ see tha’. So, when yeh go down th’ aisle with yer Uncle Bilbo, yer idad’ll be on th’ dais with th’ wargies, an’ yeh’ll go up th’ steps t’ meet ‘im.”

“Will you and Imad Dori be there?” Frodo asked.

“A’ course! We’re performin’ th’ ceremony.”

They gaped at him.

“Oh,” said Sam.

“Oh?” Balin teased.

Frodo said, “We thought Lord Mahal did it.”

“He’s a bit busy. He told us t’ go on without ‘im.”

“Oh, well,” Frodo climbed off of the sofa, Sam followed. “I guess that’s alright then.”

“Excellent, my boy,” Bilbo said as Frodo rushed over and hugged him. “Now I need you and Wee Sam to go over to your Imad Gridr. She’s going to get you both ready. Off you go.”

Frodo and Sam scampered out, tailed by Butter. Thorin smiled slowly at Bilbo. Ori felt his heart bounce at the look of love in Thorin’s eyes as he gently placed his hands on Bilbo’s shoulders.

Balin rose and patted Thorin shoulder as he headed to the door.

“Come along now, our Thorin. Yer clothing’s laid out in yer old quarters a’ Oakenshield Inn.”

“Seems rather far to march,” said Bilbo. “Will you back in time for the ceremony?”

Thorin kissed him.

“My own ghivasha, when we next meet we shall be King and Consort.”

Bilbo’s face twitched. He smiled, sniffed and looked up at Thorin from under his brows. He snatched ahold of Thorin and hugged him tight. Thorin’s arms went about Bilbo and he rested his head on Bilbo’s curls.

“My dearest dwarf,” Bilbo murmured, then drew himself up and resorted to his handkerchief.

Thorin drew away, slid his hand into Bilbo’s hair and touched his brow to Bilbo’s. They smiled at each other.

“I will see you soon, azyungel.”

“Soon, my dear,” Bilbo promised him.

Thorin turned, smiled, and touched Ori’s cheek, then went out.

Bilbo watched him go, then turned to Ori.

“Is it bad luck for dwarrow to see each other before the wedding?”

“No, it’s back luck if Dori finds out you saw each other in your wedding outfits before the wedding.”

“I see. Not taking any chances, are we.”

“Not a one.”

They immediately heard Dori.

“Thorin Oakenshield what are you doing in this house?”

“I live here,” Thorin reply came back to them, tinged with laughter.

“You are not allowed to see your betrothed dressed for marriage. Shoo!”
“Dori,” Thorin protested in a teasing tone, “why are you going to all this trouble of sending me to the old residence? I’m sure I’ll not see Bilbo and his wedding clothes if I dress in Dwalin and Ori’s room.”

“Zindis is waiting for you in the old residence. Scat!”

Bilbo and Ori heard Dori’s house shoes scamper and Thorin’s laughter told them he was being forcibly ejected from the house. Ori turned to Bilbo, grinning like a fool. Bilbo gave a delighted noise and they hugged each other tight.

“It’s happening!” Ori cried as they parted.

“Yes,” Bilbo said and drew a breath. “Yes, and I need to get dressed. My, you do look fine. Is that new?”

“Yes, Dipfa insisted.”

“That’s sounds like Dipfa,” Bilbo chuckled then grabbed Ori’s hand. “Come with me.”

Ori sat on the bench at the foot of Thorin and Bilbo’s bed as Bilbo dressed.

“Silk drawers?” Ori teased.

“I wanted Thorin to hear them whisper,” said Bilbo with a naughty grin. He pulled a white linen shirt from his closet.

“Is that your father’s?” Ori asked.

“Yes, it appears to be flat white, but if you look closely.”

Bilbo brought it over and Ori did so.

“Oh! There’s a flower pattern woven into the fabric in the same thread.”

Ori got up and helped Bilbo on with his shirt. The metal buttons at the wrists and placket were the same flower as in the weave of the material.

And Ori thought only dwarrow achieved that level of obsessive detail.

“I’m so happy Zindis could save these,” said Bilbo.

He pulled the buckskin trousers out of the box.

“May I?” Ori asked. “I promise, I don’t have any ink on my hands.”

“I believe you,” said Bilbo solemnly.

Ori ran his fingers over the material.

“That’s amazing. That’s like wearing something that’s wearing you back.”

Bilbo blinked.

“Too weird?” Ori asked, as he handed Bilbo the braces.

“I’ll think about it later,” said Bilbo. He buttoned the braces onto the trousers and pulled them on. He tucked in his shirt tails and fastened his trousers. He pulled his braces up. They were silver, with flowers woven in representing happiness and new beginnings.

“Well, I’m not quite the hobbit my father was,” he mused, “but that’s my own fault for scampering about the countryside, missing elevenses.”

Ori watched as Bilbo wound a blue silk cloth around his neck, over the upturned collar of the snowy shirt, and tied it precisely into place, then folded the collar over it. Over his shirt, Bilbo buttoned a matching weskit, then fastened his sword belt and tugged his weskit into place. Thorin had polished Sting for Bilbo and left it on the dresser. Ori handed the sword to Bilbo, who looked at the shining blade, shook his head and chuckled.

“That dwarf spoils me rotten,” said Bilbo as he sheathed his sword. He went to the wardrobe and drew from it a Durin blue velvet copy of his beloved red coat, which Dipfa had made as a wedding present. Bilbo pulled it on, buttoned it just above the waist, and tucked a handkerchief of the same blue silk cloth into his breast pocket, over his heart.

Bilbo turned to face Ori.

“Will I do?”

Ori kissed his cheek.

“You’re lovely. Are you ready?”

“As I am going to be,” said Bilbo.

Ori hesitated.

“Bilbo, you haven’t written Thorin a poem, have you?”
“Not one that can be read in public.”
Ori nodded in relief.
“Good.”
“Why do you ask?”
“I’ll explain later.” Ori chuckled.
Frodo and Sam bounced through from their room, washed and dressed.
“How do we look, Uncle?” Frodo asked proudly.
Bilbo and Ori looked the faunts over. They had done excellent work in preparing themselves.
Butter came in looking disgusted, with brushes and combs in her teeth. Bilbo laughed and took these
from the warg, wiped the handles on his discarded shirt and directed the faunts to brush their foot
hair. This done, Bilbo took on Frodo’s curls and Ori applied himself to Sam’s. Ori remembered to
be careful as hobbit hair was a good deal like Sigrid’s or Tilda’s. Ori forced himself not giggle as the
ruddy blond curls bounced back.

Bilbo declare both to be ready.

“Have we both been to the lav?” Bilbo asked.
“Yes,” grumbled the faunts.

“Well, it’s a long ceremony, are we sure? Why don’t you both go and try again, just in case.”
Frodo and Sam looked at each other, rolled their eyes, and went away. Bilbo scampered off to the
main bathroom.

“I’m after you,” Ori called.

Finally the four walked out into the Fundin sitting room, where an excited crowd waited. Hobbits
did not approach the marriage altar alone, but in family groups, as from the oldest days, even before
the Wandering.

Arne and his loves were joined by the Gardeners, the Urs, the Sisters, arrayed in the most startling
shade of orange, Glorfindel in Dale uniform, and the Rivendell elves. Dori gave Ori and Bilbo a
once over, kissed their cheeks and hurried out.

Bell hugged Bilbo, then held him at arms length, obvious admiring.

“Oh dearest Bilbo!” she said, sniffing a little. “You make a perfect hobbit groom!”

“Aye, you look well indeed,” Hamfast praised and got his hug in as well. Then everyone else
clustered around to exclaim over and congratulate Bilbo.

Bilbo, rather pink in the cheeks, finally got his entourage out to the main cavern and into the
highly decorated coaches waiting for them.

Randi hopped up to drive the coach with Bilbo, Ori, the faunts and the Gardeners crowded in.
The rest of the group rode on horse or pony back. They drove sedately down through the deserted
streets to the throne room.

“The place seems empty,” Bilbo said, low.

Ori nodded. It was almost spooky without anyone around.

“Everyone’s in the throne room,” Elladan informed them with a laugh. “All eager for the
wedding.”

“Gracious me!” Bilbo mumbled, a little pale.

The coach arrived and Hamfast hopped out, handed out Bell, the faunts, then Ori, who hid his
amusement, and then Bilbo, though Bell went to Bilbo’s other side. The group reformed outside the
throne room door. Brur came forward, grinning like a fool.

“Last chance t’ be free an’ single, laddie,” he teased Bilbo.

“Oh, hush, you!” Bilbo forgot his nerves and laughed.

Tay and Nodun kissed Bilbo’s cheek and hurried in, Tay to the pleasure guild and Nodun to her
scribe duties. Brur went to the door and looked in. Ori saw him wink and thought that was likely
the signal. Quartz winged in and perched on Ori’s shoulder.

“Wow! All the swells!” Quartz cried.

Hamfast and Bell stood with Bilbo between them, then Frodo and Samwise on either side of Ori,
with the rings on little Durin blue velvet pillows for all to admire as they went by. Frodo looked
gleeful and Sam determined.
Balin came through and looked the party over while Bombur and Erda, Arne, the Sisters, Glorfindel, Eldron, Lindir and the twins grouped together behind.

“Wait!  Wait for me!” Tharkun called as he alit from Shadowfax and rushed forward, his staff bound around with miraculously flowering vines.

Bilbo raised an eyebrow at the wizard.

“So, in this case, a wizard being right on time delays my wedding for however long it takes him to arrive.”

“Exactly,” Tharkun affirmed.  He shook his shining white robes into place as Lindir distractedly brushed him off. “Just be thankful I’m not Radagast.  I think he’s still back at the carrock, watering the rabbits.”

“No bunnies for dinner for us,” Quartz muttered to Ori.

“You couldn’t eat a whole rosacabol rabbit yourself anyway.” Ori whispered back.

“We’ll save him some cake,” Balin promised.  “Now, the weddin’ cloths.”

They were called ‘cloths’ in khuzdul, and so they were called that in westron, but the word Balin used meant specifically the banners of finely woven mithril, decorated with white gems, fire opal beads and gold bells that shimmered and chimed as they struck together, the ancestral marriage banners of the Durin kings.

Carried aloft on long poles, they reached toward the ceiling and swept the ground, and completely obscured Bilbo and his party from everyone in front of them.  Glorfindel, with his helm in one arm, drawn sword in the other held to his breast, placed himself in front of the cloths to lead.

The hobbits and the elves looked a bit confused.  Brur and Balin threw open the throne room doors.

“There’s no’ bed curtains, lad,” said Balin, “an’ everyone in th’ throne room kin hear yeh, remember?”

“Oops,” said Frodo.

Balin waved the Protector of Dale and the cloth bearers forward and the party started to walk up the aisle.

“Why all these banners?” Ori heard Bilbo say. “I don’t remember this from Balin’s description.  If these are bed curtains, should I not also have a bed?”

“They’re no’ bed curtains, lad,” said Balin, “an’ everyone in th’ throne room kin hear yeh, remember?”

Thorin called, “They’ve screened me off, too, ghivasha.  It’s so we can’t see each other before the wedding ceremony.”

“Considering we’ve been living together since your coronation?” Vi encouraged, “Jus’ go wi’ it, chuck.  It’s worth it f’r the looksee t’ come.”

“Oops,” said Brur.

Half way along, harps and fiddles joined them, and proceeded Bilbo and his billowing entourage, as they walked the rest of the length of the room.  Well wishers called out and tossed gold dust over him from each side as he walked past.

Ori slipped out of the procession.  He caught a glimpse of Beorn in his bear form, lounging among the children as he had at the coronation.  Chopper sprawled on the other side, being similarly fawned over.

Ori glanced up and saw that the entire ceiling was covered in ravens.  On the larger clefs of rock, perched every member of the Red Queen’s flock.  At the far back Jim and the circus members stood with Fanny.

Quartz drew in a sharp breath.

“What?” Ori whispered.

“Udadel Carc’s here.”
“All the way from the Halls?”
“He gets around,” Quartz replied.
“Any other dead people I should know about?”
“Keep you posted.”

Ori chuckled to himself and was in place on the dais when Bilbo’s party mounted the steps and went on the left side in front of the throne, stopped, and all cloths were swept aside.

Rather than Thorin alone with his wargs at the throne, Thorin stood on the right side in front of the throne with his entire extended family, as any good hobbit would do. Roäc perched on the throne, preening idly. Thorin was crowned and in his coronation robes. From his shoulders, the amazing butterfly cloak flowed down and pooled behind him. Sugar sat on his right and Butter on his left. Romy watched from between Gimli and Legolas. Killer lolled at Dwalin’s feet at the edge of the stair up to the dais.

The room fell silent while the grooms got their first look at one another in wedding clothes.

Bilbo’s breath caught at the sight before him, and if Bilbo had any doubt that he himself was lovely, the look on Thorin’s face should have erased it.

Ori saw Thorin as struck as he had first been with Bilbo and more.

Ori found himself humming cheerily in his mind as he quickly caught that look for posterity.

Hamfast and Bell stepped forward.

Dis and Dain met them mid-way and they bowed and curtsied.

Hamfast produced a pouch of Old Toby, and each filled their pipes and smoked together. They exchanged pleasantries and talked about how the weather was perfect for a wedding. Bilbo had told Ori this was always mentioned, even if a howling gale prevailed outside.

When they had finished their pipes, each of them said, “Welcome, brother. Welcome, sister.” and embraced. Only then were the grooms allowed to step forward.

“Oh, now don’t you look nice, your majesty,” said Bell. She rose on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

“Aye, cleans up almost as good as me,” Hamfast added with a grin.

He also stood on tiptoe to kiss Thorin’s cheek.

Dain and Dis stepped back, as did Bell and Hamfast. Balin and Dori stood before the throne and gave the king and soon-to-be-crowned consort another moment to enjoy the sight of each other.

Balin and Dori stepped forward.

“Welcome t’ all our dear guests.” Balin smiled and nodded to the audience staring eagerly at the couple of the dais. “We have invited all a’ yeh here t’ witness this momentous event. Please attend t’ th’ ceremony a’ th’ exchange a’ rings.”

“Bring forth the ring bearers,” intoned Tharkûn.

Sam and Frodo stepped forward, beaming and blushing all at once from the attention.

Balin, with a quick glare at the wizard for stealing his line, beckoned to Frodo. Frodo, despite his excitement, walked sedately forward and offered his pillow to Balin. Balin smiled and took the pillow and Dori fluttered her hands over it, murmuring blessing. Balin then waved Thorin and Bilbo to come near. Balin offered the pillow to Bilbo. Bilbo took up the ring and offered it to Thorin and said in khuzdul,

“As Mahal and Yavanna have designed us for each other, let us seek to make each other happy. Let us forge a new family and a new life together, as did our ancestors.”

Thorin gave Bilbo his hand and Bilbo slid the ring on his finger. There was cooing and sniffles from the audience.

Balin nodded to Sam who offered his pillow to Balin, who held it before Dori, who blessed it and Balin presented the pillow to Thorin. Thorin took the ring up and Bilbo offered his hand.

“We and our families have come together to celebrate our love. May Yavanna bless our love every season and year as She blesses the trees and plants,” said Thorin. Then he repeated it in the language of the hobbits.

Dori danced around the couple, scattered gold dust and flower petals and fluttered invocations over them as they turned and bowed to the assembled.

Balin and Dori began the ancient song of blessing, Dis and Dain added their voices, then all the
rest of the dwarrow.

The dwarrow were startled when every elf in the place began an independent treble melody above the melody, though everyone kept singing.

The chorus consisted of vocalables, not so much words as a cascade of rhyming syllables. The men and hobbits joined in for this, from Eowyn’s clear alto to Theoden’s booming base, and soon the entire room echoed with the blessing song. When it finished, the throne room nearly exploded with the cheers.

“Yes!” Kili shouted and pumped his fist in the air.

Ori thought, Second Music, indeed!

Balin held up his hand and people slowly quieted down. Dis stepped forward with Fili and Kili on either side of her. Dis carried a silver salver.

Bilbo had been less than enthusiastic about the idea of a formal crown, as most dwarven crowns were derived from helmets, and weighed a good deal more than the circlet Thorin gave Bilbo on his birthday, which Bilbo elected to wear for every day meetings and such.

Knowing this, and happily wearing something much lighter himself, Thorin designed a special crown for his consort: a circle of mithril flowers, each different, and each bearing in the center a precious stone to match the raven eyes of Thorin’s own crown. The king and the rest of the Durins worked this new crown together, at the same time as the votive meant for the Durin’s Day, and Bilbo had bade them take care which they fed to the lava.

“I could wear the other one as a belt.”

Dori blessed the new crown on its salver.

“Don’t worry,” Dori murmurred, “I didn’t lick it.”

“Thank you, Dori,” said Thorin.

“I licked the rings earlier instead.”

“Thank you, Dori,” said Bilbo. He wrinkled his nose and deliberately wiped his hand against his coat.

Balin took the crown from its salver and offered it to Thorin.

Bilbo knelt and Thorin carefully placed the crown upon his head. The king took his time. It was obvious he was savoring this moment.

“Professor Bilbo Baggins of the Shire, I, Thorin Oakenshield of the House of Durin in Erebor, High King of all Dwarrow, crown you Bilbo, Prince Consort of Erebor. Rise, my ghivashel, and stand with me.”

“Yay!” Frodo cried, then slapped his hand over his mouth. From between his fingers he mumbled, “Sorry.”

Bilbo rose, smiling through tears as Thorin beamed at him. They kissed, to the delight of the room. Frodo squealed

There was a crash of drums and a glorious blast of trumpets. Balin stepped forward on the dais.

“All hail the high king and his prince consort of all dwarrow!” Balin roared. Every dwarrow bowed, elves, men, and hobbits saluted the pair according to their traditions. There was a second of silence. Then the cheers, applause, and shouts of delight threatened to raise the mountain off its roots.

The rulers from all corners of Arda moved forward to embrace and congratulate the royal couple. Ori could hardly hear what was said through the happy racket all around.

Elrond and Lindir gave their congratulations and when they stepped back, Ori murmured to Lindir, “Descant? That song doesn’t even have a descant.”

“We’re elves. We can’t help ourselves,” said Lindir with a wink.
Partying, Partying, and More Partying.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. And one hundred chapters after meeting, they’re finally married! No, we didn’t plan on it taking this long, but these Durins are just so dang busy!! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Finally Thorin took Bilbo’s hand and placed it on his arm. They led the party down the steps from the dais and made their way slowly down the aisle, smiling and thanking those who pressed forward to congratulate them, to the doorway where Fruhn’k had the teacup waiting.

Minty and Vespa were hitched to the coach, the ponies and the coach all swathed in Durin blue and diamonds. Each pony sported a single long, spiral horn of mithril and pearl, topped with a white gem.

Bilbo and Thorin stared. Rigel and Ara grinned.
“Just a little something to amuse you both,” Ara said lightly.
“Aww,” Dwalin snickered, “yeh’ve go’ horned horsies.”
“Hush,” Thorin said. “We don’t want Nori to start singing.”

From somewhere above them, Nori’s voice echoed down,

“I’m a horned horsey,
I used to wonder what kind of hay,
I'd eat at night. I'm a horned horsey,
Until the goats shared their pasture grass with me!”

“Now you’ve done it!” Ori sighed.

Bilbo stared.
“What in all of Arda?”
“I’ll explain in a moment,” Thorin said and helped Bilbo into the teacup, while Butter and Sugar ranged themselves on either side of it.

Dwalin called to Ori, who ran to climb on Gnasher’s back and sit before his husband. Dwalin curled an arm about his waist and Ori was free to scribble the scenes before them as they trotted forward, Killer beside them.

The rest of the royal guests climbed into their equipages as the populace streamed out and all around them, shouted joyously and tossed gold dust. Brur climbed up to drive the teacup and hollered at everyone trying to crowd around the coach.

Tay and the pleasure guild swooped around and danced the royals up the roads. Their twirls and gyrations kept the crowds from under the hooves, but encouraged everyone to dance along side.

“I didn’t realize our Tay was in th’ dancin’ guild,” said Dwalin.
“He’s not,” said Ori, “I think he just can’t help himself right now.”

Slowly the massive crowd moved up to the largest platform in the middle of the mountain. People rushed about, lighting lanterns and strings of Buer’s twinkling lights. This place was larger than the throne room and great dining room used for the coronation. Tables and benches lay spread out along the nearest edge, with the circus set up at the far end, and the middle open for dancing. Shops and grand mansions lined the edges, all with every window lit. In front of each store and house, stalls
were ready to sell things once the feast waned.

The royals got down and soon mixed with the crowd, talked, and laughed. The wagons from the kitchens arrived and everyone went to bring out the food and dishes and the great barrels of wine, ale, and cider.

Thorin and Bilbo were called to take their seats at the royal table. They went unhurriedly, still talking and greeting people, Bilbo, sweet-smiling and welcoming, Thorin, powerful and benevolent. Their wargs trailed after, tails away. Several members of the family followed, but most continued to circulate among the hordes of people. Dwalin had been convinced by Arb and Furh’nk to eat first before taking guard duty, and so he joined his husband and the newlyweds at the table.

“Bring forth the scalding soup!” Dis called.

This caught almost everyone’s attention and triggered shouts and yells of encouragement. Hijil brought the steaming kettle forward and Dain followed with a plinth to set it on.

Hild turned to Aris with a delighted cackle. Ori had a moment to take in the Blackfoot Queen’s celebratory fashion. Hild’s gown fell from high on the neck to the floor in open weave of moss green, adorned at each joining with a sapphire, in honor of the Durins. She wore a gold armlet upon each arm, which cascaded in ropes of precious stones, caught up at a matching cuff at each wrist. She wore her hair in her customary halo, wound round her head, with a tiara meant to represent a circle of jeweled knife hilts. Ori scribbled hastily and made notes on the colors and gems. He was definitely going to color this one. He rapidly turned his attention back to the traditional newlywed soup custom.

People crowded around to watch, but let Ori through to the royal couple’s side.

Wonderful!” Bilbo enthused. “I’ve been dying to try it.”

“Dis,” said Thorin wryly, “I don’t think it’s going to help us produce healthy dwarflings.” “Of course not,” said Dis. “I just want to watch your face when you try to swallow it.”

“You’re never going to forgive me for laughing at you at your wedding.”

“Dams have long memories, nadadel,” said Dis with an evil smile.

More shouts announced the arrival of Mistress Dazla, who brought forth a golden bowl and one golden spoon.

Mistress Dazla, this is your day off!” Thorin chided.

“If you’ll pardon me, your majesty, you’ll hush. I’ve been waiting a long time for this.”

In the end, Dis wasn’t the only one laughing at Thorin. Dwalin seemed almost ready to pour the contents of the bowl down Thorin’s throat. Thorin raised an eyebrow.

“One more spoonful,” Dwalin muttered.

Thorin, beetroot, with tears streaming down his face, did so. Dwalin turned to Chat.

“Righ’, tell tha’ no good coward, our Thorin sucked down twice th’ amoun’ tha’ he sputtered over.”

Chat and Givris snickered in delight.

“Excellent,” Thorin grumbled. “I’m finished now.”

“Really, my dear?” asked Bilbo. “I could happily eat this all night. Where is your dwarven fortitude?”

Ori had bent closer to draw the proceedings, and so he heard it clearly when Thorin leaned forward and whispered, “Still sheathed, because we’re in public.”

“Ask a silly question,” said Bilbo.

Balin brought Thorin a bowl of cold water, a cloth and several handkerchiefs.

“Thank you, Balin.”

“A good retainer’s always prepared,” said Balin, snickering.

“Keep laughing, Balin,” said Thorin, as he washed his face and sniffed thickly. “You aren’t married yet.”

Dwalin gave a shout and patted the top of Balin’s head. Balin smacked at him. The crowd cheered as Bilbo upended the bowl and swallowed down the rest.
From a distance, Ori heard Torq wail, “No wonder he drank me under th’ table!”

As if to make the soldier feel all-the-worse, Frodo swept a forefinger inside the bowl and licked it off.

“Yummy!” the faunt squealed.

Sigrid turned to Fili.

“What’s in the soup?”

“What’s not in the soup?” he replied, rolling his eyes. “Think of every single food that contains spice and heat, grind it to powder and boil it down to a paste.”

Sigrid gulped.

“We’d better start eating every spice we know to prepare.”

They hugged each other, giggling.

Once the soup tradition was dispensed, the kitchen staff set out the dishes and the feasting began. People found seats and Ori was happy to see the main dish of roasted young goats were served in slices, with root vegetables, and not cooked whole and set back up as if they were alive.

Unfortunately, this meant there was no need for the couple to cut out the heart together, but it was served to them on a platter.

Balin explained to Theoden, “Th’ goat’s an animal a’ fortitude. Eatin’ th’ heart together’ll make th’ union strong.”

“I’ve always found it rather tasty myself,” said Theoden.

“Aye, tha’, too,” said Balin.

Some elves ate a version of the dish without the goat. Instead, Nomirliel had introduced the royal chefs to cubes made of bean curd with the same texture as the tenderest meat.

“It doesn’t really have a lot of taste on its own,” she said to Sculdis, who dared to try it. “It’s very good at picking up the flavor of whatever is cooked alongside it.”

“Good for when there’s no meat, I take it,” said Sculdis, “but perfectly edible. Needs salt.”

“I’ve always thought so, too,” the elf replied, as she reached for the salt cellar.

Drums sounded out a marching beat as the chefs paraded out the gravy course in the royal tureens. Most held venison gravy, with cavern mushrooms, but a few were strictly mushroom, for Beorn and for elves who preferred to confine themselves to vegetables.

The dwarven favorites were all there, including the dreaded sausages wrapped in fried scallion pancakes. Bain and Stonehelm ate them along with the rest, but could not look at each other without snorting.

Other foods made their first appearance at the king’s marriage table. Deneb had supervised the creation of spicy groundnut stew, and a cadre of Dale women brought huge pots of dry salted fish, which they reconstituted and cooked with peppers, potatoes and onions. The Rohirrim supplied their special fortified marriage mead, which tasted of wild honey and berries and kicked like wild horses.

The pastries were mainly of Gondorian variety, including iklars with differently flavored creams: vanilla, xocolātl, and coffee, and dozens of little cakes, moist with crushed, sweet almonds, and sugar, smothered in a glaze of cherry liqueur. Bowls formed of lacy, hardened sugar held mounds of frozen custard and whipped cream and a dusting of cinnamon. Ori was relieved to see there was no tiered and molded white gelatin among the desserts.

“This is amazing!” Aragorn cried, looking out over the sugary largesse. “This didn’t all come from that one bakery?”

Thorin said, “I understand the same baker now owns three bakeries across Dale.”

“Three?” Arwen exclaimed. “What is it that Margr and Vi say? He must be worked to a thread?”

Bilbo nodded into the crowd at the tables below.

“Actually, he appears remarkably well.”

Apparently, Bilbo had caught the eye of the baker, who looked startled when Bilbo beckoned to him.

The baker came forth and stopped in front of the happy couple and bowed. Ori hadn’t met him before, but noticed right away that there was something different about him. Though stout and solid, the dwarf stood on the tall side, and his beard was sparser than Kili’s. His ears looked oddly small in
his moon-round face. Ori thought he must be part mannish.

Before Thorin could greet him, Vi leapt over the table and seized the baker.

“It’s yeh!” she shrieked up at him.

Margr, right on her heels, seconded, “Aye, yer th’ wee shit as used t’ sit at our table as a pebble.”
“An’ yeh never wrote!” Vi added.

“Yeh couldn’t read, imad,” said the baker politely. “An’ when I came back, yeh didn’ recognize me anyway.”

“Yeh all looked alike!” Margr cried.

The dams hugged him suddenly, and tightly, to the point where Ori was afraid his eyes would pop out of his head.

“Where yeh been then?” Vi demanded.

Thorin glanced over at Ori.

“I’d say Gondor.”

Ori nodded. He wondered how they could politely detach the baker from Vi and Margr long enough to introduce him, but the sisters took the guess work out of it by turning the baker toward them and Vi brayed,

“This is him!”

“Ah, yes. I’m Thorin, son of Thrain, and this is my husband, Prince Consort Bilbo Baggins.”

Thorin looked fit to burst with pride as he said this. “I’m afraid we didn’t catch your name.”

“Orlo, son of Irlo, yer majesty, yer highness.”

Margr and Vi looked at one another.

“Who, in Mahal’s name’s, Irlo?” the sisters asked each other.

“You and your pastries are very welcome in Erebor,” Thorn said quickly. “Even if we have butchered the name of one of them.”

Orlo shrugged and grinned.

“Don’t matter wha’ yeh call ’em, majesty. They taste th’ same.”

“Here, let me introduce you to King Elessar and Lady Arwen, his betrothed.”

“By all means, King Thorin,” said Aragorn.

“Yes, we want to place an order of iklars for our own wedding,” said Arwen. “Can you do a version with elderberry flavoring?”

“Any flavor yeh fancy, m’lady, though, th’ delivery migh’ be a bit tricky.”

Lady Galadriel smiled over the rim of her wine cup.

“No need to worry. I’ll deliver them myself.”

Vi squealed excitedly, and Margr dragged him forward to chat with the Gondorians.

“Alas,” said Dis, “poor Orlo will likely not get another word in edgewise.”

Ori looked at Dis, then looked a little closer. She wore a gown of the same Longbeard battle dress plaid as Thorin had that morning. Now it sported a bright ornament at the shoulder, pinning closed her shawl. Ori wondered if it was not Easterling make, since it was far more abstract than the usual dwarven ornament, a sort of black velvet carving, edged in orange, atop a small red pelt.

“Is that a new type of brooch?” he asked.

“No, it’s Rutile,” she replied. Rutile waved her front two legs at him and chirped. “It’s her costume. She’s Durin.”

Ori laughed in delight.

“I didn’t recognize her at first on all that red fluff.”

“That’s Durin’s beard,” said Dis.

“I recognized it righ’ off,” said Mahal in Ori’s head. “Resemblance’s uncanny.”

“Oi!” Durin protested. “Da!”

“No bickering in my brain,” Ori hissed. “It’s busy enough in there as it is.”

Ori and Dwalin actually got to dance together for a little while, before Dwalin went on duty. Ori continued on, dancing with Arne, with Sigrid, even with Killer, as the warg would not be left out. When Ori decided to take a break, he sat down by Bard and Thorin, Ori with his ale and Killer with a bucket of water, which he slobbered and sprayed over everything in the vicinity with each shake of
his head. Ori and Bard watched as Thranduil and Sigrid wagged together, purposely trying to put each other out of step and laughing at every try.

Ori thought Bard looked like a lovesick pup.

Thorin must have thought so, too.

“Will you marry in the way of men?” Thorin asked Bard.

“I’d like to,” said Bard. “The problem with the wedding ceremony, at least among the Dale men, is that they’ve always been about fertility of the most direct and bodily kind. Doesn’t really cover two males or two females or - heh - multiple mixed parties.”

“What about people who remarry, or marry late?” Thorin asked.

“There isn’t a ceremony, because the assumption is that there are either already children on one side or the other, or that it’s too late to have any. Then it’s strictly a civil contract, assuming that one or both of them will die sooner rather than later, and that their near relatives will battle over the spoils.”

“It doesn’t seem fair that you don’t get a ceremony if you want one,” reflected Thorin.

“Ceremonies involve feasting, and no dwarf worth their beard would miss that.”

Bard smiled into his tankard.

“Men aren’t so different. Just because there isn’t a ceremony, doesn’t mean there isn’t plenty of ale. I’ve read the dwarven contract. For a people who marry for love, it does seem to be on the obsessive side regarding possessions.”

“That’s because when dwarrow battle over spoils, it involves actual battle,” said Thorin.

“Ah.”

“Specialized contracts are something of a preemptive strike.”

It occurred to Ori that he had never read his marriage contract. Not that he had to, as he already knew what it said. As a ‘standard’ agreement, it said that he and Dwalin would make sure each of them and any badgers had food, shelter and clothing, a very general definition of a family. As to material goods, it said: what you have now is yours, what I have now is mine, but we’ll share what we come into from now on.

Put simply, it meant the less well-off partner couldn’t be coerced into anything just to make sure they had a full belly.

He and Dwalin hadn’t had much of a ceremony, and they were just as married as any other dwarf couple. Still, it must be different for kings.

“Maybe,” said Ori, “you could combine a marriage ceremony in with your coronation.”

Bard groaned.

“Don’t say that word. Sven is pushing to crown me on the spring equinox, strictly by tradition. I’ll have to have a great argument in place before I approach him with any changes to that. I’m sure he’s worried that Eru will strike him dead.”

Sigrid went to dance with Fili. Thranduil turned to Bard with a smile and a crooked finger. Bard abandoned them without another word, as laughter followed him all the way to his husband.

Ori looked over at Dwalin, who finally got a chance to sit down, having been relieved in his guard duty by Arb.

Dwalin caught his eye, gave him a wicked grin and a wink and patted his lap.

Oin and Gloin laughed and raised their tankards to Ori as he squeaked and darted over to take his rightful seat.

In a little while, Dwalin and Ori went and danced with Bilbo, and with Tilda, though she always insisted on leading.

Ori knew something was afoot when they returned just as Eomer and Theoden approached the table and sat on either side of Beorn. Master Eorl trotted up with them and munchied from a small pouch of oats Theoden placed on the floor at his feet.

“Have you a moment, Mister Beorn?” Theoden asked.

“I have many,” Beorn rumbled. He had spiffed up his clothing for the occasion, and was clad in a sleeveless tunic woven of linen threads dyed green and blue over a pair of dark green woolen trousers and his boots. He was in a merry mood and ready to tease the men of Rohan. “Which
would you choose?"
   "We would like a word concerning my niece, Eowyn."

The conversation at the table lessened considerably. The dwarrow and their guests didn’t even
disguise it when they all leaned forward to hear. Ori himself looked around for Eowyn, for she was
not on duty tonight.

"Ah, yes," said Beorn. "The White Lady. The fiery shield maiden. Rarely have I have had such
thrilling company."
   "That’s my sister," said Eomer pointedly.
   "Yes, you have the same look about you, though you are not as comely as herself." Beorn
grinned into his tankard.
   "Really?" Theoden said archly. "Find her comely, do you?"
   "Who would not?" Beorn challenged him. "It’s a lucky male who catches the eye of the White
Lady."

Eowyn swooped down on them with Arivett at her heels.
   "Uncle! Eomer! What are you doing?"

Theoden remained stoic, but Eomer winced, and his shoulders shot up around his ears.

Arivett sing-songed under her breath, "Eomer’s in trouble, Eomer’s in trouble."
   "Sister," Eomer greeted her.

   "Don’t you ‘sister’ me, you mangy field mouse. You two are here to give Beorn a shovel-talk,
and there’s nothing to be shoveled but your horse dung!"

Beorn laughed.
   "We were speaking of your beauty, lady, and how your brother, alas, can’t compare."
   "Really?" She arched a brow. "Chatting up Beorn, Eomer? I didn’t think he was your type."

Beorn whickered at Eorl and the tiny horse neighed in reply, and rolled his eyes as Eowyn
insinuated herself between Eomer and the shapechanger.

   "Well, he is strong," said Beorn, "or Queen Arivett wouldn’t have him. He has that to his
advantage."
   "Right you are," Arivett murmured.

Theoden looked like he wanted to say something. Ori imagined it was to stop this conversation
before it started. Alas, it was too late for that.
   "Perhaps," said Eowyn slyly, "we could talk about what you like, Beorn. Shall we go into detail
of our adventures and compare?"
   "No!" Theoden shouted. Then he cleared his throat and lowered his voice. "There’s no need, my
dear. We were just joking with Beorn, in a friendly manner."

   "That’s too kind of you," said Eowyn. She grinned at Ori, then took a deep breath and squared
her shoulders. "Beorn is a great, good man and I like to think that I was raised as a sound judge of
character."

Ori snickered to himself. Raised. Past tense.
   "Besides," she continued, "I couldn’t marry Beorn, lovely though he is."
   "Yes," said Beorn. "She would have eaten my animals."

He raised his tankard to her in salute.

Theoden continued around Beorn’s elbow, "We just want someone who is good enough for you,
who will honor you."

Beorn swallowed, licked his lips, and slapped Theoden on the shoulder.
   "My thanks, your majesty. I would wish that for you as well."
   "I was talking about my niece," said Theoden.
   "Why?" Beorn challenged. "We all know you’ll never see anyone as good enough for her."
   "Ooooooo!" said the dwarrow around them in delight.

Theoden merely nodded and Eorl whinnied and nodded as well.
   "It’s true," said Theoden.
   "It is," Eomer affirmed.
   "Happily for me, I get to pick out who is good enough," said Eowyn, "and not either of you."
Ori felt sorry for Glorfindel and Haldir. Eowyn had effectively taken the sting from their jibes before they ever got to use them.

Bilbo popped the final bite of an iklar into his mouth and leaned over to Thorin.

“Do you suppose it will be safe for us to go and explore the rest of the platform now, and leave Eowyn’s kin to her tender mercy?”

“They are warriors,” said Thorin. “They can take care of themselves.”

Theoden huffed. “Thank you, Thorin! It’s nice to know someone has that much faith in me.”

“I didn’t say you’d prevail, brother king,” Thorin continued, “just that you’d put up a good fight.”

“I see. Very nice,” said Theoden with a smirk.

“Coming along, Ori?” Bilbo asked.

“Oh, yes!” Ori cried. “I want to see what the vendors are offering.”

“I want to see if my face has been plastered over skivvies,” said Bilbo. “If it isn’t a good likeness, I’ll be most put out.”

“Arivett and I will come, too,” said Eowyn, “since our business here is finished.”

In the end, the Durins and their guests wandered forth in a herd, eager to see what delights awaited.

Dori and Balin sauntered close just as Ori heard Lady Kadis and Mistress Ondr cackling, then Granny Klak said something and the cackling only rose.

He glanced up at Dori, who sighed.

“I wash my hands of all of them,” said Dori. “Take a look.”

Ori looked over at the table in front and slightly to the side of the high table. Judging by the number of empty drinking vessels on and around that table, things had taken their usual course.

“You’re a cad and a bounder,” said Red Queen to Baluchistan, “and we have no opinion of you.”

“I go’ me opinions a’ yeh. Yer bloody bootiful. I could jus’ tuck mesel’ under one a’ them wings f’ever.”

“We could eat you without a second thought,” the bone breaker scoffed.

“Aye,” he warbled. “Tha’s th’ bes’ par’.”

Dwalin and Ori exchanged glances, snickered. Dwalin had to go back on duty. They kissed and Ori continued to wander with his friends. Whether this fowl courtship ended badly or well, he didn’t want to witness either.

The circus at the other end of the dancing area was not the full fair, but they had managed to bring Castle Bounce and several of the game booths along with the acts. A crowd of gamesters had gather about a table run by Fior and Jim. Ori could just see that the table was set up for the rats to race. Fanny with Mavey were giving rides around the whole square. Hordes of youngsters lined up for turns.

Stalls, stores, barrels, and vendors opened and offered mementoes of the wedding. Some of the clay figures set out were still wet with paint. In other stalls, cloth figures were being hastily dressed. There were plates, tankards, tea sets, all manner of dishware emblazoned with the date and names. There were dishcloths, aprons, and handkerchiefs, one stall had even made commemorative clothing.

Ori wandered about sketching in the company of Eowyn, Arivett, and Cemnesta, taking in the sights and sounds of the celebration. Arivett’s dress was as stunning as her mother’s. Arivett, heavily pregnant, showed it to best advantage in a sheer rust gown, studded with rubies in horizontal stripes running down the left side. The skirt clung about her belly, then it opened upward, covering her right arm, but leaving most of the left of her torso bare. Her body hair was swirled in spirals of gold and deep red paint, studded with more rubies, carnelians, and amethysts. Her hair fell in loose braids at the back, but gathered up over her ears to show off gold ear hoops and cuffs trailing chains with fire opal dangles, each carved as a desert rose.

Tonight, Eowyn had traded her Dale uniform for a gown of scarlet silk that bared her shoulders, and a necklace and earrings of gold and moonstones, which Thorin had gifted her. Cemnesta was not to be outdone in robes of burgundy velvet swirling with gold embroidered leaves. In his lavender robes, Ori felt they made a rather fetching group. Of course, everyone was in their best
clothes and admiring themselves and each other.

Talk drifted to Ori from all around.

“He is a kind dwarf, good king,” said Deneb. She nodded decisively.

“He is,” said Nadaris. “Weren’ sure a’ him at first, bu’ he go’ us outa tha’ mine, an’ he’s been ever so guid t’ me Caris.”

“Which one is Caris?”

“Th’ damlin’ with th’ dwarflin’ in a headlock.”

“Ah, very strong. It is good.”

“Aye, it is.”

Among the commemorative clothing stall, Ori found a pair of soft cotton black sleeping trousers with ‘King & Consort Security’ embroidered on the seat in white westron letters. Ori, after giggling himself almost sick, showed them to his companions, who shrieked in delight, and at their encouragement, he bought a pair in Dwalin’s size. Eowyn found a white pair with ‘Dale Guard’ in blue letters and Arivett found red silk pair with ‘Queen’ on the bottom and Cemnesta, a green cotton pair with ‘King’. The proprietor winked and promised to have them sent to Fundin House.

They moved on and met Master Vobwi, who walked about pushing a large barrow. Inside were several small cages containing a selection of animals and birds. Eowyn and Arivett exclaimed over these. Cemnesta was entranced by a baby skunk.

“Look at it,” he gushed. “All black and white with such a sweet, tiny pink nose!”

“Aye,” Master Vobwi agreed and unhasped the cage. He put his hand in, scooped the little creature out and handed it over to the elf king. Cemnesta cooed over the skunk, which snuffled at him and was very happy to be fondled lovingly.

“Nice wee boy,” Master Vobwi stated. “Was found abandoned near a road an’ I’ve had his glands removed, so he can’t stink up th’ place. Friendly li’le critter, very affectionate.”

“How much?” Cemnesta murmured as the little skunk had made itself comfortable against his collar bone.

“One gold, yer majesty.”

Cemnesta paused, then handed over a single gold coin. Arivett got herself a very weird looking lizard which Master Vobwi said was called a chameleon and needed to be kept warm. Arivett placed it on her shoulder and squeaked when its mottled skin seemed to waver then turn a few shades of red in places to match her gown.

“They do that t’ hide themselves in trees an’ such t’ catch their prey.” Master Vobwi informed them. They eats flying bugs an’ such.”

Arivett happily handed over ten gold for the chameleon. Eowyn was still looking at the cages.

“Anythin’ f’r yeh, lass?” Master Vobwi asked her.

“Any miniature oliphaunts?” she teased.

Master Vobwi chuckled. “Sorry, lass, don’t think they’ve managed to make those yet.”

“She wants a warg,” Arivett giggled.

“Better see the king about that,” advised Master Vobwi.

They bade Master Vobwi goodbye and wandered on.

Ori frowned, then looked again. There was Buer’s stall. They made their way over. Inside Buer’s stall, Omosuil busily cooked something in oil, and talked to customers, moving constantly as a young man stood behind him spinning sugar floss onto cones of paper.

Instead of simply the plain stall with lights, there was now a sign across the top on all four sides. The signs read:

\begin{center}
\textit{Master Almost’s Fried Lembas - Puts Hair On Your Chest: 5 Coppers}
\textit{With or w/out cheese.}
\textit{Bacon optional, as well.}
\end{center}

Another sign, just below counter height, read:
The ‘blueberry’ was printed on a placard which hung from two hooks and could easily be changed out.

As they approached the stall, they saw Kili and Tauriel waiting in line. Kili waved to them. An odd, but nicely fragrant and familiar smell wafted from the stall.

“What’s Omosuil doing in Buer’s candy floss stand?” Ori asked. “Who’s Master Alm—Oh! Isn’t that what Vi and Margr called him?”

Kili nodded,

“Omosuil bought out the place from Buer. He had some dwarrow stone masons make plinths for the machine and fryer, so he doesn’t have to bend so far to reach them.”

“He bought the stand?” Ori echoed then glanced up at the woodland king. “What about his position in your guard?”

“He’s resigned his commission and runs this place instead.” Cemnesta looked amused.

“Really? He’s staying in Erebor?”

“Yes, and he seems very happy, doesn’t he?”

“He does. Can he make a living this way?” Ori turned to Kili

“Between this and his pension, he can,” the younger prince smiled.

“It does seem wildly popular. Is he using your recipe?”

“I gave it to him with my blessing,” said Kili. “It’s not like I’m going to go into the fried lembas business.”

“Who’s in there with him?” Eowyn asked.

“No idea,” Kili said. He craned his neck for a better look at the assistant. “I’m guessing he has a helper, because it’s hard to make candy floss and fry lembas at the same time.”

There was a roar and the people in line turned to see the First March Warden of Gondor, red cloak flapping, chasing a squealing group of badgers, faunts, children and a couple of the Aldernay fawns. Bilbo and Thorin strolled up, greeting folk and accepting good wishes. They paused to allow the Wild Hunt to tear across their path. Butter and Sugar barked encouragement.

“‘Scuse us!” Boromir shouted gleefully and careened after his prey.

“That’s quite a group,” Thorin commented as they arrived.

“Which raises an interesting question,” Bilbo mused. “Dwarf young are called ‘badgers’, elves are ‘fawns,’ hobbits call theirs ‘faunts’ and men call them ‘children’. What does one call a mixed group like that?”

“A racket,” Kili suggested, making his wife giggle.

“True,” Arivett said, “you two are having a dwelf and Eomer and I’m having a… Hmmm, what will it be called?”

Ori chuckled. “If I remember correctly, the choice was a ‘morf’, a ‘dwan’ or a ‘marf’.”


Bilbo and Cemnesta snickered.

“Yes,” Eowyn agreed. “I like marf, too. But what would one call a group?”

Thorin watched Boromir’s quarries bounding around in delight.

“Seeing as how in groups, they act like baby goats, I say we call them ‘kids’.”

“Kids,” Bilbo echoed, “yes, I think that will do nicely.”

The line ahead had been served and they greeted Omosuil. The retired elf captain refused payment for their order as he explained, it was with their help, he had found a wonderful new craft. He tried out his khuzdul on Kili and Thorin, who encouraged him. Ori got some blueberry spun sugar and found it delicious. Arivett, Cemnesta, and Eowyn tried the fried lembas with cheese and bacon, and approved of them highly. Thorin and Bilbo shared a cone of spun sugar and Kili and Tauriel had a cheese lembas.
They took leave of Omosuil and continued to wander. More and more people were now dressed in costumes and dancing in the open square. Goats, ponies, and pigs romped past. There were a few sheep, several Durins, and any number of ‘rocks’ and ‘gems’ doing the wag. Ori waved to Fanny and Mavey strolling by.

Two dwarrow in a horse costume trotted up.
“Hullo, our Ori!” it cried.
Ori stared at the horse.
“Mistress Vi?”
“Aye, it’s us. Say, our Mar, our Ori’s here.”
“Happy Durin’s Day, our Ori!” Margr brayed.
“Happy Durin’s Day, Mistress Margr,” said Ori politely. “I like your costume.”
“Ta, chuck,” said Vi. “It’s our Glorfy’s horse, Assfelloff. Wha’ d’ yeh think?”
“It’s an exact likeness,” said Ori.
“Aye, we figured, we’re allus ridin’ him, so why shouldn’t we be somethin’ he’s allus ridin’?”
“An excellent point,” said Ori.
Margr said, “Oi! Our Vi! Yeh’ve go’ ever so wide a bum. Why ain’t yeh th’ back a’ this thin’?”
“Hush yeh, b’f’r I fart on yeh,” said Vi.
The two took their leave and trotted off.
“Fuckin’ eh!” said Durin in Ori’s head

As piss, laddie. As piss.

“You should be,” said Ori, “they defeated a balrog.”
“Aye, they dowsed it in water an’ trod on it. I like dams who show initiative.”

After they finished their treats, Arivett dragged Eowyn, Cemnesta, Kili, and Tauriel off to the square, and joined the revelers doing the roscobal hop. Ori wondered at the stamina of dwarrowdams. He was in awe that Arivett, heavily pregnant, could prance around the place, and keep up with her companions. Ori saw Vi and Margr, still in costume, hopping gamely along with them.

Thorin, Bilbo and Ori meandered back to the feasting tables. Bard was parked on a table, one booted foot on the ground, the other on a bench. He looked feral. Unger, in front of him, looked mulish.

“Unger,” said Bard, “I’m afraid I’m not serving you well enough, not seeing to your particular needs.”
“I would never say such a thing, sire!” Unger assured him.
Bard winced at ‘sire’, but he continued on.
“Nonetheless, to make sure you get the attention you deserve, I’m designating one person to hear you out whenever you feel you have something vital to add or request of the crown.”

Unger looked like he’d been handed a box of iklars.
“And who would that be, sire?”
“That would be me,” said Thranduil.
The king-father swept around in a cloud of deep gold silk and organza, with a tiara of colorful autumn leaves.

Unger’s jaw bounced. Really, Ori felt he heard it.
Thranduil loomed over the stunned man.
“You will let me know if you need anything, won’t you?” Thranduil purred.

Unger babbled something of being at Thranduil’s service, bowed, and got out of there as quickly as was feasible.
Ori raised a brow in Bard’s direction.
“You’ve been taking kinging lessons.”
“I’ve only learned from the best,” said Bard gleefully. He slid an arm about the king-father’s waist and winked at Thorin, who laughed at them.

“You look wonderful in autumnal colors, Thranduil,” Bilbo commented as he looked the king-
father over critically.

“As you do in Durin blue,” Thranduil complimented in his turn.

“Thranduil,” Thorin said, smiling in admiration at his husband, “I can honestly say I agree with you entirely.”

“I like it,” Bard said with a laugh in his voice. “Bilbo matches you and my sweetie looks all warm and cozy. Makes you want to curl up in front of a good fire with a mug of spiced cider.”

Thranduil’s eyes slid over and his cheeks flushed slightly. Ori quietly sketched the scene and made notes, valiantly trying not to laugh as he did.

“How very cuddly sounding,” Thorin teased.

“He is,” Bard grinned.

“Is he?” Thorin added. He clearly enjoyed the king-father’s still reddening face. “I had not heard he had such a talent.”

“I have many talents of which you know nothing, Oakenshield,” Thranduil quipped.

“How intriguing,” Thorin went on. “Do tell, or should we ask Bard?”

“Well, let me tell you, Thorin- ” Bard started, but Bilbo hushed Thorin and Thranduil gave Bard a shove with his hip.

A shout from the left made the five turn.

Mr. Wandi and Haldir rode astride Fanny’s neck and waved to them. They waved back. Ori hurriedly caught this for posterity. Mavey walked beside Fanny, patting her trunk, and Beorn walked on the other side, seeming to talk to both Mavey and Fanny.

Ori craned his neck and saw the crowd of ‘kids’ waiting for a turn in Castle Bounce. Boromir and Eomer, stripped to tunics, breeches and socks, were there, making sure the kids got the bouncing of their lives. Arivett and Lavender seemed to have cleaned out a candy vendor somewhere and were passing out sweets to every group that exited the castle.

Near some game stalls, Ori saw Ursith, clad in his hat and Durin blue. Ursith wandered about, handed out gold coins to all the kids, and patted them on the head. The parents seemed a bit leery of the infamous underworld boss as Ursith handed out bit of paper to the parents. Ori closed the distance to hear Ursith burble,

“Openin’ soon! Lots a’ prizes an’ low stakes games! I’m havin’ a big music show. Bring th’ whole family!”

Ori realized he was talking about the Dale casino, but what kind of a musical show he meant, Ori had no idea. He wondered who would be there and if he would be sent to take notes. Thorin had certainly spoken privately with Nori many times.

Ori finished off a sketch of Ursith with his hat askew and his mouth wide open, when he was bumped into.

“Howdy-do, wee feller!” Ursith spouted genially. He promptly handed Ori a gold coin and patted him soundly on the head. Ori looked about, saw no one was watching and kicked Ursith’s shin.

“Fuck off, ya liddle mole,” Nori’s voice hissed. “Gimme back me coin.”

Ori stuck out his tongue.

“No. I’m going to use it to pick my teeth.”

“Long’s yeh don’t shove it up yer hubby’s bum,” Ursith snapped.

“If I do, that’s when you’ll get it back.”

“Wee shit.”

“Oh, go propose to Dori.”

“Oooo!” Ursith brightened up. “Now there’s a big, fat idea. ’Scuse me, youngster.”

Ori snickered to himself as Ursith pranced away, stopping only to buy an extremely ugly table lamp as an offering.

Ori walked further along and came across a small area of iKeyha inflatable furniture. Here Bombur and Erda sat on one end of a couch, and Dain and Sculdis on the other. Then the Urs stood, then sat down hard. Dain and Sculdis bounced high. Then Dain and Sculdis stood and sat down hard, sending the Urs aloft. They continued to take turns, both couples intent on seeing how high they could bounce each other.
After visiting every shop, stall and vendor, they all made their way back to the high table. Finally, Bilbo had leaned forward to talk to a happy, but weary, Dori, then sat upright and gestured to Hijil, who bowed and went off to the last of the kitchen’s wagons.

“Well, my dear,” said Bilbo.

Thorin turned to him and followed his gaze to the next seat over, where Sam and Frodo cuddled together, asleep, with Dis’ shawl over them.

“Well, ghivasha,” said Thorin. “I think it’s time.”

With Thorin’s leave, Balin and Dori stood. Sculdís smacked Dain’s arm as the two of them arrived with the Urs in tow. To Ori’s amusement, everything stopped.

Dori waved cheerily.

“Oh, we’re just retiring for the night. Please continue to enjoy yourselves - and make sure you eat something to go with all that ale!”

The crowd chanted, “Yes, Bearer.”

“Such cheek!” Dori tut-tutted.

Hamfast and Bell rose as well. Thorin and Bilbo went and embraced them as the tween Gardeners collected Frodo and their sleepy younger siblings. Thorin and Bilbo kissed each of them on the top of the head.

“Bell, Hamfast, thank you for taking care of Frodo,” said Bilbo. “I know he’s a handful.”

“I’m a handful,” Frodo mumbled.

Hamfast snorted.

“Right, you’re a little terror. Not to worry, Bilbo, we’ll bring him back in time for his lessons next week.”

“How are you getting home?” Thorin asked.

“Hamson’s takin’ us in the cart,” said Bell, “then he’s off with his brother and Snowdrop to the fun fair for the Durin’s Day party. I suppose you two will give it a miss this year for a private party of your own.”

Bilbo sputtered and Thorin reddened.

“How is it,” Thorin asked, “that you’ve made me blush at my age, Mistress Bell? Are you receiving oracular messages from my mother?”

“Just practicin’ for me daughter’s wedding,” she replied, and patted his cheek. “You blush, but I’m aimin’ to make Boromir’s head pop clean off.”

“Practice makes perfect,” Thorin agreed, and kissed her forehead.

Thorin gestured for Arb to escort them out.

Rather than sit back down, Thorin grinned at Bilbo.

Bilbo gave him the eye, but turned to speak to the revelers by waving a hand to the musicians, who quieted right away. Everyone turned to look.

“My friends,” Bilbo called out. “It’s also time for us to retire for the evening, but we have one more duty to perform before we go.”

Hijil and his staff wheeled out an enormous platter of ginger-spiced cakes from the final wagon.

Thorin took Bilbo’s hand and walked to the platter, as did every unmarried person, followed by quite a few who were already married, but just wanted a cake from the hands of the newlyweds.

Ori thought this was a graceful way for the royal couple to accept the congratulations of their people and still be able to retire before dawn.

Dwalin looked over Ori’s shoulder as Ori sketched the royal couple and their well-wishers.

“Stay’r go?” Dwalin asked.

“If we go,” Ori mused, still drawing, “maybe we can spend a few moments alone in each other’s company before we either fall asleep or someone attempts to slaughter someone else or the rest of the Misty Mountains explode.”

“Never realized yeh were such a strategist,” Dwalin teased.

“I’ve learned from the best,” Ori teased back.
Dwalin lifted Ori onto Gnasher’s saddle, then swung up behind him. Ori smiled at the memory of when he had first ridden the goat. He looked back at Dwalin, who grinned and ran two fingers along Ori’s marriage braid.

“I have no idea how I managed it,” Ori mused, “but I love you so much more now, than I did then.”

“I’m jus’ too bleedin’ charmin’ f’r yeh t’ resist,” Dwalin teased.

“You are,” Ori agreed. Dwalin turned beetroot and hugged him close for a moment.

Ori looked about as they waited. Balin and Thorin boosted an exhausted Dori into the teacup with Bilbo already inside, pulling Dori in. Ori was a little aghast to realize just how large Dori had become carrying the two badgers. Despite that, Dori had spent most of the day dancing and fussing over arrangements. Ori smiled. Even being twice his usual size and heavy with badgers, Dori was still the strongest dwarf Ori had ever met. He wondered if he would ever be able to match Dori’s fortitude, then decided he didn’t want to.

He looked around, the party was still going on. Musicians switched out with each other. Dancers whirled around the space. Ori saw Uristh with Yizaris on one arm, Granny Klak on the other, doing a dance that involved a lot of high kicks. He made a quick sketch.

The circus was full of blinking colored lights and mobs of people. The entire platform was filled with merrymakers, most in costume. The feasting benches had been left and were now populated with drinkers, alongside the benches, more barrels of ale and wine still waited to be rolled out. Two huge, festooned wagons arrive. There was a sign on either side proclaiming, ‘Moo & Cluck in Motion’. Haldir and Mr. Wandi headed toward the wagons at a dead run.

“I suppose it’s official, now,” Ori commented. Dwalin chuckled.

“More like givin’ in t’ the masses.”

Slowly, the teacup and Grinder moved through the crowd, as people shouted good wishes and lewd comments. Ori thought that Butter and Sugar looked ready to be away from the noise and crowds. Killer padded next to Grinder. It took some time, but they managed to make it to the end of the platform and were able to pick up speed.

The royal cavern was silent and only marked by the sounds of their movement and muted glow of the stones showing the way along the road. Fundin House was in a low glow with the phosphorous lamps over the front door and the stable.

Balin drove the teacup into the yard and Thorin and Dwalin unhitched and took the animals through to the stable. Bilbo and Ori steadied Dori up and into the house. There was a single lamp in the receiving room for returning guests. Beside it, on the table, were many candelabras for people to light and find their way to their rooms.

Bilbo and Ori helped a yawning Dori into the sitting room and through to the master bedroom. Bilbo came from the stable, thanked them and took Dori in and closed the door.

“I want a cup of plain ordinary tea,” Bilbo said, tiredly. “What about you?”

“That sounds wonderful,” Ori said, brightening up at the thought.

Bilbo took Ori’s hand and led the way through to the kitchen of Bag-End East.
Bilbo had the kettle on and Ori was placing mugs, milk and sugar on a tray when they heard Thorin and Dwalin laughing. The two came in, Dwalin had Durin’s keg on his shoulder.

“Tea first,” Bilbo instructed as Thorin came through, kissed Bilbo, and fetched out a tap and a stand for the keg.

Ori brought the tray and Bilbo followed with the teapot. The sitting room fire was on and shadows of ravens danced over the walls and ceiling. Dwalin lay on the floor, his hands clasped behind his head, eyes closed. Ori saw that his husband had changed into his pink drawers and had chucked aside his boots and weaponry. Thorin was nowhere to be seen.

Bilbo set the pot on the nearby table and poked Dwalin’s shoulder with his toe.

“Do you intend to bed down there for the night?”

Dwalin chuckled and, in a swift movement, grabbed Bilbo’s foot and shook it lightly.

“Nah, wee nug. Let th’ tea seep an’ go git outta them glad rags. Yeh look starched in ‘em.

Bonny, bu’ starched.”

“A good notion,” Bilbo said, “I agree.”

The hobbit headed off to change. Ori went to Dwalin as his husband sat up.

“Here,” Dwalin handed him a folded cloth. Ori shook it out. It was the old pink night shirt and Ori’s cardigan. Ori gave a sigh of relief and, with Dwalin’s help, got into nightwear. They folded and carefully laid Dipfa’s creation over the arm of a chair and Ori plopped down on the rug.

Thorin and Bilbo wandered in hand in hand, Thorin wearing thin cotton breeches and Bilbo, the matching nightshirt.

Dwalin frowned at Thorin.

“B’fore thin’s get cozy, I’ll fuckin’ kill Ulfr for wha’ he said. Say th’ word an’ he dies.”

Bilbo looked shocked, but Thorin merely shrugged.

“I have too much respect for Yizaris to do that. However, I will speak to her before they leave. If she wants him gone, it will happen. I am willing to see if Buer can reform him as Durin directed.”

Dwalin grunted assent, saying, “Then I’m done wi’ i’.”

Bilbo poured out tea and passed the mugs out. Dwalin sprawled on his side with Ori leaning against him. Ori watched as Thorin dropped down on his stomach and lay still on the rug, face down for a moment.

“My love?” Bilbo giggled. “Are you asleep?”

“No,” Thorin’s voice sidled out of the rug. “I’m just being dead for a minute.”

“It’s good to be king, but a bit tiring?” Ori guessed.

“Yes,” mumbled Thorin, and rolled over. “Thror was never as social as I’ve been on the best days of his life. Months would go by before any of the common people of the mountain saw him. People see me everyday.” Thorin smiled and sipped his tea. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. The best way for me to know what’s going on, is to talk to people.”

“You do it very well,” Bilbo praised and sat crosslegged against Thorin. Bilbo leaned nearer, licked his thumb and rubbed the corner of Thorin’s eye.

“Eh?” Thorin asked.

“You missed some of the charcoal.”

“Ah, thank you, beloved.”

“You looked amazing, Thorin,” Ori told him.

“Did you get some good drawings?” Bilbo asked eagerly. Ori hopped up and fetched his sketchbook.

They all lay on the floor together, going through the pictures before the fire.

“There we all are.”

“That cloak is wonderful, my dear!”

“Here we are exchanging rings. Ori, this is lovely.”

“Look, Amrâlimê. The crown looks perfect on you.”

“Here’s everyone singing.”

“Here’s Red Queen and Blu being drunk.”

“I don’t want to know. If they somehow produce an egg, I’ll have to send Roäc to the healer for
mental help.”
“There’s yeh eatin’ spicy soup.”
“It was delicious. I must get the recipe.”
“That reminds me, you and Ori never got that.”
“Don’t miss it, we go’ three cats, a bat, an’ a warg. We’re full up.”
“ Completely full.”
“Wha’ th’ fuck’s tha’ thin’ on Arivett’s shoulder?”
“Master Vobwi says it’s called a chameleon. It eats flying bugs.”
“Is that Beorn and Mavey?”
“Beorn seems to like talking to Mavey and Fanny.”
“Imagine those two as a couple.”
“Don’t think Beorn’s int’ olipahunts, love.”
“Beorn’s too old for Mavey.”
“He’s too big for her. I heard Eowyn say he was too big for her and she’s a woman.”
“Poor Beorn, too big for Eowyn and too old for Fanny.”
“I’m not going to think about either of those things!”
“Great Mahal, is that Ursith dancing with Yizaris and Granny Klak?!”
Ori blinked. The images on the pages wavered and doubled as the other three went back and forth through the book.

Ori opened an eye. His head was pillowed on one of Bilbo’s and Thorin’s sofa cushions. Dwalin snored behind him. Bilbo’s curls were before him and Thorin breathed quietly into them, fluffing the curls into Ori’s face. Ori could see that Butter and Sugar had lain down either side of Thorin and Dwalin and Killer lay across their feet.

Ori felt very warm. Bilbo stirred and opened his eyes. Ori blinked at him.
“Good night,” Bilbo murmured and kissed Ori.
“Night,” Ori mumbled and closed his eyes.

When Ori opened his eyes again he could just see dawn peeping over the wall that enclosed the meadow through an unfamiliar window. He was still sandwiched with Bilbo between Dwalin and Thorin, now both snoring. The floor was amazingly soft and the fireplace wasn’t there. He stared for a long time at the pinkish stone beyond his head. Rhodochrosite, his brain informed him.

“Rhodochrosite,” Ori muttered.
“Not in pie,” Bilbo murmured.
“Too hard on the teeth,” Ori agreed as he wondered why they would be making rock pies. Maybe they would be like mud pies, but would have rocks and gems in them to represent fruit. Would these be sacrificed? Would Mahal like rock pies? “Would we sacrifice them to Mahal?” he asked himself.

“For tea,” Bilbo mumbled.
“Mahal’s coming to tea,” Ori decided.
“Tea’s at four o’clock,” Bilbo replied.
“Four o’clock,” Ori affirmed.
“I want a cup of tea,” Bilbo said.
“It’s not four o’clock, Ori pointed out.
“Botheration,” Bilbo griped. Ori was aware of stifled sounds on either side of himself and Bilbo. He frowned then blinked. Dwalin and Thorin were desperately trying not to laugh. Ori looked at Bilbo, who blinked and shook his head, then sat up.

“We’re in bed,” Bilbo informed Ori.
Ori thought this over while he stared at an unfamiliar ceiling.
“Whose bed?” he asked.
“No, what,” Bilbo corrected.
“What?” Ori asked.
“No one I know is named bed,” Bilbo frowned.
“Why would anyone name their child ‘bed’?” Ori asked frowning. He sat up, too. Dwalin and Thorin were face down in the pillows, each shaking with stifled laughter.
“Oh, stop laughing, you silly dwarf,” Bilbo ordered rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “Ori and I were just a little confused.”
Thorin rolled over and roared with laughter as Dwalin remained helpless on his face.
“Hmmm,” said Bilbo. “First breakfast or bath? For a hobbit, I’m curiously undecided.”
“How about toast and tea, then a bath?” Ori suggested. “Then you can have first and a half breakfast if you’re still really hungry?”
“Genius, my dear Ori, sheer genius!” Bilbo proclaimed.
“I knew tha’,” said Dwalin as he rolled over with a grin and a wink for his husband.
“I feel rather bad that we interrupted your wedding night,” said Ori. “Aren’t you supposed to consummate or something?”

Bilbo tugged on his dressing gown.
“Sounds like Vi and Margr: Ain’t yeh supposed t’ contemplate ‘r somethin’ , our Bilbo? Or it ain’t official? Aye, our Vi, our Lady. Yavanna might be righ’ miffed, make dandelions grow in their crotch hairs.”
“We’ve been ‘contemplatin’ for almost a sixmonth, ghivasha. I believe our crotch hairs are safe.”
Thorin squawked abruptly, and shot forward, squishing them all together.
“Thorin? Are you alright?” Bilbo asked.
“Yes, fine, just a cold, wet warg nose at the small of my back.”
Ori half sat up and peered over Thorin. Sugar sat at the side of the bed, and Ori would swear she was smiling. Butter lay on her back, all paws in the air, tongue lolling out nearly to her ear, looking cute.
“They need to go out,” said Thorin with a sigh. He stood. “You know, my damlings, if you really cared about your king’s beauty sleep, you’d learn to unlatch the doors yourselves.”

“Toast,” said Bilbo.
“Yes,” said Ori. He nodded. “It’s an idea whose time has come.”
They bundled up a little, more for sleepy comfort than any real cold, though Ori felt the draft as Thorin let the wargs out, and he knew summer was over. In the kitchen, Bilbo turned up the oven as Ori collected the abandoned tea things from the sitting room and rinsed them out.
Ori had rarely eaten more satisfying toast. Somehow, Bilbo managed to toast the bread on both sides, not just one, and he laid out pots of six different kinds of jams, and clotted cream as well as butter, because it was dwarven bread, and was up to the challenge of carrying it without falling apart.
“You could sell this toast from a market stall,” said Ori.
He sat on Dwalin’s lap at the kitchen table. He held his teacup in one hand, With the other, he played with the bead in Dwalin’s beard.
“Alas,” Bilbo replied, “I’m going to be a little busy ‘consorting’. Perhaps Omosuil would be interested. He’d have to widen out his stall.”
“While he widens ou’ our waistlines,” Dwalin noted as he fed Ori toast slathered with butter and blackberry preserves.
“Mmmm,” Ori hummed as he licked off Dwalin’s fingers. He held Dwalin’s gaze and gave him a little smile. “Tasty.”
Thorin chuckled.
“Shall we leave the two of you alone with the toast?”
“Did yeh say somethin’, our Thorin?” Dwalin asked. He leaned forward and licked the smear of jam off Ori’s lips.

“Nothing important,” said Thorin.

Ori kissed Dwalin, Dwalin kissed Ori. Ori put down the teacup. When they came up for air, Thorin and Bilbo were gone.

“Gone t’ ‘bathe’,” said Dwalin with a chuckle.

“Shall we join them?” Ori asked.

Dwalin’s grin turned naughty.

“Yeh know, tha’s a really deep tub. An’ a really waterproof bathroom.”

“You wouldn’t,” said Ori with a grin of his own.

“A’ course I would,” said Dwalin.

Ori scampered after Dwalin as the warrior ran through the house, hopped out of his pink drawers, and roared like a warg. The actual wargs, now sprawled at the fireplace, opened an eye each to watch him, then went back to their nap. Ori reached the bathroom doorway just in time to see Dwalin leap, tuck his knees to his chest and fly right over Thorin and Bilbo to land like a boulder in a puddle, right in the middle of the tub.

The tidal wave was magnificent.

“And now, the floor show,” said Thorin dryly.

Bilbo stood with this hand on his hip, only about knee deep in water even for him, as the excess water flowed down drains in the bathroom floor.

“Dwalin!” he cried in exasperation as he gestured to his impressive erection. “You’re holding up progress!”

Dwalin grinned up at Bilbo.

“An’ wha’ d’yeh wan’ me t’ do abou’ tha’, our nug?”

“The least you could do is hold up progress!”

“Ah. I kin do tha’,” said Dwalin.

Thorin chuckled and went to turn on the taps again while Ori tossed his cardi and nightshirt back onto the bench in the bedroom.

He turned to step down into the tub, and Thorin held out a hand to help him.

“They’re incorrigible,” said Ori. “Ooo, the water is nice.”

“There should be more of it shortly,” said Thorin.

He sat. Ori sat in his lap.

“Hullo,” said Ori cheekily.

“Hello and welcome, milord scholar. I hope the seat is to your liking.”

“Best seat to watch the floor show from, your majesty.”

They laughed and rested their foreheads together for a moment.

“I’m so happy for you, Thorin.”

“Thank you, Ori. Shall we?”

“Mmm, what do you have in mind?”

“I was thinking I’d turn you to face the current debauchery, fiddle with your bits and, hopefully, enjoy your backside sliding against my bits. We could even add a little oil to the proceedings, now that the tide is coming back in.”

“Sounds lovely,” Ori murmured, and kissed him.

How was kissing Thorin different from kissing Dwalin, or Bilbo, for that matter? Ori had no idea there were as many styles of kissing as there were styles of handwriting.

Dwalin’s kiss just curled his toes, his beard, sometimes his earlobes, it was so all-consuming, and
Ori was quite eager to be consumed. Ori’s Song rose in power and volume the longer it went on.

Bilbo’s kiss was soft, but strong, seductive, but with potential behind it that hinted at what was to follow.

Thorin kissed with pure joy in the act. Every kiss came through as a smile, as if he were giving and receiving a present.

Ori giggled to himself. It wasn’t a goat-poop hair bead, either.

Dwalin had once told Ori that Crown Prince Thorin was required to be publicly grim, and even harsh, over so many years, that his tender aspects erupted like lava in private. He was the sweetest ‘bottom’ Dwalin had ever loved.

“Not me?” Ori cringed to remember the tiny squeak of his voice.

Dwalin had held Ori’s face in his hands and gave him a wink.

“Yeh ain’t a bottom, love. Yer a snow bear in trainin’.”

It was true that Ori insisted on playing ‘Gonad’ to Dwalin’s ‘maiden’. Couldn’t let those perfect pumpkins go to waste.

Thorin had a nice grip on Ori’s own pumpkins right then, and his mouth on Ori’s neck.

“Oh, mark me,” Ori breathed.

Thorin’s prick shook between Ori’s legs.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I have all these scarves, I should put some of them to use.”

“Do you still have the one with little representations of Dwalin’s bottom all over it?”

“I only wear that one for special occasions.”

Meanwhile, across the tub, Bilbo said to Dwalin, “Shall I ride you?”

“Aye, tha’d be grand,” said Dwalin. “Do yeh have some oil?”

“Yes,” Bilbo said, wryly, “Mr Wandi makes sure we have a constant supply.”

It sounded like Bilbo was rummaging in a shelf built into the wall by the tub, just above the high tide mark.

“Here we go. This ought to make everything quite slippery. I may have to latch on to your chest hair to keep my place.”

“I go’ somethin’ tha’ll keep yeh in place, our nug.”

“I look forward to a demonstration. After all this fuss, I’m looking for something unfussy. Bet you thought you’d never hear a hobbit say that.”

Thorin turned Ori in his lap to face their companions, but did not abandon his work at Ori’s neck, merely shifted toward the nape, still sucking and licking, riling up the scribe and soothing him by turns.

Ori gasped in tearing breath at what he saw.

Bilbo stood with his back to them, straddling Dwalin’s legs. He leaned forward, hands on Dwalin’s shoulders as they kissed.

Dwalin had his own cock in a his left hand, and the thick, oiled forefinger of his right hand up the hobbit’s bum. As Ori watched, a second joined it.

Bilbo groaned.

“Dwarven fingers are are my favorite fingers in all of Arda. Oh. Remind me to write that down. I can use that.”

Thorin chuckled into Ori’s skin.

“Stop writing, ghivasha.”

“Our Thorin’s righ’,” Dwalin enforced. “Yeh need t’ focus.”

Ori watched, fascinated, as the muscles of Bilbo’s bottom flexed under all that velvet flesh.

“Oli!” Dwalin cried. “I ain’t half finished yet!”

“Sorry, just focussing,” said Bilbo.

“Some hobbits,” Dwalin grumbled, but kissed Bilbo anyway.
“Wee bi’ more oil?” Dwalin asked.
“Yes please, then I believe I’m ready.”
Dwalin complied. The light scent of the fresh oil tickled Ori’s memory.
“My dear?” Bilbo called.
Thorin looked up and Bilbo tossed him the closed flask, which Thorin caught with one hand.
“Would you care to sample the vintage, Ori?”
Ori took the oil, opened it and sniffed. It smelled divine. It smelled seductive. It smelled like…
“Is there tea in this oil?” Ori asked.
“Yes,” said Bilbo, “what better to perk us up? And the tannins are soothing to one’s skin.”
“Aye, thank bleedin’ Mahal f’r tha’,” said Dwalin. “Yeh know I worry abou’ me complexion.”
Ori handed back the flask to Thorin
“Stand up a little.”
Ori did so.
Thorin poured the oil down the small of his back. Ori shivered as it trickled down between his arse cheeks, followed by the carress of Thorin’s hand. Gently, Thorin drew Ori back against him once more. Ori hummed as Thorin’s ever-stiffening cock grazed his crack.
A film of oil coated the top of the hot water. The tiny voice in Ori’s brain wondered if they would slip and crack their skulls open as they tried to get out. Ori took that voice, gagged it, bound it, stuffed it in a trunk, secured the trunk with chains and tossed it with a five hundred pound weight into the Bay of Forochel.
The water had all but covered Dwalin’s dwarfhood. By the time Thorin closed the taps, there was just tease of it sticking up through the surface, like the tip of a boulder in a pond. Bilbo slid through Dwalin’s hands and neatly encased just the part exposed to the air. With great control, or sheer hobbit stubbornness, Bilbo pulled up a bit, then dropped a little further in the same, slow, powerful manner.
“Look at him,” said Ori.
He heard Thorin swallow.
“I am looking, I promise you.”
While he nibbled Ori’s ear, his fingers played in the slickness of Ori’s chest fur, found his nipple and circled the nub, before he drew the whole length of his forefinger across it, then back and forth again, and again, so slow and so gentle. Ori shivered and mewed. He leaned a little harder into Thorin, and trapped his prick between them. He used what purchase he could find to rub his back against Thorin’s front.
Thorin kissed his shoulder lingeringly, and let his hand drift down Ori’s belly.
“You want to jerk me off?” Ori asked.
“Only if you’ll play with your nipples for me. I want to watch you.”
“What about yours?”
“Between your back and my nipple rings, you’re taking care of it already.”
“How efficient we are,” said Ori.
“It is the dwarven way,” Thorin reminded him.
Across the tub, Bilbo sunk down extra hard and Dwalin let his head drop back and he moaned. Warm water splashed and heaved around them.
“Oh,” Ori breathed.
“What do you think?” Thorin asked.
“So beautiful,” said Ori.
His prick surged in Thorin’s hand.
“You’re beautiful,” Thorin purred.
Ori felt Thorin’s mouth on his neck, right above his pulse. Ori couldn’t understand how he felt so aroused and yet, so languid all at once. A little more of this and Ori could easily slip beneath the oil and never notice.
Luckily, with one of Thorin’s arms around his waist, Ori was in no danger of drowning in anything but pleasure. Thorin’s arm tightened and Thorin leaned into him harder.
“This is just too good,” Thorin groaned. Already he seemed to be growing restless, breathing heavier.
“Can you keep hold of my waist?” Ori asked.
“Huh?” Thorin asked distractedly.
“So we stay, you know, connected and I don’t slide off into the water?”
“I would need both hands.”
“That’s fine.”
Thorin linked his hands around Ori’s waist. Ori leaned his shoulders forward and pushed his bum back hard, which squeezed Thorin’s erection in a hot, slippery grip against his lower belly. Thorin gasped out a violent groan.
“You’ll have to help me,” Ori said.
“I can do that,” said Thorin tightly.
He adjusted his hold and pulled. Ori slid back over Thorin’s thighs and right into his pelvis. Ori thought he might look slightly ridiculous, but it felt so nice to him, and he could tell it felt blissful to Thorin, who started to mutter obscenities under his breath and only grew louder from there.
Across the tub, Bilbo and Dwalin appeared to be in a competition, plunging down and bowing up with increasing force. Dwalin hands slid up and down Bilbo’s sides with every pump.
“Oh, yes, oh yes, right there, you lovely thing,” Bilbo praised.
Dwalin chuckled and muttered something about hobbit endurance and, “Kin I grab yer cock, our nug?”
“Not without me tumbling over. I don’t think I need it anyway. This is… mmm, yes.”
Then Ori lost track of time, and his surroundings, as Thorin shuddered beneath him, not so much an eruptive climax, but a slow, achingly fine ride to trembling, then shivers, and finally Thorin dropped his forehead onto Ori’s shoulder.
“Great, bloody Mahal,” Thorin gasped. He sat back, drawing Ori with him. “Talk to me, Ori. Tell me what you want.”
Ori felt like the emperor of sex at that moment, and he only shook a little, from excitement, as he said, grandly, “Your hand on my cock is all I want … right now.”
“My, you are spending a lot of time with my husband,” said Thorin.
Ori felt Thorin’s smile against his skin, even as Thorin reached to grip him once more.
Ori squirmed. He was quite a bit more aroused now, and the rising cries across the tub did nothing to calm that. It was as though Bilbo and Dwalin were racing to make each other climax first, and Ori was out in front of both of them.
He watched through lowered lashes as Dwalin pounded Bilbo’s arse, then he closed his eye and let Thorin pull him down, moaning and thrashing, into the whirlpool.
Dwalin shouted, Bilbo shrieked and Ori’s eyes flew open.
Thorin’s deep voice laughed in his ear.
“You’re awake just in time for the grand finale.”
The heat flew up in Ori’s cheeks and he groaned. He remembered falling through the chasm of
his completion. Apparently
he had also fallen asleep.
No way he would be able to sleep through all of this.
Dwalin howled and Bilbo thrashed like was clawing his way out of his own skin. They had
managed to climax, violently at
nearly the same time. Ori knew that rarely happened. Though, the two of them were so competitive,
Ori wasn’t really surprised.
He was impressed, though. Bilbo lifted on last time and Dwalin’s bright purple cock would not
have looked tiny on Beorn.
What did Bilbo do to Dwalin that could cause something like that?
And would Bilbo teach him?
Bilbo slammed down. Dwalin roared. His pelvis heaved Bilbo up in the air, but Bilbo locked his
ankles together behind
Dwalin’s back and rode out the whole of Dwalin’s storm and his own, firmly attached.
The pair of them collapsed into the bath, water and oil sloshed all around the tub.
“Fuck me,” Dwalin gasped.
“Maybe later,” said Bilbo.
Ori and Thorin must have tripped some form of unspoken communication between them, because
they erupted into cheers,
whistles and clapping all at one.
“Here here!” Thorin called.
“Author! Author!” Ori cried.
“Ta’,” said Dwalin. “Hope yeh don’ mind if we don’ bow righ’ now.”
“We’d fall on our heads,” Bilbo agreed.
He kissed Dwalin’s chest and slumped against him.
“Well, good night, folks.”
“It’s mornin’,” said Dwalin with a nudge.
“Hush, you, I’m trying to sleep.”
“I don’t believe I actually fell asleep,” said Ori.
Thorin hugged him.
“You’re exhausted, Ori. Go easy on yourself.”
Ori winced.
“Was I snoring?”
“You were snoring,” Thorin affirmed. “It was cute.”
Great, he’d gone from emperor of sex to stable boy in the matter of a few moment. The world
was, indeed, a fickle place.
At least Thorin thought he was a cute stable boy, even if he did snore.
Eventually, Bilbo did sit up with a groan.
“Ori, my dear, come kiss your husband, I’ll kiss mine, and we can go in search of second
breakfast.”
Ori splashed across the tub toward Dwalin, who grinned at him and opened his arms. Ori fell into
them and into a kiss.
“Did yeh enjoy yerself, love?”
“Yes! We need to do this more often! That is, if it’s not impossible to clean out the tub
afterward.”
“Superheated water from th’ geysers’ll take care a’ it, love, jus’ li’e th’ dishes.”
“I think we’ll have to seal up the chamber and simply rinse down the whole room,” said Thorin.
He held Bilbo in the curve of
one arm and rubbed their slippery noses together. Dwalin fetched out towels and soap. The four went to the smaller shower area and scrubbed the oil off themselves.

“Good thing that bathroom seemed to be made for such,” Bilbo snickered as he dried off and put on a fresh nightshirt. “Bloody have t’ burn tha’ water,” Dwalin commented. Ori dried off and pulled his pink night shirt back on as Dwalin and Thorin followed looking like drowned rats. Thorin had a large towel over his head and water dripped from his hair onto the rug.

The four of them wandered out to Fundin House sitting room. Ori carried his satchel and Dwalin had Ori’s formal robes tossed over his shoulder. The house was silent. They went towards the kitchen just as Balin and Dori came through from their bedroom.

Balin greeted them cheerily. Dori stopped dead in her tracks and gaped at them. Ori wondered if his hair had done something it shouldn’t. To everyone’s surprise, Dori stamped up to Thorin in a towering rage.

“How dare you debauch my baby brother!”
Thorin looked at Dori in great surprise.
“I did not debauch your baby brother, Honored Bearer.”
“Oh,” Dori stopped short. “Well-”
“I debauched Dwalin’s husband,” Thorin said quietly and firmly.
“Oh!” Dori huffed. “I-”
“Dori!” Ori cried out.
“Pet I’m only-”
Ori did something he’d never dared or even thought to do. He growled at Dori.
Dori’s eyes flew wide and both Thorin and Dwalin looked impressed and stepped away from between the brothers.

“Pet!” Dori scolded. Ori frowned and stood his ground.
“Dori, no,” said Ori sharply.
The Bearer inhaled sharply and her bottom lip trembled.
Balin swallowed, looked at his brother and his king, looked at Ori then took Dori’s arm.
“Come along, me beloved. How abou’ a nice cuppa tea?”
“With biscuits?” Dori asked in a tearful voice.
“Aye, me hear’, with biscuits, an’ I think there’re still some lovely scones from earlier.”
Balin escorted Dori out. Ori sighed.
“I shouldn’t have growled.”
Thorin considered, and said, “Dori would have growled. Dori would probably have bitten.”
Dwalin came and put his arms about Ori.
“Yer fine, love. Yeh go’ t’ draw th’ line somewhere’s. Ore’s outta th’ mine.”
“Perhaps another cup of tea with us,” Bilbo said quickly and drew Ori back to Bag End East. Dwalin and Thorin went off into the depth of Fundin House and once more Ori was sitting in Bilbo’s kitchen.

Bilbo poured him a fresh cup. Ori knew he had been right but…

“Bilbo, did you have to go through this with your parents?”
Bilbo sat down next to Ori.

“Not really. Bungo was a Baggins through and through. I had excellent manners. Belladonna was the adventurer and both encouraged me to challenge myself. The difference is that you and your brothers, especially your brothers, lived desperate lives. Their first and natural instinct is to protect you.”

Thorin and Dwalin came back in. Dwalin was dressed and he carried a bundle of familiar looking material and Ori’s boots. Ori smiled and took them from Dwalin with a kiss.

“You’re right, Bilbo,” Ori sighed. “I just wish they would…not stop caring but…”

“Remember yeh’ve grown up?” Dwalin suggested.
“Yes,” Ori said as Bilbo poured out mugs of tea for Thorin and Dwalin. “I wish they could realize I’m not in danger from you and Thorin. Or Dwalin, for that matter. Dori is getting better about that.”

“Don’t worry too much, Ori,” said Thorin gently. “When the badgers are born, I think Dori’s protective instinct will switch to them and be more easygoing with you.”

Ori giggled. “You think? He followed me on the quest, remember? I do hope you’re right, though.”

“Speaking of which,” Thorin smiled. “Have you heard back from Master Brur?”

Ori shivered. “Not yet. I keep thinking he’s tearing my presentation down to about three pages.”

“No’ bloody likely,” Dwalin scoffed. “Yeh always underestima’e yerser’, love.”

Ori climbed into Dwalin’s lap and they chatted about the ceremony and party yesterday.

Ori decided a decent interval had passed and went through to the kitchen first. Dori as taking sweet bread buns stuffed with apple and cinnamon out of the oven. Ori’s mouth watered as Dori placed them on the table. They faced each other.

“Ori’s Dori?” “Dori’s Ori?”

They smiled and giggled half-heartedly.

“Pet,” said Dori. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have meddled. You’re grown up and I’m having new badgers to raise. It’s just I forget, and you’re my-“

Ori took Dori in his arms and they cuddled for a moment.

“I shouldn’t have growled at you, Dori. That was very wrong.”

“It brought me to my senses, so perhaps it was for the best,” Dori sighed. They sat at the table in silence together for a few minutes then,

“Dori’s Ori?”

“We don’t.”

“I just worry about you. Thorin is the king and Bilbo his consort. I’m worried you might feel obligated to be with them.” “Ori’s Dori, I didn’t have to go into the mine, I didn’t have to go into the treasury. Mahal, I didn’t have to go on the Quest. I chose to do those things. Just as I’ve chosen...

to...be with Thorin, and Bilbo.”

“Pet, as long as you’re happy-“

“I am happy, Ori’s Dori.”

“As long as they don’t do anything you don’t like, I mean after all…”

Ori giggled and put his nose to Dori’s.

“Dori, if you ask me one more time, I’ll tell you everything we did. In complete detail. Every lick-“

“Hush!” Dori squealed and pushed him away, laughing.

“Besides, would you tell me what you and Balin get up to? No, never mind I’ve heard it often enough.” Ori teased.

“Pet!” Dori giggled.

Ori tried to sit on Dori’s lap, but being so pregnant, Dori didn’t have much lap left.

“Pet, there isn’t room!”

“Spread your legs, oh that’s right, you only do that for Balin.”

“I’ll spank you!”

“You’ll have to catch me.”

“Pet!”

Dori rose and they embraced.

“Now,” said Dori as they sat back down, “have a bun.”

“Won’t it spoil my second breakfast?” Ori asked, the picture of innocence.

“Second breakfast, is it? Yes, it might, but with your mouth full, you can’t give me any more of your sauce.”

Bilbo and Thorin came in, sniffing, followed by sniffing wargs. Ori waved his bun at them. He was too busy to even try to speak around his mouthful.

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Dori rose and went to Thorin.  
“Your majesty, I am sorry-“

“Now, now, Dori.”  Thorin hugged the Bearer.  “You’re a parent.  I know.  Sometimes I have to
catch myself from telling Kili to be careful when he’s using a fork at meals.”

“What kind of buns, Dori?” Bilbo asked, far more interested in the baking.

“Apple cinnamon sweet buns,” Dori announced.  “Do have some.”

Ori swallowed, “Even if it spoils your second breakfast.”

“On the side of the practical,” said Thorin as he bit into a bun.  “Dori, these are wonderful.  Are
these going to be breakfast for our guests?”

“Thank you.  Yes, these and there is porridge with nuts and fruit. and coffee or tea,” Dori said
with a smile.  “After all the romping last night I imagine something light is in order.”  Dori went back
to the oven and removed another large tray of more buns.  Bilbo and Ori bustled to make tea and
brew coffee.  Dwalin and Thorin took themselves to the breakfast parlor and began setting the table,
which involved a great deal of juggling and throwing crockery and flatware.  The lock of the
meadow doors rattled as they were thrown open and Ori heard Butter, Sugar and Killer barking and
playing outside.

“I refuse to watch,” Dori muttered, filling platters with the buns and pouring threads of thin icing
over the buns as decoration.  As Ori hefted the porridge pot into the warmer on the sideboard, he
realized he had to have another bun, so he could taste the icing.

With everything set out and ready for when the guests decided to appear, Balin arrived fully
dressed and sat down with them.  Beorn came in from the meadow, still wearing his party clothes,
but rather rumpled.  Three happy wargs followed him and went to the full feeding bowls on the
floor.

“I smell apples,” he said by way of a greeting.

Dori poured him a flagon of tea, piled a few buns on a plate and invited him to sit.  Beorn folded
himself into a chair and began eating.  Dori placed a large bowl of steaming porridge at his elbow.

“Last time we saw you,” Thorin said, “you were talking with Mavey and Fanny.”

“She and I brought Fanny safely home,” Beorn drained his tea.  “Nice girl, Mavey.”

“She’s too young for you,” Dori told him, refilling his tea.

Balin and Dwalin snorted and Thorin rolled his eyes.  Beorn looked at Dori.

“Bearer, I assure you, I didn’t come seeking assistance to take a wife.”

“If you want one,” Ori put in, “Dori would love to help you.  Lady Galadriel, too.  And I’m sure
Mistresses Margr and Vi would have lots of advice.”

Beorn grunted.  “You make me wish to flee, Ori.”

“Don’t do that,” Thorin laughed.  “We’ve hardly seen you.  Unless you are concerned for your
animals.”

“No, the elf queen sent soldiers to watch over my lands while I’m away.  I have a few days to
explore your mountain again.  I want to walk the land where the lava spilled down.”  Beorn finished
the buns on his plate and began on his porridge.

“Please do,” Thorin invited.  “It was a very successful bleed and I value your opinion.  Hamfast
Gardener is in charge of farming.  I’m sure he would like to hear as well.”

“Good morning,” Theoden breezed in.

“Welcome, Theoden brother,” Thorin said around a chorus of greetings.  “There is tea and coffee,
but there is also a tapped barrel over there.”

“You know me so well,” Theoden chuckled and took a tankard from the sideboard and filled it.

“What have we here?”

“Apple buns,” Bilbo said.  “Dori made them this morning.”

“Delicious,” agreed Beorn around a mouthful.

“Whose buns?” Kili demanded as he and Tauriel walked in.

“We don’t know, Kili,” Bilbo said dryly.  “We haven’t met anyone named ‘buns’.”

“Aye, no’ even any named ‘bed’,” Dwalin said to no one in particular, making Ori and Thorin
snicker and Bilbo wrinkle his nose.  Kili and Tauriel helped themselves to coffee and buns and
praised the buns highly. Ori watched as Dwalin fed Killer a bun then patted the warg as it scooched under the table to lie on their feet.

The younger set arrived in a herd and swarmed over the food. Soon after, all the other guests came down and found places and demolished the rest of the buns and most of the porridge. They were all sitting about talking and laughing over the day before when a terrible screech tore through the open meadow door.

Baluchistan whirled through tail first, bounced off three of the walls, and disappeared into Dain’s hairdo, nearly knocking the Iron Hills monarch into his tea. The last sight of Baluchistan was his beak disappearing as he slid down the inside of Dain’s tunic. Dain blinked and twitched a little, but went back to his tea. Ori imagined it must have tickled. Sugar and Butter’s ears were perked interestingly.

Everyone glanced at each other. Ori realized he hadn’t seen Quartz since yesterday. Red Queen landed on the patio and strutted in. Tharkûn and Celeborn made room, while Arne swung another chair around for her. She perched on it, inspected the table, and Dori brought her a small bowl of coffee.

“Thank you, Honored Bearer. We would remark on the lateness of this meal but we are only just risen ourselves.”

The rest of the royal raven family led by Roäc winged in, landed on the table and went to their respective dwarrow to be fed bun crusts and fruit and nuts. Roäc strutted across the table to Thorin.

“Quite the rumpus, wasn’t it?”

“Should I ask?” Bilbo questioned.

“Heh. Her majesty thought she’d laid an egg.”

Red Queen raised her head from her coffee and rolled her eyes.

“We should have reconsidered how much ale we consumed last night.” She turned and bobbed her head to Thorin and Bilbo. “A delightful party. Will you be having another egg? Your current nestling is a lovely one.”

“Thank you,” Thorin replied gravely over a few snickers. “Bilbo and I are very proud of Frodo.”

“You should be. We are pleased we did not disturb any one. Our awakening was rather startling.”

“Did yeh have ’n egg, then?” Sculdis asked.

“No,” Red Queen paused to peer under the table then came back up to look around. “We dreamt we had, and woke and stood to look, but instead of an egg, there was that-“

“It was warm,” Baluchistan protested from somewhere in Dain’s clothing. “It was startling,” Red Queen repeated. “When we look under our feathers expecting to see an egg, we do not expect a pile of feathers to stare back at us.”

“I could see how that could be startling,” Dis commiserated.

“Indeed,” Lady Galadriel agreed.

Rather a lot of people were trying desperately trying not to laugh. Red Queen drew herself up then shook out her feathers and made a cackling noise.

“Yes, we agree, it was certainly a humorous situation. We are amused.”

“Mean I kin come ou’?” Baluchistan asked, still muffled.

“Aye,” Dain said and pulled his collar out and peered down his tunic.

“Blu, where yeh be?” Dain demanded.

“Donno! It’s dark!”

“Mahu! Blu, ge’ oot!”

“I canna see which way oot is!”

“Up!”

“It’s bloody dark an’ hairy in here! Which way’s up?”

“Fuck it!”

Dain leapt to his feet and started jumping up and down violently. “Quit jumpin’!” Blu howled. “’M gettin’ seasick.”

“Yer ain’t never bin t’ sea. Aaaaugh!! Yer in me britches! Ow! Yeh put yer talons on me
jewels ‘gain an’ I’ll roas’ an’ eat yeh!’
“T’m slidin’ t’ me death!” Blu screamed.
Ori saw a lump wiggling inside Dain’s breeches on the left thigh. By now even Red Queen was helpless with laughter. The ravens crowded around to shout encouragement and the younger set helped. Dain gave a roar and kicked off his left boot. Baluchistan rolled out on the floor, squawking up a storm. Dain jumped some more to shake the feathers out of his trouser leg.
“Mam!” screamed Blu flapping and climbing into Sculdis’ lap. “Save me. Da said he’s gonna eat me!”
“Oh hush, yeh daft birdie!”
Everyone settled down again, still giggling a little.
Yizaris came through at that moment, frowning.
“Thorin?”
“Yizaris? What’s happened?”
“Have you seen Ulfr? He didn’t come to bed last night, and I can’t find him with the others on the floor around the feasting tables.”
“He may be curled up in a niche or something. I’ll send out a detail to search the usual places,” said Thorin. “He hasn’t said a word since your wedding,” said Yizaris. “I’m getting a little worried. He’s usually quiet when he’s got an idea going, but not like this.”
Roäc left and returned with Arb, who wasn’t exactly perky this morning, but he certainly looked alert.
“Your majesty.” Arb bowed.
“Yes, Arb, would you please take a small detachment and search in the vicinity of last night’s party for King Ulfr. He seems to have wandered off.”
“At once, your majesty.”
As Arb turned to go, Ulfr walked in.
“Found him!” Roäc announced.
“Thank you, Roäc,” said Thorin.
“Hey, anytime.”
Ulfr still wore last night’s clothing, as if he had never gone to bed at all. Ori didn’t think he was hungover, but that wasn’t to say Ulfr was well. Yizaris hurried over to him. She embraced him, and he returned the gesture listlessly.
“All right, Ulfr?” Thorin asked.
Ulfr seemed to ponder for a moment, then he just said, “No.”
Thorin rose and approached. “Would you like to go to the office and talk about it in private?”
“Talkin’s useless a’ this point. Now I need t’ act.”
He stepped away from Yizaris and drew his knife.
Bruised, Contused, and Confused.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. We do humbly apologize, but we have to post this early as Friday is Yule and we shall be celebrating like Margr and Vi (without the horse costume). Happy whatever holiday(s) you celebrate to you and yours. Hugs, kisses and cookies all ’round and please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Thorin didn’t move.
Every other person in the room drew their own weapon or seized something nearby to use.
Yells and shrieks sounded.
Chairs were knocked to the floor.
Sugar and Butter bounded forward in full roar.
The table lurched dangerously as Killer burst out from under it.
The ravens rose in a shrieking cloud.
Red Queen leapt on the table, screaming, her wings spread out. Beorn morphed into a bear.
Dwalin charged around the table with both axes up.
Balin and Fili had their short swords out.
Sigrid grabbed Tilda’s boot knife and wielded it, covering her sister.
Yizaris cried out in horror.
Arne bellowed, “No! Adad!”
It took Nodun and Tay to hold him back.
Buer was shocked into stillness.
Dori seized the teapot and hefted it up to throw.
Every dwarf took a war stance.
Bard, Bain, Aragorn and Boromir were ready with fists.
Arwen had her knife out.
Thranduil and his elfin family leapt up.
“Mahumb!” Tauriel hissed. “Why didn’t I bring my bow to table?”
The Rivendell elves were ready.
The three wizards had their staffs pointed and glowing.
Lady Galadriel’s hands sparkled with blue energy.
“Stop!” Thorin ordered at battle pitch.
Every person and animal stopped, Dwalin so abruptly that his shoulders shot out at a sharp angle before he righted himself, growling.
“Sit!” Thorin commanded.
The wargs sat. So did Legolas.
Silence.
Ulfr sighed and shook his head.
“I’m no’ commitin’ regicide, yeh numpites.”
Thorin asked, “What are you doing, Ulfr?”
“Blowin’ mesel’ up with me knife!” Ulfr huffed. “Honestly! I should think it’d be fairly obvious.”
He grasped his own beard with one hand and cut it off at his chin.
“Ho-lee shite!” Baluchistan squawked and fell beak-first into the porridge pot. Ori fished him out, along with seven stray feathers. Roäc smacked Baluchistan with a wing.

“Your timing’s impeccable, as usual.” Ulfr offered his knife hilt-first to Buer.

“Hold this f’r me f’r a mo’. Ta.” Buer came and took it, though he looked about as comfortable with a knife as Bujni had.

Ulfr dropped to his knees and offered his severed beard to Thorin. He said, in khuzdul, “I have acted dishonorably and called into question my sacred oath to my king. I also pissed off Durin the Deathless, which has to be some sort of crazy. I offer you my life, to dispose of or restore to me as you see fit.” Thorin took the offering and looked at it for long minutes. It lay across his hands like an animal pelt, as it had been growing for centuries.

No one moved or spoke, except for Baluchistan, who had to fend off the wargs trying to lick the porridge off him. “Ge’ off, yeh grea’ dumb beasties!”

“Ulfr,” said Thorin, “I can’t think of a single punishment that would be worse than this. It’s bad enough that you’ll have to walk around shorn. Most dwarrow would rather die. I consider the debt paid. Please, stand up.” Perhaps he didn’t need it, but Arne came forward and he and Buer helped Ulfr to his feet.

“I’m sorry, Arne, Buer.”

“Thank you, father,” said Arne, sobbing.

“That was really amazing! I mean, I never saw- It was really- I mean, wow!” Yizaris sat, limp with relief. The youths went to comfort her. Meanwhile Thorin was stuck with handfuls of lavender-streaked beard.

“You’ve really had a change of heart, Ulfr.” The Ironfist king chuckled.

“Call it a change a’ sight. Even if I wasn’t changed, yeh were righ’. This is yer kingdom, an’ I’ve behaved disgracefully be’r th’ family. This bein’ Durin’s Day, or close on it, I beg everyane’s pardon. An’ now, breakfast’ r no, I think I could use a drink.”

Thorin looked over at Kili, and held out the beard helplessly.

“I’ve got it, idad,” said Kili.

As Kili passed Ori on his way out, Ori asked quietly, “What are you going to do with it?”

“Put it away, I guess, until Uncle Thorin says otherwise. Who knows? Maybe he thinks Ulfr should glue it back on before he returns to his nasty relatives.”

“Please,” said Thorin, “let’s all return to the table and eat. We’ll say no more about this. The matter is closed.”

As he returned to his seat, he grinned up at Theoden, who had relaxed and placed his knife back on the table with his spoon.

“Theoden brother, thank you for your willingness to butter someone for me.”

“It’s an honor,” said Theoden.

Dori replaced the teapot and spooned out healthy servings of porridge for Yizaris and Ulfr. Two more chairs were added to the table and Bombur and Erda went to the kitchen and returned with two more platters of buns.

Yizaris sat with her arm about her husband, a mix of relief and exasperation. Arne was sober and Buer still startled. Conversation started again as Dain and Scudis scolded Blu and then took him to the kitchen. A moment later everyone heard Blu screaming that Dain wasn’t giving him a bath, but trying to drown him.

After breakfast, Ulfr and Yizaris retired to their room.

Thorin went out into the meadow with the wargs for a while and he was granted his privacy by his family and friends.

“Are you alright?” Ori asked Bilbo as they lingered over tea, and watched the high king of
dwarf roll around in the grass with massive animals who obviously still thought of themselves as
twelve pound puppies.

“I am now,” said Bilbo. “It’s gratifying that everyone was so willing to defend Thorin. It’s good
to have such loyal companions.”

After the events at breakfast, Ori would have thought sparring with the last thing anyone wanted
to do. He expected at least Lindir would want to go shopping or something. The Durin’s Day
celebrations would continue for several more days, and would do even if the dwarf didn’t also
have a new prince consort to celebrate.

Instead, the Durins and their company decided to adjourn to the practice ring. Bilbo decided he
wanted to spend some time writing.

“Please go on,” he said to Thorin, with a kiss. “I have to work on your Yule present while you’re
distracted, and you’re not distracting me.”

“I? A distraction?” Thorin asked him cheekily.

“Of the best kind, I assure you. Now, shoo!”

After the king had gone, Ori lingered.

“Yule present?”

“And something else that just occurred to me,” said Bilbo. “Would you mind terribly if I kept a
secret from you, just for a few hours?”

“Mmmmaybe,” said Ori.

He grinned and kissed Bilbo’s cheek.

“I’ll be at the arena with my sketchbook, if you need me.”

Ori went to the balcony above the practice ring and took out his drawing materials.

Bard stood at the railing beside him, and looked down on the ring with an occasional flinch. Ori
followed his gaze to a pair of men facing off with swords. Even heavily armored, they were tall and
gangly, as though they hadn’t grown into their limbs yet. One struck with power and control, the
other blocked, with more enthusiasm than skill. Thorin stood to the side, dispensing instruction,
praise and criticism in the same, even tone.

“I know Bain has to learn,” said Bard. “He needs to be able to defend himself. He can’t just be a
scrapper like me.”

“Is he facing Theodred?”

“Yes, and Theodred is good. He’s very good. But he could slip, Bain could slip. Either of them
could be killed at any moment.”

“Theo’s been doing this all his life,” said Ori. “I don’t think Thorin would let Bain spar with him
if Thorin didn’t think he was careful.”

“How can Theoden stand to watch this every day?”

Theoden sat on the bench at the edge of the ring, armored up himself, with Eowyn on one side of
him and Aragorn on the other, also dressed for combat.

Ori could see there were several times Theoden wanted to say something, but visibly restrained
himself. That Rohan allowed his only child to spar under Thorin’s tutelage spoke of Theoden’s trust,
but Ori knew this wasn’t easy for him, either.

“I think he’s just had longer to resign himself to it,” said Ori. “And, Rohan is a warrior society.
Eowyn says all the Rohirrim learn to fight, even if they’re going to train to be a weaver or a cook.
Though, a cook should be able to handle their knife just as well as a warrior wields their sword,
shouldn’t they.”

“Have you seen Bilbo practicing with his sword?”

Ori stared at him.

“I know he carries a sword. When I asked, he said he was much more likely to accidentally open
a letter with it than defend himself.”

“I think he’s being mischievous, as usual,” said Bard. “It didn’t look to me like he opened much
mail with it, but possibly quite a few bellies.”

“We’ve always suspected there is more to him than he lets on. I don’t know why we should be
surprised, though, considering his mother.”
“You all talk about her, but I don’t know anything about her. I suppose she was before my time.”
Ori gaped at him.
“You don’t know about Belladonna Took? But, why would you,” Ori mused. “Bilbo likes to say she was an oddity, even for a Took, like a hobbit of old. I wonder.”
Ori felt the grin forming even as it occurred to him.
Bilbo said most hobbits loved a good scandal, provided they weren’t involved in it. How scandalous would it be if all Arda knew of the exploits of Belladonna Took? There were plenty of stories just in Master Sadie’s private archives. Ori hadn’t been surprised that Sadie kept private accounts of what she saw and heard in Erebor. They proved a treasure trove. For one thing, they reinforced the idea that Belladonna never met Thror. She seemed to have avoided him neatly. But Ori’s favorite story so far was the day Belladonna told old, disapproving Sikar to kiss her patoot.
Ori needed to talk to Bilbo. They were meeting after dinner to go over the hobbit’s translation of the Infernal Adventures of Durin the Deathless. Even now, preliminary illustrations for that book sat in Ori’s office. Ori had done a few, though Arne provided most of them, while Omi and Loli created illuminated lettering for the chapter heads, and Buj the decoration for the cover.
If everyone was amenable, there was no reason they couldn’t produce a new book over the long winter.
Gold to produce the Infernal Adventures in the usual volume, and in paper covers, came from Thorin’s personal trove. If Ori was careful, he could probably pay to have the exploits of Belladonna printed himself.
If Bilbo was interested.
“Yer wool-gatherin’, love.”
Ori jumped, startled, and turned right into Dwalin’s arms. Impulsively, he stood on tiptoe and kissed him.
“Hullo. Yes, I was. In fact, by now I could knit sweaters for everyone in the family.”
Bard gently prodded Ori’s shoulder.
“I’d like mine to be green.”
“Like what to be green?” Ori asked. He never looked away from Dwalin. “Oh! Right! Wool-gathering, sweaters, green. Uh-huh.”
Bard chuckled.
“It looks like they’re done bruising each other down there. I’m off to collect my son. Have fun, you two.”
“Are you off-duty now?” Ori asked Dwalin.
“Aye, all yers.”
“I need to run an idea by you.”
Lunch time came later than usual, and they all gathered, either still a little damp from the bath, or nursing some bruise or other.
Every time Bain winced, Bard winced, but said nothing.
When everyone had finished their cold cuts, cheeses, deep brown onion soup, breads, and various salads, and wandered away, the inventors of the company cleared the table in the breakfast parlor, and Bujni spread out what looked like schematics on the table.
Buer, Ahkn, Dain and Ulfr poured over it.
Ori stared fascinated. Engineering wasn’t one of his strong points but the diagrams were so intricate they sparked the artist in him. Yizaris continued to sit beside her husband, sipping her tea and having the occasional cake from the plate on the sideboard. She didn’t seem to have any intention of letting him out of her sight.
Ahkn looked up from the plans, and stroked his beard.
“Lad, I can honestly say this is nothing I would have thought of doing myself, but your planning is impressive, and your calculations moreso.”
Bujni bowed to him.
“Thank you, your majesty. I can say without self-flattery that I have devoted many hours to this.”

“He was working on it when I first met him, months ago,” said Ori.

Ulfr frowned and cocked his head. He started to speak several times, but hesitated.

“King Ulfr,” said Bujni politely, “I would be glad to have your input.”

“How’re ye gettin’ home after ye land?”

Bujni gasped and wobbled a little. Buer and Ori rushed to support him.

“Mahal’s brazen beard!” Bujni cried. “How could I have overlooked such a detail?”

“We all do it,” Buer assured him.

“Have you ever had to walk back across Middle Earth after an experiment?” Bujni challenged him.

“No, but sometimes, after I’ve blown myself up, it feels like I climbed Erebor on my knees.”

“Hm, yes, I see your point,” said Bujni.

“All’s no’ lost, our Bujni,” said Dain. “Lot’s ve folks’ll be willin’ t’ follow yer fligh’, an’ track yeh down.”

“They would?” Bujni asked. Clearly this idea astonished him.

“I’m not terribly happy with myself right now,” said the Stonefoot king. “Ulfr’s only my best and oldest friend, but I didn’t notice he was going around the bend.”

“You’re a little distracted by impending fatherhood, and grandfatherhood,” Ori pointed out. “And Ulfr is a grown dwarf. He knows where to turn when he’s unhappy.”

“He’s also the stubbornest cuss in Middle Earth. I’m sure he thought he didn’t want to ‘bother’ me with his problems. Or, maybe he thought, given my daughter married a man, not a dwarf, that I’d lost my sense of loyalty. Which is utter shit, of course, but unless he’s brewing something useful or poisonous, or usefully poisonous, he always thinks in straight lines.”

“Maybe this has put some curve into his thoughts,” Ori suggested.

“Sure.”

Thorin and Bilbo came in, followed by Thranduil and Bard. Bilbo looked around and went right over to Ulfr, who was busy devouring the piece of cake Yizaris had put in front of him.

“I have something for you, Ulfr,” said Bilbo.

He handed Ulfr a bundle. At first, Ori thought it was an animal, then when Ulfr unrolled it, he realized it was Ulfr’s beard, the length wrapped in three thin, dark strands.

Ulfr cocked his head.

“I don’ ge’ it.”

“The dark strands are locks of Thorin’s hair. The whole keeps its shape because it’s bound by the king. The strands stand out because they’re supported by beard. Now do you see?”

“Aye. I git i’ now,” said Ulfr. He nodded solemnly.

“That’s brilliant!” Buer exclaimed.

“Indeed,” said Thranduil, who seemed deeply affected by it.

“Bu’, Perfesser,” Ulfr asked, “wha’ this a’ th’ end?”

“That’s a lock of my hair.”

“Wha’ does tha’ represent?”

“It’s adorable,” said Bilbo. He fluttered his lashes.

“So, it’s th’ carrot cake, is it?” Ulfr asked.
“Yes, I’m the carrot cake to Thorin’s plum pudding.”
“An’ wha’ makes th’ hard sauce?” Ulfr asked slyly.
“Butter and Sugar, of course.”
Ulfr laughed so hard, he tipped his chair over and went down. Yizaris rescued his dessert then, seeing he was in no shape to finish it, shrugged and ate it herself.
Thorin unfanked Ulfr from the chair and helped him up.
Ulfr muttered something, and Thorin hugged him.
“You’re an ass, Ulfr, but I do love you.”
“Me king,” Ulfr acknowledged, gripping Thorin tight.
Mistress Dazla came in, looked at the wreckage of Ulfr and turned to Ori.
“Lord Ori, there’s a clothier here to see you.”
Ori wondered what Dipfa had done to annoy Mistress Dalza as he followed her out to the receiving room. It wasn’t Dipfa, but, instead, a dwarf Ori didn’t immediately recognize.
“Lord Ori,” said the dwarf with a bow. “Your order from the market last night.”
“Oh! Of course! Trousers!”
“Indeed,” said the dwarf. He grinned. It was obvious he loved this part of his work.
Ori said, “Will you excuse me a moment? I’ll be right back.”
He ran back inside, and then burst back out with the squealing Arivette, Cemnesta, and Eowyn at his heels.
They tipped the clothier well, then Ori ran back inside, grabbed Dwalin’s hand and bodily pulled him along.
“Come with me!” Ori cried.
Balin laughed at them.
“Where’re yeh goin’?” Balin asked Dwalin.
“Where’re we goin’?” Dwalin asked Ori.
“Bedroom.”
“Oh, aye? Really?”
“I’ll give him right back, Bujni,” Ori called behind them.
Ori shut the bedroom door behind them.
“I have a surprise for you!” He held out the wrapped package shyly, hoping at the last minute the clothier hadn’t mixed up the packages.
He hadn’t.
Dwalin held up the pants.
“These’re grand, love.”
“That’s not the whole thing,” said Ori. “Turn them around.”
Dwalin did so, and tilted his head back and laughed.
“Try them on!” Ori ordered
Yeh jus’ wan me t’ take me britches off!” Dwalin teased.
“Well, yes, but I also want to make sure they fit.”
Circumstances had moved a ways beyond high fashion when a knock came at the door and it opened.
“Ah, there you are Captain Dwalin,” said Bujni.
Bujni came in, drew a chair to the side of the bed, and opened his note book. For one horrible moment, Ori thought Bujni was going to draw them.
“You were telling me, captain,” Bujni said gravely, “that, depending on the wind, you would have to send out groups of roughly several persons. Would you advise they be on foot or on goats?”
Dwalin looked at Ori then tuned to Bujni.
“Sorry, laddie, but I canna be thinkin’ on tha’ right now.”
Bujni’s eyebrow flew to his hair.
“Is there a problem, captain?”
“No, but I’ve go’ me hand on me husband’s balls, so-.”
Bujni rose, peered across them, then folded his notebook away with a snap.
“Ah. I shall await you in the sitting room,” he informed them, put the chair back in its place and shut the door as he went out.

“Now,” said Dwalin, “where were we?”

“Pet,” Dori called, “you have a visitor in the kitchen.”

Ori groaned and Dwalin laughed. Ori pulled his britches back up, tidied his hair a little and went out.

“Why are they in the kitchen?” he asked Dori.

“It is where the food is,” Dori reasoned.

Ori walked into the kitchen. Master Brur sat at the table, arms crossed, very obviously waiting for him, which was not to say Brur had been without sustenance. A wedge the size of Ori’s head had disappeared from the xocolatl cake on the table and a great blob of frosting and jam now decorated Brur’s orange tunic.

Really, Ori thought Dipfa should see the current state of Brur’s tunic, since the amalgamation of stains nearly formed a pattern.

“Master Brur?”

“Siddown.”

Ori did so.

“Is the quest document really that bad?” Ori cringed.

“No, it’s tha’ good,” said Brur. “In fact, it’s so bloody good, I had t’ put a few commas out’ve place, jus’ t’ have somethin’ t’ fix. Fuckin’ sickenin’. There’s jus’ one thin’ tha’ bothers me.”

“Yessir?”

“This was yer quest?”

“Yessir.”

“Why ain’t yeh in this report? Yeh mention heroics, talkin’ trees, balrogs gettin’ liquified, elves eatin’ fried lembas an’ everythin’ tha’ come out’ve tha’ box. Nowheres can I find wha’ actually happened t’ yeh. Yer personal experiences. Yer though’s on th’ matter.”

“Ah, well, you see, I did add all that, then I took it out because, a historian isn’t supposed to draw attention to themselves.”

“Pu’ it all back.”

“Pardon?”

“Pu’ it all back, yeh silly badger. It’s yer story, yer allowed t’ tell it. Mahal wrote yeh a fuckin’ excuse note. Yeh don’t ge’ more’ve a hand-engraved invitation than tha’. Besides I want t’ move a few more commas around. Make me feel better abou’ meself.”

“I do have the original manuscript.”

“Aye, le’s have it.”

“Now?”

“Aye, go on. I’m agin’ here.”

Brur waved him away. Ori scampered to his office, opened the secret compartment Gloin and Gridr had installed in his desk, and took out the original manuscript. He felt sick and thrilled and, as scribes went, terribly naughty.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. And now back to our regularly scheduled…. Oh wait, we don’t have one of those! Tee-Hee! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

All too soon, the company of Ori’s bullies were present at the table in the breakfast parlor, along with everyone else who had worked with him on the Quest. They all lightly scolded him for leaving himself out of his own story. Brur read aloud the presentation, with all Ori’s old edits put back in. Elrond and Dwalin looked very proud and Dori beamed from her chair on the patio, in the sunshine, but close enough to hear everything. When all was finished and approved of, Ori thought of one last thing.

“Do I need to make any changes to the abstract, Master Brur?”

“Nah. Can no’ do it anyhow. I sen’ th’ summary out t’ all th’ scribe guilds a’ Arda when we discussed this a few weeks back.”

“What?” Ori didn’t quite scream.

“Yeh’ll be presentin’ this on th’ firs’ work day.”

“That’s in five days!” Ori stared horrified.

“How can we fit them all in the presentation hall of the Scribes Guild here?” Ori demanded.

“Ach, laddie,” Brur grinned evilly at him. “They ain’t gonna fi’. I already go’ our Thorin t’ lend us th’ throne room.”

“I’m going to present this in the throne room?” Ori gasped. He felt a little dizzy at the thought.

“ ‘Course,” Dain boomed. “Bes’ place f’r it.”

Thorin smiled down the table at Ori.

“As strange as it may seem, Ori, Dain is right, which doesn’t happen that often.”

Dain stuck out his tongue at Thorin, who simply continued.

“You will have to have on display all the preliminary work that was done, maps, Floviq’s dictation, and everything from the box.”

“Oh.” Ori hadn’t thought that far.

“I wan’ extra security f’r me hat!” Dain barked.

Sculdis snorted a laugh.

“Luv, ain’t no ane wan’ t’ touch tha’ thin’.”

“It’s bleedin’ fascinatin’!”

“It’s th’ carapace of a bleedin’ evil spider!” Brur grumped.

“It’s me bes’ hat!” Dain argued.

“And therefore must be on display with all the other objects,” Thorin said, “and they will all have a security detail. Dwalin?”

“ ‘Course,” Dwalin agreed.

“I wonder how we’re going to explain ents,” Kili commented.

Galadriel smiled sweetly at him.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

Dori came in from the patio.

“Tea,” She announced.
Tea was served the sitting room, as the breakfast parlor table was still covered in papers. Hild and Aris arrived with Eomer and Arivett in tow.

“And when is the presentation to be?” Hild asked.

“In five days,” Thorin informed her.

“Excellent.” she replied. “Make a note, Aris, we will leave the day after.”

“Noted, yer majesty,” Aris intoned.

“Aye, same here,” Chat agreed. “I want t’ hear eve’ythin’.”

“I believe I’ll stay, too,” Gheir added. Mavey and Floris made delighted noises.

“I’m glad you didn’t take Fanny and she was safe with us,” Mavey told Ori. Ori was glad, too.

The idea of Fanny going on the Quest was not a good one.

It came to pass that pretty much everyone was going to stay for Ori’s presentation. He was pleased with the idea of so much support, but equally worried that every monarch in Arda would be there.

He was still pondering this when Chat and Givris sat down near him.

“Here, our Ori, ” Chat began. “I saw ya doin’ yer scribblin’ at the weddin’. Any chance ya could polish up a couple o’ them drawin’s fer me t’ take back and show around? Can’t have liddle Frerin missin’ out on all this fun.”

Ori felt his heart blossom and he grinned.

“Of course, your majesty. I have some nice ones and I’ll make one of the whole family for you.”

“Good lad,” snickered Givris.

Tay and Arne came from the kitchen and set out a platter of scones, they were each perfectly round, deliciously browned and studded with currants. Dori passed these around to be sampled.

“Oh, these are lovely,” said Yizaris. “Did these come the foreign bakery?”

Ori bit his tongue, since several such ‘foreigners’ sat at the table with them.

“No,” said Dori, refilling Yizaris’ teacup. “They were made by a very talented young dwarf I know. He blended the tea as well.”

“Is baking his craft? It would be a shame if he wasn’t apprenticed somewhere.”

“He is,” said Dori. “I believe he has a master and is just beginning.”

Ori rolled his eyes in Bilbo’s direction and tried one of Arne’s scones. They were wonderful. Ori looked up, caught Arne’s eye and winked. Arne grinned at him. Ulfr caught the grin as he reached for his third scone and stared at Arne.

“Arne, lad, did yeh make these?”

“He did,” Tay confirmed.

Yizaris leapt up, mouth still full, and grabbed Arne into a hug. Ulfr looked gobsmacked.

“These’re th’ bes’ bleedin’ scones I ever tasted!” Ulfr gasped. “Yeh definitely found yer craft, nidoye.”

“They are wonderful, my pet!” Yizaris cooed over her son.

“Any more?” Ulfr demanded.

“I imagine there could be,” Tay said and leaned to whisper something to Arne. Arne chuckled and hurried back to the kitchen.

“Now I wish I’d taken him down to the kitchen years ago,” Yizaris lamented. “I never thought to, as I’m not much of a cook myself.”

“I wish we’d done tha’ instead a’ tryin’ t’ teach ‘im th’ sword,” said Ulfr.

Arne winced as he came back with another plate of scones, this time with xocolātl chips.

“Sorry, Da. I was r-rubbish at it.”

Ulfr grinned.

“Should’ve givin’ yeh a kitchen knife.”

“Were you wounded in sword training?” Fili asked with great concern.

“I never got that f-far,” said Arne. He grew red in the face.

“He sat on ‘is sword while gettin’ ready,” said Ulfr.

Tay yelped, “Is that where that scar came from?”
Arne buried his head in his arms.
“Ye’s,” he squeaked.
“Nearly cut ‘is bum off,” said Ulfr. “Aye, a nice set a’ kitchen knives. Once yeh ge’ him trained up, our Tay, th’ lad could be a chef!”
Yizaris giggled, “Or have a tea house of his own with a cobalt door knob.”
“No cobalt!” Ulfr frowned. He seemed to do some thinking as his wife fixed him with a raised brow. “Fine. Bu’ I don’ wanna hear ‘bout it.”
“My love,” Yizaris shared the last scone with Givris, “I hardly think he’s going to write home about such things in detail to us.”
“‘Less he becomes a master o’ Position 20,” Givris added which sent both dams into peals of laughter.

At the mystified looks passing between the guests, who were elves and men, Brur went back to the parlor and returned with the Book of Glittering Diamonds. He leafed through and passed the open book to Theoden. Theoden looked, then his eyes bulged. He opened the folded leaf and choked.
“That’s asking for a broken neck!”
He was suddenly surrounded by elves and other menfolk.
“Great Eru!”
“How is that possible?”
“Five people!”
Bard looked at Tay.
“Is this something all who have cobalt door knobs have to know?”
“Unfortunately,” Tay said with a smile, “up until the box was opened and we found this original book, Position 20 was considered almost impossible.”
“Aye,” Oin agreed, “the Healers Guild has a book for all the entries a’ folk who’ve tried it an ended up in th’ infirmary.”
Eowyn and Arivett shrieked with laughter.
“You dwarrow are engineers in all your crafts,” Thranduil teased.
“I don’t think I could bend that way as man or as a bear,” Beorn said with a worried look on his face.
Elrond took the book away from Theoden and examined it.
“Is this a well known book, then?”
“Oh yes,” Dis told him. “It’s usually given as a traditional wedding gift. However, many parents - and uncles - when their badgers become of age, will use it to explain sex to them when they themselves lack the words.”
She and Thorin exchanged dirty looks.
“That’s very useful!” exclaimed Galadriel.
“Her majesty’s prose is…interesting,” Lindir commented as he read over Elrond’s shoulder.
“And,” Elrond said delightedly, “there’s an entire chapter on sex between races!”
Bard blushed, then,
“Thorin, perhaps you would consider having this translated?”
Thorin laughed and raised an eyebrow at Ori, who grinned.
“Laddie,” Master Brur said with a wink, “it’s our Ori’s next project.”
Everyone looked at Ori, who felt himself blush.
“I have several projects going right now, but I thought it would be a good idea.”
“It is,” Celeborn said. “It’s an excellent idea.”
Bard took the book and looked it over. He was beetroot but serene.
“If you would, Ori. My khuzdul isn’t that good, but I can see she is very detailed and to the point. There is no disrespect to anyone. I trust your translations and I would much rather Bain and Tilda learned from Queen Kivi than how things usually go in Dale.” He looked up at Sigrid before he continued.
“I take it Fili was able to…er…discuss her majesty’s book with you.”
“Yes, Da,” Sigrid came and gave her father a hug.
“How do you learn in Dale?” Elrond questioned, the researcher in him ready.
“Um…” Bard swallowed. “I don’t know what girls are told. Dori instructed Sigrid. As a boy, it’s mostly that when your father considers you ready, he takes you to one of the bawdy houses by the docks and hands you over to a woman he can afford.”
“Is that what happened to you?” Thranduil gasped.
Bard nodded.
Bain gagged.
“Da! No!”
Bard waved his hand.
“No worries, my son.”
“Thank you,” said Bain with a sigh.
“It just complicated things in the long run,” said Bard. “It took some time for my wife and I to… um… figure out what we liked. Which is probably why we were married three years before we had Sigrid.”
“That’s terrible,” Sculdis cried.
Bard turned red again when he saw all the dwarrow monarchs looking at him with sorrow in their eyes.
“It was the way things were. We didn’t know any different. You dwarrow are so open, but Dale and many different groups of men don’t consider sex as something to be discussed. It’s expected you will have children, but you just don’t talk about it.”
“It’s thought of as shameful among some,” Dori added.
“It’s not shameful among elves,” Cemnesta said thoughtfully, “just something private and not open for group discussion. We are immortal, thus one child is considered enough.”
“We just think about poetry and singing afterwards,” Thranduil remarked acidly.
“Mahal’s blue balls, lad!” Ulfr grinned at Buer. “Yeh were bleedin’ righ’, we dwarrow’ve go’ plenty t’ offer an’ teach other cultures.”
“Yes,” Buer agreed, still a little wide-eyed over what man and elves lacked. “Ori, you really do need to get this book translated.”
“Let th’ lad present the Quest, then he kin get started on it.” Brur growled.
“I promise,” Ori turned to Dwalin with a wicked smile. “If you don’t mind, of course.”
“Happy t’ help, love,” Dwalin smirked at the company. “Gotta be there is case yeh need anythin’ extensively annotated.”
Everyone laughed.
“And I,” said Dori grandly, “will write the preface to the new edition.”

The next few days were a blur for Ori. He spent them arranging things on the tables in the library and writing out cards of what they were and where in the box they had been found. Brur wrangled with the printers guild and brought the first one hundred copies down to the workroom. Ori was amazed as he looked one over. His work in print.
As he paged through it, he was amazed to see the exquisite printing job, the words and diagrams and other illustrations somehow falling perfectly into place. He turned to the last page and ran his finger down the lines of signatures that attested to the truth of what they had set down: his name, Dwalin’s, Kili’s, Tauriel’s, and dozens of others. Vi and Margr had learned to sign their names just for this purpose.

The scholars from outside Erebor began to arrive almost immediately, and were brought in very small groups into the workroom, escorted by details of Dwalin’s soldiers and members of the scribes’ guild. The library open stacks were overrun by dwarrow, elves and even men, checking facts and making notes and squabbling over who got access to what next.
Ori was willing to bet Master Brur didn’t sleep that whole time, as the old librarian ran rampant among the scholars, smacking their knuckles with a ruler if he caught them doing anything they shouldn’t, such as trying to tear incriminating evidence from documents. Teyan went wherever Brur
couldn’t be, invisibly snapping books shut on guilty fingers and pushing volumes out into guilty noses.

Ori witnessed her work on several occasions and found it very hard not laugh.

In the midst of all this, the printers’ galleys came back for the text of the Infernal Adventures, and Ori found it a relief to go over someone else’s work for a change. He felt jealous of Bilbo, who faced the prospect of another publication with complete calm.

“You’ve already told me it’s perfect, Ori-mate,” Bilbo teased him, as the project group took tea at Bag-End East. “I have every confidence in you. We’ll make sure the printers haven’t put any semicolons where they should not be, and by the time your presentation is done, it will be time to look at the printers’ proofs of the illustrations.”

“Then we c-can be anxious,” said Arne, while Omi and Loli nodded.

Bujni cocked his head in surprise.

“Are you actually anxious?” Bujni asked.

“Aren’t you?” Loli asked, wide-eyed. “It’s your cover design.”

“No,” said Bujni. “My precious diamond assures me that the balance of decorative elements and meaningful empty spaces is perfect, and that the colors I chose balance or cast them into relief to produce a harmonious whole.”

“Oh,” said Loli, rolling her eyes. “That’s what I thought.”

Bilbo refilled Bujni’s cup.

“In that case, you’re the perfect dwarf to accompany Ori, Dis, and I to the printers’ guild meeting next week.”

Everyone except Ori and Bilbo looked surprised.

“What’s happened?” Arne asked.

Bilbo hummed.

“Apparently, we’re pushing their current resource to the limit with our output. They’ve gone from printing copies of royal pronouncements, guild meeting minutes, and the regular issue of Vug and Better Caves and Caverns, to full scale printed book production, something for which they were not prepared. We seem to have sprung their cogs, as it were.”

“They want to know exactly how many more works we’re going to inundate them with this winter,” said Ori, “so they can take on more apprentices, and put paper and ink suppliers on notice.”

“Not to mention negotiating with book distributors,” said Bilbo, “of which in Erebor there is currently one. By spring, the distributor wants to expand out of Eriador, east and west. We’ve created a lot of work with our works.”

Arne shook his head.

“We’re naughty scribes,” he said. “We should be ash-ashamed.”

Omi draped her wrist across her forehead.

“Oh, woe!”

“What’s this going to mean for your publisher in Gondor?” Ori asked.

“Nothing yet,” said Bilbo. “I have a contract to produce seven books for him as Shire, but nothing in our agreement keeps me from working with other publishers and distributing under my own name. There’s no ‘noncompetition’ clause.”

“But,” said Ori, “that’s because there’s never been any competition before.”

“Something neither I nor Mister Denethor had foreseen as a problem,” said Bilbo.

“How does the lending library in Dale get its couple of copies?” Ori pondered aloud.

“I had ‘em done wi’ our Bilbo here’s permission,” Brur told him. “There’re two of each f’r our library an’ a couple a’ copies f’r th’ Dale.”

When Ori got back home, he went to the bedroom and found Dwalin, lounging on the bed, stroking Garnet. The raven was snuggled down on the covers against his chest.

“Is Garnet alright?” Ori asked. He came over and dropped his satchel.

“Aye, she’s fine. Feelin’ broody. She feels be’er when I keep her close an’ rub her back.”

“I can understand that!” Ori said with a grin. He sat and leaned over and ran a finger over
“Just that time, Garnet, or are you baking an egg in there?” he asked softly.
Garnet cracked open and eye, reached and tapped his nose with her beak.
“Egg,” she croaked. “Gettin’ heavy.”
“Do you want us to make you a nest in here?”
“No. Quartz is building one in the aerie. Better up there.”
“If you’re sure,” Ori murmured.
Quartz winged in and landed on the bed. He hopped over to Garnet and checked her over.
“Nest’s ready. Can make it bigger. Can get more fluff, too.”
Garnet turned and looked at Quartz.
“Got a view of Queenie?”
Quartz snickered. “One ledge up. In front. Perfect view.”
“Then I like it.” Garnet stated. She rubbed her beak against Dwalin’s hand and rose up. She
fluttered her feathers and shook.
“Why yeh wantin’ t’ spy on Red Queen?” Dwalin asked the question Ori wanted to, but wasn’t
sure he should.
The two ravens looked at each other and laughed.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Time for Ori to defend in front of Mahal and everyone, but his nerves of steel have turned into nerves of nerves! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori stood before the bedroom mirror in his coronation robes, which Thorin, Brur, and Sadi insisted he wear for his presentation. He had spent the morning with all who had been involved with the quest, preparing the throne room, laying out the contents of the box, labeling everything. Bard had brought the old book of his people to be shown with the badgers’ primer. All notes and sketches were laid out. The box itself took pride of place in front of the dais.

Everything was ready. He was ready, on the outside anyway. Dwalin had put in all his braids and beads, then gone to be with the guard detail in the throne room.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Ori muttered to himself. He turned to Killer, who sprawled on the bed, his tail thumping. “What am I going to do, Killer?”

“I dunno, Ori.” Killer turned on his back, paws in the air. “Rub me tummy an’ we’ll figure it ou’.”

“Lord Mahal?” Ori asked cautiously.

“Aye, yeh think yer warg suddenly talks?”
“At this point, I wouldn’t discount anything.”
“He was so nice an’ obligin’ abou’ it, he a’ leas’ should git a tummy rub out’ve it.”

Ori rubbed Killer’s tummy. Killer’s back leg squiggled spasmodically.

“Ohooo, nice! Gi’e me some more. Tha’s th’ spot!”

“Lord Mahal, what can I do for you?” Ori asked distractedly.

“Havin’ a li’le faith in yer creator’d be nice. I pu’ some guid stuff in yeh.”

“Look, when Dori makes a cake, does th’ cake say: Ooooo! I dunno if I’ll taste guid enough. I only have eggs, an’ xocolātl, an’ sugar, an’ Dori’s only ane th’ bes’ cooks in Erebor! Wha’ever shall I dooooooo?”

Ori barely choked down a snicker.

“Point taken, M’lord.”

“Bloody finally. Go on. They’re waitin’. I’m waitin’, an I go’ importan’ valar stuff t’ do.”

“All right. I don’t want to put You behind schedule. Come on, Killer.”

Ori turned, then turned back and leaned to look into the warg’s eyes.

“You’re the only one in there, right, Killer?”

“Laddie,” said Mahal, “ge’ a grip. I’m in yer head.”

Killer licked his nose.

“An’ I don’t lick just anybody’s nose,” Mahal finished.

Ori giggled to himself and went out with Killer at his heels.

Ori waited in the anteroom behind Sadi. Up on the throne, Thorin seemed to be reading one of the abstracts that were freely available at the door. Bilbo sat at his left, leaning a little to peer at the parchment as he patted Butter, who leaned against the throne. Like Sugar on Thorin’s other side,
she looked about, ears on the prick. Both wargs were resplendent with their Durin blue collars about
their necks with the mithril royal insignia.

Dwalin stood in his usual place at the top of the steps to the dais, Killer now lay at his feet as he
surveyed the room. Dwalin had put Killer's new official guard collar on the warg. It was a wide,
black leather affair, gilded all around with short, steel studs.

Dori and Balin and all their royal guests sat comfortably on couches on the dais. The right side
between the throne and the edge of the dais was empty but for the podium where Ori would speak.
He could just see his notes sitting there, ready. The room was filled with people. Men, dwarrow,
and a few elves floated around, conversing quietly. People crowded the tables, stood in groups
talking, picked out seats and gathered to sit together. Every single one of them would be watching
him. He swallowed.

Sadi snorted.

"He has his nerve, showin' up here."

"Who?" Ori asked and peeked over her shoulder.

"Master Trig."

She chucked her chin at a square, grey-beard dwarf sitting dead in the center of the first row of
chairs. A traditionally attired and decorated Stiffbeard, he wore tiny spectacles perched on the end
of his nose and carried a copy of the quest extract under his arm, bright red slips of paper sticking out
between practically every other page. He looked like he was ready for a brawl.

Ori groaned.

"Isn't he the one who believes elves don't exist? That they're all a product of mass hysteria?"

"Tha's him, th' li'le weasel. I don' like t' say all Stiffbeard males're smug in their own superiority,
bu' he's smug in his own superiority."

"How nice of him to join us," said Ori. "I don't suppose we could get rid of him? Tell him his
favorite inkwell was stolen or something?"

"Nooooo," said Sadie, with a slow, wicked smile, "we'll no' be rid a' him, bu' we kin make thin's
a wee bi' more interestin' while he's here."

Sadi took out her notebook and a graphite wand and scribbled a note, then beckoned one of the
apprentice scribes. The damling's robes hung on her still small frame, so it was impossible to see her
boots as she scurried over in a whirlwind of cloth. She took the paper Sadie offered and listened
carefully to the old master's whispered directions before she bowed and scurried away again.

"Sadi, what have you done?" Ori asked with a grin of suspicion.

"Watch, young scribe, an' learn."

Soon Lindir arrived with his own copy of the excerpts and sat right next to Trig.

"Good afternoon," said Lindir pleasantly.

Trig looked at him, then quickly through him, then turned back to face front.

Glorfindel arrived and plunked down on Trig's other side.

"Hullo!" Glorfindel bellowed. "I understand you're the one who thinks I don't exist."

Trig had jumped a bit when Glorfindel sat, but stolidly returned to pretending he was alone.

Lindir said to Glorfindel, "M'lord, do you suppose, if someone were to come and ask Master Trig
if these seats were taken, he'd say 'no'?"

"Seeing as we're just mass hysteria, he'd have to, wouldn't he," said Glorfindel. "Let me try an
experiment."

He poked Trig in the side, and Trig jumped and squirmed.

Glorfindel grinned.

"Shall we see if he's ticklish, Mister Lindir?"

"That's an excellent idea, Lord Glorfindel. Let us proceed."

The pair of them mercilessly poked and ticked Master Trig's sides, trying to force a reaction of any
kind.

The dwarf seemed to be holding his own for a moment, but leapt to his feet all at once, grasped the
arm of a passing fellow scholar, and asked directions to the privy.

As he hurried away, Glorfindel called after him, "Don't worry, my friend! When you come back,
these seats will still be empty!”

“Sadi,” said Ori, “that was beautiful.”
“I’ve still go’ it,” she said with a nod.

Glorfindel and Lindir had returned to the dais and the guest couches arranged for tall people. Elrond sat with his hand proudly entwined with Lindir’s and Vi and Margr, dressed in their jumpsuits like all the rest of Ori’s Bullies, perched one on each of Glorfindel’s knees.

When Trig returned, the seats had been taken by other dwarrow. Trig was forced to sit back a few rows.

He didn’t look terribly upset about it.

“Alas, it won’ shut ‘im up,” said Sadi. “Bu’ a’ least he won’ be sittin’ righ’ before yeh like an orc on a chamber pot.”

Ori peered around Sadi again. More people were seating themselves, a few stragglers walked around the room looking at all the treasures from the box. Dwalin had a couple of guards at each table. A copy of Bard’s chandelier was there as well. Ori’s gaze traveled to the back and he frowned. Someone had seen fit to put a massive mock-up of a tree in the back. He wondered if Ulfr and Buer had thought to make one to represent what an ent looked like. It seemed like something Buer would think of, then do just to see if he could. Ori schooled himself not to jump out of his skin when it lit up or wagged a branch like one of Dain’s mechanisms.

Master Brur pushed his way into the antechamber, looked Ori over, smirked, and ruffled his hair. Ori hissed and Sadi snatched Brur to her side.

“Bash on with it, whippersnapper.”

Brur grinned, went to the door the antechamber, and loudly cleared his throat. Anyone not in their seat rushed to sit down. Thorin inclined his head.

“Master Jansad,” bellowed Brur, “Second Chair of the Scribes Guild, Majesty!”

There was a round of applause, while Brur assisted Master Sadi to hobble to the dais and up the steps. Dwalin took her arm from there and brought her to stand before Thorin, Killer following. Sadi bowed creakily and Thorin inclined his head.

“Welcome, Master Sadi, it is always good to see you. Please proceed.”

Sadi turned and started to hobble back to the edge of the dais. Dwalin offered his arm, but she swatted at him with her stick. Dwalin chuckled and a ripple of giggles went through the audience. Killer wagged his tail. Dwalin snapped his fingers and Killer went and lay down once more and gazed worshipfully up at Dwalin, who returned to his place and slipped Killer a treat.

Sadi straightened, and then her voice rang out strongly.

“Yer Majesty, Consort, Blessed Bearer, lords, ladies an’ all peoples. I have come t’ present Lord Ori a’ Fundin House, First Chair a’ th’ Scribes’ Guild a’ Erebor. He has prepared f’r yeh a presentation a’ his recent quest. I call Lord Ori a’ Fundin.”

“Lord Ori a’ Fundin,” bawled Brur.

Ori took a deep breath and walked out towards the dais. He was shocked by a sudden roar of applause. He could hear the voices of friends and old neighbors shouting encouragement. He felt his face turn beetroot. He walked to the steps, turned and bowed to the audience then turned again toward the podium.

“There’s me love,” Dwalin murmured as Ori looked up at him.

“Love you,” Ori whispered and went forward to bow to Thorin. Thorin smiled down on him and nodded. Bilbo looked eager for him. Ori turned and bowed to the royal guests, who all whispered animatedly.

Ori went to the podium, his notes seemed to smile up at him. Quartz landed on the edge of the podium and winked. Ori breathed out and smiled at those before him.

“I thank you all for coming. Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge and offer my deepest thanks to the following people.”

Ori read through the long list of names of all who had assisted him, elves, men, dwarrow, Beorn, ents, and ravens.

“And finally to King Thorin II Oakenshield for his full support.” Ori paused then smiled, “and his
unending patience with me.”

As he hoped, another ripple of laughter went through the throng.

Trig jumped to his feet.

“I heard enough! You’ve made up names for a bunch of people you call elves who do not exist.

Mahal is the Valar and only He and the dwarrow, His children, exist!”

Ori had not expected Trig to start arguing before he had barely begun, so his mouth didn’t wait for
his brain.

“A world of only dwarrow, Master Trig? What a lonely life you must lead!”

Trig sat down more in shock than true subjection.

Ori began with recounting the familiar event of discovering mithril in the old zinc mine, which had
quickly led to the finding of the ostrakai in Zark’s mine, and then the realization of what they had to
do with King Nali.

Master Trig bounced up again.

“King Nali was a legal regent and a famous reformer! Nali was legally king and regent until Nain
was of age!”

“I’m aware of that, Master Trig-“ Ori began.

“Nain was a true descendent of Durin the Deathless!”

“Shut up! Pay attention!” Quartz barked. “Want me to fly over there? Peck you?”

Ori reached around and yanked Quartz back and stuffed him into his satchel.

“Hey!”

“There are snacks in there,” Ori said.

“Oh. All righty, then. Oooo! Bacon!”

“Why do you carry bacon in your satchel?” the old dwarf demanded.

“To buy off my loud-mouthed bird,” said Ori.

“D’uh!” Quartz’ voice echoed from the depths of the bag, and since this was the throne room, it
was perfectly clear all the way to the back.

“Wait,” said the old dwarf. “That’s your raven?”

“And I’m his dwarf,” said Ori simply.

“But, he was chosen to be your particular companion?”

From the back of the throne, Roãc squawked, exasperated.

“Are you really that dense, Trig?”

“Tell ‘im, Da!” said Quartz around a beakful of bacon.

“He is in the account of the quest,” said Ori. “You did read the account?”

“I recall reading that you were guided through the Halls by a raven, but I had assumed that was all
a delusion.”

Quartz popped back up onto the lectern.

“Delude this!” he cried, and turned and wiggled his rear at Master Trig.

A chorus of riotous laughter and caws echoed off the walls. Ori had no idea where they came
from, but the walls and ceiling were suddenly covered in ravens.

“Trig,” said Sadi. “I realize yer no’ one t’ take advice, bu’, fer th’ love a’ Mahal, shut up.”

Mica said, “Aw, let him keep talking! I want an excuse to poop on his head.”

In this she was encouraged by many vocal ravens and quite a few vocal dwarrow.

A dwarf up in the gallery said, “I’d pay good money to see that.”

“Now, now,” said Thorin. “Let’s not be nasty. Or messy. I’m sure we’re all ready to settle down
and listen to Lord Ori read from his text.”

Sugar ‘woofed’ for emphasis.

Ori took this as a signal for him to continue.

He got to the point where he had offered to check the hallway as their escape route.

“Nooo, laddie, yeh didn’t!” Dub wailed.

“He did.” Dwalin rumbled.

“What yeh see when yeh came t’ yer senses?” someone shouted.

Ori sighed and recounted his time in the Halls.
People listened eagerly to hear about the past royals. They chuckled over how it sounded just like those they knew.

Ori told of the escape and the rescue by the ents, then the ruin of the three mountains. He faithfully related the words of the valar Who had spoken, then Lady Galadriel putting him to sleep.

There was a stunned silence. Ori went on, telling how elves had come from the ground and remembered nothing since they had been captured and forced to become orcs. How King Cemnesta had to leave Lothlórien to deal with the same problem. There were noises of sympathy and shock.

“And that’s another thing!” Trig shouted. “You keep referring to these people who don’t exist, rising from the ground at Dimrill Dale, our most holy site!”

“Because they did,” said Ori.

“You can’t prove that!”

“Did Durin the Deathless awake in Mount Gundabad?” Ori asked.

“Of course!”

“Can you prove it?”

Trig opened his mouth, then closed it.

“That’s not the point! You’re making spurious assertions about sacred ground.”

Ori thought, just you wait until I talk about the hobbits.

“People that don’t exist aren’t going to start popping out of sacred ground and existing!” yelled Trig.

Glorfindel rose.

“Must I come down there and sit beside you again?”

Laughter rippled through the crowd.

“Oh, wait a moment, and I’ll join you,” said Lindir. He stood and brushed down his robe.

Master Trig turned pale.

“There’s no need, milords. I am willing to concede things I have experienced as empirical proof. Some elves do exist.”

“Bloody finally!” someone shouted from the gallery.

“Though, I still maintain they must have been an experimental model of dwarrow, designed by Mahal, Who is the only Valar.”

The audience groaned.

“He is so goin’ t’ ge’ struck by lightnin’,” said Durin in Ori’s head.

“It won’t be a moment too soon,” Ori murmured.

“Still think Mica shouldn’t poop on him?” Quartz asked.

“Hush,” said Ori. “There’s one of Dori’s apple cakes in my pouch.”

“Ooooh!”

“Dear Master Trig,” Lady Galadriel cooed from the dais, “please do tell me if I exist.”

“I am a skeptic of the first water, milady,” said Trig, “but I’m not that skeptical. Or that suicidal.”

“Ah, so you are willing to acknowledge me, but not my Maker? Scrupulous scholarship, indeed! I shall leave you to your research.”

“Though,” said Trig, as if turning the idea around in his head, “if you are as powerful as all that, why did you not simply zap you and your companions to safety when the cavern collapsed?”

“I am not a valar, Master Trig,” said Galadriel. “Even I have limits. I might have taken two or three with me to safety at a time. Given that I did not know how long I had to make such trips, which of my companions would you have had me choose?”

Trig looked conflicted, then said, “All right, that’s one for you.”

“Do I have leave to continue?” Ori asked politely.

Thorin and Galadriel waved a permitting hand in unison. The crowd tittered.

“About that stuff you shoved in a box,” Trig had a look of triumph. “You can’t prove any of that.”

“Where, in Yavanna’s name, would he o’ found all them seeds?” Hamfast bellowed as he leapt up from his seat.

Ori rolled his eyes and they alit on the table bearing all the books. Queen Kivi’s original book sat
in the middle, the gems catching to light. Ori turned and grinned at Trig.

“Master Trig, have you heard of Queen Kivi?”

Laughter rocked the room and Trig grinned in returned.

“Aye, Lord Ori, and as a happily married dwarf, I’m very familiar with her book. Every chapter.”

“You then agree she was a queen of dwarrow and wrote her masterwork, ‘Queen Kivi’s Book of Glittering Diamonds’?”

“Every chapter, milord and what a queen she was.” Trig stuck his thumbs in his belt and looked about proudly.

“Then,” Ori asked politely, “how is position 20 possible with only two people?”

The look on Trig’s face was a delight to Ori.

“Well, you do have to stretch first,” said Trig.

“You’ll never stretch enough to cover the roles of three other people,” said Ori. “You’ll end up in the infirmary.”

“Aye,” said someone in the crowd, “makin’ up stories a’ how yeh’ pu’ yer back out while th’ healer smirks at yeh.”

“The voice of experience!” someone else cried, to the delight of the crowd.

“You’ve seen samples of Queen Kivi’s handwriting,” said Ori to Trig. “You’ve examined the book from the box. As an expert on Queen Kivi, are you willing to challenge that this is not her own work?”

“Well, I-” Trig began.

“If,” Ori felt wicked, “Position 20 is possible for two people, would you kindly give us a demonstration?” Howls of laughter cut him off.

“I didn’t bring me wife!” Trig barked, his posh accent dropped away in his shock. “An’ I ain’t gettin’ all nakkie here in fron’ a’ Mahal an’ everyone!”

“You don’t have to be,” Ori replied chirpily. “Just stand up in the aisle and I’m sure someone will kindly volunteer to help.”

Thorin asked, “Would anyone care to assist Master Trig in this endeavor?”

“No!” the crowd chorused.

Ori shot a smile up to Thorin, who winked and casually lit his pipe.

Then Glorfindel, Vi and Margr stood.

“We’re up for it,” said Glorfindel, “if you can find a fifth.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Trig. “I am also willing to concede this point, if only to help the proceedings move along.”

“Aw,” said Vi.

“Spoilsport,” Margr agreed.

Ori had a moment of confusion, for he had thought to speak more of the quest, and now they were on to the contents of the box. There was only one place left to go.

He spoke of the items of hobbit history in the book and told of meeting Bilbo Baggins, scion of two of the three oldest hobbit houses, and the revelation that hobbitts were not descended from men.

“I thought they was rabbits,” someone said in the crowd. They sounded genuinely confused.

“You think you attended the wedding of your king and a rabbit?” Ori challenged.

“We was willin’ t’ overlook tha’,” said the voice. “He’s a pretty good lookin’ feller.”

“They are not rabbits,” Ori promised. “They don’t have fluffy little tails.”

“I can demonstrate if you’d like,” said Bilbo cheekily.

“I’ll help ya,” said Hamfast.

“And me, too,” Bell agreed. “Of all the silly ideas.”

“They are their own people,” said Ori, “created by Lady Yavanna, wife of Mahal. One of Prince Consort Bilbo’s own ancestors was the wife of Durin the Deathless. On that table,” Ori pointed it out, “we have documents torn from dozens of historical sources, gathered and hidden by the scribes of Khazad-dûm, to prove this.”

Trig, apparently momentarily cowed, now shot to his feet again. Everyone around him groaned, but he didn’t take the hint.
“I read the assertion that they grew from the ground - again our most sacred, bloodstained ground - at Azanulbizar. This is not only a fabrication, but a vicious lie, and an insult to all who died and were burned there.”

The main entrance doors to the throne room boomed open. Everyone turned.

In the doorway stood Bifur, at the head of a squadron of about two hundred other grizzled dwarrow, all armored.

“Trig!” Bifur barked. “I did fight at your side at Azanulbizar, and you wert a fool then, and be an e’en bigger shit-head now.”

“Lord Bifur,” said Thorin. “You are most welcome.”

“Apolgies for our lateness, mine king. It doth take a bit for such a number of us to march at speed these days.”

Ori was very glad to see Bifur, and his fellow veterans. Things were already way out of hand. And, worse than that, it was his job to rein it all back in. He wished he knew how.

“Wait,” said Mahal.

Bifur’s cronies bowed and were provided seats in and around the room.

Bifur himself stood in the center of the aisle and said in general, “I hath known the hobbit, Prince Consort Bilbo Baggins, many years now. I can give assurance to all present that he and his people doth exist. I was not begun when they did emerged from the ground, which was e’er long before Azanulbizar, but I hath the word of one who canst say he was there when it happened.”

“Not another elf!” Trig cried.

“No,” said Bifur flatly.

A ripple of talk went through the crowd, and then the ground shook, and shook again. Ori turned and stared at the tree in the back. Familiar eyes opened and the head turned to look about.

“A-hoom!” rumbled Treebeard, moving forward from the back of the throne room. His upper branches brushed the ceiling. “Much… has… been… done… here…. A-hoom! Nice… colors…”

“Treebeard!” Ori shrieked in excitement, forgetting himself entirely.

The room collapsed into hysteria, which completely escaped Treebeard’s notice.

“Ah… Lord… Ori… my… friend! Yavanna’s… blessed… branches! How… good… to… see…you…so… soon.”

“That’s an ent,” announced Kili, nodding with great satisfaction.

Treebeard approached and bent to Thorin, who rose and bowed in return.

“I… am… called… Treebeard… of… Fangorn…”

“Thorin, son of Thrain,” said Thorin. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“You… think… so? Hasty… decision…”

“But, is it the right decision, m’lord?” Thorin asked with a smile.

“Well… yes…” Treebeard actually shrugged. “My… kind… were… there… ah-hoom… when… the… hobbits… the… other… children… of… Yavanna…, may… Her… leaves… never… wither…, emerged… from… the… fertile… ground… at… Caradhras…, but… HOOM…perhaps… my… word… is… not… enough.”

Thorin looked over into the audience.

“Seeing that Master Trig has fainted, I’d say your word is perfectly accepted. Thank you for believing in the existence of my husband.”

Treebeard leaned all the way down. A lengthy branch reached out and gently patted Bilbo’s curls.

“I… remember… you…, sapling. You… climbed… my… branches… more… than… once.”

“And it was an honor, Lord Treebeard,” said Bilbo with a grin. “Thank you. Will you stay for a while? We could bring you some water, if you’d like.”

“That… would… be… refreshing… thank… you.”

After that, the rest seemed to pass in a dream for Ori. People stared at Treebeard, then at Ori, then at Treebeard.

Ori heard his old nemesis Lor, up in the balcony.

“A tree. He’s pals with a tree.”
Ori back tracked to the skipped part about staying with Beorn. Upon hearing his name, the bear in question rose and turned into a very naked skinchanger. Ori stopped, swallowed, and did not squeak. Thorin thanked Beorn for attending, and nodded to Ori to continue. Beorn returned to bear form and Ori did so, telling of everything else what had been found in the box.

As per the decision of Thorin’s council and the Bullies, the silmarils were not mentioned. Ori smiled as he got to his ending.

“All hail Queen Sunflower, first queen of all dwarrow.” he said and bowed in the stillness. He gulped, then everyone was on their feet cheering and stamping, others wept as they cheered. A chant began,

“All hail Queen Sunflower, first queen of all dwarrow! All hail Queen Sunflower, first queen of all dwarrow! All hail Queen Sunflower, first queen of all dwarrow!”

A shimmer appeared at the top of the stairs of the dais. It grew and glowed. Ori did squeak then. To his delight, Durin the Deathless appeared hand in hand with Queen Sunflower. The cheering all but pushed Ori over. The rowdiest got rowdier. Others fell to their knees or just stood staring. The first rulers bowed to their people, turned to acknowledge the current royals, and then smiled and bowed to Ori.

Trig, who had just come-to again, passed out once more.

No one noticed except Ori.

“Thanks, laddie,” Durin rumbled. They smiled around again and vanished. Thorin blinked and had to borrow Bilbo’s handkerchief. He then rose, came forward, and raised his hands to quieten the room.

“My beloved people, we are all part of the Second Music. It is now a time of great rejoicing. The darkness is vanquished and we dwarrow shall be regarded as equal among men, elves and hobbits. We are all good neighbors. May we all live together in peace.”

There was more cheering but Thorin raised his hand again after a few moments.

“Master Sadi?” Thorin said.

The master rose from her chair, and when she got to Thorin’s side, she held her hand out to the king. Ori watched as Thorin placed a bead in Master Sadi’s palm. She took it and hobbled over to him. Ori willed himself not to faint.

“Master Sadi? What are you doing?”

“Silly badger. Bleedin’ Durin himself jus’ approved yer presentation. I’d say tha’s enough f’r a mastery.”

She turned and shot a look at Dwalin.

“Ge’ over here. Yer goin’ t’ be doin’ this from now on.”

“Yes, Master Sadi,” said Dwalin in singsong.

He walked over with a huge, proud smile. Killer gamboled after, panting.

Dori burst into messy tears.
Success, Snacks, and Sexy Things.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. To paraphrase Ursith, we mean Nori; Ori’s a here! Ori’s a hero Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Urns of coffee, kegs of ale, and dozens and dozens of varieties of cookies, cakes and other small snacks were brought forth for the reception and celebration. They were celebrating more than Master Ori of Fundin had anticipated. He accepted hundreds of congratulations, not just from his beloved kin, but from scribes, historians, and librarians of all different levels, almost none of whom he had ever met and more of whom he had only read.

They all wanted to argue and discuss some obscure point or other, and inevitably looked startled if Ori said quite frankly that he wasn’t familiar with their sources, but eagerly wrote the information down in his notebook to follow up.

It was even more taxing than the presentation.

The king and consort stood nearby, insuring that Ori’s buffalo would have to hover at Ori’s elbow, which was just where Ori needed him to be.

Loli and Omi cried excited tears all over him. Bujini bowed to him solemnly and embraced him. Ori and Arne held each other tightly for a long minute.

“I am s-so proud of you,” Arne murmured to him.

That nearly set Ori off on a crying jag of his own. Luckily, at that moment, Elrond had finally gotten around to reviving Master Trig with smelling salts, which attracted everyone’s attention.

Trig started to protest, but Elrond cut him off.

“Kindly give up this pretense, Trig. You and I have been corresponding long enough for you to know very well that elves exist.”

“I didn’t realize you were an elf!”

“Indeed? Pray tell, whom do you think lives in Imladris? Broadbeams?”

“I though you were a visiting scholar!”

“A dwarf at Imladris as a visiting scholar? Dwelling at the Last Homely House as a visiting scholar for thirty years? Do you think, for one moment, that I am going to believe that?”

Trig fell into the sulks but had enough decency to blush.

King Gheir approached and loomed over Trig.

“Your Majesty,” Trig struggled to his feet.

Gheir grasped his arm and helped him up.

“I’m already the biggest blowhard they’ve ever seen, Trig,” said Gheir. “Don’t help me.”

Ori saw Ulfr bearing down on Trig, cheek by jowl with Dree and Eriss, and fled the scene, giggling.

People, scholars and non, stood about talking or wandering to the tables again. High Priest Sven poured over the book of the Dale ancestors, exclaiming every now and then. Thranduil stood beside him, and agreed that Dale could certainly aspire to the beauty of its ancestral buildings. Teilnar, on Sven’s other side, took notes a speed. The open copy book sat beside it.

Mr. Wandi and Hamfast presided over a very long, tiered structure which held the urns from the House of Beauty and Healing. All the plants were growing vigorously. Some already showed flowers of rich colors. Treebeard appeared to be in deep discussion with a hibiscus.
Durin’s axe lay on a table all on its own. Warriors gathered there. Furh’nk allowed each a chance to lift and admire the balance of it. Master Dubb actually teared up, though he said it must just be all the book dust. He absently wiped his face with the tail of Ivo’s tunic. Ivo merely rolled his eyes as if he was used to this by now.

When Ivo held the axe, his face cycled through even more expressions.
“It pulls on different muscles than the sword. I wonder how long it takes to master the axe?”
The crowns, flower and mithril, were on show under their large crystal cloches, as no one was allowed to touch them due to the fragility of the flowers.
Around each item were the labels and explanations Brur had ordered from the printers. Ori thought he saw several people from that guild, and not just because they were mystified by what they had been printing.
“Lad!”
Ori turned at the shout and saw the source was Master Khujik hurrying toward him as fast as the elderly dwarf could. Ori embraced his old teacher.
“First Chair an’ now a Master. I’m tha’ proud a’ yeh, laddie. Out-rankin’ me in less than a year!”
“Never in experience, sir.”
Khujik swung round when Dori approached and clasped her hands.
“Blessed Bearer, I’ve jus’ bin tellin’ young Master Ori here how proud I am a’ him.”
Dori smiled mistily
“My badger has done great things, Master Khujik.”
“He has indeed, Bearer. Yeh are t’ be commended f’r yer raisin’ a’ him.”
Dori put an arm about Ori’s waist and hugged him.
“My dearest badger.”
“You trained me well, Master Khujik. I thank you with my whole heart,” Ori said and bowed to Khujik. Khujik returned the bow and excused himself to examine Durin’s axe.
Dori smiled at the master’s retreating back.
“I am very proud of you, Dori’s Ori, very proud.”
Ori wrapped his arms about Dori and hugged.
“This is all your fault, Ori’s Dori.”
“Thank you, pet. I’m sure Master Khujik thinks so, too. Now, go and circulate, so people can tell you you’re wonderful.”
Dori patted Ori’s butt to shoo him away.
Master Vobwi bounced into him and volubly admired his skill in his negotiations with the bone breakers. Such fascinating birds!
Arivett and Eomer poured over one of the tables that held the items from the box. Eowyn seized Ori and brought him over. Arivett had tears running down her face as she hugged him hard.
“This is amazing! I’m even more proud to be a dwarrowdam, if that were possible. You are a hero!”
Eomer nodded.
“I never dreamed so many things existed before. Just look at that child’s, I mean badger’s, toy pig. It’s on springs! It’s very old, though, I suppose it’s just for show now.”
Ori laughed and looked about. He spotted Wee Sam and beckoned him over.
“Sam, would you mind showing Queen Arivett, and Prince Consort Eomer how the pig works?”
Sam nodded eagerly and mounted the saddle expertly. Ori and Eowyn pushed down on it behind the saddle and Sam bounced. The pig rocked back and forth at a gallop. Several onlookers burst into applause.
“I want one of those for our marf!” Arivett cried.
“I want one of those for me,” said Eomer.
“Entirely feasible,” said Dain as he approached.
“Don’t tease,” said Eomer, and he stuck out his lower lip.
“I ain’t teasin’,” said Dain. “We’ll call it a late weddin’ present. Also, yer no’ as good with tha’ lip thin’ as me Chopper, so yeh’d best pack it in.”
Chopper oinked smugly.

“Dain!” Ahkn shouted, and stumped over to them.

Dain turned to him.

“Yeh bellowed?”

“This bridge! This bloody bridge!” Ahkn gestured to the diagrams of the ill-fated mithril bridge mounted on large boards behind another table.

“Aye, wha’ abou’ it?”

“It’s a work of genius, and I’m that pissed I didn’t think of it, and I’m an inch from calling you out into the courtyard and bashing in your head over it.”

“Hmmm,” said Dain, “jealousy’s makin’ th’ old dwarf feisty. Yeh sure yeh don’ jus’ wan’ me t’ buy yeh a drink ’re somethin’?”

Ahkn thought about it, shrugged and said, “Yep, that’ll do.”

Ulfr, apparently having finished with Trig, had cornered Bilbo by the marriage quilt, the latest in a hoard of scholars and others gathered there to pepper him with questions.

“An’ this means a son?”

“Yes.”

“An’ what’s this?”

“I’d say someone won a prize for ale brewing, though it wasn’t without controversy.”

“Yeh kin honestly read that in all this?”

“Yes.”

“This ain’t a quilt, our Bilbo, it’s a gossip tapestry.”

“The lace along this piece is exquisite,” said Yizaris. “I’ve never seen this pattern, and I have a hand for tatting.”

“Those are chamomile flowers,” said Bilbo. “They’re restful, like the tea.”

Bilbo sent a look of distress toward Bell, who took his place at the quilt, answering questions, while Bilbo went to get his own cup of tea, presumably not chamomile, and likely laced medicinally.

The pleasure guild was packed around the table which held the items from the box of Durin’s and Sunny’s sex toys, and the seven volumes of the Book of Bearers. Nearby, Nugget and her cohorts demonstrated a dance bearers might do on feast days, to please the king. The Master of the Guild explained how they had been told that on Durin’s Day, the name of Durin’s wife was Sunflower, but not why she had such a name.

Tay brightly and explicitly explained each and every toy with a pleasant smile on his face.

“Oh, that would take some doing,” Tay replied to an elven scholar. “It’s not for beginners or the faint of heart, but I can refer you to an artisan, if you’re interested in a reproduction.”

Bujni stayed by the table which held the Dale books, and the ‘History of Men’. If asked, Bujni would read from this to the great amusement of the Dale folk.

“’Men: fascinated. Elves: Horrified.’” echoed Mistress Callin with a cackle. “I think that there says it all.”

“I know,” Miss Sifian giggled. “I feel I should rush home and check to see if my body hair is in the appropriate pattern!”

Elves swarmed over the table with the musical instruments and the one with Sunny’s hair ornaments and her jewelry.

The jewelry crafters among them sketched rapidly. One elf lady pulled a comb from her own hair and showed Dis that it bore the same hallmark as a comb on the table. It was not Durin’s work, but an elven piece acquired for Sunny.

“That’s amazing,” said Dis. “Do you know anything about the artisan who created them?”

“I am the artisan who created them.”

Anyone interested in cooking and baking crowded around the tables with these tools. The mithril masters closely patrolled the table with the mithril tools of Durin. Ori honestly wondered if they would bite anyone who tried to handle Durin’s tools.

Roäc perched on the back of a low stool between the two tables of books. The Book of Ravens lay open on the stool before him, turned to face the onlookers. The floor around the stool was knee
deep in other ravens. People and a couple of bone breakers craned their necks to see as Roäc held forth on the glories of his line.

One Dale matron, who perhaps should have known better, asked how old he was.

“Only my hairdresser knows for sure,” said Roäc, to the confusion of just about everybody.

“I beg your pardon?” the matron asked.

“There he is, tall elf feller, looks pleased with himself, carrying a fat dog. Just ask him.”

The matron turned, observed Mr. Wandi then nodded. She made a little bow to Roäc.

“Thank you very much, sir,” she said politely.

In the midst of this, Ori felt an itch on his right hip and was afraid it meant he had a new tattoo coming in. It peeved him to think how long it would be before he got a look at it.

He turned and saw Master Nodun as she hurried to his side.

“Master Scribe?” she teased.

Ori hugged her.

She soon let go, laughing.

“Now that you are a proper master, along with being the First Chair, I must tell you about some wonderful news.”

“Yes, please,” Ori said excitedly.

“There is going to be a contest to create the new royal portrait. Usually it is just for members of the artistic guild, but King Thorin insisted it be open to all.”

Ori stared at Nodun, “Really there’s a contest for painting it?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I haven’t seen your work yet and the first chair usually puts one in.”

“I’ve just started with oils. I’m more proficient with graphite pen.”

“According to Master Bombur, you’re quite proficient with oils as well.”

Ori cursed inwardly. He’d been ratted out.

“How is the miniature coming?” she asked.

“I’m ready to bash my head against the wall,” he admitted.

“Don’t do that,” she said. “It’s very hard to get blood and brains out of the plaster. I could take a look if you’d like?”

“I would love the help,” he said.

“If you agree to put in an entry for the new royal portrait.”

Ori cocked an eyebrow at her.

“You drive a hard bargain, Master Nodun.

Nodun pursed her lips, then broke out in a laugh.

“Just think. You are a very new master and I’m sure it will give others am eager notion of competition. I’ll show you the hall of royal portraits tomorrow. About tenth volley?”

“Certainly!” Ori enthused. “I’ll meet you-?”

“At the door over there,” she pointed. “It leads to smaller meeting rooms but the hallway is impressive.”

Nodun went off and Ori started thinking about painting. He then remembered he had to think about the translation Queen Kivi’s book, talk to Bilbo about writing the exploits of Belladonna Took, go through his notes about the questions scholars had asked him that he needed to read up on, make Dori’s Yule present with Thorin’s help….

“I’m booked,” he said to no one in particular.

The afternoon was almost done by the time the reception started to simmer down. The guards watched over the crating up of the items from the box to send back to the library. Ori tried to help, but Sadi shooed him away. Bilbo slid his arm through Ori’s.

“Time to go home for a cup of tea?”

“Tea sounds like a wonderful idea!”

Brur came over and handed Ori a cream-colored leather-bound volume. Ori took it and there, on the cover, burned into the leather, was his sigil. Ori hugged his masterwork to him. His work in print and professionally bound in the workshop of the royal printers of Erebor.

“I did it!” Ori squeaked to the ether. “Thank you!”
Next thing he knew was being enveloped by Dori.
“I’m so proud of you, Dori’s Ori.”
“I didn’t imagine it, Ori’s Dori! I did it! I got my mastery!”
“You did, my pet.”
“Ori’s Dori?”
“Yes, pet?”
“Now that I’ve got my mastery, should I think about getting married?”
Dori giggled delightedly.
“I suppose so, pet. Did you have someone in mind you’d like to walk out with?”
Yes!” Ori cried. He turned to Dwalin.
“Captain Dwalin, would you please walk out with me?”
“I’d walk anywheres wi’ yeh, Master Ori.”
“See,” Dori said as they walked off arm in arm. “That is the proper way to begin courting as dwarrow.”

They got in the front door and the household staff descended on Ori, shouting congratulations. Ori grinned like a fool and thanked them all. Mistress Dazla ordered everyone through to take tea.
Ori turned and Nori erupted through the floor, grabbed him, whirled him around and chanted.
“He’s a hero again!”
Tea tasted lovely. Ori sipped happily, curled next to Dwalin on a sofa, Dwalin’s hand on his knee and Killer at their feet. Everyone who had not attended the original opening of the box discussed all they had seen and heard.
Ori finished his cup and looked at Dwalin, then put his cup down.
“I need to get out of these fancy robes before I smear anything on them.”
“You are perfectly sober, Lord Ori,” Dipfa said seriously. “I trust you completely with them at the moment. Do you require assistance?”
“I’ll help ‘im,” Dwalin said as he rose and took Ori’s hand.
When they went through to their bedroom, Killer trotted along. Ori shut the door behind all of them and leaned on it.
“Dwalin?”
“Love?”
“You need to rip my clothes off right this second.”
“If I rip ‘em, our Dipfa’ll murder me.”
“You’re right. You need to gently remove my clothes right this second.”
“Oh, aye. I kin do tha’.”
It wasn’t quite as quick as all that, of course.
Dwalin had to unbutton and unbuckle, and the other seemingly dozens of things necessary to remove dwarf clothing. Dwalin tickled and fondled his husband, and drew out the suspense.
“Do you suppose,” Ori asked, as Dwalin nuzzled his neck, “that our ancestors came up with all this clothing as a tease?”
Dwalin deftly unlaced the front of his tunic, kissing, nipping and licking as he went.
“I thin’… mmm, yeh smell li’e cookies… tha’ it were more a contest t’ see who could bury themselves in th’ most ornaments. Bastards.”
Ori laughed as Dwalin lifted the tunic over his head.
They maneuvered over to the bed, still kissing. Dwalin sat on the edge and Ori climbed onto his thighs.
“Kneel up a bit,” Dwalin directed.
When Ori did, Dwalin slid his hands beneath Ori’s undertunic and pulled him into a deep kiss. Ori sighed happily, safe and loved, surrounded by gentle power.
“Love you.”
“Love yeh, too. Yer me perfec’ armful.”
The under tunic came off and joined Ori’s tunic on the floor. Ori’s belt followed after, and his
trousers gaped open.

Dwalin fell back on the bed, and Ori tumbled after with a squawk, then a hum as Dwalin’s big hands latched onto his bum and squeezed. Ori had a mind to crawl up his husband and kiss him, but Dwalin seemed to have other ideas. He rolled Ori over, still cradling his arse, and rubbed his beard against Ori’s furry torso.

“Lift,” said Dwalin.
Ori lifted his legs and trousers slid off to join the tunics on the floor.
Dwalin stopped and laughed.

“Wha’re those?”

“My new smalls. You don’t like them?”

“Those look li’e the’ scarf yeh go’ in Dale, with th’ upside down hearts.”

“They are not hearts,” Ori said with a lofty sniff. “They are representations of your adorable bottom, embroidered in red silk thread upon pink lawn.”

“Oh, is tha’ all?” Dwalin asked.

“Of course that’s not ‘all’,” said Ori with a playful poke in the belly. “They remind me of you!”

“Tha’s flatterin’. D’ yeh mind if I take ‘em off?”

“At your leisure,” said Ori. “But not too much leisure.”

Ori felt like a pastry spilled out onto a plate, especially when Dwalin commenced to nibble on his tenderest bits.

Ori was so blissed out, it took him a moment to realize Dwalin had stopped nibbling, and now peered down on Ori, or at least at Ori’s hip.

Of course! The tattoo! Between the euphoria of his mastery and the mental challenge of all those scholars, Ori had forgotten all about it.

“What is it?” Ori asked. He twisted about, and tried to get a look at it.
Dwalin cocked his head, frowned, and pulled back a little.

“I think it’s a cake,” he said.

“A cake?”

“Aye, li’e one a’ Dori’s.”

Ori cried out into the ether, "A tattoo of a cake? Really?"

Mahal replied, "Yer as guid as any one a’ Dori’s. I don’ wan’ yeh t’ frget. ’Sides, I’m sure yer Dwalin finds yeh jus’ as yummy."

"Oh, Mahal's bloody... er, sorry," said Ori.
Ori heard chuckling, and he turned to Dwalin.

"I need to explain. It’s about something Killer said."
Dwalin cocked an eyebrow.

"No, really, Mahal said it, but through Killer," Ori babbled.
Killer, on the rug by the fireplace, thumped his tail, rolled over with his paws up and his tongue out.

"Don’ listen t’ him," said Killer. "I'm a talented pup. Han'some, too."

"Alrhgh', tha's jus' disturbin'," said Dwalin.

Ori wrapped his legs around Dwalin’s waist and yanked his husband down on top of him.

“Oof! I keep frgettin’ how strong yeh are, love.”

Ori kissed the tip of his nose.

“Give me a minute, and I’ll remind you.”
Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Whew! What a busy day our Ori’s had. Now, onward to dinner. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwararrow time, same dwararrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

We thank all of our readers for your outpouring of love to us for our recent loss. You are all very kind. If we could, we would hug each and everyone of you. Please considered yourselves thoroughly squeezed tight by both of us.

And a shout-out to #Blistering Typhoons for the mac and cheese recipe!

Ori blinked awake and looked up into Bilbo’s smile.

Thorin appeared beside him.

“Wake up, Master Scribe, Captain of the King’s Guard,” Thorin teased. “You have twenty minutes to be properly clean and dressed for dinner.”

“Dinner?” Ori repeated as his stomach agreed.

“Yes,” Thorin said as he sat beside Bilbo on the bed. “Aragorn has insisted on making us a traditional Rangers’ dish to go with the roast turkey.”

“Th’ fuck?” Dwalin managed.

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“He wouldn’t tell us,” Bilbo chimed in, “other than it can be a main course or a dish instead of potatoes. That, and I over heard him telling Mistress Dazla, he was going to use noodles instead of boiled bulgar wheat or rice.”

Thorin and Bilbo left them to wash in the bathroom. Ori and Dwalin happy dressed in comfortable old clothes and arranged each others hair. They entered the sitting room just as Dori was calling everyone to table.

Seated and talking, the guests and family partook of potato salad mixed with cooked chopped carrots, peas, chopped onion, chopped pickles, and chunks of apple, all dressed in a light creamy dressing. There was a dish filled with chunks of ham to add in for those who wished meat. This was a dish popular among the Stiffbeards. Gheir was delighted to introduce it to them all. The elves praised it highly and Mavey hugged Gheir’s arm.

“Isn’t it good?” she squeaked.

“You can carry a tin pail of it in your saddle bag for lunch,” Gheir instructed. “Just keep it cold. We refer to it as rushing salad as you can throw it together quite quickly.”

Then the main course of roast turkeys was set out, there were a few large salads and vegetable dishes, and Aragorn’s offering.

“Rangers make it when they’re in the Shire in the spring,” he told them all. “We buy the ingredients from the hobbits. It has a sauce of pint of milk, half a dozen eggs, a chopped ball of cheese, and a good sized jar of pickled tomato puree. I put noodles in, as we usually use bulgar or rice. You put in some sauce, then some noodles, then some cheese, and keep layering until the pan is full or you used all the ingredients. Then you bake it in the fire a good while.”

“It looks like a cheese bake!” Kili said and sat up to lean over the table. “Smells great!”

Dori spooned out helpings for everyone and it was tried.

“I like this,” Beorn rumbled. “I will ask you again for the recipe.”

Dinner, Dainties, and Dubious Males.
“Mam, Da,” Snis piped up. “You’ll learn, too?”
Chat and Givris exchanged looks and Givris ruffled Snis’ hair
“Aye, me pebble, I’ll make sure yeh kin have it again.”
“Why not use fresh tomatoes?” Erda asked as she looked up from where she and Bombur has taken a small piece aside and were diligently parsing it all out, to taste individual flavors.
“It’s usually too early for fresh tomatoes,” Aragorn chuckled. “The tomato puree is so smooth, it mixes well for the sauce and you do get the flavor of all the spices the hobbits add in when they put it up in the fall.”
“It’s one of my favorites,” Arwen smiled up at her betrothed.
“With your permission,” Erda said with an exchange of nods with Bombur, “we’d like to offer this dish at the Inn.”
“Certainly.” Aragorn looked pleased. “You’ll have to come up with a name for it.”
“What do the rangers call it?” Bombur asked.
“Shire grub,” Aragorn said and everyone laughed.
“That doesn’t sound good,” Frodo opined.
“Shire bake?” Randi suggested.
“We don’t make it,” Bilbo said.
“Ranger bake,” Theoden said. “And, if you serve it with plenty of ale, you’ll have baked ranger.” Arwen poked Eowyn and she gave her uncle a shove for Arwen, making everyone laugh.
“Ranger noodles,” Erda decided.
“We can serve it as a lunch dish in the pub,” Bombur said thoughtfully. “We’ll put a side salad with it. It can be a dinner dish for any not wanting meat.”

The next morning Ori was ready and waiting at the throne room side door when Nodun arrived. She opened the door and they went through to the hall of royal paintings.
Ori thought that they would be formal portraits, like what he had seen in the archives, but the paintings in the enormous hallway were quite different.
“You see,” Nodun said, “for each king there are one or more allegorical paintings.”
Ori stared up at the angry dwarf king violently killing the king of Firebeards for their sack of Doriath. In another picture, Thror showed the arkenstone to the people. It glittered above a swirl of bodies and people gesturing wildly.
“Notice that the Stonefists are in great joy, but the Blacklocks do not agree,” said Nodun. “Thror is holding the arkenstone to Mahal and the scribes are bent over their books.”
“Because only Thror gives the laws,” Ori gathered.
“Yes,” said Nodun as she glared at it.
The next portrait showed Thrain leading a charge at Khazad-dûm.
“We have one of Thrain, even although he was not crowned.” She smiled and patted Ori’s shoulder. “We need one of Thorin now. See what you can do.”
They walked back to Fundin House in companionable silence.
Ori’s head was full. Thorin wasn’t his grandfather, under the thrall of a dragon in the form of an evil gem. He wasn’t Thrain, obedient and doomed. Yes, Thorin was a warrior, but he understood the pain and suffering war brought. Ori felt that Thror had possibly never experienced war as Thorin had. Ori spent his walk back to Fundin house mulling over the paintings he’d seen. Thorin was different. Thorin only wanted his people happy and prosperous.

They arrived at the house to a flurry of activity. Dori was determined to get in one of her famous tea parties before any of the monarchs left. Most of the younger set and the males had been shooed away to do something else.
Hild and Arivett sat with Aris, who did double duty, taking notes from the left and right. Granny Klak and Givris were in cahoots, laughing filthily over something, and they beckoned Nodun over. The sisters, Dori, Dis, Galadriel, Yizaris, Arwen, Sigrid, and Eowyn sat at table with them all and
chatted. Ori glanced at Yizaris. The queen was obviously thoroughly enjoying the sisters’ gossip and Arwen and Eowyn watched them fascinated. Red Queen, on a cushioned chair, took tea from one bowl and baked goodies from another, while she discussed something with Master Sadi and Master Podvuh. Ruelis and Zendi chattered with Gridr, Binni, and Garnet. Beryl and Mica perched on the table both for cake and their share in the conversation. Rutile had taken on the duty of passing the butter dish to any who needed it.

“Ooo, our Gladdy, it’s jus’ bin tha’ lovely havin’ yeh here f’r such a nice long stay,” Margr cooed. “Now yeh’ll be comin’ back soon, we do hope.”

“Oh, yes,” Galadriel’s eyes glowed. “Dearest Dori and I are going to be propping up each other during our pregnancies.”

“Very wise,” Vi approved. “Always best t’ go though it wi’ someone who knows.”

Ori sat on the chair opposite Thorin in front of the fireplace, a little apart from the fascination.

“If you don’t mind, Ori,” said Thorin, “I could use your help going through the papers.”

Thorin could have just sat in his office with the door open, Ori supposed, but for whatever reason, Thorin had insisted on going over papers in the sitting room.

“Forgive us, ladies,” said Thorin. “We hope our presence wouldn’t disturb your party.”

“Oooooo, no’ t’ worry our majesty,” said Vi as she demolished her second iklar.

“We’re jus’ tha’ thrilled to watch yeh do yer king-ish thin’s,” Margr added. “Bu’ yeh’ll have some tea, surely, an’ a little somethin’?”

“Yes, Thorin,” said Dis, “you must take sustenance while you’re so busy, and please don’t work too hard.”

Thorin drank tea, and nibbled from a plate full of treats at his elbow while he frowned at the same piece of paper he’d sat down with. Ori sketched under the guise of looking busy.

“You go’ nuthin’ t’ worry ‘bout, our Hild,” Givris said, “Ol’ Mam Diyfris moved t’ Beleghost some few years back t’ stay wi’ her daughter’s family. She’s th’ bes’ birthin’ dam about.”

“Make a note, Aris–” Hild started.

“Mam, I rule Beleghost,” Arivett interrupted. “I’ll send for her when I get back.”

“Oh that’s right,” Hild giggled. “Make a note, Aris, Arivett is going to contact the birthing dam when she returns. I’m going to have a bath when I return home.”

“I thought you had hot springs?” Dis inquired, holding out a syrupy berry for Rutile to stuff herself with.

“We do, but a group of tile workers, all dams, arrived and offered to show off their skill by retiling my bathroom.”

“More Stiffbeards, mam?” Arivett giggled and helped herself to a slice of apple pie redolent with cinnamon. “You’ll be ruling both clans, soon!”

“Yes, I shall.” Hild’s smile was pure avarice, then she and Arivett shrieked with laughter. Ori caught Thorin’s eye and noted this down.

“Hild, yer a menace,” Margr called down the table.

“True,” Hild smiled around a sip of iced green tea.

“Make a note, Aris!” teased Tauriel.

“Don’ have t’, ma’am,” Aris grinned. “Story a’ me life.”

“I suppose,” Granny Klak said as she helped herself to a slice of iced ginger bread still warm and plump with dates, “you could do it quite seamlessly by simply marrying Gheir.”

Aris choked on her tea and Hild fell back in her chair and screamed with laughter.

“I can’t imagine anything worse!” she managed to gasp out.

“I dunno, luv,” Aris recovered herself and looked at her queen with sparkling eyes. “Jus’ thin’ a’ all them lovely Mavises,”

“Ooo, there is that,” Hild sat up and giggled. She turned in her chair and looked at Thorin. “What is your opinion, my High King?”

Thorin glanced up and smirked.

“It’s your funeral, Hild.”

“Why, whatever do you mean?”
Thorin put the paper down.

“Hild, if you marry Gheir there’s going to be a war, not just because it’s your wedding day. The legalities of combining yours and Gheir’s kingdoms would be argued for the next several ages. And that’s not taking into account both yours and Gheir’s funeral arrangements either.”

“Good point,” Hild agreed. “As queen I must be put to the stone in my own mountain. Gheir’s people just park their queens about the king.” Hild grimaced then brightened. “Arivett can steal all the Mavisés.”

“Mam!” Arivett cried. “I don’t want dams in my bed and Eomer would die of exhaustion within the year!”

“Tha’s true, too, luv;” Aris agreed.

“Nonsense,” Hild announced. “If Gheir can do it, I’m sure Eomer could handle twice as many at least! I wonder how Gheir managed the extension to his royal nurseries. If he keeps this up, he’s going to have to add an extension to his mountain.”

“Men can’t build nests properly,” Beryl mused.

“We have noticed,” Red Queen put in after she swallowed down an entire pork bun, “males tend to be easily beguiled by flattery and frequent mountings. They tend to die out quickly with an excess of such. Once the dominant male is out of the way, one can easily rule his flocks.”

“Is that how you became queen of such a large flock?” Eowyn asked around a mouthful of xocolātl cake filled with red currant jelly and dusted with powdered sugar.

“Of course, nestling.”

“Red Queen,” said Thorin.

“Yes, High King of All Dwarrow?”

“Don’t help.”

In the ensuing shrieks and giggles, Dori brought Thorin another plate of goodies and poured him more tea.

“Now, dear Thorin, we’re all just being silly. Pay us no mind. We would never dream of interrupting your work.”

“Thank you, Dori.”

Garnet winged over to Ori and settled on his shoulder, Ori stroked her back as he’d seen Dwalin do.

“I have to go to the nest,” Garnet said to him quietly.

“Time for eggs?” Ori asked, a little excited.

“I think so. Tonight or tomorrow. I’ll have to sit for about three weeks.”

“Will you be warm enough?” Ori asked. “It’s late in the year.”

“I’ll be fine. All the other nests are up there and the warmth of the flock will make it cozy enough. Tell Dwalin for me?”

“Of course. Shall I tell Quartz to go up with you?”

“He’ll be busy bringing me food.” Garnet stretched and fluffed her feathers.

“What should I send him with?” Garnet looked surprised at his question, then rubbed her beak against his cheek.

“You’re such a sweet little mate to my Dwalin. I’ll need meat.”

“Raw, cooked or er…old?” Ori couldn’t bring himself to offer rotten meat.

Garnet cackled.

“I don’t mind.”

“Do you want to fly or shall I carry you up?”

Garnet rubbed her head into his hair.

“Such a good dwarf. No, I can fly.”

“I’ll take you to the meadow,” Ori said and rose.

There was a definite chill to the sunshine outside. The ponies frisked and nickered at each other, and looked up from time to time at the enormous new tree which had appeared in their midst. Ori thought Treebeard looked like he was asleep, but perhaps he was just enjoying the sun.

Ori went around past the windows of Bag-End East and lifted his arms up, so Garnet could get a
good start. He watched her flight, up and round the corner to the aerie. Quartz whirled by, tapped Ori on the head with a wing tip, and hurtled after Garnet.

Once back inside, Ori went through to the larder and, in a handkerchief, placed several choice pieces of different meats. Mistress Dazla came in and started a little to find him there.

“What in all Arda are you doing, Lord Ori? Are you hungry for something other than the dainties? I’ll make you something.”

“No, thank you, Mistress Dazla,” Ori explained. “Garnet’s gone to the nest to lay eggs and I was getting her something.”

“That’s very sweet of you, but ravens are capable of getting themselves food.”

“I know, but Quartz is the father and since he’s with me I feel like I should help.”

“Oh, you sweet thing,” cooed Mistress Dazla, and accompanied him out of the larder. She found Ori a small leather carrying basket and they popped in the meat. Ori went back out to the meadow and called Quartz.

Quartz whisks down, a little agitated, to land on his forearm.

“Important message?”

“No, meat for Garnet.”

“My work.”

“I know but you work with me, so I thought you might like some help.”

Quartz stared, then hopped forward, grabbed the front of Ori’s tunic with his talons and shoved his head under Ori’s chin, wings open and about Ori. After a moment, Quartz took the little basket and flew back to the aerie.

Ori went back in and took his seat once more. Sadi was talking.

“Mister Denethor’s sendin’ his representative with some a’ his own presses, t’ set up shop here under th’ mountain. He’s rented th’ space an’ is t’ take on guild apprentices, per agreement, at better than scale pay. They’re goin’ t’ publish th’ last a’ th’ Shire septet f’r which Bilbo’s been contracted, an’ set up t’ distribute them east from here.”

“Apparently he thinks dwarrow don’t understand printing,” Dis said waspishly. “When we opened our written negotiations, he sent a long ridiculous letter explaining the printing process to me as if I was a badger. Patronizing git.”

“He always was,” Arwen agreed.

“Huh,” muttered Jani as she spooned marmalade onto the pork bun she had split open. “One a’ those men who think men invent everything a’ use and elves an’ dwarrow just hang about, lookin’ at flowers ’r digging holes.”

“And thinks females are good for nothing, except housework and making babies,” Eowyn agreed with a frown.

“I’ve had the misfortune of meeting him while visiting Gondor,” Lady Galadriel told them as she ate away at a saucer of pears cooked in dorwinian wine then baked in soft new cheese. “He’s a perfect cad. It’s amazing Boromir turned out so well. The way Denethor treats his second son, Faramir, is a disgrace.”

“I remember Faramir,” said Eowyn. “Serious sort. Quiet, but nice. He wrapped up my hand once when I was sparring with Boromir. I missed Boromir’s head and punched the stable door jamb. He was very good about it.”

“He’s grown into a very level-headed and studious young man,” Arwen said with a smile, taking a little cake from the plate as it was passed round. “Yet, he is also an accomplished warrior. He does duty as a ranger quite often as well, and he has a very naughty, very dry sense of humor.”

“Faramir is lovely,” Lavender said. She turned to her mother. “He was so welcoming when I got there. When Boromir is away overnight on guard duty, he always checks on me. I’ll be sitting with dear Arwen in the drawing room and he will stop by and see if we wish any messages sent to Boromir or dear Aragorn.”

“Does Denethor treat you well?” Dis asked.

Lavender snorted. Bell put five plump triangles of buttered bread filled with thinly sliced cucumbers on her daughter’s plate then took some herself.
Thorin looked up.
“Lavender?”
Lavender laughed.
“Oh, not to worry, your majesty. He’s still a bit pissy over Boromir and I. When I first arrived, he continued to introduce Boromir to ladies Boromir’d known forever but who didn’t interest him, or he them. Finally, Boromir said Denethor needed to stop, as he was going to marry me and had the blessing of his king to do so. So, then Denethor tried to speak down to me, told me I was forgetting my place and should leave his son alone.”
Vi tutted and helped herself to a pillowy scoop of whipped cream and dolloped it on her slice of berry tart.
“Bet yeh didn’t stand f’r tha’, our Lavender.”
“No! I cut him off in the middle. I told him he either behaved himself properly or I’d swat his silly head with a frying pan. He laughed at me and said he’d like to see me try.”
“Eru!” gasped Sigrid, all but dropping her lemon handpie. “What a dumdeumel! What did you do?”
Arwen sipped her tea.
“Aragorn and I told him to behave. But would he listen?”
“Idiot!” Beryl and Mica chorused.
“I went to the kitchen,” Lavender continued with a shrug, “got a big frying pan, went back, found him in the meeting room with dear Aragorn and his counselors and swatted him over the head. When he came to, I told him if he was rude to me or my Boromir again, he could expect another.”
“Well done,” Sculdis praised.
“It was,” Lavender giggled. “He is civil, but keeps away from me and I have ever so much respect from all the counselors. I have quite a lot of friends among their wives.”
The table erupted in mirth once again.
“Ooo, lovelies!” Margr cried, “me an’ our Vi f’rgo’ t’ tell yeh all abou’ our Rogi!”
“Tha’s righ’!” Vi squealed.
“Oh no, what has he done now?” Galadriel groaned.
“And whose underpinnings is he vandalizing now?” Dori inquired scornfully as Binni passed the gooseberry tarts.
“Our Rogi’s go’ hissef’ a’ sweethear’!” Vi told them.
“No!” Gridr cried.
“Ew!” Sigrid put in.
The sisters cackled and had more cake.
“Tell us about her, chook,” Granny Klak ordered, giving Rutile a piece of cheese.
“Well,” Margr leaned forward. “Turns ou’ our Rogi takes after us a bit.”
“Meaning,” Yizaris pushed.
“He likes ‘em tall!” Vi shouted.
“What?” Dori and Arwen said together.
“Oh dear!” Galadriel began to giggle.
“Aye,” Vi grinned. “He’s walking’ ou’ wi’ tha’ lovely Miss Sifian!”
“Or, rather, she walks an’ he scampers t’ keep up!” Margr added.
Ori’s graphite wand accidentally tore his paper. Thorin dropped a biscuit in his lap but rescued it quickly.
“Miss Sifian?” Sigrid asked. “Isn’t she a teacher?”
“Aye, love,” Margr went on. “She come round t’ teach us t’ write our names in our Ori’s book. We had lessons an’ practice. Rogi were jus’ leavin’ th’ firs’ time she stopped by. Didn’t he make sure he was round th’ nex’ two times she called.”
“An’ he’s go’ a proper job now an’ everythin’,” Vi added. “Works down a’ th’ school, so’s t’ be close t’ his sweetie.”
“How can Sifian bear that?” Sigrid said with a look of distaste. “He’s kind of… creepy with the young ladies.”
“Oh, he gets tha’ from ‘is da,” said Margr. “No’ much a’ looker, no’ much personality, but’ a good, big dick.”

Ori had a mouthful of tea and he could neither swallow it or spit it out.

There was more laughter at Rogi’s expense.

Red Queen ruffled her feathers and burped.

“This is very strange. We do not usually eat so much in one sitting. We don’t remember eating like this since-“ The bone breaker stopped. Ori thought something had crossed her mind. She never usually stopped in the middle of a sentence.

Galadriel looked at Red Queen. Dori put the last pork bun on Red Queen’s bowl.

“Well, dear, you used to live on rodents and dead orcs. Perhaps you’re filling out and becoming more healthy.”

“Filling out…” repeated Red Queen.

“Dead orcs don’t sound like food that’s in any way healthy,” Ruelis added.

Red Queen perched as though struck. She stared into the distance, her beak clicked a few times then her eyes blazed.

“Oh, of all the-“ Red Queen gasped, then quite obviously began to curse and swear in the shrieks and squawks of avian language. Beryl and Mica looked at her, intrigued. The other guests waited for Red Queen to recover enough to tell them what was going on. They didn’t need to wait long.

“Agh!” Red Queen raged. “Do any you know how boring it is to have to sit on a twiggy nest forever? And all there is to do is to wait for whatever stupid male it was to bring dinner!”

“Oh!” cried Podvuh. “You’re going to lay an egg?”

“One or two,” muttered Red Queen darkly. “Brooding takes two months, then we fly ourselves ragged getting food.”

“If you tell us which male, we can make him bring you food,” Dori said soothingly. “If you’d prefer, we can always send someone to the aerie with supplies.

“Tell a male?” Red Queen was startled out of her sulk by the suggestion. “They’re only good for eggs and fighting.”

Ori didn’t dare to look Thorin in the eyes as he seemed to be shaking slightly and desperately trying not to laugh.

“Send him down and we’ll all have a talk with him,” Hild commanded helpfully. Yizaris nodded, frowning.

“Send who?” Red Queen asked and gulped down the bun.

“The male responsible?” Gridr suggested.

Red Queen made a disgusted noise. “We can’t remember. It’s better to be discreet about these things. If they all think it was them, then they all bring food and you get more to eat.”

“You can’t remember?” Galadriel raised an eyebrow.

Red Queen fluffed her feathers, but didn’t answer.

Thorin and Ori looked at each other.

“Red Queen,” Thorin said, “we are very proud you are laying eggs here in Erebor. They will be the first bone-breaker eggs the mountain has ever hosted.”

“That’s true,” Red Queen said thoughtfully. “Yes, we are pleased after all. We are the first female to lay on this mountain.”

“How excitin’!” Vi enthused. “Imagine havin’ a wee princess ‘r prince eggy righ’ here in Erebor. Our Dori,” nodding her head at Red Queen, “we ought’ t’ have a bit of a do.”

“A wonderful idea!” Dori praised. “Dear Thorin, perhaps a public announcement?”

“I will see to it,” Thorin promised with a slight smile and laughter in his eyes.

“Yer foundin’ yer own line!” Sculdis said.

“We will be the first to lay outside of the southern Misty Mountains,” Red Queen stated with a touch of pride.

“An yer chick’ll grow up righ’ along side th’ Durin’s an’ Mahal’s speakin’ ravens!” Vi added.

“Aye, our Vi,” Margr added eagerly. “Th’ firs’ alliance a’ ravens an’ bone-breakers! If tha’ don’ scare th’ britches off any bad ‘uns, nuthin’ can!”
Red Queen cocked her head. “Perhaps we should suggest to our brother king Roäc, that it is not too late in the season for egg-laying.”

Thorin inclined his head to Red Queen. Ori felt he should tell the news. “Roäc’s offspring, Quartz is…er…nesting with Garnet.”

Red Queen looks straight at him. “Quartz, he assists you, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, he does.”

“We shall give him our felicitations when we see him. Perhaps he will bring us to visit Garnet while she broods.” Red Queen turned to her fellow tea drinkers. “We are not aware of the customs concerning visiting while brooding among your various peoples. Among our kind, one must request a visitation.”

“Ah,” said Dori, catching up quickly. “We don’t…er…brood as such but the birth, or as you would say ‘hatching’, is private to family. Then, when the mother is feeling recovered enough, there is usually an afternoon when people are told they may drop by and see the new badger. There are usually refreshments and such conducted in another room by the father and the rest of both families.”

“Aye,” Vi said. “We call ‘em visitin’ days.”

“Ah,” Red Queen nodded solemnly. “We are glad you have told us. This is good information. We shall inform our flock.”

“Dori’s brooding right now,” Ori piped up naughtily.

“Pet!” Dori cried with a pretense of shock. The party guests all giggled, but Red Queen looked upset by the revelation.

“Brooding? You should be on your nest, resting and keeping the egg warm!”

“We don’t lay eggs, dear Red Queen,” Dori explained. “I’m currently carrying two badgers.” She patted her belly. “Around Yule I will give birth to them. They won’t have shells and will be very small and helpless like your hatchlings.”

“Much like rabbits, then,” Red Queen nodded wisely, but raised her head high when Bell and Lavender giggled.

“People always compare hobbits to rabbits,” Gridr explained and poured Red Queen more tea. “It’s the feet.”

“Is yer nursery ready?” Givris wanted to know.

“Oh yes,” Dori all but purred. “Please, all of you come and see.”

A herd followed Dori through to the master bedroom. Ori realized he hadn’t seen the nursery either and padded after.

Ori gaped. The room was no longer sumptuous jewel tones and gold and mirrors, but awash in pastel colors. White lace festooned the walls and ceiling. Phosphorous stones had been set behind these, making a pleasant glow. Great swathes of pastel silk looped all over the walls. The bed was similarly festooned with silks and pillows. Huge bows tied and folded into flowers and gems garlanded the room.

The crib next to the bed was amazing, all carved wood, stained dark, with ravens carved on the legs which sat on tiny casters. Two carved trees at either end held the cradle, which was also carved and the panels painted with images of Erebor, flecked with gold. Inside was lined with pale blue silk and there was room for two. The head was sheltered by a half cover of carved raven wings. It was beautiful. Ori wiggled through the crowd and drew the cradle, while everyone else gushed and complimented the cradle and room.

“This is beautiful, Dori,” Galadriel admired. “All the lace and pillows everywhere makes it so cozy and soft.”

“Ooo, our Dor, it’s like a wee fairyland!” Margr cooed. Vi sniffed into her hankie. Arwen and Sigrid wore longing looks on their faces. Eowyn seemed a little uncomfortable. Ori rather doubted there was anything this foofy in Rohan. Red Queen stepped forward with a soft, grunting noise. She went to Dori and put her beak into Dori’s hands. When she drew away everyone could see that Dori’s hands were full of soft delicate, white fluff.
“That will help keep the hatchlings warm,” Red Queen pronounced. “Down from your own breast,” Dori sniffed. Gridr lifted the bottom sheet up and Dori spread the down. Mica and Beryl added a little of their own and Gridr tucked the sheet back down and Dori burst into tears all over Red Queen.

Ori felt rather uncomfortable and he slipped out, Eowyn behind him.

Thorin looked up from his seat.

“How much pastel is there?” he asked with a twinkle in his eye.

“It’s everywhere! And pillows! It’s like being inside a quilt. And the lace-” Eowyn shuddered. Thorin pointed his teaspoon at her.

“No lace, Lady Eowyn, I beg of you.”

“It’s very,” Ori searched for something nice to say, “fluffy in there.”

The door burst open and Fili and Kili barged in.

“We’re here!” Kili announced. “Any leftovers?”

Tauriel and Sigrid came out of Dori’s room and rolled their eyes. The rest of the party emerged chattering and laughing. Dori poured the princes’ tea and sent them off to the fireplace with their uncle and plates piled with dainties.

Soon the rest of the royal guests and family members arrived back. Mistress Dazla and her team bought out more food and everyone enjoyed tea and dainties.

Theoden and Thranduil had been touring the library archives with Brur, Ahkn, and Celeborn. They returned and Ahkn’s eyes were like saucers.

“I’ve never even dreamt that so many books existed. And two hundred something floors to store ‘em. Good thing I got all that ointment from Oin. My knees wouldn’t have survived.”

Balin had conducted Ulfr, Glorfindel, and Aragorn through the armory and its museum of ancient armor and war machines. Ulfr looked like his head was going to burst with ideas, Aragorn was obviously impressed, and Glorfindel jealous.

Floris and Mavey had dragged Gheir through the markets. They had purchased a large wheeled basket which was piled high with packages, each stamped with the names of clothiers, jewelers or beauty product makers.

Chat, Bilbo, and Dwalin had gone to the Moo and Cluck for a pint or two. Bilbo and Dwalin were both fine and Dwalin carried Chat slung over a shoulder.

“He’ll never learn,” said Givris fondly.

Elrond and Lindir went with Mr. Wandi and Hamfast to return the plants to the Palace of Healing and Beauty. Hamfast was very proud and Elrond delighted. Mr. Wandi was as satisfied as the proverbial cat who’d got into and finished the contents of a cream pot.

Boromir and Eomer were last to return. They had been at the circus with the faunts and the rest of the younger set. Boromir carried Frodo and Sam while Eomer carried Snis and Sni. All four kids were sound asleep. Gimli, Legolas, Bain, and Stonehelm lugged in cloth bags stuffed full of prizes and candy.

“Well done, lads,” Bilbo chuckled as he motioned Boromir to follow him back into Bag-End East. “I take it they were well-behaved and minded you.”

Boromir and Eomer exchanged looks and laughed.

“Yes,” said Boromir. “And we minded them.”

“Though, I can’t say we were as well-behaved,” said Eomer.

Givris led Eomer and Dwalin to her rooms to put Snis, Sni, and Chat to bed.

By dinner time, the kids and Chat had recovered and come down to dinner. Tay and Arne had joined Nodun and the sitting room was full. Ori could hear Dori and Mistress Dazla discussing the fact that over the winter the breakfast parlor would have to be enlarged, while they laid the table for the meal.

They began with a thick rich soup of purple beets served with sour cream. Dinner was brought by Bard, who had hunted up eight brace of ducks. These Mistress Dazla had roasted, the cavities filled with oranges and a sweet orange syrup basted the crackling skin. Alongside the ducks, she served
white mounds of rice cooked with dill and dishes of roasted sweet potatoes and carrots swimming in maple syrup with cranberries and apricots. For dessert, there were platters of soft, white frozen vanilla custard eaten with long pieces of xocolātl. They lingered at the table over tea and coffee.

Gheir sat back in his chair and belched contentedly.

“Bearer, never in Thror’s reign did the royal guests eat like this. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever had such meals. The true hospitality of dwarrow has returned with you. And I never in my life sat down so often with so many different kinds of folk. This Second Music is amazing.”

“At the risk of being a bringer of gloom,” Elrond said, “are there any problems that linger, we should discuss while we are all together?”

Thorin became serious.

“That is an excellent point, Elrond. Is there any business to discuss?”

To Ori’s surprise, Ulfr and Yizaris smiled and nodded encouragingly to Arne. With a slight blush, Arne retrieved a paper from his pocket and rose. He bowed to all present and read from his paper.

“His Majesty, Thorin II, High King of Dwarrow,

Hail,

I, Arne, do hereby renounce my claim to the th-throne as the first born of King Ulfr and Queen Yizaris.

I relinquish my title as crown prince of the Ironfists.

I surrender all those who have given th-themselves into my care as my personal servants to the good keeping of my sister, Princess Zaris of the Ironfists.

To all my former s-subjects under my father’s care, I thank you all and bid you a fond farewell from

my new home in Erebor.

All hail King Thorin II, H-high King of All Dwarrow.

Arne, Scribe to Master Brur, First Librarian of Erebor.”

“You’re staying for good!” Ori cried in delight.

Omi and Loli jumped up and ran to hug Arne, while the rest of the younger set cheered and applauded.

“This is brilliant, Arne!” Fili shouted.

“How wonderful!” Tauriel enthused.

Thorin held out his hand for the letter. Arne handed it to him, along with a quill and ink. Thorin wrote his acceptance of the announcement and signed it. Bujni tipped a candle to drop some wax onto the paper and Thorin then pressed his seal ring into it.

Yizaris hugged Arne and Ulfr clapped him on the back.

“Well, me lad, an’ yeh’ll always bloody be me lad, yeh seem t’ have found yer proper home an’ craft here. If this wha’ yeh truly want then stay wi’ me an’ yer mam’s love an’ blessin’.”

“Thank you, Da.” Arne grinned. Tay and Nodun pulled Arne into a hug and Ulfr ruffled Arne’s hair.

Thorin passed the letter to Balin, who took it.

“Thankee, our Thorin, I’ll have this copied up an’ sen’ throughou’ all Arda.”

The hubbub died down and everyone settled in their chairs.

“Now,” Thorin nodded to Arne, then, “any further business?”

Everyone glanced about, then Vi nudged Glorfindel and he stared, then obviously recalled something.

“There is one thing, and unfortunately not as joyful as Arne’s remaining with us here in Erebor. We hear that rangers do occasionally encounter orcs and bandits.”

“Why are there still orcs?” Buer asked. “I thought that...er…” he stopped and glanced around at the elves, then went on, “I thought they were...er... coming back healed.”

“The original orcs were elves tortured, twisted, and mutated into orcs,” Celeborn replied. “There are others with with no original elf blood in them. These are fewer without their dread lord defeated
“And gone.”
“So they just need to be cleared out.” Hild said.
“Um,” Ori began. All eyes turned to him. Ori straightened. “Drum isn’t evil. We need to make sure he’s safe.”

Glorfindel chuckled.
“He’s in good hands with Ecthelion and his White City Bang Crash.”
“Ori does have a point,” Thorin said slowly. “If there are others like Drum, they should be protected and allowed to live as they choose. They are harmless, friendly, and assist in bringing joy to all people. If they need, they must be safeguarded against those who would ill treat them or force them to harm others.”

Oin wiped his mustache and set his tea cup down.
“Me an’ Elrond wrote a summary of Drum’s features, physical an’ mental. We’ll have it printed up with copies f’r all a’ ye an’ yer healers. Orcs won’t know wha’ yer lookin’ f’r, so if yeh find any that fit Drum’s points, look after ‘em. If yeh ain’t sure, put ‘em aside until our Elrond ‘r I kin have a look at ‘em.”

“Drum ain’t a warrior. Check f’r a servant or porter,” Dwalin added. “I’m thinkin’ any like Drum’d act fearful.”

“Drum eats grass,” Frodo put in.
“Eating grass is not always a sign of docility, nestling,” Red Queen told him gently. “A moose eats grass.”

“Moose is perfectly docile,” Thranduil frowned.
“Like yer elk?” Dain teased.
“Moose is my elk,” Thranduil said, glancing at him with raised brows.
“You named your elk, Moose?” Bilbo shrieked in delight.
“Yes, she’s the biggest elk ever seen. She is bigger than the largest bull moose I’ve ever seen. It seemed appropriate and she likes it.”

“Moose is a girl?” Bain demanded.
“Of course Moose is a girl,” Thranduil said. “Beyond what she obviously lacks, she doesn’t shed her antlers every year like bull elk do.”

“‘Splains why me Chopper’s always flirtin’,” Dain commented to Sculdis, who snickered.
“No,” said Thranduil with finality.
“But Adanana,” Tilda broke in. “You can’t stand in the way of true love and we’d have a poose!”
Hild, Boromir, and the twins burst out laughing.
“You mean a mig!” Elladan suggested.
Or a pelk!” Elrohir added.
“Dearest Thranduil,” Hild hiccuped, “if your elk has a poose, we would pay you handsomely for it.”

“No,” repeated Thranduil. “There will be no poose, pelks or migs or moars. It’s odd enough that Dain’s bird is attempting courtship with Red Queen.”

Red Queen made a sound like she was hacking up a lung and Frodo and Sam looked worried.
“I thought you were going to brood?” Yizaris said to the bone breaker.
“Tomorrow,” Red Queen muttered.
“Someone cannot bear to be absent from the council,” Givris teased.
“We are part of brother king Thorin’s council,” Red Queen said loftily, then looked pleadingly at Thorin.

“Indeed you are, sister queen,” Thorin said with a gravity that told Ori he was a hair’s breadth from laughing. “Perhaps after your laying is finished, we could find some other members of your flock to brood for you while you attend to royal business.”

“We cannot leave brooding to another,” Red Queen grumped. “Brooding is very individual.”
“I know!” shouted Dain. “I’ll work yeh up a contraption yeh kin strap t’ yeh butt, so yeh kin brin’ ‘em wi’ yeh!”
“You!” Red Queen glared, “are not strapping anything to any part of us!”
“Aw, c’mon, luv,” Dain entreated. “It’d be an engineerin’ masterpiece.”
“How would we fly?” Red Queen demanded.
“I’ll work tha’ ou’!” Dain promised.
“Very well,” Thorin managed. “Back to the original subject.”
“Blu’s tryin’ t’ romance Queen,” Sculdis put in.
“I’m wha’?” Baluchistan’s voice sounded from Dain’s hood. There was an explosion of feathers from said hood and Baluchistan rolled out onto the table, leaving the usual trail of black feathers in his wake.
“Evenin’, all me lovies, wha’s t’ do?”
Roäc whizzed through and landed on Thorin’s shoulder and clicked and muttered in Thorin’s ear. Thorin’s smile glowed and he reached over and ruffled Fili’s hair. Roäc hopped down and landed right in front of Fili. Fili automatically fed Roäc a cookie.
Roäc swallowed the cookie, then cleared his throat and pulled back his shoulders importantly.
“We have been to a convocation of our kind. We have decided that the Crown Prince Fili of Durin should be granted the honor of our company. Prince Quartzite of my line is now brooding with Garnet. Prince Fili, we have decided the first hatchling will be your raven.”
Fili gasped, then put his brow down to Roäc’s head. They stayed that way a moment. Then Fili raised his head, his eyes shone.
“Roäc, King of Ravens, I am deeply honored by your choice and those of your folk. I promise to keep trust with the raven you have chosen to work with me. Thank you.”
“It’s time you had the assistance of one of my people.” Roäc hopped forward and butted his head into Fili’s midriff. “You will be an excellent king when your time comes. And you’re not half as mouthy as Thorin.”
“Thank you, Roäc,” Thorin said dryly.
The guests and members of the household all applauded and cheered.
“Garnet’s and Quartz’ first egg!” Ori squeaked and turned to hug Dwalin.

***See the appendix for note about antlers.
Eggs, Excitement, and Expectations.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. According to the Dwarf Telenovela Central’s timeline (which is remarkably elastic in all directions) it’s getting through what we’d call October, which means that we have Last Harvest at the end. You can probably guess what Last Harvest is in European and North American places. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori woke with the sound of wings. Quartz landed on Ori’s butt with a squawk of triumph.
“Four eggs!”
Ori sat up and held out his arms. Quartz flapped inelegantly into them. Ori hugged him carefully and turned to Dwalin, who was rubbing his eyes.
“Dwalin, my love, four eggs for Garnet and Quartz.”
Dwalin sat up with a grin and ruffled the feathers on Quartz’ head.
“How’s me girl?”
“Fine. Had a good sleep. Wants breakfast.”
“Clever lad t’ come an’ see us ‘bout tha’!”
Ori and Dwalin looked at each other and laughed.
“I fancy we kin help yeh find somethin’,” Dwalin added as he tapped Quartz’ beak.
Quartz fluttered around and teased Killer. Ori and Dwalin kissed good morning then got out of bed, dressed and went through to the kitchen, followed by Killer, Mask and Nori-Pori, and Kihshassa clinging to Dwalin’s back. They entered to find Balin making tea for himself and Dori.
“Mornin’, brother, wee brother, wha’s bringin’ th’ pair a’ yeh here a’ this hour?”
“Morning, Balin! Quartz needs meat for Garnet,” Ori told him.
“Me Garnet’s go’ four eggs,” Dwalin added with a touch of pride in his voice.
“Congratulations, laddie,” Balin chuckled and ran a finger over Quartz’ head.
Ori saw that Quartz had dropped off the little basket Ori had given him with last night. Ori caught it up and padded through to the larder, as Quartz fluttered to his shoulder. They picked out some choice pieces of chicken, a few strips of raw bacon and a knot of butter.
“How do we get water to her?” Ori asked.
“I sit. She goes,” Quartz told him. Ori came back into the kitchen and opened the window.
Quartz flew off with the basket in his beak. Balin had disappeared, but Dwalin was pouring the rest of the boiling water from the kettle into his old yellow teapot. Ori saw there was a tray with cups for them.
“How do we get water to her?” Ori asked.
“I sit. She goes,” Quartz told him. Ori came back into the kitchen and opened the window.
Quartz flew off with the basket in his beak. Balin had disappeared, but Dwalin was pouring the rest of the boiling water from the kettle into his old yellow teapot. Ori saw there was a tray with cups for them.
“Bed or th’ parlor?” Dwalin asked.
“Let’s sit in the parlor,” Ori said. “It’ll be the first time we’ve sat there alone.”
Dwalin chuckled and followed Ori through, carrying the tray. Dwalin opened the door and let Killer out. The cats hissed at the cold and Kihshassa got on the table and lay there preening. Dwalin went back in the kitchen then returned with a bowl of chicken pieces for the cats and a bunch of grapes for Kihshassa.
Ori prepared the cups with honey and milk, then poured out for them. Dwalin put chow in the wargs’ bowls and refilled the basin with fresh water. He came and sat next to Ori, taking his mug when Ori passed it to him. They each sipped and sighed contentedly.
The first few fingers of dawn were creeping towards the far edges of the meadow. Ori craned his
head. The edges of the meadow were showing bits of frost. Treebeard was still in the middle and a huge bear was curled in a high crook of his branches. Ori looked at Dwalin, who nodded.

“No’ t worry, love. Fanny’s safe wi’ th’ ponies. Our Bofur’s done a grand job a’ bossin’ th’ group workin’ on expandin’ th’ stable. Mind, she may no’ like t’ go ou’ in th’ cold th’ way th’ ponies an’ goats do. Treebeard lives outside an’ our Beorn’s furry.”

“I wonder if Fanny’s ever seen snow?” Ori commented idly then grinned to himself. He and Dwalin were getting closer to finishing each other sentences like an old married couple.

Dwalin chuckled.

“Yeh’ll have t’ knit her a coat, love.”

“Shit,” Ori said.

“What?”

“I need to finish your green tunic. I’ll be right back.”

Ori hurried through and fetched out the fat knitting basket from its corner and returned. Dwalin was pouring them a second cup. Ori settled back in his chair and busied himself, while Dwalin lighted his pipe.

They sat in comparable silence for a while. Killer bounced up to the door and butted his head against it. Dwalin rose and opened it for him. The warg trotted in and shoved his muzzle into the food dish. Dwalin patted the munching head and came back to Ori’s side. He kissed the top of Ori’s head, pulled his own chair nearer and sat back down. Ori grinned at him.

“How’s me hero this mornin’?” Dwalin asked as he lifted Ori’s legs to rest on his lap.

Ori giggled and put down his knitting.

“I’m tired. Working on it was one thing, but speaking in front of all those people…I don’t know how Thorin does it.”

“He’s older an’ was raised up t’ do it.”

Ori paused then,

“If your adad hadn’t pushed you to be a warrior, what craft would you have chosen?”

Dwalin snickered.

“He didn’ have much pushin’ t’ do. I was a wee bruiser. Mind, I did consider otherwise a couple a’ times.”

“Poet?” Ori teased.

“Smartarse. I did think a’ th’ scribin’ crafts, music technicals an’ his’ory mos’ly, bu’ ol’ Brur said me writin’ looked like a drunk chicken dancin’.”

“I’ve seen your writing, it’s not that bad,” Ori laughed.

“I’m a dab hand a’ farrier work an’ I’m no’ a bad jeweler, but no’ good enow f’r either a’ th’ guilds. Did think a’ th’ pleasure guild once.”

“Really?” Ori gasped.

“Aye. Me an’ Thorin’d bin mucking’ abou’ an’ he said I should be one a’ them sorts who take care a’ them tha’ like people t’ tie ‘em up an’ spank ‘em. He said I should dress up li’ a dungeon master ‘r wha’ever.”

Ori stared then burst out laughing.

“I suppose you could, but then you like it when I play Gonad and you play the maiden.”

“Can’ let me perfect pumpkins go t’ waste, love.”

Ori giggled, rose, and held up his knitting.

“Please stand up, my buffalo. I need to measure.”

Dwalin rose. Ori patted the new material against him. He drew it back and smiled.

“Thank you. That’s the main part of the front and back done. I just have to put on the fancy bits for the hem, arm holes, and the collar.”

“Yeh knit faster than me mam ever could. I feel li’ I migh’ see sparks comin’ off yer needles.”

Ori laughed.

“Do you like it?”

“Looks grand, love!”

They sat down again and Ori began on one of the arm holes.
“Good morning.”

Ori and Dwalin looked up as Thorin and Bilbo arrived, trailed by Frodo and Sam riding Sugar and Butter respectively, supervised by Posey. Ori heard Mistress Dazla and her team starting work in the kitchen.

Bilbo and Thorin got the faunts settled and Bilbo went through to the kitchen.

“Wha’s on f’r t’day, me king?” Dwalin teased, as he lifted Kihshassa off the table and placed her on the sideboard. Thorin opened the door for the wargs and Killer raced out after Butter and Sugar. Posey hopped up on the sideboard and settled next to Kihshassa.

“Mostly leave taking of the kings,” Thorin said. “Ulfr, Yizaris, and Buer are heading out after breakfast. I believe Ahkn and HIlld will be either going with them or shortly after. Gheir will be with them. Chat will wander off whenever Givris declares them ready. I imagine the Rivendell group will accompany them for a little way. Dain and his family will head west there as well.”

“Aye, was good seein’ Chat,” Dwalin chuckled. “Never could hold his ale, bu’ he’s a fine dwarf an’ a good king t’ his people.”

“He is,” Thorin grinned. “I was a bit worried when he married Givris, but they’ve prospered together and rule their people well.”

“Snis and Sni are adorable.” Ori put in. “Frodo and Sam took to them right away. I hope they can see each other more somehow.”

“Well,” Thorin turned as Bilbo came back in with a large teapot. “Bilbo and I have been talking and it is traditional that the new high king travels to each of his fellow kingdoms. So we think this summer, we’ll take the ‘Royal Tour’.”

Ori felt a flash of delight and looked at Dwalin, who grinned.

“Sounds good.” Dwalin said. “We’ll be righ’ there wi’ yeh.”

“Both of you certainly will,” Ori squeaked before he could stop himself and blushed as Mistress Dazla and her team came in. The table was quickly set and more tea put down. Behind, in the kitchen, Ori heard Chat teasing the kitchen crew. From what Ori could hear, he thought Chat was going to make mullis for them.

“We get to go, too?” Frodo piped up.

“We’ll see how things are going and what the roads look like, my boy,” said Bilbo, “and we have to discuss things with Hamfast and Bell first.”

“What we discussin’?” Ulfr asked as he came in dressed for travel. Yizaris had an arm about Arne, and Buer, in a new travel suit, came in behind.

“The logistics of a royal tour,” Thorin told them.

“Sounds good,” Ulfr replied jovially. “Send a raven when yeh know when yeh’ll be in me lands an’ we’ll give yeh a grand time!”

Mistress Dazla whisked through with Larit and Oqizla following. They set down several covered platters. Thorin leaned forward to see what was under one.

“Oh no you don’t, your majesty,” Mistress Dazla scolded. “Those are for eating with mullis.”

“But Mistress Dazla,” Thorin protested, “as king, I ought to make sure everything is tasty before I offer it to my subjects!”

Mistress Dazla shoved her fists into his hips and glared at him.

“Is your majesty suggestin’ there might be something amiss with my cooking skills?”

“Never, Mistress Da-”

“Then you just keep your fingers out of those platters!” she ordered and vanished back to the kitchen. Frodo and Sam giggled at Thorin, who pulled a disappointed face. Dwalin snorted and reached over to the platter.

“Captain Dwalin!” Mistress Dazla’s voice rang out from the kitchen. “Whatever you’re doing, stop it!”

Thorin roared with laughter as Dwalin stared at the kitchen door, incensed and demanded.

“Mahal’s hairy balls! How in all Arda does she know?”

“She’s an amad,” said Dis as she breezed in with Jani. “Mahal gave us mysterious powers to predict dwarfling mischief. Or else, you and Thorin are simply woefully predictable.”
Dwalin turned to Ori, who tried vainly to look sympathetic.  
“And,” Dis went on, “to her advantage, Mistress Dazla has known you and Thorin since you were badgers.  
“Aye,” Dwalin leaned back in his seat. “She was a nursery maid back then, chasin’ all us bloody Durins ‘round th’ place.”  
They all heard the shout, laughter and talk coming from the receiving room. Ori guessed that almost all the guests were up and coming to breakfast. The door burst open and Dain fought against Gheir, Glorfindel, Kili, Hamfast, and Bell to get in first. Bell and Hamfast sandwiched themselves in the doorway and planted their feet to the jambs Gheir and Dain tried to push past the giggling hobbits to no avail. Glorfindel tried to step over all of them but Dain stood up sharply, mid-bellow, and slammed his head into the poor elf’s crotch. Glorfindel bellowed. Kili leapt neatly through and shouted.  
“I win!”  
“Bugger!” Gheir grumbled as Bell and Hamfast stumbled away laughing.  
“May the rest of us come in now?” Lady Galadriel inquired. Gheir grouched at the elfin lady. She leaned down, scooped him up under the arm pits, and whisked him neatly into the room.  
“Oh!” Gheir shouted, legs kicking to no avail. “That’s cheating!”  
“You were in the way!” she teased and made her way to the table and sat down gracefully.  
Mavey and Floris bounded in and pulled Gheir away to sit with them. Jim and Celeborn came in talking, and Ruelis, Hild, and Arwen followed. Soon everyone else appeared and the table was full. Chat bounced in, rumpled, hair on end, and carrying a huge platter piled high with mullis. Everyone cheered and dug in. The ravens flocked in the middle of the table and savaged two mullis among them all. Red Queen flapped in and Tauriel pulled a chair out for her. Baluchistan snatched up a mulli and brought it to her.  
“Yer lookin’ finer than fresh meat this mornin’, me lovely parsnip. Have one a’ these an’ I’ll fetch yeh some a’ tha’ ham.”  
“Thank you,” Red Queen sighed and caught up the mulli in one of her talons and began to feast. Baluchistan returned, dragging the largest slice of ham across the table to her. Ori was glad Mistress Dazla had given them mats for their plates instead of using a table cloth, as Baluchistan had left a greasy trail punctuated with feathers across the table. Once he deposited this on Red Queen’s plate, he hopped over to Dain and Sculdis and stood in front of them.  
“I’m stayin’ here,” he announced.  
“Yer no’ serious, lad?” Dain bellowed, incredulous.  
“A’ course I’m serious! Ooo, never though’ I’d say tha’. Bu’ tha’s beside th’ point. Whoever th’ da is, they’re no’ comin’ forward t’ take care a’ Queenie. So I’m doin’ it. I’m no’ th’ only raven in th’ Hills, jus’ th’ best. If yeh need help, ask Oink ‘r Grunt, tell ‘em I’ll kick their tail feathers if they don’ lend yeh a wing.”  
“Yer sure?”  
“Duh!”  
“A’righ’, if yeh insist. Remember they’ll no’ cosset yeh li’e we do in th’ Hills.”  
Baluchistan made a ravenish snort.  
“I go’ no time f’r cossetin’!”  
“Sleep when yer dead, will yeh?” Dain teased.  
“I kin do withou’ sleep.”  
Now Dain snorted.  
“Yeh sleep twenny hours a day, lad.”  
“I don’t need t’ sleep twenny hours, I jus’ do it, ’cause I’m lazy. Same reason yeh do it.”  
“Oi!”  
Sculdis reached over, picked up Baluchistan, and hugged him close. The raven nuzzled her and she placed him on the table again.  
“Yer a fine raven, our Baluchistan,” she said.  
“Ta, our Mam.”
With that, Baluchistan went back to drag more ham to Red Queen. Celeborn and Aris passed the plate of ham up the table, so Baluchistan could stay in one place and simply put ham on Red Queen’s plate. Bilbo, with a look at Dori, went through to the kitchen. In a short time, Miss Larit came through and replenished the ham plate.

“Ta, luv,” Baluchistan crowed and, after having a small piece himself, went back to his chosen duty.

Galadriel and Thranduil bickered over the pots of elderberry preserves. Frodo called Posey over and he and Sam fed her bits of muli. Theodred and Gloin argued some point of trade law. Arivett and Eomer stuffed mullis into themselves as fast as they could. Eomer made sure Arivett was supplied with fried black pudding to eat with hers. Arne, Hild, and Elrond discuss some first age poet. People pushed the platters around to top their mullis with different things. Bard spooned thick xocolātl, flavored with hazelnut oil, over his mullis and refused to share it with Arwen. Aragorn and Lindir were talking crops with Hamfast as Lavender, Bell and Ruelis argued hotly with Mister Wandi about the ingredients for the best skin cream.

Ori looked at Thorin. Bilbo leaned against Thorin’s shoulder as they drank their tea. Thorin was looking around the table and smiling on all his guests. Ori knew exactly what he was going to paint as the royal portrait.

By mid morning all the guest were ready to head out. There were still last minute points people were shouting to each other, while kissing and hugging other people farewell. Hild cried all over Thorin and Bilbo, telling how proud she was of them. Gheir wasn’t far behind in the sentiment. Ulfr hugged Bilbo very tight then, with Yizaris, went to every elf, man, and hobbit to bid them a fond farewell and told them to have ‘a pint to his new eyes’. He and Yizaris were warmly invited to travel and visit everywhere. Yizaris had tears in her eyes and Arne and Buer looked proud enough to burst.

Everyone congratulated Ori again and told him how much they had enjoyed his presentation. Thorin had gifted all the kingdoms with a leather bound copy of Ori’s book and everyone wanted him to sign it in his own hand. At a grin from Thorin, one of Ori’s spider quills was brought and a bottle of gold. Ori thought he was going to burst into flames, his face felt so red.

With much waving and more shouting, the caravans went off down the royal tunnels to the main city. The household hurried to the tunnel to the balcony over the main gate, where the once-elves had already gathered to shout and wave farewells. Ori counted. There were only four once-elves on the balcony.

“Where are Dree and Erris?” he asked Dwalin.
“Goin’ with Ulfr an’ his lot back t’ Ironfist territory.”
“Seriously? The two of them? They’ll bicker the entire time!”
“Aye, they’ll fit in perfect in Ulfr’s kingdom.”
“They didn’t say goodbye!”
“I don’ think they knew they was goin’ themselves until abou’ an hour ago. I knew Erris didn’t.”
“Wait. Did I miss something?”
Dwalin gave a wicked grin.
“Ulfr mentioned he’d miss them this mornin’ when he took leave. Dree saw tha’ as an invite, an’ then she turned t’ Erris an’ said: Ge’ a wiggle on, yeh sour old elf. Yer goin’, too.”
Ori gaped.
“Are they married or something?”
“Siblin’s, it turns out.”
“Ulfr’s relatives are in for a bit of a shock.”
“Guid f’r ’em. Keep ’em on their toes.”

Outside, on the ramparts, the sky was now gray and overcast. There was a chill wind blowing that hadn’t been there in the early morning.

In a few moments, the entourage came out to the cheers of the inhabitants of the mountain. Everyone was waving and calling greetings. The guests came out to the courtyard and the Durins
shouted farewells to them. Flags were raised. Armor glittered. Ravens and Bonebreakers swooped and sailed over them all.

Bard and Thranduil led the way down to Dale where another crowd waited to cheer and gawk at the royal visitors. All too soon the huge combined caravan was heading south to the Oracanis, another to the ship waiting in the dock of Dale. Dain and his family headed to the northwest. The final caravan headed up to the great north road.

Ori and Dwalin lingered back with Thorin, Bilbo and the faunts as the Durins slowly returned to Fundin House.

“Look!” Frodo cried. A fat flake of snow floated down to them, followed by others. Sam and Frodo put out their tongues, trying to catch the flakes as they fell.

Thorin frowned at the Great North Road in the distance.

“Chat will be fine,” Bilbo said and tucked his arm into Thorin’s. “I’m sure if it storms, Elrond will take them in at Rivendell, then see them safely along until they reach the Shire. The rangers will be around as well.”

“You are right as always, ghivashel,” Thorin agreed.

A huge bear climbed and lumbered down the mountainside. It stopped at the sight of them, rose up on hind legs, and waved a paw. They waved back and called their farewells.

Ori looked up to the rocks guarding the meadow and royal residences then gaped. Treebeard was ‘walking’ down the mountainside. Instead of using his great roots at his base to walk as he had before, Treebeard used all his thousands of tiny roots. They inches forward and tucked themselves into minuscule cracks and crannies in the rock. The bulk of Treebeard above stayed calmly still, as he moved bit by bit down the almost straight wall. They went to the edge of the balcony and he slowly rippled past them.

“I… like…this…place…Hoom!”

“You are always welcome among us, Treebeard,” returned Thorin with a bow.

“My…thanks. I…shall…visit…with…, ahoom,…the…trees…in…the…, hoom, …valley… now.”

“There’s a lovely copper beech on the big green there,” Ori told him. “Hamfast thinks it may have walked over.”

“Hoom! I…shall… go…there…immediately…Hoomhoom.”

They watched him gain the paved main entrance. The guards there bowed politely. The crowd that had gathered to see off the guest also bade him farewell. This took some time as many badgers rushed up to talk and pat the ‘magic’ tree. Finally Treebeard was able to pull all his roots up under him and stride off, walking on two very large thick roots.

“What an amazing time,” Ori enthused as Bilbo tucked an arm about him.

“Bloody brillian’,” Dwalin agreed.

You really are a legendary king, Thorin,” Ori turned to Thorin. “Every time we have a great gathering, it’s better than the last time.”

“Thank you, Ori,” Thorin chuckled. “I think it seems so, as we’re all getting to know one another better.”

“But it is,” Ori insisted.

Dwalin knocked his brow into Thorin’s.

“Don’ yeh go lettin’ me wee scribe’s words git’ yer head now.”

“Your wee scribe is the scribe of Mahal,” Thorin teased. “He must be right.”

“Don’ go gettin’ all fancy an’ puffed up. I’ll ’ave t’ smack yeh.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time, Dwalin,” Thorin quipped.

Ori and Bilbo looked at each other and burst into giggles.

They came through the door into the tunnel. Bilbo climbed ahead of Ori. It was then Ori noticed that Bilbo’s and both faunts’ foot hair seemed thicker. He was about to open his mouth but decided to wait until he could ask in private. It might be something that happened when hobbits were settled and happy or something Bilbo added to the food to make the hair fashionable by other hobbit standards.
They got back to the house to see the wagon for the royal laundry piled high with guest bedding. The last load was being brought out of the Oakenshield Inn. Fili and Sigrid were talking with the supervisor and Tauriel and Kili were helping to get the load settled while they laughed and chatted with the workers.

Thorin went forward and the supervisor of the group bowed. Thorin reached into his pocket and handed the dam a bag.

Ori heard the chink of coins and smiled. Thorin was determined to get his treasure trove down to only a respectable dwarrow hoard. When people had money and lived comfortably with a roof over their heads, good food, clean water, and free access to healers and education, they prospered and the kingdom became rich as a whole. Following this, other lands would trade and travel as the lands were now becoming safer. Everyone in Arda would be happy.

The wagon pulled out of the cavern and they all went inside.

Dori was fussing around the sitting room and Mistress Dazla, Dis and Gridr were in attendance, “Thorin, dear!” Dori caroled. “We simply must get the meadow facing doors and windows ready for the winter. And as we’re going to be continuing to have so many guests that parlor is going to have to be enlarged, it’s already snowing, and Dain and Sculdis broke their bed.”

“Where’s Balin?” Thorin asked.
“Here, laddie.” Balin came through from the office.
“Send a bat to Master Najedh, it’s time for winter shutters. Advise him they also need to repair the bed in the emerald room in the upstairs diplomatic chambers. Tell Bofur we’ve another job for his group, who expanded the stable for our oliphaunt.”

“I’m on it, me king,”
Thorin grinned at Dori.
“Send Roäc to speak to Mahal and Yavanna about the snow.”
“Thorin!” scolded Dori as Thorin, with Bilbo on his arm, headed to the office, chuckling.
Ori gave Dwalin a kiss and turned to follow Thorin.
Bain came in the sitting room door with a cheery hello for everyone.

“Thanks, Dori, but da sent me with a note for Thorin.”
“Well, when you’ve finished there, come and see me,” Dori ordered and disappeared into the kitchen.

Ori and Bain went into the office.
“Bain.” Thorin greeted the lad, who grinned and handed him Bard’s note. Thorin nodded to a chair near the desk and Bain flopped into it.

“Yeh came by pony, I hope, lad,” said Balin as he and Thorin seated themselves behind their desks. Ori parked on a chair between Thorin and Bilbo, who perched on his stool on his own desk.

“Yes, I put her in the meadow.”
Thorin unfolded the note and frowned. Bilbo hopped off his stool, crossed to Thorin and read over his shoulder.

“Bilbo, ghivasha, do the hobbits do something similar to what Bard is proposing for the Last Harvest celebration?”

“Yes,” said Bilbo.
Ori expected him to elaborate, but instead Bilbo sat and smiled benevolently.
They all looked to him, waiting, but soon it was apparent he had finished speaking.

Bain leaned forward.

“Er, Uncle Bilbo? What do hobbits do for Last Harvest?”
“I can’t talk about it now, my boy. Not until after the first hard frost.”

“Is it bad luck or something?”

“Let’s just say, it’s not at all a good idea,” said Bilbo. “Rest assured, I will speak of it at great lengths afterward. Unlike the men in the west, your people and mine seem to have many of the same ideas.”

“Oh,” said Bain. “So, when is the first hard frost?”
“Day after tomorrow,” said Bilbo. 
“Really?”
“I have no idea, actually,” said Bilbo. “It’s when Yavanna wills.”
“Can’t you just ask Her?”
Ori heard a giggle at the back of his mind.
“That’s cheating!” Yavanna called gaily. “Spoilsport!”
The next morning they woke to a hard frost.
Frodo and Sam jumped around excitedly, though they kept stubbornly mum as to why.
Bilbo was more cautious. He merely hummed cheerily to himself until he received Hamfast’s note from the Dale.
“Time to make the snickerdoodles, my lads,” he announced to the faunts.
“Yay!” they chorused.
They joined hands with Bilbo and the three of them skipped in a circle and chanted in the hobbits’ tongue over and over until they were dizzy with the circling, and fell over and onto the couches and rug, helpless with laughter.
Thorin waited until Bilbo caught his breath, then brought Bilbo his tea.
“Is it quite safe to approach the celebrating hobbits?” Thorin asked with a smile.
“It’s Last Harvest, Idad!” Frodo cried.
He and Sam began to explain, over and under one another, without stopping for breath, just what this meant.
Ori got the idea that it involved a large bonfire and the corn dollies, which he had heard of, and the dead walking abroad, which he had not.
“Bilbo?” Ori asked.
“Oh, the veil between this world and the next is at its thinnest at Last Harvest. Sometimes, if the bonfire is built with the right intent and the offerings to Yavanna and to the dead are tasty enough, our blessed dead come back for the night just to say hello. And eat the offerings, of course.”
“Of course,” said Ori. “Though, if it’s only for hobbits, you’ll be going to Hamfast’s and Bell’s house, right?”
“I thought we were,” said Bilbo, “but the Dale men believe something similar, in ways that other men haven’t in a long time. High Priest Sven isn’t keen, but Bard wants to have the bonfire on the square in front of Dale Hall, and celebrate properly, or as properly as they can without actually burning a live man at the stake as an offering to Yavanna.”
Ori and Dwalin exchanged alarmed glances.
“Th’ thin’s yeh learn abou’ yer neighbors,” said Dwalin.
“We aren’t supposed to dance and sing like that, or make specific plans for the celebration, until after the first hard frost,” said Bilbo. “That’s an invitation, and you don’t send endless invitations every single day. No one has the time to reply to all that, and it’s not polite to ignore an invite. The last thing you want is irritated, dead relatives at your bonfire.”
“They’re really party poopers,” said Frodo and Sam nodded.

On the next restday eve, the kitchen of Bag-End East was crowded with hobbits, men, dwarrow, and elves, all in a merry mood.
They sat at the big table with heaps of stripped grain stalks before them and industriously turned them into corn dollies.
Bilbo, Frodo and the Gardeners showed the others how it was done. Bilbo and Bell especially made corn dolls wonderfully quick, and the tiny figures stayed in one piece, even without being lashed together. Everyone else used string. Bilbo also provided various colored threads and bits of cloth, so they could personalize their figures.

Ori had already made several with red hair and beards.

Bard proved a quick learner.

“How did you do that so quickly, Da?” Tilda asked. She sat on his knee and examined the tiny figure with its black beard.

“My hands must still remember,” said Bard. “I haven’t done this since I was a boy, younger than you.”

The heads of Legolas’ kept popping off.

“That’s discouraging,” he said to the room in general.

“Yer thinkin’ too much,” Gimli teased.

“What are you making?” Legolas asked. “Aren’t they supposed to look like you?”

Gimli held up what amounted to a square bundle of stalks with bright red threads tied to it.

“I think it’s an exact likeness,” said the dwarf.

A pot of mulled cider sat on the hob, and filled the air with a delicious scent. They drank it in large mugs, and ate snickerdoodles by the plateful to keep up their strength.

“Shouldn’t we sing?” Bilbo teased Hamfast.

“As if I could carry a tune in a wheelbarrow,” Hamfast replied. “Bell, my dear, you sing. Y’ have such a pleasin’ voice.”

Bell stuffed a whole cookie in her mouth and shook her head, and shrugged helplessly.

“I’ll sing,” Frodo volunteered.

“Me, too,” said Sam.

Thorin smiled at them.

“And what will you sing?”

“We have to be careful about that,” said Frodo, and Sam nodded in agreement.

“Why?” Ori asked.

“There are words you don’t say or sing out loud at harvest time,” said Sam.

“Because?” Ori asked.

Frodo frowned.

“I’m not sure, but it has something to do with things drooling under your bed.”

“Yeh bin talkin’ t’ Vi and Margr, lad?” Dwalin asked.

Frodo shook his head.

“About what?”

“Never mind, go on. Sing any song yeh kin ge’ away with.”

“Pie!” Sam said abruptly.

“Pie!” said Frodo. “Pie.”

Before anyone could inquire, the young hobbits began to sing in unison, and then Sam’s older sibling joined in.

“If all at once the sun goes down, and fog rolls in the dah-ark
    Whistle a tune, and sing to the moon and you’ll think it’s all a lah-ark.
If you get lost, and the ground’s afrost,
    Follow your nose when the cold wind blows.
All peach and pear and pumpkin there.
    Hot from the oven,
Oh boy, I’m lovin’ that tasty, tasty pie
TastytastytastytastyTASTY PIE!”

Everyone clapped and cheered.

“Tha’s th’ hobbityest song I ever heard,” said Dwalin. “Sing it again, an’ we’ll sing along.”
And so they did.
Ori made sure he got all the words down before he joined in and they all sang it through several times at the tops of their lungs.

Butter and Sugar lay in front of the stove with their chins on their paws and peered up at them dubiously.

Romy howled.

“Uncle Bilbo, am I old enough to mask this year?” Frodo asked.
“I believe so.”
Frodo looked excited, then less so.
“No,” he said. “Sam isn’t, so I won’t do it either.”
Samwise patted his arm.
“You go on, Frodo. You’ll look a treat in those curls.”
“Really?” Frodo asked. “Then you can walk out as my beau! And Idad Thorin can walk out as Uncle Bilbo’s!”

Bard looked from one to the other, then at Thorin, who shrugged.
“I have no idea. Ghivasha?”
“Masking,” said Bilbo. “It’s an old Shire tradition, usually only practiced by Tooks and Brandybucks nowadays. We dress up in costume for Last Harvest, any way we choose, though usually as the opposite sex.”

“Oooo! I want to do that!” Tilda cried. “Da, may I please? Please!”
“You want to dress as a boy for Last Harvest?” Bard asked.
“No, I want to dress up as an elf. Then Wicked Stepmother can dress as a dwarf!”

Thranduil choked on his cider.

Bard looked at Thranduil and a slow grin crossed his face.
“Til, that idea has merit.”

“Til, that idea has merit.”
Thranduil hissed.
“I’ll have Bob for company.”
“Til, that idea has merit.”

Bard looked at Thranduil and a slow grin crossed his face.
“You’re sleeping on the bouncy couch,” Thranduil hissed.
“Til, that idea has merit.”

“Til, that idea has merit.”

Thranduil choked on his cider.

Bard looked at Thranduil and a slow grin crossed his face.
“You know, Til, that idea has merit.”

“Til, that idea has merit.”
Thranduil hissed.
“I’ll have Bob for company.”
“Til, that idea has merit.”

Thranduil peered down at Tilda, who all but hopped in her seat with excitement.

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Thorin stepped up beside them.
“The ponies all happily lined up to go to their stalls without any coaxing,” said Thorin.
“And the goats could care less,” said Ori.
“I wouldn’t say that,” said Thorin. “I can see by the way they’re standing, they’re keyed up as if for a battle. Even I can feel it. There have been Last Harvest celebrations within my lifetime, but I don’t recall feeling such strong energy before. Dwalin?”

The warrior shook his head, and scowled out over the meadow.

Ori sent a silent question into the ether, but instead of words, he received images of doors and gates opening. He thought he recognized the doors of the Halls, and he could guess where the white picket gate under the rose-covered trellis led, but he also saw another gate, wrought iron, black and tall, and beyond it, a wide way of broken cobbles that wandered into a mountain pass.

“Mandos,” said Mahal.

“Are you ready?” Bilbo called from the bedroom.
“As we will ever be, ghivasha,” said Thorin.

Bilbo skipped into the sitting room, a vision of puffed sleeves, lace and ribbons. Ori slapped his hand over his mouth and Dwalin’s jaw creaked open.

“Omi leant me one of her darling West Farthing frocks,” said Bilbo. “I just had to make a few adjustments.”

The frock, pink with enormous green and yellow cabbage roses, sported a voluminous bow in the back and layer upon layer of crinolines under the skirt, so much so that it flowed out in tulle all around and the skirt itself sat upon them almost like a tablecloth.

“That’s amazing,” said Ori.

“Isn’t it though,” said Bilbo. “I’ve always wanted to be wider than I was tall. It’s a good thing dwarven doorways are so big.”

Thorin went to him, kissed him and peered closely at his hat, which perched atop and to the front of his head, tied down beneath a wig of undyed wool ringlets that cascaded behind him to the floor.

“Is that Lobelia’s hat?” Thorin asked.

“Yes, she wasn’t using it and, I do wear it better if I do say so,” said Bilbo. “Oh, and I have another surprise. You should probably sit for this.”

“You preggers?” Nori asked from the fireplace chimney.
“No, Nori,” said Bilbo, “and don’t be rude or I’ll tattle to your brother.”

“Got it,” said Nori.

When they had all settled, Bilbo called, “Alright, Frodo. You can come out now.”

And so Frodo did, in an exact replica of Bilbo’s outfit, right down to a miniature copy of Lobelia’s ugly hat.

Frodo skipped lightly to the middle of the room, pointed his toe, did a pirouette and curtsied.

Then he rose and fluttered his lashes.

Everyone clapped.

“Lovely, akunith,” said Thorin.

“Lovely,” Sam echoed, and nodded eagerly as he followed Frodo out.

“But, Idad,” said Frodo, “where is your costume?”

“I wore mine at Durin’s Day,” said Thorin. “I think it’s time I let you and your uncle have all the attention.”

The square before Dale Hall had been blocked to traffic, lined with stalls for selling food and trinkets, or featured games of chance. Hamfast and his sons and dwarven apprentices had chosen the oddest shaped pumpkins from the harvest, emptied them out, and carved spooky and funny faced into them. Some had lit candles inside them, and glowed merrily.

At the very center, a man tended a huge bonfire, and the cold night air smelled of woodsmoke, and under that the scents of cooking food, and ale, and mulled wine.

A large band had set up on the steps of Dale Hall and was already playing, but it was a tune Ori had only ever heard hummed or crooned by the men in Dale. It had never sounded like this, lilting
and haunting. Nor had Ori ever seen anyone dance in quite this way.

The men and women, and some elves, all masked, danced in couples, whirling around each other, and at the same time, the entire mass of dancers whirled round the bonfire. They wore masks, some mere strips of cloth with holes for eyes, but others of fancy materials, trimmed in beads and feathers. Some wore costumes, and all wore sashes of orange, gold or brown that trailed and fluttered as they moved.

“They’re leaves,” said Ori.
“Eh?” Dwalin asked.
“They’re swirling like fallen leaves in the wind,” said Ori.

As he watched, the square seemed to fill with even more dancers. Not all of them were men, some were elves, and quite a few were hobbits. Few of these newcomers looked solid.

“Oh,” said Ori.
“Awrigh’, love?” Dwalin asked.
“The dead are here.”
“Brillian’,” said Dwalin. “As long’s they don’ make nuisances a’ themselves. Nothin’ like havin’ t’ chuck some man’s dead udad in th’ lockup f’r bein’ drunk an’ disorderly.”

“Hullooo, our Ori!” Queen Sunflower called as she and Durin flashed by.

“Hello, Queen Sunflower!”

They were masked, of course, but there was no mistaking them. They, at least, were quite solid.

They danced gracefully together despite their disparate heights. Ori thought it was because they plenty of time to practice now they were in the Halls.

Looking closely, Ori picked out a few people he knew. Nor was he alone.
He felt Thorin’s hand on his shoulder, and knew the moment the king recognized his own parents among the dancers.

Ori said, “Your mam seems … um… to be leading.”
“I’m sure they arm wrestled for it,” said Thorin, his voice thick with emotion. “Do you think… will they talk to me?”

The ghostly royals exited the dance by a pretzel stand a little ways over, and Freris huffed impatiently, and gestured to him.

“Come along, yeh wee, slow numpty,” she barked, but there was a laugh under her words.
Thorin looked down at Bilbo, obviously uncertain.

“Go on, my dear,” said Bilbo. “I’ll save you a dance.”
Ori turned away, already feeling tears spill over. He looked around, and breathed deeply.

“Oh, Hamfast, and Bell, and the faunts are here,” he said.
Then he looked again.
Hamfast and Bell wore each other’s clothes.
She wore fawn breeches, a white shirt, white neck cloth, and a gold embroidered weskit under a sky blue coat. She had bound her long tresses up behind her in a bun, leaving the hair closest to her head to ripple and curl loosely in a masculine style.

Hamfast wore a party frock of pink with vertical green stripes, his cap sleeves and skirt hem embroidered with floral bands of pink and yellow carnations. Matching ribbons in huge bows punctuated his ‘updo’ wool wig with its wide, straw porkpie hat with fake fruit perched atop. As his head moved, a price tag fell out of the hat and dangled from the brim by its thread.

“Sister!” Bilbo cried.

“Sister!” Hamfast replied rapturously. “How-DEE!”

They slammed together in a fond embrace, their crinolines flying up in the back to reveal bloomers trimmed all down their bums with foofy lace to match their frocks.

Ori glanced over the crowd and his eyes alighted on Miss Sifian. She had had her hair done up. The ‘wings’ still framed her face becomingly, but the rest of her hair was curled up in such a way that it appeared the top of her head was layered with bows. Her dress was long sleeved and simply styled in russet wool which she had covered with a charmingly laced sable tunic. She sat primly on a wooden bench watching the dancing. Next to her was Rogi.
Rogi was bald around the crown, with just a poof of hair standing upright like a bare sapling straight from his head. His mustache and beard were long enough to braid together and back around each side of his face to join the long braid that fell down his back. Little metal dagger charms fringed the mustache/beard braids along the bottom edge all the way to the nape. They tinkled together whenever he moved his head.

Bilbo winced.

“Oh, my. Not so much a stud as a dud.”

Dwalin grinned wickedly.

“I’m keepin’ tha’.”

“With my compliments,” Bilbo assured him.

Sifian watched the dancers with studied interest. Rogi scooched closer. He watched her a moment, then carefully laid his hand on hers, folded in her lap.

Miss Sifian jumped.

“Mister Rogi!” she cried out. “Touching!”

Rogi snatched his hand back. Miss Sifian pointed to a spot further along the bench away from her.

“Stay on your side.” she commanded.

Dwalin winced. Bilbo and Ori looked at each other.

“Heh!” Margr came up to them, while watching Rogi. “He’ll need a big hammer t’ crack tha’ nut!”

“He’s go’ a big hammer,” Vi added. “Trouble is she ain’t wantin’ t’ git nailed.”

The sisters cackled maniacally at the expense of both sweethearts. Dwalin snickered rudely while Bilbo and Ori pulled faces at each other.

All around them, Ori saw people he knew. Most of the mountain had come to see and enjoy their neighbors’ festivities. The carts bearing the logo of the ‘Moo and Cluck in Motion’ had set up as well. Orras was shouting out his menu. The circus was there, too. Ori hurried over as he saw Fanny. Fanny trumpeted to see him and wound her truck around him and lifted him.

“How do you like Fanny’s coat?” Mavey squealed as Ori hugged some of Fanny’s head. He drew away and looked at his friend. Fanny was wearing an enormous woolen blanket. It draped from her neck down to lower than her tail. The sides shrouded her down to her knees. It was a creamy color with beautiful Durin blue runes for oliphaunt scattered over. Each of her legs was wrapped to her feet in matching enormous hose. A hood hung over her head and both ears. Most of her trunk was also cozily wrapped.

Fanny put Ori on his feet and he looked her over.

“Are you warm enough, Fanny?” Ori asked solicitously. Fanny patted his shoulder with her trunk and gave a nod.

“Are you and Fanny doing an act?” Ori turned to Mavey. “Oh no,” she giggled then squeaked as Floris arrived juggling several apples. Biscuit, in her wake, with his front paws on her shoulders, walked on his hind legs. He had a bright purple cone-shaped hat tied on his head. “We’re just showing Fanny off and letting people pat and feed her.”

Floris grinned and continued to juggle as Fanny helped herself to apples spinning in the air, much to the delight of the crowd of little kids watching her. They ran underneath her and reached to see who could touch her tummy. Others were satisfied just to stand close and cling tight to one of her huge legs. Biscuit stood on his front paws and waved his tail and back legs in the air.

Ori hugged as the trunk slid around him again.

“I’m so glad you’re happy here with all of us, Fanny,” he murmured and Fanny lifted him to her head again. She put him down and Ori waved to Floris and Mavey as more people came and crowded around to see Fanny.

Kib and Granny Klak went by, Kib eating fire and Granny juggling knives. She caught them all at once and came and hugged Ori.

“How is my darling youngest great grandchild?”

“I’m well, Granny. Is your new craft juggling?”
She laughed.
“Not exactly, my pet. I have a stall over there. Come and see me later. I have a wonderful new
toy Dain and Buer made for me.”
“I will, Granny,” Ori giggled and watched them stroll off.
Master Ubqim floated by in her gray green weedy robes, now garlanded with felt leaves of brown
and orange. She was singing to herself and dancing to her own music. Ori watched interestedly as
she wove by, oblivious to the crowd.
Arne, Tay, and Nodun danced by and waved to him.
He saw Kacuho and Rouho at one of the many taverns’ outside bars. He went over and greeted
them and had a pint. They introduced him to Pahvu, Podvu’s brother, so Ori was finally able to
thank him for keeping all the guild hall’s original materials safe.
Sadi and Brur joined them briefly before dancing off again. Ori walked on, watching the dancers.
Hathor and Guernsia whirled by laughing, chased by Master Hallow and Pohvu who were
attempting grace while getting used to dancing with extreme height differences. Pohvu, Ori realized,
was leading.
Poczoh was dressed to the nines and offered free fried fish sandwiches to everyone. There were
no takers except for goats, dogs and wargs. Posey tried one and spat it out in a drain.
“What wrong with the fish sandwiches other than they’re er…sandwiches?” Ori asked Master
Axsin, who was strolling around with Tukkaj who was already extremely drunk.
“Remember, lad, Poczoh is the second best fish monger in Steam Alley.”
“And there are only two,” Ori recalled. “Ew.”
“Indeed.”
A ruckus started up among the band members on the steps of Dale Hall. They paused in their
playing, parted from in front of the door, and Thranduil strode out with Tilda by the hand. Tilda
looked proud enough to burst in a fine green velvet elven gown sized to fit her. In fact, it was so fine
that Ori suspected it had come from the Greenwood itself. She wore an elven tiara, and a string of
pearl-sized starlight gems. Her hair flowed down loose around her shoulders.
Thranduil looked the soul of dignity.
Ori locked his jaws shut and realized that Master Axsin was thunderstruck.
“Lad,” said Master Axsin, “that’s just about the strangest thing I’ve ever seen, and I deal in strange
every day.”
Ori could only nod.
It looked like someone had taken Lord Bofur’s ‘best’ clothes and stretched them to fit an elf.
Thranduil even wore a replica of Bofur’s hat, complete with two stuffed toy ferrets perched jauntily
atop. Instead of carrying his pickaxe on his shoulder, he held the iron head in his hand and used the
tool as a sort of walking stick.
All assembled gaped for a moment, then everyone burst into applause, whistling and cheering and
calling out.
“Oi! Suits yeh, me lad!”
“Isn’t Princess Tilda adorable!”
“Blessed Mahal, she’s wearing a king’s ransom around her neck.”
Thranduil nodded regally to acknowledge them all, and Tilda preened and copied Thranduil’s
nod.
They approached and Ori unstuck his jaw.
“King father! Tilda! You look great!”
“Many thanks, Lord Ori,” said Thranduil. “Alas, I feel a great need to scratch and belch.”
“They do say clothes do make the dwarf,” said Ori.
Master Axsin bowed grandly.
“Princess Tilda, you’re a vision.”
Tilda cocked her head.
“Of what?”
Thranduil looked to the sky, obviously gathering patience.
“He means, you look lovely, my Tilda.”
“Oh, thank you, Master Axsin!” She put her free hand to her heart and bowed to him. When she straightened, Ori noticed that her pointed ears were actually attached to her tiara, which kept the whole cleverly in place.

“You do look lovely, Til,” said Ori, “even without your boot knife.”
Tilda smiled naughtily and hitched up the hem of her gown a little. Her sleek elven boots included a knife sheath, and the knife hilt was decorated all over with leaves made of emeralds.
Ori gaped at them, then at Thranduil, who winked.

“Where’re Bard and your brother and sister?” Ori asked Tilda.

“Oh,” Tilda said, “Da and Bain went off to do something ceremoniou-sh.” She frowned at her inability to manage the word then she grinned up at him. “Sig’s off with her FeeFee!”

“She does not call him that!” Ori gasped. “Does she?”

“That’s what I call him when she’s being all moon-eyed over him. I mean, he’s sort of cute, in a Bob-ish way, but boys are still icky and I think she must have fallen and hit her head.”

Thranduil gave a cough that sounded suspiciously like a choke of laughter.

“Come along, my fawn, we need to mingle,” he said in a slightly unsteady voice.

“Yes, adanana!”
Ori left them to ‘mingle’ and proceeded around, sight seeing and sketching.

A dam dressed as a queen drifted by, and Ori did a doubletake, since she was solid and her crown looked terribly familiar. As he watched, she surveyed the crowd with an air of superior amusement, and, seeing a pretty young dwarf couple dance by, fixed her eyes on them and slowly licked her bottom lip.

Oh, sweet, blessed Mahal. Ori couldn’t quite believe what he saw.

He approached her warily, as one might a strange dog, and cleared his throat.

“Yes, dear?” she asked melodiously, turning to him while still watching the beauty on display.

“Queen Kivi?”

“I am.” Her head turned languorously to catch up with the rest of her body and her enormous green eyes locked onto his and he couldn’t look away. He swallowed then bowed deeply.

“Ori of Fundin, at your service, your majesty.”

“Oh, aren’t you a Sweetheart,” she said. She drifted a little closer and put her hand against his chest. “What do you Desire, my Dear?”

If he did desire anything, the list would have gone right out of his head. All dwarrow ran warm, it was true, but this dam exuded heat even from a distance, and his body responded to it.

“I… wanted to ask you about Position 20.”

She rolled her eyes, all trace of languor vanished.

“Mahal’s hairy blue Balls!” she cried in obvious frustration. “It was a Joke! No one with a Spine was ever Meant to do that, not even with Ten participants. How would I know that idiot printer would Push the galleys through after I died and I never got a Chance to Correct him!”

“No wonder the directions didn’t make any sense!”

“And it’s Too Late to Correct it now,” she lamented.

“Actually, I’m translating your work into westron. I could correct it. Or, at least put a warning on it: Don’t try this at home.”

“Don’t try this Anywhere!” she replied. “No matter how Well you Stretch first.”

“Understood, your majesty. Then, I have your blessing?”

“Of course, my Dear.” Now she was warm again, and a little closer than Ori felt comfortable. “I would be Honored.”

“Thank you,” he said.

His eyes shifted around, looking for an escape before his nether regions perked up again.

Then Glorfindel strode by. He had Rogi by the collar. Rogi was bleeding profusely from the nose and Glorfindel bellowed admiringly about Miss Sifian’s right hook, and Queen Kivi’s attention was captured and held.

Rogi, seemingly oblivious to his smashed nose, caroled to any nearby about his beautiful,
powerful woman.
Ori bowed quickly and got out of there.
He wasn’t really paying attention to his path, which was now quite choked with dancers and other revelers. He had to navigate it with all the nimbleness he possessed.

“Excuse me. Sorry. I beg your pardon.”
He finally reached an empty spot under a footbridge.
A laughing voice teased him.
“It’s dangerous out there. You could be hopped or wagged.”
Ori turned.
“Sigrid? What are you doing here?”
She blushed and adjusted her dwarven tunic.
“Fili was called away to help Master Kir get ready. We were just… saying goodbye for now.”
“I see,” said Ori. “At least you don’t have any love bites.”
“Not where you can see them,” said Sigrid with an evil grin. “There are some advantages to height difference.”
“Naughty! I love it!” said Ori, and they hugged, squealing.
“Where are you off to?” asked Sigrid, pointing to his kit.
“Bard gave me permission to sketch from the bell tower while Dwalin is on duty.”
“That’s going to be some view,” she agreed. She looked out over the dancers with a smile.

“Have fun!”

“You, too, Sig.”
“Ori?”
The sudden waver in her voice made him stop and turn back to her.
“Sig? What is it?”
“I think I just saw my mother.”
“Oh.”
She cut her eyes at him, and her breath gasped suddenly uneven.
“I didn’t imagine that, did I.”
“Probably not. This is the night when the veil between the worlds is thinnest. Thorin’s already seen his parents.”
“He has? That’s… Of course, he would, but, I’m not…. Until tonight, I thought that was just a story.”
“You were there when Durin and Sunflower first appeared,” Ori reminded her.
“But they’re dwarrow, well, a hobbit and a dwarf. You’re magical beings. Men aren’t.”
Ori looked out over the square, which had grown steadily fuller as the moon rose. Durin danced by with Mathilde. They waved.
He waved back.
“I wouldn’t bet on that, Sig.”
Sigrid whimpered. He turned to find she had leaned into the wall with her arms clasped about herself.

“Great Eru,” she gasped.
“Yes, child?”
The familiar voice came on the wind.
Now Sigrid really cowered and edged back down the passage.
“Oh, mahumb,” Ori swore. “Sigrid, hold on a moment.”
Ori looked around wildly. He had no idea what to do. Eru wasn’t Mahal, and Ori had no real idea how to address Him. It was so much more formal and specific than talking to Mahal.
Truthfully, Ori had been amazed that Eru could be satisfied with the sacrifice of a plate of cookies. He had expected there to be a little blood involved.
Mahal’s voice raised the temperature around them by at least thirty degrees.

“Hold on, our Siggie,” he boomed. “Oi, Da, I think ‘Great Eru’ means, er, gi’e me strength’r some such.”
“But, I created her with all she needed,” said Eru, sounding genuinely puzzled.

“Lord Eru, sir,” Ori squeaked, “we aren’t mighty like valar and, occasionally we just need to be reminded. Please. Sorry.”

“Ah. I see.” A mighty throat clearing followed. “Sigrid, child, I gave you strength enough to handle this.”

Mahal huffed impatiently.

“Aye, well, ta f’r tha’. Say ‘r do somethin’ useful, ‘r comfortin’!”

Abruptly, Sigrid disappeared.
“What the fuck?” Ori cried.
“Wha’ th’ fuck?” Mahal cried.
“I set her aside to speak with her mother for a moment. Do you suppose that will suffice?”
“Is Sigrid dead?” Ori asked, swallowing.
“Of course not! She has things to do. This is the expedient way to show her that men are magical beings, that she has strength, and that her mother loves her. There. All sorted.”
“Aye, li’e th’ time yeh dropped Ulwe in th’ deep end a’ th’ ocean t’ teach ‘im t’ swim. Da, remember when we talked about’ yer parentin’ skills?”
“You’re still in one piece,” said Eru.
“I ain’t delicate.”
“Neither is Sigrid.”
The valar seemed to withdraw, leaving Ori alone in the rapidly cooling passage.
Ori heard a familiar caw and Quartz landed on his shoulder.
“No worries,” said Quartz, pecking lightly at Ori’s beads. “Siggie’s safe.”
“Does she know that?” Ori asked.
“She does now.”
“Will she come back? Is it alright for me to leave here?”
“Sure. Now, about my empty stomach.”
“What about Garnet?”
“Told me to push off for a while. Driving her nuts hovering.”
“Oh, in that case, chips?”
“Yes, please!”
“With cheese, I suppose, and gravy.”
“What do you think?”
“I think you’ll make yourself sick again.”
“Eh! Probably. Let’s go!”

They were munching their way through gravy-covered delirium when High Priest Sven walked by, did a double-take, and grinned. He lifted his own container of chips, cheese and gravy in salute and they ate for several minutes in companionable silence, except for occasional sounds of culinary bliss.
Ori caught Quartz eyeing the priest’s portion and hissed, “Behave.”
“I am behaving, like a raven,” said Quartz, with the avian equivalent of a pout.
A drum pounded from someplace in the outer streets, a low, insistent bass beat.
“What is that?” Ori asked.
“I know,” said Quartz.
“Well?” Ori prompted.
“Sorry, sworn to silence.”
As the drum grew louder, closer, the musicians in the square stopped playing, and the crowd turned expectantly, the chatter faded to silence.

High Priest Sven polished off his last mouthful and cleared his throat.

“Yes, well. I’ll just nip over to the side for a pint. Excuse me, and Eru bless you!”

He hurried off. Ori frowned and shivered.

The dancers stepped back, and made an avenue to the bonfire.

A masked figure shouted. Ori was not surprised to recognize him as Bard, who leapt up on the steps of Dale Hall and held up his arms. In one hand he carried a nine tethered whip with which he randomly smacked the steps.

“My people, we have defeated our enemies. We are whole once more. We traveled as one people from the frozen wastes long ago and became the people of ancient Esgaroth. We had good neighbors in the dwarrow of the great mountain that sheltered us. We lived in peace and prosperity. Then fell times came upon us and our ancient city in the attacks of the malignant valar Morgoth and his evil servant Sauron. They destroyed so much of our beloved Arda, murdering our families and our good neighbors the elves and the dwarrow. Together, men, dwarrow and elves defeated him!”

Cheers rose from the crowd. People of the three races toasted each other, slapped backs, shook hands, and hugged.

Ori was impressed with Bard’s oratory but wondered at his appearance. Then he realized Bard was dressed as an old fashioned executioner. He began to worry what was in the wind.

“Easy, lad.” Mahal’s hot boom echoed in his head.

Bard’s whip punished the step again and everyone hushed and listened.

“All during this time, we did not know but a depraved monster of that evil had come among us. We, in our helpless state, were ground down to naught but beggars and thieves, forced to eke out a sad existence in our once beautiful land. Our good neighbors the dwarrow suffered under a tyrant of their own. With the lifting of the shadow that covered Arda, the dwarrow freed themselves and aided us to overthrow the despicable villain who held us in thrall. All hail our people and their good friends!”

Cheers started again. Bard held up a black gloved hand.

“Now, my people, we have once more found our kindness and friendship with the lands and waters about us. The hobbits came among us and taught us to care for our lands once more. We have called on the valar of old to assist us. They have smiled upon us. All hail our precious goddess Enina, called by the dwarrow and hobbits ‘Yavanna’.”

There was a clear note of a flute. Ori turned and saw that Deneb, Mistress Guernsia and the Dale matron with the beehive hairdo stood with Tilda, still in her elf costume. They sang a line of soft throbbing notes, then lowered their voices to a hum. Women from every walk of life in Dale came forward. They carried a great carved wooden platter the size of a table top. It was covered in fruits, grains, meats and many prepared foods, all set up to look as though they were pouring from a large, beautiful curved horn of woven straw. This was carried into the square and placed on a table hastily brought out and set in front of the steps of Dale Hall. People cheered and wept and several came forward and knelt before the table.

Bard struck the whip again against the step.

“We have overcome and we live free and in friendship and prosperity with our fellow peoples of Arda. No longer do we huddle in huts and starve. All hail Enina, Mother Goddess of us all.”

Bard waited this time for the joyful noise of the throng to simmer down on its own.

“We have a final duty, my people.” Bard shouted and whirled the whip above his head. “It is time to bring the tyrant to justice before Blessed Enina. Bring forth the prisoner and let him face those he has wronged.”

Bard saluted the crowd then bounded off the steps and back down the cleared avenue.

A shiver went through the crowd then a yell of “Justice!” came from the back, and many others took it up.

In another moment Ori heard the solemn drum beat. The crowd strained to look as the drum grew louder, and finally a lone drummer, black-garbed and cloaked, entered the square. Ori recognized
Ivo, his face set and solemn.

Behind him, identically dressed, Bain carried a long pole, at the top of which hung the skull of a cow, draped in red banners.

Finally, after him, the dark, masked figure of Bard led a horse and tumbrel into the square.

On the driver’s box sat Master Arim, dressed in blinding yellow, with a bejeweled golden crown on his brow and a scepter capped with a blood ruby gem in his hand. Beside him was Mistress Callin, robed in green, with a crown of leaves and berries on her head. Ori recognized this as one of Thranduil’s tiaras.

In the tumbrel, propped up, stood a straw figure in ostentatious robes and a carved pumpkin for a head.

Ori recognized the robes of Master Calmar.

Shouts started and grew to a roar as accusations, Poczo’s fish sandwiches, and stones were hurled at the ‘prisoner’.

“You stole my father’s living and left us starving!”
“You dishonored my daughter!”
“You killed my husband!”
“You slaughtered all my farm animals!”
“You burned up all my families boats!”

Glorfindel, Eowyn, and the rest of the city guard were on hand to keep the citizens from surging forward to attack the tumbrel. Occasionally Glorfindel caught and corrected the aim of flying stones or fish sandwiches, so only the ‘prisoner’ was struck.

The tumbrel rolled to a stop at the bonfire. The shouting, insults, and jeering faded as Mistress Callin made a calming gesture.

Hamfast and Hamson separated from the crowd, and bowed to Master Arim.

“My king, by your leave,” they chorused.

Arim nodded regally.

The two hobbits ran around behind the tumbrel.

Thranduil appeared in his dwarf garb to hold the horse’s head as the executioner joined the hobbits in removing the straw effigy from the wagon. They dragged it before Master Arim.

“Here is the prisoner, my king,” the executioner shouted. “What is your will?”

Master Arim, who seemed to be holding in a snicker, bellowed, “Let him feed the flames, let his bones sweeten the ground, and let his blood tempt the return of the Sun, the Lover of Great Enina and maker of metals, who taught our smiths to make tools.”

The drum began again, and the crowd began to stamp in time with it.

Mistress Callin was tenderly lifted down and she waved to the executioner to bring the ‘prisoner’ to her at the edge of the bonfire. There was another hail of raging incriminations, fish sandwiches, and stones as they threw in the figure and everyone cheered and yelled judgement on it as it was consumed by the flames.

Master Arim pounded the butt of his scepter three times on the box of the wagon.

“Justice is done!” The old man announced, then sighed and deflated with a chuckle. “Now someone get me down from here and get me a blessed pint.”

After that, the musicians started up again, and the people, one by one and in groups, threw their corn dollies and their old mistakes and regrets into the flames with the vanquished tyrant.

Mistress Callin was lifted up and carried on the shoulders of strong men to a chair beside the table of offerings. The chair was draped in green velvet with gold leaves. Ori suspected this had also come from the Greenwood.

One by one, the citizens of Dale approached her and knelt or bowed and she offered them something from the table.

Bard had removed his mask and helped Master Arim to the ground. Master Tin and Lord Zark arrived to take him to sit and have a pint.

Ori peered at the old man’s ‘Crown Jewels’.

“Oh, they’re paste,” said Ori.
“Of course they’re paste,” said Bard with a laugh. “I don’t think Arim would have been able to hold up his head beneath the real thing.”

“Well done, my husband,” said Thranduil.

“Was I a convincing lord high executioner?” Bard asked with a laugh. “That’s the closest I ever want to come to being the real thing. I’m going back to the stable and put on less ominous clothing. Boys? You want a ride?”

Ivo and Bain climbed into the tumbrel.

Bain said, “Da, you don’t have another bonfire waiting when we get there, do you?”

“Hmmm, maybe. Let’s find out,” said Bard.

Ori, who had been sketching feverishly, sat beside Master Arim and his pint.

“That was incredible,” said Ori.

Arim raised his tankard.

“Thank you, and to your very good health, m’lord.”

“But, I thought the men tempted the Sun to return at Yule,” Ori said.

Arim laughed and Zark and Tin sat down with them.

“That’s usually how it goes,” said Zark. “But it sounds as though Yule will be rather busy this year, as men, hobbits and dwarrow all celebrate it differently. Not to mention, we’ll celebrate King Thorin’s birthday and a royal wedding right in the middle of it.”

“Aye, havin’ more t’ celebrate’s a good thin’,” said Tin, “bu’ it does ma’e f’r a hectic schedule.”

Apparently, this was a popular table, for they were soon joined by Thranduil, and Bard back from the stable.

“Bard!” Ori cried. “Excellent speech!”

The king of Dale coughed and said, “Yes, my husband has a flair for the dramatic.”

“I wrote the words, but you delivered them perfectly,” Thranduil insisted. “You just needed a little coaching to convey the proper spirit.”

“And a whip, apparently,” said Bard.

“A whip does lend a certain air. Where there’s a whip, there’s a way.”

“Yes, well, how you know that I’ll leave alone.”

Thranduil gave him a sweet, dangerous smile.

“Let’s just say that the orc who said that to me no longer has his head. Or his whip.”

“I suppose,” Bard said wryly, “you have the definitive collection.”

“Now, my love,” Thranduil cooed. “we all have our little secrets.”

“Fine.” Bard looked sidelong at him. “That collection will stay very far away from our bedroom.”

“Spoilsport!” Thranduil giggled.

Bilbo approached, closely followed by Glorfindel. The hobbit carried forth a bowl of something they couldn’t see, though the smell of alcohol wafted through the air. Ori looked around and realized that Hamfast, Bell, and several of their faunts, likewise bore bowls to the drinking tables.

Bilbo put the bowl on their table, and Ori peered in on a heap of raisins and almonds. They sat like pebbles at the bottom of a small pond of brandy.

“What are we supposed to do with this?” Bard asked.

“Drink it?” Thranduil suggested.

“I am in favor of that,” said Glorfindel.

“No no!” Bilbo cried. “It’s not ready yet.”

“What’s missing?” Ori asked. “Whipped cream?”

“Hardly, my dear,” said Bilbo.

He took a flint from his purse, and struck sparks into the brandy, which bloomed into a crown of blue and yellow flames.

“Now it’s ready,” said Bilbo.

They looked at the bowl. They looked at him. They looked at the bowl.

“Ready for what?” Thranduil asked archly.

“Ooo! Snapdragon!” Wee Sam cried.
He and Frodo ran up and knelt on the bench. Sam reached right into the center of the bowl, snatched out a raisin and popped it, still aflame, into his mouth. Frodo copied him, just as casually.

“Sam,” Bell called, “remember, that’s brandy, so you only get to eat one.”

“Yes, Mama,” said Sam as he licked his fingers and he and Frodo walked away.

Bard and Thranduil grinned at each other, and braved the flames.

Ori climbed the steps to the bell tower of Dale Hall and onto the platform. The wind was stiff enough here that the bell swayed a bit, though not enough for the bell to toll. He pulled his scarf up a little around his neck and looked out over the party below. The details of faces, masks, costumes blurred, but the colors by lamp and torchlight stood out brilliantly, and he was glad he had some colored inks with him, because he didn’t want to miss noting that. He had a mind to paint this scene in oils at some point. It would be rather abstract, but he thought the many colors together might be made to show the movement of the crowd.

He unfolded the portable desk and clipped his paper down, grateful to Gridr for her obsessive attention to detail in designing the contraption. Ori thought the only improvement to the desk might be a small chamber for embers, not enough to set everything on fire, just warm enough to keep the inks from freezing in the winter while he worked. He wanted to paint the various tones of snow on the mountain before spring thaw. For a long while, Ori leaned over the desk, sketching, trying this color and that. As he glanced up from the page, a snowflake landed on his nose.

He looked up at the slow flurry as it sparkled in the lamplight, and settled in hair and beards, only adding to the festive air. It was not cold enough for the snow to accumulate yet, just a reminder that winter came to Erebor, then Dale, far sooner in the season than it would to the south and west.

As he watched the celebration, he saw a large wagon approaching the center of Dale from the great road. By the light of the lanterns on either side of the driver, Ori could see a man wrapped in a forest green cloak seated alone on the box. Two stout draft horses pulled the wagon. A third, smaller horse walked behind on a lead.

Ori assumed the wagon was headed to the mountain. This would, of course, take it right through the main square, which had been blocked off against anything but emergency traffic.

“Dwalin!” he hollered.

But Dwalin couldn’t hear him, of course.

He quickly packed up his gear and hurried down the tower steps to the street. He arrived just as the soldiers surrounded the wagon. The driver, wisely, held up his hands to show he held no weapon, and promptly complied when ordered to climb down. He removed his dark green hood to reveal fair-hair and light-skin. Ori thought he looked vaguely familiar.

Just as Dwalin stepped forward, being official, he was cut off by a loud, booming voice.

“Oi! Faramir! Yer early, lad!”

The music stopped.

Everything stopped as the entire square turned and looked right at the stranger.

Before the soldiers could make a further move, Sunny and Durin were upon them. The couple still wore masks, but there was no disguising that Durin stood wider and taller than any other dwarf here. The man’s eyes grew larger than a hobbit’s as Durin rushed forward like an overfull mine cart and slapped him companionably on the back.

“Guid t’ have yeh!”

“He, sweetie, have a cookie.” Sunny produced the plate out of thin air and offered it. “It’s an awful long road from Gondor just on hardtack.”

“Ma’am?” he asked, though he was smart enough to take a cookie nonetheless. Ori thought they were jam-filled. “How did you know I only-“

“Thorin,” Sunny called, “come and meet Mister Faramir. And make sure he eats!”

“Yesssss, Umadel,” Thorin sing-songed as he approached.

“Fresh!” she accused.

She stuck Thorin with the plate as the band struck up again and she dragged her husband off to dance.
“Mister Faramir? I’m Thorin, son of Thrain.”
“Your majesty.” Faramir bowed, and Thorin returned it.
“And, I believe you know my husband.”
“Bilbo!”
“Faramir!” Bilbo cried.
The man knelt and hugged him.
“It’s so good to see you again!” Faramir said.
“Likewise, my boy, likewise. Here. Better have another cookie.”
Thorin offered the plate and added, “Once the badgers, faunts and children see them, they’ll disappear as fast as they arrived.”
“Oh, thank you,” said Faramir. He climbed to his feet. “King Thorin, I’m here as Mister Denethor’s representative and have brought the printing presses by agreement with Princess Dis. I’m afraid I’ve come at a bad time. Or, a good time, at least for the folks here.”
“It’s the Last Harvest festival,” said Bilbo.
“You’re welcome, of course,” said Thorin, “but we didn’t expect you before tomorrow night at least. Where is the rest of your company? You weren’t attacked on the road?”
“No,” said the man. He looked very uncomfortable.
Sunny whirled by with Durin.
“Those orcs’ hind ends ditched him at the border of Gondor,” she shot.
“Thank you, Umadel,” said Thorin.
“How did she know that?” Faramir asked, obviously perplexed.
“She makes it her business to know everything,” said Thorin. “Here is Captain Dwalin, my personal guard.”
“Captain,” said Faramir, bowing. Then he turned and looked down at Ori and he smiled. “You must be Lord Ori. My brother Boromir speaks of you all with great fondness, and he bade me seek you out in particular as soon as I could. Apparently, you protect the wayward and the confused.”
Ori thought this was because it took one to know one.
“Mister Faramir,” said Ori, bowing. “So, that’s the press then?”
“Yes. It’s-“
“Thorin, for the love of Yavanna, get the man a drink,” said Sunny as she danced by again.
“Yes Umadel,” said Thorin, now snickering.
“Is Mistress Umadel your majesty’s aunt?” Faramir asked.
“Her name is actually Sunny,” said Thorin. “Umadel means Grandmother of Grandmothers.”
“So, those are relatives of yours.”
“You could say that,” said Bilbo.
“Mister Faramir,” said Thorin, “when was the last time you spoke to your brother?”
“Actually it’s been quite a while. I wasn’t home the last time he and Mistress Lavender returned from visiting you all, then he was off riding the borders with Prince Eomer and his new wife, who, I take it, is the most terrifying person one could imagine.”
Ori said absently, “Wait until you meet her mother.”
“He did write me about the goings on in Erebor,” Faramir continued, “but I can see he left out a few important things. But ‘Sunny’ sounds familiar. I’ve heard it somewhere before.”
“You have,” Thorin assured him.
“How did she do the trick with the cookies?”
“She’s dead.”
“Oh! Haha. You’re joking.”
“No, I’m not,” said Thorin.
“No, he’s not,” said Bard, approaching. “Queen Sunflower and King Durin are dead, and they’re his first, direct-line ancestors.”
Faramir appeared to struggle with the concept, and finally came out with, “Her feet seem awfully large and furry for a dwarf’s.”
“Dwarrowdam’s,” Ori corrected automatically.
“She’s a hobbit,” said Bard.
“She’s that Sunny?” Faramir yelped. “And that’s…. I get it n-. No, I actually don’t get any of it.”
“Neither do I,” said Bard. “Welcome to my life.”
It seemed to strike Faramir that they hadn’t been introduced.
“Faramir of Gondor, at your service,” he said with a bow.
“Bard, King of Dale,” said Bard.
“Your majesty!”
“Never mind that. Come on, I’ll buy you a drink.”
“What about my horses?”
“Bein’ stabled at th’ royal residence under th’ mountain,” said Dwalin.
“My gear?”
“Yer gear’s on it’s way t’ yer room,” said Dwalin. “Wagon an’ press’ll be stored securely nearby.”
Faramir turned, found his wagon and horses gone and groaned.
“They move quickly here,” said Bard.
“Should I be worried?”
“No point in it. Better to let them go and hope for the best. We just have to be off the streets by three bell.”
“What happens at three bell?”
“They flood the streets with boiling water.”
“Beg pardon?”
“I know. It’s late tonight because of the party. Don’t worry, if you’re dead drunk in the gutter, a huge elf will pick you up and at least move you to the sidewalk.”
“Seriously?”
“Glorfindel? Rarely.”
Hamfast climbed to the top of the steps of Dale Hall as the band sloped off on their break.
“Alright! Time for th’ Gandalf - er, Tharkûn - look alike contest!”
“Oooo, Adanana, we should have entered that,” Tilda cried.
“Next year, perhaps,” said Thranduil serenely.
Bard grinned at him.
“She won’t forget that, you know.”
“Of course she will!” Thranduil protested. “Legolas always did.”
“Tilda isn’t Legolas.”
“Nope,” said Tilda, with her mouth set in a dangerously stubborn line.
Before Thranduil had a moment to protest, Bard took Faramir in tow, Faramir talking in hushed, urgent tones. Bard laughed, paid a street vendor for a tankard and handed it to him.
Ori, Dwalin, Bilbo, and Thorin watched them go.
“Well,” said Dwalin, “tha’ wen’ about’ as well as I expected.”
Thorin shrugged.
“Bard will make sure he gets to Erebor in one piece. Eventually.”
The contest was not run on scientific lines, as Bujni was quick to point out. Bilbo, Tauriel, Kili were official judges, but their decision was necessarily swayed by the volume of the applause and shouts of the crowd for the individual contestants, of which there were eleven. These included Tharkûn himself, Rigel, one of Nadaris’ young sons in a paper wig, and Dipfa, who sylphed across the stage in a long white beard wrapped round and round herself and nothing else.
Dipfa seemed to be the favorite until a call went up from the crowd and a last contestant hurried up the steps.
Ori thought it looked rather like Master Kir in a long white robe, with his hair pulled back, but there was something off about his proportions. For one thing, Kir wasn’t nine feet tall.
“You’re late, pardon me sayin’ so,” Hamfast chided lightly.
“No, I ain’t!” Yes, definitely Master Kir. “A wizard’s always righ’ on time.”
This brought a laugh and a cheer.
Master Kir smacked the base of his stick on the step.
“Now, all a’ yeh hush, ’r I’ll turn yeh int’ handkerchief rabbits! Hold up! Hold up!”
He reached into a pocked in his robe, pulled out a bottle labelled ‘red wine’, glugged from it, and
put the bottle back.
“A’righ’, le’s bash on wi’ it.”
There was no competing with this turn.
Master Kir carried all before him, and received the standard Shire prize of a jug of blackberry
wine. He accepted this gratefully, but insisted Hamfast hold onto it for him.
“I’m gettin’ th’ vertigo up here!” Kir barked. “Tha’s enough a tha’.”
A swarm of mithril apprentices climbed the stairs and plucked Master Kir from the heights,
revealing Fili, on whose shoulders he had stood.
Tharkûn saw this and roared, “Foul! Foul! That’s grounds for disqualification!”
But no one listened to him.
Master Kir was set down at the drinking tables to gather his prize and congratulations.
Fili, who wore only an old white shift, probably Dis’, accepted a pint of his own. He wiped the
sweat from his brow and, smiling, looked around.
Then turned to Ori.
“Have you seen Sigrid, Ori-mate?”
“She’s with her mother,” Ori blurted.
“What?”
Suddenly Fili loomed right over Ori, and Ori got a clear picture of how much Fili and Thorin were
alike.
“I mean, she’s with Eru!”
“Ori!”
“Sigrid saw her mother dancing and she - that is, Sigrid - asked Eru for strength and He tried to tell
her she had strength and she didn’t believe Him or understand Him or something and He sent her to
talk to her mother but she’s not dead - that is, Sigrid’s not dead but her mother is - I promise!”
Fili stared at him, looked to be processing what Ori said, started to say something, then finally
went with, “Ori, tell Eru I want Sigrid back right now.”
A pop sounded beside them and Sigrid appeared.
“I didn’t do that!” Ori wailed.
Fili turned and flung himself into Sigrid’s arms.
Bilbo, who had apparently witnessed the entire scene, linked his arm through Ori’s and steered
him toward the drinking tables.
“I think you could use a pint,” said Bilbo.
“I think I could use a keg,” Ori replied.
Ori had to admit, he was feeling better after he sat with Bilbo for a while and his heart slowed
from a gallop. One pint was plenty to restore him to good humor.
It didn’t hurt that he suspected Mahal was patting him on the back, spiritually speaking.
He and Bilbo got to talking about all of Belladonna’s hijinks from her years on the road, then
Belladonna appeared across the table and told them a few Bilbo had never even heard, and Bungo
appeared beside her and called her out when her exaggerations ran to outright lies.
Old Bullroarer Took wandered past with his horse, called Trouble, because it followed him
everywhere, and soon Ori was writing so fast and laughing so hard that he didn’t have time to worry
or brood.
Meanwhile, at the opposite end of the table, Tharkûn was extremely drunk, and extremely cranky.
“How does one lose a contest where the point is to look like one’s self?” he demanded for the
fourteenth time.
“Maybe you just didn’t look meddlesome enough,” said Bilbo.
Rigel waxed philosophical over his tankard.
“Good thing there wasn’t a handkerchief folding contest. I’m absolutely rubbish at it, you know.”
“Exactly!” Tharkûn cried. He slammed the butt of his staff on the ground for emphasis and
suddenly all the dwarf statues around the square wore copies of Jani’s bathing costume from the inn. “The fix was in! It was rigged.”

Rigel gently loosened Tharkûn’s hold on the staff and leant it against Tharkûn’s chair.

“I think you’ve had more than enough.”

“I’m just getting started!” Tharkûn shouted.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” said Rigel. “A little more drink, and Erebor will be under water as well.”

Bilbo sighed.

“At least the statues will be dressed for it.”

“I don’t see how the contest could possibly be fixed,” said Ori. “Nori wasn’t even involved.”

Abruptly, Ursith towered over him, listing dangerously, and with a sloshing tankard locked in his left hand.

“Oh! Master S-scribbly! I’ll no’ hear a word again’ Master Nori! H-He’s me fav-o-ri’e high-placed flunky, I’ll have yeh know.”

A dwarf at the next table muttered, “Bastard still owes me twenny gold.”

Ursith spun on him and Ori and Bilbo passed the time chatting, eating chips, and watching Nori terrorize the populace.

“That’s it,” said Rigel. He called to his wife. “Ara, Tharkûn and I are off like a herd of lizards in a cloud of goo.”

“That sounds like fun,” Ara replied. “Don’t forget to write from wherever you two end up.”

She, and Vi, and Margr, and Dis cackled over their drinks as Rigel hoisted Tharkûn to his unsteady feet.

While Rigel carted Tharkûn off to wherever drunk wizards go, Ori stared at Bilbo in amazement.

“You mean to say, Tharkûn enters the contest every year in the Shire and he always loses? How?”

Bilbo drained his tankard neatly and put in on top of the pyramid of ‘empties’ at his end of the table.

“Probably because we all made a pact to never vote for him.”

Ori went through his sketches, making notes and filling in some sections in color. When he looked up again, most of the band had wandered over to the Moo and Cluck in Motion and only a few remained, jamming, up on the steps of Dale Hall. The families with young children had gone home and the bonfire had burned down to embers. Dori and Balin had retired earlier, taking the dozing Frodo and Wee Sam with them.

Ori yawned prodigiously and Thorin laughed at him.

“Time t’ head home, yer majesty?” Dwalin asked.

“I think so,” Thorin agreed. He turned to Bilbo. “Ghivasha?”

“Yes,” said Bilbo. “The party is definitely winding down. Excellent turn out for Last Harvest, though. Ended the way they always do.”

Ori looked around at the staggering drunk, the snoring and the odd couple snogging, rolling around in the street.

“Is Hobbiton usually littered in bodies like this?”

Bilbo linked arms with Ori as they strolled toward their waiting mounts. Thorin and Dwalin followed and, though they spoke in low voices, Ori knew they were talking about his arse and Bilbo’s. He gave his a little extra wiggle and smiled at their chuckling.

“The bodies in Hobbiton are usually more active,” said Bilbo. “Hobbits can hold their drink, remember. And about nine months later, the midwives are running from smial to smial, cursing the day they were born themselves.”

When they reached the sitting room, Ori found Sigrid and Fili, clad in nightwear, sharing a pot of tea with Dori by the fireplace. Ori immediately fixed on Sigrid, mainly because it hurt to look directly at Dori. In a high collared, highly ruffled and entirely pink dressing gown, pillowing around
her full belly, and wearing a bejeweled, pink satin turban, Dori looked like nothing so much as a big, foofy, blushing ball.

“Sigrid!” Ori shouted.
He ran to her and leaped across the back of the couch to hug her.
“Ori! You wouldn’t believe where I’ve been!”
A quick look told Ori that she was not only in one piece, but pink-cheeked and happy. By her eyes, he could tell she had been crying, but not from sorrow or pain.

“Lord Eru said he sent you to talk to your mam!”
“He did! It was wonderful! I so owe Him cookies!”
“I’ll help you make them,” said Fili.
She raised a brow at him.
“Provided we save you some?”
“I shall be your humble taster!” the prince teased.

Bard and Faramir arrived, comically wavering on their feet. In proper lighting, Ori could see the young man was not only drunk but still dressed in his stained traveling clothes, his blond hair askew. Faramir blinked owlishly at everything and Ori realized this was all new to him and sympathized. It had once been all new and very strange to him, too, and he was sober at the time.

Dori rose at the appearance of their new houseguest.
Bard slurred, “Faramir, this’s Dori, the Bleshed Bearer of Erebor. Dori, this’s Faramir Gondor.”
“M’lady,” Faramir managed, bowing, slightly unsteady.
“Mister Faramir!” Dori cried. “You come in and get yourself warm by the fire this instant!
Mistress Dazla! Do we have a blanket for Mister Faramir?”

“Of course, Bearer,” said Mistress Dazla, entering from the hallway with the item.
“Thank you, dear,” said Dori. She took the blanket and wafted it around to drape him like a cape.

“Now, sir, will you kindly tell me why are you scampering about the countryside with only two changes of clothing?”

Bard navigated the edge of the couch and sat on Sigrid’s other side, kissing the top of her head along the way. He blearily stared Fili down.
“Sigrid? Where’d you disappear to tonight?”
“Da! Not where you think!”

Apparently, Faramir was on his own with Dori.
“I-I didn’t know how long I’d be staying, m’lady.”
“We’re sending you right around to Marhdin in the morning. He’ll outfit you properly. Are you hungry? Would you like a cookie?”
“I think I’m rather too drunk to decide,” said Faramir, considering it deeply.
“We can take care of that right off,” said Dori. “Come into the kitchen. Come along.”
“Given his state, Dori,” said Thorin coming in from Bag-End East, “perhaps some hot soup and a little bread are in order.”

“Of course, Thorin dear. Now, Mistress Dazla, does Mister Faramir, have a nightshirt?”
“He does, m’lady. I checked.”
Faramir gaped at her.
“Unless, Mister Faramir, you prefer to go without?” Dori asked.
Thorin smiled and shook his head.
“Dori.”
“Oh, I suppose it can all wait until we’ve sobered him up a little.”
As Dori hustled Faramir into the kitchen, Ori heard Faramir ask, “Sober me up with what, m’lady?”

“Hot coals in your drawers. What do you think, silly man?”
Thorin slid his gaze over to Ori.
“Do you think he’s safe alone with Dori?”
“Perfectly,” said Ori. “Provided he’s a good boy and does what Dori says.”
“Ah. Just like everyone else.”
Meanwhile, Bard was digesting Sigrid’s account of that evening’s adventures.
“Is your mother alright? Is she happy?” Bard asked, clasping Sigrid by the shoulder.
“Da! She’s fine! She said she’s very happy to see you found someone with… er… such a cute
behind.”

Thranduil, now in his everyday robes, swaggered through in time to hear the last of this, and
asked, “Who thinks I have a cute behind? Not that it isn’t true.”
“My late wife!” Bard cried.
“Oh. Well, in that case.” Thranduil addressed the ether. “Thank you, ma’am. I promise I’ll take
good care of him, and I’m sure he’ll take care of it.”
“But…” Bard was quickly losing his composure. Ori thought Bard being drunk didn’t help.
Thranduil neatly skirted the end of the couch to kneel down before his husband.
“My dear? What’s troubling you?”
Bard swallowed.
“She must think I don’t love her anymore.”
“Da! That’s not true!” Sigrid cried.
“How do you know that, Sig?” Bard asked.
“Because she said you were agonizing over it for no reason. The details of how it works are a
little vague, but you will see her again and you’ll be happy together. Most likely, all three of you.”
“Really?” Bard looked like he’d been handed the moon. “Really? We’ll…Wait. All three of
us?”
“As I said, the details are a little vague.”
“Let’s hope she likes tall blonds,” Thranduil mused.
Bard looked back and forth between Sigrid and Thranduil.
“I need to ask more questions, but I can’t decide in what order,” he said. “Also, I think I might cry
like a little girl at some point.”
“I did,” Sigrid confessed.
“So did I,” Fili added.
Thranduil chuckled and gathered his husband up.
“Come along, husband. We have time to check on Bain and the Monster Child, then, I think
we’re late for bed.”
“You’re not going anywhere else tonight, are you?” Bard asked.
“Not unless you’re going, too.”
“Good. Good. G’nacht.” He bent and kissed the top of Sigrid’s head again, and Fili’s for good
measure, then let himself be led out to the receiving room, bound for the guest rooms upstairs.

Ori did an internal check and decided it was time for more food. He went through the kitchen to
grab a snack and say goodnight. As he entered from one door, the hall door opened, and Furh’nk
and Eowyn entered in uniform, cackling evilly. Haldir followed, rather more soberly.
“I knew yeh had it in yeh, our Wynni,” said Furh’nk.
“He had it coming. I just hurried it along. Oh. Hello.”
Faramir, who was sitting at the table, froze with the soup spoon half way to his mouth and a look
of amazement on his face.
“Eowyn! Our Furh’nk! Our Dirty!” Dori cried. She placed a glass of restorative at Faramir’s
elbow as the young man managed not to drop his spoon back in the soup. “Look who’s arrived
early with the presses!”

Faramir rose and bowed, still draped in his blanket.
“Faramir of Gondor at your service!”

Furh’nk and Haldir returned his bow.
Eowyn cried, “You’re Boromir’s little brother!”

Faramir cringed.
“Yes, I-“
“You grew!”
“Yes, I did,” said Faramir. “I’m sorry.”
Her eyes flew open and she laughed delightedly.
Furhn’k said to Dori, “We have presented ourselves as you commanded, Bearer.”
“Yes, and right on time,” said Dori. She waved an imperious hand. “Sitsitsitsit.”
They sat across from Faramir and were presented with their own bowls of soup.
“You look terrible,” said Haldir to Faramir.
“I feel terrible,” said Faramir.
Eowyn winced.
“You didn’t eat one of Poczoh’s fish sandwiches, did you?”
“No, but I think that’s about the only thing that’s gone right since I left home.”
“Good,” she took more bread. “I mean, good that you didn’t eat one. I saw a raphcuctus bird spit one out.”
“What?”
“You didn’t like the party?”
“I don’t remember most of it. What’s a raphcuctus bird?”
“They cannot fly,” said Haldir. “My Lord Celeborn has one as a companion. Has better manners than Glorfindel, but then, who doesn’t.”
Faramir blinked and gave his head a little shake.
“What?”
Dori interrupted.
“Mister Faramir, drink this and eat.”
Faramir obeyed.
“A raphcuctus is a bird,” Haldir clarified as Faramir pulled a face and did his best not to choke. “It is round, and fat and has a beak like an spear.”
“Pet?” Dori turned to Ori and pursed her lips. She nodded toward the table.
This wasn’t a request, and Ori knew it.
He sat next to Faramir, who looked almost embarrassingly grateful for the seeming show of solidarity.
“How are things going out in the city?” Ori asked the soldiers.
“Very well, m’lord,” said Frhn’k. “We’re jus’ warmin’ up, then we have t’ go back an’ help Lord Glorfy move th’ bodies.”
Ori leaned toward Faramir.
“Drunk, not dead,” he offered, reaching for the bread.
A squawk and a storm of black feathers hailed Baluchistan’s arrival. He tumbled from one of the small passages above the cabinets and onto the table to land with three short hops on his rump.
“Oi, Lady Dori, Queenie’s a bit peckish an’ wantin’ somethin’ nice an’ dead.”
“What are…?” Faramir stared at the raven, scattering black fluff all over the table.
“Pardon me, m’lord,” said Baluchistan. “Won’t be a mo. Er, Baluchistan, late a’ th’ Iron Hills, at yer service.”
The raven bowed.
“Faramir of Gondor, at yours… sir.”
“Gondor, eh? How’s our Sandy doin’? Say, lad, yer three sheets t’ th’ wind. Our Lady Dori, he looks more rumpled than me. Ain’t he had th’ cure yet?”
“Not all of it, the naughty man! I try, Mahal knows I try!”
Faramir obediently took up the glass again.
“Down it in one,” Ori advised. “I know it tastes horrible.”
Faramir did so and immediate resorted to his ale.
Eowyn inhaled the steam wafting from her bowl with a smile.
“Mint soup! My favorite!”
“I thought the chicken soup was your favorite,” said Dori.
“That one, too!”
She raised a full spoon to her lips, blew on it, then swallowed it with a little moan of appreciation, and licked her lips.
“Faramir, you have got to have a taste of this,” she insisted. He took to this suggestion immediately. He applied himself to his soup and didn’t look up from it.

“Better have a piece, before Frhn’k takes it all,” said Eowyn.

Faramir stared at her, mystified, then looked down and realized she was offering him the bread board.

“Oh, sorry,” she said. “You can’t eat one of those without a little spread.”

Faramir shot to his feet.

“Excuse me!”

He disappeared back through the door to the living room.

Ori stared after him, then turned to Dori, who waved him to follow, which Ori did.

Faramir, however, had not gone far.

He leaned on the wall just outside the door with his face in his hands.

“Mister Faramir?”

“I - I can’t talk to her right now! I can barely talk as it is.”

“Well, you are pretty drunk. I don’t think she expects you to compose a sonnet.”

“She’s so… oh, Eru, did she grow up! And she must think I’m a total dolt!”

Ori experienced the strange feeling of having done this before.

“Maybe when you’re sober, it will be easier,” Ori soothed.

Faramir raised a brow.

“You’re right,” said Ori. “Sober just makes what you said or did drunk so much worse.”

“How much worse than that could it get?”

“I once got drunk and agonized about balancing my work at the library with giving birth to a dozen badgers. In front of my entire family.”

Faramir cocked his head.

“I’m male,” said Ori.

Faramir sucked in a horrified breath.

Dori stuck her head around the door frame.

“Mister Faramir? You’re soup is growing cold.”

“We’ll be right there, Dori,” said Ori.

“I’m just having a crisis,” said Faramir. “It was bad enough when we were children and she was cute. Those freckles! Now I’m beautiful and she’s an idiot.”

“What?” Ori asked.

Faramir looked to be trying to concentrate, and finally came up with, “Other way ‘round.”

“Hmm,” said Dori. She looked him up and down. “You’ll do nicely.”

She returned to the kitchen.

Faramir looked down at Ori.

“What just happened?”

“Ride-by-Dori-ing. You’re doomed.”

“I knew that.”
Ori and Faramir re-entered just as the three soldiers rose.  
“There you are,” Eowyn sang out.  She crossed to his side and peered up at him.  “You weren’t sick, were you?”

“N-no, ma’am,” Faramir said thickly.

“Good,” she patted his arm then twinkled.  “What’s this ma’am business?  Thank you for not calling me ‘Addled One’, like Bored Mouse does.”

“It’s very rude of him,” Faramir said, trying to convey solemnity and failing.

“Oh, come here, you!  We all but grew up together!”

With that Eowyn hugged him.  Faramir looked stunned then delighted and hugged her back.  Haldir and Furh’nk exchanged mischievous looks and Dori smiled a very satisfied smile.

“Now,” Eowyn released Faramir.

“I sorry, I’m grubby with travel,” Faramir said quickly.

“My advice to you,” said Eowyn, poking him in the stomach, “is to let dear Dori feed you some more, then have a bath, and be sent to bed.  Around here, your best bet is just to do everything Dori tells you.”

Dori murmured darkly, “Your only bet is to do what I tell you.”

Eowyn turned to Haldir and Furh’nk,  “Right, we’re off like a harlot’s dress, come on, you two.”

The three soldiers exited, leaving Faramir staring after her.

“Eru’s sweet world!” Faramir moaned.

“Mister Faramir, dear?” Dori cooed.  “Are you of an elegant sufficiency?”

“I couldn’t be that elegant if I tried,” Faramir mumbled, then, “Huh?”

“You need a bath, deary,” Dori decided.


“And so was she,” Dori giggled.  “And for a brief moment you were filthy together, weren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Faramir breathed.

“Agrib, dear!” caroled Dori.  Agrib appeared and bowed.

“Yes, Blessed Bearer?”

“Mister Faramir is in dire need of a bath, then to be put to bed.  Would you please assist him?  He’s still recovering.”

“Yes, Blessed Bearer,” Agrib bowed again.

Dori made a shooing motion.

“Off you go, Faramir, dear.  You follow our own Agrib and he will assist you.  You can discuss your underclothing with him without embarrassment.  Tomorrow you will wait upon Master Mahrdin after breakfast.”

“Is Master Mahrdin the head of the printers’ guild?” Faramir asked.

“No, darling, he’s a tailor.”

“Why-“
“Because you are not having any pubic meetings in any of that clothing you brought.”
“Why—”
“It won’t do, darling. Run along now, you need a bath.”
“But—”
“Agrib.”
“Yes, Blessed Bearer.”
Ori watched as Agrib all but forcibly removed Faramir from the room. Ori called after him.
“Do you need my presence, Mister Faramir?”
“No, thank you. I shall be brave.”
“Excellent,” Agrib agreed.
Ori considered, then called out.
“Would you like me to accompany you to Master Mahrdin’s tomorrow?”
“Yes!”
“Happy, Dori?” Ori asked, looking sidelong at his beaming brother.
“Oh, yes, yes, completely! He’s perfect.”
“I refused to ask you what he’s perfect for,” Ori teased.
“Good,” Dori laughed, “for I shan’t tell you anything!”
“I’m going to bed,” Ori said with a yawn.
“Off you go, pet. You wash up and pop under the covers. I’ll tell our deary when he comes in.”
With that, Dori kissed Ori’s cheek and hustled him out of the kitchen.

In the morning, Ori kissed Dwalin and slipped noiselessly out of bed. He padded through to the kitchen where Balin was making tea. Dori sat at the table, silver hair spilling loose, in a dressing gown of powder blue, while Mistress Dazla fussed over her.
“Dori?” Ori said as he gave Balin a hug.
“I’m fine, pet. It’s just getting a little hard to sleep. The badgers are active and I’m the size of a cavern.”
“Is Faramir up?” Ori asked.
“Not that I know of, pet.” Dori turned as Agrib arrived carrying a large jug.
“Agrib, dear, do we know anything about our new guest?”
“I just checked on him, Blessed Bearer,” Agrib reported. “He seems ready to wake. I’m going to take him some water to wash his face.
“Thank you,” Dori smiled. Agrib filled the jug from the hot spigot and went out.
“His clothing is dreadful, dearest Bearer!” Mistress Dazla put in.
“He’s going to Master Mahrdin straight after breakfast,” Dori told her. “I’ve had a bat from Mahrdin saying he’s ready to attend to Master Faramir. I had Agrib send his poor excuses for clothing over to Mahrdin earlier, so there would be some things ready for him to wear.
Ori looked askance at Dori.
“What will he wear to breakfast and to go to Master Mahrdin’s?”
“Jim leant me some clothing.”
“I don’t think they enjoy the same sense of style,” said Ori. He had visions of Faramir skulking down the back alleys of Erebor in tights and sequins.
“They’re about the same size, pet. I’m sure Ruelis will make sure the clothes provide adequate coverage. He’ll have to wear his own boots, however. Theoden just had to have the fringed ones Jim leant him. And rather fetching they looked, too.”
“Who would have thought the king of Rohan liked fringe,” said Ori into his tea. Dwalin pushed into the kitchen and wrapped his arms around Ori, kissing the nape of his neck through his hair. Ori giggled and petted Killer, who enthusiastically licked his face.
“Faramir fancies Eowyn,” he whispered.
“Drunk ’r sober?” Dwalin mumbled.
“Eowyn wasn’t drunk and I think both for Faramir,” Ori teased.
“Smar’arse,” Dwalin chuckled and helped himself to Ori’s tea.
Mistress Dazla shooed them all through to the breakfast parlor. Bilbo and Thorin breezed in with the faunts and Tilda, followed by the wargs.

“Is Faramir awake?” Bilbo asked.

“Agrib is tending to him,” Dori replied and poured tea for them. Ori was just digging into the freshly baked ham rolls when Thranduil and Bard entered. Thranduil was amused and Bard looked extremely hung over. Dori made a scolding noise and whisked out to the kitchen. Fili and Sigrid entered, followed by the younger set all talking and laughing. Eowyn was with them and patted Bard’s shoulder.

“Clean up was finished before second hour after midnight,” she told him cheerily. “The flush went through without a problem and your streets are pristine.”

“Mshdfgh,” Bard managed.

“He says ‘thank you’,” Thranduil cooed.

“This way, if you please, sir.” Ori head Agribs voice.

Faramir entered the room, dressed in his boots, a pair of black trousers and a long white tunic with white embroidery. He did a double take at the number of people in the room. A chorus of greeting showered him and he bowed and returned them. Dori came back in, put a cup of restorative in front of Bard and pulled Faramir over to sit near her, conveniently next to Eowyn.

As they ate, Thorin glanced at Fili.

“Master Kir is up and taking nourishment, according to Master Minta ,” said Fili.

“Good to know he survived to savor his victory,” said Bilbo.

Tharkûn appeared.

“Bloody cheek.”

Rigel appeared.

“Stop whining,” he admonished the other wizard.

Ara appeared.

“He’ll stop whining when you stop whining, which is never,” she said, and her teacup filled itself.

Thorin nodded to them and a call of greeting went around the table.

“And?” Thorin prompted Fili.

“I’m off with Bofur to inspect the shoring for the new lifts to the zinc mine. I’m sure Lady Kadis will be happy to have us out of her beard. Then I have a…er… project I’m working on in the forges.”

He cut his eyes toward Sigrid, who politely pretended not to notice.

“Excellent,” said Thorin. “Kili?”

“Riding with the guard this morning,” Kili reported. “Then, after lunch, I’m taking target practice with a new crop of archers. Faramir?”

“Your highness?”

Kili chuckled.

“At the breakfast table I’m only Kili. It’s hard to be all royal when you’re spilling eggs and bacon down the front of your tunic. Anyhow, Eowyn says you shoot as well as wield the sword and javelin. Would you like to come with us?”

“Oh, go on, Mister Faramir,” Dori encouraged. “Dear Eowyn is going as well, aren’t you, my dear?”

This looked like news to Eowyn, but she had been around long enough to know a command when she heard one.

“Sounds good, if you don’t mind the company, Tauri?”

Tauriel blinked.

“Not at all. Husband, don’t forget we have to go over the rough draft of the presentation.”

Kili winced, but nodded.

“You’re going to find every one of my spelling errors aren’t you.”

“I am determined,” she warned. “Even if it kills us both.”

“Brave girl,” said Dis. “Thorin, Randibur has a trade proposal he’d like to go over with you, but the envoy from the Blacklocks is being a dumdumel and keeps changing her mind about the terms.”
“Where is Randi this morning?” Thorin asked.
“He said they were taking a breakfast meeting over it. Don’t be surprised if he arrives with a split lip. The envoy has quite a sucker punch.”
“You warned him, I take it.”
“Of course,” said Dis airily.
“Of course,” Thorin echoed and she wrinkled her nose at him. He turned to Dori.
“Bearer?”
“I have plans of my own to accomplish,” said Dori with a dangerous air of mystery.
There wasn’t any mystery, however. Ori’s birthday was in two days.
Dori continued, “Ori will escort dear Faramir to Master Mahrdin’s after breakfast.”
“Why?” Eowyn looked at Faramir.
“The Blessed Bearer and Mistress Dazla don’t like my clothes,” Faramir told her with a grin.
“The clothes you have on are perfectly fine,” she said. “Though, they do look familiar.”
“They’re on loan from the circus,” he said.
“Oh.”
“Master Faramir,” Bujni addressed the man in formal tones. “In most circumstances, I should suggest that you visit the show rooms of my precious diamond, but I believe that in your case, the Blessed Bearer is very wise in sending you to Master Mahrdin’s. His assistant Pika will serve your tastes admirably. In due course, should you wish to become more daring in your statements of fashion, I shall alert my precious diamond.”
Faramir nodded and said “Thank you, Lord Bujni.”
“We don’t dislike your clothes, dear Faramir,” Dori interrupted. “They are simply not suite to your station here in Erebor.”
Faramir stared.
“Ma’am…Blessed Bearer, I-”
“Dori,” Dori corrected.
“Dori, I-,” Faramir tried again.
“You may call me ‘Auntie’,” Dori cooed.
“You’re in now,” Eowyn giggled.
“Er…Auntie… I work with the presses. I get covered in ink.”
“Well, my own dearest badger is the king’s scribe, and I can’t tell you how many times I’ve had to scrub ink off his nose.”
Brandy raised her head out from Balin lap and snorted. Faramir’s eyes widened.
“We’re no’ talkin’ about ye, wee one,” Balin patted her. Brandy disappeared from sight again.
Ori looked at Faramir, whose eyebrow were almost at his hairline. The man made a move to look until the table.
“Don’t,” Bard said around a mouthful of fried apples and onions. “There are wargs, cats, and probably birds under there.”
Baluchistan and Quartz arrived together with the other household ravens and swarmed over the platter of chopped ham Miss Oqizla carried in. She put down two small baskets and nodded to Quartz and Blu.
“Breakfast for your mates.”
“Ta, love!” Blu bellowed in a small explosion of feathers.
Faramir sat up again and gazed at the flock of bickering ravens on the table. Ori thought he should help.
“Faramir, Dori calls me his badger because I’m the youngest. And I’ve been scrubbing my own nose since I was forty.”
Faramir thought for a moment, and finally he asked, “Who scrubs the nose of the actual badger?”
“Ah, she’s a well-grown lass,” said Balin. He chucked a fried egg under the table. Chewing sounds ensued. “She kin take care a’ herself.”
“Brandy’s very clever,” Eowyn told him and helped herself and Faramir to more ham rolls.
Thranduil lifted the crock of elderberry jam up to his face and peered in, before industriously digging
out the leftovers with the jam spoon. Bard watched him then sighed. “Just stick your finger in and get the rest.”

“Are you referring to the jam or something else?” Thranduil asked.

“Badgers’re present!” Kili called out.

“It’s just jam, Kili,” Tilda objected.

Faramir mused, half to himself, “And I don’t think the actual badger thinks of jam one way or the other.”

“Aye, she does,” Balin put in helpfully. “Gooseberry’s her favorite.”

“Gooseberry jam,” Frodo sighed, enraptured.

“Perhaps, if yeh pay particular attention in yer lessons, I’ll take yeh an’ our Sam away this afternoon for a gooseberry tart,” said Balin with a wink.

Frodo sat bolt upright and turned his ‘please, oh please’ puppy dog eyes on his Uncle Bilbo.

“I’m the gatekeeper of the treats, apparently,” Bilbo mused. “Like putting Nori in charge of the henhouse.”

“I ain’t done that since Chicken!” Nori protested from somewhere under the door sill.

Faramir looked terribly excited.

“I’m pleased to make your acquaintance, Master Nori!”

“Aye, they all say that, ’til they get to know me,” Nori warned.

“It’s true,” said Dori. “Nori, are you planning on joining us at table, or do you intend to stick your head up through at some point and take a bite off my plate?”

“If you insist, our Dori.”

“I do not, horrid weasel. Come and say a proper hello to Mister Faramir.”

“Oi! Don’t you malign me ferrets! They’re refined young ladies, all proper manners an’ such.”


“Cos’ I’m too slippery,” said Nori as he rose through the table and swept Faramir a low bow.

“Hullo, our Dori’s latest project. Me advice is: run away quick as you can, ’fore it’s too late.”

“I call her ‘Auntie’,” said Faramir.

Nori shook his head.

“We’ve lost another one. That ham roll?”

“What are the majick words?” Dori prompted.

“Dori, I’m hungry.”

“That will do. Sit.”

“Woof,” said Nori obediently, though he did as he was told.

He snatched the last two ham rolls out from under the ravens’ talons.

They rounded on him and cursed him out at volume.

“Bloody dwarf!” Beryl groused. “Swipe an egg right out of my arse, why don’t you?”

Faramir finished his tea and set it down with a shake of his head.

“Bard, what was in that ale last night? I think it made me hallucinate.”

“Ale,” Bard answered with a raised eyebrow.

“Why? What did you think you saw?” Dis leaned forward in amusement.

“I thought I saw wargs all brushed and clean like household dogs, wearing collars with medallions on them. Ridiculous, I know.”

Faramir looked surprised when everyone chuckled.

Thorin lifted the table cloth beside him.

“Come, my damlings.”

Butter and Sugar slithered out from under the table and, tails wagging and tongues out, panting, sat beside Thorin.

Thorin smiled benignly at the Gondorian as Frodo grabbed Sugar in a hug.

“Faramir, welcome to Erebor.”

Faramir grinned.

“Thank you, your majesty. I think I’m going to like it here.”
“And we don’t use titles at home.” Thorin added.
“Thank you,…Thorin.”

Shortly thereafter, he and Ori were shooed out of Fundin House, bound for the tailor. Eowyn rode with them a little ways.

“Is it always like this in the king’s house?” Faramir asked.
As they passed into the tunnel out of the cavern, Eowyn waved to the guards on duty.
“Oh, no, it’s very quiet at the moment.”
“Yes,” said Ori. “Wait until all the dwarven under monarchs are here, along with the elves from Greenwood, Imladris and Lorien. And, then there’s Mister Wandi.”

“And Mellon,” Eowyn reminded him with a chuckle.

“Mister Wandi is King Thranduil’s son, am I right?” Faramir asked. “The haiderresser?”
“Stylist,” she corrected loftily. “Don’t let him get his hands on your hair, you’ll end up with a miniature of the citadel of Minas Tirith on your head.”

“Tell me that’s an exaggeration,” he pleaded, laughing.
Eowyn and Ori looked at each other then giggled.
“Never,” they chorused.

A screech cut the air that sent Faramir’s hand for his sword.

“Oh, Mahal’s bloody teeth,” Ori groaned. “Brace yourself.”

“We’re under attack?” Faramir asked.

“Not exactly,” said Ori.
Vi and Margr must have been purposely loitering in the square down from the entrance of the royal cavern. That was the best Ori could guess. He saw their carriage parked sideways in the middle of the road and the twin dwarrowdam juggernauts were upon them, each dressed in bright orange and gold ruffles which billowed and snapped around their substantial forms. Ori had an awful feeling that they were dressed like piles of dead leaves.

“What in Eru’s name?” Faramir asked in a hiss.

“Repeat after me,” Ori warned. “We have an appointment with Mahrdin. Dori set it up. We can’t be late.”

“No,” Faramir agreed. “We can’t be late.”
Eowyn nudge him.

“Tell them they look wonderful.”

“What are they?” Faramir asked, a grin plastered painfully across his face.

“Your worst nightmare in matching outfits,” said Ori. “Dori’s ladies in waiting.”

“Oooooooo, our Vi!” Margr bawled. “There he is! Ain’t he a handsome feller?”

“He is! He is!” Vi gushed.

Faramir had the sense to dismount his horse, Elboron, and go to meet them, as Elboron looked ready to shy and bolt. Eowyn called her greetings from Windfola’s back with her hand on Elboron’s halter.

Ori felt it was his duty to go as Faramir’s second. Happily, Honda was never anything but amused by the sisters.

Faramir was introduced, bowed gallantly upon introductions, suffered to be kissed on the cheek by each, and then to have their orange lipstick wiped off his cheeks with spit on matching handkerchiefs.

Like Boromir, Faramir was a gentlemanlike soldier, and he answered their rather personal questions as honestly, and as briefly, as he could.

“Yeh’ll grow yer beard now yer here, our Faramir,” said Vi as she reached up and patted his cheek. “This stubble will never do in Erebor.”

“He’s got them strong features, our Vi,” said Margr. “He mebbe kin get away with it, unlike our poor Kill, bless his heart.”

“Ooo, an’ a dimple on yer chin, laddie,” said Vi, tapping the item with a saucy forefinger. “Yeh know wha’ they say: A dimple on th’ chin means Morgoth’s within.”
Ori clenched his teeth under his smile. As pleasant as Faramir was, Ori doubted he relished being compared to the ultimate evil, even in the form of a flirty comment.

“Ma’am?” Faramir asked.

“It means, we’re bettin’ yer a bit naughty under them nice manners,” said Margr. “Our Wynni, best look after yourself an’ th’ other lads an’ lassies, an’ le’ us know if he’s no’ a complete gentleman. Yeh don’ have a sweetie back west, our Faramir?”

Faramir coughed off to the side and apologized. Ori thought the shake of his shoulders had more to do with self-control than sickness. The man recovered himself admirably.

“No, m’ladies, I do not.”

Vi said, “We’ll take care a’ tha’. Here, our Mar, who do we know needs a feller?”

Ori cut in, “I’m sorry, ladies, but Dori has set us an appointment with Master Mahrdin. We can’t keep him waiting.”

“Bes’ shoo, then, chook,” said Margr. “We’re on our way t’ see if our Dori needs anythin’, an’ we was goin’ t’ bring a dozen ikars, but, it’s more like a half dozen now.”

The carriage was righted, the ladies climbed aboard and went on their way.

“Sorry about that,” Ori murmured as the three of them waved to the sisters.

“I like them,” said Faramir.

Eowyn stared at him.

“You like them?”

“They’re like my old nanny, from when I was a boy. Except, you know, moreso.”

“Eru, you are a sick pup.” Eowyn bent over Windfola’s neck laughing. “Don’t you think so, Ori?”

“He hasn’t met Red Queen, yet.” Ori teased in his turn.

“Do I want to know who Red Queen is and what she is actually queen of?” Faramir glanced back and forth between them, obviously ready to play the game. “Should I make an appointment to pay my respects or swear my fealty?”

“Don’t swear your fealty,” Eowyn told him. “She’ll make you bring her food.”

“Bring her food,” Faramir repeated.

“Bones,” Ori added.

“She eats bones.” Faramir grinned. “I think you’re both making this up.”

Ori and Eowyn laughed.

“Not really,” Eowyn said. “Red Queen is what she calls herself and she is the matriarch of a huge flock of bone breakers, you know, some people call them eagle vultures.”

“Great Eru!” Faramir gasped. “I’ve seen such birds flying. They’re about as tall as a dwarf when perched.”

“The flock moved here when…” Ori searched for a good word.

“When Ori and his bullies blew up three of the Misty Mountains.” Eowyn finished.

“Now that I read about!” Faramir turned to Ori. “Is it true you brought back the west doors created by Celebrimbor and Narvi?”

“Yes,” Eowyn went on, “and Ori cleverly suggested the Red Queen offer them to Thorin as a gift.”

“Ori,” Faramir laughed. “What was the original name for the members of your quest? Surely calling them bullies was a joke.”

Eowyn and Ori gleefully related how they came to be called bullies.

“And you joined them in Lórien?” Faramir said to Eowyn.

“Of course!” she cried. “I refused to be left behind. We had a glorious time and Auntie Gladdy let me wear the jumpsuit she didn’t want.”

“Auntie Gladdy!” Faramir threw back his head in laughter. “I have heard many names for the White Witch of the Golden Wood but never Auntie Gladdy. Had I been among you, I would have joined your ‘bullies’, too, Ori.”

“I would have been glad to have you, Faramir,” Ori told him.

“He couldn’t come,” Eowyn stated with a glint a mirth in her eyes.
“And why not, m’lady?” Faramir demanded.
“There wasn’t a jumpsuit for you!”
“Alas.” Faramir sighed deeply.
“I’m sure Lady Galadriel would have insisted the elves make you one,” said Ori, “but, Dipfa wouldn’t approve. She made the others, you know, and the ‘replacement’ the Lorien elves made for me was not up to her exacting standards.”
“The uniform you lost to the orcs?” Faramir teased.
“You make it sound like I lost it in a card game,” Ori teased.
Eowyn said, “Oops, I’ve gone farther with you than I intended. Faramir, I’ll see you this afternoon. Ori, see you at dinner!”
She rode off and Ori glanced up at Faramir and coughed.
“That’s a lovely shade of red you’ve turned, Mister Faramir. It’s nice to know I’m not the only one who does that.”
“Pardon?” Faramir asked, turning to him.
Ori rolled his eyes.
“Come on, or we’ll really be late, and that is not only rude, but punishable by death.”
“Really?”
“Do you want to find out?”
“No, not particularly. Lead on.”

Pika met them at the door.
“Lord Ori, Mister Faramir, welcome, and please brace yourselves.”
Pika closed and locked the door after them and nodded to Ori to seat himself. Ori sat in the chair Dwalin had occupied when he had brought Ori there ages ago. Ori squirmed. He and Dwalin hadn’t had much time together even with the kings gone. He wanted a day to have Dwalin to himself and spoil him.
Ori heard quick, heavy steps and turned to find Master Mahrdin bearing down on them with blood in his eyes.
“Mister Faramir!” the tailor cried, holding out Faramir’s trousers. “These are patched!”
“Er… yes? I thought I did a rath-“
“A gentledw- gentleman in your position should be far more carefully attired! That is why you pay a tailor!”
“I don’t actually have a tailor, Master Mahrdin.”
“I can see that!”
The dwarf took a deep breath and got hold of himself with great effort. He bowed stiffly and said in a voice closer to normal, “Mahrdin, son of Greeneld, at your service.”
Faramir bowed.
“Faramir of Gondor, at yours and your family’s.”
“You see,” said Mahrdin, “you are a gentleman, and, with your indulgence, we will attire you as one.”
“Thank you, Master Mahrdin. I did try to explain to Auntie that I am a printer and am likely to be covered in ink. Also, I apologize if I’m being rude but, I don’t know your terms for service.”
Pika started at him, incredulous, and Mahrdin waved a careless hand.
“The Blessed Bearer has authorized me to charge it to the Fundins’ account. Pray, climb down from that towering rage before you even begin. Do you want to argue with Bearer Dori over a gift? I thought not. You have excellent survival instincts. Now, strip.”
Faramir did so, obediently. Ori was relieved to see his under pinnings were not patched and were obviously of good quality.
Master Mahrdin called for his step stool and went to work, calling out measurements for Pika to record, then sending Pika for linens and cottons and another apprentice to the back of the storeroom for sturdy canvas, all black or dark blue.
“I envision several sets of work clothes and, of course, a few sets of casual clothing, and two finer
sets, for meetings and slightly more formal settings, such as dinner at the king’s table.”

“Master Mahrdin, I appreciate your forethought,” said Faramir, “but I am not sure I’ll be here very l-

“Pika, the Gondor book.”

“Yes, Master Mahrdin.”

Pika scampered off and returned with a thick volume of fashions as worn by the men in Minas Tirth.
Robes, Regalia, and a Repast.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Dori’s fussing is almost at a fever pitch! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The assistants reappeared with armfuls of things. Faramir was shown to the curtained room to change into new underthings, then he was brought out again with a very nice pair of tan trousers and a matching pale tawny shirt. Pika disappeared into the back and carried forth a leaf green, padded over-tunic embroidered with the tree of Gondor in gold thread. Faramir was fitted with an intricately stamped pale green belt with a gold buckle.

He was led to a large mirror to approve.

Ori wondered if he had looked as surprised as Faramir did when he had first seen himself dressed at Mahrdin’s. “As you see, sir,” Mahdrin commented as he walked around Faramir, inspecting the man. “We have kept the basic design currently popular in Gondor but added length to the tunic, and the belt is in keeping with the fashions here in Erebor.”

“It’s very stylish.” Faramir turned and twisted to see himself from the back. “Do I wear this to royal occasions?”

Mahdrin looked horrified, then quickly schooled his face before Faramir noticed.

“No, sir, this is an everyday suit.”

“Good thing I have a big work apron,” Faramir murmured.

“You are pleased with it?” Mahdrin asked politely.

“Very, I—”

“I’m having several of these made up,” Mahdrin informed him. “Pika, the formal robes!”

Pika disappeared and returned moments later with two assistants, Ori didn’t know.

“You see, sir,” Mahdrin explained. “I had not yet seen you and did not know how the colors would sit with your features. The design is the same, but we have a selection of colors for you to try.”

The upper tunic part of the robe was much like what Aragorn and Elrond wore with the high, round neck and long sleeves, but the material was heavily embroidered with gems. The tunic did not end at the knees but reached the floor. It was split on either side just below the hips. Under this were matching trousers and boots in the dwarrow style with silver caps.

The robe was entirely black with silver embroidery.

“It’s impressive,” Faramir said gazing at himself in the mirror. “I don’t usually wear black.”

“Indeed,” Mahdrin agreed. “You look positively ill in it, sir. Pika, the bright one.”

Faramir put this one on and took one look at himself and said with finality.

“No.”

Ori suppressed a giggle. The robe was the same as the black one, but Ori thought Mahdrin had taken inspiration from hobbits. The robe was white with broad stripes of bouquets of flowers and ribbons embroidered and set with small round pearls.

“Springtime?” Mahdrin suggested delicately.

“No.”

“Pika!”

The final robe Ori like immediately and Faramir’s face lit up.
“This is perfect,” Faramir said with a grin.

Again the robe was in the same style but shimmered with all the hues of red and orange. There was no embroidery, but for around the neck and the cuffs of the sleeves, a thin line of copper ribbon with copper beads sewn in squares. Mahdrin nodded and Pika brought out a pair of boots dyed scarlet with copper toes. Faramir was all the colors of fall, and tall like a maple tree.

“Do you think I offended Master Mahdrin?” Faramir asked as they stepped out of the shop.

“I think you just shocked him,” said Ori. “I did, too, when he first met me. I didn’t have a tailor, either.”

“I would think, as a lord—”

“I’ve only been a lord for about eight months. Before that I was a back alley scribe in Dale.”

“Really? You seem to fit in so well.”

“That’s what Dwalin says. It didn’t hurt that the Durins took to me quickly.”

“They took to me rather quickly as well. It probably doesn’t hurt that my brother is so popular.” Ori smiled at him.

“My brother is the Bearer of Erebor. Don’t worry, you’ll soon come into your own.”

“I thought the Bearer was female.”

“Dori’s both.”

Faramir was quiet for so long, Ori looked at him with raised brows.

“Are you shocked? I know not all men are all right with that.”

“I’m used to being able to tell the difference.”

“Um… Sorry?”

They mounted up and rode slowly towards the royal cavern. Faramir looked about him, taking in the sights of dwarrow busy at all manner of crafts, the pale light shining in from the very top of the mountain, the red glow from the depths where the forges lay. The inside levels criss-crossed with great streets that met in open markets and shops and others filled with residential areas carved out of the mountain through the ages that the dwarrow had lived there. Ori watched the man as a slow smile came to Faramir’s face. The man paid little attention to his horse as he tried to see everything at once. He finally looked back at Ori, who grinned.

“It’s a lot to take in, isn’t it?” Ori suggested.

“I was born and raised in the White City, which is great among men, but here it seems but a village and I an uncouth yokel.”

Ori laughed.

“Cities are cities. I’m sure you have forges and markets in Minas Tirith. Lots of places to eat and shops to buy things.”

“We do, but this is amazing! How is there light coming from above? Is there some sort of immense light source?”

“Yes,” Ori said breezily. “We call it the sun.”

“Oh, stop teasing and tell me,” Faramir chuckled.

“I was as surprise as you when I first saw it,” Ori confided. “As I told you, I grew up in a back slum of Dale. The first time I ever saw the inside of the mountain was when Dwalin brought me home. Dwalin told me all about the small opening at the very top of the mountain. They can only open it when it’s not storming outside. They refract the light with mirrors and crystals, so everything gets daylight on good days.”

“That is amazing,” Faramir said, a little breathless. “I have heard and read much of your people’s feats of engineering but never dreamed of such. Mithrandir seems to have left out a great deal when I was an occasional pupil of his.”

“Oh,” Ori was instantly curious. “Are you training to be a wizard?”

“Me?” Faramir gasped around laughter. “No, but wizardry isn’t the only thing he knows. Some of it’s even useful.”

“You don’t let him know that, I hope!”

“Certainly not!” Faramir cried, drawing himself up loftily. Then he collapsed into chuckles.
“Bilbo always warns me not to encourage him. The two of them have an incredible mutual irritation society.”

They rode on for a ways. Ori pointed out this and that as they meandered a bit through the mountain.

Finally, Ori asked, “What did you study with Thark- um, Mithrandir? I can’t imagine he’s a patient teacher. He never stays in one place for more than a minute.”

“It wasn’t anything he planned, or I planned, or that my father was privy to, of course. It was my secret, feeble bit of defiance.”

“I can’t imagine he’s a favorite with Mister Denethor.”

Faramir grinned.

“When I was a boy, every time Mithrandir visited the city, my father would growl about it, and warn me not to trust him. Then, as soon as Father’s back was turned I ran off to find Mithrandir and followed him around like a puppy. I discovered, if I asked questions, I only got the standard elven yes and no answer, but if I just kept quiet, and waited, he’d start muttering to himself and then he’d start muttering in my general direction. Bilbo says it’s because Mithrandir can’t resist having an audience.”

Ori burst out laughing.

“Yes, that’s something I’ve noticed, too.”

When they got back to Fundin House, they went to the sitting room.
Ori grabbed a throw pillow off the couch and tossed it to Faramir.

“What’s this for?” Faramir asked.

“To scream into. I figured you needed it.”

“You are too kind, Lord Ori,” Faramir chuckled and threw it back. Nori-Pori leapt on the pillow in mid-air, dropped with it to the floor and tussled with it. Faramir went over and scooped Nori-Pori up, then cradled him like a baby. Ori’s ears were assailed by loud purring.

“Beautiful cat,” Faramir said, nuzzling between the ears.

“They’re the three kittens my cat, Sassy, had. Dwalin rescued them during the scouring of Dale but Sassy was gone.”

“Sassy is a good name for a cat,” Faramir grinned. “What’s this one’s name?”

“That’s Nori-Pori. His fur matches Noris hair.”

“An excellent match. How does Nori the dwarf cope?”

“He ignores it.”

“Sensible.”

“That’s Mask coming through.” Ori pointed as the purring calico wandered into the room, tail high.
Faramir took in Mask who trotted over and sniffed his boots.

“Animals with bisected faces like the are said to be magical.” Faramir tucked Nori-Pori into one arm and reached down and picked up Mask with the other. Mask happily climber onto his shoulder while Nori-Proi industriously licked the man’s nose.

“Thank you, my friend,” Faramir chuckled. “I take it, my morning ablutions were not to your standards?”

Dori bustled in, Powder trailing after.

“Oh, there you are, Fari dear. Pet, did everything go well with Master Mahdrin?”

“Faramir has a brilliant royal robe,” Ori said happily.

“Auntie, I’d like to thank you,” Faramir began.

“Oh pish-tosh!” Dori interrupted. “You need proper clothing while you’re in Erebor. I can’t understand how your father let you go with what you had. It will never do. He must have gone positively silly when he advised you on what you needed.”

“I thought I’d be working with the guild, Auntie, not staying in the royal residence.”

“Where else would you have gone, dear? Now, no more nonsense. You both have just time for a little lunch, then Fari dear is off to play archery with the boys. Off you got to the breakfast parlor.
Where’s Eowyn?”
“We haven’t seen her since before we went to Mahdrin,” Ori explained.
“I’m back!” Eowyn called from the receiving room.
“Oh!” Dori rushed out.
Faramir and Ori looks at each other.
“It’s wonderful,” Faramir said and followed Ori to the parlor. Faramir still carried the cats and rubbed their ears, speaking softly to them. Ori came in to see Fanny, in her coat, peeking in from the window. He grabbed the bowl of fruit from the sideboard and opened the door. Fanny’s trunk snaked around him.
“Ori, why is there an oliphaunt hugging you?” Faramir sounded confused.
Fanny released Ori and she hunkered down further to see into the parlor.
“This is Fanny,” Ori stated proudly. “She works with the circus and lives in our stable. She’s a dear friend of mine. Fanny, this is Faramir. He’s visiting from Gondor.”
Faramir came forward. Nori-Pori leapt from his arms and ran up Fanny’s trunk. Fanny looked Faramir over then patted him on the head with her trunk. Faramir offered his arm and, wrapping her trunk around it, Fanny clasped it for a moment.
“Well met, ma’am,” Faramir said with a bow. “You are the first oliphaunt I have ever been privileged to meet.”
Fanny huffed politely and release him.
“You didn’t see her at Last Harvest?”
“When you’re that drunk, you tend to dismiss enormous oliphaunts, pink or not.”
“Pink?” Ori muttered to himself.
“Pet,” Dori cried coming into the room. “Close that door immediately! There’s a howling gale going in!”
“It’s barely a breeze, Dori, or they would have shut the great window at the top of the mountain.”
“Breeze, my beard! The dwarf who controls that thing is most fickle and taken to strong drink. Fanny! You go back to the stable right now, young lady! You’ll catch a chill and then what am I going to tell Jim and Ruelis?”
Fanny snorted in amusement, the tip of her trunk tugged gently on Ori’s hair. Fanny got to her feet, trumpeted, and trotted away to the stable, the bowl of fruit tucked against her.
“Pet!” Dori scolded, closing and latching the door. “That fruit was for later!”
“Fanny needed a snack,” Ori teased.
“Oh, did she now? I suppose she told you that?”
“It’s cold outside, you don’t want Fanny to take a chill!” Ori cooed innocently.
“Pet, you sit right down, and you, too, Fari dear. Eowyn?”
“Coming, Auntie.”
Eowyn came in. She had changed out of her uniform and wore a plain blue tunic with a brown bodice, over a pair of puffed blue breeches tucked into her brown boot. She dropped a pile of weaponry and leather on a chair nearby and sat down opposite Ori and Faramir.
“Where’s your coat?” Dori demanded.
Eowyn chucked her chin at the pile.
“Quilted leather jacket,” she said, and grinned up at Mistress Dazla as the housekeeper ladled out a bowl of thick, rich stew and passed it to her.
“Thank you, Mistress Dazla,”
“You be sure to wear it, too, young lady,” Mistress Dalza reminded her. Eowyn giggled.
Mistress Dalza turned her eagle eyes of Faramir when she handed him his bowl.
“Thank you, ma’am,” he said politely.
“Blessed Bearer,” Mistress Dalza said.
Dori rounded on Faramir.
“What you have on is fine, Fari dear,”
“Thank you, Auntie.”
“Where is your coat?”
“Upstairs, Auntie.”
“Humph,” Dori glared. “Eat and then go and get it. I must know if it is fit for our mountain air.”
“Air is air, Dori,” Ori protested on Faramir’s behalf.
“Mountain air is colder,” Dori frowned. “You eat up, pet.”
Mistress Dazla and Dori flounced out. Ori looked at Eowyn and Faramir who were both vainly trying to stifle laughter and the three of them ate their lunch.
Ori reflected that Dori had best give birth soon, or the lot of them would be wandering the sitting room, muffled to the ears.

Ori spent the beginning of the afternoon in his work room. He had finished the preliminary sketches and the cartoon on his prepared canvas for his painting and now he went about laying down the basic shades to fill in the shapes of the figures and principle objects around them. After working on a miniature of Sigrid, it came as something of a relief to have what felt like miles of room to depict gigantic people. The canvas was nearly as tall as himself and twice as wide, to suit the monumental nature of such a thing.
He soon found himself dancing from one side of the canvas to another, building up paint. He had to go to the opposite end of the room from time to time, to see what he had done.
He took a cup of tea, with Dori’s long-suffering indulgence, then decided he would go and see all those new shops in Steam Alley, and perhaps search out the shade of blue paint for Thorin’s eyes. He was unhappy with what he’d mixed so far himself. Having been that close to said eyes, he felt the need to capture them on canvas exactly.
Ori missed Dwalin, who had been working what felt like constantly for the past few weeks. Just sleeping beside Dwalin was no longer enough for Ori. He knew he was being greedy, he knew this was the nature of Dwalin’s craft, but he wanted more time with this husband when they were both awake, Dwalin was not subduing idiots, and Ori was not the very self-conscious center of attention.
There was a new public stable in East Dale, very well-kept and well-run. Ori had asked Nori about it before he even considered leaving Honda there. Ori had not been at all surprised to discovered that the stable belonged to a dwarf named Tareet. This was another of Nori’s aliases.
Perhaps it was for the best that Nori never slept more than a few hours at a time.
Ori had dressed in casual clothes, hoping to blend in a little, and now he pulled up his hood as he walked into the street, which bustled with people of all descriptions.

The square in front of Vi and Margr’s house had undergone quite a transformation in itself. The air, for one thing, smelled noticeably cleaner, probably because there was no sewage flowing in the gutters, or coal smoke belching from the chimneys. The flats that fronted on the square had been freshly painted, some had window boxes, though nothing grew in them right now. Every house had glass windows, with sturdy shutters to protect them at night or in case of storm. The one or two shacks that had huddled against the tenements were gone, replaced with small, tidy cottages with little, fenced-in yards.

Ori worried for a moment about the people who had lived in those shacks. He wondered where they had gone.

“Purty, ain’t it.”

Ori turned to face a dam with a pickaxe on her shoulder. She had obviously just come from the mines.

“It is,” said Ori.

“King Bard ordered all th’ houses shored up ‘r replaced, an’ th’ rubbish taken away, an’ th’ sisters paid t’ have it all prettified.”

“The sis- Mistress Vi and Mistress Margr?”

“Aye. Now tha’ they’re heroes, an’ famous f’r their fashions, an’ in with th’ swells, folk come t’ th’ neighborhood jus’ t’ look at their house. Then th’ gawkers go on t’ Steam Alley, t’ th’ pastry shop. Mistress Vi says it gives th’ quality somethin’ nice t’ look at. Or it may’ve been Mistress Margr. Can’t rightly tell one from another.”

“It is a challenge,” Ori admitted.

A window in one of the flats swung open on a hinge and a dam with a pebble in her arms called out, “Are yeh comin’ in, love, ‘r goin’ t’ have yer tea on th’ sidewalk?”

“I’m on me way, me precious gem.”

The dam at the window snorted and shut the window.

“I’ll let you get to it,” said Ori. He grinned as he headed up Steam Alley.

Nor could he believe what he saw there. The flats still rose above the shops on both sides, but instead of pawn shops and rag and bone establishments, now those shops sold books, or stationary and art supplies. iKeyha had a shop, and the Gondorian bakery had taken over the vacant lot next to their building, and Ori saw they had flagged it, and there were benches around a fire pit, cheerily ablaze, where dwarrow, elves and men socialized and sipped steaming hot drinks.

The pub on the corner remained, but even this seemed to have come up in the world.

He stopped when he realized that iKroth had opened a branch here, and went in, completely agog.

The moment he stepped inside, the luscious scents of ink and paper flowed over him, with under notes of pigments and graphite.

And it was busy. It looked like every scribe and apprentice in Dale had decided to descend on the
shop at once. They seemed mainly centered around the inks, at the far end of the shop. The sounds and smells told him someone was mixing custom colors, and it impressed him that they had an ink specialist in-house.

He made a note to go back there himself when it was a little less fraught.

Someone had built a winding staircase through the middle of the ceiling, and he looked up into what were once flats, but the walls were gone, and instead he saw sheets upon sheets of handmade paper, hanging on long racks. He recognized these as the sort bookbinders used for end pages. Quickly he climbed to the next floor. At the desk, a manager haggled with a customer over a large order, and shop assistants ran back and forth, assembling the goods. Others waited on customers. A young dam crouched at a lower shelf, apparently restocking pots of glue.

She turned and looked up at him with a smile. By her dress and her hairstyle, Ori guessed she was an unmarried dam of the Stiffbeard clan.

“What may I do for you, good sir?” she asked.

“Nothing at the moment, thank you,” he said. “This is my first time in. It’s quite something. Is it always this busy?”

“Yes, and good thing for me. I just got to Dale, and I needed this job. A pack of us Stiffbeard girls travelled here together, and got a place above the old pub in Steam Alley Track.”

“Welcome,” he said. “And you live here now? In Steam Alley, I mean?”

“Yes, a lot of young dwarrow have moved here.”

“I grew up in Steam Alley,” he said. “I don’t remember it as a neighborhood people wanted to move into, never mind enough people to support a place like this.”

“Oh, there’s a school here now, and Lord Ori, the king’s scribe, grew up here, too. Did you know him?”

“Yes, a little. But I’ve been gone, living under the mountain for quite awhile.”

“It’s considered good luck for journeyman scribes to buy the supplies for their master pieces here,” she said. “Then, they go and put a pretty stone near the gate of the house where he grew up. The dam who lives there now with her badgers, she collects up the nicest ones and she’s put in a path of them through her garden. You should take a look.”

He thanked her, and soon found himself walking down the alley, eaten up with curiosity.

For one thing, he had no idea that Dori had sold the house, never mind to a dam with badgers. For another, he couldn’t imagine calling the muddy track in front of the door and around the sides of the house a garden.

Ori did a double take when he reached the shack where Dam Rittl lived. It had never been much, just a sagging old box in a lot surrounded by riotously growing herbs and other plants. The plants were still there, but the shack was now a tiny house. As he passed, Dam Rittl herself came to the door to admit another dam, who seemed distressed. Dam Rittl looked well-fed, her braids and beard tidy and her tunic clean. Ori had been used to thinking of her as elderly, but now he could see that she wasn’t much older than Dori.

She saw him and called out her greeting as he passed. He smiled at her and waved in return as she ushered the other dam inside.

He heard the badgers before he saw them.

They were playing football in the street in front of his old house, running and screaming, and having a grand time.

The house itself had been done up, much as the rest of the houses. The steps were immaculately clean.

The ball skittered across the ground toward him and he put out his foot and stopped it. The damling chasing after it slowed when she saw him, then smiled.

“Lord Ori!”

“Miss Caris, how are you keeping?”

“I’m keepin’ well, thank yeh. Have yeh come t’ see th’ garden?”

“Yes, actually, I was told all about it at the shop down the road.”

She kicked the ball back to her playmates, grabbed his hand and pulled him along to a neat little
stone wall with a gate set in it. Beyond the gate, a mosaic of wonderful colors filled every inch of
open ground. The sharp, angled shapes mimicked the ribbon patterns stitched into the hems of
tunics, one pattern flowing seamlessly into the next, changing colors as it changed shape.

Ori gasped.
“Oh, bu’ there’s more,” said Caris.
She led him through the gate and around the side of the house where the mosaic continued. Now
there were variations in the patterns to allow for the crested wave design commonly called the
raven’s head. Around the back of the house, the design slowly dissolved for lack of stones.

“Caris, this is wonderful!”
“Me brother did it. Well, he’s me brother now tha’ Ma’s took him in. He’s dead clever with
colors an’ shapes an’ thin’s.”
“So, you live here now.”
“Aye, it’s ever so much be’er than th’ rooms f’r rent place we lived in. We damlings have our bed
in own room, an’ Mam has a room an’ a bed t’ herself an’ everythin’! It’s quite posh!”
“You know,” said Ori in a conspiring whisper, “there was a loose floor board in my room, and I
used to keep my most secret things in the space underneath.”
“Oooo!” said Caris. “Which was your room?”
“To the right of the top of the steps.”
“Tha’s me room!” Caris gasped.
“Just remember, if you’re going to use it, you have to put things in a metal box so the mice won’t
eat them.”

Her eyes narrowed and her expression turned sly.
“I can find a metal box,” she said, and nodded to herself. “Thanks!”
“There’s another hiding place under the floor in the room at the left of the stairs, where my brother
Nori used to sleep.”
“That’s me brothers’ room!” she cried. Then she grinned. “Don’ think I’ll be tellin’ ‘em abou’ it,
though.”
“I wouldn’t either,” he agreed conspiratorially.
They walked back around to the front of the house.
“How is your mam?” he asked.
“She’s grand, bu’ she’s workin’ on an order a’ frogs f’r Master Dipfa righ’ now, so she tol’ us no’t
come in unless it’s t’ pee or ‘cos we’re bleedin’ t’ death.”
“Frogs?” Ori asked. “I thought she was in the trim guild. And why does Dipfa want frogs?
Although, if she could find a way to work them into an outfit, I wouldn’t be surprised, but it would
be hard to get dressed with your clothes jumping all over the place. Why are you laughing?”
“Frogs’re sor’ a’ fancywork buttons an’ button holes, made a’ sturdy cord. They don’ hop abou’
on their own!”
Ori took his leave and went back to the Gondorian bakery for an iklar and coffee. It was
Gondorian coffee, and thick with more cream and sugar than even dwarrow usually took. Ori
couldn’t quite stand a spoon in it, but it was a very near thing.

Then he went to a narrow second hand bookshop, wedged between blocks of flats, and he did
restrain himself. Really, he did.
He only bought about a quarter of the store instead of half.
At least, that’s probably what Dwalin would say to tease him.
He carried his favorite five or six back in his satchel, and paid to have the rest delivered to Fundin
House.
The dam behind the counter called in her mam from somewhere back of the stacks. The older
dam introduced herself, told him it was an honor, and made sure he had her card.
At last he made his way back to the stables, where Honda eyed him and his bulging book bag and
snorted.
“It’s not that heavy,” he told her, as he heaved the bag up and tied it to his saddle.
Honda listed almost imperceptibly to that side.
“Oh, knock it off!” he admonished her.
As they left the stable, Ori patted the bag of books.
The dam had promised delivery tomorrow.
He was going to need to put a new bookshelf in his study.
Maybe two.

Ori arrived home to a herd gathered for tea. Kili bounced about the middle of the room.
“It was brilliant, Dori! I’ve never seen a javelin thrown like that”
“It was a javelin throw, Kili!!” Faramir protested. “That’s how I was taught. You make it sound
like I fired it out of my ass.”
“I’d by tickets to see that!” Sigrid giggled. Eowyn laughed so hard, she tumbled from her chair.
“It’s not that funny,” Tauriel reproved.
Eowyn calmed down and Faramir offered her a hand. She pulled herself up into her chair and
said,
“Far, you remember that time we came to Gondor and Mithrandir was there with his little fire pops
as he called them?”
It was Faramir’s turn to roar with laughter.
“Now you have to tell us,” Fili ordered.
Arne moved over, so Ori could sit with him on the sofa. Dori handed Ori a cup of tea followed by
a plate of cookies.
“Eomer and I were teenagers,” Eowyn enthused. “Eomer was always trying to be tough and
soldierly like Boromir.”
“Mithrandir couldn’t resist giving the four of us something to play with,” Faramir put in.
“He thought we’d be scared,” Eowyn said loftily. “We weren’t.”
“It was right after lunch,” Faramir told them.
“We’d had bean soup.”
“Augh!!” Fili moaned.
“Go on!” Kili interrupted.
“You know there’s going to be a fart involved!” Fili shoved his brother.
“But was it on fire?” Kili demanded.
Faramir choked out, “Worse!”
“Exactly!” Eowyn cried. “My dimwit of a brother dared Boromir to light one of the pops-“
“What are pops e-exactly?” Arne butted in.
“They’re like little fireworks but tiny,” Eowyn explained. “They’re red with a fuse and about this
long.”
Eowyn used two fingers to show about a inch. Ori had a feeling something very stupid was about
to be revealed.
“Mithrandir always told us,” Eowyn went on, “that once a fuse is lit, it can’t be put out. Eomer
said he had a monster fart coming on and he bet Boromir that his fart would put it out.”
“He lit a firework near his bum?” Tauriel demanded.
“If only,” Faramir groaned.
“Both he and Boromir pulled their breeches down and stuck the lit pops in their bums.” Eowyn
finished.
“And farted?” Kili asked.
“Yes,” Faramir and Eowyn chorused.
“And?” Sigrid asked a mix of horror and mirth on her face.
“We all made an important scientific discovery,” Eowyn said.
“Indeed?” cried Bujni. “What did you discover?”
“Farts are flammable.” Eowyn giggled.
Everyone fell into laughter.
Thorin, Balin and Dwalin entered the sitting room.
“Idad,” Kili shouted, “guess what?”
"You tried to eat your boots?" Thorin teased. Balin and Dwalin chuckled.
"Idad!" Kili frowned at Thorin. "I haven’t done that since before I was twenty and then, only once."
"The results of flatulence are flammable!" Bujni roared.
That stopped the three in their tracks. Thorin stared at Kili. Dwalin gave the room an eyeball inspection. Balin raised an eyebrow and said gently,
"I hope yeh laddies did yer experiments outside."
"No, no," Fili put in. "Eomer and Boromir found it out, when Eomer was a teen."
"They dropped a cinder down the privy when they farted?" Thorin guessed.
"Tha’ works," Dwalin put in.
"That burns the hair off your arse," Thorin argued.
"I told yeh, yeh had t’ be careful."
Fili and Kili stared at their uncle with huge eyes.
"No, they used a tiny firework Tharkûn gave them," Tauriel explained.
Dwalin and Thorin turned to her.
"Why in all Arda would Tharkûn do that?" Thorin demanded.
"He thought it would scare us," Eowyn said around a scone.
"Eomer dared Boromir to stick a lit one in his ass and fart." Faramir elucidated.
Balin squeezed the bridge of his nose, sighing, as Thorin and Dwalin bellowed with laughter.
"Flatulence aside," Dori said loudly ending all discussion in that vein, "There are decisions to be made."
Dori served tea to the king, the advisor and the captain.
"Which decisions are yeh referrin’ t’, me heart’s delight?" Balin asked, taking his cup as Dori planted a kiss on his brow.
"Tomorrow is our dearest Ori’s birthday."
Dori glowed at Ori, who felt himself redden, he looked at Dori.
"I don’t know what kind of decisions we can make to stop it being my birthday, Dori."
"Now, pet!" Dori gave him an aloof look. "The decisions are what you would like to have for cake, firstly, then what you want for a dinner party and then we need to think about presents."
Ori glanced at Dwalin who grinned.
"I took th’ day off."
"Ori’s Dori," Ori widened his eyes to Dori and tried to look like he was a badger wanting candy.
"Fine!" cried Dori, "Don’t look at me like that. You always get what you want when you have that look. And don’t give that look to Nori either."
As Dori finished, the spymaster strolled in via the mantelpiece.
"Is he givin’ that puppy look?"
"Of course!" Dori proclaimed. "Just as you taught him!"
Nori snickered.
"Proudest moment o’ me life so far."
"Yes, I’m sure it is," Dori huffed. "What is it that you want, pet?"
"May I have a birthday lunch instead of dinner?"
"Of course!" Dori said.
"That sounds lovely, Ori." Thorin smiled at him. "Are you and Dwalin going to the night market?"
"No," said Ori and took refuge in his teacup. "I was hoping for some time to read poetry."
"O course, me love," Dwalin promised.
"Poetry?" teased Faramir. "Is that what it’s called in Erebor?"
"No," giggled Sigrid. "We call it reading the memoirs of Queen Kivi."
"Do I want to know who Queen Kivi is?" Faramir asked.
"I wear her crown," Thorn said loftily.
"She’d a bloody big head f’r a dam," Dwalin added. Thorin kicked Dwalin’s boot. Dwalin kicked back.
“Queen Kivi wrote that racy book,” Kili explained. “The Book of Glittering Diamonds!”

“Is it full of equally racy poetry?” Faramir grinned.

“No, it’s a sex manual,” Arne told him.

Faramir gaped.

“A sex manual? Dwarrow need a manual? Isn’t it just…er… instinctive?”

“No, lad.” Balin smiled. “It’s more o’ a book abou’ possibilities.”

“And advice,” said Dori, “about making sure to stretch one’s limbs properly before proceeding.”

“There is that part,” Oin rumbled, from his seat next to Bujni, “but it’s also very useful when badgers, children as you would say, come of age and become interested in close relationships with others. Queen Kivi is very practical and completely unbiased in any way.”

Faramir looked nonplussed.

“I suppose this is another way of suggesting reading material for me?”

“No, no, Fari dear,” Doi soothed. “Besides, it’s in khuzdul.”

“I’m going to translate it into westron,” Ori said before thinking.

Dori froze.

Ori realized what he’d said and froze as well.

Nori cackled at them.

“Ooo, cat’s outta that bag, now. Better start runnin’, liddle mole,”

“Shut up, Nori,” Dori and Ori said together without thinking.

Dori turned to Ori.

“Pet, does Master Brur approve of this project?”

“Yes, Dori,” Ori gulped. “I discussed it with him. We both think it’s important.”

“Important?” Dori gasped.

“Yes, Dori.” Ori put down his cup. “It’s the Second Music, we are a part of the world. Queen Kivi did extensive research on physical relations and not just among dwarrows, but men and elves as well.”

“Oh,” Dori thought this over. “Yes, we do seem to be mixing happily amongst each other.” Dori took a deep breath. “Well, then you are quite right, pet, it is very important. I’m sure your translation will help many people.”

“Thank you, Dori.”

“Yessss. It’s quite important, isn’t it. Perhaps…. Even so, I shall write the preface in the westron translation as well. What do you want for your birthday lunch?” Dori nearly gave the company whiplash with the subject change.

Ori giggled and grinned at Dori.

Dori widened her eyes and laughed.

“Beside chips, you naughty thing!”

“Buttered rolls!” Ori teased.

“Oh! Fine. But mark my words, pet. There’ll be more than just chips.”

“Yes, Dori.”

“And your cake, Dori’s Ori?”

Ori squeezed his eyes shut; images his favorite things ran top speed through his head.

“Xocolātl cake with raspberry jam and…sweetened whipped cream filling,” he decided. There was a chorus of ‘oo’o’s’ and ‘ahhh’s’.

“Very nice, pet. And what do you want on top?”

“Dwalin!” Fili, Sigrid, Kili, and Tauriel shouted.

Ori rounded on them.

“The xocolātl cake is to share with you lot. Dwalin is my personal cake, thank you very much!” Delighted shrieks met this sally.

“Tha’s righ’,” Dwalin added with a silly grin on his face.

Dori giggled.

“Well done, pet. Now what would you like?” Ori squirmed, then,
“That lovely stuff we had with mullis. That xocolātl with hazelnut cream.”


“After cake, please,” Ori decided.

“Excellent,” Thorin agreed.

“Ori,” Bilbo said. “I hope you don’t mind, but I fully intend on helping Dori with your cake.”

Ori grinned, but before he could answer, Agrib came from the receiving room carrying a large crate.

“What’s this, Agrib?” Thorin asked.

Dwalin rose and relieved the dwarf of his burden.

“Came on a wagon train from the Iron Hills, your majesty. The label read that it’s to be delivered to you as there are instructions, but it’s for her majesty…Red Queen.”

Thorin groaned.

“Dain, why can you never just let an idea stay in your head for once?”

Dwalin pulled the lid off the crate and there was a letter in Dain’s crabbed hand, a rolled sheaf of papers, and what looked like a pile of buckles lying on a bed of straw.

Ori remembered.

“Thorin, is it the harness to hold Red Queen’s eggs while she flies?”

Thorin was reading Dain’s letter.

“It is exactly that, Ori. Included are the instructions.” Thorin nodded his head at the sheaf of papers. Balin removed the roll and spread out several sheets. Bujni hurried over and peered around Balin’s shoulder.

“This migh’ actually work, lad,” Balin said slowly.

“His Majesty, King Dain’s directions are most exhaustive,” Bujni murmured.

“Roäc?” called Thorin. “Are you about?”

The raven flitted over from the kitchen, a piece of cookie in his beak. Roäc swallowed this and cocked an eye at Thorin.

“‘S’up?”

“Dain has sent a gift for Red Queen, but as brooding requires an invitation among bone breakers, would you ask her if we might see her?”

“What he send?” Roäc asked and hopped onto the side of the crate. “Brilliant! Restraints! Blu’s gonna get kinky!”

“No, you sheep’s ass,” Thorin growled.

“Baaaaaa!” Roäc cackled and flew off.

Thorin read over the letter again and Dis, Jani and Bofur arrived home and Gloin, Gridr, Dipfa, and Binni came through the other sitting room door from their home.

“What’s to do?” asked Gridr.

Gloin and Binni came to where Bujni was studying the instructions and carefully taking the pieces out and examining them before he placed them out to fit together. Ori frowned over the assemblage. With the pieces laid out like this, he could see how they would form a harness on Red Queen’s body. Dain had thought things through. The buckles could fit loosely or be tightened. Faramir and Eowyn came over and sat on the floor. Neither could read the instructions, but Dain’s diagrams were exact.

Bujni looked over the bits of leather and tiny chains and began to giggle.

“Bujni, my beloved son, as much as Oin and I love you, you are too big for us to carry you in a harness.”

Bujni released Dipfa and laughed.

“Beloved Da, this is a gift from Dain.”

“We are not carrying Dain around either,” Binni replied. Oin swore. Bujni went back to the pieces he had laid on the floor.

“This is for Red Queen,” Thorin told them.

Ori rose and went to where Bujni was studying the instructions and carefully taking the pieces out and examining them before he placed them out to fit together. Ori frowned over the assemblage.
“I think this will work,” Eowyn said thoughtfully. “The chains are mithril and so won’t weigh her down.”

Dori inspected the pieces.
“It was very clever of my brother to use the pale brown for the leather. It will match dear Red Queen’s feathers nicely.”
“Pays to accessorize,” said Nori.
Butter and Sugar perked their ears. Romy barked and Sugar gamboled off to the breakfast parlor.
They heard Miss Larit speaking to someone and the meadow door open and close.
Roäc flapped in and Red Queen strutted in, followed by the wargs.
“Sister Queen,” Thorin greeted her. “Your eggs?”
“One of our daughters is sitting and Baluchistan is supervising her,” Red Queen said airily. “We understand Brother King Dain has sent something?”
“Yes,” Thorin said and moved to her side. “He included a letter for you as well.”
Thorin held up a small sealed paper. Red Queen took this in her beak and, with a talon, broke the seal. She held the paper in his talon and looked at it, before stating,
“Brother King, please assist us. We do not know your written language.”
“Of course.” Thorin took the letter she held out to him and read aloud, running his finger under the runes as he read, Red Queen following along as he did.

Salutations Sister Queen,
As discussed, I have made an egg/nestling carrying
pouch for you. If it doesn’t please you, pay it no mind
as it is an Experiment.
Best,
Dain. ooxx

“What are those circles and diagonal crosses?” she demanded.
“Circles are hugs and the crosses are kisses,” Thorin said gravely.
“Oh, how nice. Hmmm,” Red Queen paused then shook her feathers. “As Brother King Dain has been so kind as to attempt such, we shall try his experiment.”
She regally strolled over to the pieces laid out.
“How does this experiment work?”

Dipfa, after reading over the instructions, and with Bujni’s assistance, carefully put the harness together and dressed Red Queen in it. Ori had to admit to himself it was very clever. The straps did not hinder any movement and yet fitted snugly enough to Red Queen’s body. Once in the harness, Red Queen flapped and paraded about, examining it. Sigrid and Mistress Dazla came in with a long mirror from Dori’s and Balin’s room. They held it while Red Queen inspected herself from all sides. Dipfa hovered and made minute adjustments.
“That’s amazing,” Kili admired.
“Is it comfortable?” Tauriel asked.
“Yes, we hardly know we are wearing it,” Red Queen replied, appraising herself.
“Here’s the pouch,” Dis said, lifting the item from the crate. “And look here, it’s been padded and there’s other note.”
Dis read aloud,

This pouch has been padded warmly with down from the ravens of
the Iron Hills in honor of the friendship between ravens and
bone breakers.

Dis opened the top flap and looked in, touching gently.
“This is lovely, Red Queen, look.”
Red Queen went to Dis and looked in.
“Such lovely down. So soft. We are deeply touched by the kindness of the ravens of the Iron Hills. Ori?”
“Would you like me to write to them for you, ma’am?”
“Please. Perhaps a plate of your…your…ink, yes, ink, so we may put our talon mark upon it.”
“Certainly, ma’am.”

Ori put his satchel on the dining table and dug out a page of cream parchment and black ink. He sat down and turned to Red Queen.

“I’m ready.”
Red Queen a-hemmed and began.

“To the generous and honored ravens of the Iron Hills.
We have received your gift with delight and are deeply touched by your kindness.
All hail the mighty friendship of all bone breakers and ravens.”

“Excellent,” Gloin approved.
“Yes,” Thorin agreed.

Fili fetched out a platter and Ori set out a selection of inks.
“What color would you like, ma’am?” he asked as solemnly as he could.

Red Queen inspected the tiny bottles and decided on the red. She hopped up on the table. Ori poured ink into the platter. Fili and Ori carefully helped Red Queen to place her foot in the ink, then raise it. Fili blotted the drops and Red Queen triumphantly placed her foot where Ori directed. After a moment, she lifted it at his instruction and the print was perfect. Dori and Jani washed off the remaining ink with a soapy cloth.

“We thank you,” she acknowledged with a slight, regal bow of her head. “And perhaps a second, brief note to Brother King Dain?”

“Of course, your majesty,” said Ori.

“Write it in the purple ink. It seems to us he will like that.”

Ori got down to business right away, all the while wondering if Red Queen understood the meaning of ‘purple prose’.

“Oi, our Red Queen!” Jani called. “Come have a looksee. Our Dain put in sumthin’ fra’ that Ulfr.”

Ori glanced over to where Jani was holding a large, flat metal box. It was open and he could see many small parcels of leather.

“What are these?” Red Queen inquired cocking an eye at them.

‘Cordin’ t’ th’ note. Yeh bend ’em an’ they give off heat.” Jani said. She did so, then shouted.

“Mahal’s balls, they do! Ulfr’s a bloody genius, but I ain’t tellin’ him!”

“He knows,” Balin commented.

“Here.” Jani tuned back to Red Queen. “Yeh tuck one a’ them in yer pouch when yer flyin’ an’ yer eggies won’t get cold.

“An excellent notion,” Red Queen admired. She took the leather parcel in her beak and tucked it into the bag of down at her breast. “Master Dipfa, if you would accompany us to our nest, we shall place our eggs in this pouch.”

“I’ll take you up,” Fili offered. “There a door to the aeries from the courtyard.”

Fili led Dipfa out and Red Queen, after approving of Ori’s letter to Dain and adding her talon mark, exited through the breakfast parlor. Sigrid went with her to close the door.

Dori turned to Dis.

“Now, Dis dear, I know you’re taking our Fari to meet with the heads of the printing guild tomorrow. Will you all be back for lunch?”

“Oh yes,” Dis assured.

Faramir looked surprised.

“But, your high- Dis, surely I will be too busy with the printing work to return.”

Everyone turned and stared at the young man.

“Faramir,” Thorin said quietly, “here in Erebor, it is written into all guild laws that time must be given for meals. You may work all you wish, but you are allowed time to go home and have a meal.”
Faramir paused, then nodded.  
“Of course, I was forgetting. Your work is not governed by daylight.”  
“It’s takes a little to get used to,” Eowyn said lightly.  “The dwarrow may work all hours of the day as they wish. Being soldiers, you and I know a bit about that, but things here are not dependent on light.”  
“Then I am delighted to be able to attend your birthday lunch, Ori,” Faramir grinned.  
“Good!” Ori said warmly.  
Sugar bounded out to the receiving room, Kili ran after her. The sound of the door was heard. Roäc flew in and landed on the tea table. He seized the last half cookie as Mistress Dale removed the plate.  
“Here we are!” Red Queen swaggered in. The pouch on her breast was bulgy and Baluchistan fluttered about her. Dipfa followed proudly.  
“Sister Queen,” Thorin greeted her. “Is the gift a success?”  
“Indeed it is, Brother King,” Red Queen cooed. “The little sacks have made the pouch as warm as my nest.”  
She went straight to Dori.  
“Would you like to see them?”  
Dori squeaked delightedly as Red Queen flipped back the cover and allowed Dori to peer in.  
“Oh, how pretty!” Dori enthused. “Like clotted cream with little red speckles all over!” Red Queen nodded and Dori moved away, so everyone could crowd around to see.  
“Your majesty,” Gridr asked, “may I keep any large pieces of shell at hatching?”  
“Of course, we have no use for them.”  
“Thank you.”  
Ori took his turn with Dwalin. He saw three eggs, a little larger than goose eggs, nestled in the black fluff. Dori was right, the eggs were very pretty.  
“Do you know yet if they will be male or female or both?” Ori asked politely.  
“We do not,” Red Queen said happily. “It is our special surprise.”  
“They’ll be loved!” Baluchistan caroled.  
Bilbo and the faunts came in. Bilbo was carrying a basket.  
“Red Queen!” Bilbo said, surprised. “Have your eggs hatched already?”  
“No, Consort. Brother King Dain has gifted us with this delightful egg carrier.”  
Frodo and Sam rushed over to admire and Red Queen leaned forward, so they could see inside.  
“Ooo,” Sam enthused. “You made big eggs!”  
Thank you, nestling.” Red Queen gently ruffled both faunts’ hair with her beak.  
“Will you be joining us for dinner?” Bilbo asked.  
“Oh yes,” Dori cooed.  
“If Brother King Thorin is agreeable to catching us up on the news of the Kingdoms?” Red Queen looked over at Thorin.  
“Naturally, Sister Queen.”  
Ori shooed everyone away to wash up for dinner.

Ori went into the bedroom and Dwalin closed the door behind them. He took Ori in his arms.  
“Miss yeh, love,” Dwalin murmured, kissing Ori’s hair. Ori hugged tight.  
“I miss you, too! It seems like forever since we had a conversation.”  
“I’m more than pleased yeh decided t’ take tomorrow afternoon. I’ve a pressie f r yeh.”  
Ori giggled, “Don’t tell me things like that, I’ll go looking for it!”  
“Yeh won’t find it as it’s no’ here yet. Yeh’ll jus’ have t’ wonder, me love.”  
“My buffalo,” Ori laughed and stepped away to dump his satchel on the bed, before flopping on it himself.  
Dwalin followed and leaned down and pulled off Ori’s boots. He sat nearby and began to massage Ori’s feet. Ori groaned happily. Nori-Pori and Mask climbed up and sat on Ori’s chest. Killer bounced up on the bed, followed by Kihshassa.
“The only ones we’re missing are Garnet and Quartz,” Ori mused.
“Aye, too bad they din’ fancy havin’ their nes’ here, eh?”
“It would be cute and we could talk to them,” Ori said idly, “but they probably prefer having the rest of the flock around them.” Ori nudged Dwalin with his toe.
“I can’t wait to see their babies.”
Dwalin chuckled at him, “Didn’t think yeh liked babies much.”
“These are feathery babies.”
“An tha’ makes a difference, eh?”
“Yes,” Ori cried and hugged the cats, who objected around purring. “We have furry babies and soon feathery ones!”
“Bes’ kind,” Dwalin agreed firmly.
“I’m glad Dori’s having the babies. I couldn’t cope.”
“Me, neither. Mindin’ Fili an’ Kili was more than enough.”
Ori laughed.
“They didn’t change much, did they?”
“Only go’ bloody bigger.”
Ori ruffled the fur of both cats the wrong way and they got off him, indignant. He sat up.
“Here, it’s your turn.”
Dwalin kicked off his boots and shifted further up the bed. Ori began massaging his right foot.
Dwalin fell back on the bed with a grunt of appreciation.
“Better?”
“Aye, tha’s wonderful, love.”
Ori’s birthday!

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Guests? Check! Presents? Check! Cake? Checkcheckandcheck! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same darrow time, same darrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori opened his eyes as he heard Dwalin say, “Aye, tha’s grand, brother.” Ori sat up as Dwalin settled the tea tray on the bedside table. Balin looked pleased. “There yeh are, wee brother, an’ many happy returns a’ th’ day.” “Thank you Balin. You brought us tea.” “Aye, well, yer havin’ yer special day an’ our Dori wants t’ play in th’ kitchen over yer breakfast, so take yer own time.”

Balin pattered out, taking Killer and the cats with him. As the door clicked shut, Ori giggled. “I’m almost afraid of what Dori might be doing.” “Oh aye?” Dwalin said and leaned over him. Ori put his arms about Dwalin’s neck and kissed him long and lingeringly. When they released each other Dwalin sat up and poured out two cups of tea. Ori sat up and rearranged the pillows for them. Dwalin handed Ori his mug and leaned back with his arm across the pillow tops. Ori snuggled under Dwalin’s arm. “Happy birthday, me love.” “Thank you.” Ori cocked a teasing eye up at his husband. “Is my present here yet?” Dwalin slewed a look at him. “Yeh thin’ I’d tell yeh if it was?” Ori swallowed his tea and made to get up. Dwalin grabbed him with his free arm and pulled him in for a tight hug. “No, yeh don’, me wee scribe.” “Is it still in the receiving room?” Ori teased. “Donno, love.” Ori knelt up, his arms akimbo. “You don’t know if it’s here yet, do you?” Dwalin just chuckled and sipped his tea. Ori sighed and crawled back and snuggled up to him. “Fine.” “Uh-oh, ‘M in trouble now. He’s usin’ th’ ‘F’ word.” “Yes, you are,” Ori told him, attempting to look fierce and failing, then he remembered. “My buffalo, I should warn you.” “Oh aye?” “Dori gets really maternal on my birthday.” “More so than usual?” “Very maternal. Don’t be surprised if I’m reduced to a pebble.” “So a wee bi’ more than usual?” “If Dori does what he always does. Then Dori and Nori do this thing they do.” “Tha’ a lo’ a’ detail, me love.”
“If I know my Dori, he’ll wait until everyone’s there.”
“Even be’er.”
“It’s really silly and embarrassing.”
“I’ll sit righ’ nex’ t’ yeh as usual.”
“You’re not going to defend me?”
“‘Gainst our Dori? Tha’d be asking’ f’r death.”
“Dwalin!”
“Wha’s he gonna do? Push yer face int’ yer food?”
“No, he makes a special birthday breakfast!”
“Nuthin’ wrong wi’ tha’.”
“You haven’t seen it,” Ori groaned.

They had a second cup of tea in companionable silence until Kihshassa woke and crawled up and into their laps for love and skritchels. They both got up, washed and dressed and Ori dragged his feet as they went to the breakfast parlor. Ori could hear the voices of pretty much everyone. Dori had obviously made sure of an audience. Ori stopped before the doorway, gave Dwalin a look, and heaved a sigh. They went in

“There’s the birthday boy!” Nori roared and leapt to his feet.

Choruses of good wishes from around the table. Dori had invited Bard and his family to witness. Of course he had.

He closed his eyed tight.
Nori seize ahold of Ori, ripped up his tunic and blew a giant raspberry on Ori’s exposed belly.
“Nori!”
Nori grabbed him into a hug and began forcing him to jump the number of Ori’s years. Dwalin laughed helplessly and everyone else enjoyed counting with Nori.

“Sebenitee-four!” Nori bellowed.
“May I sit down now?” Ori tried to put up a cold, indignant front, but blew it when he giggled.
Nori pushed him over to his chair.
“There you go, me liddle moley-poo. Dor!”
Dori stuck her head out of the kitchen, saw Ori and squealed.
“My little badgerling!”
Dori rushed out, embraced Ori, and covered his face with seventy four kisses. Everyone helped count. Dori finished, then planted an extra big kiss on Ori’s nose.

“And one to grow on!” Dori cried. “Your breakfast is just about ready, pet, and then I’m going to spank you.”

Dori bounced back into the kitchen. Ori slumped in his chair.

“Doreeee! Why? You haven’t spanked me since I was forty. I’m too old to be spanked!”

Dwalin was face down on the table laughing. Ori looked at Sigrid. She was grinning maniacally.

She turned to Eowyn.

“Just wait. It gets better.”
“No it doesn’t!” Ori grumped. He glared at her. “Traitor!”

“Happy birthday, Ori,” said Thorin from the head of the table. “And many happy returns of the day.”

“Thank you, Thorin. And thank you for being polite about it.”

Thorin snickered as Bilbo and the faunts fell into giggles.

Thranduil looked at Bard. Ori could almost see the question mark above the king-father’s head.

“Birthday traditions in our families,” Bard elucidated. “Dori always make the breakfast for the lucky one.”

Bard grinned at Ori who made a face at him.

“Come now, Ori,” Bard chuckled. “It’s been a while since Dori could celebrate like this.”

“Couldn’t he wait for Tilda’s?” Ori suggested.

“Mine’s not until late spring,” Tilda reminded him. “That’s too long to wait.”

“Not to me it’s not,” Ori muttered.
Someone knocked at the meadow door. Dori had had the builders in install the winter doors, and they and the windows were covered in new curtains of thick green velvet with gold embroidery. Fili, Frodo, and Sam rushed over to let Red Queen in while keeping the curtains covering the door. Baluchistan escorted her, and Roäc breezed in after.

“Birthday lad!” Roäc greeted Ori and landed on Ori’s shoulder and tweaked his ear. “That’s from our Quartz an’ our Garnet.”

“Tell them thank you,” Ori laughed and laid his hand gently on the raven and pressed the bird to his cheek. “That’s from me to Quartz and Garnet.”

“We have arrived to wish you another successful year of life,” Red Queen announced and tapped Kili’s cheek with her beak and he readied a chair for her.

“Well done, laddie,” Baluchistan echoed.

“Here you go, pet!” Dori caroled form the kitchen and swept in with a plate. Dori placed it lovingly before Ori.

Ori wanted to crawl under the table. On the plate lay the usual pancake shaped like a dwarf. This time, instead of raisins, the dwarf had blueberry eyes and a smile made of blueberries and he had raspberry buttons down his front. He lay in a pool of melted butter and hot maple syrup. Dori had cut a sausage to look like an axe and a strip of bacon for a pick.

“Ori!” shouted Nori. “He’s dead fierce lookin’! Bedder sort him out quick, our pebble!”

Ori started to giggle in spite of himself.

“Remember, you have to leave the head for last!” Bain shouted.

Ori stuck out his tongue, then eyed Nori. Nori waggled his eyebrows. All was ready for a command performance.

Ori put on a fierce grimace and, with his fork, chopped half a leg off.

“Auuuugh!” Nori threw his voice to the pancake. “Me leg! Yeh rotten brat! I’ll get yeh!”

The Bardlings cheered and Bard and Dori burst out laughing. The Durins, the king-father and Faramir and Eowyn stared.

Ori chewed the leg up. Dori’s pancake was delicious. He looked the pancake over and then ate the head of the axe off.

“Me axe!” Nori shouted from the pancake. “Ooo, I’m goin’ t’ smack yeh wi’ me handle when I ge’ a chance!”

Ori enjoyed the sausage axe head and went for the arm holding the sausage handle.

“Mahal’s balls! I’ll kick th’ handle a’ yeh! I still go’ me other arm!”

Ori saw from the corner of his eye that everyone at the table was now thoroughly enjoying the spectacle, Dwalin all but crying with laughter. Ori ate the bottom half of the other leg. Nori as the pancake bellowed with rage. Ori disposed of the rest of the axe and the rest of both legs. The pancake yowled and threatened to whack Ori with his remaining arm. Ori considered his options, then ate the other arm and the bacon pick. As the pancake cursed him, Ori gave Nori a sly look and viciously chopped off the very bottom of the torso. Nori screamed.

“Me family jewels!” Nori’s voice rose by two octaves. “Yer worse than ’n orc!”

Everyone shouted and laughed.

Ori disposed of the body and watched Nori as he flipped the head over. The pancake’s voice became muffled but no less vulgar. Ori used his knife and fork to leave only the berry face on the plate and ate the head. Nori’s voice flew impossibly higher. Ori turned to Dwalin.

“Would you hold my beard, please, my love?”

Dwalin snickered and complied. Ori leaned over the plate. Dori realized what he was going to do and shrieked. Ori sucked all the berries and most of the butter and syrup off the plate in one go.

Bain, Tilda, Fili, Kili, and Gimli cheered.

“Pet!” Dori cried. “I never taught you such dreadful manners! And in front of the king! Three kings!”

“I’m not a king anymore, Dori,” Thranduil reminded.

“Don’t help!” Dori scolded.

Dis and Jani leaned on each other, while Bilbo wiped tears of laughter from his eyes.
“And you, our deary, shouldn’t have allowed it!” Dori was grasping a straws by appealing to Dwalin.

“Had t’,” Dwalin teased. “Don’ wan’ t’ be wastin’ th’ day combin’ syrup outa his hair.” Dori huffed and poured more tea for Balin.

Red Queen ruffled her feathers, accepted the sausages Baluchistan brought over for her, and observed,

“It is pleasant to see that on the yearly anniversary of your hatching, you keep the tradition of allowing your prey to put up a good fight before disposing of it.”

“See Ori’s Dori,” Ori said. “I was honoring the pancake you made me.”

“Eat some bacon, pet.”

“Yes, Dori.”

“Humph,” Dori said, then a light came into her eyes.

“Are you finished, pet?”

Ori swallowed the last piece of slice of bacon he’d grabbed.

“Yes. Oh! No, Dori!”

Dori swanned around the table.

“Up you get, you naughty badger!”

“I’ll hold ‘im for you, Dor!” Nori walked right through the table and grabbed Ori out of his chair.

Ori groaned and made a terrible face at Nori who laughed at him. Dori lifted the back of Ori’s tunic and carefully spanked him once for each year and one very large spank to grow on. They didn’t hurt, of course, but everyone at the table shouted and laughed and help Dori count.

“There!” said Dori proudly. “That’s all the naughtiness spanked out of you for the year!”

“I haven’t been that naughty!” Ori complained.

“Yes, you have!” Tilda shouted. “You ran away with Dwalin!”

“Exactly!” Dori agreed.

Thorin leaned over to Bilbo.

“Remind me not to turn my back on Dori on my birthday. At my age, it would take all day.”

“No one spansk you on your birthday,” Bilbo agreed. He added, “Except me.”

After breakfast, Faramir and Dis rose to leave for their meeting with the printing guild. Faramir grinned at Ori.

“Will Nori be vocalizing your lunch?”

“Ha!” Nori shouted.

Dori smacked Faramir’s bottom with a tea towel.

“Now you hold your tongue, our Fari! You are not to encourage Nori and Ori to misbehave!”

Faramir snickered.

“You hurry up, Fari dear. Dis is waiting,” Dori added for effect.

Faramir looked at Dis, who was busily employed in kissing Jani for the morning.

“Of course, we’re in a hurry,” he quipped.

Eowyn pushed him.

“Don’t you start.” He laughed and playfully pushed back. They tussled in a pushing contest.

“Headbutt!” Gimli shouted in Khuzdul.

“No!” Thorin and Dwalin shouted together.

Eowyn did it anyway. She wasn’t tall enough and they reeled apart.

“Idiot!” Dwalin scolded her.

She held a hand to her forehead, giggling and complaining that it hurt. Faramir pressed his hand over his mouth. Thorin pried it away and inspected him. Fortunately, Eowyn’s head had done no damage to the young man’s face.

“Eowyn?” Faramir asked worriedly. “Are you hurt?”

She took her hand away, laughing. There was a tiny cut in her forehead.
“What’s that from?” he demanded.
“Your tooth!”
“I’m sorry-” he started.
“Don’t be!” she said merrily. “If anyone asks, I’ll just tell them you tried to bite my head off.”
“Eowyn!” he cried, then started to laugh. “No one will believe you!”
Red Queen ruffled her feathers into order.
“This is the oddest mating ritual we have ever seen.”
Glorfindel breezed in to talk to Dwalin.
“What happened to your head, our Winnie?”
Eowyn glanced at Faramir and said,
“Faramir tried to bite my head off.”
Glorfindel looked at the mark, now bleeding slightly, then at Faramir.
“You missed.”
“It was an accident,” Faramir explained, then shot a look at Eowyn. “I’ll do better next time.”
“Don’t,” Glorfindel advised. “You’ll dislocate your jaw getting around a head that big.”
Eowyn kicked Glorfindel on the right greave.
“That bit’s armored, you know.” The tall elf regarded her.
“Don’t worry,” she cooed. “I’ll aim higher next time.”
“Badgers!” Dori cried.
“Captain Dwalin,” Glorfindel greeted Dwalin.
“Faramir, come on,” Dis called, heading for the door.
“Balin,” Thorin said. “We’re due at winter stores inspection.”
“Aye, lad, I’m with yeh.”

Ori smiled at the now empty room. He sat down in the comfy chair to the right of the fire and curled his legs under him. It was his birthday and he could do anything he wanted. Dwalin wouldn’t be long with Glorfindel, as Dwalin had the day off. Ori thought back on all his projects. He had the royal portrait for the contest, for one. Translating Queen Kivi’s book need to be done as well. He was nearly finished with the miniature of Sigrid. He hadn’t even started on the diary of Lady Galadriel’s mother. He frowned, then popped up and went through to his office.

He unlocked his desk drawer and unwrapped the tissue paper he’d wound around the book for safe keeping. It wasn’t a very big book, especially for someone who had lived for thousands of years. He had kept his own journal since he’d started as Thorin’s scribe, and he had already filled several books. He tentatively opened the diary. The inside cover bore an inscription.

I, Lady Eärwen of Olwë, the Teleri of Aman, aged one hundred and three years, have decided to keep this book to record my inner most reflections.

Each page after held an entry.

Dear Diary, my half brother-in-law Fëanor is an ass.
Dear Diary, Father says we are not going on holiday to Beriland after all.
Dear Diary, I have neglected you dreadfully. Tomorrow I wed my true love, Farafin. He is very beautiful and kind and brave. I am very excited. He wooed me delightfully. He sang many songs to me and we danced together at a party thrown by his brother, Findis. We shall settle in Aman and I hope to bear him children.

After this, Eärwen became far more interesting, the entries much longer and the handwriting extremely small. She was particular in her history of the elves from the First Age, and very particular about her children and their offspring. Ori giggled over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how Eärwen lamented over how
Eärwen admitted that Galadriel would be an excellent queen, as she grew wise and powerful, but wished for her to stay in Aman. Ori read on about Fëanor and his wrong doings. He frowned over the descriptions of Morgoth and Sauron, and Sauron’s forging of the rings to trick the peoples of Middle Earth. She told of the sack of Dorithath by the Firebeards, who Thingol had refused to pay for the necklace. Then she got on to meatier stuff.

Dear Diary, we visited Doriath today and met two young males. One is named Celeborn and the other, Oropher, Celeborn’s cousin. Celeborn is handsome, full of quiet wisdom, and Oropher is also handsome, but restless and inclined to combat. Oropher has established himself deep in a forest on the far side of the Misty Mountains. He is wedded to a Noldor lady whose name I do not recall. He longs to challenge the great worms of the northern wastes of Middle Earth. Oropher, despite his physical strength, is rather clumsy and pays little attention to his dress. At luncheon, Oropher ate with his fork in his right hand and a large spoon in the other. He uses the spoon to leverage food to his mouth. I wonder if perhaps he has trouble with his vision. He missed his mouth often. I pity those who are charged with laundering his clothing. When he rose and left the table with his cousin, he forgot to removed the serviette from where he had tucked it into the belt of his robe. Celeborn is somewhat enamored of a young soldier named Haldir.

Ori choked and had to reread that sentence several times. It couldn’t be, he thought. There must be several soldier elves named Haldir. Musn’t there?

...enamored of a young soldier named Haldir, which my Galadriel finds excessively amusing. Celeborn is of a retiring nature, and not at all adept in his attempts at wooing Haldir. Haldir has yet to notice he is being wooed.

Oropher has brought his first born with him. I believe the child is called Thaniu? Barduil? No, that can’t be right. At any rate, the child can toddler quite respectably and is in constant motion, but has yet to comprehend the idea of walls. He seems to think that if he continually walks into them they will, at some point, simply disappear. Oropher doesn’t explain things, merely goes to the child turns him in another direction and off he toddles again until he hits another wall. It is quite like watching one of those funny clockwork toys that are created by dwarfs.

Ori had to close the book at that point, he was laughing so hard. There was a knock on his office door. “Coming,” he called and hurriedly rewrapped the book, stowed it back in the drawer and locked it. He went to the door, unlocked it, then opened it to find Mistress Dazla waiting. “Lord Ori,” she greeted him with a raised eyebrow. “I need this door to remain unlocked so my staff may clean it.”

Ori’s heart sank. He kept the door locked as he didn’t want anyone to see his work in progress. “Oh, don’t worry, Mistress Dazla,” he chirped. “I keep it clean myself. I don’t want to give you or your staff any more work.”

“You clean it yourself?” Mistress Dazla repeated in a flat tone. “Yes.” Ori grasped at the nearest straw. “I do know how. I was raised by Dori.”

Mistress Dazla looked him over for a moment. “Let me see, Lord Ori.”

“Um…”

Mistress Dazla made a shooing motion. Ori sigh and backed up to let her in. “Please don’t look at what I’m working on, ” he pleaded.

“My only interest, Lord Ori is that this house be in top order.”

She moved around, looked over the chairs, inspected the properly plumped cushions, and ran her finger along a shelf. Ori was relieved he’d dusted it the other day, after he’d cleared up his painting tools.

Mistress Dalza turned.
“I shall provide you with a supply of old sheets, Lori Ori. You will use them to cover your work. You may keep the door locked, as I will obtain and hold another key to this room and I will see that nothing you are busy with is looked at or in anyway disturbed. Will that suit?”

Ori let out the breath he had been holding.
“Thank you, Mistress Dazla. I’m sorry it bothered you.”
Mistress Dazla beamed at him.
“You are never a bother, dear Lord Ori. Now, you have just another hour before everyone has to gather for your birthday lunch. It will not do to have the birthday dwarf being late.”
“No ma’am.” Ori grinned. “I promise.”
She patted his cheek and went out, murmuring about what a lovely young gentledwarf he was. Even though he was alone, Ori blushed. Now knowing he didn’t have much time, he settled for checking on Sigrid’s miniature. It had dried completely. All it needed was a coat of clear finish for protection, then he could fit it into the locket she had given him. He looked at the painting critically. There was really nothing he could fix. He was rather pleased with how he had capture the light in her eyes. He put it down and decided he would show it to her that afternoon. If there was something she didn’t like then he wold change it. He turned just as the door opened again. It was Miss Oqizla. She was carrying several folded sheets and had her eyes tightly closed.
“Coverings for your work, Lord Ori,” she piped.
Ori hurried to her side.
“Thank you, it’s alright, you can’t see anything from here,”
“Mistress said we’re not to peek until you’ve got it all covered,” she informed him.
Ori suppressed a giggle and thanked her. She whisked out. Ori put the pile under his desk, keeping out four. With two, he was able to completely cover the painting for the contest. The other works in progress only needed a sheet each. He smiled and went out. leaving the door ajar so the staff would know the room was ready. Really, he reflected he should have asked Mistress Dazla in the first place.

He went through to his room and found Dwalin changing his shirt.
“Is Glorfindel happy with the arrangements?” he asked and came to Dwalin’s side. He put his arms about Dwalin bare midriff and hugged him, sighing as Dwalin’s arms slid about him.
“Aye, he was jus’ talkin’ abou’ th’ up comin’ festivals. Gotta have room f’r folk t’ muck abou’ an’ keep safe. Keep th’ badgers away fr’m any wantin’ t’ drink an’ figh’.” Dwalin buried his face in Ori’s face. “How’s me birthday lad?”
“Galadriel wasn’t joking when she said her mother’s diary would have dirt on Oropher.”
Dwalin pulled back and peered at him, a twinkle in his eyes.
“Wha?”
Ori ginned.
“Apparently Oropher was somewhat clumsy.”
“Somewha’?”
“He used to miss his mouth a lot, when he was eating.”
Dwalin roared with laughter then shook his head.
“Yeh be’er keep tha’ diary locked up, me love. If Thranduil finds out-“
“Finds out what? as a toddler, he ran into walls constantly?”
“What?”
Ori giggled,
“Oh yessss. Thranduil was a toddler in constant motion. When he ran into walls, he just kept on banging into them until someone came and turned him in another direction.”
Dwalin fell back on the bed, roaring. Ori felt very pleased with himself and clambered on the bed and sat astride his husband.
“No leaking information, captain.”
Dwalin tried look serious but couldn’t manage it.
“So, me wee scribe terror, where were they when this was in th’ works?”
“Doriath. After the Firebeards got pissed off with King Thingol, but before the second sacking by
Fëanor. She and her husband Farafin, were visiting and having a lunch party with her friend Elwing. Galadriel was with them and they were introduced to Oropher and Celeborn at that time.”

“Mahal’s balls, tha’ were during’ th’ Firs’ Age!”

“Yes, apparently Haldir was there, too.”

“Shit, tha’s one old book.”

“I know. The pages are very thin and delicate. I’m so excited!” Ori enthused.

They heard Dori calling for them and went through to the sitting room.

Mistress Dazla set the table, and Tilda hopped around in front of Brur, who fired addition problems at her. She shouted the answers back.

Bilbo came through and hugged Ori.

“Are you ready for your chips, m’lord?”

“Yes! What are the rest of you having?”

Bilbo laughed and kissed his cheek.

“You have to share this time, but don’t worry, there’s plenty!”

“Ori!” bellowed Brur. “Th’ housekeeper says yeh were laughin’ like ‘n idiot earlier, wha’ were so funny?”

“Lady Eärwen’s diary,” Ori told him.

“Lady who?” Brur demanded.

“Lady Eärwen, Lady Galadriel’s mother.”

“Oh, aye. Tha’ll be fun t’ publish.”

“I can only copy it,” Ori reminded him. “We can’t publish without Galadriel’s permission. Unless Lady Eärwen is still alive. If she is, we’d have to ask her permission.”

“Anythin’ good in it?” Brur asked.

Ori gave him a sly look, then turned as shouting came from the receiving room. Fili, Kili, Sigrid and Tauriel bounced in, followed by Arne, Bujni, Dípfa, and Bain, and the faunts. They had obviously been outside judging by their rosy cheeks.

“When’s lunch?” Kili asked.

“Soon,” Bilbo told him. “Frodo, you and Sam go and get washed up. If your Uncle Thorin is there, tell him it’s almost time.”

The faunts tore off and Bilbo turned to the younger set.

“That goes for you lot, too.”

“Yes, Auntie!” Kili crowed and skipped neatly out of the way as Bilbo made to spank him.

Ori heard the receiving room door again. Dis, Randibur, and Faramir strolled in, followed by the Dale royal family with Mister Wandi and Haldir. A moment later, Glorfindel burst in, Margr and Vi on either side.

“Oooo, our Ori!” the sisters shrieked in unison.

Ori went to be fussed over and hugged.

The Groinuls arrived with Romy and Legolas, as well as Omi and Loli, who were helping Master Sadi along.

Dori bounced in from the kitchen, saw the the sitting room was full, and bade everyone to sit down. Thorin set Bilbo on his left and Ori on his right.

The sitting room door opened again and Celeborn and Galadriel breezed in.

Shouts of greeting went up.

Ori jumped to his feet, excited, and rushed to meet them. Galadriel knelt to hug him and kissed his cheek.

“Happy birthday, my dear,” she said.

“What a wonderful surprise! Thank you for coming!”

“Our Dori sent a raven, and we knew we couldn’t miss it.”

“Happy birthday, Ori,” Celeborn said with a smile. He followed his lady to kiss Ori’s cheek.

“You look well, sir,” Ori said.

Celeborn had put on some weight and was getting almost as buff as Glorfindel.

Ori led them back to the table and they seated themselves. Mistress Dazla and her team brought
out platters of smoking hot chips, baskets of floury rolls and crocks of fresh butter. Ori made a happy noise and he buttered two split rolls lavishly, then filled each with hot, salty chips. He took a big bite. The butter had melted against the chips. He savored the hot chips. He felt melted butter run into his beard. He was so happy.

There were other things on the table besides chips and rolls. He vaguely noticed rushing salad, a plate of jellied beetroot, and a platter deep fried black pudding, but he stayed with his chips and rolls. When he reached for his fifth roll, Dori said,

“Save room for cake, pet. Bilbo and I exerted ourselves quite famously!”

“Ooo, cake!” enthused Galadriel.

When everyone had eaten their fill, the table was cleared and Dori and Bilbo came out bearing a huge platter between them. It was a beautiful cake, two round thick layers, with raspberry jam and whipped cream filling oozing out of the middle, and a swirly cloud of xocolātl decorated with raspberries on top. Everyone oo-ed and ah-ed at the sight of it.

“It’s beautiful!” Ori cried. “Thank you both so much!”

“Now, pet,” Dori said, as she laid the cake before Ori. “You cut yourself the first slice and make a wish. And no wishing for more adventures!” Dori finished sternly.

Everyone laughed.

“If I’m to have more adventures,” Ori chuckled, “may they be silly and have happy finishes for me and all my friends!” He stood and cut himself a plump triangle. He put it on his plate and Frodo and Sam shooed him to the chair by the fire. Everyone else was served cake by Bilbo and joined him over. Ori stared at the enormous something covered in a cloth on the small stone table. Frodo, Sam and Tilda hovered excitedly about it. When everyone was seated with their cake Bilbo told them to remove the cloth. They did with gusto and Ori gaped. There were all kinds of parcels wrapped in gaily colored tissue paper.

“Time to open your presents!” Dori sang out.

“This is all for me?” Ori managed. “Where do I start?”

He was aghast. He’d never had so many presents at one time.

“Pick one for Ori, Til,” said Bard.

Tilda frowned with great consideration, then took up a red one. Gridr and Gloin were delighted.

Ori removed the paper and saw a small wrought iron box with hooks and straps to attach it.

“I took your idea and there it is,” Gridr said proudly. “You can put some cinders in and it will fit right next to your inks in your waist kit, so they won’t freeze.”

“This is wonderful!” Ori marvelled. “Thank you both so much!”

Tilda was now occupied with her piece of cake, so Ori selected a small parcel wrapped in green.

“Good lad!” Bofur praised. Ori grinned at him and careful opened it. The pasteboard box inside held six silver buttons shaped like ink pots. Ori laughed delightedly.

“Thank you, Bofur.”

Ori turned to Dipfa and handed the box to her. “I’ll let you decide which of my working tunics these should go on.”

“I shall design one especially, Lord Ori,” Dipfa promised faithfully.

Ori looked at the pile and chose a long flat-ish one. Eowyn giggled. Ori looked up at her.

“Is there horse manure in it?”

“No,” she laughed.

“Is there a mouse in it?”

“Hmmmm,” she teased

“Or some crushed snails?” he tried.

“Mmmmmaybe. So hurry up and open it.”

Ori did so and was amazed at the beautiful pair of vambraces tucked up in the tissue. They were thick leather and tooled with the horse of Rohan.

“I was watching the badgers in Dale using their slingshot, and I saw how their wrists got welted by the band when they released the stones. You need your wrists intact, Master Scribe.”

“These are amazing, Eowyn, thank you!”
Ori worked his way through the pile. Dis and Jani gave him a tooled leather belt with a buckle decorated with rose gold. Oin’s and Binni’s box held a sketch book bound with metal loops to flip the paper easily. Bujni and Dipfa gifted him with a new buttery leather satchel. Cemnesta had sent over a box full of spider quills. There were two bottles of the finest Dorwinian wine from Thranduil. Bard handed Ori a box with a wink. Ori squealed to see it contained a baking of Dam Rittl’s best currant buns. Nori’s gift was an etch bottle of ink. Dwalin smacked Nori and Ori realized the ink was in one of the bottles Dwalin had commissioned for him.


When Ori held it up to the light, the ink within glinted a luscious blue-green.

“How could I ruin something so perfect?” Ori asked.

“By walkin’ into the iKroth while I was havin’ the dam mix it!”

“All that excitement was about you?”

“Always is,” said Nori, preening.

Frodo and Sam gave Ori the tiniest easel he had ever seen. He thank them both profusely as it was the perfect size for painting miniatures. Thorin laughed and brought out from behind the door to Bag End East a large package. Ori unwrapped this and gasped at the easel. It was cunningly made so that it could be raised or lowered and could stretch to hold any canvas. Ori wouldn’t have to precariously balance his largest work on a too-small easel again.

Ori hugged Thorin as he thanked him.

Faramir’s parcel was very small and Ori was surprised Faramir had seen fit to give him a present.

“I saw it while Dis and I were at the Print Guild. I thought you needed it,” Faramir chuckled.

Ori opened it to find a small carved stamp. The design was of a quill in an ink bottle.

“It’s perfect!” Ori crowed.

Baluchistan, Red Queen and the other ravens stopped fighting over he cake crumbs to present Ori with feathers; one from Red Queen, one from Baluchistan and they handed over one from Garnet and a white one from Quartz.

“He pulled his single white feather out?” Ori gasped horrified.

“No, no,” Beryl assured him.

“He’s got another coming in,” Sapphire explained. “He likes only having one.”

“Oh,” Ori sighed with relief. “please tell them thank you for me.”

Galadriel rose, as did Celeborn.

“Ori,’ said Galadriel. “You seem inclined to have adventures and Celeborn and I have decided you need one of these.”

Between them, she and Celeborn shook out a cloak. Ori recognized it as identical to the kind Tauriel and Legolas had worn when they had first climbed up the meadow wall all those months ago, before the Scouring of Dale.

“As you know, this will keep you hidden,” said Celeborn with a smile, “but it will also protect you from cold and harsh sunlight.”

Ori put the cloak about his shoulders. It was almost weightless.

“I can still see you,” said Tilda.

“It doesn’t make me invisible, Til,” said Ori.

“Oh.” She looked terribly disappointed.

Ori bowed to the elves.

“Thank you, I’m honored to receive such a gift.”

Dipfa all but pounced on him, her eye an inch from the weave of the cloak.

Ori smiled at her.

“Would you like to try it on, Dipfa?”

“Oh, no, Lord Ori, I couldn’t - yes, please.”

“Are you ready for your present from us?” Fili and Kili shouted as Tauriel, Sigrid, and Bain bounced up. Arne, Legolas, and Gimli got up, too, grinning like idiots.

“Wait just a moment, please,” Ori said. “I have something to do first.”

Now aware of how the hobbits did things, Ori made sure he had presents for ‘his’ hobbits.
Ori gave Bilbo a Durin blue scarf, and Frodo the same, but with long, fringed tassels. Sam also received the fringed version, but in jaunty purple.

"Thank you, Ori, these are lovely," said Bilbo.

He eyed the faunts, who immediately chorused, “Thank you, Idad Ori!”

“You’re very welcome. Winter is here on the mountain,” said Ori. “I’ll make you mittens, too, in another few weeks.”

“Yep,” said Nori. “He can make them fings with fingers, too, believe it’re not.”

Ori squinted at the prince consort.

“Bilbo, pardon me for asking something so personal, but are your feet getting… furrier?”

The hobbit grinned at him slyly.

“Are you taking notes, Master Scribe?”

“If it’s at all appropriate.”

“By all means,” said Bilbo, “if it moves more silly books on hobbits into the folklore section.”

Ori took that as permission enough, and he took dictation of the following.

“Yes. Winter, as you say, is here, after all. We grow fur between our toes and up our ankles and the fur on top comes in thicker.”

“Like a lynx,” said Thorin.

“Very like a lynx, actually,” said Bilbo, “though it does make a terrible mess when we shed in the spring. Oh, well, just in time for spring cleaning anyway.”

Thorin drew Bilbo closer to his side.

“I know the skin on the bottom of hobbit feet is very thick, ghivasha, but can it protect you from the cold? Not all the areas of Erebor have heated floors.”

“If the cold is extreme, we may take to wearing thick leather pads lashed to our feet, especially if we venture outside, but it’s very uncomfortable. We stay inside as much as possible, but sometimes we have to go out to chop firewood, or replenish food supplies after being snowed in for a few weeks. We don’t like to do that, of course, because there’s no open market in winter or early spring. There are a few shops in Hobbiton, but if you want any variety, you have to take a pony to Bywater, and then you are usually obliged to stay the night at an inn, buy your supplies the next morning and leave for home immediately thereafter.

“And, of course, it’s very expensive. There are quite a few hobbit families who simply get by on tea and toast, supplemented by whatever foodstuffs they’ve put by.”

“That canning method is ingenious,” said Bujni. “When the jar is opened, the food taste like it should, not like salt.”

Bujni had not looked up from his notebook the entire time he spoke. His face wore that intense look that Ori feared boded something scientific, and possibly silly.

“What are you working on, Bujni?” Ori asked.

“I recalled your account of the incident of the cats at the inn, how they thundered in a herd and made a noise far larger than their size should allow. Thus, I set out to find a scientific reason for it.”

“There was a badger, too,” said Ori.

“Yes, I have factored that into my calculations. I made a field trip to the site of the incident, interviewed witnesses, ascertained the temperature and humidity at that time of year in proximity to the lake, and adjusted the average weight per cat to reflect their relative ages at the time.”

“So, did you find the answer?”

“Yes,” said Bujni. “I have concluded that cats are supernatural beings who laugh in the face of physics.”
Still Ori’s birthday.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Yes we are having too much fun with Ori’s birthday. This part, however, does have rather a lot of sexy bits in it, so if you don’t particularly care for that sort of thing, you can skip the bit after Dori starts bossing Nori around about his hair down to where Ori and Dwalin talk about the moon. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

As though on cue, Nori-Pori uncurled himself from his nest in Romy’s fur. The cat stood, stretched, and looked at Romy. The back hunched, the fur went on end, Nori-Pori squalled, hippity-hopped sideways away and shot off into the hallway, yowling. Romy stared after the cat, looking extremely confused.

“As I just stated,” Bujni said with great dignity.

“When he starts walking though walls like his namesake, I’ll worry,” Dori replied placidly.

“My dear Lord Ori,” Mister Wandi smiled. “After discussing it with Haldir, we have decided you and Dwalin shall be gifted a day at my spa. You shall have steam, massages, skin treatments, and a special bath.”

“Will it have sparkly pink shit in it?” Dwalin asked.

“Of course,” Mister Wandi giggled. “Pink sparkly shit is very good for your skin.”

“That sounds wonderful, Mister Wandi,” Ori said quickly. “When should we come?”

“Oh, whenever you like,” Wandi said, airily. “I shall write it in my book.”

“Thank you.” Ori grinned, then Kili bounded up and grabbed Ori’s arm.

“C’mon!” he shouted.

Ori was seized and jostled toward the breakfast parlor. Bain clapped his hands over Ori’s eyes and Sigrid and Arne shoved Ori along. Ori was finally pulled up short and held still.

“May I look yet?”

“Hang about!” Sigrid teased. Ori heard the sounds of the curtains being pulled aside, then shouts of laughter from everyone all around him.

“Ready?” Fili said in his ear as he spun Ori around.

“Should I be afraid?”

“Terrified!” Arne said.

Bain took his hands away and Ori looked at the table. It was empty.

“And here’s what me, Kili, Sigrid, Tauriel, Arne, Legolas, and Gimli made you,” Fili chortled and turned Ori around to look out to the meadow.

Right at the edge of the patio stood a snow figure of a dwarf. Specifically a snow Ori. The figure’s hair and beard were made of dried leaves and grasses, Ori’s old knitted winter hat was on its head and it also sported his old coat and scarf. In one of its snow arms, it held a snow book and the other a twig pen. Next to snow Ori, a small snow Fanny wound her trunk around snow Ori’s shoulders.

Ori squealed.

“That’s brilliant! You’ve all made Fanny look so real! Where did you get my old clothes? Dori!”

“Well, pet, it’s not like they fit you anymore,” Dori said lightly.

“Sorry we couldn’t make Fanny full sized,” Sigrid offered.

“Weren’t enough snow,” Gimli added.
“That,” said Faramir admiringly, “is very well done.”

“Indeed,” Celeborn agreed. “Who would have thought to make sculptures of snow? Have you coated them with something so they won’t melt?”

Kili stared at Celeborn.

“Why, Uncle Other Elf?”

“Even if there was such a coating,” Arne put in quickly, “it would never withstand the winds around the mountain.”

Ori giggled.

“Arne, are you saying at some point there will be a gale and my old clothes will blow away and end up Mahal knows where?”

“Imagine that!” Bilbo laughed. “Somewhere in the West Farthing a knitted purple hat and scarf will end up on someone’s back doorstop!”

“And the coat will be found on the shores of the Sea of Belealas.” Thorin helped.

“Let’s hope it’s not wearing any of my old skivvies,” Ori murmured, then busied himself with hugging everyone and thanking them for their gifts. People started to leave to attend their afternoon duties. Ori grabbed Sigrid’s hand and turned to Lady Galadriel.

“Galadriel, are you in a hurry to leave?”

“Certainly not!” Dori interrupted. “Our dearest Gladdy and I are having tea with Margr and Vi this afternoon.”

“Oh, aye, we are,” said Margr.

“Yeh’ll never get rid a’ us now,” said Vi.

“No, Ori, I’m not in any hurry,” Galadriel agreed.

“Good!” Ori said. “I have to show Sigrid something, then I want your…er…input on something else.”

“Certainly,” the Lady smiled. “I am quite at leisure.”

Ori pulled Sigrid after him.

“Did you find something I should see in Queen Kivi?” Sigrid asked as Ori unlocked his office door.

“No, I want to know what you think.”

He pulled her into the room and shut the door before going to the table and uncovering the miniature.

“There,” he said.

Sigrid came over and looked. She gasped and caught the little portrait in her hand. “Ori! This is amazing! It’s almost like one of Buer’s crazy sun graphics! It’s perfect! Would you help me get it in the locket?”

“I have to put a clear coat on it to protect it first, but yes. Are you sure you like it? Do you want me to make any changes?”

Sigrid gazed down at the painting, then looked at him with a quizzical eye.

“You want me to complain you’ve made me too pretty?”

“You are pretty, Sigrid. That’s what you look like,” Ori told her.

Sigrid put down the painting and turned and hugged Ori.

“Thank you so much!”

Ori hugged back.

“I’m sorry it took so long. I used to think I was busy back in Steam Alley, but life is certainly crazy now.”

“And you love it,” Sigrid said with a grin.

“I do,” Ori admitted. “I’ll let you know when the finish is dry and then we can set it in the locket together.”

“Sounds good to me,” Sigrid said.

They went back to the sitting room.

“Is it my turn now?” asked Galadriel, rising.

“Yes,” Sigrid said and hugged Galadriel as she crossed the room to sit with Fili. Galadriel came to
Ori’s side and together they went to his office.
“What have you found?” she asked.
Ori retrieved Eärwen’s diary.
“Did you get a chance to read any of it?” he asked, handing it to her.
“No, I recognized her handwriting. Are you having difficulty reading it?”
Ori pulled up a chair for the Lady and then sat opposite her.
“Read where I put the ribbon marker.”

Galadriel opened the little book where Ori had marked the luncheon at Doriath. He watched her read. Her eyes widened, she choked, dropped the book in her lap, fell against the chair, her head back, and shrieked with laughter. Ori grinned, he had hoped she would find it as funny as he had.
“Did that really happen?” he asked when Galadriel had recovered herself a little. “Oh yes,” she managed and wiped her eyes. “I admit I wasn’t paying that much attention to Thranduil. I missed him walking into walls. Oh, Ori, thank you for showing me this.”
“I only started reading today,” Ori admitted. “Eärwen is….” he paused, not sure how to say that the mother of the Lady of the Golden Wood was an utter ninny. “She’s very…”
“Simple.” Galadriel smiled. “She is wise in her way, but has no ambition beyond her home. She did not even follow my father when he was banished for a time. She loves her home.”
“So she’s still alive?” Ori checked.
“Oh yes. We do write occasionally. She inevitably asks when I shall grow up and stop my adventuring ways. She does not see that Lothlórien is my home. For her, only Aman is home to elves.”
“On that, why did she write in Sindarin?”
“Oh, Mithrandir taught it to her. Father had no interest. I knew she had a journal but never gave it much thought. Keeping a daily record was believed to be a good exercise in organizing your thoughts on what you had learned that day. I can only suppose she used it as her practice in keeping the language and, of course, no one else in the household knew it.”
“Do you think she’ll be alright with having her diary copied?” Ori finally got the question out.

Galadriel looked at him.
“She’s never mentioned that she had lost it, so I imagine it no longer matters to her. Once you have made a copy for the library as Brur insists, I do want it back.”
“Brur wants to publish it,” Ori told her.
“Brur will have to speak to my mother about it, then, won’t he?” Galadriel’s eyes danced.
“I want to be there if he does,” said Ori.
“So do I,” she admitted.
Ori hid the book away again and they returned to the sitting room. Ori went right to Dwalin.
“We’re turning in,” said Ori, grabbing Dwalin’s offered hand. “’Night.”
Dori raised a brow.
“You’re not seriously going to sleep now, pet?”
“Not sleeping. Reading,” Ori said.
“Readin’? Me fine fanny,” said Nori. “Now I’ll spend all night being sick.”
“No, you won’t,” said Dori archly. “Go find something constructive to do.”
“Bo’s in th’ mines.”
“You could brush your hair and rebrand your eyebrows. The one on the right is hanging in your face.”
“Bo does that. You do it for me instead.”
Dori sighed.
“Go on, then. Bring me your brush. And it had better not be one you stole!”
Ori thought this was one he owed Nori, in a sick, strange way. Dori would be occupied a good, long while tonight.

“Queen Kivi?” Sigrid asked archly as Ori let himself be led away.
“Queen Kivi didn’t write poetry,” say Ori, and blew her a raspberry.
On their way past, Dwalin snatched a bottle of Dorwinian and handed it to Ori, then picked up the
box of scones.
  "Snacks!" Ori cried. "Good idea!"
  "You need wine glasses!" Dori fretted after them.
  "Nope," said Ori. "Night, everyone! And thank you!"
Raucous laughter and calls of "Good night, lovebats!" and "Sleep well - if you sleep at all!"
followed them to the bedroom door.
  As Dwalin opened it, he smiled down at Ori.
  "Ready fer yer present?"
  "Yes, please!"
Ori walked in and saw it instantly.
  Before the fireplace sat one of the iKeyha inflatable couches, in Fundin green, trimmed all around
  in lavender. Cushions piled over it in every shade of purple jewel, as well as several of Binni’s
  special ‘bacon’ pillows. It was hideous, and perfect. Close by stood a low, wrought iron reading
  table, with dwarven dancers all around, holding up the top.
  "Dwalin! I love it!" Ori turned and threw himself into Dwalin’s arms. "Thank you!"
  "Happy birthday, wee darlin'."
Killer had followed them in, ready to take advantage of the new accommodations. He didn’t look
  happy when Dwalin told him to go lay down on the rug, but he wasn’t too upset to accept the new,
  huge rawhide bone Dwalin had stashed in the bottom of a wardrobe.
  "Bribery?" Ori asked as Killer went diligently to work on it.
  "It’s yer birthday. I’m pretendin’ he’s a hobbit."
  "Ah."
They stripped down to their skivvies. Then Ori put his cardigan back on and Dwalin laughed as
  Ori sat in his lap.
  "It’s cozy," said Ori shyly.
  "I would never stand between a dwarf an’ his cardi."
  "What shall we read?"
  "In a minute. Tell me a bit a’ wha’ yeh found in Galadriel’s mam’s diary?"
  "Ooo! I’ve been wanting to translate more of that. Later, you can help me with my research!"
  "I’d be pleased an’ proud, love," said Dwalin. "Especially if we kin find a real juicy bit."
Ori laughed. "Yes, then I’ve got a small book of Yhon Khytz’s sonnets."
  "Khytz! No Rh’berd Hrik?"
  "Mmmmaybe. If you’re extra good," Ori teased.

Several hours later, Ori yawned and stretched luxuriantly, then he relaxed and turned. Dwalin
  smiled down on him. Between reading and cuddling, pee breaks, drinking wine and eating scones,
  several hours had passed, and Ori was amazed to find it was growing late.
  They kissed and Dwalin playfully tapped Ori’s nose.
  "Yer wantin’ yer rest, wee scribe?"
Ori shook his head.
He heard himself say, "No, I want you inside me."
Dwalin’s eyes flew open comically, but now that Ori had said it, he realized it was true.
He ran his hands through Dwalin’s beard.
  "I miss you so much. I miss your kisses and your beautiful, furry body against mine."
  "Ah, love. Wha’ yeh do t’ me."
Ori laughed and said, "And what I’d like you to do to me."
Which was not to say Ori wasn’t still a little nervous. He had simply reached the point that he
  wanted more than he feared.
  "Yeh wan’ t’ bring your Kivi with yeh?" Dwalin offered.
  "No, I have that chapter memorized," Ori admitted.
  How many times he had stroked himself off thinking about it after he read about it, Ori kept that to
  himself.
They rose to their feet, still kissing. 
Up on the bed, Killer watched them, tail wagging, and jumped down to follow them out the door. 
Dwalin shooed him back. 
“Go lie down, numpty. Unless yeh wan’ another bath.” 
Killer’s tail abruptly stopped wagging. He sighed and hopped back up onto the bed.

Ori was so happy to find Dori and Balin had retired for the night, and the living room lights were low. Unless someone was canoodling before the fire, Ori and Dwalin would have their privacy. Actually, now that Ori thought about it, they would have their privacy anyway. Who would want to stop canoodling just to tattle on them? And to whom? And what would they tattle? Oooo, we had to stop messing around ‘cos we heard Ori and his husband messing around, and then-

And then he told his brain to knock it off.
Ori took Dwalin’s hand and lead the way to the bath chamber.

As Dwalin filled the tub, Ori slipped off his cardigan and looked down at it with a laugh. “Not exactly seductive, is it,” he said.
“I li’e it,” said Dwalin. He grinned over his shoulder as he poured oil into the hot running water. “Sides, tha’s th’ one yeh were wearin’ when we met.”
“Is it odd to be sentimental over knitwear?” Ori wondered aloud. “I’m sentimental about your pink drawers, so I guess I’m the wrong one to judge.”
Dwalin came to him and kissed him.
“Love yeh.”
“I love you, too.”
They took their time, peeling each other out of their skivvies. Ori let his fingers, then his mouth, trace each of Dwalin’s scars and tattoos, his every mark of beauty. Ori loved how the lighter-colored scars mapped his husband’s ruddy skin, the raised ridges and carved valleys, half-hidden under the rich growth of his fur. He loved Dwalin’s notched ear and bisected eyebrow, the inky battlecries and khuzdul prayers for the dead over his pate.
Every moment, Ori gave in a little more to his own longings. How he had missed this.
“A’righ’, love?”
“Missed you so much.”
Their mouths met and the kisses shot bolts of desire between Ori’s lips and his crotch. Dwalin took Ori’s hand from his cheek, and pressed his mouth to the pulse point of Ori’s wrist, and kissed up his arm until he reached and nuzzled and sucked Ori’s neck.
Ori purred.
“Ready?” Dwalin whispered into his skin.
Ori shivered.
“Oh, yes.” Ori made to step into the tub, but Dwalin swept him off his feet and lowered him into the heat. The steam carried a soft, faint smell of the oil. Ori let himself slip under to his chin. His muscles surrendered all traces of strain, and a moan traveled up his throat.
When Ori finally sat up again, Dwalin boosted himself in and scooped Ori into his lap.
“Give us a kiss, azyung,” he rumbled.
Ori slid his arms around Dwalin’s neck and they kissed. Their tongues played, their hands roamed, and the erection that ripened against Ori’s thigh was twin to his own.
Gripped with restlessness, Ori twisted around until he straddled Dwalin’s thighs. He remembered the first time he’d attempted seduction in this tub.
As he recalled, that ended rather well.
Now the oil in the hot water worked majick on their skin, and their pricks slid against each other deliciously, no matter how hard they pressed.
And they pressed hard.
Dwalin murmured into Ori’s mouth. One big hand roamed to Ori’s belly and down.
Ori thought Dwalin meant to jerk him off and, though that wasn’t the plan, he wouldn’t complain
if Dwalin did so.
But Dwalin had other ideas.
“Sit up a bit, love,” he said.
Ori raised himself and Dwalin’s hand slipped under to cradle Ori’s sack in his big palm, while his
blunt, strong fingers pressed between and a little behind Ori’s stones.
Ori flinched as Dwalin pressed a certain spot, and Dwalin grinned mischievously and went to
work, rubbing it over and over.
Ori felt it twice, at Dwalin’s touch and deep inside. He put his hands on Dwalin’s shoulders for
leverage and kneeled up a bit more. His eyes closed and his mouth opened.
“That’s it,” he said.
“Yeh tell me when.”
“Oh, now would be just fine.”
A second hand grazed Ori’s bottom, a slick finger teased his opening,
Then a mouth closed over his nipple and sucked.
Ori jumped and gasped.
Dwalin pulled back.
“Too much all a’ once?”
“A little,” Ori breathed. “That’s… that’s just fine the way it is now.”
The finger breached him and drew slowly in and out. Ori shivered because he knew that finger
was long enough to-
“Ooooh!” he cried.
The finger pulled back.
“Sorry,” Ori whispered.
“F’r wha’?”
“Nothing. I think it’s just me default state.”
They both laughed at that.
“Yeh ready f’r me t’ stretch yeh a li’le more?”
Ori almost asked, Stretch what? But he held his tongue at the last moment.
“Yes, please,” he said politely, then he giggled.
Dwalin eased back into him, watching Ori’s face as he added a second finger. Ori bit down on a
gasp. It wasn’t burning, and it didn’t hurt. He didn’t want Dwalin to think it did and stop. Dwalin
went on, deep and twisting. Ori had learned a bit about control recently, but he didn’t think he’d be
able to hold back much longer.
“Dwalin…..”
“It’s a’righ’. Let go. Yer young an’ springy. It’ll help yeh relax, too.”
Ori bounced. He let the water buoy him as he impaled himself on Dwalin’s fingers.
The climax took him abruptly, without the usual build up, and he couldn’t stifle the shout as his
muscles seized.
Dwalin withdrew.
Panting, Ori leaned his forehead on Dwalin’s shoulder as his husband nuzzled him and whispered
endearments.
“Tha’s th’ way, me gem a’ gems. Rest a mo’.”
Ori was shocked to find his own prick was still hard.
“Dwalin, should I still have an erection? I mean, is that natural?”
“Aye, though I thin’ our Kivi may’ve lef’ tha’ out.”
“That’s odd. I’ll have to put that in the footnotes. So, it’s natural.”
“Love, it’s all natural unless yer cock turns green an’ falls off.”
Ori rolled his eyes.
“That’s a relief. I think I’m going to need more oil.”
“Aye. Go’ a drum stashed aside jus’ f’r yeh.”

“Smartarse.”

Dwalin chuckled.

Ori said, “I should turn around, shouldn’t I.”

“If yer ready, aye.”

Ori felt so uncertain then. He kept reminding himself to relax. He didn’t want a repeat of the first time Dwalin tried to teach him to swim, even if he was less likely to drown in the tub.

He turned and got up on his knees, his hand clutched to the edge of the tub. The water lapped at the tops of his thighs.

“Bottle’s bin sittin’ in hot water, ought t’ be nice an’ warm f’r yeh.”

Ori counted one finger, two… then he felt a third, and that did burn a little, but not enough to complain of, until Dwalin’s hand started moving.

That felt weird.

Even with Dwalin’s other hand still at work on his sac, Ori’s body didn’t quite know what to do.

Ori thought about it, then he didn’t think, just let his brain go slack, felt the warm water, listened to Dwalin’s breathing. That got Ori going again, because he knew the sounds of Dwalin’s growing excitement.

Dwalin was aroused by doing this to him.

A flutter started at his gut and spilled warmly into his groin.

Oh.

Oh, that did it.

He moved into Dwalin’s touch experimentally, and felt Dwalin jump a little in surprise.

“A’righ’?”

“Mmmm. That’s… Are you ready? Could we try…?”

“I’m ready, bu’ yer in charge. I’m jus’ followin’ orders.”

Well, that’s terrifying, Ori thought.

But he had been in terrifying situations before, and had much less control over them.

He took a deep breath.

“Please?” he asked.

“There yeh go, bein’ poli’e again.”

Dwalin withdrew. He splashed a little water on Ori’s back.

“What was that for?” Ori asked over his shoulder.

“Luck.”

“Really?”

“Naw, jus’ teasin’ yeh. Spread ou’ a li’le more. Tha’s it.”

One hand curved around Ori’s hip, then something that wasn’t Dwalin’s hand slid between his arse cheeks and pressed against his opening. Ori breathed out deeply, and Dwalin pushed, past the ring of muscle, but no further.

Dwalin swore under his breath.

“What’s wrong?” Ori asked.

“Absolutely nothin’, love. How’re yeh feeling?”

Ori snickered.

“Stuck.”

“Does it feel good, yeh rascal?”

“I don’t know. It’s different.”

Dwalin’s free hand traveled around his waist and down. Ori felt the rough fingers and palm wrap his length and tug.

Ori drew in a sharp breath.

“I can feel that twice! I mean, in front and back!”

Dwalin hummed.

“Aye.”

“Will you move? Just a little!”
Dwalin moved gently in and out, and when Ori felt confident, he said, “Maybe a little more?”

“Wait!”
“A’righ’.”
“Don’t move!”
“This is me no’ movin’.”
“I’m really messing this up, aren’t I?”
“Actually, yer doin’ well. Are yeh hurtin’?”
“No! Just the opposite! It was just… do that again?”

Dwalin did so, pulled out and pushed back slowly, and Ori rested his forehead on the edge of the tub between his hands.


“Feels nice from here, too,” Dwalin assured him.

“It does?”

Dwalin paused, kissed him between the shoulder blades, and continued.

“Aye. We’re doin’ this t’gether, remember?”

Ori didn’t know what to say that wouldn’t sound foolish. He had feared Dwalin would only get so much enjoyment out of this, teaching his inexperienced husband what would, to Dwalin, be such a simple thing.

Like swimming.

The plain truth laid bare to Ori was that Dwalin, his wonderful, patient husband, would happily teach him anything.

He lifted his head and arched his back. The sound of cracking as his spine released its tension echoed off the walls.

“Tha’ was impressive,” said Dwalin.

“You’re impressive. More?”

Dwalin pushed himself in a little farther, and when Ori was used to that, a little more, until Dwalin was finally seated all the way in and rested, waiting, while Ori got over his astonishment. Dwalin’s pelvis was up against his arse.

“It fit!” Ori exclaimed.

“A’ course it fit,” Dwalin replied. “It ain’t an axe handle.”

“Hm, but still made of wood,” Ori mused.

“Funny. Yeh want to try movin’ agin?”

In lieu of an answer, Ori consulted his arse muscles. They were fairly well stretched out, but with a little effort he could still clench them.

Dwalin huffed out a breath and bowed forward.

Pushed toward the side of the tub, Ori giggled nervously.

“Sorry, I should have warned you. I wasn’t sure you’d even feel anything.”

“I fel’ tha’ a’righ’,’,” said Dwalin. “’No fair skippin’ ahead in th’ chapter.”

“Yes, Captain Dwalin,” Ori simpered. “I’ll be good.”

“Rigggggghh’. Shall we go on?”

They went on, slowly increasing in speed, as the bathwater cooled and their gasps and then groans filled the room.

Ori knew he would be sore tomorrow, but he didn’t care, as he pushed back into Dwalin’s thrusts. Dwalin had him tight by both hips the first time he hit Ori’s sweet spot, and Ori cried out and nearly leapt off.

“Ohh! More!” Ori cried.

Not every thrust hit home, but increasingly, they did. Eventually, Ori realized that Dwalin was learning his body, but that was the last realization he had before physical pleasure took over completely, and he pushed back and back, happily impaled, knuckles white with the strain, legs burning from effort. He was enjoying himself so much, his climax took him by surprise, ripping its way back to front as he came heedlessly in the water, up his own chest, even a few drops on his
throat.

It must have taken Dwalin by surprise, too.

“Mahal’s hairy arse! Look a’ yeh!” he crowed.

“What? Huh?” Ori asked distractedly, his body still pumping against Dwalin’s of its own accord, while the tingling travelled up his spine, inside his skull, and made a puddle of his brain.

“Love, tha’ w-“

The blood roared in his ears, and when he could hear again, it became the roaring of his husband, who had reached the tipping point and seemed intent on warning the entire mountain.

Ori thought that was adorable, and wanted to say so, but he was out of breath, his throat sore from gasping and moaning, and lack of water.

Dwalin pulled Ori back up and against his chest with both arms as they knelt. Dwalin’s head rested on Ori’s shoulder, while they waited to catch their breath.

Ori giggled.

“What’s so funny, scribe?” Dwalin growled in his ear.

“I must look like your teddy bear like this.”

Dwalin laughed and cuddled him even closer.

“Go’ yeh jus’ where I wan’ yeh.”

“That’s good, because I don’t think I could move right now.”

In a while, Ori stirred.

“We should wash,” he murmured. “And do something about the tub.”

“Aye, an take care a’ yer arse, ‘r yeh’ll be hurtin’ t’morrah.”

“I didn’t think that was avoidable.”

“No’ entirely, bu’ a’ leas’ yeh’ll be able t’ sit down.”

“Oh. Yes, that could be really embarrassing. Nori’s going to tease me enough as it is.”

“He’s no’ t’ talk. His nadadel still brushes his hair f’r ‘im.”

“Dori’s precious ba-dger!” Ori sing-songed.

Washed clean and toweled dry, Ori lay on the bed while Dwalin slathered his opening with vaguely medicinal-smelling ointment that he couldn’t place.

Dwalin crawled into bed, and pulled Ori to lay on top of him, Ori’s cheek on his chest.

“Thank you, my love,” said Ori.

“Anythin’ f’r yeh, me own wee scribe.”

They lay quietly for a time. All the lamps were covered, but the furniture in the room was silhouetted in the light of the moon, now risen full.

“The moonlight is so beautiful,” Ori said, rolling off and snuggling down against Dwalin, where he could see the moon properly. “Dwalin, do you ever wonder if there’s someone on the moon, looking down at Arda? Do you think they see Arda as beautiful?”

“Eh? I dunno, love. I suppose, when I was a badger, I always though’ th’ moon was a flat disc. Bu’, now yeh mention it, Arda would look fla’ from th’ moon, too, wouldn’t it.”

“And there’s the man who came down from the moon in the Merry Old Inn song.”

“Considerin’ tha’ song was made up by drunks, I don’t think tha’s been though’ out.”

“Enough that someone thought he used the moon as a reading lamp. And if the man in the moon came down to Arda, what would happen if we went to the moon?”

“Le’s no’ discuss tha’ with our Bujni. He’ll drive himself mad figurin’ how t’ get there.”

“It must be possible. That’s how the Silmaril got up there. The one not in Durin’s sock drawer, anyway. Imagine the man on the moon, mooning us.”

Dwalin muttered, then his breath evened out, and Ori realized he was asleep.

But Ori’s brain was still working:

Everyone thinks the moon is romantic, dwarrow, men, elves, hobbits … Do orcs think the moon is romantic? Do orcs have any concept of romance?

Do courting orcs sit in the moonlight, and murmur sweet, orc nothings?

How do orcs reproduce?
Dwalin always says they just shit where they stand. That can’t be terribly romantic. You’re standing there, and the orc of your dreams walks by and you say ‘Hello, we should breed.’ Then, pffftt, right there on the ground. That can’t be at all conducive to-

“Ori.”
“Yer scarin’ everyane in th’ Halls. Go t’ sleep.”

Ori winced.
“Sorry!”
“Tha’s a ’righ’,.”

“While You’re here, may I ask a question?”

“Is it abou’ orcs?”

“No!”

“Then, go ahead. One question.”

“Did You make goats, or did Eru?”

“It was more’ve a group effort. Hard t’ recall. We were all pretty drunk.”

“You made an animal when You were drunk?”

“More ’n one. Still don’ know where tha’ platypus come from.”

“What’ s a platypus?”

“Yeh’ll find out. Tha’ s three questions.”

“Oh, right. So, I owe You two. You can ask anything!”

“Ori, go th’ fuck t’ sleep.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Ori and his family and friends have a lot of projects to get done, so off we go! There will be food! So, bring snacks! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dvarrow time, same dvarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The next day, Ori rolled over and realized he had to go - right now.
The oil from last night was responsible, he knew as he hurried to the bathroom, and he had expected it. Nor was it anywhere near as bad as he had feared. He supposed this was the positive side of being able to imagine anything up to and including the end of the world. The reality was almost never as bad as his fears.
“Except for ‘coming to’ sitting in orc guts,” he muttered.
That was pretty bad, though he hadn’t exactly been lucid enough to realize how bad.
“You know,” he continued, “you’re talking to yourself in an empty room, and your husband is probably wondering if you fell in.”
When he had washed and returned to the bedroom, Dwalin raised the furs and Ori tucked himself into his husband’s arms.
“How’re yeh feeling this mornin’?” Dwalin rumbled, and kissed his neck. “Yeh sore?”
“Not really,” said Ori. He stretched back into Dwalin with shameless abandon. “Though, whenever I move, I am reminded of a certain someone.”
“Anyane I know?”
“Mmmmmaybe. You’re wonderful, you know. You’re amazingly patient.”
“So’re yeh,” said Dwalin. “It’s no’ easy bein’ a warrior’s husband, ‘r wife, f’r tha’ matter. We never seem t’ be home when yeh need us.”
“If I found it easy, that would mean I didn’t love you as much as I do.”
They cuddled for a little while, and then the cuddling got somewhat out of hand. Ori was about to suggest Queen Kivi, when Dori knocked on the door.
“Enough of that, now, pet, dearie. It’s time for breakfast. I’m sure the pair of you have worked up an appetite!”

Dwalin nearly fell over laughing when he observed a breakfast spread of blackberry pancakes, with blackberry muffins on the side, blackberry juice and blackberry leaf tea.
“Yeh seem t’ve worked ou’ a theme, our Dori.”
Dori gave an impatient huff.
“Bilbo and I were just helping!” Dori snapped.
Ori caught Bilbo’s glance and Bilbo rolled his eyes sympathetically.
“An’ we appreciate i’, our Dori,” Dwalin managed. “We jus’ used th’ oil, we didn’ drink i’.”
“Oil is an enema!” Dori shouted.
“Language!” chorused Nori and Kili.
“I do not need an enema!” Oin roared. “Me bowels moved just fine this mornin’!”
“Not you, Dwalin and Ori!” Dori insisted.
“Oh now Bearer,” Oin went on in a soothing tone. “if you’re worried yer wee Ori’s got all bound up with the butter and cream, I’m sure the oil our Dwalin used while he was pluggin’ him last night will have sorted all that out.”
Everyone at the table snorted and a few had to mop up tea. Ori felt his face flame and wondered if there was any point in crawling under the table. Dwalin just put an arm about him and grinned.

“Gross!” Nori grumbled. “I’m done wif brekkie. I’m all nauseous now.”

“Bugger off, nuisance!” Dwalin drawled without heat.

Ori was horrified that everyone at the table knew more about his sex life than he did of any of theirs. At the same time, he was bursting with pride that he had the best husband in all Arda and likely the world.

Ori looked up as the raven fluttered into the breakfast parlor. He had decided to read there as he had a few other history books he’d asked Brur if he could borrow. They were extremely old and dealt with the Firebeards. He was trying to sort out the timelines between Lady Éärwen’s diary and dwarrow history. The table in the parlor was bigger than the desk in his office.

The raven wasn’t one he knew and it looked as though it had come a long way. It landed on the table and sighed. Ori got up.

“Please rest a moment, I’ll get you food and water.”

The raven all but flopped down and Ori went to the kitchen. Dori was slicing up raw mutton. Ori got a small bowl of water and proffered another to Dori.

“Raven, pet?”

“Yes. It looks tired, so I’m going to give it something before finding whomever the letter is for.”

“Good badger,” Dori murmured and chopped up a slice and popped it into the bowl. Ori went back through and put both bowls down near the raven. The raven drank gratefully, then offered its leg.

“Who is it for?” Ori asked politely before removing it.

“Yer Ori, righ’?” the raven asked.

“I am.”

“I’s f’r yeh. King said t’ tell yeh, yeh go’ all his an’ Queen Givi’s an’ th’ pebbles’ love.”

“Thank you, er?”

“Shelly,” said raven.

“Thank you, Shelly.”

Ori carefully removed the letter. “That’s so kind of them. Please take your time and rest.”

“Ta,” said the raven around a beak full of meat.

Ori opened the intricately folded paper.

“Our Ori,

We’re safe home. We had a good trip spending a couple of day’s with Rhonda and Linda. Rivendell’s a real pretty place. All flowers, bendy trees and elves singing all over everywhere. I swear there must be something to the old tale that elves eat leaves and bark. Most of them had nothing on their dinner plates but leafy stuff. They call it arugula and purslane. Looked like weeds to us. Not to worry, Rhonda knows how to feed dwarrow and we had proper stick to your ribs meals. The pebbles had a grand time as all the elves wanted to play with them. Worked well as they are quick on their feet and ran Sni and Sni all over the place. Pebbles slept every night like logs. Much as we love the little shits, it was nice to just put up our feet for a while.

Our Sni’s got so he sings that Tra-la-lallying thing wherever he goes. We’re hoping to get him singing some dwarf songs soon, just for balance, and so we don’t lose what’s left of our minds.

We got back last evening in time for dinner. I got the pebbles fed and into their beds, then Chat and I went down to the hall for our welcome back dinner. Our steward brought Frerin and T’dillah down for it. Steward says Frerin’s behaving, as T’dillah’s overdue
beyond a week. She tells us she’s working on a book of poetry, wants to have it published. Mahal forbid, though Frerin seems excited about it. Chat was in a good mood and gave Frerin leave to have the manuscript sent to a Gondor press Frerin knows about.

They seemed in a good enough mood to stay after dinner to hear about our visit. Everyone - well, almost everyone - was real excited about the wedding and all those sweet pictures you drew got passed around, and most impressed seeing all the crowned heads of Arda, as your Margr and Vi like to say. It was a fun thing when Frerin got his look at them pictures of yours. Me and Chat really liked the way you showed how much of that spicy soup our Thorin swallowed and the ones of the whole family were grand.

T’dillah looked like she was wanting to say something nice, but Frerin looked so black-afronted that she said she was feeling poorly and the pair of them went off to bed. Guard came down later and told us all that Frerin had been raging for two hours about those pictures. Apparently, Frerin thinks Thorin had been practicing as no one could eat that amount of soup! Practicing!

And he’s dead sure that our Bilbo couldn’t have swallowed a bit at all, and that the picture of him drinking from the bowl was just made up.

Mahal’s balls, I swear that lad’s got more than just a beehive rammed up his arse.

Much love to you and everyone still hanging about Fundin House,
Givris.

Ori chuckled as he folded the letter but he sobered as he thought of T’dillah. An overdue pebble was not a good thing. He sat thinking for a moment, then patted the raven and went to find Thorin. He went through to the sitting room and saw a piece of paper on the floor. He thought from the size and color of the paper, it must have dropped from the packet in Faramir’s pocket.

He meant to pick it up and, still folded, put it in his bag to return later. Then he realized, he’d better make sure it really was Faramir’s, and not Dori’s list for ‘surprise’ Yule gifts or reveal the names of the badgers.

He only meant to check the hand-writing, look for a name or something. At least, that was what Ori told himself. He read:

“Dear Father,

We have arrived safe and the equipment is safe. You were right about the outriders you hired to accompany me. They are entirely competent and saw me safely to Erebor.

Mr. Baggins is in fine health and writing like a fiend. You’ll be happy to read that his marriage to King Thorin was, indeed, a love match, so any romantic aspects you care to attach to publicity will ring quite correct.

The dwarrow (that is the correct plural for dwarf, as I’ve been told innumerable times since our arrival) are a very warm and generous people, not greedy at all, and Mr Baggins and his nephew are very well-liked. I have been treated with great courtesy, even though it is obvious that to the pressdwarrow neither our craftsmanship nor our work ethic is quite up to snuff.

If I may be delicate, other things we heard about the Durin line are true. The king is quite eccentric. Plainly put, his family is nuts. Oh, it’s nothing that will keep them from properly running the kingdom. They are a dead-clever lot, and they are every one of them bent on Erebor prospering….”

Ori folded the letter, rather angry at himself for reading so far down. It was none of his business, was it. If Faramir thought them all mad, that was none of his business either.

He heard a ruckus in the kitchen and Nori singing loudly, and off-key:
Ohhhhh-ho, I got ferrets in me pants.
Ohhhhh-ho, they’re gonna have a dance.

Then again, perhaps Faramir wasn’t all that far off the mark.
He picked up his books from the table in the parlor and retired to his work room, out of the way of any, and continued his reading.
It was only after that stupid little song ran through Ori’s head for the next three hours that he added a new descriptor to Faramir’s list. Murderous. He was going to kill Nori and stuff the ferrets down his throat.
If only Nori-Pori didn’t get on so well with little Assault and Battery, or as Dwalin called them, Assbat.

Ori didn’t say much at lunch. He was concerned it might be noticed, as family drifted in and out, all on schedules of their own. Fortunately, Dori seemed to talk enough for all of them. Between Yule preparations and the impending badgers, Dori had an awful lot to say.
Ori dawdled over his food. Faramir had come in from his meeting with the printers’ guild chairs, ate heartily and went to change into work clothes. As the man was leaving, and there wasn’t anyone else around, Ori approached him.

“Faramir?”
The man turned.
“Ori?”
Ori held out the page of the letter.
“You dropped this in the sitting room.”
“Thank you,” said Faramir, peering at him closely. “You read it.”
Ori looked at his toes.
“Yes, and I’m quite ashamed of myself. It was wrong of me, and I apologize…”
“But?”
“But, don’t you like it here in Erebor? Do you really think so little of us?”
“Of course I like it here in Erebor! And I think you’re family is wonderful!”
“But, your letter!”
Faramir sighed and ran his free hand through his hair.
“That letter is meant for my father, Ori. It doesn’t do to let him think I’m too happy or comfortable. I’d be on the first caravan back to Gondor, new printing contract or not.”
“He’d could really do that? I mean, I know it’s not my business, I really do, but you’re of age.”
“But if I want to work the press, I’m bound to him. He’s made sure no one else in Gondor will hire me, and the only other great presses in Arda reside here in Erebor, where the dwarven guild is closed to outsiders. Truthfully, I think that’s the real reason he even let me out of his sight.”
“He doesn’t treat Captain Boromir like this, does he?”
“Boromir is the eldest son, the march warden of Gondor, and the king’s closest friend and comrade. Also, Boromir didn’t cost our mother her life.”
Ori winced.
“Moreover, Father doesn’t see Boromir as a threat to his power or position. Father never had ambitions as a warrior.”
“He sounds like… not a very nice man.”
“He’s not. But, at the moment, he’s half a world away, and that’s where I want him to stay.”
Ori drew himself up.
“I hope I am still trusted by you?”
Faramir dropped to one knee and embraced Ori. Ori hugged back.
“Ori, I shall always consider you my friend here, and I know that your concern for me outweighs your natural dwarven nosiness. I’m also deeply grateful it was you who found this letter, and not Auntie Dori.”
That made Ori laugh.
“Dori would be screaming at Thorin to write to Aragorn to have your father beheaded.”
“Yes,” Faramir chuckled. “Most awkward.”
They parted ways, Faramir to the presses and Ori to his office.

Some hours later, Ori found an excuse to walk down to to Dwalin’s office in the army headquarters. This took some time when he got there, as most of the soldiers came to chat and wish him many happy returns of the day for yesterday. The guard outside the hallway to the offices gave him a smile as Ori went by. Dwalin’s office door was open. Ori looked in. Dwalin was writing. Several ravens, a few bats and a couple of thrushes perched on the large stand. A pile of unopened letters sat on the left hand side of Dwalin’s desk and the right, a larger pile of replies. Ori watched his husband for a few moments, enjoying the sight of this fine specimen of a dwarf working. His dwarf. Ori grinned in spite of himself and at that moment Dwalin looked up.

“Now here’s a sigh f’r sore eyes.”
Dwalin rose and came to Ori. Ori bounced forward and wrapped his arms about Dwalin.
Dwalin kissed the top of his head and gave his butt a squeeze.

“What bring’s yeh here, me love?”
“Nothing really, though I did tell myself it was to ask about old historical army documents.”
“Them I kin help yeh with. Wha’ war maneuvers’re yeh wantin’ t’ check on?”
“Firebeard’s sacking of Doriath?”
Dwalin looked faraway over Ori’s head.

“Well, now, tha’ sor’ a’ thin’s kept wi’ th’ weaponry used ‘round tha’ time. Lemme think.”
Dwalin released Ori and went to the maps covering the walls of his office. There was a smaller one near the fireplace. Ori followed Dwalin to look. Ori went right up to the map in delight. There was Beriland drawn out in detail, as it looked before it sunk beneath the waves. Ori saw the city of Doriath marked and various other settlements.

“Annex three,” Dwalin muttered then smiled at Ori. “C’mon, we’ve a bit of a trek.”
They went to the door as Dwalin whistled a dismissal to the messengers. They came out the door and Dwalin locked it behind him.

“Captain!”
Ori turned as did Dwalin.

“What’s bothering yeh lad?”
Targ looked apologetic.

“Captain? Tha’ Master Faramir, he was involved in a fight, down in th’ presses.”
“What, Mahal’s hairy balls. Is he still alive?”
“Ooh, aye. He won. Yeh think he’d look happier about it.” He turned to Ori. “He’s askin’ f’r yeh, Lord Ori.”

“Me? Why?” Ori asked, even as he pulled on his cape.
Targ said, “I think ‘cause yer th’ nearest thing he’s go’ t’ a friend.”
Dwalin and Ori exited the headquarters as Furhnk arrived with Gnasher saddled and ready.

Dwalin swung up, and grasping Ori’s hand, pulled him up behind. They galloped after Targ to the printing guild houses.

They went into the anteroom. Through the doorway to the printing floor, they saw printers and apprentices collecting bits and pieces of equipment and parts from a huge pile on the floor, along with what looked like the shattered remains of wooden crates.

“Wha’ happened?” Dwalin asked.

“It were a real buster,” said the shop foredwarf. “Yeh know wha’ Y’gar’s li’e? Can’t leave th’ new guy alone, always pickin’. Turns ou’, tha’ Faramir weren’ th’ easy pickin’s we though’.”
Dwalin groaned.

“Tha’ explains it, then. We all though’ he’d be bitin’ stone floor when Y’gar jumped upon a bench, took a swing at ‘im, an’ caught him by th’ nose. Instead, tha’ Faramir tried t’ push a full crate a’ lead type between ‘em. Tha’ never moved, bu’ then he fell against a stack a’ six other crates an’
accidentally knocked ‘em over. Right’ on top a’ Y’gar.”

“Where is Y’gar now?”
“Still bein’ dug out.”
“Anyone called th’ healer?” Dwalin rumbled
“Aye, we imagine th’ healer’ll be along. We’d be more worried if Y’gar stopped laughin’.
Can’t move a muscle right’ now.”
“Where’s Faramir?” Ori asked. “Is he hurt?”
“No’ as such. Don’ even think his nose is broken. He’s out back. Can’t miss ‘im. Tall feller, with a bloody rag t’ his face.”

They found the man right where they looked, sitting on a crate in the supply room, with his head back. He seemed somewhat glum, in fact, more than any dwarf who won a similar fight.

“Is Y’gar alright?” Faramir asked tiredly.
“Just fine,” said Ori.
“Nothin’ a skull hammer won’ fix,” said Dwalin.
“Oh, Eru’s blessed blue b-. Er, that is…”
Dwalin laughed.
“I hope Iluvatar takes yer usin’ th’ name a’ his stones as well as Mahal takes it from us.”
“If I’m suddenly struck by lightning, you’ll know,” said Faramir. “He’s really going to be alright?”

“Aye, bu’ yeh’ll call Y’gar ‘her’, if yeh know wha’s guid f’r yeh.”
“I hit a woman?” Faramir yelped.
“A dam,” Ori reminded him.
“But - but that’s so ungentlemanly!”
Dwalin said, “She hit yeh first. C’mon. I think yer done f’r th’ day.”
“I can’t.”
“He can’t, Dwalin,” said Ori. “It’s like the soldiers. He has to go right back to work if he wants to keep the respect he earned.”
“I learned respect?” Faramir asked, clearly dubious.
Dwalin nodded, “Me Ori’s righ’. If yeh kin do it, yeh should go an’ help pull Y’gar ou’. She’ll offer t’ treat yeh t’ a tankard a’ th’ Moo an’ Cluck. Yeh should say ‘Aye, sure’.”
“Wait. Isn’t that a food cart?”

“I un’erstan’ it’s gonna be time f’r Kili’s and Tauriel’s presentation in a couple a’ days,” Dwalin rumbled.
Ori took his hand as they walked back into the street.
“How can you tell?” Ori snarked. “Is it the non-existent plans for the not-party that Dori is, of course, not planning for them?”
Dwalin snickered.
“Our Dori’s a gem among gems. Hard t’ believe there’s times he makes me look subtle.”
Between one step and the next, Dwalin disappeared.
Erebor disappeared.
Ori stood at the threshold of a large dining room in The Halls. Miraculous sunlight, warm wind, and the scent of flowers poured in from open windows on all sides, and trays of still-steaming gingerbread filled the air with mouth-watering promise. Sunny presided over the teapot at the head of the table, and Bilbo grinned up at him from her right hand.

“Hullo, Ori,” Bilbo piped. “Nice of you to join us.”
“Hullo, Bilbo. Hullo, Sunny, how are you keeping?”
“Keeping just fine, but you’d best take a seat, lovey, we’re not all here yet. Sit next to Bilbo. You can kick each other under the table if you like.”
“Really, Sunny,” said Bilbo. “I haven’t done that since I was a naughty faunt.”
“You’re all faunts to me,” said Sunny, “so feel free.”
There were suddenly two other hobbits at the table, across from Ori and Bilbo. One was
obviously a hobbit version of Yavanna herself, with saw whet owls perched sleepily on the leafy branches of her hair. Upon closer inspection, one of the owls was devouring a vole.

Ori and Bilbo leapt to their feet and bowed.

The other hobbit, a rosy-cheeked, red-headed male, reached out a forefinger and lit all the candles on the table, one by one, without a match.

“Show-off,” said Yavanna.

“Lord Mahal?” Ori asked, agog.

Bilbo, apparently, had never met Him, and swallowed, and bowed very low.

Mahal laughed.

“Aye, tha’s me. Jus’ tryin’ it on f’r ‘size’.” Then he laughed again at his own, terrible joke.

“Sit down, laddies. Our Sunny’ll have th’ vapors if her tea gets cold.”

“Da, you’re incorrigible,” said Sunny fondly, and poured out.

There was whipped cream for the gingerbread, and also platters of crustless sandwiches, some filled with a soft, yellow cheese and slices of cucumber, some with butter and cress. A plate piled high with shortbread triangles sat at Sunny’s elbow and, before Yavanna, a bowl of what looked like candied flowers.

One of Yavanna’s owls dropped down onto the cloth and stuck his beak in. She reached and offered him a few from her palm and the owl shot her a look.

“Oh, I beg your pardon,” said Yavanna with a delicate snort. A shallow dish of of dead mice appeared.

The owl was not appeased, but Yavanna was firm.

“It will have to do. It’s very hard to converse and have our meal while you chase your meal all over the table.”

The owl sighed and dug in.

Ori did not watch.

Mahal looked around.

“Where’s th’ lad?”

“He was meeting up with some people,” said Sunny. “Something about our Kili’s and Tauri’s presentation. He said to go on without him and he’ll catch up.”

Ori wondered if Durin meant to appear at their presentation as he had at Ori’s, then Ori silently scolded himself for his presumption, and Durin chuckled in his head and said, “Well, it ain’t gonna be me, silly dwarf.”

One of the seemingly-sleeping owls in Yavanna’s hair roused and started to cough.

“No!” Yavanna cried. “Absolutely not! No pellets on the table!”

Ori could have sworn the owl was grumbling as it took wing and flew out the open window.

“Now,” said Sunny, in a business-like tone. “We need to do something about this Denethor person.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Uh-oh, sounds like trouble’s brewing. Or maybe it’s just tea. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

“What has that lunkhead done now?” Bilbo asked, most concerned. Mahal said, “If it was only jus’ him.” “It started harmlessly enough,” said Yavanna. “Lady T’dillah submitted a manuscript of her poetry to Mister Denethor for consideration.” Ori coughed on a gingerbread crumb and Bilbo yelped, “Her poetry?” “Yes,” said Yavanna. Mahal grumbled, “Tol’ yeh her poems’re anythin’ bu’ harmless.” “It’s not really about the poems themselves,” Yavanna insisted. “Me love, they could set dwarven literature back a’ leas’ ‘n age.” “They aren’t that ba- alright, they are that bad, but she is sincere in her efforts. She has a natural inclination to create something, as does any other dwarf.” “If only she had talent,” said Mahal. Yavanna elbowed Him hard in the ribs. “Oi!” “Eat your sandwich,” She ordered. “At any rate, T’dillah isn’t vicious or scheming.” “No,” said Ori. “That’s Frerin.” “Yes,” said Yavanna. A small raincloud appeared above her head, flashed lightning, and spattered the leaves on the branches with a brief shower. The owls looked unimpressed. “And that is where the trouble begins. Frerin encouraged her, in fact he offered to help her.” “Ohhhh,” said Ori. “He’s a lousy poet, too?” Bilbo asked. “I have no idea,” said Ori. “But he was raised by Thror at Thror’s maddest, and he may know a great many secrets about Erebor, maybe things not even Thorin knows.” “Very good,” said Yavanna. “Frerin is clever. And he could teach our Legolas a thing or two about epigrams.” “He could use the poems in T’dillah’s book to send code to his allies,” said Bilbo. “If he could place saboteurs under the mountain, he could do all kind of mischief right under Thorin’s nose, without so much as sending a raven.” “Givris said Chat gave his permission for it to be sent. Surely, it would never get as far as outright sedition,” said Ori. “Would it?” Bilbo shook his head. “I don’t see how. Ursith is the one in charge of sedition and he works for Thorin. This is bad, yes, but we can warn Thorin. His rule and his alliances are strong. Though we are more than grateful for the warning, the whole affair doesn’t seem like something the valar would even regard enough to involve Themselves in.” Mahal and Yavanna each seemed to look anywhere but at them. “You’re meddling!” Ori exclaimed. “No, no, no,” said Mahal. “Well, aye, we are, jus’ a wee bi’. We’re no’ Eru, sittin’ ou’ in th’ ether, contemplatin’ who knows wha’. We’re more- er?”
“Hands on,” said Yavanna dryly.
“Aye, hands on.”
“But, knowing that Thorin could take care of this, what’s really the matter? What are we missing?” Bilbo asked.

“Faramir,” said Sunny. “This isn’t just an internal matter among the dwarrows. Part of the reason Denethor sent Faramir to Erebor is that Faramir might cotton onto what Denethor is doing. He thinks little of Faramir as a grown man, but he knows Faramir isn’t stupid, and he’s aware that the king confides in his younger son as well as his elder.”

“But, what could Denethor gain from helping Frerin?” Ori asked. “It’s not like he has military ambitions. Unless, Faramir was wrong about that.”

“Faramir’s half wrong about that,” said Sunny. “Though not military, Denethor does have ambitions, and he could use a sympathetic patron to achieve them. If Frerin causes chaos in Erebor, leverages power there, Frerin could cede him some valuable spoils.”

“Frerin gains political power, Denethor gets control of the printing industry in Erebor,” said Ori. “Access to new markets in the east of Arda. It would be like Nali all over again!”

Bilbo struggled for a moment.
“This all seems a bit farfetched,” he said finally. “Frerin, stuck in a tower in Chat’s fortress, manipulating the king of Erebor?”

“Farfetched, p’raps,” said Mahal, “P’raps no’. Th’ point is, we haven’t come all this way t’ risk Thorin, nor Faramir.”

“Thorin is the lynchpin that holds together all the new alliances of Middle Earth,” said Yavanna. “Middle Earth is secure, because Erebor is secure.”

“Mother,” Bilbo said to Yavanna, “please help me understand this. A book of T’dillah’s poetry, if published, could devastate the kingdoms of Middle Earth.”

“So it would seem,” She said.

Ori asked, very quietly, “Does this mean we have to go get Denethor, or Frerin, or both of them, and kill them to get the book?”

“No,” said Yavanna, “neither of them has it. The manuscript is missing and Denethor is tearing Gondor apart looking for it.”

“We have to get to him before he finds it!” Bilbo cried. “And what does Faramir have to do with it?”

“Ol’ Den won’ fin’ it,” said Mahal, as He shoved a huge spoon of whipped cream into His mouth. “Tha’s where our Fari comes in. He don’ realize it, bu’ he accidentally brough’ it with him t’ Erebor. Tha’s th’ good news.”

“What’s the bad news?” Ori asked, cringing.

“He lost it somewhere in Fundin house when he was drunk, an’ we’ve gone abou’ as far with the meddlin’ as we dare.”

“So You won’t tell us where it is?” Bilbo groaned.

“Agrib must have seen it!” Ori cried.

“Er.” Mahal swiped an errant blob of cream off the side of His cheek with a thick hand, then licked it off. “I kin tell yeh this. It was in the shoulder bag our Fari carried abou’ with him a’ th’ Las’ Harves’ party, an’ he tol’ Agrib he could unpack tha’ himsel’. ”

“We need to get back!” said Bilbo.

“Finish your tea first, dear,” said Sunny. “Oh, you haven’t eaten much at all. Wait and I’ll make you a plate to take with you!”

Sunny rose and began piling goodies on a large platter. Ori noticed it was Dori’s favorite. Sunny caught his eye and winked.

“You’re going to trust us with it, ma’am?” Ori asked teasingly.

“Oh, of course,” she beamed at him. “If either of you break it, it’s not my fault.”

Bilbo and Ori looked at one another.

“Of course,” they chorused.

Yavanna and Mahal vanished in the traditional puff of smoke scented with violets and hot iron.
Sunny shoved the platter to Bilbo, and then Bilbo and Ori stood together in the sitting room in Fundin House.

“He were walkin’ righ’ beside me,” Dwalin insisted.

“Bilbo is missing, too,” Thorin said as Dori bustled through from the kitchen.

“Alright,” she demanded, “who has stolen my favorite platter this time?”

“We’re back,” Ori said as chirpily as he could.

“We brought leftovers from tea,” Bilbo added helpfully.

Everyone turned and stared at them.

“With whom were you having tea?” Dori demanded.

“Mother Yavanna, Father Mahal and Sunny,” Bilbo informed them and passed the platter to Dori.

“Oh, so Sunny was borrowing it,” Dori cooed, suddenly in raptures. “That’s alright then. She knows how to care for fine porcelain. What a lovely sandwich.”

Dori balanced the platter on her enormous belly and trotted back to the kitchen, clearing the patter of its bounty.

Ori stared after Dori.

“Dori’s getting really big,” he said, mostly to himself. “I hope the badgers come soon, he looks like he’s going to pop.”

“Balin’s problem,” Dwalin told him with a fond kiss.

“Thorin, my dear,” Bilbo said, “might we go somewhere private? Ori and I were summoned for a somewhat unpleasant reason.”

Thorin put an arm around him, and led the way to his office. They seated themselves and Bilbo related what had been said at the valars’ tea table. Thorin closed his eyes and Ori thought he looked like he had a headache. Dwalin swore colorfully. Thorin sighed.

“I can hear my mother in my head saying ‘This is what comes of being merciful, you should know better.’ ”

“Yer no’ yer mam, Thorin,” said Dwalin.

“No, more’s the pity. If I were, this problem would be easily solved. I’ll admit no one would have faulted me here or in the Halls, if I had seen fit to have him beheaded, but killing kin is not something I want to make a habit of, nor do I want my own younger brother’s blood on my hands.”


“I’m not issuing orders either.” Thorin replied.

“Ain’t takin’ yer orders. I’m goin’ ou’ there on me own steam an’ filletin’ him like a fuckin’ fish.”

“No, you’re not,” Thorin said tiredly. “What we need to do first is find this thrice cursed book. Nori?”

“I’ll take a look,” Nori replied from the wall behind the curtain.

“I’ll help you,” Ori volunteered. “Seeing as how I’m staying here rather than going with Dwalin to kill Frerin.”

“Yeh’d come along?” Dwalin grinned.

“Of course,” Ori said loftily. “I’m the king’s scribe. I have to document such matters.”

“Goin’ upstairs,” said Nori. “Race you!”

“Ain’t takin’ yer orders. I’m goin’ ou’ there on me own steam an’ filletin’ him like a fuckin’ fish.”

“No, you’re not,” Thorin said tiredly. “What we need to do first is find this thrice cursed book. Nori?”

“Found it!” Nori cried.

“You found the book!” Ori cheered.
“Naw, Bofur’s old tit ring. Fings was gettin’ rough one night an-“
“Shut up, Nori.”
“Shuttin’ up now. Oi! Ain’t this the lamp Master Ursif brought our Dori as a courtin’ gift?”
“Yes,” said Ori as he peered under the bed. No book. Not even dust bunnies. Mistress Dazla was ick’s worst nightmare.
“What’s it doin’ in Gheir’s bedroom?” Nori demanded
“Dori put it there to scare Gheir when he came to visit.”
“What’s scary about it? It’s beautiful!”
“It’s hideous.”
“Naw!”
“Really, Nori? A painted plaster warg dressed as a court dancer with a clock in its stomach and a lime green, frilly shade?”
“Yer right, it’s hideous. Hope it makes ‘im pee his pants.”

Ori could hear the preparations for dinner going on in the kitchen below when the five regrouped in the hallway outside Faramir’s room.
“This is insane,” Thorin rumbled. “That book must be here. Agrib came back hours ago to tell us he’d found nothing.”
“There’s no damage t’ any a’ th’ ceiling’s either,” Dwalin muttered. “He can’t’ve made a hole an’ stuck i’ in.”
“Is it in any of the walls, Nori?” Thorin asked.
“Nope. Looked all through.”
Bilbo twitched his nose at them.
“I think Faramir might have been a little drunk to execute such a plan with any finesse.”
There was a firm tread at the entrance to the hallway and they all turned to see Faramir. The man looked happy, tousled, and his work apron liberally doused with ink, grease, and all manner of smears. He opened his mouth to greet them, stopped, then said,
“May I help you?”
“Faramir,” Thorin went forward, “we are very glad you’re back. I understand you brought a book with you from Gondor?”
“I brought several,” Faramir replied, looking mystified. “Is there a particular one you need?”
“Yes,” Thorin said, “the one that was sent to your father from Frerin. It was a book of Frerin’s wife’s poetry.”
“Father has that.”
“No, Faramir,” Thorin told him. “Ori and Bilbo have had word from Lord Mahal and Lady Yavanna that the book was in your satchel.”
Faramir’s eyes widened. He removed the satchel from his shoulder and handed it to Thorin, then he opened the door to his room and went in.
“All the books I brought are on the nightstand,” he said.
Thorin gave the satchel to Nori, who passed his hand all though it.
“Nuffink,” Nori grumped.
Dwalin rechecked the books on the stand, looking through them as well.
“There’s eigh’ books here,” Dwalin reported. “None a’ ’em’s T’dillah’s poetry.”
Faramir frowned. “I grabbed nine. I remember debating how many would fit.”
The man went to the stand and rifled through the pile. He dropped to his knees and peered under the bed. Dwalin politely lifted the foot, so Faramir could see better. With Faramir, they went through the entire room again, moving furniture this time. They found nothing but an old courtesan’s hair bead, a recipe for lubricant and a mouse, which Nori-Pori chased out of the room.
Ori gave the room a final distracted look over and saw the bathroom door was open. Binni had been busy since summer, redecorating every guest bedroom and bath in the house. So far, Ori hadn’t seen anything worse than throw pillows covered in raspberry sequins and towels embroidered with the runes for: his, hers and up-for-grabs. He wandered in, naturally curious.
This wasn’t so bad, he thought. Alright, the tile was pink marble - floor, walls and ceiling, but it wasn’t a bilious pink. The tub and sink were all obsidian, as was the lavatory behind an open door. A chair to hold the bather’s clothing sat beside the tub. A borrowed bathrobe hung over the back of it. Ori frowned at the chair. It was decidedly off balance. Dwalin and Thorin came over to him.

“Faramir?” Ori called. “What happened to the bathroom chair?”

“What?” Faramir said, coming over. “Oh, when I arrived and went to sit on it, I found it was off kilter, so I fixed it.”

“It’s still extremely off kilter,” Ori said pointing. Everyone looked.

“Eru’s breath,” Faramir murmured. “I must have been more drunk than I thought I was.”

“Repair’ble,” Dwalin said and crossed the room with Ori at his heels. Ori looked at the chair legs. One was propped on a book. Ori meeped and pounced. It was a handwritten notebook with the Rikanta family crest embossed in the cover and T’dillah’s name in ink across the top.

“It’s here!” Ori shouted.

“Tha’s me love,” Dwalin praised. “Nothin’ wrong wi’ this chair now, our Fari.”

“Thank you, Dwalin,” Faramir chuckled. He looked at the book. “That is definitely not the Lay of Luthien.”

“Yes, he weren’t a book. They called him Beren,” Nori said knowledgeably

“What?” Faramir stared at Nori

“Her lay,” Nori said slowly and loudly. Then he added, “They got married later ‘r sumfin’, right?”

“Lay as in a song, Nori!” Ori shouted. “Not lay as in fuck!”

“Oi, language, you liddle mole!”

“It translates as the Song of Luthien!” Ori insisted.

The song was considered one of the finest works in Gondor, and Ori felt himself honor-bound to defend it. He turned and saw that Dwalin and Thorin went standing, arms folded, looking at Faramir, who had fallen back on the bed, where he lay shaking silently.

“Oi, you alright our Fari?” Nori bellowed.

Faramir let loose a howl of laughter. Ori clutched the book to himself. Life was good, for now.

“All we have to do is figure out what to do with this,” said Ori. “Do we burn it?”

“No, I think it can still be of use,” said Thorin. “Let me see that, Ori.”

Ori surrendered it. Bilbo read over Thorin’s arm as the king flipped through the pages. The khuzdul covered the lefthand page, and the westron translation was transcribed on the right.

“Silver ink on black paper?” Bilbo asked. “Really?”

“Call it her hallmark, ghivasha. You know, this isn’t her handwriting.”

“It’s not?” Ori yelped.

“No, and I’ve read her handwriting, as you recall. This is Frerin’s. In fact, it’s very like any other Durin’s, as we’re all taught to write the same way, simply and with clarity, to avoid our letters and orders being misread.”

“Then, how can you tell this is his?”

“Frerin’s diacritic marks always have a bit of a wave to them. He must have ‘volunteered’ to write her poems out clean for her before the manuscript was sent to Denethor. He was taking no chances with his code. Nori, do you think you could decipher this?”

Thorin held out the book.

Nori took it, read from it, snorted, and said, “When I was a pebble. The poetry itself’s like a warg’s brekkie. The westron don’t scan a’ tall.”

Thorin cut his eyes at Ori.

“Perhaps you and Nori could improve upon it.”

“But, that would change the co—oh,” said Ori. “If we know the code, we can rewrite Frerin’s orders to Denethor.”

“And the results,” said Thorin with a grin, “will be a pleasure to watch.”
Faramir, who had listened to this with obvious and increasing confusion, stood and looked down at the handwritten pages.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Well, besides the fact that it’s horrible verse.”

Ori swallowed.

They had forgotten something.

Before anyone else could do so, Ori stepped forward and said, “Your father and Thorin’s brother are working together to try to discredit Thorin and seize power in Erebor.”

“What?” Faramir cried. “My father is doing what?”

“The westron translations in the manuscript are coded orders to your father from Frerin.”

Faramir groaned and sank down on the bed.

“Oh, Thorin, I am so sorry. Please believe me, I had no idea what my father was up to. I would certainly never knowingly help him hurt the Durins.”

Thorin put a hand on Faramir’s shoulder, which he could do, because Faramir was sitting down.

“I know that,” said the king. “As it is, you’ve unwittingly helped defend us from him. Ori and Bilbo tell us, your father is tearing Gondor apart, looking for something you’ve been using to prop up a bathroom chair.”

Nori clasped his hands under his chin, cocked his head, fluttering his eyelashes at Faramir, cooing, “Our hero!”

Faramir hit him over the head with a pillow.

While Nori went to translate the code, and redo his hair, Dwalin took Ori by the hand and led him back down to their bedroom. Dwalin sat on the new sofa and lifted Ori onto his lap. They rested their foreheads together for a moment and Dwalin sighed.

Ori felt terrible.

“I’m sorry, Dwalin. I know it worries you when I just pop out like that.”

“Naught yeh kin do abou’ it, love, I know. It’s no’ li’e Mahal sends a raven an’ tells yeh t’ meet Him a’ th’ Moo an’ Cluck f’r a pint, half a cow, an’ a chat.”

Ori reflected that this would certainly add something new and different to the Night Market.

“I guess, you have your duty, and I have mine,” said Ori.

“Aye, an’ I need t’ talk t’ yeh abou’ tha’.”

Ori drew back. That didn’t sound good at all.

“Are you going on maneuvers or something?” he asked.

“No, love, I’m no’ goin’ anywheres. Bu’, I need yeh t’ do somethin’ f’r me.”

“If I can.”

“Yeh know our Gimli’s ridin’ with th’ patrol now, an’ helpin’ train th’ badgers.”

Ori grinned.

“I understand he’s very good with them.”

“Aye, he is. Mentally, I think they’re all th’ same age. Usually, I wouldn’ push a new warrior t’ take on more responsibilities righ’ off. No’ fair t’ them, no’ when we’re no’ a’ war. Gimli’s different. He’s a Durin.”

“The others will expect him to lead whether he’s ready or not.”

Dwalin looked pleased.

“Yeh ge’ it. I knew yeh would.”

“But, what does that have to do with me?”

“I wan’ our Gimmers t’ star’ trainin’ older dwarrow, bu’ he’ll need t’ work up t’ tha’.”

Ori went very still.

“You want him to train me.”

“Aye, t’ use th’ axe. If he kin do tha’, he’ll be a ways t’ward trainin’ others.”

“Dwalin, I can’t use Durin’s Axe! It nearly snapped me in half once before.”

“No’ Durin’s axe. Yeh kin use the one I trained on as a badger. Yer abou’ th’ same height I was, an’ yer stronger than I am now. An’ th’ live edges’re blunted.”
“I’d love to help you, you know I would, but when would I have the time?”
“I’m no’ askin’ yeh t’ become a warrior, ‘r ride patrol. If yeh kin gi’e our Gimmers an hour mos’
days, it’ll still be more’n he’s go’ now.”
Ori put his hands on Dwalin’s cheeks and looked him right in the eyes.
“This is about more than Gimli, Dwalin.”
The warrior sighed.
“Aye. I don’ li’e t’ think on it, bu’ th’ more thin’s yeh do f’r Lord Mahal, th’ more He’s likely t’
ask a’ yeh. Yer slingsho’ migh’ no’ always serve.”
Ori was afraid this was true. Nor was it something that he hadn’t thought of himself. He was a
dwarf. Even happy, silly dwarf adventures tended to include sharp objects.
“Alright,” said Ori, “but you’ll have to make Gimli’s schedule around mine. I still have the guild
to consider, my work for Thorin, the painting projects, the Queen Kivi translation and, oh yes, I
miraculously still have a job at the library, to which someday I’ll have to return.”
“I’m sorry, love,”
Ori bit his lip.
“And, most importantly, I have a husband who needs seeing to more often than once fortnightly,
or alternate birthdays, whichever comes last.”
“Hmm,” said Dwalin. “Yeh know, we may have a wee bi’ a’ time righ’ now.”
“Do we?” Ori asked.
“Aye. I’m think-”
“I’ll go lock the door.”
Ori jumped up and scampered over, with the sound of Dwalin’s laughter in his ears.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Nori is a useful pest, T’dillah is oddly inspirational, and Ori has a poetic moment. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel!
Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori and Dwalin had been having the most wonderful time, but….
“Get out of here, Nori!” Ori screamed, enraged. Nori bounded off the bed and away, laughing. Dwalin snarled and leapt after him. He managed to grab Nori’s belt before the redheaded thief became intangible and vanished through the wall. “Bloody nuisance,” Dwalin hissed. Ori sat on the bed, puffing in anger and embarrassment. “I can’t believe he just dropped on us while we were….in the middle…about to…. Dwalin snorted a chuckle and came back to the bedside. “Aye, guid thin’ I didn’ have yer gems in me mouth. Goin’ t’ see wha’s crawled up his arse?” “No,” said Ori with an evil smile. “We’re not finished.”

A good time later, and after a wash and change of clothing, Ori and Dwalin strolled into the sitting room where Dori, Gridr, and Mistress Dazla were fluttering about, preparing for tea. Nori sprawled in a chair. He snickered when he saw them. “Aww It’s the lovebirdies! Did I wake you?” “Nori, I swear-“ Ori flung himself at his brother, Nori leapt out of the way. Ori snatched at him, but his hand went through Nori. Ori growled. “Ha! Can’t catch me!” Nori teased, capering around. Gridr came through and carefully placed Dori’s favorite platter, piled high with cookies redolent with banana and xocolātl. on the small granite table. Mistress Dazla followed with a stone tray of tiny buns, some pork, others basil with cheese, or lamb. She had arranged a cloth to keep the stone, thus the buns, hot. Dori, carrying a plate of ginger biscuits, took hold of Nori’s ear and propelled him forward. “Stop being annoying,” Dori ordered, releasing him. “Oi!” Nori shouted, then stood stock still and stared at Dori. “How come you kin grab me?” Dori smiled like a serpent. “No doubt, the same way I can keep you out of rooms I don’t want you in,” Dori cooed and turned to go back to the kitchen. “Behave,” Gridr ordered the room in general. “Anything on this table knocked about ’r missing, I’ll cut yer ears off.” Nori and Ori watched first Dori then Gridr and the housekeeper return to the kitchen, then looked at each other. “How?” Nori demanded. “Either he won’t tell you,” Ori replied, “or he doesn’t know. Same as always.” “Bat shit,” Nori huffed and threw himself back in his chair. “What did you want earlier, or were you just being a jerk?” Ori asked. Dwalin muttered, “Courtin’ death.” “Huh?” Nori looked at Ori, then grunted, “Oh! I gone an’ done the translatin’ o’ the code in that
book. Bloody lousy poetry. Made me wanna vomit.”

“Bad as all tha’?” Dwalin asked and sat next to Ori on the sofa, then leaned forward to admire a plump cake dripping with blueberry preserve and whipped cream oozing from the center.

“Bleedin’ sickenin’,” Nori grumbled. “She’s a dunce.”

Dori returned, put down a plate of scones, lush with orange glaze, pushed Nori’s feet off the table, licked her finger and scrubbed something off Ori’s face, then seated herself ponderously in her inflated chair.

“Now, where is everyone?”

Fortunately for Ori and Nori, who exchanged horrified glances, the sitting room door opened and the rest of the Groinuls came in. The door from the receiving room opened and Balin came in. Then Thorin and Bilbo came in from Bag End East followed by the faunts, trailed by the wargs and Posey.

Soon the room was filled with people. Faramir arrived slightly tipsy and his front smeared with the Moo and Cluck’s special sauce, and began telling Bujni about the press. Eowyn breezed in a few moments later and she and Faramir were sent by Dori upstairs to tidy up.

“I’m not that bad, Auntie,” Eowyn said cheerily. “Our Fari’s a right mess, though.”

“Oh aye, ma’am?” Faramir asked, unholy glee in his eyes. “It’s delightful to see you safe and well. May I give you a celebratory hug?”

“No fear!” Eowyn laughed.

Faramir left Bujni and began to stalk toward her. She took a step back.

“Piss off!”

Faramir grinned. Eowyn laughed and sidled over to Dori,

“I mean it! Piss off, you arsehole!” she cried. “Auntie, do something.”

“Language, darling,” Dori said absently. “Both of you go upstairs and tidy up. You have ten minutes.”

Faramir lunged forward. Eowyn gave a battle cry, vaulted over Nori, and bounded out of the door to the receiving room, slamming the door after her. Faramir, in hot pursuit, collided into the closed door, swore, wrenched it open, and lit out after the laughing shield maiden.

Fili, Kili, Sigrid, and Tauriel came in, looking wonderingly after the two.

“What’s going on, Dori?” Sigrid asked, coming over and kissing Dori’s cheek.

“Oh, there you are. Nothing, they’re just being silly men children. Ready for tea?”

They crowded around to join Gimli, Legolas, and Romy on the rug.

Bard and his family arrived and were greeted and the gossip of Dale dispensed.

When there was finally a pause, Frodo shot over to Dori.

“Please Imad Dori,” piped Frodo. “I have to show everyone something!”

“Do, sweetling?” Dori cooed. “Well, everyone is here now,” as Bofur, Dis, and Jani arrived with Eowyn and Faramir in their wake. “Come in, dears. Frodo has something to show all of us!”

Everyone sat and looking expectantly at Frodo.

The faunt and Posey stood before the coffee table, where everyone could see them.

Frodo said, “I taught Posey a trick. Ready Posey?”

Posey clunked, apparently in the affirmative

Frodo placed a ginger biscuit on her closed beak.

“Wait for it,” he told her. “Wait for it. Now!”

With the flick of the beak, the ginger biscuit hopped into the air, Posey’s head snapped up and she snatched the biscuit in flight and swallowed it.

“Tah-dah!” Frodo cried.

The audience showed its appreciation.

Frodo bowed and Posey watched this, as if fascinated, and copied it.

Ori wondered how long it would be before Posey started teaching Frodo tricks.

Mistress Dalza came in with a platter piled high with hot buttered toast and Miss Oqizla followed with the teapot

Over tea, Thorin had Nori produce the poetry book and Bilbo and Ori told of their visit with the valar. Nori took his turn and reported on Frerin’s plans to undermine Thorin. Thorin was the only
one who managed to control his anger throughout, which Ori thought was for the best, though he could just imagine what Thorin’s office looked like.

Frerin’s plans began with the spread of rumors throughout every kingdom of dwarf, man and elf. Not only had Thorin gone mad just like Thror, but was conspiring with the Fundins, using hospitality to learn the weaknesses and undermine the leaders of elves and men. The slim volume only contained thirty three poems, but each contained a nugget of deadly poison.

Balin took the book from Nori and put a magnifier in his left eye.

“Mmmm, th’ khuzdul is harmless, th’ coded westron is where he’s put th’ dangerous words.”

Balin put the magnifier down. “Me heart, where’s yer granny?”

“Granny Klack?” Dori glanced up from passing a slice of cake to Jani.

“Aye, I think we need t’ pick her brain a bit.”

Sapphire hopped forward on the table, swallowing a scone chunk.

“Want me to get her, our Thorin?”

“Please, Sapphire.

The raven flew off. The assembled went on with tea. Roäc blew in.

“Queenie an’ Blu’re at th’ door,” he announced. Omi ran through to the breakfast parlor to let them in. Dori and Tauriel prepared a plate for Red Queen and Miss Oqizla hurried to the kitchen for a bowl.

Everyone called greetings as the avian pair entered. Red Queen proudly wore her harness, which was admired again. Baluchistan echoed every compliment, and strutted proudly like a bird six times his size.

Thorin nodded to Balin, who quickly caught the raven and bone breaker up on the latest problem. Red Queen was incensed on Thorin’s behalf.

“Brother king, only say the word and we and our entire flock will fly to the blue mountains, there to tear Prince Asshat apart!”

Baluchistan seconded this colorfully and at length. Roäc hissed, and at Thorin’s behest, flew off to fetch Brur and Sadi.

Sapphire breezed in and Granny Klack arrived to be greeted, hugged, and welcomed. Brur and Sadi arrived a moment after with Roäc. When they were all settled and provided with tea and goodies, Thorin questioned Granny Klak as Balin handed over the book to her, open at random.

“Oh!” Granny Klack cried, “these are far worse than any she’s ever produced! They’re so terrible, there’s a kind of grandeur to them.”

“Granny,” Thorin said gently, “Are these in her usual style, so to speak?”

Granny turned few pages, made a disgusted face and passed the book to Brur. He and Sadi bent over it.

“If,” Granny grunted, “you could call it such, it is exactly in the way her rhymes go on. And on and on.”

“Could there be anything in the paper or the ink or the spacing?” Ori asked quickly.

Granny shook her head.

“T’dillah is not clever enough for such. All I can see is that Frerin has taken extreme liberties with the translation. No doubt he will say it’s for secrecy sake as outsiders shouldn’t learn kuhdzul. Vile creature.”

“Is T’dillah able to write or speak in Westron?” Thorin asked.

Granny shook her head.

“Th’ question remains, then, laddie,” Balin turned to Thorin. “What’s t’ be done?”

Everyone sobered and thought it over. Ori fidgeted. If the book wasn’t published, Frerin would find another way. He had put a code for Denethor. If the code-

“We should do as you originally suggested, Thorin. We should change the code,” Ori said aloud. “We could rewrite the translation, so the code makes sense, but the orders would be so scrambled, Frerin’s allies would do strange things instead and all the monarchs in Arda would hear of it and immediately know the conspirators.”

“Aye,” snickered Sadi. “I’ll take it in hand t’ send ‘our’ translation t’ th’ press, an’ then th’
original kin have a wee accident.”
“Ori,” asked Thorin, “can you, so to speak, retranslate these verses to do such?”
“I can try,” said Ori.

The herd moved through to the breakfast parlor and Ori went for his satchel.
He returned to find his place by Dwalin was open for him and everyone sat around the table. The tea things had been brought in as well.

“T’dillah is a nice enough lass,” Granny was saying. “But she lacks sense. She really is the silliest thing.”

Silly. Ori giggled with delight at a flash of an idea and ran to the kitchen.

Mistess Dazla stared.

“Are you wishing for more tea or food, Lord Ori?” she asked.

“No, ma’am.” Ori grinned. “I need a tumbler and a bottle of summer berry wine.” “For the king-father?”

“No, for me. I have to write some poetry!”

“Although,” Thranduil called through, “I wouldn’t say no to one.”

“Or five?” Thorin teased.

“Don’t be gauche,” Thranduil admonished with a sniff. “Not before sundown, anyway.”

Thorin raised brow.

Thranduil sighed.

“I’m not a party-crazed tween, Oakenshield.”

“Well, you’re not a tween, anyway,” said Thorin.

Bard snickered and opened his mouth.

“You’ll be sleeping on the couch for a month,” Thranduil warned. “Without Bob.”

Ori returned to the table with the open bottle and, in front of everyone, poured himself a glass and drank it back. He bounced into his seat, grabbed a graphite wand, looked at the first poem and read aloud.

“I bear my child
It kicks
I am a tool of a warrior”

Everyone groaned. Ori felt the wine tickle his brain and wrote. Dwalin leaned over him and read out to all:

“I have a child
It spits
I am a rabbit of a warrior”

Snickers went around the table.

“I see the sea,
It’s dark and deep
I think to drown
I’ll go all the way down
I see the bottom.”

Ori pondered then,

“I drink the sea
It’s brown and salt
I think and frown
I travel down
I think I feel my bottom.”

Faramir and Gloin both lost a mouthful of tea and Kili gazed at Ori with respect. Nori cackled. Brur kept track of Frerin’s coded orders, so they could set a watch on the areas he sent to. Eowyn wrote to her uncle and Faramir to Aragorn. Balin composed a letter to be copied to all the dwarf undermonarchs. Thranduil undertook the messages to Imladris and Lothlórien.

“Though, I’m sure Lady Galadriel already knows, with her ‘mysterious and mystic powers’,” he said with a snicker.

“My heart is sore
Soon my babe will roar
It will see the sun
I am undone”

Ori sniggered. He fancied he could hear the laughter of valar in the back of his head.

My insides are sore
Soon my tummy will roar
I can’t see the sun
It’s going out my bum.

Ori drank back another glass. By this time everyone was laughing, shouting, and throwing out suggestions for rhymes. Nori was advising the use of other code words to further scramble anyone seeking Frerin’s orders.

“I grieve for the light of the morning
I am large and still I am unborning
I long to give birth
As land touches surf
So I work at the gown I’m adoring."

I heave out of bed in the morning
I’m like a barge and still I am charming
I want to put out
To that ungrateful lout
So I dress in a way that is disarming.

Ori’s handwriting grew more than a bit messy, but Sadi assured him it was still legible enough for the typesetter, and, she vowed, she would write a pretty introduction for this adorable little book. Another round of tea and dainties and two more glasses of wine got him through all the verses. “Finished” Ori crowed and fell out of his chair.

Ori woke groggily. He was sideways. He stared out at the fireplace in his and Dwalin’s room. Bits and pieces came back to him. He had retranslated T’dillah’s poetry by getting drunk. He’d passed out at the table. He cringed. He was such a lightweight for a dwarf when it came to wine. It would have taken about twelve ales which was still rather lightweight.

He sat up and sighed. At least that was what he intended to do. He sighed anyway and clambered up from the floor.

The door opened and Dwalin came in. He saw Ori, crossed the room, and wrapped his arms about the smaller dwarf. Ori leaned contentedly against his husband.

“Now what?” he murmured.

“Our Granny Klak brought a spare notebook with the Rikanta crest, and our Nuisance has copied
the originals an’ yer brilliant translations out clean in Frerin’s hand. Go’ t’ give it t’ him, he’s a
master a’ forgin’ handwritin’. Denethor’d never know the difference. Sadi’s writin’ her introduction
t’ th’ book an’ takin’ th’ whole show wi’ her t’ th’ presses t’morrow. All th’ letters’re sent t’ all th’
kings with Brur’s notes on any who migh’ be organizin’ agains’ Thorin.”

“Perfect.” Mahal’s hot boom chuckled in Ori’s head.

“Perfect,” Ori echoed, then yawned and noticed the window showed nothing but stars. “What
time is it?”

“Ten. Yeh wan’ a bi’ a’ dinner?”

“Yes, please!” Ori realized he was starving.

They went through to the kitchen. Mistress Dazla was checking to see everything was in order for
the night. She raised an eyebrow at the sight of Ori.

“Does Lord Ori require the Blessed Bearer’s restorative?” she asked Dwalin.

“No,” said Ori. “I require a side of beef and a pot of tea. Is that a possibility, Mistress Dazla?”

She scoffed.

“We’re dwarrow, after all, m’lord. And your beef dinner is in the oven keeping warm.”

“You’re wonderful,” Ori said simply and hugged her. She laughed, tut-tutted, and went out. Ori
turned as Dwalin pulled the covered platter out of the oven and put it on the table. It was a beautiful
chunk of steak, smothered in spicy sauce and roasted onions. Hearty chunks of chips cozied up to it
and there was a other dish of brussels sprouts steaming in butter, garlic and tidbits of bacon. Dwalin
poured them both mugs of tea and they sat down together.
Past, Present, and Poof.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. And welcome to the third anniversary of our story! We are delighted all of you stuck with us and we have thoroughly enjoyed entertaining you. We have lots more to tell so… Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori slept well after his late dinner and woke with a pop. It was still dark, but Ori knew that the days had grown short and the mantle clock declared it to be morning. After a long kiss, he and Dwalin rose, washed, and dressed. Dwalin took Killer out the stable door and Ori went through for breakfast. The parlor was bright with candle light and the curtains still drawn over the dark. Surprisingly, Kili was there, as was Tauriel. Kili looked manic and Tauriel serene.

“We have the notes?” Kili muttered, shoving food into his face and staring at a list.
“Notes are here.” Tauriel patted the bundle of papers on her right.
“We have the original manuscript pieces torn out of books?”
“We have the torn pieces.”
“We have the writing samples to verify the writers of the manuscripts?”
“We have all the writing samples.”
“We have the notes?”
“Dear, did I not just s-. Pest!”
Kili grinned up at her.
“We’re ready!”
Tauriel smiled back and nudged his shoulder with her elbow.
“And we have Teyan’s master work.”
“The what? Oh, yes. Yes, we need that” Kili chuckled. He glowed at Ori. “Are you and Dwalin coming to our presentation?”
“Aye, Ki,” Dwalin nodded, coming in with Killer at his heels. Ori filled his cup with tea. “We’ll be there.”
“You, too?” Kili asked as Dori bustled in with another platter of steaming sausages.
“Of course, darling, we’ll all be there to support you and our dearest Tauri.”
“Good!” Kili enthused as Tauriel hugged Dori and turned to greet Thorin and his family coming in.
“We’re all ready, Idad!” Kili crowed.
Thorin looked Kili over, then raised a brow at Dori.
“You’re not yet dressed,” Dori put in.
“You must be properly dressed, both of you,” Dis added as she hurried in. She kissed Dori’s cheek and filled a mug with tea. Dori buttered two rolls, filled them with sausage then wrapped them in a napkin. Dis took this, nodded to everyone and hurried out to a meeting.
“What’s wrong with what we’ve got on, Idad?” Kili wanted to know.
“Your breakfast’s on your front,” Fili put in as he arrived with Bard and his family.
“Kili!” Bilbo sighed.
“Oops,” Kili replied and pulled a face at his tunic’s front.
“Don’t you worry, your highness,” Mistress Dazla said as she put down another teapot. “Your mother, the Blessed Bearer, and I have taken care of your clothing. It’s ready for you, so you must
both bathe and change before you go.”

Thorin looked pleased with this. Mistress Dazla’s bird whisked through and, with a frown, the housekeeper went out of the parlor. She returned shortly with Red Queen.

“Red Queen!” Sigrid said in surprise. “Won’t the egg sack let you through the window?”

Red Queen gave the crackling hiss that passed for her laugh. “Have you looked out your window, man-child? Ah, no. We see that the cloth coverings are still in place.”

Tilda bounced out of her seat and pulled one of the curtains. It was solid darkness. Balin chuckled and brought a candle over to her. With the glass lit, everyone could see the white wall outside.

“It snowed!” Frodo shrieked in delight.

“Yes, Frodo,” Thorin chuckled. “And now you know why I took the wargs out with me earlier.”

Frodo turned with a slight frown. Thorin went on.

“Agrib, Gibi, and I went to the stable and shoveled a path, so they could get out to the meadow.”

“Did they like the snow?” Sam asked.

“Very much. They all bounded around like puppies.”

“How’s Fanny?” Ori said, with a flash of concern for his friend.

“Asleep an’ snorin’,” Dwalin told him.

“Good,” Ori smiled to himself. “I’ll take her some fruit before we go.”

Meanwhile, Kili and Tauriel were speaking urgently between themselves.

“We have plenty enough material, dear,” Tauriel soothed. “It may not have any bearing on our topic. Even if it does, this is a mystery for another day. Perhaps my Aunt Galadriel can help us.”

“What’s wrong?” Bilbo asked.

Kili shook his head.

“Nothing’s ‘wrong’ exactly. We’ve just spent a lot of time reading over the scraps. Some of the scribes had really weird handwriting, not easy to read like Ori’s. I think they all talked like Bifur, too. I guess they wrote and talked the same way.”

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“Kili?”

“Uncle Bilbo?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, so, there’s a problem with Durin VI.”

“No’ me fault,” Durin grumbled in Ori’s head.

“Only, not so much a problem as something’s missing. A bunch of somethings.”

“Hello?” Galadriel called from the sitting room. “We’ve arrived!”

Thorin rose, all they while looking to Dori, who shrugged.

“I had no idea they were planning to attend,” said Dori. “Oh, I must speak with Mistress Dazla and make sure there are enough towels.”

Galadriel burst in without ceremony, and with her Celeborn, Elrond, Lindir, and the twins. The calls of greeting went up and hugs and kisses were exchanged.

Dori made sure the guests were seated, and provisioned, and that Elrohir was sent up to the guest room to put on his trousers, since it seemed his grandmother had seized him and whisked him away from Imladris when he was only half dressed.

“Has it happened yet?” Galadriel asked.

Her eyes sparkled with excitement. Her tea stirred itself while the pot of elderberry jam slid from in front of Thranduil and down the table to rest at her elbow.

“Excuse me!” Thranduil groused. “I was not finished with that.”

She pointedly ignored him while Bard scraped some jam off his own toast and on to Thranduil’s.

“We aren’t giving the presentation for a while, milady,” said Kili.

“No, the other thing. I saw it in my mirror!”

Thorin slid his eyes to Celeborn, who shrugged apologetically and helped Kelli up into his seat.

“What did you see, m’lady?” Thorin asked.

“Well, if it hasn’t happened yet, I can’t properly tell you, because that would be cheating. What are we talking about?”
Bilbo passed the sausages down the table toward her.
“Kili and Tauriel found some curious discrepancies in their research.”
“There are references to an ugly incident at the time of Durin VI,” said Tauriel, “but no real explanation of what that might have been.”
Thorin wiped Sam’s chin.
“Getting eaten by a balrog can pale the rest of the details of one’s life,” said Thorin.
“Not quite that ugly,” said Tauriel, “but not much better, we think. We’re fairly sure we’re missing documents that might be more explicit.”
Ori was horrified.
“Why didn’t you say something? You could have asked Teyan!”
“If we thought it would make or break our defense, we would have,” said Tauriel.
Mistress Dazla entered with a second pot of elderberry jam, which she placed before Thranduil, who put his hand to his heart and bowed to her.
“My saving grace,” he murmured. “I thank you.”
On her way back up the room, Dazla dug in her apron and pulled out a packet of well-worn paper. She put it on the table in front of Tauriel.
“I think this is what you’re wantin’, m’lady.”
Then she curtsied and went out.
In the silence, Tauriel wiped her hands and untied the ribbon that bound the brittle pages. Kili began pouring through them.
“My love?” Tauriel prompted.
Kili looked. His eyes swept over the pages, then grew very large.
“Oh, mahumb,” he said finally. “Idad? You need to read this.”
“What is it?” Thorin asked, as Kili passed him the pages.
“Just, please, read this.”
Thorin read, the rest of the table at rapt attention as Thorin’s eyebrows rose higher and higher, and finally he fell back in his chair.
“Oh, mahumb,” he growled. “To Mordor and back.”
“What is it, Thorin?” asked Bilbo. “You’re scaring the faunts.”
“Read this! Please!” Thorin urged.
He took Sam and Frodo each on one of his knees.
“I’ll give it a try,” said Bilbo. “Happily, I’m quite comfortable with the archaic script.”
Mistress Dazla returned with a plate of muffins.
Thorin eyed her.
“Were you ever planning to tell us?” he asked her.
“If the need arose,” said Mistress Dazla, completely calm. “I could wait. I had time.”
“Oi!” Thranduil shouted. Then he clapped his elegant hand over his mouth in horror.
Legolas pointed and laughed.
Thranduil hissed between his fingers, “Why does everyone keep stealing my line? No one has more time than an elf!”
Frodo looked at Thorin and then at Mistress Dazla.
“Tell us what, Idad?” Frodo asked. “What did Mistress Dazla tell us?”
“That she’s Eldura, the daughter of Durin VI, and a Noldor elf. In fact, her mother is Elwing, which makes her—“
Lindir shrieked in delight and Elrond gaped.
“My dear!” Lindir cried. “You have a sister!”
Galadriel giggled.
“See, isn’t the surprise more fun?”
“Well, a half-sister, at any rate,” said Dazla with a smile.
She went to Elrond, patted him on the shoulder and refilled his teacup.
“Sister?” Elrond asked weakly.
“Oh, Mahal, yes,” she said with a smile.
“And you’ve been alive since the time of Durin VI?” Elrond continued.

Bilbo looked up from the pages.

“Apparently, yes. But, where have you been this whole time?”

“Here, of course,” said the housekeeper. “Helping raise Durins.”

Thorin said, “That only accounts for my lifetime.”

“And your father’s, and Thrór’s, though he vexed me to the point where I wanted to empty a chamberpot over his head and I nearly gave the whole thing up. In fact, I’ve been here almost since the founding. Every few generations I went away, did a little adventuring, tended to my kin in the Orocarnis, then returned.”

“As your own daughter,” said Thorin, “Because your position is passed down in your family. Except, it was really passing from yourself to yourself. No wonder you always look the same. Adad used to say to you never changed.”

“Your adad was a dear, sweet dwarf. I did change, a little, but it’s only glamour.”

She seemed to let it slip for a moment, and instead of Dazla as they knew her, she was nearly as young-looking as Kili - though she had a better beard - and her large, dwarf ears tapered to gentle points.

Frodo said, “You look like a hobbit with a beard!”

Tauriel laughed.

“The shape of things to come?”

“Perhaps,” said Dazla, as she reverted to the dwarrowdam they knew. “Now, don’t look at me like that, Captain Dwalin. I’ve not been half the trouble to you as you younger Durins have been to me. And you, the worst of the lot.”

“Me? Wha’ did I ever do?” Dwalin demanded.

“Dressing your hair and beard with your porridge comes to mind.”

Balin snickered.

Dazla turned to him.

“Don’t get me started on you, Lord Paints-His-Bum-Red-and-Walks-Naked-Through-His-Mam’s-Teaparty.”

“Oh, dear,” said Dori, who hid her smile behind Balin’s shoulder as Balin sputtered and Dwalin grinned and muttered about filing that story away for later.

“Sister?” Elrond asked once more. He couldn’t seem to grasp the entire concept. “Why did he-? Was Elwing Durin’s One?”

“No, but he did want to marry her, and he wasn’t allowed to,” Dazla said. “He told me time and again, he would have if he’d been able, but he wasn’t Deathless, and he was a good king, but he wasn’t Thorin’s equal, either. But we did live in his house and he did call me daughter. At least until he went out and got himself eaten by a balrog.”

“Then Nali cast you out,” Elrond surmised.

Dazla clicked her tongue.

“Nali tried to have me killed, but I was raised in the king’s house, and I can fight far better than those dumdumels of Nali’s, thank you very much. It was I who removed myself from the chronicles in Khazlad Dum.” She nodded at the papers still in front of Bilbo. “I went to the Orocarnis and supported Queen Nild in establishing the matriarchy of the Blacklocks, and when their children were grown, I followed the Longbeards to Erebor.”

“And instead of Eldura, unacknowledged princess of the Durins,” said Thorin, “you became Mistress Dazla, and kept the Durins’ house.”

“And I still do,” said Dazla.

“I would be happy to acknowledge your line,” said Thorin. “You and your kin should take your places at this table.”

“Thank you, but no, your majesty, I am the housekeeper and I am keeping the house, and I always will, unless Oqizla decides she will remain forever, then I may leave it to her to carry on, and I will go back to the Blacklocks.”

Kili said, “There are a lot of choices at this table.”
Fili pointed out, “Two isn’t a lot.”
“But three is,” said Kili. “She chose to tell us now. Is it still a secret, Mistress Dazla?”
“No, you may use these papers as you please. Oh, wait, I need this one for a moment. It’s got Queen Nild’s spiced meat pie recipe on the back.”
Thorin looked thoughtful.
“It is up to you, of course, but don’t you wish the matter to remain private?”
“It’s just pie, Idad,” said Kili.
“No, not the p- you little rockrat! I’m talking about Mistress Dazla’s parentage.”
“My king,” said Dazla, “you can print it as an announcement and have it read in the central market, if you like. No more secrets. Is that not what you want?”
“Yes, but this isn’t my secret to tell,” said Thorin.
“Then I’ll give it to you as a present and Kili and Tauriel can finish their reading with it. And if someone still has a problem with dwarrow and elves marryin’, send them to me and I’ll explain.”
“I just don’t want you hurt,” he said. “Whether you sit at this table or not, you are still family. You are loved and you are valued … and you know this kingdom doesn’t run without you.”
“You run the kingdom,” said Dazla.
“And you run me.”
“Oh, now you’re exaggerating. King Bard, please remove your elbows from the table, you’re setting a bad example for Tilda. Oh, and that reminds me, King Thorin, if you and Prince Consort Bilbo would clear out that final storage room in Bag End East. It’s full of concubinage, it hasn’t been cleaned since who knows what age, and you wouldn’t want the faunts playing in all that.”
Bilbo shot her a saucy eye.
“Shouldn’t Brur look through it first?”
“Certainly not, your highness. For one thing, we’d never get him out of there, and for another, I wouldn’t want to stumble upon him tryin’ anything on.”
“I’m related to the Durins!” Elrond shouted, then cleared his throat. “I beg your pardon for speaking out of turn.”
Kili snorted and Fili laughed. Thorin, also, looked amused.
“Yes, brother Elrond,” said Thorin, “I’m sorry to say your manners will suffer, but at least your appetite won’t.”
“Mistress Dazla?” Elrond ventured.
She smiled at him.
“Under the circumstances,” she said, “I think you can simply call me by my name. I intend to call you by yours, at least within the family.”
“Dazla,” he started again, “I realize you’re busy, but might you spare me a few minutes during my visit? I would very much like to hear about your life.”
“And we want gossip about our grandmother Elwing!” Elrohir cried.
“Oh, I can see you’re going to be my weak spot,” said Dazla. She squeezed Elrohir’s shoulder and clouted him lightly about the head with her tea towel before she turned back to Elrond.
“Brother, I will happily make time for you.”
Elrohir and Elladan jumped up and lifted Dazla between them like a war hero.
“Imad Dazla!” they cried in unison. “Hip Hip Hooray!”
“Put me down, you naughty fawns!”
But everyone at the table had already joined in and cried out, “Imad Dazla! Hip Hip Hooray!”
“There’ll be no pudding for any of you if my feet do not touch ground this instant!” she cried.
“Really?” Elladan asked, wide-eyed.
She sighed.
“Of course not, but it’s always worth a try,”
They dutifully replaced her, she straightened her apron, curtsied and swished out.
They heard a great deal of delighted squealing from Dazla’s team in the kitchen.
Thorin looked around with suspicious eyes.

“And now, would anyone else like to reveal deep, dark secrets? Anyone else secretly a long-lost relation? Anyone married in the past few days we should know about? No? Very well, it’s time to finish up. Open Court today. And all that that entails.”

Ori was worried Fanny wouldn’t like the snow, but she couldn’t spend all the long Ereborian winter in the stable, no matter how roomy it had been made for her comfort.

He dressed up warmly, wrapping himself in the scarf with little versions of Dwalin’s bottom all over it, and went out with a basket of apples. One apple was no longer even a tea cake for the rapidly growing oliphaunt.

He met Bilbo with the faunts at the stable door and they went through. Both Sam and Frodo rushed out the meadow door and shrieked as the cold wind hit them.

“Here th’ pair a’ yeh,” Dwalin said and swung each onto the back of a ram. “Hang on tigh’ now, hear?”

“Yes, Idad!” they crowed,

“Fanny!” Ori cried as Agrib, Gibi and Dwalin opened wide the meadow doors, the battle rams shoving to get out.

Fanny trumpeted her greeting as he approached and sniffled him all over with her trunk.

“I brought you a treat,” said Ori as he hugged her. He thought her skin felt scratchy, and wondered if she didn’t need some balm to keep her hide from drying out. He would ask Oin.

“Then, you can go out into the meadow, but don’t think you have to if you don’t like it. It’s full of snow and Jim says you only ever saw snow on the mountain tops as you travelled.”

Fanny eyed the white world beyond the stable as she munched a few apples, then threw her trunk in the air, and gave a warning, and thundered out the door into the snow.

She galumphed, and bounded, trumpeted, and galumphed some more. She rolled in the snow like a warg, and when she stood she sprayed her back with a blast of snow and was off again.

“Mahal!” Ori gasped and fumbled for his sketchbook.

Dwalin walked up to stand behind him and laughed.

“I t’ae it tha’s an ’aye’,” he said.

Ori nodded and furiously sketched.

“I hope she doesn’t catch a chill,” he fretted.

The rams bounded about, but never once dropped their tiny burdens. The wargs tore around, leaping, rolling, and burrowing into the drifts that covered the meadow. All the ponies were let out to play. They whinnied and squealed and romped in the drifts and galloped in trodden down parts.

Thorin and Dwalin went to help out the stable crew clearing old hay, laying down fresh and refilling mangers and water troughs.

Bilbo stood close to Ori and watched him draw as well as keeping an eye on the faunts.

Fili and all the younger set, minus Kili and Tauriel, arrived dressed for snowy fun and ran out in the trails the animals had made, shouting and throwing snowballs.

In the middle of the melee, Hamfast arrived with his wagon to take away the dirty hay. When Dwalin raised an eyebrow, he explained it was for the fields. He had organized a team of wagon drivers to do this once a week.

“I’ve had the first snow plowed into the soil, an’ this lot will be put on at the first show o’ spring. The fields’ll yield twice more at least this coming year.”

“Thank you so much, Hamfast,” said Thorin warmly as Bilbo and Ori came to greet Hamfast.

“You’re a wonder. The work you did when you arrived is going to keep us all fed over winter. We are all most grateful to you and all who assisted you.”

Hamfast blushed a little and chuckled.

“Well, our Thorin, it’s no easy task, but I have enjoyed myself. Been quite the challenge, as you dwararrow would say. My Bell’s is rare pleased with the house and there’s plenty f’r all the faunts t’ do.”

“Please give my best to Mistress Bell,” Thorin smiled.
“To be sure I will,” Hamfast nodded, then grabbed Wee Sam as the faunt tore through to jump into his father’s arms.

“Da, we’re ridin’ rams and winnin’ snowball fights.”

“So you are, so you are, me boy. And I expected nuthin’ less. Good lad!”

Hamfast took himself off and Thorin went back to the meadow to call the younger set in to prepare for open court.

Ori stood on the dais, resplendent in his black green court clothes, his papers and ink at the ready for notes.

The throne room was packed as usual, filled to the brim with the peoples of Erebor and Dale, since it served both kings to have all the citizenry together. Ori wondered if this was because the people knew open court was for everyone, or because there was inevitably some weird happening. Of course, it might be for the coffee party afterwards.

Dori and Balin took their places, Balin in his red court robe and Dori, a floating cloud of pale orange and yellow swirls, bejeweled with rubies. Dis, in a fine silk gown of Durin blue and adorned in obsidian, sat with Dori on the couch, Margr and Vi stood stalwartly behind them, dressed in matching caftans of blood red, almost hog-tied in ropes of amber beads.

Brur roared from the royal entrance. Fili and Sigrid paraded to the dais with Bain and Tilda, Tilda skipping along, holding Fili’s hand.

Then everyone rose as Brur announced the four monarchs and their party. Dwalin, with Killer at his heels, and Glorfindel followed by Eowyn, led them in. Red Queen strutted down the carpet first, with Baluchistan hopping solicitorously next to her. They were followed by Thorin and Bilbo, and Bard with Thranduil. Roäc fluttered over their heads, and the two wargs strolled after. There was wild cheering, clapping bowing and curtsying as they made their way up to the dais.

Red Queen leapt up to her stand, which was wide enough for Baluchistan to perch beside her. Roäc winged over to the throne. Thorin, Bard and their consorts bowed their thanks to the audience. Thorin and Bilbo sat on the throne and Bard and Thranduil sat on the sumptuous couch on Thorin’s right. Sugar and Butter lolled before the throne and Dwalin stood at the foot of the dais steps, opposite Glorfindel. Killer sat attentive slightly behind Dwalin.

Eowyn tucked herself next to Ori, with her hand on her sword. The pair of them had made a pact never to look at each other in this instance, for fear they would both dissolve into giggles.

Balin rose, bowed to Thorin, and went to the edge of the dais where he cleared his throat.

“May the glory of Mahal and Yavanna bless this court and all present. Here only the truth shall be spoken. By the wills of his Majesty High King Thorin II of All Dwarrow, and his Majesty King Bard of Dale, this court is now open. Attend to the word of the kings.”

Balin bowed and stepped back to his place. Ori wrote busily as Thorin spoke.

“Thank you, Lord Balin. Good morning everyone.” Thorin paused and shouts of ‘Good morning’ and other greetings were called out. Thorin smiled and nodded.

“As most of you know, we have a special presentation today, so let us take care of business matters first. All wishing to speak may rise and come forward to make their address.”

Bofur reported for the miners guild that a second chunk of mithril, ten feet by thirty-five feet by fifteen, had been successfully removed from the vein and now sat on the main work floor.

Mister Wandi came forward to announce that three new steam rooms were now operating and the tropical plants were flowering.

Hamfast and Bell informed the court that now that the stock was in for the winter, manure wagons would be going around both Dale and the mountain twice a week so please be sure your stable was cleaned by the tenth bell. Also, Bell would be teaching flax spinning in the great room in Dale Hall starting the first of the week.

Then Master Jojuk, head of the printers’ guild, came forward and announced that Lord Faramir had been bonded into the guild with the honorary rank of master printer, and bade the court to note that this was the first time the guild had accepted a non-dwarf, as Lord Faramir had quickly proven
his worth to the guild members, and they had voted him in within days of his arrival.

“Besides, he kin hold his drink,” the guild head finished.

Many dwarrow present nodded over this important fact.

“Aye, an’ he laid me ou’ guid an’ proper!” Y’gar attested.

Thorin looked out over the audience.

“Master Faramir, please rise.”

Faramir, who was trying and failing not to blush, rose as bid. Thorin started the applause and, when it eventually died down along with the shouts of ‘well done, laddie’ and ‘guid on yeh’, looked at Faramir again.

“That guild braid suits you.”

“Thank you, your majesty,” Faramir replied with a grin. “It only took me three times to learn how to do it after it was put in.”

“Told yeh he was clever!” the guild head bellowed affectionately.

Ori looked around. The guild head had been the last of the petitioners that morning, and it was clear everyone was waiting for the presentation.

Thorin nodded to Balin, who came to the edge of the dais once more.

“The following presentation has been made possible by His Royal Highness Prince Kili of Erebor and Captain Tauriel of Erys Lasgalen,” Balin said with all due aplomb. He bowed once more and called to the royal entry doors.

“His Royal Highness Prince Kili of Erebor and Captain Tauriel of Erys Lasgalen:”

Ori looked over and smiled with true pleasure. The pair looked lovely. Tauriel was dressed in an elven-style long silk gown of the Durin tartan and a cloak of Erys Lasgalen green. Ori recognized the white gems that sparkled on her neck as those Thorin had given Thranduil, in thanks for Tauriel and Legolas’ service.

Kili was dapper in tunic and trousers of Erys Lasgalen green, trimmed with silver with matching boots, and his cloak was of the Durin tartan. Hand in hand they nodded and smiled at the applause and came up the steps of the dais to bow to the rulers and take their places at the front where Balin and Bain had moved a table with a lectern for their papers.

Kili and Tauriel turned to the rulers again. Thorin nodded and said, “Carry on.”

The pair bowed again and turned to an audience all but wriggling with impatience. Tauriel bowed again and Kili waved.

“Morning all!” he said cheerily, then, “You first, my love.”

“Thank you,” Tauriel replied gravely, but was unable to keep the giggle out of her voice.

“Your majesties, and all peoples here at the open court of the kings, we are here today to present to you and defend research in the thesis of Teyan, daughter of Eyan, journeyman scribe of Khazad-dûm who was killed in the massacre there. She left us her masterwork and we offer it in her name for the title of master of scrivening. Her research was of a subject close to Prince Kili and me, as it defies the histories of the utter separation of the races of Arda. She spent much of her adult life collecting hidden scraps of documents that show how interracial marriage, though publicly frowned upon officially through time, was common and, from what she gathered, very happy and successful.”

This brought a round of applause and a few catcalls to Guenia and Hathor, both of whom shouted out their agreement.

Ori wrote steadily as Kili and Tauriel got to the meat of the thesis. The union of Narvi and Celebrimbor had people shouting that they had always thought the famous pair had done more than ‘just’ work on doors together. Kili and Tauriel presented proof that other high-placed nobles, later reported to have left Khazad-dûm and sought other lands, had never actually left that kingdom at all, but had been bound in mixed marriages, all mention of which had later been stricken from the records.

As their identities and their fates were revealed, many who recognized family names chuckled over this, and at least one dam cried, “Wait, you mean my great great umadel was an elf? No wonder I’m so bleeding tall!”
To which an elf in attendance muttered, “No wonder I’m so short!”
The two stood and stared at each other, and burst out laughing.

As a merry uproar rose, some remarked on other unusually tall or short children that had been born. Where ancient drawings had been handed down in families, some dwarrow remarked on how someone’s udadel or imadel always wore their hair over their ears, or had be know to ‘have trouble’ growing beards. Most of those had traditionally claimed that they were excellent archers, and didn’t mind their beardlessness so much, as they were less likely to get their beards caught in the bow string.

At that, the merriment died down, and the crowd turned curious eyes on Prince Kili.
Kili visibly blanched, and said, “Unfortunately, as far as I know, I don’t have elven blood.”
A mutter of scandal shivered through the crowd at the implications for the fate of Kili’s beard.
Kili took a breath to continue the presentation, but Dubb shot to his feet.

“Yeh don’t, laddie!” Tell me, yeh don’t!”
Kili opened his mouth, then closed it, and Tauriel choked on laughter.

“No,” Kili elucidated. He turned back to look at his family.
Thorin regarded him with amused eye, while Fili turned away, his shoulders betraying his mirth.

“Yeh don’t, he does,” said Dis, “and both the king and I gave our permission. The scabbing from a torn beard is dreadful, as we all know. Please sit down before you faint. Pray continue, inudoy.”
“Mahal wept,” moaned Dubb, and he dropped into his chair.
“No, I bloody didn’t,” came the hot boom in Ori’s mind.
“No, He didn’t,” Ori said clearly before he thought.

When the gales of laughter died down and Dubb had yelled at the ceiling that “It’s jus’ n expression!” To Kili he shouted, “If yer goin’ t’ do it, lad, kin yeh no’ ma’e it look less li’e a warg’s breakfast?”

Butter raised her head with an outraged look, while Sugar woofed.

“To continue,” said Tauriel in her ‘captain giving orders’ voice.
Kili gazed up at her with naked gratitude.

Silence blanketed the room as the spectators looked around themselves, perhaps trying to pick out these undiscovered Durins.
Kili took a breath and a sip of water and set on the lectorum the packet of notes Mistress Dazla had give them over breakfast. Ori was impressed at how neatly and concisely Kili explained the secret love affair of the king and Lady Elwing of the Noldor.

“So,” he concluded, “we’ve been blessed with the presence of Imadel Eldura, daughter of Durin VI, this whole time, and we didn’t even know it. We’ve always called her by the name and title she prefers: Mistress Dazla, head housekeeper to the Durin kings.”

He finished and turned to bow at Mistress Dazla, who had joined Marga and Vi behind the sofa at the start of the presentation. Dressed in her best uniform, and bearing the keys to the house, she smiled and nodded proudly to him.

“Any questions?” Kili piped up.
No one said a word. Kili and Tauriel glanced worriedly at each other. They both looked at the kings. Thranduil raised an eyebrow. Thorin shrugged. The royal party looked out over the audience, most of whom sat staring at Kili and Tauriel with their mouths open.
Thorin allowed the silence to extend for a few moments more, then spoke with a little more volume.

“Are there questions for the defense of this thesis, or is it accepted?
People looked around at each other, and there were a few mutters, but no one said anything.
He turned to Ori.
“First chair?”
Ori nodded.

“Then the thesis has been accepted.” Thorin rose and stood before his throne. “The title of master is thus conveyed upon Teyan, daughter of Eyan, late of Khazad-dûm.” Thorin paused. “We must convey the bead of mastery to Master Teyan.”

“Here I am!” Teyan poofed into view, almost running to the throne.
Ori saw the air shimmer nearer to Kili and Tauriel, and two other dwarrow appeared on the dais, dressed in the antique robes of scribes.

He turned and caught Sadi’s eye.
She mouthed, “S’tuk and Whilf!”
“Seriously?” he mouthed back.
“Yes!” she replied soundlessly, and waved her fingers to urge him to action.

“Be’er do yer first chair thing, laddie,” Mahal’s hot boom came from the back of Ori’s head.
Ori nodded to Balin, who rose and took Ori’s place at the scribe’s stand, while Ori approached the two strange dwarrow and bowed.

“Masters, I am Lord Ori of Fundin House and First Chair of the Guild of Scribes. I welcome you to Erebor, seat of the high king of all dwarrow.”

Both bowed in return, each wreath in smiles. Ori turned to Thorin.

“Your majesty, prince consort, may I present to you Masters S’tuks, son of Dutuk and Whilf, daughter of Nililf, founders of the guild of scribes under Durin the Deathless.”

Thorin smiled benignly at the pair of ghosts. Bilbo seemed amused. Ori turned back to them.

“Masters S’tuk and Whilf, His Majesty King Thorn II, known as Oakenshield, and his consort, Professor Bilbo Baggins.”

The legendary scribes bowed deeply to Thorin and Bilbo on the throne. Ori continued indicating to the Dale first family

“His Majesty King Bard of the City of Dale and his consort, King-Father Thranduil, late of Erys Lasgalen.”

The dead masters bowed again and the Dale royals nodded and smiled politely.

Ori looked at Roäc on his perch on Thorin’s right shoulder.

“Roäc, King of Ravens,” Ori said and then turned to Red Queen on her intricate iron stand inlaid with rubies.

“Her Majesty The Red Queen of All Bone Breakers, and, um, Baluchistan.”

Both birds were allotted bows and looks of wonder from the founding scribes. Baluchistan shouted, “Howdy!”

Ori beckoned to the chairs of the scribes guild and presented them. He looked out over the throne room.

“All scribes, guilded and free, of all races residing in Erebor and Dale, please rise,” Ori said.

There was a scuffling and all the scribes popped up to their feet, mostly dwarrow, but several the race of men and a couple of elves also rose. The masters and the throng bowed amiably to each other.

Ori bowed again to the masters, giving them the floor to perform the braiding of mastery for Teyan. Fortunately, the master had brought the beads with them, and they did the ceremony with all due pomp and circumstance, and then brought Teyan to the front of the dais.

“Master Teyan!” the pair announced together.

Teyan bowed. Everyone rose as one and burst into loud applause. Teyan looked about, then a grin crossed her face and she crowed,

“You like me! You really like me!” And she flung herself on both masters in an encompassing hug.

They patted her, amused, and murmured. She released them quickly and bounced over to Tauriel and Kili who stood by, beaming at her.

“Thank you both so much,” she squealed and, unable to hug them, settled for hopping up and down in front of them.
“Thank you for writing about something so important to my wife and I,” Kili said with surprising formality. The three bowed to each other.

Thorin rose and delivered a speech about the importance of history and standing together as united before the valar as the people of Arda.
The masters and Teyan gave a final bow.
“You’ve all done very well!” Master Whilf called out.
“Don’t forget the proper use of the Orocarni comma,” adjured S’tuk.
“You and you bloody Orocarni comma,” Whilf grunted.
S’tuk rounded on her.
“You can have my Orocarni comma when you can pry it from my cold, dead hands!” he barked.
“We’re both already dead, you idiot,” Whilf sighed.
“Well, come get it,” S’tuk challenged as they faded from sight.
“Bye!” shrieked Tayen to all assembled and she, too, vanished.
Everyone gave a round of applause once more.

Then, instead of nodding to Balin to adjourn open court, Thorin and Bilbo stepped down from the throne and came to Kili and Tauriel. Dis and Dori rose and joined them as did Bard and Thranduil. Fili approached to stand next to his brother, and Sigrid stood by Tauriel. Their presentation table and materials were moved aside.

Ori returned to his post and watched over Thorin’s shoulder as Kili and Tauriel, obviously confused, were turned to face the Durin King.

“What are you doing, Idad?” Kili asked, low, though secrecy was impossible in a chamber where he could be heard at a whisper from two hundred feet away.
“I’m performing your marriage ceremony,” Thorin replied.
Every scribe in the room cried out and fumbled for their paper and graphite wands.
“Shit!” Omi hissed. “Ooops, sorry.”
“Marriage ceremony?” Kili asked weakly. He turned to Tauriel, who looked just as startled as Kili.
“A dwarf prince needs a dwarven marriage,” said Thorin. “Seems like an excellent day for it.”
“So, that’s why we had to dress like this!” Kili cried.
“Of course it is, inudoy,” said Dis. “Do you think I’d put you in your good tunic for anything less?”
“I did think you were taking a terrible risk,” Kili admitted.
Thorin cleared his throat.
“Shall we begin? Assuming neither of you objects?”
“Of course not!” Kili said, his voice on the edge of breaking with nerves.
“Please, continue, your majesty,” said Tauriel, with a soldier’s composure.
Thorin sang the first verse of the old khuzdul blessing song, and everyone joined in.
Then the elves present sang the sindarin blessing song, and Ori realized that Thorin sang it with them, his voice notably deeper than any elves, but blending pleasingly, at least to Ori’s ears.
The last of notes echoed around them.
“Kili, Tauriel, join hands,” said Thorin. “Now, repeat your vows after me.”
He spoke at a regular pace for Kili, but more slowly and carefully for Tauriel:
“As Mahal has forged us for each other, let us seek to make each other happy. Let us forge a new family and a new life together, as did all our ancestors.”
Nor did Ori miss that ‘all’, and everything it meant.
When Thorin called for the beads, Fili took them from one of his pouches, and dropped them into Dori’s hand for the blessing.
As she offered them to the couple, Kili cried, “Fi! You did it! They look great!”
“Thank you,” said Fili dryly. “Pay attention, cram brain.”
Tauriel tilted her head.
Kili blushed.
“I designed these with the hope of making and giving them to you one day. I didn’t realize Fili
would beat me to it. On the other hand, I didn’t think we were getting married today, either. Do you… you like ‘em, right?”

“Yes, melleth nin, I like them very much.”

At this juncture, Frodo rode across the floor and up the steps on the back of Posey, whose saddle had gained gay ribbons for the occasion. In his long, Durin blue waistcoat, Frodo dismounted and strode across to them, carrying a covered tray. He presented this to Thorin.

“Thank you, Lord Muffin,” said the king.

Frodo bowed and took his place next to Bilbo.

Thorin lifted the cloth to reveal, not Gridr’s silver brushes, but the hair brushes of Bilbo and Frodo.

“I hope you don’t mind if we bully our way into the ceremony, my dears,” said Bilbo. “If one of you were mine, it would be traditional for you to use my brush to tidy your hair for your wedding.”

A stool was brought forth for Tauriel to sit while Kili did her braid.

“Well done,” said Thorin as he admired Kili’s handiwork.

“Thank you, idad,” said Kili.

“Why can’t you do that to your own hair this well?” Thorin asked.

“I could, but I’m trying to maintain my carefree, whimsical appearance,” said Kili.

Thorin actually laughed in surprise and delight.

Kili took the bead from his hand and clapped it into Tauriel’s hair.

Then Kili stood on the stool and Tauriel braided and clasped his hair.

He turned before she could pull back, and gave her a smack of a kiss.

Thorin growled, “No leaping ahead in the ceremony.”

“Sorry,” said Kili. “I couldn’t pass up the opportunity.”

“Down,” said Thorin, though he couldn’t hide his grin.

Kili leapt down and Dwalin pulled away the stool. As the warrior turned again, he caught Ori’s eye and winked at him.

Thranduil handed Thorin an embroidered ribbon.

“Thank you, brother king,” said Thorin.

Thranduil inclined his head graciously.

Thorin went to wind the ribbon around their clasped hands, then hesitated.

“Dis?”

He held out the ribbon.

She took it with a smile and did the honors herself.

“May Mahal and Eru bless this union,” she said. “May Yavanna make it fruitful. May you walk into eternity together.”

Under the cheers of all assembled, Dis touched brows with her newly-married children.

Thranduil kissed Tauriel’s forehead, murmuring in Sindarin,

“Be happy, my daughter.”

“Thank you, Ada, I believe I will be.”

The table was brought back, and the contracts rolled out to be signed.

Instead of a coffee hour, ale and wine were served, a band quickly assembled and the doors flung open to the world.

Ori heard the heralds of Erebor calling out the news of the new marriage. The door to the kitchens opened and refreshments brought in, so the party began.
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. The family is swelling and more than previously expected! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

When they finally reached the gates of Fundin House, Bard climbed off his horse, then stretched and yawned. Tilda was drooping a little. She had spent the party romping with all her school friends as well as all her friends among the scribes guild and the library staff. Ori shook his head. Both he and Sigrid had lost track of what Tilda ate, and Ori thought it was likely too sweet and too much. Everyone alit and the stable hands rushed out and laughed with delight as Thorin looked them over, then greeted them without emotion, “Brats of Durin VI.”

The guards dismounted and formed up, awaiting orders.

“At ease,” Dwalin barked.

Most of the soldiers relaxed with grateful sighs. Haldir still stood at attention, his uniform, overlaid with the tabard of the city guard, immaculate as usual.

Ori reflected that elf soldiers never seemed to stand ‘at ease’, except for Glorfindel, who never did anything else.

Dwalin looked to Thorin with a questioning brow.

“I think the guards can stand down for the rest of the day,” said Thorin. “I doubt any of us will be going out again.”

Dwalin gave them a look over, and signaled Furh’nk to dismiss them, which he did.

Eowyn grabbed Haldir’s collar and pulled it down, to reveal a love bite of truly wondrous proportions.

“Mister Wandi got you last night!”

“Get off!” he barked, trying in vain to detach her.

“Faramir! Come look at this!”

The Gondorian sighed and laughed.

“Eowyn! Give him back his collar! Terribly sorry, sir. I’m Faramir of Gondor and she’s a pest.”

“I’m Haldir and I am besieged. We have met before, by the way.”

“We have? I’m so sorry, I don’t remember.”

“You were spectacularly drunk,” said Haldir as he batted absently at Eowyn, who would not leave the elf’s collar alone.

“Oh! Lothlorien, right?” Faramir recalled. “You’re the captain of Lady Galadriel’s guard.”

“At your service. The daughters of men can be very rude and… pushy.”

“That’s what we like about them,” Faramir replied.

“We’re not any pushier than Mister Wan-deeee,” Eowyn sang.

Finally, she released him.

“Yes, well,” said Haldir, as he restored his collar. “That’s what I like about him.”

Eowyn turned to Faramir.

“I’m a pest, am I?”

“Aren’t you?” Faramir challenged with a smile.

“That’s not to the point,” said Eowyn. “Oh, look, there’s Tauri trying to rescue her hubby from his new father-in-law.”
She moved around him to go to her friend, but not before pinching Faramir’s arse. Faramir squawked and the soldiers laughed uproariously.

Targ patted Faramir’s arm.

“Lad, yer screwed.”

Haldir smirked.

“I hardly think he minds.” He turned to Faramir and said, “Wandi and I live in apartments above the Palace of Health and Beauty. We are at home to visitors in the mornings after third rest day. If your schedule allows, please come for tea.”

“So Mister Wandi can interrogate me?” Faramir asked.

“I should think that was obvious,” said Haldir.

Ori chuckled and began to unhitch Honda from the teacup, but Gibi pushed in front of him with a grin.

“Sorry, Lord Ori, this is a job for a Brat of Durin VI.”

Ori gave him a look.

“How long have you been in service to Mistress Dazla, Gib?”

“That would be telling, milord.”

“I’m a scribe, I’m supposed to tell”

“I’m not.”


Ori went into the house through the stable door and headed to his room. Dwalin was there, pulling off his uniform for more comfortable clothes.

“Hey, me love.”

Ori walked over and buried his face in Dwalin’s chest fur.

“I love you,” he said. “You’re such a normal Durin.”

Dwalin threw back his head and roared with laughter.

“Yeh go’ a real strange sense a’ normal, me love.”

“You know, last spring I never imagined I would know so much about them, or anything else, as I do now.”

“Aye, secret Durins, secret hobbits, meltin’ balrogs. All a days work now, ain’t it?”

“The melting balrog took two weeks.”

“Picky, ain’t yeh.”

“Yes, which is why I married you.”

“An’ here I was thinkin’ it were jus’ f’r me cute arse.” “I’m very picky about which arses I think are cute.”

Ori grinned up at his husband, who narrowed his eyes then kissed him. Ori kissed back, thinking this was an excellent way to spend the rest of the day, but Dori’s voice caroled down the hallway.

“Pet! Our Deary! It’s tea time!”

Ori and Dwalin looked at each other, then at the timepiece on the bedside table.

“It’s too bloody early f’r tea,” Dwalin growled.

“We only had party treats for elevenses and lunch,” Ori sighed. “Dori’s probably worried about our constitutions.”

“Oh aye, I’m jus’ fadin’ away righ’ now.”

“Yes, “ Ori giggled, “we’re both just worn to threads.”

“C’mon, yeh wee rascal. Ge’ yersel’ outa them glad rags, b’fore our Dori has a conniption.”

“Or worse,” said Ori, “comes looking for us.”

They all assembled once more in the sitting room in Fundin House. Dori bustled about with with Mistress Dazla, Gridr, and Binni, the four of them giggling about how successful the wedding had been.

Dis pretended to grouse as Kili and Tauriel sat themselves in her lap.

“Nana!” Tauriel cried and hugged Dis hard. No one knew what Dis replied, as she was buried in
silk and elf hair.

Thranduil looked over the pile on Dis with amusement.

“Why, Dis, is that you under these fawns?”

Dis seized Tauriel and Kili around the waists and heaved them off her as she rose. They rolled giggling onto the couch. Dis shook out her skirts, then fixed Thranduil with the pin of her eye.

“Thranduil,” she said, levelly.

“Dis,” Thranduil replied, ready to be amused. To his surprise, Dis stepped forward and hugged him. Thranduil gave an audible gasp of surprise, recovered his composure, and gently wrapped his arms about her. Dis withdrew and cocked an eye at him.

“Welcome to the family…. Brother.”

Dis’ grin was pure evil mirth.

Thranduil blinked, then replied calmly.

“Sister.”

Dis smiled, sweetly.

“And all that that entails.”

Then Jani walked in and Kili and Tauriel leapt up and surrounded her, shouting rapturously, “Mam! Mam!”

Jani batted at them.

“Get outa here, ya loonies! If I was yer mam, I’d’ve sent ya back where ya come from!”

“But, Nana, aren’t you going to give your blessing?” Tauriel cooed.

Dis tried to extract her lover from their embrace, but was laughing too hard to be much use.

“Does she truly mean that?” Thranduil asked Ori aside.

“Oh, yes. Jani would definitely send them back.”

“Not Jani, as you well know.”

Ori smiled.

“How long have you known dwarrow? Besides long enough to see the worst of us? Family means everything. If Dis calls you her brother, then you’re her brother. Of course, that makes you Thorin’s brother, too.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.”

Ori snickered.

“You adore Thorin. But don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.”

“You are very good,” said Thranduil, “though, I suppose not good enough to avoid the temptation of using that fact as leverage whenever I’m being… naughty?”

“You show the wisdom of your centuries, king-father.”

“You’re a brat.”

“Takes one to know one.”

“True. Dorwinian?” Thranduil gestured with the bottle.

“Yes, please.”

Throrin and Bilbo returned from Bag-End East, far less formally dressed, and minus two faunts and one warg.

“Napping,” said Bilbo, to Dori’s unspoken question as the couple flopped down on the couch.

“Tilda’s tucked into a spare bed and Sugar is with them.”

Elrond entered from the kitchen, still talking over his shoulder, and now carrying a tray of blackberry tarts. Ori heard Mistress Dazla laughing.

Elrond put down the tray on the table, and caught Thorin grinning at him.

“I’m eminently trainable, as you see,” said Elrond.

“I can vouch for that,” said Lindir as he reached around for a tart.

Elrond sat next to Thorin, his expression suddenly much more sober.

“I received your letter about your sister-in-law’s poetry. I had just enough time to read it before Lady Galadriel appeared and we found ourselves in your sitting room. I am sorry to hear that your brother still plagues you, all of you.”

Thorin sighed. Bilbo held his hand and Thorin squeezed it.
“Thank you,” said Thorin. “Really, I never believed I would be entirely rid of him. Durins are nothing if not stubborn, and Frerin never met a grudge he couldn’t hold. He knew just where to attack me, of course.”

“Your overtures to other races,” Elrond surmised.

“Yes,” said Thorin. “It’s hard to overstate what a giant risk it was for the Durins to reach out to other dwarf clans, never mind people of other races. Conventional wisdom says we are generally despised, seen as greedy and conniving.”

Elrond shook his head.

“I think, in his anger and paranoia, he sees your alliances as far more fragile than they are. No one who has met your people, never mind your family, would ever believe such things of you.”

“Thank you,” said Thorin. “I think I needed to hear that. Perhaps that isn’t a weakness a king should admit, but the trust goes both ways.”

“Thank you, as well,” said Elrond as he chose a tart.

“Yes,” said Bilbo, “family should stick together. Really, Thorin, and I thought I was related to half the world.”

Dwalin set Ori on his lap and took a sip of Ori’s wine.

“Durins don’ have a family tree, s’ much as a family thicket,” he said.

Ori helped himself to another tart and Miss Oqizla came out of the kitchen with a large laundry basket, full of blankets. She brought it to Red Queen, who perched by the fire.

“Here we are, ma’am. Mister Agrib is off to the aerie to get another warming pack. He should be back in a shake of a lamb’s tail, but I’ve buried a hot brick among the blankets with your eggs. Housekeeping’s giving your egg bag a wash and it’ll be dry and ready soon enough.”

“Oh, how nice,” Red Queen approved as she inspected the basket. “And quite the right temperature as well. You have our gratitude.”

Oqizla curtseyed and went out. Baluchistan hopped up on the basket and sat right down on his butt and spread his wings.

“Righ’, me wee apple puddin’, all under control here. Yeh ge’ some treats an’ th’ gossip an’ enjoy yerself!”

Ori tried vainly not to choke on his mouthful.

“Papa Baluchistan’s on th’ job,” Dwalin hissed in his ear. Ori elbowed him.

Roäc winged in, but instead of going to Thorin, he landed on Fili’s knee.

“It’s time!” he intoned.

“Time for what?” Fili asked, rather mystified.

“Garnet’s and Quartz’s clutch with your raven is hatching,” Roäc informed him. “You must come to the aerie and bond with the hatchling. Hurry up.”

“Oh!” Fili rose as Roäc fluttered upwards. Sigrid got up as well.

“I’m comin’ t’ be with me lass,” Dwalin said.

He stood, with Ori in his arms.

“Fili! Roäc!” Ori cried. “Am I allowed to document the event?”

Roäc gave his hissing laugh and Sigrid turned dancing eyes on him.

“Sounds like you’re in. Come on.”

Ori and Dwalin followed the pair out to the royal cavern.

“Are you planning on putting me down any time soon?” Ori asked.

“Spoil me fun,” Dwalin pretended to grumble, but did let him stand on his own.

Roäc led them up the steps to where they had watched the lava bleed. Half way up the stairs there was a sharp turn and a tunnel off to the left. Roäc went through a bolt hole above a door, which Fili opened.

Ori was expecting a cold wind from outside to hit them, but there was only warmth, the smell of feathers, and the noises of the roosting ravens. Thousands of ravens.

Ori stepped in and looked about in astonishment. He had never given much thought to where the ravens of Erebor lived. To his embarrassment, he realized he’d had a vague idea of something on the order of a largish hen house.
Now that he took a moment to reflect, he realized that King Roäc would never live any place less than grand.

“Imagine what Binni could do with all this,” said Ori.

“I try no’ t’,” said Dwalin.

The ravens lived in one, enormous cavern pocketed inside the mountain, bathed in the glow of natural phosphorous. Nests were tucked in every open space and wedged in rocky crags. All manner of trinkets, gems, and oddities that the ravens had taken a fancy to lay in a thick blanket around each nest.

Ori had a sudden thought that it might be interesting to catalog which ravens had taken what and from whom over the generations of ravens that had dwelt in the mountain during the course of dwarf history.

Sigrid stared around in wonder.

“This is amazing! I was sort of expecting something like a hen house.”

Ori sealed his mouth shut and Roäc snorted disgustedly.

“Do you shit where you sleep? Silly manchild, we’re Birds, not birds.” “Of course,” Sigrid said quickly. “I never really thought about what might ravens do.”

With another snort for good measure, Roäc guided them to a rocky outcrop and stopped next to a nest slightly apart and above the others. Bits of gold, and silver, and cut and polished gems surrounded this nest like a crown on the head of a king. The outcrop overlooked a far deeper crag than the others, nearly a cavern all its own. Ori peeked down, onto the huge nests of the Bonebreakers far below.

Dwalin leveled himself behind the royal nest and ran a finger down Garnet’s back.

“Doin’ alright’, me lass?”

Garnet arched into his touch.

“Rub between my wings,” she creaked.

Quartz promptly flew into Ori face and nibbled at his ears and beard.

“Ori! I’m about to be an adad! I’m thrilled! Worried! So much work!”

“I’m sure you’ll be a wonderful adad,” Ori soothed, stroking down the ruffled feathers and pressing the black body against his cheek. “You have instincts and Garnet’s done this before.”

“True,” Quartz agreed. Then he narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “Other ravens of the household helping you?”

“Yes, thank you, they are,” Ori assured him then grinned and whispered, “But it’s not the same.”

Quartz pressed his head against Ori’s as Sigrid and Fili sat down next to Garnet on her nest.

Garnet blinked as Dwalin’s finger made tiny circles between her wings, then her eyes flew open and she rose. They all looked in eagerly, Ori taking notes and sketching. Three of the eggs had cracks across them. Both Sigrid and Ori squeaked as a little beak poked out. Two more beaks popped out and the babies struggled free. Ori looked closely at the tiny creatures, naked and eyes tightly closed. Ori glanced over at a shocked noise from Garnet. The fourth egg did not have any cracks, but it was slowly rolling around the nest. Dwalin frowned and steered the egg away from running over its nest mates.

In the quiet, they all heard it. A tiny voice.

“Help!”

Then,

“Get me out of here!”

Then,

“Why’s it so bloody dark?”

Fili, Sigrid and Ori all stared at each other. Quartz and Garnet stared at the egg. Dwalin muttered, “Wha’ th’ fuck?”

There was a loud crack and a head came out, the shell rolled, and the rest of the hatching fell out. This one didn’t fall instantly down to rest. It stood up and looked about it, eyes wide open.

The cavern erupted in caws and cheers for the new heir of King Roäc, but Roäc himself looked at
the nestling with narrowed eyes.

“Where in Mahal’s name am I?” the chick cried.
Fili leaned forward excitedly.
“Your eyes are open. Hello, little one.”
The raven turned, looked all the way up at Fili, squawked, and fell over.
“What the fuck? Where am I? Why’re you so bloody tall?”
The raven waved its tiny wings, then looked at its wings.
“What the fuck? I have wings? Fuck! I’m naked.”
The tiny raven dove for a shell then stopped looking up at Garnet.
Garnet looked down at her chick. Ori was sure if she had them, one of Garnet’s eyebrows would be raised.

“Oi! This....” The chick looked about again, then hopped in delight. “Wheee, I’m a raven! Ha ha! I’ll be able to fly! This is just grand!”

It turned back and cocked its head at Fili.
“I remember you! You’re Fili! You’re my - ha! - my great grand chick!”
Fili cocked his head to the side.
“I’m your what?”
“My chick’s chick’s chick! Dis’ lad!”
Fili’s mouth dropped open.
“Udad Thror?”
Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Heaven’s to Betsy! Is that really Thror? Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori stared as his pen scribbled wildly, recording everything. Sigrid looked horrified. Dwalin looked ready to pounce, and Fili’s face was expressionless and set like stone.

The little raven hopped about, getting used to its new legs, then stared up at Fili again. “What’s the matter, my lad?”

“I’m not ‘your lad’,” Fili said, steel in his voice. “Are you Thror returned from the Halls as a raven?”

“Er….” The raven took a step back, then ruffled its nonexistent feathers and stepped forward again.

“I am. Mahal gave me leave to come back and try again. I don’t remember much, but I learned I did terrible things and failed as a king and a dwarf. I asked to try again.”

Fili regarded the raven for a long time.

“If you given me your word that you are going to better yourself, then I will accept you as my raven. Understand, Thorin is the High King of all dwarrow. I am his heir and my loyalty to him is complete.”

“Aye, I accept,” the chick chirped. “Now-”

“How is it that you remember me?” Fili demanded.

“I learned of you in the Halls. I asked the Maker if I could help you.”

“I see. Beside me is Sigrid Bardsdatter. Bard is the King of Dale and our ally. Sigrid and I will be married at Yule.”

The raven chick stared at Sigrid, then blinked and flapped its little, naked wings.

“Is this a political union?” it asked.

“No!” Sigrid cried, startled into speech. “We love each other!”

“Oh!” The chick looked from one to the other then bowed. “I wish you both very happy! Then I’ll be raven to both of you.”

“You will swear an oath of loyalty to Thorin as your king,” Fili said sternly.

“Or,” Dwalin growled, “Yer f’r th’ cook pot an’ I’ll eat yeh f’r breakfast.”

The hatchling hopped ‘round and looked up.

“Fundinson! Dwalin! What the fuck happened to your hair? You’re as bald as an elf’s arse!”

Dwalin turned to Fili.

“I’m eatin’ him anyway.”

Fili unbent enough to laugh. He rose and addressed the chick.

“For now, I think you’d best let Garnet sit on you and get you food and I’ll discuss it with Thorin.”

Ori looked at Garnet and Quartz, who honestly looked as horrified as ravens could look.

The chick glanced at the two ravens and said,

“No offense meant…er…parents.” The chick looked up and flapped its tiny wings harder. “Ah, come on, take me with you. I want to see everything again. Not that I can really see much of anything. Why is everything so blurry?”
Roäc scoffed, “You were just hatched, dumdumel.”
“Roäc?” the chick said wonderingly.
“Hush or I’ll eat you,” Roäc replied genially.
Fili paused, then exchanged looks with Sigrid. Sigrid smiled naughtily and took out her handkerchief. She leaned close and scooped the hatchling into it and covered the chick with her hand.
“Oh, this is nice and warm,” the muffled voice said.
“Bloody weird,” Quartz managed as Garnet settled down on her three remaining hatchings.
“Bloody fuckin’ weird,” Roäc added. He ruffled his feathers. “I had word, but I never thought his brain would come through that fast.”
“Yeh alrigh’, me Garnet?” Dwalin asked as he regained the stone path.
“Yes,” she croaked. “But my Quartz has it right, that was weird. The chick will need food soon, and a great deal of it. Keep it warm.” Garnet adjured Fili and Sigrid. Sigrid raised her hand to her ear.
“He’s snoring,” she reported, making all of them chuckle.
Ori held Dwalin’s hand as they followed Sigrid and Fili back down to the royal cavern. Fili and Sigrid were talking quietly, so they wouldn’t wake the chick, despite the fact Sigrid had bestowed it in her pocket.
“I don’t know what idad’s going to say,” Fili sighed.
“He’s reasonable, and if Thror gives an oath of loyalty and in front of the family, this will probably work out. Don’t worry too much, my love, when he isn’t with you I’ll keep him close. Also, we’re both forgetting Roäc as well as the other ravens. They are loyal to Thorin, as they’ve often demonstrated. I don’t think Roäc will let Thror take the tiniest hop out of line.”
“I meant what I said. I’ll eat him before Dwalin, if he does,” Roäc promised
“Yes,” Fili agreed. “But I’m going to insist he take an oath of loyalty to Thorin and in front of our allies as well. He’ll need to go by a raven name though. We don’t want to confuse people.”
“True.”
Ori gave voice to his worry.
“Wait,” he said and stopped. The others also stopped and looked at him.
“What’s up, Ori-mate?”
“Fili, we can’t let Frerin find out about Thror.”
Fili smiled grimly.
“I’ve already thought about that. It’s going to be explained to him and included in his vow of loyalty.”
“Sensible, lad,” Dwalin praised and hugged Ori close to his side. Ori wrapped his arms around his husband.
“Sorry, I should have realized-
“Oi,” Dwalin teased, “wha’ I tell yeh ‘bou’ apologizin’ when yeh need t’ say somethin’?”
Ori cocked a naughty eye at Dwalin.
“So, that’s not just for the bedroom?”
Dwalin dropped his head in Ori’s hair and stifled his laughter. Fili and Sigrid giggled.
“Too much information, Ori-mate,” Fili joked.
“Seems like Ori really does talk all the time,” Sigrid added with a wicked grin.
“Oräc,” Roäc said. “The chick’s name is Oräc.
“Oräc,” Ori repeated and wrote it down.
“Little Oräc,” Sigrid cooed, her hand in her pocket, warming it. “You know, Sig,” Ori said with a grin, “it’s going to be very useful if every time you put him under your hand or in your pocket, he goes to sleep.”
Fili chuckled again.
“We’ll definitely be putting that to use.”
They entered the house and Dwalin stopped them all in the receiving room, except for Roäc, who
flew through the raven bolthole above the door and into the sitting room.

“Fili, lad, I’m thinkin’ yeh should go b’fore us an’ drop th’ news. Tha’ way they kin all ge’ their shoutin’ outa themselves an’ it’ll keep th’ chick asleep. If yeh don’t fancy it, I’ll do it.”

“Ugh,” Fili opined. “You’re right, idad Dwalin.”

“Instead of that,” Sigrid said, “I’ll stay here and you all go in. That way, Fili, you have back up with Ori and Dwalin.”

Fili kissed her gratefully and escorted her to one of the armchairs at the far end of the receiving room. He came back and Ori and Dwalin followed him into the sitting room.

Roäc was perched on the stone table before the hearth and everyone turned to look at Fili.

“Fili,” Thorin rose. “Roäc is being unnecessarily obtuse. Is something wrong?”

“No, not exactly,” Fili said, slowly.

“Is it healthy?” Dis asked. “You look worried, my son. Come and sit down.”

Fili went over to the fireplace but remained standing.

“The chick is healthy and hearty. It can both stand and speak, and its eyes are fully open.”

“How very unusual,” Red Queen said.

“Very,” Thorin agreed.

“Mahal granted the request of someone from the Halls to live again. To try again to live life honorably and to the precepts of Mahal and Yavanna. Mahal granted this request.”

“Oooo,” Vi squealed. “Is it someone we know?”

“Yes,” Fili allowed.

Thorin came to Fili’s side and place his hand on Fili’s shoulder.

“Out with it, Fili. Who has retuned to us?”

“Thror.”

Dis screamed.

Ori watched Thorin’s expression hardened. The room echoed with jabbering on all sides. Jani, Balin, and Dori restrained Dis, helped by Margr and Vi.

“Where is he?” Dis growled. “I’ll kill him!”

“Silence!”

Everyone looked at Thorin.

“Is this true, Fili? Are you certain?”

“Yes, he said so himself and Roäc knows him.”

“I do,” Roäc affirmed.

“Fuckin’ eh!” Baluchistan croaked, still spayed out over the basket of blankets. “Again?”

“Who is Thror?” Red Queen asked. “We must know all the facts.”

Balin gave Red Queen a brief rundown of the events of Thror’s life. Ori didn’t think she looked impressed.

“Brother King,” Red Queen turned to Thorin, “if it is your wish, we shall eat this annoying hatching.”

Thorin glanced about the room.

“Have we all vented our anger?”

Most people nodded.

“No,” Dis growled.

Thorin sighed.

“Is it at least under control?”

“I’ll never forgive him.”

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’. As this would work best with everyone seated and able to speak and hear, I suggest we move to the breakfast parlor and convene as a council.” Thorin looked at Fili.

“Where is the chick? With Garnet?”

“No,” Fili grinned. “Asleep in Sigrid’s pocket.”

A ripple of laughter went around the room.

“Is he being civil to her?” Dis demanded.

“Yes, Amad.” Fili went to his mother and kissed her cheek. “He asked if it was a political union,
and when Sigrid informed him ours was a love match, he congratulated us and offered to be raven to both of us. The best part seems to be that once he is in Sigrid’s hand he falls instantly asleep.”

“How very amicable of him,” Elrond chuckled.

Everyone filed through to the breakfast parlor and seated themselves in what Ori now thought of as their seats. Ori prepared his paper and inks for the council notes. Mistress Dazla and her team removed the tea things from the sitting room and set out ale and wine on the sideboard in the breakfast parlor. People helped themselves. Miss Oqizla came out of the kitchen with a saucer of chopped, uncooked bacon which she set at Sigrid’s empty seat. Mistress Dazla brought out platters of fruit.

“So you don’t spoil your dinners,” she admonished them.

“Fili,” Thorin sighed again. “Please ask Sigrid to come in.”

Fili disappeared out the door and, a moment later, walked back in with Sigrid. She smiled at Thorin and went to him. Her hands were folded over in front of her. She opened them under Thorin’s gaze. Ori could see the chick curled up in her handkerchief. In the silence, everyone could hear the tiny snores. Ori quickly drew Sigrid and Fili holding the chick for Thorin to look at, her hands lowered so Frodo and Sam could see. Tilda stared. Red Queen, once more attired in her harness with her eggs cozy inside, perched on her chair and Baluchistan, Sapphire and Beryl settled on the table with Roäc.

Thorin nodded to Sigrid. She sat down and removed the handkerchief and the chick blinked.

“Eh? Oh aye, Sigrid, right? Fili’s betrothed. What’s to do, lass?”

“It’s time for you to take your oath to Thorin II, High King of All Dwarrow,” Sigrid told him.

“Oh! Right you are, lass.” The chick stood up, yawned hugely and looked up at her. “I’m ready.”

The chick turned looked up at Fili beside her. “I’m doing things right this time ’round.”

“Good,” said Fili and gestured to the side.

The chick turned and looked at Thorin.

Ori hadn’t thought what to expect, but it wasn’t the chick gasping and then crying out in a choked voice.

“Thorin! Our Thrain’s first! Wee one!”

The chick hopped out of Sigrid’s hand and fell on Thorin’s sleeve.

“Look at you! All grown up. I remember rolling you around the floor on your belly. You were a wee round ball of giggles!”

Thranduil snorted into his wine and Fili and Kili gulped, but managed not to comment. Thorin colored a little, then looked sternly at the chick now standing on the table next to his hand.

“Fili, Sigrid, and Roäc tell me that you are Thror retuned from the Halls as a raven.”

The chick straightened itself.

“I am. And I’m to be Crown Prince Fili’s and Sigrid, the Lady…er…” The chick looked wildly at Sigrid


“Yes, I remember that! I’m ready to take my oath to you, Thorin II, The Oakenshield, High King of All Dwarrow.” Ori noted that the chick seemed to enjoy rattling off all Thorin’s titles.

Thorin regarded the chick.

“You said you wanted to try again. What do you remember of your reign?”

The chick shifted, then made a loud peep and its mouth flew open and stayed that way. The chick hopped nervously.

“Shove some food in the beak,” Sapphire instructed. “It may be Thror, but a chick needs food and sleep.”

Sigrid took up some bits on bacon, and with the practiced ease of dealing with chickens, put a piece in, and pushed it down the craning neck. Four more followed until the chick was able to close its mouth on its own.

“I don’t remember much. I remember Frerin as a wee….”

The chick dropped on the table and fell asleep. Sigrid put her hand over it to keep it warm.
“This could take a while,” Kili commented.
Thranduil started to giggle and soon everyone was quietly laughing.
“This is rich,” Elrond said.
“I don’t trust him,” Dis hissed.
Roäc hopped over to her.
“He’ll behave. He’s in my line now and will behave or else. My flock will watch him, as will all of you.” Roäc turned to the men and elves at the table. “The slightest hint of anything, and I want to know.”
“Of course,” Bard said. “We remember his reign. I suppose when he wakes up, we’ll find out what he remembers.”
“Thorin as a little naked raven chick.” Thranduil, Ori reflected, was enjoying this.
“Adananna,” Tilda piped up, “I’ve got some doll clothes that might fit him.”
Both Thorin and Dis choked over this. Roäc ruffled his feathers.
“The down will grow in in a day or so, then feathers. I don’t think doll clothes will serve, nestling.”
Tilda cocked her head.
“You’re right, I don’t think we’d be able to stick his wings in the sleeves.”
Faramir and Eowyn looked at each other then, both stifled laughter.
“Perhaps not,” Eowyn said carefully, “but it might be fun to try. Should we, at least, ask the chick?”
Lady Galadriel dropped her face into her arms on the table. Celeborn glanced down at his wife and snickered.
“Perhaps the sleeve holes could be adjusted?”
“Why do you want to play dolls with a baby raven?” Bain asked.
“You do not approve, Incorrigible Stepson?” Thranduil purred.
“Well,” Balin added, “it does seem a bit daft. But I can understand, tha’ poor wee chick’s awful nakkie at th’ moment.”
Baluchistan strutted across the table and peered around at the snoring chick under Sigrid’s hand. Ori thought he might be sniffing at it.
Baluchistan straightened up, cackled, and went back to Red Queen, pausing on his way back to spear a banana through the center, and cart it over to her.
“Here yeh are, me cherry biscuit. Gotta keep yer strength up.”
Red Queen examined the banana, then looked inquiringly at Legolas. Gimli picked it up and peeled it for her.
“Now what?” Red Queen asked.
“Stick in in yer gob,” Gimli instructed.
Red Queen swallowed it, then seemed to suck her beak in toward the back of her head.
“No more mush,” she told Baluchistan. “Crunch.”
Baluchistan looked at the fruit on the table and Tauriel reached over and passed him an apple. He rolled this to Red Queen, who liked it much better.
The chick stirred, raised its head, and stood up.
“Sorry, lost my path of thought there. I remember Frerin as a wee badger. You were already grown and…” The chick stopped and peered at Thorin. “Eeee, lad, you’ve gone gray.”
“Yes,” said Thorin, “and I hold you largely responsible.”
“How long have I been gone?”
“About seven months,” Balin said.
“Not long enough,” Dis growled.
The chick hopped over to her, and then a little closer, though Ori thought that was far from wise. Then it hopped even closer, and Ori realized, the chick’s eyes might be open, but its vision was still as blurry as before.
“Dis! Oh, I’m so sorry lass, I-”
“I’m not talking to you.” she snarled.
“Right,” the chick said, nodding. “Fair enough. I accept that.”
“Go away,” she ordered.
“Perhaps you should come back over here,” Thorin suggested.
The chick hopped a little, but was obviously wearing down.
Thorin scooped the chick up carefully, placed him and Sigrid’s handkerchief into the empty butter
dish, and pulled it toward him.

“Now,” said Thorin. “Tell us, how did you come to be in an egg?”
“I told Udadel Mahal I wanted to come back and make it up to you, my lad. He said he’d send me
back as a dwarfling, but I wanted to come back quicker than that, as something that grows faster.”
Bilbo said over the top of his wine glass, “Good thing you didn’t ask Lady Yavanna. She might
have sent you back as one of my flowers. Can you imagine? ‘Thorin, something is decidedly off
about this begonia.’”
The nestling peered up at him.
“What’s a beg- begin- whatever that thing is? Do I know you? You wouldn’t happen to be Bilbo
Baggins, would you?”
“I would, actually,” said Bilbo with an evil little smile.
The chick gave a miniature caw of excitement.
Then promptly fell asleep again.
After a short while, it woke, was fed, and continued.
“You’re the bravest little hobbit of them all!”
Bilbo choked on his wine.
As the hobbit wiped his face, he sputtered, “Where did you- Oh, Mother! Really! Must you go
telling that to every being you meet?”
Kili gigged.
“The bravest little hobbit of them all? That would make a great song.”
Bilbo leapt to his feet and shook a forbidding finger at Kili.
“No, no, and no. You hush, or I’ll cut all your bow strings while you’re asleep.”
“Hmmm,” said the chick, “Vicious. Good Durin spouse material.” Then it craned its neck in
Frodo’s direction. “And who’s this youngling? Thorin, you go off and have a fling with a hobbit
lass while I was all doolally?”
Thorin appeared to consider, his face not entirely as stern, despite his anger.
“No. He’s Bilbo’s nephew, Frodo. And this his friend and companion, Samwise Gardener.
Samwise’s parents are the agricultural ministers to King Bard of Dale.”
Thorin pushed the butter dish across the table, where Bard was returning from refilling his cup,
and the chick did a wobbly bow.
Bard nodded.
“You look just like Girion,” it said. “Gave me quite a turn. Thorin, just how many hobbits’ve
you got out here? And, more importantly, do any of them bake?”
“Mama bakes!” Sam piped. “She learned from Missus Belladonna.”
“Ahhh, nothing beats Bella’s cakes,” the chick sighed with remembered pleasure. “So, I did hear
from others in the Halls that I did terrible things. I made Dis’ lads miserable, and for nothing! I
heard from our Idris that they were good-natured pebbles. Where is Dis’ other lad?”
“Right here,” said Fili scooting the butter dish back toward Thorin as he nodded to Kili, who
watched the chick from Dis’ side. “My younger brother, Kili,”
The chick looked over at Kili.
“Ah, jus like your amad, well done.” The chick turned back to Thorin
“The arkenstone. It was a dragons egg, yes?”
“Yes,” Thorin said.
“It drove me mad. I don’t remember much of anything, except that it was shiny and it told me
how amazing the kingdom would be. I’d have more gold than any ruler and we, all dwarrow, would
rule, take our place and be respected in the world.”
Ori remembered his own experience.
“It offered me lots of things it thought I would desire when I took it from the treasury. I was lucky.” Ori grinned at his husband, then his family all about him. “I had everything I always wanted.”

“Oi! Ori lad!” the chick cawed. “They’re missing you in the Halls. Thrain actually talks about you, and to other people besides Freris.”

Ori glowed with happiness and didn’t care that he was blushing.

“Listen, Thorin.” the chick said anxiously. “I’ve got to tell you, to warn you-“

“Warn me?” Thorin’s brows shot upward.

“It’s terrible and I’m telling you right now as he ain’t here. You’ve got to be wary of Frerin! I know he’s your brother, but he used to come with me to the treasury! He touched the arkenstone and he wears a ring I gave him that was given to the dwarrow by ol’ flame eye! It’s terrible. It’s all my fault-“

“I’m aware of that, udad.”

Thorin stopped talking as the chick’s beak opened again and it hopped around in frustration until Sigrid shoved more bacon in.

“You know?” the chick demanded. “How could-“

Thorin sighed as the chick fell asleep in the butter dish.

Mistress Dazla came in and removed the scattered remains of fruit. She spared a glance at the snoring chick in butter dish as she went out.

“Balin,” said Thorin. “When he wakes up again would you update him?”

“Aye, lad. They do say brevity is th’ soul a’ wit but I’m afraid this ain’t likely t’ be short ‘r funny.”

“I though’ brevity was th’ soul a’ pretty underpinnin’s,” Jani offered.

“That, too, lass” Balin agreed.

Ori sketched Thror in the butter dish and added to his notes. Dori rushed out to the bathroom and returned as the chick woke up again.

Balin gave a brief but concise run down of Frerin’s career. The chick stared, then finally,

“Arivett…Arivett… Hild’s daughter?”

“The very one,” Balin said. “And now the Queen of Belegost.”

“She was always one for a tussle,” the chick reflected. “Just like her mam, then?”

“Aye, an’ she’s married t’ King Theoden’s nephew Eomer.”

“Theoden?” the chick repeated.

“King of Rohan,” Balin supploded.

“Folcwine’s lad?”

“Folcwine’s great grandson.”

“Great grandson?”

“Theoden, son of Thengel, son of Fengel, son of Folcwine. Eomer is the son of Theoden’s sister, Thedwyn.”

Ah,” the chick paused then. “Might be an idea to warn this Theoden and Eomer about Frerin. We ain’t much for talking to men and elves, but-“

“Thror,” Thorin said with a slight smile. “They and all rulers of Arda are well aware of Frerin and his doings.”

“You wrote and introduced yourself, canny, lad, very canny. Maybe a meeting?” “We have all met already. Once at my coronation and again at Bilbo’s and my wedding.”

“Fuck!” The chick had to sit down in the butter dish to absorb that information, then looked wonderingly up at Thorin. “You’re a great king, Thorin.”

“I do my best,” Thorin replied dryly. “But I would have never achieved it without the help of my family, friends, and allies.” Thorin smiled at everyone at the table. He turned as Mistress Dazla came in. “And none of us would have done it without the help of our household.”

“Now don’t start that.” the housekeeper scolded.

“You look just like your mam,” the chick said peering up at her. “You are a daughter or granddaughter of Mistress Dazla, aren’t you?”
Mistress Dazla shook her head at Thorin. “I think that should keep until he’s brought up to snuff, your majesty.”

“Indeed,” Thorin agreed. “This is extraordinary, even for Durins,” said Thranduil. The council members helpfully scooted the butter dish back down the table. The chick suddenly stood up a little straighter, and ever so slowly turned to face Thranduil. “Hello, King Thror,” said Thranduil pleasantly. The chick screamed and fainted.

Or fell asleep, Ori thought. Most people who faint don’t snore. The chick was quickly brought around by the smell of bacon waved under its beak. “Ooooh, Mahal, what a nightmare!” it muttered. The chick straightened looked around, saw Thranduil, then Elrond, then Galadriel, and whispered hoarsely.

“Thorin! Thorin!”

“Yes?”

“There’s elves at the table.”

“Yes. They’re welcome here.”

“What, even Thranduil?”

“We are friends and allies.”

“That’s sick!” Thror cried.

“You just congratulated me on being a great king for knowing all the rulers of Arda,” Thorin protested.

“But Thranduil? Really?” The chick pointed a naked, shaking wingtip up at the king-father. “He was, at the time of your death, King of the Greenwood.”

“He’s only being your friend because he wants those white gems.”

“I gave him the white gems as a thank you gift when his son, Legolas, and his captain, Tauriel, brought me warning of the slave trade between Calmar and Mordor.”

“Captain Tauriel?” the chick repeated. “Thranduil’s adopted daughter? You’ve seen her? She isn’t allowed near dwarrow.”

“What?” Kili asked.

“Oh yes, ol’ twighead there, got a prophecy that she would fall for a dwarf.”

“What?” Kili and Tauriel said together. Thranduil waved an impatient hand.

“That was long ago. I have recovered and Cemnesta is King of the Greenwood.”

“You ain’t king?” the chick demanded.

“No, I am now King-Father Thranduil and Bard’s consort.”

“Well, that’s- Fuck-“ the chick managed to get out as his beak flew open again. With a sharp hand, Thranduil shot the butter dish back to Sigrid and she put more bacon into the once king. “You’re brilliant, lass,” the chick said when its beak worked again. “I’ll be proud to be yours and-“

It fell asleep again. Mistress Dazla came in again and laid her hand on Thorin’s shoulder.

“Shall I serve dinner as a whole or just courses as you progress through this?”

“What’s easiest for you and your staff,” Thorin replied. “We may be here for a while.” She patted him, nodded to Dori, and went back through.

“That’s something no one told me.” The chick woke up again. “Thorin, I think Frerin might be going as mad as I was. He’s going cause even more trouble with his secret codes and whatnot.”

“The book of his wife’s poetry will be published in a week,” Thorin said. “Chat has been informed and we’ll be sending him a copy.”

“As if any of us would entertain even the thought of listening to some one so silly as the Asshat,” Lady Galadriel observed to Gridr.

“You an’ I know that, lass. But there still folk like Calmar an’ Sikar about. Ori noted the look of utter mischief in Fili’s eyes as he scooted the butter dish over to Gimli, who
pushed it down to his mother. Galadriel and Gridr watched as the butter dish stopped in front of them.

“Our Gridr,” the chick began then looked up at Galadriel.

“Eep!” it managed.

“Quite so,” Galadriel replied. “I also am aware of Frerin and any further foolishness I see in my mirror, I shall immediately tell Thorin.”

“You would?” The chick seemed to brighten. “Well, by Mahal’s and my own hairy balls, this is beyond anything I could have dreamed possible! Thorin!” The chick started to climb out of the butter dish, but found it was being scooted by various hands back up the table. The dish got to Balin and the chick looked up at Dori, then toppled over on its bare bottom.

“Mahal’s hairy arse, aren’t you a looker,” the chick chirped.

“My, aren’t you a little flirt,” said Dori archly.

“And who might you be, my dear?” the raven cooed.

Balin growled, “Dori is me betrothed an’ th’ Blessed Bearer of Erebor.”

“Excellent. Well, our Balin’s a prosy old windbag for all he’s the best advisor any could wish for. But if he keeps yeh happy in the bottom bits, my dear, I’ve nothing to say on the matter. I look forward to our continuing acquaintance, presuming we’ve already met.”

“We have,” said Dori. “In fact, I was presented to you at court, I danced, and you dropped dead.”

“But what a way to go.” said the chick with a sigh.

Frodo turned to Thorin and hissed, “Why is this raven chick making goo-goo eyes at Imad Dori?”

“Because some things never change,” Thorn replied dryly. “Congratulations, Udad, you’ve just put to rest any doubts I might have that you’re Thror returned.”

“And now,” said Fili, “you will take your oath of loyalty to our King before this council of his allies.”

The chick clambered out of the butter dish and, with and some flapping, stood up before Thorin, bowed and began the recitation of the oath. Ori noted down that Thror did not use the oath taken by the under monarchs of dwarrow, but the one of lifelong service as Dwalin, Bujni, and Dipfa had taken, adding in loyalty to Fili and Sigrid as the heirs.

Thorin listened, then paused. He looked around the table.

“Is this acceptable to all rulers and councilors present?”

All nodded except for Dis. She glared at the chick. Thorin waited. She made her decision.

“I accept it, but I don’t trust him.”

“Noted.” Thorin turned to the chick and rose. “You are accepted as a raven of the House of Durin. You will carry out the will of Mahal, Yavanna, Roäc, and myself. You will render service to our allies and treat them with respect.”

“I will,” the chick said.

“You are a raven and, according to raven custom, King Roäc will name you. Roäc?”

“Oräc,” Roäc said.

The chick bowed to Thorin and then at the rest of the table.

“I am Oräc of the House of Durin. I serve King Thorin II, the High King of All Dwarrow and his allies.”

The chick turned back to Thorin.

“What a day!” it cawed. “I’m a raven and a happy lad.” Baluchistan and the other ravens snorted and cackled. Baluchistan hopped over, leaving his usual trail of feathers, and patted the chick on the head with a wing, almost but not quite squashing it.

“Sorry, Oräc, bu’ yer no’ a lad.”

“I’m a raven lad then.”

“No, our Oräc, yer a raven lass.”

Ori honestly broke his pen nib over that. Even Dis laughed. Oräc looked confused, then tried to shove her head under herself to check and fell on her butt.

“How can you tell?” she demanded.

“I kin smell yeh, yer a lass.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Oräc sighed and got up. “Right, no one tells Umad about this.”
“She’s on th’ floor a’ th’ mead hall screamin’ with laughter.” Durin told Ori
“She know already,” Ori giggled.
“Ah well,” Oräc huffed, “she always did have the prettiest laugh. Glad she’s getting to put it to use.” Oräc’s beak popped open again. Bilbo loaded Oräc back into the butter dish and Sigrid commenced pushing bacon into Oräc.

Quartz winged in and landed on Ori’s shoulder to rub his beak on Ori’s cheek.
“Oräc being good?”
“Yes, thank you.”
“Gotta fly. Other chicks’re hungry.”
Quartz disappeared and Ori sat back in his chair. The household staff was passing out large mugs of delicate fish chowder and there were boards of breads, butter and various spreads being settled on the table. Balin winked at him.
“Our Quartz’ a busy lad now.”
“I’m going to have to do without Quartz for a while,” said Ori to Thorin. “He’s busy bringing food for the nestling and, no doubt, losing his mind.”
Balin chuckled.
“Puir thin’. I kin imagine him runnin’ abou’ with his head cut off, takin’ care a’ the hatchlin’s an’ drivin’ his mate nuts.”
Dori put her hand on her belly.
“You won’t have to imagine for very long, my love. I’m in labor.”
Badgers, Bearers, and Brouhaha!

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Baby Time!! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Balin stared at Dori, his mouth falling open to an eloquent, “Grch!”
Ori shrieked, leaped out of his chair, and rushed around to hug Dori. Thorin called out his congratulations, everyone around the table cheered and chattered while Balin continued to sputter.
“I’m not crossing my legs for two weeks just to make Oin happy. My bladder has had it with these little acrobats.”
“Quite right, my love,” Binni sniffed.
“Indeed, honorable adad,” Bujni agreed, entering with Dipfa from their night out. “What’s to-do?”

Gimli said, “Dori’s havin’ th’ pebbles, an’ Balin’s havin’ kittens.”
“I shall go and organized clothing for the noble dwarflings,” Dipfa announced before leaving the room.
Balin seemed to finally motivate himself to move from his chair. He all but knocked Ori over, grasping Dori by the shoulders.

“Shouldn’t yeh be lyin’ down? D’yeh feel faint? Should I make yeh some tea?”
“I’m not ready for anything in particular, dear. It will be quite awhile before -Ha!- push comes to shove.”
“Bu’ yer havin’ th’ badgers!” Balin cried.
“Not right at this moment. They do take their time. It’s a pity we’re short on ravens at the moment. I should send word to nadadel.”

“The raven hopped over with a knot of cold beef in her mouth, swallowed the entire knot in one amazing go and said, “Yes, o king?”
“Dain needs to know Dori’s in labor. Please fly to Iron Hills and-“
He never got to finish. She was already out the door.
Ori said, “Do you suppose Dain will outrun Chopper to get here this time?”
“Oh, I have so much to do,” said Dori. “Pet, will you let Mistress Dazla know I’ll be indis-”
Delighted shrieks shot from the kitchen.
“I’d say she knows,” said Ori.
“Well, she’ll need help getting the rest of dinner for everyone,” Dori continued without missing a beat. “Oin, have you need of assistants to help you? Nori-“
Nori dropped through the ceiling with a screech.

“Oi! Balin! You’re supposed to be ready to catch the liddle moles!”
Dori grasped Nori by the ear and pulled.

“Nori, I have a job for you.”
“What’s that?”
“Be kind, be helpful, and stop screeching or I’ll thrash you.”
“I can do that.”
“Excellent.”
Mistress Dazla came in.
“Your bedroom is all prepared, Bearer.”
“I’ll go ge’ me birthin’ bag.” Oin levered himself to his feet with a groan and went out, Elrond in tow.

Thorin nodded to Gloin and called Agrib to attend him in the office.
Galadriel, Gridr, Dis, Binni, and Mistress Dazla escorted the Bearer out, Margr and Vi followed behind them, with Red Queen and Sugar bringing up the rear.

“And someone should tell Grandmamma!” Dori instructed over her shoulder.
“That’s me,” said Roäc as he flew off.
“Clench and relax!” was heard before the bedroom door was shut.
“What’s going on?” Oräc cried.

Sigrid scooped up Oräc, butter dish and all, and grabbed the rest of the bacon. She put the chick, dish, and bacon in Fili’s hands, kissed him, and followed Dori through.

“The Bearer is in labor,” Fili explained.
“Just how long have I been asleep?” Oräc cried.

Everyone adjourned to the sitting room to wait.
Miss Oqizla and the rest of the kitchen staff brought through platters of sandwiches and a tapped keg.

Ori threw himself at Dwalin.
“We’re going to be uncles!”
“Aye, we are. Gonna ma’e th’ wee ones their firs’ axes. Gotta ge’ ‘em off on th’ righ’ foot.”
Killer gamboled around them.

Thorin and Gloin came back in, Butter at their heels, and Brur and Sadi arrived.
“Suppose yeh want me t’ go an’ yell th’ news in th’ main square,” Brur said to his king.
“Please, here’s the proclamation,” Thorin handed Brur a hastily written document. “I’ve sent bats and ravens out all over Erebor and Dale to announce as soon as you do. Bells and horn volley right after. Gibi?” Thorin called.
Gibi popped his head out of the kitchen.

“Please saddle Grinder for Master Brur and meet him in the courtyard. Take one of the ponies for yourself as his escort.”
“Aye, majesty.”
“Thank you, Gibi.”
“Righ’, I’m off,” Brur said. He bowed to Thorin and swaggered out. Thorin escorted Sadi to a chair.

“If Dain is coming,” Bilbo mused. “I think I’ll go and open ‘his’ door at the end of the corridor. He almost went clean through it the last time he arrived.”

Ori curled into Dwalin’s lap on the couch. Bilbo returned perched on Thorin’s knee. Thorin rubbed his back, and Bilbo leaned in and kissed him.

Kili, Tauriel, and Bain took it upon themselves to play with Frodo, Sam, and Tilda. They organized a rousing game of Balrogs and Basements on the floor near the dining table now folded against the wall. The game required Legolas, Gimli and Nori to join in as well.

“You’re not going?” Faramir asked Eowyn and nodded to the closed bedroom door. She shuddered.

“No, I prefer to admire other people’s babies. You can hold them, tell them they’re cute, and then give them back. I’m not really good with children. I am looking forward to seeing Eomer’s and Arivett’s children. I think I’ll be an excellent aunt.”

Faramir nodded.
“I think I’m uncle material myself. I have no problem training children and youth, but the idea of chubby little faces lisping at my knees isn’t for me. Boromir loves babies. He plays with every child in his vicinity and willingly changes their nappies.”

“They do!” Tilda called out in agreement. “I’m not getting married. I’m going to drink The Tea every day and just flirt outrageously.”

“Tilda!” Bard cried, horrified.

Sadi burst out laughing.

“Where did you learn about tea and flirting?” Thranduil asked calmly.

“Everyone talks about it. Doesn’t matter if you’re in Erebor or Dale.” Tilda frowned, then said darkly, “People are obsessed.”

“Til,” Kili said and poked her. “It’s your turn. Pay attention.”

Bard fell back against his chair and moaned. Thranduil giggled into his wine.

“Thank you, Kili.” Thorin said quietly.

All the bells in Erebor rang, then the horn volley followed. Ori swore he could hear people cheering. There was the faint echo of bells from Dale and Ori thought he could hear the cheering there as well.

Gloin poured out flagons of ale for everyone and passed them out.

“Bes’ relax an’ pu’ yer feet up, lads,” Gloin said jovially, “we may be in f’r a long wait. Mind, me gem popped ou’ our Gimli, there, li’e he was a stone from a catapult.”

“Da!” Gimli yelled from the floor, where the game was noisily progressing.

“You’re going to fight an orc, Gimmers,” Bain ordered. “Roll for initiative.”

“Righ’. One! Mahal’s beard an’ toes, wha’ kin I do with a one?”

“You caress the orc’s cheek.”

“Bugger!”

Romy barked in agreement and the cats snaked round the players. The other three of Sugar’s pups were being well behaved. The deep brown male, graced with the name Forn, lay across Kili and Tauriel’s laps. The other female, Roberta, yellow like Butter but striped with dark brown, snuggled against Fili and guarded the well-wrapped butter dish holding Oräc fast asleep, between her paws.

The last one, a male, sat nearby watching.

Ori sat up, remembering. He turned to Sadi.

“Sadi, you said Mistress Dazla was your great grand niece. Did you know about Dazla?”

“Of course.” The old master scribe grinned at him. “It makes for a better story. I’m Dazla’s great grand niece but I wasn’t cut out for household work. I wanted scholarship. I kept the secret and, eventually, we just switched our roles of niece and aunt.”

Ori laughed.

“That’s wonderful. I’m glad you were able to follow your dreams,”

“Oh, Auntie has no illusions about people. She keeps all family close, but only those who work for her know all the secrets.”

“Are there any more secrets we should know?” Bilbo asked.

Sadi chuckled and drained her ale. “Ask Auntie.”

Bilbo twitched his nose at her and she winked.

Ori doodled in his notebook, while Thorin, Bilbo and Dwalin talked idly. Gloin, Elrond, Bard, and Thranduil exchanged fatherhood stories.

“Legolas was convinced my crown grew out of my head, rather like Monster Child and Sam,” said Thranduil. “He was upset he couldn’t seem to grow his own, so he glued twigs onto his head.”

“I remember that,” said Elrond.

Gloin winced.

“Yeh have t’ shave ‘is head?”

“Oh, yes,” said Thranduil. “He was such a disaster, I’m amazed he didn’t end up bald.”

Granny Klak came in with Roäc, and she went to the kitchen with Lindir to see if there was any soup left.

Roäc, Beryl, and Garnet finished off a stray sandwich. Baluchistan lay on the small stone table on his back, snoring among the dishes. He had gathered his own nest of feathers while he slept.

Mistress Dazla came out of the bedroom.
“Everyfing going alright?” Nori exploded to his feet.
“Everything is fine, Master Nori.”
“Dor clenchin’ an’ relaxin’ like he’s supposed to?”
“Master Nori, “ Mistress Dazla sighed painfully. “Your knowledge of act of giving birth is woefully inadequate.”
“Well, whadyou expect?” Nori demanded. “I’m not the one who pops out sprogs.”
Mistress Dalza hit him over the head with the wet towel she was carrying and went muttering into the kitchen.
Nori looked puzzled, then horrified.
“Oi, what was on that towel? It’s wet an’ smells funny!”
Mistress Dazla leaned out of the kitchen with an evil grin.
“I used it to sop up when the Bearer’s water broke!”
Nori screamed and fled the room, yelling for bath water.
Eowyn bounced to the kitchen door and looked in.
“You didn’t?” she giggled.
They all heard Mistress Dazla laugh.
“I mopped the Bearer’s brow with it.”
The room erupted in laughter.
Mistress Dazla reappeared with a pile of folded white cloths and whisk back into the bedroom.
“Should we tell Nori?” Faramir asked.
“No,” Ori said, drawing Nori’s face. “Washing himself and all his hair will give him something to do and will take a chunk of time.”
“How long is Nori’s hair?” Eowyn asked.
“It’s probably why Dori kept mine short.” Ori said idly. “It takes ages to get Nori’s all washed and dried.”
“Who’s going to play for Nori?” Bain asked.
“I’ll do it,” Haldir said and rose from his seat by the fire.
“This could take all night,” Thranduil said to the soldier gently.
“I sent a bat to Wandi. If it gets to midnight, he’ll come and join us.”
“The game players will be going to bed before that,” Bard told him.
“I’m counting on it.” Haldir flashed a smile over his shoulder before seating himself on the floor in Nori’s vacated place.
An hour passed and Nori reappeared with Granny Klak. She was fussing over him. His hair was still damp and he’d left it loose. Eowyn got out of her seat to go and admire it. She put her hands resolutely behind her back, making Nori laugh at her.
“You just wanna play wif it, doncha?”
“Yes, it’s amazing!”
Bofur came in, he had obviously washed up at the guild commons. Nori bounded to him. Granny Klak went back to the kitchen. Eowyn went and curled up with another ale which Faramir provided her.
“Dori’s poppin’!” Nori bellowed and grabbed Bofur. Bofur wrapped him in his arms and patted his back.
“That’s good news, ducky.”
“I’m nervous!”
“I’m sure Oin’s got everythin’ under control.”
“How can you be so calm?” Nori demanded.
“Me brother’s wife’s popped out a baker’s dozen, an’ she’s goin’ for the record. Who’s with our Dori?”
Bofur steered his husband to a sofa and Gloin poured out two ales and brought them over.
“Ta, Glo,” Bofur said and refreshed himself with a gulp.
“At las’ check,” Gloin expanded, “along with me brother, there was Lady Galadriel, me gem, Dis, Jani, Binni an’ Dazla. Oh, an’ Sigrid, Margr an’ Vi, th’ bird queen, an’ Sugar.”

Baluchistan snorted and raised his head.

“Me wee pot a’ bramble jelly’ll take care a’ Dori.”

The raven fell back to sleep.

Ori felt the familiar tickle at the back of his brain.

“About twenty minutes,” Yavanna cooed.

Ori looked at Bilbo who grinned, he had heard as well.

“About twenty minutes,” they chorused.

Thorin leaned over the back of the couch to address the gamers.

“You have about ten minutes to finish up.”

“That’s fine,” Kili called, “I’m the walking dead, Gimmers is engaged to an orc, Fili and Haldir are trapped in a barrel of fish, and Tauri and Sig have been changed into angry moths. We have to hope Frodo, Sam and Tilda can rescue us”

“Sam and I are going to make a potion to turn them back,” Frodo reported. “Tilda gave us her magic tea cup”.

“Excellent, my boy,” Bilbo approved.

“Oi,” Nori said. “You lot write me out of the game?”

“No, I’m playing your character,” Haldir replied.

“I was a chunky prostitute wif a wooden leg. How do I fight?” Nori demanded.

“I bought a magic knife from a shady peddler and sharpened my leg.”

“Sensible,” Nori nodded. “I was just flashin’ me boobies.”

“At orcs and ogres?” Haldir asked.

“You flashed your boobies while children were playing?” Bard managed.

“I told ‘em they had t’ close their eyes.”

“Nori,” Bilbo sighed, “you are a pest.”

“Nuisance,” Dwalin added.

“They was just imaginary boobies,” Nori pointed out. “Fee-oh-retical.”

“I got the potion and I’m throwing it in the air!” Frodo cried. “Sam, roll for the potion to work on Kili, Gimli, Tauri, and Captain Haldir!”

They all heard the die bounce on the floor.

“Twenty?” Fili gasped.

“Your potion,” announced Bain, “kills the five orcs and the evil ogre wizard, and cures everyone. Which means you’ve won.”

“Yay!” shouted the faunts.

Bilbo sighed as he rose.

“And not a moment too soon.” He went out to the kitchen.

“An excellent campaign,” Haldir approved.

“Has Haldir grown a new leg?” Tauriel asked.

“Sure, why not.” Bain laughed.

The group picked up and put away their game pieces and rejoined the rest at the fireside. Bilbo returned with a platter of toast covered in melted cheese.

They heard a crash in the far distance and a terrible screeching noise which grew louder and louder.

“Th’ fuck?” Dwalin hollered, leaping to his feet.

Chopper bounded into the room, harnessed with two large battle rams. They pulled a sleigh, the metal runners screaming along the stone floor.

“Hullooooo!” shouted Sculdis.

“Me sib!” Dain roared and almost fell out of the sleigh. He seized Dwalin by the tunic.

“Where’s me wee dumplin’?” Dain screamed in his face.

“Why’d yeh bring a bloody great sleigh in th’ house?” Dwalin yelled back.

Dain pushed away from Dwalin and bounded to the bedroom door. He flung it open.
“Me dumplin’?”
“Get out!” Dori screamed.
Dain leapt back as fluffy pink pillow sailed past his head.
“Sorry, dumplin’.”
“Send Sculdis!”
“Righty-o.”
Dain carefully shut the door and looked pleadingly at Sculdis, who was busy kissing everyone hello.
“Me delicate jewel of a bride?”
“I’m going, yeh great lump,” she laughed, giving Ori an extra squeeze. She trotted over, kissed Dain noisily, slapped his butt, went in and closed the door behind her. There was a gale of feminine squealing and a great deal of talk.
Dain came over, butted heads with Thorin, and crashed into a chair.
“Mahal’s hairy arse, what a trip.”
“Dain,” Elrond came forward.
“Howdy-do, our Rhonda! “Dain leaned up and offered his arm, which Elrond grasped. “An’ here’s Linda, an there’s me almos’ son-in-law Diry. All keepin’ well?”
“Very well, thank you,” said Elrond with a grin.
“Dain, good to see you,” Bard reached out his hand to the Iron Hills King.
“Bard!” Dain bellowed. “How yeh keepin’?”
“Well enough.”
“Hullo there, Sprite.”
“Greetings, Rockhead, had you a good journey?” Thranduil responded easily and inclined his head with a smile. Dain chuckled.
“Where’s Sapphire?” Thorin demanded.
“Eh? Oh, probably still snoozin’ in the sleigh.”
Ori and Gloin hurried over to the sleigh, where Sapphire nestled among the furs. The raven popped awake and shook herself.
“Nice ride.”
“Excellent,” said Thorin. “May we please get this sleigh and the goats out of the sitting room before Mistress Dazla sees them and murders all of us?”
Faramir and Eowyn took charge of the goats. Bain, Haldir and Bilbo removed the furs and luggage while Thorin, Dwalin, Bard, Fili, and Kili took the sleigh apart under Dain’s instructions. Thranduil and Sadi watched in great amusement.
“Why are there no bells on this side, Idad Dain?” Fili asked.
“It’s a narrow squeak comin’ along tha’ hallway in th’ sled,” Dain said. “No’ t’ worry, our Bilbo, I’ll remove ‘em in a mo. Caught ‘em on th’ handle on th’ door a’ Bag End East. I’ll knock out any scratches I made.” “I’m keeping the bells,” Bilbo told him, making both Thorin and Dwalin laugh.
“There’s an idea,” Dain grinned. “I’ll attach ‘em t’ th’ door side, so yer company kin ring ‘stead a knockin’.”
In a few moments, the goats and sleigh were stowed in the stable. Agrib and Larit took the Iron Hills Monarchs’ luggage to their rooms upstairs.
They all gathered in the sitting room to gobble up the cheese on toast.
Granny Klak returned from the kitchen with a jam tart.
Dain grinned at her.
“Evenin’, Auntie.”
“I am not your aunt, silly dwarf, though I suppose it’s better than ‘Evenin’, yeh old bat.’”
“Yer no’,” Dain protested. “Well, yer no’ a bat.”
Granny Klak flicked a bit of jam filling into his beard.
He hummed with pleasure as he fished it out and ate it, then regaled them with the doings in the Iron Hills.
“How is Stonehelm?” Bain asked diffidently.
“Oh, aye, almō’ f’rgo’. Bin carryin’ this aroun’. Now me dumplin’s saved our ravens th’ trip.”
He handed Bain a much creased and folded letter.
“Thank you, Idad!” Bain cried, and went off to the corner to read it.
Ori leaned over to speak to Granny Klak.
“Umad, you aren’t going in to help Dori?”
The old dam grimaced.
“I won’t be much help while I’m being violently sick all over the room. Terrible thing to try to remove from lace.”
“You get ill? What happened when you had your own pebble?”
“That’s different. Unless you have a mirror, you can’t exactly see what’s going on, and even if you could, you’re too preoccupied to care.”

Thorin went and patted the last warg pup which had followed the players over, and brought it to Dain.
“Dain, have a warg. He’ll keep Chopper company.”
The warg woofed, leaned over to sniff at Dain’s offered hand, then sat down on Dain’s foot.
“Chopper!” Dain called.

Chopper nosed through from the kitchen where he’d been bothering Larit for snacks, then seeing someone new on ‘his’ dwarf, trotted over to inspect the pup. They had a good sniff at each other, then curled up together on the hearth rug.
“That’s settled,” Dain commented, grabbed at Thorin’s neck, pulled him down, and thunked his brow against Thorin’s. “Thankee kindly, cuz.”
“You’ll have to come up with a name,” Thorin reminded Dain as he seated himself next to Bilbo again.
Dain looked over the dark gray brindled warg.
“Haggis,” he announced.
“Haggis?” Thranduil echoed.
“Aye,” said Dain. “Plump an’ full a’ whate’er.”
“I thought that was you,” said Thranduil.
“A’righ’,” said Dain amiably, “tha’s one f’r th’ twig head.”

Dain leaned over toward the warg.
“Haggis? Who’s a guid lad? Who’s a guid wee ball a’ suet?”
The warg thumped his tail and panted happily.
Dain nodded in satisfaction.
“Aye. Smart lad. I’ll have ‘im trained up by spring.”
Thorin stretched and tapped Dwalin on the shoulder.
“Better get the instruments ready. Balin will want this done traditionally.”
“Aye,” Dwalin agreed. He rose and brought Ori with him, through to their bedroom.
“What did Thorin mean?” Ori asked.
“When a Durin badger’s born, bearers an’ dams help th’ mother an’ th’ males play and sing.”
“Oh! I’ll get my flute.” Ori hurried to the dresser and unwrapped his flute from its nest in the bottom drawer. He joined Dwalin who was carrying his viol.

They rejoined the party in the sitting room. Dain held a pair of small drums that were joined together by a chunk of wood. One drum head was slightly smaller than the other and Dain was tapping and tuning them. Fili and Kili had their fiddles and Thorin his harp. Nori had his own flute and Bofur had his double flute. Faramir produced an instrument of men called a lute. Lindir carried a small elvish harp.

Eowyn grinned at the those without musical instruments.
“I gather we are to sing?”
“Oh if yer voice don’ carry,” Gloin commented, making Bard chuckle.
“Am I late?”

Mr. Wandi bustled in, deposited Mellon next to Chopper, and scampered into Haldir’s arms. Miss Dazla came out of the bedroom.
“It’s time,” she crowed and dodged as the population of the sitting room thundered her way.

Ori wiggled in and up to the huge bed. Balin sat with an arm about Dori. He had stripped down to his under tunic and had still sweat through it. He had pulled his hair and beard back and secured them out of the way, which made him look like he was wearing a white wool scarf around his neck. He eyed the herd invading his private sanctum and muttered about having to knock in a wall.

In the middle of the bed, lightly covered with a crocheted sheet, Dori looked ridiculously serene, almost immaculate, especially for one in the throes of giving birth. The Bearer was propped up with pillows. Ori thought there must be a thousand of them. Lady Galadriel sat at the head of the bed, curled on her side, her hands resting on Dori’s shoulders. The blue glow around Dori told Ori that Galadriel was largely responsible for Dori’s surreal state. He wondered how elves gave birth, and if they even noticed that the baby had arrived.

The rest of the bed was covered by lounging females. Margr and Vi sat on the foot, the end of the sheet over their heads as they busily watched whatever was going on with Dori’s nether regions. Sigrid and Red Queen curled on either side of Dori, gently rubbing her hips. Sigrid used her hands and Red Queen, her head. Sculdis, Mistress Dazla, and Dis folded cloths, prepared things, and talked with Oin. Gridr gave Dori’s free hand a manicure. Mister Wandi hurried over to help. Ori came over and Dori beamed at him.

“There you are, pet. Give me a kiss.”

Ori leaned down and did so. “Are you in much pain, Ori’s Dori?”

“No, no, dearest Gladdy is taking care of that.”

Dain, after kissing Sculdis, leaned over and noisily bussed Dori’s cheek. He gave her swollen belly a pat. “Now yeh badgers come along. No keepin’ yer cousins up pas’ their bedtimes.”

Nori crowded in as well. “Drop any bits yet?”

“Bits?” Balin echoed confused.

Dori narrowed her eyes as she studied Nori. It was obvious that Nori was not quite losing his mind over this. “Nori, dear,” Dori said soothingly, “the dwarflings arrive whole, not in bits. No assembly is required.”

“Oh righ’. I knew that.” Nori grabbed Bofur, who had just leaned in to salute Dori’s cheek. “Ya look just grand, namad,” said Bofur.

“Thank you, nadad. Please take Nori away and help him play.”

“Aye, ’m on it!” Bofur grinned and hustled Nori off to the side of the room where the sofa and chair with more stools had been gathered.

Thorin sat in the middle with his harp and plucked a low note, they all joined in playing soft and low. The dams around the bed began singing songs of welcome and the blessings of Mahal and Yavanna. The ravens perched on the top of the waiting cradle. Ori watched as he sat with Dwalin, his low piping blending with the notes from his husband’s viol.

Margr bobbed out from under the sheet and gave Oin a nod. He came over and lifted the sheet to rest on Dori’s knees. Apparently, things had progressed to his satisfaction. “Righ’ our Dori, push.”

Ori noted that the musicians and others were seated where they would not be looking straight up Dori’s privates, as Oin cast the sheet over Dori’s chest and leaned forward. Dori’s face strained. The blue glow increased slightly. Balin petted and cooed into Dori’s ear. “Steady now, beloved,” Balin murmured.

Thorin led the music to accent the time whenever Dori pushed. “Yer crownin’, lovey!” Vi called out. “Keep goin’. ”

“Well, an’ yeh are juicy, ain’t yeh,” said Margr.

A thump made Ori turn and Bofur, still playing, looked down at Nori flopped on the floor. Dain and Bofur shrugged at each other and continued the tune.
Tilda sat beside Faramir, watching intently as his fingers drifted over the strings. Ori thought it was a very nice instrument. He thought a lot of things, in order not to watch what was going on too hard. Dori was decidedly sweaty and very red.

He glanced over at the faunts, who didn’t seem at all bothered or distracted by the birth.

“Here we are!” Oin shouted.

A wail of a newborn filled the room.

A cheer went up.

Dori gave a gasp and a squeak.

Another wail joined the first.

Balin was hustled to the end of the bed to cut the birthing cords. He stared down at the badgers and tipped over.

“Bugger!” Oin groused.

“Is that my Balin out again?” Dori managed.

“Aye, love,” Dis laughed.

Oin hrmphed.

“How kin a healer work with all these bodies fallin’ abou’?”

Red Queen hopped down and began to fan Balin vigorously with her wings. Dwalin and Ori came round and hefted Balin to his feet and steered him over to plump back down beside Dori. Ori scuttled around to the other side to give Dori a hug.

Dis and Gridr wiped the babies down and brought them up to Dori, who gave a cry of delight as she cuddled them.

“Balin! Look!”

He looked, smiling hugely as tears ran down his cheeks.


“First twins born into the dwarrow race,” Oin announced. He knocked back another drink. “Both bearers.”

Everyone began to clap and cheer and chatter. Dori had to be kissed by all, though Ori remained firmly by her side and looked down at his nephlings, pink and wrinkly on Dori’s chest. They were beautiful, even though to his eyes they looked like little potatoes.

“Such a fascinating procedure,” Red Queen commented as she strutted up the bed to look at the twin with one eye then the other. “They already have some down on them. When do their eyes open?”

“Soon enough,” Balin smiled, petting one twin then the other.

“Dain,” Dori demanded over the hubbub. “Names.”

Dain expanded proudly and put his arm about Sculdis.

“Well, I was inclined to like Haggis an’ Pie—“

“No one will find your body, dearest nadad”

“I thought as much,” Dain grinned. “Rillias and Rillin.”

Dori squealed delightedly and Balin nodded.

“Rillias and Rillin they are.”

After a few moments, everyone was chased out of the room by Mistress Dazla.

“Those pebbles and their parents need to rest. Margr, Vi and I will care for them. The rest of you - shoo!”

Brur came back in, smelling like a pub.

“Brur,” Thorin greeted him. “Please go back out and announce twins, both Bearers! Their names are Rillias and Rillin.”

“Fuck my life,” Brur groused and went out again.
You Say Tomato, and I Say…

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Well, now the nephlings are here we can get on with things as usual in Fundin House. As usual, this means chaos. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwaarrow time, same dwaarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The herd made its way back to the sitting room, all talking at once.
“So cute!” Bilbo exclaimed.
“So tiny,” Bard added.
Frodo yawned, and regarded the man with a frown.
“They aren’t small! They’re the biggest fauntlings in Middle Earth! They’re already bigger than our Sam’s little sister!”
Bilbo took Frodo by his left hand, and Sam by his right.
“Not fauntlings, Frodo, dwarflings. Remember? Even newborn mountains start as foothills.”
Sam piped, “I think they look like poh-tay-toes.”
“Best not to say so in front of your Imad Dori,” said Bilbo.
“Why not?” asked Sam. He looked perplexed. “Those’re almost me very favorite things in the world!”
“I promise, I’m not casting aspersions on potatoes,” said Bilbo. “They are fine tubers with many virtues. It’s just a little late to explain cultural differences tonight. There are two faunts I know who are far overdue for bed.”
For once, it seemed they were too tired to contradict him.
Thorin made to go with them, but Bilbo shook his head.
“I’ll be back in a while, my dear. Enjoy your company.”
“Thank you, ghivashel,” said Thorin, and kissed him.
Bain and Tilda also went off to bed without an argument.
Everyone else availed themselves to refreshments, and raised their cups and glasses to the Blessed Bearer, her consort, and their offspring.
Ori hugged Dwalin and released him. Dwalin took his viol and Ori’s flute then started off in the direction of the bedroom. Ori turned as the sitting room door opened, and Elrond’s twins burst in, dragging Brur in between them - backwards. Brur sang off key and the words were rather slurred. Something about calves and lambs and baby goats, complete with attendant animal noises. Celeborn followed them, a trifle pink in the cheeks. Glorfindel brought up the rear, slightly more sober, and far more amused.
The twins set Brur on his feet and he roared a congratulations to them all. Thorin and Dain took him in hand, parked him in a chair beside Sadi and Sculdis went off to the kitchen, calling back that she meant to make Dori’s restorative. Ori hoped she knew how.
He looked back at the elven twins, who were chattering at their father. Elrond went to the bedroom door and tapped lightly. Mistress Dazla peeked out frowning. She grudgingly opened the door for the twins, Celeborn and Glorfindel. They went in quietly and in moment returned. Celeborn went to Galadriel who had plopped herself down beside Ori.
“Tired?” he asked, as he caressed her hair.
“A little,” she smiled. “Dori has promise to be with me when our new fawn comes. We still have over a year to decide on the details and prepare to host the party.”
“We can bring things,” Ori offered immediately.
“It would be wonderful if you brought your instruments,” said Galadriel. “I would love the music to be the first thing my fawn hears.”

Mistress Dazla came out of the bedroom, crossed into the sitting room, stopped and stared at the deep scratches and long, black streaks that marred the floor. Her floor.
“Dain,” she said, low and dangerous.
“Oh aye?” Dain turned from toasting his nephlings for the third time.
“What happened to my floor?”
“Oh…”
“I don’t want to know what you did, but I know you did it. Tomorrow morning you are going to render this floor to its former pristine state!”

Dain tried to look contrite, but it wasn’t his best effort.
“I’ll be seein’ t’ it before dawn, our Dazla. Yeh have me word. An’ yeh know me word’s guid.”
“Yes, which is why I let you live,” she replied.
Elrond came though and gave Mistress Dazla a glass of wine.
“New and old siblings, my nésa.”
They clicked glasses. Dain stared at them.
“Eh?”
“Oh,” Mistress Dazla turned back to Dain with a sparkling look. “Didn’t you know Lord Elrond is my younger half brother?”
“Huh?”
“It’s true,” said Elrond. “I just found out about it myself.”
Dain’s eyes shifted from one to the other.
“No’ much of a family resemblance,” he muttered.
“I’ve been told I more closely favor my father’s side of the family,” she said primly.
Thorin refilled Dain’s tankerd, and herded him off with an arm about his shoulders. “Come on, Dain,” said Thorin. “I’ll fill you in.”
“See wha’ I get comin’ late t’ th’ party?”
“The fawns are so tiny!” said Elladan.
“And so identical!” said Elrohir.
“We must teach them all our tricks!”
“All of them!”
Glorfindel chuckled.
“You have time to plot. They can’t even lift their own heads yet.”
“Don’t encourage them, Glorfindel,” said Lindir. “You know plotting is just what they’ll do.
Fortunately, Thorin has time to twin-proof the kingdom.”
Mistress Dazla approached Lady Galadriel with a curtsy, and dug a slip of paper from her apron.
“While you are here, milady, I believe I’ve long promised you this.”
Galadriel took the paper and her eyes lit up.
“Klakuna’s ginger cake recipe! But is this not a great secret?”
Granny Klak waved a grand, negligent hand full of rings.
“I gave my blessing. I refuse to stand between anyone and a good cake.”

Ori and Dwalin went in to see Dori and the new twins once more before retiring for the night.
Nori was already there. He stood over the cradle and gazed at the dwarflings with a raised eyebrow.
“Out with it, Nori,” said Dori from her pillow nest on the bed. She looked proud and tired, and seemed to glow even as she stared her younger brother down.
“Don’t mind me, our Dor,” said Nori. “I’m just tryin’ to figure out which ‘em’s the evil twin.”
A silver satin pillow bounced off the back of his head.
“Oi! Good fing I ain’t put up me hair yet!” Nori cried.
“Nori,” said Balin at Dori’s side, “if I hear yeh’ve made book on which a’ me dwarflin’s is th’ evil
twin, yeh’ll never have t’ worry abou’ yer hair again.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, brother,” said Nori. “Besides, I got no time. I got a casino to decorate.”

“You’re going to decorate the casino?” Ori hooted.

“Well, not me in particular. I hired Binni to do it. I’m just, whatchacall, supervisin’.”

Ori and Dwalin exchanged looks of horror.

Binni? Binni given free rein to decorate someplace far less formal than the throne room?

“No worries,” said Nori. “I already told him, no chintz.”

“There’s a relief,” said Dwalin. “Have yeh warned ‘im off abou’ bacon, too?”

“Why? Ain’t no one doesn’t like bacon,” Nori sniffed.

Ori went to kiss Dori’s cheek.

He whispered, “I’m very proud of you, Ori’s Dori. I love you.”

“Oh, pet, I love you, too,” said Dori, as she bit her lip, but it did no good, and she stared to cry. Ori panicked.

“Please don’t cry, Dori! I didn’t mean to upset you!”

“You haven’t, pet,” Dori assured, drawing Ori down to rest their foreheads together. “I’m just all over the place after giving birth. Great Mahal! I gave birth! Twice! I am good!”

“Yes, you are,” Ori assured him.

“Get some sleep, pet. Midnight’s already come and gone! Wait! Have yeh eaten? Make sure you eat!”

“I’ll make sure, our Dori,” Dwalin said and leaned over to plant a kiss on Dori’s cheek.

“Oh, our deary, you’re so good to my little pet. Thank you.”

Ori went to say good night to the twins. They were asleep, wriggling, breathing, and already snoring like good, healthy little badgers. The identical platinum colored hair on their heads and chins sat pin straight.

“Good night, my little potatoes,” Ori whispered.

He looked up, and found Balin favoring him with a smirk.

“Oh! I didn’t mean - they’re really cute, it’s just - I should probably shut up now, shouldn’t I.”

Balin dissolved into chuckles.

“I was thinkin’ they looked like th’ caps a’ white cave mushrooms meself.”

“Balin!” Dori cried. “They are your own dwarflings!”

“Aye, an’ considerin’ Fundin’s line usually comes screamin’ int’ th’ world lookin’ like frogs, I’d say they go’ off easy.”

“Oh, that is lucky,” said Dori.

Ori looked up at Dwalin.

“Balin looked li’ a frog,” Dwalin told him. “Mam used t’ say I was a ball a’ hair and growls.”

“And now I have all the hair,” Balin teased him in turn, shooing them out of the room. Ori waved to Dori and went out. They met Margr and Vi bringing in trays of piles of somethings, Ori wasn’t sure what.

“Righ’, loves,” Margr cooed. “Off th’ pair a’ yeh go t’ yer beds!”

“Aye,” Vi agreed. “No’ t’ worry, me an’ our Marg’re in charge.”

Dwalin and Ori bade the party in the sitting room good night and went to their bed.

Ori popped awake and wondered how soon he could go and check on his new nephlings. The room was dark but for the phosphorous stones around the door. The window was buried in snow. He craned his neck and squinted at the time piece on the bedside table. He could see by the glow of the clock face, also made of phosphorous, that it was just five in the morning.

Killer lay across his and Dwalin’s waists. Nori-Pori was stretched across the top of the pillow, and he could just see Mask curled on Killer’s shoulders.

He snuggled back down in Dwalin’s arms and closed his eyes. His mind buzzed.

His miniature for Sigrid just needed to be set in the locket. His portrait for the painting contest was coming along well. He pondered Eärwen’s diary, After Doriath had been lost below the waves, she often put in comments as to things happening Arda and the workings of Sauron. Ori frowned. If he
wanted the full picture, he was going to have to see what both Mistress Dazla and Elrond had to say about what went on.

Dwalin stirred and tightened his grip around Ori. Ori snickered to himself. Dwalin echoed it and gave his ear a whiskery kiss.

“I kin hear yer brain goin’.”

“I believe you. I can’t get it to shut up. I need to pick Elrond’s brain then Mistress Dazla’s.”

Dwalin cleared his throat, a little more awake now.

“Elrond?”

“Things Eärwen alludes to.”

“Ah.”

“She speaks a little of what Arda was like when the elves and others were fighting with Sauron.”

“Guid thin’ our Rhonda an’ whass’s arse, Aragorn’s ancestor, chucked his ring int’ th’ lava.”

“Yes, I don’t want to think what our world would be like if Isildur hadn’t done it.”

“Rhonda would’ve punched him in th’ snoot,”

Ori giggled over the thought. His stomach growled.

Dwalin snicker,

“Guess we’re getting’ up, love?”

“If Killer lets us,” said Ori.

Washed and dressed, they took Killer, Kihshassa and the cats to the stable. Dwalin opened the meadow door for them to romp out. Killer ran out, barking at everything and nothing, but the cats only went a short way, lifting each paw in turn in disgust before retreating back inside. Ori went to see Fanny. The Oliphaunt lay drowsing on her side in a huge nest of straw. She cracked an eye open and her trunk snaked over and pulled Ori to her. Ori hugged her, then drew back in surprise.

“Fanny!” he cried. “You’ve grown a fur coat!”

Fanny made a snuffling noise and rose to her feet. Ori looked her over. Her entire body now had about a inch growth of fur. It was lovely, being a mix of a rich red and gold.

“Fanny, you’re even more beautiful than ever!” Ori enthused. “Dwalin! Look! She’s gilded!”

Dwalin shut the door, as Killer and the cats frisked in the straw and Kihshassa clung to his back.

Dwalin came over and had a look at Fanny.

“Well, lass, yeh look grand, an’ yeh’ll be good an’ warm over winter. The circus folk’ll like yer new look.”

Fanny patted both their heads and lowered herself back in her hay nest.

Ori hugged her head.

“As soon as Dori lets me, I’m going to bring our new nephlings out to visit you. I’ll tell Floris and Mavey to come and see your coat, too!”

They left Fanny to sleep, patted Harley and Honda, gave Gnasher a good scratch behind the ears, and went back in the house.

In the breakfast parlor, Miss Oqizla was in charge of things and Margr and Vi were finishing breakfast with Glorfindel before going off to bed.

Thorin and Bilbo were there with most of the rest of the herd. Dain was noticeably missing, but Ori could hear him singing in the sitting room. He must have been giving a scold as he was not singing terribly loudly.

Bilbo dished up fried cornmeal cakes with maple syrup and bacon.

“What’s Dain doing?” Ori asked, as he received his plate.

“Fixing the floor,” Thorin replied. “Strangely enough, he seems rather happy about it.”

“Oi, Ori,” Gimli hailed him. “After breakfast, wha’ say yeh an’ me go down t’ th’ armory practice ring an’ have a start a’ trainin’?” Ori’s heart leapt then sank.

“Certainly,” he heard himself say.

After spending a little time with the newest inmates of Fundin House, Ori, Gimli and Dwalin
made their way to the armory.  
Gimli was kind enough to find a training circle away from the main arena. It turned out to be a sort of private space that young Durins used when they were just starting out, to save the family any loose talk about whether Prince or Princess Such-and-Such would be a lousy warrior. Ori knew the feeling. He wouldn’t want his first efforts in verse read aloud in the Central Market, either.

The practice axe Ori used had been balanced for a strong dwarfling, about his own height. Ori suspected he found it far lighter than Dwalin had as a pebble. He would have liked to say something about that, but he had no idea if it mattered. That was the trouble, wasn’t it. He had no idea about anything.

The first day, Gimli dressed him in light armor and himself in extremely heavy armor.
“I thought you were supposed to teach me to defend myself,” said Ori.
“Aye, an’ I will. Firs’, yer goin’ t’ take yer bes’ crack a’ me.”
“With what?”
Gimli raised a magnificent eyebrow.
“Yer axe?”
“I can’t just hit you with this!”
“Listen, it’s been blunted, I’m wearin’ enough steel an’ leather t’ fill an armory, an’ I go’ skin like rawhide. Yeh ain’t goin’ t’ hurt me. See?”
Gimli stepped back a few paces and raised his arms from his sides, about chest height.
“I jus’ wan’ yeh t’ ge’ a feel f’r it. Go on.”
“Are you sure?”
“Aye, go on. B’fore I’m old enough t’ collec’ me pension.”
“Oh, alright.”
Ori took a deep breath, hefted the axe as he’d seen warrior’s do, and let it fly.
Gimli flew, too.
The blow knocked him off his feet and through the air several yards to land with a graceless thump in a cloud of sawdust and sand. He lay there, unmoving. Then his muscles started to twitch.
“Oh, Mahal, I’ve killed him!” Ori cried.
Suddenly Dwalin was there. He sped past Ori and leaned over Gimli for a brief, tense second.
Then Dwalin scowled, and nudged Gimli with the toe of his boot.
“Knock it off, our Gimmers. It’s no’ tha’ funny!”
Gimli twitches grew to shudders, then shakes, then he opened his mouth and howled with laughter.
It was just as well Dwalin had already turned to make his way back, as Ori slid to the ground. Dwalin caught him, or maybe a little time had gone by, but Ori was in Dwalin’s arms when he came-to. Dwalin sat on the ground with Ori in his lap.
“Oh, Mahal… what did I do?” Ori cried.
Gimli leaned over him.
“Yeh’ve convinced me tha’ if yeh ever wan’ t’ go int’ th’ guard, yeh need t’ try th’ war hammer instead a’ th’ axe,” said the young dwarf. “Yeh could knock some orc’s noggin back int’ th’ last Age.”
“That wasn’t that long ago,” Ori protested.
“No, th’ Age b’fore tha’.”
“Dwalin, I think I need to go lie down.”
“Aye, we’re goin’.”
“I can come back tomorrow, right?”
Dwalin did a double take.
“D’yeh wan’ t’ come back tamarrah?”
“If Gimli has the time. You’re right. I need to learn this.”
Gimli laughed.
“I’ll make time, our Ori.”
“So, you’re not really hurt?”
“Oh, aye. I’ll be one big bruise come th’ mornin’. Won’t be th’ firs’ ‘r las’ time. As long’s me beard still looks guid.”

His beard did, in fact, look good, though the rest of him moved like a dwarf about to return to stone.

He handed Ori the same axe, which Ori took, though he was now sure it would bite.

“Now,” said Gimli, “I’m goin’ t’ tell yeh wha’ Da told me a long time ago.” “Is it a secret?”

“No, it’s th’ truth. Whether yer jus’ defendin’ yerself, ‘r yer off t’ collect some heads, th’ axe makes its own demands.”

“What does that mean?”

“It knows when yer afraid a’ it.”

“Shouldn’t I be?”

“If yer afraid, it’ll betray yeh. Let’s call it havin’ a healthy respect. In tha’ way, every weapon is th’ same.”

“Even the slingshot?”

Gimli opened his mouth, then closed it and chuckled.

“I’ll no be catty abou’ slingshots. Yeh could still take me eye ou’ with it.”

The Appendix and the Glossary have been updated through chapter 163!

And check out the second episode of the DTC After School Special for a surprise!
Pebbles, Peasants, and Presentations.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Everyone wants to meet Dori’s and Balin’s badgers - absolutely everyone. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

After four days, Ori was more comfortable with training and Dori felt less physically stretched. Over breakfast of eggs cooked in cream and dill and a huge platter of roasted cavern mushrooms and tomatoes, Thorin said there would be a special open court that day so that Dori, Balin and their new badgers could be presented to the populace. This announcement set everyone chattering.

“Oh, how nice that will be!” Dori cried.
“Aye,” Balin agreed as he cradled the twins in his arms. “An’ they’re such good wee badgers, aren’ yeh, me darlin’s?” Balin cooed down at the matching pair of Durin blue eyes staring up at him. “Me precious bundles a’ love. Yer adad jus’ tha’ proud a’ yeh both. An’ yer uncles’re proud a’ yeh, too. Yer idad Dwalin’s so jealous a’ all tha’ lovely hair!”

He rocked them, and hummed softly, then began to sing,

There’s wee Dwalin in his wee wee boots,
Stompity stompity stomp stomp stomp,
He canna find Thorin, so they’re no’ in cahoots,
Stompity stompity stomp stomp stomp,
Is it a growl or is it a fart,
We can’t tell, so bless his wee heart,
Stompity stompity stomp stomp stomp!

Everyone burst out laughing and the badgers squeaked happily. Thranduil and Elrond had to wipe their fronts.

“Thanks, brother,” Dwalin rumbled, frowning, but it was obvious he was pleased. Ori hurriedly committed the song to history as he scribbled it into his pocket notebook. While he was at it, he sketched a little cartoon of how he imagined ‘wee Dwalin’ stomping around Erebor in his nappy and boots.

“Stompity stomp,” he murmured to himself, and giggled.
“Ah,” observed Red Queen, resplendent in her harness bulging with eggs. “You sing funny little songs to your young as well. We are pleased to know this.”
“Oh yes,” agreed Thranduil. “There is nothing like a new little sapling to turn a parent’s brain to porridge.”
“Mm,” said Dis, gazing pointedly at Kili as he babbled at Tauriel’s belly. “Some of us are more porridgy than others. Runs in families.”
Randibur looked to her with bulging eyes.
“Imad? I can’t imagine you being all… gooey over a badger.”
“I wasn’t,” said Dis. “Thorin was.”
Thorin could probably have defended himself, if he wasn’t caught in the act of making funny faces at the twins.

He cleared his throat and attempted to look majestic.
“You sing to your young, sister queen?” he asked Red Queen.

“Indeed, we have a great tradition of serenading our nestlings. It strengthens the familial bonds. We shall be quite delighted to attend this introduction of the Blessed Bearer’s young to your people.”

Ori thought that perhaps the bone breakers really didn’t need much ruling, as Red Queen spent a great deal of time in Fundin House ‘assisting’ Thorin or Dori or whomever she thought would need it. Of course, Ori reflected, there really hadn’t been much in the way of ease and comfort in Khazad-dûm, fighting for food and survival with the orcs. No one could really blame Red Queen for eagerly spending time socializing with her peers. Ori refused to laugh but he did catch Dwalin’s eye. Dwalin smirked and put an arm about his shoulders.

Just then, Roäc blew into the room and landed on the table, closely followed by Great of Heart. The bird of Rohan strutted up to Thorin and held out a leg.

“Ah, thank you, Great of Heart,” Thorin said as he untied a roll of parchment and opened it. Miss Oqizla came in with a chicken carcass and put it in front of Great of Heart. Roäc helped himself to bacon.

“What news, o king?” Roäc asked around a mouthful.

Thorin read the note then threw back his head and roared with laughter. This was met with demands to know what was going on and who had written. Thorin slid down in his chair and managed to give the note to Bilbo.

Bilbo frowned and read aloud.

Brother King,

My Theodred was out riding this morning and saw two ravens flying toward Meduseld from opposite directions, at such great speed, that they collided head on and fell to the ground.

Theodred rescued both and brought them to me. The ravens said they each carried a birth announcement of mother Hild and daughter Arivett to each other. They were both full of the news and very anxious that these messages be delivered, so I sent two of my best falcons to complete the deliveries.

The raven are recovering in my hall. I thought you might get some amusement out of this, as well as the satisfaction of knowing that your kingdoms have continued to increase apace.

Love to you all,

Theoden

Postscript: I received your raven two days ago, a fine specimen, and would like to send my warmest congratulations to Lord Balin and the Blessed Bearer. I shall be sending the traditional gift of my people to them.

Secondary postscript: I would not for a moment entertain the thought of pondering anything the Asshat had to say.

“What are they? What are they?” Dori cried

“Badgers, I imagine,” Bilbo teased.

“Do not antagonize the Blessed Bearer!” she commanded.

Nori stuck his head up through the table.

“I’m not even goin’ to lay odds,” he said. “But I’m willin’ to bet they’re both girlies.”

Roäc hopped up to Great of Heart and croaked at the falcon. Great of Heart removed his head from the carcass and shrieked back.

Roäc cackled evilly.

“And you’d be half right,” he said.

“Arivett had a dwarfling?” Dis cried.

“No,” said Roäc, and he hissed then crowed. “Hild.”
“Oooooooooo!” the company chorused. Dis raised a brow. “Depend on it. She’ll trade him for a sword with the next caravan that passes by her fortress.” “No,” said Roäc. “He’s being introduced as the heir of Ahkn, Crown Prince Lahkn of the Stonefoots!” “Thank Mahal,” said Thorin as he struggled to sit up and wiped his eyes. “We were all worried the crown would have to pass to Ahkn’s brother, and Prince Jahkn is a good, kind soul, but I’d rather put my wargs on the throne of the Stonefoots then see him on it.” “He’s incompetent?” Thranduil asked. “Not so much incompetent as vague. Unless he’s at his spinning wheel or his loom, he doesn’t have an attention span.” “Arivett and Eomer have a daughter,” said Bilbo to Eowyn. “You are officially an aunt.” “Excellent,” she said. “Hopefully they’ll have a dozen or so, and no one will ask me when I’m next.” “So,” Bilbo asked, “what is this traditional gift that your uncle is sending to Dori and Balin?” Eowyn was suddenly very busy drinking her ale. She mumbled something and Faramir, beside her, began to laugh. “Of course!” he cried. Thorin turned to the Rohan woman. “Eowyn?” “Uncle’s going to send two of the best foals born closest to the time of the birth.” “How lovely!” Dori crowed. “But does your dear uncle know that badgers take a while to grow? They won’t be riding on their own for quite a few years?” “I don’t know,” Eowyn admitted. “I think it’s more that he gets to send them.” “It is a very kind gesture of him,” Dori mused. “We shall cherish them as such.” “Can room be made in th’ stable?” Balin inquired. “Aye, I’ll see t’ it.” Dwalin promised. “Eowyn?” Thorin turned back to her. “Would it be offensive if any but the badgers rode them?” “No, our horses need care, training, and to be ridden. I’ll help you with them.” “Thank you. Bard, do you think Sigrid and Bain will have use for them?” Bard grinned. “I’m sure they will, but Frodo and Sam?” “We can share!” Frodo urged. “Very well,” Thorin approved. “Not to worry, my love,” he said at Bilbo’s concerned look. “Saddles can be made for them. As, no doubt, we shall visit Rohan and they will be able to ride there.” Frodo and Sam fell into a quiet discussion about the horses and riding. Great of Heart finished his repast and looked at Thorin, who said, “Rest my friend, a letter shall be composed for you to return home with when you are ready.” Another raven arrived and landed in front of Thorin. “Shelly!” Ori recognized Chat’s raven. “Hello, Shelly,” Thorin greeted the raven. “Hullo, our Thorin! From me Chat,” Shelly announced, holding out her leg. Thorin removed the roll and read, while Bilbo filled a saucer with bits of toast and bacon. Thorin growled in exasperation. “What is it, my dear?” Bilbo asked. “He’s offering me his beard for having ‘failed me’, in that he didn’t detect Frerin’s plot. Idiot. Ori, please take this down.” “Of course, Thorin.”

“Dear Chat,
I don’t blame you for anything. if you send me your beard,
"I will bring it back there myself and glue it to your arse.

Love,

Thorin."

"Got it," said Ori.

"Not that anyone would be able to tell there was more hair on his arse," said Thorin. "He’s been mistaken for a bear cub in the public baths by his own subjects."

"True," Gloin agreed. "'No' abou’ Chat’s arse, I mean, but about Frerin. Pity Dain an’ Sculdís left us th’ other day. Did yeh ge’ a chance t’ discuss th’ matter with Dain?"

"I did. He’s now eager to see what possible actions might be taken so, as he put it, he could weed out his court. I seriously doubt there are any loyal to Frerin in the Iron Hills. Frerin and Dain always disliked each other."

"Not to put a damper on things," Bard said, "but are you aware of any here who might move against you?"

Thorin chuckled. "Only a few, and they have irrevocably bound themselves to that terrible crime lord, Master Ursith."

"Wrapped nice an’ tight ’round me liddle pinky finger," Nori cackled.

"Such a good boy!" Granny Klak praised.

"Truth," Nori agreed, toasting himself with his tea cup.

"Granny’s precious ba-dger," Ori singsonged quietly.

"How is th’ casino comin’ along?" Gloin asked.

"Brilliant. I’ve go’ every streetwalker and bawd in Dale bound to the Pleasure Guild an’ trainin’ nicely. Lovely lot a’ harlots every one a’ ‘em. Guild’s cleaning’ ‘em up an’ got all kinds a’ medical help f’r ‘em. The young ones’er all bein’ sent t’ the guild schools and brought up proper. Them that don’t want to go on puttin’ out ‘re being trained in cards an’ dice and listening t’ everytfing. There was lots that wanted t’ wait tables an’ cook, too. Like the money. Ten times be’er than anyfing they got on their own. Got their pimps under me thumb as staff, too. All’re happy as pigs in a mud puddle bein’ me bodyguards an’ security f’r t’ place. Knew ‘em all as Nori, so Master Ursith knew jus’ where t’ tickle ‘em, so they slapped down quicker than a wink."

"You’re a genius, Nori," Bard said. "Thank you for taking in all those women and boys, who had no way of making a living, but with their bodies. You, I mean Master Ursith, are a true guardian to them all."

"Aye, well don’ go spillin’ it about. Ursith is a mean ol’ crime lord. Only likes his money. Savin’ them miners got him a finger on the King, so watch out f’r ‘im, our Thorin."

"I shall indeed," Thorin replied gravely, but with a twinkle in his eyes. "Ursith is a desperate villain and I shall ever trust my spymaster to keep him under surveillance."

"It really is a delightful outcome," Galadriel put in. "Perhaps Ursith’s wicked reputation shall draw in the other such criminally minded persons."

"Well, our Gladdy," Nori replied, "the only way they can stay is if they bind to Master Ursith."

"Speaking of Dale," Dori said suddenly, drawing all eyes to her. "My dears, it really is time we solidified our plans for Yule."

Thranduil and Bard exchanged grins, then Thranduil turned to Dori. "Indeed, Blessed Bearer. Bard and I, with the Bardlings’ help, have at least a workable storytelling revel that will include most of the main streets and the finale in the town center before Dale Hall."

"Indeed?" Thorin said interestedly. "I am a little familiar with the Yule story told in Dale. There are always the central characters of the Snow Maiden, Grandfather Frost and a malignant creature of some sort."

"Correct," Bard said. The terrible Ice Fiend know as Supmark and his band of Nekushdies, who try to prevent the Snow Maiden and Grandfather Frost bringing Yule gifts and the promise of Spring to the people."

"We have," Thranduil put in, "embellished the story a little."

"Wicked Stepmother rewrote it." Sigrid explained as she and Fili began to laugh.
“We do need your help in taking the parts of a few…er…characters,” Thranduil continued. Everyone around the table looked at each other.

“If,” Thranduil’s smile was very dangerous, but his tone was one of diplomatic delicacy, “the good Captain Dwalin would be so kind?”

“As long as it means I’m Supmark, I’m in,” Dwalin replied. “Mebbe ge’ some off-duty soldiers interested in playin’ nekushdies. Targ’s pretty dramatic, ‘specially when he’s had a few.”

Bard turned and smirked at Thranduil. “Told you he’d do it.”

“Excellent,” Bilbo enthused. “do you have a script so to speak?”

“I shall finish preparing it and bring it to you, Dori and…” Thranduil trailed off looking about. Thorin glanced at Bilbo.

“My love, Dori, and Dwalin and, I suppose, anyone else who wishes to be a part of it.”

An excited clamoring rose and Ori hugged Dwalin’s arm. He knew that Dwalin would make every attempt to surpass his role as the elderly princess in the tower.

“Oh dear!” Dori cried.

“What is it, beloved?” Balin asked, as the room fell silent.

“Whatever am I going to wear to open court?”

Ori sat at his desk in the catalogers hall in the library. He had finished some busy work from Brur earlier and was now following up on some of his own research. He had been busy comparing the history the library contained with the events described by Galadriel’s mother. They were in agreement in most things except the account of why the sack of Doriath had occurred and where orcs came from.

“Yeh really want t’ know?” Mahal’s hot boom was in the back of his head.

Ori considered, then.

“If it will help any other orcs who are like Drum, yes.”

“Drum an’ his kin didn’ star’ ou’ like tha’. They were around long before then. Morgoth used them t’ star’ orcs before he mixed ’em up with elves an’ men, turnin’ all t’ evil. Torture an’ mutatin’ ’em all t’ yeh kin bare recognize ’em. They’re what yer folk called ’mine knackers’.”

Ori stared into the middle distance. Mine knackers were only faintly remembered legends. When the dwarrow mined into the mountains there were stories, mostly referred to as dwarrow fairy tales of magical creatures who would warn the miners if there was danger underground. They would tap out their warnings in the stone. They were usually described in stories as the size of a badger. No one had a good description of how they looked but the legend occasionally raised its head among the dwarrow.

A whomp of a book on the desk in front of him brought him back to himself.

He peered up at Lolibur, who didn’t look best pleased, though he couldn’t think of anything he’d done.

“Sorry, our Ori,” she said. “I didn’t mean to put it down quite that hard.”

“What’s the matter?”

“My parents are making a big deal of my getting married too soon. As if! I made the mistake of mentioning in a letter that we wanted to announce our engagement in the spring and suddenly I was a just a damling, barely ready to make my own way in the world.”

“Your parents wrote that?”

“It’s not like we plan to elope, although you and Dwalin did and look how happy you are!”

“But you were already in love with him, and he with you!”

“I was, but I didn’t know he was. I went into it not sure if I wasn’t getting something worse than what I escaped.”

She opened her mouth, but he cut her off. My, but he had grown daring recently.

“I’m not saying your parents think that about Furh’nk. Have they even been formally introduced to him? You know dwarf parents want to cross examine your intended within an inch of their life. Even if they don’t really have any say over whether and when you marry.”
“They don’t! Which is why I don’t understand the fuss! I was thinking we’d be engaged a respectable amount of time, a decade or so.”
“Did you tell them that?”
“I wrote ‘a long engagement’! That’s a decade. Everyone knows that.”
Ori was beginning to think it was a good thing that a large, snow-bound valley sat between Loli and the inn.
“I need to move out of my imad’s and idad’s house, get my own flat. I can afford it now that I’ve finished my formal lessons. Maybe if they see I’m alright on my own, they won’t fuss so much.”
“You wouldn’t move in with Furh’nk?”
“No, that would be too much like getting married right away, and I want to make it on my own for a while. Maybe I should write and tell them that.”
“You think?” Ori teased gently.
“Then I can invite them to see my flat in the spring, and they can interrogate Furh’nk then. Maybe it’ll distract them from noticing Pika has been combing Omi’s hair. Thanks, Ori!” She leaned in and pressed their foreheads together. “You give such great advice!”

As he watched her skip away, he felt like he’d really accomplished something. What that was, he had no idea.

Brur exploded into the room and roared.
“Ori! Court.”
“Shit,” Ori muttered, threw in things into his satchel and fled home to dress.

This court appearance was rather different than previous. The crowd gathered outside while the King and court settled themselves. Thorin and Balin had thought it best that the family was in place, and the Blessed Bearer was seated comfortably, before the excitement began. Ori glanced around from his scribe’s stand. The only real difference was that instead of Dori and Balin’s usual couch, Dori would be seated on a marvelous daybed: a square canopy above and, Ori thought idly, several thousand cushions, all trimmed with deep folds of white lace. The material covering all was the same stuff that Mahdrin and Dipfa had produced for Dori’s presentation robe. It spilled all around, set every now and then with beads of gold or sapphire.

Dori arrived in the teacup and was tenderly escorted to the daybed by Balin, the sisters, and Galadriel. Dori glittered in her presentation robe with an over robe of fine open work gold net set with sapphires. Dori was help to relax on the seat, while her entourage heaped cushions around her and the twins were laid in her lap.

Margr and Vi stood on either side with their polished mattocks and dressed in silk gowns of Balin’s Fundin red. Everyone else went to their usual places and Thorin nodded to Brur at the entry doors. The guards just managed to scramble out of the way as the crowd surged forward, almost filling the room instantly.

“All hail King Thorin II!” roared Brur. “His majesty presents the first children of the Blessed Bearer of Erebor!”

Cheers rang.

Thorin rose and held out his arms to them.
“Come my people. Come forward with our good friends and allies from Dale. Come and meet the Children of the Blessed Bearer and Lord Balin.”

The guards just managed to scramble out of the way as the crowd surged forward, almost filling the room instantly.

“Ou’ a me way, peasants! Oi! I’m ‘ere t’ see th’ Blessed Bearer an’ her tots!” The crowd parted for Master Ursith, who had obviously dressed down for this event. This meant that instead of his traditional black, everything he wore, including his jewels and nail decorations, was pink. The torchlight bounced off of him and Ori found he couldn’t look directly at the criminal mastermind without spots dancing in his vision and the need to sit down until the wooziness went away.

Balin raised a brow, Margr and Vi raised their mattocks protectively.
But the Blessed Bearer merely nodded and said, “I’m sure there’s no cause for alarm. Everyone is
allowed to greet me and my... tots."

“Aye, an’ I brung them a pressie each!” Ursith chortled. “Somethin’ useful!"

He clapped his hands and a matched set of flunkies scampered up the aisle, each carrying something exceedingly heavy, draped in pink velvet cloth. They laid the objects at the Bearer’s feet and quickly scampered away. Ursith bowed.

“With yer permission, a’ course, Blessed Bearer.”

“Kindly bash on with it, Master Ursith.”

He grasped the velvet covers one in each hand, and whipped them off with a flourish. “Ta-dah!”

Everyone leaned forward to see. Then they leaned forward a little more. Ori looked and saw two smallish... vases? Chamber pots? Coal skuttles? Butter and Sugar’s hackles rose and Thorin had to soothe them.

“Very nice,” said Dori. “What are they, and what are they for?”

“These’re solid gold nappies! One f’r each!”

Balin said, “Happy thought, indeed.”

“Master Ursith,” said Dori, “I thank you, but, how would I put these on the pebbles?”

“Eh?”

“You do know how nappies work, don’t you?”

“Yeh slap ‘em on their bums,” said Ursith jovially.

“Yeeeesss,” said Dori. “Do you not see a problem with their design? Perhaps they’re a little too solid, and you seem to have neglected leg holes.”

“I figured they’d jus’ sit in ‘em. Easier t’ clean than cloth nappies, righ’? When they done their wee business, jus’ give these a swish a water, an out int’ th’ gutter with th’ dross.”

Vi muttered, “Wish it was really tha’ easy.”

“Thank you, dear Ursith. We’ll be sure to put them to good use.”

He bowed again and said, “Under th’ circumstances, I’m thinkin’ yeh prob’ly won’ be considerin’ me proposal.”

“Alas, I am sensible of the honor, but I fear I must decline. But take heart, I am sure Mahal has placed your One somewhere in Middle Earth. Perhaps you should take a protracted journey to go and find them.”

“I li’e th’ adventurin’ sort,” he replied. “I’m hopin’ they come t’ me.”

“I’m sure you’ll get just what you’ve got coming to you,” Dori said pleasantly. “Good day, and thank you again.”

Ursith bowed for a final time, then turned and strutted back up the aisle, whistling.

Ori couldn’t decide if he wanted to go home after this.

The scene played out much as he imagined. When they arrived at Fundin House, Nori was already there, lounging smugly in the sitting room.

Dori didn’t even stop to change clothes. She marched across the sitting room smacked Nori across the head with a fresh nappy.

“Nori! You creep!”

Nori took flight, and Dori went right after him, across the room and around furniture. Dori was amazingly spry for someone who had recently birthed twins.

“Oi, our Dori! Enjoyed it, did yeh?” Nori asked with a grin as he ducked the nappy.

“Enjoyed it? I hope you have said your prayers to Mahal, because I’m sending you to Him.”

“No way,” said Mahal in Ori’s head. “No one’s Halls’re Nori-proof. Give us a millenium ‘r so.”

Ori said, “Dori, Lord Mahal says you have to give Him a millennium to secure the halls against Nori.”

“Well!” Dori huffed.

Mahal went on, “I knew he was trouble. I hadn’t even finished puttin’ im t’gether an’ he was stuffin’ everythin’ int’ his mouth an’ screamin’, “Mine!”

As Dori had always insisted this was Nori’s first word, Ori wasn’t all that surprised.
“Did you really design Nori this way?” Ori murmured to the ether.
“I may’ve gotten his plans mixed up with th’ schematics f’r some minin’ equipment. An’ I was badger-sitting one a’ th’ Wife’s fly trap plants at th’ same time.”
“So that explains his hair?”
“I ain’ takin’ th’ blame f’r tha’.”

Finally, Dori had Nori cornered, and Nori could have easily escaped through the wall, but he simply stood and let Dori beat him with the nappy to his content before the Blessed Bearer gave it up and marched back to the bed chambers in a huff.
“Well, duck,” said Bofur. “Now ya’ve done it. Fifty lashes with a fresh nappy!”
“Naw, if our Dori was really angry he’d’ve used a dirty one.”
Enchanted, Excited, and Exhausted

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. We’re getting ready for Yule. The fact it’s going to be mid-summer here in a few weeks makes it entirely…weird. Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Please note: Red Queen’s song is all @Blistering_Typhoons’ fault!

Two days later, Ori had a quick dawn breakfast with Dwalin, then fled to the library for a couple of hours. He had a lot to do there, and not a lot of time to do it, since Nodun told Master Brur that Ori was painting for the king’s portrait contest. Brur told Ori he was limited to mornings for his library work.

“Don’ make me send yeh home on th’ end a’ me boot, laddie.”
Sadi had looked askance at Brur.
“As if yeh kin raise yer boot withou’ fallin’ over.”
That Dori expected him home for second breakfast further cut into his time.
As he worked at his desk, Sapphire landed in front of him with a note from Gimli asking him to meet at the training grounds for something he called ‘endurance training’.
He thought that sounded grim.
Sapphire cleared her throat.
“Oh, sorry.”
He pulled some snacks from his bag, and her particular bowl, and put them out for her while he pondered his fate.

He arrived home in time for second breakfast to find the sitting room was full. Dori lounged resplendent in her inflated chair feeding the twins, while Gridr, Margr, Vi, Mistress Dazla and some of her staff busily worked through the mound of baby things. The presents continued to pour in from all the dwarf kingdoms of Arda without an end in sight. Mistress Dazla gloated over the amount of cloths sent for nappies, Margr and Vi sorted through clothing, and Gridr inspected toys.

“Dori,” Gridr said in a pleased tone, “there’s more than enough here to send to the badger care guild. You’ll supply every care center in the mountain, with plenty over for the Dale places.”
“Aye,” Vi agreed, “an’ these badgers’ togs’s too small f’r man babies, but there’s more than enough f’r any dwarf badger that needs.”
Ori ate enough to satisfy Dori, who despite being occupied, could still watch him.
After second breakfast, Bilbo and Thorin went back into Bag End East and returned dressed formally.
Thorin shrugged into his coat.
“We’ve been invited to read to the badgers at the East Dale School this morning,” he explained to Ori.
“You both look quite dapper,” said Ori.
“Thank you,” said Bilbo as he adjusted his handkerchief in the breast pocket of his Durin blue jacket. “I’ve been studying Vug, and taking my hints from that fashion plate scribe they’re always on about.”
“So, what you’re saying is, you’re socks don’t match,” Ori put in slyly.
“Alas, I don’t wear them myself,” said Bilbo, as Thorin settled his cape over his shoulders. “So I’ve had to go with underpinnings in screaming royal blue silk.”

Dwalin looked them over.
“Targ’s ou’ front with th’ security detail. Be guid f’r yer bullies.”
“Yes, Mam,” Thorin sassed him.
Dwalin shot him an obscene gesture.

‘Endurance training’ was more complicated it sounded.
Ori had imagined it meant running in a circle until he wore the surface of the stone to the height of his ears.

“No! Nononono!” said Gimli with a grin as they stood in the sparring ring. “Mahal made us to run for centuries. Nothin’ t’ teach there. This’s abou’ keepin’ yer arms in tune with yer brain, so yeh kin figh’ f’r days if need be.”
“I haven’t got days,” said Ori. “I’m supposed to meet with the scribe chairs at lunch.”
“A’righ’, t’day yeh’ll train so yeh kin figh’ f’r two hours.”
“Jolly.”

This meant axe drills. This meant not only swinging the axe for power, but stopping the swing instantly, whenever Gimli said ‘Stop’.

He said this with such frequency, Ori understood why dwarf axe-wielders moved up the military ranks so quickly. They wanted to be the ones who said ‘Stop’, not the ones who had to stop. After an hour of this, Ori wondered if he would ever raise his hands over his head again. His shoulders seemed to have seized.

Still, he was surprised when Gimli called a halt a half hour early.

Ori blinked the sweat out of his eyes and had just the presence of mind to lower his ax slowly to the ground, as respect required.

Over the past ninety minutes, Ori could have sworn that axe gained a hundred pounds.

“Are you sure, Gimmers?” he panted. “I don’t think I’ve dislocated anything yet.”

“Recovery’s par’ a’ trainin’,” said Gimli. “Yer hubby’s here t’ make sure yeh do it, too.”

Ori followed his gaze to Dwalin, who leaned against the wall, arms crossed, with a big grin on his face.

Inwardly, Ori groaned and wondered how long Dwalin had been there, watching him flail about.

“Come ge’ ‘im,” Gimli called to Dwalin. “He’ll need unfanklin’.”

“I still have to clean my axe!” Ori protested.

“I’ll do it as a fav’r, this once,” said Gimli with a wink as he took the weapon. “Go on.”

The bath attached to the Durin’s private training circle was as simple as the fighting ring. They had it to themselves, and while Ori appreciated the lack of soldiers snapping towels at one another, boasting, and telling bad jokes, it felt a little eerie as well. Condensation dripped water from the shadowy roof of the cave, and the murmur of the sluice flowing into and out of the natural pool felt soft and distant. It was so empty and quiet, their breathing echoed back on them.

Ori sat on Dwalin’s lap, facing forward, up to his chin in steaming water. The medicinal herbs and rubbing oils Dwalin used smelt of lavender, and the vapor rose around them in a calming cloud. Ori imagined this was it was like to sit in a cup of herbal tea. It certainly beat the scent of any lineament Oin prescribed.

Dwalin worked Ori’s shoulders and arms down to the fingertips and back, each side, then again, and again. The warrior found aching mountains of muscle under his shoulder blades and worked them into at least foot hills. Then he did the same for the angry flesh down the sides of Ori’s spine and over his hips.

Ori had drawn the dwarven anatomy his entire life. He knew how all the muscles worked together, and how they should look. He had never had those connections driven home quite so forcefully.
He wondered if all this muscle pain wouldn’t lead him to draw anatomy more accurately.
“I kin hear yeh thinkin’, love,” said Dwalin. “Wha’s on yer mind?”
“Nothing warrior-like,” Ori assured him. “I’m not strategizing on how I could better swing the axe without looking like a dope.”
Dwalin chuckled.
“F’r wha’ it’s worth, yeh don’ look li’e a dope. Our Gimmers’s goin’ t’ have t’ train yeh t’ keep yer tongue in yer mouth, though.”
“I stick it out automatically when I’m concentrat’ing,” said Ori, and he whimpered as Dwalin found a particularly complicated knot at the top of his arse.
“Sorry, love, I’ll try t’ make it quick,” said Dwalin. “Aye, well, yer no’ as likely t’ bite yer tongue off when yer drawin’.”
Ori sucked in a harsh breath that had as much to do with the realities of fighting as it did Dwalin’s ministrations.
Firmly, he reminded himself that he was not training to be a warrior. He was not going into any pitched battles, or riding the streets on patrol, though the part where the soldiers helped people they met while on patrol appealed to him.
No.
All he had to do in a bad situation was fight long enough and skillfully enough to cut an exit for himself and run as fast as his Mahal-given legs could carry him.
He had feared orcs the most, until Gimli explained that orcs were the least of Ori’s problems. Though they travelled in packs, and they were mighty, they were also few in number, and slow without their wargs, and they didn’t have enough brain power to plan ahead. It was easy to outpace them, and usually simple to find an unguarded spot in their scant armor to target. And their weapons sucked slug slime.
Men and elves were far worse. The cleverest and quickest could jump around like well-armed frogs, bludgeoning and stabbing all the while. But men were quick to tire, and they and elves tended to underestimate a dwarf’s skills. It took longer for a dwarf warrior to find an opening to finish them, but a dwarf was nothing if not patient.
“Yeh’ve drifted off agin, love,” said Dwalin.
“Oh? Oh, sorry. How long have we been in here? At this rate, I won’t have time to eat or change before I have to be at the scribes’ hall.”
“I had yer robes an’ satchel brought here, an’ Bilbo’s arranged f’r th’ royal kitchens t’ serve lunch at th’ meetin’, an’ also push it back an hour.”
“We can’t do that! Think of all the schedules it will throw off!”
Dwalin kissed the top of his head.
“Love, they all know wha’ yer up t’ here. When it comes t’ th’ firs’ chair, they don’ expec’ military timin’.”
Ori knew he had truly changed when he didn’t feel the need to protest further.
“Now all I have to do is stay awake for the meeting,” he said.

Amazingly, he did not nod off as he feared. Instead, he felt a surge of energy that carried him through the meeting, and even let him spend a little time with Arne in the apartment afterward.
Arne looked at him askance as Ori chuckled at the lavender tea before him.
“Sorry, I just have this thing about lavender,” said Ori.
Yes, he was forever going to associate it with Dwalin’s hands on his sore muscles, but Arne didn’t need to know that.
Arne placed the plate of cookies between them on the little table and they proceeded to demolish them.
Ori had a whisper of guilt over this, as he had just eaten an entire meal, and one put together at the direction of a hobbit, at that. Lately, he just couldn’t stop eating. Perhaps it was because it was winter now. Perhaps it was because in winters past he and his brothers had far less to eat. Perhaps it was the extra physical training.
Really, it was probably because they were Arne’s best cinnamon and xocolātl chunk cookies and Ori was nobody’s fool.

“I got a letter from Buer,” said Arne with a grin. He pulled it from the pocket of his tunic and waved it.

“Really! What does he say!” Ori cried, before he remembered it wasn’t any of his business.

“I don’t know,” said Arne. “It just arrived. But we’re going to find out.”

“Are you sure?” Ori asked.

“I don’t think he’s going to write: Ori is a shale-head, but don’t tell him I said so.”

“It’s always a possibility,” said Ori. He shrugged, then winced at the twinge.

_Dear Arne,_

_I’ve settled in. The chambers and workshop I’ve been given are both ridiculously large and I was taken seriously, unfortunately, when I said the only thing my bedroom needed was a coat of burnt umber paint._

_The Ironfists are nothing if not literal._

Arne groaned.

“I should have warned him.”

_Your sister is beautiful and terrifying, and looks at me like something she scraped off her boot._

“I need to warn him about that, too,” said Arne.

“Is he going to need to be scraped off her boot?” Ori asked.

“If she even noticed he’s there, it’s either very good or very bad.

_Your mother hasn’t thrown me out of the kingdom yet but yesterday was a near thing. Ulfr and I have been developing a clockwork gadget to help with cooking and baking._

_We made a machine that mixes dough, sauce, frosting and such. Yizaris agreed to try it out._

_Shortly thereafter, she came back through covered in xocolātl frosting. It was smeared all over her face, in her hair and beard, and across the front of her apron. She looked like she had lost a fight to a vengeful pastry chef._

_Apparently, not only does our prototype ‘mixer’ spin very fast, but if you neglect to put the blades down all the way into the batter before you turn it on, you will instantly become aware of it._

_We didn’t blow her up, but it did look like she wanted to burn us down._

_Then Ulfr said something, and Yizaris giggled, and I decided I should clean up the kitchen, then go recalibrate something for a while._

_Providing your own amusement seems to be the thing here, as is looking after yourself._

_No one comes to check on you if you didn’t make it to dinner. On the other hand, no one has a breakdown if you’re rummaging through the larder in search of a cold chicken leg at two bell in only your skivvies._

_Food here is plentiful, but I’ve become spoiled by the variety at Dori’s table. It’s not that I mind meat and ale at every meal. I am a dwarf, after all, and I’m grateful to have it, but it’s roasted to within an inch of charcoal, and no one here has ever heard of barbecue sauce._

_Vegetables are generally looked on with suspicion, except for the usual carrots, taters and onion, but those are for stew._

_I have discovered, though, that the Ironfists have given into one particular vice._

_“Really?” Arne said. “Astonish me, Buer.”_
muster with Mistress Gamgee. Someone decided they would branch out and concocted a
broccoli cake, but that was a total bust, so they did what Ironfists always do with food that’s
unappealing: they deep-fried it and smothered it in melted cheese.

It wasn’t half bad, but I swear before I leave here I am teaching these dwarrow about azip.
Dree and Erris amuse themselves by following their old bodies around and harassing the
once-dwarrow now wearing them. Dree is particularly nasty to Ulfr’s old math tutor, who got his/her body
and stalks around the place like an ill-tempered ferret.

“Oi! Stop frowning so much! That body was meant to be pretty for eternity, you git. You’re
going it all wrinkled.”

Ulfr’s relatives are really the worst. I didn’t like the way Ulfr’s brother and his brother’s husband
were eyeing some of my equipment when I first arrived, so I put a booby trap on my workshop door.
The green paint on their faces will likely fade in a few weeks, but their totally bald pates are a lot
harder to hide. Ever see a bald elf? Really, it’s kind of sad.

I’m amazed Yizaris puts up with the once-dwarrow, even if they are Ulfr’s family. If this were Erebor,
kin returned from the dead or not, I’m pretty sure Thorin would have their heads out on pikes in a trice, and given the
wargs their ankles to gnaw. Instead, the royals just ignore these people, as if hoping they’ll go away.

Alright, not all of them. Zaris always seems to be doodling torture instruments on her tunic sleeve, usually
when one of them is looking at her. Then she mutters out of the side of her mouth to Yizaris, who
just says, ‘Not yet, dear.’.

Right, I’m off back to my workroom as the shellac should be dry.
Tell Ori ‘Hullo’ for me and check for love bites from Dwalin, so I can tease him. And give Nodun and Tay a hug.

Ori made it back to Fundin House in time to change just before dinner. He bounced into his bedroom to see Dwalin pull off his shirt. He dropped his things on the floor, ran headlong into his husband, and hugged him tight.

“There’s me love,” Dwalin chuckled, wrapping his arms about Ori who was busy trying to bury his entire head in Dwalin’s chest fur. “How’d th’ day go f’r yeh?”

“Lunch meetings are nice, Brur only wants me to work in the mornings and Arne got a letter from Buer.”

“No, but he smeared it in xocolātl frosting! What about you?”

“After yeh left, I got a couple a’ them elves who’re dwarrow now, and ran ‘em around in their greaves t’ get ‘em used t’ soldierin’ again. They’re gettin’ be’er a’ handlin’ their weapons. Poor sods keep f’rgettin’ they ain’t go’ th’ reach they once had an’ fall on their faces every now an’ then. How’re yer muscles?”

Ori slowly let go, doing an internal check. “I feel fine. You’re such a good healer to me.” He stood on tiptoe and kissed the end of his husband’s nose.

They arrived in the breakfast parlor to find they were the last to the table. Bard and his family
were there along with Margr, Vi and Glorfindel.

Oräc had graduated from the butter dish to an old woven doll basket with wheels that once belonged to Sigrid and Tilda. It contained a small poofy cushion and several handkerchiefs to keep her warm. She had been placed between Sigrid and Tilda. Tilda was very involved with Oräc and the little heap of doll’s clothes at her elbow. She was trying out different doll hats on Oräc. who finally protested.

“I can hardly hold my head up as it is! Why a hat?”
“You’re a raven princess! You have to look pretty.”
“Oh mahumb. Fine. Gimme that purple one.”

Thranduil, at the far end of the table, was a trying and miserably failing not to laugh. Bard and Faramir appeared to be able to control themselves while the rest of the diners watched in amusement.

“Oi,” Oräc shouted at the king-father. “You can’t talk. You’ve got twigs stuck in your head.”

“In my hair, not my head,” said Thranduil. “Rumors to the contrary not withstanding. I would much rather wear my twigs then whatever that is on your head.”

“At least I’ve got a proper hat. You’re just jealous because purple isn’t your color.”

“Purple is one of my colors,” Thranduil replied calmly. “just not that shade.”

“Come on, just admit I’m pretty,” Oräc snapped. “Our wee Princess Tilda says so.”

Tilda had found another hat she seemed to like better. This one a rather fetching bright green with croched lace and ribbons of the same purple as before. She removed the purple hat and placed the bonnet on Oräc head, turning the basket around to tied the ribbons under Oräc’s chin.

“There,” she announced, pleased.

“Will I do, lass?” Oräc asked.

“Yes, it’s perfect.”

“Should I be wearing a hat to meals? Seems a bit rude.”

“You don’t fit any of the doll clothes, and it would be much ruder to come to dinner naked,” Tilda said with finality.

Oräc shrugged her now down covered tiny wings. “Right you are, lass.”

Ori glanced over and noticed that Dis was trying very hard not to laugh.

The other ravens watched Tilda’s efforts with benign disinterest and Red Queen with extreme fascination.

“Not a red hat, nestling?” she inquired of Tilda. The little girl shook her head vehemently.

“No. She’s Prince Fili’s raven. You’re a bone breaker queen and it would be rude if she appeared wearing a red crest.”

Red Queen cackled with delight and Mistress Dazla and her team informed the Blessed Bearer she was served.

Dinner was a spicy green cress and chicken soup with new bread followed by a platter of lake cat fish, provided by Bain who blushed hotly at the praise he was lavished with. The fish was smothered in a creamy sauce of onions and dill, served with roasted twirls of mashed potatoes and carrots roasted with orange slices.

Ori ate away his large portions with gusto and pitied Buer who was missing the variety of flavors. He grinned at the sight of dessert which was poached bananas enrobed in a hot, rich caramel sauce and topped with frozen vanilla custard.

After, they adjourned to the sitting room. The fire burned bright and cozy. Ori with his knitting curled on the couch next to Dwalin. Thorin and Bilbo lazed next to them. Frodo and the younger set sat on the floor before the fire, playing a complex game centered on building a trap out of a variety of metal objects.

Dori was ensconced in her inflated chair with the sleeping twins, her ladies-in-waiting, Sigrid, and Tauriel around her, all but worshipping the badgers.

The general talk was mostly about Yule preparations when suddenly Red Queen gasped.

“Me wee turnip!” Baluchistan yelled.

“Our eggs!” Red Queen screeched. “Our eggs are hatching!”
The room briefly devolved into panic, then Dori called to Mistress Dazla. A large laundry basket stuffed with blankets was brought through and the eggs carefully transferred to the basket along with the fluff from the harness.

Thorin rose and hurried through to Bag End East and returned with his harp. Mistress Dazla and her team hovered and brought tea and snacks.

“How very kind of you, Brother King Thorin,” Red Queen cooed as she perched on the basket, peering down at her three eggs, each of which shuddered slightly. A few other people scattered and returned with instruments. Thorin led them in a soft melody, so the cracking of the eggs could be heard.

“Me lovely gooseberry,” bawled out Baluchistan, perched on the basket across from her. “Are yeh dilated more’n six inches?”

“Six inches?” cried Gridr. “Who dilates that much?”

“We do not dilate at the moment,” Red Queen announced. “We have already laid the eggs.”

“Oh aye, aye, righ’ yeh are, me wee potato.”

“Do you wish to be private, dear?” Dori asked quickly.

“Naw, darlin’,” said Baluchistan. “If everybody just -Poof!- disappeared righ’ now, it’d be weird.”

“I was speaking to the queen,” said Dori.

“Abou’ wha?” the raven asked distractedly, his eyes still on the eggs.

“Not at all,” said Red Queen to Dori. “We are delighted that you are all here to attend our royal hatching.”

Red Queen rose up over the basket and looked down, everyone crowded around and seated themselves on the floor to watch.

“A’right,” said Nori. “I give ten to one odds on that first one hatchin’ first, thirty to one on the second hatchin’ first, fifty to one on the third hatchin’ first. Likewise, if you guess the trifecta, I’ll frow in a dinner at the Moo an’ Cluck. Who’s in?”

Dwalin shot him a look.

“How much is it jus’ t’ get yeh t’ shu’ up, Nuisance?”

“Ya can’t afford it,” said Nori.

“Really, we have done this before,” Red Queen said dryly. “This is hardly our first clutch.”

Kili seemed to give this a deep thought.

“So, this wouldn’t be a crown princess or prince or birdess or whatever.”

“No, we keep our own council and choose our heir upon our death nest.”

“What if you die before you name an heir?” Kili asked.

“All royal progeny engage in The Contest, to show which of them can bring the largest bone from the longest distance. That was how our sister won.”

“Why isn’t she queen, then?” Kili asked.

“We pecked her to death,” said Red Queen. “Oh, look, this one is quite ambitious! See how it’s determined to break the shell around the whole circumference.”

Kili turned to Tauriel,

“I really did not need to know that.”

Tauriel wrapped an arm about him.

“Just call it research, melleth nin, and now its done, you don’t have to think about it any more.”

Kili sighed, “I have the wisest wife in the world.”

Ori leaned in, sketching as fast as he could. The egg nearest shook and a tiny beak poked out. Everyone cheered. The beak gnawed and pecked harder. The egg rolled on its side. The nestling crawled out and gave a tiny screech. Red Queen screeched back in delight.

“Here she is!” Baluchistan shouted. “Well done, me clever wee lassie! Yeh cuddle up t’ yer mummy an’ have a rest. Yer out in th’ world now!”

“She has a little red crest!” Frodo shouted, as he peeked over the rim of the laundry hamper. Red Queen stared, then swelled with pride.

“The first ever bone breaker to hatch with the royal red crest! It’s is a sign of Divine Royalty!”
“Da’s wee princess! Mahal loves yeh, me darlin’!” Baluchistan hollered, and leaned in to stroke the little one gently with his wingtip.

Another beak cracked out of a shell eliciting more cheers. This beak was black and very pointed.

“That’s a raven’s beak!” screamed Roäc. “I knew it! Brother, you’re insane and you’re an adad!” Baluchistan stared, his eyes rolled back up into his head, and he fell off the hamper to the floor.

“I was right!” screamed Beryl, hopping madly among the coffee cups. Oräc jumped up and down in her basket in Fili’s lap.

“How the fuck did that happen?” Oräc asked Sigrid.

Thranduil raised a brow at the nestling.

“You mean to admit you don’t know?”

“Oh, push off, our Thranduil. You know what I mean.” Oräc stood deathly still for a moment.

“Did I just call him ‘our’ Thranduil?”

“You may have,” said Sigrid with a twinkle.

“Never mind,” said Oräc. She tried to wave a wing in dismissal and nearly overset onto her fanny feathers. “So, how did it happen?”

“Baluchistan got lucky with Red Queen, of course.” Sigrid told him, and patted Oräc’s head. “Lucky?” Oräc demanded.

“As in, lucky she didn’t just eat him for supper,” Fili said sarcastically.

The newest little raven broke free and gave a squawk. Baluchistan’s eyes flew open and he hopped back onto the rim of the hamper with Frodo and Sam’s help.

“There’s me wee laddie!” he bawled out. “Lookin’ finer than a gem!”

This chick was not naked like other birds when first hatched, this one, despite obviously being a raven chick, was covered in fluffy golden down. It looked up at Baluchistan. Baluchistan croaked and ruffled his feathers. The tiny raven watched as the usual poof of feathers floated down to the floor. The tiny raven struggled to his feet and ruffled his down, golden wisps floated off. It croaked at Baluchistan.

“Me boy!” Baluchistan screamed and fell off the hamper again. Red Queen’s eyes were the size of scones. Garnet and Beryl screeched and laughed.

“A golden raven!” Thorin said wonderingly. “That’s new.”

The last egg rolled over and exploded. There, sitting on its rump in the nest with its large feet sticking out, was a hatchling. Its bright red beak, hooked at the end, took up most of the skull. It was naked except for a few scattered bit of golden fluff with a poof for tail feathers. It was twice the size of its siblings. The red beak open wide.

“Aaaaaaughk!”

“It’s a raphcuctus bird!” Ori and Dwalin shouted together.

Red Queen fainted this time, to the shout of Baluchistan yelling that he and his Queenie were avian geniuses.

“How did you make a raphcuctus bird from a bone breaker and a raven?” Kili asked, agog. Baluchistan fanned his wings over Red Queen’s beak. Ori thought he was probably trying to circulate some fresh air over her, but he was in danger of smothering her in loose feathers instead.

“Where’d yeh think raphcuctus birds came from?” Baluchistan asked.

“Other raphcuctus birds?” Kili ventured.

“Sure, now. Bu’ they had t’ come from someplace t’ begin with.”

Red Queen stirred and groaned.

“We had the most terrible nightmare! We dreamed we had reproduced with the mad, molting raven.”

“No’ a nightmare, me rare pickled beet,” Baluchistan crooned. “A dream come true.”

And he began to sing:

“I flew wi’ her once upon a dreaaaaaaaam!”

Red Queen peered up at Thorin.

“Brother king, you have your knife?”

“Yes, bu-"
“Good, kindly cut our throat with it.”

“Nonsense,” Bilbo assure the avian queen. “This is a delightful outcome, and the pair of you are extremely well suited.” Red Queen gave the Hobbit a dark look, which he ignored. She peered down at the newly hatched trio, already worn out and asleep in the basket.

“We have brought a raphcuctus bird,” she said, then rose proudly and hopped back on her impromptu nest. “Blu!”

“Me darlin’ bulb o’ fennel!”

“We are pleased,” said Red Queen in a flat manner that led Ori to wonder how she meant that.

“Apparently, this clutch was quite a mixed lot. See, a true bone breaker, the first ever to be born red-crested. And there, already covered in fluff, and already shedding—”

“It’s gold!” Dis reminded her.

“You were crafting while You were drunk?” Ori murmured.

“Aye, but it’s Baluchistan’s chick, so it’s no’ like any’s goin’ t’ be surprised.”

“We are still speaking!” Red Queen warned. Her tone was obviously lost on Baluchistan. She sighed and continued. “We are truly blessed by the valar…and by our union with Bluekisstan.”

In Ori’s head he heard Mahal say, “Don’t tell ‘er, but it was an accident. I was drunk an’ I dipped it in th’ wrong pigments.”

“You were crafting while You were drunk?” Ori murmured.

“Baluchistan’s chick, so it’s no’ like any’s goin’ t’ be surprised.”

“And we have produced a raphcuctus bird,” Red Queen continued. “No bone breaker has ever done such a thing.”

“It’s usually th’ raven who does th’ honors,” said Baluchistan.

“We are still speaking!” Red Queen warned. Her tone was obviously lost on Baluchistan. She sighed and continued. “We are truly blessed by the valar…and by our union with Bluekisstan.”

“Closer enough f’r me, “ Baluchistan said lovingly as she settled down over the chicks. He then fluffed his wings and snuggled up to her, putting one wing over part of her neck.

“But, we still may decide to kill and eat you.”

Sapphire hopped up.

“Shall I inform your flock?”

“Please do, sister raven. Tell them we require our royal quartet.”

Sapphire cocked her head but flew off.

Thorin brought out a few bottles of dorwinian and Mistress Dazla brought out wine glasses and the health of the new nestlings was dutifully drunk.

Thorin began dictating a letter to Dain to Ori, when Mistress Dazla hurried away then returned with four large male bone breakers. They bowed to the company then went and bowed to their Queen.

“We shall now sing to our new chicks.” she announced.

Ranged in a line, the royal quartet began to hum and sway in harmony, then began to vocalize, each in a different octave.

“Aaaah!” Red Queen caroled.

Our aerie
past compare
these feathers
Golden we wear
Aaah!
Our aerie
Tell all
We ever are
The … Queen!

And the quartet echoed, “The…. Queeeeeeooooooooeen!”

Everyone gave a round of applause and the twins giggled and squealed.
Ori leaned into Dwalin.
“I didn’t realized any of the other bone breakers could talk.”
“Mebbe they jus’ can’t ge’ a word in edgewise.”
Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Things are going apace for our Ori and Yule is not far away. Ori has a lot to do! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

The days tumbled along, one after another.

Outside the mountain, winter deepened. Bard visited the half dozen houses on the edge of the lake, apart from the city itself. These, too, were his subjects, and though they were an independent lot, they were not so proud as to refuse fuel for their fires, blankets for their children, or varied provisions to go along with their daily meals of fish. Bard had also extracted a promise that these villagers would come into town for Yule.

Glorfindel took on assistants to help gather up the drunk or bewildered left on the streets of the city after dark. It was too easy for even the sober to misjudge the bite of the winter cold at the foot of the mountain. In previous times, it had not been uncommon for Ori to trip over men frozen dead on the sidewalk outside the corner bar after a particularly rowdy night.

“Yeh finished gatherin’ all tha’ wool, love?”

Ori looked up from his now-cool cup of tea. It wasn’t particularly late, but he had the sitting room at Fundin House to himself. In the quiet he had lost himself in thinking about nothing.

He smiled up at Dwalin, who was kitted out for night patrol.

“Absolutely,” Ori said, “I was just going to take it down to the mill.”

“Make sure yeh ge’ a guid price f’r it,” Dwalin rumbled.

He leaned down and Ori stretched up and kissed him.

“Sleep well, love,” said Dwalin. “I’ll be back f’r first breakfast.”

“I’ll be here,” Ori promised as he opened his knitting basket.

Dwalin went off. Kili greet him in the kitchen, already chattering as the two went out the stable door, Killer and Forn at their heels.

Ori measured out a length of the green yarn he’d bought recently. It wasn’t the same green as Dwalin’s jumper. Ori had long determined that particular shade of green was Dwalin’s alone. Instead, Bard would get a sleeveless jumper the color of moss. It would not be as detailed as Dwalin’s, but the heavier wool would knit up quicker and bulkier, and give the man another layer of warmth under his coat this winter. If it ran a bit big in the chest and belly, well, loose layers were better for trapping the heat. That’s what Sigrid said anyway.

Really, it was amazing men had survived this long. They suffered the cold so terribly. Dwarrow grew warmer automatically, the colder it got. That was what saved Ori and his brothers in the rooming house. Their room was cheaper than the others, because it was furthest from the kitchen stove.

He hummed to himself, going over his Yule present preparations as he fell into the pattern of knitting.

Sigrid’s miniature was set, wrapped and hidden in her underpinnings drawer in Dale Hall.

Dori’s present… Ori smirked to himself. He had finished it yesterday. It wasn’t an oil painting, but pen and ink with washes of brilliant color. Though Dori would exclaim over anything Ori made, Ori himself was rather proud of the results.

Let’s see, who else, he thought.
The mismatched pair of socks for Dwalin were finished last night. Mahal and Yavanna were getting a big batch of snickerdoodles. Ori had ordered extra cinnamon from the spice merchant for that.

Already Ori had cast on, counting stitches under his breath while his mind sped along. It was so quiet in the house. Winter hush, Dwalin called it.

“Enjoy it, love,” Dwalin had warned him with a laugh. “It don’t often last with th’ Durins.”

Ori never remembered later when his consciousness flew apart from his body. It no longer seemed strange to him that he had been in the living room at Fundin House a moment ago, and now he was at the private training ring where Gimli spent long hours teaching him.

Someone was using the ring right now, a lone figure with a sword, going over the figures every swordsman learned as a badger, and continued to use through mastery and beyond. This was a master, but he was being careless.

As his eye drew closer, Ori saw it was Thorin wielding Orcrist.

The king’s hair was braided back. Sweat soaked his tunic. His face twisted in anger and his movements were vicious. Ori heard Frerin’s name and wasn’t surprised. It had seemed to him that the king took this latest betrayal a little too well. Ori saw that it burned Thorin from the inside out, because he had kept it contained and hidden.

Since Thorin shared an office with Balin now, he wasn’t going to take his rage out on the furniture.

Thorin would never subject Bilbo and the faunts to his temper.

Ori thought Thorin should have gone to Dwalin with this, but, of course, the great, royal numpty was trying to deal with it on his own.

Thorin ended the form, went to the water fountain at the edge of the ring and dowsed his head, and drank his fill.

Then he went right back out and started again.

Ori watched the scene retreat from his eye, but then found himself in Dale, sinking through the ceiling of Dale Hall, through the room where Tilda slept in a bed the size and shape of an elven row boat. Her pink cheeks were barely visible in the mound of silk and snowbear fur. He sensed this was not Bard’s decorating scheme.

Down in the family room, Bard sat on a stool before the fire with his hair bound back and an old rag draped over his shoulders. A bowl of melting ice sat on a table nearby and Sigrid stood over her father with a needle and waxed threat, looking from one of his ears to the other.

“What are ya doing?” Hamfast asked. He sat on the hearth seat and puffed at his pipe. Then he passed it to Bell beside him. “I mean, besides the obvious?”

Bard sighed.

“The kings of our line have both ears pierced. We’ve lost a lot of our culture, but that’s not something that’s been forgotten. I figured I’d better - Ouch!”

“Da! I haven’t done anything yet!”

“I figured I’d better do it now, so it’ll be healed by the early spring.”

“Is that when your coronation’ll be?” Bell asked.

“Yes, supposedly before the ewes lamb.”

“Er, which ewes an’ lambs would these be?” Hamfast asked.

“Ones that went to their Maker a long, long time ago,” said Bard. “I guess to the ancestors, it meant things were going to get really busy, and the people wouldn’t have time for this nonsense.”

“Oh, now, our Bard, it’s not nonsense if it makes people happy,” said Bell.

Bard looked to be struggling.

“She’s right, Da,” said Sigrid. “You owe this to the people.”

Bard glanced Thranduil’s way. Thranduil blatantly ignored him and continued to leaf through the latest issue of Vug.
“Big help you are,” Bard muttered.
“I attempted to assist in the design of your coronation robes, but you got all snippy with me.”
“Pink isn’t my color, or Thorin’s, for that matter.”
Thranduil gave a long-suffering sigh.
“If you won’t work with me, there’s nothing I can do.”
Bard hissed as the needle went through his earlobe, and a few drops of blood dripped onto the cloth around his shoulders.

“There,” said Sigrid. She tied a knot in the loop of the waxed thread. “All we have to do now is keep it clean, and move the thread through it once or twice a day.”

“Thank you, Sig. If I’d had it done as a baby, it would have spared you a lot of trouble. You did talk to Fili about that, didn’t you?”

“Yes, and he’s perfectly fine with it. Pierced ears don’t have a particular meaning for dwarrow, so there’s no chance of cultural collision. I imagine he’s designing earrings for the theoretical badger right now.”

Thranduil said, idly, “I understand you’ve been to speak with Fili about your crown. Wouldn’t take my advice about that, either.”

“Thranduil…”
The king father tossed aside his magazine.
“Really, my love, you can’t tell yet when I’m teasing?”
Bard huffed out a laugh.
“No.”

Then the room faded to black, but blue sparks in the distance drew Ori forward into a long, narrow stone room.

He recognized the implements of the forge, the rolling mills, the tongs, the plans on the table.
But there was no fire.
Instead, the air was thick with anticipation, and on it rode a wave of chanting.
Ori had never been to the mithril workshop. As far as he knew, no one who wasn’t a guild member was allowed in.

Now he saw why.
A fat chunk of mithril sat on a blue stone bench. Fili and Master Minta stood on either side of it, stripped to their skivvies, pouring with sweat, as they stared at the metal. And as the words fell out, the mithril sagged, and melted into a flat sheet.

Without stopping, Minta nodded to Fili, who reached over and folded it in on itself.
The dwarf prince winced in pain, though his hand wasn’t burned, as far as Ori could see, and he never stopped chanting.

The master smiled at him, and shook her head, reached for the reflattened sheet, and folded it over again without so much as a flinch. Fili raised an eyebrow at her, but he grinned, too.

They took turns folding the metal over, and over, and over until it was a tall, narrow stack, and when it was no more than a finger’s width, each dwarf grabbed an end and pulled.

Sparks flew and metal shrieked as they drew further and further apart. Minta grasped a round, thin, steel bar from the table as she passed, and when she reached the wall, the chant had changed in tone. They no longer spoke in unison, but their words chased one another in a circle as she wound the now wire-thin metal around and around the bar.

Fili having reached the other side of the room, dropped his end, and came back wielding a knife with a pearlescent blade. He looked worried, but she merely nodded at him brusquely, and he chanted something new, in a sharp, crying voice, and ran the blade down the length of the coils, which she let dropped to the floor in clattering rings. She continued to wind, and he to cut.

Ori realized, they were making rings for chainmail. Then Ori drew away into the darkness again, and somewhere in the distance, Dori exclaimed angrily, “Why is this pebble’s foot marked with a rune?”

He slid briefly through Dori and Balin’s bed chambers, Dori gestured to the gurgling infant on the changing table.
Balin looked up from rocking the sibling.
“I did it so I kin tell ‘em apar’, beloved.”
“Seriously? You, their father, can’t tell them apart?”
“Me eyes ain’t wha’ they used t’ be, me jewel.”
“So you painted a rune on this one’s foot. A rune that won’t come off!”
“It won’ hur’ them,” said Balin. “An’ it’s no’ permanent. If it was, I’d still be wearin’ it all over me forehead.”
Dori raised a brow.
“Dwalin?” she guessed.
“Aye, though a’ least he was still too young t’ write anythin’ obscene. Yellow an’ purple. I looked like a Durin’s Day decoration.”
Ori slid through the wall on the echo of Dori’s delighted laughter, but instead of the next room, or a closet or a larder, he found himself in another forge, this one very tall and familiar.
The forge of Mahal burned bright and hot. At the anvil, the valar and Durin hammered steel and sparks flew with every blow. Plans for several different projects littered the work table, along with empty ale cups and a half-eaten fried lembas.
The metal went into the fire once more. Durin worked the bellows, the flames swelling and roaring with each gust of air.
“Yeh ever goin’ t’ tell me wha’ this is, Da?” Durin asked over the noise.
“No, I am no’,” said Mahal. “It’s a surprise f’r Yule, which is why I’m finishin’ it by meself.”
Durin turned to Ori and said, “He’s always like this a’ Yule.”
“Hold yer wisht,” said Mahal. “r yer surprise’ll be yeh won’ ge’ one.”
And then, Ori was back in the sitting room with Thorin kneeling before him with a startled expression.
“How may I help you, Scribe of Mahal?” Thorin asked.
Ori blinked.
“What? Why do you ask?”
Thorin grinned wryly.
“When your eyes are on fire, I assume something’s afoot.”
“Oh! Um… I’m sorry, I was just watching Mahal and Durin at the forge.” Ori blinked several times. He had no idea if this changed anything, but short of dowsing them with water, he didn’t think anything else would. “Better?”
“Yes,” said Thorin. He held Ori by the nape and drew their foreheads together. “Back to those beautiful brown eyes.”
Ori blushed as Thorin pulled back.
“What’s this?” Thorin asked, gesturing to the work in Ori’s hands.
Ori groaned, fearing that he would have to start Bard’s jumper anew, but when he held it up, he realized it was finished. Since it would have taken more than one evening without miscellaneous mental side-trips, Ori suspected he’d had help.
“Oh, it’s for Bard for Yule, but I only started it tonight, and I think I owe Yavanna cookies.”
“At least,” Thorin agreed.
Ori put aside the jumper.
“Thorin, are you alright?”
The king’s eyebrows shot up.
“Yes, of course, why wouldn’t I be?”
“You weren’t fine out in the training circle tonight. I was afraid you were going to cut your own head off.”
“When were you at… Oh. You have been busy.”
Ori slid his hands onto Thorin’s shoulders. Even warm from the bath, they sat like rock. Ori rubbed them, feeling ineffectual.
“You poor thing.”
Thorin chuckled.
“Not something one usually hears in connection with a king.”
“I’m not talking to a king. I’m talking to Thorin Oakenshield, my husband’s shield brother and my dear friend.”

Thorin drew him down from the couch and held him. Or, they held each other. Thorin rested his forehead on Ori’s shoulder, which thanks to all that axe training, could easily accommodate him. Thorin raised his head with a sigh, and Ori kissed him.

It startled them both for a moment, Ori could tell. He hadn’t intended to do it, and Thorin obviously hadn’t expected it.

But then they were kissing again, harder, and Ori’s arms slid around Thorin and Thorin’s breath hitched as he pulled Ori against him in a delirium of kisses.

When Ori found himself on the rug, it occurred to him they were still in the middle of the sitting room.

Dori had become more accepting of Ori’s independence, but Ori didn’t want Dori to find him with his trousers around his ankles, either.

“Bedroom?” he gasped.

“Bedroom,” Thorin agreed. He turned and made a cawing noise.
Roäc stuck his head out of the raven bolt hole by the fireplace.

“How’d you even know I was here?” the raven groused.

“I could hear you laughing at us. Will you please tell Bilbo-“

“That you’re safe and sound and haven’t abandoned him?”

“Tell him I’m with Ori. That’s enough. No editing my words to your own satisfaction.”

“Spoil my fun.”
Roäc disappeared.

Ori looked at Thorin. Thorin looked at Ori.

Ori had just enough presence of mind to tuck his knitting back in its basket before he grabbed Thorin’s hand and they ran, holding in snorts and laughter.

The bedroom door closed and locked behind them. The bed was covered in animals.

“Oh, mahumb,” Ori growled.

Nori-Pori yawned and flicked an ear. Mask stretched to cover more of the bed than was physically possible. Brandy grunted at him smugly, and Assault and Battery chittered in their sleep. Apparently, Ori’s cats were having a slumber party.

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“Hearthrug?” Thorin suggested.

They tumbled onto it, kissing once more.

Ori made sure he landed on top.

“Oof!” Thorin gasped out in surprise. “You’ve grown into quite the armful.”

“Have I? All I know is that Dipfa is going to murder me if I go through the shoulders of one more tunic.”

Thorin laughed.

“Zindis is going to murder me if she has to let out my trousers one more time.”

They grinned at one another, and then the room suffered a blizzard of clothing as they appreciated what time, training and good food had done to their bodies.

“You are gorgeous,” Thorin said as ran his hands down Ori’s arms and across his broad chest.

No longer waif-like, Ori was closer to Dori now in shape. Dwalin often told Ori that he was beautiful this way, but to hear Thorin say it for the first time made his innards flip.

“You’re the gorgeous one,” said Ori, as he ran his face and hands through Thorin’s chest fur.

No longer rawboned, the king had expanded into a miniature of the mountain he ruled, round, strong and hard as the rock on which he stood.

Ori reached in for the nipple held in the raven’s beak and flicked out his tongue to taste and tease. Thorin pulled Ori’s hair aside to watch as Ori’s lips closed around the ring and tugged, then took the whole nipple in his mouth and flooded it, and sucked just hard enough.

“Love your mouth,” Thorin murmured.

Ori trailed his lips up over Thorin’s collar bone, sucked at the sensitive skin beneath his beard and
then nuzzled the side of Thorin’s neck before he moved on to trace the tip of his tongue over the edge of Thorin’s ear.

Thorin shuddered beneath him, so Ori did it to the other ear as well.

“You smell edible,” Ori said

Dwalin wasn’t only one who had changed his hair oil. Thorin smelled cinnamon spicy, citrusy and... like coffee cake.

“Thank you, Bilbo thinks so, too.”

“His idea?”

“Mine. Molten steel was a bit austere for him, I could tell. He finds this more appealing.”

“Jumps on you the minute you close the bedroom door?”

“And has me for dessert.”

They kissed again, harder. Ori felt Thorin’s hands slide down to cup his arse. It was giving Ori’s body ideas, several of which he wanted to develop, but right now he had a plan for Thorin, and he voiced it before his traitorous brain could get a thought in edgewise. He nuzzled Thorin’s neck and said, “You know, I’m going suck your royal cock until you scream.”

Thorin pulled back and stared at him.

“That’s not a quote from Queen Kivi.”

“I was, you know, paraphrasing, but I’m still going to do it, with your permission, of course.”

“Kiss me a little more first,” said Thorin. “Your beard is lovely.”

“I’m glad you like it, because I’m going to rub it all over you.”

Where was this coming from? Ori had no idea. Firmly, he slowed down, and glided his mouth and his beard down Thorin’s body.

Thorin leaned up on his elbows, watching.

“You know,” said Ori, “it would be a lot easier to tease you this way if you ever wore your drawers.”

“I apologize,” said Thorin primly.

“Mmhmm.”

Thorin’s cock was narrower than Dwalin’s, but that had its merits, too. The plump head fit nicely into Ori’s mouth, and that, Bilbo had told him, was chiefly what Thorin liked toyed with.

“If you can keep a nice, tight hand around the shaft,” Bilbo said casually over scones one afternoon, “another kneading his stones, and your mouth working the head, that will eventually, happily make him lose his mind.”

It did take time, and care, but Ori had endless amounts of both. The longer he applied himself, the fatter the head grew, and the king of Erebor lay flat on the furs, writhing, and soon panting. Sometimes Ori licked it, imagining it like an iklar, so that he had to stifle giggles. Then the shaft shuddered and pulsed in his hand and it was brought home quite clearly that this was a cock, the king’s cock, and it was in Ori’s mouth.

Ori rubbed himself against the fur rug, holding in little cries of his own as he grew harder and hotter by degrees.

He felt the fur tug beneath him, and saw that Thorin had it in double fistfuls, pulling against the inevitable. Thorin’s mouth gaped open as he gasped for breath, lost to the world. He snapped up to this elbows again as he muscles seized and Ori held his eye as he let Thorin’s cum bathe his lips and beard.

Thorin’s eyes flew comically wide, and he groaned and fell back hard, shuddering.

“You are going to kill me, Ori, and I am going to die a happy dwarf.”

Abruptly he sat up, seized Ori and pulled him down into the furs, tickling and nipping at him until Ori shrieked with laughter, struggled hopelessly and almost couldn’t breath. They kissed again, licking each other’s lips. Ori found himself in Thorin’s lap, his arm around Thorin’s neck as Thorin pumped his cock in a hard fist and Ori came, twisting, moaning in his grip.

Panting and sweating, they eased down into the furs. Thorin lay face up, and Ori curled into him with his back to the fire.

They dozed off and on, and kissed, and dozed some more.
Finally Ori eased away to pour out a glass of water for each of them.

“Don’t worry” said Ori, “I didn’t put my dick in it.”
Thorin saluted him with his cup.

“Please tell me that made you feel a little better,” said Ori.
Thorin tilted his head and put on a vacant look.

“About what?”
Ori poked him in the belly.

“You are a very dangerous dwarf,” Thorin acknowledged. “I do feel better, a part of me feels a lot better.”

“Seriously. Why are you still dragging yourself and everyone else through this? I mean, I’m not eager for blood, but Frerin’s putting people in danger.”

Thorin sighed.

“Yes, Nori and I had a long talk about Frerin. The short answer is, he’s still useful.”

“Because you can weed out the troublemakers through him.”

“Yes. Beyond that, there’s the welfare of his One and his pebble to consider. T’dillah may enjoy the fruits of all Frerin’s plotting, but I believe that’s the limit of her involvement. I could be wrong. She could be the greatest actress in Arda, and the mastermind behind this whole plot.”

Ori raised an eyebrow and Thorin chuckled.

“I said I could be wrong, but I don’t think I am.”

“She is more than a little unbelievable,” said Ori.

“As a younger dwarf, I thought no one could really be that pudding-headed. Lesson learned.”
Then they settled down again, Ori curled up with his head on Thorin’s chest. The heartbeat actually startled him. He never thought about anyone else’s besides Dwalin’s and his own.

Idly, Ori traced the edge of the raven tattoo through Thorin’s chest fur.

“I love you, Ori.”

“I love you, too, Thorin.”

Ori woke to the sound of familiar laughter. He cracked open an eye at Dwalin, standing over them in the fire light.

“Thorin, me lad, it’s past dawn, an’ yeh got to wash, eat an’ be ready t’ discuss the annual guild grants in half an hour.”

“Oh, Mahumb,” Thorin swore.

Killer licked the king’s face with gusto as Thorin hastily gathered up his scattered clothing, kissed Ori, and ran to throw open to bedroom door… to find it was still dark in the hallway.

Dwalin laughed, Ori giggled in surprise, and Thorin turned to Dwalin with a smirk.

“Arsehole.”
Boxes, Books, and Benedictions

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Winter is here, it’s cold outside, Yule’s coming and our Ori is learning lots! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

As Yule approached, there was much merriment, and visiting, and great quantities of food. It has been many years since Erebor had seen a Yule so cheerful, or Dale had seen one so bountiful.

The royal houses of Durin and Bowman met at Dale Hall for a pre-Yule party, to flesh out Thranduil’s plans for the day of days, and to wait for something else long-anticipated.

Bard stood at the blazing hearth, mead cup in hand, and sang:

“Winter is coming
The geese are getting fat
Time to put a fish
In the old goat’s hat.”

Thorin stared at Bard.
“Did you just make that up?”
“Of course not! It’s the winter rhyme. You don’t recognize it?”
“No,” said Thorin. “The imagery is bizarre.”
“The point is, the old goat won’t go hungry,” said Bard.
“Not today, at least,” Thorin replied. “Would it not be more effective to teach the old goat to fish?”
“Get a grip, Thorin. It’s a nursery rhyme.”
“And I already know how to fish,” said Tharkûn.

He appeared abruptly on Bard’s other side, already supplied with drink, and blowing shapes of swimming fish and frolicking goats with his pipe smoke. For good measure, he also made a ‘hat’.

The antechamber door opened and Arne and Faramir entered, pink-cheeked from the cold, and each carried a large box.

“They’re ready!” Arne announced.

Everyone gathered around them as they placed the boxes on a side table.
Omi and Loli jumped up and down like excited badgers, and Ori and Bilbo exchanged grins.
Arne pulled the top off the first box, then turned to the hobbit.

“Bilbo? Would you do the honors?”
The consort beamed.
“I don’t mind if I do.”

He reached in and pulled out a book bound in deep blue leather, smiled down at it a moment, then turned and handed it to Thorin.

“I think it’s only right that you should have the first copy, my dear.”

“The Infernal Adventures at last,” said Thorin. He leaned in and kissed Bilbo, then opened the book to the beautiful end papers. The frontispiece showed Durin, in mithril armor, hefting his axe as though to smote his enemies. “Arne,” said Thorin, “this is amazing.”

The prince ducked his head.
“I-I wasn’t sure, idad.”
“Then I think you were very silly to doubt yourself,” Thorin chided gently, and with a warm smile.

Ori had provided spot pen and ink illustrations, but the full page illustrations were all Arne’s.
The title page listed Bilbo as the translator, Ori as the editor, and all the names of all the dwarrow who had provided the designs and illustrations therein.

Ori knew when Thorin reached the dedication page, because first the king swallowed, then he laughed.

*For King Thorin II, Oakenshield, who strives to follow in Durin’s footsteps.*

*and*

*For Lord Elrond of Imladris, who made this translation possible.*

“I love it! I’m sure Elrond will, too.” He turned to Faramir. “They’ll be distributed as we discussed?”
“Yes, every school inside and outside the mountain will get their copies, courtesy of the crown.”
“And the library’s copies?” Thorin asked.

Ori snickered.

“Master Brur is pouting, because Sadi told him he had to wait until you had yours.”

Faramir shook his head. “For someone who’s only four feet tall, he did an amazing job of breathing down my neck at the press. Finally, the boss had to call Master Jansad to drag him away by the ear, so we could print in peace. I’m still in awe of that full-color press. The quality is amazing.”

“And the paper copies?” Thorin asked.

“They go on sale tomorrow, and we already have enough orders for a second printing.”

The door opened again and Eowyn rushed in, breathless, with Haldir not far behind, and not out of breath at all.

Ori imagined elves would find it vulgar to pant. Except, perhaps in the throes of passion. He wondered what it was like to have sex with an elf. He made a list in his head of people who might know, and of these, which would be most likely to gossip about it.

Hmmmmm. Wandi…

“Sorry we’re late, boss,” said Eowyn to Dwalin.

Dwalin chuckled.

“This ain’t a military parade, our Wynny, it’s strictly f’r fun.”

“So, what your saying is, Glorfy’s not here yet, either.”

“A’ course no’. Git yerselves some grub.”

Haldir raised a brow.

“Did you leave any for us?”

“A few crumbs. Have a lembas if yer peckish.”

“Only if it’s fried and filled with blueberry preserves,” said Haldir.

Sigrid heard this as she exited the kitchen with Milgr, each carrying a tray, which they put down on the long table in the middle of the room.

“Funny you should mention that,” she said.

She gestured to the food on her tray.

Haldir’s eyes about rolled out of his skull, to everyone’s delight.

“How in Eru’s name did you do that?” he demanded.

Milgr snickered, and turned back to the kitchen door.

“Oh, yer highness! Yer biggest fan’s here.”

Kili stuck his head around the kitchen door and winked at Haldir.

“I posted Tauri as a lookout in the bell tower. She signaled me you were coming. Happy Yule, even if it is a little early.”

“Wh-I… Thank you!”
Tauriel descended the stairs into the room and laughed at Haldir.
“Kili, mel nin! It worked!”
“We’re geniuses,” Kili replied with a shrug.
Dis topped off her cup and said to Bard, “You’re ready for tomorrow night?”
Bard chuckled.
“As long as you don’t expect us all to wear matching pajamas, I’ll be happy to spend Yule Eve with the Durins.”
“Vi and Margr and Glorfindel will be there as well. I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve asked Milgr if she’d like to join us.”
“Of course I don’t mind. I can’t expect her to sit here with Bob while everyone else is out having fun. Unlike Bob, who thinks it’s the most fun when we’re quiet and somewhere else so he can sleep.”
“And are you sure you’re ready for Yule itself?”
Bard laughed ruefully.
“You mean, am I ready for my daughter to get married? No, I don’t think I’ll ever be. What about you?”
“I am more than happy to have another daughter,” said Dis. “I have been outnumbered by Durin males for far too long.”
Dis said this so blithely, but Ori had seen how much work Dis, Dori and Thranduil put in to planning just a simple ceremony. They seemed to thrive on it. No wonder Dori wanted people to ask his permission. It gave him time to map things out like an invasion plan.

The next morning, Ori and Dwalin rode into Dale with Gnasher and Grinder pulling a cart. It was snowing, and fat flakes fell on the heavy tarp that hid all kinds of Yule surprises for the following day. They saw Sigrid walking toward Dale Hall with a basket over her arm and gave her a ride the rest of the way home.
Dwalin pulled the cart around the back of the house, hidden from the street, and they began to carry in what seemed like the contents of a jumble sale.
“Sigrid!” Bard called excitedly from the great room.
“Da, what’s happened?”
Bard stood at the table with the book of his ancestors open in front of him.
“I think I found it, or more of it than I thought there was!”
“To what?” Sigrid asked, taking off her hat.
“To the song. Remember, my grandmother’s song about the yellow stars leading the way?”
“Really?” Sigrid enthused.
“Yes, and since I can now translate some of the old book, I know what Grandmother meant when she said, we only sang it when the sun returned!”
“Because it’s about the return of the sun,” Sigrid surmised.
“Yes! Now if I could only remember the way the words sounded originally. I may have them on a printed page, but I can’t pronounce them. Westron may be my only hope. Ori, would you please take a look at it?”
“Of course, Bard. This is important. Besides, it’s about a book. It’s not like you could stop me.”
Once again, Bard brought forth the book of his ancestors. It was always disorienting for dwarf at first, reading lines from left to right, and not the usual way. Unlike the runes, which even singly conveyed entire ideas, westron words were spelled out in symbols that represented sounds, and the sound together made the word that had to be read in context with other words to form ideas. Ori though this was rather taking the long way around.
“Where is it?” Ori asked.
“In the section with the sun people.”
These were brilliantly-colored, androgynous figures, their heads stylized as suns with almond-shaped eyes and neat, small rows of dots down their cheeks, like tears. They danced in pairs around the borders of facing pages, and the text was laid out as though in verse. As it turned out, they were
verse.

On a scrap of paper, Bard had written out the words he could translate. It didn’t hurt that many of
the lines began with the same word.

“Is it a song, or a prayer?” Ori asked.
“Tt think it’s both,” said Bard.
“A chant?”
“That makes sense. To me it always sounded like people walking slowly in step.”
“Do you remember the tune?”
“Some of it.”
Bard crooned, Da dadada Da Da Da. Da dadada Da Da Da.
Ori thought about this a moment.
“We might never get it translated perfectly, but we could have enough clues to convey the
meaning. I’m going to copy it out and show it to Bilbo. He’s spent a lot of time studying that
badger’s copy book.”
He took down Bard’s notes, too.
“Do you think he might have time to look at it after Yule?” Bard asked. “I know the dwarrow
don’t slow down in deep winter like men.”
“For this, I think he’ll make time,” said Ori.

Not that he had any intention of waiting until after Yule to find out.
“What do you think?” Ori asked.
“It’s a benediction,” said Bilbo.
They sat at a table in Bilbo’s library, paper scattered across the surface, much written over, with
lots of crossouts and notations.
“This combination of symbols?” Bilbo tapped his finger on the page. “I think it’s a word that
means 'bless’.”
“Blessings for the new year?”
“Something like that. On one hand, it warns you to be humble, on the other hand, it says, be
resolute and you will find fortune. It’s rather melancholy, in a way.”
“What’s puzzling you?” Ori asked with a smile.
“How can you tell I’m puzzled?”
“Your nose keeps twitching.”
Bilbo laughed.
“I’m rubbish at keeping that a secret, apparently. I can’t help thinking I’ve read this somewhere
before, and not in westron.”
“Maybe in Elrond’s library?”
“No, though I do need to take you to Rivendell some day and let you run wild in his library.
You’d love it. Where… Oh.”
“Oh?”
“Oh!”
Bilbo dragged a step ladder to a far corner of the bookshelf and started to root around in a familiar
selection of books which were hand-lettered along their spines. He selected three and brought them
back to the table.
These were Belladonna’s travel diaries.
Ori found her handwriting difficult to read, not because it was messy, or blotted, but because it
zigged and zagged like lightning, with very little in the way or loops or serifs. Ori thought it the
spare, economical style of a person who doesn’t have time to waste, or at least who doesn’t waste
time.

Bilbo paged quickly through the first, then about halfway through the second, he seemed to find
what he was looking for.

“Bless day and night
Bless the sun.”
Follow yellow stars.
Do not stray.

“What is that?” Ori asked.

“Loosely translated, it’s a fragment of an easterling blessing song.”

“An easterling song? Then, how did it get into Bard’s book?”

“We could guess that the person who made Bard’s book simply heard the song someplace and liked it. Or, we could go with the suspicion that Bard’s people were once related, at least in part, to the easterlings.”

“Really?”

“It’s just a theory, but, look at the faces of the dancing figures. Don’t the marks remind you of something?”

“They’re like the scarifications on Deneb’s face!”

“Yes, and the same sort of motif shows up in the architecture of some of the buildings in Bard’s book. It’s not everywhere, and the people in Bard’s illustrations don’t look like that, but it could be that long before they lived in that city, Bard’s people and Deneb’s people at the very least worshipped the same gods.”

“They may have worshipped the sun,” Ori supposed.

“They seem to be quite diverse, actually. This word means ‘night’, and this means ‘rain’.”

“Bard is in for quite a shock,” said Ori.

“I think he’ll be more surprised than shocked. I don’t think he’ll mind, at any rate. You said he had a tune for this song?”

“Yes.” Ori crooned it for him as best he could recall. “Bard said it always reminded him of people walking slowly in step.”

“Oh, I like that,” said Bilbo. “Yes, we can definitely work with that.”

Bilbo hummed the tune to himself, and paced back and forth in the library. After a few minutes, Bilbo sang,

“Bless the daytime, bless the night
Bless the sun which gives us light.”

“Bilbo!” Ori cried. “That’s fantastic!”

Bilbo chuckled and gave a bow with a flourish.

“Thank you, you’re too kind. I doubt the rest will be quite as easy. I think I need to talk to Rigel-chuh and Ara-chuh, and especially Deneb-tsari.”

“Deneb-tsari?”

“It means The Learned Deneb. Apparently, she was once a scholar.”

Ori sat up straight.

“No! Bilbo! Have you been keeping secrets?”

Bilbo chuckled.

“I only found out last night, Ori-mate. Before her family broke with Morgoth, she was tutor to the princesses of her tribe, a position akin to Balin’s, but Ara-chuh says it pains Deneb to remember that. This is the first time Deneb has even spoken of it since they started west.”

Ori nodded.

“I won’t say anything unless she brings it up.”

“You’re very good. We’ve been working terribly hard. I think, if we pause here, we might just be in time for elevenses.”

The room shook, the shelves shook, a terrifying roar echoed through the halls, along with high-pitched shrieks and rolls of thunder.

“Ah,” said Bilbo. “Dain is early.”
Preparations, A Party, and Pressies.

Chapter Summary

Welcome back, friends, to a new episode here at Dwarf Telenovela Central. Yule is here. Time for a party! How very unusual! There are hardly any parties in this tale!! Please join us again next Friday for more excitement! Same dwarrow time, same dwarrow tunnel! Keep those cards and letters coming, friends!

Ori and Bilbo hurried out the door of Bag End East, over the sleigh blocking the passage into the sitting room, to find not only Dain and his family, but also the royals from Dale and those of the ravens and bonebreakers.

“Da!” Baluchistan cawed. He flew up and smacked into Dain, claws tangled in his tunic. “Da! They hatched! Yer an udad!”

“Wha’? Queenie’s eggs?”

“They’re mine, Da!”

“Yers? I don’ wan’ t’ know how ‘r where, bu’ I’m so fuckin’ proud a’ yeh! Wait’ll yer mam hears!”

“Hears abou’ wha’, yeh big puddin’?” Sculdis asked, turning from exchanging hugs with Dis. “Queenie’s eggs’re our Blu’s! Yer an umad!”

“Oh, Mahal wept,” said Sculdis and Dis laughed.

“Me beautiful toasted cashew!” Blu hollered and fluttered to Red Queen who was strutting about. She wore her egg bag, but it was now open so the nestlings could look about them. Red Queen paraded over.

“Brother King Dain and dear sister Queen Sculdis. As you see, we have had a great use for this charming bag you so kindly sent us. Allow us to present our hatchlings; The Scarlet Princess, Cawnickcawnack and our interesting-

“Pork!” Baluchistan announced proudly. He fluffed his feathers and leaned in to whisper like a trumpet in Dain’s ear. “I got t’ name tha’ one!”

“Capital, capital!” Dain thundered. “Let’s have seat an’-

Mistress Dazla appeared out of the kitchen with her pack of minions. She looked at the luggage trail Dain and Sculdis had left from the hallway to Bag End East, through the open door and into the sitting room. She raised a brow at Dain.

Chopper, released from harness, hid behind Sculdis.

“I didn’t bring me sleigh int’ th’ room, mistress!” Dain cried in self-defense.

“Thank Mahal for small favors,” said Dazla dryly.

Agrib, Gimli, and Bard helped gather the acres of baggage. and she escorted the Iron Hills couple out to the receiving room and up the stair to their rooms. Ori wondered how long his eldest brother would stay and hoped it was for a while. He also wondered how they would get the sleigh out of the hallway. Probably the same as last time, they’d take it apart.

He looked around for Stonehelm and found him, as Bilbo would say, having a quiet word with Bain.

“I’ll bloody kill yeh if yeh do somethin’ li’e that again!” Stonehelm all but lifted Bain off his feet in a hug. “Goin’ after orcs all untrained like a kitten lickin’ a rabid goat!”

“That was ages ago, Stone, I’ve been good since then!” Bain laughed as he bent to hug the dwarf around the head.

“Good, eh? I’ll jus’ bet.”
They drew apart and looked each other over.
“Bugger, yer growin’,”
“You’re bigger, too. Wider.”
“Bin trainin’.”
“And you sound a lot more like your da.”
“Trainin’ an’ yellin’ at soldiers. Probably star’ talkin’ more elegantly, hangin’ abou’ with yeh, me youthful prince.”

Bain snorted then grinned at Stonehelm.
“Hungry?”
“If he was roasted up, I’d eat me boar brother.”

The two made their way to the kitchen. Ori heard Miss Oqizla scold, then male laughter, then shouts of ‘Oi!’, and the two came back through, each holding an ear with one hand, and a cookie with the other.

This was followed by cries of welcome for the King of the Greenwood, and the Lórien and Imladris folk with a ‘pop’, bearing gifts and bottles of mead. Celeborn and Thranduil greeted each other warmly in the spirit of the season, and Kelli fawned over Pork and clicked and clucked at him.

Lady Galadriel looked about her, then turned to Bilbo.
“Deneb and her family aren’t here?”
“They’re in prayer tonight,” said Bilbo, “but they will be joining us tomorrow. I have several questions I need to ask her.”
“You do not ask me?”
“I would if it were a yes-or-no questions,” teased Bilbo.

He was saved from her reply by the arrival of Dori and Balin from their quarters with the pebbles.
Ori looked to Dwalin, who was good at looking for strays.
“Are we all here yet?”
“Still waitin’ f’r Bell an’ Hamfast an’ their lot. Hope they get here soon, th’ smell a’ food’s abou’ done me in.”

It had finally happened that they had outgrown the breakfast parlor when the entire herd arrived for a sit down meal.

The sleigh was dismantled piece by piece and put in storage, and all the doors between Fundin House and Bag End East were thrown open to the great room of Bag End. A short passage between the Fundin kitchen’s and Bilbo’s kitchen had been quickly installed at the end of autumn and both kitchens were employed to prepare the Yule Eve feast. Tables were brought in, and chairs, and sofa. Cushions covered most of the rest of the open floor.

They shared a sumptuous dinner of roasted duck stuffed with plums and flavored with cinnamon, orange oil, curry powder, and brandy, cooked while heaped with small potatoes, onions, asparagus, and sunroots. Hamfast had brought mature asparagus plants from the Shire and kept them growing in one of his greenhouses. This was followed by a dozen marvelous peach preserve upside down cakes.

Everyone settled in the sitting room in Bag End East. Ori sat on the rug next to the fire, Dwalin stretched out next to him, his head in Ori’s lap. Killer and the cats gathered around them. Red Queen took pride of place in the middle of the rug and the nestlings were let out to look around.
Frodo, Sam and Tilda were fascinated by Pork, who despite being a little clumsy was very curious about his surroundings and the three kids, Posie, and Kelli supervised him as he explored the room.
Scarlet Princess preened as her udad and umad petted and cooed over her and Cawnickcawnack practiced fluffing his down with his adad and idad Roäc.

The wargs snoozed in a heap off to the side. Dazla and Elrond chattered nineteen to the dozen with Lindir and Cemnesta. Dori was ensconced in her inflatable chair, gossiping with Vi and Margr while Dori gently rocked the ‘traveling’ cradle with her foot.
“Our Rogi’s quite given up his criminal ways now,” said Margr.
“Aye, he’s reformed f’r th’ love a’ Miss Sifian,” said Vi. “Perhaps some day he’ll get t’ hold her
“She’s very proper, is Miss Sifian,” said Margr, “though she’s polite enough when she comes f’r tea, yeh kin tell she’s not used t’ dwarfy manners. Goes a bit grey abou’ th’ mouth when our Glorfy takes us on his knee.”

“Should I invite her to my next tea party?” Dori asked. “Or do you think it would be too much for her?”

“Go on,” said Vi. “We’ll have her broken in proper by then.”

Yes, Ori thought, provided the ceiling doesn’t fall in, or King Father Thranduil isn’t there pretending his iklar is his husband’s penis. Perhaps Balin should attend, to distract her with conversation about the education of the young.

Bilbo served mulled cider and curled next to Thorin on the sofa.

“Really, my dear, it will be a trial never to celebrate your birthday on your birthday. Oh, well, I’ll just have to make you a cake on each day and one for every day in between.”

Kili nodded

“And we’ll help you eat them, idad.”

“How self-sacrificing you are sister-son.”

“It’s true,” Kili agreed.

Bard looked up from the card game he was losing to Fili.

“Is this a dwarf thing? Or something I should pay attention to as well?”

“It’s a dwarf king thing,” said Thorin with a smile. “The king’s birthday is quite a big day, an extra rest day for those who want it. It’s not really about the king, but about service to his people. At his discretion, prisoners might be pardoned, debts paid, a new public space beautified and dedicated.”

“So, pie for everybody,” Bard surmised.

“A choice of several, actual,” said Thorin. “Not everyone likes the same thing.”

“Still,” said Bilbo, cuddling closer, “It’s nice that this first one that you’re king actually falls on the proper date.”

“Moves around, does it?” Bard asked.

Thorin prompted his other sister son,

“Fili, would you like to elaborate, or will you continue to annihilate your father-in-law without mercy?”

“I can do both,” said Fili, frowning at his cards. “The king’s public birthday is always the day after the last normal rest day of the year. Idad was actually born on a Mid-Winter’s Day, you would say Yule. This year, the days coincide.”

“But, Mid-Winter Day’s not always on the same calendar day either,” said Bard.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Thorin. “If a dwarf or dam were born on Mid-Winter Day, or on Mid-Summer Day, that is always their birthday, no matter what the calendar says.”

“I wouldn’t think the movements of the sun and stars would matter to dwarrow one way or another.”

“The sun is important,” said Fili, “because, at least symbolically, it’s Mahal’s Forge. Twice a year we rededicate our forges to Mahal, the shortest day and the longest. Thrones, Dominions,” he announced, and spread his cards on the table.

Bard sighed.

“And with that, I am finished,” said Bard. “You’ll have to find someone else to demolish.”

“Oh, I’m a lousy card player, said Fili. “You’re the only one I ever beat.”

Dwalin chuckled and said the Ori, “Yeh comin’ along? Time t’ pu’ th’ crew through its paces.”

“This I have to see,” said Ori. Though, truthfully, he would have preferred to sit here with Dwalin’s head in his lap for the rest of the night. Tomorrow would be too busy for them to get any time alone.

He followed Dwalin into one of the extra rooms, traile by Eowyn, Faramir, Haldir and a few others.

Thranduil arrived a moment later with a thick sheaf of paper.
“Captain? Are we prepared?” Thranduil asked.
“We’re ‘bout set,” said Dwalin. “Jus’ makin’ sure they’re tuned up. Let’s hear the growl, our Diry.”
Haldir cleared his throat, and gave a squeak a little louder than that of a mouse.
Dwalin blinked.
“Aye, tha’s terrifyin’. I jus’ peed me britches.”
“I’m getting warmed up,” said Haldir with dignity. “Such things do not come naturally to an elf.”
Thranduil snorted, but kept his eyes on his pages.
“A’righ’,” said Dwalin, “try again.”
This continued for some time, though Haldir never seemed to be able to do worse than belch.
Even Arne delivered a perfectly respectable growl.
Finally, Dwalin sighed.
“No worries, our Diry. We’ll just pretend yer a mute.” He turned to Eowyn. “Yeh wan’ t’ show im how it’s done, our Wynny?”
Eowyn gave a growl to put a warg to shame. Haldir looked embarrassed, Dwalin satisfied, and Faramir impressed.
“Did you practice that?” he asked her.
She waved a negligent hand.
“It’s a gift.”

Back in the big room, the kids were caught between overexcitement and exhaustion. Dori’s pebbles fussed to be fed, and Bain and Stonehelm leaned against each other in the corner and loudly snored.
“Bed?” Ori asked Dwalin.
“Aye, best get there now. As I recall, Yule mornin’ with th’ Durin’s starts in abou’, oh, four hours. ‘Course, tha’ was when th’ princes were badgers. With their Ones aroun’, they may no’ be so keen t’ face th’ day.”
“While the faunts and Tilda will be out of bed and excited at the arse-crack of dawn.”
Dwalin put his arm around Ori’s shoulders as they walked back up the hallway to Fundin House. Ori put an arm around Dwalin’s waist and leaned into him.
“I wasn’t any different,” said Ori. “Even when we had nothing, Dori always had a piece of candy and a new scarf or mitts for me.”
“We were spoiled rotten at Yule, even by Fundin,” said Dwalin. “Me folks gave us any sweets we wanted, an’ took us down t’ play in th’ family treasure trove and decorate th’ forge. I’d f’rgotten abou’ tha’, ’til jus’ now. An’ it were never abou’ greed, we didn’t want t’ keep any of it, bu’ it were all pretty t’ look at, all glittery in th’ torchlightl. Bu’ all tha’ beauty, tha’ were nothin’ compared t’ yeh.”
Ori blinked at the stinging in his eyes. He stopped and when Dwalin stopped, Ori turned and buried his face in Dwalin’s beard. Dwalin stroked his hair and kissed the top of his head.
“Love you so much,” Ori said, though talking into the beard, with his voice rough, he was afraid it sounded like ‘Muffins, glue and such’.
Dwalin lifted Ori’s chin and kissed him.
“Oops!” Nori walked out of the kitchen, saw them and turned back around, right through the door. Over his shoulder he tossed, “Sorry.”
“His timin’s lousy, as usual,” said Dwalin. Abruptly, he picked up Ori, and tossed him over his shoulder, squeaking and giggling.
“G’night, Nori!” Ori called.
“Night, Chick.”

It was a little later than dawn by the time everyone assembled back at Bag End East, where a first breakfast of hot coffee or xocolātl with cinnamon, sweet pastries glazed in honey, and hot blueberry and cloudberry dipping sauces awaited.
“Simple and to the point,” said Bilbo. “We’ll have something more substantial once all the presents are opened. For, I doubt we’ll have a moment’s peace until then.”

Everyone wished Thorin a happy birthday, and gave him presents, and he gave presents to all the hobbits as well.

To Bell he gave a paperboard box wrapped with a pretty pink bow.
“What’s this?” she asked as she untied the ribbon. She lifted away the top of the box to an intoxicating cloud of xocolātl. “Fudge with dried bramble berries and walnuts! Thorin! Where in Yavanna’s name did you find this?”
“I made it,” said Thorin. “Though, Frodo thinks teaching me to make muffins was quite simple in comparison.”
“This is wonderful! Happy Birthday. Ham, if you put your fingers in this without me permission, I’ll cut them off.”
“Yes, my dear,” said Hamfast, pouting outrageously.
“Never fear, Hamfast” said Thorin, “I’m looking after you as well.”
Hamfast’s eyes lit up when Thorin handed him a box similar to Bell’s. Hamfast thanked Thorin heartily and opened it. The scent of cardamon and pistachios issued forth.
“Well, bless me!” Hamfast gasped. “If it don’t beat all. Thorin, I ain’t even going to ask you how you made green fudge.”
“Best not to,” Thorin advised with an amused look at Bilbo, who wrinkled his nose in reply.
“Let’s see your hands!” Dis and Kili cried together.
Thorin held out his hands and waggled his fingers making Frodo and Sam giggle.
“Aw!” Kili cried, obviously disappointed. “He washed them!”
“You should have seen the bowl!” Frodo crowed, making everyone laugh.
Dori went through to Fundin kitchen and returned with a small silver salver. On it perched a little cup and saucer, with a thread of steam rising from it. Dori brought it to Bard and placed it in front of him.
“Happy Yule, Bard, dear. It fits all the requirements,” said Dori. “It’s handmade, not of precious stones or metals, and I made it myself.”
“This is-” Bard fell silent. His face displayed one emotion after another: surprise, happiness and sorrow. “Dori, this isn’t…”
“Da?” Sigrid asked. “Are you all right?”
“This is-” He took a deep, shuddering breath and pulled his shoulders back. “Sigrid, you remember I told you about Girion’s mother.”
“Her parents came from the northeast later than the rest of our people.”
“Yes, they wandered longer than most, and they brought what they could carry. What was the one thing her mother would never leave behind or sell?”
“The toolkuh! The brewing vessel, for the spiced coffee. Is this that coffee?”
“Yes, this is what it looks like, what it smells like.” He closed his hands around the cup on the table. Then he raised the cup to his lips and sipped.
Dori, who had been hanging back, waiting to see if he had succeeded, finally reached the limit of suspense.
“And?” he prompted.
Bard beamed up at him.
“And it’s perfect, Dori.”
Dori darted forward and hugged him. Bard carefully released the mug and hugged back.
“I’m almost afraid to ask how you did it.”
“My dear,” said Dori, “the Easterlings still use them. True, I didn’t make the toolkuh itself, and Deneb looked at me strangely when I told her what spices I wanted to put in it, but I don’t follow silly rules that get in my way, and the current Easterling recipe sounds rather more bitter than spicy.”
“They have a toolkuh,” said Bard.
“Yes, and now you have one, too.”
Mistress Dazla entered with the freshly cleaned item, a small metal vessel on the end of a short
wooden handle, the metal bowl chased with images of the sun.

“Da?” Sigrid asked. She touched his shoulder, which brought him back from his bewilderment.

“Have a sip, Sig,” Bard encouraged. “You, and Bain and Tilda should all try it.”

Tilda peered over the edge of the cup with a frown.

“What’s in it?”

“Coffee and spices, and honey and milk,” said Bard. “The taste and smell of this is my earliest memory, my great grandmother at the stove, brewing this.”

“You drank this when you were a little boy?” Tilda asked.

“Only once. It was the last time she brewed it before she died, and the toolkuh was sold for the price of the metal. Then it was impossible to get the spices, and no money even if you could get them. Dori, how did you manage this?”

“Dis made a few discrete inquiries with our new trading partners,” said Dori, “the ones who provide the xocolātl for zinc.”

Ori said, “It’s amazing, the good that came from that awful mine.”

“This is yummy,” said Sigrid. “Bain, try this.”

Bain looked askance, but he wasn’t old enough to be routinely offered tea, never mind coffee, and he wasn’t going to pass this up.

Tilda tried some, seemed to consider critically, “Needs more honey.”

“Of course it does,” said Bard as he kissed the top of her head.

She offered the cup to Thranduil.

“What do you think, Adanana?”

Thranduil sipped, considered, and said with great dignity, “I think it tastes like more.”

“My present next!” Tilda cried.

She ran up to Thorin, and thrust a gaily wrapped packet at him, about six inches square. Ori nearly swallowed his tongue when he recognized the same packing paper that Dipfa had used as a dress at Thorin’s coronation.

“Happy Birthday and Happy Yule!” Tilda said. “Open it!”

Thorin laughed.

“I’m very happy to obey, Tilda,” he said.

The paper was wrapped around and around.

“Sorry,” said Tilda. “I couldn’t find my scissors, and Idad Gloin told me never to cut paper with my boot knife or I’d blunt it, so I just used the whole sheet.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” said Thorin, as he un unravelled the gift.

It was a light blue, cotton sack, folded in quarters, and when Thorin opened it out, he found that three edges had been blanket-stitched with black cord, and the open edges bound with dark ribbon. The rune of his name had been painted carefully on one side.

“Tilda! Thank you! This is amazing work!”

“It’s a cozy,” she offered. “Like for teapots, but this one is for your raven crown, so it won’t get mussed when you aren’t wearing it.”

He opened his mouth, but she kept up her nervous chatter.

“I nearly didn’t finish it on time,” she said. “I started it a long time ago, so by the time it was nearly finished, the start of it looked like a little kid did it.”

Thorin smiled at the sight of her hopeful face.

“I’m honored, Tilda, not only because you crafted this for me, but also because I am the only dwarf king in Arda who can say they have one.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

She hugged him, then she pulled back.

“Do you like the rune? Master Brur suggested it. I was going to just paint it on the side, but he told me it would bleed through the way I was going to do it, and he made sure there was a blotter inside the sack to soak up the excess when I painted.”

“Master Brur has many good ideas,” said Thorin.
Bilbo approached Thorin next, bowed to him, and held out a book.
“My latest and greatest work, your majesty. An edition of one, just for you.”
Thorin took it and opened the cover.
“These Old Shards, by Notathain A. Shire.”
He raised his brow to Bilbo.
“Is this safe for general consumption, your highness?”
Bilbo rocked back on his heels, and up on his considerable toes, and looked smug.
“The first few pages at least.”
Thorin read the first line out loud.
“In the days of Good King Thomas, a mountain of a man…” He groaned. “Bilbo, what have you done?”
Fili and Kili snickered.
Thorin fixed them with a look.
“Don’t laugh, badgers. You didn’t escape, either: and Crown Princess Philippa, the king’s niece and heir, and her mischievous and adorable baby sister Princess Kaylee.”
The brothers squawked. Tauriel and Sigrid exchanged gleeful looks and Dwalin coughed as if he had something in his throat.
“Oh, and look,” Thorin continued. “Someone has provided an illustration of this illustrious line.”
“Really?” Ori asked. He blinked innocently and winked at Arne who, with Nodun and Tay, had joined the guests at the royal residence.
Kili yelped, “Ori! I do not wear pigtails!”
Roäc and the other ravens cackled.
Bilbo smiled.
“Thorin, dear, this is not the end of my gift-giving,” Bilbo warned.
He presented Thorin with a painted box, about a foot square, but only an inch or so high.
“In case you ever feel the need for them,” said Bilbo, blinking saucily.
With obvious trepidation, Thorin eased open the edge of the box and looked inside, then rolled his eyes and laughed.
“Should I keep them on me at all times, in case I split my trousers?”
“At your discretion, King Morsel.”
Ori raised a questioning brow. Everyone else stared in blatant curiosity.
“C’mon lad!” Oräc called from her basket. “Don’t keep us in suspense!”
Thorin heaved a sigh.
“Durin blue silk shorts. Thank you, ghivasha. You won’t escape so easily, you know. It is my birthday, and you are a hobbit.”
“Do your worst!” Bilbo challenged.
“My worst requires privacy. We’ll save it for later. In the meantime, I believe you have something for Elrond.”
The elf lord looked up from the couch where he and Lindir were examining the toolkuh.
“For me? I’m honored, Thorin.”
“The honor is all ours, Elrond.”
Bilbo presented Elrond with his copy of the Infernal Adventures.
Elrond gasped, read the dedication, gasped more, then shouted a very loud, “Hurrah!”, grasped Bilbo around the waist, lifted him and proceeded to try and hug the stuffing out of him. Ori realized where the twins had got it from.
“I take it this meets our approval, m’lord,” Bilbo teased.
“This is wonderful! And new illustrations! Thank you!” Elrond cried.
Ori turned to Dori and shyly offered his flat, rectangular package.
“My! For me, pet? You know you shouldn’t have!” said Dori, in the same tone he had used from the first offering Ori had made him in earliest pebblehood.
“It’s from Thorin and I,” said Ori, as he and Thorin shared a grin.
Dori carefully unwrapped the paper, so as not to tear it, and placed it aside, an old habit from the
lean times, when any paper could be reused, if not for another gift, then by Ori to practice his calligraphy.

Dori surveyed the beauty before him, and shrieked so loud, he woke both pebbles and even Oin winced.

Balin peered over Dori’s shoulder.
“What is it, beloved?”
“It’s Thorin, wearing pink, with a foaming white lace jabot,” said Dori, clearly delighted. “Thank you pet, our Thorin, it shall adorn my boudoir, to remind me every time I see it that I was right.”
Balin looked dubious.
“Yer boudoir? Seriously?”
“Yes, it shall be kept forever as an heirloom of my house.”
Dis glanced over at it, then at Thorin, and choked.
“Really, nadad?”
“What? Do I not look every inch a king?” Thorin challenged archly.
“I can honestly say, I never thought you would pose so… majestically!”
Meanwhile, Dwalin handed Thorin a familiar box, which the king opened, laughing.
“A hair bead made of goat poop! Dwalin, you shouldn’t have!”

After all the presents had been opened and people were still playing with, admiring, eating, or trying things on, Bilbo went off and soon they all enjoyed second breakfast of small sausages baked in crescents of sweet dough and fluffy omelettes with new floury rolls. After this, materials were gathered, gas masks distributed to elves and men, and everyone ferried down to the royal forges.

Ori recognized the side hall that opened to the Fundin troves. Thorin led the way purposefully down to where the royal family kept it’s private trove. It was nothing to the treasure room Thror had kept and had been ensorcelled by the dragons egg, but quite impressive enough, and filled with many strange, wonderful objects, most of which Ori didn’t recognize.

The forges were silent but warm. Ori nudged Thorin when he noticed than even little Tilda’s brow had sweat beading on it. The men and elves couldn’t remain down here for too long. Thorin gave a nod.

Dain opened something he’d been carrying, He set it up and gave it a good winding. The blades of steel set in a circle were soon whirling and cooling the area.

Thorin went to the far wall of the trove and tapped the side. A massive oblong drawer popped out, lined with matte black silk. The entire surface, but for the silk between each stone, was covered in starlight gems. They were all cut and polished to the highest standard. Thorin turned to the elves with a smile and said,
“Help yourselves.”
Thranduil, Celeborn, and Galadriel all gasped. Elrond looked stunned and Cemnesta, his brothers and the twins all turned pale. Galadriel got herself together and went forward to look. She drew out a single gem, a perfectly smooth teardrop shape. She held it out to Dis.
“If you would be so kind as to make this into a necklace for me, please.”
Dis took the gem, held it up to the torch light, and frowned.
“Just the stone on a chain of mithril, I think. Unless you wanted something specific?”
“No, I think you’re right,” said Galadriel. “The stone itself is ornament enough.”
“Where would you like the stone to sit?”
“At the throat?”
“Easily done.”
Celeborn went forward.
“I would like a match to my lady’s gem, if I may, Princess Dis.”
“Nothing would make me happier, Lord Celeborn,” and she smiled at his formality.

Thranduil stood carefully examining the gems. Ori wondering what he was planning. All about the forges were being cleaned and put in order. The younger set played with the faunts and Tilda, which mostly consisted of climbing the mounds of treasure and sliding or rolling down them
shrieking with laughter. As they raced between the troves of the Durins, the Fundins and the Groinuls, Dain stood in the middle and smacked the last butt to pass him.
“Got yeh in th’ heart!” he bellowed as whomever was tagged squealed delightedly. The wargs, cats, birds, and others were left at Fundin House for their own good.

Balin, carrying the twins, led the way to the Fundin forge, with Dori, Ori, Dwalin, Nori and Bofur in their wake. Dwalin shut the door after them. Once inside, they took out their gifts and set them on the anvil. Ori had made several dozen snickerdoodles doused in cinnamon for Yavanna and Mahal. He had knitted a pair of Durin blue socks for Durin. He hoped they were large enough.

Nori put a burlap sack on the anvil, It seemed to be holding something heavy and round. it certainly sounded solid.
“Do I want t’ know, Ducky?” Bofur asked.
“Nope,” Nori said.
“Nori!” Dori turned to the spy master. “Is that something you stole when you were off somewhere while my Ori was on his quest?”
“I didn’t steal it.” Nori barked. “I found it.”

Dori huffed and set the twins on the anvil for Balin to bless when the lava entered the room. Dwalin opened the hatch and the lava poured in. They all breathed the hot scent in. The twins wiggled and cooed.
They all bowed. Dori and Balin each took a badger and brought them to the edge of the lava trough. Holding the badgers against their chests they leaned over and murmured blessings to Mahal. Ori thought the twins were enjoying themselves.

They all drew back behind the anvil once more and Dori sang an ancient hymn. They bowed again. Dwalin closed the lava hatch and they went out, securing the door, so the fumes would not caused distress to the men, hobbits, and elves.

They found the younger set bouncing around as both the Durins and the Groinuls came out of their forges. Ori noticed that Bilbo, Frodo, Sam and Tauriel were being helped out of their masks. Legolas was holding his and raking his fingers through his hair, now soaked with sweat. Wandi went to him and helped Gimli dry it.

They left the troves in a chattering group. Ori grinned at Arne and Sigrid.
“And now lunch then Yule in Dale!”
Thorin’s birthday lunch was an amazing affair. Dori and Dis had put together every favorite dish of Thorin’s, and Fili and Kili chased Bilbo around, trying to get him to curl up on a platter. “I am not lunch!” Bilbo scolded. “I am a mysterious creature of Yavanna, and I will not be served on a plate!”

“It’s a big platter!” Kili protested.

“Go away or no dessert for either of you!” Bilbo threatened.

Mistress Dazla fetched the two away to the kitchen, then they reappeared and brought the main meat dish in together, snickering. “Is that what I think it is?” Thorin asked in a reverent tone.

“Yes,” Fili laughed as they put it in front of him. “And why Kili and I went off the other day.”

Ori stared. He had heard about and seen pictures of deep water cavern crayfish, but seeing them in front of him was another thing. They were three times the size of the crayfish he had seen at the inn. Unlike those, the cavern crayfish had no shell and, when found, were completely transparent. Cooked, they became shades of delicate pinks, greens and blues, meaty flesh, all swimming in melted butter. There were ‘ooo’s’ and ‘aaaah’s’, then Thranduil looked up the table to Thorin and said with a distinct pout but merry laughter in his eyes,

“Thorin, you have gone too far. You have married my daughter to your nephew, you have destroyed the arkenstone, you have turned Legolas into a dwarf. All that I could forgive. But Thorin… pastels?”

Everyone was laughing as Thorin looked up, his mouth full, and butter running down his beard.

“Hush up, buttercup. Someone feed him a crayfish.”

“Adanana, is a mighty oak, not a buttercup,” Tilda pointed out, but the mighty oak was now too busy eating a crayfish, and moaning with greed at the deliciousness, to comment further.

“Fili,” Dis asked, “I thought these were rare.”

“So did we,” Fili admitted. “When we went down to the old deep lake, we hoped to get Idad at least one, but the lake is full of them. We used the old royal mithril net and it took both of us to haul it in. We kept what was needed for all of us, and gave the rest over to the meat market guild with instructions for the guild masters to assess the crayfish situation. These crayfish must really like mithril.”

“Bofur?” Thorin said.

“Aye, I’ll look int’ it,” the miner replied. “I’ve heard old tales tha’ the crayfish eat the minerals next t’ mithril. We’ll make sure they’ve enough, an’ see that the miners don’t break through t’ the lake.”

“Your majesty,” Dipfa declared. “I shall design fo you a court robe dedicated to these marvelous crayfish.”

“I shall be honored, Dipfa,” Thorin said gravely.

“Passstellls,” Thranduil murmured in a sing-song voice, while Ori was assailed by the vision of Thorin dressed as a crayfish. He shook his head to rid himself of it, before he slid under the table giggling.

“Yes,” Arne put in. “With the Second Music, it seems like all the ancient creatures of Arda are
returning. What’s next do you think? Mine knackers?”

“I though’ mine knackers were fairy tales,” Gimli said around his third crayfish.

“Fairy tales come from somewhere,” Oin said. “It’s figurin’ out where.”

Ori stopped eating. Mahal had told him.

“Um,” Ori started. Everyone looked at him.

“You know something, Scribe of Mahal?” Thorin asked.

“Well, there was one time when I couldn’t get to sleep and I was wondering about moonlight and how everyone, men, dwarrow, elves, and hobbits all like it and I was wondering if orcs liked it and if orcs found it romantic and then I wondered if orcs could be romantic and how could they be as Dwalin told me they shit where they stand and that isn’t very conducive to romance and Mahal told me I was scaring everyone in the Halls and I asked him about orcs like Drum and where those orcs came from and he told me all the original ones were mine knackers, who had been captured and mutated by Morgoth,” Ori finished in a rush.

Silence.

“Our sweet, wee mine knackers!” Gridr yelled.

“That bloody-” Jani was cut off mid-yell by Thorin raising his hands.

“Ori, thank you for telling us. I will contact every monarch in Arda to tell them that this is a possibility, and they are to keep a watch for such.”

Jani gave a sigh of delight.

“Our Bo, jus’ imagine us workin’ with knackers, just like in all th’ old tales! It’d be real magic.”

Bofur shook his head in amazement.

“Idad,” Frodo piped up. “Do orcs really just go to the bathroom in their trousers?”

Sam added, “Do orcs wear trousers?”

“Fili ‘ Ori hastened to changed the subject. “I hope you plan on being good to my Sig when you’re married!”

Fili, mouth full, stared at him.

“Ori,” said Sigrid, “are you giving Fili the ‘shovel talk’?”

“Yes, yes I am,” said Ori. “Though, I guess, from me it would be more of a pen nib talk.”

Fili nodded and swallowed, “Either way, I understand. I wouldn’t want a nib in the eye any more than a shovel to the head.”

“We’re dwarrow,” said Dwalin. “Th’ shovel really won’ have much effect.”

“It will if I shove it up his jacksies,” Ori teased.

Balin chuckled. “Better watch yersel’, me lad. Our Ori kin be fierce when he starts threatenin’ yer jacksies.”

“What’s jacksies?” Sam asked.

Kili and a few others snickered but Fili rose and came around the table to hug Ori.

“I promise I will be very good to her. I’m forever grateful to you for introducing us.”

Ori sputtered and blushed as Fili squeezed him and Sigrid giggled.

The cake was a magnificent affair of xocolātl crumb, with butter cream frosting, and a middle layer of cherries soaked in cordial, which all the hobbits insisted on bearing to the table and placing in front of Thorin while they sang him a traditional hobbit birthday song, though with a twist on the traditional lines:

“We wish you a happy birthday,
And many more a birthday,
And cake on your birthday,
You old person you.”

“Old person?” Thorin asked with a grin and a raised brow.

“Count your blessings, my dear,” said Bilbo. He handed Thorin the knife with which to make the ‘wishing’ slice. “These usually have one lit candle upon them for every year. Bad enough with
hobbits, for dwarrow it would constitute an inferno.”

“Aye,” said Hamfast. “It’s gotten so, my birthday’s held outside, even though it’s the dead o’ winter.”

“Icing is flammable,” said Bell with a nod.

Ori made a quick sketch of the scene to detail later, then he consumed one cake slice while sketching the other, fascinated with the contrasting textures.

Finally satisfied, he ate his second piece of cake, and turned to offer Dwalin another, and discovered Dwalin wasn’t there.

In fact, the table seemed oddly empty.

Dwalin was missing, and Eowyn, and Faramir, Arne, and Bain.

Thranduil caught his eye and winked at him.

When the cake was finished down to the last crumb and blob of frosting, a yowl and holler split the air and the room was filled with fearsome creatures, most of them growling, and one of them trying to growl but only managing a belch. They were covered in furs, some of animals, some their own, and streaked with soot, and girded round with belts of rusty old bells that thunked and clanged. The largest of the beasts, the Supmark, whipped his fearsome horned head from side to side, then pointed to Fili and shouted, “Aha! Get ‘im!”

And the group grabbed up Fili and bore him wailing from the room, though Supmark did stop to kiss the top of Ori’s head on the way out.

Silence descended, and in the distance the fussing of the twins and Marigold waking hungry from their naps.

“Well,” said Dori. He knocked back the contents of his teacup, and stood. “I’d say it’s time for us to go and get ready.”

Sigrid swallowed, and reached out to grasp Bard’s hand. She was smiling, but her smile looked rather like terror around the edge.

The Dale group took their leave, back into town.

Ori stood behind Thorin atop the highest platform in the center of the Erebor’s Central Market. Bilbo stood to one side of Thorin, and Frodo stood on the other, holding Thorin’s hand. In Frodo’s other hand, he clutched the toy Sugar Bofur had carved for him. Sam, off with his parents and siblings, had the warg toy that looked like Butter.

The real Sugar and Butter lolled on the platform, sniffing curiously. Butter dangled her tail off the edge of the platform, periodically draping it over Arb’s helmet and in front of his face, possibly knowing that, standing at attention, the dwarf couldn’t do anything about it.

Dori sat on his inflatable chair, and Balin stood proudly beside it. Each wore a sling in which they carried the pebbles, and the teacup was stocked with extra nappies.

It seemed as though every dwarf in the mountain had turned out to wish the king many happy returns of the day, which was best, since he had an important announcement to make. The platform looked like an island in an ocean of beards, all gussied up in gold beads, citrines and carnelians, as befit the day.

Thorin raised his free hand high, and the crowd fell silent.

Ori felt a shiver go up his back.

“Thank you,” said Thorin. “And thank you all for coming out to wish me a happy birthday. In times past, the Durin kings chose this day to do good works for their people, and I intend to keep this tradition.”

There was no reason to state that it had not been kept for many years.

“The crown has purchased the property known as Mithril Square, with the intention of establishing a free academy of learning for all the peoples of Arda, a place to share knowledge, and a neutral ground on which to meet and understand one another better.”

As Mithril Square loomed, impressive and glorious over Thorin’s shoulder, it was not hard to underline the importance of such a gift on the people of Erebor.

“This plan, still in its early stages, is many-fold. Chieflly, it is to gift the world with dwarven
culture, our arts, our industries, and our language. Secondly, it is place to offer a broad education to
the youth of Erebor, Dale and beyond, who have finished primary education, but who do not have a
craft, or are still awaiting the chance for an apprenticeship. In conclusion, it is a place for us to learn
about the larger world, the men, hobbits, and elves, and all they have to offer.

“To this end, I am open to suggestions from the people of Erebor and Dale. This will be your
academy. Where do you want to take it? Under the mountain, ideas may be submitted through
Master Brur at the Great Library, through any guild scribe, or through Master Orris at the Moo and
Cluck, as takes your fancy.”

A great cheer rose up, but quickly subsided.

“In Dale, where I will also make this announcement, ideas may be submitted through the head
teachers at any of the Dale schools, through Princess Sigrid at Dale Hall, or at any tea house, quartz
or cobalt.”

Another cheer went up, and some laughter.

“Please remember,” Thorin added, “I will consider each suggestions, no matter who makes it, or
how modest or grand it may be. Try to keep the cursing to a minimum. Thank you. And now, to
Dale and Yule.”

The cheering started and followed them as they rode out on ponies with Dori and the elves in the
teacup carriage. Ori patted Honda’s neck as the crowd, some walking, others riding, and more
catching rides on carts and carriages, followed their king out of the mountain.

They rode out into the crisp, cold afternoon. A few flakes floated in the air, the sun shone and a
little breeze teased beards and hair.

The great cavalcade traveled down the road and entered Dale to cheering as people moved toward
the center of town and Dale Hall.

Soon the royals were welcomed into Dale Hall by Milgr, who was all a-flutter with excitement.
Bard and Bain were nowhere to be seen, but Tilda was beautifully dressed in a white fur coat and
blue boots with curled toes, each capped with silver. Thranduil was also missing.

Thorin sent the wargs through to the kitchen to keep Bob company for the duration.

“Here we are,” caroled Mistress Dazla from the top of the stair. She made a shooing motion and
Sigrid came into view and started down the stairs. She was the perfect Snow Maiden. She wore the
traditional highly stylized dress of her people; it was all sky blue silk and white fur heavily
embroidered with silver snowflakes. On her head, she wore an elaborate kokochnik, trimmed with
tall, white feathers and blue and white designs of snowflakes

Everyone present cheered and praised her.

Sigrid turned bright pink and hugged Dori who had burst into tears at the sight of her. Dis kissed
Sigrid’s cheek and sniffed, looking her over with a sigh of pleasure. Sigrid turned to Lady Galadriel,
who was clad in one of her flowing white gowns, but for a sprinkling of tiny diamonds on her
bodice, suggesting a snowflake.

“Ooh, Lady Galadriel. You look so perfect. You really should be the Snow Maiden. But don’t
you have a cloak or something to wear outside?”

Galadriel laughed and embraced the girl, saying,

“Oh now, my child, I couldn’t take the role from you! It would hardly fit with your dear fathers’
plans! I assure you, I am most happy to let it go, and the cold never bothers me anyway.”

“Ready?” Thorin asked, and Sigrid hugged the dwarf king and consort at the same time.

Sigrid laughed and looked at Dain and Sculdis, who grinned. She turned to all of them.

“Let’s do this bastard!”

Ori watched eagerly as Sigrid burst out of the door of Dale Hall. The Durins and their party
guests poured out after her.

“Help me!” she cried to the populace. “The Prince of Spring has been lost and Grandfather Frost
cannot come, if the prince is not here!”

“How did this happen?” called Mistress Callin, in her role as the crone.

“I don’t know.” Sigrid cried and wrung her white fur gauntlets extravagantly.

“Harharharharhar!” came a roar from a roof top.
Ori looked up in delight. There lurked Supmark and his minions.

Now that Ori had a chance to get a good look at Supmark, he thought his Dwalin was amazing and ridiculous in this get up. He wore a jumpsuit of brushed out sheepskins, his face now obscured by a hideous wooden mask, painted and carved so that his eyes stood out and his forked tongue twisted out nearly a foot from his face. From his head rose impressive antlers that Moose must have cast before she reached adulthood. Instead of sweeping out to the side, they were fixed to stand straight up from Supmark’s head. Supmark shook his fist in the air and waved his long willow bough switch. The rest of the Nekushdies were similarly attired, but for differences in horns and sheepskin colors and varieties of switches and chains. They hollered and jumped up and down, making all the rusty sleigh bells adorning their belts ring out.

“It’s that evil Supmark and his minions, the Nekushdies!” Sigrid cried, pointing anyway despite everyone was already looking at them and cheering and shrieking in laughter and pretend fright.

“Why are you here?” Sigrid cried. “You belong in the freezing northern wastes!”

“We’re hungry!” shouted Supmark. “Th’ Prince o’ Spring challenged us an’ didn’ bring us anythin’ t’ eat, so we captured ‘im! We’ve locked him in a trunk an’ hidden it ’til we get food! So there, Snow Princess!”

All the Nekushdies shouted and jumped again, making a cacophony with their bells.

“Stop! Bring back my Prince!” Sigrid shrieked in return.

The Nekushdies did stop, except for Supmark, who made a show of shaking his hips at them.

“Stop that noise!” Sigrid scolded.

“I’ve go’ th biggest bells t’ make th’ most noise!” chortled Supmark

“Release my Prince and we shall share the feast we made for our beloved Grandfather Frost.”

Supmark shook his head and bells.

“No! He only brings sweets!”

“What’s wrong with sweets?” demanded Tilda. Most of the children shouted along with her.

“Stop yellin’, yeh brats!” Supmark bellowed, making them all giggle delightedly. “Sweets’re bad f’r yer teeth!”

“How do yeh know?” Caris shouted.

“Because all ours fell out!” yelled a Nekushdie, who sounded suspiciously like Faramir. All the Nekushdies and Supmark wagged their masks, the jaws fell open and lots of horrid looking black pegs could be seen.

“Ewww!” shouted the kids.

“Quick everyone!” cried the Snow Princess. “We must search for the Prince! Supmark and his Nekushdies don’t have a sleigh, so the trunk must be hidden here in town!”

“No!” shouted Supmark, but the kids of Dale and Erebor were already ganged together and breaking into smaller groups to rush around town, searching. Supmark slid off the roof and leapt to the ground, his Nekushdies following. They each picked a group of kids to chase and went yelling, and waving their switches of tied together twigs.

Chaos reigned as the parents and others called out suggestions for places the trunk might be.

“No, look under there! Righ’ there!”

“Mam, it’s th’ size of a bread box!”

“Yeh never know, the Prince migh’ be jus’ a wee thin’!”

“No’ tha’ wee!”

Some kids rushed madly around hunting, while others pelted the Nekushdies with snowballs. Supmark roared and snarled and occasionally grabbed some child and gently tossed them into a snowdrift. Nekushdie Arne and Nekushdie Bain helped with gusto.

Ori scribbled wildly, catching Haldir as a Nekushdie dodging snowballs and when he could, using his switch to hit them, making snow fly everywhere. The Faramir and Eowyn Nekushdies madly chased kids up and down streets, howling, but never quite caught them.

Supmark leaped about from foot to foot, shouting orders, and waving his switch, his bells all clashing like miniature thunder. Ori swore he could hear more than just two valar laughing helplessly in the back of his head.
Ori caught sight of Caris peeking around a corner, then waving to someone behind. A group of about ten badgers and children, with Caris and Tilda helping, hauled a very suspicious looking trunk out from an alley. It was wrapped in enormous chains, which Ori knew to be made of stuffed paper, and painted with large westron letters reading ‘Private’, ‘Do Not Touch’, and ‘Supmark’s Super Secret Trunk’.

A shout went up and people rushed forward to help haul the trunk into the middle of the square. “Hurray!” people shouted and cheered as they welcomed their intrepid kids back into their arms. The Snow Princess, on the Dale Hall porch, made ready to join them. Supmark noticed and he and all his Nekushdies made a dash for the trunk.

“Stop!” the Snow Princess commanded, descended the steps, and strode up to Supmark. “Tha’ was mine!” Supmark raged. “An’ it still would be, if it weren’ f’r them rotten kids!”

“You said you locked the Prince of Spring in a trunk and we’ve found a trunk, so we’re going to open it!”

“No yeh won’t!”

“Yes, I shall!”

Sigrid turned and went to the trunk
“Don’ open it!” yelled Supmark.

“Why not?” demanded the Snow Princess.

“Er… Go’ me drawers in there.”

“Well, if it’s only your drawers, why can’t I open it and see?” the Snow Princess laughed.

“‘Cose yeh ain’ married t’ me!” Supmark bellowed. “It’s improper an’ I’ll.…”

“You’ll what?” she challenged.

“Er…Tell yer granda!”

“He can’t come until the Prince of Spring is here, so if you’re going to do that, the Prince must be in the trunk.”

“Bugger!” yelled Supmark, kicking some snow, while the Nekushdies face-palmed in unison.

“Foil’d again!”

The Snow Princess went to the trunk and tore the chains away. The lid flew open and the royal golden horns of Erebor sounded.

From the trunk rose a figure covered in a snowy white sheepskin. It was cast aside in a flourish and there stood Fili in his role of the Prince of Spring. The crowd roared its triumph.

Ori goggled at him. Fili was dressed like an elf. He was completely clad in poofy silk, pale green trousers, a pink tunic and a bright red cape. Every part of his clothing was embroidered with gold new leaves and flowers, even his lilac boots. He stepped out of the trunk and waved, tossing his hair. Ori choked. Mister Wandi had done Fili’s hair and beard in perfect pin curls.

“Yavanna help me,” said Bilbo, “he looks like a dandelion.”

The Prince of Spring and The Snow Maiden clasped hands and rubbed noses while everyone cheered. Together they went up the steps of Dale Hall.

“My friends,” the Prince of Spring called out. “Listen! I hear the silvery bells of the sleigh of Grandfather Frost and his loyal friend, the King of Ice Pixies!”

“All kids of Dale,” The Snow Princess called out. “Sing the song of welcome for Grandfather Frost, so he knows to come to us!”

Miss Sifian cleared her throat, as the youngsters clustered together in front of her. She raised her arms and all the children sang,

“Here comes Granpa Frost, here comes Granpa Frost, right down to Dale Hall
He’s got a big sleigh and it’s filled with gifts for one and all,
Hear those sleigh bells jingle jingle, oh what a lovely sight,
So jump and cheer and sing out loud, ’cause Granpa Frost comes right now!”

“Louder!” Dain and Celeborn shouted. “He can’t hear you above the sleigh bells.”

The kids all screamed the song at the tops of their lungs and Miss Sifian glared at the laughing
dwarf and elf.

Up from the south road came the ringing of sleigh bells. Kids of all races shrieked and shouted in
delight. A huge sleigh pulled by an enormous elk glided into the square. Inside sat the driver. His
head was of a normal size but his body was a vast bulge of dark blue velvet festooned with white
fur. From behind him the graceful figure of Thranduil leapt out. The King-Father twirled around,
casting aside his pale blue cloak, to reveal a skin-tight jumpsuit of silver cloth, dappled with
diamonds. He struck a dramatic pose and cried out,

“Younglings of Dale! It is I, the King of Ice Pixies, bringing to you your beloved Grandfather
Frost.”

Ori nearly swallowed his tongue. Thranduil, his eye full of wicked delight, was posing directly at
Dain. Dain’s mouth fell open, then the mighty king of the Iron Hills toppled off the steps of Dale
Hall into a pile of snow and lay there, roaring with laughter.

Grandfather Frost rose, turned and faced everyone. He was absolutely round. He was so
amazingly large, his stomach bulged at the top of the sleigh and his huge white beard followed suit.

“How! Ho-Ho-Ho! Come along, all you kids!” Grandfather Frost shouted, his voice remarkably like
Bard’s. The kids all came forward eagerly.

“I see the Supmark and his Nekushdies!” said Grandfather Frost. “What? No one was carried off
or given the switch?”

“No!” the kids chorused.

The Nekushdies grumbled and the Supmark kicked at the snow again, as if terribly disappointed.

The kids all cheered and the King of Ice Pixies pirouetted back to the sleigh and opened the entire
side of the vehicle, dozens of brightly colored packets flew out and into the square via the coat of
Grandfather Frost.

“How good you’ve all been!” Bard cried. “The bounty of winter!”

The youngsters squealed and rushed to snatch up the packets. Each contained a little sack of fruit
candy, a pair of knit mittens and a hat with a tassel, all in bright colors, courtesy of the knitting guild.
The mittens and hats had clever draw strings to make them as small as the wearer needed, then the
apparel would ‘grow’ along with them.

“It’s no’ fair!” cried Supmark. “We’re still hungry!”

Grandfather Frost looked the Nekushdies over.

“Tell you what,” Grandfather Frost said jovially. “If you can find a child who has been so
naughty this year that you can smell it, you and your Nekushdies can eat them.”

Supmark and the Nekushdies cheered and went from kid to shrieking, giggling kid, sniffing at
them, then complaining loudly that they didn’t smell bad enough.

As the riot of picking up presents ensued, Grandfather Frost climbed down from the sleigh and
helped the King of Ice Pixies unharness Moose. Once it was certain every single kid had a gift,
Grandfather Frost, with his ‘friend’, the King of Ice Pixies, scaled the steps of Dale Hall and turned
to the assembly of men, dwarrow, hobbits, and elves.

“My friends!” Grandfather Frost cried. “The sun has returned to us. The days will now be
longer. It is a time of great rejoicing!”

Everyone cheered, and as the cheering faded, Ori heard chanting from the street beyond the
square. The words were strange, but the tempo familiar.

He and Bilbo exchanged looks of amazement, as the crowd parted and the Easterlings arrived.
Bard gaped at Thranduil.

“Did you-?” Bard started.

“Happy Yule, my love,” said Thranduil, and kissed him.

Ori turned to a new page in his book and began to sketch the Easterlings like mad with his
graphite wand. He could only hope he remembered the myriad of colors later on. The Easterlings
walked to the steps of Dale Hall in single file, and Ara led them with her staff, and Rigel followed at
the very end, carrying the toddler. Each member of the party was dressed in an open cape of deep
blue-black, but under these, they wore shifts the colors of the sun.

They fanned out, facing the royals as they sang, and as the last notes faded, Ara pointed her staff
at a brazier on one side of the steps, then a second across from it. Flames kindled and then leapt ice blue, then true gold, and a breeze like springtime swept the square.

Deneb climbed the steps, hands held out to Bard, who had abandoned his ‘big’ coat and beard, and he met her half way and they embraced.

“Thank you for this,” Bard said to her. Then he looked down at the rest of the Easterlings.

“Thank you. You’ve helped make this the happiest Yule I’ve ever had.”

Ori noted that in midst of all this, High Priest Sven had climbed up on the center fountain, now boxed in for the winter, and was singing and chanting on his own, his hands upraised and waving.

“Who’s tha’?” Dain asked, who had finally recovered enough to be pulled out of the snow by his delicate jewel of a bride and his heir.

“Who?” asked Sigrid.

“Him,” Dain gestured with his chin.

“High Priest Sven,” said Sigrid

She stood arm-in-arm with Fili, who shook out his hair as they watched the high priest going through his invocations.

“High priest, eh? Tha’ explains th’ hat, I s’ppose.”

Dori eyed him.

“Says the dwarf who wears a giant spider carapace on his head.”

“Wha’ he doin’?” Dain asked, waving his arms in imitation.

“He’s worshiping Eru for us,” said Sigrid.

“Worshippin’ f’r yeh? I didn’t realize yeh could farm tha’ work out.”

“We all worship Eru, of course,” Sigrid clarified. “But he does the sacrifices and public worship and things.”

“An’ he’s fun t’ watch,” said Dain.

“That, too,” Sigrid agreed with a grin.

Unfortunately, Sven finished and saw Dain waving his arms. He smiled broadly, got down, and approached.

“Oh, Mahal,” said Dori. “He’s coming over. Smile, dears, smile.”

Ori wondered if Dori’d lost his mind.

“Why?”

“A bunch of smiling dwarrow usually scares people off,” said Dori.

Alas, it did not work.

High Priest Sven approached Dain and, without preamble, said loudly and slowly, “Very good! It pleases Eru when his adopted children worship him, too!”

Dain stared at him, then he brayed, “Are yeh deaf?”

Sven drew back, obviously mortified.

“Er, no. Eru bless you all!” he cried, then hurried off.

“Oh, aye,” said Dain. “I see it now. Puir lad’s a halfwit, so th’ men gave ‘im a job anyane could do. Mighty kind a’ them, actu’lly.”

Dori patted Dain’s arm.

“He means well.”

“Then, I suppose there’s no harm in ‘im.”

“Da says the last high priest was very different.” Sigrid shuddered. “Da told us that he wanted to publicly punish everyone if they didn’t do what he said. In the name of Eru, of course.”

“Sounds li’e he was defective’r somethin’. Wha’ happened? Eru called ‘im home?”

Sigrid looked uneasy. She glanced back at her father, who was deep in conversation with Deneb and Thranduil, while Ara and Rigel supervised the Easterling kids as they opened their presents.

“Da told us the story. It was before Calmar’s time, so Da took him out in the boat,” Sigrid replied softly. “Da says he dropped him off on the other shore of the lake. The priest said something about praying in the wilds, converting any wandering heathens. I like to believe Da wouldn’t lie.”

“So, where’d this ‘un come from?” Dain asked.

“Unger Janser’s father complained to the priest’s order that the priest had abandoned Dale, so the
mother house in Gondor sent a new one.”
“Convenient,” said Dain with a shrug.
“Yes, they don’t have many dwarrow in Gondor. Sven had never met one. Suddenly he was
surrounded by a lot of short people with beards. Come to think of it, they probably didn’t help
matters by pretending not to understand a word he said.”

The bell at the top of Dale Hall rang.
Fili and Sigrid smiled at each other, clutching hands.
Everyone cheered, though few of them knew why.
Bard turned from his husband and friend and addressed the crowd.
“Now that the prince and princess are both here, King Thorin and I have agreed with our heirs that
this is the perfect day.”

People chattered and whispered, looking at their grinning monarchs.
Bard went on,
“King Thorin and I call upon all of you to join us in witnessing the marriage of Sigrid, my
daughter, Crown Princess of Dale to her beloved, Fili, Crown Prince of Erebor, nephew of King
Thorin, son of Princess Dis.”
The cheers were deafening.

High Priest Sven scampered up the steps and stood opposite the pair. He cleared his throat and
projected his voice, which was actually quite melodious.

“Now we stand in the presence of Eru, and beg He will give His blessing to the union of Fili and
Sigrid. Let us honor Him, the Author of this sacred rite.”
Ori heard Someone coughing in the back of his head.
“Da,” said Mahal. “Yeh promised Yeh’d behave.”
“Yes, of course. Just something in my throat.”

Luckily, Sven didn’t know he was being heckled by his Creator.
“Who gives this woman?” Sven asked serenely.
Ori thought it was pretty obvious she gave herself, but kept his mouth shut and kept drawing.
“She does,” said Bard.
Sven turned his head and gaped at Bard, then said, “Oh, yes, quite. And who give this m- Well,
let’s just skip ahead a little.”
Bain, still wearing the bottom half of his Nekushdie costume, muttered, “Good idea.”
In fact, High Priest Sven was obliged to skip quite a few things. Ori knew there was a whole bit
where Sigrid was supposed to say she’d obey her husband. Ori snorted to himself. No dam in Arda
would vow something like that, and a good many young women had begun to say they would not
either, and went to the mountain with their brides and grooms to sign contracts in the dwarven way
instead. Such marriages were legal under the mountain and outside of it. If Sven had chosen to be
stubborn about it before, he certainly wasn’t going to try it with the future queen of Dale and Erebor.
Sven looked nervously around, probably most happy to yield the next part of the ceremony to
someone else.
Thorin bowed to him, stepped up and sang the first verse of the old khuzdul blessing song, and
everyone joined in.
Then the elves present sang the sindarin blessing song. Then Mistress Callin sang the bridal
blessing with all the married women of Dale.
The last of notes echoed around them.
“Fili, Sigrid join hands,” said Thorin. “Now, repeat your vows after me.”
“As Mahal has forged us for each other, let us seek to make each other happy. Let us forge a new
family and a new life together, as did all our ancestors.”

When Thorin called for the beads, Kili took them from one of his pouches, and dropped them into
Dori’s hand for the Bearer’s blessing.
As he offered them to the couple, Fili said, “I made these for us. Do you like them?”
“They’re beautiful,” Sigrid said in a shaky voice, her eyes full of happy tears.
At this juncture, Bain offered a covered tray. He presented this to Thorin.
“Thank you,” said the king.
Thorin offered it to Bard, who lifted the cloth to reveal Dis’ silver brushes.
Sigrid went down a step of Dale Hall while Fili did her braid. He took the bead from Kili’s hand and clasped it into Sigrid’s hair. She came back up to braid and clasped a bead in his hair.
Thranduil handed Thorin an embroidered ribbon.
“Thank you, brother king,” said Thorin.
Thranduil inclined his head graciously.
“Dis?”
He held out the ribbon.
She took it with a smile and did the honors herself.
“May Mahal and Eru bless this union,” she said. “May Yavanna make it fruitful. May you walk into eternity together.”
Dis stepped back and everyone looked at High Priest Sven.
“Er…” he began as first Kili then Bain handed him a ring.
“Ah, yes, thank you.” High Priest Sven cleared his throat and intoned,
“Are you, Crown Prince Fili, son of Dis, and heir to Thorin Oakenshield, High King of all Dwarrow, free to lawfully to marry Crown Princess Sigrid, daughter of King Bard of Dale?”
“I am,” Fili stated clearly.
“And are you, Crown Princess Sigrid, daughter of King Bard of Dale, free to lawfully to marry Crown Prince Fili, son of Dis, and heir to Thorin Oakenshield, High King of all Dwarrow?”
“I am,” she said.
“Then repeat after me,” said Sven smiling at Sigrid. “I, Crown Princess Sigrid, take you, Crown Prince Fili, to be my husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.”
Sigrid repeated the vow, and slid the ring onto Fili’s finger.
Sven turned to Fili and said, “Please, repeat after me. “I, Crown Prince Fili, take you, Crown Princess Sigrid, to be my wife. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.”
Fili did and when he put the ring on Sigrid’s finger, the crowd gave out a roar of pure happiness.
“Now,” said Fili to Sigrid, “we’re promised twice.”
Sven sighed with pleasure before calling out to the crowd,
“You have declared your consent before me, Eru’s representative here in Dale. May the Iluvatar in His goodness strengthen your consent and fill you both with His blessings. What Eru has joined, men, er, elves, hobbits, and dwarf…dwarrow must not divide.“
Fili and Sigrid kissed and everyone cheered again.
Bard and Thorin clasped arms, and Bard embraced his daughter, and then Fili. Then Bard hugged Dis, who wept happily.
Thranduil swept through and embraced everyone in his path.
Margr and Vi shrieked and rushed out as Orlo opened his cart.
“Iklars for everyone!” the sisters bellowed. “Happy weddin’! An’ Yule! An’ everythin’ else!”
Tables were brought out, more great braziers were lit to warm the revelers, doors of pubs who had offered their kitchens for feast cooking were thrown open.
As the proud parents, Thranduil, Bard, Thorin, Bilbo, Dis and Jani sat together, and Celeborn served the mead he had supervised the warming of, though Hathor teased him that he might have forgotten how. The parents approved of the mead and began the tradition of toasting the newly wed couple. Once more the foods from all over Arda were served up and the serious eating, drinking, and dancing began.
The kings lingered long after the kids were taken off home and put to bed. The bridal couple had been sung and teased as they went off in a small sleigh Mistress Callin called a troika. People from the Dale and the mountain had lavishly decorated it with ribbons, pine boughs, strings of nuts and popped corn as well as a boots and shoes so old they were beyond repair.

The troika headed toward the mountain, where the couple would spend their wedding night in the old king’s suit in the former Royal Residence.

The party continued without them. Dain had all but adopted Thranduil.

"Tha’ were brilliant, laddie! I still think I mus’ a’ bin dreamin’! Yeh was bloody amazin’! An’ twirlin’!” Dain enthused. “I’d a’ fallen on me head!”

“Well, you do have a habit of addressing me as pixie. How could I resist?”

“I bloody couldn’t,” Dain agreed. “Here lemme pour yeh another.”

Ori blinked, a little muzzy-headed, and looked about. Lady Galadriel’s mead had done it’s work. There were only a few people left in the square, and most were talking and clearing up. Bard slept with his head on the table. The guard was on patrol through the city. Thorin sang the hobbit birthday song to himself and occasionally giggled, while Bilbo sat cuddled in his lap, sober, but bemused, and played with the celebratory beads in Thorin’s beard. Ori contemplated painting a picture in oils across the mountainside. He’d call it: Still Life With Chips.

This revery was broken by Dwalin, who rushed up with Haldir and Arb, all wearing armor, and deadly serious expressions.

“Thorin!” Dwalin barked.

“Hm?” Thorin swung his face around and squinted at Dwalin. “Yes?”

“Thorin, we caugh’ four orcs on th’ western slope, millin’ abou’. Three were carryin’ rabbits, one was dressed as a rabbit.”

“You mean, dressed in rabbit skins.”

“No, dressed as a rabbit.”

Thorin paused, and finally asked, “Lop-earred or cottontail?”

“How’d yeh even know th’ difference?”

“When you’ve had this much mead, suddenly you can tell the difference,” said Thorin. “And, has anyone questioned these rabbits?”

“Th’ three with th’ rabbits bit int’ th’ rabbits, which mus’ve bin poisoned, ‘cause they fell over dead.”

“The rabbits?”

“Th’ orcs. Pay attention, yeh souse. Th’ wee one, ‘bout Drum-sized, dressed li’e a rabbit, spilled ‘is guts.”

“Did you mop them up?”

“What?”

“We don’t want anyone to trip.”

“Thorin.”

“I’m sorry, Dwalin, it’s just that I know how they got here, and so do you. What did the bunny orc say? Were they expecting reinforcements?”

“No, they followed ‘Frerin’s’ directions t’ th’ letter, though I don’ recall anythin’ abou’ dressin’ li’e a rabbit.”

“Must have been garbled in translation. So, what have you done with the remaining orc?”

“Up t’ yeh. He’s askin’ f’r asylum.”

“Seriously?”

“Aye. An’ I don’ recall tha’ in ‘Frerin’s’ directions, either.”

“Where is this orc?”

“Our Winnie’s taken him t’ th’ dungeons up home.”

“Tell me,” cried Bilbo, sitting up in Thorin’s lap. “Was she still in costume?”

“Oh! I get it!” Ori cried. “Nekushdies! Nekush means ‘bad’ in khuzudl! They’re baddies!”

And he laughed so hard, he fell off the bench.
A hiatus for this week - sorry

Chapter Summary

Everything is fine. As most of you have probably figured out long ago, we’re in the US and this is the week of the 4th of July. We are going to be the central hub of family parties. From today(Monday) until Sunday, we are going to look like the kitchen at Fundin House getting ready for Durin’s Day. Wish us luck and ch. 171 will appear on the 12th! Thank you all muchly in advance -Dolly and Stevie.

Chapter 171 due out on 20191712!

End Notes

Notes:
- The name of the Master of Dale I found at The tolkiengateway.net/wiki/The_Hobbit_(2003_video_game). He really doesn’t seem to have a book canon given name. However if anyone know what it really is, please tell me!!
- All gemstone have been randomly chosen for color from the Gem Select site. All gems and precious metals mentioned are mined in the Lonely Mountain which in real life would be geologically impossible.
- The height of Lonely mountain is from Tolkien Gateway site.
- I have played fast and loose with aging, Khuzdul, and the politics of men, elves, and dwarrow.
- I have place jokes and/or respectful nods to authors, movies, songs and more in each chapter. I’ll put in a hint at the beginning of each chapter and whomever guesses first will receive a picture of one of my four cats as a reward in the answer box. You may request Iduna, Po, Luna, or Mortimer. Your 1st hint is Georgette Heyer’s "These Old Shades".
- Darth Maul will not make an appearance!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!