Name Me
by Ainulinde

Summary

Thorin knows that the world offers him nothing for free, and that only the strong retain what they claim to be theirs.
He is the heir to an alliance forged on bonds between people raised in harsh environments, but before he can claim their allegiance, he must prove his worth.

Ningalor knows she will have to pay for her freedom one day; as fate taught her at the age of five, nothing good is meant to last. She left her alliance- a taboo akin to treachery, and must hide her identity at all costs. Even if that means sacrificing her people and ignoring their plight.

So when an old friend makes a request she knows she absolutely cannot agree to, she knows it is fate, knocking on her door.

Thorin, on the other hand, wonders what has he ever done that made the gods hate him that much.
Chapter Summary

"I am not holding on to the fire
I cannot trust the darkness in which I sleep
History has no compassion
For the voiceless and the inferior."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The day started, bright and crisp and full of leisure, without a single hint of what’s to come.

Ningalor sighed her contentment and sipped from her wine glass, appreciating the richness of the flavor. Some would argue it was far too early in the day to consume alcohol of any kind, particularly for a woman, and especially for an unmarried one (an old spinster, they damned her). However, she knew no better way to celebrate the last days of April than to sip on wine just as fruity and vibrant as the month itself. The aged red revealed an undercurrent of chocolate, enhanced by the wooden taste of the oak and in perfect yet complementing contrast to the spark of the cherry. She spun the glass gently against the wooden bench on which she sat and inhaled deeply.

The sun shone bright and blew fresh, sweet breeze upon her face. While unconventional, she chose to spend it outside instead of hiding in her house from the unforgiving touch of the not-so-shy anymore rays of sun. Her duty as the sole manager of a rather large estate did not allow for idleness, but the day was too beautiful to spend it laboring over books and numbers and such.

The garden faced the road, which was somewhat inconvenient but seldom posed an issue. The people of her village, called the Shire, rarely crossed so close to her house without a good reason, and reading a book with a plot was indeed a pleasant change. In fact, she was immersed in the story, which began to unravel the tale of an unexpected journey, when a shadow fell on her page and interrupted her reading.

“Good morning,” she said, her tone polite but crisp enough to enlighten the intruder to her presence and, hopefully, shoo him.

“What do you mean?” said a deep, booming voice, “Do you wish me a good morning, or mean that it is a good morning whether I want it or not? Or that you feel good this morning; or that it is a morning to be good on?”

“Gandalf!” she cried. She leaped from her bench and ran toward the old man, opened the gate in a hurry and hugged him fiercely without a single consideration for her reputation. “Oh, it really is you!” She smiled shortly, before frowning again. “Though no doubt you are here only because of a scheme, and, therefore, I do not expect you to be good, on this morning or the rest to come.”

“How absurd!” The old man frowned quite menacingly, yet the amusement shining from underneath very bushy eyebrows could not be mistaken for anything else. “I never scheme,” he mocked her choice of words with a proud huff.
Ningalor merely cocked a brow at him, before schooling her features into a more appropriate smile as she decided not to comment on that. “Have you come to look at the estate? I have taken very good care of it, I’ll have you know.”

“Of that, I am certain,” the old man replied, scanning the building for a short moment and then scanning her quite thoroughly, making her feel entirely uncomfortable. He had a long, gray hair, tousled from the journey, and wizened, sunburned face. His long silver beard and broad shoulders gave him the commanding build of a king, and his eyes, like the bluest sapphires burning bright, seemed to notice everything. Massive, bushy eyebrows set above a rather large, prominent nose crowned his appearance with command and gravity. His clothes earned him the nickname ‘Gandalf the Gray,’ for they were gray of color and tarnished by wear. His staff, wooden and polished, and his boots, black and covered in mud, were the only items which were not gray – even his hat, a large, pointy thing, was gray.

“Yes?” she asked after a long moment of silence, feeling increasingly ill at ease.

“You seem to have settled,” he offered finally, after another long moment of inspection.

“Well, of course. This is my home now,” she said, confused. “Wasn’t that your intention?”

“Hmm… Indeed, it was. And I am glad to see I was successful.” He added thoughtfully, “How do you like it?”

Ningalor scowled and yet answered honestly, hoping she wouldn’t come to regret her, “I love the peace and the quiet. I love the gentleness of the folk here, even if the conversation is lacking and their minds tend to be simple and focused on very few things, food chiefly amongst them. But of course, it is a small price to pay in return for anonymity and freedom.”

“You are bored, then.”

“Books make for excellent company,” she countered, sensing the wheels turning in her companion’s graying head. She crossed her hands over her chest, narrowed her eyes, uncrossed them and instead walked to her bench. She sat gracefully and picked up her book, hoping for it to signal that yes, she was happy, yes, she had settled, and yes, her book is preferred to some company.

“But the world is not in your books, child, it is out there! Beyond the borders of the Shire!”

“As I well know, thank you!” she replied curtly.

Gandalf scowled in response and added, “I think it is time, Ningalor, you had spent your days doing what you meant to be doing, and adding figures isn’t one of them.” He ignored the way she cringed when he used her real name, and then nodded, as if to himself. “It will be very good for you, and most amusing for me. I shall inform the others.” And he turned away without another word.

“Others? What – Gandalf!” She stood up, entirely flustered. Shouting would not do, as it was improper, and the idea of chasing the man on foot seemed absurd to her – he was indeed an old man, but surprisingly swift for his age, and she already lost sight of him as he turned left at the nearby corner.

With an angry huff, she closed her book and finished her wine. She could not protest, not really, as she was not really the owner of Bag End. She only managed it when Gandalf was absent, which was usually the case. And if Gandalf wanted to bring guests, she could do nothing about it. Deciding to swallow the bitterness of a lost argument, as well as the powerlessness of her situation,
she squared her shoulders and entered the house, opening the round, green door with more
decisiveness that she actually felt.

“Primula?” she called, picking up her hat and a basket. “Primula?”

“Yes, Miss Lily?” A stocky, agile woman appeared. She had long black curly hair, bright blue
eyes, and apple red cheeks. Her comely face lost its smile when she saw the expression
on Ningalor’s face, and she lowered the child she was carrying to the floor, letting him toddle away
as he liked. “You look troubled, what is it?”

“Master Grayhame dropped by. I believe he intends to invite some people over,” she said, fastening
her hat with short and brisk movements. “Did not say how many, or when they will come,” she
added when she saw the questions forming on Primula’s face.

The woman scoffed. “That’s very like him, indeed!” She rolled her eyes at her employer. “What
shall we do, Miss?”

Ningalor passed her another basket. “I suggest we stock up before the markets close. I am not sure
what we have in our cellars, but we definitely need more wine and ale, if we are to cater to his
tastes.”

Primula accepted the basket with a warlike glint in her eyes. “Well, I do know what we have, and I
agree entirely. Let us raid the market, then,” she declared as she wore her hat and smiled at
Ningalor, who lifted her brow in a small, calculated movement. “Nothing too perishable, mind. I
suggest smoked meats and cakes, and cheese and wine by the dozen.”

Ningalor walked out and let Primula close the door behind them. “A raid indeed. Let us hope we
will prepare well for the oncoming attack.”

The other woman laughed freely, giggling at the notion, and Ningalor allowed a small smile to
grace her lips as her companion chatted away. If all else fails, at least she could prove to the old
man how well she learned the ways of the Shire.

Maybe that would convince him to let her stay.

They were properly excited that day and nervous at night, but no visitor came knocking on their
doors. The day after passed just as peacefully, as the only unusual event happened during the late
afternoon when Frodo, Primula’s son, managed to chase a pack of geese inside the house.

They found him giggling and jumping excitedly, completely satisfied with the havoc his actions
caused.

Primula cleaned the house while chastising the boy. Meanwhile, Drogo, her husband, fixed the
fence and took care of the poor beasts, and Ningalor rearranged her paperwork, which floated
everywhere and had to be chronologized, again.

Therefore, when she finally sat to dinner with the Baggins family at the servant table (smaller,
homier, easier to clean), the knock on the door caught them entirely unprepared. Neither was eager
to get the door and find out who was on the other side, and each urged the other with pointed
brows and shifting looks to go and greet the guest.

Eventually, Ningalor rose, feeling quite ridiculous for being wiggled at, and announced, “I’ll get
it.”
She was, after all, the hostess of the estate, and that was her responsibility. She walked toward the hall, straightened her dress and felt slightly better when she heard Drogo and Primula getting up unanimously and following her to the door, which was knocked on, again. She looked behind to find Primula muttering something about the lateness of the hour and to see – oh Gods, this was not meant to be a reassuring sight – Drogo clutching a shovel.

Ningalor opened the door, and whatever she was expecting, it wasn’t a tall, burly man with a massive, wild beard, dressed in a long cloak and looking incredibly dangerous.

The tall man bowed slightly, taking in the sight of baffled Ningalor and the couple behind her in a stride. “Lord Dwalin, at your service.”

Ningalor blinked twice, then remembered the manners of her youth and curtsied shortly. “Madam Lily, at yours. Do come in,” she said politely and stepped back. The broad-shouldered man entered the house (he had to bow slightly to fit) and glanced around – not in appreciation, she sensed, but in search of a trap, or perhaps a way out. A warrior, then, even if his muscly frame already informed her of that.

“Please place your weapons next to the door, if you’ll be so kind,” she added, taking in the sight of two battle-axes and goodness knows what else. “And your cloak.”

She did not need to glance back, for Drogo suddenly remembered his duties (or perhaps Primula nudged him) and came to help the man shrug off his heavy travel cloak, which seemed out of place in the warm weather. In the candlelight, she could see his scalp was tattooed with symbols foreign to her. He had a rather large, prominent nose, a wolfish beard and mustache, ashy brown, and as dirty and tousled hair, covering the area from his ears to his neck. His eyes, bright green and vigilant, scrutinized his surroundings from underneath thick and bushy eyebrows. His face was torn by old battle-scars.

“Are you Gandalf’s guest?” she inquired when the man did nothing to explain his presence.

“Aye. Said it will be here. Said there will be food. Lots of it,” he grumbled. His voice was thick and his annunciation – guttural.

“Right this way, my lord,” she said with a small bow of her head and led him to the formal dinner table while Primula, bless her, already scurried to the kitchen to bring dinner. “Are we to expect more guests tonight?” she asked.

The man settled into the chair, his frame still mighty and menacing despite the homely tapestry surrounding him. “Aye, lots more,” he said with a gruff, nodding in appreciation when Primula appeared with a dish of fish and a large flagon of ale, which the man finished alarmingly fast. “Any more?” he ordered.

Ningalor exchanged a glance with Primula, who hurried back to the kitchen. The lord’s accent was familiar, yet she could not place it. Staring is rude, she reminded herself after failing to decipher the Lord’s origins, and followed Primula to find the couple already preparing several more dishes.

“Something tells me this ‘Lord’ intends to eat like one, and if more like him are coming, then we need to prepare our entire cellar!” Primula hissed.

Ningalor nodded and intended to voice her own displeasure when a knock, just as alarming as the one before, made the couple jump and Ningalor freeze. “Let us hope that when he said ‘lots more’ he meant about five more, yes?” Ningalor sighed and walked briskly to the door, took a steadying breath, and opened it.
“Lord Balin, at your service.” Bowed a smaller man than the one before, and definitely kinder looking (both things not hard to achieve, considering the impressive scowl and size of their first guest).

“Madam Lily, at yours.” Once again she curtsied and allowed the man in. He wore a magnificent, red cloak and tunic, even if slightly singed. He had a long, massive white beard, receding hairline, and hairy eyebrows.

“Cloak and weapons by the door, if you please,” she added, pointing to the small pile.

“I see I am not the first to arrive,” he commented, chuckling.

“No, my lord. Lord Dwalin is already eating at the table. May I offer you dinner?”

“That will be most appreciated,” said the old man kindly.

Ningalor warmed up to him slightly – he spoke like a proper lord and not one raised in the wild – and led him to the dining room.

“Brother!” Dwalin, who already finished his fish and apparently was busy finishing their bread, got up from his chair with a loud clank and marched toward Balin.

“Good evening, brother!” The men clasped hands and chuckled, then smashed their foreheads together.

Ningalor frowned, and both men lost her respect.

What an inappropriate way to behave at a dinner table!

Primula appeared carrying yet another tray, and both men sat and began (or resumed) to dine, exchanging small pleasantries and ignoring Ningalor entirely.

While it was incredibly rude to disrupt a lord’s dinner, she felt that, for the sake of her and the Baggins’ nerves, she quite had to. “Excuse me,” she said once, politely, and when ignored she repeated her words, her voice stern, “Excuse me!”

Balin seemed to notice her and turned to face her with a frown. Dwalin just narrowed his eyes.

Great.

“Do forgive me, my lords, for the interruption, but how many of you are we to expect? I am asking for the sake of preparations, of course.”

Balin smiled at her in reassurance. “Hmm… I do not know, Gandalf was not too unambiguous. At least one more for sure, and let us hope for far more than that, yes?”

Dwalin nodded as he tore his cold cut with relish, and Balin returned to his own dish, so, properly dismissed and none the wiser, Ningalor left the room and once again retreated to the kitchen.

“Well?” Drogo asked, frying fish in a hurry.

“At least one more, but hopefully more than that.” She buried her face in her hands.

“I do hope that they will have proper stomachs, not a bottomless pit like that Lord,” Primula spat, stuffing the chicken with quite a bit of force. “Are we to feed an army?” she complained.

Knock – no, knocks on the door. Ningalor cocked a brow quizzically at the couple, but both were
too busy to notice the impropriety. She walked to the door, wondering what she would find upon opening it.

“Lord Fili –“

“And Lord Kili –“

“At your service,” they finished together and bowed together, which made her lips twitch.

“You must be Lily!” said the dark-haired boy (whose name she already forgot).

His pleased yet inappropriate comment made her lips curl.

“Madam Lily, if you please.” She stepped inside and repeated the usual comments, watched as they hung their cloaks (“Look, Fili! I think Lord Dwalin’s here! Lord Balin, too!”) which meant the dark-haired one was… Kili? She began to wonder at the amusing similarity between those people’s names as she led them inside (were they also siblings? They did not say), and then hurried to the kitchen to bring more tankards of ale since Dwalin and Balin already finished three.

The light haired one, Fili, she supposed, had a bright, handsome face, a cocksure gait, and eyes promising mischief. He had a beard and a mustache as well, short and well-groomed, though he had quite a mane of long, blond hair to make up for that. His clothes were rich in texture and, like Lord Dwalin, adorned with quite a bit of soft looking fur.

Kili, however, was dark haired and had the least impressive beard out of the four (more of a stubble, actually). He had the same cocksure gait, the intensity of his companion and the handsome features – sharp eyebrows, dark eyes and an elegant nose, but his youth still showed in the roundness of his cheeks.

Ningalor wondered if they came from the mountains as she considered the thin fabric of her dress, and about the wealth of these people, these lords, that were Gandalf’s guests. She took one plate full of sausages from Drogo, and yet another bottle of wine, and aided the two in feeding the men – who apparently hadn’t eaten for a week, judging by the amounts they managed to consume.

Another knock on the door – by the gods, make it the last of them! – interrupted her train of thought, and she once again hurried to the door, wondering, for the first time, where did Gandalf intend to lodge them – Bag End had two guestrooms and two bedrooms, but…

She opened the door and cursed the fates, for before her stood not one, not two, but eight men, each more menacing and stranger looking than the other. Then she laid her eyes on the strangest of them all and exhaled in relief mixed with the lightest touch of reproach.

“Gandalf!”

The old man smiled at her, clearly quite pleased with himself. He chuckled when Ningalor ordered the new guests around and then, despite the fact she was supposed to lead them to the dining room, only muttered, “Just follow the noise.”

Which they did heartily and offered her neither names nor service – perhaps she judged the Lords too quickly for their ill manners – this group had none!

She looked at Gandalf in disapproval. “Gandalf, what were you thinking, inviting an army here? And without proper warning! Poor Drogo and Primula are working so hard, your men clearly have no manners, and where on earth am I supposed to lodge them? I do not suppose either of them – or you – thought to bring a tent with you?” Yet she still looked behind him, as if expecting a tent.
“Now, now, my dear! No need to fret.” The old man chuckled. “Have you eaten yet? I did want to join you at supper, however, circumstances....”

They reached the dining hall – Gandalf had the gall to laugh openly at the raucous merriment. Ningalor, on the other hand, paled and wondered how many hours she would have to spend scrubbing the floors (and, oh gods, the walls. How on earth did they manage that?).

“I think I lost my appetite,” she uttered in pure distaste.

Gandalf hmmed and took his seat. “Well then, could I trouble you for a plate?”

She offered him a tight-lipped smile. “Of course, the usual?”

“If you could, my dear. And after that – do join us!” he called after her.

Ningalor already dismissed herself and left. She returned with his food, but the old man was too busy counting his companions to notice, and muttered, “We appear to be one man short.”

Dwalin, if she remembered correctly, took a large sip from his tankard and declared, “He traveled North to a meeting of our Bond. He will come.”

Ningalor sighed, feeling entirely unrepentant as she cursed the man in her mind and surveyed the table. Indeed, a few more dishes, perhaps, and then it would be a proper time to bring out the desserts. Oh, and she had to tell the couple to make one more dish for later. Right.

She marched, determined to be useful to the best of her ability, into the dining room. The men shouted at her for cakes and beer, which made her cringe with distaste (as if I were a common wench!). But before she could serve the men, there was another knock on the door, louder and clearer and far more commanding than its predecessors, and the men fell quiet.

Ningalor cocked her brow at that, wondering if the knocker had not dented the wood or damaged the paint with his forceful knocking, and turned to open the door when Gandalf rose from his chair, muttering, “He is here,” and went to the door by himself.

Curious though she was, Ningalor walked to the kitchen to perform her duties. She cared little for the commotion or for those who were late. Primula returned to the dining room with her, carrying a hot plate of roast lamb and stew. She placed the dish at the appropriately empty seat at the head of the table, while Ningalor spread out the desserts and cakes and ale. This time, however, no one paid attention to them or to the food.

“...I lost my way, twice. Wouldn’t have found it at all had it not been for that large oak tree you spoke of,” said a deep, smooth baritone voice, rich and articulated.

Ningalor paused, frowning imperceptibly. This man differed from his companions, though she knew not the reason, nor could she decipher that from his words. The... rhythm of his words was different. One might suspect he was of aristocratic origins.

Gandalf appeared, accompanied by a tall, strongly-built man, handsome and grim. He had dark hair, falling to his shoulders in long, smooth tresses. His clothes were the richest by far, as he wore a fur-trimmed coat and silver mail. His tunic was vibrant blue and his entire posture a regal one, and his eyes, piercing blue, scanned the men with a commanding calm and a benevolent tilt of his head. His sharp, aristocratic cheekbones and the trimmed beard only accentuated the strength of his jaw. He had a prominent nose and thick, expressive eyebrows, but one could not mistake his somber, noble features for anything but utterly captivating.
His eyes locked with hers, and the contempt they held made her forget whatever praise her mind supplied.

Gandalf cleared his throat. “Lily, my dear, allow me to introduce you to the leader of our company, Thorin II Oakenshield, Duke of Erebor.”

The man, Thorin, was not impressed by the title, as was Ningalor, who frowned in confusion. Nor did she appreciate the fact that Gandalf had, once again, introduced aristocracy into her life. She had rather enjoyed the lack thereof, despite what the old man might have thought.

The Duke was looking at her, inspecting her with revulsion unhidden. As if she were some broken furniture, useless and disappointing, unworthy of even the mere show of politeness. Prickled, she pressed her lips in a similar show of disgust. “Duke of Erebor? I thought that title was lost. Unless you are the Usurper, in which case I do apologize,” she quipped and congratulated herself when the man narrowed his eyes at her, sending a scorching glare her way.

Gandalf interrupted, as usual, “No, no! This is the true heir to the title, which indeed, as you so politely mentioned, was lost.” He cocked a bushy brow at her, a gesture she reciprocated. Something that, apparently, caused the younger men to snicker.

Sensing that she might be hindering something, Ningalor curtsied gracefully and mumbled, “Do excuse me.”

She turned to leave, but Gandalf would have none of that. “No, Lily! I must insist that you had stayed with us. Prim, dear, if you are all done setting Thorin’s food….”

“Oh, right, yes, sorry, Master, I’m –” Primula blushed, curtsied, and left the dining hall in a hurry. Ningalor followed her escape, then returned her eyes to Gandalf. Meanwhile, the so-called duke abandoned their company and sat, with all due ceremony, at the head of the table and began to eat.

His men spoke to him, but Ningalor did not understand their words nor bothered with them. Indeed, she felt more and more out of place with each passing moment. Her gaze snapped to Gandalf.

The man must have understood her objection from the look on her face, for he quickly added, “You are very necessary for this meeting, dear. We have gathered here for your sake, after all!” He ushered her into a chair – next to the Duke, in fact, and sat between them – as a sort of a mediator, she thought grimly.

The Duke glanced at their direction and replied in grave Westron to Dwalin, who asked him a question in a loud, protesting, desperate manner, “This is our quest, our duty, ours alone.”

Ningalor frowned but said nothing. She glanced at the faces of the men – worried, fallen, angry, unsure. Whatever cheer they had died with the Duke’s words, or perhaps his mere presence. They looked grim and weathered, and even the boys had a hard, sharpened glint in their eyes.

“But how are we to reclaim the Mountain with thirteen men and one woman? We need their help!”

Her eyes widened at the words, and she fixed a flabbergasted gaze at the speaker, a red-haired man with the wildest, most impressive coppery beard she ever saw and a guttural accent like that of the warrior-lord. But before she could say a word of protest, Gandalf placed a steadying hand on her shoulder. She sent him a suspicious, accusing look, and while at it caught sharp blue eyes – the Duke was scowling at her, then fixed his eyes on Gandalf, who opened his mouth to speak.
“Yes, Gloin, that is indeed one option, but a very dangerous one at that! An army of men, all of whom identifiable as members of the Dwarven Bond – you will attract attention, and not the one you seek. No, for such a quest, it is better to be swift, and silent, and shadowy. The less attention, the better, and swifter you will be, the more trouble you will avoid. For every problem, there is always the violent option – but the diplomatic one is no less potent, and sometimes even wiser.”

All eyes as one turned to look at her, and Ningalor, who had spent many years avoiding the spotlight, did not welcome them. “Ah, let me guess. Am I to be that fabled diplomat?” she asked softly, but the poisonous edge had not gone unnoticed.

Gandalf, of course, chose to ignore that. “Fabled? Too young for that, I think.” He chuckled. “But you do have a way with words, especially with the other alliances, I believe? The Brotherhood of Men and the Elven Alliance often clash with the Dwarven Bond. Now –”

“Whom are you loyal to?” asked one of the younger men – Kili, was it? She forgot who was the dark haired one and who the fair. His rude interruption of his superior could have been brushed aside had his question been less penetrating. Dangerous, even. She must answer carefully.

“The Shire once owed its loyalties to the High King, but there hasn’t been a king for many decades now, and it hadn’t pledged for any of the alliances,” she replied and thought of Gandalf’s words. Erebor… she saw it once, a heap of ruins in the distance. She saw it from her room, in her father’s fortress.

“What about the White Council?” asked another, but she did not grace that with an answer. That question was too dangerous for her to risk answering it honestly. For if her case were brought before the White Council, her current actions would be considered treacherous, even if only the help of a member of the White Council allowed for the execution of her betrayal.

“I am afraid I must to refuse you, my kind lords and good sirs,” she said, voice clear and sharp, “I have my duties –“

“What duties?” boomed Gandalf, infuriated with her decision, “None which I haven’t given you!”

*And that is why one must never trust a member of the White Council,* she thought disdainfully and said, “So you have the right to order me around as you please?” She stood up, cheeks ablaze, “I will not go east, Gandalf!”

“You fear a childhood shadow! Besides, our road will not take us near –“

“Oh, indeed, for roads and rivers are free of wanderers, restrain his reach and stay his spies.”

“You think too highly of yourself, I dare say,” Gandalf replied hotly, and then added more kindly, “You are changed; time has passed. Those who are looking will not know what for. It is quite safe, as far as the road east goes.”

“Pretty words might soothe a baby, but I haven’t been one for quite a while. Diplomats, there are many. Find another.”

“Lily –“

“I haven’t been to any court for… far too long. I know not how to hold a sword, nor shoot an arrow. This… quest of yours was not meant for folk such as myself –“

“Lily!” thundered Gandalf as he rose from his chair. “Cut out from the world indeed! You have forgotten that I have been roaming this earth far longer than you have, and I have met many a man
– diplomats and soldiers alike – therefore, if I chose you, it was a well-informed decision that was
made carefully. Sit down and have some wine, please.” When she refused to sit, he poured her a
glass and continued, “He will not look for you, surrounded by those of the Dwarven Bond. And
while roads and rivers are no barriers, he has his mind occupied elsewhere. Now,” he added,
sterlyn, as Ningalor slowly slid into her chair and accepted the glass of wine, yet did not sip from
it. Shame boiled within her when she realized how many had witnessed her conversation with
Gandalf. Too many. On second thought, she did sip from the glass.

Too many ears. Too dangerous. Does he mean to blackmail me?

“Now,” Gandalf repeated as he sat down, and once again the eyes left Ningalor in peace and
focused on Gandalf. “As you well know, the objective of this quest is to take back Erebor. We will
encounter trouble on the road, no doubt about that, but… when we get to the Mountain….” He
pulled out a map, weather-stained and ancient, and a key from his robe and placed them on the
table.

“The Front Gate is sealed. Smaug the Usurper crushed the doors, and mercenaries known in the
wild as the Goblin tribes are patrolling the roads to it. However, this map speaks of a hidden
entrance, and this is the hidden entrance’s key.” He handed the key to Thorin, who accepted it with
yet another dark scowl.

Ningalor cocked a brow. “I do not see why I am needed. You speak of Goblins and danger and
goodness knows what. What skill I have, they will skewer me before I have a chance to talk.”

It was the renegade Duke who answered. “We do not need you for the road. We can fend for
ourselves and take care of you,” he replied grimly, voice dripping contempt. “We need you to
speak with the serpent, find out his traps, discover his plans.”

Ningalor’s eyes widened momentarily before she managed to school her features and hide her
thoughts. “You want me to speak with the Usurper? The mad murderer will skin me alive the
moment I step into his halls.”

The false Duke’s face twisted into a thunderous glower, probably because of the unfortunate way
she chose to phrase her sentence, but Gandalf, once again, stepped in. “Not another word of
pessimism, child!” he reprimanded. “Smaug was not seen for many a year. It is possible that he
merely died or perhaps left. We need to find out. If he is still alive, I do believe that he had no
interaction with the world at large for many years. His first action will not be to kill you.”

“Hardly reassuring.”

“I am sure your mind will change in time,” Gandalf said offhandedly, smiling serenely at her bitter
expression. “Trust me on this,” he said to Thorin, who growled his displeasure yet nodded to Balin.

Balin retrieved from his pocket a rather large piece of parchment, with many additions and side-
notes, written painstakingly in perfect calligraphy and minuscule script. Ningalor frowned at that,
blinded several times, yet found it hard to focus on the words. No, reading was impossible under
the weight of… actually, only one man was looking at her, and he turned his piercing gaze away
the second she lifted her eyes and met his.

She pursed her lips. “I shall take some time to read, then. Excuse me.” She left the room.

This time, no one tried to stop her, though she may have heard Gandalf sigh.
“This is a terrible idea.”

Thorin’s eyes left the woman, now that she had gracefully retreated and finally managed to escape their company. She did not say it, but he saw in her eyes how offensive she found them, and he could not have agreed more with Dwalin’s words.

Gloin, too, hmmed his agreement. “She looks weak, too thin and frail, and no doubt too used to the comforts of home. Saw none of her diplomatic skills yet.”

Gandalf cocked a brow. “Did she not convince you, quite easily, that she is not meant for this journey? That was her point, and she got it across rather well, I should think. But that only proves my point as well.”

Ori blinked. “I don’t understand, if –”

Balin chimed in, “The odds are against us. After all, what are we? Merchants, miners, tinkers, toymakers; hardly the stuff of legend. We are not a company of the very bravest, or the very brightest, and she no doubt sees that, too. We cannot risk taking her with us, and she has no reason to come.”

Oin joined, “And if she did come, it will be only for gold.”

Gandalf boomed again, “I will allow no such words of slander! Had Lily had a love of gold, she would not be found here, and do not mistake it.”

Thorin considered their advice and their bickering. His men did not like her, and neither did he. Evidently, Gandalf saw something they did not, though perhaps he only wanted to add this burden to serve his schemes, or as mockery. He gritted his teeth when he remembered the woman’s words. Not five minutes passed since he entered the house and she already managed to insult him – did so on purpose. Her features, lovely when he first saw them, contorted in scorn, and he saw no beauty in her any longer.

“If you want my aid, you will take her with you,” Gandalf added. He directed his words at Thorin, for none had dared to speak until their leader voiced his opinion.

“We do have quite a few warriors amongst us,” Thorin offered, weighing the options, and to Balin’s scoff, he added, “Courage, loyalty, a willing heart. I can and will ask no more of any of you. Should she show us the same, I will consider her a worthy member of my company.”

She had blue eyes, cold, scornful, expressionless, frightened.

So far, she had nothing to offer that he asked for, and while the youngsters grumbled at his decision, he knew that Balin – and Gandalf, no doubt, understood his words perfectly.

However, even a reluctant agreement was enough to satisfy the old man. He rose from his chair with not an ounce of the difficulty that usually accompanied old age. “A wise decision, Your Grace! Now, I will go and check on Lily, for she has gone for quite a while,” he excused himself and left.

Thorin looked at his men, his true company, and saw only fire in their eyes.

They offered plans, they spoke of risks. Each repeated a rumor heard from passing travelers or traveling merchants. They were unsure, they were worried, and Gandalf’s suggestion for their lucky number, which seemed so promising at the beginning, now seemed like yet another empty promise; another disappointment.
Balin cleared his throat. “Thorin, you have a choice,” he started softly, the age weighing his voice. “You’ve done honorably by our people. You have built a new life for us in Ered Luin, a life of peace and plenty. A life that is worth more than all the gold in Erebor.”

Thorin stirred. He could have no doubts, not in his heart nor theirs, if their quest were to succeed. “There is no choice, Balin. Not for me. Our home was taken from us, stolen from us. Our men, women, and children died in the wild, starved in the cold, lost their honor, their comfort, their freedom. We paid with many lives, and while we had nothing – a once great people brought low – that snake stole our home and enjoyed its riches. We will reclaim our homeland, free it from his grasp, and seize back Erebor!”

They had an outline of a plan, but no actual plan, and some of his men saw too many winters or too few. Many, indeed, had not held a weapon for too long a time and allowed their skills to rust. But now, cheering and chanting, their spirit lifted and their eyes blazing –

Balin smiled and raised his cup, “To Erebor! To Thorin! To Durin the Deathless!”

“Du Bekâr! Du Bekâr!” they shouted in response, and the house shook with their zeal and valor and faith.

He could ask for no more than that.

Ningalor read the contract. Most of it tried to prevent her from suing them, or so it would seem. Loss of reputation, damage to home while gone… renting equipment? What could she possibly rent from them?

There was, in fact, only one section regarding the promised payment – one-fourteenth of the profit. One fourteenth? She looked up upon hearing the door open and saw Gandalf. “They will stab me in my sleep! Fourteenth indeed! The same share as the so-called Duke! Perhaps I misread….”

“You did not misunderstand, my dear. The promise is one-fourteenth of all of the wealth in Erebor indeed, and that is not an amount to be trifled with.” Gandalf smiled gently at her, so she guessed the look on her face must have been quite silly.

“But this is beyond ridiculous! Unprecedented too, to be sure. Are you sure they won’t stab me when the job is done? Nothing in the contract says otherwise.”

“Of course not! How can you possibly think such dark thoughts? They are decent fellows, honest and loyal to the bone.”

“To their leader, perhaps. Not to me.”

“And their leader is an honorable man. Grim, perhaps, but fair.”

She could not ignore the reprimand in his voice and pursed her lips in response. “I have no need for gold. And that much is bound to be trouble, rather than comfort. I have here everything I need.”

Gandalf sighed and sat beside her, took out his pipe and began to smoke. The rich, spicy tobacco filled the room with ashy aroma. “You might not,” the man said slowly, thoughtfully, “but your people do. They need your help.”

“My people?” she protested, “What people? I have none – Except for the Baggins, perhaps, but I do rightly by them, or at least –“
“Do not mock me, child,” Gandalf chided, quick to anger. “I am not speaking of the caretakers! I am speaking of your people! The people you abandoned! Mirkwood is not what it once was. The Great Greenwood is falling. The borders are shrinking, as each passing day brings with it more criminals who choose the trees as their home. The roads are not safe, your people are hiding, and your father does nothing to fix it! Instead, he locks his people inside and sends his guards patrol only the paths close to his home. The once great Dukedom is no longer, and people fear to tread near it.”

Ningalor swallowed with difficulty. “You haven’t told me.” She did not refute his accusation and weathered the sting silently. He hadn’t mentioned that he was the one who made her betrayal possible.

“You haven’t asked.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “And what am I supposed to do? How can I, wealthy or poor, influence his rule? I will not,” she added, voice wavering, “return to him. I will not.”

Gandalf hurried to reassure her. “Of course, I am not saying that you should! Nor will I allow him to find you, if I have any say in the matter. But as a wealthy woman, you can pull many a string. And connections with Erebor, and perhaps even Esgaroth… the possibilities are infinite. All you should do, my dear, is dare. Dare to be brave, and you could help Thorin and his company and save your people. I do believe in you, child.”

Ningalor, her breath quickened, rose from her chair, back ramrod straight, lips pressed into a tight line. She could not. She would not. She opened the door to leave, but the act allowed Thorin’s speech to echo within the small study and her very core.

The story of loss, the massacre, the wretched wandering of his people…

She remembered the fires. She saw the flames from her window. She smelled the ashes.

Clenching her fist, she turned to Gandalf, whose kind eyes told her he knew exactly what went through her mind, and yet, she knew what she had to say. “Fine, I’ll do it. But I have a few conditions I want to be added to the contract.”

Gandalf, damn him, cocked a brow and smiled.

Thorin relaxed in his chair, smoking his pipe, and pored over maps with Balin and Dwalin. The men served his father before him and knew the way well, and their shared experience helped devise the safest and fastest route to the mountain. That is, if all should go according to plan.

The dishes were cleared – one look from him and his men quickly offered their help to the exhausted couple who had been waiting on them all night. Gandalf had finally emerged from the study, though he and the woman still spoke in hushed voices. The old man treated her as his ward, it would seem, and while it should have attested to her worth, all it did was annoy him.

The woman once again raised her eyes to meet his, though her blank expression revealed none of her thoughts. She turned away from him, probably to complain to Gandalf about this or that, for the old man glanced his way before stirring her to the table where he sat.

The woman looked mildly upset, which probably meant she was entirely annoyed with them and the situation. She said nothing, apparently waiting for the old man to start talking.
Gandalf, in a rather rare occurrence, kept his mouth shut.

The woman sent one undecipherable look his way (resentment, surely), before she turned to Thorin and, finally, spoke. “I have heard your words, Your Grace, though no doubt they were not meant for my ears. And yet, I found they had affected me all the same. I would be honored to take part in your quest, such as it may be.”

Her eyes were unwavering, her voice steady and clear, and though he could read nothing from her expression, he also could find no hint of either deception or scorn.

All eyes focused on him, and he replied with the proper respect, still wary of the woman and her intentions. “I accept your services, which were highly recommended.” Scowling slightly, he added, “I cannot guarantee your safety; nor will I be held responsible for your fate.”

The woman cocked her brow. The cunning in her eyes told him she expected such a warning, or perhaps anticipated a similar issue. “The edge of the wild is full of perils. I cannot hold you the culprit of circumstances,” she offered. “However, before I sign this contract, I would like to discuss the addition of three sections, should we all agree on them, of course.”

Thorin narrowed his eyes, yet the fact that the woman was still standing, her posture regal and confident, and the fact that Gandalf was not a step behind her robbed him of any objection he might have had.

“Balin,” he snarled, after a failed attempt to hold his temper in check.

The older man nodded and took out a beautiful, intricate pair of glasses an equally delicate pen, and raised his head expectantly. The woman offered him the contract, moved a chair with undeniable grace and sat down, Gandalf right behind her.

“State your objections, and we shall discuss them.”

“Not objections, Your Grace,” she countered, the movement of her lips sharp but her words cautiously annunciated, “mere… additions. Should they be agreed upon.”

Thorin leaned back in his chair, using his height to his advantage, but the woman did not seem affected by that. She spoke with the same trained expression and articulate voice; she did not join the quest yet, and already she wished to change the terms and demanded to be treated as equal. The insult implied made him tighten his fist in anger.

“Firstly, I would like a promise that no matter the circumstances, the members of the company, myself included, of course, would do all in our power to aid the other members, and allow neither circumstance nor… any other source of hurt or misfortune befall our comrades. Unnatural and natural alike, delivered by fate or by direct order.”

Thorin leaned forward, eyes ablaze with rage. “You think I will hurt my own men? That I intend to harm you on this quest?” he snapped. The implication was clear, and no doubt stemmed from the age-long hate directed at his people. Clearly, they were not worthy of her good opinion, or even good enough to be considered honest or fair in their offers!

The woman did not flinch, though she swallowed before explaining her actions, “I am sorry for what I have implied, Your Grace, but I know you not. Gandalf vouched for your character, and I do believe him, but power may yet change a man, and I prefer to assume the worst about your character and let time and shared experiences prove me wrong than assume the best and be let down,” she answered eloquently.
“I am not a thief in the dark, claiming things above my station. I was born into power; I know its
taste and temptation, and even in exile I have led my people and ruled and served them to the best
of my ability,” he replied. Her explanation felt too elegant, too noble and lofty to be thought on the
spot. As if she predicted his objection. As if she – a mere housekeeper – understood anything about
power and command. Perfection smelled like dishonesty, but one he could not prove. He gritted his
teeth.

“I do not doubt your word; I see the truth of it reflected in the loyalty and love of your men.”

Once again, her ready reply made him scowl. He wanted her to think, to fumble over words, to get
flustered and trip. The more she spoke, the more he suspected her addition was a mistake. The
woman looked like the very definition of a trap.

She continued as if she guessed his thoughts, “However, I am an outsider. And I have seen men,
greater and lesser, born into power or rose into it, who lost sight of the things that truly mattered.”
She sipped from her glass. “It is a precaution, nothing more,” she added, her eyes hard but not
sharp, as she knew she had won.

Thorin’s scowl deepened, but he saw no way he could reasonably object to her clause. He nodded
to Balin, who engraved the words into the aged parchment. He let the woman view the contract,
who nodded appreciatively when the man followed her wording, then to Gandalf, who hummed his
approval, and lastly to Thorin, who gave a sharp, yet firm nod.

He fixed his glare unto the woman, who spoke once again, “Secondly, I would like a promise,
based on good faith and honor bound, that should I ever be in need of a sanctuary, for whatever
reason, Erebor, should it be successfully reclaimed, would be willing to grant it.”

Thorin’s gaze darkened. “Whom do you need protection from?” he asked, his words forceful and
demanding. Was the argument between her and Gandalf, not an hour ago, planned? Another
deception?

“No one at the moment, but should such need arise –“

“You spoke of a man, earlier this dinner,” he interjected, dismissing her lie. His words were harsh.
He did not care if he offended or hurt her – she spoke quite freely in their presence, after all.

The woman did take a moment to answer but did not falter. “Indeed, I have, but Gandalf said that,
at this time, his search for me had come to a halt.”

“Why is he searching for you?” he demanded, displeased with the answer. The woman had existing
enemies. Did Gandalf try to use him as a mercenary army for his ward? The thought burned his
skin.

This time, the woman pursed her lips and Gandalf countered instead, “That, Thorin, is no concern
of yours. But it does not add to your list of enemies, I assure you.”

“Is this because he poses no threat to us, or because he is already an enemy of ours?” Dwalin
demanded. His eyes did not follow the conversation but focused entirely on the woman, as if he
expected her to pounce on Thorin for whatever reason.

“Neither, or rather, somewhat in between, as the situation stands. Let us hope we shall not
encounter him at all,” Gandalf replied as vaguely as he could. “A sanctuary, I should think, is not
too harsh a demand… no length of stay is requested, or any supplies, or even lodging. Lily
provided you with all of that, and she was not even warned of your coming.”
“This is your estate, is it not?” Thorin growled. “It is her duty.”

“She is to manage it, see to the business and balance the numbers. The preparation of food and lodging is not listed among her duties, and yet she did take care of that,” Gandalf objected.

It was a weak argument, hardly a point of comparison, but members of the Dwarven Bond, all too often outcast by the other alliances, did not take hospitality lightly.

“Very well,” Thorin muttered, disgruntled. “But should she ask for such a sanctuary as protection from one of our own, she will have to face a trial.”

“Agreed,” the woman answered, narrowing her eyes at his phrasing, but Thorin merely nodded to Balin, who once again wrote the new section and showed it to all parties involved.

“And the last?” Thorin demanded, already aggravated by the conversation.

This time, the woman did hesitate. She dropped her eyes, betraying a short moment of vulnerability, but when she raised her eyes, it was gone. “Should the quest be accomplished and Erebor were to be reclaimed, and should, amongst the vast wealth of your dukedom, should one find the White Gems of Lasgalen… I would like them.”

This was her least articulate comment, and her voice was quiet and her eyes not half as haughty as before. This was what he hoped for earlier, but that did not matter when he heard her request. “Not an hour ago, you heard of this quest for the first time,” he snarled. His voice dropped several octaves and thickened with anger. “Not half an hour ago, you refused to take part in it. And yet you dare – before we even sat a foot out of this house – you dare claim a part of the treasure as your own?”

The woman flinched, and it was plain to see his words affected her, but she did not back down. “Your anger is justified, as are all of your accusations,” she replied eventually.

Thorin waited, infuriated, but the woman said nothing more and did not attempt to offer any explanation. That, at least, he thought he deserved. “Did you know the gems were in Erebor before you agreed?”

She considered his question for a moment. “Yes.”

“Are they the reason –“

“No!” Came the swift reply.

He loomed over her, his eyes narrow and his glare penetrating. “Why, then?”

She did lean back in her chair to distance herself from him, but other than that did not move. “Leverage.”

The woman sat still, no expression on her face but the hard glint in her eyes. The mere word had a chilling edge to it he did not expect to find in a woman like the one before him.

“I assume you will not tell me who is your target.” He could suspect, however. The man hunting after her and the man she planned to use the gems against were the same man.

The woman shook her head, a short, graceful movement. “He is not of the Dwarven Bond.”

“Why this necklace?”
The woman opened her mouth, closed it, and murmured, “It just seemed like the proper tool.”

Tool, she called it. The art of his people, secrets refined by eons of practice. A tool, she thought it.

She glanced at Gandalf, but the old man shrugged and said nothing. He looked at the unfolding scene with interest but did not participate in it.

“As you like,” Thorin waved his hand. “But should I decide against any or all new additions, I can change the contract as I wish, without informing you.”

“So I’ve read. In that matter, I have no say. I can just hope that your actions will be guided by honest intentions, instead of dishonest ones.”

Once again, her words crawled under his skin and infuriated him. He fixed his irate glare on her, but the woman instead glanced at the paper as her eyes followed the elegant movement of the pen. After they all read and nodded, Balin offered her the pen, and—

The woman paused. She straightened and lowered her hand, which shook slightly.

Gandalf, glancing at the paper, hmmed when he noticed the problem. “I think your signature will do, Lily. Isn’t that right?”

Balin nodded, baffled. “A signature or your name, whichever you prefer.”

Gandalf placed his hand on the woman’s shoulder, a touch she leaned into. She breathed, fixed her posture, raised her hand, and signed with a swift, curved movement.

Afterward, she offered Balin back his pen and swallowed. “I believe our business is done, then?” Her voice, however, was steady.

“Yes.....” Balin took the parchment and glanced at the signature. His face betrayed his utter confusion. “My, what language – is this Sindarin?”

Thorin snarled silently.

“It is the sign of my ward,” Gandalf supplied. “And as valid as a name, if not more, for it is backed up by the Heren Istarion.”

“I see,” Balin replied, studying the symbols, “fascinating. All right, all seems to be in order,” he declared and packed the contract with a pleased expression. “Welcome, Miss Lily, to the company of Thorin Oakenshield!”

The woman smiled thinly, though there was a hint of warmth in her icy eyes. “Thank you, my lord.” She rose and straightened her dress. “I will take care of the sleeping arrangements.” She turned to Thorin, whose suspicion did not fade in the slightest. “Are you to sleep alone, or would you rather share?”

Thorin, of course, did not want to share, but the estate, while large, could not have that many bedrooms. “How many beds do you have?” he inquired, trying to keep the anger from simmering. It was a practical inquiry, one he could not object to.

“Four. All of them large and could hold at least two.” She turned to Gandalf. “I assume you would want to keep your room to yourself.....”

“Well, there must be some benefit to being the owner.” The old man smiled. “And my back is not
what it used to be.”

“Very well. Your Grace?”

“I will lodge with my nephews.” She knitted her brows and so he clarified, “Fili and Kili.”

“I shall add a mattress if one was not already added. My lord?” She turned to Balin, sensing, rightly, that he was the elder.

“I think I will stay with my brother,” the older man replied, and Dwalin grunted his agreement.

“Hmm… for the last bedroom… Oin and Gloin? They are lords as well, are they not?” Her manner was so businesslike, it was nothing short of infuriating. Bossing them around, ordering them…

Gandalf took out his pipe. “And where will you sleep, my dear?”

“With Drogo and Primula. They have brought a mattress down to the servants’ rooms.”

Gandalf furrowed his brow. “You are no servant,” he objected.

The woman’s fingers twitched. “And yet, I am no lord.” She exited the room, her hair and dress billowing behind her.

Gandalf sighed, and only then Thorin realized that his eyes followed her, clouded with anger.

“She used to be a person of great importance, once,” Gandalf said slowly. “Do not mistake her actions or her words for scorn or mockery. She was raised to withhold words and emotions and to reveal nothing.”

Thorin tightened his fist, muttering darkly, “Why are you telling us this? I care not for who she used to be.”

The man puffed a ring of smoke. “You are both grim and bitter, and I refuse to have an adventure without any joy in it,” he replied loudly. “Between the two of you, I fear I may find more cheer in a graveyard.”

“This is not one of your parties, old man,” Thorin hissed, jaw clenching. “I would advise you not to forget that.”

“And I would urge you to listen to my counsel more often,” Gandalf rose, angry himself. “I think I hear music. I shall go and seek the company of like-minded fellows.”

Thorin waved his hand in dismissal, but the old man had already left.

He groaned in aggravation and muttered, “I agreed to suffer an addition to our company to reap the benefits of his wisdom; why must he have picked the most obnoxious one he could find?”

Balin tilted his head. “I am not so sure, Thorin. She is eloquent and presented her arguments rather well. We spent hours debating on the very wording of the contract, remember? She convinced you with relative ease.”

“If Gandalf had not sat right next to her, I would have thrown the parchment in her self-righteous face,” he growled, unwilling to be appeased.

Dwalin shrugged. “Say what you like, there is something not right about her, and I don’t like it.”
He turned to Thorin. “You noticed it too, didn’t you?”

“You noticed what?” Thorin grumbled, tired and suffering from a mild case of a headache.

“You kept staring at her,” The older warrior pointed out.

Thorin, scowling, sipped from his wine glass and said nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
-Du bekâr: To arms, a common Dwarven battle cry.

So! That was the first chapter. Phew! What do you think? Hope you guys like it so far! Any comments would be appreciated, of course =) Next chapter will (hopefully) be posted next Saturday, so stay tuned!

I have to say, after staying away from the world of fanfiction for more than six years, returning to it is quite an exciting adventure. So here I am, back again, and extremely excited to return to the typing side of the written word. Hopefully, my quest will be slightly less painful than Thorin’s.
I Am No Stranger

Chapter Summary

'They have dark eyes, black eyes.  
They do not lie, or pretend, or withhold.  
They wear their souls when their blankets unravel,  
And they do not wait for tomorrow.  
The edge-  
Where the earth is thin and from above and below  
You can see only stone-  
The edge of a knife.'

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was early when she rose. Far too early, in her opinion.

Ningalor got up, back aching from sleeping on the thin mattress, and stretched while trying to hold in her yawn. The small room and the stale, warm air occupying it did not encourage a good night’s sleep, but she offered her bedroom to the Duke the night before, so she didn’t have another option. She wondered, for a moment, what on earth induced her to agree to join this ridiculous quest, that most likely did not have soft mattresses and feather pillows included. She stretched again, grimaced when Drogo gave yet another snore, louder than the one before, and smiled gently when she noticed Frodo’s dark curls. The boy cuddled between his parents and slept as if his father did not try to bring the house down with each breath he took.

Oh, and now she had to sleep each night with fourteen men!

She left the room, washed, and changed into travel appropriate clothing. In her bag, she packed a warm, woolen tunic and thick stockings, wrapped in a thick blanket. She braided her hair and felt nervousness rising in her stomach.

While she dressed, Drogo and Primula rose and prepared breakfast, and the welcoming aroma of eggs and fresh vegetables eased some of her anxiety.

She entered the kitchen, smiling at the hardworking couple, though their tired glances told her they wildly disapproved of the notion of her going on an adventure, and with thirteen strange men, at that! From Prim, muttering, she could tell that Gandalf’s presence only added to their disquiet and distrust. As they shooed her to the dining room, Drogo pushed a bag of apples into her hands and warned her not to eat anything that smelled bad and to never trust the cooking of strange inns – “Do not eat the meats! Dog meat instead of horse, and horse instead of cow!” while Primula gave her a small silver pendant and begged her to wear it – “It is my lucky charm, may it keep you safe!”

And thus, she found herself in the dining room, quite late, and once again, the focus of too many stares.

She placed the bag next to one of the walls, donned the necklace and joined Gandalf’s side, who
smiled brightly at her when she sat next to him.

“I forgot how comely you look in your traveling attire,” he commented, cracking the shell of his poached egg.

“Comic, more like,” she replied and took a generous portion of the salad, which for some reason was left untouched. “I do not like their stares,” she whispered, sensing two young men – the Duke’s nephews? – still drowsy from sleep, glancing her way as they sat down and competed who could chug his pint faster.

“They will get used to you soon enough,” Gandalf said, completely unhelpful, and helped himself to a second portion of bacon. “And you to them,” he added when he noticed her scowling at one of the men, the one that boasted incredibly large proportions, who just managed to catch a hard-boiled egg, which was thrown at him, with his mouth.

“Dear me,” she whined and sipped her tea.

They began to ride.

Thorin led his men. They had a cheer about them that he hoped signaled a good start to a successful journey. Their chatter was lively and friendly as the band of brothers tried to get closer together and become a true fellowship. All except the Diplomat, who kept her mouth shut and did not utter a word from the beginning of their trip. She rode next to Gandalf and did not appear to have an issue with the road nor with the ride, though it was hardly challenging and not a proper test of her expertise. They left the Shire, the small, sheltered settlement that it was, and marched toward darker places, where safety depended on the quickness of your wits and the sharpness of your sword.

He wondered if the woman knew that; if she knew the world at all, or if, like some of her gender, she was more likely to wail and scream in panic at the first sight of blood or danger.

They left the hobbit lands, beautiful, vast planes of rolling hills and little rivers, charmingly green. Slowly, they marched toward the lone lands, where folk were strange and sparse. The settlements were rarer, the trees thicker, and the roads rockier. Still, the woman said nothing.

Thorin enjoyed the ride. The air was crisp, the weather was warm but not overbearing, and the company was full of cheer and song. It felt satisfying, to be seated on top of a saddle and to lead those loyal to him, to do something, rather than sit at home and brood or cater to the needs of lesser folk, especially those loyal to the Brotherhood of Men.

Next to them rose hills, darker than the ones before, and some bore the ancient ruins of deserted castles and fortresses, remains of evil deeds and glory long forgotten. The weather turned cold, and it began to rain.

Thorin turned around to glance at his men. Most huddled into their capes and cloaks and complained about the trickiness of May. Gandalf smoked serenely, quite pleased with himself, and next to him the Diplomat covered herself with a long cloak of dark green, made of something that looked like soft wool and yet was thinner and had a shimmer to it. She was admiring the scenery – or so he thought, there was no expression on her face – when her eyes snapped to meet his and the light blue darkened in response.

He turned away.
In fact, the woman’s clothes surprised him and rankled him even more. They had the distinctive air and the distinctive touch of the Elven Alliance, and looked too expensive for a mere housekeeper to afford. If they were remains of her former life, they indicated too close a connection to the Elven Alliance for him to stomach. The very notion, that a supporter of those back-stabbers rode in their midst!

“Balin,” he uttered, and the man trotted to join his Lord by his side. “The woman’s clothes. What do you think of them?”

“Hmm.” The man did not question his inquiry, though from his tone he undoubtedly thought it strange. He turned to glance at the woman riding behind them. “Good for travel. Rich. No sign of wear… I see no issue with them.”

“They look Elven made,” Thorin growled.

“Ah.”

He and his men had no love for the Elven Alliance, snobbish men who controlled the White Council and thus effectively ruled Middle Earth. No other alliance had that much power or say in the making of the land, a fact that caused deep bitterness in the hearts of those loyal to the Dwarven Bond.

Balin turned around once again. “Yes. Yes, they do, but we cannot blame the woman for her poor taste in clothes.”

Thorin snarled, “She said yesterday she owed her allegiance to no one, like the rest of the Shire, but obviously she lied! She wears their clothes, and no doubt is not from that backward village.”

“Actually… she did not claim to be from the Shire, did she?” Balin pointed gently. “Surely you aren’t jumping to conclusions again? Regardless,” he added, perhaps sensing Thorin’s rising anger, “I am sure Gandalf would know more of the matter.” He turned around and waved, and Thorin could smell the spice of a pipe filling the air as Gandalf trotted to their side.

“Yes?” He smiled benevolently, clearly not as affected by the rain as the rest of the company.

“Gandalf,” Balin started politely, “Thorin was intrigued by Miss Lily’s attire –“

“Did the woman desert her alliance?” Thorin cut through Balin’s words. He did not wish to waste his time with manners. If the woman was a deserter, even of the cursed Elven Alliance, she had no place amongst his men. Treachery was not a thing to be welcomed.

Gandalf’s face darkened in a fearsome scowl. “What makes you say that?” he demanded.

“Her clothes look elven made,” Thorin growled in return. “And she does not live with her kind.”

“They are elven made,” Gandalf replied, “are there no men of the Brotherhood of Men equipped with dwarven weapons?”

“You said she was a person of great importance, and her clothes look too rich for a mere housekeeper,” Thorin countered.

“Oh course she was of great importance, she used to travel with me!” Gandalf answered hotly. “And her clothes were my gift to her. Your hate for everything Elven is unfounded, Thorin.”

“You will not tell me what to feel, and against whom!” Thorin commanded. “I will hold you to
your word,” he added, “but I will not welcome renegades to my company. The inspire evil.”

“How ridiculous you sound.” Gandalf scoffed. “It is not unheard of, to leave one’s alliance.”

“Uncommon, to say the least. And those who leave usually do that to join Morgoth’s Bind.”

Gandalf did not ignore the insinuation and answered gravely, “She is my ward, not his servant. You must trust me on this.”

Thorin scowled, tried and failed to think of a counterpoint, and eventually nodded in sullen agreement, dismissing the men.

The rain kept pouring, Gandalf kept smoking (protected by his large hat, of course) and the road rose higher and higher, and steadily grew worse.

Several days had passed. Ningalor wondered how many more days will the quest take, as she already missed her home, and her bed, and her friends and, oh gods, decent company.

The nights were long, yet sleep did not come easily to her, if it came at all. The earth was cold and uncomfortable, and the concert of snores – penetrating and repulsive. The long watches of the night were a thing she was not used to, and hours spent staring at the unblinking dark and dreading the worst finetuned her nerves till they trembled. She did sometimes manage to fall asleep, but that was usually due to pure exhaustion. Then, the nights often proved too short. Thorin was, apparently, an ambitious leader (stiff-necked and relentless, more like), and a leisurely pace must have been despicable in his eyes.

Her bottom hurt from the long hours spent in the saddle, which she was no longer used to, her muscles ached, and the dreary loneliness of the East Road, under cover of darkness, did not help chase away her bleak thoughts.

Under the gentle rays of the untroubled sun, however, the world looked different. She found beauty in the wild planes and the untamed land, and that was enough to satisfy her disquieted mind. Gandalf’s company too was a great change, even if the man enjoyed communicating with the rest of the men far more than she deemed necessary.

More often than not, her eyes, bored and idle, were drawn to the broad back of the leader of their company. Clad once again in fur and wool and mail, the man looked bigger and broader than he appeared in Bag End, but on the road, his large size was graceful and commanding. His intensity and wildness of character, unwelcomed before, embraced the wilderness of the surrounding. They were becoming on him, in this untamed land.

Each night they stopped about half an hour before sunset. Gloin or Oin often lit a fire – they seemed to take pleasure in the task and were proficient at it, while the younger men (and she included) were sent to fetch wood for kindling and scout the land.

Well, they scouted; Ningalor mostly focused on not getting lost.

They would sit next to the fire, Bombur (that was the name of the larger fellow, she discovered. A kind and decent man, even if slower and more physically challenged than the rest of them) cooked, and they ate. They celebrated their cheer with loud songs, as they were rowdy and fond of it, and Gandalf was fond of them.

Ningalor mostly looked at them, detached, and felt incredibly out of place.
And if there was a hint of longing in her eyes, no one but Gandalf could have spotted it, but the Istar’s attention was fixed on the men, not on her.

Sitting alone and detached from the group as well was Thorin. She sometimes saw him smiling or gazing benevolently at his men, but usually he scowled at his maps, or just stared ahead, scowling at nothing. Perhaps she looked too often than was strictly necessary.

Sometimes, she felt the weight of eyes, piercing eyes gazing at her through the flames, but she never caught anyone looking at her, and instead felt increasingly uncomfortable.

Imagining she was being stared at could not possibly be healthy.

Sleep came slowly to him now, light and troubled, and often burdened by dreams of fire.

He wondered if he should talk to Gandalf about it, as the man was a renown Istar, but the woman never left his side, and even the thought of her annoyed him enough to disregard the notion. Nor could he tolerate her company or her eyes, always guarded. She often sat alone and detached, observing his men with no expression on her face. She looked grim and aloof, and in the firelight, her hair, long and blonde, reflected the flames beautifully, but her fair skin looked waxy and the shadows that danced upon her face made her look dreary and witchlike.

He closed his eyes to chase away the unnatural look of her and hoped to find sleep instead.

Orcs.

He roused immediately, blood pumping and ears ringing and reached for his weapon –

The clearing they slept in was empty of foes, his companions snored peacefully, and the strange noises of the forest were calming, not alarming.

“Throat cutters, smugglers, murderers. You know the sort.”

That was Fili, sounding unnecessarily excited.

Kili joined, “They attack in groups, at the small hours of the night, making no noise –“

“Clearly,” The Diplomat’s voice cut through their words, sharp with anger, “you were never attacked by Orcs. Otherwise, you would have known that their attacks are many things, but never quiet,” she reprimanded.

Kili scoffed. “One or many, let them come! I will kill these traitors by the dozen!”

Fili snickered. “Don’t say that, you might scare her again.” When the woman frowned, he added, “You jumped.”

“You squealed.”

Thorin heard enough. “You think this is a joke? That to be ambushed by Orcs is fun?” he thundered.

The boys ceased laughing immediately and the woman, who sat farther away from the flames and on top of a large rock – apparently attempting to guard the camp, and poorly at that if Fili managed to terrify her with his trick – froze but did not turn to look at him.
Kili looked down sheepishly. “We didn’t mean anything by it.”

Thorin found it hard to forgive. “Of course you didn’t. You know nothing of the world, much less of those cursed traitors.”

He marched to the edge of the clearing, trying to calm his raging heart and silence the screams. The fires. His brother –

Some memories are better left to rest, along with the fallen.

He heard Balin mentioning it, the Battle of Azanulbizar, but could not find it in him to listen.

After losing their dukedom, they sought to reclaim another, long ago lost to those traitors, sworn to the Fourth Alliance whose name was rarely mentioned and often spat with rage or uttered in fear.

His grandfather dead. His brother massacred. His father, gone to try to reclaim their old home, disappeared without a trace. He was seventeen. At that age, no one should have expected him to lead.

He led. He had to.

He buried his grandfather, wept over his brother, and marched to the Blue Mountains.

The grief was too near, the pain too fresh. Too many they lost, too many they buried. The Orcs and the Goblins, two cursed clans that waved the Flag of Morgoth with pride, were defeated, but not before they laid waste to his already spent people. Moria was no home to them, not then, not now, and Ered Luin proved to be poor lodging where the bitter taste of exile never left his mouth.

He snapped open his eyes.

The woman was looking at him, her eyes hooded and guarded. No, there was understanding in them, in the dark pools of her eyes. No compassion or pity, no scorn or mockery.

Her lips, which were parted, closed, and once again she hid behind her blank mask and said nothing as she looked away.

The night was quiet. His boys, repentant now, were asleep. Balin also settled into his cloak, and the Diplomat looked at the forest and said nothing.

His gaze did not leave her. A small, hunched figure, lonely atop of the rock she chose to guard, blending with the blackness of the night. Her golden hair, tied in a messy braid that gleamed in the moonlight, and her pale face were the only features that stood out in the darkness.

“Balin said,” she whispered, still not looking at him, “that your deeds earned you a name. After your house had fallen, you created your legacy.”

He scowled, not sure what her words were supposed to mean. “It was not my intention to fight with a branch, but dying was not an option I could consider.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” she said – did she correct him?

He frowned, straightening. “What is that supposed to mean?” he demanded, words harsh, perhaps too loud in the quiet night.

The woman turned to look at him. “He said he found someone to follow, a leader. A leader of men whose respect was won in battle would not allow himself to die, not while his men needed him.”
Thorin still glowered. He was unsure what her words meant or how to respond. Her face did not leave clues that could help him accomplish either. “Am I supposed to thank you?” he growled.

Whatever kindness the woman’s face held, he noticed only when it was gone. “Clearly, manners are quite a different forte.” She no longer looked at him.

“What do your duties, and keep your fancy words to the time when we will have actual use of them,” he ordered and turned away, closing his eyes.

The woman did not answer, but when the morning came and the days to follow, she pointedly ignored him. While no one else noticed that, since they rarely spoke or glanced at each other’s direction (he had a right to, she was suspicious), he did.

He did, and he cursed the confounding woman for being far too difficult and arrogant than a simple housekeeper had any right to be.

Ningalor watched the men, thinking, but her thoughts were gentle and pleased, and there was no frown on her face. Bofur was clearly the friendliest, and his sweet and kind spirit brought many a smile to the travelers’ weary faces. He always had a positive remark to share, an encouraging comment, a supportive hand. His cousin, Bifur, was the quiet sort. He too was kind and gentle and preferred to show his kindness by making things for those who needed them, usually a clever toy made of an unwanted piece of wood, a scrap of metal or a small rock. Bombur had shown his kindness with food, which he took great care to prepare, and always made sure everyone had eaten their full before he finished the caldron. The three were simple folk, and yet they were treated as equal by the high-born and showed their kindness to all.

The loudest, of course, were Kili and Fili. The two heirs clearly had great love and respect for their uncle and tried to impress him in every turn, be it by demonstrating their skill, volunteering for every task, or just boasting of killing. That was Kili, usually. The younger boy had an endless supply of cheer and energy, while his brother, the more serious out of the two, tried his best to take care of his younger brother and prove his worth.

The other nobles had their fair share of loudness. Gloin and Oin often argued, about trade or money or politics… every time they found a new topic worthy of debate. The old healer and the seasoned banker were formidable warriors and tactless conversationists, which often just added fuel to the fire. The other trio of Dori, Nori, and Ori proved interesting to watch. Dori was a very decent, respectable fellow, whose primary concern was taking care of his younger brother Ori and brewing the very best tea kettle he could each night they could afford it. He would drink his tea, make sure Ori was healthy, warm and comfortable and unbruised. Ori, who preferred to write or draw in his journal, grumbled at the excessive attention but complied without putting too much of a fight. He was older than the Heirs yet shyer, which made him appear younger and more inexperienced than the loud duo. Nori, on the other hand, was almost an odd attachment. He and Dori visibly did not see eye to eye on most things, and the sneakiness of his character made Ningalor wonder if this brother had a love for trouble the older brother did not approve of. He was very loyal to his kin and always watched out for them from the corner of his eye, but sitting and talking with his brothers was not something he often practiced.

Then there was the leading trio – the Advisor, the Warrior, and the Duke. Balin’s kindness was earned but also offered. His cunning eyes missed little, yet he did not let much on. Hiding behind his gentle smile, he made his judgment secretly, though his loyalty unmistakably lay with the man he was now advising. His brother was much like him in this manner – fiercely loyal and suspicious, yet he did not cloak his nature with kindness like Balin had. He trusted neither her nor
Gandalf and displayed his dislike of them openly. She did not blame him for it since she had yet no opportunity to prove her worth, such as it was.

They were both standing with their backs to her, poring over some old maps while Gandalf shook his head angrily. Thorin took little notice. Thorin…

“There was once a king! He ruled all of Middle Earth. In the time when there was still technology, and mechanical rings and mechanical swords and –“

“Laddie, I know there was a king,” Bofur answered kindly, “but not for many years. Will not be again, I wager. The last king was murdered by the Fourth Alliance and since then there was a king no more. There is a fine old tune about that… not sure about the mechanical nonsense, though.”

Kili objected hotly, “Mama told me the old stories, of trees of gold and silver, and the Jewels of Fëanor, and –“

“Just old stories, lad,” Oin said. “No trees can shine, and no jewels reflect a light produced from trees. Bedtime stories, is what it is.”

“The high king too,” added Bombur.

“The High King was real.” Frowned Ori. “I read it. The last king, his name was… Glad… Glad something-“

“Gil Galad,” Ningalor supplied. They turned to look at her, seated far away from them and covered in shadows. “Gil Galad was the last King. He was the protector of two of the three mechanical rings, Vilya and Narya. Those were not mere stories.”

“Nonsense, lass!” objected Dori. “Do not fill the boys’ heads with fish tales! They are stuffed with enough nonsense as it is!”

“The first and the second kin slaying are not myths, as well as the Oath of Fëanor that caused them. Unless you mean that The War of the Great Jewels was fought for nothing,” she replied, annoyed at having her words taken so lightly.

“The war was fought, aye, but not for jewels that could shine on their own!” Dori countered.

“The technological ore, while forgotten, is not a fable or a legend. The sacred trees, as well as their lost light, caused many deaths and were the reason for much bloodshed. This is history, not a fairytale.”

“Come on, lass, don’t tell me you honestly believe that!” Gloin chuckled. “Trust a female to believe a children’s story!”

“I am afraid that children’s story is true,” Gandalf interjected. “There is still machinery in this world, Gloin, and those old stories should not be trifled with. Nor should we talk of such dark history, this late at night.” Gandalf sent her a meaningful glare, so she pursed her lips and said nothing. She could feel Thorin’s eyes on her, yet preferred to sulk and stare at the fire than return his unwavering, unsettling gaze.

Bofur took out his fiddle. “Gil-galad was an Elven-king.

Of him the harpers sadly sing;

The last whose realm was fair and free
Between the Mountains and the Sea,” he sang gently. His voice was not the sweetest, nor the most soulful, yet it had a lovely tinge to it, like a seasoned troubadour telling a charming, melancholic tale.

“His sword was long, his lance was keen.
His shining helm afar was seen;
The countless stars of heaven's field
Were mirrored in his silver shield…” He stopped playing and lowering his bow. “I’m afraid I forgot the rest. Old age, lousy memory.”

Ningalor, feeling somewhat foolish (or perhaps just reckless, spurred by the scrutinizing glare,) sang softly, “But long ago he rode away,
And where he dwelleth none can say;
For into darkness fell his star
In Mordor where the shadows are.”

She did not have the prettiest of voices, but young ladies of her court were trained in the art of singing, and her voice carried on well, accompanied by Bofur’s skillful playing. They were all silent now, for none but the fire dared to speak. The song was a lament for time and heroes lost in legend, and Ningalor’s voice had no cheer or storytelling quality in it. She mourned the High King, and, judging by the hollowed silence, they sensed her grief in her singing.

“You sure know a lot about the High King,” said Bofur, gazing at her curiously.

“It is the tragedies that haunt you, long after the heroes were laid to rest,” she replied, weighing her words.

“He was not the first king to die,” Balin pointed out. “All of his predecessors died tragically.”

“Yes, but he was the last,” she answered softly.

How lonely were nights in the wilderness; how alone she felt treading them, a vagabond with no home nor people to call her own. And the High King, fallen. Forgotten. Left to the care of threadbare, moth eaten songs. Was he lonely, when he fell? Was he scared? Could he, who died so bravely, forgive her cowardice?

She returned Thorin’s gaze, and after a long moment of silent glaring, the exiled Duke dropped his eyes, once again, to his maps.

Days followed nights, and long watches and endless rides chased the hours away.

Thorin looked at the stars, wondered at their endless shine, and then looked down at his men. His boys, first, always the first; on his list of worries, in his moments of fear, during scenes of battle. How hard it was to balance exposing them to enemies and wishing to keep them from harm. They were old enough, he knew, fine and young and healthy, and they needed to see the world, to claim their share in it. Dis, their mother (his fiery, beloved sister) was adamant that he would take care of them always and see to them first. She did not need to worry about that, of course. He would die
before he would let harm befall them, the treasures of his life.

He had no children of his own, too busy and burdened to entertain a thought of a wife or of marriage. He had to take care of his men, provide for his family, rule. He did not have the time to look after another. Nor did he need such a person in his life – the boys meant everything. For them, he will reclaim Erebor and create a life worth living. For them.

The boys were too young. They did not see Erebor in its glory, nor its fall. They never left Ered Luin, and every moment was a wonder to them. The others were less sheltered, and even the men that did not come from Erebor, that is, Bifur, Bofur, and Bombur, were no strangers to sleeping on rocks or riding ceaselessly. Nor did the woman, it would seem, though her desire to bathe whenever they spotted a river next to their camp was entirely too troublesome for his liking. Gone far downstream, so they would not spy on her, and always returning late, often late enough to make him worry and terrify the watcher… she only caused trouble.

Gandalf, of course, thought it was very amusing.

Right now, the woman’s only worth as a diplomat was proved in her ability to remain silent. She did not talk to them, granted, but since it was not them they hired her to speak with, he only found that mildly vexing.

The rest of the company proved true still. Balin and Dwalin, of course, he trusted with his life. His more distant cousins, Oin and Gloin, were useful and knowledgeable, and their skill with weapons was not something to be taken lightly. The Ri brothers were also helpful, though he still did not understand Ori’s purpose nor his need to describe everything they went through in detail. Bofur and Bifur were fighters as well, if less trained than the rest of his men, and he would not exchange Bombur’s cooking for anyone’s (the man could make a soup out of nothing). It was the woman that, therefore, had yet to contribute anything to justify her part in the adventure, though, thankfully, she did not eat much. If only he could get Gandalf to promise she won’t sing about dead kings ever again, and he could suffer her presence without complaining too much about her.

He wondered how could a woman, and plainly a sheltered one at that, sing so sadly about a man who died decades before she drew her first breath.

Their road led them to a small forest, and the rain chased away whatever cheer the company had. Thorin and Gandalf rode ahead, arguing as usual. Ningalor could not hear what they said, and she paid little attention to them. If it were something that concerned her, she would eventually learn of it. If not, she had no intention to pry and little curiosity as the situation stood. Thorin’s words still burned and infuriated, and she decided to ignore him as best as she could; which, of course, didn’t require much.

She knew, sitting alone and speaking mostly (only) to the Istar isolated her from the group, and that the men thought her rude and a snob. Superior to them, dismissive of their food and songs and general merriment. They were not entirely wrong, but her isolation did not stem from scorn. Rather, she simply had no idea how to approach them and, in any case, had little to say. Therefore, when Gandalf rode ahead, she rode alone.

“A penny for your thoughts?”

The voice startled her more than she dared to admit. She turned her gaze to the man who had just joined her side. Bofur.
He had kind eyes and a cheery disposition. He was not handsome of face, with his large ears and long nose, lopsided eyes and eyebrows, but his sheer optimism and good faith, as well as his kindness, made his face a great sight to look upon. The friendly man attempted to reach out, it would seem, and she did not want to offend him, yet knew not how to show him that his attention was appreciated.

It did take her about a year to open up to the Baggins family, and they were a cheerful and friendly, unworried sort, unbruised by the world.

“I’m afraid they are not worth that much,” she said eventually, “merely admiring the scenery.”

“Hmm,” the man smiled at her. He had a strange looking hat, old and battered, and was not high born, like most of the company. She did wonder how he stumbled into this quest, what had drawn him, and how did it feel, to be standing on equal grounds with his lord and ruler?

It was not her place to ask, so she said nothing.

“Don’t look much like home, yeah?”

“Excuse me?” she breathed. A bit too sharply, apparently, for Bofur raised his hands and blinked in confusion.

“The Shire. It don’t look like the Shire. That’s all I meant.”

“Oh.” She felt incredibly foolish, then. “Yes. Indeed, it does not. Rather refreshing, I should think, even if some of these ruins do look sinister,” she babbled, trying to make up for her earlier response.

Bofur laughed openly and the unease was gone from his features, though Ningalor still felt it burning in her stomach. “Don’t let the boys ‘ear you talk. Ori don’t show it, but I think he is mighty frightened. And Kili and Fili do no good, either. Fili has a good head, but Kili’s too young still. Tries to prove himself too much, get his uncle to notice ‘im.”

Ningalor pursed her lips, and then decided to speak her mind; he declared his freely, so why should not she? “They are too young, though. The Heirs to the title should not be placed at such a risk.”

Bofur frowned at her. “And who said that? Thorin earned his respect. Born into it, yeah, but he earned his place. Fili should know the price. This is perilous times, and lord and miner alike may die all the same. Titles don’t mean much when you face the wrong end of the sword.”

Ningalor knitted her brows, considering his words. There was truth to them, the truth of hard life won in sweat and blood. This was not her life. She had no part in their world or their culture. Perhaps that is why Thorin was so offended by her words… was it three nights ago?

“I did notice,” she said suddenly, “that you and your kin do not use titles or prefixes.”

Bofur half smiled at her, though she could not understand the reason. “That, Lily,” he said, perhaps a bit too emphatically, “is the true meaning of brotherhood. Like I said, titles mean nothing when a horse runs you over, or an arrow pierces your heart. We are all the same, ‘ere. Besides, will take years to get your message across if you had to say ‘my lord’ and ‘your grace’ every five minutes, aye?”

She nodded thoughtfully and said nothing in response. They were so different from the people she was raised with; the intricacies of the court held no meaning to them, at least in the wild, and they valued fellowship above manners. It sounded so silly, she suddenly realized, to judge a man by the
way he spoke, rather than by his words.

Bofur glanced at her. “You just the quiet type, or did I offend you?”

“No offense was made, Bofur. Worry not,” she answered, glancing at him shortly before looking away.

“You never sit with us,” he pointed out. “I was thinking, maybe we do something wrong?”

“Hardly,” she murmured, “but I am not of your kind, I’m afraid.”

He frowned at her. “What’s that supposed –“

“We will camp here tonight!” Thorin roared, bringing his horse to a full stop with a sharp snap of the reins.

They halted in confusion and looked at the surrounding, yet found no good reason to stop right here, right now.

‘Here’ being the middle of nowhere, too close to the road, right next to ruins of a house – an area without any strategic value (or so Gloin muttered; she had no idea what he meant) – but while the others scanned the surrounding, Ningalor watched Thorin and Gandalf. Both men looked furious, and no doubt the argument between them was the real reason behind Thorin’s order.

“Oin! Get a fire going!” Thorin commanded, jumping off of his horse. “Fili! Kili! Take care of the horses!”

Ningalor ignored him as he left and instead glanced at Gandalf worriedly, wondering if it would be a good idea to ask the infuriated Istari what was going on.

“Thorin Oakenshield!” the man challenged. “This is not a good place to stay, and if, for once, you will listen to advice other than your own –“

“Curse them!” Thorin bellowed, turning on the old man. “The Elven Alliance did not help us then when we needed them, and I will not go and beg for their help now! The White Council, all controlled by men sworn to that Alliance, sat and did nothing while my people starved!”

“And bearing a grudge is the surest way to keep them fed, is it not?” Gandalf responded. “So be it,” he muttered, turning his horse away from them.

“Gandalf? Where are you going?” Ningalor called after him, feeling incredibly lost and extremely childish. Alone. Yes, she felt that too. She kicked her horse to follow him, unsure of the situation.

“To seek the company of the only person who makes sense around here!”

“And that would be?”

“Myself!”

She stopped her horse and watched Gandalf kicking his to a gallop.

She breathed in and straightened her back, looking at his fading figure. That should definitely not have offended her as much as it did, but the hurt was there, undeniable. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them, all residue of emotion evaporated.

She turned her horse around.
They were all looking at her, even Thorin, though she did not return his gaze as she guided her horse back to the makeshift camp.

“Is he coming back?” asked Dori, fumbling through his bag.

“I do hope so. Otherwise, the bargain for my service would not be worth much,” she replied, voice perhaps a notch too cold – poor Dori did not deserve it – but while it was easy to school her expression, it was hard to ignore the simmering pain. She got off of her horse and brushed its fur with her fingers, allowing the beast to eat with the rest of the horses.

Life would have been so much easier if she were a beast, and not a human, particularly a woman, especially unmarried.

She was twenty-five, and already the world told her she should not hope for much.

At some point Bombur prepared soup, and despite the lovely (and quiet) company of the horses, she, unlike them, could not feast on grass, and so she had to return to the company of men.

The cook did give her a strange look when he offered her a bowl, which she, of course, properly thanked him for, and the people of the company did send concerned (or suspicious) looks her way, but she ignored them to the best of her ability. When Bofur asked her if she could deliver food to the heirs, she did not mind the interruption but welcomed it as an excuse to get away.

The younger men, however, did not seem to notice the bowls of steaming soup she carried for them. Instead, they were gazing at the horses, quite transfixed.

“Lily, are you good with your numbers?” asked Kili, not looking her way.

“I suppose….” She frowned. “What is this all about?”

“The horses… how many horses can you see?” Fili asked, and the hesitation in his tone indicated that this time, the boys were not playing tricks.

She counted the horses. And then she counted again. Squinting and stepping closer, she counted one last time, to check. “Fili,” she decided to address the elder, “why are there only twelve horses grazing? Where are the other two?”

“That, is the very heart of the problem,” the young man answered, frowning.

Ningalor huffed. “Well, don’t just stand there! You two are scouts, aren’t you? Go find the other two while I guard the other twelve, and let us lead them to the clearing, where it will be harder for them to wander.”

“Lily, we did tie them,” Fili protested.

“Apparently, not good enough.”

“Our ties are the best!” Kili added.

“Then perhaps the thing you tied them to wasn’t strong enough.”

“We tied them to trees,” Fili objected.

“What is your point?” she asked, thoroughly exasperated.
The two men showed her each a cut rope.

“Oh,” she breathed. “Oh.” Gathering her wits, she declared, “Even a better reason to get them away from the trees! I will alert the company –“

“No!” Kili shouted.

“Let’s not tell Thorin, just yet,” Fili amended.

“He will be terribly angry.”

“You really don’t want to see this.”

“We don’t want to see this.”

“And we are his nephews.”

“And he loves us.”

“So.”

Ningalor had to work very hard to prevent her lips from twitching. “Fine, though I do think this is a stupid idea. What do you suggest?”

The young men exchanged a short, excited look. “We sneak into the forest, find the robbers, and get our horses back,” Fili said.

“This plan is far too reckless –“

“We will take care of them, you will take care of the horses,” Kili promised.

“We do not know their number, their location, their weapons, we –“

“Shhh!” both brothers hushed her and pulled her to the ground, and then she saw why.

Fire. A blink of light, next to a small cabin.

The brothers prowled toward the fire. Soon, they discovered the camp of the thieves and the thieves themselves. They were huge in size, fat and slow, with arms and legs as thick as small trees. This, she thought to herself, did not look promising.

Tied to a pole, right next to them, were two of their horses, looking a bit agitated but not all too affected by the situation.

The two heirs looked at her expectedly, and Ningalor sighed, prayed, and began to crawl.

“Nice two ‘orses you caught there, Bill!” croaked one of them, glancing at the beasts, “Can I ‘ave the white one? Always wanted a white ‘orse.”

While the men talked, she crawled toward the horses with one of Fili’s daggers, hoping to not get noticed.

“Shut up, Tom!” said the one called Bill, who roasted something that looked like a whole pig’s leg over the fire, and then took a large, juicy bite out of it. “Ya wa one, ya get yer own ‘orse!” He wiped the grease on his sleeve and swallowed loudly.
Crawling, apparently, was harder than it looked. Rough stones and twigs and roots rubbed uncomfortably against her limbs that already began to ache.

“Where did ya found them? I seen no horse round ‘ere since I was a wee lad,” said the third.

*Just a bit further,* she thought desperately as she crept toward the horses. She was so close. *Just a bit further.*

“There. There they were. Now, all she had to do was cut the bloody rope. The rope she could not reach from her spot on the ground. Perfect.

“Ya mean there are people out there?” the third roared, spitting a bone out of his mouth, “But they can come for – hey!” He turned around to look at the horses, just when Ningalor, unfortunately, stood to cut the rope.

The man grasped her hand, rendering any attempt to bolt futile, and twisted it so she dropped the knife. “Look, boys! I found a mare,” he hissed – and cursed in pain when a rock hit his head –

“Let her go!” Kili challenged as he and his brother burst from the woods, waving their swords in a dramatic entrance.

The man did let her go when he turned to face the intruders, though not intentionally. “Boys! We got company!” Bill roared and picked up his axe.

The cabin was not empty, and six men – just as humongous – walked out, carrying axes and swords. She did not stay to watch.

Running through the trees was not as easy a thing as she had previously thought, especially not during nighttime when roots and shadows of roots lay hidden in the uneven ground and attempted to trip her, while the bushes and the undergrowth grabbed her tunic with greedy branches, making her falter and stumble on every step.

When she finally made it to the camp, she had no breath left, only just enough to yell - “Thieves!”

Immediately, the men rose from their seats, dropped their bowls and mead, and ran into the forest with Thorin in the lead. They did not need her to guide them as the sound of metal scraping metal was enough of a clue. The took over the chase easily, while she, less fit and sure of foot, tripped and fell behind.

Crouching in the greenery with nothing but shouts of battle to let her know one was occurring, she wanted to remain there and hide. Brave she never was, and running into a fight, with no weapons? Not that a weapon would have made her all that useful, mind. And yet, the idea of disappearing in the moment of need did not sit well with her, so she took a deep breath, cursed the fates for bringing her here and Gandalf for his absence, and stumbled into the camp.

Chaos was the only way to accurately define the sight that welcomed her.

The men of the company – shouting, stabbing, falling, running, and the gang – doing much of the same, really. In the flickering light, she found it hard to tell who was a foe and who a friend, and she wondered how they could tell and aim their blows. Sensing panic and bile rising within her, she remembered her original task and turned to do just that. She tried to free the horses.

Circling the edge of the battle and thus avoiding the true terror of metal and blood and screams, she
stepped toward the frightened beasts and, after a moment (perhaps minutes, perhaps seconds, she was too terrified to tell) found Fili’s dagger and began to cut the rope.

“Bitch!”

That was her only warning.

The horses, once free, bolted and made her stumble into the light and drop the dagger.

One of the men – Bill, was it? – grabbed her by the hair and put a knife to her throat. “Ya move and I stick ya like a pig, got dat?” he hissed, not like she had any intention of moving, frightened as she was, and bellowed, “Oi! Drop yer weapons! Drop ‘em or I cut ‘er open! Do it!”

There were three of the giant men standing while the entire company was still uninjured and battle ready.

They were winning, and she ruined that. She failed them. She saw it in their eyes, and she looked away before the word ‘burden’ would have been branded on her forehead. She refused to meet their eyes and closed hers in shame when she heard the tale telling sound of metal hitting the ground.

“Tie ‘em up!” he ordered. “Make one wrong move, and I stick the fucking bitch, I swear I will!”

The two other gang members seemed to rejoice in the task and tied the men with thick ropes as tight as they could.

“We should Kill ‘em, Bill! Let's Kill ‘em!”

“Yeah, show ‘em not to mess with the Troll gang!”

“Start with the tall one, I don’t like that look of his.”

This was not good. Not good at all. Not good not good not good – Gandalf.

They had hope. They had Gandalf, and Gandalf was not yet caught. All she had to do, she thought in pure, sheer panic, was play for time. And she’d better start now, before they chopped Dwalin’s head off.

“Stop!” she shouted, still not sure of her plan but sure she had to say something.

She was slapped for her efforts and knocked to the ground, and then, stars blinking in front of her eyes, had her head twisted up when the men pulled on her hair. She may have cried out, but, in her panic, was not too sure.

“Ya don’t talk, bitch,” the man ordered, his breath hot and the stench nauseating.

She coughed. “No, wait, Bill? Bill, was it?”

“I said, ya don’t talk, or I knock yer pretty lil’ teeth out, one by one –“

Cruel. Right. “He, he killed your gang, members of it. They all did,” she gasped. “Can’t just – can’t just kill him, y’know? You need to… to torture him first!” she tried to imitate a bit of their way of talk, terrified they will beat her just for sounding pretentious.

Smart. Yes, that exactly what she was hired for. Only years of self-control prevented her from rolling her eyes at the shouts of protest that emerged from the tied men.
“Oh? Lil’ bitch ‘ere ain’t so bad after all.” The thieves laughed. “What’d ya want to do with ‘em, eh?”

Something that would attract Gandalf. Or someone. Anyone.

“I… I’d make a fire, a big, very big fire, and burn all of them together, so everyone will hear them shouting, really, really, really loud.” She did make eye contact with them then, hoping to find anyone who’d understand –

Out of all the men, who shouted curses at her and damned her, only Thorin looked, if anything, contemplative.

“Really, really loud, on a very big fire, so everyone will hear and see and know not to mess with you,” she emphasized. “They killed six of your men.”

“Dat they did,” said Bill. “Tom, Bert, get a fire going! A bigger one!”

Tom rumbled and began to throw wood into the fire, but Bert did not move. “I say we start by burning one right now. Just to get a taste. Just for fun. No one can tell de difference between thirtn and twelve shouten men, aye?”

“No, you have –“

“Shut up!”

A strong kick to the face did shut her up, as well as the blood trickling from her nose and mouth. She gingerly touched her teeth with her tongue, but none of them appeared to be moving. Good. She decided to risk her luck a little further.

“Take the one that killed most of your men, then,” she suggested, and flinched when Bill turned to look at her, but this time, he did not kick her. She crawled back slowly, her hand searching in the grass, searching…

“But wo killed the most? That stupid!” Bert complained. “I just say we go wuth the younger one ‘ere, to make ’em beg.” He reached for Ori, and while he was not the youngest, the suggestion was still horrifying.

“I killed the most!” Thorin’s voice boomed.

Tom, who was still collecting and piling wood, blinked. “I thought ‘e did?” He pointed at Dwalin.

“Thorin, no!” shouted Balin. “I killed the most!”

“No, I!” roared Dwalin.

“No, I!” joined Kili.

“I killed the most!”

“No, I killed the most!”

“I killed the most –“

“And may you kill many more!” boomed, thankfully, a very familiar voice –

From the shadows, three arrows sprang in quick succession, and the gang members dropped to the
ground, each with a harsh sounding thud.

Ningalor was never happier to see someone dead in her entire life.

Gandalf hurried to the men, dropped Kili’s bow and began to free them from the ropes, and those he freed were quick to help each other. Ningalor, slowly and carefully, stood up. She gingerly touched her face. Her cheek was boiling to the touch, but her nose did not hurt too much anymore. Her lips still did, but her mouth did not burn as it did before. She tried to wipe the blood with her fingers, feeling still very much ashamed, when Oin suddenly appeared by her side and said kindly. “Come here, lass, let me look at you.”

He took her by the elbow and placed her next to the fire so he could observe her face properly, tsked-tsked, shook his head and announced, “Nothing broken! I’ll just spread some ointments, and tomorrow you’ll be as good as new!”

A hand suddenly appeared, holding a smooth, wet cloth. She accepted the fabric and wiped her face carefully, avoiding the concerned look in Gandalf’s eyes.

“Lily, what on earth happened?”

“It was my fault, I was caught,” she muttered, looking down. New blood tickled with each word she uttered. “I had an idea to play for time until you had returned, but I dare say it was not too bright. As you can see.” She pointed to the bruise on her face.

“Now, surely you did very well! I saw the massive fire, which was far too large, and heard the shouting. Excellent way of attracting anyone’s attention, I dare say.”

“Which would not have been necessary, if someone didn’t get caught.” Thorin’s deep, smooth voice, joined the conversation.

Ningalor wished she could have groaned, but Oin was currently busy applying a nasty smelling ointment to the deep cut on her lower lip.

“Thorin!” Gandalf warned. “You are the warrior, and she is the bruised one? How dare you complain?”

“Had she not tried to… whatever it is she tried to do, we would have been victorious,” he growled.

“Had she not tried to play for time, you would have been dead,” Gandalf countered, and would have said more, perhaps, if Ningalor had not pulled his sleeve quite pathetically. No doubt she looked pathetic, covered in ointment to reduce the swelling of her nose, stop the bleeding of her lips, and ease the burning of her cheek. She did not look at Thorin, and, in fact, said nothing for the rest of the night and the morning to follow it. When any of the men sought to talk to her, she simply pointed to her swollen lip and walked away, for even if they tried to be kind, the shame that this moment brought was not something she wanted to be remembered or pitied for.

“Check the cabin!” Gandalf ordered, “We never know what we may find!”

They quickly went to explore, all too happy to leave the bad memories of the Troll encounter behind, and indeed, the cabin, while foul smelling, held several treasures – gold and food and ale, old clothes and dirty bedding, several rusty weapons…

Ningalor walked outside, feeling no pleasure at the sight of the spoils, and continued her search for the dagger. She found it, eventually, as well as the two horses, as the beasts rejoined their herd and continued to graze as if nothing happened. From far away, she could see… a cloud of dust?
Something that moved fast; really fast – and in their direction.

She hurried back to the company. “Gandalf!” she shouted, ignoring the fresh blood tickling anew on her chin. “Gandalf! Someone’s coming!”

Gandalf, who was busy comparing swords with Thorin, raised his head in alarm and quickly joined her, thrusting a cobweb covered short sword into her hands. “What have you seen? Speak quickly!”

She tried to wipe the blood – a futile effort, really. “I am not too sure. Something moving fast, incredibly fast, in this direction –“

But she needed to say no more for from the trees sprung an old man, dressed in brown and dirt and looking entirely haggard, astride a horse as bewildered as he. “Gandalf!” The man shouted as he tumbled down from the agitated beast. “Gandalf! Oh dear, I must speak with you! I must!”

“Ah, allow me to introduce Radagast the Brown,” Gandalf said cheerfully. “He is an Istar, like myself.” He led Radagast aside, and the two of them began to talk in hushed voices.

Ningalor tried to suck on her bleeding lip, which resulted in Oin slapping her hand in disapproval. “No more talking, Diplomat!” the old man warned as he reapplied the ointment sternly.

Ningalor swallowed her pain and her pride, and indeed, said nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Thus their journey begins. I felt that, with the difference in size between the trolls and the dwarves, I had to make them into a gang in order to maintain status quo.
Also, introducing the concept of machinery as lost technology from the first age that turned into legend and children’s stories. Some knowledge, that should not have been forgotten, was lost ;)
What do you think?
Next chapter (probably) next Saturday.
"You ignore indifference
Blink away the ignorant pity
As you sit in judgment
And define my sin, secure and surrounded and selfish.

And I, the victim, the convict, the damned.
Voiceless."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They had no moment to rest – the wolf howl cut through his flesh like a knife.

For the one to voice it was a deadlier predator.

“Wolves? At this hour?” wondered Dori.

“Those are no wolves.” Thorin clutched the hilt of his sword. “Orcs! To the horses!”

Gandalf and Radagast appeared immediately, just as alarmed by the sound. “Orcs? This far south?”
Radagast worried his robe. “This is not good, not good at all….”

“They are here for a reason. You are hunted,” Gandalf growled, voice grave and expression thunderous. “It will be a bitter chase, but we have to flee. Run!”

They ran to their horses and mounted them, holding on to their weapons and clutching the saddles.

“We will head North!” Thorin ordered. “The weak will lead, the rest will stay with me and attack!”

“They are too many!” Radagast protested. “Let me draw them out on a chase. Then go.”

“They will outrun you,” Thorin objected. “Or shoot you down!”

“This is no time to argue! Godspeed!” Radagast jumped on his agitated horse and left the protection of the woods – immediately the howls intensified and echoed closer and closer.

They were too many. And they were mounted.

Thorin surveyed his company. He had enough warriors, and those looked at him and with anticipation and adrenaline pumping through their veins. The rest… Ori looked terrified, Bombur began to sweat, and the Diplomat… the woman sat still, but her knuckles were white and her horse kept shaking its head. She had a sword tied to her waist now, but it looked too short to be of any real use. If she were indeed frightened, she did not show it.

“I know of a safe place,” Gandalf declared.

Thorin nodded. “Lead us there. Diplomat, Ori, you follow closely. Bombur, behind them. The rest
– spread around them; Dwalin, Gloin, I want you at the back with me. Kili, Fili, flank the sides and watch our back. If we get in contact, Bofur and Bifur, accompany Gandalf. The rest stays with me and attacks.”

Gandalf did not look pleased. “We should all flee to safety!”

“The line of Durin does not flee from a fight,” Thorin ordered grimly. “Ranks!”

The howls sounded distant, though not distant enough, but they could wait no longer.

“Follow me! Do not engage unless you must!” Gandalf ordered and kicked his horse. They all followed him, trotting when still in the forest and galloping when they finally reached the plains.

The gang of Orcs – men dressed in black, hooting and howling, riding wild, infuriated horses – hollered their anger after failing to catch the lone rider. They were not tired by the chase Radagast led them on. The dark men turned back the moment they heard the thundering sound of fifteen horses galloping – and covered the distance quickly, howling and hollering. They were about twenty, if Thorin counted correctly, daring to look back, and luckily had no archers amongst them. They were fast, however, and their guttural shouts and curses became clearer to the ear with each passing second.

They will catch them.

“Follow me! We will lose them in the mountains!” Gandalf bellowed.

He led them up – the mountains were steep, the road narrow, and the sudden valleys deep and dangerous, twisting between trees. Their terrified horses could barely walk, no matter how relentlessly their riders urged them to find their footing faster, faster, faster –

The road was too hazardous for a chase. If they kept at this pace, one of their horses would stumble, and one of the riders could fall… jumping over waterfalls and climbing rocks, they could not even do that at a trot. What the hell was Gandalf thinking?

“İfridî bekâr!” Thorin roared, “They are upon us!”

The first rider fell before he reached him – Kili’s shot took him down. He drew out the elven sword he took from the thieves’ horde, its blade gleaming with a thirst for blood, and cut the second rider. Next to him, Dwalin drew out his axes and with a roar cut yet another as Nori threw his dagger at the fourth to come. Kili’s arrow pierced the eye of a challenger to his left while Balin’s mace shattered the skull of a hollering Orc. His own sword cleaved through the stomach of his enemy, drenching him with guts and blood.

Thorin dared not charge down the mountain. The slope was too steep, and his horse was not a war horse – it stood unsteadily and neighed in panic when it smelled the blood. Still, he managed to cut down his foe.

“We are surrounded!” shouted Bofur –

Mahal, they were far more than twenty.

“Come here, quickly!” Gandalf shouted, “Down this path!”

That path was too narrow and steep for a quick escape but smooth with wear. He could hear the rest of the horses trotting down to safety.
He blocked an axe, chopped the arm that held it, and beheaded the Orc with another, smooth strike.

He had to admit the blade was well made for the task.

“They will follow us!” shouted Balin, who yet refused to go down the path and to leave Thorin’s side.

“Fili! Kili! Go!” Thorin ordered, sparring with another Orc and beheading him. The warm spree of blood, salty and metallic, was not unfamiliar. “Now!”

They boys hesitated, but did not dare to disobey.

“Oin, Gloin! You next! Dwalin — “

“I will not go before you!” The warrior roared, dodging a nasty attack and hacking a ribcage open. “Even if I have to throw you down there!” He freed his axe from the fallen body, spraying his horse with bits of lungs and bone.

“Dwalin, if I order you — “

A silvery sound of a horn, high and mellow and piercing, interrupted their argument.

Thorin’s enemy fell, a white arrow sticking from his back —

“This is no Orc horn,” Balin muttered breathlessly. “Or arrow.”

“To the path!” Thorin ordered as the Orcs turned to face their new enemy, and galloped after the rest of his company, Dwalin and Balin but a step behind.

He caught sight of them, riding slowly, and sighed in relief. Slowing his horse (the poor beast was already frightened, and Thorin did not want to die from a tumble down the cliff) he counted them – twelve, and unharmed. But all such thoughts of victory soured and curled the moment he caught the sight below them, the city built into the valley, residing above a waterfall, blending with the trees and the living stone.

His insides twisted and churned, his jaw tightened, and his lip curled. Tricky bastard.

“Welcome,” declared Gandalf, waving them over, “to Rivendell! The Hidden Valley.” He paused for the added dramatic effect. “We are expected and welcomed here, so I beg you to act accordingly.” Gandalf cocked one bushy brow, but Thorin merely scowled in response. He refused to let the scheming Istar get the better of him.

He rode to the front, joining the old man, and noticed, from the corner of his eye, the Diplomat’s face crumbling for a very short moment, accompanied by a muted twist of her lips.

Unexpected, unexplained, and… somewhat reassuring.

They were welcomed into a courtyard, where they dismounted and had their horses taken by their host’s servants. When he entered, muttering something to Gandalf about an Orc raid far too close to the borders of his Dukedom, the Duke looked as impressive as a powerful duke such as he surely must.

Elvish bastard.
Gandalf cleared his throat. “Your Grace, my lords, Mistress, and Masters, allow me to introduce the most wise, kind and potent prince, his Grace Elrond, Duke of Rivendell.”

The man smiled and moved his hand in a welcoming gesture. “Saesa omentien lle.” His features froze for a moment when he glanced at them.

Thorin did not know the reason, but he had to consciously stop himself from gritting his teeth.

“Your Grace,” Gandalf continued as he turned to address Elrond, “may I introduce to you the most honorable, noble and fair prince, his Grace Thorin, Duke of Erebor.”

“Gamut sanu yenet,” Thorin replied, politely enough not to be offensive, but not too polite – he was not his inferior, after all, even if the man did belong to the White Council.

“Welcome to Rivendell, Thorin, son of Thrain,” said Elrond, eyes wise and cunning. His eyes flickered to focus for a brief moment on something behind Thorin before he added, “You must be tired from your long journey, hungry and wounded. Please, allow me to offer you our services and hospitality. Nartho i noer, toltho i viruvor. Boe i annam vann a nethail vin.”

“We thank you,” Thorin declared, feeling foolish and chagrined for not understanding the last part (was he insulted? Would Gandalf had told him if he were?). Feeling he had to be a bit more eloquent, he added, “Your help is appreciated and welcomed. My company had quite a share of perils.”

“Hmm. I do see the evidence of that,” Elrond noted, or did he reprimand him? Thorin refused to let such simple words worm under his skin. He gritted his teeth. He would not be shamed for bringing the evidence of battle to another’s court.

“Nae saian luume’,” the Duke added, his eyes focusing once again on – oh, it was the Diplomat who attracted his attention.

The Diplomat said nothing, but there must have been something in her expression that the old Duke had managed to read, for his face softened slightly and he opened his hand in a slow gesture. Then he turned around and began to walk toward the main building accompanied by Gandalf – and the Diplomat, for some unexplained reason, following in his wake.

“Your Grace,” said another man, bowing, “I am Lindir, advisor to the Duke of Rivendell. Please, allow me to show you to your rooms and offer you a bath.”

“Very well,” he replied gruffly, his eyes still glued to the trio. Only when Lindir straightened did his gaze leave them. Dismissed like a cur mongrel. And he dared to think those days were over.

The woman’s mystery, irritating at first, was nothing short of infuriating now.

“You are a liar, a deserter of your duties. I am ashamed to see you brought so low.”

Ningalor cringed, and not because Elrond applied his own medicine on her beaten face. The old Duke did not change much since she last saw him – tall and lithe but broad of shoulders, his figure was graceful and his posture regal and elegant. His long hair, always done in intricate style, lost its color but remained magnificent even in silver. His intelligent brown eyes, penetrating even without the aid of the sharp, expressive eyebrows, saw right through and into her. His mouth tightened in disapproval and his wrinkles deepened, and Ningalor knew she had no means to appease him.
His cloth, long and opulent and flowing, the beauty and the tranquility of the room, the richness of the scent – flowers and pines… all were luxuries she had given up reluctantly, and the sight of them reminded her of that. She refused to regret her decision.

She bowed her head. “I could not stay. I could not – was I brought low? Perhaps, but freedom is worth to me more than a title or a pretty dress. I am Lily now, nothing more.”

“It is not the loss of title I lament; it is your people. You have a duty, and you abandoned it on a whim.”

“I did not!” she fired back. “Do not – do not offend me so, by presuming I am fickle of character and spoiled. I had no power in court to aid my people. They lost nothing when I left. My father merely lost… a possession. Nothing more.”

“Ningalor,” Elrond began to reprimand her, “you cannot possibly think –“

“Your Grace cannot possibly convince me otherwise.”

Elrond sighed. “Thranduil had lost much when his wife died, but your father loves you. He discovered that when he lost you,” he said gently, but Ningalor merely glowered in response.

“I do not want his love, nor his hate. Rather, I would have his indifference. I want to be left in peace, Your Grace.”

Elrond exhaled. “I understand, but this is not good enough. You are not the daughter of a rich merchant or a wealthy sailor. You are a lady, and your dukedom is vast and failing. I cannot forgive you for claiming you want peace, sacrificing your people for it, and then running around, doing errands for another duke, another people.”

“I was… touched, by the desperation of his cause, the injustice,” she said slowly, “and should we be successful, I will be able to help my people through other means.” When Elrond cocked a brow, she explained, “Through wealth.”

“He means to take back Erebor.”

“Yes; seize his homeland, as is his right.” Ningalor exhaled weakly. “I heard, during my time with them, their stories and history. They lost much after the fall of Erebor. Wealth and honor, to be sure, but also life, and peace, and safety. They do not deserve to be snubbed by the rest of us, by those who can aid them in their quest.”

Elrond shook his head slowly and eventually replied, “I am not sure I support this quest, noble as it may be.”

“Your Grace has agreed to offer your help,” Ningalor countered, then leaned forward. “You have!” She bit her lip when she noticed the improper phrasing, but Elrond did not reprimand her for it; he did not miss it, either, and his eyes turned calculative again.

“I offered my hospitality, as it is my duty as a member of the White Council, but I am not sure I can condone such reckless actions. It should also be my duty to return you to your place, even if you did not stand trial for your actions.”

“Your Grace…..”

“I will hear no more, Ningalor. Not from you.” He rose gracefully. “Now, rest well. I can see that you are exhausted. We shall speak later.” He turned to leave, then lingered next to the door. “And
whatever Grayhame had said… you owe nothing, not to Thorin, his people, or the Istar himself. You may stay here, with us.”

Ningalor smiled bitterly. She appreciated his kindness, for the offer of turning a blind eye was not one to be taken lightly. “And what would be the price of that, Your Grace?”

“Merely that you had returned to us. To your rightful place. Think about it,” he said slowly as he closed the door behind him.

Ningalor sighed and got up with great difficulty, and only because she did not dare to stain the bed. They did cross some shallow rivers that allowed her to wash her limbs, but she did not have a proper bath for over a month, and the thought disgusted her.

It dawned on her that has been a month since she left Bag End.

Her fingers battled with her hair and scrubbed her skin pink. A month had passed, and she still felt uncomfortable and had issues speaking to any of the men she spent most of that month with. She sank into the bath and blessed the heat of the water. How alone she was, how small was her world, and how lonely it made her feel.

She blinked away unwanted tears and got out of the bath with a sudden movement that made her head spin. She refused to surrender to self-pity. Instead, she dried herself, dressed in the undergarments she was given and dived under the covers.

Her eyes closed before her head hit the pillow.

Thorin bathed and dressed, though he took no joy in the luxury offered. He wanted to refuse the clothes they had given him, but the thought of wearing the sweat and mud and blood and gut stained clothes after he spent at least half an hour cleaning himself from those… he donned the opulent blue tunic and the soft pants and even allowed one of the servants to brush his hair, though he trimmed his beard and braided his hair by himself. The clothes were of the highest quality, evidently made for a lord – the silver embroidery was incredibly intricate – but even that did not appease him. He scowled at the lithe statues and the tiny fountains that decorated just about every wall he laid his eyes upon, and left for dinner.

Those bloody Elven fountains were everywhere.

Few of his men refused the offer of fresh clothes and a warm bath, but his eyes did not linger on them – he was to dine with Elrond and Gandalf, as was appropriate for his status. He listened to Gandalf telling of their adventures and ate with aversion – the Elven Alliance had a strange fascination with greens… from the corner of his eye, he saw the Diplomat dining with a rather pleased expression and dressed in beautiful attire. The light blue dress matched her eyes and flattered her figure, not that he cared much for that, of course, and her golden hair fell freely, caressing her back and shoulders, but for a few braids adorned with gems that sat upon her head like a crown. She had small shoulders, a small body in general, and while the dress had no cleavage to speak of (not like the woman herself had breasts worth mentioning), it did reveal the woman’s collarbones – fine and delicate; her creamy skin, smooth and translucent, enhanced the finesse of her –

He tore his eyes away from her in distaste just in time to hear Elrond’s inspection of their swords. “This is Orcrist, the Goblin Cleaver. A famous blade, forged by the High Lords of the West, my forefathers. May it serve you well.” He offered Thorin his sword back. “And this is Glamdring, the
Foehammer. Both of these swords were made for the King of Gondolin. The line was long broken, and I believe the fates have granted them to you,” he said solemnly. “How came you by them?”

Gandalf had a ready answer. Of course. “We found them in a cabin of a small gang of thieves, and not a few hours later we were ambushed by Orcs. Your Grace, these events, coupled with –“

“Mithrandir, you see trouble where there might be none. These events might be connected and might not. We need more time to decide.”

“But that is what he wants! Can you not see –“

“This discussion can wait for the meeting of the Council,” Elrond intervened. “Now, what were you doing on the East Road? Where are you headed?” When silence greeted him, he continued, “Perhaps next time, when you want to keep a secret, you should inform all of the parties involved? Lily has already confirmed your plans, which were guessed by me.”

Thorin stirred, eyes blazing, but before he could say more, Elrond added, “She spoke highly of you, your quest, and your people’s plight, Your Grace. And I do prefer honesty to a lame attempt at deception.”

Thorin lowered his fork. Indeed, the Elven Alliance was not to be trusted, but he had to secure the Duke’s aid, now that he knew of their quest. “Would you try to withhold my own birthright from me? My people’s birthright?” he demanded, trying to keep the anger from tainting his voice.

Seeing the frustrated look on Gandalf’s face, he wondered, for a moment, if he should have had the Diplomat handle that talk. It was her duty, after all.

“I could not support it, but I will not attempt to stop you,” Elrond said slowly, after a long moment of introspection. “I do value the opinion of Mithrandir, and should he be right in his assumptions, the capturing of Erebor might affect the future in ways we cannot yet foretell,” the Duke finished vaguely.

They finished eating in silence, and then resumed their conversation in one of Elrond’s many studies. This time, the Diplomat was present, though she stood apart from them, next to the window, bathing in the moonlight. With her pale dress, fair skin, and blonde hair, she looked like a marble statue. A painstakingly carved statue, done by a loving, expert hand… Balin joined them, blocked the sight of the cursed woman and dispelled the moment.

“We do, however, need your help with the reading of a map,” said Gandalf rather conversationally, after a long moment of hushed conversation between the old men.

“A map,” Elrond said, unconvinced. “Surely the heir of Erebor knows his Mountain’s secrets?”

Thorin gritted his teeth, but Gandalf ignored the jab. “Second opinion, then.”

“You think you missed something, that more may be hidden.” Elrond’s eyes pierced into Thorin, then returned to Gandalf.

Thorin’s eyes darkened at the assertion – the implication that he was brought low enough to need the help of an Elf. His body straightened then, jolted up – he caught, from the corner of his eye, the Diplomat, glancing his way, then quickly averting her gaze. He glowered in return.

Gandalf’s eyes also flickered his way before he waved the Duke’s words with a noncommittal wave of his hand. “Well, that could certainly be the case…”
“Is that because you lack information? You have missing puzzle pieces and cannot succeed in your mission without them.”

“That remains to be seen, but I would rather not risk it,” Gandalf said, voice guarded.

Elrond sighed. “Mithrandir, how can I offer you help when I cannot support your quest? At least not so… openly? While we are both members of the Council, I cannot act so freely without the other members’ consent.” He paused for a moment. “Which you know they will not grant.”

Gandalf nodded. “Saruman had already voiced his opposition when Thrain tried to reclaim the Mountain. I doubt his opinion changed.”

“Indeed, his changes rarely,” Elrond observed “but we are, then, at a stalemate.”

“Not a help, a trade.” They all turned to look at the Diplomat, who up until now said nothing. “A trade of favors or information. Surely, such a thing cannot be considered as help, when not given freely?” She glanced at Thorin, but quickly shifted her gaze when she noticed his glare. Let Elrond say what he like, had the woman kept her mouth shut, he might not have had to beg so pathetically for aid.

“A trade… a trade I can do,” Elrond mused. He turned to Thorin, considering, and began to pace about the room. They all waited, breathless, counting the seconds with anticipation. Thorin’s patience was at an end when Elrond finally stopped and turned to face him.

“Should your quest be successful, you will become, officially, the leader of the Dwarven Bond. I want a promise from you as their future and current leader, one that will honor bound the rest of your kin, that should Mordor rise… should the Fourth Allegiance rise from its ashes, the Dwarven Bond will stand with us, as in the days of old, three alliances, united in their cause, against one.”

There was a moment of silence during which Thorin considered the Duke’s words. Then he raised his head and bowed slightly. “Mordor is the enemy of us all. Should my homeland be reclaimed and I become the leader, I promise you this – we will honor this agreement and face down our common foe, together.”

Elrond smiled. The expression looked strange on his somber face. “Well said! And we do have noble men and woman present to bear witness. I will look at your map,” he said gravely.

Thorin offered him his map and waited in silence. He did not allow Balin’s agitation to affect his expression, though he shared the old man’s feeling. The maps of old, the secrets of his kin, exposed thus to an outsider – and a sworn Elf at that! But his quest, balanced on the edge of a knife, could not suffer any more false steps – they could not afford to stray.

At first, Elrond said nothing, and Thorin cursed his supposed diplomat, offering a promise before the other side showed he could deliver! And if she conspired against him…

Then, as if Elrond heard his thoughts, he marched toward the woman, toward the window, and uttered, “Cirth Ithil.”

“Moon Runes…of course,” Gandalf sighed and turned to the Diplomat to explain what those were. She did look slightly puzzled, but it was merely due to a small twitch of her face. Other than that, her face revealed nothing. “The Dwarven Bond is very protective of its secrets, so they developed a type of ink, infused with special metals, that can be read only when shone on with the light of the moon or the stars.”

The woman frowned and shifted slightly closer to Elrond. They did not speak, but the older man
lowered the map and pointed to the runes, and the woman’s eyes widened with curiosity. She smiled.

Thorin was impatient and refused to allow his interests to be seconded to those of a mere advisor. “Can you read them?” he demanded.

The Duke, still with his back to him and with the map bathing in the moonlight shining through the window, read, “Stand by the gray stone when the thrush knocks, and the setting sun with the last light of the day will shine upon the keyhole. It appears it is yet another riddle.”

“Balin, write that down,” Thorin ordered. Elrond turned away from the window and gave him back the map, which Thorin accepted and quickly folded. “I thank you,” he said gravely.

Elrond nodded gracefully. “I wish you luck,” he replied, though his eyes, severe, had not an ounce of friendship or faith, only worry. He looked at Gandalf and the two men exited, probably so they could resume their earlier conversation.

“Lily, have you met the Duke before?” Balin asked pleasantly after the men had left. “You seemed familiar.”

The woman looked at him, her eyes guarded. “I traveled with Gandalf in the past. There are some who still remember me.”

“You have been here before, then?” Balin continued, eyes kind and gentle.

The woman, for some reason, looked at him warily. “Yes,” she said, after a long moment of consideration.

“Do you know where the library is? I have heard Rivendell possesses many ancient books, and I would love to use the opportunity to read them.”

Thorin scoffed.

The woman’s jaw tightened, then forced her lips to form a faint smile. “Of course,” she complied, all so graceful in the process, then turned to Thorin and gazed at him with a polite, quizzical turn of her head. When he glowered in response, she merely muttered, “Do excuse us, Your Grace,” and turned back to Balin, who smiled and motioned for her to lead. As they headed out, the old man turned and signaled to Thorin to join them, which he begrudgingly did.

The woman knew her way well, very well. Too well, in fact, and the thought vexed him. The riddle the woman posed made him think about her more than he would have liked.

They reached the library, an elegant, large space, with books piling upon books as high as the ceiling. The shelves were divided by long, elegant columns and niches bearing lithe statues of women and men, heroes of the past. There were also several secluded spots for reading as well as desks and chairs for studying. Few men wandered about, but none who belonged to Thorin’s company.

“Can I help you find anything?” the woman asked politely when she turned to face them. Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw him, and something close to a frown appeared. She quickly tore her gaze away, probably because his gaze turned outright scorching at her reaction.

“No, no, I think we can manage. Thank you!” Balin said politely, and his eyes followed her as the woman tilted her head in response and left, her steps hurried.
“Hmm. Strange,” he muttered, and turned to face Thorin. “Now, shall we solve this riddle?”

“I still find that hard to believe.” Elrohir chuckled, picking a grape from the bowl of fruit and popping it into his mouth. “What a silly little girl you are.” He took another one and threw it at Ningalor, who flinched, then rolled her eyes at his acts.

“Though I do thank you chose to act upon your silliness before we were married, otherwise I would be the one burdened with the hunt for you,” Elladan chimed in, reclining on the sofa.

They sat in one of the gardens, secluded to most but open to the lords and ladies of the Valley. The garden was lovely – a mere spot in the wild at first sight, but the columns, covered with fruit-bearing vines, the canopy of leaves and silk, and the chairs and sofas and tables, allowed those used to luxury to still enjoy it.

Ningalor, lounging on the mattress, her gaze fixed on a faraway waterfall, smiled shortly, and replied in the same manner, “Perhaps I should have waited. After five years, you could have declared me dead and find another wife, surely.”

“I can still declare you dead.”

“Dead to the world, most definitely.”

“And, therefore, free to follow your dreams,” Arwen piped in, looking up from her book and gazing at Ningalor with wonder, “I admire your courage.”

The two brothers tensed at her words, but Ningalor knew not why. “It was not courage that guided me, nor did I have any dreams to follow. Courage lies in making a choice. I simply ran away.”

“Perhaps you should tell her how the Dwarves treat you to discourage her from picking up any silly notions,” Elladan emphasized, but she could read the warning, and a certain amount of spite, in his tone.

She sighed and said carefully, “Silly as my actions may be, and despite the many laughs you had enjoyed at my misfortunes, I do not regret them; but nor would I recommend them to another.”

Elrohir’s cheeks colored in shame at her words, but Arwen’s gaze did not waver. Ignoring the stern look she received from Elladan, she said, “I do think there is courage in it, and that you are brave still, to be willing to face such perils.”

Ningalor gaped at her, surprised, but said no more when she felt Elladan’s cold glare clawing at her. Arwen, somewhat disappointed by her silence, returned to her book. She was young still, barely twenty yet, but one could sense that she was not the one to follow another’s design.

It had been more than five years since she last saw them, the three heirs of Rivendell, and they had changed little since she had gone. Except Arwen, who grew to be one of the most beautiful women Ningalor had ever beheld.

They grew up to be so fair and proud, the embodiment of well-bred leaders, she thought. They must think poorly of me, the one who fell from grace.

But aside of their jokes, their words were kind. After the tense moment had passed, the jolly mood returned, and it made her wish she could have accepted Elrond’s offer to stay. He was right – this was her place; this was where she belonged. Had she stayed and married Elladan, this could have
been her home. Yet even now, looking at his handsome profile, Ningalor felt no regret, nor longing, nor love. They grew up together as siblings might, and the idea of anything romantic blooming between them was repulsive to her.

Yet it was as if no time had passed. Their meetings felt natural, familiar. Safe.

Ningalor did not ignore Thorin’s company entirely but tried to avoid them when she could. She did not feel comfortable in their presence, and though she bowed her head and wished them good evening or morning and still dined with them, she never felt so much like a stranger in their company as she did now. And whenever she did find herself straying into a conversation, mostly with Balin or Bofur, though once she did manage to hold a conversation with Dori about tea, Thorin’s piercing gaze weighed too heavily on her, and she stopped short of whatever it was she tried to attempt. Arwen spoke of courage. Indeed, of that she had none.

A month passed – far too long, in Thorin’s impatient opinion – before they finally left the valley. He thanked the Duke appropriately, he felt, for his advice. The man was learned and wise, and while his people were at times too proud and arrogant for Thorin’s taste and showed them little respect, their leader had shown no such qualities.

Thorin’s men, on the other hand, showed little courtesy, though he did not mind that too much. They were loud at dinner, singing and cheering and caring little for the men of Rivendell’s terrible taste in music. The woman, however, never did join them, spoke with them even less, and Dwalin informed him that he saw her more than once spending her time with the duke’s heirs. With them, she smiled and talked, or so he was told.

Thorin gritted his teeth and ignored the insult; the implication that his men and their company were not good enough for her. Let her suffer the wild alone, then! She will have to get used to being alone, should she keep turning her nose at their company. He would not adjust to her taste.

The day before they left, Gandalf arrived at his chambers, looking harried. He knocked on the door and entered the room swiftly, as if afraid of being spotted.

“Gandalf,” he greeted him from his chair by the balcony, smoking into the night. “Well? Can we leave yet? I do not wish to deny our departure any further.”

“Can you? Must you! Tomorrow, before sunrise, you must leave Rivendell’s borders,” the man breathed.

Thorin frowned. “Why are we to sneak off, like thieves in the night?” he demanded.

“Oh, do not search for insult where there is none!” The Istar replied, aggravated. “Soon, the White Council will be held, and I must attend it. Saruman, the leader of the Council, will try to stop us. Therefore, you must leave tomorrow.”

“Why not now?” he answered, feeling anger simmering under his skin. No support, no help, no understanding. They all try to keep from him and from their people their birthright; their only right.

“Because it is dark, the road is dangerous, and should you take the horses now, the men will surely notice. Enjoy your last sleep today in Rivendell, in a bed! Tomorrow you will leave, Elrond will be at a meeting and could easily claim he knew nothing of your plan while his men will supply you with food for the road. Have some cheer, Thorin Oakenshield! Fate is with us!” Gandalf declared as he made for the door, “Gather your men!” and left.
Thorin scowled, for cheer was the last thing he felt, housed by those who’d rather turn a blind eye to Dwarven plight than help. Whatever help was offered now had to be wriggled out of them with promises and the old Istar’s cunning.

He got up from his chair, put out his pipe, and went to inform his men.

Thorin found most of them in the garden, drinking and being merry. Ori and Bifur he did not see, but the men that roomed with them promised to pass the message along. And, of course, he did not see the woman.

He considered for a moment to send Bofur, but the man was singing and entertaining the bunch, and he did not want to ruin the overall mood. Since he was their leader and tasked with keeping them in check, he cursed inwardly and decided to search for her himself.

He knocked on her door, not expecting much, but, surprisingly enough, she was there, and quick to answer.

She wore a long, white dress, form-fitting around her waist and breasts. The unblemished fabric was embroidered with gold around her waist and then loosened all the way to the floor. The dress had no cleavage, but her shoulders were entirely bare, and the same decoration was embroidered just above her breasts and continued all the way to her arms, from which semi-translucent white fabric emerged, like a waterfall, covering each hand in not-so-demure sleeves. Her hair – once again done in intricate braids, was drawn away from her face, from which her eyes blinked at him with guarded puzzlement.

Only then Thorin realized he had been staring at her without a word uttered, and his glower intensified in his embarrassment. The woman stepped back, allowing him into her room, though no doubt was uncomfortable at the idea of such impropriety.

He realized that she thought he wanted to say something that needed privacy. The notion irritated him – he had no intention of wasting time in her company. “We leave tomorrow, an hour before the sun rises. Meet us at the stables twenty minutes before to prepare the horses and load the packs,” Thorin ordered.

He turned to leave, but the woman’s voice stopped him, clear and unexpected. “Why in this manner?”

Unable to decide if she wanted to insult or accuse him or was simply baffled by the entire ordeal, he uttered, resentful, “While you are clearly welcomed by the Elven Alliance, we are not. We need to leave before the White Council tries to stop us.”

“Unwelcomed?” she countered, voice sharp like a whiplash, “You were received and treated with the highest honors, as a duke, which, while you certainly deserve to be, may I remind you, you are not!”

He turned on her, furious. “Be silent, woman! I know what I am!” He did not raise his voice, but the intensity it held made her take a step back. “Whatever kindness they showed us, it was begrudged, and all due to the friendship between Gandalf and Elrond,” he spat.

“You were not given charity or pity. And while your men showed little respect, His Grace said nothing,” she snapped. “Why must all those who are not of the Dwarven Bond be on the receiving end of such hate and mistrust?”

“How dare you judge me by your standards,” he replied, cold wrath burning underneath his skin.
“How dare you – who were born and raised in comfort, and knew no hardship, judge me and my words and actions! I had seen my men die, I had seen children starve, I had seen their mothers starve as they gave their babies all they had. I had seen milk run dry, and men weep, and children frozen to the bone. I have given all I had. I had worked,” he spat the word, “for men, selling whatever skill I had, finding whatever job I could, to feed my family and my men, clothe them and protect them. We had no help.” He already stood so close to her – he pinned her to the wall with his anger. “I would not trust, and I cannot forgive that which I cannot forget.” He took a step back, visibly trying to get his temper in check. Damn the woman.

He should have sent Bofur. The woman gulped, mouth tight, eyes wide – was she frightened? No, she looked horrified, worried, regretful? He gave up trying to guess from the illegible expressions on her face. “Tomorrow. We will not wait for you, should you not show up,” he added, voice hoarse with the remains of rage, and left.

The image of her pressed against the wall could not be pushed out of his mind, and he cursed himself and her. Especially her silly white dress and her wide blue eyes and creamy collarbones and –

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
-Ifridî bekâr!- Ready arms!
-Saesä omentien Ile- Pleasure meeting you.
-Gamut sanu yenet- Well met.
-Nartho i noer, toltho i viruvor. Boe i annam vann a nethail vin- Light the fires, bring forth the wine. We must feed our guests.
-Nae saian luume'- It has been too long.

Mistrust, treachery, and promises. In other words, politics, or at least my interpretation of Tolkien's racial tension. What do you think? Next chapter next Saturday (definitely a deadline I would never have managed last year when I was still in the army. Glad that's over!)
"Could love be a burden
And pain a nationality
And could borders be broken
With a whispered touch?
We are islands of fire-
Scarred and separated and shrouded in smoke-"

Riding without Gandalf was a reality that placed a gloomy blur on her thoughts, no matter how she tried to cheer herself up. The hours before the dawn were colder than she expected, and the weather did not improve much during their climb. No one showed her an ounce of welcome when she joined their ranks, so she saddled her horse and rode up the mountain in silence. Though perhaps she was a fool to expect it after spending so little time with them.

Their trail was rocky at best, though soon the sky cleared and turned bright blue, the sun shone, and the men sang. One thing could certainly be said about them: they held on to their optimism and cheer and did not let their adversities dampen their mood.

For five days, they climbed and climbed, slowly toward the mountains they rode. The path was hard and dangerous, crooked and lonely and cold, for chill wind from the mountaintop came and passed shrilling between the rocks and their ranks. Ningalor changed to her woolen stockings and tunic, wore her cloak tighter around her body, shivered, and dreamed of warmth.

They all slept huddled – next to a fire when they could make it, which was not very often, and once again Ningalor regretted her gender, which forced her to sleep alone. She often sat next to Balin or Bofur, who did not frown at her when she did so, and kept to herself. The road was narrow, and nightmares about falling or tripping made her wake often with unease. So when a hand shook her in the middle of the night, she snapped awake and jumped away from it, breath hard and heart beating painfully –

"It is your time to watch,” a voice muttered, deep and smooth. She looked up to find the Duke’s eyes piercing her from the darkness of his face. The fire burned low, and the light captured in his eyes made him look sinister.

“Oh,” she may have mumbled, got up with difficulty and wore the blanket around her shoulders, for the night was bitter cold.

“You are supposed to guard, not to sleep.” His voice followed her, dark words in the blackness of the night. Her heart beat frantically with the remains of her dreams clinging to her mind.

“A duty I could not perform if frozen,” she hissed back. She could not see him, only a dark blur, and hugged herself as she leaned against the cold rock. Whatever warmth the blanket held was already gone.
The Duke was still standing, still looking at her. She tried to ignore him, but the knowledge that he was staring at her made her edgy.

“What troubles you, Your Grace?” she mumbled. She would have added a sharper edge to her voice, had she known for sure he was glaring at her; though he most likely was, since he did little else.

“Are you cold?”

The question made her suck in her breath. She knew not how to answer it and shivered in response. In the dark, she could not tell if he was concerned or mocking, and his voice, muffled by the wind, was unclear to her. She was afraid to admit to weakness, should he throw it in her face as yet another sign that she did not belong.

“Are you awake?” This time, his voice was definitely angry.

“I am, Your Grace,” she answered quickly, offended. Not a second ago, he was about to show her kindness (or so she thought) and now…

“Are you ignoring me?” His voice was closer. Angrier? She could not tell.

“No, Your Grace.”

“Then why did you not answer my question?” The blob of blackness moved until it was right in front of her. He was right in front of her. She shivered.

“I did not know how to answer it, Your Gra –“

“Enough with that! As you so kindly pointed out, I am not a duke, here in the wild,” the man snarled. He loomed over her. “Now, before you waste any more of my time, answer me – are. You. Cold.”

He was too close. She could feel the heat he radiated. She wondered how could one, so cold in demeanor, standing surrounded by icy winds, be so warm.

“The night is cold, Your –“ She managed to stop just in time but still felt ashamed for her mistake. Suddenly, there was a hand on her cheek. Warm, rough fingers caressed, for a short, fleeting moment, the skin of her cheek, trailing across her jaw. His touch burned her skin. She froze, unsure what to do, and her heart quickened once more. She knew she was supposed to be offended, but the only thing she managed to feel was pure and utter cluelessness.

The only thing she knew for sure was that while she did not understand it, she did not mind the touch.

“You are ice,” he whispered. His voice was raw, vibrating inside her chest, binding her stomach in knots. Without another word, he turned away from her, marched to one of the horses – she could not see what he was doing, but it sounded like he was unpacking something – then she heard the sound of boots crushing stones, and the man wrapped a thick wool blanket around her.

Actually, he cocooned her in – which probably wasn’t that hard, considering how she was huddled. Still, the gesture surprised her entirely. She did not know how to react.

“I know we are not to your taste, woman,” he said slowly, “but we care for our company members, and like it or not, you are one of us.”
She looked up at him, clutching the blanket. It smelled a bit of horse and was slightly itchy, but it was thick and warm. “I... I thank you,” she huffed breathlessly, and added slowly, trying to dispute his accusations, “I said once that I would be honored to join your cause, and that has not changed. Nor do I dislike your company, or ever thought you to be careless in the way you have taken care of each other.”

The Duke, no, Thorin still stared at her – his eyes were sharper than hers, she realized, or perhaps it was due to the light of the moon that he blocked with his broad back.

“You avoid our company.”

She hesitated, unsure how to answer. Why did she avoid their company? “I... feel unwelcomed, at times, and a stranger at others,” she confessed.

“You are accusing us.”

“You glower at me whenever I open my mouth.”

“I do not **glower**.”

“I can **feel** you glowering,” she retorted. “Do forgive me for not being the friendly sort, but may I remind you that this was not a part of the contract, so you may take your accusations elsewhere.”

She could still feel his eyes on her, but instead of... well, whatever she learned to expect from him, he muttered, “Keep the blanket,” walked toward his own bundle of blankets, and left her to watch.

Too confused to understand what had transpired, she clutched the blanket and traced her fingers over her cheek. She could still feel where he touched her.

It was the first time their skins touched.

Thorin generally glowered ahead, trying to see through the fog.

Balin said (and he agreed) that they were in all likelihood marching into a storm, but Thorin, try as he might, could not find a proper hiding place from the elements. No caves peered from the hard rock's surface, and the narrow, treacherous mountain path was not a good place to stop. Walking forward, though, in a fog, where the trail was dangerous, was also a bad idea. Thorin ordered them to holler if any saw a place to hide, but so far all he heard was grumbles.

Ten days passed since that night he gave the Diplomat his spare blanket, and for some reason, her small, pale face, her figure – hunched and trembling – the memory of that night refused to leave him in peace. Her answers baffled him still. She did not look him in the eye throughout the entire conversation, and he wondered if he offended her in some way, since not for a moment, throughout their journey, did he think she did not approach them because of him. He tried to glower... less, though he knew not if he had any success in the matter, and, if anything, his eyes sought her more and more.

During the long hours of the night, he watched her, cuddled in his blanket. He saw her face contorting in pain and her eyes flashing awake with fear, raw and pure on her face. He saw her forcing herself to ignore her fright and try to sleep instead. He could see well in the moonlight, and the expressions she allowed herself to make when she thought no one was looking made him want to...
She did not join the conversation, though she followed it, and she sat with them, but huddled away. Sometimes she caught him staring at her and quickly turned away. Other times, he caught her looking at him, and though she tore her gaze from him the moment he spotted her, he felt her eyes on him, seeking him out. They both knew, he realized, that they were looking at each other, though he knew not what he sought from her.

Her eyes, he suddenly understood, were not blank with scorn. They were guarded. And lonely.

Thorin’s eyes snapped up – just as Balin warned, it began to pour.

The wind slapped the icy, frozen rain into their face – as sharp as thousands of needles – and sent their horses into a stumbling panic. The road, dangerous enough as it was, became slippery and treacherous. In the growing dark, they could not see the way nor direct the poor beasts.

“Dismount!” Thorin shouted. They walked in a miserable convoy, each man leading his beast. Trembling and soaked to the bone, they tried to grip the wet surface of the wall of stone and stay on the path.

Thunder and lightning rolled and rumbled, the earth shook, boulders smashed and fell, above or between them, and Thorin kept searching, searching…

A boulder hit the rocky path in front of him. Hurtled, as if thrown.

“Thorin, we have entered a battle scene! We must find shelter!” Dwalin shouted.

Then he saw it – men, dressed in black, emerged from hidden tunnels, aimed a catapult, and threw rocks at the men on the other side of the mountain. The boulders were enormous and dangerous, and the men who either did not spot them or simply did not care, kept throwing boulders at the other side.

They were caught in the middle.

“We have to turn back!” Dori shouted.

“Can’t! Horses don’t march backward! Can’t go around them neither!” answered Nori.

“Uncle! I see a cave! Way over there!” shouted Kili, pointing ahead.

“Let’s go!” Thorin bellowed, and his men followed.

Just as he led them to the pass, a boulder, mislead or perhaps directed at them, hit the middle of their ranks. He saw the massive rock flying against the sky of black and lightning. It crashed hard into the mountain. He heard the hit, felt it in his stomach, as loud as the rumble of the thunder.

_No. No. Not my boys. My boys._

The sound echoed in the valley. Rock shards hit Thorin’s back and face, sharper than the rain as they tore through his skin. He saw blood tainting Balin’s horse, who neighed in panic. He smelled it. The road behind him was ill-defined in the rain, but the boulder was impossible to miss. He felt his body freeze and turn to stone with dread.

He shook with the painful beating of his heart.

“No! No! Kili! Fili!” Thorin shouted frantically, trying to head back but to no avail. Like Nori said, they could not go back. The boulder tumbled down toward the cliff, carrying rocks and part of the
path with it, blackened with blood, carrying, perhaps, not only bits of horse but also his two precious boys to an early grave deep between the stones…

_Not my boys. Mahal, take me and bring me back my boys. Not my boys._

“We’re fine!” yelled Dwalin. “We’re unharmed!”

Relief washed over him, like warm water on a frozen limb, and then –

“Where’s Lily?” Bofur cried, frantic. “I saw her horse go down, but where’s Lily?”

“There!” Kili shouted, “She fell! She didn’t duck!”

“Get ‘er!” Dwalin ordered.

The woman held to the edge of the road with all her might. Her hair glistened red with blood which looked incredibly odd against her pale face – was it her blood? Mahal, let it be the horse’s – Kili dived to the ground and tried to pull her up, but the woman failed to grasp his hand, slippery because of the rain, and fell a bit further.

This would not do.

Though he could not go back, he could see an edge of stone on the face of the cliff he could walk on, just below the path, and he jumped.

“Thorin, no!” shouted Balin.

Thorin ignored him and focused on not slipping. The edge was narrow and traitorous, the stone wet and smooth. He stomped his boot into the face of the cliff, and only after he found a proper footing, he allowed himself to take a step. Foot, then hands, then a foot, as the mountain shook and rumbled around him. It felt like a lifetime.

But her eyes, wide and frightened, guided him to her.

He passed Balin, then Dwalin, then Kili… finally, he reached her. The woman’s face was pale, her mouth trembled, and the blood that trickled down on her cheeks was terrifying; her sight terrified him. Still he said nothing as he boosted her up and ensured she was pulled to safety by Kili and Dwalin. Her body was small and cold, shivering in his hands. Only after he saw her standing, plastered against the wall, did he allow Dwalin to help him up as well.

“Thought we lost you!” Kili cried, slapping the woman’s shoulder.

Thorin’s eyes roamed over her in search of trauma. “Are you hurt?” he demanded.

She still looked shocked but managed to answer, “I don’t think so. That’s the blood of my horse.” She wiped it from her face, and Thorin could not help but breathe in relief. She was shaking, her voice uneven, but she was alive.

Thorin suddenly remembered they still were on a perilous road, in the middle of a storm, within the shooting range of two opposing clans, and he had yet to get his people to safety.

“Balin, lead us!”

That proved to be a bit of trouble, as Thorin’s horse was terrified and refused to move forward at first, but after a slap on its back, it bolted ahead, tripped, and fell as well. The loss of supplies was staggering (three horses overall), but that would not matter much if he could just manage to bring
them all alive to the shelter.

They got there, eventually.

The cave was not too cavernous but thankfully abandoned. While caves in these parts were usually occupied, this one seemed thoroughly deserted. Thorin and Dwalin and even Nori checked for seams and cracks in the surface but found nothing. And even though there was, in fact, enough wood to make a fire (which made Balin really suspicious, but they were too tired to consider his words), Thorin would not hear of it. So they all grumbled, wet and displeased, and tried to get as far away from the entrance of the cave as possible.

Ningalor cursed her fate. About ten days ago, she received a warm, cuddly blanket, and from Thorin, no less! A blanket that now probably lay at the bottom of an abandoned valley. Her blanket too was gone, so now she just had to make do with her soggy woolen clothes, all soaked through, and hope she wouldn’t die of something or catch a cold. She wondered if they would hate her had she developed a fever. So, crouching in the corner and attempting to squeeze the water out while stopping her teeth from chattering, she did not notice someone was walking toward her until he laughed kindly at her sight.

“Well, don’t you look like a drowned puppy!” Bofur chuckled and offered her a dirty looking cloth, “Here, love. I think you might ‘ave intestines in your hair.”

Ningalor swallowed uneasily and accepted the fabric gingerly. She grimaced, quite pathetically, when she tried to remove said lumps from her hair, until Bofur pitied her and sat next to her.

“Give it ‘ere, I’ll do what I can.” He hummed a merry tune and sat behind her, and Ningalor ignored the improper proximity and tried to will her body to leech as much body heat as it could. “Y’know, if you wore a hat, this wouldn’t ‘ave ‘appened.”

“I had my hood up,” she protested, “though I doubt I would’ve minded another piece of clothing in this weather.”

“It gets chilly, aye. Autumn is soon coming, too. But don’t you worry, the weather’s finer, down the mountains.”

“I just need to stay alive a little longer, then.”

Bofur laughed. His fingers were soothing in her hair and his touch gentle as he collected the golden locks and wiped them clean with his makeshift handkerchief. “That attitude won’t do at all, ‘ave a little cheer!” He chuckled. “Or Thorin will come glowering about to find out what I did to you.”

She froze. “What on earth do you mean?”

“He did just nearly fall off a mountain for you.”

“He’d have done that for any member of his company,” she protested, feeling her cheeks heating. So conscious of that, in fact, she failed to notice the added weight of piercing eyes, glaring her way.

“True, true, can’t deny that he did that for you, though.”

“Only because I was unlucky enough to –”

“And he hasn’t stopped looking at you ever since you joined us.”
She suddenly found it hard to breathe. “Glower, you mean.”

“Call it what you like. If it’s there, it’s there,” the man added charmingly while Ningalor shifted in unadulterated discomfort. Such things were not meant to be discussed so lightly, real or not. Not that she thought for a moment that they had any base whatsoever – “He is looking right now. Just you wait, see how I get in trouble.”

“But of course –“

“Bofur!” Thorin ordered suddenly. “First watch.”

“See?” He winked at her, no doubt the reason why Thorin’s glower intensified, rose and took his place next to the entrance of the cave.

Ningalor remained alone, in the back of the cave, still shivering. She touched her hair tentatively and looked at it, and while some of her locks were still coppery, most regained their original luster. She knew she had to thank the man for his kind actions and for his kindness in general. It was not like she enjoyed an overabundance of compassion in the past few months.

An unexpected noise made her open her eyes to find boots facing her. She traced her eyes along the figure to find Thorin. Thorin was standing in front of her. Her breath hitched slightly, but, knowing not what to say, she merely looked up at him with wonder, confusion, and perhaps an ounce of hesitation.

Suddenly, he offered a bundle to her, which turned out to be another thick, luxurious blanket. “It’s Dori’s,” he said slowly when her eyes widened in puzzlement.

While indeed that was not the cause for her confusion, she was too cold to question it further and raised her hand to accept the blanket, which she promptly wrapped around herself, burying her ice-cold hands in the thick folds. “Thank you,” she said earnestly. “For earlier as well.”

The man nodded, still looming over her, and Ningalor wondered if she was expected to stand or was supposed to invite him to sit. Or do neither. With Bofur’s words echoing in her mind, as well as Thorin’s inexplicable kindness, she decided to dare. “Would you like to join me?”

It was so silly that her cheeks flushed.

An invitation to sit on the ground, in a cold corner of the cave, in the spot farthest away from everyone. It was laughable. Surely – but the man lowered himself gracefully to a sit by her side, away from the small tower of horse intestines, and Ningalor wondered if she was supposed to say anything. She had nothing to say, and the uncomfortable silence sent her heart racing. Daring to glance at the man next to her, Thorin did not seem all that bothered by her silence. He watched his men and looked out into the storm.

“How are you feeling?” he eventually asked, voice low and gravelly like the rumble of ancient stone.


Thorin nodded sharply and said nothing.

“How?” she dared. They both nearly faced death today, after all.

He tensed for a moment, then visibly forced himself to relax his shoulders. “I am well,” he uttered.
She glanced at him once more, then quickly averted her gaze to the floor of wet rock, then out, into the howling storm. She sensed him glancing her way but did not try to hide her faint smile.

She had to remember to thank Dori for the blanket.

Thorin kept aiming short, cautious glances at the woman by his side. The fury that burned within his chest when he saw her conversing with Bofur simmered down, and the soft blush that covered her lovely cheekbones when she invited him to join her changed his mood entirely. Now, however, seated side by side, he had nothing to say – the notion left his mouth dry.

The woman did not help and also said nothing, though a glance her way revealed that she was smiling. The expression, as gentle and careful as it was (he wouldn’t have considered that a smile at all had he not spent months trying to read the small changes in her features the woman used instead of facial expressions) looked strange on the face he was so used to see blank or in a frown.

It was becoming on her, he decided, the smile as well as the blush. They added life to her otherwise mask-like face. They made her appear comely again in his eyes. His breath hitched slightly when he realized he was the cause of them, or at least hoped he was.

At some point, they all gathered their blankets and tried to sleep. The woman did the same, though, since she was already cuddled in her blanket, all she did was lean against the rock behind her and shift until she found a comfortable position. “Good night,” she whispered.

Thorin wondered, should he leave? Move? But the woman merely closed her eyes and said nothing more, so he muttered, ‘Sleep well’ in response, wrapped himself in his coat and leaned against the rock. He did not sleep, though. Instead, he fixed his gaze on the woman’s golden head, watched her shoulders rise and fall with each breath, and wondered.

He was awake when the wall behind them began to move.

At first, he thought it was him slipping down the rock, or perhaps dreaming – his eyes did nearly flutter close a couple of times – but at some point, looking into the darkness, he could see things shifting, though he knew not what he was looking at.

Hinges. Those were definitely hinges.

“Wake up! Wake up!” he roared, getting up and attempting to make a grab at his sword when something hard hit him, and he tumbled to the ground.

The wall he leaned against was open and from it emerged men, dark men with sharp grins, dirty and accompanied by the stench of unwashed clothes and rotting food. Any attempt to warn his men proved futile when at least sixty men appeared, armed with whips and cleaving knives and numbers – when one fell down, another took his place. They were outnumbered within seconds, and soon their weapons were wrestled out of their hands, chains bound their bodies and hands, and they were whipped into a miserable run into the mountain, into a dark underground city, to the sound of the hollers and cackles of the men living there.

Thorin tried to look around, to see that no one was hurt, but he could not spot his boys nor the woman. He cursed his luck and the gang that captured them and trudged on.

Any attempt to map or understand the underground city was a lost cause. There were too many identical tunnels and wooden bridges and networks of rough cut stone paths for him to decipher where was what or spot another way out. Their horses also were taken, and if the screams and the
shouts were any indication, they were meant for dinner. So now, they lost their supplies, their weapons, and their freedom. If he did not do something soon, they might also lose their lives.

Suddenly, they were forced into a stop and pushed onto their knees. From the corner of his eye he spotted Fili, helping Kili as much as he could with his hands bound; Dwalin, who must have resisted the chains so much they began to dig into his skin, for he was bleeding; Balin, still carrying his head with dignity; the Diplomat, breathing hard, face white, and holding her arm. She was bleeding, perhaps wounded from the many whips that cracked at them to force them into a run. The hate that burned within him now blazed with savage ferociously.

Looking up, he saw a giant man studying them with unmasked delight. He was fat and tall, with small, piggish eyes, discolored face, white spotted with red, and many chins that wobbled as he scanned them. There was cunning in his tiny eyes, and hate and greed to be found in plenty. He wore a long robe, purple in shade, and one could easily discern the richness of the color and the pattern, even in the deceiving light of torches and fires. He had a shiny ring on each finger and a lavish golden crown, as well as an outrageous number of necklaces, each gaudier than the other. He apparently had access to wealth yet no respect for it, if one judged correctly from the many blood and wine stains on his clothes.

His teeth were yellow and crooked, and the golden ones shone when he spoke. “Who are these miserable persons?” he demanded, torn between giddiness and suspicion.

“Trespassers,” informed him one of the men, who cracked his whip all too eagerly on their backs. “Found ‘em sheltering on our front porch.”

“Is that so?” The man scanned them until his eyes fell on Thorin, who returned the glare hatefully. “What are you? Thieves? Murderers? Spies? What is your Alliance? Cursed be you if Elven!” he croaked. He sat on a throne, no doubt a lavish one once. “Well, speak up! I do command you!”

None answered him, and Thorin knew none would talk unless he gave the order. He stared ahead and said nothing. From the corner of his eye, he spotted their weapons, piled carelessly so closely, yet still beyond reach. Was it done to taunt them? He had to think, had to wait for the right moment… he tried to escape the chains without his captors noticing, for they were not adeptly placed. He refused to die on his knees.

“Oh? You will not talk?” The man smiled. “Dwarven Bond, I think you are. And we do not like Dwarves around here!” he hollered. Screams and shouts echoed throughout the cave in an eager response. “And we know how to treat Dwarven guests, now don’t we?” He chuckled. “Bring out the Mangler! Bring out the Bone Breaker! Start with the youngest!” he cried, pointing at Ori. “No, wait, they have a woman!” He smiled. “Start with ‘er.”

“Wait!” Thorin stood up and stepped forward. One of the men tried to yank on his chains, but Thorin pulled hard and remained standing. “We come in peace, O Lord.”

“Do you?” The man smiled. “Do you really? A thief, a spy, a murderer, and now a liar as well!” His smile, cruel and merciless, now turned sour and infuriated. “Thorin Oakenshield,” he spat the name. “Do you think I do not know your name? Your face? The man who led the war against my people, the man whose cousin killed my son?”

The men hollered curses and screamed insults.

Oh. Thorin let out a shuddered breath, angry and desperate. He knew now who they were but not how to save his men from them. Tied and bound, what a humiliating ending!
“Yes, you know me now, as I know you. I am the Great Goblin, leader of all of the Goblin clans! Your man murdered Azog, my son!” He pointed a finger at him. “Duke under the Mountain, never!” he screeched. “I will kill your men, so slowly and painfully, they will curse your name with their dying breath and beg for mercy, and they will have none! Only pain and despair and death, I will serve them! And you shall thus know the price, O Duke, of the pain of fathers who have buried their own sons.” His breath, hissed and uneven, deserted him as he landed once again on his throne. His eyes shifted. “Now, the woman. As an appetizer, I think.”

Behind him, he heard the tell-tale sounds of a struggle. The woman cried out, and his men shouted as they tried to release themselves from the chains and help her. She tried to resist them, but she was not a fighter, which they were, and whatever attempts she made were futile.

He did not want to witness it. No matter what sort of cunning the woman had, it would not help her, not with the revenge-thirsty leader of the Goblin clan.

“Listen, O Great Goblin!” he shouted, hating the words as soon as they left his mouth. But they had the desired effect. The man raised his hand, the goblins stopped dragging the woman, and the sounds of stomping and chanting as the men cheering for the torture to come were silenced. Thorin hoped he knew what he was doing, for this time, he could not risk failure.

“My men will not break easily!” he declared. “Nor will any member of my company! And we are not alone. We are expected, and followed.” They did not like his words; he was spoiling their fun. “I understand you want me last, but do you really have the time to wait, days after days, for my men to break? You will wait hours, O Great Lord, and receive no satisfaction.” He took a deep breath and utilized the power of his voice to reach and echo within every niche and every ear and every cave. “Or, you could start with me, instead. Save the men for slaves, and enjoy watching the man who ordered the death of your son break and beg, crawl for your mercy!”

“Thorin, no! You cannot do this!”

“Uncle! Uncle!”

“Thorin, you bastard –“

“There has to be a way, another way!”

“We have gold, and aplenty!”

“We’ll build your son a statue-“

“Name cities after him-“

“Uncle! Please!”

“We’ll give you all we have!”

“Uncle! No! No! Uncle!”

Thorin did not waver, his resolve was not shaken. The men voiced their protests. They played their parts well. Now, all he had to do was get to their weapons…

The Great Goblin laughed. “They are already begging! Not so unbreakable now, are they?” He chuckled. He agreed. “But only blood will pay for blood! I will take you up on your offer, Thorin, son of Thorin,” he mocked. His smile widened when Thorin allowed himself a breath of relief. “Kill the woman.”
“No!” he shouted and spun, eyes wide –

Lily looked at him, mouth open in a silent scream, as the men who held her threw her from the rock surface and down to the abyss.

She was gone.

Black.

She could see nothing, and for a moment wondered if she had indeed opened her eyes, or perhaps had lost her sight. She remembered being pushed, the horror on Thorin’s face, the horror pulling in her own stomach – the dread, the fall… and then nothing.

Was she dead? If so, it was rather disappointing.

She tried to get up and check her surrounding – not without managing to hit her head, again, against the stone. Something squishy… soft… cold. She shivered in disgust, unsure of what it is she landed on, but it saved her, apparently. She felt her way, more carefully this time, until she managed to find the ground. Her fingers sense something round and large… it had the texture of a fungus. Was it a fungus? A rather big one, that’s for sure. She preferred to believe it was a mushroom instead of… well, whatever else her imagination supplied her with. And now she was properly and most definitely lost, perhaps in an area deserted and uncharted, with no way out at all. And if there was a way, should she go right or left? What if there were more ways than just two? She could get lost forever. A whine escaped her lips. She did not want to die, and to die like that, lost in the Great Goblin’s cave… starve or be devoured by a monster in the abyss…

Not that they will look for her. The man ordered her death, and dead they must think her. No, she had no hope of rescue; nor could she wait to be found, if such a thing was ever a possibility. And besides, they could all very well be dead themselves. She shook her head to get rid of her gloomy thoughts. So, forward (she just turned left, since she had no idea what was ‘forward’ in those dark and depressing tunnels) she must go.

As she rose, a sharp pang nearly made her double over. Her hands reached, blind and trembling, to remove the object that tried to force its way into her stomach. Oh. Her sword. When they rode, the small thing kept hitting her leg, so she hid it in her corset. Perhaps, for the first time since she left Bag End, she had a bit of luck on her side. Trying to gather her courage, she drew out the short sword and began to walk. And walk. And walk. The tunnel shrunk with each step she took until it forced her to crawl on all fours. Terror tore through her as she imagined herself getting stuck and lost and forgotten, left to choke or starve or die of thirst… The walls closed in around her and her fear rose and rose until her body was shaking and her heart racing. Deeper and deeper and deeper into the tunnels she crawled.

Suddenly, she felt something metallic, round. A ring, perhaps? The round metal object gave her hope that maybe another human crossed the path before, and she placed it in her pocket without overthinking it. She kept crawling. She could not stop. She continued crawling for what seemed like hours or days or minutes. Her elbows and knees were frozen and stiff, her muscles screamed in protest, and she was so, so very tired…

Yet she dared not stop to rest. Too afraid of the dark, too cold to pause, too terrified of being left alone… she did not know what happened to her friends, and that thought too filled her with dread. What if they all died, suffering horrible torture? What if Thorin… Thorin, who once again risked his life to save her own. Thorin, the only one to notice she was quivering in the dark. Thorin, who
kept watching her. Thorin –

Stepping into a pool of cold water snapped her out of her tired musings. She jumped and cursed because her boot immediately filled with water, ice cold and bitter, painful to the touch. She stopped instantly and wondered uneasily if she had crawled and walked all this way for nothing.

Therefore, she was suitably terrified when from the darkness suddenly blinked at her two pale, lamp-like eyes and a voice, wheezy and hoarse with disuse, croaked, “Bless us and splash us, my precious! A choice feast, we smell!”

Ningalor, heart pounding so hard her chest heaved in pain and the sound of the blood was deafening to her ears, raised her hands in response – shaky though they were – and pointed her short sword in the direction of the voice.

There might have been a crack in the stone, or an opening far above, for a few rays of moonlight wandered into the dreary space, and she could see, even if very little. She carefully felt her way forward, toward the voice, and tried not to wave her blade too foolishly.

And indeed, from the lake (for now she could see that a lake it was) rose a man, old and twisted with age. He was as pale as a ghost, with few hairs to speak of, and frightfully thin. Most of his clothes were rotted or torn, and the only piece of fabric somewhat properly in place was tied around his loins and resembled the remains of pants. His shape was crooked and uneven, mostly long, dangling limbs and a small ribcage, and he carried with him the very distinctive air of a madman. She wondered, for one, terrified moment, if that was to be her fate, if he, like her, was thrown down and lost his way in the tunnels, and after so many years without sunlight and fresh air, also lost his mind…

The creatures coughed again and again, and Ningalor could remain quiet no longer. “Who are you?” she demanded. She was somewhat proud to note that her voice shook only a little.

“Who are ye?” the old man repeated to her, and Ningalor was not sure if she was being asked a question, mocked, or if the raving methuselah was just acting upon his madness.

“I am Lily, of the Shire.” She decided to try and show him kindness, or at least to be polite. If one ignored his initial desire to eat her, the man did not do anything too harmful, for the moment. “I am lost, here, and I would like to find a way out, please.”

“Lost, is ye?” asked the old man. “Lost in the caves?” He coughed again. “We make ye into a dinner, not lost again!” He cackled. “Soft, and juicy, yes! Yes!”

Cannibal. Yes, that’s great. Think, think, think! “No-not dinner! I make for appalling dinner material, let me tell you!” she declared. “How-how about a trade, hmm? I give you something of mine, you show me the way out?”

“Why?” he wondered. “We hungry, we eats ye,” he explained to her slowly, as if she were a dimwitted child.

“Do you know a way out?” she cried desperately, trying to keep her sword pointed at the twisted monster.

“Do we? We do, do we, my precious,” he wheezed again, shifting from one stone to the other.

She could not follow his movements, and his never-ceasing actions made her lose her cool. “Do not play games with me! Simply answer, is there a way out?” she almost pleaded.
“A game? A game?” he replied in wonder. “Let us! Play a game, yes!” He laughed wildly, which induced Ningalor to jolt with unadulterated fear. “What has roots as nobody sees, is taller than trees, up, up it goes, and yet never grows?”

Thank the gods her father had a passion for poem riddles. “The mountain,” she answered, slightly calmer than before.

“Yes! Yes!” the creature replied, too joyful and excited for Ningalor’s taste. “Yer turn, precious!”

“Wai-wait!” she breathed, still entirely unsure of the situation. “If, if I win, you will show me the way out, yes?”

The creature stopped his rather juvenile dance and peered at her. “Oh yes, safe paths for scared women.” He smiled. She could see he had few teeth left, but cruelty and madness in abundance. “And if we win, we eats ye,” he said gutturally.

“Agreed!” she declared, too terrified and desperate to say anything else. Oh, now she really got herself into a mess, didn’t she?

“Ask, ask! Riddle, riddle!” he commanded.

She replied with the first thing to cross her mind. “I have forests, but no trees. I have lakes, but no water. I have roads, but no travelers.”

The man gawked at her in the dark, scratched his head and hissed and hissed. Could it be this easy? She dared to wonder for a miserable, hopeful moment, only to be proven otherwise.

“Mapses, mapses, we say it is! Yes!” he said joyfully and screeched at the sight of her crumbling face. The creature regained his seriousness and studied her. A chill passed through her bones. “Voiceless it cries, wingless flutters, toothless bites, mouthless mutters.”

She gawked, frozen by fear and too nervous to think. It was when the creature began to crawl toward her that she snapped out of her haze and tried to think fervently. Mouthless - not living, then. Cries, flutters, murmurs… she looked around – “Wind!” she cried breathlessly. The cave was dark and cold, but a gust of air from the crack up above was sometimes felt, frozen and painful to inhale, but fresh from the mountaintops. She tried to steady her breath and asked, “My life can be measured in hours, I serve by being devoured. Thin, I am quick, fat, I am slow. Wind is my foe.”

Once again, the creature muttered to himself, and Ningalor thought it was a good strategy, to ask him about things he undoubtedly could not find in his cave…but just as she hoped that the wretched creature will not be able to answer, he hissed and replied, “A candle! A candle, we say!”

He cackled again at the sight of his success written in the despair on her face. “Not seen, not touched a flame in years, precious, yes… no flames or fires or candles ’ere, precious!”

Charming, she thought with a cringe, and once again tried to keep her terror in check when he asked her his riddle, “It cannot be seen, cannot be felt, cannot be heard, cannot be smelt. It lies behind stars and under hills, and empty holes it fills. It comes first and follows after, ends life, kills laughter.”

Since she was surrounded by it, for many and many hours now, the answer came to her quickly. “The dark,” she offered simply, and the creature’s throaty groan was enough of a reply. Perhaps, though, she should not have answered this quickly, for now she had to think in a rush of a riddle.

Thinking of the one thing that could bring her comfort in this endless darkness, she recited, “No legs have I to dance, no lungs have I to breathe, no life have I to live or die and yet I do all three.”
Of course, after she uttered the words, she realized it might have been wiser to ask something else, not so similar to the riddle she just asked before. However, hope once again began to bloom in her weary chest, when the creature hissed to himself, and still did not answer; he whispered and spluttered, but said nothing coherent.

“Well, answer me!” she demanded with more courage than she actually felt. “Answer, or surrender.”

“Give us a chance! Give us, give us, precious!” he wailed pathetically, and Ningalor was too scared to press her point further.

After she had given him his chance (too long, in her opinion) she demanded again, “Well? Have you an answer?”

But suddenly the creature cried, “Fires! Fires!” and Ningalor groaned in ever growing desperation.

“Alive without breath, as cold as death; never thirsty, ever drinking, all in mail never clinking.”

She gaped at him, mind utterly blank. Alive without breath… not a living thing, then? Wind again? Storm, tunnels, the earth? No, mail… mail… mail… what wears mail besides a man? Or is it a man?

The creature began to hiss with pleasure, “Is ye soft? Is ye scrumptious? Will ye crunch between our teeth?”

“A moment, please! I gave you a good, long while!” she cried and stumbled and stepped, again, in the ice-cold water. She moved her leg quickly, lest some underwater creature – “Fish!” she wheezed, all too desperately, and breathed yet again when the scowl on the old man’s face meant she was right. “What does man love more than life, fear more than death or mortal strife, what the poor have the rich require, and all contented men desire. What misers spend and spendthrifts save and all men carry to the grave?”

It was a long and winding one, and Ningalor hoped he would forget the beginning and would thus fail to answer. However, the creature, surrounded by it, knew the answer quite well. “Nothing!” he screeched, and was right, just as well. “This thing all things devours: birds, beasts, trees, flowers; gnaws iron, bites steel; grinds hard stones to meal; slays king, ruins town, and beats high mountain down.”

That, however, was also easy for Ningalor, since there were not many things that can all other things devour. “Time,” she replied calmly.

Then she promptly lost every ounce of calm, for indeed she answered reasonably but had no riddle prepared. And in her panic, and under the pressure of those two, lamp-like eyes, she tried to think of anything, from her youth to this very moment, anything… she felt around her belt for inspiration, and then suddenly felt a lump in her pocket. “What have I got in my pocket?” she wondered, too terrified and confused to notice she said it aloud until the creature screamed in protest.

“Not fair, not fair! To ask us a question – not a riddle!” he hissed, frightfully upset. “Not a riddle, is it? What ye has in yer nasty little pocketses?”

“No-no! It is a riddle!” she declared, at her wits’ end. “I had to ask you a question, and a question I did ask. Answer, or surrender – what have I got in my pocket?”

He hissed and roared in his anger. “Ye musts give us three guesseess, three, yes!” he coughed again.
“All right, three guesses,” she agreed, unsteady on her feet.

“Handses!” cried the creature.

“No!” She showed him her hands.

He spluttered and stomped, twisted his long limbs and beat the stone. “Knives!”

“Wrong!” She pointed her sword at him steadily. “Last one!”

“String, or nothing!” the wretched man cried.

“Two guesses, both wrong!” She was not foolish enough to think that the fact that she won, and not entirely fairly, meant she would not be devoured by the thing before her, but she dared to hope he might decide to be kind and show her the way out.

All such naiveté was crushed, of course, when the creature hissed, raving mad now, and puffed his cheeks, eyes blazing with savage, animalistic fury.

She gripped her sword so hard that her knuckles turned white.

The man moved his hand to his own pocket and rummaged with his fingers – his eyes lost their anger and the blue looked lost and terrified. He groped and searched everywhere he could reach, the dirt, the water, his pants, again and again with nothing but pure shock and terror on his face.

“Where is it? Where is it? No, no! Where, where?” he screamed, searching around frantically. “No! No! My precious is lost!” he screeched, angry and desperate. Suddenly, he turned on Ningalor, and the wrath returned to burn in his unnaturally large eyes. “What has ye got in yer nasty, little, pocketses?” he shrieked.

“None of your business, now would you –“

The creature screeched again.

Ningalor fled.

“Give it to us! Give it, thief! Thief!”

She ran, bumping and scraping herself against the rough rock, too terrified to care. She heard the creature’s voice following her, the sound of bare feet against the stone, but was too scared to stop. She should stop, she should fight, she might be running toward a dead end – and hers –

Fisting the cursed ring that caused all this, she felt it slip onto her finger as she stumbled and fell to the ground, into a nearby niche.

Grasping and trying to pick herself up by clinging to the rock, she suddenly froze. The man paused next to her. He looked at her – no, through her, growled in misery and anger, and continued to curse her name and ran down the tunnel.

She whined, breathless, for how could it be? The creature, unlike her, could see well in the dark. Then she heard him mutter, “Wear it, she did! My precious, my precious! If she puts it, we won’t see ‘er! Clever eyes in the dark will pass ‘er, yes!” the creature wailed as he ran, and Ningalor followed cautiously, careful not to make a sound. “Came from the back door, to steal from us, she did! To the back door! Catch ‘er, catch ‘er!” he wheezed, and Ningalor followed.

She gasped. The legends were true, then, and machinery was indeed real! For what else could
explain a ring that made one disappear? Clearly, the gods were with her, to have given her such a gift.

He led her unknowingly through tunnels and caves, cursing and hissing, to the back door. When he reached the back entrance, he bowed his large head and hid. She stepped closer, confused and shaking with adrenaline and fright – despair shot through her when she understood the reason for the mad man’s behavior.

For there stood Gandalf, robe smeared with blood, beckoning, and then he ran out of the mountain and after him followed Thorin, Balin, Dwalin, Fili, Kili… all in a run, Dori, leading Ori, Nori looking behind, Gloin, Oin... They were all alive! And they were all running out of the mountain, and between them and her stooped a mad cannibal. Could she scream or holler for help? But no, the creature will notice her and kill her.

She should kill him first, shouldn’t she?

Ningalor raised her hand that held the sword again and cursed the creature in her mind. He tried to kill her, eat her, and now stood in her way… and yet, she could not. She could not bring down the sword, could not take away a life from a man so pitifully broken. This was not the heat of battle, this was execution. This was murder.

She took a few steps back, accelerated to a run, and, as tired and hurt as she was, ran with all the power she had left and jumped. She pushed the creature to the ground, who hissed and growled in her wake, and ran. She ran out of the cursed mountain, into the open air. She ran and ran and –

But she could see them no longer. The mountain was not pure rock and dangerous cliffs anymore, but rather green and full of trees and bushes and stones with no clear path in sight for her to follow.

Despair caused the air to desert her lungs. She had no idea where they had gone.

Thorin stopped running as they reached a clearing far enough from the mountain and took a deep, shuddered breath. He turned around and counted his men. Kill and Fili, always together. Dwalin, Balin, the Ri brothers, Oin and Bofur and Gloin and Bifur, and last came Bombur, sweaty and breathless.

And there, of course, stood Gandalf. The Istar proved beyond any doubt that his fireworks did not solely serve as the life of the party. The old Istar counted them as well, and Thorin clenched his jaw when he noticed the shock and the worry that he knew would appear etch themselves onto the wrinkles on his wizened face.

“Where is Lily?”

They were silent. Those who did not look at the ground in grief glanced at him, unsure. He was not certain that he had the strength to speak or what would be the quality of his voice, but knew that it was his duty.

“She was pushed,” he said gravely, slowly. His voice was deep and raw, but never shaking. “From the path, into the abyss.” He turned to face Gandalf. For once, the years showed on his old face as grief and denial replaced the forever blazing glint of cunningness and wisdom.

“No,” he breathed.

“I am sorry,” Thorin faltered, not sure what to say. “We were bound in chains, I…” But what
excuse could he make? How could he explain his failings? His voice failed him, too, and he said nothing more.

“But pushed, merely pushed…” Gandalf whispered, holding on to impossible hope.

The idea of her lying, bleeding, alive – no, she was dead, dead and lost, and to kindle any such hope in his heart was cruelty beyond imagining. “Gandalf, I saw her fall.”

“But you never know! She might… might have fallen to a nearby cliff, or landed on something soft!” The old man encouraged himself. “We must go back and find her!” he commanded, to their pure and utter dismay.

“We saw her fall, none could survive that!” argued Gloin. “I know you grieve for the lass, but this is madness! We only just barely escaped with our skins!”

“Only with my aid!” thundered Gandalf, “And as I came back to you, you must go back for her! I will not leave her inside the mountain to die!”

“Damn you, she is already dead!”

“Silence!” Thorin commanded. He closed his eyes, pain seeping through his veins. Gloin was right. He could not risk the life of his company, and yet, even the slightest notion that she may be lying there, wounded, desperately alone… He removed the necklace with the key from his neck, walked toward his heir and passed it to him. The boy stared at him, wide-eyed and confused. He had to be strong. Thorin placed his hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently, passing on the message with his touch. “I will go back.” They stared at him, stunned. “Dwalin, Oin, Gandalf, you will join me. The rest will continue toward the mountain. Fili, you will lead them. Balin knows the way.”

His nephew looked at him, pleading, “Uncle, no, I can’t – “

“You must be strong, Fili,” he said gravely, since he had not an ounce of reassurance to grant his boy. Oin and Dwalin looked at him, as solemn as he, for they knew as well that returning to the mountain might cost them their lives, but they did not question his command.

“Very well,” said Gandalf slowly, “let us – Oh, Manwe be blessed!” he cried, voice slightly shaking, and they all turned and looked toward the hill, and –

Thorin’s breath got caught in his throat, and for a long moment, he had forgotten entirely how to breathe.

For there stood Lily.

She walked unsteadily, her steps unsure, her clothes torn and red in several places, but then she spotted them staring at her and began to hobble with newfound purpose, stumbling and tripping yet doggishly making her descend.

Gandalf left them and started to walk briskly toward her – Thorin wished he were the one to go to her – and caught her in his arms when the woman stumbled into the safety of his embrace. The old man crouched slightly and hugged her carefully, whispering soothing things. The woman looked at him, and smiled gently, muttering something when the old man cupped her cheeks carefully. When Gandalf was finally reassured that his ward was well, he took her by the arm and led her back to the group.

She was dirty and bloodied, hair ashen and brown with mud, clothes torn and no longer elegant.
Her steps were pained and unsure – she clearly leaned on the old man for support – but as they returned to the group, her eyes scanned the company until she found his, and there her gaze lingered.

He breathed in relief and his lips parted slightly. The longing and happiness in his eyes could not be mistaken for much else, surely, but the warmth that spread throughout his body was something he could not deny even if he wanted to.

Lily blinked, her lips parted as well as she drew in much-needed air, and sent a small, shy smile his way. Her eyes softened, and the deep pools of blue filled with warmth.

Gandalf looked on quizzically.

“Lily! We almost gave you up for good!” cried Kili in joy, effectively killing the moment.

“How on earth did you survive?” asked Fili, smiling uncertainly.

“How indeed,” Dwalin added, suspicious, especially after he witnessed Thorin’s reaction.

“Yes, what happened?” Bofur chimed in, softening the edge of Dwalin’s inquiry.

“I landed on giant mushrooms, I believe,” she said slowly, carefully, “and then I ran into a crazed man. We played a game of riddles, which I won, and then…. She hesitated for a moment before finishing the sentence. “He showed me the way out.”

“Mushrooms indeed! I do believe Radagast would love your story.” Gandalf smiled. “But we haven’t a moment to lose! We –“

The sound of horns and wolf howls, which they already knew belonged to no wolf, tore through his words.

“Run!”

No horses, no food, no rest, only adrenaline and fear and pain.

Ningalor stumbled along with everyone else, and her heart sank when she heard the tell-tale sound of hooves beating upon the rocky earth and the howls, getting closer and closer. Gandalf dragged her along, his grip on her arm fierce for one as old as he, until they reached a cliff – effectively cornered now, with enemies behind and no means of escape –

“Up into the trees! Climb, climb!” Gandalf ordered. He helped her by hoisting her into a tree and then turning to climb another. Great. She hadn’t climbed a tree since she was a young girl, and her hands could not pull her far. Her legs had slipped often and trembled, unable to get a sure hold of the branches, and overall her situation was rather dismal. She could not, for the life of her, pull herself up.

Next to her Bofur climbed, using Dwalin’s head as a stepping stone, and Dwalin right after him, cursing under his breath. Balin and Gandalf ascended with surprising agility for their age. Nori jumped, twisting his body gracefully around a branch, and quickly reached some of the top branches. Bifur helped Bombur, and Dori quite literally threw his brother up with surprising strength. Kili and Fili, of course, raced up the trees with enviable ease.

Ningalor looked up – she remained on the lower part of the tree, within easy reach of whatever was
coming to catch them – men mounted on horses, carrying spears and swords. She will end up skewered if she did not gather the courage to climb –

“Lily!”

She looked up, clinging to the tree trunk with all her might – she saw a hand.

Thorin, a few branches above her, stooped down and offered her his hand. His eyes, arresting and crystal clear in the darkness of the night, looked right into her. “Trust me,” he added, voice raspy and raw, and she took his hand without another thought.

He hoisted her up and guided her to the branch right above his. Her muscles still shook every step of the way so he had to lift her a couple of times, and yet he never let her go, nor did he indicate for a moment that he was in a hurry or worried about the army that cornered them and hollered around them. His hand hadn’t left hers until he made sure she was secure and far from the ground. Nor did his eyes leave her, not even for a moment. She did look away a couple of times, to glance down or at a branch or because his eyes were sometimes too much for her. And yet she could not help but end up looking at him, returning his gaze with barely concealed fear, and then uncertain trust.

Looking into the unwavering blue of his eyes, she had entirely forgotten the danger surrounding them. All she could do was hold on to his arm, delve into his eyes, and surrender whatever notion of proud and unbending aloofness she had.

The warmth of his hand and the rough touch of his skin burned and tingled her nerves, and all of her senses were honed to the feeling.

Only when the tree shook as the men attempted to knock it down with their axes did their gaze break and they let go of each other’s hands – Ningalor turned to grip the trunk all too forcefully, Thorin to grip the hilt of his sword. She gulped and prayed.

“Ganmun!” Thorin growled.

Ningalor looked down, trying to find what caused Thorin to say something dripping so much hate and anger.

She spotted the leader of the gang, a tall man astride a large, pale horse, thick of body and broad of face. He was riding almost leisurely into their ranks and laughed openly at the sight of the company hiding in the trees, clinging to the branches, effectively cornered.

Indeed, it must have been a laughable sight, but the heat and rage simmering from Thorin worried her. The hate and the fury written on his face, engraved into the harsh planes of his features, and the dark, thunderous scowl, so deep and dangerous in its animalistic wrath that she felt dread sinking into her bones.

She has never seen him like this, the royal face contorted with righteous rage, and wondered if there was something she could do to stop the brewing trouble. She wondered if she would dare reach him and calm the oncoming storm. She wondered if her touch had such powers and if it was her place to do anything at all. She wondered and did nothing.

“Oh, I do smell it, the stench of fear! So sour and thick in the night’s air!” the man bellowed. “I remember your father reeked of it, Thorin, son of Thrain!” he roared.

Ningalor could see the anger shifting and building deep within Thorin, rising in furious and fuming waves of raw wrath. The taunts were an easy trap as any, trying to lure Thorin from the tree and into the ground, where the enemy had the advantage.
But Thorin did not move. His knuckles turned white, his teeth he bared in a snarl, but he made no move to leave the safety of the treetop.

The man’s smile did falter, and his expression turned malicious and animalistic. “You had my father killed and my grandfather murdered, but I killed yours!” he hissed and raised his hand, “This one is mine! Kill the others!” he ordered.

The men charged at them and tried to chop the trees down with their war axes. They all struggled to hold on, and Ningalor’s thoughts left Thorin for a moment and focused on the impending death promised by the hollering gang below.

She may have let a whine of fear cross her lips, because Thorin’s eyes suddenly left the glowering leader’s figure and shifted up to glance at her. The fury subdued slightly, but he had no reassurance to offer her, and neither did she. Their interlocked gaze broke again when their tree shook violently, and Thorin once again growled in anger while Ningalor gulped in fear.

“Drink their blood!” the man roared.

The weight and force of the mob underneath were not for naught, for soon the trees surrendered to their efforts and bowed to the men below. It was a savage land, and even those mighty trees that survived years of snow and frost could not oppose the horde around them. Their roots did not go deep enough to withstand the slaughter, and one by one, they fell. The Goblins cheered as they uprooted the trees, and those fell and landed just above the cliff.

Ningalor clung to the dry bark with all her might when their tree fell as well, but Thorin grabbed her and hoisted her over his back and jumped to the last tree that stood aloft. He lowered her back to the tree, next to the trunk, and once again made sure she was secure with her hands gripping the tree trunk before he let go of her.

She missed his touch, his warmth, and the sense of safety that accompanied it, but did nothing to protest.

They were now at their last resort, at the mercy of their captures, and the glee on their faces told her they knew it as well and were incredibly pleased with it.

Suddenly, a burning something was thrown above her and hit one of the men. He began to burn immediately, screaming and crying.

“Fili!” Gandalf shouted and tossed him a burning pinecone. The boy caught it, hissing at the heat, and aimed at another man, hitting him and his horse. They both immediately began to burn – the horse galloped in panic, burning some of the other horses in its way, while the man attempted to roll on the ground and put the fire out, to no avail.

“Liquid fire,” Gandalf explained when he saw her looking up at him. He poured about two drops from a small bottle filled with greenish-yellow liquid, and instantly the pinecone began to burn. He tossed it to another man, and soon they all gathered pinecones and threw them at the men, crying and shouting in victory each time they hit someone. Their delight increased when the smirk deserted the Leader’s face.

But soon she could not see the man’s face. Their cheers turned sour as the fire turned against them and the trees began to burn. The chemical Gandalf used was highly flammable, and the strength of the wind quickly turned their asylum into an inferno.

The roots of their sanctuary began to give way and twist free from the rocky, dry earth, and the tree...
began to tip over the cliff. Ori screamed in terror and Dori cried for Gandalf – Ningalor looked in horror to find them hanging in the air over the abyss. She held to the tree with so much force that the skin of her palm tore and the rough bark clawed at her flesh, but she did not notice that at the time.

Their enemy roared, and Ningalor looked up again in fear – but soon her dread changed target, for Thorin rose to the challenge. He drew his sword.

“No! Thorin!” Balin cried, as he was prone to whenever Thorin was about to do something dangerous, but their leader paid him no heed.

He rose and walked, proud and infuriated, toward his doom.

Ningalor’s eyes followed. She gasped, breathless, wishing to say something, to do anything – to step in between the men’s interlocked gaze and talk some sense into Thorin, to touch him, to stop him with all her strength. Her lips parted but they did not know how to form the words, so she continued to stare, frozen, at what was sure to be a massacre.

But the challenger had no interest in a slaughter just yet. He raised his hand to stop his men and rode menacingly toward Thorin until his challenger crossed the ring of fire.

He pounced on Thorin, the horse’s hooves hit his chest – she did not see if Thorin attempted to duck, but he was thrown down and fell upon the ground. Before he could return to his senses and rise again, the man swung his mace and smashed Thorin’s face – she could not see, from her location, if he hit him or not, but she heard Balin scream and felt her heart sink.

She rose.

Thorin got up again, grabbed his sword and cut the man’s horse, but while the horse fell, the man rose and swung his mace again, once again throwing Thorin on the ground.

“Thorin, no!” cried Dwalin.

Thorin ducked again, but the next swing hit him in the shoulder and he lost his sword. He lay on the ground, defeated, while his enemies hollered.

The man smiled victoriously and lowered his mace. “Bring me his head!” he ordered, pleased with the sight of his vanquished enemy.

One of his henchmen stepped forward, drawing his sword.

This would not do.

Ningalor ignored the fact that she was weak and helpless and never held a sword in her life before. She ran forward, quick and small, moved in between the Goblin’s ranks and pushed her blade into the henchmen’s chest. First there was some resistance, then the blade sank in sickening ease. It made a strange splanching and sucking sounds as she withdrew the sword, then stabbed the man again frantically. Once, twice, until he dropped his sword, gurgling blood at her as he fell.

Her hands, shaking and stained with blood, lifted the blade in a silent challenge to their leader.

She must have made for quite a pathetic sight, white and wide-eyed, the blade suddenly clumsy and weighty in her hands. And yet, she did not leave Thorin’s side, nor did she dare to turn around and see his condition. She did not dare to look and see if she arrived too late, if Thorin was already –
He's not. He’s not. He cannot be. Her hands trembled. He cannot be.

Their leader regarded her as one would a tiresome fly and ordered, “Kill her.”

As the men closed in on her, her hand began to sneak toward her pocket where her ring lay, go on, use it, disappear, run away— Kili, Fili, and Dwalin jumped from the trees and, with a mighty roar, joined the fight. The Goblins changed their ranks and attacked the newcomers, and her world swarm before her eyes flooded with massacre and chaos and fear.

Her impending death continued his leisurely walk toward her.

At first, she refused to leave Thorin’s side, but the swinging of the mace forced her to duck and retreat until she was cornered, shaking and frightened, against a tree.

The man smiled and lifted his mace, in a move that would be sure to be the end of her—

An arrow buzzed near her ear and hit him in his shoulder, making him drop the mace and roar with pain.

Out of the trees burst several men astride golden-brown horses— screeching their anger, they began to shoot and kill the Goblins surrounding them.

Their enemy, wounded, called his retreat, and soon the newcomers hoisted the company on their horses and rescued them from the burning inferno. One of the men, wealthier than the rest, gently picked up Thorin. She tried to see if— but then she was also hoisted onto a horse by a man dressed in black and taken without a word uttered. They were all taken away, from what she could see, and led up to the top of the mountain.

“Who are you?” she cried, unsure if she were supposed to resist, if she was being rescued or kidnapped.

“Meneldor is my name, son of Thorondo. My brother is the Lord of the Eyrie. We are enemies of the Goblins. They seem to be your foes. Therefore, we decided to offer you our aid.”

“Where are you taking us?” she breathed, trying to glance back behind her, “One of us is gravely wounded!”

Her rescuer spoke strangely, she noted, but was too agitated to pay the man’s manner of speech any special attention. Her body swarm with frantic thoughts she failed to appease.

“To the Eyrie. Your friend will be treated and your fate shall be judged.”

She said nothing more. She tried to focus on not falling, for the climb was dangerous, and the horses galloped without any concern for their riders.

“Thorin!” She heard Fili cry. “Uncle! Uncle!”

From the darkness she could make out a fortress, built into the cliff, but she could not see Thorin, and she did not hear him respond. She clutched the saddle, feeling the man’s hand holding her securely in place, and could do nothing as her ribcage began to shake, out of control. It may have been the fear, it may have been the stress, it may have been the unfortunate series of events that rained upon them.

It may have been the encounter with death, face to face, being lost and found in the tunnels, or having a battle of wits. It may have been many things.
She clasped her hand over her mouth in a futile attempt to stop the sobs from escaping, but could utter no coherent response when her rescuer asked, “My lady? Are you hurt?”

She knew her pain had no physical remedy.

“Thorin!” Kili shouted, and the despair in his voice made her shoulders shake with violent tremors that could no longer be masked as the result of the cold weather.

“My lady?”

A shuddered sob was her only response.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
- Ganmun- the filth!

So Gandalf’s disappearance allowed the two protagonists to finally get to know each other, but... now he's back. Where will their path lead them? Comments and reviews are welcome =)
Chapter Summary

"Follow the words of the unspoken,
Find the world of the lost-
Trailing the steps of silent silhouettes
Will not lead you to heaven."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first thing he managed when his eyes snapped open, unfocused and clouded with pain, was breathe, “Lily.”

He gasped for air and tried to get up – his body shot sharp spasms of agony in a vehement protest – strong hands soon guided him back to lie on the soft material he had been resting on.

Strong hands? Perhaps he was just weak.

“Easy, easy, Thorin. Keep still, laddie!”

“Where is Lily?” he breathed somehow, black dots dancing before his eyes.

“Everything is all right. We are all, Lily included, safe and sound.”


“Easy, Thorin. You should not be up yet,” a voice admonished him. “Here, drink this – yes, that’s a good lad – all of it! Dwalin, help me.”

Thorin twisted his mouth – the liquid was lukewarm and utterly repulsive, chalky and thick on his already thick tongue. Hands again – opening his jaw and tilting his head, and soon he has no choice but to gurgle and swallow the revolting substance.

“That’s it. Eases the pain, helps the bones. We’ve been feeding you little else this past week. Had to keep you unconscious,” the voice explained. “Here, this will pass the taste – just some herbs to help the muscles heal. Tilt your head – good….”

Oin. That was Oin’s voice.

The herbs were bitter, but washed away the remaining chalkiness quite well and helped him snap from his drug induced state. The pain was slowly reduced to a haze blurring the edges of his mind, which was addled still, but not quite as much. His eyes managed to focus on the world around him.

Oin, Gandalf, and Dwalin peered at him worriedly.

He coughed.
“What happened?”

That seemed like a proper way to summarize the different questions that turned his brain into a jungle of worry.

“And after you had decided to very foolishly charge Bolg?” Gandalf said, brow cocked in reprimand, ignoring the nasty look Dwalin aimed at him in response. “The Eagles came to our rescue. Lord Gwaihir saw the burning fires and thought the Goblins were planning to attack the Eyrie. As he and his men stumbled upon us, they chose to offer their aid. We are sheltered at their fortress as we speak. And with the great help of Lord Meneldor, your shoulder, and perhaps even your life, were saved,” he added with a small, friendlier smile.

Thorin frowned and Oin hurried to explain, “The filth fractured a few of your ribs and shattered a part of your shoulder blade so thoroughly I thought we will have to chop it off – Don’t look at me like that, you are in no danger now – Lord Meneldor, the healer of the Eyrie, is highly trained. They have a medicine they call Axoloa which is nothing short of miraculous, I might add, though he refused to give me the recipe…..”

“What Oin means to say,” Gandalf interjected, “is that we were saved by the most fortunate circumstances.”

Thorin scowled. “I will thank them properly, of course.” He disliked the notion that Gandalf thought him to have such bad manners. “How long till my recovery?”

“Another week, at least, Your Grace,” a tall, graceful man joined their conversation. He was garbed, oddly enough, in a beautiful, long cloak made of eagle feathers, which was fastened by silver clasp shaped like an eagle’s head. He had sharp features, a prominent nose shaped like a beak, piercing, golden eyes, and long black hair, braided with feathers. His dark skin was smooth and earthy against the pale fortress’ walls. “I am Meneldor, son of Thorondor. My brother, Gwaihir, is Lord here.”

He had a flowing, gentle voice, with a strange rhythm to it. He spoke like the wind and paid little attention to punctuation. Thorin found it hard to follow, especially in his state, but Dwalin’s annoyed blink comforted him; at least he wasn’t the only one.

“As the leader of this company, I thank you and your brother for your hospitality,” he replied. “We are indebted to you and forever at your service.”

The man cared little for the polite remark, though he bowed his head to acknowledge it. “It is true, then? You are Thorin Oakenshield, and in your company, you have brought your two heirs, your sister’s sons?”

“I did,” he confirmed, tone solemn yet guarded, suspicious.

The man turned to Gandalf. He wore a robe made of woven cloth, dark and intricate, and a strange corset of dark brown with foreign, white symbols on it. “Four political refugees; two hunting parties. You ask too much in exchange for an arrow, Istar.”

“Well,” the old man objected, “I disagree with your counting! I do not think he is tracking, or even aware of our presence. And technically, there is only one heir at any given moment –“

The man raised his hand. His movements were sharp but graceful. “I have heard you and your ward argue with my brother over too many dinners.” He glanced at Thorin. “For the sake of the wounded, I will recommend two more days. Goblins we can handle, but we cannot risk his men
scouring our lands.”

“He does not have the manpower—” Another pointed look from Meneldor silenced the old man. “Three more days, then,” he bargained.

Meneldor stood in silence and once again looked at Thorin. His golden eyes had an unnerving quality to them, piercing and unblinking.

He nodded sharply. “I will see what I can do,” he said simply, bowed, and left.

“What was he talking about?” Thorin demanded. “Who is he? What hunting party?”

“Just a mere exaggeration. We shook off the goblins, and for now no one else is on our trail,” Gandalf said gravely, annoyance prickling his voice. “They refuse to take part of any event that does not involve a direct revenge on the Fourth Alliance. Perhaps, one day, they will change their minds,” he muttered, as if to himself, words lost in the darkness of events that had not yet come to pass. “I must speak with Lord Gwaihir. Oin! Do whatever you can to heal him as fast as possible!” he ordered on his way out. “And I do mean anything!”

Oin sighed and exchanged a look with Dwalin. The man shrugged.

“What?” Thorin snarled.

“Well, when you were unconscious, we tried to test how much of the Axoloa you can take,” Oin said slowly. “The more you consume, the faster you heal, but the pain involved….”

“We can numb the pain of one cup, but two and three…” Dwalin supplied.

“How painful?” Thorin hesitated, bracing himself.

“Fourth one knocked you out. We just kept you sedated,” Oin said flatly.

“Faster healing, though,” Dwalin shrugged.

He could not lose face now, he thought, and nodded gravely.

When the sweltering heat of the third cup made him feel like he was burning alive, he was thankful for the fourth cup that Dwalin forced into his throat.

If he screamed, his ears rang too loudly and his blood burned too high for him to hear.

The strange halls of the Eyrie reminded her too much of a crypt for her to find any comfort between them.

It was cold, so high up the mountains, and the men and women inhabiting the fortress were as cold and strange as the land itself. They wore leather and furs and feathers, spoke as if chanting or screeching, and their songs had beautiful but unfamiliar imagery and an eerily, uneven sound that sometimes felt cacophonous to her untrained ears. The women were equal to the men—the walked with them and spoke the same, and even their attires were identical. The children were curious, quiet, careful, and even at that age they did not display behavior that separated the sexes. Strange and unblinking—at times she could not tell the gender until they spoke. They gave them food and sanctuary and medicine and felt no need to offer any more. She shivered.

At first, she was alone. She needed their help to dismount, since her muscles shook for the entire
ride and cramped too badly for her to move them properly. Gandalf rushed with Oin and Lord Meneldor, as he said his name was, to Thorin’s side, and she was too frightened and felt too out of place to step any closer. So when Lord Gwaither, the man who carried Thorin, welcomed them into his hall, it fell on her to trade formal remarks and lead the rest of the company into the Eyrie in the wake of its Lord’s footsteps.

Dwalin and three of the Eyrie men carried Thorin in on a strange looking canvas, pulled between two wooden poles. Meneldor ordered plants and medicines she has never heard of while Gandalf and Oin offered their own skills and aid. She stonewalled her turmoil within and carried on.

So now, after hours of talking to the noble and silent Lord of the Eyrie, she walked aimlessly. She had little to hope for, and the thoughts of Thorin’s condition haunted her every thought. She could not sleep, no matter how weary.

“Morning, lass!”

Ningalor jumped at the sound. She turned to find Oin blinking at her curiously from one of the tall, heavy wooden doors of the Eyrie.

“My, looking at you, one would think it was you who spent nights and days tending to the wounded, and not me!” He chuckled, but the worry in his eyes was genuine. “Are you well? It’s not yet dawn!”

“I find it hard to sleep here,” she replied quietly, and after a short moment of hesitation, decided to close the distance between her and the old man. “How is he?” she breathed, unsure if she can handle the news, knows that she must.

Oin looked at her knowingly (she did, after all, skip whatever niceties appropriate for such small talk) and then sighed. “The lad will pull through. Crushed too many bones with his stupid attack, but Lord Meneldor has some medicine I have never seen the likes of which before… apparently, the risk of falling and breaking bones is too high here, so they drink the medicine as children to strengthen their bones.” He shook his head. “Three weeks and he’d be as good as new, but Gandalf says we don’t have time for that, so we increased the dose. Poor lad, it’s not good for him. We have to keep him sedated, to ease the pain.” He scrutinized her, taking in the white face and the dark smudges under her eyes. She must have looked like the dead, with her pale hair and skin, ashen and lifeless in the soft light of the first morning rays.

“You saved his life.”

The comment made her snap out of her reverie about crypts and pain and, oh, Thorin… “I merely waved my sword in the right direction,” she mumbled, unsure how to handle the knowing gaze or the kindness beneath it.

The man hmmed, unconvinced, and shook his head. “An act of friendship is not something to be taken lightly, especially one involving a life.” He yawned and added before she managed to form a proper reply, “Well, I must go and… tend to my needs for a moment; can’t leave Thorin too long without someone to watch over him.”

Ningalor knew it was not an innocent remark and thanked the man deeply and earnestly for his veiled offer. “I could watch over him, if you’d like,” she breathed. When the man did his best to hide his amusement, she added, “I have no training, but basic things I can do, and sleep is rather tricky of late….”

“Well, I would love to close my eyes for a moment, aye,” the healer said slowly. “All you need to
do is make sure he is comfortable, offer him water every hour or so, and make sure his temperature
doesn’t spike. For anything more complicated, don’t hesitate to wake me up!” He chuckled. “You
do me a great service, and I dare say the lad would have preferred your care to mine.” He waved
her off and left, while Ningalor, heart racing and cheeks too red for her liking, took a deep breath
and entered the room. She did not dare to dwell on the meaning underlying Oin’s words, but she
needn’t bother brushing them off – the sight before her captivated her mind entirely.

Thorin lay, sleeping (she preferred not to think of his state as ‘unconscious’) on a large, wooden
bed, covered in furs. The shy early morning light gently touched and caressed his face, crowning
the man with tranquility and peace she had never seen him wear before.

She dared to cross the distance to the bed and to him. To stand near him. To look at him.

His mouth was slightly parted and his arms rested on the blanket, bandaged in several places,
especially around the shoulder. He wore nothing underneath, and the sight of his bare arms and
broad shoulders sent her heart racing. He had tanned arms, muscular and sculpted, and scars to
remind her of the history of violence the man before her had endured. His collarbones and the
curve of his neck were as powerful as the rest of him, angled and sharp. The man did not have a
single soft or round curve in his body, and the fierceness of his form was a mere reflection of his
character, for it too had no softness or gentleness left unguarded. His beard was wilder now, longer
and in need of a trim, and his hair was messy, tangled and bloodied. His face was, even in a coma
induced state, guarded and wary. Even drugs could not chase away the dreams.

She sat carefully on the edge of the bed, drinking in the harsh planes and the rugged regality of his
features. She has never seen him this close and took a moment to memorize the rise of his
cheekbones, the shape of his nose, the wrinkles around the eyes and the worry lines ever etched
into his forehead in a frown; the thin, parted lips.

The air that she held in her lungs deserted her lips in a shuddered breath.

He was beautiful.

She twitched her fingers in a silent protest against such thoughts and dipped the soft cloth into a
small water basin that was placed near the foot of the bed. After a long moment of agonizing
hesitation, she wrung it in her fist and gently tapped his forehead. She could feel the heat radiating
from him, probably because of the fever, but dared not to touch him, skin to skin.

After she finished, she carefully folded the cloth and placed it on his forehead, making sure she did
not touch him in the process.

She could spend hours just watching his chest rise and fall with each breath and the small
movements of his eyes underneath the thin skin of his eyelids. She shuddered when she thought of
the piercing pair resting ever uneasily, as if ready to blink open and tear into her.

But no such thing happened. Thorin remained unconscious as she continued to watch.

The state of his hair and beard, however, greatly bothered her. Thorin had taken great care to look
like the duke he was meant to be. He washed nearly as often as she did, always kept his braids
clean and orderly and his beard trimmed and kingly. His hair was often brushed, and he allowed no
ounce of dirt cling to him if he could help it. While Kili and Fili enjoyed the mud as a mark of the
road, and the miners and the warriors saw little use in trying to keep clean in a dirty environment,
Thorin suffered no such slights to his person.

So the blood, the sweat, the tangles…
They washed the rest of him, she noted, and treated the wounds with extreme care. Every blemish was bandaged, and even the smallest bruises was wrapped and hidden with cloth and ointment.

Deciding to be brave and to take advantage of the early dawn hours – before anyone could spot her in the act – Ningalor rose and rushed to the bathroom attached to Thorin’s room. She found, as she expected, soap and yet another basin, as well as a knife and a clean cloth, like the one she placed on Thorin’s forehead.

This was probably where they washed and tended to his wounds, but now she had a different goal in mind. She used the two basins – one she filled with soapy water, the other with plain, lukewarm liquid. First, she lifted his head carefully and fanned his hair across the pillow. Then, she took the long, dark locks and washed each gently – first with the warm water, then with the soap, then with the warm water again. She untangled the long hair with a gentle tug of her fingers, careful not to pull or do anything that might cause discomfort. She dried the lock and moved on to the next. The blood was the hardest to remove, but she worked slowly, diligently, carefully.

She unclasped the braids and redid them, weaving the now silken hair with care.

She did not wash, and her hands were the only clean thing about her. The water was ice cold, up in the mountains, and the Eagles saw no need to light fires for warmth, only for cooking. They kept Thorin’s basins hot with small, heated stones placed inside them, but the rest of them enjoyed no such luxury. The room was heated as well, and the heat pouring from the man lying before her melted the frost that had such sure hold of her bones before.

She traced her fingers over the strange engraving in the mithril bead before binding it into his hair. It was light, lighter than she expected, and silver-white in the early morning glow. The shape, square-like and sharp, was the epitome of the Dwarven culture in her eyes – sumptuous, splendid, strange, severe; accessible to the very few, the chosen.

She cleaned his beard with similar care and cut some of the wayward growth. She had never shaved a man before so she did not dare go overboard, but her attempts, while amateur and few, did undo the wild, renegade looks.

He appeared like a duke again, she thought, and rose to put away her tools. The soap smelled of flowers and spring and had the distinct edge of medical herbs. She wondered if she would be chastised for wasting such a thing on the patient’s hair and beard, but the silken, smooth feel of the man’s locks was a justified cause, she felt. She touched her own hair – brittle and dirty, smeared with blood and covered in dirt. It was golden no longer, as was she.

The hours passed without her noticing. Her eyes were fixed on the unconscious man, and her mask of the guarded, trained expression was shattered with each slow, pained breath he took.

She came in the night, when sleep eluded her, and often stayed until the sun shone brightly. Oin welcomed her company, Dwalin eyed her suspiciously and Balin inquisitively, but none objected. Fili and Kili visited once, but Balin had to shoo them when the younger boy burst into tears.

She did manage to fall asleep for a few hours, on and off, but often kept her watch, cleaned his forehead and poured a few, precious sips into his parted lips. Thus, she waited.

She jumped when a hand touched her shoulder, and her eyes widened with worry when she met the harsh glint of Gandalf’s eyes. His grip on her shoulders tightened. She swallowed uneasily, but even the crestfallen glance she sent to her mentor neither moved him nor broke through the scowl. Her eyes darted, once again, to the sleeping man. She closed them, took a deep, shuddered breath, and relaxed her shoulders in defeat.
She rose, and as Gandalf steered her outside of the patient’s room, she did not look back nor did her face reveal the pain pulsing within her.

When he opened his eyes again, he thought he dreamed of golden hair, dancing on his arm as a hand, as white as marble, as warm as winter sunlight, caressed his forehead with a wet cloth.

Merely a dream, though, because the sight that peered back at him was Oin and Gandalf, frowning over something and mumbling about doses and safe paths. Meneldor stood unmoving, unblinking, and watched.

“Water,” he croaked as a means to get their attention. Not a second passed and Oin was by his side, expertly guiding a cup of water to his lips.

He sipped carefully, since his throat was raw and burning. The water tasted like heaven in his feverish state.

“Welcome back, Your Grace,” said Meneldor. “Tomorrow you will descend and leave our borders. We shall take you to Lord Beorn’s border. Master Grayhame thinks he can convince him to show you friendship,” he spoke solemnly. “I am afraid we can host you no longer.”

“We are thankful for the time you offered us and took us under your wing,” Thorin annunciated to the best of his ability, though his tongue was sluggish and lazy of late.

Meneldor cocked a brow, then tilted his head to one side. “The advisors did nothing but croak, but it was their leader who showed true grace,” he said cryptically. “Rest, son of Durin. And stop stuffing him with the medicine. He needs to heal, now, and too fast a recovery will prove a hindrance rather than a grace, in the days to come,” he warned and turned to leave. Then the man paused, frowned, tilted his head to one side, and crossed the distance to Thorin’s bed.

Thorin looked at him warily, but the healer paid no attention to his glare, but rather to… his features in general? Thorin resisted the urge to shift uncomfortably or scowl in response.

“Have you a head injury, or earned one here without my knowledge?” the healer inquired.

“No, no, his head was unharmed,” Oin supplied. “Didn’t fall off the bed, did you?”

Thorin glowered at both of them. “I do not believe so. But I wouldn’t know.”

“Indeed.” The healer’s lips twitched. “Someone had seen to your hair and beard and washed them with medical herbs. Not the traditional use, but the scent of calendula is rather becoming on you, Your Grace.” He exited the room, amused, leaving them baffled.

Thorin frowned. “Explain,” he uttered, since he did not understand the man’s remarks, nor if he should be offended or complimented by them.

Oin looked at Gandalf in confusion before a crooked smile broke on his weathered face. “Must have been L –“

“He spoke of Lily and myself, the croaking advisors,” Gandalf quickly interjected. “We asked to stay until you had fully recovered. Since I did help Gwaihir – healed an arrow wound, old story – I did think it was only proper….” He sighed. “But we did overstay our welcome, and Gwaihir’s patience grows thin. Rest well, Thorin! We depart early tomorrow, and I do not doubt it will be a slow and painful march down to the valley below,” he said as he stirred Oin out of the room with
him. The old man frowned but did not protest too vehemently. “We will leave you to rest now,” Gandalf declared before Thorin could voice at least one of the many questions his blurry mind managed to produce.

And then he was alone.

The room was small but spacious, and had a large window, nearly as large as the wall, in fact, offering a view of the valley and the mountain range.

If the window had faced east, he would have seen the Lonely Mountain.

Besides the window, the room was stark. He was covered in furs, as were parts of the floor, and the fireplace was big enough to roast a common pig, but other than that and the few wooden furniture, which was expertly but humbly carved, there were few remainders of wealth or finery. Though perhaps, nested so far up the mountain, they had no need for lavish decorations to waste their efforts on. Strange folk, he thought them, though he met only their healer.

Balin arrived, smiling in evident relief when he saw Thorin was awake and quickly joined his side, bearing a map with him. He explained the plan jovially enough – down to Beorn’s land, whoever the man was, then into Mirkwood. Thorin gritted his teeth in irritation, but he too saw why entering the damned Dukedom was necessary, then down to Lake-Town – he had never heard of the place, and realized it must have been the settlement of the survivors of the Dale Massacre, and finally, Erebor.

Erebor, Erebor. No sweeter name was ever uttered by his tongue or ever crossed his mind. Dreams of her vast halls and golden treasures did her no justice, the stronghold of his people, the fortress of days to come, the homeland of his forefathers, his birthright…

The lady of his dreams, Erebor!

“How is everyone, not one wounded?” he asked slowly, thinking of his nephews.

“Just scratches and cuts! You were the only one seriously injured, I’m afraid.” The old man chuckled. “Setting a dreadful example to the young ones, to be sure.”

“And Lily? Was she truly not hurt by the fall or by Bolg’s men?” he asked earnestly. Perhaps too earnestly, for Balin’s face darkened. The seriousness engraved into his wizened worry lines made Thorin frown.

“She is well,” he said finally. “Thorin…may I ask why the woman causes you this much worry? Why are you so concerned with her wellbeing?”

“I know not what you mean.” Thorin scowled.

Balin all but rolled his eyes at him. “First, you never stop looking at her – I saw you, we all saw you. Don’t try to deny it. The woman noticed it as well, though I do not think she welcomed nor appreciated the power of your glower. You nearly jumped off a cliff, offered yourself as a sacrifice, almost embarked on an insane rescue mission –“

“My duty as the leader of the company is to protect you. All of you,” Thorin objected.

“Aye, and you take care of us very well, but usually your duties are accompanied by far less staring,” Balin countered. “And… blankets.”

“She was cold.”
“I did not say you were unjustified in your actions, all I am saying,” Balin reprimanded his tone, yet softened his gaze. “Thorin, I must advise against forming an attachment to her.”

Thorin bristled, “I am forming no such –“

“Aren’t you?” Balin scowled. “May I ask then why was she the only receiver of such careful attention? Do not lie to me, lad, I have known you since birth!”

Thorin grimaced and pursed his lip, but eventually his eyes darted, in defeat, to his fists, which he forced to relax.

Balin sighed. “We do not know her. Do not be a fool to think she truly is just a well-spoken Mistress of the Shire. One of the main reasons why we must leave tomorrow is her; or whatever she used to be before Gandalf smuggled her away. I swear on my beard,” Thorin’s eyes widened. This was not an oath sworn lightly, “that Lily is not her real name. Whoever she was, there is a powerful man out there – powerful enough to threaten the Eagles, here in their Eyrie, who still hunts her. Even if she might be worthy, she cannot be our lady, Thorin.”

Thorin scowled. “I have made no plans to make her such,” he said, feeling like a child with a silly excuse, and Balin’s knowing gaze told him his objection was feeble indeed.

“But then you planned to woo her for the journey and untangle yourself when earned your title yet again?”

“I have made no plans at all!” he growled and swallowed when Balin blinked in surprise, and then in pity. “I do not know… what I am doing,” he admitted.

“And that is what worried me the most.” Balin sighed.

They sat in silence for a while, each battling with his own thoughts and qualms and uncertainties.

Thorin had given in and asked, in a voice far too embarrassed than he would have liked, “Balin, tell me honestly,” he requested, unsure – he felt his face heating up and hoped that his skin was weathered enough not to show it, “you said that my… glowering was not appreciated.”

Balin’s face fell, as he could guess the question to come and hoped to discourage Thorin from asking it. Thorin trudged on. “But now?”

He sighed raggedly, almost in protest, and Thorin felt he had to add, “Honesty, please. That’s all I ask for.”

Balin hesitated, but his loyalty ran too deep, and even for the sake of his own interests and whatever he thought was best for his leader, he would not lie to him. “She is seeking you with her eyes, much like you search for her,” he admitted. “She treated you when you slept, watched over you for hours, and her care was gentle and tender. I dare say her argument with Lord Gwaihir was indeed a passionate one, especially from one so cold and composed. And she did cross swords with Bolg’s henchman, and killed one on your behalf.” When a small smile began to bloom on Thorin’s face, Balin added quickly, “She stopped coming and did not visit again, and I do think that Gandalf’s hand was in the matter, but I do not know for sure. I dare say that this unforeseen… complication is not to his taste as well.”

Thorin’s smile disappeared faster than it came. “Why should I care for the Istar’s schemes?” he growled.

“Because the Istar’s schemes brought us this far, so evidently he knows much more than he lets on
and sees a bigger picture than either of us. He has all the facts, Thorin, and if he objects to this…
attachment, then he is probably right to do so.” Balin finished sagely and added kindly, “Better to
end this now, before it develops any further, aye, laddie?” When Thorin did not respond, he sighed.
“She stopped visiting, Thorin. If she saw no future to this and accepted Gandalf’s objection so
effortlessly, then you should not bother with her.”

Thorin’s face perhaps revealed too much of his pain, for Balin’s expression was pure pity and
empathy. “I am sorry, laddie,” he said gently, then left him be.

Thorin waited for the door to close before he allowed his face to crumble entirely.

He closed his eyes, evened his breaths, and dreamed of hair, as golden as the sun that set over his
beautiful Erebor, burning bright.

Ruined.

Three days passed, and once again she was placed on a horse and held on to a rider who guided
said horse – too fast and quite carelessly, in her petrified opinion – down the mountain. If the
ranger sensed her fear in the way she hugged his midriff, he did not comment.

The only thing that appeased her, even if slightly, about the situation was the fact that all of the
company members, Gandalf and Thorin included, had a rider guiding them down the mountain. It
was a dangerous ride, and few could survive it untrained.

Gandalf was taken by Lord Landroval – the captain of the knights in the Eyrie and another brother
to the Lord of the Eagles, and Thorin was led by Lord Meneldor, the grave healer. They dressed
him in a strange corset, like the one they wore, to protect his still-healing ribs.

If Thorin found the bumpy ride painful, he said nothing in protest.

Ningalor fixed her eyes on his fur-clad back and cursed herself for feeling any wisp of longing or
want. Gandalf was right. Of course he was. She did not tear her eyes from him and there was no
one around to see her looking, so she refused to feel guilty. The bitterness tasted like bile in her
mouth.

Eventually, they reached a valley, marked by a large rock peering upwards from the face of the
earth. The trees thinned, the earth mellowed, and from afar she could hear a nearby river. The
valley was green and wide, and the weather was fine – the sun shone brightly and the breeze was
softer, warmer, sweet with the scent of warm grass.

The rangers either dismounted and helped them down or waited for them to dismount on their own.
Her rider aided her like one would a lady, bowed, and mounted his horse without a word uttered.

She tried not to frown. He acted appropriately, but she did not like a reminder of her past nor that
they were aware of it. She looked for Thorin.

Lord Meneldor had two rangers help Thorin down, but the man refused their help and dismounted
on his own, even if his movements were stiff and pained. The healer gave instructions, to Thorin
and Oin both, but Thorin paid little attention and instead he looked at his men – and his eyes found
hers.

She felt as if she were slapped when the intense glower scorched her where she stood; when the
fury simmering in the depth of the blazing blue was directed at her.
She did not know what she did to receive such a hateful stare, and her face must have revealed her shock and pain, for Bofur rested a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Lily, you all right? You look like you’d seen a ghost!” he asked with genuine concern.

“No doubt she has,” a voice said, and Ningalor’s eyes snapped to meet the regal, harsh face of Landroval. The Lord kicked his horse until he stopped before her. “I can tell you did not miss this place, my lady.”

Ningalor blinked and gulped uneasily, for then she understood – behind Thorin, she could see the dark borders of Mirkwood and indeed, this was not a pleasant sight. She pursed her lips and paled, but said nothing.

Landroval, unlike the stoic healer or the noble Lord, had the hard bearing of a warrior, and, apparently, compassion for those in trouble, the like of which his brother had for the wounded. “Tis is bad form,” he muttered, “to leave a child thus unprotected.”

“I am not alone,” she replied carefully, but the golden eyes saw directly into her and read the age-old fear plainly. A child, he called her. Did she look this young to him, or was it her inability to take care of herself that invoked the term? His eyes also told her what he thought of the company and the protection they offered; which wasn’t much, apparently.

“You need not go where you are hunted,” Meneldor added. “Even Mithrandir would not condone such a folly.” There was an offer of sanctuary? No, just an advice. They already told her they would not host her, would not risk their own kind to hide her amongst them.

They glanced at Gandalf, who remained suspiciously quiet. Eventually, he replied, “It is her decision.” The look he leveled at her revealed why he no longer thought her a worthy addition to the company.

She withstood the onslaught of disappointment quite well, she thought.

“I already made my decision,” she said finally, gravely, and from the twin looks the brothers aimed at her, she could tell they thought it a foolish one indeed.

Landroval raised his hand and immediately all of his rangers turned their horses to face him. “Farewell!” he declared, “Wherever you fare, till your eyries receive you at the journey’s end!”

“May the wind under your wings bear you where the sun sails and the moon walks!” replied Gandalf with ceremonious annunciation.

Landroval lowered his hand, and he and his men galloped up the mountain.

Ningalor looked wistfully at her one way out of this entirely stupid commitment and allowed her shoulders to drop in defeat.

Once again she felt eyes, his eyes on her. She did not turn around to return the favor.

Thorin cursed himself when he saw the woman’s shoulders fall with her gaze still fixed on the galloping horses, long after they disappeared into the trees and the echo of their hooves sounded no more. When she did move away from her spot, it was so she could stand alone and away from the group. She did not go to stand next to Gandalf, as she was used to, nor joined Bofur’s side despite the jovial waves the man sent her way.
If anything, she looked utterly miserable, and he could not help but wonder if at least some of the blame could be placed at his feet. He wanted to cross the distance, take her in his arms, and promise her all the safety and protection he could offer.

He wanted a sign that she would not reject him, or an explanation for the ease with which she abandoned his side. He wanted to know what right she had to look so stricken, so hurt, when he transmuted his pain into anger – surely she knew what her actions caused him?

Surely, if turning her back to him was a choice she made, she knew she could no longer look at him, for him, as she did before? Surely –

“I found a river!” Fili cried. “The water’s warm, too!”

Kili jumped to his feet. “Last to the river is a smelly old fart!” he cried, already undoing his belt while on the run. Fili would not turn down a challenge, and soon the entire company ran and stripped while cheering and hollering all the way to the river.

Thorin could not help but chuckle, despite his gloomy thoughts, and joined them as well. The promise of a wash was something he longed for, though he refused to strip on the run like a spring rabbit.

Gandalf followed too, chuckling, but the old man did not wash with them. He winked at Thorin and crossed to the lower branch of the river, just as Thorin stepped into the riverbed and watched his men, naked and merry, splashing and washing cheerfully.

He began to loosen his belt as well when Oin, washing his beard from murk, waggled his finger at him. “No, not you! We haven’t enough clean bandages, and we just changed them today!”

Thorin scowled, displeased to be denied of a proper wash. “But –“

“Besides, we did wash you!” the healer said, glaring at a clot of blood that tangled in his beard. “And the lass did a fine job washing your hair and trimming your beard, I should think!” he added merrily.

Thorin’s breath deserted his lungs in a hiss, but the old man was too busy with his knots to notice. Lily…

He turned but, as expected, the woman was not there. Of course, she would not spend her time amongst naked men… he hurried back to the clearing, but she was not there as well. He looked around, worried, heart racing. She could not – did not go back, did she? Changed her mind, returned to the mountain? Left when none of them was left to stop her? Or – or taken?

The Lords of the Eyrie did say she was hunted.

Thorin cursed aloud and cried out her name. No response came. He yelled again and began to search – at first, he started to climb the mountain, but he saw no traces in the soft earth except hooveprints. Deciding to trust his instincts, he tried to go down the river and into the forest, for perhaps she left a hint, a mark, something for them to find her –

His hand tightened on the handle of Orcrist. Broken bones or not, he will not let them take her.

“Lily!” he cried. “Lily!”

“Thorin?”
He stopped short. Her voice. That was her voice, quiet but not too far, coming from the river…
“Lily!” He rushed ahead. “Are you hurt? Did –“

“Stop! Don’t – don’t come any closer, please!”

He paused, worry and fear racing, Orcrist drawn in his hand. “What happened? Are you hurt? Wounded?”

“I am… naked.”

Thorin blinked, swallowed with difficulty, and immediately turned around to face the trees. He sheathed the sword, cheeks blazing red. He found his voice, eventually. “Oh. Oh, I thought–” He stopped, feeling like an idiot.

The woman explained the obvious. “The wash sounded… pleasant, but, of course, I had to search for a more… secluded spot.”

Was she as embarrassed as he? Mahal. “Of course, I….” Deciding to mask his embarrassment, he scolded her. “You should have informed us, not… disappear like that!”

“Why should I ever?” Her reply was cold.

He huffed in annoyance. “The Eagles, they spoke of someone, hunting for you –“

“I can take care of that myself, I should think.”

“Indeed? I was not thus impressed with your fighting skills.” He berated himself for the sneer in his voice, but the coldness in hers was not something he had expected.

“Not all battles must be won with steel,” she countered.

“Most are,” he said gravely and leaned against a tree. The corset was stiff and painful, and the throbbing underneath rose and fell with the beating of his heart. His fist twitched.

“Not offense intended, of course,” the woman said defensively, “but could I please ask you to leave?”

Thorin bristled at the words, but her anger was justified and he was too tired, of worry and pain and the enigma the woman was, to be angry again. “No, you may not,” he growled. “I am not leaving you this defenseless.” He added quickly, “I will not turn around, have no fear.” Perhaps he said it too angrily? It was kindness. He wanted her to know it was kindness.

The woman was silent for a while, but when she spoke her words were laden with… something. Hurt? He could not tell without looking at her. “I find these words strange, spoken by a man who not half an hour ago glared at me with so much anger… anger I do not understand what I did to deserve.”

He closed his eyes in pain. Of course she did not. Perhaps he was just reading between lines that he alone imagined. Perhaps Balin was wrong. He sighed, his moan too ragged and loud for his own liking, too broken, and his words were far too earnest. “Forgive me, you… you did nothing. I merely misunderstood, misinterpreted… things that I should not have overthought. I am not angry at you,” he finished. The last sentence was raw – could she tell, though? Could she sense, not looking at his face, what he meant?

The woman was silent for a long while. He heard her moving in the river, washing. He tried not to
imagine her – her hair, wet and dark, clinging to smooth, pale curves, and –

“May I know what happened, or what caused the misinterpretation?” she asked finally. Her voice was soft and small, and it took his breath away.

_Balin told me you stopped visiting me after Gandalf had advised against it. “Nothing important.”_

“But, surely –“

“I would demand nothing of you,” he said roughly, raggedly. “But I do intend to keep you safe. And that I will do.”

“I don’t understand,” she whispered.

Thorin braced himself and the turmoil within before muttering through tight lips, “I expect nothing,” he hissed. Must she embarrass him so? Surely she knows, like the rest of his company, what a great fool he had been?

The woman said nothing more. She walked out of the river – he could hear the water dripping, the sound of her footsteps… he could hear her dressing. He gritted his teeth, turned his hands into fists, glared into the forest and said nothing.

He was so busy glaring and berating himself and the world in general that he did not hear her crossing the distance until she whispered, “Thorin….”

He twisted to face her, his eyes snapped to meet hers.

“What is it you would want of me?”

Her hair, dark gold and wet, clung to her face and to her back. Her arms were crossed over her chest, as if in a hug. The fabric was tight around her form as well, and he had to tear his eyes away from the wet, creamy skin that caressed the curve of her collarbones. Her eyes were wide, blue and defenseless, and soft blush adorned her pale cheeks.

“What I want must be given,” he muttered, his voice deeper and darker than he would have liked. Ashamed, he tore his eyes from hers and turned to march back into the forest –

“Thorin….” She touched his wrist, her finger dancing on his skin, and he grabbed her hand before he could stop himself.

She looked up at him, eyes wider still, as he caressed her smaller hand in his larger one. Her skin was no longer soft, and he could feel small cuts and tears crisscrossing her palm. “You are cold,” he breathed, holding her hand far longer than he should have.

Her fingers twitched and slowly, hesitantly, closed around his hand. He looked up at her, shocked, and the woman looked just as unsure as he felt. Balin’s warning echoed in his mind, but it faded as quickly as it came when her fingers gently brushed his knuckles.

“You are warm,” she whispered, still looking up at him.

He could drown in the blue of her eyes, he could… his eyes followed a drop of water from her forehead, down her cheek, the graceful curve of her neck, and the collarbone…

She shivered.

He immediately let go of her hand and took off his coat. When the woman still looked at him with
her eyes ever wide, he wrapped the coat around her shoulders, pulling it together as if to hug her with the rich, thick fabric, and caused her to stumble forward, toward him.

Her breath was so shallow he dared not do anything else, and her eyes, so uncertain, dissuaded him even further. “Keep the coat,” he whispered, voice too hoarse for his liking, and released her.

She knows now. All that was left was for her to decide.

When they emerged from the forest back into the clearing, she found that all of the company members were waiting for them, and whatever cheers and hollers the cried, “Oi, Thorin, we’ve been waiting forever!”, “Must take back Erebor before winter, mind!”, “I do hope for you that you didn’t wash, because –”

Everything they wanted to say died on their lips when Ningalor too emerged, now properly dressed in Thorin’s coat, feeling warm and snug and thoroughly embarrassed.

They were staring at her, mouths agape and eyes wide, and Ningalor stopped in her tracks, feeling heat that had nothing to do with the coat (at least, not directly) flushing through her.

Thorin noticed it too and looked back to see the cause. He looked embarrassed, if one could judge from the tightening of his jaw and the gruffness of his tone. “Gandalf! Where is that man you spoke of?” He glared at the rest of his men until each dropped his gaze and ceased staring.

Ningalor managed to breathe again.

“Just a bit further! Follow me and I will explain the plan,” Gandalf replied jovially, signaling for Thorin to take the lead with him, but not before he leveled a meaningful glare her way. Ningalor pursed her lips and trudged on forward with the rest of them, feeling like an unwanted outcast.

The coat was too big for her and reached her ankles, and though it had no sleeves, the fur was warm and soft against her cheeks. She walked slightly hunched and with her shoulders stiff, and found the presence of the fur hiding her face immensely comforting.

It was unlike anything she had ever owned – big and thick and regal and lacking all finesse, but it was incredibly warm and had the added benefit of smelling like Thorin. She focused on that, on the rich scent of metal and earth and musk, and the lightest touch of flowers and medical herbs, probably from his hair.

She breathed the intoxicating smell in and ignored, to the best of her ability, the uncomfortable feeling, the knowledge that they were all looking at her, thinking, talking behind her back.

The miners and the Ri brothers didn’t seem to mind nor care very much (though she did hear Dori complain about impropriety and saw Ori blushing after Nori muttered something that made Dori pull his ear). Fili and Kili were shocked, it would seem, torn between giggling and pretending to be indifferent about the matter. Balin and Dwalin whispered vehemently, and she could clearly tell they were against… whatever it was they thought was happening. Gloin glared at her unappreciatively, but Oin hummed pleasantly, appearing to be very pleased about something.

So there she was, a pariah no one would dare talking to.

But she was warm.

“We’re here!” Gandalf called, and they all stopped and peered ahead.
What they saw was a ring of large, well-trimmed bushes – a living fence, perhaps hiding stone underneath. Behind the bushes stood tall trees, obscuring what lay beyond.

“That is his house?” Bofur wondered, “This friend of yours?”

“He is no friend of mine just yet. He may help us, or he may kill us,” Gandalf said evenly. “We will go in pairs! Five minutes between each pair, do not hurry! Lily, you are coming with me first.”

Ningalor stepped forward obediently, but Thorin leveled a thunderous scowl at Gandalf. “You just say this… Beorn may attempt to kill us, and you send your ward first?” he objected.

Should she be happy that he was this worried for her safety? She felt even more like an incapable burden now.

“She looks more harmless than the rest of you, and I dare say I will need her wits, rather than your sword,” Gandalf replied, prickly after he had his judgment tested. “And if he were annoyed, goodness knows what’d happen! Lily!”

Ningalor ducked under the weight of the company’s collective gaze and trotted to join Gandalf’s side.

They entered the fence. Behind it another ring of oak trees rose to greet them, and a cobbled path, leading to a giant manor, as big as the width of the ring of oaks. The house was large and humble in design, like an overstretched cottage, but there was a feral air to it that looked neither Elven nor Dwarven, and definitely not Man-made. There were rows upon rows of beehives and many small buildings such as barns, stables, and sheds. The air was sweet with the fresh scent of blooming flowers, medical herbs, and spices.

“Explain the coat,” Gandalf muttered.

She twisted her lips but answered dutifully, “I was cold.”

“Ningalor,” he rumbled, “we talked about this.”

“I know,” she mumbled, “I didn’t… he sought me out, and I….”

“Return the coat, turn him down.”

She breathed sharply. “I don’t want to. Gandalf –“

“Once he finds out who you are, he will toss you aside without a second thought. And you will be discovered, should you stray too close.” Gandalf shook his head. “It is doomed and too risky.”

“I know,” she mumbled again. “I know that.”

“Then do as I say!” he ordered. “Return the coat.” When she said nothing, he added, “They all think you are… intimate now.”

“I know.” Her voice was barely heard. “I know, Gandalf, I knew when he gave it to me, I…. She buried her fingers in the fur. “I know all of it, but when I think of him, let alone stand in his presence….”

Boys on horses galloped toward them. They looked at them and raced away, but Gandalf made no attempt to speak to them.

“They have gone to warn their master,” Gandalf explained. “Beorn’s household does not
communicate with strangers.” He placed a hand on her arm and squeezed gently. “This is your decision, but I should hate to see him break you, and I cannot promise I could protect you from Thranduil, should you stay by Thorin’s side.”

They had no time to speak of anything else, for Gandalf led her to the back yard of the cottage, a garden of vegetables and fruits and trees and flowers. There stood a giant man with a black mane, wild beard, and bare arms and legs, thick with knotted muscle. He wore a leather tunic and looked utterly barbaric, chopping wood with his massive axe. He made Dwalin look small.

He lowered his axe when he saw them and burst into a booming laugh. “Why, that scrawny girl and this old man? They don’t look at all that dangerous! Come on, off you go!” He laughed again, and the boys kicked their horses and galloped away, looking at them curiously.

“I don’t have visitors or strangers at my gate often,” the man added. His forearms were thicker than her legs. “What’s your business here? Speak up!” He had thick, dark eyebrows and black eyes, and the planes of his face were fierce and wild.

“I am Gandalf,” declared Gandalf.

“Never ‘eard of you,” the man replied gruffly. “This your kid?”

“My ward, Lily. I am a member of the Istari, my lord,” Gandalf said magnanimously. “You may have met my colleague, Radagast? He lives close to your border.”

“Aye, I know the old man. Not so bad as far as old men go.” He scowled. “What do you want of me?”

“Ah!” Gandalf said cheerfully. “Well, my ward and I need help and shelter. We have lost our luggage and food after we were attacked by members of the Goblin clan.”

“Goblins?” The man said, interest avid in his eyes. “How’d you run into that filth? Didn’t come down the mountain, did they?”

“I hope not. It is a rather long story,” Gandalf said cryptically.

The beast-sized man, Beorn, considered his words. Then he decided. “Well, like I said, we don’t get many visitors, and stories sure are welcome! Come inside and tell your tale!”

The inside was as marvelously wild as the outside, and giant in size. There was a huge fireplace in the middle and many open windows to allow fresh air in. They were served milk by a silent woman, dressed in white, and Ningalor sipped in silence as Gandalf told his tale. Every once in a while, he hinted that there were more of them, and when Beorn pointed that out, a pair of men appeared and joined their company. Beorn’s eyes narrowed in obvious suspicion and Ningalor almost surrendered, almost told Gandalf to be careful, for the giant could sense the trickery and the scheming in Gandalf’s eyes – after all, the Istar himself told her of the man’s wrath… but the tale fascinated him, it would appear, and he agreed to suffer the constantly increasing number of men in order to hear the end of it.

Thorin arrived last, accompanied by Fili and Kili, and Beorn’s face darkened when he heard their names.

“You are the one called Oakenshield,” he said, all good humor gone.

“Aye, I am,” Thorin declared.
“I know your quest,” said the man, his voice grave and dark. “I knew your father.”

Thorin’s eyes widened. “My – my father? When? Where?”

His reaction was the last thing she expected, and her heart squeezed in pain to see the grief and the desperate hope in his eyes.

“Many years ago.” Beorn waved him inside his cottage and stood up. “These are my lands. I have many people to protect, and a few of my kin that lives in the forests. When we hear of Orcs, we hunt. When we hear of Goblins, we hunt. When we hear of murderers and thieves, we hunt.” He waved to several of the silent women and men, giving no verbal command. “Some rumors travel quickly, others slowly. If there are no survivors, sometimes they don’t travel at all. When an Orc pack attacked your father, we arrived in time to kill them, but not to save him.” The man bowed his head gravely. “He gave me your name and his, wanted to give you a ring, but he had no hands to bear rings on.”

The company was silent. Balin wept and Dwalin looked ashen, stricken with grief. The rest looked shocked or horrified by the tale. Thorin clenched his jaw so hard the muscles of his neck corded and knotted violently and his face grew unnaturally white. He said nothing.

“I will let you stay here for as long as you’d like, son of Thrain,” Beorn declared. “Perhaps your tale shall be a happier one.”

“Thank you,” Thorin muttered, voice uneven, and Ningalor looked up in horror to see the proud, hard blue break, the unforgiving eyes soften with tears, and the sharp cheekbones and strong planes gleaming wet.

“His last wish was to tell you that he loved you.”

Thorin bore his grief with pride as she looked away in shame.

Chapter End Notes

What do you think?
The inspiration for the Axoloa came from the simple fact that eagles, throughout their lives, eat bones for calcium. So I figured that people who live so high up the mountains surely had a method to strengthen their bones as well.
In Quenya, ‘axo’ means ‘bone’, and ‘loa’ means ‘growth’.

I know I didn't publish anything for two weeks and I do apologize- I was hiking in the mountains, therefore- no wifi.
Saw some bears, though, and elks, and tons of squirrels =)
See you next Saturday!
He sat and waited for her.

There was nothing else he could do; the consequences of the too fast healing were catching up with him. His bones were mended, as well as the tissue surrounding it, but both were very tender and fragile. He needed to rest a week or so, strain his body as little as he possibly could, and wait for the marrow and the tissue to build up in strength.

During the day, he sat under an ancient oak tree and read, rested, or watched the company as they played or sang to entertain him. When the evening came, bringing with it cold, dark winds from the mountains, he was ushered inside a large room where he lounged on a mattress stuffed with feathers and luxurious, thick hides for blankets. The room was often too stuffy and warm, as Oin had insisted on having the fireplace nearly always lit to burn many medical herbs from Beorn’s garden and thus ensure he would not catch a cold, or something, and strain his lungs. While he did appreciate the care, it meant that he could move very little, had to wear that annoying corset, and spend hours at a time lying on his back and letting Oin smear whatever he felt necessary to smear on his chest.

Which often smelled absolutely awful, as his two boys felt was essential to mention whenever they came to visit him.

He was given a large coat from their bear-sized host – it had a wild, rugged appearance and had still retained the skull and the upper jaw of the bear from which it was made, but he was slowly learning to appreciate its savage appearance.

And it’s not like he was going to get his old coat back.

Balin came to reprimand him for his actions and once again reminded him that he was soon to be a person of great importance who would have to marry a woman of equal importance, or at least as equally important relatives. A woman not from the Dwarven Bond was out of the question.

A woman with suspicious origins should not be considered at all.

Oin, on the other hand, apparently came to the conclusion that the best way to help Thorin endure
the hour spent applying pure stench to his chest was by telling him how Lily spent her time. Usually, it seemed she was performing some tasks for Gandalf or talking to Beorn. Oin must have thought he was doing a good job explaining her absence to Thorin.

Thorin wondered if, at some point, he would manage to gather the courage to ask for her presence, or simply make Oin shut up. But as it was, bored and restless and often babysat by two gruff, pedantic old men, Thorin waited.

Counting the hours, dreading the passing of the days, tense and anxious, he waited.

And then she came.

He was reading a tome about medical herbs, which was written in tiny letters and was utterly boring, when light knuckles rapped at his door. Balin and Oin did not knock while the rest of his company rarely troubled him in his chamber. He had not spoken to Gandalf for days, though he was not too sure he minded that, and the silent staff that did not utter a single word and made him feel distinctly uncomfortable never entered when he was present.

“Come in!”

The door opened painfully slowly, and there she stood.

Still clad in his coat.

Which was far too big for her, he noted absentmindedly, and made her look that much smaller. He felt the anxiety leaving him in a rush as well as his breath when new, unexpected nervousness settled in his stomach. She stood by the door and looked at him, her eyes large and uncertain, and he could see the same hesitation he felt himself stiffening her posture.

“Come,” he ordered, lifting his hand, and managed to feel a slightly bit better when the woman entered the room, closing the door behind her.

She walked slowly toward him and sat on the floor by his mattress, close enough to reach but not intimately so. Oin had not yet come to change his bandages, and since he was inside, he did not have to wear the corset, and, all in all felt slightly better about the shape she found him in. His chest was unclothed but was also covered in herb-stained bandages, though from the way she blushed and looked away he could tell that this was still inappropriate by her standards.

She shifted and lowered the coat – even she thought the room was warm! – so it rested around her elbows, and he had to take a deep, calming breath; she had no idea how enticing she looked like that, half dressed in his coat.

She looked away again, uncomfortable due to the stretching silence. “How are you feeling?” she asked uncertainly, cringing when her voice shattered the silence.

“Better.” He managed not to add now that you came. No doubt she would have bolted had he said it. “In three days’ time I will be allowed to return to my duties as usual.”

“Oh,” she muttered, noticeably unsure what she was supposed to say. “And then we will leave?”

“Oin wants to stay for another week, just to make sure I healed properly.” He grimaced. “This medicine is far more trouble than it’s worth.” Gods, what nonsense he is saying!

She looked stricken. “Of course not! We-we are all grateful that you made such a speedy recovery. Such injuries may take months to heal.” She looked at her hands again.
Thorin cleared his throat. “I had yet to thank you,” he said carefully. “For saving my life.”

She blinked, clearly fighting for control over her features. He hated that, the perfectly appropriate expression, and dared to place his hand on hers. “Thank you,” he said hoarsely.

Her hand was so small in his palm. He did not dare to actually hold it, should she pull away. He was terrified of that – what would happen had she pulled away, if she had rejected his touch? How is he to look her in the eye? Perhaps he misread her actions again, perhaps she came to reject him…

But all such notions lost their meaning when Lily blushed, looked away, and held his hand. Her fingers twitched shyly and closed around his palm, and he could feel her pulse racing when he returned the gesture. From her face, he could tell so little – pinkish, perhaps, but closed off and guarded. The blush was an achievement all of its own, he sensed, holding her hand gingerly. When his thumb brushed on her knuckles, he could clearly see her chest rise in surprise and her lips part momentarily. When he intertwined his fingers with hers, he could hear her breath deserting her, but while her eyes snapped to look at their hands and she swallowed nervously (he hoped it was nervousness and not unease), she still managed a small, tight-lipped smile.

“You saved my life at least three times already, I figured I owed you at least that much.”

That was not what he expected and the opposite from what he hoped to hear. “You risked your life as an attempt to pay a debt?” he growled, “My duty to my people is to keep you safe, and that is what I do! You have no such responsibility, nor do you need to pay me back.” He narrowed his eyes at her, and while he did not let go of her hand, he also did not allow the shock in her eyes to mellow his tone.

“Then were your actions spurred by duty?” She pulled her hand away and sat ramrod straight. “The blankets and the coat as well?” She was hurt; that, he could see.

Thorin clenched his hand and cursed his temper. “That is my duty,” he replied carefully, “but duty is not what spurred them, nor was it the motive behind them.” He licked his lips. “Was yours?”

She blinked and looked away. Her fingers stroked the fur of his blanket. “I had the debt, and a duke’s life is worth more than that of a peasant, but those were... those are not strong enough arguments. They were not the reason.”

They both must look like such great fools, he sensed. He regretted his outburst, and now her hand seemed beyond his reach. He tried to think of something else, anything else, and uttered, “I must also thank you for tending to my hair and beard.” When she looked up in confusion, he added, feeling foolish again, “I was given to understand you saw to them?” he asked, hesitating.

She opened her mouth, closed it, and nodded. “I did,” she admitted. “It must have been inadequate, for I have little experience, but I felt....”

“No, it was –“ He scratched his beard nervously. “Beards and hair matter a great deal in our alliance. You could learn much about a person from the type of braids he uses, the beads he wears...” He felt foolish then, even though the woman blinked at him in interest. “Servants may brush our hair, but the rest of the care we do ourselves, for it is an intimate gesture, to –“

Lily turned red and placed a hand on her mouth, looking utterly horrified. “Oh! Do forgive me! I had no idea! I did wonder why no one cleaned – oh –“

“I don’t mind,” he hurried to say. She still looked at him, wide-eyed and shocked, and he added, feeling like a silly boy in his teens, “I... appreciated your care.”
How imprudent she must think him!

Thorin looked away, allowed his eyes to leave her and look at the fire dancing before him. For two persons whose very profession meant they had to banter words rather often, they were fairly terrible at holding a conversation.

Suddenly, he felt her hand on his, and he turned his gaze to meet hers – her eyes had the most intense look he ever saw the icy pools hold. “Thorin –“

“How? Lily? Where has that troublesome girl gone off to?”

The woman looked frightened, as if caught in the deed, and attempted to withdraw her hand. He grasped her wrist before he could think twice, and whatever it is he wanted to say died on his lips when they heard Gandalf call her name again.

“I must go,” she whispered. She did not withdraw her hand but she resisted his pull, and her face was devoid of whatever warmth or color it held before.

“Visit me again,” he asked. Commanded. He should have worded it better, no doubt, make it an offer or a question, but the woman’s fingers caressed his – was it a promise? And she was gone.

Thorin’s hand twitched. Curse that Istar.

Ningalor darted away – away from Thorin, away from Gandalf, out of the house and into the garden.

She had to clear her head, her thoughts.

It took her so very long to gather the courage to knock. She memorized the schedule of Balin and Oin, waited for a moment when Dwalin wasn’t watching, tried to escape Gandalf’s very obvious attempts to keep her busy, and waited.

It was all so obvious, in fact, that two days prior Beorn took her to see the ranch. She did not ask way he wanted her company, nor was it her place to ask.

They watched the boys and the girls ride and play. They were speaking a language she did not understand, but they were too busy and childishly excited by the game and the ride to notice her presence and cease talking.

“I see you walking around my house like a shadow,” Beorn grumbled. “The men look at you but do not speak. The old man tasks you but his worry never eases. My girls say you stare at Oakenshield or Oakenshield’s door, but never open it. Never talk to him.” He did not look at her, and she did not look at him. “Always silent.”

Too personal, too quickly. “Why do you ask?”

The lord shook his messy mane. “I care for many. I know their faces, I know their sadness. Weakness in the wild means death, and I do not raise them to be weak. Whatever it is that burdens you, it weakens you.”

“Every man capable of thought is a man burdened. Every man charged with a responsibility is a man worried.”
“A pampered parrot raised in court?” he asked and shook his head. “Men lock themselves up in stone and metal. They forget what it means to be men. They create traditions and titles to remind the weak that they are weak. Are they weak?” he questioned her. When she blinked at him in confusion, he explained, “This is the wild! The world is the wild! Do you think I care for the Duke of Mirkwood’s arrogance, or for the Serpent of Erebor’s threats? I can fight, I can guard, and I can take care of myself. Why should I pay to this or that? My women aren’t worth less of my men. I do not obey the Brotherhood of Men nor any other self-titled alliance.” He spat. “If you do, that is the source of your weakness.”

She looked down. “I left my alliance long ago.”

“Not long enough. You still follow their rules, wait to be commanded, do as you are told.” Beorn shook his head. He pointed to the playing children. “Some of them are mine. Some belong to others. Do I know? Does it matter? Love is a promise, and such a promise cannot be taken as lightly as some think.”

She did look at him then, utterly shocked.

“Some prefer gold, or comfort, or praise. Fools, I think them.” He pushed his hand into his sleeve and gave her a leather bag. Inside it were crushed herbs, almost taunting her with their simplicity.

Her eyes darted from the bag to the rugged lord and back to the herbs it contained.

The lord cocked a bushy brow and smiled. “No consequences. No court to hold you down. You are a free bird! Why are you so afraid to live?” He began to walk away. “A teaspoon would do, at least an hour before!” he hollered as he left.

Ningalor looked at the bag, looked up at the man, and huffed.

This was improper, this was wrong, this was – oh, all the rules she had to live by!

Wrong, wrong, wrong… this choice was wrong. But the bag gave her the option to choose, and she could choose to be free.

Perhaps not for long, possibly only for a week. She was not such a fool, to believe she could escape her father’s claws so very easily, or at all. But for one, one sweet, gods given week, perhaps, she could be allowed to choose, and she could choose him.

When she finally dared to knock on Thorin’s door, she had no idea what to expect.

The Duke looked at her with such intensity she sometimes felt too inadequate to return his gaze. He was too passionate for her, and the words he spoke, though uttered gruffly, were the last thing she expected. His hand, callous and warm, his chest, so very muscular and refined… he looked like a statue, sitting there, looking at her, waiting for her… he had not taken back his words, and if his touch meant anything… Gandalf’s eyes held nothing but a warning, Balin and Dwalin – mistrust.

Thorin’s eyes were torrid, like fire, but there were gentleness and tenderness in them, too.

He laid his intentions bare before her and waited for her to decide.

What could she possibly decide?

If they decide to go through Mirkwood, it may be the end of her. If that was the case, then this was possibly the last week of freedom she was given.
And Beorn offered her a choice.

In the last days of his confinement, the entire company came to his room and stayed for a never-ending visit.

It was the very last day he had to be in a bed, covered in bandages and salves. Balin thought it was utterly necessary to have someone with him the whole time so he would not attempt any further foolishness, it would seem.

“Don’t do anything extreme, though!” Oin wagged his finger at him and added, “You were fine three days ago, but I kept that from you so you wouldn’t… jump into action.” The old healer looked mighty pleased with himself and ignored Thorin’s thunderous scowl cheerfully. “I told her that, too.”

“Oin…” Thorin threatened, bristling, “do not dare to smear her name like that!”

The old healer looked at him, confused. “Smear? Of course not! I… I assumed you were already intimate?” he asked slowly.

“Of course not!”

“But that day, in the river, you had given her your coat—”

“She was cold!”

“Cold!” Dwalin huffed and rolled his eyes. “Who’d have thought you could be wooed just by being demurely shivered at?”

Thorin threw a wooden bowl at him which the gruff warrior ducked with ease.

“– Fall so completely for shaking damsels –“

The second bowl he threw hit the warrior straight in the face. The man cursed, but thankfully said nothing more. Kili and Fili looked utterly serious when he fixed his glare on them, but the second his eyes left them he could hear them giggling.

The healer looked confused, then sighed. “Well, that would explain why the lass had such a confused look on her face. Might also explain why she never came, eh? Didn’t want us thinking things we shouldn’t?”

Thorin scowled but said nothing. She did come. For a short and fleeting moment, he even held her hand.

She did not visit since.

It was late, very late, when even Fili and Kili tumbled out of their Uncle’s room, tipsy by the look of it. The men celebrated and drank for their leader’s recovery while Ningalor waited and counted the hours.

She considered everything. She weighed the consequences. They already thought they bedded, even Oin suggested so! And next week she might be captured and never see him again. Did it matter? No. No, it didn’t. She was twenty-five years old, an old spinster.
But the way Thorin looked at her when she stepped out of the river, the way his eyes, scorching, followed the trail of the drop of water from her head to her breasts…

She did not shiver from the cold. She was never looked at like that, and she found that she wanted more – more of that feeling, foreign and forbidden to her.

She brewed the tea, drank it slowly. It was bitter, but the silent woman who helped her brew it allowed her no sugar, though she did give her a bowl of strawberries with cream, and based on her playful wink, Ningalor assumed it meant something in their culture. But the woman did not explain and Ningalor had no intention of asking either Gandalf or Beorn, so she ate her strawberries, felt her stomach tighten in nervousness (or was it the tea?) and waited.

The hour was indeed very late; she almost aborted the plan. She almost gave up.

But then the door to his room opened and Thorin stepped out. He stretched – the muscles of his chest and stomach weaved and danced – and pulled his hand to the side, then moved it in a circular motion. He did not seem to mind the cool night’s air, and she let out a shuddered breath when he lifted his arms in a stretch and the muscles of his stomach rippled in response.

The man froze. “Who’s there?” he demanded. His hand immediately flew to his waist, though he did not wear his sword.

Feeling utterly foolish for getting caught like that, she stepped out of the shadows and walked toward him. When he saw her, the tension left his shoulders almost immediately and the infuriating man smiled at her. It was a small gesture and tight-lipped at that, but the very notion that he smiled because he saw her took her breath away.

“Lily,” he greeted. “Why are you awake at this hour?”

She was too much of a coward to press her point, wasn’t she? She did not dare to stand close enough for intimacy; couldn’t will herself to take that one more step, even though the heat Thorin produced seduced her quite effectively.

“I heard you are well,” she managed lamely.

The man nodded. “We had a party,” he replied, voice slow and measured. “Removed the bandages.”

She hmmed in response. She could not help but glance into the hall, as if expecting Gandalf to appear and stop whatever folly she was about to commit. Was it a folly? She glanced up at Thorin, worrying her lip. Would he reject her? Think her lewd or ill-bred? Was it really such a good idea?

How did he do it, making her feel feverish and nervous, reckless and hopeful?

Thorin frowned at her when she said nothing, then he glanced as well into the hall. “Do you… do you want to come in?” he offered, unsure how to approach her.

It was her chance to turn back, to say no. Not that she doubted his honor, but… she swallowed her uncertainties and her fears. She was running out of time, and she wanted to feel this promise, this love that Beorn spoke of.

She wanted Thorin to look at her like he did before, that day near the river.

“Yes,” she whispered.
Thorin’s face was unreadable to her as he led her inside, though his eyes did snap to meet hers when she blurred, “Close the door.”

The man frowned at her.

“Please.”

It was improper for her to be in the same room with a man, this late at night. Thorin was trying to act honorably by her, and she –

“Are you ashamed of being seen with me?” the man asked, voice harsh.

She jolted. “No!” She opened and closed her mouth, not sure how to explain. “Please,” she breathed again.

Thorin closed the door.

He crossed his hands over his chest, then sighed, for some unknown reason, and crossed the distance to her. Close, but not too close. “Forgive me. I…..” He raked his hand through his hair. Why was he nervous? Was he nervous? Why should he be? Was she seeing things? “I judge you too harshly.”

She shook her head. “You allowed me in.”

“I would not deny you anything I can grant you,” the man declared passionately.

They were both taken aback by the statement, but Thorin did not back down, nor did he close himself to her. Without breaking eye contact, though her hands did shake, she removed his coat and placed it on one of the chairs next to her.

His eyes widened, then hardened. “Are you rejecting me?”

“No,” she whispered.

Judged too harshly. Perhaps they both did not really believe the other could possibly want them.

She started undoing the ties of her corset. Thorin’s eyes widened, but she still did not dare to look away. The hard lines softened with each tug she gave and the harsh glare was replaced by heat; by want. So that’s desire…

“What are you doing?” he breathed, and the raw edge to his usually smooth voice made her shudder.

“You said it must be given,” she murmured.

He inhaled sharply and placed his hands on her arms, stopping her progress. “I said – I didn’t mean –” He looked torn suddenly, but resolve hardened his face. “I have no intention of demanding anything that you are unwilling, or under… improper circumstances….”

“This is the wild, does it matter?” she whispered. “We have nearly faced death so many times, I…..” She blushed, but her resolve too was not to be shaken. “I want to, but I simply do not know how… how to give,” she admitted.

Thorin’s eyes pierced her, held her, and for a long moment he did not speak. Slowly, his hold of her arms became less restrictive and the scorching heat returned. “Are you sure?” His voice dropped an octave.
She managed to cock her brow at him. “I do not make my decisions hastily, nor do I take my choices lightly.” She gave the corset a final tug and removed it.

Thorin’s eyes followed its fall, then returned to follow the movement of her digits as she started to undo the ties of her tunic. Her fingers shook.

“All right,” Thorin whispered, his voice raspy, and she nodded and turned around. His fingers were thicker than hers but snaked under the string expertly. Her tunic sat loosely against her skin faster than she could handle. Her breath deserted her in a panicked rush.

His fingers traced the exposed spine of her upper back all the way up to her neck. She shivered.

“You don’t have to,” his voice whispered in her ear, his breath hot against her skin.

The very touch of his fingers burned and tingled and felt so hot… she felt hot. Scared and nervous as she was, she wanted… more.

“I want to,” she breathed back and gasped when his fingers tightened their grasp on her neck and jaw, tilting her head up, while his lips kissed her ear, her cheek, tracing a trail on her jaw.

“Trust me,” he breathed, and when she turned her head to look at him, he bowed his head slowly and claimed her lips.

She gasped, unsure – the touch was short, and light, and it sent her heart racing.

Thorin looked at her, the blue of his eyes penetrating and burning. “Trust me,” he asked again.

She nodded shakily and dared to place her hand on his cheek, caress the rough hair of his beard, and kiss him.

She had never kissed or been kissed before, and the soft lips, warm and wet and intoxicating, made her mind go blank in a way she did not believe was possible. His hand held her jaw still, caressing her cheek, while his other hand rested on her lower belly and pulled her to him. With her back pressed against his chest, skin against skin, and his lips caressing hers and his teeth biting ever gently, she felt her belly tightening with pleasure. Feeling weak and dizzy all of a sudden, she placed her hand on his for support and moaned unevenly when his hand pulled on her hair gently to reveal her neck while his lips placed short, feather-light kisses on her burning skin.

“Thorin…” she whispered, not sure whatever for, but the man smiled at her and then, without a proper warning, lifted her.

She gasped when her feet suddenly left the ground and strong hands carried her to the soft mattress, fingers digging into her flesh. He lowered her carefully, gently, cupped her face with one hand and resumed kissing her. The kiss that started gently demanded more and more of her senses, and soon the only thing she wanted was to feel closer. She buried her hands in his hair and beard, the scratchy and the silken sensations staggering, and she moaned in surprise when Thorin responded in a growl and entered his tongue into her mouth.

She allowed his tongue to explore her mouth, confused and intoxicated by the touch, and when Thorin murmured against her lips, “Trust me, Lily,” all she could do was moan in response.

He kissed her again, his lips demanding but slow in their progress, and once again planted a trail of kisses on her jaw and her neck. Slowly and ever so gently, his finger pushed down the fabric of her tunic to reveal her collarbones, enticing Thorin to growl yet again. He kissed and sucked on them, driving her breath shaky and erratic. She was still unsure and scared, but Thorin worked her slowly
and gently, always returning to her lips, and Ningalor felt heat pulsing through her when his beard
scratched her cheeks. She whispered his name again, not even noticing she did so.

But Thorin did, and his eyes were ablaze with desire. His hands grabbed her tunic, their touch sure
on her thighs as they ascended, and began to pull the cloth up. She blushed when the fabric that
protected her chastity was removed and thrown aside and her hands immediately rose to cover her
breasts. Thorin kissed her again, his lips conquering hers, and she, the willing conquest, parted her
gated mouth to him and once again allowed him entry. The pleasure that the mere touch of his lips
shot through her made her tremble and gasp for air. His left hand supported him while the other
trailed burning trails on her arms and her stomach. Her muscles tightened with each thoughtful
touch, and when his hand held hers and gently moved it, she obeyed, nervous yet again.

His fingers slowly moved up, his hand cupped her breast and his thumb grazed her nipple and she
bit her lip to hold in her breaths. Thorin used his other hand to caress her cheek, leaning on his
elbow.

“Shh… trust me,” he muttered again and pinched her nipple gently, making her whine. He resumed
kissing her lips, sucking and nibbling, then kissed her neck and sucked on her collarbone. He kissed
her burning skin until his lips reached her breast and he took her nipple in his mouth.

The air deserted her lungs with an audible sigh. She squeezed his forearm and buried her other
hand in his hair, pulling him closer – once again Thorin growled and bit her nipple carefully while
his other hand trailed to her other breast, rubbing and pinching gently.

“Thorin….” She let out a choked sigh and arched her back, feeling his hands and his lips kissing
and roaming over her breasts, her neck, her stomach and her lower belly. His fingers began to snake
under the fabric of her pants, and his hands massaged her hips, up and down, until he sat by her
side and tugged off her boots. Since his body no longer hovered over her, Ningalor suddenly
noticed that she was half naked, the fire was nearly out, and she was cold. She shivered and tried to
cover herself with Thorin’s blanket.

She felt his hands on her side, traveling up, and then, “Lily, are you cold?” Thorin’s voice, low and
deep, made her shiver again.

“Just a bit,” she whispered, her voice breathy and raw. His blue eyes burned her, but this time, she
did not attempt to avoid them. She felt hot just from having him look at her, like that.

Thorin smiled and bowed down to kiss her forehead. “Silly girl,” he said, covered her in the
blanket, and rose so he could tend to the fire.

He threw two logs in and knelt by the fireplace, poking and awakening the almost dead flames.
Ningalor stared at him, blushing, and she could not help but notice his obvious arousal. “I am not a
girl,” she protested, feeling all the more childish for it.

The man glanced at her and smirked. “After tonight, you will most certainly not be,” he said
casually.

She blushed red and Thorin rose and crossed the distance towards her again. He lowered her to the
covers and kissed her lips gently. “It will hurt, but I will be as gentle as I can,” he murmured
against her lips. Feeling her tense, he pulled away slightly and added, “We don’t have to…."

“No,” she refused flatly. “No, Thorin.”

The man nodded, kissed her and once again made her forget what it meant to think coherently. His
hands traveled down, roamed over her body gently but confidently, and his lips joined them, caressing every inch of skin with a tender touch. His fingers sneaked under the fabric of her pants and pulled the material down with them. Ningalor whined but did not resist, and then Thorin removed his pants and both of them were naked before the other. He bent over her, his fingers traveling up her legs and digging into the flesh of her thighs. First he touched her outer thighs, then his fingers moved and caressed her hot skin until they parted her legs and stroked her inner flesh. Ningalor blinked at Thorin, nervous, but Thorin’s eyes did not leave her, even when he stretched her legs further and touched the spot hidden by golden curls.

Ningalor whined, and her hands instinctively fisted the blanket as her lower lip was caught between her teeth. “I’m right here. I’m here with you,” Thorin mumbled, kissing her lips tenderly, seductively, as his fingers rubbed and electrified, causing her insides to twitch, of all things, and then one of his fingers entered her.

She exclaimed at the foreign feeling, which, unlike the rest of the things Thorin did to her, did not feel good. “Shh… relax. Lily, relax. It’s all right.” He kissed her neck and her collarbones, making her gasp, and began to move the finger slowly within her. It felt weird, it felt uncomfortable, and she closed her eyes in fear when she imagined what his manhood would feel like.

“Lily, Lily, relax. Focus on my lips, on my voice. Lily,” he whispered her name, his voice husky and deep, and she tried. She buried her hands in his hair and pulled him to her, wishing it were her real name that he whispered.

He entered a second finger.

The feeling of discomfort increased with the stretch, but once again he kissed her and muttered sweet nothings in a foreign tongue against her lips. He increased the pressure on the fingers touching and rubbing and she moaned in response, holding on to him almost desperately.

Slowly, he entered a third finger, and Ningalor cried out. She did not believe she could stretch so, but she drowned her fears by kissing the man on top of her and moaned again when he increased his rhythm of the movement of his thumb, even if the fingers penetrating her still moved slowly.

Her muscles tightened suddenly and twitched and she threw her head back in shock, body full of sweet, aching pleasure. “Thorin…” she whispered.

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The man removed his fingers, took one of her hands in his and parted her legs with his other hand, “Trust me,” he whispered again, and very slowly, he entered her.

She did not moan, or cry, or sigh. She could not breathe.

The stretch was painful, but not unbearable, even if when she opened her eyes to look she whimpered at the size of him and her muscles tightened painfully.

Thorin groaned and kissed her gently, demandingly, intensely, passionately. “Lily, Lily… you are doing great. Shh… slowly, that’s it. You are doing great, ibin abnâmul. My madtubirzul.”

She blinked and opened her eyes. Thorin stopped moving. He rested inside her, taking over all of her, but suddenly Thorin’s deep, hoarse voice, his lips, his hands, his manhood were not the only things on her mind. “What does that mean?” she moaned, her voice barely above a whisper, “What you-oh!”

Thorin slowly began to pull out and gently entered her again. The movement and the friction were so strange to her, her muscles tightened and pain shot through her. One of her hands grabbed the
blankets, the other squeezed Thorin’s hand as a soft whimper escaped her lips.

Thorin breathed ruggedly and bent to kiss her again. “Shh… agyêdê, relax. Don’t be so afraid,” he said gently, kissing her lips, her jaw, her eyes. “My bunmel….”

She sensed that he was teasing her with his words. “What does it mean?” she whispered.

She could feel Thorin’s grin against her lips. “One day I’ll tell you.”

“Thorin! –“ she gasped again when Thorin began to move inside of her. This time, the notion was not so unsettling to her and her muscles did not tighten so much in protest about being penetrated in this manner. His hand caressed her cheek and her hair while his lips continued to murmur things in a foreign tongue and kiss her anxieties and worries away.

“Thorin…” she whimpered, her hand buried in his hair, and the man caressed her cheek and simply looked at her – the crystal-clear eyes, shining with desire and warmth – his eyes engulfed the whole of her existence, delved into her and encompassed the whole of her. She lifted her hand to cup his cheek, stroking the beard and the harsh planes of his face. The man blinked at her, took her hand and kissed her palm gently as he once again moved and filled the whole of her.

Ningalor pulled him down and kissed him, weak with tension and uncertainty and want, and Thorin answered all of those, increasing his pace.

His hand left her face and once again trailed and touched her lower region, rubbing with demanding, experienced fingers, and the electrifying touch coupled with the softly murmured foreign words made her twitch once again, her body an echo of pleasure and pain.

Suddenly Thorin whispered, his voice thick and raw, “I… I need to –“

She did not release him, and the very notion of him exiting her was unimaginable to her. “I took care of the consequences,” she murmured.

He looked at her with a frown. “Are you sure? I wouldn’t want to, I mean….”

She kissed him, the touch of their lips sloppy and unrefined but still managed to unravel her completely – and apparently Thorin as well, for he groaned as he became undone and filled her with hot, burning seed.

They both stared at each other for a moment, Thorin wiping the tears she did not know she shed, Ningalor simply trying to breathe.

He did exit her, slowly, and left behind emptiness and pain. He lay next to her and covered them both with the thick blanket and pulled her to him. She was too weak to resist or attempt to move on her own, and so being cradled between those muscular, warm arms and being pressed against that hard, warm chest was nothing short of utterly reassuring.

He guided her head to rest in the crook of his shoulder while his hand stroked the length of her hair and gently massaged her scalp. His other hand rested on her waist, drawing circles on her side and back, and their legs were effectively tangled. She placed her hand on his chest, stroking the short, coarse curls and admiring the hard, sculpted lines in the fickle light of the fire.

“Good night, Lily, my umral,” he whispered and bent and kissed her forehead, again and again, until she surrendered to the darkness that took over her, closed her eyes and fell asleep.
Footsteps rushing toward the door made him snap awake and search for his sword – the one that rested against the opposite wall and was farther away than he thought necessary. Whose stupid idea was to put it there?

The door opened dramatically, making him grab the next best thing – a boot, apparently – "Uncle! Beorn said we –"

Kili’s words died on his lips and he gasped when said boot hit him square in the chest.

"Out," he commanded, drowsy from sleep, and instinctively grabbed the hide and pulled it up to cover the woman resting on top of him.

Kili’s red cheeks informed him that the boy saw more than he should have, but he complied quickly and shut the door with a loud thud. Thorin groaned.

Lily blinked awake slowly, drowsily, and Thorin gazed at her tenderly and watched as yesterday’s events caught up with her gradually. She lay right on top of him, one of her hands hugged his side while the other rested on his chest. Her hair, golden and so very soft, fanned on his shoulder in waves which he stroked gently. Her eyes, dark and dazed from sleep, suddenly widened as she twisted her body so she could look at him.

Even after yesterday’s night, she still looked up at him uncertainly, as if unsure how she ended up naked in his lap but did not want to question it.

He smiled at her lazily and caressed her cheek. "Good morning, Lily."

The woman blushed and bit her lower lip. "Morning," she mumbled, and where had the daring of yesterday gone off to?

Thorin’s fingers traveled to the nape of her neck – must she look so terrified when I touch her? Why does she hesitate so? – and pulled her down for her kiss.

At first, the odd angle made for a rather sloppy kiss, but then his fingers guided her head, tilting carefully, and his lips caressed hers confidently. He felt her breath shatter against his mouth, a whispered moan when he took one lip between his teeth and sucked.

Such a confounding creature, he thought dazedly. So very controlled, yet his lightest touch unraveled her entirely.

He released her, and when her eyes looked at him with hesitant wonder, he guided her gently to rest her head against his neck. He could feel her heart racing but saw only her blush.

He stroked her hair and her cheek. "How are you feeling?" he asked, voice still thick from sleep.

She stirred slightly and did not answer immediately. "I am well." She cuddled against him, shifted and rested her hand against his chest. "You?" Her fingers began to trace the line of muscle and froze when she realized what she was doing.

She was about to pull away, he sensed, so he placed his hand on hers and pressed it against his chest. Was yesterday not enough to prove her that he wanted her touch? "I am very well, I should think." He chuckled, stroking her knuckles.

She lifted her head. "Are you sure? I mean, your ribs and shoulder….."
“Perfectly fine, though I appreciate your concern.” He smiled lazily and cupped her cheek. The woman blushed, but this time she leaned gracefully into his palm and closed her eyes. He looked on, taking in the sight of her, her lips slightly parted, and wondered if one day he would be able to master her body language and read between the lines all the nuances only she could see.

She was so small, he noted. Thin and lithe of figure, almost child-like, in fact, and with her small breasts and perky nipples, she had few womanly curves. Did she lose weight during their trip? Her skin was soft, creamy and unblemished, though her hands were no longer smooth and she had a small, still somewhat red cut on her arm. All signs of his failings.

The intensity of her words and bearing never made him consider – she acted like his equal, but perhaps… “Lily, how old are you?” Gods be damned if she were younger than his nephews!

Her eyes snapped open and she scowled. “Impertinence,” she chastised.

Thorin cocked a brow. “I will not be told off by a naked woman,” he countered. She blushed, perhaps due to what he told her yesterday? and gasped when he lowered her to the covers and bent over her. She did look very small and young, like that. “I will have you answer.”

“Whatever for?” She resisted, her eyes following the path of his hand that roaming over her side. He did not dare do anything more, however, and her refusal to answer worried him.

“I….” How should he explain this to her? He frowned. “I require your answer.”

Was he glowering? The woman pursed her lips, looking away, but his hand, gentle and tender as he cupped her cheek and caressed her mouth made her glance up at him in hesitation. “Twenty-five,” she eventually replied.

He felt relief washing over him. “Truly?”

She muttered, “Of course,” and pouted slightly. It made him huff in amusement, still stroking her bottom lip.

“Good,” he managed. “I was terrified for a moment that you are as old as my nephews.”

“Aren’t they still in their teens?” she wondered.

“Yes. Though Fili is soon to be celebrating his twentieth.”

“Surely I do not look that young.” She glanced at him carefully, and he bent down and kissed her. So soft, she complied so very easily, so responsive in his arms.

“No, hulwulê, but I wanted to be sure.” He continued to kiss her, frowned when she resisted.

“What does that mean? What’d you say?” She pushed at his shoulders, and the uncertainty made her eyes look wide and guarded again. “Why are you saying things I can’t understand?”

The secrecy of Khuzdul meant he should not be telling her, but the fear that blinked at him – what was she so afraid of? convinced him he could be allowed to break the rules this one time, for her. “It means, ‘my sweet,’” he mumbled against her temple, “it… comes more naturally to me, the words are more meaningful.”

She blushed and looked away. Her hand played absentmindedly with his braid. “Not to me,” she whispered. “I don’t understand. What if… how am I to know what you say?”
“Peace, Lily.” He nuzzled at her hair, kissing her cheek. “Nothing but words of admiration.”

She still looked mildly unsatisfied, but he remembered the power his words had on her, how the foreign endearments opened her up to him like a blooming flower. She knew not what he said, perhaps, but still could tell he whispered phrases of tenderness.

They lay in silence like that for a while; Ningalor played with his hair, cuddling comfortably against him, while he traced lines on her skin and kissed her forehead or her cheek, just to see her blush prettily.

She glanced at him, looking up at him with uncharacteristic shyness. “You never stated your age,” she said carefully.

Thorin hmmed, “You haven’t asked.” He kept his lips from twitching, daring her to inquire. She opened her mouth and closed it, scowling slightly before her face, once again, cleared of expression. She was not going to, it would seem. Why? Did she feel it was not her place to ask? He gave up trying to understand what made her think she could appear at his bedroom and offer herself to him but not ask how old he was. “Thirty-five,” he sighed against her ear.

The woman perked up, looking appeased, and swallowed slightly. “And our age difference does not bother you?”

“It is not unheard of.” He shrugged and added with a crooked smile, “Our situation is, of course, but once I reclaim Erebor, I will court you properly.”

She looked – was it sorrow? Grief? But the moment was gone before he could decipher it. She smiled and reclined against him, and if her smile were slightly watery, he did not comment. “And what would that entail?” she asked in a small voice.

“Well, I will give you seven gifts,” he explained softly, “made of the Seven Holy Metals. First, I will make you gift of lead, to show I will share all your burdens. Should it be accepted, I will give you a gift of tin, a promise I will always tend to you, in sickness or in health. Should this one be accepted also, I will make you a gift of iron, to show I will always protect you. An item of copper, to show I will love you till the end of my days.” Was her breath slightly uneven? Surely not. “A gift of silver, to show I will always listen to your advice and wisdom. A gift of gold, to show I will provide for you will the end of my days. A gift of Mithril, a vow that you will always be my light and my treasure.” She said nothing in response, but when he took her hand in his, he could feel her pulse beating wildly against his fingers. Perhaps this reaction was enough. He cleared his throat. “Which would also be a proposal of marriage.”

This was everything Balin had advised against. This was an unveiled promise he should not be making. This was an offer even Gandalf seemed opposed to.

But yesterday she came to him, and with eyes wide and unsure and fingers trembling, she undressed before him. He could not repay such act by leaving her deflowered and without a husband.

The woman seemed to sense his thoughts and detached herself from him. “I did not come to you yesterday to secure your hand,” she said, shards of ice laced in her voice.

“Nor am I offering it to you, not yet,” he said carefully. She stiffened, but did not resist when once again he pulled her against him. It was far too early, he knew, to tell her how he felt in her presence, but that did not mean he was willing to let her go. “Why did you come?” he asked suddenly.
She bit her lip and looked down at his hand that pressed her against his chest, and for a long moment said nothing. “A precaution,” she said slowly, eventually. “Before… if time and consequences came to tear us apart, I wanted no regret, no rules of court to stain my memories, make me wonder what could have happened if… if I dared to….” She did not finish the sentence.

“I am not going to let anything happen to you, Lily.” He tilted her head up, making her look at him. “I will protect you, laslel.”

She frowned at him, but when he smirked, she did not protest – she twisted free of his grasp and cupped his face and kissed him.

It surprised him enough to exhale sharply. He hugged her to him, answering the kiss tinged with want and need desperate enough to make him want to…

“Thorin!” A knock on the door made them break apart, gasping. “Breakfast is almost over!” That was Dwalin, sounding incredibly gruff. “Wake up your lass and come before Beorn’s staff takes the plates away!”

“Ten minutes!” he cried, annoyed that Dwalin had to show up just then. When he looked down he saw Lily looking at him, eyes wide and face white. The woman could talk about daring all she wanted, but it was clear that there were many things she still wasn’t ready to face. Not like he was going to let her get away with that. “Kili saw us, about an hour ago,” he said carefully. She looked slightly less frightened – why? What did she think? That they heard them? “Join me,” he said, asked, ordered.

The woman nodded and wrapped the blanket around her undressed form, suddenly shy and discomfited by her nudity. Thorin understood and released her, getting up and dressing in silence. He noticed that the boot he threw earlier belonged to her, so he retrieved it as well as the corset and the coat. The last item marked her as his, and now it mattered to him all the more.

She donned her clothes with remarkable ease, but he still could easily read the nervousness that stiffened her movements. Once again, she closed herself off to him and to the world, and that… was it too much to have her simply smile at him?

She stood up when she finished dressing, engulfed in his coat, but she dropped her eyes and did not look at him. He crossed the distance to her and cupped her face with his hand. “Lily, what’s the matter?”

The woman blinked at him, then looked down again. She took his other hand, held it gently in her hands, and when he squeezed hers back in reassurance, she lifted his hand and kissed the knuckles tenderly.

It was such a sweet, careful moment and when she looked up at him her eyes were trusting again, even if not exactly happy… he did not understand it, what she did nor what it meant, but decided to reply by kissing her forehead and taking her out with him, still holding her hand.

They followed the noise, but when they finally reached the dining room, his men had gone quiet and stared at them.

Every single eye in the room focused on them – even Gandalf peered at them from underneath great, bushy eyebrows. One pointed look from him, though, and Fili emptied the seat next to the head of the table while Bofur picked up the clean plate and silver that were placed next to him and laid it in place of Fili’s dirty dishes. Only then did Thorin lead her to the table – she sat next to him gracefully, even if he could read her discomfort as easily as the rest of them, probably.
The staff came and offered them trays full of food – mostly honey cakes and fruits and eggs, as they served no meat of any sort. One of them placed a boiling cup of tea next to Lily, who accepted it with a small nod of her head, as well as a bowl of syrupy cherries and berries, mashed into a red, thick liquid, and floating in it was one white lily.

The odd dish – was it edible? It looked more like a preserve – smelled incredibly sweet, but Lily had made no attempt to touch the bowl.

The serving woman smiled at her, let out a small giggle and left the room without a word uttered. Thorin scowled at her and then at Lily, but the woman kept her features appropriately empty and revealed nothing.

Gandalf, however, got up from his seat, took in the sight of the plate and closed his book with an angry snap. “Lily, after you had finished your breakfast, do come and find me,” he commanded. His voice was grave and cold with ire, but not a notch louder than the usual.

Thorin glowered and opened his mouth, but both the thunderous fury that burned in Gandalf’s eyes as well as Lily’s hand on his knee and the plea in her own eyes silenced him. The incensed man left and Lily ate slowly, carelessly, and very little.

She did not touch the cherries though she finished the oddly smelling tea. She rose, eyes downcast, left the table and joined the Istar. Thorin’s eyes followed her, but she did not glance at his direction.

Ningalor took a deep breath, comforted herself with a memory of Thorin, eyes soft and groggy from sleep glancing at her with warmth as he pulled her down for a kiss, and walked to stand next to her mentor and guardian.

Gandalf leaned next to an ancient looking oak tree and smoked furiously. She knew it was not his ‘thinking’ smoking or ‘calm, happy’ smoking because he made no smoke rings and instead blew out clouds of smoke like an enraged dragon.

She did not cross into his line of vision but nor did she need to. She knew he was aware of her presence and waited for him to acknowledge her; she wasn’t sure she wanted to be acknowledged.

Eventually, the puffing of smoke slowed down, even if slightly, and the words uttered were so rich with wrath and disappointment they made her cheeks color in shame and her stomach twist uneasily.

“You offered yourself to him.”

Her hands twitched uncontrollably. “Yes. I came to him.” She looked down, blinking away unwanted moisture. It felt so perfect, lying there in his arms. Why did everything else regarding their relationship had to be so awful, making her wish she had never been born?

Gandalf exhaled angrily. “Had I not known him to be a most honorable man, I’d have had him pay the price for defiling you.” She winced. “I must ask what on earth crossed your mind when you decided to commit such an atrocious folly.”

“Mirkwood, actually.” She smiled bitterly. No act of foolishness of hers was ever committed without the influence of her father, it seemed.
“That is hardly –“

“No, Gandalf, no, it isn’t!” she cried. The man turned to look at her, shocked, no doubt, that she dared to raise her voice in a conversation with him, but she failed to tame her reaction. “I have no chance, you said, no shot at happiness! I must hide who I am at all costs, but even then I cannot live freely! Next week, or in the weeks to come – every moment, I may be caught, exposed. If I haven’t a chance, at all, then why… why can’t I at least have one week’s worth of happiness?” she cried openly. “Why can’t I be selfish, just this once, and know what it means to be loved?” she whispered. “I’d rather… I’d rather suffer from a broken heart for the rest of my life than spend my days wondering what could have happened.”

Gandalf looked at her sobbing silently into her hands and mercy and pity replaced the burning anger. “Ningalor, my dear…” he sighed and hugged her to him until she managed to swallow the last of her tears. “I am sorry, child.” He exhaled and placed his hands on her shoulders as he peered into her eyes. “When our last week at Beorn’s ends, I must leave.”

She finally looked up at him, confused and scared.

“I have another matter to attend to, and Beorn’s words worry me a great deal. This task is far too dangerous for you, but I could take you to a safe place, so you need not go into the forest.”

Her throat tightened again. “But… then I will have to leave them.” Leave him.

“Yes,” Gandalf said gravely, “and I cannot help but think that a break from his company will only do you good. But worry not, after I have finished my task, I will rejoin their quest and take you back with me, should you still want to.”

“Do you know how long your task will take?” she asked with a tinge of desperate hope, even though she knew the answer.

Gandalf’s kindness had a stern edge to it, as he knew as well. “No, my dear. Nor do I know if I will return; but it is something I must do. You need not go into Mirkwood. Not for him.”

Ningalor looked down and said nothing.

Gandalf sighed. “I will give you time to decide, and now I must go and have a stern talk with Beorn. Do not make this decision lightly, and keep drinking Beorn’s tea!”

Ningalor followed his departure, then stubbornly wiped her face. It did not help much – only made her feel more miserable. She has never been the weepy type, but Thorin and the thunderstorm of emotions he had awoken in her weakened her, it would seem.

A memory of Thorin pressing her against his chest, warm and protective, his hold sure and secure against her waist, his long hair silken and ticklish… his breath, hot in her ear… she did not mind being weak, she smiled feebly, desperately, if he were the root of her undoing.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
-Ibin abnâmul- beautiful gem
-Madtubirzul - golden heart
So Beorn is the head of a small, feudal settlement. They do things their own way, and they don't really like strangers. The dishes Ningalor is given are symbolic of a loss of virginity (I think the strawberries and cream one was pretty obvious). The second dish was a bit trickier but expressed the same notion (kind of pre and post ceremony)- white lily is a very common symbol for virginity and purity, and so drowning it in the red syrup and staining the flower, as Ningalor should have done but did not, symbolizes the loss of virginity.

What'd you think?

-Agyâdê- my happiness  
-Bunmel- beauty of all beauty  
-Umral- lover  
-Laslel- rose of all roses
Chapter Summary

"Torn and cold, for steel is thunder-
And we worship the silence-
But we sew the jagged edges together,
Unfit and undone we undress and unravel."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He had waited – must she always keep him waiting?

It was noon when Gandalf returned, muttering to himself and carrying piles of books from the library to the room he claimed as his. He read and smoked and ate with Beorn’s silent servants attending to his every need and dismissed the rest who tried to approach him. Beorn left for a meeting of his kin, it would seem – tall and large men, as big as he, with dark hair and darker looks, burly and massive of frame. They argued and shouted in a language foreign to him, then left the estate armed and mounted upon thick legged steeds with as foul a temper as their owners’.

Thorin did not like this.

Something was happening and was being kept from him. Gandalf locked himself in his room, Beorn left, and Lily… Where was Lily? Thorin gritted his teeth. He tried asking, but the silent servants would not answer him, nor did his men see her. Surely, she was not taken or sent away without his knowledge? Surely – surely, she did not try to avoid him, spurred by the old’s man fury? Yesterday’s regrets?

He remained in his chair for a long time, then left and headed to the library. He commanded the servants to bring her to him had they saw her, but they blinked at him but showed no sign they understood his request, or, if they did, intended to do as instructed. He tried to read to pass the time – he knew she avoided his company when he was surrounded by his men, not out of spite but out of shyness.

It was late in the afternoon when Thorin resolved to find her.

He entered every room, opened every door, and thundered outside, movements sharp with anger. Worry. He followed the paths of the garden, down to the small pond, and in fact would have missed her entirely if not for the reflection of her golden hair, fluttering in the wind.

Damn the woman, he thought, but even his musings could not mask his relief. She stood next to a large oak tree, hidden by the massive trunk. She stood unmoving, her eyes fixed on the wall of thorny bushes and beyond, on the dark strain of Mirkwood, bleak against the crystal blue sky. She looked like a statue, marble white and immobile, and the sight pulled him to her as if it was crafted by the machinery of forgotten times.

He climbed the small mound with ease and, following yesterday’s events, did not ask for her permission as he approached. Instead, he hugged her from behind, pulling her against him. The
woman jumped and tried to fight for a moment, but froze again when he muttered, “Shh… lukhudel, it’s me.”

He pressed his cheek against hers and Lily, still rigid for a long moment, exhaled weakly and reclined against him.

In fact, she leaned on him entirely; he was not sure she would remain standing had he suddenly released her. Not that he had such intentions. He laid his palm flat on her waist and pulled her closer while his other hand hugged her stomach. She exhaled, then placed her hands on his, and he caressed her fingers with his in response. *So small*, he thought absentmindedly. *Her heart beats so frantically, like a caged bird.*

“You frightened me,” she whispered, laying her head against his chest.

“Forgive me, umralamê. I meant to surprise you.”

She sighed. “Will I ever know what you say?” She sounded resigned.

“Mayhap,” he answered, amused. From the corner of his eye, he could see her face had a slightly pinched expression to it and his mood sobered. “Lily, what is the matter?” When she did not answer, he probed further, “Is Gandalf to blame?” She cringed. “I will take responsibility, for yesterday and the days to come,” he promised solemnly.

“He was upset with me,” she admitted eventually. “But worry not, he knows I… I am the root of – “

“Lily,” he interrupted, then turned her so he could look at her, tilted her head so he could peer into her eyes. Was she frightened again? Worried? “Should you reject me, I will not press my wants any further. But as long as you’ll have me, I will take care of you, and I will not allow the Istar to cause you such distress,” he vowed.

Her eyes widened with each word proclaimed, and again, the soft blush, the utter, wretched sadness… He frowned and cupped her face. This was not the reaction he had expected, and yet again he seemed to have miscalculated her response. What on earth was he supposed to say to make the burdened woman smile?

“It’s not Gandalf,” she muttered suddenly. She held on to him, he noticed. Her hands grabbed the fabric of his shirt quite desperately. “It is Mirkwood. I… dislike the notion of entering the forest.”

Thorin frowned, certain she was hiding something from him, yet decided not to press the point further and nodded instead. “As do I. The Dukedom is failing and plagued with criminals, but it is its people and their cursed leader I despite most.” His forehead furrowed in a menacing scowl and for a moment, he had forgotten about the woman in his arms. The shadows of the trees watched them too keenly, and he tensed in anger and hate.

Soft fingers caressing the skin of his neck broke through the storm of rage. Thorin frowned and looked down to find his woman glancing up at him, eyes knotted with concern.

He cleared his throat, flustered. “Forgive me. The woods bear bad memories, and I lost myself in them.”

Lily nodded in understanding, though he was not sure if she really did. “Beorn has a hot spring in his land, did you know?” she asked, cheeks ripening red the longer he gazed at her in confusion.

“No,” he said finally, sensing the woman waited for a verbal response.
“Well, since Beorn is not here today, I was thinking of washing,” she said clumsily and added shyly when he still looked at her with pure and utter confusion, “Would you like to join me?”

Thorin blinked once, twice, then smiled at his confounding woman – a tight-lipped, crooked smile, and took her hand in his. Features adorned with a small, short-lived smile of her own, Lily led him down the path, passing by blooming flowers and silent vassals, some of whom rushed ahead of them to a small shed, guarded by a thick wooden door. Thorin followed his woman and wondered what had he done to deserve her.

Ningalor blushed and tried to keep her heart from racing just yet – Thorin was clearly very calm, but the almost mischievous glint shattered her cool completely. The door led them to a wooden cabin with wooden floors and two thick, white towels, which were probably left there by the servants. The cabin was bare of any unnecessary furniture, and contained two benches, a few shelves, and stairs that led to a lovely spring, steamy and hot and bearing the distinctive smell of rotten eggs. A shallow spring, then, but deep enough to allow for proper bathing. Small, curved windows allowed for natural light to pour in, though someone had lit a few candles and placed them along the perimeter of the spring, adding a touch of intimacy.

As if bathing together was not intimate enough.

She saw Thorin taking off his shirt and mail, and then yet another shirt. Following his example, she took off her own coat, sat, and began to unlace her boots. She did manage to take off one before strong hands and skilled fingers took over, removing her other boot. Thorin glanced up at her, and the very notion that he was kneeling by her side made her breathe shakily.

Gods, he was kneeling. Surely – no, impossible. Had kneeling held such a meaning in the Dwarven culture, he wouldn’t have –

Still, the gesture shook her and made her heart beat even faster. The act of kneeling willingly before another spoke of love and loyalty unshaken. Surely he did not mean... but all such thoughts of uncertainty were forgotten the moment Thorin looked up and the blue of his eyes took her breath away. His chest, sculpted and hard to the touch, was already covered with a thin layer of sweat (or was it the humidity?) and glistened slightly in the faint light. Her lips parted involuntarily and her eyes widened when his hands once again traveled up on her legs, fingers digging into the tender flesh. He removed her corset and undid the knots of her tunic with just a few tugs of his fingers as she sat there, rigid and breathless. Thorin removed the cloth that hid her from him and piled it carelessly on the wooden floor, and he took off her pants with similar efficiency, eyes blazing, penetrating into her with ease. Melting her.

So she was naked and then Thorin was too, and she wanted… oh, for once to not be so hesitant! He picked her up in his arms – she gaped at him in surprise, but the tender, heated eyes became the only thing in the world that actually mattered. She wrapped her hands around his neck, stroking the soft skin behind the ear, and Thorin growled, his hold of her back and legs tightened, and he kissed her.

The hungry claim lit fire deep in her loins. The soft lips sucked on hers with an urgency she hadn’t felt before, but the biting of his teeth was gentle and left her mind blissfully blank.

“Water’s hot,” Thorin mumbled against her lips, but she failed to decipher the meaning of the words until Thorin slowly lowered her into the spring. She gasped and her grip on his neck tightened and he stopped immediately. When her breath steadied, she looked up at him again, and
very gently he lowered her into the water.

Like she thought, the water was rather shallow and barely even reached Thorin’s waist and her midriff, but Thorin simply sat on the stairs – she did not even notice them as her mind was so utterly focused on Thorin’s lips – and pulled her to sit in his lap, guiding her to straddle him. She exhaled sharply when she could feel his manhood, large and pulsing against her stomach, but Thorin cupped her face and kissed her, melting all of her uncertainties with his touch.

She decided to dare a little.

Her fingers began to explore the soft skin of the neck, the tender skin behind the ears. She could feel his rumbling again – was it displeasure? She stopped immediately, but Thorin’s hands grabbed hers gruffly and pressed it against his neck – his eyes were smoldering with desire, so she kissed him and moaned breathlessly when his hands traveled up her thighs, the sensation coupled with the heat of the water enchanting and utterly foreign to her. She allowed her hands to travel once again, caressing the rough beard and then down the firm neck. She reached his shoulders, broad and muscular and thick, and wandered down the hard planes of his chest, caressing the short hair and the ripples of the knotted muscle. He growled again when her hands traveled too low, but instead of freezing in hesitation, she dared to continue her journey, trace the well-shaped bones of the pelvis, and, breathlessly, she dared to touch the shaft.

He hissed again and she immediately withdrew her hand, sensing that perhaps she has crossed a line she should not have. “I’m sorry,” she breathed, eyes wide and worried.

Thorin’s eyes, however, had an animalistic glint to them, and he grabbed her hand and placed it on his manhood. She exhaled uncertainly, but his hand guided hers, up and down, and pressed her fingers against the soft skin burning underneath her fingertips. She breathed raggedly, unsure, but one look at Thorin’s burning eyes undid her entirely. He left her hand and began to explore her in return. He kissed and bit her neck and her collarbones as his hands massaged her breasts and rubbed her nipples, and one of his hands snaked down, fingers firm on the flesh of her belly, until he had reached her opening and his fingers began to expertly rub and massage her lower region.

She gasped and her hand failed to keep up with the rhythm, though she did try, while her other hand gripped his neck, fingers buried in his hair for support. This time, when he penetrated her, the sensation was not as uncomfortable and painful, and the desire to be filled, which was new as well, made her arch her back with pleasure and close her eyes.

“May I?” Thorin muttered suddenly, voice raspy and thick with desire, and the low tone made her stomach tighten even more.

She cupped his face and kissed him in response and Thorin withdrew his fingers and lifted her – she had to lean on his broad shoulders for support – and entered her. Her fingers dug into him as he slowly lowered her into his lap, filling the whole of her.

“Shh… ghivashel,” he whispered in her ear, “ûrzuduh ra gîmiluh.”

“You… insufferable… infuriating…ah!” He began to move inside her, rendering every attempt to speak coherently completely useless.

Thorin chuckled, breath rugged, and cupped her cheek, thumb brushing her lower lip.

“Zî abnâmûl kuthu nurutsû baraz’alâj.”
He kissed her before she could protest, and every wish to do so died with each caress of his lips. His hands hugged and supported her as he rocked inside her body, and Ningalor leaned into his caring hands and attentive touch. The warmth of the water stroked her sensitive skin as each spot Thorin touched tingled and scorched. She buried her fingers in his hair and pulled, arching her back as pleasure burned through her, and cried out when Thorin bit her neck in response.

“Zi abnâmul,” he muttered hoarsely.

“Thorin,” she breathed, “is it too much to ask you to speak the common tongue?”

The man blinked at her and cupped her face. “No, joy of my heart, it is not,” he answered, voice deep and raw, and trailed kisses on her jaw and neck. “Moon of all moons.” He kissed her lips. “Sun of all suns.”

She could feel her face burning and did not need Thorin’s breathless chuckle to inform her of that. “Is that translated?” she asked shyly, moaning when Thorin suddenly increased his pace.

“It is, lover mine.” He hugged her to him, chest to chest, the water steaming and rising and falling with the rhythmic dance of their bodies. While one hand lay flat on her back, the other traveled down and touched her possessively, causing her to twitch and her toes to curl and her lips to unwittingly breathe his name, again and again, as her hands sought purchase in the broad planes of his chest. She felt her body tense and tight when go weak with pleasure as waves of it rocked and flooded her form, the sweetness of it echoing within her and causing her to shudder. Few moments after, Thorin growled against her ear and, biting her lower lips gently, finished deep inside her form, hot and thick and pulsing within her.

She rested her head on his shoulder, her breath erratic and shallow against Thorin’s neck, and went limp in his arms. Had he dropped her on the floor of the spring, she was not sure she could have pushed herself up. But Thorin had no such intentions. He exited her and cuddled her against him, stroking her back. In fact, she felt like an overgrown baby, but the tenderness of the gesture made her smile.

They remained like that for a long, long while, until Thorin shook her gently. “Lily? Didn’t fall asleep, did you?”

“No, I’m quite awake,” she mumbled in a voice that only suggested otherwise and twisted so she leaned against him instead of straddling his sides. Her eyes, awakening slowly, focused on the wall and noticed jars filled with a white liquid that looked distinctively like soap. She groaned. The thought of exiting the seductively warm water was too unbearable in her state.

Thorin frowned and followed her line of sight, cocking a brow at her. When she pouted at him slightly he rolled his eyes and gently placed her on the stair – it was more like a long bench, she realized when she sat on it – and got out of the water with enviable ease. She watched him walk toward the shelves, water dripping from his well-fitted form, and then carrying back two jars with him and two cotton cloths. Thorin offered her one of the cotton cloths, opened the body soap jar and began to scrub his skin with his cloth rather vigorously. The contents smelled like honey and cream, and the delicious scent was infinitely better than the smell of the spring. She scrubbed herself as well, the soap soft and creamy against her skin, and wished she’d have been brave enough to dare to ask Thorin for the permission to wash him. When he began to tug on his hair somewhat forcefully, however, she could not resist and lay a tentative hand on his forearm.

Ningalor blushed when she remembered Thorin’s description of the meaning of hair care, but the man simply looked at her warmly and, after a short moment, offered her the jar.
She unclasped and undid his braids, and since Thorin’s eyes burning into her, she kept hers focused on her task. She mumbled, “I’ll need you to turn around,” but instead he moved and sat on the stair below, right between her legs, and lowered his head to rest against her chest.

She exhaled weakly at the sensation and tipped some of the soap into her hand. After a short moment of hesitation, she dared to pour the liquid into his hair and massage it into his scalp. She worked slowly, diligently, undoing the tangles with a careful brush of her fingers and rubbing the soap into the long hair. Thorin breathed slowly, deeply, and she could feel him relaxing as the rigid neck and shoulder eased and softened against her. How many worries must he carry, how heavy his burden. “Tilt your head back,” she whispered and when he did so, obediently, his eyes fluttered close and her heart skipped a beat. She placed her hand on his forehead, as a barrier, and then cupped her other hand and washed his hair slowly, ever careful not to let a single drop touch his face. She washed his hair again until there was not a single tangle left and his hair was soft and smooth and smelled of honey and cream.

“You are… very good at this,” he said slowly, voice deep and tender.

“Do you remember the couple from Bag End? The one that prepared your food...?” Thorin hummed. “They have a small boy, about five years of age, and he is as sweet as he is mischievous and often needs to wash at least twice a day.” She chuckled. “Very fond of mud and beasts and climbing trees.” Thorin smiled leisurely, and the entirely relaxed expression sent her heart racing. “He hates washing, though, and as most of the Shire-folk, he mistrusts bodies of water – even bathtubs, so I must be very gentle with him when I wash him.”

“Isn’t that the duty of his mother?” Thorin wondered, but she sensed no judgment in his words.

“I suppose, but the estate is very large for two people to maintain alone, and I love him dearly.” She smiled. “You did not meet him, I suppose? I have never met a sweeter child.”

Thorin smiled. “Oh, in their youth I am sure Kili and Fili could have competed with him for the title.” He chuckled. “Wild and rowdy as they come – not a puddle of mud would’ve been left unattended for long!” His smile transformed his face, introduced light where once was darkness. “Fili was, of course, the more responsible one, but Kili knew no bounds. Both entirely too reckless for their mother’s poor heart. She forgot that at their age, she was just like them.” Ningalor bit her lip and smiled gently. She never heard Thorin open up like that about his family or speak with such obvious affection. “Fili planned the worst of their tricks, but it was nearly impossible to punish them, with Kili looking up at you all innocently.”

“They are still very much like that, I dare say.” She smiled when Thorin chuckled again. Who knew that talking about his nephews could soften him so. “Is their mother your sister?”

“Aye,” he nodded, closing his eyes when her fingers massaged his temples. “She was very much like Kili, if a bit less reckless and more quick-witted. Frerin was very much like a combination of both; too rash and wild for his own good, but very protective of her.”

“Frerin?”

He sighed, voice tinged with sadness. “My brother. He was slain in the Battle of Azanulbizar when he was only fifteen. I should have protected him better.”

“Thorin….” She placed her hand on his shoulder, stroking the skin, and lowered her head to kiss his cheek.

The man smiled somberly and caressed her hand. “It was eighteen years ago. I am well.”
So he was seventeen. The thought sobered her. She tilted his head back and washed the hair, and Thorin closed his eyes and leaned against her chest, though the eased tranquility was gone.

When she finished, he opened his eyes and detached himself from her. “May I wash yours?”

She nodded shyly and sat in between his legs obediently. He caressed her scalp, much in the same manner that she did his, and she closed her eyes when the sensation caused her to shudder. The expert hands and the gentle pressure, the way his fingers stroked the locks and untangled them… she hummed in appreciation and allowed her mind to wander. She surrendered to his attentions entirely, obeyed every guiding touch of his hands. She had others wash her hair, but it never felt this intimate, this good, like it did right now. Lost in the sensation, she did not notice he was speaking to her until he gently touched her shoulder. “Lily?”

“Hmm?”

“You know, it’s bad luck to fall asleep in a hot spring.”

“I wasn’t sleeping,” she protested, blushing when Thorin chuckled.

“What did I say, then?”

“Something in Khuzdul, no doubt.”

He chuckled again. “I said I finished.” He smiled gently. “We should leave for dinner. The sun is about to set.”

“Oh.” She untangled herself from him and touched her hair, which was silken and smooth. She did stay in the spring too long but had no intention of letting Thorin know that, if he did not already. Evidently, he could tolerate higher and lower temperatures better than she could.

“Stay here,” he ordered, exited the spring – Ningalor’s eyes once again followed his muscular, wet form – and then he returned, covered in a towel and holding one open for her. Blushing and smiling lopsidedly, she groaned and rose. The sudden shock of cold air (which was not cool at all, merely chillier than the water) made her shiver immediately. But the moment she stepped out of the spring, Thorin cocooned her in the towel and rubbed her body in firm, circular motions, until she ceased shivering.

“Thank you,” she mumbled and leaned against his form. Was it too much, to ask for his constant and undivided attention?

Yes, it was. She could tell from the way he hugged her he had other duties, more pressing worries, and held no grudge when he gently untangled their bodies. She dressed quickly, hoping to snuggle into Thorin’s coat before she was exposed to the air long enough to shiver again, but when she did finish dressing, she could not find it. Looking up with a frown, she saw Thorin, already dressed and with his hair braided, holding it for her, and rose with a tender smile to accept the offered coat. He dressed her in it, hugging her, and pulled her into his embrace for a soft, gentle kiss.

Her time with him was running out.

Thorin studied the woman walking beside him, once again closing herself to him and to the world. The vividness of her eyes faded as the blue donned its shields and hid underneath the mask of ice, and even though she still blushed when his fingers caressed hers or when he gently squeezed her hand, the smile was gone.
He saw her, from the corner of his eye, looking away and visibly wincing. Frowning, he followed her eyes… trees, ranches, silent servants… not them, surely? Bofur playing the flute farther east, sitting in the garden – the music? Then his eyes snapped up. Mirkwood again.

The dark mass of trees he saw her staring at, frozen and anxious.

He stopped and pulled her toward him. Lily frowned at him and pursed her lips when she saw the look on his face, shifting uncomfortably. Distancing herself from him. He must have been glowering quite powerfully, then. He sighed and cupped her face, but this time, the gesture wasn’t just a gentle caress of her lovely features. This time, his hand firmly held her head, forced her to look at him and prevented her from looking at anything else but. He could see her eyes darting, as if sensing an entrapment. But duties come before comfort, and his duty was to protect her.

“Lily, there is something we must discuss, before we join the others,” he announced, voice low and deep. Her eyes widened slightly in worry; or was it fear? “Tell me honestly. What really bothers you about Mirkwood?”

She tried to pull away, but his hold of her was firm. Had she tried to physically fight him, he would have released her, but her actions were restrained, like the rest of her.

“Thorin… I do not wish to talk about this,” she managed.

The fact that she did not try to twist her words artfully or protest angrily softened him. His eyes were more tender than before, even if the hard glint was not satisfied.

“I know, khajmel. I would not have pried had I not felt that, uninformed, I would not be able to protect you to the best of my abilities.”

She looked up at him, and there was… pleading? In her eyes? He frowned, but the odd look was gone, and her doe-like eyes no longer look startled or fearful, but pained. She looked down.

He sighed. “Is it the one who hunts for you that troubles you? Is he in the cursed forest?” She jumped, eyes wide, and the fear was back. Exasperated, he urged, “Just… tell me something, Lily. Anything.”

“Yes,” she breathed shakily. She was silent for a long time before uttering, “My father resides in Mirkwood.” Her lower lip trembled slightly, and was forcefully pressed until it trembled no longer.

“Your father? Is he the one to invoke such fear?” Shock turned into a low hissed growl. He had always assumed a former lover, perhaps a fiancé. He, once again, judged her too harshly.

“I merely… do not wish to return to his side, that is all.” Her voice was below a whisper, but then she looked up at him, and her eyes were hard. “Ask no more of me, Thorin.”

He nodded and pulled her into a firm embrace, cuddling her head against his chest. “I will not let him have you, I promise you this,” he vowed.

The woman shuddered slightly and her hands traveled to grip his shirt with force that turned her knuckles white, yet remained silent. She said nothing, but he could feel her slowly relaxing, the muscles easing, her figure softening. He looked up, and his glower challenged the silent forest.

The sun sank and the shadow of the mountain engulfed them as the chill wind shrieked between the trees. The Dukedom of trees, still lit by the red rays of the dying sun, mocked them.

Thorin snarled silently, challenging the towering forest. He led the woman inside Beorn’s cabin to...
He watched her eat mutely, cutting the pie into small bites and consuming few of them. Was it the way she usually ate, the result of perfect manners, or was it due to stress? Or, he wondered, was it because the food was not to her liking? When dessert was served, he placed the largest of the honey cakes on her plate, instead of just cutting her a slice. Lily looked up, eyes wide and face pink, discomfort written into every inch of her body – the snickers did not help, he imagined, but he eventually managed to stare her down and made sure she ate the cake. She did eat with more relish, he noted, yet still could not manage to finish even half of the sticky delight.

He looked up to find Gandalf gazing at him with eyes calculative and frowned in response. The man scowled back, and when dinner was over and Gandalf walked to the library, he did not seem at all surprised to find that Thorin followed him there.

“I saw you staring at Lily during dinner,” the old man said as a conversation starter.

Thorin glowered at having spoken to in this manner, but managed to contain his displeasure when he answered, “Aye. I am worried she is not eating well.”

“The reason for the cake, yes?” Gandalf hummed when Thorin clenched his jaw in response. “You care for her, then?”

Thorin straightened. “Of course! This… I do not treat this as a trifle, or her as an object to play with. Once I have reclaimed Erebor, I would court her properly.”

“Such declarations.” Gandalf’s eyes were calculative again, even if he did not seem too impressed by Thorin’s promises to act honorably by his ward. “Have you told her of your plans?”

“I did,” he replied carefully. If anything, he expected Gandalf to be relieved by his promise. Clearly the old man was troubled by the fact his ward bedded a man while still unmarried. Just like Lily, however, the Istar did not look too pleased. Was it him they doubted? His quest? Something else they did not see fit to tell him?

“Thorin, I am still forced to advise against forming such a relationship. Here you are safe, and that false sense of security perhaps had… made you lose sight of what’s at stake –” Thorin opened his mouth to speak, but Gandalf refused to be interrupted, “you are in the wild! Your path is full of dangers, and you must remain focused.”

“I am!” Thorin responded, blood simmering at the accusations. “I am the leader of my men! Do not think – for a moment – that I will do anything that would endanger them. To Lily, I owe my protection as well, from the dangers of the road and from her father.”

Gandalf’s eyes snapped to meet his. “She told you of her father?” The man was unmistakably shocked.

“Yes,” Thorin said, his voice hard. “He is the reason she fears Mirkwood.”

Gandalf narrowed his cunning eyes and asked carefully, “Did she tell you his name?”

Thorin did not respond for a long while. “No,” he said eventually. “Nor did I ask.”

Gandalf hmmed thoughtfully. “Nor should you. She may not have looked like it, but speaking of him distresses her terribly.”
Thorin glared. “She looked quite terrified, aye. I do not turn a blind eye to her troubles, Gandalf.”

Gandalf looked worried. “No, I am merely surprised she had let you see this much.” His tone, though, was not surprised at all.

“Gandalf,” he said slowly. “I want to assure you – my intentions toward your ward are true. While this entire… relationship is very unexpected to me, and not at all what I had in mind when we first met, or what I imagined could happen… I do care for Lily.”

“Yes, Thorin,” Gandalf said raggedly, “worry not – I never thought you to be anything but honorable. Your progression concerns me, that’s all. And its bad timing, I’m afraid.”

“I understand,” Thorin went on, “but I refuse to detach myself from her because of that.”

The old Istar’s eyes were unreadable. “No, young lovers never listen to old men’s council, do they now?”

Thorin glowered. He left the room when it seemed the old man had nothing more to say.

Ningalor followed Gandalf from the corner of her eye, but the dread set firmly in her stomach only when Thorin rose abruptly to follow the old man. She gazed down at her half-eaten honey cake and kept her face clear of emotions. She wondered when it would be appropriate for her to excuse herself.

Oin and Gloin were debating, again, and Balin and Dwalin sent glares her way when they thought she wasn’t looking – Dwalin in a scowl and Balin in concern. Bofur and Bombur, however, smiled at her as they joined her side, and Kili and Fili soon followed. Suddenly, Ningalor was surrounded by the people she had spent the entire week avoiding.

Thorin’s nephews smiled at her with mischief mixed with admiration, as if the very notion that she formed a relationship with their grumpy uncle was an achievement worthy of praise. Bofur and Bombur, however, had a kinder expression on their features. Ningalor blinked uneasily and wondered what was expected of her in these situations.

“Do you like honey cakes?” asked Kili, as always incredibly at ease when his skill at breaking the ice was needed.

“Or honey in general?” Fili added. Both smiled at her beatifically.

Thank gods for safe conversation topics. She smiled hesitantly in response. “I suppose. Beorn’s cakes are something quite special, I think.”

Bombur nodded. “Aye, lots of honey, but not too heavy, a combination that is harder than it sounds! Tried to ask for the recipe, but they don’t talk very much, Beorn’s people, eh? Didn’t let me watch neither.”

Bofur pumped his pipe thoughtfully. “’haps it’s just meant to be one of those things unique to one place, eh? Like Grandma’s special mead, y’know?”

“Do you think he has special mead, too?” Kili wondered aloud.

“None for you, laddie, you cause your Uncle enough trouble as it is.” Bofur laughed.
“Lily could distract him, then.” He turned his puppy eyes on her, and Ningalor was mortified to note her cheeks were most definitely heating up at the implication. “Right, Auntie? You will help a nephew in need?”

Ningalor choked on her wine quite pathetically, and Bombur’s cheery attempts to pat her back did not help much. They laughed, but it wasn’t a gleeful cackle at her misfortune; rather, they all seemed very supportive of her and Thorin’s relationship. Warmth spread through her when she looked upon those friendly faces. They accepted her; slightly too much, even. She smiled at the gangly teen. “I think you will find I disapprove of bad manners more so than your uncle; and I am well trained at resisting puppy eyes, I assure you.”

Kili looked slightly crestfallen, before both he and Fili burst into identical, charmingly cocky grins.

“Seems like this aunt is going to be stern like Amad.” Fili chuckled.

Ningalor gulped uneasily, despite the shared amusement. “Nor am I your aunt, Fili,” she reprimanded slightly, but her voice had a weak quality to it that, thankfully, went unnoticed.

“For now!” Kili didn’t seem too troubled with propriety, it would seem.

“Lass, we are just happy that Thorin managed to do more than just stare,” Bofur hurried to assure her with a friendly pat.

“Still stares, though.” Bombur chuckled. When Ningalor looked slightly confused, he added, “It was the reason for much speculation –“

“Quite the gossip –“ Bofur chimed in.

“But just between us simple folk. High lords don’t do such natter.” Bombur laughed.

“More like they are busy arguing about the important stuff,” Dori joined them, reprimanding, “as should you.”

“The life of the conversation, dear brother, lies dead at your thick, clumsy feet.” Nori rolled his eyes, “What’s wrong with good fun and a blooming romance?” He snickered.

Kili and Fili joined him, and when they saw the glance she leveled at them, Fili added, “Just very unlike him, that’s all.”

“Uncle doesn’t like strangers,” Kili added with a wink.

“What’s the broody Duke like?” Nori waggled his eyebrows. “You know, when the room is dark and –“ Dori smacked his head powerfully, and the man cursed but said nothing further on the topic. He did, however, manage to sneak a few unsavory winks when his older brother wasn’t looking. Had she not known him for several months, Ningalor would have suspected the winks to be more than just playful.

The lords rose, took their drinks and left in the direction of the library, probably to plan the rest of their journey. The rest paid little attention to their departure.

“So are you going to stay with us in Erebor?” Kili asked, eyes wide again.

“We need to reclaim it first, brother.” Fili punched him playfully.

“We need to reach it first,” Bombur reminded them.
“And cross Lake-Town-“

“Kill Smaug-“

“Navigate through Mirkwood-“

“Convince Oin that Thorin is healthy like a dog in hea –“

“Nori! Watch it!”

“But after all that,” Kili insisted. “You are staying with us?”

Ningalor sipped from her drink carefully; they were all looking at her – why was her response so important? She did not want to lie, not to those open, trusting faces, but Gandalf’s offer weighed heavily on her conscience. She knew it was too early to mention such a thing, especially since she had yet to decide whether to leave with him or not.

Not that it mattered, really. She had no future with Thorin. Every moment felt stolen, imagined, a precious violation of their predetermined fate.

She could not tell them that, however.

“I cannot foresee what other, unexpected situations may occur, but… the way things stand, I will stay.” Her response was careful enough, but the men cheered, as if… well, what did they think she would say? The cheers died suddenly, and Ningalor knew why – she could feel his eyes on her.

She turned around and, indeed, there he stood. Thorin, whose face eased into a gentle smile when he stepped out of the shadows. Were her words the cause, or perhaps just the sight of her? Either way, years of training failed to stop the soft blush from creeping into her cheeks and her heart from racing when Thorin crossed the distance to their group.

“I have a meeting I must attend to,” the Duke announced, addressing the whole group but looking at her. “Fili, join me,” he invited his heir, but before he left, he stroked her cheek tenderly and caressed a lock of her hair. Her eyes followed his and his successor’s retreating figures, and only when she returned her gaze to the rest of the men, she noticed the shocked looks on their faces.

She refused to show her discomfort, so she straightened up in her chair and looked away, sipping on her drink. Unease made her edgy, so when Nori snickered, she leveled her father’s patented gaze at him – the thief coughed himself into a stunned silence, which induced the rest of the company, surprisingly enough, to laugh loudly and heartily.

“You spend too much time with the Duke, lass! You glare just like him!” Chuckled Bofur.

“Or Amad!” Kili added.

Dori said, still chuckling, “Not quite like her, but she’ll get there with practice.”

“Soon your face will turn wrinkled from scowls, just like the rest o’Durinol!” Bombur threatened the boy with an amused smile.

Kili glared in response. “I will not!”

“Look’e here, brother! He’s already scowling!”

“Youth wasted on the Durin heirs, eh?”
Even Dori nodded. “Better keep smiling, lad! Otherwise, lasses will call you Kili the Grim!”

“Kili Sourpuss!”

“Kili Lemonface!”

The boy’s scowl now had an offended edge to it, and Ningalor countered, “Kili Ironbow, perhaps, for his deeds in battle?” She cocked a brow, “Surely a leader regains fame for his actions, rather than facial expressions?”

Kili’s eyes grew as wide as Beorn’s plates, despite Bombur’s huff of amusement. “Don’t feed his ego any further, it’s full enough as it is!”

“I never saw him miss the mark.”

“Kili Bullseye, then.”

“He hadn’t seen enough battle for a battle name, Lily,” Dori reprimanded her.

The boy puffed his chest. “No! I am done with animal nicknames!” He turned to Ningalor, who was surprised by the serious glint in the boy’s eyes. “I will fight hard to be worthy of the title, Lily!” he vowed, and Ningalor wondered if grand declarations were another thing that ran in the family, besides fearsome scowls.

She opened her mouth and closed it, feeling rather staggered. Surely, he did not mean to adopt a name given by a peasant, made up on the spot?

Sensing he was waiting for some sort of ceremonial recognition, Ningalor waved her hand uncertainly in the unmistakable fashion of the Elven Alliance. At that moment, however, she did not register it, confused as she was by the incident. “I… give you my blessing.” She felt utterly ridiculous. “And I am sure your aim will always be true.”

Kili bowed, determined and excited. “I will go and practice now, and just you watch – in my next battle, I will have killed hundreds of men with my bow!” he declared and left, nearly running into the door on his way out.

Ningalor followed him, eyes wide, and her utter cluelessness must have shown, for Bofur shook his head with a sigh. “Dear gods, lass! You have given him a battle name!” He chuckled. “Fili will be quite jealous.”

“What on earth is a battle name?” she cried, sensing she may have done something utterly terrible.

“A name earned in battle,” Dori lectured. “For great deeds in battle. Like ‘Oakenshield’. Thorin defeated his enemy with a branch. Kili is too young and inexperienced for such an honor.”

“The Duke was seventeen,” Bombur protested.

“But he earned it in a battle hard won!”

“But surely, my suggestion cannot be taken seriously,” she protested weakly, feeling faint. “I am of small consequence!”

“Small consequence!” Dori exclaimed, “You are the companion of the Duke! Improperly done, perhaps, but as long as he keeps you by his side, you are, by law, of very great importance.” He shook his head at her.
“The Elven Alliance don’t use such names, aye, but in our alliance, they mean a great deal,” Nori chimed in. She snapped to look at him. His expression was friendly, but his cunning eyes narrowed at her, and his smile was sharp and utterly fake.

She watched him shrug and drink from his cup and unwillingly did the same, heart hammering.

“It’s a good name, I’m sure Thorin wouldn’t mind.” Bofur attempted to cheer her up and ended up heaping more worry on her increasing pile of dread.

They chatted some more, and when they excused themselves and went to bed, she remained. She read silently, waiting, until a strong hand grasped her shoulder firmly – she jumped, but her features eased into a smile when her startled eyes met with Thorin’s warm ones.

He undressed her with such gentle hands, gazing at her appreciatively, and growled in her ear when this time, as he entered her, her hips rose to meet his.

When they lay together, bodies intertwined and gazes locked, Ningalor tried to memorize his face by tracing her fingers over his features, studying the planes of his body, blushing when his larger hand caught hers in the act, and smooth lips and coarse beard caressed the sensitive skin. They did not talk much, perhaps, but their bodies spoke volumes and in earnest. In the safety of his arms Ningalor could forget about Mirkwood, and her father, and her lies; her impending betrayal.

She stroked the strong jaw, the firm curve of the neck, the sensitive ear, and basked in the warmth of Thorin’s eyes. The man chuckled when she cuddled closer, but his hands pressed her against him, and his fingers stroked her cheek affectionately. He made sure that the fire was well tended to and that she was always covered in the thick fur blanket while his side was mostly exposed. No one has taken care of her quite like that in the past, and she wondered if she could, or should, ever tell him; that his touch was enough to make her forget all about Gandalf and her father and Nori’s remark; that his lips invoked fire within her that had never burned before; that his eyes undressed her from inhibitions and fears and made her feel breathlessly alive. Oh, if only Thorin could have given up his quest and they could have stayed here, like this, for the rest of their lives!

She did not want to wake up.

In fact, even when the first shy rays of dawn had tickled the edge of her senses, and Thorin’s chest rose abruptly and changed rhythm, she refused to open her eyes. Something in her hoped that maybe, if she clung to the fading fogs of her dream, they will never have to leave Beorn’s Manor, never enter the silent woods that were once her home.

“Lily,” Thorin’s deep, raspy voice and his hand, gently caressing her face, however, were not something she could ignore if she wanted to, and she was fully awake sooner than she would have liked.

She dressed quickly, which was fortunate, for the moment she donned Thorin’s coat, Oin knocked and entered to test Thorin’s recovery one last time before they left their sanctuary. Their leader stood, fully naked, and allowed the old healer’s hands and eyes to check any injury or scar, old as well as new. There were so many, crisscrossing the knotted muscle, rougher or smoother to the touch. She closed the door and did not look back, ignoring the sensation of Thorin’s eyes boring into her back. Instead, she walked outside to check on the horses and thank their host. As she expected, she found Beorn and Gandalf talking in hushed voices, Gandalf worried and Beorn glancing at the horses and the servants packing with displeasure.
Not displeased that they are leaving, surely, but rather upset that they are borrowing his horses, she guessed. When they noticed her, Gandalf excused himself and walked toward her, pulling her away from the company that already began to gather and make predictions about the weather.

“Did you make your decision?” he probed, voice low and urgent.

She did. She looked away and then up again, and Gandalf’s fearsome scowl told her exactly what he thought of that. “You are dooming yourself, child, and I cannot promise I could help you again.”

She nodded. “I know. I cherish every moment of freedom I am offered.” Her hand traveled to her pocket. Suddenly, the need to feel the cold metal of the ring the gods had gifted her mattered a great deal. Why would it matter? She fisted the ring. “I made that choice back in Bag End, Gandalf.”

The old man huffed in annoyance. “I will return you to complete your part!”

“You can’t know that! You said yourself you might be walking toward your own doom!” She pursed her lips at her words and exhaled weakly. “To enter Mirkwood without guidance is suicide; you know this.”

“As long as they follow the road, they will be just fine. The path is still quite safe.”

She looked away but immediately returned her eyes to him when she saw Thorin, dressed in Beorn’s bear coat, emerging from the long cabin. “I made a promise. Besides, you told me I should dare.”

“I told you to dare, not to sacrifice yourself!”

“What is the difference?”

“Ningalor!”

Their gazes remained locked for a long time, but she refused to give in. Eventually, the old man squeezed her shoulder gently and muttered, “We have three days’ ride ahead of us. I must ask you to reconsider.”

Next Beorn came, and he spoke to Thorin in length. Sometimes gruff, at times threatening, but they parted shaking hands. When the beast-sized man finished, he approached her, pulled her aside, and grumbled, “You left your cage, I see. Be careful, lest it snare you back, songbird.”

“I intend to stand by my decisions,” she promised.

“A doe in a pack of wolves, and the old fox is taking you to the serpent’s den.” He shook his head. “The King of the forest will not take kindly to your companions.”

“We do not wish to disturb his slumber.”

“Thranduil is not asleep!” Beorn growled. “His hold of the dukedom is weaker, aye, but that is not necessarily in your favor. He is not as wise as his kin, but that makes him more dangerous.”

“How would you deal with him, then?” she inquired, looking down.

“If the stag’s daughter stumbles, the wolves will tear her apart. If she rises, the stag’s antlers will surely catch her.” When she paled, he added, “The birds of the forest chipper loudly, if one listens.
Don’t show them your true hide, for they will mount your head on the wall.”

She turned on him. “You knew? When you —” She lowered her voice. “When you offered me the bag?”

The man huffed, unimpressed. “No, I did not. Does it matter?” He squeezed her shoulder and released her, nearly making her stumble forward, and added in a low growl, “I told the Istar – a darkness lies upon that forest and fell things creep beneath its trees. And you are still hunted by Orc clans. If you truly must enter the forest, counsel caution. Perhaps to you, your lover will listen.” He sounded mildly disdainful as he glanced back. “Or, if you be wise, do not enter the forest at all. Loyalty is at times overpriced.” The gruff Lord left her and entered his home, making her wonder what made him think she possessed such powers, to counsel or desert the man she fell for.

Ningalor forced herself to breathe and turned to face the company resolutely to find them all mounted and looking at her expectantly. A silent servant offered her the reins of the last unmounted beast. She mounted the black and white horse gracefully and took a deep breath, and only then realized that she still held the ring. She released it, lest she turn invisible while they all watched, and immediately missed the reassuring touch of the ever-cold band. She assumed her place next to Gandalf, despite Thorin’s obvious expectation that she would ride with him, and looked away to avoid his scowl, even when she heard Gandalf tsk in annoyance, no doubt challenging Thorin with a glare of his own.

She could not ride with him. Surely, he knew that while she may find a place in his bed, she could not publicly take his side, not without a formal invitation.

“We ride!” Thorin ordered and turned his horse around, kicking it into action.

Ningalor breathed and did the same, staying close to Gandalf. The sight of Mirkwood greeted them, a dark spot looming ever closer. Ningalor gripped the reins, knuckles turning white. She felt sick.

Thorin found the development of the events to be quite displeasing.

Mirkwood itself, of course, was the source of never-ending irritation that grew worse with each moment he spent gritting his teeth. Lily’s actions only added to the pile. She rode the entire day without uttering a word and remained by Gandalf’s side, infuriatingly so, especially since whenever he turned to glance at her the old man was there, challenging him with a fearsome glower on his face. Lily looked, if anything, apologetic at times or frightened at others, but mostly her mask was firmly in place, and her guarded eyes shared little. He wanted to summon her to ride next to him but did not want to put her loyalty to Gandalf to the test publicly, and the knowledge that if he did he would probably lose irritated him greatly. He pushed them harder than he should have, taking out his anger by riding fast and quite recklessly. If asked, he will say he wanted to outride the Orc packs that surely still hunt them. He wasn’t asked, however, and that appeased him, if slightly.

After several hours of riding hard, he called for a stop and ordered to make a camp hiding behind another monumental rock like the one they saw before. He saw the men dismounting while muttering complaints, and their displeasure spiked when he did not allow them to start a fire. Gandalf demanded they would appoint a watchman, reminding them of the chasing clansmen, and soon the muttering died out.
Thorin took the first watch.

They all fell back into the old, established patterns. Brother lay next to brother, Lily close to Gandalf. Damn the silent woman and her protective guardian. Damn her hard eyes and pursed mouth. Damned be the softness of her hair and the gentle touch of her hesitant fingers. Damned be he, who fell so completely under her spell. Damn –

The woman rose and glanced around. The camp was silent, if one ignored the snores, and all but the two of them were sound asleep. Without a word uttered, she huddled in his coat and walked toward him, hesitating for a moment as she stopped before him. Her eyes were wide and uncertain again, her jaw clenched, and, despite his irritation, he could not turn her away.

He glanced at the spot next to him on the grass and the woman’s lips parted slightly before closing again as she moved to sit next to him. He leaned against the rock while she remained rigid.

“I am sorry,” she muttered, her voice barely above a whisper.

Thorin’s annoyance flared once more, and he said nothing. He also did nothing to hide his irritation and knew the woman could see it plainly when she turned to glance at him.

“I cannot disobey Gandalf publicly,” she explained, “nor can I, as a peasant, ride beside a duke.”

“But you can sneak into a duke’s sheets and don his clothes,” he replied, voice containing nothing but ice and ire.

Lily swallowed, offended. “Forgive me, Your Grace. I must have misunderstood – I thought my company was wanted. Good night,” she answered just as sharply and attempted to stand –

Thorin grabbed her arms and yanked her, forcefully, into his lap. The woman yelped in surprise and then in pain when her body hit armor, but Thorin’s arms held her firmly and did not release her. She pushed against him and tried to rise again, hissing in pain when he refused to free her.

“Stop it,” he growled, grabbing her hands with one hand and cradling her head to his chest with the other. The woman whined in protest – or was it pain? He eased his hold but did not release her. “Your company is wanted. And I missed it today,” he admitted in a whisper. He released her when the woman made no attempt to leave. “Forgive me,” he added.

Lily said nothing for a long while, and though she remained pressed against his chest, the position was no doubt uncomfortable, and her body was rigid and stiff. Her breaths were hurried and shallow. Thorin cursed himself inwardly and muttered gently, “Khebamu... look at me.”

Lily stirred, breathed deeply, and sat up. She sat between his legs but made sure she did not touch his body, and when he tried to touch her cheek she turned her face away from him, revealing a small red mark, caused by his armor. Her eyes were trained in the direction of Mirkwood; her hands were fists.

“What does that mean?” she muttered, voice flat and thick. She swallowed visibly, though her face had no emotions displayed.

Thorin sighed in exasperation. The woman flinched, sensing his impending refusal. He took her hand in his. His fingers caressed the soft skin until the fist relented and her palm lay open, and he intertwined her fingers with his. She looked down at their hands, then up at him. Her heart was racing, he felt, but her face was white and colorless. Her eyes, however, were open and hurt.

“Heart-forg...” he breathed and explained when the woman blinked in confusion, “where one’s
This time, when his hand made contact with her cheek, she did not flinch, and instead closed her eyes and released a shuddered breath. He pulled her to him, gently this time, and her body eased against his as she shifted until she found a comfortable position. He kissed her forehead until she smiled tentatively, and then he tilted her head gently and kissed her lips.

The first touch was short and careful, but the woman pulled herself up and cupped his cheek, fingers buried in his beard, and kissed him back –

“Oi, you are supposed to be guarding!”

They broke apart with a shocked gasp – Thorin once again securing Lily against him possessively – to find Bofur chuckling at them. “Startled rabbits. Thank Mahal no clansman came by, eh?” Thorin glowered in response, until the miner raised his hands. “Peace! It’s my turn to guard. Just… you know, don’t wake up the young ‘nes.” He winked.

Thorin’s hold of the woman became firmer when he felt her shifting against him in protest. “No such acts of indecency shall be performed, worry not,” he snarled, but the man merely nodded cheerfully and lit his pipe. He turned his back to them and hummed to himself a song about an old inn.

Lily glanced up at him, cheeks blazing red, and his anger dissipated entirely.

“Stay with me,” he asked, cupping her cheek gently and stroking her hair. The woman looked down and then back up at him, lips parted – oh, if he could have led her away and stripped her slowly until she was naked and blushing in the moonlight - bad things to wish in such proximity. He forced himself to stop imagining lest his mind attempt to construct such an image of her. His fingers did push her collar down until they found her collarbones and caressed them gently.

The woman’s breath hitched. She looked away. “Should they find us –“

“I want you by my side.” Thorin refused to hear any such objections. “I will keep you warm and protected.” No such vow was necessary, but Lily looked up at him, sorrowful and tender – was it sorrow? She blinked and rested her head in the crook of his neck in response to his offer. He pulled on his cloak until it cocooned both of them entirely and wrapped his arms around her small form protectively. He kissed the woman cuddling in his lap affectionately.

“Sleep,” he whispered, and Lily nodded and did just that. He smiled softly, breathing in the scent of her hair, and closed his eyes as well. Finally, his muscles eased and his frame relaxed as Lily’s mere presence managed to undo his worries entirely.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
-Ghivashel- treasure of all treasures.
-ûrzuduh ra gimiluh- my sun and stars.
-Zi abnâmul kuthu nurutsi baraz’alâj- you are beautiful when you blush.
-Zi abnâmul- you are beautiful.
-Khajmel- gift of all gifts.
-Durinol- line of Durin.
Cultural misinterpretations and misunderstandings- Thorin and Ningalor are equally confused by each other (I am having a great time). Both Thorin and Ningalor are trying to get closer to each other, so cultural mishaps are going to appear more often from now on.

Also, I'd like to mention how deliciously deceiving third person limited POV is- to the readers and the story. The third person limited POV is used to describe the events from the characters' eyes- how they see and interpret the scene based on their understandings, feelings, and interests. A character could be WRONG.

Both Thorin and Ningalor are not telepathic. Just because they think the characters around them are afraid or angry does not mean they are necessarily, or that their reaction stems directly from the interaction unfolding. While Ningalor does have the upper hand here in regards to accuracy, her cultural understanding of the Dwarves makes her less than reliable.

Oh, and sometimes characters don't know what they do or how they feel, exactly. Like we sometimes don't know why we are happy or sad.

That is to say- confusions are coming! *rubbing hands together excitedly*
The Captives of a Dream

Chapter Summary

"Hands untangle fear and longing,
Where words dare not tread
Our eyes would follow,
And touch would guide."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The days followed a similar pattern – Lily looking down or away or tense, attempting to hide from his searching eyes or Gandalf’s angry ones; diminished by Mirkwood’s shadows.

They rode hard, took a few breaks and only when absolutely necessary, and stopped to camp when Thorin or, more often than not, Kili, who had the sharpest eyes, spotted a good location.

Thorin moved his watch toward the middle of the night, when the Istar was sure to be asleep, and waited for Lily to rise and join him.

After their first night, the Istar was utterly furious and spent the day lecturing to his ward in a hushed voice, while the rest of the company snickered or grinned widely when it was least appropriate. They were late to rise – awakened only when Dwalin threw a piece of wood at Thorin’s head, to the vast amusement of everyone with the exception of the old Istar himself.

“Wake up, lad! The sun is bright and shining!” the warrior declared, laughing loudly at their expense.

Thorin’s eyes snapped open and his anger spiked when he realized what was happening. “Dwalin, I swear –“

But Lily, startled and utterly embarrassed by the whole commotion, burrowed firmly into his lap – the action was so endearing he found he had little attention to spare to his amused men, so, instead, he focused on her. He ceased glowering and looked down at her wide, still unfocused eyes, cupped her cheek and stroked the soft skin. She blushed and dared a small smile, and he offered a tight-lipped reciprocation of the gesture.

“Malah faslamânu zanatul,” Dwalin cursed, looking away.

“Dwalin! Watch your language!” Dori smacked him powerfully, forcing the older warrior to grunt. “There are children nearby!”

“We are no children!” Kili protested, though his red ears and the cheeky smile suggested otherwise.

Fili chuckled. “We are no children indeed, but you still are.”

“Am not! You are just jealous you don’t have a battle name!”
“You don’t either!”

“Do so!”

“Do not!”

“Boys!” Thorin bellowed, rising after unwillingly untangling himself from the woman, who scurried away the moment she could and made for the safe company of the horses. “Itkit!”

The boys looked down obediently, but Kili decided, apparently, to test the waters. “Sorry, Uncle. We thought you woke up in a good mood today.”

“Kili!”

The boy’s sly smile bloomed into a genuine one, and he and his brother scrummed to get away from their now properly angry uncle. One look told him that no member of the company found his scowl impressive, and even Ori giggled into his hands, though he ceased when his brother – whose lips twitched – slapped his back powerfully and the boy began to cough.

For the first time in many years, Thorin felt thoroughly embarrassed, and this time, he did not need Dis to bring him to this state. “Pack up and saddle the horses. Now!”

“But breakfast –“

Thorin focused his glower on Bombur and answered curtly, “On the road. We are wasting precious time, and the days are growing shorter. Five minutes!” he ordered, feeling a tad satisfied at the sight of their fading smiles. No one, of course, attempted to object. Soon they were all mounted, and Thorin felt less annoyed by the fact that Lily did not join him, though seeing Gandalf’s anger and her pale face made it very clear that the both of them had no share in the collective amusement.

Thorin kicked his horse into a gallop, and they rode.

He heard, after a while, another horse moving to join his side and for a short, hopeful, utterly silly moment thought that it was Lily, leaving Gandalf’s side and joining his.

It was Dwalin, however, and the amused glint told him the man did not miss the second of disappointment that crossed Thorin’s face. “Thought it was ‘er, didn’t you?” Thorin scowled and Dwalin chuckled. “Never seen you so cute in my life, and I’ve known you since birth – all cuddled and smiling –“

“What do you want?” Thorin uttered curtly, gruff and embarrassed.

“Besides to make fun of you?” The warrior chuckled, but then his face sobered. “Thorin, if we… you know Balin and I don’t – we don’t like it. Whatever secrets she’s hiding, they can’t be good. And Gandalf’s objection –“

“We talked about this,” he dismissed him.

“Aye, we did. Thought maybe you needed a reminder.” Dwalin’s suspicion was etched into every wrinkle and line of worry on his face. “I dunno, the lowborns like ‘er, as do your boys and Oin, but the rest find it hard to trust someone they know so little about, and I don’t know what Nori’s deal is – even you don’t know who you got yourself so smitten with. And now I understand if you need a shag, even if she has the body of a –“

“Watch your words, Fundinson,” Thorin growled, hand fisted and eyes blazing.
Dwalin scrutinized him, eyes narrowed in a cold, speculative gaze, and nodded. “We need your mind clear and focused. If I need to throw a log to wake you up, then your head is not here and who knows what else isn’t as well. Don’t listen to the rest of our advice, fine, but… this quest is dangerous enough as it is. Don’t make me bury another Durin.”

Thorin blinked, surprised, and clasped the other man’s shoulder. “You won’t, Dwalin. We will take the Mountain and grow old and sick of each other, I assure you.”

The seasoned warrior nodded, though his smile was thin. “Just save the sappiness for later, eh? When you come into your own.”

Thorin considered his friend’s words and nodded. “I will keep her by my side, but my focus shall not wander.”

Dwalin grumbled, displeased, then looked away. “If you can do both, fine. Can’t – and I will tear you apart, if I have to.” His eyes hardened. “My duty is to keep you alive, lad, not happy.”

“Dwalin….”

“Just don’t make me, all right?” He sighed when Thorin nodded and then fished an apple from his bag and tossed it to the man beside him. “You are too old to act like a love-struck teen. And I am too old in general,” he groused. And the forest loomed ever nearer.

He did not break his word to Dwalin. While he still spent the nights holding the woman in his arms, she awoke before dawn and left his side as stealthily as she came. And while his muscles did ache from sleeping in a sitting position for two days, he knew the difference between cuddling together and lying together. He could tell the line was more distinct in her eyes, just as he knew that Gandalf was not misled by her tricks, though he said no word of protest to Thorin directly.

When they reached the trees, her breath got caught in her throat; this was not the forest she remembered.

Just as the name itself was tainted, the vast, green woods were no longer green. The trees were silent. No birds, deer or even rabbits peered from the grass or the high, black leaves, and the forest groaned but remained deathly still. The trunks were huge and gnarled, the branches twisted, the leaves – dark and boney. The sun shied from entering the dukedom’s borders, and the blackness underneath had a sickening, sweet scent to it.

This was not the Greenwood of her childhood.

“No orcs or goblins!” Dwalin declared, “We have luck on our side!” But even this attempt did not cheer the ever-cheerful company. They all looked upon the trees with a sense of dread pooling in their chests.

“Welcome,” Gandalf said grimly, “to the greatest forest of the Northern world. Or what remains of it.” He paused, eyes somber and tense. “The dukedom is large – it stretches about four hundred miles from north to south, and is up to two hundred miles wide from east to west. Do not wander! Stick to the Old Forest Road, keep your swords and eyes sharp, and eat and drink nothing! Fell things grow, now that the Duke abandoned his borders, and thieves and murderers inhabit these trees. You are more likely to encounter them than Mirkwood Guards if you will not be careful.” No one dared enter the gate – an arch of old, covered in ivy. There were supposed to be statues, she remembered, one of her mother and the other of her grandmother, but she could not distinguish
them from the wild growth. “Set the horses loose! Beorn will be expecting them.” Gandalf reminded them, and they all dismounted and began to unpack, muttering about the weight of their bags.

She was about to dismount as well when Gandalf’s hand grasped her arm firmly, and the blue eyes were piercing with worry. “Lily, do not.”

“This forest looks… sick. No way around it?” Dori asked, picking a leaf and sniffing it after rubbing it between his fingers. “Smells vile, too.”

“Not unless you want to march two hundred miles north, or twice that distance south,” Gloin grumbled. “The cursed forest is our only choice.”

Ningalor felt her ring, almost overwhelmed with the need to wear it.

“Lily.” Gandalf’s voice tore through her thoughts, and her pinched expression was clearly reflected to her from the fiery blue of his eyes. “Trust me as you once did. Do not enter the forest.”

“Oi, what’s taking you so long?” Nori complained, and Ningalor tore her eyes from Gandalf’s piercing pair to see the members of the company, studying them. Thorin was looking at her.

“Hótulonyë, lastaenni. Ala minnataur atartya.”

Ningalor gulped, sighed, and looked up at her mentor. The sorrow and grief must have been plainly written, for both of them knew that entering the forest would seal her fate, just as the old man easily guessed why she snuck in between Thorin’s arms each night, and only there managed to fall asleep.

“Avatyarni.” She untangled her hand from his grasp. “Namárië, faithirnya.”

She dismounted and began to unpack. Her fingers did not shake and her movements were fluid and trained. She slipped back into her court mask, she sensed. She paused for a second to touch the ring, then unwillingly released the band and resumed her tasks.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Thorin moved to stand between them. With her back to Gandalf and her eyes fixed on the horse’s burden, she did not see him moving to stand by her side. She paused and tried to breathe, feeling his eyes drilling holes into her.

“I must leave you,” Gandalf said finally. “Believe me, I would not do this unless I had to, and indeed, I must.” He did not explain or address the root of Thorin’s inquiry, but this was soon forgotten as the information he revealed was far more disturbing. “I will be waiting for you at the overlook of Erebor, if all goes well. Do not enter the fortress without me!” The last part was directed at Ningalor, who twisted so she could face him and bow her head in response. She will not mourn her fate, she told him in her posture. Gandalf’s feature softened, telling her that he shall do so for her.

“Stay on the path,” he ordered, turned his horse and galloped back the way they came.

Thorin turned to look at her, but she returned her eyes to the task at hand and, when finished, released her horse to run with the others in Gandalf’s wake. Her eyes did not linger on her last hope of escaping her father’s reach galloping away, though her heart did mourn by beating frantically in her chest.
She was not caught yet. She should not grieve before her time.

Instead, she put on her bag and dared to look at Thorin. The man’s worried scowl turned onto a scorching glower when her face revealed nothing, but he did not act upon his irritation. He turned away from her and led them through the weathered arch.

They walked in a single file. The path itself was narrow and wound in and out among the trunks. Soon the light dwindled and the twilight ruled, and the quiet was so deep that their feet seemed to thump along while all the trees leaned over them and listened. Watched. As their eyes became used to the dimness, they could see a little, but what lay before their eyes was grim and frightening – twisted branches, as white as bones; dark leaves, as black as night; soft moss, as red as blood. Occasionally, a slender beam of sun that had the luck to slip in through some opening in the leaves far above, and still more luck in not being caught in the tangled boughs and matted twigs beneath, stabbed down thin and bright before them. But this was seldom, and it soon ceased altogether. Oaks and lichen, ivy and herbs with pale leaves and unsavory smell were the few plants she could distinguish, and the white cobble path was snaking further out of sight, buried and cracked by leaves and roots. This part of the forest her father abandoned, and the trees did not take kindly to being disturbed.

She walked in the middle of the file, after Bofur and before Nori, whose distrustful eyes rarely left her. He voiced none of his suspicions, but she had the gnawing feeling that his were more founded than Balin’s or Dwalin’s, and that his grasp of her situation was more astute. He will uncover her identity sooner or later, but she had no idea what he would do. No doubt keep the knowledge to himself until the opportunity to use it arose, she thought grimly, but had no idea when such a moment would present itself.

For now, Thorin followed the path and adhered to the map, so she said little. If all went well, in thirty days or so they would be out of the forest and away from her father’s realm. If all went well. Ha.

The air was thick with sickness, stale and dense, and the company began to mutter and stumble, calling for air. And soon she knew why – red blooms decorated the path like glistering drops of blood. Fumella, the flowers of sleep. Ningalor closed the collar of her shirt around her mouth and nose, to block the pollen, and indicated to Bofur to do the same. When she turned around, she saw Nori’s scarf was already raised, and his sharp eyes narrowed, but he turned around and ordered the others to cover their noses and mouths just the same.

“How’s that supposed to help, Lily? I can hardly breathe either way!” Bofur noted, slightly wheezy.

“The red flowers’ pollen is causing this. You should not inhale it.”

Bofur tightened his scarf. “Really? How’d you know?”

Ningalor did not answer in a hurry. “Knowledge you pick on the road, I suppose.”

Eventually, they came to a halt next to a clearing. It was hard to tell if it was night or day, with the trees so thick, but the temperature dropped noticeably, and since they were all sick and tired, Thorin probably saw no reason to push them further today.

He did not allow them to light a fire, which Ningalor agreed with despite the chill in her bones, and they all huddled together, trying to ignore the eyes blinking at them from the dark growth.

They ate unenthusiastically and not much, as they had no way to resupply, and dared play no game
nor hum nor sing a merry tune. Enormous moths flew around them, and the forest grumbled, but other than that, the eerie silence was deafening.

Ningalor looked at their tense, pale faces and chuckled inwardly, humorlessly. There she was, inches away from perhaps facing the greatest foe of her freedom – shouldn’t she be the fearful one? And they, the great warriors and wanderers, who had faced horrors that left her trembling, allowed mere trees to unnerve them.

A daughter of the forest. She should welcome them into her dreary halls.

But her humor would have been lost on them, she mused, and so she sat next to the two heirs, who did a very fine show of looking brave, and decided to attempt to cheer them up instead.

Fili managed a smile when he saw her approach, but Kili’s attempt looked more like a watery twist of his lips. She offered a tight-lipped smile in response and lowered herself gracefully to the wet grass, cuddling in the thick folds of Thorin’s coat.

“I don’t like this forest,” Kili managed, ripping strands of grass with restless fingers. “It’s unnatural, this place.”

“Don’t let the old trees get to you, brother. We have about a month to spend in this forest, so you better keep your senses sharp.”

Kili swallowed, agitated, and did not shrink from his brother’s hand that hugged his shoulder and rubbed his back.

She nodded. “The forest is very old, and its memories are unpleasant, but even the thieves shrink away from the path. As long as we stick to it, we will be fine.”

Kili huffed and Fili added, “I don’t like it – none of us do, but it’s the bags I hate the most. Too heavy.”

“You will regret saying that when they will be too empty to fill your stomach,” she countered gently.

“Surely by that time, we will be out of the dukedom?” Kili said, a tad worried.

Ningalor looked into the forest, facing the red eyes blinking at her. “If all goes well,” she managed.

Fili straightened, grim suddenly, and Ningalor could tell from the hard glint that the next inquiry will not be one she wished to hear.

“Lily,” Gods, there was urgency in his voice, “did Gandalf tell you why he left? What – what did he want from you, when he –”

“Lily!”

Saved at the last minute or tossed into the fire? Ningalor sighed in relief mixed with anxiousness when Thorin called for her, excused herself and joined their prickly leader. She swallowed uneasily when Thorin, clad in shadows, looked at her with eyes hooded and gruff. Once again, he indicated with his head and she sat next to him, facing the company and the dreary silence of the woods, feeling the heat he emitted tickling her senses.

“How are you?”
This was not what she expected, neither the words nor the gentle tone, and her eyes snapped to look at him, wide and vulnerable. “I… I am well,” she managed sheepishly.

He turned to look at her. The shadows looked strange and demonic on his sharp features. “This forest… it unnerves us all,” he admitted.

She could sense that this confession had a question hidden in it, and so she took his hand and caressed the rough skin gently. “Yes, but I do hope that it will be the worst of it. That… that our visit will go unnoticed.”

Thorin hummed in response, holding her hand gently. His eyes searched hers, the frown ever deepening. “You seem… more at peace than I expected.”

Ningalor’s hand twitched but his hold tightened. He did not release her. She suddenly remembered that night, not three days ago, how he pulled her to him, knocked the air from her lungs and utterly terrified her – what should she do if he were to do that again? “I am used to trees, more so than to caves or swords or fights.”

“This forest is no stranger to you.”

Once again her hand twitched and once again he tightened his hold.

“No,” she murmured. She took a deep breath and turned to face him, eyes hard. “Release me or cease your inquiry, Thorin. I do not take kindly to being treated so.”

Thorin’s eyes darkened, and he ignored her. “What did Gandalf want from you? What did you say?”

She scowled. “I will not answer that.”

Thorin’s hold was crushing. “You deny me?” he growled. “Why?” He demanded.

Her jaw clenched. “You are hurting me,” she whispered.

Thorin’s eyes widened. He released his hold slightly, then glowered when she used this chance to remove her hand entirely. “What happened three days ago cannot happen again.” Her voice was hard but uneven. “Should you hurt me once more, I will leave your side,” she threatened. Idle threats, she thought humorlessly. Either she will be taken, or he will toss her aside. Did it matter?

Thorin looked stricken. “I – I didn’t, I meant –“ He raised his hand, dropped it. “I did not mean to hurt you, I am sorry,” he said earnestly. How could she possibly resist the smooth, velvety rawness of his voice?

She still did not look at him. “You also must understand that I am not yours. You may ask a question I may choose not to answer, and you have no right to demand that information from me.”

“Lily, I only think of your safety –“

“I relinquished every notion of safety when I stayed with you, instead of leaving with Gandalf,” she snapped, then paled when she realized what she said. “Worry not about my safety,” she muttered weakly and rose abruptly.

She walked resolutely to the other corner of the camp and sat next to an aged oak where she left her bag, then retrieved her blanket with gestures short and sharp. She could tell they were looking at her – Thorin frowning indignantly, the rest silent and confused. She cuddled in her blanket and
tried to ignore the glances, from the company and the forest alike.

The night was cold, but the blanket was warm and thick. Sleep did not come, even after the lone hours passed and the hour of the wolf came.

No wolf was heard, though, and the silence of the woods, even pierced by snores, was still thick and ominous. She forced herself to close her eyes and tried to empty her head, but still could not sleep. She turned and turned, listening to watchmen change and the eerie cry of creatures of the night that pierced the darkness, but sleep did not come. She could smell the smoke of their pipes, spicy and strange in the cool night’s breath, but even such gentle reminders that she was, indeed, not alone, did not ease her enough so she could sleep. Though she tried to bury the thought and deny it, the notion was persistent and hard to ignore — that she indeed relinquished her one last chance for a man whose grip left a mark, whose gentleness was gone when his demands were denied, whose eyes, ever seeking, she could not satisfy... the man she apparently left on the first day of entering her father’s realm.

She wondered if it was too late to turn back.

Suddenly she heard footsteps, coming closer and closer, and opened her eyes with a terrified snap.

Boots. She had seen those boots before. The boots that belonged to — her eyes darted up the figure until they were met with crystal blue — Thorin. Thorin’s boots. Thorin’s eyes; looking at her.

The eyes that glanced at her were ashamed and hesitant, the uncertainty evident. She realized he was waiting for her to allow him to approach her and wondered how unsure and tense she looked to him, for his jaw clenched tighter the longer he looked at her. She sat up, huddling into the blanket, and Thorin bowed his head slightly before kneeling at her side.

He knelt.

Her heart raced at the notion.

“Forgive me, amrâlimê. Binublûra zu.” He hesitated when he saw her frown in displeasure. “It means, I have failed you. Twice. I do not wish to cause you harm, nor was it ever my intention.”

She swallowed, looking away. “Marlel....”

“How am I supposed to accept an apology when half the words are undecipherable to me?” she mumbled, then cringed. Must she sound so hurt?

Thorin looked away before glancing up at her. Every movement was graceful and regal, even when humble and earnest. “Lily, ghivashel, treasure of all treasures, forgive me.”

He was the only person in her life now, the only one that remained, here in the wild. Even if she had wanted to, how could she ever refuse him anything?

She looked up at him again, eyes wide and lips parted, and the longing in her heart must have shown in her eyes, for Thorin smiled tentatively, hesitantly, and reached to cup her face, tilting her head to face him. “Mukhuh nami zu?”

His voice was raw and deep, and the heat that rushed through her was welcomed, if unexplained. “Thorin,” she protested weakly, cheeks red, “what does that mean?”

The man stroked her cheek with gentle fingers. She wanted to object, to inform him that she did not forgive him, to –
“May I demonstrate?” he whispered softly, and she knew she had nothing to do but look up at him with wonder and exhale weakly when his lips claimed hers. Her hand darted to tangle in his hair and pull him closer, and Thorin had to lean against the oak tree lest he topple on top of her. Her other hand grasped his shirt in pure, utter desperation. He could taste that, no doubt, in the wretched hopelessness of her touch, for he pulled away and gently touched his forehead to hers.

“Lily?” he whispered.

She bit her lip when she realized how close she was to tears, and looked away, breathing hard. She dropped her hands when weakness overtook them and waited.

Thorin cupped her face gently, but she refused to look up at him. His hands released her and he stood and turned away. She wanted to protest, opened her mouth to do so, but did not manage to say anything. She looked at his receding back and felt her throat tightening dangerously.

She pulled her knees toward her chest and hugged herself tightly, burying her face in the soft fabric. She blinked furiously, refusing to surrender to the utter misery that shook her body; the melancholy that tore her insides and stabbed her chest like small, sharp knives; the pain that flooded her form and dripped gently against her cheeks. If only she knew what he had said… She jumped when a hand gently touched her shoulder and her eyes snapped, too bright, but she hoped that in the shadows no one would notice, to see Thorin, again.

Gods, he did not leave her after all.

Thorin, who was carrying his own blanket and bags with him; who, after cupping her face gently, sat next to her and wrapped his blanket around his body. When he looked up at her again, his features softened – or was it a trick of the fickle starlight? And he opened his arms to her, cupping her cheek again and wiping her tears.

She was crying, then.

Her hands reached out to him, touching the strong jaw and the silken hair, and his hands welcomed her into his embrace. He pulled her to him, gently guiding her into his lap, one hand rubbing her back gently while the other guided her head to rest against his heart.

“Shh, Lily, ukradel, what is the matter?”

She said nothing, merely fisted his shirt tightly and trembled.

How could she even begin to explain how utterly wretched she felt?

He cocooned her in her blanket and his as well, and then lay on the ground with her in his arms. “Sleep, Lily. I am right here with you,” he promised, kissing her forehead, her eyes, her lips.

This time, he did not probe further for an answer, for which she was thankful. She held on to him tightly, like a drowning child, and he held her to him just as firmly. She buried her head in the crook of his neck and breathed in deep the rich, metallic scent. She wrapped her hands around his midriff and tried to still her shaking form. And Thorin did not understand – surely – how could he? But he cradled her to him like one would a child, and his lips and hands and warmth were all she craved; she did not want his words. Finally, she managed to close her eyes, and sleep.

Thorin’s eyes were trained on the map and his senses were sharpened and fixed on his surrounding, but his thoughts were all Lily.
Cold, crestfallen, crying Lily. His Lily.

Pale face in the darkness, peering up at him, eyes bright with tears.

Ten days passed since they entered the cursed forest. The food began to dwindle, and the men were edgy. And Lily faded, as if the trees sucked the life out of her veins and left her white and withered. He did not ask her why, not after the disastrous results of the first day he tried to approach her, but the worry and the indignation lay heavily on his shoulders; concerned, because he had never seen her like this. Angry, because someone made her react this way. The sharp, aloof woman who fooled thieves and high-borns alike, who argued with lords and disobeyed the old Istar, looked more and more like a frightened child. A broken child.

It made him wonder how many people warned her not to enter the forest, the reason she did – for him, she said, then paled and left him. For him, she admitted. For him.

Thorin shook his head and focused on the map. He nearly took the wrong turn – Dwalin just waited for an excuse to toss the woman out. A few lucky arguments, they said, was not a proof of loyalty. Neither was lust. Thorin gritted his teeth. He will not betray her to them, but he also had no intention of failing his men as their leader, not now.

Bent on getting out of the twisted nightmare of roots and shadows, he pushed them forward, his pace hard and unforgiving. This time, no one complained. They were all unnerved and worn thin by the crooked branches and gnawed trees, the whispering of the dead leaves in their ears. There was no wind, this deep in the forest. And some of the steps he took landed on rotten leaves on soft moss – his feet sank in a sickening sucking sensation, a soft sigh not unlike that of a dying beast, which had him shivering in disgust time and again. The whole forest was moaning and groaning unnaturally around them, living and dying at the same time, breathing sickness and dead leaves down their throats, watching them day and night with red, beady eyes.

Out of the whole of them, even when merely a shadow of herself, Lily still seemed the least affected. She kept her calm, never tripped, and walked the path with ease. She looked like a ghost, born to the dreary trees and black brooks, and the notion unnerved him completely. The unnatural way she fitted in the forest had not gone unnoticed by other members of the company, he knew, but no one dared talk against his lover. No, it was only in the darkness of the night, when the woman’s cold, bone-like fingers grabbed on to him like he was the only thing warm in her life, that he felt she was still human. She held on to him like she had no warmth left. She needed sunshine, he realized, and warmth and flowers and freedom.

She needed him, it dawned on him. He remembered her crying when he left her, how her eyes shone like broken glass. She did not walk next to him, she told him she wouldn’t, but she crept next to him when they lay to sleep, as silent as a shadow, materializing from the darkness.

Each night he held her, and each night he wondered if he should have sent her away with Gandalf instead. If he was selfish, to have led her into such peril.

Twenty days in and no way out. Not even a ray of sunshine to quench their thirst for the outside world, but still, their presence had gone undetected. Dwalin tapped his shoulder – he must have pushed them arduously today if Dwalin asked him to stop – and begrudgingly, he did.

They sat. He preferred to describe that as sitting, rather than crumbling, and opened their bags for a sip of bitter water and a bite of dry bread. Thorin tore a piece of his, but could not force his lips to open and his teeth to tear at the hard crumbs. With a sigh, he tore his daily share in half and rose,
trudged across their makeshift camp, and offered the hard bread to his nephews.

He should not have brought them with him, either.

Both of his boys had bags under their eyes and a semi-hollow glance, a feverish glint of weakness. The forest was leeching them as well. Both of them looked at the bread hungrily but refused, with regal grace and childlike eyes, the offering.

Kili’s belly growled.

Thorin scowled. “Boys,” he ordered.

They looked away, up, at the food, away again – Thorin sighed and grabbed their hands, stuffing them with the offered bread. He did not bring them here to starve. “Eat,” he ordered. “Or your Amad will not let me hear the end of it,” he said gruffly and ruffled their hair.

Glancing at each other one last time and back at him and at his cocked brow, they finally gave in and tore into the bread hungrily.

“Don’t choke,” he muttered. His heart clenched and tightened. He remembered a time he faced a similar situation, many years ago, when the dark hair belonged to Dis and the blond to Frerin –

He left the boys before the memories of personal failures would overcome him and moved to sit (fall) next to Lily.

Lily, who, with a gentle hand (so cold) caressed his fist until his fingers loosened, and stuffed her own share of bread into his palm. His heart quivered again. This was not the way it was supposed to happen.

“Lily….”

“I already ate.” She smiled gently at him. “I need less food than the rest of you.” She closed his hand gently, caressing the rough skin. “Eat,” she ordered softly.

Thorin exhaled bitterly, glowered at the bread disdainfully, and ate. Slowly, painfully, angrily. He finished her share unenthusiastically, ignoring the painful contraction of his stomach. She held his hand and he hers, their fingers dancing and exploring shyly. “Tomorrow, you eat,” he ordered. Weak. Must he sound so weak?

She squeezed his hand. “Don’t worry about me, Thorin. You need to keep up your strength.”

So pale and white. So thin. A ghost.

“When we get out, I will –“

“Oh, don’t! Don’t mention food, please.” She chuckled breathlessly, humorlessly. “Bombur has done nothing but fantasize out loud about all the food he wants to eat, you see… quite lucky you don’t have to hear that, though sometimes I fear that the chorus of growling stomachs will summon something from the trees….“

His body warmed with affection for the woman. She must have noticed, for she blushed and looked away, and Thorin smiled, for her blush was a color of the living.

“Join me at the front, and you will have to listen no longer,” he offered, stroking her cheek, but his smile died when her blush faded, and he knew that she meant to refuse.
“Thorin, I told you, I can’t….”

“Lily,” he groaned in exasperation, “what truly bothers you? If I want you at my side, then nothing else should matter.”

“I… I understand that, but Thorin, I am a liability –“

“I want you where I can protect you.”

“Then I must stay where you needn’t worry about me.”

They both glowered, refusing to give in. But he was tired, and hungry, and he did not want to risk upsetting her again. Eventually, he sighed and pulled her against him, cradling her head against his chest and caressing her cheek with his thumb. “Must you be so hard all the time?” he grumbled against her cheek.

She slowly relaxed her stiff muscles, clearly embarrassed by the affectionate display in front of his men. But his men looked away, and besides, they were too hungry to care for their duke’s romance.

“Thorin…” she whispers, and he is not sure he wants to hear the rest of the sentence, if there is a sentence to follow, when suddenly –

“In the trees! Bombur, behind you!”

Dwalin shouted, jumping – they all jumped to their feet, weapons at hand –

Thorin pushed Lily behind him –

An arrow –

A body fell to the forest floor.

It was a body of a boy, dark-skinned and dead, with an arrow embedded in his left eye. His right was open and terrified. His body was small and skeletal, dark skin and dark eyes, dark, matted locks. He wore squirrel skins sewn in patches. In his hand, he held Bombur’s share of bread and bag of coins.

Kili, holding the bow, let out a soft sob and, trembling, stepped back and kicked his water bag. It dripped over the leaf covered earth much like the boy’s blood tainted the dark mud on which he fell.

With his lower lip shaking slightly, Kili took another step back and nearly tripped into the hands of his equally shocked brother. This was not a clansman or a murderer. The skinny boy looked like he barely survived ten winters.

Thorin tore his eyes from the body and strode toward his boy, who looked at him with eyes wide and frightened. He crossed the distance easily and pulled the boy into his arms, burrying his head in his chest so as to hide the body of the dead child from Kili’s eyes.

“A Black Squirrel,” Dwalin announced into the tense silence, turning the body over with his boot. “Bastard nearly got away with Bombur’s whole bread.”

Thorin hugged the boy to him. The desperate way in which Kili grabbed his coat was not unfamiliar. He stroked the boy’s hair. “That was a good shot,” he comforted the boy. “You did
well. You didn’t know.”

Kili’s hold tightened, but his shoulders did not shake, nor did he allow himself to cry. He was strong, his boy.

“Ironbow, indeed,” Bofur said, attempting to improve the mood.

Thorin scowled in confusion but did not release Kili. He could hear his men dragging the body away from the camp, and thanked them silently for their consideration. They all could see how shaken Kili was. But that did not explain Bofur’s comment. “Ironbow?” he asked.

Fili managed a shaky smile. “A battle name Lily gave him, Uncle.”

Thorin furrowed his brow and allowed Kili to lift his head so he could frown at him directly. Kili looked up, and the young archer swallowed and twisted his lips in an attempt to smile at his confused uncle. “No – I’m not using it, I mean, you know, I hadn’t actually been in battle. A real one, I mean…..” His attempt at a smile failed epically.

“Nor did Lily know she was giving him a battle name,” Bofur chimed in, and Thorin turned so he could look at his diplomat. The pale woman looked uncertain, but unshaken. She stood, like a statue, engulfed in shadow. “It’s a good name, though,” he finished.

Thorin looked down at his boy. Soon, he will be as tall as he, and not a boy anymore.

“Ironbow.” He tasted the name on his lips, smiled gruffly and ruffled the dark locks. “Aye. Once you had a taste of battle, lad, you will be Kili Ironbow.”

Kili’s smile was radiant, and even if the name was given too early, it was a good name. It made Kili smile.

“You will have to perform well to earn it,” he added, slightly somberly, but Kili’s smile only widened.

“Yes! Don’t worry, Uncle! I will shoot so many, you will run out of enemies to kill!” he boasted.

Thorin chuckled. “I expect no less of a Son of Durin.” He looked up. “You too, Fili.” The blond youth nodded eagerly, clearly just as excited to earn a battle-name of his own.

Balin cleared his throat. “Thorin…..” His voice sounded grim, and Thorin’s smile died.

When he turned to face the old man, he understood why. Dread and anger replaced the sorely needed happiness and comfort that he allowed himself, just for a moment, to sink his teeth into.

For Balin held the map. The map that was their way out of the cursed forest. The map that now dripped water smeared with ink to that accursed forest ground; a map that could no longer lead them out.

“No!” he cried and crossed over, releasing Kili and taking hold of the now useless parchment. “How did this happen?” he asked, voice thick – with what? Anger? Fear? Frustration?

“I studied the map.” Balin explained gravely. “When Dwalin noticed that boy, I dropped the map so I could get a hold of my mace. It fell into this puddle,” he said, pointing to Kili’s overturned water-bag, “which I assumed was created when – “

But Balin stopped short, probably because they all could sense the rage boiling within Thorin’s
whole body.

He could not really blame them, and if he could it would not matter. The map, intricate and complex to begin with, was now roads and rivers of ink and one could not tell a painstakingly drawn path from a random smear.

He fisted the thing in his hand, crumpled it entirely. This was not frustration. This was desperation. Utter, bleak, hopelessness that made Kili step away from him, face white and eyes wide, for Thorin glowered at the map with so much wrath –

He did not notice the small hand on his arm until he heard her whisper, “Thorin…”

And then he looked up.

Lily looked at him, her eyes unreadable in the shadows, but she did not appear to be afraid. Not of his thunderous scowl, at least. “Thorin.” Her hand touched him. Held him. “I know the way,” she whispered. He blinked, unsure he understood her words accurately. “I can lead us out.”

His eyes widened as the anger began to fade. Could it be, could it really be that their luck finally changed? That the gods were finally with them? So many perils they had to endure, he began to think that even Mahal did not look favorably on their quest, but… he breathed raggedly, in utter relief.

“Why did you not mention this before?” Dwalin bellowed, ever suspicious.

“There was no need,” she protested.

“How come you know the way?” That was Balin, echoing the same mistrust.

She inhaled deeply, stonewalling herself, and answered, “I traveled with Gandalf to many places. I have walked the Old Forest Road before.”

She looked at him, lips parted in hesitation, though her hand did not leave his arm. They all waited for his decision. “Tomorrow, you will lead us,” Thorin declared. “The faster we leave this forest, the better.” She was the only one who dared approach him when he was shaking with ire. How did she manage to calm him down, with a touch of her hand and a whisper?

His boys smiled, the lowborns cheered, his lords scowled, but Lily breathed in relief. She smiled gently, nervously, when he took her hand and led her back to their spot.

Deciding it was enough excitement, they all covered themselves in their furs and closed their eyes. Thorin pulled the woman against him, his palm resting on her stomach and pressing her back against his chest while her head rested on his outstretched arm. He moved her hair from her face and kissed her cheek. “You will have to walk with me after all, tomorrow,” he whispered in her ear.

She held his hand and managed a watery smile, and then kissed his knuckles tenderly. The gentle gesture and the way she covered herself with his body touched him. “My laslel…” he mumbled. “Katagilemul habanuh….”

“Thorin,” she protested weakly.

“Sleep,” he ordered, pressed her against him, and buried his nose in her hair. His white flower, so full of secrets. Let her fears be baseless and his arm strong enough to shield her. Let their chapter, unlike the rest of the chapters in his life, end differently. He was getting accustomed to it, to this taste of happiness. Let it last.
When she took her place at the head of the file, she knew she no longer had anywhere left to hide.

And yet, the thought did not make her hands tremble, or her steps falter, or her mind cloud with doubt. She led them surely on the path she walked so many times before, when she dared to delve deeper and deeper into the forest in an attempt to escape her father’s realm.

And now, she walked in the opposite direction, using the knowledge she worked so hard to acquire for the very opposite reason she strove to gain it. Had she known, when she was still locked and barred from the outside world in her father’s fortress… was it irony? No, she thought bitterly, just a miserable turn of events; unfortunate circumstances; a bad choice.

But Thorin, not a step behind her, was a wall of warmth in the back of her mind, a support she could rely on. She did not fool herself into believing his promises, knowing her lie to be too traitorous for him to swallow, but he was here with her, at least for the moment, and the knowledge that he trusted her to save him and his men strengthened her resolve.

If she shall fall – when she shall fall, she will not take them down with her.

They walked at a steady pace, fast and hurried, and while she could not plow ahead with Thorin’s strength or determination, she also did not need to stop and consult the map, and thus, overall, their pace was not changed.

They were so busy looking ahead, expecting an armed patrol to stumble upon them at any given moment, that they paid little attention to what was going on behind.

In fact, it was Nori’s half shout, half curse that made the head of the file notice its end was missing.

“Spiders! It’s the Spider Web gang!” Bofur managed half a shout before his voice was muffled as well.

Then, they noticed them.

Men dressed in black, faces covered in masks resembling a spider’s face, took the men captive – they threw white sacks over them and wound them tight around their form. They men could not resist much, as the fabric was sticky and clung to their limbs, limiting whatever movement they attempted.

Thorin, Dwalin, Kili, Fili and Balin roared and jumped into action, rushing after Gloin and Oin into the fight, while Ningalor exhaled weakly and put on the ring.

And the world changed.

It was as if time slowed and her senses sharpened. She could see the shapes of the men and clearly distinguish them from the trees that suddenly turned bright green and red and brown. Thorin’s tunic also glowed bright, the blue richer than she had ever seen before, and the swords they had swung shone like rays of starlight.

They were not accustomed to fighting in the forest, in the dark, and the gang captured them with ease, cocooning them the way a spider would a fly. They strapped them to the trees and chuckled merrily.

“Kill them! Eat them now! Soft and juicy!”
“Hard and leathery, this one is. Too long they wandered.”

“But still juicy inside! Let them hang and soften.”

“Not too fat, not well fed.”

“Fresh meat hard to come by. Complain not! Eat all!”

“A choice feast, not yet poisoned by the forest!”

They clunk their many swords and daggers as they spoke. Their voice had a strange, silken touch to it, and their words were fine, even if too smooth and strangely structured. They were pale, terrifyingly so, and had red, bloodthirsty eyes. They were born in the forest, she realized, the children of its corruption. And since they did not know how to distinguish the edible from the poisonous, they ate the men they captured.

The very notion sickened her to the core. Suddenly lamp-like, hollow eyes floated in her mind – but the creature from the cave was left there. She should focus on the trouble before her, not the one from her memories.

The men circled the largest bundle and began to poke the tied man, which, no doubt, was Bombur. Bombur kicked and managed to hit one of the so-called spiders, but the cannibals laughed in response.

“Alive and kicking!” they clanked.

“Stick him, finish him!”

She stood, and silently shadowed one of the Spiders.

“Feast! Feast! Feast!” they clanked together.

Ningalor drew out her sword and shoved it through hard leather and sickeningly soft stomach. The blood that splashed her face was warm and bitter, and the coppery scent nearly sent her stomach reeling. She did not have the time for that, though, so she retrieved her sword and rushed back into the wild growth. The men turned and screeched and clanked when the saw their fallen brother, and Ningalor used the distraction to stab yet another gang member.

She did not wait, this time, and ran to the other side of the path. The adrenaline and the fear and the excitement caused by the sickening sights before her made her remember an old childhood rhythm Primula sang to Frodo when he was but a baby. Careless and shaking with fear and recklessness, she sang, “Old fat spider spinning in a tree! Old fat spider can’t see me!”

Slash, she cut loose one of the members of the company. Fili. The boy could not see her, but he did not look for long. The moment of confusion was gone when he focused on the enemy, but, instead of rushing forward, as she feared he’d do, he freed himself and cut loose another bundle. Kili.

The gang was infuriated.

Some of the Spiders climbed the trees, others rushed into the bushes, some – squealing – tried to subdue the men instead.

Ningalor ran, her steps light and sure now that her senses were sharper than they had ever been, and chanted, “Big, fat spider, I shall chop! Down you drop! You’ll never catch me up your tree! So keep your webs away from me!”
She stabbed another.

“It stings!” the Spider cried, “Kill her!”

*Sting, that’s a good name,* Ningalor thought, her head spinning and her muscles shaking with tension, *Sting.* She cut the last man loose – Ori, apparently, and slunk back into the shadows.

The rest of the men did the job for her.

She looked on as Thorin and Dwalin, working back to back, killed and cut the pale men, spilling guts and blood everywhere. Kili covered for Fili with his arrows while Dori smashed skulls into a pulp and Gloin hacked right and left.

Ningalor shook and chuckled breathlessly, feeling blood dripping from her sword and her face. Had she had anything in her stomach, she might have thrown up.

“Lily!” Thorin cried, slashing and hacking. “Lily!” He looked around frantically. “Lily!”

Gods, she really should pull herself together.

She rose from her hiding spot and felt for her ring, muttering weakly, “I’m right –“

An arrow buzzed next to her ear and embedded itself in the now twitching body of a spider.

That was not Kili’s arrow.

“Lily!”

“Elves!”

Ningalor dived for cover, and, unmoving, unbreathing, frozen with mind-numbing fear, watched from the cover of the trees as the battle scene turned into a massacre.

The Spiders fell by the dozens, and only those who fled survived. Men, clad in green and brown, sprung from the trees and with bows and arrows aimed, surrounded Thorin’s company.

“Do not think I won’t kill you, Dwarf. It would be my pleasure.”

The voice was rich and deep and oh so very familiar. “Enwenno hain!” the voice commanded.

And Ningalor, cowering in the bushes and frozen and stiff, watched as her brother, proud and handsome and full of contempt, chained the men she had agreed to risk everything for and take them to her father’s fortress.

She watched them leave and wept soundlessly into her hands.

She saw Thorin looking around frantically, searching for her, even after Legolas hit him and ordered him to cease resisting.

She did not move even after the very echo of their footsteps was long gone.
Translation:
• Mahal faslmagånuzanatul- Mahal’s hairy balls.
• Itkit- silence.
• Hótulonyë, lastaenni. Ala minnataur atartya- come with me, listen to me. Do not enter your father’s forest.
• Avatyarni- forgive me.
• Namárië, faithirnya- farewell, my savior.
• Binublûra zu- I failed you.
• Amrâlimê- love of mine.
• Marlel- love of all loves.
• Mukuh nami zu? - May I kiss you?
• Ukradêl- greatest heart of all hearts.
• Laslel- rose of all roses.
• katagilemul habanuh- sparkling gem.
• Enwenno hain- take them.

So Ningalor’s nurturing thoughts of betrayal and Thorin needs a translator. Or maybe a handbook about elven traditions. What’d you think? Reviews and comments are welcome =)
And the King Bows his Head

Chapter Summary

"The Winter has come to hunt in your fields
As trees, old and leaden with time,
Bow their weary branches to his majesty
And throw their children at his feet, for the lord to tread
As threads of ice weave the curtain
For the sun to remove her crown and undress behind."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Thorin Oakenshield. We meet again.”

Thorin stood, chained and dirty, stiff and rigid. He did not allow the toils of the journey show in the regal posture. His eyes were burning.

“I cannot say I waited for the day, but, alas, we have to face the... inconveniences life tosses at our feet, must we not?” Her father smiled. He knew his way with words, and Thorin, proud and enraged, was unable to stop them from sneaking under his skin and armor. He tensed in anger.

“What brings you to my Woodland Realm, O son of Thrain?” mocked her father.

He sat on his throne, a large seat made of antlers and carved wood, and looked down at the chained man. The hall of the Duke was vast and spacious, round and dark of colors – dark burgundy and deep green, ivory and ebony. Her father had a love for riches, and his clothes of silver and blood stood out against the paleness of the throne. The shades, while prominent, did not overburden the eye or clash, and instead mirrored in fabric and carved wood and stone the wilderness of Mirkwood; the darkness of its shadows.

And Thranduil ruled over decadence and wilderness with cultured grace and perfect elegance.

Legolas stood next to him, a hand on one of his twin knives and a contemptuous look on his face. Two other guards stood next to the entrance, face impassive and dressed in Mirkwood green, while two more stood next to the Duke. One of them was a young girl, no more than eighteen if Ningalor had to guess, and they too had an expressionless look in their eyes.

Thorin glared challengingly at her father and said nothing, refusing to take an active part in Thranduil’s interrogation.

She wondered when was the last time Thorin ate.

It took her a whole day to gather the courage to stand, and what motivated her was mostly the stench of the quick to decompose bodies. The forest was hasty to reclaim its own. She stood, shaking, and knew she could not go back. Logically speaking, she would not survive the journey back. Her supplies were too few.

But that was not what made her walk numbly on the well-treaded path toward the fortress where
the company was held captive. Thorin…

She did not notice her surroundings until she stood, facing the gates of the Woodland Realm. Her father’s dukedom. Sneaking in was easier than sneaking out, she found out over the years. All one had to do was wait for the gate to open – there was no other way – and the entering patrol, always regal on their trotting horses, paid little attention to the passing small beast that snuck between their ranks, as long as it did not interfere with the horses’ graceful ride. Invisible now, she did not even have to bother with that part. All she had to do was stand close to the gate and not touch anyone or anything as she entered.

And now she stood, hiding in a niche behind a graceful statue, and looked on as Thranduil questioned Thorin. Made a show of it, as was his wont. But Thorin, the untrained actor, failed to please the audience.

Thranduil’s lip curled.

Her father aged much since she last saw him, and the notion shocked her. For some reason, she thought her father was infallible, that even time could not touch him. He was in his early fifties; he was not supposed to look this… sick.

His once platinum-blond hair was now entirely white and brittle. His skin was still firm, but the wrinkles were many and deeply etched. He was thinner. The once muscular and graceful form looked hollow, full of craters and cavities, and his cheeks were as gaunt as his grim, boney fingers. Her heart was pinched, to see him like this. It was not love, nor regret, but there was something painful about him, the Duke she feared brought low.

The father she could not hate, but also failed to love.

The man who now played with Thorin’s life, toyed with him, his tone changing from contemptuous to angry. She wondered how much blood had been spilled by the feud between their families.

“You would not answer? No matter. You are simple folk, and I know your quest. You wish to reclaim your lost dukedom, to rule one again over your Alliance. How noble,” he sneered.

Thorin gritted his teeth.

“Perhaps, next time, you should not enter borders which are closed to you, like a thief in the night.” He cocked an elegant brow. “Though I may have done you a service, Oakenshield. Thirteen men cannot overcome that which lies in your ruined halls. Especially your thirteen. Old, I am told, or too young. Even your kinsmen do not support your quest, I see.”

Thorin’s hands twitched.

“So you are thirteen? For a moment, I doubted my son’s word. Surely, even the son of a madman would not be so suicidal… I see I overestimated you.” He chuckled.

Thorin’s knuckles turned white and he bared his teeth when Thranduil mentioned his father, but he still said nothing. Thranduil, apparently, was greatly amused to see how easily he could play with the man before him, but the failure to make him talk irritated him. She could see the anger simmering underneath the thin layer of amusement.

“He cried for someone, no doubt a woman, by the name of Lily,” Legolas interjected suddenly, “looked for someone when we captured them.”
“Is that so? Have you brought not only boys and grandfathers, but also a woman?” Thranduil’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

Thorin stood rigid, sensing that the Duke’s attention shifted.

“So, did you bring a woman?” He turned to the young girl.

“Penin, dorel,” she replied curtly, “er llingril yar.”

Was there a woman? he hissed, slowly, dangerously, looking at Thorin. Legolas’ hand tightened around his knife. “You will answer, son of Thrain, or I will resort to other means to get information out of you. And I, unlike you, have time. I can wait.”

Thorin glowered, face full of contempt. He did not find Thranduil’s threats too impressive, it would seem.

“Hmm, perhaps I will state it this way – answer my question, and I will offer you my help. A Duke to a Duke, we may see eye to eye.” Thranduil’s eyes were ablaze. “Do not, and I will send you to my dungeon and hold you there until you rot.” He leaned forward. “What will it be, Duke of Erebor?”

Thorin was not impressed by the change in treatment, but it seems he was not going to let his wounded pride get in the way of negotiation. “There was no woman,” he conceded.

Legolas scowled, and the disappointment that flashed for a moment of Thranduil’s features was not lost on Ningalor, though she was not sure if Thorin noticed it.

“But the name you cried out –” Legolas protested.

“You must have misheard,” Thorin cut through his words coolly. “I have two nephews by the names of Fili and Kili. I searched for them at the end of the battle.”

“How did you navigate through the forest?” Legolas pressed, angered that Thorin interjected in this manner.

“We had a map. It was lost in the battle.”

“Who provided you with such a map? We are the only ones in a possession of such knowledge,” the heir declared.

Thorin scoffed. “Your secrets are not as well kept as you would like them to be, it would seem.”

Legolas narrowed his eyes in rage, but his father raised his hand before he could speak again. “No one guided you?”

“No.”

“Who gave you the map?”

“We acquired it from a kinsman,” Thorin answered, “before the beginning of the journey.”

“I find that unlikely.”

“I care not as to how you find it,” Thorin snarled.

“You should, if you want my aid,” Thranduil threatened.
“I do not lie,” Thorin growled. “The map was ancient, drawn before you closed your gates to the world and allowed cannibals and thieves to plague your gardens.”

“And now, where is that ancient map?” Thranduil hissed, angered by Thorin’s words.

“I already told you, it was lost. You are welcome to search for it amongst the bodies of the dead.”

Thranduil’s fingers tightened around the arms of his throne. “And there was no woman?”

“I will not repeat myself,” Thorin growled, then narrowed his eyes. “Why should that concern you so?”

Thranduil was not quick to answer, and while he looked down on Thorin, Ningalor held her breath and prayed. He took his time to watch Thorin balefully, then replied, “A woman of Mirkwood was kidnapped from my lands, about five years ago. I seek to return her to her rightful place, in the name of her worried family and her own misery, which I doubt not to be wretched indeed. Have you seen such a woman in your travels?”

“I do not believe so,” Thorin replied, as coldly as before. But Ningalor sensed the guarded edge, the suspicion. Was it directed at her or at Thranduil?

“She has blonde hair, blue eyes and beautiful features,” Legolas said then, and despite the careful tone, the pain woven into his words broke her heart. “About this tall,” he demonstrated with his hand, “lithe and fair skinned. She should be twenty-five years of age now.” The almost hopeful look made her brother look younger than his thirty years of age. The years that withered her father were kinder to Legolas – the fair lord was as handsome as one would expect, a dangerous warrior and sharp minded. He was less dutiful than he was once, she noted, as her father looked at him with a touch of disdain for the outburst.

The sideway glance did not affect Legolas as it once did.

“I have seen many women who fit this description,” Thorin snarled, “none come to mind or left an impression that made them memorable.”

“I see,” Thranduil replied silkily, threateningly. “Well, it matters not. I have other things to ask of you.” The Duke took his time. “You might remember, a debt your people owe me? A necklace of pure starlight, paid for in full, never given to its rightful owner,” Thranduil snarled. “Give me what is mine, and I shall aid you, Thorin Oakenshield.”

Thorin said nothing, and for a long moment he glowered at Thranduil and Thranduil at him. She could see the rage burning and rising inside him, but her father either ignored it or did not notice the dangerous fury.

“Even if you did pay for it, Thranduil the Lie Weaver,” Thorin spat, “that necklace is spoken for.”

His voice rose, louder and louder. “You expect me to trust you? We came to you – broken and homeless and starved, and you offered no help! Oath Breaker! Friend Stabber! You, who lacks all honor, dare to claim a part of my people’s heirloom after you did nothing but insult me and my kin?” he roared, “You think me spineless, that you may step on me as you wish and have me obey your whims? May the sickness that eats through your dukedom eat through you as well, Thranduil Poison-Tongue!”

“Enough!” Thranduil jumped to his feet in raw rage. This action, however, was not in his favor, as now it was easier to note all the places where Thorin was broad and muscular, and he was hollow and failing. His eyes, though, were as cunning and infuriated as Thorin’s were, and his voice as
thunderous. “And may the fire that burned your people burn you as well, Thorin the fool, the thief, the liar,” he cursed him. “I warned your grandfather, but my service was repaid with thievery. Go and rot, fool. You will not see again the light of day, and may the accursed line of Durin end here in my cells! Be gone!” he ordered.

Thorin snarled but could not fight the guards – not when three of them forced him into submission and dragged him from the hall.

Thranduil collapsed into his throne.

“Adar….”

The Duke raised his hand, and Legolas stopped in his tracks. “Question the others,” he ordered. “I do not trust that man’s words. We may discover more from the lowly than we would from the inflated ego of those barbaric lords.” He looked tired. She had never seen him look this tired. “Question them about her, as well. They are unsavory folk, who knows what they have seen, where they have been.” And her father buried his face in his hands, betraying his exhaustion. His weakness.

She fled.

Just as Thranduil ordered, Legolas questioned each man separately, thoroughly, mostly about their quest. It seemed he did believe Thorin when the man denied his knowledge of her, but did not fail to mention her to the rest of the men. Each was taken aback when questioned about her, but loyal to the bone as they were, none betrayed their leader’s lover to the cocky lord.

And still she listened and took in the sight of them – bruised and angry and desperate – they did not see a way out, and her disappearance did not improve their state. Did they think her dead? Or worse, that she fled and betrayed them?

Last to be interrogated was Nori, and it was his interrogation that she feared the most.

The cunning thief was the least impressed by the questioning and the least offended by the accusations. He did not allow his ego to interfere with the examination and preferred to play the idiot when he could, if only so he could annoy the already irritated Lord.

In fact, Nori seemed to be having a great time, taking out his frustrations on the noble elf.

Tired and vexed by the hours he spent interrogating thirteen men, Legolas was less careful with his wording than he was before. “Did a woman accompany you on this quest?” he demanded.

“A woman?” Nori cocked a brow. “Whatever for?” His cunning eyes narrowed, but his voice was annoyingly foolish in its inflations. It maddened Legolas quite effectively.

“How should I know whatever for? Was there a woman? Blonde, beautiful, blue eyes? Have you seen someone like her?”

“I have seen many a woman, aye. Blonde and pretty. I knew plenty, if you catch my –“

“Watch your tongue, dwarf, or I will remove the miserable thing from your filthy mouth!”

“Couldn’t answer your question then, now could I?” Nori replied with a cocky smile. “Why’re you looking for a woman? Must be better ways for a lordling to find a missus, eh?”
“I am not looking for a wife,” Legolas hissed through gritted teeth, “I am looking for my sister, you dimwit! Have you seen such a woman? Kidnapped, perhaps? Out of place? Did such a woman accompany you, guide you in the forest?”

Nori’s deceivingly foolish expression faded as if never existed. “Your sister?” he wondered, then inquired, “Cunning and quick witted, cold and aloof, fluent in Sindarin, thin and pale, long, golden locks, ice blue eyes? About twenty something years of age? About this tall?”

Legolas froze. “Yes…” he said slowly, “Her features would be similar to mine, but more feminine and soft.” His breath quickened. “Well?” he demanded, “Have you?”

Nori’s narrowed eyes suddenly widened and the man began to, inexplicably, laugh.

“Your sister!” he sneered, chortling and guffawing, nearly folding in half, “Your sister! Thranduil’s daughter!” he cried in merriment, “Your-ha!”

Legolas’s hopeful expression turned sour and annoyed. “Be silent!” he ordered, moved forward and pulled Nori’s hair back, exposing his neck. “Answer, Dwarf, have you seen her? My sister?”

“Ah, no, m’lord.” the man chuckled, “I just imagined you in a dress, is all. You are very feminine, with your braids and-oomph!”

Legolas punched him forcefully, making him topple to the ground. “Take this joker back to his cell,” he snarled. “The dimwitted fool knows nothing.”

Nori was dragged, still laughing almost manically, to his cell. Ningalor followed.

His laughter died when the guards shut the door, and Ningalor watched the man’s expression turn cold and angry. She looked at him, at the only man in the group who was not blinded by loyalty, and could see the wheels turning. Not in her favor.

She left him in his cell. She did not have the courage to face him yet.

Not empty handed, at least.

Thorin tried to force his way through his cell bars so many times his hands began to bleed.

He stopped, not because of the pain but because he refused to break his bones over this cursed elven jail, and instead roared his frustration.

The guards already knew to avoid his cell, which was the set in the deepest part of the cave they called a dungeon. He was separated from his men and was left in the dark entirely, figuratively and otherwise.

He did not know what happened to them or to Lily.

Thorin growled and tried, for the tenth time, to search for a weak link, a rusty part, a fragile spot. He was surrounded by stone and metal, and his cage was well maintained. As much as he hated to admit, it was not one he could possibly break by force.

Still, he tried. They served him a meal once a day – a slice of bread and a cut of meat. Not the finest quality, but also far better than what he would have expected, as well as a jar of water. They had no intention of letting him starve, it would seem, nor use any form of torture. Apparently,
Thranduil was going to follow through with his plan. Leave him in the darkest part of the cave to rot.

Thorin sighed and collapsed against the wall, sliding down the cave’s smooth stone.

He cursed his pride, cursed his fate, cursed Gandalf for leaving them. He cursed Thranduil and his arrogant heir, his insults and his haughtiness…

He did not count the days; could not, since there was no light but that of the torches, and tried not to think of her. Lily… his Lily, saving them once again, then disappearing entirely. Did she hide, or was she murdered? Left to die, wounded?

She did not lie; they were searching for her. The Duke himself was searching; his heir passionately so. Gandalf said that she was once a person of great importance. He never thought to inquire what he meant by that. Perhaps he should have, perhaps… perhaps he should have told them that yes, there was a woman, so they would search for her, find her, heal her, instead of… he bashed his head against the stone. His loyalty to her ensured that he could not betray her secrets and instead denied her existence, but now he wondered if it was indeed the right choice. Was it better for her to be dead, or alive, but captured?

He buried his face in his hands – what a choice for him to make! What right had he to choose either? What right had he to take her away from Gandalf? The old man was right; he could not protect her, and, therefore, he should not have taken her from those that could.

How cocky he was, how arrogant, how foolish…

“How, Thorin?”

He jumped and hit his head, again, and looked around wildly.

Had he gone mad? Summoned her in his mind to ease his suffering? Had Thranduil decided to play another trick on him? But no, a pale, small hand clasped the iron bars and he rushed forward, in the dim light… “Lily,” he breathed.

The relief, the surprise, the pain… he felt entirely undone by the shadowed sight of her in the fickle torchlight.

So pale and white and fragile. His beacon of hope looked up at him with tender blue eyes, too surreal for him to take in with one glance.

He clasped her hand through the bars and with his other tried to touch her cheek. The spaces between the bars were narrow, however, and he could not reach her, but the woman stepped forward and leaned into his touch, pressing herself against the bars so she could stand closer to him. “Lily,” he sighed again, bowing his head, “oh, Mahal, Lily… I thought I lost you.” He shuddered.

The woman was thinner than he – thinner than he remembered – and managed to thrust her arm through the bars so she could cup his cheek and stroke his beard. How small she looked, and worried, and pained. But he drew so much comfort from her presence. He held her hand to him and leaned into her touch. Let her see how weak he was, let her see how much he needed her. He kissed her fingers and breathed raggedly. He did need her.

“Oh, Thorin, I’m here,” she whispered, cupping his other cheek. “I am sorry it took me so long to find you. I had to follow the guards… Oh, Thorin…” Her voice shook.
“I thought –“ He stopped short, refusing to once again imagine her dead or dying, left in the forest alone. “Are you wounded? Hurt in any way?” he demanded, whispered.

“No. No, I am quite well.” She tried to smile. Oh, Mahal. She tried. “I will find a way to free you, Thorin. I swear, I will do all that I can – “

“Lily,” he whispered, “they – they are searching for you. They asked me about you. They – even Thranduil….”

“Yes, I know.” She must have sensed the urgency in his voice, what he was about to force himself to say. Nearly asked her to leave him for her own sake. But he could not force the words out when all he wanted was to beg her to stay. “I heard.”

“Heard?”

“Yes… I was there when he interrogated you. And the rest of the company,” she admitted.

“How –“ He tried to think back. “I did not see you.”

“I know.” She looked down. “I was hiding.”

He sighed, knowing what he must say, what he did not want to say. “Lily, you cannot put yourself in such a risk. I cannot allow this.”

“Nor can you order me to leave,” she interjected. “I told you, I am not yours for you to order as you please. I am not leaving you, Thorin, whatever the danger may be.” Her touch was so tender. Her hands held him, supported him, saved him. “I am not leaving you, Thorin,” she whispered. “I will find a way. I will. I must.”

“Lily….” He bowed his head, leaned against the bars, but he could not get any closer to her. “Lily…” he whispered. Surely, he can do better than that, can he not? But at the moment, the only thing he managed was to whisper her name, like a prayer. “You are our only hope, now,” he whispered. “My only hope.”

She looked up at him, anguished and sorrowful, and her hands trembled. “Thorin,” her voice was uneven and weak, “there is something I must tell you –“

Footsteps.

Lily gasped and removed her hands, though he tried, senselessly, to grab her.

“I must leave,” she breathed.

“No, Lily –“ The sound was getting closer and closer. “Lily –“

“I will return,” she promised, utterly terrified, “I cannot stay!”

And within a blink of an eye she stepped into the shadows and disappeared. Thorin tried to reach for her in the dark in vain before he remembered the danger. He cursed the bars and the guards and moved to slink back against the wall, crashing into the floor of stone.

Not a moment later, a guard stopped by his bars.

“Is there anyone with you?” he demanded, “I heard voices.”

Thorin looked at the floor, and his hand twitched. “You are young, a child of the forest. You don’t
belong here, underneath the rocks – know you not? A stone has a voice, and it may speak.”

The guard indeed was young, and he took a step back, clearly affected by Thorin’s low grumble. “Your place, perhaps! Jail fits you well, I see,” the youth declared.

Thorin growled, and his voice was smooth and dangerous, “Then why are you terrified of a man locked behind bars?” Suddenly he rose. “Be gone, you son of weeds! Out of my sight, I said!”

And the guard, for all of his training and weapons and freedom, said nothing more and fled.

Thorin leaned against the rock, thought of his woman, and hoped.

The first thing she did was raid the pantries.

Not the ones the chief cook used as she knew he would notice any missing items immediately. The servants’ pantries, however, were more accessible.

Thus, she revealed herself to the members of the company, with freshly baked bread and cold cuts. She knew they had no love of vegetables or fruits, but every once in a while, she snuck some of those too. The men at the beginning looked at her in mistrust, then in uncertainty when she promised she was going to do her best to free them, and then, with time, even Dwalin was happy to see her.

It was only Nori she did not know how to read, what to expect, how to approach.

He accepted her offer easily, but sniffed the food thoroughly before biting into it. “Putting your knowledge of the grounds to good use, I see,” he remarked.

Too sharp for her, she thought, but refused to flinch. “Yes.” She did not try to deny.

Nori’s eyebrows rose, but the cunning eyes did not seem surprised. Narrowed, but not confused. “I thought it was hilarious when I found out,” he commented. “If the cocky Duke knew Thorin was porking his daughter….” She did flinch at the sly comment, but the man seemed to enjoy riling her up. She guessed she deserved it. “They’d execute him for sure. Still, twas worth a good laugh.” He lifted his jar, “Cheers to you! I am also the disappointment of my family.” He smiled, but the gleeful twist of lips was sharp.

“Did you tell anyone?” she asked carefully.

“Na. It feels too good to keep ya on your toes. Maybe next time you could fetch me wine, instead of this horse-piss.”

“Unlikely.” She scowled.

Nori laughed. The sound was sharp and unsettling. “Well, yer ladyship. Methinks, if you want me mouth sewn shut, you might wanna explain a few things.”

Ningalor’s lip curled, but Nori’s eyes were harsh and unforgiving, and she knew she needed him to be sure of her intentions, lest he betray her secret. Nori did as he wished; he did not care for the way things were supposed to be done. But he was fiercely loyal to his brothers, and he recognized Thorin as his leader. She was an outsider, a nobody, and if she would prove a hindrance or a menace to either Thorin or, most importantly, his brothers, he will get rid of her.
“No love lies between my father and me,” she said carefully. “I left him five years ago. Gandalf helped me escape. Hid me in the Shire. There is little else to say.”

The man cocked a brow at her. “Ah, lass, you make for a terrible story teller indeed!” He got up and joined her next to the bars. “What made you leave your daddy?”

She twisted her features at him, but obeyed, irritated. “My mother died in an orc raid when I was five years of age. She died protecting me. My father despises me. Is that not enough?”

What more could she say? How could she explain the hours of loneliness, locked in her room? How her father turned her away, day after day, and looked on with disgust when she dared burst into tears? How could she describe the longing for a touch – anyone’s touch – and for love? She could not, so she did not. Not like it mattered, not to a man who was born and raised in a society where he had nothing, neither love nor wealth, only burdens. How pathetic he must find her.

“He still searches for you,” the thief pointed out.

“Not out of love,” she spat. “I am his lost property, and he wants that which was his retrieved.”

Nori looked at her, his eyes hard as they judged her, but the cunningness in them saw that she was honest, and, therefore, accepted her words. “And the lordling?”

She scowled when he spoke of her brother like that, but did not protest. “My brother is the heir of Mirkwood. This is his place, not mine,” she said shortly.

“So why’d you come back?” the man snapped, then cooed at her and mockingly declared in a high pitched voice, “Because I hate Mirkwood, but I love Thorin more?” He twisted his face at her.

Ningalor turned her hands into fists, knuckles white and eyes blazing with anger, but said nothing.

“Wait? Are you serious? Is that really? –” He laughed, barking in amusement, and when her face turned pinkish with shame and anger, his laughter died. “You are serious,” he said, but the shock did not comfort her.

“Why is it such a surprise for you?” she sneered. “I had given him everything already, so why the fact that I entered my father’s lair so strange in comparison?”

Nori scowled. “If he found out –“

“He will toss me aside without a second thought. I am aware of that.” Her voice was cold. Her eyes were bright. She blinked and turned her face.

“You don’t think him a man of his word?” Nori accused her. He did not care for her personal misery.

“Whatever promise he made will be forgotten the moment he learned of my origins. If he were a lesser man, I’d fear for my life,” she said colorlessly. “I knew that it was not meant to last.”

“So why…?” For the first time, Nori looked confused. He did not understand what made her act so foolishly. She smiled bitterly. Neither did she.

“You said it yourself,” she whispered, “I love him.” She took a deep breath to rein in the stray emotions in her voice. “I’d rather have a day with him and the rest spend jailed, than live the rest of my life free but wondering what… what could have been.”
“Mahal, you are sickening,” Nori said quietly. But the venom was gone from his voice, and for a long while he said nothing, merely stared at her.

And Ningalor bared her intentions, allowed him a glimpse of her emotions, and awaited his judgment.

He said nothing, though, and eventually, the silent staring managed to unnerve her enough to utter, “I nearly told him, not two days past.”

Nori, surprisingly, nearly choked on his own musings. “Tell- are you daft?” he snapped, “or just a masochist?”

“A what?” She blinked.

“Oh, you –” He rolled his eyes. “Fuck it. You tell him, he gets pissed and doesn’t trust you, and then what? You need to get us out. If you tell Thorin, we are all f**ked. And you still need to talk to Smaug,” he reminded her. “If you fail, I’m next on the list, and I sure don’t wanna go down that path unless I really had to. Meaning, unless you were really dead.” He did not dress up his words, and the bluntness made her flinch. “All ya gotta do is keep Thorin happy and find a way out. That’s all, lass. If you find it hard to keep yer mouth shut, find a way to keep it busy.”

She narrowed her eyes at the implication and glowered, but the man did not seem too affected by her glare. “That’s the point of secrets, lass. Gotta keep them secret. Gotta be careful, not to let them run too wild.” His grin was sharp.

“You are cruel to me,” she said finally. “I don’t understand why.”

“Cause you are a Mirkwood, that’s why!” he snapped. “And I don’t buy that love bullshit! You better prove it to me that you are worthy of my trust, because once you finished your task, you’d want me to have a good reason to keep me tongue from waggling,” he threatened. Ningalor glowered, but even the anger could not hide the fear. Nori sighed and looked away. “Find a way out, lass. Quickly.”

She exhaled weakly. “There isn’t,” she muttered in defeat, “only the main gate –“

“Oh, for f**ck’s sake! Have you nothing inside yer pretty lil head?” Nori bit. “You think like a lady – that’s what pisses me off the most. No fortress has only one exit. Where d’ya think servants come from? Let me tell ya, not through the main door!” he groaned. “Follow some folk around. Watch. Listen. There has got to be another way in. Servants, animals, exports, imports… only lords enter through the main gate. Lords and soldiers and prisoners. Nobody bothers to open the main gate for anyone else.”

He looked away and Ningalor rose, sensing she was dismissed.

“And next time, bring wine!” he called after her.

Ningalor rolled her eyes.

Wine. Yes, of course. As if she’d risk touching her father’s collection. Her father loved wine and consumed large quantities of it on a daily basis. He’d notice any missing drop. In fact, once a month he received large deliveries of wine, stored in extremely large barrels…

Ningalor blinked, put on the ring, and stalked down the cave and toward the wine pantry.

Barrels, and many of them, large enough for even Bombur to fit into.
For all of Nori’s harsh words, he knew what he was talking about.

Thorin waited for her. He always waited.

He waited with his ears trained. Hope made him jump up and rush to the bars for real and imagined footsteps alike. Guards stomping and water dripping echoed within the cave’s dreary halls, and the sounds had him sleeping for short intervals, awakening full of unease, dreaming about never ending fires. He snapped awake in the darkness, always darkness. Sometimes, the bleak loneliness made him question whether he was really awake or still trapped inside a dream.

He started to feel cold, at times. Was winter upon them? He shook uncontrollably, pain shooting through him, but he paid no attention to that. He thought only of Lily, cursed the passing hours, and waited.

When he heard his name whispered, he woke up and rushed to the bars as fast as he could, lest she disappear and be swallowed by the darkness – he fell on his knees before her, black dots dancing before his eyes, breathing hard when he clung to the bars for support.

“Thorin!” she cried, her hands warm against his cheeks.

He leaned against the bars, into her touch, the coolness of the metal and the warmth of her hands soothing. Her hands, oh, her hands. She was really there; this time, it was not his feverish mind supplying her gentle voice, as if in a dream.

“Oh, Thorin….” She caressed his face, touched his forehead. “You are cold!” she exclaimed, “How can you possibly – ? Thorin, can you hear me?”

“Aye,” he breathed. It was difficult, at first, but now he managed to open his eyes and focus on the sight before him. He lifted his head slowly, carefully, and smiled weakly at her. “You came.”

“Thorin….” Her eyes looked at him, pained and anguished. “When was the last time you ate?” she whispered.

He frowned at her. “I… I eat that which is offered.” He hated that, feeling weak and desperate. He did not want her to see him like that, but he craved her presence too much for him to attempt any act of dignity. Lily looked at him, so worried with eyes full of pity. For over a month, he had allowed himself nothing but a slice of bread, and even that he sometimes denied himself and offered to his boys. The power of will, when he had hope, helped him push through. But in his cell, he had little hope left, one that came and went in the form of the woman crouching before him.

The woman who now withdrew her hands from him, though he tried to grab her quite desperately, and opened the bundle at her side. The scent immediately hit him, made him groan unwillingly, but Lily simply tore a small part of the chicken and offered it to him, through the bars.

“Eat slowly,” she whispered, “I will nurse you back to health,” she promised.

He did eat slowly.

His stomach contracted painfully when he swallowed, and he had to sip from the jar at his side, but Lily was gentle and understanding. He did not feel as ashamed of his state, now, when she sat by the bars, feeding him carefully. “I don’t understand,” she whispered, “I visited the rest of the men, and their… their state was better.”
Thorin forced himself to chew. The chicken tasted so good, he wanted to tear into it and swallow it whole. It was probably for his own good, the fact that Lily gave him a few stripes of the meat, instead of offering him the entire bird.

He knew hunger; he knew what starvation did to people, as well as the sudden abundance of food.

“I scared the guard,” he answered, sheepish all of a sudden. “My… meals arrive less often than before.”

She sighed and cupped his face, and looked away. She blinked furiously, her eyes unnaturally bright, but her hold of him was unwavering. She fed him vegetables, scowling when he attempted to refuse, and made sure he finished his slice of orange, as well.

The meal was long, as the food was offered in small amounts and in short but frequent intervals. She gave him a small glass of milk, fresh and pure in color, and retied the bundle. “I will bring you more, but you must be fed slowly, Thorin,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

He wanted to tear his way through the bars and eat everything her bundle contained, but he knew she spoke the truth. He exhaled and wiped his fingers on his already dirty clothes, and then gently cupped her face. “Stay with me,” he asked.

Her presence mattered to him more than the food she had given him. She mattered to him.

She shifted her position and leaned against the bars, holding his hand with one hand and with her other she caressed his cheek. “I am not leaving you,” she whispered. “In a week’s time, I will get us out of here,” she promised.

Thorin sighed and held her hand. “This… food, Lily, where did you get it?”

“I stole it,” she admitted, “I know my way around.”

He felt so weak, like that. This was not how it was meant to be. This was not what he promised her. “Lily, you must be careful. If…” He cursed himself inwardly. “Don’t take unnecessary –“

“Don’t you dare to finish that sentence, Thorin Oakenshield.” She glowered. “Don’t you dare.” Her voice shook. She squeezed his hand and bit her lip. He wondered how pathetic he must have looked, to have elicited such a reaction from his composed, aloof lover.

“Lily…” Just saying her name made him feels stronger. “I promised you I will protect you. I cannot have you place yourself at risk for my sake.”

“Nor can I cower in the shadows while the guards allow you to starve, Thorin.” The way she said his name, like it was an extension of her existence, an ending of her breath, made him close his eyes and hold on to her very presence. She took his hand through the bars and kissed his knuckles gently, holding him. He caressed her face and she leaned into his touch, pressing his hand against her cheek.

“Do not blame yourself for this. For any of this,” she whispered.

She came back, day after day, and spent hours feeding him and sitting with him. She told him of his boys and passed on messages from the rest of the company. She gave him larger portions each time and started to, once again, smile at the sight of him.
He felt healthier, stronger, and slept better too.

She gave him hope.

They often found themselves sitting face to face, holding hands and hating the bars. He cupped her cheek, she caressed his jaw, and their mutual need for a touch replaced all the things that were left unsaid.

The hours without her allowed him to think, to remember, and so when they sat, facing each other in the deep belly of the cave, he wanted more from the woman. He wanted her memories, as well as her care. He wanted to truly know her, even though the woman took every precaution possible to hide her past. Still, he wanted to know her like no one else ever would.

“Tell me about yourself,” he asked. The woman, as he expected, tensed immediately. “Anything, Lily. I won’t press you for answers.”

“Why, then?” she asked in a small voice.

“I want to know you,” he answered honestly. “All I know is that you live now as Gandalf’s ward in the Shire. That is precious little to know about a person.”

She shifted uncomfortably. “I… I have little else to add. I do not know what to say.”

She looked so small like that. He wanted to know, but he did not want to hurt her in the process. “Then may I ask? I will understand, should you refuse to answer.” He did not want to scare her away.

She gulped uneasily. “Only if you return the favor,” she challenged.

He smiled at her. “I will withhold nothing from you,” he promised. She looked up at him, then away, and up again, as if unsure if the affection in his eyes was truly meant for her. “Where are you from?”

She scowled. “You know the answer to that.”

“You spent your childhood here?” he refined his question.

She exhaled weakly and nodded. She really was a Mirkwood, then. He disliked the notion, but he knew, from the moment they met, that she was a former elf of sorts. He was comforted by the fact that she hated the place enough to leave.

“Have you a mother? Siblings?”

“My mother died long ago. My brother and I have not spoken for several years.”

He wanted to ask her about her family, her mother, but sensed it would be too much for her. “Why did you leave?” he asked instead.

She said nothing for a long time, but eventually muttered, “My father was overprotective. He refused to let me out of his sight, but also refused to… to show me affection as a father should. When Gandalf came to visit, I… I begged him to take me away. It took me a while to convince him, but eventually he pitied me enough to smuggle me away from the forest.”

He sighed, “Then I owe you an apology.” She looked up, confused. “I… when we were in Rivendell, I accused you of knowing no hardship.”
“I knew no hardship,” she whispered. “My troubles are nothing, compared with what you had to endure.” Her smile was bitter. “All I lacked was a father’s love. I dare say you were denied more than that.” She gulped uneasily, but his hand squeezed hers gently, and she dared, “What… what happened, after Erebor fell? To you?”

He groaned at the onslaught of memories even time did not manage to heal, but did not deny her. He promised her he would not.

“I was hunting,” he started. “I was fifteen; you speak of hardship – of that I knew none, only the severity of the responsibilities my future held, but those were not meant to be mine until I was much older. My grandfather lived for a long time, my father was not yet duke. I had time.” He paused, remembering the beauty of Erebor. “I was with my brother and my sister. That, perhaps, was the only grace that day had to offer.” He closed his eyes. “The Usurper came with his machines of fire and smoke. We did not know until we saw the smoke rising from our home. Our home was… it was beautiful, Lily. Years of study and of practice of the arts were invested in the halls of stone, years of love and craftsmanship. It was truly magnificent, defying every expectation – vast, capacious chambers of green stone and pale marble, architected to resemble the mountain from which they were born… rivers of gold and gems and mithril… The heirloom of my people lies in our art, and our art transcends the passage of time and the toils of the years. It was meant to last, from generation to generation. All of that, gone and lost and burned.

“When we returned, the battle was already lost. I helped evacuate my people, my grandfather, my… my father.” He clenched his jaw. “I had to tear my father away from the body of my mother, which was crushed underneath a great pillar and could not be moved.” She cupped his face, her hand squeezing his. He kept his eyes closed. He did not want to look into her pools of blue and find pity. “That was when Thranduil betrayed us. We were homeless and wounded, but he closed his borders to us. No help came from the Elven Alliance that day, or any day since. We led the people – my grandfather and father, mostly. I protected my people, worked as a smith when I could. Whatever coin I earned was spent on food, on shoes, on medicine. And yet, my people starved, and a smith desperate for work cannot ask for much. I did what I could, sold all I had to offer, every jewel and bead I had given, all but the ring and beads of ruling. My sister too, and my brother, we gave up on all our fineries in our search for a home.” He paused for a moment. Reliving his brother’s death was always hard, even after all those years. “My grandfather decided to reclaim the lost dukedom of Moria. The Battle of Azanulbizar claimed his life, as well as the life of my brother and many others. My father left to try and seize Erebor and disappeared. Now I know he was murdered, too. After waiting and searching for over a year, my uncle, then the Duke of Ered Luin, where we finally found sanctuary, declared me duke. I already served as my people’s leader. I was too young, they said, barely eighteen, but by law I was of age.”

He took a deep breath. Telling her his story… it was not a pleasant tale; neither was hers. She found her place in exile, though. He did not. Perhaps hers was happier, her own pain personal and, therefore, smaller. But the eyes that looked up at him, full of compassion and understanding, supported him through the telling of his life – one unhappy chapter after the other.

“Dis, my sister, married. It was the first celebration since we were exiled, and the wedding was almost too… too joyful. Nine years later, her husband died in a mining accident. That’s what the miners said. Kili was six, he does not remember much, but Fili… Fili was nine. He was too young to have to endure such a loss. I knew I could never, could not replace their father, be a father to them, but I… I tried. Still try. They did not deserve to be robbed of their father so early on, nor did my sister deserve to lose yet another man she loved. We are hard people, she said, we can endure everything.” He sighed. “Living on the road, hungry, cold, grieving… we lost everything, everything we did not deserve to lose. We had no help, but nor did we ask for it. We endured.” Lily looked at him with so much sorrow, he cleared his throat, trying to think of something more
pleasant; he wanted her story and ended up sharing his instead. “That’s why Gandalf’s offer to support our quest was so… so surprising. Why I did not expect much when he said he knew of someone who could help.” He chuckled. “Why I am always surprised to see you are still here.” He was used to losing, yet Lily survived every attempt to separate them and stubbornly clung to his side. He smiled affectionately at her. “I dare say my men and I did not create the best first impression when we met.”

Lily managed a smile, though he could clearly see she was still shaken by his story. “I was raised to always be well behaved, have perfect manners, act appropriately… yes, it was quite a shock.” She stroked his beard, his now prominent cheekbone. Painfully prominent. “You were very impressive, however.”

She chuckled when he smiled. “You insulted me, if I remember correctly.”

“You stared, which was quite rude of you.”

“Ah. Forgive me. You were not what I thought you’d be.” He kissed her hand. “I thought Gandalf’s suggestion would be a warrior of sorts. A beautiful woman was the last thing I expected.”

She blushed. “I thought you were looking at me with contempt,” she admitted.

“I admit I was suspicious, and skeptical. But still, I could not stop looking at you.” He shared a confession of his own. “You were an enigma. Still are.” He stroked her lips. “I do trust you now,” he added.

She blushed so beautifully, so gently. “Thorin…” she whispered weakly.

“I wish we could have met under different circumstances, less perilous….”

“Do not wish that,” she said suddenly, passionately, “Thorin, you are everything to me, and I am willing to risk….” She bit her lip when both of them noticed what she said. “Everything,” she finished weakly, eyes wide and slightly horrified, her heart racing.

His own was beating rapidly as well, and he grabbed her hand when he sensed she was about to bolt. “Stay,” he asked breathlessly. “Lily, please.”

She was jumpy, pale and tense, but eventually his fingers in her hair, his fingers caressing hers made her bow her head, and remain. “Amrálimê…” he whispered, “amrali zi, nûlukh furkhuhaz.”

“Thorin…” she protested, her cheeks red, her eyes unsure.

He smiled at her. “One day I will tell you everything, I promise.” He took her hand and kissed it. “I want you always at my side,” he whispered.

And Lily held his hand and looked away.

“I will stay,” she promised. And if her voice were uneven, he did not comment.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
-Savdh hirdaen nei taur- Have you found a body in the forest?
-Penin, dorel- no, I haven’t, your majesty.
-Er lhingril yar- only those of spiders.
-Amrâlimê- Love of mine.
-Amrali zi- I love you.
-nûlukh furkhuhaz- Moon of my life.

So... Thranduil. I actually really like his character, hope I did it justice. Proud, manipulative, protective, vindictive, aloof, grieving. And loving, yes. Ever loving and protective of his people, especially his children. I also hope that none of you would judge him as harshly as Ningalor did since misinterpretation is a theme in this fanfiction that I am rather fond of.
Dwarves are, luckily, more straightforward than the elves. Otherwise, I think I would be lost myself in the layers of meaning they spin =)
"Things unnoticeable to all
Saw my face
And smiled.
I am one of them, as all were before me.
I have no doubt they will find no satisfaction in me
Nor did I ask for any as they colored my eyes with mist."

Ningalor hid and waited for the young, female guard to pass. That particular guard entered the
dungeon quite often – too often. Ningalor wondered if Thranduil noticed the missing food and
decided to burden the youngest guard with the task of patrolling that frequently as punishment.

She sneaked past the cells and the guard and made her way to Nori’s cell. She explained her plan,
which made the thief laugh quite a bit before he reminded her to steal back the weapons and pack a
barrel full of food, and also money if she could find it. They would need it, he assured her. He also
instructed her to find his coat, a brown, undistinguished thing, and unbutton the third pocket on the
inner layer of his left breast and from there retrieve a small, green vial. A few drops, he promised,
and the guards will sleep quite soundly, enough for her to smuggle the keys and lead them outside.
He sounded quite excited, but the semi-cruel gleam was not to her liking. Still, she did as she was
told.

It took her the whole night to empty the small room of their weapons and coats and transfer them
into the barrels. She had to stop and wait, holding quite a bit of items, some very heavy, while
guards passed or paused for small talk. She dared not cross next to them out of fear she might drop
the items carried, so she crossed the same path many times, so tense and nervous she felt as if her
body were about to snap.

When she finally finished, she once again raided the pantries, but this time, she stole smoked
meats, hard cheese, and quite a bit of lembas bread. If they were lucky, they would not need to
finish it, but she took every precaution and emptied her father’s stores. She also sneaked into her
father’s coffers and filled three small bags with coins. That should do, she felt, still uncomfortable
with the idea of stealing money.

She took a jar of fine wine, added the few drops Nori prescribed, and placed it carefully on the
guards’ table. She hid and waited anxiously.

This was the most important part of her plan. If she were to fail that, if the guards would not be
tempted to drink, they would not fall asleep, she would not retrieve the key, and someone would be
sure to notice the depleting pantries by now…

“Well, looks like even the guards will be having their share of the Mereth-en-Gilith!” declared one
of the guards when he entered the room. Another guard followed him, the one who had the chain
of keys tied to his belt. He looked at the wine with a frown.
The other guard had fewer qualms about drinking on duty. He poured both of them a cup and sat, sipping the wine appreciatively. “Say what you like about our ill-tempered Duke, but he has excellent taste in wine. Come, Galion, try it.”

Galion shook his head, making her heart flutter in despair. “I have the Dwarves in my charge.”

“They’re locked up; where can they go?” the other objected, shaking his cup at him.

Galion sighed, took a seat and the cup and a sip of the wine. “Just one, then.”

But one, apparently, was all she needed. Soon enough the guards were snoring, and Ningalor picked up the keys and dashed down the stairs.

She did not have time to waste.

Thorin woke up and glared at the darkness.

Something was not right.

Years of living under stone taught him to discern, from the nuances of temperature and sound, his location and the location of others. It wasn’t a sound method, as echoes may be transformed by the stone before they reached his ear, but something still felt wrong. He was supposed to be alone.

Footsteps, and too many of them, echoed back and forth. Three men, at least. Five, ten… he blinked, must have counted wrong.

He stood up and walked toward the edge of his cell, curious and wary, when –

Lily.

The woman smiled brightly at him and entered a key into the lock of his door without much ado while he stared, eyes wide and utterly surprised. She did promise him she’d rescue him, but he never expected… he did not allow himself to truly believe.

She opened the door. “We must hurry! We need to –”

He stepped out of the cell, his body tingling at the notion, and took the woman in his arms. After yearning to do so for a period that felt like a lifetime, his nerves burned at the feeling of her soft body, firmly pressed against his with no bars to separate them.

“Khajimuizu uh ôhûfuk,” he murmured, smiling at her shocked expression, the soft blush –

“Thorin!” That was Dwalin, gripping his shoulder. “Do it later, would you?” he hissed.

Thorin released the woman unwillingly, and only then he noticed that the entire company was there, apparently in the middle of being rescued as well. But still he held her hand as she led them down, then up, deeper into the mountain…

“We’re in the cellars!” Kili whispered loudly.

“Lass, you are supposed to lead us out, not in!” Gloin groaned.

“I know what I’m doing!” she answered hotly.
She led them toward a dead end, however, and even Thorin allowed himself a moment of doubt.

“Into the barrels,” she commanded. When no one moved, she added, “Trust me!”

Agitated, she turned to glance at Thorin.

Thorin looked at his woman and hoped her plan would work before barking, “Do as she says!”

The men stared, then each climbed into a barrel. Two were closed shut, but the other thirteen were invitingly empty. She nudged Thorin and led him into a barrel, but did not enter one herself.

Instead, she rushed toward a lever and appeared to be counting his men.

It was distinctively uncomfortable inside the barrel and felt no better than his cell. Thorin prayed to Mahal his woman came up with a sound plan, since he was the one who gave the command.

“What now?” Bofur asked, sounding as doubtful as the rest probably felt.

“Hold your breath,” Lily commanded.

She pulled the lever.

The floor tilted, the barrels rolled and Thorin held on to the barrel with all his might and hoped he was not going to be sick – the barrels dropped, one by one, into the water of the river.

The fall was terrifying – he thanked Mahal when his barrel survived, and made sure that the rest landed just as safely.

He began to propel himself forward, as his barrel was the first, but soon he had no need for it. The river’s flow escalated and pushed them onwards, and all he had to do was hold on and pray his barrel would not topple over.

Behind him, he heard his boys holler and cheer, and he smiled in response.

He breathed in deep the scent of the water, of the trees and the earth. Fresh and crisp, cool wind danced around him as he felt the ice-cold water splashing on his face – freedom! After being stuck in that cell for goodness knows how long, he was finally free.

*Let them doubt Lily now,* he thought proudly.

Then a sight appeared before him, peering shyly from between the wild trees, that made him forget everything else.

Erebor.

The Lonely Mountain spiked up into the sky, jabbing the clear blue with its claim, and ruled over the valleys and lakes and forests with the might of a king. The distinctive star-shaped mountain with six ridges radiating as spurs from the peak was a sight he never thought he would see again. And from the face of the mountain, two giant warriors were carved, guarding over the massive fortress that shadowed and dwarfed all other fortresses – Erebor. His Erebor.

The gates, which were always open, were now closed off and sealed, and the ruin was evident even from that distance. The fallen gate, the crushed walls… the claws of the serpent left a deep, bleeding mark in the living rock.

The trees that rose, as silent soldiers poised to guard the mountainside, bowed to him as the wind
that propelled him forward shot through them. Between them, their fallen brothers lay, pale and skeletal; those were many, and the living trees – few. It was as if the earth itself had turned against her proud, aloof children and left them to face wind and fire and death all on their own. Many of the mast-like trees he saw were white and barren, and stood as grave marks in place of their living comrades.

But there it was, Erebor, after more than eighteen years. His Erebor, at last. Erebor.

He kept looking at it, the subject of his dreams and nightmares, with wistful eyes and beating heart. No living being could compete with the love he felt for his lost home. He will reclaim it or die trying. Erebor.

They floated down the river for several hours and reached the shore only at midday.

He got out of the barrel with difficulty, his muscles aching from being confined for too long and tossed about in the roaring river. He turned around to see the rest of his men paddling just as painfully, muttering and limping. He smiled when he saw Fili helping Kili and then… then his smile faded.

“Lily?” he bellowed, wading toward the group. His heart began to beat rapidly, anxiously. “Lily!”

He looked into the empty barrels and the men that climbed out of them, but those who managed to stand looked at him with the same worry. He clenched his fists, trying to think back… she led them, he held her hand, thirteen empty barrels and two closed, heavy looking ones… thirteen!

“Lily!” He refused to believe that, cursed his folly. He was so sure she came with them. She did not stay behind, would not! She would not have left him, not without telling him first – “Lily!” he cried out.

The heavy barrels reached the shore last, and a pale hand, clinging to the chime, released the hoop and drowned in the now gently flowing water… “Lily!” He rushed forward, the burning of his muscles forgotten, stooped down in the water and picked her up in his arms. Lily.

He crouched – his muscles were not yet strong enough and protested the exercise – tilted her on his knee and slapped her back forcefully, once, twice, until the woman gasped and coughed out the excess water in her lungs. He gently massaged her back, breathing hard, as relief flooded his form with each shallow breath the woman took. She went limp in his arms after a feeble attempt to push herself up. He hugged her to him, though most of her body was still inside the icy river.

“What the hell were you thinking,” he scolded, “going down the river without a barrel? You nearly drowned! You could’ve –“

“Thorin, I don’t think now’s a good time.” That was Oin, paddling toward them. He took one look at the woman and shook his head. “Get her out of the water, right now,” he ordered. Then he turned to the men on the shore. “Gloin, start a fire! Now! Boys, fetch wood! Dwalin, Nori, stand watch!”

No one dared object to the healer’s orders.

Not even he would dare, Thorin thought grimly and picked the woman up. Her eyes fluttered close and her body, limp and boneless, began to shake violently. “Lily?” he asked, terror replacing the relief he felt not a few moments earlier. The woman did not answer, and he rushed out of the water and toward the shore, burning muscles be damned.

“Heat loss,” the healer diagnosed her. “We must get her warm, as soon as possible.” He cursed. “I suppose she left the coat you gave her, or perhaps it was too heavy and she had to give it up lest she
drown… we need dry clothes….”

“The barrels! Lily brought our stuff!” cried Bofur.

“And food!” added Bombur.

“The coats as well?” Thorin demanded.

“Aye! Everything!”

“Fetch it here immediately!” Oin ordered, “I want everyone to clear the area! Be quick!” He began to massage Lily’s stomach and back with quick, smooth motions to try and stimulate the circulation of the blood. Bofur hurried forward and dumped all the coats into one, big pile, then handed Thorin the coat he gave his lover. For some reason, the fact that she packed it with the rest of the coats so it won’t be lost touched him deeply.

“Fire’s made, brother!” Gloin declared.

“Good, make another one for the rest to dry next to. Now, be gone!”

The men grumbled and left. Oin looked at Thorin. “You must strip her of her wet clothes and dress her in the dry ones. Quickly!” The healer fished out his coat and searched for his herbs, while Thorin did as he was told, nearly tearing the tight, unrelenting fabric in the process.

She was blue, ice to the touch. She looked more and more like a marble statue, and her sight terrified him. He never undressed her so quickly before, but this time, he took no pleasure in the act. He wrapped her in his bear coat first, as it had sleeves, then his own coat. When he finished, Oin took a small, metal cup, filled with freshly boiled water with herbs floating within, and began to ease the hot liquid down Lily’s blue lips.

“Wrap the rest of the coats around her limbs, but make sure to heat her torso the most, otherwise, her body will lose the heat it managed to preserve. Don’t massage the limbs! Only the middle, lad.”

Thorin obeyed and cradled the woman in his arms, keeping her torso as warm as he could with the coats as well as his own body heat. They moved her closer to the fire, placed her in the sun, and Thorin willed his body to warm hers. He prayed with all his might, his heart beating frantically with each shallow breath she took.

Lily began to shiver again.

“Good, good, that’s a good lass.” Oin finished the first small cup and filled it up again, placed it between the flames and withdrew the second one from the fire. “That’s it. Steady.”

Thorin kissed her cheek, whispering to her. He muttered her name, again and again, whispered his love to her in his own tongue and the common one. He hugged her cold, shaking body to his chest with all the strength he could muster and caressed her cool, wet skin as gently as he could. Mahal, she was ice.

“Lily, Lily, come back to me, Lily….” He kissed her. “Âzyunguh ana zu ubznatiki ubzar magh nâturma ‘azahyi kidhuzaz. Âzyunguh ana zu tursiki uhrus magh Mahalul gabil khubûb….”

If Oin thought his declarations silly, he did not show it, and breathed in palpable relief when Lily’s eyes fluttered open, her hands twitched and she took her first, deep breath.
“Lily!” Thorin cried out, heart racing again.

The woman shifted slightly, looked up – dazed and confused, exhaled and buried her face in the crook of his neck. “Tho… rin…” she managed. He swallowed thickly and cradled her against him, suddenly realizing how close he was to losing her.

“Lass, finish your medicine, then thank your rescuer,” Oin reprimanded. When she did not respond, he cocked a bushy brow at Thorin.

He sighed and tilted her head gently. “Just a sip, Lily, that’s all.”

The dazed woman opened her lips with difficulty and exhaled when the hot, bitter drink was poured down her throat. “Good. One last cup, all right?” Oin fetched the small, metal cup. “Would’ve given you more, but I ran out of herbs.” He once again fished out the small cup, blew on the hot liquid, and made Lily swallow the medicine. “We need to get her somewhere warmer where she could rest next to a fire. We cannot stay here. Already stayed too long.”

Thorin nodded. He did not like the delay, but the sight of the shivering woman made everything else seem of little to no importance. She was so utterly vulnerable and defenseless, shaking and breathing erratically. He cradled her in his arms, wrapped the coats even tighter around her form and rubbed her back and stomach, as instructed. Oin wrapped the metal tools in the thick fabric and placed them next to her torso carefully, enticing the woman to cocoon in a fetal position and burrow into Thorin’s lap in a desperate attempt to get warm.

“I promised her I’d protect her,” he whispered weakly.

Oin looked on, his old eyes full of compassion. “And that you do, lad. Just keep her warm –“

“ – the barge over there, it wouldn’t be available for hire, by any chance?”

Thorin’s eyes snapped to meet Oin’s – that was Balin – talking, undoubtedly, to a stranger. Which meant trouble. Oin grabbed his staff, signaling to Thorin to not let go of Lily. He rose to stand between them and the bushes that separated them from the rest of the company as well as the stranger.

“What makes you think I will help you?”

Thorin cursed under his breath. The new voice belonged to a man, and a suspicious one at that. He was so focused on Lily, he must have missed the commotion that preceded that conversation.

“Those boots have seen better days,” Balin said diplomatically.

“Don’t try to buy me, old man. Those barrels are from Mirkwood, and I find it hard to believe you just appeared at the same time they did.”

“As has that coat. No doubt you have some hungry mouths to feed. How many children?” Balin continued stubbornly.

“I’m not gonna answer to a runaway. Thranduil’s men will come for you. I want no part in this.”

Oin nudged at the bushes, revealing a tall, grim-looking man, his attire as weather worn as his face. The man noticed that, however, and aimed his bow at them. “Who’s there?” he demanded.

“Must have been a rabbit –“
I saw a man! How many of you are there? Speak up! Stand where I can see you!"

Thorin cradled Lily in his coat and stood, as weak as he was, and walked out of their hiding spot. They just escaped the cursed duke’s dungeons. He could not afford getting caught again.

The man eyed them suspiciously, then loosened his bow slightly when he noticed Lily. His eyes widened first in shock and narrowed in confusion, but something about the woman’s pitiful, shaking form must have affected him, for his eyes continued to dart in her direction.

“I am Thorin,” he said gravely, “we are thirteen men and one woman, who is gravely ill. We need help.”

The man glanced at Lily again. “What happened to her?”

“Heat loss,” Oin supplied quickly, “a reaction usually triggered by prolonged exposure to cold elements, causing dangerously low body temperature —“

“I know what heat loss is,” the man said impatiently. “Was it caused by the Forest River?”

“Aye,” Oin replied somberly, “spent several hours in the icy water. I did what I could, but she still needs rest and plenty of warmth. Here, we cannot linger.”

The man lowered his bow. He scratched his beard, deep in thought, eyes grim and troubled.

“You wish to go into Lake-Town?” he asked.

“Aye,” Balin confirmed. “Just for a short while. We will pay you for your efforts.”

The man glanced at them, noting the state of their belongings and the haggardness of their form. “No one enters Lake-Town but by leave of the Master. All his wealth comes from trade with the Woodland Realm. He will see you in irons before risking the wrath of the Duke.”

“Smuggle us in, unseen, and we will pay you double,” Balin promised him.

The man narrowed his eyes at him, suspicious, and scrutinized them once more. No man budged, all stood firm and true, ready to face and challenge the mistrustful eyes. The man glanced at Lily again, and Thorin’s eyes narrowed when he noticed the sudden grief that darkened the man’s lined, harsh face.

“Help me get those barrels to the barge,” he commanded.

Thorin allowed himself a very small, and short, spark of relief.

She felt like she was burning.

Ningalor opened her eyes sluggishly, feeling dazed and confused and very dizzy. Her skin felt horrible, as if every inch of it was prickled by needles and pins, and had her body been stronger, she would have stripped off all of the layers that caused that sensation. It took her a while to realize that she was, in fact, naked, and that her body was firmly pressed against another body.

She lay in a fetal position while the other body cocooned her form entirely, legs pressed against legs and her back against a chest as two, muscle knotted arms covered her own arms and hugged her firmly.
She felt an ache, a bone-deep ache, and incredibly weak and exhausted, as if she has not slept for several days. Her head felt stuffed and her world was blurry, and she felt, in short, incredibly miserable and sick.

Uncomfortable too, and too warm, but too utterly unfocused to manage to do anything about it. She closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep.

It was late in the morning when she opened her eyes again, or so she thought based on the light floating through the drapes. This time, thankfully, her eyes managed to focus on her surroundings.

She lay on a wooden bed, cheap and small, that could support two people only if they were pressed against each other. The floor was wooden too, and the entire room looked (and smelled) like a fisherman’s cabin. In the fireplace, a fire burned brightly, and next to it sat a young woman – she looked about seventeen, at the most, and washed her laundry by scrubbing the fabric forcefully against a metal washboard.

Ningalor groaned weakly when she tried to sit – her body protested vehemently against such exercise. The room was too hot, even for her, and her clothes irritated her skin, and from her location, she did not see any member of the company. Was she alone?

“You’re awake!”

Ningalor blinked when the girl-woman walked briskly toward her, dried her hands on her dress and pressed her palm against Ningalor’s forehead.

“You have a fever, but the real danger’s gone.”

Ningalor looked up at her, opened her mouth to say something, not sure what, and ended up sneezing quite pathetically.

She accepted the fabric the girl offered her and blew her nose. “Where am I?” she managed.

“In my Da’s house,” the girl said unhelpfully, “I’m Sigrid.”

“Lily.” She coughed. “Who is your Da?”

“Bard; he is a fisherman; and a bargeman.” The girl looked at her. “Do you remember anything at all?”

“I remember many things,” Lily managed to cock a brow, though she doubted it had any affect. “You might want to specify which event you are referring to.”

Sigrid looked mildly embarrassed, but also intrigued. She was a pretty girl, Ningalor noted. Not yet a woman, perhaps, for her face was still round, but her eyes – large and almond shaped – were kind and clever, and her well-shaped nose and mouth and her round eyebrows made her expression comely. She will grow up, no doubt, to be as beautiful a woman.

“I meant from the accident. My Da said you spent hours in the Forest River.”

“Yes….” She tried to think what should she say and how much of it. “I do not remember that too well. I just remember being cold.” Safe enough, and not that far from the truth.

Sigrid nodded. “Your husband is very worried. You slept for two days straight.”
Ningalor’s eyes widened. “He- he is?” she asked weakly. She had no doubt to whom Sigrid referred, but did not want to contradict her, if that’s how Thorin chose to introduce them. She did not know even if that innocent comment was a product of such declaration, or if that was what the girl assumed based on the closeness between them.

Sigrid nodded again. “He didn’t really want to trust Da, at first, but eventually he agreed to do what Da said. We live on the river, so we’ve had our fair share of heat loss cases.” She paused. “My mother died of it.”

“Oh, I’m-“ another sneeze, “very sorry to hear that, truly.”

Sigrid shrugged. “It was many years ago. Besides, Da says she’d have wanted us all to be happy together, so we shouldn’t grieve.”

Ningalor offered a tender smile. “Your father sounds like a very nice man,” she commented. “How many are you?”

“I have a younger brother and a younger sister. My brother sometimes goes hunting or fishing with Da, and my sister is too young, so I take care of the house,” she said proudly, “and of you, since the men had to go out.”

“And you are doing a great job, I’m sure.” Ningalor smiled, then frowned. “Do you happen to know why they left?”

“Da shows them the way out. I think. Or something like that, in case the Master found out about you.” She lowered her voice. “Mirkwood folk came to warn him, I think. Da said something like that.”

Ningalor nodded, still frowning. There was more she’d have wanted to find out, but now was not the time, nor was Sigrid the right person to ask. She attempted a smile. “Now, I feel like I slept for far too long. Think maybe I could join you? I might not be a very good help, but I know a thing or two about house-keeping.”

Sigrid frowned at her at first, then smiled hesitantly. “Well, I suppose… but you must rest, so nothing too tiring.”

So thus she found herself seated at the table, a weather and food stained balancing book nearby and a just as weathered pen at hand, trying to balance the numbers and explain the math to the young woman, who tried to scrub the floors and listen to her at the same time.

Every once in a while, a younger child, named Tilda, appeared, glanced at them, and ran to hide in her room. “She’s nine,” Sigrid said, “and she’s not that shy – she just doesn’t want to do her chores.”

“Who would?” Ningalor supported the girl, and both of them smiled wryly at that.

The time passed quite nicely in this manner, and both were immersed in trying to solve the issue of balancing the growing expenses (the master raised the taxes again, apparently). As a result, neither noticed the commotion of the men returning to the house, until the cries of “Lily!” made them both jump. Sigrid suddenly remembered that she had yet to take care of dinner, and Ningalor found herself effectively surrounded by the two heirs, Oin, and Bofur – all of whom seemed very excited at the notion of her recovery.

“Lily! –“
“You’re awake! –“
“Thought you died –“
“Or worse –“
“Kili, what could be worse –“
“Now, now, don’t exhaust the patient, that’s Oin’s job, lads!”

“Which I cannot do properly with all of you squabbling about!” the old man chastised, “Now, Lily, how do you –“

Ningalor sneezed.

The men looked at her, slightly stunned, then chuckled warmly. Apparently the sight of her, red nose and cheeks and eyes slightly glazed, was a comic one indeed. Oin placed a hand on her forehead, made her open her mouth and checked her reactions. “Just a common cold, now!” he diagnosed. “You will need to drink a lot of tea, and rest, and soon you will be as good as new!” he declared.

Kili smiled cheekily. “Now maybe Uncle won’t try to bite everyone’s heads –“

He was silenced properly with an elbow to the ribs, and the too cheery smile on Bofur’s face told her all she needed to know.

“Come, lads, Oin, let’s see what’s cooking in the kitchen, eh?” Bofur stirred them all toward the door, where stood, as sullen and grim as ever, Thorin.

Her heart jumped at the sight of him, but the displeasure vibrating around him made her worry her lower lip in uncertainty. He did not look pleased to see her, and the notion made her gulp uneasily.

The man leveled a glare at her, sighed in aggravation, and shook his mane as he stepped closer. “I am supposed to be angry at you,” he informed her. “Your careless actions caused us quite a delay, too many headaches, and depleted what was left of Oin’s herb supply.” She flinched and looked down, then up in surprise and hope when he sat next to her and cupped her cheek gently. “But I am far too pleased to see you recovered.” He paused momentarily to stroke her hair. “I thought you were going to die in my arms,” he admitted.

Ningalor’s eyes widened. She had never heard him speak like this before, voice weak and careful and full of emotions. “Thorin, I am sure my situation was not that bad –“

His eyes snapped to look at her, ablaze. “You were unconscious for two days, Lily! That was, by far, one of the worst cases of heat loss I have ever seen. Were the water colder, were I slower to find you….” He looked away, fists clenched. “You know you are susceptible to cold temperatures… you –“ He looked at her again, and the blue eyes were clouded and shifting between rage and resignation. “Next time you make a plan, of any sort, I want to be informed. You rescued us, but nearly at too great a price.”

Ningalor thought of Smaug, yet said nothing. Instead, she placed her hand over his and stroked his knuckles gently until the fist relented and his hand held hers, quite possessively.

“I promise.” She cupped his cheek, fingers buried in his beard. “I am sorry I have caused you, all of you, such distress. I miscalculated. I thought I’d manage to climb on top of the barrel, I….” Her voice died on its own, for Thorin took her hand and kissed it gently. She blinked uncertainly,
smiled carefully, and properly sneezed.

“I’m sorry –“ she managed, flustered as she blew her nose, “I’m afraid I caught a cold….”

Next to her Thorin looked away, then again at her and, inexplicably, began to laugh.

The sound, low and quiet, vibrating deeply within his chest, and the soft wrinkles around the eyes as the face attempted to adjust to the unfamiliar expression made her eyes widen incredulously. The action induced her to sneeze yet again, which prompted Thorin to laugh some more and ruffle her hair when she still looked at him with eyes almost childishly wide.

Feeling almost foolish at the unexpectedness of the events unfolding, she managed a smile of her own and then, sensing her cheeks heating up, she dared to rise from her chair and move to seat in his lap.

Thorin, surprised, stopped laughing, but hugged her to him all the same. She hid her face in his hair nervously, but relaxed when one of his arms supported her back while the other rested on her knee, pulling her closer to him. He chuckled when he turned to look at her to find her glancing at him with eyes just a tad too bright and face all too red.

“How are you feeling?” he inquired, stroking her cheek.

“I’m sick,” she confessed, pursing her mouth when he chuckled again.

“I can tell.” He frowned. “You should be in bed, not…” He inspected the balancing book, “balancing equations.” He groaned and muttered, “I hated doing those when I was younger.”

Ningalor wrapped her hands around his neck and pressed her nose against his chest, feeling perhaps too warm and too dazed, but very pleased and relaxed. “I spent two days in bed, I don’t want to –“ She sneezed and accepted the cloth gratefully. “No,” she finished and blew her nose.

Thorin tried to scowl at her. “By Mahal, Lily, you even sound like my nephews.” His hand in her hair was tender, however, and he made no attempt to move.

Ningalor pouted, but indeed began to feel rather sleepy and merely muttered in response, “I missed you,” she mumbled against his neck.

It took a long moment for the words to finally register and only when Thorin cuddled her closer and whispered, “I was with you the whole time, Lily. I told you, I want you always at my side.”

He very gently kissed her cheek and Ningalor’s eyes widened and her cheeks heated again when her mind finally caught up with the situation. She grabbed Thorin’s shirt in her fist, feeling quite wretched all of a sudden – always, he said. Always.

But there won’t be ‘always’; not for them.

No, for the moment he learns the truth of her birth, he will send her away, cast her aside, leave her deserted and broken hearted and – Ningalor gulped, heart galloping.

He is going to break her, and she him.

She never thought – not about him, of what she will leave behind. That ‘always’ was a promise he was going to break, a promise she is going to face the consequence of. But while she knew that, he… he has no warning of what’s to come. He thinks she is going to be with him, always.
She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat and the strange misery that suddenly flooded her form. Not a moment ago, she felt happy like she had never felt before. Now, she felt like she was drowning.

No, this would not do. Determined to enjoy every stolen moment with her love, every precious second, she lifted her head and kissed his cheek affectionately, nuzzling at his beard and savoring the somewhat surprised chuckle.

She wasn’t going to grieve her folly before her time. She wasn’t going to grieve for Thorin, not while he was so peacefully pleased. Happy. She made him happy. She would wreck that same happiness later, but for now, safe and secure in his arms, she was not going to give that up.

Thorin turned his head to glance at her, and the arresting blue made her heart skip a beat. His eyes fluttered and focused on her lips, and Ningalor, quite unwillingly, angled her head away. “I’m sick,” she explained bashfully when Thorin scowled.

“I am ready to face the consequences,” he declared gallantly. His fingers curled underneath her chin, tilting her head, as he gently claimed her willing lips.

Her breath escaped her at the tender touch as she buried one of her hands in his hair while the other gently cupped his jaw and caressed the rough beard. Thorin bit her lower lip and teasingly earned his way into her mouth as his fingers tangled in her hair and his hand traveled up her thigh…

“…I don’t want to – you do it….”

“I knocked last time –“

“You opened the door, without knocking –“

“You open the door then –“

“But if they are... y’know….”

Thorin growled against her lips, inducing her to chuckle breathlessly. He lowered her back to her seat and marched to the door, which he opened with an annoyed thrust. “What?” he barked.

From her spot, she could hear Kili and Fili smiling unrepentantly in their uncle’s annoyed face. “Dinner’s ready.”

“Thought you’d want to know.”

“Before –“

A hiss of pain made her rise from her chair to find Thorin pulling Kili’s ear before the youth managed to complete whatever unsavory nonsense he was about to utter. She smiled despite herself, walked toward the Durins, and rested her hand gently on Thorin’s arm.

The man released the boy’s ear immediately, but looked no less pleased with the duo. “Go,” he ordered.

Ningalor smiled when the two all but bolted – eyebrows wriggling and Thorin snarling – and then rested her head on Thorin’s arm.

“More trouble than they are worth,” he grumbled, and Ningalor wondered if he was embarrassed by his nephews’ teasing. The thought made her smile as she glanced up at him, which made Thorin
scowl half-heartedly as whatever it was that stiffened his frame deserted his form.

“Come.” He took her hand and led her to the dining room where the rest of the company waited for them, as well as two males she had yet to meet.

The older one was Bard, she assumed. The man had shoulder-length, tousled dark hair, that was kept somewhat in check in half a ponytail. His face was broad and handsome, grim and honest. His eyes were kind when glanced at his children and mistrustful when focused on them, his lips were thin and pursed and his forehead lines with worries. He had aristocratic cheekbones, hollow cheeks, a strong chin, a mustache as well as a small beard, and his skin was sunburned and weathered by the harsh winds and the long days spent facing the elements. He was dressed poorly – his coat looked like it was made from the hide of one beast, roughly cut and made into something wearable, and his tunic underneath looked like a sack someone cut holes into and then tied in the middle. The young boy next to him – probably his son – was better dressed, even if his clothes had yet to fit his frame, and Ningalor had no doubt that whatever coin the man made was spent on his children, and not on him.

The young boy resembled his father, but his face was round still and his eyes large and not as mistrustful. His brown curls and his pinkish cheeks, as well as his pale, blue eyes, reminded her of Frodo, which made her smile. He wore a coat similar to that of his father, but his tunic was made of leather.

Their clothes were a mix, she noted, glancing at Tilda and Sigrid as they ran to their father. Some pieces new and cheap, some weathered and of fine quality. They could have bought those items from a ruined family, or maybe received them as donations to the poor… but somehow, glancing at the man’s too sure, too regal posture made her think it was the other way around.

The man nodded to her in acknowledgment, a gesture she returned, and they all sat around the small table (the children and the head of the family moved to dine in the kitchen). They supped jovially, with many stopping to ask her about her wellbeing – even Balin stopped for an encouraging pat, and Dwalin nodded her way…

Nori cocked his brow at her, eyes unreadable, but Thorin’s hand on the small of her back and Kili’s and Fili’s ever bright smiles more than made up for that.

She crossed and escaped Mirkwood unrecognized, the company (more or less) trusted her, and Thorin’s tender eyes never left her.

Feverish as she may be, Ningalor glanced at her lover, and dared to hope.

She woke up in the middle of the night, again, cocooned in Thorin’s arms and pressed against his chest. She frowned, vague memories of dinner dancing through her fogged mind – she had a cup of mulled wine and leaned against Thorin’s shoulder… she must have fallen asleep. The notion embarrassed her, but she felt too safe in Thorin’s arms to worry about that overmuch. The man slept deeply, and despite the frost on the window and his nakedness under the thick fold of the fur, a thin layer of sweat glistened on his skin.

It was very hot in the room, she noted, glancing at the cheerful fire, and she was incredibly thirsty. After a short debate, she found herself waddling toward the kitchen, searching for a clean cup and a source of water.

The cabin was silent, if one ignored the rumbling snores. The wood creaked and groaned with the
movement of the waves, and the scent of fish and salt was refreshing, if a bit too strong for her taste. The light shining in from the window – pure, unadulterated moonlight – was breathtaking, and Ningalor soon forgot all about her thirst. Spellbound, she stepped closer and closer to the window until her hands and face were nearly pressed against the muted glass. The sight of the lake and the cabins floating on top of it, rooted to the bottom on uneven sticks, made her heart flutter. Feeling around for hinges, she tried to open the window and actually see the unnatural settlement, boats instead of carriages and waves instead of grass and –

A hand on the window closed it shut before she had such a chance to get a proper look, untwisted by the glass, and Ningalor jumped with unease to find herself face to face with the cabin’s grim owner.

Bard narrowed his eyes at her, and his suspicion remained even after she hurried to take a few steps and distance herself from him and from that window.

“Forgive me, I….” She sensed an explanation was needed, as well as an apology. “I found the sight to be captivating.”

“Rotting wood on an icy lake,” the man dismissed her, eyes narrowed further, “and the Master’s watching. Shouldn’t you be recovering or something?”

“Probably,” Ningalor shifted, frowning at the mention of that Master, again. Didn’t Sigrid say something about him? Oh, if only her brain weren’t so fuzzy at the time! “I was… thirsty,” she admitted.

The man scowled, scrutinizing her, and apparently decided either to believe her or that a cup of water wouldn’t hurt, for he turned his back to her and muttered, “Won’t find water there,” and entered the kitchen. She followed hesitantly.

Bard filled a cup from a barrel and offered the cold glass to her, which Ningalor accepted appreciatively and gulped thirstily, yet politely.

Bard observed her throughout the process, but she could not tell what thoughts crossed the troubled man’s mind.

“Thank you,” she said gracefully.

“Hmm.” Bard accepted the cup and filled it again. “Feeling better?”

“Yes, quite.” She smiled. “I am very grateful to you, for offering us a place to stay and for me to recover.” She hesitated, then added, “At a risk, too, I was given to understand.”

Bard was still frowning, but his features were grimmer than before. “Aye. A fact your friends do not appreciate, I have to say.” He dismissed her when she opened her mouth in an attempt to explain. “You seem like a strange addition.” He pointed out. “You don’t fit.”

Ningalor gulped, unsure, feeling the fear rearing its head from the shadows of her thoughts. “What makes you think that, good sir?” Had the Mirkwood guards mentioned her, as well? Why? How could they know? Did someone see her? Or –

The man’s chuckle was bitter. “I am no sir, Miss, and that’s exactly what I meant – you sound too… cultivated, for their sort. And judging by their clothes, they are not some mere travelers as they claim to be. That Thorin, especially.”

She blinked, but kept her face expressionless. What could she say that won’t expose them? They
did not share their cover story with her; she had nothing to say, and so she remained silent.

Bard scoffed. “Figured you’d say nothing.” He crossed his hands over his chest. “I just don’t want trouble, Miss. My children have been through enough.”

“We mean no harm,” she hurried to reassure him, but Bard was not impressed.

“You escaped Mirkwood, didn’t you? That’s as bad as it gets, around here.”

“We will be gone as soon as we can, and endanger you and your family no longer. You can trust us to remember this act of friendship and repay it when we can.”

The man shook his head. “You speak like a lady, but you and your band of vagabonds have no title to your name, or you wouldn’t be sneaking about. I want no business with you. I pitied you, Miss, because of my wife. That’s all; no kindness, no friendship.”

“And yet, we will treat it as such,” she insisted.

Bard cocked a brow. “And who are you, Miss, to make such promises?”

“I am no one,” Ningalor promised, “but I know quite a few influential people who… erm… hold me in regard high enough to aid those who aided me.”

Bard scowled at her. “You speak in your own name, not theirs, and you aren’t offering their aid, either….” He crossed his arms. “Why?” he demanded. When she did not answer, he mused, “You are unmarried.” The accusation plain.

Ningalor cringed inwardly. “Indeed, I am not,” she admitted softly.

Bard cursed. “Keep that to yourself, if you please. I don’t want my daughters to… get the wrong ideas –“

“Of course,” Ningalor hissed, eyes narrowed. The implication was clear enough, unwelcomed and humiliating.

The grim man did not appear to care for the insult he paid her.

Ningalor decided that, if the man allowed himself to ask such things and make such inquiries, she is allowed the same. “Forgive me, but earlier you mentioned… a master? Who might that man be?”

Bard scowled, then sighed. For a long moment, he said nothing. “I don’t… are you from the area?”

“No,” she was quick to mutter.

Bard did not seem suspicious of her reaction. He appeared to be lost in memories, somber and dark. “Well. It’s… it’s a long story, old history. But the short version is that once this shithole has been…. Something. The lake lodged between the two dukedoms wasn’t settled for many, many years, and instead, the city of Dale flourished on its shores. That was eighteen years ago, before… before Smaug the Serpent came, with his machines of fire and armies of clansmen. The Duke of Dale failed that day, his aim was not as true as his people needed it to be, and Dale fell. Its people, to escape the fires of the Man Snake, built Lake-Town on the rotting beams and ruins of Esgaroth. The people of Esgaroth, in the days of old, had no duke. The new settlers didn’t want one. Their old duke failed them, you see. So they voted for a man to rule over them, for a limited time. That’s how the Master was elected. But people forgot the ways of the past, and now he rules like a proper
“duke and taxes us the same.” Bard frowned at the lake, oblivious to the moonlight’s beauty. “We fell with Dale,” he muttered, as if to himself, and added, “He will do whatever necessary to keep his position, and that includes silencing challengers and selling you all back to the Duke of Mirkwood.”

“You have no love for him,” she observed.

“Few do. And their number lessens each day.”

“I dare say that you might be some of the opposition the Master fears?” Bard looked troubled at her observation, and she took that as a confirmation. “Why?”

“I don’t think he rules as he should, that’s all.” Bard’s eyes were fixed on something in the wall. Was it a… an iron arrow? An ancient hunting tool, perhaps? A decoration?

“Why don’t you remind the people of that fact that his rule is timed, as you said? Replace him?”

The man’s eyes snapped and focused on her, unreadable. “Can’t,” he said finally. He poured himself a cup of water as well. “You said you’ll be leaving the moment you can,” he said, changing the topic abruptly. She nodded mutely. “Where to?”

“Well, on our way.”

Bard rolled his eyes at her. “You are in the middle of nowhere, woman!” She would have been offended at being addressed as a ‘woman’ had she not been preoccupied with questions she could not possibly answer. “Mirkwood is closed off to you, and the rest of the road leads to nothing but mountains.”

Ningalor held her breath as the man’s scowl turned darker and darker. “Where are you going?” he muttered darkly. He was beginning to guess, she realized, and his suspicion was not to his liking.

Ningalor pursed her lips. She knew she could not answer that; she also knew Bard’s mistrust meant trouble, but what could she say? Think!

“Well?” he demanded, “Where are you headed?” His hand twitched, and she could read the warning in his eyes; that if he were to guess that they are headed to Erebor, to awaken the sleeping beast that ravaged his people, he would…

“Iron Hills,” suddenly a voice, deep and smooth yet as strong as thunder, cut between them, “to visit members of our Bond.”

Thorin, dressed in his pants and not much else, emerged from the door and crossed toward them, eyes challenging the other grim man fiercely.

Bard took a step back and Ningalor a step forward, standing in between the men. Thorin’s hand landed on the small of her back possessively, yet his eyes did not glance her way.

Bard nodded, eyes still wary and full of distrust, and only then did Thorin lower his eyes to look at her. His eyes were troubled, and she could sense the anger tinged with worry shifting underneath. “Why are you out of bed?” he demanded, voice low and raspy.

“I was thirsty,” she admitted, heart hammering. Must his eyes look so tense? Mere hours ago, he smiled, even laughed, in her presence…

His eyes soften at her reply. “Did you drink?” His shouldered slumped slightly, but his voice was
still worried.

“Come,” Thorin ordered, steering her toward their temporary bedroom with more strength than necessary. She could feel Bard’s eyes following them all the way to the door.

Not a moment after he closed it Thorin grabbed her by the arm, his hold sure and firm. “Lily, what did you tell him?” he muttered, the worry rising yet again, carrying with it the same anger from before.

Her breath deserted her lungs, confused. “Thorin?”

“He asked you questions. About us. I need to know what you said,” Thorin cut through her words, impatient. His grip tightened. “If you told him anything, I….”

“Thorin!” she hissed back, “Do not threaten me!”

Thorin blinked, suddenly conscious of his actions. He sighed, his grip loosened slightly, but his voice was still harsh. “I need to know if I need to awaken the men and leave now or not, Lily. And that depends on what you told –“

“Nothing!” she cried, feeling the pain welling in her stomach. “I thanked him for hosting us, promised him we would repay his kindness, and asked him who the Master was. Do not assume so little of me!”

Thorin breathed with visible relief and grumbled, “You already told Elrond –“

“The Duke of Rivendell already knew, do not mistake that,” she reprimanded, then sighed, “I would not jeopardize your quest if I could help it, Thorin.” She sounded hurt, though she tried not to, and cringed when Thorin’s expression softened; he picked up on that, and the notion displeased her. She didn’t like the ease with which he could read her. She felt naked before him, vulnerable.

“I woke up,” he said suddenly, “to find you gone, and then I heard you speaking with that man and…. “ His hands cupped her cheeks instead of her arms and he kissed her forehead with a passion she did not expect nor understand. “Amrâlimê….“

She sighed, but did not protest. In truth, she missed the foreign words and the tenderness behind them. She smiled gently at him and took his hand; she did not pause to think about the way his hand had caressed her cheek before his fingers tangled with hers. “Let’s go back to sleep,” she offered shyly.

That, however, proved to be more of a challenge than she thought. The bed was, after all, narrow. Thorin took off his pants – the room was indeed warm – and lay on his side, then guided her to lie on her side next to him. His arms held her to ensure she would not fall off the bed, but the position did not allow her to move much and the cramped position was too uncomfortable.

She shifted, risking an embarrassing fall yet somehow, with Thorin’s aid, managed to lie on her back and tried to entice Thorin to sleep on her chest.

The man looked at her, frowning. “Lily, I’d crush you,” he objected.

“It’s uncomfortable,” she complained, “and I won’t be crushed.”

Thorin leaned over her. “Lie on me, then.”
“Thorin, you are already sweating. Can you imagine having both me and that fur for a blanket?”

The man frowned, uncertain, so she opened her arms to him, gently caressing his beard, and slowly Thorin lowered himself onto her chest, placing his head above her racing heart, one hand pushed underneath her head, tangling in her hair, the other caressing her side.

At first, the added weight did knock the wind out of her and made it hard to breathe, but she welcomed that weight, that body, because it meant that Thorin was still there, with her, a reminder that affected every inch of her. She breathed in the scent of his hair and his skin and his sweat and thought there was no better scent in the entire world.

She couldn’t stop herself; she kissed his head gently.

“Goodnight, Thorin,” she whispered, with her hand stroking his hair, the other hugging his back and caressing the moist skin.

The man grumbled something back, and soon was sleeping deeply, peacefully, on her chest. Ningalor smiled to herself and etched the treasured moment into her memory.

Even Thorin needed a safe place where he could feel protected and secure, she mused, heart cringing in love and pain; and he found such a place between her arms, resting against her heart.

Gods, she really should have listened to Gandalf, didn’t she?

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
- Mereth-en-Gilith - the Feast of Starlight.
- Khajimuizi uh ôhûfuk - You set me free.
- Âzyunguh ana zi ubzûnatiki ubzar magh nâturma ‘azahyi kidhuzaz - My love for you runs deeper than an endless sea of gold.
- Âzyunguh ana zi tursiki uhrus magh Mahalul gabil khubûb - My love for you burns hotter than Mahal’s great forges.
- Amrâlimê- love of mine

Bard is NOT happy. At all. Which makes sense. Also, Thorin sucks as identifying undercover royalty.
What do you think? Next chapter next week!

Also - thank you, thank you, thank you to lucife56 for her AMAZING art!!! It’s beyond lovely. I have no words to describe just how overjoyed I am. It is stunning. Y’all should check out her Tumblr - http://lucife56.tumblr.com
Again- Thank you so much!
The Stars Are Not Dawning

Chapter Summary

"The trees in the yard flower softly,
Their eager scent longs for days long forsaken
And dreams of nights with starry might,
Curly hair, blurry eyes,
Shining rivers reflected in the vast, moonlit sky."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thorin woke up slowly.

He was so used to snapping awake from a nightmare, an ominous whisper, or a crunch of a twig broken by the wind or a traveling beast, that it took him a moment to understand that it was indeed morning and that he was indeed waking up. How strange.

The first thing to tickle his uncooperative senses were the lazy rays of late morning, pale and weak as they attempted to penetrate the oncoming army of clouds as well as the promise of rain. Then, a whiff of a scent, a body scent, sweet and calming, not as sharp or sour as the smell of man-sweat or thick as that of a horse’s hide he became accustomed to during their journey. And the softness on which he lay, rising and falling meekly, rhythmically, weaker than the movement of the waves, but still…

He opened his eyes.

Lily. A particular weakness took over him when he realized he lay in the woman’s cradle, with her hands wrapped around him the same way a mother might hold a sleeping child, one on his back and another tangled in his hair. The gentle touch, soft and unassuming, so reassuring, freely given and wholeheartedly, moved him deeply. He sighed and lowered his head again unto her chest, slowly, as her breath shifted but the woman still slept soundly. His Lily.

His savior and the first on his list of worries, now. He remembered her body, cold and shaking in his arms, and grasped the warm figure underneath him just to reassure himself that it was truly her, his love, who lay beneath him, alive and safe and warm. And Gandalf thought to deny him that.

He lifted his head again to study her features, leaning on his left forearm with his right hand free to caress a stray lock and trace the line of her jaw and neck, her collarbones… so gentle and refined; her finesse was another mystery he hadn’t managed to fully comprehend. The smooth forehead, the weary eyes, so tired of being on guard all the time, he thought affectionately. The high cheekbones and the hollow cheeks, the full, now parted lips, also tired of being locked, he wondered, tracing his thumb over her lower lip. They were made to be kissed, not pursed into a thin line of proper manners. Her hand fell from his back to land on the bed, and he caught it too, the thin, weightless limb, so graceful and fine. She was not made to survive in the wild, he mused, caressing the long fingers, the lean muscle, soft and unresisting under the pressure of his fingers. Beautiful, but weak. His to protect. His.
Her chest rose abruptly and changed its rhythm, and shy blue eyes fluttered open, meeting his with that same inexplicable hesitancy, tenderness mixed with wariness – what did he do to deserve such cautious treatment? But the woman looked at his hand, holding hers carefully, and when she looked up at him, she smiled. A shy smile, so full of affection, that he could not help but smile back as he bent to claim her lips. Aye, those were made for him, to be kissed by him. Her other hand touched his cheek gently, carefully, and his hand left hers, fingers traveling up the forearm, then the arm, to caress her cheek with the same gentleness.

He would have undressed her right then, reclaimed that body that so long was left unvisited by him, but the woman’s weak, dazed response reminded him that she was still recovering and that whatever methods she used to take care of the consequences were not practiced when she was unconscious.

He broke the kiss and bent to touch his lips to her forehead, causing the woman to blush. “How are you feeling?” he murmured against her skin, kissing it again in search of fever.

“Much better.” She sighed and wriggled slightly underneath him in an attempt to stretch. Thorin, suddenly conscious of the surprising comforts of being the one cuddled, wrapped his hand underneath her and guided the woman to lie on top of him, pressing her against his chest.

A weak groan told him he should have been gentler with his lover, but the woman simply placed her head on his chest and shifted until comfortable. He stroked the blonde hair, noting the pleased expression, and wondered if the woman finally opened up to him or if she was simply more carefree with her expressions in the morning. Either way, the sight pleased him, and he kissed her forehead once more to express that. Lily looked startled, then shy once more, but the affectionate look, as careful as always, was no less beautiful.

He knew that asking her about her wariness directly as well as fussing about her health would distance her from him, but did not know what would cause the opposite reaction. Both things, he suspected, showed a level of distrust. The first would result in probing into her past, while the latter would insinuate she was incapable of taking care of herself. While indeed she did not prove herself otherwise, the woman’s pride would not allow her to fully admit that. Therefore, he chose instead to show he trusted her by seeking her counsel.

“Lily,” he murmured in her ear, watching the stir of her limbs as the woman lifted her head so she could look at him, “has Oin checked up on you yet?”

“Yes,” she replied carefully. Sensing her oncoming retreat, he stroked her cheek and hair, watching the wariness fading with each thoughtful touch. “He said I just have a cold, now. Nothing too serious.”

“Hmm. That’s good.” He smiled at her, the gesture hiding not an ounce of the affection he felt for the woman. She blinked and looked away, then back at him, then away, as if incapable of handling the sight yet, disbelieving it to be true, had to look again and again to seek reassurance that her eyes did not deceive her the first time. Confounding creature. “I was thinking of leaving soon.”

“Yes.” She hurried to agree. “We are quite a risk for this family, I understand.”


The woman frowned as well, as if the title was not to her liking. His scowl deepened and the woman looked at his chest instead. “ Seems like an honest man. Something is bothering him about the fall of Dale and the Master of Lake-Town, yet I know not what.”
“Many lost much in the attack, their fortune and families as well.”

She nodded. “I just… I wonder if there is more to him than meets the eye.”

Thorin glowered, displeased. A man, tall and grim. What more was there to see?

The woman saw his expression, furrowed her forehead in confusion, then cocked her brow. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she chastised.

Thorin matched his expression to hers and lowered her to the covers, ignoring the woman’s cry of surprise (or was it protest?). He kissed her neck while his hands undid the ties of her tunic – already expert at the task, and fondled a milky breast and a hardened nipple, desperate for attention.

“Thorin –“ she cried, protesting weakly, “I – I can’t –“

“I will not be denied by a foolish woman,” he growled, yet his hand left her breast to caress her cheek.

“No, I –“ He kissed her, those obedient lips, mistreated by their owner. “I didn’t –“ Another kiss, short but demanding. “Drink my –“ A moan, shallow and breathy. “I need to –“

“I need you,” he told her, ordered, confessed.

“Thorin…” she sighed in surrender, fingers grazing the skin of his shoulders, jaws, scalp, their sensation addicting and agonizing and intoxicating all at once.

He removed the tunic with almost desperate savageness and her pants with equal need, fingers and lips exploring with unquenched urgency every inch of skin illness and irons denied him before. And Lily responded ever so beautifully, crying his name and fingers seeking, seeking… her need to touch and kiss him was almost equal to his own, and he whispered her name, again and again, against her soft breasts and pale stomach and twitching womanhood. He sucked on her fingers and collarbones and nipples, and she arched her back and fisted the fur when he applied the same careful attention to her womanhood below.

He was her lord, a thought crossed his mind, her ruler, her owner. No one knew her so well as he, no one commanded her body like he could. For no one else but him did she dance and whimper. His treasure, his love, his woman. His.

“You are mine,” he whispered to her, inserting a finger into her, watching the blue, dazed with pleasure, widening and fluttering close. “Mine,” he murmured, rubbing and pushing, tasting her whine against her lips. “Say it,” he commanded. “Say it,” he growled.

She cupped his cheeks with ferociousness he did not expect and replied with passion he did not know her to be capable of, “I am yours, Thorin,” she breathed. “I am yours,” she sighed. “I was made to be yours.” She landed back on the bed, weak and twitching, eyes closed, lips parted, cheeks flushed –

He removed his fingers and kissed her, worshipping those lips with the need in his, the admiration evident in every touch and caress. “Zâyungi zi yothur nidif gulûb ublûr aglâbizd, khajmel.”

He kissed her before she could protest the foreign words and savored the breathy moan she released when he entered her. Deeply and slowly, tasting every second of pleasure with every inch of his body, he looked at the woman, his woman, gasping as every inch of her felt him too. She opened her eyes, the blue unguarded and utterly beautiful, and her hand rose to caress his cheek,
hold on to him as they danced together, as they became one again.

“You are beautiful,” he whispered to her, kissing her jaw and her lips, “my madtubirzul, agyâdê... my Lily.” He reassured himself, with each careful or demanding touch, that she was indeed his.

“Say it again,” he asked breathlessly, slowly moving out and returning into her, sucked into her in the most inviting way possible.

She cupped his cheeks, wrapped her hands around his neck, buried her fingers in his hair, held him and unto him at the same time. “I’m yours, I’m yours,” she reassured him again and again. “Oh, Thorin, I am forever yours,” she moaned breathlessly and cried weakly when he quickened his pace, wishing to savor more of her. All of her.

Mine, mine, mine, his mind demanded as he kissed her breasts, her neck, her lips, savoring every crook and shiver and elegant arch and milky skin. Every place touched by her burned and glowed, every part of him turned to gold, his mind numb with pleasure and his body craving more of it. Stronger, deeper, slower, faster – he lifted her, fingers digging into the soft flesh of her thighs, and her surprised moan was weak with pure, primate pleasure. She was twitching and tightening around him, milking him, taunting him, wanting him. The pleasure danced in waves in his stomach and muscles and veins.

He surrendered, groaning in sweet, mind-numbing defeat as he filled every inch of her with his claim. Once again he landed on top of his woman and masked his breathlessness by kissing every place his lips could reach.

He closed his eyes in pure and unwavering satisfaction and missed the sudden horror that replaced Lily’s face.

She sipped the tea, boiling hot and scorching as it went down her throat.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. So stupid. She took another sip, relishing the terrible burn. She hoped that, despite what Beorn said, the tea would also work retroactively. That it would kill whatever it is that might be growing in her stomach. Was she overreacting? It was a likely possibility, since her family was not known for being very fertile. In the ten years that her parents were married, her mother gave birth to only two children, despite the fact that they were an affectionate couple; or so she was told. She knew nothing about Thorin’s side, however, and the thought churned her mood further as she took another painful sip. Let it burn her womb the same way it burned her stomach.

It was foolish enough that she bedded unmarried. Even more Foolish still that she allowed him to deflower her. But pregnancy was a whole other issue.

She wondered if Oin had herbs of the sort that could help her deal with her current problem. She doubted it, though – he was a medic of a company on a dangerous adventure; he had no need for herbs against pregnancy. No one expected a female, let alone this romance, or her own utter inexcusable irresponsibility.

He stopped when she asked and would have ceased entirely had she insisted. She should have insisted. Foolish, so utterly foolish. Her fault.

She boiled another cup, just in case.

“Lily? You all right there?” Bofur walked toward her, eyeing her mug. “That looks dangerously hot, must say.”
She smiled thinly. “We are to leave soon. I wish to be at my best.”

“If you say so,” the man said kindly. “You can wait for the tea to cool, though. We ain’t leaving
till Bard returns. Needs to tell us when’s best to go.”

He was about to add something, perhaps he noted her slightly pinched expression? when the door
banged open and Bard entered, closed the door behind him and glared fiercely.

“Thatin,” he snarled. He looked about the room, still agitated – or infuriated? Then roared,
“Thatin!”

The few men in the main room turned, eyes wary. Ningalor frowned, her hissing tea forgotten.
Something was, without a doubt, incredibly wrong.

“Aye.” Thorin, Dwalin, and Balin joined them from the kitchen, eyes challenging the enraged
man.

“Thorin Oakenshield,” Bard continued, glowering. He waved his children away when they
appeared at the bedroom door – Sigrid took Tilda, but she failed to pull Bain away from the scene.
They hid in the doorway and watched.

Thorin glared back as Dwalin touched the hilt of his axe. The men rose slowly, sensing the tension
in the room, each glancing at his comrade with his hands grazing his weapons. Bofur and Bifur
closed ranks in front of her.

They all did, she suddenly realized. They stood as a wall between the angry man and their leader’s
lover – warriors at the front, the rest at the back. Ningalor scowled; surely, they didn’t think one
man could pose a threat to thirteen? Surely they had no intention of harming a man in front of his
children?

“Son of Thrain, son of Thror, Duke under the Mountain,” Bard snarled. “That Thorin.”

“I know my name, Bargeman.” Thorin glared. “What is your issue with it?”

Bard straightened, eyes blazing when Thorin did not even try to deny his origins. “You are not
going to the Iron Hills. You are going to that cursed mountain,” he accused, “with thirteen bloody
men!”

Thorin said nothing. He didn’t need to say anything, however. The truth of it was plain enough.

“You are going to awaken the beast,” he accused further.

“Kill him.”

Bard laughed. It was not a cheerful sound.

“Kill him,” he repeated dryly. “Aye. Like you and your family did last time he was seen? Back
then you numbered more, but you failed all the same.”

Balin intervened, “We know the risks –“

“Do you know. Looking at you, I wouldn’t have guessed it,” he snapped at the old man. His eyes
returned to Thorin. “You are going to get us killed, again. And for what? For –“

“The men of Dale failed to kill him, too,” Dwalin growled, pointing at the ominous black metal on
the wall which she failed to recognize the night before. “You don’t know the history of that thing,
haps, but that is –"

“The Black Arrow. Do not insult me further, Dwarf! I know my history,” Bard roared.

_Oh_, Ningalor sighed. _Oh._

He continued, incensed, “You do not know your own, if you think –“

“That is why you oppose the Master, but say nothing,” she said, words cutting through the rising temperatures and the heated, violent gestures, “son of Girion.”

“The failed Dragonslayer,” noted Thorin coldly.

Ningalor stepped forward, waving Bofur aside when he tried to hold her back, or at least step before her to offer protection. “You do not think you have the right.”

“I do not.” The man stood firm. “As well as you. You have no right to enter that mountain.”

“I have the only right,” Thorin challenged. “Had the aim of your father been true that day, my people would not have had to wander years in search of a home!”

“Do not blame my father for this! Had your grandfather been less greedy, the Serpent and his machines would never have come!”

“You dare to blame my kin and people for our success and wealth? We worked hard and spent hours of honest labor to build our dukedom! Dale, might I remind you, shared in our wealth!”

Bard was not moved by Thorin’s fury nor by the anger of the rest of the thirteen, thick and righteous, full of pride and vengeance. That was the rage of hard men, used to harsh environments and violence. But Bard… Bard had much to risk, didn’t he? He was antagonizing strangers whom he invited to his house, where he kept his family, his children…

_He alerted someone._ She suddenly realized. _He lays his accusations so as to explain, to justify the soldiers when they burst through the door._

“You will kill everyone, every child and man and woman, your followers and friends and strangers alike, for a fool’s quest. You didn’t defeat him with an army, so now you seek to redeem your name with a handful? Murderer be he who wakes the sleeping beast!” Bard replied, eyes ablaze and unwavering.

He and Thorin stood as equal, each sure of his own truth and willing to destroy the other to uphold it; neither would budge. Then Thorin spoke, voice measured and rich, but not as infuriated as before. “I remember the times when Dale was the center of all trades in the North. I remember it flourishing under the rule of your father. This city, its people, and your family lost much when the cursed serpent and his machines of fire arrived. Together, we could see those days returned. I will relight the great forges and rekindle the Dwarven flames, and we could have Dale rebuilt and returned to her rightful ruler. The heir of Girion.”

Did he also recognize the danger? Or perhaps he thought of turning the grim man into an ally? Bard looked away, first at the bare floor and then out to the window, where cheap glass twisted the view of cabins and icy water. “I am not so greedy as to demand something I have no right to claim. My father failed; I have no right to demand more of these people.” He returned his eyes to Thorin. “And you have no right dealing with me while on your way to start another massacre!”

“My word is true and honor bound!” Thorin replied. “No promise of mine is to be thrown aside
like a mere trifle. Nor would I cower in the shadows while my people suffer, as yours do! Wear my shame like a cloak and refuse to take any action to help those dependent on me – this I will not do.”

“How can I trust any word coming out of your mouth? You were dishonest about your intentions once and you will be again! Your promises and your words are as sleek and sneaky as their owner.”

Thorin’s hand clasped the hilt of his sword as the mockery and the distrust, that age-old treatment – Bard’s eyes followed the movement, in fact, all eyes did – Ningalor could hear the shuffling from where the children stood, as Sigrid pulled both her siblings toward her and covered their eyes.

She stepped forward. “I understand your pain, as well as your mistrust.” She stood before both men and glanced at Thorin, whose hand released the hilt slowly. Following the gesture, the rest of the company let go of their weapons as well. “A few months ago, I said the same. I joined Thorin’s quest with much hesitance, but despite the many opportunities I had to turn back, I did not. I did not, because I believe in Thorin, I believe his word, I trust his promise. I heard the stories of his people, and I believed them too.”

What was she saying? What lies was she telling? *I believe in a man who I know will break all of his promises to me, and now I try to convince another to believe him too. Am I lying to him, as well as to myself?*

Bard did not look persuaded by her words and his anger was replaced by a hard, cold conviction. This was not going in their favor. “You speak so because you are his lover,” he dismissed her. “You do not talk without his permission.”

“I speak so because I am an Istar’s ward,” she replied, skin prickling at the blatant words. “I speak my mind as I see fit, and I do so because for all your words of accusation, you are the one betraying us.” She saw the truth reflected in the hard glint of his eyes. “You informed the Master.”

Bard’s jaw tightened but he did not deny her assertion. “I only do what’s right,” he muttered. “I should have never let you in, I should have let you die in his arms!”

“Da!”

They all turned, staring in disbelief at Sigrid, holding the two children – they had forgotten about them. Bard’s face fell, Thorin’s temper cooled, but Dwalin’s face, Ningalor saw, was still ire iron-cast. He did not miss her accusation of betrayal, more so because the statement was left unexplained.

“Repay kindness with benevolence, friendship with kinship…” Ningalor omitted the end of the ancient promise – a duke’s promise – as well as the mention of whom it was making the vow. She could neither say ‘we’ nor ‘I’, a fact which was not lost on the lords surrounding her.

“Treachery with vengeance,” Bard completed the sentence. “I did not know wards could make any such promise. If you truly are what you claim to be.”

“I am making it,” Thorin declared. “My promises are bound with the honor of my people and my alliance.”

Bard looked around. He looked at the grim expressions and the honest eyes; looked at her, standing firm and alone; looked at his children; looked at the arrow. He returned his eyes to Thorin. “I have your word,” he asked again.

Thorin lowered his head slightly in a bow. “Aye.”
Bard turned his hands into fists but nodded, eyes hard. “The soldiers should have been here already,” he muttered. He looked at his children, one last time, before finally making his decision. “I’ll show you a way out.”

Their belongings were folded and ready, bags packed and weapons sharp. Bard led them through tunnels and unwatched paths to three abandoned boats tied with a rotting rope made threadbare by the passing fish and movement of the waves.

“Row hard; keep in the direction of the Mountain,” he instructed.

The day was bright and the fog began to lift. They did not have much time – five to a boat but the last one, which carried a barrel stuffed with food items stolen from Mirkwood. Thorin wanted to toss it out of the boat to feed the fish but Balin dissuaded him, promising that the best way to mock Thranduil was to use his food to feed his enemies. He did not like this, but agreed that it was unlikely that they should find a better food source in the castle. Hunting, of course, would be too dangerous, and game was rare.

Better to eat the Elves’ stale bread than one’s own stomach, he thought as he rowed, then glanced at his woman.

Lily did not row – it was quickly established she was terrible at it. At first, she did try, and after splashing Gloin with the ice-old water, the man cursed and snatched the oar out of her hands, thus effectively ending that particular attempt.

Thorin glowered, but he knew the warrior was right and rowed harder to make up for the vacancy. She saved them again; how did she know, however?

“How did you know?” he asked instead. Safer, more relevant.

The woman glanced his way but did not seem surprised. She anticipated his question, but apparently wasn’t sure about his tone and mood at the time of the questioning. “He was threatening us plainly. Not a smart thing to do when one is outnumbered, especially when such actions place one’s family at risk. Bard is a cautious man, so risking everything he holds dear didn’t make much sense, unless….”

“Unless he would have called for backup.” Thorin nodded. He saw the logic of her reasoning, and it put his mind at ease. “It was foolish of him to accuse us, then. Had he said nothing, we would have been taken.”

Lily shook her head. “He is an honest man; such trickery would not sit well with him.”

“You assume much of his character.”

Another cautious glance, triggered by the growl in his voice. “My duties require that I assess people’s character quickly and accurately in order to predict their actions. My precision is the only validation you need.”
“What for?”

She did not look at him; her eyes did not leave the mountain and the fortress looming over them. “I can handle Smaug.”

He snapped to look at her, eyes sharp. When she did not look at him, he returned his eyes to the front and rowed ever harder. “We have a thief,” he said flatly.

“You have a diplomat –“

“Lily –“

“No, Thorin.” Did her voice shake, or was he imagining things? Her eyes were stern and her expression set in stone. “We wait for Gandalf, as we promised, and I enter the mountain, as I promised.”

He tore his eyes from her, ignoring the softness of pleading underneath the polished glint.

“We do not wait for Gandalf, and you are not entering the mountain,” he hissed.

“But –“

“I give the commands, woman!” he snarled.

“You are a sentimental fool,” she snapped. “You will send Nori to his death –“

“I will not send you to yours!” he roared.

All muttering died – he did not need to look behind to know that the rest of his men on the boat were staring at them, listening. Damn the woman.

“Be silent, or I’ll send you with a boat back to the Bargeman, and you can wait for the Istar there, for all I care. My decision is final.”

The woman, wisely, kept her mouth pursed shut.

It prickled – a part of him wanted her to try to test him, the same part that warned that the woman was not at all convinced or even likely to do as told. A smaller part – but just as annoying – continued to voice a warning from the edge of his awareness – the pleading. There was something… else, something that was not anger or cold resolve when she made her request. Like she was afraid of something – but what could be worse than facing the cursed serpent? Or could it merely be the fact that she missed Gandalf? Let her miss him all she likes, he thought sourly. They were running out of time and could no longer wait for the old man.

Thorin refused to let worry bite through his resolve and channeled all of his misgivings to the powerful movements of his arms. I will kill the Usurper, I will have my mountain, and I will have my woman by my side. Mahal be blessed, I will have all of it, or nothing at all.

As they left the boats behind, so did Ningalor’s last hope.

She did not need to see Nori’s sharp, feral teeth exposed in a silent snarl to know that she was in quite a bit of trouble. Two options lay before her – face a notorious mass murderer or risk having her parentage exposed. Neither were promising, and neither were safe. In fact, both could very likely result in her death, or worse, imprisonment. She looked at the crumbling fortress with
derision which only deepened when she noted the love and awe so plainly written on Thorin’s face.

*How very like a man to love a rock more than life, to be willing to risk everything for a glorious past. Or a glorious future.*

They trudged on. The land was burned, from the sight of it, black and barren and bleak, and the silence that echoed in her ears was broken only by the drumming of her heart. The men were silent as well, hopes and fears clashing and warring within their chests. They were nearing the end of their journey as well as their greatest challenge. The man and the army of machines of fire and metal. Some of them were sharpening their resolve and weapons to face the future – Kili’s silver bow, Fili’s golden knives; some of them were reliving the past – Balin’s gray face, Dwalin’s white knuckles, Oin’s red eyes.

Thorin walked ahead, and alone.

He was fighting reality as well as the past, pushing through the climb as well as his memories.

She had no share in their collective grief.

“Heard you had a squabble.”

Ningalor twisted her lips in distaste. “You hear much.”

Nori did not care for her baleful tone. “You don’t scare me none, mila –”

“I will enter the mountain, you cowardly fool!” she hissed, annoyed to hear the dry, humorless chuckle, “but not for your sake.”

“Course not. It’s for Thorin’s sake.” His voice was rich with mockery.

“If I die, don’t –“

“That’d depend on the manner of your death, methinks,” he interrupted. “I don’t care much for Mirkwood, see, but cowards and traitors are a filthy lot. Elven ones are the worst, ‘m afraid.”

“I am not a coward.”

“No?” He cocked a brow. “You run away from your own name faster than a spring chicken from the butcher’s knife. If you die, your name shouldn’t matter to you no longer.”

She looked up at the ruined statues of giant warriors, clutching their axes and frowning at the sight of visitors. “It would matter to Thorin.”

Nori looked at her, eyes sharp and speculative, but she did not return his gaze.

There were no trees, only blackened stumps, and neither beasts nor grass nor any life of any sort. That was Thorin’s home. A scar upon the face of the earth, too hideous to look upon. He told her of the beauty of Erebor, of halls that were the mark of the architecture of the age, of vast fields of wheat and barley and gardens and little rivers, of bird song and butterflies, of gems and veins of gold and mithril.

All she could see was death.

How hard it must be for him to return to all that once was glorious, and see the ruin, the remains of the fall of greatness – his greatness?
“Go to ‘im.”

She snapped to look at the cunning thief, embarrassed to note that she had entirely forgotten he was walking by her side.

The thief rolled his eyes. “I can see plain as daylight that you want to support the grumpy fool, so go to ‘im.”

Flustered, she stuttered, “H-how-“

His voice was derisive, but his eyes were unreadable. “You’re not the only one in the business of reading others, milady. And your simpering face is more depressing than an empty wallet. Go.”

Ningalor looked at Nori, then looked at Thorin’s burdened shoulders, hunched underneath the weight of memories, and picked up her pace. She had to trot to catch up with the Duke, who, as usual, chose an impossible pace through which to transmute his anger and worries.

The grim man’s face was chiseled with rage and grief, the eyes hard and unforgiving, the fury… decades old and still burning bright, keeping every muscle tight and strung to the point of breaking; his fists were shaking, she noticed, as every nerve hissed with memories and pain.

She took his hand.

Thorin snapped into attention and out of his poignant reverie at her touch. He glanced at her hand, touching his wrist, and looked up to gaze at her face – did his nearly crumble, or was she seeing things? The pain and the vulnerability were shaped by the years and yet sharp as if born yesterday. She could not help but share her own fears and worries, be as vulnerable before him, explain with her eyes and with her touch everything she did not know how to say.

Thorin nodded and took her hand in his. He returned his eyes to the mountain and so did she, but his pace eased somewhat and his shoulders slumped, as if the burden was eased slightly, lifted.

His hold of her hand was sure, almost too firm, but utterly reassuring. He was holding on to her, and his very touch felt like the only solid thing in the world for her. Were they walking toward their death? Was this to be one of their last moments? She thought of the way he made love to her, how he demanded that she’d belong to him, like a child, like a lost man grasping at straws…

He too realized that their time together was a fleeting thing, that any moment might be the last. Perhaps he also realized how fragile their relationship was, perhaps his possessiveness revealed his understanding, even if unconscious, that they were not meant to last.

She squeezed his hand, overcome by her own musings and storm of emotions, and Thorin squeezed back gently, glancing down at her. He did not have a smile to share, not even the tight-lipped one, and the plain sorrow in his eyes allowed not an ounce of warmth shine through. Still, she looked up and willed all of her love to penetrate through years of training and reach the man walking beside her.

I’m here with you, for you, till the very end. Our end. I’m not letting you go until you send me away or the fire takes me. I love you, Thorin. I love you.

Thorin’s lips parted as he drew a much-needed breath and he closed his eyes in pain before he once again focused on the Mountain. Trudging on, that was what he was doing. Pulling himself together, and carrying on.

She should learn from him and do the same.
As they got closer, the air began to smell fouler – like the boiling metal and molten fire of the few and the great fire mountains – ever restless and ever burning. But the Lonely Mountain was stone and metal, cold and hard. The scent of rotten eggs, accompanied by a biting, choking sensation at the back of her throat was not its scent. The foreign stench of machinery was the mark of the rule of the Usurper.

It was unspeakably worse than the smell of the spring in Beorn’s mansion.

Even Thorin’s face betrayed his disgust, which was the plainest confirmation that the home of his childhood did not smell like a volcano. Smoke was rising from several spots and the temperature rose with each step they took, which meant that Smaug was most likely still alive and his machines still working, feeding off of the great forges, perhaps, or whatever remained of them.

Kili, as usual, was the first one to spot the stairs, the ones that would take them to the secret entrance. He and his brother took the lead, excited to finally see their ancestors’ home; their heirloom. Ningalor was surprised that Thorin let them do it, instead of being his usual over-protective self, but Thorin’s eyes were glassy. He walked the worn path from memory, it seemed, and it was unclear from his expression whether the memories he saw before his eyes were good, or bad.

She squeezed his hand gently when they reached the stairs – winding, worn cuts that bit chunks off the flesh of the mountain. They barely deserved the description of stairs, but they were the only thing in sight that allowed access to the fortress, besides the front gate.

Thorin visibly braced himself, stonewalled himself, and began to climb. The stairs were narrow, so he took the lead, and though in the beginning he glanced behind to ensure she was well, the closer they were to the fortress, the less he glanced behind.

Until he stopped glancing at all and instead picked up his pace as his need to get to the top of the stairs, to be home, was stronger than anything else.

Perhaps, Ningalor thought bitterly, he will be able to handle her absence just fine, when the day comes.

The climb, at least for her, was challenging. She did not slip, but her muscles shook with the strain of climbing those endless, uneven stairs, some of which required her to use her hand in order to reach. The Durins handled the ascent with fire and desperation, unrelenting, and soon left the rest behind. Dwalin passed her, grumbling something about needing to protect the heir, but Balin walked right behind her, muttering about knees and age and lazy bloody masons.

It was near twilight when she finally reached the top of the stairs. Barely breathing, she looked back to find that no member of the company fared very well, climbing the steep mountain. With a stitch in her side and burning lungs, she did not do so well herself. When she turned her head, she saw that the stairs led to a path which led to a small overture, where Kili and Fili pounded on the rock excitedly, and even Dwalin and Thorin knocked, leaned, listened, tried to find the secret entrance.

Ningalor sighed and leaned against the wall, trying to catch her breath. Her eyes followed Balin as he also rushed forward and joined in the searching and the pounding. To climb this far only to encounter the plain, undistinguished face of the Mountain was the very definition of anticlimax, she mused.
Ningalor frowned and glanced at the wall. Could that be they reached the wrong spot? Climbed the wrong stairs? Did not climb high enough, or perhaps too high? She assumed, for some reason, that there would be, well, a door. Wood or stone, but a door.

Wait. Wasn’t there…?

“Wasn’t there –“ she wheezed, “Balin…wasn’t there…. “ She stumbled toward the old man.

“Wasn’t there a riddle? I think… I think there was –“

Ningalor tried to remember the riddle.

There… there was a bird, of some sort? She really did try, but whenever she attempted to focus on those memories, Thorin’s eyes, full of hate and contempt, as if he attempted to burn her where she stood, tore through the memory.

Thrush. There was a thrush.

“Balin, the riddle!” she tried again, now that her voice was under her control again, “Thorin, your map….”

She stood there, helpless and ignored. Behind her Bifur and Bofur joined the search, and Oin and Gloin rushed passed her. No. This will not do.

She crossed the distance and touched Thorin’s shoulder carefully. The man paused and turned, and his eyes were undecipherable to her. It was almost as if he did not recognize her.

“The map,” she reminded him, trying to ignore the tremor caused by the aloof eyes, “wasn’t there – I think I remember a riddle.”

Thorin frowned, then muttered, “Stand by the door where the thrush… Everyone! Back off the wall!” he commanded. “Balin, the riddle!”

The old man rushed forward and examined the plain surface. “Thrush, thrush, thrush…” he mumbles to himself. He drew out his glasses – how did the fragile thing survive their journey, she did not know – and, with his face nearly plastered to the surface, began to search for… something.

“Uncle, is he searching for a bird?” asked Kili, confused. He was not the only one, Ningalor noted. Bifur, Bofur, and Bombur all looked confused, as did Dori, Nori, and Ori.

Oin chuckled. “No, laddie. Balin is looking for the signal of the Thrush, where the Thrush knocks when requesting entrance.” When even Fili frowned in confusion, he added, “The Thrush is a house of messengers. They deal in delivering information secretly, sworn to the Dukedom of Dale.”

“Like the House of Raven!” said Fili, excited to learn more about his ancestors’ history.

“Aye. The Ravens are sworn to the House of Durin,” Gloin grumbled. “Some of them fled with us, the rest – Mahal knows where.”

The sun began to set, the last rays caressing the figures standing over the cliff with weak, careless attention, before allowing the shadow of the Mountain to claim them whole.

“There!” Ori shouted, “I think I saw – there!”

And indeed, the very last ray shone upon a dent in the stone, a wrinkle in the rock, where a small
dimple hid from prying eyes and intruders alike.

“Fili!” Thorin ordered, but he did not need to – the heir rushed forward, removed the chain with the key from his neck and all but lunged toward the small hole in the gray wall. They all held their breath as time, sound, and movement seemed to have paused – all but the twist of the wrist, the small, barely audible click, and then, the wall was no longer a wall.

A small crack suddenly appeared, so thin it was nearly invisible, and in fact the only thing to signify its appearance was a small tinkle of dust. Fili pushed gently and the crack grew in size, as the wall caved in and revealed the blackness of the cave beyond.

The heat, pouring from the mouth of the entrance, was unbearable, and they were all reminded at once that their home was not theirs yet, and that it was still occupied.

All eyes turned to face her. Ningalor knew what had to be done.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
-Zâyungi zi yothur nidif gulûb ublûr aglâbizd, khajmel – I love you more than words can say, gift of all gifts.
-Madtubirzul – golden heart.
-Agyâdê – my happiness.

Finally, Erebor. Also, an (un?)expected development. If you’re wondering why didn’t the Master's men show up, it is because the Master suspected an attempt to overthrow him and ignored Bard's words. Clever of him.
What'd you think? Comments and reviews are welcome! Next chapter next week!
"You damn the crowd that lusts for luster, 
Talentless, your fingers spun ashes into fire, 
Yet no colors are as vivid as the colors you've lost. 
My child, my child, 
You took his hand, 
And the verdict claims- 
Guilty or innocent- 
You are not welcomed 
Anymore."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Take it.”

“What is that?”

“Poison. You can hold it in your mouth and nothing will happen, but chew on it proper and drink the juice and you’ll be gone for good.”

“Why would I want something like that?”

“There are worse things than death, lass. Think of it as an act of kindness.”

“You merely do not want Thorin to rush to his death and lead you to yours, should he hear me scream.”

Nori’s smile was sharp. “Well looky’ here, her ladyship is learning!” he mocked, his tone hushed. “You have three hours, make them count.”

Ningalor nodded uneasily and turned to face the black passage that led, or so she was told, to a body of stairs which will lead her, if she kept going straight, to the Great Hall. Right.

Thorin’s words still echoed in her ear as she slipped on her ring. Don’t take unnecessary risks. Your most important duty is to return to me, he commanded and pulled her in for a rough, desperate kiss that made the members of the company look away in discomfort.

His burning eyes lit her path as her senses, sharper than ever before, directed her. The deeper she entered, the hotter it was; she was suddenly incredibly thankful she gave Thorin his coat before entering the mountain. The heat made her dizzy, and she paused and breathed deeply until her heartbeat calmed somewhat and her body got used to the temperature. Only then she took another step.

Erebor, she began to understand, was nearly entirely underground. And giant in size. She lost sense of time quickly as she delved deeper and deeper into the bowels of the mountain. There were no windows, no light, though it would appear they had once a system resembling an aqueduct of sorts
which kept the halls lit. The fortress was forsaken to decay as dust and rust settled in and destroyed the halls’ former glory.

The stench increased as well, and then - she took a turn and paused - there was light.

Hesitating in the passage, she knew the taste of fear. Continuing on from there would be the bravest thing she had ever done in her entire life. She did not know how long she stood there, too proud to go back and too terrified to move forward. With Thorin’s words echoing in her mind, she knew what she had to do, however afraid.

She walked toward the light.

The reddish glow grew and grew as well as the heat. Ningalor did not know if she was wiping her brow from cold sweat or just regular one, and her tongue toyed with the leaf kept under it, making sure it was still there. That way, Nori advised, she won’t bite on it unnecessarily. Not like it helped ease her anxiety.

She placed her hand on the hilt of the sword she dubbed *Sting* and kept walking toward the red glow. So focused on that, in fact, that she did not notice the truth in Thorin’s words mirrored at her from every direction. Despite the havoc and destruction wrecked by the Usurper, there were still much glory and beauty to be found in the high walls and the expertly crafted pillars and passages, stairs, and doors.

She did, however, manage to note how enormous the fortress was, and how dwarfed she felt by the imposing size of it.

And there it was; the great hall.

Or what remained of it. Much was shattered and ruined, but she paid little attention to the relics, and instead focused on the monster of metal that lorded over the grand chamber.

The machine was giant in size, reddish golden, and shaped like a dragon from a child’s book. That would have been reassuring, if not for the fact that the murderous creation before her was much more terrifying than any drawing could possibly be. It had giant wings, which were open wide and nearly covered the circumference of the cavernous space. The wings had a skeleton of metal not unlike the anatomy of bird’s wings to which sharp metal swords were attached, designed skillfully to create the illusion of feathers. Red… fabric? Leather? Was stretched by the swords and the skeleton of metal to mimic a wing not dissimilar to that of a bat. The head of the beast was also metal and gears, mouth open in a silent roar, and she could see something dripping to the floor from the nostrils. Oil, she suddenly realized, as with her sharpened senses she did not need to step close to the puddles to smell them.

The cavity in the middle of the beast’s chest was open and in it sat a man, who appeared to be sleeping. Fume and steam rose and swirled in the air, reflected in the vast amount of treasure that was simply poured in the middle of the floor like a sea of gold separating the man in the machine from the rest of the castle.

She stepped closer.

Now she could see that the man was connected to the machine with… ropes? Coming in and out of his body, but far sleeker and made of material she could not recognize. The lower half of his body was either missing or swallowed by the machine, and the top appeared frail and weathered.

The hands of the contraption, she saw, were buried in the piles of gold, and from the intense heat
that all but physically slapped her in the face, she realized it was melting the precious metal.

Why?

She was mesmerized by the sight; that was her first mistake. She took another step; that was her second.

The dragon rasped.

It all happened so fast it took her a moment to process what was happening. The eye sockets lit with blue flames and the mouth quivered with tongues of fire dancing across the metal jaws. The heat rose and the metal croaked, and the puddles of oil began to burn like sacrifices before a pagan god. The cavity lit as well as the metal heated and turned bright red, and molten gold began to flow through the glass veins of the metal monster.

The man inside it opened his eyes and hissed, “Thief.”

Ningalor could not breathe. She stared, muted by awe and fear, at the gigantic metal structure. Her brain told her it was nothing more than steel and leather, and yet she could not help but observe it as one would an organism, as if it were alive.

“Thief!” he bellowed, and the voice echoed through the empty tunnels of the vast fortress. Steam rose again from cracks in the floor - was there a body of water underneath? And the Usurper inhaled the steam deeply. Ningalor, on the other hand, felt dangerously dizzy and held on to the ring as her palms became uncomfortably sweaty.

She could not think, shaken as she was by the pounding of the blood echoing in her ears.

“I smell you…” Smiled Smaug. “I hear you… I feel you… yet I cannot see you. Why do you hide? Come along! Help yourself. There is plenty for the taking… if only for the modicum price of courtesy.” He paused, measuring, waiting. His voice had a silken, commanding quality, utterly charismatic and unquestionably sinister.

“I haven’t had a visitor for so many a year! Come now, step into the light,” he drawled. “Did you think me dead, or old and frail? My poor, philistine boor. Or perhaps, a spy? I know your kind. But I shall reward your efforts!” he invited, “If you but spare a moment of your time and play the proper guest, hmm?”

Well, this was a game she was familiar with. “I did not come to steal from you, O Smaug the Tremendous!” she answered, hoping her voice did not sound quite so young and frightened as she felt. “I merely wished to gaze upon your magnificence and upon the legendary machinery that puts all others to shame, O Smaug, Master of Metal!”

“A woman!” He smiled. She could see now that he was bald, his eyes were unnaturally golden in hue, and that his skin was yellowish in coloring, almost golden as well. Was he consuming the gold? “You have good manners, for a liar and a thief. Do me the kindness of returning the favor, for I have not gazed upon a human being for... why, I cannot even remember.”

As tempted as she was, she refused to remove the ring. “Why do you hide from the world, O Smaug, Creator of Catastrophe? You have the world at your feet, ripe for the taking!”

“The world? Silly girl. What shall I do with it?” he sneered. “What use is there for humans? Capricious, arrogant sort. Metal is far superior to man, and here I have all the metal I shall ever need. Where are you from, child? Why do you hide?”
Ningalor wondered at his incessant fascination with her location, and slowly realized it placed her in a position of power in their exchange. She crept silently to a different location and answered, “I come from a forest never-green and an end of a bag the likes of which you’ve never seen.”

“Such witty descriptions,” mocked the dragon lord. “If that is so, then I am the master of all beasts and only on the finest I do feast. What brings you here, riddle-maker?”

He needs the metal to survive? He consumed it? “A horse and an eagle and a bear,” she answered. “A barrel and a-

“And a dwarf too?” asked Smaug from his throne of metal.

Ningalor froze, hesitated. How could he ever know? How-

“Come now, foolish thief,” he chuckled. “I can all but smell the stench of that barbaric tribe reeking from your breath. You are not of their alliance, judging by your tone, but that matters little to me. I do pity you,” he changed his tone, though his mockery was no less venomous. “Did they promise you a share of the spoils? Whether you live in a forest or in a bag, how will you carry your share? Protect it? Protect yourself from the knife they will point at your throat?”

Ningalor gulped. “There- There is no, ‘us’, O Smaug the Magnificent;“ she managed, “I came by myself, to look upon the greatest of men-“

“Idiot,” snapped Smaug, “I am no man!” he roared. “No, I long transcended that pitiful form of existence. No… you think me a mere thief, do you not? I know you are. Stupid child,” he said casually. “The dwarves - what do they need gold for? Oh, they make pretty objects, yes, yes, like children of the stone age, they gaze upon and admire that which they do not understand. I understand gold. I can use it for far greater a purpose than making pretty objects, indeed. I made creations superior to any man, with gold as my life-force.” He paused, smiling as he mused, “My machines and I will transcend time, the stars, the earth! As long as there is gold, I shall remain. When the last of your pathetic race had faded, I shall stand proud. None can undo me, ere I decide to end myself. My machine is the strongest there is. None could penetrate that!” He demonstrated by… moving something, was it a stick? With his hand, and suddenly the cavity closed and the dragon stood, poised to fight. As it did so, however, she could see a hole gaping at the left metal breast of the machine. She could see oil dripping from several hinges and steam hissing from several cracks. The beast of metal rose before her.

“Oh, how Perfect! Flawless! Staggering!-“

“Be silent, girl!” the man roared and the head of the dragon roared too, sending a tongue of flames in her direction. Ningalor jumped and rolled to the ground, barely escaping the sudden leashing, but as she did so, she fell on a large pile of metal which clanked and tumbled and gave away her location. The gold hit her stomach quite forcefully, and the pain knocked her breath out and brought tears to her eyes.

“I know you now. I see you.”

Ningalor raised her eyes in horror.

The golden ones to return her gaze were cruel and merciless. “Such a lovely child. Too bad you haven’t wit or cunningness of any sort, do you? Stupid child. Thief. Murderer!”

The dragon roared again and Ningalor jumped to hide behind a pillar, mouth dry and heart racing and waves of adrenaline- “You cannot hide now, not from me!”
Ningalor cursed her fate and rushed again to the pile of gold, searching frantically for the gold band - she could see, from the corner of her eye, the dragon head turning bright red again as it prepared to send another wave of flames her way…

The ring!

Ningalor fisted it and disappeared and not a second too soon, as the flame licked her arm and burned her tunic. In her panic she slapped the fire repeatedly until it died, but not before it manages to scorch her hand and arm. At the moment, though, she did not feel the pain.

“Hiding again, are you? Come out now!” Smaug ordered.

Ningalor stood up with difficulty, all poised to run back to the secret passage and away from the madman in his machine of murder when she heard his voice again.

“Barrels, you said? Woods never green, you said? You thought to trick me?” he gloated. “Stupid child. I have no intention of killing you, yet; no, do not be afraid. I can smell your fear. I need not see you. I will go to Lake-town, and then to Mirkwood, and burn those silly wooden settlements to the ground. And you will know, summer child, the price of awakening a creation far superior to you. A Dragon!”

The metal roared and the mountain shook, and the machine turned toward what no doubt was the entrance before he blocked it with giant boulders. “I am Fire!” he declared. “I am DEATH!”

All Ningalor could think was, No… before the tail of the machine slapped the wall behind her and an avalanche of rocks ricocheted from the clash and everything went black.

Every minute ticking by had Thorin’s patience running thinner and thinner, his steps more agitated, and his pacing closer to the edge of the cliff and the door - the black mouth gaped at him, challenging him.

“Thorin, sit down! You’re giving me a headache!” Dwalin complained, chewing disdainfully on the lembas bread. “Lass won’t come here faster if you pace yourself to death.”

“Silence,” he growled. “I want all ears listening, in case something happens.”

“Can’t hear nothing with all that stomping,” Gloin objected. “Can we at least light a fire to burn that thing? Taste like stale bread and dust.”

“No fire,” Thorin dismissed him, once again staring at the unnatural blackness of his home. How could he have ever agreed to send her down there?

He glared at Nori, then again at the door, then continued to pace.

She did like to keep him waiting, didn’t she? Guessing and hoping and worrying. Thinking too much. Honor bound or duty bound, she knew he would not favor one member of the company over another, especially when she stepped up so bravely to do as she had promised.

He also did not like that Nori volunteered to walk her to the end of the passage, and did not like his expression when he exited. It was dark and cold, the look on his face, and did nothing to ease anxiety in Thorin’s chest.

Damn the woman.
Perhaps an hour passed before they heard the first rumble.

It was a small echo within the stone, disturbing the smallest of rocks and the weakest of weeds, but he heard it. He stopped and focused his eyes on the never-ending darkness.

The ground shook once more, stronger than before, and with the rumble a hiss of heat shot out of the opening of the cave like the breath of Morgoth himself.

Thorin rushed toward the door. “Lily-“

“Easy, lad,” Dwalin grabbed his shoulder quite forcefully. “She might still be working ‘er magic on ‘im, don’t-“

The third rumble shook the entire mountain, or so it seemed, as boulders and stones rushed to their end and all attempted to find their balance, tipping dangerously over the edge.

Ori dropped his journal. “Was that an earthquake?” he squeaked.

Balin shook his head. “That, my lad...was a dragon.”

Then enormous boulders, the massive ruins that blocked the entrance to Erebor rolled down and hurled down the mountainside with a rumble deeper and more frightening than any thunder, and from that open wound emerged a giant machine, red as blood and glowing bright. The unnatural monstrosity spread its metal wings and, with fire pouring from its mouth and feet, rushed up to the sky, smoke and ashes trailing behind it and tainting all in their path.

Thorin’s eyes focused on the dragon, on the man caged in metal he had sworn to defeat, and suddenly another thought crossed his mind.

“Oin!” he hollered and rushed into the passage.

The darkness filled him with uncertainty, but he knew he had to find her.

He had to.

“…we should get out of ‘ere before Smaug returns.”

“Could plan an ambush, we have the space…”

“Don’t let Thorin here ya, he will bite your head off for suggesting something that doesn’t include finding his precious lass.”

“Where is the lass? I swear, we searched everywhere…”

“…Took her with him? To… throw… I mean…”

“Burned to crisp in an option-“

“Nori!”

“What? ’m just saying…”

Oh gods, my head.
Ningalor moaned weakly, feeling the lump as well as still sticky, nearly dry blood clinging to the skull. *How long have I been out?* She thought sluggishly. *What on earth is going on? What…?*

Slowly her mind began to catch up with her environment and the world stopped dancing. There stood Bombur, Nori, Bofur, Dori, and Ori, all muttering and looking, frankly, exhausted and agitated.

*They are looking for me.* She understood with a painful pang as bits of the conversation reached her ears. *But why? I am right here* - she attempted to get up, failed, and noticed the golden glim of the ring on her finger. She removed it weakly, carefully and slowly – for some reason her left hand really hurt – and tried, “I’m here, I’m-“

She was too weak for anything louder, and as she tried to speak, she noticed that something poked her tongue, something - the leaf!

She spat it out with all the power she managed to muster in her current state, which wasn’t much, and checked the leaf for bruises or chewing marks.

But the fat leaf looked fat still, and that meant that at least poison was no longer her primary concern.

Now, she had to get up.

She tried to support herself up by gripping the broken pillar next to her, but all she managed was to slide further down and cause some stones to tickle down toward the treasure hall. But that, apparently, was all she needed to do.

Within a blink of an eye - or perhaps she fainted again? Bofur was by her side. “Found ‘er! Get Oin! Call Thorin! We - Lily!”

And then Bombur muttered (or yelled? Everything was so distorted) something about a table, and someone - maybe Dori, carried her as another cradled her head and held it in place, and someone shoved a torch too close to her face, and Oin - was it Oin? Mumbled something about the bleeding tendencies of head injuries and something about a hand… whose hand?

She hissed in pain, was she in pain? Her head was killing her, the rhythmic pumping of blood will make her head explode, surely…

So much muttering, so much noise… white noise… and a whisper, “Lily… Lily… Lily…”

She had something important to say, something about a bleeding machine and a dying man, something about a left breast and a hole gaping bare dripping oil and steam and gold, something…

Ningalor closed her eyes and sank into darkness.

Thorin stood in his mother’s bedroom and watched Lake-Town burning.

Eighteen years ago, he mused bitterly, it must have been the other way around; someone on the shore of the lake watched Erebor burning bright, and he, too, was equally unable to do anything in the matter.

His body burned with the need to be there, stick his sword deep into the flying machine and tear it to pieces with his bare hands.
But he had to find Lily first.

He tore his eyes from the window and glanced at the woman resting on the remains of his mother’s bed. Once, this room had been the height of luxury, beautiful and sophisticated in a symphony of mithril and indigo, the colors of his house. Little remained of that beauty, of the vibrant colors, and the only luxury the room had to offer was a rather large window that once encompassed the beautiful view of the lake. Now, that, too, was burning.

Nothing scared him so much as running into his ruined home and seeing no trace of his woman. He saw the ruin the dragon created, the black spots where his fire rained afresh, some still scorching to the touch, but Lily… where was Lily? He rushed upstairs, then back, thinking maybe she got lost, maybe the Usurper hid her, maybe he took her, maybe he buried her underneath rock and stone, crushing the soft body into pulp…

He was not the one to find her; that was Nori. Apparently, she lay right next to the entrance to the great hall. Did he miss her when he rushed in to find her? Was she hiding in a nook he did not see? Guilt and doubt clouded his eyes. He should have been the one to find her. He should have found her. Or rather, he should never have let her enter that mountain without him.

With her bandaged head and arm, the woman looked frailer than ever before, and Thorin hated that sight of her, her skin marked with his failings.

She would never listen, and still and always - kept him waiting.

He waited by her bed. Watched and waited.

His eyes followed the seven men he sent to Bard’s aid, as he promised, and prayed to Mahal with all his might he did not just send them to their death as well, the same death that Smaug was now raining on Lake-Town.

The lake burned so brightly. Unnatural, sickening glow.

Was that his mistake? Lily’s? Or simply the inevitable sacrifice one had to pay when ridding the world of tyranny?

He watched from the window as the dragon continued to burn and destroy Lake-Town, as rain of flames shot from the sky and destroyed all in their path. The lake, a torch worse than his most violent nightmares, lit the darkness that served a witness to the horrors. He thought he could feel the mountain shaking, hear the screams, smell the burning wood and flesh and water. Specks of flames shot into the sky and smoke and tongue of fire blinded the stars; so far was their reach that even the Valar were rendered helpless.

His hand shook as it gripped the hilt of his sword, knuckles white with strain. His body shook, trying to contain the trauma of his youth - the halls of old burning bright, his mother crushed to death - the sickeningly sticky scent of melting flesh - the screams -

He could never forget the screams.

Then, the machine spluttered.

Thorin, muscles convoluting with memories of pain and eyes wide and bare before the creature’s madness - what has he done, to deserve to witness Smaug’s desolation twice in a lifetime? - took an involuntary step forward.

The machine flew back and forth, confident and methodological in his quest to annihilate his
enemies. But - no, there was no denying this - his wings twitched. The beast of metal fell to his left and stuttered, dropping a few meters before trying, and failing, to rise again.

The dragon rose, head straight up, opened its wings wide and pummeled - jaw leaking fire first - into the lake. The machine fell. The machine fell and crashed into the lake, exploding with a blinding flash of light - the lake itself was burning!

Then a sound - a devastating thunder-like rumble - tore the lake from its very bowels. Water and steam rose angrily and charged the unsuspecting shores, crashing ice and root and men and woman and child into oblivion. Steam and smoke blurred the night into a chaos of fire and death, and the funeral pyre, the largest ever seen, rose up high, all the way to the stars, where the dragon claimed his place.

The dragon was defeated at last.

The reign of terror was over. Smaug was no more. But the fires… the fires were still burning. In his mind’s eye, they will never stop burning. He could feel the heat melting the flesh from his face, melting his rings and beads and mail, tearing hungrily into his body and claiming…

Those fires will never stop burning him.

An eerily, golden light covered the lake long after the tongues of flames slowly withered. Eventually, the golden layer too sank, and the lake was as black as night. Darker still was the hour when his men returned, leading with them what that remained of the people of Lake-Town.

The convoy was painfully small, and he could not even tell if his men were amongst the few shadows stumbling to safety or not. He was a duke, now, a proper duke with a large dukedom and a handful of people.

He should be pleased, shouldn’t he? Had no reason not to be.

The sun rose and shone over the golden lake, and only then Thorin realized he spent the entire night lost in thought and memories and pain.

He was home! Home at last! A ruin, perhaps, but one that could be rebuilt and restored, now that it was recovered.

If Lily would only open her eyes…

A knock on the door. “Thorin? We have visitors.” Balin.

He sat next to her on the bed, caressed her cheek, wiped her forehead. He sighed. “Tell Bard to wait, I cannot see what is so urgent that - “

“Not Bard, Thorin. Ravens. The Ravens have returned.”

Thorin exhaled, kissed the damp skin of her forehead, and tore his eyes in surrender from the unconscious woman. He wanted to be there when she first opened her eyes, but duty came first. He marched to the door. “When- can they send a message?” he demanded as he began to match to the Gallery of Dukes. The great hall still reeked from the presence of the Usurper.

“Well, they must be sworn first before you, as their duke, and then - “

“Send Oin to watch over Lily. I will attend to the matter. We need to send a letter to Dain immediately.”
Thorin clasped Balin’s shoulders. “We may have won that round, if you can call that winning, but we still number fourteen, and we are poor guards when compared with a machine of fire and death. We need soldiers and supplies.” He paused, glancing at the view of the few tents that surrounded the main gate, where Bard and the remainder of his people camped. “We need to rebuild Erebor.”

He walked through the halls - already his people began to see to their restoration. The primary paths they used were lit, even if the fire-duct was not fully restored yet and smoke clouded the wall where the glass was shattered. Gloin, with the help of Ori, began to count the treasure and remove it to one of the many coffins. Dori found the least destroyed rooms and made them serviceable, while Bombur saw to the kitchen. Bofur and Bifur began to dig out the rubble; Fili, Kili, Nori and Dwalin stood watch, and Oin took care of the many wounded by the vile dragon. Balin, apparently, had been trying to come to an agreement with Bard, but so far the grim man refused to enter the mountain and demanded to know the total amount of the wealth so he could, accordingly, demand the share of his people.

They were too few to inspire command or valid claim on the mountain, and all working too hard. The Ravens were probably the best news he received ever since he saw the machine of fire sinking in the burning lake.

He entered the gallery. It was a vast space, rectangle in shape, supported by pillars, large and imposing, and in the niches created by those pillars stood statues of the dukes of Erebor, still clad in majesty and authority. Standing at the end of the room, the largest of them all, crafted from the finest gold, was the statue of Durin the Deathless.

Thorin walked to the center of the gallery, eyes fixed on the figures draped in black that asked for an audience, and as they bowed, he realized - this is the first time he entered the gallery as a duke. A duke like the many decorating the walls. He made a mental note to commission statues for his grandfather and father as well.

He stood before them and signaled with his hand, as he had seen his grandfather do so many times, and the three men rose. One was old, gray of hair and black of skin, clad in the traditional black raven feathers of his house. The wizened face held cunning in them, as well as the black, bottomless eyes, beady and yet, intelligent. The other two were younger; in fact, one was a boy still in his teens. However, they also had the same sharp features, beak-like nose, black skin, and black, beady eyes.

“O Thorin son of Thrain, and Balin son of Fundin,” croaked the eldest. “I am Roäc, son of Carc. Carc is dead, but he was well known to you once. Now I am the chief of the great Ravens of the Mountain. We are few, but we remember still the Duke that was of old. Most of my people are abroad, but they are coming to pay respects to Your Grace, the lawful duke. We bring tidings, and knowledge, and service,” he finished.

“Which I gladly accept,” answered Thorin. “I will see the restoration of the olden days and the ancient traditions. Our houses were tied together since the birth of Erebor, and I value our friendship - may it last as long as the Mountain stands!”

“As long as the Mountain stands!” echoed Roäc and the two younger men with him. Thus they swore and thus the old ties were renewed. “This is my son, Cluck, and this is his son, Ceres.” He paused. “The good tides I bring with me and my kin, but the whispers we hear are as dark as our wings. Many are gathering hither, for news of the monster’s death has already flown far and wide, and many are eager for a share of the spoil. Already a host of Mirkwood is on the way, and the lake men murmur that their sorrows are due to the Dwarven Bond. They too think to find amends
from your treasure, and do not see in their master a leader any longer, nor in the Dragon slayer,” the old man rasped.

It was poorly done, thought Thorin, to have an old man stand without an offer of neither food nor water. It was not done properly. But the Ravens did not comment on the lacking hospitality, for they, no doubt, saw the destitution in Thorin’s dirty clothes, messy hair and beard, eyes red from lack of sleep. They may have won a mountain full of gold, but had not a moment to spare and enjoy said wealth.

“Your own wisdom must decide your course, but thirteen is a small remnant of the great folk of Durin that once dwelt here and now scattered far. If you listen to my counsel, you will not trust the Master of the Lake-men, but rather he whose arrow brought down the menace of fire and metal. Bard I heard the men call him, heir of Dale and heir of Girion, once the Duke of Dale. You must reach a settlement with Bard; he is a grim man but true, and is likely to be a great ally when time comes. Peace may cost you dear in gold, but greediness shall cost you more. Thus, I sound my council.”

Thorin narrowed his eyes, thinking. Cluck’s face darkened slightly at the sight of his scowl while the younger boy, Ceres, looked alarmed. The old man did not move, for he saw similar frowns on other, ancient faces, nearly erased from memory.

“A host of Mirkwood, you said,” Thorin said eventually. “How large?”

“A great host, two thousand armed at least, Your Grace,” spoke Cluck. “They bring provisions, thinking to win Lake-Town’s people’s hearts with food and wine, or perhaps to plan a siege. They will be here tomorrow morning, if not earlier.”

Thorin’s knuckles turned white. The treachery of that man! His arrogance! “Is there any of your kin here presently that may carry a message to the Iron Hills?” he asked, voice low and thick with rage. He understood Bard’s demand, for there were a promise and a matter of a slain madman. But Thranduil had no such claim; Thranduil had no such right.

Ceres took a step forward. “I am young and swift of wing, Your Grace. I can reach the Iron Hills as fast as the wind blows.”

Thorin nodded. “Go to my cousin Dain, who rules over the Iron Hills, tell him that Erebor is reclaimed, and in need of an army, mounted and armed. Then, send envoys to all members of my kin, spread the word - Erebor is reclaimed, and their Duke and Lord needs soldiers, miners, builders, provisions. Any man of skill who will answer my call shall be welcomed.” He gritted his teeth. “Too long has the Elven Alliance mocked me and my people. Too long have they narrowed our paths and limited our steps. This ends today. Balin!” He turned to address his advisor. “Call all the men! Tell them to cease whatever it is they are doing and fortify the fortress! I will not welcome a host of Elves with my defenses wide open!”

“Thorin, perhaps you should seek a settlement with Bard, now, before - “

Thorin glowered, expression thunderous. “I sent men to his aid and offered him the safety of my home, yet he wishes to know my wealth before seeking settlement! Tell him that he can wait for our accounting to reach a conclusion before claiming a share,” he spat, “accept our offer, or lose everything, should he choose to side with the Elven Traitor. Remind him also,” he added, “that the river that fills the lake is birthed here, in the bowels of my dukedom. River Running is under my control, and Redwater belongs to the Iron Hills. Our wealth lies not only in rivers of metal and gems. Perhaps they need to be reminded. Call Oin back. I will not have him tending to the wounds of our enemies.”
Balin sighed. “Thorin, is it really the best approach? The man merely wants to be reassured that—“

“If he wants my friendship, he should not side with our foes!” Thorin roared back, “I will not beg him for aid. Those days are done, Balin! Those days should never have been! And if that son of weeds thinks he can cage me, starve me, and then take a share of the my people’s heirloom, he has never been more wrong in his entire life! I will not have my fate decided by that tree lover ever again!”

Ningalor woke up.

Well, at least her ears weren’t ringing anymore. That was something. She sat up gingerly and looked about. She was… in a bed. Smelly and dusty and somewhat broken, but a bed nonetheless. The room was covered with peeling tapestries and the floors with carpets of fur and dust. There was no doubt in her mind that this once was a room full of luxury and beauty, and she, therefore, guessed she was still in Erebor. But how did she get here? Was it Smaug? Thorin?

She walked to the window and her breath deserted her in a horrified rush.

Lake-Town was gone.

Where once stood cabins of wood now remained only waves and shards of broken ice. Very few wooden structures remained, and those were charred and black. The lake itself reflected the sun too brightly, as if its floor was polished with golden metal. Wisps of steam rose from its center, clouding the sky. Black flakes still swirled and swam in the air - at first, she mistook it for snow, before she realized that those were the remains of yesterday’s horrors, dancing before her eyes. From her window, she could not see if the beast managed to ravage Mirkwood as well like he vowed to do.

“Thorin,” she breathed, heart racing and face pale, and she rushed out of the room and -

Straight into Oin, as it were.

“Child, relax! What is the matter?” the old healer cried as he climbed back to his feet and dusted his trousers. “You should not be up and about just yet!” he reprimanded.

Ningalor stared, eyes wide - it didn’t make sense. Oin did not make sense. What - “Smaug,” her confused mind managed, “I saw him - the lake -”

“Now, now, calm down, take a deep breath, and get back to bed. Yes, that’s it, that’s a good lass.” He led her back to the room and gently but firmly guided her to sit on the bed. “Eyes open wide,” he said, nodding in approval, “Good. What is your name?”


“Hush. Where are you?”

“Erebor, I think. Oin, I need - “

“What is the last thing you remember?”

“A rock falling on my head. Oin, please - “

“Move your arms.” He ignored her. Disgruntled, she did as she was told, panic still burning
through her veins. If Smaug returns – when - will? What has happened?! “Fingers. Legs. Toes…
good, good. Close one eye. Can you see well?”

“Yes. Oin - “

“Now the other. Can you see?”

“Yes! Oin - “

He clapped next to her right ear. “You heard that?”

Breathing in annoyance, she hissed, “Yes, now will you - “

He clapped next to her left ear. “That too?”

“Yes, I am fine, now-“

“Catch!”

She caught the bag that was thrown at her and hissed, “Oin! Stop playing games! I need answers!

Smaug - “

“Games?” The healer frowned at her. “Don’t be foolish. And you can relax, Smaug is dead, slain
by Bard. The Ravens returned and were sworn in.” He updated her as he checked her pulse.

“Thorin prepares for war, Balin tries to understand the ancient machinery that dams River
Running, and Dain is on his way with an army. Bombur - “

“Wait.” Ningalor took a deep breath, trying to organize everything in her mind. “War? What war?
Didn’t you just say Smaug is dead? I don’t understand,” she finished weakly.

Oin’s face fell as both bitterness and righteous anger replaced the usual kindness. “Aye, the dragon
fell, and now everyone thinks they deserve a share of the loot, Thranduil included.”

“…What?” she wheezed, voice weak and shaken. She wanted to say more, but no sound came from
her mouth.

“The Elven bastard tries to put us under siege. Bard chose to side with him. Bard demands one
twelve of the share, but Thorin refuses to give him anything unless the armies first withdraw. That
request was answered with a siege, I’m afraid, though neither army is prepared for winter. Nor are
we, despite what Thorin thinks.”

“But – but - “ Ningalor stuttered, “I don’t understand, Thorin and Bard exchanged a vow, and…”

“And Thorin refuses to honor that vow when he is threatened with invasion; Bard refuses to
dismiss the Elven army until given his due, which is enormous, according to Gloin. Even if you
ignore the gold the dragon has consumed, Erebor boasts a treasure hoard too large to count. To
give a fair share of it - that will take forever. Gloin tries to calculate how much wealth was taken
from Dale, how much in damage, and how much for friendship. So far he suggests five chests full
of gold per household, but Bard wants more.”

“What does Thranduil want?”

“A necklace, or something of that sort,” spat the old man. “Payment for the kindness he showed us
when we were his guests. If that’s his notion of hospitality, I suggest we show him the same.”

“Good gods!” Ningalor breathed, dizzy again, “There must be something, there, oh, where is
Gandalf when we need him?” she cried. Of all things that could have happened, a battle. A battle!

Oin eyed her curiously. “You seem distressed, child. Why is that?” he asked kindly, “No one will be able to harm you, not within these walls,” he said as he removed her bandages and smeared some ointment on her left arm and right palm, then bandaged them again. “I hope it will not scar, but Smaug’s fire is a strange one…” he muttered as he treated her limbs.

Ningalor bit her lip, trying to contain her fear. She must have done a poor job, for Oin petted her shoulder briefly. “All will be well, lass,” he promised, “you and Thorin will live to see many peaceful days, I am sure of it.” He hesitated before adding, “Lily, I have some… more news as well.” She blinked at him, worry and fear swirling in her eyes, is Thorin…? “I… well, during your conversation with Smaug, you sustained a blow to your stomach.” Her eyes widened. He couldn’t mean… “No permanent damage was done, but… you are with child, lass,” he finished gently.

No. No, no, no…

She asked about the one thing that terrified her most. “Did you tell Thorin?” she chocked, her voice weak. No, no, no… this could not be. This was the last thing… no. She paled and swallowed with difficulty. It was too late, then. Consequences, she thought angrily, desperately.

No. Of all things that happened, of all things that could have happened… no, no, NO!

“No, it is the woman’s right to share the blessing, as she sees fit,” the old healer said kindly, “I wasn’t certain if you knew… do not look so distressed, lass. It is a great blessing from the gods! It means they look favorably on your connection! Nothing to be ashamed of!”

“Well, no, I mean…” She took a deep breath, tried – in vain- to rein in her stray emotions. “I must see Thorin,” she said.

“Aye! I am sure he’d love to see you up and about!” Oin said, trying to sound more energetic than either of them actually felt. He scrutinized her as she rose, as if expecting her to pass out any moment. “You’ve slept for quite a bit - my medicine, of course…”

Oin kept talking as he led her through the maze, but Ningalor could not hear him. All she could think of was her father, her father and his army at Thorin’s doorstep… did he come for her? Did he realize? And why Bard trusts Thranduil now? She suspected there was more to the story than what Oin revealed, but her mind was too agitated by the proximity of her father and the promise of violence to truly grasp the situation. By the weight of her unborn child. Too many people forced to pay the price for her mistakes.

She did not even notice they entered a vast room, full of statues and gilded pillars, until she suddenly sensed Thorin’s eyes on her. The powerful, penetrating gaze cut through the fog that clouded her mind, and soon all she could focus on, all she could hold onto was Thorin’s presence. He dismissed the four men at his side and walked toward her, his stride sure and confident, and gripped her shoulders in a gesture which was firm and spoke of intimacy.

Oh, she needed his touch. She needed his hands to hold her up.

“Lily,” he greeted, and the subtle relief embedded in the warmth of his voice made her feel so very weak. How long could she lie to him and avoid her father? Every moment is soon to be the last, she thought desperately. The uncertainty gnawed at her nerves.

She wasn’t raised to be this weak, she reprimanded herself. She wasn’t made to be this brittle. It was Thorin’s warmth, so freely given, that shattered her walls of ice and left her defenseless.
Weak.

She smiled feebly at Thorin, determined to hide her turmoil deep within her. She cannot be weak, not now.

Thorin frowned and cupped her cheek gently. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m- I’m well,” she stuttered, suddenly aware that all eyes in the room were focused on them, a notion that did not sit well with her. She also suddenly realized that Thorin was a duke now, a proper duke, and that this level of intimacy in his own halls meant something entirely different.

“I… forgive me,” she started. Polite, reserved, proper - her eyes darting in discomfort when his frown deepened. “I failed to negotiate with Smaug, and then failed to deliver the information - “

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Thorin dismissed her. He tilted her head so that her eyes had to meet his. “Is something the matter?” he probed. “Don’t deny yourself rest if you need it,” he added gently.

This was not fair, not to her and not to him. Was it too early to regret the night she had given herself to him? She shook her head. “No, I… I lied to you, “I’m fine.” She smiled uneasily. “I heard there is to be a battle?” she added, changing the subject. Proper, safe ground. She was not sure she could withstand Thorin’s gaze for long before breaking and confessing everything to him. Her muscles shook with the strain. She never dreamed she would grow to love someone so completely that the notion of lying would hurt her so.

*I just wanted to be free. Why is it so wrong of me to wish that?*

Thorin’s eyes clouded with ire as he nodded and led her to the half rotten table. Balin, Dwalin, as well as two men she did not know, stood next to it, looking at a roughly drawn map on which gems were placed to mark the location and size of each army. The contrast between the polished gems and the poorly drawn map highlighted their actual struggle, she mused.

“Roäc and Cluck, of the house of Raven, my lady,” bowed the eldest, and the younger man followed suit. Black were their clothes and eyes and hair, with raven feathers decorating their braids and coats. She nodded and was about to answer, to explain that she is no lady (hoping beyond hope that this was a mistake rooted in Thorin’s proximity and not the truth of her birth), but Balin spoke before she could and quickly introduced her to the two men. “Her ladyship Lily, ward of Tharkûn, and a member of the quest to reclaim Erebor.”

The men nodded, Ningalor frowned, and Thorin squeezed her arm in warning when she wanted to protest. Confused and powerless, she remained silent, unsure of what that just transpired. Did they want to preserve her honor by giving her a title instead of explaining she was the duke’s mistress? Or perhaps they aimed to protect Thorin’s honor, so none would suspect he had taken an unmarried lover?

*Did it matter? She thought desperately. Does any of this matter?*

Thorin nodded and Dwalin pointed at the gems, apparently continuing their earlier discussion.

“We have two thousand elves besieging us, as well as a hundred fighting men- archers, mostly, under Bard’s command. Three hundred survivors overall, mostly women, children, and wounded. And Dain brings two thousand men and three war machines. He will have the height advantage, but be vulnerable to archers from the hills, which Bard either positioned or will position. They are convinced we have aid on the way, which is why they want to attack now. Which is why we should wait.”

Thorin nodded. “Did you check any of the old escape routes? We can get food through them.”
“Bifur, Bofur, Nori, and Ori are searching. Dori, Gloin, and Bombur are strengthening the defenses, Oin prepares medicine, and Fili and Kili keep watch,” Balin explained, “we haven’t heard of any discovery as of yet, but time will tell.”

Ningalor frowned and said slowly, “I thought Bard was an ally…?”

“The newly declared Duke demands more than he should while aiming his arrow at our throats. I will not grant him anything while threatened, as I had told him,” Thorin growled, glaring at the twenty red rubies gleaming next to one, small, green gem.

“How much does he ask for?” She tried.

“One twelve of the treasure to be delivered at present time,” sighed Balin. “As if we do not have enough to do already.”

“And five chests of gold per family…?”

“There are fewer families than before, and Bard assumes Dale’s wealth to be greater,” the old man shook his head.

“They cannot feast on gold, and with the coming of winter I believe the metal will be of little use, to all of us,” she probed. “Perhaps, in addition to gold, we can offer our services as builders? Rebuild both Dale and Erebor, and tie the two together?”

Thorin sighed. “Lily, he has already joined forces with that cursed Elf. We will not beg for peace.”

“Buy it, then. Buy food from Thranduil, buy friendship from Bard. Invest the wealth now, earn it later.”

“Or just kill fifteen men and one woman and take it all for free,” Dwalin grumbled. “If you want to be diplomatic, go talk with them yourself. I say we prepare for battle. Words are fickle, but fists are not.”

“Bard’s men are weak, and Thranduil loves his too fiercely to risk them for things that may be given freely,” she insisted, looking directly at Thorin. “Erebor needs to be rebuilt, restored, before it can regain its former glory. Having a good relationship with the neighbors is the first step.”

Dwalin huffed in annoyance. “The first step is to come from a place of power, and for that reason, we cannot bend the knee before an Elf and a homeless—“

“Dragon slayer,” said Roäc. “Bard the Dragon slayer. And his people are in need. He has trouble governing them, I hear, and they do not wish for war like their proud leader does. My lady speaks the way of peace, words I can deliver.”

Ningalor frowned, uncertain, but a glance at Thorin’s troubled face told her the old man sided with her, and that his council weighed more heavily than hers.

“No,” declared Thorin. “We will not beg nor buy what that is rightfully ours. I want the front entrance barricaded and every war machine ready for battle. Dain is supposed to arrive at the ninth hour, so we must be ready.”

The men nodded, bowing their heads, which neither Balin nor Dwalin did before, and Ningalor glanced at Thorin uncertainly before bowing her head as well, unsure of the proper behavior now that Thorin was truly the Duke of Erebor and the leader of the Dwarven Bond.
She was quickly corrected, however, when she felt fingers curling underneath her chin, tilting her head up, and her eyes were met with Thorin’s gentle gaze, though the pain that flickered underneath had not gone unnoticed. She frowned. Was it something she did? Something she didn’t?

He signaled with his head for her to follow him and marched out of the gallery. Ningalor followed, trying in vain to match her pace to his. She did not look behind, though she did not need to - she could feel the eyes of the men pinned onto her back. Her stomach turned uncomfortably.

Thorin continued to lead her in silence, though his pace slowed somewhat, and Ningalor knew without any shade of doubt that she was entirely lost.

The silence, however, unnerved her far more than the eerie halls or the rubble or the human bones scattered here and there. Thorin paused next to a door, pushed it open and -

And they were outside.

Ningalor’s breath escaped her body in utter, uncontrollable relief as she tried to inhale and fill her lungs to the brim with the fresh, crisp air. She hurried, as if drowning, to the edge of the balcony and swallowed with her eyes the sight of the mountain, already turning white and silver, the flowing river, the trees…

She drank the view raggedly, ignoring the bite of the northern wind, and felt the tension, or at least some of it, leaving her shoulders.

Then she felt hands, strong arms hugging her waist and pulling her against a warm chest and she closed her eyes, inhaling Thorin’s scent with thirst she did not know before.

“Oh, Thorin…” she sighed, tangling her fingers with his, leaning against him.

“Hmm,” he rumbled. “You were tense. At the meeting.” His arms tightened their hold. “Distant.”

She squeezed his hand, feeling faint. “Forgive me. I… the battle and…” she gulped. “I do not know what to do,” she whispered, voice barely heard. I do not know how to behave around you.

Thorin rubbed his cheek against hers, then kissed her forehead gently. “Nothing, amrâlimê. You need not do anything. Nor is this your fault. We always had to fight to protect our own, and this situation is no different.”

She tensed, uncertain, and Thorin sensed that, for he pressed another kiss to her cheek. “Do not think about them. They will crash against the ancient stone and break, like waves upon the shore. No harm can reach us within these walls.”

“You can speak with them,” she reprimanded. “Try to come to an agreement.”

Thorin sighed in frustration. “Lily…”

“At least try!” She turned in his arms so she could face him, cupped his cheek gently. “Your rightful rule should not begin with bloodshed.”

Thorin scowled. “My rule began when my father died,” he said harshly. “I will not speak with those who come to force me to my knees. You may speak with them if you wish, but I find it futile.”

Ningalor paled, looked down and muttered, “I can speak with Bard. I think we can see eye to eye, as long as I have your word you will uphold whatever agreement we strike. But I cannot meet with
Thranduil,” she whispered.

Thorin frowned. “I can promise no such thing. I will give no more than the amount Gloin advised.”
He sighed. “Lily, you must know, surely, that Thranduil cannot reach you. Not in my dukedom.”

“If Thranduil sees me here, there will be war,” she said colorlessly. “No matter what you present me as.”

Thorin frowned at the touch of venom in her voice.

“Your Grace,” she added.

He growled, “I told you not to call me that.” His blue eyes were ablaze with anger. “I treated you honorably. I invited you to the war council and did not ask you to bow before me. I set you as my equal!”

“Which I am not!” she cried and untangled herself from him. “I do not want to lie about my… about anything,” she finished weakly. She was very close to tears, she realized with horror. Thorin’s kindness would be the thing to break her. The kindness she did not deserve. She thought of his hands on her stomach. She did not muster the courage to tell him.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Thorin raking his fingers through his hair in frustration. “I can never please you,” he said finally, coldly. “Nothing I do is ever good enough for you.”

She blinked her tears away. “You could talk with Bard.”

“No.”

“Why go to war when you can avoid one?”

“This war is unavoidable.”

“Thorin…”

“I did not ask for your approval.”

She flinched, hurt, and looked at the river below her. She hugged herself, suddenly conscious of the biting chill. She heard him sigh and saw him approaching from the corner of her eye, then felt his hand, heavy and hesitant, on her shoulder.

“I hoped the view would please you,” he muttered, as if to himself, and Ningalor could not help the sob that escaped her lips. She looked up, saw the tenderness in the piercing blue, the harsh resolve, the pain… he deserved better. Better than the lies she provided him with.

Her breath quivered - no, she will not let him see her cry. She cannot -

She hugged him fiercely, clasping her hands behind his back, holding on to him as if she feared drowning in her own emotional turmoil. She felt slightly reassured when Thorin hugged her just as firmly, cradling her head with one hand and with the other rubbing her back gently, holding her tightly.

“Ghivashel…?” he whispered, “Lily?”

“The view did please me,” she whispered, sobbing. “Thank you.”

“You do not sound as if you weep from joy,” Thorin muttered cautiously. He traced his fingers in
her hair, pressing her against him. “What do I need to do to make you smile?”

She sobbed, and held on to him, and did not answer.

She did not resist when Thorin had to leave her, guiding her back to the statue room and kissing her forehead gently before taking his leave. She should tell him, she thought miserably. She should, before he finds out. She needs to. And yet, she hadn’t said a word.

Left in the hall, however, without the meager knowledge of how to navigate the underground fortress, had her feeling even lonelier than before. She reached one of the many doors, unsure which one she came from, and hesitantly peered into the hall. Silence greeted her. Silence and… was it the soft bubbling of water? Surely not. Maybe cooking, however. Thinking that food of any sort sounded like an excellent idea, she began walking toward the sound while attempting to memorize some of the fallen pillars and ruined decorations as breadcrumbs, so she may found her way back. A doomed attempt, she sensed, as she delved deeper into the dark. She should have stayed where she was and wait someone to find her. Sounds echoed within the stone and tended to deceive the untrained listener, or so Thorin said. Thorin…

She paused in surprise and uncertainty when her wandering led her to an open, cavernous room, supported by massive pillars, some broken, creating a circle of sorts. Their shape was reminiscent of falling water, and as she dared to take another step in, she understood why.

The pillars encircled a hole in the ground, an opening three meters in radius which widened as it descended, and revealed the soft bubbling of a body of water.

Water. There was water within the bowels of the mountain.

“Halk Abnâmul, we called it.”

A voice in the darkness made her jump. She twisted, heart hammering, to face the newcomer. A skylight in the stone above allowed a few stray rays of sun in, which shone upon beaten, dust covered red and long, white beard. Balin.

Relief mixed with anxiety rolled in her stomach. She suddenly noticed her surroundings - how easily he could push her into the water, make her disappear, say it was an accident… don’t be foolish, she reprimanded herself as she greeted her companion with a small bow of her head. Still, the bitter rush of fear remained.

“The Blue Gem. Here.” Balin lit a lantern held by one of the few, unbroken pillars - she did not even notice it, at first - and then another, and another, and lowered the small chain till in graced the mouth-like hole. She gasped, quite unwillingly taken by the sight.

“It is beautiful,” she whispered, gazing at the polished surface, the somewhat milky color of blue within blue, deep, deeper than the roots of the oldest tree. A shy movement, far away from the small opening, caused some of the water to move gently down the stream and the surface to wrinkle - like the brow of an old, grief stricken woman, and the colors of the deep danced with the swirling of the water.

All this time, I was walking on top of an underground river, she realized. The notion reassured her, for some reason.

“Yes, yes, it is.” Nodded the old man. “The birth place of River Running. I was sent to ensure it was still here,” he chuckled, eyeing structure and machinery her eyes could not see, “and the dam
still strong,” he added softly. Wiping his hands, he smiled - but there was a certain cunning in the eyes, a cold, assessing wariness that made her doubt the gesture and take a step away from the hole in the stone. “The color is something, isn’t it? A blue this deep, this pure, eh? Caused by the crushing of the stone, see - the water grinds, bites into the living rock as it descends from the mountaintop and then assembles here. The rock flour gives it the milky color, that richness. Once,” he reminisced, “this room was a celebration of lights, an almost sacred spot, where one could marvel at the strength of Mahal and the silent power of water, running deep.” He turned to face her, and the grave expression told her the last sentence was directed at her. “Bringing stone down to its knees.”

The last part hit her like a slap. She breathed in her pain and murmured, “Balin, I never meant…”

“Oh? Did you think we would never reach Erebor, or that your actions had no consequence?” He turned on her, eyes ablaze. “Did you think Thorin was anything less than the man he truly is? Did you think he would treat you as lightly as you treat him, a mere-“

“Balin!” she shouted, distraught, “Accuse me of what you like, but never, never doubt my devotion to Thorin!” She cursed her choice of words and tried, with little success, to slow her breaths and control her stray emotions. “If anything, I never… never dared to believe he would… that we should last this long. Truly, I never meant - I… I did not foresee this.”

Balin barked again, “Did you have so little faith in us and our quest - “

“No, just no faith in my survival, if you must know,” she snapped, looking away. She should leverage this conversation, survive just a bit longer, not dig her own grave with such vigor. So foolish of her, to lose control over this. Breathe, ease, assess… never forget the mouth in the stone, wide open and ready to swallow you whole.

Balin sighed. Something in his demeanor changed, softened, aged. He looked into her eyes again, and she could see her cunning was no match for his. “What is your real name, Lily?” he asked slowly, pressed on carefully when he noted her face betraying her, “Who are you really? Surely, if you care for Thorin this much, you won’t deny him the truth he deserves?” Oh, how the trap was tightening around her. This was his plan all along, to rile her into a confession and then use it against her. “Thorin intends, despite everything, to make you his lady. Surely he deserves to know at least the name of the person he is risking so much for?”

She looked away, blinking and attempting to cope with the shreds of her former mask. “It isn’t fair,” she managed, voice uneven.

“And when has life ever being fair?” the old man chastised, “He deserves the truth.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Will you give it to him?” Balin pressed. Not unkindly, she sensed. No, it was not cruelty that directed his words. It was loyalty and protectiveness and love, but not for her. No, not for her. She had done nothing to deserve any.

“After the battle,” she finally answered. “I… do not want his mind to wander.”

When she turned to face Balin, her eyes were bright but her resolve was iron. She saw the remains of his kindness turning slowly into anger. He had no pity left; not for her. “I know you doubt me; I know you always have. And, in truth, I did nothing to inspire anything but… but do not doubt my… my love for Thorin. Please, if there is anything honest about me, anything pure of lies and entirely true,” her hands tightened around her stomach, “it is my love for him.”
“That, my child,” said Balin balefully, “would depend on the nature of your secrets.”

Dinner was a tense, silent affair. The men chewed and swallowed the lembas bread solemnly, slowly. No song was sung, no merriment was heard. A fitting mood, mused Ningalor sourly. They sat on the floor, since most of the chairs were rotten to the core. In fact, Thorin was the only one to enjoy said luxury, though he did not seem too pleased by the notion, either.

“This will not do, lads!” cried Bofur, rose, and picked his violin. “Tomorrow we defend our fortress, but tonight, we celebrate it!” He played a few notes, and the men cheered as they joined him -

“Under the Mountain dark and tall
The Duke has come unto his hall!
His foe is dead, the Worm of Dread,
And ever so his foes shall fall.
The sword is sharp, the spear is long,
The arrow swift, the Gate is strong;
The heart is bold that looks on gold;
The dwarves no more shall suffer wrong.
The dwarves of yore made mighty spells,
While hammers fell like ringing bells
In places deep, where dark things sleep,
In hollow halls beneath the fells.
On silver necklaces they strung
The light of stars, on crowns they hung
The dragon-fire, from twisted wire
The melody of harps they wrung.
The mountain throne once more is freed!
O! wandering folk, the summons heed! Come haste!
Come haste! across the waste!
The Duke of friend and kin has need.
Now call we over mountains cold,
‘Come back unto the caverns old’!”
Here at the Gates the Duke awaits,
His hands are rich with gems and gold.
The Duke is come unto his hall
Under the Mountain dark and tall.
The Worm of Dread is slain and dead,
And ever so our foes shall fall!”

They cheered and sang, and Thorin smiled as well - she missed the expression, however weary it rested upon his face. Then Fili and Kili brought more instruments, hidden in the pile of treasure, and the music sounded rich and lovely, in stark contrast to the darkened hall and the poor dinner.

The two heirs played the fiddles very lightheartedly, though none could have competed with Bofur’s skillful playing. He switched to the flute and Balin played a gentle song on his violin, to which Dwalin hummed but refused to sing because ‘it was a lass’s song,’ he claimed.

“Uncle, look what I found!” Fili rushed ahead with a golden harp, and the duke’s face lit with wonder and memory.

“Ah, that’s your old harp, isn’t it?” asked Balin, eyeing the clever craftsmanship appreciatively. “I am surprised it survived.”

Thorin hmmed but did not answer. He touched the strings gently, expertly, lovingly, and then he glanced at Ningalor, eyes ever so warm she did not even think to refuse.

She rose, as if enchanted, and moved to sit by her lord’s feet. Thorin began to play, and the sweet, lovely notes filled the empty, cavernous space. How could one so rough create such gentle music, she wondered. The notes were so soft, somewhat melancholy, slow to bloom but always tender, and Ningalor realized, when Thorin’s eyes fluttered open and focused on her and did not leave her, that he was playing her a love song.

Her breath deserted her in an uneven sigh, her cheeks reddened, and she smiled.

He wanted her smiles, more than her advice or observations. That was the only thing he asked of her.

Thorin blinked, surprised, and smiled gently in return. A small gesture, tight-lipped and careful, but still, it was a smile. Her smile widened slightly and did not leave her face for as long as he played. He played for her, as she kneeled by his side, gazes locked and full of warmth and tenderness.

She smiled for him, even when she felt she was about to break.

It was later that night, as she stood next to the window, looking at the still eerily golden lake, that she heard a knock. She expected his coming, and yet she sighed in relief when it really was Thorin who entered.

This time, at least, there were no consequences she had to avoid. No tea she needed drinking.

She crossed over to him easily, hating every inch of distance between them, and Thorin, oddly
enough, seemed relieved by her reaction. Reassured, rather. Why?

“I brought you something,” he said as he offered her a silvery bundle. Almost shoved it into her arms, in fact.

She took the offering, frowning, and slowly came to realize it was a shirt. A lovely thing, silvery-white, with small gems woven beautifully into the hem.

“It is silver steel, or mithril, as it was called by my forebears. It is as light as a feather, and as hard as dragon scales. No blade can penetrate it,” he explained. When Ningalor looked up at him, frowning, he added, “Put it on. I want to make sure it fits you well.”

He took it from her hands and held it so she could slide into the shirt, which, now that she thought about it, had the texture of a shirt of mail, even if it was much finer in design. The shirt was a perfect fit and just as light as Thorin promised. His hands settled on her waist after he finished dressing her, and their hold was nothing short of utterly reassuring. He gazed at her appreciatively and added slowly, somewhat flustered, “I… I know I promised you I would do it properly, and the… traditional gift is usually beads, but…” he hesitated before he continued, “now you needn’t worry about being presented as something you are not. If you accept,” he finished.

Ningalor frowned in confusion, as she failed to follow Thorin’s vague statements, but the hesitant, almost boyish glance he leveled at her, his careful hold of her waist, the knowledge that tonight might be their last…

It didn’t matter, did it? He came to her, tonight; he asked her to smile. She can grant his wishes, can she not? At least for tonight. So she smiled at him, and, using his chest as support, tiptoed and kissed his lips.

Thorin exhaled, his shoulders slumped in relief, and his hold became surer as he pressed her against him, kissing her lips and her neck, the need evident in the touch of his lips and her fingers in his hair. He paused, breath quickened, and muttered, “Lily… I promised you I… would do it properly.”

She frowned and cupped his cheek, smoothing the harsh worry lines that seem to forever etch themselves into his forehead.

“Thorin… stay.”

When he looked away, fighting for his resolve, she added, “Do not leave me, not on the eve of battle. Please.”

He looked down at her, closed his eyes, and nodded.

He let her remove his belt first, clumsy, heavy thing, and untie the outer tunic. Then she removed the armor, or tried to - the mail was heavy and Thorin, less careful with his clothes, tossed it on the floor without a second thought. She undid his gloves and, after the sleeves were freed, undid the ties of his shirt and removed it as well.

She will show him how much he means to her. For him, her knees shall bend. Only for him.

She kneeled so she could remove his boots but Thorin growled, picked her up and seated her on the bed. A pang of shock and hurt shot through her, but the tender look in his eyes told her he was not rejecting her; no, he simply misunderstood the gesture. He picked her up as an act of affection. Her heart clenched with love and pain so sharp she felt as if the organ was about to tear in half.
Oh, Thorin… my poor, beloved Thorin… why did you ever allow me to get so close to you?

Thorin then returned the favor and undressed her with the same gentleness, unlaced her boots with slow and measured movements, and lowered her to the covers when he removed her pants. He kicked his boots off and removed his own pants somewhat desperately, but when he leaned over her, their naked bodies almost touching, he cupped her cheek and looked at her, simply looked.

Ningalor frowned, confused, then eased her frown and smiled at him. He wanted her to smile at him. Thorin’s eyes widened at her expression, hope and vulnerability exposed, and the arresting blue lit again with passion. She opened her hands to him, ready to accept him, and Thorin bowed down and kissed her.

His touch was full of hunger but also incredibly gentle, as he took his time to kiss and explore and touch every part of her, as gentle and meticulous as he was on their first night together. He kissed her lips and her jaw, then trailed soft, light kisses on her neck. He sucked and kissed her collarbones, kissed her breasts and bit her nipples gently, playfully. He kissed her stomach, her fingers, her womanhood below, and every inch of her skin yearned and burned, wished to be touched and caressed and kissed. He kissed and sucked until she was twitching uncontrollably below him, calling his name and arching her back and burying her fingers in his hair.

“Thorin, Thorin!” she called his name, breathless and raw, and called him to her, the need for his presence stronger than anything she had ever felt before. She kissed him and pulled him close, buried her fingers in his hair, and tried to sear her love and her remorse in every touch, every movement, every sigh.

She did not let go of him.

If this were truly to be their last, she wanted to make it memorable. She pushed him slightly until he relented and lay on the covers as she climbed on top of him. She moaned in surprise and uncertainty when she felt him pulsing against her womanhood, but the desire and trust that beamed at her were the only reassurance she needed.

She wanted to love and worship his body the same way he loved and worshiped hers.

She kissed his lips, his beard, relishing the scratch of the rough hair against her skin, then kissed the firm neck, the strong arms, the muscle knotted chest. She traced every scar, marked them into her memory with her fingers and her lips. She collected his sighs with her kisses, caressing his face and his moist skin with all the gentleness and love she could pour into her touch. Then, she bowed before him and took him in her mouth.

The surprised intake of breath and the shocked tensing of the muscles worried her for a moment, but the pleased, dragged out groan and the hand in her hair, guiding her, made her try to take more of him in her mouth. She licked the shaft and the veins, sought to take in as much as she could, careful not to let her teeth touch the sensitive skin, and sucked.

The intense gagging sensation was hard to overcome, but the surprised moan, the breath hissing against his lips, the hand tightening its hold on her hair - she was pleasing him. She continued, encouraged, kissed and licked and sucked, tasting the saltiness of the skin, relishing the short breaths and the barely contained groans.

“Lily, Lily… come here,” he breathed, “Lily…”

She released him and crawled toward her lover, smiling crookedly at the undone man below her. His hand tangled in her hair and pulled her down for a long, sloppy, utterly unraveling kiss that left
her just as breathless.

“Who taught you to do this?” he rasped, fingers still in her hair.

“You did,” she sighed and kissed him. “I… I wanted to please you the same way you please me,” she added shyly.

Thorin groaned and lowered her to the covers, spreading her hair around her like a halo, lifted her legs and kissed her as he entered her. She moaned and locked her ankles behind his back, pulling his close and deep inside of her, and Thorin growled and bit her ear, whispering words she did not understand in a language she did not know.

He began moving in and out of her, slowly at first, and then faster and faster, pounding her breathless as he whispered her name and she cried his.

“Oh, Thorin,” she moaned, “Thorin…” she tangled her fingers in his hair and pulled him down for a kiss. “Thorin…”

He slowed, going deeper each time and longer, as if he wished to become one with her for the rest of eternity. He changed his angle, going deeper inside of her, and kissed her when she cried out, weak with pleasure. “My yusthûna,” he breathed, “zabadinhuh…”

She did not complain, this time. She wrapped her hands around his neck and held onto him, refusing to let go.

Thus they danced, again and again, and sleep did not find them for many hours to come. When they finally did fall asleep, exhausted and sweaty, Ningalor laid her head on her lover’s chest and wrapped her hands around his waist; Thorin embraced her and pressed her against him, one hand cradled her head, fingers tangled in her hair, while the other rested on her waist. He covered her in the blanket, kissed her forehead, and soon both were fast asleep. They were smiling.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
-Amrâlimê - love of mine
-Ghivashel - treasure of all treasure
-Yusthûna - wife
-Zabadinhuh – my lady

This is, without a doubt, my longest chapter to date. Phew!
So... Smaug. Nice fellow. Wish I could've played with him more, but even in the book he stays long enough for one conversation and then dies. So Smaug is dead, the worm of dread, and now Ningalor and Thorin can pretend they are dealing with their own problems. Well, Thorin thinks he does- he sees an issue and attempts to tackle it heads on, regardless of whether it's the best solution or not. Ningalor is just like, I'll wait for the worst outcome possible; but so far, so good!
Well, y'know, you've gotta poke fun at your characters sometimes. It's for their own good.

Anyways... Hope you like it! Comments are welcome! Next chapter next Saturday =)
Chapter Summary

"I will die for you
And close the night
I couldn’t care less about the what the others thought
My debt to the free
Was left untouched
I want the dead to know that I wasn’t strong."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A knock on the door had him fully awake within seconds, his mind sharp with the awareness of a warrior.

“Thorin? You in there?”


_The night was over much too soon_, he mused, glancing at the first rays of the shy winter sun dancing upon the golden lake. He looked at his woman, sleeping peacefully on top of him. His Lily, now truly his. A ceremony is needed, of course, to cement the tie before his people and his alliance, but, for now… it was good enough. Hasty, perhaps, but proper.

He will wed her after the battle, he thought, caressing a stray lock of hair, her bottom lip, her cheek. No longer will she have to worry about the people hunting for her, or about titles, or propriety. She will not have to worry about anything, anymore.

He began to untangle himself from her, unwillingly answering duty’s call, when Lily opened her eyes, and the soft, unfocused blue that gazed at him tenderly was more beautiful than any gem he had ever beheld.

“Shhh, go to sleep,” he whispered, kissing her forehead. “Sleep, Lily.”

“Thorin…” she protested weakly and attempted to push herself up.

“It is not yet dawn.” He guided her back to the covers, kissing her eyes till they remained closed and her body softened against his. “Sleep.” He seared his words to her lips with a kiss. “My love.”

Lily mumbles something he did not understand – wasn’t even certain it was said in Westron – and fell asleep. He gazed at her, searing the image of her in his mind, sighed and began to dress.

_If we are to fight today, I will fight, I will win, and I will return to her._

He exited the room and closed the door carefully, ignoring the angry look Dwalin directed at him.

“ Took your sweet time,” the warrior grumbled. “That was more than a minute.”
Thorin cocked a brow. “If it were that urgent, you would have knocked twice.”

Dwalin shook his head. “I came to your room first, found it empty.” He leveled a glare at him. “You should have told me. Would’ve saved me a headache or two.”

Thorin thought of the night of love they shared, of the gentle responsiveness and the passionate need, of blushing cheeks, rosy lips, and soft, heated sighs; fingers in his hair, eyes full of tenderness and desire and warmth. “I did not plan to stay the night; but nor do I regret it,” he added, tone slightly sharp.

Dwalin grumbled a curse. “Balin saved you from an embarrassment yesterday, but you cannot just… this isn’t the wild, Thorin!” he said, frustrated.

“I know.”

“What do you mean, you know? You keep acting like –“ Dwalin paused and grabbed his arm, forcing him to halt. “You didn’t,” He rasped. “You wouldn’t!”

“And yet, I did.” He smiled involuntarily. “She accepted.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Bastard!” Dwalin cried out, stunned, then pulled him into a bone-crushing hug. “You conniving bastard!”

Thorin returned the gesture, gripping the man with equal force. “Don’t tell the others just yet,” he asked. The warrior shook his head, exhaled his resignation, and nodded.

They continued marching toward the Place of Arms, Dwalin torn and Thorin calm. It was the right thing to do. He knew it was. It made him happy, so how wrong could it have been? Dwalin, however, had to take a few minutes to come to terms with the new reality. He clapped his shoulder, shaking his head in dismay.

“Well, guess I must be happy for you,” Dwalin grumbled. “I am happy for you.” He sighed, laughing roughly. “What’d you give her?”

“A shirt of mithril.”

Dwalin guffawed, snorting. “Well, lad!” he laughed, “you ain’t got a romantic bone in you, eh?”

Thorin frowned. “I want her safe from the battle to come,” he explained, tense.

“Well, sure. Practical.” Dwalin snored. “What’d you get her for the rest of the metals, a set of armor to match?”

Thorin glared, then muttered, “I did not… prepare anything for those, yet.”

“Well, ain’t you lucky she said yes,” Dwalin mocked. He added as an afterthought, “You… did tell her of our traditions, right?”

“Yes,” Thorin answered curtly.

The warrior sighed. “And… you told her that no child of hers could ever be heir to either Erebor or the Dwarven Alliance? Unless she happens to produce Dwarven roots?”

“No, but that is irrelevant.” Thorin glanced at the man next to him. “Fili is a good lad. He will be
an excellent leader to both.” He clasped Dwalin’s shoulder. “She is dear to me, Dwalin. That should be good enough reason for you to accept her.”

The old warrior looked away, at the carved walls of the dukedom where he was born and raised, then at the man he was trained to defend, and nodded. “Let’s win today, then worry about tomorrow,” he said.

Thorin smiled somberly and entered the room, Dwalin but a step behind.

The men rose when he entered and bowed their heads. They were all dressed in the finest armors created by the finest smiths Erebor had once been home to. He nodded to them, smiled benevolently at the sight of his nephews – did Kili pick Frerin’s Armor, or did Balin give it to him? And Fili, handsome in golden armor suit that once belonged to him… the memories struck him afresh, seeing them together.

Dwalin marched toward him, carrying his grandfather’s armor – the armor of the Duke, and dressed him in it, tightening the straps and ensuring the fit was right so no blade could penetrate the woven metal. The men stopped and looked at him, eyes wide in awe as he transformed into the duke he was born to be, piece after piece of mithril and steel – no expense was spared when the aristocratic family’s armor was concerned.

“Uncle, they are outside.”

Thorin turned to face Kili, face his men, and nodded.

“We are Dwarves,” he declared, “heirs to craftsmanship, and art, and skill beyond imagining! Men born and raised in the shadow of the Mountain to rise as strong as the rock, as hard as the metal, as unbreakable as the diamond! We are hard men. We are true, and fierce, and valiant, and we will not simply give up our home, our heirloom, our **heritage**, because of the greed of the men outside these walls. When we sat upon this quest, I asked for courage, loyalty, a willing heart. I received so much more. So today, I ask you this – will you follow me, one more time?”

The men rose – weapons at hand, armor fastened, and cried in unison – “Du Bekâr! Du Bekâr! Du Bekâr!”

It was cold when she finally woke up.

The fortress that used to be so warm when Smaug resided in it was now so cold, as if the stone itself froze with the coming of winter. Thorin’s side of the bed was cold, as well. When did he leave? She shivered as she glanced around, looking for her clothes. A broken smile twisted her lips when she saw the coat he gave her, that day at the river, on the chair, next to the mithril shirt.

It was beautiful, shining with a light of its own, she noticed, admiring the gift. She did not feel worthy of the mail, and the knowledge that Thorin had given it to her made it all the more precious in her eyes. She donned the mithril shirt first, then the rest of her clothes, then the coat. She was covered with Thorin’s gifts, she chuckled, cocooned in them. **I will keep you warm and protected,** those were his promises to her.

Will he demand them back, if – **no, when,** she corrected herself, he learns of her origins?

Will they protect her from him?
“This is my final offer, and that is your final chance to accept it. Dismiss your Elven friend and put down your arms. That is my only condition.”

Bard shook his head, considering. “I understand that you and Thranduil do not see eye to eye, but Thranduil has been nothing but a friend to me and my people, in our plight – “

“Yes, he has been very selective with his friendship,” Thorin snarled.

Thranduil smiled serenely at him in response.

Bard huffed in annoyance and continued, “And we will remove the siege gladly, but only after you have given us our due.”

“Your due?” Thorin growled, “You exaggerate Dale wealth for your benefit, and yet I had agreed to give you more as well as my men’s services as builders, and you consider my goodwill your due? To you,” he directed his glare at Thranduil and snarled, “Erebor owes nothing.”

Bard rolled his eyes and quickly interfered when Thranduil opened his mouth, no doubt to offer a slimy remark of sorts. “Thorin, perhaps Lily could join us? I understood from Balin that she is to serve as the diplomat of your company. Maybe we could reach a better settlement with her as a mediator.”

“The final offer I made was crafted by her,” Thorin dismissed him. “Accept the terms, or prepare to die penniless and homeless.”

Bard was about to offer a sharp reply, judging from the anger in his eyes, but Thranduil was the one to interfere this time. “So there was a woman,” he said slowly, “you lied,” he accused.

Thorin cocked a brow. “Should I have told you about her existence so you could capture her and thus lose our last chance to escape your so-called hospitality? I think not.”

Thranduil’s expression was infuriated. “She guided you through my dukedom. She stole from me, poisoned my guards, and devised your escape.”

“Had you not captured us and jailed us unjustly, she wouldn’t have resorted to those actions,” Thorin snarled.

Thranduil fumed, and, oddly enough, turned on Bard, who seemed suspicious of the duke’s obsession with the female member of Thorin’s company. “Bard, you said you saw her.” The man nodded slowly. “Describe her,” Thranduil ordered.

Was there something desperate in his command? Thorin growled, “We are here to discuss the upcoming war, not to describe members of my company – that I give you no permission to harass!”

“Be silent, traitorous Dwarf!” Thranduil snapped, all composure lost. “For five years, I have been looking for my daughter, and if I discover that she is the woman you hide behind your crumbling ramparts, you can be sure I will not tarry long, ere I charge these walls of stone!” he shouted, breathing raggedly, then once again turned on Bard. “Describe her!” he ordered.

Bard looked at Thorin, eyes unreadable and mouth pursed. If there was a moment to salvage Bard’s loyalty and turn him against the Elven Duke, it was probably this. However, all Thorin returned was a scowl, so Bard complied. The unease was evident in his tone as he unknowingly repeated the same details Thranduil once mentioned when he questioned Thorin in his halls. Lithe, young, blue eyes, blonde hair, sharp tongue, regal in manners…
“And her name is Lily, you said? The Westron translation of Ningalor….”

No. No, no, no, it cannot be. Oh, Mahal – It cannot be… she cannot be… she would not have betrayed me so, lied to me… no, not my Lily, no…

Thorin turned away, ignoring Bard’s shout, ignoring Thranduil’s threat – he returned to his fortress.

He had to find her.

No, no, no! I will not have it! She cannot be, she isn’t – no!

Ningalor watched the men outside. The feeling of her ring was soothing in her palm.

Elves. Her father’s men. Trained since birth, the men did not move an inch unless commanded to, and then they moved in flawless unison, like a perfected war machine. Expressionless, they faced the ruined fortress. She knew they’d kill all in their path if ordered to and show no mercy. The oath of Feanor, she mused, did not look so out of place when faced with an army such as that.

Was it too late to search the mountain of treasure for that cursed necklace and toss it at her father’s feet? Was it too late to buy Bard with the gems of Girion, which she heard Gloin mutter about last night?

She toyed with the ring.

The army parted like a wave before their lord and commander. Thranduil and Bard rode forward, and she knew that this was the last chance to solve this crisis. She did not hope for much, however. The hate that existed between Thranduil and Thorin ran deep, especially after her father jailed and starved him, and she knew Thorin would refuse to show weakness before his former captor.

It was just as unlikely that her father would show any kindness to the man, should he once again refuse to give him her mother’s jewels, and Bard… Bard was changed, she noted. From the grim man, eaten with doubt and memories of failure who carried the guilt and the blame for all of Dale’s suffering, rose a man, just as grim as before, but commanding and brave, a seeker of justice. The killing of Smaug convinced him he can once more lead his people to a better future, and the first step to that, it would appear, was securing enough gold to build said future.

She closed her fingers around the ring.

How smooth it felt, how perfectly smooth, the solution to all her troubles…

“Lily!”

The urgent, forcefully hushed call made her jump and turn to face the newcomer as she hid the ring in her corset.

“Nori,” she breathed. The coldness in his features, as well as the urgency in his tone, made her huddle protectively in Thorin’s coat.

The thief frowned when he noticed the gesture but closed the distance nonetheless. “You should leave, now.”

“What?”
He pulled her hand and began to drag her away from the window. “Thorin is now speaking with Bard and Thranduil. Bard mentioned you. You must leave. Now."

She resisted, untangled her limb from his reach. “Why? Why are you telling me this?”

Nori twisted his face. “No time for questions, you need —“

“How can you possibly expect me to trust you?” She resisted him again. “How can I know —“

“I believe you, alright? I believe you love Thorin. I saw how far you were willing to go for him,” he growled his frustration, “and unless you want to end your life trapped in Mirkwood forever, you —“

“Thorin! What on earth has happened? The negotiation —“

“Leave me! Where is Lily?”

“In the old library, last I saw her. Thorin, what —“

He pushed through, ignoring all in his path. No, no, no… it cannot be…

“Lily!”

He pushed through the rotting doors of the library and marched toward the woman. He ignored Nori as the thief slid away from her and into the shadows. Only the woman mattered. She took a few steps back, fear in her eyes – oh, there was fear – but she did not run. Perhaps she was thinking to stand her ground. Perhaps she already knew, or guessed, the root of his anger.

“Thorin, can you quarrel later? The Elves are preparing their attack!”

“Be silent!” he roared, ignoring the strange look on Dwalin’s face. The sorrow on Lily’s face. Sorrow and fear. He turned to her again, pinning her to the wall with his glare. “Is it true?”

Nori piped in, “Thorin, that’s a confusing question —“

“Be silent, thief!” he bellowed. His eyes did not leave Lily’s eyes. He could see resignation and remorse – no, no, let him be wrong, no… those were not the emotions he wanted to see.

“Is it true?” he asked again, voice wavering. Breaking. “Are you… his daughter?” He steadied himself, steadied his voice. “Tell me you are not Thranduil’s daughter.”


Someone cursed – was it Dwalin? His men gathered around him, looking at the woman pinned against the wall. But Thorin had eyes only for the woman – his woman – the woman he thought was his. The traitor. The liar.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, eyes shining with unshed tears, “I truly am.”

“You lied to me!” he roared, “You deliberately – you betrayed me!” he accused. His voice shook.

“Thorin, please, let me —“

She was begging. He could not – no, she had no right. She had no right to beg.
“What are you?” he snarled, “Who are you?!”

And the woman, still clad in his coat, his cursed coat, stood before him, shaking, and confessed, “I am Ningalor, daughter of Thranduil, lady of Mirkwood.” She was crying. “Thorin –“

No, no, no!

“Thorin, no!”

But by the time Dwalin reached and stopped him, it was too late.

Thorin looked up, saw the horror, the shock, the betrayal written plainly on Lily’s – no, Ningalor’s face.

He looked down, and his breath was caught in his throat.

He dropped Orcrist – the sound clanked and echoed, ringed in his ears – hands shaking, and stepped back as the woman slid down the wall, fighting for her breath.

He stabbed her. Oh, Mahal, no, no… what have I done?! No, no, no… he stabbed her. He stabbed her.

Oin rushed to the woman while Dwalin held him back, supported him, held him up. The muted, shocked silence, the horrified, hurt blue eyes…

All of his promises for naught. He stabbed her.

The terrible wheezing sound of choking, the short, hurried breaths – he could hear the pain in her panting. He knew he was the cause of it. He stabbed her.

“I’m fine…” she wheezed, fighting for breath, “Oin, please, I’m unharmed…”

“Impossible, child! That sword would have torn a man in half! Let….”

But no blood poured from the woman’s stomach. The corset and the tunic below were torn, but the fabrics were not stained. The woman, still breathing with difficulty and unevenly – rapid, shallow breaths – pulled down on her tunic to reveal the shirt of mithril below.

Thorin sighed in relief and removed Dwalin’s hands. The guilt he felt was gone, and he succumbed to his wrath with ease. He glared at the woman. He did not even try to hide his pain.

“Get out,” he rasped.

Lily – no, Ningalor looked up at him, and the blue was vulnerable and hurt. Broken. “You promised me,” she whispered, “you promised me you would not give me to him.”

And the pain was gone. All that was left now was rage. “I made you no such promise. I made a promise to a woman by the name of Lily, but that woman does not exist. I owe you nothing!” he roared, “You are hereby exiled from the dukedom of Erebor! And should you ever trespass here again, my strike shall fall upon your neck! Be gone, traitor!” he snarled, “As devious as your father. You can join his ranks and rot, with all your kind!”

The woman rose slowly, with difficulty, touching gingerly the area where his sword was meant to pierce her flesh. “Thorin, please….”

“I curse you. You, and the Istar that forced you on this Company! May we never meet again!” he
thundered.

The woman steadied her breath, wiped her tears, and when she lifted her head again, her face was clear of emotions. That perfect mask, the statue like expression – oh, how vile he found it then, and now he knew why! She wore the regal superiority of her people with ease that spoke of years of training, of the solitude and treachery that was the mark of the Elven Alliance. How did he ever miss that?

She shrugged out of his coat and held it out to him.

He took a step back, away from the mask and away from the coat.

“I do not want it,” he snarled.

“In the contract, it was written that any equipment rented must be returned –“

“It was a gift!” His outburst felt wrong. It stood stark in contrast to the composed, cold statue before him. “Keep the coat, for all I care,” he snarled. He will not let her see him break. “Keep the mithril as payment. But linger here one moment more and I will toss you out,” he threatened.

The woman released the coat.

It fell slowly to the floor, folded on itself, fur and fabric piling so carelessly on the cold stone.

She walked passed him, did not even bother to look at him, one last time, and exited.

Dwalin laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, which he shrugged off. He swallowed his bitterness, his anger, his pain. His eyes refused to follow her.

He stilled his rage, slowed his breaths, and shouted, “Ifridî bekâr!”

The answering cry was dutiful, powerful, strained.

Oin picked up his sword, which he dropped upon realizing what he had done, and offered it to him. Thorin held the blade, glaring at it hatefully, and muttered, “Today, you will drink the blood of your makers.”

A horn, silvery and muted, pierced the silence.

And then another horn answered, deep and clear and sharp. And the sound of two thousand hooves was heard; heavy hooves of war horses, carrying the armed and armored men of the Dwarven Bond.

Dain had come.

Ningalor walked through the open gate; the gate that was left open just for her.

She knew what she’d find on the other side. What she hoped not to see. The last thing she wanted to see. But, alas, there he was. The constant promise, the consequences which she knew that she could never escape from. Not really, and not permanently. Her comeuppance. All eyes were on her, she felt. All eyes were on the lone figure exiting the Mountain.

And then she saw him. Her father. Her father’s eyes.
The gate closed behind her. She had nowhere to hide. She walked forward.

Thranduil walked toward her. The urgency in his steps and the disbelief in his eyes were not what she expected. He paused before her, his eyes searching – searching for what? What could he possibly want from her? She looked back at him, expressionless. What did he want from her?

“I chên nín,” he sighed, relieved, and smiled at her. He smiled at her, as if… as if he were happy to see her. He cupped her face gently, peering into her eyes. “Savdhir dadwen enni,” he muttered, and he pulled her into his embrace, hugging her to him, holding her.

Ningalor’s breath deserted her and she swallowed with difficulty the lump in her throat. He was hugging her – all her childhood, her father refused to touch her, to look upon her with any emotion but disappointment, and now… now… “All will be well. You are safe now. My daughter…” he whispered to her. “No one will harm you now,” he promised.

Ningalor’s breath quickened, her heart raced – she felt her father’s heartbeat, racing as well. Her muscles shook with the strain as she attempted to maintain her mask, to keep herself from breaking. She will not cry. Not now. She will not let them see her cry.

Thranduil, sensing her shaking, released her and removed his cloak of silver and fur. He attempted to wrap her in it. The gesture reminded her too much of that day at the river and she took an involuntary step back, resisting the offer.

Thranduil frowned, cupped her cheek. “You are cold, my flower. You needn’t be.” She stilled herself and looked away, allowing him to fasten the luxurious fabric to her neck. And by the gods, it was cold.

“Will you not speak to me?” he whispered, “For five years I have been searching for you, looking everywhere for you. Five years I had dreamed of this moment, to hold you back in my arms. And yet, will you say nothing?”

Ningalor gulped uneasily, opened her mouth, closed it. No. She could not say a word, too afraid that if she tried, she would start crying and never stop. She looked down.

Her father nodded. “Traumatized, I am sure. Come, Legolas will take you to safety, away from harm.”

Too many eyes. Too many people watching.

And there was her brother, running toward her, gripping her in his arms and hugging her fiercely, panting. “Nethelen,” he whispered, “nae saian luume.’”

And Ningalor hugged him, buried her face in his cloak, and held on to him. Her sweet brother. Would he forgive her? Would any of them? She did not deserve their love, nor their forgiveness.

Legolas cupped her face, looked at her, disbelief and joy shining from the blue eyes, the same shade as hers… his eyes were searching hers, her face, trying to reassure their owner that he indeed was holding his long-lost sister in his arms… the joy disappeared, and Legolas frowned, for the longer he looked at her, the more he could see through the cracks in her mask.

He held her gently and whispered, “Nin? What’s wrong?”

Oh, how close she was to breaking.

A silver horn was sounded, and a steel horn answered.
Suddenly the soldiers around them shifted, changed position, and her father, mounted, commanded, “Ribo i thangail!”

For there, up on the hill, stood two thousand members of the Dwarven Bond, mounted and armed, quick to advance into the valley.

Legolas cursed and grabbed her arm. “Come, we must leave, before –“

“Halt!”

The voice rang, loud and clear, and into the intersection between the Elven army and the Dwarven one, rode a single man, draped in gray. Gandalf.

“Halt!” he ordered with a voice like thunder, “Cease this foolishness! Now!” the Istar commanded. “Do not quarrel between yourselves! Remember the alliance of old! Remember the days when Elves, Men, and Dwarves fought together! Side by side! Remember the Common Enemy!”

“The Common Enemy?” Legolas frowned. “But he was defeated – Morgoth was defeated –“

Gandalf bellowed once more, “The Goblin tribes are upon you!” he cried. “The foul bowels of Gundabad had emptied, and the black dread has come upon us all!”

From the other side of the valley, another horn was sounded.

Black and gritty was the sound, raspy and unrefined.

And leading that black army was a man she already recognized – the broad face, the small eyes, the evil smile… “Bolg,” she whispered.

And with him, carrying the black and red banner of Morgoth high, rode their foe. Countless, merciless, as black as night, howling the cry of the wolves as they advanced. A tide of fury and disorder.

She clutched her brother’s arm, perhaps in a desperate attempt to convince him to forget the foolish siege on Erebor and unite against the common enemy –

But her brother pulled her away, muttering something about how this was not their fight; this was not their doing; it was not their people that should pay with their blood for others’ mistakes; he should get her to safety.

Safety meant entrapment. But did she have anything worth staying for?

She allowed her brother to drag her away while her father’s army closed and opened around her, like the ensnaring teeth of an iron beast.

No grievance, no gold, no wounded pride had the power to stir hate and anger in their hearts that could compete with the cold and bitter loathing they felt for the Orc and Goblin tribes.

Thorin called out his men – to join the armies of Elves, Dwarves, and Men battling their age-old foes.

He ran ahead, his men following, the cries of battle echoing around him and merging with the blood and fury pumping in his ears. The first ounce of satisfaction felt gritty and coppery in his mouth as his sword clashed with the sword of the enemy – clank, slash – and his face was sprayed
on with blood.

Adrenalin, blood, sweat. The addictive scent of heated metal, biting cold and angry as it tore through the feeble flesh of his foes. Kill! Kill! Kill!

Whenever he closed his eyes, he saw her. That pure fear and betrayal. The fear.

He roared and hacked the men charging at him. He could not close his eyes.

Thranduil’s men charged first, their arrows swift and deadly aimed. But Dain’s men, who were mounted, quickly overtook them and clashed with the mounted Orcs. Bard’s men climbed up onto the Eastern front and directed the flood of the enemy into the valley, where they could have the height advantage.

Thorin didn’t really care about that.

Slashing, breaking, hacking, cutting, slicing.

*Lily on the floor, looking up, eyes wide, tears staining her cheeks.*

A scream tore from his chest as he challenged the enemy and ripped the man in front of him. The gore of the fight meant nothing. Another man cut down is just another man slain. And he will cut them all down. He did not duck, nor parry, nor paid any attention to the club as it hit his shoulder. The stinging of the pain was lost in the constant storm of rage and despair and anger.

His boys were right next to him, cutting and slashing.

He did not notice the worried glances they sent his way, the concern in their eyes, the number of times they charged ahead to cover for him, cover him.

His own boys, protecting him. He never allowed this before.

But he did not notice.

*Lily’s eyes, fluttering – Kill! Kill! Kill!*

“We stop here. You stay hidden and remain at this spot. I’ll position a guard to watch over you.”

Ningalor took a step away and distanced herself when he released her arm. She looked up.

Her brother was not looking at her. He was surveying the battle with his fists clenched.

“Father was devastated, you know? Raving mad with anger. He thought he failed to protect you.” He turned around, cold anger and disappointment and blame clouding the blue that darkened under storms raging, ever raging. “I never told him. What you did, I never… he would not have been able to handle that.”

She looked down.

“I suspected. That you left. I wasn’t sure, I thought… I thought you were hurt. For a long time, really, all I could think was that I failed you. I should have protected you, and to have you kidnapped from our halls, the heart of our dukedom. . . .” He paused. His fingers twitched. “I realized, at some point, that you left. That you had preferred to betray your own kind. That you –“
He turned around to face her.

“Have you nothing to say?” he shouted. “You left us! You left me! And for what? For what? To join those... Dwarves, to - will you say nothing?” He gripped her shoulders. The touch was firm, but not violent. “Will you not say anything?”

Ningalor looked up at him, at that hurt, perfect blue... she was tired of blue eyes glancing at her with disappointment. She said nothing.

“I was happy, to see you,” he muttered. “I was, truly.” His jaw clenched. “You came out of that... rubble, and you looked so... alone and cold, I thought you were afraid of Father’s reaction. I thought you were worried we would not accept you. But I was wrong yet again. You were merely upset you had to leave them,” he accused. “You did not want to return to us.”

“Legolas....”

“Oh, now you speak! I am your brother!” he cried. “I am your brother, and you left me. For –“ He looked away, then returned his eyes to her. “For what? Explain it to me. For what?” he demanded.

“I wasn’t....” How could she explain? What could she say? What is left for her to say? No answer of hers could ever satisfy him. Oh, how she hurt him. She did not think about that; in the same way she did not think about Thorin. Thorin...

She looked down and wiped her tears. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I have not considered the... consequences.”

“Yes. I can see that you didn’t think. A spoiled child, running away....” He caressed her cheeks, holding her. “Father... Father is harsh. But Father loves you. Father loves us, sister... I love you. Was my love not enough for you?”

“I am sorry,” she sobbed, but it was not her brother’s pain that that welled in her eyes and dampened her cheeks. She could not chase the image of Thorin, broken and betrayed, from her mind. Was that also wrong of her? “I am sorry.”

What could she say? What could please him? She could not tell him she wasn’t happy, was never happy, never felt like she belonged, always had to be on guard. Always lonely. She was so lonely.

They were hiding in an abandoned watch-spot, looking over the battle. They saw the tides of black, red, and silver clashing, crashing, breaking. Her brother observed the battle attentively, eager to join but unable to leave her alone.

He thought she would run again, she knew. He wasn’t wrong.

He could not break the lines of the enemy.

Pushing and roaring and slashing, Bolg was still there, beyond his reach. The hatred that burned through his veins and blinded his eyes and deafened his ears could not be pierced by the cries of his nephews.

“Bolg! Bolg!” Cut, slash – an attack he should have parried – he felt the blade denting the mail and twisting it around his arm as he beheaded the man in front of him. Numbness and pain and adrenaline and rage. Broken, blue eyes...
“Bolg! Come here, you coward! Cease hiding behind your men – Bolg!!”

A staggering hit to the shoulder. His hand fell to his side, useless, and dropped the shield. He should have felt warm blood flooding the tunic bellow. He should have heard Fili screaming for him.

“Bolg!!!”

Legolas was pacing. Back and forth. Again and again. He paused, looked at the battle, paced again.

“I should be with my people,” he said.

Ningalor looked at her hands and said nothing.

Legolas’ face was hard and frozen, anger and tension sculpting the youth into a man. No, she realized, he became a man long before his time; but she was not there to see it.

“Will you tell me where you lived, all those years?”

A softness hid underneath the angered words. Pain. That was pain. Had she grown so dull she failed to spot it, or was it her own anguish, blinding her to that of others? She looked away.

“We used to speak once,” he whispered. “You used to tell me things.”

Oh, Legolas. “I am sorry,” she mumbled, looking at her hands.

Her brother’s face twisted in a fearsome scowl. “Do not bother apologizing, oh beloved sister,” he snarled, then sighed in frustration. He mellowed his tone. “Did you at least find a place… that could be a home for you?”

She looked away and placed her hand on her stomach, where Thorin –

The place throbbed with pain that tore her breath away from her breast. Perhaps, she thought desperately, the act would be to my, and the child’s, benefit. No child should be born into a world where he is unwanted. Unloved.

“Nin?”

She snapped from her reverie and hid her wet cheeks. “I do not know,” she gasped. “Does it matter?”

Legolas walked to stand next to her and placed his hand on her shoulder. The familiar gesture felt out of place. “I do not wish you ill, Nin, surely you know that.”

“You wish me forever locked in our father’s dukedom. What is the difference?”

“How dare you! Mirkwood is safe!”

“It is a gilded jail and you know that! You knew that I was unhappy –“

“You had no reason to –“

“I just wanted to belong, Legolas, and I didn’t! He never loved me!”
“Don’t be ridiculous! Why do you think Father would go to such lengths – “

“He would go the same distance for that stupid necklace – “

The sharp pain tore through her like she was slapped across her face. She fell to the ground, the rough and uneven surface rushing to meet her and sink its teeth into her flesh. She placed her hand on the burning spot, swallowed the sting of tears.

She had to stop crying. She had to stop. Just stop.

“Nin! Nin, what’s the matter?”

“Hîr nîn,” declared a new voice as her owner revealed herself, marching from the trees.

It was the young, female guard. She advanced and bowed, though her forehead furrowed at the scene – Ningalor on the pile of rocks, weeping with her hand on her stomach, and her brother crouching at her side, terrified, his fingers almost but not quite daring to touch her shoulder.

She had to stop her ribcage from shaking.

“Tauriel,” Legolas addressed the guard, then helped her up. His hands were careful, but firm. She did not meet his worried eyes.

It did not befit a lady to lay sprawled on the ground like she did, after all.

Legolas cupped her cheek gently and she could sense his worry in his touch. She looked away.

Her brother tensed and released her, then returned his attention to the guard.

She had long, flaming hair, pretty, if sharp, features, upturned nose, and sharp, bright eyes. Worried eyes. She glanced at Ningalor once more, uncertain.

“You took your time,” Legolas reprimanded. “You were supposed to take my sister away half an hour ago.”

“Forgive me, hîr nîn, but the battle is… getting out of hand. I could not access this spot with ease.”

Ningalor could have, had she looked, detected the stress in the young guard’s face. The fidgeting. The fear and the anxiousness no guard of her father should have allowed herself to display.

She should have heard the tremor in the voice.

Legolas, perhaps, did notice, for he frowned and demanded, “What do you mean?”

“The Durin heirs… they are surrounded. Wounded.” She gulped and hastily added, “Hîr nîn.”

Now Ningalor turned to look at her as well, eyes wide and horrified, and she spotted the same fear, gazing back at her from wide, green eyes.

The guard was, for some reason, terrified.

Legolas scoffed. “Let them worry about their own. This is not our fight.”

“Legolas!”

She could not help the cry, tearing from her throat. They both turned to look at her in dismay –
what an unfitting behavior for a lady – but she did not care. Could not care.

“Legolas, please. Please, if you ever loved me, please, I am begging you, please –“

“What? What is it?” He gripped her shoulders, shocked by the unrestrained emotional display. Her brother had probably never seen her cry so much before. Hadn’t seen her shed a tear since the age of ten.

“Don’t let them die.” She could see his eyes clouding with dismay. Pain. “Please, I’ll do anything – but don’t let them die, don’t let him die, please, brother, please!”

Legolas’s eyes widened, torn.

“Please! Save them! Rally your men – please, brother, I know you can save them, please….”

He was a good man, her brother. She knew that. No matter how cold he was raised to be, he was noble in character and could not stand another’s suffering. He was fair, and true, and loved her dearly. Or so she hoped.

“If I do this, if I go… you will never try to leave Mirkwood again,” he said slowly, measuredly. “The dukedom will be your home, and you will become the lady you were meant to be. Promise!” he added.

She did not hesitate. She had nothing to lose. “I promise – I promise! Now, please, go, with all the love I have for you, and save them. Please.”

Legolas looked at her again, surprised at the passionate begging, the wild emotions, then nodded and left them.

“Hiril nín?”

Ningalor collapsed, once again, to the floor of stone, and clutched her stomach. The area felt hard, and the very touch of her fingers caused blind spots of light to dance before her eyes. Sharp pain burned through her, white and piercing and beating within, rushing like the beating of her heart.

“Hiril nín!”

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
-Du Bekâr – to arms
-Ifrîdî bekâr – ready weapons
-I chênen nîn – my child
-Savdhir dadwen enni – you have returned to me
-Nethelen – sister
-Nae saian luume’ – it has been too long
-Ribo i thangail – Rush the shield-fence
-Hîr nîn – my lord
-Hiril nîn – my lady

When I first read the Fellowship and when I saw the movie I always wondered how
Frodo emerged almost unscathed/with a major bruise from the troll/orc stab- (version
differentiation) I mean, even if the spear did not pierce the skin, it still should've caused a major wound. So in my version, Ningalor is wounded. Voila! Poor Thranduil still can't get his point across to her, though.

What'd you think? Hope you like it! Comments are appreciated- next chapter will be posted next Saturday!
You Always Left a Mark

Chapter Summary

"Penetrate the words of the soul
And the lies of the mind
And the fears of the heart
And the tears of the blood
And the coldness of the flesh
She is not herself when she speaks,
She is not herself when she's gone."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Wellcome home, my lady. Shhh… do not rise yet. All is well, lie back.”

Soft covers, soft pillow, soft mattress, sweet flower scent. This is not Erebor; was all her sluggish mind managed to provide her with. In Erebor, the mattress was hard, the air and the covers choked with dust; her pillow was harder than the mattress, and had the habit of rhythmically moving.

Not Erebor.

She opened her eyes.

The man who sat by her bed wore a gray expression and had soft, indecipherable eyes. He had long, brown hair, streaked with silver, thin eyebrows, and sharp features. His elegant, thin frame and bone-like fingers moved gracefully as he cleaned her forehead with a damp cloth. Her throat tightened at the touch.

“Would you like a sip of water, my lady?”

His voice, too, was smooth and sleek. Familiar. Why? She opened her mouth to respond, but all she managed was a raspy sigh, so the man lifted her head carefully and poured a few sips of the precious liquid down her dry throat. The coldness felt invigorating against her chapped lips and the water revived her body, though its sudden passing awakened a dull ache in the middle of her chest.

“Thank you,” she croaked when the man lowered her head with the same careful movements to the pillow. He wore a healer garb, she suddenly noted. The cloak was usually almost blindingly white, tailored to fit the body tightly so as not to interfere with the healer’s work. The white was a symbol of health; during darker times of war and pain, the garb was stained red with the patients’ blood, and thus marked the price of adversary.

This healer’s clothes were earthly brown and dry red; there was little white to be seen.

“You were at the battle,” she observed. Whispered, rather. Her voice was barely heard and unrefined from lack of exercise.

The healer leaned back, a shadow passing over his eyes. “I was,” he admitted. Soft, mellow tones. Sadness. “Her ladyship should rest,” he added. “I shall give you the blood of the Fumella, to ease
She had no time for that, surely. As sluggish and slow as she felt, she could not endure oblivion again without first satisfying her desperate need to know—“Did they survive?” she asked hurriedly, urgently, and attempted to sit again despite that stubborn beating pain—“The Durins—”

His hands were thin, thinner than hers, but restricted her to the bed with a strength she did not expect. His eyes were harsh, suddenly. The chill in the bright green seeped the strength from her limbs.

“You demand too much, my lady,” he said smoothly, cryptically. “You are wounded. You should rest.”

“I cannot. Not before—”

“Her ladyship has suffered much. She is confused. She does not remember that worry for her people’s welfare should come before the one for foreigners.” Calm voice, cold with anger. He rose to tend to something she could not see, but the sudden thick, sweet smell made her eyes close on their own.

“You… lost. Someone.” She fought against the overwhelming odor and tried to force her eyes open. Her limbs were too weak to obey her commands.

“As tactful as your father.” A healer’s mask covered his smooth, thin lips. His hands were gentle as he once again lifted her head and poured the red, thick liquid down her throat. “You do not even remember me.”

She lost her consciousness before she could grasp the meaning of his words.

The darkness that welcomed her was as red as blood.

He was slow to regain consciousness, his mind throbbing with pain.

His body felt heavy, restrained, rusty. He could barely shake his own head. He could not move anything below his neck. That sensation, at least, was not unfamiliar. *Axoloa.*

Thorin opened his eyes.

Pain was something every warrior eventually learned to appreciate. Pain meant you were alive and still owned that painful mass of bone and muscle. Pain was a blessing because pain meant you survived.

His body throbbed in agony and discomfort that made him curse the very notion of pain.

“Well, looky here! Good morning, laddie!”


Oin was by his side within moments, checking up on him, probing and examining and nodding in approval with every hiss that escaped Thorin’s clenched teeth. “In two weeks, I say, you’ll be up and running! How do you feel?”

“Shitty,” he managed. Longer, more sophisticated words were beyond him. “What happened?”
“Quite a bit, actually. You were asleep for three weeks. Dain has been taking care of the fortress in your stead. Repairs and what not. He will be thrilled to hear of your recovery. The boys would too, I imagine. And maybe Dis will calm down a bit. She has been planning to yell at you ever since she had arrived.”

“Dis is here?”

“Aye. Arrived a few days ago.” Oin chuckled. “Worry not, I am sure the sight of you covered in bandages will soften her up!”

“You do not know my sister,” Thorin rasped.

Oin chuckled again. He made him drink a potion of sorts to reinvigorate his senses and then walked into the hall, yelling something Thorin did not manage to catch.

He returned, beaming. “Gloin’s son. Fine lad, that. A fine child….” He sighed, and his eyes focused on Thorin again. Was it pity? Disappointment? The old healer looked older than he remembered. Tired.

“Help me up.”

“Not yet, lad.” Oin shook his head. “Must do something about that suicidal fightin’ style of yours. Surely this was not Fundin’s teachings. Even Lord Meneldor commented on it….”

“The Eagles were here?”

“Aye. And Lord Beorn. He is still here, waiting for the winter to pass. He was the one to pull you out.” Oin’s face was gray. He was leaning on a cane, Thorin suddenly noted. “Even the Elves could not get to you. The Elves saved them; the boys.” He added upon noticing the fearsome scowl on Thorin’s face, “Don’t be a fool, Oakenshield. If not for the Lordling –” He paused, changed his mind. “Beorn pulled you out,” he repeated.

The healer turned away, muttering to himself. Something about herbs and medicine. *Or perhaps something to distract the mind and stop the memories.*

“Oin?” He knew that face. “Who?”


“Oin…”

“You!”

The door opened abruptly – was nearly tore off its hinges, in fact, and in strode a flutter of fabric and fur.

“That serej bund! Where is – that uncommonly idiotic – fool of a Durin!”

“Hello, Dis,” he managed when the infuriated woman drew much-needed air, probably so she could continue cursing him, “idmi d’dum.”

She paused and sneered, “Quite a nerve you’ve got there, welcoming me into my father’s halls after you almost led my two boys to their deaths,” she spat. “You promised me you would keep them safe! Had I known you’d be acting this recklessly, I would have tied you to your bed until the entire foolish notion of claiming this crumbling pile of rubble would have passed.” She cocked her
brow. “Though I see Oin had already done a fine job of that,” she finished sweetly, eyes flashing fire.

Her muscles bulged, barely restrained by the finesse of her dress. Her entire posture was a promise of violence.

“Come now, sweet cousin.” Dain slapped her back, smiling uneasily. “Lad just woke up. Have a go at him when he gets out of bed, yeah?” He turned to Thorin. “You look terrible.”

“I did not imagine otherwise,” he remarked drily. “What is the state of affairs?”

Dain laughed. “Look at you! Barely alive but still talking business.”

“You could have at least inquired about your nephews,” Dis interrupted sharply, still glaring daggers at him, heaving rage and thunder. Thorin supposed he was lucky she wasn’t actually aiming daggers at his head. Dis had an exceptionally good aim.

“I understood them to be well,” he hedged.

“They are. No thanks to you,” she hissed and ignored Dain’s not so discreet eye roll. Dain himself was a reckless, one-against-twenty kind of warrior. No doubt he thought Kili’s and Fili’s actions to be laudable. “They followed you into the heart of battle – attempted to protect you from your own folly – nearly gave their lives to save yours! What kind of a leader are you, charging by yourself? No strategy, no thinking, no – you tried to take out at least four hundred clansmen alone, if reports be true!” she accused. “The only reason they did not tear you limb from limb sits in the front yard and attempts to reconstruct the front wall by himself, I believe. My sons are also alive, also not thanks to you – they were saved by a force of Elves, led by Thranduil’s son! And even they could not save you from your own foolishness! I can hardly believe –“

“Give the lad some credit, will you? He and your sons nearly took half the horde out,” Dain tried to appease her. He could see a glint of approval in his cousin’s nod. Perhaps his sister was not so far from the truth. This was not exactly reassuring.

“I instructed you, specifically, to keep them safe!” Dis ignored Dain, her voice just as commanding and infuriated as before. “Do you know what that felt like, riding to Erebor in the middle of winter and meeting on the way a raven who told me that if I didn’t hurry, I might arrive just in time to bury you? Bury my sons? Have I not buried enough, Thorin, that you would have me bury them as well? My sons, Thorin!”

She turned away from him. His sister, intense and fierce and unyielding. Fiery and proud, she held them together. As strong willed as the rest of the Durin line, she was a force to be reckoned with. No other woman could ever compare to her in her power of will or fierceness of nature.

Blue eyes looking up as tears, as pure as diamonds, rolled down a pale cheek…

“Dis…” he tried, but he was not sure what to say. What could he say? He acted recklessly. He was in such a feat of rage, he could not even remember the battle.

“They said you fought in a frenzy. Cutting right and left, not even bothering to defend yourself,” Dis accused, “and all of that because –“

“Now, now!” Dain interrupted, voice needlessly loud, “We are here to discuss matters of state and alliance! Balin and Dwalin will soon join us, and Beorn too, I think, but if you can’t rejoice at your brother’s recovery, I must ask you to leave.”
Dis now focused her infuriated glare on Dain. Thorin was impressed with the way his cousin did not budge an inch. “You may not order me around, Iron-foot!”

“Can’t have you killing our Duke ‘ere, either.” Dain was not too impressed with Dis’ willfulness. He was a duke himself, used to ruling and to Dwarven women. And while Dis was the sister of the leader of the Dwarven Bond and belonged to a superior house, she was not a duchess. But she was a Durin.

Dis’ fierce gaze challenged Dain’s aggravated one, and Thorin considered interrupting the staring contest when the door opened again and in strode Balin, Dwalin, and Beorn.

The latter had to duck, but he did not seem to mind the fact as he smiled ruefully at Thorin. “Sun’s shining bright!” he declared with a touch of merriment.

“That means good morning.” Balin translated, relief and kindness beaming from his old, wise eyes. Balin too looked like he had aged a decade. Dwalin nodded at him, offering a short-lived smile, and then took his place next to the door. Thorin frowned. Too many things happened. Too many things –

“So, now that we are gathered,” Dain said, smiling broadly and clapping his hands, “let’s review everything, eh? To be honest, I cannot wait to get out of this dump – no offense –”

“Does not look like much of a ruin anymore, if I dare say so myself.” Balin smiled. “Heating and lighting systems all work in the west and the south wings. Nearly all the paths, including the main mining routes, are clear of rubble, and most of the sleeping quarters and usable again, even if nothing is in the best of shapes….”

“Aye, my men have been working day and night to fix Erebor. They are warriors, not builders, architects, or artisans.” Dain sounded sour. “Those will come soon enough, worry not.”

“We survived the worst days of our first winter rather well.” Balin refused to be anything but optimistic. “Our alliance with Bard and even Thranduil strengthens in hold every day –“

“Thranduil?!” Thorin roared. He attempted to sit and was pushed down yet again.

“Easy, cousin.” Dain forced him to lie down and withstood with ease Thorin’s rather pathetic attempts to free himself. “Don’t go back into limbo just yet, eh? I also want to go home, Thorin.”

Realizing that any chance to throw off Dain was futile at best, particularly in his current condition, Thorin gave up. He swallowed his wounded pride and his anger and demanded, “How weak have we become, that we must align with that oath breaker?” he spat.

Dis glowered. “His boy saved my sons, remember? We owe that ‘oath breaker’ nothing but gratitude.”

Balin swiftly added before Thorin managed to growl his response, “The Elven Lord was… agreeable, after Gandalf spoke with him. He agreed to deliver quite a bit of food and fabrics and materials to help us endure the first winter. He also lent us many of his healers and opened his borders for trade. He extended the same assistance to Bard, of course. The Duke of Dale has been spending most of his time building Dale, but he also agreed to start trading and already began paying handsomely for our services as builders out of the payment of the settlement.”

Thorin glowered. “How much did you pay him?”

“Ten chests per family of Dale was the agreed amount,” Dain answered, “and the Gems of
Lasgalen to Thranduil. Took us a month to find them, granted, but he was pleased all the same.”

“Those gems were spoken for,” Thorin hissed.

Balin and Dwalin exchanged a glance, Dis narrowed her eyes, and Beorn’s face remained expressionless.

Dain shrugged. “Weren’t claimed. And the tree-shagger was pretty adamant, so who cares? Give him the stupid gems and be done with it.” His eyes were calculative, but he did not push the subject. The name that everyone was thinking of, but none would dare speak, did not cross his lips.

“The war took a heavy toll,” Dain continued, changing the subject, “from all alliances alike. At the first day of spring, we were planning to celebrate the rebirth of the free land and commemorate the fallen. You don’t have an issue with that, do you?”

“No, cousin,” he answered. “Tell me more.”

So thus they sat, with servants bringing food and ale, debating policies and the like. Balin was the voice of reason, Dain of practicality, Dis of pride. From taxing to housing to maintenance to mining to trading, no subject was left untouched. Fili did not join them, but Thorin was assured he was in charge of some building project. Kili was hunting. The odd coldness that bloomed in Dis’ eyes when he inquired about their location dissuaded him from inquiring further. They will wait.

Beorn threw in his opinion every once in a while, shaking his head at them and their stubbornness. He was invited to join the council because of his status, but Thorin caught him more than once glancing in his direction, eyes clouded and undecipherable. He did not seem to be fond of their ways.

Dain was the embodiment of fire, Thorin mused. He had blazing red hair, streaked with white, and brown eyes, aflame with passion. The mane was shaggy and adorned with beads of silver and gold and mithril, and the just as wild beard was barely tamed by the intricate braids that symbolized his statue. He was stockier and shorter than Thorin, perhaps, but his frame was broad and muscular, and his axe arm was especially massive. A cunning, dangerous warrior and an able leader. One could see the love he had for his people shining just as bright as the hate he had for his enemies.

Dis, on the other hand, wore the muted colors of his house – paler skin, blue eyes, and raven black hair, but she too was a force to be reckoned with. She was a warrior, wide of frame and muscular, but graceful and beautiful nonetheless. She rarely smiled or laughed, these days, and a glower settled permanently on her features. She had broad features, strong and prominent – large eyes, sharp nose, thick lips and strong chin, and her wild beauty had few rivals.

She was the embodiment of strength; she was meant to survive. Her blue eyes were sharp and polished, and there was no softness about her. This was a woman who had endured and would endure everything.

“Thorin, please…”

Dwalin, on the other side of the room, remained silent. He did not approach his lord, only looked on or away from afar.

Oin entered suddenly, apparently interrupting a debate between Dis and Dain, whose voices rather quickly became louder and louder. “Come now, you disrupted His Grace’s recovery for a good, long while! Out, all of you!”

Dain smiled as he approached him. “Heal quickly, cousin. I don’t know how many days will I be
able to endure the nagging of this one.” He chuckled.

Dis, not half as amused, slapped his shoulder and then smiled sweetly at Thorin. “Yes, recover well, brother, so I could put you back in this chamber myself.”

Balin smiled and bowed, following the still arguing cousins. Beorn did not bow but he nodded at him as well as he exited. Dwalin remained. He did not move from his spot against the wall where his eyes glinted out of the dark.

“Dwalin,” he said, attempting to invite him over, but it was Oin who appeared, tilting his head with expert hands and pouring white, chalky liquid into his mouth.

He thought he heard someone say, ‘I should have protected him better,’ but he wasn’t sure.

A dull ache and a strange pull, almost a resistance, as if she was rising from underwater.

She only managed to open her eyes with the power of her will, but could not tell what her eyes were seeing. She breathed in deep the sweet scent of honeysuckle and wintersweet, the refreshing bite of fresh snow, the comforting scent of birch burning, her father’s favorite firewood. *Not Bag End.*

As the shades around her began to gain shape and form, the colors redefined themselves into walls, a light green divan, and silver and white curtains, tied with woven ropes of burgundy. Her old room.

“*‘Quel amrun, Hiril nín.’*”

Ningalor turned her head with difficulty toward the voice, feeling weak and dizzy.

“I must say I expected you to rise yesterday. You wanted to sleep, I see.” It was the healer again, still dressed in the blood-stained robe. It either meant that the battle was still taking place, or that there were still patients he had yet to heal. His green eyes scrutinized her, then he nodded. “I understand,” he murmured, as if to himself, and there was a shade of compassion, easing the sharpness of the eyes glazed with pain.

Once again, she concluded he was grieving. A healer may not wear his grief while blood still flows fresh. Last time she asked him about his pain, he drugged her, so this time, she decided to say nothing.

“Silent.” The healer sat by her side and checked her temperature. She scowled at the impertinence, as he should have asked for her permission, now that she was conscious to give it. The man was not impressed by her facial expression. “How good of you to finally wake. I am sure His Grace will be very pleased to see you conscious.”

He was taunting her.

“Are you sure that it isn’t you who is the happy one?” she bit. “You drugged me despite my will.”

The healer narrowed his eyes at her. “Cheeky child. Versions of events are measured by loyalty.”

“Loyalty is measured by blood.”

The man tensed. Ningalor looked away, as she was too weak to wave him away. The healer removed his hand and curled it in disdain. With his dark hair and green eyes, one could not mistake
his for anything but Silvan lineage. How hard he must have trained and worked to prove himself again and again to her father. But even a Sindar healer should not have allowed himself to –

Then she realized.

“Nestor,” she said and returned her eyes to the healer. The young, witty apprentice, sharp-tongued and reserved yet driven, hardworking. He was warmer once.

“Ah, my lady remembers,” the man commented. “May I continue with the treatment, my lady?”

She nodded weakly. Her neck, and slowly her chest as well began to awaken from the influence of the Fumella. The sensation made her restless, but she could not move her limbs yet.

“You were struck by something. Blunt, I’d say. Like a pole. A strong blow, but not enough to penetrate the skin.” Ah. He had not seen to her clothes, then. It must have been the young, female guard. The oddly terrified guard. Nestor removed her blanket and opened the ties of her robe. Her chest was bound in cloth, as by tradition, but the spot below it was greenish in coloring. The area around it, about four inches in radius, was yellow, while the center was blotchy with green and purple. It was swollen, but not terribly so. She groaned unwillingly.

“Hmm, yes,” Nestor agreed. “His Grace wants to know what caused the injury. The scars on your hand and arm as well.”

“My encounter with Smaug,” she said colorlessly.

Nestor froze. He glanced up sharply and uttered with dismay, “Impossible.”

She did not bother gracing it with an answer. Nestor either chose to believe her or decided not to risk insulting her further and remained silent. She did not flatter herself to think that it was her he opted to respect. No, the man simply did not want to anger her father. She wondered what made him so bitter, what churned his mood and turned him vicious. She wondered whom he had lost.

She knew better than to ask.

Nestor applied salves of some sort to the bruised area. He was gentle with her, which she appreciated.

“It will please you to know,” he said slowly, eyes calculative, “that your child was unharmed by the injury.”

She winced, and not because he tenderly pressed cold cloth dipped in ointment against the bruise.

“It does not please me,” she whispered. She gulped, trying to still her shaking heart. Even that relief she was denied. She looked at Nestor, pleading. She hadn’t mustered the courage to beg.

The healer looked at her coldly, then sighed. Perhaps he found he had an ounce of pity to share with the silently weeping lady. “I cannot help you; you know I cannot.” He rose and looked away, avoiding her eyes. “I will tell His Grace you need your rest,” he muttered and left quickly before she could manage to breathe his name.

A small modicum of kindness, she thought hopelessly, was not a matter of small consequence.

“Come, brother, let’s spar!”
“Can’t, Frerin. I must study.”

“You are going to be the worst warrior in the entire line of Durin if you don’t practice. I bet I can beat you. Blindfolded, too!”

“Didn’t I defeat you last Wednesday?”

“That was ages ago! Besides, Fundin taught me a new trick. Showed me your weaknesses, too.”

The images were blurring, shifting.

“I’ll be the best fighter, just you watch!”

And he was the best fighter. Frerin’s fire was hard to match. His furious onslaught was common knowledge. The golden lord of Erebor.

“Just you watch, brother!”

He was sitting in the garden of Ered Luin, body hunched and sweat gleaming off his brow. Arms folded as he leaned on his knees, gaze glassy and focused inward. His hair and shirt were rumpled. He was crying, but when you lay a hand on his shoulder, he shrugged it off angrily and rose abruptly, walking away. Away from you.

“I don’t care if you are the duke to be. I don’t care! I need to be there! I need to be there, Thorin!”

“Frerin….”

“I too have lost my mother, Thorin. Stop pretending you don’t care! Stop trying to be so – Just stop! Get away from me!”

Your brother was crying. Your brother broke down and cried, and you could do nothing about it. And even if you could, you didn’t. Burdened with loss and too much –

Your brother is lying in the snow. He wasn’t supposed to be there. He was supposed to be home he was supposed to watch over your sister he was supposed to be alive he was not supposed to be lying here in the snow with blood staining his golden locks and his ribcage broken and hand twisted unnaturally and eyes glassy and frozen his eyes weren’t meant to remind you of milky glass made by inexperienced apprentices he was supposed to be alive he was –

You pulled Lily out of the water, her body cold and heavy in your arms, limp, lifeless –

She breathed, “Tho… rin…” and molded her body to fit yours better –

“I’m bored, brother!” Frerin swung his axe right and left. “Let’s go hunting!”

“So I could outride you again?”

“Shut it, Dis! You are not invited!” Frerin glowered. “It’s gonna be just us boys!” He smiled brightly at Dwalin, who rolled his eyes as he sharpened his blade.

“She’s the better rider and ya know it,” Dwalin said, smirking at Frerin’s exasperated sigh. Dis wasn’t appeased. “’M Coming too!” she declared, “Want to ask Dad see what he says?”

Your knuckles turned white in frustration. “Take it outside, will you? I need to –“
“Study!” they completed the sentence for you.

“Augh. Trade. I hate trade,” Dis said, peering over your shoulder.

“I hate numbers.” Frerin shook his mane. “Blades make much more sense.”

“You just say that because you struggle with your numbers.”

“Do not!”

“Do so!”

You were just about to tell them to be silent once and for all when your father stepped into the room, smiling wearily at the three of you. Your mother followed, frowning slightly, yet her face also eased into an exhausted smile. You never asked her why she always looked so tired.

“Dad! Let’s go hunting!” Dis smiled sweetly, using her charm. Again. It wasn’t fair.

“I am afraid I cannot, nanging,” he dismissed her. “How are your studies, son?” His eyes were weary and displeased when you showed him. He nodded, but his expression did not ease in the slightest. “I had hoped you will have finished your reading by now.”

Your cheeks reddened and you sent your brother a nasty glare. Frerin scowled. His eyes darted back to his axe in a barely disguised pout—

You took the two steps necessary without even thinking about it. One hand rushed to clash with her shoulder and shove her against the wall as your other drew Orcrist, aimed, and thrust the blade, pushing as deep as you could—

“Come now, surely Thorin deserves a little break?” your mother said, taking a step into the room. Her hand lifted, as if to touch you, and then returned abruptly to rest at her side.

Thrain grumbled, then said, “Frerin, Dis! Why won’t you go hunting? Tis a beautiful day. Stop bothering your brother.”

Lily’s hands pushed at your chest feebly, so feebly you barely felt them, then fell to her sides—

“Thorin, why won’t you join them? He has been locked in his room all morning.” She aimed the second part of her sentence at Thrain. “Watch over them,” she added, eyes flickers to look at you, then away.

Frerin scoffed.

Thrain sighed. “You heard it, Fundinson?” He turned to the young man, who snapped into attention. “Two eyes open at all time.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Frerin? Frerin! Wake up! Wake up, damn it! Wake up! Get up! That’s – That’s – Get up!” He was so cold when you pulled him against your chest. “Get up now. Look at me. Brother – “ It wasn’t raining. Those drops of water weren’t rain. “Wake up! Look at me!”

But he was asleep. He was looking at you and he was asleep.

Don’t make me bury another Durin...
“I am Ningalor, daughter of Thranduil, lady of Mirkwood.” She was crying. “Thorin –“

“No more Axoloa.”

Ningalor glanced out the window. The view of trees laden with snow did not capture her attention. Her eyes followed the fall of the snowflakes as they dusted the evergreen forest. Wounded, the servant said as she snatched the earrings from her palm. Gravely wounded.

Ningalor tensed only slightly at the sound of footsteps.

“…Why Wasn’t I informed of this before?”

“My… wounded… three months is the proper….”

“Do you really think that propriety is relevant anymore?” her father roared. Huh. She was quite certain she never heard her father raise his voice before.

Her father burst into her room, which was another unusual occurrence, with Nestor in his wake. The healer seemed bothered, but when his eyes met hers the green was smooth and emotionless. It was his grief that polished his eyes and drained the green of its color. His eyes were vivid once, weren’t they?

Not that it mattered, because her father was leaning over her, face pale with rage and blue eyes ablaze.

“Tell me it is a mistake, daughter,” he commanded. “Tell me my healer is tired and in need of rest. Tell me there had been a mistake. Tell me!”

There was a note of desperation in his tone. Wasn’t this scene familiar? Her hand played with her ring under the folds of her dress. She suddenly remembered how Nori, in a futile attempt to buy her time, asked Thorin for the meaning of his inquiry.

“IT is true.”

Her father stepped away, as if her confirmation settled around her like a curse. His eyes had a note of pleading, shock, then rage. He looked aside, attempting to control his temper.

“Who did this to you.”

It wasn’t a question; not really. But it seemed her father had no intention to blame her.

“I will have his name, daughter! Who dared defile you? Who –“ He sat by her side on the divan next to the large window and gently touched her cheek. She looked up, eyes wide and lips parted – she did not expect this. Not gentleness. Why was he gentle with her?

“You don’t eat; you barely sleep; you rarely speak. I thought… I never thought something like this would ever happen to a child this pure, oh, my daughter….”
She looked down, for she knew that this too was kindness she did not deserve. Nor did her father deserve to feel guilty over a crime that never took place. Nor did Thorin – she did not complete the thought. Swallowing the bitterness over the reaction she knew would follow, she uttered, “It... it wasn’t forced.”

She did not need to look up to feel him tensing. “Surely you do not mean that.” His voice was silken, dangerous. “I will have the name of your defiler. I will avenge your honor.”

“There is no such name.” She looked up, knowing she must, and the pain and shock in her father’s eyes made her heart squeeze in equal anguish. He did not deserve to have such a misbehaving daughter. “I am sorry, Adar,” she whispered.

Thranduil’s hand dropped. He looked away. “A name, Ningalor. I need a name.”

“I have none to give.”

“Do you not even know the name of the man you – “ The air deserted his lunged in a rush of rage. His face twisted balefully. “I thought I raised you to be better than this.”

It stung. She swallowed her pain before she answered, “He promised he’d marry me,” she whispered, suddenly aware of how foolish she sounded. She regretted the words the moment they crossed her lips.

“Oh. Did he now. I thought you cleverer. At least your worth should have been clear to you.” He glared at her stomach as if he could kill the unborn child with his stare. Ningalor would not be surprised if it were true. “Did you try to kill it?”

She exhaled weakly. “Yes,” she admitted.

Thranduil scoffed. He stood up, and she flinched unwillingly when she sensed the fury radiating from the man. Her father.

“Kill it.”

The command was directed at the healer. Nestor bowed – his cloak was white again, she noted, and he wore a circlet of black, burned metal to signify his grief. He had no need for that; the man draped his sorrow around him like a cloak of shadows.

“I cannot, Your Grace,” he answered colorlessly. “The goddess forbids it. A child is a gift, even one created under unfortunate circumstances. If you wish to kill your own blood,” the healer added, a note of spite in his voice, “you must bring the issue before the White Council.”

Thranduil snarled. His face was a mask of twisted features as the muscles contorted in indignation, eyes livid and teeth bared, his body tense with the rawness of his rage vibrating around him.

Nestor took an involuntary step back.

He could not go to the White Council without letting everyone know of her disgrace; his disgrace. Nor could he do that without a name of the offending party and proof that the child was created in a way that broke the laws of the Valar. Thranduil could not take that path.

“My daughter will not have a child unmarried. Remove the nuisance.”
“I am afraid I cannot, Your Grace. It is a sin,” the healer explained, and there was a measure of emotion cracking through the expressionless demeanor. “I am sorry, Your Grace. This cannot be done.”

Thranduil turned to look at her and her breath deserted her under the weight of his venomous glare.

“Very well. Let the thing be born. If we cannot kill the bastard, at least we will provide it with a father.”

She looked up, horrified, but her father could not be moved. His rage was not to be appeased – the cold eyes were merciless and held no warmth for her; it was as if he did not recognize her.

“Nestor; your lover died in the battle, did he not?”

Nestor did not hurry to answer; he seemed to have realized Thranduil’s plan and tried desperately to think of a way out of it. “Yes, Your Grace,” he admitted weakly.

Thranduil sneered, “Worry not; even spoiled, my daughter is still superior to you and your lineage. Arodon, however, was a Sindar, was he not?”

It was strange to see emotion twisting the emotionless features of the healer. “Your Grace, please, do not –” His eyes were wide with horror and his face pale with suffering. He looked like a man drowning, a man about to lose all that was dear to him in this world.

“We cannot have her marry someone now,” Thranduil ignored the healer’s distress. “But Arodon has never married, is of the right lineage and is, conveniently, dead. The paperwork should not be hard to produce.”

“Your Grace, I beg of you –“

“Adar!”

The shock made her voice tremble. This was unfair; impossible; unbearable. Nestor’s eyes focused on her in pleading. The man did not treat her kindly, but to steal his lover from him, the right for the memory of his lover, to cloak her own mistakes… no. No, she cannot…

“Remove the child.” Thranduil turned again to face the healer.

The man, torn, looked from her to her father, mask thoroughly shattered. He was shaking, but his voice, even broken, did not waver. “I am sorry, Your Grace, please, forgive me, I cannot. I cannot,” he whispered, “Please, let me have Arodon’s memory, at least. We were to marry after the battle, Your Grace, I beg of you –“

“Cease the begging! Remove the thing, and none shall question your tie to Arodon.” He leveled his ice-like eyes at the healer, pinning him to the wall with his anger. “My daughter’s folly or your lover. Decide which is more important to you.”

She could taste the bitterness, the helplessness, the agony. The man bowed his head and said nothing.

“So be it,” Thranduil snarled. He walked toward Nestor and ripped the circlet of grief from his head. The violent gesture tore at the man’s thin, veiny skin, and a drop of blood trembled down his forehead. “You have no one to grieve for, healer.”

He turned to her but still did not seem to recognize her. “I will order new clothes for you. You must
have dresses and jewelry of a widow.” He threw the circlet at her feet.

“Adar, please,” she begged, “please, there is no need —”

“And after you have… flushed the parasite from your body, on the last day of the Enderi, you will leave Middle Earth and sail to Valinor.” He paused and swallowed, and then she saw it, the infinite pools of sadness that underlay her father’s cruelty. He had tears shining in his eyes, as bright as gems. “That was what you wanted, wasn’t it? To leave this place?”

“I never – Adar, I never meant, I didn’t think —”

“Yes. You did not think. Your mother suffered from the same infliction.”

Ningalor looked down. She could not bear her father exiting in a flurry of fabrics and fury nor Nestor’s infuriated, shattered, teary gaze.

She glanced at the circlet, ashen and black, and buried her face in her hands.

He was dead to her, after all. Perhaps grief was not that out of place.

“…I’ve heard… she doesn’t leave her room, maybe….”

“…His Grace isn’t taking this well. I’ve heard one of the guards mentions he thinks her mind isn’t sound anymore.”

“What do expect? Traveling with Dwarves —”

“Kidnapped. Her ladyship would never….”

“… sudden marriage… does His Grace take us for fools?… damaged reputation —”

“…impossible… like the Duchess of Rivendell… Grey Heavens….”

Legolas had enough. He rose from the window seat where he lay and read – or tried to – read his book. He closed it with an angry snap. He shall not stand for those gossipy snippets. He stomped out elegantly, making sure to glare ahead and ignore the chattery aristocracy.

He could feel their eyes on him, assessing, calculating, and the final mutter, ‘Just like his father.’

Legolas stopped and glared, but the lords of Mirkwood simply bowed their heads and hid their eyes as well as their thoughts.

The path was familiar, even if he did not take that particular turn and climbed those particular stairs for years. Five years, to be exact. Oh, how he wanted to refute those rumors, to prove that there was nothing wrong with his sister, that she was just… tired, perhaps, from the long journey. She needed to adapt, to… yes. All she needed was time. He paused suddenly when an unfamiliar view from one of the windows drew his attention.

Erebor, apparently.

The mountain of ruin was rising again, reassembling into the fortress of glory it once had been. With a few improvements, if his mind supplied him with an adequate memory of the castle. The gates were taller and thicker as well as the watchtowers, which were more numerous than before. They were expanding the front, building deeper into the face of the Lonely Mountain, and
appeared to be building a moat, as well. The flag of the house of Durin beat high atop the fortress, large enough to be seen from Mirkwood itself. Mocking them, surely.

Legolas cocked an elegant brow in disdain and continued, steps determined, till he finally reached an elegantly carved door of ebony with a silver handle and, oddly enough, no guards to watch over it. He frowned. Even before his sister left—deserted, he reminded himself doggedly, his father always kept men watching over her. Keeping her safe. Locked, his mind supplied.

He shook his golden head and knocked on the door.

Silence. He knocked again, though he had the distinctive feeling that the action would not trigger a different reaction. Again, Silence.

He opened the door.

The room was, undeniably, empty. A quick scrutiny revealed that several items, such as clothes and jewelry, were missing. The room had the distinct air of not having been disturbed for a while. It was too orderly and too empty.

Legolas’ lips thinned as he turned away and marched to his father’s study.

The walk from Ningalor’s room to his father’s was strangely long, now that he thought about it. His room was also very distant. Odd that he did not notice that, until now. He quickened his pace, ignoring lords and ladies and guards and servants as they parted before him. He did not have to wait long before he was admitted into his father’s presence.

The Duke took one assessing look at him and dismissed the rest of the men. He turned his back to him as he poured them both a glass of wine, then offered the delicate goblet to his son.

Legolas did not accept the offering. “Where is my sister?”

Thranduil cocked an elegant brow and placed the rejected glass on a nearby table. He swirled his wine, breathed deeply, then took a small sip. “In a cottage in the deeper part of the forest. Nestor and Tauriel are keeping her company.”

“Why?” Legolas all but threw his hands in the air. Nothing made any sense anymore—the strange, hastily made marriage papers, the hurried ordering of grieving clothes, Nestor’s hollow, glassy glare of hate… “What more do you want from her?”

All Ningalor needed was time and good company. That’s all. Friendship and support.

Thranduil took another sip. A man less familiar or less tuned to the fickle Duke’s subtle body language might have missed the muscle in the jaw that twitched, the knuckles turning white for less than a second, the glimpse of white teeth, nearly bared in a silent snarl.

“She begins to show,” he said finally.

“She what? Show what?”

“Your sister—“ Another sure sign of anger. ‘Your’ was always used to signify dissatisfaction. “—is with child.”


“Arodon was a mere cover story, boy!” Thranduil snapped. He took another sip, longer still, and
visibly tried to calm his flaring temper. “The… criminal must have aided your sister in completely besmearing her name and lineage during her journey here.”

That, at least made sense. That explained the silence, the isolation, the staring… maybe even the ring. Maybe the ring she kept playing with and hid (unsuccessfully) when someone walked into the room. From him.

Legolas blinked, then gritted his teeth, rage boiling through him. To think that anyone, anyone would dare! “I will kill him myself,” he vowed. “The defiler shall be punished for my sister’s suffering.”

Thranduil sent a grim, mockery glare his way and sneered, “There was no defiler, according to her. There was a promise of marriage.”

“Then we shall claim it! No one can escape the consequences –”

“Who?” hissed his father, voice low and dangerous.

Legolas stopped in his tracks, confused. “What?”

Thranduil focused his thunderous glower on him. It was strange, to see the animalistic fury frozen inside the blue pools in the middle of the impassive perfection that was his father’s face.


“Please, I’ll do anything – but don’t let them die, don’t let him die, please, brother, please!”

Legolas froze. Saying anything will betray his sister, but saying nothing…

“You know something.”

Legolas locked his fists behind his back. “I have no idea what you mean,” he muttered through tight lips.

Thranduil snarled, “Do not lie to me! She told you something!”

Legolas did not answer. Whatever his sister said could not be repeated; not to his father. They were not ready to face yet another war so soon after the end of the last one.

Thranduil glowered, but Legolas did not change his reply, nor did he look away.

“Very well,” Thranduil sneered. “Go and see her. Speak with her. See if you can make her say anything. I can wait. I will wait, as much as necessary, but I will avenge my daughter’s honor. I will avenge her.”

Yes, if his father was an expert at anything, it was waiting. Waiting and remembering.

“Ningalor is still alive,” he whispered.

Thranduil lifted his glass. Spun it. Sipped. His eyes were dark and fallen. Grieving. “Not to me.”

Swallowing his turmoil, he neither bowed nor waited to be properly dismissed. Legolas turned his back on his father and his schemes and left.
Dis had, to be quite honest, enough.

Enough of Thorin’s dark brooding, and Kili’s reckless behavior, and Fili’s endless silence. Oh and the Fundinson brothers; those two deserved what was coming to them. She specifically instructed them to take care of the three idiots that were the remains of her family. This would not do.

And all of it, apparently, lay at the feet of a woman no one would dare name and a missing Istar.

Who was not technically missing, of course, but merely left after the Battle of the Five Armies, as it was named. He was officially banished from Erebor and then disappeared entirely after he struck an undisclosed deal with Thranduil, the one that guaranteed the oath breaker’s help. She made a mental note to herself to somehow, in some way, make Thorin mend his connections with the Istar. Maybe in a year. Or two. Idiot.

But that, of course, did not explain what in Mahal’s name was eating Kili. For some reason, she doubted the woman toyed with both uncle and nephew. Two faced tree shagger.

But Kili avoided everyone like the plague, hunting for game farther and farther away, almost close enough to Mirkwood to start yet another conflict with Thranduil. And Fili… if Fili knew something, the boy did not think it necessary to share with her. And if she knew anything about her eldest’s stubbornness, it was that only Thorin could match it, down to those silly staring contests. Whatever was burdening Kili, he was running away from it; and whatever was burdening Fili, he was silent about it. Could the two be one and the same? Fili was, after all, the sensitive one.

And perhaps it was all Thorin?

Ah. And there, of course, were the Fundinsons.

“There is no meeting,” she declared as she entered the room, closing the door behind her. She had to be quite clever to catch the both of them, as the two became experts at avoiding her; however, she did not allow herself to feel too clever too soon. “Well, not with the Duke. And I can assure you,” she added with a voice like a whiplash when she saw Dwalin rising from his chair, muttering under his beard, “that this is just as important. Sit!” she barked.

Dwalin sat; Balin, on the other hand, rose. “Dis, we both have quite aplenty to –”

“What is wrong with my brother?” Silence. Ah, nice. How enlightening. Refreshing, too. “What are you keeping secret?” That was not desperation in her voice. She was Dis Durin, born to stone and fire. The fact that her only family was slipping away, falling apart, breaking – was not a thing that could move her. She was fire and her will was iron. She lost too many already to allow what she had left to fade away.

And oh, Thorin was fading.

The brothers looked away from each other, each buried in his own musings and guilt. Dwalin rose, again, and very unceremoniously walked toward the door.

“For my brother’s sake. For… for our friendship’s sake. Please.”

Dwalin stopped, uncertain. At least his reaction to pleading did not change. Balin, of course, was a harder fish to catch. However, a careful glance revealed that the man was eyeing his brother with a barely contained harshness. Huh. Was he also kept in the dark?

“Dis… Just… let it die, yeah? Let it – just forget about the whole thing. Erase her. Thorin has been through enough.” Dwalin sighed his frustration. “There was nothing – it wasn’t done right, all
right? It wasn’t – just a mess. Them and the – and the parting, it was wrong. A big ol’ mess. Better
forgotten.”

“But Thorin does not forget! He’s still… he isolates himself, broods, never smiles… and Kili….”

“What’s Kili got to do with all this?” asked Balin, interest and confusion clashing.

“I thought you’d tell me what my son is running away from,” she barked. The brothers exchanged
confused glances and said nothing. Perhaps she should ask Fili about this instead. If only she could
get the boy to talk to her about matters that weren’t Erebor related. What caused his silence? The
muted anguish? The servants said he was walking the fortress from the hour of the wolf to the
hour of the owl, that trays of food were returned full even after hours spent brooding over old
books. That the Duke’s heir, much like the Duke himself, rarely smiled.

She waved her hand in frustration, going back to the original topic. Her sons will wait. “What
wasn’t done right?” She narrowed her eyes when Dwalin tensed. “Their relationship? The
courting?”

Dwalin looked away, torn between his duty to the Durin family and his duty to his Duke.

“The shirt?” added Balin, “What was it originally given as?” When he saw Dis opening her mouth
in confusion, he explained, “The shirt of mithril.”

No, he could not mean – the proper marriage gift was beads. Balin was just – no, this could not be.

“He said it was payment,” Dwalin grumbled.

“No, he said ‘keep it as payment,’” Balin pressed on. Something told her they had this argument
many times before. “You cannot change the meaning of a gift already given! And unless it is
returned –”

A door opened abruptly, bringing all conversation to a halt.

“Balin!” Nori burst in, then paused. The thief scanned them, the situation, then focused on Balin
again. “It’s Ori,” he said.

The audacity of the man! Dis gritted her teeth in irritation at the implication. Cleary, he thought,
erroneously, that this meeting was unimportant enough for him to interrupt –

Balin rose, shook his head, and muttered a short, ‘I am sorry,’ to Dis before leveling another glare
at his brother and exiting the room with Nori. The barely hidden urgency in the thief’s eyes did not
appease her. Thorin should have picked better men for his quest, even if he had so few to choose
from.

She focused her glare on Dwalin, again, but the warrior looked away, hands in fists. Why would
the mentioning of Ori’s name cause such a reaction? Sure, the boy had a few nightmares (yet
another support Thorin should have dismissed) and he still mourned his brother, but he was a
Dwarf, born and bred to become iron and stone. He shall recover.

Dwalin turned to face her, and the harsh glint in his eyes told her he could guess her thoughts. Her
old friend and playmate suddenly looked unrecognizable.

“You judge us,” he said, “for not being as strong as you. For not standing on our feet as quickly,
spitting in the face of grief and weakness. No one except your brother, and maybe your sons,
thought we’d actually make it, but we did. Not all of us, but some. And we all showed loyalty, and
honor, and commitment. We faced all our trials together!” And you weren’t one of them, is that what he was trying to say? Perhaps he is right. I should not judge a man based on his past after he embarked on such a feat of loyalty. Was it, however, loyalty? She instinctively knew that these accusations had no place among these men. She was a warrior herself, after all. She knew the price of life.

She shook her head, muttering, “I should have come. Even if it were the end of the Durins, I –“

“Balin, Tharkûn, me… even Gloin, we all failed to stop Thorin from doing what he did. Your presence would not have saved him. Just… let it go.”

Another day, another council meeting.

The men of the council rose and bowed when he entered – his sister did not, but nor did he expect that from her. Fili was seated by her side, determined but tired; his brother was nowhere to be seen, but that, too, was to be expected. After falling asleep rather soundly twice in a row, Dis finally relented and allowed the youth to enjoy his age and perform some of the more physical duties.

“I’ll be the best warrior, just you watch!”

He sat in his grandfather’s chair – his chair – and the council began.

First, there was the issue of security – with Beorn and Dain gone, the numbers of soldiers dwindled greatly. They did expect many of their alliance to arrive, now that the roads were safe again for travel, but most were artisans, builders, miners, architects. Not soldiers.

Dwalin, of course, argued that each Dwarf was born a fighter and each must serve his duty as one. A rotation of sort, but first all men and women must be trained until they met Dwalin’s standards.

Balin argued that only a group of the workers should be used, and more intensely. There was no need for a large army, only for a well-trained one. There was no need to waste that many resources on all, instead of just on a specialized fraction.

Dis argued that in times of peace and alliances, soldiers only bring war. It was time to build, and all resources should be invested in the restoration of Erebor. Besides, she was tired of the endless dust dying her hair gray before her time.

Oh, how they loved to argue.

Next came the issue of food supplies. Currently, they had to rely on Mirkwood trade and Kili’s hunting team. They had to invest in rebuilding the gardens, restocking the game and maintaining a steadier flow of supplies. There was a limit as to how many fish they could purchase from the Bowman and how much gold they were willing to put in Thranduil’s coffers.

Dwalin suggested opening trade routes with the Iron Hills, but they, too, found that diversity of food was something hard to come by. Balin suggested making a deal with Bard – he will devote some of his resources to ensure a steady supply of food (other than fish) into the Mountain, and in return, he will have a monopoly on the trade with Erebor. Dis objected, saying that there was no need to kill all relations with Mirkwood, particularly trade, since those ties were the most valuable tools in maintaining an alliance. She did, as usual, push the idea of restoration. Maybe send a letter to Ered Luin and call for gardeners as well.

Now they were debating whether working the earth was a job fitting for a Dwarf.
Thorin listened, knowing that at the end of the day, he will have to be the one to make a decision. Fili also listened attentively, but Thorin saw that the boy’s eyes lit with fire whenever his mother spoke. He will have to learn to judge based on opinion, not the passion or speaker.

Both Dwalin and Dis had views that emphasized the seclusion of the Erebor – Dwalin by militant aggression, Dis by the resurrection of the arts. Balin, however, had the most open approach to the outside world. War or art, family or alliances. Decisions that would shape the Future of his Dukedom, reborned from the ashes of itself.

Something, however, was not right.

Usually, the advisers debated, and then presented the argument before their Duke. This was not always practiced, but often. Balin, for example, emphasized this tradition. Dis did as she wished, which was the usual, but Dwalin did not look at him. It was rather unsettling.

In fact, Dwalin spent those five months avoiding him. Was it guilt, still? Or something else? And Balin too, while still kind and supportive, sent sometimes concerned, disappointed, or tight-lipped glances his way.

Maybe it was just him, imagining things. Dwalin, after all, nearly worked himself to death these days; perhaps Balin was frowning at him because he was allowing that? Thorin massaged his temple, feeling the oncoming headache. Those also became the usual, these days.

Fili opted for a fully trained army, as Balin suggested, and a full restoration of the gardens as a second priority. He weathered his mother’s assessing glare quite nicely, but he should not go to such lengths to explain to her his decision, only to him. His decisions were good, however, and well explained. He will be a good duke, one day.

“All dwarves shall serve in protecting the fortress; all will be trained to some degree. From those, Dwalin will pick his favorites and train them to be soldiers and guards. We will, eventually, have to build a militia. Trade with Mirkwood and Dale shall continue as usual; I want the gardens restored, but not as a first priority. If Thranduil tries to raise prices again, cease buying from him until we create an official trading contract.” Thus, he ruled.

The councilors bowed their acceptance (Dis merely remained silent). Another meeting was over.

Thorin gazed at his sister, who remained standing while the rest exited. He saw the rare gentleness with which she dismissed her son but did not answer his confused glance. She was fire, he realized. Fiery and volatile and loud, perhaps, but she had infinite warmth and kindness about her. Life hardened her, made her gentleness rarer, but even harsh – kindness was still kindness.

Whether she walked into a room or opened her mouth to speak, none could ignore her. She was a powerful woman, opinionated, strong. He was worried, at first, that he would have to secure her a husband to ensure she maintained her station, but clearly, Dis did not need another to demand the respect she deserved. She was a Durin, and she was fire.

Now his sister walked to him, climbed the few stairs that elevated his chair, and placed her hand on his. He looked up, frowning at the concern he saw reflected back at him.

“You are not yourself, Thorin,” she said finally.

This was unlike her. Unlike them, really. Concern was not something shown in words or tone, but rather revealed through deeds. A pause of silence stretched and thinned. Thorin willed his fist to remain relaxed. “Am I lacking in my behavior to any of you?” he inquired in a low grumble.
“Your vigor is missing; your passion. The men are talking.”

“Talking?”

“Whispering. When they think no one hears them.”

“What men? What whispers?” he demanded, unnerved. Now his hand was a fist.

“Your men. Your company; or what remains of it.” Her hold of his hand tightened. “You are not the same, ever since that woma –“

“Do not mention her!” he roared, jumping from his seat in sudden rage.

Dis froze, frowning. She did not expect his reaction.

He should not have been so out of control.

Thorin sighed and distanced himself from her. From the chair of ruling. “I am sorry. For yelling at you. She is not worth mentioning.”

“Clearly she is, if that is how you react,” Dis objected hotly. She huffed when he stiffened. “I understand she was important to you. Perhaps still is. Doesn’t matter. Emotion is fickle. Snap out of it.” She was challenging him, wasn’t she? Thinking of her own husband? “I… I don’t understand, Thorin. You got what you wanted, what you dreamed of for years – you restored Erebor, your name and deeds are already being sung by Dwarves in every dukedom! Why aren’t you happy?”

He exhaled raggedly, twisting his fingers. “I did not think an emotion was a duty. What else would you demand of me?” he snapped.

A challenge in return. Dis did not take the bait. Instead, she pressed her point. “The sons of Fundin. They… They are disappointed. In you. Why would they be when you achieved the impossible?”

Thorin froze. If Dwalin – but he wouldn’t. He would not betray him so. He would not – “Stop going in circles, Dis. Speak plainly,” he commanded. Angry, Defensive. She could see through that too.

“I told you quite plainly, I think. Something went wrong; no one would talk about it, no one would explain me what, but I can feel it. I’m trying to understand what, why, and why can’t you snap the hell out of it,” she hissed. She wanted to make him confess without revealing all she knew. Mother taught them that. “This girl isn’t worth half of the mess she has caused.”

He was too used to the sharp scrutiny of another pair of blue eyes, he realized. Dis could only see his anger. She could not see through him. She could not read the nuances and decipher them into worlds of meanings.

She did know, however, how to push all of his buttons. “She betrayed me. She was punished for it. There is nothing more to it.” His tone was final. That was the end of it; them.

“Except a shirt of mithril.”

“It was her payment,” he snarled. “The contract promised her a payment and a payment she received.”

“Balin said you told her to keep it ‘as payment.’” She paused, trying to keep the accusatory edge
from her voice with little success. “What was it originally given as?” The suspicion. She was starting to connect the dots he was trying so hard to eliminate.

“Bad wording. That’s all. The coat was a gift, the shirt –“

“I doubt Balin –“

“Enough.”

“Did you marry her?”

“I said, enough!” he roared, breathing hard. His entire body was tense with fury, as if ready to pounce.

Dis looked at him – the second of fear dissipated as quickly as it appeared. He hadn’t yelled at her like that ever since the death of their brother. She was not someone he could scare, however, with rage and a glimpse of violence.

“You married her.”

He did not answer. He found he had no answer. No response to the shock, the soft pity, and then, the rage. “How dare you.” He did not answer still. “This is not our way, Thorin! Marriage is bound in honor! Even if the woman is – Mahal, Thorin!”

“What do you care?” he snapped. “No one besides Dwalin knows, and few suspect. It is erased. Never happened.”

“What about your word? Your honor?” she challenged

“I made a promise to a liar! I do not –“

“Oh, save your excuses! You are a coward, Thorin!” she accused. She stood close to him, her finger stabbing his chest. “You made a mistake and married an unworthy, manipulative liar who no doubt deserves to rot in her father’s forest, but –“ she pushed him again “ – you must uphold your mistake. Go there, face those tree shaggers and face her.”

“Just a moment ago you said emotion was fickle, that this… mess should just be ignored –“

“How dare you! Marriage is different!” She swallowed with difficulty. “Marriage is different,” she finished, then visibly channeled her personal pain into rage.

He closed his eyes. The agony of Lily’s betrayal flooding him anew – the woman, still clad in his coat, his cursed coat, stood before him, shaking, and confessed, “I am Ningalor, daughter of Thranduil, lady of Mirkwood.” She was crying. “Thorin –“

“… fall into such a trap. I should have come with you – came to you, and offered herself! What kind of a high-born does this? I cannot –“

“I will not have you speak ill of her, or at all,” he threatened. He grabbed her arms and shook her. “She is dead to me, do you hear? Dead!” he thundered. He was holding her too firmly; he knew that. “Do not mention her again.” He pushed her away from him.

And Dis looked up at him, and the confusion was slowly replaced by recognition. Sharp features softened as eyes widened in dismay and lips parted in denial. He flinched, as if stung, and looked away. Upon realizing his mistake, he turned and began marching toward the door. He did not want
to see that pity, that understanding, reflected back at him.

“What was she like?”

He paused. This time, he could not stop his knuckles from turning white.

“She was ice.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
-Serej bund – idiot.
-Idmi d’dum - welcome to the Hall.
-’Quel amrun, Hiril nín - good morning, my lady.
-Nanging – flower.
-Adar – father.

Siblings’ perspectives! Sorry, a bit too excited. Thorin and Ningalor are a bit depressed right now, so their perspectives are pretty self-centered and… not too perceptive. Won’t get any plot development this way. I’m still keeping the format of his side, her side kind of thing, but this also may be tweaked a little bit.

Now, to the burning issue- the characters’ attitude toward abortion is NOT my attitude. I am not going all political here, but I was not trying to convey my opinions via Nestor. I do NOT think abortion is a sin. However, (and that’s a big factor, I think) Tolkien is catholic, and his works reflect his strong beliefs. My original characters as well as my interpretation of Tolkien’s characters live in his world, which follows the same belief system and, therefore, would consider abortion to be wrong.

I also believe Tolkien would be entirely against Ningalor’s promiscuous behavior, and would have granted her the same fate of Aredhel. That is, at least, my understanding.

So, there’s that. If you are either pro-life or pro-choice and are offended by all or any of the things said above, please remember that this is just fanfiction and I am neither advocating my opinions nor have any claim as to Tolkien’s true opinions.

Also, Dis. I just love her. I can see her breaking meeting tables.

What’d you think? Please share because I’d love to hear from you! Next chapter, of course, next Saturday =)
A Name Caught in Ribbons

Chapter Summary

"No, I won't let my smile betray my sorrow but, oh darling, I still imagine I hear the echo of your footsteps. Enclosed and forever dying, I miss you. I can't stop missing you."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Legolas sipped from his glass, wondering how many of those he would need to pass the night.

The sun began to sink – almost too early – and the view of the Mountain and Mirkwood basking in the red rays, as well as the now forever golden lake – was glorious. Legolas ignored it in favor of taking yet another sip from his glass.

The first day of spring was exceptionally lovely this year. Too bad his sister was not allowed to come and see it. Her fault, in truth, he thought bitterly. However, bringing her here to a place with so many Dwarves might not be a good idea regardless of her situation. The Dwarf Lady – her name escaped him – breathed in visible relief when Thranduil introduced only him as a member of the aristocratic family. He glared at her, but the woman – more like a man in a dress, he thought haughtily, challenged his glare with surprising strength. Dwarves.

From his semi-secluded spot, he could observe the mingling of the crowds, or rather, the lack thereof. This was a celebration of peace, perhaps, but each stuck to his own kind. The men of Erebor and Dale were friendlier with each other, possibly because of the close trading and building partnership, but both were somewhat cold toward his men. The Dwarves were outright rude.

Alcohol will make either friends or enemies of them, he thought.

The sun disappeared and the bonfires replaced the missing light with energetic giddiness. He could see Thorin approaching his father, both as stiff as sticks, and after a few minutes of tense conversation, they left the commotion to speak somewhere privately. His father filled his glass before he exited.

“The new Duke is so rigid he looks like a boulder someone dressed in a dead animal and a curtain.” A man dressed in green stopped next to him. Aithon, the rumored soon to be captain of the guards. “Would you not say so, my lord?”

His name befits him admirably, Legolas thought disdainfully. “It speaks of ill manners to speak ill of one’s superiors. Or would you care to continue your observations and note how drunk my father looks?”
The man stiffened. “My lord, I meant no offense, of course, I merely wished to improve your mood,” he tried. Blond and green of eyes, he no doubt thought it would be easy to replace the current, Silvan captain of the guards. Why was she to be replaced? Legolas disliked the whole notion. It smelled strongly of blood politics.

“You may do so by leaving,” he said curtly. Too curtly. It wasn’t the man’s fault, after all. *Ill attitude toward one’s inferiors shows the true measure of a man,* his mother used to say. *Well, I just revealed mine to be rotten indeed, mother.*

The dances and the music were, however, quite entertaining. The musicians switched every so often so each culture could have its traditional dances, and while at first only people of that particular culture danced, as time and alcohol loosened both nerve and prejudice, one could spot members of two or even three alliances dancing together.

He could see Gandalf at the center of the mess, sometimes dancing quite terribly, others surprisingly nimbly, as he pulled more and more innocent bystanders and enticed them to dance. His merriment could be matched by few other spectators. *There are hidden qualities worth admiring in the Istar,* Legolas noted. He wanted all to be joyous and included, as well as to erase years of suspicion and mistrust, apparently.

Legolas thought the notion to be quite silly.

But he could not bring himself to hate the old man, even if he truly were the one behind his sister’s disappearance, as his father claimed. Gandalf came to Mirkwood to speak with his father, no doubt on the Dwarves’ behalf. His attempt at eavesdropping did not bear much fruit, but he managed to catch the phrase ‘wasn’t their fault,’ and ‘did not know.’ He knew for certainty that he almost begged to be granted the right to see Ningalor, yet was denied; then sent away.

It was a mistake to take her to begin with; no doubt he saw that, too.

Legolas kept glaring, particularly at one, drunk, redhead youth who challenged an equally drunk, equally redhead man – Dain, was it not? to a duel, when another person slipped by and joined him. He was alerted to his presence by the clumsiness of his walk – not an Elf – and the somewhat meek declaration of, “May I join you?”

He turned. The boy before his was richly dressed and pale of face. Not intimidated, as Legolas thought before, but polite and no doubt unused to it. He was one of the Durins, though Legolas, for the life of him, could not remember who was Kili and who was Fili.

The dark-haired boy considered his silence an invitation, apparently, and stepped forward. He resembled his mother, but his expression was softer.

“How do you like the celebration?” he asked.

“The wine is excellent,” Legolas offered. Mirkwood wine. Why was he testing the boy?

“Hmm. Yeah. The malt beer is good too. You should try it. It is our specialty,” the boy countered.

“I thought your specialty was gems.”

“Break a tooth trying to eat one.”

“Oh? You speak from experience?”

“Babies and ravens like shiny things equally.”
“That so.” This, he had to admit, was mildly humoring.

The boy fidgeted. “How’s Lil- I mean, her ladyship?”

Ah. That was the purpose of the visit. And the small talk. *Find me a name, Legolas.* “Why do you ask?”

“Didn’t see her for a long time, that’s all,” he hedged.

Legolas turned to frown at him, but the boy apparently had experience with glares and frowns, for his soft, chocolate, *puppy* eyes lost none of their intensity. “We miss her.”

“Do you,” he snapped.

“Well, yes,” he answered, unfazed though now wearing a frown of his own.

“She is well.” Legolas still glared, searching for clues. This *child* could not be the one. His sister would not let a boy ten years her junior touch her, let alone bed her. This was impossible. “Why do you ask?”

“She isn’t here,” he pointed out, again. Suddenly, Legolas remembered how tiresome it was trying to wriggle an answer out of Thorin’s men, back when they were his father’s prisoners.

“Perhaps she did not want to see you.”

The boy took a step back, as if stung by the venom. “That – yes, I can understand that,” he mumbled, “we should have been nicer.” A glance to see if Legolas was appeased. Dashing away when he noted Legolas wasn’t. At all. Down again. Up. “Can you tell her, though? That we do? The commoners, and me and Fili. The Ri brothers too – well, that’s just Ori and Nori now… and Oin.” He waited. No response. “Can we visit?”

“Absolutely not,” Legolas seethed.

Kili seemed only slightly deterred. “Is she in the palace, then? Safe and all?”

“The captain of the guards never leaves her side,” Legolas snarled. “Why are you so preoccupied with my sister’s location and safety?”

Kili paled and his eyes turned black and hooded with misery. That reaction – no, it could not be. It could not be *him*.

“I am not, not at all, I… Forgive me, I see I have upset you. Please, enjoy the celebration.”

He fled.

The celebration was about to reach its climax; Tharkûn had just finished positioning the fireworks. The lords of the forest and the mountain and the lake in between already gave the final hearty speeches and blessings and thanks, all except Thranduil, and, of course, Thorin.

Thranduil, however, merely sulked in the shadows and allowed his son to bless the survivors for him. Which he did, Dis thought distastefully, rather well. Fili tried his best to smile – even Kili managed to stay for the entire evening. He sighed so much she wondered how much air did her youngest manage to store in his lungs, but had no time to question it. Dain, despite his obvious drunkenness, received a thunderous round of applause at the end of his speech. *Soldiers do love a*
soldier, she thought, fighting a smile of her own.

But it was not supposed to be like this. Thorin was supposed to give the speech.

Brat.

A brat whose disappearance turned too many heads and quickened too many tongues. She knew the Elves found insult in everything and Bard was mind-bogglingly suspicious – it was as if he expected Thranduil and Thorin to fight over the last piece of cake or something.

“He said he’d retire early,” a voice said as a hand appeared from the midst of the crowd to still her rushing form, “let him go, Dis.”

Dwalin, also sullen. No, exasperated. With her or with Thorin? The man had quite a few followers eyeing him admiringly. Clearly, that was not enough to sway the man from doing his duty. Not the anyone could or would dare to question his loyalty to the Durins now; to Thorin.

“He is neglecting his duties,” she objected. Under the quick to fade mask of enjoyment and the hazy veil of drunkenness she could see worry, ever restless, coiling and uncoiling. “Where may I find him?”

Dwalin shrugged. “I don’t think he’s in the right mood, anyhow.” He released her. “Try the wine, eh? The Elves might be a pain, but they know their stuff.”

He wanted to distract her. Perhaps buy Thorin more time, or maybe, trying to indicate that this was futile? No direct objection meant no direct command, however; perhaps he wasn’t certain whether Thorin needed company or not.

Dis twisted her body elegantly back to face the front gate of Erebor and left the garden with her head held high. She could not hear Dwalin sigh over the sound of the fiddles and the songs and the fires stretching toward the stars.

The deeper she delved into the Mountain, the fainter the echoes of the celebration sounded, until they could be heard no more. The sound of her footsteps and that of the occasional servant, and then – it was just her and her own two feet, walking alone. The echo of the halls made them sound like a thousand legs, taking a thousand steps. She quickened her pace

Not his room, not father’s, nor mother’s – definitely not grandfather’s (she knew he felt uncomfortable there, even though it was his by right), maybe Frerin’s? But now it was Kili’s room and it, too, was empty. Dis scanned it quickly: a bed, a rug, a closet, so bloody messy, a desk… she paused. There was… yes, she touched the paper gently. A hastily made sketch of a woman. Long red hair and a green attire... no doubt lovely, she mused, eyeing the painstakingly drawn features and the blots of black ink ineptly masked by the red one. It was not hasty, she realized, just poorly done. Her son probably worked hours attempting to draw the figure. Did they not say that Ningalor was blonde? Who might the object of the drawing be?

A good question for another time. She etched the sketch into her mind and left the room. Maybe...

Determined again, she rushed toward her mother’s favorite spot to read, the one place where none might disturb her, and with a dramatic curve of her hand opened the door to her mother’s balcony.

Oh, she might have known. Should have known.

Thorin stood with his back to her, magnificent in his attire of fur and richly embroidered cloth. His crown was thrown at her feet, the metal bent. He was facing the mountain and the river roaring
The coming spring already began to melt the snow from above – the roar even muted the sound of the fireworks, though the vivid colors were mirrored in the frost that still clutch the face of the mountain.

“I brought her here. I made her cry.”

Dis returned her eyes to her brother in confusion, uncertain if he meant to address her or spoke to the wall of stone; if he had noticed her at all. She had no doubt whom ‘she’ was, however.

“I never understood why I… why everything I did for her, everything I gave her never made her smile. The more I had given her, the more brittle she became. I… she never told me why.”

Dis felt that, at this point, she had to make her presence known. “Thorin…?” she hesitated.

Her brother turned to look at her. His smile was ruthless. “Aye, I knew it was you. Who else would disturb me here with so dramatic an entrance but my little sister?”

Well, she fought the blush at the indirect, yet somewhat gentle, reprimand. Either he is drunk or…

“What brought this up?” she asked, still standing upright at her spot. Thorin did not invite her to join him, and she did not dare to act so freely when he seemed so… vulnerable. Huh. Vulnerable was not a word she paired with her brother before.

“I did as you said,” he declared and turned his back to her once more. “I asked Thranduil about N- about her.” She could not see his expression; nor could she tell if he looked as broken as his voice sounded. Perhaps it was the river.

“I blamed her for so long, too – we stood right here when she cried because she did not want to lie, anymore. She did not want to parade as my lady when she wasn’t. She did not want to be my lady, I think. To accept what she knew I would later deny her.”

So much bitterness… it must be the echo of the stone, twisting the tone of his words.

“Balin and Nori, they saw what I refused to see. She wanted – she nearly told me.” A heaved sigh, a broken – no, just the fireworks. More fireworks. “Nori told her not to tell me, and Balin supported her silence. Only after Erebor, after – afraid I’d lose it if… if I knew. I did; I acted so recklessly, as if… as if heroism in battle would return my Lily to me.”

“…Thorin?”

The hunched figure, those shaking shoulders could not possibly belong to her older brother. A trick of the light, perhaps, so colorful as it clashed with the scene of ice and silver, white and brown.

“He sent her away. To Valinor.”

Valinor. She may as well be dead, for all the difference it made. The afterlife was just as inaccessible.

“Perhaps it was for the best, perhaps… that was what she truly wanted, after all, to be separated from him. Maybe she’s happy. Maybe –” His voice broke off when she took the necessary steps to reach her brother and hug him fiercely. He hid his face in his arm, then dropped it in defeat. She buried her face in the luxurious fur and closed her eyes to allow him a modicum of dignity. He deserved at least that.

“Maybe one day she will forgive me.”
Legolas swallowed before he entered the cabin where his sister was housed.

It was a lovely place, truly. The first flowers of spring began to envelop the soft, newly discovered pillows of grass – the trees, evergreen, crowned the cottage with their foliage. In fact, the spot of green was one of the few places where one could still behold the beauty of Greenwood.

It was his mother’s recluse. Now it became his sister’s cage.

*It is for her own protection,* he shook his head.

Ningalor looked up from her spot by the window when he entered, and the tired, accepting glaze in her eyes unnerved him. It was too dull and empty, unbecoming on her.

He noted Tauriel standing guard, shooting a worried glance in his direction; Nestor, he did not see.

He closed the distance and hesitated, then sat across from her. His eyes snapped to look at her hand as a sudden movement of her fingers revealed a flash of gold. That ring again? He frowned, but Ningalor simply looked away.

“How are you feeling?” he tried.

The pale woman before him placed her hand on her swollen stomach in response.

Ningalor looked as if the child within her tried to suck the very flesh from her own body. Her skin tightened and became translucent, revealing delicate veins decorating thin, frail limbs. Her hair thinned as well and her stomach seemed so unnaturally large, as if a parasite, and not a baby, was growing within. The sight was sickening.

“It kicks; sometimes,” she answered.

“That’s good, I think.” His frown deepened. Father told him to produce a name, but the sight before him made him hesitate. “How do you like the cottage? It was mother’s once.”

“So I was told.” She paused. Looked away. “I want to go outside.” When she saw the look on his face, she whispered, “Where will I go? Where can I go, Legolas?”

Legolas pursed his lips, then turned to look at Tauriel and nodded. The captain of the guards nodded back, but the worry still fixed her featured in a frown. He looked back at Ningalor, saw a small smile of gratitude on her face. The gesture was infinitely sad and quick to disappear.

A name.

“They held a peace celebration. At the valley below the Mountain.” A spark of interest. Good. He should visit more. Bring a book, perhaps. Maybe she’s just bored. The ring flashed again in his mind, worried him for a reason unexplained. He shook his head and continued, “It was pleasant enough. The fireworks were spectacular.”

“Yes, I saw them occasionally, from the window. Gandalf’s, I suppose?”

The clever hesitation, feinted innocence. But his sister was right – where could she go? He could not imagine she could even walk very far, let alone ride. “Yes, Gandalf’s.” He should tell her, shouldn’t he? “They asked about you.”

Ningalor froze. She very slowly and very deliberately forced her features to ease into a semi-
interested smile. It hurt to know that his sister didn’t trust him. A sudden twist of his stomach told him she was right not to – the name weighted heavily on him. But surely she knew that all that was done, was done out of love?

“Who?”

“The younger lord, Kili…? Dark of hair?” she nodded and he continued, “he expressed interest in your wellbeing. He said that he and the… commoners, miss you. Father was approached by Oakenshield, but he did not say what they discussed – sister, are you well? You look pale.”

And she did – as white as marble, but she waved him down as he got up, about to summon Nestor. Tauriel rushed forward with a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, which Ningalor accepted gratefully and without a comment.

Not a rare occurrence, then? What caused the reaction? Which of the Durins? He knew better than to ask directly.

“Nin? What’s the matter?”

His sister placed the glass on the table next to her. Her hand did not shake, but the glass was still nearly full. “Oh, nothing. I thought I may have felt it kick.” She swallowed. “How did Father look, after the meeting?”

She believes Father mistrust me… no, she suspects that there was more to that meeting? What has become of us, Mother? I am not my sister’s enemy! Neither is Father. Can she not see how much pain she has caused him, how much he worries for her – the toll her folly took left him sick and empty – is this not enough for her, as proof or punishment?

“Calm, I think. He… he was rather intoxicated when they met. He only mentioned later that the Duke made a polite inquiry, and that he put an end to this.”

“To what?” she gasped.

Legolas shrugged. “Father took out his ire on Gandalf for all that was done to you. As long as the Dwarves prove honorable in their conduct, our alliance should endure. No love shall lie between us, but no conflict, either. Those were Father’s words.” He paused. “He was given Mother’s necklace.”

Ningalor inhaled sharply. “Tho - I mean, the Duke had given him the gems?”

“No, it was Dain Ironfoot. The other, red-haired duke. He was the acting duke at the time – more of a duke than Oakenshield, really. The latter disappeared during the celebrations, gods know where.” Ha paused. “The Dwarves already compose songs about him, did you know? Far too early, but they do. Celebrate the name of a man still among the living,” he babbled. His sister nodded dutifully, apparently not very interested. He rose, smiling gently when she looked up in surprise.

“Come! Let us go outside.” He offered her his hand.

Ningalor truly, honestly, smiled up at him.

It was a tired smile.

“How is she?”
Legolas glanced up at his father. The Duke of the forest gazed at the cabin with clouded eyes and shadowed features. He did not know if those were Ningalor’s actions or his memories that cast such darkness in his mind.

“Not… not well,” he admitted. “Nestor is preparing medicine of all sorts – apparently, she does not have much of an appetite.” He wondered if he should describe how shocked he was to find her, how thin her arms and translucent her skin – decided against it. “I allowed her to go outside.” Thranduil’s lips thinned. “She is accompanied by Tauriel at all times.” He added, “Father, I do not understand why are you demoting –“

“Demoting? I did no such thing. Your sister needs a companion. Someone to sail with her to the undying lands and protect her,” he dismissed him. “Have you a name?”

“No.”

“Did you ask?”

“…No.”

“Do you care so little –“

“I don’t think it would be wise to distress her now further, Father,” Legolas said through tight lips. “Besides, I thought you told me you put an end to this?”

“I did,” Thranduil snarled, “to their hopes and ambitions. Not to my vengeance.”

Dis watched Beorn as the gruff Lord waved them all goodbye and turned his horse to face the road. The foul-tempered beast stomped its giant feet and, with a loud neigh, charged the age-worn path. Beorn headed home.

He left them, as he said he would, in the middle of Spring, after the floods had ceased and the weather was no longer tricky. He left as their sworn friend and ally, with all their gratitude and thanks – physical and otherwise. Dain had left but a month before. Nori left without even saying goodbye; not even to his own brother.

She wasn’t too bothered by it, but she knew the Thirteen were, as they came to be called. What was left of them, at least.

She turned around, saw Thorin returning to the halls of his home. He refused to look up, to recognize the silent staring of the shadowy woods of Mirkwood. Now, it was time for Thorin to rule on his own, as he was meant to from the day of his birth. It seems that Thorin realized that too, she mused as she followed him inside.

In the month and a half that passed since his talk with Thranduil, Thorin focused on restoring Erebor with new vigor. One might say the ancient blood inside him awoken once more in response to his people’s need. He worked hard, barely slept, only spoke and marched and met with all of them, architects and warriors and ravens, planning and talking and working.

Not that he managed to fool her, of course. She knew how Thorin behaved when he was grieving.

But that was all that was left for him to do. The woman was forever gone, probably already left this land – and working was the first step to recovery. Even if his smiles were rarer than ever before
and the grief was forever etched into his ice-cold eyes, he will recover. He must.

She thought of her children and how lucky Thorin was that both were males. Not for the first time. Oh, her boys…

With that in mind, Dis cast one final look at Thorin’s retreating back and marched toward the library, where she knew Fili spent most of his time studying. Kili, she suspected, was away yet again, hunting or exploring or doing whatever it was he needed doing to justify his absence from court and excuse his odd proximity to Mirkwood’s borders.

She waved aside both servants and lords on her way to the library. Let Thorin handle matters of state, now that he finally fulfilled their father’s quest

The library, as she expected, was quieter, calmer. Something told her Fili chose to spend most of his days with his eyes glued to the written word for a motive similar to Kili’s. For them, Thorin said when he told her of his plan. For their future, he will reclaim Erebor. For their inheritance, he will risk their lives. His life. For their safety and pride and happiness. Oh, and how happy they look, Thorin!

It took her a while to find Fili (the library was large, after all), but the golden hair and the shining beads that reflected the bright afternoon sun made it difficult for her boy to hide.

Was he hiding? She approached and said pleasantly, “Your book must be interesting indeed, son.” Fili tensed. Surprise and wariness danced in his eyes before he forced them away. “You missed Lord Beorn’s departure.”

“Forgive me, Amad, I was… yes. Absorbed in my studies.”

“Surely you could spare some time to go outside? This is your first spring in Erebor, and it is incredibly lovely this year.”

Fili glanced out the window with a touch of disdain he tried to hide. “Yes, but I never studied to be an heir – not properly, at least. There is much I know little of.”

She frowned. “Did Thorin tell you this? Because I will not have you waste your youth –“

“No,” he snapped, then mellowed his tone, “no. Uncle teaches me, but the… studies came from my own volition.”

“Hmm. Like Kili’s never ending hunting trips?”

He sounded exasperated. “Amad….”

“No, Fili,” she snapped, then sighed. She lowered herself to the seat next to him and cupped his cheek. “My boy,” she pleaded, “why must you keep your burdens to yourself? I love you, you know I do. Allow me to help you, Son. Fili….“ She caressed his hair. “I am your Amad.”

Oh, now the eyes he turned toward her were a boy’s eyes. But then he turned away and she saw the man underneath. “Amad….“ She could see him struggling. She waited, then touched his shoulder.

“What is bothering you, Fili?” she asked softly.

He tensed again, the man’s muscles tightened and coiled underneath her fingers. He did not expect that, apparently. But she could understand that – he saw her chasing after Kili, trying to figure out what’s wrong with Thorin… her heart clenched in pain.
“I… never mind. It’s nothing. Pay it no mind.”


“It’s Thorin!” Fili twisted his lips in a silent curse when he realized what he said. He looked away from her, but it was too late now for him to stop. “It’s… ever since we got here. I thought – I thought that this was it, y’know? Erebor! Uncle would never stop talking about it, reminiscing, looking… I don’t know, happy? Like it was everything. Like it would solve everything. All the mistreatment and the hate and the wrongdoings will be gone the moment Uncle would once again walk as the rightful duke, and then the rest of us would be restored to… to glory and whatnot. And everything will be fine and great and… and happy. But then we got here.”

Fili paused, looking away. Looking at Mirkwood. Was it his brother he was thinking of, or something else?

“I know you don’t like… don’t approve of Thorin’s relationship,” he said slowly. Carefully. Dis was just as careful not to show her conflicting emotions. This was not what she had expected. “During the quest, he... everyone told him not to get involved with her. I heard them. I think they told her too, Gandalf and the rest, but... you should’ve seen them together, Amad, you’d never believe it was Thorin if I told you. And then, to survive everything, including Smaug, and to….”

His fists tightened. His entire body tensed, as if repulsed by the very words Fili failed to find.

“He stabbed her, Amad!”

Dis exhaled sharply, turned to face her son. This was never mentioned before. No one ever –

“Impossible!”

“I was there! He stabbed her!” Fili shouted. “You don’t know – he carried her when she was sick and she fell asleep on him and he wasn’t even mad he just carried her and looked at her like she was everything – and then – and then –“ He got up, too upset to sit down or face his books anymore. “Uncle always said to honor our words, and protect the weak, and always stand by those to whom our loyalty is promised, and-and-and he always said to show our worth by our words and deeds, and to fulfill our dues and promises and-and she was crying and she begged that he’d let her stay, just that, let her hide there like he promised and he stabbed her pushed her against the wall and –“

Fili fell silent.

He looked away. She could see the tremors still tearing through him as the righteous anger he tried to bury within burst the very fibers of his being. “Is that what being a duke means, Amad? You never… you never talk about Grandfather, and Thorin never talks about his grandfather, and….”

“Oh, Fili! Of course not! Being a duke is being what your uncle always has been – a noble leader who –“

“Acts honorably and fulfills his promises?” Fili smiled without mirth. “Yeah. He was like that until he stepped inside these halls.”

“Fili….”

He waved her away, so she waited. She watched and listened, waiting for him to speak again and
spit all the pain that poisoned him from within.

“Balin said it was just a one-time mistake that Thorin regretted the moment he realized what he did, that I should judge him based on his life of honor and sacrifice instead, weigh the years and not that one moment of lost control.” So Balin knew? Balin knew before I did? “But it’s… I know she betrayed him and lied to him and all that, but….”

“But that’s no excuse?” she completed his sentence softly for him, “Fili, my dear, I know it is hard, but you should forgive –“

“I am not angry at him,” he interrupted her, “I really am not. I can see how hard it is for him. I just….” He sighed. “Just forget it, all right? Like I said, don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

“Fili…”

“And Kili’s fine, too. He isn’t running or anything. He’s just trying to meet with that Mirkwood Elf guard.”

Dis paused, unsure she heard correctly.

“What?” she demanded.

Fili looked strangely satisfied, having managed to stupefy his mother, then infinitely sad. “Just don’t bother him, all right? He’s… not handling it well. I’m just telling you so you’d leave him be.”

“What do you mean, ‘not handling it well’? What is there to handle?” she cried.

Fili weighted the options, then muttered, “He hasn’t seen her ever since the battle. No one has. Rumor is that Thranduil sent her away as well, with Lily. Just… leave him be, all right, Amad? He… he’s just still hoping to find her, that’s all.”

And he walked away, body bent and eyes downcast. Oh, her boys…

To hell with those Mirkwood women!

It was dark still. The stars blinked in vein and yet resisted fading completely, just as winter’s hardest blow always arrived before the frost surrendered to the onslaught of spring.

It will be dusk soon, he knew.

Dusk and then day and then twilight and then night, counting the days away with the march of his feet.

The veiled sound of mewling caught his attention, and he sighed in relief, as well as in recognition of the new burdens that lie before him.

Legolas rose in greeting of his sister, who emerged from the cottage holding a bundle in her arms and followed closely by Tauriel and Nestor.

Varda! There was color in her cheeks.

Ningalor looked up at him and smiled faintly. She still looked weak and frail, but her eyes had a touch of light to them – he hoped it was vigor and not fever – and though she was not given enough
time to recover – barely a month – she looked better than she did throughout all of those long months of pregnancy.

He was told the birth was difficult. He was told Nestor almost had to pry the baby from his sister’s body. He was told she almost gave up. He stood by the cottage and heard the screams.

He had not told his father any of it.

“It’s a girl,” she whispered to him. Was there a touch of pride in her voice? Ah, no. It was love. A mother’s love. His heart tightened in love and loss and awe and fear. His sister, a mother.

He did not allow the conflicting emotions to show as he returned her smile. “May I see her?”

Ningalor balanced the bundle on one arm and with the other gently moved the cloth. The baby within was tiny, he mused, pale and weak and breathing softly. Her tiny hands twitched, and the baby opened her eyes for one short, dazed moment, and blinked at him. The blue was a tad darker than the azure of his family, but it was gone before he could really gauge the shade.

The baby’s fingers curled, and she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

“Pronounce her name before the Valar, and all that shines, all that lies above, all that rests below, all that grows, all that flows, all that lives, all that dreams, all that weeps, all that hunts, all that judges, all that remembers, all that fights, all that heals, all that dances, and all that is shall know her as your daughter and my kin, a lady of the forest,” he said in the traditional manner. His sister tensed – it was not he who was supposed to announce her daughter, and it was not he who was meant to welcome her. Her daughter was not meant to be named before trees and rocks, but before all of her people in a festive ceremony underneath the sky.

He doubted Ningalor was bothered by the lack of the celebrations, however. It was the absence of their father that caused her cheeks to ashen.

“Doroniel.”

Legolas’ eyes widened. Produce me a name, Legolas.

“You cannot name her that,” he hissed, “Adar –”

“I know,” she smiled somberly at her child, misery etched into the weary eyes and the pale lips. “I shall announce her to the world as Niphredil, for she was conceived with the coming of winter.” She still did not look at him. “I wanted you to know the truth, brother.”

That, too, was untraditional. If anything, Ningalor was supposed to name her daughter after a summer plant, for she was a summer child. But he could understand the symbolism, and the thought pierced through him. For Ningalor it was winter still.

“Niphredil,” he repeated, giving the name his recognition as it crossed his lips.

“Niphredil,” repeated Tauriel and Nestor murmured, bowing.

And thus the ceremony was complete.

“We must go, nethel,” he urged. “Our escort awaits.”

Ningalor clutched her child closer to her chest involuntarily. “What about Adar?”

Legolas’ lips thinned. “I do not know. Come.”
Ningalor came.

They walked through the forest to where their escort awaited: twenty of Mirkwood’s best mounted on steeds, four horses with their saddles still empty, five ponies carrying their equipment, and –

And Thranduil.

The man turned to face them upon hearing their approach, and his eyes were undecipherable as they focused on Ningalor and the bundle in her arms.

“Adar,” said Legolas slowly and halted before him, “may I present Niphredil, daughter of Ningalor, lady of Mirkwood?” The formality of the event made his stomach churn.

His father pointedly ignored the bundle in Ningalor’s arms, the very evident anxiety in Ningalor’s eyes, and the way her hand tightened around the blankets, eliciting a protesting mewl from the bundle.

“How are you?” Thranduil asked softly, gazing at his daughter.

Tenderness as well as sadness were woven in his voice. Ningalor’s eyes widened, as if they were the last thing she expected. Legolas furrowed his brow. He wondered how well did Ningalor actually know their father.

“I am well,” she whispered. Weakly. She did not sound well, a fact which was not lost on the Duke.

“A winter flower for a summer child,” he commented.

Ningalor did not answer. Perhaps she did not want to draw attention to her unnamed partner by explaining.

“Have you a name to give me?” he asked, more direct this time.

Ningalor tensed and shook her head. She held her daughter close.

Thranduil’s eyes cooled. Was it disappointment? Pain? He turned away. “Safe journey, my child. We will meet again, at the end of my time here in Middle Earth. Goodbye.”

He bowed his head slowly and began to walk away. He offered no soft touch, no warm words, no consolation, only formality and pain.

“Don’t you want to see her?” Ningalor asked suddenly, her voice too sharp for the predawn hours to contain. “Your first granddaughter?” She turned to face him, but Thranduil did not return the favor.

“I have no granddaughter.”

He left them.

A soft bleating sound was heard, growing louder and louder. Niphredil began to cry.

Thorin led his guest through the corridor toward the door, which was opened by bowing guards, and then outside. They marched on the wall until they reached a spot from which they could see Dale, flourishing as in the days of the past.
It was an act of consideration to his guest, as well as an indirect warning of what could happen should the fellowship between Erebor and Dale be forsaken once more.

The look Bard gave him was slightly ruthful, yet the man’s glance softened when he gazed at his dukedom.

“How is the restoration?” Thorin asked.

“Still have a long way to go before returning to the glory of the good ol’ days, but… we will manage to survive the upcoming winter pretty well, I think. Your men are very skilled.”

“That is their craft,” Thorin agreed graciously. “The gates of Erebor are open to welcome you and your people, should you encounter hardship.”

“Your proposal is appreciated. Dale offers the same.”

Thorin hmmed in approval.

“People are flocking to Dale; Erebor too, I imagine?”

“Aye. Many come. Some return to their ancient homes. Some seek a new life. Have you had trouble?”

“Just a bit. Petty thieves and the like. But the war hardened the men. They refuse to give up so easily what they nearly gave their lives for. You?”

“Dwalin’s men command the fortress. He is thorough at preventing any acts of disobedience according to the Dwarven Law.”

“…I see.” Bard’s eyes narrowed, as if questions he was not sure should be ever uttered crossed his mind. His eyes focused on Mirkwood, then turned to look at Thorin. “How are you holding up?”

Thorin’s hands tightened immediately. Too direct; presumptuous, even. Not even his closest friends – but Bard was a fellow duke and an ally. This was not a man he could dismiss on such grounds.

“Why do you ask?” He turned to look at him. His glare should do the job of discouraging the man.

Bard’s calculative gaze did not lose its potency. He was not cowed, but his voice had a disarming, honest quality to it. “Well, with being a duke again and all. Nearly a year has passed. I know I still find it strange.”

_A year has passed… A year since I last saw_ – “I served as a duke in exile. It is strange, I admit, but fitting, for me to rule Erebor. That was my fate ever since I drew my first breath.”

“Hmm. I understand. Though I must say, I thought it would make you happy.”

Thorin snapped, “You presume too much, bargeman!” Then cursed his temper. Now he overstepped the line.

Bard’s eyes flashed in anger, but the moment faded more quickly than it appeared. He restrained himself and ignored the insult, doing a much better job of containing his temper than Thorin did. “I thought we are friends, Oakenshield. Perhaps I did presume too much.” The man’s shoulders sloped as the tension the pulled his body loosened and the strings were released. “Thorin, forgive me.”
Thorin’s hand twitched as he fought the instinct to grasp the hilt of his sword. He did take a step back, body tense. “Whatever for?” he barked.

Bard either ignored his mistrust or did not notice it. The grim man sighed and looked away, eyes focused on the golden lake. “For betraying Lily. I did not know.”

Thorin exhaled sharply, as if slapped. This was not what he expected. Nor what he needed. Another reminder of her. As if his dreams weren’t torment enough.

The man, ignorant of the turmoil in Thorin’s heart, continued, “I saw her. When she walked outside. I never saw anything so... like she was expecting her own execution. I should not have done that. I would not have turned her in, had I known, I would never have done that. I thought Erebor meant more to you than everyone, including her. I never thought, however... Forgive me.” Bard turned to face him, and his eyes were honest. “Forgive me.”

He thought...? Thorin’s stomach churned and coiled when he realized the man was right. Nothing mattered as much as Erebor did. Now, nothing matters because Lily –

“It does not matter anymore.”

Bard’s eyes widened. Was it the colorlessness of his voice? The thickness of his grumble? The man should be relieved. Instead, he is alarmed by the lack of anger. By the defeat. Why?

Does it matter? He thought.

Thorin turned his back to the Duke behind him. “We should go. Bombur prepared dinner –”

“Won’t you go after her?”

Thorin paused. He did not turn his back. “This is not the purpose of your visit, bowman! Must I remind you of your duties as well as your manners?”

“Don’t give me that crap! Only two weeks ago my scouts reported sightings of an entourage –“

Thorin snapped. He turned, growling, “She is gone, Bard! She is beyond my reach! Do not mention her!” He paused, trying to calm his shattered breath to no avail. “This is not your fault. It was I who cast her out; it was I who broke all of my promises to her; it was I... I lost her. I lost her.”


“Our dinner awaits.” He stilled his form, turned his pain to stone and anger to iron. He is a Durin. He is the leader of his men. He shall not break. “And the past is buried. I am the Duke of Erebor. My days of wandering are done.” He walked away; trudged on; marched ahead.

He did not look back.

Nor did he look forward.

He faced his duties and carried on.

She could get used to this, she mused; the silence, the chirping birds, the unassuming pity in the eyes of the silent servants that attended to her every need.

Yes. She could learn to live with pity.
Ningalor sipped her tea and offered her giggling daughter a wisp of a smile. She was amused by the butterflies, dancing freely in Beorn’s garden. Her laughter was free as well. Unfit for court, she huffed.

Mirkwood’s shadows could not reach her, this time of day. If she closed her eyes and held her ring tightly, she could pretend she had never entered the woods at all. Wear it, her mind whispered, wear the ring and run…

“Still silent.”

Ningalor snapped awake and quickly hid the metal band in the folds of her cloth. Beorn’s eyes scrutinized her, yet he gave no sign of displeasure as he sat next to her on the grass.

She knew not what to say, yet it seemed as if Beorn did not expect her to answer. He had the same look in his eyes that he had the day Legolas stopped at his gate, asking to spend the night, and the gruff Lord noticed her, holding a bundle and surrounded by soldiers.

“She’s a pretty baby. Grow to be a pretty lass.”

Ningalor swallowed and smiled uncertainly. She was unsure how a mother was supposed to respond. Thank him? It was not her he complimented. And Doroniel was pretty. Fat cheeks and large eyes, full of light and wonder, a wide, innocent smile and fine, dark hair. Her laughter was full of joy. Was she ever like that? Was Thorin?

“Does he know?”

“No.” Her reply was quick. Too quick, she knew, but Dwarves are possessive. She tore her eyes from her child to gaze pleadingly at the giant beside her, and his eyes darkened as he understood the root of her anguish. He nodded.

“That’s why you’re leaving? To keep her safe?”

Ningalor shook her head. It took her a moment to gather the courage to answer. “To wash my actions of shame. Thranduil believes the ocean will manage that.” She explained when she saw the confusion in Beorn’s eyes, “Pretend she is the offspring of another.”

Beorn said nothing. He broke a small branch full of golden leaves and placed it before Doroniel. The baby tried to catch the branch, perhaps? Her hands and legs twitched but did not manage a full movement. Her glee, however, was obvious.

“What do you want, little doe?”

“What I want does not matter.”

He snapped, “Pampered bird, cease obeying others! Stand up on your own two legs, for once!”

“My actions hurt others –“

“Don’t tell me you’re still thinking of Oakenshield –“

“Beorn –“

“That was a year ago!”

“It matters not!” she shouted, frightened herself, and then mellowed her tone. “It matters not. Thranduil and Legolas and… and Thorin, they are not to blame. Not for my foolishness. Besides,”
she added, feeling the anger of her companion lashing out at her in the corner of her mind, “I have my daughter to take care of. I cannot act irresponsibly again, nor can I leave her.”

Beorn shook his mane. “What about Gandalf, where is he?”

The question tore through her. He told her he would not be able to save her, but still… she missed her guardian. She missed Gandalf. “I do not know.”

“He tried to speak with Thranduil on your behalf at the peace festivities.”

“I was not told,” she murmured.

“Thorin, as well.”

Ningalor blinked. She looked up from her daughter and stared at Beorn. Surely she did not understand what the Lord just said. Did Thorin ask about her?

“Thorin spoke with Thranduil. About what, I do not know. Both deserted the festivities soon afterward.” He shook the branch, eliciting another pearl of laughter, then turned to face her. “You may yet find a place in Erebor, child. I can take you there.”

She looked away, swallowing the lump in her throat. “He would not want to see me.” He did not ask about me, then. Why would he?

“But you want to see ‘im, don’t you? Be brave, child. Just once.”

“Beorn, he… he banished me from Erebor. He said if I… if he ever lays eyes on me again, he will….” Her voice failed her as she did not find the words.

“Harsh words spoken in a moment of anger. I saw him, lass. He is a shadow of himself, now that he lost you.”

“He tried to kill me,” she breathed, then looked up, eyes horrified as if they still failed to grasp the meaning of her words. “He stabbed me.”

Beorn looked at her, scrutinizing, then away. The anger was unmistakable. “Failed to mention that.”

She sighed. Not surprised, yet too tired to form the necessary words.

“If you want to stay, I will allow it.”

“Beorn…” she sighed again. Thankful, but too tired to argue her point, explain why that would not work, describe her father’s temper. The stubborn, demeaning glint in Beorn’s eyes told her what he thought of her worries; a puppet tied with the strings of court. But she could not ask so much of him, could not be his burden.

Could not stay within Thorin’s reach.

“I thank you, truly,” she said.

Beorn, with an aggravated growl, got up and left.

Chapter End Notes
Translation:
-Doroniel – daughter of oak.
-Niphredil - a pale winter flower, snowdrop.
-Nethel - sister

Fast forwarding a bit =) It's going to take a while to reposition all the characters, but I believe Dis is doing an admirable job of that. Still, it's going to be a few chapters before Thorin and Ningalor will be ready to face each other again.

I have to say I was rather uncertain if I really wanted to write a baby into this, but Doroniel is so cute I cannot possibly regret her. Once again, this is not a pro life/pro choice scenario. I just think Thorin and Ningalor would have a cute baby.

What do you think? Next chapter next Saturday!
A Dream of a Stranger

Chapter Summary

"Calling upon the coldest wind
He summoned mountains and rivers to force her out of her way
His love lacked grace and was devoid of warmth
But it was his devotion that banished her from his lands
She was simple and true
But his manipulation games nurtured only silence."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Niphredil! Niphredil! Turn – Yes! You turned! You are on your belly! Look at you! A very advanced move, your ladyship!”

Doroniel, as Ningalor insisted to keep calling her in her mind, answered with a bright, dazzling smile, then her head landed – nose first – in the thin mattress on which she was allowed to play.

Ningalor perked up, worried, but her child apparently inherited her father’s stubbornness, for she soon picked up her head again, despite the apparent effort, and giggled when Tauriel rewarded the herculean effort with the appropriate coo.

After a few more minutes of that exercise, Tauriel guided the baby to lie on her back and watched with an amused expression as Doroniel discovered her hands and attempted to suck on them.

If there was an excellent discovery ever made on this journey, it was the fact that Tauriel, before she was taken under her father’s wing and trained to become the elite warrior she was, took care of the children of the poorer families in her father’s dukedom. She had no relatives to take care of her, so instead she earned her slice of bread and a roof over her head by watching over children whose parents were too poor to afford to stay at home and raise themselves.

Tauriel was nineteen. When Ningalor was nineteen, she was too busy planning her escape to care for those around her. Tauriel simply bore her burden and focused on the tasks before her. Ningalor found that to be admirable. She respected her, therefore, and did not probe when the girl-woman’s eyes clouded with mist as she looked behind them, as if expecting to see a familiar face or a familiar scenery bursting through yesterday’s snow.

A shadow fell upon her face and she looked up, then smiled in gratitude when her brother offered a mug of heated, mulled wine. Her father ensured that they made the journey supplied with the best food and, of course, the best wine.

She grabbed the mug in her left hand, feeling the warmth tickling through her senses and easing the pain. The areas where Smaug’s fire licked her left her skin mutilated, and the scars throbbed with old ache when they came in contact with something cold, like the snow.

Nestor did his best; Oin did his best. Smaug still left his mark.
“We shall reach Rivendell in a fortnight or so. The snow slows us down, as well as the need for extra caution,” Legolas said. His eyes were fixed on the giggling baby and on the guard playing with her.

She could not tell, however, who was the focus of his attention.

“I am in no hurry,” she muttered.

Legolas frowned at her. “The road is dangerous,” he reminded her.

“I know.”

“We will reach Rivendell.”

“I know.” Her voice was weaker.

“You will leave Middle Earth.”

Ningalor did not answer.

Legolas sighed. He held her hand for a brief moment, then released her when she did not respond. “It is for your own protection.”

“But because there it will be easier to convince everyone that Arodon was, in fact, dark of hair?” she said colorlessly. “It is not for my own protection, but for Father’s. Father’s name and reputation. Lie to me, for all the good it serves you, but do not lie to yourself.”

She looked at Doroniel and saw the other guards pointedly ignoring the baby. They did their duty, which was to offer protection. They did not speak unless commanded to, and they did not gossip. Her father’s men were well trained. But still, through the eyes of glass and expressions of porcelain, she saw the accusation, the suspicion. The aloof confusion.

Arodon was blond and died during the battle. Ningalor was blonde and returned to her father’s authority mere minutes before said battle. So how could they have a baby, and one with hair as black as twilight?

And then there was Nestor, dull-eyed Nestor, who throughout those two long months never spoke, not a word, just stared ahead and healed the wounded with movements like those of a ceramic doll.

They obeyed their lady with muted, accommodating servility. But they refused to recognize their lady’s daughter. None but Tauriel and her own mother approached her. Even Legolas kept his distance.

Ningalor suspected the case will not be much different in another continent.

“Father wants you safe –“

“Father thinks me dead.”

“Ningalor!”

“He did not even look at her. He could not even touch me. Do not tell me I am in the wrong, Legolas.”

“You don’t have anywhere else to go, Ningalor! Valinor is your last resort. Do not blame Father for this.”
“Only myself, then.”

Legolas tossed a cold glare her way. *Yes, only yourself,* his eyes said, but his mouth remained silent. He looked away.

“I do not wish to fight you,” he said eventually. Slowly.

Ningalor nodded. Suddenly, she realized that this shall be their goodbye, as well. That this was one of their final moment.

She turned and hugged her brother, burying her face in the folds of his cloak. “I am sorry, brother, I truly am. I never meant for this, for any of this. I have never wanted my life to turn up like this. I’m sorry.”

Legolas, surprised, hugged her back gently. The guards were looking out, into the forest. Tauriel was playing with Doroniel. If she closed her eyes, she could almost believe she was alone, and safe, and not on the brink of another journey to yet another unfamiliar place.

“I know,” Legolas whispered. “I know. I am sorry, too, for not being there for you, as I should have.”

Ningalor held the ring in her fist, thought of Gandalf, and, despite everything, tried to hope.

Scarlet. Thorin braced himself internally though neither his steps nor his pace faltered as he entered through the main door of the library. He took special care not to look at the wall directly to his left and instead marched into the belly of the room.

If Fili seriously thought that books – pages and leather stained with ink – would be the thing to apprehend him, he clearly underestimated the amount of reading involved in the proper upbringing of a dukedom’s heir.

He simply did not like them very much. It was far easier to send Balin to do the reading for him and report back. The old devil actually enjoyed spending hours poring over smeared words, marked with time and illegible handwriting.

Thorin marched in, glancing right and left with his head held high, hands folded majestically behind his back. No crown, no heavy, fur trimmed overcoat, no gilded armor. With the amount of sleep he allowed himself and the amount of walking he usually did, those became too great a hindrance.

Besides, his people knew him. The admiration in their eyes was not kindled by the wealth he wore upon his person. These were not the soft days of his grandfather’s rule, gilded with polished gems and feasts and the unmistakable air of decadence. No, these were hard days, with winter’s breath sharp at his throat, and his people needed a hard duke, one that would endure.

And their duke needed his heir.

So.

Library.

Thorin noticed, of course, that his nephews avoided him whenever possible. He was neither as blind nor as deaf as Dis thought him to be. But he knew the pain in Kili’s eyes too well to help, and
he understood that Fili needed space and time to overcome whatever it was that gnawed through
him. So he gave them that. Then he became too preoccupied with ignoring his own grief to notice
the troubles of others.

Duty first, family second. Never forget that your people are your duty, and your dukedom is your
duty, and your allies and your foes. Family comes second. Always.

Honor first, before pride. Duty first, before pleasure. Your people first, then your life.

You live to serve; remember that.

The heir is both family and duty, Dis reminded him. You cannot send a servant to fetch him, you
must go yourself, she demanded.

Well, let her preside over the meeting with the builders. After one meeting with her, the architect
and his team will be more agreeable, no doubt, to the idea of pure restoration of the Great Hall,
without any remodeling of any kind.

Well, he just walked the length of the library. Did he miss him? Dwalin’s men clearly said –

“Fili is not here today, Your Grace.”

Thorin turned around in a snap – he failed to notice the other presence entirely – “…Ori,” he
breathed in relief.

It was no wonder he missed the youngest Ri. Ori was buried in so many books, he may as well
have been a bookshelf.

“How did you know I was looking for him?” Thorin asked.

“Just a guess. Haven’t seen you in the library before, Your Grace.”

Thorin frowned. “You need not be so formal with me, Ori,” he chided gently. Ori blushed and
looked down. People first, family second.

“How are you?” he asked, managing not to add, holding up, just in time. The boy looked so frail,
now that he thought about it; he was not sure he could stomach such a direct inquiry.

Ori looked up in surprise. Which was understandable, since, now that Thorin thought about it, they
hadn’t had any meaningful exchange during all those long, long months of the quest.

“I… I am well, Your – Thorin, I mean – I… read.”

“That’s… good. That’s good,” he hurried to reassure the flustered boy and waved him down when
he made an attempt to stand up. Instead, he sat down. Ori stared at him, wide eyed. Sitting down
meant an actual conversation. Something told Thorin he wasn’t entirely thrilled by the idea. “Is
that a book about Moria?” he tried again, eyeing the cover of the book that now served as Ori’s
chest armor, if one could judge by the way the boy plastered the book to his body.

He is a boy no longer, Thorin suddenly realized. Just like my boys.

“Er… Yes. Yes, I… find it interes- I want to know more, I mean, about the lost Dwarven
Dukedoms,” he corrected himself.

The observant consideration made Thorin sigh and lean back against the bookcase, hoping it will
hold his weight. It did.
“You miss your brothers,” he said. Ori froze. “I miss mine too. All the time.” It was not a revelation he wanted to make, but one Ori desperately needed. Dwarves, despite what all the other alliances (and Dis) might have thought, did not have hearts of stone.

“I… yes.” A beat of silence. Thorin let it stretch. He did not look at Ori. He waited, thinking of Fili. Fili knew he was coming and fled. Should he respect his need for distance or force the issue open?

Suddenly he thought of Frerin, milky eyed and, You are not my duke, brother!

“It was always just the three of us, as far as I can remember. I was always the youngest, and Dori and Nori always took care of me. Dori took care of all of us. I was never… It was never just me. Just Ori. It was Dori’s brother or Nori’s brother or the youngest Ri or just Ri. Now I’m Ori. I don’t… I don’t want to be Ori, just Ori. I don’t want to be –“ A pause. Silence. Shuffling. More books pressed against the agitated body. “I shouldn’t have expected Nori to stay. He never does. But I thought that maybe – he and Dori had all of these fights, all the time. So I thought maybe –“ Silence. Wavering voice.

“Maybe for me he’d stay.”

Then Ori realized what he said and whom he had spoken to and buried himself in his cloak.

Thorin wavered, hesitant, then slowly, carefully, placed his hand on Ori’s shoulder. Ori jumped, and while he did not relax, he also did not resist or shrink away from the touch. “You are not alone, Ori. You walked with us through every trial and in each you showed your loyalty, your honor, and the strength of your heart. Such deeds change you, and such deeds can never be forgotten. We are… not thirteen, not anymore, but the Company still stands true. You are not just Ori, and you are not alone.”

Ori nodded, but he did not move nor raised his head, and Thorin considered adding something, saying something, hugging him? He was not certain what would be the proper way to handle the situation, and a part of him was relieved to hear the rush of footsteps, and then the appearance of a servant, bowing low and muttering something about a convoy of members of the Broadbeam Tribe.

Thorin gave the shaky shoulder a final, hopefully reassuring squeeze and rose, answering duty’s call.

He did not notice that the moment he marched away, a brooding man stepped away from the niche he used as a hiding spot. The sun shone upon his golden braids and golden beads, but his eyes, instead, bore into receding man’s back. The sun shone upon his golden braids and golden beads, but his eyes, instead, bore into receding man’s back.

The body was a man’s body, but the eyes were a boy’s eyes, and they were uncertain.

The Duke of Rivendell sat patiently and listened to Legolas as he passionately told her tale. The edited version.

He read the letter composed by Thranduil and watched Ningalor tending to her daughter with his eyes clouded and undecipherable. He must have noted Tauriel fidgeting at her side and the weak, palpable relief that caused Ningalor’s form to tremble when he accepted the baby and called her name. Niphredil, not Doroniel. Recognition from the White Council had weight. Names had weight.
And the Duke of Rivendell had observant eyes.

Legolas finished the story and waited for the Duke to speak. Long moments stretched into long minutes of silence, and Legolas, despite his training, had to fight for his composure.

Ningalor dared not meet the Duke’s eyes.

“Legolas, leave us, please. You, too.” He nodded to Tauriel. The guard turned to obey but Legolas scowled, refusing to leave his sister’s side. Elrond focused his gaze on Legolas, not unkindly, and her brother rose, then hesitated, then, finally, obeyed.

Elrond was silent still, deep in thought. He had time.

“You hesitated when I asked for her name,” he finally said.

Ningalor glanced down. She knew she could not lie to him.

“What did you really name her?”

Ningalor looked up. Was she pleading? Perhaps she was. Her hold of her daughter tightened as she cradled her to her chest.

Elrond frowned, rose, and sat facing her. “Ningalor, when did I ever mean you harm?”

“I don’t want to go,” she whispered. “Please, please don’t make me.”

Elrond’s eyes held pity. She looked down. Pity was perhaps what she needed, but she did not want to face it.

“She is the daughter of Thorin Oakenshield.”

Her eyes widened in surprise and fear. “How….?”

“I saw him looking at you, and I saw you avoiding him. Thranduil’s lie is a foolish one, so there weren’t many options left.” He sighed, a deep, bone rattling sigh. “What shall I ever do with you, child? You refuse my advice and refuse to listen to reason. How can I help you now?”

“Don’t send me away. Please.”

Elrond’s frown deepened. “Why ever not? Ningalor, you have broken almost every taboo in our society. This may be your final chance to redeem yourself.”

“They will mistreat her,” she said in a small voice, “they will not accept her.”

“Thranduil’s scheme may work in Valinor. I shall approve it; you and your daughter will find peace there.”

“I do not want to. Please,” she begged.

“You sound like a child. What reason do you have?” when Ningalor looked down, he added, exasperated. “Are you expecting me to guess? I cannot help you unless you tell me.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I… I only know I don’t want to go.”

“That is the reasoning of a five-year-old. You are twenty-six. Tell me what truly bothers you.”
And Elrond sat and waited. He was in no hurry. He had time.

Did she? Every moment felt like the last of its kind.

“I never liked court. I never felt like I belonged. I was so lonely. It’s probably not good enough a reason, barely an excuse. But I… I betrayed my family and my people, nearly drowned, then nearly burned to death and nearly crushed by rocks and almost stabbed – to avoid that. To not return to-to that. I don’t have a better excuse. Only my daughter. Please, don’t make me go. I really, really don’t want to go.”

Elrond sat in silence.

Moments ticked by and the silence stretched on, and Ningalor held on to her daughter and waited. She waited with her head bowed and her neck exposed and knew she did not have much to hope for.

“Your daughter.” Ningalor froze. “May I hold her?”

“Oh,” she breathed in relief, then released the bundle in her arms and gave her to the Duke. Doroniel, still asleep, stretched slightly when she finally had a room to do so. Elrond gently pulled at the blankets so he could look at her properly, and through he smiled gently at the sleeping baby, his eyes did not miss the shade of her hair.

“She is a pretty baby,” he said.

“Oh, yes,” Ningalor gasped in discomfort. Was she supposed to thank him? She glanced at him uncertainly but Elrond, once again, was too preoccupied to notice her fidgeting.

“What is her name?” he asked carefully.

“Doroniel,” she whispered.

Elrond’s eyes snapped to meet hers; Ningalor blushed and looked away.

“Ningalor, why are you here?”

She looked up, confused. “I… I was sent by my father –“

“No,” he stopped her, “I meant, why aren’t you with Thorin?”

Ningalor tried to swallow and regain her composure, or what was left of it. It took her several attempts before she was marginally successful, and by that time her voice wavered and tears began rolling down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” she hurried to say, wiping her cheeks in a futile attempt to stop crying. “I’m –“ A sob escaped her and she pressed her lips together, trying desperately to regain control over her features.

“He discovered your identity and left you?” Elrond guessed gently. He caressed her hair. “Hush, child. Don’t cry. Tell me. Tell me so I could help you.”

So Ningalor did. She told him. She told him everything.

She told him of Gandalf’s warning and Beorn’s offer, of sleep so peaceful and eyes so gentle, of promises and protection, of deeds of bravery, of lies upon lies and fear and hope, of a shirt of mithril and the strike of a sword.
And Elrond sat and listened. He held her daughter and held her too and in his hands, he held her fate.

“He gave you a gift of mithril?” he inquired.

“Well… at – at first it was a gift. Then he said it was payment.”

“But it was not given as payment,” Elrond mused, then asked, “and what happened after the gift was received?”

“We…” Ningalor blushed. “We shared the night,” she mumbled a confession.

Elrond nodded and asked no more. He held her hand and waited for the tears to cease.

“I will consider this,” he told her as he led her to her room. “All will be well, Ningalor. Sleep, child, worry not about a thing.” He placed her daughter in a cradle next to her bed and ordered Tauriel to watch over her. He gave her a tea to drink, which smelled faintly of chamomile and made her feel lightheaded, and left.

Ningalor curled into a ball, as tight as she could, and fell asleep. If she cried while unconscious, Tauriel was her only witness; a guard trained by her father, she knew how to remain silent.

She kept her watch.

Thorin glared.

Thranduil glanced around, eyeing the Great Hall with a curl on his lip and disdainfull eyes.

Thorin glowered.

Thranduil eventually looked down and his eyes found Thorin’s, then offered him a serene nod of his flawless head in a manner that ensured that his crown of silver and white gems caught the light and sparkled like freshly fallen snow.

A clever immitation, but not the gems of Lasgalen. Those he kept hidden, no doubt, as befitted of the treasure he coveted most.

Or perhaps he just failed to remove them from the necklace, which was meant for a woman, and inlay them in his crown.

Thorin smirked.

Thranduil’s expression turned cold.

“I see you have nearly finished your repairs,” he noted.

“Not at all. Merely the restoration of the initial structure.”

“Really? I would not have guessed. This looks just like your Grandfather’s reception hall,” he bit.

“Then your memory serves you ill, though I would not hold this against you – age does that to the mind, or so I am told,” Thorin bit back. “I shall be sure to invite you when Erebor is finally repaired, so you could withstand the glory and craftsmanship of my people first hand.”
Thranduil glowered. “Indeed. I shall be flattered. Be sure to order enough wine – actual wine, of course, so I may manage to flatter you back,” he cocked an elegant brow.

“Perhaps I could order another bottle to be fetched now, should it make you more agreeable.”

He could feel Dis glaring daggers at his back.

“What a wonderful suggestion. Assuming, of course, that you have wine, not that disgusting thing you call ale. Your company becomes infinitely more bearable after a bottle or two.”

Thorin wondered how rude it would be to spill the wine on his so-called guest. Thranduil smirked back.

They sat facing each other next to a large table covered with maps and glasses and plates full of food and many other delights, prepared by Bombur and his army of chefs.

Thranduil did not touch anything, but he did wave his hand for a refill of wine in an alarming rate.

Several servants stood next to the wall, waiting on them, and behind each duke stood several advisors, ready to jump and whisper something in their ears.

He was quite certain Balin found a way to chain Dis to the floor; otherwise he’d have his ear ripped off by now.

“How odd. Is this a new tradition?” Thorin said with as much grace as he could muster.

Thranduil, clearly, found the attempt to be quite laughable. “The feast of Turuhalmë is very near. It is tradition to give gifts and visit one’s neighbors.”

Thorin scowled. “Not at all, but I am not surprised to find your education lacking,” Thranduil dismissed him gracefully. “In fact, as a token of good will, I brought wine.”

“Half of your gift already rests in your stomach.”

“A worthy investment indeed. I am already tasting the fruits of my labor,” Thranduil took another sip.

Thorin kept his tone neutral. “Perhaps we should also come to visit. Our winter celebration also lists gift giving as part of its traditions.”

“I’d hate to think you troubled yourself so for my sake,” the Elven Duke dismissed him, “but I cannot bear the thought of rejecting your noble offer so heartlessly. You may send your gifts with a messenger.”

“I’ll send you horse dung in the shape of your face.” Thranduil finished his glass. “So crude,” he muttered disdainfully. “One would have thought that fine food and an army of servants might have mellowed your crass spirit, but I may have hoped in vain.” He waved his hand. “Since you are too boorish, I’ll speak plainly – dismiss your men, o Duke of Erebor, and I shall dismiss mine.”

“Whatever for?” Thorin demanded, annoyed with how the duke managed to turn his title into an
Thranduil glanced at him with disgust. “Privacy,” he spat.

He then returned to his drink, since his glass was already filled yet again, and waited. Bored and dismissive, he waited because he could afford it.

Thorin dismissed his men.

Thranduil waved his hand and his, too, left without a word uttered.

There was a long moment of silence as they waited for the room to empty and for Thranduil to finish his glass of wine.

Then the Elven Duke spoke, voice dull but eyes penetrating like spears of ice. “You already know my daughter had left these lands.”

Thorin felt as though he had been slapped.

His hands coiled and grabbed the ancient arms of his chair. It took every ounce of self-control he ever possessed to prevent his face from betraying him.

Thranduil’s gaze was relentless, as if he was bent upon breaking Thorin with his glare. He gave no hint as to whether he managed to see Thorin’s emotional turmoil or not.

“You may not know, however, why I sent her away.”

This was a trap. This had to be a trap. “Why are you telling me this?” he rasped.

“She was a part of your company. She shared in your perils. Do you not wish to know her fate?”

“Since when do my wishes mean anything to you?” he snarled.

Thranduil smiled, but the gesture was cold and empty. “Did I not say? I come bearing gifts.” He did not wait for Thorin to respond. Either he noticed how unstable Thorin was or simply ran out of patience; grew bored with his game. “My daughter is my treasure. I do not give up on what is mine easily. And yet, I sent her away. It may interest you to know, Oakenshield, that you returned my daughter to me broken.”

Thorin’s breath deserted him. He opened his mouth, but the weak howl of pain prevented any words from forming. Thranduil looked at him in distaste, as if he were a particularly pathetic animal, then continued.

“I did not mean that metaphorically. Not entirely. Her ribs were broken. She then very bravely claimed the injury was caused by Smaug. But the injury was fresh, and Smaug had died two nights before. Why would my daughter lie to me, Oakenshield?”

And the woman, still clad in his coat, his cursed coat, stood before him, shaking, and confessed, “I am Ningalor, daughter of Thranduil, lady of Mirkwood.” She was crying. “Thorin –“

Broken on the floor before him, her body shattered against the wall, her eyes welled with tears.

Then she walked away like nothing. The picture of perfect elegance. She got up and left – left him – and –

“I asked you a question,” Thranduil snarled.
“I-I did not know about the injury,” Thorin whispered.

Thranduil leaned back. He observed, then muttered, “That was not the question.”

_The horror, the shock, the betrayal written plainly on Lily’s – no, Ningalor’s face._

_The woman fought against the pain, fought for her breath as Orcrist fell and the sound reverberated at her feet. She could not even look at him._

*I stabbed her. I stabbed her. I stabbed her._

_The muted, shocked silence, the horrified, hurt blue eyes…_

“You were her defiler.”

The venomous words filled the room and echoed within his soul. Defiler. Defiler. Defiler.

“I should have you pay the price and rip your wretched head from your miserable shoulders. It is my right to do so.”

The Duke rose and drew his sword. He pointed it at the left side of Thorin’s neck, drawing blood.

There were no witnesses, but that did not matter.

Thorin did not resist.

_Defiler._

“I lost my daughter because of you. I had to send her away because of you. Selfish, greedy Dwarf! You lied to her, deceived her, broke her! It was your stroke, wasn’t it? You robbed her of her chastity and then broke her!” The point of the sword tore deeper and deeper into his throat. The pressure made it hard to breathe. He could feel blood tickling down his throat and staining his tunic.

Thorin’s hand instinctively rose to block the strike and clasped the blade, but its owner was weakened, and the gesture tore through the flesh of his palm and his fingers and did not stop the sword’s advance.

His other hand felt too heavy to be moved.

“Why? Better think carefully before you answer, Dwarf, or I will tear off your head. Why?” he thundered.

What could he say? Blood tainted the silver sword. His blood.

“Why?” Thranduil roared. His hands were poised but his voice shook. He was losing control.

“I love her.”

Thranduil pushed the sword a millimeter deeper. “What?” he cried. His eyes were wide and frantic. The pressure intensified.

“I love her,” he choked.

Thranduil removed his sword.
The Duke of Mirkwood glared at him, face white and eyes full of rage, shoulders shaking and heaving with anger and disbelief.

Thorin’s breaths were shallow, but free. The sword did not penetrate his arteries nor his trachea.

“What?” the Duke demanded, breaths just as shallow. Agitated to the point he lost every control he had upon his body.

Thorin’s hand felt the wound – a deep cut, but not life threatening. The trembling of his body had more to do with grief than adrenaline. Lily...

“I love her,” he whispered. “I betrayed her and I lost her, but I never stopped loving her.”

“My daughter is beyond you now. You shall never lay your eyes upon her again.”

Thorin did not answer.

“I gave her away to grant her sanctuary from the likes of you. I see I was right to do so. I shall see my daughter again, but you have lost her forever.” He cleaned his sword, then returned it to its scabbard. “I came to avenge her, but I see I have no need for it. Your torments, which are justified, shall never leave you, and the regret you feel for your evil deeds shall gnaw at you till the day you die. But it is no more than you deserve.”

Thranduil turned away and left.

At some point Balin and Dis and Fili returned. Someone called for Oin while someone else tried to calm Dis as she vowed vengeance. Another person went to stop Dwalin – who no doubt arrived as soon as he heard the raucous – from sending the army after the traitorous Elf.

Everything passed in a blur. Thorin couldn’t bring himself to care. He couldn’t bring himself to hiss in pain or shout his anger or react in any way to the needle sewing the cut or to the infuriated muttering of his men.

A hand upon his – Thorin turned his head slowly and found Fili looking up at him, worried. He gripped the hand back.

“I am sorry, Fili. I failed you. I know.”

His heir squeezed his hand and kept holding on to him. He shook his head. “I judged you too harshly, uncle. I’m sorry,” he muttered.

Judged too harshly... he mused. I judged you too harshly –

No, blue eyes glanced up at him, you allowed me in.

Thorin, please...

Sometimes Legolas could have sworn the woman before him was not his sister.

She would sit or stand, usually stare, and her eyes held empty malice that made the blue look shallow and vacant. She did not hear those who passed or even the wails of her child. No, all she did was glare unmoving at the world around her, hand in a fist.

But Niphredil was crying.
How could she stand merely two steps away and do nothing? His sister, who spent the entire journey holding her baby as if someone might come to tear her from her breast –

She did not hear her. Her own daughter.

Legolas crossed the distance to her and gripped her shoulder.

She jumped and looked up, startled, then she blinked, then she rushed to the cradle and whispered soft words of comfort to the weeping baby. There was something almost desperate in the way she held her daughter, and something almost defensive in the way she ignored his presence. Did she also notice her state? Did she know the cause?

Legolas frowned and strode away. Something was not right.

He snuck passed the patrolling guards and the servants, of which there were not many, with ease earned by decades of practice and marched toward the round clearing where the Duke held his meetings. He did not care if Elrond was busy; he did not care, even if it were the Lady of Light or the Lord of Isengard that demanded his time. The Healer had some explaining to do – what was the cause of his sister’s strangeness? Why wasn’t she getting better? Why wasn’t her journey approved already? Why was she still here, in Rivendell, instead of in Grey Havens? Why –

“… Your meddling, Gandalf, has caused enough trouble already! I shall not send her with you!”

“You cannot possibly be considering sending her to Valinor! Not against her wishes!”

Legolas froze. His sister – they were discussing his sister’s fate!

Elrond sighed. “I cannot send her away, regardless of her own desires. I already explained to you the intricacies of her situation.”

Gandalf was silent. When he spoke again, his voice was measured. “Does she know?”

“I do not believe so.”

“Will you tell her?”

“No. Not now, in any case. I do not, however, think it wise to send her with you. She should remain here. Her daughter would be raised in a manner befitting a lady. To Ningalor, Rivendell would be a sanctuary where she could heal and return to her proper place in society.”

“That is kind of you, Elrond, but not what she wants.”

“Ningalor does not know what is good for her. I know you mean well, but feeding her delusions serves her ill, Gandalf.”

“She is not delusional! She wants a place to call home. I had found her a place like that.” He paused, then added, voice leaden and burdened. “Convincing her to join Thorin’s quest may have been a mistake –“

“May have been? Gandalf, she is but a shadow of herself!”

“I do not doubt her deeds contributed greatly to the company’s success and survival.”

“Any man with a touch of common sense and a bit of luck would have achieved the same, since Thorin and his men lacked both! In no way was her inclusion justified.”
“Elrond –“

“No, Gandalf. Ningalor stays here, and that is final.”

“Here she will enjoy no anonymity, nor will her daughter!”

“Rivendell has already endeavored to hide a persecuted child. We have not failed him and we shall not fail her.”

“I still think Ningalor has to make her choice in the matter.”

“Her choices and your guidance had led her astray for the last time. Since she had not improved in the five years she spent in your care, I believe it is time you relinquished your protection of her and –“

“Gandalf?”

The men – and Legolas – froze.

For suddenly, from the shadows, his sister materialized.

But how? I am standing here, on the stairs, blocking the entrance – only barely hidden, how did she sneak by me? How come I neither heard nor saw her?

“I thought I heard you. Your voice. From my r – I thought I heard you,” his sister mumbled. She took another step into the light, one hand fisted and trembling, the other shaky and relaxed.

Legolas saw the expressions worn by both Gandalf and Elrond. Something was not quite right with Ningalor. Something was wrong with his sister.

“I wasn’t sure,” she whispered.

Gandalf exhaled and opened his arms. “My dear child,” he breathed, “I am so sorry for leaving you, I should have never taken my eyes off of you….”

Ningalor rushed into his arms before he could finish, forgiving him without a word uttered. She trembled and hid her face in Gandalf’s thick, woolen cloak, and missed entirely the alarmed look the Istar exchanged with Elrond.

The Duke sighed, then nodded. “Two months, no more. If she agrees. And Should I, by that time, see no improvement, she shall return to Rivendell.”

Gandalf bowed his head.

Elrond turned and left the clearing. He directed an irritated glance at Legolas when he saw him and paused, exasperated. “Perhaps I should exchange a word with Thranduil regarding the quality of his tutors. It seems both his children developed the appalling habit of listening to things they shouldn’t.”

Legolas refused to be cowed. “It was agreed that my sister will be sent –“

“Agreed? It was requested. The request was denied.”

“But she needs –“

“To rest in a familiar place surrounded by loved ones. Valinor shall be no such place for her; not
now, at least.” He began to walk away, indicating for Legolas to follow. “You will say nothing of what that had transpired here to your father. Tell him Ningalor left this land. This shall grant both of them the peace of mind necessary to move on, and recover,” he explained.

“But why?” Legolas demanded, then clarified. “Why is she like this?”

Elrond paused, glanced at him, then looked away. “Some women experience melancholy shortly after giving birth, sometimes for a prolonged period of time. I do not know why, but it isn’t hard to guess, in Ningalor’s case. I can only hope that she will recover, given enough time and rest.” He began walking again and Legolas followed. “I can tell how much you care for your sister, but understand that Thranduil’s suggestion isn’t truly in her favor.”

“What should I do, then? How can I….” he weighted his response, then continued, “please both?”

“Go home; tell Thranduil Ningalor sailed. Do your duties, and when you judge the time to be right, cross the Misty Mountains and visit her. Time will tell; perhaps Ningalor will change her mind, or your father – his resolve.” The Duke cocked a brow at him, measuring his response.

Legolas ventured, “Or a certain someone, his temper?” he dared.

Elrond lifted his second brow. “I was thinking pride, rather. It is winter still, and too early for you to risk crossing the Misty Mountains. You have time.”

Time. He had time. Legolas waivered. Time shouldn’t be a novelty; wasn’t used to be so fleeting. It was the distance – distance made it fickle, and seasons – an obstacle. Distance and weather hindered his journey till the conditions mellowed and the time was ripe for him to reunite with his sister.

Those temporary, fleeting moments suddenly transformed time from a continuous condition into an opportunity, a thief, an irrevocable truth.

But he had time.

Dis welcomed the snow – one had to admit, the slippery thing had quite a sense of beauty and elegance, but she still celebrated its departure with relish. If there was a season that symbolized the endurance of all things, it was spring.

One might mock her – how could a creature of stone and iron truly appreciate something as soft and fragile as flowers? But flowers, she thought fondly, survive the coldest winds and the strongest storms and bloom – despite all odds, they bloom. What iron will they have.

Erebor bloomed now, too. Erebor endured.

The Durins will one day bloom as well. She knew that truth to be ironclad. Unshakable and unbreakable. Like the spring. One could forget it was coming, choose to believe in the prowess of the winter, but just as the winter surrendered, so do all things bow before the inevitable.

She looked away from the window when she heard footsteps, and then frowned in slight irritation when she noticed the source. Not because he annoyed her, but because she knew the news he brought could not be good. The irritation was quickly replaced with a grim scowl. She waved her hand and her spy rose, looking as ordinary and unassuming as ever.

“Same whispers, new whisperers. Still just whispers, though.”
“What started as whispers shall later become words plainly spoken. Who?”

“Sheir number grows, milady, not wanes. Same old, and a few bold members of the new convoy. They blame you.”

“How? Dis ground her teeth. Of course they would, but they never did so before. “How dare they!”

“You aren’t a duchess, but you act like one. Some say you aren’t a lady, either.”

“I kept my last name!”

“But married a commoner. Some say it’s greedy, to have both.”

“I want names.”

“I have a list.” The man seemed unbothered by the surprised glare. He placed the crumpled paper on her desk. “Wouldn’t use it, though. Censorship has its limitations. Censoring whispers tends to be particularly unwise.”

He was right; she knew that. Still, she had to know. No clan leaders, but some were lords nonetheless. This meant trouble.

“And, of course, I am to blame for Thorin’s apparent bachelorhood,” she hissed. “We need that woman. Have you found her?”

The man twisted his beard. “The lordling returned to his home. Saw him myself. Still accompanied by his father’s soldiers.”

“But was she amongst them?” Dis insisted.

The man shrugged. He had dull black hair and beard and the general appearance of a hardworking man. Whatever was his profession could not be discerned by his clothes nor the items he carried. Miners would think him a miner, fishermen – a fisherman. He knew how to blend in.

“They were riding in daylight. Not so cautious like last time. Less, too. Three horses short.”

“How’d you know that? You didn’t know about their departure,” she reprimanded. His answers annoyed her. He did not know for certain; that much was clear.

“Why, I counted the hoofprints all right, soon as I got wind of the rumors,” he said defensively. He had the dark skin of his kin but no feathers nor beads in his hair. A half Raven, or so she was told. But the cunningness of his kin was not diluted with the color of his skin. She wondered why he never told her his name.

“So Thranduil lied. He told Thorin she left four months before her departure. Why?”

The man shrugged again. “Mirkwood folk aren’t so keen on speaking ‘bout her. They shy away from any conversation. Don’t mention her, either. It’s her betrayal, I think. She left them and then didn’t return – not willingly, at least – and now they can’t accept her. Or maybe he can’t.”

“She left then? For good?” Dis insisted. Thorin received today another wedding proposal. Each clan sent his prettiest, wittiest, or richest. Or all of those combined. The women who failed to capture the Duke’s eye tried to go for her sons, whose statue as heirs seems to be questioned by all. A formal marriage to Thranduil’s girl could be the key to cementing Fili’s status as the future duke to be, and had the added benefit of not damaging the reputation of the House of Durin. Well, not
irrevocably. Thorin had achieved the impossible, after all. The clans shall forgive such a slight, especially if the marriage came with the support of the strongest alliance. Well, probably. Hopefully. If.

Of course, she had her own share of marriage offers, and she was not infertile yet. She may secure in that manner the support of at least one tribe. Failure to bring a child, however, could bring about the opposite results. And she would, no doubt, lose her statue as a Durin as part of the bargain.

Vili let her keep her last name, but Vili was a commoner. That threatened her sons’ future as well. Also, the girl was rumored to possess the ability to make Thorin happy. Dis clenched her fists.

“Hmm… one would think so, eh? She left, that’s for sure. But not to Grey Havens. I had a pair of eyes set on watching the departing boats, and the runaway missy never boarded any of them. Never entered town, or so I heard.”

“Why ever not? Did she defy her father again? Did he lie to Thorin on that, as well?”

The Raven cocked his heard to one side. “I don’t read minds, milady. She might be in Rivendell still, but there I am deaf and blind. If she left with Tharkûn again, then I cannot help you. Old man comes and goes faster than whispers navigate the wind. Can’t do much personally, unless you want me to cross the Mountains.”

“No,” she replied quickly, “you are needed here.” His comment held more, though, than mere criticism. She narrowed her eyes. “Who do you have on the other side?”

“Me?” he looked surprised. “Why, none, milady. No spies, or at least none of the traveling sort. You have someone, however.”

“I do?” Dis glared. She was quite sure none of her acquaintances or friends were of the right material. Or shady enough, for that matter.

“Aye.” The Raven might have smiled, despite her glower. Even his expressions were ambiguous. “A certain thief who left on uncertain terms. The eldest living Ri,” he added when she blinked owlishly at him.

“He will not listen to me,” she hissed.

“No, ‘course not. Haven’t got a reason to. But,” he smiled and then once again looked like an ordinary hardworking man, the kind who works their days away to support the family they love but could never afford to spend time with, “he will listen to his brother.”

Dis glared at the half Raven’s retreating back. The man never waited for her dismissal. He had the uncanny ability to know when she needed something from him and when she didn’t, and came to report as he pleased. She wondered how Thorin would have reacted had he known she employed a spy behind his back. She furrowed her forehead, wondering if he really was working behind Thorin’s back. Or she, for that matter. Somehow the notion of Thorin deploying spies did not sit with her. Her brother was too direct and honorable for that sort of practice. But he dismissed his wife –

She rose and strode to the library. She was not unfamiliar with the structure, nor with its contents, but the imposing shelves, as high as the ceiling, and the smell of decades long forgotten and years beyond count made the room feel like a structure lost to time, something that is neither here nor in the past.
It was a sanctuary to those who felt torn from reality.

Mother once said that books offered comfort to those who preferred to sacrifice a few hours of their lives in exchange for a story, rather than live out their own. Mother was an avid reader.

It didn’t take her long to find Ori, really. The amount of books surrounding him gave him away.

He blinked in surprise and then in suspicion when she sat across from him. Clearly, the Raven overestimated her ability to secure the cooperation of either of the Ri brothers.

“I need you to do something for me. For Thorin,” she stated.

The boy’s eyes became even more suspicious, if such a thing was possible. He clearly did not expect such a direct request.

“What sort of thing?” he hedged. His eyes darted, searching for means of retreat.

“You must vow that this shall remain between us,” she demanded.

“Why?”

“Thorin must not get a wind of this.” All right, wrong thing to say. Ori became closed off within seconds. “It’s for his own good,” she hurried to add. The boy looked even less convinced than before. He rose.

“The House of Durin shall owe you and your brother a favor of your choosing,” she promised recklessly.

“Two favors,” the boy challenged.

“Don’t push your luck. Sit!”

Ori blinked owlishly at her and sat down, rather unwillingly, but too used to obey to refuse. He frowned, then pondered the odd conversation. Dis could see the wheels turning. She waited.

“One for the deed, another for the secrecy. In writing.” He presented her with a paper and a pen.

Dis glowed, then sighed. She could have avoided this, mayhap, had she been kinder to the Ri family. Though she had to admit the boy had some guts, demanding two favors from her house. Who taught him how to bargain? She supposed that one of the reasons why she was willing to agree lay with his harmless appearance. Perhaps she should not surrender so easily. Balin took the boy under his care, after all. He was harmless no longer.

“I have other means. Don’t test me.”

“But you came to me.”

“Because you care for Thorin,” she dared a guess. The boy paused, frowning. She had him now. “I am only doing this for his sake. One favor, no more.” She considered boasting how kind she was to do so, then decided against it. Honor required a recognition of a debt.

Ori glanced at her uncertainly and then in resignation when she filled the paper accordingly and signed it. She pushed the contract toward him.

“I will not sign before I hear what you need,” he folded his hands.
Well, no harm in that, I suppose. Hope. I could wriggle an oath of silence out of him, should he refuse. She prayed with all her might he wouldn’t. She didn’t really have any other means.

“I need you to send a letter to your brother, asking him to… do something for me.” She then continued to explain her plan. “Convince him however you see fit. I need to know if there is any hope. I have to know.”

“Why?” he asked in a small voice.

“For Thorin,” she emphasized.

Ori fidgeted. He glanced at the contract, still unsigned. “I don’t know; I don’t think my brother will listen to me, I…”

“Try. Please. For Thorin.”

Ori looked up at her, exhaled weakly, then signed the paper. His hand shook.

For Thorin… and my boys.

Chapter End Notes

So many things are happening and everybody is plotting stuff (except for Doroniel. She's just cute, at this point).
I like to juxtaposition the elves' and the dwarves' way of handling things. I think dwarves are more straightforward, hit the nail on the head kind of people. Not efficiency wise, but rather in the more physical sense.
Elves, on the other hand, take their time to plot and think. They are more reactive than proactive, in a sense. Even Ningalor, Legolas, and Tauriel, the younger elves, don't often take the initiative - they either wait for someone else to initiative or for a push of sorts, and even then their actions are more subtle, generally speaking.
Even Elrond, despite having the ability to 'fix' everything with a letter or something similar, chooses to see how events will unfold without taking an overly active part.
I mean, Dis is literally the most active character in the story, right now. Go Dis!
Btw this is not Tolkien's view or opinion, merely my interpretation =)
What do you think? Next chapter next Saturday!
Primula woke up. She stared at the ceiling with glassy eyes and failed to understand why she was awake to begin with. Then she realized and sighed in frustration. Not again.

Dori was crying. By the gods, the girl had a set of lungs on her. She was in Miss Lily’s room, all the way on the upper floor, and Miss Lily, sleeping a mere five inches away from her daughter, still couldn’t hear her.

Miss Lily…

Ma’am Lily, now, in truth. She left as a child, returned with one. A widow.

And where was that Elven guard anyways? The solemn-faced beauty had a way with children, clearly, but seemed to like late night walks more than Primula deemed necessary.

Primula got up and strode toward her Ma’am’s bedroom. No baby should cry this much. Not in her house, at least. She walked up the stairs with renewed urgency, opened Lily’s door without knocking and walked straight to the cradle. She picked Dori up, holding her close and humming an old lullaby softly. Dori still cried. The baby protested her care and wriggled, as if trying to reach something behind her.

Primula turned.

Her hold of the baby tightened as she took an involuntary step back, mouth opened in silent terror.

She managed a shuddered breath but a moment later, when her eyes finally managed to grasp the scene before her.

Lily was not jumping from the window.

No, not jumping. The woman sat on the wooden frame, apparently ignorant of the cold breeze that put the hearth’s efforts to waste and her child’s cries. She was playing with that ring, again.

Dori, faced with the wall and not her mother, stopped squirming. She still sobbed, though not desperately, now that Primula no longer shook with the remains of adrenaline and rubbed the baby’s back gently. She waited a few more moments, until the last of the sobs was heard, then placed the baby in the cradle with her head facing the wall.
Was the baby worried for her mother?

Primula shook her head. She may have raised only one boy, but that taught her more than enough about a developing child’s level of understanding. Dori most likely just wanted to be held.

She braced herself and walked toward the window, where Lily once again resembled a ghost more than a living woman had any right to. “Ma’am,” she said and shook her firmly. “Lily.” No response. “Lily.”

Then the woman snapped and looked at her, eyes wide and translucent and face paler than the moon.

Primula muttered a short prayer to Yavanna, just in case.

“Oh. Prim. Why…? Is it…?” She looked out to the window. “It is cold,” she whispered.

“Hmm. And your baby’s crying her lungs out. Might I ask what are you doing, sitting on the window like that? You gave me quite a fright!”

Lily rose and stepped away from the window. Her hand was in a fist. Now that the moon did not shine through her thin, frail hair, she resembled a human once more.

“Forgive me. I… I suppose I just wished….”

“Not this again.” Primula shook her finger at her. “I’m done, Ma’am. I am done!” She extended her hand. “Give me that cursed ring of yours. Now.”

Lily stepped back, affronted, holding the plain piece of metal as if it meant her life. “No!” she yelled.

“You barely eat, almost never sleep, just stare with those vacant eyes – like a ghost, that’s what you are! A possessed ghost who can’t even hear her own baby’s cries! I shan’t stand for this! You haven’t been here for a year and a half, almost two – but there is no excuse for what you have become!” Primula forced herself to lower her voice. “I will wrestle it out of your hands, if I have to. Give me the wretched thing, or so help me –“

“No.” She looked frightened. “This is a gift from the gods, it saved me –“

“Can you even hear yourself?! A gift from the gods?! A creation of Morgoth, more like! Yavanna knows he had quite a collection of cursed jewels created by his most mechanical and dirty hands. Give it now, Lily!”

Lily seemed shaken from the mention of Morgoth, thrown so recklessly in the darkest hour of the night. Still, she held her ring. “No. No, I can’t please, I need this –“

“Need it for what? You are obsessed with a relic that should have been left where you found it! Give it to me, now. Please.” She sighed, aggravated. “Lily, I am your friend. Trust me, please,” she whispered.

Lily froze, uncertain.

Primula took the initiative. She pried the cold band out of Lily’s hands, ignoring the rough skin of her scarred palm, and then threw the ring with all her might out of the window.

The small thing disappeared within seconds, sunk into the darkness of the night and the thickness
of the snow.

“No!” Lily cried and rushed after it – nearly threw herself out of the window as well –

Primula grabbed her and thanked Yavanna once more. Raising a very inquisitive boy for seven years sharpened the instincts and enabled her to stop the maddened woman just in time. It also gave her the strength to prevent her from pushing both of them out of the wide window.

The woman was still thrashing wildly in her arms, fighting with what meager strength she had left.

“Lily! Come – calm down! Hey!”

Dori began to cry.

Oh, darn it! Thought Primula, but, this time, the baby’s shrills had just the right effect. Lily froze, body heaving, and seemed to have come to her senses. She glanced at Primula, horrified, then relaxed.

Her eyes had color in them.

Primula, very hesitantly, released her hold.

Lily hurried to pick up her child and cradle her in her arms, whispering soothing things in a language Primula did not know. She fastened the window close.

“Prim…” Lily whispered. She turned to face her. “What… what happened?” Her eyes shone.

“What happened to me?” she said with a broken voice.

Primula felt her shoulders sag. Oh, here was the Lily she knew, if frightened and frail and too thin for her own good. She squared her shoulders again and grabbed Lily’s elbow, guiding her to sit on the bed lest she fall with the baby still in her arms.

“Doesn’t matter, it’s over. Hey?” She caressed her hair. “It’s over. I will stay here. You put Dori to sleep, then sleep yourself, yes? And tomorrow I’ll make you a nice breakfast. And second breakfast, yes? You take a few days off the books and eat and sleep and care for Dori, hmm?”

Lily smiled weakly. “Yes. Yes, I’d like that.” She stroked Dori’s cheek. The baby gripped her finger in her fist and offered a wide smile, full of gums. Lily’s smile widened as well, and softened.

Primula sighed in evident relief. Yavanna bless that child.

“I didn’t hear you, maen nín. Goheno nin. Loro vae, abarad.” She looked up and glanced at Primula, who inwardly cringed. She looked too tired for a woman as young as she. “Thank you, Prim. Truly.”

“Promise me you won’t go searching for it. Promise you won’t go looking, Lily. Promise.”

And Lily smiled at her now once again sleepy baby and nodded. “I promise.”

She elicited a small chuckle when Dori bleated her agreement softly, then closed her eyes and drifted to sleep, still holding her mother’s finger.

“I do, I promise. I promise.”
Nori could feel the weight of the letter in the inner pocket of his shaggy coat, just above his heart.

Well, he didn’t actually feel it. Damned thing weighed nothin’. Blasted paper.

Why the hell was he even on the road, away from comfort and the well-endowed innkeeper up in Ered Luin? Why – *Oh, fuck it*, he grumbled in his mind and kept walking. Blasted Durins. Can’t handle nothin’, that family. Not even keeping one’s woman, apparently.

Stupid like the rest of them, really. With her high and mighty and he-won’t-hurt-me-


He didn’t delve into the reasons that made him pack his bags once more and leave his rather comfortable, new house – bought with his share of the loot – right in the middle of the dukedom, where all the rich folk lived. All high and mighty and *rich*. Threw lots of parties for him, aye, a member of the Thirteen, no less! No more ‘thief’ or ‘scum’ or ‘rat’ or ‘that fricking Ri again’… or whatever. He forgot the rest. Now it was ‘noble Nori!’ and ‘good sir’ and ‘kind sir’ and ‘well aren’t you a handsome mister…’

Nori snickered. He liked his new life, aye. Nori the merchant of all sorts of goods, from high and low and your neighbor’s hoard. If Ori knew that, he would’ve thought twice before listening to that ol’ witch, trying to save the rest of ‘em idiots.

Still, money didn’t make him stupid – he didn’t wear his wealth. The men that passed him thought him a beggar, at the most. Some even threw him a coin, which he ignored. Some tried to knife him for sport, for which they paid dearly.

None of this explained why he was drinking diluted ale and listening at inns, pubs, dark corners. None of this could be justified as ‘securing a shipment,’ as he told his new fat friends with their fat, fat pockets.

He did miss the road. Aye, he did. Not as sweet as his feather stuffed mattress, but exciting; thrilling. And the news he carried were a better catch than those miserable little fish the owner of the inn dared call ‘the catch of the day!’

Of a bad day, maybe. But his wasn’t so bad, now was it? Nori could think of one innocent place that whispers neither reached nor left. A place guarded and hidden rangers. A home of an Istar. A place where a desperate girl like Lily fled to once and no doubt did so again. A place he would visit today.

Stupid lass, he thought, exasperated. Everyone knows you can’t hide in the same place twice.

Aye, he did miss being stared at like a trouble seeking misfit.

The villagers glared at him as he passed through. Some even stirred their children away and muttered underneath their breaths. Suddenly, Gandalf’s advice to arrive after the sun had set made some sense.

Them Hobbit folk sure did not like strangers.

*For a small, backward village, they’re pretty full of themselves, ain’t they?* He mused sourly when a shop owner hurried to shut the door as he neared his place. *Pretty arrogant, eh, to treat harmless strangers like that.*

Finding Bag End was easier, this time around. The large estate really did stand out, especially that
giant oak tree that loomed over the house. Nori wondered if there was any symbolism to it, shrugged, and knocked on the door.

He waited and hummed a happy tune, then knocked again, louder this time.

He glanced behind, taking in the meadows of fresh green and the puddles of muddy ice, glistening in the sun. Leftovers of the last snow to fall this year. He knocked again. It was already late noon, and he did not want to stay too late, nor return tomorrow. Can’t really say he liked the inhospitable place.

The food was great, though.

He knocked again.

The door opened suddenly and on the other side stood a short boy with curly black hair and blue eyes that shut the door in his face two seconds after.

Nori wondered if he should just leave and enter through the garden. All he had to do was chat with the lil’ lady, right? No need to be too formal about this.

The door opened again, and – Nori inwardly cursed Mahal and his luck and every fucking tree he saw on his way there – for before him stood that bitchy Mirkwood guard, red hair and everything.

Well, they might as well place a sign. Idiots.

“’ello,” he said amiably, “you far away from home, ain't you? Is yer ladyship present?”

“What do you want?” hissed the woman, exposing her short, fang-like knife.

He placed his hands before him, palms open. “Oi! No need for that! I just passed by and I thought to meself, hey, why not visit Lily? You know, your lady? Ningalor? Just for a chat, for ol’ time’s –”

The knife was drawn within a blink of an eye and pointed at his neck.

“How did you find us? Your kind is not wanted here,” the woman declared.

Nori took a step back, just to be on the safe side. The woman did not have the look of a killer, but he did not want to be cut either way. “How? Well, that’s easy, ainnit? Just did one plus one, is all. Look, can you just go back and tell yer lady Nori’s come to say hi? I mean no harm, really. Though I would appreciate some food in me stomach and a nice glass of wine, methinks.”

The guard twisted her pretty face at him the way one would if a smelly ol’ cat decided to die on their front porch and was already poppin’ maggots. She shut the door in his face.

Nori continued humming his tune.

Should’ve gotten a horse. At this rate, he’d return to Bree at midnight. If the guard didn’t decide to put a hole in him, that is.

Ten minutes had passed before the door opened again. The suspicious guard still curled her lips at him, but nonetheless allowed him in. “Her ladyship will see you now. Mind your manners and behave appropriately,” she warned.

“Didn’t use to be so full of herself when she was just Lily.” Nori cocked his brow.
The guard looked like she was about to reply, but instead just flashed an inch of her knife and turned around, leading him into the foyer and then the hall. “You will do well to remember your manners, Dwarf, or I will toss you out.”

“Personally?” he inquired.

The young guard glared at him in distaste.

She opened a door and allowed him to cross first, then followed him and closed the door behind her. They stood in an old-fashioned study, cushioned with faded armchairs and ancient books covered in soft leather. A cheery fire hummed in the fireplace, next to which was a small table covered with books and tea mugs, next to which was an armchair on which sat a woman that now stood in greeting.

Her expression was wary and careful, her dress simple and her hair tied in a bun, but by the gods, it was Lily.

Didn’t age a day. Damn Elf.

“Hello, Nori,” she greeted.

“Well, ain’t you a pretty sight,” he greeted in return.

Lily frowned slightly, then offered a short smile when he smiled at her. Not the sharp smile nor the threatening one. Hell, he really was happy to see the woman in one piece.

“Please, have a seat.” She beckoned to the armchair across from her. “Tauriel.”

Nori ignored the guard’s protests as he sank into the soft cushions. Hell, after his journey he did deserve some luxury. “Don’t forget the wine!” he called after the guard as she exited, still protesting in Sindarin about her lady’s decision.

He waited till the door closed and then snickered. “Don’t think me a threat, eh?”

“I doubt you would have embarked on such a journey just to stab me in the back,” she replied.

Good answer, too. Would’ve made him feel guilty about doing that, if he had any plans to. She did overestimate his journey, but he wasn’t about to correct her.

He very unceremoniously unbuttoned his pocket and offered her the letter.

Lily accepted it with a touch of healthy suspicion.

She opened it and read.

Nori stretched, letting the fire’s heat lick his tired limbs. The smell of old spice and the wood burning was a tiring thing. Made one feel safe and warm and lazy. He took out his pipe and filled it with tobacco. Longbottom leaf. Now that he could afford it, he only smoked the good stuff.

“Say,” he huffed a bit of smoke, as if trading secrets with the fire. “What do I call you now, ladyship?”

“Not that,” the woman rebuked. She was scanning the letter again and again. Thinking of all he said and what the letter meant, probably. Looking for traps. It’s highly suspicious when an untrustworthy man comes open palmed and clean-handed. Then you know for sure he’s hiding something.
“I was Lily once, and Lily I still am.” She glanced up, looking for whatever effect her words might have had on him, then returned to the letter.

He waited.

When she read the flimsy piece of writing for about the tenth time, he grumbled, “Hey, when is that wine coming? Your guard ain’t so good at hospitality.”

“That is my duty, not hers.” Lily looked up and fixed her eyes on him. Sharp blue still sharp. “Why did you show me this?”

Nori shrugged and puffed a ring of smoke. “Like you said, didn’t come this way to stab you in the back.”

“Why did you come, then?”

“Oi’ time’s sake. And good food. When is lunch?”

“You missed lunch; and afternoon tea.”

“Huh. When is dinner?”

She narrowed her eyes. Then sighed. “You shall be provided with food and wine as a token of friendship, Nori. No need to banter for your rights as a guest.”

Nori nodded. She was right, ‘haps, but one can’t be too careful. “I wanted to give you a choice… deciding which information you want out. You stand out. You and that guard stand out even more. Can’t trust rangers to stop danger and rumors forever. But you have the upper hand, for now.”

“Why… why am I being searched for?” she asked. Careful. Meaning he should tread carefully too.

“Dis, the other Durin, searches for you,” he answered her indirect question, omitting Thorin’s name, “because she wants her babies to inherit Erebor. Got some issues with that, however. Firstly, her husband – Fili’s dad – was a commoner. Secondly,” Quick, think of a way out of this one- “the Duke is unmarried and still capable of producing heirs. Or so everyone thinks.”

Lily’s lips twisted upward when she recognized his attempt to omit Thorin’s name. Was it a smile? The fire could be cheating him. There was one window, but it was closed with the curtains drawn. The room suddenly reminded him of a rabbit hole; a hideaway.

Her face once again donned the porcelain mask. “‘Or so everyone thinks’? what did you mean by that?”

Nori sent her a shrewd look. “Dis needs the Duke to marry someone harmless, see, someone who can’t produce children or, better yet, someone whose children cannot inherit Erebor or the alliance. Meaning, someone who is not a Dwarf.” He inhaled smoke in, exhaled smoke out. “But someone who’s someone, y’know? Not a peasant from ol’ Lake-Town. Also, there’s this rumor, see, one that Dwalin tried to bury and Dis tried to uncover, that says the Duke might be already married to such someone.”

Lily froze. She stared at him, unblinking. She paled as the inability to comprehend was replaced by the inevitable denial.

“That someone is you,” Nori added, for further clarification.
Lily exhaled weakly, lips parted. She did not draw in air, however. She ceased moving, as if attempting to resemble a doll more than the usual.

“You are married,” he said slowly.

No reaction. Pleading and confusion clashed behind the ashen irises.

“To Thorin.”

“Impossible!” Lily heaved and breathed with difficulty as the name shattered the little self-control she had left.

Nori frowned. “Why impossible? He gave you a gift of mithril, then bedded you. For all intents and purposes –“

“No!” Lily rose, agitated, fists clenching and unclenching before she settled for pacing, then stopped and turned to face him, hands crossed over her chest, then thrown into the air in pure helplessness. “Impossible!”

She crossed then again, uncrossed, then gripped her hair, messing her perfect bun.

“Impossible,” she whispered, holding on to the last remaining wisps of her shredded reality.

“Well, you covered that ground.” Nori rose, gripped her elbow, and led her back to the chair. He picked one of the tea mugs and offered it to her. “Wait here, I’ll call for wine-“

“Ningalor! Are you well? You – step away –“

Nori put his hands in the air and stepped away from Lily as her guard rushed to push him and hold her lady’s pale face. “Ningalor, is everything all right? What did he do?”

“Me?” Nori bristled. “I didn’t do nothing! Ask her what she did –“

The guard turned before he could blink and once again he could feel a blade against his throat. “Be silent, Dwarf, or I will tear your tongue out!” she threatened.

“ Comes to think of it, I believe the lordling said somethin’ similar when –“

“Show some respect! Or I’ll –“

“Two glasses of wine, Tauriel, if you would be so kind. Or Ask Prim, if she is not too busy.”

Tauriel turned to stare at her still whitish lady. From the way her eyes pop, she looks like she thinks her lady lost it alright, Nori mused.

“And do not eavesdrop, please. It is a terrible habit.”

Lily raised her hand, and Tauriel released her hold of Nori’s neck. She bowed, turned, and exited carefully, but not before she could send another threatening look his way.

“A lively one, that lass,” he commented.

Lily ignored him.

She remained perfectly still until Tauriel returned with two glasses and a bottle. She poured Lily a glass but not for Nori, and when she offered it, she clasped Lily’s hand in reassurance.
Lily smiled, but the gesture was forced and tired. “Nori is a friend of mine; he means me no harm. You can return to Frodo and continue his lesson, if you wish.”

Tauriel hesitated, then nodded. The guard seemed to be thinking Lily’s made of glass or something.

Lily sipped her wine as Nori poured himself a cup and sipped as well. It was an excellent wine. Thick and full of alcohol. Dunno the year, dunno the grape, but it’s wine alright.

“Explain,” she ordered.

“Pretty simple. He gave you a gift of mithril, which you accepted, then shared the night with you. Not much else to it.”

“But…” she gasped, as if she ran out words. “I did not know! My consent –“

“You bedded, Lily. That’s consent. Unless forced, that’s consummation, even.”

The woman huffed, then laughed silently. Nori frowned, then scowled when he noted the hidden relief. That reaction was the last he expected, but he supposed it was possible that several people gave her grief because of her ill-bred behavior. That could be it.

Suddenly she looked thoughtful. “But he said ‘keep as payment,’ doesn’t that mean…”

“Can’t change the meaning of a gift once given, especially after consummation. You can return it, though, and then it could be given back with new meaning.” He paused, sipped, continued. “Giving the gift would mean breaking the marriage.”

“And compromising my location.”

“And the fact you didn’t leave Middle Earth.”

She turned to stare at him. “How…?”

“Your daddy told Th – the Duke –“

“I see. Add no more, please.”

Nori furrowed his brow. He weighed his options, then sighed. “Don’t you… want to know?”

Lily swallowed with difficulty. She stared into the fire and did not answer for a long while. A moment of shadow and smoke crossed her features and her lips parted – her breath shuddered. “No. It would be better… if I didn’t.”

She finished her glass and recomposed herself, and once again became the statue of ice he once knew her as. “I am assuming that by coming here and showing me the letter, you have given me the option to choose. As such, I’d consider it a testament to your spirit, your character, and your friendship if you keep the events of today between us, and… say that you did not –“

“Mommy!”

The door burst open and in dashed a tiny thing – tiny and pink and mud everywhere –

“Mommy, look! I found lilies! Pretty!”

The ball of toddling mess was swept into Lily’s arms as the uprooted flowers – the one responsible for the dirt – were pressed against her face.
Lily winced and secured the thing, a toddler, apparently, then pushed the flowers away from her mouth.

“That’s a snowdrop, sweetie. Did you uproot that from the garden? Drogo will be quite upset.”

The toddler appeared not concerned in the least. In fact, she was even more excited.

“The snow pooped?!” she exclaimed.

All right. This – this had to stop.

“What. The fuck. Is that?!” he cried, pointing at the thing.

Lily covered the toddler’s ears. “Language, Nori! This is a toddler. Please, do not soil yourself,” she remarked dryly.

She was afraid, he realized when he shook off the surprise elicited by the snarky comment. She was terrified.

He stared at the child who, now that she was aware of his presence, clutched her mother’s arms and hid in her embrace, looking at him unblinking. Lily held her, one hand in her curls – black – another rubbing her back gently. Her eyes were blue and curious, but startled.

If he were to guess, the child should be about two.

And two would mean…

“Ledh Tauriel,” she mumbled and lowered the child. The toddler, with her large eyes and pink dress and bare feet trailing mud, disappeared without a word uttered.

Lily’s eyes lingered on her disappearing form, then focused on Nori again. Pleading.

“That’s Thorin’s child,” he wheezed.

The woman flinched as if slapped when he unintentionally uttered Thorin’s name. She then recomposed herself and glowered. “No, that is my child. I am her mother.”

“Well, no doubting that, but there’s gotta be a –“

“I am raising her. She is my child,” she said fiercely, then implored, “please, Nori, do not tell them, please, she is my life now. I cannot have them take her from me. I cannot. Nori –“

“Lily,” he stopped her, “what – why would anyone…? Lily, no one is about to take your child. The child belongs to the mother, that’s the law.”

She attempted to swallow several times, then whispered, “You won’t tell them? Not about me and not about her?”

His heart constricted with a pang like a punch to the stomach. “I won’t,” he promised. *I’ll write to them instead.*

Lily’s grateful smile was a kick to the junk. Suddenly dinner wasn’t that important no more. He had to get out of there; had to get away from those blue eyes, the pleading and the startled ones.

He talked on and off about a trading affair he had to take care of, gloated about his booming business, and fled with his tail between his legs.
It wasn’t the good thing to do. But Nori never considered himself good. That was Ori’s job. Or decent – that was Dori’s. No, he was a thief. And now he was going to steal Lily’s secret.

It didn’t feel good, but that wasn’t a part of the job description.

Lily’s fear did give him a pause, but Elven laws about child keeping didn’t matter to Dwarves. His mother raised three kids and no goddamn pops, either of the three, ever told her otherwise or tried to steal his kid for himself. That was the law.

Thorin would lose his gems if he knew he had a kid.

Or if he knew Lily was still alive and kicking in the fucking Shire.

The sky was still shining bright. Spring was awakening, and the light survived just a bit longer. The Misty Mountains must be meltin’ as we speak. Not safe yet. And until my letter gets there, it’s gonna be middle o’ summer. Thorin can’t come – he’d stay stuck on the other side for a year. But the letter would, and the Duke’ll have to wait. He’ll have a whole year o’ thinking to do. The baby’d grow a bit, understand a bit more, and Lily might stop fretting a thief in the night stealing her child. She’ll have time to think, too. Maybe I’d visit; teach her Dwarf stuff. Maybe not.

He kept her secret once, for all the good it did her.

But Thorin lost his colors and Lily could not handle hearing his name. Miserable sods.

I’m sorry, Lily. I truly am. But Thorin deserves to know. And… Nori paused suddenly. Sentimental folly, no doubt, be still his feet ceased moving. A few snowdrops bloomed by the side of the road, white and pure and surrounded by mud. He tore one from its roots, feeling foolish, but nonetheless placed the flower in one of his many inner pockets. The one that was sewn against his heart.

You deserve to be happy.

Dis looked up and closed her book, uncertain if she should be pleased or worried by the sudden appearance of her spy and the news he might bring.

She accepted the letter offered and opened it carefully.

She read it once, twice, then one final time. She lowered the paper and tried to still the thoughts dashing about her head.

“Did you read it?” she asked her spy.

The man, who studied her face intently as she pondered the written words, regarded her with expressionless, beady eyes. “Of course not, my lady.”

She nearly hissed her frustration but decided against it. It was evident he would not tell her. Did it matter? Such a flimsy thing, too. Short and uninformative.

She read aloud, “Brother. Your handwriting improved. I can’t hardly read it now. Makes you think it’s not your pen. Did you get a new one? I’m well, thanks for not asking. As for the lass, she’s all fine and dandy. Everything turns green around her. Even doors. Just a side note- don’t let scary people discourage you. Sometimes it’s better to stand on your own two feet than scare little girls. It’s not all about enduring. Yours, your brother.”
She nearly slapped the thing on the desk when she finished. “Explain,” she demanded.

The Raven smirked at her. He smirked. “As you wish,” he said, however, with not a touch of malice. “Nori begins the letter by stating he knows it’s not Ori’s words. He then emphasizes how impersonal the favor requested was – I think that part is directed at you.”

“How could he know I was behind this?” Dis inquired, troubled.

“Ori hinted that in his letter. He called you ‘scary people,’ that are discouraging. You’re making another appearance in this letter as well.” Dis waved her hand angrily, and the man continued. “He later described where the woman is hiding, but in such a way that only Ori would understand. Or, possibly, one of the Thirteen, but that’s quite a risk for you to take. Also, another way of ensuring you would require the approval of at least one in order to find her.” He twisted his beard thoughtfully. “Pretty clever, I might say.”

“You can admire his cunningness later. I thought you were all the help I need?”

The man shrugged, impervious to her glower. “I don’t know every place in Middle Earth, milady. Shall I?” she nodded impatiently, and he continued, “Don’t let scary people discourage you…” That’s you, again. Clever. Then… then something about considering the woman’s fate and not only the Durins’ wishes. See that? Enduring?” He looked up, considering the options. “He is asking me to do so, as well.”

“What do you mean?” she snapped.

“Well…” the spy hesitated. Her spy hesitated. “Nori’s an old… acquaintance.”

Dis rose from her chair. “Whom are you loyal to?!”

“The House of Durin. That is not what I mean; your questioning of my loyalty is unkind.”

Dis opened her mouth, then wavered. Her spy glowered at her. She insulted him and exposed a side she had never seen before. She angered him. “What did you mean, then?” she asked, tone mellower.

The spy hid his thoughts, for this was not a proper apology. She wondered if she should, or if this would grant the man too much power over her. No. She cannot apologize.

“I trust his judgment. What he means to say is – stand on your own two feet. You don’t need to worry about the whispers, especially if this means ruining another’s life. He says that to you, milady.”

“How do you know?”

“The remarks about the pen and the impersonal greeting – his writing to his brother is a disguise. He speaks to you.”

Dis contemplated his words. Their meanings. “You mean you would not tell me the full meaning of the letter if that means I would bring the woman to harm.”

“Perhaps.”

“You presume too much.”

“Oh? The letter is yours. You may try to decipher it yourself. Or ask another. I am a mere tool for
you, aren’t I? You are the Durin and I am your raven; You are the wind and I am the bird.” He did not look troubled by his words. No, he truly believed them; or so he deceived her to think. “Lay me down and I shall leave.”

“Do not threaten me!”

The Raven cocked a brow and remained silent. He awaited her judgment.

Dis rose and paced, then paused by the window. She had some thinking to do.

“You don’t think the House of Durin needs her.”

“Currently, no.”

“You think Fili can manage without.”

“As things stand, yes.”

“You think Thorin can rule without.”

“As the wind blows, yes.”

“You think Thorin rules well.”

“As the whispers go, yes.”

“You think Thorin is well.”

“No.”

This gave her a pause.

“You think Thorin rules to the best of his ability? Commands his people to the best of his ability?”

“No.”

“Without a doubt?”

“Without a doubt.”

She exhaled. The sky was so blue today. The wind was warm. It was summer. The bees buzzed and the flowers bloomed and the breeze smelled of warm earth and flowers and the hard working’s sweat. It smelled like youth. It felt like peace.

“You think Thorin should be informed?”

“I think we should take our time carefully about this and gauge his possible reaction. The situation is delicate.”

“How delicate?”

“Why, as delicate as a little girl.”

Dis scoffed. “Little girls are not delicate – no.” She spun to face the spy. The man looked as unassuming and boring as ever. “You don’t mean that,” she breathed, leaning against the window frame.
“Don’t make that face, milady! You’d scare all the little girls in the world, making that face.” His eyes followed her as she rushed to the desk and picked up the letter, reading the lines again and again.

Something gave her a pause. The man analyzed the letter without ever looking at it.

“You did read it,” she accused.

“Course I did. Needed to analyze it perfectly to impress a certain lady,” he said, as if commenting on the dusty wind, blowing from the nearest restoration site.

“Thorin would lose his – Thorin would rush over the Mountai – Thorin –“

“Thorin first needs to decide if he wants to pursue his lost lover,” the spy dictated. “If he cares for her still. If he wishes to embark on said journey, he needs to be prepared. The woman’s in a delicate situation, and if Thorin’s visit has a chance of hurting her, she probably won’t be too thrilled about it. He needs to be prepared to work his way into her good graces. If the woman – and I don’t know, but I assume she is – worried about her child or even hiding her, we can’t risk Thorin knowing about her beforehand. That’s why it’s a delicate matter.”

Dis remained silent for a while, considering his words.

“You did quite a bit of thinking.”

The Raven shrugged. “I had some time on the journey back.” He glanced at the window. “Can’t tell your brother now, so you have some time to do some thinking too.”

“Or he’ll rush out of Erebor and stay stuck on the other side of the Misty Mountains?”

“Or try to cross it.”

“My brother is not that foolish.”

The Raven shrugged, leaving the gesture for her interpretation.

“Final note, milady,” he said slowly. “I think it might be wise to… for you to not be the person who tells the Duke. Think about it,” he added when he saw she was about to protest. “You need, again, the help of one of the original Thirteen, so… make it count,” he suggested.

“Who, then? I know you already have someone in mind.”

The spy looked unconcerned. “Well, as I am sure you know, Lord Balin and the Duke have a disagreement.”

“In which I side with Thorin wholeheartedly,” Dis objected. “I can understand Balin’s reasons, but it is unwise to spend our forces too thin this early in Erebor’s rebirth.”

The spy cocked a brow at her. “You are just waiting for Balin to get too old for the journey, milady,” he said calmly, “so you won’t have to lose another loved one on the gates of –“

“Be silent!” Dis roared.

The spy fell silent.

Dis poured herself a glass of wine and drank it. Slowly. Slowly.
The spy waited.

“He is not the only one who has Thorin’s ear. He will listen to Dwalin and Oin as well.” She paused. “Do these lords want anything we can offer them?”

The spy shrugged.

“What is their attitude toward the woman? Perhaps they’d be interested in retrieving her.”

The spy shrugged again.

“Speak,” she hissed.

“They are not men of initiative. Lord Dwalin lives to serve, and I can’t imagine he has much love for the lady. Lord Oin seems to have come to terms with her exile. Both think your son would not have issues succeeding, and neither would act on your behalf, especially if that risks the chance of hurting the Duke.”

“You already thought of this,” she accused, again.

“Is milady displeased I am doing my job?”

“You treat me like a slow child.”

“You presented me with a problem I am trying to solve. I also heard that the Duke of Rivendell has a daughter, fairer than the stars themselves. I could make inquiries –”

“I cannot offer Balin what he wants; I haven’t the power!” she interrupted, frustrated. The last thing she needed was another White Council member interfering in their alliance.

“You also have the Duke’s ear. And you understand his grief better than any.”

Dis dismissed the man.

The spy walked out and left, once again blending with the servants and the workers, as if he were one of them all along. As if he was just another peasant, taking care of this or that in the Lady’s room, then leaving without a word uttered.

As if their conversation had no impact on the fate of the Dwarven Alliance.

As if they had not exchanged a single word.

It will soon be winter again.

Thorin stirred and raised his head when a cool breeze, carrying with it the touch of snow and the flavor of rain, ruffled the pages of the report he was reading. Attempting to, at least.

They had just reclaimed Erebor. Barely two years had passed; two years of peace, and restoration, and new hope for his people. Two years of reestablishing old traditions and connections, of returning and reviving a reality once so broken that even the stories told were whispered in quiet melancholy.

And yet, some of his men had developed a taste for adventure and a distaste for peace, it would seem. Some wanted to own, not restore; revenge, not revive.
Some found no peace in Erebor. He knew that would be the case, that his suicidal mission would inspire others. He was just surprised it had only taken two years; and that during those two years, those two had requested to leave his side.

Thorin rose and walked to the window. Being of the ruling family meant his room had quite a few of those, but he did not enjoy the view as much one from the lower classes, whose house was built within the belly of the Mountain, would have expected.

*This view is the property of warriors and the duty of soldiers; the dream of adventurers. For me, it is the burden I must protect,* he mused.

It was a beautiful burden.

A knock on the door made him snap from his reveries as his hand – an old habit – jolted to grasp the hilt of his sword.

“Balin Fundinson requesting entrance,” the guard announced.

“Granted,” Thorin replied, releasing the hilt. It would be beyond rude to greet his old friend with a hand thus poised.

Balin entered.

The old lord had aged in appearance but not in spirit, which remained cunning and sharp. His body, too, remained robust and agile. Thorin, suddenly, wished it were otherwise and then cursed himself for wishing so.

“It is getting cold, isn’t it? A breath of promise from the Mountain this early means a harsh winter is coming,” Balin said, noting his proximity to the window.

“Aye,” Thorin agreed, then walked to his desk and poured two glasses of wine. He was not surprised that Balin understood the true purpose of windows. “I shall send a letter to Bard later today, to warn him if he had not noticed already and ask for a larger delivery, next time.” He offered Balin a glass.

“Thank you.” Balin accepted. “Though I do not think it will be necessary. The Duke already inquired whether we have a need for more provisions. All is settled.”

Thorin smiled, but the gesture was tired. “A lesser service would have advanced your goals better, my friend.”

Balin chuckled, waggling his finger at him. “An axe may blunt with disuse, but only misuse may break it. Ori has advanced much in his training, I’ll have you know.” Upon noticing Thorin’s frown, he added, “I assume he had asked permission to join me, but worry not; I will soon dissuade him of that notion.”

Thorin sipped from his glass. “I can understand why he wishes to leave,” he said slowly, “and I trust you understand why I….” He thought of Dis, suddenly, of her surprising visit and unexpected words. Of revenge and death and Frerin…

“Yes,” Balin said simply. His eyes, however, were hard. “I lost my father that day, Thorin.”

Thorin nodded. He finished his wine and placed the glass on his desk.

“I did not come here, however, to discuss Moria.” Balin’s eyes softened. “You know, some of the
clans had already started sending men to woo you.”

Thorin sighed in frustration. “Balin, I will not marry! We discussed this topic countless times already. Fili is –“

“A good heir who will be a good duke. I know.” Balin swirled the remaining wine in his glass. “Do you still care for her, then?”

Thorin froze.

He felt as if an arrow of ice pierced his heart. As if his entire body turned into winter. As if frost clutched his limbs and tore his insides into a blizzard.

“Why would you ask me that?” he rasped.

“Answer the question.”

Not unkindly. Balin was not unkind. It was sorrow that stiffened his voice. Did he want to know why?

“Yes,” he confessed. He closed his eyes. “Yes.”

“If you could go to Valinor….”

He clenched his hands. “I would go. I would go to Mordor itself if that meant I could see her again. You know I would.”

“And do… what?”

“Beg her forgiveness.”

“And if she refused to forgive?”

His knuckles turned white. “I would beg still.”

“And if she hated you?”

His hands shook, so he clenched them harder. “I would do all I can to win her love again,” he whispered. “Have you ever doubted me?”

“No,” Balin said softly. “Never.”

There was a moment of silence. Of hesitation. Thorin waited for Balin to judge him; Balin almost feared to judge.

“And if you could do it again….”

“I would; over and over. I would do it properly. I would keep my promises.” His voice almost broke. Almost.

“Well, laddie…” Balin sighed, as if making a great sacrifice. “Lily did not leave Middle Earth, Thorin.”

He misheard. He misunderstood.

“Lily is still in Middle Earth. She returned to the Shire. She did not sail to Valinor.”
Thorin stumbled.

His hand gripped the desk with bruising strength, desperate enough to tear through his skin. His knees buckled. She did not sail. She did not.

Balin crouched and caught hold of his shoulders, squeezing firmly. “Lily is still in Middle Earth, laddie. She did not go to a place where you can’t follow.” His eyes searched his, but Thorin could not decipher the sight before him.

“Then I must – I must – ”

His legs refused to support his weight. Balin’s hands on his shoulders were a remainder of his burdens. But Lily, Lily, Lily…

“You must prepare Erebor for the winter. You must train Fili. You must think, really think, if this is what you want,” Balin instructed. “And, should the answer remain positive, you must prepare seven gifts and wait for the winter to pass.”

“Lily – “

“Is not going anywhere. And neither are you, at least not until the Misty Mountains will once again be safe for passage. You said you would do it properly; duty comes before family, laddie.”

Thorin looked down. He could not think clearly. He could not see clearly.

Lily’s eyes danced before his mind, twinkling with clarity and fading from his memory. The harder he grasped, the further she fled. He was constantly losing her and helpless to regain her. Her voice became a whisper, haunting him at night. Her scent had long evaporated. He had no keepsakes he could hold on to. And her hands… he could still feel her touch; a ghost’s kiss. That, too, was fleeting.

Waking up, holding nothing but the remains of a dream where he used to hold –

“How long… have you known?”

He had a chance. He had a chance. He had a chance to see Lily again. He felt the weight of the years and his longing tightening his throat, like a sword tearing through the tissue. The scar on the side of his throat ached.

“Less than a month. I had to be sure, Thorin.”

Sure of what? That the information was true? That Thorin would oppose his quest to reclaim Moria? That his devotion to Lily was true?

Thorin did not ask. He did not care.

In seven months, he will leave Erebor. He must prepare Fili to temporarily rule in his stead. He must prepare the dukedom – the alliance, maybe summon Dain? He had to prepare. He had to think.

He had to make seven gifts.

Nine months from now, he will be in the Shire. He will see her. He will see her.

“Lily….”
He would see her, and Mahal be blessed, he would go down on his knees and beg. He would do everything he can. He would give her everything he had. He would say everything he failed to say before. He would keep all of his promises.

He would do everything, just to see her again. Lily…

He had hope.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
- Ledh: go to.

Meeting next chapter! And new POVs!
What'd you think? Comments are appreciated =)
The Price of a Flower

Chapter Summary

It is when I wake to watch the first sigh
Of blue and indifferent morning light
That I think that words, unspoken,
Weigh and burden.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kili’s horse snorted, apparently unimpressed with his master’s inability to find a comfortable position. But seriously, after two months of sitting on the same saddle – everyone would be a bit uncomfortable.

Well, except his uncle; and Dwalin. And the rest of the soldiers that accompanied them, of course.

And Bofur, who smoked his pipe and looked at peace with the world as a whole.

At least Bombur looked discomfited; but the man also doubled his size since their quest to retake Erebor, so Kili couldn’t really take comfort in his lack thereof.

Bofur sent an encouraging smile his way.

Kili turned his head, cheeks reddening, and stared ahead resolutely, right at his uncle’s back. He expected that at least he would understand (or show) that he was feeling an ounce of what Kili was feeling. But no, not Thorin. Thorin had to look grumpy practically all the time. Hell, even when he was sleeping he was scowling. Maybe that’s why his hair started turning silver.

Kili, out of pure superstition, checked his own locks. Still black. Good. He then checked his face. No wrinkles yet, either. He will not be Kili Sourpuss. No way.

They will reach the Shire today.

The moment the thought crossed his mind, his heart seemed to have stumbled and was now still stumbling, trying to find its proper place but apparently debating between his throat and his stomach.

“You alright, laddie?”

Kili gasped, heart still bouncing around his ribcage, and then managed a semi-confident – oh, who was he kidding – entirely nervous smile at the man next to him. “Fine, yes, of course, it's very warm today, isn’t it?”

Bofur, Mahal bless him, nodded kindly. “Yes. It is summer, after all.” He glanced his way. “You look ‘bout ready to jump out o’ your skin, lad.”

“Oh, hmm, yes – no! I….” He sighed, defeated. “I don’t know,” he summarized.
Bofur snickered. “You know, I would have expected Thorin to be having a breakdown, not you. Are you worried about him?” Upon noticing Kili’s hesitation, he added, “Or is it your lass you’re worried about?”

Kili jumped and turned to stare at the man beside him. “How? –“

Bofur laughed, not unkindly, and waved his hand. “Don’t look so suspicious, lad!” He drew heavily on his pipe and puffed out a cloud of smoke. “You forget you are heir now, after your brother. A lord all proper. Rumors started when both you and your uncle started occupying the forges, using very specific metals.” He eyed him knowingly.

Kili did not blush.

“Well….” He ran his fingers through his locks, toying with his new braids. A man of age, now. A lord who can marry, too. “Just in case,” he mumbled.

Bofur did not question his last statement. “I heard your mother was none too happy,” he commented instead.

Kili cringed. “Yes… well, she wanted… she thought….”

“…that one Mirkwood in the family is more than enough?” Bofur finished for him. He smiled and shook his head when Kili stared at him, flabbergasted yet again. “You made your brother very worried, Kili.”

“He – he told you?” Kili blurted, uncertain if he should be angry or relieved.

“We chatted. The lad takes his duties very seriously. That can make a lad grow into a lonely man, if he don’t have a friend to share his worries with every now and then.”

The sun kept on shining and the road was evergreen. The peacefulness of the Shire did not match the storm raging in his heart.

“You think she’s with her?”

Kili deflated. His greatest fear was to find that Tauriel sailed away, like she was supposed to. His mother searched for Lily because she needed her; she certainly did not want him to follow in his uncle’s footsteps. At least, not so literally.

“I… I can only hope,” he admitted.

Bofur clapped his shoulder. “Come now, all will be well! Or we will be forced to call you ‘Kili Lemon-face’!” He threatened with a smile.

Kili winced a smile back.

They left their horses as well as the soldiers in a clearing close enough to Hobbiton, yet not actually visible from the small village – the people there, after all, did not like strangers, and did not lease rooms in their inn for folk they deemed unsavory. Kili did not assume his nicer clothes (and almost proper beard) would change that.

Bree, on the other hand, was too far, and Thorin was not so optimistic as to think that Lily would let them stay in Bag End again, so, instead, they set up a camp. Well, the soldiers did.

Kili fingered the medal of lead in his pocket and prayed wordlessly.
He'd have so much to explain – the traditions, the meaning, why he didn’t write to warn of his coming, why he was there to begin with… It had been almost three years. What if she had forgotten him? What if she had moved on? What if she sailed? What –

He felt a hand clasping his shoulder.

“It will be fine,” Bofur reassured him. “Go. We will wait here.” He squeezed gently. “That’s what we’re here for, after all,” he added, pointing to his brother, “emotional support and all that.”

Kili nodded weakly. He turned and followed Thorin, who appeared oblivious to those around him. He did not even notice him, but Kili himself was too flustered and nervous to offer words of encouragement or any words at all.

The Shire.

Thorin paused, frowning slightly, as if unfamiliar with the scenery before him. Then he squared his shoulders and marched toward the path, passing by small houses and smaller people, ignoring all that paused to stare in his wake. People parted before him, muttering – Kili heard the Istar’s name mentioned in distaste quite a few times – but Thorin paid them no heed.

His eyes were fixed in the direction of a large estate, crowned with an oak tree, that loomed over the small village.

Kili followed, hiding in his shadow. Unlike his uncle, he was rather conscious of the glares sent his way, and that awareness made his ears blaze red. His eyes scanned the horde of villagers – searching, searching, searching.

Then, from the crowd of angry onlookers peered two curious, blue eyes, that widened in surprise and then dashed away the moment they met his own. A small boy, with a dark nest of black curls, rushed toward a lone figure, holding a child and standing half hidden by a market stall.

Kili froze. He stared.

The woman bowed and released the child, who then gripped the older boy’s hand and ran with him, away from the commotion and away from the crowd. The woman watched as they departed, rose, and turned to look at him.

Her hair may have been in a bun, and her body adorned in a simple, summer dress, but he would have recognized her face anywhere. Tauriel.

She didn’t – she did not sail. Tauriel.

His mind burned with her name following the drumming of his heart, his lips parted and he knew, he knew…

Tauriel bolted.

She faded as swiftly as she appeared. Kili pushed through the villagers and raced after her. She may have been the captain of the guards, but he had been training – and he was not going to allow mere grass and distance get in his way. He will not falter, he will not stumble – he must see her –

He reached the top of the hill and glanced around frantically.

No, no, no… I cannot lose her. Not now. Not –
“Tauriel!” he shouted, his voice hoarse and desperate. “Tauriel!”

No answer. Only the cracked response of a few geese that marched by, admonishing him.

“Tauriel, please! Taue –“

“Cease your shouting, you vulgar brute! It is midday! The children are sleeping!”

Kili jumped, startled, to discover a red-faced Hobbit glowering at him from her window.

“Be quiet and go away!” she commanded, then shut the window before he could as much as open his mouth to apologize.

His shoulders slumped.

Well, it was not a total defeat. After all, he did see her. He did, didn’t he? She was not a figment of his imagination, a dream, his heart’s desire. She was there, clad in a green dress and holding a child –

A child. A toddler, really. His heart picked up its pace again, pounding within his chest. Could it be…?

Then he heard a rustle behind him, no more, and he turned.

And there, wide-eyed and ever lovely, stood Tauriel.

His breath deserted him in a hiss. “Tauriel…” he whispered and strode toward her. Almost ran. Just to touch her – just to hold her –

Tauriel took a step back, and he paused, giving her the space she needed.

“What are you doing here?”

Her eyes searched his, shifting from confused to wary to vulnerable.

Kili imagined he did not change much; hell, he must have retained that lost, desperate look he worn in Thranduil’s dungeons. “I came for you,” he confessed.

Tauriel blinked at him, shocked. Her lips parted and then pursed shut, and she took another step back.

“I… I mean, I would’ve come sooner, or….” What did her reaction mean? What was he supposed to say? “I thought you left,” he tried to explain, “I tried to contact you, then –“

Tauriel looked confused. This was not going in his favor.

“I’d understand, if you moved on, if you have… that kid, I mean… but if… I mean, I never stopped – I haven’t stopped caring for you,” he rushed, confessing and fretting at the same time. “I didn’t. If you think, I mean, if there is a chance you might….”

“How did you know I was here?” she asked slowly. She glanced away, clutching facts and avoiding the emotional mess he was creating. Way to go, Kili, he reprimanded himself, very romantic.

“There was a… I think there was a letter…. “ Telling her there was a spy would not sit well with her. But he didn’t need to – Tauriel’s eyes narrowed as she understood what he was trying not to
say. He hurried to explain, “You weren’t mentioned, but I… I hoped….”

“Why didn’t you send a letter?” she accused, “Why did you just….” She heaved, then took another step back. “You didn’t come here alone, did you.” She looked up at him.

Kili’s heart sank; her eyes were hurt and her face was pale and she turned, without another word –

*No, not yet. Please. Stay a little longer. Let me hold you; let me touch you. I need to know you are real.*

“Tauriel,” he exhaled, gripping her wrist, “please… I came here to see you. I had to see you –“

She freed herself, looking vulnerable just for a split second, then, once again, regained the fierceness of the warrior from his memories.

“But you did not come alone.”

She ran.

Lily sipped her wine and reviewed her math with a slight frown.

She sat in the inner yard of the estate, enjoying the sweet summer breeze and oblivious to the world around her. That was the wonderful blessing of the not-so-large garden – it was blissfully quiet. Also, the old oak tree offered quite a bit of shade, which allowed her to do her work in peace.

Compared with last year, the estate’s expenses were higher – and the income, lower. While she did expect the rise in the expenses (she did not stay at Bag End last summer, and nor did Tauriel or Dori) the lower income was an issue to address. According to Drogo’s report, this year’s produce was in no way lacking, nor did their neighbors’ export exceed theirs in number or quality.

Maybe it was time to try to reach newer markets? She could send Drogo to Bree. It could have been a local thing, after all. If there were rumors, neither of the Bagginses would share them with her.

They might if she asked, however; Tauriel was out with the children again, Prim was at the market, and Drogo, too, was out – something about the upcoming festival, so she’d have to wait –

Someone opened the door to the garden.

It was too early, though, wasn’t it? Was something the matter? Did Dori try to go exploring alone again? Did –

Lily rose. She emerged from beneath the oak tree, expecting… she fell back, cornered against the tree with her heart racing wildly when back gazed fierce, blue eyes.

Those were not the ones she wanted to see.

He was looking into her. Through her. Walking toward her.

No. Her mind was playing tricks on her. Her dreams leaked into her reality and stained – this was a dream; nothing more. A hallucination induced by the soft heat and the oak tree’s shade.

A daydream. A bad dream. A bad dream which was getting closer and closer and closer –
He had silver in his hair and no armor hidden underneath his loose, blue tunic. No weapons were concealed in his belt. Even in the summer, he wore boots. But the silver...

“Stop.”

The man stopped.

She was shaking. Why was she shaking? Why were her legs wobbly and her brain numb and her heart beating so fast, as if she was about to run out of air or blood or both? She felt faint. She felt weak. She could not comprehend the parted lips, the stormy eyes, the hesitance in the man’s posture.

It took her a long while before she managed to find her voice again.

“You cannot be him.”

The man swallowed, expression shattered. He seemed so driven to get to her, but did not know what to do when his presence was denied. Did he expect she’d be happy to see him? She stared, lost in his eyes and his… and him. Lost in him – she did not know what she was feeling.

“Have you come to kill me?”

The man flinched as if she struck him. Did she? She did not recall moving. The rough tree bark tore her dress. Behind her was a tree and behind the tree was a wall. She was not a good climber, but he did not have weapons. Lily wondered if she would have been reassured to see him with sword and armor and his hair as black as night. She wondered what being pierced felt like.

“No; no, it wouldn’t,” he breathed weakly, “Lily….”

He was still there, facing her. Waiting. His hand twitched, as if he wanted to touch her, to see if she was real; or maybe it was her, wanting nothing more than to –

“Why have you come?” she attempted to demand, but her voice broke and revealed her weakness. Betrayed by her own body, her mind, her lies… her lies? But this was so long ago.

Three years ago, she betrayed the man she loved.

“For you. Only for you. No one else but you. Lily….” He waited, but she said nothing. What could she say? It didn’t make sense. Nothing did. Why was he here and why was he looking at her and why did he have silver in his hair? Why did she feel so cold even though it was summer?

“Forgive me. Lily. Please forgive me. For everything I had done – I know I do not deserve your forgiveness, but I must ask for it, for every promise broken and every… every hurt I caused you….”

The man slowly lowered himself on one knee. Her breath deserted her. He then bent the other knee.
“Stop!” she cried. She begged. She had no idea what she was asking for, but her instincts told her this was a sight she could not handle. *Not another promise.*

She turned her back and gripped the tree next to her, holding onto the solid, warm wood as if it were the only thing that could keep her standing. As if it were the last thing that was real in her shredded reality. Her other hand rose to cover her mouth.

“Lily, please, look at me.”

His voice was warmth and soft and it was behind her. Right behind her. His body was a furnace, sending heat waves all the way to her and melting the frost that had taken a permanent hold over her bones.

She was melting, figuratively or otherwise. Was she still quivering, or did she start the moment he stepped closer?

She had nowhere to run.

“Lily… I had never meant you harm. I lost control and betrayed you; it was never my intention to cause you pain. To hurt you. Ever since that day, I had done nothing but regretting… regretting what I did.”

She said nothing; she did nothing. She did not understand his words. She could hear his voice and feel his breath, but his words held no meaning for her. What was he saying?

“Lily, won’t you… won’t you look at me? Please look at me. Lily, please.”

Why did his voice sound so weak? Why did it break? What did he mean? Why was he saying things she couldn’t understand?

“Lily… just… you don’t have to – I just want a hint, anything, that you could forgive me.”

She was crying, she realized suddenly. Why was she crying? Why did a whimper escape the lips she was trying so hard to lock? Why was she holding on to the tree with such desperation, the bark tore through her skin?

“Lily….” His fingers ghosted over her hair; her exposed neck; her shoulder. Then, they touched – feather light and oh so tentative and her body jolted, trembling and weak, no longer capable of containing her silent sobs –

She cringed and his hand left her immediately, as if he never touched her, but the touch lingered. She could feel the fingers burning through the cotton of her dress.

“You hurt me. I don’t want to be hurt again. Please leave.”

A shot of hot air hit her cheek, as if forced out from lungs, collapsed.

“You don’t mean that.”

“Leave,” she whispered tonelessly. She could not turn around to face him. She could no longer see the wall of red bricks covered in ivy. She could no longer feel the oak that was holding her up. She could still feel Thorin – no, that was not Thorin; that couldn’t be Thorin – the man behind her.

“Please.”

Who said that? Was it her? Him?
A soft summer breeze played with the few locks that escaped her bun, but she was still cold. So cold. Why was she cold?

Lily turned around

He was gone.

Tauriel knew what she had to do.

She first ran to Hamfast’s home, ashamed to find that she was out of breath, and made sure that both Frodo and the young lady were well. Since both played so peacefully – Frodo with Hamfast’s son, Sam, and Dori with the butterflies, Tauriel allowed herself a moment of relief.

They weren’t here.

Now she must find her lady.

Tauriel steadied her breath and prepared her body, yet not a minute passed and her lungs were heaving, again. She neglected her duties and allowed herself a life of decadence by her lady’s side, and now she failed to protect her lady as a guard should.

She reached the green door and entered cautiously, looking for any sign of struggle or destruction. Perhaps they weren’t here yet? She was not certain if she should expect violence; she knew, after all, that Kili would never harm her or something she loved.

And she left him there. Dear Gods, she left him –

*Duty first*, she reminded herself harshly, moving silently toward the garden. Empty.

Besides, both the Duke and his son seemed to think it was imperative to get her lady away from Mirkwood. Surely there must have been a reason? Kitchen – empty.

What were they even doing in the Shire? Why did they search for her and her lady? Why was Kili –

She ignored the pang of pain that shot through her. Study – empty.

This was not her decision to make. She would have left everything for him, once, but now she had a duty she could not walk away from. She vowed to give her life to protect Lady Ningalor and her daughter, and no one – not even Kili – could stir doubt in her heart.

So why were her hands shaking?

Bedroom – she sighed in relief – not empty.

“My lady,” she announced her presence.

Her lady sat next to the open window. She held a letter in her hand, and her eyes were fixed on the view before her. Her bun was entirely undone, and her golden hair danced in the wind. It took her a moment to register Tauriel’s presence, and she straightened slowly but did not turn to look at her.

“We discussed this before, Tauriel. I had given up my status long ago.” A wisp of a smile graced her lips. “You shall confuse Dori.”
But how can she be anything but a lady? How can she address her as anything else? Her entire body was curved in perfect cultured elegance Tauriel could never dream of mimicking. Strength and frailty contained in a beautiful vessel that the slightest wind may shatter.

“We are alone, my l –“

“But we never truly are,” her lady dismissed her. “Where is Dori? And Frodo?” Her pale fingers tightened their hold of the letter.

“I sent them to Hamfast’s. My lady, I encountered men of the Dwarven Bond in the market today. Forgive my delay, I….“

Her lady was silent. She folded the letter and placed it on the desk by the wall.

“Must I also ask for your approval? I told you before – I am Lily, nothing more. And you are my friend, not my guard,” she murmured. “I know of their arrival. What caused your delay?”

Tauriel opened her mouth to question, realized she was about to address her as nobility again, and fell silent.

“Your delay, Tauriel.” Her lady finally turned to look at her. Her eyes were red. “Did something happen?”

Yes.

“No, y… no. I neglected my duties and allowed myself to lose my strength.”

The lady frowned. “You look as though you had seen a ghost. Are you sure you are well?”

Tauriel hesitated.

“You needn’t tell me, if you do not wish it.”

*Duty first.* Tauriel raised her head, glancing at her lady uncertainly. She ran like the wind, expecting a storm. Lady Ningalor appeared calm. The house was quiet; the air was peaceful. Her lady’s tears were silent. She did not know how to face the muteness at the end of the battle.

She failed to arrive in time.

“What… about you?” It felt strange, breaking the rules. It felt wrong. But it made her lady smile. Tauriel was trained to kill, not to comfort – not herself or anyone else, but she made her lady smile. It was a sad smile.

“Thorin was here,” she said simply.

“The Duke himself was here?” Involuntary shock pierced her voice. Tauriel paused and mellowed her tone. “What did… are you well, my – I mean, Lily?” She cringed.

“I am… not entirely certain.”

“Did he… did he hurt you?”

Her lady’s hand rose to touch her shoulder. “No,” she said.

“Shall I… chase them away?”
The lady looked up. “Who are… ‘they,’ exactly?”

Tauriel took a small step back. “I… I do not know for certain. I shall go and –“

“But you said you saw members of the Dwarven Bond. If you did not see Thorin, whom did you see?”

Tauriel looked down.

Her lady rose. “Tauriel…?” she asked softly.

Her resolve was not to be shaken. “No one I knew, my lady.”

She was trained to guard and protect. It was not her lady’s duty to care for her.

She sighed. “You know I can see through your lie, don’t you?” She raised her hand. “Tauriel, I am not your lady. I shall not ask you to do something you do not want to. Your life isn’t bound with mine. I want you to know that.”

Tauriel took a step back. “Why are you saying this?” she whispered.

Her lady’s smile was sad still. “You look as though you had seen a ghost,” she repeated.

Tauriel clenched her fists, bowed rigidly, and left.

The roads of the Shire confused him.

Thorin paused, glancing around. He was quite certain he had no idea how he got there. One moment he was leaving Bag End, the next… he was not entirely sure. Perhaps that’s what fleeing felt like.

He allowed a shuddered breath to tear through him. The sun moved quite a bit – where did his legs take him during that hour erased from memory? He could spot nothing familiar, just a meadow of flowers surrounded by trees.

He still could not chase away the sight of Lily’s face when she first saw him.

It was almost as if she did not know him.

In truth, he did not know how she’d react upon seeing him. A part of him even feared she may have moved on; she may be indifferent, might even laugh at him for his troubles. He dreaded that. He expected shock, to some degree. Maybe anger. Another part he could not keep silenced hoped she may be happy to see him.

He knew she would not run to him, he knew she would not kiss or even hug him, but maybe… maybe a smile, after the moment of surprise had passed. Maybe a touch. Maybe she’d look at him like she did at the beginning of their relationship – uncertain and hesitant, perhaps, but with a touch of tenderness.

Hopefully not how she looked closer to the end – gentle and vulnerable and so close to breaking.

But the shock was replaced with fear and tears and Mahal, he did not want to make her cry.

She asked him if he came to kill her.
She could not bear to be touched by him.

_Lily_… he closed his eyes. The meadow of flowers was too peaceful for the emotions that tore through him to accept. He bore no weapons, no armor, no finery, and yet…

Something crashed into him.

Thorin opened his eyes, frowned, and glared at his surroundings. Failing to spot the threat, he looked down.

Large blue eyes, slightly tearful, peered up at him uncertainly, as if about to cry but unwilling to miss anything important. The blue eyes were attached to the small body of a young child, wearing a blue dress, a mess of black hair, and no shoes.

Thorin scowled at the thing.

The girl, who apparently waited for this cue, began to cry.

Thorin looked up, alert, but no villager came to rescue the shrieking toddler or to chase him away. Come to think of it, being framed as a child harasser was not exactly something he wished for; neither was being chased away by a Hobbit, of all things. Also, he was quite positive his ears could not handle such high-pitched wailing at his age.

He took a small step back and bent down. “Stop it,” he ordered.

The toddler stopped crying immediately and blinked at him curiously. Her lower lip twitched.

“Are you hurt?” he inquired.

The toddler shook her mess of tangled locks. Then she looked down, and her eyes widened. She cried out, rose, and began to push at his legs in an oddly determined manner.

Thorin blinked and allowed himself to retreat a few steps back.

The girl made another broken sound and picked up a few flowers, already plucked from the ground, which Thorin, apparently, trampled.

She looked up at him again, eyes wide and hurt, and began to weep in earnest; those sobs were a lot quieter and more heartfelt than the screams from before.

Thorin glowered at the heartbroken child for doing her best to make him feel guilty.

“Stop crying,” he commanded again. “There are other flowers.”

The girl was not impressed. She wept pitifully, looking up at him and sniffling.

“It was not my intention to destroy your flowers. Forgive me,” he tried again.

The girl’s body heaved as if too small to contain her sobs.

“I will pick you new ones.”

“N-no!” the girl objected. She looked troubled. “It’s for Mommy!”

Thorin did not bother asking why would that disqualify him for flower picking. He frowned.
The girl shrank a little, but when he did not move, she explained, “I am making Mommy a crown.” She looked at the trashed flowers in her hand and her lower lip began to tremble again.

“Very pretty,” Thorin hurried to say.

The girl paused, looking confused. Thorin did not really blame her for it.

“Where is your mother?” he tried. Maybe he could deliver her to her parents. He wasn’t entirely certain the Shire was truly safe. Weren’t there wolves here, a few years back? Also, he admitted reluctantly, he was quite lost. Perhaps the girl’s parents could tell him where he was, exactly.

“Home, I think,” the girl said.

“Does she know you are here?”

“Maybe,” the girl answered, unconcerned. She glanced around. “I don’t think so.”

Thorin decided to have a talk with that girl’s parents. “Won’t she be mad?”

“Yes,” the girl answered seriously. “But Sam doesn’t like it when I take his flowers. I had to go to find flowers,” she added, then smiled. “Mommy likes flowers.”

Thorin suddenly remembered how thankful he was when Fili and Kili finally grew up. “What’s your name, child?”

The girl shrugged her tiny shoulders. “Mommy said not to talk to strangers.”

Thorin frowned, wondering if that particular rule shouldn’t have been mentioned earlier in their conversation. “I am Thorin,” he stated and offered his hand for a shake.

The girl glanced up and down at his serious expression and his offered hand and giggled. “You’re funny!” she exclaimed.

Thorin removed his hand, scowling powerfully, but that only induced the girl to lower herself to the grass and laugh openly.

Perhaps he did miss Fili and Kili as toddlers. Just a tiny bit.

“You should not laugh at others,” he reprimanded.

The girl allowed herself a few more giggles, then sat up. “Why not?” she asked curiously.

“It… is not very nice.”

“But Merry and Pippin do it,” the girl insisted. “They take stuff,” she confided.

“Wrongs aren’t righted by others’ endorsement of them,” Thorin objected.

The child blinked at him, then laughed at him, again. “You talk like Mommy!” she pointed out. “Saying funny words!” She hid her face behind her fingers, then peered at him. “‘Thorin’ is a funny word,” she asserted, then released another cry of delight.

“Thorin,” Thorin emphasized, “is my name.”

The girl paused, laughed, then got up. “I am Dori!” she declared. “Your name is funny!” She grabbed his hand and began to pull. “I need flowers!” she dictated.
Thorin, at this point, gave up trying to understand what was going on in the young child’s mind.

Dori was quite pleased when he rose and followed her around, dragged down by her tiny hand, as she picked up some choice flowers. He prayed to Mahal no villager, or worse, one of his men, would come and see him maneuvered by a child. This was quite embarrassing.

When the girl had enough flowers – Dori; what kind of parent gave their child a boy’s name? – she sat down and began to weave her wreath. She looked at him pointedly and patted the pillow of grass next to her, clearly expecting him to marvel at her efforts.

Thorin sat down.

He watched the girl as she concentrated on her work. She had a small nose and bright eyes and fine hair which wasn’t, in fact, a mess of curls, but a mess nonetheless, puffy red cheeks and a bright smile.

“Are you a daddy?” the girl asked suddenly.

“No, I am an uncle.” He frowned. “Why do you ask?”

“I thought old men are daddies.”

Thorin scowled. “I am not old.”

Dori giggled. “Your hair is turning white!”

Thorin had to admit the child had a point.

“It’s all right if you don’t have a kid. I don’t have a daddy,” she confessed, face contorted in dedication. “Mommy says he was very brave and he died.”

“I… am sorry to hear that,” he offered, frowning. Was she attempting to comfort him?

“Yes,” she agreed sagely. “Mommy says he was tall and he liked to sound important. But he was still nice.”

“Did you… did you know your father?”

“No! He died AGES ago! Aunty Prim says Mommy’s sad sometimes. Are you sad because you don’t have a kid?” She looked up, eyes wide.

Thorin scowled. “Can’t really say that I am….”

Dori’s face fell.

“I mean, of course, yes, very much so.”

The child looked oddly satisfied. She continued to work on her wreath with a pleased expression that Thorin found to be mildly disturbing.

He gave up, looked away, and thought of Lily.

He must try again; maybe tomorrow, or would it be too early? Maybe he should wait a day, then try again. Maybe he should write a letter, this time, hoping she hadn’t left the village to avoid him, which was the chief reason why he did not send a letter to announce his coming to begin with. Maybe he should warn his men, just in case. Maybe…
A hand pulled on the short sleeve of his tunic.

“I finished,” Dori said. “I’m going home.”

Thorin nodded and rose. “I shall accompany you,” he announced.

“Acco…?”

“Walk with you,” he amended, “to make sure you are safe.”

Dori blinked, then nodded. Her face grew serious. She gave him her hand. “Come, Thorin, I will protect you,” she declared.

Thorin frowned, considered correcting her, then sighed in defeat. He took her hand – which meant he had to walk hunched, and followed Dori, who was pulling him rather excitedly.

She turned around to glance at him and elicited a cry of merriment. “You walk funny, too!”

“I do not,” he bristled. “You are short.”

Dori paused, looked at him, and lifted her hands. “Pick me up.”

Thorin wanted to refuse. He knew he should refuse. This was bound to ruin his reputation and name forever. But the girl looked up at him expectedly and she wore no shoes and Thorin found he did not have it in him to refuse. He bowed down and picked her up in his arms.

Now that they were face to face, Dori touched his beard and pulled his braids and looked at him in wonderment. “You look funny,” she concluded.

“You should not criticize those offering you aid,” Thorin reprimanded. “Where do you live?”

Dori pulled his braid as means of directing him. “This way!”

Thorin winced and walked as told.

“This way!”

“By Mahal, child, let go of –“

“No! That waaay!”

“Cease pulling, or I swear –“

“Look, Thorin! I am tall! Taller than you!”

“Sitting on someone who is already tall won’t affect your own height –“

“Nooo! You are going all wrong!”

“Listen, this is ‘right,’ and this is ‘left,’ now release –“

“It’s there! That house!”

Thorin paused. He suddenly found it hard to swallow. His throat was dry.

“Thorin!” The girl frowned at him. “Thorin?”
Thorin willed his legs to move. There could be a million reasons. So many reasons, none of which were related to Lily. Not directly. One of them was probably the fact that none of the Valar seemed to favor him lately. Or ever, actually.

His breath was stuck in his throat. He wasn’t ready to face Lily again. And he was quite certain that she, also, wasn’t ready to face him. Not yet.

Thorin released the child.

He had to go. Had to leave. He turned away from the door, marching faster upon hearing it open – “Mommy! Look, I made you a crown!”

Thorin froze.

“Oh, Dori! We talked about this! You are to stay with Tauriel or Frodo the whole time! Can you imagine how worried I was when Frodo came back without you? I was about to go and look for you myself.”

“But, Mommy, I made you a crown!”

“And it is a lovely one, but I would rather you did as you are told, no…."

Lily’s voice died.

Thorin turned around.

Oh, she was looking at him. She was holding Dori and looking at him, pale and wide-eyed. Her hold of the child tightened. The child, who could be no older than three, who had a black hair and bright, blue eyes…

Dori’s messy hair bounced as she turned her head to glance at her mother, then Thorin, then her mother, again.

Her mother. Lily.

“Mommy?” Dori pulled her sleeve. “This is Thorin. He took me home. He is funny.”

“Funny…?” Lily echoed, failing to tear her frightened eyes from him.

“He says weird words like you,” Dori mumbled, pulling on her mother’s sleeve in agitation. “Mommy?”

“Neledh bardh. Avathos.”

She lowered Dori back to the path, and the child sent one, worried glance his way, then ran inside.

It was just Lily then, facing him. Just him and Lily, looking at him with those frightened, pleading eyes he did not know what he did to deserve.

“You told her I had died?” he choked.

Lily flinched. Her shoulders slumped. “I had to tell her something,” she muttered. “She kept asking.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he cried. Too desperate, too raw. He could see the fear flashing in her
eyes again.

She gulped. “Last time we spoke, you said you’d kill me.”

“I did not mean that! I never meant that!”

“You stabbed me.”

Thorin hissed as the accusation tore through him and the old guilt simmered anew, burning his throat. “I… I know. I lost control – I wish I hadn’t – and I regretted it ever since. I know it’s not an excuse, but, Lily, Lily… I vowed to protect you. I failed you in every way possible, but still I… I wish to make amends. Had I known you were here earlier, I would have come sooner.”

Lily crossed her arms over her chest, all but hugging herself. “I did not want you to know,” she admitted. “I did not want you to come.”

Thorin took an involuntary step back. The stark words stripped him of his breath.

“Lily, I….” His voice died on his lips. He did not know what to say. He felt his hands tightening around his throat, as cold as the bite of a sword.

“Did Nori not mention her?” Her voice was thick.

“Nori… I – I do not understand.” He frowned. “Lily –“

“Nori said your sister needs my marriage to you to be validated for Fili’s ascension to be unquestioned. Is that why you came?”

“No! Of course not! Lily, please, do not think I came here for any reason other than to beg your forgiveness!”

“You crossed the Misty Mountains just for that reason? I do not believe you!”

Her voice broke and her eyes sparkled like a thousand shattered stars. She looked away.

“Lily,” he sighed, daring to cross some of the distance to her. He stopped when she flinched. “Lily, you are the only reason I ever needed,” he confessed.

He could see it, the hesitation and the hurt threatening to overpower her before she managed to don her mask of calm. He stood so close, yet did not dare to touch.

“Lily….”

“What about Dori?” She blinked furiously. “Will you take her from me?” she whispered.

“No! No, Lily, never – never from you. With you. If you choose.” He lifted his hand slowly, carefully, and wiped her tears.

Lily recoiled from his touch.

“I thought you died.”

Lily stepped away from him. Her shoulders did not shake but her hands, still crossed over her chest, clutched her sides. She looked away and he could see tears shining in her eyes.

“For a long time, I thought you died. They would not tell me. I had to bribe a servant to learn that
you were gravely wounded. They did not bother to tell me when you recovered. I spent months living with that uncertainty. Only my brother’s indirect comment informed me you survived. I thought you died. I thought you died hating me. I thought my betrayal killed you.”

“Oh, Lily….”

She took another step back, away from his reach.

“They thought you still hated me. I lived with the knowledge I shall never see you again. And now… now you decided to appear out of nowhere and expect me to… to what? To uproot everything, again, and go with you?”

“No, Lily –“

“No, Thorin.” She said his name. She looked up and said his name. “Not this time. This is not a quest to conquer a mountain. You cannot expect me to… to leave everything and go with you. I am sorry, but this I cannot do.”

He hated to see her like this. He hated the fact that he was the cause.

“Lily, all I wish for is to spend time with you. Please.”

Lily shook her head. “I can’t. Not now, at least. I need… I need time, Thorin. I need time.”

He nodded. “May I… May I visit you again? Tomorrow?” he pleaded.

Lily swallowed. Her eyes darted, but then they returned to him. To face him.

They were uncertain and lost, but no longer frightened.

“Yes,” she whispered.

She entered the house and closed the door and left him.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:

-“Neledh bardh. Avathos – Go inside (home). Do not fear.

Finally, a reunion! This chapter was a pain.

I’m sorry I did not update in time – I had a hectic few weeks in the army and did not get much writing done, so I will try to update once or twice a month.

Also - a ton of thanks to the incredibly talented lucife56 for her INSANELY BEAUTIFUL art!!! It’s stunning and I love it with all my heart. Y’all should check out her Tumblr - http://lucife56.tumblr.com

Again- Thank you so much!

Anyways, hope you like it and that it was worth your wait! What’d you think? Please let me know in the comments!
Touch Would Follow

Chapter Summary

There are paths greater than any fate
She feared none but her own steps
His wishes were too large for her small body to contain
She was simple and true
She understood none of that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dis observed the man before her with a glower that did not shame any man of the Durin Line.

She stood by the duke’s chair where her son sat as the temporary ruler of Erebor and the Bond and glowered. Fili, on the other hand, merely looked grim. His eyes were focused, but the gleam was hesitant.

To be honest, it was rather unfair to expect him to handle this situation calmly.

From the other side of the room, Legolas glowered back.

“Wine, my lord?” she offered, “Your father’s gift to us.”

Legolas scowled.

“Ale, maybe?” Fili suggested.

The Elven Lord waved his hand. “Wine will do,” he relented.

Dis waited until the Lord spoke. The Lord waited until the servants brought the wine, then sipped from it slowly, taking him time; Fili did an excellent job of holding his nerves in check.

“Where is the Duke?” he asked finally.

“Away to visit members of our Bond,” Fili said stiffly. He sat unmoved, even though the Lord’s piercing gaze was rather unnerving. The axe manifests the bearing of its master, Dis thought, scrutinizing the two men before her.

“Of that I am aware. He had asked for the right to pass through my father’s dukedom peacefully several months ago.”

“Then you know Th- the Duke is away. Is there anything you need of him?”

Weak, boy! You should remind him that you are the duke, even if temporarily. Dis gritted her teeth. This time was a gift – a chance for Fili to shine as a duke and charm all those who doubted him.

“My son is willing to listen to whichever deal you came to struck, my lord.”

Dis raised her head in defiance, hiding in that manner the rushed beating of her heart. Oh, she hoped she was wrong.

“What did you come for, then?” Fili asked, voice torn between demanding and earnest.

“I told you why already; I wish to know the location of your uncle.”

Fili’s posture wavered and betrayed his shock at the sudden hostility.

Dis took over. “Your wish is denied. The location of the Duke is not for the likes of you to claim. His travels are of diplomatic nature for he is the leader of a widespread alliance.” She paused. “Are you here to revoke the passage agreement?”

Legolas’ hesitance betrayed him. “No.”

“Your father does not know you are here.”

Legolas swirled the wine in his glass. “An idle threat. I think both of us do not wish to involve my father, do we not?”

A threat? She almost frowned, but was quick to overcome the momentary confusion. Instead, she offered a wry smile. “There was no threat involved, my lord.”

“Hmm.” Legolas weighed her comment. His eyes revealed nothing. “Perhaps not one you meant, but my father is a threat when… certain matters are concerned. Do not deny me, and I will not tell my father of my suspicions.”

He caught her mistake, then. Did he mean to offer insult, or just point it out and weaken her control of the situation? Either way, the Lord’s words were not to her liking. Dis clenched her hands. “What suspicions?”

“Where is the Duke?” Legolas demanded.

“That question of yours was already answered.”

Legolas paused. He took another sip, then focused his glare on Fili. “I did not know members of the Dwarven Bond lived in the Shire.”

Dis glowered, unmoved, but Fili’s face revealed all the Lord needed to know.

Legolas scowled, rose from his chair and turned his back. His men bowed – the meeting was ended.

The Lord prepared to leave.

“Wait!” Dis called.

Thank Mahal, the man paused.

“What are your intentions?” She hoped she did not sound as desperate as she felt. How did he know, anyway? Dis knew this would be the wrong question to ask. “Will you tell your father?”

Legolas did not reply. He took his time to contemplate his answer and did nothing but gaze at the magnificent hall around him, unmoving. Eventually, he turned to scrutinize her, and his eyes held weight she had not seen in a man so young before other than her brother.
“No,” he conceded eventually.

“Then what will you do?”

Again, the Lord said nothing.

Dis suddenly felt a small tap on her shoulder, and she took a small step aside, allowing the old man through.

“You will go to you sister’s side, wouldn’t you?” said Balin.

Legolas glowered with fire so fierce a few of Fili’s guardsmen grabbed their weapons. Such expressions felt like an insult and looked like a threat.

“You have no right to keep harassing her, after all you had done,” the Lord growled, voice thick with anger. “We had let you pass as an act of peace, but you lied to us so you could hurt our own! I shall not stand for this! My sister was granted sanctuary from the likes of you – “

“And from the likes of your father too, I imagine?” interrupted Balin, still calm. “My lord, I understand your anger – “

“You do not! You know nothing of her suffering and your corruption!”

“And you, may I say, know nothing of the damage your sister has caused.” He raised his hand when Legolas opened his mouth in protest. “Thorin is more honorable than you think. He had not left to hurt your sister. He had left to make amends to her, as is right by law.”

“He comes with soldiers, armed, to face a defenseless woman. You call this making amends?”

“The road is traitorous, my lord. Did you not travel with a similar number of soldiers?”

“My men are honorable; yours are not. I had seen the truth of it on my sister’s body!”

Balin’s face burned red with anger, and Dis took it as a sign to step in again.

“My lord, you mentioned before your father is a threat. I take it that her stay was not something approved by him?”

Legolas froze. “You dare threaten me again?” he hissed through tight lips.

_I dare to do as I like._ She did not answer his accusation. “Do you not think it will look strange to your father, should you leave? Especially if your trip happens to coincide with the Duke’s?” She glowered, then, intentionally, mellowed her tone. She needed to appeal to him, not turn him against her. “Your sister deserves more than a life in exile. Should you go now, neither your sister nor Thorin will earn what is rightfully theirs.”

Legolas glared. For all his anger, he was listening. He absorbed her words and the meaning behind them. “And what is that?”

_Duty before – no, not this time. “A family.”_

Legolas’ eyes widened for a split second, then his glower turned ugly with hatred. “Curse be upon you! You knew, and still – “

“We knew nothing!” She fumed, “We knew nothing. But Thorin recognized and grieved for his deeds. My brother is so much more than you give him credit for. An act of senseless rage triggered
by your father’s life of treachery is not something you should hold him accountable for!”

“He nearly killed her!”

“He is making amends for it! Your father’s betrayal cost the life of thousands – and what amends had he to offer for the torn families and the starving victims? He turned his back on us!”

“You cling to the past like a wretched woman to her remaining youth,” he snarled. “My father is not the root of every evil that has befallen your oh so hapless people.”

“No, he is not, but you cannot deny many can be lain at his feet,” she growled back. “Should you come between my brother and his happiness – and your sister and hers – you shall regret it forever.” She paused. “Then you could have your share in your father’s crimes, I suppose.”

“How arrogant of you to assume my sister’s happiness lies in your brother,” he sneered. “No crimes shall haunt me but the ones you brew, you witch!”

Fili hissed his rage but Dis waved him silent. “Do watch your mouth, boy. The next time you insult me, I will be sure to spank you proper,” she replied. “I understand your pain as well as your anger. Your sister’s departure broke my brother’s heart. I shall not blame either for this – lovers do quarrel. Let them sort it out as mature adults should.”

“This was not my sister’s fault. Do not blame her for her injuries.”

“She lied,” Dis snapped. “She betrayed my brother with her lies. I blame none, but I refuse to let you turn my brother into the villain here!”

“So you will scapegoat her?”

“I told you; I shall blame neither. My brother loves your sister with such passion – he spent the past three years still dreaming of her day and night. Her betrayal shook him to his very core. I wish with all my might you sister cares for him just as deeply, but I doubt it. I had never seen a man love a woman as profoundly as he does. I wish for him to be happy, and I assume you wish for your sister the same. Should you come between them, I shall never forgive you.”

“I do not need your forgiveness,” he barked.

“Nor,” she continued, eyes blazing “will your sister.”

Legolas’ glare would have scorched her had she not weathered so many similar glowers in her youth. The Lord turned and left. His men parted before him and closed their ranks around his form the way leaves dance upon the whim of a passing breeze, alive for a moment yet still chained to their tree.

Fili waited till the doors closed. “Amad,” he urged.

“Amad,” she muttered. Rage and adrenaline exhausted her, but her muscles were strong – they bore the strain with grace. She gratefully accepted the glass of wine Balin offered her. “Even if he chooses to go, Thorin has at least two months to work his… charm, I suppose. You were late,” she directed the last comment at Balin.

“Amad,” he urged.

“I shall have a raven watch over him, worry not,” she muttered. Rage and adrenaline exhausted her, but her muscles were strong – they bore the strain with grace. She gratefully accepted the glass of wine Balin offered her. “Even if he chooses to go, Thorin has at least two months to work his… charm, I suppose. You were late,” she directed the last comment at Balin.

The advisor bowed slightly. “I was working on the other side of the mountain. The Lord’s visit was rather abrupt.”

Dis finished her wine, then gave it to a servant. She squeezed her boy’s shoulder in encouragement
and left the room, following Balin’s footsteps.

The old man added thoughtfully, “You were right, of course. Thorin does love her. More than is good for him, I dare say.” He looked older than his years.

She narrowed her eyes

Balin continued, his voice growing harsher with each word uttered, “I know what you are thinking. I would never agree to form a deal with you, of any sort, had I not suspected Thorin would benefit from it. My loyalty lies with him, not with your plots.” He clenched his hands. “I would have told him regardless of your promise.”

“But you accepted it.”

He shrugged. “An opportunity, but not a one that could tip the balance. None can.”

“Still, you leave his side.”

Balin glanced at her. His eyes were undecipherable. “Thorin avenged his father; now it is time I had avenged mine. And it is time you had honored your favor to Ori.”

“Favor?” She almost heaved in frustration. Oh, of course Balin would know. “What does he want?” Denial would be disgraceful, and she was tired of games.

“You know what he wants.”

“You wish to take the boy with you and deprive Thorin of guidance entirely?”

“Deprive?” the man chuckled. “I don’t know what you mean. The Duke always had at least two advisers at his side – a warrior and a scholar. Dwalin stays. And Thorin is now on a quest to recruit his second adviser, is he not?”

“A sec… you cannot possibly mean that!” she objected. “An Elf may not sit and dictate – “

“An Elf? No; but the Duchess of Erebor?” Balin’s smile was a benevolent one, but his eyes were shrewd. They held some odd satisfaction she did not like. “Did you think you were purchasing a mere puppet? Someone to please your brother and secure the inheritance of your son? You say Thorin loves her – and you are right to say so, but that was not what made him take her as his adviser on more than one occasion. Her words and guidance mellowed his actions and molded his decisions. Should she choose to come with him, she will not settle for pretty dresses and poetry books.”

Dis grumbled, “How can you possibly expect me to let you leave after these words?”

“My departure is not for you to decide, Dis.” His tone was still kind despite its iron touch. He offered her a pen and watched as she signed Ori’s contract. Now the lad was free to go. Dis huffed her dissatisfaction but knew it would be dishonorable to object.

“I am just warning you. Do not let her silence fool you as it had fooled me.”

Tauriel glared at her lady. Her lady pretended not to notice. Dori did, but the child was too excited about the notion of a picnic to fully pay attention.

In fact, she simply stuck out her tongue, told her that grumpy people aren’t invited, then locked her
hands with Frodo and began to spin, cheering the whole time. Frodo seemed a tad confused, but he usually complied with whatever nonsense his ‘little sister’ came up with.

The poor boy was too observant for his own good. Very much like his mother in that sense.

As if summoned by her frustrated musings, Prim appeared, carrying a large basket and a blanket, and handed them to her lady, Ningalor. Lily. Tauriel’s lips twitched in aggravation.

Drogo trailed behind his wife with a rather lost expression on his face.

Tauriel understood his confusion. Yesterday’s events baffled all of them. Tauriel was, at the very least, pleased that Prim agreed with her – the Dwarves were bad news. Any contact with them was bad news. They made everything dangerous, even a picnic.

“All I’m saying….” Prim sighed. She threw her hands in the air, then gripped Ningalor’s forearm. “You be careful, yes? I expect to see you here in time for afternoon tea or earlier!”

Ningalor wore a mildly annoyed expression on her face. “I am no child. A picnic is hardly dangerous. Just remember, if he comes – “

“I’ll smack him proper!”

“You shall do no such thing.”

“Who is coming, Mommy?”

“A nightmare,” Prim muttered.

“A friend,” Ningalor said, glaring. Her confident posture did not hide the nervous gulp nor the sudden twitch on her digits and the way she clenched the basket.

A ‘friend’ shouldn’t make one feel so threatened.

“At least take Tauriel with you. For my peace of mind,” Prim insisted.

Her lady turned to face her, her features strangely blank. “I believe Tauriel has other things on her mind,” she observed.

Tauriel stiffened in response to the accusation. “Not at all. I will gladly accompany you. It is my duty – “

“You have no duty, but to yourself,” her lady interjected. “You are free to do as you like.”

Tauriel’s temper flared. “I wish to join you.”

Her lady swallowed again. Tauriel detached herself from the wall against which she leaned, poised to argue her point further, but her lady raised her hand. Her face was somber.

“I wish you didn’t,” she finally said.

Her voice was too weak for Tauriel’s liking.

Dori, who had long stopped spinning and observed the scene mutely, rushed to hug her mother’s leg. She looked up when she felt her mother’s gloved hand caressing her hair and pouted in response.
Her lady smiled. “We are going to have a lovely picnic.”

Dori frowned. “Is Mommy sad?”

“Of course not! Why would I be?” She crouched and kissed her daughter’s forehead. “We shall make crowns together. Would you like that?”

The child’s face brightened. She grabbed her mother’s hand and began to swing it in excitement.

Her lady smiled, as well. Her smile was not half as dazzling. Still holding her daughter’s hand, she walked toward the door and left.

Tauriel glared at the door for allowing this.

“Mom?” Frodo asked uncertainly.

Prim scoffed. She turned around and began to sweep the floor rather rigorously.

Drogo shrugged. “Might be for the best,” he tried, “you never know.”

“I thought we both agreed that this – this ridiculous notion –“

“You never know,” Drogo insisted. “Like you didn’t know he was alive, till now?”

Prim froze. She turned to glare at Tauriel as if she were the source of this mess.

Tauriel glared back. “Lily explained her reasons yesterday. Her situation – “

“Well, of course ‘her situation!’ But we are her friends! We deserve to know!” She resumed her chores. “What else is being kept hidden from us? Next thing we know, she be an Istar herself!”

Tauriel scowled. “What Lily is required to do for her own protection is no concern of yours, Primula.”

“Protection! Friendship has no value to you, I see. Or alliances.”

“Prim,” Drogo warned.

“What alliances?” Frodo squeaked.

Drogo and Prim exchanged a glance. Prim scoffed, and Drogo sighed.

“Nothing to worry ‘bout, boy,” he said. “The strange folk will be out of our hair soon enough.”

“But – “

“Here,” Drogo left the room, then returned with a dirt covered book in his hand. He slapped the cover twice, trying to remove the dried mud. “Why won’t you go and study some flowers? For the festival. You need to know which ones to pick,” he added with a wink, then winced when Prim twisted his ear upon discovering the mess he made on the freshly swept floor.

Frodo looked unconvinced but accepted the book nonetheless.

“Go on,” Drogo urged the reluctant boy. “And take Sam with you, eh?”

Frodo muttered something under his breath, then glanced up at Tauriel, who still scowled from her corner. “Come with me?” he offered.
Tauriel tried, but she could not think of something better to do with her time. Even if it meant spending it with the young gardener apprentice who, if she were to judge from his constant blushing and mumbling, had developed feelings for her. She deserted her corner with a sigh and nodded.

Frodo looked slightly hesitant – perhaps because of her expression? – and added, “You also need to know your flowers.”

Tauriel smiled bitterly. Based on her memories of the Lithe celebrations in past years, she wasn’t very likely to exchange flowers nor wreaths with any, other than her lady and the Baggins family. Still, the boy’s eyes were hopeful. She nodded and followed.

The festival was in two weeks’ time, and she was likely to watch over Dori and her lady, like she did in festivals past. She did not have any courtship prospects, of course, nor entertained a wish for courtship. Where her lady went, she followed.

They stopped at Hamfast’s home – Sam turned as red as the flowers he was holding, but agreed to join them nonetheless. The two eight-year-old boys rushed ahead while she trailed behind. They were good boys, carefree and gentle in spirit. Dori would grow to be like them. She would need Tauriel’s protection to help retain her innocence. Even the Shire could not stay safe forever.

They strolled away from the village and into the forest, looking for flowers.

She had her duty, after all.

Sam pointed out several different flowers and plants. Frodo collected the ones that appealed to him the most. Tauriel watched the trees, longing for a different forest.

She had no regrets. She made her decision. And she could not leave – she will expose her lady, endanger her, all because she selfishly –

“Tauriel?”

Tauriel snapped out of her reverie and spun, her hand poised to draw her dagger –

Kili blinked back at her, standing ten meters away but still too close. He looked rather uncertain.

“I… I was just about to go and look for you,” he admitted.

Sam rushed to her side. He glanced at her stunned features, then at the intruder. He scowled.

Frodo ran to hide behind her.

Kili managed to tear his eyes from her and look at the boys. “Hello,” he offered. “Who’re you?”

Sam and Frodo exchanged a glance. They clearly expected a less friendly reply.

“We’re flower picking,” Frodo blurred.

“Oh.” Kili managed to look at her again. “May I… may I join you?” He began to walk toward her.

Both boys turned to look at her – Sam confused, Frodo contemplative. Then Frodo ran to Kili, gave the baffled man his book, ran back to grab Sam’s arm and dragged him away. Sam may have protested.

Tauriel scowled. She should berate the boy later for trying to set her up. Picking flowers was the
Hobbits’ idea of a romantic pastime; not hers.

She turned to face Kili again, who took another small, hesitant step toward her.

“May I?”

Tauriel’s hand twitched. She sighed. “Kili, I cannot – I do not know what it is you want of me, but – “

“To court you,” he interrupted, cheeks red but eyes determined. He took a small coin out of his pocket. He held it out to her.

Tauriel glared at the gray, shiny thing. “What is that?” she whispered.

“When we court, we offer seven gifts, made of seven metals. It’s tradition. The first one is lead, it means – “


His hand shook. He still held it open. “Do you not care for me?”

His voice did break, however.

“Kili…."

“I just… I mean, I’d understand. I can’t…. ” He did not complete the sentence.

She knew what she had to do. She closed his hand for him. “I am sorry, Kili. I have my duties. You have yours,” she muttered, then turned her back and left. She did not run. She did not rush.

This pain was like all other pains. It, too, shall pass.

Thorin steadied his breath. He knocked on doors before.

He knocked on the one before him three times already. He could do it again.

Thorin knocked.

It was about ten in the morning. Ten, he figured, was a reasonable hour. Not too early, not too late, not close enough to lunch or breakfast to interrupt it or solicit a begrudged invitation. Though he did hear Hobbits had the habit of eating seven times a day, so he was not entirely certain which time would be the most appropriate.

The door opened.

Behind it stood a short, stout woman with black curls and angry blue eyes.

Thorin bowed his head politely.

The woman still glared.

“I am Thorin,” Thorin introduced himself. “I came to visit Lily.”

The woman hmphed. “And do what?” she demanded.
Thorin blinked. He did not expect an interrogation. “Talk,” he hedged. “Would you tell her I had arrived?”

She scrutinized him, then sighed. “Go down that road, turn left – right before the market – keep heading straight till you get to the forest.” She appeared oddly reluctant to share that information with him.

Thorin blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Madam decided to go for a picnic.”

“A… picnic?”

“And you are late. We expected you two hours ago.”

Thorin hesitated, bowed his head, and turned toward the road. He ignored the sound of a door closing somewhat violently. Why would Lily try to lure him away from Bag End? The woman appeared to be telling the truth, yet Thorin had his doubts.

It was unlike Lily, however, to send him on a fool’s errand.

Well, at least a forest wasn’t hard to find. The trees were spacious and welcoming, the grass was soft underneath his boots, and the air was gentle and fragrant. The chirping of the birds and the sound of a child laughing only added to the tranquil and peaceful setting. Thorin followed the sound.

He paused, heart clenched in both pain and love, for the scene before him was too beautiful – one he had not imagined even in his wildest dreams – for him to take in a stride.

Lily lounged on a blanket, wearing a light summer dress and reading a book. The wind toyed with a few locks that escaped her braid and framed her face. She smiled faintly when Dori ran to her and dumped freshly picked flowers in her lap, then tumbled and landed there too.

Lily’s smile widened. She caressed the child’s black locks with a tender hand, adorned in a white glove, and the toddler looked up and smiled brightly at her mother, giggling.

It was so peaceful; that was not the source of his pain.

He knew his presence would add tension. He knew Lily’s smile would be guarded or gone entirely. He knew he did not have a place on the picnic’s blanket.

Lily turned a page. Dori rushed about from one spot to another, exploring all sorts of plants and bugs, when her eyes landed on him.

First, she looked happy to see him. Then she looked frightened.

Thorin swallowed, clenching his fists.

She squeaked and ran to her mother, again, and pulled on her sleeve in agitation.

“Dori? What on earth is the matter?” Lily looked down as she lowered her book, then up – and her eyes met his. She saw him. She looked at him.

Thorin braced himself.

Lily, inexplicably, smiled. The smile was short and uncertain, but reassuring. She nodded in
Thorin slowly walked toward the blanket. The child – his child, jumped to hide in her mother’s arms, but Lily kept talking, calming the girl. The language had a strange sound, a rhythm he was not familiar with. Hearing Lily speaking it reminded him of music. He sat across from them and waited.

A part of him wondered, hoped, prayed that she told Dori who he really was.

Dori’s head materialized, and her eyes looked curious rather than worried. She blinked at him a few times, but since he did not know what she looked for, he kept waiting.

She leaned forward. “Are you really Mommy’s friend?”

He knew he should not have hoped. He knew that. Still, the disappointment stung. “Aye.” He glanced at Lily, seeking a hint as to what had just transpired, but Lily looked down at her daughter and not at him and her expression revealed nothing.

“You didn’t tell me!” the girl accused.

“I… did not know she was your mother,” Thorin confessed. His eyes darted again to look at Lily, but Lily still averted hers.

“You scared Mommy.” Dori folded her hands. “You made Mommy cry.”

Lily looked, if anything, a tad mortified.

Thorin resisted the urge to take both mother and child in his arms. “I… did not mean to. It was not my intention.” He thought for a moment, then offered his hand.

Dori glared at it.

“Friends?” he asked, expression serious.

Dori looked up at her mother, who nodded.

“Friends!” Dori shook his hand gravely. “But you promise to not make Mommy cry.”

It hurt. “I promise.”

“Good!” Thank Mahal, the girl smiled at him. “You are funny,” she observed, then giggled when Thorin scowled. She ran back to the trees, looking for more flowers. When she turned around and saw him looking at her, she stuck out her tongue.

“Dori,” Lily reprimanded.

Dori giggled and ran.

Lily sighed. “Forgive her manners,” she muttered. “I’m afraid several of the Hobbit folk might be a bad influence.”

Thorin shook his head. “Better than my boys, in truth. Everything is funny to her.”

Lily’s lips twitched. It may have been a smile. “Her definition of ‘funny’ is broader than most. It also applies to anything that is strange or new to her.”

recognization, then muttered something to her daughter in Sindarin.
Thorin nodded. The silence made him uncomfortable. “Why Dori?” he asked.

Lily was not quick to answer. “Her full name is Doroniel. Her Elvish name is Niphredil.”

He frowned. “I did not know the Elven Alliance had outer names.”

“Outer names?” Lily looked at him. She looked at him.

He cleared his throat. “Our alliance gives a child two names. A name known only to members of the Bond and a name to share with others, of other alliances.”

“Oh.” She looked hesitant for a moment, then away. How strange it felt to sit so close to her, yet know she is beyond his reach. “Dori has two names because I knew the name I had given her would be frowned upon,” she confessed.

“Why?”

Lily did not answer. She opened the basket at her side and took out two cups and a bottle of orange juice. She poured him a glass first, then another one for her.

Thorin accepted the glass. He wondered if Bofur knew Sindarin.

“How are you?” he asked.

“Well.” Her answer was sharp. She winced. “How was your journey?”

“Long.” A shadow of displeasure crossed her features, and he amended, “We did not run into trouble, this time around.”

She nodded. “And Erebor?” Her voice was softer than he would have liked.

“Flourishes. Our relations with Dale stand true.” He considered mentioning Mirkwood but decided against it. He rubbed his neck, feeling his scar. “The restoration of both dukedoms will soon come to an end. Both are more heavily fortified than before, but they resemble the days of the past.”

Lily nodded. She did not take him up on the implied invitation.

“How is the Shire?” he tried.

Another wisp of a smile. “Never changes.” She glanced at Dori, running free. “It is a good place to raise a child.”

Thorin nodded, knowing it would be unwise to mention anything regarding a departure. He did not need her hint but took it all the same. “It seems safe,” he conceded.

Lily’s head shot up. “You think it isn’t?”

Thorin raised his hand instinctively to cup her cheek and wipe the frown from her face, then froze. His fingers curled into a fist, and he quickly lowered the offending hand to the blanket.

Lily followed his hand with an alarmed expression.

“Shoes,” he blurred.

Lily blinked. She tore her eyes from his hand to glance up at him. “Shoes?” she repeated.
Thorin raked his fingers through his hair. “She does not wear them.”

“Oh,” Lily sighed. “It’s a Hobbit thing, I think. Children rarely wear shoes, as do some of the adults. It hardens the sole of the feet, they say.”

“And flowers,” he added, then explained when Lily blinked in confusion. “Is that a Hobbit thing, too?”

“It is a part of their culture.”

Thorin nodded. Everything he said felt out of place. He did not know what to say to her. Conversation was not something they were good at, even when he only knew her as Lily. Before they spoke, he suddenly realized, they touched. She gave him her body freely but was careful with her words.

Now, she had no interest in sharing either.

Suddenly, Lily looked up and smiled, and her smile was so beautiful and complete and warm…

She smiled at Dori who rushed into her arms and squealed in delight. Not at him. She never smiled at him like that.

Then Dori turned to smile at him and – perhaps she saw the look in his eyes? He was not quick enough to erase it with a smile – she left her mother’s lap and took his hand in hers. Do all children have such small hands? She gripped his fingers and pulled with all her might.

Thorin did not move; he was uncertain if he should.

“Come!” the child commanded when she realized force alone would not do. “We pick flowers!”

Thorin glanced at Lily, torn, but the woman looked away, and Dori’s eyes were pure joy…

She, at least, wanted his company.

Thorin focused on his daughter. “Only if you teach me how to make a flower crown.”

Dori stopped pulling. “You don’t – “ She released his hand and ran to her mother, then whispered loudly in her ear, “Thorin doesn’t know how to make a flower crown!” She giggled.

Lily’s smile was a weak one. “Then maybe you should teach him?”

Dori nodded, very pleased with herself, then tried, again, to pull him to his feet.

This time, Thorin complied.

Dori heaved and turned to face her mother, again. “I made him stand!” she cried triumphantly.

“I can see that.” Lily smiled. She had true warmth in her eyes when she looked at her daughter.

Thorin forgot she could be warm.

He followed his daughter, holding her tiny hand in his. They trailed, searching for new and exciting flowers. Dori did, at least. Thorin looked at the tiny creature – barely up to his knees – and wondered how could such a thing ever be his. At some point, his eyes caught what looked like spots of blue, dancing against the green growth. He pointed them out to Dori, who rushed forward – pulling him in the process – and ordered him to pick some for her and some for him. Her eyes
glowed whenever he presented her with a flower. She was all but bouncing on the balls of her bare feet.

Lily shied away from him whenever he gifted her with anything.

Eventually, even Dori had enough flowers. She sat on the grass, waited for him to join her, and showed him the proper weaving of the stems.

Thorin tried to mimic her – it was actually harder than he expected. His fingers felt big and clumsy and consistently undid the stems he did manage to somehow hold together.

For Dori, his constant failures were an endless source of amusement.

Thorin did not blame her. He swallowed his frustration and thought of Lily. Oh, Lily… she changed, he realized. Something changed. He looked up, suddenly overcome by the need to see her, and blinked in surprise when he discovered she was already looking at him, watching him.

Lily quickly looked away, cheeks slightly pink, and Thorin wished he could have held those cheeks in his hands, caress the soft skin, and –

“Thorin! Your crown broke!” Dori shook her head at him. “Try again!”

He frowned at her; the child had the audacity to giggle.

She balanced herself on her toes and petted his head. “I believe in you,” she said seriously.

“Thank you,” Thorin bowed his head graciously.

The gesture was lost on the child, but she ran to her mother – Thorin’s eyes followed her, noting the smile that bloomed on Lily’s face, the easy laugh, did he ever make her laugh? – Then she ran back, holding most of the flowers she already picked in her hands and leaving a trail of petals behind. She smiled brightly at him.

Thorin smiled back, uncertain, and his eyes sought Lily’s.

Lily looked away.

“I will make you a crown!” Dori declared. “Watch!”

Thorin watched, but his thoughts were all Lily.

She was different. She was warmer, more confident. Her posture was not as defensive as before. Even when she looked at him, her eyes did not reflect the same hesitant wariness they held in the past.

She was loved unconditionally. His love was a fleeting thing for her, a thing too fragile to last. She always expected a fracture, a break, an end. Her daughter’s love, however, was unshakable.

He looked up, suddenly overcome by the need to memorize her features again, the face that began to flee from his memories as well as his reach. But Lily felt him stare and flinched and he knew that his gaze was unwelcomed. He released her, burning the sight he was permitted to behold into his mind.

Instead, he focused on his wreath, forehead furrowed in concentration. He knew his love was not so weak. He knew his feelings were writ in stone. It was obvious to all who knew him.
But how will he make Lily see that? How will he prove himself to her? How will he –

Thorin looked up.

Lily was gone.

It was far enough. They could neither see nor hear her from here.

Lily leaned against a tree and felt tears sliding down her cheeks. Her body slowly glided down to the grass and her hands covered her face. Stupid. This was so stupid. The entire notion was so inept, it was absurd she was the one to conceive it.

Lily bit her lip, trying to contain her hurried breaths. She was once an expert in crying in silence.

This was ludicrous. She knew she could handle Thorin. She had done it before. She thought about this meeting the last night and knew it was the best way to do this. That way, she could introduce Thorin to his daughter without risking any unexpected surprises or revelations.

What she did not expect was the undeniable look of utter wonder Thorin could not stop directing at Dori. Nor did she predict the easy-going gentleness and the almost playful seriousness that did not fail to elicit giggles time and time again from her positively charmed daughter.

Dori was the friendly sort; she, unlike her parents, was quick to warm up to strangers. But she was also a sensitive child, always attuned to the mood of those surrounding her, especially Lily’s. And yet, all the child required was a few words of reassurance for her to once again trust Thorin enough to take him flower picking with her and hold his hand.

And Thorin looked like –

Lily shook her head. Yesterday’s guilt made her do this. The guilt she felt for keeping Dori hidden from Thorin for so long. She could not predict this. Oh, poor Dori… would she cry when he left, returned to his home? Would she have to explain it to her? Would he return the next summer, or would the child grow up and forget she ever, even if unknowingly, held her father’s hand?

I could go with him. I could leave and then Dori –

No. This was just a possibility. She had to consider all possibilities, of course, but with a clear mind. She had to consider court life and travel and her father and Thorin. She had to think of Dori.

Right now, though, thinking proved to be an unexpectedly difficult task.

Thorin was changed.

The silver in his hair and the lack of armor and weapons marked a deeper transformation. Thorin was, somehow, more… is accessible the right word? Open. He felt open. His scowl was not as deep and his eyes not as dark. He no longer walked like he had to force the air into submission; he walked like he owned it, the same way he commanded paths and plants and people and her peace of mind. What he once demanded was now undisputedly his.

A duke, she noted with a watery smile. A proper duke. No longer persecuted or belittled or threatened, no longer forced to cower in the shadows and carry his people’s suffering on his shoulders.
Lily scowled and pursed her lips at her traitorous musings. She wiped her tears and slowed her breaths. She had to think. Thorin could not stay very long; he had to, at some point, return home. And he had to do so before winter blocked the road through the Misty Mountains. Which meant that the latest he could stay was July. Well, the end of July. Maybe even the beginning of August.

That meant she had, as the most, two months to decide. Their former relationship lasted about a month and a half. This was… plenty of time.

Lily rose and walked back. All she had to do, now, was set expectations. Preferably when Dori was not around. At that age, time was a strange concept. Thorin leaving in two months would translate to Thorin leaving now, and that might induce some tears. Lily hated watching her daughter cry.

Which was, as things stood, inevitable.

Lily once again made sure her face was clear of any traces of distress, then emerged from the trees and paused, watching the two. Thorin still worked on his crown, she noted. Dori already wore one, of which she appeared to be very proud indeed, and was currently working on a second one.

Was it her imagination, or were their expressions nearly identical?

Then the man noticed her and looked up. His eyes were still blue. Had she forgotten?

He rose.

Lily took an involuntary step back.

He walked toward her. She could not turn away from him, not when he looked at her with such tender longing in his eyes.

Thorin paused before her. He opened his mouth, yet said nothing. He breathed deeply, then spoke, “I… I made this for you.” He offered her the flower wreath.

Lily blinked, several times, before she finally managed to look down at his hands. Then she had to use every ounce of willpower she had not to laugh. She was quite certain the effort made her lips twist downward, but she was too conscious of her efforts to maintain a straight face to afford glancing up at him.

Thorin made her a crown made of pincushion flowers. The flowers were lovely, blue and purple and lavender in shade, and the wreath, while not expertly done, was not that bad. The flower, however, was a traditional Hobbit symbol for a widow in mourning.

Her husband, who embarked on a two-month journey so he could ask her forgiveness, made her a mourning wreath.

Lily did not dare to look up. She could not. She could not possibly tell him.

She also could not remain silent and stare at the offered present without offending the man greatly.

She bowed her head slightly, accepting the offer.

Thorin’s hands twitched slightly, then disappeared from her sight. He crowned her with gentleness she did not expect. His hand caressed her hair, traveling down, and touched her cheek. His fingers followed the curve of her cheekbone, feeling the remains of dampness she had failed to dry
entirely.

Lily took a step back, breaking the contact. She wiped her face from his touch, then looked up.

Thorin’s expression was torn. Yearning and guilt… she could understand one; why the other?

“Blue looks lovely on you,” he said, voice hoarse.

*So does grieving, I am told.*

“Thank you,” she replied instinctively, then looked away. She tried to comfort herself with the fact that this, at least, was not a courting crown. Dori sometimes made her such crowns, but one could not expect a three-year-old to know the language of flowers.

“Mommy!” Her daughter ran and then pulled on her dress. “Is this a good flower?” her eyes sparkled.

“A good flower?”

“Thorin’s crown. Is it a happy flower?”

She could *feel* Thorin frowning. “I… I don’t know. We’ll have to ask Drogo.”

Dori scowled. “Frodo said you know everything,” she accused, disappointed.

“Did he now? I’m afraid those claims are hard to live up to.”

Dori pouted, then declared, “I think it’s a happy flower. Thorin made it to make you happy.”

Lily froze, yet still could not help but glance at the man facing her.

Thorin, damn him, did not take his eyes off her. He looked startled, but was quick to own up to the claim.

Lily had to look away. She walked toward the blanket, sat, and opened the basket. “I think it is time for eleventhes.” She took out a premade sandwich and smiled when she heard her daughter rush to accept the treat. “Wipe your hands first. Not on your dress.”

Dori froze, slightly ashamed, then accepted the napkin Lily held and resumed cleaning her hands with vigor. Lily did not hear Thorin join them, but his looming frame was impossible to ignore. She offered him a napkin as well and made sure their hands did not touch in the process.

“Sit,” she ordered.

To her surprise, both Dori and Thorin immediately obeyed. Her cheeks reddened. “Properly,” she reprimanded her daughter, who sat with her legs stretched before her.

Dori immediately mimicked her mother, who sat with her back straight and her legs folded in front of her and sideways in a way that displayed the hem of her dress.

When she was done ensuring her dress surrounded her entirely, she looked up, seeking approval.

Lily nodded with a smile and offered Dori the sandwich. “Slowly,” she added with a cocked brow. “Chew.”

Dori worked diligently on the giant bite she took and swallowed. The next bite she took was
smaller, which earned her another pleased nod.

Then Lily took out another sandwich and offered it to Thorin. The sandwich looked ridiculously small in his hand. His expression, however, was curious.

“There is fruit, also, if you’d like,” she added.

Thorin finished his share in two bites and glanced up – his tongue dashed out to lick his finger, and Lily hoped, no, prayed she was not blushing.

Thorin frowned slightly. She probably was.

“You have a napkin,” she reprimanded, then took out her own sandwich. She also took out a smaller basket full of fruit and refilled the glasses with orange juice.

When she looked up, Thorin was smiling at her. That old, semi-crooked, tight-lipped smile that looked oddly becoming –

Lily bit into her sandwich with more vigor that was necessary. Was she still blushing? Her cheeks felt hot. She then glanced down at the basket of fruit Drogo prepared; she had no idea if she was red or white at this point.

She asked Drogo for a summer fruit. Drogo packed strawberries.

Of all fruits, he had to pick strawberries. Of all the berries available…

Did she look as mortified as she felt? She could feel Thorin’s eyes on her.

Dori, of course, did not let insinuations bother her as she grabbed a particularly red strawberry and stuffed it into her mouth. She immediately grabbed another one, still munching on the first, and the only thing that stopped her from stealing yet another was Lily’s cocked brow.

The child swallowed. “Mommy?” She offered her the offending fruit.

Lily sighed. Prim was right; she must find a way to resist the child’s adorableness if she ever wanted to educate her. “One at a time, Dori.”

“But Thorin will eat all of them!”

Thorin, whose hand hovered over the basket, scowled. “Unfounded accusations. You had two already.”

Dori rose to face her challenger. “Mine!” She declared.

Thorin grabbed a strawberry and bit its head in defiance.

Dori stomped her foot and directed her pout at her mother.

At this point, Lily was somewhat uncertain if Thorin was serious or not. “Dori, behave. There is more than enough for everyone. And it is improper to refuse to share with a guest, or eat in like a glutton to deprive a guest of food.”

Despite the fact she probably missed a part of the message, Dori understood her mother did not side with her. The child glared at Thorin, displeased to find the man was now consuming his second strawberry. “This is my mommy!” she challenged. “Go away.”
“Dori!”

The girl looked on the verge of tears, clearly displeased at being in the wrong, again.

Thorin froze. His somewhat horrified expression told her that he may have helped raise two boys, but bossy girls were new to him.

“Dori,” she called, summoning the dramatic child to sob in her arms. She stroked her hair and refused to look at the man who was seeking her so fervently with his eyes. “You said some unkind things, didn’t you?”

“B-but, but….”

“Stop crying, Dori. No one is trying to hurt you.”

“He ate my strawberries!”

“They aren’t yours; they are for everyone. You were very rude. It isn’t nice to be rude to people.”

“But Mommy….”

“I thought you were friends?”

Dori nodded against her shoulder.

“Thorin won’t be your friend if you’ll be mean.”

Dori was silent.

“Do you want Thorin to be your friend?”

Dori nodded again. She detached herself from Lily, wiped her tears, and turned to face Thorin bravely.

Lily looked up to… oh, she really shouldn’t have. A harsh man like Thorin had no right to wear such a tender expression. His entire face softened with gentleness. No wonder Dori developed the habit of dragging him around like a ridiculously tall puppy.

“M sorry,” she sniffled. She then grabbed a handful of strawberries and offered them with a pinched expression of sacrifice. “Friends?”

Thorin cradled her tiny face in his hand, then ruffled her hair. “Always.” He smiled.

It was such a sweet moment. It should not have hurt her so.

Dori unceremoniously dropped the fruit in his lap and wrapped her hands around his neck – and bolted without another word uttered. She returned, still running, to Lily. “I did good?”

“You did well,” Lily stressed, but Dori instead hugged her too and ran away again, pleased with her mother’s approval and unconcerned with grammar.

“She has your eyes.”

Lily returned her gaze to Thorin. The man was looking at her, again, still wearing that tender expression she found so hard to handle.
“It seems the only thing I’m capable of is making you cry.”

She swallowed uneasily, focusing on her half-eaten sandwich. “You made her laugh, too.” She tried to change the subject.

“I want to make you laugh.”

Lily stiffened. “I think you’ll find I’m not as easily entertained,” she answered colorlessly.

“I remember.”

Lily didn’t answer. She also did not flinch when she heard Thorin’s shuddered exhale.

“This… picnic. It was for her, wasn’t it? Not for… not for us.”

Lily clenched her fists. “There is no ‘us,’ Thorin.”

“You still own the mithril shirt I gave you.”

“How do you know I did not throw it already?” she snapped. She looked up.

Thorin’s expression was impossible for her to read, but she could not deny the pain that flashed like lightning in his storm-ridden eyes. He swallowed with difficulty. “You wouldn’t.”

Was it an assertion or desperation? Either way, he was right; she did not.

“If you want it, I can – “

“I don’t. I want you.”

“I am not for sale.”

“I am not looking for a woman coin can buy.”

“I am afraid the woman you are looking for has long left the market. She does not exist.”

Thorin inhaled sharply. “I refuse to believe that. I… I cannot believe that.”

Lily looked away. “It has been three years, Thorin. Three years is… a very long time.”

“My feelings for you have not changed.”

Lily refused to acknowledge his words. She pointedly looked away. “I did not presume to speak for you.”

There was a moment of silence. Oh, those were not the right words, were they?

“I know,” he muttered. “It was foolish to hope otherwise. Lily, please, just… give me a chance to… to, at the very least, earn your forgiveness.”

“You want more,” she whispered.

“…Yes. Yes, I want more.” His fingers curled underneath her chin – when did they get there? – and his hand gently cupped her face, tilting her jaw with a tender touch so he could peer into her eyes. He was too close. “I want your heart, Lily.”

His eyes kept searching hers.
“It was mine, once. I know it. I want your love. I want you to rule beside me as my wife.”

His second hand rose to stroke her hair.

Lily freed herself from his touch, breathing with difficulty. She could not look at him.

Perhaps she never should have.

“You are asking too much,” she whispered.

“I know.”

His voice caressed her ear. He was too close. Her body didn’t seem to possess the will to move away.

“I will wait. Even if there is only a sliver of a chance, I will wait.” He chuckled. The sound was bitter. “You always did make me wait.”

Lily snapped.

Her hand whipped and collided with Thorin’s cheek – the rough beard almost scratched her glove – and the sickening sound echoed in her ears long after she jumped to her feet to distance herself from the shocked man.

Thorin slowly raised his hand to touch the area, as if unable to comprehend what had just happened.

“I’m sorry I did not mean to – “

Thorin looked up. He slowly rose to his feet.

Lily stepped back. Her anger returned. “You assume too much of me and my character. You may leave. I shall not make you wait,” she spat.

“Lily….”

“Just – just leave, Thorin! Just – give me back the peace and quiet and normalcy and leave.”

“Lily – “ There was urgency in his voice.

“I wish you never have come here, I wish I never joined your stupid quest, I wish Beorn had never given me his tea, and I wish I never, ever, got that silly notion in my head that you could ever cause me anything other than pain – “

“Mommy?”

Dori blinked at her, not daring to cross the distance to her. To them.

She wore the crown she made and held another one in her hands. She fidgeted, looking from Lily to Thorin with her eyes large and uncertain.

Lily’s shoulders slumped. She forced a smile to her face. “Yes, Dori?”

“I made a crown for Thorin,” the child mumbled.

“How thoughtful.” She walked away and began to pack the dishes and the cups and the half-empty
bottle into the basket. “Why won’t you give it to him?”

“Is Mommy angry?”

For a moment, Lily wished Dori was born with her father’s understanding of human emotion. “Of course not. It is almost time for lunch, and we must go back.”

“Is Mommy sad?”

“No, sweetheart.” She folded the blanket and wrapped it over the basket. “We need to help Aunt Prim with her lunch. Come, give your new friend his gift and take your leave.”

Dori did not move. “Can Thorin come with us?”

“I’m afraid he has other things to do.” Lily turned around. She refused to look at the man next to her. She should not have lost her temper. She never did before in his presence. She did not want him to know how much he had distressed her. She did not want to see the aftermath of her actions.

Dori still didn’t move.

“Dori, tolo lim.”

Thorin crouched down to look at his child. He opened his arms to her.

*Look away. Look away, now.*

But she couldn’t. She watched as Dori ran into her father’s arms and wrapped her hands around his neck. She watched as Thorin muttered something she could not hear and as he bowed his head for Dori to adorn it with small, pink flowers and oak leaves – no, those were oak-leaved geraniums. The flowers of friendship.

“Sam told me it’s a happy flower,” Dori mumbled, her hands holding her father’s face. “Are you happy?”

“Yes,” Thorin murmured, then kissed the child’s forehead.

Dori elicited a small giggle. “Your face is funny.” She explained, “It has hair on it.”

“Be a good girl, yes?” Thorin’s voice was hoarse when he released her.

Dori nodded. She ran to Lily’s side. She took her hand and looked up beseechingly.

Lily squeezed gently and led her away. She did not look back. She did not want to know what she’d find.

A part of her also wanted to run into those open arms…

It was too late for that. Too late for desperately seeking love and protection, too late for throwing all caution to the wind, too late for selfish decisions that were not thought all the way through.

Perhaps they were never meant to be in the first place. Perhaps there was never a time for them to begin with. Perhaps she should have just listened to Gandalf.

“Mommy?”

Lily bent and picked the child up. She cradled her head against her shoulders, listening to the rapid
beating of her heart.

Dori was worth it. Dori was worth all of it.

The girl’s thin arms and weak grip should not have comforted her the way they did. “Thorin said he’s very sorry. He said he’d wait forever.”

“Dori….”

“He told me to tell you.”

“I see.”

The day was bright and warm. The sun shone with all her summer might. Lily had no reason in the world to feel cold. She shivered.

“Mommy?”

“Yes?”

“Is it a happy crown?” She touched Lily’s blue wreath.

“No, my love.”

“It made you sad?”

“I am not sad, sweetie.”

“Is Thorin bad?”

“…No.”

“But you look sad.”

“I’m just tired, that’s all.”

“But….”

“Hush now, child. All is well.”

“I think Mommy made Thorin sad.”

Lily sighed. “Dori, please; enough.”

Dori fell quiet.

“Did he eat your strawberries?”

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
-tolo lim: come quickly

Another long chapter, but they sure don’t make it easy. At least Dori knows what she
wants - all of the strawberries. I wish the other characters knew what they wanted with the clarity of a three-year-old.
What'd you think? Comments are welcomed!
Chapter Summary

Like a dream of a stranger,
    A fleeting kiss,
    Perhaps a touch of lost lust no longer lasting,
    She is seconds away and forever uncaught.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kili leafed through the pages of the flower book he was holding. For the first time since he left Erebor – home, he reminded himself – he was glad Fili could not join them. If his brother knew he was reading a book, and a book about flowers, at that…

Dwalin did give him an odd look, but the old warrior scoffed and cursed and muttered whenever he glanced at either of the dark haired Durins in his care.

Bofur and Bombur were debating if the time was right to visit Lily or if they should wait. He might have heard one of them suggesting they go look for the ‘mystery lass.’ He directed a glare at them.

The two men did not find his glare impressive, judging by their chuckles.

Tauriel was a mystery, though. When she was a guard and he a prisoner, she talked and talked and her eyes sparkled like gems when he responded, just as eager to form a connection. There was something undeniable about him and her together. Sometimes he felt as if Mirkwood was a prison for her, as well.

She did not know who he was, however. He did not tell her. Was this the reason? Was Lily? Was that child he saw her holding? But Tauriel had green eyes and long, auburn hair, and the child had blue eyes and black hair and did not look anything like the woman holding her. Still.

He refused to think he traveled all this way for nothing.

Suddenly he heard a choked sound. Dwalin was having a coughing fit.

Bofur and Bombur chuckled again, not unkindly.

“You…” Dwalin managed to utter a beginning of a sentence, before snorting. “You have something in your hair.”

Kili looked up.

Thorin marched into their camp, looking darker and broodier than he did yesterday. Clearly, Lily was giving him a tough time, too. Even the bright, pink wreath could not brighten his grumpy disposition.

Thorin glared.
Kili was somewhat encouraged by the fact the Dwalin was as affected by his uncle’s glower as Bofur was by his.

“It’s ah… pretty,” Kili managed, holding down a smile when he became the receiving end of the scorching stare. “Is that a new Dwarven fashion?”

Thorin frowned, then cocked a brow. “I did not know you can read,” he commented.

Kili’s ears burned. “You taught me.”

“I think I gave up at some point.” Thorin marched toward him and snatched the book before Kili managed to hide it. He looked at the pictures of the flowers, then smacked Kili’s head with it.

“Ow! Uncle!”

Thorin ignored him. He confiscated the guide and began to flip through the pages.

“Can I have it back now?”

“No.” Thorin, apparently, was searching for a particular flower. “You brought this from Erebor?”

“And… No.” Kili admitted, defensive. How could his uncle look even mildly threatening with a flimsy flower crown on his head was beyond him. “Did Lily make it?” He pointed at the wreath. A part of him was jealous.

Thorin stiffened and did not look up. His face darkened again. “No.” He paused, looking at a delicately painted picture of a flower not dissimilar to the one he was currently wearing. A smile… was it a smile? It was gone too quickly for Kili to tell. “No, my…” His voice died slowly.

Kili frowned. He exchanged a glance with Dwalin. Dwalin muttered something about Mahal’s balls and moved to lean against a tree. He took out his axe and began to sharpen it, muttering to himself.

Thorin began to flip through the pages again, then paused at a page with a dainty painting of a blue flower. He groaned.

“Uncle?”

Kili peered over his uncle’s shoulder and read the description. Mourning, widowhood.

“Huh. Did you declare your own death?”

“Whose death?” Dwalin barked.

“Mine.” Thorin ignored the wild look Dwalin cast about the camp, looking for either danger or his soldiers. “I made her a widowhood wreath.”

Kili felt that laughing at his uncle again, at this point, would be plain cruel. “Does she know?” he asked diplomatically.

“I am not certain. I thought she was laughing at me when she accepted.” Thorin was still, unfortunately, dead serious.

“Well….”

“Watch it.”
“Yes, sir.”

Thorin cast him a dangerous look, and Kili changed his approach. “Can you teach me?”

“Teach you?” Thorin didn’t follow.

“How to make flower crowns.” Kili hoped he did not sound as embarrassed as he felt.

Thorin considered it, then nodded. “I also need to practice,” he said gravely. He raised his head and barked, “Bofur!”

The man raised his head and wisely wiped the smile from his face. “M’lord?”

“Do you what ‘Doronië’ means?”

The man looked perplexed. “I’m afraid not. Is that Sindarin? I can ask around.”

Thorin shook his head. He glanced at Kili and walked away from the camp, apparently searching for flowers. Kili followed and wondered how to coax his uncle to give the book back.

They skipped a few flower beds – Kili began to suspect Thorin also wanted to distance himself from his men – until Thorin found a suitable spot. Kili sat and watched his uncle pick a few flowers, remove the leaves, then braid the stems together. Thorin was right. He wasn’t very good at it.

Kili hesitated, then asked, “How’s… how’s Lily?”

“One step forward, two steps back.” Thorin scowled as his crown fell apart. “Did you find her?”

Kili tried to swallow the bitterness. His crown broke as well. “Yeah.”

Thorin hmmmed.

“Do you… do you think Lily told her something?”

Thorin raised his head.

Kili continued, flustered, “About… about me. Or about… not, not being with me.”

Thorin frowned. “I… cannot imagine that she would.” His voice was careful. Kili realized, belatedly, that he indirectly accused his uncle of interfering in his relationship. “I can speak with her.”

Kili did not want to ask whom Thorin meant. “No, no, that’s… I mean, you’re right, why would she? It’s… probably the same for… for both. I think.” Eloquent. Yes.

Thorin scoffed at him. “It would be shameful if both of us returned without our query, boy. I can’t imagine Dis has been successful at wiping out all of the whispers.” They worked in silence. “Did she give you the book?”

“No. Actually, a young boy did. She had two boys with her. Last… I met her yesterday, too.” Kili’s hands shook slightly. He looked at the broken flowers before him and picked new ones. “Same boy, but that time, she held a toddler in her arms.”

Thorin’s head shot up. His eyes bore into him. “A toddler?”
Kili nodded miserably. “Yes, about… I think about three years old? I mean, that could – that could mean anything, that doesn’t…."

“A little girl with black hair and blue eyes, maybe?”

“Yes! How’d – is she really…? Did Lily say something? I thought she might have been the boy’s sister, but if, if Tauriel did… did find someone, I mean…."

Thorin sighed. He, unlike Kili, gave up on his crown entirely. “No, Kili. I don’t think Tauriel has met another.”

Kili looked up. Thorin looked… sad. Sadder than… did his uncle ever look sad? Angry, yes. Displeased, annoyed, furious, grumpy… but sad? Was ‘sad’ the right word?

“The child you saw in her arms was Lily’s child.”

Kili blinked, still confused. Did Lily find another? He would have expected his uncle to have a fit.

“My daughter.”

Huh. Well… Wait, what?

Thorin decided to wait a day.

He and Kili spent it tearing nearly every flower in their path in their attempt to perfect their flower weaving skills. In fact, Bofur looked a bit worried by their abuse of the local fauna, but let it be known – ‘surrender’ was not a term a Durin was familiar with.

The next day, Thorin charged into the village. It was eight in the morning, and his body was buzzing with yesterday’s unspent energy. Later today he should challenge Dwalin to a throwing match. Mahal knows that sitting idly was not something his old friend could stomach. Nor could he, for that matter.

Thorin knocked on the round, green door and waited. He wasn’t sure how to feel about it – he could never predict was lay on the other side.

A short and stout woman, apparently. The very same one from two days ago. Was it too much to hope for Lily to open the door and greet him?

This time, the woman did not scowl at him; rather, her eyes widened as they roamed over his body in utter disbelief that bordered on inappropriate, he sensed.

Thorin frowned at her.

The woman sighed in visible relief. “Wait here,” she ordered and closed the door in his face.

Thorin wondered if enlightening her to his status as a duke and leader of the Dwarven Bond would improve her treatment of him. It was a tantalizing possibility; however, he wasn’t sure Lily would take kindly to him misusing his birthright like that. It also meant revealing the fact that the leader of the Dwarven Bond was thus humbled by a woman, which wasn’t exactly illegal but certainly was embarrassing.

In fact, some of his Bond might take it as a personal insult, and a grave one at that.
Better to stay anonymous, then.

The door opened. The same woman, looking slightly discomfited. “Ma’am is sleeping. Come back in an hour,” she muttered, hesitated, then closed the door.

Thorin scowled. He was quite certain the woman lied to him, but decided it would not benefit him to point that out. The woman had an honest face and did not hide her intentions. What was Lily’s game?

Thorin sat on the bench next to the door and waited.

Was Lily’s intention to make a fool out of him? Was it someone else’s?

Thorin wondered if the woman would share information were he to knock on the door again. He considered it, yet did not move. Every once in a while, he got the distinct notion someone was watching him. Was it a test? Thorin sat and waited.

When he deemed the sun moved enough, Thorin rose and knocked on the door, again.

The same woman opened the door to a slit, looking more annoyed than before. “Ma’am’s still asleep,” she muttered, then quickly shut the door.

His blood simmered. Thorin returned to his sit rigidly and resumed his watch. No; wait. He was waiting.

There won’t be a third time. The next time he knocked on the door and was told Lily was sleeping, he’d force it open and wake her up himself. Not that she, in all likelihood, needed to be awakened. He could handle refusal, but toying with him was unacceptable.

He felt the pen in his pocket, wrapped up in thick fur and boiled leather.

He had no hope she’d accept it this time, like he had no hope she’d consider him in any of their previous meetings. Still, he carried the pen for the sliver of a chance Lily would be willing to open her heart to him once more.

At least it was easier to pass the time with Kili’s book at hand. Flower language was an odd knowledge for a duke to have, perhaps, but at least he was not going to proclaim his own demise a second time. Next time, he’d give her a red chrysanthemum or a forget-me-not, or tulips – but not yellow ones – did any of them bloom in the summer? He was quite certain neither he nor Kili encountered any in their quest to outdo each other’s crowns.

He rose instinctively when the door opened, then blinked in disappointment when the man on the other side of the door looked just as startled to see him.

“Hello,” the man offered with a nod of his head, then smiled kindly. “You are Thorin, I gather?”

“Aye,” Thorin answered stiffly. Who was the man? He had no memory of him.

“Looking lively, too,” the man noted as his smile widened. “I’m Drogo Baggins,” he offered his hand for a shake. “You met my wife, Primula. She thought you were going to die at midnight or something.”

“Die?” Thorin frowned. He shook Drogo’s hand.

Drogo waved idly. “Just an old superstition. Like, don’t eat before you sail, or never laugh at live
dragons, yes?” He looked mildly surprised. “And here’s me talking! Come inside, why don’t you? Can’t let a guest wait by the door, can we? Ruin our reputation, eh?” He opened the door and waved him inside. “Dear me, you haven’t been waiting long, I hope? Should’ve knocked, eh? Or did you? Would you like something to drink? Or eat, maybe? It’s past second breakfast, ’m afraid, but we do have a seed cake somewhere.” He looked around, as if expecting it to materialize, then smiled at Thorin apologetically. “Pardon, I’m not allowed in the kitchen often. Missus says I bring dirt everywhere I go. Sit, why don’t you? I’ll go find Prim. Is that my book?”

Thorin looked down at the book he was carrying. “It is… possible.” He offered the book back.

“Looks like my copy.” Drogo smiled still. “Oh, you can borrow it, it’s all right! Always glad to meet another with a passion for flowers, eh? Must say, didn’t take you for one. But – “

“Drogo Baggins!”

The man winced slightly when the short, stout woman from before – Primula, if Thorin understood correctly – stormed in and pulled him aside. “What on earth are you doing?” she hissed.

“Nothing! I just saw him outside, and I was thinkin’ –“

“You were supposed to go to the market!”

“Right. I will, I will.” He raised his hands as if to calm his wife. “I just didn’t think it proper, leaving the poor man to wait like that?”

Thorin wondered if he should inform them he can hear them.

“That is not your decision to make!”

“Well, he’s already here. What’s the harm in that? Seems like a nice fellow.”

“That’s not what you said four years ago!”

“… We met before?”

“Yes! He was the leader of the gang that ate our entire pantry!”

There was a beat of silence. “I don’t think we actually met, though… wait, Prim, listen, he’s here, and that’s where it stands. Can you get him some food?”

“Food?!”

“Well, he waited in the sun who knows how long. Can’t have him think we’re bad hosts. You know what they say about bad hosts…?”

“I thought you didn’t believe in ‘old wives’ tale’ Like you said yesterday? Foolish superstitions?” He shrugged. “Can’t be too careful, eh?”

Primula turned to glance at Thorin, then turned bright red when she saw he was already looking at them, brow cocked at their words. “Fine. But don’t forget to go to the market! I need fresh fruits and vegetables before lunch time!”

“Will do,” Drogo reassured her. He sighed and returned to the living room, once again waving Thorin to sit. He joined him with an apologetic smile. “Sorry about that. It’s been hectic, the past few days.”
Thorin waited with a glower, but the man did not elaborate. What was he insinuating?

“Didn’t take you for a fellow gardener, I must say,” he added, “if anything, I’d guess you’re a hunter.” He mimicked the pulling and releasing of a bow.

Thorin frowned. “I am not a gardener.”

“Oh.” The man deflated, disappointed. “Well. I just thought, because of the book? Gardening takes time. It’s a lot about giving, you know, giving to receive? Lots of waiting and attending to your plants, if you want them to bloom. Maybe that’s why I didn’t take you for one, eh?”

Thorin scowled to hide the surprise invoked by the man’s words. “How long… should a gardener wait?”

Drogo’s eyes lit up. “Well, that depends on the flower. Also, you need to make sure you give in enough sunlight and water, and all that. Give too much or too little and the flower would wither. Do it just right, however, and you’ll see the results.” Drogo smiled and demonstrated the growth of a flower with his hand. “First just a shoot of green, then the first leaf – the most beautiful leaf, if you ask me, then it grows and grows, and you know it’s because of the love you showed it that it is able to bloom so beautifully and love you back.”

Primula returned, carrying a tray. She brought a seed cake, a honey cake, and a fruit cake, as well as a bottle of wine, a kettle of tea, and a bottle filled with freshly squeezed orange juice. She added a plate of cookies, glared at her husband, and left.

Drogo chuckled. “That’s her way of apologizing. Eat up! You must have waited for quite a while.”

Drogo shook his head. “This is not our way.”

Thorin moved to cut a slice of the honey cake when Drogo jumped from his seat, took the knife, and cut a generous slice for him. He also poured him a glass of wine and looked mildly apologetic for not doing so in the first place.

Thorin accepted his services with a gracious nod. “A hunter also waits,” he noted.

Drogo looked lost for a moment, then tried to answer. “Well, yes, but it’s a different kind, I think, no? A gardener forms a relationship. His waiting is a way of giving; a hunter’s waiting is his way of taking. Thus, a hunter’s reason for waiting dies, while a gardener’s blooms.” He thought for a moment, then appeared pleased with his explanation.

Thorin’s hand tightened around his fork. “I see,” he muttered. “Then if I am a hunter, wishing to become a gardener… what would you have me do?”

Drogo looked oddly puzzled. “I… well. What would you like to grow?”

“Lilies.”

“Oh, well, I suppose… firstly, you need some bulbs. To plant. Wait till autumn, then plant. Preferably in an area where they can be cold during their dormant period, in a place where they can get rain, but not too much. Where the soil dries quickly. Also, lots of sun. Sun is important. Then, you need to loosen the soil… about twelve to fifteen inches, say? Don’t forget to enrich it, too. Animal feces will do, I think. Then…”

Thorin frowned.

“Would you like me to write it down? Get you a bulb? Maybe an easier plant to start with? I can –
Thorin raised his hand. “Don’t tell me you actually gave me gardening advice,” he said, exasperated.

Drogo’s confusion left him speechless for a moment. “Err… yes? You asked about lilies and waiting…?” He glanced around, possibly looking for his wife. “What did you think we were talking about?”

Thorin pinched the bridge of his nose in annoyance. He might have known.

The sound of fabric rustling made him turn his head and meet Lily’s eyes. The relief he felt at the sight of her was quickly replaced by anger when back gazed calculated distaste.

“Thorin,” she greeted. “You rose early today, did you do not? Do forgive me. I made you wait.”

He glowered at her words. He should have known. He bit back his response, however. He promised he’d wait, and if that was her way of testing her resolve, so be it. An hour or so in the sun won’t be the thing to break him.

“Yes,” he said instead. Too blunt – she could read through that. He turned to face the baffled gardener. “Your wife is an excellent cook.”

“I… I will tell her! Thank you for, er… yes.” Drogo glanced at Lily, whose scowl nearly matched Thorin’s.

“Drogo, you are to go to the market today, are you not?”

“Yes, err, now, I think?” He rose absentmindedly. “Is there anything you’d like, Miss, I mean, Ma’am?”

“Not at the moment, no. Would you mind taking Tauriel and Dori with you? I do believe they’d appreciate a change of scenery.”

Thorin glowered at the woman, whose hand twitched but other than that – ignored him entirely.


Lily nodded and her eyes followed Drogo as he left.

Thorin knew her well enough to know she was preparing herself for a battle with him.

He poured another glass of wine. “Join me?” he invited, voice still too sharp for his liking.

Lily finally turned to look at him. Her face was adorned by that immaculate mask he despised. She cocked a brow. “You invite me to sit in my own house?”

“Common courtesy,” he reminded her. Lily, as he expected, did not take that comment well. But nor did he, her treatment of him. “Join me,” he repeated.

Lily moved, as if to obey, then paused, frowning. Upon realizing her mistake, she pursed her lips and complete the task. She ignored the glass of wine he placed in front of her.

“You wish to prevent me from seeing my daughter?”
Lily’s head twisted to look at him at his wording. Her eyes betrayed a moment of vulnerability before she turned away from him, again. “Last time, you asked to spend time with me, did you not? Should my daughter be the reason for your visit, you may join her at the market. Or on her way there. Drogo did just leave, after all.”

He shook his head, eyes still containing the anger he was trying to subdue. “It is you I came to see. Yet it seems my efforts, to you, are trivial.”

“Am I supposed to be impressed? I did not ask for you to come.”

“I would have thought this was enough to warrant me a chance.”

“This is your chance. You waste it lecturing.”

Thorin paused, confusion and hope chasing away the bubbling anger. “Chance?” he coughed.

Lily stiffened. “You said you’d ask for my forgiveness,” she muttered. Her hands once again moved to hug her chest. Gloves, he suddenly noted. It was summer and yet she wore gloves.

*Also, lots of sun. Sun is important.* “Are you cold?” he asked. His voice sounded too hoarse for his liking.

Lily frowned, her face betraying her own confusion and hesitance as the mask dropped from her face like melting ice. “It is summer,” she mumbled.

“Would you rather we sit in the garden?” he suggested.

“I would rather you state your business.” She looked away and ignored his outreached hand. “When are you leaving?” She tried, and failed, to sound nonchalant.

“In two months’ time.”

Lily did not seem surprised. “That is… a very long time.”

“Aye. Fili rules in my stead, for now.”

Lily still looked away. “Oh? And is he… accepted?”

“I do not know. Dis and Balin are there to guide him.”

Lily nodded.

“I did not come here for any reasons which are political, Lily.”

She picked up her glass and took a small sip, buying herself time. “So you said.”

Thorin caught the small tremor that tore the rigid posture. He rose, startling her, and offered her his hand. “Show me the garden,” he asked. Commanded.

Lily rose slowly. She ignored his hand. “As His Grace wishes,” she said coolly, then turned her back to him. “Shall I curtsy, as well?”

“I told you not to call me that,” he hissed.

“You treat me like a subject.”
“You are shaking.” He grabbed her arm, surprised to find that the limb was warm. “At least deny me the sight of you shivering when I have no coat to give you.”

Lily recoiled from his touch. She looked away, eyes darting, then led him outside.

The garden was small but lovely. He could see flowers – which ones were the romantic ones? They all fled his memory – red and pink and orange, dancing in the wind. Lily still stood with her back to him. She stood where he saw her first, after all these years, hiding in the shade of an old oak tree.

“I am sorry.”

Lily huffed. It may have been a laugh. She turned to face him. “Yes.” Her voice was bitter. “You keep saying that.” She waved her hand when he opened his mouth to protest. “I would have had to return to my father either way. He would have threatened you with war, otherwise. The… resulting alliance was the best possible outcome.”

“You cannot mean that!”

“No? Why ever not? Nori told me the alliance between Mirkwood and Erebor is stronger than ever, that he even received Elven customers, that – “

“None of these excuses what I had done.”

“It was for the best. Had my father known – “

“You father knows, Lily. He gave me this upon discovering,” he snarled, pointing to the scar at the base of his neck. “He called me your defiler.”

Lily’s lips parted as she ran to him, her mask and pride gone. Her fingers ghosted over the uneven, too smooth skin, eyes wide and – and the moment was gone. She tore her hovering digits and her body from him and looked away.

“I… I did not tell him. I never revealed your identity,” she stammered, guilty eyes once again glued to the scar, “I told him you promised me marriage, but I have not….” Her eyes followed the movement of his hand as he cupped her cheek, but she did not shy from his touch.

“But… Lily, I did marry you.”

Her eyes glanced up just for a split second.

The realization tore through him. “You… but I told you, of our tradi – of mithril, I… I thought – I was certain you knew.”

Lily’s face contorted in his hand. His pain must have been too much for her. “I… yes, you did, but I did not realize, Thorin –“ She gasped when his hand left her face, then fell quiet.

Thorin took a step back, looking away. “I thought you accepted me,” he muttered, “loved me.”

But she did not. She did not marry him. What he meant – he could have been anything to her, even nothing. He could mean nothing to her now. She said so, didn’t she? Three years was a long time.

She did not know.

He took the pen out of his pocket, glaring at the pack of bound leather. “I came to court you. I thought that if… if you accepted me once, you might do it again. If you loved me –” He released the pen, dropped it on the grass. “It matters not. I shall not be a burden to you. Good day.” He
turned abruptly.

He could not endure the sight of her.

“Thorin –“

“And if you see Tauriel, do tell her Kili is serious about her. He loves her. He –“ Thorin’s voice died.

He marched out of the house.

Oh, what a fool, what an utter fool he had been. A laughing stock. A pathetic, idiotic fool. He crossed the mountains for nothing. He spent days laboring in the forges for nothing. A fool, holding on to a promise never honored. A fool. How naive was he, to think a woman like that could ever love a man like him?

Tauriel handed Primula the baskets laden with vegetables and fruits, once again annoyed at the ease with which the woman grabbed the handles and then picked at each purchase, mistrusting both Tauriel’s and Drogo’s eyes to be sharp enough. She scrutinized the produce in her search for defects as Tauriel stood by, awaiting her judgment and flexing her sore muscles.

She really had neglected her training.

“This will do,” Primula grumbled. “Frodo! Cease your reading and watch over Dori. And I do mean watch!”

Frodo sighed, aggravated, as he rose from his spot by the window and took Dori’s hand. If Tauriel interpreted the rebellious look correctly, he most likely planned to continue his reading is a spot hidden from his mother’s watchful eye. Dori, of course, was still brimming with energy and full of stories she babbled energetically to the elder boy, oblivious to his lack of interest. Hopefully, however, the garden and Frodo’s sporadic humming would keep the toddler busy.

Tauriel left the room and searched for her lady. Drogo was a kind, hearty man, but not a very practical one. If Ningalor were in danger, he wasn’t very likely to notice. And though she trusted her lady enough to know she’d alert her had any problems did occur… she had to make sure.

Tauriel knocked on the study and waited until permitted entry. She kept the door open to allow for a breath of fresh air enter the stuffy room. “M – Lily, are you well?” She nearly slipped.

Her lady sat next to her desk and appeared to be writing. She looked up. “Tauriel. How was the market?”

“Same as usual,” she hesitated, then decided to limit her report to Dori related matters only. “Dori enjoyed the walk. She asked Drogo a lot of questions about flowers and their meanings, and she and Frodo played with the other Shire-folk children quite nicely. She also inquired quite a bit about the people and their relation to each other.”

Ningalor frowned. “Did she now?”

Tauriel faltered. “Well, I… it is my understanding that well-bred ladies should be interested in this sort of thing, no?”

Ningalor opened her mouth, then closed it. She nodded. “Did she ask about Thorin?”
“She did, m – Lily.”

“And what did you say?”

“Merely that we are on a mission to buy fruits and vegetables, nothing more.”

Her lady chuckled. “A mission, indeed.”

“Lily, are you…?” Tauriel paused, unsure how to phrase her inquiry.

Ningalor looked up and cocked her brow. “Well and alive, I’m afraid.” Her lips quirked in a short-lived smile when Tauriel appeared ready to protest. “Do join me, please?”

Tauriel approached the armchair with caution. She sat gracefully on the edge of the cushion, back ramrod straight, and awaited her lady’s judgment.

“This… this whole, unexpected visit brings up memories from another time, of another, unexpected journey. I remember the day they first knocked on Bag End’s door. Dwalin, Balin, Kili….”

Tauriel made sure to not move a muscle.

“I never asked you – it was you who kept visiting the men when they were captured in my father’s dukedom, wasn’t it? Why?”

“It… it was my duty.”

“An odd duty to give to the captain of the guards, surely?”

“What does my lady imply?” Tauriel kept her tone respectful. She also kept her fists hidden from sight.

The lady looked away, reminiscing. “I did enjoy some of the travel with them, I must confess. Bofur and Bombur were ever so kind, and Fili and Kili – a constant source of optimism and amusement. Especially Kili. A kind, passionate boy, loyal to the core. Eager to please, but just as stubborn in his defense of his ideals.” Her lady paused. She waited.

Tauriel swallowed. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because Kili is a good boy – a man now, in truth – and I do not wish him harm or pain. I was told he cares for you.” The lady paused, waiting once more.

Tauriel did not find it in her to reply.

“It was Kili, wasn’t it? The reason for your delay.” She did not wait for a verbal answer. “Tauriel – “

The guard rose. “Am I dismissed?” She managed to keep her voice free of tremors.

Ningalor’s eyes were sympathetic. “I am not your lady, Tauriel. You may do as you like.”

Tauriel did not move. Fleeing was not a term she was familiar with. She slowly slid back to the armchair, looked down at her hands, slowed her breaths and released the tension crippling her by flexing her fingers, one by one. “Why are you telling me this?” she repeated.

“It… it is possible I have made a mistake,” Ningalor admitted. “It is just as possible for me to
correct it, should it really be something I wish to put right. Perhaps, for me, things are as they should be. I do have a child, after all. You don’t.”

“I shall not leave your side.”

Ningalor returned her eyes to the letter she was working on. She picked up a strange glass stick, of sorts, filled with black liquid. “I have not asked you to come, and I shall not force you to stay.”

Tauriel swallowed. “Am I so meaningless in your eyes, you choose to cast me away in this manner?”

“Yes, I shall not force you to stay.” She paused. “Of course not! I merely refuse to tie you down, should you be interested in leaving.” She paused. “Duty has its place, and so do loyalty and sacrifice, but… I shall not deny you your happiness, Tauriel.”

Tauriel looked away. “Isn’t it a bit presumptuous, my lady?” she mumbled.

“I do not believe so. Perhaps it is an ornament?”

Tauriel’s frown deepened. She suddenly remembered Kili, holding a small medallion and looking at her with eyes full of hope… “Is this the mistake you hope to correct?”

“In a way. I need to choose if to accept this.” Ningalor glanced up, but Tauriel did not answer. The choice implied was not one she wanted to face.

Perhaps her lady was right. Perhaps the only thing that prevented her from making a decision was her own cowardice. Hiding behind excuses and refusing to choose…

Tauriel left the room. With the same slow and undetermined steps, she strolled toward the main door. She exited the house, then down the path and out through the front gate – she wandered out of the village, out of Hobbiton, and into the woods.

Finding Kili’s camp was easy. All she had to do, now, was leave a flower.

It had been two days since her talk with Tauriel, but Lily rejected the worry that tried to worm under her skin. It was not the first time Tauriel had taken some time for herself, and the woman was more than capable of handling farms and forests on her own.

Tauriel will be fine. As she assured Dori again and again, the woman will return, safe and sound.

If she did not see or hear from her in five days’ time, she would alert the rangers.

Lily folded the letter she had written and rewritten those past two days, picked up the strange glass and metal rod, and placed both carefully in a small satchel. It belonged to the original owner of Bag End, but she was certain he would not mind if she were to borrow it. Perhaps even took it for granted, since he leased his estate to an Istar for an undetermined period of time. And Istari were
known to be quite greedy when they found a place they decided to call their own.

After she promised – twice, and fled before she’d required to do so a third time – that no, she wasn’t going to disappear as well, Lily left Bag End and strolled toward the Green Dragon.

She breathed in deep the scent of the blooming flowers and admired the flower wreaths that already decorated some of the houses and the fences in her path. The buzzing of the bees and the buzzing of excitement tinged the atmosphere with Lithe-appropriate festivity. A bit more than a week, now. She should join Prim and help her decorate – Bag End looked positively bare compared with all the other blooming cottages around her.

She reached the inn and marched toward the owner – a portly man with a large, red nose and surprisingly sharp eyes – and smiled pleasantly when the man noticed her.

“Mister Bolger,” she addressed.

The round eyes narrowed slightly and the natural, welcoming smile became forced. “Ah, the Istar’s ward,” he greeted. “What can I do for you?”

Lily cocked a brow at that, but kept her retort to herself. The man knew her name, that was certain, yet chose to treat her as a stranger. “I was hoping you could pass a message from me to one of your guests,” she answered, still cordial.

“Our guests? Didn’t know you were chummy with the Sandyman family.”

“No.” Was he trying to rile her up on purpose? “I refer to members of the Dwarven Bo-

The man, very rudely, silenced her. “Shh! Don’t mention their name! We don’t house that kind here.” He scowled. “You and your… unsavory acquaintances can do as you like, but not here.”

Lily stared. The abrasive tone and sharp mistreatment stood in stark contrast to the once hospitable atmosphere she once associated with the inn.

The man’s exasperated expression was softened by the apologetic tone. “Bad for business, Ma’am. A sniff of rumors from the east, and you know travelers and how picky some are. Best to keep your nose out of trouble and no trouble will come to you, as they say.”

Lily pursed her lips against the onslaught of indignation that simmered within her, tilted her head politely, and asked, “Do you know where I might find them?” Keep out of trouble, indeed! He sent a duke, a duke, to sleep on the woods!

“The direction of Green Hills, I heard.” The man leaned a bit closer, as if participating in a conspiracy. “And do make them leave before the Lithe! Can’t have their kind ruining our celebration.”

Lily had long decided to not let his kind ruin her mood. Green Hills were farther than she had expected, but not as distant as Bree. She considered her luck and her letter, then decided that if she had walked this far, she shall walk some more.

She offered a sharp, mirthless smile to the inn owner, who frowned in return, and left the inn. Gods forbid, should Hobbits welcome a stranger in their lands!

She had not seen Thorin ever since he stormed out of Bag End. Ever since she had failed to form the right words that would undo the misunderstanding. Ever since she hurt him.
It took her two days, but still, she did not feel she found the correct words. They will have to do, however. That is, if Thorin had not already left.

The sudden thought made her quicken her pace.

But surely, arriving out of breath and sweaty would not do, either. She slowed down.

But if they are already gone, that would not matter. Better to discover it soon so she could return in time for dinner, and goodness knows how far they may have camped? Better to just be done with it.

If she raced, however, she would not have time to think everything through. She should take her time and arrive composed and prepared.

But if she would miss them, even by a minute? And besides, she had traveled with Thorin. He had seen her covered in mud, sweat, blood, *horse intestines*…

That was years ago. This isn’t the wild. She should not act in a manner befitting a maiden. She is a Madam, and she should walk as one.

Was time of essence or was her appearance? Which should matter more?

“Looking for something, lass?”

Lily, startled, turned to face the voice with a racing heart.

A man, not even hidden by the greenery and dressed in dark blue garb, rose in greeting. “Can’t let you go further, lass. You’ll have to go ‘round.”

How she missed him was beyond her. At least Thorin did not camp that far from the village; her legs were beginning to ache from walking in a constant changing pace. “Thorin’s camp, I presume?”

The guard’s eyes darkened. “That’s ‘His Grace’ to you, lass. State your business and leave.”

Lily frowned at her own mistake. She was too used to the begrudged, accommodating treatment she received from the Company. The guard could, however, solve some of her problems. “I have a letter to pass to His Grace, if you’d be so kind?” She fished it out. “If you could only tell me your name, so I could be sure no foul play is at hand?”

The guard’s outreached hand turned into a fist. “Don’t go accusing me, lass! Give me your name first, so I know your intentions are honest, then I shall give you mine.”

“How the hell did you miss me?” A man emerged. His hair was done in two, crooked braids and covered in a beaten, weather-stained hat, but his eyes shone when they spotted her. “Maha! It’s Lily! Dear me, Lily!” He rushed and embraced her, eyes glancing over her figure. “You look the same as ever. Can’t say the same for me. I think I added a stone or two to my weight. Blame Bombur, really, now that he has the time all he does is cooking. You remember me? And Bombur?”

Lily couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped her lips. “Of course I do, Bofur. It is great to see you.”

The man brimmed with pride. “You think so? Oh, I knew you’d remember us! But we didn’t want to interfere… well, come in! I know at least one broody Dwarf who’d love to see you, too!” He turned to address the baffled guard. “This is Lily, she was the fourteenth member of the Company.” He returned his excited eyes to her and frowned when the smile that graced her lips
before faded from her features. “Come now, lass. It will be all right.”

Lily’s smile tried and failed to imitate the joy she felt not a moment before. She took a small step back. “I came to deliver a letter.”

“And if I know the recipient, he’d come right after ya without a glance at your penmanship. Come on. Bombur will be mighty disappointed.” Bofur refused to give up. “Any chance you brought that mystery lass with you?”

Lily wasn’t sure what he had meant, but she had a guess. She shook her head.


And Lily came.

She followed the happily chattering Bofur to their makeshift camp, watched the guards rise in suspicious greeting, and nodded to Dwalin, who, very unceremoniously, dropped his axe, and to Kili, who, like Bofur, began searching immediately for someone behind her.

Bombur, after a short struggle, rose to his feet and beamed. “Lily!” he boomed. “Why, you haven’t changed at all!”

Lily managed to smile more easily as she clasped his hand. “I’ve heard much about your improved cooking.”

“Saw much, you mean. There’s two of me, now.” Bombur patted his stomach affectionately.

“Well, you know firsthand.”

“First mouth, you mean,” Bofur chimed in.

Bombur chuckled, then pondered the topic. “Actually, you only had a taste of my ‘on the road’ feasts, didn’t you? That doesn’t count.”

“Still only on the road, though.”

Bombur puffed his wide chest. “I’m expanding my culinary knowledge by tasting other cultures’ food.”

“Just don’t start adding Elvish recipes….”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Bombur huffed, then turned to face her. “Sorry, no harm meant, they are just too….”

“Too green – “

“And tasteless – “

“And they ain’t got no meat in ‘em,” barked Dwalin, scowling. He nodded gruffly in her direction. “You coming with us?”

Well, it was a welcoming remark, of sorts. “I… I came to deliver a letter.”

Dwalin’s scowl deepened. “He’s right there,” he pointed to a large tent, clearly failing to see the need for said letter.

Lily faltered. Somehow, delivering the paper and leaving promptly afterward felt wrong. Too cold
a deed for this too warm a company.

Behind her, someone cleared his throat. “To whom… to whom is it addressed?” Kili asked.

Lily turned to face the man – oh, he had grown so much taller – and her face softened at the sight of the hesitant, earnest expression. “I spoke with Tauriel,” she said instead, watching the shoulders deflate. “I spoke highly of you and your character. Surely you know that?”

Kili’s ears reddened as he looked away. “Yes, of course, I never, I mean….”

Lily sighed. Kili’s easily read demeanor shed some light on Thorin’s closed off one. “You both appeared out of nowhere, without warning. Tauriel needs some time to think, Kili.”

“And you had your time?” asked Bofur.

“I…”

“Lily?”

Lily closed her eyes, just for a brief second, and prepared herself for the sight that would soon appear before them. Well, no use for the letter now. She turned around.

Thorin stood before her, confusion and hope battling in his eyes. His lips parted and his expression softened and his eyes were too gentle, flickering with uncertainty. Oh, Thorin.

She took a deep breath yet did not trust her voice to carry over unblemished by stain. She walked to him, heart racing at the subtle widening of his eyes, and signaled for him to follow her by tilting her head to the side. She kept walking, her back to the camp, and was only slightly relieved to hear Thorin marching after her.

“They won’t hear us from here,” Thorin muttered, oh, too close –

And Lily turned, again, to face him. His territory now, in truth. She felt uncertain. “I…” she tried, stopped, looked up. “I hope it’s a good time.”

Thorin frowned.

Keep going. Her fingers fumbled with the handles of the satchel. “I thought it might be a good idea for us to discuss our… expectations.”

Thorin loomed nearer. “Expectations,” he repeated.

Lily took a small step back. “Yes.” She paused. Thorin was wary around her. It pained her to think of the cause. “I would also like to clarify a few things.” Be brave. “While I… truly, I had no knowledge of our, of the marriage, I… do not regret what happened that night. Or any other night before it.” She swallowed her shortened breath, waiting for Thorin to respond. She forced herself to look up into his eyes and acknowledge the newly revealed tenderness. Maybe respond in kind.

“So you accept me?” He was immediately at her side, hands, holding, hugging her waist.

He wasn’t making it easy for her. “I accepted you then. Knowingly or not, I did so willingly and without regret,” she said carefully. “Now, however, there are other factors involved. Which is why we need to talk,” she hurried to add, quickly before the fire dies, “I am not saying I’m rejecting you, Thorin, only that it isn’t a decision I can make lightly. We need to set expectations and – “

“So you care for me?”
Lily looked up, torn, into the ever-storming eyes of the man who was holding her up in the same way he was undoing her.

“I need you to give me something, Lily. I cannot keep losing you. I can wait. I will wait. Every year I will come here, to see you, to hold you, to… in hopes you will, one day, choose to come with me. But I need something, Lily. I need to know if… if I mean anything at all to you.”

“Thorin,” she breathed his name. She had to say his name. Her hand rose to stroke his beard, his cheek, fingers tracing forgotten paths they once knew so intimately. Oh, if only she could touch him. “Thorin, if I did not have a daughter to care for, I would have left with you. I would.”

Thorin’s eyes narrowed, almost in vexation. Was he annoyed? Defensively, she shot back, “Love isn’t a good enough reason to abandon all responsibility, Thorin.”

Thorin exhaled weakly, still holding her waist, fingers digging into the soft flesh, as if he feared she’d turn into a ghost from his dreams were he to release her. “You love me?” he whispered.

“Thorin….” Oh, his name. His name. She never thought she’d have a reason to say it again. “I would not have done any of the things I did otherwise, for any man but you.”

His tone hardened. “But your love isn’t enough to sustain you over the mountains?”

“Is yours? I haven’t asked you to leave your dukedom for me, yet you ask – “

“This comparison is unfair! You weigh a child against a nation – “

“This child is my world, Thorin!”

“And have I no part in it? You are the center of mine, yet you are determined to keep me torn!”

“You are asking me to take my daughter on a dangerous journey to a place where we might not be welcomed, where she may grow up unloved, or insecure, to court, Thorin!”

“She will not be unprotected and neither will you. I am here for you. For both of you.”

“Like you were after you attempted to skewer me?”

His hands released her at her words, as if burned.

She did not free him. “I need to know. I need to know if, should you rage once more, if you pose any danger to us. I am not saying my lies were justified, but I need to know. I cannot decide after a week, Thorin. I cannot decide – I will not decide after so short a time. And… and you may, maybe you’d decide that what you felt for me once isn’t as strong as it was – “

“Do not do me the dishonor of doubting my devotion.”

“I never doubted you, Thorin. Nor do I now. Precaution, however, will… will give me a peace of mind.”

She removed her hand.

Thorin sighed. “I said I’d wait, and yet I rush.” He took her hand in his. “A month and a half to decide. Would that be enough?” he whispered against her knuckles.

“It would,” she breathed.
Thorin kissed her hand.

His beard grazed the glove as his lips touched the soft fabric. Her body tinged with memory of how his lips felt like, caressing her skin. He looked up – what he sought, she did not know – but then he took a step closer, and a hand on her cheek stroked her features and tilted her head –

Lily took a step back, freeing herself from his touch. His eyes were too much for her. She looked away.

“I also, I also came to give you this.” She steadied her breath rummaging through the satchel. Really, she would have fished it out sooner had her hands shook less. “This.” She took out the small leather package.

Thorin’s uncertain eyes turned pained once more. “Lily, this is a sign of rejection.”

“How can I reject something that wasn’t given?” she objected. “You said there were… seven gifts?”

Thorin accepted the package. He opened it with ease and drew out the odd piece of metal and glass. “Yes. Each metal represents a part of the vow we share, the vow of marriage. This pen’s ink is infused with lead. It is my promise I’d share all of your burdens, and you, mine.”

Lily’s eyes widened. “This is a pen? I thought this was a glass rod, or… an ornament.”

“Here.” Thorin unscrewed the gilded cap, revealing the familiar, pointed nib. “It writes just like a regular pen, but it does not require an inkwell. It’s less… less messy. The traditional gift is a medallion with the crest of the family, but I thought that… more than a name to protect you, you’d need a tool to speak your mind as you see fit.”

Her eyes snapped up to look at him. The meaning of his gift echoed within her. “Thorin….”

“An equal, Lily. Share your burdens with me, and I’ll share mine with you.”

She should think this through. She should stop, consider the options, weigh the implications, she… she should have never looked into his eyes. One look into the endless storm of hope and love and regret that echoed within her, one glance into the promise of safe shores where she could throw her anchor and stay, one flicker of her eyes to lock with his, those blue eyes she never thought she’d ever see again… the eyes that looked up at her from her daughter’s face now glanced at her from above. She was lost and saved at the same time, caged and freed in his eyes. She was not living, but alive.

She opened her palm and presented her hand to him, fingers reaching, dreaming of touching the man before her.

Thorin placed the pen in her willing hand and watched as her gloved fingers closed around the gift. His fingers then caressed hers and engulfed her hand.

Her fingers tangled with his, seeking his touch, longing for it, yearning. A soft sigh escaped her lips when his hand returned the touch, the same need evident in his digits, in the warmth of his skin, in the gentleness of his touch, in the strength of his hold.

“I accept,” she whispered.

Thorin smiled. His lips curved in that uneven, genuine gesture that eased the harsh features of his face and brought light to his eyes.
Her heart started pounding in her chest, racing to safety, to the cold shores she knew since birth.

“I think I need to go,” she blabbered. “I need to help with the Lithe preparations and Dori’s lessons….”

Thorin nodded. His smile did not fade. “May I walk you back?” His voice echoed within her chest, reminding her of forsaken paths and denied emotions.

She could not deny him anything when he smiled. “Yes,” she exhaled.

Thorin took her satchel from her, then took her hand in his. His fingers were warm. They enveloped her hand, caressing her knuckles and burning her through the soft cloth. Her hand molded to accept the touch as her fingers reacquainted themselves with his coarse skin, yet ever gentle hold.

Thorin led her back to the camp and to the main road, hand still holding hers, and Lily followed – unsure, uncertain – then, with his hand as her guide, she quickened her pace and walked by his side.

Chapter End Notes

Both couples begin to move in the right direction =)
BTW, if you think it through, Drogo's description of how to grow lilies isn't that different from Lily and Thorin's relationship, except he brought her a pen instead of feces =)
And the Istari comment was a reference to Saruman and his acquisition of Isengard. Just a slight easter egg left for fun.

Hope you like it! I'm still writing the next chapter, so I don't know how long it will take. Meanwhile, you are more than welcome to read my short Bilbo X Thorin fanfiction called The Bookshop.

What'd you think?
As I Loved the Stars

Chapter Summary

When she closes her eyes
And his world seems to stop,
He bows his head to listen
To the tremble of her heart
And his fingers kiss - with wavering patience -
The silence of her lips,
The corners of her smiles.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It started with a flower.

Kili woke up slowly, almost but not quite used to the chirping of the birds combined with the sound of Dwalin’s axe strokes hacking whichever hapless guard he chose to train. Ah, and there was that sun thing, too. Why the Shire needed that much sunlight was beyond him.

The realization that he was waking up – meaning, that he also fell asleep – as well as the new flower resting innocently in his lap, made him groan in frustration. Yet another small, white flower, surrounded by thick, meaty leaves. He failed to catch her, again. And – he looked to his left – yes, she didn’t take the medallion. Great.

Kili stifled a yawn and sat in his bedroll, stretching. He winced and rubbed his sore shoulder. He should also move his bedroll to a more comfortable spot, maybe closer to the middle of the clearing where the rest of the men slept and away from those stupid trees with their silly roots. That, at least, would be productive, he mused, feeling miserable.

The need to do something ached within him, but Kili was almost certain telling anyone about this, especially Dwalin, would be a bad idea. He stared at his wilting collection of small, white flowers and sighed. If only Uncle hadn’t forgotten that plant identifying book…

“Well, I ain’t never seen a flower make anyone this unhappy,” said a cheerful Bofur. “Some ale, maybe?”

Kili dismissed the offer, then grimaced and accepted the mug. He took a long swig. “When you have about… three? Three of those and you don’t know why you have them… I mean, flowers are, well, weird things to – to have, I think, unless you are a gardener, but, they are weird for me to have. I don’t collect flowers. They just… they just came. I think. I don’t…hell.” Kili gave up and took another swig.

Bofur was kind enough not to laugh in his face. “Mystery lass indeed. I say, why not ask her? Chickweed flowers are not the unfriendly sort, after all.” He hummed. “I think they’re a request for a meeting. Are they? I think I remember an old song – whoa there, laddie!”

Kili sprung up to his feet, the medallion clutched in his fist. “Meeting? Where?”
Bofur chuckled breathlessly. “Well, I don’t know – I am not sure if – Kili! Well, there he goes – “

Kili didn’t stay to hear the rest. He had to know – he will go everywhere, where they first and last met, where she lives, where – everywhere. Everywhere.

If he had even one seed of hope, one small, white flower of a chance, he would savor it. He refused to lose her again.

Lily woke up.

She lay in her bed, hand folded underneath the pillow, eyes following the silken curtains, dancing in the wind. Her other hand searched, almost instinctively, for a warm body by her side. But she was alone. How many years now?

The soft sound of childish laughter drew her focus back to the window. Lily rose, feet barely caressing the warm floor, as if afraid to awaken the sleepy room, and her fingers caught the curtains and tangled in the white fabric. She peered through, smiling at the sight of her daughter, running into Tauriel’s arms. Tauriel was back. Her smile softened; she missed her.

The young woman felt her gaze and looked up, smiling.

Lily was relieved to see that bright smile, too rare a sight on the woman’s lovely features. Her smile widened in response, and she released the curtains to their dance so she could dress and braid her hair.

A persistent thought – a quiet musing – had been teasing her mind for the past few days. A notion she could not put to rest and which only intensified when her eyes caught the sight of Thorin’s gift to her. A pen, so lovely she mistook it for an ornament. To share her burdens, and she – his; to freely speak her mind.

Lily diverted her eyes. She had to think. Leaving with Thorin would tear Dori from everything she knows. The child would spend days, if not weeks, crying for her aunt and uncle, and the Shire, and freedom – Lily had no intention to let her wander anywhere without an escort, especially not on the road – and how was she supposed to handle that? Unless… unless she would take her to Thorin’s camp. Unless she introduced her to his men. Unless she, eventually, told her Thorin’s true relation to her.

Lily stood up. She undid the ties of the nightgown and watched as the fabric fell to the floor. She felt the fresh breeze upon her naked skin, relished the sensation, then marched to the closet.

She tired of fear and uncertainty as she tightened the corset. She tired of living in the shadows of
others’ expectations as she wore her dress. She was too young – yes, young – to bury herself in a villager’s life. Lily glanced one last time in the mirror. She donned her gloves.

She would take Dori to meet Thorin’s men. Should she befriend them and feel comfortable in their company, then Lily would have nothing to fear, right?

Lily turned away from the mirror and walked downstairs. Dori was strong, after all. She had the blood of survivors flowing in her veins. She entered the garden, smiling at the delighted, “Mommy!” as she crouched to take her daughter in her arms.

“Good morning, Dori.” She kissed the child’s forehead.

“Tauriel’s back!” the child declared, then giggled. “Look! Tauriel!”

The young woman’s smile almost looked ashamed. “Indeed, I am,” she admitted as she walked closer. “I fear I must apologize – “

“Nonsense.” Lily kissed the child’s forehead one more time, smiled at Dori’s easy laugh, and lowered her back to the grass. “I trust you made your decision?”

“I… yes. I did.” Tauriel paused, looking hesitant. “But I am not so certain anymore.”

Lily frowned. She did not miss the way Tauriel’s eyes followed Dori, as if expecting a disaster at any given moment. “Whatever decision you made, I support it. Dori does not need a bodyguard, Tauriel, especially not a miserable one. Nor I, for that matter.”

Tauriel offered, a shy, almost involuntary smile, which quickly sobered. “Then if I take my leave of you…?”

“I shall give you my blessing, as well as money and supplies for the path you choose, of course.” Lily clasped Tauriel’s hands in hers. “You have been a great friend to me. I wish to support you, not stand in your way.”

Tauriel nodded, holding Lily’s hands. “And have you… have you decided as well?”

Lily’s smile did not weaken. “I am about to. Dori!” she called, then picked up the child in her arms. “Do you want to come to a walk with me?”

“A walk?” The child’s eyes widened in excitement.

“Yes, to meet Mommy’s friends. Would you like to come?”

Dori nodded with all her might, whipping her hair up and down. “Will Thorin be there?”

Lily’s smile softened. “Yes, love, I think he will. Would you like to see him?”

“Yes!” the child shouted. “I want to make him a flower crown. Can I make him a flower crown, Mommy?”

“Of course, you can, sweetheart.”

“Tauriel come too?” Dori asked, focusing her bright eyes on the silent guard.

She hesitated. “Another time, Dori. I… I have a meeting to attend.”

Lily’s eyebrows jumped, lips toying with a knowing smile, but Dori was far less pleased. She
leaned toward Tauriel so she could pull on her sleeve. “But you stay. You stay.”

Tauriel hesitated again, but a small nod from Lily made her smile at the worried child. “I’ll be here when you return, your ladyship.”

Dori was appeased. She pulled on Lily’s dress, asking her every question she could think of – about flowers and Tauriel and Thorin, and told her stories with neither beginning nor end about Frodo and Sam and that good for nothing duo by the name of Merry and Pippin –

*She will be fine,* Lily reminded herself. *She is strong, she is friendly – gods know whom she inherited that from – and she is young, oh so young. She will learn. And gods forgive me – she is meant for so much more than provincial life in the Shire, as perfectly happy and tranquil as those can be.*

Eventually, Dori asked to be allowed to roam free, and she ran from one flower bush to the next, collecting flowers and trimming them with surprisingly precise movements. She kept singing and humming melodies she learned from Prim as she weaved the flower crown, features perfectly poised.

Lily guided her to ensure her path was clear of rocks and roots and other obstacles and tried to ignore her heart roaring in her throat.

Her one and only treasure – not to the slaughter, surely? Her treasure. Let them treat her with the kindness she deserves. Let them accept her. Let – oh, maybe she should have discussed this with Thorin.

This time, Dwalin rose in greeting instead of that young guard – Flói? – she remembered from her former visit. The small bow of his head lost its meaning when his eyes landed on Dori, who immediately ran to hide behind her mother’s legs.

“This here is no place for babies,” Dwalin growled. “If you been playing Thorin, I swear – you should go.”

Lily glowered. “Dwalin –“

“No!” peeped a small voice from behind her legs. “I came to play with Thorin!” Dori declared, then returned to her hiding spot. “You’re mean!”

Dwalin blinked. Twice. Then he shook his head. “Thorin’s too busy for games, lass.”

Lily all but rolled her eyes at him. “Dwalin, surely you understand that –“

“But I made him a flower crown. I did! I want to see Thorin!”

Dwalin glowered at Lily, as if she’s the one to fault for this situation and the stain upon Thorin’s manly reputation. “Right. Give it here, I’ll… pass it along.”

“No!” cried Dori. “I wanna see Thoriiiiinn!”

Lily frowned, then focused her eyes on Dwalin again. Those sounded like real tears. “Dwalin,” she hissed, pleased to see the man take a small step back. “You will grant us entrance, or I swear –“

“Lily?”

Her heart all but tumbled, trembling and fluttering in her chest.
Thorin emerged from the trees, looking at her – *looking at her* – then his eyes noted the small hands clasping her knees and widened with urgent worry that burned Lily’s lips. “Dori?”

The child peeped, sniffling, and ran with all her might straight into Thorin’s arms, wailing the entire way.

Thorin picked her up and cradled her in his arms, whispering soothing words foreign to her ears. “Dori, why are you crying?”

The child looked up, lower lip trembling. She then offered him the flower crown she crushed in her tiny fists. “I made it for-for you,” she stuttered between sobs. “He-he wants to steal it.” She pointed an accusing finger at Dwalin, who looked more bewildered with each passing moment.

Dwalin’s eyes snapped from her, to Thorin, to the child, and all over again, as if failing to comprehend – or rather, accept – the sight before him.

Thorin bowed his head gracefully so Dori, still hiccupping, could crown him with her wreath. Then he turned to glare at Dwalin for his behavior, though Lily discovered – like Dwalin, no doubt – that his glare lost much of his power under the canopy of flowers.

Dwalin did, however, manage to look regretful. “Thorin, is… is that…?”

“Yes,” the man growled, hugging the child in a protective hold.

Dwalin sent another confused look to Lily, who scowled in return. “Of course,” she answered, voice scathing. “I am not the kind to toy with another. I thought you knew that.”

Thorin’s glower intensified.

For the first time in her life, Lily saw Dwalin bowing his head in defeat. “I, well, apologize for my behavior.” He nodded to Dori. “I’m sorry I frightened you, little lady.”

Dori hid her face in Thorin’s chest. Then, upon feeling her father’s soothing fingers in her hair, she looked up and pointed at Dwalin. “Stealing is bad!”

Dwalin frowned. “I wasn’t trying to *steal*,” he muttered defensively, “I didn’t know you’re – “

“My friend. Dwalin is also my friend.” Thorin cut through his words with ease that can only be born of practice, she assumed. What should she think of it? Did he hide Dori’s parentage out of respect for her or out of refusal to acknowledge – no. She should not doubt him. She promised him she would not.

“A very old, and very good friend of mine,” Thorin explained, fingers still stroking Dori’s hair.

Dori shook her head. “I don’t like him. He’s mean and scary.”

Lily stepped closer. She did not know if to welcome Thorin’s soft smile or be wounded by the confusion in his eyes. “Dori, love, remember we came here to meet Thorin’s friends. Do you remember?”

The child nodded reluctantly, then burrowed into Thorin’s chest. “I don’t wanna. I want Thorin.”

Thorin’s eyes searched hers, hope and longing clashing and tearing the calmness of his features.

She felt her cheeks reddening. “If… if we are to… I do not want the new world to be so foreign to her. If… if she accepts the men, then….” Her whispers died with a twitch of Thorin’s lips. It was
almost a smile.


Lily followed, leaving Dwalin to stumble after then in complete confusion. She prayed Bofur and Bombur would know how to show kindness.

“Lily!” the men greeted her, exuberating everything she could have hoped for and more.

Bofur rose, energetic as ever, and hugged her. “My, what a great honor, seeing you again! You just missed Kili – hullo! Who might you be?” Bofur’s eyes all but tripled in size upon seeing Dori, still bundled in Thorin’s arms.

“I’m Doroniel, but everyone calls me Dori,” the child said shyly, no doubt excited to try the introduction Frodo had been trying to teach her the past few days.

Bofur exchanged one quick glance with Thorin and another one with Lily and his eyes lit up. “Dori! Aren’t you a lovely little lady! Bofur’s my name,” he declared with a swooping bow that made Dori giggle.

Bombur, who rose – with difficulty – to see the source of the commotion, smiled with similar delight. “And I’m Bombur! At your service, little lady!” He bowed as well, which elicited yet another giggle from Dori.

The child pushed herself up so she could pull on her mother’s sleeve. “They’re funny!” she exclaimed.

“Oh, very!” Bofur agreed. “Come now, little lady, how’d you like a tune or two? I can play the flute and the violin, all sorts of melodies for your amusement, eh?”

“Hmm, maybe she’s hungry. Are you? I can make you a sandwich. Lots of honey, yeah?”

Dori nodded enthusiastically. “I like honey! Mommy, can I have a ‘sawwich’ with lots of honey?”

Lily smiled, relief pooling deep within her chest. Oh, she began to feel warm again. “Of course, sweetie.”

It took a couple of minutes – and two skillfully played songs – before Dori could be enticed to leave the safety of her father’s arms. Her father was also reluctant to let her go and spent a few more minutes observing the scene, watching his daughter play and cover herself with the sticky golden liquid, before he raised his eyes to look at her.

Lily could watch the both of them together and never tire of it. Dori brought a gentle light to his eyes and soft smile to his lips with ease Lily did not believe was possible. She was afraid to breathe, to shatter the almost youthful expression, and remembered to release the air locked in her lungs only when Thorin looked up at her, and neither the smile nor the light withered.

He walked toward her, took her hand in his, and led her away from the camp, yet stayed within earshot. His hand was so warm, his grip so reassuring. Lily almost wished Dwalin would come to frighten her so she would also have an excuse to hide in Thorin’s arms.

But Dwalin did not come.

Thorin bowed his head slightly, almost too quickly, and pressed a warm and gentle kiss to her
forehead. He lingered just for another moment, perhaps waiting, but for what? Her breath melted against his neck.

Her hand twitched, but she didn’t know, or was too uncertain, to act upon her wishes.

“I’m glad you came,” he greeted.

“I… Yes. It is good to see you.” She fumbled for words, uncertain what to say and how, not sure how to explain what she wanted, not certain she knew what it was.

Thorin smiled. He did not release her hand. “You brought Dori.” His fingers caressed her knuckles.

“Yes. I wanted her to meet your men…” Thorin’s hand caressed her hair, still in a braided bun, all proper and done. Her thoughts and words and breaths melted with his touch.

“Yes?” Thorin mumbled. “Is that… is that your decision, then?”

No hope, just patience. It is almost as if he did not dare to be hopeful, should that scare her away. He wasn’t, she mused bitterly, wrong. “I’ll see based on… on her progress. If Dori accepts them, and then accepts you, then… then.”

Thorin frowned. “Accept me?” A defensive note flared in his voice. His fingers froze, tracing her bound hair.

“Yes.” She could not back down. Not know. “I… I was thinking of telling her who… who you really were.”

Thorin’s breath deserted his lips. His eyes, ever seeking, the storm ever raging – she wished she could keep the storm at bay and summon the sun her daughter always managed to help shine through. Her hand rose to caress his cheek, hold him, maybe hold her too. “Wouldn’t you want her to know?”

“Yes.” The answer was short, breathless and choked. “Yes.”

Dori’s laughter bloomed between them. Lily squeezed Thorin’s hand involuntarily, but Thorin responded, squeezing back. Was his smile mirroring hers, or was it the other way around? Could she drown in his eyes and forget about the rest of the world, for the rest of her days? Could –

But Thorin’s eyes left hers and the smile was replaced with a frown. He looked at their intertwined hands and Lily could feel the dread pulling and tearing her lungs within her chest.

“Are you cold?”

“No,” she whispered.

Thorin looked up. “May I take off your gloves, then? I want to hold your hand.”

Her voice distanced between them. “You are holding it.”

“I wish to touch your hand, not a piece of cloth.” His fingers expressed his love as he gently caressed her knuckles, her small wrist, her digits. Then they asked for more than she was willing to offer –

Lily escaped his touch and fixed the glove immediately on her hand. Her cheeks were red, but not due to a romantic sentiment. She took a few steps back and detached herself from him.
“…Lily?”

She did not look at him. “I… I do not remove – I need my gloves.”

Thorin took a step toward her, which resulted in her taking a step back. “Why? What’s the matter?”

She fiddled with the cloth and still did not look at him. “I am not the same as I once was, Thorin. I… I was pregnant; I had given birth, I breastfed, I am scarred, I… I am not as pretty as I was, my – my body is not the same, I – “

“You are beautiful. My bunmel, you are the most beautiful – “

“Oh, of course you’d say that,” she snapped, then sighed. “I – you see what you remember, but I changed, and…”

“And I also changed.” Thorin crossed the distance between them, taking her again in his arms. “I have silver in my hair and numerous scars covering most of me. Any mark upon your body is a symbol of the journey. It is nothing to be ashamed of. Scars are a symbol of honor. They are a testament to your sacrifice and evidence to the deeds you had done.”

Lily still didn’t look at him. How could she? Was this another lie she unwittingly told him? A lie of beauty that no longer existed? Should he look upon her and turn away in revolt – she looked away, unable to process her thoughts before him.

“Lily, agyâdê, what happened to your hands?” he whispered.

It took her a moment to answer. It was a long moment. “Smaug,” she muttered back.

Thorin growled. The low and feral sound was unmistakable, yet almost soothing. Maybe she could still fashion a reason that would allow her to cuddle against his chest, protect her from ghosts long laid to rest.

“When… when I went to speak with him, I was burned by his flames. Oin and Nestor, my father’s healer, tried their best, but his fire burns strangely, or so they said. My left palm and right arm are forever scarred.”

Thorin waited, but she did not dare to look up and see what he thought of her words. She could feel him looking at her, seeking her with his eyes. When she did not look up, Thorin slowly touched his forehead to hers. “This is my fault; I should never have sent you. I should never have exposed you to such dangers, I….”

Lily smiled humorlessly. “Wasn’t it you who hired me to handle such dangers?”

She leaned into his touch. She wanted – she needed his touch. Thorin kissed her forehead as his hands traveled up her arms, then down. He took her hands in his and slowly removed the glove adorning her right hand.

Lily looked down at their hands with unease. “This hand is not scarred,” she whispered.

“I know.”

Then he took off the other glove.

Lily’s hand trembled in his and her eyes darted up to look at him before fleeing, once again, to her fingers.
The back of her hand bore no marks. It was only when he exposed her palm that the true damage was revealed. Her palm was covered in thick, uneven scar issue, coarse to the touch, hard and inflexible. It was paler in color than the rest of her skin. She exhaled unevenly when he touched the scar.

“Does it hurt?” he whispered.

“Only when it’s cold,” she whispered back.

Thorin took her palm and kissed it. “And this?”

A tremor shot through her when his lips grazed the deformed skin. “…no.”

He kissed her hand again. This time, he applied more pressure and allowed his lips to explore the scar and tenderly, slowly, oh so slowly, care for it. Care for her.

“Thorin…” she muttered. Her voice trembled.

Now she sought him with her eyes. Thorin returned the gaze, firm and gentle and full of affection. One of his hands held her palm, thumb caressing the malformed skin, while the other rose to cup her cheek. He bowed his forehead to touch hers again. “You don’t need gloves,” he murmured. “Don’t be ashamed.”

“It’s ugly. I am… I can’t…”

“You are beautiful, Lily, and your hand proves your courage and character withstood the greatest horror of our age. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I didn’t. Not really. I was so scared, and I failed entirely – he burned Lake-Town to ashes and only because of me, because I awakened him, because – “

“You went down there willingly. You faced him. Smaug was terror and madness bound into the shape of a man. None could have stopped him. Do not blame yourself for this. If anything, it is I who should never have sent you down to meet him. I will never risk your life again, Lily. Never.”

His words bloomed in her stomach and filled her with warmth, making her feel light and dizzy as they melted her burdens away. Her hand moved to rest against Thorin’s midriff and then traveled to his back as she closed the distance between them and leaned in for a hug.

Thorin embraced her. His hand traced the cheekbone and caressed her hair as he cradled her head against the nape of his neck. His other hand held hers, fingers stroking and accepting with their touch the hand she hid before. Lily’s hand clutched his shirt, betraying a desperate need, a sighed desire, and Thorin tightened his hold, pulling her closer.

“Hold me a little longer,” she asked, voice muffled against his neck. “Stay.”

She could not see his expression, but she could feel his response in the tightening of his hold, in the quick beating of his heart. “Anything I can grant you, I will,” he vowed. “My lily.”

“Thorin!”

The delighted shout was the only thing that warned him from the oncoming charge.

Thorin raised his arm, just in time, to catch the excited toddler and welcome her into his arms.
while still holding Lily’s hand. He had no intention to let go of her just yet.

Dori looked up, eyes sparkling. “I ate an apple!”

He chuckled. “Did you save me some?”

“No!”

All residue of pain disappeared with his daughter’s smile. She climbed onto his shoulders and bent to hug her mother and plant a sticky kiss on her cheek. “I ate an apple,” she declared again.

“Was it tasty?”

The girl hummed. “Can I have cake?”

“Not now, sweetie. You’ll have to wait till four.” Lily smiled at her, leaning her shoulder against his.

Thorin wondered, for a moment, if that’s what it felt like to have a family of his own.

Dori pouted, but quickly forgot the cake as she discovered a scar, cutting through Thorin’s arm. “What’s that?” she asked, tracing the line with her finger.

She was quite content to be held in his arms as she investigated. Thorin kissed her locks, as black as his. “It’s a scar. Once, I was wounded here, and when I healed, my skin changed.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Not anymore.” A tremor shot through him when his body remembered the axe that cut through the muscle and left that mark. Lily, perhaps mistaking the tremor for weakness, led him to sit underneath one of the nearby trees. She had a strange expression on her features as she, too, scrutinized his scar with her eyes.

Thorin opened his palm as Dori, now sitting in his lap, reached for his hand. She giggled when he made a playful attempt to grab her fingers. Dori, excited by the prospect of a game, tried to get a hold of his fingers without letting him catch hers.

Thorin looked up to find Lily frowning at the jagged line. “It is… I do not remember this one,” she said carefully.

“I added several to my collection after the battle over Erebor,” Thorin explained. “Oin thought I was going to lose a limb, again.” He half chuckled as Dori squealed in response to his fingers rising to challenge hers.

He smiled, then returned his attention to Lily, who shook her head at him. “You must do something about that ridiculous fighting style of yours,” she muttered. She was quite pale, he noticed.

He lifted his other hand to caress her cheek. “I am not usually like that,” he tried to reassure her, but Lily’s face grew whiter underneath his fingers. Oh. Cursing in his mind, he clarified, “It wasn’t your fault – “

“How can you say that?” Her voice was hollow. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I am not. Hey,” he whispered, cupping her cheek. “Don’t blame yourself for deeds when none would hold you accountable.”
“How can I not?” she mumbled.

He could barely hear her. “Ghivashel, please. Don’t burden yourself with unnecessary guilt. Whatever happened, happened. I do not blame you for my folly.”

Lily finally looked at him. She lifted her hand to hold the one that touched her cheek and his fingers, in response, trailed the line of the cheekbone and stroked the soft hair, then intertwined with her own. She did not flinch nor shrink from him as he lowered his head and –

“Thorin?”

Thorin froze as did Lily.

Dori blinked at him curiously. “I caught you,” she announced, showing him his thumb clutched in her fist.

“You did,” Thorin admitted, glancing cautiously at the woman next to him.

Lily turned her face away from him, cheeks pink, and released his hand. He hoped this moment was not an opportunity spurred by guilt. The hand he held was scarred.

He returned his eyes to his daughter. “Now I shall catch you,” he declared, then held the child and lifted her in the air.

Dori squealed in delight and giggled when he lowered her back to his lap. “Again!” she commanded and laughed out loud when lifted her above his head.

“Again!”

“Again!”

Thorin felt an easy smile creeping into his face as his child, eyes wide and trusting, asked once more to be lifted to the sky. The laughter that bubbled on her lips translated into happiness that bloomed in his chest. Aye, he could get used to that, if only…

An unfamiliar sound nearly made him freeze with Dori in midair.

Next to him, Lily was laughing.

Her laughter was far more reserved than the pearls of joy elicited by her daughter, but it did not change the nature of the sound, nor made it in any way less precious to him.

Thorin turned to look at her, to etch into his mind the sight of her lips curving and cheeks reddening as love and warmth melted the blue and made her eyes spark with life.

“Again!”

Thorin threw Dori into the air, cherishing the gasp from the woman next to him as well as the unrestrained giggles of surprise from his daughter as he caught her. She squeaked again in happiness and threw her arms around his neck, then quickly released him and wandered into her mother’s lap.

“I flew!” she shouted. “I flew, Mommy!”

“I saw.” Lily chuckled and hugged her gently. “Now, why won’t you let Thorin rest for a little bit?”
Thorin scoffed, but before he could protest, Dori looked at him excitedly. “My birthday is tomorrow!”

He blinked. “I-it is?”

“Yes!”

Lily smiled. “Tomorrow is a very general term referring to the nearby future. Her birthday is in nine days’ time.”

“Tomorrow!” Dori declared.

“I see. What gift would you like?”

Dori frowned, confused, and repeated, “It’s my birthday.”

Lily explained, “Here, they give gifts on their birthdays, rather than receive. Some small treats for the guests.”

Thorin paused, puzzled, but once again, Dori addressed him, “You’ll come?” Her eyes shone so brightly; he couldn’t possibly refuse.

His features softened into a smile. “Of course.”

Dori leaned on his thighs. “You’ll stay forever?”

His smile faded. “No. I live far away. When summer ends, I must leave.”

Dori frowned, turned to her mother, then back to him. “You’ll stay forever?” she repeated. Her voice quivered.

Thorin glanced at Lily for guidance, but the woman seemed to be battling her own emotions and remained silent. “No, miminh. I cannot.”

“You stay,” she ordered. Her hands grabbed his fingers again. “Stay.”

Thorin cupped her cheek with his free hand, frowning when the child’s eyes welled with tears. “I’ll stay for your birthday,” he promised.

Dori turned to her mother. “Make him stay. Make him stay, Mommy,” her voice broke.

Lily opened her arms and Dori climbed and wrapped her hands around her mother’s neck. “You know, Thorin has a lot of family and friends that he misses dearly, like Aunt Prim and Drogo and Frodo? He wants to go and see them, too.”

“No!” the child protested. She refused her mother’s hug and addressed Thorin again, tears streaking down her cheeks. “You stay.” Her lower lip trembled.

“I’ll come every day,” Thorin promised instead. “We’ll play every day. I promise.”

“You stay?”

Thorin hugged the child to him. “Until the end of summer,” he whispered.

Dori pushed away his hands. She stepped away from them, shoulders heaving with bitter sobs. The slow realization that the impending departure was not something she could prevent with tears made
her cry harder.

Thorin made a move to rise, but Lily was faster. She hugged her child, cradling her head close to her chest. She murmured a few words in Sindarin he failed to catch and waited until the sobs quietened and Dori looked at him, eyes glistening with hurt and betrayal.

“Thorin leaves in a month and a half. That’s a very very very long time. You can play every day, isn’t that nice?” She wiped her cheeks from tears.

Dori nodded. “Thorin leaves tomorrow?”

“No, he’ll be here.”

“Pinky promise?”

Lily turned to face Thorin, who walked up to them and offered his finger for a solemn shake. “Pinky promise.”

Lily lowered Dori to the ground. The child wiped her face on her arms, looked up in pure misery, and then grabbed Thorin’s fingers with her hands. “We play now,” she declared, with a pout too earnest and too sweet for him to do anything but comply.

He looked up to see Lily nodding, then followed his daughter back to the camp. The joyous shouts of welcome from Bofur and Bombur did make her smile and laugh again, but her grip on his fingers was ironclad.

Thorin prayed this would be enough for Lily. Mahal, convince her to accept him. Please.

He sat on the grass and watched, with slight envy, as Bombur made a rather lovely flower crown to please his daughter, then observed – with a sharper pang of envy – as Bofur left their merry gathering to speak quietly with Lily.

The woman stood, as graceful and poised as ever, and smiled. Her expression was not a happy one, but what it was, he could not tell. They will accept her, he wanted to promise her. Her and her daughter both. Bofur had new songs written ever since last year, celebrating her deeds, adding her to the stories from which Thorin tried to erase her before. Lily of the Shire, the lucky number, the silent diplomat, she who faced the dragon, reader of men.

Bofur even wrote a ballad about them, though he mentioned no names and never sang it before Thorin and his court. Thorin wouldn’t have known it at all, but for a maid with the terrible habit of singing as she cleaned.

So when Bofur lifted his hand and struck a melancholic chord on his always cheerful violin, Thorin’s heart all but lost its footing. He looked up and fixated his gaze on Lily who stood as poised as before, still unaware of what’s to come.

“Far over the misty mountains cold,

The ancient winds many secrets hold,

Of a fair lady their whispers moan,

And a mighty lord, as harsh as stone.
The pale lady, her hair gold, her eyes a spell,
With silent woe she wore her secret like a shell,
In places deep, where dark flames end,
She dreamed of warmth and a loving hand.

And he the warrior, the kingly lord,
Saw in her eyes his life of old,
With iron and steel, he wanted peace to last,
To earn his people's wealth and end their plight.

On silver nights, adorned with maiden blush,
The flowering petals guided their touch,
The lord of fire and the lady of ice,
Danced in the light of the moon's entice.

Far over the misty mountains cold,
The wind sings their pain of old,
For when he learned the truth she bared,
His blind rage tore her from his breast.”

The music ended, and silence reigned. All eyes, he felt, no – even the wind ceased its whispers as it waited for Lily’s response. The woman stood, as silent and fair and spellbinding as the ballad depicted her. She nodded to Bofur, thanking him for the song, and her fist rose to clutch the fabric underneath her breasts, as if to protect the spot where she was struck, all those years ago. Where he struck her.

Should he go to her? Hold her? Wait? Will the ballad remind her of the love they shared or of his betrayal? Will she –

“Thorin,” Dori said as she climbed into his lap and wrapped her tiny hands around his neck, “Mm tired. I wanna go home.”

Thorin nodded and lifted her, one hand holding her, the other cuddling her small head to his chest. He looked up to see Lily, ever sharp and watchful, nodding to Bofur as she all but glided to take her place by his side. She looked up at him, frowned slightly – perhaps his hesitation, or perhaps – and then eased her features into a soft smile.

Thorin exhaled, his breath too rugged to be contained. He bowed his head, offering a smile in
return. A smile. A smile meant… everything. He followed Lily as they left the camp in silence, though he knew Dori’s appearance would be cause for much conversation and gossip.

“I… I believe that went well,” Thorin tried. He had to know where he stood.

Lily nodded. “Yes, I believe so.” She smiled softly. “A lot of excitement for one day,” she added, caressing her sleeping daughter’s hair.

Thorin hummed, the melody still fresh in his mind. “I heard Bofur play you our… his ballad.”

“Yes.” She managed yet another smile. “He said he might have to write a new ending, though he almost wishes not to. Happy endings are terrible for ballads.”

Thorin balanced Dori on one arm, then noticed he still held Lily’s gloves in his fist, and how the woman artfully hid her palm by folding her hands. He stuffed the gloves into the pocket of his pants, then took her hand in his. Her left hand. Lily’s arm twitched, but the rigidness melted with each caress of his fingers.

“I have grown tired of sad stories,” he muttered.

“Yes,” Lily whispered, voice barely heard. “So have I.”

Tauriel waited.

The third day must be the last day, she decided. Had she not been clear enough? He had the book, after all. And her bags were already packed. Her bag. She was surprised how little property she had to her name. She did not collect many items to signify the passing of the years. And she parted with ease, almost with relief, with the objects she did collect, almost as if they were weights, tying her to the Shire’s sort earth. She was named after a forest, perhaps, but she had no love for roots.

She longed for stars and stories, not for a surplus of silence and surrender of strength.

Perhaps she was not clear enough.

A crushing of twigs – heavy boots marking the earth with their haste –

Tauriel almost, but not quite, reached for the bow she no longer wore, heart racing.

Kili almost tumbled out of the bushes and into the clearing. Almost, for the young man was quick to secure the footing he lost upon seeing her. “Tauriel,” he breathed, a sigh almost like a prayer.

Tauriel hid her face in the canopy of the tree. “Took you long enough,” she muttered, then winced at the obvious complaint. Too obvious, then, that she had been waiting –

But Kili smiled, eyes ever bright, and Tauriel’s cheeks flushed pink.

“Forgive me. The Shire can be a confusing place at times,” Kili confessed, still smiling, somewhat out of breath. “This is where we first met, did we not?” He looked around, sharing his smile with the trees and the bushes and her, too. “After all those years.”

She almost wanted to keep that smile for herself.

Kili approached her tree, offering her his hand. “Come down?”
And Tauriel frowned. She needed no help, after all. She was born to climb trees and branches. But her hand, apparently, had a will of its own. Her hand accepted his, her waist leaned into his palm, and her body allowed his to guide her to the grass. They stood so close now, one of his hands holding hers, the other hugging her waist. She had to look up to gaze into his eyes – soft, melted brown full of joy and warmth. The notion made her gasp for air and filled her lungs with his scent, of earth and grass and flowers and musk, and she almost forgot what she wanted to say.

“You disappeared,” Kili muttered, taking in the sight of her as if he never dreamed he would see her again. “I… I was worried you left.”

“I did, for a time,” she managed to answer. “I had to think.”

“And?” Kili probed. His voice was eager.

Tauriel knew she shouldn’t hesitate. She knew that. “Do you remember our first talk? In the dungeons?”

Kili smiled. His gaze grew softer, though he clenched his fist. Good memories mixed with bad ones, or something else? “Aye. You spoke of starlight and memory, of walking beyond the forest.”

“And you spoke of fire moons and sights I never saw before. Still haven’t. The world is so large and full of wonders, but I was destined to guard one forest, serve one lord, see every stranger as my enemy.”

Kili frowned. Maybe he expected something different? But he still listened, eyes gentle and full of tenderness. No one has looked at her with such tenderness before. She should finish, quickly, before the sight would leave her too drunk to speak her mind.

“Then I was sent to serve my lady in the Undying Lands. I saw some of the world, but in a rush, and still as a threat, an enemy. Then we stayed in Rivendell, a wonder as well as a prison. I was never asked, well, I was not raised to answer questions. Ningalor… Lily was the first person to ask me what I want.”

“And what do you want?” Kili rasped. His hand tightened its hold on hers.

Tauriel freed herself from his grasp. “I want to see the world, Kili. I want to travel. I want to see the fire moon you spoke of, mountains, rivers, forests. I want to visit the dukedoms of the Brotherhood of Men and the Elven Alliance. I want… I want freedom, Kili.” She turned to look at him. “I love you,” she blurted, blushing under the intense burning of his eyes. “I do. Perhaps I always will. But I do not want to be tied down yet again. I… I can’t. I cannot accept your hand, Kili.”

The man looked away. His adam’s apple shifted in his throat, lips parted but voice silenced. Then he returned his gaze to her, as intense as before. “May I join you?”

Tauriel’s eyes widened. She didn’t think – never thought he’d choose her over his inheritance. An heir to a dukedom – no. Impossible. “Join me?” she gasped.

Kili closed the distance between them. “Yes. Join you. I have traveled before. Traveling alone is… lonely, especially since you have no one to share the world with, the sights, the experiences, even the dangers. I can show you my world, as well, that of the Dwarven Bond. Two people can handle the wild a lot better than one,” he continued, voice soothing and yet still so eager, so full of promise, of adventure and companionship and… and acceptance.

Perhaps he is right. Perhaps the world is a lonely place. Perhaps…
“I have never been much for court anyways. You… you make me feel alive, Tauriel, like I have never felt before. I have loved you since I first laid eyes on you, and my feelings for you have lost not an ounce of their strength.” He took her hand in his as his eyes bore into her. “You were a dream for so long, a dream I never thought would survive the light of day, a dream of starlight – cold and pure and beyond my reach. Please, Tauriel, I wish to be with you, not only in my dreams.”

His words rushed through her veins, sweeter than adrenaline, more terrifying than a knife pointed at her throat.

“But, His Grace – “

“Thorin would do anything to have Lily by his side. He would understand.”

Tauriel wanted to accept the hand holding hers. She did. Her fingers yearned for his touch – but her head spoke of warning her heart could not withstand. She withdrew her hand. “And should I never wish to become your wife? Should I choose the wild, or another, what will you do then?”

“I will accept it,” he vowed.

Tauriel looked up.

Kili’s eyes were pained, his voice was hollow, but his words were firm. “This isn’t a ruse to bind you to me, Tauriel. I meant my words, each and every one. I want to be by your side.”

_I know what I want. I always knew what I wanted. I was just afraid to reach. But why should I fear?

Tauriel took his hand again, surprised to find the medallion he offered her before clasped there. She looked up.

Kili’s cheeks reddened. “I thought… I mean, even if, if you do not wish to marry me, or – or anyone, you, you could still…”

“Be yours?” she whispered. Lily explained it, after all, the gifts and their meaning. Kili’s hesitant glance and burning cheeks confirmed the rest.

But his hand felt warm, and strong, and callous. It felt good, holding his hand. Reassuring. Why shouldn’t she, in fact? She could see the world with Kili at her side, and he will tell her stories of travel and adventure, and then she will have adventures, all of her own. With him.

Why hesitate?

Tauriel pried the medallion from his hand, observing Kili’s crest – the intricate lines forming three squares welded into each other, poised on their corners. She looked up, saw the hope so plainly expressed, exposed – Kili had no fear to be himself, never bothered to hide the meaning of his words behind symbols and gestures and vague expressions – and saw love, plain and pure, reflected back at her.

With her free hand, she cupped his cheek, feeling the coarse beard underneath her fingers, and she closed her eyes and kissed him.

Kili’s lips parted to accept her. His hands hugged her waist, then drew her closer to him, so close their bodies touched. He bowed his head to deepen the kiss, lips covering lips, then drew back.

“Wait, Tauriel, does this mean…”?

“Yes,” she sighed her smiles into his lips. “I accept you.”
Kili smiled. She could feel his bright smile against her parted lips. “Good.” He kissed her again. “I… err, I like that decision.”

Tauriel couldn’t help it. The laughter that bubbled within her burst through her lips. She wrapped her hands around his neck, pulling him closer, and kissed him in between smiles.

And Kili held her, one hand caressing her cheek, the other wrapped around her waist, and he too was smiling and kissing and laughing.

“I’ll go with you to the edge of the world and back,” he vowed. “Everywhere, anywhere, wherever.”

“And what would your uncle say?”

“Probably something serious.”

And Tauriel laughed, feeling a touch of weakness she could not name before floating within her, easing her always tense muscles, blooming into warmth. Happiness.

It was happiness.

Lily watched Prim wash the dishes, muttering to herself, but didn’t listen.

Her mind was hypnotized by the rhythmic movement, her thoughts tied to the man leaning against her favorite oak tree, smoking into the night, watching his child dance with the flowers.

“You know, I haven’t seen him this happy, eh? Ever, I think.”

Yes, Bofur, her mind whispered. I know. I know I make him happy. He makes me happy too. I know that.

“I’m fond of happy endings meself. At the end of the battle – we won, aye, but we nearly had to bury them as well, Thorin and Kili and Fili.”

“As well?”

What a fool she had been. She never asked, never wondered, only ever worried about Thorin.

“We lost Gloin and Dori that day. And Bifur. Remember them?”

He waved her apologies and grief aside. His smile held no bitterness.

“You have each other now, eh? Why does anything else matter? He’s alive, lass, that’s something that, for a very long time, none thought possible.”

“And Tauriel is gone again, willful child, and where have you been this entire day? This man is bad news, I tell you –“

“He never reached Bolg. An enemy sword cut through his shoulder. Had he struck Thorin an inch below, the sword would have torn through his heart. That’s what Oin said, at least. I wasn’t there, eh? I buried my cousin.”

“I love him.”
Prim froze. She turned around to look at Lily, but Lily didn’t return her gaze. She looked up, and her eyes could not leave the darkened shadow of the man outside her window.

“Ma’am, I don’t think…”

Lily felt the inside of her palm, coarse and uneven and deformed. Thorin didn’t even flinch. Thorin held her deformed hand and kissed the scar. Prim’s words of warning were swallowed by the smoke rising from Thorin’s pipe.

Lily left the room and walked toward the garden.

The sun began to set and, with its final breaths, painted the garden in pink and orange and gold. Dori ran back and forth, watching the sway of the flowers and trying to sneak up on Thorin, though her muffled giggles gave her away. Thorin did not move from his spot, but his steady presence filled her with calm she didn’t know she missed.

Dori, of course, was the first to notice her. Her daughter ran into her arms with her eyes shining bright, as bright as a thousand stars, and told her stories of her day. Her happiness and excitement were the only approval she needed.

Then Thorin turned around and smiled at her, filling her with courage she never knew she could possess. She nodded, a soft smile on her lips, and Thorin drew closer, seeking in her eyes the reassurance that yes, she intended to fulfill her promise to him, and yes, Dori was going to accept him.

She couldn’t promise him that, but she would be there for both, no, all of them.

Thorin placed his hand on the small of her back, engulfing both mother and child in his presence.

Lily smiled at her daughter. “Dori, sweetheart,” she started, cupping her child’s cheek. “I have something very important to tell you.”

Dori looked up, eyes still bright. She smiled. “A secret? I like secrets.”

Lily mirrored her smile. “It was a secret, but after I tell you, it’s not going to be a secret anymore.”

Dori blinked and nodded, though it was hard to tell how much the child understood.

Lily looked up at Thorin, took in the sight of his parted lips, the warm eyes, and breathed in the strength to carry on. “Do you remember what I told you about your father?”

Dori nodded, confused. “He was brave and he died,” she recited.

“Yes, baby, that’s what I told you, but what I told you wasn’t true.”

Dori frowned. “You said it’s bad to lie.”

Lily’s heart clenched in her chest. “I know. One day I’ll explain to you why I did that. But you know, Dori, your father isn’t dead, baby.”

Dori’s hands caught Lily’s dress and pulled – or held on – Lily did not know. “I have a daddy?” the child asked.

She smiled and tried to speak despite the tightening of her throat. “Yes, sweetheart, you do. Would you like to meet him?”
Dori looked down, lower lip trembling. She pressed her cheek to her shoulder in blatant refusal. “Why is he here now?” she demanded, voice breaking. “Why didn’t he come before?”

Lily did not dare to look up at Thorin, though she could feel his pain as if it were her own. Perhaps it was. His fingers dug, almost subconsciously, into her back. “He didn’t know where we were. Dori, you and I had to hide from lots of people.”

“Why?”

Oh, gods, the child had tears in her eyes. Lily tried to catch them, but Dori pushed her hand away with a pout. “I’ll explain when you grow up, sweetheart. Your daddy didn’t know we were here. He didn’t know about you at all,” she tried to calm her with gentle words.


“No, baby,” Lily promised, cradling her close to her chest. She looked up at Thorin, eyes red, unsure how to continue.

His breath shattered against her forehead, as uneven as his child’s voice. Thorin clenched his jaw and reigned in his pain and guilt and inhaled weakly.

Lily carried on. She rubbed her daughter’s small, shaking back. “Your daddy and I had a fight, and after the fight, I had to go far, far away. I thought your daddy was still angry with me, so I didn’t tell him I was leaving.”

“T’s no – no good to fight. Frodo s-says it’s bad.”

“Frodo is right, sweetheart,” Lily whispered, voice laden with emotions she had to hold within. “But we had a fight, and I moved far away, but I didn’t tell your daddy. When he learned where we lived, he came to find you and me. He wants to meet you very much.”

Dori’s hold of Lily’s neck choked her, but Lily did not protest. “Baby? If you don’t want to, that’s all right. You can meet him tomorrow instead. He will wait for you.”

Her daughter lifted her head and wiped her tears. “No,” she declared, every inch her father. “I wanna meet him and I wanna tell him he’s been a very very very bad d-daddy and that and that and that I am very very mad at-at-at him.”

Lily smiled, ignoring the tears gliding down her cheeks. “Be nice to him, yes, Dori? He loves you very much.” And she turned her child to look at her father.

Dori looked up at Thorin, confusion and tears blurring her eyes. He opened his hands to her, but Dori pushed him with her hand. “No,” she stated. “You’re Thorin. Where’s my daddy?”

Lily stifled a sob. “Thorin is your daddy, baby.”

“No!” Dori protested, tears welling in her eyes again. “You’re Thorin! You’re Thorin! I want my daddy!”

“Thorin is your daddy, sweetheart. He came from far, far away – “

“Thorin’s my friend! He told me! Friends don’t lie! Frodo said!”

“Dori – “

“Dori,” whispered Thorin, “Dori, please, look at me.” He bowed down so he could peer into her
eyes and cupped her small face, wiping her tears. “I am sorry I did not tell you the truth. I am sorry I wasn’t here for you when you grew up. I am sorry, miminh, for causing you such pain. But I am… I am your father, Dori.”

Dori’s lips tilted downward. “You’ve – you’ve been very bad,” she accused. “You are not my friend.”

Thorin’s breath deserted him. His eyes shone as well. “Yes – I know. I know. Please forgive me.”

Her shoulders shook, her hands trembled, her lips shivered, but Dori carried on. “A-are you my daddy?”

“Yes,” Thorin vowed. He wiped her fresh tears with his fingers with the utmost gentleness. “Yes.”

“And-and-and you’re… you’re gonna go? You’re gonna l-leave me again. You’re gonna leave?”

Oh, Lily tried, and failed, to stop her tears. She kissed her child’s curls, weeping in silence into her dark locks.


Dori hid in Lily’s arms. “But you lied. Are you lying again? Fro-Frodo said if someone lies, they are unt-untustwothy.”

Lily looked down at Thorin, tears in her eyes, and saw the same pained love and anguished longing that tore her heart to pieces reflected back at her.

“I know, and I will never lie to you again, Dori. I promise you. I am not going anywhere without you.”

Dori was still not convinced. “Are you really my daddy?”

“Yes,” Thorin rasped, eyes seeking, hoping, begging.

“Really really?” she insisted.

“Yes.” Thorin dared a smile. “Really really.”

He opened his hands to her again, but this time Dori did not push him away – she all but jumped into his arms, clasped her hands behind his neck, and wailed openly, repeating the cry “Daddy, daddy,” like a prayer.

And Thorin held her close, cuddling her small head against his chest, kissing her forehead, burying his tears in her curls. “I’m here,” he soothed. “I’m here, I’m here, I’m not letting you go.”

And Lily watched, not even trying to hide her tears anymore, her tender smile, her love for the man and the treasure he held in his arms. So when Thorin opened his eyes and looked at her, full of affection, and drew closer and kissed her forehead, she knew she could close her eyes and lean into his touch, because he would be there when she wakes.

Eventually, Dori’s sobs died down, and the child fell asleep out of pure emotional exhaustion.

Thorin followed Lily as she led him to Dori’s room and gently lowered the child to her absurdly large bed.
“This was the guest room, once,” Lily explained. She watched as Thorin caressed his daughter’s hair and wiped her cheeks and kissed her forehead, enchanted by her breaths.

“What will happen in the morning?” he whispered, voice thick.

“I… I do not know. But I think it would be better if you spent the night, if that’s…”

“Of course.” Thorin tore his eyes from his daughter and looked at his wife. “You said you had given her two names. You never said why.”

Lily’s eyes fluttered to look at the sleeping child, then turned to glance at the stars. “I named her Niphredil to please my father, a pale winter flower named Snowdrop in the common tongue, though she was born in the summer and should have been named after a summer flower. I named her Doroniel for myself, in a way, and for her.” The woman hugged herself, sniffling, and while her smile was tender, her eyes hid a silent turmoil. “I did not know if I would survive her birth or the days after. I wanted to give her a name that, even if we were separated, would help her find you.”

“I don’t understand,” he murmured.

Lily did not look at him. “Doroniel means ‘daughter of oak.’”

Thorin rose to his feet and walked to her side, taking her hand in his. “Lily….”

“I was thinking, maybe, would you like some wine? After, after today…?” She held his hand with surprising strength.

Thorin kissed her forehead, pulling her close. “That sounds like a… very good idea.”

Lily nodded. She led him downstairs, still holding his hand, and then to the living room. “Wait here,” she ordered, and left for the kitchen.

Thorin waited. He did not know how to process the recent development; he did not know what was bothering Lily. Was it something he said? Something he didn’t? He lifted his arms, remembering the weight of his child holding on to him. His child. His daughter, crying for him so desperately. He could have prevented this had he been less proud, had his rage and hate never took hold of him, had his love for Lily been as clear to him then as it was now.

Lily.

Thorin left the living room and marched to the kitchen. He found her with ease, her golden hair – still in that tight braid – reflecting the candle-light like a precious metal. She stood, ever poised, holding a bottle of wine and staring at nothing. Two empty glasses of wine waited patiently by her side.

“Lily,” he muttered.

The woman jumped, looked up at him with eyes far too wide, and then offered a broken smile. Her hands shook.

Thorin pried the bottle from her hands, opened it, and poured each a glass.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Thorin nodded. He placed the bottle on the counter and offered her a glass. “What bothers you?”
Lily accepted the glass with both hands. She took a small sip, trying to ease the tremors out of her limbs. “A lot… much has changed,” she managed.

Thorin hummed. He finished his glass and placed it next to the bottle, then held Lily’s waist, reassured by the soft warmth of her presence. “You seem tense.” He wished she would have closed the distance between them, leaned against him, anything. But Lily did not move.

She managed another small sip. “Yes.”

“You don’t have to drink the wine if you don’t want to,” he whispered to her hair.

The woman nodded, almost confused. She placed her glass on the counter, fingers still trembling, and spilled some of the dark liquid on the pale wood. She did not seem to notice. Her hands returned to hug her chest.

“Lily? Tell me.”

“I need to see.”

“…see? Hey – “

But Lily did not explain. She took his arm in hers and dragged him to the large fireplace, then sat him on the carpet near the flames. Her hands, still shivering, undid the ties of his tunic, then pulled the collar down to try and unveil his… chest? No. His scar.

Thorin pried her hands from his shirt, holding her quivering hands in his for a brief moment, then removed the piece of cloth entirely. He took her hand and placed it on the deep cut on his shoulder, the one that nearly reached his heart.

“Did Bofur tell you?” he murmured.

Lily nodded, lips trembling.

Thorin cupped her cheek. “I am alive, Lily, and I am here with you.”

“I needed to feel your heartbeat.” Her voice was so soft. “I wanted to make sure.”

“Lily…” He pulled her to him, cradled her head against his heart. “I made a promise today, to you and to our daughter. I am never leaving you again. I intend to stand by it.”

Lily molded her body to fit his. She pulled herself into his lap, legs folded, hands caressing his chest. “I will not mourn you twice, Thorin. Promise me you would not risk your life again. Promise.”

“I promise.” Thorin hugged her. His hands encircled her, stroking the tremors until the muscles ceased shaking. “I am never leaving you again, Lily. I promise. Even if you choose not to come, I will stay.”

Lily raised her head and freed her hands, though she did not move away from him, nor did he release her. With movements slow and measured, she unbraided her hair, combing through the golden locks with her fingers. When she finished, she dropped her hands and looked up at him, eyes vulnerable and gentle, and watched his fingers as they rose to stroke her hair and hide in the thick locks.

“I missed the feeling of your hair,” he whispered, relishing the silken sensation he was denied
before.

Lily nodded. “I know. It is tradition, here. A woman mourning should not let her hair fall freely.”

His hand froze in her hair. “You said you mourned me once,” he muttered.

“I did.” Her eyes shone again. She lifted herself up so she could look at him and cupped his cheeks. “I never stopped loving you. I never stopped mourning. How could I?”

“Lily – “

Lily bowed down her head and kissed him.

The first touch was weak – she fled before he could fully respond, taste, comprehend – “I’ll come with you. Wherever you go, I’ll follow,” she whispered against his lips.

Thorin buried his fingers in her hair and pulled her down to him, kissing her with years of thirst, years of longing. His breath shattered against her lips as her sighs were tempered by his mouth. He sealed his promise with every touch of his lips, every sigh, every caress. Her fingers drowned in his hair and her body melted against his. His body, numb and unconscious, awoken from its cold slumber with the touch of her lips as her kiss breathed life and love and desire into his bones.

The soft touch, long forgotten and yet so familiar, burned through his blood like fire; her body against his felt like fire. His fingers, racing to reassure their owner of reality, slid down her back and thighs, digging into the soft flesh that answered his touch with a whispered song, and then up again, up to caress that golden hair, untainted yet by the touch of time.

“I love you, Lily, hulwulê, ayyâdê, zabadhûh,” he breathed, “my sweet, my happiness, my lady. Amrâlimê. My love.”

Lily sighed into his lips, kissing them, tasting them, caressing them. “You said the last one to me before.” Her eyes shone. A soft smile danced upon her rosy lips and oh, mahal, she looked so beautiful, so happy.

Thorin kissed her, searing his love and yearning and devotion into those lips, always beyond his reach.

“I did,” he whispered to her lips. “You were always my love. I had no other.” He cupped her cheek, adorned with a pale blush, and memorized her features with a gentle touch. His fingers traveled up the elegant cheekbone, then the hollow of her temple, and finally found their place hidden in her hair. His palm, so large and unrefined against her smooth skin, caressed her cheek. His eyes lit with wonder when she leaned into his touch, kissing his wrist.

Lily returned her eyes to him and revealed soft pools of blue, as full of wonder and hesitant joy as his. She held his face in her hands, stroking the coarse beard and the smooth hair, silver among black. Her eyes did not leave him, seeking and finding and yet still searching.

Thorin waited, hoping his eyes held the answers she so sorely needed. He allowed himself to be vulnerable, open himself before her, surrender to her exploring fingers. Her touch. He missed her touch. He missed her.

Lily kissed him, a soft and sweet kiss, short and yet forever lasting.

“Stay with me tonight,” she asked, voice as soft and gentle.
Thorin caressed her cheek, her golden hair. “Anything you want, ghivashel.”

And Lily, again, melted into his arms, seeking solace in the crook of his neck. “I want to stay by your side.”

Thorin kissed her head, then lifted her in his arms and cradled her against him. “Tell me where to go.”

Her weight in his arms made her feel real again. Her arms around his neck made her feel real. Her eyes, looking up at him with tenderness he never thought they’d show him again, her lips, kissing his jaw… she was real. And she lay in his arms.

Thorin took her to her room, then sat her gently on her bed and looked around. “I have been here before,” he stated, confused by the knowledge.

“Yes. On the night before the quest, you slept here,” Lily confirmed, undoing the bonds of her dress.

“You slept with the servants,” Thorin remembered. He turned and walked to the window, feeling the cool night’s breeze on his naked chest. He waited until Lily finished dressing.

Two hands wrapped around his waist as a soft body hugged him from behind and a smooth cheek caressed his shoulder.

Thorin held those hands, the scarred and the healthy one, and allowed them to lead him to the bed. He lay on his side with his outstretched hand offered as a pillow, an offer his wife was more than ready to accept. Lily snuggled up to him, wrapped her hands around his waist and leaned her head on his arm, tangling their legs together. Thorin hugged her with his other arm, pulling her close, and lowered his head to rest next to hers, lips kissing her forehead. His fingers toyed with her long hair.

“Sleep, love. I’ll be here in the morning,” he promised.

Lily mumbled something, it may have been his name, and closed her eyes.

Thorin stayed awake a few moments longer and watched the woman he loved sleeping in his arms before the soft whisper of her breaths lulled him to sleep.

He wondered if his shirt by the fireplace would pose problems in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:

- Bunmel- beauty of all beauty
- Ghivashel- treasure of all treasures
- Miminh – little one

I apologize this chapter took me forever - I suppose I did not really want to part from those two. One more chapter to go before I finish, so if you guys have any requests, please share and I'll try to fit them into the final chapter =)
Back Again

Chapter Summary

Dreaming of wonder, for our days are young
And every shared glance is music
Thrumming to the beating of our hearts -
Time only passes, you whispered, when
I am with you

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Softness and warmth were the first sensations to tickle him awake.

Thorin’s eyelids fluttered, yet remain closed, as his hand searched for someone out of pure instinct, as if trying to grip the last wisps of his dream and root them in reality.

A solid presence offered the best possible resistance to his searching hand. The soft, warm body did not fade, even when his eyes snapped wide open.

He lay in a bed, but not in Erebor; and Lily remained real, not a dream.

She lay on his arm, face pressed against his chest, one hand hugging his waist, the other resting on his scar. Her hair caressed his arm, golden and so very soft, and her content expression was beautiful in the early morning light. It was almost as if no time had passed, as if he still had to rise and don his armor and go to war; as if he never banished her from his side.

His fingers traced her form, from her fingers to her hand to her arm, searching for signs that yes, she was real, and yes, she lay in his arms. He caressed her skin as gently as he could, trying to reassure himself of her existence without waking her. Oh, Lily…

His fingers reached her neck, graceful and lithe, then rose to caress her hair. His thumb traced the path of her cheekbone, then traveled lower and lower to timidly explore her bottom lip.

A soft tapping sound that merged with the chirping of the birds and the humming of the sweet summer breeze, however, ruined the illusion of peace. Thorin watched Lily stir awake, waiting – for what, he did not know; perhaps for confirmation that last night was not a mistake, and that Lily, truly, wanted to live by his side.

The woman frowned slightly, then opened her eyes. The dark blue, unfocused at first, followed the unconscious movement of her fingers as they curled against his chest. Then she looked up, and her eyes lit up with a tender smile and gentle affection that echoed like fire in his chest. Her soft smile widened, and she lifted herself up to press a quick kiss to his lips and shush him before closing her eyes again and… feigning sleep?

The door opened, and the tapping of small, bare feet filled the room. Lily’s hand snuck underneath the covers to hold his and squeezed, so Thorin followed suit and closed his eyes.

Dori, after a short struggle, climbed on the bed. She crawled to Lily and kissed her cheek. “Wake
up, Mommy!”

Lily leaned with her back against his chest and hugged the child to her. “Hmm. Good morning, sweetie. How’d you sleep?” She exhaled weakly when – Thorin opened one eye, then immediately closed it – Dori chose to sit on her belly.

“Why is… he in your bed?”

Thorin’s hand squeezed Lily’s involuntarily. The woman responded with a reassuring squeeze, her fingers stroking his knuckles.

“Daddies and mommies sleep together, baby.” A short pause. Thorin dared another glimpse to find Lily stoking the child’s unruly hair. “Would you like to wake him up? Go on.”

A short moment of hesitation felt like forever as Thorin waited for the child’s reaction.

Dori, quite unceremoniously, tapped his forehead. “Wake up, sleepy head!” she shouted.

“Dori!” Lily pinched his arm so Thorin, ever dutiful (and perhaps temporarily deaf), kept his eyes closed.

“Pippin says that’s how you wake up old people.” She giggled.

“What have I told you ab – never mind. Dori,” she whispered, “he’s your daddy.”

Another pause. A changing shift in weight made him assume Dori wriggled as she pondered the new concept. “Forever and ever?” she verified.

“Forever and ever.”

“I can call him ‘daddy’?”

“Yes! He’d love it very much.”

“And I can tell Frodo I have a daddy?”

“You can tell everyone.”

“Even Sam?”

“Even Sam.”

“And Auntie Prim and Uncle Drogo and Tauriel and Merry and Pippin and and-and – “

“Everyone, Dori. Everyone.”

The child thought some more. “And after I tell everyone, Thorin will still be my Daddy?”

“Forever and ever.” He could hear Lily’s smile. “Wake him up, Dori. Go on.”

This time, a tiny mouth plastered a sticky kiss to his cheek, and a hesitant voice whispered, “Wake up, Daddy.”

Thorin opened his eyes. He smiled at the hesitant blue eyes that peered down at him and ruffled her hair. “Good morning, Dori.” He cupped her cheek. “How’d my little girl sleep?”

Dori’s eyes almost tripled in size. She looked at her mother, who smiled and nodded, then back at
him, and back at Lily, and back at him again – until she finally decided to curl into a ball on his chest.

“T’ll’m staying with Daddy today,” she declared.

Thorin hugged her with one hand, cradling her against him. He looked up to find Lily smiling ever so tenderly and raised his hand to caress her cheek. “Can we invite Mommy?”

Lily took his hand and kissed it. She held his palm in both hands, then gently graced each coarse knuckle with a touch of her lips. Her smile neither waned nor withered.

Dori considered the offer. “Only if I can have cake for breakfast.”

Lily chuckled. “I’m afraid cake is reserved for afternoon tea, love.”

The girl wriggled in protest, so Thorin offered, “Maybe we can steal one when Mom isn’t looking.”

“Thorin!”

He weathered her playful punch with a cocked brow. “I’m forging an alliance. She knows how to prioritize her demands.”

The woman shook her head, trying and failing to hide her amusement. “And here I thought I was supposed to be the diplomat and you the headstrong duke.”

Thorin laughed. He propped himself up, still holding Dori, and cupped Lily’s cheek. “You have never been timid yourself, I dare say.”

She smiled despite herself, eyes shining like the brightest stars, and Thorin bowed his head and kissed her. He held her so gently, yet even the softest touch breathed new life into him, a touch of spring that came to chase away the frost hold of winter. Lily cupped his cheeks, fingers buried in his beard, and held him as she undid all memory of loss and pain.

The bliss, so new to him, bloomed like the first rays of summer sun in the cavity of his chest, filling it with warmth and life. With a soft kiss, lips caressing lips, they explored the familiar, rediscovered forgotten memories, roused nerves rusty from disuse.

He could never get enough of her, his lily.

“So, about that cake….”

Oh, it was joy and relief and smiles that could not be fought off.

Lily watched Dori as the child took Thorin on a tour and introduced him to her dolls and taught him their extensive history. She held his hand and sat in his lap or demanded to be lifted and carried, hands hugging her father’s neck or pulling on his braids.

Thorin, ever smiling, obeyed every demand with patient gentleness Lily did not know him to be capable of. There might be tears, she mused, when the initial excitement wore off, and it was time for education and boundaries, but for now, the lovely relationship that bloomed between the father and child filled her heart with joy.

This was the right decision. The perfect decision. How come she failed to see it for oh so long?
Lily entered the living room and retrieved Thorin’s shirt, then returned to the second floor, almost skipping up the stairs in her haste to return to Thorin’s side. She offered him the shirt and leaned in for a kiss – lovely and short, as Dori immediately pulled on her skirt and demanded her father’s attention.

Lily laughed and released Thorin’s hand so he could cradle their daughter in his arms. The tender love in his eyes was enough.

They left for the dining room to have cake – though Lily informed both gluttons that this was a one-time occurrence – and Dori, of course, introduced Thorin as her father to everyone in the room, including a hapless squirrel that looked on quizzically. They returned to Thorin’s camp, listening to Dori’s endless chatter and holding hands, and oh, would that those beautiful smiles and sweet chuckles never end. Thorin’s face brightened whenever he looked at his child, nestled in his arm, and the light erased the lines and the scars and the grim worry that brooded within his eyes. His hand, so warm and callous, gripped her hand with reassuring strength and a tender touch. His fingers never stopped caressing hers, as if constantly seeking to reaffirm her presence to their owner.

Despite the silver in his hair, he had never looked this young.

When they reached the clearing, Dori immediately reintroduced Thorin to all the camp’s members as her father, to the vast amusement of Bofur and Bombur and the muted embarrassment of the young guards. When she saw Dwalin, she glared and declared, “I came to play with my daddy!” Then ran to hide behind Thorin. “Go away!”

Dwalin let out a disgruntled growl and left to sit in the corner of the camp, sharpening his axe with a thunderous scowl.

Thorin frowned at the child, then glanced up at her, but Lily shook her head in response. Dori was still frightened of losing her father yet again, a possibility symbolized by Dwalin’s refusal to allow her to see him the day before. She was not yet ready to see him as a friend.

Bofur and Bombur, of course, thought it was quite hilarious.

This time, it was impossible to entice Dori to be separated from Thorin. Even when she fell asleep – chasing butterflies is a rather tiring task, after all – her hand gripped Thorin’s fingers with an unrelenting force. The man looked up and offered her the same tender smile with which he regarded their sleeping daughter. It was a beautiful smile.

“I understand you’ll be leaving soon?”

It took Lily a moment to tear her eyes from the two dark figures arguing in her garden. Tauriel sat next to her, as still as stone, as pale as the waning moon, and awaited Thorin’s judgment. Kili’s movements were wild and animated; Thorin’s – few and composed.

She looked up to find Prim gazing at her, her blue eyes softened with concern.

“Yes,” Lily replied, a smile blooming on her face. She placed her hand on Tauriel’s. “Tauriel, too, I believe.” The young woman swallowed with difficulty, to which Lily whispered, “You shall not want for company.”

“They have been arguing… for a time, now,” she mumbled.
“Thorin’s quest was to take back the home of his ancestors. Kili’s wish to travel is foreign to him.”

Tauriel’s lips fluttered. “I wanted to see the world, I….”

“And you shall. You shall, Tauriel, with Kili at your side,” Lily promised. Her hand squeezed the guard’s hand gently, offering reassurance.

Tauriel nodded. With confidence still shaky but holding true, she resumed her watch.

Prim shook her head at them. “I don’t understand you. Either of you. The world is… dangerous! It’s full of-of the Big Folk, for starters, and thieves and murderers and goodness knows what else!” She twisted the towel she used to clean the table. “And you have a child!”

Lily looked up at Prim and smiled. She wondered at her own lack of fear and her smile widened. “I know, Prim. I have traveled to the edge of the wild and back again many times – far too many times – and you’re right; it is a dangerous business, going out your door, but… I trust that which awaits me on the other side. I belong with Thorin, and Tauriel belongs wherever her heart may lead her.” She took Prim’s hand in hers. “I shall never forget you, Prim, and Drogo and Frodo. I shall never forget what you have done for me. You have been the friends I never imagined I could have, and it is you I regret leaving the most.”

Prim looked down, a watery smile tugging at her lips. “Are you sure you cannot stay? We can grow used to him, to your Dwarf husband.”

Lily chuckled. “Just for another week.” She looked up upon hearing a heavy set of boots – two pairs – entering the kitchen, and smiled.

She smiled at the sight of Kili’s soft, blushing smile, and at the color that bloomed on Tauriel’s cheeks. She smiled at the awkward hug and the nervousness masking the budding confidence and trust building between the two. She smiled at the tender sight of their love. She smiled at Thorin, shaking his head and, after failing to hide his own smile – slapping Kili’s back, a validation and a blessing.

Her smile softened when he approached her, eyes warm and expression almost shy.

“Still coming with me?” he whispered as he kissed her temple. “Not changing your mind?”

She held his hands, caressing the rough skin, then placed them on her waist. “Of course I am,” she whispered back, a smile still tugging at her lips. “And of course I am not.”

Thorin rumbled something that sounded like a complaint as his fingers tightened their hold. “Trust an Elf to say both yes and no.”

“Trust a Dwarf to ask the same thing in different forms that require opposing responses.”

“Trust an Elf to blame the Dwarf.”

“Trust a Dwarf to – A quick kiss to her lips melted her response. She leaned into the kiss, hands quick to travel up the arms and hug his neck. “Just trust, perhaps?” she breathed against his lips.

She could feel his smile as he seared his response with a kiss.

On their last day, she looked back. She climbed the tallest hill and watched as the sunset painted
the small village. The Shire. She took in the smells and the sights and watched as the day bloomed
upon the sky and then withered into night.

It had been her home, her freedom, her sanctuary. Gardens and gossip, wind and wine, food and
friendship. Whatever the future held for her, nothing could charm its way into her heart the way
the Shire did.

Fingers tightened around her waist, pulling her against a warm, hard chest.

This time, she did not protest. Instead, she leaned against the muscled body that engulfed her,
softening with a quiet sigh.

His chest, in response, rumbled.

“It was a beautiful day,” she whispered. Her hands held his, fingers intertwining, skin against skin.
No more gloves. “Do you have gardens in Erebor?”

“Few, and only for agriculture and medicine. You shall have one, if you wish it.”

His hands against her stomach reminded her of so long ago when she stood on a balcony and
watched the coming of winter and the end of her freedom.

“What would you like to grow?” he whispered.

“Lilies.”

Thorin chuckled, then kissed her hair. His left hand left hers – despite her protesting fingers – and
fished something from his pocket, then offered it to her.

He held a small tin box, as simple as they come, but she knew him to be a swordsman, so the plain
hinges and the simple embellishments must have taken hours of work. Hours of love and devotion.
She opened the box, revealing an interior stuffed to the brim with small bags of cloth.

“This is my second gift. It’s a tin box, filled with an assortment of medical herbs picked by Oin. To
treat every issue, or so he said.” His voice vibrated slightly, as if from nervousness, and Lily
looked up, frowning. Did he think she would turn him away, a day before their departure? “It is a
vow, a promise I will be by your side to tend to you, in sickness or in health.”

His eyes darkened, or perhaps was it the result of the sun’s light beginning to fade? Lily smiled at
him, trying to sear the love that graced every fiber of her being into her eyes. She turned around,
still clad in his embrace. “In sickness or in health,” she repeated, “I shall never leave you.”

She accepted the small box, wondering at Thorin’s gentleness, and then looked up. Oh, the light
returned to his eyes. She cupped his cheek with her free hand, seeking the warmth emitted by the
fire in the ever-stormy blue. “I promise.”

And they kissed, lips exploring lips seeking the past and crafting the present. Lily’s fingers traced
the sharp cheekbone, then moved to tangle in his hair and pull him closer to her, only closer, as his
hands settled on her waist and cradled her to him. She had to tiptoe but had no fear of losing her
balance, not when Thorin was there to hold her, catch her, erase her worries with a caress of his
lips.

His beard prickled her cheeks, sending a burning jolt from her heart to her stomach, and the meek
moan the friction elicited enticed Thorin to pull her flush against his chest.
He broke the contact suddenly, pausing to exhale a shuddered gasp against her cheek. “I am sorry, I….”

Lily shook her head, still holding his gift; still cradling his head. “Stay with me tonight.”

Thorin opened his eyes and looked at her. “Are you… certain?”

She nodded, exploring his scalp with her fingers. “Every night.”

Thorin closed his eyes, grumbling in pleasure as her fingers’ touch soothed the worries so quick to rise. “Every night?” He smiled that crooked, tight-lipped smile she loved so much.

Her cheeks flushed crimson, despite her best attempt to regain her composure… an attempt that failed entirely when Thorin traced a line of kisses on her jaw, leaving her breathless.

“Every night.”

In the end, however, Dori insisted on spending the night with them, between them, so even his nights were taken. Thorin, however, did not complain. He watched both mother and daughter sleep and smiled. Lily, of course, slept like a lady. She was curled on one side, one hand resting on Dori’s belly, the other holding his. Dori, on the other hand, slept like Kili and Fili did when they were boys – limbs sprawled everywhere, taking more space than the adults combined.

Thorin moved her hair from her small face, then caressed his wife’s cheek. Aye, his wife.

Perhaps he imagined it, but it seemed to him that Lily smiled.

He offered her the knife as Dori ate her porridge while listening to Bofur and Bombur retelling the story of their encounter with the Troll gang, which was where they decided to make camp.

They stood farther away from the group, hidden by a tree’s shadow, and watched their daughter listen with eyes wide and sparkling to the slightly embellished version of what happened in that very spot, as Bofur exclaimed, while Bombur fed the absorbed toddler, whose mouth was conveniently wide open with awe.

Thorin had to admit he was impressed with how the two managed to convince the child to sit down and eat instead of running around or away in an attempt to explore every single rock and plant and bug. Also, the stories kept the child’s mind occupied, so she didn’t cry for her home in the shire.

Though he wished the two didn’t make him sound quite so foolish. He may have stared, but he was quite sure he never stuttered.

Lily, of course, thought it was terribly amusing.

She offered him yet another half smile half frown as she accepted the bejeweled weapon.

“It’s a ceremonial knife, mostly for special events and fancy dinners. Men and women of our alliance never walk unarmed, but some weapons are considered offensive in certain settings. Wearing a ceremonial knife, however, is… almost expected,” he explained. “It is made of iron, a vow of protection.”

Lily drew it out of its leather sheath, studying the symbols gracing the metal. “I do not know how
to use a knife, other than to slice apples, perhaps.”

Thorin hugged her from behind, pulling her against his chest. He kissed the nape of her neck. “Then how do you explain the times you saved my life – and that of the company – using a blade?”

“Sheer luck?”

She shuddered when he bit the spot he kissed before. “I’ll teach you to use it.” He snickered. “Make a warrior out of you.”

She scoffed. Her hand rose to hold his, fingers intertwining. “I doubt it. Are all Dwarf women warriors?”

“It is common to train both boys and girls when they reach the age of six. My sister won several axe throwing tournaments in her youth.” He smiled, reminiscing. “The Elven Alliance does not train its women?”

“It is uncommon, to say the least. Men are considered preferable for the job.”

She tensed in his arms, so he muttered, “You will not be judged for that, I promise you.” He kissed her cheek and soothed, “It is a vow of protection, Lily. I will protect you from physical and verbal threats alike.”

From the corner of his eye, he could see her smile, though the expression was uneasy. She sheathed the knife. “What could I possibly protect you from?” she asked in a small voice.


“War?” She frowned and turned to face him.

His hands settled on her waist, ensuring she was still close to him. “Well, you are a diplomat, are you not?”

Lily scowled, though failed to hide her smile. “Only if you promise to listen.”

Thorin’s smile widened. “That is a different vow. I am afraid that for now, I can only offer you protection.” He kissed her. “And medical assistance,” He kissed her again. “And to share your burdens.” He kissed her again and again until her lips surrendered to the smile toying with his.

“I shall have to accept your gift, then,” she feigned defeat, “if only so I could get the next one.”

He laughed, a rumble slow to bloom but quick to light his wife’s eyes. “Come,” he told her, holding her hand. “Let’s find two sticks.”

“Sticks?” She didn’t follow.

“For the weapon training.” He picked up a branch and broke it in half, testing it for rot or weak spots before handing one to Lily. “Can’t start the training with a sharpened blade.”

The woman didn’t look at all excited as she regarded the piece of wood with alarm.

“I also wanna play with sticks!” Dori ran to join them. “Daddy, I want a stick!”

Dwalin rose from his spot. “I’ll teach you, lass.” He broke a small, yet sturdy branch from the tree above them and offered it to her. “Real warrior stuff.”
Thorin watched Dori considering her options. Her face contorted into a concentrated pout he found to be adorable. “I want Daddy to play with me,” she decided.

Dwalin folded his arms. “If you wanna play, lass, that’s fine. But if you want to be a warrior, you gotta train with me. I teach all the soldiers.”

Dori frowned, reconsidering. “I’ll be mean and scary like you?”

Dwalin snickered. “You’ll have to work hard for that.”

The child accepted the stick. She held it in her hands, scowling, then – with a loud yell – ran toward Dwalin and started attacking his leg. “I cut you! Yah! Yah!”

Bofur choked on his drink. “That lass is gonna be fearless, eh?”

Thorin smiled, shaking his head, and watched as Dwalin crouched to show the child how to properly hold the stick – and nearly lost an eye for his efforts. He turned to glance at his wife, who stood poised with a gentle smile and shining eyes, her stick all but forgotten.

He hugged her from behind, hands guiding hers into the proper position. “You hold the knife like this – one hand, no need for two – “

“Thorin! You teaching or you playing?” Dwalin growled at him.

“Yah! I’m mean and scary!” Dori, stick now held properly, continued her savage attack on Dwalin’s boot.

“For an ant, maybe,” the warrior replied, unimpressed.

“Thorin,” Lily observed, “I believe I have won.”

Thorin looked down to find her stick pointed at his gut. He smiled. “Not if I tackle you.” He drove his sheen into the inside of her knee and toppled her into his arms, then to the ground. He wrestled the stick from her hands and planted them against the grass.

“I fail to see how that taught me anything,” Lily remarked, breathless. Her cheeks, however, were flushed.

Thorin looked at her, his woman. Her hair surrounded her like a golden halo, her hands pinned above her head, her eyes bright and her cheeks flushed red and her chest heaving and her lips, oh, her lips –

“Get a room!” Dwalin ordered. “Don’t give the lass here any wrong ideas ‘bout fightin’!”

“Mommy, look! Dwalin showed me how to stab!”

Thorin released Lily’s hands, albeit reluctantly, and helped her up. Lily took in the sight of Dori charging a shrub to the sound of Bofur and Bombur’s rolling laughter and shook her head.

“Perhaps I should have Dwalin teaching me as well?”

Thorin scowled, embarrassed. “I can teach you.”

“All I learned was that I should hold the knife with one hand,” she teased, a smile on her lips.

“And to stab instead of threaten.”
She chuckled. “Of course.”

Thorin’s scowl deepened. He picked up the stick and declared, “I’ll teach you to block, instead.”

Behind him, Dwalin snorted.

Dori, exhausted, fell asleep in Thorin’s arms almost immediately after reaching Rivendell and missed entirely the staring contest that comprised most of Elrond’s and Thorin’s meeting.

Thorin protested the need for a visit, but some things are just… easier to deliver when you have the White Council at your side. Of course, she wasn’t entirely sure her father would heed Elrond’s words, but it might be enough to influence the opinions of her people and, most importantly, her brother.

Her brother might be the answer to everything. The letter he wrote to her – ink smeared at the edges of every letter, lines twisted in a hurry – indicated she should tread carefully. But she shall tread nonetheless. She decided to write her own fate the day that soft blue eyes, as innocent as a fresh summer sky, saw her and glowed with laughter-tinted light.

Lily caught her reflection in the mirror, then returned to her writing. Elrond was still interrogating Thorin, and despite her trust in Thorin’s devotion and Elrond’s judgment, she still could not chase away the gnawing sensation that perhaps…

A gentle yet clear knock on her door aroused her from her musings. Lily rose and bowed her head, nervous yet again, when Elrond entered.

The Duke’s gray hair and solemn eyes did not soften upon seeing neither her nor her daughter, but his chest did seem to deflate upon releasing a timeworn sigh.

“He fights most ardently for you,” the Duke noted.

Lily nodded. She paused, waiting for words that did not come, then responded, “That is his way. He does not hide or withhold. I do not doubt him.”

Elrond’s eyes pierced her, tearing into her soul, seeking the doubt she professed not to have. “We had a similar conversation in this very room about five years ago. You did not doubt him then, either. And yet, a year after, you were once again my guest, and not of your own choosing.”

“I spoke of his devotion to his people.”

“You were one of them when he cast you aside. You were his wife!”

Lily flinched, then returned Elrond’s gaze. Her eyes did not waver. “I belong to no one, Your Grace. I leave with Thorin because I choose to do so. I choose him because I love him. Even if my choice would separate me from my people and even if I will never be truly welcomed by his, I choose him. That is my choice, both bitter and sweet, and I stand by it. By him.”

Elrond inspected her. In the long silence that followed, he studied her.

Lily waited. As nervous and hopeful and fearful as she was, she waited.

The Duke cast one last, contemplative look at the sleeping child before closing his eyes and bowing his head.
Oh. The air fled her lungs as she rushed forward, taking his hand in hers as a sign of gratitude. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

Elrond held her hands, studying the scar on her palm with a careful touch of his thumb, then held her eyes with his. “If allowing this would mean you had finally found your home, your happiness, I could not choose otherwise. But know that Rivendell will always be a home for you, should you be in need of one.” He squeezed her hands gently, smiled, and released her. His smile was short-lived. “I believe he is in his room, waiting for you.”

“And may I visit?” she asked, breathless.

For the first time in their conversation, Elrond looked amused. “He is your husband, is he not?”

She huffed – a short laugh tumbled from her lips, as rebellious as she – curtsied, and walked (or ran when she was sure no one was looking) to Thorin’s room. To Thorin.

She opened the door without stopping – or thinking – to knock.

Thorin stood on the balcony, smoking. He turned to face her, alarmed, but the smoke that clouded his eyes dissipated when he saw her smile.

Her eyes caught the sight of a bottle of wine and a plate of strawberries, already washed and cut, which Thorin left neglected on the table next to him. With her smile never wavering, she closed the door behind her and walked to the table, then poured two glasses of the dark, red liquid.

Holding his hand, she led him to the divan, to sit among the stars and the fireflies. Thorin reclined against the cushions, eyes dark in the soft candlelight, and Lily joined him, cuddling in his lap.

His left hand held her waist while the other caressed her cheek and her hair. Lily smiled, picked up a strawberry, and fed her husband. His amused chuckle made her flush as red as the fruit, and the smile he sent her way was just as sweet. She leaned against his chest, relishing the warmth and the intimacy of the moment, and allowed Thorin’s fingers to undo her worries and her corset.

His fingers fed her a strawberry, as sweet as the dark wine, and lingered when she kissed the juice from their tips. She lifted herself up to untie Thorin’s tunic and watch as he removed it quite unceremoniously and threw it aside. They did not hurry. The night was young and the strawberries were sweet and after so many years spent apart, they relearned and discovered, unearthed and entrusted – their weathered bodies a treasure of secrets and moonlight and love.

Lily cupped his cheeks and kissed him, the scratch of his beard and the caress of his lips electrifying her senses and blooming inside her. Her fingers continued to tangle in his hair, silken and wild, and then traveled down to study the planes of his body. She traced every scar, committing them to memory, and stroked the firm muscle and the sculpted chest that haunted her dreams. Her breath hitched when she reached the jagged line that tore through his shoulder, and her hands tightened their grip on his neck when she kissed him, drowning.

Thorin answered her fears and wants, anchoring her against him. His fingers tangled in her hair and pulled her to him, their touch soothing and his kisses demanding. She liked the assertive strength of his kiss. Craved it. She whispered her sighs against his mouth as a secret song of desire that Thorin was more than willing to answer. His hand pulled up the hem of the dress and found its way underneath, tracing burning trails on the flesh of her thigh.

The touch left her breathless. She broke the kiss, gasping for air, and Thorin marked her neck with searing kisses and gentle bites. Her hands traveled up from his shoulders to his hair, pulling him
closer, and Thorin answered with a growl and kissed her collarbone, sucking on them and biting when he heard her broken sigh.

“Undress me,” she whispered, kissing the tip of his ear. “Thorin….”

His hands released her hair and leg and moved to undo the bonds of her dress as his lips searched hers with rekindled hunger. Her dress pulled around her, revealing her shoulders, and Thorin’s fingers tugged it lower to unveil her breasts.

Her breath hitched as she remembered how once, before she breastfed – a surprised moan shuddered through her and through her worries as Thorin cupped one breast, his touch so tender and full of devotion, and kissed her nipple. He bit and sucked gently, pulled her closer to him, fingers digging into the soft flesh of her lower back. Lily embraced him, seeking the solid warmth of his presence as well as the sweet caress of his lips.

“You are beautiful,” he muttered to her stomach, trailing kisses on her skin. “Zi abnâmul, ghivashel. You are beautiful, treasure of all treasures.”

Oh, she could melt in his arms when he rumbled those foreign words, so full of devotion.

“Even though I was changed?” she mumbled, teeth worrying her lower lip to lock in her sighs.

Thorin looked up at her, eyes so blue, as tender as the soft smile on his lips. His hands traveled up to cup her cheeks. “You are no less beautiful to me today than you were all those years ago. Lily, surely you know, you must know that you are the most beautiful woman in the world to me.”

Her lips parted as she exhaled weakly and her eyes brimmed with tears. Embarrassed, she curled her fists and looked away, trying to rein in whatever storm of emotion chose to rage within her –

But Thorin did not let her go. He kissed her eyes and her damp cheeks and her lips, again and again, until she managed a broken smile. His hands were so soothing, so tender, as they stroked her cheeks and held her up.

“Oh, Thorin,” she whispered, his name a broken prayer, as she wrapped her hands around his neck and sought sanctuary in his hair. “Thorin.”

His hands rubbed her back, holding her and hugging her at the same time. Then they traveled lower, tugging on her dress, and Lily lifted herself up so she could shrug out of it entirely. She returned to his lap, naked, and he wrapped her legs against his midriff as his fingers explored the tender flesh of her inner thighs. She kissed him, her body almost burning with the need to feel him, make sure he’s real and alive and still with her –

Thorin kissed her, saving her, reviving her, with passion and love and devotion that melted her insecurities and fears with the same warmth that each of his caresses spread in her belly.

“I love you,” she whispered, her voice breaking, “Thorin, I need you.”

“I am not going anywhere,” he promised, “I am not leaving you.”

His fingers penetrated her, rubbing and exploring and pleasuring. She arched her back, mind black and chest heaving with uncoiled desire. His lips kissed her neck, her collarbone, her nipples, all of her… All of her basked in the light of his presence and the warmth of his touch.

Lily, drunk on his touch, somehow managed to release his hair so she could undo the ties of his pants in response. She touched him, explored his warmth with her fingers, then leaned on his
shoulders for support as he lifted her in his arms and entered her.

His growl rolled against her lips as he kissed her, claiming her mouth with intoxicating hunger. Oh, he was inside her. Lily opened her eyes, lips parted – she could not breathe – to find Thorin looking at her, holding her. “Lily?” he rasped.

She rushed to kiss him, taste him, touch him. He was inside her, and the staggering sensation bloomed within her veins like blossom like gold like the sun. Even the initial pain felt good. Felt real.

Thorin began to slowly glide in and out of her, tempering her sighs with his lips and fueling the twitching in her loins with his ragged breath. He was so slow and gentle with her, rocking in and out of her, that Lily felt the need to reassure him, hold him as well. Her fingers sought purchase in his broad shoulders as the need that burned within her colored every moan with desire.

He lowered her to the divan, ever so slowly, removed his pants and entered her again, filling the whole of her. Her entire body felt his. She could not see or feel or hear anything that wasn’t Thorin’s ragged breath in her ear. Thorin’s raspy voice. Thorin muttering her name, again and again, reassuring her, stroking her, making her blossom with pleasure unknown to her before.

He kissed her, lips rough and demanding and unrefined, and yet the desire was muffled by the careful worship of his touch, as if he wanted to taste and explore every inch of her, hear her moan and cry out his name – there was no hurry, this time. He commanded her body’s secrets with a trace of fingers and lips over soft skin and perky nipples, taking over her senses and leaving her breathless.

“Thorin,” she choked, then opened her eyes to simply look at him. “Thorin,” she called him to her.

He returned to her lips, reassuring and conquering and surrendering, as her legs locked behind his to push him deeper and her hands tangled in his hair to pull him closer. Thorin growled in her ear and the feral sound echoed within her as her back arched yet again, hips bucking forward of their own accord. She collected each growl, each sigh with a kiss, searing hot and full of passion, smoldered by the unrelenting heat in his stormy blue eyes. He increased his pace and Lily’s fists gripped the silk fabrics as she arched her back, arms trembling and body melting, aching and twitching with pleasure.

“Thorin….”

Thorin finished with a drawn-out grunt, filling her with his seed. He toppled on top of her, as spent as she, and both took a moment to feel, to taste, to find solace and comfort in each other’s panting forms. His heavy body left her breathless, but she welcomed the sensation as another reminder that Thorin was truly there with her. She hugged him, tracing invisible paths on his moist skin and firm muscle that relaxed with her soft touch.

Thorin exited her and cuddled her to him, chest rising and falling underneath her, and Lily surrendered to his soothing fingers in her hair and the calming smell of his body and the warmth of his chest.

They remained like that, holding each other and absorbing, remembering, cherishing, until Lily finally found the strength to pull herself up and kiss him. That kiss was slow and gentle, no hunger involved, and tasted of satisfied love and devotion.

She broke the kiss to smile at him and stroke his features with her fingers – the sharp cheekbones, the well-defined nose, the strong jaw and tender lips and coarse beard; oh, and those blue eyes,
watching her. She fed him a strawberry, amused, and her cheeks bloomed pink when he chuckled.

She ate one herself, savoring the sweetness, and smiled when he poked her so she would feed him another one. She picked another strawberry and traced Thorin’s lips with the tip, yet drew it away whenever he tried to bite.

Thorin growled, propped himself up and bit the fruit from her hands. When she laughed, he lowered her back to the divan and bent over her, the strawberry still locked between his teeth. Her eyes widened when he bowed his head so she could take a bite. Her lips met his as she bit into the fruit, and there they lingered as Thorin leaned in and kissed her.

She lifted her hands to bury her fingers in his hair and beard and pull him closer and lick the taste of the strawberry from his lips.

“I love you,” she whispered.

Thorin swallowed the strawberry and offered a teasing smile. “Hmm. I know.”

The next day, Thorin stood quietly and observed his wife brushing her hair. Her soft blush betrayed the fact she knew he was looking at her, and the fact that his gaze still affected her made him smile.

When she started braiding her hair, he closed the distance between them and held her hands in his, allowing her hair to untangle and fall freely. She watched, eyes wide with wonder, as he braided her hair expertly, binding the front hair in four braids while allowing the rest of her hair to grace her shoulders unbound. He then tied the four braids together with a copper hair comb shaped like a dainty stem adorned with three leaves, bejeweled with diamonds and one, silver lily.

“A gift of copper. A promise I shall always love till the end of my days,” he whispered to her hair.

Lily’s lips parted as her fingers explored the gift, gingerly trailing the curves and the finesse of the hair comb.

“It… it is beautiful, Thorin.” A soft smile danced upon her lips. “I did not take you for a jeweler.”

“Swords have adorned hilts,” Thorin protested, then admitted, “I may have relied on another’s skill, in this piece. I wanted to present you with a gift worthy of you.”

Lily’s eyes lit with warmth. She took his hand in hers and kissed it, whispering, ‘I promise,’ and ‘I love you,’ to his knuckles. She looked up at him, yesterday’s promise still shining brightly in her eyes, and –

“Daddy!!! Everyone is waiting for you!” A voice commanded from the door, “Dwalin says you are wasting daylight.”

For a short moment – accompanied by an exhausted groan – Thorin almost missed the days his daughter and his best friend were on non-speaking terms.

“Yes, come, brother, let’s spar!”

But he is asleep. Frerin is looking at you and he is asleep.
“I’ll be the best fighter, just you watch!”

Your brother is crying. He is crying – yet the eyes that meet yours are angry –

Lily’s hands push at your chest feebly, so feebly you barely feel them, then fall to her sides –

People are screaming. People are running. They push against you. Pull. Shriek. The heat is deafening.

Your brother is lying in the snow. He wasn’t supposed to be there. He was supposed to be home he was supposed to be alive he was –

Lily, lifeless in your arms. Her body is cold and limp and blue. She does not respond when you kiss her –

“Thorin? Thorin. Thorin!”

“I am Ningalor, daughter of Thranduil, lady of Mirkwood.” She is crying. “Thorin –“

Smaug looks at you from the flames that lick your skin. Eat your home. Consume your mother. His golden lips widen. His eyes are gold within gold within gold. “Hmm. Smells like roasted pork, doesn’t it? With a hint of copper. Cheap life smells like cheap metal.”

“You promised me,” she whispers, “you promised me you would not give me to him.”

“Thorin!”

His eyes snapped open, tearing into the vast darkness in a vain attempt to find blue, blue eyes –

“Thorin –“

A hand on his shoulder. He hissed and pushed away, trembling limbs fight unrelenting fabric to no avail – choking him, grabbing him, shackling him –

“Thorin, it’s me. Thorin. Hey, it’s all right. It’s all right now. Thorin, please.”

He looked up. His lungs, trembling like the rest of him, managed one, shaky breath. Lily.

Lily, blue eyes clad in darkness, crawled to him. Her hands held his face, held him, then pulled him against her chest. Her racing heart echoed his uneven throbbing.

“Shhh,” she whispered, hands massaging his scalp, then rubbing his back. “What’s wrong?”

His hands, weak from futile struggle, rose to clutch her arms, then hug her. Hold her. He pulled her to him, limbs still trembling, with a need too desperate to contain. And Lily held him, strength never waverling. She kissed his forehead and hair, again and again, anchoring him with her touch.

The dream refused to let him go.

“Thorin?”

He untangled himself from her, then fought the wet sheets still clinging to his drained limbs. His failed attempts became frenzied when the fabric refused to let him go – Lily helped. Her marble white hands freed him from his bonds like she freed him from his cell – like they tended him when he was broken –
“Thorin?”

He rose and stumbled outside. The cool wind felt colder against his wet skin, but he could breathe again. He could breathe. The cool wind smelled nothing like Smaug’s breath. He entered Beorn’s pond, one step, then another, until the water reached his waist. His chest. He cupped the clear water in his hands, observing the reflection of the moon held in his palm, then washed his face. The water that trickled down his back was cold. So cold.

Nothing like Smaug’s inferno.

“Thorin? Thorin, come back.” That was Lily’s voice. Lilly… she witnessed it. She saw his failure.

“I…” His voice failed him as well. He washed his face, numbing his skin. “I am not clean,” he muttered. He washed his face again, trying to drown his brother’s dead body from his retinas. Cooling the ever-burning flames. One day they’ll go away. They had to go away. Leave. Please, just leave.

“No,” a voice whispered behind him as two hands hugged him from behind. “I am not leaving you,” she promised, holding him. “Never ask that of me.” Her lips kissed his back. The kiss was warm.

His fingers, almost out of habit, tangled with hers. “You are cold,” he muttered.

“Yes.” Another kiss. “Come back to bed?”

“The sheets….”

“Are the last thing I care about.” Her hands squeezed his in reassurance.

“I am sorry,” he whispered. “I thought these… dreams had stopped. I thought that the Axoloa’s effect had ended. That I…” conquered my nightmares. That he did not say.

“Thorin, look at me.” Her voice was so soft, so gentle. “Look at me.”

He turned around, supported by her hands.

She stood before him, pale but bright in the moonlight, shining like a star. Her eyes were his sanctuary and his salvation, soft like her touch. Her hands cupped his cheeks, caressing his beard, then guided him to bow his head so she could kiss his numb lips and breathe life into them.

His hands held her waist as he returned the kiss, drinking the softness of her lips, desperate for the gentle promise hidden in their warmth. Her hands were cold.

He touched his forehead to hers and watched as her hands held his, fingers tangling with fingers, then led him out of the pond. They sat next to the fire, draped in new blankets, and Lily sat in his lap, cradling his head against her chest. His hands held her, fingers digging into the soft flesh, and the rhythmic beating of her heart – like a lullaby – put his fears to rest and banished the remains of his dream.

“You said my name,” she whispered to his hair. “You were in pain.”

His hold of her tightened. He breathed the scent of her hair and her wet skin and reminded himself she was safe. He was safe. And Lily sat in his arms, holding him.

“The Eagles warned us of the consequences. Their medicine induces dreams… too lifelike to be
called dreams. Memories. Fresh like yesterday.” He shifted closer to her. “It had been years since I last consumed it. I thought….”

Her body responded to the desperation in his voice. Lily cradled him closer, kissing his forehead and his hair. “Bad memories?” she whispered.

“Yes.” He closed his eyes. “Lily…..”

And Lily understood. She lay on the soft fur and opened her arms to him, guiding him into her embrace. She held him, her fingers soothing in his hair. “I love you,” she whispered. “I’m not leaving you. I’m not leaving you.”

Her fingers stroke his hair, his back, reassuring his with each gentle caress of her love and her presence. She kissed him, again and again, whispering her promise to him with a voice never wavering. Her body was so soft under his, so reassuring. The sensation of her meant everything to him.

“Don’t blame yourself for this, for any of this,” she whispered, and hadn’t she told him this before?

Thorin rested his head against her heart and fell asleep.

When she woke, she was alone.

Lily opened her eyes slowly, tired and a tad too warm, to find herself cradled in furs that were probably meant to make up for the missing body warmth. She smiled sluggishly and entertained the notion of trying to go back to sleep when last night’s memories shook her awake.

She was alone.

Lily rose, need stronger than sleep burning through her veins – oh. A soft smile tugged at her still tired lips. She was not alone after all. Her steps were light as she closed the distance to her husband and hugged him, kissing his cheek. “How are you feeling?” she whispered.

Thorin pulled her into his embrace, kissing her forehead in response. “Thank you,” he muttered.

Lily nodded, then cradled his face in her hands, fingers buried in his beard. Her eyes searched his, looking for a residue of yesterday’s nightmare, a stain of pain, a sign of misery. When she found none, she smiled and kissed him. “I did vow to share your burdens,” she teased, pleased when his lips met hers with a grin.

His hands left her waist so he could fish something metallic from his pocket which he clasped around her neck. “A gift of silver. My promise that I will listen to your advice and wisdom,” he vowed.

Lily touched his gift – a necklace of masterfully crafted strings of silver, embroidered with star-like gems, shining with a light of their own, crafting intricate shapes of stars and lilies. It was beautiful.

“The necklace of Lasgalen would have been more appropriate, I suppose, but – “

“This is better.” Lily looked up, seeking and promising and basking in the love shining in her husband’s eyes. Her fingers caressed his hair, tangling in the silvering strands. “I promise you the same.”
Thorin kissed her, bowing his head and holding her in his arms with gentleness and tender love that said everything his words could not. “This room was our beginning,” he said, then his smile faded. “A witness to my promises.”

She kissed his brow, trying to wipe his frown with her lips. “To their renewal. You keep your word, Thorin.” She smiled as she kissed. “Don’t judge yourself too harshly.”

His frown deepened. “Lily….”

She cocked a brow at him. “You did just promise to listen to my wisdom, did you not?”

“I regret it already,” he sighed, but he smiled as his spoke, and his kiss – a bruising, burning kiss – was full of warmth.

Once again, she opened his door without knocking, and once again, his frown disappeared upon seeing her smile.

“Does your father know you sneak into men’s rooms? Quite the hobby,” he teased as he welcomed her into his arms.

“I should hope not; I take pride in my sneaking skills,” Lily replied, kissing his lips. She sighed, exhaustion seared into her breath, and leaned on his shoulder for support. “Dori?”

“With Bombur and Bifur. I did not want her to witness the… confrontation.” He kissed her temple.

“How was it?”

Lily hugged his back, comforted by its strength. “Dreadful, but one could hardly imagine otherwise. Father was furious.” She needed those moments with him, as stolen as they felt. It was never easy, she mused. It isn’t going to get easier, she knew. Her people did not accept her and opposed Thorin; they scorned their union. What would his people say?

As if sensing her thoughts, Thorin led her to the divan and then poured her a glass of wine. He sat next to her, chuckling when she snuggled against him. “And…?”

“It will take him a few months to adjust, I suppose.” If at all. “My brother is on my side – “

“Legolas? Really?” Thorin frowned, fingers locked in her hair.

“Ah.”

They sat in silence, drinking wine and seeking each other’s presence. Lily held his hand and kissed his knuckles, sensing the tension in his hold. “What’s on your mind?”

Thorin frowned at the lavish walls of his room as if they were the stark stone walls of his cell. “Names,” he admitted. “For you and for Dori.”

“What for?” She shifted up, looking into his eyes.

The troubled blue softened as his hand cupped her cheek. “I told you, I believe, that it is a Dwarven Bond custom to give our members two names – a secret one and another one with which to deal with the other alliances.” He chuckled. “It seems you were destined to bear many names.”
“And how did you intend to name me?” she whispered, leaning into his touch.

“You are an adult; you may pick your own name,” he muttered, tangling his fingers with hers.

She held his hand, then kissed it. “Name me.” His eyes held a promise she craved and cherished, the strength to endure everything.

Thorin looked at her, into her, caressing her hair. “Ragnjeidr,” he whispered, kissing the name into her lips. “And Sigrun for Dori.”

Lily returned the kiss. “What do those mean?”

Thorin chuckled. “I have another gift for you,” he said instead.

She frowned. “Thorin….”

But the man kept his silence. He gave her a small package covered in cloth, then watched as she opened the bonds and unveiled a delicate tiara made of gold. The golden circlet was adorned with gentle flowers and blue gems, crowned with one, incredibly detailed oak leaf and a large sapphire, shaped like an acorn.

“A promise I shall always provide for you, Ragnjeidr, my brightest adviser.”

Lily smiled. Her body bloomed with smiles, she felt, a blissful weakness she could do nothing to suppress. A perfect sensation caused by the man engulfing her in his arms. “Hard name to live up to,” she whispered. “Is it possible you think too highly of me?”

“Impossible.” He crowned her, setting the masterpiece of gold and sapphires upon her hair. “Ragnjeidr.” He kissed her lips. “Ragnjeidr,” he whispered, his eyes ardent.

“Ragnjeidr.”

Chapter End Notes

So… I guess that’s what happens when you can’t pick a name for your character. You end up with three of them.

I would like to thank each and every one of my readers – your comments and kudos really kept me going! Thank you for all of your support =)

Name meaning:
- Ragnjeidr – old Norse name meaning "bright advice," derived from the elements regin "advice, counsel" and heiðr "brightness."
- Sigrun - Derived from the Old Norse elements sigr "victory" and rún "secret." This was the name of a Valkyrie in Norse legend.

That’s it! Let me know what you think!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!