No Matter What We Breed

by fideliant

Summary

In a world where omega males are slightly less rare than Arkenstones, Thorin doesn't do himself much of a favour by falling in love with the first gentlehobbit he lays eyes on. Much more is expected of virile alpha male dwarves, after all, even more so for kings, but when Bilbo is revealed to be the first omega male in centuries, Erebor is suddenly not the only prize that Thorin has set his sights on winning.

Notes

No, this is not a kinkmeme fill, for once -- just trying my hand at some omegaverse.

Special thanks to atienne for helping this writer through his first foray into this crazy and wacky trope. Title’s from Demons by Imagine Dragons.

• Inspired by In The Shadow of the Blue Mountains: The Alpha and the Omega by beetle
Chapter 1

When Thorin first lays eyes on the so-called burglar named Bilbo Baggins, he is not at all what he had expected him to be like. There is nothing in the way he looks, stands or carries himself that points to any proficiency in burglary whatsoever, but far from wanting to turn to Gandalf and scold the wizard for ostensibly wasting all their times, Thorin is seized with the inexplicable desire to applaud his recommendation.

It's shocking enough that Thorin has to tighten his jaw to keep himself grounded. An alpha or a beta would easily perceive a quickening of his breath as interest, and a fall in it…well, the exact same thing. And he cannot be perceived as interested in Master Baggins by any of the other alpha and beta dwarves around him, or worse, by the hobbit himself. It would most definitely not do to have it known that he finds this…modest-looking creature rather handsome at first sight. Embarrassing, even, should Master Baggins turn out to be an alpha of his race, and then Thorin would never hear the end of it from Dwalin, the hierarchy of kings and subjects be damned.

Wearing a thin, cream-coloured cotton shirt and suspenders holding up a pair of brown trousers, Bilbo Baggins looks up at him, his bluish-grey eyes tapered with uncertainty. There's a comeliness to the expression on his smooth, round face that makes Thorin's mouth water. Locks of curly, auburn hair adorn his head, and when Gandalf introduces him to Thorin, Bilbo's pointed ears twitch at the mention of his name. The shirt he's wearing is only buttoned up to the third one, allowing Thorin a peek at a sliver of the hobbit's pale chest, which he finds himself imagining to be as smooth as his face.

What is most striking about the hobbit, however, is his scent. Alpha or beta, Thorin couldn't be arsed to figure which one Bilbo is at the moment — all over him, Thorin can smell spring downs and satin sheets and brown honey, all molding together into an aroma that fills his lungs in the same manner as how fine food makes its way into his stomach. He has to wonder exactly how Bilbo smells when he is in heat, and the thought has to be tucked away before it can grow into something beyond Thorin’s volition. It’s all he can do to stand his ground, the alternative being to tackle the hobbit to the floor to sniff lovingly at his neck, perhaps thieve a kiss from his lips if he’s feeling particularly brave about it.

“He looks more like a grocer than a burglar,” Thorin says instead, and he grins through the guilt sparking inside him like the beginnings of a small thunderstorm. Bilbo looks slightly hurt at this, and Thorin’s heart sinks, but he doesn’t verbalise the apology that springs into his mouth. Desperate times and desperate measures, and so on.

Out of instinct, the next thing that Thorin does is take a deeper breath as any alpha dwarf does, or for an alpha of any other race as it is generally customary when meeting someone for the first time. This time when the underlying hormones in Bilbo’s scent suffuses his nose, Thorin is aware that his face betrays his inclination to hide his surprise, though Bilbo just sniffs and does not appear to make anything of it.

Thorin glances around at the rest of the dwarves. Those who catch his eye return his gaze knowingly, some with curt nods and others with light shrugs. He looks back at Bilbo, who is scratching behind an ear now with his lips pushed forward into a pout. Mild bemusement clouds his face, something that Thorin only registers when he realises that he’s been staring at the hobbit for an inordinate amount of time.

“Er,” Bilbo says, starting to fidget. “Is there something on my face?” He rubs at his cheek absently and looks down into his hand, frowning. The expression creases several lines into his forehead, and Thorin can’t help but lick his lips at the mental image of tasting Bilbo’s skin on the tip of his tongue.
“Is it gone now?” he asks Thorin, looking up at him with eyes wide and innocent.

It is not a mere interest anymore. Thorin is positively intrigued with Bilbo Baggins, which has a bit to do with the halfling’s most aesthetically pleasing appearance and a whole lot to be attributed to how he smells strongly of a yet-to-be-determined mating partner who has to be short of a few months away from cycling beautifully into his very first heat.

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Later, when the halfling has fled upstairs and left them behind in his living room, Thorin pulls Balin aside, away from the company to talk with him. “Is he…?” He leaves the question dangling, sure that his wisest and most trusted friend, another fellow alpha dwarf, will understand.

Balin nods.

“I — I was beginning to think that it was just me,” Thorin says as he slumps his shoulders. He pinches the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes. “Now he will be a liability more than ever. Gandalf clearly means to sabotage our quest by insisting that he accompanies us.”

“You don’t know that,” Balin tells him gently. “Perhaps there is another reason as to why Gandalf has deemed Master Baggins a suitable candidate for our cause.”

“We don’t need an alpha in full heat tagging along with us,” Thorin snaps, because that is what he would say and actually mean every word of if he had not already decided that he wanted Bilbo Baggins in their company, by hook or by crook. “Not if we have to pull him out of every omega we encounter on the way. And you know that draughts will not do anything to suppress the heat of a flowering.”

“No, they will not, but you are making the rather unfair presumption that Master Baggins is going to be an alpha when he flowers,” Balin replies. “The maturation heat of a beta is much easier to keep under control, even without the use of draughts.”

Thorin is fully aware of this fact, having thought it through carefully before approaching Balin, but he purses his lips and tries to look his most disagreeable. That they are speaking one-to-one means that they have now attracted the not-so-surreptitious attentions of the other ten dwarves in the room, and he has to make this convincing if Bilbo is to be accepted by them. “And if he does flower as an alpha?” he challenges, keeping his face and voice stern.

“Then you also know that the heat of an alpha, even while maturing, can only be brought to its zenith when in the extended presence of an omega in heat as well, of which we number none and the world numbers very little,” Balin says patiently, shaking his head. “We are all living proof of that fact of nature, are we not? You are worrying too much, my king.”

As a matter of fact, Thorin is not worried in the slightest; he hasn’t hit the peak of a heat in over a century, what with the dwarves’ love of locking fertile omega females away from the general populace. Feeling brave to push it just a little further, Thorin throws out the absurdity, “Then what if he matures as an omega?”

The incredulous smile on Balin’s face almost makes Thorin grin. Just a little, he feels guilty for manipulating his odds to this level, but on the other hand, that and the patronising look that Balin gives him would be well worth the prize of having Bilbo in their party. “An omega? Really, Thorin! You may as well posit that Master Baggins will mature as the Firedrake!”

“It is a possibility —” Thorin says, false skepticism in his tone as he revels in the knowledge that it
bloody well is not. The day a male omega appeared on the face of Middle Earth would be the day that another Arkenstone is pulled from beneath the Lonely Mountain, his grandfather used to say.

“Nonsense. There has not been a male omega for four hundred years of recorded history — check with Ori if you need confirmation.” Balin sighs. “I know that you want nothing less for this quest to be a fruitful one, Thorin. But do not let phantom concerns bias you against Master Baggins, whom as far as I can see bears only the sincerest wishes that we see nothing less than success.”

Thorin looks away to conceal his satisfaction. He probably wouldn’t have anything to say in reply to any of that even if he wanted to, anyway. He looks down at his boots and waits, pretending to give the prospect deep thought. For all of ten seconds he keeps up the charade, complete with exaggerated gulping, a bite of his lower lip, and the restless shifting of indecisive eyes. Finally, he returns to his company, Balin tailing behind him, and Thorin tells them all while his heart is soaring inside his chest, “I will allow it.”

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Well, all he can say is he did try.

Now, at the forefront of a line of twelve dwarves and one wizard, a company most dismally missing one hobbit, Thorin keeps his gaze to the road ahead on the pretext of scouting the route. He is really just sulking furiously into the mane of his pony, gnashing his teeth together so hard that he thinks Balin might just be able to hear him. Bully if he does — it doesn’t matter to Thorin, not anymore.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. What had done it? Had it been the grocer comment that put the hobbit off? It wasn’t that offensive, not really, though he thinks and he thinks and can’t figure out anything else besides that might have led to Bilbo declining to join them. Certainly not the bit about Smaug and dragon fire and being a furnace with wings, because even though he’d fainted at that, Bilbo had insisted that he was fine afterwards when he regained consciousness.

If it is so, Thorin knows that he will never, never forgive himself for this, could kick himself for ever thinking it a good idea to call the hobbit a grocer.

With every step he’s further and further away from the halfling, a thought that pains him, never mind that it couldn’t have come to much. An alpha-alpha relationship wasn’t out of the question, though Thorin already has enough of those with the members of his company, thanks. Granted, he thinks that he’d be closer to the hobbit than any of them — Thorin knows that he would have done anything in his power to make that a reality, at least until they found their separate omegas, but still that didn’t mean they still couldn’t continue to be near each other. Just anything to get more of that scent, and to cast his eyes upon that handsome, boyish face, maybe press his own lips to the hobbit’s in a simple act of brotherly love…

“Wait!”

The cry comes from behind them, high-pitched and desperate and familiar. Thorin falters on the edge of disbelief, cautious of dashed hopes and expectations, but when he turns his pony around, the wind catches him, carrying that sweet, delicate scent of comely little gentlehobbit in an excited state of almost-heat, and Thorin has to grip his reins tight to avoid falling off.

“Wait, wait!” Bilbo jogs up to the pony at the back of the party, puffing and panting and looking completely winded. He holds up a browning length of paper and grins dizzily, his round face shiny with sweat. “I signed it!”

Homely, gorgeous, flustered, sweaty hobbit. The scent is threefold now, amplified through the
blessing of a liquid medium. The elementary pheromones he is giving off are enough to attract the combined attentions of Dwalin and Nori, both of whom are now looking intently at him, much to Thorin’s displeasure. He makes a mental note to relegate them, and the other alphas, to the back of the party after their next stopover, preferably keeping Bilbo close to him at the front. It pays to be king, sometimes.

Later, while Balin is making sure that the paperwork checks out and the dwarves have developed a small crossfire of lost and gained bets, Thorin determinedly keeps his body facing the front like the needle in a compass pointing solidly north, if only to conceal his smile, which he is sure closely resembles that of a dragon who has stumbled upon an exceptionally large pile of gold to claim, to own, to love as his very own.

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When Thorin thinks that he’s finally stayed away for the prerequisite amount of time needed for anyone to settle fully on the decision that he is most definitely not attracted to Bilbo, they are already making camp that same day to stop for the night. Working up the courage and convincing himself that it’s perfectly normal to exercise polite discourse takes him well into dinner, and they are preparing to go to sleep by the time Thorin shuffles over to the hobbit, who is busy draping his groundsheet over a plot of dry earth and spreading it out.

“Evening,” Thorin rumbles, keeping his voice even. The hobbit’s fragrance assails his nose with a gentle vigour, and he sniffs at it eagerly.

Bilbo stops smoothening out the groundsheet to look up at him. “Good evening.”

“Pleasant night, is it not?” Good grief, he sounds like he’s courting the halfling already. He doesn’t dare to look around to see if anyone is watching them, if they are in earshot to pick up their conversation. Not that anyone would be able to make anything out of a formal greeting, an induction of sorts, if you will.

Bilbo smiles shyly. “Why, yes. I suppose it is.”

“I have heard that hobbits make excellent sleepers,” Thorin blurts out at a half-baked attempt at levity, then gives himself a mental kick for the inanity of that statement. “I mean — hobbits are artful in the ways of enjoying life’s many pleasantries. That was what I meant to say.”

“Oh.” Bilbo’s face turns a most endearing shade of red, pinkening his cheeks and spreading to the tips of his ears. “Oh — um. Thank you very much, Thorin. It’s very kind of you to say so.”

“You’re welcome,” Thorin says, almost heaving a relieved sigh at getting that turned around. He keeps his eyes on Bilbo’s face, most resolutely not looking down his tiny, trim little body and dreaming the fantasy of having the hobbit father his children. Healthy stature, good build, a fertile-looking belly that would nurture a dwobbit very nicely. If only. “Rest well, Bilbo.”

“And you too.” His hand floats absently over his groin, where he scratches for a moment before he appears to take notice of this, and when he does, he stops and pulls his hand away, looking embarrassed. The scent rising from Bilbo is concentrating in the air noticeably, and Thorin recognises this as one of the many indicators of approaching the zenith of mating maturity. He allows a small smile.

“Congratulations,” he tells Bilbo, with all goodwill intended.

“Whatever for?”
Thorin blinks, thrown. “It is not long now for you, is it not?”

“Is what not long now?” Bilbo asks, clearly not following, even as his hand drifts back to scratch at his inner thigh once more.

_Gods_, Thorin thinks, daring himself to believe it. “Your first?” he tries again, slowly becoming more and more mystified.

Bilbo frowns, still scratching. “First? What first?”

_He doesn’t know_. Astonishment comes over Thorin as he excuses himself with a hasty _good night_ and quickly returns to his own groundsheet, lying down on it and turning away from where Bilbo is, his mind working fiercely to digest this new information, and realising with a start that he is somehow drawn toward the hobbit even more so for that.

Curious, simply curious. Thorin decides that he needs to talk to someone about this the moment he wakes up. Someone who might just be able to shed some much-needed light on the enigma that is Bilbo Baggins’s spectacular ignorance, and then some.
Early next morning, Thorin seeks out Gandalf while the others are still sleeping. The wizard is leaning against a large birch tree with his pipe between his lips and the brim of his hat pushed down to cover his eyes. Gandalf’s luxuriantly white beard is draped down the front of his robes, the tip twined around the fingers he has nestled in his lap.

Before Thorin can say anything, Gandalf beats him to the punch with a genial “Good morning, Thorin.”

“Good morning,” Thorin replies, minding his manners. “I need to speak with you, wizard.”

“Regarding Mister Bilbo, I am sure. What is it that you wish to speak about?”

“It’s about…him.” Instantly he wonders why he’s asking Gandalf about this, it being common knowledge that the wizards of Middle Earth are biological outliers on the ubiquitous system of mating. Still, he supposes that being exempted from an ordered system shouldn’t be mutually exclusive from possessing knowledge on it, and if Gandalf has proved anything it’s that he is very knowledgeable, so Thorin forges ahead. “You won’t have smelled it, but —”

“Mister Bilbo is maturing into his first heat.” Gandalf reaches up to tip his hat back, revealing a pair of twinkling, grey eyes and a smile around his pipe.

Thorin bristles, annoyed. “How did you —”

“Why does this trouble you, Thorin? I believed that you had worked this out the night before we departed Hobbiton.”

“Because he is unaware,” Thorin replies, shaking his head. “He does not know what is happening to him. What he is, or what we all are.”

A thin spout of smoke streams out of the corner of Gandalf’s mouth. “I fail to see the problem in this.”

“But…because,” Thorin splutters, wishing he had given his case a bit more thought before approaching Gandalf. Indeed, he doesn’t really know what he’s being so uneasy for — frankly, it changes very little about his plans, if at all. He takes a deep breath to collect his thoughts, piecing together his worries into something resembling a valid concern. “I am troubled, Gandalf. When it happens — when his heat draws close — what will we tell him, then? Already he is displaying marginal discomfort, knowing not of the happenings in the months to come.”

Gandalf laughs amusedly. “My dear Thorin, tell him what you yourself were told as a youth! If you could understand the paradigm of cycles and heats as a young dwarf then, what more so for an adult hobbit like Mister Bilbo?”

“It’s not the same thing.” Thorin insists. Unlike his previous protestations, these are dangerously genuine, and he is all the more desperate to have them reasoned away at all costs, even if it means facing humiliation in front of Gandalf. “It is well-known among dwarves, while I fear it is not among hobbits. If he hasn’t known his whole life, then —”

“You still have nothing to be worried about,” Gandalf finishes for him firmly. “Yes, you are most correct in the conjecture that hobbits know little about this, I can confirm that much, but why should that remain the status quo? Perhaps it is up to you to change that, starting with Mister Bilbo!”
“Why me? Why not you?”

The look Gandalf gives him is unnervingly kind, almost sympathetic. “Because of the two of us, I am not the one who has taken a...let’s say, invested interest in our little friend, Thorin.” He leans back and lowers his hat over his eyes once more, as Thorin sputters incoherently and comes to his wits’ end spinning out a retort and turns on his heel to stalk away, his face hot with indignation.

_Wizards, pah! What do they know, really? Nosy, prying creatures sticking their noses where they don’t belong,_ Thorin growls to himself as he plants himself back where he had been resting the night before, and until the next dwarf begins to stir from sleep, he doesn’t so much as acknowledge Gandalf’s presence, and to his added chagrin, Gandalf himself appears to be perfectly fine with that.

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When they have finished a breakfast of bread and cheese, they get back on the road. In a display of defiance, Thorin rearranges their order of moving out such that Bilbo is right behind him, so Thorin can look Gandalf in the eye with the most contumacious expression that he can muster.

That Gandalf only smiles warmly and nods with approval is enough to ruin Thorin’s mood for the rest of the morning, though it picks up considerably when Bilbo starts talking to him out of the blue.

“So. Um,” the hobbit says, fiddling with the reins of his pony. “Erebor. What is it like?”

Thorin looks over his shoulder at him and smiles. “The grandest place you could ever imagine,” he replies, already feeling a lot better about the day. His childhood is one of the more impressive things that Thorin has to talk about, and having Bilbo unquestionably impressed with him would be an excellent start to their relationship. “Hallways larger than the biggest caves and floors tiled with gold and jewels. And the riches in the royal vaults — I shall show you, once we have made it there.”

“Ah.” Bilbo lowers his gaze to the pommel of his saddle, where his hands are resting. “We — we will make it there, won’t we?”

His scent changes slightly; now, it is soured infinitesimally with a pinch of fear. Thorin breathes it in anyway and finds that in spite of it, Bilbo has lost none of his appeal. It still suits Bilbo very nicely, Thorin thinks affectionately, and again a vision of putting his nose against the hobbit’s temple and breathing in that _marvellous_ scent flashes in his mind. “We shall,” Thorin tells him. “I will make sure of it.”

Bilbo furrows his brow and doesn’t look wholly convinced, but he nods. Thorin notices that Bilbo is squirming a little in his saddle — that’ll be the itch starting — and turns his face away to hide his grimace from him. It wasn’t a pretty affair when he matured all those years back; he could hardly walk about for days, during which he’d been held down in bed, thrashing in agony while the royal dwarven healers smeared their poultices over his nether regions. If it’s the same for hobbits...well, all Thorin can do is hope for Bilbo’s sake that it isn’t, and he occupies his mind with that to push back the inevitable prospect of sitting Bilbo down to explain what everyone should already know from childhood.

What starts to catch Thorin’s attention, however, is the fact that when they have stopped again for the night on the distant outskirts of the Trollshaws, Bilbo’s scent has changed yet again. The sweetness of it remains, though there’s something else there that Thorin cannot exactly place, something novel and mysterious and foreboding, and though he tries hard to figure it out, he can hardly find a reason to be worried about that, which in itself ferments enough worry for him to keep his eyes on Bilbo throughout the setting up of their campsite.
Chomping his way through a mouthful of stew, Thorin stops and wrinkles his nose, lifting it to take an assessing breath in. He nearly gags and spits out the remaining stew in his mouth, getting chunks of meat and carrot in his beard. His grooming is hardly something to be concerned about if the scent in the air speaks true, and Thorin keeps on sniffing to confirm his suspicions. No mistake about it — it's trouble, dangerously close to their location. A stench of filth, faint but miasmic. So thick it may as well be slime in the air; a troll? No, trolls — two betas, at least, the alpha their leader. And, right dead centre in the midst of it all…

Bilbo.

He drops his bowl without another thought and quickly rouses the other dwarves to arms, then leads the charge into the woods at the same moment Kili pops out from the trees, waving his arms in a plea for help.

They follow Kili and burst from the foliage in an outpouring, uncoordinated motion, hacking at calves and thighs and feet and toes and any quarter of exposed troll-flesh. Thorin looks around wildly for Bilbo, and is instantly relieved to see the halfling scrabbling away from the battlefield on his hands and knees. With the knowledge that Bilbo has made it to safety, he throws himself fully into the fight with a battle cry, brandishing his axe wildly.

For five entire minutes, it is chaos of the highest order. Dwarves are captured in huge, clumsy hands only to be released seconds later with the help of biting, sharp blades, and the trolls howl and curse and stamp with anger and frustration. Ori slingshots a rock beautifully into one of the trolls’ forehead, followed by the thwacking of Oin’s cudgel raising angry welts on wart-covered shins. As for Thorin, he darts nimbly around their legs, his axe flashing in and out of toughened, leathery skin, and evades the slow, clumsy hands that grab only air around him. He slips through yet another attempt to grab him and steadies himself, preparing to slam his axe down onto a oozing troll toe —

“Hold it!” the troll bellows, jabbing a finger at a figure that the other two trolls suddenly have stretched between them by his arms and legs. Thorin stops, the scent of the figure familiar, only now the fear is all that remains in the smell of him. “Lay down your arms or we rip his off!”

Thorin looks up into pleading, terrified eyes, and quickly changes the harried sagging of his face to a downturned, mutinous scowl before he can give the game away in the heat of the moment, throwing his axe to the ground with a defiant clang. The rest of the company follow suit behind him, and Thorin looks back up in time for the lip of a brown sack to descend upon him and swallow him up into darkness.

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Later, as they’re helping each other out of their nasty-smelling prisons, Thorin makes for Bilbo immediately, holding him by the shoulders and checking him all over for injury. “Are you alright? Did they hurt you?”

Bilbo shakes his head, looking absolutely downcast. “This is all my fault,” he mumbles. “I’m sorry.”

The misery exuding from Bilbo is a whole different scent altogether, one that easily punches through the residual stink of troll sack and makes Thorin want to crush the hobbit against his body and hold him there to console him. It’s a desire that nauseates as he knows that he cannot fulfill it at the moment, so Thorin tightens his grip on Bilbo’s shoulders to steady them both. “No. This is my fault. I should have made sure that the place wasn’t dangerous. I should have known better than this.”
I — I just don’t know what gave me away,” Bilbo says. “I was quiet and everything, and then…all of a sudden they just knew that I was there.”

Thorin reckons a wild guess but keeps his deductions to himself. He remembers the odd behaviour of the scent Bilbo was giving off the night before — while its erratic nature is still a puzzle to him, Thorin is quite sure that the alpha among the trolls must have picked up on it just as he had from so far away. “You have to be more careful next time,” he tells Bilbo, moving one hand just higher up his collarbone and leaving it there. It’s as far as he feels brave enough to go for now, but he lets his thumb brush gently against the side of Bilbo’s neck. The slightest contact of barest skin on skin makes something inside Thorin leap like a reflex, even though that doesn’t really make any sense, and all he wants is for Bilbo to be wrapped up tight in his arms with nothing between them. It doesn’t make any sense in the slightest, but Thorin thinks that everybody’s allowed to disregard sensibility every once in a long, long while.

Like now, with Bilbo Baggins.

When Bilbo snuffles and pulls his soft mouth into a small smile, Thorin’s heart positively sings. His smell morphs, sweet yet again but with an additional tincture to it that Thorin thinks he may well be able to get drunk on, which isn’t an absurd possibility seeing as he’s already stayed around Bilbo long enough to know what’s been done to his nose. “I will,” Bilbo promises.

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After the encounter with the trolls, it’s not long before they have yet another run-in, this time with a pack of warg-riding orcs. The chase of it is something that Thorin appreciates with a morbid curiosity, if for the way it makes Bilbo’s scent go haywire all over the place. Fear and tension and excitement create a mixing slurry of smells that rise off Bilbo’s sweaty skin, cloying the air with an indisputable scent of the slow onset of heat that any alpha in the immediate vicinity would have to be an idiot to miss.

It is a challenge for Thorin to keep his mind arrowed ahead as he leads their escape across the grassy terrain, dodging behind boulders and tall grasses to evade their pursuers. He is immensely grateful for the physical demands of his body which go beyond his biology as an alpha, allowing him to easily combine the panting as the result of physical exertion with the way his body is reacting to Bilbo’s smell. His eyes dart about the landscape, searching for danger and tracking the movement of their enemies, but flicker to Bilbo every once in a while to keep him constantly in his sight. And, where he can spare to check the rest, he becomes aware that his preoccupation with the hobbit is shared by most of the other alpha dwarves running alongside him.

On Bilbo’s immediate right, Bifur widens his eyes when the hobbit’s hair brushes against his nose. While Dwalin is covering the left flank, he keeps looking toward the right more often than not, where Bilbo is. Even Balin is visibly having some difficulty focusing on their current predicament, his face grim and stony as they continue to run away.

Gods, Bilbo must know that he’s practically a walking homing beacon for any alpha male within half a mile by the state he’s in, Thorin thinks. Even for a person who’s absolutely clueless about the mechanics of mating must at least have a functional sense of smell. But Bilbo only looks frightened and anxious, clearly wondering how on earth the orcs seem to always pick up on their trail just as they manage to leave them behind.

In the end, the wizard manages to pull an escape route out of his hat, and they’re squeezing their way through a chasm. The confines of the path is all that is needed for the different smells of every alpha and beta dwarf there to mash together into a potpourri of odours that finally drowns out Bilbo’s own scent, which Thorin isn’t sure if he should feel grateful or annoyed over.
Rivendell puts Thorin back into one of his worst moods since starting out from the Shire. As much as possible, Thorin looks at no elf save the strong-looking alpha that emerges from the foyer to greet them, and keeps shooting withering looks at Gandalf whenever he gets the chance. Gandalf mainly ignores him and talks to the elves at length before returning to their party. “Lord Elrond has agreed to grant us room in Rivendell,” he tells Thorin. “And also to take a look at the map to see what he can help us with.”

Thorin stiffens, a bad taste in his mouth. “You mean my grandfather’s map. Whom the elves betrayed.”

“For goodness’ sake, Thorin! You stand in the presence of one of the few living beings on Middle Earth who can actually read your map!” Gandalf bangs his staff authoritatively on the floor. “Don’t be unreasonable. You have everything to gain from this and nothing to lose.”

Thorin clenches his jaw and shakes his head. He cannot — will not — forgive the elves after what happened at Erebor. Much less ask for their help, seeing how that turned out the last time.

“Thorin.” A soft voice and a wash of scent — Thorin snaps his head to the right and sees that Bilbo is standing there. Looking very serious and altogether still very comely to behold; Thorin feels his resolve soften a little at the sight of him. “I…I know that it’s not my place to say anything, but — I think you should. I trust Mister Elrond.”

Thorin flicks a cursory glance back at the elf lord, who is cloaked in a distinctly metallic beta smell. It’s not as disgusting as Thorin wishes it would be, which is mildly infuriating. He supposes it counts for something that unlike several others in his company, the elf takes no significant notice of Bilbo, at least not the kind of notice that makes Thorin want to step in front of the hobbit protectively. “I shall be willing to help you, Thorin Oakenshield,” Elrond says. “But only if you let me.”

Against his better instincts, Thorin drops his gaze and nods.

They are taken through Elrond’s study, where Thorin hands the map to the elf lord. “I thank you for this privilege,” Elrond murmurs as he accepts the document and unfurls it over his desk. With a slender finger tracing the words inked onto the paper, he looks through the written directions. “Erebor?” he asks, looking up in surprise.

Thorin opens his mouth to tell him that it’s none of his business, but Gandalf intercepts him with, “It’s purely academic, of course. Nothing more.” The wizard returns Thorin’s glare with a benign look, the shut up implied plainly in the most polite manner of expression.

Elrond looks between the two of them with searching eyes, but he says nothing and returns to perusing the map. His eyes flit over the map from corner to corner, over landmarks and routes and sketches, lips moving soundlessly.

“Can you read it?” Thorin asks. He is growing impatient, and he doesn’t like how the elf is frowning at a certain portion of the map near the legend indicating the location of Erebor, which has been inexplicably left blank for some reason.

“Yes. But I fear that the time is not now.”

“Explain,” Thorin says gruffly. The looks on Gandalf’s and Bilbo’s faces makes him add, “Please, Lord Elrond,” immediately afterwards.
“See here?” Elrond taps the spot which he had examined for a long while. “It’s not blank. Well, it is as of now, but not exactly. There is writing here in special runes. Moon runes. You cannot see them at the moment, of course, but you can still sense the hardness of the silver ink that was used to write them.”

“Moon runes,” Thorin repeats, awed at his grandfather’s ingenuity. “Of course. When?”

“These runes were written on a midsummer’s night in the light of a crescent moon,” Elrond recites smoothly. “It will be half a month’s time before such a moon appears in the night skies, and then I shall be able to translate them for you.”

“We don’t have that sort of time,” Thorin argues. “We’ll just have to make do with what we have.” Moon runes or not, he’ll be damned if they’re all going to waste two weeks in the home of an elf while Erebor awaits and begs to be liberated.

“But we cannot proceed without knowing what the runes say,” Gandalf replies, gesturing at the map. “They must hold vital information to greatly help your cause, or else your grandfather would not have gone to such lengths to conceal it.”

This makes a terrible amount of sense to Thorin. He fishes around for more reasons as to why a long stay is out of the question, but can’t think of any. Apart from his father’s key they have little to go on with, and for all that he knows of his grandfather, there is most definitely something of importance in those runes. There really is no other option than to stay and wait with the elves, which just makes Thorin even moodier.

“Fine. Two weeks,” he concedes. That they will leave the moment the runes are translated is heavily implied, but just so it’s clear, Thorin disseminates this caveat among the company afterward so that nobody has an excuse to get too comfortable. Still, Bilbo is happy that they get to stay in Rivendell for a while and is all smiles for the rest of the day, even thanking Thorin for listening to him and agreeing, which Thorin thinks makes it a little bit worth the additional trouble.
Chapter 3

Sleep does not come easy to Thorin, and is broken in the late hours by a sudden density in the air. He awakens with alarm, feeling as though his nose has gained sentience and turned into some sort of ravenous beast. He is sniffing furiously, the need to find out the reason as to why overshadowed quickly by the uncomfortable tightness in his pants. Thorin stifles a bewildered cry as he plunges a hand down there and — oh, gods, he’s hard. He’s hard as he has never been before with the head large in his fist, and he’s already slightly moist at the swollen tip, his groin aching fit to burst with the urge to mate, and —

A second later, the scent hits Thorin full-on and his nose explodes with sensation, banishing all else but the smell to the furthest recesses of his mind. Eyes beginning to water, he claps a hand over his nose and mouth with a choked gasp. His chest feels like it’s yawning, anything to suction up even more of the smell with the hunger of a starving man at a banquet spread. It can hardly be described as a smell, because nothing so simple should be garnering this level of reaction from him, and yet at the same time he can find no other way to label it. Or, now that he squeezes his eyes shut and gets his thoughts back into order sufficiently to pull up memory of over two hundred years of identifiable smells, perhaps he can.

An omega? Here?

Thorin leaps out of bed and plants his feet firmly, lifting his head and taking a deep breath in. It very nearly brings him to his knees as his heart picks up double time and his skin tightens and his mouth goes impossibly dry, all happening at the same time, the effect much too potent to be the result of anything but the heat-pheromones of an omega. The scent of this omega is heady and spicy, sweetened with a subtle touch of something close to the creamy aroma of roasting hazelnuts, and packed with the explosive burst of pheromones being released intermittently, the time delay mere seconds between each thrill-inciting wave. Pheromones which Thorin recognises only from an instance in his youth, where he had sneaked past a locked room full of unclaimed omegas in heat on a dare, and paid the price for it when his father found him the next day lying against the door in a pool of his own release.

Omega. Here. Unclaimed and unbonded. His to fuck, to claim, to fill with his offspring and bind with for life. Thorin’s brain starts to go a bit foggy as those words creep across the edges of his thoughts, and he shakes his head urgently, which he accomplishes with great difficulty as the arousal and burning need to mate continues to throw him considerably off balance. He can still think in complete sentences, which is a good sign, though he’s not sure how much longer it will last. Definitely not very long if his own heat begins, which it will, eventually, given enough time for exposure. Before Thorin realises what he’s doing, the door to his room is already wide open behind him. He cannot remember making a conscious decision to start walking, and yet he is already out of his room, drifting unsteadily down a dark hallway in his nightclothes with his nose tipped into the air, helplessly following the trail to its source.

A short distance away, a few dozen steps at most. The smell becomes stronger as it continues to call enticingly to him, making him hypersensitive all over from the tinniness in his ears to the flaring heat at the tip of his nose to the prickling of his bare soles on night-chilled wood. Not a right, a left, and within the fuzziness of his thoughts, a fearsome possibility emerges. No. It cannot be. His legs continue to carry him beyond his volition, literally being led by his nose and a mix of curiosity and arousal, and he stops at one of the many doors along the hallway. From under the door, another crest of that heat-imbibed scent floods out and rushes up to greet his clamoring nose. He can barely keep the moan in his throat as he pushes the door open to a tsunami of redolence crashing down on him,
hot and enticing and overwhelming now that he’s close enough to determine that whoever the omega is, that person is experiencing his first heat. His. A male.

*It’s not possible. This cannot be happening.*

In the room is a bed, and on that bed is a small, squirming figure. At this distance the primary scent, previously smothered to the point of insignificance by the powerful pheromones of a full-blown heat, manages to bleed through, honey-sweet and laundered draperies mingling in what must be the wonderful fragrance of omega gentlehobbit in a maturation heat.

With exceeding difficulty, Thorin holds his breath.

The figure squeaks and rolls over to face the doorway. Bilbo is holding on to his pillow tightly, his face screwed up in discomfit. He appears to be unconscious, or perhaps just somehow asleep, but either way it is clear that the hobbit is not in a state of lucidity as his legs tangle in the sheets and his fingers press deep into the pillow, on which he turns his tousled head restlessly. He moans and gasps and makes increasingly desperate noises which are nearly cries, and every turn of his head sends a thick wave of pheromones rolling around the room, each one finding its way to the now-open door where Thorin is standing in shock and disbelief.

Before Thorin knows what he is doing, he takes a step into the room. Then another. His skin is starting to feel very, very hot, his crotch, immensely heavy. His head is pounding with blood that shoots through his body in muffled thuds, to the erection that is throbbing painfully in his pants to herald the telltale signs of the oncoming knot. Thorin swallows dry, and the action triggers the realisation of what will happen if he does not get out this very instant, what will happen to him and Bilbo if he gets any closer, but *Bilbo wants it, doesn’t he, his tiny omega body needs this for him to feel better, he needs nothing else but to be well fucked and knotted like the ravishing creature that he is, and Thorin could be the one to give it to him, because he’s a king and as king he deserves to have the first omega male in hundreds of years, deserves Bilbo, which is the truth, and all he has to do is to go up to Bilbo and seize the hobbit and thrust into his hole, hard, and knot there and fire his spawn into him* —

Thorin touches his cock, feeling the bulging tissue that has started to inflate at his base, and stops dead in his tracks.

Oh, *gods*, no.

He turns and bolts from the room, closing the door behind him short of slamming it shut, and drags a nearby table in front of it. Thorin leans against the wall and just tries to breathe through it, because what he needs to calm himself now is air and *more of that scent* — no, blast it, not the scent, just the air, that’s all, but it doesn’t help that there is no conceivable way to separate the two. He covers his ears and squeezes his eyes shut and digs his chin into his chest, desperately trying to ignore the shrieking in his nose of *but why did you stop* and the pounding in his crotch agreeing with *get back in there now* and Thorin growls to himself that it’ll pass soon enough once he gets back to his room and pulls himself off in time, knowing that it isn’t going to be the same but needing something, anything as an anchor hold on the part of his mind that isn’t carnal and atavistic and raring to fuck. In all honesty he does want to do it, has only ever wanted it as much as he once wanted the Azog’s skull next to the Arkenstone on a platter made from the Firedrake’s bones, but Bilbo doesn’t and cannot make a choice, not like this, but *he could want to as well, in actual fact he really does, the omega part of Bilbo wants Thorin too, and this has to be fate, that they met at this point in time because they were meant for each other, weren’t they, so that makes it alright, doesn’t it…?*

There is a creak from around the corner, the sound of weight added on top of wooden floorboards. Hearing that, Thorin steps away from the wall immediately, squaring out his shoulders and trying to
appear as composed as he can, hands clasped over his groin in a shape large enough to hide his oversized stiffness.

Another person comes into sight, shifting out of the darkness. He walks in Thorin’s direction and stops when he sees him there. “Declare yourself,” Thorin calls out boldly, holding himself up in lieu of collapsing into a spineless heap on the floor.

The person lifts his head. “It is Dori, Your Majesty.”

Ah. “You are up late tonight, brother in arms.”

“As are you, my king.”

While it is dim, the pheromones have heightened Thorin’s vision enough to catch sight of Dori’s eyes, which are shifting about the corridor. “You should return to your room and rest, it’s been a long day. Get some rest,” Thorin says, the courtesy an unconvincing disguise.

Dori’s gaze fixes on him. The dwarf sniffs, the corners of his mouth turned down. Though his face is impassive and slackened with tiredness, his eyes are alert and wary. “I was…looking for the water closet.”

“You were going the wrong way,” Thorin replies. “It’s at the other end, not here.”

“Yes, of course. How silly of me.” For a second, Dori’s eyes dart away from Thorin and to the door of Bilbo’s room, then back to him again. Even more of the scent leaks out in a cresting wave, serrying around them both. Thorin leans imperceptibly toward the door, readying himself to intercept any sudden movements and keeping Dori fully in his line of sight.

Inside the room, a soft mewl is heard, and rolling out on its heels is yet another surge of fresh omega-heat scent. Neither dwarf shifts from where they are, an impasse of silence breaking open between them, the tension as palpable as the scent itself as the tightness in their looks dares each other to make the first move.

“Good night,” Thorin says firmly, using a tone of finality that brooks no argument or protest.

Dori’s eyes narrow slightly, but he says, “Good night.” and with a last fleeting, longing look at Bilbo’s door, he turns around and walks away. When the other dwarf is finally gone, Thorin stays rooted to the spot for a minute longer until the scent becomes too much to take, then he finally moves, burying his nose in the sleeve of his nightshirt and fleeing to his own room. He throws himself in and locks the door and shucks off his pants before his legs give out, and Thorin collapses against the door with a sob as he takes his swollen cock in both hands and pulls hard, fucking the unsatisfying hollow of his clenched fist, and all he can think of is Bilbo, his little Bilbo, writhing in bed with his wet, soaking, tasty virgin hole, needing a nice strong alpha to fill it with a tongue or a finger or a erect, knotting cock and he could be that alpha, couldn’t he, oh yes he could, he could claim him and take care of him and look after him and—

It doesn’t take long for Thorin to come in spurts with incredible volume and distance he hasn’t experienced in decades, each one punctuated with a bitten-off yell through the teeth he has embedded in his knuckles. When it is over and his cock is softening marginally in his grasp, the relief brought is minimal, batted back by the smell of male omega hobbit-heat pulsing through the crack at the bottom of the door at intervals, where Thorin puts his nose to and gulps the scent in, unfurling a monster of want and need deep inside him that he’d long forgotten could even exist.

***
Thorin doesn’t even bother with knocking, though when he barges into Gandalf’s room the next day, the wizard only looks moderately surprised. “Is something the matter, Thorin?” he asks mildly, an open book in his lap.

“An omega,” Thorin growls. “The hobbit is an omega.” When Gandalf’s only reaction to this is a small nod and a smile, Thorin thinks he could very well throttle the wizard. “Did you know about this?”

“No. I did not. I am many things, Thorin, but it is beyond my ability to make such predictions.”

Thorin groans, rather disgruntled that he immediately takes the wizard’s word for it. “How could this happen?”

“Nature is a strange force to be reckoned with,” Gandalf says sagely. “If anything, this is cause to celebrate! Why, I don’t think in all my years I’ve ever come across a male omega before, and now we have one in our very company.”

“This is not a joke, wizard!” Thorin rounds on him, suddenly very angry at Gandalf. “Do you have any idea what an omega in heat will do to our quest?”

“I have my speculations, yes.”

“Then you know that he can no longer come with us,” Thorin says, and he can't believe that he actually means it.

Gandalf looks at Thorin for a while, all traces of jocundity fading from his face. He clears his throat and nods. “That would probably be for the best, yes. I will speak with Lord Elrond tomorrow to arrange for an elven escort to bring Bilbo back to the Shire. And in the meantime, perhaps a replacement burglar —”

“No,” Thorin says immediately.

Gandalf raises an eyebrow. “No?” he asks, looking perplexed.

Thorin sighs, and repeats himself, “No.” What was he thinking? Stupid, he fumes at himself. Sure, sending Bilbo away would excise the problem, but it’s a cost that Thorin isn’t sure he’s willing to incur, even knowing all that’s potentially at stake. The thought of Bilbo being a liability doesn’t compare to the irrational fright Thorin has of never being able to see or smell him again, nor does it override his established affection towards him. In many ways, Thorin knows that he is like his grandfather where it comes to possessiveness — Thror had the Arkenstone, and now Thorin has Bilbo. He’s gone through far too much trouble and heartache to get Bilbo fully on board and close to him, and orcs will have to sprout leathern wings and breathe fire before Thorin will even consider giving him up now. “Bilbo must stay. I spoke without considering the consequences of expelling him. He is…essential to our quest. You said so, and I believe that to be true.”

“Yes, I did,” Gandalf says, “but as it was, I was speaking under the same assumptions that you held about Bilbo. Now that this has come to light, there is a very real risk of him being hurt, quite possibly by one of our own. You cannot ignore that, Thorin.”

“I would not be here speaking with you if I was going to ignore it,” Thorin retorts. Sometimes he wonders why exactly he places so much trust in Gandalf when the gesture is one-sided more often than it isn’t.

“Fair enough. What do you intend to do, then?”
Thorin clenches his jaw. Of course he hasn’t had the time to start thinking of a solution, and improvisation has never been one of his stronger points. “I don’t know,” he confesses.

“Hardly a reassuring answer, if you ask me,” Gandalf says wryly.

“You think of something, then,” Thorin shoots back, annoyed. “He was your idea, so this is partly your fault, mind you.”

“Look, all I know is that you are looking at things too narrowly, Thorin,” Gandalf says in a conciliatory tone. “Goodness, must it really only ever be do or don’t? Surely you know there’s always more than one way to solve a problem.”

Thorin looks at Gandalf, a flicker of hope alight in his chest. “You’ve thought of something?” he breathes.

“I don’t so much think there is a way as much as I know there is,” Gandalf says loftily. “And in any case, on a related note, I thought that you would be pleased by this turn of events.”

“Pleased? What do you mean?”

Gandalf stares at him meaningfully.

“What?” Thorin says. He has an inkling of what Gandalf might be going at, which makes it difficult to keep himself from flushing.

“You know as well as I do, Thorin, that an omega’s cyclic heat ends upon being knotted and bonded with an alpha. With this in mind, there's an obvious solution, is there not?”

“You… wait, you can’t be suggesting that I…” He swallows, but cannot contain that feeling of maybe that he had felt when he saw Bilbo for the first time, now blooming into a sky-bound oh, yes. Yes.

“You? Well, it doesn’t have to be you, if you are adverse to courting and mating with our little burglar,” Gandalf says saucily, the relish back in his voice. “Others might be up to it, though. Dori, for one.”

“Dori?” The feeling rising blessedly in Thorin’s chest screeches to a jarring halt. With the events of the previous night still fresh in his mind, Thorin fists his hands at the memory of encountering the other alpha dwarf outside Bilbo’s room. Looking for the maturing omega. Thorin’s omega.

“It doesn’t have to be him either, per se,” Gandalf continues with an expression of clear enjoyment. “Who is to say that maybe Balin won’t win him over first? Or his brother Dwalin? He is a strong, virile alpha dwarf, after all, capable of fathering many children with him. Or perhaps Nori? Or —”

“That’s enough!” Thorin waves a hand, unwilling to hear any more of it. “It appears that it cannot be avoided — I shall do it,” Thorin says, his voice laden with the weight of duty.

Gandalf guffaws heartily. “You don’t have to make it sound like you don’t want to, Thorin! Why, it’s been rather clear that you’ve been attracted to Bilbo since day one!”

“You are mistaken, wizard!” Furious at both himself and Gandalf, Thorin lets the anger show in his voice. “Do not misjudge my intentions. I am doing this for the good of Master Baggins, who deserves to be claimed by the best mate for him.”

“And claimed by the best mate, he shall be. Who that turns out to be in the end is dependent on you
and you alone. But heed this, Thorin,” Gandalf warns, “It would do you and your company good to play fair. And above all else, Bilbo’s well-being is my highest priority. If at any point I believe there is a need to intervene personally, I will.”

Thorin gives this careful thought. All else granted, he has the capacity to exercise his authority to bar everyone else from courting Bilbo to solidify his victory, but that would not come without the inevitable sowing of discord among them. As much as he hates to admit it, there is some truth in Gandalf’s words — where it comes to winning Bilbo, there is little he can do to stave off the advances of other alphas, at least not in the sense of courting ethics, which he would be held to as their liege. “Fine. Will you help me?” he asks Gandalf.

“No. If you are to win Bilbo, it shall be on your own merit. Surely you cannot claim to be the best mate for him if you need help from me!”

“That’s not what I meant,” Thorin says, shaking his head. “I need help to…control it. The heat. I could feel it last night. I will hardly be able to win over the halfling if I’m overcome with the desire to violate him against his will whenever we meet.”

Kindness shows in Gandalf’s eyes. “That, I can grant you.”

“And the halfling? Will you make something for him? To control it as well.”

Gandalf shakes his head. “You know that there is no stoppering the effects of a maturation heat.”

“I know that,” Thorin replies impatiently. “If we cannot help him prevent it, then…then perhaps another type of draught. Not to stop the heat. Something which will…ease the symptoms. Help him sleep through it.”

The look on Gandalf’s face turns dangerous. “Thorin Oakenshield, are you suggesting we drug Bilbo?”

“No drug, you fool!” Thorin grits. “If you have any knowledge of omegas, any at all of what an unclaimed heat will do to them — I was there last night to witness what he was feeling. He is going to suffer, Gandalf. Badly. Last night was only just the beginning of what is to come, and it will become much worse unless you help me to help him.”

“Then tell him. He deserves to know what to expect of his own body. What you and every other dwarf are intending to do. That is fair, Thorin.”

Thorin looks away from him and at a bookcase. “He will know. In time.” Out of the corner of his eye, he can see the protest written all over the wizard’s face, but Thorin doesn’t care. Explaining his intentions to Bilbo can wait until when the halfling has fallen in love with him too, especially where said explanations might just have Bilbo packing up and running back to the Shire as fast as his little hobbit feet can carry him, and Thorin’s seen him run before.

“Very well,” Gandalf says, though not without heavy disapproval in his voice. “But you must promise me that you will not compel Bilbo into making a choice that he wants no part of, Thorin. If he chooses another, or none at all…”

“I promise.” Thorin nods, then turns to leave the room.

“Oh, Thorin?”

Thorin pauses, keeping his gaze straight ahead. “What is it?”
“Don’t you want your draught?”

When Thorin turns back, he sees that Gandalf is holding out a glass bottle filled with clear fluid. “This is for you,” Gandalf explains. “A drop at breakfast and a drop at dinner. The effects should be immediate, but you should not expect full suppression, so exercise reasonable discretion with the dosage. Sleep will be difficult under its effects, but I suppose you would prefer that rather than the alternative. You will have Bilbo’s draught by tonight.”

Thorin accepts the bottle and thanks Gandalf. Looking at it in his hand, something about this bothers Thorin as a wee odd. “You carry this around with you?” he asks Gandalf suspiciously. “You said you did not know that Bilbo was an omega.”

Sighing, Gandalf closes his book and puts it on the table next to his chair. “Your suspicious nature will be your undoing one day, Thorin. Come now, you don’t honestly think that by now you are the only one who has expressed their desire to me to win over our little burglar, now, do you?” He smiles again and leans back, his grey eyes twinkling with rekindled mirth.

Thorin storms from the room, his fingers wrapped so tight around the bottle that he thinks it might shatter in his hand.
Lunchtime is an awkward affair for most of their company, more so for the fact that on top of the smell of good food, the dwarves now have to deal with the siren-scent of a male omega in the middle of his maturation. It is well fortunate that the beta dwarves do not have to suffer the brunt of it, having their own developing heats knocked back into dormancy by the domineering alpha counterpheromones, though Thorin is also rather thankful that every elf he's scented in the elven outpost is either a beta or a bonded alpha. He already has enough on his plate with a handful of alpha dwarves to best — he doesn’t need the rivalry to be complicated by any of the elves joining in on the courtship.

Bilbo is seated to his immediate right, chewing sedately on a stick of asparagus. Thorin observes the other alphas carefully, watching for their reactions whenever Bilbo’s scent flares up. Balin, the second-nearest to Bilbo, does not seem to pay very much attention to the hobbit, though he is inhaling with much more depth than Thorin thinks is usual, even considering the appreciation of a well-cooked meal. Dori is exercising obvious effort to throw discreet glances at Bilbo without anyone’s notice, his gaze flitting between the other alphas before returning to the hobbit. The bonded alphas, Gloin and Bombur, may as well be betas like Oin and Fili, all of whom take no more interest in Bilbo than per normal.

The alpha that looks at Bilbo the most is Dwalin, who makes no effort to hide his stare as he chews mouthfuls of red pepper and onion, and Thorin finds himself immediately marking him out as his largest rival. Him, followed by Dori, and perhaps even Nori, from the strength of their scents with relation to his own; he can’t rule out Bifur, or even Kili, because he’s not taking any chances anymore, looking on what happened the last time he’d gone out on a limb.

“Master Baggins, would you care for some more salad?”

Caught off guard, Thorin whips his head around so quickly his neck cricks. Balin is holding out a bowl to the hobbit from across the table, smiling an all-too-wide smile that rubs Thorin the wrongest way possible.

“Oh, yes. Please and thank you, Mister Balin!” Bilbo beams at him and takes the bowl. Beneath it, their fingers touch for a moment as the bowl exchanges hands, and Balin’s smile grows even wider. Thorin’s glare goes ignored by Balin, who returns to his meal and continues eating without so much as a glance across the table at Thorin.

When they have finished, Thorin is stalking back to his quarters when he meets Balin in the corridor. “Your Majesty,” Balin greets coolly.

“Balin,” Thorin replies with a matching air, eyes front and steeled.

“I hope you had a good lunch today.”

“I did. And you?”

“It was charming, my king.”

“The lunch or the halfling?” Thorin bites out, unable to keep it back.

Balin shrugs, looking not the least perturbed. “We all scented him last night, even if not all of us thought it necessary to imprison Master Baggins in his room. Or just keep him in, whichever you prefer. He was rather perplexed at not being to leave his room this morning, if you’ve heard. Had to
be let out by an elf, the poor dear."

"I had to," Thorin says hotly. "Whatever Dori has told you, I did it to protect him."

"From us, no doubt about that." Balin shakes his head sadly. "Forgive me for saying this, Thorin, but sometimes I believe you think too little of us. Would you think that any of us would force ourselves upon Master Baggins against his wishes?"

"It matters not if it is against any of your wishes. What matters is the deed that would transpire — if you would be able to stop yourselves from claiming him without having won him! I barely held myself back last night," Thorin snarls, clenching his hands into fists by his sides to stop them from shaking.

If anything, the look in Balin’s eyes grows even sadder, pitying, even. "And therein lies the problem. You don’t trust yourself to control your own urges and assume with a sweeping hand that none of us harbour similar qualms. That is untrue."

Beneath the combination of rage and frustration that threatened to overtake him not moments ago, Thorin’s conscience rises to the surface to nag at him. Because really, what had happened to his trust of brotherhood in all of them? He’d said so from the start, that he entrusted more of his faith to them than anyone else in the dwarven kingdom for having answered his call to arms. Maybe, just maybe, Balin was right about this. "So…so you’ve sought help from Gandalf as well?"

"I have. As Dori and Dwalin and you probably have too. I assume that he gave you the same draught as he did all of us?"

"Yes." Thorin decides against telling Balin about his request for a separate draught for Bilbo for the time being.

"Then why the antagonism, Thorin? We shall be able to have our turns at wooing Master Baggins without the risk of anyone accidentally hurting or violating him, if those are the terms of your worries." The pity on his face disappears, to Thorin’s relief, and is replaced by a mischievous smirk. "Of course, unless you have other worries besides those."

Thorin scowls at him. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I am fully invested into winning Master Baggins," Balin says, spreading his arms wide. "Even if my rival is my sworn liege, I have no intention of throwing the courtship; for the sake of my offspring and my soon-to-be mate, I will be making every effort to convince Master Baggins to allow me to claim him. You are attracted to him as I am, are you not? You can be assured that Dori and Dwalin and the others feel the same."

"I do not fear losing to any of you," Thorin says, annoyed. "Make your advances for all I care. You shall not have him, because he will not choose any of you."

"We will see."

"Yes." Thorin strides past him, and says as they brush shoulders, "We will."

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He has two bottles, both made of glass and filled with clear liquid, completely identical at a glance apart from the labels tied to their necks: one with a B and the other with a T. The liquid in the bottle labelled T has a faint, unpleasantly bitter aftertaste that lingers on the tongue, while the other liquid is exceedingly sweet. "Three drops, Thorin," Gandalf had cautioned as he handed the bottle to him.
“Just three drops will suffice. Nothing more.”

Now, as it is approaching the late hours, Thorin busies himself with brewing a cup of strong, black tea in the pantry with mint added to mask the flavour, no sugar added. He shakes three drops into the cup and slips the bottle labelled with a B back into his pocket. Then, he takes out the other bottle and checks the label again before swallowing a drop from it, making sure to put it back into a different pocket from the first one.

Thorin brings the tea carefully from the pantry and into the guest quarters, knocking on the door when he arrives. The door opens and Bilbo pops out from behind the frame. “Thorin!”

“Good evening, Bilbo.”

“Good evening!”

Thorin holds out the still-steaming cup of tea. “I thought you would like an after-dinner drink.”

Bilbo’s eyes widen. “For me?”

At this distance, Thorin can sense that the hobbit’s heat is approaching, a heavy odour manifesting in an insistent tingle along the bridge of his nose, much duller now that he has taken his draught. He nods, keeping his expression perfectly neutral and squeezing his thighs together and telling himself that the sensation of growing hard just from being in Bilbo’s presence is merely a physical one.

Bilbo smiles gratefully and takes the cup from him. “Thank you, Thorin.”

“Best you drink it while it’s hot.”

He sips at the spiked tea without hesitation. “Why, it’s delicious!”

Thorin just watches him tersely. “Just simple black tea,” he tells Bilbo, not very sure why he’s doing so. Reassurance, he decides, both for Bilbo and himself. “With some mint. For the flavour. Do you find it too sweet?”

Bilbo takes a few more sips and smiles at Thorin, smacking his lips in appreciation. “Not at all. This is very nice, Thorin. Thank you very much!”

“Make sure that you drink it all up,” Thorin reminds him, then turns away to leave.

“I will, good night!” Bilbo calls after him.

Later, back in his own room, Thorin lies awake for a full hour after going to bed with a buzzing feeling in his nose and an ache in his groin. He can’t scent the heat-pheromones anymore but is still sharply aware of them swirling about in the air above him. Similarly, the response his body is putting up has been greatly diminished — Thorin slides a hand into his breeches and feels that his cock is only slightly hard, and he is no longer consumed by insatiable yearning to hunt the smell to its source as he had been the night before. He turns onto his side, knowing that at the very least Bilbo will enjoy peaceful sleep where he himself will most likely not, and stays there until the suppressing draught has run its course and he manages to drop off on his own.

***

“Good morning!” Bilbo chirps when he arrives at the breakfast table.

The greeting is returned around the table, at which most of the alpha dwarves are eating grumpily,
Thorin included. He shoots a narrow gaze across the table at an exhausted-looking Balin, then to Dori, who is picking moodily at a crust of dry bread. Nori yawns widely without covering his mouth, and a bleary-eyed Dwalin is shaking a pepperpot into his cup. Thorin smiles, thinking himself to at least look less harangued than the whole lot, until Bilbo squints at his face and says, “Thorin, you’ve got a bit of lettuce in your beard.”

Thorin’s face heats up with humiliation, though when he reaches up to comb it out with his fingers, Bilbo says, “Oh, no, let me!” and picks it out for him. Thorin forgets entirely that it’s disrespectful among dwarves to touch each others’ beards and stares with amazement at the lettuce leaf Bilbo has scissored between two fingers.

“Thank you, Bilbo,” he mumbles.

“No problem!” Humming merrily, Bilbo sloshes a generous amount of pumpkin juice into a mug and drinks deeply, then cuts out a hobbit-sized slice of bread to swipe gooseberry jam across, all the while with a radiant expression on his face. It’s enough to make Thorin forget his tiredness and give Bilbo a small smile.

“Did you sleep well?” he asks.

“I slept wonderfully, thank you for asking,” Bilbo replies. He grins at Thorin. “Like a babe. I don’t ever remember sleeping so well before. Perhaps you should make me tea before bed more often!”

“I will,” Thorin says, jumping at the chance. He chooses to avoid Balin’s suspicious look and focuses entirely on Bilbo’s expression of stunned surprise.

“You will? Thorin, I was only joking —”

“It is the least I could do for you, halfling, for agreeing to accompany us on this quest.” Now Dwalin and Dori are staring intently as well, breakfast all but a forgotten mess between them. Thorin concentrates determinedly on his aim at hand and says, “You must know that I think you very brave and very noble, Bilbo Baggins.”

“I am?” Bilbo says, pointing at himself with wide, unbelieving eyes. Dori just looks incredibly unhappy at this response, which Thorin glimpses and grins at. Bilbo, on the other hand, looks floored. “Oh…thank you. I’m flattered, really I am!”

Thorin looks at him proudly as Bilbo eats his breakfast, and can’t help but think that for what it’s worth, he doesn’t so much mind giving up any measure of sleep for this.

***

Over the course of the next week, Thorin plans and doubles his efforts. He mixes the tea dutifully and doses it every night for Bilbo and he takes his draught, then plays his cards carefully for the rest of the day, aiming to finalise the courtship by their departure from Rivendell. It’s not a lot of time to work with, but there’s little that can be done about that. Thorin knows it to only mean that he has to move fast.

“Would you like to walk with me on this morning, Bilbo?” he asks after one breakfast, extending an arm.

“Walk? Oh, why not? Gets the food settled in the tummy.” Bilbo takes his arm. He smells sweeter and more enticing than usual, which Thorin thinks fondly has to do with the chemistry of his scent finally working out its balance. Holding the hobbit’s arm, Thorin lets him set the pace but controls the route, wending their way through the elf settlement. Past the battlements and the plaza, he takes
Bilbo to the eastern balconies where the running river Bruinen cuts across the elven settlement at a tangent. They stand there, arms locked together, enjoying the breeze that catches them and watching the ripples made in the river as it flows through the valley and finds its end at the waterfalls.

“It’s beautiful,” Bilbo breathes beside him. Thorin takes this cue to move a little bit closer to him, such that Bilbo could snuggle against his arm if he wanted to. He doesn’t, which is disappointing, but Thorin doesn’t lose heart. It’s really only the beginning, and it’s to be expected.

Next, they make their way down to the barracks, where Thorin takes the time to introduce Bilbo formally to weaponry and the like. It’s where he shines the most outside of armed combat, where his knowledge of smithing and weapon maintenance is matched by few. “Sharpening a dwarf’s weapon of choice is akin to according him a great favour,” he says, holding his own battle axe with both hands. What he doesn’t mention to Bilbo is that doing it with regularity is common practice leading up to a union between said dwarves, but Thorin figures that like the explaining of their mating cycles, it’s a fact that won’t suffer if he explains it later rather than sooner.

“Could I sharpen your axe, Thorin?”

“Why, yes. Of course you can.” He hands his axe to Bilbo, smiling broadly and guiding him to the grindstone.

“Golly, I’ve never used one of these before!” Bilbo laughs nervously, holding the sharp edge of the axe to the stone wheel. He is swathed in his scent today, fresh and delectable and filling Thorin with the urge to taste him despite having taken his draught in the morning.

“I shall show you,” Thorin tells him instead, coming up from behind the hobbit to hold the back of his hands where they are on his weapon. His hands are smooth to the touch, a stark contrast against his own, calloused and rough from years at toiling at the forge. “Put the blade here.” He pushes Bilbo’s hand down and rides the motion of his body such that his nose is but an inch from pressing into the back of Bilbo’s hair, the tip brushing honey-brown curls. Bilbo doesn’t seem to notice, so Thorin takes a breath in of that delicious, hobbity scent and grins stupidly.

“Am I doing it right?”

“Mm.” Now, Thorin moves his head to get a better look at the grindstone over Bilbo’s shoulder. It isn’t, of course, a purposeful gesture to have his nose right at the nape of the hobbit’s neck, where his smell is the strongest. “You can start pressing the pedal when you’re ready.” He lifts his face, bringing his mouth close to Bilbo’s earlobe. Even with the suppressant in his system, the scent is making Thorin rather needy, perhaps it won’t hurt to just taste Bilbo’s skin a little bit, Bilbo won’t mind, will he; it’s just a taste after all, nothing more, just to have an idea of what to expect once he has won him; he flicks his tongue out, wetting his lips —

The grating sound of whetstone slicing across metal arrests Thorin’s attention yet again. He looks back down, ashamed with himself. No. Not until Bilbo has chosen him over all the others. He clears his throat and says, “Hold it still at that angle, yes…”

The weapon sharpening is over much sooner than Thorin would like, though there is no mistaking Bilbo’s enjoyment at the experience. “That was quite fun,” Bilbo says, wiping his hands. Thorin puts his axe back onto the rack, smiling at the memory of having Bilbo so close to him. It did feel very much like a hug in the many ways that it wasn’t. Even now it feels as though he’s already winning, with just that extra bit of effort needed for Bilbo to see that Thorin’s the one for him, that they were good together. “Bilbo, what do you know about the Hall of Fire?” he asks.

“Nothing,” Bilbo replies.
Perfect. Thorin thinks that he may just concede that the elves aren’t too bad after all, should this work out in the end “I think you might like it,” he says, offering his arm again and smiling.

***

At the front lobby, Bilbo *gapes*. Thorin looks at his open-mouthed expression with the feeling of assured triumph rising inside him. “Thorin, this is wonderful!” Bilbo cries. The hall is a small building of masterful woodwork and intricate architecture, with a thatch roof and pillars of polished redwood. Wind chimes and charms dangle from the upper rafters, strung up by a tulle of silver threads thin enough to be invisible to the untrained eye. There is music piping out of the hall, being made by what sounds like a small regiment of string instruments.

“How do you like it?” Thorin asks.

“I love it.”

*I love you,* Thorin thinks, and it wasn’t all that far off, not really. “Wait here,” he tells Bilbo, then climbs the steps leading to the entrance to speak with the elf seated there. “Beg pardon, but may we go inside?”

The elf nods and gestures into the hall with a hand.

“Thank you.” Thorin turns, intending to call to Bilbo, but stops with his mouth half-open when he sees Bilbo standing where he left him, chatting animatedly with Dori and holding a bunch of daisies. Daisies that Thorin doesn’t ever remember giving the hobbit because he hadn’t planned for flowers until their third outing and this is only halfway through their first.

He shouldn’t have daisies. He shouldn’t have flowers at all, unless...

Cursing and gnashing his teeth, Thorin walks back to them at a pace which is much too slow for his liking but still too quick to resemble normal, unhurried walking. “Dori,” he calls in tense greeting, once he has gotten close enough to them.

They stop talking to look at Thorin. “Your Majesty,” Dori says gruffly.

“Oh, Thorin! Dori picked these for me, see?” Bilbo holds up the flowers, beaming. “And he’s asked me to help him sharpen his sword, and to make dinner with him, and he even says he’ll teach me how to braid his beard tonight!”

“Has he now,” Thorin says coldly, locking eyes with the other dwarf. Beard-braiding is among the most intimate of acts between dwarves in the final stages of courtship, something which Thorin was reserving to ask of Bilbo himself once their love had become mutual enough for that.

“I have, my king,” Dori says without any sign of being fazed by his gaze, nor does he look away.

“And you have accepted?” Thorin asks Bilbo.

“Well, yes. I have.” Bilbo grins at him. “Now that I know how to sharpen stuff, but Dori said that extra practice never hurts.”

“You can practice with me,” Thorin says quickly, only just stopping himself from stepping between Dori and Bilbo like a barrier. “You must be tired of blades. I’ll show you how to sharpen an arrowhead instead.”

“Oh, that’s alright! Kili said that he’d show me already.”
“Kili?” For once, Thorin shares a hastily quashed scowl with Dori, who looks equally miffed at this information.

“Yeah! Also said that he’d take me out to the range to teach me a little. You know, shooting things and stuff.”

Thorin forces himself to smile. “That’s…that’s very thoughtful of him. And Dori.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Dori says loudly with a bow too low to be construed as genuine sentiment.

Thorin steps closer to Bilbo and hooks his arm through the hobbit’s. “Come, Bilbo.” He tugs him along with strictly more force than necessary.

“Thorin, wait! My flowers!”

He looks back to see that Bilbo has dropped the daisies that Dori gave him. Thorin doesn’t stop walking forward. “I’ll pick you some nicer ones,” he growls, pressing down his anger and giving Bilbo another rough tug.

“Thorin — ow!” Bilbo squawks, wrenching his arm out of Thorin’s grasp. “That hurts!” He glares at Thorin and walks back to collect his stupid flowers. When he comes back, Thorin glowers at him. “Don’t look at me like that. You were being very rough and mean with me.”

“I…” The hurt, chastising look on Bilbo’s face makes Thorin stop just as the guilt starts to chew at his insides. Bilbo’s angry, and Thorin wants to make it right again — they were having such a good time together and he was so sure that he was gaining ground in winning over Bilbo — but he doesn’t know how. “I’m sorry,” he finally mumbles, looking down at his feet.

“That’s better,” Bilbo huffs. Thorin keeps looking down until he feels a hand being held against his jaw. He slides his gaze up in astoundment, not quite daring to believe just yet that this is happening, but there it is, Bilbo has a palm held to his bearded chin, lifting his face to peer up into his eyes. Bilbo’s soft mouth quirks up at the corner into a small, hopeful smile. “So, um. You were taking me inside?”

Thorin nods and, taking Bilbo’s arm again, walks him into the hall.
Chapter 5

“How goes the courtship?” Gandalf asks.

Thorin sighs and doesn’t bother to elaborate any further, sagging in his chair. It is late in the afternoon, and they are in Gandalf’s room sharing a pot of tea between them. When Thorin isn’t drinking Gandalf’s blandish, new-age brew, he’s smothering yawns and trying to keep himself from nodding off, the result of accumulating nights where the suppressant has consistently denied him sleep. When he looks in the mirror, he doesn’t have to search for long to see the shadows that now hang low beneath his eyes.

“That could mean just about anything, dear Thorin,” Gandalf tells him, bringing his cup to his nose and inhaling the steam with a delicate appreciation.

“I don’t understand,” Thorin growls. “I have made my interest obvious to the halfling and partaken in the rituals and methods of courtship, and yet he remains unresponsive to my romancing of him.”

“Are you sure? What have you observed of Bilbo?”

Thorin takes half a minute to process an entire week’s worth of efforts. “He’s happy,” he says, his voice reduced to a weary groan by sleeplessness. “Very happy with all the attention.”

“Has he expressed interest in any of you?”

Just thinking about the prospect of Bilbo choosing anyone else is enough to make Thorin’s stomach turn. He shakes his head. “Not as far as I have seen.”

“Hasn’t he? He’s been speaking rather highly of Balin — they have been taking trips to the library very recently,” Gandalf says airily, flipping through a book.

Thorin knows all too well about their library visits, having spied on them at a distance. Reconnaissance is all fair play, really — he is aware, for example, that whenever he brings Bilbo out to the Hall of Fire, there are no less than three pairs of eyes that tail them all the way to the entrance of the hall, one of which follows them in on occasion. What Gandalf has just told him about Bilbo’s increasing closeness to Balin, however, is news to him. “He has?”

“Mm. Bilbo’s taking quite the shine to Balin, as he is to his brother. Dwalin prefers a much more rugged, down-to-earth approach — why, I do believe it was just this morning that he told Bilbo up-front about his attraction to him!”

Thorin splutters in the middle of choking down another mouthful of tea and drops the cup, spilling the rest all over his lap. It takes a good few seconds before the pain subsides sufficiently for him to be outraged. “Dwalin told him?”

“Yes. Bilbo didn’t know what to make of it, the poor soul. Was flattered beyond measure, I can tell you that.”

“And…and what did he say?” Thorin isn’t sure if he wants to hear the answer to this.

Gandalf smiles. “Dwalin will not be discouraged, Thorin. You know him that well.”

Thorin falls back into his chair with a stunned sense of relief. “Bilbo said no, then.”
“He did.”

“Does he know about — did Dwalin tell him?”

Gandalf shakes his head. “I’m afraid not.” His expression changes, shifting quickly into a severe, thin-lipped look that is scouring just nearly as much as it indicates disapproval. “Of course, you do still have the power to change that. Then perhaps you wouldn’t have to drug poor Bilbo every night!”

“For the last time, I’m not drugging him,” Thorin says, far too tired to have to go through all of this again. He rubs his forehead with the heel of his hand and exhales in a staggering breath. “I’m running low on the draught. Bilbo’s draught. Will you make some more for me?”

“Already? I did say that three drops would be sufficient. You can’t possibly be using that much —”

Thorin gnaws at his lips. He hasn’t told Gandalf about the liberties he’s been taking with the wizard’s instructions just yet, but he can feel Gandalf’s suspicions forming even without looking at him.

“Thorin,” Gandalf says after several tense seconds. “Exactly how much of the draught have you been giving Bilbo?”

Biting now lapsing into an edgy chewing, there’s no question about the dangerous fury building in Gandalf’s voice. Thorin glances at him and looks away almost immediately in favour of glaring at the floor to conceal his guilt. “Look, I have been meaning to ask you about it —”

“How much, Thorin?”

“Five,” Thorin admits. “Sometimes six. But it’s not what you think! It’s — it’s…” He rests his cheek on his knuckles with a sigh, ducking his chin so as to avoid Gandalf’s gaze. “It’s starting to become…ineffectual. It’s not working as it used to.”

“Rubbish.” Gandalf shakes his head, still glowering at Thorin. “Concentrated tincture of valerian is one of the strongest sedatives known to the elves.”

“And yet Bilbo has started to suffer again!” Thorin makes a frustrated noise. “It was…the previous few nights. Up till then it was working fine. He was sleeping through it with three drops. Then it just wasn’t enough after a while — he was crying in his sleep again. The heat is becoming irrepressible. Soon it will be surging when he’s lucid enough to feel it, and then what?” He looks pleadingly at Gandalf. “You must mix something stronger.”

“Anything stronger than what I’ve prescribed and you may as well kill him, Thorin!” Gandalf booms. “It’s a miracle you haven’t already with the dosage you’ve been using!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Thorin groans, holding his face in his hands. “I shouldn’t have, I know that. But…but you don’t know what it’s like, to — to stand there and watch, and…I can’t watch him suffer. I can’t.”

“This is getting out of hand. You must tell him now. He’s been kept in the dark long enough.”

“What good will that do?” Thorin spits. “What good?”

“It will let Bilbo know that he is not alone in this,” Gandalf says with paper-thin patience that threatens to rip at the edges. “He will know that what he’s experiencing is perfectly normal…and that he can rely on those around him to see him through it. This is a chance for the both of you, Thorin.
Don’t throw it away now and regret when it’s too late.”

Thorin looks up reluctantly at the wizard. “And if I choose not to?”

“I’ll tell him myself. Do what you deem best, Thorin, but I will not stand idle on this and allow him to be tossed around like a child’s plaything. I selected him for your quest and am therefore responsible for his well-being. Whether or not he chooses any of you after I tell him is immaterial to me.”

The edge to Gandalf’s tone leaves no room for argument. Thorin weighs his options, and, after a long moment, decides to take the ultimatum. It’s always been a matter of forestalling one way or another, besides. “Tomorrow morning,” he finally says. “I promise.”

***

When they gather for breakfast the next day, it’s as though someone has met with an untimely demise and they’re all in the process of digesting the news. Where only a week ago they had eaten merrily around the same table, now they’re helping themselves to the food without so much as a look to each other. The betas have voluntarily joined in on the muteness, presumably forsaking speech on their own accord so as to avoid agitating the more high-strung, sleep-deprived alphas — across the table, a sullen Dori thunks the butter knife into the slicing board so hard that it sticks there, quivering ominously, before he tears into his buttered bread with his teeth like a lion maiming its kill.

At the other end, Nori sits silently in his seat, bloodshot eyes flitting about the company with the nervousness of a hunted animal; even with the distance between them, Thorin can smell the alcohol on him, evidence of heavy insomnia in his long and haggard face. Kili’s hair is a disheveled mess, his clothes untidy and rankled beyond any semblance of order. With his head on the table and his hand stuck into a slab of butter, Dwalin is snoring loudly. Balin just looks completely and utterly worn-out in spite of his impeccable state of dress, and a close look reveals that there are faint circles around his eyes.

Seated next to Thorin, even Bilbo is remarkably hushed as he eats, popping small pieces of bread into his mouth and stirring the boysenberry syrup listlessly with a long spoon. “Is something the matter, Bilbo?” Thorin asks gently after observing him for a while.

Bilbo rubs a hand over his face. “I’m just not feeling very well,” he answers, sounding terribly drowsy.

“Ah.” Anxiety stirs deep in Thorin’s stomach, a churning amplified by the heavy absence of food. He used the last of the sleeping draught to dose Bilbo the previous night; hardly three drops, and as he’d expected, had only worked for a few hours into the night before the heat had settled in, potent and overpowering. “Why is that?”

“Feels like I’ve been sleeping too much lately…I don’t know. And, um. Funny dreams.”

“What of? Dreams can sometimes be significant.”

Bilbo blushes. He mumbles something inaudibly about just dreams and being silly and resumes eating his breakfast, one hand thrust under the table and out of sight of everyone else.

“What do you want to talk about it?” Thorin tries.

Bilbo pauses with a slice of bread clamped between his teeth. The look in his eyes is shielded, tinted with the slightest bit of worry.
“Bilbo,” Thorin says, remembering his promise to Gandalf. “There is something that I must tell you. Something which I think might have to do with the dreams you’ve been having.”

Bilbo blinks, head cocked to the side. There’s a question in his eyes. He removes the bread from his mouth and asks, “What is it?”

A quick glance around the table reveals that no one is watching, but Thorin decides that privacy would be more boon than bane. “After breakfast,” he says to Bilbo. “We can talk at the eastern balconies.”

***

“So what is it, Thorin?”

They’ve made it to the same spot where Thorin had taken Bilbo to admire the scenery a few days ago, and the sun has only just broken through the neighbouring peaks that round the valley in. Now, facing each other, Thorin can already feel his resolution threatening to crumble. He looks past the railings and over the river, trying to winch up his mettle. “Bilbo, how do hobbits mate?”

Bilbo’s eyebrows raise high into his fringe. “What?”

Thorin returns his gaze to Bilbo, determined in his purpose. “How do hobbits mate in the Shire?”

Bilbo turns red, sunlight curving over the left side of his face. “Um, well,” he says, his feet fidgeting, hands coming to a clasp behind his back. “A…a gentlehobbit meets a ladyhobbit and when they both like each other, then. Well. Then they fall in love. Have sex.” The last part is blurted, and Bilbo looks down immediately as though he has said something rude.

Thorin nods. “And has a gentlehobbit ever mated with another gentlehobbit before, Bilbo?”

“That’s absurd,” Bilbo says, looking at Thorin with an incredulous grin. “How would a gentlehobbit get pregnant? It just doesn’t happen.”

“True, it doesn’t happen. Most of the time,” Thorin says slowly. He’s still trying to find a better way of parsing it, which is difficult given that what he’s about to tell Bilbo will most assuredly not make any sense to him given all that he’s said. “Most of the time,” he repeats.

Bilbo nods.

“But. Hm.” Thorin shuffles his feet, still plying the answer he has in mind. After a minute of endless phrasing and rephrasing, he resigns himself to what he’s had since the very beginning. He lets honesty be his touchstone, working his words into a form that he hopes Bilbo will be able to accept. “Listen to me carefully, Bilbo. Your dreams — do they always involve mating or sex?”

Bilbo’s mouth falls open slightly, then he blinks several times, confused, and answers, “Er, um. Well. As a matter of fact, yes. How did you know?”

“Because that is how it’s often like, what you’re going through now.” The befuddlement on Bilbo’s face only deepens more, but Thorin forges on, pressing down every instinct to break it off, walk away, and leave it there where his words can do no further harm. “You are different, Bilbo. Different from all other males of every race and species.”

“Different? What do you mean, ‘different’?”

A long pause, a shared glimmer of uncertainty, and then Thorin decides that there’s really no point in
dragging it out any longer. He moves closer to Bilbo and puts a hand on his shoulder, the other
settling over his stomach. “You are capable of bearing children, Bilbo,” he says quietly, making sure
to keep eye contact with him.

Shock threaded with disbelief shines in Bilbo’s eyes. “Wha — wait, children?”

“Yes.”

“But…no, that can’t be —” Bilbo shakes his head, and he looks like he’s torn between an
incredulous grin and laughing it off. ”You’re kidding me, right?”

Holding his eyes, Thorin swallows hard. When the silence stretches out before them to the point
where the time for confessions is long past, the half-smile slides away from Bilbo’s face and a quiet
uneasiness takes its place.

"Thorin —"

"I'm sorry," Thorin murmurs, and Bilbo's face goes tight with the first hint of true fear.

"I — wait, hold on. Hold on a moment," Bilbo stammers. "No, this is — I, no. I can’t have children!
I can’t get pregnant, I’m not female!"

“You can,” Thorin says firmly. “This is why I’ve said you are special. Males who can be
impregnated — they’re exceedingly rare, but they have existed like you exist right now.”

“But…but —”

“This is why —” he takes Bilbo’s hand and guides it to his groin, resting there, “— this has been
happening to you. It’s been happening for a while, hasn’t it? It’s because you’ve been in heat.
You’re fertile.”

“How did you —”

“I can smell it. We all can, save for Gandalf. You’ve been maturing for weeks now, and now you’re
ready to carry a child.”

"A child…!” Bilbo jerks his hand out of Thorin's grip, cradling it with his other. His mouth is twisted
and colour is rising quickly in his cheeks. "You're lying. Tell me you're lying."

"I'm not," Thorin says, but Bilbo doesn't seem to hear this as he stumbles back, and Thorin steadies
him by the shoulder. "Bilbo, listen to me. Your body has been behaving this way because of
everything I've just told you. And this is why we have all been seeking your favour." As soon as the
words are out of his mouth, he wants to take them back on the spot when sudden understanding,
quick and sharp, flashes in the look on Bilbo’s face.

“So…all this while,” Bilbo says, desperation giving out to a expression of grievous hurt, “you’ve all
been treating me so nice because you want to…impregnate me? Is that it?”

“No, it’s not like that!” Thorin says, standing his ground and tightening his hold on Bilbo’s shoulder.
Bilbo shudders, but does not move away even as anger blazes across his features, pushing every
other emotion out.

“Is that why you took me along? So that all of you could have your turn at breeding me like a…like
a calf?”
“No!” Thorin insists. “That’s not true, it was never supposed to be like this — we had no idea…no indication that this was going to happen to you. We couldn’t have known about any of this from the start.”

“But you knew,” Bilbo exclaims. “In the end, you knew and you didn’t say anything! How could you? All of you!”

“I thought you would leave if I told you!” Thorin protests. “I — I didn’t want to lose you.”

“So you lied to me!”

Thorin bristles, biting down on the instinct to retort. “I made a gross error in judgement.”

Bilbo gives a mirthless, incredulous laugh that makes Thorin’s heart clench in his chest like a fist. “Maybe you didn’t,” he says sadly.

This is what it takes for Thorin's blood runs cold, a feeling of impending loss in his gut. “Just let me explain, I can —”

“And I thought…I thought,” Bilbo says, shaking his head, tear streaks under his eyes. “The tea, the walks, everything? Was it all so that you could have your way with me? Was it all a lie?”

“No,” Thorin breathes, and it’s the most honest thing he has ever known. “Never.”

“Then what am I?” Bilbo demands, his voice thick with misery. “What am I to you, then?”

“Everything.” Bilbo’s lips part as if to say something in reply, but Thorin leans down to kiss him before Bilbo can do anything else. Thorin kisses and kisses him, and it is more than he ever thought it would be to have Bilbo like this, finally tasting his lips and his skin and all of him, as by doing this he could make Bilbo his, forever. Bilbo trembles and breathes against his mouth, the air tumbling out in a sob while Thorin holds him steady by the back of his neck. When it ends, Bilbo has gone very still, his gaze turned to the ground and away from Thorin.

“Bilbo —” Thorin starts.

“I need some time to think,” Bilbo mumbles tonelessly, reaching up with an arm to wipe his eyes on his sleeve. Even after putting it back down, he still does not look up at Thorin.

“Bilbo, please…just let me —”

“You’ve done enough, just. Don’t.”

Thorin takes his hand off Bilbo’s shoulder as though he's just been scalded, and he has to clench his hands to stop himself from reaching again. Bilbo doesn't leave immediately, but he eventually he does turn to trudge away, a defeated slump to his shoulders, then he is gone and the dawn is still and unbroken once more. Amid the roar of waterfalls and the chilled air of early morning, Thorin remains standing on the balcony with his eyes prickling and a painful thudding in his chest, looking up at the sunburnt sky, all alone.

***

For the most of the afternoon, Thorin tries to sleep the best he can with the draught chilling away the growing heat that continues to simmer deep in his bones. It’s so quiet in his room that he wants to scream, or get up and start throwing things about, anything to break the maddening stillness that surrounds him in the wake of Bilbo’s absence. He’s above feeling sorry for himself, but all the same
he can’t help but float through the silence, his thoughts fluttering to Bilbo like moths dancing around a flame, and it makes the rupture deep inside him throb, aggravating the headache that has made its home at the very back of his skull.

Much later, after what feels like several hours of treading a fine edge spanning both consciousness and misery, he hears someone clearing his throat in the doorway behind him. Thorin turns over slowly and sees that it’s Bilbo standing there, his hands behind his back and his eyes trained on his bare feet. In a clumsy motion, Thorin throws himself out of bed and closes the space between them with a single long stride, standing before Bilbo and looking down at him.

“Bilbo,” Thorin says, his hands stirring to touch him. Between the events on the balcony and his own altered mental state, predicting any outcome to this is beyond Thorin. Bilbo just sniffs, moving his gaze up slightly, just enough for Thorin to see his eyes. They’re red and puffy, but otherwise dry, a bleak reminder of how Thorin still has the capacity to hurt him. It makes Thorin hate himself.

“Bilbo…”

“Saying my name isn’t going to make everything alright, Thorin,” Bilbo mumbles, eyes wandering back down again, though he keeps his face tilted up to Thorin’s. When Thorin does reach up with one tentative hand, Bilbo doesn’t shy away from him, so he rests it on his shoulder in favour of caressing his cheek.

“I’m sorry,” Thorin says. “For everything.”

“Everything?” Bilbo makes a startled, choked sound, resembling the beginnings of a laugh quickly squashed flat. “What kind of apology is that? So you do regret all of it, even the bits where you were nice to me?”

“No,” Thorin says, infuriated at himself. He’s had hours to think this over and prepare for it, and yet here he is, blathering the first things that come to mind like a halfwit. “I’m sorry for not telling you about this. For not making my intentions known to you before making my advances. That was wrong of me, I know that now, and I’m deeply, truly sorry.”

Eyes still refusing to look at anything but Thorin’s face, Bilbo remains quiet. His expression reveals nothing.

“Are…are you angry?” Thorin asks.

With a contemplative sigh, Bilbo slouches his shoulders. There is a long, aching pause, and then Bilbo says, “No. Well, maybe a little bit. A large bit, actually. Who wouldn’t be?” He lets out a slow, rifling breath and makes a motion as though he’s considering spreading his arms wide, but thinks better of it. “I don’t know what to do about all of this.”

He looks so tiny, so forlorn, like a person wearing something much larger than he could ever hope to fit. Thorin relaxes his hand on Bilbo’s shoulder, but is certain that he will grab on tight if Bilbo moves away, and it is the thought of ever hurting him that makes Thorin let go entirely. The palm of his hand tingles with sensation, suddenly cold and empty in the absence of something to hold on to.

“You said I was in heat,” Bilbo says, his voice barely a murmur. “That I was able to be with child. Were you lying about that?”

Thorin shakes his head.

“Ah.” Thorin can see Bilbo’s throat working. “And the…um. The mess. Not just at the front, but also —”
“It is normal,” Thorin tells him. “That is how it is for a fertile in heat. It is to...facilitate entry. For impregnation.”

Bilbo’s face falls even further. The urge to reach out and hold him intensifies. “I still find that hard to believe,” he admits. “Me, able to bear a child — it just sounds crazy.”

“It’s why I didn’t want to tell you,” Thorin says, and there is truth in there that he wills Bilbo to see. “I thought that you wouldn’t have believed me.”

Bilbo presses his lips together into a pale, thin line. He looks off to the side, his eyes fixed blankly to a spot on the door frame.

“But there’s more than just that,” Thorin continues. “I didn’t finish back then, what I wanted to tell you. It’s not just the mating that is of significance — when it happens, a bond forms between the two mates. A deep and unbreakable bond, one which joins them for the rest of their lives, never again to exist as two separate people. Two people, but as one, connected to each other.”

Bilbo’s eyes finally drift to his face, and Thorin is compelled into chancing a touch against his cheek. “I care about you,” he tells Bilbo, rubbing a thumb over his jaw. “And, I...I want that with you. To be with you forever. To wed you and make love to you and father your children, if that is your wish. And if it is not...then...” The rest of the sentence has no ending that he can touch, and failing to say anything else, he looks down, choosing silence over the option of dashing his heart against the ground.

When he feels warmth on the back of his hand, Thorin opens his eyes. Bilbo has covered his hand with his own, and his gaze has flickered to Thorin. “I,” Bilbo says, and stops, looking very uncomfortable. He bites his lower lip, a wavering in his expression. Then, with the weight of the world on his breath, he sighs.

“Please forgive me,” Thorin tries. Seeking forgiveness is something that does not come to him naturally, but he knows the words and how it’s supposed to go, and it isn’t like he has anything left to lose. “I know I have no right to ask this, and...You have every reason to be angry, I’ll understand if you want to leave, but...but I’d never actually thought of it like this, that I could ever find someone else I wanted to be with, and you, well. You’re the first, you know? Over a hundred years and it’s only ever been you, and I’d hoped — gods, how I’d hoped — even before I knew that this was going to happen.”

Bilbo’s only response is a sniff. His gaze does not falter even as the corner of his mouth twitches, as his fingers stiffen over Thorin’s.

Thorin takes a deep, deliberate breath. “I lied to you because I was afraid. Of losing you, I mean. I thought that if you knew...if I told you what you were going to have to go through, you wouldn’t want to have anything to do with. Us,” he says, swallowing down the me as soon as it springs into his mouth. He doesn’t know if being unselfish will enhance his apology in any way, but it’s reached a point where he would consider begging, and as sorry as he is, it doesn’t take much to figure out which is the more kingly option.

“You’re afraid?” A laugh escapes Bilbo, thin and humourless. “Thorin, I’m the one who’s just been told I can get pregnant. How do you think that makes me feel?”

Oh. “I didn’t mean —” Thorin cuts himself off, shaking his head. He tries for another stab, rewords his penitence the best he can. “It has never been my intention to cause you distress,” he amends.

This should be helping, but Bilbo just looks vexed. “You didn’t think I would be upset about you
lying to me?”

“I wanted to protect you! That’s what people always do, isn’t it? They lie to protect the people they love!”

“They don’t lie to the people they love,” Bilbo says coldly, removing his hand from Thorin’s. He backs away, a step and a half, and folds his arms in front of him. Thorin makes no effort to reach for him again, in fact couldn’t, even if he tried.

“What do you want?” Thorin whispers, and it feels like he’s losing all of his air, like he’s being drowned on dry land. “What do you want me to do?”

For a long, long while, Bilbo doesn’t look at him, and when he does, he winces, as though the sight of Thorin is enough to cause him pain. Then, a shiver seems to rattle through him, and he says in a low, emotionless murmur, “I want you to leave me alone.”

“Bilbo —”

“You can tell the rest of them, too,” Bilbo snaps as he looks back up, his eyes hard and shiny. “I don’t want this, so, so you can all just stop it now. If any of you so much as touch me, I’ll… I’ll go, I’ll leave and go home — blast your stupid contract, you can forget about me helping you. I mean it.”

There’s something Thorin has to say to this, but his tongue has glued itself to the backs of his teeth and he can’t get his voice to work either. He blinks rapidly and holds on to his breathing, like it’s the only thing that’s keeping him afloat. It’s quite possible that his heart is about to break, and that’s terrifying.

“Don’t tell me you’re sorry. I know you are,” Bilbo continues. “I just… I don’t know if I can trust any of you anymore.”

And that’s it, really. Thorin manages to get his mouth to open, but he still has nothing to say, so he closes it. He bows his head to stare at Bilbo’s feet, eyes refusing to focus. He has to fist his hands to keep from falling over, dig his nails in until it hurts, and it is only then that he realises that he isn’t breathing quite right, hasn’t been for some time already.

“Don’t just stand there, say something.”

The way Bilbo’s voice cracks on that last word pulls Thorin back to the surface, and he draws a ragged snatch of air in through clenched teeth. “The tea,” he mumbles, because he’s already damned and may as well go down an honest person, for what it’s worth. “There was a sleeping draught in it.”

There is a jerk to Bilbo’s body that makes Thorin think that he’s about to strike him, and he braces himself in preparation, but the blow never comes. Instead, Bilbo puts one hand over his mouth, like he’s trying to hold his words back, and makes a muffled sound that could have been a curse if it’d been allowed to take shape. He shifts fractionally on his feet, widening the distance between them by inches. It seems several minutes before he finally walks away without asking for an explanation, and he doesn’t look back at Thorin, not even once, when he goes.
Chapter 6

When the moon wafts through the clouds that night, it is a glowing sickle-blade of light curved at the end of the horizon, and nearing the end of dinnertime, a summon comes down from Elrond’s solar.

Gandalf and Elrond are the only people waiting for Thorin when he arrives. He catches Gandalf’s eye when the wizard looks at him, sombre and knowing, and it speaks volumes that the elf lord is suddenly the most likable person in the room to Thorin, himself included.

Ultimately, Elrond translates the moon-runes for them, Gandalf poses a token question, and Thorin holds his silence throughout the meeting. He is sure, however, to thank Elrond when they take their leave for the night. As Gandalf walks alongside him to their quarters, Thorin can feel the wizard studying him, though Gandalf does not say anything, and it’s just as well that Thorin, much too exhausted with words, doesn’t expect him to.

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Thorin dreams of falling through miles and miles of cloudless sky, heat and sunlight striping across his back, and when he lands sprawling to break the surface of the ocean in a almighty splash, he wakes, jilted from sleep. His bedclothes are soaked through with sweat, and when he heaves a lungful of air in, a cloud of heat-pheromones swarms his nostrils in a giddying rush. He has a private moment of controlled panic to himself before he remembers that he’d taken his suppressant right before going to bed, just as he always does, but he snatches up the bottle on his bedside table and trickles another dose of the potion down his throat, just in case.

He falls back into bed, an arm over his face, and he tries very hard not to think about Bilbo, how it has to be for him now that there’s nothing to dull every sensation that accompanies the onslaught of a full heat. Thorin grits his teeth, presses his face into his pillow, and wills himself to just go back to sleep, searching for a distraction, any distraction, but eventually he can’t help but get up and change into a set of dry clothes and pad out into the darkened hallway.

The trail of pheromones is easy enough to follow, but Thorin may as well be walking through water, and he is a short distance away from Bilbo’s room when he hears something. He stops.

Someone’s crying.

Bilbo.

Thorin hesitates, and then lurks closer before he can think about what to do. Yes, that’s Bilbo, a soft, desperate sound that’s trickling from the other side of the door in gasps and sniffs. Thorin stands there, stock-still, and waits, just listening. There’s a whinnying squeak, a sharp bite of air. A long and broken moan. Heart hammering away, Thorin breathes in the scent rising up to assail him, and it takes all of his willpower not to bolt forward and barge into Bilbo’s room and gather him up in his arms to embrace him, console him.

“Please,” he hears Bilbo sob out of nowhere, and Thorin all can think for a few seconds is that he’s been noticed, somehow, up until it becomes clear that Bilbo’s addressing someone else whom Thorin can’t scent over the crushing assault of pheromones all around. “I can’t — I can’t…”

“You’re doing so well,” that person says. It’s Balin speaking, the timbre of his voice a soothing comfort. “Shh, shh, it’s fine, you’re okay, I’ve got you. Easy, there. Take it easy.”

“Balin,” Bilbo moans shakily, every breath an agony unseen. “Balin…Balin, make it stop, please
“I can’t, not like this. I’m sorry.”

There’s a faint shuffling noise from inside the room, and all Thorin can grok this as is Balin moving close to hold a writhing Bilbo in his arms, to kiss his brow, to do everything that Thorin would and more in his place. Bilbo’s crying has been reduced to an intermittent whimpering, now so quiet that Thorin has to ghost closer and stand with his face an inch away from the door to hear him. Any time now Thorin will knock, or the door will open without him making a move and Balin will be there, staring up at him, and Thorin will be told to go in either instance; he’s not wanted here. Bilbo doesn’t want him here.

He leans his forehead against the door noiselessly and stares down into the thick felted dark, unbudging, keeping it together the best he can. The whimpering beyond the door ebbs, now a little more than a mewling, and eventually when Thorin cannot hear even that as well, he finally gathers up the will to leave.

***

When they have gotten everything to depart in the morning, Bilbo is the last one to enter the Rivendell stables. In the act of saddling his pony, Thorin watches Bilbo waddle in, a stiffness in the hobbit’s gait. Bilbo gets to his pony and stares apprehensively at the saddle, his hands drifting slowly over his thighs. Thorin is briefly seized by the impulse to go over and help Bilbo mount his pony, but he’s only taken his hands off his own steed before Balin is at Bilbo’s side, talking to him. Bilbo doesn’t say anything, but he does give Balin a small smile and nods to whatever the dwarf is saying to him. When Balin puts his hands on Bilbo’s shoulder, Bilbo lowers his head to let him kiss his hair.

Thorin forgets fixing his own pony momentarily and looks on as Balin wraps his arms around Bilbo and hoists him onto his pony. When Bilbo’s gaze sweeps over the stable and finds Thorin for a moment, they hold each other’s eyes for the merest of seconds before Bilbo thins his lips and looks away as sunlight through the rafters catches in golden streaks across his chest and hair.

As they leave the stables in a single and orderly line, Thorin rides at the forefront of the party, his back unfailingly straight. The glaring excess of sun in his eyes hurts something fierce, but he doesn’t let himself turn around. He can’t. It’s easier by far to pretend that the morning light is what’s hurting him the most as they ride out of Rivendell, the elven settlement behind them and the Misty Mountains awaiting.

***

They take a long and winding route out of the valley and up into the Misty Mountains, reaching the High Pass by duskfall. Thorin rides wordlessly, breaking out of his reverie only to coordinate a safe movement through a section of the pass where a quartet of stone giants are sparring in the downpour. Awash in heavy rain and thunder, Thorin has to bellow at the top of his lungs to get heard by all in the party, until he is certain that he will be dreadfully hoarse for days to follow.

Lightning forks across the weltering sky, followed by the loudest thunderclap they’ve heard so far, and its wake Thorin hears Fili’s distant cries of “Oh, oh, help!” When he turns around to seek out the commotion, it’s just in time to see Bilbo’s pony rearing up and whinnying in fright. There’s a blood-chilling moment where Bilbo fumbles, struggling to maintain his hold on the reins, then he loses the battle and veers out of his saddle with a shriek.

Thorin is off his own pony without another thought, and he lunges forward to make a reckless grab at Bilbo, but falls short by bare inches. Bilbo disappears over the edge of the precipice they are
travelling on, but manages to obtain a handhold on the cliffside. All else forgotten save getting Bilbo to safety, Thorin scrambles down the ledge himself and wraps an arm around the terrified hobbit, heaving him back up into clamorous hands. In the effort, his own hand slips on the rocks, and Thorin has a split second to think about it being a long and grim drop down the mountainside before several hands have grabbed him painfully by his arms, keeping him from falling.

“Hang on!” Dwalin is saying, and then he and Dori and Bombur and Gloin combine their strengths into a single almighty tug, hauling Thorin up onto the path again. Back on the cliff, he lays flat on his front for a few seconds, panting and blinking rainwater out of his eyes as his heart continues to hammer away inside his chest. His shoulder is hurting dreadfully at the joint, a feeling not unlike that of dislocation, but it’s fine, they’re all fine and nobody is plunging to their deaths, which is the only thing that truly matters, really.

“Bilbo,” he murmurs, still dazed. “Where’s —”

“He’s safe, Your Majesty,” Bofur says. “Are you alright?”

When he feels safe enough to move, Thorin waits a while before nodding and pushing himself to his knees, and it’s then that he sees Bilbo sobbing in Balin’s arms, inconsolable, his face tucked against the dwarf’s long beard as Balin rubs his back gently and murmurs into his hair as they wrap tighter around each other, eyes for none except each other.

Thorin stares at them, keeps looking until he can finally breathe again, and then with a long, sharp motion, he rises to his feet and lifts a clump of wet hair away from his face, turning back to the path ahead. “We have to find shelter,” he says, raising his voice once more as though his throat hasn’t just gone impossibly dry. He trudges on with his hands fisted beside him and tries to keep himself from shaking, oh, he tries.

***

Close to the summit, Thorin calls a stop for the night in a cave that Fili and Kili scout out quickly before returning to the party to give the all clear. They tie their ponies up near the mouth of the cave and throw down their packs and lay out their groundsheets, discussing among themselves to meddle out a system of appointing sentries to stand guard while the others rest for the day.

As he is, Thorin doesn’t have it in him to partake in lengthy negotiation, so he volunteers for the first shift and leaves them to quibble over the remainder of the roster. He swallows another double dose of his draught before getting on duty, now for the added purpose of keeping himself awake, and tilts the bottle in his palms, making a note of how much he has left. There’s enough for a few more days; he thinks dully about asking Gandalf for more, wondering if the wizard could begrudge him even that much after everything that’s happened.

He trudges to the front of the cave and chooses a rocky outcrop near the entrance and sits there, looking out into the thunderstorm. Rain lashes into the cave, accompanied by the occasional flare of lightning and on its heels, the accosting thunderclap. Thorin pulls his furs tighter about his body, folding his arms to warm his hands against himself. Parts of him feel too big, too foreign where they are, like he’s been broken apart and reassembled with entirely different pieces. A gauntlet where a hand had been. Knives for fingers, a weave of glass chains over his heaving chest. Cold, clammy skin.

Balin is good for Bilbo, Thorin can’t help thinking despite himself. They’ll be happy together, won’t they? Even if it I am not the one, Bilbo will be taken care of by someone else who loves him and whom he loves in return. It’s better like this, if he isn’t mine to claim.
And yet, even with this knowledge, Thorin is wholly unable to come to terms with it, only managing to feel even colder and more alone.

“Thorin?”

Thorin doesn’t need to turn around to know it’s Bilbo. He stiffens at the sound of his name being called, wants to turn and look but doesn’t dare. He’s afraid of what he will see, what will happen, if he does.

“Thorin?”

Slow as he sounds uncertain, Bilbo shuffles around the rock to get in front of him, then plops down on his knees, reaching eye level with Thorin. His presence is a small one, smaller than most Thorin has ever experienced and yet so much more than he knows what to do with.

“I…” Bilbo says, a flickering of something, almost, in his eyes. He can’t seem to decide where to hold Thorin, hand moving undecidedly over cloaked knee and arm and shoulder before finally settling at his bearded cheek, where he brushes a thumb over his jawline. Where his skin meets Thorin’s is warm, the softness of his touch a small miracle. “I…just. I wanted to say. Thank you for saving my life, Thorin.”

It’s a good thing that he’s hidden most of himself away from Bilbo’s sight, if only that neither of them take notice of the way his hands have started to tremble. The reply comes by pure instinct as he fears saying anything else more than simply, “You’re welcome.”

“It was very good of you,” Bilbo mumbles, shifting his hand in a tender movement downwards, soft skin scraping wet stubble. “You were very brave, you know? I — I was so scared. I thought I was going to die. And you were so…so. Well. You already know.”

Thorin sits and looks at Bilbo, trying to remember the last time they have ever been this close, and it was when he’d kissed him, he’s sure of it, now that it’s all coming back to him. When now he can see every square inch of Bilbo’s face and count every last wrinkle down to the faint lines at the corners of his eyes. Bilbo’s mouth becomes very small as his eyes scan Thorin’s face, harried little lines appearing on his forehead as he stills his palm where beard ends and skin begins. Thorin wants to touch him back, kiss him, but he isn’t sure if it’s the right thing to do. So, he waits.

“You feel so cold,” Bilbo breathes, laying the back of his hand against Thorin’s neck. He clammers up onto his lap and slips quietly beneath Thorin’s furs, any chance of a by-your-leave forgone and wholly unnecessary. He is just small enough for Thorin’s cloak to fit snugly around the both of them, with Bilbo seated on his thighs and their bodies aligned against each other. Bilbo’s hands pick apart Thorin’s folded arms and he guides them around him, then Bilbo hugs him back and rests his head on Thorin’s chest.

Too stymied to say or do anything, Thorin just holds him huddled up there, clutching him even closer still. They stay like this for a long while, and when he closes his eyes against the top of Bilbo’s hair without meaning to, Thorin can’t help but think of comradeship and bonds and other things far too strong to be severed by anything, even death.

***

They don’t catch the electric blue glow leaking out of Bilbo’s scabbard before the floor of the cave has fissured open under the whole lot of them. There’s just enough time for Thorin to shout a useless warning, and then it’s a long and wild tumble that has Thorin grazing his palms several times as he scrambles to get a grip on something, anything. He cuts his cheek on a particularly nasty ricochet off
yet another rocky chute, grabs blindly yet again for a handhold he’s not even sure is there, and they fall, and fall, and fall.

When they do land, finally, in a whirling mess of limbs that take them all of ten seconds to untangle themselves from, Thorin is already reaching for his sword as he rises, quick as a reflex, but the effort still comes too little, too late. Goblins, an entire mountain’s worth, swarming and grabbing and shoving at them, and Thorin beats back a fair number with his bare hands before his wrists are chained behind his back and goblins have kicked his legs out from under him.

Face pressed into the dirt, Thorin snarls and tries to wrench free, but the seven-odd goblins on his back are easily three times his own weight in unity. He hears Dwalin roaring behind him, a pained noise from Gloin just beside him, and then a squeak of pure alarm that could only be Bilbo far behind in the mayhem.

For the first time since starting out on their journey, Thorin finds himself wishing desperately for an intervention from Gandalf, and quite predictably, there’s no sign of the wizard anywhere. They’re hauled roughly to their feet. Above the rabble, a goblin screeches something unintelligible, a throaty garble of words that riles up the others. Thorin struggles against the goblins flanking him on both sides, receives a fist to the gut for it, and then they’re quickly dragged along without a second’s delay or hesitation.

Thorin twists in his restraints to look over his shoulder, stealing glances at the rest of the captured party as much as chains and goblins will allow. He manages to definitively count seven, thinks it may be Dori centred in the cluster of goblins labouring to keep their captive subdued, and then they stop and he’s pushed forward to his knees. So made defenseless, the goblins’ hands on him remain tight all the same. It’s a compliment in itself, if but a useless one.

With measured caution, he looks up. The largest, moldiest goblin Thorin has ever seen in all two centuries of his life grins down at him from his throne, all crooked teeth and rank alpha. “So, what have we got here? Dwarves in my mountain? To what to I owe the pleasure?” the goblin booms.

“None,” Thorin answers, holding the goblin’s stare. To look away would be taken as an admission of guilt; even as Thorin is loathe to admit it, this is an exercise in passive-aggressive diplomacy if he’s ever encountered one. “We were merely passing through, nothing more.”

“Nothing more, eh?” The goblin’s dangling jowls quiver. “So it would be wrong if I were to think that the whole lot of you were coming to attack and pillage my kingdom, wouldn’t it?”

“We mean no harm to you or your people;” Thorin says.

The goblin laughs unkindly. “You and I know the precise nature of relations between my people and your own… I suppose the next thing you’ll tell me is that you’ve repaired your ties with the elves of the Mirkwood!”

The lie is not so much a stupid one as it is impossible to attest to, so Thorin says nothing, making the immediate mistake of defaulting to silence.

“S’wot I thought,” the goblin grunts, leaning back in his throne, looking disgustingly pleased with himself. “Looks like the rumours were true, then! The King Under the Mountain returns, only — well. You don’t exactly have a mountain, do you?”

Thorin clenches his jaw, fists his hands in their manacles, tries to come up with a plan and fails. In the absence of one he makes a conscious effort to tamp down on his anger and remain calm, and he fails at that as well.
This must show on his face, if for how the goblin’s toadlike smile grows wider still. He strokes a thick, grubby finger down his many chins. “King of nothing, but a king no less. I know someone who’d pay a small treasure for your head, as a matter of fact.”

“Do what you will with me,” Thorin growls. “Let the rest of them go — they are of no value to you.”

“That’s for me to decide,” the goblin replies, leaning forward to eyeball the other dwarves before looking back to Thorin, a wicked smirk on his lips. “Who’s to say that I won’t keep one of you and kill the rest? A dwarf would make a fine pet indeed, wouldn’t you say?”

Thorin sucks in a noiseless breath. The manacles clink behind his back, keeping his sword hand a finger’s length away from the hilt of Orcrist.

“Who will it be, then? The silver-mane?” Dori shoots a glare of his own back at the goblin, who turns to Fili. “The youngest? Or, why not —” The goblin’s eyes widen, bloodshot and deranged, and tick to the far end of the chain gang where a frightened Bilbo is kneeling. “You,” the goblin says, pointing with a bulbous finger, “bring him here.”

The fight Bilbo puts up is a feeble one at best. Thorin bolts forward, tries to put himself between Bilbo and the goblin, and makes it half an inch before his whole body is pressed into the dirt again, a dull weight between his shoulders. “Stop!” he calls out, wriggling fruitlessly to absolutely no give whatsoever. The goblin takes no notice, and reaches out to close a thick hand around Bilbo’s throat.

This is when all the lanterns choose to go out at the same time, raising a split second of shared panic before a blinding flash blazes through the entirety of the cavern with a ear-shattering bang. The weight on Thorin’s back lifts just as he feels the manacles break off his wrists, light splintering at the edges of his vision. A distinct electrical smell rises in the air, followed immediately after by the fetor of burnt flesh. Sparing no quarter to ask questions or be thankful for this turn of events, Thorin wills himself the first to recover. He unsheathes Orcrist and bolts forward, slicing through the two nearest goblins to him with so much force that blood spatters his face.

“Bilbo!” Thorin roars, louder still for the fact that his ears are ringing from the blast and he can barely hear himself speaking as it is. He feels an answering grab at his shoulder and stops short of a retaliatory strike only after realising it’s Bilbo beside him, who defends his right with a clumsy stab that’s far from a sturdy counter in any shape or form. In the melee a goblin falls dead all the same, and Thorin can see the horror rising in Bilbo at the blood on Sting for the briefest of moments, a look that threatens to paralyze but fades quickly in the building tide of battle.

“We need to move!” someone shouts, and it’s Gandalf, damn him, but there will be a time and place to shout at the wizard for always taking so long to show up. For now, it is pandemonium. The not-so-dazed goblins rise against them like water bursting from a broken dam, angry and inexorable in their advance. Thorin quickly passes Bilbo into Bombur’s keeping and runs ahead to cut a swathe through the goblins accosting them from the front.

“Do you know the way?” Thorin shouts back at Gandalf.

The wizard grunts and sprints to the forefront of their party, and Thorin takes this as a response in the affirmative.

So they flee, meeting goblins by the hordes as they run. The route Gandalf leads them appears haphazard, full of sharp turns and detours, but he doesn’t slow down and this much is all that’s needed to inspire sufficient confidence in whatever plan he’s following. Doubts stranded, beyond reason, Thorin focuses and runs after the wizard, his questions and angry words shelved in favour of
the instinct to survive.

Instead, he fights his best and his hardest, savagely mowing down goblins foolish enough to take him and Gandalf head on. The others repel enemies from the rear and sides, a clumsy defence that keeps together only in due the ability of their opponents, or rather the lack thereof. A threat solely in sheer volume, the goblins prove to be poorer fighters by far, and Thorin’s party makes it a significant distance before the path begins to thin out even as the goblins continue to replace their slain with shocking speed.

What seems like ages later, the chase finds them caught on a narrow stone bridge between two converging waves of goblins. Forgoing the unthinkable option of turning back, Gandalf and Thorin plow straight into the oncoming assault. Gandalf lets loose another brilliant flash of light from his staff that throws several goblins back, charred and smoking. Thorin takes advantage of the momentary diversion to match Gandalf’s score in seconds. It puts a dent in the goblins’ forces, but only just.

“Hurry!” he calls, gesturing for the others to cross. They’re interrupted mid-way, however, by the arrival of the massive goblin from before, who brings with him a second army of his kind, and the fighting begins anew.

Cobbled together in the rear guard, Dwalin, Dori, Oin and Bifur are managing to keep the goblins sufficiently at bay, though not without considerable effort. Further up ahead, Kili and Ori battle those whom have taken to lobbing spears and knives at them. Just behind Thorin in the vanguard, Gloin and Bofur and Balin form a convincing bulwark against craftier foes scurrying up from beneath the bridge to engage them.

It’s those in the middle, right on the bridge, who have it the worst. Carrying Bilbo on his shoulders, Bombur isn’t in any state to wield a weapon, leaving just Fili and Nori to protect them both, but the lack of room to manoeuvre weakens their defence by degrees. Close quarters make for bad match-ups with smaller, more nimble opponents, and it’s evident that the goblins are well aware of this. Hedged in at the front and back, even Thorin and Gandalf combined cannot hold a safe route for long. The goblins bulge in number with more of them emerging from hiding, effectively locking the dwarves in place, preventing them from moving forward or backward.

From above, a neighbouring scaffold feeds goblins onto the bridge five at a time, and with Fili taking on two at a time and Nori’s hands full with the other three, it’s only Thorin who catches sight of the sixth goblin creeping up to pounce, the target clear.

Then, Thorin is doubling back at top speed, slipping on blood underfoot, bellowing a warning that never reaches anyone on the bridge. He has Bilbo’s name on his lips and can’t seem to make himself any louder, can’t seem to run any faster. His heart is pounding and blood is surging in his ears as he dispatches a goblin blocking his way, then another, and he prays that he’ll make it in time. He has to make it, he has to —

The goblin jumps.

An ungodly fear grips Thorin and he has taken but one step on the bridge when the goblin slams into Bilbo, knocking him clean off Bombur’s shoulders and over the edge of the bridge. Whole body gone numb, Thorin leaps and flings out his hand, missing by metres, and he can’t stop reaching even after the lifetime it seems to take Bilbo to fall passes and the last of the hobbit has disappeared into the all-enveloping darkness below.
“We have to go back.”

Dwalin and Bombur don’t move from where they are in front of Thorin. Flanking him, neither do Fili nor Kili, although the brothers look much more unsure of themselves as they trade a sideways glance between them. The forest that they have stopped to rest in is a sparse one, hardly the safest of hiding spots, but they’re a distance away from the foot of the Misty Mountains where they exited from and it’s easy enough to spot the advance in the event of any downhill attack.

Grinding his teeth together, Thorin has to pry himself away from the easy option of raising his voice. “Didn’t you hear what I said?” he growls. “We have to go back!”

“You know we can’t,” Bombur mumbles, feet fidgeting. Dwalin just makes a noise of vague assent, his face turned towards the ground.

Thorin waves an impatient arm, battering down the pain in his shoulder from where a goblin's club had checked him brutishly not more than an hour ago. He will not accept what he’s hearing, he won’t. “You’re suggesting we leave Bilbo behind to die?”

“You're being hasty,” Balin cautions. “How far do you think we’ll get if we charge in there blindly like a pack of fools?”

“Don’t question me,” Thorin snarls, beginning to lose the fight to remain level. It shows in the way his throat is straining with the effort it takes not to shout. “If you can walk away from this and live with yourself, then that’s your decision. But I’m going to find him, and if I have to go alone, so be it.”

The silence that follows this is excruciating. Then, Balin says in the quiet, reserved voice of his that Thorin knows him exceedingly well for, “You and I know full well that there isn’t a single person in this company who wouldn’t follow you back in there if you choose to go.”

“Do we, really?” Thorin returns without thinking. He recognises that he's being spiteful, but does not let himself consider taking any of it back. He's gone as far as to jettison sound reason as it stands; there's little else he can do but to press on to go back. “And yet here I am, being impeded by my own brethren! You would stop me to avoid being led to your deaths, is that it?”
Something in Balin's face slips and the hurt in his eyes becomes clear all too late. Thorin's shame, initially small, mounts as Balin just regards him with a look that's tired and defeated and disappointed all at once. ‘Of all things to say, Thorin,’ Balin murmurs, the tone in his voice dead, and he lowers his eyes. Perhaps it is his mounting guilt or purely the prospect of possibly having lost Bilbo, but Thorin is driven to do the same.

Gandalf, ever the one for timely and significant interruptions, coughs loud enough to arrest attention. ‘I agree with Thorin,’ he announces, a gravity to his words. ‘Bilbo’s safety was my responsibility and I failed him on that count. He would never have been put in danger’s way if it was not for my decision to include him in our company.’

“It’s my fault,” Bombur says. “If I’d just held on tighter to him —”

“You would have fallen along with Bilbo,” Gandalf finishes for him firmly. “This is not the time to be assigning blame to those who do not deserve it. Right now, the important thing is to start looking; I daresay, if the fates are kind, he could very well still be alive with nothing more than a few scratches!”

Thorin looks up at the wizard, skeptical. “You can’t possibly mean that.”

Gandalf shrugs, though his face remains grim. “Larger miracles have happened. You wish for that to be true as well, do you not?”

“I — yes, Mahal, yes.”

“Then there’s not a second to lose.” Gandalf nods at the rest of the party, a gesture that manages to reassure a lot more than it should. “If we search in a smaller group it will be easier to move about and evade detection — I’d think no more than four, me included, will be optimal.”

“I’ll go,” Thorin says immediately.

Gandalf regards him with the caution of a person handling kiln-fresh metal. “Can I trust you to remain calm if you come?”

“Yes.”

“No matter what we may find, Thorin. Remember that.”

Thorin swallows, something heavy rolling about in the pit of his stomach. He tries swallowing again to settle it, but that doesn't work. Nothing helps when all he can think of is Bilbo lying cold, mortally wounded, dead, somewhere on a ledge deep in the heart of the Misty Mountains. He takes a long moment trying to get past that mental image, how it wedges between his ribs like the ache of an old injury, but his silence appears to be enough for Gandalf.

“Well, then. Let’s go.”

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The other two who follow are easy picks. Nori is closely acquainted with the shadows and moves the quietest out of all of them, whereas Gandalf asks Oin to accompany them with his first-aid satchel stocked and fully ready for use. When they’ve figured out some semblance of a strategy that might just not get them all killed, Gandalf forms them all up — Nori’s assigned the position of front scout, while Gandalf relegates himself to the back. He gives Thorin the task of protecting Oin and his supplies at all costs, which Thorin defers to without protest. It’s not like Thorin at all, this quiet resignation that grinds at him in all the wrong ways, but he keeps his head down and his answers
succinct and lets Gandalf walk the three of them through the search-and-recover plan. He doesn’t say anything about how Gandalf never once uses the word rescue, how he steers clear of it and its necessary connotations, but Thorin can tell that they all do notice, somehow.

Even so, no one says anything about it.

“Sundown is our cut-off point,” Gandalf says, gesturing at the sky with his staff as he finishes explaining the last of his plan. “We’ve probably got two hours at most, give or take fifteen minutes. Should be sufficient time to sweep the place, assuming nothing goes awry. We retreat if we’re discovered.” He levels a severe gaze at Thorin, the command clear. “Do not push ahead if it comes to that.”

Thorin sucks in a breath. “If I were at the front —”

“Thorin.”

It’s the only thing that Gandalf needs to say. Thorin presses his lips together, keeping back the remainder of his words, but he forbids himself from looking down. The shame is one thing; acknowledging it is another.

A mild kindness softens Gandalf’s expression. “I’m not your enemy, Thorin. Everyone here wants to get Bilbo back safe, but we’re going to have to work together for that to happen. You must understand this.”

“I’m not a child,” Thorin snipes, irritated.

Gandalf’s lip twitches, like he’s fighting a grin. “Believe me when I say that talking to a child would be much easier.”

“And if we can’t find him?” Thorin demands, allowing the jibe to slide in favour of larger, more important considerations. “What then?”

The infuriating lift to Gandalf’s mouth disappears immediately. For a brief, terrifying second, the facade slips, just enough to be noticed, and the wizard looks like he honestly has no idea what they would do. It’s gone as soon as Thorin sees it, then Gandalf sighs resignedly, and this is how Thorin realises that neither of them truly wishes to have an answer put to that question.

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From where they have harboured the party temporarily, Gandalf leads them on a winding path up the hillside, around trees and fallen logs and bushes that decorate the forest floor. It’s not as direct or quick an approach as Thorin had expected, but they reach the opening they’d exited the mountain from in a matter of minutes and Nori slips inside noiselessly. He pops his head out after a while and gives the all clear signal before disappearing back in again.

“Right,” Gandalf says quietly. “In we go, then.”

“Bilbo,” Thorin whispers, and he doesn’t say hang on or we’re coming for you, even as the words shape themselves at the back of his throat. Oin holds his shoulder gently and murmurs, “We’ll find him,” and all Thorin can do is nod, trying his best to believe it. He knows what this proves, innately, as they tread back into the mountain and all sunlight fades from sight. He only wonders why it’s taken him this long to realise that there’s nothing in the world that could keep him from following Bilbo into the dark.

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The bowels of the Misty Mountain manage to perplex and intimidate less effectively the second time they navigate through. Thorin keeps Orcrist drawn and his non-sword hand anchored to Oin’s back as they move deeper in, their formation closely-knit. The path is lit with minimal light, but after a while their eyes adjust adequately for them to be able to better make out details around them. They move at a speed tailored to caution, allowing Thorin time to sniff the air, searching for any trace of the scent he knows for sure belongs to Bilbo.

“Keep moving,” Gandalf says from behind him.

“I can’t smell him,” Thorin murmurs without turning around.

There’s a pause, and then Gandalf says, “Have faith. We don’t know anything for sure, not now. You never know — our little burglar might just surprise us yet again.”

Thorin can see the small hope in there, but he holds on to it and refuses to let it go for anything.

They proceed on, now much further behind Nori than the distance they’d agreed to keep between them. Recognisable features crop up along the way — there’s the rock formation they’d passed on their way out, the undulating path where Thorin had almost tripped, the intersection that Gandalf created by blasting out a cave-in. When they start encountering turns that Thorin doesn’t remember them making on their way out, he glances back at Gandalf. In reply, Gandalf presses a finger to his lips and shakes his head.

All spoken communication ceased, the atmosphere of the underground takes over. Whisper of wind, a rustle much like vegetation disturbed, some rhythmic dripping that seems to come from everywhere at once. It echoes, unhindered, just so to mask the near-imperceptible sound of their footsteps. The only scent in the air continues to be the clear smell of water, and something else which doesn’t quite identify as goblin or troll or hobbit. With Bilbo and actual goblins to be worrying about, Thorin quickly puts it from his mind.

Walking on for what seems like hours, there’s still no signal from up ahead. The cocktail of scents in the air lingers, nothing remotely suggesting the presence of anyone else but them. The path keeps unspooling into the darkness. They look out for the tiniest shadow, the slightest of movements. When their search drags on and continues to turn up empty, Thorin finds himself taking larger, bolder steps, pushing Oin onward with a rise in the volume of their movement. The other dwarf looks over his shoulder at Thorin once, but doesn’t say anything. Gandalf, as it happens, does not share Oin’s reservations.

“Easy,” Gandalf mutters.

Mildly worded, the order in there is plain, but Thorin chooses not to pay it any notice. He presses on, his paces lengthening and growing louder with each stride.

Something seizes him by the shoulder, and in the second it takes for him to realise that it’s Gandalf’s hand, Thorin bites a curse word in half before trying to shake loose. It only makes Gandalf tighten his bony fingers on Thorin’s collarbone to the point of discomfort, and left with no other choice, Thorin goes still.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Thorin seethes.

“Calm down,” Gandalf says, his voice deathly calm. “Rushing this is going to bring us nowhere.”

“We’re going too slow! At this rate —”

“Do you think we’ll stand a better chance at finding Bilbo if you bring down every last goblin in this
mountain onto us?"

“I—” Appallingly, Thorin can’t think of anything to say to this. Several angry possibilities cross his
mind, but as he fails to boil over, so do they.

With a huff, Gandalf releases him. Thorin turns to glare, a gesture Gandalf reciprocates. “Don’t make
me regret allowing you to come with us, Thorin. I know you’re worried for Bilbo, but don’t expect
forgiveness if you allow that to jeopardise getting him out safely.”

“You don’t understand,” Thorin says, his voice beginning to tremble with the effort it’s taking not to
shout. “If anything happened to him…if anything has happened to him.” That sentence has no
ending he can even begin to edge towards. He squares his shoulders and clutches the hilt of Orcrist
hard enough that his hand shakes. He’s furious at himself all of a sudden, so furious he could very
well burst from it, this swollen feeling in his chest that manages to make breathing a labour.

“Then it has already happened,” Gandalf says, sounding unfailingly stern even in his most hushed of
undertones. “No amount of blame, self-imposed or otherwise, is going to solve anything. We’ve
spoken about this, Thorin. Do try to remember that.”

Shamed once more in the same vein, Thorin forces a deep breath in, attempting restraint, and his
anger subsides fractionally. The second breath is unable to replicate the calming effects of the first,
but it’s something he can do and a ready alternative to exploding on the spot.

With nowhere to go, the remainder of Thorin’s rage cannot hold for long; it collapses on itself,
leaving a feeling of terrible hollowness in its wake. His heart continues to throb painfully against the
wall of his chest, where it’s squeezed too tight for comfort. “I thought I could protect him,” Thorin
says, his voice barely a whisper.

A trick of the dark it might be, but the rim of Gandalf’s hat seems to droop with his eyes. “I know,”
he says with unexpected sympathy; all factors considered, Thorin had been ready for another round
of scolding. “As did I.”

This is something else they have in common that Thorin finds he is able to accept. He lifts his head to
look at Gandalf, and the wizard looks back at him with a sagacity that speaks of years and years of
practiced patience.

“I need you to cooperate with me,” Gandalf says. “Be careful about this. We have time. Once we are
found out, we’ll have none at all. You must know that there’s no reason to risk that outcome.”

Thorin considers this. In the dim light, Gandalf’s face is kind and gentle. It’s always been something
Thorin actively dislikes about the wizard, but he can find no ill will to bear, only reticence. Keeping
it together, he nods.

Just then, Gandalf frowns and gestures ahead with a tilt of his chin. Thorin turns swiftly, prompting
Oin to follow suit, and they raise their drawn weapons in a steady motion, ready to strike at any
given notice.

The scent that greets Thorin’s nose is a familiar one. Slinking out from a dark corner, Nori emerges
hands first, his palms turned outward in a preliminary act of good faith. The rest of the dwarf follows
soon after, arms, legs, then all at once until he too is standing in the same dim light that contains the
rest of them.

Thorin lowers his sword all of an inch, but keeps his grip firm. He’s not so chastised nor worried as
to drop his guard, not even for a moment. “What is it? Did you find anything?” he demands.
Nori nods, but his expression is unfathomable and there’s something in there that sends a wave of cold through Thorin. It’s certainly not the expression of one bearing any measure of good news. He reaches into his pocket and pulls something out and proffers it to the two of them, his eyes never once leaving Thorin’s face. Then, Nori tips what appears to be a number of pebbles into Gandalf’s hand and Thorin hurries forward to see that they’re not really pebbles after all — they’re buttons. Five small, dirty brass buttons, dented somewhat but otherwise whole, and as polished as the day Thorin had first seen them glimmering down the front of Bilbo’s neatly-pressed waistcoat.

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By the time they exit the Misty Mountains once more, the sun has pinkened the most distant of clouds and the night air is cold, but Thorin can’t take in any of that. The only thing he can do is remember, and the clarity with which he remembers the two hours that have passed them by is astounding. He remembers walking, a whole lot of it, and the winding, endless dark. He remembers clenching Bilbo’s buttons in his fist, held tight as he would a dear promise unkept. He remembers insisting on staying behind to keep up the search when Gandalf had given the order to pull out, remembers when they’d reached the precise point of brinkmanship and his impossible decision afterwards, remembers closing his eyes and taking one last breath of air at the entrance as if he still had it in him to believe in miracles.

Now, as they trudge back to where the others have moored for the time being, everything gives way to shame, to grief, to unrelenting guilt. It feels like there’s something that Thorin is meant to say or do, but he has no idea what it is. Not when they’re returning empty-handed with four to their count instead of the five it should have been.

For the longest time since Erebor, Thorin had forgotten that loss could burn so deeply.

“We could,” Gandalf says on the way down, then stops mid-sentence, and seems to think better of saying anything else. He too can’t seem to be able to lift his head, though his eyes continue to wander.

Thorin doesn’t slow down and doesn’t look at Gandalf. This comes all too naturally to him, his old habits reemerging from dormancy, and he doesn’t have anything left in him to react otherwise.

“We’ll search again tomorrow,” Gandalf promises, and Thorin nods, neither of them fooling each other.

“Uncle!”

Thorin looks up at the sound of Fili’s voice. Standing a short distance downhill from where they are, Fili is waving an arm at them and gesturing behind him, looking unfathomably excited. “Uncle, look! Look who it is!”

Thorin does look, and when the person behind Fili comes into sight, he almost drops his sword.

Later, he won’t remember dashing down the hill and scooping Bilbo up and crushing the hobbit to himself as if they were already bonded forever and never to be parted again for the rest of their lives. He won’t remember sliding his lips against Bilbo’s forehead, mouthing his name like a mantra, and Bilbo trembling slightly against him. Neither will he remember apologising, over and over again until he’s not sure if the words are aloud or just in his heart and if Bilbo can even hear what he’s saying.

What he does remember is having all conceivable fear banished from that quiet somewhere inside of him, a miracle he casts aside for the living, breathing one encircled in the territory of his embrace. Where hopelessness had been is nothing but wonder, and an immeasurable gratitude that this is
happening, that if he closed his eyes and opened them again Bilbo would still be here with him.

“How,” Thorin murmurs with his nose buried in Bilbo’s neck, the smell of Bilbo too familiar, his scent too much even beneath the thickness of dirt and sweat. “You,” he tries again, and he only realises he’s holding on to Bilbo too tightly when Bilbo starts wriggling about in his hold.

“How,” Bilbo gasps, his arms pinned to his sides. “I…I can’t breathe.”

At this, Thorin quickly loosens his grip but doesn’t release Bilbo just yet, afraid of risking his absence all over again. Instead, his hands find both sides of Bilbo’s head, cradling him there, and he feels his heart open at the wide-eyed look Bilbo gives him. “Are you hurt?” he asks.

“No, er. Not at all,” Bilbo mumbles, looking mollified more than anything. His voice is very small but his eyes are clear, and at the back of it all is incredulity, a line of wonder in his own expression as if he doesn’t quite believe that any of this is real either.

Thorin exhales and puts his forehead down on Bilbo’s, possessive arms locked tight around the hobbit’s waist, and it almost feels like he can keep him safe here if he just holds him long enough. “I thought,” he says softly, then once more, “I thought,” and even without the rest it’s clear that they all thought the same thing, even Bilbo himself.

“I know,” says Bilbo. Honesty hurts, but Thorin is holding Bilbo and Bilbo is letting himself be held, and in spite of the fear and anger and confusion of days and weeks behind them, they are both here, no longer lost, and Thorin finds that this is more than anything he could have imagined.

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Heading back to the main body, they hear the first howl break over the mountains just as the other dwarves come into sight.

Thorin turns to look, which is a mistake in itself. The warg careens into both Thorin and Oin, tackling them both onto their backs, but Gandalf reacts, quick as winking, and sidesteps the beast to thrust the blade of his sword into its throat before it can proceed to maul either dwarf.

“Get up, get up!” Gandalf snaps, facing uphill with both sword and staff in hand. Fili and Nori push the dead warg off of them and haul Thorin and Oin to their feet. As the rest of the company joins up with them, more dark figures loom threateningly in the distance. “How many?” Gandalf demands, and it takes Thorin a few seconds to realise that he’s being addressed.

A whirlwind of scents are carried to them quickly on the downdraft, and Thorin sizes up a figure as fast as he can. “Twenty,” he says, lumping both alphas and betas together, and revises his estimates immediately when the scents grow stronger. “Thirty. With riders.”

Gandalf curses.

Two more wargs bound over a fallen log and land in their midst. While Dwalin immediately cuts one down, Bifur and Dori are swept to the ground by the second before Kili puts an arrow between its eyes.

“Front scouts,” Dori reports, panting as Ori helps him up. “They’ll know where we are by now.”

Thorin meets Gandalf’s gaze, their only course of action clear.

“Run!” Gandalf booms, and they scatter without hesitation.
Fleeing downhill is a challenge in balance further complicated by the menace of heavy footfalls thundering the ground behind them. The incline is sharp, the terrain uneven, and several times Thorin avoids a misstep by the sheer instinct of years of footwork. He worries all the more for Bilbo, who runs beside him, his face paled with renewed fright. Mid-dash, Thorin bounds closer to him and puts an arm across his back, ready to catch him if he should trip, and Bilbo edges closer into whatever minimal comfort this may provide.

“They’re going to catch us, aren’t they?” Bilbo squeaks.

Thorin looks at him edgewise, shakes his head furiously. “I won’t let anything happen to you. Not again.” He grips Bilbo’s shoulder as he says this, keeping his gaze on Bilbo when the hobbit looks to him with trust in his uncertain eyes. He is the one that he has to protect.

Bilbo doesn’t say anything, but he nods, and they run.

The hillside ends in the apex of a cliff without warning, a cliff much too steep to abseil in time short of throwing themselves hundreds of feet to a dense canopy of trees below. Circling around yields no way out whatsoever; they’re trapped short of doubling back to engage their enemies. The snarling becomes louder, the footfalls like drums, the oncoming scent soaked through with cold murder.

“The trees!” Gandalf bellows, gesticulating wildly around them. “Up into the trees!”

It’s not an order that has any obvious tactical foresight to it, but it’s far better than staying where they are. They scurry up at top speed, three persons to a tree, and get out of reach just in time to avoid the first arrivals of snapping, growling wargs that circle them below.

“Now what?” Thorin shouts at Gandalf, but the tree they’re clinging to shakes violently before Gandalf can answer. They all look down at the exact moment a warg slams into the trunk again, rocking them about a second time. The third shock jolts the tree with such force that Bilbo yelps, nearly toppling off his branch, and while Thorin shoots out an arm and rights him before he can slip, the persistence of a significantly larger warg causes the tree to lurch to the point of uprooting and falling over entirely.

“Jump!” Gandalf commands, mere moments before the blow that does the tree in connects. They leap over to the neighbouring tree where Gloin, Bombur and Bofur have taken shelter, only making it as their initial refuge crashes noisily to the ground. Seconds have barely passed before the besiegement passes on to them, and with six persons to the tree, it takes just three well-aimed strikes from the wargs to force them over to the third, then the fourth, until they are all sharing the last remaining tree at the far edge of the cliff.

Finding purchase, Thorin manages to orient himself into a position that promises some level of stability. He looks around the others. No one is in immediate risk of falling, though with many of them clinging to branches for dear life, any possibility of arranging a counterattack at full strength is slim at best.

The tree that their entire company now inhabits is a tall and sturdy one, but it shakes all the same when the wargs double up and proceed to batter it two at once. Attacked long enough, being shaken loose is only a matter of time. Something drops on Thorin’s head and lands in his palms. The fir cone is unnaturally hot against his skin, then Gandalf yells from above him, “Make yourself useful!” which isn’t the most insane thing Thorin has ever heard only when the pinecone promptly bursts into flames. Reservations foregone in light of this chance to fight back, he hurls the cone before he can burn his fingers, striking a warg on the head with it. The beast’s growling turns into shrieking as its pelt sparks and catches fire, compelling the warg to flee.
“More!” Thorin shouts up at Gandalf. Two more cones are tossed over to Thorin; he mis-aims the first and a thatch of dry grass across the cliff goes up in flame, but the second one ricochets off its primary target and strikes another, setting both howling wargs ablaze.

“Good shot!” Gandalf cries.

“More!” Thorin repeats, unable to emphasise himself enough. Gandalf hastens to acquiesce and those with free hands available join in the volley without question. The improvisation works much more effectively than Thorin had predicted it would — where fir cones miss, new flames crackle to life from the ground, creating a barrier of fire and dark smoke that none of the wargs seem brave enough to cross.

“You have a plan,” Thorin says to Gandalf, not quite asking, but his words have little certainty behind them, if at all.

A little further up the tree, Gandalf trains his eyes on the wargs circling about below. Something close to fear happens to his face, the small smile emerging too uneasy, too late. “I’ve lived through worse,” Gandalf allows, touching the tip of his staff to another fir cone.

Though he tries to, Thorin doesn’t really doubt this claim, even considering it’s of absolutely no help. Stop-gap measure it is, the magic fir cone stratagem only stays viable for so long. The imminent threat of unburnt wargs quickly gives way to the larger, more dangerous one as the orcs arrive. Hulking and scarred, they keep their distances from the tree, though their scents carry swiftly on hot air rising, stronger and repulsive than ever before. Alphas numbering more than betas, it makes all the hairs on the back of Thorin’s neck stand, but none of it compares to the cold disbelief that rushes him when the orcs part their ranks and one of their number rides forward into plain view.

“Thorin,” Balin says from a few branches away, the shock in his voice understood.

“Azog,” Thorin spits.

The Pale Orc, atop his white warg, raises an arm at them, or rather what passes for it in the evidence of Thorin’s handiwork. A wicked array of spikes jut out of the stump left below his elbow, flashing orange as he turns it in the firelight. The scent rolling off of him, all seven feet of alpha orc, is as hideous as Thorin remembers. He looks straight at Thorin, sharp teeth bared in a smile of grotesque pleasure.

“I’ll kill him,” Thorin growls.

“Wait — oh!” Balin cries.

The tree lurches at the bludgeoning of several more wargs, bending at an angle that has many of their number straining to keep from falling off. The nothingness at the edge of the cliff rushes up to meet them, threatening to claim those hanging on by the skins of their teeth. Thorin lifts his head, eyes, meeting Azog’s, and he is filled with an indomitable hatred.

He hadn’t witnessed the act at Moria, having only looked up in time to see the orc standing triumphantly with Thror’s head in his hand. It feels like Thorin is as he was there, now, where everything has narrowed down to the ultimatum of doing whatever it takes to kill Azog, or die trying. He moves as if by instinct, unsheathing Orcrist, and strides lengthwise along the fallen tree, never once breaking his line of sight, his shoulders squared, duty-bound. Heat sears his face, singeing his beard. Then Azog’s warg is bounding for him, and with his heart pounding and blood coursing hot through his body, Thorin dashes forward to meet him.
Azog’s mace comes down hard and Thorin feints, twisting out of the way, but the warg lashes out with its hind legs, kicking him hard in the chest on the rebound. Caught off guard, Thorin stumbles, barely managing to keep his balance. The warg swivels faster than he’d expected it would and the mace swings heavily in the downward arc of a pendulum. Too close to be certain of being able to dodge it completely, Thorin chooses to parry instead, catching the mace in the centre of Orcrist. Though not a direct hit, the torque powering Azog’s blow is enough to stagger Thorin yet again, allowing Azog to reach down with his pike-hand and slash at him unguarded.

The front of Thorin’s mail rips with a clinking noise and a runny warmth spreads down his chest before something heavy slams into the side of his head. His eyes squinch shut around blurred vision as he falls, a dull pain throbbing in his skull and chest. This is soon followed by another sharp pain around his midsection. Clamped in the warg’s jaws, he’s lifted up, the constricting pressure denying him air, all ending in him being shaken roughly and thrown several feet away. He lands on his side, hitting the ground hard, and his abused shoulder flares anew under the sudden shock of his own weight.

“Pitiful,” Thorin hears Azog cackle. “You are unable to even put up a worthy fight! Pitiful, indeed! Tell me this, Son of Thrain, Son of Thror — how does it feel to know that your grandfather remains unavenged? That I live where he died by my hand?”

With great effort, Thorin presses himself to rise. He steadies himself and lifts his sword, blinking blood out of his eyes. He doesn’t fall for the goading, but all the same the anger leaches readily into his veins like venom, making it difficult to concentrate on fighting. Panting and aching all over, he assumes a defensive stance that Azog breaks easily with a command for his warg to charge straight ahead, bashing Thorin to the ground.

“No doubt you desire revenge, Oakenshield.” Azog sneers the epithet like a curse word. “As do I.” He lifts his mangled arm, as proof.

Thorin coughs, his throat and eyes irritated by smoke. Searching the dirt, his free hand finds something that fits into his grip with an obliging familiarity, and he arms himself with it without looking as Azog swings another blow at him. The oaken branch cracks against Azog’s mace, shielding Thorin well enough for him to duck and answer the attack with one of his own.

The warg lets out a shrieking roar that echoes for what sounds like miles. Azog leaps off of it before it falls, landing with a boom that shakes the earth. Without so much as a second to compose himself, he rams Thorin with his hulking tonnage before Thorin can think of countering. Thorin is thrown backward, his equilibrium lost, and Azog’s mace smashes into his ribs with an audible crunch. All his air gone, Thorin keels over.

Azog kicks him viciously in the chest, throws back his head and crows. The spectating orcs join in, hissing and jeering their excitement. Lying on his back, Thorin wavers on the narrowing edge of consciousness. He can vaguely register Azog giving a command in orcish along with the hazy silhouette of another orc striding over to stand above him. His body isn’t hurting as much as it should, strangely detached from the pain that he knows for sure is there. Everything just seems so muffled, so far away.

Something heavy lands on Thorin’s stomach, pinning him there, and he can feel the cool point of a blade resting delicately against his throat. It lifts, a pinprick of orange light suspended just above him, and there’s nothing else for it; he closes his eyes.

A yell, a hot scent, then both weight and sword have vanished.
Slowly, Thorin blinks his eyes open. He turns his head to look. It’s Bilbo, driving Sting into the chest of the orc that was standing over him, and when the orc is still and silent, Bilbo quickly retrieves his weapon and steps between Thorin and Azog, turned towards the latter.

*Don’t*, Thorin tries to say. No sound escapes him. He tries run as well, but his voice remains lost and even mouthing either word is beyond him. Bilbo takes several steps back, brandishing Sting wildly as Azog approaches. Thorin tries to stand, tries to breathe. Some air leaks back into his lungs, but it’s nowhere near enough to revive his strength. The orc gets closer. Bilbo’s slashes turn more frantic, more desperate, continuing to meet nothing.

There’s a rising cry from behind them, and then the other dwarves are dashing forth with their weapons raised high, through flames and over uprooted trees to confront Azog’s band of orcs. Metal rings out loud through the tearing of flesh and the war cries of dwarves and orcs and wargs, all enveloped within the crackle of fire ascending to claim the dead. When ample sensation comes back to Thorin in the form of lancing pain and he can breathe again, somewhat, he pushes himself to his knees on clenched fists. There he stays for several more seconds, gasping and keeping himself propped up by sheer force of will alone.

Somewhere in the fighting, there's a squeal, high-pitched and filled with panic. The sound cuts across the pain and disorientation and everything else around him, compelling Thorin to look up.

A distance away, Azog is holding a struggling Bilbo in the air by the throat. Bilbo’s legs are flailing about and there’s an expanding flush in his face whilst he visibly fights for air. He’s trying to pry Azog’s fingers away with his hands, but the orc’s response is to squeeze him even tighter still, and Bilbo’s kicking lessens significantly.

Thorin is midway to them before he even knows what he’s doing. Across the cliff, through blistering heat. His body screams out in apt protest, but he pulls himself above that and runs, swinging Orcrist at Azog’s remaining arm in an attempt to cut it off when he gets close enough. This nets him another kick that catches him squarely at the waist, slapping him aside like a rag doll.

“Is this miserable creature of such value to you, Oakenshield?” Azog shakes a near-lifeless Bilbo and laughs, almost bewildered. “You would risk yourself for his safety? You fool! A small and insignificant being such as this is worth nothing, nothing at all…!”

The air shifts. Ashen air sweetens with a scent Thorin knows too well, one that fills him with an unholy mixture of dread and arousal. His heart pounds wildly in his throat, seized with sudden dread. It’s night, when *it* always happens. Azog’s expression changes rapidly from contempt to surprise, surprise to confusion, and he looks at Bilbo as though he’s seeing him for the first time before it settles on one of giddied incredulity.

He releases Bilbo.

Bilbo lands in a heap, coughing and massaging his throat. Whatever relief this brings is cut short by Azog swooping onto him and forcing him to the ground. The orc puts his nose close to Bilbo’s ear, and the hobbit’s wail is drowned out by the noise of pure delight that bursts ut of Azog.

“I knew it!” Azog whoops, twisting Bilbo’s face up to leer down at him. "Pretty little omega halfling, and to think I was going to have you killed like the rest of these wretched dwarves!”

Bilbo lashes out with a tiny fist, clipping Azog's chin. The orc laughs cruelly and kneels Bilbo in the back. The sickening crunch of gravel under stress and Bilbo's pained yell is the most terrifying thing Thorin has ever heard in years.
"A fighter, this one," Azog grunts with gleeful fascination. He grips Bilbo's head by his hair and yanks him up to take another breath at where ear meets jawline, his spiked hand at Bilbo's throat a warning as to what resistance will reap. "Ripe for the claiming, too." His eyes find Thorin, the intent in them plain. He bares his teeth in a grin and takes his mangled limb away, reaching down to dig into the cotton waistband of Bilbo’s trousers instead.

At this, Bilbo cries out and tries to wriggle away. Azog holds him down without so much as adjusting his grip, the spikes tearing through the material with ease. Pants and undergarments torn to rags, a swell of heat pheromones blooms into the stifling air, thickening it even further, and Azog’s tongue flicks over the pale line of his lipless mouth.

“No!” Thorin yells.

Bilbo’s bared bottom is soaked and shining and he sobs piteously as Azog sinks his weight between his thighs, forcing them apart. The orc tears away his own loincloth, revealing a pale length that’s already fully hard and starting to swell into a visible knot at the base. “Watch me, Oakenshield,” he hisses at Thorin, lowering himself to press the oozing tip of his erection against Bilbo’s backside. “Watch me claim your halfling. I’ll make him mine.”

Azog pushes his hips forward and Bilbo screams, but it is all that the orc manages to do before Thorin launches himself from the ground with all of his remaining might, barreling shoulder-first into Azog. There’s a snap along his upper arm and the feeling of a reset bone grinding out of place yet again, but he throws the pain to the back of his mind to join the rest that he’s already exacted himself to ignore. He lands, arms and legs sprawled to cover Bilbo as much as he can. “No,” he gasps, everything in his field of vision already regressed to a collection of hazy shapes. “No —”

He expects the kick when it comes, though the same cannot be said for the metallic taste that trickles into his mouth not long after the initial pain breaks. He holds fast, shaking his head. His chest feels like it’s full of splinters. “No,” Thorin repeats, now more of a gurgle than the coherent word it should be. Awash in pain, it’s difficult to tell for sure how many more blows follow the first few, but the kicking does stop, eventually amid a loud screeching from far above them. It’s all over, just like that, and Thorin can’t hang on to consciousness any longer. His body is numb, his limbs stone, and he’s sinking so fast there isn’t any time to struggle against it.

From far off, someone screams, the sound muffled and indistinct. His eyes fall shut of their own accord and he drifts, insensate, into erasing oblivion. The last thing he remembers before the darkness mists over him completely is Bilbo’s quivering warmth beneath him as something unseen closes around both their waists, lifting them high into the infinite sky, then higher, and higher still.
“That,” Gandalf declares, “was foolish.”

Thorin doesn’t so much as blink. He’d been expecting a rebuke much more strongly-worded than that. He lifts his head, refusing to be ashamed. Nor does he wince at the shock of pain that radiates down the left side of his body where Azog had kicked him; he’d much rather take that than lose whatever dignity he still has left. “If you mean to chastise me for doing what I did, then you should have the decency to acknowledge that it was right.”

Standing several feet taller than Thorin, Gandalf doesn’t back down. They’re in the Carrock stables, a short distance from the garden where their winged saviours had dropped them off before disappearing into the darkened skies from whence they had come. “You could have gotten yourself killed,” he says, his eyes stern. “If the eagles had not arrived when they did —”

“But they did,” Thorin finishes simply.

Gandalf looks as though he’s going to continue with the admonishment, but then he sighs exasperatedly and shakes his head. “We may not be as lucky the next time such a thing happens,” he cautions. “Honestly, Thorin. Must you always be so reckless?”

Breathing is painful. He’s only just regained consciousness and already it feels as though not enough air is getting into one side of his chest, not with the throbbing there and the too-tight squeeze of his ribs around smarting lungs. Thorin settles himself by blinking rapidly and taking several shallow breaths before replying. “It is a matter of the heart,” he says. “I don’t expect you to understand, wizard.”

“I do understand your feelings for Bilbo.”

Thorin scoffs, sounding much more rude than he’d intentioned. “Then you would let me see him now instead of continuing with this farce of a reprimand!”

Gandalf’s look turns sober. “He’s still in shock, Thorin. Surely you would not begrudge Bilbo his rest. Let me tend to you for the time being.”

Thorin waves an impatient hand. “I do not require your immediate attention,” he growls.

“You’re still bleeding,” Gandalf points out.

So he is. While his armour has prevented the worst, he’s still nicked in too many places to count and a fresh trickle of blood is running down his side from under his bandaged arm. Thorin turns to put it out of Gandalf’s sight. “It is of little concern.”

“You can hardly help Bilbo by bleeding all over him, can you?”

Forcing his words civil, Thorin looks down. “How is he?” he asks, trying a different tack.

This method of questioning seems to work. “He is not unharmed, but it’s nothing lasting. Well,” Gandalf amends, “in the physical sense, at least. But you have spared him a great deal of anguish, and most probably saved his life besides.”
“I…I am glad to hear that.”

Gandalf nods, a small, approving gesture. “The danger is past,” he tells Thorin. “For the most part. There may well be more to come. You must know that sending him home is still not completely out of the way, as of now. Radagast will come if I bid his help.”

Thorin gives this careful consideration. Gods, he does, and it takes every shred of self-control not to take the most selfish way out. That and the memory of a smaller body pinned beneath his own, seizing in the tremors of absolute terror. Thinking about it still chills him to the core. “It’s for the best,” he murmurs, but lifts his gaze as he speaks. “I need to ask Bilbo his opinion. That is only fair.”

“Should you ask and he wishes to stay, will you still send him away, then?”

The answer changes shape halfway out of Thorin’s mouth. “Ye — no.” He shakes his head as Gandalf cocks an eyebrow at him. “I don’t know.”

“It might not be your decision to make,” Gandalf reminds him softly, if not kindly.

There’s a long pause where Thorin chews his lip, waiting for something else to be said, anything. He feels his mouth open and close around the request that comes through, eventually. “I need to speak with him. Please,” he adds, upon seeing Gandalf’s look.

Gandalf weighs him for a few seconds longer. Quietly, judiciously, a brief flicker of something in his eyes. Then, without another word, he turns to lead the way.

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When they enter the main hall, Thorin nearly walks head-first into a kneecap. A towering Beorn frowns down at him, a water jug and cheese bowl in his massive hands. The skinchanger’s mouth twists as if contemplating discourteous words, but he seems to reconsider. “Will you be staying long?” he asks gruffly, addressing Gandalf.

“Just until we’ve patched ourselves up. This one in particular,” Gandalf replies, gesturing to Thorin with a tilt of his head. “Shouldn’t take more than a day and night.”

Beorn shrugs, thick alpha scent falling off his shaggy body in waves. “My animals will provide you with assistance, if necessary.”

“Oh, it is very kind of you. Our thanks, Beorn.” With a flourish, Gandalf bows his head, simultaneously conking the end of his staff against Thorin’s thigh.

“Yes,” Thorin says, turning a sideways glare into a dignified sort of nod. “You have the gratitude of the kingdom of Erebor.”

If this moves Beorn in any way, he shows no indication of it. He plods into the dining area, Thorin and Gandalf at his back, and sets both jug and bowl on the table that a number of the company have gathered around. Fili notices Thorin first and stands, starting for him. Perched against a window lit with moonlight, Kili soon follows suit, and Thorin motions for them to sit down. “I am fine,” he says firmly.

“Uncle —”

Thorin shakes his head and embraces his nephews for a fleeting moment. “I just need some binding up, that’s all,” he says, ruffling Fili’s unkempt hair. “Where is Oin?”
“Still seeing to the rest. Back there.” Kili points vaguely in the direction of the rooms further down the hall.

Gandalf leads Thorin past several doors before knocking on one that has been left slightly ajar. He pushes it open with his staff and Thorin hears a scandalised noise coming from within. “Gandalf!” Oin bristles, his hands full with the ends of a bandage that’s wrapped around Balin’s left knee. “I should remind you that it is polite to wait for a reply before entering!”

“Apologies.” Gandalf defers with a tip of his pointed hat. “We’re looking to speak with someone.”

Oin groans beleagueredly, giving the bandage another twist. “Can’t it wait?”

At this, Thorin steps out from behind Gandalf. “Oin,” he says.

Eyes meeting Thorin’s, Oin hesitates, then trades a look with Balin before thumbing over his shoulder at the figure huddled in the corner. Bilbo is leaning in the angle created by the two walls, wrapped up in a large blanket and nursing a cup of hot tea between his hands. He catches Thorin’s gaze and something like a small smile tugs at his lower lip, fading when Oin exclaims loudly in surprise and Thorin realises that he’s trailing his own blood into the room.

“Your Majesty,” Oin starts, tone anxious, “you shouldn’t be moving around so much. Your wounds have opened again.”

“I know,” Thorin says. He raises his arm slightly to expose the dark red patch blossoming through layers of white, then lowers it back to his side. “Could you help me?”

“Yes, of course. I just need a few more minutes with Balin, you understand —”

“I could help.”

Everyone turns to Bilbo. He’s still holding on to the cup, little coils of steam rising from the tea inside of it. Setting it down on the floor, he unbundles himself from the blanket and rises to his feet in a clumsy motion. “With the bandaging,” he clarifies.

Oin is the first of them to speak. “Do you know how?” he asks.

“A fair bit,” Bilbo answers. “I’ve done the occasional scraped knee back in Hobbiton. I suppose it’ll be almost like that, just…bigger.”

The claim isn’t one that inspires much confidence, but Oin pushes his first-aid satchel to Bilbo all the same and tells him which compartments holds the clean bandages and medicine. Bilbo extricates a spool of it along with some scrunched-up gauze and a small tin of poultice before waddling over to Thorin. “Er,” Bilbo mumbles, eyes flicking to Gandalf.

“It’s getting a little crowded in here,” Gandalf says hastily. “Perhaps it would be better if you worked in another room?”

Bilbo blinks, looking surprised and grateful all at once. “Oh, um. Yes, please.”

Gandalf leaves the room first, then Bilbo. Before Thorin steps out, he twists his head to look at Balin. They don’t say anything to each other, but the tilt of Balin’s head suffices for a small sort of nod, his implied meaning clear. The rueful smile that follows is all that’s needed to confirm this observation, and Thorin returns the gesture before shuffling out, closing the door behind him.

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The room opposite is a small one, furnished mainly with a neatly-made bed up against one corner and an adjacent table and chair. A fair bit of moonlight gets in through two windows on one side, but most of the room is lit by a candle on top of the bedside table. Bilbo’s unravelling a length of bandage by the bed, Gandalf holding on to one end of the material next to him, when Thorin enters.

“Sit,” Gandalf instructs, tapping the bed frame with his staff.

Thorin complies wordlessly, hobbling up to them and plonking himself down on the edge. He lets Bilbo peel away the bloodied bandages sticking to his side and only looks when he hears the hobbit gulp audibly. The bleeding has slowed, but blood still continues to ooze out of the teeth marks scattered along his ribs. Surface injuries, Thorin can vaguely tell, though the look of them and the volume of blood suggests otherwise.

Bilbo swallows again. “Lie down,” he says. His hands are steady, guiding Thorin to rest injured side up and pillowing his arm behind his head. The initial press of gauze to open wounds stinging and raw drives a hiss from Thorin, but he keeps as still as he can while Bilbo mops him dry and Gandalf looks on.

“I think I might go see how Balin’s doing,” Gandalf announces out of nowhere, placing a reassuring hand on Bilbo’s shoulder. “Will you be alright on your own?” Though Gandalf speaks to Bilbo, Thorin has a feeling that the question is directed at him as well.

Eyebrows furrowed in concentration, Bilbo nods without looking away.

“Good, very good. Now, if you’ll just pardon me…”

The door clicks shut in Gandalf’s wake and the room falls into silence. Bilbo continues cleaning Thorin up. Thorin just watches, not quite daring to say anything just yet. He breathes and keeps himself from flinching whenever Bilbo brushes a particularly abused spot, eyes fixed on his small, pale hands. It’s only when Bilbo puts the soiled material aside and starts work on the dressing itself does Thorin clear his throat to say something. “Are you alright?” he asks.

Bilbo pauses, looking at him for a moment. Then, he shakes his head and resumes cutting smaller squares out of the large piece of gauze he took from Oin’s first-aid satchel.

“Bilbo —”

“M’fine.”

Thorin holds on to that answer until he can’t force himself to let it be any longer. “You were injured,” he pushes. “Rather badly, were you not?”

“Speak for yourself,” Bilbo mumbles.

Heat floods Thorin’s face. “I was merely concerned,” he says, managing to feel indignant before he remembers himself.

“I know. I’m sorry. That was…uncalled for.” His scent flares, tinged with that something edging precariously close to misery.

“You don’t have to apologise,” Thorin says, and Bilbo blushes. “I would not begrudge you anything.”

“I just — it wasn’t a very nice thing to say.”
More gauze is pressed to Thorin’s side, each square just big enough to cover two punctures each. He follows Bilbo’s instructions to hold the dressings in place with his other hand while Bilbo secures them in place with a long, continuous bandage, looping it under and over him until the bite wounds are fully covered. When Bilbo is done, he sits on the bed, sinking the straw slightly beneath his weight. Unsure of how to proceed, Thorin gets up to sit on the bed and studies Bilbo’s face. There’s a couple of scrapes on his cheek and a dirt streak smeared across his forehead, but it’s the looming disquiet in his eyes that’s the most distressing feature to take in.

“He was going to,” Bilbo murmurs, his fingers knotting together restlessly. He closes his eyes briefly. No further elaboration is needed to know what he’s talking about. “I didn’t…you —”

Thorin covers Bilbo’s hands with his own, larger one. Bilbo shudders, eyes flying open with surprise. “I would die first,” Thorin tells him, dropping his voice a shade down to something that he hopes is equal parts reassurance and fierceness. “Believe you me, I’d not allow anything like that to happen. Not so long as I am alive.”

“I’d really rather not have that happen, if it’s possible,” Bilbo mumbles. “The part with you dying, I mean. I honestly don’t know what I’d do. What would any of us do, really?”

“Balin has his auxiliary orders. Fili is my current heir. The quest would continue on as planned.”

Bilbo’s breath catches and emerges in a hiccup. “Could we not talk about this right now, please?” he asks.

Tenderly, Thorin rubs his thumb over Bilbo’s knuckles. “As you wish.”

Silence breaks open between them again. Bilbo looks down at his covered hands. For all his stature, he looks heartbreakingly smaller than usual, and it makes Thorin’s heart clench in his chest like a fist. There is a quality about him that Thorin can’t quite feel level about, a looming protectiveness that surges and compels him to finally go about doing the right thing.

“I have spoken with Gandalf,” Thorin says softly. “We have options, now.”

“Options?”

“Yes.” Another rub with his thumb does nothing to relieve the tension wound tight in Bilbo’s hands. “About what we’re going to do now.”

A beat, then, in a monotone: “You’re sending me away.”

Thorin doesn’t answer immediately, but he does shake his head after a while. “I promised Gandalf I would ask you,” he says. “We will not act outside your agency.”

“I get to choose?”

It’s the skepticism in Bilbo’s voice that spurs Thorin to nod emphatically.

“What about the contract?”

“It will be taken care of. You needn’t worry.”

“But I,” Bilbo starts, then bites his lip. He takes a breath and marginally loosens his hands. “I said that I would help you. I promised.”
“I knew that your life would be at risk from the beginning. I didn’t know that it would come to this.” The confession comes out in a rush, low and thick and brutal. “What’s happening to you will keep happening until you have been claimed. Until then there is every chance that you’ll be hurt by anyone we might meet, man, elf or orc.” Or dwarf, Thorin thinks but doesn’t say. He hadn’t believed himself to be so cowardly as that.

Bilbo eases forward. His eyes are a little clearer, but the look in them is still unreadable. “I could choose one of you,” he says. “Right now. Would that make it stop, then?”

The straightforwardness makes Thorin hesitate. “When you are once-claimed and with child, yes. But you would be bound to a dwarf forever, unable to be with anyone else even if you wished it.” Could you possibly live like that, Bilbo? Claimed by one of us like a prize to be put on display, to be bred, to be owned for eternity?

Bilbo hums softly, yet thoughtfully. Though his eyes fathom thoughts, none of them make it into words.

“If you went back to the Shire,” Thorin says, and it’s the hardest thing he’s ever had to do, “you could find someone else. A gentlehobbit, just like you. He could love you and take care of you and your child.” The way none of us can, not like this. “That is the option I would have you take. Gandalf agrees with me. You would be safe from harm.”

“I would,” Bilbo says, his voice stilting. Be it a question asked or a concurring, Thorin simply cannot tell.

“You would,” he echoes, and looks down at the now-crumpled bedsheet.

Long seconds pass. Nothing rights itself. Thorin holds Bilbo’s hands until one of them tugs free and moves into his. When he looks back up, Bilbo is clambering into his lap with his eyes closing and Thorin doesn’t know what to think up until Bilbo’s lips are pressed firmly over his mouth and there’s warm breath in his beard, sweet breath that constricts his chest with want and blooms desire all over his skin.

“Bilbo,” Thorin says, a half-hearted warning. He can feel the heat beginning deep in his loins, slowly aching its way up his body, and he shifts back to place just enough distance between them such that getting away and a hold of himself is still a possibility once the situation demands it.

Bilbo doesn’t seem to take any notice. He drifts closer and kisses Thorin again, letting out a moan of deep and unfulfilled longing. “You said I could choose,” he murmurs.

“I — yes. Yes, I did.”

“Well, then.” Fingers light against Thorin’s cheek, Bilbo gives him a look of endearment that’s much more honest than anyone could possibly deserve. “I think… I would choose this.”

Thorin has to suck in a breath to jolt himself into motion, and even then he can’t move much further than the allowance it takes for Bilbo to reach his lips if he desired. “You can’t want this,” he says, almost desperate for it to be true. “You don’t, it’s the heat, I’m telling you —”

“What you’re telling me is that I don’t know myself,” Bilbo cuts in sharply, his anger palpable, but benign. “It’s the only thing you’ve been telling me all this while, and I’m sick of it. Maybe it’s the heat, or maybe it isn’t. Honestly, Thorin, not everything has to revolve around whether or not I want your child kicking about in my belly.”

Stymied, all Thorin can do is gape while Bilbo embraces him carefully to avoid brushing his injured
The smell of Bilbo pours in like a tidal wave, and the hobbit’s proximity has him staggered. When Bilbo pulls away, Thorin feels his cock twinge needily. The warning that springs into his mouth is an embellishment at most, but is still one that warrants repetition. “If I do,” he says, his voice already gone hoarse, “If you let me, you will be with our child. We will be bonded for life. You have to know that.”

Bilbo’s response is an annoyed huff. “There you go again,” he complains. “For the last time, I know. I mean, I know that it’s what you believe — to tell the truth, I’m still having trouble getting my head around it — but that’s fine with me, it really is. If what you say is the truth, then so be it. If it isn’t, then I’ll take it that it wasn’t meant to be. But we are. You can feel it too, don’t you?”

Thorin does, the reason being he never envisioned it being any other way in his most discreet fantasies. But he still shakes his head and stares at his lap and murmurs, “You must know that I would never forgive myself if I were to cause you any distress or harm.”

Too late.

Taking care not to drop him over the side, Thorin bears Bilbo to the bed, stripping off his vest and shirt as they go. He slips out of his pants and pushes his erection into Bilbo’s clothed thigh, kissing his shoulder. Bilbo’s head falls back, a gasp rolling from his throat as Thorin moves lower to tongue his nipple, swirling over pink, pebbling flesh.

“Mmm,” Thorin mutters, finding the nub of firmness between his lips and tugging upward. He groans into it, letting the omega scent well up and take him irrevocably past the point of meaningless words.

Bilbo whines, his fingers tangling in Thorin’s long hair.

“Will you let me?” Thorin asks against his chest, now teetering precariously on the point of no return. “Will you let me claim you?”

“Yes,” Bilbo whispers. “Yes, yes.”

Emboldened, Thorin reaches down with both hands to remove Bilbo’s pants, then his own, and it takes a few seconds before they are fully naked and coiled against each other. With all clothing out of the way, he closes a hand around Bilbo’s cock, now half-hard and filling slowly, and strokes him until he’s throbbing firmly against his palm. His scent sharpens with definition, portending the near-realisation of a full, unrestrained heat. Thorin clamps his teeth into Bilbo’s shoulder, not sufficiently hard to hurt, but enough to leave a lasting mark. Skin hot under his lips, he ruts against Bilbo, yearning for more friction or some other stimulus apart from the slow slide of their bodies pressed up against each other.

“Hgnn,” Bilbo whimpers, jerking his hips. Thorin kisses his parted lips again, running his hands smoothly down his sides to finger the curves of his ribs one at a time. He licks the side of his throat
and just under his ear, his cock pressing up urgently against the hobbit’s stomach.

“Turn over,” Thorin instructs, pushing himself up to allow space for Bilbo to complete the motion, then lowers down onto him again. He sighs with his head drooping over Bilbo’s shoulder and his mouth close to his ear, inhaling the smell of his hair, and kisses his cheek while tilting his hips to the side for his hand to move to Bilbo’s arse.

The first touch is wet and slippery, coating his fingertips with runny warmth almost immediately. The slick drips everywhere all over the sheets, heat-infused and messy and altogether glorious. The headiness of it combined with Bilbo’s scent has Thorin very nearly in tears, and he rubs two fingers into the cleft underneath him, returning them to his mouth and sucking obligingly on them. He groans with the satisfaction of finally tasting Bilbo’s heat, and he has to get more, needs to go even deeper than before.

Bilbo gasps and shudders, lets out a needy groan as Thorin pushes two fingers inside him. His wetness intoxicates, like a siren call, and for a wild moment Thorin thinks about getting his hungry mouth down there, to lick and suckle at Bilbo like a babe. Instead, he reaches around with his other hand to take hold of Bilbo’s pleasing firmness, to touch him in this manner that only he can, now.

“Mine,” Thorin growls into Bilbo’s shoulder, concentrating on the way his breaths come out hot and heady against his skin. Bilbo smells of pure lust and everything Thorin has ever conceivably wanted, all pheromones and heat-musk that rises off his body in dizzying waves, assaulting them both, and Thorin can barely think through the fog that’s now steadily creeping in over his brain, making his tongue feel so very thick in his mouth.

“Mine,” Bilbo agrees softly, turning his head. Thorin strokes him inside, pressing in until Bilbo is squirming and panting and dripping out so much that Thorin’s hand is completely soaked up to his forearm. Choosing not to pull out just yet, Thorin curls his fingers down and starts thrusting them deeper into soft, vulnerable flesh, stretching Bilbo wider still.

Beneath him, Bilbo *keens*.

The sight of him like this is almost too much for Thorin to take; his balls are aching fit to burst, and he swears he’s almost hard enough to temper steel. “Beautiful,” he murmurs. When he pushes in all the way and finds a tight opening that has to be the entrance of the birthing canal, the muscular rim closing it in yields beautifully to his touch.

“Oh,” Bilbo mumbles when Thorin withdraws his fingers to the tips and pushes them right in again. Thorin repeats the action, but with three now, folded upon each other, entering with ease and when he can go no further, he strokes and wiggles, seating his fingers down into the flesh there. Rubbing the rim of the second opening inside of Bilbo effects both writhing and frantic squeaking, and it takes a forearm across his back to pin him down, hold him still.

Pressed to the bed, Bilbo moans, his hair rustling against the sheets. His eyes are half-open and he’s breathing noisily through his mouth, but he heaves a deep breath in when Thorin extricates his fingers. Thorin drags his cock through the crack of Bilbo’s arse to slick himself up, and rolls his body over just so to position himself right over Bilbo’s dripping hole. Before Thorin can lower himself down, Bilbo brings up his knees, lifting his hips slightly off the bed. Thorin takes this opportunity to reach around once more with a slicked hand, circling the head with just his thumb until the whining builds and recedes.

“May I?” Thorin breathes into his ear.

Still shaking slightly, Bilbo nods, legs shifting apart in implicit invitation.
Thorin raises his hand to massage Bilbo’s stomach, conferring reassurance before he pushes in. The loosened muscle resists for a fleeting second, then gives in entirely. Thorin goes at a slow, deliberate pace, relishing the feel of Bilbo parting sublimely around him. The slide into the heated constriction of his body thrills him, pinches in his vision, almost makes him come just from the feeling of it, but his knot has only begun to swell; it isn’t time just yet.

He groans halfway through, steadying Bilbo by his shoulders. Bilbo moves with him, lurching forward to let Thorin drape across him, both of them sweaty and panting and flexed to their limits. Thorin eases back, feels himself shiver despite the stifling warmth between them. He forces his eyes open to bear witness to himself disappearing into Bilbo a quarter of an inch at a time, watching the rounded stretch of his hole spasming and expanding around his length, and every single tiny movement in is close to a marvel on its own.

“Good?” Thorin grunts, blinking quickly as his breathing starts to tumble in his throat, pausing with his cock almost fully sheathed in Bilbo’s body. Only the widest part of himself, the growing knot, is all that remains outside of him.

“Good.” He clutches onto Thorin’s hardness, sinking back into the bed. “Oh, ohh —” He braces the bed with his elbows, and Thorin has to close his eyes, lips moving to Bilbo’s shoulders and as he gives one last thrust in to complete the entry.

“Incredible,” Thorin whispers, almost too afraid to move. Bringing himself beyond that fear, he withdraws his cock half an inch and then plunges forward again, seating the entirety of his length deep inside Bilbo, deliberate and instant. Just past the unseen opening of the birthing canal, he can feel the head of his cock twitch, and it makes something in him leap excitedly like the lightning-fast arc of a reflex.

He kicks his hips a couple more times, driving into Bilbo over and over again. It takes a while, but he finds just the right rhythm that has him breathless and Bilbo crying out, and yes, there it is now — he can feel the rapid expansion at the base of his shaft, a swift build of pressure magnified by raw arousal. Bilbo gives a sudden yelp, his breaths coming out desperate and panicked just as his body spasms and shudders and locks tight on Thorin’s knot, trapping them both together.

“Don’t be afraid,” Thorin says, stroking his thumb across Bilbo’s cheek reassuringly. “We’ll be fine — you’re doing fine.”

“Thorin,” Bilbo says, a note of panic in his voice. “It’s…you’re —”

“Fine,” Thorin grits one more time, and then pleasure punches through him and he’s clenching his teeth so hard that his gums hurt, wracked a churning in his loins that goes on and on and on. Beneath him, Bilbo makes a harsh, strangled sound, his body convulsing with every spurt of sticky heat into Thorin’s fingers. It colours his scent with the mark of the claimed, and Thorin barely keeps down a sob of relief. He strokes the climax out of Bilbo, rides it through with him.

When they have stopped for the moment, he wilts over Bilbo, his body fitting against the curve of his back, and he’s contented for now but not completely, and Thorin rectifies that by letting his mouth brush Bilbo’s lips, flooded with affection and the sensation of preliminary afterglow. Their heats still hang like a heady perfume in the air, redolent with powerful pheromones, and surely the others must know by now. “Fine,” he repeats. “We’ll stay like this for a while — I won’t be able to remove myself. For now. But we are together, bonded, me to you, forever…”

“Oh,” Bilbo says, a single syllable of awe. He moves his hips forward experimentally, tugging on the knot and wincing at the lack of give. Thorin gasps and holds Bilbo down to keep him from moving any more, apologising wordlessly with a firm kiss between his shoulder blades.
“Hurts,” Thorin mumbles.

“Sorry,” Bilbo whispers in reply, and pushes back to meet him in time for a fresh wave of tightness to coil up in Thorin’s balls.

It hits too fast for either of them to be ready. Thorin’s breath surges out of him as he comes a second time, and he barely strangles a yell in his throat. Part of it slips out anyway, a brief outburst that he catches by sinking his teeth into Bilbo’s sweaty shoulder. Bilbo doesn’t seem to notice or bother as his whole body startles with the shock of it, his cock throbbing as he pumps frantically into Thorin’s palm. They deflate once more, Thorin rolling to his uninjured side to keep from crushing Bilbo. Everything is a bit hazy now, but Thorin can hardly start to care about anything apart from the bond that now links them together.

“I wasn’t aware,” Bilbo starts, his fingers twining uncertainly with Thorin’s. “Twice? That’s…it’s —”

“Thrice,” Thorin rumbles, the intense sensation of climax starting in his crotch again, and he returns his slippery hands to Bilbo’s cock to stroke it back to full length.

This time he knows what to expect, just barely managing to brace himself in time for the feeling to crash over him like a tidal wave. When he comes again with one hand encircling Bilbo’s pulsing cock and the other clasped at his soft belly, his knot throbs to the point of agony as the pleasure threatens to overwhelm. It hurts to come, oh, it hurts, but at the same time every fibre of his being is on overload and it’s worth it all to have Bilbo like this, holding him fast and coming apart through the sheer intensity of their shared orgasms.

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Much, much later, when the knot has receded enough for Thorin to finally pull out of Bilbo, they share the bed the best they can, which they manage to by the skins of their arses. Holding him closely, Thorin is vaguely aware of how different all of this feels, and not just by virtue of their proximity. He feels contented, he feels complete, and beyond that a sense of inexplicable well-being in finally belonging to someone. For now, they are just lying still and kissing tenderly, eyes for nothing except each other. Thorin thinks they’re somewhat entitled to it, having been sealed together so awkwardly for so long, and he is overjoyed when Bilbo responds endearingly in kind.

“I didn’t expect,” Bilbo mumbles, eyes slipping shut, “it’d be like. That.”

“Neither did I,” Thorin says, leaning into his touch. Built to comfortably accommodate a single occupant, the bed has only just enough space for two smaller bodies, but it does give Thorin all the more reason to be closer to him. “I’ve heard tell, but I never believed…I must say the stories are understating what it’s like.”

“Mm,” Bilbo mouths over his throat.

“How are you feeling?”

Tipping his head down, Thorin lets Bilbo slide his tongue past his lips to flick hungrily at his teeth. “Rather sore down there,” Bilbo admits. “Might be a while before I can sit down without feeling you.”

Thorin laughs quietly. “I’m sorry. Do you — I could ask Oin, or Gandalf for something to help with that.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Bilbo says tiredly, dropping his face into the fur on Thorin’s chest. His
breaths come out heavy and warm and he shuts his eyes as he eases against Thorin. “It’s a lot different from usual, this mating thing, isn’t it?”

“Different how?”

Bilbo tilts his head back “I don’t know. It’s not like, well, regular sex — usually we’d just come once and that’d be it. I sort of lost count a bit back there.”

“That is how it is, but only when in heat. Now, it shall end,” Thorin says, insinuating a hand between them to rest over Bilbo’s stomach. “And your pregnancy will begin.”

“Hm.”

Thorin looks down at him. “Do you doubt me?”

Bilbo is silent for a few seconds. He just puts his face at Thorin’s chest and makes a humming sound that Thorin cannot grok.

“You will see,” Thorin says. “When Erebor is freed, it will only be a few months at most before our child will arrive.”

“And if not?”

“Then,” Thorin says, kissing his forehead, “we get to do this again.” He grins when Bilbo trembles in laughter against him. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

The answer is clear long before it’s spoken, giving itself away in how Bilbo’s eyes glimmer with mirth. “I guess I wouldn’t complain,” he says. “That was rather incredible, after all.”

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It’s the immediate aftermath that gets a wee odd, after that.

Thorin hadn’t given much thought to that on account of being wholly prepared to leave the Carrock one member short, which is why the brand of normality that returns almost instantly makes him somewhat leery. The congratulations are pleasant enough to receive, some of them wistful and others not as much. He doesn’t dwell for long on his suspicions about coin changing hands among the beta dwarves; it’s altogether harmless, as are the newly-emerged wagers on baby names, and Bilbo thinks it good fun besides.

Gandalf is insufferable about the affair, as always. If anything, he displays more relief than he does smugness, and though it’s not by that much, it’s still something. Thorin makes it a point to kiss Bilbo in front of him whenever the opportunity arises partially just for the sake of it, daring Gandalf to gloat, but more often than not they’re met with a simple, approving smile.

Apart from all that, he’s grateful for the way things fall back into place by the end of their sojourn at the Carrock. The smell of heat about them fades at long last, the quest becomes the sole matter of import, and the alpha dwarves gladly discard the last of their draughts. As far as Thorin knows, anyway. It’s enough that he spends the night with his arm across Bilbo, the hobbit curled into him, and that they both sleep more soundly than they have in weeks.

“How’s this going to work?” Bilbo asks the next morning. It’s the day they’re scheduled to set out once again and they’re having breakfast with the rest of the company at Beorn’s table. The communal mood is an affable one, made good-natured by the absence of rivalry and the added advantage of sorely-needed rest.
Passing a bread roll over to Balin, Thorin takes one for himself and Bilbo. “Hm? How is what going to work?”

“You said Fili’s your heir,” Bilbo elaborates, accepting the roll. “Assuming I do get pregnant and it’s a boy, what happens then?”

It’s a fair question, brooking deeper consideration that Thorin is not so inclined to give it in favour of breakfast. “You are thinking very far ahead,” he notes.

This earns a smile from Bilbo. “Well, it never hurts to ask the important questions early.”

“Your foresight is impressive. I hadn’t thought of that myself,” Thorin admits.

The smile leads into a look of slight worry. “Fili’s not going to lose his right to the throne, is he?”

“I do not think it is likely,” Thorin tells Bilbo. “Succession laws speak against it, if I remember correctly, but we will address it further when the situation arises.”

Bilbo purses his lips, but relaxes visibly. “I just…gods forbid there be any bad blood because of this.”

“I am certain he will understand, should it be the case.”

Bilbo raises an eyebrow and pokes Thorin in the tunic. “If it is a boy, you’ll be the one to tell him.”

Properly amused, Thorin lets out a chuckle. “My beloved,” he rumbles, tilting Bilbo’s chin up with a finger. “Boy or girl, I would gladly tell everyone.”

Bilbo’s smile returns at this, the expression wide with love. He moves down the bench to lean closer to Thorin, and the kiss between them is long and deep.

Chapter End Notes

And so here we are, finally done with the last chapter! I'm terribly sorry about the wait, and even more so if it's not the payoff you've been reading this monster for, but I think this is as good as it gets with respect to the initial draft and the many, many other drafts that have followed and been scrapped, so, yeah. I apologise for that and the fact that I'm pretty much ending this bit of omegaverse with plotless smut that I'm still not too satisfied with; it's definitely not me at my best, but I've hit that point where I really need to finish some things and move on to other projects I've got planned presently.

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