The Bad Season

by The Feels Whale (miscella)

Summary

The first sign of trouble arrives in the innocuous form of Thorin’s daughter, Bella, when she sneaks into his office and starts going through the wardrobes.

Thorin ignores her at first. He is busy and she’s not causing a disturbance. If Bella wants his attention then she will march up to his knee and demand it. He has never had to worry about his little girl suffering in silence. She will always let him know what she wants from him, which she does once she’s inspected all his cabinets and closets to her satisfaction.

“Father, where’s Papa?” She looks under his desk, as though Bilbo might be hiding there.

Or: the Ring was always going to be a problem.

Notes

Please don't kill me.

Also: brief mentions of potential violence towards a child happen in this installment. NOTHING ACTUALLY HAPPENS.

See the end of the work for more notes

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into his office and starts going through the wardrobes.

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“Father, where’s Papa?” She looks under his desk, as though Bilbo might be hiding there. Fortunately he is not, but then again if Thorin has learned the virtues of locking doors when he wants to be alone with his consort.

“I don’t know, sweetling.” Thorin replies truthfully. He checks the water clock suspended from the center of the vaulted ceiling in his study. Strange. It’s time for lessons and Bilbo is frighteningly punctual. That begs the question of what Bella is doing out of lessons. She enjoys her routine almost as much as her papa. “Have you checked the school room? Or the conservatory if he’s not there?”

“I looked there and there.” Bella pouts, crossing her chubby arms over her chest. “And I checked with Mister Ori in the Library and with Fili and Kili and with Bobbin. He wasn’t at lunch either, but Grim wouldn’t let me go look until I ate twenty bites of my food and he kept losing count on purpose.” She stamps her foot. “We were going to go fishing today for earth lore.” Her lower lip starts to tremble alarmingly. “I want my papa!”

“Shh!” Thorin scoops her up into his lap and rings for one of his aides. “Peace, darling. We will find him.”

Dreyfus, his senior assistant appears in the doorway and takes in the sight of his lord’s sniffling daughter with no small amount of alarm. “Sire?” He asks with trepidation all through his stance.

“My consort is not to be found this afternoon. Please find search him out and let him know that Bella awaits him in my study.” Thorin settles Bella in his lap, which soothes her somewhat. However, she has an orderly little mind unlike her brothers who call both Thorin and Bilbo ‘Da’ and will happily deal with whoever answers to it first. Bella on the other hand has clear divisions in her mind regarding her parents. She likes Thorin for formal occasions and when she is frightened, but Bilbo is her source of everyday comfort and guidance.

Still, she allows Thorin to dry her tears and eventually set her up with a children’s primer on identifying different sorts of stone and a collection of colored inks with which to copy out five of her favorite kinds. He expects it to last her until Bilbo can be fetched, but hours grind by without Bilbo ever appearing.

Bella is subdued when Thorin brings her out of the study to the family dining room for supper only to find the royal apartments in an uproar with Dis at the center of it all.

Thorin stands there frozen, listening to his sister snap out orders until he realizes that she isn’t directing a team of healers… she’s directing a search party.

The boys collect their sister and take her into the playroom to distract her while they all keep out from underfoot. It is only then that Dis can bring Thorin up to speed.

“He’s not been seen since after family breakfast.” She is pacing back and forth in front of the fire with the hems of her skirts snapping like the tail of an angry cat. “Your valet reports that some of his belonging are missing; a mail shirt, a walking stick, and several suits of clothing. It may be an attempt to conceal what truly happened.” She hastens to add. “He would not leave us.” She stops
and looks at Thorin. “He would not leave you.”

…but is that true?

Thorin has time to think about that as his dwarves tear the mountain apart searching for any clue as to where their King’s lover has vanished to. The old members of his company have formed their own private search where they check the hallways and corridors for invisible bodies tucked in out of the way corners. Thorin ordered it himself when he looked to the mantle in their bedroom and realized that Bilbo’s little ring, his ‘funny magic ring’ as he called it, was missing too.

Bilbo could be anywhere. He could be hurt and no one would know.

Balin comes to sit with Thorin as he waits.

“Lad… I hate to ask this.” Balin falls silent under Thorin’s glare, but gathers his courage and continues. “Was all well between you and our Burglar?”

“Yes.” Thorin snaps, but then… he sinks into his chair. “Perhaps. I…he’s been quiet of late. Preoccupied with his memoir, but still good-natured. For the most part. We’ve quarreled some once or twice in the past few weeks, but it was nothing!” He turns to Balin, willing the older dwarf to understand. “I barely remember what it was about and we made our peace within the hour. There was nothing going on that would force him to run.” He turns away. “If Bilbo though to leave me, he would have packed the children and taken them with.”

“Aye. That is true.” Balin agrees quietly.

“Um…” The door creaks open and Thorin’s head snaps up. It’s Frodo peeking in through the crack in the door and the tiny spark of hope in Thorin’s chest dulls back down to a glowing ember. “I… can I talk to you?”

“Of course, Frodo.” Thorin waves Balin away. The older dwarf bows and ruffles Frodo’s hair as he passes him. “Come.” He holds his hand out to Frodo, who is fifteen this year and cutting a fine figure in the quilted burgundy coat his cousins had made for his birthday. He wears shoes, unlike most Hobbits, but it’s in deference to the cold stone floors of Erebor more than anything else and he usually forgoes them in the carpeted interior of the family rooms.

“I… was not supposed to tell.” Frodo tucks his hands behind his back. “I promised I wouldn’t, but I think I ought to even so.”

Thorin feels his hands clench around the arms of his chair. “What do you know, nephew?”

“I was with Uncle Bilbo right before he vanished.” Frodo says slowly. “We were in the conservatory and he was showing me how to start a graft on one of the little apple trees we received from Gondor this year. Only, then…” He trails off, looking away. “Gandalf appeared there and sent me away. When I came back later they were both gone, but I thought nothing of it until Auntie Dis sounded the alarm.”

“You have done well coming to me with this.” Thorin forces his hands to still before he risks touching his beloved nephew. “I am proud of you and your choice in trusting me. Go now to your cousins and say nothing. I will handle things.”

The Wizard is involved. That can mean nothing good.

Dis takes the news badly. To say she dislikes Gandalf is to say that water is only a little wet or that molten metal is slightly warm. The fact is that she blames Gandalf for convincing not only her
brother, but both her sons to risk their lives recapturing Erebor when the settlement in Ered Luin was finally beginning to thrive after decades of deprivation.

That he appeared on a gentle Hobbit’s front step and whisked him off into danger with barely a ‘how do you do’ only seems in keeping with his flawed character in Dis’ opinion —and now he’s done it again.

“I will have his hide.” She vows in a voice like death when Thorin shares Frodo’s information with her. “I will nail it to the front gates and let all of Arda know what it means to meddle in the affairs of our people.”

For once, Thorin cannot make himself disagree.

His men range far and wide, searching for word of the gray wizard’s whereabouts, but none return with any lead worth following. Days turn into weeks and the weeks become a month before the first clue as to Bilbo Baggin’s fate arrives at the front gate of Erebor in cloaks and hoods just as the sun begins to set.

Balin is speaking to the messengers when Thorin joins him on the wall.

“What do they want?” He growls, looking down at the anonymous figures clustered before his door. “Why do they not show their faces?”

“What they want is word of our burglar.” Balin replies darkly. “…and they’re offering payment for it. The reason they do not take off their masks, I think, has to do with the nature of the thing they’ve brought with them.”

“Explain.” Thorin frowns.

“They’re offering us one of the rings of old.” Balin breathes, keeping his voice quiet. “A ring such as that which was lost with your father.”

Thorin feels his heart stop dead in his chest. “The Dwarven rings of power were lost to the cold drakes and those that weren’t…”

“I know, lad.” Balin looks back down to the sinister dark shapes waiting down on the ground. “I too know where the others went.”

“We have no truck with the agents of Mordor in my lands. We have no need of their poisoned gifts.” Thorin spits the words out like nails. “Send them away. Fire upon them if they will not go. Light the area with pitch if need be. Send word to Bard. Warn him to close his ears and his gates against them. Drive them off.”

“Aye, my liege.” Balin gestures curtly to the soldiers at him command and they begin to notch arrows into their bows, but it is not necessary. The agents of Mordor disperse easily enough, but there are many restless nights on the walls following their departure.

“What is going on?” Dis asks one evening. “Why do they want him? What has he done?”

“I don’t know.” Thorin sighs as he pores over maps and reports from all over the continent. “I don’t know.”

Bobbin takes to sitting with him in the evenings. They are both quiet, but the company is welcome and of all his sons Thorin suspects Bobbin understands him best.
Sometimes he almost forgets why that is.

“Things are changing.” Bobbin says one such evening as he sets aside his reading. When Thorin looks at him he sees someone who is and yet is not his son looking back at him.

“Bobbin?” He goes to kneel at his son’s side.

“I came because of what I knew was to come.” Bobbin looks at Thorin with old, old eyes. “…but it’s too soon and things are changing. They’re happening differently and I no longer understand.”

“Durin.” Thorin drops his hand and understands at last that he isn’t speaking to his son, Bobbin. This is Durin the Deathless speaking. “What is going on?”

“I don’t know.” Durin draws in a shaking breath. “I don’t always remember, but I knew that he would never be harmed. I knew he was supposed to be safe. I knew he would never fall to it, but…”

“What is ‘it’?” Thorin grasps the fabric of his trousers to keep from shaking the boy. “What is happening to your father?”

Durin shakes his head. “I don’t remember!” He gasps. His narrow shoulders start to shake and his eyes shimmer under a veil of unshed tears. Durin blinks again and is Bobbin once more. “Da!” He piles into Thorin’s arms in a way he hasn’t done in years and Thorin cradles him close. “Da’s in trouble.” He whimpers. “Something bad is happening and I don’t know what.”

“All be well.” He whispers into Bobbin’s hair. “I swear it. We will find him.”

All is not well. That night there is fire in the southern skies and three days after that an ash cloud covers the region. It’s not dangerous; more of an annoyance than anything else that makes breathing difficult without the aid of a cloth over one’s mouth.

“A volcano must have erupted.” Ori posits, showing Thorin the results of his research. “The trembling ground and particulates in the air are symptoms. I think we are in no danger here. The Lonely Mountain is remains asleep under Mahal’s hand. We will have no eruptions here. My only concern is…”

“Aye.” Thorin agrees. “There is only one volcano in the south large enough to touch us here in the north.”

“Yes.” Ori shudders. “Mount Doom.”

Gandalf finally appears on the eighth day following the eruption. He rides up to the front gate of Erebor astride a white horse the likes of which Thorin nor any of his people have ever seen.

“Thorin, King Under the Mountain.” He calls out when Thorin arrives on the wall. “I hear you have been searching for me. Here I am! And I have something of yours as well. Open your gates and bring your healers.” With that Gandalf draws back the folds of his travel worn cloak to reveal the form of one very familiar Hobbit tucked into his side with his eyes closed to the world. “He will have need of them.”

Bilbo does not wake even during the commotion that follows him inside. He does not wake when Thorin pulls him down from Gandalf’s saddle nor when his children shout in his ear. He does not wake when the healers tend to his grievous burns and lacerations. He does not wake when Oin force feeds him gruel. He does not wake when the apprentice healers bathe him and he does not wake on the one occasion when Dis slaps him full in the face only to start weeping a scant second later.
He lays still as stone in their bedchamber save for the steady rise and fall of his chest. The family takes turns sitting by his bedside to speak to him or read to him on Gandalf’s advice.

“He’s lost in a dark place.” The wizard says with grief and weariness in all the lines of his face. “Much of his strength was spent in Mordor and it is up to those who love him to coax him back.”

When asked why they were ever in those dark lands, Gandalf only shakes his head and says it is not his tale to tell.

“I will let Bilbo tell it.” He says. “For if I do not tell it then he must return to do so himself. I choose to trust that our burglar would never let a good story die in such a way.”

Thorin’s duties vanish one by one until he has nothing to do but sit at the side of his bed and read to his Hobbit.

Bilbo looks different now. There is white and silver in his hair where it was once a rich gold. Lines have been carved in the corners of his eyes and bracketing his mouth. Perhaps it’s only Thorin’s imagination, but they grow deeper with every passing day.

The Lonely Mountain is quiet these days. Even the fall of hammers in the craft halls seems hushed, respectful --- *waiting.*

Then fifteen days after the eruption, an entire week after Gandalf re-appeared with Bilbo in tow, Thorin looks up the book he has been reading to find a sleepy pair of blue eyes trained on him. The book hits the floor and Thorin cares not what happens to it.

“Bilbo!” He growls and cradles the Hobbit’s face in his hands. “Speak. Do not sleep again!”

“…think I’ve had enough sleep for now.” Bilbo murmurs and covers Thorin’s hands with his own. “I feel like someone rolled me down the mountain side in a barrel full of rocks.”

“I ought to do that for all the worry you’ve caused me.” Thorin lets his forehead drop gently down to touch Bilbo’s. “Confounded Halfling. I thought I’d lost you.”

“I thought you’d lost me as well.” Bilbo groans and grasps Thorin’s shoulder. “Help me sit up, please? I can’t seem to… oh.” He looks down and finally notices the sleeping lumps of their children covering his lower half. “Have they all been sleeping here?”

“Aye.” Thorin agrees and helps Bilbo into a seated position. “As have I. Fili and Kili trade watches in the arm chair while Dis keeps the mountain from falling down around our ears. You have many heartfelt apologies to make.”

“I will make them.” Bilbo promises. He wets his lips. “Starting with this one.” He pulls Thorin down into a weak kiss that Thorin cannot help but deepen. “I…I, Thorin, I did a bad thing.” He whimpers. “You won’t ever forgive me for it. I won’t forgive myself. I’m so, so very sorry.”

“You’re home now.” Thorin says, breathing in the scent of his lover’s hair and skin. “There isn’t much I wouldn’t forgive in exchange for that.”

“Not this!” Bilbo shakes his head. “Not this.

“One would argue, Bilbo Baggins, that you were not wholly at fault.” Gandalf says and Thorin very nearly draws steel on the wizard for startling him. As it is, Bilbo wheezes when Thorin’s arms constrict around him. “You were under the influence of a force that has corrupted creatures great and small, but you did not succumb to it.”
“What is he talking about?” Thorin turns a searching look on Bilbo who drops his gaze. “Bilbo?”

“I will take the blame for this, dear Bilbo.” Gandalf lowers himself onto one of the stools that ring their bed these days. “I left it too long even though I suspected the truth. You were left alone and ignorant of the danger you faced. That is my doing and I will own it.”

“What danger?” Thorin growls, wondering if he should summon his guard. What danger could possibly be lurking in the halls of his mountain that he did not know about?

“You know of the ring that Bilbo found in the Misty Mountains?” Gandalf asks and Thorin nods. It has only been sitting on their mantelpiece for four years. “It was not any magic ring. Indeed, no ring of power could be considered just ‘any’ magic ring, but this one… even less so. You see, it was Isildur’s Bane that Bilbo found in that cave. He was only able to access a fraction of its power leading me to think it was less that it truly was… and so I left it with Bilbo, believing him to be the most proper steward for it. Only…” He looks to Bilbo, who grants him a pale and mute nod.

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“…only on my visits here I began to notice that not all was well with our burglar.” He continues. “He seemed all right when he was with you and the children, but when I chanced to observe him with others…” Gandalf frowns. “His behavior was not the same. Perhaps it was less noticeable to your people, who only think fondly of your consort and are a more private people than Hobbits are. He seemed withdrawn and spoke less than I knew him to be capable of. Often I would see his hand slip into his pocket as if constantly searching for something. I believed it to be his pipe or his handkerchief until one day we happened to be discussing the souvenir he took from our old adventure.”

Bilbo turns his head into Thorin’s shoulder and takes a deep shuddering breath before he nods once more. “It was in my pocket.” He says. “I still don’t remember putting it there.”

“Yes.” Gandalf agrees quietly. “I decided to visit more often after that. Fortunately my business often brought me to this area. Then, a little over a month ago, I arrived unannounced and came across Bilbo in the conservatory where little Bella was born. He was there with Frodo and his behavior… was not his own.”

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Bilbo goes still in Thorin’s arms. “No.” He pushes himself away, despite Thorin’s best efforts to hold him. “I don’t need you to lie for me, Gandalf.” He sighs and looks down onto the coverlet where all his children – adopted and otherwise - are deeply asleep. “I was showing Frodo… something. I don’t remember what and the lesson wasn’t going well. I… I grew frustrated and I…” His face crumples. “Eru, help me, I nearly struck him! It wasn’t… it wasn’t a little cuff like how Fili will discipline one of the boys. It was a blow meant to lay out a full grown man. I… very nearly hurt him. If Gandalf hadn’t been there, I think I might have.”

Thorin shoots a look to Gandalf, who shakes his head.

“All the rings of power exert some influence on their bearers, be it small or great. They wait in the corners of their bearer’s mind and when their will is weak, the ring strikes. It seems like madness from the outside… and perhaps from the inside as well.” Gandalf says softly. “I think you know something of that, Thorin. Or your father did.”

“Do not speak to me of him.” Thorin turns to take in Bilbo’s shattered expression of shame. There has never been a time when Thorin has wanted to remember his father’s war of revenge less. “Is this why you left?”

Bilbo starts to shake his head, but then nods slowly. “I… Gandalf had other reasons why we had to go, but that was the reason I chose to follow. I could not… Bella is barely even five. What if I
raised my hand to her next? I couldn’t risk it. I couldn’t.” He closes his eyes and draws in a long breath. “So I followed Gandalf to Mordor. We were to go to Isengard first, but…”

Gandalf turns his head. “Isengard will be a problem for another time.” He says gravely. “My order is… no longer an order. Rhadagast has retreated into the woods and will not allow himself to be found. Saruman has fallen to greed and cannot be trusted. I am a wizard alone.” He seems lost for a moment, staring out into the middle distance before he shakes himself. “There was no aid to be found there and Saruman prevented us from seeking council in with the men or elves. His forces harried us at every turn and there was nowhere to go, but south… to Mordor. What passed there does not, perhaps, bear speaking of yet. Know only this, Thorin; that your consort succeeded where Kings of Old all failed.” He exhales slowly. “The One Ring is no more.”

“Bilbo, is this true?” Thorin can understand what the wizard has just said, but the words… they don’t make sense.

“It’s true, Thorin.” Bilbo says sadly. “…I threw it into the fires of Mount Doom and the mountain erupted. There were entire settlements of goblins surrounding the base and lava poured down onto them all. I’ve never seen so much death, not even after the Battle of Five armies. We almost didn’t escape. If it weren’t for Gandalf’s eagles… we wouldn’t have. They flew us out of Mordor while the creatures manning the Black Gates were overwhelmed by goblins attempting to flee. Even then there was still ash and boiling mud and stones flying through the air. The eruption reached out for a hundred miles in every direction and made a black pillar in the sky. The walls of Mordor seem to have contained it for now, but… I don’t know how many would have survived within.”

Thorin is save from having to speak by a sleepy whine from somewhere in the vicinity of Bilbo’s knees. Bella squirms closer into her brother’s side, only to realize that there are people in the room who are moving around. She rolls over onto her belly and blinks up first at Thorin then at Bilbo… and her little eyes go as big as saucers.

“PAPA!” She shrieks and climbs straight over Grim and Bobbin in her eagerness to get her arms around Bilbo’s neck, which awakens everyone else in the bed and it’s not long before Bilbo is covered in fauntlings including one pale-faced and shaking Frodo who can’t be convinced to let him go or stop apologizing.

“Shhh, No. It wasn’t your fault.” It hard to tell who Bilbo is rocking in his arms or crooning to as that seems to change on a minute-by-minute basis. Thorin has his arms wrapped around the entire brood, trying to hold them in together by sheer force of will alone.

He spies Gandalf slipping out the door through the corner of his eye, but says nothing. All he loves best in the world is here and for now he does not care about the how or the why of it.

Tomorrow, perhaps, he will lock everyone out of the bedroom and have it out with Bilbo but it’s perhaps more likely that he will pin his husband to the bed and map out every new wound and scar with his hands and mouth.

What happened is still too big for Thorin to process alone and if it is half as serious as Gandalf seems to think, then the consequences will be wide ranging enough to put whatever ire he still feels for Bilbo into perspective.

His lover is home and his family is reunited. That is all that matters.
End Notes

What I described happening in Mordor when Mount Doom erupted is called a pyroclastic flow and they really happen. I saw a special on TV once where science dude was speculating that they range up into extinction level events. Fun times in Mordor.

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