Outtakes for The Journal, everything that I couldn't fit into that story. Missing moments, glimpses of the future, it's all in here.

Hello dear readers and welcome to Duly Noted, the outtakes and additions for The Journal. I'd strongly advise to read that first, or this will not make any sense at all. This is a little earlier than I had planned, but well, The Journal was all such heavy stuff lately and I wanted something a little lighter, I got quite a few requests about one-shots about Thorin, Kate and their kids and so the first outtake was born. Enjoy!
“Do you remember, Cathy, that one time when you caught Thorin and me in the very middle of a minor disagreement about a subject I have long since forgotten? You were only five or six years old, coming over to our room late at night because you were unable to sleep. I remember very well that you were a little scared when you heard us talk in raised voices, using phrases like ‘headstrong woman’ and ‘right royal imbecile.’ I explained to you that it was only a disagreement and not a fight, after which you made us swear that we had never really fought, nor would we ever do it in future.”

The Journal, Chapter 7: Arguments

Erebor, 2964 TA

This had to be the worst day Thorin Oakenshield had seen in quite some time. On days like these he sometimes wondered why he had ever wanted to reclaim his Mountain in the first place. Or maybe he should have reclaimed it and then left the job of being king to someone else. Apparently being a king in exile and being a king in his own Mountain were two very different things. In the Ered Luin he had not had quite so much paperwork to deal with, not that he could remember anyway. And he did not think there were quite so many nobles complaining about pretty much everything a noble could possibly complain about back then. He could not remember that from his exile anyway.

That would be because most of the Erebor nobles ran to the Iron Hills, a little voice in the back of his head commented. Most of them had only returned once the dragon was dead and the Mountain was theirs again, acting like they had every right to do that. Thorin had been on the verge of saying that if they had not been willing to share the hardship, then they had no right to share the advantages of the restored kingdom either, but it would turn out that they actually did have the right, according to the laws.

It did not mean he had to like that he had to put up with the likes of Lord Nali. The dwarf was positively ancient – had celebrated his two hundred and seventieth birthday last year if Thorin remembered correctly – half deaf and had unfortunately been on the receiving end of Thorin’s youngest son’s childish mischief.

The King under the Mountain rubbed his forehead, fighting a mild headache, hoping it would just disappear, but the chances of that happening were slim to none. He loved his children dearly, but sometimes he wished there was not so much of him in them. Thorin and Frerin had been the terror of the Mountain as kids and those were stories Dís, being the doting aunt that she was, had always loved to tell. It would now seem that his offspring was trying to prove that they could be just as mischievous as their father had been in his younger days.

Well, thank Mahal that his girls at least knew how to behave themselves. Duria had always been going by the rules, every single rule she had ever been set. She was younger than Thoren and Thráin, but she had been lecturing the boys on their behaviour since approximately the age of five, copying Kate’s sternest tone of voice so well it was almost creepy. And Cathy was just a sweet girl who liked to curl up on his lap and fall asleep there while he told her a story or sang her a lullaby.
No, it was his male offspring that caused him headaches and grey hairs. Thoren and Thráin had
been a nightmare. The two were what his wife called the dictionary definition of inseparable and
always up to one prank or other. Thoren had now become a little more serious. As heir to the
throne he could not be seen gallivanting around the palace all hours of the day, playing childish
pranks on practically everyone. He had duties to attend to and the lad was coming to see that for
himself. Thorin hated the need for his eldest child to grow up so fast, but it would seem that royalty
was doomed to that.

Maybe that was, he pondered, why had let the rest of them be childish for as long as they wished.
Fortunately Thráin was growing up as well, but the same could not be said about Jack. Six, almost
seven, years old and he was a menace, always getting himself and Flói, his partner in crime, into
trouble. The worst thing was that most people could not even be really be angry with him. The boy
just smiled that sweet innocent smile and all was forgiven and forgotten. Of course Lord Nali had
to be the exception.

The king looked at the paperwork on his desk and decided to call it a night. He would not get this
done before midnight anyway and he had already missed out on a night with his family. The
children would be sleeping by now, but with any luck Kate would still be up, waiting for him,
reading a book, seated in her usual seat in front of the fire. Thorin was very tempted to grab some
wine and join her there.

True to expectations Kate was where he had expected her to be, nursing a cup of tea and a huge
book that was laid open on her lap. ‘You’re late,’ she remarked, not even looking up as Thorin
came in and closed the door behind him. ‘What kept you, the paperwork or Lord Nali?’

The king shed his coat and marched over to the vacant chair opposite Kate’s, making a small
detour to give her a kiss before he sat down. ‘You heard?’

The queen closed the book. ‘I did.’ She tried and failed to keep the corners of her mouth from
curling up. ‘I know I should not be thinking this funny, but…’ A chuckle escaped from her lips.
‘Lord Nali, covered in ink from top to toe?’ The sound that came out this time was a very
unqueenly giggle.

And Thorin could not keep himself from joining in, not entirely. He had been hard-pressed to keep
his face straight when he had seen it too. Apparently it had happened in the library where Lord
Nali had been doing some research for something. Jack and Flói, being very bored with their
lessons a level higher, had watched over the balcony and detected the most annoying noble in all of
Erebor right under aforementioned balcony. What had followed was that two – or three, or four… –
bottles of ink had suddenly fallen right on top of said lord’s head. Lord Nali had been covered in
blackish blue ink all over, spoiling his expensive clothes and elaborately braided white hair and
beard. It also so happened to be very good ink, durable, very difficult to remove. It would take
weeks, if not months, for all of it to come out again and with that the dwarf lord was not pleased.

‘What were they thinking?’ he wondered, shaking his head. They had been lucky that it was not a
foreign dignity this time. Thráin and Thoren had done that once and the chaos had been absolute.

Kate shook her head. ‘They weren’t.’ She snorted. ‘And Jack has two older brothers to look up to in
that regard. Sometimes I do wonder if naming him after my brother was such a good idea. Jacko
was just like that when we were children.’

Thorin sent her an inquisitive look. ‘And Cathy is just like you at that age?’

‘Afraid not,’ his wife told him. ‘I used to be in just as much trouble as he was, more even. You
know, sometimes it’s difficult to punish Jack for just being a young boy making mischief when I
used to be so much worse.’

‘And when Lord Nali deserved everything he got?’ Thorin added.

Life truly was good. It may be filled with paperwork and whining nobles, but he also had a wife and children. Thirty years ago he had not believed that would ever even be for him and he had been content with that. He had not missed it. Of course he had not exactly known what he had been missing out on. Thorin was still none too fond of Gandalf, but he did owe the wizard, if only for whisking Kate away from the world where she had been born.

‘Look at you,’ Kate said. ‘You almost seem to regret that you weren’t there with the boys to help them pour the ink over Lord Nali’s head.’

It would be a lie to say that after all that whining Thorin was not very close to doing exactly that, no matter how wrong or politically incorrect it was to do so. And diplomacy had never been Thorin’s strong point, but he had managed to refrain from saying or doing things he would certainly regret later, instead settling for fantasising about pouring ink over Nali’s head while he nodded, made apologies and pretended to fully understand why Nali was so angry.

‘He got what he deserved,’ Thorin pointed out. ‘He’s been nagging all week about that new mining shaft.’ He got up to pour himself some wine. ‘How was your day? Calm?’

‘I wish,’ his wife muttered. ‘I was supposed to have a meeting with some of the tradesmen of Dale, but then Duria had a… problem.’

The way she spoke the word problem made Thorin suspect this was not something he wanted to know about. ‘Female problem?’ Dwarves did grow up a little slower than the children of the race of Men, if only a little, but his children had a human woman for a mother. Thorin had hoped that he had a few years left before he needed to worry about all that with his eldest daughter, especially since she was the most dwarvish of his offspring.

Kate heard the tone of voice and laughed. ‘In a way,’ she replied. ‘But not what you’re thinking. She’s had that particular female problem for the last two years, Thorin. Keep up, will you? She has started to grow a beard.’

Thorin frowned and turned around to look at her, trying to hide his unease about the idea of his daughter having that other female problem. ‘That’s not a problem, is it?’ Beards were normal for dwarf women and Duria was half a dwarf. Her human blood was not even visible in her looks at all, but that had never been a problem before. So what was the matter now?

‘No, it isn’t,’ Kate sighed. ‘Not really. It was just that she was afraid that she didn’t want one.’ The queen looked a bit sad now. ‘She wanted to look like me and now she’s afraid that Narvi might not like her anymore, because she has a beard.’

Good. ‘She was too good for him anyway.’ There was nothing wrong with Narvi, nothing much anyway, except that he had the guts to trail afterThorin’s daughter like a lovesick puppy for nigh on two years.

Kate looked disapproving. ‘Thorin…’

‘She is,’ he insisted. Of course Kate had to side with that boy. She thought it adorable. ‘And she is far too young anyway. Have you seen him, Kate? He’s at least ten years her senior!’

‘Pot, kettle, black,’ his wife shot back. ‘If you’re so obsessed about age, you should not have married me either.’
'That’s different,’ he said dismissively. Really, she should be on his side in this. They were Duria’s parents, they should present a united front on this matter, to protect their little girl.

‘Yes, we have an age gap of exactly one hundred and seventy-two years,’ Kate reminded him. ‘That’s quite a bit more. I haven’t heard you about that awfully much.’ She turned back to the fire and Thorin re-joined her. ‘She’s fine now, more or less.’

They would need to have this discussion about Narvi and Duria another time, Thorin decided. He did not have the energy for it now. And this was one of the very few subjects the two of them would never agree on. ‘That’s good,’ he said, secretly grateful that she had handled this. He might not have done so well. As Dís – and Kate on occasion as well – never tired of reminding him, he was not very skilled in the art of reassuring people at all. ‘What else happened?’ he questioned. That scowl he well knew had crept onto Kate’s forehead. Something had displeased her.

‘Nai happened,’ she replied. ‘Lord Nali’s daughter. She came banging at the door just after noon, I think, to demand my full apologies for the ink incident.’ The scowl deepened. ‘She even had the nerve to tell me how I was to raise my children, since I was clearly incapable of giving them a good dwarvish upbringing.’

Thorin’s hands clenched into fists at the mere mention of this. He knew his decision to marry Kate Andrews had been not well received by each and every one of his people. Like a certain elf had once remarked, it was quite unheard of and yet he had done it all the same. Some had accepted it, with or without a little help, but there were those that remained hostile towards the once company advisor. Nai, daughter of Nali, was a prime example of that. Although in Thorin’s opinion no one was less suitable for lecturing someone on non-existing parenting skills than that woman, because her children were quite the bullies and Nai let them.

But at least Thorin knew that he had married a woman who could hold her own. Gandalf had told Kate long ago that it had been her temper that had made her so well qualified for the job of company advisor, but it was an asset for the Queen under the Mountain as well. With so many people at least very sceptical of Thorin’s bride, even now, it was a good that she could stand her own ground.

‘How dare she?’ he growled.

‘That’s what I said,’ Kate said. ‘What a harpy that woman is. I may or may not have told her that she was to look at her own children before she came near mine again. Then the whole usual blah blah followed.’

‘Usual blah blah?’ That did not bode well. It meant that he had missed something that could be important.

‘About how you could have married a much better woman than me, that I had polluted the line of Durin etcetera.’ Kate shook her head. It was almost, Thorin realised, as if she had heard it all before, heard it before and could not really care anymore.

The point was that he had never heard any of this before. ‘Polluted?’ he echoed, his voice dangerously low. Maybe it would be best for everyone if Nai and her children were exiled from Erebor. That would make it clear that he did not tolerate this kind of behaviour towards his wife. If he had gotten his way, he’d have thrown her from the gate, but as a king he could probably not been seen doing that, or be seen losing control of his temper in such a manner.

‘Poisoned was the word used,’ Kate said. ‘Along with polluted.’ She gave him a scrutinising glance. ‘Don’t beat yourself up over it, will you? I can handle her. I did make her back off
Of that he had no doubt – and it was not quite of the question that Nai had been in tears when Kate was through with her – but he could not let this pass either. ‘You are my wife and she insulted you.’

‘You used to insult me on a daily basis once, if my memory serves me well,’ she shot back.

‘But…’ he began.

‘Good grief, Thorin, knock it off, will you?’ They may have been married for more than twenty years now, but that did not mean that they did not clash anymore and some things never really changed. ‘Stop fighting my bloody battles for me! I can do that myself well enough, thank you very much.’

She may be a queen of a dwarven kingdom, but sometimes she really did not understand a thing about their culture. ‘Is it so disagreeable to you that I would want to stand up for you, headstrong woman?’ he demanded. He did not exactly know when he had ended up on his feet, but when he checked again he was standing and the wine lay on the floor.

‘And so you can go ahead and bite everyone’s head off when they so much as look at me the wrong way?’ Kate too was now standing. ‘Oh yes, I am sure that would make for a fine scene to look at. Sometimes you can be a right royal imbecile, Thorin Oakenshield. That will only succeed in making it worse!’

And her words made this situation worse. ‘How long has this been going on?’ He had believed that the talks at least had stopped years ago, even if some people refused to get it into their thick skulls that it was none of their business who their king had married. He could not take away their opinions or their prejudices, but he could put an end to them voicing said opinions.

Kate knew what he was doing. ‘Forget it,’ she snapped at him. ‘And you’re not getting any names either. Not as long as you’re like this.’

‘And like what am I?’ he growled. Kate was as stubborn as any dwarf he had ever met, but she was still not used to being protected. And if she could, she would stop him from doing so. It was one of the things that frustrated him most.

‘You’re about to storm off and teach those people a lesson with your fists the moment I tell you those names,’ she said. ‘And that’s not going to happen.’

Did she truly not understand? ‘Kate…’

‘Mama?’

Whatever Thorin had been planning to say, the sound of his youngest daughter’s voice stopped him from saying it. He swivelled around to see Cathy in her night’s clothes in the opening of the door, looking utterly forlorn. She had a thumb in her mouth and was staring at the two of them. Mahal help him, she was barefooted as well and that while it was still winter.

And that was not to be borne. He took three big steps and lifted his little girl from the ground. Kate used to call him a big softie where Cathy was concerned, but on this he tended to ignore her. ‘What are you doing out so late?’ he asked gently. ‘It’s almost midnight.’

‘Couldn’t sleep.’ Cathy was Kate’s spitting image, but she was much shyer than her mother. That showed now that she buried her head in Thorin’s hair.
‘Do you want me to sing you a lullaby then?’ he inquired. For some reason his daughter liked those and it had always helped her to sleep. Of course that meant that he usually ended up having to carry her back to her room, but he did not really care about that. Kate usually just smiled and remarked that her youngest had her father wrapped around her little finger.

‘Yes please.’ The words were hardly audible since she muttered them against his hair, but it was a predictable answer anyway. And so he sat down in his chair and favoured his wife with that look that told her that they were not yet done talking about this. But he was not having his discussions with Kate in front of the children.

‘You were fighting,’ Cathy said as Thorin set her on his lap. There was an underlying tone of fear there.

It must be father’s instinct to put his little girl at ease. ‘No, we were not, dear girl,’ he told Cathy. Well, they had been, but she needed to be reassured.

‘You were shouting,’ Cathy insisted. ‘Mama and Lady Nai were shouting too.’

Mahal only knew what Cathy had overheard. Part of him was not sure he even wanted to know, but he was quite sure that it was nothing a girl her age should have heard. He knew the ugly things Nai, daughter of Nali, could say – no doubt her father’s bad example was contagious – and he knew that Kate could lose her temper quite impressively as well. Today was clearly not his day.

‘That was a fight, dear.’ Kate had rolled her eyes at his immediate denial of what they had been doing being a fight, but she was not showing any of that now. ‘Your father and I merely had a disagreement. That’s something else. I was really angry with Lady Nai for something she said, because she said something very mean. Your father and I had a different opinion about something. It’s not the same.’

Thorin nodded. ‘Aye. It was a disagreement. We don’t fight, Cathy.’

Kate quickly gave him a well-known on-your-head-be-it-look that their daughter did not see. And he might even have to admit that this was not the cleverest thing he had ever done, but what mattered now was that Cathy was reassured enough so that she could get the sleep she needed.

‘You never fought?’ Cathy asked.

‘We didn’t,’ Thorin lied. Oh, he was getting himself into trouble with this, not in the last place with his own wife, but it was for the greater good.

‘And you promise you never will?’ his daughter insisted. Shy she might be, but when she had her mind set on something, she was just her mother; not giving up until she had what she came for. Quite a feat for a six year old. And when Thorin found himself on the receiving end of her demands, she did get what she wanted. He’d better make sure that Thranduil did not find out how easily he could give in sometimes.

‘Promise,’ Thorin said. After all, if their latest fight counted as a disagreement, then they would have no problem at all keeping that promise. It would be easy. ‘Now, how about that lullaby?’

Cathy soon drifted off to sleep, too tired to stay awake for much longer. Sometimes Thorin suspected her of staying awake on purpose when he had a lot of work to do and could not be there when Kate put her and her twin brother to bed. It made him smile, even if he really ought to reprimand her for it. Well, he could always do that some other time, surely.

Kate arched an eyebrow at him as she watched him. ‘Honestly, Thorin? We never fought?’
Disbelief was obvious in her voice. ‘And in what parallel universe did we never fight, if I may be so bold to ask?’ She might be disapproving of what he had said, but she was amused as well. The dwarf king knew her long enough to know that.

‘We argued,’ he told her, rather pleased with his own explanation. ‘We fought orcs.’

Kate just threw her head back and laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Updates for this one may be a little irregular for a while since I have a few other things to finish as well, but I do have quite a few ideas already. Of course, if there is something you want me to write, just let me know and I’ll see what I can do. Comments would be very welcome. I’d love to hear what you think about this one!
Hello dear readers, here’s the next one-shot. It’s a missing moment/deleted scene this time and it would fit in between chapter five and six of The Journal.
Enjoy!

“The dwarf race did not seem to have it easy. (...) She had seen it for herself when they had stayed in Bree for the night. There were whispers and barely concealed hostility. She had to do her shopping by herself, because most shop owners would not allow dwarves into their shops for fear they would steal something, which admittedly was probably wholly justified where Nori was concerned. But the others were all honest and trustworthy, not that the town’s people acted like it. Clearly it was all right to have dwarves as workers in town, but they were about as welcome as orcs when they were guests in it.

And then there had been the worried glances people had sent in her direction that had set her teeth on edge. The innkeeper had even gone as far as to discreetly suggest that she was welcome to stay in Bree if she needed to escape. The man’s concern had been genuine, she could tell, and at that time she had wanted to go home more than anything, but staying in Bree was hardly going to get her there and so she had politely declined, telling him that she was travelling with the dwarves out of her own free will. That wasn’t quite the truth, but it at least put the man’s nerves to rest, even if he had been staring at her as if he thought she had lost her mind.”

The Journal, Chapter 33: Plans

Kate could feel it the moment they entered the town of Bree. She was not sure what it even was that she felt, but that it was unpleasant, that was rather clear. Bilbo was ill at ease, which was nothing to new, because he was not yet accustomed to the idea of even going on an adventure, never mind the notion that he liked to be on one. He might even be longing for his nice hobbit-hole already for as far as she knew. The burglar was not used to horse-riding, even when it was only a pony he was riding, and he looked like a little ball of misery curled up on Myrtle’s back.

Kate could relate to that. The horse-riding was causing her muscles to ache, making it difficult to sleep at night. But her physical discomfort paled in comparison with the matters that were haunting her mind. The realisation that she was neither insane nor dreaming had more or less sunk in now, so she was quite convinced that she had for some stupid bloody reason ended up in The Hobbit after all and that she was now enlisted to go with the company as their advisor for reasons as of yet unspecified. This did however not mean she had to like it and if she would get her way, she’d be home today rather than tomorrow, but that choice was not up to her, it would seem. She was not powerful enough to magic herself from one world to another. That she needed Gandalf for and he seemed oddly determined for her to stay, also for reasons as of yet unspecified, even when he could not have missed out on the fact that the dwarves wanted Kate in their midst about as much as
she wanted to be there.

So, the hobbit didn’t like being here and neither did she, but the dwarves were ill at ease as well, which was something new. They had been excited about the prospect of going on this quest and while they were still in the Shire, they had been loud and overly cheerful, even if Kate often found herself receiving the cold shoulder treatment. Ori, Thorin’s nephews, Balin and Bofur to a lesser extent seemed to somewhat like her and heaven only knew what Bifur thought, but with the rest of them it was quite obvious that they did not want her here. They thought her a burden, much like they thought about Bilbo, and she was only here because of the wizard and no one seemed to quite know what he had been thinking when he brought Kate Andrews into the mix.

But when she was not concerned, this group was the school example of Robin Hood’s merry men, with the emphasis on the merry part. There was nothing merry about them now that they came near Bree. It had started around midday, Kate thought, when Thorin had announced that they would spend the night in the inn before they would make their way into the wild. There had been a few worried glances exchanged between some of the dwarves and after that it had only gone downhill. The cheer had disappeared and by the time they rode through the town’s gates, that in all honesty looked like they could not even keep out a hobbit when closed and would probably fall apart in the first strong gust of wind, the company was cloaked in silence. Only Gandalf seemed perfectly calm and cheerful, but that was hardly a surprise to anyone. He was always like that, much to most people’s endless annoyance.

What the hell is going on here?

That thought settled in Kate’s brain and made itself comfortable there. Because it wasn’t just the dwarves that appeared to be highly uncomfortable here, the town’s people did not seem too happy with their arrival either. She might have put that down to the fear of their pantries being raided the way Bilbo’s had been, but the barely concealed suspicion in their eyes was too malicious for that. People did not look like that just because their food stores might be in some form of danger. That was not the way the world worked.

She briefly contemplated asking Balin about it. He was what seemed to be her self-appointed personal guide to Middle Earth. Thus far he had been kind to her. He was the kind and patient grandfather of the group. Balin liked everyone, it seemed, and nobody disliked him in turn. And Kate was grateful for that, because she sometimes liked to have someone to talk to who was not showering her in questions about her world and took the time to answer some of hers.

But even Balin was now alert and taciturn and she decided against it, instead opting on observing, hoping she could might be able to learn a few things that way.

Her observations did not make her any happier though. People got quickly out of their way when they approached, but it didn’t seem out of respect. Kate spotted a young mother who ushered her two children, who had been playing on the street, back inside with a worried expression on her face. Well, maybe the obvious display of arms made the people nervous, the supposed advisor thought, looking at Dwalin, who indeed looked rather threatening. It did however not account for the dwarves’ uneasiness.

And that uneasiness only increased – in tenfold – when they reached the inn. Some of the company were downright jumpy and that was something unexpected for her. The innkeeper seemed polite enough when Thorin asked for rooms and, with a glare that would have gotten him arrested for murder if looks had that power, paid for them in advance when it was asked of him. Gandalf’s presence and familiarity with the owner of the inn seemed to help with that, because he kept the suspicious glances to a bare minimum, so unlike the other guests. Kate even saw a few of them leave the moment they saw who it were that were coming in.
What the hell is going on here? She feared that she was for some reason missing some very vital information about race relations here. The idea of not welcome was conveyed well enough by the town’s people, but what she didn’t know was why. If her memory served her right, then she had heard quite a few things of dwarves working as tradesmen, smiths, tinkers and the like all over Eriador. Bofur especially liked to share his stories of his fortunes and misfortunes on the road at the campfire at night. Why would people be opposed to having skilled craftsmen in town? It seemed rather foolish to her.

Again she contemplated asking, but one look at the faces around her told her to not get her hopes up. It was all rather doom and gloom around her, even though the sun was shining and her own thoughts were not very good company either these days, most of them revolving around what her family must be thinking when she would not come home when she was supposed to and her own strong objections to being here. When the adventure was in a novel it was all good and well, but doom and gloom was far easier to take when it was printed on paper than when one found oneself in the middle of it.

‘I’m going out,’ she announced as soon as she had dumped her bags in her room. She still had the money she had won from Thorin and in the past few days it had become quite clear to her that her own clothes were never going to do for a journey such as the one they were going to make. Purchasing clothes from this world felt remarkably like accepting that she was going to be here for quite a while and that was not something she wanted to be planning for, but to not do it now she had the chance, that would not only be unwise, but even downright foolish. She could only hope she would not be needing the clothes for too long. ‘Buying necessities.’

She still had a few hours before the sun would go down and she assumed the shops would be open until roughly around that time. At least she hoped they would be, because she needed them to be.

‘Alone?’ Bofur asked. ‘I don’t think that’s wise, lass.’

Kate felt the need to point out that a) it was still day and not even nearly dark yet and b) she was a grown woman who didn’t need anyone to chaperone her when she went into town alone. She suppressed the urge. Bofur was one of the few to be kind to her thus far and she was not going to ruin that if she could. Only heaven knew how long she still had to put up with this lot. It would be nice if she didn’t have all of them against her.

‘I think so,’ she therefore replied. ‘Although some directions would be nice.’ Bree was not all that big, but all the streets looked alike to her and she could really do without losing her way.

‘Fíli, Kíli, go with Miss Andrews.’ Thorin did not even look up from the maps he had been studying when he barked his command. ‘Make sure she’s back here before sundown.’ The dwarf sounded both weary and annoyed, both of those emotions caused by her decision to go out and make his life yet a little more difficult, Kate imagined. She made a mental note to stay far, far away from him for the duration of this quest, or as far away from him as she could manage anyway.

That didn’t mean she liked his assumption that she could not look after herself though. In fact, she was on the verge of launching into a tongue-lashing that Bree would remember for years, but something told her she might regret that later. Best let it be for the time being perhaps. Pick your battles, girl. This was not worth getting into a fight over, especially not with tempers being as short as they apparently were.

So instead of losing hers, she settled for a ‘Fine’ that nevertheless managed to convey perfectly what she thought about the matter. It would have to do for now and at least she had made sure Thorin knew what she was thinking, not that he could particularly care about that, she wagered. It
was more for her own peace of mind that she had put up some very mild form of resistance for the sake of putting up resistance.

Fíli and Kíli themselves did not seem to be too happy about going out. Fíli’s hand was remarkably close to his weapon, although he never really touched it and Kíli kept shooting glances around him as if he was afraid someone could sneak up on them any minute. It spelled the situation out quite clearly for Kate. Relations with the people of Bree were tense. She got that. The reason was still not any clearer.

‘Where did you want to go?’ Fíli was the first one to get a grip on himself and go back to pretending that everything was completely normal.

‘Somewhere I can buy some decent clothes for on the road,’ Kate replied. ‘A good cloak too, if my budget’s sufficient.’ She glanced down at her hiking shoes. They were great for hiking trips, but the first rainfall two days ago had made it clear that they could not keep out the water indefinitely. The shoes were waterproof enough, but they did nothing to prevent the rain from leaking in via drops falling from the ends of her trousers. ‘And boots too if I can find them.’

Kíli merely nodded. ‘This way.’

Not even one single quip about how that’s necessary after the wet socks? Now it was official that something was not quite right. She was once again tempted to just ask, but she did not know her companions quite well enough yet to be sure if they would appreciate her asking about such possibly quite painful things very much. She somehow doubted that they would appreciate it.

She would find out, she swore, just not by asking. She had always been rather curious and it annoyed her that she did not know everything about this. There was nothing like an unsolved mystery to keep her up at night, which was part of the reason why she didn’t read any detective novels before going to bed, and at the moment she would probably take anything that would distract her from the rather unpleasant and frustrating topic of how to get out of this world as soon as she could.

She followed the brothers, who kept up a pace that made Kate almost forced to run after them, to a small tailor’s shop three streets away from the inn. It looked old and dark, but it was neat and well looked after, Kate decided on first glance. The dark should not surprise her, she supposed. There were no houses bathed in light around here, not even when the sun was shining.

Kate was already on her way to the door when she realised that the brothers were not following her. ‘You’re not coming?’ She turned around.

Fíli shook his head. ‘No, that would not be a very good idea. Just go, Miss Andrews. We’ll wait here.’

He almost seemed nervous and it took Kate a lot of self-restraint to not demand an explanation on the spot. It wouldn’t work anyway. Dwarves were stubborn oysters when it came to sharing information and, like the oysters, they remained completely unmoved in the face of the pearl catcher’s – or information seeker’s – frustration as they refused to open up a bit. She could only hope that the town’s people were a little more talkative.

‘If you’re sure?’ It came out as a question. Going into a shop in a strange world alone was hardly the worst thing that could happen here, but it did make her nervous. She had no idea how things were done around here and she did not know about prices and the cost of things either. This could very well end up in disaster, but trying to convince Thorin’s nephews to come with her and help out was a battle she would be doomed to lose.
The shop was not empty. There was one man in his fifties in the back of it working on what looked like a tunic. Well, it did mean that she was in the right place. That was something. Now she just had to get what she needed.

‘Good afternoon?’ she called.

The man looked up. ‘Good afternoon, miss. How can I help you?’ The tailor got up from his stool and moved a little closer. The expression on his face was puzzled, Kate decided. Another mystery, it would seem.

‘I am looking for decent clothes for travelling,’ Kate replied. ‘You do have them, don’t you?’ She tried to make it sound like she knew what she was doing perfectly, but she had the idea she was failing rather badly at that, because she did not have a clue what the customs around here were.

‘Yes, yes, I do,’ the tailor said. He was looking more confused with each passing second. ‘I may need to have a few things adjusted, miss. It’s not every day a young woman such as yourself comes asking for these things.’

I would imagine not. No gender equality in these parts, that’s for sure. Kate watched as the man bustled around the shop to look for things she had been asking for. If she looked over her shoulder through the window, she could see her companions-gone-glorified-bodyguards looking highly uncomfortable, trying and failing to make it look like they had every right to be where they were. They were not fooling Kate and they were not fooling any passers-by either. This might well turn into the most awkward experience I’ve had in years.

The shop owner returned to her with some garments that looked like they had been made for a man at least twice her size as if to confirm her thought. ‘I am afraid I do not have anything smaller, miss,’ he told her.

Kate bit her lip. If she was going to walk in those trousers she would surely trip over the garment multiple times within the minute. ‘Could you possibly adjust them a little?’ she inquired, hoping that she did not sound too hopeful. If this was the best she could hope for, then maybe sticking with her own clothes was not such a bad idea after all.

The tailor nodded. ‘Naturally. When will you be needing them?’ He was undoubtedly polite, too polite. Kate suspected it was just a mask to hide his own confusion behind.

‘I’ll be leaving tomorrow at first light,’ she replied. ‘Could you do that?’

Another nod was her reply, although only a blind man could have missed out on the not very happy expression that went with it. And if he was going to work all night, then that was understandable, she imagined. Well, at least he got to stay in his house with a hearth while she would soon have to trek through the wilderness.

‘I’ll have to take your measurements, miss. You will be able to collect the clothes before you leave.’ The reply was curt now.

‘I would be very grateful,’ Kate said. And she was, even if it was currently overshadowed by confusion and awkwardness. Oh, go ahead, just ask. ‘I may be bold to ask, sir, but is there something amiss?’

The tailor looked like he was not going to answer that question for a second, but then he changed his mind. ‘I would feel more at ease if I knew that a young woman such as yourself would not venture out into the wild on her own,’ he admitted, being equally frank with her as she had been
with him.  

Ah, that was the matter. Well, at least she could put his mind at rest about that one. ‘I won’t be going alone. I am with a group of dwarves currently staying at the inn.’

Or maybe not, she observed as the tailor’s eyes all but popped out of their sockets in shock. ‘Dwarves?’

_Did I speak Chinese?_ ‘Yes,’ she said, sensing an opportunity to ask a few more questions. He looked properly horrified now and in her experience people didn’t really think much about their words when they had just had a good fright. This tailor had just gotten one. ‘Is something the matter with that?’

She may have asked that a little too sharply, because the man instantly realised that he may have crossed a line that was not supposed to be crossed. ‘Nothing much, miss,’ he replied.

Nothing much always means that there’s very much. Kate was no fool, no matter what her new companions seemed to think. ‘So, there is something,’ she probed. ‘Sir, please. I’d like to know what I can before I venture off into the wild with them.’ That might help him to loosen his tongue a bit.

He looked every inch as uncomfortable as Kate felt. ‘I’d just advise you to keep a close eye on your valuables,’ he said after a lengthy period of hesitation in which he pretended to be busy with her yet to be purchased clothes. ‘And to keep a knife close at night,’ he added after another half-minute.

That was all she got out of him. He too seemed to be practising his oyster skills and no amount of probing could tempt him into saying another word on the matter, keeping the conversation, such as it was, on strictly the clothes and the payment. That would dent her budget rather badly, but at least she would get what she needed and she would have enough left to buy a pair of boots at his neighbour’s shop.

She ventured there next. Fíli and Kíli remained outside again, the shopkeeper was shocked that she seemed of a mind to travel with dwarves – Kate left out the involuntary part of the journey for fear he would drop dead; he did not look very healthy already – but would not say more about the reason why he was so shocked, effectively making sure that by the time the dwarves and the advisor returned to the inn, she was in a right foul mood, even though she had been able to get what she had set out to get. Fíli and Kíli were not much happier and seemed to have turned into younger versions of their uncle when it came to talking habits.

_What a mess._ Kate dumped her purchases in her room. She had never been the kind of woman who actually liked shopping and admiring her new clothes and she was now in even less of a mood for such nonsense than she normally was.

At least she had gotten some clues as to why the people here disliked dwarves so much. Just plain old prejudice caused by not knowing anything about another people at all. Racism was obviously not something her world had the monopoly on. The people here seemed to think that the dwarves were greedy – although that might be true to some extent, especially when Nori came into the picture – and would take advantage of her at the earliest opportunity, hence the advice to keep a knife on her person at night.

People were hypocrites, she had to conclude. Dwarves were apparently welcome enough when they came to fix a farmer’s equipment or forge a good sword for a man, but when they came as guests, they were about as welcome as orcs because of some apparently deeply rooted prejudices
about stealing, which would explain why Thorin had been asked to pay in advance. Was the innkeeper really afraid they would leave without paying?

Was it just something that was caused by ignorance? Kate had no idea, but it was starting to annoy her. Of course it didn’t take much for her to be annoyed these days. Her temper had been short ever since she had come to realise that her hiking trip would involve a lot more kilometres than she had anticipated and was unlikely to be concluded in the two weeks the brochure had offered, never mind the fact that aforementioned hiking trip was not even taking place in her own world.

She rubbed her forehead, fighting the beginnings of a mild headache. She wanted to be home more than anything, but that was unlikely to happen, much as she tried to keep that rather unwelcome notion out of her mind. The longer she stayed her, the more realism was starting to sink in. Kate wished it didn’t.

She left her things in her room and went down to get something to eat when her stomach started growling so loudly it could no longer be ignored. And she would be a fool not to eat a decent meal when she had a chance for it, even if that meant she had to seek out the company again. There was just no helping it. Well, if they were being unsociable, she saw no reason why she would try and make small talk.

The inn was slowly starting to fill with people, but it was not very busy and all the guests seemed to keep their distance from the large table in the corner, where Thorin’s company had assembled. They were already eating, so Kate supposed she would need to make sure she got some supper by herself. Oh well, what had she been expecting? That Thorin would be as considerate as to make sure she ate? Hell would have to freeze over before that happened.

And so she made her way to the innkeeper. He was washing some of the empty tankards, but he looked up when he caught sight of her. ‘How may I help you, miss?’ he asked politely. He sounded and looked almost exact the same as the tailor. Kate sincerely hoped he didn’t share his concerns.

‘My friends seem to have started dinner without me,’ she observed. ‘I was wondering if you would have something for me?’ *And please save me from any sodding worries about my company.* Kate may be none too eager to travel with a company of loud, usually far too cheerful, prejudiced and arrogant dwarves, but that didn’t mean she liked all these looks either. The dwarves were a lot of things, but Kate didn’t think she was in danger of having her possessions stolen and getting killed. That was just plain ridiculous and the notion that prejudices here were just as strong as they were at home, did not make her like this place any better.

At first the man seemed to comply with her wishes. He turned around and got her a plate of steaming hot stew that made Kate’s stomach growl even louder in a rather embarrassing way. ‘There you go, lass,’ he told her. ‘And don’t hesitate to ask if there’s anything you need.’

His friendliness tempted Kate into a smile. ‘I’ll be fine,’ she informed him. ‘But I’ll keep it in mind. Thank you. You are very kind.’ She was still pissed off, but it would be very bad manners indeed if she were to take that out on this man. It was not as if he could help her problems and he wasn’t the cause of them either. That honour was Gandalf’s and his alone.

He shook his head at her. ‘Do you have to go with them dwarves, lass?’ he asked. ‘If you need a place to stay, I am sure we could find something for you in town.’

Kate frowned. ‘Why would I want to stay here?’ she asked bluntly. It may be too blunt, but she did not like the direction this conversation was taking.

‘They’re dwarves, miss.’ The sentence was spoken as if it was an explanation in and out of itself,
which to him perhaps it was. ‘You don’t know what they’re like.’

As a matter of fact, I think I do. Arrogant, taciturn, unsociable and at least as prejudiced against women and hobbits as you lot are against them. Same old, same old.

The innkeeper looked at her intently with what appeared to be fatherly concern. ‘I want you to know that you have a choice. Gandalf is a good fellow, but I don’t know about his companions.’

That makes two of us, Kate thought wryly. Some stupid sentimental part of her was touched at the concern of a complete stranger and tempted too. Heaven knew that she wanted a way out of this and that seemed to be what was offered here. She wouldn’t have to go through an entire quest that she had not even chosen herself. She might get out of it before it had even properly started.

But then how will you get home? As it was, she had a deal with Gandalf that he would let her return to her world as soon as the quest was done. And she wanted to get home even more than she wanted to get out of this blasted quest. Staying here in Bree would not get her home. Even worse, it might just ensure that she never got anywhere near home again. That was not what she wanted. So you take one day at a time, set one foot in front of the other and eventually this will be over. Stop being such an enormous coward, Andrews.

‘They’re decent,’ she therefore replied. Depending on what your definition of decent was, that was not entirely a lie. ‘Don’t worry. I’m travelling with them of my own free will. I do have a choice.’ She didn’t, but it would not do to burden him with all the ins and outs of her tale. Provided he didn’t get a heart attack first, she was not sure how much he would believe of it. It sounded insane even to Kate, and she had been the one to whom it had all happened.

‘I just wanted to make sure if you’re certain,’ the innkeeper said. He was staring at her as if he thought she had lost her mind though.

Maybe she had. ‘I am,’ she said. ‘But thank you for your concern.’

She took up her plate and left, feeling a little bad with herself for lying to someone who had been trying to be kind to her. But what other choice did she have if she ever wanted to see her family and friends again? There was none and so she took a deep breath and marched over to the company’s table. Time to face the music. Who knows, if the dwarves kept consuming alcohol at that rate, that might even be literally.

Chapter End Notes

I’ll try to do something about the kids next and I am working on something from Kate’s past as well, but if you have suggestions, don’t be afraid to throw them my way.

And reviews would mean the world, so if you have a moment, I’d love to hear what you thought about this one.
Overheated

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“My companion did not look too pleased with the way things were going either; if he had directed that scowl at me I think I would have run for the hills without as much as a second thought. And I think Thráin and Jack know exactly how your father looked that day. I swear that he had exactly the same look on his face after we had saved you two from the River Running after you had decided it was so hot that you would go for a swim, even when you didn’t know how to swim at all.”

The Journal, chapter 35: Shady Business

Erebor, summer 2962 TA

Once upon a time Queen under the Mountain, Queen Catherine, had believed that she would never get used to living underground. She didn’t think she’d like being cut off from any natural source of light and the warmth of the sun. Thorin, bless him, had been understanding and had made sure their quarters were on the southeast end of the Mountain, where they had chambers with windows and a large balcony to sit on. The old royal quarters had been reduced to rubble by the dragon anyway and by the time those were finally inhabitable again, the population had gotten used to the king and queen living where they lived.

Today however the influx of sunlight was a bother to Kate. The region was suffering from a heat wave, which was unusual this far north, but the year as a whole had been warmer than usual. In cases like this, living underground was a blessing, because the Mountain itself was cool and an altogether pleasant place to be these days. Kate’s quarters, with all their windows, were boiling. On days like these she hated the dwarven dress code with a passion and she missed the summer dresses she would have worn at home instead of the long-sleeved heavy dresses that made her sweat if she lifted as much as a finger. On days like these she was almost prepared to throw propriety to the wind and have the royal seamstress make one such summer dress anyway, and consequences be damned. But she was a queen now and giving into her whims was not something she could get away with any longer, especially not since she was supposed to be meeting with some men from Dale in an hour to discuss repairs on the road between Erebor and their city.

‘Give back! It’s mine!’ Cathy may be a very shy girl, but when her siblings did something she did not like, she had a good pair of lungs she was not afraid to use.

‘I had it first.’ When Kate turned around she saw her youngest son clutching Cathy’s favourite toy to his chest with an expression that betrayed he was not going to let it go. The owner of said toy stood in front of him with her arms folded over her chest in a manner that reminded Kate a lot of Thorin, because of the facial expression and the downright icy stare she unleashed on her twin brother.

In any other situation Kate might have been amused, but not today. The twins had been bickering all morning over practically nothing and that, in combination with the altogether far too hot weather, had made Kate’s patience practically non-existent. *Mahal protect me from any more arguing this day.* ‘Jack, give the toy back to your sister,’ she said warily.
'She wasn’t playing with it!’ Jack protested, righteous indignity written all over his face.

‘We had an agreement,’ Kate reminded him sternly, trying to keep her temper in check. This weather was not her son’s fault and she should not take her own annoyance with it out on him. Her own father had done that quite enough when she was a child. ‘No taking of Cathy’s toys, not even when she was not playing with it. You were only to play with them if she allowed it. Did you ask?’

‘No, but…’ He looked defensive now.

‘Then you give it back,’ Kate ordered. ‘Now, Jack.’ Cathy fortunately was not the only one who had mastered Thorin’s laser look over the years. Kate now unleashed it on her child to make him obey and thank goodness that it worked. The last thing she could use today was a temper tantrum from one of the twins. She tried to remember if Jacko and she had been that bad when they were children, but she didn’t think so.

As always the thought of her brother sent a stab of pain through her. Kate did not regret the choice she’d made, but the feeling of being torn in half never truly faded. It was the price she’d had to pay for the life she lived now. And it certainly did not help that Jack sometimes looked so much like his namesake that, had she not known better, she could have thought she was looking at a younger Jacko instead of the nephew he had never seen, would never even know existed.

She might have lost herself in very unwelcome sentiment if someone had not snapped her out of it by knocking on the door. ‘Oh, for Durin’s sake,’ she muttered under her breath as she turned to let in the visitor. Ten to one it would be someone who wanted Thorin for something, but her husband had taken Thoren on an inspection of a new mining shaft and would probably not be back for ages. She had said the same thing over and over again for most of the past few hours.

It turned out things could be even worse when she opened the door and found herself staring at the dwarf woman who might be now very well called her archenemy, Lady Nai, her biggest headache ever since they had first met. ‘Good afternoon,’ she forced herself to say.

Nai’s face twisted in a smile that was so obviously fake that Kate wondered if the woman expected anyone to believe it at all. ‘My lady,’ she said. She stubbornly refused to refer to Kate as her queen, because she did not think a daughter of the race of Men was meant to be ruling a far superior race such as her own.

Kate ignored the insult in disguise and repaid her in kind. ‘Nai,’ she acknowledged, stripping the dwarf lady of her title, so that she was still highest in rank here. She may not be as old as this dwarf woman, would never be that old, but she had been roaming the world of shady politics and verbal backstabbing long enough to have learned a few tricks. ‘How can I help you today?’

Judging by the look she got for her troubles, Nai knew exactly what Kate was doing. ‘I would have a word with you,’ she said haughtily.

Kate suppressed the urge to slam the door in her face. ‘I am sure that can be arranged,’ she replied with as much fake friendliness as she could muster. ‘One minute please.’ If she was going to have a catfight with Lady Nai, then not in front of her children. ‘Thráin!’ she called to her son, who was studying some old maps he had gotten from the library, in the corner of the room. ‘Take Jack and Cathy outside. The weather’s far too nice to spend your time inside.’

Thráin may be nearly eighteen years old, but he could be as much of a rebelling adolescent as he ever was, scowling at his mother with that look of pure boredom he had perfected ever since puberty had first kicked in. ‘I am busy, amad.’
So am I. ‘These maps will still be there come evening,’ she reminded him. ‘Go outside, Thráin.’

Her son was in no mood to obey. ‘Can’t Duria watch them?’ he all but pleaded.

‘Duria is out,’ Kate said. Probably with Narvi too. ‘And I wasn’t asking.’ She was all too aware that Nai was watching and that she would use everything she thought was wrong with Kate’s parenting skills as ammunition in the fight their conversation would doubtlessly end up in. ‘Now, Thráin,’ she told him.

He may be as stubborn as his father sometimes, but he was blessed with a little common sense. He even listened to it every now and then. Today was either a now or a then fortunately. ‘It’s Duria’s turn next time,’ he said, putting up some resistance for the sake of putting up resistance, something he could not have inherited from his father, but that sure was a trait that ran in the family, on mother’s side.

‘We’ll see about that,’ Kate said.

Her son knew that was the best he could hope for and so he departed, scooping up Cathy with one arm and taking Jack’s hand with the other. They had been wanting to go outside for hours, but had been unable to because their aunt Dís was on a journey to the Iron Hills and Kate herself had been cooped up in here, working her way through a stack of reports she was supposed to have read ages ago. Whoever thought it was fun being royalty, had better think again.

‘You are very stern with your children,’ Nai observed with an underlying tone of malice the moment the door closed behind Thráin.

‘How I raise my children is my concern,’ Kate reacted sharply. Yours might certainly benefit from a sterner upbringing, if only half of the stories I’ve heard about them are true. Dalin and Halin were both several years older than Cathy and Jack, and the Mountain’s very own nightmare. Their mother let them get away with everything. They played pranks on everyone and they were not all in good nature. People got hurt and Kate for one couldn’t wait till the day they finally came of age, so that the law at least could properly punish them for it, since their mother failed so spectacularly in that duty. ‘It is none of your business. What are you here for, if I may be so bold to ask? I’m afraid I have very little time today, as I have very many duties to see to.’ And only about three quarters of an hour before I need to go. She may not like such a meeting, but she would choose it over a discussion with Nai any time.

‘It is about your daughter Duria,’ Nai said and Kate mentally braced herself. ‘It has come to my attention that she is spending an awful lot of time around a dwarf of common birth.’

That was what this was about? Kate had thought she’d had this conversation with Thorin one too many times already. She had not believed she would be having it with Nai. ‘Narvi, son of Bombur, aye,’ she nodded. At least Thorin had not gone on and on about his birth, more about the age difference, because Narvi was a good ten years older than the girl he was courting. ‘Again I’d like to emphasise the fact that my personal life or that of my children is of no concern to you. If this is all you came to tell me, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave. There are quite a lot of things that need my urgent attention.’

Nai’s eyes narrowed. ‘The lad is not of noble birth,’ she pointed out venomously.

‘Narvi’s father was one of the companions who took back Erebor for our people,’ Kate shot back. ‘While you and your husband were holed up in the Iron Hills until the Mountain was ours again, if my memory serves me correctly. I think the term noble birth may be in desperate need of redefinition.’ It was hard not to explode. She was feeling criminally overheated and by now the
temperature of her blood started to match it, if for different reasons entirely. The Queen under the Mountain was not quite sure how much more insult she could take. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.’ It was as clear a dismissal as she could give without physically removing the other woman from the room, as her fingers were itching to do. Small wonder her sons were such nightmares; they had a good example of a mother to look up to.

Nai huffed, but if looks could kill, she’d have been arrested for regicide soon. ‘Maybe you do not think this a shame, because you yourself have no noble blood in your veins.’ All decorum had now been abandoned, as Kate had known it would. ‘How could I have expected a farmer’s daughter to understand?’ she scoffed.

The queen had to remind herself that punching the woman would be very unqueenly behaviour indeed. Instead she pulled herself up to her full length so that she was towering over the dwarf lady. On occasions like these, the height difference was nothing short of a blessing. ‘Out,’ she repeated, taking deep breaths to get herself back under control. ‘Don’t make me humiliate you by having to call the guard.’ Nai didn’t move. Time for threats. ‘I believe Lufur is on duty today,’ she went on. ‘Wasn’t it his boy that broke his leg last week because of some practical joke of your sons? None too pleased with it, he was.’

This time Nai’s face did show panic rather than condescending disapproval. ‘I won’t forget this,’ she snarled.

‘Good,’ Kate shot back. ‘Neither will I.’

That too was a threat and Nai recognised it as one, if her hurry to get out of the room was any indication. Kate exhaled in relief as the door fell shut behind her. She’d be more relieved if she wasn’t sure she would not be having another conversation before the week was out. What a mess.

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Thráin had to remind himself that he was no longer a child who could get away with throwing a temper tantrum when something was not to his liking. Not that he had ever been able to get away with it. His mother might occasionally overlook it, but his father had always been stern on such matters, lecturing him on how such behaviour was unbecoming of a prince of Durin’s line, especially when aforementioned prince was second in line for the throne.

He had no interest in thrones however, which was why it was a good thing he was not the eldest. Thoren was being prepared, had been prepared, for such a role from the moment he could walk and he would be good at it as well, Thráin guessed. He himself couldn’t wait until he was old enough
to travel on his own so that he could explore the world. This of course was very unbecoming of a
dwarf of Durin’s line as well, as Lady Nai and her annoying friends never failed to remind his
mother. Strangely enough it was his mother who defended him, saying that the king himself had
spent many years of his life wandering Middle Earth. Would they perhaps imply that they were
condemning his behaviour as well? That at least had made them back off quickly enough.

His mother had not been defending him today however and now he was stuck with the twins.
Cathy had tired and had fallen asleep with her head on his shoulder, thumb stuck in her mouth,
completely unaware of what was going on around her. She could be so easy to watch. She never
whined, not with him anyway, because he was her favourite big brother, a title Thráin was secretly
proud of, even if it would not impress anyone else very much.

Jack was another matter entirely, far more like Thráin himself. He was jumping with excitement at
going outside. As much as a punishment it was to his older brother, it was a reward to him. Their
mother insisted he was not to go outside the Mountain on his own, but she almost never had time to
go with him and with his father and brother busy inspecting the mines – something he was very
glad he didn’t need to do – his aunt Dís on travel and Duria having a picnic with Narvi somewhere,
the task of babysitting his youngest siblings fell to Thráin.

And he didn’t like it. He had promised himself he would spend the day looking at the maps he had
found in the library and it was far too hot now to be out here anyway. They had hardly left the
Mountain and he felt the sweat trickling down his back already. Jack didn’t seem to notice. He was
bouncing up and down, smiling so widely it was a miracle his face had not split in half already.

‘So, what do you want to do?’ he asked, hoping it would not involve spending more time in the
very hot sun. Dwarves may have been granted a lot of endurance by Mahal, but Thráin had a
lingering suspicion the Maker may have forgotten to add resistance to sunburns to that list. It was
either that or his human blood that was to blame for the painful burns he had gotten two summers
ago after Thoren and he had accidentally spent a day and a night on the slopes of the Mountain
because they had gotten lost and couldn’t find the front gate anymore.

‘We can fight with sticks?’ Jack tilted his head and gave Thráin the full benefits of his best
begging puppy look.

‘Amad will kill us both if she catches us.’ The illegality of such an act added to its allure, but today
he was firmly of the opinion that it was just too hot for anything that was physically demanding.
Dwarves were used to the heat of fires, which was a dry kind of heat. This was something else
entirely. ‘And she has a sixth sense for detecting trouble too.’ No matter what excuses Thoren and
he used to think up, she had never believed any of them, no matter how plausible. And with his
mother’s patience already at an all-time low, it would be best not to risk it.

Jack’s face fell. ‘Racing?’ he suggested next.

Thráin started to sweat at the mere idea. ‘No,’ he said.

His eyes wandered over the surroundings, hoping he might get any ideas from that, because he did
feel a little bad about dismissing all his younger brother’s ideas without a moment’s thought. The
thing was that it was just too hot for just about any game Thoren and he used to play at that age,
because all of them involved jumping and running and he was not about to do that now. His gaze
finally fell on the river. There was a strong current and neither of them could swim – dwarves
weren’t made to be on or in water, after all, although that excuse never worked when their mother
tried to make them take a bath – but it wasn’t deep here and the water would be cool. Cool sounded
just about right to him now.
‘We’re going into the river,’ he announced. There was a nice bush on the shore that provided shade, under which he could lay down his sister. He doubted she’d wake now that she was sleeping so peacefully. That only left Jack to look out for and if he held him at all times, no harm could come to him. And they would at least both cool down a bit.

It had been the right thing to say, because Jack’s face lit up instantly. ‘Can we?’ he asked excitedly.

Thráin nodded. ‘Of course.’

Jack frowned. ‘Won’t amad be mad?’

*Quite possibly.* But he would get the full benefits of her anger. And it was not as if his parents’ anger had ever stopped him from breaking rules. With the sweat covering his entire body, their anger seemed worth it. ‘Not as long as I am with you,’ he lied. ‘But you’ll have to listen to me very well and do exactly as I say, do you understand?’ He waited for the confirming nod before he continued. ‘You will hold my hand and not let go and when I say we’re going out again, you will come without protest.’

Jack didn’t like that, but he nodded.

‘Good,’ Thráin said. ‘Let’s go.’

He laid Cathy on the ground and made a pillow of his tunic. It was not as if he would need that for the next few hours. They laid their clothes there as well and then took off towards the river. Jack was holding Thráin’s hand and was smiling and bouncing up and down still. The older brother had a distinct suspicion he might soon be promoted to favourite big brother for him as well.

The water was cold on his feet and legs as he stepped in, but it was a relief as well and he welcomed the cold. It felt like he could finally breathe again after all that stifling heat of the last few weeks. Jack did not seem to mind either. He jumped up and down, thoroughly enjoying the splashes of water he caused. The water was not deep at all and so Thráin sat down so that he got more of his body beneath the surface. Apart from the fact that he was stark naked and being seen like that would be frowned upon, it was also very pleasant. He held on to Jack’s hand, but then leaned back until his face was below the surface, to ensure all of his body got to enjoy the water.

When he resurfaced Jack grinned up at him. ‘Can I do that too?’

*Amad’s going to kill me.* But he was doing so well and it was obvious that Jack suddenly liked him a whole lot better than he did before. That could come in handy later. And besides, he didn’t think there was anyone who could say no to that dazzling smile. ‘Of course,’ he therefore said. ‘But you must come up again soon and you must hold your breath,’ he instructed.

His younger brother frowned. ‘Why?’

Thráin tried and failed to bite back an amused smile. ‘Because dwarves can’t breathe under water,’ he explained. ‘Only fishes can do that.’

Jack processed that information. ‘Oh,’ he said eventually. ‘I see.’

This time he had to let out a bark of laughter. Jack didn’t understand at all, but it was always very funny to see him try to act like an adult. ‘Of course you do,’ he said indulgently. ‘Well, do you want to try?’

The boy nodded eagerly.
‘Come sit down next to me then,’ he said.

Jack made to obey, but he must have slipped, because suddenly he fell. The force of it made Thráin accidentally let go of his brother’s hand, which he had been holding only very loosely, because holding on tightly didn’t seem all that necessary before. But now the current grabbed his brother and dragged him away from Thráin.

He was on his feet right away. ‘Jack!’ he shouted. He could see his brother’s head, but there was no reply forthcoming and the panic gripped him by the throat. Maker be good, this could not be happening. But it was and he had to do something or else Jack would die. Thráin could not swim, but he could not sit back either and so he did the only thing he could do. He did not allow himself a moment to think and dove into the water.

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Thorin was glad that he could return to his own quarters after the inspection of the mines. It was one of those things he needed to do and it was good to see the work with his own eyes, so that he knew the facts and progress for himself, but he could do without the inane babbling their guide had treated them with. Garin was very knowledgeable about the mines, no one would deny that, but his mouth didn’t stop moving for a single second and the worst thing about it was that Thorin already knew everything he said, or at least almost everything.

Thoren looked no less relieved to be out of there than Thorin felt, even if he did well try to hide it. The King under the Mountain sometimes regretted the need to shape his eldest son into a dwarf that was fit to rule. He remembered a young boy running around Erebor with his brother, making mischief as they went. It was as if with every day that passed, a little of that carefree boy slipped away, leaving a dutiful son and heir in his place and Thorin hated the need for it.

Because Thoren might not have it easy when one day he would become King under the Mountain. The one thing Thorin did not doubt was that he was well suited to the position, because his son was clever, responsible – at least the last few years – and cared for the people he would one day rule. It was mainly the fact that not all those people cared for Thoren that worried his father. It was not too surprising that not everyone wanted a king on the throne of Erebor who was only half a dwarf and had a human woman for a mother. Something like that had never happened and there were quite a few dwarves who would rather see a more distant branch of the Durin line in power than the rightful heir. Thoren had a lot to prove, simply because he existed and Thorin hated it that, although he was the king, it was not within his powers to change this.

‘Did you understand all Garin said?’ Thorin asked.

His son nodded. ‘Aye.’ The mask of the dutiful heir slipped for a moment and Thoren’s face revealed a boyish grin. ‘But he sure does talk an awful lot.’

The king found it impossible to argue with that. ‘That he does.’ He opened the door to their chambers and stepped inside. The room was deserted except for Kate, who was sitting at her desk, working her way through a stack of parchments with a deep frown etched onto her forehead. ‘We’re back,’ he announced.

The queen looked up, sending him a sarcastic smile, not so very unlike the one their son had just displayed. ‘So I noticed,’ she commented. ‘Garin was his charming self again?’
‘How do you know?’ Thoren asked.

Kate grinned. ‘Because the two of you look absolutely miserable. Besides, it’s not as if his mouth ever stops moving. His wife says he even talks in his sleep, so if he can’t even stop chattering at night, what makes you think he will do it during daytime?’

Mother and son shared a laugh, while Thorin looked around the room. He had half been expected to be cuddled to death by his youngest daughter, but Cathy and her twin were nowhere in sight. ‘Where are the children?’

‘Thrúin has taken the twins outside,’ Kate replied. ‘They were bickering all morning already and I needed a bit of peace and quiet to work.’

Thorin smiled. The twins could be a handful, even shy little Cathy from time to time. And they had started causing trouble from even within the womb, so that surely set the tone for the rest of their lives.

He was just about to comment on her remark when a panicked voice came in through the window. ‘Jack!’ And Thorin had no trouble recognising Thrúin’s voice.

Kate swore and rushed out to the balcony with Thorin on her heels. They were just in time to see their son dive into the river. Jack was nowhere in sight and neither was Cathy. Thorin’s heart stopped and for just a moment the panic overwhelmed him.

‘Mahal be good,’ Kate whispered in shock. ‘None of them can swim.’

He heard the unadulterated terror in her voice and that snapped him out of it. He could not just stand here and watch his children drown. He turned on his heels and broke into a run, using his intimate knowledge of the Mountain and its many shortcuts to navigate his way to the gate. The voice of realism told him that he was most likely going to be too late, but he squashed it, instead pouring every last reserve of energy into running. That may be looking rather unkingly, but his dignity could go to hell, as his wife could phrase it so eloquently phrase it. He wasn’t sure whether it was the physical strain he put on his body or the fear for his childrens’ life that made his heart beat as frantically as it did, but he could not care. His mind was all too quick to provide him with the images of the three of them lying dead, drowned in the River Running.

He could hear footsteps behind him and suspected his wife and son had followed him, but he did not look back to make sure. He had no time for that. His boys’ lives were in danger.

The guards at the gate gave him strange looks, but Thorin paid them no heed. He merely ran for the river, scanning it for any sign of Thrúin and the twins as he went. Mahal, please let them live. Mahal, please let them live. The words became a mantra in his head, drowning out any other sound and thought. He did not care that a king should not behave in such a way. If there were consequences, he would face them later.

His heart and hopes sank as he scanned the river and saw no sign of any of his children. Was he already too late?

‘Thrúin! Jack! Cathy!’ Kate cried out. Thorin knew his wife. She tried to keep in control of her voice, but this was a cry from the heart and the panic seeped through.

Thoren and Thorin’s voices joined in, but with each time their cries went unanswered, Thorin’s hopes were dashed a little further. He ran along the shores of the river, still looking out, still hoping that by some miracle the boys would have found refuge on the other side.
‘Father!’ When he heard Thráin’s voice it was like water to a man dying of thirst, inappropriate though that comparison may be.

Thorin swivelled his head around and spotted his son in the middle of the river, holding on to a lump of rock in the middle of it for dear life with one arm, whilst clinging Jack to him with the other. Jack was not moving, but his eyes were wide open with fear. Thráin was in better control of his facial expression, but Thorin knew his son. He was scared as well and worse than he let on.

But while the relief washed over him, he could not fail to notice that Cathy was not with them and Kate had said that she had sent all three of them outside. A stab of pain went through him. He loved all his children, but Cathy was his youngest, his little girl, who curled up on his lap to fall asleep, who stayed up long past her bedtime when he was late or simply walked all the way to his study to bid him goodnight. The thought of losing her made him almost incapable of moving.

But his sons were still alive and he could rescue them. ‘I’m coming for you!’ he shouted back over the sound of the rushing water. He banished the thought that this rushing water could carry both his children away in a heartbeat, long before he would be able to get to them. Instead he stripped to tunic and breeches and kicked away his boots. During the years of his exile he had learned to swim, even if he did not particularly like it. He thanked Mahal he had taken the time nonetheless. ‘Stay where you are and hold on.’ He waited until Thráin had responded with a tentative nod, before he turned to Thoren. ‘Run along the river,’ he ordered. ‘Find your sister.’ Find her alive.

Thoren was already running and the king wasted no more time; he dove in and began to make his way to the rock. The current was strong, but he would have to be stronger. He could not afford to lose, not with the boys’ lives at stake.

In the end he was almost thrown against the boulder. The breath was knocked from his body, but he had made it. ‘Give Jack to me,’ he ordered Thráin, his tone of voice curt and snappy as a result of the tension. ‘I’ll bring him to the shore and then come back for you. Can you hold on for that long?’ The concern showed all the same.

Thráin may be young still and foolish too, but he was a fighter. ‘I can,’ he said, trying to make it convincing. He handed Jack to his father, but held on to the rock tightly as he did so.

Thorin took Jack in his arms. ‘You were very brave,’ he said, hoping to sound reassuring, even though that was not his strong point. ‘Jack, hold on to me, but do not move. Do you understand?’

The boy’s lip was trembling, but he managed to nod and he followed the instructions. The king jumped back in again and swam back to shore with strong strokes. Kate was waiting for him there and she took Jack from him the moment they came within reach, clutching him to her chest. ‘Thank God you’re safe.’

Thorin shared the sentiment, but he did not allow himself to feel relief just yet. Thráin was still out there and Cathy was still missing. The time for relief was not yet, if it ever came, which by now he sincerely started to doubt. He dove back in again and swam back. The current was trying to drag him with it again, but he resisted and kept on going, because there was no other alternative. Thráin was still holding on, but Thorin had seen fatigue in more soldiers than he cared to count and he could surely recognise the signs in his own flesh and blood. He was holding on by sheer strength of will, but not much else.

‘I’ve got you,’ he said as his arms slipped around the lad. ‘No harm will come to you, I promise. Let go, son.’ He knew it sounded like he was talking to Jack instead of his older son, but Thráin was deep down nothing more than a frightened boy and the tone of voice seemed to work.
He swam back again and dragged them both to land. Thráin was trembling and close to crying as well, Thorin suspected, even if he held the tears back bravely. The lad had an iron will, something he may have inherited from both Thorin and Kate.

Kate now knelt down next to him. ‘Are you all right?’ she all but demanded. ‘Where is Cathy?’ The worry for her just rescued son and the fear for her still missing daughter were warring for dominance and it showed.

Thráin coughed, expelling some water from his lungs. ‘Upstream,’ he panted. ‘Sleeping under a bush.’

This time he let the relief was over him in waves far more powerful than the ones he had just come through. His children were all alive and relatively well. There was the shock to deal with, but that they could handle. For now he was just glad to have his family back.

Kate was already beyond the relief. Anger was clouding her eyes now. ‘What the hell were you thinking?’ she scolded. ‘Both of you! You can’t even swim, for Durin’s sake!’ Had Thorin not shared the sentiment, he may have been amused at the way his wife mixed curses from both her own world and those of Durin’s Folk, but not today. ‘Have you lost your mind?’

Thráin was wrapping Thorin’s discarded coat around him, as much to warm up as to conceal the fact that he was wearing nothing underneath. ‘I thought it was too warm, so we went into the river to cool off,’ he explained. ‘We were staying to the shallow parts, I swear, but then Jack tripped and…’

But Thorin was not listening any longer. Before now he had hardly spared it a moment’s thought how the boys had ended up where they had, because he had been too preoccupied rescuing them to ask any questions, but now the relief turned to anger effortlessly and his face twisted into something Kate referred to as Thorin’s laser look. ‘You went into a strong-current river while you couldn’t even swim?’

He had hoped that Thráin had learned some common sense by now, but it would seem that would not grace the lad for some years. But at least Thorin could lecture him on his behaviour and that was exactly what he did.

Chapter End Notes

Life is going to be pretty chaotic for a few weeks, including holidays and work, so I cannot say when the next update will be, as my main focus will be on The Journal and Operation Wandless. I’ll try to squeeze in a chapter when I have the chance though. In the meantime, please review?
“He should have known it too. Mahal knew how much she missed her home. In Beorn’s house he had, accidentally mind, seen some letters addressed to her brother, letters that could never be sent.”

The Journal, chapter 52: Welcome

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**Erebor, summer 3003 TA**

‘Thoren, are you in here?’

Aforementioned King under the Mountain had a desperate wish to either call ‘No!’ or say nothing at all and just hope that Duria would pass and look for him somewhere else. This, however, was no behaviour that was becoming of a king, especially not a newly crowned king of Erebor who had to fight hard enough to be taken seriously in the first place because of his mixed blood.

‘Here!’ he called, sounding remarkably like an echo.

It was as if his sister had waited for him to call her in, because she entered the room approximately half a second later. ‘I knew you were here.’

Thoren didn’t look up. ‘Then why did you ask?’ He loved his younger sister, he really did. He just didn’t like her mothering habits. She had done so since she was five years old and lectured Thráin and him on shirking their duties and breaking the rules. Since she always went by the rules herself, they never got the chance to call her out on it. Thráin had teasingly remarked that when her own son Dari was born she would have a child of her own to raise, but it had not stopped her from applying the same treatment to her older brothers apparently.

‘You’re always here.’ Duria sounded a little more subdued now. ‘And I don’t think it’s good for you,’ she added. ‘You can’t keep clinging to their memories, Thoren. You are the king now and you have to take responsibility.’

He was tetchy. He knew it and he also knew that he could not lose his temper. It happened all the same. ‘Pray tell me which crisis I have missed out on in my absence,’ he snapped at her.

If Duria was impressed by that speech at all, she did a fine job of hiding it. ‘I’m just worried about you.’ She was toying with the braid in her beard, a clear sign that she was uneasy, as she should be. ‘We all are, even Thráin and Jack. It’s…’ She hesitated, but then took a deep breath and went on. ‘It’s like you’re refusing to accept that they’re not here anymore and you’re not moving on. Even Thráin says you’re always wondering what father would have done or what mother would have said.’

Thoren wondered if he should be angry with his brother for betraying that to Duria, but then thought better of it. It was not as if any of them could keep a secret from Duria the Nosy once she
started prying in affairs that didn’t concern her. Her, however, he could be mad at. ‘Then what else am I supposed to do?’ he demanded of her. ‘What other examples do I have? Or do you now propose I start to model my conduct on Thranduil?’

Duria looked positively scandalised and a little abashed. ‘I didn’t mean it like that!’

‘Of course you didn’t,’ Thoren growled. And it was very well possible that was the truth. Duria meant well, which was why it was practically impossible to be angry with her for longer than a few hours.

‘We’re only worried,’ she emphasised, throwing her arms up in the air. ‘I mean, this is their room and you’re spending a lot of time in it, lately.’ Thoren correctly translated lately as since father’s death.

‘It is to be my room,’ Thoren pointed out. ‘It needs… cleaning out. And I’d rather do it myself than have some uncaring servant go through their belongings. And…’ Now it was his turn to hesitate. ‘There are so many things here, Duria, so many things that we could never even guess at.’

Duria nodded in what appeared to be understanding. ‘I know. We all read their journal.’ She sounded a little sad.

The king shook his head. ‘There’s so much more, especially about mother. Sometimes I even wonder if we knew her at all.’ He looked down at the sheaf of parchment he had been steadily ploughing his way through. ‘There’s so many things she wrote…’ And that did not even begin to cover it.

‘She was some sort of scribe, wasn’t she?’ Duria asked. ‘In that other world? Those are her writings?’ She looked pointedly at the parchments.

‘Letters,’ Thoren corrected. ‘To her brother.’

Duria frowned. ‘Uncle Jacko, the one we never met? She never sent them?’

Duria was a bright woman, but sometimes she could be rather dim. ‘How do you think she would have done that?’ he asked. ‘He lives in another world.’ Suddenly he wondered about that. Uncle Jacko, he had been told, was his mother’s twin brother, but she had died only half a year ago of old age. Jacko may not even be alive anymore himself. But it was not as if they would ever have a chance of knowing for sure. ‘And I don’t think Gandalf would have done it for her.’ What he knew of the wizard was mostly hearsay, but he knew his mother had never grown very fond of him.

His sister nodded. ‘I see.’ She looked again. ‘Can I read them?’

Thoren nodded. ‘Of course.’ Mahal knew he wanted to share this with someone, even if only with his nosy sister. And so he made room for her on the rug where he himself was sitting, and passed her the first letter.

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Erebor, early spring 2945 TA

Dear Jacko,
It’s been a while since I wrote to you, but life has been rather busy here. But now there’s a snow storm raging around the Mountain and we’re all cooped up in here. Trade has been suspended until the roads are clear again; now there is just too much snow and far too much cold. If Thorin can be believed, this is not an unusual thing so late in winter or early in spring, if this can indeed be called spring at all, but I have never seen it before and to tell you the truth, I do not like it. Give me warmth and sun any day.

At least this means that life has quietened down somewhat. Thranduil won’t make it through this blizzard for quite some time, which will postpone the meeting for at least another few weeks. I daresay everyone involved is glad of this. One thing has not changed since I first stepped foot in this world; relationships between elves and dwarves are still as glacial as they have ever been.

Or maybe glacial is not quite the correct word. Thorin’s blood has reached boiling point more than once over the past few weeks. Yes, this may be a momentous occasion, because this will be the first time in years Thorin and Thranduil are even willing to talk to each other – progress indeed – but it is of course not unlike that elf to try and make things explode before we have even started.

He was remarkably not difficult about the location of the talks, which should have put us on guard of course, but it didn’t. Then the message came that he would bring his nephew with him to the talks, which is quite out of the question. Remember when I wrote that Galas once knocked me out with the hilt of his sword? Well, Thorin may not be at liberty to repay that elf in kind, but he is not about to let him come anywhere near the front gate. To make a long story short: Thorin refused, Thranduil took offence and ever since then messages have been passed to and fro, getting ruder every time. Thorin has been in a right foul mood ever since and lately I heard Thoren say something that sounds remarkably like “bloody elves” and no, I did not teach him that, thank you very much! Thank goodness Thráin is still too young to understand what is going on.

The thing is, I should perhaps be the one to pacify the situation, but I don’t want to. Galas is an arrogant sod with less brains than your average goldfish and an ego roughly the size of the Himalaya, which is always a very dangerous situation. But well, it would seem I am the queen now and queens don’t get to keep grudges against a foreign ruler’s nephew. When did life become so bloody complicated!

All my love,

Kate

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Dear Jacko,

Just a quick update on the trade talks. They’re over. Successfully and safely over, with the only casualties a few dented egos, mostly on Thranduil’s side. But thank Mahal they’re gone. If I had to put up with all those pointy-ears for even a day longer, I might have gone mad. Their complaints ranged from our lack of vegetables on the menu and the lack of trees in the city – honestly, are they all so dim that they can’t see that trees don’t grow on bare rock? – to the lack of fresh air and
smoking hearths. Most of the complainers came to me rather than to Thorin – which may have been not such an unwise decision – and especially that Lainor fellow annoyed the hell out of me. Honestly, would it kill him if a meal passed without the salad? It’s not as if the two of us seem to have been permanently scarred by it.

But they’re gone now and the peace has returned. The trade agreement has been signed and that is, at least for now, the end of it. Now all that needs to happen is for Thorin to get his blood pressure back to normal and for the guest quarters to be cleaned and then all the evidence of elvish presence in the Mountain will be gone. I can’t wait.

As for Galas, he didn’t come. He was planning to and would thus cause a major diplomatic meltdown, but very unfortunately for him he fell from his horse near Dale, broke a leg and an arm and he had to stay behind, solving all the problems. I would bet that Thorin and his closest advisors were a little too unsurprised to learn it, almost as if they already knew such a thing would happen, and some of the guards were missing around the time this “accident” occurred. I have refrained from asking what really happened. Politics is a nasty business and talking not always solves every problem, no matter how much I would like that. I suppose I will have to get used to it.

All my love,

Kate

Erebor, autumn 2945

Dear Jacko,

Life in the Mountain has turned to madness. Maybe it has always been like this and I never noticed before, but I could not tell. The thing is, Thorin has gone to Esgaroth for business and now he left me in charge of the council. That was three days ago and I am beginning to think he has made a serious mistake. He could have left me in charge of a zoo or a group of hyperactive toddlers and it would have gone better than it goes now. You simply won’t believe the amount of prejudice I have to fight against here.

So yes, I am the first human Queen under the Mountain and yes, there are quite some people here that are less than okay with that, but when Thorin first told me I might face troubles because of that, I thought he was exaggerating. I know better now. Normally, when he is around, people keep their tongues under control. Now, when he is not here, they do not. Apparently I am degrading/polluting/ruining/all-of-the-above the line of Durin by my very presence. Some are at least subtle about their opinions, others not so much.

And the council leads by example in this case. Quite a few of the people on it are decent. There are a few members of the old company and Lord Toigan is nothing short of a saint in my opinion. Some others are moderate and are wise enough to keep any unpleasant notions to themselves, but others… So, without further ado, I’ll introduce you to my very own headaches: Lord Nali and his daughter Nai. Nali is an elderly noble who does not yet qualify as antique, but he is well on his way to become it. He lived in Erebor before the dragon came, but like the true whiner/coward/comfort-loving dwarf that he is, he fled to the Iron Hills until we took back the
Mountain. He does have some useful connections there, so we need him and the law says that we cannot actually kick him out for deserting his own people in their hour of need – ridiculous arrangement – so there he is. Biggest complainer I’ve ever met and also the leader of what appears to be the anti-Kate movement. Mind you, his only daughter, Lady Nai, is just as bad, if she isn’t worse. She is not officially a part of the council, but she always accompanies her father, because he is so “frail.” I sometimes wonder if we’re talking about the same Lord Nali. This pathetic excuse for a female is a true expert at verbal backstabbing and strengthens the thought that women fight their battles with snarky words and scathing remarks spoken in sweet tones. Fighting fire with fire seems to help some.

Just not today. Lord Nali is going on and on about the control over the new mining shaft they found the other day, claiming it is on his patch, even when it is quite obvious that it is in fact just not on his patch, but on his neighbour’s, Lord Bari, whom I happen to like quite a bit better. Yes, I am biased, but it would also be the right thing to do to give it to Bari, because that would be justice. Granting it to Lord Nali would be a grave injustice. That hasn’t stopped him from pursuing the matter with an enthusiasm that does not befit one his age at all.

I wish I even had an ounce of your patience with all those self-important whiners, but I don’t. Out of the two of us you were clearly the one born to be a politician. I’m too blunt and short-tempered for it and so, I fear, is Thorin. In that respect we are remarkably alike. I lack the laser look with the power to shut them up though. On days like these I sometimes just feel the strong urge to behave like Thoren on a difficult day: wail and scream until I get my way for once.

All my love,

Kate

P.S. It might be worth a try, even if only for the joy of seeing Nali’s face.

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Erebor, spring 2946 TA

Dear Jacko,

When I accepted Thorin’s proposal, I thought I knew what I was in for. I knew that I was going to be a queen, going to rule. I also knew this meant that I would sit through more councils and talks than I cared to think about. I even anticipated that not everyone of Durin’s Folk would be thrilled to have a human woman for a queen.

What I didn’t expect was for me to become the Peacemaker under the Mountain. Yet, that is what seems to have happened today. What happened, you wonder? Lord Moron happened. Admittedly his name is Merin, but it’s just the two letters and between the two of us, Thorin and I have agreed his nickname suits him better. Believe it or not, I even believe Thorin was the one to come up with it in the first place.

Come to think of it, he has not yet come up in my tales, has he? In short then: Merin, son of Walin, aged ninety-seven, descendant of a noble family originally from Erebor, but – surprise, surprise –
fled to the Iron Hills when Smaug came. Merin’s father has a seat on the council and is, to my huge annoyance, a close friend of my biggest headache. But at least Walin can keep his tongue, his son cannot. He’s just one of those youngsters that should long since have grown up, but seems to be stuck in puberty. He has an ego approximately the size of the Mountain itself, the brains and friendliness of a jellyfish and a group of friends who follow him around like a bunch of idiots, doting on his every word.

Unfortunately for me he seems to have joined the anti-Kate movement, a popular movement among the returned nobles from the Iron Hills. That lot has no idea what it is like to live in exile and they therefore do not understand the need for change, instead hanging onto their beloved traditions with a passion that by all rights should have driven their spouses to fierce jealousy decades ago. One of their traditions is that dwarves keep to themselves and outsiders are not welcome, with me being the outsider.

Merin and his followers – because that is what they really are – have taken it upon themselves to bleat this view to the world and preferably within my hearing distance. I just tend to ignore them. They are bullies and as long as their attacks are verbal – as if any of them even dares to lay a finger on me; they value their heads attached to their bodies after all – I can repay them in kind and Moron’s taunts lack greatly in originality, so it’s almost amusing to exchange these witticisms with him. Childish of me? Perhaps, but in my defence, Moron is rather a child himself.

So far, so good. He was at it again today, but since I had more urgent business to concern myself with, I let it be. I’ve heard worse and it’s difficult to get worked up over things I’ve heard so often before. Moron just had the bad luck that Thorin walked into the corridor as he spat at me that my children were an abomination.

I’m afraid to say that the dignified King under the Mountain lost it. He stormed through the hallway like an angry bull and knocked Moron clean off his feet. I had to call the guards to put an end to things, but by then Merin’s face had gained an intimate knowledge of Thorin’s fists and he was out cold by the time the guards finally arrived. Thorin too was knock-out, but only because Lufur had to, because otherwise Thorin would have happily continued to beat Moron to pulp.

Lufur is a dear and, some would say, far too kind-hearted to be in the guard, despite his clear bulk of muscle. ‘Beg your pardon, my lady,’ he told me with a bow and a blush of embarrassment. ‘Didn’t mean to use that much force, but…’

It was damn well necessary. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Thorin that mad and here I was thinking I had seen it all. Apparently I was wrong in that assumption. Well, at least I am grateful Lufur acted as he did – and now I need to make sure Thorin never reads this – because it allowed me to deal with matters before it could truly get nasty again. Strangely enough it didn’t take that much persuasion to make Walin see the wisdom of relocating to the Iron Hills along with his family and now they’re gone. Thorin is most displeased and is seriously contemplating going after them, but so far I’ve managed to keep him in the Mountain. All of a sudden it is as if my husband’s disappeared and I’ve just gained another child to look after. He’s standing in front of the hearth, brooding again, plotting bloody murder. Catherine the Peacemaker indeed. Well, it does have a nice ring to it, don’t you agree? It sounds better than Catherine the Child-minder anyway.

All my love,

Kate
Erebor, early summer 2946 TA

Dear Jacko,

Why do I bother? Why do I bother writing letters that I can never send, that you will never read? Why do I keep writing to you as if you know what I am even talking about? You don’t know the persons I describe, you have never seen your nephews, nor will you ever, and the same is true for me. I haven’t got a clue as to what is going on in your life. Good grief, you will not even see the letter I’m writing this very minute! It’s like I am writing to myself, just pretending that maybe someday you’ll read them, something a foolish little girl might do.

I know we’ll never meet again and it was I that made that choice. Do not mistake me, I do not regret it. If I were to make the same choice today, I would choose no different. That doesn’t make these feelings go away though. Even though this was my choice and I’ll stand by it, it does not change the feeling of being torn in half. I miss you, I miss mum, I even miss the cat, although he’ll be dead by now for all I know.

And that’s the point, isn’t it. I don’t know. And I am never going to know either. I don’t know what’s become of you, how you are and it’s driving me up the bloody wall.

But what’s the point of that anyway?

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Erebor, late summer 2946

Dear Jacko,

Unexpected ladies’ day away from the kingdom today and what a relief it’s been. Thorin offered to babysit – am expecting all kinds of disaster to meet me when I return home – and let Dís and Thora whisk me away to only Mahal knew where, because they sure as hell weren’t telling me. I am suspecting it’s an early birthday gift, especially since Thorin appeared to be in on the whole thing. ‘Because it’s been such a busy summer,’ Thora claimed and Thorin keeps insisting it’s because his sister loves a bit of female company, but I don’t think so.

Anyway, it’s nice and Thora’s remark isn’t completely off the mark either. It has been a busy summer what with trade talks, mining crises and the explosion in two of the forges. And apparently Thora’s idea of fun is to seek out the markets of Dale. I must admit that I was a little sceptical at first. I mean, the queen cannot be seen acting like a giggling school girl now, can she? Apparently she can though and it has been more fun than I believed I would have.

What we did, you ask? Well, you could compare it with Laura, Anna and me going shopping, I suppose. Getting the picture? Afterwards we picnicked on the grass outside the town and had quite a lot of fun making a mess of one another’s hair. Dís and Thora are both aware of my background and you won’t believe how good it is not to watch my tongue all the time, although I might have scarred Thora for life when I told her of modern fashion sense…
All my love,

Kate

P.S. Situation at home on my arrival: chambers looking like a hurricane went through them, Thorin in complete disarray. Thoren spilling ink over the trade agreement with Esgaroth and Thráin sleeping on the edge of the table. What. The. Hell. Happened? I wasn’t gone for that long!

Chapter End Notes

Normally I put letters and the like in italics, but since most of this chapter is a letter and it would not read very pleasantly, I didn’t do that in this chapter. I might do more of these letter things again, but right now I’m out of ideas. Suggestions are always welcome, as are reviews. I love to hear from you!
Erebor Was Lost

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone. This time there’s another outtake from The Journal, an extensive version of Thorin’s flashback in chapter 59. It’s mostly movie-based, but I hope you’ll enjoy it anyway!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Visions appeared on his mind’s eye, memories of the day Erebor had been taken. He recalled the fire, the almost unbearable heat, the fear, the screams and he had to remind himself that getting lost in his memories would do nothing whatsoever in helping him to take back what Smaug had taken.”

The Journal, chapter 59: Homecoming

Later Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór, would sometimes wonder how it was possible that a day that began so good, could end in such misery. It was one of those things he did not have an answer to, as he sat near the fire, staring off into the distance, where the area around Erebor was still burning, the smoke obscuring the Mountain itself from view.

And then to think that the day had started out as an ordinary day. Well, it had not been exactly peaceful. He was woken when a little piece of rock broke from the ceiling and fell onto his stomach with considerable force. That was what it felt like anyway.

‘Ugh!’ he sputtered, cracking one eye open to see what was happening.

He found himself looking at two twinkling blue eyes, framed by messy black hair, that no one had bothered to put a comb through since the owner had gotten out of bed. ‘Morning, brother!’ the little menace said cheerfully.

‘Dís,’ Thorin acknowledged with a groan. ‘What are you doing out so early?’ Precious few the female dwarves may be, but his sister was a wildcat and not even a dwarf in Thorin’s opinion. Where she got so much energy from and so early in the morning too, he’d never know.

Dís shook her head. ‘You’re late,’ she corrected. ‘Ma says you have to inspect the guards with Balin as soon as you’ve eaten breakfast.’

He remembered that, remembered that all too well. And he was in absolutely no mood to inspect any guards, not when his bed still felt so very comfortable. ‘Get off,’ he demanded. Dís was still jumping up and down on him, which did nothing at all to increase his appetite. ‘Why hasn’t someone done your hair yet?’ His little sister was dressed, but her hair was a mess.

‘I was busy,’ she said haughtily. ‘I needed to wake you. And ma says that if you don’t get out, she’ll send Frerin with a bucket of water in next.’ She grinned mischievously. ‘Can you stay in bed
for a little longer?’

Thorin snorted. No, he would not risk that if he could help it. Sometimes he wondered if he was the only one from his siblings who didn’t live to make mischief as a daily job. ‘I don’t think so,’ he said as he worked himself up into a sitting position. ‘Here, let me have a look at that hair.’ He didn’t wait for an answer, just lifted his sister up and turned her around so he could get at that bird’s nest she called hair.

‘Thorin!’ she protested, but he paid her no heed, taking the comb from the bedside table and putting it through her hair. That made her sit still at least. ‘You’re boring,’ she commented. ‘Frerin is more fun.’ She sounded as if she was pouting.

Thorin could feel a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. ‘Frerin is more fun, is he?’ He tied off the simple braid he’d made – anything more complex would be a waste of time, since she would run around all day and undo all his work anyway – and tickled her sides. ‘We’ll see about that.’

Dís let out a high-pitched squeal as she writhed to get away from him. ‘Thorin, let go!’ There was one thing this little lady excelled in, and that was in screaming as if she was a pig led to slaughter, making Frerin pop in.

‘Where are the orcs?’ he demanded, holding his sword up with a grin. ‘Ah, I see! Don’t fret, princess, I’m here to save you!’ With those words he dove on the bed and the whole thing ended up in a wrestling match that lasted at least ten more minutes, the result being Thorin being pinned down, with Frerin holding down his arms and Dís sitting on his legs to prevent him from moving those.

‘I yield! I yield!’ he laughed. ‘Will the little orcs now kindly get off so that I can inspect the guards?’

Frerin frowned and looked at Dís. ‘What do you think, little sister? Shall we let him?’

Dís looked thoughtful. ‘I’ll need to think about it,’ she said in a perfect imitation of their mother.

Thorin took advantage of both their distraction to throw them off and make a run for it, grabbing his clothes and boots on the way out, locking the door to his bedroom behind him to buy himself some time. Frerin would pick the lock within minutes, but he did give himself a head start, which he would need, because he was late. The braids in his hair and beard were still more and less in place and he fixed them as he grabbed breakfast on his way out, chewing on it as he put on his boots.

‘You’re off, then?’ his mother asked. Lady Theyra was a tall dwarf, but Thorin was almost as tall as she was these days.

‘Thanks to those two orcs I’m late enough as it is,’ he nodded. There wasn’t any real malice though. Although he would never admit it out loud, Frerin and Dís provided some well-needed distraction these days now that his responsibilities grew ever heavier. It was good to remember to laugh and his siblings never passed up an opportunity to remind him how to do that.

His mother tugged the braid in his beard softly. ‘Don’t you say that you did not enjoy it, lad.’

Thorin smiled. ‘Well…’

She nudged him in the right direction. ‘Off with you. Try to be home in time.’
‘I’ll try,’ Thorin promised. And try he would, but there were no real promises he could make. That used to be different some years ago, but that was when his grandfather was still paying more attention to the ruling of the kingdom than the contents of the treasury. Thorin tried not to let this bitter him, but he could not deny that King Thórór’s behaviour worried him. It seemed to have gotten worse in the last month again and so ever more duties fell on his father and Thorin. He would not object against those – one day they would all fall to him, he had been told for years – but it was the reason for this that worried him. And there was nothing any of them could do, nothing a healer could give a medicine for. The affliction was of the mind and it frightened the young prince more than he dared to say.

He met up with Balin near the front gate, waiting with the patrol. ‘You’re late, laddie,’ he commented, an indulgent smile on his face.

‘I was set upon by a band of vicious orcs,’ he answered with a straight face. ‘And I had to fight my way out.’ He cast a look around, noticing that they were still missing one other dwarf. ‘Won’t the king be joining us?’ A shiver went down his spine; he had a very good idea of the answer already, but he needed the answer.

Balin indeed looked uncomfortable. ‘The king is otherwise occupied,’ he replied tactfully. Thorin quashed the thought immediately though. His grandfather was still the king and as such he was entitled to respect. He was not showing that by agreeing with Balin in public. And the less news of the seriousness of the situation seeped through to the outside world, the better it would be for everyone involved.

‘Then we will go without him,’ Thorin decided. That was the only thing to be done now. If he continued as normal, then he could maybe even fool himself that everything was normal, at least until he would see his grandfather again. Then he would know that things were not normal. He was at least grateful that his grandmother wasn’t here to see it. He was sure it would have broken her heart to see it. Come to think of it, his grandfather’s affliction seemed to have begun four years previous, shortly after her death. He was loath to dismiss that as mere coincidence.

Balin nodded. The patrol made ready to go, when a guard descended the stairs in a hurry. ‘My lord,’ he said, bowing to Thorin. ‘There is a storm coming from the north.’

Thorin frowned. Storms were not unusual in this area, but it was unusual that a guard made mention of it. After all, the Mountain had weathered many storms and had never even been damaged in one. It was the way of mountains: they endured.

‘Why are you mentioning this?’ Thorin asked sternly. ‘If the gate needs closing, you can see to that.’

The dwarf opposite him, only a year or two older than the prince, looked fairly nervous. ‘There is something wrong, my lord,’ he said. ‘The wind is coming from the north, but it is as hot as the wind blowing from the deserts in high summer.’

Thorin could not explain why he felt so uncomfortable at hearing that, but it was a fact that hot winds did not come from the north. The winds coming from the north were cold and icy, never even near warm. Something was wrong now that they were.

He took the chairs two at a time as he made his way to the top of the front gate, the guards at his heels. And the closer he came to the top of the staircase, the warmer the air became. It was a dry kind of heat, the kind one felt when there was a fire nearby. The sounds of the wind were drowning out most of the other noises outside. And even though it was hot here, a cold shiver nonetheless
found its way down Thorin’s spine again. He knew what this was.

In the back of his head a memory stirred of days spent in the library, being taught history by his teachers. The old dwarf who was tasked with teaching him had told of the expedition to the Grey Mountains and how it had failed because of the dragons that had driven the dwarves out. He vividly recalled the tales old Vurin told then. ‘First, my lad, there was always a hot, dry wind to announce their coming,’ he had said when Thorin had asked him how his ancestors had escaped the beasts, because surely there was no possibility of escape once they came. ‘That was how they knew when to run.’

A hot, dry wind was blowing now and from the direction where there still lived dragons. It was commonly known that the Grey Mountains were still infested with the foul breed, but it was also common knowledge that they never ventured south, not this far south. Had one of those now done so?

He turned back to Balin. If his suspicion was right, there was no time to lose. If he was wrong, he would be making a fool out of himself, but that was a risk he would have to take. ‘Sound the alarm,’ he ordered. ‘Call out the guard. And do it now.’ The longer this unnatural feeling storm went on, the more he became convinced that he was not wrong, even though he knew he wanted to be.

But Balin knew too. He was rather bookish in his spare time, knew their history by heart. But Thorin could see that he did not want to believe it, not yet. ‘What is it?’

The question may have been rhetorical, but Thorin answered it all the same. ‘Dragon.’ He shouted that warning to the inside of the Mountain too. Maybe he would be made out as a fool when it did turn out this was just an unusual storm, but that was a risk he was willing to take, because it was much better than the alternative.

It was as if his call summoned the beast. A burning pine was thrown into their line of sight and he all but froze into place. He had been right. Maker be good, he had been right.

But there was no time to freeze into place, not now, not when the dragon breathed fire on the battlements and the dwarves manning it. Even despite his warning, many were taken by surprise, burned to cinders before they could even begin to run.

Thorin thanked his quick reflexes for his next action of roughly grabbing Balin and hiding behind a large column as the sea of fire emerging from the beast’s mouth fell all around them. The air was hot, unbearably hot and the stench of burning flesh and hair made the dwarf prince want to throw up on the spot.

And the fire seemed to last forever, making it hard to breathe, hard to think. But eventually it did stop and he let go of his friend. Both of them were panting, trying to process what had happened, burned to cindes before they could even begin to run.

The dragon fire had removed all other traces of their existence. No remains were left.

Balin walked up the battlements. ‘Thorin, it’s gone! It’s gone, laddie.’ A relieved smile graced his face.

Thorin remembered his lessons and he did not smile. ‘But it will be back before long,’ he answered.

The next half hour passed in something of a blur for the dwarf prince. Guards told him the
firedrake had made for Dale and was dealing out death there as they were speaking, but in Thorin’s mind there was hardly time to think of anything but the defence of his own kingdom. He felt for the people of that city, but he also knew there was nothing he could do for them, nothing at all. And he had his own people to think of. Their own doom was fast approaching, for that beast would not find what he was surely looking for in Dale.

The front gate had been closed and Thorin’s own father had now appeared to take some of the responsibilities. Thorin was glad of it, even as he could not help but notice that the king himself was still nowhere in sight. But that too would have to wait until this was all over.

Deep down inside he feared the outcome of this fight. History had taught him a good few lessons about dragons and he knew they were strong, determined and vicious. The dwarves that had settled in the Grey Mountains did not really have any chance to defend themselves. The dragons were too strong for them, too big.

But they did stand a better chance, he told himself. Erebor was a strong kingdom, with defences that had yet to be overcome. The front gate took ten dwarves to even move if it was not locked and bolted the way it was now. They did stand a chance. Not all was lost just yet. And if he had any say in the matter, it would never be lost. This kingdom, like the mountains, had been made to endure.

‘Ready, lad?’ a voice came from his right as he marched up to the head of the column.

The dwarf looked to his right to see Frár, one of his father’s personal guards. He was getting older, but he was the kindest soul Thorin had ever met. When Frerin and he had still been very small he’d let the two of them climb on his knees and back and use him for a horse. They could get away with nearly everything. As they grew up, Frár was the one they sparred with in training, who gave them advice, even though they weren’t always looking for it. Now, it was a reassuring thought to have him with him.

He nodded, even though it was a lie. How could anyone ever be ready for something like this?

But ready or not, time had run out. The sound of a furious dragon pounding at the door made Thorin grip his spear tighter. Even though it had been made by dwarves and would therefore be stronger than any manmade weapon, it felt like a toy in his hand, something that would hardly be any use against a firedrake as big as the one he had seen.

One minute. One minute was all it took for the great lizard to make the door fly off its hinges and then there was no more time to think. The beast descended on them in a rain of fire. Thorin ducked and felt the heat passing just overhead, indicating that he had ducked only just in time. He looked up, only to see the dragon pass over him. And for a moment there he feared he would soon find himself crushed under its paws, but they passed over him, deeper and deeper into the Mountain.

It was then that he realised that they did not stand a chance. How could they stand against such a monster? It walked over them, burned them, flung them out of its way as if they were nothing more than annoying insects. The few spears that did come into contact with the dragon bounced right off the scales. The beast did not even seem to feel them. In that moment Thorin, son of Thráin, was afraid.

‘Run! Get out of here!’ he bellowed. He would rather be taken for a coward than that he would have them all lose their lives here today. It was part of the strategy lessons his grandfather had tried to impart on him. Better to live and fight another day than to lose lives in a battle that you cannot win, he had said and he was right. And this was such a battle. Could they ever win against a monster such as this one?
Only when he thought of his grandfather, he realised that the king had not been seen all morning. And Thorin knew beyond the shadow of a doubt where he was. It was also the same place the dragon would be headed for. Maker be good.

‘Frár, Turi, get them out of here, now!’ he bellowed at the two closest moving warriors he could see, trying not to look at the warriors that were not moving for fear of recognising them. And he could not allow anything to cripple him now. Grief and mourning would not be until all was said and done. There simply was no time.

Frár was shouting something, but Thorin could not make out the words over the noise in the halls. There were screams and dragon’s roaring. The smell of burning flesh was invading his nostrils, making the dwarf prince sick to his stomach, but he pressed on, shouting at his people to run as he passed them. How many heard him and obeyed his command he would never know. Thorin feared that there were less of them than he had hoped.

Later he may wonder why he was not afraid in that moment, and he might decide that there were more important things to be felt. Panic, aye, there was that, but there was determination also and a sense of duty that had been instilled in him ever since he was a boy. Anger was more present, boiling in his blood, fuelling his every step. Furious he was. Maybe it was unnatural, especially when the rest of his people seemed to have descended into chaos, making for the front gate as fast as they could, while he was running in the opposite direction.

But none of that mattered now. Just a little distance ahead of him he could see king Thrór’s head, making for the treasury, clutching something to his chest.

‘Grandfather, no!’ Thorin yelled. He had lost track of where the dragon was some time ago, but he was bound to be somewhere close. The echoing in the halls and the many screams made it difficult to pinpoint where the dragon’s roaring came from. But he remembered Vurin’s lessons all too well. ‘Gold, my lad. Dragons will always crave gold more fiercely than we crave air to breathe.’

He forced himself to run faster, grateful for all those times Frár had made him run around the training grounds until he was sure he would collapse in exhaustion. It paid off now. The roars of the dragon were intensifying in volume and Thorin knew that his assessment of where the beast was headed had been correct.

He ran into the treasury only feet behind his grandfather and king, who was in the process of kneeling on the stones, as if he was looking for something. The madness must have a firm grip on his mind to make him disregard his own life in such a careless way. The piles of gold were thrown all across the room, moving like waves on the river, making it all too clear that there was something big and dangerous behind it. For the first time since this ordeal had begun, Thorin felt a twinge of fear.

‘Get out of here!’ he bellowed at the king, grabbing him like a bag of flour and dragging him out of the treasury with him. With his free hand he pointed his sword in the direction of the beast. It would not do anything to save his life should the drake see him, but it made him feel a little more secure, if only a little.

He did feel better once they were back in the main hall and he had kicked the door to the treasure room firmly shot. It would do nothing to save them, but hopefully it would buy them a little time.

And he would need the time. Before now, his grandfather had been too much in shock to protest the treatment, but now he had come to his senses and he fought Thorin off easily. King Thrór had the advantage of age and experience over his grandson and Thorin found himself knocked to the ground forcefully. ‘What are you doing?’ he hissed. The madness burned in his eyes and for just a
moment the dragon seemed wholly unimportant in comparison with the madness that had taken hold of the King under the Mountain. ‘You were trying to steal from me, weren’t you? You won’t get it, you hear me?’

Thorin tasted blood, but he could not care. He rose to his feet and, praying that the Maker would forgive him for this, hit his grandfather across the face. ‘Grandfather, please!’ Thorin was not the kind of dwarf who pleaded with others, but now he did, and almost without thinking.

The gleam of madness disappeared, sanity returned and for a moment the King under the Mountain looked utterly shocked and appalled, and not by his grandson. ‘My lad…’ His voice trailed off as he saw who it was that he was talking to.

‘We need to get out of here,’ Thorin merely said. ‘The Mountain is lost.’ As much as it pained him to even think it, this was the truth. The consequences of it had to wait until later, until they were far away from the danger the dragon posed. Later.

King Thrór did not waste any words on the matter. He merely nodded and followed Thorin out of Erebor. The dwarf prince tried and failed not to look at the corpses that littered the stones. He did not give himself the time to stop and look at faces; even without looking he knew that there would be people he knew and cared for amongst them. He did not even know what had become of his own family.

The light of the sun, no matter how obscured by the smoke that rose up from the burning fields, was one of the most welcome sights he had ever beheld. It was a false sense of safety, he knew, but it was something. And with relief he noted his father standing close by, overseeing the evacuation of Erebor, although a small voice in the back of Thorin’s head told him it was more of a flight than an evacuation. He kept that thought to himself.

The line of Durin was not given to expressing emotions, but Thorin’s father looked relieved when he saw the king and his own son.

‘Get him out of here,’ Thorin muttered.

The small nod Thráin gave in response to that told Thorin that he understood. The madness was a powerful thing, and unpredictable. King Thrór may have walked out of Erebor of his own volition, but there was no telling if he would not rush back the next minute.

As for Thorin himself, his mind was in chaos, filled with thoughts of both rage and despair. He had a fierce wish to rush back in to fight the monster by himself, if only to do something, anything at all, but his duty to his people had to come first and Thorin knew that. It had been taught to him ever since he was a child. And with his grandfather not paying much attention to his duties and his father too preoccupied getting Thrór out, that duty fell to Thorin. There were still so many dwarves inside the Mountain and so few outside. He had to go back and make sure as many as possible would make it to safety, wherever that was. That was his duty as prince after all.

And it was a heavy one, one he was afraid he would be too young to shoulder, but there simply was no time to dwell on such thoughts and so he ran back, sword in hand, for whatever good it may do him. He had spotted Dís with a group of children, her eyes wide with fear. She was still trying to be the strong princess though, grown up before her time. Gone was the mischievous lass who had wrestled with him only this morning. But at least she was alive and that was what counted. Except for his brother and his mother, his family at the very least had been accounted for.

He ran into Frerin when he was near the gate. His younger brother by five years had his hair singed a bit, suggesting he had come quite a bit closer to the firedrake than he should have been. But he
appeared to be otherwise uninjured and his eyes were sparking with righteous rage instead of with mirth, as they usually did. It was a frightening change in his younger sibling, but Thorin did not allow himself to dwell on that either.

‘How many are still inside?’ he had demanded.

Frerin shook his head. ‘I do not know,’ he replied. ‘Too many.’

He did not allow himself to think of the dangers as he made his decision. ‘Then we will go back and see that as many as possible are evacuated.’ He had been on his way to do that anyway. The difference was that he now involved Frerin in it as well.

Frerin did not protest. Instead he followed Thorin without question, as he’d always done since the day he had learned to walk. But it was easier said than done, for they were the only two even trying to go back. Panic had broken out among the people and they were running for their lives, some of them with only the clothes they wore, others clutching as many valuables as they had been able to grasp to their chests. Thorin found he despised them, to think of wealth when so many needed those arms to lean on.

Frerin had followed his gaze and spat on the ground. ‘They disgust me,’ he muttered under his breath. It was very unlike him to talk like that. Frerin had always been the happy one, the careless one. He’d had all the privileges of being a prince of Durin’s line, whilst having to bear none of the burdens that came with being the heir to the throne. Thorin sometimes envied him for that, but now he only regretted that his brother had needed to change so drastically in so short a time.

Thorin did not reply. There was nothing he could say that could make this any less horrible and he had a task to be done. They were getting ever closer to the main gate and he could already see his mother standing there, ushering people through it with a calm that was in sharp contrast with the panic Thorin could see on so many other faces. Once again he admired her strength of mind and wished he had but a fraction of it. No matter how great the crisis, she always kept a clear head and balanced his father’s sometimes fiery temper. They were a good match and right now her calm composure was a gift from Mahal himself. Even though she must know there was a dragon lurking close by, she never wavered and even when the most horrible sounds were heard from within, she never left her place. He had to admire her for that.

‘How many are still in there?’ he asked as he joined her.

Her reply was the same as Frerin’s had been. ‘Too many, my son.’ She may sound as if she was in complete control, but Thorin was not easily fooled. He heard the concern and the helplessness he himself experienced.

‘I will try to find more men to help you,’ he promised, even when he doubted how many he would be able to find that would be brave enough to come back with him. Dwarves were not known for cowardice, but to go up against a dragon would be a fool’s errand, a suicide mission.

She merely nodded, not pointing out that his plan would never work. ‘Good,’ she said. ‘Frerin, help Darin here.’ She pointed at a young warrior who was barely able to remain on his own two feet. There was blood trickling down his forehead and into his eyes. On his own he would never be able to make it out of the Mountain to safety. ‘Thorin, you take Frár out.’

Frár had collapsed next to the gate, sporting bad burns and bleeding wounds. He had been in the thick of it and although Thorin did not say it, it was nothing short of a miracle that he was still drawing breath. And he had only been beside Thorin when the dragon had descended on them like a hungry wolf on defenceless sheep. Such a small distance between safety and danger.
‘Put your arm around my neck,’ he ordered, trying to haul the elderly guard to his feet. ‘Come, Frár, we can yet make it out.’ He was not entirely sure if his old friend was even entirely conscious, but he at least did what he was told with some help of his protégé. Otherwise he gave no sign of being aware of anything anymore. Thorin was forced to carry his entire weight as he stood up, a burden just as crushing as the weight of duty. He turned back to his mother. ‘I will be back as quick as I can.’

A few young children were clinging to her skirts, too scared to go anywhere without someone there to hold their hands, frozen into place, and Thorin made the mental promise to guide them to safety the moment he came back. The little ones were scared out of their depth, eyes wide and faces pale. Some were crying. ‘Will you?’ a boy asked with a tremor in his voice.

Thorin nodded, conjuring up the most reassuring smile he could manage under the given circumstances. ‘I will,’ he said. ‘I will be back before you know it.’

It was a promise he ended up breaking, but not for lack of trying. He was forcing Frár on as fast as he could, all but carrying him over the road, but it wasn’t fast enough. It was only half a minute after he had taken his leave of the small group at the gate that he heard it, the hurricane-like noise and the dragon’s furious roar.

He swivelled around and found his mother’s eyes, calm, but now with a hint of fear in them. Her arms were wrapped around the children near her. It was the last he ever saw of her. The next moment she disappeared in the dragon’s fire and when the flame at long last disappeared, there was no one there anymore. The desperate cry had escaped his lips unchecked and he could feel tears mingling with the sweat that was trickling down his face already. Maybe it was only then that it truly started to dawn on him what they had lost, only now that he had lost someone he held dear. The pain was worse than anything he had ever felt before, but he had to force his grief back for the sake of his people and with the elves appearing on the horizon, he could at least begin to hope that they were not alone in their hour of need.

His hopes had vanished as soon as they had appeared when Thranduil turned his back on his allies and left the dwarves to fend for themselves. Thorin could see the elf’s face as he looked down on the disaster unfolding before his very eyes. From such a distance it was difficult to make out what expression was on his face, but he seemed unmoved by the dwarves’ plight, an idea that was strengthened when he turned around and commanded his troops to turn back. As they disappeared out of sight, they took Thorin’s last hope with them.

As it was, they didn’t make it far before they had to stop so that they could allow their wounded to rest. And there were too many of them. Too many were wounded, but there were hardly any medicines, or healers for that matter. There had been no time to fetch any supplies before they had run for their very lives. The elves could have aided them in that at least, even if they did not dare to risk their lives against a firedrake. Now they were left to themselves.

It proved to be Frár’s death. He was a fighter and he clung to life with a stubbornness that was their race’s most prominent characteristic, but his mind was not strong enough to make his heart continue to beat when the body had been injured so much. He passed on just before the last rays of sunlight disappeared behind the horizon, fighting till his very last breath.

Thorin left the healers then. It was just one more death on top of all the people they had already lost, but it was the last straw, he supposed. It was just too much. He made his way to a cooking fire that seemed abandoned nearby. How strange that the very thing that had destroyed their home and had killed so many of his people was necessary to keep them from freezing to death. It was irony if ever he heard it.
Heavy footsteps drew his attention away from the campfire. Frerin was approaching, face still stained with blood and ash, beard and clothes torn. He was carrying Dís, who was clinging to him as if her very life depended on it, shoulders shaking as if she were crying. She was crying, Thorin knew, crying because her whole world had been turned upside down and she did not truly understand yet why they were still out after dark.

Frerin looked dishevelled. There was no other word for it. Thorin had grown used to having a younger brother who was full of mischief, sparkling eyes and quick smiles. Tonight, there was none of that. There was only a seriousness that Thorin was starting to associate with their father more and more. ‘She doesn’t have a coat,’ he said. ‘And she’s cold.’ And I don’t know what to do. Those words were unspoken, but Thorin heard them all the same and they broke his heart.

Their father was too busy, as was their grandfather, and their mother was no more. And Frerin had come to him, so he held out his arms and took his sister from his brother, tucking her under his cloak. She was small enough to fit in there, so she could warm herself. It was only now that he noticed that her feet were bare. Yes, Dís would do that. She was a wild child, who preferred to run around the Mountain without any boots on. The dragon must have interrupted her game.

She grabbed his tunic and buried her face against his chest. ‘I want to go home, Thorin. Why can’t we go home?’

He wished there was something reassuring he could say to her, but there was nothing forthcoming. That had always been his mother’s job. ‘Because we don’t have a home anymore,’ he replied with heavy heart. He stared into the darkness, seeing his home still burning, with flames and smoke alike rising up to the night sky, obscuring the moon. Erebor was lost and so, he knew, were they.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked it. Please review? I’d love to hear what you think!
Hello, dear readers. This chapter is the answer to the request Ifbookswerefood-I’dbefat on FF.net made months ago, to have a bit more on Kate and her father. It took me a long time writing and it’s quite possibly the hardest thing I’ve ever written. Nevertheless, I hope you’ll enjoy it.

So, what about your parents? Balin asked at some time. Are they still alive?

‘Yes, although I don’t really see my father anymore,’ she replied, determined not to waste too many words on that subject. The less said about John Andrews, the better. ‘I used to live with my mother until two years ago. Now I’ve got a place of my own, sharing it with a close friend, but I still see her a lot.’

At this, people frowned. Your parents don’t live together? Glóin asked.

Divorce must not be a common thing around here, she observed. ‘No, not anymore,’ she replied truthfully. ‘My dad’s a jerk. He cheated on my mother a lot, so in the end she kicked him out. That was about ten years ago. I haven’t really seen him much since.’ She shrugged. ‘That’s all there is to it, really. No big deal.’ Of course, it was a big deal. For years she had struggled with her anger and the never answered question of how her dad had been capable of doing that to them. But her anger had apparently failed to affect him and in the end he had all but disappeared off the radar altogether. As a matter of fact she didn’t even know where he lived these days and with a shock she realised that she could no longer really care about it either.

The Journal, Chapter 7: Arguments

Kate Andrews doesn’t really know when she first noticed that something is not as it should be. When you are a child, you generally don’t care too much about any troubles your parents may have as long as they don’t intercede with your life. She is hardly an exception to that rule.

And she loves her parents. She loves her mother’s gentle laugh and her cookies. She loves her father as well, loves his deep chuckles and his bear-like hugs, the ones she gets when she stays up late to see him come home from work. She knows he loves it when she does that and so she tries to make a habit of it, even if Jacko can’t seem to be bothered about welcoming their father home. She rolls her eyes at him and is snappy with him for a few days, but staying angry with her twin is quite a challenge and so she gives up after three days, when she needs someone to play with. Her life is a carefree one, a happy one, even if it takes another ten years for her to fully realise just how lucky she is to have such a happy childhood. She only realises it when it all starts to fall apart.

Only then can she see that the trouble has begun much earlier. Her mother tries to keep it from
them and she’s doing a good job of it too. Her father reassures her frequently that all is well and so why would she think anything is amiss? As long as she gets to crawl onto his lap in the evenings and he tells her a story, what could possibly be wrong?

She reckons the first cracks start to show when she’s about six years old. Well, they may have been there longer, but she’s never paying any attention to them. She ignores the fact that her father seems to be out all hours. He’s working hard, her mother tells her, and she has no reason to believe it’s otherwise.

Of course, perfection doesn’t last forever. It’s the weekend and Kate would love nothing better than to play outside and play football with Jacko and a few kids who live nearby. The weather interferes with her plans; it’s pouring and her mother’s forbidden her from stepping as much as a toe over the threshold on pain of not getting dessert. Kate and Jacko briefly contemplate whether foregoing ice-cream is worth the risk, but in the end they decide that it’s not. Anyway, there’ll be another day of weekend left, and they might get another shot tomorrow.

‘So, what shall we do?’ she ponders. They’re sitting in the windowsill of Jacko’s bedroom, sending glares at the deluge outside that’s preventing them from doing what they’d like to do best. Kate’s extremely bored and she really doesn’t feel like playing any game at all, but if their mother catches them doing nothing, she’ll have them pass the time by doing chores for her and that is something Kate hates even more than being bored.

Jacko is equally non-enthusiastic. He has this telling pout that gives him away. ‘We could always play hide and seek,’ he offers, apparently incapable of thinking up something better.

‘Ugh,’ is her commentary.

Her twin looks at her. ‘Do you have better ideas?’ he throws back.

Kate would be forced to admit that she hasn’t, but admitting that Jack has a point is something she doesn’t do as a rule. ‘Any idea is better than hide and seek.’ She speaks the name of the game as if it something that falls into the same category as chores, school and grown-up visitors.

‘Mum will have us do chores if we don’t play,’ Jacko points out. Only in hindsight will she realise that a six year old should never be this shrewd, but this is Jacko she’s talking about and she’s used to it from him, even if that doesn’t mean she has to like it. ‘You can seek?’ He knows she likes that better than hiding; she never knows where to go and most of her hiding places of choice are so dusty that her sneezing gives her away almost every time.

She rolls her eyes, knowing full well that there is no real point in arguing. ‘Fine,’ she says with emphasis. She may be unable to come up with a really good alternative, but she’ll have him know that this one certainly does not have her full approval. ‘One, two, three…’ She’s rather proud of her ability to count up to a hundred, so she’ll demonstrate it. Jacko still counts in units of ten – ten times counting to ten is his preferred method with this game, although Kate strongly suspects him of cheating – and she’s beaten him at this. It has taken a few long walks with her dad to perfect it. They counted every step they took, counting out loud in unison. By the end she was out of breath and her head was reeling, but she has never felt that proud before.

Jacko’s out of the room before she’s counted to five, a little speed devil if ever there was one, their
mother tends to say. Well, if he’s entitled to run fast, she’s got a right to count fast. She makes it up to a hundred in approximately fifty seconds and then yells at no one in particular: ‘Coming!’

And she thinks she knows exactly where to go. For all his cleverness, Jacko is still a creature of habit and there are only so many places he can be. Either he’s hiding under the couch in the living room, in their parents’ wardrobe or behind the pile of boxes in the attic. Their parents’ bedroom is closest, so that is where she’ll go first.

To her surprise he isn’t even hiding. Instead he stands in the middle of the room, holding something in his hands with an expression of mild alarm on his face.

‘Found you!’ Kate calls out in a singsong voice, feeling rather pleased with finding him so soon. ‘What have you got?’

Jacko holds out his hands so that Kate gets to take a look at what’s in them. It’s a small box with a very beautiful necklace in it. ‘It fell out of dad’s jacket and I can’t get it to close again.’

The explanation makes sense. Even though this is one of Jacko’s favourite hiding places, they’re not supposed to actually be here and they’re certainly not supposed to go through their parents’ things. Mum’ll give them a good scolding if she finds out.

‘Give here,’ she demands. ‘I’ll do it. What jacket was it?’

Jacko points at the black one that’s nearest after he’s given her the box. ‘Do you think it’s a present for mum?’ he asks.

Kate merely rolls her eyes. ‘What else would it be?’ she retorts. Honestly, boys! Surely even Jacko would know that this is not the kind of thing her father himself would wear? She frowns as the box refuses to close as stubbornly as it did for Jacko. This is something she does not want her mother to know they found. It’s rude to open someone else’s presents, she’s been told. And it would spoil the surprise. But the fact remains that the box doesn’t do as she wants it to, and in the end she just shoves the thing back into the pocket of the jacket, frustrated with it all.

‘What are you doing?’ Jacko asks in shock. ‘He’ll find out.’

‘He won’t be mad,’ Kate says confidently. She’s daddy’s little girl; he is never angry with her. ‘Not if I tell him. Mum won’t find out.’

‘You sure?’ Jacko asks, but only because that’s expected of him. The relief is written all over his face.

Kate doesn’t deem that worthy of a reply and so she rolls her eyes again. She’s seen her mother do that and finds it to be a good method of dealing with stupid questions herself.

And she keeps word. Her mother is doing the dishes with Jacko and Kate uses the opportunity to monopolise the spot on the sofa next to her father. He’s watching the news, something that Kate really can’t be bothered to find interesting, so now would be the perfect moment to talk. ‘Dad?’

‘Yes, sweetheart?’ The rumble comes from deep inside his chest, she can feel it when she lays her head on it.

‘We found your present,’ she whispers conspiratorially in his ear. When that doesn’t trigger a reply right away, she adds: ‘The necklace in your pocket.’ That way he’ll know what she’s talking about. ‘It’s for mum, isn’t it?’
Her father stiffens and for a moment there Kate fears she has found a way to anger him after all, but then it’s gone and he says: ‘Of course it is, little Katie. But you can’t tell her.’

‘Of course,’ Kate agrees. ‘Or it wouldn’t be a surprise.’ Everyone knows that.

She feels more than she sees that he nods; she’s laid her head on his chest, because it does make for a good pillow and she’s getting a bit sleepy. ‘That’s right,’ her father says. ‘It’s our little secret.’

Kate snuggles closer against him and gives a nod of her own. ‘Our little secret,’ she confirms.

If she would have been a slightly more suspicious soul, she may have noticed that she never sees her mother wear the necklace, but she doesn’t. And really, she has more interesting things to worry about. The matter is closed, Jacko and she won’t get their ears blistered and life goes on. She doesn’t give the necklace as much as a thought after that day.

It doesn’t mean that all is well and soon even she can’t deny that. Her father is working long days and often comes home after she has gone to bed. Oftens she tries to stay awake until he’s back, so that she can go down and say goodnight; it seems important to do that somehow. She can’t do it every night and sometimes she falls asleep before she hears the tell-tale sign of the front door opening – she’s always furious with herself for that afterwards – but tonight she’s been careful and she smiles to herself when she hears the door. She did it. Now she only has to wait another ten minutes to give him time to take off his coat and shoes and greet her mother. Then she can go down. It’s like a ritual that has been in place for years. Her mother tells her that ten years is too old to do that, but her father still likes it and that is the opinion that matters to Kate.

But tonight, instead of silence, there’s shouting. She hears it when she stands on top of the stairs and means to go down for the nightly ritual.

‘You don’t understand a thing of it!’ That’s her father and he’s positively roaring, effectively freezing Kate into place mid-motion, foot dangling over the stair, where she had meant to put it.

‘I understand it perfectly!’ Her mother easily matches her father for volume, something Kate had not expected at all; her mother always sounds so gentle. This, this is infinitely wrong.

The shouting continues, but she can’t make out all the words. Only when the anger downstairs reaches a crescendo she hears bits and pieces.

‘Other women, John!’ her mother screeches. ‘Did you honestly think you could keep that from me? How could you?’

‘Maybe I was fed up with all this banshee’s wailing!’

Kate doesn’t know what a banshee is, and neither does she know what her parents are even talking about, but all of a sudden it feels as if the world as she knows it has come to an untimely and abrupt end. Without knowing why exactly, she turns back and returns to her room. She is unable to say how long she has been standing there, but her feet are cold. That night, she cries herself to sleep. Her feet remain icy all night long.
It is not the end.

That is a realisation Kate Andrews comes to before long. She no longer goes downstairs late at night to say goodnight. There’s a lot of shouting a lot of the time, ever more. And then there are nights her father isn’t even there. What use would it be waiting up then? She tells herself she’s too old for it anyways, so it doesn’t matter.

But it does. Of course it does. She feels it in the air, the atmosphere in living room and kitchen. It’s cold. It’s not a physical cold, but it feels like winter, all ice and harshness and chill. It’s never agreed, but for some reason it isn’t talked about. Still, all of them know, even Jacko, whose intuition has never been very well developed. And it affects them all. Her mother grows silent and at some point Kate has trouble remembering what her laugh – the real, happy one, not the one she so obviously fakes – sounds like. Jacko is stubborn and uncooperative. He has bouts of silence and even Kate doesn’t get through to him, even when they used to share everything, as siblings should in her opinion.

Her father is the worst. She still tries to climb next to him onto the sofa when he’s watching the news and she’s done her homework, but it’s always ‘not tonight’ or ‘I’m tired, Kate.’ Katie, the childhood endearment he so often used, is mentioned less and less.

One night, she’s had enough of the dance, of treading on eggshells and letting her father do what he is doing. It isn’t right. She’s twelve now and even though she still hasn’t got the full picture, she knows quite enough to realise that her parents’ marriage is falling apart and that the reason for this is that her father has relationships with another woman, or women, she doesn’t know. By now she has pieced together enough to know that “working late” or “seeing a client” is just a very flimsy excuse for going to see a female who is not Helen Andrews.

‘You’re lying.’ The words are out of her mouth before she can stop herself. It’s a Tuesday night and they’ve finished dinner in an awkwardness that has Kate wishing for an immediate escape route. Apparently the same is true for her father, who’s announced that he’s going to see a client. It triggers something in Kate and she speaks her mind before she can check herself.

She’s as shocked by her boldness as her parents and brother are. She supresses the urge to clasp her hands in front of her mouth and she’s torn between wanting to apologise and standing her ground. She’s only longing for how things used to be, still hoping and praying that they one day will go back to how things were, deep down knowing that might never happen. It’s making her stomach feel like she’s swallowed poison and she’s burning from the inside out, but now there’s anger as well and to her surprise it’s her father this anger’s directed against.

‘You’re not going to see a client,’ she states when the silence drags on and on. She had planned an apology, but that is not what comes out. ‘You’re going to see another woman. And it’s not right.’ It’s more than not right, but she doesn’t have the words for it. She feels that this issue is so much bigger than she with her mere twelve years can understand. And for some reason it only makes her feel frustrated and therefore angrier.

‘It’s not true,’ her father says.

The lie is so obvious that Kate doesn’t believe it for even a second. Her mother is frantically signing at her to back off, but Kate ignores her. She doesn’t know where the anger comes from, but it’s there and it’s strong and suddenly it’s uncontrollable. Maybe it’s the result of having been on the side-lines for so long and her own helplessness to do something, but she doesn’t care either.
‘You’re lying,’ she repeats. It’s not the best case she’s ever made, but she is sure she has truth on her side. Truth always wins out, doesn’t it? ‘We all know it.’ That is the truth, even if it has never been spoken.

Her father glowers. ‘What do you know about these things?’ His voice is harsh and Kate inwardly cringes. It is the tone of voice she recognises from the shouting he does at her mother when both thinks she is asleep. ‘You are only a foolish child!’

It hurts. That is the only word for it. It hurts. It is as if she has been kicked in the guts and she finds it hard to breathe. She wants to say that she is his little girl, little Katie, not just a foolish child. He has never spoken to her like this and it hurts. Her vision goes a bit blurry. ‘Don’t go.’ She’s pleading, but her words fall on deaf ears. Even when she cries, he leaves all the same.

It goes from bad to worse after that. She doesn’t always cry anymore, but the anger grows and intensifies. So do her outbursts. Her father gives as good as he gets and it rapidly turns into fighting, something that shocks Kate herself as much as it shocks her father. And she hates it. This is not how it is supposed to be. She wants things to go back to how they were. She wants to crawl up on his lap and pretend none of this ever happened. That would be her happy ending.

Instead she finds herself shouting at him time and again, all but demanding that he stays home and fixes whatever it is that he has begun. He refuses to and that is what makes her feel so powerless. Things are falling apart and there’s nothing she can do to stop it from happening.

It eventually explodes. Later she’ll think that it was only a matter of time, but that moment she only feels as if someone has died. And something has died. Her life as she’s known it has died. Nothing is ever going to be the same.

Her mother and father have started to shout again, more and more as time drags on. Kate hates it and throws herself at her homework to have something to focus on between sleeping, school and the fights that are rapidly becoming commonplace in their home. Jacko hates it too, and locks himself in his room with music blaring from the speakers. His results at school are poorly, even as Kate’s take flight. But it’s escapism for both of them, a way of keeping their sanity under circumstances that by all rights should have them weeping most hours of the day, if not all hours. Of course she realises the underlying motives much later only. At the time she feels just powerless and so very, very angry most of the time.

When the end comes eventually, it almost comes unexpected. It’s a few weeks before her fourteenth birthday, it’s summer and she’s spent the afternoon with Laura and Anna, two of her best friends, at the local swimming pool, swimming, sun-bathing and laughing. For the first time in weeks she feels as if not all is as gloomy as she thought. A weight has been lifted off her shoulders, the clouds chased away by an extensive laughter therapy provided by her friends. She’s actually whistling a song when she comes home, hopeful again that things can straighten themselves out as long as days like this keep on existing.

She is reminded of just how foolish this notion is when she comes home and finds the hall full with bags and suitcases. She barely has the chance to wonder what this all is about when she notices that her father is standing between them, holding one bag in his hand.
It hits Kate with all the force of a lightning bolt. ‘Where are you going?’ she demands, wariness and fear in equal measure colouring her voice.

‘I’m going to live somewhere else.’ The words sound wooden and formal, well-rehearsed too, and Kate wonders how long he’s practised them. She is not sure that she wants to know. ‘Things don’t work anymore, Katie. This is the best for all of us.’

Kate doesn’t know if it is because she has taken so many emotional blows already or that it means something else, but she stands there for a moment, unable to feel anything. Well, it feels as if the world has just come to an end, but that doesn’t really count, she tells herself. The world hasn’t ended and the idea is both irrational and foolish.

Then the anger surfaces and that is something she can do something with. ‘You’re leaving?’ She all but growls the words. There are tears forming in her eyes, but she tries to ignore them. She’s angry, she tells herself, not sad.

Her father nods. ‘It’s for the best,’ he repeats. ‘This can’t go on. It doesn’t work anymore.’

‘It doesn’t work anymore because you’re sleeping with other women than mum!’ She doesn’t know why she shouts that at a volume loud enough that all the neighbours can hear, but she does. ‘You’re the reason this isn’t working anymore and now you’re running out on us!’

‘Your mother has sent me away,’ he corrects.

*Good for you.* Kate is shocked at her own thoughts and the intensity of them. She feels torn in half, between wanting to kick him out herself, so that they would be rid of the endless fighting and the atmosphere it causes, and wanting him to stay. Because deep down inside she is still that little girl who wants to crawl onto the sofa next to him and be his little Katie, little daddy’s girl.

‘But you’re not exactly protesting now, are you?’ She’s verbally stronger than she was now and she can hold her own in an argument. Almost two years of doing this on at least a weekly basis has given her more than sufficient experience in that field. ‘If you had been, you wouldn’t find it so easy to abandon us!’

Something has gotten through to him and he looks at her in shock. ‘That’s not true!’

Kate takes that for all that it’s worth. ‘Coward!’ she screeches, knowing she sounds exactly like the banshee he compared her mother with once. ‘Coward!’ She storms past him in a haze of tears and, once in her bedroom, collapses and weeps. She doesn’t hear the door slamming shut behind him as he walks out on them once and for all.

Kate doesn’t think the rest of the summer is worth remembering at all and she tries not to dwell on it too much later. They sell the house and move to a smaller one. It’s a new start in a way and Kate tries to see it as one. She focusses on her school work – her grades are still great due to the ridiculous amount of time she spends on her homework – and does her best not to think of her father. Jacko has clearly moved on; three years on and he’s doing good in school, has a girlfriend, Jane, and laughs again. No longer are her ears tortured by the too loud music he listens to.

Her mother too seems better than she was. She’s laughing again and that is something Kate hasn’t seen for quite some time. Sometimes she wonders if she’s the only one who misses something. It’s
like the missing tooth; she keeps sticking her tongue in the hole. It’s annoying and ever present, even when she doesn’t want it. She misses the good old days. She doesn’t miss the shouting, doesn’t miss the icy moods and suffocating silences, but there should be four persons in the house instead of three.

Maybe that’s what causes her to pluck up the courage, find out her father’s address and take a bus there before she can change her mind. He is family after all and she’s always been a daddy’s girl. Even when all they did was fight, she always longed for his love and approval and maybe, now that some years have passed and the storm has calmed, they can begin to rebuild that which has been lost. She’s not told her mother and Jacko of her intentions, only shared them with Laura and Anna. The former has declared her mad, the latter, whose own parents are divorced, albeit under friendlier circumstances, sympathises. Anna thinks that it’s important to try and keep in touch with all of the family and since that is what Kate herself feels, she does as Anna urges her to do.

Her father has obviously done well for himself. He lives in a large and beautiful house with a lot of garden. It’s all very impressive and for a moment Kate is tempted to turn tail and leave. Get a grip on yourself, girl. You’re almost an adult. You don’t do running away.

With that thought firmly cemented in her mind, she marches up the path to the front door and presses the bell. No going back now and in a way that puts her at ease. The choice is made now.

For a moment she fears that he won’t be home, but then a child’s cheering announces that there are people inside. Barely ten seconds later the door opens and then Kate finds herself face to face with a woman in her early thirties. She looks a bit shy and timid, but she’s very pretty. She’s tall, slim and has blue eyes and blonde hair, the type that’s commonly known as every married woman’s nightmare. Kate has the unpleasant feeling that this woman has been her own mother’s nightmare.

The main reason for that assumption is the child the woman is holding. Two years old at most, but he has the same green eyes her father has and although his hair is as fair as that of his mother, it’s as messy and curly as Kate’s own. Her stomach churns and she almost runs there and then.

The woman’s question keeps her in place. ‘Can I help you?’ she asks, friendly, but mildly puzzled as well.

Now is definitely not the time to back out. She’s come this far already. ‘I’m looking for my father,’ she tells the woman. ‘John Andrews. Is he home?’

‘Your… father.’ The woman looks as if some pieces of a puzzle are falling into place and she seems shocked. Did she even know that her lover – husband? – had two children out of his first marriage? It looks like she didn’t.

Kate nods. ‘Didn’t tell you about me, I reckon,’ she says sourly. Why is she even surprised? He’s made it perfectly clear years ago that he doesn’t give a toss about the people he’s left behind, or he would have made an effort to stay in touch. He hasn’t. ‘I’m Kate.’

The woman extends a hand. Kate spots the wedding ring before she takes it and shakes the hand. ‘Audrey,’ she introduces herself. She seems to be in a state of shock still. ‘And my son, Henry.’

The child looks at her, but Kate’s grounded in place, too shocked to remember her manners. She has a half-sibling and she didn’t even know of his existence. He looks like a happy child – he surely positively beams at her – and is clearly well loved by his parents. At least he has a father, something that can no longer be said about her.

‘He’s lovely,’ she forces herself to say, even if it costs her more than she’d like to admit. But it
hurts, it bloody well hurts. It even hurts to breathe. It certainly hurts to look at her half-brother – it feels wrong to call him that when she feels no ties to him whatsoever – and to know that his father, their father, abandoned the family he had in order to marry this vision of physical perfection and have this child to replace the ones he’s left. ‘I’d like to see my father now.’

It’s a lie. She’s no longer sure that is what she wants, but she is nothing if not stubborn. She won’t run now.

And it’s too late for that anyway. ‘Kate?’ The incredulous voice belongs to the man she hasn’t seen in three years, but for a moment Kate is taken farther back, to when she was five and came down to greet him when he came home late. It’s the tone of pleasant surprise and she lets it reassure her. Not all is lost. Something surely can be salvaged from the ruins of what used to be.

She looks past his new wife and her child to see him standing in the hallway, casually dressed, like he used to do during weekends. He’s unchanged, except for a few grey hairs at his temples and the glasses he didn’t have when she last saw him. ‘Dad,’ she acknowledges. She’s become good with words, but they fail her now.

He looks puzzled. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I came to see you.’ It seems logical to her, but clearly not to him. ‘I didn’t know you married again,’ she offers, trying her hardest not to let that feeling of hurt and betrayal get the better of her; she’s come here to reconcile after all.

He at least has the decency to look ashamed. ‘I didn’t know how to tell you. I wanted to, but…’

‘You didn’t know how to. That’s it?’ Despite her best intentions, the anger is welling up and it’s strong. The mental pain, that by now is almost physical because of its intensity, doesn’t make things easier either. ‘So you avoided it. Because that was easier.’ Her tone of voice is almost venomous. ‘Tell me, did you even tell her about Jacko and me or is that something you didn’t know how to tell her either?’ The pain is twisting her stomach into knots and squeezes her lungs. Her eyes are burning too, but she won’t let him see her cry. Anger is easier, anger she can do. It protects her from getting hurt worse than she is already.

The look on Audrey’s face tells her this assessment of the situation is spot on. She didn’t know. Kate supposes that makes it easier not to blame her and heap all the blame on her father’s doorstep instead. And she knows exactly how to do that; she’s had almost five solid years of experience with that.

She looks at the woman who is clearly completely taken aback by this turn of events. Henry is still smiling happily, pulling a necklace his mother is wearing. And that is what stops Kate dead in her tracks. She knows that necklace. For a moment she is six again and she’s standing in her parents’ bedroom, looking at the necklace she believes to be a present for her mother. It was never meant for her mother at all. Our little secret indeed. It is utterly sickening that she has helped him in cheating on her mother, even if she had done it unknowingly.

Judging by her father’s expression when she eventually looks back at him, he knows exactly what she is thinking. ‘Katie, I can explain it…’ he begins.

Kate doesn’t let him finish. The anger has definitely won the fight now. ‘Don’t you dare!’ she snarls. ‘I’m not your Katie anymore. That girl is gone, long gone. Good God, how long has this been going on for? How old was she when you decided to throw my mother over for her? Twenty? Younger?’ The very thought makes bile rising in her throat and the burning feeling in her eyes increases. How could he? ‘How could you do that to us?’ She snorts; it’s better than crying. ‘And
to her, come to think of it. Did she ever know you were married? Did she even know you had kids? And I mean before today.’

It’s only too clear that Audrey didn’t know; she’s as pale as a sheet and a small, vengeful part of Kate feels a grim satisfaction for having wracked her life, even for a little bit. It will serve her right for having made such a mess of Kate’s.

‘Kate…’ he tries again.

But she’s had enough. If she’ll linger here for only a moment longer, she won’t be able to hold in the tears she has sworn not to cry where he can see them. And so she pulls herself together for the last time and glares at him. ‘Save it,’ she snaps. ‘I’m not in the mood to hear it. You are despicable! It was a mistake coming here. I’d say, don’t bother contacting me, but since you never did made an effort in the past, that’s probably unnecessary anyway.’

She flees then. She hears him call her name, but she doesn’t turn and she doesn’t stop. She doesn’t think she would have done, even if she had known then that it would be the last time she’d ever see him.

Many, many years later she’ll stand and watch from the shadows as her husband lifts their youngest daughter onto his lap. Thorin has been kept up by all kinds of paperwork in his office and it’s close to midnight already, yet Cathy has kept herself awake somehow, not unlike what her mother used to do when she was that age.

‘Story?’ she begs, wide eyes staring up at her father. It’s the kind of look both mother and daughter know that Thorin finds impossible to resist.

Tonight is hardly an exception. ‘Very well, but a short one. You should have been in bed hours ago, little princess.’ He tries to keep his voice stern, but neither female is fooled. It doesn’t help that he wraps a blanket around her and makes her as comfortable as he can, as if he is preparing to tell a particular long story. And there’s every chance of that; Thorin loves story-telling and Cathy loves hearing tales. Unless she falls asleep, it’s not impossible that they’ll be here for another hour. Maybe she should tell them to keep it brief, and many an evening she will do just that, but maybe she can make an exception tonight; the sight that meets her eyes is nothing short of endearing.

‘About your adventures,’ Cathy requests. She tilts her head. ‘Please?’

It’s a good thing Thranduil doesn’t know how easy it is for Thorin to change his mind, or he’d start making more of an effort. ‘What adventure?’ the King under the Mountain asks. He’s had a lot of adventures and he sure doesn’t have the time to tell them all. Most of them aren’t appropriate material for a bedtime story either.

‘You and amad,’ is the request this time. A little romantic in the making and no mistake.

‘Very well,’ Thorin says again. ‘It began, long ago…’

Kate keeps to the shadows, an endeared half-smile on her face. For a moment there she can see herself on her own father’s lap. The scene in front of her is utterly familiar and she feels a sharp pang in her chest that she stubbornly refuses to put down to regret for what could have been. Instead she puts it down to longing for something that is long gone and she tells herself not to be so
Still, what she sees is so familiar that she can’t help but feel the hurt all over again. The memories resurface so easily. Cathy is so like she was at that age, a daddy’s girl to boot. Thorin is her own personal hero, just like Kate’s father had been to her, until she discovered that he was not much of a hero at all. That’s something that will never happen with this father and this daughter, she knows, and she smiles as she commits this to memory, to drag up when her own memories are too dreary.

She sends up a quick and silent prayer that Cathy can remain her little daddy’s girl forever, no matter how old she gets. It’s not like a second chance to her – her childhood is long behind her and no one can change the past – but it’s hope, and a new start as well. And that’s enough to be getting on with.

Chapter End Notes

Next time I’ll try to do something with the kids again, since this was kind of depressing to write. It certainly was intense and I hope I haven’t made a mess of it. As always, I’d really love to hear what you think and if you have a request for this story, don’t hesitate to ask. Please review?
Liquid Solution

Chapter Notes

Another request fill this time. Thetravelinglemon on ff.net asked me to write the story about Jack being drunk on the streets of Dale several months ago and this is what came out. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fortunately, no matter how much trouble you lot are capable of getting yourselves into from time to time, none of you have ever gotten yourself locked into a cell in Thranduil’s dungeons – at least, not that I know of – and I am grateful for small mercies. But at least Jack has some prison experience – even if it is only for being a drunken lunatic on the streets of Dale – so you can relate to how humiliating it is to be dragged away and locked up. And we weren’t even drunk.

The Journal, Chapter 47: First Kiss

Erebor, summer 2978 TA

Jack, son of Thorin, did not belong. It was something he had known for a few years now and he didn’t find it any easier to deal with as he grew older. Born the son of a dwarf and a human woman, he was something that had never existed before. His parents had defied all traditions and conventions in order to marry and had that way ensured that a lot of people weren’t happy with them. But his father only had to scowl – and a very frightening one it could be too – for people to shut their mouths and they usually ran out of insults once they engaged in a battle of words with his mother fairly quickly. Of course it made it easier on them because they were the King and Queen under the Mountain and they had reclaimed the whole kingdom from a dragon – their tale was already legendary, and they weren’t even dead – which had given them some leeway to make an unconventional decision.

But Jack and his siblings had never slain a dragon or reclaimed a kingdom and they were oddities, things that didn’t neatly fit in with the rest. Neither fully human nor fully dwarf, unique, as their mother used to say when he was still little and he had come to her crying when someone had called him an abomination. Back then he hadn’t known what that word even meant, but he had judged by the facial expression and the tone of voice that it didn’t mean something nice. His mother had all but exploded in anger and he was fairly certain that the offending dwarf had his ears blistered twice later; one time by his mother and another time by his father.

It didn’t mean that aforementioned offending dwarf was necessarily wrong. He didn’t even know what he was or to which race he belonged. Strangely enough his siblings never seemed to have a problem with it. Well, it was easy for Thoren, he imagined; his eldest brother was heir to the throne of Erebor, so he’d be a fool not to see himself as a dwarf. And he looked like one too. The only things he got from his mother were her red hair, including the curls, and his height. Well, he got that from her family, he imagined, since no one in Dale would think his mother tall. But Thoren stood a head taller than their parents. Still, he was a dwarf through and through.
Thráin simply didn’t care. He looked like a copy of their father – before his hair went grey, Jack assumed – except for the grey eyes he got from amad. Having said that, Thráin didn’t behave dwarflike, preferring a wandering existence over labouring underground. He was criticised for that when he was home, but Thráin clearly didn’t mind; he laughed it away.

Duria too was a dwarf, no doubt about that. She looked like one, including the beard, and once their father finally accepted the fact that his daughter was in fact all grown up and old enough to know her own mind, she’d marry a dwarf. No doubt about where she belonged either.

Cathy was like Thráin a bit, he reflected; her mixed heritage never seemed to be an issue with her either. But then, Cathy was such a sweet girl, that no one seemed to be able to speak ill of her. And she had the advantage of being female and rather fragile. People automatically seemed to want to protect her. The ones that didn’t usually took one single smile before they were swooning at her feet, which was entirely unfair in Jack’s opinion.

But even among his siblings Jack was the odd one out. He was too tall. Dale was the place where he could go unnoticed if he so chose; he was the same height as most men there. His mother tended to say that he took after her brother, the one he was apparently named after, but whom he had never met. He’d asked about him once and she’d said she had lost him. Jack had not dared to ask more.

But whoever he was, he didn’t like his uncle, because he took after him in looks, and according to his mother in temper as well, at least when he was younger. But it was his appearance that made him stand out. He had decided to grow a long beard and he would have to admit that the result looked very dwarvish, but it hadn’t done the trick of blending in. A few years ago he had done everything he could think of to make him come across as dwarvish, until Flói had mockingly remarked that he was more dwarvish than the dwarves. His best friend only came to his chest these days, but he was one of the few who’d never made an issue of his mixed blood. Their mothers called them the long and the short, or the dynamic duo.

‘You’re brooding,’ Flói commented.

They were taking a short break from the forging. It was in their blood with both of them and they were good at it. At first, Jack had only taken up the craft because it had been his father’s for years, until he was otherwise preoccupied as King under the Mountain, but eventually Jack had started to enjoy it for himself. It was not the task itself that was bothering him, but rather one of his masters. Farin was a good master, and a good friend of his father’s, who would not intentionally hurt Jack, but his casual and far too true remark about Jack being a bit too tall to work effectively at a certain anvil grated on his every nerve.

‘What of it?’ he demanded.

‘It doesn’t suit you.’ Flói remained unflappable in the face of Jack’s darkest moods and often he was grateful for that, but today he was not in the appreciating mood. ‘Makes you look like your adad too much.’

‘Good,’ Jack growled. Maybe that would stop the gossips from gossiping for a while. Because there was not much of his father in him, or Cathy for that matter, and his amad was not a dwarf, the people had started whispering that maybe Thorin was not his father at all, that rather than that he was the result of an affair his mother had with one of the men of Dale. After all, it was widely known that her race was not as loyal as their own. The King under the Mountain had royally lost his temper when he heard the rumour and no one had mentioned it since in his hearing, but it didn’t stop people from thinking what they liked and saying it when they didn’t think anyone close to the family could hear it.
Flói nudged him and passed him the waterskin. ‘Nah, you don’t mean that.’ He was quiet for a while. ‘We should go for an ale after work.’ Flói was by no means a simple soul, but he was of the opinion that ale solved most of the problems on and under the earth. He’d give the orcs ale as a means of dealing with them, if given half a chance, Jack would wager. He himself would rather use the ale to feed them drunk and then bash their skulls in for good measure, to make sure they’d never bother him again.

‘It won’t change a thing,’ Jack pointed out.

‘Of course it won’t. Some folk will always have something to complain.’ Flói, who had never been on the receiving end of the kind of complaints Jack had to endure, could be a lot too easy about this. ‘It might do miracles for your mood, though. It looks like a good day to get drunk.’

‘You always think it’s a good night to get drunk,’ Jack retorted.

‘Aye, but it almost never works, does it?’ That was the truth; Flói had a remarkable resilience to the workings of ale, mead and wine. The only occasion when Jack had seen his friend well and truly drunk was when he got a flask of elvish wine at King Thranduil’s last visit ten months ago. Flói had been singing non-stop until he had gotten into a fight with someone who didn’t appreciate his vocal qualities and had ended up with a black eye, a number of bruises and a split lip.

‘And the consequences are disastrous when it does work,’ Jack reminded him. ‘And I don’t feel like standing out.’ And with his height he would. Last thing he wanted was to attract more attention; he’d had enough of that already.

His best friend was wholly unconcerned. ‘We can always go to Dale. Pubs and ale there as well, if I recall correctly.’

Jack wondered why he was even still protesting when it was blatantly obvious that this was an argument Flói was determined to win. ‘Then you will stand out.’

The dwarf shrugged. ‘I don’t mind. Makes for a nice change, don’t you think? ‘Sides, there’re enough dwarves having shops and houses there. Might not attract much attention at all.’

‘Those are man-sized pubs,’ Jack couldn’t help but point out. ‘You wouldn’t be able to reach the bar.’

‘That’s what I’m bringing you for.’

The youngest prince of Durin’s line stared down at his friend. ‘You’re not going to let this one go until I’ve confirmed I’ll go with you, are you?’

‘Well, I’ve considered drinking alone, but where’s the fun in that, eh?’ A grin broke through when he realised he was actually winning the argument.

Jack only realised that it was indeed so when he saw that tell-tale smile, triumphant in the extreme. And maybe it was a good idea to be away from the Mountain for a little while, with all its judgemental minds. Admittedly, it wasn’t all that bad, not anymore. People had gotten used to him by now, but it were mostly the nobles who were troubling him. Most of them had been holed up in the Iron Hills while the rest of the people of Erebor had been in exile and neither of his parents actually liked them. Most normal people, who had known his father all their lives and had followed him in exile, had little problems with his unconventional marriage and the resulting offspring.

But Jack had heard too many scathing remarks to be able to bear as much as one more. Even Farin’s comment, that had been completely devoid of any ill intent, had made him grit his teeth in
anger. Dale sounded like a better idea by the minute. And ale would help him unwind. Tight as a bowstring, his mother tended to say when he was in a mood like this, and mood blacker than the deepest dungeon. Right now he had reached the point where he was growing tired of his own dark thoughts. Ale sounded like a remarkably good idea right about now.

‘I suppose you’ll need someone to hand you your drinks,’ he said, trying to make it sound as unenthusiastic as he possibly could.

Flói knew him better than that; the grin widened. ‘I knew you’d see sense in the end.’

‘I’m relieved to hear it,’ a voice behind them said. ‘And there’s a mighty lot of sense in going back to work. I’ve got some swords that need finishing by the end of the day and you’re not going anywhere until you’ve done them.’ Farin was an impressive dwarf. He was not tall, rather small actually, but he was broad-shouldered and very strong; people avoided getting caught up in a fight with him for a very good reason. Right now there was soot on his face and the sweat had drenched his face and braids. He clearly had not been taking a break from work like his apprentices had done.

Jack got to his feet and dragged Flói up with him. ‘Right away,’ he replied.

Farin patted his hand, the closest thing he could reach, paternally. ‘You’re doing good work, lad. Your father will be proud.’

Jack forced his face into a smile. ‘Thank you.’

He meant to get straight back to work, but Farin held him back for a while longer, even as he beckoned Flói to get a move on. ‘No offence meant, lad. You know that?’

He nodded. Aye, he knew. That was part of why he was so angry with himself for being mad at Farin, because he had not meant any harm at all. He was mostly angry with himself and with his parents too. Couldn’t they have thought about the consequences of throwing convention to the wind before they married and had children? Had they given as much as a thought to what life would be like for their offspring? Sometimes he rather doubted it. Even then, why did he have to be this ridiculously tall? If only he could be of a height with Thráin or Thoren his life would be that much easier, and not just because he required man-sized tools to work with.

‘Nothing wrong with being who you are,’ the smith told him. ‘I’m sure it has its advantages in the relations with Dale. They will take you seriously, lad. Remember that.’ He gave another pat on Jack’s hand. ‘And you’re handy for reaching the shelves I can’t reach, that’s for sure.’

Jack appreciated that he was making an effort, but Farin was really only making it worse. All he wanted was to fit in, to not be different and he certainly was in no mood to see the advantages of being more man than dwarf. Ale sounded like such a good idea right now.

The rest of the afternoon he hammered away at the anvil as if the world would end if he didn’t finish his work in time. The physical labour at least drove all other thoughts out of his mind for a little while and that was a very welcome change. And it was a good thing also that at this rate the work got done a lot quicker than it would have been done otherwise, and when he washed his hands and face, he felt a sense of pride at having done a good day’s work.

‘You were working as if there was an orc with a whip behind you,’ Flói said. He was untying a mannish ponytail he had made to keep his hair out of his work; a lesson both of them had learned the hard way when they had burned their beards in the forge’s fire. The smell of burnt hair had been up in his nostrils for at least a month after. ‘Still got your dander up about being a mite bit
You would have your dander up too if you had to be reminded of it every single day,' Jack muttered darkly. 'I wish the Maker had shown some sort of sense when he decided to make me.'

Flói shrugged, taking his coat from the chair he’d casually draped it over in the morning. ‘Maybe he has. The way I see it, you’ve got two makers, what with your mother being a child of Ilúvatar. Maybe he thought there were enough taking after Mahal’s fashion and wanted you different. Who’s Mahal to argue with Ilúvatar then, eh?’ He slapped Jack’s back. ‘Let’s head off to the pub then, shall we?’

It was a point of view Jack had not thought about yet, and it struck him as odd, even as he at the same time saw the logic of it. It didn’t mean this solved all his problems. He sometimes wondered if they could ever be solved or that he was doomed to spend the rest of his days – and Maker only knew how long or short he would live with that mixed blood of his – listening to other people complaining that his parents should never have married.

‘Ale sounds like a very good plan,’ he agreed.

Flói smiled. ‘I knew you’d come round in the end.’ They took off, using a variety of short-cuts they had memorised in the days they were playing pranks on everyone and more often than not in need of a quick escape route, because neither of them fancied to be acquainted with any of the guards or the wrath of the King under the Mountain. Jack’s father was a just king and he was unlikely to appreciate his son causing diplomatic scandal, as Jack knew only too well.

The days were long and the sun was still shining when they left through the main gate. Jack smiled; he loved the sun. These days he tried to spend as much time underground as he could in order not to seem as even stranger than he was already regarded, but he could not disregard his human blood entirely.

‘Lovely weather,’ Flói commented. He was a dwarf through and through, but Jack had dragged him outside so often that he had come to like the outside as well. ‘Too warm for this coat, though.’

‘Very undwarvish of you,’ Jack commented.

‘My ma says you’re a bit obsessed with being dwarvish,’ Flói said. ‘You know what, I think she’s right. Anyway, your adad used to wander for years, didn’t he? It’s rather become a dwarvish thing to do, I’d say.’

He supposed so, but that was not what most of the critics said. ‘I suppose you can blame my parents for that as well,’ he said sourly. The only luck he had was that he was not actually the heir to the throne. Looking as he did, he would never be accepted. Thoren may be tall, but he wasn’t too tall and he looked enough like their father to get away with it. Jack had no such advantage.

‘You don’t mean that,’ Flói said. ‘You don’t really blame your parents for marrying, do you? Mind you, I would have to make do without a best friend. Not sure I could have managed.’

‘So what if I am?’ he questioned. ‘Blaming them, I mean.’ It may not be fair of him, but was it fair of them to do as they pleased without stopping to think about the consequences?

‘You’re behaving like a child now,’ his friend informed him. ‘The way I see it, your parents are terribly fond of you and your siblings. I heard a story once that your adad beat someone unconscious for insulting your brothers, before you were born.’

‘They should have thought about that before, don’t you think?’ Jack muttered. Part of him knew
full well that Flói was right, that he was behaving like a child and that his parents really cared about them all. He knew this with his head, but it was hard to feel it sometimes when it essentially was their marriage that had subjected him to being talked to and about.

‘I wasn’t done yet,’ Flói said easily. ‘I think your parents first and foremost love each other. My father remembers the fuss there was when it all happened and he says it wasn’t pretty. They’re living for each other, not just with each other, or they wouldn’t have bothered with all of the difficulties.’

He really wasn’t in the mood for any of this wisdom, even if it was true, which Jack strongly suspected was indeed the case. ‘It’s a very good night to get drunk,’ he therefore said. There was truth in that too.

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Thorin, son of Thráin, King under the Mountain, was thoroughly fed up with all the paperwork he had to concern himself with. Most of it was a waste of time and effort, but there were trade talks coming up with the elves and he could not afford to be ill-prepared. Thranduil would be as difficult as he could possibly be, that was for sure. And it was important that Thoren did well in the talks. He was all grown up now and everything Thorin could have wished for in an heir. At the same time he hated the need for Thoren to be so responsible and solemn a lot of the time. But it was his duty, as it was Thorin’s to make sure that he was ready when the day came he would take the throne.

Kate had gone to bed, he found when he entered their chambers. The fire was still smouldering, but the living room was dark otherwise. It wasn’t surprising; it was close to midnight already and she would have done some tiring duties of her own. He stroked his beard, grown out since the Mountain had been reclaimed, in thought. She was in charge of the practical preparations, and she insisted on doing them herself, even if it was only too clear that she was not as young as she once had been.

He tried to ignore the familiar stab of fear when he thought about that. When he had married Kate Andrews, she had been young and full of energy. But she had aged, and faster than he himself had done. It was altogether frightening to see. Kate had whacked him over the head when she had heard him expressing that fear and had told him that she still had a few useable years left, thank you very much. Besides, she was not the one who was entirely grey. She, so unlike him, still had a few strands of hair that were as red as they had ever been, even if the rest of her unruly curls had faded to silver.

Still, the fear was real and ever more present, although he took care to contain it when in company. He had a lingering suspicion that Kate knew all the same.

She was asleep when he opened the door to their bedroom, curled up on his side of the bed. Kate had been a restless sleeper when they had gone on the quest and time had not changed that. And that reassured him somewhat, that even though everything else changed, some things always stayed the same.

He undressed and slid in under the covers, gently pushing his wife back to her own side of the bed. In the past he had done so successfully without waking her, but today she stirred. ‘What time is it?’ she asked, voice slurring with sleep. ‘And what in heaven’s name are you doing?’ She blinked and
worked herself into a sitting position.

‘You were on my side of the bed,’ he replied.

‘You should have warned me,’ Kate muttered. ‘I had no idea a dwarf’s possessiveness extended to his side of the bed.’

The disgruntled words triggered countless memories of months spent on the road and completely inappropriate banter. She was more responsible now, but every now and then that young woman would resurface.

‘Are you laughing at me, Thorin Oakenshield?’ she inquired sharply.

He tried to force his face back in a neutral expression. ‘What of it?’ he asked. ‘I need something to laugh at after reading Thranduil’s demands.’

‘Hmpf,’ Kate said, lying down again. Thorin followed her example. ‘I am wondering how long it will take for him to demand every firstborn child and half of our wealth in exchange for the “privilege” of doing business with him. He’s growing more arrogant with every passing year, I swear. I dread to think what he will be like in a thousand years.’

‘Maker have mercy on me,’ Thorin groaned in his pillow. ‘Don’t give him ideas.’

Now it was her turn to laugh. ‘I wasn’t planning on it. And speaking of firstborns, how’s ours doing?’

‘Just short of pulling out his own beard out hair by hair in despair.’ Thorin turned on his back, pulled her back against him – ‘Am I going to lie on your side or my side of the bed tonight? Make up your mind.’ – and wrapped his arms around her. ‘But he will do well in the talks. He’s got a brain about him and a keen mind for politics.’

‘Hasn’t inherited that from either of us,’ Kate observed. ‘I mean, we can do it if we put our minds to it, but Thoren’s a natural.’ There was no denying that.

‘Where are the others?’ he asked. Apart from Thoren, his offspring had been remarkably absent today. Inevitable now that they were all growing up, but not pleasant. In his head they were still little and it sometimes was difficult to comprehend that was no longer true.

‘Thráin’s locked himself in the library, poring over old maps. He says he’s planning a trip to the Shire, but I sincerely hope he’ll put it off until after the talks.’ Kate ticked off her fingers. ‘Duria has gone to bed, so has Cathy and I have no idea where Jack is. He was supposed to spend the day with Flóí at the forge, so who knows what mischief they have gotten themselves into.’

She had hardly finished that sentence when there was a frantic pounding on the door. ‘Thorin, my lady, I think you’ll need to come immediately.’ Thorin immediately recognised the voice as belonging to Lufur, the guard that was on duty tonight. Kate had made a strong case for abolishing the whole bodyguard business when they married – ‘I’m a grown woman, for heaven’s sake, not a child who needs round the clock supervision!’ – but Thorin had put his foot down and in the end Kate had given up the fight.

‘Bloody hell. It’s after midnight,’ Kate complained. ‘Can’t folks keep their complaints to regular hours, please.’ She got out of bed anyway and Thorin followed her example. Kate took a cloak from a chair; with what little light there was she didn’t see it was his and so he made do without one.
He opened the door. ‘Lufur,’ he acknowledged, only then realising there was something with him. ‘Flói?’ Because of his surprise it came out as a question.

‘Flói?’ Kate echoed. ‘What are you doing here at this time of night? Is Jack with you?’

The young dwarf looked as if he wanted to be anywhere but here. ‘I’m afraid there’s a problem, my lady.’

Thorin did not like the sound of that at all. Jack had been a handful since he learned how to walk and talk, but mostly his best friend was in trouble with him. That he was not so now, somehow made him anticipate all kinds of horror. ‘What kind of problem?’ he demanded in a harsh tone of voice that had the dwarf in front of him cringe; he was clearly anticipating all kinds of trouble to come his way.

‘What happened?’ Kate asked, no less urgent, but perhaps a bit more gentle. That was a trait that had come with age, and decidedly not something she had when they first met. ‘Is he injured?’

‘Not exactly, my lady.’ Flói was staring at the point of his boots. ‘But he’s drunk.’

Thorin groaned. He supposed that there had to be a day when that had to be added to the list, but preferably not yet. ‘Where is he?’ he demanded. Flói’s breath smelled of ale and mead too, but he clearly could deal with the effects better than Thorin’s youngest son.

‘Well, that’s the problem,’ the young dwarf replied. ‘He’s in the dungeons, in Dale.’

Thorin groaned again.

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This was certainly not one of his better ideas, Flói reflected as he tried to coax his friend out of the pub in which they had ended up. Jack was not someone who drank a lot, because he said he liked to be in control of his own mind, and not let the ale do the thinking for him. Flói didn’t think he’d ever seen Jack consume more than two ales in the span of one evening.

His idea of getting drunk together had been more of a joke really, to get Jack out of that mood that darkened his eyes and had his lips just a small line of disapproval and hurt. Flói’s own light-heartedness was not out of ignorance, but rather a way to balance Jack’s darker moods. He was no fool; he had eyes and ears and everything. It was obvious that Jack was searching for his own place in a world that didn’t have places for people like him. And it was eating away at him, more so with every passing year. The more he understood of the world and the way it worked, the bitterer he became. And there was something distinctly unnerving about the way he could glare at the world.

Flói was older than his closest friend by about a decade, but he was a dwarf and had aged slower, although their mothers always agreed they were of the same mental age. As a consequence, he had known the youngest prince all his life. When they were younger, they had played pranks together, and when they grew older, they took up the same craft. Flói was content that way. He loved his work and he loved to spend time with friends afterwards.

But what was enough for him was not enough for Jack. Whereas Flói was happy, Jack was sliding ever closer towards depression. He was certain the queen knew it, even though he wasn’t certain about the king. But then, the king was always difficult to read. ‘Look out for him if you can,’
Queen Kate – as only people close to the family were allowed to call her – had once told him. ‘He needs his friends. Mahal knows he needs them.’ She had smiled ruefully. ‘And there’s only so much I can do.’

Flói liked the King and Queen under the Mountain; his association with their youngest son meant that he had spent a lot of time with them over the years. Nevertheless, he was still very aware that their marriage was an unconventional one and to a certain extent he even agreed with Jack; he doubted they had ever spent much thought on what life would be like for their children, especially for Jack, who was the odd one out, so visibly different from Durin’s Folk.

And it had been plaguing Jack’s mind, he knew. All day he had been working as if there was someone with a red-hot poke behind him to beat him with if he didn’t work hard enough – a tell-tale sign that he was troubled – and with a scowl on his face that told Flói that something was very wrong. It was anger at the world that rejected him and he was powerless to do anything about it.

And that was something that troubled Flói, hence the drinking proposal.

Dale was not his place of choice – everything was far too big for him – but it was good to be away from Erebor for a time and see Jack blending in with the crowds that populated the pub. It was noisy and there was a smell that Flói could not quite define, but it was distinctly unpleasant. But at least everyone was minding their own business and no one as much as looked at them twice.

He should have realised something was wrong when Jack started on his third mead of the evening. As far as he was aware, Jack had never even drunk more than half a tankard of the stuff and it was a lot stronger than ale. Most dwarves had no problems with strong drinks, but the prince was of mixed blood and his mother wasn’t known to take well to it. But he was too relaxed and relieved to notice that anything was amiss until Jack started talking.

‘It’s not fair,’ he announced a bit too loudly. There was a slur in his voice that did the job of alarming Flói, whereas the third mead had failed to do that.

He did a quick count in his head and came to the conclusion that this must be either the fourth or the fifth tankard Jack had drained. ‘How many have you had to drink?’ he asked warily.

It was testimony to just how drunk Jack was that he didn’t answer the question. Instead he went on as if Flói had not spoken at all. ‘It’s not, is it?’ he asked, even though his friend had no idea what he was referring to. ‘First there’s Thoren, named after my father. Then there’s Thráin, named after my grandfather. Then we have Duria, the treasured and rule-abiding Duria, because she’s born on Durin’s Day.’

He downed another gulp of mead, just as Flói had decided it would be much better to remove it from his reach. It was clear that he’d had far too much already and his parents wouldn’t thank him for bringing their son back in such a state. And if he passed out, Flói didn’t think he was tall enough to carry his much larger friend all the way back to the Mountain. He really, really should have thought of this a bit sooner.

Jack hadn’t noticed. ‘Even Cathy with her strange name, got named after my mother. But who do I get named after? Just some unknown uncle with a ridiculous name!’ The tankard landed on the table with so much force that the contents sloshed over.
Flói was torn between feeling the first hints of panic at the situation he was in and feeling pity for his friend. He really stood out in every respect. No doubt his parents had meant no ill when they named him for the queen’s elusive brother, but it was just one more thing to add to the burdens their son was already carrying around, simply because he was existing. As the venomous Lady Nai had once remarked within their earshot – as she had clearly been planning on doing – the king’s children were something that had never been meant in the original plan of the world. As harsh and hurting as her words were, Flói could not deny the truth in them. He however didn’t come to the conclusion she did: that just because they had never been intended, they were wrong. Flói could not believe that for even a second.

‘I think you’ve had more than enough,’ he said decisively. ‘And it’s getting late. There’s not a holiday tomorrow and Farin will want us in the forge bright and early.’ Farin was a good master, patient and indulgent at times, but he didn’t suffer fools and drunkards lightly. He stood up and grabbed his friend’s arm to get him to move too.

‘Why’d he want that, eh?’ Jack didn’t protest the treatment, but he was not exactly cooperating either. ‘I’m too big for it, he says. You heard him, didn’t you?’ The slur was that more obvious now, definitely not a good sign.

‘In truth, I heard no such thing,’ he said, gently trying to steer his friend in the direction of the door. The people they passed gave them a wide berth, with good reason; Jack was swaying on his feet. Mahal give that he won’t vomit over one of them. ‘The anvil’s too small for you, is all. We’ll find a solution.’

‘I’m too big for everything!’ Jack declared to the world at large. Flói agreed with him that he at least was too tall for him to easily help him out of here. If they had been the same height, he could have wrapped an arm around shoulders or waist to stabilise him. Right now, for the first time in his life, he felt too small. Normally it didn’t bother him and really, he had Jack for when he needed a couple of feet extra, but the prince was not much of a help now.

The people in the pub paid them no heed, only stepping aside to let them pass, and in the general noisiness Jack’s drunken comment went all but unnoticed. Flói was glad of it. He was even gladder still when they left the establishment behind and were back on the street in the fresh air. It was well after dark, but the heat had not subsided much. But still, the air here was clean and didn’t smell of things he didn’t want to know about. And maybe it would clear Jack’s head as well.

But that hope proved to be in vain when Jack started to sing – if such a word could indeed be used for the sounds he was making – the ballad of Beren and Lúthien. If he had not suspected already that Jack had consumed more mead than was good for him, then he would have done then. Their school masters had insisted that they knew some of the elven history and language and the tale of Beren and Lúthien was the ideal way to combine both those things. Neither child had displayed much interest in either and Flói had been of the opinion that if he couldn’t escape elvish history, he’d rather hear about the Nirnaeth Arnoediad or the Sack of Doriath, something that had a bit of action in it and not just some soppy love story he didn’t care to hear about. Jack had not even tried to come up with an alternative; he had just hated the song. And there was no reason whatsoever why he should be singing it at the top of his lungs on the streets of a very quiet Dale.

‘Hush!’ he said, hoping to silence him before some of the city guards came looking what the caterwauling was all about. In the nightly silence Jack’s wailing was all the more audible and he was definitely not drunk enough to appreciate this kind of behaviour, not drunk enough by half.

His attempts were not sufficient. They had not even made it three streets before a couple of guards showed their faces. Four of them, all of them tall, taller than Jack, he’d wager, and Flói had no
The young dwarf produced an apologetic smile. ‘I’m trying.’ He was certainly doing just that, albeit without much success this far. ‘He’s drunk a few too many, I’m afraid. I’m just trying to get him home before he passes out.’ There was friendship between Dale and Erebor, so he wouldn’t need to be afraid to be judged on which race he belonged to. He might however be judged on his skills of keeping his friend quiet.

‘Then do so quietly,’ the guard snapped. He had come closer in order not to have to resort to shouting himself.

Jack had been seemingly unaware of the presence of others, but now he laid eyes on the guard. ‘Not much of a beard, don’t you think?’ he commented. For a moment he sounded almost sober, with the noticeable exception that he would never have addressed an authority figure in this manner if he had been in his right mind. ‘Then, it takes a dwarf to really grow a good beard.’

The guard narrowed his eyes. ‘Are you insulting me?’ It was clear that he had no idea to whom he was talking. Neither, it seemed, had Jack.

‘He’s clever, isn’t he?’ the prince commented to Flói. ‘He knows I’m insulting him!’

This was shaping up to a disaster of legendary proportions. And he wanted no such thing to happen. ‘We need to get you home, eh?’ he said in his most soothing tone of voice. ‘No more mead for you, I think.’ No more mead, ale or wine ever, if he had anything to say about the matter. Clearly it hadn’t helped him with relaxing and the consequences were definitely not worth the trouble.

‘You shall watch your tongue or I’ll have you spend a night in the dungeon to sober up,’ the guard growled, who clearly didn’t think any of this funny either.

It happened too fast for Flói to stop it. Jack grinned at the guard like a lunatic, about to make another scathing remark, but he never got round to it. Instead he did something much worse. Before either the city guard or Flói knew what happened, Jack had vomited all over the man.

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Thorin didn’t speak as he ordered to have ponies saddled to take both him and Flói to Dale. He could see that the young dwarf felt guilty about the whole thing, especially since it was his idea to take Jack out for the evening. He’d never thought very highly of Flói’s intelligence, given the many pranks Jack and he used to play when they were little. This however was taking things way too far. He was ten years older than Jack – give or take two years, Thorin wasn’t entirely certain – and by all rights should have been more responsible. Maker have mercy on him, they were hardly more than kids. How had it come to this?

He knew, though. Jack had always been the biggest troublemaker. There was something about him that reminded Thorin of himself. He himself had trouble with being content with what he had. Deep down there was always a longing for more. It was having been denied that, his kingdom, for so long that had made him slide dangerously close towards depression at times. Because he had
wanted more and had been unable to get it. The longing for more, for better, had festered within him. It was a part of that which had made his grandfather and father slide into madness. It ran in his family.

Most of his children had been unaffected by it. Thoren and Thráin got frustrated sometimes with how things were done, whereas Duria just took it in her stride and went on with her life. Cathy, his little girl, although not so little anymore these days, had a wonderful gift for contentment. It was a rare thing and he found he envied her for it.

No, of all his children it was Jack who took most after him. He may have almost none of Thorin’s looks, but he had almost all of his character, except that it was mixed up with a recklessness that Thorin himself had never known. Jack harboured an anger the likes of which were all too familiar to his father, and he had a lot to be angry about. Jack had always been the odd one out, the one who looked different, who wasn’t accepted as easily as his siblings, and Thorin remembered how hard that had been already.

It didn’t make his life easier and it certainly did not make his son’s easier, but for all that it was worth, he loved him like he loved Jack’s siblings. No, that was not entirely true. He’d always had a soft spot for the twins and not just because twins were so very rare among his people. After Duria he’d thought that there wouldn’t be any more children, especially not since Kate miscarried three years later. That was a time he tried not to think about too much; it still hurt too badly. But it had made the surprise and joy all the greater when Kate told him that she was with child again, almost nine years after Duria had been born and when neither of them had really been expecting it anymore. To find out that there were two babies instead of one had been a blessing from the Maker.

He’d never said this to Jack. Time hadn’t changed his inability to talk easily about feelings and he now felt that he had been remiss in his duty towards his own son, resulting in the latest disaster. As much as he blamed Flói for being young and foolish, he blamed himself even more.

The lad was remarkably quiet. Thorin didn’t really fault him for running back to Erebor; it was either that or getting locked up with Jack and that wouldn’t be any good to anyone, but part of him blamed Flói for leaving his son under such circumstances. Friends didn’t abandon each other. It was one of the rules he lived by.

The young dwarf seemed to have read his thoughts. ‘I didn’t mean to leave him on his own.’ They were close to Dale now and this was the first time he had spoken since they had set out. He clearly felt more at ease with Kate, but Thorin had persuaded her to stay behind while he dealt with the mess that he felt was entirely too much of his own making.

‘I know you didn’t,’ he replied curtly, fully aware that if he meant to put the lad at ease, he would not succeed, not like this. ‘You did as best you could. The fault lies not with you.’ Not in its entirety, at least.

Dale was quiet at this time of night, the way Thorin liked it best. He didn’t like to come here during the day. Even though there was friendship between the people of Dale and Erebor, Thorin found it hard to forget how he had been looked down on by people of the race of Men during his exile. And it was too noisy for him. Now, the town was almost peaceful, although he made himself no illusions; in a few hours it would be as noisy as it had ever been.

He knew the route to the city’s dungeons very well. It was hardly the first time he had reason to be there, although he had never needed to venture near them because of his own son. That was a novelty, but, as Kate would wryly remark, there was a first for everything. Having said that, he had hoped he would never have needed to do this.
He dismounted and left the pony for Flói to tie up, while he himself made a march for the entrance. No matter what he had done, Jack was his son and he would not leave him here, in a dungeon in Dale. He had made a mistake, indeed, but this was not the way.

There were two guards in front of the door. They recognised him. ‘My lord,’ they muttered. ‘What brings you to this place at this hour?’

‘Word has reached me that you arrested my son earlier this evening,’ Thorin told them. Being angry at himself would not do him any good and neither would it get Jack to freedom any sooner, but nothing was stopping him from taking his fury out on the men who’d had the guts to lock up the youngest prince of the ruling line of Durin as if he were a common criminal.

The guards looked confused. Even though there was friendship between their peoples, they were not intimately acquainted and Jack looked so little like his father that it was unlikely they would recognise him on sight. In truth, Jack looked more like of one them than like one of Durin’s Folk. If they had known his character however, they might not have thought such a thing.

‘There has been no dwarf arrested tonight, my lord,’ the boldest informed Thorin.

His friend caught sight of Flói, who had now completed the task Thorin had set him and joined him. ‘Hang on for a minute,’ he muttered, forgetting for just a moment in whose presence he was. ‘You don’t mean the drunken fellow he,’ a jerk of the head in Flói’s direction, ‘was with, do you? Now that you mention it, he was going on about dwarvish beards.’ He shrugged. ‘But then, he was also wailing the ballad of Beren and Lúthien.’ It was only when he found himself confronted with Thorin’s most angry scowl that he realised exactly to whom he was talking.

‘That is my son,’ Thorin confirmed with an iciness that by all rights should have frozen the area immediately. ‘And I would have him released immediately, before I feel it necessary to take the matter to your king.’

That elicited a positive eagerness to help. ‘Of course, my lord,’ the first guard said. He seemed to be both older and wiser than his companion with the big mouth.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘Flói, stay here.’ This was something he needed to do on his own and he was not very eager that many people saw Jack in such a state. There would be gossip enough when this inevitably came out.

The guard didn’t feel the need to fill the air with words as he showed Thorin to where Jack had been locked up. The prison at least was cool, which was more than could be said for the outside – Thorin’s tunic clung to his skin in a way that felt most unpleasant – but it was nothing like the halls of Erebor either. Clearly this was not a building that his people had helped to build.

‘Here we are,’ the guard announced. He took out a key and unlocked the door, letting Thorin enter first.

The sight that met his eyes very nearly broke his heart. Jack had curled himself up in the far corner of the wall. When he heard the sounds, he turned around. His eyes were red and unfocused. ‘Adad.’ At least he had enough sense left to recognise him. It was a small mercy only, but better than nothing.

‘Come son, time to go home.’ Thorin talked to him the way he had done when Jack had been a little lad afraid of thunderstorms. Mahal help him, Jack was all but a child still. He certainly looked it the way he sat there.
Jack didn’t move. ‘It’s not so bad here,’ he slurred. ‘It’s good for dwarves, underground. I’m a dwarf, you know. Don’t look it, though.’ He looked in what appeared to be disgust at his long legs.

It was like having a dagger stabbed into his heart. This was not the life he’d wanted for his little boy, even if Jack had long since outgrown him. A dwarf in a man’s body he was and he was paying the price for that every single day. And Thorin had never meant for it to be like that. Maybe he had been a fool for thinking he could get away with marrying Kate and having children with her after all that he had done for his people. And they had gotten away with it. It were their children who were paying the price for the decisions they had made, and Jack most of all.

‘You belong in Erebor, Jack,’ he told his son, knowing it wasn’t the truth. Jack wanted to belong in Erebor, but that didn’t mean he did.

And even in his befuddled state, Jack remembered that, which told the King under the Mountain all he needed to know about how deep-rooted this matter truly was. ‘I don’t, do I?’ he questioned. ‘Not really a dwarf, not really a man. Don’t know what I am.’

Thorin swallowed and forced himself not to think of the guard’s presence as he spoke his next words. ‘You are my son,’ he said. That at least was the truth. ‘And you are very dear to me. Isn’t that enough to be getting on with?’ It wasn’t a real answer, because there were none. East solutions didn’t exist, not for him and not for Jack. Neither of them could change the views the world entertained about what should and shouldn’t be.

The fight had gone out of Jack and all that remained now was a slumped form with a dirty beard, a child in an adult’s body, someone who was completely and utterly lost in a world that didn’t seem to want him. He’d have given Erebor itself if that meant Jack would be able to find a place of his own, but it was not within his power. It fuelled his own anger.

The lad was too old and too tall really to be carried like a baby, but that was what Thorin did all the same. It might look laughable – even though the guards had the good sense not to comment – but to Thorin it felt like a tragedy. No, there weren’t any easy answers. He could only send up a prayer to Mahal that things might be better in future. It was all he could do.

Chapter End Notes

This was supposed to be both short and funny. I’m afraid it turned out to be neither, but I hope you enjoyed it anyway.
Please let me know what you think. It means a lot to hear from you and if you’ve got requests, just ask away.
Manipulation

Chapter Notes

This time, a request from melocets: how about an instance when Cathy wants something and Kate doesn't want her to have it and Cathy uses Thorin’s weakness for her to get it, resulting in an angry Kate and Thorin in the dog house? I hope it’s everything you wanted it to be. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 8

Manipulation

‘And you promise you never will?’ his daughter insisted. Shy she (Cathy) might be, but when she had her mind set on something, she was just her mother; not giving up until she had what she came for. Quite a feat for a six year old. And when Thorin found himself on the receiving end of her demands, she did get what she wanted. He’d better make sure that Thranduil did not find out how easily he could give in sometimes.

Duly Noted, Chapter 1: Disagreement

Erebor, late summer 2964 TA

Kate Andrews, formerly from England and currently Queen under the Mountain, was in a very bad mood. Aforementioned bad mood had very little do with Lady Nai and her annoying commentary from earlier that day, and everything with a lord from Dale who had done nothing but complain for the last fifteen minutes. So far she had managed to keep her face straight, resisting the urge to either laugh manically over this man’s pathetic complaints or snap at him in a way that her children referred to as amad’s run-and-hide voice. Either would have meant diplomatic disaster though, and that was the only thing that kept her from doing something she would surely regret later.

‘I understand this is all very hard on you,’ she said in her most soothing tone of voice, hands folded in her lap. ‘But I am sure that there are more sides to this story.’

She had searching her memory trying to remember what she knew about this specimen and her brain had provided her with the name of Einar, one of the king of Dale’s advisors, who had a lot of land south of that city in his possession. His current complaint was about the dwarf company he had signed a contract with for marble that was supposed to end up in the new house he was building. Now the dwarves were being “deliberately obstructive” he said and he wanted his marble right now.

‘Your Majesty, the marble isn’t there. It’s as simple as that,’ Einar insisted. ‘I am sure you can set this right, as their queen.’
It was a mistake made very commonly among men; that just because she was of the same race as they were, she would side with them. Kate always felt the need to point out that she had married a dwarf for a reason and that if she had truly been wanting to side with their lot, she’d have stuck with them. The fact that she hadn’t spoke volumes in her opinion, but clearly not in those the likes of which she now found herself talking to. With every passing year she understood better why Thorin wanted nothing to do with them.

*Listen to yourself, girl. You’re rather turning into a dwarf yourself,* she thought. Well, that was the truth, she supposed. She had spent so long living among them that it was inevitable that she would feel sympathetic towards them, as she was now their queen. It didn’t stop men from thinking what they wanted.

Truth was that they found her more approachable – certainly more reasonable – than the King under the Mountain. Another truth was that Thorin had run out of patience for men approximately a century, or more, ago, which was why they had come to the current arrangement. If something didn’t need Thorin’s urgent attention, she was to deal with the men, while he dealt with dwarvish envoys. The elvish delegates they received together. Elves were visitors both of them dreaded, and sharing the responsibility in dealing with them made the burden a bit lighter to bear. Shared troubles and all that stuff.

Today, Kate thought she’d rather be dealing with dwarves. Good grief, she’d even rather be talking to Lord Nali and his tiresome daughter than to be stuck in here listening to this whining. She knew the case. The leader of the dwarf company had explained the matter to her the previous day. Einar was supposed to pay three days ago, and he hadn’t done so. He had been the one to breach the contract first, no matter what he was bleating now, that was the long and short of it.

‘It will please you to hear that I have already talked to Regin, who, as you know, is the leader of the company you have signed a contract with. He told me that you were to deliver payment three days ago. He also told me that this payment has not been delivered, upon which he deemed it wiser to postpone delivery.’ Kate knew where the sentiment was coming from. Dwarves were commonly known to be greedy and Einar would much rather see the product before he paid, whereas Regin was afraid he would not be given his due when he had delivered it, making him want to see gold first. Hence they had reached an impasse and neither party was satisfied. And Maker forbid that one of them bent their stiff necks first. If both of them stopped mistrusting the other, this was not necessary at all.

‘My lady, I am sure you can understand…’ Einar began. It didn’t escape Kate’s notice that all of a sudden he didn’t call her Your Majesty anymore. And if he thought that was subtle, he’d have another thing coming.

‘What I understand is that you are extremely distrustful,’ she interrupted. One of the perks of being a queen was that she could do that without problems and consequences. ‘You will be here at noon tomorrow, with your gold, and hand it over to Regin. He in turn will deliver you the marble and then it is yours to do with as you wish.’

Regin, who had been remarkably quiet for the duration of the audience, bowed slightly. ‘As you wish,’ he told her.

Einar was less easily satisfied. ‘It was in the contract that the marble should be delivered to my home!’

‘It was not Regin who violated the terms of the contract,’ Kate pointedly reminded him. ‘Quite frankly, you have entirely wasted my time today. This is my judgement, Lord Einar, and if it is not to your liking, you are welcome to find another supplier of marble, but I guarantee you that you
won’t find them any closer than the Iron Hills.’ Her patience was rapidly running out now.

This elicited a lot of mumblings about how he hadn’t meant it like that, but the glares he sent in her direction belied his polite words. And she didn’t have any more patience to spare him, so she wrapped up the proceedings and, seeing that there were no others seeking either counsel or judgement, left. There would be paperwork aplenty – the stack on her desk was alarmingly high – and she was determined to deal with at least half of it before supper. Lufur, her bodyguard for the day, and generally one of her closest friends under the Mountain, almost had to run to keep up with her.

‘And they say dwarves are stubborn,’ he commented in his beard.

Kate laughed. ‘And so they are, but it would seem that it is not purely a dwarvish trait at all. Mahal preserve us, I do hope we won’t be seeing him again after tomorrow.’

‘I’d take him over Lady Nai any day, though, my lady,’ Lufur commented.

Kate had told him he was free to address her by her first name, the shortened version of it, but so far she had been entirely unsuccessful. True, he didn’t call her Your Majesty anymore, but my lady was as far as the compromise went in his case. But coming from Lufur’s mouth it sounded more like an endearment than a title.

‘I’d take Thranduil over Lady Nai,’ she pointed out.

They shared a laugh over that, which was the best thing they could do about it in the end. This was her life now and she had chosen it. It hardly seemed fair to complain. She was too old for that anyway. And so she took a deep breath when she found herself confronted with the enormous amount of work she had to do and set about it with a vengeance.Delaying was not going to help her and the sooner she got started, the sooner she was done.

Well, at least the kids were out of her hair for the day. Thoren and Duria were with their Aunt Dís on a trip to the Long Lake, Thráin had gone on a hunt with a couple of friends, Cathy was with Thora, the mother of Jack’s friend Flói, while those two were probably running amok somewhere in the Mountain. But there were no officials staying at present, so there was only so much damage they could do.

She’d hardly finished that thought when the door was pushed open and Cathy came in. She had that shy little girl smile on her face that she always had when she wanted something.

‘Hello, amad.’

The smile was so brilliant that Kate had to smile back. ‘Hello, little miss. Where do you come from all of a sudden?’

‘Mrs Thora had to go and “clear up Flói and Jack’s mess”,’ she replied, imitating Thora’s voice so well it was almost creepy.

_Do I want to know what mess they got themselves into this time?_ Kate thought to herself. She came to the conclusion that she really didn’t want to know. And here she was thinking that Thoren and Thráin had knack for trouble when they were a little younger. It would seem that Jack and Flói were in the process of out-doing them if only they could. She would have worked herself up over it, but she was too tired of all the business with Lord Einar and his marble to really do it. Anyway, Thora was dealing with matters already. Kate would just have to make sure she would take the boys to task next time when that time inevitably came around.
‘Well, I’m a little busy, so if you can play quietly, you can stay here,’ Kate said. No doubt that her
daughter could manage that. Jack was loud enough for two, so Cathy compromised by being a
sweet and rather shy girl.

She was not to be underestimated though. She could be devious if she so chose, and that smile
predicted that she was about to ask a favour she knew she had very little chance of being granted.
And true to expectations, Cathy’s next words were a request. ‘Can I go and play outside?'

Kate shook her head. ‘Not on your own, dear one. We had an agreement.’ Since the incident with
the River Running two years ago, she would be a fool if she let her youngest out near that river on
their own. She’d keep Thráin away as well, but she supposed he was old enough to know his own
mind by now. It didn’t mean she didn’t worry, though.

Cathy’s face fell and for a moment she frowned, apparently deep in thought, before brightening
considerably. ‘Can I go visit adad then?’

As far as Kate was aware, Thorin was taking a break from being king by retreating to the forge to
do some work, before he felt compelled to pull out his own beard in exasperation over the latest
matters at court. Cathy knew to stay away from the fire, and it was unlikely that Thorin would
object to Cathy’s presence; Kate had a lingering suspicion her husband would conquer kingdoms at
her request, if such a request were ever made. Besides, she really needed to get some work done.
‘Off you go,’ she told her daughter. ‘Tell him to be back in time for dinner. And to wash
beforehand.’

Cathy was already off, radiant smile all over her face. A daddy’s girl right there, Kate observed.
Well, she wouldn’t deny that right now that was exactly what she needed. With a heavy sigh she
turned back to the details of the legal case of a theft. This was going to be a long, long afternoon.

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From time to time it had not been all that bad to be a blacksmith, Thorin observed. They had one
huge advantage over kings; blacksmiths didn’t have to put up with all that much paperwork. As
king in exile he had been his people’s leader, but that had not involved the ridiculous amounts of
paperwork the crowned King under the Mountain had to put up with on a daily basis. Retreating to
the forge had been one of his better ideas of late to be sure. His race was made to work, and
although he would be the last one to claim that being king was not hard work, he gained almost no
satisfaction from doing it, not the kind of satisfaction he got from really crafting things. That was
what dwarves had been made for, and Thorin may have chosen an unconventional bride, but he
remained a dwarf through and through.

And it helped that he wasn’t just crafting anymore to just survive, and he wasn’t making things for
men only to be dismissed when they turned up their nose at work finer than they ever had any
hopes of making. Those times were long behind him. Now he could make things of beauty again,
and no man would dream of turning his nose up at it now. Not that it mattered; he couldn’t stand
the sight of them at the best of times, his own wife being the exception to the rule. It was one of
the reasons why Kate was the one to go and deal with their mannish visitors.

‘Hello, adad!’ A cheerful voice made him turn around. Cathy hands were clasped behind her back
so that she would not burn herself on anything, the way Thorin had told her to do whenever she
came visiting the forge. She unleashed her most brilliant smile on her father, the one Kate claimed
'What are you doing here?' Thorin asked, wiping his hands on a nearby cloth. ‘Mrs Thora grown tired of you?’

His youngest shook her head, bright red curls whipping her face with the force of it. ‘Mrs Thora had to get Jack and Flói out of trouble,’ she announced with a childish disdain that told the King under the Mountain she did not particularly care for her brother’s antics. Thorin could hardly blame her for that. He loved his children unconditionally, but Jack had been a troublemaker from the moment he figured out how to walk and started pushing things off tables, like bottles filled with ink and the like. It was hardly a surprise that he and his close friend had gotten themselves in trouble again. He could only hope that it wasn’t the kind of trouble that required royal intervention.

‘What’d they do this time?’ he asked. Thank the Maker for Thora, though. She had a wise head on his shoulders, and no doubt she’d lecture the lads on their behaviour as soon as she laid eyes on them.

Cathy shrugged. ‘Don’t know. Mr Lothar wouldn’t say.’

Thorin inwardly groaned. Lothar was a guardsman, making Jack’s offence probably a little bit bigger than just an unauthorised trip to the food stores.

Before he could think any longer about Jack, his twin demanded his attention again. ‘Amad sent me,’ she informed him. ‘She said you should be back before dinner.’ The smile became almost cheeky as she added her mother’s words, the exact phrasing too, if Thorin knew his wife at all: ‘And to wash beforehand.’

‘Did she say that, eh?’ He had to smile; the corners of his mouth curled up of their own volition. ‘You delivered your message well then, didn’t you?’

The smile only widened. ‘Can I go and play outside?’

A slight frown crept onto his forehead. ‘You know you’re not supposed to. Besides, your amad would have both our heads.’ And it was an agreement he wholly supported. He had forgotten none of the fear that had gripped his heart when he had been thinking that three of his children had drowned in the River Running. It was not a feeling he would willingly risk again.

Cathy tilted her head and blinked at him, silently pleading with him in addition to her verbal plea. ‘Please, adad? I’ll promise to stay away from the water. Pleasepleasepleaseplease?’

Kate would call him a marshmallow – whatever that was supposed to be – tell him that he gave in way too easily and was she really to do all the raising by her own only to have him ruining her good work again? Then again, Cathy never got into trouble. It would seem that even though his male offspring had made him go grey, he somehow never really had to worry about what his daughters were up to, although he still had his doubts about that Narvi lad Duria seemed so taken in with.

Before he could change his mind again, he nodded. ‘Very well. But only if you do stay very far away from the water,’ he added in a probably vain attempt to appear as if he was at least the one in charge here. King under the Mountain he may be, known for his skills in battle and for his terrifying scowl, but when it came to his youngest daughter, Kate’s assessment was probably spot on.

‘Thank you!’ Cathy rushed forward, hugged him and pressed a kiss against his beard, since she
was still too small to reach his face. He meant to lift her up, but she was gone already. A small part of his mind told him that he had made a very unwise decision. It was the very same part of his mind that warned him to arm himself when coming into contact with orcs, but Cathy was hardly going to run into orcs; the area was safe. Thorin himself had made sure of that. And surely she would keep her word that she would stay away from the water. She was half a dwarf, and dwarves were known for honouring their agreements. The thought that he may have been guilty of violating his agreement with his wife was one he conveniently banished to the back of his mind.

The day passed quickly and without other interferences, for which Thorin was grateful. Tomorrow he would face another day of court again, and all the paperwork that came with it. He didn’t hate it, not strictly speaking. He had fought too hard for it to be able to resent being king, a true King under the Mountain and not a king in exile. He had done right by his people and that was something he could never regret.

Kate was still frowning at the papers that were stacked on her desk in their living quarters when he came in. ‘Anything of interest?’ he asked.

‘Nice to see you too,’ Kate retorted, sending him a mocking glance. ‘And no, there’s nothing that can’t wait until after dinner.’ She only then seemed to realise something and she frowned, the frown that usually meant she was seeing right through some scheme of Thranduil and she didn’t like what she found. ‘Where’s Cathy? I thought she said that she was going to visit you for a bit?’

Maybe that part of his mind that had warned him about not sending Cathy to play outside had not been so mistaken after all…

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Cathy loved it outside. She’d loved it for as long as she could remember, so it may well be counted as forever. True, she loved being under the Mountain as well. She liked to feel of the carven stone underneath her fingertips and the precious gems catching the light and sending it around the halls in beams of red, green and gold. But there was something about grass underneath bare feet and sunlight on her face. She could keep it up for hours; running around outside the gates, pretending she was reliving her parents’ adventures all by herself. It was for sure that they had not spent all their lives being in Erebor, so there was no reason why she should. Her adad used to say that it was because she was fragile – a word Cathy did not quite understand yet, but that seemed to mean that she would get hurt as soon as she put as much as a toe outside the main gate – and her mother just said that it was because she said so.

But she was outside now, imagining the place to be full of elves for her to outwit. It was a game she sometimes played with Jack and Flói, although they always wanted her to play the elf, because she looked more like them, or so Flói claimed with that annoying smile of his.

‘Well, at least I’m smarter than you,’ she always retorted. And she was. Whereas Jack and Flói struggled with their school work, she excelled, and that was something to take pride in.

And this was a game she was good at, and even better at when there were no actual elves – or her brother and his friend, who could be just as annoying, if not worse – around, so that she could pretend she was really, really good at this.

She kept it up until strong hands picked her up and a low voice announced: ‘It seems I caught a
little elfling outside my gates!’

Cathy laughed and instinctively kicked, but her adad was not one for letting go. ’I’m not an elf!’ she protested indignantly. ’I’m running from elves.’

’Ah, is that it?’ he asked, putting her back on the ground. ’In that case we should probably run from them together, before they find us.’

Cathy arched an eyebrow. ’Amad says you don’t run from anyone. Ever.’ Truth be told, amad always said that adad could be very frightening as well, but she hadn’t seen any evidence of that for as long as she was alive. Sometimes she did wonder where those stories about her father slaying orcs came from. Her father was much too kind to slay anyone, even orcs. Still, both her parents insisted the tales were true. Of course, they could be exaggerating. Her school master himself said that most tales were slightly exaggerated.

’Let me tell you a secret, little princess,’ he said, sitting on the grass, pulling her down with him. ’Your amad is very right, but sometimes it’s wiser to keep out of a person’s way, when they’re angry, so as to avoid an unnecessary fight.’

Cathy frowned. ’But that’s running away.’

’It’s a strategic retreat,’ the King under the Mountain corrected. ’That’s just good battle sense. You’ll learn that when you’re a little bit older.’

Cathy was really growing tired of all the adults telling her that, and quite frankly, she didn’t think her father was particularly fearsome, but she agreed with her mother that he in general didn’t run away from things, or made a so-called “strategic retreat.” She was cleverer than to believe all that. ’Did you and amad fight?’ she asked hesitantly. She remembered them doing that once and it had frightened her a little.

’I told you,’ her father said. ’We don’t fight. It was a disagreement. And we have to be very nice to her for a day or two.’ He stared down at her. ’And you shouldn’t disobey your mother’s orders, lass. You’re far too young to have all that dragon’s cunning about you.’

Cathy frowned. ’You’re not angry?’ She was aware that she had possibly done something that was not very nice, but then, her mother hadn’t forbidden her to ask her father the same question she’d asked her, so it didn’t really count as misbehaviour, did it?

He gave her a stern glance. ’Don’t do it again,’ he told her. ’Now, I believe I have a little elfling to catch.’

It took her a few moments to grasp what he meant and then she was up, squealing in delight as she ran away, her father chasing after her.

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Unknown to father and daughter, there was someone watching the game from a window with fond exasperation. Kate, Queen under the Mountain, may have made a bit of a scene before she sent her husband out to make sure Cathy didn’t do herself a harm – ’If you gave her permission to play outside, you’d better bloody well make sure that nothing happens to her yourself!’ – but that was wholly justified, she told herself. They had an agreement, and even though it was sometimes
endearing to see, how she was to raise her daughter if he gave in to her every whim – ‘Honestly, Thorin, all it takes for her is to smile and bat her eyes and you’re practically putty in her little hands!’ – she would like to know. Of course girl children were rarer, more treasured among dwarves, but honestly, did he really have to let her get her way about every little thing – ‘How is she supposed to learn the meaning of the word no if you never say it to her?’ – every single day?

Still, at the end of the day, she was just happy to have this life, to have them. She only had to remember how very easily things might have turned out different to remember that being grateful for what she had was not such a bad thing at all.

She might however postpone telling that to Thorin for another hour or two.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up next, a request from uno mega for a piece about what happened with Kate’s family while she was on the quest. It might be a while until it’s done, but it’s coming.
Please review? I’d always like to hear what you guys are thinking. And as always, requests are welcome.
She had been worrying. What would her family do if they discovered Kate had quite literally disappeared off the face of the earth? She imagined they would call the police, start an investigation. The police would search for her, investigate every clue until the trail inevitably went dead. As time dragged on, they would start to give up hope, tell her loved ones to prepare for the worst…

The Journal, Chapter 6: Uncomfortable Situations

When he looked back on it later, Jacko Andrews would always be able to say exactly when the nightmare had begun. And to think that it was just such a normal Tuesday afternoon. If that wasn’t a cruel reminder that normal days could turn into hell, then he didn’t know what was.

He was in the supermarket, having gone there after work to buy the necessities for dinner, as the fridge had turned out to be rather empty when he had inspected it that morning. What little it was that remained had all gone bad. He chalked it up to too many takeaways and dinners at Jane’s place in the past week. His not so very well developed cooking skills had nothing to do with the matter whatsoever. That was what he said out loud anyway. If called upon he would claim that there were just others who could cook so much better than he ever would.

True, living on his own was just not as easy as he had always expected it to be. How his mother balanced running a household and a full-time job, he’d never know. What he did know was that his mother probably would faint at the sight of his flat. Best keep her away.

He was in the queue for the check-out when his mobile phone rang. The number on the screen was vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t quite place it. And now admittedly was not the time to think about it; people were staring. ‘Jacko Andrews.’

‘Hi, this is Laura Porter,’ a female voice replied. The voice, like the number, was familiar, and he had the annoying feeling that the name should mean something as well, but he drew a blank.
‘Kate’s flatmate,’ she added helpfully before he could embarrass himself by having to ask for her name.

‘Ah.’ In hindsight he should have known that. Laura Porter: green eyes, black hair down to her waist, and a mouth that never seemed to stop moving for even a second. Kate and she had been thick as thieves from the age of five. It didn’t explain why she was calling him. They had never been friends – he had always taken care to lock himself in his room when she came over – and as far as Jacko was aware, she didn’t even have his number. ‘How did you get my number?’

‘Kate’s address book,’ Laura said. Was it just his imagination, or was she a bit nervous? ‘Look, I know this sounds a bit insane, but is there any chance that Kate is with you?’

He didn’t know about insane, but this was unexpected. ‘Not that I know of,’ he answered, frown on his face as he tried to pay for the groceries and keep a conversation on the phone going at the same time. ‘Why are you asking?’

That set off a rambled explanation. ‘Well, she was going on a hiking trip for two weeks, but she was due back on Sunday afternoon, only she never came. I’ve tried calling her mobile, but I think it’s switched off, straight on to voicemail. Then I tried the travel agency, Magical Trips, but the phone number’s apparently not in existence right now and when I googled the address, it turned out there’s an accountant’s office. I don’t know where she is, but it’s not like her!’ It sounded frustrated as well as a tad bit scared.

Laura seemed slightly out of breath after her hurried explanation, which couldn’t have taken up more than twenty seconds, if that, and Jacko was having a physical reaction to her words himself; his blood had run cold and his skin was crawling in the same way it had done when his father had walked out on them almost ten years ago.

‘Have you tried my mother?’ he asked. He wouldn’t put a lot of money on that bet, though. His twin was nothing if not punctual and she made it her habit always to tell someone where she was and when she would be back. If she had told Laura that she would be back on Sunday, she expected to be back on Sunday. If there had been a change of plan, then Laura, as her flatmate, would have been the very first to know. As it was, there could be any number of explanations for this disappearing act, but something about this felt wrong, especially the bit about that travel agency being nowhere to be found.

‘I didn’t want to alarm her,’ Laura admitted. ‘So I thought I’d call you first.’

‘You did the right thing,’ Jacko assured her. His mother wasn’t frail, not by any stretch of the imagination – she had survived seventeen years of marriage to John Andrews after all – but Kate having gone missing would be a shock and the news might be better coming from him. ‘I’ll ask her myself. In the meantime, can you call her friends, colleagues? You said you had her address book, right?’ Maybe he was overreacting and Kate would either laugh and call him a fool, or she would snap at him to stop being such a big baby since she was a grown-up and could look after herself perfectly, thank you very much. There was also the possibility that something really was wrong.

‘I didn’t want to alarm her,’ Laura asked, seeming relieved that he was actually taking her seriously.

‘You know Kate,’ he said. ‘If she says she’ll be somewhere, she’ll be there.’ And something about that travel agency was off, too. ‘Call me if you find anything, and even if you don’t.’

He was so distracted that he almost left the supermarket without his groceries until a girl ran after him, carrying the items in her arms, and pushing them into his with a look that clearly stated she
didn’t think much of his intelligence. Kate would probably have come up with some witty remark or a bark in annoyance, but Jacko had never been the type for that. Jacko pouts, Kate shouts, their father used to say in the good old days when he was still living with them. As much as Jacko despised him now, there was truth in that. He’d like to think that he had outgrown the pouting, but he was still the more thoughtful type, whereas Kate was impulsive and easily vexed.

It had started to rain when he left the supermarket and so he waited till he was back in his car before he made the call to his mother. Best to get this over with.

The phone was answered after just two rings. ‘Helen Andrews.’

‘Hi, mum. It’s Jacko.’

‘That’s a nice surprise!’ she exclaimed. ‘You don’t call all that often anymore.’

And how he wished he had a more pleasant reason to make this particular call. ‘Sorry,’ he apologised. ‘I take it Kate calls more often than I do?’ His twin would have barged in and asked the question straightaway, but Jacko wasn’t like that. If he could he would rather not alarm her, not in the least because he would probably look a right fool if he worked himself up into a panic for nothing. He didn’t think that he was – either panicking or panicking for nothing – but he’d rather not take the risk all the same.

‘Not much,’ his mother admitted. ‘But she lives nearby.’

‘I’d visit more often, but it’s quite a drive,’ he said, not sure why this felt like it was an accusation when he was fairly sure it had not been meant that way. ‘And how is my favourite sister these days?’

‘She’s your only sister,’ his mother countered. ‘But she’s fine, I think. She went on a hiking trip, but I haven’t heard from her since. Too busy having fun to text, I shouldn’t wonder.’

_Maybe you should wonder._ He didn’t like the sound of this at all. ‘So, actually you haven’t seen her for weeks?’

If he was hoping that he had kept the worry out of his voice, he was in for a big disappointment. ‘Jacko, are you all right? Is something wrong?’

‘I don’t know,’ he answered honestly. ‘I don’t know.’

A few hours later he did know. He’d told his mother that Laura had some trouble locating Kate, and that he would come over to try and find out what they could before they would take this to the police. He didn’t want to look a fool, and so he kept it to himself, but he could almost feel that something wasn’t quite right. Besides, he didn’t go in for all that nonsense about “sensing” that things were wrong or dangerous. Still, he had to admit that this didn’t feel right as he went through Kate’s things with Laura, feeling a bit guilty about doing so without her permission. If she ever found out, she would probably raise merry hell about it and he would have to grovel on his knees for her forgiveness.

‘There’s nothing,’ Laura told him. She had been mostly silent, which was in sharp contrast with her usual chatter. She had done as he asked and called every person in Kate’s address book, only to
hear that none of them had seen her in two weeks or longer. What her calling had done was alarm every single person of Kate’s acquaintance, not exactly the result Jacko had in mind when he asked her to do it. ‘Just that holiday brochure. Here, take a look at it.’

He did exactly that. The thing was that there was nothing about it that suggested this wasn’t a perfectly normal flyer. There was an address and a phone number. There wasn’t an email address though, which was strange. Surely no travel agency would be so behind the times not to have one, or a website, come to think of it? Had Kate noticed? Or had she just shrugged it off, as Jacko himself might have done if he had been in any other situation than this one? Would he have noticed if he had been in her shoes? He knew almost for certain that he wouldn’t have. Only now that he was trying to look for clues did it jump off the page.

Whatever it was he had been looking for – and he wasn’t even certain what exactly that was, notes maybe, diary, anything that might tell them were Kate was – it wasn’t there and he got to his feet, more frustrated and, yes he would admit it, afraid than he had been before. This was nothing like what his sister would do, not normally, not ever. Something must have happened to her. God forbid, she might even be dead. She had left two weeks ago and only now had Laura sounded the alarm. It wasn’t that he blamed her for that – she couldn’t have known any sooner and with Kate herself being on holiday, as planned – but that could mean that she had been in danger for two whole weeks already. Now that was nothing to calm his nerves in any way.

‘There’s nothing,’ he agreed. A look at his watch told him that it was well past midnight already and both of them were looking tired. ‘We’ll have to report her missing in the morning.’

Laura nodded, defeat written all over her face. There were no words, though. Jacko himself hardly knew what to say. He only felt that it was his task to take charge, and so he had to.

‘I can look after the cat,’ he offered. The animal was Kate’s, a white cat with black paws and a black patch on the tip of its tail by the name of Fidget. Laura didn’t much like it, and now that it seemed that Kate may not be home anytime soon, it seemed polite to offer. ‘I’m staying with my mother. She’ll be more than happy…’

He wasn’t allowed to finish that sentence. ‘I’ll look after him,’ Laura interrupted, as she picked the cat up from the floor and practically clutched him to her chest. ‘It’s no problem. I can do it.’

Even Jacko knew that Laura all but detested the beast and that Kate practically had to bribe her into caring for him while she was away. But he didn’t question her actions, not now. He heard that which wasn’t spoken. It was the fear that if both of them acknowledged that Kate might not come home – even if it was in removing her cat – then it would become real and she would never be home again.

Things did not look better in the morning. Jacko didn’t know why he had thought – or hoped, more like – that they would be, but they weren’t. Kate still was not there. But then, this was not where she lived. Could it be that she had turned up at her own home? He didn’t think it likely, but he phoned Laura all the same.

‘It’s Jacko,’ he told her when the phone was answered after just two rings. ‘Is there any chance…?’

Laura spared him the need to finish the question. ‘She isn’t here.’
Jacko tried to squash the feeling of disappointment. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t known already that she would not be there; Laura would have called if she had miraculously turned up in the middle of the night, never mind the time. Still, it felt as if he’d been kicked in the gut by an angry mule. Bloody hell, Kate, where are you?

It wasn’t the fact that she was not here – Kate was forever dashing here, there and everywhere – it was the not knowing that made him feel as if he could fall ill at any moment now, he pondered as he shaved. His mother was already downstairs, or maybe he should say that she was still downstairs; the door to her bedroom was open and her bed looked remarkably unslept in. Not that Jacko himself had gotten much rest. Most of the night had been spent in tossing, turning and wondering. His mind had come up with worst case scenarios that made the worst horror movies appear like children’s cartoons.

True to expectations his mother was pale and sporting dark rings under her eyes as she handed him a cup of coffee, that he sorely needed. Coffee didn’t make things better, but at least it cleared his mind, and the last thing he could use was to appear like a babbling idiot when he wanted the police people to take him seriously. And he needed the police to take him seriously, because his sister was missing and he had no idea where she was or what had happened to her. The thought was more frightening than he had thought possible.

‘I found a good photograph to take with you,’ his mother said, pushing the aforementioned picture at him from across the table. It was a fairly recent one, taken last Christmas, when they had celebrated with just the four of them; his mother, Kate, Jane and himself. A small party only, but it had been great. In the picture Kate was laughing at the camera, that mocking half-smile on her face as she scoffed at Jacko that he really ought to learn how to handle a camera before he attempted to use it.

He forced himself to smile and nod his thanks. Suddenly it seemed awfully difficult to speak. ‘Thank you. It’s a good picture.’

He stared at his coffee rather than the picture, though. Somehow it felt a bit painful to look at Kate’s smiling face when she might very well be dead. He didn’t think she was; he’d like to think that he’d know somehow if she was. They were twins, weren’t they supposed to sense how the other was, being closer than most siblings? But he could sense nothing except the uncertainty. He could only guess, and his guessing didn’t make him feel any calmer at all.

‘I thought so.’ Helen Andrews was famous for talking, well, chatting. As long as Jacko could remember she had filled the house with the sound of her chattering. There was no chatter now. All there was, was silence.

Jacko didn’t think of himself as a melancholy type, much less as one with a love of theatrics. He liked to think of himself as practical, as capable of keeping a cool head in crisis situations, but that attitude was rather failing him now. Fear was a paralytic, not a motivator. He knew he should turn his anxiety about his twin into action, but he found it hard to do so.

_The longer you sit here and wallow, the greater the chance that Kate is dead._ He didn’t know how that thought crept into his head, but it did the job of snapping him out of his lethargy. This was what he needed, the thought that what he did actually mattered, the idea that his actions could make a difference, that as long as he was doing something, there was actually a chance that Kate was still alive.

And just like that his organising nature resurfaced. There were things that needed doing, and he was the one to do them. Already he was making a list in his head. So he gulped down the last remnants of coffee and got up. ‘I’ll pick up Laura,’ he announced, picking up the picture, pointedly...
avoiding to look at it. He’d gotten out of his mood now, and he didn’t want to risk sliding back into it. He took a deep breath. ‘And someone needs to tell dad.’ There was something very wrong about calling that man by the title of dad, which indicated a measure of warmth and affection, and Jacko felt neither. He’d never really gotten along with him, but Kate had clung to him for as long as she could, a daddy’s girl to the core, although she hadn’t seen him in years now either. For as far as Jacko was aware, contact between them was non-existent. Still, he would need to be told.

‘He wasn’t in Kate’s address book?’ his mother asked.

‘Address crossed out, phone number unreadable.’ He had seen that only the evening before. Laura had mentioned it to him, after which she asked if it would be worth a try to call him if Jacko had his number, which he didn’t have. Anyway, it would be a waste of time, he’d told her; Kate had not seen him in years. Why would she suddenly do so now? But he needed to know anyway. And it would be better coming from Jacko than from a stranger. Or that was what he liked to think at least.

It was difficult to say how long the interview with the police lasted for. It felt like a lifetime on one hand, and a short mere seconds on the other. To be honest, Jacko found it hard to recall much of it later. It was all a bit of a blur as he answered questions and tried to get it into a thick skull that his sister wasn’t one for running off or disappearing into a drug den – at which point he had almost bodily hauled the bloody idiot interviewing him over the table – before someone with more sense took over. This one did take him seriously, and so Jacko found himself repeating his story again, with Laura to back him up. She was interrogated about when she had last seen Kate, what Kate had been like then – hurried and excited – and every last detail about that trip she was supposed to go on. Laura handed over the brochure – Jacko was glad he’d made copies the previous evening – and had to admit that she didn’t know much. They’d both been so busy that they hadn’t had much time to chat. There were alarmingly little facts to go on, and it was not something that had escaped Jacko’s notice. Kate’s entire disappearance was shrouded in mystery.

And it did nothing to improve his mood. He dropped off Laura and then found a quiet little restaurant with Wi-Fi to eat and find out his father’s address. He’d checked Kate’s address book, but his twin had gone to great lengths to make it unreadable, and he had to google to find out what he needed to know. While his laptop was still in the process of booting up, and his food had not yet arrived, he gave Kate’s mobile phone another try. ‘Hi, this is Kate Andrews. Or well, it’s my voicemail actually. I am currently unable to take your call – or I have accidentally left my phone at home again – so please leave a message and I’ll try to call you back as soon as I can.’ It was almost a relief to hear his sister’s voice, even only on her voicemail. She sounded so cheerful there, so carefree, that Jacko could almost be fooled into believing that she was all right. But then he remembered that this was not really Kate and that her welcome message was only a poor substitute for the Kate he really wanted to see.

It was strange really, he pondered as he ate his food without really tasting it. He had not been very close with her, close enough, but not as thick as thieves. They could go weeks without seeing one another, and neither of them had a problem with that, but when they did meet, it was almost always with warmth and ease. But Jacko hadn’t really thought about Kate for a few weeks, not until Laura had phoned him yesterday, but now Kate took centre stage, right away. It was because she wasn’t here now that he was worried, extremely so. It was because he could already be far too late and he wished to God they had spent more time together, as he would have done if only he knew this was coming.
You don’t know if it’s too late. He immediately called himself to order. They didn’t know anything yet. There could still be some reasonable explanation for all of this. Something could have gone a tad bit wrong with the trip, and therefore her mobile stopped working or something like that. But he dismissed that thought again the very next second, because if that was the case, why then would the travel agency have vanished? No, there was something very fishy about all of that. And why would someone go to all that trouble of inventing such a company only to abduct his sister? It didn’t make any sense. Kate wasn’t someone who got into trouble with the kind of people who could afford to do such things. She got into trouble often enough – well, she talked herself into trouble, more like – but not that kind of trouble. She was just an ordinary woman, not someone who deserved that kind of special attention. Mystery indeed. Frustration ruled supreme, although he could hardly deny the growing panic underneath.

It helped to do something, but not much. Still, he googled his father’s address and then, on an impulse, entered the words Magical Trips into the search browser. The results that came up were mostly about Magical Tours, while Google helpfully asked him if he had not meant that perhaps. No, he hadn’t, but it couldn’t hurt to look over the results all the same, only to realise that was a waste of his time. The very first link in the list was something about spiritual holidays, and he was quite sure that was the kind of nonsense Kate really did not have the patience for. He looked up the address in the brochure and added that to the name. The no results found message that appeared on the screen made his heart sink, even though he had known in advance that it was unlikely to turn up any satisfactory results. But really, what had he expected? Had he really thought that he could find answers on the internet? He had been a bloody fool for even hoping.

With that, he finished his meal, gathered his belongings, paid and left the restaurant. He had a visit to pay to his father. Now there was something he definitely not looking forward to, but it had to be done. A small voice in his head whispered that maybe Kate was with him, but Jacko squashed that voice right away. Even if there had been nothing wrong with that travel agency, then he was still the last person she would have gone to. She had done that once, about six years ago, and without telling him until after it had all been said and done. Judging by the way she told the story, things had not gone well, and that was even with all the editing she had done. What she had told him included the part about their father having remarried and having a son with his new wife. Henry was the kid’s name, she’d said. Jacko had been a tad bit curious after hearing he had a half-sibling, but he didn’t think it was worth the trouble to go and see for himself. It wasn’t as if his father took an interest in him these days after all, and Jacko found that he could live his life without him easily enough. He didn’t need his father in his life, not the way Kate had needed him, even though she would probably rather die than admit to such a thing.

The sun was shining when he parked his car and walked the path to the front door, something that seemed wholly inappropriate for a day such as this one. He couldn’t help but notice that his father had done well for himself indeed if he could afford to live in a house such as this one. He’d done professionally well, if not personally.

Part of him really didn’t want to be here, would gladly leave this job to the police, but then, that would be cowardly behaviour and Jacko Andrews was not a coward. Besides, there wasn’t much else he could do at the moment and he found he needed to do something, anything, if he didn’t want to go mad instantly. That was quite possibly the only reason he actually rang the doorbell after staring at it for a solid five minutes.

‘I’ll get it!’ someone yelled inside as soon as the noise died down. It was a child’s voice. ‘Leave it, Tara, I can do it. I’m the oldest!’ He was yelling loud enough that Jacko could hear every word.

The door opened before he could analyse the voice any further, and for a moment it was like being hit in the chest with a sledgehammer, the face that looked up at him was that familiar. If not for the
fair hair and green eyes, it could have been Kate at age eight or nine. No doubt this was the half-brother she had mentioned; the messy hair was a dead giveaway. The Andrews curse they used to call it, since every born Andrews seemed to suffer from it.

‘Hello!’ the child said, looking far too happy. ‘I’m Henry Andrews. Who are you?’

‘I am Jacko,’ he answered, omitting his surname as to not confuse the boy. That would lead to questions, and he hadn’t come here to answer those. ‘I’m here to see my… your father,’ he added, catching and correcting himself at the last possible moment. ‘Is he at home?’

The child nodded so enthusiastically that he would probably give himself a headache. ‘He’s in his study. Tara, you go and get dad, I’ll look after Mr Jacko.’ He seemed awfully pleased with himself for thinking up this arrangement.

The girl standing behind him, a six-year old child with the same messy hair – although it was as red as Jacko and Kate’s – and blue eyes, positively glared at her brother. ‘Why?’ she demanded.

‘Because I’m the oldest,’ Henry said. ‘And you’re not supposed to talk to strangers.’

The girl – Tara? – took that for all that it was worth. ‘You’re not supposed to talk to strangers either,’ she countered. ‘But I’ll do it, just this once.’ She smiled deviously. ‘You’ll owe me a favour.’ No wondering where she got all that cunning from; her father was just as bad.

Jacko was just glad that the whole confrontation was over and that he was now shown to the living room. Henry seemed to enjoy the job of playing host to a visitor, holding open doors with a polite smile and chatting non-stop about his favourite football team and his school, which only required Jacko to listen and nod every now and then. And that was a good thing, because he was hardly in a mood for chatter himself. Here he was, meeting his half-siblings, who didn’t even know or suspect that they were related, all while on a mission to tell his father that the only sibling he did want to see was missing. He had been in more pleasant situations to be sure.

He had been in less awkward ones too, and it certainly became awkward when the door opened and Tara dashed in again, announcing that she had found her dad, and he would be here soon, would the visitor perhaps care for something to drink? She wasn’t allowed to make tea, but she could get something else. It really didn’t help matters that she sounded so like Kate when she chattered.

Jacko was on the verge on asking for whisky – God knew he could use a bit of alcohol in his system if he was expected to deal with this and leave with his sanity intact – but that was something he could hardly ask of a child and so he said he was fine, thank you. And thankfully he didn’t need to bother with any more attempts at conversation, because his father entered. He was older than Jacko remembered him being, but with almost ten years in between meetings, that was to be expected. His hair had mostly turned grey, but was just as messy and curly as it had always been. There were more wrinkles too, but all in all he looked relaxed, like someone who went through life without stress, without a care in the world. It stung that he had almost never looked like that when he had still been married to Jacko’s mother, not that he could remember anyway.

‘Jacko?’ John Andrews had stopped in the doorway, jaw dropping, looking as if he had seen a ghost.

‘Yes.’ He didn’t even think about acknowledging that man as dad, not with his two children from another marriage in the same room, and then quite probably not even without them in the room.

It was as if his father had read his mind. ‘Henry, Tara, go and play in your rooms.’
The boy frowned. ‘Why?’

‘Because I say so, that’s why. Now.’

The children looked infinitely curious, but they did as they were told, which was probably nothing short of a miracle. It was also a miracle that Jacko was infinitely grateful for. The last thing he wanted was to spend more time with the living and breathing reminders that his father was a lying bastard without as much as an ounce of regret in his body for the havoc he had wreaked on the lives of his former wife and two other children.

‘Please sit,’ his father said.

Jacko was tempted to say that he’d rather remain standing, but he had a lot to tell and that would be better if it was done from a sitting position. He gave a nod and did as he was asked to.

‘Why are you here?’ The tone of voice wasn’t exactly hostile, but neither was it very welcoming. But then, he had not expected that it would. There was too much bad blood between them. There was mostly surprise, and confusion too.

Well, if his father could be blunt, Jacko could do that trick as well. ‘Kate has gone missing.’

Whatever it was that his father had expected, this was not it. He stared at Jacko in what looked like a greater state of shock than he had put on display than when he had come into the room and had found his estranged son in his living room. No doubt Kate would have a scathing remark ready had their roles been reversed, but Jacko had always liked to think of him as the most grown-up of the two of them. At the very least he was less impulsive, less likely to explode.

‘I’m sorry?’ Those were the words he opted on in the end.

‘Kate has gone missing,’ Jacko repeated. ‘Her friend phoned me last night. She hasn’t come back from her holiday.’ Those were possibly the hardest words he had ever needed to say, even though he had said them at the police station this morning already. Each time he spoke the words it started to feel more and more real, more like something that was actually happening, and not just a nightmare of his.

He ended up explaining everything, and throughout the conversation he saw his father’s attitude shift from shocked and not understanding to alert and interested. He even took a notepad from the side table to make notes, the way he might do when he had clients. Jacko wasn’t entirely sure what to make of the idea that now he had apparently been degraded to client, but at the same time he should probably be glad that he wasn’t met with blatant disinterest for what he had to tell. Maybe John Andrews cared for his eldest daughter more than he’d let on in recent years. But then, Kate had always been a daddy’s girl, and before they started fighting at every opportunity, they had been close. If he was not very much mistaken, he may even have seen a flash of regret on his face when Jacko explained that they had called everyone in Kate’s address book, and he must have realised that since he had not received a call, he wasn’t in her address book anymore.

‘What would you like me to do?’ was the question at the end of the story. It sounded like he meant it, but Jacko knew better than to take his word for anything these days.

‘When they catch a suspect, you could do me the favour of not defending him in court,’ Jacko remarked wryly, not quite sure what to make of this change in behaviour. Whatever it was that he had been expecting, this was not it. His father had never cared one iota for any of the family he had left behind. Why would that change because Kate was missing?
‘Jacko, I meant it.’ He almost sounded pleading.

‘Yes, so did I,’ Jacko countered. ‘You never cared. You just walked out. And you know what? We did just fine without you. We don’t need you now.’

‘Yes, you do. You need my contacts, the people I know,’ his father said. ‘I know we didn’t always get along very well…’

‘You can say that again,’ Jacko muttered.

His father ignored that. ‘But Kate is my daughter and I do care.’

‘Yes, your particular brand of caring seems to involve not telling your wife about us and not getting in touch for years on end. Forgive me if I misunderstood. Mea maxima culpa.’ Too late he realised he was employing Kate’s unique type of sarcasm to get back at his father, and that was probably not the best way to go about this, especially because he was right and they would need all the help they could get. Kate would need all the help Jacko could get, and she would not thank him for messing this up. She might not be alive to scold him for it if he made a mess of this. Now that helped him to set his priorities straight. ‘I’m sorry.’ It took considerable effort to get the words out of his mouth. ‘Is there anything you can really do?’

‘I think there is.’ It looked like determination, the emotion on his face. Jacko found it hard to suppress some of the relief he felt. ‘Listen, Jacko, I know that you do not like me, but can we work together, for Kate’s sake?’

Jacko recognised this for what it was, an unparalleled attempt at emotional blackmail. He was even more pissed off because it was working. By dragging Kate into this conversation, he had effectively ensured Jacko’s cooperation. And for a moment he wasn’t entirely sure if he should be glad of the help, or extremely furious for being used like this.

In the end it turned out that he was more glad than furious, because this was something that his father, for reasons beyond Jacko’s comprehension, seemed to take seriously. Not that there was any more conversation than was strictly required, and most of it was by phone anyway. Even his mother approved of the arrangement, as long as she didn’t have to be the one to do the communicating, which meant that Jacko was the go-between. Not a role he fancied taking on – it had always been Kate in that position – but for his sister’s sake he was willing to put up with it. And, quite frankly, it was remarkable what people were prepared to do for her when the news broke that she was missing, in the form of an appeal on television. Most of the assistance and sympathies – things Jacko hated, because they seemed to imply that people believed she was dead – offered came from friends and distant family, just the usual rallying of forces and sticking together in case of a crisis. When however the guy who had cheated on Kate some years ago, Marc, came knocking, Jacko immediately sent him away. He had that guilty look and the nervous disposition of someone who feared that they would be taken for a suspect and quickly started smarming their way around the family to kill suspicion. A lot of people who had been annoyed with his sister had started to act like that, and Jacko had sent them all away. He didn’t think they had anything to do with the matter anyway; not enough money and power to pull off such a thing.

The support did help, but mostly Jacko found it increasingly hard to deal with. Kate’s face on television screens was a bit of a giveaway, and had made sure that every single person of his
acquaintance knew what was going on. He’d avoided them for a week, but when that week ended and there was still no sign of his sister, his mother reminded him that using up all his days off was not going to bring Kate back and that he had to go back to his own flat. He would have to face life, much as he hated the thought. It felt like giving up.

He hated the thought even more when he got back to work and he was either assaulted by the sympathy shower or avoided like he had the plague, as if having a sister gone missing was contagious and they feared one of their own loved ones might disappear if they came too close to him. Jane was nothing short of a blessing, explaining that they just didn’t know what to say to him, not knowing how he would take it. What she didn’t say, but what Jacko could read as subtext, was that a lot of people did the same thing when someone had lost someone to death. That thought did nothing to make him feel better at all.

And things only got worse as time dragged on. After two weeks the despair had settled quite comfortably under his skin and in his stomach, giving him little appetite and robbing him of his much-needed sleep. Jane expressed worry for him, but Jacko ignored the concern as he phoned the police another time, demanding an update, all but ordering them to tell him that Kate had been found alive. His hands shook and his eyes burned when they told him that there was no clue to be found.

Four weeks on the police had still not seen hide nor hair of Kate, and that was when his father launched the idea to hire a private detective. Jacko hardly had the funds to pay for such a thing, but John Andrews assured him that the costs were not for him to worry over. Normally he would have argued over such a thing, but if this was he needed to do to get Kate back, then he would let his father pay, even though he did stop to wonder what on earth had caused him to change so drastically.

‘Is he any good?’ he asked. ‘The detective?’

‘He isn’t quite Sherlock Holmes,’ his father admitted. ‘But only just. He’s good enough, Jacko. And he owes me several favours.’

Jacko decided not to ask, and instead just gave him the green light to go ahead and do what needed doing. He was desperate enough to give it a try.

Eight weeks and counting it looked like the detective – Patrick Miles – didn’t have any more success than the police though. He had been told that whoever had abducted Kate, because by now it was quite obvious that was the case, had been very, very clever about what they did. They had left no evidence behind them except that one brochure, and that was hardly anything at all to go on, since Magical Trips did not exist, and never had, and there was no tracing where the brochure had come from in the first place. That was their only clue, but it led to a dead end. He had known – feared – this for a while, but it didn’t make the news any easier to bear. Jacko tried Kate’s mobile again after that meeting, alone in his flat, when Jane had gone out to see her mother, listening to the recording of his twin’s voice at least a dozen times, feeling wearier than he had in months.

In the twelfth week he visited his mother again, only to find that she wasn’t dealing with this any
better than Jacko himself was, which was to say: not at all. Her face was pale, there were dark rings
underneath her eyes and even he could see that she had lost several pounds, although he was
probably not one to lecture her about weight loss when his own appetite had been severely affected
by recent events. Not even in the years leading up to the divorce had she looked this bad. They sat
in silence for a while, drinking tea. Eventually Jacko shared the details of the case, not liking the
fact that there had been so little progress that he could tell everything there was to tell – including
details – in a mere three minutes and twenty seconds. His father was trying to get a new appeal on
television done, but Jacko didn’t think it was going to yield results, not after twelve weeks, fourteen
if he counted the two weeks that Kate had supposedly been on holiday. The detective had told him
there was a distinct possibility that even if they did find Kate after all this time, there was no
guarantee that she was still alive. That was the only detail he omitted in his progress report.
Besides, even without him saying it, his mother would know.

He didn’t stay long. In fact, he all but fled. Everything in this house reminded him of Kate. He
could too easily picture her, sitting curled up on the sofa with her nose stuck in a book, leaning on
the counter while their mother was cooking and she pretended to help only so that she could chat
and talk about her day, trying their mother’s harp and producing a noise that could not be called
music by any stretch of the imagination, sitting at the table opposite their mother while they were
engaged in a battle of Scrabble – it was never just a game with them, not when they were both so
good with words – arguing over whether or not a word one of them had just invented was even a
word at all, and if not, why it should be one. The memories were overwhelming and, he realised,
extremely unwelcome. Kate, he decided, was like the tooth he had lost when he nine and had a
little accident that knocked aforementioned teeth out: gone, and he kept sticking his tongue in the
hole she had left behind, more so every day.

Every day, hope started to fade a little more.

Jacko would never say that he was giving up on Kate. How could he? She was his twin, his sister,
and one of his best friends. But he wouldn’t insist on optimism up to the point of insanity either,
and he knew that the chance that Kate was even still alive was extremely small. The police had told
them so, the private detective had told them so, friends and family treated them like it was so. As
summer changed into autumn and no news had been heard from her, the frustration about the
uncertainty started to get the upper hand. He would never wish Kate dead, would never wish that
fate for her, but he did want closure, something that could at least tell them if she was dead or alive.
But no body had been found, and Kate was still missing. She could have been dead for months.
And, much as he loathed that thought, life went on without her. He’d let Jane whisk him away on a
holiday to France during the summer, had gone to work without missing a day after that one week
and started eating and sleeping somewhat normally again. And he hated that, because to him it felt
too much like accepting the current situation, too much like admitting that she was probably dead
and never coming back. He was learning to live with this, not easily, but out of pure necessity, but
it terrified him all the same, maybe because he didn’t really expect to hear any news by now. With
something of a shock he realised that he was on the verge of giving up. He hadn’t even really
protested when Patrick Miles had warned him that the chances of Kate’s survival were
unbelievably small.

He was on his way to work at the end of October when his mobile rang. He was driving, and
normally he would have ignored the call, but his screen told him that it was his father and he never
called if he could reasonably avoid contact, which meant that this had to do with Kate, the only reason they even had contact at all. That decided him, so he parked in the first available parking spot that he saw – a parking spot for disabled people – and answered. ‘Jacko Andrews.’

His father didn’t bother with the niceties. Normally he gave some indication of to whom Jacko was speaking, but today he even skipped that. ‘Miles called,’ he reported, a hint of excitement to his voice. ‘The police have found a witness to Kate’s abduction.’

When called on later, Jacko would violently deny having been the source of that choking noise that was audible when that news properly sank in. There was news. No, even more, there was a witness. Months of silence, but now there was a witness. And that meant that there was something to be investigated after all. And that meant that there was still a reason to hope.

‘And?’ he asked, keeping his fingers crossed for good news.

The news wasn’t good. ‘The police have dismissed his account. I don’t know why. I want to talk to him myself to find out. Would you like to come?’

‘Is that even entirely legal?’ Jacko asked.

‘I don’t care about legal,’ his father growled down the line, which was quite something out of the mouth of a lawyer. ‘I care about finding my daughter.’ Indicating that because Jacko was a tad bit worried about the legalities, he didn’t care as much about Kate.

Irritated at being put in his place like that, and really not appreciating the fact that he was getting a lecture about caring from the very man who had not cared enough for his family to stay, Jacko snapped: ‘Give me the address.’ His father obliged, fortunately refraining from adding any more “helpful” commentary. ‘Give me two hours. I’ll meet you there.’ He hung up before his father could say anything more.

It was more of a two and a half hour drive, but this phone call was like someone had lit a fire under his arse. It was the first news he’d had in ages and he wanted to hear it. This might be what they needed. And so he phoned work and told them that there was a family emergency and possibly some news about his sister. The result was a positive eagerness to give him a day off; they had been quite lenient to him ever since disaster had struck. After that call had been made, he turned the car and hit the gas.

It was a minor miracle he made it to the rendezvous point without having been fined for speeding, considering the speed he had driven at, but that was not what had been most on his mind during the journey. His heart had started to beat faster and he could feel excitement and hope in equal measures, each of them trying to gain dominance. Could it be? Could it really be?

Of course his father had beaten him here; he lived nearer by. The neighbourhood was a bit shabby looking, but not really in a state of disrepair that indicated that all decent people had moved out, abandoning it to the criminals and junkies. Yet. Nevertheless, his father’s car stood out; far too up-market for this place. John Andrews himself was rather out of place as well in his suit and tie and shoes that had been polished until they shone. Jacko was wearing a suit as well, but next to his father he looked positively poorly clothed. But then, his father liked appearances. He was good at keeping them up as well.

‘What do we have?’ Jacko asked, foregoing the niceties, something his father didn’t have the monopoly on.

‘Jeremy Grey,’ his father responded. ‘Thirty-five years old, something of an artist. Apparently he
spent the last few months painting in Italy. He only saw the latest appeal.’

Well, that hadn’t been a complete waste of time then, he thought. ‘But if he saw it happen, why didn’t he tell it to the police right away?’

His father was frowning. ‘Apparently he did, but they didn’t take him seriously, and he left for Italy a week later. And the police didn’t realise it was Kate he had seen until he kindly pointed that out to them.’ If Jacko had not already believed the police a bunch of incompetent fools, he would have been converted to that belief after hearing this. Maybe that was not entirely fair to them, but they didn’t have sisters that were missing for well over six months.

Jacko merely growled by way of a reaction. This could have been solved months ago, and instead the police had blundered around without any result to show for their apparent efforts. If their incompetence was what had gotten Kate killed, he swore to God he would make them pay for that mistake.

They rang the doorbell to Jeremy Grey’s flat, and were met by the man himself approximately thirty seconds later. His father had said that he was something of an artist, an impression confirmed by the many marks of paint dotting his once-white shirt. He had a messy beard and even messier hair, and without having the excuse of having curly hair the two men on his doorstep had. In short, he didn’t look like the kind of person one would easily label reliable witness.

‘I’m John Andrews, and this is my son Jacko,’ his father introduced them. ‘I called?’ he added when the name didn’t immediately seem to ring a bell.

Realisation dawned on his face, along with something that looked remarkably like relief. ‘Yes. Yes, of course. Please come in. Can I offer you anything? Coffee? Tea?’

‘Information about my daughter would be most welcome,’ his father said icily. There was impatience underneath, of the same kind that Jacko himself experienced. Even after all that he had done in the past months, Jacko had trouble realising this was really happening. He’d known too much of a father who wasn’t interested, and to now find one who was very interested almost felt wrong.

The man smiled nervously. ‘Of course,’ he said again. He led the way to the sitting room and motioned them to please sit. Jacko had to get rid of a couple of sketchbooks to do that. The flat wasn’t exactly a waste dump, but it wasn’t neat and tidy either. The place was covered in paintings and drawings, most of which weren’t even all that bad.

‘Please talk,’ his father invited. ‘I have heard that you saw my daughter abducted?’

The artist nodded, seating himself in a chair on the other side of the coffee table. ‘I think I did.’ The nervousness increased in tenfold. ‘But it is very strange, sir, very strange.’

‘Could you for heaven’s sake just tell us what you saw and leave the interpreting of the events to us?’ Jacko asked. All of a sudden he found he had no patience left. He would probably need to apologise for that later.

‘Of course.’ Mr Grey took a deep breath. ‘Well, I was on my way to a friend one afternoon. He lives not all that far off, so I decided to walk there.’ Not all that unlikely; Kate hadn’t lived all that far away from this place. ‘I was just about three streets away when I saw your daughter – Kate, wasn’t it? – standing by a bus stop. It looked like she was a bit impatient, or nervous, because she kept checking her watch and her mobile.’ Yes, that sounded like Kate. She tended to do that when someone was late and she was extremely annoyed.
He took the photograph he had of Kate from the file his father had brought with him and then pushed it across the table. ‘Is this her?’

Jeremy Grey nodded immediately. ‘Yes.’ He clearly didn’t doubt that. ‘That is her. I am certain of it.’

‘So, what happened?’ Jacko prompted.

‘Well, I stopped to admire a piece of graffiti art on one of the walls,’ the witness narrated. From anyone else this would have sounded like rubbish, but this man looked like the type to do exactly that. ‘So I didn’t look all the time to her. I turned when she cursed and threw a piece of paper on the ground.’ Here he hesitated.

‘Yes?’ John Andrews urged.

‘Well, this is where it becomes so strange, sir.’ The nervousness turned to something that almost look like jumpiness. ‘There was wind, but only at the bus stop. There wasn’t wind anywhere else, but it looked like it was storming where she was. And then she just… vanished. There one second, gone the next.’ He must have seen the absolutely disbelieving looks both father and son bestowed upon him, because he added: ‘I am not crazy, I swear. I know what I saw! I am not doing drugs, and I haven’t touched the alcohol for over two years.’

‘Yet you expect us to believe that she was magicked away in broad daylight?’ John Andrews’s voice was dripping with scepticism. For once he spoke for Jacko as well. ‘It looks like you have read too many Harry Potter novels, Mr Grey.’

That was it, probably. It was either that, or this man had a very twisted sense of humour that Jacko could not at all appreciate. His hope was sinking, rapidly flowing down the drain, leaving him feeling empty and disappointed, so very disappointed. The emotion was so fierce that he could feel it in his chest, a suffocating feeling that made it hard to breathe. There was anger as well, righteous fury at being so fooled.

‘I am not making this up!’ Jeremy Grey had jumped to his feet. For one who was making this up he was looking alarmingly sincere. But then, he was an artist. They were a strange lot, all of them. Small wonder why the police had not taken him seriously. No one in his right mind would.

Jacko didn’t even realise he jumped up as well until he found himself grasping Mr Jeremy I-Think-I’m-So-Funny Grey by the collar. ‘Do you maybe expect us to start believing in magic now? Or do you just take pleasure in toying with people’s feelings in addition to your painting? You’re despicable!’

To his utter humiliation there were tears burning behind his eyes, but he’d be damned if he was going to cry here in front of this man, and so he turned on his heels and left the flat, not even waiting for his father. His hands were shaking and no sooner was he on the street that a strangled howl left his throat. He normally wasn’t one for showing emotion in public, but he found he could not possibly hold it back now. This hurt too much. Maybe he could have dealt with this if they had never heard of Mr Grey’s existence, if this just slowly faded and he could accept the knowledge that there was never going to be more information about Kate’s fate. But this, this was too sudden. The blow was too heavy and far too much to bear.

He didn’t even fully register when someone hauled him into an embrace and let him cry on their shoulder, let him cry like he hadn’t cried since he was a little boy. Jacko only realised that his father was holding him when he heard the whispered ‘I’m so sorry, son’ over and over again. It took him another few seconds to realise that he was not the only one crying.
‘Sorry for what?’ he demanded. His voice was not as sharp as he would have liked it to be, partly because his voice was muffled against a jacket and also because no one could really sound angry when they were crying. ‘Sorry that the witness turned out to be useless?’

‘That too,’ was the answer. ‘I’m sorry I left.’

Jacko snorted. The result was again undermined by holding on to his dad as if he was the only thing that kept him from drowning in his emotions. ‘What made you?’

‘Your sister.’ No surprise there. ‘She once accused me of being a coward. It turned out that she was right.’

‘You only reached that conclusion now, did you?’ He tried to wriggle out of the embrace, but his father had clearly no intention of letting go.

‘After long and hard thinking. I am just sorry I never…’ Jacko could hear him take a deep breath. ‘I’m just sorry I never got round to telling it to Kate.’

‘It was realising she had cut you out of her life,’ Jacko realised, remembering the expression on his face when Jacko had told him they had phoned every single one of Kate’s contacts and he wasn’t one of them.

It was telling that this didn’t get a denial. ‘It was.’

Jacko swallowed. Maybe he should be mad that it had needed to come to this before his father grew himself a brain, when it was too little and too late. Because Kate was gone now. If he hadn’t believed that before, the fact that this was the first physical contact he had with his father for well over a decade told him that. And it made the tears stream down his face all over again. This time, he couldn’t even care. He mourned. Standing on the pavement of a cold and empty street, holding onto his dad for dear life, Jacko Andrews mourned.

‘Why did you try to leave?’ He had been meaning to ask what the “disagreement” had been about and he was a little surprised to hear what had actually come out. It unnerved him. Why did he feel so strongly about this?

‘Would you not were you in my shoes?’ she countered. ‘I miss home, I miss my family.’ She held on to her legs so tightly her knuckles turned white. ‘They might even believe me dead by now. And I am not even capable of letting them know that I am still alive.’ The anger had turned to distress in a matter of seconds. ‘What if…’ She hesitated for a second. ‘What if I return and there is nothing for me to go back to because they already believe me gone?’ It came out in a whisper.

The Journal, Chapter 29: Schemes

Chapter End Notes

There will be a second part to this, but that won’t be until the whole matter has been dealt with in The Journal timeline. In the meantime I still take requests and I really to
know what you all think. What did you like, what did you dislike? Please review?
First off, apologies for taking so very, very long in writing this. In my defence, I don’t think any story has ever taken so much effort as this one. It has literally taken me months to get it done, so I hope it came out all right. So, here is the second part to uno mega’s request about what happened to the family Kate left behind. Enjoy!

She sorted the letters in chronological order and then stopped to look at her handiwork. There were dozens of them, written late at night by the light of a campfire, in Rivendell, at Beorn’s, in Lake-town, in the Mountain itself... The story of the quest for Erebor as witnessed by one Kate Andrews. Still, when her family got this, would they believe it to be real? Or would they think this was sent to them by some practical joker with a particularly unamusing sense of humour? What would she think if she was the recipient of such a parcel?

The Journal, Chapter 89: Letter to Home

Jacko never told his mother about the witness. That would only be rubbing salt in an open wound. Jeremy Grey had turned out to be utter rubbish and that was the end of it. Jacko forced himself to stop thinking about it. Of course that was easier said than done and in the weeks following the incident, his sister was firmly back on his mind again. But there was a difference this time. Before now there had always been a small amount of hope that Kate was out there somewhere, alive, and they only needed to find her. Now there was just nothing. It was as good as certain that she was dead and gone.

‘I almost wish they would just find a body,’ Laura said over the phone when she called one day to ask for news. She must have known in advance that any news that may come was unlikely to be positive, but she had developed the habit to call every two weeks on a Sunday afternoon all the same. ‘Does that make sense?’

‘Yes,’ Jacko replied. The same thought had gone through his head more than once in the weeks that had passed since the Jeremy Grey disaster. It felt wrong to mourn her when they were not one hundred per cent sure that she really was dead. Finding her body would at least bring them closure. If they found her, they could mourn her and start to move on. As long as she wasn’t found, they kept hanging on to that little bit of hope, never entirely able to let go of it.

‘It makes me feel rather bad about myself, I suppose,’ Kate’s friend said. ‘It certainly doesn’t make me a good friend.’

Then what kind of brother am I?

Jack ended the call with some vague excuse and stared around the room. The day was cold with winter fast approaching and the longer he was here, the more he thought it a very bad idea that he
had come to stay with his mother for the weekend. He was supposedly here to help her paint the wall of the spare bedroom, but he was no fool. The main reason why he was here was to help her cope with Kate’s disappearance, to drive away some of the loneliness. They’d done it before and it used to work, too.

Maybe it was the miserable weather that made him, made them, feel so depressed. Jacko had never been one to let his mood be decided by the weather, but there was a first time for everything.

But being on his own was less preferable than having a bit of company and so he made his way downstairs, having taken Laura’s call in his own room so his mother wouldn’t have to hear him say that there had been no news.

The living room was empty when he entered and he recalled her having said something about doing the laundry while he was on the phone. So much for company. Well, he had a book; he could read some until she returned.

Jacko was fairly certain though that when he had left his book on the table, there had not been a wooden box standing on top of it. And it didn’t look like anything that fit in this room; his mother loved elegance and light colours. This box was made of dark wood, sturdy and heavy-looking with symbols carved into it that didn’t look like anything Jacko recognised.

‘Is this yours?’ he asked when he heard his mother enter again.

She walked over and gave it a confused look. ‘No, I don’t think so. It wasn’t there when I left.’

*And it wasn’t there when I left either.*

He didn’t like the feeling of this. When neither of them was there to keep an eye on it, the backdoor was locked, and no one could go through the front without a key anyway, unless they broke it open. And if someone had climbed in through one of the windows, which were also shut to prevent the heavy rain from getting in, Jacko would like to think he would have heard something. And he hadn’t.

But then how did it get here? He was not in any hurry to start believing in magical explanations like the useless Mr Grey.

And he was not the only one very ill at ease with this; his mother looked out of sorts as well. It wasn’t exactly the box itself that bothered Jacko; it looked harmless enough. It was how it had gotten here in the first place that he didn’t like.

‘I’ll go and check the doors,’ he announced. And the windows and all the mouse holes. There was something about this that set his teeth on edge, something that really shouldn’t have happened, couldn’t have happened.

*Listen to you, Jacko Andrews, you’re going as mad as Jeremy Grey.*

He should have known in advance that he would find all doors locked and all windows closed. There was nowhere an intruder could have entered from, but yet there was the box, sitting on top of his book, where neither of them had put it. Neither of them had seen it in their lives.

And so a quarter of an hour later they were back where they started, staring at the box, wondering what the hell to do with it. It hadn’t exploded yet, so Jacko took that to mean that it was unlikely to do so now.

*We should open it.*
‘Maybe we should.’ It was only when his mother replied that he realised he had spoken out loud.

He was the one to suggest it, so he should be the one to open it. It only made sense. And so he did. It wasn’t locked and the lid came off easily. But whatever it was that he had expected to be inside – and he didn’t even know what he was expecting in the first place – it wasn’t the sheaf of folded papers he found himself looking at. It was just ordinary paper, the kind you could buy just about anywhere. All of it was folded he noticed when he hesitantly lifted all of it out of its box, and all of them were numbered, number one lying on top. Some of the papers looked like they had been burned in the corners, others showed signs of water damage.

*What the hell is this?*

‘Letters,’ his mother said. ‘They look like letters.’

Letters in a box. Yes, he supposed they did look like that. His curiosity was starting to get the upper hand now that it turned out that there was nothing at all explosive in the box. Why would someone go through all that trouble to deliver a box with letters without being seen? It still did not make an ounce of sense and he supposed it wouldn’t until he had opened one of those letters and read it.

‘Shall we?’ he asked.

His mother nodded. Really there was nothing else for it, and so Jacko took the piece of paper that had been labelled number one, and unfolded it.

_Dear Mum, dear Jacko,_

_As I hardly know where to begin, I suppose that I could always start by telling you that I am not dead. Seeing as you are reading this letter and will have recognised my handwriting – at least I hope you have – that must be rather obvious to you, though. But I’m alive and in good health._

_And I am sorry. I am really very sorry for not making more of an effort to give off a sign of life sooner than now. Truth be told, I do not know if there would even have been a possibility for that, but I feel guilty for not trying harder than I did. But at the time I was trying my hardest to come home to tell you in person that no serious harm had befallen me, and this alternative did not even occur to me. Nevertheless, I am so, so sorry for leaving you in the dark for so long. I would undo it if only I could, but alas, I am no wizard._

_Speaking of wizards and impossibilities brings me to the next matter. You may be wanting to sit down for this bit. Insane though this might sound, I am in another world. Middle Earth, courtesy of that rather pathetic excuse for a wizard called Gandalf the Grey. Yes, that sounds crazy. Heaven knows that it felt like that for a good many weeks before it even started to feel real to me._

_Yes, it sounds crazy, but please bear with me. I do not know how I can convince you that this is not the biggest nonsense you have ever heard in your life or that I am not a practical joker with the worst sense of humour ever born. It is just true. But hopefully you haven’t forgotten what I am like, so give me a little credit, please._

_Where to start? Well, at the beginning, I suppose. It all began with the brochure for a hiking trip organised by the company called Magical Trips. In hindsight I should probably have realised there was something off with that, but at the time I suspected no such thing. Anyway, I was waiting at the bus stop for the promised bus, which never came. Instead there was a note – and I am still not entirely sure how or when it got there – telling me that my transport wasn’t coming, apologising for the inconvenience and concluding with the wish to see me soon. Next thing I knew there was a_
whirlwind kind of thing – that wizard has a slight love of theatrics, I am sure – and I was standing in the Shire, in Bilbo Baggins’s house, with Gandalf telling me that he was pleased I could make it.

It turns out that without knowing I had been employed as advisor to the company of Thorin Oakenshield on the quest to retake Erebor from a bloody fire-breathing monster. Suffice it to say that I was hardly pleased with this turn of events, but there was not much choice at the time. Gandalf made it crystal clear he would only return me home as long as I played my part in his plan.

Like I said, it sounds completely insane. And if I were the recipient of such a letter, I might have sent the sender of it to the nearest mental asylum I could find without delay or hesitation. Except now I am the sender of such a letter and I am fairly certain I have not lost my wits along the road.

And I won’t spend pages and pages trying to persuade you. First of all, I don’t have all that much paper left – and I have been reliably informed that I am not to be let near parchment unless I want for disaster to hit – and secondly, most of the paper you’ll find in this box is my account of what happened on the quest. I also included the memory card of my camera, so you can see and decide for yourself if I have turned into a lunatic over the past months.

Anyway, it is all over now. The dragon is dead, the Mountain reclaimed and the orcs defeated. The battle we know as the Battle of the Five Armies took place only yesterday and here I am, sitting in some tent in the middle of the camp writing this letter to you.

You may be wondering why I am writing all of this in a letter rather than to tell you in person. The reason for that is as simple as it is infuriating: I am not coming back. That too is thanks to a certain wizard. I intended to come back to let you know I was fine before living out the rest of my days here, but apparently that is out of the question because of the spell he used to get me here in the first place. A There and Back Again spell is what he called it, which, if I understood him correctly, means that I could go back home, but would then be stuck there.

And that is a problem, because leaving is becoming something of an impossibility. I have become too involved in all the politics around here. People believe certain things about me and if I were to leave… Well, let’s just say that the consequences would be disastrous.

There is another reason, though. I am pregnant. And there is no way that this particular child would have a chance at a normal life in our world. I would explain it all, but I think the letters I am sending with this one would do a much better and coherent job of it than I could in this one. Suffice it to say that there are so many ties binding me to this world now that coming back for good is not an option anymore, no matter how much I regret it.

And I do regret it. I don’t want this. Well, I do want to stay here, but not at this cost. The price just seems too high. You win some, you lose some. Isn’t that the saying? I suppose that sums the situation up to perfection. And at the moment I would be losing more by coming back. I suppose that makes me look heartless, that giving you up seems the lesser evil. And I am so, so very sorry for doing this to you. I wish I could change it, but I just can’t!

So I guess that this is goodbye. Duty calls. There are decisions to make, people to deal with and according to some, I am the person to talk to. I miss you. I wish I could see you again, but it is not to be.

I am sorry. I am so sorry.

I love you. I love you. I love you.
P.S. Please take care of the cat; Laura hates him.

For a moment after he finished reading, Jacko could only stare at the letter. Impossible! This is impossible. Wizards, magics and fairy tales. There was no way on earth that Kate, no-nonsense Kate could ever be involved in any of that, provided that it was even real, a notion which he dismissed out of hand.

Something gave him pause, though. The handwriting was Kate’s beyond the shadow of a doubt. He knew what her writing looked like, and this was it, right down to the way she crossed her t’s and the strange things she did with her a’s. He knew that writing, would know it anywhere. It had been Kate who wrote this. And the style, the phrasing, the words she used, that was Kate as well. Her writing style closely resembled the way in which she spoke, especially when it wasn’t formal writing. He could almost hear the words coming from her mouth as they were written.

Other than that, the whole idea remained utterly ridiculous. He speed-read the letter again, determined to find something that would prove this thing a fake, and instead found the exact opposite. The paragraph detailing her abduction…

‘No,’ he whispered.

Her account matched Jeremy Grey’s perfectly, including the whole whirlwind nonsense. Except now he was not all that certain that it even was nonsense. From one moment to the next this letter had gone from a fake to a frightening possibility that it might just be real. He had already acknowledged that Kate had written this, and he could not think of one reason why his twin would make up something so strange unless she was forced. And if she was forced, why not choose something people might actually believe?

‘That can’t be right,’ his mother said, but she was pale. ‘Jacko, this has to be nonsense, a practical joker of some kind.’ There was a pleading tone to her voice, begging him to reassure her that really this was just a joke, that no one would ever do this. It was also an assurance he could not give her.

‘It isn’t.’ God help him, it wasn’t. And so much for his plan to spare his mother Jeremy Grey’s account. Of course he could have forged the letters in order to lend some credibility to his story, but how then would he have gotten them written in her own hand and how in the blazes would he have ever smuggled them inside here? He didn’t even know where they lived!

No, the letters did not seem to be fake, but still, the explanation was too ludicrous for consideration. Magic and wizards and elves and dwarves and stories that were real. To be honest, that sounded like the concept for some very cheesy kind of book, and that was not the nonsense Kate liked to indulge in as far as he was aware.

‘The other letters,’ he said. ‘What is in them?’

His instinct urged him to hand these to the police and let them do with them what they could in order to discover what really happened to Kate and why her abductor thought it such a good idea to torment them like this.

But what would he tell them? That someone was playing some sick joke by making Kate write a letter like that, letters like that. Because it was plural, a whole collection of letters in her hand. Whoever had her, they must be insane, but also dangerous. Wasn’t that the kind of thing that mentally deranged lunatics did?
And deranged lunatics might even go as far as to make the whole thing up, because if the intended recipient did believe what was in them, then what use would there be in searching? There would be no coming back from that. And they would have their way with Kate uninterrupted.

The thought alone set Jacko’s blood to boiling.

But his hand seemed to have gained something of a will of its own, creeping towards the letter now lying on top. The paper was crumpled, as if it had been crushed a couple of times and it certainly had been folded and unfolded numerous times. But the writing was legible and unmistakable Kate’s.

Two weeks. It has been two weeks. If this was a normal holiday, I would have been back home now, but of course this is hardly a normal holiday. Come to think of it, this is not even much of a holiday either. This is one crazy roller coaster ride in a world that should be fictional with people that should be just as fictional. Instead it is all so real and I don’t suppose anyone will call me out on it if I admit to a piece of paper that I am dead scared of it.

The fact that I am even writing this makes it feel as though I am admitting to myself that I will not be back home anytime soon. In the back of my head I think I have known that all along, but it is quite another thing to have it confirmed.

How is this even my life?

The rest of the letter was spent detailing what had led her to that point. He knew the story – because it had to be a story; such a thing could never be real – up to the point of her abduction and her new “job” as advisor, but that letter appeared to have been written in haste, whereas in this one she seemed to have taken her time writing it and detailing what had happened to her. She mentioned arriving at Bilbo Baggins’s house – of all people – and what had transpired there.

‘Impossible,’ he whispered, but there was a pleading quality to his voice now as well. What was this madness? His thoughts echoed Kate’s perfectly. How is this even my life?

The letters that followed were all written in true Kate-style. In her writings she always was annoyingly precise and there were entirely too many details in these missives, things one only would notice when one was there and Kate had never been cut out to be a liar. Even in writing she could not be false without him noticing.

But she could not possibly be telling the truth. But there were details and a consistent line running through the letters. Who she liked – not many and she was close to almost none – who she disliked – Thorin and Gandalf – the landscapes she saw, routines in camp at nightfall… Could one even make this up? It was just that he could not see how this account matched the first letter that he read. Kate seemed to have no intention to stay where she was from what he’d read.

I am not sure yet, but I think I may have sold Thorin a little short. That dwarf seems to have no limits when it comes to his company. That is the only sensible explanation for us leading trolls on a merry hunt which was bound to get us caught I can think of. Of course the only sort of thanks I got for risking my neck was the gift of a sword he found in a troll hoard and a warning not to hurt myself with it. Which is pretty rich coming from one whose bright idea it was to let ourselves be chased by trolls, if you ask me.

Change of heart there. Jacko knew the book, not as well as his sister, but he knew it. Unlike Kate he didn’t have much patience for fiction, though. Books should have useful information in them if they were to hold his interest. If he wanted fiction, he would watch a movie. Plenty of those about and more visual, just how he liked it. He didn’t need his own imagination to fill in what characters
looked and sounded like. So he had seen the movies – the two that were out so far – so he remembered a part where trolls were involved, but he was fairly sure that the trolls chasing ponies and their riders had not been part of the story as he knew it.

_I am congratulating myself on having made it to Rivendell alive and in one piece, although not quite that unscathed. Just my luck to trip over my own feet – in a bloody rabbit hole of all things! – and knock myself and Ori down just as the warg leapt at us. Of course it would have been too much to ask that it would have missed me altogether. It scratched my shoulder and it is hurting like damnation, but I am quite sure that it does not justify the scene Dori is – still! – causing over it. I am starting to wonder which is worse: death by vicious orc or death by fussing dwarf?_ 

_The elves are just as quick to fuss over it as he is, though, but they do it differently. And I am not sure what to make of them quite yet. They sort of serenaded us when we entered the valley – to which I may or may not have sung a less than flattering response – but otherwise they are so serene and unearthly that you just can’t help but feel uncomfortable around them. The way I see it, they have only three moods: they are either wise and serious, serene and smiling or happy and silly. And to be honest, the fact that they have deluded themselves into thinking that Thorin and I are married does not speak for their intelligence much. We bicker like an old married couple, that much is true, I suspect, but that is where it ends. And I am perfectly happy to keep it that way, thank you very much._

_Fortunately we’ll be leaving tomorrow. I suppose it sounds strange to say that I’m not really sad to leave Rivendell so soon already. It was nice being here and it was even nicer to be able to have some time to just sit back and do nothing, but some of these elves are really getting on my nerves, not to mention that I am more than glad to drop this whole marriage act. I’m pretty much convinced now that the elves have had more wine than healthy. How else could one come to the conclusion Thorin and I would be some kind of dream couple, never mind an “excellent team,” as Gandalf would have them believe?_ 

_But that gave Jacko pause. Thorin. That was the one she was marrying? What did she think this was? A fairy-tale of some kind? That could hardly be right. Not that she seemed to like him much at this point, but it was hinted at._

_And it only became more obvious when her account went on. She did not often mention it again, except to complain when the Great Goblin apparently suffered from the same delusions the elves had – _Is he out of his mind? Oh, wait, stupid question, of course he is!_ – but there were other signs. All of a sudden he appeared in her reports a lot more than he did before. There was even the occasional mention of we in relation to something the two of them did. And Kate did not even seem to realise what was going on as she wrote it. If this was a forgery, then it was a damned good one. _

_All thoughts of forgery went right out of his mind though when he happened upon a drawing folded into a letter of Kate’s that dealt with their visit at Beorn’s. _Apparently this is how our interactions look to people who aren’t us_, she’d written underneath a drawing of herself and someone who was presumably Thorin. He had her grabbed by her wrist, Kate half-turned away from him as though she had meant to walk away and he had held her back. She was smiling, that teasing smile he knew so well, and he was looking solemn, unamused, but certainly concerned. Concerned about her, given where his gaze was directed. That made him feel slightly queasy. _

_How good could a fake be? There had to be a limit to that, hadn’t there? But he wasn’t sure he was quite ready to believe in the existence of Middle Earth and the characters that inhabited it. Damn it, Kate, what have you gotten yourself involved in?_ 

_Surreal. That was what this was. He worked his way through her letters and passed them on to his_
mother when he was done, but it felt like it was not really him reading it all. He read about her
collection to Dori, Nori and Ori, about her adventures in Mirkwood, about an elf called Elvaethor,
about Lake-town, the search for an elusive side-door, the slaying of the dragon and the lead-up to
the Battle of the Five Armies. But throughout there were interactions with Thorin and a budding
relationship that she seemed to become more and more aware of as time progressed. She did not say
much about it, even in her letters, but he knew his sister well enough to read between lines. By the
time they had arrived at the Lonely Mountain, the two of them were a couple.

Eventually, there was only one letter left.

Dear mum, dear Jacko,

Well, here we are then, at the end of the story. This is going to be my last letter, well, for you to
read. As I am writing this, I am still in the process of struggling with the letter you will have read
first, if all goes well. But I rather think I owe you at least something of a conclusion to this account
of events. It’d be like writing a manuscript and writing “the end” after the second to last chapter
otherwise.

So, here goes. As you may have guessed, the battle was won. That is one of the most important
things, I suppose, but the cost was high. You already know I was not supposed to fight and to that
end I stayed behind with Bilbo and Lufur, only to realise that we had stupidly forgotten to close
the side door. And with Nói being the black-hearted bastard traitor that he is, the chances of that
door being secret were absolutely non-existent. So why I was even all that surprised to find the
orcs already inside when we arrived to contain the damage, I’ll never know.

Suffice it to say that it was one hell of a fight and it turned out that Bilbo was once again the great
hero – story of this quest, if you ask me – by cutting our makeshift ladder and sending the orcs
flying down the mountainside. The rest of the orcs were taken care of by us and Elvaethor and
Tauriel. Where they came from and how they knew they were needed, heaven only knows, but they
were a tremendous help. To cut a long story short, the orcs took collective flying lessons – landing
lessons not included in the price – and we retreated into the Mountain. And really, who needs keys
when a hairpin will do the job as well?

Of course, that was when Tauriel dropped her own bomb on me. Apparently I’m pregnant. Yeah,
that kind of took me by surprise as well. To be honest, I’ve had better things on my mind than
thinking about that, which must be why I’ve missed all the signs. And I didn’t even think it was
possible to begin with. Turns out, it’s not the first time something like this has ever happened,
according to Elvaethor. A certain Dari and Inga have done something similar centuries ago – and
had offspring as well – but I had never heard of the story. I feel a little better for knowing Thorin
didn’t have a clue what he was talking about either.

As you may have guessed, Thorin lives. So does most of our company. There are some still
unaccounted for and I know that Fíli is busy leading the chase of the orcs. Their forces have
scattered entirely and are on the run. They won’t be coming back anytime soon. Would that the
same could be said for Thranduil and Erland, but I’m doubting it.

We lost Kíli. We can blame Bolg for that – believe me, I do blame him quite a lot – but fortunately
he is dead. Apparently Thorin saw it all happening right in front of his very eyes. If truth be told,
I’m grateful for the fact I did not have to witness it. There is only so much I can take.

And there are so many dead or injured. Not many that I know, that’s true, but too many all the
same. Balin is injured, word is that Bofur and Nori have been hurt as well and Ori has lost a hand
in defence of Thorin. Of course Thorin is quick to take the blame in addition to the wounds he’s
already nursing. Some bloody nuisance of an orc took a sword to his right knee and although he
doesn’t say so – because that would be showing weakness and heaven forbid that should happen – he’s clearly in pain. Which so far hasn’t stopped him from going walkabout when the mood strikes him.

But he is not yet recovered enough to talk with his lords. Nope, that thankless task has fallen to me – okay, admittedly I sort of volunteered – and it is not something I’d recommend. Dwarves can be a stubborn and unyielding lot and Blackbeard is by far the worst of it. Honestly, if today’s proceedings are defining for the years to come, I fear for my sanity.

But well, I’ve made my choice, so it’s no good whining about it now, is it? Not that I could ever imagine that this was where I would end up, and I am not certain it is something I am entirely happy with either. Under the circumstances, it is the best option available, though, harsh though that may sound. There is no way to do this right for the full hundred per cent. Whichever way I turn, someone will get hurt. As stupid as this sounds, my current course at least ensures that as few as possible are hurt. I’m containing the damage, I think, not preventing it, not by any stretch of the imagination.

I wish I could at least could give you the assurance that I’ll write, but with Gandalf not always readily available and his objections to not being a glorified messenger, I can make no such claim.

I love you to bits and I will miss you every day.

All my love,

Kate

Saying goodbye. That was what she was doing. She was telling them goodbye, because she would never see them again. This was the end. The end of months of uncertainty, but also the end of the search. What point would there be in searching out someone who had gone from this world? There was none.

He stopped himself there. He was not really about to accept that this was reality, was he? It couldn’t be. Every ounce of common sense dictated that he treated this as nonsense. There was no such thing as stories being real, not in this world. Stories were just that. They weren’t real. They could not be.

But then why did Kate’s letters sound so truthful?

He pulled his mobile out of his pocket and dialled a by now well-known number. If he was to make any sense of this, an extra pair of eyes couldn’t hurt. Goodness knew he was at his wit’s end.

He was in luck; the phone was answered after the second ring. ‘John Andrews.’

‘Hi, it’s Jacko,’ he said. He glanced at the letters. ‘Would you mind coming over? There may be news about Kate.’

If this had been any other situation, Jacko might have laughed at the baffled expression on his father’s face. Today however was not such a day. He still could not quite escape the notion that they were victims of a sick joke and Jacko had suffered more than his fair share of them already.

‘Have you had them tested for fingerprints?’ His father asked when he had read the last one. On inspection the box had turned out to contain the memory card to Kate’s camera and another two
notes in addition to the letters they had already read. One was a very short and formal note written by this supposed Thorin, expressing his apologies for not returning Kate to them and his vow that she would be well looked after for as long as he drew breath. Jacko might have felt some measure of relief at that if he had been convinced that it was actually real. So far, he wasn’t. The second note had been infinitely more informal and was signed by someone who called himself Nori. Basically, his note ran along the same lines as Thorin, though the wording was different, but ended with the assurance that they needn’t worry about Kate. (Not to worry. We’ll look after her. Dori will fuss over her till he drops, Ori will make sure she won’t make a fool out of herself and I’ll do my bit to keep her spirits up. Between the three of us, what could possibly go wrong, eh?) It was the height of insanity.

‘Not yet,’ his mother said. It could be called a miracle she was even considering talking to her former husband, never mind that she was actually doing it. If that was not testimony to how serious the matter was, Jacko wouldn’t know what was.

‘I’ll have Miles look into it,’ he said. ‘He has the contacts to have it checked out discreetly.’ It rankled that he was making decisions as if he had a right to. They may be starting to mend fences, but that didn’t mean everything was well yet and Jacko was reluctant to put up with his father’s attitude. John Andrews seemed to have taken their sort-of reconciliation outside Mr Grey’s house as a sign that he was at liberty to waltz back into their lives. He wasn’t quite ready for that, not yet anyway.

Still, he bit his tongue and kept his silence. He had called him here to help, to offer insights, so he shouldn’t start complaining now that his father was doing what he had come for. Not that Jacko thought the fingerprints test would come up with anything useful, but it was worth a shot. It might be their best shot.

‘Good,’ he said. It was as much of his seal of approval as he was likely to give. ‘What do you make of the letters?’

John Andrews shook his head. ‘They sound genuine.’

He wasn’t buying into this, was he? ‘But they can’t be.’ In his head can’t be sounded suspiciously like please, don’t let them be. ‘There is no such thing as Middle Earth. And Kate is too practical to believe in it.’ Unless she had found out that it actually was real. But that would be absurd.

In the end it all came back to that. It was far too absurd to be real. And Kate was just about the last person on earth to ever lose it and start believing in impossible things. And if a kidnapper wanted to get the police off his back, then he would have to come up with something more believable. So why go for this approach? None of it added up.

Unless it was real. Of course, this notion was followed immediately that it could not possible be real at all. It was a circle from which there was no escape.

His father nodded, but the gesture lacked certainty. Not surprising, since he hardly knew what Kate had been like in the past couple of years. All contact had been severed. He wondered what she would make of his involvement in the search for her. Like as not, she would want him to stay as far away from it as possible. Well, Jacko had no such reservations. In fact, he very much wanted to hear her rant about it, because that would mean that she was actually alive enough to do so.

Still, there was something to be said for his father’s point of view as well. They did sound genuine. And if the very notion had not been so ridiculous, Jacko would have believed them in a heartbeat. The wording was all Kate, the handwriting was hers, the way she viewed the world and people around her was uniquely hers too.
And then there were the letters themselves. Much of the paper smelled of smoke and a good deal of the missives were suffering from water damage. Kate chalked it up to what she called the Mirkwood inferno and leaking barrel respectively. The oldest letters were in worst shape. Only the last couple of letters looked relatively unharmed. Well, the last and the very first, which she claimed she had written last. Even from looking at them, one could tell that they had taken months in the writing.

‘Have you taken a look at the memory card yet?’ his father asked.

Jacko shook his head. ‘We’ve waited till you were here.’ Part of him wanted to desperately know what was on it, whilst another part didn’t want to know at all. It didn’t help that he had absolutely no idea what to make of it. Photographs could be forged, manipulated. Why should he believe it?

Still, he fetched his laptop and opened the files. The card was full. There was barely room left for one more photograph and that while Kate was not exactly an enthusiastic photographer. She made pictures during holidays, but only ever the bare minimum. This was not the bare minimum.

The first fifty pictures or so were all of landscapes. Beautiful landscapes to be sure, but the kind of sights that could not be found close by. She must have been really far away. And she must have been at liberty to take photographs. Kidnappers generally didn’t allow such things, did they?

It was only after the landscapes that pictures of people started to appear. Dwarves, his mind supplied, but he dismissed that idea too. He only thought that because he had read those letters. Nevertheless the fact remained that the people were all very hairy and rather bearded, not to mention short. There was a series of pictures that must have been taken on the same day. There was a large house in the background, but the pictures appeared to be made in a garden of some kind.

And then there was a video.

‘Video?’ His mother was the first to frown at the screen in confusion.

‘Apparently,’ he said, hitting the play-button.

It turned out to be a fairly short one and there wasn’t much to be seen, just a patch of grass and the boots of the one holding the camera.

‘That’s the one,’ Kate’s voice said. It wasn’t exactly high quality – the video had a grainy quality to it and the voices sounded like they came through a tin can – but it was unmistakably her. And a bittersweet sound it was too. ‘Now, hold it steady, and don’t press that…’ The video ended abruptly.

‘That was her.’ His mother sounded like she was in shock.

So, for that matter, was Jacko. Months and months he had longed to hear that voice and there it was. But it wasn’t in the way he wanted to hear it. He wanted her here, safely back from whatever ordeal she had gone through. Was that really too much to ask?

His father meanwhile had clicked on the play-button of the next video.

‘Now, don’t press that button until you want to finish the video,’ Kate’s voice came again. ‘Best get your finger away from it, just in case. Now, hold it steady and move it…’ Whoever it was that was holding the camera did so very fast. For a moment, Jacko only saw a blur of greens before it settled on his sister’s face. And that was a shock in and out of itself, another thing he had hoped to see for so long and once again he got his wish not quite in the way that he wanted. ‘Well, not that fast. You’ll get seasick watching that.’ She rolled her eyes in exasperation at the cameraman.
It was Kate, no doubt about that. He could be relied upon to recognise his own sister’s face when he came upon it, but there were differences as well. Chief amongst them was the wound that crossed her face from chin to forehead. And it was not such an old wound, he guessed. It had scabbed over, but it still looked too red, too fierce. He remembered reading something in the letters about having been whipped across the face by goblins. That could explain her injury, if he only bought that explanation.

She appeared thinner too, as if she hadn’t been eating well, and her skin colour betrayed that she had spent considerable time in the sun. Well, that was something to be grateful for at least. At least she wasn’t kept in some dark hole underground.

‘What, like this?’ a male voice asked. The tone betrayed enthusiasm and excitement. The camera was moved again, considerably slower this time.

‘Yes, Kíli, like that,’ Kate said.

‘That is quite the thing you have there,’ another voice said and the next moment a grey-haired fellow showed up next to Kate, giving the camera an interested look. ‘One might almost call it magic.’

Kate snorted. ‘It isn’t. It’s just a camera. Kíli, get your finger away from that…’

The video ended.

What was this? If he had been a less practical sort, he might have said magic. It all seemed real, but the fact remained that it couldn’t be. Yet everything he knew about his sister seemed to correspond with what he had seen and read. There was a bit of doubt wriggling its way into the back of his mind. What if?

‘That’s a damned good forgery.’ His father was rubbing his chin, leaning back in his chair. He too seemed to have been thoroughly startled by what he had seen.

‘Is it?’ he heard himself ask, wondering why he was even saying that. He could not truly start to entertain the notion that this was real, could he? But then, what other explanation was there for all of this? If Kate had been kidnapped, as they had thought, then what was all of this good for? It served no purpose. It was simply too insane to believe.

Kate herself had admitted in her letter that she would not have bought any of this had she not seen it all for herself. At the same time she had written that she would not spend pages to convince them. She had left the choice whether or not to believe up to them, but she wanted them to believe her.

‘You cannot think…?’ John Andrews looked at him, no, stared at him.

‘What else am I supposed to think?’ he shot back. The more his views were attacked, the more he wanted to defend them, no matter how many doubts he had about them in the privacy of his own mind. And he was not even sure that his doubts were based on logic rather than his own wishes. How had this even happened? ‘There are no rational explanations for this.’ And then there was that rather unpleasant realisation about Mr Grey. ‘And it fits with what we heard from Mr Grey.’

Heaven forbid. The man was clearly a bit addle-brained, but why expose himself to such ridicule unless it was true?

‘Let’s see what else is on the card.’ His mother was being the diplomatic one in this, heading them off before they could get into an argument. And Jacko wanted to provoke an argument. He needed to vent his frustration and confusion in some way and Kate’s preferred method of shouting loud
enough to bring down the roof suddenly seemed as good a method as any.

Still, he gave in with a curt nod.

There were more photographs. Kate was in some of them, suggesting that this Kíli had been given free access to her camera. He had made another video in which he showed them round the house, with Kate giving instructions in the background. Beorn’s house they called it. What followed was a short video in which Kate was trained with a sword, which ended abruptly when her weapon was knocked out of her hand and the cameraman had to duck in order to avoid a full-on collision.

It was evidence upon evidence that this was exactly what it appeared to be. Dread was settling in his stomach. If this was real – the if was still very present in his mind – then they were never going to see Kate again. Of course, the idea had presented itself over the past couple of months, but this would make it final, would end all the hope they had. She was gone, for good.

There was another video. By now it felt like they were rubbing salt in open wounds and he was torn between sitting and watching and throwing the laptop out of the window. It was just too much. In the end it was the realisation that this was Kate’s final gift to them that made him stay where he was. Bloody hell, Kate, what have you gotten yourself involved in?

The video was not of any better quality than any of the ones they had already watched. In fact, the quality was probably worse. Well, the lack of light in the house may have something to do with that as well. But when he did get used to it, he could make out people and furniture. The focus of the one manning the camera seemed to be two people sitting on the ground a short distance away, a piece of paper or parchment between them. One of them was Kate, the other he thought was Thorin. They were conversing, studying the thing between them. He could only hear voices, not words. But it was the body language that really got his attention. They seemed relaxed, at ease with the presence of the other. Kate looked as if she belonged there and it stung.

‘Give that here, you’re doing it wrong,’ a voice nearer by said.

‘Lay off, Fíli, I am getting the hang of this,’ someone else responded.

‘Thorin is going to kill you for spying on him like that,’ the first one, Fíli, predicted.

‘He’s too busy.’ The other dismissed that out of hand. ‘Maker preserve us, how long do they need to get together? They are taking forever!’

This remark was met by laughter. ‘Afraid you’ll lose your coin to Nori?’

‘Nah, I’ve got till Durin’s day. Plenty of time.’ The camera shook a little. ‘I wished they’d hurry up, though. It’s almost painful to watch.’

That was the end of it.

And the end of Jacko’s patience as well. He shoved his chair back and left the room. He wanted to believe that it was a joke, a very sick kind of joke, but there was only so much one could see before the very foundations of that assumption were shaken to the core. And now it was all starting to come crumbling down, his denial lying in shatters at his feet.

I almost wish they would just find a body, Laura had confessed. Except there would never be a body, would there? Even when she died, hopefully of old age sometime in the very distant future, they would bury her there. In the meantime, she might as well have been dead to the family she left behind in this world. She was absent and would never be coming back. It all amounted to the same
thing, didn’t it?

‘Damn it, Kate. What have you done?’

Jacko knew that his parents didn’t want to believe what they had been told. His father had left shortly after Jacko himself had left the room, taking some of the letters with him for that private detective to scrutinise. He seemed determined to find something, although his son was quite convinced there would not be anything.

He could not even quite say why he thought that. Maybe he had seen too much proof that what she claimed was real – no matter how absurd that idea was in and out of itself – or maybe he was just too tired to search for an alternative explanation. Either way, the arrival of the box had marked something. They had reached the end of the line. They had exhausted all their possibilities and there was nothing to be done about it now. They had searched, hoped and followed up clues, to no avail. Kate was gone and she would not be coming back.

And so naturally the quest for fingerprints came to nothing. They found Kate’s prints and several belonging to Jacko, his father and his mother. Then there were a couple that could not be matched. They were big prints, Patrick Miles had reported, fingerprints that could only have been made by large hands. Other than that, there was not much that could be learned from them at all.

And so their last lead had led to a dead end.

‘But I guess I already knew that,’ he admitted to a picture of Kate he had in his bedroom. He liked that one. It had been taken a couple of years ago during a holiday in France. Things had been relatively simple then, certainly in comparison to the mess they were in now. ‘You were never one for doing things the way they were supposed to, were you? But good grief, did you have to go and get yourself stuck in a fictional world?’

It had to be the truth. He had gone through all the options in his head over and over again and not one of his explanations had provided a satisfactory answer for all the facts. There were always holes, things that could not logically be explained. The only one that made any sense was the explanation Kate herself had provided.

And it left him feeling empty, useless, powerless. At least before the letters had arrived, he had been able to sustain the belief that he was doing something to get her back, but even that was now gone, leaving him without purpose. There was nothing left to strive for. There was only acceptance to achieve. And Jacko found that acceptance had yet to grace him with its presence.

‘You left us.’ It felt better now that he could speak it. The anger had been simmering inside since he had started to realise that Kate’s continued absence was of her own making. Her disappearance was not her own work, but this was. She had made a conscious choice to not come back. That couldn’t not hurt. ‘You go on ahead to make a new life, but we don’t get a choice in the matter at all, do we? You run off with a king and here we are, worrying about you.’

He wasn’t being entirely fair. He had seen the longing for home in her letters, her frustration with the wizard’s refusal to let her go back, but it hadn’t been enough, had it? In the end she had chosen that world, that life. And he did not begrudge her happiness, but it shouldn’t have to be like this. They had worried so much over her, feared her dead and now there was that box with letters and a memory card with photographs. She was alive, she was well and she was never coming back.
He snorted. ‘And I can take it, you know, but how could you do that to our mother? She’s devastated. She only wants you back. Don’t you think she’s been through enough? She’s been crying off and on and trying not to. Would it really be that bad to come back to us? Were you so unhappy here that you felt it necessary to escape to another world?’

_Here I am, talking to a photograph_, he thought. It was a good thing there was nobody else with him or they would have declared him mad. And it felt better to get it off his chest, all the anger and sadness and fear. Because it was one thing fearing that nothing would ever be as it was, but it was quite another _knowing_ it.

Through it all, the photograph remained silent.

Acceptance did not come easy and it did not come quickly. It came gradually, with weeks and months and years. Even so, the pain only dulled. It was never truly absent. It was, Jacko reflected one day, like missing a tooth. There were times when he could not think about it, but eventually he would stick his tongue in the hole it left behind and be reminded once again. Kate became a cold case. They never told the police there was no hope at all. How could they? They’d be seen as insane. Goodness knew that it still sounded insane to his ears and he was fairly convinced that it had happened as Kate claimed.

And it was easier than he thought to not tell people. After all, people don’t like talking about missing persons, especially when they have been missing for ages. They were all too afraid to ask, claiming they would not want to put their finger on the sore spot, but really because they didn’t know what to do with the reactions they might get.

In time, the anger and resentment subsided. They were still there, but like the pain, they dulled. Jane knew, of course she knew. She had a right to, although she had no easier time of it coming to terms with the bizarre reality of it.

There were still days when he wondered how Kate got on, if she ever regretted choosing as she did, but for most part she had vanished out of his life, taking the place of the sister long since gone, a picture of her kept on the mantelpiece in remembrance. His son asked about her once and he had told him the truth, that his aunt had gone missing a couple of years before he had been born. Archie had taken it in his stride and resumed whatever game he was playing at the time. It did not make much of an impact. _That’s all she is to us now, a memory._

Even so, sometimes, when he had the house to himself, he would catch himself out on talking to her picture, as if she could hear him. ‘I do wonder if you’re happy now,’ he said one day. ‘If your life is everything you thought it to be. Well, I’m fairly certain you’ve got a kid of your own, older than my Archie, that’s for sure. Other than that, we don’t know anything, do we?’

Maybe someone had heard him. Otherwise it would be one hell of a coincidence that that box was standing on the coffee table all of a sudden. It was of a similar make as the one that had suddenly appeared in his mother’s living room years previous: heavy, sturdy and with strange symbols all over.

‘You did it again,’ he said, somewhat surprised and somewhat in awe. ‘Bloody hell, Kate.’

True to expectations, when he opened the box, he found a pile of letters, all of them written on parchment and all of them numbered. He remembered a comment she had made about her skills with that particular material and thought that her penmanship must have improved with the years.
A strange thing to think perhaps when faced with the first real news in seven years. A sign maybe of how much it had dulled. He wasn’t exactly jumping for joy, but he did find that there was a smile tugging at his lips.

When he unfolded the first letter, he found a drawing inside. Kate was at the centre of it, with her husband next to her. A young boy was perched on her lap and another child, a baby, was in Thorin’s arms. Next to him was another boy. Three children.

‘You wasted no time, did you?’ he muttered before turning his attention to the letter itself.

Dearest mum, dearest Jacko,

As you can see, I have managed to beg, plead and blackmail Gandalf into being my messenger one more time. It took considerable effort, but he yielded in the end and so here we are at last.

And I hardly know where to begin, because there is so much to tell you…

Jacko put the letter down, picked up the phone and dialled a very familiar number. ‘Mum,’ he said when the phone was answered. ‘I have something here that you will want to see…’

Chapter End Notes

I couldn’t resist ending it on a sort of positive note. The next little story will certainly be something happier.
Thank you for reading and, as always, I would appreciate a review if you have a moment; I’d very much like to know what you thought about this chapter. And, of course, suggestions are more than welcome as well.
Road Entertainment

Chapter Notes

After all the heavy stuff of the last two chapters, here’s a couple of missing moments from The Journal, dealing with entertainment on the road. The first part is set between chapter 15 and 16 of The Journal, the second part between chapter 33 and 34 and the third part takes place during the second part of chapter 34, after Dori has left Thorin to his thoughts.
Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The whole company was more at ease now. The days of rest had been good for all of us, I think. There were stories and songs on the road and I soon started to regret ever making mention of the game of I Spy, because Bofur and Kili could keep that up for hours at a time. Not that I can really blame them. There was so much to spy that it was hard to run out of objects, although it remained a slight mystery to all of us how Bofur could be so sure that Fili’s spare socks were blue, since they were safely packed away in his luggage.

The Journal, Chapter 16: Acceptance?

There was such a thing as boredom on the road, Kate Andrews soon learned. Not that she wasn’t dropping from exhaustion, saddle-sore and in most cases in a bad temper, each day. No, that wasn’t the problem. Riding was a challenge in and out of itself, although she rather thought she had gotten the hang of it lately.

But when the novelty of learning how to ride had worn off, it had become clear all too soon that sitting in the saddle all day was nothing short of tedious, especially since her companions were so suspicious of her and hardly spoke to her at all. They rather occupied their time laughing and joking amongst themselves. After all, she was only here on a whim of the wizard. Days became weeks and Kate didn’t think she had ever been so very bored before.

But that had been before Rivendell, before the troll incident and before she had sort-of accidentally saved Ori from a vicious warg. There was more acceptance now. Talking to her was suddenly allowed, although Kate rather doubted it was Thorin who had given the change his seal of approval; he hadn’t spoken to her beyond the “could you pass me the stew.” He spent his days at the head of the column, keeping mostly his own company. Whatever good qualities he may possess, she was convinced sociable wasn’t anywhere on the list. It made her wonder why everyone here followed him so willingly when his social skills left a lot to be desired. So much for being allies.

‘Kate, give me a hand here,’ Kili begged, effectively snapping Kate out of her pondering about Thorin’s strange conduct. It was none of her business anyway.

So she turned in the saddle. ‘Help with what?’

‘I need something red,’ he announced. ‘And I have listed everything red I could possibly think of.’
Ah, \textit{I Spy} again. She was starting to sincerely regret ever making mention of that silly game in the first place, but then, Bofur had rather insisted she told them what she used to do when on the road and in need of some form of occupation. That game was the first that had come to mind. Big mistake, that, because her companions – and maybe even friends? – had been playing it tirelessly ever since. Well, mostly Bofur and Kíli. They could keep it up from dawn till dusk – and if only that were a figure of speech – but they tended to rope others into it as well.

‘My hair?’ she offered half-heartedly, not really in the mood to throw herself into the game. Not that she had anything better to do, but she had never really liked the game back home, using it more as a last resort to stave off real boredom when all other options had been exhausted.

And if she was really honest with herself, grateful though she was for not being left to her own devices all the time, part of her was fearful. She didn’t want to become involved. She wanted to go back home and that was all there was to say on the matter. Getting involved meant that things got complicated, well, even more complicated than they already were. Her life was messed up enough as it was already. Getting involved was not a good idea and yet it kept on happening regardless of her wishes on the matter. And these suddenly so very friendly dwarves weren’t making it easy on her to keep to the side-lines.

Bofur shook his head. ‘Not even close, lass.’

‘That was my first idea,’ Kíli admitted. No surprise there. She was riding right in front of him. On the other hand Bofur would never choose something so obvious.

‘Bombur’s beard,’ she tried again.

‘Ori’s tunic,’ Kíli chimed in. He hardly seemed to have listed everything red that he could think of – Ori’s tunic was rather an obvious thing – he’d just been looking for an excuse to include her. And, come to think of that, he had been doing that a lot lately. And so had a lot of the others. That was still a novel thing, Kate found. Ori was giving her Khuzdul lessons, Dwalin was teaching her how to use a sword even though he indicated time and again that he thought it a waste of time and effort, Dori had offered to mend a tear in her cloak and Fíli and Kíli seemed to have embarked on a mission to engage her in conversation, stories and games.

And it rather bewildered her. It was not the fact that she was treated more as a member of the company in her own right rather than a useless wizard’s tagalong that made her feel slightly uneasy. No, it was the abruptness of the changes that left her baffled. The only thing that she could think of that could justify it was her rescue of Ori and that had been more of an accidentally tripping down a rabbit hole and taking Ori down with her at the exact right moment than an intended rescue.

\textit{Dwarves, will I ever really understand what goes on inside those thick skulls?} Kate didn’t think so. But then, she didn’t need to. If all went well, she’d be home in a couple of months. And the wizard had better keep his word. As things stood, Kate wasn’t overly fond of him and her well of patience had the annoying tendency to run instantly dry in his vicinity. Pity she couldn’t drag his arse in court for abduction. Now that made for a nice mental image.

Bofur shook his head. ‘No.’

‘Nori’s pony,’ Kíli went on. ‘Or Glóin’s hair. Or my socks.’

‘Oh, your socks are red, are they?’ Bofur asked interestedly. ‘Can’t see ‘em.’

‘You couldn’t see Fíli’s spare socks either,’ Kate reminded him, remembering the long quest for
guessing what blue object Bofur had in mind a few days previous. They’d been at it for two hours all together before he finally took pity on them.

‘But I knew they were blue,’ Bofur countered.

Kate saved herself the trouble of pointing out that wasn’t the point of a game that was called *I Spy*, meaning he’d had to see it. She had explained that all two days past and it didn’t seem to have made much of an impact. Like Óin, Bofur excelled at being selectively deaf.

‘Fine,’ she conceded. ‘Ehm… Balin’s blanket?’

Somewhere a little bit further down the column she could hear Dwalin groan. ‘Maker have mercy.’

Two hours later Kate was just about ready to make the same plea when Bofur finally revealed that it were Kate’s sunglasses, which of course she wasn’t wearing at the time and were stuffed somewhere down her bag.

Road entertainment had been few and far in between, Kate observed, what with encountering stone giants, orcs, goblins, the bloody Defiler and talking eagles. The last couple of days had been an ongoing whirlwind of activity and very little time to catch their breaths. The few moments of respite they were given were spent on catching up with the necessary sleep rather than wasted on idle talk and silly games.

It had been an emotional rollercoaster as well. Between agreeing to be friends with Thorin – and who did that, agreeing to be friends like it was a contract that was signed – finding out the reason for her presence here – *really?* – and gaining three brothers in one fell swoop – and how had *that* happened without her noticing? – there had not been exactly much time to think about more pleasant distractions, although heaven knew she was in need of some. But now they were at Beorn’s, had enjoyed two nights of sleep and the privilege of good meals. It felt like she had found her footing a bit. Of course, Azog was still out there somewhere and they were going to take a different route than the one described in the book, so there was still plenty to worry about. It was just that after a long day of preparations and Kate felt ready to drop.

‘Come sit over here with us!’ Bombur invited.

Kate had been about to turn in for an early night, but it seemed like her friends had different ideas. She might as well join them. If they got to talking, it inevitably got loud, because dwarves generally didn’t like whispering. Or maybe it was just for Óin’s benefit that they were perpetually loud; how else would he hear what was going on around them?

‘What’s it tonight?’ she asked, sitting herself down between Glóin and Balin.

‘How about that book of yours?’ Balin suggested.

Kate grimaced. ‘It’s in my pack, at the very bottom. Do you mind?’ She knew she would if she were asked to retrieve it. And she wasn’t sure she would be able to keep her eyes open; her eyelids were heavy enough already.

‘Oh, that’s all right,’ Fíli said, mischievous grin well in place. ‘I know a good story. You won’t sleep a wink all night.’

‘So, scary story then?’ It took her all her self-control not to laugh. Scary stories she could handle.
About ten years ago Jacko had gone through a phase where he really liked scaring people with gruesome stories and Kate had been his guinea pig of choice. And although her brother had been a good storyteller, his tales had mostly amused her. It were the scary movies that had her secretly inspecting the space between her bed and the floor, not the stories. There was however no need to share that particular detail.

‘If you want to hide in your bedroll, we’ll understand,’ Kíli teased.

‘Or behind our uncle,’ Filí helpfully. The wink he threw in for good measure was nothing short of suggestive.

Kate had to remind herself that exploding would gain her nothing. If anything, they might view that as confirmation and renew their efforts on behalf of the Get-Thorin-and-Kate-together-committee. If only she ignored it, the whole thing might die a silent death in the shadows of Mirkwood. And if she never heard from it again, it’d be too soon.

‘If I need to hide, I think Bombur will suit my needs better,’ she deflected. ‘And I won’t need to. Whatever you have, you’ll have nothing on my brother.’

As expected, this was taken as the challenge as it was, making them forget about their less than subtle hints about her non-existent love life. ‘You’ll be begging for mercy before we’re halfway through,’ Filí predicted.

Kate grinned. ‘Bring it.’ Their quest to scare the new girl would go south faster that they would realise.

The tale itself, told by Filí and Kíli together, was about a dwarf called Fryr, who had the command over a small group of dwarves sent to sniff out a troll’s lair. Once in the lair they found the troll itself dead as the proverbial doornail, but that was hardly the last of their trouble, as the cave sealed itself shut and left the dwarves with no way out, locked in with a creature they couldn’t see, but that whispered to them and killed off the dwarves one by one until only three remained.

To her surprise Kate, although decidedly not scared, was certainly intrigued. Filí and Kíli were gifted storytellers and especially the latter had a flair for the dramatic, what with the hand gestures and lowering his voice during the so-called scary parts. She certainly felt a lot less drowsy and quite a bit more alert as the tale unfolded.

‘And so there were only three of them left,’ Kíli narrated, taking over from his brother. ‘They were with their backs against the wall and the voice had gone quiet once more. Fryr knew that his time was running out, but then, just as he was to speak words of encouragement to his companions, there was an almighty roar…’

‘Where are my socks!’

Well, he got the part about the almighty roar absolutely right. On the other hand it spoiled the mood quicker than Kate could blink. Because of course this had nothing to do with the tale and everything to do with Nori, who had been on the other side of the house.

Kíli snapped right out of his role as storyteller. ‘No, that wasn’t it.’

_That figures._

‘What is this about?’ Naturally it was Dori who demanded an explanation. He would be; he considered it his life’s purpose to keep his brothers in line. And Nori was still a work in progress. ‘There are people who are trying to sleep.’
‘Someone stole my socks.’ Nori had yet to lower his voice.

Kate tried and hopefully succeeded in looking as confused as the rest of them. Truth was of course that those socks hadn’t gone and taken themselves for a walk. But then, neither were they gone. They were just at the very bottom of his pack, rolled into that spare blanket that she hadn’t seen him use ever since they left the Shire. The weather hadn’t been cold enough to warrant its use yet. Running from here to there and back again all day had provided her with the perfect opportunity to take the socks in question and hide them. True, she had been contemplating stealing them as payback for him trying to make off with some of her belongings in Rivendell, but she didn’t have the guts for it after all. And this might even be better in the end.

‘Seemed like the thief has finally been robbed himself,’ Dwalin observed. He had never made a secret of not liking Nori. In fact, it was common knowledge. Ten to one that he had tried to rob Thorin once or something equally as criminal. ‘Serves you right, laddie.’

Dwalin clearly wasn’t the only one who felt like that, judging by the murmurs of agreement around the room. Even Thorin, whose face had seemingly been glued to the maps in front of him, looked up. Of course she could be mistaken – he was too far away from her to be certain – but Kate could have sworn she saw one corner of his mouth make a slightly upwards movement; as close as Thorin Oakenshield generally got to something akin to a smile. Oh, so he found this amusing as well?

Nori on the other hand was far from amused. ‘I need them back.’

It only went downhill from there. Eventually Dori still chose Nori’s side, declaring that the joke had gone on long enough and that whoever it was should give the stolen items back. When no one came forward to claim responsibility – and given that they were all as innocent as lambs, why would they? – Dori demanded that they all empty their packs to find the culprit that way.

Kate breathed a silent sigh of relief that she had decided against hiding them in her own luggage. So she obliged her adopted brother by emptying her pack, grumbling all the while about having to pack again. The others were doing much the same and she didn’t want to stand out in any way. Nori was the sneaky type; he knew all the signs of a thief and a liar and he must know she still had a bone to pick with him over the Rivendell incident, even though that had been weeks ago.

‘They’re not here either,’ she said, rather unnecessarily, when Dori came to inspect her. ‘Sorry.’

Dori huffed, but nodded. ‘I did not think you had them.’

Oh, so she was above suspicion now, was she? ‘I hope you find them,’ she said. That was not even a lie. She did hope the elusive socks would be found, preferably with quite a few people watching. It’d make Nori look a bit like a fool. Undoubtedly that would dent his ego some, but he could do with a bit of humility either way.

‘Do you require help?’

Kate looked up to see Thorin, sitting on his own bedroll only a few metres away. She hadn’t realised he slept so nearby. For some reason that made her just the tiniest bit uncomfortable. She squashed the feeling. ‘How come you didn’t have to turn your pack inside out like the rest of us?’ she asked, jerking her head in the direction of his own luggage.

‘There are some perks to being who I am,’ he replied. It didn’t take a genius to know that he obviously did not think there were a great many. Well, he wouldn’t, not with the life he’d had,
would he?

‘So much for equal treatment,’ she commented mockingly.

‘I am offering my assistance,’ Thorin pointed out. He acted on it, too, leaving his spot to retrieve a few of her shirts from the floor.

‘So you are,’ she agreed. ‘Thanks for that by the way. Any luck with those maps?’ Changing the subject was what she had become good at. Besides, when did she talk about anything besides the quest with Thorin anyway? They weren’t good at small talk. Well, Kate usually was, but small talk with Thorin? He never even seemed to participate in the campfire conversations. It was only very seldom that Fíli and Kíli had tempted him into singing a song or two with them. And if even they were having so much trouble coaxing their uncle into more sociable behaviour, Kate thought it better not to have too much hope.

‘You seemed unsurprised by this turn of events,’ he remarked, ignoring her comment altogether.

‘It’s not in the book, I can tell you that much,’ she said. ‘You should know.’ He’d read it only a day ago.

‘And yet you were unsurprised,’ he persisted.

Shit, did he know? ‘It was a matter of time, wasn’t it?’

‘Miss… Kate,’ he began. He clearly wasn’t used to using her first name, given his tendency to start with the Miss before realising he was supposed to call her something else now. And if Kate was really, really honest, there was something a bit endearing about being called Miss Kate. It sounded like he was somewhere between not being friends and being friends and was trying to find his balance.

She stopped that train of thought right away. Endearing? Since when did she find any aspect of this grumpy dwarf endearing? Good grief, Andrews, you should stop listening to what they’re all saying. It’s starting to drive you insane.

‘Yes?’

‘As a matter of interest, where are they?’ It was a bit of a long shot, but he still seemed that tiniest bit amused.

Kate contemplated playing dumb for a bit longer, but then decided against it. ‘At the bottom of his own pack, rolled into his spare blanket,’ she confessed in a hushed tone of voice. Then, in an impulsive mischievous tone, she added: ‘I can’t wait for him to find that out.’ She wasn’t even sure why she did that, confiding in Thorin about a prank she pulled on Nori, but there she was. Well, it was what friends did, wasn’t it? And they’d done so many new things lately that one more probably couldn’t hurt.

‘Dori will shout loud enough to bring down the roof,’ Thorin predicted and wasn’t that strange? No rebuke, no stern reminder that she’d had her fun and that she should be giving Nori a clue as to the whereabouts of his missing items of clothing? For a moment there she could almost be fooled into thinking she was with one of her friends at home. But then, she was with a friend, wasn’t she? She just wasn’t at home.

‘That’d be the first time I’m looking forward to witnessing that,’ she said. ‘Bit of a shame about it interrupting the story, though, even though Nori’s got impeccable timing, coinciding his mighty roar with the one in the tale.’
Thorin raised an eyebrow in what appeared to be curiosity. ‘Which tale where they telling?’ He must have heard his nephews’ voices, but would have been too far away to make out the words.

‘The one about Fryr and his men,’ she replied. ‘Kili had just gotten to the part where there are only three of them left and they are about to hear an almighty roar when Nori started wailing like a banshee.’

The look on Thorin’s face was now more puzzled than curious. ‘A banshee?’

Kate shook her head. ‘Never mind. Thanks,’ she added when he handed her back her books so she could put them back with the rest of her luggage. ‘Do you know how that story ends, by the way? I must admit I’ve gotten a bit curious.’

‘The voice proclaimed that justice was done and then the cave was unsealed,’ Thorin said. ‘It later became known that the dead of the cave had all committed some hideous crime or other for which they had gone unpunished. The voice sought to rectify this.’

‘A cautionary tale then, about which sins not to commit?’ Kate guessed. Interesting idea, really.

Thorin nodded. ‘It is.’

She still wondered about one thing, though. ‘Who was the voice? The embodiment of justice?’ Just like two nights before, when she’d been listening when he was playing the harp, this felt surreal. This, talking with Thorin about something that had nothing to do with the quest, it just didn’t happen. Discussing books and stories was something she did with friends. Especially with Anna. They’d sit down with a cup of tea, pick a book and argue about it for hours on end.

Except Thorin most certainly wasn’t Anna, she wasn’t home and there wasn’t a cup of tea in sight. But he was a friend now, wasn’t he? She’d better start acting on it. But good grief, this is going to take some getting used to.

‘You’d be better off asking Balin or Ori about it,’ he replied, a bit evasive now.

‘I’m not asking them, I’m asking you,’ she pointed out. ‘What do you think?’

Thorin hesitated, as if he somehow considered this a personal question, which Kate didn’t think it was. ‘I think it was the voice of the Maker,’ he answered eventually. ‘And that he took it upon himself to remove the children he made that didn’t abide by the code he set them to live by.’ He stood and nodded at her. ‘Goodnight, Kate.’

It took her a couple of minutes to realise what had set him off so much, until she realised that, if he really viewed the story in that way, he didn’t think he had done all he could to live by the code Mahal had set his children. I was wrong. He doesn’t have an ego, he’s got a guilt complex the size of Mirkwood dragging behind him. What for, though? Losing Erebor, losing so many of his kin?

She made a mental note to ask Balin discreetly about which crimes the fictional dwarves had committed, so that maybe she could get some clue what had made Thorin turn into his usual taciturn self again. After all, she was just looking out for him now. That’s what friends did, didn’t they?

She kept mulling the tale over until another almighty roar snapped her out of it. A little distance away stood Dori, missing socks in hand, shouting at Nori for wasting everybody’s time. The victim of the verbal assault for once wasn’t shouting back, staring in bewilderment at his own socks, clearly at a loss as to how in Durin’s name they would ever have ended up where they had, since he was so sure he hadn’t touched that blanket in months.
It restored her good humour just a bit when she realised that the corner of Thorin’s mouth was once again curling slightly upward.

Thorin would happily admit, even if only in the privacy of his own mind, that he was glad to see the back of Dori. It wasn’t that he disliked him, but he was not overly fond of him either. And he surely didn’t know what to make of his belief that he was in any romantic way interested in Kate Andrews. Permission to court, indeed. Had he not had such strong control over his own reactions, he might have snorted in derision. It was probably best for his continued health that he hadn’t; Dori had a lot of strength in his fists that he liked to employ in the best interests of his family, whether they approved of it or not.

‘Don’t you think I’ve been doing quite enough singing for the day?’ The subject of discussion was riding somewhere behind him, but her voice tended to rise as her annoyance did and for some reason unknown to Thorin she was really annoyed by her new friends’ insistence she treat them to a couple of songs from her own world.

‘Well, we’ve still got a few hours to go,’ Nori reminded her. ‘We need to keep entertained.’

He was behaving like his normal self again, although he kept casting suspicious looks at his companions from time to time, still trying to find out who had been responsible for hiding his socks. Strangely enough his gaze never lingered on Kate. As his adopted sister, she was perhaps above suspicion. And Kate hadn’t let on she had anything to do with it whatsoever. There was a cunning streak there that was entirely undwarvish. It was a firm reminder that she was not like them, that she was different. Yes, they were friends, but that was all they would ever be. Dori must have suffered from sudden delusions to confront him like he had.

‘Told you, not the company entertainer,’ Kate sing-songed. ‘It really only says advisor in my contract.’

‘Balin would be happy to change it if you asked him.’ Nori may not know that it was his own sister who had made him look like a fool only the night before, but to her it must surely feel like he was taking his revenge by making her look like a fool in turn. Thorin liked to think he was slowly getting the measure of this woman and she did not like to be at the centre of the attention, especially when she was asked to demonstrate skills she did not feel she had perfected. They had agreed to become friends and so he thought he was allowed to notice such things.

‘Of course, I’m perfectly sure Thorin would be pleased to do anything you asked him.’

It was hardly any surprise at all that it was Fíli who made this remark. Thorin did not appreciate being the one joked about. He’d been laughed at by too many to bear it even when it was done in good fun. Some of the sting never went away. It always reminded him of all those who had laughed at him, of all those who had told him that no matter what he did, it would never be enough. He was a king in exile – and in truth, more a blacksmith than he had ever been a king – and could never rise to the glory of his ancestors. How could he, with both Khazad-dûm and Erebor lost to his people?

And even if he succeeded in reclaiming it, who was to say that he would not lose his mind to greed afterwards? He had read the book and it hadn’t given him an easy moment since. True, there were distractions, but that was all they were. He didn’t think his sister-sons knew what it meant to him that they had told the tale of Fryr and his companions to Kate, but if the Maker had a sense of humour, it must be a very twisted sense of humour indeed.
The advisor herself seemed blissfully oblivious of the parallels between The Hobbit and the story of Fryr, but Thorin was not so blessed. One of Fryr’s companions had fallen prey to greed prior to setting out with Fryr, begrudging his peers what he owed them. And he had been struck down for it in that Cave of Judgement, as some scholars called it. In Kate’s book, he himself fell prey to such an affliction and although his book self came to his senses, he still died in battle. Crime and punishment.

Kate’s annoyance was steadily climbing up to the point where it started to resemble something closer to anger. ‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, give it a break, will you? Believe me, it is starting to get repetitive.’

She was right; it must have been going on for longer than Thorin had realised. He made a mental note to ask for how long exactly – he had the uncomfortable feeling that their delusions found their origins around the same time the elves had first made mention of it – and to see that they stopped. He would not have the quest undermined by suggestive remarks. None of them could afford to let their minds wander, not with what lay ahead.

‘Just saying that he would probably do what you asked, seeing as how you are his advisor and all,’ Fíli clarified. ‘And his friend.’

‘I’m sure,’ Kate grumbled.

‘Well then, how about that song?’ Balin asked. ‘We could do with more merriment along the way.’

For a few seconds nobody said anything. Thorin more or less assumed that Kate simply refused to open her mouth and win the argument by sheer determination and stubbornness. That would have been how Thorin preferred to cut off arguments that weren’t going his way. It tended to work, although he couldn’t say what exactly it was that put people off once he had decided to no longer waste his time trying to talk sense into contrary folk. Dís would know. So, for that matter, would Balin and Dwalin, if he were ever of a mind to ask them. Maybe even Kate would know, but her he wouldn’t ask. If she were ever to tell him, it would come out during an argument. Despite their friendship, he doubted they would stop having those. They were still who they had always been, after all.

‘Very well,’ Kate gave in. ‘You brought it on yourselves.’

‘Brought what on ourselves?’ Nori asked, sounding wary of her for the first time all day. Kate’s threats of violence were generally considered laughable, but the other kind, the kind that involved verbal attacks, were things to treat with care. Contrary to popular belief, the advisor could hold her own. She’d gotten her own back yesterday, repaying Nori for trying to steal from her in Rivendell, lending credibility to the saying that revenge was a dish best eaten cold, because her victim still did not so much as suspect she was the one to blame. Now however he was on guard.

It took Thorin little to no imagination to picture the devious grin on her face as she started in on a new song: ‘Old MacDonald had a farm…’

It took Thorin exactly one verse to solve the mystery of why Kate would consider this payback. It was the most inane song he ever had had the bad fortune to hear. It was quite possibly more meant for small children rather than full-grown dwarves, dealing as it did with a man in possession of a farm and a load of animals who made ridiculous noises. Maker have mercy on me.

It took Kíli a verse and a half before he got the idea and threw himself into it with an enthusiasm he hadn’t put on display since he was a young boy being presented with sweets on Durin’s Day.
'Kate, what have you done?' Glóin lamented over the sound of Kíli’s singing. Like Thorin, he must have realised that there was no chance Kíli was letting go of this at any time soon. It was the *I Spy* game all over again.

Looking around revealed that Kate was biting her lip and evidently had just realised the consequences of her mistake. ‘I may have created a monster,’ she admitted. For all the clever thinking she sometimes did, she still was very young and impulsive at times. It wasn’t a side Thorin had seen a lot of these days, not since they had gone into the Misty Mountains. Much had changed in only a few days.

Kate’s assessment of the situation was indeed spot on, because Kíli had embarked on a quest to find old MacDonald some more animals to own. But then, there were only so many animals to find on a farm before he ran out entirely and had to start over. And where would be the fun in that? Thorin knew Kíli too well. He wouldn’t do that.

Having said that, he may have slightly underestimated Kíli’s creativity in coming up with animals that could be found on a farm. Cats and dogs he could understand though – they ate mice and kept intruders away respectively – the mice on the other hand were more questionable, but he really drew the line at wolves.

Fortunately, so did Dwalin. ‘That’s enough, lad. No one keeps wolves on a farm.’

‘No,’ Fíli agreed. ‘He did keep a wolf pup in his bedroom, though.’

Thorin remembered that. Apparently the beast had been abandoned by its mother for some reason and Kíli, endearing child that he was, had taken pity on it and taken it home. He must have sensed on some level that the adults in the house were hardly going to approve of his choice of pet and had kept it secret for a full two weeks – an impressive feat, all said – before it escaped and burst in on the family during supper. Thorin had taken it out into the wild and Kíli had cried for ours before he calmed down, but that had fortunately been the end of it.

‘Do tell,’ Kate urged, sounding just as eager for anything that wasn’t that infernal song as Thorin felt.

It worked, although it certainly did not stop the song from getting stuck in his head for the days that followed. Kíli, being singularly unhelpful in this particular matter, kept on whistling it when he was bored so that by the time they encountered the elves, most dwarves was just about seriously contemplating gagging him.

(However, it wasn’t until Kíli regaled the elves with all verses of old MacDonald and his farm that he gained a little appreciation for the tune, even if only because the elves seemed to find it just as vexing as Thorin himself had thought it at first.)

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**Chapter End Notes**

I haven’t forgotten about your requests (one is in the works, although it’ll take a bit of time), but this piece has been waiting to get done for a long time. I hope you liked it. As always, reviews would be much appreciated.
Dear Jacko,

Well, he’s here. The baby, I mean. It took an awful lot of trouble for him to get here in the first place, but now he’s asleep in his cradle and Thorin is staring at him like he’s discovered a mithril vein in one of the mines. It’s a rare sight to see him like this, emotions on full display. You’d say that after a year and a half we’d have become at least a little better at showing what we feel, but guess what, we’re only marginally less hopeless at it than we were when we first met. Well, at the very least we’re still making progress, even if we’re moving slower than a hibernating bear. It’s progress all the same.

It takes a really special occasion to express what we feel as opposed to feeling it and not saying a word about it, as is our wont. But this is such a special occasion. But then, we never even thought our little Thoren was possible at all, but here we are, having a miracle of our very own.

Of course, we could have had better timing, but timing has never been our strong suit, for neither of us, so maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised that our son’s birth just so happened to coincide with another caravan arriving from the Ered Luin…

It decidedly was not his fault, the King under the Mountain told himself when the door fell shut behind him, it really wasn’t. Thorin remembered being present when his sister delivered her sons. Dís had wanted him there, what with almost all their other kin deceased. Thorin had been unable to refuse her. And now at least he knew something of how babes entered the world.

What he hadn’t anticipated was that the race of Men had considerably more trouble delivering their offspring than his folk had. Dís had experienced pain and discomfort, but she had always been a strong lass. Dwarvish women in general were stronger. Childbirth was not, as it turned out, as dangerous for them as it was for their mannish counterparts.

It was a conclusion the King under the Mountain was reaching for himself as he stood there, watching Kate suffer, mentally keeping up with the sotto voce stream of curses his queen uttered when another contraction hit.

‘You’re doing well, Kate.’ Thora – because of course the chatty healer would be here – gave her an encouraging smile.

‘She is not doing well; she’s in pain.’ Dori had folded his arms over his chest, the very picture of disapproval. ‘Do something about that.’ It must be one of the first times Thorin found himself
agreeing with Kate’s older brother when it came to the former advisor. He might have made more note of the event had this been any other day.

Óin pretended he hadn’t heard a word Dori said, but Thora, being young and in the possession of excellent hearing, rounded on him. ‘It’s childbirth, Master Dori,’ she said, slightest hint of annoyance in her voice. ‘It is not exactly a walk in the park.’ If her copying Kate’s expressions and speech patterns wasn’t an indication that she had spent more time in her company than Thorin personally would have liked, he wouldn’t know what was.

‘You are a healer,’ he snapped. Or she was supposed to pass for one; Óin seemed to tolerate her presence only as long as she wasn’t in his way and because his bad hearing made it so that he could not hear most of her wittering anyway. ‘You can make it less painful.’

At this moment the subject of conversation butted in. ‘Oh, for heaven’s sake!’ she exclaimed. ‘Have you two heard yourselves, fussing like a pair of bloody mother hens! I am right here and I can speak for myself, in case you’d forgotten.’

Oh, he had not forgotten. In fact, he was well acquainted with Kate’s I’m-fighting-my-own-battles attitude. But she lived in this world now, had made the conscious decision to stay. Could she not learn to accept that his culture was different from the one she had grown up in and that Thorin, judging by all that he had heard of it, sincerely disliked?

Unlike Thorin, who knew it was wiser not to contradict her – which would not stop him from continuing on his chosen course a little more discreetly – Dori barrelled on with a fervour normally reserved for lecturing his younger brother. Tact was a hard thing to come by in that family; the only one who had been blessed with it was Ori, as far as Thorin was aware.

‘It is my duty as your brother…’ he began, only to be cut off by his adopted sister, whose temper was steadily approaching the danger zone.

‘Out,’ she snarled.

This took all in attendance by surprise. It was enough to make even Dori stop and stare, a rare occurrence indeed, as he was rarely ever stopped for anyone once he had started on a rant.

‘Beg pardon?’

‘Out,’ Kate repeated, a grimace on her face. ‘I can’t do this with the pair of you hovering over me like I’m on my deathbed. So go.’

For a moment Thorin thought she referred to her brothers, but she was still squeezing Nori’s hand with no sign of letting go. It was only then that he realised that “the pair of you” referred to Dori and him, the only two persons in the room to have expressed concern. Kate didn’t like concern, especially when she thought there was no need for it, so this was not something to be surprised at, but it still stung. Not a year past she had told them that they were in this “together or not at all,” but here she was, sending him away, depriving him of the chance to witness his child being born, a child that by rights should not have ever have existed, because it was deemed an impossibility. It was a miracle in the aftermath of a horrible battle that he claimed so many lives and a hope for a future in which there would be less death and more life.

Thora was quick to catch on. ‘Well, you heard her,’ she said, flapping her hands impatiently. ‘Make yourselves scarce.’

Part of Thorin longed to protest, to make his right to be here known. He didn’t, but it took him
most of his self-control to keep his tongue under control. With his mind he understood that Kate was in pain and that she lashed out when she was. He’d known her long enough to know that it wasn’t personal and that she wasn’t saying it to hurt him. Nevertheless that was what she did. It was one of those days that he wondered if he would ever fully understand what went on inside her head and if they would ever cease hurting the other – he was long beyond thinking that he didn’t do the same thing to her on occasion, even if he did so unknowingly – in such a way.

Dori again displayed his clear lack of tact by turning on Thora. ‘Who do you think you are?’

The young healer was protected from his biting anger by a shield of confidence several inches thick. ‘Her Majesty’s loyal servant,’ she replied with a bright smile. ‘Well, shoo with you.’

‘He gets to stay,’ Dori observed, sending a suspicious look in Nori’s direction.

‘I am here to keep our dear sister and respected queen in high spirits,’ he said. ‘It’s a very responsible task, I’ll have you know.’

Dori looked like he was about to utter another objection, but thought better of it at the last possible moment. Had he been born a wizard, his expression would still have summoned a hurricane though, and Thorin felt at least as disgruntled as his brother-in-law looked, but he liked to think he at least could boast better control over his facial expression.

The Maker be praised for distraction, though. He hardly set foot outside the room before Balin accosted him, telling him that the caravan his sister was part of was less than a mile from Erebor. Arrivals from the Blue Mountains had steadily come these past few weeks and Thorin both eagerly anticipated and dreaded his sister’s coming. It would be a relief to clap eyes on Dís after more than a year’s separation. They had always been close, had faced the cruel world and the hardships of exile side by side. He could not have wished for a truer or more reliable friend and kinswoman. Yet at the same time he did not look forward to seeing the accusation in her eyes for not being there to prevent her youngest’s passing. He had sent her a note to warn her. Better that she should hear it from him than from a gossiping and uncaring stranger on the road.

He made his way to the gate, still at a slower pace than he would have liked. The knee had healed nicely from the injury he had sustained in the battle, but, as Elvaethor had predicted, it had not gone back to how it had been. On average days he could get by well enough, but on days like these, when he had spent entirely too much time standing, walking and pacing, there inevitably came a time when the limp came back. But he was determined not to need a walking stick, because Mahal help him, he would not be seen as weak.

Dís was already there when he arrived, talking to Dwalin, who had made up part of the welcoming party in his king’s absence.

‘Dís,’ he said.

That soft-spoken greeting was enough to make her turn around. Her keen eyes took him in and he could see her reach conclusions faster than he could blink. Doubtlessly it hadn’t passed her by that he favoured his left leg and that it was costing him increasingly more not to show that the pain had made a reappearance as well. Neither would she have missed the guilt in his eyes.

His grief over Kíli’s death had hardly even begun to abate. He only had to close his eyes to be transported back to that horrible moment, reminded all too well that he had been powerless to stop it from happening. And he should have been there. Kíli had been his sister-son, under his protection, one of the few living kinsmen he had left in this world. He should have been there.
‘Good to see you’re still standing on your own two feet, brother,’ she remarked. ‘Although on one more than the other.’ Like Kate, she had a flippant manner she liked to employ to diffuse potentially explosive situations. He had not been joking when he told Kate they were much alike. Except Dís never needed to be told what was in his heart; she always knew.

‘It is good to see you,’ Thorin replied. It was. If only it wouldn’t be overshadowed by the sorrow Kíli’s demise had caused.

At a discreet suggestion of Balin the others disappeared, leaving Thorin the room to be alone with his sister. The moment they did so, he embraced her, silently expressing what his tongue could not yet speak. Dís didn’t say anything, but the silence was neither awkward nor uncomfortable. They knew each other too well to need words. Which suited Thorin just as well.

Still, some at least were required. ‘I am sorry,’ he said. It wasn’t nearly enough, could not even begin to make amends for his failure.

‘I know.’ There was no I forgive you, but neither was there the accusation he had anticipated and imagined at length. Dís could have a temper. Her anger burned whereas his froze. They were complete opposites in that respect. It was how they handled things. It was good that Thorin never lost his self-control in the face of all the injustice they had faced, but sometimes he had needed Dís’s fire to remind him not to take it, that they were treated wrongly and that he had a right to rail against it. There was no fire now.

‘I should have…’ he began, because he should have been and done so many things.

His sister only shook her head. ‘No.’

He stopped. ‘What do you mean?’

‘It was a battle. Kíli knew the risks. You couldn’t have prevented this.’ He could only wonder at how much it cost her to say it, to be strong for him, to not blame him when she must feel the grief even more keenly than Thorin himself did. How could she even stand there without looking at him as if he wasn’t the sole cause she only had one son left instead of two?

‘Dís…’

Once again he was not allowed to complete his sentence. ‘He killed a dragon. He survived that. You weren’t to know the battle would take his life instead.’

Except he had known. That cursed book of Kate’s had foretold it before the quest had even begun. He might as well tell her. ‘I did know.’

Dís snorted. ‘Yes, some sort of enchanted book.’ Like he had at the start, she didn’t seem to think much of it. It was surprising that she knew of its existence, though. ‘Fíli told me when he met me at Dale.’ Another snort. ‘But since when have you held with any of that magic nonsense? Have you gone addle-brained after hanging around that wizard for too long?’ She gave him a scrutinising look. ‘Word has it you’ve taken a mannish girl for your queen. Imagine my surprise when Fíli told me it was true.’

Kate. He’d known that sooner rather than later the subject of conversation would turn in this direction. And there was every possibility of Dís not taking it well. Theirs was not a race that welcomed outsiders with open arms after all, and they had very good reason not to. And Kate Andrews was even more of an outsider than anyone could even suspect.

‘It is true,’ he nodded.
‘Catherine,’ Dís prompted, raising one eyebrow in a request for him to please explain what in the world was going on.

‘Kate,’ he corrected. His sister was no outsider that she should use the name Kate didn’t like.

‘Kate,’ she conceded with that whatever-you-want-brother look that really meant she still wasn’t overly charmed by what was happening. ‘Fíli told me where she was from and what she was doing with your company. What I don’t understand is why in Mahal’s name you thought it wise to marry her. A mannish girl? Thorin, have you taken a complete leave of your senses?’

It was a question that had been more than implied by most of the people – elves, men, orcs and dwarves alike – he had met with since he had left the Shire. Of course they had jumped to the wrong conclusions at first, but later, when there was truth to their observations, he had spent considerable time thinking on an answer and until this day, had failed to come up with one that satisfied both him and the questioners.

_It was the right thing to do_, he meant to say, but that was both too formal and wrong. He hadn’t married Kate Andrews only because his honour demanded it of him. He had done it because he wanted to, not just because everyone just assumed it had happened already and it was just a clever lie they encouraged to save their skins. It went a lot deeper than that. If truth be told, he loved her. It was plain and simple. It took considerable more effort to translate that into the spoken word.

He had the good fortune that Dís was such a skilled reader of his face. She shook her head when it dawned on her. ‘Mahal, save us all,’ she said. ‘Our people aren’t short on eligible maidens, but it had to be a mannish one from another world who turned your head.’ There was yet another snort, just a tad disbelieving. ‘She must be quite something.’ Again, there was not a trace of reproach in either her eyes or her voice.

‘She is like you in many ways,’ Thorin said, the barest hint of a smile tugging at his lips. The temper, the quick wits, the teasing smile. ‘Although she lacks the beard.’ That was something he had learned to see past, but his people were still adjusting. But they had defeated a dragon and reclaimed a homeland – and Lufur had been spreading stories of her heroic stand at the side door during the battle – and outright disgust had in quite some cases turned into reluctant acceptance and, in one or two rare instances, even to respect. Balin may have been right after all when he remarked he had earned the right to make a few controversial decisions.

‘Such a rare specimen and yet I do not see her here to make my acquaintance.’ There was the light mocking he had missed on so many a day this past year. She was still questioning his decisions – and possibly his sanity – but she also loved him with the unconditional love of a sister. He had her loyalty, as he had always had and he was a lucky dwarf because of it.

‘She is in labour,’ Thorin said, which consequently brought the matter back to the centre of his attention. Would the child be born already? He wondered. He hardly knew anything of such matters after all. For Kate’s sake, he hoped the birthing process would be over. He was not squeamish in the very least, but it never got easier seeing loved ones in pain. And in danger. Thorin knew enough of the world to know that childbirth was not without risks for the race Kate belonged to.

‘Ah,’ Dís said. ‘Which begs the question why you’re here with me and not with her holding her hand.’

Lying to Dís would be useless; she’d see through it in seconds. ‘I was asked to leave the room to take my worries elsewhere.’ It sounded more dignified than _I was kicked out of the room because I fussed too much for Kate’s taste_.

To his surprise a knowing smile tugged at Dís’s lips. ‘Spirited lass, eh? Good on her.’

He arched an eyebrow, asking her to elaborate.

‘Thorin, there were moments I would have sent you away if I could,’ she said. ‘Maker knows you were driving me around the bend with all that fretting you were doing over me and the lads.’ It was impertinent to speak like that, but he had always accepted it from her. She was family; she had a right. But when Kate had done the same, he’d been vexed at first, because she could claim no such right. She could now, but not when they first met.

‘Why didn’t you?’ he asked.

‘Because you are my brother and had a brotherly right,’ she said. Thorin heard what she hadn’t spoken, though. She’d let him stay, because she hadn’t wanted to hurt him by sending him away. Dís was not known as a selfless person, but she had always been for him, even when he felt he was the last dwarf who’d be deserving of such devotion.

‘Thank you.’ Other words would not suffice. And Dís would know the deep emotion behind them without him having to spell it out.

Dís was on the verge of saying something, but never got the chance, because Nori interrupted. ‘What are you two doing here chin-wagging?’ he asked, sauntering into the room as if he had a right to. Nori had never been one to abide by any law of decency – or laws in general, come to think of it – and he had only gotten worse now that he was kin of sorts to the King under the Mountain in spite of Dori’s attempts to rein him in.

And Thorin had just about enough of it. ‘You should not be here.’ If he had appointed himself as Kate’s helper, he should stay with her and do some actual helping.

‘What, and miss the chance to announce I’ve just become an uncle to a prince of Durin’s line? Nah, don’t think so.’ He shrugged. ‘It’s the kind of thing I’d think you’d be interested in knowing, but if you’re not, I’d better find my brothers to impart the good news.’

There was going to be a day when he grabbed Nori by the collar and personally disposed of him outside the gates, but maybe not today. Because while utterly infuriating, what he was so ineloquently saying was that the babe had been born.

‘It is over?’ he asked.

‘So it is,’ Nori replied, his usual cheerful self. ‘I’ll say, I swear I almost felt her squeezing my hand near the end, so that’s saying something, but the only one crying is your new-born son, so I reckon Kate’s quite all right.’

Dís chuckled. ‘Good to see some people never change around here.’ For some reason that went far beyond Thorin’s comprehension, she had always thought Nori more amusing than annoying. She gave him a soft shove in the direction that rascal had just come from. ‘Go see your wife and son. I will keep.’

He wanted to go. Thorin very much wanted to go and confirm with his own eyes what Nori had said, but what kind of brother would he be if he left his sister here?

Dís made the decision for him by shoving him a second time. ‘Anyone would say you were afraid to face your wife and son,’ she remarked in that gently mocking tone. ‘Go.’

And so he went. He imagined that he would be admitted back into the room now that the hard part
was over and done with, but it felt rather surreal all of a sudden. Maybe it was because he had not managed to wrap his head around the idea that Kate and he had been able to conceive a child together. It should not have been possible. And yet it had happened and it had happened so very, very quickly. And between getting rid of elves and men and starting to rebuild Erebor from the ruins Smaug had left there had been so little time to stand still and let the realisation sink in.

And now he had to. Of course Kate had let him feel when the child kicked within her womb and no one could have missed the unmistakable swelling of her stomach as the pregnancy progressed, but as long as the child had not been born, it was hard to feel that he was truly about to become a father.

But it’d be no good dwelling on that. He’d reached the rooms he shared with Kate and knocked, more out of politeness than actual necessity; they were his rooms after all.

He didn’t need to wait long before the door was opened. ‘Ah, there you are,’ Thora said. ‘Congratulations. You have a healthy baby boy.’ That sunny disposition of hers had clearly weathered the storm of Kate’s temper. ‘Right,’ she added over her shoulder. ‘You give me a shout should you need anything.’ With a wink that was entirely too impertinent, she grinned: ‘Enjoy.’

Thora was gone in a whirlwind of brown braids before Thorin could take her to task for it.

But with the chatty girl out of the way, he could enter the room properly. Kate was still in bed, propped up against the pillows, a blue shawl draped over her shoulder and what appeared to be a bundle of blankets in her arms.

‘Well, don’t just stand there,’ she said. ‘Come meet him.’

Uncertainty made him linger at the door. ‘Are you not afraid of my fussing?’ She had sent him away for that to begin with.

Kate laughed, an actual unrestrained kind of laugh that lit up her entire face, the kind that had been only too rare. ‘More afraid of Dori’s. Yours I believe I can manage.’

His feet made their way to the bed of their own volition. Thorin could not recall making a conscious decision to do so. As he came closer it became obvious that Kate was not holding mere blankets – although he had known that already – but there was a tiny person wrapped in them. He could not recall either Fíli or Kíli ever being this little.

‘Well, they must have been,’ Kate commented, making Thorin realise that he had spoken his thoughts out loud. ‘So… what do you think?’ He didn’t think he imagined the uncertainty in her voice. Had he not made it clear enough that this child was welcome?

But he had never been one to find the right words at the right time and it seemed that this was no exception. They had been given a miracle all their own, a son. He had never believed he would ever marry, much less become a father. He’d had to take care of his people; there simply was no room left for a wife and offspring. And there hadn’t been a need. Dís had given him heirs and they were more than he could have asked for.

‘He has got your hair,’ he offered, seating himself on the bed. And indeed he had. There was no mistaking that colour and, though little hair there was, it was already curling.

Kate smiled. It was the kind of smile that he seldom ever saw on her. It wasn’t mischievous or wicked. If anything, it was soft and peaceful. ‘Poor dear. He’s been struck by the Andrews curse.’ When Thorin merely stared at her in confusion, she clarified: ‘The curls. It’s what Jacko used to
call it. Wild, curly and completely unmanageable."

‘It is not a curse,’ Thorin told her. Mahal knew that it was her first physical feature he had even taken note of.

‘Not an actual curse,’ Kate agreed. ‘That’s just what we called it.’ She grinned at him. ‘The rest of his looks all come from you, though, right down to the scowl.’

‘Babes do not scowl,’ he corrected her. Certainly not his son. As it was, he was lying in his mother’s arms, sleeping. Looking at him made him feel more real. The impossible had happened.

‘He does,’ Kate insisted. ‘Tell you what, though, it looked absolutely adorable on him.’

They fell into silence, just watching. There had been many a silence between them, but not many had been so companionable. This one was. It was new and strange, but Thorin rather thought he could get used to it. After all, they had a child together. The marriage was real and Kate wouldn’t ever leave. The quest had been successful and he had lived to tell the tale.

‘You know what,’ Kate spoke up all of a sudden. ‘I have been an idiot.’

The sudden announcement was enough to tear Thorin’s gaze away from his new-born son in favour of looking at his wife in bewilderment. ‘How so?’

‘Well, what woman in her senses would send her husband away while she is giving birth?’ she asked. The manner of her speech was light-hearted, but Thorin had learned to know better. This was Kate apologising. ‘I mean, really? Sending my brother away was probably my best decision all week, but you? Not my best move now, was it?’

‘It wasn’t.’ He had meant to be there and she had sent him away, had made him leave. Pretending that it hadn’t hurt would be futile. It had.

She smiled sheepishly. ‘I’m sorry, Thorin. And I’m still trying to get the hang of this whole relationship thing. I’ve never been any good at it, you know. So, I’ll do better next time?’

Recognising the peace offering for what it was, he pressed a kiss to her mouth in silent response.

Kate Andrews was sorry. It wasn’t an emotion she was feeling very often, and if she did, she hardly ever spoke of her regret or offered her apologies. But this situation rather called for it. Because even though Thorin hadn’t said in so many words that he was hurt, that didn’t mean he didn’t feel it. They didn’t really talk about feelings, after all. They let their actions speak for them instead. However, every now and then, when she had really screwed up, she needed to add words to get her message across.

True, she had been in pain and Dori was annoying the hell right out of her, but Thorin had, all things considered, kept very good control of himself and his reactions. And she had overreacted. Something like that required a spoken apology, the kind where she actually said she was sorry, albeit in her own roundabout way of going about such a task. He deserved that, especially because he had a fear of people leaving him that went back decades, well over a century even.

The mood lightened after she had accomplished that. Thorin was actually doing some real smiling, the sort of smiling where the joy actually reached his eyes. And so Kate had done the only thing she could think of to make that smile stay there: she passed her son over to his father.
In hindsight that might not have been her brightest idea, because Thorin had hardly let go of him since. Even now, while he was lying on his back on their bed, the babe was lying on his chest, prevented from rolling off by his father’s hands. If anything, Thoren seemed to find the upwards and downwards motion of Thorin’s chest as he breathed calming, because, like his father, he slept like the dead.

*Well, that’s a relief, Kate thought wryly. At least I won’t be woken up by his crying every hour of every night.*

It wasn’t all that late yet, but they had decided to call it a night early. Thorin had been pushing himself too hard all day, walking too much and refusing to sit down even when a chair was offered to him and Kate was really just exhausted, but her mind wouldn’t shut down and so here she was, sitting in front of the fire, watching her husband and son excel at the activity she herself would love to gain a mastery in. Goodness knew she needed it.

So naturally insomnia would choose tonight to grace her with its presence. And really, it wasn’t that strange at all. She was running high on emotion. Joy was the first and foremost of them. She had a son and he was amazing. It would seem she would need to correct her opinion about there being no such thing as love at first sight, because oh hell, yes, there was such a thing.

And then there was that tiny sliver of regret trying to spoil it all, reminding her that there was a great part of her family that would never know about her child. And they would surely have loved to meet him, well, once they got over the weirdness of the whole thing. Heaven knew it had taken Kate long enough to wrap her head around the idea of Middle Earth and its people being real.

*But that’s never going to happen, so get your head out of your fantasies, Andrews. She’d made her choice, she’d said her goodbyes – sort of – and now it was time to start living in the real world, pun fully intended. Besides, yes, she missed her family, but she had a husband and a son just a few metres away and they were family too. Not to mention her three adopted brothers, who all seemed to dote on the newest addition to the family. According to Nori, Dori was only so enthusiastic because he had someone younger than Ori to fuss over, which might explain Ori’s very relieved expression.*

Still, they somehow never managed to erase the sense of loss that had been casting its shadow over her ever since she had given her letters to Gandalf. *Resign yourself to the fact that’s never going to change.* As it was, she thought she might have felt guiltier if she had gone back and had left Thorin. It was a small consolation only, but a consolation all the same.

*Oh, for heaven’s sake, quit it with the doom and gloom, Andrews.* Not that she used that name anymore, except in her own head. Having said that, Kate was at a loss as to what her actual surname was these days, or even if she had one. Dwarves didn’t do surnames and Thorin’s Oakenshield was more of a nickname or an honorary title to commemorate his contribution to the Battle of Azanulbizar than an actual name. So what made that of her then? Most folk called her by her title – and someone calling Kate Her Majesty still gave her the urge to look over her shoulder to find out which royal was standing behind her – or with her first name, either the full or shortened version of it. For the past months that had sufficed and maybe that was all the answer she needed.

And just maybe it was time to try and give going to sleep another go, which of course was the moment Thoren chose to wake up and start fussing. *Impeccable timing he has, that’s for sure.* Thorin didn’t seem to have noticed that the baby had woken up. On the road he had been a light sleeper – when he managed to snatch some to begin with – but now, when he knew he was safe, it was hard work getting him to wake in the morning, something that hadn’t stopped amusing her yet. She was sure it would before a week had passed, though; being the one to see to a fussing infant all
hours of the night was bound to erase most of her tolerance and selflessness soon enough.

For now, however, she would let him sleep, because goodness knew he needed his rest, what with him pushing himself to the breaking point and, Kate strongly suspected, often beyond. As long as there was work to be done, be it dealing with the dreaded business of state or making sure the kingdom became inhabitable again, Thorin would not be sitting down, even if it was best for that knee of his. Of course it was healing well, even Óin agreed, but that didn’t mean Thorin should go on his merry way and undo all the good work. There was already a chance it would never quite go back to how it used to be.

‘Come here,’ Kate said, lifting Thoren from his father’s chest, hoping that carrying him around for a bit might do the trick of sending him off to sleep again. Or maybe he was hungry. How was she supposed to know? It wasn’t as if she was an expert on motherhood and giving birth hadn’t provided her with an instant package of knowing what to do when a baby was crying.

Fortunately, just this time at least, Thoren seemed content to be held; he ceased crying the moment Kate took him into her arms and exited the bedroom to let Thorin enjoy his rest. He showed no signs of picking up where he left off with his nap, though. Instead he was just staring up at her. Oh, and that was definitely a miniature version of Thorin’s face she saw.

‘You take after your dad, don’t you?’ she said, glad she had left the bedroom so her talking wouldn’t wake Thorin. Besides, there was this lovely rocking chair in the sitting room, just perfect for the purpose of getting a fussy child to sleep. ‘Although you seem to have inherited that mess of curls we Andrews have to call hair. I imagine that’ll be fun to brush out once it starts to grow.’ She touched his hair. ‘You’re a little miracle, you know.’ He seemed to like her voice and so she kept talking. ‘And all the more dear to me because of it. You are so loved, Thoren, so very loved.’

Whatever it was that stayed her tongue and prevented her from speaking her heart was gone. Temporarily, no doubt. When morning came and she’d had some sleep, she’d revert back to her usual self. Becoming a mother would not change her that much overnight.

‘My mum would have loved you too,’ she heard herself say, not entirely sure where that had come from, especially given the fact she had all but forbidden herself to think about what she had left behind. Tonight was not a night for such dismal thoughts and for heaven’s sake, could she at least be happy for a few hours before the regret intruded on her happiness again?

Already she was so tired of always feeling pulled in two directions and she still had her whole life ahead of her. It had been less than a year since she made her decision to stay and hardly a day had gone by that she hadn’t been thinking about it. True, she knew her regret would have been worse had she chosen differently, but that didn’t necessarily make it easier to live with the decision she had made. How did anyone do this? Of course, there was no one to ask, her position being so annoyingly unique. Bloody Gandalf. God give he won’t do this to anyone else once the whole Ring crisis comes around. Although she would be long dead and buried by the time that happened, she might just come back to haunt him for all eternity if he as much as contemplated doing to another living soul what had been done to her.

‘She would have,’ she continued. ‘She was always on my case to find a good man so she wouldn’t be too old and grey before she became a grandmother. If she’d known you, she’d have spoiled you rotten until I could have strangled her. And your Uncle Jacko would have made sure you had some basic football skills as soon as you could walk. It’s always vexed him I didn’t have the slightest bit of interest in the wretched game. No sense in running after a ball only to kick it away again, is there?’

The thing was, she could see it. If only she closed her eyes, she could see what could have been if
she had gone back, the life Thoren would have had there. Not that he would have been called
Thoren then. The name only served to remind folk whose son he was, that he was an heir of
Durin’s Folk and that was not something to be questioned, as some people did, people who hadn’t
been on the quest, who had no idea what they were talking about. In that way they may have been
very lucky with how Thoren turned out to look, a perfect of Thorin and her both, although with
Thorin’s features dominating thus far.

‘Not that you won’t have a very great and loving family right here,’ she went on, more to remind
herself than to remind her son, who after all wasn’t old enough to understand what she was on
about. ‘Your dad loves you so much, Thoren, you have no idea. And don’t get me started on your
uncles. True, Uncle Dori will preach and lecture until he drops for want of air, but if anyone is
bothering you, he’s the best protector you could wish for. Uncle Nori will make you laugh, I think,
but heaven help him if I ever discover he’s been trying to teach you how to pick people’s pockets.
And Uncle Ori will teach you everything you need to know. He’s a walking and talking
encyclopaedia, that one.’

‘What use will he have for his aunt then?’

Kate had been so caught up in her own little world consisting solely of Thoren and her that she had
missed the arrival of a so far unknown dwarf. Female, she judged after a quick examination, a
dwarrowdam. She might as well learn to use the correct terminology, seeing as how she was Queen
under the Mountain these days. Having come to that conclusion, she could only say that she looked
an awful lot like Thorin. In fact, had Thorin been born female, she imagined this was what he
would have looked like. They shared the same nose, eyes and mouth. They even were quite similar
in build.

‘Dís?’ she asked hesitantly. Thorin had mentioned his sister had arrived in one of the few moments
he wasn’t too preoccupied adoring his son and he had said something about Kate meeting her soon.
It was just that she hadn’t expected it would be this soon.

The dwarrowdam nodded. ‘And you must be Kate.’

It was hard to learn from her tone what she thought at all and the nerves, so easily summoned these
days, took up residence once more in her stomach. They were good tenants and even when they
left, they were never that far away. It wasn’t like Kate Andrews to be so nervous about what others
thought of her. But that had rather changed when she ended up becoming Queen under the
Mountain. The position had never been meant for one like her. She was no dwarf and she was not
from this world, even though she did now belong there. The dwarvish customs and laws continued
to confuse her and in months past she had been afraid of making a fool out of herself more than
once. And in a way meeting Dís was scarier than dealing with Blackbeard and his ilk, because she
was someone Thorin held in high esteem. She really didn’t want to mess this up. All of a sudden,
she felt woefully unprepared.

‘I am.’ The most original greeting uttered in living memory, to be sure. That’s the best you can
come up with? ‘I’m sorry I wasn’t there to greet you on your arrival,’ she offered. ‘I was…’

‘Giving birth to my nephew,’ Dís finished. Was that amusement she saw in her eyes? It was so hard
to tell. ‘My brother told me.’

Say something! Kate ordered herself, but her brain must have melted all of a sudden, because she
couldn’t think of a single thing to say that wouldn’t sound horribly cliché and utterly inane.
Awkwardness increased by the second. Oh, for goodness sake, it isn’t like you to be speechless.
You’re a grown woman and you can handle this. Get a bloody move on!
‘Will you sit down?’ she asked. Not the most original thing to settle on, but better than nothing at all.

Dís did as she asked with only a curt nod in confirmation. ‘Where’s my brother gone off to?’ she wondered.

‘Sleeping,’ Kate replied. For a brief moment she considered waking him, but then, remembering how exhausted he had looked, decided against it. Besides she was not such a weakling that she needed her husband to get through a meeting with her sister-in-law. If Dís asked for him, she could always go and wake him. Until then, she was on her own.

Oh, joy.

There had been many a day when Dís, daughter of Thráin, had wondered about her brother’s intelligence, or rather the apparent lack thereof. She had experienced a great many such days of late. Truth be told, she had already had her doubts when he had announced he would set out to reclaim their kingdom with just a small company consisting of kin and friends, with the addition of a wizard and a burglar. And of course he had taken her boys with him. He could hardly do anything else, them being his heirs. But Dís had spent the better part of a year fearing for them.

And then the news had come. The dragon had been defeated and her Kíli was the one to have done it. What mother would not be proud of such an achievement? Reckless he may have been, but he would be remembered as the one who had freed the region of the greatest blight that had ever laid upon it. She had been unable to stop smiling and whistling for joy for days on end.

Until her joy had been cut short so cruelly. Her youngest, her Kíli, so full of life, had been cut down on the field of battle. Thorin’s note was short and formal, as was his way, but Dís had known her brother long enough to taste his pain. Like as not, he was beating himself up over it more than she could ever do.

It was no one’s fault, she knew that. Dwarves went to war when they could, when there was a need, and her son had died for the most noble of causes: in defence of their halls. He died with honour and that should be a consolation. And it was. But there were times when Dís could only mourn for all those that she had lost. She knew she was not that old yet, but her heart felt ever so weary. Will it ever end?

It had ended now. Or, that was what she hoped for at the very least. Erebor was theirs. They had a Mountain to call their own once more. Their people would have a refuge, a place to call their own. Thorin had succeeded against all the odds. At the very least it had provided her with a distraction as she packed up her life and moved back east again. She had a people to look after and to guide in Thorin’s absence. It fell to her to lead them over the Misty Mountains and through Mirkwood and it was a task that kept her busy from dawn till dusk.

Of course it didn’t help to be confronted with elves like Thranduil, who had been nothing but accommodating when they passed through his realm. That in itself was enough to set Dís’s alarms off. She didn’t really remember the day Erebor fell to Smaug; she’d been too young. There was only a vague impression of fire, screams and the smell of smoke that had been in her nostrils for weeks after. But she remembered what Thorin told her, that even though they begged for help – and dwarves never begged unless there was good cause – the elves had stood and watched before they turned away. Turning away was what they were good at.
Well, turning away and playing those cursed mind games of theirs. So when Thranduil bid her convey his warmest greetings to her brother’s wife, Dís was understandably confused. Not that she had given that arrogant king any clue as to said confusion. Rather, she had ignored the remark altogether and had gone back to her tasks. But of course she wondered what the elf had meant, and so had all the others who had been present to hear the words.

So of course her mind had been churning over Thranduil’s words again and again. Thorin had a wife? The very notion was absurd. Her brother had never shown the slightest interest in any lass. Even if he was inclined to turn his mind to romance, his duties never left him the time for it. He had always been working so hard, making sure their people had a place to work and rest their travel-weary heads. The title of king had come to him too soon in life and Thorin was a dwarf who took his responsibilities seriously, even though no joy derived from it. So if he had not found the time for romance in day-to-day life, how in Durin’s name had he managed to find it on the quest for Erebor? It did not make sense. The marrying bit made even less sense, if that was possible. Dwarven courtships could last for years before the wedding followed.

But apparently there was some truth to Thranduil’s words, for when they came in Dale, or what would in days to come be Dale once more, the people spoke of a Queen under the Mountain, a woman named Catherine, a mannish lass who had somehow managed to snatch herself a king for a husband and whose tongue was not to be underestimated. Stranger and stranger, she remembered thinking and not for the first time Dís wondered about Thorin’s state of mind. What had he done? Fortunately it was Fíli who managed to shed some light onto this situation. He had met her in Dale and had told an altogether wondrous tale which of course all came down to a wizard and his hare-brained schemes. Dís had never liked magic much. It was something she could not defend herself against with any arms that a smith could make. And this tale of other worlds and magic books made her ill at ease. Not that she doubted her own son’s words, but Thorin must have been out of his mind to marry such a woman. Not to mention that it was rare, if not unique, to hear of a marriage between a dwarf and a mannish girl.

What had he been thinking?

The answer to that question came when she asked him about it. Of course, being Thorin, he did not give her a verbal reply, but she knew him well enough to read his face. He’d fallen in love at last. Maker help us all. She must be quite something. Well, spirited at least, given the fact she’d sent Thorin away so that she could give birth to her babe in peace.

Curiosity well and truly piqued she had decided to go and make her acquaintance once she had finally a moment to do so. The sun had set a while ago, but it wasn’t all that late yet and so she had asked directions from Dwalin and had gone on her way.

At first, Kate was something of a disappointment. The lass was small for one of her race, although her height wouldn’t stand out in Erebor. Fragile too, from what she could see. Whatever the attraction existed between the lass and Thorin, it could not be anything physical. Too frail, no beard and not much of that spirit the people in Dale had spoken of either, not that she could see anyway.

But for all intents and purposes she was kin now and for Thorin’s sake she would make an effort, even though she would love for him to be here. But her brother was asleep, Kate – the name sounded utterly foreign – had informed her and the reply had not been followed by an offer to wake him. Dís assumed that none would be forthcoming and resigned herself to sitting through one of the most awkward visits of her life.

In her tries to make conversation suddenly the elf’s words sprang to mind. ‘King Thranduil wished
for me to convey his warmest greetings to you.’

Kate’s head snapped up and her eyes narrowed. ‘Thranduil is a gossiping busybody who’s entirely too shrewd for his own good,’ she declared, making it quite clear that there was no love lost between her and the elven king at all. Ah, there was the fire she had heard of but had not witnessed. ‘And he wouldn’t have conveyed his greetings at all if it hadn’t given him the opportunity to confuse you. Or cause strife in your midst.’ She thought for a moment. ‘Or both.’

‘He did not cause discord,’ Dís reassured her, liking the lass slightly better than she did before. Men were usually too much in awe of elves to say anything against them despite their obvious flaws, but this Kate seemed to be an exception in more than one way. ‘I take it you do not like him much.’

Kate snorted. ‘Like him? If I never see his face again, it will be too soon. Did you know he had the lot of us imprisoned when we passed through Mirkwood?’

Dís shook her head. Despite her earlier misgivings about Thorin’s choice in partner, there was something that was vaguely familiar. It took her a few moments to work out where she had come across it before, but then she remembered. There had been days when she could be just like that. How many times hadn’t she been angry during their exile, lashing out about the wrongs done to them? And her wit had always served her well in that. It was just slightly unnerving to find such a familiar trait in a mannish lass.

‘Thorin’s note made no mention of it,’ she replied.

Kate smiled. There was a hesitance to it, as if she wasn’t sure how far she could go and what she could say. ‘Want me to tell you about it?’

Why not? ‘If you wouldn’t mind telling the tale,’ she said.

‘Not at all.’

The bedroom was both dark and empty when he woke. Unlike most of the dwellings under the Mountain, the bedroom Thorin shared with Kate had windows, mostly for her benefits. Had dawn been breaking, there would be some natural light coming in through them, but it was still dark.

And that was unusual. As soon as the elves and men departed after their siege, he had started sleeping better at night, confident in knowing that no enemy would disturb his sleep or take Erebor for his own while its king rested. That he had woken up now was reason enough to wonder about the reason.

But he was fairly certain that there should at least be two more people in the room. Thorin recalled falling asleep with his son on his chest and Kate somewhere in the room. It had, all things considered, been a joyful day. It still hurt that Kate had asked him to leave, but at the very least she had apologised. He could hardly hope for more.

Over the past months he had learned that being married to Kate did not automatically mean they were sailing smoother now than they had done before. They still disagreed on matters, they still were of the opinion that the other could be particularly pig-headed and difficult and they still weren’t any good at talking about matters of the heart. But there was a solid foundation now, preventing them from falling apart as they had done before Dáin’s arrival. He could trust her now, trust her not to leave when it got hard. There was a quiet comfort in knowing that.
But she was not here with him, and he distinctly remembered Óin, when he came to check on mother and babe, saying that Kate should get some rest. And while she was constantly chiding him for ignoring the advice of the healers, she wasn’t doing much better herself. In that way, they truly were too much alike.

He was pondering this when a bout of laughter from the living room found its way to Thorin’s ears. Kate’s he recognised instantly and the other voice took him only a moment longer to identify. It was because he hadn’t heard his sister laugh in such a long time, he reasoned. He’d been away for too long and their reunion had not given either of them much cause for merriment.

If he was really honest, he hadn’t known what to expect when his sister and his wife met, but he had been fairly certain he should have been there when it happened. Dís had not sounded and looked as though she wholly approved of his choice in partner and he had known Kate was nervous about meeting Dís. After all, they had gotten married without her knowing about it. Dís had a right not to be happy about that, she’d said and Thorin had to agree she made a fair point.

He was about to rise and join them – he was surprised Kate had let him sleep through it all to begin with, given how tense she’d been about this meeting – when he first heard the front door close and then the door to his bedroom open. There was a little light left from the sitting room, just enough to allow Thorin to see his wife holding Thoren.

‘Hush now, you,’ she warned the babe in soft tones. ‘We won’t want to wake him now, do we?’

Her sight in the dark was not as good as his and so she must have thought he was still asleep. ‘What was my sister doing here?’ he asked. Why didn’t you wake me? Was that because she thought this too was a battle she ought to be fighting on her own? After more than a year he thought he knew her a little better, but that did not necessarily make it easier to interact with her. For all that she said they should take on the world together, Kate had an annoying tendency to go off on her own and face it alone regardless.

Kate stiffened. ‘For heaven’s sake, Thorin!’ she hissed at him. ‘You scared the crap out of me.’

‘What was she doing here?’ Experience has taught him that the quickest way to get to an answer was by repeating the question and refusing to acknowledge her reaction.

True to expectations, it worked this time just as well as it had done in the past. ‘Saying hello,’ Kate replied. She put the babe in the cradle and then waited for a couple of seconds. When nothing happened, she tiptoed over to their bed and made a hushing gesture in his direction. ‘Please keep your voice down. He’s only just fallen asleep and I don’t want to wake him again.’

‘My sister and you wouldn’t have been helping much,’ he observed. If he had heard their voices, it was certain that his son would have heard them much better.

‘He likes laughter,’ Kate declared, shooting him that look that Thorin knew to mean that she full well knew he was right, but was not going to admit it because she wanted to salvage what was left of her pride. ‘Makes him scowl less,’ she added with a teasing grin.

The teasing was still new. It had not been part of their original interactions. Thorin wondered what it said about them that they took so much time getting used to new things in their own relationship. Kate called them a dysfunctional couple that somehow functioned in spite of it all. It was as good an explanation as any he might care to think of.

‘Babes do not scowl,’ he insisted.
Kate didn’t miss a beat. ‘Not when he’s sleeping, he doesn’t.’ She got into bed and laid claim to the thing she deemed the best pillow, which just so happened to be him. ‘By the way, did I happen to tell you I really like your sister?’

As she drifted off to sleep Thorin, son of Thráin pondered that every now and then there were days in his life when the sorrow for those he lost didn’t weigh him down so much. There were days when he did not fear quite so much for the future of his people as he did on others. There were days when his duty did not feel so much like a weight pressing him down. There were days when Thorin found he could smile without restraint.

This day, he concluded before he joined his wife in slumber, had been such a day.

Chapter End Notes

Thorin and Kate just can’t seem to be only happy, can they? I tried to get them to be fluffy for a bit, but they weren’t cooperating much. I hope you enjoyed it anyway. On another note, after being asked about it quite a number of times, I’ve started to write a sequel to The Journal, called The Book, dealing mainly with Thorin and Kate’s children in the time period of the Lord of the Rings. Also, Gandalf isn’t quite done messing with the Andrews family yet. I’m about two and a half chapters in at the moment, but I’d like to know if there is a bit of interest from your side before I start posting anything, because the Lord of the Rings is a huge story and I’ve a feeling The Book might get really long as well.
Anyway, just let me know. Also, reviews would be very much appreciated.
Thank you for reading!
Family Visit AU Part 1: Loophole

Chapter Notes

I've always sort of hated that Kate couldn't go back to her family to say goodbye, so here we have that trip back that doesn't happen in the official Journal universe. I'm basically writing an AU of my own AU, if that makes sense.

Enjoy!

Loophole:

1. an ambiguity, omission, etc, as in a law, by which one can avoid a penalty or responsibility

2. a small gap or hole in a wall, esp one in a fortified wall

Dictionary . com

Erebor, summer 2949 TA

It was widely known that dwarves lived by their contracts. Once a deal was struck and all the signatures were in their proper places, no one would be able to come back on it, because dwarves would stick with it until their dying breaths. This of course often led to great frustrations among men and elves alike, but as it was, there was little they could do about it. After all, they had signed of their own free will, which generally meant they agreed with the contents of the contract. According to dwarves, this was all plain and simple.

Or rather, it used to be. Knowing that dwarves stuck with their agreements had lately led to men and elves trying to find and create loopholes in the contracts, leaving them room to wriggle out of them if the arrangement no longer suited them. Dwarves in turn had taken to thoroughly checking and checking again before they signed anything. This, Thorin, son of Thráin found one of the most mind-numbing tasks ever invented, but as King under the Mountain, the final checks on contracts that concerned his kingdom inevitably fell to him. Granted, when he could, he always asked Kate to go over them when she had a moment to spare. After all, her mind was more suited to the kind of manipulation men and elves were prone to. Not that he often verbally asked, but he'd leave a contract lying about the room – safely out of reach of the eager hands of his sons – and he'd give it a few hours. Without fail Kate would come to him a few hours later, pointing out that if he didn't do so-and-so, he would give the elves leave to charge far more under circumstances that were surely going to happen a lot or something of the sort.

Still, much as he despised it, he had slowly begun to master the art and this was how he had discovered the loophole his wife had always missed. Had this been any other matter he would have gently teased her for it, but seeing as this matter was so delicate, it had seemed better to him to make sure it was a loophole he could exploit, before he would raise her hopes, only to have them crumbled again.
And that was how he had come to be here, in his study, looking at the grey wizard who had tried unsuccessfully to fold his large body into a dwarf-sized chair.

'It has come to my attention that you have been rather dishonest with my wife,' Thorin said when the pleasantries were out of the way.

Gandalf looked surprised to learn it. He was smoking his pipe, the smoke of which slightly obscured his face. 'How so?'

'If memory serves, you once told her that there was no possibility for her to return to the world that she came from and still come back here.' He knew this for certain; he had been there when the wizard made this announcement. And he had seen Kate's hopes crumble more and more with every word that was spoken. To this day, the memory never failed to rile him.

'That is true.' Gandalf still didn't seem to realise where Thorin was headed with this.

'A There and Back Again spell is what you called it, isn't that right?' Thorin waited until the wizard had given a nod in confirmation before he continued: 'Then you will cast such a spell on me.' If someone had told him a couple of years ago he would command a wizard to use his magic on him, he would have fixed them with as stern a glare as he could muster and sent them on their way. Even now, it was not a decision he made lightly. But he felt as if he owed a debt, a feeling that rather than decreased, increased with every passing year. Because Kate was not as good a dissembler as she liked herself to think and there were always little moments when she recounted a memory from before the quest and she'd suddenly fall silent for a second and times when she looked at something or someone that reminded her of what she had left behind and there would be that rueful smile on her face. Of course, she seldom spoke of how much she missed home, but then, she didn't need to. She had gotten married to the one person who spent most of his life missing it. The fact alone that she had willingly and knowingly given up all hope to see her family and her home again put Thorin deep in her debt.

Gandalf for once seemed to be entirely lost for words; he had even forgotten he was smoking. And so Thorin took this as his chance to elaborate. 'Kate told me that when you brought her here, everything she was holding onto at the time came with her,' he said. It had taken him a long time to coax this information out of her without her being any the wiser. Subtlety was hardly his forte, but he had managed. 'Were you to cast this spell on me and I were to hold onto Kate at that time, I would take me with her, is that correct?'

As Kate would have phrased it, on the opposite side of the desk Gandalf was doing an unflattering imitation of a fish on dry land. His mouth opened and then closed again as if he was looking for something to say but could not quite find the words to do so. Thorin found this not much of a problem; in truth, he had been longing to get one over Gandalf ever since he'd first been introduced to the wizard's scheming. Of course a king should be above such petty thoughts, but as long as he did not share them with the world, no one would feel the need to point this out to him.

'Theoretically speaking you would be right,' Gandalf spoke at long last. He'd taken up smoking again.

'And so Thorin took this as his chance to elaborate. 'Kate told me that when you brought her here, everything she was holding onto at the time came with her,' he said. It had taken him a long time to coax this information out of her without her being any the wiser. Subtlety was hardly his forte, but he had managed. 'Were you to cast this spell on me and I were to hold onto Kate at that time, I would take me with her, is that correct?'

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'Theoretically speaking you would be right,' Gandalf spoke at long last. He had always been the kind to omit the truth or to just slightly bend it, but he had never been the kind to outright lie.

'Then I see no further need to discuss the matter,' Thorin answered. He would not admit to being pleased that his theory had been confirmed, but it was decidedly not a bad feeling either.

'I never thought you would wish to see this world for yourself, Thorin Oakenshield,' Gandalf observed. He'd taken up smoking again.
'I do not,' Thorin replied. And really, he did not. The more he heard about it, the stronger his desire to never set foot there. He did not fear her world, but neither did he think he could feel at ease there. But it was not for his sake that he was asking.

'Then why?'

'Because a debt is owed,' he replied promptly. 'By both you and me.'

Had Kate been here to witness this conversation, she would have told him in no uncertain terms that he owed her nothing, that it had been her own bloody choice for heaven's sake and could he please get his head out of his arse and start living in the present instead of the past? There was a good reason why she was currently not here after all. Of course, she would have been wholly justified in pointing out that Gandalf on the other hand owed her a fair few favours and maybe it was time she cashed them in.

Gandalf was intelligent enough that he understood this reasoning. But understanding did not seem to make him like it any better. Of course, that would make two of them. Thorin did not in any way look forward to visit a world not his own. But then, Kate had done it and she had done so without any preparation. No, it was not her world he dreaded the most. That place was reserved for her family. They would be entirely in the right to accuse him of taking a beloved daughter and sister from them. There was nothing he would be able to say in his defence.

In the short moment of silence, Gandalf had miraculously summoned up another excuse. 'Travel between worlds is not meant to happen.'

Thorin glared at him. The advantage of these chairs was that he could look the wizard in the eye rather than having to look up at him. 'If it is possible, then there is nothing you can say that will change my mind.'

The grey wizard muttered a great deal about the stubbornness of dwarves and their general bloody mindedness – which went a long way in showing that Thorin wasn't the only one who had picked up Kate's mannerisms and speech patterns by association – but eventually left Thorin's study under a cloud of smoke and chagrin and with a promise to do as he was asked. All things considered, the morning could be counted as a success.

He did not have long to reflect on his success – or to explore that sense of dread in the pit of his stomach – because Kate let herself in just a few minutes later.

'Was that Gandalf I saw just leaving?' she asked, brow furrowed in confusion. 'You two finally kiss and make up?'

Thorin merely arched an eyebrow at her.

'Obviously not,' Kate concluded. She sat herself down in the chair the wizard had just vacated. 'Well, at least you didn't come to blows over it.'

'I would not strike a wizard,' Thorin reminded her.

'Neither would I,' she said, giving him a very pointed look to go with it.

'His pipe would beg to differ.'

'Well, maybe,' Kate admitted. 'But then, the river is too far away. He'd catch me before I came even close. And I didn't exactly strike him. Not that I didn't want to, mind.' She gave him a searching look when he didn't reply. 'Okay, out with it. What did you two talk about and why
haven't you told me yet?'

Honestly, he should probably have known better than to try and conceal anything from her. 'We spoke of a debt he owed you,' he replied.

Kate seemed mildly confused for just a moment before she regained her composure. 'I think we both agree he owes me several, including a bloody apology, but which one in particular are we talking about?'

'Your family,' Thorin replied.

'Yes?' By the looks of things this hadn't quite cleared matters up. 'Thorin, honestly, I'm in no mood to play the guessing game with you today.'

And so he explained that he had thought of a loophole and how he basically had the elves to thank for the idea occurring to him in the first place – 'Well, I guess Thranduil is good for something then,' Kate commented – and that he had just put the idea to the wizard.

At this point Kate was chuckling. 'He'd have loved that.'

'He did not.'

Kate rolled her eyes. 'Sarcasm is completely lost on you, isn't it? Never mind, I doubt it yielded much result.' She'd wrapped her arms around her torso like she always did when she was bracing herself, whether for a fight or for a disappointment. 'I'm sure that he would have mentioned something when I first asked him if there was such a possibility.'

'There is.' She could not honestly think he would share this with her if there wasn't, could she?

Although she didn't know it, her facial expression closely resembled the one Gandalf had put on display when Thorin made his demand. The unflattering disbelief looked quite out of place on her face, though. 'You… you mean…?' It wasn't often that she was lost for words, but this was indeed one such rare occasion. 'Do you really mean…?'

'He has consented to the idea,' he told her. He omitted any mention of the wizard doing so willingly; she'd know that was a lie anyway. In all the time that they had known him, he had never done them any favours that only benefitted them without at least grumbling about it in a remarkably Dori-like manner.

Her jaw dropped. 'You mean I can actually go and see them?' It was hard to describe the expression on her face, but it looked like joy. There were some tears in her eyes as well, but he was not exactly a stranger to shedding tears of happiness. Well, there was another thing he could not have possibly predicted a decade ago.

'You can.' It was easy to keep his composure; he did not want to venture there. He had long since abandoned the notion that she would stay there once she got back, rationally at least. Perhaps it was a more or less undefined fear of the unknown, although he could hardly even admit that to himself. And for Kate's sake, he would keep his mouth shut.

That, he reflected, had been one of his wiser ideas. Besides, Dori might have lectured him for hours on end if he had so much as considered ruining Kate's mood. He'd negotiated a week of preparation so that he at least would not feel completely out of place. And Kate had decreed that if they were going to blend in, something had to be done about clothes, because 'I'm very sorry, but there's no way we're going to blend in looking like we do.' But she was laughing and humming songs. It was not until he'd been married to Kate for a couple of months that he first discovered that habit. When
she was really happy she'd start to sing a song and change it into another just a couple of lines in and on and on it went. Some songs he recognised, others he didn't, a strange mix of two worlds, seemingly effortlessly blended into one new tune. Really, Dori would have had his head for making her stop.

'But where are we going?' Thoren, who was now seven years old and fancied himself quite the expert on a lot of things all of a sudden, inquired on the day of their departure. He was giving his mother, now dressed in trousers rather than skirts a critical look, one that conveyed that something was not quite right about all of this.

'We're going to visit my family, sweetheart,' Kate replied mildly, making a last attempt to make his hair stay in one place. She should have known that was in vain; their eldest had inherited not many of her features, but he certainly had her curls. 'My mother and my brother. Your grandmother and your Uncle Jacko.'

Thráin perked up at the mention of uncle. 'Is he like Uncle Nori?' To Thorin's dismay, both his lads were quite taken with him. If he'd had a say in the matter, they would have taken to Ori more, but then, Nori had always been the most colourful of the bunch.

Kate pondered this for a while. 'Not quite,' she said. 'We used to get into trouble all the time when we were kids, but I don't think we ever did any law-breaking.'

Thráin looked almost disappointed to learn it.

Meanwhile, Thoren was still of the opinion that he hadn't been provided with a satisfactory answer. 'But where do they live?' he asked. 'We haven't saddled any ponies.'

'The wizard will take us to another world,' Thorin said. Not that he strictly knew how this was going to happen. He only knew he was to hold on tight to his family.

For Kate this was seemingly easy enough. A few months after Thoren's birth she had mastered the art of doing things one-handed almost overnight. She'd have the baby on one arm and use the other to write a letter, make tea or set a table. It was one thing Thorin had never got a mastery in. It had been hard enough when it was just Thoren, but now that he had more children than arms, he often found himself constantly feeling as though he could really do with another pair of hands. It seemed hardly fair that Kate could go out the door with all three without any of them getting lost in the market while he would only need to blink and find he was suddenly short a child.

'Oh,' Thoren said, considering this. 'With magic?'

'Indeed.'

And apparently that was answer enough for him. 'Couldn't Uncle Nori come?' he asked.

Kate laughed. 'Dear one, I would not set your uncle on anyone.'

There was a lot of sense in that to be sure. It would hardly endear Kate's kin to her new family if Nori were to relieve all of them of their valuables. To be honest, Thorin was not entirely convinced he would not do his brother-in-law some serious bodily harm if he were to find out such a thing had happened.

'Are you okay?' While he had pondered this, Kate had shifted her attention from Thoren to him.

'You have asked before,' he observed.
'And it's not as if you've given me a workable answer.' The look on her face told him she probably had made an accurate guess as to what was really on his mind. 'For heaven's sake, Thorin, they're my family, not a pack of wargs. And if they're going to be mad at anyone, that person will be me. My choice, remember?'

He was unconvinced. 'Not at first.'

'So they'll rant at Gandalf a bit. It's not as if you objected to that before. Unless, of course, he has become your best friend in this past week? But I rather think I would have noticed that.'

'He has not.' After everything, no, he could not consider the wizard a friend. An ally, yes, but that was all he would ever be.

'Then seriously, stop looking like a lamb that's going to be led to slaughter.' Annoyance made up the majority of her voice now. 'And if the worst happens, I'm sure you're better in a fight than Jacko anyway.'

Maybe he should stop doubting the family she so clearly longed to see, but there was still that guilt gnawing away within him, that certainty that if – no, when – they would blame him for Kate's disappearance, they would be wholly justified in doing so.

'For Durin's sake, Thorin, stop blaming yourself,' Kate growled, just soft enough that no one but him heard her words. 'It was an impossible situation and that is no one's fault but Gandalf's.' He would have disputed the wisdom of these words with the wizard himself so close had he had any less pressing concerns to distract him. 'And if you so much as think about blaming yourself for not finding this little loophole any sooner, then so help me God, I'll knock you into the middle of next week myself.'

It didn't set him to rights, not by a long way. But he had made this choice and he would see it through.

Thráin had managed to catch her final words and had jumped to the wrong conclusion. 'Are we going to time travel?' The excited gleaming in his eyes told his parents he was hoping the answer would be yes. Curse Ori and his stories.

Kate snorted. 'I should hope not.' She lifted Duria up and extended her hand to Thráin. 'Hold on tight now,' she told him. 'Thoren, you take your father's free hand and you do not let go until we tell you to. Do you understand?'

'Hold on and don't let go until you tell me to,' he parroted back dutifully.

'Exactly.'

Thorin had not felt this ill at ease since he had to tell the elves and men they could take a share of the wealth of Erebor to repay them for the services rendered. He'd experienced a similar feeling then; an urge to run, a repulsion so strong he just wanted it over with so that he could move on to just slightly less unpleasant matters.

'We are ready,' he told the wizard. He held Thoren's small hand secure in his left one and had his right on Kate's shoulder. It should be sufficient. 'Do it.'

He had hardly spoken the word when the wind began. It was just a breeze at first, but then it picked up. He could feel Thoren's hand clench his own. His son was a self-proclaimed explorer, wanting to investigate everything, but he was only a child still. And there was something distinctly wrong about this wind, something unnatural, something magical. It cost him all his self-control to
remain where he was and let it happen. He had been the one to command the wizard to do this in
the first place. And it was too late for second thoughts.

Next to him, Kate was murmuring soft reassurances to Thráin, whilst trying to soothe a crying
Duria back to sleep, but she herself seemed calm. But then, she had lived through one such spell
already and, admittedly, when he met her, she had looked perfectly well.

As soon as it had started, it was over again, but he was no longer in Erebor. Instead he was outside,
blinking against the sudden bright sunlight.

Kate was doing the same. 'Well, there's no way we're in England; there's way too much sunshine
for that,' she commented dryly.

Wherever they were, they were far from alone. The square they were standing in was filled with
people, all going about their business without even sparing a glance for Thorin and his family. It
was clearly a city of Men and he recalled again that there weren't any elves, dwarves or orcs to be
found where she came from. A bewildering world indeed. But these people did not look like they
could belong in a city like Dale. Their clothing was distinctly different. If anything, it was less
modest, but no one so much as looked twice at garments that would have caused a scandal at
home.

Thráin looked wide-eyed at the place they had landed. The fear over the strange wind had subsided
the moment there was something more interesting going on. 'Where are we?' He made one hopeful
look at his father, but Thorin's face must have conveyed the message that he didn't know, so he
turned to his mother instead. 'Amad, where are we?'

The fact that Kate had started frowning did not bode well. Thorin followed her gaze to the building
that seemed to loom over them. There were letters on the front, most of them forming words he
didn't understand. Clearly Kate did, because the frown deepened into the well-known I-know-
what's-going-on-here-and-I-do-not-like-it stare she usually reserved for the likes of Thranduil.

'That's the Millennium Centre,' she said. 'In bloody Cardiff. I am going to kill Gandalf.'

Kate had mentioned the name London, Thorin recalled, when he had asked her where they were
most likely to arrive. Judging by Kate's furious expression, they were nowhere near it.

He frowned. 'Have you been here before?'

Kate shook her head. 'No, but I used to watch Doctor Who,' she replied as though that explained
everything, which it didn't. She must have seen the uncomprehending look on his face, because she
added: 'Never mind. I just know where we are, is all, and it's not where we were supposed to be.'

'We're not there yet?' Thoren asked, sounding disappointed.

'Well, there's a little bit of a problem,' Kate admitted. 'But nothing we can't solve.'

She looked like it too, like she knew what should be done. The moment they had arrived here,
something about her had changed. Though hard to identify at first, her posture spoke of confidence,
of fitting in. This was her land and she knew how it worked. Instinctively Thorin felt that she
belonged here in a way she never did in Erebor. And he would be lying shamelessly if he said that
very thought didn't set his teeth on edge.

'First things first, we find a place to sit for a minute,' she announced. 'You can watch people from a
little distance too, Thráin, come on.'
It had been a long time that Thorin Oakenshield had felt so out of his depth. He had come to a world not his own, so different in so many aspects that he could not help but feel inadequate. It was not a feeling he enjoyed, even more so because Kate for once seemed to know exactly how to behave, what to do and where to go. Unlike in Erebor, she knew how to simply be. She knew where they were and her tone had suggested that somehow she would all figure it out from there. Whereas he, on the other hand, knew nothing. Not all of Kate's stories could have prepared him for the otherness of this place. Even the air tasted different, and not necessarily more pleasing.

Kate installed the lads on a nearby bench and told them to stay on it while the problem was sorted out.

'Well, that's a bit of a setback,' she observed once Thoren and Thráin were thoroughly distracted by all the strange sights around them. 'That wizard… I'm going to do him a harm for pulling that stunt on us. Dropping us off near my relatives? Bloody bullshit.'

'Revenge for forcing him to do his bidding?' Thorin offered. It didn't seem likely, but under the given circumstances, the notion had to be entertained.

Kate seemed doubtful. 'I don't like him, but this seems too petty for him. And if he hadn't been so precise with from where he snatched me and where he dumped me the first time, I might have thought his aim was a bit off. Although I've got to say, if he'd been any more off, he'd have dropped us in the sea.'

'What shall we do?' It took considerable effort to force these words past his lips. It wasn't like him to be helpless in the face of anything and he detested the fact that he was so now.

This was one of the times he regretted just how well Kate had gotten at reading him, because all of a sudden, she was looking at him through narrowed eyes. 'Are you okay?'

He deflected the question in the tried and tested way. 'I was unaware that you were a social worker.'

She grimaced. 'I could very probably find you one somewhere in the city.'

He repeated his initial question.

By way of an answer Kate dug up the device she had called a phone. 'Time to see if this thing is still working, I suppose. Gandalf may have done his little thing with the batteries, but that doesn't mean anything for actually using it. And I don't even know if all the numbers in here are still correct, so…'

He stopped her there, before she could truly start to ramble. While she was talking the thought had started to occur to him that she may not necessarily have the answer to their current predicament, despite being in a familiar place. 'Again, what will you do?'

He didn't think he had imagined the grateful smile she sent his way. 'Well, I'm going to try to call Jacko and see if he can come pick us up. Chances are, he's less likely to get a heart attack when he hears my voice than my mother, so there's that. And that is, if he's somehow still got the same number. He used to change his a lot back when I lived in this world, because he was forever losing his phones. I hope to God he's broken that nasty habit.'

If he was lucky, he may have understood half of that speech. She had explained telephones, but when she started about numbers, she might as well have started speaking in the same strange tongue as the one on the building.
She took note of his complete lack of response and interpreted his unease correctly. 'We're going to be fine, you know. I mean, it's different, but people are still people. Just... different. A bit. Ugh, that sounded weird even to my own ears.' At least she knew better than to pity him. He would tolerate much from her, but not her pity.

'Call your brother, Kate,' he reminded her. The sooner he got out of here, the better he would like it. She looked as though she had identified the source of his trouble and was about to say something, but then thought better for it. Thorin thought her wiser because of it; after all, there was nothing she could say now that could in any way improve matters. And since there was a trouble that needed solving, that should be a first priority anyway.

She turned her attention towards her phone. 'Well, here goes nothing.'

Jacko made a mental note to never ever buy coffee in that particular shop again; it tasted like it had come straight from a ditch. He looked in disgust at the liquid that was supposed to pass for his beverage of choice and then, without any regret, tossed it out onto the obliging grass next to him. It could do with some watering anyway. This summer had been decidedly dry this year so far.

Anyway, he had better go. Jane never liked it when he had to stay away overnight, but sometimes it just couldn't be helped. And it had been worth it to see the girl reunited with her parents after having been missing for almost a month. Here's one I could bring home, he'd thought, squashing the thought of the one he had not been able to do the same for. Of course, Kate wasn't strictly speaking missing. He knew where she was, but it was so far out of reach he could not even begin to think where to start.

He started back towards his car, sunny mood as good as gone. He'd have to go and find some decent coffee along the way, even if only to wash the taste of that garbage away.

It was probably a coincidence that his phone started blaring out whatever ringtone Jane had thought amusing – a cow, this week – just before he drove out of the car park. The display gave him the number of his caller, a number that looked vaguely familiar. He should know who it belonged to, Jacko felt, but if they had ever called him before, it must have been a very long time ago.

'Jacko Andrews,' he announced when he picked up.

There was a short silence on the other end of the line. 'Hey, Jacko. It's Kate.'

It was good that he didn't do phone calls whilst driving. If he did, he would have found himself wrapped around a tree or something of the sort. That voice made something clench in his guts and did something decidedly unpleasant to his heart. It was like being hit by a sledgehammer and for a moment there, he didn't think he could breathe.

'Ehm, hello, you still there? Jacko?' The voice that belonged to his long-lost sister sounded mildly concerned.

In his state of confusion he blurted out the first thing that came to mind. 'You can't be Kate. She's gone.' He'd thought so many times he'd seen her in the first months after her disappearance, but he'd always been wrong. He'd be wrong again.

'Oh, for heaven's sake!' she growled. 'You didn't get my letters a couple years ago, did you?' Then, softer, as if speaking to someone with her: 'I swear, when we get back, I'll be strangling the wizard
with his own beard.'

'Can I watch?' a child's voice asked eagerly.

'What? No!' she exclaimed. 'Go on, sit back down. And don't go moving unless we tell you to. Finding you again in this crowd won't be an easy feat, I'll tell you.' She turned her attention back to him. 'Sorry about that. Are you still there?'

He repeated his earlier statement. 'You can't be Kate. We did get the letters, but she can't come back, so who the hell are you?' If this was a joke, he did not see the humour of it and quite frankly, he was starting to get pretty bloody mad about it.

'Really?' she asked. 'I'm Kate, Jacko. You know, the one and only?'

But he was not that easily fooled. 'Prove it.'

'Fine,' she snapped. 'When we were little, we figured out how to open the cupboard containing the sweets with a hairpin. I'd read about it somewhere and you wanted me to prove that I could do it and when I figured it out, you made me teach the trick to you. Mum never found out how we did it, although she did suspect we were the culprits. And then there was that thing with Audrey Harris, a bottle of wine and an almost arrest I wasn't to mention ever again…'

Jacko found he didn't need any more convincing. 'Kate? How?'

'Long story,' she replied. 'It involves a wizard and a bit of a loophole that should honestly have occurred to me years ago, but there we are. Listen, we've got a bit of a problem. Gandalf dropped us off just now. In fact, he promised he would make us land somewhere near my relatives, which has got to be some kind of a joke only he finds funny. Well, at least we're on the right island, so there is that.'

It took a moment or so for him to really understand what she was saying. 'You mean, you're back in England?' Surely he must be dreaming, but the only thing that happened when he pinched himself was a feeling of discomfort. He didn't miraculously wake up.

'Well, that's the thing,' Kate admitted. 'We're in Wales, actually. Cardiff to be precise. Which is probably nowhere near where you're living.'

Jane always said that when things sounded too good to be true, then they probably were. Jacko found that he had a hard time remembering that just now.

'I'm there,' he said. 'I'm in Cardiff, for work. I was just about to leave when you called. How…?'

He liked to think of himself as level-headed, but his calm composure was being subjected to unprecedented pressure and it was hard to think straight.

'If there's one thing I've learned, it's that Gandalf moves in mysterious ways.' She did not necessarily sound pleased about it. 'I honestly don't know. Look, I know it's a lot to ask, but would you mind picking us up?'

Did she really think she could keep him away now that he knew she was that close? She'd have to beat him off with a stick. 'Where are you?' he asked.

'Just about in front of the Wales Millennium Centre,' Kate replied.

'Just give me a few minutes.' It was only when he had said that, that he realised she had been mentioning "we" instead of "I." 'Hang on, who's we?'
'Just me, my husband and my three kids,' she answered. 'Will that fit in your car?'

'It'll be a tight fit, but it will work.' The car had been designed for five people, but given that three of the six who would try to get inside were children below the age of ten, it should be just about doable. 'Three kids, Kate, really?' It was almost without thinking that he fell back on the bantering that once upon a time had been so natural.

'Hey, if you keep on having commentary, I'll just walk to London,' she threatened good-naturedly.

'Yes, sure,' he mocked.

'Oi, I did a whole lot of walking eight years ago, you know.' And he did know; he'd read all about it. And the years had not made it sound any more plausible. He had chosen to believe it because there wasn't much choice and because the only alternative was to believe his sister dead. And if it came to a straight choice, he'd much rather believe Kate to be alive and happy than dead.

'I'll be there as soon as I can,' he promised. 'Don't move.'

'Yes, sir,' she agreed, before hanging up.

Jacko really stepped on it, well, as in so far possible in the late morning city traffic. Honestly, where did all these cars even come from and why were they all here, blocking his way? All the same, he still managed to break a few speed-limits and he may or may not have scared a couple of pedestrians into an almost heart-attack, but there was no police around to take any note of his transgressions, so just this once he got away with it. And it was not as if he made a habit out of this kind of behaviour anyway.

Parking, as usual, was a bloody nightmare and of course there were no parking spots anywhere near where he wanted to be. He briefly considered running the last part, but there were too many people about to gather much speed and he would have to admit that sprinting in his suit would draw attention he did not want. In the back of his head the notion that he should probably call his mother made itself known. And he had every intention of doing just that, as soon as he could think of a way to do it without sending her straight into cardiac arrest.

Kate had never been tall, but in crowds she was nonetheless hard to miss. Her hair always stood out. Jacko knew for a fact that their mother had always used it to locate her; it was easily her most recognisable feature. And time had not changed it. The mane of red curls caught his attention from quite a distance away.

Good grief, she was really here. Somehow she had managed it. He didn't know how, didn't really care either. All that mattered was that she was here and everything else would be sorted out later.

As soon as he was close enough to call her name without alerting everyone within a hundred metre radius, he did so. And she heard, turned around and came at him, running. The only sensible course of action was to hug her and hold her and convince himself that his sister had actually made it back. Even though he had driven like a devil trying to get here, it had still felt so surreal. Of course he had always entertained that small hope that she would find a way to get back in the end, but with his rational mind he had also known that it was a vain hope. She was gone and she would stay gone. He had resigned himself to that a long time ago. Well, sort of.

'Jacko, I can't breathe!' she protested at last. 'And I won't thank you for breaking my ribs either.' He let go and held her at arm's length. 'Bloody hell, Kate.' Those were decidedly not the words he
had in mind, but they slipped out when he looked at her face. She was mostly unchanged, still
herself. But there was a scar running from her forehead all the way down to her chin that was
almost impossible to miss. It drew the eye.

'Nice to see you, too,' she remarked wryly.

He made a noise that wasn't quite a chuckle and that wasn't quite a sob either. 'How?'

'Like I said, Gandalf.' She smiled at him. 'Don't ask me to explain it yet. I'm not sure I quite
understand all of it myself.'

'Fair enough,' he agreed. It wasn't as if he was in any state to fully comprehend her explanation. His
mind was still reeling and eloquent sentences seemed to be suspended until further notice.

'Ah, I've missed this,' she sighed, looking out over the square. 'It's weird, you know, being back.'

'It's weird having you back,' Jacko pointed out. He'd forgotten what it was like talking with his
sister. It had always been in a slightly roundabout way. And what with the whole father-shaped
disaster hanging over them like a thundercloud during much of their childhood, they'd gotten very
skilled at avoiding elephants in the room. Of course, that strategy only worked for so long.

Kate nodded. 'I bet. Come on, meet the family.' She grinned mischievously up at him, but quickly
became serious again. 'Just... just cut Thorin some slack, will you?'

She did not elaborate and she deliberately ignored the questioning look he directed at her. He had
no choice but to follow after her, towards the small group of people just a little distance away.
There were a guy and three kids. The youngest was held by the father, presumably Thorin, but dear
God, if he had been that child, he'd start wailing from the stern look on his face. He gave the
distinct impression of not wanting to be here. And Jacko couldn't help but wonder what Kate had
ever seen in Mr Strict Schoolteacher over there.

Predictably she introduced him as Thorin. Jacko shook his hand – a firm, strong shake – and told
him it was a pleasure to meet him at last. The dwarf told him likewise, although he didn't seem to
mean it any more than Jacko did. They were trying to get the measure of one another, he thought,
and he also felt as though neither of them quite passed the test.

'Amad, he's a giant!' The black-haired boy was pulling on his mother's coat to get her attention, all
the while staring in awe at Jacko.

Kate laughed. 'So he is, sweetheart.'

His red-haired brother gave Jacko a calculating stare. 'As big as the trolls?' he asked.

'No, not quite as big as that,' Kate grinned. 'Not by a long way. Not as ugly either, I'd say.' She
turned her attention back to Jacko. 'Sorry about that. Jacko, these are my boys, Thoren,' she
indicated the poor kid that had been struck by the Andrews curse, 'and Thráin.' This time she
pointed out the boy who had mistaken him for a giant, which he assumed was better than to be
called a troll. 'And this shy little lady here is Duria.' She took her youngest child from Thorin's
arms to show her to him, but the girl quickly hid her face in Kate's hair. As hiding places went, she
couldn't have found a better one. 'As I said, she's a little shy.'

'She isn't any fun,' Thoren declared, clearly determined that his uncle was made aware of this fact.
'She can't walk properly and she's always crying and then she always gets what she wants. If I do
that, I get sent to my room.'
'It's because you're a little older and should know better, dear.' Kate seemed wholly unimpressed with his complaint. 'Hey Jacko, does mum still live in London?'

'Still in the old house,' he confirmed. 'Ready to go and give her the surprise of a lifetime?'

'Absolutely,' she said. She held out her free hand. 'Car keys?'

'Beg pardon?'

'Car keys,' Kate repeated. 'It's been forever and a day since I got to drive.'

He frowned at her. 'Which is why you are getting nowhere near that the driver's seat. You haven't had anything stronger than one horse power on your hands since 2013. I'd like to see you've still got it before I unleash you on unsuspecting drivers.'

'This from the guy whose car has more dents than I could count in a month?' Kate was understandably sceptical. It was remarkable how many details just slipped away with the passage of time. He'd forgotten so much. But then, was it really forgetting when it all came back to him now? 'No way I'm letting you drive, not with my kids in the car.'

'Your licence hasn't been renewed in ages. If, no when, we get stopped, how would you like me to explain that to the cops? You know, this being my car and all?'

He had missed that cat got the cream grin she subjected him to. 'Gandalf has updated it for me. Magic.'

'That's hardly a substitute for the real deal. Doesn't tell me anything about your driving skills,' he pointed out.

'I passed the driving test,' Kate countered. Good grief, she had always been good at arguments like that. 'On my first try. How many did you need again? Three?'

'Four,' he corrected her sourly.

'Three gold pieces says amad wins.' The youngest boy, Thráin, was leaning towards his brother conspiratorially, trying and failing to give himself the air of an adult.

Thoren shook his head. 'Better hand them over already. He's a giant!'

Jacko could feel the corners of his mouth curl up almost of their own volition. Which was why it surprised him that Kate's forehead was all wrinkled up in a frown that could have summoned up a hurricane on the spot. A quick glance in Thorin's direction told him that her husband had the frown to match.

'Nori,' they said in unison. It didn't sound as though they were very happy about it.

'This time I am banishing him for the foreseeable future,' Thorin informed Kate. They were more words than Jacko had heard him say before, but they didn't exactly make him like Kate's guy any better. Bloody hell, he didn't sound – or look – like a good-natured fellow, did he? What on earth Kate was doing with him, was probably one of the universe's greatest unsolved mysteries.

Kate shook her head. 'I'll do you one better; I'm telling Dori,' she muttered darkly.

Thorin gave a satisfied nod. 'That will do.'

'I thought so. Jacko, car keys? We're wasting daylight. We both know you're a rubbish driver,
especially in cities, and you'll need to phone mum to prepare her. I'd do it myself, but… well, you
know. She might not respond well.' It was the first time he saw something resembling guilt in her
face.

And she should feel guilty. He buried the memories most of the time, but they were never far away
either. She had put them all through hell. And he was fair enough to admit that those first months
were not her fault, but then she'd gone and left them and all they got was a box of letters and a
memory card filled with photos. Yes, he had missed her, but he also very sincerely resented the
choices she had made.

But it was hardly the time to pick a fight, not with her kids nearby and her husband scowling a hole
into the nearest wall. Jacko may positively tower over him, but he knew better than to
underestimate him. He radiated danger, something Kate either did not see or chose to ignore. He
assumed the latter; she had always been perceptive.

'If you drive us off the road, you'll be paying for the damage,' he warned her. After all, she did
have a point; someone needed to call their mother and it was maybe better that it wasn't Kate doing
the calling. And he had always been opposed to the use of phones behind the wheel.

'See, you owe me!' Thráín said triumphantly.

It was weird to behind the wheel of an actual car again, Kate reflected, and at the same time it was
just like riding a bike. She was just a little rusty, but the knowledge and the skills were still there in
her head.

Of course, that was the easiest part of it all. Getting her two awestruck lads into the car had been
easy enough; so far they were fascinated by everything they saw. They had inquisitive minds both
and would spend most of their time investigating everything they came across. Being driven around
in an otherworldly piece of machinery? Yes, please.

Thorin was less pleased, which brought her to her biggest current problem. She was well aware he
did not like it here so far and cars were unlikely to improve his opinion. Neither was the fact that
Jacko had laid claim to the passenger seat, leaving Thorin to take the spot between his sons –
because no one in their senses would have let those two have free reign of the back seat if they
wanted to arrive with their sanity intact – and with Duria in his arms. This was a recipe for
legendary disaster squeezed expertly in Jacko's suddenly very cramped feeling car.

This is going to be the drive from hell, or to hell, she thought, silently cursing Gandalf's sense of
humour once again. Honestly, she'd said London, hadn't she? How in the name of all that was holy
had he managed to make Cardiff out of that? Never mind that her brother was there, she had
requested to be dropped off near her mother's place.

Jacko was fiddling with the navigation system in his car. Kate had always despised those velvety
voices informing her she had taken a wrong turn and to please turn back. She'd rather make do with
old-fashioned maps than to be forced into a pointless argument about which route was better.

Predictably, the next second a woman's voice told her that she was supposed to turn around here.
Given the fact that they hadn't even left the parking spot yet, that didn't bode well for the rest of
the journey.

'Give me a break,' she muttered. 'Jacko, do we really need that wretched thing?'
He gave her a disbelieving look. 'You tell me you can drive to London from here without help?'

'I'm fairly sure that's why road signs were invented,' she pointed out. 'And folk have driven from Cardiff to London before those systems were developed, you know.' This statement of fact coincided with another reminder that she should turn around. 'So what, you want me to perform a U-turn in the middle of the road? Give it a rest, woman!' she snapped at the device.

When she turned back to her brother, he was looking at her with sad puppy dog eyes and a rueful smile. 'I'd forgotten you did that,' he said.

Kate quickly turned her attention back towards the car and the road. Hello guilt, my old friend. It was one thing knowing that she had hurt them immensely by disappearing the way she had, but it was quite another to see what it had done with her own eyes. Either way, someone would have had their hearts broken over the whole affair, she reminded herself. Whichever way I would have chosen. But this hardly made it easier.

'Just turn the volume down before I roll down a window and throw the thing out,' she said. Thorin may think that avoidance was a Kate speciality, but she knew better. It had been perfected into a form of art by the collective Andrews clan. It was wired into her very DNA to dance around the sensitive subjects. And it spoke of good sense not to get into the specifics with young children in the car.

Fortunately Thoren, bless him, provided her with distraction. 'Amad is good at throwing things,' he announced, leaning forward to make sure his newfound uncle properly heard him. 'She has thrown Gandalf's pipe into the river once. Uncle Ori told me,' he added as if that made it true.

Of course it was true and if Kate had her way, that was not the only thing of the wizard's to get flying lessons, not after this debacle. 'I'm not all that opposed to wizard-tossing either.

'I did,' she confessed with a sheepish smile when her twin looked at her for confirmation. 'In my defence, he was being particularly annoying that day. He was asking for it.'

Driving was indeed as easy as she remembered. City traffic was challenging after so long in a place with considerably slower-moving vehicles, but at least it required that she concentrated and it forced less pleasant matters from her mind for the time being. Behind her, her sons were just about bouncing with excitement, staring wide-eyed at their surroundings when they weren't shouting things like 'Adad, adad, did you see that?' and 'Amad, what is that?' she answered them as best she could, finding a whole new challenge in explaining this world in words that they could understand.

Once they had left Cardiff behind, she turned to Jacko. 'You should probably call mum, tell her we're coming.

He nodded. 'Any clues how to announce you're back without sending her straight to hospital?'

'This one's all yours,' she said. And it wasn't as if she hadn't spent most of last week trying to think of a way. But most of her ideas had sounded absurd even in the privacy of her own mind. She'd never say any of it out loud. Quite frankly, it was a miracle Jacko had taken it so well.

Oh, who was she fooling, really? He was taking it one step at a time, but there would be a serious Talk in her near future, and she knew her brother well enough that, if properly riled, he could easily outdo Dori in a fit of temper. And worse, she knew she deserved everything he would accuse her of. Because, if push came to shove, Gandalf may have put her in an impossible situation, but the choice she had made in said impossible situation had been all her own.
He scowled at her. 'Well, thanks for that.'

Still, he did as she asked. Kate was used to a lot more resistance to her requests ever since their teenage years; a clear sign that he was still a little out of balance.

Kate looked in the mirror to see how Thorin was holding up. To the unsuspecting eye he was in a bad temper, but well in control of himself. Kate however was not an outsider and she liked to think she knew him better than that. She hadn't heard him speak more than ten words together since they'd met up with Jacko. He was never the truly talkative type, but this was taking the taciturn to the extreme. Of course he would never admit to being freaked out – certainly not in those exact words – but to Kate that was what he looked like. But then, she hadn't taken the transition between worlds much better. In fact, she distinctly remembered having a breakdown of some sort. Moreover, she at least had known a little about the place where she had ended up. Of course she had told stories, but it must have been hard for him to visualise any of it. And now he had been dumped in a strange world, with strange customs, bewildering technologies and far too many tall people for his taste. All things considered, he was holding up admirably.

While she had been pondering all of this, Jacko had managed to get a hold of their mother. 'Hey mum, it's Jacko… No, I'm fine and no, I'm not driving… Yes, I am in the car. Mum, would you mind letting me finish?'

Speaking of forgetting things, it had quite slipped her mind her mother had a bee in her bonnet about phones and cars and any combination thereof and of course she would have heard the noise of the engine in the background.

'I promise you I'm not driving right now.' Jacko clearly hadn't convinced her. 'I am not in the driver's seat, I swear.'

Oh, for heaven's sake… 'He's not!' she called, hopefully loud enough that her mother might hear. It was unlikely she recognised Kate's voice with all the other noise and over a phone anyway. And it was not as if Helen Wilson – once Andrews – would let Jacko say what he wanted to say if she did not intervene. Never mind that they were grown-ups who had always been responsible drivers – well, sort of responsible drivers in Jacko's case; there was a reason Kate didn't trust him behind the wheel – in their mother's eyes they would never really grow up.

'Kate?'

Maybe she had gotten that bit about not recognising just slightly wrong, if that shocked exclamation was anything to go by. Oops, so much for breaking the news to her gently. Well, she had never claimed to be any good at subtleties anyway. If she had, she might have appreciated the elves more than she did.

Cover well and truly blown, she decided to make the best of it. 'Hey, mum.'

The withering glare Jacko unleashed on her should by rights have made her drop on the spot, but he obligingly put the phone on loud and held it out in her direction.

'You can't be…' The voice on the other end made a sort of choking sound that strongly suggested crying. It made Kate's gut clench with guilt all over again. Good grief, what had she put them through? She had deliberately not spent all that much thought on it after she had given her letters to Gandalf to be sent. The choice was made and nothing could be done about it. Why waste time on endless what ifs?

'I am,' she said uncharacteristically softly. 'And yes, I am me, I'm really here and no, I'm not
holding the phone right now.' Lord have mercy, she hadn't anticipated doing this reunion over the phone. Better cut it short. 'Gandalf dropped us off in bloody Cardiff, so it will be a while before we get to yours, but I thought it'd be better to give you a heads-up.' Her hands felt sweaty all of a sudden. How could she have forgotten how bad she had always been at anything approaching showing emotion? It wasn't just something that happened with Thorin, although she had been getting better at it with him. But this, this was something else entirely and the guilt did not make it easier. She was in the wrong and she knew it.

The choked sound of her name coming out of the phone's speaker didn't do her any favours either. 

_Mum, I'm so very, very sorry._

'I'm here,' she repeated. She blinked quickly to keep her vision from going blurry. She was driving a car; crying was really not an option right now. 'And we're en route. We'll need a while. Listen, mum, I'm driving right now.' _We can't have this conversation right now._ Not that she imagined having this one face to face would be any more fun. But delaying was a good enough tactic for the moment. 

_You big coward, Andrews._

Fortunately Jacko decided this was a good moment to take the phone back and continue the phone call on his own. The displeased look Kate caught from the corner of her eye told her he was deeply unhappy with her interference. He'd kept a tight hold of his temper so far, but now she caught a glimpse of the resentment underneath his control.

_Oh damn._

All of a sudden it was both too hot and too cold in the car. She had been so distracted by the joy the prospect of seeing her relatives had caused in the days leading up to today that she had, well, not forgotten about what she had done to them and what they must think of her, but rather she had chosen to ignore it. There was no ignoring it now.

Her brother wrapped up his conversation and turned his attention back to her. And he was angry. 'What the hell, Kate?' he snapped at her. 'What happened to breaking it to her gently? You could have given her a fucking heart attack.'

Kate couldn't remember Jacko having such a taste for salty language. 'Mind your tongue,' she chided him. 'There's kids in the car.'

'Stop avoiding me,' he growled.

'Fine, I wasn't thinking,' she admitted. Hearing her mother's voice had been... Well, she couldn't say what it had been like. It was as if the years had just fallen away and it was just another day with Jacko and her in the car, arguing with a somewhat mollycoddling mother who didn't know when to stop. And she had reacted exactly as she would have done then. Old habits were hard to break after all. 'I messed up. You happy now?'

He snorted. 'Not by a long way.'

Thank goodness for rear-view mirrors. They allowed Kate to send a warning glance in Thorin's direction without having to turn her head around. It looked like he was hanging onto the last remnants of control by a threat and this was hardly the place to have a full-on confrontation.

'Air,' she announced when Jacko didn't so much as look at her again. 'We need air. And lunch,' she added as an afterthought. There was an exit not too far ahead. Kate had no idea where exactly she was or what exactly could be found there, but there would be a place to stop and a place to buy some food beyond the shadow of a doubt. And she needed a moment to herself to get herself back
under control.

No one protested. Even the lads had fallen silent. A good thing too. She loved to answer their questions, but she didn't have the patience for it now, not anymore. That talk was bound to happen a lot sooner than she had anticipated and she dreaded it more than going for another round with a band of orcs. Orcs could only kill her.

What a mess. It only hurt to know that the mess was of her own making.

They stopped in a small village. Kate was in no mood to do the whole family meal yet – not under the given circumstances – so she directed the car to the supermarket. Buy some bread, something to drink, consume and go. And in that short time, she should be able to clear her head a little.

'I'll go,' she offered. 'Try to keep it civil,' she added to Thorin and sort of to Jacko.

The first thing she realised upon entering was that her idea of cost of things was hopelessly outdated. She could only just muffle a choice swearword as to not offend the young man filling the shelves nearby. The other thing that sort of baffled her was the range of products on display. It wasn't that she had forgotten how her world operated, it was more that she had gotten used to another way of doing things. But at the very least she was thoroughly distracted from all the issues that had made staying in the car such a nightmare.

Of course that only worked until she emerged from the shop to find her husband and her brother had dismissed her command to remain civil and were caught up in a heated argument that, by the looks of it, hadn't come to blows just yet, but it was certainly headed in that direction. Meanwhile Thoren and Thráin amused themselves by trying to teach their sister to walk.

'Oh, for heaven's sake!' she exclaimed, loud enough to get the men's attention. She had been gone for ten minutes, tops. Was it that hard to not get in a fight? She had not expected Thorin and Jacko to become best friends, but honestly, couldn't they have made a bit more of an effort?

'He questioned your honour,' Thorin reported in Khuzdul, as if that explained everything. Truth was that he had probably waiting for a valid excuse to vent his frustration with this world to someone and Jacko had obligingly painted a target on his own forehead.

Ah yes, that would have done it. 'Which made you think you needed to channel Sir Lancelot,' she asked. Bloody hell, she loved that dwarf enough to forsake a whole world for him, but really? Hadn't he learned she knew how to stand up for herself by now? 'I'll deal with my brother. Privately."

The choice of words brought the faintest hint of a smile to his face. Jacko of course could not see just how uncertain of himself this place made Thorin feel. How could he? It had taken Kate months to figure Thorin out. But she had asked Jacko to cut Thorin some slack and that request had been blatantly ignored. She could blame him for that, couldn't she?

'Jacko, a word,' she told her twin. 'Alone.'

She marched over to a couple of trees out of hearing distance of the car. They stayed within sight, though. It seemed better for everyone's nerves, both Thorin's and Kate's.

The knowledge that she might have an audience did not stop her from rounding on her twin as soon as she had the opportunity. 'What the bloody hell was that about, Jacko? I asked you to cut him some slack, not to provoke him to the point where he's about ready to knock you into the middle of next week!'
'Cut him some slack?' Jacko echoed, eyes wide in disbelief. 'He was about ready to tear me limb from limb!' 

'Yes, because he is terrified!' Ugh, how the hell could she even begin to explain Thorin? She had seen him use that ready to commit murder look to cover up the fact that he felt unsure of himself so many times, she had learned how to see through it. But Jacko didn't know that. 'He's been thrown into another world that is so different from what he is used to, where dwarves don't even exist, where the technologies are so alien he doesn't even know where to start trying to understand them. And he's already on guard, because his past experiences with Men haven't left much of a good impression. If you were in his place, you'd freak out to. Hell, I know I did.' 

The disbelief did not subside. If anything, it increased. 

Kate snorted. 'What, you think I landed in the Shire, was told I was going to be an advisor and just said 'Oh, that's fine. Yeah, sure, let's do that'?' 

Now it was his turn to snort. 'Well, what was I supposed to think, Kate? You didn't exactly tell me, did you? We got some lousy letters saying you couldn't come back because you got stuck in a bloody fictional world!' he was steadily building up to shouting level. It was probably a good thing there weren't that many people about. 'We didn't even know if they were from you!' 

She rolled her eyes. 'Oh, don't give me that. You know my handwriting.' 

'Could be fake. How were we supposed to know?' 

'Now you're just talking shit, you know that?' No, this was not how she had expected the reunion to go. Maybe she should have, but if she had, it would be later, not hot on the heels of her arrival. It seemed she had severely underestimated how deep Jacko's resentment actually went. 'No one could fake that and they could certainly not fake those videos on the memory card.' 

He ignored that. 'It never crossed your mind that your family might need something more than letters and a couple of photographs?' 

It was a good thing her children were nearby; else she might have slapped him. 'Did you even read the bloody things properly? I wanted to come back, I did. But that's not the same as being able to.' She had thought she had explained the situation well enough in her letters, but being confronted with a very pissed off brother made her rethink that initial assumption. 

'You could have come back.' This time it was Jacko who accused her of talking nonsense, even if he didn't say it in so many words. 'You chose not to. That was what you wrote. You had the opportunity, but you didn't.' He threw his hands up into the air in exasperation, or that was what Kate thought it was anyway. 'Were you that unhappy here that you felt you had to run away to another bloody world?' 

'What? No!' How could he even think that? *Maybe because you ran away and never came back*, a small voice in the back of her head whispered. She pressed a mental mute button. She really didn't need this right now. 'I wasn't unhappy here. I honestly wasn't.' 

'Why then, Kate? Why write us all off with a couple of letters and pretend your life in this world never happened?' 

Now she was riled. 'Because there wasn't much choice!' she shouted. 'Try to imagine it, would you? The Battle of the Five Armies had just finished. Really just finished; no one had gotten round to naming it yet, and believe you me, elves are quick to name things. I had just found out I was
pregnant, Thorin was injured, Kíli was dead, Ori had lost a hand. Not everyone was accounted for, but there were things that needed doing, because dwarves can be a bloody obnoxious bunch when they put their minds to it. We all knew it would not be long before Thranduil and Erland would start nagging again. There was so much to be done, I was knee-deep in all of the mess and that was when Gandalf decided to tell me I couldn't go back permanently. There wasn't any time, Jacko. There just wasn't time! How could she possibly make him understand?

'You're missing the point, Kate!' he snapped at her. 'Believe me, I'm thrilled that you're here, I really am…'

'You sure sound like it!' she retorted.

He went on as if she hadn't spoken at all. 'But you should have returned eight years ago. You shouldn't have stayed at all! You don't belong there!'

The penny dropped. 'Oh, for heaven's sake, that's what you said to Thorin?' If she had been angry before, she was furious now. 'No, you're missing the point here. I was never going to come back, Jacko, I never was. It took me years to understand that, but…'

It had taken her sleepless nights beyond count to even start to grasp it. Her children had given her plenty of opportunity to sit in the rocking chair and hum them a tune while her thoughts took flight. And she had imagined. She had gone through so many what if scenarios they had made her head spin. And she had always ended up right where she was at that moment: in a rocking chair with a child in her arms. Realistically she knew Gandalf would never have sent her back. Nothing she or even Thorin could have done would have made him change his mind. And whichever way she would have turned, eventually she would have seen Thorin's merits, being forced to work so closely with him. Even if she went back now, knowing what she knew, she wouldn't make any other decisions. True, she might rethink the decision to set Mirkwood on fire, but other than that?

From the moment Gandalf took me, I was destined to live with regrets either way. She could hate the wizard for it, and she did, but the eventual choice where to live had been her own so yes, that was on her and Jacko was right to blame her. Of course, admitting to that in the privacy of her own mind was quite something different than admitting it out loud.

'But what, Kate?' Jacko demanded.

Years of practise and it still takes so much effort to say it. Speaking of messed up. 'I love Thorin,' she said, bracing herself for the protest she knew was coming. 'There, you have it. And it took me bloody long to figure it all out, but I think that was where we were always headed, long before we even realised. I mean, even the elves figured it out and that was when we were barely on speaking terms. And I couldn't leave him then, certainly can't leave him now.' She swallowed, but battled on. 'And no, I don't belong there, I never did, was never meant to. But tough luck, because that's where Thorin is meant to be.'

No protest followed her words. Maybe he was still trying to find a semblance of coherency in them. She couldn't blame him if that were the case; she wasn't even entirely sure what point she had tried to make. There had been a point in there somewhere, of that she was sure. Bloody hell, give her recalcitrant dwarves or scheming elves any day. Those she knew what to do with, those she knew how to fight. Those she wanted to fight. She did not want to fight with her own brother, not when she just wanted to hug him until her breath ran out. So of course she understood his anger. Had she been in his place, she would have been livid too.

'Jacko?'
All the anger seemed to have drained right out of him. 'Bloody hell.'

Kate sighed. 'Yeah, that just about sums it up, I suppose.' And just like that, the fight went out of her. 'I'm sorry, Jacko. I never meant for any of this to happen. It just did.'

'But you would do exactly the same things you did if you got the chance to do it all again.' He knew her well. In the past years, she had forgotten just how well.

And so there was no point in lying. 'Yes.'

'Bloody hell,' he said again.

She nodded. 'I know. Jacko, can we not fight? At least not yet? *It's all I am ever doing, I don't want to fight with my family on top of it.* When she had once predicted to Thorin that they would be doomed to fight till the end of their days, she hadn't known she'd be so right about that. *A regular Cassandra I am. And I don't even believe my own prophecies.*

He gave that a few moments' thought. 'Fine.'

Kate strongly suspected that he didn't want to fight with her any more than she wanted to fight with him. But they were so alike; neither of them could give up or be seen to give up without putting up at least a little resistance. Funny how she had never realised that before.

'Good,' she said. 'Let's go. I want to go and see mum.'

'She might not necessarily take it better than I,' he warned her.

Kate only snorted. 'Don't I just know it? I spend my life rolling from one fight straight into the next, so nothing new there.' She was quite sure she hadn't meant for it to come out so bitterly, but she found she couldn't help it. She did hate how it was all turning out. 'Just let's get going,' she suggested. 'One problem at a time.'

The thing was that the whole one problem at a time had never really applied to her life. But she could pretend, couldn't she?
Family Visit AU Part 2: Homecoming

Chapter Notes

Fair warning: everyone has issues and everyone is sort of uncomfortable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Homecoming:

1. the act of coming home

Dictionary . com

"You're riding shotgun," Kate announced when she returned from her almost-fight with her brother. Thorin had divided his time between keeping an eye on his offspring and keeping an eye on his wife. A few times it had looked like the siblings would come to blows over whatever got them fighting in the first place, but Kate had kept a tight hold on her temper.

This didn't mean that the brother was necessarily pacified. 'He is what?'

Thorin would have echoed the sentence if he was in the habit of doing so, being unfamiliar with the expression. Instead he raised an eyebrow.

"You've been evicted from the passenger seat," Kate informed Jacko. Of course the giant she called a brother wouldn't notice that she repeated her earlier words in slightly different terms so that Thorin would understand. Kate could do subtle if she made an effort. "And banished to the backseat to slake my boys' infinite thirst for information."

It was an excuse and a weak one at that. She would have her motives, she always did. Apparently the argument had not gone very well.

"This is still my car, you know," Jacko Andrews reminded his sister.

"So is the backseat of aforementioned car," Kate replied sunnily. "And I bet it doesn't see your backside nearly enough." The tone became dismissive. She was not going to negotiate. Thorin knew that; he had heard her use it on Dori on numerous occasions. 'Sorry, but I'm really not letting you drive. I've attempted to count the dents, but I ran out of fingers and toes to count them on, so…'

Thorin knew this. He had been dismayed when first confronted with the death trap on wheels. Kate could not be serious about using that to reach their destination, could she? He had rapped on it with his knuckles – and may or may not have added to the number of dents already present – which had not made him feel any better. Fortunately Kate seemed to know what she was doing. He did not say this, but he felt more at ease with her in control of this car than he would have been with a complete stranger. He also had a lingering suspicion that Kate knew this and that it was exactly the reason why she had demanded that it be her who occupied the so-called driver's seat.

Kate waited until they were on the road again and Thoren and Thráin were thoroughly distracting Jacko before she talked. 'How are you holding up?' There was genuine concern in her voice, but also something else. It was like she feared his rejection of the land she came from.
And he did. 'It is very different.' It was the best he could make of it. 'Travel in Middle Earth must seem slow to you,' he observed.

Kate nodded, small smile on her face. 'It does, sometimes. Mind you, you need to pay a lot more attention to the road around these parts. You can't trust the car to find the way for you like a horse can.'

She kept her eyes on the road. The speed with which they were going made Thorin's stomach clench. 'Your world is a dangerous one indeed.' He'd always thought so, even when the thought barely made sense. After all, Kate hadn't been able to handle a weapon when she had first arrived in his world. But now he understood something of it. There weren't bandits or orcs here that could take an unsuspecting traveller unawares, for how could they when everyone flew by? The danger here was in the method of travel itself.

She pondered that. 'I suppose so, in some sense. If you want me to slow down, just tell me.'

Thorin considered it. At some level he was touched at her concern, but he felt he had an image to maintain, mainly for the brother's sake. 'I trust you to know what you are doing,' he replied. He did trust her. In fact, Kate was the only one he trusted in this bewildering world.

Kate checked that the lads were still monopolizing their uncle's attention, leaving him with no opportunity to do some eavesdropping on the conversation taking place in the front of the car. This led Thorin to believe that had been Kate's intention in banishing him to the back.

'You're taking the transition between worlds better than I did,' she said.

It was a remark that hovered on the very edge of the sympathy Thorin so despised. Despite their almost eight years of marriage, the urge to slap it down was still strong. He could not be seen as weak, especially not in the face of a challenging situation.

Kate must have sensed it, because she shrugged. 'Well, considering I had a very embarrassing nervous breakdown within hours of arriving. The title of Mr High and Mighty ringing any bells, by any chance?'

It did, in fact. He was however too much on edge to acknowledge it verbally.

Kate's eyebrows did the dangerous thing they always did when she got annoyed. 'Thorin, please, can we not do this? Not today? You don't have the bloody monopoly on the whole guilt trip, you know? I know this world terrifies you, but don't shut me out.' She bit her lip. 'There might be more of that later anyway.'

He frowned. 'It did not go well?' He had anticipated a truce of some kind. If Kate was angry with someone, she usually had no reservations about sharing her frustrations with the world.

'We're okay,' she answered, eyes still firmly on the road. 'Sort of. It's just that I haven't spent a lot of time thinking about what my disappearance and my choices meant for him, for everyone I left behind. To be honest, I didn't want to think about it and now that we're here, well, it's not as joyful as I would have wanted.'

This got stranger as the conversation progressed. 'Is he not happy to see you again?' Thorin found he had a hard time keeping the incredulity out of his voice. Surely that could not be?

'He is happy,' Kate contradicted. 'Thrilled was the word he used. But it doesn't change the fact that I've put them through hell. I chose that. I wasn't expecting him to thank me for it, but I guess I didn't realise how deep his resentment really ran. Good grief, I can't even begin to imagine how
terrified they must have been when I just vanished without a trace. And I was gone for the better part of a year before I even let them know I was still alive.'

Thorin did not like the sound of this. 'You regret your choice?"

The quick glare she sent his way before she focussed on the road again told him he had let more of his own insecurity shine through than he had wanted.

No, he did not doubt her, he did not doubt that when the time was up she would return with him to Erebor. He could rest assured in that knowledge. But all his certainties were subjected to truly unprecedented pressure this day. He could see how well she fit in this world, how much easier she moved, with how much more confidence she carried herself. She possessed the skills this world required of her and she hardly stopped to think about it. And there was the ever-present pull of the family she had in this world. He was not so naïve as to think they would not try to tempt her back. Clearly her brother thought Kate had made a mistake. How could the other members of her family not think the same? And this was a fight he could not fight for her. It was hers and he would have to stand at the side-lines to watch her fight it. And he despised inactivity; he was one of Mahal's children after all.

'It was an impossible situation,' she hissed. 'There would have been regrets either way.'

Thorin supposed that was as much of a consolation as he was likely to get. It must be enough to know that she would stand by him and in the meantime he would have to battle through until he was home again. And he missed it already. He missed the quiet reassurance of the mountain halls, the cold stone under his fingers, the sounds of hammers on anvils. He was not made to be aboveground, certainly not in a world where he was the only one of his kind, because his kind had not been created on this world. He was never meant to be here, just like Kate had never been meant to step foot in his world. He wondered if it had scared her as much as it did him, but knew the question would never pass his lips, not in the present company, not until he was home again.

Kate's knuckles turned white, a clear sign she was gripping the steering wheel with more force than it strictly speaking required. 'I’ll tell you what I've told Jacko and then I hope to God that's the end of this whole sorry mess. I love you. I'm not going to leave you. I was never meant to be in Middle Earth and I don't belong there. I probably never will and I've sort of accepted it. Probably won't stop me from trying to do something about it, but there you have it. Either way, it doesn't matter where I do or do not belong, because you just so happen to be needed in Erebor, so that's where I am going to be. I left a whole world to be with you. Did you honestly think I was going to go back on my promise?'

This one at least he could answer. 'No.' His response had the desired effect; she ceased talking at once. 'I never doubted you.' In the privacy of his own mind he could admit that he would never have made an effort to come here if he had not been one hundred per cent convinced of her loyalty. But fears were not always well-founded and that sense of dread had nonetheless done its level best to make itself at home in this past week.

'Good,' Kate said, seemingly determined to make an end of it there and then. 'Then there's nothing more that needs to be said, is there?'

Had they been alone, he might have acknowledged the fact that her words had touched him. Deep down he had always been aware of how much she had given up for his sake – hence his sense of debt to her – but to have her put it into words, to have her say that not belonging did not matter in the long run, because she needed to be where he was, that struck something. There weren't many in the world who had shown him that same amount of loyalty, none who were not his kin at any rate. In some way, they were obliged to stand by him because of their bonds of kinship. Kate had made
the choice without such bonds influencing her decision. She could be so flippant about it that even he often overlooked the depth of her affection for him. He did not do so now.

'There isn't,' he agreed. Time hadn't cured him of his inability to speak his heart, especially when other prying ears and minds were so close. The words that needed to be spoken were not meant to be overheard by a man whose attitude Thorin at best considered hostile at the present time.

'Good. Music,' she decreed. 'Who knows, mainstream music might have improved in my absence. Unlikely, but then, you never know.' She raised her voice just slightly, signalling that the secret part was over. Others were welcome to join in.

Jacko promptly did. 'Your taste in music hasn't improved then,' he teased.

Kate snorted. 'Well, forgive me if I don't consider computer produced beats to be even remotely in the same category as music.'

'I rest my case.'

She fiddled with a device whilst sending her twin brother an exasperated eye roll in the mirror. Not a moment later noise filled the car. This Kate had explained. She had warned him that music in her world could just about come from anywhere and that the presence of music did not necessarily mean that a musical instrument was even remotely in the vicinity. It still startled him.

Kate sighed. 'And I rest mine. Honestly, they're calling this music these days? I'm changing the station.'

She did something Thorin did not quite understand, but a few moments later another song filled the small space. Not that he believed this piece had more claim to the name of music, but something about it had caught Kate's interest.

'Is that Taylor Swift?' she asked. When Jacko had nodded in confirmation, she added: 'Not what I was expecting from her.'

Thorin only heard some woman singing about shaking something off. It could not possibly warrant the look of mischief on his wife's face. It certainly couldn't justify that she didn't "change the station" once again, but instead listened attentively.

Or maybe, when the chorus came around for the third time and Kate started singing along, he realised that it shouldn't have surprised him after all, especially not when it became clear that she had slightly changed the lyrics to suit herself:

"Cause the wizards gonna play, play, play, play, play,
And the orcs are gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate,
Baby, I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake,
I shake it off, I shake it off.
Heart-breakers gonna break, break, break, break, break,
And the elves are gonna fake, fake, fake, fake, fake
Baby, I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake,
I shake it off, I shake it off.'
Jacko shot his sister a very unflattering look of disbelief. 'Are you serious?' he asked her over the sound of Thoren and Thráin's laughter.

Kate grinned. 'I couldn't come up with something to replace heart-breakers on the spot. I sort of like the sound of the rest of it, though.' As did Thorin; with little to no effort on her part she had made the corners of his mouth curl up of their own volition. It brought back so many memories of Kate rearranging existing songs to suit the situation. 'Hey, I needed to make the lyrics fit a bit more than they originally did. As they are now, that's practically the story of my life. Who knows, with some effort, I might make something of the rest of the song as well.'

Jacko shook his head; Thorin could see it in the mirror. 'You are such a child, Kate.'

He ignored her mutterings of 'It takes one to know one,' for he knew better. With one melody and some skilful reinterpretation of the words, she had not made him forget his current unease, but she had drained some of it.

He was fairly sure she noticed the grateful glance he sent in her direction.

It was increasingly hard to not stand by the window on the lookout for Jacko's car. At first Helen had kept busy. No doubt Kate and her husband were staying the night, so there were preparations to be made. Beds needed to be made. No doubt Jacko wouldn't make the drive back home to Jane and his kids that night, so he would need a place to sleep as well. She decided to put Kate and Thorin in the guest bedroom in the attic. Jacko could have his old bedroom and the children would have to share Kate's old one. It was a bit of a tight fit, but it would have to do. After that she was done with that she went out to the shops to make sure she had enough to feed them all.

But eventually she ran out of things to do and there was nothing to do but wait. She picked up a book for a while, but soon realised she had read the same page at least three times and she still couldn't tell what it had been about. She kept on reliving the moment her daughter's voice had come over the phone line, talking to her as she had always done, as if those years hadn't happened, as if it had all been some dark dream dispelled by daylight. Of course it had happened, but it had not felt like it.

And now she was here. How, Helen did not know, nor did she particularly care. Her daughter was back. There was that nagging little feeling in the back of her head that told her that Kate would not be back for good, but she did not want to think about that just yet. She wanted to make the most of whatever time they had and everything else would come later.

And of course she wondered about Kate's husband and children. Helen had never particularly cared for fantasy novels, but when Kate's letters had arrived, she had started reading *The Hobbit*. It was research of a sort. She had read it with Kate's letters next to her, comparing the book's contents with her daughter's writings. There were similarities, but also remarkable differences. The way Thorin was described was maybe the biggest difference of them all. Helen did not like him in the book, but seeing him through Kate's eyes made him seem more real, more like a human being – no matter how much offence the real Thorin would probably take at that description. She had seen Kate's initial dislike of the guy gradually change to reluctant admiration. And that in turn had transformed into love, weeks before Kate had admitted to it. Helen knew her girl, knew her very well indeed. She wouldn't have chosen as she did unless she really loved Thorin. That didn't mean her choice hadn't hurt, because it did. It hurt every single day and being worlds apart had done nothing to cease her worrying.
And now she was back, on her way home with her husband and three children in tow. Jacko hadn't mentioned them other than to inform her three such children existed. She didn't know if they were boys or girls, never mind their names and ages. But she wanted to see them, she desperately wanted to see them, to get to know them.

The minutes turned into hours, but they were going by with all the speed of a hibernating bear. It was her own impatience that made it feel this long, Helen knew, but that knowledge did nothing at all to make time fly by any faster. Eventually she ended up just doing chores around the house, things that didn't necessarily needed doing right away, but that kept her busy.

It didn't keep her occupied enough not to hear the sound of Jacko's car pulling into the street. She was upstairs, changing the light bulb in her bedroom. It wasn't the only one, but it had been broken for a couple of weeks now and she had kept on delaying it. It was just a stroke of luck that her window overlooked the street.

Kate was the first one to emerge from the dented vehicle. She had indeed been driving. Not that it surprised Helen much; Kate had never approved of her brother's skills behind the wheel. And though it was hard to see from a distance, Helen could have sworn her daughter had not changed much. Her hair was longer, almost down to her waist, plaited into a long braid that for some reason hadn't fallen out yet. Her clothes were a bit odd, she noticed, as if they were made by someone who'd only had the vaguest notion of what people dressed in around these parts.

To her surprise, Jacko had been banished to the back seat, because the man who had occupied the passenger seat was decidedly not her son. He was about the same height as Kate, give or take an inch or two. He didn't seem much at ease. Deer caught in the headlights was Helen's first thought.

She didn't spend more time looking; soon enough she would be able to see them up close. The need to hold her daughter in her arms again had been growing steadily ever since she had first heard Kate's voice through the phone and she had practised her patience long enough.

She made it to the door apparently just before Kate could ring the bell; her hand was hovering over it.

'Hey, mum.'

Helen briefly registered the sheepish and almost awkward look on Kate's face before she caught her daughter in a hug that probably crushed the air from both their lungs. She didn't care. The impossible had happened. That was all that mattered.

Unhappy noises made a quick end to the embrace Helen could have kept up for at least a couple more hours.

'Mum, we're crushing your granddaughter.'

That made her let go. She had completely failed to notice the child in Kate's arms, the child that was now looking at her with clear blue eyes. The unhappy noises had stopped the moment she got the space to breathe. When she saw she had eye contact, she quickly buried her face in Kate's hair.

'She has your nose.' Stupidly it was the first thing that came out. It also happened to be the first thing that sprang to mind.

Kate smiled. 'So she does. Mum, meet Duria.' She gestured with her free hand for the others to come forward and introduced her husband and her two sons, Thoren and Thráin. The names were foreign, but the faces looking at her were not. The eldest was doubtlessly her daughter's son; his
red curls left little room for doubts. The other lad took after his father, but the grey eyes looking curiously back at her were Kate's.

'You're our grandmother,' he established, looking as if he wasn't sure what to make of it. 'We've never had one before.'

'Thráin, manners!' Kate scolded.

'We've got uncles though,' Thoren spoke up. 'Though adad doesn't like them very much.'

'But he likes them better than elves,' Thráin added.

Kate rolled her eyes. 'So much for trying to teach them some manners,' she remarked. 'Sorry about that. May we come in?'

The shock must have turned her into a fool. She was doing this all wrong and Helen gave herself a thorough mental talking to. 'Yes, yes, come on in.'

They did. The boys were doing so with eager faces, chatting so excitedly that Helen had trouble keeping up. Kate followed them, indulgent smile on her face and her daughter on her arm. Jacko, who followed her, did not share in the happiness his mother felt. There was a deep frown in his forehead that she knew all too well; he had worn it for most of his teenage years. But the he'd had a good reason for it. It was however entirely out of place this day.

'Later,' he said in answer to her questioning glance as he passed her. It was a tone he had always shared with Kate; the one that suggested that no amount of begging, bartering or blackmailing was going to tempt him into parting with his secrets before he was good and ready.

That did not bode well.

Thorin was the last to enter and he did so with a respectful nod in her direction. Helen honestly did not know what to make of him. He had been polite when introduced, had uttered the pleasantries that were expected of him, but beyond that, he had kept his mouth firmly shut. Not that he needed words to convey his displeasure. His posture practically radiated it. He did not want to be here and he had no reservations about making that known. Her first impression of him was that of a cold and resentful person and she could not for the life of her imagine what Kate had ever seen in him. Of course she did know; she had read the letters after all, but there seemed to be little resemblance between the Thorin she had described and the one currently marching through her front door.

_God God, how am I going to manage this?_

She couldn't breathe. It felt as if there was a large rock on her chest, making every breath she took more of an effort than something that went without thinking. Her mother was so _nice_. In fact, Kate would go as far as to say that she was _too_ nice. She wasn't angry, she wasn't even irritated, she got along wonderful with her lads and even normally shy Duria had started to warm up to her. To top it all off, she had cooked Kate's favourite meal for dinner. That had done it. Her vision swam with tears and she had to invent a trip to the car to fetch something to get some air. All of these things just added up into one pile of guilt that started to take on the size of the Misty Mountains. She couldn't see over it and she certainly couldn't see a way to the other end. She had a lingering suspicion that her road wasn't necessarily any more pleasant than the trip through Goblin-town.

The fresh air helped a bit. At the very least it made her feel a little less trapped. There was a car nearby and she still had the keys. If she needed a way out, it was there for the taking. And Maker help her, but she was tempted. Everything in her yearned to get in, find a stretch of open road and
just drive until she had forced her mind back into a semblance of order. But that was something the old Kate would have done. She wouldn't have thought twice. The old Kate would already halfway back to Cardiff by now. She had always been good at running.

'What a mess.'

Saying it out loud did not make any of it better. The whole way she had been anticipating a shouting match or at the very least accusations and sad looks. She had earned those many times over. Jacko's shouting she could match. She was good at that. Many things might have changed in the past years, but that had not. But she was completely and utterly defenceless in the face of so much kindness.

Why wasn't she angry? Why didn't she even ask why?

Deep down Kate was fairly sure she already knew the answer. Her mother was kind, had always been. It was hard to pick a fight with her. And Kate considered herself something of an expert on the subject; picking fights came naturally to her. But that was a trait that she hadn't gotten from mother's side of the family. Her father was the one that had always excelled at arguing and Kate had always taken after him more. *Though not in the walking out on the spouse department,* she reminded herself.

*No, but you're quite good at abandoning your family,* a nasty little voice in the back of her head taunted.

She squashed it. She'd had the same discussion with herself for years and she never got close to a satisfactory conclusion. Said conclusion was unlikely to happen today. As it was, her current problems only fed the voice of what she suspected to be her conscience; it hadn't shut up since her fight with Jacko. Then again, if she had chosen differently, she would have felt guilty over leaving him. *Guess me and my conscience are going to be at odds till the day I die,* then.

'Get a grip,' she told herself. 'Time to get a move on. You can handle pesky elves and annoying men and stubborn dwarves. You can do this.'

If anything, leaving Thorin and her brother unsupervised for too long was a disaster waiting to happen. Neither liked the other much and with good reason. Jacko had been unbelievably rude – what *had* gotten into him? – and Thorin of course had turned selectively mute. It was how he coped with a world that increasingly bewildered and frightened him. Kate knew this, but she was also uncomfortably aware that it hadn't made that much of a good impression on her brother and mother. Of course the latter was unlikely to mention it within hours of meeting him, but she would bring it up eventually. Worse, she would express concern for her daughter's situation and Kate could not promise herself she would not explode.

'What a mess,' she repeated. It was a good thing the street was empty; the last thing she needed was to be mistaken for a lunatic.

There was no disaster that met her when she came back in. Thoren and Thráin had attached themselves to their grandmother, getting underfoot and in the way as she tried to cook. Not that she minded; she was answering the boys’ questions patiently and with a smile so wide it threatened to split her face in half. Jacko was setting the table. Thorin had retreated to the sofa with Duria. Someone who didn't know him might have called him stoic or cold, but Kate knew better. He was way out of his comfort zone.

'Ah, there you are,' her mother said. 'Just in time. I'm about done.'
She forced her face into a smile and mentally prepared herself for a meal that would mainly consist of damage control with a side dish of awkwardness. 'That's me, perfect timing,' she quipped. 'Lads, that's quite enough of that. Let's get you on a chair.'

'But we can help!' Thoren said. 'We can carry the pans.'

'I'm sure you can,' Kate agreed, privately thinking that a combination of her lads and hot objects was not such a good idea at all, certainly not in the foreseeable future. 'But how will you reach the table, eh? You've got a bit of growing to do before you can try that.'

'Like Uncle Jacko,' Thráin nodded enthusiastically. 'Amad, can I get that big when I grow up?'

This time the smile wasn't forced at all. 'We'll see about that. It's not something you can control, sweetheart. Besides, you'd hit your head on all doorposts. Come on now. Time for dinner.'

Nothing made a dwarf focus like the promise of food and her sons were no different. Thank the Maker for small mercies. Now it was just a simple matter of surviving dinner and hoping that no one would do anyone else a harm. Thorin was generally well in control of his temper, but he took offence to anyone attacking his family, and whether that attack was verbal or physical mattered little. And Jacko hadn't exactly done a lot of cooling off by the looks of things.

_What does it say about me that I'd almost rather go for another round with Thranduil than face this?_

It appeared that she was in luck though. Thorin was on his best behaviour, which in this case meant that he focussed mainly on his food. Of course it would help his case if he actually tried to make small talk, but Kate also knew to keep her goals realistic. Eventually they might all warm up to each other, but it was going to take time. _And patience and patience and did I mention patience yet?_

In the meantime she would have to do the talking for him. She asked Jacko about Jane and learned that he had gotten married about eighteen months after she had disappeared. He had two kids of his own, a son called Archie, who was about Thráin's age, and a baby girl called Susan. From what she heard, he had found some happiness of his own. _Good for you, brother. You deserve it._

'I'd love to meet them,' she admitted. 'Where do you live anyway these days? I'm assuming it isn't Cardiff?' If so, she liked to think he would have mentioned it before now.

'York,' Jacko replied. 'It's close to Jane's parents.'

Kate was about to call him out on the fact that it wasn't exactly close to their mother and it was hardly fair to leave her all on her own, but she stopped herself just in time. It wasn't as if she had any right to accuse someone of that, not when she had moved to a different world entirely.

'I see,' she said instead. 'Speaking of Cardiff, what were you doing there anyway? You mentioned work?'

'I'm a private detective,' her twin explained. 'A case took me there.'

_Now that_ took her by surprise. 'Imagine that!' she exclaimed. 'My brother has become a regular Sherlock Holmes.' Not that she could see Jacko in such a hat, mind. 'Bit of a career switch, though. I thought you had your heart set on becoming a politician.' Of course, her information was over eight years out of date.

He snorted and the look he sent her was so cold it chilled Kate to the bone. 'That was before my
sister disappeared off the face of the earth.'

That hurt. Kate was well aware that her disappearance had Consequences, and not just for her, but it was quite something else to have her nose rubbed in just how it had shaped the lives of those she had left behind. And hello again guilt, my old friend.

Firmly reminding herself that having a fight in front of her kids was not a good idea, she opted for flippancy instead. 'You might want to take that up with Gandalf. He's kidnapper extraordinaire as far as I am aware.'

'He's not the one that kept you away, though.'

She got it. She really did. 'No, that was my choice.' Impossible though it had felt. And it still kept her up at night. It still made her chest ache and her eyes burn. It wasn't easy. It had never been. 'Jacko, can we not fight? I prefer to have battles of words with the likes of Thranduil, not with you.'

Jacko clearly had a thing or two to say on the matter and Kate was okay with fighting it out when they didn't have an audience. She knew her brother. He could get very angry and harbour grudges with the best of them, but once the air was cleaned, he could usually let it go. It was the act of clearing the air that was the problem.

Fortunately, her mother hurried to the rescue. 'You remember Laura?' she asked.

Kate nodded. Of course she did. They had grown up together, had been very nearly inseparable since the age of five. 'Yes,' she said, wondering where her mum was going with this. 'Does she know where I ended up?'

Kate hoped she did. Leaving her best friend in the dark would be nothing short of cruel. And Laura could deal with the crazy side of things. Of course Kate had always argued that was because Laura herself wasn't entirely sane, to which aforementioned friend had always retorted Kate should take a good long look in the mirror. Given the fact that I ended up married to Thorin Oakenshield, she may have had a point.

Jacko nodded. 'She does. She's also taken your cat off our hands.'

'Are we talking about the same Laura? She hated Fidget.' It had been nothing short of a nightmare to even get Laura to look after him for two weeks and it had involved a lot of begging and downright bribery. Hell would have to freeze over before she would so much as consider to keep it.

'She liked to have a reminder of you,' Jacko replied coldly. 'You having gone missing after all.'

And another low blow. Kate supposed she deserved that one. That didn't mean it didn't hurt. It only meant that she would bite her tongue and let it wash over her. She could only hope Thorin would be wise enough to let it be. The low growl and the fists below the table indicated otherwise though.

Again, her mother interfered. 'She wrote a story about you,' she said, amused smile on her face. 'A fan fiction I believe it's called?'

As distractions went, this was quite a good one; Kate all but choked on a potato. 'She did what?' Really, Laura? Really?

'Based on your letters,' her mother confirmed, dispelling all hope Kate might have had that maybe she had misheard. 'I can't quite recall what she called it. Something about the Written Word, I think?'
Given that her letters – her *private* letters no less – had been used to build a fan fiction on, that title wasn't much of a surprise. However, everything else about it was. 'Bloody hell,' she said. It was the most eloquent she could manage.

'I haven't read it myself,' Jacko said. 'But I've had a look at her review section and people appear to like it. Laura got quite a few remarks saying the story felt rather realistic.'

Kate snorted. 'Well, maybe because that's what it was. I didn't make it up, you know. And I certainly did not write those letters for public consumption. Even if it is on a fan fiction site and no one will consider it has anything to do with the actual reality.' She ran her hand through her hair, dislodging strands from her braid in the process. Well, it had started to fall out anyway. 'Maker be good, what in the world did she think she was doing?'

Of course, it hardly came as a surprise that Laura was still reading fan fiction; she was the one who had introduced Kate to it in the first place. But she had never been much of a writer. Kate doubted she had the attention span to produce more than the occasional one-shot, never mind a story as long and complex as hers.

And what the hell was it even supposed to mean? Why even tell the story? No one would believe it was real, no matter how realistic it may come across to the readers. Stories like her, they never happened. That in itself had been banished to the realm of fan fiction long ago. That was the very reason why it wouldn't stand out, why no one would think anything of it. And still it set Kate's teeth on edge. She had shared her stories with her mother and her brother because she owed them the truth. Other than that, they were nobody's business but her own.

'Mourning,' Jacko replied immediately.

Well, that didn't make a lick of sense. 'I'm not dead.' And they could not have believed that she was, could they?

'You were to us,' he said. Again, the answer followed right on the heels of what she had said. He didn't even think about it. That rather implied that Laura hadn't been the only one to do some mourning. All of a sudden the room felt too cold.

*Out, I need out!* The urge to flee had been building ever since she set foot inside the house and by now it was almost overwhelming. It took her most of her self-control to remain in her seat. If not for Thorin's hand gently taking hers beneath the table the effort might have been beyond her. He didn't talk much, and by the looks of things it wasn't all that easy for him to keep his promise to her to let her sort out this mess. Kate appreciated it; the last thing they needed was Jacko and Thorin ending up in a nasty brawl in her mother's house.

'That is enough.' When their mother raised her voice everyone always stopped, maybe because it was such a rare occurrence. 'I'll not have this sort of thing in front of children at my dinner table, thank you very much. Jacko, if you want to sort this out, you can do that later, after you've had time to cool off.' It was remarkable how quickly she could make them all feel like naughty children. Kate had sort of forgotten that.

Thoren had leaned over towards his brother, wonder written all over his face. 'That's amad's voice,' he said excitedly.

Thráin nodded. 'It's scary.'

Or maybe she hadn't forgotten; after all her sons recognised the tone instantly. So perhaps she had unconsciously channelled her mother all these years. Something about it felt oddly reassuring. And
right now, reassurance was a thing she was in dire need of.

The rest of dinner passed without further incidents. Jacko seemed to have decided to focus his efforts solely on his food, which was perhaps for the better. Afterwards he had gone outside for a long phone call with Jane. Helen understood him to a certain extent. When Kate disappeared he had not left a stone unturned in his attempts to find her, so when she wrote she would not be coming back, that must have felt like a betrayal. Of course Helen doubted Jacko was even aware of this, but it fuelled his reactions all the same.

It was heart-breaking to watch and disturbing to see how passive Kate took it. Before she was taken, she would have fought him tooth and nail if he talked to her like that and never mind that she was in the wrong. She never sat back and let him rage at her. And this unsettled Helen almost more than the fact that her daughter had mysteriously returned from magical places. What had happened to her?

And she honestly tried not to lay blame down at Thorin's feet before she was in possession of all the facts, but something about him made her feel ill at ease. Whether it was just his persistent silence that unnerved her – he hadn't spoken more than twenty words altogether for the whole evening – or the way he looked at everything like the world had terribly offended him, she couldn't say, but there was decidedly something. Was it his influence that had turned her lively daughter into this quiet woman who looked like a lamb that was led to slaughter?

It was as if her thoughts had summoned Kate to the kitchen; she poked her head in barely a second after Helen had finished the thought. 'Is it okay if I come in?'

'Of course! Tea?'

Kate's face lit up. 'I'd love some. I haven't had a cup all day, what with all the last minute preparations and another tug of war with the wizard.' She sat herself down at a kitchen chair. 'Now there's a sentence I wouldn't have imagined saying ten years ago.'

It did not take a genius to notice the tension still present in the set of Kate's shoulders, but the smile seemed real enough and so Helen just went with it. 'Having a tug of war with a wizard or not having had a cup of tea all day?'

'Take your pick,' Kate laughed. 'Although Dori makes sure I never really run out of tea and Nori's forever bringing home exotic flavours from all over. Whether or not he's paid for those is another matter.' She must have noticed the astonished look on Helen's face, because she added: 'Believe me, it's best to just let it go. If Dori hasn't lectured the habit out of him by now, we can safely assume he will never change.'

'Your life is so different now,' Helen remarked. Of course, that was the understatement of the century.

Kate nodded, smile gone again. 'Hm, I suppose so.'

'You look tired,' Helen said as she handed her a steaming mug. Maybe it was too soon for this, but something wasn't right about Kate and her family. And everyone knew Helen wasn't one for poking things with a stick, but this was her only daughter; she was entitled to know if she was happy and safe. No, she needed to know if she was happy and safe. She could live with Kate's absence – although there would always be this piece of her missing – if only those two things were
'Travelling preparations and a day of driving will do that to a body,' Kate answered. She wrapped her hands around the mug. 'The lads are quite exhausted, poor things. They've been bouncing with excitement since we told them we were going a week ago. Thráin could barely keep his eyes open just now. Mind you, they still insisted on a bedtime story.'

Well, that explained where Thorin had gone.

'And Duria?' Helen asked.

Kate smiled. 'Sleeps like the dead. She won't wake before morning. Small mercies and all that.' She looked up. 'If your stories are to be believed, Jacko and I never much believed in the whole sleeping-through-the-night-business when we were little. So, you know, from someone who's finally realised what that means, sorry.'

There was a weight to that sorry that suggested that she was apologising for another thing entirely.

'Sorry for that or sorry for something else?' she therefore asked.

Kate took a while, studying the table with surprising intensity, before answering. 'For everything,' she said softly. 'For not letting you know sooner, for not coming back, for…' She bit her lip. 'Just sorry. I know I've put you through hell and I wished it could have gone different.'

It was telling that she didn't say she wished it had never happened at all.

'I'm just glad you are back now.' It wasn't enough, not nearly enough. If she had her way, she would hold her daughter forever, never let her out of her sight again and never mind the fact that Kate was an adult now, a grown woman with children of her own.

'You know that it is temporary, yes?' Kate, for lack of a better word, looked vulnerable. 'I mean, we've got six weeks, but after that, we'll go back. Before the kingdom descends into chaos.' There was flippancy at the end, and something that sounded apologetic. And that was the Kate she knew, utterly awkward with anything approaching emotional vulnerability, something for which they had John Andrews, Robert Smith and Marc Cooper to thank. Helen missed that little girl who wore her heart on her sleeve. Kate hadn't done that in a long, long time.

She nodded. 'I know.' She had known right from the start, but six weeks was still better than she had dared to hope for. 'Or your kingdom descends into chaos.' And wasn't the thought of her little girl as a real queen a strange one.

Kate scoffed. 'More Thorin's kingdom than mine, mum, honestly. I'm just the mannish girl he chose to marry in a temporary stroke of insanity. At least, that's what some folks like to think. And then of course there are the sensible people, who really know better than all that, but they're still a little outnumbered.'

Those words did not sit well with Helen. 'Are you happy, Kate?'

To her surprise, Kate's forehead wrinkled into a frown and her eyes narrowed in suspicion. 'Mum?' she asked, an invitation to elaborate.

Well, she'd started now. She might as well finish. 'Thorin doesn't seem like a nice sort of fellow.'

She'd struck a chord. She knew it before the last word had left her mouth, because the fire in Kate's eyes was back with a vengeance. 'Bloody hell, you're sounding like Elvaethor when I'd just met
him,' she complained. 'And you're wrong, whatever the hell it is you are insinuating.'

Helen wasn't the type to fight with people, but then, Kate had always excelled at arguing. Strange how such a thing had slipped her mind. Her absence had made her remember Kate fonder than she was in reality. True, Kate could be compassionate and kind and carefree, but she could also be tremendously headstrong and difficult and argumentative. Picking a fight with Kate was easy, because she always seemed to be looking for one. And true, she had a lot to be angry about, but lashing out, taking down everything in her path had never been the right way to go about solving her problems. Helen knew this and she knew that Kate knew it too. It was just that she did not always act on it.

'He barely speaks, Kate,' she pointed out. 'He glares at everything and everyone.'

'Yes, because he is scared!' Kate growled. 'Maker be good, I've had this argument with Jacko already. I'd hoped not to have it with you as well.'

This made Helen stop. 'Scared?' That was decidedly not the impression the King under the Mountain had given her. Cold, indifferent and angry she had concluded based on her own observations. Not even the content of Kate's letters had enabled her to see him in a different light.

Kate bit her lip. 'We're… we're remarkably alike, you know? We don't do emotions, especially not in front of other people. I tend to shout to cover it up, Thorin just… withdraws. And he's been dropped into a world that frightens him, that is so different from what he knows. You have no idea. And then there's the guilt, because he has somehow gotten it into his head that my being in Middle Earth is his fault and his alone and he's expecting you to be mad at him instead of me, which is ridiculous. And all the while he's afraid you'll do something that will make me stay here. Oh, and if you so much as hint at knowing any of this, then I have never told you a single thing and you have worked it all out on your own.' It was truly quite astonishing how few times she actually stopped for breath during this speech.

And it left her speechless. Kate's words made a strange sort of sense. In a way, Kate was indeed not much different. She became irritable in situations that most people would be uncomfortable in and that irritation covered up the lack of confidence she felt. It had been like that for a long time.

Still, it did not explain everything. 'You're quieter than you were,' she observed.

Kate shook her head. 'Not usually.' She caught Helen's uncomprehending glance and added: 'Thorin doesn't have the monopoly on guilt, you know.'

*I know I've put you through hell and I wished it could have gone different.* Guilt indeed. And it wasn't without ground, Helen knew this. There had been days and nights when she had wondered why and how and then she'd wondered some more about the why. Truth be told, she still wasn't entirely clear on that. She just couldn't. In her letters Kate claimed that she loved Thorin, but there was precious little evidence to support that theory thus far. There were no signs of affection that she had been able to notice. She had seen her daughter in love before, however unfortunate those times had turned out to be, and it had been entirely different. It had brought out a lighter, more carefree side at the time. There had been none of this tension she detected today. Guilt may play a part in that, but it couldn't be all, could it?

'I see,' she said, not seeing at all.

Kate smiled wryly. 'Do you indeed?' She looked at the mug again. 'Few people do.'

Adopting some of Kate's infamous sarcasm, Helen silently wondered why. 'Thorin and you do not
'We don't,' Kate agreed. 'But we work and we work well.' And oh, Helen knew that look on her daughter's face. I'm going to tell you something you probably won't like and don't you dare have any critique. She'd seen that face numerous times and every single time she had uttered something other than a completely positive response, she had found herself with an enormous row on her hands and with no clue how exactly that had happened. 'And I love him, mum. I don't need your approval, or even your understanding, but I'd like it if you did not suggest in any way that he is bad for me. He is not. I am tired of hearing the same thing over and over again from people who don't know the first thing about it.'

'Maybe I don't,' Helen admitted. And she didn't. She had not seen Kate for eight years and she had changed. They both had and trying to reconnect after so long, after parting as they had, it was not an easy thing. There were so many questions, so many things unclear. She could hardly ask it all. Kate had never taken kindly to people prying into her private affairs. Her own mother had hardly been an exception to that rule. 'But I know you. And I know you always wanted the old-fashioned romance for yourself.' It was one of the few things she had never bothered to hide.

'Well, that didn't exactly work out,' Kate commented nonchalantly. 'I guess Marc rather proved that romance isn't all that it was made out to be.'

'Marc was just one man,' Helen pointed out.

'Maybe so,' Kate said. 'Just not my kind of guy, as it turned out.'

'So, Thorin isn't one for romantic gestures.' Trying to make Kate part with her secrets was something that required a lot of practise and a lot of patience, but Helen always thought she had mastered the art.

'He's not.' Kate's eyes had narrowed again. 'But he's there. He's always going to be.' She put her empty mug back on the table. 'I rather think that's a bit more important than flowers and poetry, don't you?'

It left Helen with a lot to think about, even long after Kate had said her goodnight and had gone up to bed.

Chapter End Notes

Things are going to get better, I promise. So, Thorin and Kate have a while before they have to return home. Are there any things you want to see them do while they've got the chance? I can't promise I will write all of it, but I will try to work in what I can.

The song Kate rearranged is of course Shake It Off by Taylor Swift.

As always, reviews are more than welcome.
Family Visit AU Part 3: Progress

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1. movement forwards, esp towards a place or objective

2. satisfactory development, growth, or advance: she is making progress in maths

3. advance towards completion, maturity, or perfection: the steady onward march of progress

Dictionary .com

It was altogether far less exhausting to attend council meetings, pore over boring documents for hours on end, work at the forge and even reclaim an entire kingdom than to sit through a meal with Kate's family, or so Thorin Oakenshield found when he finally stretched out his weary limbs on the bed Kate's mother had provided. He could feel the brother's resentment simmering in the very air he breathed. The mother was better, but something about her scrutiny of him – even though conducted with kind eyes and gentle voice – made him want to bolt out of the room. Confronting an army of orcs appeared to be the better option.

In a way it reminded him of Bofur once remarking that if forced to choose between an angry Kate and a dragon, he'd pick the dragon. Not that the mother and brother were angry, mind, not in the way Kate was, but something about them still made Thorin think almost longingly about taking on Smaug with a small company of dwarves, one woman and an unbelievably brave hobbit. Considered to how things stood now, the odds had been extremely in his favour then.

This house did not help him in achieving any peace of mind either. For a mannish building it looked sturdy enough, but he missed Erebor already, missed being underground. Without knowing what it would mean, Kate's mother had given them the attic, as far away from the ground as possible. Had he thought her capable of cruelty, he would have suspected her of it. But she had been as pleasant as could be.

'You still awake?' Kate whispered as she came in.

'Yes.' He doubted he would find rest here. It certainly would not come easily to him, despite the weariness he felt to deep down in his bones.

Kate nodded. By now she would know what issues plagued his mind without needing to be told. 'The lads are sleeping and I would be very much surprised indeed if Duria woke before morning.' Their daughter had mastered the art of sleeping through the night rather quicker than her brothers, Maker be praised.

'And your family?'

'Mum's still mulling things over with a cup of tea and I haven't seen Jacko since dinner.' He could hear that her brother's rejection had hurt her deeply. Thorin himself had felt the need to remind himself repeatedly that fastening his hands around Jacko Andrews's neck would do him no favours here. But it had been hard, having to sit through sneering remark after sneering remark, unable to do something.
In a way Kate had been proven right; her family's anger had mostly been directed at her. All his fears to be accused of stealing Kate away had been for nothing. A good few things had been said about her choices and it had also been made obvious that at least Jacko thought Kate had made the wrong one. However, he found he could have endured his fears coming true if it spared her the pain she was put through.

She must have seen his look, because she shrugged. 'It can't be helped. I'll talk with Jacko tomorrow and my mother will come round, I know she will.' It did hardly escape his notice that she made no such claims about her brother.

'Come to bed, Kate,' he told her, gently as he could. 'Fretting won't do any good.'

She smiled. It did not quite reach her eyes, but it was genuine. 'When did you get so wise?' she wondered. There was a mildly teasing tone, because they both knew from whose lips this piece of wisdom came.

'Can't recall,' he said.

This made the smile reach up just long enough to touch her eyes. It was a look he did not see nearly enough. 'You're getting old; your memory's going,' she shot back. She quickly undressed and liberated what little hair remained in her braid from it. 'Would you mind braiding it for bed?' she asked.

He sat up and nodded. It was something that had taken a while to figure out, but eventually he realised that Kate drew comfort from physical contact the same way he did. She would never ask for it directly, and neither would he, but they did not need to; they knew each other too well.

Thorin did as she asked and then held her when he lay down again. Though who was drawing comfort from whom was hard to say. They both had a need of it. They had't asked him again how he was holding up – he wouldn't have thanked her if she did – but he was sure that she knew. Not all the stories she had told could have prepared him in any way for what he had seen here. The cars, the devices that did things seemingly by themselves, the speed of life itself... It left him bewildered and slightly afraid. There was so very little that looked in any way familiar, that he could in any way relate to. He did not belong here. He felt like drowning.

So he clung to his wife as she clung to him. No words were spoken, nor were they needed. They would not make matters better anyway. Actions had always counted for more. Kate drifted off quickly enough. She always tried to stay awake when she knew his mind was troubled, but her body's need for rest would eventually win out. It had always been like that.

And she did not need to be awake to be a comfort to him all the same. There had been many a night that he had woken from a nightmare to find relief in the simple fact that she was there. Most of his night terrors consisted of disjointed images, memories and worst fears alike. Death was the only constant in them. Of course, never his own. That at least would have been bearable. Having Kate near reminded him that she was alive, warm and breathing. And if she was, so were their sons, their daughter, his sister, her brothers, Fili, Dwalin and Balin and everyone else.

But even holding her gave him no peace of mind. Not even in all his years of exile had the longing for home been so strong, but then, he had never been in a world he did not understand. Back in Middle Earth life followed certain rules, certain patterns. It had always been in a specific way or something very close to it. There were no such patterns to draw from here. It was too different. And the few people they knew in this world had so far proven to not be all that friendly.

Thorin managed to snatch bits of sleep throughout the night, never longer than half an hour at most
– often far less – together, lying awake for what felt like hours for the rest of it. It was nothing short of a blessing when a floor below first Duria began to fuss and then inevitably, Thoren and Thráin followed in her wake. Kate didn't stir and so he let her be, found his clothes, dressed and left the room. She had been exhausted and she was a daughter of Men, meaning that she needed the rest far more than he did. His mind might crave the oblivion of sleep, but his body could go without for longer than hers.

He collected the boys and lifted Duria into his arms before he made his way downstairs. Not that he knew what to do when he got there; he'd only caught glimpses of what certain things were used for. How to use them was a different matter entirely. But he could think of a way to keep his offspring occupied until the other people in the house woke.

As it happened, he was not the first to come down. Or maybe he was, because it seemed like the lone occupant of the living room had never gone up in the first place. Kate's mother – 'Call me Helen, please' – sat curled up on the sofa, the way her daughter did. The pose was one familiar thing at least. So was the pensive look in her eyes.

'Good morning,' he said.

She looked up when Thoren and Thráin enthusiastically echoed the greeting. 'Good morning indeed. Early risers, are you?'

'The lads generally are,' Thorin replied. And as a consequence, so was he. Or Kate, whichever one of them was woken first. 'We did not mean to disturb you.'

Helen left the sofa in one fluid motion – especially considering her age – and shook her head. 'You didn't. You're just a little earlier than my children, which comes as no great surprise.' The amusement became more pronounced. 'When they were teenagers, I had to practically beat them out of bed with a stick. Who knows, those days may still be in your future.'

The suggestion that any dwarf would ever spend his days lazing in bed set his blood to boiling. He knew better than to shout in the woman's face, though. She could not know what it meant. Kate had made more than one such error when they had first met. Sometimes, when she wasn't really thinking about what she was saying, she still did. It only served to emphasise that she had been raised in a world and a culture not his own.

'I don't believe so.' The words sounded wooden and awkward to even his own ears, but it was far better than exploding in rage.

Helen must have sensed that something was amiss. It was right there in the brief furrowing of her brow, but it was not there in her voice when she spoke again. 'Well, if I know Jacko and Kate, we'll be waiting a while still, but there's tea and I've found The Lion King lying around when I cleaned up a week ago, so I reckon you boys will like a spot of movie-watching before breakfast, don't you?'

Thorin did not understand a single word of that last sentence. Or rather, he knew what the individual words meant, but all of them put together had him struggling to find any semblance of coherency. Neither did Thoren and Thráin by the look of things, but that had never put them off. Not knowing was the quickest way to awaken their curiosity.

He nodded his approval. What was the worst that could happen? Helen seemed like a responsible kind of woman. It did not stop him from trying to work out what she was doing on his own. He failed, naturally. He had better resign himself to be forever baffled by this world's mysteries.
Nevertheless he had to consciously stop himself from doing a step back in shock and astonishment when the screen – he remembered that word from one of Kate's explanations about her "phone" – came to life with sound and motion.

Thoren and Thráin were equally surprised, but visibly far more happy about it. 'Oh, adad, do you see?' Thráin exclaimed at a volume loud enough to drown out the sudden noise and to quite possibly wake the dead as well.

'How's it doing that?' Thoren wondered. 'Is it magic?'

Helen shook her head. 'No, it's not. I'll explain later. You two enjoy the story now.'

She did not need to say it twice. Thorin's sons were already staring wide-eyed at the screen and its goings-on. A story, Helen had said. It brought up a memory of discussing the wretched book on the road and Kate making frequent mention of another version, a movie, as she had called it. He had been unable to imagine what it was like and when asked, Kate had explained that it was a different way of storytelling. It seemed to Thorin that different was the key word indeed.

'Why don't we relocate to the kitchen for a cup of tea?' Helen suggested. 'And maybe a glass of milk for this shy young lady?'

Duria showed her face just long enough to reveal a delighted smile, which was all the answer that was needed. So he followed Helen to the kitchen. The lads did not even seem to notice their departure. In a way he envied them their curiosity, their willingness to explore new things. It was still a good thing for them. As for Thorin himself, his exile had burned all his excitement for new things right out of him, because in his experience they were only very seldom good.

'Your people drink a lot of tea,' he observed. He always thought that it was just Kate, but since he had been here, he had seen both her mother and her brother consume incredible amounts of it. Of course hobbits were well-known for their love of tea – it would be hard to forget Master Baggins's many lamentations about the regrettable lack of his beverage of choice on the quest – but hobbits were strange creatures. 'I assumed it was mostly popular among hobbits.'

This gained him a chuckle for his efforts. 'Hobbits could have been British. Or the British could have been hobbits. Take your pick.'

He sat himself down on one of the kitchen chairs, not quite knowing what to make of a comment like that. Kate would have responded with some kind of witty remark that would keep conversation flowing, but Thorin had never been blessed with the gift of words, especially not among those he barely knew. Helen, for all the traits she shared with her daughter, was a stranger.

He settled on a curt 'thank you' when his tea was handed to him after a silence that had lasted far too long. By that time Duria had found enough courage to climb down from his lap to inspect a toy her grandmother had found for her. Slowly but surely his little girl was overcoming her shyness. It was hard not to, with all the adoration she received. If he was anyone else, he would have found Kate's mother a difficult woman to dislike as well.

Helen looked pensive for a moment, but then seemingly settled on what she wanted to say and spoke. 'I didn't say yesterday, but thank you.'

Well, that took him by surprise. 'What for, may I ask?'

'Staying with Kate,' Helen said.

If that had been intended to clear matters up, she had failed. Either way, it didn't. 'Beg pardon?' He
sincerely hoped that it was just his imagination reading an insult in her words.

"It was something she said yesterday." He knew that thoughtful look; Kate often wore it right before a deep and meaningful insight, when she had spent a long time thinking about a subject beforehand. "She said that at least one of the reasons she married you is that you stayed, because you stand by her and always will."

He should not have been surprised that Kate had confided in her mother of all people. She did not usually share personal affairs with anyone but him and those very close to her, and she had not seen her mother for eight years. Then again, knowing Kate, she could have said it in a fit of temper, defending him because she was sick and tired of folk making assumptions and sticking their noses where they had no business being.

When he did not reply, she went on. "I think she'll have told you that her father left and that she has been unlucky in love before she met you?"

"I am aware of it." It was one of the things where they had found common ground. Both their fathers had disappeared and while their cases may otherwise be very different, both fathers had gone because they gave up the fight, because the family they had was apparently not enough reason to keep on fighting. And neither of them were strangers to people leaving them.

"So someone staying because they want to and not because they have to, that's rare for her. Or at any rate, it used to be. I can thank you for that at the very least." The words were clearly genuine, if unnecessary. Of course he stood by Kate. She was his wife. Then again, part of the reason he loved her was because she had chosen to stay even after she had fulfilled her vows, because she wanted to, not because she had to, like Helen thanked him for doing.

He nodded, accepting the compliment. He would not say 'you're welcome,' because he had not done it for her. Quite the contrary, most days he was only too aware of how selfish he must have been to keep her when in another world there were people he deprived of her company. But he also recognised a peace offering when he encountered it. Kate took after her mother like that, apologising without actually saying the words.

And so he could make an effort, couldn't he? He owed it to Kate to at the very least try to get on with her family. All things considered, the mother might be a far better place to start than the brother, who had given every impression of not wanting to have anything to do with him. Of course the feeling was entirely mutual.

"You have a good instrument," he observed, referring to the harp he had seen in the living room. It could not hold a candle to the instruments his people could craft, but as mannish work went, it was surprisingly good.

He knew at once he'd struck gold. Helen's face lit up and she smiled. "You know about harps then? The book mentioned it, but you know better than I how unreliable they can be."

It might not be so bad as he had feared after all.

When she woke up, Kate could not for the life of her remember where she was and how she had come to be here. The mattress felt wrong and it was by far too light in the room. Her bedroom in Erebor had windows – she would never stop being grateful to Thorin for suggesting they stay in those airy rooms instead of the royal apartments deep inside the Mountain itself – but they had
heavy curtains that never let in that much daylight. Come to think of it, the bed was too empty.

It was then that consciousness caught up with her and it all came crashing back, instantly chasing the last remnants of sleep from her mind. She was back. After all these years, she had come back at last. She was home. No, not home. Erebor was home. She chose that. And still there was that little voice in the back of her head that kept referring to this world as home, because it was where she had been meant to make her home. That of course was before the grey wizard had come meddling in things he should have stayed out of.

She opened her eyes to find that it must be later than she had intended to sleep. No, scratch that, she hadn't intended to sleep at all before Thorin had found some rest of his own. The previous day had been a trial beyond compare and she'd wanted to be there for him when they finally got a moment alone, bugger it all.

She groaned in frustration. That had not gone as planned.

Having said that, there was nothing she could do to remedy that now. And seeing as Thorin had already gone down and her mother had always been an early riser, if there was some kind of disaster going to happen, it would be safe to say it already had and she had managed to sleep right through it. Jacko on the other hand had never risen early unless he'd been held at gunpoint, so there was that. Small mercies and all that nonsense.

'Well done, Andrews,' she muttered. She'd somehow stuck with her habit of chastising herself with her old surname, given the fact she hadn't exactly gotten a new one when she married, because dwarves didn't hold with that sort of thing. No, because using their fathers' names to tell them apart is such a splendid idea.

In all the chaos and emotional turmoil of the previous day she'd hardly had the time to really stop and think about it. Only now did it really start to sink in that she had really made it back. It somehow still felt too good to be true, a mere dream she could wake from at a moment's notice. When had she ever had such good luck without a price tag attached? Luck only ever seemed to happen to other people.

'I'm back.' She spoke the words out loud to see if they made it seem any less surreal. They didn't. Well, there was hardly any point in lazing about while the day was wasting. Now you know you've spent too much time among dwarves, my dear. Either way, there was a shower a floor below her that Kate decided had her name on it. Honestly, the baths in Erebor were heavenly and no exaggeration on that count, but to have flowing hot water again? That was a different kind of heaven altogether. Maybe she could even persuade Thorin to try it with her. Preferably when no one else was home, naturally.

When she came down the stairs she noticed that the door to Jacko's room was already open. Now there was a surprise. But there weren't any noises indicating World War Three coming from downstairs, so maybe everyone had decided to be sensible for the day. Or maybe not a whole day, but she would be happy with just about thirty minutes more. Or maybe an hour. If she had to go and play peacemaker for the day, she'd prefer to do it on a full stomach.

Taking a shower was every bit as delightful as she had expected it to be. And to think I used to take it for granted. It wasn't until she had gone on a quest in a medieval sort of world that she realised how much she missed those luxuries she hadn't even stopped to properly appreciate until then. Well, better make the most of it, because it won't last.

Turning off the shower took a considerable strength of will. The hot water raining down on her
skin felt good. It relaxed her tense muscles and at long last made her feel as if she was a twenty-first century woman from Earth instead of a thirtieth century of the Third Age of Middle Earth noblewoman.

Dressing the part also helped. Kate could hardly believe her mother kept her clothes, much less that they actually still fit. She knew she had gained some weight since her questing days, not much, but some. She'd kept in shape. Traipsing all over the Mountain all the livelong day every day would do that to a body.

No Middle Earth fashion for me for six whole weeks. Have I died and gone to heaven? She'd never been the dress-wearing type, but her position demanded it of her and so she had complied. But this was not Erebor, she would not have to sit through council and court for six blessed weeks and there was no call for dresses or skirts around these parts. But in the interest of not giving Thorin too much of a culture shock – well, more than he'd had already – she chose a short-sleeved T-shirt and a pair of jeans ending just an inch above her ankles. It was summer after all.

When she was done she took a good long look at herself in the bathroom mirror. And there, that was how she used to be. There were no braids in her hair and there was not a dress in sight. She wasn't even wearing any jewellery. If one overlooked her scars, particularly the one on her face, it looked as though she had never left at all. And isn't that a somewhat frightening thought in its own right? Thorin no doubt would think so. And fret about it something awful.

For now however peace reigned in the house. In fact, when she came in, the adults were nowhere in sight. Instead she was met with the sight of her wide-eyed sons sitting on the couch watching the television with rapt attention. As chance would have it she came in just as Timon and Pumba launched into their life's philosophy of Hakuna Matata. And didn't that just bring back lots of happy memories?

It took Thoren a whole minute to notice her, he was that caught up in the events on screen. 'Amad, do you see? Do you see that?'

She laughed. 'Yes, I do, sweetheart. I used to watch this when I was your age.'

He looked at her as though he could barely believe it. 'You didn't.'

'I did,' she assured him. 'And The Lion King used to be one of my favourites.' She'd loved Disney movies, all of them, although she had a slight preference for the stories that weren't about the love at first sight couples. 'Pay attention, darling, you'll miss the important bits. I'll call when breakfast's on the table.'

She did not need to tell him twice. Bless.

Assuming that the rest of the family had made themselves comfortable in the kitchen, she headed that way, humming the song under her breath. Goodness knew she'd love to have no worries for the rest of her days, but that was unlikely to happen. But it was a hard fact that she felt less like she was dragging a ball and chain of guilt behind her. Some of her load had been miraculously lifted. Either that or she wasn't quite awake enough to realise it was there yet.

On the other hand, maybe she was still dreaming. It seemed the only reasonable explanation for the sight that met her eyes when she entered the kitchen and found her husband and her mother deep in conversation about harps. Duria was playing with Lego bricks at their feet. So much for not handing that out to children below the age of three, Kate thought wryly, although she was probably lucky; Duria had never had the questionable habit of putting things in her mouth.
'Morning,' she greeted.

Her mother echoed the greeting. Thorin acknowledged her presence by sending a quick smile her way. Had she blinked, she might have missed it, that and the genuine relief in his eyes. Nope, there hadn't been any war in her absence. That was good to know.

'Where's Jacko?' she asked. He hadn't been abed, but he was not anywhere to be seen either.

Her mother frowned. 'I thought he was still sleeping.'

Kate shook her head. 'His door was open and the bed was most definitely empty.' She might have said not been slept in had it not been for her brother's habit to make the bloody thing so neat not even Dori could have criticised him for it. Still, she wondered. 'Did you hear him go to bed?'

Somehow she doubted her mother had broken herself off the habit of staying up all night with huge amounts of tea when there was a Serious Matter that needed thinking about. Her bed had definitely not had an occupant last night and Kate knew well enough that she might have been the Serious Matter in question last night. At least it seemed as though she had arrived at a favourable conclusion.

'Truth be told, I can't recall him coming in after he went outside.'

Kate groaned. 'Not this again.'

When her brother was seventeen, there had been something of a fight about… well, she couldn't even remember what it had been about. Afterwards he had stormed off. That had been nothing new. Jacko needed to blow off steam when he was mad and it was for the best if there was no one in his way when that occurred. But after four hours they had gotten worried. He did not come back and he wasn't answering his phone. And matters did not get better when they realised he had swiped the car keys and had made off with the car, never mind that he did not have a driving licence. The next evening he had come strolling back in, totally calm, apologised and went on as if he had not put his mother and sister through the worst day of their lives. Apparently he'd driven all the way to Dover in an attempt to clear his head. Now that he had done so, he'd come back.

'This happened before?' Thorin asked.

Kate grimaced. 'Unfortunately.' A quick peek out of the window told her that, unsurprisingly, her brother's car had done a vanishing act along with its owner.

Her mother looked resigned and slightly uneasy. Her unease was not unfounded. Jacko was a safety hazard behind the wheel at the best of times, and anger made him worse. It was not that hard to imagine his drive had come to a sudden standstill against a tree, or a house, or at the bottom of a river. 'I'll try his phone.'

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_He'll have that turned off_, Kate knew. He was a grown man, but he could be so bloody childish sometimes. That had not changed, she found. 'I'll try Jane. He might have gone back home.' She retrieved her phone from where she had left it the previous night. 'Hang on, you try Jane. I don't have her number. I'll give Jacko a ring.' _And give him a piece of my mind on his voicemail if he has the guts to ignore me._ Going off the radar without a good reason – a good reason meaning here something along the lines of being abducted by a wizard to another world – was not acceptable and her twin really should know better.

Her mother left the kitchen to make the call, leaving only Thorin and Kate with their daughter. Duria had no interest in the affairs of the adults. Her new toys were far more captivating.
'Are you…?' Thorin began.  

'Okay? Worried?' she asked, filling in the blanks. When he confirmed that he had indeed meant to ask that, she replied: 'No to the first, yes to the second. Jacko's a bloody fool and a danger behind the wheel. Especially when he is angry.'  

It was testimony to how much he had relaxed already that he smiled. 'He truly is your brother then.'  

Kate snorted. 'I'm a much better driver, thank you very much.'  

'I beg to differ,' her husband remarked. 'You drove so fast I felt as if I had left my stomach behind in… Cardiff, was it?'  

'Oi, I'll have you know I stuck to the speed limit.' And everything was fast compared to transport on horseback. 'You just haven't experienced being a passenger when Jacko's the chauffeur and if I have a say in the matter, that'll never happen. I like you in one piece. And him too, preferably.'  

He must have read the worry from her voice and eyes. 'Call him, Kate.'  

So she did. The phone rang once, twice… Kate was surprised he hadn't switched the thing straight to voicemail. 'Pick up,' she growled into the phone.  

Her brother promptly did. 'Jacko Andrews.'  

She didn't bother returning the courtesy; he'd know who she was from the caller ID. 'Where the bloody hell are you?' she demanded.  

'All night?' He could probably deduce from her tone that she wasn't buying what he was selling. 'And you didn't think to, oh, I don't know, leave a note? You paid attention in school, you can set pen to paper, can't you?'  

'Like you did, you mean?' came the sarcastic response.  

'Well, if you had gotten abducted by a meddling wizard I might have been sympathetic, but you're obviously still a free man.' Couldn't he see what he was doing? 'You're damn lucky mum only just realised a minute ago that you'd gone or you would have had her fretting all night. Again.'  

'I needed to clear my head.' Was it just her or was he really giving her an impression of a sulking teenager?  

'Which stopped you from writing a note or telling anyone where you were going how exactly?' It was all a load of bullshit.  

'Good grief, Kate, you're such a hypocrite sometimes,' he complained, still keeping up the charade of the spoiled kid. 'You can tell mum I'm on my way. I'll be there in ten.'  

He hung up before she could comment on the suggestion he was driving whilst making a phone call.  

'He's on his way apparently,' she reported wryly. 'He'll be here in ten minutes.' Her mother had come in just as she mentioned his expected time of arrival and immediately passed it on to Jane, so at least she wouldn't worry when there was no need. He had managed to survive the night, so it stood to reason he would also survive the next few minutes, after which Kate might just knock him
unconscious herself.

'Where's he been?' her mother asked.

'Maker knows,' Kate replied. 'Dover? Cardiff? Narnia?' She didn't think she imagined the quick upwards motion of Thorin's lips at the last name. Well, he would know it; she'd taken to reading the stories to the boys recently. He had never paid much attention when she read to the company on the quest, but he'd become well acquainted with the book afterwards. She'd even caught him in the act of reading it once and his argument that it could not be worse than trade agreements had not fooled her for one second.

She got a snort for a reply. 'That'd be the day. Both my children hanging out in other worlds.'

'Jacko without his morning fix of caffeine and no phone to distract him from that?' She shuddered at the thought.

'It would seem that Gandalf selected the right Andrews for the task after all,' Thorin observed. And if he was getting relaxed enough to joke, that must mean he actually got on pretty well with her mother. No great surprise there — it was impossible to remain angry at her for long and her mother could never maintain anger for any length of time herself either — but a relief all the same. Now she'd just have to focus on bringing Jacko around.

'Wait, you mean the one who doesn't want to get out of bed in the morning and talks before she thinks? I suspect that one went over well with the elves.'

More surprising was that her mum was bantering right along with him. At her expense. And Thorin did not seem to find that an issue like he normally did. She'd been praying for a miracle, but she hadn't actually expected that it would happen. Miracles happened to other people and on the rare occasion that they did happen to her, they always seemed to take place around Durin's Day. This particular one had come months ahead of schedule.

Thorin did not miss a beat. 'She serenaded them on first encounter.'

'They serenaded us first.' Kate had only ever responded. She hadn't made up the songs. She merely altered the lyrics. And the elves had been asking for it. So had the orcs, and the men of Lake-town. And the Taylor Swift song in the car had just been too good an opportunity to miss. 'And I responded at your request at least two times, if my memory serves me right.' She fixed him with a stare. Two could play this game after all.

'Aye, but it was you that did the singing. And you did not protest the notion.'

'I questioned your sanity instead,' she retorted.

Meanwhile her heart was soaring. They had sort of grown used to this, this bantering when they were at ease. Uncharacteristically it had been Nori who had once observed it was how they showed affection. They didn't really say things like 'I love you' but they had this instead. Well, this and the physical side of things, which they kept well away from anyone, especially the likes of her brothers. Neither of them was demonstrative about it, which Kate was grateful for. Even after years they still made her feel slightly awkward. Or rather, it made her feel awkward, because the memory of the last one who had been so outspoken about his affections had turned out to be a right bastard in the end. *Thanks for that, Marc. I'll punch your nose in gratitude if I ever happen to run into you again.*

'No news there, sweetheart,' her mother smiled. 'Ah, that'd be Jacko,' she said when she heard the
Speaking of those waiting in line for a punch in the face. 'You'd better open the door,' Kate advised. 'I'm not sure I wouldn't throw him right back out again.'

'Kate…'

'Mum, he ran off. Again.' Her mother's ability to see the best in people was admirable, if a little annoying. 'He has a phone. He could have called, texted. Hell, he could even have written an old-fashioned note. He did none of those.'

Neither had she done any of the aforementioned. But her situation had been different. She'd had her phone, true enough, but she had been only a world out of reach. And it was not as if she had been able to send a note. Though if you had asked Gandalf sooner, would he have let you? It was just one of those questions that had been on her mind a lot lately. The answer was that she didn't know. The idea had never occurred to her. She had been too focused on getting home to settle for a temporary solution. All or nothing. She was such a person.

But Jacko did have a point. There might have been a possibility for her to let them know where she was – question remained if they would have believed it – and that she was alive and as well as she could be on a quest to battle a dragon. She had not used it. Those were the facts and they did make her feel like a hypocrite for going at Jacko like a bull after a red flag. Well, you never laid claim to sainthood.

Thorin's amusement had yet to abate. 'Notes are old-fashioned?' It was how they communicated when one of them was not where they would normally be at any given time.

'In Erebor not so much,' Kate replied easily. 'Here? Definitely. You've seen how we communicate here.' It went without saying that he did not like it. There wasn't any need to state the obvious.

Although she might make an exception in her brother's case. Her mother would be too relieved to tell him the truth, but Kate had no such reservations.

It was however not Jacko who walked into the kitchen a few moments later.

'Laura?' Kate's jaw dropped. Running an errand? Collecting her lifelong friend more like.

'Hey there, Kate.'

Laura had not changed, not one bit. It was a bit unnerving really. A bit more mature perhaps, but that was only expected. And even then, one should probably take care to stress the bit in that previous sentence.

The next moment she was all but lifted off her feet and crushed in a hug whilst cringing at the volume of delighted laughter penetrating her left ear. 'Good to see you!' she exclaimed. 'Bloody hell, Kate, I'd never expect to see you again.'

'You might not if you won't let me breathe soon,' Kate reminded her. Being friends with Laura had always been easy. It had never once gotten awkward or uncomfortable between them. That being such a difficult thing to come by these days, she was all the more thrilled to find out that apparently the eight years of not seeing each other, of not even being on the same planet, had not changed that.

Laura let her go and held her at arm's length. 'You weren't joking about that scar on your face.'

Kate rolled her eyes. 'You're looking good too, by the way.'
'Why, thank you.'

'Really, why am I friends with you again?' she asked in mock exasperation.

'Because I'm a wonder and a delight and you love me for it,' Laura immediately responded. 'And I feed your cat.'

That effectively side-tracked her. 'He's still alive?' Fidget had been four years old when she got stranded in Middle Earth, so she hadn't dared to hope he would still be alive. 'Good on him.'

'Mind you, he's still bringing home mice and birds and then expects me to congratulate him on a job well done.' Laura wrinkled her nose in disgust, but she could not hide the affection underlying the remark. *Oh, you've grown fond of him, all right. 'You should have taught him to at least kill them before he drags them in, you know.'*

'Yeah, that didn't work out,' Kate agreed. 'You really look well, you know.'

'So do you.' She did sound sincere this time. 'Life in Middle Earth must suit you. Haven't run out of people to shout at yet?'

Kate aimed a hit at her head, which missed. 'How many times do I have to tell you I don't thrive on conflict?'

'At least a hundred times more,' Laura informed her sunnily.

She had that annoying grin on her face that said *you know very well that I am right and you are wrong*. Trouble was, Kate knew she was at least half-right. She did not thrive on conflict, but neither did she avoid it and a battle of wits and words had always been right up her street. And of course her best friend would remember that. She could hardly expect any different.

'Well, aren't you going to introduce me to your husband?' she asked.

Kate sent her a warning glance; Laura wasn't quite the screaming in glee type of fangirl, but neither did she hide that she could obsess over books and movies. She kept it within reason generally, but having a "fictional character" in the same room might cancel reason out of the equation entirely. 'Behave,' she ordered. 'Also, *my* husband. And I'm the jealous type.'

Thorin and Laura looked both thoroughly surprised to learn it.

'Well, it's not as if girls are throwing themselves at your feet, so there's not much cause to show it now, is there?' she defended herself. Good grief, was he smiling? Well, smirking more than smiling, but it amounted to the same thing. 'Anyway, Thorin, this is my best friend Laura Porter. It is still Porter, right?'

Laura nodded. 'Not for long, though. I'm getting married in three weeks.'

'Congratulations then.' Kate made a mental note to make sure she attended the wedding. She owed Laura that at the very least. 'And Laura, this is Thorin. I'm sure you'll get along very well. And if she chatters too much, you can block her out.'

Laura arched an eyebrow. 'That's what you did, then?'

Kate shrugged. 'That would be telling.' Of course she never did, but they'd loved teasing one another. And it was always nice, never nasty. Kate had always been grateful for that. There had been enough nasty in her life as it was, and not nearly enough niceness. Her friends had always
done their best to remedy that.

'Indeed,' Laura chuckled.

'Well, I'll leave you two to get acquainted. I'll need to have a few choice words with that empty-headed brother of mine.' It was a good thing she did not have the strength of a dwarf, or Jacko would find himself in dire need of a hospital within the hour. What in the world had he been thinking?

As it happened, there was no need to go and find her brother; he entered the kitchen, followed by her mother. Kate was sorely tempted to give him a piece of her mind all the same, never mind the audience, but her mother's subtle shake of the head made her change her mind. It probably could wait. Surprisingly, Jacko already looked a bit chastised, which could mean that their mum had finally been able to rile herself enough to make her displeasure known. *Good for her.*

'Tea,' she decreed and it was so British that it set Kate to smiling.

It should have been one of the most awkward moments in her life. Thorin by rights should have urges to flee the room, Jacko would be making unpleasant remarks and her mother would do the sad puppy eyes. But none of that happened. Laura helped with that. Unlike Kate, filling the silence with happy chatter came easy to her.

'You know what, the movies were a bit rubbish,' she declared. *The Hobbit movies,* she clarified when Kate did not immediately follow. 'Especially when compared to your letters.'

It had been years since anyone had felt the need to discuss *The Hobbit* story with her. She had not even read the book since Lord Erland had gone insane and had taken off with his wealth into the wilds, the last bit of book-truth that had actually come to pass. But she had once studied it so intensively that the knowledge had yet to disappear from her mind. It was always there at the tip of her fingers, ready when she needed to call on it. Of course she never had to these days, but it was there all the same.

'Not all the time,' she disagreed. 'I mean I only saw the first one, but that came true every now and then. Sometimes at the same time as the book, which was confusing.'

Laura's smile widened into a grin. 'Well, you never saw the second and the third. Didn't have much to do with the book, I can tell you that.'

Kate knew that this was an invitation to curiously inquire what exactly had been so different, but she wasn't going to take the bait. 'Neither did reality, for that matter.'

'Well, I *was* surprised you actually found out the name of the Master of Lake-town,' Laura nodded. 'You know, since he didn't have one in the book.'

She snorted. 'Of course he had a name. It's not *Doctor Who*; people don't go around calling themselves the Master. Sounds a bit pretentious, doesn't it?'

Laura rolled her eyes. 'You haven't seen that for eight years and you're still going on about it?' She looked at Thorin. 'Does she do that with you as well?'

Thorin looked like he did not quite know what to make of her – Kate suspected he was mentally counting the similarities between Laura and Thora and was rapidly running out of fingers and toes to count them on – but he was certainly polite, if a little formal. The joking mood had taken a hopefully temporary backseat. 'She does.' But the fact that he confirmed Laura's assumption had to count for something. He wouldn't do that if it was someone he truly could not stand.
Her friend barely acknowledged it. 'Well, like I said, the book doesn't give him a name. Nor does the movie. He's just fat and scheming and unpleasant.'

Kate snorted. 'Sounds like him, all right.'

'Of course, that is where the similarities pretty much end.' Laura sounded entirely too pleased, as if she knew that what she was about to say would not please the ones who'd hear it.

'Oh, for heaven's sake, get it over with.' Kate aimed a playful hit at her head. 'You know you want to.'

'Well. As a matter of fact, there was that scene where the orcs attacked Lake-town,' Laura began, instantly confirming what Kate already knew; she was having way too much fun and her audience wasn't.

'Beg pardon?' Kate knew for a fact that never happened.

Laura was on a roll now. 'And according to the movies, Kíli had a thing with that Tauriel girl.'

Drinking tea had not been one of her better ideas, for she almost choked on it. Never mind that no one in their right mind brought up Kíli in such a casual way around Thorin, especially when he hardly knew them, but even not considering that, the concept itself was utterly bewildering. As far as Kate knew, Kíli and Tauriel had not even really known each other. They might have known the other by face, but that was as deep as the acquaintance ran. Romance surely did not come into it.

'Please tell me you're joking!' She'd lamented more than once that Gandalf had taken her away before all three movies had been released, but it seemed now that maybe the wizard had known what he was doing all along, because from what Laura was telling her, the last two would have had very little to offer in the way of actual advice.

Laura cheerfully assured her that she was not and went on to tell her that, if the movies could be believed, the company had found the side door within a day of leaving Lake-town – and how that was possible with distances being what they were Kate would very much like to know – and that the company had attempted to more or less drown the dragon in gold – which quite proved that at least the movie-versions of the company members were quite insane. By the end of it, Kate was quite ready to switch to coffee.

'And I did wonder, because you never mentioned in your letters, does Dáin really ride a pig instead of a pony?' her friend finished.

'Come again?' They must have been drunk when they thought that one up. On second thought, they must have been drunk a disturbingly long time if that actually made it to the big screen. Of course, it was a movie. Kate knew this. It had nothing to do with reality. She knew that too. Still, so many other things that should have had nothing to do with reality had happened. She really should not take it personally. 'No, he thinks that a pony is sufficient. How would one even go about riding a pig? It must be very uncomfortable.' Now that her initial shock had subsided a little, she could almost picture it. But it would look laughable and it was unthinkable that anyone wishing to see the next day would ridicule Dáin. He was not one to be trifled with, she knew that.

Thorin had not enjoyed the talk as much either. His brow was furrowed in a frown that had been known to send recalcitrant envoys searching for an excuse to get away as quickly as possible. And he had gone all silent and brooding, too, which was decidedly bad news. Of course, Laura had been focusing her attention on Kate, so naturally she hadn't noticed, but Kate knew better. And she knew that look. The sooner she could get the conversation onto a different topic, the better it would be.
'Imagine that, Gandalf might have known what he was doing when he abducted me after the first movie, after all,' she said, giving voice to the thought she'd had just before.

It had been quite the wrong thing to say. The silence that followed her words made her realise that she had just brought up her abduction in a more or less positive way when to most people around the table it had been anything but. Well, shit.

It was already far too late to save face. She'd said it; there was no taking it back. And at least it had been honest. Now it was for certain that she had been hanging around dwarves for far too long. Even so, dancing around a subject had never been her strongest point. Beating around the bush was for liars and politicians.

'You know what I mean,' she muttered. 'In my role as company advisor it wouldn't have been helpful to know about the other movies.' And for Durin's sake, stop looking at me like I've kicked your puppy.

Naturally it was Jacko who took it upon himself to reply. 'Well, that's just the thing, isn't it? You just forgot what it meant to us.'

'I didn't.' How could she? How could he think that she ever could? 'I just talk before I think, that's all. And that's nothing new.' She had done that since she had learned how to talk. And her brother should know that better than anyone.

Jacko barrelled on as if she had not spoken at all. 'You just don't get it, do you? We were searching for you for months, even after the police had more or less given up because they were at their wit's end. We did appeals on the telly, we distributed more posters with your face on it than I can count. Dad even hired a private detective, who of course couldn't find you either, but...

'Hang on, did you say dad?' she interrupted. He couldn't have, could he? As far as she was aware, Jacko had cut their father out of his life completely and couldn't care less about it. There was no way that he would ever willingly contact the man. In the end, Kate had agreed with him of course, but it had taken her a long time to get there and even then she couldn't summon up the complete disinterest her brother displayed. She'd rather settle for anger instead.

'Yeah, he helped,' he admitted. 'Wasted lots of money on it too.'

Kate frowned. 'Hang on, are you on speaking terms again?' Her twin's silence was all the confirmation she needed, even when it made no sense at all. 'What is this? A parallel universe where our father by some miracle isn't the biggest bastard known to man?' And people never changed that much. Of course they changed little bits, but her father would have needed several lifetimes to get from utter prick to a halfway decent human being.

'Surprising enough it was your disappearance that made him sit up and pay attention.' Stranger still, Jacko was on the defensive. 'He was the one who hired the private detective.'

'You said.' It also explained exactly nothing in her opinion.

'He cares, Kate.' Yes, that was definitely his defensive tone. What the hell was going on here? 'No one did more to find you than he did.'

'If about ten years too late,' she retorted. 'Don't you think it odd that he just abandons us, disappears entirely and then tries to get back into your good graces again the moment it looks as though he might become a suspect?' She had really been doing too much politics lately. That did not mean she was necessarily wrong, though.
'Do you have to think the worst of people right away?' he complained. Great, pouting. And here she was hoping he had outgrown that after puberty.

'I find that in my line of work it generally works,' she answered. Especially in her dealings with Thranduil and cronies. Since she put them in the same mental box as her father, the same treatment in her mind more than sufficed. 'And you ought to know better.'

'You haven't seen him for well over a decade,' Jacko pointed out and were they really fighting over their father of all people? This was beyond ridiculous. Jacko should be the last one to fight his corner.

'I don't need to.'

'Too bad. I called him. He's on his way.'

Time seemed to freeze. 'He's what?'

Chapter End Notes

And will you look at that, progress at last. Some of it anyway.

The next chapter will not be for this AU, but a piece about Elvaethor that I've been planning for a long while. I was going to wait with that, but I've been dropping some hints about that character in The Book recently, so I thought it might be best to deal with him in Duly Noted a bit sooner. That chapter will probably be sometime this week, most likely Wednesday. So keep an eye out for that.

As always, thank you for taking the time to read this monstrosity. Reviews would be most welcome.
Sorry, no continuation of the Family Visit AU this time, though the next chapter for that is in the works. It's just that I felt it necessary to do something with Elvaethor first, seeing as how I've been dropping some hints about his background in The Book lately. And if you weren't aware, I'm back to writing for The Book and it's updated every Sunday.

So, enjoy!

This time she [Cathy] was sure she saw the grief pass his face. That wound hadn't closed and she had suspected as much. Most of the time he had a tight control over his emotions and as far as she knew he had only slipped up once and she wasn't supposed to have seen him then. But she had, very shortly after her father had passed and had been buried. Elvaethor had been staying in Erebor at the time and when she had been unable to find him inside, she had at last thought to look outside. And there she had found him, in front of her parents' tomb, on his knees, tears on his face, sobs shaking his shoulders. 'Not again,' he'd said. 'Please, not again.' Deciding that this was a private moment, she had turned on her heels and left. Of course, she hadn't stopped wondering about what he had meant by 'not again,' but it wasn't her place to ask.

The Book, Chapter 7: Of Elves and Dwarves

It is the strangest thing, Elvaethor reflects, that both times he has interacted intensively with other races, it has been the result of the marriage of a dwarvish male to a mannish female. He ought to have learned his lesson from the first couple, from Dari and Inga. He knows the friendship can't last for long, knows that both will inevitably die while he will live on, indefinitely if battle doesn't claim him. He ought to have learned his lesson then and he really thought he had. After he had been too late to save Inga's life when she died in childbirth and incapable of convincing Dari that there were still things to live for even after his beloved's demise, he turned his back and fled back into the forest of his people. He hasn't left the woods since. The short trips to the town of Esgaroth hardly count, for he avoids contact with the men there, only speaks to them about business and then he is gone again. It works well for several centuries.

Yet here he is.

There is something about these two that would have drawn his eye even if Gandalf had not asked of him to watch out for them. They have something he has not seen in a very long time and he finds it hard to put his finger on it. And for a few days the answer keeps eluding him. Not so when he sees them stand before his king, both of them bound, but far more alive than any other in the hall. They are alive and they are fighting, for their quest and for one another and in doing so, they make Elvaethor's people pale in comparison.

It's something he has always missed in his own people, long before he could even identify what it
even was he was missing. He loves his people, for they are wise in many things and even-tempered. At times it seems as though nothing can rile them, nothing can snap them out their serene sense of just being, never changing, never growing. They used to, Elvaethor remembers a time when they did, back when the world was young. But those times are long gone and his people have sunk into complacency. It was his disapproval of that and the longing for something more that had catapulted him into the lives of Dari and Inga in the first place. It had been wonderful and he had been honoured to be their friend, but the hurt when they passed on had been more than he thinks he can bear a second time.

And still, here he is.

Maybe it is because Thorin Oakenshield reminds him of Dari, in both looks and character. The dwarf has made no secret of his dislike for his captors and the captain of the guard in particular, but then, Dari needed some time to see beyond his prejudices too. Elvaethor is prepared to wait. He shouldn't be getting attached, because Thorin is on a mission to reclaim his Mountain from a dragon. Certain death is lying ahead. It cannot end well.

And still, he is not running.

Because then there's Catherine – or Kate, as she prefers to be called, he later learns – who is nothing like Inga, who is loud-mouthed where his friend was soft-spoken, who is abrasive and angry where Inga was gentle and content, who is grey-eyed and red-haired where she was blue-eyed and fair-haired. They could not be more different, but yet they are alike as well. Both have given up everything in order to be where they ended up being. Both have more loyalty than could be found in all of Mirkwood and Elvaethor is blown away in awe once more.

He knows he won't be running.

And so he sets them free, against his king's wishes, against his orders and against his better judgement. He knows where they will go and he knows they are walking towards their own deaths, but he cannot let them end in a cell in Thranduil's dungeons. They shine too brightly for that. He does not lie to Kate – the name still tastes foreign on his tongue, but it suits her well – when he tells her that her story is worthy of song, worthy of a far better ending than they will have here. She does not believe him. Truth be told, Elvaethor doesn't think she likes him much better than her husband does. It should dissuade him from getting any more involved than he already is.

Instead he is drawn to the two like a moth to a flame.

It is mere coincidence that on his way towards Erebor he passes close to the graves of the two people whose memory he honours by running after the two who so remind him of them. He has never been here after he buried Dari with his own hands. He remembers how little the body weighed when he laid him to rest in the cold and unyielding winter ground. He remembers how Dari's face had finally reflected a peace he hadn't seen since Inga's death. Despite being created by two different Makers, Dari had never doubted for even a moment he would find his wife again beyond the veil of death. For that matter neither did Elvaethor, but it had not eased the insistent ache in his chest and neither had it consoled the two young children standing quietly in the background while their father was buried by elven hands. Tilly, the girl and the eldest, a mere seven years old stood still as a statue, her brother's little hand in hers and the baby in a basket by her feet. The boys had not even been old enough to understand what had happened and Elvaethor had been unable to offer much in the way of comfort. As it was, he could barely see beyond his own grief. And so he had escorted them to a sister of Inga's willing to take them in and he had left, swearing never to return.

But here he is again.
'I beg your forgiveness,' he says. 'I failed them and I wronged you.' The eyes of Inga's statue, the one made by Dari's own loving hands, look at him in silent reproach. There is no statue of her husband. Elvaethor should have done something about that, but he hasn't. It's one more wrong that he will have to right. Still, Elvaethor does not need a physical reminder of his friend's face. He is an elf; he has perfect recall. And if Dari were here now, he would tell Elvaethor to stop dwelling on the past and do something useful about the future. As it happens, Elvaethor intends to do just that. 'I will look better after these two, Valar willing,' he continues. 'They remind me of you. They shine so very brightly and yet they do not realise it themselves. Their song deserves a better ending than the sad one you were given.' It has nothing to do with politics, nothing to do with favours granted to wizards and nothing to do with the elusive "Right Thing" and the more elusive "Greater Good." He has seen something he long thought lost and it is filling him with fire and purpose more than it did in those days long since gone. He is not ready to lose it again. 'Forgive me. I shall do better,' he vows.

This time, he won't turn tail and run.

And they are magnificent. He barely makes it inside the Mountain in time to witness Smaug's final moments. The dragon does not notice him and neither do any of the dwarves or the invisible hobbit. He watches and admires and something tugs at his heart, growing stronger with every breath he takes. He admires Thorin's courage and the way Kate takes charge in the aftermath. It does not matter that she snaps at him for making himself at home on the throne – in hindsight not his best move – or when Thorin grumbles at him. They live and they remind him so much of that other couple it is almost a physical ache. But they live, they have a future. Investing in friendship seems like a real possibility. Something changes and he fears that this time is more permanent than it ever was with Dari and Inga.

Even if he wanted to, he doesn't think he can run.

Of course it is never simple and he finds that very soon Erebor is under siege. And the more he learns, the less he thinks his people have the right of it in this conflict. His king ought not to be there, demanding gold and riches, and the dwarves ought not to be trapped inside their own Mountain. So it is without remorse that he makes the trek up the Mountain to the side door every other day to deliver the food that will keep Thorin's company alive long enough until such time that a satisfactory solution can be found. And it gives him time to get to know the one half of the couple that so intrigues him. Kate is wary and suspicious at first, but as time passes she opens up and they talk.

It fills a void in Elvaethor's heart he was barely aware existed. He has always been friendly with his peers, but he never found the kind of friendship among them that he needed, that he still needs. Among his own people he has always been the odd one out, the one that never truly fit in. He doesn't here either, but this is one misfit finding friendship with another, kindred spirits if you like. He hasn't quite realised how much he has missed conversations like these since Dari until he found them anew. *I could have told you that a whole lot sooner, my elvish fool of a friend.* He lets the memory of Dari into his mind and for the first time in centuries he doesn't shy away from the pain and the cascade of bittersweet memories it unleashes.

Of course, he might jeopardize the friendship by borrowing Kate's book and reading it. It leaves him stunned, with more questions than answers. And maybe it is for the better that he brings it up in the middle of a battle, because else she might have bitten his head off. But she confirms what he was thinking but would have thought impossible: she hails from another world. If he did not admire and respect her before, he does so now. And he fears it may well be irreversible.

When she calls him *my friend* in the aftermath of the battle, he knows it is. She has indicated she
counts him a dear friend before, but to hear it so casually spoken, as if it is the most natural thing in the world when it is anything but, that warms his heart.

He knows that it cannot last forever, he knows that both Thorin and Kate will inevitably die while he must live on indefinitely. He ought to have learned his lesson with Dari and Inga.

Yet here he is.

The area around the Mountain does not look much more inviting than it did a year ago, but the winter snows are early this year and give the land a gentler look. It is for the better in Elvaethor's opinion. No matter how old he will become, battles never become any easier. They weigh heavily on his soul, more so with each passing century.

But it is good to be back. It has taken him a year to find his way back and while it is nothing more than the blink of an eye for his kind he knows that it is not so for other races. And many things have changed.

'Hello there, stranger.' Kate smiles when he's granted entrance to the royal apartment. He hasn't told anyone of his coming, so she has not been expecting him. Truth be told, he was not sure that his duties would allow him time to come until the very last moment. Thranduil has kept him busy this past year, no doubt in an attempt to create some distance between himself and some of his so-called questionable acquaintances. If not for his sister's invaluable help, he might not have found the time at all. 'Good to see you again.' He finds himself caught in a welcoming embrace and for a moment it reminds him so much of Dari, his eyes burn.

But he is firmly back in control of himself when she lets go of him and he manages a sincere smile. 'And you, my lady.' He lifts her hand and presses a kiss on it.

Kate grimaces. 'That is not my name, Elvaethor. No titles among friends, please. It's bad enough I can't seem to break Lufur of the habit. Don't make me go through it all with you as well.'

'Very well, my Lady Kate,' he says. He is teasing her, but it is done in good humour and he knows she will take it as such.

Indeed the corners of her mouth do curl up. 'Not a bad start, I suppose. Take a seat. Can I offer you something to drink? You see,' she continues, throwing in a mischievous smile and a wink for good measure, 'this time I am actually capable of offering you a refreshment you hadn't had to bring yourself to my doorstep first.'

He laughs at that. 'I would appreciate that,' he says honestly.

'It's the least I can do,' Kate points out. 'After everything you did for us. I wouldn't even know where to start paying you back for all the risks you took on our behalf.'

'There is no need,' Elvaethor reminds her. Already she has started to take on dwarvish mannerisms, forever insisting that one service should be rewarded with another. He remembers that from Dari too. And then Inga would tell them what he will tell his new friend now. 'It was done in service to a friend. It does not require payment in either gold or favour.'

She hands him a cup of steaming tea, over which she raises an eyebrow at him. 'Well, it may not have occurred to you, but sometimes one wants to do something in return, you know, because they are friends. It shouldn't become one-sided.'
Stubborn as a dwarf too. There is not much of Inga in her – except for that loyalty of hers that will never cease to amaze and humble him – but so much of Dari. He knows they are not the same and Kate could never replace his old friend – nor would he want her to – but there are so very many similarities.

Some of his emotions must finally have made it onto his face, because Kate's face sets to frowning. 'Is something wrong?' she asks.

'Just memories, my Lady Kate,' he replies. When she doesn't appear satisfied with this answer, he adds: 'You remind me of a dwarf I once knew. You and he are in your ways remarkably alike.'

Now she understands. 'Dari, right?'

He nods. 'Indeed.'

Because he has known her for a while, he knows that she tends to make light of situations that involve unpleasant emotions. He expects her to do so now. 'Tell me about him?' She doesn't.

Elvaethor blinks and for the first time in a long while, he is rendered speechless.

Of course, Kate misinterprets. 'Tell you what, I'll swap you. A story for a story. I owe you mine anyway.'

As a matter of fact, he had wanted to know. The mystery of her has kept him wondering, although he had assumed – correctly, as it turns out – that Gandalf has played some part or other in the matter of her coming to this world. He listens in astonishment as her tale unfolds, a tale of magic and books and finding home in the most unexpected of places. A tale of struggle and heartbreak and fights that will, he is sure, be remembered for ages to come. It's the tale of a quest the like of which he did not expect to find in the world today.

So in return he tells her of Dari and Inga. He doesn't tell her the tale as it is told by the people of the Lake and Dale, but tells her of his own memories, ashamed though he might be of his own conduct, especially after their passing. He doesn't hide behind smiles and word games, not now. It is not a novel experience – he has done this before – but it feels like one all the same.

'You really are the odd one out, aren't you?' Kate remarks when his tale has been concluded. She doesn't give him a chance to reply, before she continues: 'Well, just so you know, we'll keep a room ready for you in case you need a place to crash.'

He cannot stop smiling even if he would want to.

He doesn't.

Dwarves don't have a particular love for outsiders, but among the members of Thorin's company he is at least tolerated. Kate's oldest brother is none too fond of him – but then, it appears he is none too fond of anyone who isn't close kin – but the other two slowly warm to him, especially Ori. Bofur is the first one to invite him over and to teach him a game of cards he doesn't know. It's from Glóin he learns that he has in fact acquired a nickname. Apparently they call him the Insect, for he is like one in so many ways: he is buzzing around their heads, driving them crazy, inducing the urgent need to squash it and always just out of reach. Had he not had previous experience with dwarves, he might have been insulted. He might still have been, had Kate not interjected: 'Not that we'd want to be rid of you, mind. You're one of our heroes.'
And so he doesn't run.

Or, in fact, he does, but he is not running back towards Mirkwood. He is running towards Erebor whenever he can. His king doesn't like it and his peers do not understand it. They wonder why he would willingly seek out the company of dwarves. They are too rowdy, too crude, too blunt. They lack in wisdom and grace. And they do. Elvaethor does not deny that their blunt honesty does take some getting used to, but when he does, it is like a breath of fresh air through a dusty cupboard. And while the wisdom they possess is nothing like his people's, it's wisdom all the same. It is simpler, more use in everyday life and dwarves don't hold with abstract concepts. They are too practical for that.

The first time the combined force of Bofur and Bombur convinces him to attend a dwarvish celebration, one in honour of the birth of Thorin and Kate's second son, he is overwhelmed by the noise. Dwarves are having shouted conversations everywhere, there is a food fight going on somewhere to his left and the whole thing is topped off by the loud music that serves as general background noise. It's an assault on all his senses and his first instinct is to turn tail and find a quiet corner, but Bofur's grip is quite strong and he is led into the chaos all the same. And then there is just no leaving. Nori shoves a plate in his direction, Lufur engages him in conversation and Thora drags him to the floor for a dance. To his own surprise he finds he does enjoy himself. Naturally he does prefer music that isn't played at headache inducing volume, and he could have done without being pelted with potatoes, but no elven party he has ever attended has made him smile like this one has.

So the next time Lainor accuses the dwarves of being noisy and crude and blunt, he quite agrees. They are. 'But they enjoy life,' he says. The words do not suffice. To truly comprehend the meaning one has to have been there. And he cannot see Lainor willingly step foot inside the Mountain. Nor does Elvaethor want him to.

Slowly but surely the room Kate has offered him is starting to show signs of being lived in. He keeps some of his clothes there for ease of use. There isn't any point in carrying them to and fro every time he visits and by now he has accepted that he does a lot of visiting. There are some books on the desk as well and some other personal belongings. On the other hand, his quarters in Mirkwood look decidedly emptier these days.

Valar be praised that Thranduil has quite given up trying to keep him within his boundaries. He did try, the first three years or so. But there isn't anything that is really keeping Elvaethor there. Tauriel is captain of the guard now and there is not much call for more guards. The threat of spiders and orcs is much abated. He finds himself without a purpose in the land he used to call his home. He finds he is not even all that welcome anymore, not so long as he does not give up his friendships in the Kingdom under the Mountain. His people think him unreliable. They do not trust him not to choose the side of the dwarves again in the case of a potential future conflict. Elvaethor cannot in truth assure them that their fears are unfounded. The price he has paid for helping Thorin and his company is a steep one, yet he cannot bring himself to regret it. His conscience is at peace.

And so he spends more and more time away from home. He visits kin in both Lórien and Rivendell. He even once makes it as far as the Shire, to pay a call to one very flustered Bilbo Baggins, who hardly knows what to make of him or what to do now that he is there. Neither do his relatives and neighbours, but that doesn't stop them from peeking in through the windows to catch a glimpse of him. It is quite the experience, but Elvaethor does not think he will return soon. The Shire will be talking about this for many years. If he were to come back, some of the hobbits might
spontaneously combusted out of sheer shock and excitement. Also, he fears he may have quite
destroyed whatever was left of poor Bilbo's reputation. As Kate phrases it when he tells her of his
travels, 'they won't be calling him respectable ever again now that they have seen with their own
eyes that he keeps the company of elves.'

And it is to Erebor that he returns to tell of his exploits. It is there that he feels he can breathe
freely. It is, he tells Kate on one particular occasion, as if the heart can breathe instead of only the
lungs. His friend accuses him playfully of being a poet in disguise, but by the look in her eyes he
can see that she knows what he means. Like as not, she has experienced the feeling herself.

He does not get the opportunity to ask, for her sons are at his feet, clamouring for stories from their
"Uncle Elf." The name comes from Thoren and dates back to the time he was too young to properly
pronounce his name. Thorin shook his head in disbelief when he first heard it, but he lets it pass
time and again until the lads don't call him anything else.

His relation with the King under the Mountain is still shaky at best. Thorin Oakenshield is slow to
trust and his distrust of elves runs deep. He has good reason to. Elvaethor knows this only too well.
He himself cannot help but feel ashamed of Thranduil's conduct in the wake of Smaug's attack. His
people have not behaved with honour and it is too late to make amends. They would not be
welcome.

Something is about to change, though, because orcs are beginning to roam the area once more and
something has to be done about them. The kings of Erebor and Dale make an alliance to address
the problem. Kate at the time is pregnant again and she does not like the idea of her husband riding
out to battle. It frustrates her even more that she cannot do a single thing. Not that she says as
much. Instead she grumbles about 'bloody orcs' that 'breed like bloody rabbits' and 'can't they just
crawl under a rock and die or something?'

Elvaethor does not know about crawling under rocks, but he knows something has to be done and
there is something he can do to speed up their demise. And so he saddles a horse and announces to
a dumbstruck Thorin that he will ride out with him.

When the King under the Mountain eventually does find his tongue again, he gets nothing but a
brusque 'why?' as a reward for his troubles. It's hardly a secret Thorin does not like him, may not
even fully trust him and somehow it keeps on stinging.

Elvaethor shrugs. 'It is the duty of every sentient being to battle the threat of orcs wherever they
may find it.' It's true enough and he can't stand the sight of the abominations, but it's not the whole
truth. Come to think of it, he might not even truly comprehend his own motives. But explaining
that to Thorin is more of a challenge than Elvaethor can face.

Thorin mutters something almost inaudible about passing on the message to Thranduil, but doesn't
tell him to leave. That in itself is more of a victory than he has achieved with Kate's husband to
date. Back in the day it was Dari he had always felt more of a bond with. Inga had always hovered
in the background, permanently astounded that one of the elven race would even honour them with
a second of his time, never mind coming back again and again. Thorin is like Dari in so many ways
that it sometimes hurts to look at him, but Dari had never felt such deep hatred for elves as Thorin
does. He has good reason to, Elvaethor knows, but the heart still aches.

And for Thorin Oakenshield, nothing but deeds will do. Words are empty, but deeds mean
something. It is a code both Kate and Thorin live by, even though words were Kate's trade once.

'Thanduil is afraid,' Elvaethor explains late at night at a campfire. They are still two days of
marching away from where the scouts claim the foul creatures have their current hideout. There is
'He is afraid of his own shadow,' Thorin scoffs. He doesn't look at Elvaethor as he says it, but he is talking and that is progress indeed.

Elvaethor smiles. 'Not quite,' he says. 'But he has suffered in the past. His father fell in battle with the orcs and he has feared them ever since.' It was no reason to hide behind trees, had never been in Elvaethor's opinion, but it made Thranduil's behaviour make some kind of sense.

The look on Thorin's face says that he too has suffered losses at the hands of orcs and more recent ones at that, yet he will not be found cowering behind the mighty walls of his kingdom. The contempt is written all over his face. 'I see.'

Elvaethor chuckles. 'You do,' he agrees. 'But you do not approve. And neither do I.' It has always been a most frustrating thing how his king plays hide and seek with the orcs, forever hiding behind trees. Of course, the orcs know better than to launch a direct attack, because that Thranduil cannot stand for. But as long as they don't bother the elves, they can pretty much do whatever they want in the area. And if the men or dwarves come knocking, asking for aid, Thranduil sends them away with the excuse that it is not his problem. Elvaethor has recently explained this to Kate and she was quite vocal about it.

Her husband is not so bent on making himself heard, but he doesn't need to. Thorin can communicate with stares and frowns as well as his wife can with words. This time however he makes an exception. 'Indeed. You are here. While your king is not. Those last words he doesn't speak, but Elvaethor hears them all the same.

'So I am,' he agrees and he does not leave. True to his word he makes sure to stay close to Thorin when the fight begins. He takes down an orc that plans to stab the King under the Mountain in the back. He pays for it with a heavily bleeding shoulder wound and a broken leg, courtesy of the first orc he's ever seen wielding a war hammer, but is immensely relieved to find that Thorin has come through the battle with nothing but a few scratches and one cut that needs stitching. Dari was never as reckless as Thorin undoubtedly is and so he knows that Kate was very right to worry about his safety. And that means that Elvaethor has to watch out for him when she cannot, because he is not ready to lose either of them.

He spends the way back to Erebor in a cart with the ill-tempered healer Óin taking care of him. He grumbles and then pretends not to hear Elvaethor's retorts. He's mostly complaining about stubborn elves that refuse to do as they are told and if his patient won't lie still this instant, he will tie him down. Elvaethor knows better than to doubt it.

'What were you doing?' Thorin demands when they make camp one night and Elvaethor has bartered and blackmailed his way out of the wretched cart. The king has found him by the nearest fire. To his utter frustration his leg will not carry him any further. He has to sit down and give it the rest it needs. It will heal faster than any of the dwarves' injuries, but it still needs time. And Elvaethor has little patience for such matters.

'Thorin,' he acknowledges.

The king only scowls at him and repeats the question.

'I watched your back,' Elvaethor replies truthfully. He has. Not because he promised Kate, although he has more than suggested to her that he would see her husband safely home again, but because he cannot bear loss. He knows that it will come one day, but there are decades yet in which they ought to be alive. Not yet, not yet. There is time still. And he will see to it that those years will be
filled with life.

It is not answer enough for Thorin. 'Why?'

Maybe spending so much time with dwarves is starting to rub off on him, because he answers directly: 'Because you are worthy of life.' And because Kate is as well. And without him, he doesn't know how long she will survive. Thorin is all that keeps her in this world. He anchors her here.

Thorin does not contradict him, but neither does he agree. 'Kate tells me this is not the first time you've spent time with my kind.'

The change of subject is abrupt, but Elvaethor goes with it. 'Yes,' he says. 'Dari,' he adds. The name of his old friend is still not spoken without waking grief and regret anew, but he can bear speaking of him now. It gets easier too. 'I considered him a close friend.'

Thorin doesn't ask how the tale ends. Like as not he already knows. Thorin and Kate do not generally keep secrets from one another. In fact, she has asked his permission to share his story with her husband, so Thorin might have known for years.

'You were a fool for endangering your life,' Thorin says brusquely. Elvaethor has the uncomfortable feeling that Thorin knows exactly why he acted as he had on the battlefield. That he doesn't say so in so many words means nothing. Words are only wind, after all.

'You live,' he points out. 'And so do I.'

Thorin gives a very unsubtle look in the general direction of Elvaethor's leg. 'I see.' He sees more than Elvaethor has told him, that's clear beyond the shadow of a doubt. And yet he does not understand, not fully. Elvaethor would like to keep it that way, because he doesn't think he can bear to have Thorin know of his cowardice when Dari died. He will seek to erase it and he has sworn to do better.

He can only hope that he will be strong enough when the time comes.

He spends little time in Mirkwood in the following years. His stupidity – as both Thorin and Kate refer to it – on the battlefield has won him Thorin's trust and maybe even reluctant friendship. He's been made to feel welcome when he visits. It is not yet the friendship that he enjoyed with Dari, but it may yet become something of the sort. After all, when Kate has a miscarriage three years after Duria is born, it is Thorin who sends the note to Elvaethor that he is needed. It's not a good time. Kate withdraws into herself to grieve and Thorin does not know what to do with both his own grief and hers. Elvaethor feels their pain, but is unable to do much beside sitting with Kate and holding her as she cries. It has been long since he felt this powerless. In the end he has an idea, marches over to Thorin's study and lets himself in before Thorin has told him he can.

'What are you doing here?' the King under the Mountain demands. 'I thought you had devoted yourself to my wife's care.' The accusation is very clear in his voice.

'It is not me she needs,' Elvaethor tells him, bracing himself for the storm of protest he is sure will follow. 'It is you. And you need her.' He curses himself for a fool for not seeing it before. Time has been wasted. 'Go to her.'

True to expectations Thorin's eyebrows make a very threatening move. 'You presume to tell me my
business, elf?"

The derisive elf makes Elvaethor cringe inside, but he presses on. It is not for his own sake that he is doing this. 'I think I do, in this matter. Kate will no more ask for your company than she would ask for an audience with my king, but that does not mean that she does not need it.' He thinks on this for a moment, and then adds: 'Though she does not need an audience with my king.'

Had circumstances been different, Thorin might even have smiled. Now he only looks at Elvaethor with a deep frown etched into his forehead. 'Dwalin has told me the same.' It looks like he's trying to figure out whether or not Dwalin has in fact put Elvaethor up to this.

He hasn't, but it doesn't really matter. 'Then he is wise,' he says. 'And you would do well to heed his words.' Thorin might never act on the words of an elf, but he will listen to his oldest friend.

But maybe, just maybe he has some influence after all. The same hour Thorin gets up and makes his way towards his chambers. He tells Elvaethor to leave and to not disturb them and he exhales in relief.

Still, leaving is hard. And so he stays. He teaches the lads some Sindarin. In later life they might have a need of it and Elvaethor is better qualified to teach it than any other under the Mountain. He experiments with healing techniques with Thora, discusses history with a lively dwarrowdam called Síf and to his own surprise, finds himself sparring with Dwalin one day. He is not quite convinced the dwarf likes him, but he gets the commentary that he isn't half bad afterwards and is invited to a drink with Dwalin and some other dwarves. He makes some new friends that night.

He still travels much and his official home is still in Mirkwood. Thranduil can still command him and does so on occasion. But eventually Erebor calls to him again and he cannot let that call go unanswered. He has felt peace within those walls that has long eluded him. He feels he can laugh without restraint, talk without deceit and breathe without regret. It is not mere happiness he finds there, but a sense of belonging that both elates and frightens him.

He knows it cannot last forever. But he will make it last as long as he can.

And then he nearly loses it long before he is ready. He is in Dale on his king's business when Thorin's note finds him. Kate has gone into labour. You are needed. He knows how bad it is by merely looking at the messenger's face. Never once has he laid eyes on Nori without seeing some kind of mischief in his face. Never once has he laid eyes on Nori without seeing some kind of mischief in his face. There is none now.

He mounts his horse and gallops down the road to Erebor as fast as he can, leaving Nori far behind. His heart thunders and he can't seem to breathe. He does not see the road. He only sees the memories: getting a note in Dari's hand, riding long and hard to make it in time. He had seen Inga alive, but she had been too far gone for him to do anything. He remembers her pale and cold and Dari next to her, devastated. He remembers how that story ended.

Not again, he prays. Please, not again. Please, let her live. Give them more time. Let them not end as my old friends did.

It is a good thing that the horse knows the way, because tears are blurring his vision. And he cannot let them show, he knows this. So he forces his emotions back under control. When he reaches the gates, no one is able to tell he has wept. Ori is the one to welcome him and guide him to where he needs to be.
'Save her,' he tells Elvaethor. It is completely out of character for Ori to give commands of any kind, so it is telling that he does so today.

He doesn't say *I will*, because he cannot give promises he might not be able to keep, but he gives Kate's brother the next best thing. 'I will do all that is in my power,' he vows. *Valar give that it will be enough.*

He knows the moment that he steps into the room that not all is lost. He has not merely arrived in time to be a spectator to her final moments. But he also knows that if nothing is done, she will not live to see another sunset. *Give me strength,* he prays.

And then he sets to work. His first order of business is to remove Dori and his endless fussing from the room. Kate hates that kind of thing, he knows. Thorin's eyes betray his anxiety, but Elvaethor has not the heart to repeat Dori's treatment on him. The day is not yet won and Thorin would never forgive him if he was not here. Neither would Elvaethor forgive himself for that matter.

It is a long day and time ceases to matter as he fights to deliver the children, twins, as he had suspected for some months, and keep Kate alive. And all this time fear clenches its poisonous hand around his heart, whispering of failure, painting him pictures of the aftermath. He is an elf, so he is never cold, but he experiences it today. Fear chills him to the bone, but he cannot let it show.

Thorin is mostly silent, but his face speaks for him. Elvaethor knows the dwarf has known more loss than anybody should ever be forced to endure. He is not sure his heart can recover from even one more. He prays he will not need to find out for years.

The sun has long since set when he knows they are victorious. Kate is pale and exhausted, but she manages a tired smile from over two tiny babes. Thorin is at her side, where he has been all this time, where he will be for a long time. He will not let Kate out of his sight for some time to come yet. Elvaethor can see the relief in his eyes, an emotion so strong that it brings tears to his eyes and he knows that he is very privileged indeed that he is allowed to see it.

'I'm telling you one thing,' Kate says. 'I am *never* doing that again.'

Elvaethor and Thorin exchange a look that Kate doesn't see. *Good,* Elvaethor thinks. *Do not make us go through this again.*

'A wise decision,' he replies.

He only now lets himself feel it, the triumph, the overwhelming relief that this is not the end, that he has not failed twice. He feels both hot and cold at the same time and to his astonishment, he finds that his hands are shaking and that his vision is blurring again. He quickly excuses himself and goes to find a quiet corner where the tears finally overtake him and he weeps his relief. He is unused to such strong emotions, doesn't rightly know what to do with them. Elves feel deeply, but they seldom let those emotions see the light of day. But Elvaethor knows he has never been much like his own people. He feels things differently and, he fears, stronger.

It takes him a long time to realise he is not alone and when he does, he startles. His senses ought to have alerted him to another's presence long ago, especially given the fact that it's his friend Thora who's managed to find his hiding place.

'Don't get up on my account,' she tells him when he makes to move. 'And don't you go trying to hide those tears either.' She hands over a glass. Wine, Elvaethor sees. 'Something to help,' Thora explains. 'Go on, you'll feel better.'
He looks at her with confusion. 'I am not unwell.'

Thora shrugs. 'I know. Does that matter?' She lightly taps his head and then his chest. 'That's where it hurts, right?'

Elvaethor accepts the glass, but doesn't drink yet. 'How do you live?' he asks. 'If even good emotions can hurt. How do you live?' Dwarves, he reckons, must have the answers. From what he has seen of them, they live life to the full. They must therefore be intimately acquainted with both grief and joy.

'Everything hurts when it is too much, friend,' Thora tells him sensibly. 'And you have just given yourself the best medicine there is for such ailments.'

'The wine?' he asks. He hasn't touched it yet.

The young healer rolls her eyes at him. Clearly she thinks this a stupid question. 'Having a good cry,' she clarifies when he remains at a loss for what he means. 'You let it out. Very healthy habit, that. We all know it when we're infants, but then, as we grow older, we seem to forget. Crying helps.'

It's the height of dwarven wisdom. It's the practical kind that Elvaethor so often finds lacking among his own people. He finds himself smiling through the last tears.

'See, you're doing better already,' Thora seems pleased to see it. 'A lot of folk will tell you differently, but there is no shame in tears, tears of joy or tears of sadness. Or, indeed, tears of relief. It's all very natural. Just not for an elf, but then, you're more of a dwarf anyway, aren't you?'

This coaxes the first real laugh of the day out of him. 'Most people would disagree on that matter.'

'Most people are fools,' Thora retorts. 'Come on now, do as you're told by your healer and drink your wine. Then you and I are going to find the rest of my family and you will be celebrating the new prince and princess with us. And I'll not have an argument from you,' she warns when she sees Elvaethor is on the verge of making one. 'I'll not have you be by yourself on such a joyous night. And I have a husband and some brothers by marriage who would be glad of the opportunity to thank you for saving their sister's life.' She gets to her feet and extends her hand to him. 'Come on, you. All is well. You made sure of that. Now come and celebrate.'

'You are a wise healer, Mistress Thora,' Elvaethor says as he lets her help him to his feet. He still is uncertain if the tears are really gone, but he feels that maybe he ought to take the risk. What's one more when he has already risked so much?

She grins. 'And don't you go forgetting it.'

He doesn't.

He thinks long and hard on her words in the years that follow and the conclusion that takes shape in his mind is one that both surprises and not surprises him. He has never looked at the people of Middle Earth in the way Thora clearly does, defining them by personality traits rather than by things like life expectancy, physical features and Maker. To Elvaethor his people were the Firstborn, men the Secondborn, dwarves the children of Aulë, Hobbits something of a big-footed mystery and orcs an abomination. He only now realises that he physically fits in with the Firstborn, but his heart has never been quite like theirs. It's for that very reason he found such friendship in
Dari and Inga. It is the very reason that these days his dwarven friends far outnumber his elven ones.

'Thora can be quite wise when she puts her mind to it,' Kate agrees when Elvaethor finally shares his observations with her some years later. 'You've got the heart of a dwarf, my friend. And it's a thing to be proud of.'

'You and I are much the same, it seems,' Elvaethor remarks.

Kate laughs. 'Quite,' she says. 'Odd though it feels to be saying it. But here we are and look at us, we're dwarves without beards.' She ponders this for a moment and then favours him with an inquisitive look. 'How are you, really? We've had word from Mirkwood that Thranduil is making your life difficult lately.'

'How did you come by that news?' he asks. There are none that he could think of who would send such a note and no dwarves have gone near Mirkwood for a good long while.

'Your sister is concerned for you,' Kate answers. 'She expressed the wish we would look after you.' A smile tugs at her lips. 'And I feel I must warn you, because many of us have taken her words to heart.'

'Then my heart feels lighter already,' Elvaethor says.

The hospitality of the dwarves should be old news by now, but he will never cease being amazed and humbled by it, these friends he never expected to find. Of course, there are still those in Erebor who would feel better if he never darkened their doors again, but their number decreases steadily. Most of them are used to his comings and goings. Many of them are pleased to see his face. And Kate's words move him.

'Then it's true,' she concludes and she is frowning. 'Thranduil is making your life hell again.'

'One day you must tell me what this hell is that you so often speak of,' Elvaethor says. He has wondered many times.

'One day you will stop trying to change the subject.' Kate doesn't miss a beat and she is not to be distracted from this course.

'It does not matter,' Elvaethor assures her. 'I am here now.'

It only angers his friend. 'Well, you weren't a week ago and it does matter to me and your other friends in Erebor. You know, the thing about dwarves is that they don't like it when their friends are mistreated. You are undeserving of any disdain or ill treatment.'

In truth, he is not mistreated as such. But the distrust is palpable and he only gets the most irrelevant chores and duties to complete. He finds that conversations dry up in his presence and people avoid him in the streets. Thranduil, he suspects, does nothing to change this. Elvaethor fears that he might encourage it and even if he does not, then Galas does. And no one will tell him to stop either.

'You are kind,' he says. Kinder than many people he knows, though she hides it well.

She hides it so well that she does not even recognise it herself. 'Well, I've been called many things, but certainly not kind. I'm just calling it like I see it, Elvaethor, and so are a good many others. It's the truth, nothing more or less.'
'I stand by my assessment.' He will not be dissuaded from this.

'Stubborn as a dwarf.' Kate clearly approves. 'You should stay for a while, keep in touch with that loyal dwarven heart of yours. I think you'll find you won't be idle for a good long while. We're good at detaining those we do not wish to leave, you know.'

'I have the utmost faith in that.'

He does not wish to leave.

So he doesn't.

Of course he does not stay indefinitely, but he also finds that when he does go, he cannot bear to be absent for more than a few months altogether. Almost without realising it, he finds he has some duties he cannot forsake for long. No doubt this is the result of some clever planning by some of his friends, but he does not mind. Teaching Sindarin becomes something of an occupation. Thoren and Thráin bring their friends to lessons and then those friends start bringing siblings and more friends until he one day finds he has a whole classroom full of dwarflings on his hands, awaiting his instruction. And when he is not busy teaching – not something he had ever imagined himself doing – Thora or one of her healer friends drags him off to work with them. And he enjoys that too.

His room in Mirkwood is all but empty. There are some trinkets there he does not care for much that remain, and a few clothes, but other than that, all his belongings are in Erebor, where he knows they will be well looked after.

He likes being around to watch Thorin and Kate's children grow up. Thoren comes to him one day, not so much mischief now as in previous days, asking for aid in understanding elven culture as well as the language. If he means to do well in his father's stead one day, he must know such things, he tells Elvaethor. He enjoys teaching the lad. He's a quick study, who maybe does not enjoy learning much, but who is intelligent. It's not long before Duria, the little scholar of the family, starts attending too. With her he has long discussions on the differences between elves and dwarves and their different views on history. Of course Duria leans more toward the dwarven view of the debate, but she never becomes spiteful, like so many others of her kind do.

Thráin he sees a lot of too, but this boy does not ask for Sindarin or history, he asks for the stories of Elvaethor's travels, like he did when he was younger. There is a wanderlust in him that will not be extinguished and before long, he means to take off. Elvaethor goes with him that first, not only to soothe his parents' nerves, but also his own. The wilds are no place for the amateur wanderer, but it soon turns out it's not merely a fancy of Thráin's. He knows what he is about. The next time he goes, he goes unaccompanied and he returns with tales of his own that he takes great delight in telling. Elvaethor in turn takes great delight in listening.

Cathy is always seeking out his company too. She looks like her mother, but younger, and with fewer burdens. There's always a smile to be coaxed out of her; she is hard to anger or sadden. 'She has a gift for contentment,' Kate remarks one day and it is just what it is. It is also very rare. Most people never find it.

Jack certainly does not. He is a happy child, always getting into some kind of trouble with his cousin and best friend Flói. But then he grows and grows and becomes as tall as a man and he begins to understand what people say about him. The careless laughter vanishes and the mischief melts away. Elvaethor sees him change and he does not like what he sees. It worries him deeply to
see such resentment, such deep-seated unhappiness. He knows that it is even harder for Thorin and Kate. And there is not a single thing he can say that can make things better. Jack is the living embodiment of a major consequence that came of the unconventional choice his parents made. He cannot forget it and the world never lets him.

Elvaethor bears witness to it and wonders time and again if it was ever like this for Dari and Inga's children. It's far too late now to find out, even if he should find the courage to do so. Men do not keep such excellent records as dwarves do and what records there were have been destroyed when Dale was laid to waste in Smaug's fire. But he can wonder and he does, thinking. He has made many mistakes in the past. He ought to have been there. He should have spoken words of comfort to Tilly, he should have held Einar as he cried, he should have rocked a fussy Fryr back to sleep. He should not have walked when their parents died. And of course it is easy to say this with the benefits of hindsight. But he also knows he cannot arrive at this conclusion and behave no different when grief will inevitably find him again. And he does not know if he possesses the strength not to run from the heartache.

As it is, the first tendrils of fear make themselves at home. They curl around his heart and squeeze, tighter and tighter as time marches ever on. It turns Thorin's hair grey, leaves wrinkles in Kate's face. The King under the Mountain is still vital, strong as he ever was, despite the grey. The change in Kate is harder to ignore. Sometimes it feels as though he only has to blink and she ages in front of him. The red in her hair fades to silver, slowly but surely, and one day he comes into her study to find she has acquired glasses for reading. 'My eyes aren't as young as they used to be,' she says and she's flippant about it, but Elvaethor finds that words fail him. Dread settles in his stomach.

This is what he always wanted for Thorin and Kate, he knows. He wanted for them to have a full life, filled with joy and laughter and all the good things of life. They have been given that. By some miracle they have survived the most dangerous of quests, the loss of an unborn child and the almost disastrous birthing of the twins. No sickness has put a stain on their lives. They have lived. But as the turn of the millennium grows closer and passes, Elvaethor knows that time is starting to run out.

Thorin knows this too. He never says so, but Elvaethor sees it in his eyes sometimes. He too is measuring time, praying for just that little longer, for just one more day, one more week, one more month, one more year. They have been blessed, but slowly watching as time leaves its mark is an almost greater burden than he can shoulder.

'The two of you are being very silly about it all,' Kate declares one day, a little after Durin's Day of the year 3002 of the Third Age. Elvaethor has come for the celebrations and has decided to stay after. 'I'm getting old, is all. It's the most natural thing in all the world.'

'Not for elves,' Elvaethor reminds her. 'We are unused to such things.'

Kate smiles, eyes twinkling at him from behind her glasses. 'Indeed, my friend. You look exactly like you did when we first met. I can't believe it's been over sixty years now. My, time does fly.'

'It flies too fast,' Elvaethor says. For many of his people sixty years are nothing. For men they are all they have. He knows this, but he cannot let go, not yet. It's too soon, he keeps telling himself. There must be some time left. They cannot have reached the end already.

Kate frowns at him. 'Like I said, you're being very silly about this all. I've had a good life, you know. Ups and downs and everything, but good on the whole. I can't rightly ask for anything else.' She sees in his eyes that he finds that she should and the frown deepens. 'Okay, you listen to me now.' Her stare keeps him silent, though he wishes to protest. 'No, listen. I know that it isn't so for your kind, but it is for mine. We know that one day, we will die. It's the one thing in life we can be
absolutely certain of. So we accept that. We don't accept it if folk die before their time, but when we're old there's a point that we know, it's enough now. It's how we're made, just as you were not made for dying.' She smiles sadly. 'Truthfully, that does sound like hell.'

His head snaps up and he looks at her in astonishment. 'How can you say that?'

The sadness becomes clearer and he almost thinks he can see a measure of pity in her eyes as well. 'Well, we dwarves and men, we grow old and die when our time is up. We know that eventually those we love will do the same and one way or another, we'll find each other again after death. But you have to watch us grow old and die, unable to do anything about it. You just remain while we move on. It seems to me that yours is the crueler fate.'

She has grown wise in her later years and he knows this. It's not the wisdom of his people, but it is wisdom all the same. He can recognise it as such. But at the same time he silently rages against the truth of it. He cannot let go yet. And the way Kate is talking has made the dread return stronger than it has ever been before. It takes him by the throat and squeezes until it feels like he cannot get the air he breathes all the way into his lungs. She is speaking of dying as if she is not worried about it. Even worse, she is speaking of it as though she knows the end is near.

'What will you do?' she asks softly. She has the kindness not to remark on the tears on his face that he cannot contain any longer. 'When we have died, what will you do?'

That her concern is for him and not for herself almost enrages him again, but he fights for control and wins. 'I do not know,' he replies truthfully. Oh, how he wishes to run. But where, he does not know. He has severed the ties to his homeland too thoroughly to ever belong there again, even though not all cords have been cut. There is still something calling him there from time to time. But those bonds are not strong enough to prevent him from drifting when Erebor no longer holds appeal to him. And he dare not think about it too long.

'Well, if you won't have too many pressing demands on your time, maybe you could keep an eye on my offspring, pop by every once in a while.' The suggestion is made in a gentle way that is not much like her. Kate generally barrels on with the determination and devastation of a stone avalanche, without much care for the reactions and opinions of others. That has little changed. It's only for those she truly cares for that she makes the effort. Elvaethor feels honoured knowing himself among their number. 'Maker knows they need looking after.'

It's as if he was dying of thirst in a southern desert and she has given him water. With a few words he knows what he will do, what he must do, what he always had to do. With a few words she has told him that he cannot run, that he will need to do better this time. This is his chance for redemption, a chance to set right what had been done wrong in the past. Not that she knows any of this. Elvaethor is well aware that she would disagree with his interpretation of her words, quite loudly too if he knows her at all. She has never agreed with his assessment of his own conduct after Dari and Inga.

So he tells her nothing of it. 'I swear to you that I will not abandon them,' he vows.

Kate arches an eyebrow in a way she must have learned from her husband. 'There is really no need to be so formal about it, Elvaethor,' she says. She sounds mildly suspicious. She has every right to be.

'There is,' he disagrees and then attempts to explain it: 'You've given me a gift, Kate. I must not allow myself to waste it.'

Elvaethor thinks she understands more than she says, because there is a distinct lack of objections.
There is understanding in her eyes. 'I am not Inga,' she reminds him instead. 'And Thorin is not Dari. Our children are grown. They can fend for themselves. I would just rest easier knowing there is someone keeping an eye on them, especially considering the days that are still to come. And they cannot be very far from us now.'

They have touched upon the subject before and Elvaethor is well aware that she knows of events that must still come to pass. She is careful with her knowledge and rightly so. All Elvaethor knows is that somewhere in her world, there is another book and it describes the fate of this world, of things that must still happen.

'When they come, I will be here,' he promises.

She smiles. 'That does put my heart at rest,' Kate says.

Elvaethor feels marginally better for having done so.

But the fear persists.

And he knows soon enough that he has been very right in doing so. It's only a fortnight later when a note in Thráin's hand finds him in Dale. Elvaethor has been there for only half a day to deliver some documents to the court of King Bain of Dale. The mannish town is close enough that he felt secure enough to leave for the day.

He has been wrong in doing so, for while he had woken at dawn, the eyes of his dearest friend never opened again.

The news finds him in the crowded marketplace and for once he does not care that all those around him can see his grief. It hits him like a sledgehammer to the chest, leaving him with a gaping but invisible hole in his chest, unable to breathe. If not for the steady hand of Flói, he would have crumbled to the ground. The pain is as raw and overwhelming as it had been centuries ago. It's no easier to endure the second time. One might even say it is even harder, for he has had months to imagine just how bad it will be. And now that the moment has arrived at last, he knows that nothing could ever have prepared him for the pain that strikes him out of nowhere and consumes his soul.

The sound that comes from his mouth is almost animalistic, but he is only vaguely aware of people backing away in shock. Never before has an elf cried such tears over the loss of a mortal friend and the sight must be startling if nothing else. Elvaethor finds that he does not care for their thoughts. There is no room for that.

Flói escorts him back to the Mountain, quiet all that time. Elvaethor is more grateful than he can say. Words would mean nothing now. There are none that can ease the pain, none that can make him feel better. He knows the end of an age has come and he cannot help but mourn its passage. Too soon. It is still too soon. Knowing that Kate herself had made peace with it does not help him. Neither does it help Thorin. The King under the Mountain does not speak. He has withdrawn into himself, but Elvaethor knows this look. He has seen it before, he has lived this story before. He will not linger here long. With astounding certainty Elvaethor knows that Thorin Oakenshield will not live to see another summer. Nor does he want to.

Kate is lying on the bed, pale and cold. Her eyes are closed, as if in sleep. But there is no more breath in her body and Elvaethor knows that her spirit has fled. Thráin's note had said that she had
passed on in her sleep. It must have been peaceful; it is reflected on her face. There are no more fights to fight, not for her. Her cares have fallen away.

'Farewell,' he speaks softly. 'Farewell, my friend. Thank you for shining so brightly.' He has never spoken those words while she lived and he knows he should have. 'You will be greatly missed.' He presses a kiss to her forehead that she does not feel anymore.

Thorin has watched him throughout, without speaking. The grief in his eyes is more intense than Elvaethor can face for long. The end is written in them, more plainly than it could have ever been written in words. Looking at that feels like being stabbed in the chest over and over again and so he is quick to look away.

No words are spoken. For just once, dwarf and elf understand each other perfectly.

It's not until days later that he finally finds a way to express his heartache. He stands on the mountainside and the words come to him in his own tongue, carried on a melody that he knows he will remember for all his long years, but that he will never sing again. He remembers Thora's advice from years back to let the emotions flow freely, because it is the best medicine she knows. It aids him not.

His heart yearns for rest, yearns for fresh air and home. But Elvaethor does not know where home is anymore and though he wishes for peace, he finds none of it. How can it, when the tale is not completed just yet? And he knows that it must end, will soon end. Thorin Oakenshield has not smiled since that day, nor will he again in life.

Elvaethor does not leave. He must see this through to the bitter end. He has made a promise and he will see it upheld. And when it all draws to the close, there are five good reasons not to run. He promised their mother. But Valar give him strength, he does not know how well he will do. Not well, as it turns out. Barely four months have passed when he is fetched just after dawn by Lufur. The guardsman's solemn expression tells him the news he knows had been coming. Four months only. Dari lasted for two more before he followed his wife into the grave. And he wore the same expression Thorin wears now: peace. The King under the Mountain knew where he was heading. There is a quiet reassurance in that, but Elvaethor can barely feel it for all the pain in his soul.

It's as he tells a mourning Duria. 'He died when Kate passed on. His mind only needed a little more time to catch up to where his heart had already gone.' He knows this like he knows that the sun will rise in the east and will set in the west. It's a truth he cannot deny. But now he also knows that there is such a thing as a hard truth. He is forced into accepting it, but he does not do so willingly. But he knows that in the end there was never any choice. His will cannot keep them here. In truth, he never truly wished for Thorin to linger long after Kate's demise. It would have been a cruel and selfish wish.

And so he only feels empty, standing in front of the tomb long after everyone else has gone back inside after the funeral. He has no wish for company or food. It's solitude he requires now. He cannot accept the sympathy of others yet. Their consolations would be meaningless and he would not accept them with the grace that is expected of him. And so he is here, on his knees. He has tried to remain on his feet, but his feet refuse to obey his will. The weight of his sorrow is pressing him down and crushing his heart between cold fingers. There is a finality to the closed tomb. The story has ended and he experiences loss for the second time in his long life. And even though he begs for respite when his weeping allows him air to do so, he knows it is futile. He cannot make
time turn back on itself and return his friends to him.

The only reason that he is not running – and a destination no longer seems to matter as long as it is far away from this place of grief – is that oath he swore to his friend. He will not break it. It is the very last thing he can do to honour her memory. And he means to honour it, not shame it.

He is chilled to the bone and weary with sorrow, but Elvaethor does not run.

He has always known that this friendship could not last forever, has always known that both Thorin and Kate will inevitably die while he must live on indefinitely. He ought to have learned his lesson with Dari and Inga.

Still, here he is.

Chapter End Notes

I think this was one of the hardest pieces I've ever written, which is why it has taken so long to finish this, but I'm actually quite pleased with the result. And I hope you are too.

Reviews would be most welcome. I would love some feedback on this. Did you love it, hate it? Let me know. And as always, thank you for reading!
Family Visit AU Part 4: Reunion

1. *the act or process of coming together again*

2. *the state or condition of having been brought together again*

3. *a gathering of relatives, friends, or former associates*

Dictionary . com

'He's what?'

At this point it hardly occurred to Kate that there were other people in the room, one of whom was her daughter and she shouldn't be taught every foul word in the book. But Maker help her, was she tempted! What in the world was her brother thinking? When did he get the wool pulled over his eyes so far? Of course, it was old news that John Andrews had charm in spades and he never hesitated to use it. But especially Jacko should know better. He ought to have seen through that.

Jacko himself remained infuriatingly calm. 'On his way.'

'Yes, I got that. What I didn't get is the why.' Over the years she had forgotten how annoying he could be sometimes. She wasn't quite considering fratricide yet, but good grief, did he have to be such a fool? When it came to their father, it had always been Kate who had been gullible and forgiving, never Jacko.

'He wants to see you.'

'Well, isn't that nice for him.' Sarcasm had always served her well and it was by far the better alternative. Else she might resort to banging Jacko's ignorant head against a wall. 'Is he going to bring his little trophy wife and her son as well, you know, just to rub our noses into the fact that apparently he can do the whole perfect family routine as long as it's not with us?'

The words were falling out of her mouth and she wasn't even entirely sure how they just kept flowing and flowing when she didn't even know herself what she was going to say a second in advance. But of course it was true, all of it. And the resentment she thought had at least started to fade had proved to be as alive as it had ever been. It was boiling, growing like a cancer till she could almost feel it as bile at the back of her throat. And Jacko was in the forgiving mood, maybe had been for years?

*What the hell has happened here?*

Jacko glared at her. 'That isn't fair.'

'Isn't it?' Maker help her, her hands were actually shaking. She couldn't even define the emotion that made them do that. 'He carried on for years with Miss Goldilocks, whatever her name is…'
'Audrey,' Jacko supplied. 'And I know.'

Kate snorted. 'Do you?' She only had to close her eyes to remember everything: the shocked look in the woman's eyes when she realised her perfect husband had children from his former marriage, the damned necklace around her neck. 'He must have had his affair with her from the time we were about six, maybe even before.' And I helped him keep his dirty little secret, even if I didn't know I was doing it. Even now, the thought still made her sick. 'Whatever you think he deserves, my forgiveness isn't on that list.'

'He has changed,'

And the prize for lamest excuse in the universe goes to… 'How many times have you actually known that to happen?' she questioned. 'People never change.' And she rather thought she was in a better position than most to have an opinion on that matter. 'And even if he's somehow managed to not screw up his second marriage, that doesn't change things for us, does it?' She had made that decision to never let that man back into her life again. She had actually decided to let this whole visit pass without seeing him. Let him think she was dead. Kate couldn't care less about his feelings, hurt or otherwise. Look how that's turning out. You haven't even been back twenty-four hours.

'Just let him say sorry, Kate.' Jacko sounded tired, but then, foregoing a good night's sleep would do that to a body.

'So he did say sorry. I did wonder.' She clenched her hands into fists. That way nobody would notice the shaking.

'Bloody hell, Kate!' Jacko was getting agitated. 'You weren't really going to go back without at least letting him know you are alive, were you?'

'Oh hell, yes.' There was only sense in such a course of action; at least she wouldn't get arrested for assault.

'That's cold, Kate, even by your standards.'

She turned on her heel and left. The accusation stung, even more so because she knew that she was being just as cold as her brother accused her of being. But she couldn't face it. That man had made a waking nightmare of their lives for years and Kate did never too well in the whole forgive and forget department. Even these days, when she had so many other things to have bad dreams about, he still popped up every now and then, making her feel small, vulnerable and so, so alone. Thorin, bless him, had always held her afterwards, never saying a word. He didn't need to. He understood.

She found her way into the backyard purely on instinct. When looking back on it later, she couldn't even remember the process of getting there, which was bad news. Her hands were shaking and to her utter frustration her vision was getting blurred. Oh, for Durin's sake, no tears. He isn't bloody worth it, Andrews.

The distance helped a little, but not much. Her father was still looming over her like a guillotine and she couldn't exactly get out of here either. But dear Maker, did she want to run. And technically she could. She had a fairly good idea where the car keys were kept. She could take them, rush out, start the car and drive until the world made sense again. Until she felt safe again.

Give me another Battle of the Five Armies any day. It had not felt as threatening as the prospect of coming face to face with her father again. Orcs after all could only kill her. And right this moment it felt as if she was under attack.
'Kate, are you well?'

Thorin had the uncanny gift to know exactly when she needed him to show up. And right now, she needed him.

Of course, saying so was still so much of an effort. 'You do love stupid questions, don't you?' *Hold me, just hold me now. I cannot do this. I don't know how.* The words were so simple, so why was speaking them such a challenge? Or was it just that the pattern of not talking about feelings was so hard to break? Kate couldn't tell and right now really couldn't be bothered to analyse the situation either.

Thorin must have turned into a mind reader overnight, though. The next thing she knew his arms were wrapped tightly around her and as if by magic, the fight went right out of her. Words were unneeded, which was probably a good thing. There was nothing either of them could say that would make it any easier. This was happening and running was not going to happen.

'Do you need any assistance?' Thorin asked at last when the embrace ended.

'Other than your sword, you mean?' She knew it had been a good idea to leave that behind in Erebor. 'I don't know,' she admitted. 'I don't bloody know, Thorin. I haven't even seen the man since I was about seventeen. I didn't think I ever would again. I didn't think I would even want to. I don't want to,' she corrected herself. 'I just wanted to put it behind me.'

Of course, she never had, else why would she still have those dreams on occasion? Wanting something was not the same thing as getting it. If there was anyone who ought to know that by now, it was her.

'You get a chance to set things right.'

Thorin's words took her by surprise, just for a moment. Of course he would look on it like that. They never had a very long conversation about their fathers, but Kate had figured out over time that Thorin always regretted not getting the opportunity to say goodbye properly. Thráin had just given up, had just disappeared. In some way, Kate's father had done the same, but he had never been able to plead madness as an excuse.

'To say goodbye at the very least.' And bloody hell, when had he become so understanding?

'I don't know how,' she confessed. 'I don't… That man is *poison*, Thorin.' And the thought of him coming here frightened her. She did not want him near her life, near her husband and children. They had always been blessedly free of him, but now he would infect their lives as well.

*Okay, and now you're exaggerating.* Deep down she could admit that, she could admit that she was not being rational, but fear never was anyway. And even now, she couldn't fathom just why she was so scared of him.

*Maybe it's because you know he still has the capacity to hurt you, Andrews, even after all these years. You never really let him go, not entirely.*

'He hurt us all so much and now Jacko's gone and made peace with him and I don't rightly understand any of it.' Her hands had started shaking again. 'I can't even guarantee I won't punch him in the nose when I see him.'

'He must have earned it then,' Thorin observed.

'You don't know half of it,' she muttered bitterly. 'I just…' *I just don't want to see him. I just don't*
want to be hurt again. I just want to pretend none of it ever happened. She took a deep breath. 'Can you tell me, if it was your father who was going to walk through that door, what would you do?' Any insights he might have to offer would be more than welcome.

He shook his head. 'I do not know.'

If flippancy were an option, she might have said something along the lines of well, that's helpful. But this was not the time or place for banter. There was too much hurt involved for that, on both sides. She thought that he maybe even envied her for a chance to do the very thing he had been denied. Of course, had he come face to face with Thráin, there was no telling if it would have ended in a giant row or not, but he craved the opportunity all the same. We always want what we can't have. And isn't that the story of my life?

'Neither do I.' The tension piled up, making her nauseous, as nerves always did. Breakfast would be out of the question now; she wouldn't be able to swallow it down. 'Couldn't he have just asked? Jacko, I mean. What the hell was he thinking, springing this on me?'

For once, Thorin was the most sensible of the two of them. 'He knew you would refuse.'

'He didn't want to give me the chance to run,' she corrected. 'Apparently it's what I am good at.'

She was not usually like this and she wasn't being fair on anyone, including herself, but she couldn't think straight. Bloody hell, when was the last time she had been so terrified she couldn't even think? Possibly a rough eight years ago. There had been times when she felt like that, her heart racing out of control, her stomach in knots of tension and hands shaking with… well, fear would be the word.

'You do not run,' Thorin told her and for a moment she was taken back, back on the quest and to many an argument with the stern leader she'd been forced to work with who, as she had come to know, had a way all his own to reassure the people around him.

'That doesn't mean that I don't want to,' Kate said. If she had been the same Kate as the Kate of ten years ago, she would have been out of town already. Now there were too many people keeping her here. 'But I can't let him anywhere near the kids. I don't really want him near you either if I'm honest.' The good parts of her life should stay separate from those parts she would pay good money to forget.

He understood. 'Do you want me to stay away?' It must have cost him tremendous effort to ask, to put her wishes before his own. Kate knew that he hated having to stand on the side-lines while she did all the hard work. It went against his very nature to let her struggle on her own. He'd fight my battles for me if I'd only let him.

'No,' she said. Maybe some part of her wanted him to keep out of it. Mahal help her, she would stay out of it if only she could. But she couldn't and she couldn't see a way through this on her own either. Time to start being brave, Andrews. You might as well admit it. 'I need you there.' There, she'd said it. Those words did not come easy to her, but she felt better for saying them. 'I can't do this alone.'

Sometimes it was just so nice to be married to someone who understood exactly what she was talking about, because he was wired the same way. Thorin would know how much effort it took to admit that this was one battle she was unable to fight all by herself. Good grief, how she hated having to ask for help.

He simply held her again and it was enough, to know that she had him watching her back. They
both knew that he could not take on her father in her stead, but he would be there. It brought back the memory of what she had told her mother the previous night. He's there. He's always going to be. There was a quiet reassurance just in knowing that. She did not think she could ever have married anyone who would not always be there.

'Found them!' Thoren exclaimed, disturbing the moment. 'They're hugging,' he added to whoever it was he was making his report to. He was obviously slightly uncomfortable with that. 'Oh, and now they're kissing!

So they were. Thorin pressed a quick kiss to her mouth and then another to her forehead, smiling. Sneaky little so-and-so. You wouldn't know it to look at him, but Thorin was really not above gently provoking folk for the sake of his own amusement if he was in a good mood.

'All done now, sweetheart. You can open your eyes.' Kate chuckled in spite of herself when she noticed her eldest. He had made a show of turning his face towards the wall, holding his hands in front of his eyes. She turned back to her husband. 'Thank you,' she said softly.

He nodded. 'You can do this,' he told her. The conviction in his voice took her somewhat by surprise.

Kate arched an eyebrow as she lifted her son up. 'You seem certain.'

Thorin smirked. 'Aye, I am. For there are no rivers nearby for you to throw him in.' He gave her a pointed look. 'And your friend is not wrong; you do well in conflicts.'

To this she had to put up an argument for the sake of argument. 'Maybe,' she said. 'But I do not thrive on them.'

Thorin was wise enough not to point out that this was not entirely true.

Either way, he would not have had much time to do so, because Kate suddenly realised that there had been a spectator to the private moment she'd shared with her husband. Inquisitive green eyes from under a mop of curly grey hair had been watching their every move through the window. Kate could read the shock in those eyes and something else that she could not quite define. In anyone else she would have called it sadness, but this was John Andrews.

She all but froze. It was only remembering that her son was here that kept her grounded. 'Dearest, why don't you run back inside and find your brother? I'll be a while.' She did not want her children anywhere near that man.

Thoren hadn't noticed his grandfather. 'Not kissing?' he asked suspiciously.

Kate snorted. 'Not kissing,' she assured him. Punching would be more like it. Maker knew she wanted to. Either that or make a run for it. And a run was quite out of the question.

Thoren did as he was told. Kate and Thorin followed after him at a slightly slower pace. She had never been more grateful than when his hand found hers and held onto it. She was nowhere near ready for that and while Thorin's faith in her was comforting, it did not make her share his confidence. She, unlike Thorin, knew what that man was capable of. And she knew her own weaknesses well enough. Of course she didn't really think she would buy his pathetic excuses, but she had before. The fear was not all that unfounded.

The living room was feeling rather crowded when she came in. Her mother was there, her brother, her father and Laura. The first had Duria in her arms, while Kate's two boys had taken a keen interest in the contents of Laura's handbag.
You've handled recalcitrant elves, Andrews, you can handle your own father, Kate told herself. With that little pep talk fixed in her mind, she went forward. 'Laura, would you mind taking my boys outside for a bit?' she asked as calmly as she could. If World War Three were to happen, she would not have it happen where her children could see. 'And Duria too, please.'

Laura didn't ask. 'I'll warn the neighbours about disturbances, then, shall I?'

'You'd better,' Kate said. Hopefully it would not take very long.

'Kate, do you really think this is necessary?' Jacko complained. 'You're making such a thing out of this. It doesn't have to be.'

She fixed him with as stern a stare as she could muster. Fortunately, she had learned from the best. 'You keep quiet,' she told him. 'We will be having words about this later, don't go thinking we won't.' She'd had years to practise her best commanding tone and it was really quite something by now.

Jacko clearly was on the verge of saying something, but he didn't get the chance. John Andrews interrupted. 'So, it is real,' he observed. His eyes gave Thorin a quick onceover and then moved on to Kate. 'All the letters, they were all real.' There was a sense of wonder in his voice and a little disbelief.

Kate had no patience for it. 'Why are you here?' she demanded. Now she knew she had spent too much time with Thorin; she couldn't stand all this beating around the bush any more than he could.

He seemed taken aback, but it was only for a moment. 'Jacko called me,' he said. 'Telling me that you had returned. I had to see you.'

'It's not a mutual feeling.' Okay, she'd admit it: she could be argumentative if the mood struck her. And she wanted to be. She didn't want any reconciliation with this man. He'd had the opportunity for that and he had wasted it many times over. There was a point where she had drawn the line and it had been a point of no return. People did not come back from there.

'Things have changed, Katie,' he said, voice soft and pleading.

'Don't you bloody dare!' she snarled. 'Don't you dare call me that.' That endearment had not been used for many years and with good reason. 'I'm not your little Katie any longer.' She was a grown woman with three children of her own, for Durin's sake, and she could not allow her father to place her back in that place of vulnerability. She'd had to fight too hard to get out of it to let herself be coaxed back into it out of sheer bloody sentimentality.

He did a step back. Whether it was her outburst that had done it or the death glare she could feel radiating off Thorin remained to be seen. 'I didn't mean…'

Of course you didn't. Like you didn't mean to cheat on mum. Go and try to sell that story to someone more gullible than me. 'Don't lie to me,' she told me. 'I've met a lot of people who do that a lot more convincingly.' Like Thranduil, for instance.

'I was hoping we could reconcile,' her father said. 'That you would let me make amends for what I did. I know you don't believe me, but Jacko does. Please, Kate, I've changed, I promise.'

'I just want you to leave,' Kate told him bluntly. 'I don't want you near my family. I certainly never wanted you to read my letters.' Bloody hell, Jacko. What had he been thinking? 'I do not want or need your apologies. Maybe I would be interested if it actually changed something, but it's far too late for that. If Jacko has forgiven you for being an absolute bloody bastard, that's his business. I
still think he's gone addle-brained, but that's his problem. I don't share the sentiment.'

'You won't even give me a chance?' He appeared to be in shock.

'You had chances enough back then,' Kate felt obliged to point out. 'You remember what you did with those? Good, so do I. Anything you say now is too little and too late. You weren't there when I needed you. What exactly makes you think that I would welcome you now?'

Jacko clearly had enough. Either that, or he was afraid John Andrews would have a stroke in the middle of the living room; his skin colour was a tiny bit off. 'Bloody hell, Kate, do you have to keep a grudge like that?'

She had an immediate and really good reply for that one. 'I'm married to a dwarf. Keeping grudges is what we're good at.'

Her father's gaze shifted back to Thorin. She could feel his tension where their hands touched. Thorin did not like this kind of scrutiny, especially not from the bigger folk of the world. He didn't like them looking at him like they had a right to judge him, which they didn't of course, but that had never stopped them. And this was hard for him.

'I can barely believe that.' John Andrews had started frowning. 'Middle Earth cannot be real.'

'Fine, believe what you like,' Kate said. 'After all, there are also people believing in the little green men from Mars. To each his own. I won't waste breath trying to convince you of the more sensible alternative.'

His eyes flickered with sudden anger. 'Then why is it so hard for you to believe that I care?' he asked. 'I spent time and money looking for you. Why do you think I did that?'

Well, shit. Kate really, really did not want to think about that. It was not that she wanted to hold on to her resentment beyond the point of reason, but she didn't want him to be this perfect father either, as though the past had never happened. It had and it had messed her up for so, so long. He did not get to waltz right back into her life and pretend that all was well. It hadn't been for a long time.

'Guilty conscience,' she said. She couldn't breathe and she needed out. This had been a mistake. She should have grabbed her family and made off as soon as she could while she still had the chance. 'But here I am, in one piece, so you can go back to your perfect little family and forget any of this ever happened. Pretend it was all a bad dream. That's how I usually cope.'

He took a step back as if she had physically hit him. 'That's not true, I lo…'

That was the sort of declaration she was not ready for. 'Save it,' she said loudly over the last bit of that sentence. She needed an out, now.

So she turned around and left the house.

No one followed her.

Thorin did not quite know what to make of John Andrews when he first clapped eyes on the man. He was tall, for sure, but he had no muscle to speak of from what Thorin could see. Kate had inherited his curls, but little else. She certainly had not inherited the pleading and begging this man indulged in. Truth be told, he was a little at a loss as to why she was so afraid of so pathetic a
But he knew Kate felt cornered. As such, it came as no surprise when she took off. If John Andrews had known her at all, he would have known she would; Kate did not do well when it came to speaking of emotions, or if indeed someone else spoke of their emotions. Hearing an I love you from a father she despised was not going to go over well.

And so he let her go. He would find her after. It was not from him that she ran.

No, she was running from the father who had hurt her. Thorin was hardly a stranger to abandonment and as events unfolded before him, he could not help but wonder how he would have responded if it was his own father standing there, begging for Thorin's forgiveness. True, he would have given less cutting replies, but his tongue had never been as sharp as his wife's. And much though he craved a reconciliation, if he was unexpectedly given the chance for one, he might not have taken it. After all, even long years after his father had passed away, he had still not forgiven him.

John Andrews made to go after his daughter, but Thorin was quicker than that. His hand shot out and grabbed the man around his wrist. 'She does not wish for your company,' he said. 'You will not follow her.'

The astonished look on his face was not exactly flattering. Then again, this man's opinion mattered not.

'Who do you think you are?' he snarled. He tried tugging his arm loose, to no avail. Dwarves were much stronger than men; he would not be able to go until Thorin allowed him to.

He ignored the question. 'Your daughter's husband,' he replied, forgoing making mention of his name and position. They meant nothing in this world. 'And I have only her best interest at heart.'

Kate's father did not have the same priorities and Thorin could only despise him for it. What father simply left his children, never to look back? He hadn't been able to understand that even before he himself had children. Now that he had, he could only feel even more confusion. He loved his children more than he could say. To leave them behind, he could not even imagine ever even considering it, especially not the way this man had chosen to do. He had a good family, but chose to desert them for the love of another woman. His own father's conduct he could justify to some extent. Grief was a terrible burden to bear and Thorin was more familiar with its sting than most. But he had carried the burden, he had never let it crush him. Then again, he was the grandson of Thrór and the son of Thráin and both had fallen prey to some kind of madness. Their blood was in his veins too. And he had come close to it once.

But you never succumbed to it, he reminded himself. And as long as he had Kate standing guard over his mind, he could rest assured in the knowledge that he never would. They never spoke of it, this power she wielded over his heart and mind, but they both knew that it was there. And maybe Gandalf had known of it too. There must have been a reason why Kate of all people had been chosen as the company advisor.

The disgust on John Andrews's face was absolute. 'Big words from a kidnapper,' he snarled.

'Have a care with your words,' Thorin cautioned. Kate's father had been given every last scrap of information about his daughter's disappearance, as Thorin understood it, so he ought to be in the possession of all the facts. His words were therefore at the very least misguided.

It struck him then how this man was the first to utter the accusation he had so dreaded, the
accusation that he had taken Kate away from those who loved her. But this man did not love. Or if he did, he had a very poor way of showing it. And Thorin found that his accusation did not touch him in the light of these events.

John Andrews snorted. 'Give me one good reason why I shouldn't call the police this instant and have you locked up for abduction.' His eyes narrowed. 'I might even manage to add sexual assault to the list of charges against you.'

Anger flared like a fire within Thorin. The mere notion that he had forced himself on Kate was offensive to him. It would have been offensive to every dwarf. They did not take what was not theirs to take. Thorin lived by that code. He tightened his grip on the man's arm and ignored the whimpering this caused. 'I never saw how she could harbour such disdain for you,' he said. 'But I now see. You seek to blame me for something that was not of my making. Bury your guilt under words all you wish, but it does not change that you have fallen short off the mark yourself.' It was not Thorin Oakenshield who had run. It was not Thorin Oakenshield who had left Kate when she had a need of him.

'Dad, back off.' To Thorin's surprise it was Jacko who intervened. 'He's telling the truth. He didn't kidnap Kate.'

John Andrews turned around as in so far he was capable of doing so with Thorin's hand still clenched around his forearm. 'You cannot believe that nonsense he's trying to sell you, can you, Jacko?' The disbelief was most dominant in his voice. 'You read your sister's letters. They cannot be real.'

'Why not?' Thorin demanded. 'Were they not in her hand?' He had never quite understood why Kate had always been so afraid that her tale would not be believed until he was confronted with the evidence. Now he understood, to some extent, why she had always worried.

'You know they were, but you…'

Thorin interrupted. 'Were those not the phrases and words Kate would use?' he went on.

John Andrews made another attempt at freedom and failed. 'They were, but…'

'Was she ever given to telling tales that were not true?' Thorin knew that she was not. She could tell stories with some skill, but she had never tried to pass them off as the truth. And she would never tell a lie to those she cared about. They meant too much to her.

'She was never, but…'

Again, Thorin stopped him from finishing. 'Did she ever do things that she did not want to do, even under duress?'

Kate caving in to pressure was so far a sight he had not witnessed. She was indomitable. It was a quality that Gandalf had chosen her for. Even if it had not been the wizard who had taken her from the street but a man of ill will – and the mere idea that such a person would get his hands on Thorin's wife set his teeth on edge – Kate would never have let herself be forced into writing letters she did not mean to write. And even if she did write, she would have found a way to sneak clues into the epistles. But Thorin had, without Kate's knowledge or consent, read them himself. There were no hidden messages. If this man's claim to knowing her was true, he would know the same.

There was no answer this time.

'I think you can release him now, Thorin.' Helen was calm and gentle, but also a woman who was
not to be ignored.

He nodded in her direction and did as she asked. She must have known what she was doing, because John Andrews did not make a bolt for the door to go after Kate. Instead he took a step back.

'You say you're Thorin,' the man said.

'Aye.' He had never claimed to be anyone else.

'A character in a book.' The scorn was clear in his voice.

And Thorin objected to both tone and words. 'What witchcraft that is, I do not know. But it is one more foul and unpredictable than I have seen in all my days.' And he was in a better position to judge than most folk, having seen more of the world, having seen two different worlds. Not many people could say the same.

A noise of impatience came from somewhere beyond John. 'Look at him, dad,' Jacko said. 'Really, properly look at him. He would have to be a complete idiot to say who he was if he wasn't exactly that. Does he look like an idiot to you?'

Thorin always objected to being talked about instead of being talked with, but it seemed that Jacko had done him a favour in this case. John Andrews looked at him long and hard and Thorin returned the favour. The second impression of the man was not much better than the first had been. This man had no liking for him and Thorin had none for him.

'So now what?' John asked. 'We accept that your sister is married to an actual dwarf and that's it? You are just going to stand by and watch it happen?'

Jacko frowned, but he did not back down either. 'I am not letting Kate do anything,' he pointed out. 'If she wants something, she does it, no two ways about it. You should know that better than anyone. Besides, it has already happened. Kate's a grown woman with a will of her own.'

'Rather too much will of her own,' John muttered unhappily.

His son ignored that. 'She is married to someone she loves and she has three children with him. We might as well accept it.' Jacko looked past his father till his gaze settled on Thorin. 'I'm not exactly pleased, mind, but I think you're good for her. She certainly won't hear a bad word spoken about you and that means something, especially since this is Kate we're talking about and she's really good at seeing the worst in people.'

It was an apology without it actually being an apology. That Thorin was able to recognise this as such at all was in no small part thanks to being wedded to Kate for almost eight years. He nodded in acceptance.

'This is preposterous!' John exclaimed. 'You are actually going to let her disappear back to a fictional world? Has no one here had the wits to try and talk some sense into Kate?'

The suggestion that Kate was not in her right mind did not sit well with Thorin. 'You are mistaken indeed if you are of the belief that my wife does not know her own mind,' he said icily. By now the insults were piling up and suddenly it felt like it had been a good idea to leave Orcrist at home. Had he had any weapon to hand, he would have done Kate's father a harm by now. And the infuriating man would have undoubtedly deserved every wound Thorin inflicted on his body.

'You would say so,' John scoffed. 'You want to keep her for yourself. Heaven knows what made
you decide that; she can't be very attractive to you, if all I've read about your sort is true.'

It stung just a little to know that John Andrews was not necessarily wrong. He had not been attracted to Kate physically when they had first met. She was too skinny, too hairless, too mannish. He did not believe Kate had thought him attractive. As a matter of fact, they had talked about that once. It was a conversation Thorin remembered very well.

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It was really rather late, but sleep would not yet grace the King under the Mountain with its presence. His wife was likewise afflicted, but it did not bother them. Thorin felt pleasantly relaxed after making love to his wife. It had been a while since there hadn't been any urgent matters exhausting them or a fussy infant keeping them up all night. Kate had remarked that they had better seize the chance while it was there and Thorin had been unable to think of any reasonable objections. Truth be told, he had not tried very hard at all to search for them.

'Can't sleep either?' Kate asked, turning onto her side and propping herself up on an elbow. The faint light of the dying fire in the hearth shone on her face.

'I thought you said we had to seize the opportunity while it lasted,' Thorin pointed out. It was easier, teasing in situations like these. It was easier to talk too.

Kate showed a wicked grin. 'I seem to remember we did. More than once.'

It would probably never cease to amaze and embarrass him how she could talk of such matters with what felt like so little respect or so little reservation. Kate in turn would remind him that they were married for heaven's sake, so why couldn't use such language with him? It wasn't as if she was actually being really crude.

'So we did,' he agreed. After all, there was nothing he could say to deny it.

'Budge up,' Kate told him. 'My pillow won't stay put and your shoulder doesn't make for such a bad one, you know.'

He chuckled. 'So I am your pillow now, am I?'

'I suppose so.' Kate smiled at him. 'Firm, warm and doesn't fall off the bed. It's one of your better physical qualities.'

It set him to thinking. Kate had decided to lie down again, with her head on his shoulder, as she had said. But she wasn't sleeping; she was lying too still for that. Thorin wondered though. He knew that Kate loved him. There were no longer any doubts on that account, but he had wondered more than once what she had eventually found attractive about him. Of course she was never actually around or awake when the matter presented itself to him again, but this time she was.

'What other physical qualities do I possess then, would you say?' he asked.

Kate resumed her former position so that she could look at him. 'Are you asking me if I find you attractive?' She had always been able to read him very well and she had understood better than he could have hoped.
'I know you do,' he said. 'Else why would we be lying here as we are?'

Kate laughed. 'Touché.' Even after a couple of years in her presence he wasn't quite sure what the word meant, but he waited, knowing she would answer the question put to her. 'Well, I quite like your eyes,' she answered. It was testimony to just how at ease she was that she spoke the words in earnest instead of trying to get out of it by jesting. 'And your hair and, by extension, your beard. Though that one can tickle quite terribly against bare skin.'

'I haven't had complaints before,' Thorin said.

She aimed a playful hit at his chest. Thorin of course barely felt it. 'Oi, I would have complaints if that had been the case, because that would mean you've kissed, or worse, other girls and I assure you I would have a problem with that. Dwarves don't have the monopoly on jealousy, just so you know.'

He laughed with her for a few moments.

'Well,' Kate went on, pensive. 'I quite like your hands too. You know, you can be surprisingly gentle with those, but you also use them to craft incredibly beautiful things.'

Conversations where emotions were so out in the open were still relatively new to them, but Thorin found that he could very happily get used to them. It was another level of intimacy. The physical side of things had come relatively easy to them. It had always been the matters of the heart that had been the true challenge. But they were progressing. It was slow going at times, but they managed.

'It's just because you are you, you know.' Kate scratched her head in thought. 'Before I met you I had a thing for golden-haired fools who were taller than I was.' She grimaced. 'We both know how that worked out for me. You may not be the handsome prince on the white steed that I used to dream about, but how you look actually doesn't matter all that much, you know. You're you and that's enough. And, as it turns out, there's quite a few bits of you I'm very, very fond of.' She looked at him inquisitively. 'Though I do wonder what you saw in me. I mean, there are shorter men where I come from and beards are not all that unusual either, but you must have had some lovely vision with a beard and muscle and a bit more meat on her bones in mind once upon a time.'

If she meant that he had been raised with a different concept of beauty, then she was right. But Thorin had never had the time to so much as contemplate romance and marriage, so he had not wondered about such matters. His people and his kin had always been first and foremost on his mind. There had been room for little else. And he had not looked for it either when fate – and a wizard – threw this woman onto his path. And when he had met her, he had not thought much of her. Too frail to survive the wilderness, he'd thought, too young to be of any use, he'd assumed. He had been wrong, but it was easy to admit such things in the privacy of his own mind with the benefits of hindsight.

She had been honest with him, so he would be with her. 'Your hair,' he replied. He'd always found it one of her most recognisable features. It made her easy to locate in a crowd, but he also liked seeing that mane of red curls and it had secretly pleased him that their firstborn son had inherited his mother's hair.

She grinned. 'Really? This unruly mess? The one that can't stay put for longer than an hour and that repels brushes and combs all over the world?'

'Exactly that.' One strand of it was brushing over his chest and because it tickled, he gently brushed it back behind her ears. 'And there's your mouth. But only when it smiles,' he added. When she really, actually smiled it lit up her entire face. And really, if she'd had a beard, it would have been
hard to see all of her mouth when she did smile. 'And likewise your eyes.' There were other things too. He liked to have her near, feel her against him. There was a quiet sense of peace in waking up at night and finding her curled up against him. He hadn't known there was such contentment to be found in the physical closeness of another person.

Thorin had not realised he had traced the scar across her face with his finger until she stilled his hand, looking at him in confusion. 'Now, I know that you're a bit odd, but you cannot possibly think that ugly thing attractive.'

Thorin knew that she was self-conscious of the scars she had. Kate was not a vain woman, but she hadn't hidden the fact that she thought they were disfigurements. Thorin understood her reasoning; men were squeamish about such matters. They did not look on scars as dwarves did. To Thorin Kate's scars were the reminder that she had fought for a good cause. There was no shame in that.

'You should not feel ashamed of them,' he said, struggling for a way to explain that she might understand. 'You took this one fighting against the goblins.' He moved his finger lower, to the scar in her neck. 'You fought off a robber.' She had told the tale that morning in Bag End and he had remembered it. After all, it had been the first indication that Kate was not as useless as she appeared.

Kate grimaced. 'Two robbers, actually,' she corrected. 'And I ended up in hospital for days because of the blood loss. I even had to have a blood transfusion. It was a bit awkward, all things considered.'

He did not know why she did that, belittling her achievements. But he would not stand for it and so he pretended he had not heard her, moving on to the faint marks on her left shoulder where a warg had scratched her when she had saved Ori. 'You saved Ori,' he said.

'I tripped down a rabbit hole,' Kate scoffed. 'Hardly the rescue mission of the century.'

He continued to ignore her, moving on to the burn and the white line next to it. 'You fought an orc and lived.'

'As memory serves, you were the one to finish it off.' Kate had begun to frown. 'Thorin, what are you…?'

He did not let her finish. His hand went further down still, brushing over the scar she had on her thigh. 'This one you received defending Erebor,' he told her. He had feared for her, but she had been magnificent in her own way. She had defended his homeland without as much as a second thought.

Kate's frown deepened. 'Yes, I know. I haven't gone forgetful all of a sudden. What's your point?'

It was hard to translate the thought into the spoken word, because it was hard to define what he felt and what he meant. It was something he just knew, that he did not spend time pondering. 'They tell the tale of great deeds you did.' It was not an adequate description, but it was as close as he was able to come. He loved her because of what she had done, the risks she had taken and the words she had spoken. And there was no scar on her body to commemorate that it had been her timely warning that had saved his mind, but he needed no such reminder. He would always know and he that would be enough.
Of course, John Andrews was unburdened by this knowledge and Thorin would sooner cut out his own tongue than share this with someone so unworthy.

'It is not your business,' he said icily. 'You have lost the right to such knowledge when you turned your back on Kate and abandoned her, as no father should ever do.' These words had been long in coming, but it was not this man that they had been intended for. And yet, they needed to be spoken. 'You have no right to pry into her life, into her affairs. You have no right to judge her for her actions when your own cannot be justified in any way.' He fixed Kate's father with the iciest stare he could muster. 'You will leave her be unless she tells you otherwise.' He finished with one of Kate's own favourites. 'But I would not hold my breath for that, should I be in your shoes.'

With that he turned and left the room in search of his wife.

No one followed him out.

This was not how Kate had imagined her first day back. Of course, she hadn't had any actual realistic expectations, but Jacko running off to bring back their father had not entered her list even at the very bottom. She had fully expected never to see the man again. Truthfully, that was how she wanted it.

'That was quick,' Laura remarked when Kate joined her and the children in the back yard. Her friend had introduced her lads to the many pleasures of football and the boys did not even notice her. 'Should I ring the police to call in a murder?'

'Not quite yet,' Kate said. She sat down on the garden bench. 'Though I am not making promises. Thorin still might do something rash; he's been trying to glare my father to death since he met him.'

Laura sat down next to her. 'Kate, if I'd known what your brother was up to, I'd have hit him over the head myself, I swear.'

Kate rubbed her temples. 'No need to swear to it. I believe you anyway.'

Her friend's chuckle made her look up. 'Blimey, Kate, it's just an expression. You're not in Middle Earth right now.'

Huh. That was odd. Of course she knew that it was just something people said. But she hadn't heard anyone do it in so long that she had… well, not forgotten about it exactly, but it had not been at the forefront of her mind either. 'I've gone native,' she realised. 'And I never even thought on it.'

'Not that native, don't you worry,' Laura said. 'I distinctly remember this Queen under the Mountain making a Doctor Who reference only just an hour ago.' She grimaced. 'Honestly, Kate, you're still going on about that?'

'Of course I am. You know what, I think I should try to get my hands on the series that aired after I disappeared. I suppose I've got some catching up to do.' Wouldn't that be a treat, sitting on the sofa in front of the telly with a cup of steaming hot tea in her hands? She remembered doing that before Gandalf abducted her, but it was only a distant memory now, almost a dream.

Laura nudged her. 'You're obsessed, you are.'
'Oh, I am sorry, Miss Potterhead, I didn't quite catch that,' Kate retorted. 'That makes me wonder, is your future husband just as big a fan as you are? If not, has anyone seen fit to at least warn him before you tie the knot?' Oh, this was heaven on earth as far as Kate was concerned. Talking with Laura had always been so easy. Moreover, Laura had a way to make Kate forget about her troubles for a while.

'You're hilarious, you are,' Laura said, mock-glaring at her. 'Yes, he knows. And after the initial shock he confessed to me his undying love for all things Tolkien.' She fixed Kate with a stern glare. 'Imagine his joy when he found out about you. You'll probably meet him and you'll have a lot to talk about, but please, keep it to a level that everyone can understand you.'

Kate laughed. The universe had a wonderful sense of humour sometimes. 'I'd love to meet him. Besides, no matter how much of a nerd he is, I'll probably know better. I'm the local resident after all.'

Laura smirked. 'I wouldn't be so sure about that. He's got a thing about elves. Knows their history inside out.'

Kate groaned. Of course that would be her luck. 'Just keep him away from Thorin. And I reserve the right to punch him if he's getting all poetic about the pointy-ears. On that note, what's his name? Do I know him?'

'Don't think so. George Carlyle. He's an accountant.'

Kate pretended to be shocked. 'An accountant? Why, Laura, that's so respectable!' she teased. 'I always thought you'd elope with a hippie or something of the sort.'

'This coming from the woman who eloped with the King under the Mountain,' Laura shot back.

'Oh, we didn't elope,' Kate corrected. 'We got married. Properly married, mind you. A couple of weeks after the battle. But I get your point,' she added quickly. She knew her friend well enough to endlessly press the matter if she didn't. 'Dori would've had a fit otherwise.' And they had both needed it, the solid foundation. It was what they built their lives on. And here they were, eight years on, and they were thriving. Given her own parents' marriage from hell, Kate felt proud of that achievement.

Of course, her relief couldn't have lasted forever and now the matter of her father was firmly back on her mind. And a solution did not appear to be any closer. She still didn't have a clue what to do. It had gone worse than she had expected. Maker have mercy, had he really declared that he still cared? It had hit home, had hit home hard. And then there were Thorin's words, urging her to use the chance she was given, the chance that had been denied to him. And she understood, she really did. But heaven knew she did not want a reconciliation and now he was making her look the resentful bitch for not wanting to have anything to do with him when he was being so apologetic. Ugh, it was elf politics all over again. If she didn't know any better, she would have said he'd trained under Thranduil.

The worst part of it all was that she strongly suspected that he was actually sincere. Kate liked that even less.

Laura must have felt her mood shift. 'So, how did it go in there?' she asked.

'Try bad,' Kate replied. 'Then multiply by ten and you're about there. It seems like he actually means it when he says he's sorry. And I'm not feeling very forgiving yet.' With Laura, nothing but the truth would do.
'Well, why should you?' her friend asked. 'I know Jacko's going on and on about how he made
amends for all that he did, but I've always thought that it was too late for that anyways.' She caught
Kate's astonished look and added: 'What? You thought I was going to plead with you for giving
him a second chance?'

Kate laughed. 'Not exactly. I just thought you wouldn't be so blunt about it. What with you being
all mature and respectable these days.'

'Doesn't mean I have to like the bastard.' Laura shrugged. 'I've always thought he's a weasel, and as
slippery as an eel. He'll talk his way out of anything and I thought Jacko would have known better
than to fall for those pathetic speeches. Then again, any port in a storm, eh? And at least your dad
had the money to pay a private detective.'

'I've always thought he would get on tremendously well with Thranduil,' Kate said. 'And I don't
think Jacko just fell for a few pretty words, you know. I think the bastard actually means what he
says. He seems sincere enough. He even claimed that he loves me, whatever the hell he means by
that. I am not even sure if he really understands the meaning of the word, but in his limited
capacity, I think he means what he said, so…'

'Could be an act,' Laura pointed out.

'I've met enough insincere people to know the difference by now.' Fancy that, there was an upside
to dealing with elves after all. 'And he was genuine. Which of course makes the whole thing that
much more complicated, because now it is me looking bad for not wanting to leave the past in the
past.'

'Well, if that is how he is trying to make you feel, then he's an arse.' Laura would have made a
good dwarf, Kate pondered. She had the necessary bluntness at any rate. 'And if he really does love
you, like he claims, then he will understand that you need some time. If he doesn't, you should drag
him out of the house by his hair and never spend a thought on the man again. From the look of
him, Thorin would be happy to oblige if you asked him to help you with that.'

'You think it is really that simple, do you?' Kate asked.

'I think you're complicating things,' Laura retorted. 'You're really very good at that. Believe me, I
remember that. You don't want your dad here, because he is all kinds of unpleasant and he messed
you up, kick him out. You don't owe him anything and you shouldn't think you do. He chose to
leave and this is the consequence. Tough luck, but just dessert as far as I'm concerned.'

Kate was about to respond to that with a thank you that she meant from the bottom of her heart, but
stopped when she saw her husband approaching. And she knew that face. Thorin could do pissed
off just as well as anyone, probably even better than most, and he was very much unamused now.
Whatever it was that had gone on inside the house, it was probably a miracle it was still standing.

He saw them, nodded and moved over to them.

Laura, who did not know how to deal with Thorin in a foul mood, asked sunnily: 'Do you need any
help burying the body?'

As expected, the expression was unfamiliar to Thorin and therefore not well received. 'There has
been no murder in this house,' he told Laura icily. He was probably offended that she thought him
capable of such a thing.

'It's an expression, just something people say.' Kate was quick to step in. 'And Laura here likes to
put her foot in it. Often.'

Thorin merely nodded. Kate could see the tension in the set of his shoulders. Whatever had gone on inside, it had not gone well. No surprise there, really. It had been as predictable as rain on a Sunday that Thorin and her father were not going to get on. Thorin hated the kind of running away her father had done and he would have said something about him; by now Kate knew him well enough to know that he would not have stood idly by when she was hurt. Watching from the sidelines had never been his style. *Heaven forbid he'll let me fight my own battles once in a while.*

'He still in there?' she asked.

Thorin nodded again. 'I do not think he will leave.'

Kate moaned. 'I just want him gone. Is that really so much to ask?'

She was aware that it was not what was expected of her. The decent thing would be to give him another chance. If this was a movie or, perish the thought, a fanfic – *because really, Laura, really?* – that was what the main character would do. *But I am not a Mary-Sue and I never tried to pass myself off as a saint either, so screw them.*

She didn't feel like doing the decent thing. Every time she did tell herself that maybe she ought to be a bit less hot-headed about this whole thing she could not help but remember the endless fighting and the lies. She remembered how he had never bothered to initiate contact after the divorce. Only when it turned out that she was missing had he started paying attention. So maybe he was genuine. Maybe his efforts weren't all due to a guilty conscience, but to Kate it didn't matter. Some wounds went too deep. She couldn't stand to be around that man.

Laura grinned. 'I'll take his legs and then Thorin can take his arms and we'll just toss him out for you,' she suggested.

If that look in Thorin's eyes was anything to go by, he was not in the least objecting to such a course of action. *I wonder what was said that he's changed his tune so much?*

'Careful, I might hold you to it,' she warned.

'Oh, I was being entirely serious.' There was no jest in her friend's eyes. 'I've been waiting to give that man a good hard kick in the balls for ages.'

Kate's jaw dropped. 'Laura!'

Her friend only shrugged. 'It's true. That bastard has put you through years of hell and I've been there to pick up the pieces. I owe him some form of payback. And we both know you're not tall enough to reach high enough.'

She knew she probably should not ask. She did it anyway. 'High enough for what?'

'To punch him in the face and break his nose.' It would have been funny if Laura had been joking, except Kate was reasonably certain she was not. Laura did not do serious as a rule, but she had been known to make exceptions.

'Well, that's nice,' she said. 'But if anyone's going to be throwing punches, it'll be me. And thanks to Dori I know how to reach his head if I need to.' She turned to Thorin and grinned at the memory. 'The Galas treatment.'

And Thorin, who had been doing a great job of being his taciturn self, actually cracked a smile.
And that was good. She wanted that. She wanted the good things. So maybe she wasn't going to do this fanfiction perfect. And her life had never been much of a novel or fairy-tale either. She did not always need to do the right thing, nor did she want to. Kate only wanted her father gone.

'I'm going to kick him out,' she announced.

Just like that, she knew she would. Laura was right, she realised. Whatever it was that John Andrews had done, for Kate it had come too late. And she knew herself well enough that moving past that, really, genuinely moving past that was not in her nature. She might forgive him in words because that was what expected of her, but she would never feel like it. And that would be the kind of two-faced lying that Kate generally associated with the elves. And she was no elf.

'Need back-up?' Laura was instantly enthusiastic about that plan. Then again, she had been trying to tell Kate to give up on the man since she was fourteen.

'I might.' She looked at Thorin. 'I cannot give that man a second chance,' she said, switching to Khuzdul to have a measure of privacy. And these words were not meant for any ears but his. 'I can't just leave the past in the past. He's gone too far, done too much. I can't.' At some level that must hurt him, seeing her pass up the opportunity he would give his sword arm for. And she hated doing that to him, but some obstacles were too high to be overcome.

To her surprise, the response she feared never came. Instead he nodded, expression solemn, but there was no disappointment in his eyes. 'It is right,' he said and she could tell that he understood, even though he did not say so in so many words.

Laura blinked at them. 'You know, if that was how you two were on your legendary quest, I see why everyone thought what they did about you.' When Kate looked at her in a silent request to elaborate, she added: 'You are really rather intense. And you don't even seem to notice.' She nodded. 'Well, congratulations to you, Thorin. I hope you appreciate how rare it is for Kate to pay that much attention to anyone.'

Best friend or not, Kate was not opposed to hitting her. 'Be nice.'

Laura smirked. 'I'm warming up for when we kick your sorry excuse of a father out of the house.'

That brought her mind back to the matter at hand. 'Let's get it over with.'

She rose to her feet. She really didn't feel ready to go back in there, but the worst of the anxiety had subsided. Talking to Laura helped, but knowing that she had Thorin's full support helped even more. She realised just how much she had come to rely on him to be there, to be that solid foundation that she built her life on. Of course, they still fought sometimes, because they were both headstrong fools who didn't believe in the displays of emotions. She'd lost count of the number of arguments and misunderstandings they'd had. But there was always that quiet certainty of knowing that they would not fall apart again, not like they had done before the Battle of the Five Armies. She had been right then; they needed that one certainty, their marriage, to fall back on. When they didn't always feel it, it helped to know it.

'Thank you,' she whispered.

Of course Thorin would not say in words something like you're welcome or any time, but she knew it from the encouraging nod he gave her and the fact that he was right there next to her when she re-entered the house. I wonder if we'll ever get to the point that we won't feel awkward saying stuff like that, she thought. She wanted that, wanted all the barriers between them coming down once and for all, but she also was aware that such a thing might never be more than a wish. That's life,
Andrews. You don't do fairy-tales anyway. So get a bloody grip and get a move on.

Her father was still in the room, looking like he had been punched in the gut a couple of times. She knew Thorin hadn't really touched him; if he had, there would be an ambulance in front of the door right now. He was however nursing a bruise that went all around his forearm. So that's why he didn't follow me out.

He rose to his feet when he saw her come in. 'Kate, I am so sorry…'

She did not let him finish. 'I want you to go,' she said. 'I meant what I said. It's too little and too late and nothing you say is going to make what you did then go away. I can't see past it and I am not sure I even want to try to.' She saw that he was about to argue and cut it short. 'No, don't bother. And I am not punishing you. I just don't want you here. Jacko was the one who invited you, not me. Just go.'

Kate felt too tired, too drained for shouting and it wasn't even noon yet.

Her father looked as if she had stabbed him in the heart and even though her mind was made up, it made her experience that guilt all over again. 'Why won't you let me try?' he begged. 'I know I have made horrible mistakes, but please…'

She shook her head and he fell silent. 'Remember when I pleaded and begged? Remember what you did then? There is nothing, not even a wizard, that is ever going to be able to make me forget that.' You reap what you sow. And this harvest had been long in coming. 'There is nothing more I have to say to you. Just go and leave me be. If I do change my mind in the next six weeks, I'll let you know. But don't go counting on it.'

She made to turn and then made a spur of the moment decision. 'Farewell,' she said, bearing in mind what Thorin had said about a chance to say goodbye at the very least. It made this story less of an open ending. It was done now, finished, and this time it had been on her terms. So this time when she did turn around and left the house, it felt like the weight of the world had been lifted from her shoulders.

Only Thorin followed her out.

Chapter End Notes

This may not be how you expected this chapter to turn out, but given Kate's character I didn't feel it likely she would have responded any other way. This leads me to address a point about her character that not everyone seems to understand, especially in the light of a guest review left on The Journal on ff.net only yesterday, that Kate is quite bitchy and they cannot see how anyone could like her. Well, yes, Kate is quite abrasive and she certainly does not always play nice. Then again, Thorin is frequently snappy and unpleasant as well and somehow no one ever seems to criticise him for it, which is fairly strange, come to think about it. But I feel that's how real people are as well, and Kate on the whole is a pretty decent sort of person, but she has bad days and she has a lot of heavy emotional luggage, which shapes her character. So, I couldn't really see her acting any other way, so no fairy-tale ending to that part of the story, I'm afraid.

So far my defence of Kate. In other news, from here on I'm also going to do some
other one-shots again, but there will be more one-shots of Thorin and Kate visiting England. But I’ve addressed the most important points now and there are some other things that I also really want to do. As always, suggestions – for both this AU and the normal Duly Noted stuff – are welcome.

Apologies for the long note. Thank you for reading. Reviews would be most welcome.
For King and Country

Chapter Summary

For King and Country or How Dwalin and Kate help Thorin run the kingdom and become friends in the process.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Walking went a bit more smoothly since Óin had discharged himself from the healers' care to do some healing himself. Most other healers were too much in awe of Thorin to tell him what he should do – and Thorin had heeded their advice only until they were out of his sight before he found he had more important things to do than sitting still – but Óin had no such reservations. He had summoned a chair for his king and ordered him to sit in it. If folk wanted to talk to him, they could come to him and tell him what was amiss instead of having Thorin traipsing all over the Mountain to come to them. And if his king was still of a mind to go walkabout, he wouldn't feel opposed to tying him up, a notion that had been silently approved of by both Dwalin and Kate. One of the first times that they agreed on something and it had to be that he should not be allowed to walk.

The Journal, Chapter 95: Signed and Sealed

'No.'

It startles Kate a bit that she has spoken that word simultaneously with both Óin and Dwalin. The first is expected, the second not so much. For Dwalin to refuse his king anything, anything at all, is rare. In fact, it's so rare that Kate cannot for the life of her recall if she has seen it at all. Not that she isn't grateful for an ally in this, but it is undoubtedly unexpected.

Thorin seems just as surprised by this turn of events as she is. 'Not you too, Dwalin?' To Kate it sounds remarkably like Et tu, Brute? Of course, Thorin is hardly going to be assassinated in the foreseeable future, but one won't know it to look at his face.

'Don't want to do any arresting today,' Dwalin remarks. He almost looks amused, but Kate does not know him well enough to be certain. 'Tying up one's king is an offence, isn't it?'

She's in for a lot of surprises today, it seems, because the "question" is aimed in her direction. 'I believe so.' Not knowing what else to do, she plays along. 'Best not let it come to that.'

As matters stand, there's every chance that Óin conveniently forgets that Thorin is his king and ties him to the chair he's sitting on. Thorin is being stubborn – what's new? – and insisting he will be going down to some meeting with a number of Iron Hills dwarves. After all, he's not an idle mannish king. No one in their senses would ever mistake him for one, but that's beside the point. The point is that he needs to give his leg some rest if he ever wants it to heal properly.

Of course, cooperating is not on the agenda.

'I've a meeting to attend,' Thorin objects. He hasn't quite broken out the deadly glare, the one he
uses when he believes someone is hindering him in doing his duty, but he is getting there and Kate has no intention to find herself on the receiving end of it.

She understands, of course she does. If their places had been reversed, she'd have been kicking up a fuss as well. The sitting still must be driving Thorin up the wall, especially since Öin has started enforcing the sitting down regime in earnest four days ago. But would it honestly kill him if his own health didn't end up all the way at the very bottom of his list of priorities for a change?

She thinks she has identified the cause of the behaviour, but she cannot be sure. She certainly can't walk up to him and just ask. But it does not take a genius to see that Thorin has self-esteem issues, serious self-esteem issues. Kíli's death has not helped matters, nor has the loss of Ori's hand. So to make up for all his perceived "faults" he will go on until he literally drops.

And Kate is not going to sit back and twiddle her thumbs whilst her very-soon-to-be husband effectively ruins his own recovery. Thank the heavens for Öin and his drastic measures.

'You've got a queen,' Dwalin points out sensibly. Not that it doesn't surprise her. She is quite convinced Dwalin does not actually like her. He merely puts up with her for Thorin's sake.

But she jumps at the chance. 'I can handle it,' she says. 'And if they still want to talk to you, I'll gladly point them in the right direction.' That compromise ought to satisfy him.

From the looks of things, Thorin doesn't like it one bit. He hasn't said it, but Kate knows how to read between lines. He's afraid his people will make mincemeat of her and he really should know better by now. She's survived Thranduil and Erland. It doesn't get much worse than that.

Dwalin of course has known Thorin for far longer than she and in the process has clearly developed some mind-reading skills. 'Queens need guards, don't they?'

'I suppose so,' Kate replies. She's glad he's her ally in this and she knows he won't let any harm come to her – not that she is afraid of any physical harm, because dwarves are more honourable than that – but she is not at ease with his company. His disapproval is something she has felt right from the start and it hasn't gone away since. It sets her teeth on edge and makes the hairs at the back of her neck tingle.

'See there, no reason to leave that chair.' Dwalin looks incredibly smug. Thorin on the other hand looks incredibly displeased, but it's the kind of displeasure that shows when he has been outwitted. They've done it, but Kate can't feel any victory. She loves this dwarf; it gets easier to admit the more she repeats the sentence in her head and the idea takes root in her mind. And it shouldn't be necessary to trick a loved one, even if it is for their own good. She just wishes they could be done with the fighting forever; she's had enough of it to last her a lifetime.

Of course, such luck won't be granted to her. And she ought to know better than to expect smooth sailing from now on. Life and love are never that easy. They're worth fighting for, though, which is the only reason why she hasn't started screaming in frustration yet.

'Right you are,' she says, because Dwalin's plan is sound enough. She'll be handling the diplomatic side of things and Dwalin will be watching her back to calm Thorin's frayed nerves. It would be the ideal solution if she didn't feel Thorin's betrayed look so keenly. Bloody hell, she wanted to be done with this!

Dwalin isn't quite finished. 'And there won't be anyone to stop Öin when we're gone, I reckon.'

Kate almost laughs at that, because really, Dwalin is far cleverer than anyone ever gives him credit
for and there are so few people to know and appreciate it. It's because he's the quiet type. He's known for his strength and skill in battle. Rightly so of course, but there's a lot more to Dwalin than that and Kate feels she's only just begun scratching the surface.

They leave Thorin to ponder that as they go to handle the meeting. It's one of those dragon removal meetings – and who would ever have thought they would have a name for the destruction of Smaug's stinking corpse? – and Kate hates them, if only because no one has any idea how to go about it, but everyone pretends to be an expert on the matter. Still, it has to be done and she could oversee them as well as Thorin. It's not as if some sensible solution is going to magically drop out of the air if Thorin is there.

**Nope, we'd be needing a wizard for that.** And Gandalf has been hanging around the men and elves lately. He won't leave until after the wedding, when he'll be taking Bilbo home, but he's not welcome in Erebor either. Of course, they'd put him up if the need should arise, but Kate doesn't like him, not after what he's done to her and if she never sees his face again after he leaves she won't be sad about it.

'Thanks for the save back there,' she tells Dwalin when the silence between them becomes too uncomfortable to bear. They haven't got much to say to each other, they never have, but Kate has realised that Dwalin is about the closest thing Thorin has to a brother, so she'd better resign herself to seeing quite a lot of him.

'Aye, Thorin gets like that.' Dwalin is not a dwarf of many words, which is a big part of all the awkwardness Kate experiences when she's around him. That, and she always kind of feels as if she's said the wrong thing when she replies.

Which is why her own words take her by surprise. 'I wish he wouldn't look so betrayed. We are doing it for him, after all.' Of course, receiving gifts comes about as natural to Thorin as flying does to a fish. Kate knows this, but looking at her like she's stabbed him in the back isn't helping matters. And they've already gone so wrong once and this whole relationship still feels so fragile, as if the smallest issue can destroy it beyond repair. At least to herself she can admit that she's dead scared of it all blowing up in her face.

Dwalin doesn't seem worried or indeed surprised that she's spoken what's on her mind. 'He'll see sense in a bit.' If this wasn't Dwalin, Kate would have said he's trying to reassure her. But that's nonsense; Dwalin doesn't do reassuring, least of all when she's around.

'I hope so.' It's not as if she knows what else to say. All her skills at conversation vanish into thin air. Dwalin just has that effect on her.

'He will,' Dwalin insists. 'He might even smile when he hears Blackbeard's latest scheme.' She falls from one surprise straight into the next today. Now he's using her nickname for Walin as if it's the dwarf lord's given name? It was enough of a shock to hear Thorin do it.

'You know something I don't?' she asks.

True enough, Dwalin smirks. 'I might at that.'

Is he joking with her? Has the world come to a sudden end? 'Will I laugh?' She might as well roll with it. Who knows how long it'll last?

'Nah,' he says. 'You'll try to hide all your laughter and eye rolls and I'll be very entertained.' Yes, he is definitely bantering with her. This is new. But Kate really kind of likes it and she doesn't want it to stop.
'Oh, I see how it is,' she nods. 'Having a laugh at my expense, are you?'

Dwalin doesn't miss a beat. 'At Walin. He'll be the one looking like a fool.'

Kate snorts. 'You'd think he'd be used to that, seeing as he's hardly anything else.' Of course, Walin is nothing short of a bastard as a default setting. And Kate could do with a laugh. They have been in short supply for the last… well, year, possibly.

And maybe Dwalin ought to have taken up a second job as psychic, because true to his prediction, Walin is all for setting fire to the dragon corpse. The notion has Kate's eyebrows up at her hairline and she finds herself struggling to keep a straight face. He can't really think that a fire drake would catch fire, right? If she had any doubts about his sanity before this meeting, she certainly has them now.

It's at this point that she meets Dwalin's gaze across the table and he's having a look on his face that she can only translate as I told you so. Also there's an underlying message that tells her clear as day that he for one is having a grand time and that the laugh he's trying to keep in is not at her expense. It more feels as if he's sharing the joke with her.

It's making her feel suddenly far more optimistic about the future.

The lass is awkward at times, Dwalin observes. She's still watching her moves, not so much around the now former company and the few friends she's made this past year, but certainly around just about every other dwarf she encounters. Unless of course irritation wins out. Kate is quite the formidable force when properly riled, Dwalin knows from experience, but she feels ill at ease under the Mountain and she is even more uncomfortable with her role as Queen under the Mountain. Folk like Walin, who'll talk an awful lot and don't do a bit of decent thinking before they open their mouths don't help.

And it does not help that Thorin has caught wind of it lately. It puts Dwalin's oldest friend in a right foul mood, a violent mood to be sure. Dwalin has made sure to direct him to the training grounds for sparring a lot and he is sure that Kate has been encouraging it too. For a lass who can put such a lack of tact on display, she can be remarkably subtle if she puts her mind to it.

Of course, there are days when Thorin's frustrations boil over nonetheless and no amount of sparring or taking out his frustration on steel in the forges will put his mind to rest. He's had bouts of this before, way back in the Ered Luin. They worried Dwalin then and they do not worry him any less now. He knows that Balin has been watching and fretting as well. And Dwalin does not like the direction his brother's thoughts are taking.

Balin has always been a little too interested in history and patterns that he is forever claiming are doomed to repeat themselves. The pattern he is thinking about in this particular case is the madness some folk say runs in Durin's line, in particular Thórór and his descendants. Dwalin knows it for the utter nonsense that it is, but he also knows that there are those who do not share this opinion. Of course, those others are fools. Thorin has never been mad and one only has to look at Fíli to know he is as sane as could be. And he has personally rearranged the face of the unfortunate dwarf who whispered a little too loudly about little Thoren's destiny to end up like a raging lunatic. If even babes are not safe from such malicious gossip, Dwalin isn't sure how much faith he still has in those who he's supposed to call his own people.

That said, he can clearly see that Thorin's moods run dark of late. Mahal only knows what goes on
in that thick skull of his when he gets like that. Of course Dwalin can hazard a relatively educated guess. There will be a lot of self-flagellation involved – about putting Kate through such pain, about not being able to predict when someone is going to say something they ought to be ashamed of saying and silencing them before they do – and when his thoughts turn that way, he retreats into himself. And Dwalin knows of only one soul who's been able to drag him back from that so far.

So, aye, he'll admit that he is not Kate's greatest admirer and he isn't fond of her mannerisms and her presence, but she's good for Thorin. He remembers that when Erebor was under siege she was eventually the one who ensured Thorin never succumbed to the fate the wretched book had planned for him. Gandalf may have known what he was about when he took her from her own world. And for this simple fact Dwalin feels he owes her. And so he is friendly and accommodating and quite willing to shut up the stupid dwarves under the Mountain who feel it is their right and their duty to ventilate their opinions that a mannish lass has no business being in Erebor, never mind ruling over them.

It's something else to ask for her aid. And in his heart he is convinced that Kate already knows what is going on – the lass is intuitive if nothing else – which is why Thorin never is where he is supposed to be: in his own rooms. Balin calls it being blind to reason, running away like that. It might be at that, for Thorin has been avoiding Balin as well. He tolerates Dwalin's presence only as long as he keeps his mouth shut.

There's sense in such a course of action. Either way, Dwalin knows that his words won't sway his king. He'll be needing someone else for that.

So it is to the royal chambers that his feet carry him. There's a guard in front of the door that Dwalin doesn't know, but it's a youngling, freshly arrived from the Iron Hills if he has to hazard a guess.

'Is the Queen in?' he asks when the guard makes no move to step aside or even to acknowledge Dwalin's presence.

'She is,' the guard says, clearly only now remembering there is a certain protocol he ought to follow. 'State your name and intent.'

'Dwalin, son of Fundin. My business with the Queen is none of yours,' he replies brusquely.

He'll not let it slip to this barely bearded fool that he wishes to discuss the mental health of the King under the Mountain. Quite honestly it is beyond him what this one is even doing here. He looks like he still belongs in the barracks, training. He shouldn't be given such a responsible task as this. He certainly shouldn't be as bored doing it as he clearly is. If Thorin were ever here, he would have recognised this fact as well and have the would-be guard dismissed quick as blinking. That this lad is still here is testimony to the fact that Dwalin's friend is not.

'Can't let you in,' the guard says. 'You'll have to state your intent. It's in the rules.'

Dwalin's intent is currently running more along the lines of hauling the lad back to the barracks by the collar of his coat. 'I'm a friend of the family.' It takes him significant will-power not to shout the words. There's only sense in that; the structure is still unstable in some parts of the Mountain and he wouldn't want to actually bring down the roof in his fury. 'She'll receive me.'

'Not without stating your intent, she won't.' Curse these Iron Hills dwarves and their penchant for rules. They are rigid in their ways, the whole sorry lot of them.

Fortunately Kate chooses this moment to step in and save the young guard from his own stupidity.
and, more importantly, Dwalin's wrath. The door opens and she pokes her head out. 'Dwalin! Thank the Lord. I thought I heard your voice.'

'Aye, that's all you'd have heard if you hadn't opened the door,' he says, taking care to control the urge to throw the would-be guard out of the Mountain regardless of Kate's interference.

He can see she understands the situation and her brow furrows in confusion as she catches sight of the dwarf who's doing a miserable job of guarding the door. 'Ofur? I thought I dismissed you from my service just last week? And then again an hour ago? What in the name of sanity do you think you're still doing here?'

The dwarf draws himself up to his full height, a gesture which lacks meaning, because both Kate and Dwalin are taller than he is. 'It is only for the King under the Mountain to dismiss me. I may guard you, but you do not command me.'

Composure and decency be damned. This time Dwalin does lift the fool off his feet and presses him against the wall. 'She's your Queen, you little shit,' he growls. 'You'll obey her as you'll obey her husband and if she tells you to be gone, you get yourself gone as fast as your feet can carry you.'

Kate snorts. 'And if I tell him to jump, he's supposed to ask how high, right? You might want to lessen the pressure on his throat, Dwalin; he's going blue.'

'Do you want me to put him down?' he asks. He really doesn't feel like it, but he's supposed to be setting an example.

'Did I say that?' she wonders. 'I just want him to be conscious enough to actually understand what's being said to him. And I don't want you arrested for murder either. So, listen up, kid. You're going to run along and fetch someone more competent to do the job, preferably someone who doesn't think it's his right to decide who I see and don't see. And I don't want to see you here again.' She turns to Dwalin. 'Now you can put him down. Unless you've something to add?'

Oh, he's got a great many things to add, but none of those are fit to be uttered in the presence of a lass. 'I'll eventually think of something,' he says, letting Ofur know that this is not over yet. But he puts the lad back on his feet again.

'But someone needs to guard the door.' The choice of words is telling. He thinks it more important to guard a lifeless object than to guard his Queen.

If Kate realises this, she doesn't say. 'Kid, have you seen Dwalin? You think I'll be attacked as long as he is around? Let me tell you a secret, then,' she goes on when Ofur continues to look doubtful. And she does lower her voice as if she is really about to impart a great secret on him. 'Orcs have been known to run in fright at the mere sight of Dwalin, son of Fundin. So don't you go thinking I won't be perfectly safe as long as he's around. Now, shift. Find someone else and for Durin's sake, be quick about it.'

After the terrifying look Dwalin gives him as a parting gift, Ofur clearly thinks it wise to follow that instruction to the letter; he almost trips over his own feet in his haste to make a quick getaway.

'Do come in,' Kate invites.

Dwalin does.

'I'm actually really glad you're here,' Kate says and now that he takes a good look at her he can tell she's in something of a state. Her hair is messy – messier than usual – and she looks exhausted, like
she's not getting enough sleep. From the nursery he can hear the baby crying. 'Thoren's been feeling unwell, I think. He keeps on crying, been at it for almost a day now and I don't know what's wrong. I meant to look for Thora or any healer really, but Ofur wouldn't babysit, because that's not part of his duty, and I can't go traipsing all over the Mountain with a crying babe in search of any. And of course that bloody idiot wouldn't leave the door unguarded to go and find a healer in my stead.' She looks like she's at her wit's end. Of course, Ofur hasn't helped matters. In fact, it's probably best Dwalin did not know this five minutes ago, or Kate's warning to lessen the pressure might have come too late.

'Allow me?' he asks, nodding in the general direction of the nursery. He's held infants before and has been told he's fairly good at it.

Kate nods. 'Be my guest.' She rubs her forehead. 'I wish he could tell me what ails him, but unfortunately I really don't speak baby. And becoming a mum hasn't given me any magical baby mind-reading skills either.'

It vexes Dwalin that Thorin isn't here. Kate is inexperienced, but he knows that Thorin is not. He practically raised Fíli and Kíli, so he ought to remember how it's done. Of course it would help if he was actually home once in a while.

Clearly he has voiced this sentiment, because Kate nods miserably. 'I don't know where he is.' And it doesn't matter that he generally doesn't much like her, because she sounds so forlorn that all he wants to do is grab his oldest friend by the shoulders and shake some sense back into him.

'In the baths,' Dwalin replies.

It's where Dwalin has sent him after their round of sparring this morning. They have gone back in use only two months past, even when not all the other seemingly more important parts have been restored, but it's good. Making Erebor habitable again is dirty work after all and Thorin isn't the only one who allows himself the luxury of washing off the dirt and relaxing his muscles in the warm water. It's doing his knee some good too. And because he is the King, he gets to bathe in private, with no one to disturb him. He'll be there for a while.

She rubs circles on her temples. 'He didn't come home last night,' she admits. 'I think he slept in his study.' She bites her lip. 'We fought before he left. Something stupid really. He's been going on and on lately about stuff folk say and how he clearly thinks it's his job to put an end to it. I told him it wasn't and that I can fight my own bloody battles and then he stormed off.'

There are tears in her eyes and it is making Dwalin highly uncomfortable. That she is even sharing this with him is alarming. She is after all not really his friend. She must be at the end of her rope to even consider sharing this with him.

Of course that explains why the babe has been so upset. He isn't ill; he's just felt his mother's anxiety and responded the only way he knew how. And it is all very easy to remedy. Dwalin isn't a healer, but he knows how the cure can be found.

'I'll look after the babe,' he offers. 'Go to the baths, Kate. Frea is on duty. She knows you're coming. Get Thorin's head out of his arse.' The whole kingdom will be better for it. And being where he is at the moment, Thorin won't be able to storm off in a fit of temper, because that would involve running around naked. Dwalin may or may not have told Frea the King's clothes would not be needed for a while and so would be better folded away until... well, she'd know. He is nowhere near as cunning as Kate or indeed his own brother, but sometimes desperate times call for desperate measures.
Kate is rooted to the spot, unable to speak and so Dwalin uses the opportunity to brush past her and lift the wailing Thoren from his cradle and into his arms. The child looks at him in what appears to be confusion that this is not his mother, but then settles down fairly quickly.

'Why are you doing this?' Kate asks.

'Because you're suited to the job, lass.' It's the most honest answer he can give her. 'Not many other folk are.'

She nods, but he can tell she only half-understands. He has a lingering suspicion she still hasn't quite realised the hold she has over Thorin. For someone so bright most of the time, she can be remarkably dim at others. But she will not ask him to explain himself. Dwalin suspects it's because she finds him at least a little intimidating.

'Very well,' she says. 'If you don't mind babysitting for a bit.'

He doesn't. Thoren is an easy baby for all that he doesn't like sleeping much. He's so exhausted, he'll probably drop off within minutes.

'Go,' he tells her.

'Okay,' Kate says. 'For King and Country, right?'

Dwalin can tell it's an expression that's come over with her from the other world. It's certainly not familiar to him, but he doesn't get to ask, because she's already out the door, leaving him alone with the very young heir to the throne. Of course Thoren doesn't know any of that. He's taken an interest in Dwalin's beard, which he, after a short inspection, promptly grabs and sticks in his mouth. It is a good thing orcs never see these things. His reputation might suffer dearly for it.

But his reputation is one well worth sacrificing if it will get his friend into a better mind-set. It was one thing in the Ered Luin, but quite another here in Erebor. Now there are people looking at him and expecting to see a king in every sense of the word. And such kings can't go brooding over perceived wrongs when it suits them. Thorin is needed and as such, Kate is needed. Folk don't realise that, naturally, but Dwalin knows more than they do.

He ends up on the sofa, little Thoren on his chest, asleep now, but still with his a bit of his beard tucked in his mouth. Dwalin might as well close his eyes for a second. He doesn't like idleness, but it's not as if he's going anywhere.

When he opens his eyes again it's when the door opens to let in Thorin and Kate. Their hair is still damp, a clear sign that they have been in the baths, but they're not as highly strung as they had been just this morning, so Dwalin considers it a day well spent.

'Thank you,' Kate whispers to him as she lets him out. 'Thank you so much.'

He's not quite sure what to make of it.

It takes Kate a while to even notice the most curious arrangement that she has with Dwalin. True enough, interacting with him has become easier with time, especially since he's clearly decided she's not as useless as he once thought her and Kate in turn has learned to see past that slightly intimidating exterior to find the caring, if a bit brusque dwarf underneath. So conversations with him aren't always as strained and awkward as they were before.
Of course, this doesn't mean she quite understands what it is that they've got going. But she has Thráin, who's only a couple of weeks old and who, like his brother before him, is mostly awake at night and asleep during the day. He has given her plenty of opportunity to sit in the rocking chair, trying to soothe a fussy infant back to sleep. It's a good place to get some thinking done and in the middle of the night there are usually no folk to disturb her. She likes it like that.

And so she thinks that they might actually be heading towards actual friendship. But it didn't start out that way. Goodness, it took him ages to actually tolerate her. It has taken Kate even longer to get over that slight disapproval, justified or not, that she's always felt coming from him. But while they do not actually get on in the traditional sense of the word, they do have a common cause.

Thorin.

Kate will never go as far to say that they manage their king between the two of them. She knows her husband would object terribly against such a term and he'd be right too, because that isn't quite what they are doing. Maybe, she ponders one long night in the rocking chair, maybe they just enable Thorin to lead this kingdom to the best of his abilities.

That's why at times she'll suddenly find her schedule's been cleared, and so will her husband's be, allowing them to actually spend some quality time together just when Thorin is so fed up with the proceedings of court that he's about to explode and do some untold damage to relations with people who should be their friends. And Dwalin will nod at her or even smile and Kate knows who she's got to thank for that unexpected stroke of luck.

At other times it'll be Dwalin and the training grounds he needs and it is Dwalin who finds his schedule mysteriously free of any pressing duties. And all the documents in Thorin's study will simply go and take themselves for a short walk across the hallway and into Kate's own study. It's extra work for her and she loathes paperwork almost more than she loathes a surprise visit from Thranduil, but it's worth it. And it allows Thorin to spend some time with one of his closest friends. That Dwalin benefits from these times as well is just an added bonus, but she never actually does something for him.

Until today.

'Absolutely not.'

This is clearly not the reply the dwarf opposite her has anticipated. He's looking at her, fury marring his features for just a second before he has them back under his control. Well, turnabout is only fair play; Kate is sure she didn't have her face under control when he made his outlandish request.

'And why not?' he demands.

That he even needs to ask is making it hard for her not to forget that she is a queen and settle this in a satisfactory manner: by punching him in the face. 'Because Dwalin is a high-ranking member of the royal guard. He is not going to guard your mules, no matter what they are carrying.'

Ivar is doing an impressive imitation of an angry bull. He certainly has the face for it, including, but not limited to, the nose ring. 'He's had no problem with it before.'

Aforementioned before pre-dates the quest by some years, Kate knows and, judging by the very clear disgust on Dwalin's face, he has not enjoyed his employment in Ivar's service. Not that Kate can find it in herself to blame him; Ivar is by far the most unpleasant dwarf she has encountered to date, and that includes Lord Walin. Thorin shares this opinion, but unfortunately he is in Dale on
important business. Of course that is why Ivar is here today; he reckons she is more of a pushover than her husband. Of course, the baby in her arms and the toddler clinging to her skirts won't make her look particular threatening.

'Before he was not in a position to turn down employment.' Kate prays for patience and at the same time desperately wishes she would not be holding Thráin; Ivar is begging for a broken nose and the longer this goes on, the more Kate is inclined to oblige him. 'Now he guards the King under the Mountain and his family. Moreover he is a hero who helped to reclaim these very halls we are currently standing in.' While you were shaking in your boots at the mere thought of a dragon. 'You are not in any position to make demands of him. He owes you nothing.'

'But you command him,' Ivar says as if that settles the matter. 'As soon as you give him the order, he will come.'

As soon as? He's got a bloody nerve. 'I will give no such command.' She knows her voice is rising, but good grief, she can barely believe this is actually happening. 'What do you take me for? Your servant?'

Behind her, Dwalin is making a sound deep in his throat that suggests he is seconds away from tearing the abrasive dwarf lord limb from limb. Hardly surprising, that. Kate has met her fair share of recalcitrant dwarves, but most at least show her some respect, reluctant or not, because she is Thorin's wife and dwarves are generally courteous to females anyway. None had presumed they are allowed to speak to her like this before.

'You have more guards,' Ivar point out, because he just doesn't know when to back off. 'You can spare the one.'

It's a power play, Kate thinks. He wants her to give in. Of course, he would like Dwalin to guard his mules with precious stones – because he can scare away a robber at fifty paces just by casually glancing in their general direction – but that is not what this is really about. He's testing her authority, which means that giving in is not an option. Neither is invoking Thorin's name. She's hidden behind him quite long enough. She has been queen for almost three years now; it's about time she gets some authority in her own right. These dwarves need to get over their bloody stupid prejudices and accept that she is here now and that she is not going anywhere, and the sooner they do, the better it will be.

'I strongly suggest you go and find your guards among your own people instead of trying to steal mine.' She would have crossed her arms if she hadn't been holding her youngest son. 'Dwalin's duty is right here in Erebor.'

Besides, Thorin would go spare to find that she has sent his friend away. Her husband is still uneasy about leaving her alone with his people. He's not entirely wrong in that, because most dwarves are still getting used to her and the idea of her as their queen. She's certainly not well-liked among all the dwarves of Durin's Folk. Things are changing, but not quickly enough for Kate's tastes or Thorin's nerves. The only reason he's felt comfortable going to Dale without her is because he's left Dwalin behind to look out for her.

Ivar is about to speak again, but Kate cuts him off before the first word of protest crosses his lips. 'You might want to think again before you object,' she cautions him. She estimates that Dwalin's well of patience has just about run dry and that he is seconds away from doing Ivar some undefined but doubtlessly irreparable bodily harm. 'It won't change matters. My mind is made up and will not be changed. It would be best for you to take your leave and find your guards elsewhere.'

Ivar isn't quite looking at her. Rather he's looking at a point somewhere behind her left shoulder,
where Dwalin is standing. Kate doesn't have to actually turn around to know that he is glaring the dwarf lord into submission. He takes another breath, actually looks like he's going to say something and then, after another look at Dwalin, thinks better of it.

'I will take my leave then,' he says and Kate knows that they both know who won this round. True enough, Dwalin has helped her to win it and it vexes her a little that she needed the threat of violence to get him to comply, because that means she still hasn't done it entirely on her own. And she needs that. She needs to make it clear that she can hold her own and that she doesn't go hiding behind guards or her husband's name. She doesn't want to be that kind of person.

But Ivar is leaving and at least she hasn't given in to his demands, so she'll count it as a victory all the same.

'What a twat,' she says once the door has fallen shut behind him.

Dwalin nods at her. 'Thank you.'

Those words are so unexpected that for a moment she rightly doesn't know what to say. He never thanks her for anything, not in so many words anyway.

So, she doesn't say you're welcome. Instead she settles for: 'My pleasure.' It is, really. Way back in her own world Laura always said that Kate thrives on conflict, that she needs people to shout at to do well. While Kate is quite sure that is not quite an accurate representation of reality, her friend was not entirely wrong either. It feels good to let off steam sometimes and she really can't help it if there are folk around practically lining up for a tongue-lashing, can she? Not her fault at all.

Dwalin nods. It is too much to ask for a smile, but she is getting better at reading him and she thinks that maybe, if he were a smiling sort of person, he would have just now. 'I could tell,' he says. And in that way he is much like Thorin, Kate has found. Like him, Dwalin can be light-hearted when it is least expected and, like it did with Thorin at first, it always takes Kate by surprise.

'Well, Ivar was asking for it.' She shakes her head in disbelief. 'Honestly, what the hell was he thinking, going on like that? What's that obsession with you anyway? Did you piss him off once that he thinks he needs to make your life difficult now or something?'

She knows at once that she is absolutely right. 'Ivar holds a grudge better than most.'

It is still too soon to ask for the tale, Kate feels. It's always tiny steps forward with Dwalin, but Kate at least feels confident that some day he will tell her.

'Well, like I said, my pleasure.' She surely hasn't made a friend today, but she won't have sleepless nights over that one. To be honest, she would be pleased if Ivar took their exchange today as a hint to bugger off to the Iron Hills and bother Dáin with his unreasonable demands. He would not have the patience for such nonsense. Kate hadn't seen him since he had left a couple weeks after the battle, but she remembers him well enough. And the mere idea of Ivar asking the same question of Dáin that he had just asked of her is enough to bring a smile to her face. 'I hope he won't bother you again.'

Dwalin shrugs. 'If he does, I'll know where to find you.' That he says that he'd come to find her and not Thorin is a tiny bit of a surprise, but a pleasant one.

'Just so,' she says and then she takes a leap of faith, hoping she hasn't misread this situation horribly. 'That's what friends are for, after all.'
He doesn't contradict her.

It feels like progress.

If someone had told Dwalin, son of Fundin, five years ago that he would strike up a friendship with the mannish lass who got married to his best friend, he would have laughed in their faces. He might have accused them of having consumed far too much wine as well. But here he is, somehow in the early stages of friendship with Kate Andrews, Queen under the Mountain, and the only one laughing is her son Thráin, who's begged for a ride atop Dwalin's shoulders and who's having a grand old time, judging by the excited squeals. He's not quite sure how he's ended up being a babysitter, but he's not quite convinced he hates it as much as he'll claim when asked about it.

The thing is that Kate is busy. There are men from Dale banging on the door about some matter that needs her urgent attention. Both Dwalin, the bearer of the "good" news, and Kate know better than to unleash Thorin on the men. He hasn't got the patience to deal with them in a manner that befits a king. Having been looked down on by that race would have done that, which makes it all the more ironic that he ended up marrying one of them. Either way, Kate knows how to handle them, better than her husband at any rate.

Of course, she can't take her children to court with her. Thoren and Thráin wouldn't know proper behaviour if it waved in their faces – his hopes for the future of Durin's line are diminishing with every passing day – and last month's childminding disaster has made it very clear that Thorin should not be the one doing the childminding. Besides, Thorin has disappeared to the forges to work off some of his frustration over the latest correspondence with the men of the Lake. Disturbing him would be unwise.

In any other circumstance Kate would have cast a pleading look in Thora's direction, but Thora has wed Ori only three days past and the couple has yet to emerge from their rooms. Kate has pointed out that the odds of walking in on something embarrassing are too high and she really doesn't want to find her brother and her best friend in a compromising situation. Dwalin agrees whole-heartedly.

Of course, it doesn't solve the matter of babysitting. Dís is off the list – with Thorin in the forges – so is Lufur, the young guardsman who's become a good friend of Kate's – on a patrol three days away, under Fíli's command – and neither Dwalin nor Kate can find it in their hearts to inflict Dori on two unsuspecting and innocent lads. And Nori is out of the question for the more obvious reasons. Unfortunately, that rather exhausts their list of suitable childminders.

At this point Dwalin opens his mouth. 'I'll look after them.' He isn't quite sure where the words have come from, but there is no taking them back now that he has spoken them. 'It'll only be for an hour or two.'

Kate frowns. 'I can't promise that,' she points out, somewhat unnecessarily. The lords of Dale can drone on and on in a way that slowly lulls a body to sleep. Two hours might be a slightly optimistic prediction. 'And you don't have to do it. There are others.'

A few years ago he would have balked at her dismissal of his services, but he likes to think he's starting to figure her out. And he's come to realise that Kate doesn't like having to ask things of him. Of course, it may not have helped that he's always projected the message that he doesn't like being asked things.

But this he'd like to hear. 'What others?'
'Bofur wouldn't mind.' To her credit she follows his question with an immediate response. 'He might not even mind being dragged from the mines for it. And I might try Dara.' Hm, she might even have a point. Bombur and Dara have such a brood of their own that two more dwarflings would hardly make a difference.

'Or you could let me do it.' Thráin is already on his shoulders and Thoren has clearly perked up at the idea he'll be supervised by Dwalin for an afternoon.

She's thinking it through and then pulling one of her faces. 'Okay,' she says, another other-worldly word that is apparently a synonym for yes. 'If you really don't mind.' She is still giving him a way out.

Dwalin doesn't take it. 'Best not keep the men waiting,' he tells her.

Kate grimaces. 'Two more minutes won't kill them.' She pauses to press a quick kiss to Thoren's forehead and then reaches up to ruffle Thráin's hair. 'You two be good now,' she tells them. 'I do expect to find Dwalin still in one piece when I come back.'

He grins. 'You think I'm that breakable, lass?' There is still a bit of newness to the bantering. Kate meets it with slightly startled disbelief without fail every time, as if she can barely believe that he is actually being nice to her. When he is nice to her for Thorin's sake, she never seems to question it, but when he's making an effort for her, when Thorin is nowhere to be found, she appears to find it bewildering.

Truth is, she is not half-bad company when she's in a decent mood. Of course, she's contrary a lot of other times and Dwalin is not entirely sure what ever compelled Thorin to wed her, but that's not for Dwalin to question. His friend is old enough to know his own mind and, one can only hope, his own heart. And, if Dwalin has to be honest, Kate is better for Thorin than some of the unattached dwarrowdams populating Erebor these days.

And he has always known that it would be better for Thorin to have permanent company than to lack it. Thorin is a solitary dwarf by nature, but that doesn't mean that solitude is exactly good for him. He needs someone to keep him grounded in reality. Kate is far more suited to the job than any other Dwalin knows. That realisation has only come with time, just like the one that she has a good heart hiding behind all that snappiness and sarcasm. And there is loyalty there, more than most folk give her credit for. Then again, they don't know that she has given up an entire world for Thorin's sake. Dwalin does know and inevitably it colours his view of her and it does so in a good way.

'I think you are underestimating my lads,' she says cheerfully. 'They'll wear a body down with one hand tied round their backs, mind my words.'

Dwalin does not doubt it. 'Might be the other way around, for all you know.'

Kate arches an eyebrow. 'This I would like to see.' She's at the door now. 'I'll be back as soon as possible.' With that, she's gone.

True to her predictions, Thoren and Thráin keep him well occupied. And it's honestly hard to keep track of the passage of time when there are two dwarflings literally hanging onto him, demanding his attention, never allowing him a break. All that restlessness must come from their mother, Dwalin decides. Kate can't sit still either.

Normally he has little patience for things like this. He always made an exception for Fíli and Kíli when they were younger, and he's good with infants. But once said infants get to walking and talking he doesn't know what to do with them anymore, not until they're old enough to hold a sword
and receive instruction in the art of fighting anyway. And he very much doubts that Kate is going to allow him to take Thoren and Thráin, aged four and two respectively, to the training grounds.

It's easier than he thought. What's more, he rather enjoys it, so when Kate comes back some hours later, looking exhausted and dishevelled she finds Dwalin spread out on his stomach on the floor with her two lads on his back, pretending that Dwalin is a pony rather than one of the most fearsome warriors of this age. And Kate, who to his knowledge still finds him a little intimidating, bursts into laughter.

'Good grief, what's happened here?' She's trying to control her mirth – badly – and Dwalin fears that whatever remained of his reputation is lying in pieces on the floor. 'Oh, this is exactly what I needed.'

'A humilitating sight?' Dwalin questions, not entirely sure he ought to read an insult in her words or not.

'A good laugh,' she corrects. Then she catches herself and adds: 'I'm not mocking you, mind. Only I wish I could snap a picture of this. It looks... good. Sort of normal. A bit like I actually pictured my life. Filled with normal things.' She's starting to flounder. 'Oh, bugger it all, I can't explain it adequately.' She must have seen Thoren perk up. 'And you did not hear me say that. It's bad enough you pick up bad habits from Nori.'

Dwalin can only agree there, though in all fairness, they might pick up more from Nori than just a few mild swear words.

Kate marches over and dislodges Thráin from Dwalin's back. 'Come on, you, let's give Dwalin some breathing space. You too, Thoren.'

The latter responds with a whined 'amaaaaad' – the lad makes it at least a five syllable word – before Kate's sternest look forces him into compliance, or what appears to be compliance. The moment his mother's attention wanders to Thráin, whom she's just put back on the ground, he jumps at her and tackles her to the floor before she can find her balance.

'I won,' he declares, sitting down on her stomach.

'A worthy victory,' Dwalin praises. The lad's got battle sense, although his sense of honour leaves something to be desired. One does not attack when one's opponent's back is turned. 'How about you let your amad get up, eh?'

Thoren crosses his arms over his chest in a gesture that suddenly makes him look very much like his father at his most stubborn. 'No.'

Kate nods slowly. 'That's how it's going to be then?' she asks. 'Well, I suppose there's nothing else for it.' The lad has the good sense to start looking worried when Kate conjures up a wicked grin. 'Remember, you brought this on yourself, darling.'

Thoren, unlike Dwalin, clearly knows what's coming. The boy gets up with a squeal and tries to make a run for it, but Kate is quicker and she grabs him before he can make a quick getaway. The volume of Thoren's shrieking is ear-piercing when Kate starts to take her revenge by tickling her eldest without mercy.

'Who won again?' she asks innocently.

'I did,' Thoren insists cheekily. Another bout of tickling makes him change his mind. 'You did! You did!'
'Just so,' Kate agrees, letting up.

She rises to her feet and Thoren flees to his room, making a show out of looking over his shoulder in mock-fear. It might have looked genuine if he wasn't still laughing.

'You are a warrior after all,' Dwalin observes with a smirk.

Kate shrugs. 'Shame you can't actually tickle orcs to death. Hm, that makes me wonder, can orcs be ticklish? They don't seem the type.'

'I've never bothered to ask,' Dwalin replies truthfully. 'And their corpses aren't that talkative.'

Kate snorts. 'Big surprise.' She brushes the hair from her face. 'Thanks for today, by the way.'

'The lads were easy,' Dwalin answers. It's more or less true.

Kate gives him a knowing look. 'Were they indeed? Well, thanks anyway.'

He nods and then parrots her words from a couple years ago back at her. 'That's what friends are for, after all.'

He doesn't know what surprises him more: the fact that he speaks those words in the first place or that he actually means them.

But Kate is smiling, albeit it's in a surprised startled deer sort of way. 'I suppose so,' she says, once she's regained her composure. But he can tell that she's pleased at the development. 'And with that being the case, can I offer this friend of mine a cup of tea?'

It's not as if he has places to be. He might as well accept.

So he does.

It's unexpectedly pleasant. There isn't a single awkward silence. Progress indeed. The tea is good too. He might actually get used to this.

He does that too.

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Chapter End Notes

After the last two chapters filled with more heavy stuff, I thought a more light-hearted chapter was in order. And I think someone actually requested a piece about Kate and Dwalin becoming friends ages ago. I must confess I don't know who asked for it, but I did make note of it at the time and so here it is.

I hope you enjoyed it. Thank you for reading. Reviews would be most welcome.
Floundering

Chapter Notes

Let me start off by saying: sorry, I know it has been a while. Having said that, real life is still demanding much of my attention, which means that at least The Book won’t resume updating for a while. I can only write bits and pieces in between other activities and a story like that, I feel, needs regular updates. I hope, however, to be able to at least update Duly Noted once in a while. Anyway, I hope you’re enjoying this piece!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘I’ll look after the babe,’ he offers. ‘Go to the baths, Kate. Frea is on duty. She knows you’re coming. Get Thorin’s head out of his arse.’ The whole kingdom will be better for it. And being where he is at the moment, Thorin won’t be able to storm off in a fit of temper, because that would involve running around naked. Dwalin may or may not have told Frea the King’s clothes would not be needed for a while and so would be better folded away until… well, she’d know. He is nowhere near as cunning as Kate or indeed his own brother, but sometimes desperate times call for desperate measures.
Duly Noted, Chapter 18: For King and Country

Kate could never exactly answer the question what expectations she had of marriage before she actually got married. Saying that she had none would indicate that she did not expect much of it at all. She might even be forgiven for thinking that way, given the sad history of her parents’ marriage. But Kate had never thought like that. In fact, she had vowed that she would do different, would do better.

Having said that, she had entered into this union with few expectations, mainly because she simply did not know enough about dwarves to know what to expect. She hadn’t got a clue about what her life was going to be like, apart from the fact that she would spend it with Thorin. With divorce being non-existent around these parts that was the one thing she had been able to know.

And of course she had known that it wouldn’t always be easy. They certainly wouldn’t ride into the sunset and live happily ever after once they’d tied the knot. Both of them could be headstrong and argumentative and they had enough emotional luggage apiece to fill the treasury of Erebor with no room to spare. Arguments were bound to happen. But they had seen each other at their worst during the quest, several times over, and they had lived through that.

Still, the latest crisis had hit her completely out of the blue.

‘Why can’t you see?’ Thorin looked at her in unflattering disbelief.

Kate was about to ask him the same thing, but refrained. It would be a pointless question anyway. It had become increasingly clear this past half hour that neither of them could be persuaded to see it the way the other wanted them to.
And it was such a stupid thing, really. Kate had not expected to be welcomed with open arms by all of Thorin’s people. And they were his people, certainly not hers. That had been made very clear to her, not least of all by the likes of Lord Walin. They had wasted no time in letting her know that they thought she had no business being here. One of them had even gone as far as to speculate she must have bewitched Thorin to force him into marrying her.

Of course, not a single one of those dwarves had enough courage to utter such theories within hearing distance of Thorin. His temper was legendary and no one wanted to find themselves on the receiving end of it.

But dwarves were gossipy and nosy by nature and keeping anything a secret from other dwarves equalled mission impossible. Kate didn’t know how and where, but Thorin had gotten wind of these rumours and unkindnesses and he was more than displeased to find that she had known about them all along and hadn’t told him about it.

‘It wouldn’t have changed anything,’ she said. And in this matter at least she knew herself to be the more realistic of the two of them. Dwarves did not like outsiders and she was one. They wouldn’t have liked her if she had wed a lowly miner, but they sure as hell weren’t going to tolerate her as their queen. A mannish lass bossing them about? The mere idea put their hearts squarely in the danger zone. And they were vocal about their opinions, when Thorin was not around to hear anyway. They didn’t take as much care with their words around Kate or anyone else, although they took care around Dwalin ever since he had personally knocked one of the gossipers into the capable hands of the healers. As far as Kate knew, the victim was still limping.

Thorin was unamused. ‘You once told me that we would do this together or not at all.’ His voice could have frozen the land for ten miles around. ‘Did you not mean that?’

Well, shit. Those words hit home. She knew how much Thorin hated being shut out. She knew, better than most, how much he secretly feared being left behind, in any way. And she had. She might have done it with the best intentions, but that did not change the facts of the matter.

‘Of course I bloody meant it.’ She bit her lip. ‘I just… I didn’t want to burden you with it.’ That was only partly true. Thorin had more than enough on his plate without her adding to his troubles. There was so much to do, so much to organise and everyone clearly expected Thorin to summon instant solutions out of thin air. But that was only half of it. She also knew how Thorin would react and beyond the shadow of a doubt he would see it as his duty and his pleasure to put an end to it. And she did not want that. If she was ever going to be respected in her own right, she shouldn’t have him fighting her battles for her. She had to be seen to hold her own, to rise above their pettiness and move on. Of course, her husband would not see it her way and so she hadn’t told him at all.

On reflection, that was not her best move.

‘Burden me with it?’ It was a minor miracle he didn’t bring the roof down on their heads in his anger. ‘Your troubles are not a burden to me. Why won’t you see that?’

But in a way they were. ‘Well, you wouldn’t have them if I wasn’t here,’ she pointed out. He certainly hadn’t made his own life easier by marrying her and on some level, he must be aware of that. Thorin was no fool after all. ‘Rebuilding an entire kingdom is hard enough on its own; you hardly need to deal with all the other crap as well.’ Certainly not when she preferred to handle it herself.

That too didn’t inspire any insight on his part. ‘Has it maybe occurred to you that I would want to deal with it?’
He made that point rather clear these past thirty minutes. She just didn’t agree, was all. She fired back: ‘Has it occurred to you that I don’t want you to do that? I can’t keep hiding behind you. That’s not how this works!’ She told him before that she wasn’t going to put up with mollycoddling of any kind and she would stand by that.

‘So you hide it, like an elf would.’ As insults went, this was about the lowest of the low and Kate felt it as such. It was even worse because she knew that Thorin despised the way both men and elves could twist and manipulate. To be shoved into the same corner as Thranduil, Erland and all their cronies both hurt and enraged her.

And hurt made her anger speak louder. ‘Because I knew you’d react like a dwarf would: like a blunt sledgehammer to the head. And that’s not the way to solve this.’

As soon as the words left her mouth, she knew she’d gone too far. But she couldn’t unsay it and neither could he take his words back. The silence that dragged out between them felt like the sound of something breaking.

Then he turned on his heel and left the room. The door slammed shut behind him.

I didn’t mean it. But how could Thorin know? She had given him no indication that she hadn’t mean every single word she spoke. And now he was gone out of the door, going only Lord knows where. They’d had arguments before, but the last time they’d both spoken such cutting words had been the time they had hardly spoken for two weeks, the time when she thought their marriage was over before it had really begun. Cold dread landed in her stomach and settled there. What have we done?

She would have remained there, frozen on the spot trapped in a net of horror of her own making if not for the cries of her son. In the heat of the argument she’d almost forgotten Thoren was there. He’d settled down for a nap and his parents had used that opportunity by having the worst fight they’d had in over a year. The slamming door must have woken him.

‘I’m sorry,’ she muttered, lifting him out of his cradle. ‘I’m sorry.’ That the apology was more for his father than for him was something Thoren was blissfully unaware of. And it didn’t calm him either.

She fed him, changed him and held him, but she was just going through the motions, her thoughts miles away. This was not how she planned to do this. When they had started to discuss this thing, she’d had in mind how she was going to do this. When they had started to discuss this thing, she’d had in mind how she was going to go about it. She wouldn’t go as far as to say she practised a little speech beforehand, but still, there had been a plan. And then emotions and all the painful things from their past had elbowed in and reason had gone right out of the window.

‘What a bloody mess,’ she said.

Thoren wailed his agreement. And he still wailed it three hours later when she was getting ready for bed, and then three hours after that, when she gave up on sleep for the night and he was still crying when dawn broke, with no hope of an end in sight. By that time Kate’s worries about her marriage had taken a backseat. Thoren never really liked sleeping at night, but there was something different about his cries this time, something more desperate, as if he was trying to tell her something that she just couldn’t understand.

‘I wish you could tell me,’ she whispered. ‘I wish I knew what you mean.’ If he was ill, then she really didn’t know what to do. But she knew someone who did. The problem was that Thora lived about fifteen minutes away and Óin even a good twenty-five. And Kate didn’t know many other healers.
‘Well, sod it, I need one.’ She put Thoren down, who responded by wailing even louder, and marched over to the door. As per Thorin’s instructions, there was always one dwarf on guard. So she pulled the door open and poked her head out, only to find the last person she’d hoped to see there.

‘Ofur,’ she greeted coolly. She had in fact told him to bugger off – in somewhat more polite terms – a week before because he thought it was up to him to decide who was and wasn’t allowed into her presence. His list of who was allowed was alarmingly short and more or less began and ended with Thorin. She hadn’t seen him since, but here he was again.

His response was just as icy. ‘My lady.’

This wasn’t promising, but it wasn’t for herself that she was asking. ‘Listen, I need a bit of a favour. I think my son is ill and I need a healer. Would you please be so kind as to run over and fetch one?’

‘I cannot.’ No explanation, no nothing.

‘You’ve got legs, yes?’ Kate wasn’t about to buy his bullshit. ‘And they’re both fully-functional, aren’t they?’

‘It is my duty to guard this door.’

The words made Kate want to fasten her hands around his throat and squeeze. But for the sake of her son, she refrained. ‘Well, if that’s the case, you can come in and guard it from inside while you mind my son, so that I can go in search of a healer.’ There were more ways to skin a cat, after all. Not that Ofur was anywhere near the top ten on her list of suitable babysitters, but desperate times called for desperate measures and she would be as quick as she could be. It wouldn’t be for very long.

Ofur however shook his head. ‘That is not my duty.’

*Where’s Excalibur when I need it?* ‘Well, I can’t go walking all around Erebor with a crying baby in tow, so it’s going to have to be one or the other.’

Ofur remained unmoved. ‘It is against my orders to leave my post.’

That did it. ‘In that case, you can clear out of here this instant and find someone else to do the job you clearly think is so beneath you,’ she snapped. ‘Be quick about it and have your replacement report to me the moment they get here. It would be better still if they could bring back a healer while they’re at it. And do hurry.’ She slammed the door for good measure.

‘I’m sorry, darling. Help is coming,’ she promised, picking Thoren up again. ‘You’ll need to be patient just a little longer.’ He didn’t understand her of course. He was only five months old; it wasn’t as if he had mastered the art of speech yet.

I wish Thorin were here. He’d never been a father in the actual literal sense of the word before, but she knew he had helped to raise Fíli and Kíli both and they had turned out all right. Clearly he knew how this was done. Kate didn’t have a clue. And she was terrified that something was really seriously wrong with her little boy and that her husband wasn’t coming home and that the whole world was coming down crashing around her. And in all that chaos she couldn’t even seem to comfort her own son. *What’s the bloody use of me at all?*

Time passed. Kate made a point to not look at her watch every five seconds, because it would only depress her more. How long would it take for a replacement to get here? It was about ten to fifteen
minutes to the guards’ headquarters, might take about as long to find someone available to take over, then another fifteen minutes to get here, but maybe longer if Ofur had passed along her message to bring a healer as well. An hour, tops. She could last that long, couldn’t she? Thoren could last that long, surely?

Kate couldn’t say how much time had passed when she heard voices outside the door. ‘Thank the Maker,’ she whispered. ‘Help is here.’ She put Thoren down in his crib again – ‘not long, love, promise’ – and practically ran to the door. She only paused when she heard Dwalin’s voice. He was the replacement? At last, something good was happening.

‘Dwalin! Thank the Lord. I thought I heard your voice.’ She was speaking before she could properly take in what exactly was happening right outside her door and when she did, she realised that maybe she didn’t have such a complete understanding of events as she had thought five seconds ago.

Dwalin was sending one of his most terrifying scowls at the very dwarf Kate had dismissed an hour – had it even been a whole hour? She couldn’t tell anymore – before. He stood as rigid and unmoveable as he had then. In fact, there was not even the merest suggestion that he had moved at all since she told him off.

Dwalin’s next words only confirmed that. ‘Aye, that’s all you’d have heard if you hadn’t opened the door.’

This again? Bloody hell, she knew dwarves were stubborn, but she’d never really known them to defy a direct order. ‘Ofur? I thought I dismissed you from my service just last week? And then again an hour ago? What in the name of sanity do you think you’re still doing here?’ It took a lot of effort to remain calm. He hadn’t gone at all, had he? Dwalin’s arrival was just a happy coincidence.

And he was still as arrogant and unremorseful as before. ‘It is only for the King under the Mountain to dismiss me. I may guard you, but you do not command me.’

_If only I were stronger, I’d probably kill him._

Fortunately for her Dwalin seemed to have read her thoughts. He lifted the arrogant sod right off his feet and slammed him against the wall. ‘She’s your Queen, you little shit. You’ll obey her as you’ll obey her husband and if she tells you to be gone, you get yourself gone as fast as your feet can carry you.’

In any other situation Kate would have marvelled at those words for hours after they’d been spoken. Dwalin wasn’t her biggest fan. No, correction, he wasn’t a fan of her at all. He only tolerated her for Thorin’s sake, because he thought she was good for him. But this was different. If she hadn’t known any better, she’d have thought he was offended on her behalf.

But that was a ridiculously fanciful thought brought on by a distinct lack of sleep and so she responded with flippancy. ‘And if I tell him to jump, he’s supposed to ask how high, right? You might want to lessen the pressure on his throat, Dwalin; he’s going blue.’ He was at that, although Kate wasn’t sure she minded right now. But she knew she’d mind later, so all things considered it was better to do the decent thing.

From the looks of things, Dwalin shared the sentiment; another first. ‘Do you want me to put him down?’

As if. ‘Did I say that?’ she asked. ‘I just want him to be conscious enough to actually understand what’s being said to him. And I don’t want you arrested for murder either. So, listen up, kid.
You’re going to run along and fetch someone more competent to do the job, preferably someone who doesn’t think it’s his right to decide who I see and don’t see. And I don’t want to see you here again.’ She really didn’t. Would it actually be possible to exile this waste of space to the Iron Hills? ‘Now you can put him down. Unless you’ve something to add?’ she asked of Dwalin.

Dwalin had many things to add, if his face was any indication, but he refrained. ‘I’ll eventually think of something,’ he said, and that in itself sounded more terrifying to Ofur than anything Kate had said just now. Perfect.

Of course, he was still a dwarf and he was nothing if not incredibly stubborn and as such he still tried to make a point about a door that needed guarding, to which Kate could only respond that right now she had Dwalin for company. No one would get in except over his dead body. It took another glare on Dwalin’s part to convince him that it really was so, but then he finally buggered off. Good riddance to bad rubbish.

But with that minor crisis dealt with, the bigger one once again took precedence and she found herself blurting out all her worries to Thorin’s best friend before she could find it in herself to just shut up. She was rambling too, trying to fit all her struggles with her child and then the conflict with Ofur into as few sentences as she could, which meant she sounded as incoherent as a drunk.

Miracle of miracle Dwalin seemed to at least get the gist of what she was saying. Or maybe it was just because Thoren was still crying at the top of his lungs and he hadn’t heard a single word she had just spoken that he nodded towards the nursery and asked: ‘Allow me?’

At this point she could have begged him on her knees for help, so there was really no need to ask her to allow anything. Doubtlessly she would feel terribly ashamed of her own conduct later, as it was unlikely to improve Dwalin’s view of her, but that was something to worry about later.

Of course, the ‘be my guest’ she followed that up with should have remained just that, but her talking turned to rambling again, as if all her worry translated into incoherent speech without her consent: ‘I wish he could tell me what ails him, but unfortunately I really don’t speak baby. And becoming a mum hasn’t given me any magical baby mind-reading skills either.’ Bloody hell, Andrews, stop talking.

Dwalin frowned. ‘Where’s Thorin?’ he asked brusquely. ‘He ought to remember how to do this.’

‘I don’t know where he is.’ The admission just slipped out. She really wasn’t proud of what happened here yesterday and her own role in this whole sorry mess.

‘In the baths.’ Dwalin was very matter-of-fact about it.

Well, at least that was one mystery solved. Still, Kate was no sort of wizard or enchantress that she could summon her husband out of thin air to her. ‘He didn’t come home last night.’ And where did that come from? Since when did she share that kind of personal information with Dwalin? They weren’t even friends. But now that she had started talking, she didn’t seem to be able to stop. ‘We fought before he left. Something stupid really. He’s been going on and on lately about stuff folk say and how he clearly thinks it’s his job to put an end to it. I told him it wasn’t and that I can fight my own bloody battles and then he stormed off.’ In truth it had been much uglier than that, but at least she regained control of her tongue before she blurted that out too. Of course, it would be nice as well if she had just as much control over her tears. She hadn’t.

She had maybe expected Dwalin to take her to task for falling short and he would have been absolutely justified in doing exactly that. He didn’t. ‘I’ll look after the babe. Go to the baths, Kate. Frea is on duty. She knows you’re coming. Get Thorin’s head out of his arse.’
She had to do a double take that Dwalin had actually said those words, that they weren’t just a figment of her sleep-deprived imagination. But it seemed that he actually meant it, because while she was still staring at him, he marched over to the nursery to retrieve Thoren. And her son was just as astounded by this turn of events as Kate herself; he fell quiet almost right away.

Kate shook her head to drive away the mental cobwebs, but no clarity came to her. She was actually forced to ask. ‘Why are you doing this?’ It was too soon to even comprehend the fact that Dwalin placed his faith in her, to succeed where he clearly did not expect victory himself. Getting Thorin’s head out of his arse had been Dwalin’s job long before it had ever been Kate’s. And she had no clue why he was handing over this particular privilege to her without as much as a fight. If anything, he was handing it to her on a silver platter. Not that Kate had any idea how to go about “getting Thorin’s head out of his arse,” but that was something she should maybe not worry about now.

‘Because you’re suited to the job, lass. And not many other folk are.’ Dwalin very matter-of-fact about it, almost flippant, which was another development Kate had not seen coming, not even when she was well-rested and on top of her game. As it was, maybe she ought to resign herself to being perpetually surprised by Thorin’s best friend, but it was not a feeling she particularly liked. To hide her confusion she nodded, but she had a feeling he saw through that right away. Her game face had done a disappearing act along with her husband and she doubted she would find it again until they had sorted out this mess between them, something Dwalin had just given her the opportunity to actually go and do. If only she knew how.

But that kind of doubt was not one she’d share with Dwalin, not until she knew where she stood with him. And as it turned out, all her certainties had been built on shifting sands rather than steady rock. ‘Very well.’ She sounded almost like Thorin when he was out of his depth now; formal and uneasy. ‘If you don’t mind babysitting for a bit, that is.’

‘Go,’ was Dwalin’s only reply. He genuinely didn’t seem to mind. And neither did Thoren for that matter. He had settled almost the second Dwalin had picked him up and with something resembling shame Kate realised that the cause of her son’s misery may not have been an illness a healer could do something about. In all likeliness it had been her very badly-hidden distress that had fuelled his. What kind of a mother does that make of me? It was a question she didn’t dare to dwell on. She might not like the answer.

She nodded again. ‘Okay. For King and Country, right?’ At the moment it was the best guess she could come up with for Dwalin’s very odd behaviour. He’d said himself that he thought she was the best person for the job – and when had he changed his tune so much and how had she failed to notice that? – and nothing he’d said or done had suggested he had any ulterior motive. That wasn’t like Dwalin anyway.

Too late she realised that to Dwalin this expression would be unfamiliar and she was hardly in a mood to explain it and so she left the room before he had the chance to request an explanation of any sort.

Of course, now that Ofur had been gotten rid of and Thoren was in safe hands, the majority of thinking space was instantly swallowed up by the looming question of how to save her marriage. Truth was, she hadn’t got a clue what to do beyond going down to the baths and finding Thorin. It was clear Dwalin expected of her that she sorted it out. Get Thorin’s head out of his arse. Those had been his exact words. It was a vote of confidence, but that didn’t mean she knew how.

Understanding Thorin was shaping up to be her life’s work and she had only just begun scratching the surface. That was what it felt like at times, anyway.
And she knew she had a fair bit of grovelling to do as well. That was not a prospect she relished either. It was one thing to know that Thorin needed to be coaxed out of one of his dark moods, but it was another to know that she had played a part in the causing of such a mood. *I’m not good at this being married business,* she knew. She also knew that for both their sakes she would have to get better at it, and the same was true for Thorin. *I’m not my father. I won’t run away when things cease to go my way.*

‘Ah, Dwalin said you’d be coming.’ A cheerful voice snapped her out of her thoughts. Her feet had carried her in the right direction on their own – there had been no conscious thought on that matter – and she only came back to the here and now when Frea started talking to her. ‘Didn’t think you’d be this quick about it, though.’

Kate liked Frea. She was one of the dwarves who’d come back from the Ered Luin, in short, one of those who had lived through dragon-imposed exile with Thorin and who therefore were much more inclined to forgive him for some extremely unconventional decisions, like marrying Kate. The dwarves who’d endured exile were more likeable in general, not as stuck-up as their kinsmen from the Iron Hills, nor indeed as rigid and set in their ways. They were much more open to change, as long as it was within reason.

‘Dwalin volunteered for childminding duty,’ she replied. ‘And then he as good as kicked me out of my own home.’

Frea laughed. ‘Aye, that sounds like him. Come with me, I’ve got a place you can leave your clothes and I’ve found you a good clean towel. I would have gone on a search for soap and the like, but I’ve already given those to your husband.’

Kate forced her face into a grateful smile. ‘Thank you.’

Frea waved the thanks away. ‘No trouble. If Dwalin’s right, it’s you who’ll be doing all of us a favour by putting our king into a better mood.’

She certainly didn’t beat around the bush and it confirmed something that Kate had already suspected: that it was well-known though not talked about among the Ered Luin segment of Durin’s Folk that Thorin’s moods ran dark from time to time. It remained somewhat of a riddle though how it had happened that everyone seemed to think Kate was the best remedy for those bouts of brooding, especially since it had been her who had actually caused this particular bout of brooding in the first place.

‘You wouldn’t have any pointers on how to do that, would you?’ The words were out of her mouth before she could check them. Bugger this lack of sleep. It always removed the filter between her brain and her mouth. And this was how she was supposed to end this argument?

Frea laughed. ‘You’re the expert, Kate.’

She was surprised to learn it. As far as she was concerned, it was trial and error and just because she’d had more successes than most didn’t mean she knew what to do or how to read her own husband each and every time. And more fool to those who thought otherwise.

But apparently that was not something Frea was prepared to hear and so she kept her silence. She left her clothes where she was instructed, was pointed to a door and told that was where she was supposed to go and then Frea was off, taking Kate’s clothes with her. She suspected Dwalin’s hand in that, giving her no choice but to sort this out, depriving her of a way to run, unless she was of a mind to run around the Mountain dressed in only a white fluffy towel. And Kate had enough dignity left to not even want to consider that option.
He’s your husband, Andrews, not a rabid warg, she reminded herself. ‘Get on with it.’ She gave herself another good mental kick in the behind, opened the door, stepped through and closed it behind her before she could change her mind. Nothing would be solved by staring indecisively at the wretched thing all day.

It was warm and steamy inside. Thorin preferred his baths hot. Then again, Kate had preferred her showers just about the same way, back when she had one. Failing that, she could learn to get used to this. And the baths of Erebor, now that they were back in use, were quite something. She suspected they were not unlike the baths the Romans had been famous for, although dwarves were in general a good deal more hygienic. And thank goodness for that.

The dwarf in question was at the far end of the shallow pool, eyes closed, giving every appearance of sleep. She would have been fooled too if she hadn’t known him like she did. This was what he did when he didn’t want to be disturbed, when he hoped that whoever entered decided to just let him be. Well, no chance of that. Frea’s nicked my clothes.

She left the towel by the door, walked into the pool and then waded in about halfway. This was where her plans, such as they were, stopped. She had no clue how to proceed. There was no book to guide her and Thorin clearly wasn’t going to take the initiative here.

And it was difficult. Then again, no one had ever said that marriage was easy. Maybe that was the way of it in fairy-tales and Kate had established a long time ago that her life was about as far away from a fairy-tale as it could possibly get. And somehow, in this setting, with things being as they were between them now, it was even harder. There was literally nothing to hide behind, no cloak to curl up in, not even so much as the hem of a shirt to twist between her fingers when she didn’t know what to say. The fact that there were no clothes present didn’t bother her so much, really. Thorin was her husband; they’d seen each other naked before. And physical intimacy had never been a problem. They were both far more comfortable with letting their actions do the talking for them. It was the other kind of intimacy that was so hard to achieve and to maintain. Damn our pasts.

‘Thorin.’ At least she could alert him to her presence. He probably knew she was there; he would have heard the door and her way of walking sounded distinctly different from the dwarves’ heavier footsteps. Still, common courtesy couldn’t hurt her.

He opened his eyes, but only acknowledged her presence with a curt ‘Kate.’ This was not the most promising start.

She pressed on. ‘I am sorry.’ As always, it was hard to get the words to cross her lips, even more so because she wasn’t the only guilty party in this conflict. It took two to argue and Thorin hadn’t been the most reasonable dwarf under the Mountain either. ‘I shouldn’t have shouted at you and I shouldn’t have kept things from you. That was a bloody stupid thing to do.’ That at least was the truth. That she had done it on purpose, as he well knew, had been even more foolish.

She’d caught him by surprise. Well, she would; Kate didn’t apologise much. In fact, he appeared so much surprised that he clearly couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

This was going to be one of those one-sided conversations then, the kind where she talked and he communicated via silences and looks and left the interpreting all to her. And one misinterpretation could make this whole thing fall apart quicker than you could say disaster. Kate hated this. Would it kill him to open up just a little sometimes? She wasn’t psychic. She couldn’t pluck his thoughts out of his head and read them like one would read a book, like the Lady Galadriel. She was only human.

‘I still stand by my point,’ she said and not just because she wanted to put up some form of
resistance for the sake of resistance. It wasn’t about loss of face either. Well, it was about that a little, but it wasn’t about loss of face with him. Kate had stopped caring about that some time ago. ‘I know you care and I know you can’t stand it when folk are being nasty to me, but you can’t go punching every single one of them because it makes you feel better. And I can’t be seen to hide behind you while you go and fight my battles. I think our marriage contract says something about being equal partners. I’m not your trophy wife.’

The unfamiliar term finally forced him into opening his mouth. ‘Beg pardon?’

Well, shit. ‘I’m not just a woman you’ve married for the sake of looking pretty next to you, who has no real value of her own.’ She realised her mistake almost right away and amended: ‘Well, not that anyone around here thinks I’m even remotely tolerable to look at, but I think you get my drift.’

His brows knit together in what she had come to know as disapproval. ‘You are not ugly to me.’

So, not disapproval aimed at her, then. At least that was progress.

‘I know.’ She did. That didn’t mean he loved her for her looks. And actually, she was glad of that, because it meant he loved her for who she was, which she preferred. ‘And that’s not really the point.’

‘But it is.’ At least she had him engaged in some form of conversation now, even if she was unsure of where this was headed. ‘You said it yourself, folk do say these things and worse besides about you.’

And so they had reached the heart of the matter. ‘Yes, they do. But I can handle it; I’ve got a thick skin.’

Thorin gave her a very pointed look that told her that she did not, not in the literal meaning at any rate. ‘You should not be forced to endure such talk.’

‘In a fair world, you’d be absolutely right.’ Of course, if all was perfect, none of this would happen. ‘But it’s not and some people are just mean. Some are nice, others are bullies. Our worlds really aren’t that different. Besides, you wouldn’t want me to run out of people to shout at.’ Maybe it was slightly too early for attempts at light-heartedness, but that one had come out unbidden as well. I don’t need a bodyguard, I need a tongue-guard.

To her relief, the left corner of his mouth made the barest hint of upward motion. ‘Aye, but there are too many for you to shout at. And you cannot expect me to stay back and be forced to watch you be thus insulted.’ He didn’t raise his voice, but he still made it perfectly clear that he felt at least as strongly about this as she did. There would be no easy solutions here. ‘We promised to do this together or not at all.’

Kate really didn’t like it that he used her own words against her, though, if she was being honest, it was a same sort of situation that had made her say them in the first place, because she hadn’t wanted to be shut out, not like she had done to him these past few weeks. Those words hadn’t been exactly a part of their marriage vows, in the sense that they hadn’t been written down and therefore didn’t have their signatures under them, but it was a promise they had made all the same. And she had broken it.

‘Yes, we did,’ she admitted. Somehow, it felt like a defeat. Oh, for heaven’s sake, this is Thorin, not Thranduil. And not everything is a bloody contest. That didn’t mean that she hadn’t made a very good point, but she also knew deep down that her point was not the cause of this fight. And that put her squarely in the wrong. It was not a feeling she liked. ‘And I am sorry. I promise you I’ll try not to do that again.’ Anything else would be a promise she wasn’t sure she’d be able to
keep. Old habits took a long time to break; they’d become too much a part of her, to the point where she didn’t even think about doing them. That didn’t mean she wouldn’t try her hardest. Kate liked to think she was her own master; no one dictated her behaviour but her. That didn’t mean she was without flaws either.

Thorin nodded, accepting the promise. ‘I should not have shouted at you either. That was ill done and I apologise.’

That caught her on the back foot. If Kate’s apologies were rare, Thorin’s were even more so. That didn’t mean he thought he was always right – he wasn’t – but he still didn’t always say so, because admitting he had been in the wrong was leaving himself emotionally wide open for attack. Kate only knew this because she felt much the same.

She nodded too. ‘Apology accepted.’ At least for the time being, they were back in calmer waters, an appropriate metaphor, given where they were. ‘So, are we good?’ It was important to know that, to have that little piece of certainty back again. She needed it; she was tired of all the fighting.

‘We are.’ The fact that he gave a verbal confirmation only emphasised it. He extended his hand in an invitation to join him. ‘If Frea were here, I believe she would tell you this is not how one is supposed to use the baths.’

Frea would be right, too; Kate was still standing in the middle of the pool, where the water only barely reached her waist. ‘Isn’t it? Where I’m from we have hot water raining down on our heads from above and one generally doesn’t sit down for that.’ It was hard sometimes to find the right words to explain her world to him. Too many concepts were unknown here and there was nothing she could compare them to that would be in any way familiar to him. ‘You see, I get confused sometimes.’

She waded over to him and took the extended hand. There was relief in the contact, in knowing that they were more or less on the same wavelength again.

Thorin pulled her in and then down next to him. The hot water was heavenly. She hadn’t even realised how tense she was until the fight was done and the warm water started to relax her muscles. ‘We ought to do this more often,’ she sighed. ‘The bathing, definitely not the fighting,’ she added, before there was even a chance of a misunderstanding. ‘You know, unless there’s usually some rules against mixed bathing that we are secretly breaking. It’s one of those things a body can get all confused about.’

He chuckled, a low sound that seemed to originate deep in his chest. It was starting to become one of Kate’s favourite sounds, even more treasured because it was so rare. ‘I believe it is acceptable for spouses.’

‘We should definitely do this again, then.’ There were some other things one could do with one’s spouse in a bath that came to mind, but that might be one of those things that could be considered wildly inappropriate in a semi-public space. Kate wouldn’t really know and she could do without another faux-pass so soon after the last one.

It was therefore a good thing that Thorin seemed to have read her mind. He pulled her closer and kissed her and protesting was about the last thing on her mind. ‘So, this is acceptable too, then?’ she grinned against his lips.

‘I am the King under the Mountain,’ Thorin pointed out. ‘I can make it so if I wish.’

Fair enough. ‘And do you?’ she asked. ‘Wish it?’
The reply to that wasn’t exactly verbal, but Kate liked to think he made it more than clear in other ways.

‘So,’ she began when some time later they made their way back to their own rooms. ‘Maybe we should just agree that we actually fight our battles together. You know, instead of me trying to do it on my own, leaving you out of it, or you tearing into the bullies, leaving me at the side-lines.’ That was still somewhat of a compromise to her, but it would be a compromise for him too. And wasn’t that what it meant to be married? You can’t have it all your own way, Andrews. And you should have learned that lesson long before today.

He wasn’t saying no right away. ‘What do you propose then?’

‘Just that we take them on together. I’ve heard from a reliable source that we make quite the team.’ The reliable source being most of the company. From among their number Dori was just about the only one still not perfectly happy about Kate’s marriage and his reasons for being of that opinion were vastly different from those of the Iron Hills dwarves.

Thorin just about managed a full smile. ‘Indeed. It seems you have no measure of pity for them.’

Kate thought this was a bit rich coming from a dwarf who had been ready to punch every single one of the offenders square in the face only twenty-four hours ago, but kept it to herself. There was no point in picking a fight needlessly. ‘I’ve never had any kind of sympathy for bullies anyway,’ she said instead.

He didn’t say anything to that, but he took her hand and held it as they made their way back home, so Kate took that to be a good sign. It gave her enough courage to ask the question she thought she already knew the answer to, but that she needed to ask regardless.

‘Where will you sleep tonight then? Because I happen to know the location of a perfectly serviceable bed, if you’re interested in that sort of thing.’ Their bed, to be precise. She had missed him in it last night. She’d slept alone for most of her life, but last night it had bothered her for quite possibly the first time ever.

‘I might. The sofa in my study can be… quite uncomfortable.’ And this was coming from a dwarf who’d slept on bare rock and in the freezing cold over the course of his long life. Then again, Kate could hardly fault him for finding that bloody thing unpleasant. If anything, uncomfortable was still somewhat of an understatement; Kate’s back would start to ache just from looking at it.

‘If that’s the case, I happen to know that the spot right next to mine is still available.’ She smiled almost in spite of herself. ‘It’s yours if you want it.’

There was no jest in his eyes when he answered. ‘I do wish it.’

Chapter End Notes

I am currently working on some other little pieces, but prompts from you are always welcome, so feel free to leave ideas.

Thank you very much for reading and as always, reviews would be much appreciated.
I love to hear what you’re thinking and if you’ve liked it at all.
Dwarf in the Dungeon

Chapter Summary

Also known as: The time when Thráin proved himself very much his mother’s son and talked himself into a lot of trouble.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A frown wrinkled Thoren’s forehead. ‘The last time his message was marked as urgent he’d…’
‘Gotten himself into a spot of bother in a Gondorian prison,’ Duria finished. ‘Don’t remind me.’
That had been thirty years ago and it had been a true accomplishment to get Thráin out without their parents being any the wiser. Their clever scheme had involved the employment of a lot of bribery, a case of a stolen pony and the invaluable help of Uncle “I-am-wedded-to-my-craft” Nori.
The Book, Chapter 3: Dark Visitor

Thráin

Minas Tirith, spring 2989 TA

It was the first time Thráin had stepped foot inside this city of Men and he found himself pleasantly surprised. Most of the places where men dwelled were in quality far inferior to the Mountain he still called home, even though he was seldom there these days. Of course, he ought to know by now that dwarvish work was almost always infinitely better and the mannish city of Dale had been designed and built by dwarves for a part, so that hardly counted, which was why Minas Tirith was the surprise he had not anticipated. It was well-built, graceful and beautiful in a way not a lot of mannish cities were. He might almost suspect dwarvish handiwork.

‘Pardon me,’ a polite voice came from his left.

Thráin halted and looked to the guard – from the looks of him – who had hailed him from his post next to the gate. ‘Afternoon,’ he greeted politely.

‘Begging your pardon, sir, but you are not a man.’ The guard appeared a bit embarrassed, as if he would prefer not to have to ask this, but there was a hint of curiosity there as well. Thráin reckoned not a lot of dwarves passed this way. It wouldn’t be the first time he was stared at open-mouthed by the people he walked past.

‘I’m a dwarf,’ he confirmed. ‘Is there a problem?’

‘Not at all,’ the guard reassured him. ‘I’ll just have your name and intent and if nothing is amiss with either, you may be about your business. I have to ask strangers coming through the gates, you see.’ He seemed sincere enough.

‘Beli, son of Orin, at your service.’ He’d rather have given his own name, but even this far south it sometimes happened that people actually knew who that was. And he hadn’t decided to travel the
world to be treated as a prince wherever he came. Therefore, an alias it was. ‘I’m a wandering blacksmith hoping to do some work in your city before I move on.’ The part about the wandering blacksmith was true enough. He was a blacksmith by trade and he did certainly enough wandering.

‘We don’t see many of your fellows about,’ the guard remarked. It didn’t sound like an interrogation, so Thráin assumed he just wanted to make small talk.

‘Not many of my fellows like to leave our halls.’ He was an oddity among his own folk. Not that he minded.

‘Where are you from then, if you don’t mind my asking?’ Oh, the guard was just nosy. One couldn’t grow up with both a brother and a sister cursed with the trait without recognising it in others when he chanced upon it.

‘Erebor,’ he replied. ‘Far to the north.’

The guard looked puzzled. ‘Can’t say I know the name.’

‘You might have heard of it as the Lonely Mountain, just east of Mirkwood.’ Because no one could remember one Mountain, but that ugly forest was known the world over. Truth be told though, the elves would doubtlessly like it better if it were known for its beauty rather than the tales of its horror.

This time the guardsman nodded. ‘Yes, I’ve heard of that.’ He nodded in what appeared to be admiration. ‘You’re a long way from home.’

‘The road called to me.’ It had been tempting him for almost as long as he could remember. His family had been fighting his longing for just about as long.

‘I’ve never been beyond Osgiliath,’ the man confided.

Erebor might as well be on a different world for all this man knew. It would be just as easily to reach. It was one thing to know he occupied a privileged position, but another to be confronted with folk who lacked the things he took for granted.

Not knowing how to respond, he settled on: ‘The world is well worth seeing.’

The guard drew himself up with pride. ‘My place is here, Master Dwarf, to guard the city from the danger in the East.’

Thráin had in fact heard more and more of Mordor lately and there was something about the land in the far distance that made him feel ill at ease. Nothing good could come from that place. And for that reason he had respect for this guardsman’s attitude. ‘A most worthy goal,’ he commented. ‘Though, if you don’t mind my saying, someone’s going to have to go and take a look at the defence works if ever an army marches against this city. They’re looking a mite bit shabby from where I’m standing.’

‘What did you say?’ The voice speaking the words came from behind him and was icy cold.

Thráin turned to see a man of about sixty – or thereabouts; he wasn’t that good at guessing men’s ages – giving him the kind of glare that should have killed him on the spot.

‘Afternoon,’ he greeted, cursing his own quickness of tongue. Though his assessment of the city’s defences was accurate, it was another to utter such views within minutes of stepping foot through the gates. No surprise that someone should take offence.
‘What would you know of the defences of this city?’ the man demanded. He drew himself up to his full height, which made him tower over Thráin. He was a tall man and richly dressed. There was a haughty air about him that clung to him like a cloak.

‘Only what I’ve seen as I approached the gates,’ Thráin replied truthfully. He hadn’t made stone his craft, but all dwarves knew a little about building and sturdy structures. Minas Tirith would endure for long years in her current state, if she never came under attack.

‘And you presume to tell me my business?’ There was a threat in those words.

‘I made a suggestion to the guard here,’ Thráin said, getting annoyed. Aforementioned guard was suddenly pretending he was not there. ‘I do not recall engaging you in that conversation. If you’ll excuse me, I will be about my business and trouble you no more.’

The man blocked his path. ‘Not so fast, dwarf.’

He took a deep breath and reminded himself that starting a fight would do him no favours. ‘Step aside please. I tire of your conversation.’

The guard gasped and the elderly man’s face darkened. ‘You watch this city with a soldier’s eyes, dwarf. And you are no soldier of Gondor.’ He did not even try to mask his suspicion.

‘I am a wandering blacksmith,’ he repeated. ‘And I’ve experience with fighting off orcs and outlaws on the roads.’ There had been a few organised campaigns too, when he happened to be home when his own folk rode out to deal with roving orcs. It appeared wiser not to share that information. ‘I am not your enemy,’ he added for good measure. This proud man seemed the kind of fellow who needed to have that spelled out to him. ‘Now, step aside. I don’t like to ask the same question twice.’

‘In a hurry, dwarf?’ The way he spoke the word, it sounded like an insult.

‘Beli, son of Orin, if you’ve need of a name to call me.’ He hated having to look up to taller folk, though perhaps he would not hate it so if they did not delight in looking down on him. ‘Which you do not, as this chat of ours is at an end.’ He made to step around the menace, seeing as he was unlikely to comply with Thráin’s request, but was stopped with a hand against his chest.

‘I was not done.’

Well, Thráin was. ‘Remove your hand, if you would be so kind, before I see fit to remove it for you.’ His blood was rapidly approaching boiling point. There were days when the Maker rained his favour on him and other days when trouble dogged his footsteps. It was shaping up to be one of the latter’s.

‘Threats now?’ The eyes had become so narrow they were but slits. There was unadulterated hatred in them.

‘None from my lips,’ Thráin pointed out.

‘Yet you look at the defences of my city with expert eyes, and look down on the work of my people. Does not the Enemy have dwarves in his employ?’ His hand still hadn’t moved.

‘The dwarves of Durin’s line have ever opposed the darkness.’ Not only was he arrogant, he was also ignorant. It was a dangerous combination, especially if he held some power, as Thráin had begun to suspect. ‘And they have never willingly given their support to the one who calls Mordor his home, nor has he ever proved able to dominate them. Learn your history, man, before you seek
to lecture me. It makes you appear more ignorant than I think you are.’ It ran in his blood, to make ill-advised remarks like that. His mother had an unfortunate tendency to do the same that she had passed on to him. And he had caused major diplomatic scandal once already.

‘Is that an insult?’ The words were barely more than a growl.

‘An observation.’ He was thoroughly fed up with this man. ‘Now, remove your hand from my person. I will not ask again.’ He could break every bone in his body without breaking a sweat and the longer this carried on, the more he felt inclined to do so. ‘You’ve insulted my people and questioned my intentions. Further provocation could prove to be unwise.’

As it was, he found Minas Tirith not as hospitable as he had thought and so intended to leave and come back some other time as soon as his business here was concluded. Men could be tiresome like that, but it had been a while since he had encountered one such as this. He had not missed their absence in the least and was therefore exceedingly disappointed to learn of their continued existence.

‘Have you any notion of who you’re addressing?’ The hand clenched into a fist and he would have pulled Thráin towards him – no doubt in hopes of intimidating him – had he been a man. As it was, dwarves did not budge so easily.

‘Not the faintest idea,’ he said, taking the arrogant twat’s wrist in his hand. He only squeezed very gently, but the squeaking noise that came from his mouth suggested it hurt.

‘Now, you’ll listen carefully. You’ll unhand me and I’ll let you go in turn. Then you’ll turn around and walk away. I, meanwhile, will go my own way.’

There was a chorus of shocked gasps. It appeared they had gained quite the audience during their little exchange.

The suggestion was a sensible one. They’d stay out of each other’s ways and that’d be the end of it. By nightfall he’d laugh it off as another example of mannish idiocy.

He should have realised that this man was not the sensible sort. ‘I’ll not have my business dictated to me by a child,’ he sneered and then, to make matters worse, he spat in Thráin’s face.

He’d taken much in order to keep the peace, but every dwarf had its limits. That limit had been reached and before the man could realise what a huge error he’d made, Thráin had released his wrist and pulled back his arm before planting his fist in the man’s nose. It broke with a satisfying crunch.

The sound of a cell door falling shut behind him was a less pleasing one, but one that he maybe should have expected. Then again, how was he supposed to have known that the man he had punched was not just any upstart lordling, but the actual Steward of Gondor? Honest mistake, that. And if he was really honest with himself, he would have struck him even if he had known. He was a dwarf, not an elf that he played these complicated games. He called it like he saw it and if that wasn’t pleasing to the Steward’s ears, he was a fool.

In the meantime he had gotten himself into quite the predicament. This was no small town prison that was begging to be broken out of. He was somewhere underneath the city itself and the walls and doors looked sturdy enough. And they were relatively well guarded.
But it was entirely against his nature to give up. There would be a way out, one that did not involve begging the Steward’s forgiveness; he had nothing to ask forgiveness for.

Before however he could come up with anything even remotely resembling a plan, there was the sound of a door opening at the end of the corridor. Thráin suspected it was the Steward coming to gloat or one of his lackeys coming to ask him questions and did not bother to look up.

‘Good evening, Master Dwarf.’

He did look up when he was addressed by a child’s voice. This was unexpected, but his ears had not deceived him. There were two boys in front of his cell, looking apprehensively at its occupant. One was maybe twelve years old, the other around five or six. The youngest was the one who had spoken, he thought. He looked like he was maybe a little bit frightened, but also very, very curious. The elder, brother maybe, was mainly wary.

‘Good evening, young masters,’ Thráin returned. ‘The guard of your city employs their folk from a young age, I see.’

‘We’re not from the guard.’ The younger of the two smiled. He had the kind of wide-eyed inquisitiveness that reminded Thráin almost painfully of a younger, more carefree Jack.

‘I see,’ he said. That much he’d guessed, but he remained at a loss for what two children were doing in the dungeons. ‘I assume it is urgent business then, that has brought you to my door.’ He sensed no malice from these two.

The older lad spoke up. ‘He wanted to see the dwarf.’ He aimed for exasperation and ended up somewhere nearer fondness. Brothers, Thráin was sure. And this was not the first time he elder had minded the younger or had indulged him in something he wanted. ‘We did not mean to trouble you.’

Thráin laughed. ‘I have no pressing demands on my time.’ Not until he could figure out a way out of this wretched cell. Coming to Minas Tirith had not been one of his brighter notions of late. ‘I’d offer you a chair, but I am afraid my humble establishment is greatly lacking in furniture.’ He winked at the younger child.

He was rewarded by the widest smile. ‘Pleasure to meet you, Master Dwarf. My name is Faramir.’

‘Beli, son of Orin, at your service, Master Faramir.’ He bowed slightly in his direction, then looked at the other boy. ‘Might I have your name as well?’

The child debated the wisdom of giving his name to a potentially violent dwarf, but then decided that there was not much harm Thráin could do from within his cell. ‘Boromir, at your service, Master Beli.’ He still hung back a little.

Faramir had no such reservations. ‘I like your beard, Master Beli.’ He pressed his face against the bars so he could get a closer look. ‘I’ve never seen beards like that.’

Thráin chuckled. ‘Only dwarves can grow them like that, lad.’ And his mother may be a mannish woman, but Thráin looked very little like her. ‘Men never quite manage it.’ As Jack had once informed a guardsman of Dale before he vomited all over him the one time he’d been well and truly drunk.

It appeared that Faramir was not only endlessly curious, he also was very innocent, because he stuck his hand through the bars and reached out to touch the beard. Had Thráin truly been violent, he could have done some serious harm. He didn’t and he did not intend it either, but still.
‘Faramir!’ said Boromir in a warning tone of voice.

‘No matter, lad,’ Thráin reassured him. ‘Nothing wrong with having an inquiring mind. But you could just ask next time.’

Faramir appeared abashed. ‘Yes, sir.’ Then he realised. ‘You said, next time. Does that mean you won’t mind us coming back?’ Even a deaf fellow could have heard the hopefulness in his voice.

Thráin laughed. ‘Does it look like I have places to be?’

At least the child’s company would help him pass the time of day.

He did not honestly expect to enjoy the almost daily visits from one or both of the boys. It was beyond obvious that the visits were like a daily treat from the market to the young Faramir, who, when he came by in the late afternoon or early evening, either chatted his ear off about his day and his lessons or had a thousand questions about dwarves and, when he discovered that Thráin had travelled far and wide, the places he had seen. He had an eager mind and soaked knowledge up like it was nothing. He could never seem to get enough.

He didn’t see many others beside the children. There were guards who brought him food and water, but they weren’t that talkative. If not for them, he might have thought the Steward had forgotten about him, which struck him as odd, given the accusations he had uttered. If he did think Thráin was a spy from the Enemy – the idea still sounded absolutely ludicrous – why not come and interrogate him?

‘I don’t think you’re a spy,’ Faramir volunteered when he came to visit Thráin a week after the start of his imprisonment. ‘And our father doesn’t really think so either.’

‘Sounds like a smart man, your father,’ Thráin remarked.

Faramir frowned. ‘Why did you hit him, then?’

Oh. He’d assumed the boys were the sons of some guardsman who for reasons beyond his comprehension didn’t mind his children interacting with the prisoners, but this changed matters. They were the Steward’s sons? That was unexpected.

‘He said and did some things that vexed me,’ he replied. It was true.

To his surprise Boromir, who’d barely spoken at all since these visits began, spoke up. ‘He said you told him the defence works of the city are lacking.’ It was hard to tell if the boy was offended on his father’s behalf or just wanted to know what had happened that day.

‘So I did,’ he replied. ‘And it was the truth. You could keep an army out for a bit with what you’ve got, but not indefinitely. Your outer walls have seen better days and some towers look like they’re crumbling. Seems foolish to me, with the neighbour you’ve got.’

A stern stare was levelled at him. ‘It’s no laughing matter.’

‘It’s not,’ Thráin agreed. ‘And I am not laughing.’

Boromir looked at him for a moment and seemed to decide that Thráin was telling the truth. ‘Why would you help?’
Because he’d blurted it out before he thought about it, because no living creature should ever be subject to orcs and their evil master. He did not say it. Instead he gave the lad an old wisdom of Elvaethor’s: ‘It is the duty of every sentient being to battle the threat of orcs wherever they may find it.’ He shrugged. ‘It’s the truth, lad.’

Boromir frowned. ‘Have you?’ he demanded. ‘Fought orcs?’

‘I have.’ And he had some scars to show for it. ‘They’re nastier than you can imagine.’

‘But I’ll go and fight them when I’m old enough,’ Boromir told him. His voice rang with conviction and made him sound older than Thráin suspected he was. He wanted to be an adult, but the last remnants of childhood innocence still hung about him. Twelve years, he guessed, thirteen at the most. And no lad that age should be eager to run off to war. Though it seemed Boromir did not crave the thrill of battle, but rather longed for an opportunity to do his duty for his country. That too was worrying in someone his age.

He told Boromir as much.

And he could tell he was offended. ‘There is no shame in wanting to do my duty. I’ll keep Gondor safe. We’ll keep the threat at bay.’

A noble goal, indeed. ‘Aye, I’ve no doubt of that,’ he said. Contradicting him would only make the boy more stubborn about it, he suspected. ‘But you’re not a grown man yet. How old are you, Boromir?’

For a moment there he didn’t think the child would answer, but then he did. ‘I’ll be eleven this autumn.’

Younger than he’d thought. Then again, Thoren had grown up quicker too out of the two of them. He would be, with him being the heir, the one things were expected of. Nevertheless, Thráin didn’t like the idea of one so young being burdened with the weight of responsibility before his shoulders were strong enough to carry that load. And the weight of expectation could be a heavy one indeed, which was why he had shaken it off the first chance he got.

Perhaps Boromir sensed that Thráin would say something he did not like, for he lightly touched his brother’s shoulder. ‘Come, Faramir. Dinner will be nearly ready. We must go.’ He did not once look back as he left.

**Boromir**

There was never any chance of Faramir not wanting to go down to the dungeons to see the dwarf from the moment he heard that there was a dwarf in the dungeons, Boromir reflected. It was better to indulge him, even though he himself was not so sure it was a wise notion; he had seen what that dwarf’s fist had done to his father’s nose.

But Faramir smiled again. Boromir didn’t think he’d smiled as much since their mother passed away. And the dwarf himself appeared more or less harmless. Well, he hadn’t been harmless when he had met Boromir’s father, but he seemed to like Faramir well enough. He certainly didn’t seem to mind the endless questions.

‘Where do you come from?’
‘What’s the strangest place you’ve ever seen?’

‘Isn’t it dark, living under the mountains?’

‘How old are you?’

‘Why do you braid your hair like that?’

‘Do all dwarves live in mountains?’

The list of questions he asked was endless. The dwarf Beli answered all of them. It seemed to amuse him.

Boromir himself wasn’t sure what to make of him. A few days ago he’d looked at him in a way he didn’t quite comprehend, when they’d talked about his future. There was nothing wrong with wanting to defend his people, whatever that dwarf may think. He avoided him for a few days after – he was convinced now that Faramir would come to no harm during these visits and so was comfortable letting him go alone – and spent some extra time at weapons training instead.

Until today.

‘Please will you go?’ Boromir was starting to suspect Faramir had made a long and comprehensive study of puppies; he certainly managed to imitate the wide-eyed innocence. ‘Boromir, he’s all alone!’

‘I’ve training,’ he pointed out.

‘But I can’t walk and now he’ll think we’ve forgotten about him and he will be lonely.’ There were times when Faramir was old beyond his mere six years. And then there were times when he was just a child. His fall and injury had brought the child in him back to the forefront.

Out of the three things he said, one was true, though. Faramir had twisted his ankle running after Boromir when he lost his balance and fell down the stairs. He’d been convinced his heart stopped beating when his little brother had fallen. And then he had never been so relieved as he was then to find that Faramir was still alive and relatively well. It could have been so much worse.

‘In a few days you’ll be able to tell him what happened,’ Boromir reminded him. ‘The dwarf will be fine.’

It had been the wrong thing to say; Faramir’s face betrayed that he was on the verge of crying. ‘But he doesn’t know now,’ he said. ‘And no one talks to him and he’s nice and he isn’t dangerous and it isn’t fair!’

Maybe so. Then again, nobody struck the Steward of Gondor and got away with it. Having said that, Boromir was uncertain why after two weeks the dwarf was still there. No real harm had been done – except to his father’s nose – and from the little he had heard, Beli may even have been slightly justified in his actions. Surely his father could see that?

‘That’s how it is,’ he said. Faramir probably did not need another reminder of just how unfair life could be, but he said it all the same.

The puppy disappeared. A mule took its place as Faramir crossed his arms over his chest. ‘I’ll just go myself.’

‘You can’t walk.’ The healers had been very firm in their instruction.
‘I can. And I will.’

Boromir took a deep breath. ‘Very well. Will you promise to stay where you are if I go and visit the dwarf on your behalf?’ He was fairly sure this was blackmail of some kind. He also forgot that notion as the mule vanished and the puppy re-emerged. ‘Thank you, thank you!’

Boromir levelled a stern stare at him.

Faramir remembered. ‘Yes, I’ll stay here.’

And that was how it happened that he made his way down to Beli’s cell alone. He didn’t particularly like to go, but a promise was a promise. And it didn’t have to be a very long visit either.

‘Afternoon, young Master Boromir.’ The dwarf saw him before Boromir had been able to utter a greeting of any kind. ‘How are you today?’

The question took him by surprise, but he managed a response well enough. ‘Very well, thank you. And how are you?’

Beli held up a thick tome. ‘Your brother was kind enough to lend me some reading material, so I am keeping busy. It appears my knowledge about your land was indeed lacking somewhat.’ He studied Boromir for a moment. ‘May I ask, where is your brother?’

‘He’s fallen down the stairs,’ Boromir reported. ‘And he twisted his ankle. The healers won’t allow him to walk for a few days.’

Beli nodded thoughtfully. ‘I see. And you’ve been sent to keep me company in his stead.’ He had it worked out quickly enough. It appeared he understood a lot of things without being told and Boromir did not particularly like it. It felt almost magical.

‘Faramir fears you’ll be lonely,’ he replied.

‘Your brother is a very kind soul,’ Beli observed. Not that Boromir needed telling; he’d known that already. Anyone who’d ever met Faramir inevitably reached that conclusion, sooner rather than later. ‘If you don’t wish to be here, I will not force you to keep me company.’ He must have sensed Boromir’s reluctance.

His promise to his little brother still fresh in his mind, Boromir shook his head. ‘I have no pressing engagements.’ It sounded responsible and grown-up. His father was fond of the words and he’d picked them up by association, another big word his father liked to use.

‘In that case, I would be glad of the company. Your guards aren’t all that chatty.’

Boromir hesitantly sat down on the floor in front of the cell. ‘It is not their duty to talk to the prisoners.’

Beli chuckled. ‘Indeed not. In fact, they appear to take offence to my wishing them a good day. Your folk mustn’t be very sociable.’

‘We don’t see many dwarves in Minas Tirith,’ Boromir pointed out. ‘They think you’re odd.’

‘True enough,’ said the dwarf. ‘Then, if they’d let me go, I’d be glad to take my leave of this city and bother them no further.’
‘That’s my father’s decision to make,’ Boromir said sternly.

Beli did not press the matter. ‘I know, lad. And I wasn’t asking you to release me, especially not against your father’s orders. But as I’m uncertain as to the duration of my stay here, I would ask leave to send a message to my family informing them of my whereabouts.’

Boromir frowned suspiciously. ‘Why?’

The dwarf had his answer ready. ‘I usually let them know what I’m about, mainly to stop my mother from worrying. She does that. It’s a mother’s prerogative, she says.’ Fortunately Boromir knew that big word too. It might have been more impressive if Faramir hadn’t known it as well. ‘I’m sure your mother tells you much the same.’

Boromir looked away. ‘My mother died.’ He wouldn’t cry here. It wasn’t dignified to cry where other people could see. But he missed her. He really, really missed her.

A hand reached out through the bars and rested on his shoulder. ‘I am very sorry to hear that, Boromir. You must miss her greatly.’

He could only nod; he didn’t quite trust his voice yet.

‘I did not intend to stir up painful memories, lad. My apologies.’

Boromir nodded again, because that was still the safest option. He swallowed a few times and took a few deep breaths and so won the battle against the tears. ‘Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome. And for the record, I don’t think it’s a shame to weep.’ His unexpected words forced Boromir into looking at him, just to make sure he hadn’t imagined it. ‘I’ve got an aunt who’d tell you that a good cry is the thing that makes anybody feel better when their emotions are getting a wee bit too much for them.’

‘Is that what you think?’ It seemed strange; grown folk did not cry where others could see. If they did, Boromir certainly had never seen it before. His own father hadn’t even wept when Boromir’s mother passed away. Only children cried, because they weren’t as strong as grown-ups yet.

Beli nodded. ‘Oh, aye. And I’ll tell you something else, Boromir. Our crying, the fact that we are capable of it, proves that we have emotions, that we can feel. And that’s one thing that sets us apart from orcs, who can neither feel nor weep.’

It made Boromir feel a little bit better. ‘I’ve never thought about that.’ He felt as though maybe he should have.

Beli clearly did not think that. ‘Well, and now you have. Seems you’ve learned something today.’

‘I’ll fetch you some writing necessities,’ Boromir said, making a decision. His father might not approve, but he felt as though maybe he owed Beli a little. ‘There’s some merchants leaving for the north tomorrow at dawn. I’ll make sure your letter goes with them.’

It was the right thing to do.

Duria
‘Oh, this is really not good.’ Duria glanced at the letter again. ‘Really not good.’ The contents reinforced that opinion again. ‘How could he be so foolish?’

The answer to that was: he’s Thráin, he’s always doing one foolish thing or the other. He hadn’t done anything in all his life to disprove the notion.

‘Occasionally even Thráin talks before he thinks,’ said Thoren.

There was nothing occasional about that as far as Duria was aware. She’d been cursed with the most reckless and impulsive dwarves under the Mountain as her siblings, and Thráin was by far the worst of them.

She knew that if she dignified this with an answer, she’d only anger her older brother and so she refrained from offering comment, no matter how much she wanted to. ‘Now what would he have us do?’

Of course that was the point: Thráin hadn’t asked for anything. He mentioned something about not wanting to getting his young mannish friend into trouble, so he just informed them that he was currently doing a spell in prison in Minas Tirith for breaking the Steward’s – for Durin’s sake, Thráin! – nose. Oh, and would they please tell amad and adad not to worry? The way Duria saw it, the only way not to worry them would be not to tell them at all.

‘Well, we can’t leave him there.’ Thoren clearly had spent some thought on it. ‘And we can’t tell amad and adad.’

‘I don’t like that,’ Duria said. They weren’t elves that they kept secrets from their own. It was not their way.

It turned out that Thoren had some solid reasoning underlying his decisions for once. ‘Adad would march on that mannish city and free Thráin by force,’ he explained. And that was true enough. The moment their father caught wind of this, he would ride out to set the matter straight and Duria honestly didn’t like the offending Steward’s chances in such a confrontation.

‘And amad would only worry,’ Thoren continued. ‘And she would worry a lot.’ He grimaced. ‘And she would tell adad either way, because she never keeps any secrets from him.’

It made all an awful lot of sense and she wasn’t used to that from him. For reasons she couldn’t quite define, this vexed her.

‘What then? If we cannot speak of it to them, what do we do?’ She doubted it would make much of a difference if the two of them rode south and politely asked this Steward to release their brother. From the little Thráin had told them, the man wasn’t much for being reasonable. Besides, their parents would most certainly suspect something if the two of them left and attempted a rescue mission by themselves.

She said all of this to Thoren, who surprisingly proved to be several steps ahead of her. ‘I know,’ he said. ‘We would be missed.’ He definitely had inherited that smug smile from their mother.

Without fail it was always followed by some devious scheme that was entirely alien to one of their kind. ‘But Uncle Nori wouldn’t.’

Oh, no. ‘Definitely not.’

Duria was fond of her family, all her family, even if they were a trial to put up with. At least her uncles Dori and Ori had some sense. That was the one thing nobody in their
right mind would ever be able to claim about Nori. Duria did not even particularly like him. He was nothing a dwarf ought to be: he wasn’t reliable, he wasn’t trustworthy, he wasn’t steadfast and he certainly did not practice any craft that would even remotely please their Maker. He was always off to distant places – in that way he and Thráin were very similar – and he was always getting into trouble, mostly for thieving. Uncle Dori quite frequently said – well, shouted at the top of his lungs more like – that Nori was a disgrace to the family and even though Duria would have defended her uncle to her dying breath against outsiders, she privately shared the sentiment. He wouldn’t know responsibility and respectability if it hit him over the head with a club.

Thoren, who actually liked Nori, frowned. ‘Well, sister dearest, if you have better ideas, I am all ears. Unless of course you want to let Thráin rot in a mannish dungeon.’ Now he had riled her. ‘Of course not!’ she snapped at him. Thráin was as big a fool as she had ever encountered, but at the end of the day, he was her brother and she had a duty towards him.

‘So, if you have better options than Uncle Nori, do tell,’ Thoren invited.

He knew already that she had none and that was exactly how they ended up here, asking the dreaded uncle for help.

‘In Gondor, you say?’ asked Nori when Thoren had finished the tale. Not that there was much to tell; Thráin had been sparse with the information he sent them. Like as not he really had intended it as a note to tell them where he was. Come to think of it, that was probably the case. For all his strange ways, he had a sense of honour. It might be he did not even expect them to come to his rescue. That would even make him a bigger fool. They were dwarves and kin besides; there was no chance of them leaving him to his fate, not ever.

‘Minas Tirith, aye,’ Thoren replied. ‘We know nothing else.’

Nori grinned. ‘Punching the Steward in the face, eh? That’s my boy.’

_Why was this a good idea again?_ Her rational mind told her it was because there were no other options available to them, well, no options that wouldn’t result in an all-out war with the southern mannish kingdom. That didn’t mean she had to like it. Her scowl told her uncle quite possibly exactly that.

Today Thoren had no more patience for their uncle’s antics than Duria did. ‘Can you do it?’ he asked.

‘Do it? Possibly.’ Nori was all business now. ‘I’d be needing a fair bit of money.’

Duria’s blood reached boiling point. ‘You’d ask money for a service like that?’ She ought to have gone to her father. Suddenly war with Gondor did not sound like such a bad plan. She stopped herself right there. No, war was not the solution here. Not that she would be averse to fighting whoever had gotten it into their heads to harm her brother, but there was a time and a place and this was neither. She was more responsible than that.

‘At ease, my hot-headed niece.’ Nori had never been affected much by his own brother’s rage. It stood to reason hers would not make much of an impression either. ‘What I’m saying is, from what I’ve heard of the prison in Minas Tirith, it’s hard to break out of. So, in order to get in so that I may get my nephew out, I’ll be needing to bribe some folk. And I’ll need good coin to do the bribing.’

It sounded reasonable enough. Well, reasonable enough if one didn’t think about the fact that the rescue mission would be conducted in a manner that was abhorrent to all decent dwarves. Bribery and sneaking and general dishonest behaviour. Those were elvish practises, mannish practises
even. Of course, that might mean Nori’s approach could actually work. Deep down she knew this was the very reason Thoren had decided to ask their uncle.

*It’ll be worth it if he can bring Thráin safely home,* she told herself. *It had better be worth it.* Only for her brother’s sake could she overcome her scruples, so Nori had better not fail them. If so, well, war was maybe still an option.

‘We’ll make sure you get the coin.’ Thoren was quick to agree. While the look on his face told Duria he liked this no more than she did, he also knew they weren’t exactly swimming in other options.

Nori looked almost sheepish when he spoke again. ‘Ah, there’s one other thing,’ he said and really, why was Duria still surprised? There *always* was one other thing with him.

‘Which is?’ she asked, counting to ten and so winning the fight against her anger.

He grimaced. ‘This Ivar fellow has confiscated my loyal steed, if you know what I’m saying.’

Duria knew Ivar to be a thoroughly unpleasant dwarf who refused to get the hint that everybody would be much more pleased if he removed himself to the Iron Hills. That Nori had gotten into trouble with him was hardly a surprise. And not their biggest problem neither.

Thoren shared that opinion. ‘Take a mount from the royal stable. I don’t care.’

‘According to your father, I don’t have to show my face here again if I so much as think about touching those beasts.’ And there was the trouble. It was true that the King under the Mountain had more than enough of his brother-in-law taking things that didn’t belong to him. Whatever else may happen, that course of action would draw the attention from the one dwarf they were trying not to alarm. *Durin’s stinking, unwashed beard!*

She almost hated herself for asking. ‘What do you need?’

‘I don’t like this,’ she therefore said later that evening. She had lost count of the number of times she had either thought or voiced the sentiment and judging by the thoroughly chagrined look on Thoren’s face, so had he.

‘The alternative is that you’ll keep Ivar’s servant occupied while I steal the pony,’ he said. ‘And since you’ve never ventured down to the stables unless held at sword point, that won’t work.’

Duria found all of a sudden she had more of a taste for making conversation with a guard than actually stealing – the mere mention of the word did unpleasant things to her body – a pony. ‘Words are my trade. I’d be able.’

Thoren shot the notion down before she had been able to present her argument in full. ‘You can’t dissemble to save your life, you’re even worse at lying and anyone who sees you there will wonder what in Durin’s name ever compelled you to pay a visit to the horses and ponies, what with you never showing any interest before. You’ll be noticed, you’ll be remembered and before you know it word will have gotten back to *adad* and then it’s only a matter of time before the whole story comes out.’

She took offence at that. ‘I can keep a secret.’ She was a dwarf; theirs was a race known for being tight-lipped.
Her brother didn’t buy it. ‘If thinking that helps you sleep at night, good for you, Duria. But I’m not risking Thráin on it.’

She really did not like his reasoning, especially since it was, for just this one time, more founded than hers was. That was not usually the way of it. And Duria hated being in the wrong.

When she said nothing, Thoren continued: ‘It’ll be easy. Just stick to the plan and nothing much can go wrong.’

She did not much like the sound of that.

Before she could find the time to protest, Thoren had gotten up and walked to the entrance door to the stables with a confidence Duria knew she would never have been able to pull off.

‘Evening, Fíri.’

‘Thoren,’ the other dwarf greeted. ‘You’re out and about very late.’

Thoren shot him a meaningful look. ‘So are you. The mounts require that much care? There’s only so many stables that can need mucking out, right?’

‘Experience with that, have you?’ Fíri grinned.

‘What can I say? Aunt Thora could be very creative in thinking up punishments for naughty dwarflings.’ To look at him, one would never guess he had any sort of ulterior motive for being here. It was not the dwarvish way. Then again, they had mannish blood and their mother was well-known for employing her own people’s tactics when the need arose.

‘I remember that,’ Fíri nodded, chuckling. ‘So, what brings you all this way?’

‘A late evening stroll and a sudden fancy for taking a ride.’ If anyone but Thoren had uttered such a sentence, they’d have thought it strange. But Thoren was known for doing odd things now and again and nobody took much notice of it these days. ‘I was of a mind to head to Dale, maybe get a drink and then head back home. Do you fancy joining me?’

Fíri pondered this a moment. ‘If we don’t have to go all the way to Dale, perhaps.’

Thoren pretended to think about it. ‘Oh, we might as well stay here. At least we won’t fall off our mounts on our way back.’

Fíri laughed at this.

‘Hold on,’ Thoren said just when it looked like they were about to leave. ‘You won’t get in trouble for abandoning your post or something of the kind?’

What in Durin’s name did he think he was doing? Duria would be the first to admit she had no stomach for deceit, but right now they did not want to alert him to the possibility of something less than honourable being afoot. Whatever Thoren was getting at, reminding Fíri of his duty, she would never know. They’d agreed to get the fellow away from the stables, she didn’t want to keep him there!

To her infinite relief Fíri shook his head. ‘It’ll be all right,’ he said. ‘Work’s done for the day. Now lead the way before I change my mind.’

Thoren was fortunately quick to oblige.
Duria waited until her brother and his newfound friend had disappeared around the corner before she left her hiding place behind a haystack. According to Thoren, all she had to do was find the pony and lead it out of the stables to the agreed meeting place where Nori would be waiting. He would saddle the beast and ride it out of the gates, so when all was said and done, no one would be able to tie Thoren or Duria to the whole affair. She hoped it all went according to plan, because unlike her thieving uncle, Duria might just die of shame if she were ever discovered stealing anything, never mind a pony.

No point wool-gathering now. Get on with it. There were times when her mental voice sounded remarkably like her mother, which was odd, because Duria was as different from her mother as she could possibly be.

But it aided her in this. It’s for Thráin, she reminded herself. And we’re saving amad so much worry.

The stables were blessedly empty. The ponies and horses were all more or less dozing, though a few perked up when they saw her.

‘Don’t make a sound,’ she instructed them. ‘Because I will have you for dinner on the morrow. Don’t think I won’t.’

Whether or not the beasts understood her remained to be seen. It was more likely a happy coincidence that none of them went against her orders.

Finding the monster Uncle Nori optimistically called a pony was not that hard. Her uncle had been detailed in his description and Ivar hadn’t attempted to hide it. The only problem was that Duria had never had much of a way with animals.

‘All right,’ she said, because for some irrational reason talking aloud made her feel more certain about her own actions. ‘I’m about to reunite you with your owner. Try to behave until I’ve done so.’ What happened after was Nori’s concern.

The pony was an ill-tempered beast. Duria strongly suspected something of goblin in its lineage. There was mischief in those eyes and no mistake, and a hint of something malicious. Maybe the pony was well-suited to its rider, though at least Nori was never anything but kind to her.

The same could not be said about this beast. It pulled at the rope and if Duria had taken more after her mother, it might have pulled her with it in the opposite direction of where she wanted to go. As it was, she was as unmoveable as the Mountain itself.

‘This way,’ she snapped at it. ‘I’ll be in trouble and you’ll be short a rescuer if we’re found here. Kindly cooperate.’

She should have known that if her tactics had failed on her siblings, they were not going to work on a recalcitrant pony. Well, it had been worth a try. And it was a good thing that Thoren at least kept Fíri well occupied, because it was slow-going. Wherever it was the animal wanted to go, it wasn’t the direction Duria had in mind. And her literally dragging – thank the Maker for her dwarvish build and strength – a pony out of the stable was hardly inconspicuous. Thank Mahal that it was very late and the streets were deserted.

Uncle Nori was waiting where they had agreed, which was another good thing. Of course the pony, recognising its owner, was suddenly very keen to go in the right direction, so that Duria, instead of dragging it, was now almost dragged behind the monster herself. It did not endear her to Nori’s pony of choice.
‘Here it is.’ She unceremoniously dropped the rope in his hands. If she never saw the wretched beast again, it would be too soon. ‘Do you have all you need?’

Nori grinned as though he hadn’t a care in the world and they weren’t in the process of conducting illegal business. ‘Fear not, my dearest niece. All is in hand. And I’ll be sure to bring Thráin safely home again.’ There was more sincerity in the last sentence and Duria believed him. No matter how odd and dysfunctional her family was, they always came through for one another. And Nori was no different from the rest of them in that respect.

‘See that you do,’

‘You sound more like your father with every year, I swear.’ He grimaced. ‘Or my brother, come to think of it.’ She didn’t need to ask which brother.

‘Good,’ she said.

‘Worry not,’ Nori said. ‘We’ll be back before you know it.’ He had vanished before she could respond, leaving her alone in an abandoned street, hoping desperately that she had made the right choice.

It still didn’t feel like one.

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**Thráin**

Most of the summer had already passed, Thráin estimated. It was hard to keep track properly when all days blended together. And he hated it. He was a dwarf; he was made to work, to fill his days with useful activities. Lounging in a dungeon had not been part of his Maker’s plan. And of course it was true that young Faramir did his very best in supplying him with reading material and company each day, but in the end it was no substitute at all for going where he chose and doing what he ought to do.

Having said that, he was intensely grateful for the company. Boromir showed up more often than not when Faramir came by. He’d even visited a couple of times on his own. The truth was that Thráin liked the lads, but the more he learned about them, the less he approved of the father. From what the boys told him, Thráin had started to suspect that the Steward favoured Boromir over Faramir and had clearly no reservations whatsoever about making it known to whoever was around. But neither child tolerated as much as a hint of Thráin’s disapproval about the Steward’s fathering and so he kept his thoughts to himself. At least he knew now that the punch in the face had been wholly deserved, if not for his own pride, then for the two boys who had a sorry excuse for a father.

‘I would like to see a dragon,’ Faramir confided in him one day. How he came up with these things Thráin never knew, but the lad kept taking him by surprise.

He snorted before he could catch himself. ‘Would you now?’

‘I’ve read about them,’ said Faramir. ‘They are big and they breathe fire and…’

‘They could lay waste to an army of orcs in the blink of an eye.’ Boromir, as always, was quick to see the advantage. Thráin had come to see that this boy’s thoughts were never far away from the conflict in the East. Had he ever even been a child in the true sense of the word or had his
worthless father groomed him for war from the moment he could walk? With what he knew of the Steward, it would not have surprised him.

Comparing Boromir to his own brother was therefore a painful affair. Of course Thoren was being prepared, had been prepared for years. But Thoren had known many long years of carelessness and childish mischief. It didn’t seem Boromir had been granted the same favour.

‘And to an army of men just as easily,’ he pointed out. ‘Dragons have never been friends of the Free Folk. They have always fought on the other side. Even those that have no master are evil down to their very core.’ His father never talked much about the day Erebor fell to Smaug, but he’d heard snippets of stories all the same. It must have been a day of terror, bloodshed and death.

Boromir looked disappointed.

Thráin decided to soften the blow. ‘I do not believe there are dragons left in the world today, Boromir. The last known one was slain almost half a century ago.’

‘Still, a weapon like that…’ Boromir could clearly picture it.

‘Would turn on you in a heartbeat. The monsters can’t be trusted. They only answer to the dark.’ If they answered at all. From all he’d heard, Smaug had pretty much done what he wanted.

Faramir looked at him inquisitively. ‘Do you know any stories about dragons?’ He must have sensed there was something more than just book knowledge fuelling his words. For a boy his age, he was very quick.

He smiled. ‘Aye, and a good one it is too. Care to hear about how the last known fire dragon was slain?’

For the next half hour he gave them the story about the quest for Erebor, carefully omitting any mention of how he was related to any of the folk who had gone on a true hero’s journey. His father had told the tale so often as a bedtime story when Thoren and he were little that he knew it by heart, could recite it in his sleep if needed. As for his audience, they were listening breathlessly as the story unfolded, even Boromir.

‘And thus the dragon was slain and the Mountain reclaimed for my people,’ he finished, choosing to end it there instead of including the nastiness of scheming men and elves and the battle that followed.

Faramir’s face reflected wonder. He loved this kind of story. ‘That really happened?’

‘Aye, it did.’ When he had been as old as Faramir was now, he’d felt the exact same way about it. And in him it had awakened a longing for adventures of his own.

Boromir on the other hand was frowning. ‘What did they do with the dragon after it had been killed?’ he asked. ‘Did they just leave it there in the treasury?’ At least Boromir always asked the practical questions.

Thráin laughed. ‘Not hardly. I’ve been told that they had to drag the corpse out of the Mountain, a process that took several weeks, as it was heavy and not easy to move.’

There would have been more questions – there always were – had it not been for the opening of a door and a very familiar head poking through. The head took in the scene before him, realised that not everything had gone quite according to plan, and sighed in annoyance. ‘Durin’s beard, I thought that guard said that the coast was clear. Must mean something different here than it does
Thráin groaned. ‘Uncle Nori? What are you doing here?’

Nori’s body joined his head in the corridor. He shut the door behind him. ‘This, my lad, is a rescue mission. Only the fellow I bribed didn’t mention you had visitors.’

Was it any wonder Nori was forever getting into scrapes? If he always went in as half-arsed as he had clearly done here, it suddenly made sense why he spent so much of his time in one lockup or the other.

Boromir had acted immediately. He had sprung to his feet, facing Nori while in the same motion pulling Faramir behind him. This left the younger child between his brother and Thráin, which was an interesting move. It suggested that while Boromir did not trust Nori, he didn’t think Thráin would be a danger to his younger sibling. There was a measure of trust in that action that Thráin would not shame for the life of him.

‘Lay down your weapons,’ Boromir demanded. He himself was unarmed, but that didn’t stop him.

Nori sent him an annoyed look. ‘I’m not going to hurt you, lad. I’m just here to get my fool of a nephew out and take him home.’ He grinned at Thráin. ‘Your sister is going to tear you to pieces when she sees you again,’ he informed him cheerfully. ‘Fair warning.’

Thráin did not need to ask which sister.

‘I cannot let you do that,’ said Boromir. ‘He has been locked up by command of the Steward of Gondor and his release has not been ordered.’

‘I reckoned as much,’ Nori replied, not impressed in the least. ‘That’s why it’s a rescue mission.’

Faramir poked his head out from behind Boromir’s back. ‘You will take him home?’ he asked.

Nori nodded. ‘Aye, that’s the idea.’

‘We have got to let him,’ Faramir said, addressing his brother. ‘It’s not fair he’s been here so long. He’s done nothing wrong!’

‘Nothing much except punching a Steward in the face,’ Thráin pointed out. Having said that, the punishment had stopped fitting the crime about a week after the start of his captivity. He had done no permanent damage and the Steward had certainly not been an innocent in the exchange.

‘He got what’s coming to him from what I’ve heard.’ Naturally Nori would not think much of it.

‘Please, Boromir?’ Faramir was still pleading Thráin’s case. ‘He’s never going to let him go and he needs to go home and travel and work and do dwarf things.’

‘None of which involve hanging around dungeons.’ And Nori just couldn’t keep his mouth shut when he needed to.

Boromir appeared to think about it. It was hard to see which direction his thoughts were taking just from looking at his back. Then he turned to Thráin. ‘I sent the letter for you,’ he stated. ‘Did you ask for help?’ He looked as though he had been betrayed.

Thráin’s heart filled with pity. ‘No. I did not.’ And he was glad he hadn’t. ‘You read it before you sent it. You know I did not.’
Boromir was nothing if not insistent. ‘Did you know they would send someone to break you out?’

He felt that a lot depended on his answer. ‘No, I did not,’ he answered again. He hadn’t. In hindsight he might have known that his family was not just going to sit back and wait while he was in trouble, but he hadn’t thought on it before, nor had he held on to the hope that they would act when he had specifically asked them not to.

Boromir held his gaze for a long time, searching for answers there. In the end he nodded. ‘I believe you.’ It sounded like someone much older than he was spoke the words. If this wasn’t the situation that it is, I would have liked to speak some choice words to the man who turns his own son into an adult before his time. ‘If you can find the keys, I won’t stop you.’

Thráin looked him in the eyes. ‘Thank you, Boromir.’

The child nodded. For Durin’s sake, he was only a boy. What kind of mad world were they living in?

Nori was burdened by no such thoughts. ‘Who needs keys?’ he asked, producing something that looked like a hairpin from his pockets. ‘This ought to do the trick.’

Thráin frowned. ‘Is that a hairpin?’

His uncle grinned. ‘So it is,’ he confirmed. ‘Now hush, I’ll need to focus. Your mother taught me this trick, you know. Quite handy in a tight spot, I must say. Surprised she never taught it to you.’

He moved past the boys and stuck the pin into the lock. Thráin couldn’t see what he was doing from this side of the door, but whatever it was, it required concentration.

‘I’m surprised she taught it to you,’ he countered. It wasn’t like his mother to teach Nori tricks that would aid him in his wrongdoings. Come to think of it, he was surprised she knew how to pick locks at all.

‘She lost a wager, so she had no choice.’ Nori did not look up from his work as he spoke. ‘And she grumbled like Dori does all the while.’

Now that he could actually believe.

‘Ah, there we go!’ Nori announced when the lock gave way and the door sprung open. ‘Out you come, my boy. The guard won’t pretend to be asleep for much longer and I am ready to be gone from this place.’

Thráin got to his feet, but before he could step outside his cell for the first time in months, Faramir jumped in and caught him in a hug. ‘I will miss you,’ he confessed in a small voice that heavily implied he was fighting back tears.

‘And I you, my young friend,’ Thráin said. He found he meant it. ‘But perhaps one day our paths will cross again. And if you ever feel like seeing Erebor for yourself, it’d be my pleasure to show you around.’ But for the time being it would be wiser to avoid Gondor. As long as the Steward drew breath, he could only look forward to a continuation of his captivity if he stepped as much as a toe over the border. But he felt the child knew that already and so he did not speak a word.

Faramir let him go. There were indeed tears in his eyes. He did not have many friends and to lose even one of them must be a heavy blow to one so young. It made his insistence to do the right thing even more admirable. ‘I will,’ he promised. ‘Come and see you one day, I mean.’
‘I shall look for your coming,’ Thráin promised. He turned to Boromir. ‘Be well, Boromir. And thank you once more.’

The boy drew himself up to his full height, a gesture that Thráin thought was meant to make him feel stronger and older than he was. ‘I hope you have safe travels,’ he replied. He hesitated and then added: ‘And I hope your mother won’t have worried too much about you.’

Boromir had a bigger heart than folk generally gave him credit for, Thráin thought. ‘I’ll tell her I was well looked after.’

Nori made a show out of carefully smelling the air around Thráin. ‘Not from where I’m standing, you haven’t been. When we get out of this wretched city, I’m throwing you in the first body of water we find. You don’t half smell, lad.’

There were days when Thráin understood why Uncle Dori was always threatening to gag Nori. This was one of those days and in that moment, he could have performed the deed himself.

‘Uncle Nori, if you’ve nothing sensible to add, it would be best for all concerned if you kept your mouth firmly shut.’ At least he had heard enough of his father’s icily disapproving speeches to have a fair shot at imitating him.

Nori clearly thought the same. ‘You sound like your father.’

‘I meant to.’ He turned back to Boromir. ‘You’ve done well, Boromir. Don’t pay any heed to my uncle; he’s never spoken sense in all my years and I doubt he’s going to break the habit of a lifetime today.’ The customs of his people dictated that he would side with Nori against outsiders, but he did not feel in the least guilty about breaking tradition now. Nori had a thick skin after all and for all that Boromir pretended likewise, Thráin knew better.

The smile he got in response was somewhat watery. The boy would benefit from a hug, but he feared that the carefully maintained mask of a strong and decisive figure would shatter to pieces if he did. And Boromir was unlikely to thank him for that.

‘You should go,’ the lad said. ‘And it is best that Faramir and I were not here either.’

‘Perhaps we’ll meet again one day,’ Thráin said.

He found he’d like it.

Chapter End Notes

This was supposed to be about 3000 words at the most. By the length of this chapter you can quite possibly tell that didn’t really work out. Either way, I hope you enjoyed this not so little story and, as you may have guessed, this may have some consequences later in The Book, which should resume regular updates starting next Sunday, so keep an eye out for that.

As always, thank you very much for reading and I would love to hear your thoughts about this piece if you have a moment to share them.
As You Like It

Chapter Notes

Just a light-hearted piece for you this time, which combines three things: a young Thráin causing some trouble with the elves, Kate bringing elements of her own world into Middle Earth and a little something that I won’t spoil for you just yet. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘No, you’re lying,’ he said. It certainly didn’t help matters that this was said during one of those odd silences one sometimes has at a feast, making sure everyone heard a prince of Durin’s line insult visiting royalty. Thráin of course misinterpreted the deafening silence that followed this all too true announcement and went on: ‘He’s lying, amad. He wrinkled his nose at you. I saw. Adad always wrinkles his nose when you’re telling him to eat vegetables.’ He considered that for a moment and then added: ‘And when he’s talking to elves, too.’

The Journal, Chapter 78: Wolves and Sheep

Erebor, autumn 2949 TA

It was hardly a secret that Thorin Oakenshield hated elves. He’d never even tried to conceal it; it was, in fact, common knowledge. As such it would hardly come as a surprise that he didn’t want them in his Mountain, as his guests, which meant he had to be polite to them – ‘As I recall, none of them bothered to be polite to us when we were their guests,’ Kate had pointed out – and take care not to give any offence. And that was hard enough as it was. It was even worse when Thranduil himself came along. Thorin strongly suspected he did it just to spite him and his wife shared that opinion.

The elf king’s latest visit was of course the reason why he was sitting on his throne waiting for Thranduil to actually arrive. Kate, next to him, was fidgeting as well.

‘If he makes us late for dinner, all hell shall break loose,’ she predicted. ‘Don’t come between a dwarf and his food.’

Dwalin, who coincidentally – or maybe not so coincidentally – was the guard on duty, snorted. ‘I thought that was just true for hobbits?’

Thorin was not entirely sure when his best friend and his wife had struck up a friendship, but it must have happened sometime when he wasn’t looking. It had probably happened sometime after Thráin had been born, but what had caused it remained a mystery. That wasn’t to say that he wasn’t very grateful for this particular development.

‘Also for hobbits,’ she amended. ‘And hungry queens, so he’d better get a bloody move on.’
Of course, Thorin would look forward to the feast more if elves wouldn’t have to be present. Personally, he thought feasting the elves on their arrival wasn’t the wisest idea; it might give them the impression that he actually liked having them around.

It wasn’t entirely out of the realm of possibility that Thranduil had developed mind reading powers in the past few years, because the doors swung open to admit the elvish trade delegation and their king.

‘By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes,’ said Kate. It sounded like a quote of something or other, but none that Thorin was familiar with. She’d say things like that sometimes, like a joke that only she fully understood. Of course that didn’t mean he couldn’t be amused in the meantime.

As was Dwalin, who unsuccessfully tried to disguise his bark of laughter as a coughing fit. ‘Where’d that one come from?’

‘William Shakespeare,’ she replied. ‘A playwright from where I’m from, dead for centuries, but absolutely brilliant. My mum was something of an admirer, hence my knowledge.’

‘Sounds like he knew what he was about,’ Dwalin remarked, casting displeased glances in the direction of the slow moving delegation. Thorin strongly suspected they were doing it on purpose. ‘Got any more of that wisdom for us while we wait?’ The elves could probably hear that, but if they did, they didn’t act on it by increasing their pace.

Kate thought for a moment, before turning to Dwalin with a would-be serious face. ‘Sigh no more, my friend, sigh no more. Elves were deceivers ever. One foot in sea and one on shore, to one thing constant never.’

Thorin had never heard of William Shakespeare – ridiculous name – before today, but he would readily admit that for a man, he was in the possession of remarkable wisdom; he had never heard a better description of elves before. Still, there were no elves in this world of Kate’s, so it was just as well possible that she had changed an existing text a little to suit her own purposes. Still, the fact remained that the unsteadfastness of elves could hardly have been better summarised.

Naturally, the elves did not seem to share this sentiment. Thranduil merely frowned before he remembered that this looked undignified, but the Lainor mosquito – the name was a find of Dwalin’s – glared daggers, whilst trying to keep his mouth smiling.

‘There’s daggers in the elves’ smiles,’ said Kate. She was clearly starting to warm up to the idea of throwing more quotes around.

It offered Thorin at least a little distraction. He did not fully understand where these lines all came from and therefore he feared that the true meaning was often quite lost on him, but he was grateful for it all the same. She often told him that she wasn’t around for the comic relief – another phrase that had come over with her from the place she called England – but he also strongly suspected that she did things like these on purpose from time to time. As she’d told him before the Battle of the Five Armies, she translated him for other people without them actually knowing what she was doing. It allowed him to keep his calm and stay his sword where otherwise he would have done something reckless. Not that he strictly speaking approved of her drawing all their fire towards her, but she seemed to gain some enjoyment out of it, so he allowed it to continue. And, truth be told, he doubted he could make her stop when she didn’t want to be stopped.

And he had gone beyond the point where he denied that he needed a little distraction when dealing with Thranduil and his cronies. True, he needed all his concentration to see through the evening
without incident, but he also needed to make sure he would not feel so vexed by the night’s end that he would cause said incident himself.

Of course, there was also a chance he could rely on his own sons to do it for him.

Kate was not a fan of elves. The way she heard it, in the days before Erebor fell to Smaug, seeing elves under the Mountain was a rarity. Thranduil did not like dwarves and avoided them like the plague. But clearly something had changed in the time since, because this was the third time since Erebor had been reclaimed that Thranduil had personally dropped by for a visit. There had been that one time in 2945, then again two years past and here he was again. At least he hadn’t even attempted to bring his pest of a nephew to the talks this time, so there was that. Kate strongly suspected he came by just to spite them, something she would not put past him at all.

Having said that, she counted the days until his departure. If they had any sort of luck at all, they would be gone within the week. If not, either Thorin or Kate herself would come up with an excuse to evict them. Or maybe Balin would come up with a slightly more diplomatic solution.

Either way, there was no way she was looking forward to these coming days. It was bad enough having to face them at the talks, but feasting them meant having to do small talk. It meant smiling and not letting her temper getting the best of her. It also meant pretending that she had a good time, even when she was having the exact opposite. And the only elf she wanted to talk to had been more or less abducted by Bofur and Bombur on arrival and was now in a remote corner of the hall, laughing and drinking with his ever-growing group of friends. *Well, at least Elvaethor’s enjoying himself. No use in both of us being miserable when we don’t have to be.*

‘Looking forward to the night, then?’ Dwalin must have seen the faces she pulled when she discovered that not only was Thranduil seated in her immediate vicinity, he had brought most of his retinue with him, leaving Thorin and her almost completely surrounded by unfriendly faces.

Well, if she could not rely on them to keep her in high spirits, it would seem she had to do the job herself. ‘I think that hell is empty, and all the devils are here,’ she said. Shakespeare at least knew what he was on about. And since none of the elves knew who he was, she could at least enjoy a private joke. Who knew, it might even keep Thorin a little entertained. From the looks of it, he needed it as much as she did.

And the same might be true for Dwalin, who didn’t know much more about Shakespeare than the elves did, but who at least knew what she was doing. He had known her long enough to know when the words she spoke were not her own. And true, she might not get all the quotes exactly right, and some of them she got wrong on purpose because that suited her needs better. And if she was going to have to be here for hours to come, she was going to need something that would keep both Thorin’s and her own temper in check. The fact that Thorin had already chuckled once suggested she was on the right course. And now that she was actually friends with Dwalin, she quite liked sharing the joke with him as well.

True to expectations, he chuckled. ‘Not looking forward towards the night, then,’ he concluded.

Kate snorted. ‘Are you?’ From the way she phrased that he must surely see she intended that as a rhetorical question.
He was wise enough to treat it as such.

Fortunately she had distraction ready for when she needed it, because Thoren and Thráín had been allowed to join all the grown-ups for at least part of the night. They had begged and whined for months if they could please, please, pretty please come to the feast and in the end Thorin had caved while Kate wasn’t around. They’d had words about that after, but then Thorin had already promised and it was too late to do anything about it.

And perhaps he had been on to something. Because now, when an elf said something that made her mad or uncomfortable, she could plausibly pretend that she hadn’t heard him because there was a child on her lap demanding her attention every so often.

‘There are so many elves,’ Thoren whispered breathlessly, pulling on her skirt to get her attention. ‘Amad, do you see?’

Oh, she saw all right. ‘Yes, dearest. Now, remember what we’ve discussed.’

‘Behave, don’t throw food, don’t speak unless spoken to and don’t go running around the hall before the dancing starts,’ he parroted her endless refrain of the past days back at her. She should be pleased that he remembered, but it would remain to be seen if he acted on it. And the same was true for Thráín as well. Oh well, it was too late to send them back home now.

‘Good lad,’ she told him. She picked up Thráín. The chairs were too big for one his age and so he would have to witness the feast from his position on her lap. There was sense in such a course of action too; at least she wouldn’t be able to throttle an elf when he made a remark that made her blood boil.

The elves were pleasant enough in all outward appearances. They greeted her politely and made the expected fuss over her lads. Some of them even seemed to mean their compliments.

And then there were those whose compliments were so fake, she could not fail to recognise them as such.

‘Good Queen Catherine,’ one of them greeted her. She thought his name was Fanion and she had a vague recollection of somebody mentioning that he was a distant relative of Thranduil’s. ‘How radiant you are looking this evening.’ He clearly didn’t mean a word of it.

Apparently Thráín had noticed this as well. He had been obeying her instructions for the grand total of ten minutes while she greeted guests that were seated near them, but he had a quick mind and the dwarvish loathing of untruthfulness. In hindsight she ought to have known that this was going to cause untold trouble.

‘No, you’re lying,’ he said.

All of a sudden it was deadly silent in the hall. If luck had been on their side for once – really, would it be so much to ask? – Thráín’s very true comment would have been drowned out by the general noisiness and even the few who would have heard him could reasonably pretend that they had not. The conversation could have carried on without a hitch and by morning everyone would have forgotten anything had ever happened at all.

Alas, luck was not their friend that night.

Thráín had spoken during one of those rare lulls in conversation, one that would make a hall full of people quiet for just a few seconds until one person would resume talking and everybody followed in their wake. Nobody restarted any sort of conversation now.
Oh, shit.

Thráin either didn’t notice or misinterpreted the hush that had fallen over the hall. He was looking at Kate’s face and clearly did not recognise the shock on it for what it was either. If anything, he must have decided that she didn’t believe him, so he carried on: ‘He’s lying, amad. He wrinkled his nose at you. I saw. Adad always wrinkles his nose when you’re telling him to eat vegetables.’

After this they could probably kiss diplomatic relations with the elves goodbye. This was really very bad. Not that Thráin had said anything that wasn’t strictly speaking true. Every last word had been nothing but the truth. But Kate had learned in her eight years as Queen under the Mountain that just because something was true, was no reason whatsoever to actually speak it. That only worked on dwarves. And this whole room was filled with elves.

And Thráin was not even completely done yet. He considered his words, oblivious to the shocked gasps and continuing silence, and then added his final jewel of childish wisdom: ‘And when he’s talking to elves, too.’

Sometimes I wish you did not take quite so much after me, darling. There was no doubt in Kate’s mind that the quick tongue and the not thinking before he blurted everything out had come from her. It may not be genetic, but there were still times that she led by example. I should have known that would come back to bite me one day.

At last the silence registered on Thráin’s radar and all of a sudden he looked like an insecure five year old child. ‘Amad, why’s everybody staring? Did I say something wrong?’ He looked to her for reassurance and in that precise moment, she had no idea how to give it to him without making matters even worse.

Fortunately Lufur hurried to her rescue. ‘Your amad told you to mind your words, didn’t she, lad?’ He was kind enough about it, but there was a reprimand in his voice as well. ‘You know what? Why don’t we go and pay a visit to your Aunt Thora and Uncle Ori? And your brother could come as well?’

Both boys had already noticed that their aunt and uncle were seated very near their favourite elf, the one who didn’t mind it when they said what they liked.

‘Can we, amad?’ Thoren asked. ‘Can we, please?’

It was probably best to send them where they could do the least damage. And she would need all her wits about her for containing the diplomatic fall-out in this corner of the room. ‘Off you go,’ she told them.

Now for the hardest part.

The elves naturally were less than pleased with the proceedings and took more placating that Thorin honestly felt he had the patience for. After all, Thráin had not told a falsehood. Thorin had heard the whole of the exchange and this relative of Thranduil’s had no more thought Kate to be radiant than Thorin thought elves to be pleasant company. Thráin had done them a favour bringing it out in the open. It might even lead the elves to examine their own conduct and realise they had been at fault.
Then again, these were elves they were dealing with.

Kate was good at smoothing ruffled feathers and she was the one who took up most of the task of restoring the elves’ good humour, as in so far present in the first place. And even though she kept insisting she was no good at this game, she nevertheless managed to steer the conversation back to calmer waters. She even managed to weave the lines of William Shakespeare – or that was who he assumed she was quoting still – into the conversation.

So it was with resignation and not a little amusement that he sat through what was left of dinner, watching and listening to Kate having a lively conversation with a small group of elves – though not the offending one Thráin had rightfully accused of lying – near her, peppering her conversation with words that he knew were not her own.

Some fifteen minutes later she was in the middle of a heated debate with another one of them, who just didn’t seem to be able to stop talking. So when he finally did, Kate did not fill the silence with a counter-argument – and there were a fair few she might have been able to give – but instead told him: ‘I wish my horse had the speed of your tongue.’ This was one of the few remarks that, though not fully understood by the ones she spoke to, was at least well-received, for they all laughed.

A little later Lainor rose and addressed his hosts, thanked them for their hospitality and raised a toast he clearly did not mean.

‘I like not fair terms and a villain’s mind,’ muttered Kate. Thorin could only agree with her there. Filled with humour though her comments had been thus far, they had also been filled with insight and this one in particular rang very true. Lainor was no friend of theirs and he would, on behalf of his king, surely cause as much trouble as he could get away with. Like Kate translated Thorin to the world at large, so Lainor often, but far more maliciously, caused mayhem with the dwarves for his king, keeping Thranduil standing high above it all on his precious moral high ground.

Naturally matters weren’t likely to improve when Lainor announced that as a special kind of torture – fair play to him, he actually did say gift – he had brought some of his people’s musicians with him to play for them this evening and to share with them the musical talents of the elves. Such as they are, Thorin thought.

If he was really honest, he would have to admit that the music was not as bad as he had feared. The words on the other hand were more of a problem. The song performed was a long ballad with many long descriptions of peoples Thorin had never met and places he had never seen. Therefore it was not long before he started to lose interest. That was, until of course his wife gave her own commentary on the singer: ‘His words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes.’ Dwalin snorted so loud the wine came out of his nose. It didn’t help that Kate finished her commentary of the singer’s skill with the remark that ‘if he were a dog that would have howled thus, they would have hanged him.’ Fortunately Dwalin was laughing so loud the elves could not possibly make out her words.

Sometime later, when the singer had finally sung his last note and the dancing had started up, a nearby elf looked in horror at the dancefloor. ‘What’s this?’ he asked, directing his query at Kate, hoping that she as a fellow non-dwarf would be able to shed some light on the situation. It was clear from both his expression and his words that he didn’t approve of dwarvish dancing and that he lived in fear of having to go out there and have a go at it.

‘Have no fear,’ Kate said, laughing. ‘Though this be madness, there is method in it.’ When the elf in question did not cease to look any less horrified, she added: ‘Come now, live a little, comfort a little, cheer thyself a little.’
The elf – Thorin really couldn’t for the life of him remember his name, though they had been introduced earlier that evening – did not appear cheered. ‘I do not think I shall venture out there,’ he said.

Kate looked at him in reproach. ‘What’s that? You doubt your skill on the dancefloor? I thought your people were supposed to have mastered this art of dancing?’

‘My art of dancing, yes, that’s true. But I doubt I shall master this dwarvish art of dancing.’ He was looking a bit pale.

‘Maybe,’ Kate allowed. She had that look about her that said her victim had played right into her hands. ‘But our doubts are traitors and make us lose the good we oft might win by fearing to attempt.’ Her well of Shakespeare had clearly yet to run dry and Dwalin’s amusement had yet to dry up. His best friend was clearly having the time of his life. Even Lufur, whose duty it was to keep an eye on Kate, had been overheard chuckling from time to time.

The elf was clearly of the opinion there was no good to be won at all from leaving his chair and so he kept his backside planted firmly on it.

Kate merely shrugged. ‘Suit yourself,’ she said. ‘But my feet are itching for a dance. How about it, husband?’

Thorin had never been much of a dancer. He had never had sufficient reason for the occupation and so lacked the practise to make it look as though he knew what he was doing, which in turn killed his enjoyment of the act. He could not stand to look the fool, especially not in front of the elves.

However, if he had to choose between remaining in this company for the rest of the night or taking Kate’s escape route, he really didn’t need to think about it. There would be no getting away from the elves come morning, when he would actually have to discuss business with them, but this night at least could be made somewhat bearable.

‘Very well,’ he agreed and took her hand.

‘You looked like you were ready to strangle them,’ Kate said when they were far enough away from the elves to not be overheard.

From anyone else this might have sounded like she had deliberately staged a rescue to stop him from doing something foolish. A few years ago Thorin might have interpreted it as such and have resented her for it. But he liked to think he knew her better than that by now. And she had been in as much danger of doing something rash as he had been.

‘And they us,’ he returned, twirling her around. This dance at least was a simple one and there were even less skilled dancers than he on the floor, which might not make him stand out as much.

Kate laughed. ‘Very true,’ she agreed. ‘Well, I for one do not intend to spare them as much as a thought more before tomorrow morning. There is good music, there is dancing. I say we try to enjoy ourselves while we still can.’

He found it hard to argue with her. Enjoying himself was not something that came easy to him – he’d had too little cause for it before Smaug had been defeated – and it was harder to learn than he’d thought. But these past few years had done him good. It was hard to not learn a little when there was so much to be grateful for. And even though many people would disagree with him – not in the last place his own people – Thorin counted his wife as one of the chief blessings Mahal had
bestowed upon him.

So he let her persuade him to dance, to chase the clouds in his mind away and after a while he did find he could laugh without restraint. The world’s cares did not come so near him for a few hours.

‘You looked like you were actually enjoying yourself,’ Kate told him when they had at last made their excuses and they were on their way back home.

‘What if I was?’ he asked. ‘Is there a law against smiling now that no one has seen fit to inform me of?’ He was more relaxed than he had been when he had stepped out of his door that afternoon. That in itself was a miracle.

‘Thranduil would probably make one if he could,’ Kate pointed out reasonably.

‘Aye, he’d stop folk laughing at your jests.’ There was no doubt in his mind that Thranduil at least suspected that the Queen under the Mountain had spent most of her evening quite enjoyably mocking him and his, though without the knowledge of this William Shakespeare in his possession he would never be able to prove it. ‘Have you not run out of them yet?’

She thought that over for a moment and then smiled, but it was a different kind of smile than the one she had shown their visitors. ‘Well, I could summon up one more, I think.’

The underlying current of mockery she had put on display in front of their unwelcome guests all night had vanished completely. Whatever words she had for him, they would not be malicious.

He was proven right. ‘I love nothing in the world so well as you,’ she told him. ‘Is not that strange?’ Declarations of love of any kind were a rarity from her lips and maybe the more precious because of it. Because even though these were just stolen words, he could tell she meant them.

‘Strange indeed,’ he said. ‘But welcome.’ Then again, saying it back had never been his strong suit either.

She slipped her hand in his when they walked on. ‘It’s from one of my favourites, you know,’ she said. ‘This play called Much Ado About Nothing. And there are these two characters who always have a little verbal spar when they meet and who need a bit of help from their nearest and dearest to make them see they’re quite in love with each other. Sounds a bit familiar, doesn’t it?’

His lips curled up somewhat of their own volition. ‘It does indeed.’

Kate shrugged. ‘I was always a bit partial to it. I guess I know why now.’

‘Aye, I see,’ he said. Indeed, when she put it like that, there did seem to be certain similarities. ‘And I love you.’ It was true that he did not often know how to say the words, because somehow he always felt it made him too vulnerable, but his guard was down tonight and he knew he needn’t fear her rejection.

A soft smile he didn’t often see played around her lips. ‘Stranger and stranger still,’ she said. ‘And I know.’ Even on those days he didn’t say it.

And though there was the prospect of long-winded talks and the company of the pointy-ears in the morning, Thorin Oakenshield quite against his own expectations went to bed with a smile that night.

Chapter End Notes
Some time ago someone pointed out to me that although Kate had said ‘I love you’ to Thorin several times, he’d never actually said the same thing to her. My first instinct was to say something along the lines of ‘that can’t be true,’ but then I searched all of The Journal and Duly Noted and discovered that this person had been right. So, I hope I put that right with this chapter.

As always, thank you for reading. If you have a moment, reviews are always much appreciated!
Family Visit AU Part 5: Connecting

Chapter Notes

The Book and real life are giving me grief at the moment, so there will be some more Duly Noted for a time.
Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Family Visit AU Part 5: Connecting

1. to join, link, or fasten together; unite or bind:
2. to establish communication between; put in communication:
3. to have as an accompanying or associated feature:
4. to cause to be associated, as in a personal or business relationship:
5. to associate mentally or emotionally:
6. to link to an electrical or communications system; hook up:

Dictionary . com

‘Right, we’ll be gone for most of the day.’ Kate sent a scrutinising look to her husband and her brother. ‘Try not to burn down the house while we’re gone.’

The two self-proclaimed responsible adults in question were doing their best to convey with their facial expressions that they did not have a clue what she was talking about. But Kate hadn’t quite forgotten the Great Babysitting Disaster of 2946 and Jacko was wearing a too innocent look that betrayed he too had some history in the babysitting department that had been less than commendable.

Why did I let Laura talk me into this again?

‘We know not to play with fire, Kate.’ Jacko seemed more than a little annoyed. His scowl would have been slightly more impressive if he hadn’t had a baby girl in his arms who had taken a keen interest in drooling on his shirt.

‘You’ll know when you return how it all turned out,’ Laura said sunnily.

Kate held up her hands in defeat. ‘At least there aren’t any trade agreements lying around.’ She bid goodbye to Thorin with a quick kiss and hugged both her boys. Duria received a kiss to the forehead and then she was out the door before she could think up any more disaster scenarios that would prevent her from leaving.
Two adults against five little children. What can possibly go wrong? Kate knew the answer from bitter experience: a lot. And it had taken a lot of diplomacy to appease the vexed men of the Lake. Of course there was no danger of diplomatic disaster here, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t a very real possibility of something going wrong. Her own boys were quite creative troublemakers and from what she had seen of Jacko’s son Archie so far she had concluded he was not much different. Well, at least Duria and Susan were too small to cause any real trouble. That was one less thing to worry over.

‘What you said about trade agreements, what was that about?’ Jane asked curiously as they walked down the path towards the car. Jacko’s wife had taken to the whole idea of Kate’s temporary return a whole lot sooner than her husband. Jacko after three days still wasn’t quite out of the pouting zone, but Jane had made no secret of her delight when she saw Kate again.

‘Yes, I was wondering as well,’ Laura chimed in. ‘Come on, Kate, spill.’

Again, Kate questioned the wisdom of going on an all-female day out. The idea had been Laura’s. She insisted that Kate should have a proper dress for the wedding, seeing as how she would be bridesmaid. When Kate after some mild protest had given in she had been under the impression that it would just be her and Laura, but then Jane had arrived and she had announced she was coming too and then of course Anna had been invited along as well. And with Kate’s mother away for the day with one of her own friends, that left the babysitting in the “capable” hands of Thorin and Jacko.

‘Three years ago, Thora and Dís took me out for the day,’ she narrated. ‘Thorin wasn’t terribly busy, so he said he’d watch the lads for me. But when I came home, he looked like he had been outside in an autumn storm, Thráin was sleeping on the very edge of the dining table and Thoren was pouring an inkwell out over the recently signed trade agreement with Esgaroth. Needless to say, the men of the Lake were not pleased.’ She smiled at the memory. Hindsight made her look at it kinder. ‘And you wouldn’t believe the state of the living room. I’m still not entirely certain of the origin of the stain on the rug.’

‘Well, we’ll see when we get back, won’t we?’ Anna asked cheerfully. ‘But let me tell you: I am glad my mum was available for watching Danny, because I wouldn’t trust Seth with it either.’

‘You’re filling me with confidence,’ Kate remarked wryly.

‘I meant to,’ Anna pointed out. ‘So, this is what you’ve got to look forward to, Laura, if you ever want kids of your own.’

‘Learn from our bitter experiences and never ever let your husband alone with small children for any length of time,’ Kate clarified. ‘Not if he’s as hopeless at it as mine, anyway.’ Thorin was one of the best souls she had ever met, but multi-tasking was not a talent of his. And Kate had learned very quickly that having children required having eyes in the back of one’s head, an extra pair of hands and the ability to predict every possible mischief little children could get up to hours in advance.

‘I’ll bear that in mind.’ Laura grinned and tossed Kate the car keys, which she only caught in a reflex just before they hit her square in the face. ‘Want to drive?’

She looked up in surprise. ‘You sure?’

‘I can drive for ages if I want. You only got a couple of weeks and I seem to remember that you always liked it. And I believe my car will be safe in your hands.’
‘That’s quite the vote of confidence,’ Kate observed. ‘But if you don’t mind, then yes, I wouldn’t mind.’

It was only when they were already in the car that Anna explained the ulterior motive behind this unexpected offer. ‘Besides, when you’ve got to keep your hands on the wheel, you can’t hit any of us,’ she said.

Kate frowned warily. ‘Why would I want to?’

‘Well, we’ve got to discuss the kind of dress you want,’ Jane explained. ‘And if my memory is correct, then you never liked that kind of girly talk.’ Judging by that look, she had been in on this whole scheme.

Well, it was clever. Jane was right; Kate didn’t like dresses in general – of course in Erebor she had little choice – but she liked endlessly talking about clothes even less. So her friends had devised a situation from which she could not run. Clever indeed.

‘You are elves, the lot of you,’ she declared, starting the engine.

Anna laughed. ‘You know, most people would take that as a compliment.’ Bugger, that was right. She wasn’t home anymore, where being called an elf was definitely an insult. In this world the general consensus was that elves were beautiful and kind and wise. Mostly that was true. The Mirkwood elves, who happened to be the elves that lived nearest, were the exception to the rule.

‘Most people haven’t had to deal with Thranduil and his kin.’ No elves for her for a whole blessed period of six weeks. On the other hand there was girly fashion talk. Any hope that they had outgrown that had evaporated the moment Anna opened her mouth. ‘Believe you me, you won’t find a more annoying individual in the entire world.’ Ranting about the elven king she could do, in detail and at length.

Unfortunately her friends recognised her attempt at evasion instantly. ‘Kate, dress, what kind?’ Laura demanded.

And maybe she should think about it. If not, Thorin might suffer a heart attack. He had already been extremely unpleasantly surprised when he noticed Jane’s knee-length skirt and top without sleeves. Balancing Earth fashion and Middle Earth decency was going to be tough.

‘Not too short,’ she decreed. ‘Knee-length or longer. And it’s got to have sleeves.’

Anna frowned. ‘It’s the middle of the summer, Kate. And surely Thorin isn’t so rigid that he’d forbid you from dressing a bit more like you used to?’

‘Thorin is not forbidding me anything,’ she snapped. Of course, by their standards he was old-fashioned. He had grown up with different values, different ideas of what was and wasn’t appropriate. And Kate knew he didn’t like it when other men looked at her like they had a right to. But that didn’t have anything to do with this. ‘The sleeves are my condition, not his.’

She would have said Thorin hadn’t made conditions at all, because he trusted her. He wouldn’t necessarily like it, but ultimately he trusted her. He’d even said as much this morning.

Jane looked surprised; Kate could see her face in the rear-view mirror. ‘Why? You weren’t opposed to bare arms before.’

‘That was before my left arm got scarred.’ She didn’t like to explain it. ‘We were attacked in Mirkwood. I got into a fight with an orc, who slashed open my left arm. Then a burning branch fell
on it. The scars have never entirely gone away and I don’t like people looking. I certainly don’t want to explain it.’ It was bad enough that she could never hide the scar on her face. Make-up could hide a little, but it remained visible. And she still hadn’t thought up a good enough cover story to give to the people that she couldn’t tell the truth. ‘So, the sleeves have to stay.’ It was making her edgy, having to talk about it.

‘Or we can find a nice dress and find a little cardigan thingy to cover your arm,’ Laura said. She had been nodding in understanding as Kate gave the summary of the Mirkwood fiasco, because she knew it from the letters. Clearly Jane and Anna never read them. They had looked like it was news to them. ‘That ought to do it. And if it’s just your typical English summer day, no one will think anything of it.’

Kate nodded. ‘You’re probably right.’ She sighed. ‘While you’re at it, you wouldn’t have a good explanation for my face, would you?’

Laura shrugged. ‘That was a goblin’s whip, right?’

Kate would have confirmed that, but Anna interrupted. ‘You were whipped across the face? By goblins?’ She shook her head. ‘I can’t seem to comprehend how absurd your life has become, Kate.’

‘Join the club.’ There were still days when she would wake up and be stunned to remember that she was married to Thorin Oakenshield and that she was his queen. Some days it took her looking at him, feeling him near to be reminded that it was real, that she hadn’t dreamt it up. ‘It happened in Goblin-town. We didn’t move quickly enough for their taste, so they came at us with whips. I didn’t even get the worst of it.’ There was something almost disturbing about discussing life in Middle Earth with friends who had never been there. It was like the walls between the two worlds had come down just a little. And it was strange and oddly disconcerting.

Anna got over the strangeness of it fairly quickly. ‘How about some scars from the legendary fight with the dragon?’ she asked. ‘Like in the movie?’

‘I haven’t seen the movie,’ Kate pointed out. ‘But it’s probably wrong. The short version is that Bilbo kept it talking, then Thorin stabbed it in an unprotected patch in its foot, allowing Kíli the right angle to shoot it in the eye. And that was the end of Smaug. And let me tell you, it’s one hell of a job to drag that corpse from the treasury all the way to the front gate.’ She smirked. ‘But I bet that probably didn’t happen in the movie.’

Jane’s jaw had dropped and Anna was doing an unflattering fish on dry land imitation. The latter was also the first one to recover the gift of speech. ‘Not exactly. But I like your version better anyway. Sounds heroic.’

‘I suppose it would have worked well in a movie,’ Kate allowed. ‘But the reality of it was bloody terrifying.’ She could still remember it all too well. She didn’t even remember Smaug’s death throes all that clearly, but she could still recall with perfect clarity what his voice had sounded like, how it had echoed across the room, how she could feel it in her very bones and how dangerous he had sounded.

But her friends didn’t know that. They hadn’t gone through it with her. To them it was all just a story. They could not even begin to imagine what it had been like and it made her feel oddly lonely. She had wanted to see them again for years and now that she was with them again, she found that she no longer fit in neatly. They didn’t understand one another like they used to.

And it hurt. She had feared that it would be like this, back when she was weighing the pros and
cons of staying in Middle Earth. Being completely out of touch with her own world was one of the things she had dreaded the most and now here she was. She both felt at home and completely out of her depth at the same time. She’d changed too much to ever fit in here again and she hadn’t changed enough to ever entirely belong in Erebor. *So there I am, forever caught between two worlds, belonging in neither.* Even when Gandalf had abducted her, she hadn’t felt so uprooted.

‘You all right?’ Laura asked from the passenger seat. ‘Only you look like you’re on the verge of crying.’

‘Fine,’ Kate said, furious with herself for letting her emotions show so plainly. ‘Really.’ She focused on the road ahead and it was a welcome distraction. She wasn’t as bad at city driving as her brother, but she didn’t exactly like it either. Give her the open road any time.

‘We’re making you uncomfortable.’ Anna had always been intuitive. She could read people like a book and Kate had never been an exception. ‘Because of the movie talk?’

Kate shrugged, deciding on honesty. ‘Partly, yes,’ she admitted. ‘I just realised that I do not fit in as perfectly as I used to. And I’m not sure how I feel about it.’

She couldn’t say that their conversation seemed shallow to her. It would offend them and they certainly wouldn’t understand. But Kate’s interests in the trivial matters had gone years ago and she found she had very little patience for it now. And the trivial matters that did interest her were so vastly different from her friends’ that she couldn’t seem to find similarities rather than differences.

*I’ve become an alien in my own bloody country.*

‘Well, we won’t know what we’re doing wrong if you won’t talk about it,’ Jane said sensibly.

Kate struggled for a way to explain it. ‘That’s just it,’ she said. ‘You’re not doing anything wrong. You’re not doing anything different from how it used to be. It’s me that’s changed too much to just slip back into my old spot again. That’s what’s bothering me.’

Sort of anyway. But either way, they weren’t at fault. They just didn’t know any different. They had never spent sleepless nights listening for indications of danger in the darkness, they had never sat at home waiting till a loved one came home from battle, they had never picked up a weapon in their lives. If Gandalf hadn’t interfered, Kate wouldn’t have known any better either, but Gandalf had done what he felt he had to and now, she couldn’t identify with those who were once closest to her anymore.

‘We know,’ Anna said. ‘But…’ She thought for a moment for a way to express herself best, as she used to do. ‘We haven’t experienced what you’ve been through, but if you keep bottling it all up, we’re never going to anyway. So talk. I know, it doesn’t come natural to you, but you can make an effort and we want to hear about you and your life. We’re your friends, remember? Just because you’ve been out of the country for the past eight years, that doesn’t mean anything has actually changed.’

Surprisingly, Kate found that Anna was at least half-right. Some things hadn’t changed and Anna had been absolutely right when she saw through Kate’s words and pierced the heart of the matter. She found she could actually summon up a real smile.

‘That’s more like it,’ Laura said. ‘Now we go and find you a dress and some other much-needed things and then we’ll talk. A lot.’

Kate found she didn’t dread it quite so much anymore.
There was a bit of silence after the women had left the house, though Thorin knew it was unlikely to last long; any moment now his sons would stir up some form of trouble that, if unchecked, would soon spiral out of control. He couldn’t speak for Jacko’s son Archie, but he too had the look of a troublemaker about him. Unsurprisingly, he had become fast friends with Thoren and Thráin within minutes of meeting them.

‘You kids up for a game of football in the back yard?’ Jacko asked. Thank the Maker that at least the weather was fine. He looked at Thorin over the heads of the younglings. ‘At least I am reasonably certain there are no breakable objects in the immediate vicinity.’

This took Thorin by surprise. As far as he was aware, Kate’s brother merely tolerated his presence because he had to. He certainly didn’t wish for his company and likewise Thorin felt uneasy in his.

He nodded. ‘Very well. What shall we do with the girls?’

Jacko cast a look at Duria. ‘Well, yours looks like she won’t get in trouble on her own and she seems to enjoy playing by herself.’ Fortunately that was the truth. Duria could enjoy her own company, which was in sharp contrast with her brothers, who had always wanted to be entertained. ‘And mine is out for the count for a while. At least I hope so; she’s kept me awake most of the night.’

Jacko and his family had taken up residence in what they called a bed and breakfast nearby, which meant that Thorin had not been witness to crying of an infant all night. But he remembered what it was like all the same. Thoren and Thráin hadn’t been good sleepers and Thorin had lost count of the number of nights he or Kate had been up for hours and hours when one of their sons had decided that sleep was for other people and not for them. And it was the one part of being a parent where he’d been better at than Kate. Soothing a fussy baby back to sleep somehow came easy to him. Kate had once told him it was because he sang them lullabies and that there was something about being in his arms that made a body feel safe. He did not know if she was right.

‘I see,’ he said. If it had been one of his kin who had talked of this problem, he would have counselled them to sing to their children. But Jacko, though his brother by marriage, was no trusted friend of his and Thorin was reluctant to share more of his life than he had to. ‘I am not familiar with the game,’ he admitted and that was as much vulnerability as he planned on showing.

‘It’s easy,’ Jacko said as they followed the lads out into the garden. It mainly consisted of grass, which made it an ideal children’s playground. ‘It’s just kicking a ball around and trying to score. Of course, there’s more to it, but let’s not bother the kids with the more complicated rules just yet.’ Thorin sincerely hoped he hadn’t correctly read that last sentence as him being one of the children, given that he had never heard of the game before.

‘Kate made no mention of this game,’ he observed. And she had brought over a lot of games with her from her world in order to keep the lads entertained.

Jacko laughed. ‘Kate hates this game. It’s always annoyed her how such an “inane” game could be so popular. She never saw the sense in grown men running around after a ball only to kick it away again once they finally had it.’

Truth be told, from that description Thorin couldn’t see any sense in it either. ‘Is there?’ he asked.
‘Is there what?’ Kate’s brother appeared confused.

‘Sense, in the game?’ Thorin clarified.

‘Far as I can tell, not a bit.’ He appeared wholly undisturbed by that. ‘But it’s a lot of fun.’

That was still a new concept for Thorin, doing something just for the purposes of one’s own entertainment. Such behaviour was to be expected of children, but not of those who called themselves adults. There were too many responsibilities, too many duties. Everything had to have a purpose, although Dís had pointed out to him quite recently that this line of thinking was more of his own making and not shared by the majority of the population. Of course, dwarves despised idleness, but there was no harm in unwinding after a good day of work with song and dance and storytelling and whatever else it was that took their fancy.

The cause of this conversation was an evening with Kate and his lads. She had gotten one of her friends to make them a stack of cards with pictures, that came in pairs and that were laid on the table upside down in a random order. It was up to the players to find the matching sets. It seemed like a good way to train the lads in remembering things, but then Kate had invited him to join them. And he’d asked why. ‘Because it’s fun,’ she’d said. ‘And because it’s good to do stuff as a family.’ Then she’d grinned. ‘And because I used to be really good at this once upon a time.’ They’d had a few trying days and this had been the first time she appeared to be at rest, so he hadn’t refused. They’d split up in teams, Thorin and his eldest against Kate and Thráin. And after the lads had been put to bed they’d played just the two of them and it had been remarkably enjoyable. Also he’d only felt that he might have spent his time on reading through documents.

But there were no documents here and perhaps he ought to take his sister’s advice to heart more often.

‘Very well,’ he said.

It turned out that Thoren and Thráin had already spent considerable time learning the rules of the game. Thráin especially had a quick eye and a good sense of knowing where the ball was going to be. And Thorin found that before long, he was actually having quite a good time. They’d split up in teams. Thoren and Jacko took on Thorin, Thráin and Archie. It seemed unfair to Thorin that he would captain the team with the most people, but Jacko was quite good. In fact, Thorin suspected him of going easy on them. Normally he loathed such behaviour, but his sons were laughing and for their sake, he held his tongue.

‘Okay, that’s it, boys,’ Jacko declared eventually. Thorin couldn’t tell how much time had passed, but he reckoned it had been a good long while. The sun was high in the sky and the temperature was steadily rising. ‘Lunch.’

Kate always said that there was nothing in all the world that made a dwarf focus like the promise of food. Thorin liked to think he had better control over himself than that, but the saying was most certainly true about his sons. Duria had fallen asleep inside the house a while ago and Susan was only just waking up. She was however starting to make unhappy noises, indicating that she would not remain quiet for very long.

‘I will take her, if you do not mind.’ Thorin found himself making the offer before he could think it through. In his own world he would never have offered to take care of a mannish child, mainly because he knew such an offer would be regarded with suspicion and hostility. He’d no idea where those stories about dwarves stealing children got started, but he had found it in many towns and villages.
Jacko appeared relieved. ‘It would give me some opportunity to put lunch together,’ he said. ‘So, if you don’t mind, then I’d be grateful.’ He was already making his way to the kitchen. ‘She’ll usually settle if you walk around with her for a bit. Just keep moving and she’ll be fine.’ He stopped when he thought of something. ‘Come to think of it, have you ever been to Kate’s old room?’ He didn’t wait for an answer before he continued: ‘We moved all her stuff back after she’d gone and mum kept herself busy by arranging it all exactly the way it used to be. You can go and have a look around, if you like.’

Thorin almost froze. He wasn’t convinced Jacko had entirely come around and so his wariness of him remained. And his first instinct at such an offer was to think of it as an attempt of Jacko’s to rub his nose in the heartbreak Kate’s disappearance had put her family through. And even if there was no ulterior motive – after all, they had gotten along very nicely this morning – it was not his place to pry.

‘It is Kate’s old room,’ he said. ‘It is not my right to pry there.’

Jacko frowned. ‘It isn’t prying. We’ve all been in there at some point. And it’s not as if mum’s put all her private stuff on full display. Besides, you’re her husband; I don’t think she’d mind. And you might like to get a sense of Kate’s life before you met her.’ He shrugged. ‘It’s just an idea, not a criminal masterplan.’ He must have sensed that Thorin had suspected there was more to the offer than was said. ‘I’ve checked my ears in the mirror this morning and they’re not pointy as far as I can tell.’

‘No one would mistake you for an elf,’ Thorin informed him, almost angry with himself for being so distrustful. ‘They lack the facial hair. It can make it hard to tell their women from their menfolk.’

Jacko grinned, the remark apparently well-received. ‘They probably say the same about your people. Just go. It’s the first door on your left when you’ve come at the top of the stairs, shouldn’t be locked. I’ll shout when lunch is on the table.’

Thorin took ill to commands, but he felt there was not really one intended. So he picked up the baby and settled her in his arms. She was a tiny thing, with big eyes and the first hints of curly hair on top of her head. For a moment she looked up at him curiously, but she quickly took an interest in one of the laces of his tunic, which she promptly stuck in her mouth.

He found that it was not much different from walking around with his own offspring and Susan appeared to be easily content. Her name sounded as outlandish as all the names in this strange land sounded to his ears so far. Then again, Kate didn’t seem such an unusual name around these parts. She fit right in with Jane, Laura, Anna, Helen, John, Jacko and Archie. They were all relatively short names, though he knew Kate’s full name was longer. He’d always wondered why she didn’t use it, but this was a world, he found, that had a tendency for shortening long names. He didn’t find such a habit in his own world.

As Jacko had said, the door was unlocked. It opened up into a room that was slightly bigger than he had expected. It was light and airy, the way he knew Kate liked. It didn’t feel like a place that had long since been abandoned. This room felt like the owner could walk back in at any moment.

And Thorin stopped.

The window was to his left with a desk shoved against it, the bed against the opposite wall. But those weren’t the things that drew the eye. There was board against the wall above the bed, filled with pictures. He recognised Kate’s face in some of them, the faces of her friends, the ones he’d met at any rate, in others. Even from his spot in the doorway he could see that these pictures,
photographs Kate called them, had been taken in happy times, when there was no sorrow, no heartache and no grief. Or maybe there had been. He had seen first-hand the damage that her father had done, and he knew of her first loves, the ones who had proven unworthy of her affection. But those were not moments to be memorised the way the happier times were.

Nevertheless, it was too unpleasant to dwell on for long; the guilt had mostly subsided, but he knew from experience that it could rear its ugly head at a moment’s notice. And so he turned to the other wall, the one that was direct in front of him, mainly consisted of shelves, filled with books and little knickknacks of Kate’s old life.

The child in his arms remained quiet, so he assumed it wouldn’t hurt if he just stood and looked around, and maybe tried to read some of the titles. The books on these shelves were not unlike the books Kate had brought over with her when she had first arrived in Middle Earth, with the big difference that these did not look as old as the ones he knew. Then again, the three books in Kate’s bag had travelled all across the continent with her.

Most of the titles were very unfamiliar to him. There were a few others he thought may at some point have come up in conversation, but as the names had meant nothing to him at the time, he had not truly remembered. It wasn’t until he looked a bit lower, underneath the books, where there was a shelf filled with what he believed Kate called DVD’s, that something he’d heard of caught his eye.

It took Kate approximately three minutes to remember why she hated shopping. It wasn’t just the looking at dresses, though that was bad enough on its own, but it was also having to try them on and then parade around in front of her very own jury to see if they could withstand their judgement.

‘Too short,’ she judged on an otherwise lovely green dress that appeared to only reach mid-thigh.

‘Makes you look ill,’ was Laura’s comment on a pale yellow dress that did exactly that.

‘That one makes me look like an elephant,’ Kate said distastefully about a grey dress that made her appear as three times her own weight.

‘Way too much cleavage on display,’ remarked Jane about yet another one.

‘This one looks rather nice.’ They were about two hours into this whole excursion when Anna observed this. ‘I mean, you can see a lot of your back, but if you insist on a cardigan, no one is going to see that anyway.’

Kate hesitated in front of the mirror. Though she felt like all the dresses started to look the same after a while, she had to admit that this one looked better, and fit her better, than most of the others. It was even floor-length, but like Anna said, there was a lot of her back and her arms on full display.

Laura put in her two cents. ‘I think you look lovely,’ she said in a tone that allowed no room for argument. ‘Just buy the thing and have done with it.’ She grinned in Kate’s direction. ‘Unless of course you’re up for more dress-shopping.’

That decided her. ‘This one will do.’ It was only for a day and she probably wouldn’t even take it back with her to Erebor, because the locals would go into cardiac arrest if they saw her in that.

‘You could try to sound a little more enthusiastic about it,’ said Jane.
Kate snorted. ‘Don’t push your luck. If we keep this up any longer I am going to get terrifying flashbacks of Dori lecturing me about making sure I am well-dressed.’ She loved her brother, she really did, but there were times she could have cheerfully strangled him. While she thought this, she had a fleeting image in her mind of the faces he’d make if he ever were to see this dress. Better not.

‘Well, at least you finally know all about the joys of overbearing older brothers,’ Anna said cheerfully. Anna’s brother Sam had been the subject of many a complaint during their childhood. Kate remembered that well enough. She had met him a few times and his attitude of I-am-the-oldest-and-the-smartest had never failed to rub her the wrong way.

‘I’ve had my share, yes.’ Dori was different, but then, he was older than Sam and maybe even Sam had finally grown up. ‘But most of his efforts focus on Nori, when he’s around at least.’

‘You know, we should get a cup of coffee and chat about it,’ Jane said. ‘Somewhere that isn’t the middle of a shop.’

It sounded like a good plan. And while they had been busy Laura had magically produced a cardigan that went well with the dress, so that was them all sorted out. All things considered, they had succeeded rather quicker than Kate had thought.

‘Dress. Give me,’ Laura demanded, holding out her arms.

Kate frowned. ‘Why?’

‘Because I am paying,’ she replied. ‘Didn’t I mention?’

‘No, you didn’t.’ And Kate didn’t really like it either. Given the fact that she was now officially dead – and that in itself was an odd thought that still made her feel vaguely uncomfortable – her bank account was no longer in existence and Middle Earth currency was not going to pay for anything here. Her mother had saved her the embarrassment by giving her money for shopping before she had to ask for it, but even so it hadn’t felt right.

Laura must have realised something wasn’t right, but she waltzed right over it. ‘Well, I am. It’s my wedding and I invited you. Seems right I pay.’

‘You invited a lot of people and I doubt you’re paying for their clothes,’ Kate retorted. She didn’t quite share Thorin’s aversion to accepting charity, but in this case she came close. And it was even worse because back home she had more money than she could ever spend in ten lifetimes. She could buy whatever tickled her fancy without having to think for a second about if she could afford it or not. Not that she usually thought much about the quite frankly ridiculous amounts of riches she now possessed. The job of being Queen under the Mountain, a wife and a mother at the same time took up the vast majority of her attention. Money never played a huge role. It was easy that it was there when she needed it, but other than that she hadn’t at any point been obsessing over how rich she was now. It was just ludicrous that despite all her wealth she now had to rely on her friends to buy her a dress.

‘Well, I know that they have things to wear.’ Laura had years of diffusing Kate’s temper under her belt and an eight year break did not seem to make much of a difference. ‘Whereas you would never wear a dress unless held at gunpoint.’

Kate snorted. ‘You should see my wardrobe these days.’

‘Yeah, but you’re still you, so I also know that none of the contents of that wardrobe have made the
trip to England with you.’

Laura had her there. The mere prospect of not having to wear a dress for six whole weeks had been enough to make her “forget” to bring a dress or two. That didn’t mean she hadn’t got used to skirts – she even really liked some of her clothes – but she just wanted something else for a change.

Her lack of a response was enough for Laura. ‘So stop being so… you and hand over the dress. I don’t want to have a catfight over it in the middle of this shop, if I’m honest. But don’t think that will stop me.’

Kate had learned from bitter experience never to test what her friend was and wasn’t capable of. ‘Fine, have it your way.’

Laura took the dress before Kate could change her mind.

They went out and bought sandwiches and coffee to go before making their way to a nearby park where they could talk without attracting the kind of attention Kate was keen to avoid. Her friends may know the truth about her and her life, but that didn’t mean she wanted anybody else to overhear her talking about “fictional characters” as though they were real. At best they’d think she had really overindulged on fanfiction, at worst they’d think she was completely insane.

The conversation meandered for a bit and for a while it seemed like the old days when they’d gone out and talked about everything and nothing at the same time, carefree for hours. She’d had those moments in Erebor as well, but not as frequently as she’d like sometimes.

‘You’ve been awfully quiet,’ Anna observed after some time.

‘Nothing wrong,’ Kate reassured her. ‘Just reminiscing. We used to do this a lot back in the day.’

Laura nodded. ‘We haven’t really done it since. Didn’t feel right without you. Especially…’ She stopped herself there, but it was already too late; Kate knew what she meant.

‘Especially when you didn’t know if I was dead or alive,’ she finished. Laura wouldn’t have said it to rub salt in open wounds, but her mouth was quicker than her brain. Besides, at least it was honest. Living with dwarves had taught her to appreciate that. ‘It’s all right. Really,’ she emphasised when Laura looked like she was about to apologise. ‘I’ve put you through hell.’

‘Yeah, but it wasn’t your fault,’ Anna pointed out.

‘Maybe not,’ Kate allowed, uncomfortable because her friends were defending her actions, which she didn’t think she deserved. ‘But I didn’t exactly ask Gandalf to send a letter home either.’

She had wondered since she had come back here. Would he have, if she had asked it of him? Truth be told, he probably would have. It just hadn’t occurred to her to ask that, not when she was pressing him so hard to send her back home. Even if she had spared a thought for such a letter, she would have dismissed it, because it sounded too much like she had resigned herself to her fate. And by the time she fully committed to the quest, Gandalf was leaving anyway.

Fortunately for her, her friends knew her better than she thought. ‘Of course not,’ Laura said. ‘Because that would have been a compromise, wouldn’t it?’ She shook her head. ‘Not your style.’

Anna nodded her agreement. ‘You’ve always been an all-or-nothing kind of girl. I doubt Middle Earth changed you that much.’

*Guilty as charged.* ‘Not really. Which no doubt has driven the council to despair a couple of times.’
‘And the elves, if I remember your letters right,’ Laura chimed in.

‘And the elves,’ Kate agreed. She turned to her friend with a would-be threatening look. ‘And don’t think I’ve forgotten you turned those into a fanfiction, Laura Porter. At some point we will be having some words about that.’

‘I’ll have you know people like that story, thank you very much.’ Laura was grinning like the cat that ate the canary. ‘And the best thing about it is that nobody so much as guessed that it was actually real.’

Kate shook her head. ‘Why would they? It’s far too insane for reality.’

‘Well, they do say reality is often stranger than fiction,’ Jane pointed out sensibly.

‘You can say that again.’ In that fateful year alone she had seen so many things she would have thought to be impossible. But she had lived through those events. ‘And even by Middle Earth standards we have done absolutely crazy things.’

‘Like?’ Anna pressed.

‘Setting Mirkwood on fire for starters.’ The longer she thought about it, the more she began to believe that she had temporarily taken leave of her senses. The mere idea was mental. How she had ever been capable of going through with it was beyond her. ‘Dragging Smaug’s stinking, rotting carcass all the way from the treasury to the front gate…’

‘You mentioned that earlier,’ Jane recalled. ‘Sounds like an interesting story.’

In hindsight, it actually was. She took a bite of her sandwich, chewed and swallowed and prepared to tell the tale. ‘Let me tell you about it…’

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Thorin needed some time upstairs, Jacko observed while he made lunch, and he was starting to debate the wisdom of sending him back to Kate’s old room to have a look around. The one thing he had figured out about Kate’s husband was that there was actually no figuring him out. Just when he thought he was getting somewhere, he said something Thorin clearly took as either an insult or a direct attack. It was clear that Kate saw something in him – she wouldn’t hear a bad word spoken about him – but Jacko had yet to discover what that was.

And then all of a sudden he would do something nice and thoughtful like taking care of Susan and he would have no idea – again – of who he was actually dealing with. It was like walking a bloody tightrope in a hurricane… blindfolded.

Having said that, he was prepared to make the effort, now that he had actually calmed down enough to make such a decision. It didn’t mean he entirely approved of Kate’s life choices, but since he couldn’t change the past, he would have to learn to live with them. And they only were here for a grand total of six weeks. It seemed foolish to waste that time on being angry with her when he would never see her again once she left.

Thorin at least had perfect timing; he came back into the room just when Jacko was about to call him to tell him that lunch was on the table. He’d wondered about not calling, but he had a feeling the boys would have eaten everything before that time.
‘Just in time,’ he said, taking care to keep his voice light. The last thing he wanted was for this
dwarf to take any more offence than he already had. Kate should have left a manual on how to
handle him behind. ‘Lunch is served.’

He was rewarded for his troubles with a curt, but not unkind nod. ‘Thank you.’

Jacko shook his head. ‘No, thank you. It seems you managed to handle Susan perfectly.’ He was
just a tiny bit jealous, because he had been up all night trying to soothe her and had no success
 whatsoever. Whatever Thorin did on the other hand appeared to be working.

Other people might have taken the compliment in the spirit in which it had been intended, but not
Thorin. ‘I followed your instructions.’

‘All the same, it worked.’ Come on, you bastard, give me something to work with here. ‘Look, just
accept the compliment when it’s given. It makes it easier for both of us.’

For a moment he wondered if he had gone too far, if he’d said something Thorin would find
inappropriate or offensive. Then Thorin actually nodded at him again, almost as if in approval.
‘Very well.’

That took Jacko by surprise until he remembered that Kate had mentioned something about the
brutal, blunt honesty of dwarves, who like no others apparently valued directness. He might get
used to it. It was certainly better than beating around the bush.

He didn’t have long to dwell on it. Just supervising Archie was difficult enough sometimes, but
now that Kate’s two boys were here as well, he found himself repeatedly praying for a second pair
of hands. They were good lads, well-mannered too when they remembered that it was required of
them, but quite incapable of sitting still for more than a minute altogether. He’d rather hoped the
game of football would have worn them out, but no such luck.

‘I’m going to ask Uncle Nori for a football,’ Thoren announced. ‘When we get back. And then I’m
going to teach all my friends to play.’

By now Jacko had heard a good deal about this Nori. His nephews were obviously fond of him,
Kate spoke in fondly exasperated tones about her adopted brother, whereas Thorin gave the
impression he wouldn’t mind if Nori never darkened his door again. The only real thing Jacko had
to go on was the short note Nori had sent along with Kate’s letters. He’d come to think of that
particular dwarf as one who didn’t take anything too serious, but who at least had his heart in the
right place.

‘Why ask your uncle Nori for it?’ he wondered, because Kate may dislike football, but he didn’t
think she’d begrudge her sons the pleasure of the game.

‘He knows how to find anything,’ Thráin confided.

‘Finds it without paying for it, aye, that’s true enough,’ Thorin said.

Thráin studied his father. ‘That’s what Uncle Dori says.’

Thoren leaned over the table to Jacko and whispered behind his hand: ‘Uncle Dori is boring.’ He
made it sound as though he was imparting a great secret on him, which it wasn’t, if the fervent
nodding of his brother and the chuckle of his father were anything to go by.

The conversation flowed easier with the boys there, who only ever seemed to stop talking to put
food in their mouths and who jumped from one topic to a completely different unrelated one
without pausing for breath. There wasn’t any need for either Jacko or Thorin to do anything else but nod and occasionally remind the children to properly chew their food before they swallowed. Jacko was grateful for it, because just the idea of making conversation with his brother-in-law made him vaguely nervous.

Of course there was no avoiding it after lunch. The boys made their way back into the garden, leaving their fathers to handle the washing up. Thorin however appeared to make no attempt at conversation and Jacko had no idea how to break the uncomfortable silence.

‘What’d you think of Kate’s room?’ he asked at long last, hoping that this was not actually one of those topics that made him go even more unsociable and taciturn. It was hard enough coaxing words out of him as it was.

‘It suits her.’ That was a surprising sort of answer, but a remarkable insightful one as well. If anything, he’d gotten the measure of Kate. It would have been a bad thing if he hadn’t after all this time, but still.

He was making progress – of a sort – so he tried to keep the conversation light. ‘Because of the sheer amount of books, right?’

‘That too.’ Thorin might never be a very chatty sort of person, but Jacko suspected he was making an effort here as well, even if it did all still feel wooden and awkward. ‘But also because of the light.’ Before Jacko could comment on how much he’d hit the nail on the head with that remark, Thorin continued: ‘The books here look very different than they do in my world.’

Jacko reckoned that Middle Earth had never invented the press, so that all books he knew would have been written by hand. It was all very medieval and for that reason alone he found it hard to imagine that Kate would be content there. She had never made a secret of her gratefulness for living in this day and age.

‘I suppose they do,’ he agreed, taking care to keep his voice neutral. ‘But you’ve seen our kind of book before, haven’t you? I mean, I know Kate brought *The Hobbit*, but as far as I’m aware my sister never leaves the house without multiple books in her bag.’

The fact that Thorin actually smiled – it made him look younger and friendlier – suggested that this was one of those things that hadn’t changed. ‘No indeed. This has not altered.’ He was silent for a while and Jacko was about to give this line of conversation up as a lost cause as well, when Thorin suddenly volunteered more information: ‘I believe Ori felt it necessary to put a limit on the number of books she can take from the library at any one time.’

Huh. It certainly didn’t come as a surprise that Kate liked to read. But he was caught on the backfoot because Thorin had suddenly decided to share something that Jacko hadn’t needed to drag out of him first. The words still sounded oddly formal, but he counted it as a step in the right direction.

‘Well, if there’s anything you like to read, just help yourself,’ he invited.

Thorin was quiet for some time, so he naturally assumed no answer was going to be forthcoming, but eventually he spoke again. ‘As a matter of fact, there was something I would be interested in.’

‘Name it.’ Blimey, how did this guy ever have a normal conversation with anyone? It was more like pulling teeth than a light exchange.

‘I do not believe these stories are found in any book, but Kate has spoken often about something
called *Doctor Who*. I noticed the title in her room.’

Jacko could barely bite back a groan. ‘Only my sister could move to Middle Earth and still obsess over a stupid TV-series.’ Despite Kate’s many attempts to beg, barter and downright blackmail him into watching it with her, he had never liked it. It was too absurd, too far-fetched and simply too weird for Jacko’s taste. Of course, Kate was leading a very strange life, so maybe her tastes in entertainment should have been a warning for stranger things to come.

Thorin actually smiled. ‘She has made mention of it more than once.’ And while Jacko was perhaps not the best in reading subtext, even he could tell there was something more to this statement. But asking about that might undo all the progress he’d made today, so he decided against it.

‘You should watch it with Kate,’ he advised. ‘She certainly won’t mind.’ When Thorin appeared not to understand, he added: ‘I never really liked it.’ But now that he was actually getting somewhere with Thorin, it might be a good idea to offer an alternative. ‘You know, Kate really used to like board games. There should be a couple in her room. We could give those a try.’

It had, all things considered, been a good day, Thorin reflected. The boys had mainly kept out of trouble and his interactions with Kate’s brother were improving. He had been unfailingly friendly all day, but Thorin couldn’t help but still be a bit wary. After all, his behaviour towards Kate when they had just arrived had been almost hostile.

Having said that, he almost felt at ease now. Kate’s mother – she insisted he call her Helen – had returned late in the afternoon. Jacko had announced he didn’t feel like cooking and had ordered something called a pizza, a dish Thorin was unfamiliar with. The whole process of ordering food through the device they called a telephone and then having it delivered at the door was baffling. Thoren and Thráin had immediately taken to it, though, and Thorin found the taste not displeasing.

After dinner the boys had been put to bed. They’d run around all day and, despite their claims to the contrary, were exhausted. They only put up a token protest before they went to sleep. Jacko put Archie in the other guest room, since he couldn’t leave before his wife returned and then they settled down for another one of Kate’s old board games, called Cluedo.

It was a strange experience. Playing games was not something that came easy to him and even when he occasionally indulged, only with close friends and family. Kate’s mother and brother, for all that they were family now too, were not that close to him. Still, he sat down and played with them. This was a game that Kate had owned, that she had enjoyed. Jacko had suggested that he might like to get a sense of what Kate’s life had been like before he knew her and this day had done exactly that.

Kate and Jane arrived when they were halfway through the game.

‘Don’t get up on our account,’ she said, putting her bag down on the couch. ‘Who’s winning?’ She walked over and took the chair next to Thorin. Just her presence diffused whatever tension was left in the room.

‘I am,’ Jacko said, grinning at her.

Kate took a quick look at Thorin’s notes and cards. ‘Are you now?’ she asked. He had no idea if he had been playing the game well, but he had a feeling that Kate had decided to join him. ‘I shall
leave you to your delusions, then. But between you and me, we are definitely doing better on this side of the table.’

Jacko shook his finger at her in a remarkably Dori-like manner. ‘Oh no, you are not inviting yourself into this game.’

It would take a stronger man than Jacko to say her nay. ‘You can have Jane’s help if you feel like you don’t have the brainpower to manage alone. Come on, Jacko, I haven’t played this game for ages. For all you know, I’m really rusty.’ She tried her best to look innocent.

Her brother looked like he was about to protest, but then thought better of it. ‘All right then,’ he said in a very put-upon voice. ‘Since it’s my turn I think that it’s been Colonel Mustard with the revolver in the library.’

Kate snorted. ‘Oh, that’s nice; blood all over my books!’

‘They’re not your books, they’re Dr Black’s and he is dead.’ Jacko’s annoyance had mysteriously melted away and the response had been so immediate that Thorin strongly suspected that exchanges during games like these usually followed this pattern. ‘But feel free to prove me wrong about the Colonel.’

‘You’re always suspecting him,’ Kate pointed out. ‘What’s the poor man ever done to you?’

Jacko didn’t miss a beat. ‘Well, the name is obviously a veiled reference to the use of mustard gas in the First World War. And he’s a military man. Doesn’t take a genius to see the connection. He’s naturally suspicious.’

‘Perhaps, but just look at him,’ Kate objected. ‘He looks like a principled sort of fellow, a fine upstanding gentleman. Murder is not really his style. Now, if you were asking me, I’d put my money on Miss Scarlett over there.’

It was the first time Thorin had seen them interacting without any sharp words, without accusations and without anger. This was how they used to be. And he couldn’t help but wonder if she would have had all of this if she had never chosen to stay with him. It was just so easy to see what might have been. If she had never been taken by Gandalf, if she had chosen to marry another, a man from this world, she would have this more often. The rift that now existed between her and all she knew in this land would never have been. And this family would be as close as it now appeared, without complications.

Kate seemingly did not even notice how well she fit in here, how very much she belonged. It was hard not to feel the guilt, even though he knew that burden was not his to bear. But he also knew how often Kate struggled in Erebor, how she had to fight for even the right to be there, how she longed for the endless struggles to be over.

In a way their roles had now been reversed and Thorin wondered if he now felt as she did in Erebor; never belonging, always going right when he should have been going left, forever at fault because he lacked the knowledge to function flawlessly in a world and society not his own.

However, before he could sink to deep into what Kate had labelled “Durin melancholy” she snapped him out of it. ‘Our turn,’ she announced, gently elbowing his side. She’d discreetly written down what had happened while he had been deep in thought. ‘I’m pretty confident we can make it into the kitchen.’

He forced himself to focus on the game and found, now that his wife had joined, he was actually
starting to enjoy himself. And if he allowed himself a triumphant smile when they won – Miss Scarlett with the rope in the ballroom – nobody commented on it.

‘That was fun,’ Kate said when they had retired to their room. ‘I should ask Bofur if he could make us a set when we’re back home.’

‘That would be terribly unfair to the other players,’ Thorin pointed out. ‘You’d wipe the floor with them.’ He’d already known that Kate’s mind was suited to this kind of game. She liked to figure things out, especially when there were no lives on the line, like tonight. And she was competitive too.

She laughed. ‘You were fairly good at it as well,’ she said. ‘We make a pretty good team, if I say so myself.’

He had known they worked well together even before he loved her. It was old news. It was something else she’d said that struck a chord with him. ‘Home, you said.’

Kate was currently in the – very distracting – process of undressing and probably hadn’t heard him well when she pulled her shirt over her head. ‘Sorry, didn’t catch that.’

He elaborated: ‘You said you would ask Bofur to make you a game when “we’re back home”.’

From the look on her face it was obvious that he hadn’t clarified himself enough. ‘You didn’t mind Cluedo that much, did you?’ If anything, she had clearly misinterpreted.

Truth was, he had rather liked it after a fashion. But that was beside the point. ‘You said: “back home”.’ He had never heard her refer to Erebor as home before today. The word slipped out now and again, but always when she spoke about this place, the world she had come from. He didn’t even think she did it consciously; it was just habit. And he had never held it against her, because she was in exile. It was of her own choosing, but she was forever separated from the place she called home and he knew how that felt. Until she suddenly and without warning bestowed that title on Erebor. It made his heart feel lighter.

If Kate realised what this meant to him, she waltzed right over it. ‘Yeah, still not getting it.’ She genuinely seemed confused.

He would have to speak plainer still. ‘You never did so before. When you spoke of home, this was the place you meant.’

At last she understood. ‘And it hasn’t been true for years.’ Thorin thought there was nothing she could say that could shock him anymore, but she had done so again. ‘Not really. I mean, I’ll never stop loving the people here and I won’t stop missing them either, but I live in Erebor now. And it’s about time I bloody acknowledged that instead of pining for could-have-beens.’ She smiled at him. ‘And it’s not as if I didn’t choose this, and you.’

And she had chosen him, against all sense. Even now, in this world that she had so long called her own, she still chose him. It astounded him all over again. And he did not know how to put this feeling into words. All he could do was kiss her.

Kate laughed. ‘You could at least wait until I’ve actually undressed. No, wait, we’re in my mother’s house and…’

Thorin simply employed the best method for silencing his wife and kissed her again.

There were no more protests after that.
This chapter turned out to be a lot longer than I’d planned. Yes, that happened again. On another note, I have realised that we’re only two months (minus one day, but who’s counting?) away from the five year anniversary of The Journal. And I would like to mark that occasion in some way. I have a few ideas myself, but if any of you have any input on what you’d like to see, drop me a line.
As always, thank you for reading! Reviews would be most welcome.
How to Remove a Dragon (in Twenty-Five Days)

Chapter Notes

Another Journal outtake this time. It’s been a while since I’ve done one of these, but this one has been on my list for quite some time. It takes place between chapter 70 and 71 and near the end somewhat during the first part of chapter 71. Ever wanted to know how the company got rid of Smaug’s corpse? Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thorin was the lucky one in this, the one who could sit back and watch the rest of us do battle with the beast. I think that is the best description for what we were doing, truly. The beast was impossible to move. We had ropes and chains – taken from some store deep inside Erebor that Balin still remembered – aplenty, so we secured those around paws and neck and then acted as glorified horses to get the drake into movement. That was the only way we could get anything done. Naturally a lot of chains and ropes broke, the most memorable occasion being halfway up the steep stairs and the dragon tumbled down again and slid down the hallway, undoing two days of hard work in the process. It turned out that a dead dragon was even more of a nuisance than the live version had been. Who’d have thought?

The Journal, Chapter 71: Unwanted Visitors

Day 1

‘This is going to be a nightmare.’

‘Oh dear, he is rather big, isn’t he?’

Kate turned to Bilbo, whose assessment, unlike hers, was firmly rooted in the realm of understatement. They were standing in the treasury, staring at Smaug’s remains with something akin to despair. The dragon had died yesterday, but for some reason it felt like an age ago. So much had happened that the realisation that it was really over only began to sink in when she was looking at the corpse.

It was a surreal sort of feeling, Kate decided. For so many months defeating the dragon had been the ultimate end goal. Now here they were, Smaug was dead and he had died in a different – and in Kate’s opinion better – way than in the book. Lake-town was still there and its inhabitants would never know of the danger they had been in. It made her feel cautiously optimistic about the future.

On the other hand, there was still Smaug. And she had a lingering suspicion that defeating him had been a lot easier than the task that awaited them now.

‘Greatest and Chiepest of Calamities,’ Bofur remarked. ‘More like Greatest and Heaviest, if you
No one had asked him, but that didn’t mean there was no truth in his words.

‘Well, he has to get out of here,’ Kate said.

She had discussed it with Thorin – who would have been here himself if not for Óin’s decree he wasn’t to move so much as an inch without his say-so – and they had agreed that the dragon had to leave Erebor sooner rather than later. Thorin was of the opinion that his people had suffered the drake’s presence for long enough. Not even the corpse was welcome now. Kate’s motives for wanting him gone were a little more practical; now that he was dead Smaug would surely start rotting. She wanted him out of the door before he could stink up the place too much.

So here they were, all of the company minus Thorin and Óin, realising that this was easier said than done.

‘If we had trees, we could chop them and roll him over them,’ Bombur offered hesitantly.

But they did not exactly have trees in abundance. Kate recalled that there had been several near where they had camped when they were looking for the side door, but that was a long way away and by the time they would have chopped all those trees and have carried them back inside, it would be days, if not weeks later.

Judging by the silence that greeted this proposal, most of her companions had reached the same conclusion. Then again, Bombur hadn’t sounded convinced by his own idea.

‘Does anyone have a better idea than dragging him from here to the front gate?’ she asked.

The deafening silence that followed this query was all the answer she needed.

Day 2

‘There should be chains in a storage space some levels down.’ In the end it was Balin who dared to suggest they should go ahead with Kate’s drag-him-out plan. It was mid-afternoon at this point and the discussion hadn’t made any real progress in hours. Honestly, he was probably saving them from themselves.

Kate sighed, resigning herself to the fact that there was no easy way to remove the dragon from the treasury. Deep down she had probably known this from the start, but the prospect filled her with repugnance. The last thing she wanted was to actually drag Smaug all the way through the Mountain. Well, nobody said this was going to be easy, Andrews. Suck it up and get on with it.

Fortunately it was Thorin who made the decision. ‘See if you can find it,’ he told Balin. ‘Take all the help you need.’ He had to keep his arse firmly planted on a chair and had to literally put his feet up – he had grumbled about that quite a lot this morning – but that way he could attend the meeting and pretend he wasn’t injured. ‘Dwalin and I will scout out the route.’

‘No.’ Kate thought it at the same time Óin said it. His hearing was remarkably sharp when he thought someone was about to go and ignore his sound medical advice. He’ll need to develop a sixth sense as well if he wants to keep track of Thorin, Kate thought wryly. It was a side of Thorin she hadn’t seen before. He was a bloody awful patient. A dragon had fallen on his knees two days ago and he was already planning to go walkabout.
‘Nah, I’ll just take Kate,’ Dwalin said, backing Óin up before Thorin had the chance to protest. He probably said that because Thorin would trust her to get the job done, but it came as a surprise that Dwalin suggested it. He’d been very cooperative and tolerant lately, but it kept taking her completely off guard. It would help if he explained his apparent change of heart, because she certainly was not going to ask him about it.

Either way, she’d better jump on it before Thorin had any more bright ideas that would effectively wreck his own recovery. ‘Sounds like a good plan,’ she said. She avoided looking at Thorin as she did so; she could almost feel the frustrated glare boring holes in her skull.

It killed the protest, though, and that was the intended effect. So half an hour later she was walking through Erebor in only Dwalin’s company. It appeared he had done a bit of scouting beforehand – or he had a better memory of this place than Kate believed possible – because he’d already worked out a route, one with hallways big enough to allow passage to a creature of Smaug’s size.

‘I’ve got my doubts about this,’ he said when they came to a huge staircase.

Kate had been about to say something along those lines and was secretly glad he had beaten her to it. ‘I can see why.’ She had a clear mental picture of dragging and pushing Smaug up those stairs and in her head it looked more like one of Hercules’ labours than something actual mortals could achieve. ‘There is no other way?’

Dwalin shook his head. ‘No.’

Kate had expected this; if there had been, he would have shown her the better alternative. It also seemed she had been right in her suspicion he’d already done some reconnaissance on his own before now.

‘Well, it has to come out, so it seems we’re dragging him up the stairs,’ she said decisively. And even though she knew she did not even possess a tenth of the dwarves’ bodily strength, she would pull her weight, for all that it was worth. *You’ve got to earn your place here.* And given the fact that she was going to stay, she’d better start to make an effort. If she wanted to belong, be accepted, she had to prove herself. Sitting on her backside while others did the work was not going to do the job.

Dwalin at least approved. ‘Seems we are.’

**Day 3**

‘These wings are going to be problem.’ Kate was this close to officially promoting Bilbo to the Master of Understatement. The wings *were* a problem. They were huge, easily the size of an airplane each when fully spread. Smaug’s body itself was not quite slender, but at least not too fat to drag through the corridors she had explored with Dwalin the day before. He was long, which would be difficult enough when he had to be manoeuvred through a corner, but it might be doable. If not for those blasted wings.

‘We could just chop them off,’ Nori suggested with entirely too much cheer.

His comment was met with freezing glares from the remaining ten dwarves, burglar and advisor.

He shrugged. ‘Just saying,’ he defended himself.

Truth was, if the wings had been attached to the body at one small point, they might have
considered it. But the wings ran the length of his body, all the way from the neck to the paws, close
to where the tail began. And if even arrows could not so much as dent his armour, they’d blunt
whatever axes they had on it long before they came close to achieving their goal, more was the
pity. It would have solved a lot of problems.

It came in somehow, Kate thought angrily. There has to be a way to get it back out again. But there
was a big difference between a live dragon who came in under his own steam and a dead weight
that had to be dragged out.

Bombur had stepped forward and was examining the dragon from a different angle, a concentrated
frown on his face. ‘We could tie the wings alongside the body,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘Gets them
out of the way and makes him easier to move.’

This suggestion, unlike Nori’s, met with some murmured approval. Nobody was champing at the
bit to get started on this, but it had to be done. Bombur was surprising her lately. He was a quiet
sort, who didn’t talk unless there was dire need, but Kate was quickly coming to see that this by no
means meant he had nothing to add. And he had given them the most workable idea thus far.

They might as well use it.

And so they did. It involved lifting the dragon several times to pass chains and ropes under the
belly to the other side. At this point Kate started to suspect special treatment. Dori had been quick
to appoint her as something of an overseer, which stopped her from getting actively involved in the
actual lifting. Oh, she supposed he had a point when he said that she would not contribute much in
terms of physical strength, but she wasn’t born yesterday. The ulterior motives were practically
written on his forehead.

But even Dori could not stop her from climbing on top of the dragon’s back to pass chains there.
Her physique was best suited to that work and so she didn’t feel completely useless. This work had
the downside that she had to actually touch the beast. Already there was a vague, undefined smell
surrounding the body.

Give it a week and the smell will be unbearable.

Day 4

If there had been an apple big enough to fit in Smaug’s mouth, Kate could almost be fooled into
thinking she was looking at one of those roasted pigs. Only she didn’t think one of those pigs had
ever looked like a very badly wrapped Christmas present at the same time.

How are we ever going to move him?

‘Well, at least the first bit’s easy,’ Fíli said optimistically.

Kate arched an eyebrow at him. ‘How so?’

Kíli had clearly followed his brother’s line of thought. ‘He’s on top of the pile. We only need to
shove him down and his own weight will do the rest.’

She considered this for a moment and was forced to admit this plan might actually work. It would
beat dragging him down to the designated hallway at any rate. And there was going to be enough
dragging in her immediate future anyway; she was in no danger of forgetting the Stairs of Doom.
So it was with at least a little relief that she climbed up with the others, pointed Smaug’s head in the right direction and then joined her companions at his backside to push.

‘One, two, three, push!’

Kate threw her everything into it. She might as well have tried to push a mountain; Smaug did not move so much as an inch.

‘Again!’

They did the whole routine another three times and Kate finally felt like something was shifting somewhere. A few coins rolled down the mountain of treasure.

Dwalin must have thought the same thing. When he commanded them to push again, she thought she heard excitement in his voice.

At the next push it was more than a vague indication that something was moving. The dragon shifted under their hands, slowly at first, but then he was catching speed.

‘He’s going!’ Glóin bellowed belatedly. By the time the words left his mouth, Smaug was already sliding down the pile of gold and precious stones, creating avalanches as he went. They’d given him a start and gravity did the rest. In fact, it had all gone so fast that half of them had lost their balance and had ended up faceplanting the gold. Kate was one of them.

Next to her Kíli was whooping and laughing. ‘That was entertaining.’ He had taken a tumble as well, but was already back on his feet. ‘Need a hand, Kate?’

His carelessness was catching and she grinned up at him. ‘Nah, I’m comfy as can be.’

She held out her hand all the same and Kíli pulled her back up. He almost used too much strength and only just realised she was no dwarf and not as heavy as one. ‘There you go,’ he said, steadying her. ‘You should eat more, Kate. It can’t be wholesome to be as skinny as you are.’

‘Volunteering to share your rations, are you?’ she retorted.

‘He’s not that generous,’ Bofur told her good-naturedly.

Spirits were high and became higher when everyone realised their gamble had paid off; Smaug had even slid a little ways into the corridor before he’d come to a halt.

It looked like things were going their way at last.

Day 5

‘I have aching muscles in places I didn’t know I had muscles,’ Ori complained around midday. He sat himself down on the obliging fallen column at the side of the road.

Kate felt about the same. Bilbo had hoisted himself onto a boulder that in a previous life had perhaps been part of the structure. It was that she could see his chest rise and fall with his breathing, or she might have thought he’d died. The three of them were the most unused to hard physical labour and were showing signs of the strain much sooner than the others, to Kate’s endless vexation.

Of course Dori saw an opportunity to smother both Ori and her in concern. ‘Rest a spell,’ he told
them. Dwalin had allowed them a short break to catch their breaths, eat and drink a little. They had been at it for about five hours now and their progress was minimal. She’d said too much too soon when she had cheered at their good fortune yesterday. It had all gone from bad to worse since then. This morning the first two chains had broken and they had wasted a good hour and a half replacing them.

_This won’t be the last time, Kate knew._

‘That’s what the break is for,’ she responded quickly, because even though she hated this work, she’d be damned before she consented to sitting this out. It was more than proving herself now. It was a point of pride. And there was a camaraderie among the dragon removers that she wouldn’t relinquish for the life of her. ‘Is there still water in that bottle? Cheers, don’t mind if I do.’ She snatched it out of Dori’s hands, drank deeply and then passed it on to Ori.

Dwalin called them back to work before Dori had the chance to protest.

‘If you’re too tired to work, we fully understand, Kate!’ Fíli called teasingly in her direction.

Kate forced herself to her feet, trying not to wince as her muscles cramped in protest. ‘And let you get all the credit? In your dreams. Come on, Ori, let’s show them how it’s done.’

**Day 6**

Her bravado had all but abandoned her at the end of the day. It took her all her willpower to even make it back to camp under her own power; she had just enough pride left to turn down Balin’s offer to lean on him.

She must have looked worse than she thought, because there was concern in Thorin’s eyes as well. ‘Are you well?’ he asked when she lay down on her bedroll with a sigh of relief.

‘All my limbs are still in their proper places,’ she answered. ‘I think. I can’t feel all of them, but I think I’d have been told if bits went missing.’

Too late she realised that it was probably unwise to joke about missing limbs when Thorin had come so close to such a scenario. It certainly wouldn’t help matters that he still couldn’t move without going pale as a corpse and nearly screaming in pain. But she was exhausted, weary to the bone in a way she had never really been before. There had been days on the road when she had been tired as well, but not in all her days had she ever been made to work this hard.

‘Oh, bloody hell,’ she groaned. ‘Forget I said anything.’ _Me and my stupid big mouth._

To her infinite relief found it in himself to take it in the spirit it had been intended. ‘The pain will fade when your body becomes used to the work.’

Kate surmised from this that he meant it as some reassurance that, no matter how bad it was, it would get better. Yet every fibre of her being rebelled against the idea of getting used to this. Her back was killing her, she could barely move her arms and if she still had legs left, she could hardly feel them. And she didn’t have the energy left to get up and check that they were still there.

Still, she managed a smile, or something close enough anyway. ‘Good.’ And it wouldn’t hurt her case to develop a few muscles anyway. She’d never have the strength of a dwarf, but at least she wouldn’t be totally useless.
Annoyance woke. It was the very wise advice with which she had left him this morning when he had been grumbling about his own infirmity. To have them now thrown back at her roused her from her apathy. ‘I’m not backing down,’ she told him in a tone that would brook no argument. ‘I’m sticking with this.’ Realising she was sounding too snappy, she added: ‘I promised I’d help make Erebor a dragon-free zone, didn’t I? You wouldn’t want me to become a liar now, would you?’

That killed the discussion for the time being. And sleeping in his arms restored a little of her good humour, so there was that.

Day 7

‘Left a bit!’ Dwalin shouted. ‘Three, two, one, push!’

Kate groaned as she threw all her weight behind her shove. Smaug moved, but not nearly enough for her taste.

‘Dori will have your head if he sees you here,’ Nori told her while they waited until the other team had completed their part of the action. Getting a full-grown dragon around a ninety degree corner required buckets of patience and no little organisation. Fortunately both Dwalin and Bombur appeared to know what they were doing.

‘Dori is on arse-duty,’ Kate reminded him, using the unflattering nickname for the thankless task performed by those of their little company who had to take care of pushing Smaug’s behind in the right direction. Kate had been lucky enough to end up on head-duty this morning. ‘And what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.’ She gave her brother her sternest stare. ‘And he won’t hear it from your lips, will he?’

‘I’m the soul of discretion,’ he vowed, holding a hand over his heart and looking so trustworthy that an outsider might be forgiven for actually believing him.

‘I haven’t seen you all morning,’ Óin said.

‘So, you’re blind now as well as deaf, are you?’ Glóin commented. ‘That’s a shame.’

Óin pretended not to hear this. Kate had a theory about his deafness that mainly centred around the idea that it was selective, something he turned on and off at will, because he was always very capable of hearing what he wanted to hear. But when he did not want to hear something – like Thorin’s continued protests that he could make himself useful in some way – then all of his hearing suddenly abandoned him.

‘And here was I thinking you were on arse-duty this morning,’ Balin played along. ‘You had to be, because I haven’t seen hide nor hair of you since breakfast.’

She was glad of their support. Of course, more than half of them thought she should take it easier, on account of her being both human and a woman, but it appeared to be a point of principle to not put up with Dori being an old fusspot. At the moment that worked in her favour.

‘Make ready!’ Dwalin commanded as he re-joined them.

The thought had occurred to Kate more than once this past week that he would have made a fine
slave overseer. He’d been at them without respite for hours, which was not endearing him to Kate right now. But rationally she knew he was getting the job done and her impatience with his commands stemmed more from her frustration with the work itself than her frustration with him. This was also the only thing that prevented her from losing her temper with him.

They took up positions again.

‘Three, two, one, push!’

**Day 8**

‘He’s stuck!’

Several heads poked out from behind the dragon.

‘Stuck?’

‘Where?’

‘Can’t you do something about it before we’re old and grey?’

‘Those of us who aren’t grey already, you mean? Might need to hurry up in Bofur’s case.’

‘Wait, Bofur’s going grey?’

‘Of course he is. He’s using the hat to hide it. Just ask to look under it. You’ll see.’

‘Shut up, Nori!’ This was chorused in at least three voices.

‘How’s it going back there? What’s he stuck behind?’

‘Yes, yes, calm down. Give me a minute. I can’t conjure answers out of thin air! And I’ll have you know that climbing a dragon is not easy!’

‘A wizard would be handy now.’

‘Where’s Gandalf gone to anyway? Didn’t he say he’d come back?’

‘Didn’t say *when* he’d be back, did he? Slippery as an elf, that one. I’d say we’re well rid of him.’

‘But at least Gandalf could probably move this stinking carcass quick as blinking. I’d settle for the wizard right now.’

‘Would that mean we’d have to pay him, though? He didn’t sign a contract, did he?’

‘I don’t think he did. Ori, did Gandalf sign a contract?’

‘He didn’t. If he had, he’d have had to stay with us all the way.’

‘Well, that settles it. We wouldn’t have to pay him.’

‘Though it’s probably nice to show him some gratitude. He *did* get us out of Goblin-town after all.’

‘Huh. I’d almost forgotten.’
‘Mr Baggins, are you making any progress yet? Or should we go and get supper first? We could bring you some back if you like.’

‘Not so impatient! I am almost there. Nearly… Nearly there.’

‘Anytime before sundown would suit us, really.’

‘But don’t hurry yourself. You’ve got maybe an hour left?’

‘I reckon it’s less. But no pressure at all, burglar. Take your time.’

‘Almost… Almost… Done! You can move him!’

‘Push!’

‘Not yet, you foooooooo…!’

‘Wait! Mr Baggins, are you all right?’

‘…’

‘I think he fell when we moved.’

‘Mr Baggins? Are you alive? Mr Baggins!’

**Day 9**

‘That’s quite a bump on the back of your head, Master Baggins.’

Kate had to admit that Balin was right. You couldn’t see it from a little distance away, but on close inspection it was positively egg-sized.

Bilbo batted their hands away. ‘Yes, I know. It’s on my head in case you’ve forgotten.’ He was still rather irritated, for which Kate found it hard to blame him. But in their defence, they’d thought Bilbo wouldn’t give them the go-ahead before he’d made sure he was in a safe position himself. How could they have known they would dislodge their valued burglar from Smaug’s back? They certainly hadn’t meant to do him a harm.

‘We reckoned you’d like a ride on dragon back,’ Kili chimed in. ‘It’d be something to boast about when you get back home.’

Bilbo snorted at him. ‘Nobody would believe it.’ He dismissed that suggestion out of hand. ‘Most of my neighbours wouldn’t believe that dragons are even real.’

And the same would be true for the people back in Kate’s own world. Dragons were all good and well in stories, but no one in their right mind would ever claim to have actually seen one, much less ridden one.

Maybe it’s good I’m staying here, she thought. What would I have told them that wouldn’t sound like I’d lost my marbles along the way?

At the same time it made her sad that she had so fallen out of touch with the people of her own world. She never wanted that. She would never be able to connect with them like she connected with these dwarves now. At least here, with them, she didn’t have to hide anything. Even if she
would have gone back to live out her days in England, the secrets would always stand between her and everyone she knew.

Either that or she’d spend her life locked away in an asylum. Neither prospect was particularly tempting.

Kili was not discouraged. ‘Well, you could always have another go at it, if you like. You don’t weigh much. Shouldn’t be any trouble.’

‘I’ll give you a leg up,’ Ori offered.

‘No, no, I’ll keep my feet on the ground, thank you very much. Hobbits aren’t meant to climb things, you know.’ The idea of having to get back up wasn’t filling him with joy from the looks of it. Then again, if she’d had a tumble from that height only the day before, Kate wouldn’t be jumping with excitement either. More like running in the opposite direction.

‘How about you then, Kate?’ The dwarves weren’t fazed in the least by the refusal and Nori was already looking for another target. ‘Fancy a ride?’

She shook her head. ‘Thanks, but no thanks. The smell is bad enough down here.’ Having to climb up would bring her in even closer proximity to the source.

It turned out that her prediction of almost a week ago was coming true. The smell increased with every passing day, a nauseating mixture of burning and rotting that would turn even the strongest stomach. It was subtle at first, barely there. You’d think you smelled something, but then the moment had passed and you’d be convinced it was nothing. But it had grown stronger and stronger ever since until there was no escaping it. It was a sharp, penetrating kind of smell. Most of the company had bound scarves and cloths over the lower halves of their faces and everyone had taken to mostly breathing through their mouths to limit the damage.

It was worst for those unfortunate enough to be on arse-duty, the pushers. They had to basically glue their noses to the dragon’s back when they pushed. At least the lucky few on head-duty, the druggers, could catch a whiff of fresh air – or as fresh as it could be under a Mountain that hadn’t been aired through in well over a century – now and again. Kate also suspected that was the reason she hadn’t been on arse-duty for days. She saw Dori’s hand in this, but as long as she couldn’t prove it, she didn’t have a legitimate excuse to have a go at him. And she wasn’t entirely convinced that Dwalin wasn’t in on it.

Fortunately Dwalin came and broke them up before they could push their point. ‘Back to work,’ he told them briskly. ‘It won’t carry itself out.’

And didn’t they all know it.

Before them, the stairs loomed large.

**Day 10**

‘This is going to be a nightmare.’

‘Oh dear, those are rather a lot of steps.’

Once again Bilbo had nailed the understatement. Kate suspected he did not do that on purpose. It was a hobbit thing.
But it was almost certainly going to be a nightmare. Privately she’d called them the Stairs of Doom since she first saw them and with good reason. The good news was that the staircase was wide enough to allow passage to a corpse of Smaug’s size. The bad news was that it was steep and tall and there were at least fifty steps. And because they would have to haul and push Smaug up, there would be no breaks in between. The moment they let go, it would slide back down again and doing this twice was nobody’s idea of a good time.

Her muscles winced in anticipation.

Thorin’s words of some days ago were true enough; her body was becoming used to the work. Her body was still aching all over by the end of every day, but it was not as crippling as it had been at first. And even so she was learning to push past the pain to get on with things. Nobody else was throwing the towel in, so neither would she. And she was well aware that they worked harder than she did.

‘I am looking forward to tomorrow,’ Bofur announced.

Kate snorted. ‘So am I.’ Because once they’d reach the top of these stairs, they’d only have to push Smaug a little bit further before they would come to the next staircase. But that one would be leading down. And there was nothing more cheering than the prospect of watching that stinking carcass slide down the stairs, especially when they still had to drag him up.

‘Into position,’ Dwalin commanded.

Kate took a deep breath and joined the draggers. While she was glad to be relieved of arse-duty – the smell there did unpleasant things to her stomach – by now she was convinced there was special treatment involved.

‘Joining our ranks this morning?’ Nori asked. His cheer had yet to abandon him. ‘What would our brother say?’

‘Nothing,’ Kate replied. ‘Since he doesn’t know anything about it.’

Balin shook his head. ‘Sit this one out, Kate,’ he counselled. He had joined the special treatment team a couple of days ago.

She shook her head. ‘You need everyone you can get for this.’ That sound logic should kill his mollycoddling stone-dead. ‘I wish you lot would stop making such a fuss. I don’t know what’s gotten into you.’

‘Dori’s been nagging,’ Nori clarified.

‘Great.’

There was no more time for talk and soon enough no one had the breath to spare to chat. They really put their backs into it, because everybody wanted to get it over with sooner rather than later, but even so, it was slow-going. One could only hear the grunts of effort and Bombur and Dwalin’s orders to push or drag.

Time ceased to matter altogether. They could have been there for days and she wouldn’t be able to tell. Kate stopped trying to think more than one step ahead. If she could make it to the next step, it stood to reason that she could manage the one after that. And once she had made it that far, she could manage another step. The one thing she should not do, was look up and be discouraged by how far they still had to go. That would not be helpful.
But they made progress.

Until they didn’t anymore.

It began with the ominous sound of creaking chains and groaning ropes. It all went very fast after that.

‘The chain’s breaking!’

‘He’s going!’

‘Take cover!’

Then the weight constantly pulling her backwards was suddenly gone. Kate overcompensated and half fell on the stairs. As she regained her balance and turned around she saw Smaug sliding back down the stairs. The pushers were leaping out of the way to avoid being crushed underneath. Smaug’s ugly dead mouth almost seemed to laugh at their failure, to mock them for attempting the impossible. He certainly would have if he had been alive.

With growing horror she realised that Smaug did not stop sliding when he reached the bottom of the stairs. He’d gathered speed in his descent and slid down the hallway, only to come to a sudden halt against a wall near the point where they had begun yesterday.

The ground shook because of the force with which Smaug had hit the wall and for a moment she feared the roof might come down and they would be buried alive. But then the dust settled and nothing else happened.

‘Everyone alive?’ Dwalin shouted.

He got a chorus of affirmatives. After a quick headcount it turned out that everybody had gotten out of Smaug’s way in time. That was one positive thing at least.

But they all realised they would have to do the last two days’ work all over again.

Kate could have wept in frustration.

Day 11

‘Does that column look familiar to you?’

‘Might have seen it before, yes. Hey, I say, look at that rock! I think I saw one just like it two days ago.’

‘Well, all rocks start to look the same after a while, don’t they?’

‘Not to a dwarf, Mr Baggins.’

‘I’m surprised you still see anything at all, Glóin. My, that is a spectacular shade of purple!’

‘I don’t want to discourage you, lads, but that hole in the ground over there looks awfully similar to one I noticed the other day.’

‘Must be a coincidence.’
Silence for a bit.

‘Do you think we’re going round in circles?’

‘…’

**Day 12**

They were back at the foot of the stairs. *We’ve been here before and we failed*, Kate thought. *Why on earth did we think we stood a better chance the second time?*

She didn’t have an answer to her own question other than reckless optimism. Well, and they had taken certain precautions this time. They’d finished somewhat early the previous day, so that they could wrap Smaug in even more chains. That way, when one broke, it wouldn’t mean a repeat performance of the disaster of two days ago.

*At least Tolkien had a neat way to get rid of the corpse.* Of course, that way involved far more terror and bloodshed and she did not really want any of that. Even so, it would have been really nice to be able to shove him in a large body of water and just have done with it. *He’d probably poison the waters for thousands of years to come.*

Most of them were in slightly worse shape than they were when they attempted this the first time. Glóin especially sported a visible reminder of his dragon-shaped accident; a bruise that ran from forehead to chin along the left side of his face. Overnight it had taken on shades of blue, purple and black that Kate didn’t know were actually possible. Óin had fuss ed over him a bit, but Glóin insisted that he could walk just fine and that he didn’t need the use of both eyes in order to help. Nobody had objected to this; they couldn’t really afford to lose the help.

‘Into positions!’ Dwalin ordered.

Kate had come to dread those words.

It seemed like they were going slower today than they had been two days ago, but Kate suspected that her mind was just playing tricks on her.

*Stop thinking! Just pull.*

Groans filled the air sporadically and you could hear the sound of a huge dragon being hauled up the stairs, but other than that an eerie silence reigned in the halls of Erebor. This place was too vast for only such a small company as theirs. This Mountain was meant to house thousands, intended to be filled with people talking and going about their business. As long as nobody did just that, it almost felt like a graveyard.

It must be dark outside already when Dwalin announced that they were nearly there. For a moment it sounded almost too good to be true. She had to break her own rule about not looking ahead to make sure that it was in fact just four more steps until she and her fellow draggers reached the top. Of course, then they would still have to haul Smaug’s body up all the way, but the climb at least would be over.

It was as if Dwalin’s words had lit a fire under everybody’s arses. They had the finish line in their sights now. Not even a dead dragon was going to interfere with their goals. To be honest, Kate doubted if they would have the heart to try a third time if Smaug fell at this stage of the game.
But he didn’t. The draggers made it to the top first and started pulling from a more level surface, which was altogether easier. It still took them hours, but then at last Smaug’s gigantic head made it and then part of his body until finally the heads of the pushers came into view. Even so, they didn’t stop until the tip of Smaug’s tail was lying in the corridor and a little distance away from the stairs.

_God forbid he starts to slide at night and we can start all over tomorrow._

Kate had expected to do a little dance of joy when they made it, but she found she didn’t have the energy for it anymore. They’d been continuously working since breakfast without a break and it must be well past suppertime when all was said and done. She was hungry and tired and if she could, she might have actually fallen asleep where she stood.

As it was, her recollection of going back to camp was a little hazy.

**Day 13**

‘Next time you literally fall asleep on me, give me a warning, will you?’

Kate had to admit she had no idea what Nori was talking about. ‘Excuse me?’

A massive grin split Nori’s face in half. ‘You don’t remember, do you?’

She really didn’t and she was starting to regret that. It was true enough that she did not exactly remember every step of the way from where Smaug was to the place they made camp, but well, she had been tired and thinking of sleep. If Nori was right, she’d done more than just thinking about it.

‘Not really,’ she confessed, groaning when Nori started laughing. ‘Oh, come on, it had been a long day! Cut me some slack here, will you?’

‘Nobody else fell asleep.’ Nori was not going to let her hear the end of it yet, if ever.

‘It was a close thing for our burglar, though,’ Dwalin said, taking pity on her. That was what she assumed he was doing anyway. Him sticking up for her was still a novelty. Then again, it could just be that he really didn’t have the patience for Nori’s antics today. That’d probably be it.

‘You should have seen Thorin’s face when Dori carried you in.’ Nori wasn’t deterred by this and carried on regardless. ‘Thought his heart would give out.’

_Uh oh_. Kate did not remember any of this, but it would go a long way in explaining why Thorin had been sending her worried glances over breakfast and why Dori had been almost gently telling her to take today off to regain her strength. Kate had told him in no uncertain terms where he could stick that proposal. Anyway, they would have an easy day. They would work until they had shoved the dragon down the stairs and then wait until the next day before they would resume dragging. Kate wasn’t the only one who really wanted – and, all right, _needed_ – a day off.

But spirits were high again today. Knowing that they were going to push Smaug down a flight of stairs intentionally had cheered everyone enormously. In a way the hardest part was done now. There would be no more stairs after this. There might be some obstacles in their way and a few turns in the road that were going to be an absolute hell, but they would not hold a candle to this very unique sort of nightmare.

‘All right, lads, let’s get to it.’ Bofur all but skipped to his place, cutting Nori’s teasing mercifully
short.

Kate took her place next to him before anybody could stop her. ‘Let’s get this show on the road,’ she agreed.

‘Down the stairs is more like it,’ Fíli observed.

She had joined the pushers today, more to make a point to Dori than out of an actual desire to be there. The smell was very bad indeed. It had been decidedly less noticeable with the draggers, which was why she’d worked there for days on end, she imagined. Well, screw them and their delicate female treatment. I’m not a bloody porcelain doll.

‘Nice to see you back on arse-duty,’ Glóin said. ‘Does your brother know you’re here?’ He didn’t need to specify which brother.

‘He will soon enough.’ And he was becoming a real bother. It would be so nice if he just got the message that she did not need constant supervision. Of course, she had hardly done herself any favours in that department last night.

Glóin grimaced.

But Dori was apparently on head-duty this morning and even though he was shouting loud enough to bring down the roof, Dwalin would not allow him to abandon his post to drag his headstrong sister out from behind the dragon. Thank God for small mercies.

It took only three hours to bring Smaug to the edge of the stairs and then those at the front joined those at the back to give him that final push.

Bilbo had gone to the front to keep them updated on how they were progressing. ‘Nearly there,’ he would tell them. ‘Just a little bit further. You’re close now. Yes, he’s going!’

And so he was. Slowly, but surely Smaug started his descent down the stairs, speed increasing as he went. Unlike the first time he’d done this, it was incredibly satisfying to watch. It was a relief to let gravity and Smaug’s own momentum do the job for them for a change. If they would have had to drag him, they would have needed an entire day for those stairs. And it just so happened that luck was on their side for a change, because the corpse didn’t come to a halt until the far end of the hallway. He slowly lost speed until he almost gently came to a stop against a column. The column in question shook, but remained standing.

‘That’s almost two days’ worth of dragging we won’t have to do ourselves,’ Bombur said. And he was right.

The cheering that started up at that announcement was loud enough to wake the dead.

Fortunately Smaug remained unmoving.

Day 14

The triumph of the previous day had disappeared as quickly as it had arrived. A long day of pushing and pulling would do that to anyone’s temper and the general mood was gloomy and grumpy at the end of the day.

‘Did you make progress today?’ Thorin asked when they had returned to camp that night.
‘Reasonable.’ Even if it felt more and more like it was going to take forever. The feeling of optimism had been very short-lived. They had been at it for nearly two weeks now and they were maybe halfway. Of course, they’d lost two days on those wretched stairs, but still she felt as though they should have been nearly there by now.

Now she was lying in her bedroll feeling absolutely more miserable and far more sorry for herself than she knew she should be. She wasn’t going to show that weakness in front of everybody else, though. She already was the weakest member of this company – point in case her passing out the day before yesterday – so she wouldn’t go around advertising her misery. A voice in her head was already whispering something along the lines of “You are the weakest link, goodbye” and even though she did not want it to be true, she knew that it was. And if she for even a second would allow anyone to see that she did, Dori would jump on it. The last thing she wanted was for them to ban her from helping out entirely.

Thorin joined her and put an arm around her waist, drawing her closer.

‘I wouldn’t do that if I were you,’ she warned him.

He frowned. ‘Why not?’

‘Because I stink of sweat and dead dragon.’ If his nostrils hadn’t provided him with this information already, there was something seriously wrong with his nose. It had been a while since she’d had the opportunity to wash and she reeked. ‘Hardly the most fragrant scent.’

Thorin did not move. ‘Are you well, Kate?’ He must have heard her weariness in her voice, despite the care she took to conceal it.

‘Just tired.’ And these past few days she seemed to be exhausted all the bloody time. When they had returned to camp around midday yesterday she had made a beeline for her bedroll and hadn’t woken up until breakfast the next day. It would have been lovely if it actually made a difference. But she didn’t feel any fitter than she had before her ridiculously long beauty sleep. Much as she hated to admit it, Dori had a point when he told her she was fragile earlier today. Her tiredness combined with her irritation had led to a shouting match they would have been able to hear in Mirkwood, but that changed nothing about the truth of his words.

And Kate hated it.

‘Then sleep,’ he advised. It was not as if she could keep her eyes open anyway, but it felt nice to drift off when he was humming a song in her ear.

Day 15

Kate knew there was something wrong the moment she opened her eyes. Save for Thorin, the room was empty.

‘Morning?’ It was more of a question than a greeting.

‘Afternoon,’ he corrected her.

It took her sleepy brain maybe half a minute to process that information and reach a conclusion. ‘Whose idea was this?’

‘Balin’s, I believe.’ He was clever enough not to deny her what she wanted to know, though there
was no doubt that he had actually given his seal of approval to this mad scheme.

You went behind my back. The words were on the tip of her tongue, but she bit them back at the last moment. She didn’t want a row with him. If the decision had been up to him, he would probably have woken her, if only because that was what he would have wanted if he were in her place. No, she’d save her breath for the grand architect of this plot. It’s turning into a bloody conspiracy.

‘Good, then I’ll know who to shout at.’

‘They meant well.’ Thorin would try to defend them of course. She hadn’t expected any different.

‘They should have asked.’ She really hated to be excluded. And no matter what Dori and Balin had deluded themselves into thinking, she wasn’t too weak to help. She certainly hadn’t asked to be left behind. At the very least they could accept that she made her own decisions and it was not their right to make them for her.

‘Aye, they should have.’ It surprised her that he agreed with her, but then again, he would. If their positions had been reversed, he would have raised merry hell about it as well. ‘But you do need sleep, Kate. You are exhausted. It is plain for all to see that this work is not suited to you.’

It really wasn’t. ‘This work isn’t suited to anyone,’ she pointed out. ‘But it needs to be done. I’ll sleep when it’s done.’ That attitude should not be strange to a dwarf. They lived to work. Thorin of all people should have sympathy, if not admiration, for what she was trying to do.

He has. He hasn’t stopped me yet, after all.

‘Very well.’ He nodded.

Kate got up, located her boots and put them on her feet. ‘Thank you.’ She meant it from the bottom of her heart. ‘Oh, if you hear anything, it’s not the Mountain caving in.’

She was pleased when she saw a smile on his lips.

Day 16

‘Left a bit!’ Kate shouted at the draggers, wondering why Dwalin had thought it a marvellous idea to send her up here and oversee the difficult manoeuvre of turning Smaug left on the junction. Well, she knew why he was not letting her near the dragon. Because while she had been woken on time this morning, it was becoming very clear that they now all thought hard manual labour was a thing to be avoided where she was concerned.

‘Just like that. Pushers, into position please!’

‘I like her better than you, Dwalin,’ Kíli informed him loudly, so that Kate could hear as well. ‘At least she says please when she wants something.’

‘Aye, but you’ll do it whether she asks nicely or not,’ Óin reminded him. ‘Because I won’t be doing this all alone, lad.’

Kate missed being down there, to actively partake in the bantering. It was hard to feel involved when she was standing so far away. Of course, someone needed to be here to keep sight of everything, but that had usually been Bilbo’s job, with Dwalin issuing the actual orders.
Part of the reasoning behind this change was of course that she wouldn’t be so tired anymore all the time. At least that bit was working out; she felt more alert than she had for days. It was a shame she couldn’t turn that newfound energy into something productive. For as long as she was exiled to this remote spot, she was only in immediate danger of being bored out of her skull.

It was in no way an improvement, no matter what her brother might think.

But she was here and she had better make herself useful. This way she was contributing something instead of nothing. ‘Okay, pushers, on my count. Three, two, one, push!’

Day 17

There were no corners today so Kate had quickly assessed where Dori was hanging out and had then joined to other team. Fortunately her brother was entirely dwarvish in his approach to work; once he got going there was no distracting him, provided Nori didn’t do something monumentally stupid. Today Dori was with the draggers, possibly because he expected her to try her luck there, so Kate had quickly assigned herself arse-duty. She tied a scarf over the lower half of her face and joined her teammates.

‘You’re certain Dori hasn’t seen you?’ Glóin asked. ‘I just don’t want to hear any more of his complaining,’ he clarified when all the others had been quick to look at him in surprise.

‘Positive,’ she promised. ‘And he won’t see me from where he is.’ Stinking though it may be, there was no better thing to block one’s view than a dead dragon. She just needed to make sure to keep her voice down and Dori would be none the wiser until it was all too late.

‘Good to see you, Kate.’ Ori loathed Dori’s fussing as much as she did, if not more. Out of the three dwarves she could now call her brothers, he was definitely the one she liked hanging out with most. Dori had to be avoided for obvious reasons, especially now, and Nori could get very annoying very quickly. It was like he just couldn’t help himself. It wasn’t just his sticky fingers that was driving her up the wall sometimes, but his complete disregard for people’s boundaries. And he never knew when to shut up either. Having said that, if he put the effort in, he could be remarkably pleasant company and he never failed to cheer her up when she was in the right mindset to be cheered.

‘I’m pleased to be here,’ she said, finding that she meant it. The work was hard, but at least she was part of it now, not just a passive spectator on the side-lines.

‘That’s because your nose stopped working overnight,’ Fíli commented. ‘Has to be.’

The smell was all but unbearable and it was still getting worse. But surprisingly it was also something she was starting to learn to ignore. She had dealt with Smaug for well over two weeks now. At the start of the day the smell would bother her most. It turned her stomach upside down and made her gag, but the longer she worked, the more she found it became part of the general background. She assumed it was much the same for everyone else; it had been at least a week since anybody had emptied the contents of their stomach on the floor.

‘It’s a reflex,’ she informed her. ‘Because I couldn’t tell who reeked worse anymore: us or the dragon.’

‘What I wouldn’t give for a bath,’ Glóin murmured, eyes glazing over as he presumably imagined himself up to the chin in nice warm water. ‘It’s good my wife can’t see me now. She would never
allow me near her.’

‘Can’t say I blame her,’ said Bofur. ‘I wouldn’t have you near me either, but I’ll be damned if I have to shift this dragon all by myself, so I’ll suffer your presence for a little longer.’

‘You’re not exactly smelling of roses yourself, Bofur,’ Kate reminded him.

‘Ah, lass, you wound me!’

‘Enough chatter!’ Dwalin interrupted. ‘Into positions!’

**Day 18**

‘Quickly, Kate, get up his back. Your brother’s coming!’

*For heaven’s sake!* Dori was getting more suspicious by the hour. Of course, there had been a bit of scene last night when he had discovered she had spent the day working with the pushers. From the way he behaved it had been made it very clear he thought it had become her purpose in life to vex him.

And she wasn’t about to let him catch her. Kate was never one for actively avoiding a confrontation, but arguments with Dori always followed the same pattern. It was tiring, neither of them would ever back down and it would all get far more nasty than Kate was prepared to deal with on an hourly basis.

So she followed Kili’s advice without hesitation. Over the past few weeks she’d had to clamber up Smaug’s back numerous times to retie ropes or check if the chains were still secure, so it was not nearly so hard to do now as it had been at first. And a good thing it was, too, because Dori could be a fast dwarf if the situation asked for it.

She didn’t stop climbing until she was sitting on top of Smaug’s back. From up there she had a good view in every direction, so she could watch the confrontation unfolding below perfectly.

‘Have you seen my sister?’ Dori demanded, hands planted firmly in his side.

‘Who, Kate?’ Kili, she was coming to see, couldn’t lie to save his life. He was going to get her caught if he carried on like that.

‘I have no other sister,’ Dori informed him icily. ‘Have you seen her?’

‘Not since breakfast,’ Bombur said. He didn’t lie particularly well either; his face was as red as his hair. It was a dwarvish trait. They hated untruths. That they even bothered telling them for her sake moved her. Or else they really wanted Dori to just leave, preferably without one hell of a scene first.

Dori clearly recognised this for the lie it was, because he whipped out the finger and swung it under his nose. ‘If I find out you have been harbouring her…’

Bombur did a step back, possibly to avoid having his eye poked out by accident.

‘Harbouring?’ Nori asked interestedly. ‘Is she a fugitive? What laws has she broken? Someone ought to tell Thorin. He’s a right to know he’s about to throw his lot in with a criminal.’

‘Didn’t know Kate went in for that sort of thing,’ Fíli chimed in. ‘Thought she was more the law-
abiding sort. What laws *did* she break anyway?'

‘All the laws of simple common sense, to begin with,’ Dori grumbled.

‘In short, all of *your* rules,’ Nori translated.

He’d definitely drawn Dori’s fire – and his ire – now; the finger moved till it was under his nose. Bombur breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Did you put her up to this? All this…’ He threw his hands up in the air while he searched for the right word. ‘All this *defiance!*’

‘So a child as well as a criminal, is she? Are you her mother now?’ Nori never passed up an opportunity to provoke his older brother a little more. It was working; Dori looked like he was about to have a stroke.

Glóin broke it up before his blood pressure could reach critical levels. ‘As you can see, your sister isn’t here and she isn’t small enough to fit into my coat pocket.’ His temper was easily roused on a good day. This was not shaping up to be one of those.

Dori looked around one last time – and completely failed to look upward – and then stomped off.

The dragon was pushed forward before she had the chance to get off.

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**Day 19**

‘I spy…’

‘Not again, lad.’

‘Really, this again?’

‘Oh, I’ll play. Not much else to do, is there?’

‘Apart from dragging the dragon, of course.’

‘We need entertaining while we are dragging.’

‘True. I’ll play. What about you, Mr Baggins?’

A short silence. ‘Oh, why not.’

‘Seriously, Bilbo? You as well?’

‘Someone kill me now.’

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**Day 20**

‘Isn’t that Thorin over there?’

Kate turned her head to follow Bilbo’s pointing finger so fast she almost got dizzy. But he was right. Somewhere above them on a little balcony overlooking the hallway was Thorin. He’d been getting ever more antsy these past few days and she supposed it had only been a matter of time before he disregarded Óin’s advice entirely.
‘Yes, it is,’ she confirmed.

Now Dwalin looked up as well. ‘So it is.’ He didn’t necessarily sound any more pleased about this than Kate, but she also knew there was no way in hell he was ever going to send his friend and king back to camp, so he could sit down and basically just do what the doctor ordered.

‘Well, so long as he stays there and doesn’t attempt to actually help us, I’m sure Óin won’t drag him away by the back of his coat,’ she said reasonably. After all, it had been three weeks since Smaug died – of course she’d kept count, thank you very much – and he was on the mend. It would be even better if he gave it a little more time, but she also knew to keep her goals somewhat realistic.

Soon enough just watching them work was probably not enough anymore, but for now at least he seemed content just to be there. Maybe he wants to be included, the way I do, she thought, remembering her short-lived career as an overseer.

Dwalin accepted this reasoning and even nodded at her. ‘Good. Back to work. Break’s over.’

The company hoisted themselves to their feet again and took up positions. Dori sent one overly exasperated look in Kate’s direction, but was wise enough to leave it at that. Maybe he had at last realised that trying to keep her away was only going to make her more determined to stay. And perhaps his frayed nerves had been calmed a little since she hadn’t passed out since that one time. At any rate, he didn’t even make a fuss anymore when she joined the pushers.

‘Ready for another round?’ Ori asked. He looked at his hands. He’d spent the previous day on head-duty with Kate and both their hands were a little raw from all the dragging, since neither of them were used to such work.

‘Well, my hands appreciate a break from the dragging,’ she replied. ‘Although I’m not sure my nose agrees.’

Somewhere in front of them Kíli suddenly rediscovered old MacDonald and his farm.

‘But look at it from the bright side,’ Bilbo said cheerfully. ‘They’ll be hearing that much better over there.’

It was hard to argue with that.

**Day 21**

‘Kate, would you mind climbing up on the dragon to secure that chain?’ Balin asked. ‘These old feet are not so nimble anymore as they used to be.’

Kate took that statement for all that it was worth, which wasn’t much. She went all the same. At least when someone had to go up and stay there for a while, it was better if it was someone who did not weigh very much, so they wouldn’t make the burden heavier on the pushers and draggers down below. And it happened often enough that she had to go up, either to secure chains and ropes or to see where Smaug got stuck, because that had happened more than once before. Of course, from Dori’s perspective this task had the added benefit of keeping her away from the real hard work.

She climbed up and secured the chain, shaking her head at the state of it. The work of dwarves was sturdy, made to last. But these chains were old and had never been designed for the purpose they
were now used for.

‘This one won’t hold much longer,’ she reported. They had left a breadcrumb trail of broken equipment all the way back to the treasury – handy for if she ever got lost, although she was sure she’d never forget these corridors for as long as she lived – and they were constantly adding to it.

‘We replaced that one two days ago!’ Bofur cried incredulously.

‘I think it took a beating when Smaug got stuck yesterday.’ How this monster had ever made his way around Erebor was still something of a mystery. Many of the corridors and especially the doorways had not been made with creatures of this size in mind. He had made some of the passages bigger to suit him, hence the rubble that could be found everywhere, but evidently not all of them, because they kept having this issue. ‘This one’s a goner. We’d better replace it now before it breaks while we’re moving.’

It would mean at least an hour’s delay and by now nobody was in the mood for any more of those.

‘I’ll bring you up another,’ Nori offered. ‘Just wait a minute.’

He was as good as his word and he was quick about it too. All of them had some skills in dragon climbing by now and Nori was particularly good at it.

‘There you go, sister of mine.’ He turned up the charm a notch.

She repaid him in kind. ‘Thank you, brother dearest. Mind giving me a hand?’

‘Let’s have at it.’ He gave a disgusted look at the worn-out chain. ‘We can toss this one out, that’s for sure.’

‘My thoughts exactly. Here, can you hold that still for me?’ The more they did it, the easier the whole process of detaching and re-attaching became. It was not something Kate had ever imagined she’d be any good at; she’d always failed rather miserably at any and all attempts at DIY.

‘You’re getting good at this,’ Nori observed.

Kate shrugged. ‘I suspect there wasn’t much choice.’

‘Well, good work deserves fair pay,’ Nori declared. He looked around and then tugged what looked like a sapphire on a necklace free from between the scales. ‘Catch, Kate.’

Her reflexes were fast enough to catch it before it hit her square in the face. ‘That’s not yours,’ she felt inclined to remind him.

‘Of course not. It’s yours now.’

That wasn’t entirely what she meant.

‘Just say I pick and choose my own share of the treasure,’ he suggested. ‘And this beast is a moving jeweller’s shop anyway.’

He wasn’t wrong about that. Over the past few weeks they had dislodged riches beyond imagining from between his scales. This gives a whole new meaning to rolling naked in money, Kate thought wryly. All these riches had gotten stuck in Smaug’s armour and had become a part of him.

‘Mind you, I’d give the necklace a scrub before you wear it,’ he counselled. ‘It has the dragon’s stink all over it.’
She laughed and for once decided not to fight Nori on it. He may be a kleptomaniac, but he kept very little of what he nicked for himself. Most of it was promptly delivered to his family. And technically he wasn’t really wrong about taking shares of the treasure. She slipped the necklace into her pocket and pretended she didn’t see his delighted smile.

‘Well, so do we,’ she said.

She let him help her off the dragon. He really wasn’t all that bad, this brother of hers.

**Day 22**

‘It’s a good thing this is the last corner,’ Bofur grumbled.

Kate privately agreed, but at least the end was in sight now. Once they rounded this corner, it would only be two or three days more until they reached the front gate. And then Smaug would at least be out of the Mountain. And what they would do with him then was a matter to be considered… well, later. So long as it didn’t involve any more dragging Kate would count herself lucky.

Pushing Smaug around a corner took up all day. It was hard, frustrating work and it always felt as though they were getting nowhere. But it had to be done.

‘Well, we’re nearly done now.’ Balin had followed her train of thought. ‘It’d be a good thing to get this smell out of our nostrils.’

‘Not arguing with you there,’ Kate said. ‘Oh, what I wouldn’t give for a hot shower right now.’ She missed modern appliances. The shower was just one of those things. Central heating was a close second on her little list, closely followed by the Internet. Who knows, somebody might have put up an instructional YouTube video entitled: How to Remove a Dragon from Your Mountain in Ten Easy Steps.

‘Funny sort of rain you have in your world,’ Bofur remarked, completely misunderstanding her remark. ‘It’s not cold where you’re from?’

Kate realised her mistake of course as soon as the words had left her mouth, but by then there was no taking them back. It took her a while to explain how bathrooms functioned where she used to live, but at least it killed some time.

**Day 23**

‘This is ridiculous.’

‘Well, we can hardly leave all that treasure stuck in between his scales now, can we?’

‘I mean, anyone could take it.’

‘Of course, they’d have to cut off their noses first, but you’d be surprised what some folk would do for riches.’

‘Yes, I think I’m looking at some of them now.’
‘Lass, just appreciate that we don’t have to drag for a change. And it’s better to do this now than when he’s outside, ‘cause then we’d have to do it in the cold.’

‘Look, lads, I’ve found another earring! Think it matches the one Glóin found this morning?’

‘Oi, Glóin, show that earring, will you? We might have a set.’

‘Yeah, and then I’ll never see it again. I wasn’t born yesterday, Master Nori. We will look at it tonight, when there’s more folk watching your quick fingers than just me.’

‘Your lack of faith wounds me.’

‘Better safe than sorry. That’s my motto.’

‘Best motto ever invented. Well, Mr Baggins, what in Durin’s name are you doing?’

‘There’s something stuck between his teeth. I am trying to dislodge it, as I am sure you’ve observed.’

‘Careful, burglar. There’s no telling if those teeth are venomous.’

‘You’ll have noticed that I am wearing gloves for exactly that reason, thank you very much. And I would really appreciate it if somebody would lend me a hand.’

‘On my way. Oh, that looks big. What’d you reckon it is?’

‘I don’t know and I don’t particularly care to find out. As you’ll recall, I was not in favour of doing this today.’ The next words were rather muffled, but the words ‘dwarves,’ ‘waste of time,’ and ‘stubborn’ were audible.

‘Hear, hear.’

‘Oh, that’s stuck, all right. Anyone got an axe? I think we might need it.’

‘Nonsense, it can’t be as stuck as all that. Here, let me have a go… Oh, that’s not coming loose in a hurry.’

‘We could always try together. And we’ve still got our own burglar here. Come on, Mr Baggins, give us a hand.’

‘Two dwarves and a hobbit played dentist to a dragon. This sounds like the beginning of a very bad joke.’

‘Lads, I think I felt it move. Yes, yes, there it goes. Ouch.’

‘I think your joke ends with all three of them on their arses, Kate.’

‘Well, you can laugh all you like, but look what we’ve found. Doesn’t look too shabby, does it?”

‘Well, will you look at that!’

‘Huh. Did you just pull out one of his teeth?’

Day 24
Bilbo looked uneasily at the object Fíli presented to him as though it could jump at him and bite him at any given moment. True, four weeks ago it would have done exactly that if he’d been so foolish as to try and get a closer look. Today however it was mostly harmless.

‘Come on, Mr Bilbo, you’ve earned it fair and square,’ Balin encouraged him. ‘It takes a brave soul to go so near a dragon’s mouth, even a dead one.’

‘And you’re a true burglar now,’ Ori pointed out. ‘You stole treasure from between his teeth!’

‘And then you took a tooth as a trophy,’ Glóin finished.

‘You deserve it,’ Dwalin agreed. ‘So take it, Master Burglar.’

‘And then we can all get back to work,’ Fíli told him. He was still holding out the tooth on his hands like it was a sword he presented for inspection. It could be used as one, come to think of it. The point looked like it could skewer a horse in a heartbeat.

The burglar in question did not appear entirely convinced. It was a strange sort of gift. It would be to anyone who wasn’t a dwarf anyway. But Kate was starting to puzzle these dwarves out at last. And this gift was a mark of both appreciation and respect. Unfortunately, since they did not explain this, something got lost in translation. And she wasn’t sure how to explain it to Bilbo either.

‘Just take it, Bilbo,’ she counselled him. ‘It’s a reminder of your bravery.’

Bilbo clearly did not think he had been especially brave. ‘It came out by accident!’

‘Well, you came awfully close to his mouth before, when you kept him distracted so that Thorin and Kíli could kill him. And if that isn’t bravery, I don’t know what is.’ There, that should make some sense to him.

It did. ‘Well, thank you all.’ He hesitantly held out his hands and Fíli almost reverently placed the tooth in them. It was easily as long as one of Kate’s legs and heavy too from the looks of it. ‘I… eh… I appreciate it very much.’

The dwarves ignored the stammering and took it as if they had never been better thanked in all their lives, clapping him on the shoulder and laughing. Even though Bilbo had started out as the strange, fussy hobbit the wizard insisted on bringing along, he had very much carved out a place of his own. It remained to be seen how comfortable he was with it, but from the dwarves’ perspective, he very much belonged now.

‘Right, back to work,’ Dwalin said over Fíli’s offer to make a hilt for the tooth so that Bilbo could use it as a sword. ‘Or there’ll be one more day of this and none of you want that, do you?’

That was the trick to get everybody to focus and they all took their places for another day of hard work. They made considerable progress and by the end of the day everybody was quite convinced that the next day would finally see an end to their labours.

**Day 25**

Even though there was still a full day’s work to be done, everyone set out to work in a good humour. Bofur was whistling and there was laughing and chatting all around. Of course, there was not much of any of that when they actually got started. Very few people would have enough breath to do this kind of work and chat at the same time.
But it went quicker today than it had in the days before. Or maybe it just felt like that because they were so close now.

They managed to get the corpse up to the front gate before they took a lunchbreak and then after finally they could bring it outside.

‘Ah, Kate, do you smell that?’ Nori called, when only Smaug’s hindquarters remained inside.

Kate arched an eyebrow at him. ‘Smell what? Dead dragon?’

‘No, you fool, fresh air. Nice, clean, freezing air!’

She laughed along with him. Soon enough she would probably be too cold to appreciate it, but for now the wind felt like a long-lost friend. She hadn’t realised how stuffy the Mountain was until she felt the wind on her face again.

‘Come on,’ Nori clearly had an idea, because he first took her hand, then Ori’s and pulled them along with him, up onto the dragon’s back.

‘What are we doing?’ She felt like they were doing something silly, but then, they were all a little overenthusiastic today. After all these weeks, they maybe had earned the right to be.

‘Getting out of the stink, of course,’ Nori said as if it was perfectly obvious.

It felt like the kind of odd and impulsive thing she used to do as a girl. But the girl in her had disappeared somewhere along the road to Erebor and Kate had barely been able to find any trace of her since.

But today is a victory of sorts, she thought. I might as well.

And it was more of a victory than many of the company knew. The dragon had been slain, Lake-town was still there, Thorin hadn’t shown any signs of madness and from what she knew there wasn’t any reason to suspect a siege in the near future. Smaug hadn’t laid waste to anything, so why should there be?

I might have actually done it, she thought. She was almost scared of the thought. To have achieved such a success was dazzling, a feeling that made her feel like she was a little tipsy. One could get drunk on it if one wasn’t careful. You’ve got the strange, fanciful notions already, her brain supplied.

Nori was right this once; the fresh air was so much nicer from atop the dragon’s back. It was cold and chilly, but so, so lovely after all these weeks.

‘How’s the view from up there?’ Glóin called up. ‘Any good?’

‘The view’s shit,’ Ori reported, prompting a indignant muttering of Dori on the subject of bad language and the many questionable influences in this company on young, naïve dwarves. ‘But you should try the air,’ he added, pretending he hadn’t heard his brother, something that was decidedly easier to accomplish when one wasn’t in his immediate vicinity.

‘Well, I would,’ Glóin replied. ‘But unlike you lazybones I’ll wait until the work has been done before I seek to entertain myself. Come down and finish the job, will you?’

It was tempting to stay up there, but Glóin was right. And it would be foolish to still be at it after sundown all because they wanted a breath of clean air for a change.
So they came down and resumed work. And they had luck on their side for once. Even though many of the chains were in a sorry state of repair, none broke until they were done. Only then the chains securing Smaug’s left wing to his body gave out at last.

‘Well, we could tie that back up, I suppose,’ said Bilbo, not sounding very pleased.

‘We might as well leave it until we’ve decided what we’re going to do with him now,’ Bombur said.

‘It’ll keep the wind out,’ Óin observed and since everyone considered this as his expert medical opinion, nobody went against it.

‘So, we’re done then.’ It felt a little more real now that she had finally said it. It wasn’t really done before. Of course, this was the kind of occasion that needed to be marked in some way, even if only by a verbal acknowledgement.

‘Done,’ Dwalin agreed.

‘You know what?’ Kili said suddenly. ‘This was fun. We should do it again sometime.’

‘…’

Chapter End Notes

FYI, there is in fact no YouTube video entitled How to Remove a Dragon from Your Mountain in Ten Easy Steps, just in case anybody was about to go and look for it. :) I tried to keep in bits and pieces of realism, which is really hard when it’s a chapter about this subject, so I hope it all worked.

As always, thank you for reading. Reviews would be much appreciated. I’m curious to know what you thought of this one.
Thoren and Thráin hadn’t been good sleepers and Thorin had lost count of the number of nights he or Kate had been up for hours and hours when one of their sons had decided that sleep was for other people and not for them. And it was the one part of being a parent where he’d been better at than Kate. Soothing a fussy baby back to sleep somehow came easy to him. Kate had once told him it was because he sang them lullabies and that there was something about being in his arms that made a body feel safe. He did not know if she was right.

Duly Noted, Chapter 22: Family Reunion AU Part 5: Connecting

Erebor, late autumn 2944

‘Lay down your head, and I’ll sing you a lullaby…’

Kate knew she could not lay claim to the greatest singing voice, but it was better than nothing at all. At least Thráin’s tired cries became hiccups and the occasional whimper when he listened to her. He’d been feverish these past two days and although his fever had broken a few hours ago, he still wasn’t feeling very well.

‘And may you need never to banish misfortune, may you find kindness in all that you meet…’

But at least he was listening to her now, eyes staring up at her teary, but somewhat attentive. Her heart went out to him, her tiny little boy feeling so miserable. And she had done all in her power to take it away, but even she could not work miracles. All she could do was sing to him. And this tune was working. She had liked it back in her own world, both the soothing melody and the lyrics. It was like a well-wishing, a blessing. It contained all the things she wished for him. But if only wishing could make it so, he would be feeling better by now.

She felt her own eyelids grow heavier. Sleep for her had been a while ago and she was tired. She’d been up with a crying baby all hours of the night to give Thorin the chance to rest. He’d been needed at court today and Kate could stay home easier than he could. Not that he had slept particularly well; worry had kept them both wide awake.

He would have been better at this, Kate knew. The moment her husband started singing, children dropped off to sleep within moments. She’d almost suspected magic was involved. Her singing usually quieted her sons, but instead of drifting off, they tended to stay awake to listen. ‘It’s because they like your voice better than mine,’ Thorin had told her, but Kate called bullshit on that. There was only one of them in this marriage who could sing well, and it wasn’t her.

A knock on the door broke her concentration. ‘Come in!’ she called out.

Lufur stepped inside. ‘I don’t mean to disturb you, my lady, but there’s been a delivery, addressed
Kate shifted Thráin to one arm so she could accept the packet.

‘I believe your brother sent it,’ he added.

It was a little bag with a short note attached. To raise my favourite sister’s spirit in times of trouble, it read in Nori’s handwriting and when she pried the bag open she found the spiced tea from the East she liked so much. She could have hugged Lufur for the prompt delivery, and very probably would have if she hadn’t been holding Thráin.

‘Is he back?’ she asked.

‘I believe so, my lady,’ Lufur replied. Even though Kate counted him as a dear friend who had earned to right to drop the courtesies and use her first name many times over, he insisted on calling her my lady still. Since he had been doing so for three years now, she began to despair of him ever changing that. ‘He would have delivered it in person were it not for his being waylaid by his brother the moment he stepped through the gates.’

Kate really didn’t need to ask which brother.

‘If you would trust me with your son for a few minutes, you could fix yourself a cup,’ Lufur offered.

‘Has anybody ever told you you’re a hero, Lufur?’ she asked, meaning it as a very rhetorical question.

He didn’t take it as one. Dwarves only very seldom did. ‘Folk haven’t really stopped for the past three years.’ And because Lufur was a dwarf, he said this without pride or self-consciousness, but rather as the fact it was.

And he deserved every bit of praise he received. It had taken some time for Kate to let it sink in that their stand at the side door during the Battle of the Five Armies had been quite an accomplishment. They had stopped an army from entering with only two elves, one dwarf, one hobbit and one woman. Looking back on it she couldn’t help but wondering how they had ever pulled that off.

And Lufur had become a friend because of this. Kate reckoned it would be impossible to live through something like that and not bond over it. And she genuinely liked him. He was steadfast, loyal to a fault and kind. And he was one of the dwarves who wouldn’t so much as blink when she did something outlandish. He had the good sense not to comment on her appearance right now, which doubled her affection for him.

Kate knew she looked a fright. She hadn’t looked in a mirror for days, but the lack of sleep and the worry for Thráin mustn’t have done her any favours. There was as much hair in her braid as there was out of it and she hadn’t really bothered with dressing this morning. She’d put on leggings and a pair of thick socks and one of Thorin’s tunics. To be fair, she thought she’d been grabbing one of her own – they were the same colour and she was sleepy and paying more attention to her baby than her clothing – and by the time she realised her mistake she’d already put it on. She hadn’t had the motivation to change it, even though Thorin’s shirt was far too big for her and hung off one shoulder. It revealed far more skin than dwarves were comfortable with, but Lufur didn’t act like anything was amiss at all.

She put Thráin in Lufur’s arms and set to making tea. If she was really honest, she felt a little guilty
about handing him off to anyone who wasn’t Thorin; it was as if she was admitting to not being up
to the job herself. But Lufur was good with him and she needed to drink something. It’d probably
be a good idea to grab a bite to eat as well.

Lufur didn’t sing, but kept Thráin occupied by speaking to him in a low, comforting voice. It
worked as well as Kate’s singing; Thráin was mostly quiet, but still not sleeping. It would be better
for him if he did sleep, but of course it would be hard to reason with a four months old baby.

‘Give him to me, please,’ she requested once the tea was made.

Lufur did. ‘If there’s anything more I can do, please ask. If I need to look after your other lad for a
bit…’

‘Dís has him for a few days,’ Kate replied. Thorin’s sister had been on her doorstep with an offer of
help the moment she heard Thráin was ill. She’d look after Thoren while his brother was sick,
which killed two birds with one stone. Kate had one less child to worry about and she did not run
the risk that he would catch it, which would have left her with two sick children. ‘But thank you for
offering. I’ll let you know if I need anything.’

She would, but she did not think there would be any need to call for reinforcements. The worst was
behind them. Now she just really needed her boy to sleep.

‘Loo-li, loo-li, lai-lay…’

It was late in the afternoon by the time court concluded for the day and by then Thorin’s patience
was running low. He’d been needed to settle the disputes of his own people that for reasons beyond
his comprehension needed his judgement rather than that of the lower courts that usually dealt in
these matters. Kate had once likened it to being a referee in a sports match and, once she had
explained what that job entailed, he had found it impossible to disagree with her. And it certainly
wouldn’t hurt folk to use their common sense and sort out their own problems. For Durin’s sake,
were they children?

He wished Kate had been with him today. They both disliked this part of their duties, but when
they faced them together they usually made it through the day without incident. Of course, it had
been impossible. Thráin was too ill to be left to a minder and so Kate had elected to stay at home to
look after him. This was the other reason Thorin’s temper had been so short; he’d wanted to stay
home himself. All day his attention had wavered and at some point he had seriously considered
sending Dwalin from his side to inquire after the wellbeing of both his son and his wife.

‘Go home,’ Dwalin told him brusquely. ‘Get some sleep if you can.’

He’d only rest if he knew that all was well and Dwalin knew this. But he was a good friend and he
didn’t comment on it.

Lufur was on duty when he arrived back at his own door. That was a relief. At least if something
was the matter, he would lend a hand to Kate. ‘My lord,’ he greeted.

There were days when he was addressed thus and would almost look over his own shoulder to see
what important dwarf walked behind him. He had been a simple blacksmith, a king in exile, longer
than he had been king under his own Mountain. Some habits proved hard to break. Fortunately he
had better control over himself today.
‘Lufur,’ he acknowledged.

He didn’t stop to ask after Kate and Thráin; his need to know would be satisfied sooner if he went in and saw for himself.

‘May there always be angels to watch over you

To guide you each step of the way

To guard you and keep you safe from all harm

Loo-li, loo-li, lai-lay.’

Kate was singing softly. The song had come over with her from her own world, but Thorin was familiar with the melody by now. Truth be told, he liked the tune and he didn’t mind hearing his wife singing it. Much as she disagreed with him, he was of the opinion that she had a pleasant singing voice. Clearly his sons shared this view; they always listened to her. Kate reminded him that they never fell asleep when she sang, to which Thorin had pointed out very reasonably that they would be fools to do so when there was such a beautiful voice to listen to. He could tell by the sceptical look on her face she thought this was nonsense.

She hadn’t noticed his entrance and so for a moment he waited. With something akin to amusement he realised that she must have grabbed one of his tunics to wear this morning and, if she had taken note of this at all, she hadn’t bothered to exchange it for her own. Her hair was mostly unbound, a curtain of fire framing her face.

In the privacy of his own mind he could admit he preferred her appearance like this over her finery. She looked more as she had done when he had met her and had come to love her. He was glad that she was growing into her role and that his people were slowly beginning to accept her, but he cherished these moments most.

‘Is he better?’ he asked softly when the song had ended.

She turned around. ‘Much,’ she replied. ‘His fever broke a few hours ago. Now if he would just sleep…’

She looked tired, exhausted. Kate had slept even less than he had last night and it was harder on her than it was on him.

‘Give him to me,’ he said.

‘Thorin, you’ve had court all day. You shouldn’t have to…’

‘I want to,’ he interrupted, holding out his arms. It was not just to relieve her. He wanted to feel his son in his arms, a visual reminder that he was there and that he was well.

Kate was too tired to raise any more objections and so she passed Thráin over. The lad did not look ill anymore, just very, very tired.

‘Did you stay up just to hear your amad sing?’ he asked gently.

‘I kept him awake, is more likely,’ Kate snorted.

Thorin pretended he hadn’t heard her. ‘Aye, can’t fault you for that. She’s got a voice worth listening to. But you need to sleep, lad.’
‘He does,’ Kate agreed. ‘Perhaps if you’d sing to him, he’d actually do just that.’

Thorin sat down on the sofa, Thráin nestled securely in his arms. Kate shook her head fondly and then joined them. She pulled her legs up on the sofa and put her head down on his shoulder as if it was her pillow. Not that Thorin objected.

‘Perhaps I should,’ he said.

For now Thráin seemed content to be held and to be occasionally talked to. He was quiet, but alert. Kate offered him one of her fingers, which he grabbed with one of his little hands and stuck in his mouth.

‘He’s been fed,’ Kate pre-empted the question Thorin was about to ask. ‘And changed. And I am certain he’s neither too warm nor too cold.’

‘Just tired,’ Thorin concluded.

‘Just tired,’ Kate confirmed. ‘Just like his parents. What I wouldn’t give for a night’s undisturbed sleep.’

‘Perhaps I ought to sing you a lullaby as well,’ he teased.

Kate chuckled. ‘That might not be such a bad idea. Then again, I’d sleep right through dinner.’

‘I’d wake you,’ Thorin told her.

‘Not if you fell asleep as well.’

Thorin did not respond to that, but instead started on a song. ‘Lay down your head, and I’ll sing you a lullaby…’

He felt more than he saw that Kate frowned. ‘Stealing my songs now, are you?’

He did not stop to reply to her. Thráin was already close to sleep and he had not even gotten through the first verse. If that was not testimony to how exhausted he was, he did not know what was.

Thráin looked like him, more even than his brother did. And Thorin in turn had always looked much like his father, whose name this child now bore.

Kate had not looked a little surprised when he had first suggested they name their then still unborn son – if he should turn out to be a son – after the father he despised. He could tell she hadn’t understood, had asked if he maybe took that decision to cement their son’s position as a prince of Durin’s line, a factor that had weighed heavily in naming their firstborn.

It had only been part of the reason, a very small part.

Since he had become a father he had spent much time thinking about his own and what he had done. There had been a time when even the mention of his father’s name would make him cringe inside. He’d done so much harm, had destroyed so much. He’d never been a particularly kind or loving father. He had expected much. Thorin had never stopped feeling as though he lacked something in his father’s eyes, no matter how hard he strove to be worthy of his affection.

And then Thráin had failed him so unexpectedly.

It was a bitter disappointment he had never really understood.
So Kate’s lack of understanding had been fully justified. But she had listened when he explained that yes, Thráin was the name of the dwarf who had abandoned him when he never should have, but it was also the name of the dwarf who founded the kingdom they called their own, many centuries ago. It was a good name, an old name, a name that once had been spoken in pride and admiration, as he hoped one day to be able to do about his son.

‘Still, it was also your father’s name,’ Kate had said. ‘Won’t it be too… confronting?’

‘No.’ His reply had been spoken with more certainty than he had felt at the time, but he had known that the time had come to lay the past to rest. Let that name become the name he associated with his son, with everything good. If that name was called, the child in his arms would be the first to come to mind.

Kate had smiled when he clarified himself, albeit in a surprised deer kind of way. ‘A way to exorcise a demon,’ she’d said, although she in turn had needed to explain that expression. But yes, that was what he did.

For some weeks before the birth he had fretted it wouldn’t work, that he had done his son a disservice by naming him after one so unworthy of any recognition. But then the day had come his new-born son had been placed in his arms. He knew he had made the right choice then.

‘Loo-li, loo-li, lai-lay…’

The song had ended and Thráin was finally asleep, Kate’s finger still in his hand, blissfully unaware of all the evils of this world.

‘He will grow up to do many great things,’ Thorin said.

Kate didn’t hear him; she’d fallen asleep at last.

Chapter End Notes

The song Kate sang is Sleepsong by Secret Garden. If you don’t know it yet, I’d recommend it. It’s a beautiful song.

I hope you enjoyed this little piece. As always, thank you for reading. Reviews would be most welcome!
Enjoying himself was not something that came easy to him – he’d had too little cause for it before Smaug had been defeated – and it was harder to learn than he’d thought. But these past few years had done him good. It was hard to not learn a little when there was so much to be grateful for. And even though many people would disagree with him – not in the last place his own people – Thorin counted his wife as one of the chief blessings Mahal had bestowed upon him.

Duly Noted, Chapter 21: As You Like It

Erebor, the anniversary of Smaug’s death, 2961 TA

‘Are you ready to leave?’

Kate smoothed the ruffles out of her skirt and nodded. ‘As ready as I will be,’ she replied.

Thorin for one was fairly sure that she had nothing to worry about on the account of her appearance. Dori had fussled about her wardrobe until he deemed it adequately stocked. She owned the finest gowns, even though she complained of the long skirts and unpractical cut of many of them. She looked like a true queen ought to look. And Thorin himself had done her hair. She looked well.

He took her hand in his. ‘Shall we?’ he asked.

Kate nodded. ‘We shall.’

One could feel the Mountain’s general excitement the moment they stepped foot out of the door. The streets were brightly lit, garlands graced the walls and there was something in the air that Thorin found hard to pinpoint, but that was there all the same. The mood was catching. If not for their destination, Thorin might have found it hard to resist. Later he would give in to it, let the cheer and happiness sweep him along as they celebrated. But that would be later.

Next to him Kate was quiet and subdued as well. The day of Smaug’s death was, as always, a day of mixed feelings for not only them but their company as a whole. True, it was a day of great victory, the day they won back all that had been lost to them for so many years. It was also a day to honour those who had assisted them in bringing this victory about. Kili had slain the dragon. To celebrate without remembering him would be a grave mistake. And then there was Bifur, whom they had lost in Mirkwood, who never once laid eyes on Erebor, but who had died on the quest of reaching it regardless. To celebrate this day without also paying respect to him would be wrong.

And so a tradition had formed. Every year without fail they would make the trek to Kili’s tomb and Bifur’s memorial and pay their respects before joining the celebrating throng in the Great Hall.
Fíli joined them when they were only a few streets away. ‘The crowds seem rowdy this year.’ It was the kind of casual, neutral remark that could be expected. There was no cheer, not quite yet. They all walked under a dark cloud until their obligations had been fulfilled.

No, obligation was not quite the right word, for that indicated a reluctance to go that Thorin did not feel. He wanted to go. Without what Kíli and Bifur had done, days like these would not have been possible. They owed them everything.

‘They are rowdy every year,’ Kate said.

‘Aye, but if even Óin can be heard to complain, you know it’s worse than years gone by,’ Fíli countered.

If this had been later in the evening, they would have pursued this point until it evolved quite naturally into bantering. But they would not cross that line quite yet. In moments like these he missed their fallen friends most. He could never stop feeling as though they should still be with them. They more than any others in this world deserved to be alive to celebrate this night. Of course, all of Durin’s Folk feasted and danced, but they were plucking the fruit of another’s labour, labour they themselves had shirked out of fear. In his darkest hours Thorin begrudged them the right to be so merry purely for this reason.

Kate must have seen the frown in his forehead, for she gently squeezed his hand. No words were needed. They would have added nothing. Just to have her support was sufficient.

Some of the others joined them on their way, but most of their group awaited them near the entrance. It was a long walk for almost all of them and they were deep inside the Mountain.

‘Are we all here?’ Balin asked.

Dwalin, one of the taller ones in their group, carried out a quick headcount. ‘We’re all here.’

There was no admittance for those who had not been part of their company, as it should be. Kate had made a strong case to include Dís in their number and Thorin had been inclined to agree. But Dís herself had refused the offer when it was made to her. ‘I was not part of your company, Thorin,’ she’d said. ‘And I do not need to be there to remember him. Nor is the door closed on me on any other day that I would spend time mourning my son.’

He had been unwilling to leave it like that, but his sister had a will easily as strong as his own and in the end she had won the argument by simply not showing up. Short of dragging her by her hair there was nothing Thorin had been able to do about it and he had ended up accepting her wishes.

The mood was solemn and there was an almost unnatural silence when they entered. Dwarves were not usually given to silence. Thorin was well aware that he was the exception to the rule. Dwarves in general were noisy. None of them were here.

Kíli’s tomb and the memorial for Bifur were side by side. Candles had been lit before they entered. Since none but the company entered on this night, one of them came a little ahead of the others as a rule and made sure everything was in readiness. It had been Bombur’s turn this year.

There was no set rule for these gatherings. Elves and men were fond of their ceremonies with speeches filled with flowery, but meaningless words. Dwarves never had any use for such things. They did what worked, what felt right and natural. And none of it was ever thought strange, or was laughed or scoffed at. That was not how that worked.

This year Kate was surprisingly the first one to speak. She walked towards Bifur’s stone and laid
down a dried flower.

‘We couldn’t communicate, Bifur and I,’ she said, ‘Not very well at least. But he was never anything but kind to me. When I wasn’t feeling… When I was feeling downcast some days, he’d take care of a chore I didn’t like or he’d place a little curiosity near my head in the morning before I woke. Since there were so many flowers by the road, it was usually a flower. Seems right I return the favour.’

She stepped back, but Bofur put a hand on her shoulder and smiled a little.

It was a thoughtful gesture, one she must have planned since there weren’t many flowers to be found in this time of year. Folk who met Kate usually reached the conclusion that she, very much like her husband they would remark, had very little patience for other people’s sensibilities. Thorin however knew that this was true only to a certain extent. They both made the effort for those they cared about. There were not very many people allowed into that circle, but that did not mean it did not exist.

Some others spoke, but Thorin never did. He hadn’t in all these years. Speaking his love for his sister-son would not restore him to life. Speaking of his admiration for Bifur would not make death unhand him. They were gone, perhaps watching them if the Maker allowed it, but out of reach all the same. And he had no use for talking to the dead; they could not answer him. And the words he would speak to them could never fully express what he felt. There was a point where emotion went beyond words and every word spoken would only seem to diminish it.

You are missed, sister-son. The words however were in his mind. You were the brightest light in our years of exile, full of promise and hope. You were loved. You are loved still. We owe you everything we have. You will not be forgotten.

The gathering concluded some time later. They filed out and left the dead behind. As they walked through the door Thorin could feel the cloud of sorrow and remembrance slowly lift until it vanished completely when the door was shut. They had done this, not as an unpleasantness before more agreeable activities, but as a thing that needed to be done before any of them felt free to fully enjoy the night.

And they should enjoy it. They, more than anybody else who currently dwelled under the Mountain, had earned the right. Others had run for the safety of their mother’s skirts when the word dragon had been mentioned, and some of them trained warriors with battle experience too. Some of those had come with Dáin to fight for Erebor when it had come under siege after Smaug’s demise. But although those enemies had been numerous, none of them had breathed fire. And no dwarf worth his beard shied away from battle. They had done no more than their duty – and Thorin thought they had done a good deal less than their duty, all things told – so he could not commend them for it.

But these dwarves had come when called, some of them young, some of them all but untrained, but all of them willing to heed his call and undertake the most dangerous of quests with him. He could not ever not be grateful to them, even if he did have trouble expressing it. Despite the danger, despite all the odds being stacked against them, they had come and they had fought. They had earned every good thing ten times over.

‘The crowds are rowdier than last year,’ Óin grumbled when they came near the Great Hall.

‘I wouldn’t know about that,’ Fíli said good-naturedly. ‘Because last year I could barely hear you complain of their noisiness, whereas I’m hearing you loud and clear this one.’
The company laughed loudly, while Óin only scowled in Fíli’s direction. ‘Speak up, lad. I can’t hear you over all that ruckus.’

This of course only caused them to laugh louder. Thorin found himself joining in, in spite of his own reservations. It always seemed to take him longer than the others to shake the sorrow from his shoulders. Enjoyment did not come easy to him, though it had gotten easier with the years.

‘Speaking of loud, how is your boy doing?’ Kate asked Fíli when the laughter died down. ‘I’ve been meaning to ask, but I got a little side-tracked.’

‘He’s a marvel and a joy,’ was the immediate response. ‘Síf and I would both appreciate it if he would sleep through the night, but he’s a marvel all the same.’

‘He gets that from his father,’ Dwalin nodded. ‘You could’ve kept the entire Ered Luin awake with the way you wailed.’

Fíli attempted to look somewhat indignant. ‘Mr Dwalin, I have no idea what you are talking about.’

Kate patted him on the shoulder. ‘Fíli, my friend, allow me to let you in on a little secret. You see, it’s not your fault, really. You couldn’t help it. Your whole family’s afflicted, I’m afraid. At least, that’s what I suspect, because my boys never really liked sleeping at night either. Though, come to think of it, I never had that issue with either of my girls.’ She grinned at him. ‘So, you should probably hope for a girl next time!’

Thorin for one had been thrilled when Fíli’s son had been born. Unsurprisingly he had named the lad Kíli, after the brother he’d lost. Thorin had considered giving the name to one of his boys, but only very briefly. It wasn’t his right to use it when he had been the one to lead him to his death. Kate did not agree with his judgement of himself, but Thorin knew her to be wrong. He had known what awaited them. And he had taken that risk for himself without a second thought. But he should not have gambled with their lives. They were not his to risk. And so the name now wasn’t his to use.

In the general mood, his own musings went all but unnoticed.

‘You all right?’ Kate asked softly, falling into step with him.

‘Yes.’ It was the truth. These thought would always make an appearance from time to time, but he was master over them, not the other way around. And if ever he was in danger of losing control, Kate would be there to lead him back out. He had trusted her to do so for twenty years now and she had yet to fail him.

‘Good,’ she said. ‘Blimey, twenty years to the day that the monster breathed his last. There are days when it feels like it was only yesterday.’ She took his hand as they walked on. ‘And then there are days when it feels like a lifetime ago.’

For Thorin it was one of the latter’s. It was hard to picture Erebor empty and deserted, in ruins even. Twenty years had brought about much change. True, the full restoration of this kingdom would not be completed in his lifetime, he was sure. Smaug had done much damage. But this area was brought back to its former glory and there was music and light and the sound of hundreds of voices all speaking and laughing at the same time. They chased the shadows away and kept the memories of bad times at bay.

‘Oh, it feels more like yesterday to me,’ Bofur chimed in, unaware that he was barging in on a private conversation. ‘Hauling a dragon corpse around the corridors is not a thing one forgets in a
Hurry.’

‘Hear, hear,’ Kate said, but she was laughing.

For all that they were always complaining about what a thankless task it had been, most of them looked back on it with fondness. It was something they had achieved together and even though the work had been hard, they had shared experiences and laughs that Thorin, due to his injury, had not been a part of. He did not resent them for this. Rather he regretted that he had not been well enough to partake.

‘I say we ought to invite our burglar for the celebration next year,’ Glóin said. ‘It isn’t right he’s never been. He was there, after all.’

‘I have invited him for five years in a row now,’ Kate informed him. This was news to Thorin. He knew she exchanged letters with their hobbit somewhat regularly, but he didn’t know a thing about an invitation. ‘He always thanks me kindly for the honour, but he has a life in the Shire. And he reminded me that the last time he ventured beyond the Misty Mountains, he came back to find his things auctioned off because he was presumed dead. And his relatives pilfered the silverware, which he’s never recovered. I don’t think he’s that keen on a repeat performance.’

‘Can’t say I blame him,’ Dori said.

‘Bloody disgrace,’ Dwalin agreed. ‘Relatives treating him like that. We ought to have provided him with an escort. That would have sorted his problems easy enough.’

‘And would send all his neighbours running for the hills without a second thought. I wouldn’t think any of them have ever even seen a sword.’ Kate’s reply was quick enough, but Thorin could tell that from one moment to the next, her mind was no longer on the conversation.

He could hazard a relatively educated guess as to the reason. Because Bilbo’s nearest and dearest had thought him dead after his lengthy and unexplained absence. Kate’s own kith and kin would have had little reason to believe otherwise. True, she had sent her letters to explain, but she had confided in him that she had little hope that their contents would be believed, even by those closest to her. She had explained that what had happened to her was too far removed from what was believed to be possible by her people.

‘Why did you send the letters then?’ he had asked, not unkindly.

She’d looked him right in the eyes. ‘Because it helps me sleep at night. It’s a fool’s hope, but better than nothing at all.’ He’d held her for a long time that night and could only hope she found some peace at last.

‘We should keep trying,’ Balin said. ‘He should witness it at least once.’

‘Give us the opportunity to thank him properly, too,’ Ori agreed. ‘We’d all be charcoal if not for his quick thinking.’

‘Well, maybe if we all write to him and ask him to come, that might make a difference,’ Bofur said. ‘That way he’ll know we all want him to come.’

‘I can’t see how that would make any difference,’ Dwalin replied. ‘With half of you your handwriting’s so bad I can never decide if you’ve attempted to communicate or if you just scribbled nonsense down.’

‘Nah, that’s just because your sight’s going,’ Glóin said. ‘My scrips is perfectly legible.’
'Didn’t say it was your script I couldn’t decipher, did I?’

They had reached the Great Hall and group conversation instantly became all but impossible. Óin had a point when he said that the crowds were noisy; they were. But the people inside were happy and laughing and dancing. The mood was catching. And so Thorin was resolved to leave any and all dark thoughts outside the door. They would still be there when he left.

‘There you go, amad, drink?’ Thoren had pushed a glass into Kate’s hand before she could respond. His two eldest sons had appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

‘Thank you, I think?’ she said, but she was smiling. ‘I’ll know if I should thank you when I’ve drunk it and liked it.’

‘Maybe you’ll be so drunk you won’t remember what’s in it and thank us anyway,’ Thráin grinned mischievously.

Kate laughed. ‘It’ll take a lot more than your combined brains to get me drunk, lads.’

Thoren shrugged nonchalantly. ‘Well, it was worth a try, wasn’t it, Thráin?’

‘Of course,’ his brother nodded. ‘But, you know, since we can’t get the pleasure of seeing you drunk, think you could trouble yourself for a dance?’

‘What makes you think I would release your mother?’ Thorin asked, joining in the teasing.

‘My, I am in high demand tonight,’ Kate remarked.

‘Adad, there are enough dances to go around,’ Thoren told his father in a tone of voice he must have learned from his Uncle Dori. ‘You can have amad for the vast majority of them, if you like. Now, don’t be greedy.’

‘Yes, adad, were you never taught to share?’ Thráin chimed in. They were growing up, these sons of his, but they were careless and so innocent still. And Thorin would never begrudge them that.

Next to him Kate was chuckling her amusement. ‘Very well, I see how it is. If you don’t think you’re too old to dance with your mother…’

‘We’ll never be too old for that,’ Thoren interjected.

‘… Then I will gladly dance with you,’ Kate finished as though she hadn’t heard him, but Thorin could tell she was touched. She discreetly left the glass on an obliging table nearby.

Thoren had already grabbed her hand. ‘I’m the oldest, I get to go first,’ he informed his brother. They had disappeared before Thráin had thought up a suitable reply.

‘Guess I could always ask Nes for a dance first,’ Thráin shrugged, not in the least put out that he was not the first. ‘Hey, Nes, wait up!’ He was off before Thorin could do anything about it.

Nes was one of Bombur’s daughters. Bombur and his wife Dara had so many children that Thorin had quite honestly lost count at some point, but his sons were thick as thieves with them. Dara had been one of their preferred childminders – still was, now that the twins were still young enough to need one – when the boys and Duria had been little.

His companions had all wandered away to get themselves a drink or a dance or some other company. He was confident he’d cross paths with them again before the night was out, but there
was no rule that said they ought to spend all time together as a group.

He noticed Duria a little distance away, standing all alone, and made his way over to her. ‘Where are your friends?’ he asked gently. His girl certainly did not lack friends. She did not have a great many, but there were three or four others of about her age she spent a great deal of time with, all of them just as scholarly inclined as she was.

‘Haven’t arrived yet,’ she replied. ‘I am waiting for them.’ She gave him a scrutinising look and asked: ‘Where’s amad?’

Thorin smiled. ‘Your brothers have abducted her,’ he confided. ‘Perhaps I ought to send out the Guard to find her.’

‘That’d be a sight. Are you going to have them arrested?’ Duria was trying and failing to hide her amusement.

‘Haven’t decided yet,’ Thorin said lightly. ‘They may still unhand her of their own free will.’ He looked at the dancefloor and thought he could just make out two familiar redheads before they disappeared in the crowd of dancers again. ‘How about you and I go and have a dance while we wait?’ he suggested. ‘I’ve been told it’s a celebration tonight, after all.’

His daughter’s delighted smile was all the answer he needed.

There were days when Kate Andrews could almost forget she ever had known the word regret at all. This was not one of those days, but it always came close. Not that she would have it any other way, because the remembrance part of the night was necessary. She had never gone there with reluctance. She knew herself well enough to know that she would never be able to really enjoy the celebrations without paying her respect first.

But she had left her cares behind at the door and she fully intended to enjoy herself tonight. Her sons were certainly assisting her in that endeavour.

‘Could it have fitted in this hall, the dragon?’ Thoren asked when he twirled her around. Both he and Thráin had been fascinated with the story since they were old enough to be told stories at bedtime. And even though he was taller than she was – he’d grown much in the past few years – this had apparently not changed.

‘Easily,’ she replied indulgently.

‘I wish I could have seen him,’ Thoren said wistfully. It was a good thing he didn’t do that where his father could hear; Thorin was still uneasy with the subject. He was only glad his sons had never needed to see a dragon up close. While Kate shared this opinion, she didn’t see the harm in questions. By all accounts it was a good story, the sort of tale that might end up being in a book of adventures. Now, there’s irony for you.

‘You’d be disappointed,’ she told him. ‘He was ugly both inside and out. And then we’re not even talking about the smell of him.’ She grinned at him. ‘Or indeed the weight of him.’

Thoren called her bullshit on that. ‘You are always talking and laughing about that, amad. And so is everybody else. It can’t have been as bad as all that.’
‘Not all bad,’ she conceded. There had been days when they were dragging that she was sure one of her limbs was going to come off, but there had been camaraderie as well, more even than on the road. ‘But bad enough.’ She still had some vivid memories of that bloody staircase after all.

The dance ended and then Thráin was there. ‘My turn,’ he announced, playfully pushing his brother away.

‘Manners,’ Kate reminded them.

‘He hasn’t any,’ Thoren said. ‘If he wasn’t my brother and you didn’t insist you raised him yourself, I’d be convinced he had grown up in a warg’s den.’

‘Alas, I should have left you more to the tender cares of your Uncle Dori when you were tiny little lads,’ Kate sighed in mock-exasperation.

‘You wouldn’t have,’ Thráin said confidently.

‘You love us far too much,’ Thoren finished.

_Oh, you have the measure of me._

It was true. She loved her boys and, after a fashion, she had come to love her life. In spite of all her fears, things had sorted themselves out. True, they sometimes needed a little bit of a firm hand in sorting themselves out. But give dwarves long enough to get used to something new, and they would eventually get used to it or simply forget that it was ever not the way it was today. Kate didn’t particularly care which it was.

What’s more, she was content, happy where she was, even feeling a sense of belonging nowadays, when she thought that would be forever unobtainable for her when she first made the choice to stay. But here she was, twenty years on, and she was thriving. Loving husband, five children to her name, Queen under the bloody Mountain… If someone had told her that this would be her life before she had come here, she would have sent them straight on to a mental asylum.

‘I should applaud you,’ she told Thráin. ‘All my toes are still present and accounted for.’

‘That’s more than can be said for Auntie Dís’s,’ he grinned mischievously. ‘She made me practise.’ He spoke the word as if it was a contagious disease.

‘Looks like her hard work paid off,’ Kate remarked. Thráin was quick enough on his feet on the training grounds, but dancing confounded him. He would have been good at it if he could swing swords or axes around at the same time, but they would prefer to end the night without bloodshed.

‘What of my hard work?’ he grumbled good-naturedly. And he must have been pretty eager to show it off, given that he had ambushed her the moment she stepped through the door. He could pretend to not like this pastime all he liked, but she rather thought he had picked up a liking for it he didn’t quite want to become common knowledge yet.

If that was the case, she would oblige him. ‘As I said, I should applaud you. It’s just a little hard to do when we’re in the middle of a dancefloor. Am I off the hook?’

‘Just this once.’ It was slightly scary how well he could imitate her. ‘Anyway, I’m never going to be as good as you at this anyway.’ He looked a little annoyed. ‘You make it look like it is the easiest thing in the world.’

‘I could say the same about you and swordplay,’ Kate pointed out. And maybe she could make it
look effortlessly now, but it had taken a bit of practice. ‘But you and I both know you’ve had to work at it.’

He considered that. ‘That’s true.’

‘There you are then.’

Thráín’s dancing skills had indeed improved a lot since he’s been doing it the last time, where she could see it anyway, but he had not improved so much that he could avoid bumping into other people entirely.

‘Steady there!’ was the only warning she got before Thráin spun her into another couple. Fortunately there was a pair of arms to catch her before she fell and when she was helped up again, it was to the pleasant discovery that said arms belonged to her husband.

‘Dancing going well?’ he asked. It seemed he had left the melancholy behind, because his eyes were twinkling with badly concealed amusement.

‘What can I say?’ she shrugged. ‘You never fail to sweep me off my feet.’

Behind her Thráin made a disgusted noise. ‘Are you really going to do that here? We’re in the middle of a dancefloor!’

‘Be glad we’re not like Ori and Thora,’ Kate said, who thought they were actually being really mild. For one, they were never much for flirting in public and this was as far as it ever went. And really, her brother and sister-in-law were far, far worse. Ori would never start it, but he certainly didn’t mind it if his wife kissed him in a room full of people and Thora had always been one to take the initiative.

‘And I am not waiting around for that to happen,’ Thráin announced. He turned to Duria, who had been dancing with her father until the little mishap. ‘Sister, would you allow me to finish this dance with you?’

Duria agreed and took his hand.

‘Just wait until we’ve left and then you two can turn as many stomachs as you like,’ Thráin instructed.

‘Turning your stomach, are we?’ Thorin asked. Tonight he seemed more amused than annoyed.

‘No, making a strategic retreat before that happens!’ Cheeky little so-and-so.

She’d allow it for tonight. If she was being honest, she was far too happy to even consider being vexed by anything. She’d get annoyed enough with people in her day-to-day life, but this was a festive day, a day intended to be merry and joyful, for laughing and loving and staying up too late.

‘It seems my partner has abandoned me,’ Kate concluded. ‘It’s a dreadful business.’

‘Rude was more the word I had in mind,’ her husband said. ‘And it seems I suffered the same fate.’

‘Maybe Thoren was on to something,’ she said. ‘He’s convinced Thráin was raised in a warg’s den.’

‘Must have been.’ Thorin nodded sagely. ‘Odd. You’d think we’d have noticed it.’

Kate had an answer to that. ‘He’s a changeling child,’ she replied promptly. ‘Has to be.’
It was testimony to just how much explaining she had done over the past two decades that she didn’t have to explain this one. Ori, bless him, had written down every strange and outlandish thing she had ever said, with translation into more comprehensible terms included. And Kate knew herself well enough to know that she had not made his job much easier by using as little of these strange words and sentences as she could. She did take care, but every now and then things would just slip out and she’d never give it a second thought until she caught sight of a room filled with confused faces.

‘It’s a shameful state of affairs,’ Thorin said. ‘Would you finish this dance with me then, since we have both been forsaken?’

‘It would be my pleasure,’ Kate said, putting her hand in his. ‘Rumour has it that not many have danced with the King under the Mountain.’ Thorin never really liked dancing, though he claimed he liked dancing with her. And he made exceptions for Dís and Duria as well. In time, when Cathy had grown a bit, he would allow her to persuade him too.

‘There aren’t many worth dancing with,’ he pointed out.

Kate was honoured to know herself among their number.

It was a good day, she reflected, almost as if there was some special magic in the air that chased the clouds in their minds away and made them able to laugh as nothing had ever gone wrong in the world at all.

‘We have a good life,’ she said. A little ways away she saw Thráin and Duria dance and not get into an argument for once. Thoren had dragged one of Duria’s friends, a girl called Thulfa, onto the floor.

Thorin nodded. ‘We have been blessed,’ he agreed.

It was exactly like that.

Chapter End Notes

This was meant to go up on Sunday, but I’ve got a pretty busy few days ahead, which includes getting the keys for my flat tomorrow, so you’re getting this a little early. Also, if you’ve missed it, I’m updating The Book again. It’s far more complicated than The Journal ever was, so I may not manage it every Sunday, but hopefully I can substitute it with a Duly Noted chapter whenever that’s the case. Thank you for reading. Reviews would be very much appreciated. And last but not least: merry Christmas everybody!
Into the Past Part 1: Down Memory Lane

Chapter Notes

New year, new multichapter Duly Noted project. It may end up being AU, but I am trying to keep it fitting in with Written Word canon.
Anyone up for time travel?
Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Gosh, that takes me back... or forward. That's the trouble with time travel, you can never remember.”

Doctor Who

Erebor, spring 2950 TA

‘Are you finishing this?’ The request had barely been answered with a shake of the head on Thorin’s part before his wife with a grateful ‘thanks’ had snatched the last piece of toast off his plate. It made a short detour to avoid the eager hands of Thráín and then ended up between Kate’s teeth.

‘We will need to leave soon,’ he pointed out, trying and failing to keep Duria’s little fingers out of his beard. She was at that age where she didn’t really understand what she was doing, but she grabbed everything that came within reach nonetheless.

‘Thora’ll be here in a minute,’ Kate replied. At least, that was what Thorin assumed she was saying; it was difficult to tell for sure with the toast in her mouth.

Thorin had privately questioned the wisdom of selecting Kate’s best friend as a childminder. She was too flighty and not serious enough by half. He himself preferred Bombur’s wife Dara for that kind of responsibility, but unfortunately for him Bombur, Dara and all their offspring had gone on a trip to the Iron Hills to oversee construction work in the mines. Well, Bombur had gone for the construction work and his family happily tagged along, depriving the royal family of a much-needed babysitter. That was how Thora had ended up being chosen. Dís was off to Esgaroth, most of their kith and kin were generally busy and even Thorin agreed that his children had done nothing to warrant the punishment of having to put up with their Uncle Dori for an entire day.

He nodded. Better save himself the argument he knew was coming if he suggested otherwise. Then again, it was no news that Thora’s timekeeping was at least a little erratic.

‘It would be best not to keep Dáin waiting,’ he pointed out instead.

‘Dáin is not exactly punctual himself,’ Kate said, which was not strictly speaking untrue. Thorin just didn’t want to be late himself. ‘Thoren, kindly put that down again,’ she added in the same breath.

Their eldest put Kate’s teacup back on the table with an incredulous look. ‘You didn’t even see!’
he complained.

Thorin himself often wondered at Kate’s ability to manage three children all by herself with only one pair of eyes and hands at her disposal, whereas he turned his back for a second to find that mayhem had broken out in the moment he had looked away.

‘Didn’t you know, I’ve got eyes in the back of my head?’ Kate asked sunnily. ‘And a sixth sense that tells me whenever my morning cup of tea is in immediate danger.’

Thoren frowned suspiciously. ‘You’d need to be a wizard,’ he declared, clearly being well aware that such powers were beyond ordinary mortals.

Kate smirked. ‘Well, that’s for me to know and for you to wonder at, darling. Now, go put your boots on. Aunt Thora isn’t likely to wait for stragglers and it’s a bit cold to go around barefoot.’

‘Hobbits do it all the time,’ said Thráin, obviously proud of himself for remembering.

‘You are not a hobbit,’ Thorin reminded him.

‘And believe me, with the amount of food you lot wolf down, I’ve checked,’ Kate muttered.

It took ten more minutes and two timely interventions on Kate’s part, but then the three of them were taken away by Thora with the promise of a treat from the markets around lunch time (‘nothing focuses a dwarf like the promise of food,’ Kate had observed) and Thorin and Kate were about ready to leave themselves. By then it was really getting late and Dáin would almost certainly arrive in the council chambers before they did. And Dáin did not approve of tardiness unless it was his own.

Fortunately there were shortcuts. Most of them he remembered from his childhood, when he had been running around the Mountain with Frerin at his heels. Some of those had been made unusable thanks to Smaug, but at least others were still able to be of service.

As always, the ghosts of the past were never far off. Memories could jump out at him from behind any given corner or niche. They were not as tangible and frightening as some years ago and they were easier to ignore when there was somebody with him, when he wasn’t left alone to dwell on memories all by himself. But still, it took recalling he had run around here with Frerin to miss him all over again, to feel the loss of all that might have been just as keenly as he had felt it all those years in exile.

But today Kate was with him and the meeting with Dáin was on his mind. He should have needed no more distraction than that. That was why he stopped dead in his tracks when he saw the two ghosts at the end of the corridor.

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**Erebor, spring 2746 TA**

‘We are going to be late,’ Freya, Queen under the Mountain and self-appointed keeper of the King’s agenda, reminded her husband. Thrór was taking the time with his breakfast, documents of all sorts spread out before him. If there was any order or sense to this lay-out, Freya had yet to see it.
‘Nah, Grór’s not exactly going to be early,’ said Thrór, trying to simultaneously braid his beard, eat his sausage and read his correspondence. ‘And neither is Thráin, what with a new-born keeping him up from dusk till dawn.’

Freya found it hard to argue with the latter one; little Thorin hadn’t been feeling well these past few days and had made his illness known in the only way he knew how. But Grór was another matter entirely. He’d never been late if he could help it.

‘Your brother’s always been very punctual,’ Freya disagreed. And he’d always held it as a point of pride that he was, yet another thing he could lord over his kingly elder brother. Freya would never say so – Thrór was far too fond of his brother to tolerate such talk – but she rather thought that his move to the Iron Hills had changed him, and not for the better. There was something stuck-up and snobbish about the Iron Hills folk, as if it was somehow better to have a whole mountain range instead of one Mountain, never mind that Erebor was much richer in gems, metals and minerals than the whole range in the east.

‘Well, yes,’ Thrór agreed. ‘But he knows he can’t get anything done till I get there, and he knows me, so he probably can’t be bothered to show up early. No sense in waiting, is there?’

‘He might show up early just on the small odds that you will be on time.’ In fact, that was probably most likely.

‘Well, then a little waiting won’t kill him.’ Thrór was the most easy-going dwarf Freya had ever met, one of the most good-humoured ones too, come to think of it. Though he was King under the Mountain, he took pleasure in the smallest things. He used to say his wealth was mainly in family and friends and good work before wealth and power. He found the proceedings of court dull and mind-numbing, which was why he could almost never be bothered to show up on time. If not for Freya gently nudging him out of the door, he might not get going at all.

‘True,’ Freya agreed, resolving to use more subtle means to get her husband to hurry a little bit more. ‘But if we don’t leave now, we most certainly won’t be done at lunchtime.’ It was a well-known fact – although only among dwarves; they would never share such knowledge with outsiders – that nothing made a dwarf focus like good food. Thrór was no exception to the rule.

It worked like a charm.

‘No, can’t have that,’ he said. ‘I’ve promised to mind young Thorin for a bit after noon, poor lad. Maybe I’ll take him on a walk,’ he pondered. ‘Nip down to the forges to show him round.’

Freya laughed. ‘He’s too young for an apprenticeship.’

‘Aye, but it won’t hurt him to look.’ All he wanted was to show off his grandson to folk. If Freya thought he had been proud when Thráin was born, he was even more so when little Thorin came along. Here was a child he could indulge as much as he wanted and then he could leave the actual raising to his parents.

It still took them ten more minutes before the sausage had been finished, Thrór had redone his braid without breakfast plaited into it and the correspondence had been cleared away. Well, at least there was no evidence of his meal on his clothes, Freya reflected. It was one thing for the people to know that their king needed sustenance like they did, but it was quite another matter entirely to see the evidence in stains on his garments.

Fortunately they both knew a number of shortcuts that would save them some time. Most of those alleyways were rarely used and therefore poorly lit. And they were in such a hurry that Freya did
not particularly notice the two figures who had come to an abrupt standstill at the sight of them until one of them spoke.

‘Whoah, hold your horses!’ a female voice exclaimed when Thrór, trying to get in a last-minute look at his documents – that he should have read much sooner – almost collided with the other one. Freya had the good sense to grab her husband by the back of his coat before he could have an actual run-in with the other dwarf.

‘Apologies!’ Thrór said cheerfully and he would have been on his merry way if Freya hadn’t had him by the coat. And she did, because now that she really looked, there was something decidedly odd about these two. She would have deemed the dwarf who was staring open-mouthed at them like he could not believe his eyes the strangest, but then she caught sight of his companion.

‘No problem,’ the mannish woman said, smiling apologetically. ‘We weren’t exactly looking where we were going either.’ If she thought there was anything at all strange about this encounter, she hid it well. ‘Well, we’ll be off. As it happens, we’re running a little late.’

It seemed to dawn on Thrór now as well that this was a rather unusual development. He blinked and had another good look at her. ‘I think you are a bit lost,’ he observed. Men did not usually come this deep into the Mountain and if they did, they went no further than the council chambers. They certainly did not come this close to the residential areas.

She frowned, as though she did not entirely understand his remark. ‘Don’t think so. The council chambers are still that way, yes? Unless they’ve moved them overnight and I rather think I would have noticed that.’

 Stranger and stranger, Freya thought. What would a mannish woman have to do in the council chambers? From what she knew of their mannish neighbours, she wouldn’t have thought they let their women anywhere near an important meeting, especially not without one of their own men as an escort.

Thrór was frowning now as well. ‘As far as I remember, they are.’

She smiled. ‘So, not lost then,’ she said. ‘Well, we must be off. Thorin?’

The dwarf she called Thorin was still rooted to the spot. To be honest, his incredulous gaze was making Freya feel a little uncomfortable. She had never been the subject of such scrutiny and could not for the life of her determine what he thought. All she saw was naked shock on his face.

The woman noted it too. ‘Thorin?’ The frown deepened. ‘Are you all right?’

He didn’t look right to Freya.

Whatever Thrór’s thoughts on the woman, his attention too shifted to the open-mouthed fellow. ‘If it’s the healers you need, I can walk you.’ Typical Thrór. Never mind that he had a meeting to go to, as soon as he noticed someone in some sort of trouble, he would make them his first priority. Freya knew that while the folk in trouble always very much appreciated this, his own council and his own brother were not likely to be so understanding.

‘I… I don’t need a healer.’ This Thorin sounded like he had trouble forming words and when Freya looked closer, she saw his hands were shaking.

The frown on the woman’s face deepened a bit more, as though she wasn’t convinced by this any more than Thrór and Freya were. ‘I’d hate to agree, but you do look awfully pale all of a sudden. But if you’re sure you’re fine?’ She phrased it as a question, but Freya tasted the unspoken request
to tell her what was going on behind it.

Thorin tore his gaze away from Freya and turned to her. ‘You can see them too?’ He sounded almost surprised.

‘Yes, I can,’ the woman said, sounding distinctly worried now. ‘Okay, you’re starting to scare me. What the hell is going on?’

Now Freya was sure this lady did not come from anywhere near here. Quite apart from the fact that she’d never seen her before and it was highly irregular for anyone of the race of Men to venture this deep into the Mountain, she had so far counted two unfamiliar words. Nobody in Dale spoke quite like that.

Thorin swallowed. ‘They are the spitting image of my grandparents. If this is a jest of some kind…’ He turned to them again and this time she glimpsed the first hints of anger, ready to be unleashed the moment someone told him they’d done this for a bit of a laugh.

Thrór completely missed it. ‘That’s funny,’ he said and Freya could have cheerfully gagged him for making light of this dwarf’s clear distress. Maker knew what had happened to his grandparents and how long they had been gone. No wonder he reacted as he did when he met their image in the street. Either way, he was unlikely to have much patience for Thrór’s ill-advised remarks. ‘I’ve got a grandson called Thorin, but he’s still a tiny little thing.’

The silence that followed those words was deafening.

Thorin shook his head. ‘It cannot be.’ Whom those words were directed at was anyone’s guess.

The woman with him looked puzzled for a moment. ‘Wait a minute. You don’t mean…? I mean, I know stranger things have happened, but that? That’s the stuff stories are made of.’

Freya had lost track of what was being said, but it seemed Thorin had not. ‘I should think you of all people should know not to discount anything purely on the basis that it is more like a story than reality,’ he said and it would have sounded wry if not for the pure shock that still influenced his voice.

She wrinkled her nose. ‘Touché.’

Thrór’s well of patience had already been exhausted. ‘What do you mean?’ he demanded. ‘What is wrong?’

The woman rallied. ‘Hopefully, nothing,’ she said. ‘In that case we’ll all be on our way, going about our urgent business and we’ll laugh about it over dinner. So, we’ll just…’ She fell silent. ‘Now, maybe my memory’s going, but I could have sworn there was a carving in that wall only yesterday.’

Thrór turned to the piece of wall that had caught her attention. ‘You must be mistaken,’ he said. ‘That wall’s been bare for as long as I can remember and that’s a good deal longer than you’ve been on this earth.’

She went pale. ‘Oh, dear.’ She had gone as pale as her companion.

‘So, something is wrong.’ Thrór stated it as fact rather than question.

‘Yes, quite possibly.’ She hesitated for a moment and then barrelled on. ‘Listen, this may seem like a very stupid question, but would you mind answering it anyway?’
Thrór sounded just as confused as Freya felt. ‘What question would that be?’

‘What year is this?’ Of all the things Freya might have expected, this surely wasn’t it.

‘How can you not know what year it is?’ Thrór’s sense of tact left a lot to be desired when he was at his best. As it was, he would feel remarkably out of his depth.

The woman didn’t seem to mind. ‘Pretend I’m an idiot,’ she suggested.

Thrór did not look like he had to pretend, but he answered all the same. ‘It is spring of the year 2746,’ he replied. ‘Third Age, in case you were wondering.’

She grimaced. ‘I wasn’t, but thanks all the same.’

Freya felt it was about time to intervene before Thrór offered any real insult. Besides, some answers would be nice. She felt as if she was on the verge of discovering something important, something the woman had already realised. She also felt like maybe the answer was already within reach, but she couldn’t quite comprehend it just yet.

‘Maybe you can explain what is wrong,’ she said gently, directing the request to the mannish woman rather than Thorin, who seemed to have lost his tongue all over again.

She bit her lip. ‘Well, when we got out of bed this morning, it was spring of the year 2950,’ she said. ‘Third Age, if you were wondering.’

Oh. The pieces were falling into place now, all of them fitting neatly together in the time it took to blink. Thorin’s shock, his refusal to believe it was real, the confession they looked like his grandparents… ‘Maker be good.’ She turned to Thorin. ‘You are…’ And now her words failed her. It was almost too impossible to grasp, but she also never doubted that it was the truth. Dwarves weren’t made for dissembling and deceit and Thorin’s emotions had been written all across his face for all to see.

He nodded solemnly. ‘Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór.’

Now that she knew, she could see it. He resembled Thráin quite much, but there was something of Theyra in him as well. But he was not the babe she knew. This Thorin was all grown-up.

‘You’re my grandson.’ Thrór too needed some time, and a verbal confirmation.

Thorin nodded again.

‘From the future.’

Freya did a quick count and if it had indeed been 2950 where he had come from, he was about the same age as they were. But he somehow appeared older, as though he had seen much more than they ever had and most of it wasn’t good. Or maybe that was just the shock that made him appear like that.

‘I don’t know how.’ Thorin turned back to his friend. ‘Do you…?’

‘Don’t look at me,’ she said. ‘I don’t know any more about time travel than you do. And for what it’s worth, it doesn’t feel like a wizard’s spell. Not that I’m the biggest authority on that matter, but it doesn’t feel the same. If it had been his work and these things would more or less work the same, we couldn’t have failed to notice it.’
In this case, Thrór’s mouth kept pace with Freya’s thoughts. ‘Who are you?’ he asked. ‘I can accept that Thorin is my grandson from the future, but that does not explain you.’

She realised she had been amiss. ‘Sorry, should have thought of that. I’m Kate. Short for Catherine. I probably should have introduced myself earlier, but it’s been something of a morning.’

Thrór let out a bark of laughter. There was little humour in it, though. The situation was too strange for that.

‘Strange for a woman of your people to know Erebor so well, though.’ Thrór was still trying to work it all out. So was Freya, albeit more silently. Of course, she did not get far. ‘Rather unusual really. How come?’

Kate grimaced. ‘You couldn’t have started off with something a little easier, could you? I understand you have questions, but could we at least have a little time to gather our thoughts before we jump into the particulars of my life’s story?’

Freya was about to agree. No matter how many questions they had, Thorin and Kate must have just about as many, if not more. And theirs had been the greater shock. At least Freya could rest assured in the knowledge that this was still the Mountain she knew. These two were not so blessed. Everything they knew must have been turned on its head in the time it took to blink. And if she was still reeling, then so must they.

Thorin however was quicker than she was. He wrapped an arm around Kate’s waist and looked them right in the eye. ‘Kate is my wife.’

Kate knew that it would have been a good idea to stay in bed this morning. Of course, this insight was little use after disaster had already struck. Can’t we catch a bloody break? And there was no time to recover, no time to agree on any sort of strategy. It was happening, it was happening right now and they had to make it up as they went along. And all the while she had to fight down the panic that was gripping her by the throat so tightly she could barely breathe. It was happening all over again. She’d been stolen away from all she knew a second time and there was nothing she could do about it. She felt cold and thought that maybe she was going to vomit. I can’t have a breakdown now!

Thorin was barely holding it together and it had always been her job to stand in and deal with the matter in hand until he had rallied himself and was able to re-join the game. But she had been caught on the back foot and the sensation of flashback was stronger than she could fight for long. It had been a long time since she had felt this powerless, this lost. And while she had been taken from her own world once, time travel was a new one for her as well. It was a discovery she really could have done without.

‘Your wife?’ The incredulity in Thrór’s voice – the actual Thrór, in the flesh – was far from flattering. ‘Beg pardon, but I think I just heard you say she was your wife?’

She could feel Thorin’s tension almost crawling through the fabric of her dress, seeping through her skin and into her bloodstream, where it added to her own. By now she was used to having to defend her marital status, and so was Thorin. But this was different. These were his grandparents and their opinion of him and his actions mattered.

He stood his ground. ‘You would have heard correctly.’
Oh, for heaven’s sake! ‘Do we have to do this now?’ she asked. It only could go wrong. Thorin could snap at any moment and Kate could practically feel herself unevolving on the spot. And the last time she’d been magically abducted, she’d had a very embarrassing breakdown in front of people she’d never have wanted to see that. ‘Or can we agree, at least for the moment, that this is a very long and complicated story which I, for one, don’t want to recount in the middle of a bloody street.’

Bloody hell, her hands were shaking now as well. The panic only increased as the situation started to sink in. This didn’t feel like Gandalf’s work, so who had done this to them? What reason could they possibly have? Were they in danger? What would happen in their time? What would happen to her children? Would they ever see any of their loved ones again? She had to consciously stop herself from going down that path. If she travelled further down it, there was no telling if she ever found her way back again. And she really couldn’t afford to lose it here.

Fortunately it seemed that every little thing she’d ever heard about Freya was true. ‘It can wait,’ the present Queen under the Mountain decided. ‘What do you need?’

A one-way ticket back to the thirtieth century of the Third Age would be lovely, thanks.

To her surprise Thorin answered. ‘I would like a place where I can speak with my wife in private,’ he said. He was doing that it again, the oddly formal way of communicating he would use when he was very far out of his comfort zone, even when he was among family. One had to know him well to recognise it for what it was, but Kate had known him for the better part of a decade and she knew him well. ‘And a cup of tea would be much appreciated as well.’ For all who didn’t know him, he was holding himself together admirably, but Kate knew he craved the privacy and a place to regroup as much, if not more, than she did.

‘We have a meeting to attend,’ Freya said, not so subtly nudging her husband in the ribs when he was about to protest. ‘And our rooms are not far away. You are welcome to make use of them until our return.’

Kate nodded. ‘Thank you.’

Freya took them there, not saying a word while she did that. Thrór, with some grumbling, had gone on ahead. No matter what crisis happened along, the kingdom wouldn’t stop going on and a kingdom this large needed running. Kate knew that from experience. And all things considered, it was best not to leave the council to their own devices. At least, that was what it was like in her time. Nothing she knew about then could be in any way assumed for now.

‘Make yourselves at home,’ Freya said, not unkindly, when she let them in. ‘We’ll be a while.’

‘Thank you,’ Kate said again. Freya must have all sorts of questions, but she hadn’t asked a single one, quite possibly out of sympathy for their situation.

‘Catch your breaths for now,’ she counselled. ‘We will sort this thing out.’

She was gone before Kate felt compelled to thank her yet again.

They stood there for some time in silence. Kate suspected they both needed the time to catch their breaths, to let it sink in that this was happening to them and to come to terms with it as best they could.

It was not an easy task.

At least when she had been taken to Middle Earth she had known where she was and more or less
what she was doing there. She’d also known the way back. Just because Gandalf wasn’t cooperating then didn’t mean she was unaware that he could put her back just as swiftly as he had taken her.

She had no such answers now. There was not even the certainty that there even was a way back. *Slow down, Andrews,* she snapped at herself when the tides of panic rose again. *You don’t know that there isn’t.*

Thorin uncharacteristically had sunk down onto the couch, his entire posture radiating despair and shock. If this was bad for Kate, it must be so much worse for him. These were the people he loved and the people he had lost. Those wounds had never fully healed.

‘Gandalf might know how to get us back,’ she offered, avoiding the minefield of his pain and her fears in favour of jumping straight to a plan of action. ‘If we can find him…’

Thorin managed a nod. ‘Aye, he might.’ She could see him attempt to pull himself together and fail miserably. ‘How?’ he asked, and it was clear that he didn’t inquire how to locate the wizard.

He didn’t expect her to know the answer to that, she thought. She could not possibly know. But the need to know was so strong, the question needed asking. If Thorin hadn’t beaten her to it, Kate might have asked it herself.

‘And why?’ she added. Was there a purpose to this? Someone must have done this to them. One did not walk from one century into the next – or the previous – by accident. Even in a world with magic, it didn’t work like that. *And if I’d stepped into a TARDIS, I would have noticed that,* she thought wryly. *And at least then I would know how to get back home.*

Thorin stood up, too restless to sit down any longer. ‘They will have questions,’ he said.

‘Questions we can’t answer.’ Kate would not claim to be an expert on time travel. Most of her knowledge on the subject came straight from *Doctor Who.* True enough, those rules concerning time travel had made a bit of sense, in a science fiction sort of way. And if time travel were actually real. It was a nasty shock to find that it was.

Thorin swivelled around, looking her straight in the eyes. ‘What do you mean?’

Kate hated that. She hated her own words even more. ‘We can’t tell them about the future. We could end up rewriting the whole thing.’ She grimaced. ‘Or unwriting it. For all I know we could even end up blowing a hole in the universe or something.’

Not that the time travel rules of *Doctor Who* were the gospel, but they were all she had right now. She decided that it was better than nothing.

‘We don’t know what we’re doing, Thorin,’ she pleaded. He was going to fight her on this; the look in his eyes was all she needed to see to know this for a fact.

She was proven right. ‘They needn’t die.’ The fight was back in him. ‘None of them.’ The unspoken accusation that she would be the one responsible for their deaths if she stood in his way hurt.

‘But they did die,’ she said. ‘We know that they did. For us, this is history.’ Her hands had started to shake and her vision was already blurring. It was bad enough that they were suddenly stuck in the past and that they did not know how to get back. The little treacherous voice whispering in her head wasn’t helping. *He would rather unwrite everything you ever were to him, your whole life,*
your children, if it brought back the ones he’d lost than keep you. He would leave. You know he would. In her current mental state Kate did not have the ammunition to fight back.

Thorin must have been oblivious to her distress to respond the way he did. ‘They are not. You have seen them. They are as alive as you and I.’

The fear clenched its cold fingers around her heart and squeezed. ‘You can’t rewrite your own personal timeline,’ she countered, throwing back the first thing she could remember from hours of watching the Doctor.

Thorin’s eyes told her this was bullshit. ‘How is what you did any different?’ he demanded. ‘You knew what would happen and you changed it because it did not suit you.’

‘That was different,’ she argued. It had been, but in the heat of the moment it was hard to adequately explain it to him.

‘How?’ he demanded.

‘It wasn’t my own personal timeline for starters.’ She had raised her voice.

How had it come to this? It had been years since they had a fight of this magnitude. They quarrelled from time to time, sure enough, but it had not been like this since the time after they’d defeated Smaug and they had not spoken for two weeks. Their marriage had been good just this morning, not a cloud of trouble on their marital horizon. And only an hour or so later they were falling apart.

‘Nor is this.’

Didn’t he see? The thought was enough to give her pause.

“Yes, it is.’ She clenched her hands into fists and forced herself to focus. ‘Think on it. If you change everything now, Gandalf would never have needed an advisor. We would never have met. We would not have married, our children would not have been born and all of the circumstances that led us here won’t have happened either. You would never be able to come here and tell them what happened in that future, because by then that future had never happened and you wouldn’t be able to remember it. It’s a paradox, Thorin. It can’t exist.’ How she was able to make such a strong argument, she did not know. She was barely hanging on to what was left of her composure and her sanity by this point.

But something in her words had hit a chord somewhere. It stopped Thorin dead in his tracks. She did not even dare to hope that the thought of unwriting their marriage had made a difference.

It did to her. It made all the difference in the world. Years ago, when she had first arrived in this world, she would have given her right arm for the chance to erase all memory of her trip to another world so she could carry on living her life as she had expected. But now, almost ten years later, the thought was abhorrent. Her life was never perfect, but she had chosen this. And it was good. Just the mere idea of never seeing her children again, of them never having even existed, made her feel like she was drowning. And then there was Thorin, whom she loved more deeply and fiercely than she had believed herself capable of. Deep down she knew she would never have found a love like this in England. Nor would she want to. This was her life now and despite her many regrets, she wanted it.

And Thorin was ready to throw it all away for the chance of changing history.

It couldn’t not hurt.
Her hands were shaking uncontrollably and she thought she was maybe going to be sick. Her legs gave out underneath her and she sank to the ground, sobs shaking her shoulders. A pretty picture she would make now, she suspected, but all her self-control was gone and she couldn’t stop herself no matter how hard she tried.

A minute passed or maybe it was an eternity. Kate couldn’t tell. But suddenly Thorin was there, on his knees before her, bringing him level with her. And then his arms went around her and he held her.

His tears mixed with hers.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve been writing bits and pieces for this over the past few months, never really intending to post it. But I had about two and a half chapter all written and I rather like it, so here we are.

Your feedback on this would be much appreciated, because this is uncharted territory for me and I’d like to know what you think. So, please review.

Thank you for reading and until the next time!
“It’s frightening. Unexpected. Frankly, a total utter splattering mess on the carpet. But I am certain, one hundred per cent certain, that we can work this out. Trust me.”

Doctor Who

Thrór had trouble focusing on court business even on his best days. The proceedings bored him to tears and he found himself easily distracted. It was even worse today. Grór of course could not fail to take note of this and rewarded his elder brother’s inattentiveness with the longsuffering looks and sighs that all younger siblings mastered the moment they left the womb.

If this had been a normal day, that would have vexed Thrór. This was not a normal day.

Replaying past events and analysing them to death was something he usually left to his only son, who had made brooding into a form of art and had achieved a mastery in it Thrór could never hope to match. That was why he never bothered with trying. Overthinking only overcomplicated matters and that was not like him at all.

But this was different.

The image of Thorin and his mannish wife – and that in itself was a mystery begging to be solved – had seared into his brain. Just last night he’d visited Thráin and Theyra and he had held the infant Thorin for a good long while. The difference between the careless baby and the careworn grown-up Thorin would not leave him alone.

Freya, as ever, had more aptitude for the business of court and took care to distract those in attendance from the fact that Thrór was rather absent-minded for most of the meeting. Maker bless her. She’d always had a rare talent to take the strangest things in her stride and carry on with what needed doing. Nobody who didn’t know would ever suspect they had just met their grandson from the future on their way here.

All the same he was glad when the meeting was over – he couldn’t really tell what it had been about despite burying his head in the documents concerning the topic before – and they could leave.

‘How did they get here?’ he wondered when everyone had gone and he was walking back to their rooms with Freya. He did not expect an answer, but it was a good question.

Freya shrugged. ‘I don’t think they know.’

That was as good as an undisputed fact. Unless Thorin and his wife had both taken lessons in deceit from the elves, their shock had been very real.
‘There must be a reason, surely,’ Freya pondered when an answer from Thrór was not forthcoming.

‘I would think they don’t know the answer to that either,’ Thrór remarked wryly. There were altogether too many questions and not nearly enough answers to satisfy him.

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

Their unexpected visitors were on the couch when they entered, but both rose when they noticed them. It didn’t take a very perceptive dwarf to see that they had both wept.

‘Don’t get up on my account,’ Thrór told them, hoping to put them somewhat at ease.

Kate managed a smile. It didn’t reach her eyes, but it seemed sincere. She seemed better in control of herself than her husband, though to be fair to Thorin, the shock must have been greater for him than for her. ‘Thank you,’ she said. She sat back down.

Thorin needed a second more to follow her example. He’d grown tall, this grandson of his. And by the way he carried himself Thrór could tell that he had seen battle. Other than that, Thorin gave very little away about himself and by now Thrór’s curiosity had reached whole new heights.

‘Tea,’ Freya decreed and went off to the kitchen to make it, leaving the remaining three people in awkward silence.

Thrór loved to chat – folk were forever telling him it was a trial just to shut him up – but even he could think of nothing to say today. He struggled for a while, but then gave up the fight. The truth was that he did not know either of them well enough to have a good conversation with them and this seemed neither the time nor place for small talk.

So instead he took the time to take stock of the woman Thorin had been quick to proclaim his wife. It was quite probably the truth, but it was a strange truth. Thrór never thought such a union was possible, but the living and breathing proof was sitting in front of him.

Whatever the attraction would have been, it could not have been physical. The woman was of a height with Thorin, which made her small for her people, and she seemed smaller still because she was so frail. Still, the scar on her face looked like a battle-scar, so maybe her appearance was deceptive. Even so, a mannish woman fighting was rarer than mithril these days.

His gaze must have lingered, because she touched the scar and grimaced. ‘A whip,’ she explained. ‘We got on the wrong side of the goblins.’

Not battle then. ‘A nasty business,’ he agreed. They were making passage through the Misty Mountains all but impossible these days and it irritated him that two hundred years had not seen a change in this.

Kate nodded. ‘It was. But at least we got out of there alive.’

With that, the attempts at conversation stranded again and the silence made a return. Usually Freya was there to smooth over any bump in the road, but she was making tea.

Eventually she returned with the promised beverage. Thrór did not like it as much as his wife, but he drank when he needed to. Today seemed like such an occasion.

‘Forgive me for asking, but how did you get here?’ Freya asked when they had all sat down.

Kate took it upon herself to answer. ‘I honestly don’t know,’ she replied. ‘As far as I could tell, it
was just an ordinary day. We got up, had breakfast and then left. We were headed to the council chambers for a meeting with Dáin. Grór’s grandson,’ she clarified when she caught the two uncomprehending stares. ‘He’s probably not born yet. Anyway, we were running a little late, so we kept up the pace, weren’t really paying much attention to our surroundings. Well, until we bumped into you, that is.’

He suspected he would get an answer of that kind. They hadn’t known what hit them any more than Thrór and Freya did.

‘You said that it didn’t feel like a wizard’s spell,’ Freya recounted thoughtfully.

Kate nodded. ‘That’s right. Doesn’t have to mean that it isn’t one, though.’

Thrór remembered she had said something along those lines, which begged another question. ‘How would you know what a wizard’s spell feels like?’

The woman took a deep breath, exchanged a glance with Thorin and then said: ‘I have been on the receiving end of one. That was nothing like it.’ Then, realising that this answer was not going to cut it, she continued: ‘I can’t say too much about it, because I don’t want to run any risk of accidentally rewriting my own life. What I can say is, I wasn’t born in this world. There was a mission of some kind that Gandalf decided could use my help and to that end he took me from my own world and dropped me in this one. And the spell he used to do that was not the kind anybody could fail to miss if it happened to them.’ She grimaced. ‘That was like being inside a hurricane for a little while.’

He couldn’t decide what to wonder about first: that she could speak so calmly about being taken by magic from a world that was not this one, or marvel about the apparent fact that she had been born in said world.

‘I know, it sounds insane,’ she pre-empted the remark he might have made.

‘But it is true.’ Thorin hadn’t spoken much, but he made it clear that it was something he would not allow being called into question. His right arm had snaked protectively around Kate’s waist while he said it. ‘And irrelevant for this conversation. Her origins have nothing to do with our current predicament.’

Freya seemed to think it would be wiser not to pursue this point for the time being. ‘Perhaps not,’ she allowed.

‘But maybe Gandalf does have the answer to this riddle.’ Kate’s mind seemed to run along the same lines. ‘What happened to us was quite probably magical in nature, so if there’s anyone out there who knows how this happened, it’s going to be him.’

That was a course of action that sounded sensible enough to Thrór. He wasn’t one for theorising about what happened, but actually doing something was right up his street. ‘I’ll send someone to find the wizard then.’ And once he was found, he could figure out what had gone wrong and send these two back to where they came from.

And perhaps he could solve another mystery or two while he was at it.
It was torture to even be here. Thorin Oakenshield had seen a good deal of suffering in his lifetime, but never in his worst nightmares had he imagined a day like this. At first he had thought he had strayed into a dream between breakfast and reaching the council chambers, and it would have been preferable to the reality. The fact that it was all too real opened up a whole new can of worms.

It was real and he couldn’t not think of all the possibilities. It was like a fever ran through his blood, his thoughts jumping from one place to the next without stopping. He knew telling them of the dragon could not prevent Smaug’s coming, but they would be prepared. The monster might be slain before it ever conquered Erebor. At the very least they could make sure people were out, so his people did not have to mourn so many. He could warn his grandfather about the madness, so he could arm himself against it, as Thorin had done. So much grief could be undone, so many hearts need never be broken.

And Kate ought to realise this like no other. She had read her book, decided she did not like it much and set out to change it. And here he was, suggesting the same thing and she denied him. The rage had been quick to surface and he had spoken words to her he was ashamed to admit now that they had ever crossed his lips.

With the benefits of a few hours of hindsight he could see he had not acted rationally. It was as though a madness had been upon him and only his wife’s all too sensible words had dragged him back from the edge. If you change everything now, Gandalf would never have needed an advisor. We would never have met. We would not have married, our children would not have been born and all of the circumstances that led us here won’t have happened either. You would never be able to come here and tell them what happened in that future, because by then that future had never happened and you wouldn’t be able to remember it. It’s a paradox, Thorin. It can’t exist.

Those words had hit home where her earlier reasoning had failed to land. Apart from the fact that what he wanted was not possible, he would rewrite everything, including but not limited to his own wife and his own children. It’d be a trade, the ones he loved for the ones he’d lost. And he was not content to have only one or the other. Call it the greed the dwarves were famous for, but he wanted all.

And now he could see that he had hurt Kate. Because when he so neatly rearranged his own life, he would irrevocably change hers. He would push her out, undo everything they had ever been to one another. And Thorin was no stranger to rejection. He knew what his words must have sounded like to her.

It was rare that he would make mistakes like this. They knew each other so well now. They were very similar in many ways, which meant that if Thorin could recognise that a subject was uncomfortable for him, it was very likely for Kate as well. She tended to say they communicated on the same wavelength. He still wasn’t entirely sure what she meant by that, but that did not mean she was wrong.

Night had fallen and his grandparents had retired to their own bedroom. Kate and Thorin had been given the guest bedroom for the time being and they were told to make themselves at home. It felt like a cruel sort of joke, or it would have, if he had believed them capable of it.

He’d been sitting in front of the dying fire for some time, thinking. Kate had already gone to bed, though he doubted she would sleep. And he could not remain here all night. No matter how hard he found it, he had to apologise. He had been in the wrong and he had hurt her. It had been unintentional, but that didn’t mean anything.

True to expectations he found his wife in bed, but awake. Kate had curled up under the covers, lying far too still. That she did not acknowledge his entrance meant that she was either too deep in
thought to notice him or she was so hurt that she couldn’t bear to look at him. He hoped for the first, but feared the latter. It had been a long time since they had gone so wrong.

‘Kate.’ He spoke her name as soft as he could.

She got up in one fluent motion. By the little light they had he could see that she had wept. Even now she wrapped her arms around her legs, bringing them up close to her chest. He recognised this as the pose she took up when she felt vulnerable and braced herself for the worst. ‘Thorin.’ But her voice was steady.

‘I apologise.’ He would never be good at this, but he had to. Dwarves as a race were not good at apologising, mainly because they had very little to apologise for, but Thorin was honour bound to make one now. And it was not just honour that compelled him to do so. Some years ago he had decided that his marriage was a cause worth fighting for. And not all fights required swords and axes.

She looked up at him, mouth half open in surprise. ‘Oh.’ He didn’t think she was even aware she had made a sound.

He dared to come closer and sit on the edge of the bed, so that he was level with her instead of towering over her. Kate did not shy away from him, which was a hopeful sign. ‘I hurt you and I am sorry.’

It was rarer still to repeat the apology. With others he would not have done this, but with Kate he could be certain she would not fling it back in his face. He may have all but destroyed her faith in him, but his in her was still unshaken, strong as the foundations of the Mountain. It was important that she knew this.

She nodded. ‘I know.’ She attempted a smile, but it would not fully appear.

Encouraged by this, he reached out and took one of her hands. ‘I did not think as I ought to have.’ Even to her he dared not to utter the word madness. It was something he still dreaded, but it had been a good long while since he had last thought it would ever be visited upon him. Today he had come closer than he would ever like to be again.

Kate did not try to tell him he hadn’t. It would have been a falsehood.

‘You were right,’ he continued. The truth of that felt like a dagger to the heart. He’d learned to live with his losses. They had been his constant companions for so many years, but as time went on, he found the wounds scabbed over and healed. They had left scars on his heart to be sure, but he had learned to cope. And it had done him good to have retaken Erebor. It had put some ghosts to rest. His wife and children had done much of the rest. He had at long last moved on.

Or so he thought.

This day had made all the pain resurface as strong as it had ever been. And all the while a little voice in the back of his head had whispered what if. What if he told them? He could stop all the suffering before it even began. Ten years ago he might have taken that opportunity, would have grabbed it with both hands. After all, what did he have to lose? But he was here now, and the price would be one he was unwilling to pay. It was too high.

‘I don’t want to be.’ The words were spoken softly and he believed she meant them, that it brought her no joy to dash his hopes, which made his conduct of this morning even worse. She hadn’t meant to harm him, but his intent had been the opposite. Mahal, what have I done?
I know.’ There was still distance between them. Kate wouldn’t do it on purpose, but trust was not restored in a minute. And it would not make its return until he had spoken certain words. ‘I will not tell them. I swear to it.’ He looked her in the eyes so she knew he was being truthful. ‘I would not exchange you for them. That price is too high to pay.’ I choose you over them. Those words however did not cross his lips, but he liked to think she could hear them all the same. Much as she claimed she was no mind reader, she often demonstrated remarkable skill in it, at least where he was concerned.

“You shouldn’t have to.’ She rubbed her hand over her forehead. ‘This shouldn’t have happened. And now it’s all screwed to hell.’ She must have done some thinking of her own.

But she was right. Nothing about this was right or even made sense. And he full well knew that rational thought had only made a reappearance when his grandparents were off to bed. Thorin knew better than to trust himself when he would see them again tomorrow and he would have to fight the same battle he fought – and lost so miserably – today.

Am I being punished? Is the Maker testing me? If so, it was a very cruel test and one that he was certain he had already failed.

‘But we are here,’ he said softly. ‘And there is a choice to be made.’

She nodded. ‘And ultimately, I can’t make it for you.’ For one who forever insisted she didn’t need help fighting her battles, she sounded frustrated when she could not aid him in his.

‘But you can,’ he said, not understanding. He knew what he had done this morning, but he could hope and pray for the strength not to repeat that error.

She laughed, but there was no mirth in it. ‘Oh, I really can’t. Because it’s not my right to do that, is it? These people are not my family. I’ve only met them today.’ She shook her head. ‘And if I did, you would resent me for it. And you’d be right to.’

Kate knew him entirely too well.

And so it came to him. Thorin could feel the weight of responsibility land and settle on his shoulders, an invisible weight that threatened to crush him. He’d carried many burdens over the years, but none had felt quite so heavy as this one. Of course he knew the choices he would have to make, but it felt as if, in making them, he was condoning the suffering of his people.

Kate must have followed his line of thought. ‘You aren’t making it happen,’ she said. ‘That is on Smaug, not you.’

He looked at her. ‘Is it?’

‘Yes, it is.’ There was a spark in her eyes that had been absent thus far. ‘Smaug chose to attack. You didn’t ask him to invade.’ She was silent for a moment. ‘We were never meant to be here. It’s wrong and cruel and messed up. We need to find Gandalf and get the hell out of this place before we do something stupid and reckless that we can’t undo.’

Thorin rather thought that if anybody was going to do something reckless, it would be him. Kate would not. And Thorin could only pray he had the strength to do the same. Take us away, he begged. Let us return home and end this!

If the Maker heard him at all, he at the very least ignored Thorin’s plea.

‘Gandalf will be found,’ he said. It would take time, because the grey wizard was a wanderer, hard
to get hold of. They could be here for months, perhaps even years if he proved to be elusive. The very thought chilled him to the bone.

‘And so we set the future in stone,’ Kate whispered. There was a note of sadness in her voice.

This he did not understand. ‘How do you mean?’

She elaborated: ‘Gandalf will see me. The moment he does, he won’t be able to pick anyone else for the job as advisor on your quest. He’s already seen me, knows where I’ll end up. It doesn’t matter how ill-fitted to the job he may think me, he literally won’t have a choice. In fact, you might argue that I was the one who made it all happen.’

Thorin thought about it. It was enough to give anyone a headache. But he saw what she meant. And whereas he had attempted to change the future, Kate’s actions would ensure it.

‘Then he must have known all the while,’ he said. ‘And yet he never told you.’ What was more, the wizard had lied about Kate’s purpose.

Kate had an answer to that. ‘He could have, but I wouldn’t have believed him.’ She laughed another humourless laugh. ‘And to think that I always blamed him for what he did to me. And now it turns out, none of it was his fault anyway. I actually owe him an apology.’

The implications of this were slow to sink in, but they did. ‘Yet you have no choice either.’ They hadn’t asked to be here. And if they ever wanted to return to their own time, to their friends and family, then Gandalf was by far their best option.

‘I never said I had.’ She looked at him. ‘You’d think it’d end sometime, all the struggles and the fighting. And every single time we get comfortable, something happens and it feels like we’re back to square one.’

Thorin strongly suspected she meant their marriage rather than their current obvious predicament.

She wasn’t done yet. ‘And you’d think that by now I should have known better than to expect an uncomplicated and they lived happily ever after ending, but no, I keep making the same bloody mistake over and over again.’

There were no easy answers. There weren’t any answers at all. And nothing Thorin could say could ease either of their hurts. So he lay down next to her and held her, drawing as much comfort from the embrace as it in turn offered to her. They would have to see this through some way.

But he did not know how.

She must have fallen asleep at some point, Kate reckoned, because when she opened her eyes, the fire in the hearth was only barely smouldering. The room was dark. It would be, what with being situated so deep under the Mountain. After several years she had become used to places without windows, so long as she did not have to live in one. Waking up in utter darkness never failed to remind her of Mirkwood and made her feel almost claustrophobic.

The moment she woke she knew that sleep would elude her for the night. She was too tired still for it to be morning yet, even if she had no way to verify this. She might as well get up and leave
Thorin to sleep for as long as he could. This place and its people were taking their toll on him and the longer he could flee into the ignorance of sleep, the better it would be.

Kate replayed the last day in her head. Thorin had apologised for his behaviour and she believed him. That did not mean it did not still hurt. The pull of his long-lost relatives was strong, stronger than he had known how to resist. He had admitted that it caused him to lose all the capacity for rational thought for a short while.

Madness.

Neither of them had used the word. They hadn’t needed to.

*He won’t come that close again,* Kate thought. *Not now he knows he needs to be on his guard.*

An irrational part of her whispered to not be so sure. Kate swatted at it like she would at a fly. It wasn’t realistic and as frightening as this all was, she knew Thorin. She knew his strengths and his weaknesses. And his own terror at the idea of losing his mind would enable him to keep a very firm grip on it. And Kate’s own conduct of the previous day was not exactly painting her in a positive light either. *We have both been acting like morons.*

Then again, was it any wonder? She had been shocked to find that travel between worlds was an actual thing that could happen. And now time travel was real too? It was a lot to swallow. It would have been for anyone.

Next to her she could hear Thorin’s breathing, deep and calm, telling her that he was asleep. His arm was still draped over her waist, drawing her close. If this was hell for her, how much worse would it be for him?

*Let us find Gandalf quickly,* she prayed. *Let him know what to do, because I don’t have the foggiest. The mere idea that putting them back where they came from might be beyond his skill was so terrifying it made her tremble. No, you can’t think like that, Andrews. If you start panicking now, there’s no telling where this might end.*

She disentangled herself from Thorin’s embrace, an exercise that took up the better part of five minutes. He always held on tighter when he was unconscious and he felt that she was slipping away. And she didn’t want to wake him in the process. Eventually she managed. Thorin voiced his sleepy protest with an unhappy grunt, but remained asleep.

Hoping to keep it that way, she tip-toed out of the room and into the living room. She only took an extra blanket to wrap around her for warmth. She had been told to make herself at home, but it would be some time before she had rekindled the fire and it would be warm enough not to need it. Besides, if someone came out, they wouldn’t be shocked at her state of undress.

As it turned out, there was no need to rekindle the fire; someone had already done that. Thrór was sitting in the chair before the hearth, staring into the flames.

Kate stopped dead in her tracks. This was still his home and he may not welcome the company. And even if he did, Kate had no idea how to behave around him.

She had heard enough stories about the late – or not so late right now – King under the Mountain. Thorin did not speak of him often, but she knew he had been extremely fond of his grandfather, but was deeply ashamed of the madness that had sunk its claws into him. His death had been one of the losses that had hit him hardest, combating for first place only with the death of his mother.

But there were others who would tell tales. And many of those had not praised Thrór, but rather
had whispered about his sanity and the lack thereof. They called him the king who had caused his people’s suffering, a madman, a blight on their people. Then again, Kate had heard the last said about herself more than once.

But those were the stories. Now that she had seen the real Thrór, she saw that Thorin’s regard was not unfounded. He appeared to be a very generous and jovial kind of dwarf, nothing like the gold-obsessed king he would become. Such a cruel fate, to lose oneself like that. Kate could not picture Thrór in the throes of madness. He seemed so nice.

*But he is,* she realised. *The gold sickness will change him, but that is the affliction. It’s not really him.*

Strange perhaps that she had not thought as in-depth about it as she should have. But then, she had always fought to keep Thorin away from the madness and the madness away from him. And she had succeeded. So no, she had not spent much time imagining just what the gold sickness could have done to her husband.

‘There’s no need to lurk,’ an amused voice told her. ‘I’m not an orc; I won’t bite.’ Thrór had turned around while she had been debating what to do.

‘No one would mistake you for one,’ Kate told him. Truth was, she liked him. It remained to be seen if that feeling was mutual. Lord knew what he made of her. For all she knew he would join the ranks of those who thought she had no place among Durin’s Folk.

‘There’s never any telling what the elven king thinks,’ Thrór countered.

‘Ah, so he’s as much of a joy to be around now as he will be in the future,’ Kate observed. She walked over to the other chair that Thrór was beckoning for her to make good use of and sat down.

‘I’d have been surprised if that had changed,’ Thrór said easily.

‘Well, no surprises on that count,’ Kate remarked wryly. Thorin had told her that while his people had been on more or less friendly terms with the elves before the fall of Erebor, relations were always a little strained. Of course, it had gone from bad to worse after Smaug’s invasion and Thranduil still took delight in vexing them whenever he could.

‘Couldn’t sleep?’ Thrór asked.

‘No more than you could.’ The words were out before she could stop herself. Lack of sleep always bloody did that. She’d think something and before she knew it that thought had been translated into the spoken word. And she hardly knew him long enough to be so informal around him. ‘Sorry, that wasn’t very polite.’

He waved her apology away. ‘No matter. It’s true.’

‘It’s been a strange sort of day,’ she said. That sentence alone was worthy of the title Understatement of the Century. And Kate Andrews had seen a great many things she would have believed impossible before they happened. She would have been happy if the impossibilities were left in the past.

*Which of course, they technically are.*

‘Aye, you can say that.’

‘I just hope there’s a way back,’ she said softly and really, that was supposed to stay in her head as
well. For heaven’s sake, she barely knew Thrór!

If Thrór minded, he did not say. ‘Folk waiting for you?’

It took her half a second to realise that Thrór was not in fact trying to interrogate her, but rather that he was just a little nosy. It was something she had learned was one of Thorin’s vices, though he kept it well hidden. *I suppose I know where he gets it from.*

And she really didn’t mind answering. In fact, it was one of the few things she could tell him. ‘Yes, my children among them. Three of them,’ she told him before he could ask. ‘Two boys and a girl.’

‘The Maker blessed you,’ he observed.

It was a common phrase among dwarves. Kate had heard it used dozens of times, but it was notably unused by those who hated her very existence. They thought her children were abominations, things that should not be suffered to live. Their number was dwindling, not in the least because her nearest and dearest were always quick to shut them up when they came across these fellows.

And now Thrór, who only met her yesterday and who was likely not sure what to make of anything right now, had called them blessings. For a moment she was speechless.

This in turn puzzled him. ‘You doubt that?’

Kate shook her head. ‘I don’t.’ If anything, if there hadn’t been a blessing on her marriage, she doubted she would have conceived at all, never mind on the first try. Not that it had been a try at that stage, but still. ‘But not everyone shares the sentiment.’ When this didn’t seem to prompt a lightbulb moment, she added: ‘A lot of people don’t like the fact that I’m… well, not a dwarf.’ Because in the end it all came down to that basic fact and no matter how hard she tried to fit in, that was something she could never change. ‘Actually, I’m surprised you haven’t commented on it.’

*Blimey, Kate, keep a lid on it, will you?* Her mouth was running away with her. It had always been a weakness and lack of sleep always made it worse.

‘Not my business,’ Thrór said. That rang true. While he was apparently just as curious as Thorin – Thorin always said he just liked to be well-informed – he also didn’t think it his right to judge that which he didn’t have the measure of. And to keep the future on track, she could never fully explain.

*Curse this whole madness to hell,* she thought furiously. Her whole life had turned into a bloody game of mincing her words lest she’d say something that nobody understood. On some level she was almost used to that. But now she had to be extremely careful not to say something that had the potential to derail her own life.

*And at the same time we’re allowing him to fall prey to insanity.* Because she did understand Thorin’s reasoning and it was hard not to feel guilty about it. They could change everything. At the same time they had to make a conscious choice not to. *Can’t somebody else make the hard choices for a change? Why does it always have to be down to us?*

‘If I could tell you, I would,’ she said empathetically.

‘But you can’t,’ Thrór added. He did not necessarily sound happy with that. She had told him before that she could not tell him much, if anything. But that did not mean he did not have a thousand questions all begging to be answered.
‘I honestly don’t know how without changing everything.’ And in telling him that she had more than suggested there would be a great many things he would like to change if he knew how. From their very presence here and their behaviour he must have surmised that the future was not a particularly good place.

They ran out of words after that. Kate could normally easily outtalk an elf and from Thorin’s stories she knew that Thrór was commonly known as something of a chatterbox as well. And now neither of them had the words.

It was even more frustrating because Kate was sure that without all the secrets standing between them, they would probably really have gotten along.

Minutes turned into hours of silence until eventually Thorin and Freya woke up and saved them. Freya, bless her, had an uncanny ability to diffuse every kind of tension by focusing on what they could talk about rather than what they couldn’t. She talked easily about the weather and the relations with the people of Dale and the state of the roads. They were safe topics and Kate was eager to join in. Thrór found his tongue again as well. Only Thorin was expectedly taciturn. Conversation on the whole during breakfast was actually not as strained as she had expected.

She should have known everything was going too smoothly. It could never last.

Kate was about to offer Freya her help in clearing the table when there was a knock on the door. Thrór had told them to enter before Thorin and Kate had gotten a chance to disappear out of sight.

Another dwarf entered the room. He was about Thorin’s height and had the same colouring, but she didn’t know him.

But it appeared Thorin did. He was sitting next to her and when the door opened she could feel him freeze.

‘Ah, Thráin. Good morning,’ Thrór said, blissfully unaware of the importance of the moment.

Realisation washed over her.

*Oh, shit.*

Chapter End Notes

Next time on Into the Past: Thráin puts in an appearance.

There will be another Duly Noted chapter in Thursday, to celebrate the five year anniversary of this series, so do come and take a look. That won’t be another chapter for this project, mind, but something a little bit celebratory.

Thank you very much for reading. Your feedback/reviews as always would be very, very welcome.
In hindsight Kate could pinpoint the exact moment this whole thing had gotten horribly out of hand. They were all seated around the dinner table, plates already cleared away and the children released to go and play in the garden. Jacko and Jane were staying and Laura had dragged her very nice fiancé in to say hello. It was one of those quiet moments when there was just contentment with good company and light conversation. There were far too few moments like that in Kate’s day-to-day life, so she treasured them when they happened.

And then Laura ruined it.

She’d been chatting about how she met her very soon-to-be husband and what they had done on their first dates when she turned to Kate. ‘And how about you?’

Kate frowned. ‘How about me what?’

‘Dates,’ Laura clarified. ‘What does one do in Erebor when one goes on a date?’

She had to think about that, because truth be told, Thorin and she weren’t much for romantic outings. They hardly ever had time for them between running the kingdom and raising their children. And before they married they had been on a quest. But even if they’d had the time, they would have gone the unconventional way, because neither of them was the textbook example of romantic. That wasn’t to say that they lacked quality time together. They just didn’t do it like most
other people did.

Fortunately Thora and Ori had been good at the whole dating game. They still used words like wooing and courting, which sounded more romantic than dating in Kate’s opinion anyway.

‘Much the same things that are done here, actually,’ she replied, feeling slightly relieved that she had an answer to give. ‘Not the whole seeing a film thing, but going out for walks and dinner and a night at the theatre, that’s all part of it as well.’

But Laura had known her for a long time. And that scrutinising look had never predicted anything good. ‘You haven’t done it, have you?’

Kate decided that pretending ignorance was the best way to go for now. ‘Done what?’

‘You two have never been on a proper date, have you?’ Kate imagined this was the way a cat might look at a helpless little bird.

Well, that was that strategy discarded. ‘It’s not really our sort of thing,’ she said. ‘So please don’t go meddling.’

Jane frowned. ‘You liked going on dates with Marc, as I recall.’ There was a hint of something in her voice. Kate couldn’t put her finger on it, but she didn’t like it. She wasn’t missing out on something vital. And they should not go thinking that she did.

She grimaced. ‘Marc is hardly a good example of who you should have dates with,’ she reminded her. The lying little weasel had romanced her till he was almost blue in the face. It was just a shame that he hadn’t been sincere. He was the reason she had started distrusting romantic gestures in the first place. ‘Besides, I don’t need dates.’ They were meant to get to know a person and she knew Thorin inside out.

Her friends were not listening. ‘You can’t expect us to hear that and not do something about it,’ Jacko declared, the little traitor.

Kate had protested until she was running out of air, but apparently her love life was – once again – at the centre of everyone’s attention. In Erebor she had grown used to the constant low-level scrutiny. She was the Queen under the Mountain after all and she was not a dwarf. Her marriage was bound to attract attention. But at least here she had hoped for a little less interference, especially the active kind.

That this hope was quite in vain became apparent when two days after that conversation Laura announced that Thorin and she would be spending the weekend away so that they could do couple stuff.

‘I can’t believe her,’ Kate muttered when she went over the arrangements her friend had made in the privacy of their bedroom. ‘We came here to see them all and now they send us off to…’ She checked the piece of paper in front of her. ‘Oxford.’ She couldn’t stop an eyeroll. ‘I’m suspecting ulterior motives.’

Thorin, who had been remarkably quiet up till then, at last asked a question. ‘How so?’

‘Professor Tolkien, the one who wrote The Hobbit, lived and worked there,’ she replied. If she remembered correctly, a lot of his work was also written there. And Laura had either known this or had done a quick search on Google to figure out where best to send her. *Really, what’s gotten into her?*
It was hard to tell what Thorin was thinking. Kate hardly knew what to think herself. But if she didn’t appreciate all this meddling, he was even less likely to like it.

‘Listen, we don’t have to go,’ she said. ‘We’ll just tell Laura and George they should go and we’ll just do whatever we like. It’s not as if either of us have ever been romantics in the traditional sense of the word.’ She looked over the paper again. ‘I don’t even know how she got half of this organised. Booking a hotel in the middle of the summer is practically impossible. There’s dinner reservations, tickets for a Shakespeare play… Blimey.’

‘Do you want to go?’ Thorin asked.

If Kate was really honest, she wouldn’t mind going. She loved to see her family again, but the house was so crowded all the time that she had begun to miss the silence, the chance to retreat behind closed doors and just talk with her husband. The irony was that she had seen more of him this past week than she normally would, but at the same time they’d interacted less. And she hated the distance between them, even more so because she was well aware that this world was still putting him very much on edge. So yes, it would be nice to have it be just the two of them for a day or two.

But it wasn’t about what she wanted. Thorin had already made so many allowances for her that she couldn’t ask it just for herself. That would be selfish and that would totally defeat the purpose of this whole romantic weekend away. This at least should be his choice as much as hers.

‘Do you want to go?’ she countered.

He considered it. She was glad he took the time, because it meant he was really properly thinking about it, weighing the pros and cons. She could tell that it was his aversion for this world and more new things pitted against the need to have some privacy. It was just a question of which would win.

The latter did. ‘You came here to see your family,’ he said. ‘Would you not mind leaving them?’

_How are we both still so bloody awkward about this? What’s stopping us from saying that this is what we want?_ It frustrated her at times.

But at least she knew his mind now. And she could act accordingly. ‘They’ll manage without us for a few days,’ she decided. ‘And I’d quite like to have my husband all to myself for a change. So if he wouldn’t mind accompanying me to Oxford… ’ She smiled. ‘I suppose we should be glad Laura didn’t think of Paris.’ And she wasn’t going to put any more strange ideas in her head.

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Thorin could admit, at least to himself, that he found the idea of spending a few days away with Kate a little daunting. It was not his wife’s company that he found difficult to bear, but rather the prospect of yet another one of these strange places. After a week he had barely begun to understand this place and the people who frequented it. He had no doubts whatsoever that this Oxford place had yet more to offer in the way of things he could not possibly comprehend.

At the same time he craved peace and quiet, or as much as there was to be had in this world at any rate. If anything, he found that Kate’s world was a good deal noisier than his own. The machines and contraptions they used to make their lives easier without fail produced a wide variety of sounds and if it wasn’t any of that, there were devices that produced music – if indeed it could be called that – that played non-stop.
'That’s all,’ Kate announced, closing the boot of the car. They had been given the use of Helen’s car for their trip. It appeared to be in a better state than Jacko’s car. It was only a small consolation, but it was better than nothing. ‘I think we’re all set.’

‘You just remember to enjoy yourself,’ Laura told her, making it sound more like a command than a well-meant suggestion. Thorin did not like her much, but he was grateful for the opportunity she had provided. Or he would be, once he had overcome his apprehension.

He did not particularly like leaving his children either, but they had all three taken to their grandmother quickly and Helen seemed like a responsible kind of woman. It would only be for a few days.

‘I have no idea how you talked us into this,’ Kate said, shaking her head at her friend. ‘It’s so extravagant.’

‘Call it a belated wedding present,’ Laura suggested. ‘And the way I understand it, you haven’t had a proper honeymoon. It’s about time we fixed that. Now, if I were you I’d get out of here before the rush hour.’

Thorin was unsure what rush hour meant or what its consequences were, but judging by Kate’s expression, it was not a pleasant time of day. ‘Right, we’ll be off then.’

Thorin would never stop being amazed and frightened in equal measures by the means of transport in this world. He had not been inside a car since they had come here from Cardiff and had no wish to do again. He’d sooner have walked to their destination. But that was not the way of this world.

At least Kate was in complete control over this contraption. Despite not having been near a car for eight years, she knew what she was doing. She skilfully reversed out of their parking spot and got them on the road.

‘Well, we’re off,’ she said. There had been tension in the set of her shoulders since her friend had suggested this outing. Thorin reckoned he had not been much different. It had eased a little now, but it was not gone.

‘So we are,’ he agreed.

‘It’s odd, really,’ Kate pondered. She had her eyes on the road, as she should, but they were closer to having a proper conversation than they had come in a few days. ‘Around these parts, courting couples, and married ones too, do this sometimes. It’s what ordinary people do. It’s normal.’

He looked at her. ‘As your life should have been?’

She gave that some thought. ‘As I thought my life would have been,’ she corrected. ‘And I’ve had a taste of it, you know, with Marc.’ The name prompted another grimace. ‘But that’s not my life now. And it doesn’t really feel like the two – what was and what is – mix particularly well. Because they weren’t really meant to mix in the first place.’

Thorin thought he understood the sentiment. If it had not been for Gandalf’s interference, his world and hers would have remained separated forever. And he did not belong here. It was as though everything here had been designed for the single purpose of confounding him. He did not know how to simply be. Wherever he turned, he went wrong.

‘I understand,’ he said, and he did. ‘I was not meant to come here.’

Kate smiled ruefully. ‘And I was never meant to come back, I think. Don’t get me wrong; I’m so
very grateful for the opportunity, but it’s made one thing very, very clear. I’m never really going to belong in Erebor because of where I grew up. But I can’t belong here anymore either because of where I live now. Does that make sense?"

He could tell she had given this a great deal of thought. ‘We are both out of place here,’ he realised. It was not a conclusion he’d have thought to reach. There had never been any doubt in his mind that Kate fit here. It was evident in everything. Because she understood this world, could instinctively do what was required of her.

And at the same time she could not.

‘We can’t even use our own names, because everyone believes you’re a fictional character and I am dead.’ She snorted. ‘Sounds like the beginning of a bad joke if you say it that way. Or a really elaborate fan fiction, come to think of it.’

She was right; the reservations that had been made for them had been made in the names of Thomas and Anne Murphy, names that Thorin could not help but feel were not ones that fit them. Laura had chosen them for the specific purpose that nothing would remind anyone of their real identities, which was why she immediately dismissed Kate’s suggestion to use her own middle name, Sarah, for the time. ‘For Durin’s sake, Laura, we’re a couple on a date, not a pair of spies undercover to rat out terrorists!’ she’d exclaimed.

‘I’m an alien in my own country,’ she added softly. ‘Just a tourist, passing through.’

‘I am sorry,’ Thorin replied, because he was. When he had married her, he had not spent much time thinking about the consequences. Or rather, he had, but not of these particular consequences. And he had never wanted this for her, but at the same time he was powerless to prevent it. And yet, the only way he could have saved her the heartache, was not to have married her. And even if he had gone that route, could it have prevented this?

‘You shouldn’t be,’ Kate protested. ‘This is Gandalf’s doing. You didn’t ask for my presence, as I recall. It’s just not fair that he’s the one who did it and I’m the one who’s always paying for it in one way or another. And so here we are.’

And so they were. And for all intents and purposes they were going on an outing of a romantic nature. He had no clue how to go about that, but he was also determined not to make a mess of it. This was something she should have had, that much had been made very clear by Kate’s chatty friend.

‘You don’t owe me anything,’ Kate pointed out, leaving Thorin to wonder if he had spoken aloud or if she had merely guessed his thoughts correctly. ‘I chose this. Us. I knew what I was getting myself into.’

‘Yet you wanted this also,’ he couldn’t help but say.

Kate shook her head. ‘I used to, but I think after what happened with Marc… Well, the best way to say it is that I started distrusting romantic gestures, because at the end of the day they are just that, only gestures. It’s not really real. And you’ve always been real. I’ve never had to wonder for a single second if you had an ulterior motive for anything you’ve said or done, or if what you said was really what you meant. And that is what I signed up for. No regrets.’ She looked sideways quickly before redirecting her attention to the road, but it was long enough for him to read the sincerity in her eyes.

He did not say thank you. It would have been the wrong response. But she had eased his worry.
‘Perhaps we ought to resolve to enjoy ourselves then,’ he proposed.

Kate nodded. ‘We’re just on a holiday. No pressure. We’re just going to have a good time.’ As always, she understood what he didn’t know how to put into words.

‘I believe we are to go to the theatre tonight,’ Thorin recalled. At least that was something he was familiar with. He’d attended several plays in Erebor and had even liked some of them, though the last one he had been forced to sit through was one about the reclamation of Erebor. It had been riddled with errors and even though it had been written in his honour, he hadn’t been able to think of a single compliment to give that would not be a falsehood.

‘You might like this one,’ Kate said, sounding enthusiastic about this venture for the first time. ‘Much Ado About Nothing always was my favourite.’ He knew from experience that their tastes in these matters were remarkably similar.

‘Well then, we shall see.’

That they had somewhat cleared the air did not mean he was any less anxious about their activities for the coming days, but he could feel some of the tension drain away. Perhaps he was just uncertain because they had never really done something like it. But at least here they could go out and not be scrutinised by the people because of who they were. Kate checked them into their hotel under the names they did not belong to and nobody looked twice. It was the same when they found a pub to have their dinner in before the play.

‘Forget Laura’s dinner suggestions,’ she said. ‘Give me a pub any day.’

Thorin understood why. It was an informal sort of place, something dwarves could appreciate. And Kate appeared right at home. She made small talk with the waiter who brought them their food and exchanged pleasantries with a couple at a neighbouring table.

‘It’s not bad,’ Thorin commented when the food was placed in front of them.

‘Pretty good,’ Kate agreed. ‘So, there we are.’ She sighed. ‘Well, this was not what I would have pictured myself doing a year ago.’

‘Nor I,’ he agreed. Going out among men was always a trial, not in the least place because they all towered over him. And his experiences with that race had been largely been unpleasant and humiliating. They had always assumed their own superiority over him when it was honestly the other way around. And during his exile he had been unable to teach them the error of their ways. He had needed their coin too much.

But in this world he was not looked down on in that sense of the phrase. Folk looked and he misliked that, but that was as far as it went.

Kate smiled, one of those rare smiles that lit up her whole face. ‘I’m starting to think Laura was on to something with this; I’m actually starting to enjoy myself.’

So, to his own surprise, was Thorin. It was rare for him not to have some pressing engagements or urgent duties. Time spent with family was precious because of it. And the conversation flowed smoother after. They had to take care not to say things folk could frown on, but the mistakes they made disappeared into the general background noise.

Of course, that was when it all went wrong.

‘Kate? Kate Andrews?’
Kate stiffened, but she did not get the opportunity to explain what was happening before a man appeared next to their table.

‘I don’t believe this! I thought you were dead!’ The shock seemed genuine enough; he looked at Kate as though he could barely believe his eyes.

‘As you can see, I’m not.’ Thorin knew that look in her eyes. She did not want to have this encounter and was hoping desperately this man, whoever he was, would clear out as quickly as possible. ‘Now that you have ascertained that I am in fact very much alive, would you mind leaving? I was rather in the middle of something.’

If he heard her at all, he gave no indication of that. ‘They said you’d died. Everyone did. You just disappeared, weren’t heard from again…’ He rubbed his forehead as though that would provide him with clarity. ‘Good grief, Kate. We were all so worried, but here you are! I don’t understand.’

Thorin hadn’t missed the look of alarm on his wife’s face. But she controlled it quickly. ‘Has it ever occurred to you that you weren’t exactly high on my list of people to tell that I’m quite all right?’ she asked sarcastically. ‘Come to think of it, I don’t think you were on it at all. Now, I really don’t want to ask a third time if you will please go and leave us alone.’

‘That’s harsh, Kate,’ the man complained. ‘I haven’t seen you for eight years. And I believed that the worst had happened!’ The confusion slowly made way for indignation.

‘The way I see it, the worst has just happened.’ Kate was heading in the general direction of annoyance. ‘Go away, Marc.’

The name at last helped Thorin in placing this man. She had made mention of him, of course; he was the one who had failed to remain faithful to her when she had committed to that relationship. He could only feel contempt for him.

He shook his head. ‘The least you owe me is an explanation,’ he insisted. ‘Did you know they dragged me in as a suspect at one point? They even arrested me for a day or two. And now you are perfectly fine!’

‘I think that after everything that’s happened between us, I don’t owe you anything, least of all any more of my time.’ It was telling that Marc’s demands for answers only elicited anger rather than the guilt she had felt when others had done the same. She cared nothing for him. It should not feel so reassuring, but it was. ‘As you might have noticed if you paid the slightest bit of attention, I’m on a date.’

Marc spared Thorin only the briefest of glances. ‘Does he know then, where you’ve been, what you’ve done, this boyfriend of yours?’

He didn’t think he had ever been given the dubious honour of that title.

‘Husband,’ Kate corrected pointedly. ‘Marc, meet Thomas. Thomas, this fine gentleman is Marc, who has some issues with faithfulness and common decency.’

Her eyes begged him to just follow her lead. As it was, it was very easy to do so. ‘Aye, the one who strayed, isn’t he? After which you broke his nose, I believe.’ Thorin was full well prepared to do worse if the need arose.

‘The very one,’ Kate nodded. ‘But I think he was just leaving.’

‘She mentioned she dropped off the face of the earth and had us all worry over her, apparently for
nothing?’ Marc sneered, addressing his displeasure to Thorin.

It did not take Thorin long to establish that Marc was a vengeful, spiteful man who delighted in causing strife. But he would find Thorin a very unwilling participant in that game. ‘My wife has asked you to take your leave,’ he said. ‘I suggest you oblige her before I see fit to aid her in that endeavour.’

This only caused a snort. ‘Mate, nobody talks like that anymore. Where the hell did you come from?’

He was well aware that his speech was different from that of the people of this land. But he had no wish to be like them, so the accusation did not hurt him.

‘Leave,’ he repeated.

Marc turned back to Kate. ‘Looks like a hippie and talks like Shakespeare. You call that an improvement?’ Thorin did not know what a hippie was, but he doubted it had been intended as a compliment.

Either way, Kate failed to be impressed. ‘Well, some of us have the brainpower to understand Shakespeare’s masterpieces. Marc, get out of here, or I swear I’ll drag you out by the collar myself.’

Thorin was seconds away from beating her to it, but fortunately one of the waiters stepped in and saved Marc from an unfortunate sort of accident. ‘He bothering you, love?’ he asked Kate.

She smiled apologetically. ‘Sort of,’ she replied. ‘He’s the ex. Can’t stand it I’ve found somebody else. And I think he’s had one drink too many. You know how that goes, I suspect.’

Thorin had caught a whiff of something on the man’s breath, so it appeared Kate’s observation of Marc’s drinking was not far off. At the same time it was the sort of devious little plan she’d use from time to time when folk were making a nuisance of themselves. It was entirely mannish. It would have made him uncomfortable if not for the fact that the intended victim of her scheme was entirely deserving of it.

Understanding dawned on the waiter’s face. He put a hand on Marc’s shoulder. ‘Time to go,’ he announced.

Marc tried to shake the hand off, but the waiter’s grip was tighter than it looked, for it never moved. ‘You don’t understand!’ he exclaimed. ‘She left! Wouldn’t even let me know she was alive, the little bitch.’

Thorin was up on his feet before Marc had even finished speaking. Of course the man towered over him, but something in Thorin’s facial expression must have succeeded in alarming him somewhat. He did a step back.

‘You will not speak about my wife in that way.’ It took considerable effort not to break the nose a second time.

The waiter clearly agreed. ‘Listen, mate, I don’t want to have to call the cops, but if you don’t get out of here now, I will.’

Marc contemplated this for a moment and then seemed to realise that it was altogether a much wiser course of action to depart. Not a moment too soon either; Thorin was convinced that no matter what his next words would have been, he would have responded in violence.
He sat back down as the waiter escorted Marc from the pub.

Kate took a deep breath. ‘That did not go according to plan,’ she remarked. Thorin could tell she was shaken even though she tried not to show it. ‘I just hope he doesn’t go around telling people things.’

He did not quite understand the way things were done in this world, but he understood enough to know that if it were to become widely known that Kate was still alive after all this time, there would be consequences of some sort, and not necessarily pleasant ones.

‘He has indulged in strong drinks,’ he pointed out. ‘He may not remember this encounter on the morrow.’

‘He doesn’t need to wait till tomorrow to run to the police and tell them what he knows,’ Kate countered.

‘Would they believe the word of a drunk?’ Thorin wondered. It could be that they did, though it did not seem likely.

Kate relaxed a little. ‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘They wouldn’t.’ She appeared to come to a decision. ‘And I’m not about to let him spoil things any more than he’s already done.’

Thorin was more of the opinion that Marc deserved a few broken bones for his behaviour, but for Kate’s sake he would let it slide. He’d believed, based on what he had seen so far, that the men of this land treated their womenfolk differently from how the men in Middle Earth treated theirs. Marc had been a very unpleasant exception to that rule. And Thorin had never liked such men. He had suffered their presence for far too long because he’d had to, but there was no need for such reluctance now. Given that his own wife had been on the receiving end of such disrespectful words, he was even more inclined to put a stop to them with his fists.

‘Very well,’ he agreed.

The bed she woke in was unfamiliar. That was starting to become something of a habit lately, Kate observed. But at least it was comfortable and rather large. Apparently Laura had booked the bridal suite, given that they were now apparently on a very belated honeymoon. And, she’d added with a cheeky grin when Thorin wasn’t around to hear, she clearly knew how to put a bed to good use, given the fact that she had three children. Kate had blushed scarlet, but had enough wits to retort that she was a happily married woman in a world with no birth control. What else had her friend expected exactly? She’d taken immense pleasure in seeing Laura rendered speechless for once.

That didn’t mean Laura hadn’t been right. And well, when you intentionally gave the bridal suite to a married couple…

Next to her Thorin was still asleep, even though there was enough light flooding in through the windows to suggest early morning was some hours in the past. She’d had half a mind to join him in slumber, but now that she was awake and aware of the time, sleep would not grace her with its presence again.

*I’ve spent too much of my time hanging around dwarves,* she reflected. And it was entirely undwarvish to sleep the day away.

It made the fact that Thorin was still asleep even more remarkable. Granted, they had arrived back
at the hotel rather late and they certainly hadn’t gone to sleep the moment they did. Kate could spy items of clothing leading from the door to the bed like a breadcrumb trail. It didn’t take Sherlock Holmes to deduce what had happened here last night.

She turned onto her side and looked at her husband’s face. He was relaxed, more relaxed than she’d seen him since they had arrived in England. He’d slept poorly over the last week and even when he had drifted off, there was tension in his face and shoulders. And much as she wanted to, Kate could never entirely understand just how bewildering and frightening the transition between Erebor and England would have been for him.

But it seemed as though at last he was beginning to feel more at ease. Being away from her family certainly helped with that. At least there’s no need for guilt when it’s just the two of us.

It had been notably absent in her confrontation with Marc last night. How she’d hated to see him there! She had long since moved on, had gotten over what he’d done to her. That didn’t mean she did not still hate his guts. If he’d been less of a bastard, or if she’d never gotten involved with him at all, she would never have been so horribly awkward and wary of all things romance. Her marriage might be easier sometimes.

He hurt me, and the hurt shaped me. That she could understand what the whole affair had done to her did not undo it. It was an ongoing process. She was still learning. It became easier with time, but it was a long road, filled with ups and downs.

Thorin won’t hurt me in that way, not ever. That knowledge alone was enough. Dwarves were not like men in that respect. When they loved, they loved for life. Nothing could ever change that. To be in a romantic relationship with two different people at the same time was unheard of, a disgusting mannish practise they wanted nothing to do with. Even if one’s spouse was deceased, the remaining partner never remarried. Not because it wasn’t allowed, but because they wouldn’t want it.

Perhaps I am more of a dwarf at heart than I am on the outside. The thought made her smile. Now that she had Thorin, it was hard to even imagine ever wanting somebody else. We fit so well together. I’ll never have that sort of connection with another.

And wasn’t that a strange thought.

Thorin’s breast rose and fell with his breathing. Usually he woke not long after she did, if she was the first to wake, which didn’t happen very often. He’d say that it was because she stopped moving about so much and that was like a wake-up call all on its own. But today he slept right through it.

And whatever dreams he had, they must be good. Kate had missed his smile lately. She’d seen a good deal of it last night – as she’d expected, he’d rather enjoyed the play – and it was still here now. It made him seem younger, less careworn, friendlier. Kate knew he had a good heart, but most people wouldn’t generally know it from looking at his face. But she was better informed than they were, and she knew every inch of him.

It was as if he felt her eyes on him, because he opened them. ‘Good morning.’

‘I suspect it’s closer to good afternoon,’ she corrected.

For once, he seemed entirely unconcerned by it. ‘Is it indeed?’

‘I’d say so, judging by the position of the sun,’ she nodded.

He gave her a smile that was nine parts amused and one part more or less flirtatious. ‘It was not the
sun you were looking at,’ he pointed out.

It had taken a while for this side of him to emerge and it had taken even longer for Kate to stop being so startled by it. Then again, they’d met on the quest and they hadn’t gotten off to a great start. By the time Thorin had started to thaw out and she had started to cool off, they’d been in Mirkwood. And it had been even longer still before she realised that Thorin apparently had learned how to flirt. He only did it with her and in private and he certainly never dialled up the charm the way Marc had done, but it was there.

‘You’re my husband,’ she reminded him. ‘And we’re on our honeymoon. I’m allowed to stare.’

He gave as good as he got. ‘Aye, I remember a good deal of staring last night.’

Kate had never been one not to have the last word. ‘On both sides.’

That was the strangest thing as well. There had never been any physical attraction to begin with. Thorin really wasn’t her type, not the sort of fellow that she’d take a second look at if he passed her in the street. But because they’d been thrown together and had been forced to spend time together, she’d gotten to know him. And she had learned to see beyond what some might call physical imperfections and the hard front he put on. And she had admired him and liked him even before she loved him. And because she loved him, the exterior didn’t really matter. It was part of him. She couldn’t imagine him looking any different and nor would she want him to.

So yes, she did her fair bit of staring. It was hard not to, honestly.

‘Can’t argue with that.’ He had that smile on his face, the one that was so rare, but so precious. It lit up his entire face. He reached out and brushed her hair away from her face. She’d forgotten to braid it for bed – she’d been rather occupied – and it probably looked like a bird’s nest.

‘Been staring at the mess I try to pass of as hair, have you?’ she laughed. She knew he liked her hair, whether it was well-looked after or an unruly mess.

He responded by kissing her, an action that Kate did not object against in the slightest. Of course one thing led to another and it was quite a while later before there was such a thing again as coherent conversation.

‘We should probably go and find breakfast,’ Kate said. Her stomach was telling her it was about time she put something in it, but she was so comfortable that the idea of getting up only made her want to hide her head under the pillow.

‘I think you’ll find that it would be lunch rather than breakfast,’ Thorin replied. ‘Or even dinner.’

‘Nah, it can’t be that late yet.’ At least, she was fairly sure it was not that late yet. ‘We should probably get up.’ Again, it wasn’t followed by immediate action. She was lying in his arms and there was nobody around who could need them at the drop of a hat. It was a novelty and Kate revelled in it.

‘We should,’ Thorin agreed, but he wasn’t moving either.

‘Hm, we might walk along the river for a bit,’ Kate suggested. ‘You know, if we manage to get out of bed and all.’

He chuckled, but didn’t reply. Kate could almost hear him think, so she turned around and propped herself up on her elbows so that she could look at him. As expected, there was a pensive look on his face.
‘What’s the matter?’ she asked, quickly analysing their conversation in search of the thing that had prompted this change in mood. She came up empty.

Fortunately he explained. ‘You said your friend Laura had sent us to this city with ulterior motives, because the man who wrote your book lived here.’

Kate nodded. ‘He did.’

‘I believed you would want to make good use of the opportunity to investigate.’

And Kate had suggested a stroll along the river instead. ‘I thought about it.’ She might as well be honest about that. ‘But we’re here on a date, not an investigation.’

‘If you wanted to…’ he began.

Kate knew how that sentence was going to end and cut him off: ‘I don’t.’

That shut him up.

‘Don’t get me wrong, I am curious how it’s all possible. And if you had asked me eight years ago if I wanted the chance to find out more I would have given all my savings and my right arm for the privilege.’

‘But not anymore?’ Thorin was clearly puzzled by this change of heart.

Kate shrugged. ‘Even if the answers are somewhere in this city, which I doubt, it doesn’t matter. We already know Tolkien must have known something. But does it really matter how he knew it? It wouldn’t change anything. And even on the quest that knowledge couldn’t have helped us.’ No matter how much she had liked to believe differently at the time.

_I was clutching straws then._ She’d sought for guidance and when it was not available and things went horribly wrong, she liked to think there would have been guidance in places she couldn’t reach. It wasn’t necessarily true. But it had kept her going. Well, more or less.

‘And I’d much rather spend the day, what’s left of it, with you,’ she concluded. ‘Far more productive than going on a wild goose chase all over town. I know of better ways to spend my time.’

‘Is that so?’ He was back at ease. If he hadn’t been, he wouldn’t have teased her. ‘Productive, are we?’

‘Very.’

Needless to say, it was still another few hours before they left the room.

It was a new experience for Thorin to have done very little at all for a few days and yet not feel as though he had neglected his duties. Neither was he feeling any sudden urges to run off to the nearest forge – and he had discovered that those weren’t easily available in this land – and make amends for his idleness.

Perhaps this had something to do with the fact that he had not really been idle, he reflected on the
way back in the car, a day later. It had been some time since he’d really spent some time with Kate. They had talked much and had come closer together as a result. It had eased the tension he still felt in this world and had reassured him that she would come home with him at the end of their visit. Not that he had doubted it, not with his mind, but now his heart was calm as well.

And it had done Kate good as well. The tension had left her shoulders. She was behind the wheel, singing along to a song she knew. ‘Here comes the sun and I say: it’s all right…’

Thorin frowned at her. The weather had been fine when they set off, but now the rain was pouring down and whatever sunshine there was surely existed in her mind alone.

She saw his incredulous look and laughed. ‘Wishful thinking,’ she announced.

He nodded. ‘Ah.’

‘It’s old, the song. Which makes it one of the few songs on the radio now that I can actually sing along with,’ she added.

‘It’s also one of the few songs that has a recognisable melody,’ Thorin said. He was glad he generally shared his taste in music with her. That way he did not have to pretend he tolerated the music of this world that was barely worthy of the name.

She laughed at that. They had both laughed these past two days. And Thorin liked the sound of it. The sounds spoke of happiness and the good things of life. ‘I know. I used to think it couldn’t get any worse than it was when I left. But they’ve managed to reach new lows in the meantime. Quite the achievement, really.’ She looked sideways long enough to meet his eyes and wink. ‘Give me a harp any day.’

He’d tried to teach her, but they had soon discovered that Kate’s musical talents, such as they were, were not suited to that instrument. But she enjoyed listening to him. And, though she refused to acknowledge it herself, she had a fine singing voice that she employed not nearly often enough.

They’d had a good few days. The day before they had eventually spent the remainder of the day walking along the river, after which they had made good use of Miss Porter’s dinner reservations. Kate had been quick to call the restaurant a little posh for her tastes, but the food was good and there had been good, real music playing in the background. And he could wish for no better company. Nobody had interrupted them and Marc had not made another appearance.

‘We should do this again,’ he said. He had missed his children, but he knew they were in safe hands. And it was well worth his time to spend more time with his wife. Quite to his own surprise, this little venture had turned out much better than he had expected.

Kate had grown used to the way his mind worked and so had no trouble following his line of thought now. ‘We should,’ she said softly. ‘We really should.’

They both smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Someone – I’ve forgotten who – once requested a chapter in which Thorin and Kate would do couple stuff. Well, here it is. It seemed appropriate on this date.
Do let me know what you thought of this chapter, the series as a whole, if there are things you’d still like to see, questions you want answered… Reviews would be very much appreciated.
Thank you all very much for reading and for sticking with these stories!
You know, the very powerful and the very stupid have one thing in common. They don't alter their views to fit the facts, they alter the facts to fit their views, which can be uncomfortable if you happen to be one of the facts that needs altering.

Doctor Who

No.

That thought took up residence in Thorin’s head and repeated itself over and over again. It was the only thought he was capable of, because everything else had come to a sudden standstill. And he could only watch.

He had no real memory of his father being this young, without quite so much grey in his hair. But other than that he was exactly like the last time Thorin had looked on him. It made it that much harder to separate this dwarf from the dwarf he would become, the one Thorin both fiercely despised and desperately longed for.

No.

But here he was. And nothing that had caused such complicated feelings in Thorin had taken place yet. Thráin had done nothing yet to warrant the anger, the grief, the powerlessness. This was the beginning of the story. And still, Thorin was unable to see anything other than the father who had failed him.

His grandfather did not seem to be in any way aware of what was happening right under his nose. ‘What brings you to my doorstep this early in the morning?’ he asked, then backtracked. ‘Wait, you had breakfast yet? There’s plenty to go around. Pull up a chair and join us!’

No.

It was one thing to know that somewhere under this Mountain Thráin existed. Thorin knew that in this time his father yet lived and breathed, blissfully unaware of the tragedy that would be visited upon them, that which in turn caused his own fall. But if he had made any plans at all, they had involved hiding until the wizard had been found. It was hard enough being around his grandparents, but at least the memories he had of them were mainly positive. He would not have to pretend that he cared about them, that he missed them. But he was no elf that he could put on display an emotion he did not feel. Nor could he hide those that he experienced.

‘It seems you have visitors,’ Thorin’s father observed. The sentence hadn’t been a question, but it was clearly intended as one. He looked at Thorin and his brow furrowed in puzzlement. Thorin clenched his hand into a fist under the table and forced himself to meet his gaze.
Thráín’s stare was as uncomfortable and penetrating as he remembered it, always disapproving no matter what he saw. Thorin recalled always striving to make it give way to some sort of approval, maybe even pride, but that had always been beyond him. Frerin and Dís had made him smile sometimes, but Thorin never had. And he had searched his memory long and hard for it. You disappoint me. Those were the only words of Thráin’s that Thorin could recall with perfect clarity, as vivid now as all the times they were spoken.

‘Have we met?’ Thráin asked. The tone of voice was more suspicious than curious. That too was nothing new.

‘In a manner of speaking,’ Freya said. ‘Thráin, darling, I think it would be for the best if you sat down for this conversation.’

‘I’m no man that I would drop into a faint at the first bad news.’ He looked pointedly at Kate, who equally pointedly ignored him. ‘Amad, whatever is going on?’

‘Sit down, lad,’ Thrór invited. ‘I get pain in my neck having to look up at you, and we’ll be here for a while.’ In a strange way this reminded Thorin of how Kate would get things done. If his way – stubbornly insisting it should be done the way he wanted it – failed, she’d somehow present said way as the most practical manner in which a thing should be accomplished. And folk mainly obliged.

Thráin did not. ‘I’m not accustomed to discussing sensitive business in front of men, and their women. Not even when they have been given a place at your breakfast table.’

This was odd. Thorin recalled that his father had never been particularly fond of men even before their exile. He found them lacking in every area compared to dwarves. But he had no recollection of him ever being so vehement and outspoken about his disgust for them in the days before Smaug came and made them homeless. Had he simply been too young to remember? Had he been shielded from the less pleasant sides of his father? That could well be possible. Erebor had thick walls that could conceal and hide. There had been no such luxury on the road.

And the anger reared its ugly head, as it always did when Kate came under attack. ‘I would advise you to speak with more respect about my wife,’ he said. It took considerable effort not to snarl the words.

Thráin seemed taken aback by this. ‘Excuse me?’

Over the years he had often wondered what his family would have thought about his choice of bride, had they lived to see that day. And Thorin had always firmly believed that he would have displeased his father. And this had caused discomfort, because for some reason that made no sense to him, his approval was the one thing he had never been able to stop himself craving, no matter how unobtainable it was, no matter what had happened.

But that longing died. It died quick and easy. Had his grandparents expressed any sort of scepticism, it might have put up more of a fight, but they had not. No, the first one here to criticise was his father. And all of a sudden his opinion no longer mattered.

‘You will not speak in that manner about my wife,’ he repeated. ‘For I would make you give answer for it if you did not.’ As he would any other who presumed it was their right to speak so derisively about the woman he had wed.

Opposite him he could see Kate’s eyebrow jump up almost to her hairline. Why would she be surprised at all? They had been in similar situations before and Thorin had never failed to defend
her. Yes, it was from his father that he attempted to shield her now, but surely she knew she mattered far more to him than he did?

‘Sit down, Thráin,’ Freya repeated. The tone of voice gave away that she had been somewhat taken aback by Thorin as well. Perhaps his words had been spoken in a more heated manner than he had intended.

He obliged at last. ‘What in Durin’s name is going on here?’ he demanded. ‘I have never met this fellow or his wife before, yet you allow them to tell me my business in your home. I assume there is a good explanation for this.’

Of course there was. Thorin was just very relieved he was not called upon to give it. His grandmother was by far the best suited to explain the matter. She even managed to make it sound as though it was not the strangest thing that had ever taken place in Erebor. Thráin listened to it, frown ever deepening as the story got told.

‘You believe this?’ he demanded of Thrór when Freya fell silent at last.

‘No reason not to,’ Thrór replied easily.

Thorin remembered this aspect of his grandfather before the illness only too well. There were times when it seemed as if nothing could faze him. He could take anything in his stride and keep on going. But then Freya had died and the illness had overtaken him. And in that state he had been when Smaug had laid ruin to Erebor. And he had not recovered from that.

‘No reason not to?’ Thráin boomed. ‘How could you ever believe it in the first place? It’s beyond far-fetched. Time travel? Have you heard of such a thing before?’

Thrór shrugged. ‘There are stories, aren’t there? They have to come from somewhere, I reckon. Besides, look at him. Looks like you, looks like Theyra. Stands to reason he has to be your lad, with the way he looks.’

Thráin looked at him again. Thorin did not look away, though it took a lot of strength not to. Now that the anger had been given the time to reside, he could feel the emotions warring within him again. How many times had he wished for a second chance, a chance to make things right, to say goodbye properly at the very least? He had lost count long ago. And now his prayers had been answered at last, but nothing like the way he had imagined it. He could see now that he had wished for something he did not fully understand.

Thráin laughed a humourless laugh. ‘If that is my son, then I should believe that he has chosen to wed this woman.’ He looked from Thorin to Kate and back again. ‘No son of mine would ever dream of marrying one of that race.’

‘But I did,’ Thorin said, taking care to keep his voice calm and steady. He had to speak, because Kate was quiet. Normally when someone voiced sentiments like this, she fought them off with words. And she was strong, so strong. She had never been known to remain silent when she was attacked in such a way. Thorin knew her well, so he knew how to read her silence now.

Kate was not thought to be a gentle or considerate woman by many. Truth be told, she generally wasn’t. But she made allowances for him and those she knew he cared for. For them she would bite her tongue to stop herself from verbally reducing them to rubble. She did not do it for them, but rather out of concern and respect for him.

And he wished she didn’t. Thráin had lost all right to such consideration long ago.
‘And you have no right to judge,’ he added.

‘But apparently I am your father,’ Thráin countered, still more than a little disbelieving, though Thorin thought that the doubts were disappearing quickly. ‘Of all people, I should be able to tell you that you made a mistake, even if your grandparents apparently shirk that responsibility. What were you thinking, boy, marrying a mannish girl? Are you mad?’

The blow landed and punched the air clean out of his lungs. Thráin could not know what that accusation meant and he could never tell him. With a sudden certainty he knew that Thráin would not leave a stone unturned to change the future if he were given the knowledge Thorin and Kate possessed. And he could not allow that to happen. Because he would unwrite Kate and the children.

‘Oi, back off!’ Kate’s eyes blazed with fury. ‘You are his father, no doubts about that, but that doesn’t mean you get a free pass to call him every dirty name under the sun.’

She now had Thráin’s undivided attention. ‘You have no business speaking here, woman.’ He was back on his feet.

‘Oh, I really do.’ Kate got up as well. ‘Because like it or not, Thorin is my husband and I really couldn’t care less if you’re his father, the King under the Mountain or Durin the Deathless himself. And if you think I am just going to sit here twiddling my thumbs while you’re having a go at him, you had better think again. Now, back the hell off.’

Some of the tension melted out of Thorin’s body as at last one thing became what it always was. Silence had never suited Kate. He rose to his feet, gave her the briefest of reassuring smiles and wrapped an arm around her waist in a very public show of support. No, a show was the wrong word; it suggested pretence. And Thorin meant his every action.

This course of action brought him eye level with his father. He looked at him, looked for the smallest hint of affection. He came up empty. It was not there. He liked to think that perhaps it had existed. After all, fathers loved their sons. It was the way of the world. Thorin would no more know how to stop loving his children than he would know how to stop his heart from beating. It stood to reason that Thráin had once felt the same way, before the world had gone so horribly wrong.

But there was nothing.

There were only words. ‘You disappoint me.’

As Thráin turned and left, Thorin could only sink back into his chair. The room felt like ice.

Impossible.

That was the first thought that came into Thráin’s head when his mother explained the situation. There were so many impossible elements in her explanation that he did not rightly know where to begin. Time travel was the most obvious first on the list. True, as his father said, there were stories about that and all those stories had to get started somehow.

And he could not really keep disbelieving it, because then there was Thorin. He’d looked at him,
like his father suggested, and that had decided the matter. There was something of Theyra about his mouth and the shape of his eyes. And he had her smile as well.

He might have missed the smile altogether if he had blinked, but it had been there and it had erased all the doubt from his mind. Anger and disappointment had very quickly taken its place when he realised that if all of this was true, then he had to believe what was said about the woman as well.

Impossible.

How had his own son sunk so low? Thráin had never liked men much, though they were their neighbours to the south. On no level could they ever hope to be the equal of the dwarves, yet this had never stopped them from believing themselves superior instead. There was no humility about them, even when they had so much to be humble about.

And sometime in the future one of that race would overreach herself and bind one of Durin’s line to her. Given Thorin’s age and the way he held himself, Thráin thought it more than likely that he was King under the Mountain by now. And so a mannish girl ruled by his side. Worse, she behaved as if she had every right to be here. There was no humility about her either.

Impossible.

How could his own son, his own flesh and blood, have ever consented to such a match? He could tell there were no political reasons involved. Thorin’s hand had rested on the woman’s waist as if it was meant to be there, as if it was a place it touched quite frequently. And the way he had smiled at her had left little room for doubts either.

Even if the woman was not a witch and had not bound him with an enchantment, Thorin should have shown better judgement. He was a King – presumably, granted – and his actions should be led by duty, not personal desires. And how any dwarf in his senses could ever desire a woman of the race of men was far beyond Thráin’s comprehension.

He might have felt a measure of pity if Thorin had been addled in his wits, but it was becoming increasingly clear that he could lay claim to no such excuse. His words had been heated, but chosen with care. Admittedly Thráin had never seen madness up close, but he liked to think he could recognise it when confronted with it.

Impossible.

He found the way back to his own place by mere instinct alone. His feet knew the way and carried him to where he wanted to go. He had no recollection of the way home.

‘You are back quickly,’ Theyra observed when he closed the door behind him. ‘Are your parents quite well?’

That was the reason he had gone to them so early. His father and to some extent his mother had been absent-minded during the meeting yesterday. It wasn’t too out of character for his father. He could never be bothered about the business of court, no matter how often Thráin stressed that it was important. But his mother, though she had hidden it well, had been out of sorts as well. She had missed things she would usually notice straight away.

‘They are well,’ he replied brusquely. Physically there was nothing amiss with them. They had gone mad, if anything. How else could they sit there calmly and welcome their grandson and his wife from the future into their home? Especially his father had demonstrated a notable lack of shock or any sort of reaction really. He had just been sitting there, eating his breakfast as if this was
an everyday occurrence.

Perhaps his father had truly gone mad at last.

‘I sense a contradiction between your words and your tone,’ she said. There was a slight frown on her forehead.

There was. And he saw no reason not to explain this to her, except that he had no clue how to tell this news and not sound like a raving madman himself.

‘They have taken leave of their senses,’ he declared. That was the truth. And if that wasn’t the case, it was something very close to it.

Theyra did not give the impression that this had provided her with any more clarity. If anything, her confusion only increased. And she would have asked more questions if a baby’s wail had not drifted into the room at that precise moment.

‘Hold that thought,’ she said before disappearing into the nursery. The infant should have kept her busy for a while and should have given him sufficient time to come up with a decent explanation. But of course the whole world conspired against him. Thorin’s wailing ceased and Theyra returned quickly, the child in her arms.

It was an odd thing, Thráin thought. Only yesterday he had felt himself glow with pride when he looked at his son. Little Thorin was the apple of his eye, a symbol that his line would continue, a promise for the future.

And now he could hardly bear to look upon him.

*The promise was false. He will only bring us shame and disappointment.*

Of course the infant had no way of knowing what he would grow up to be. But Thráin knew and he could never not know it. He could never look on his son the same way. He read only dashed hopes and bitter disappointment in the little face.

‘Will you not explain?’ his wife asked gently, rocking the baby. ‘Hush now, little love,’ she added to the baby. ‘You are perfectly all right.’

Thorin was as far from all right as he could be. Nothing about him would ever be good again. Knowing the future had spoiled that chance forever. And yet Thráin would always prefer knowing what was to come over ignorance. At least he would not now place his faith in his son. He would know better.

‘It is not for me to explain,’ he said. He did not have the words to describe this. ‘You ought to ask them.’

Theyra clearly found his answer lacking. ‘I am sure you make it sound it more serious than it is,’ she said. There was a hint of disapproval in her voice. ‘Why, I only saw your father the day before yesterday and he appeared perfectly sound of mind to me.’

Because that encounter pre-dated the arrival of adult Thorin and his thrice-cursed wife. Part of Thráin longed for the relative simplicity of that day. But there was no use in wishing for things he could not have. He was faced with a grim reality. It would not do to hide from it.

‘Common sense has since abandoned him and my mother both,’ he said. How in Durin’s name had they been taken in by that girl? Was he the only one who could see clearly, who had the capacity to
recognise the danger this woman posed to the future of his people?

‘You have lost me,’ Theyra confessed. ‘Will you not explain?’

He would not. ‘Look to them for clarity, if that is what you seek.’ And it would change her too, knowing what was to become of the son she now cradled so gently in her arms. ‘But it will bring you no joy.’

Hurt bloomed in her eyes. He’d spoken too unkindly, he knew that, but he did not know how to be kind now. His heart ached, for her and for him. They had imagined a different future, one in which their lad would be a dwarf to make any father proud. And perhaps he had done things to merit such pride, but his choice of wife would overshadow it all. It was a stain on him that would never be washed away.

‘I will judge that for myself, I think,’ Theyra said. He tasted incredulity and hurt in her words. It was beyond his power to take it away. Soon enough she would understand why and when that moment had come, she would wish for ignorance. But Thráin had never believed in shielding his wife from the uglier sides of life and she in turn would not thank him if he had. Some things had to be faced.

‘Do as you see fit,’ he said.

At last she became fed up with him. ‘Very well, I shall. If you would mind Thorin for a bit, I shall leave immediately.’ She held out the baby for him to take.

Yesterday, this morning even, he would have met her halfway to hold him. He would talk to him and hum him songs when he believed nobody else could hear. But all that had gone now. He had no more songs to give this child, no more words of comfort to offer. They had all turned sour in the span of minutes.

He did the only thing he could do: he took a step back.

If she had been annoyed before, Theyra was heading rapidly towards anger now. It took a lot to rile his wife, but it appeared he had managed to do so at last, even if it had not been his intention. ‘I am beginning to believe that you have taken leave of your senses, and not your father. Well, if you won’t hold him, I shall take him with me. You’re no fit company for anybody a present, not even for an infant.’

She marched out of the room. The door fell shut behind her a little harder than was strictly necessary.

Thráin sank down into the nearest obliging chair. The implications of the discoveries he had made this morning were at last fully starting to sink in. The heavy disappointment almost made him feel nauseous.

Then a thought occurred to him. There are many years yet between now and then.

It was as if he had been given new life. And it was so simple that it was quite frankly mind baffling that it had not occurred to him before now. What he had seen was perhaps not a vision of the future that would be, but the future that could be. He had been given a warning and, having received it, it was his duty to act on it. If he did not, the blame for whatever followed would be his.

He now wished he had not sent Theyra to his parents to learn the truth. After all, he now knew it would not need to happen. There was a very easy way to prevent Thorin ever having his head turned by a mannish girl. If he worked hard enough to impose on Thorin how much less men were
than the dwarves, surely Thorin would never be able to look on one of them as a bride. His disgust of them and their ways would be too strong. And that girl, whoever she was, would lead an insignificant manish life and wed an insignificant man. And even if she tried her wiles, such as they were, on Thráin’s son and heir, they would fail.

It was the way things ought to be.

And if these matters needed a firm hand to make sure they came to pass, then Thráin would not think such a task beneath him. The future of his line was at stake.

Kate’s blood boiled. If she’d had the possibility she’d have strangled Thráin on the spot. It was either that or bash his head against a wall repeatedly to knock some sense into that thick skull. She’d met her fair share of people who hated her guts. But Thráin, she found, had reached whole new heights of disgusting.

His behaviour should not have altogether been a surprise. After all, there was a fairly good reason why Thorin had such issues with his father and the memory of him. Kate had been given to understand that he had not been a particularly pleasant individual even before the Mountain fell. Meeting him today had made it very clear that unpleasant was the understatement of the century when it came to describing Thráin.

She had tried to keep quiet for Thorin’s sake. In spite of everything, his relationship with his father was ambivalent at best. He loathed him for leaving when he should have stayed, yet had also always craved his approval.

Even after such a short time Kate could tell that approval was not going to be in the cards.

And Thorin had surprised her. The moment Thráin had attacked her, he had been on her side, calling his father to the carpet for how he treated her. The only emotion she had seen was icy, freezing anger. It was the kind of anger he reserved for folk he really couldn’t stand. Of course it would have been beyond Kate’s control to keep her own mouth shut. Then again, there had been very little choice. When Thráin had started throwing the m-word around and Thorin had made no attempt to defend himself from such a blatantly wrong accusation, she’d had to step in.

*Good riddance to bad rubbish.* Thráin had left shortly after, but not before one last kick below the belt. *You disappoint me,* he’d said. Kate was one of the very few people in all the world who knew what those words meant to Thorin.

She should have killed him for that just on principle.

Thrór and Freya had lost the plot somewhere along the way. They hadn’t said so in as many words, but the remainder of breakfast was a tense affair. Their hosts were turning things over in their minds; it was plain enough for all to see. Kate was just grateful that they did not ask any questions. Perhaps they knew Thorin and Kate could not answer them. There was a long history between father and son. Thorin’s resentment had grown and festered for well over a century. It was a wound that only ever healed on the surface. Then something would remind him and it would be torn open and bleed anew. Kate understood this because at least in the father department she came from a similar background.

Breakfast was over and Thrór had retreated into his study. Freya busied herself in the kitchen,
which left Thorin and Kate alone in front of the hearth. Her husband had made it as far as the chair Kate had occupied before breakfast and had not left it since. He was staring into the flames, lost in his thoughts. Kate could hazard a relatively educated guess as to what was going on in his head, but there was no way to tell for certain.

She took the other chair and sat with him. No words of hers could make it better. All she had to offer were platitudes and she knew better than most how useless and empty they were. Words could only tear the wound open further. The pain went too deep.

To her surprise Thorin spoke almost as soon as her backside hit the chair. ‘You said we are setting the future in stone.’

‘It’s a theory, yes,’ Kate replied carefully. Just because she knew the rules of time travel in fiction didn’t mean she knew the first thing about the genuine article. All she had to offer were theories. But so far, this one was holding up to scrutiny.

She weighed the evidence in her mind. And really, the fact that she was here at all spoke for it. Gandalf could not have chosen a worse person for the job as advisor if he’d tried. Well, he could have erred worse if he’d picked one of the squealing fangirls, she supposed, but still, her point was a valid one. There were tons more people more qualified, and willing, to have taken on the job as advisor on Thorin’s quest. But if one took into consideration that Gandalf was preserving the timeline as he knew it, then and only then did his choice make the slightest bit of sense.

‘I believe you are right,’ Thorin said. He looked away from the fire and into her eyes. It had been a long time since he had looked so haunted. It broke her heart to see it and at the same time it fuelled the fire of her rage. All of this was so horribly unfair. Hadn’t he been through enough? Didn’t it ever bloody end?

‘How do you mean?’ she asked, almost hesitantly. The decision to speak of this would always have to be his. She would not force him, just as he had never pressed the point with her. They both knew the other’s pain; the knowledge of it did not have to be mentioned to be therapeutic. The companionship of someone who simply understood was often enough.

‘You heard his words,’ Thorin said.

It had been hard to miss them.

‘I never pleased him,’ he continued. The words sounded as if they took great effort to speak. ‘He was never proud of me, nor did I ever gain his approval for anything I did. I never understood why. But what if…?’ He trailed off.

But there was no need for him to finish that sentence, because Kate heard him loud and clear. What if the reason for Thráin’s mysterious constant disapproval of his son was only due to this visit, because he knew that Thorin would marry a woman of the race of men, a race he obviously did not think highly of?

The implications of this were staggering.

‘I am sorry.’ The words did not cover it, not by any stretch of the imagination, but they were the best she had to offer under the given circumstances. Good grief, she had been the cause of the rocky relationship between father and son all these years? Long before she had even been born, Thráin had resented his eldest son for a marriage aforementioned son would not make for another almost two hundred years.
Curse this whole time travel mess to the deepest circle of hell! Kate thought furiously. No, she would not blame herself, because that did not make one ounce of sense. This was not on her, and it wasn’t on Thorin either. This was Thráin’s doing and the fact that he was doing it at all painted him as a spiteful and vindictive fellow in her eyes. How could anybody be like that and not go mad?

But he did. Or he will at least.

Thorin shook his head. ‘It isn’t for you to feel guilty over.’

‘I’m not feeling guilty,’ she replied quickly. ‘Just… angry.’ It wasn’t an adequate description of her current emotions and so she corrected herself: ‘No, that’s not the word. I’m bloody spitting mad that he’s treating you like that and I would love to bash his brains in, but that’s not going to help right now.’

To her surprise this coaxed the smallest of smiles from him.

‘What?’

He explained: ‘Your elvish friend would say that you have taken on many dwarvish mannerisms, including but not limited to the urge to solve every problem with violence.’

Elvaethor would say that. In fact, he had already said it, and more than once at that. ‘Would that it solved anything. Sorry, I shouldn’t have said any of that. Whatever happened, he is still your father.’

Thorin shook his head. ‘He lost that right.’

That silenced her. She’d said the same thing about her father, despite having given the man more second chances than she had fingers and toes to count them on. She had to make that decision in the end because it was the only one that made sense, the only option that was healthy and wise for her. But Thorin had never gone that far. Kate reckoned it was because Thráin had been lost to him and he still mourned him. It was hard to hate the dead.

But Thráin was very much alive now.

‘What a bloody mess.’ And even that felt like an understatement.

‘You remember that when we met, I hated men,’ Thorin said.

The change in topic was sudden, but Kate was sure it would lead to something. ‘Yes, I do.’ He hadn’t had a good word for men in general. That Kate belonged to that race and was female besides had not done her any favours at first. ‘It’s hardly strange after the experiences you had with them.’ It was the bane of men everywhere that they could be small-minded and stupid in any world, an affliction that was also often visited upon elves and dwarves, no matter how much they denied it.

‘My father fuelled that hate,’ Thorin continued. ‘More in exile than he did before, but maybe my mother tempered it then. He never ceased such talk until the day he… disappeared.’

And now Kate understood. ‘He was trying to drive a wedge between us long before we even met.’ Just trying to understand that reasoning was giving her a headache, but it made sense, in a sickening sort of way. ‘Bloody hell.’

The one reason Thráin had never really approved of Thorin – she privately doubted if he had ever actually loved him now – had been Kate’s presence here today. The reason why he had preached
about men and their failings until he was blue in the face was the fact that he had been made aware that his son would marry a woman of the race of men.

*In a way, I’m at the heart of all their problems.* And yet there was not a single thing she could do about it. It made her feel very powerless and livid at the same time. None of it was fair. Neither of them had asked for this. And for the longest time Thráin had been trying to orchestrate their separation without either of them knowing it.

*Setting the future in stone indeed.*

And then she realised something. ‘Hold on,’ she said, trying to force her thoughts into a semblance of order. ‘It didn’t work. I mean, we met, didn’t like each other for a multitude of reasons, but we still ended up right here. Despite your father’s meddling in things that hadn’t happened yet, we’re still here. And I don’t think anything has changed, because you remember him trying to poison you against men.’

Thorin nodded slowly. ‘Indeed. His efforts were wasted. He failed before he had even begun.’

Kate frowned. ‘Not entirely, though. You hated my guts when we met.’

‘And then I learned to see beyond what I thought to be true about you.’ Thorin looked like he wanted to find the right words to make his point, not an easy task given that they were both up to their eyeballs in uncharted territory. ‘His teachings were not strong enough to prevent our marriage.’

His love for her had been stronger. Despite all the odds being against them, they had still made it this far. Despite Thráin’s meddling. Thorin’s prejudices and Kate’s best intentions not to get attached and go home, they had ended up right where they were now. It was enough to amaze anyone.

*What we have is strong.* She had known that before today. But that opinion had been strengthened just now. Because they were so unlikely to ever happen. Everything argued against it: their people, their upbringing and plain common sense not the least of those reasons. She had forsaken a world to become his wife, he had risked the wrath of his own people to marry her. Their love had to be that strong to withstand all that the world could throw at it.

‘A cheesy romance novel would call that fate,’ she reflected. ‘Or destiny.’ Just the words made her wrinkle her nose in disgust. In fact, if she remembered right fan fictions had always been very liberal with those words as well. That thought made her shudder.

‘What would you call it?’ Thorin asked.

Kate had to think about that for a moment. ‘Just love, I think.’ It was common knowledge that it had turned otherwise very sensible people into idiots. ‘And our pig-headedness.’

That prompted a smile, a real one this time. ‘Aye, it must be that.’

Had they been allowed to continue in this vein, Kate was reasonably certain there would have been kissing in her immediate future. Alas, that was not to be, because the door opened and a dwarrowdam let herself in. She had light brown hair and a very nicely braided beard. There was something just a little bit familiar about her, but Kate couldn’t place it.

‘Oh, hello,’ she said when she spied them, clearly not in the least bit surprised or alarmed to find two strangers in the living room of the King under the Mountain. ‘You were not who I was expecting.’
Kate recovered from the shock of the unexpected visitor first. ‘The King’s in his study, if you’re looking for him,’ she supplied helpfully. ‘And I think the Queen has gone to the kitchen to make tea.’

‘That was just who I was looking for,’ the new arrival said. ‘Theyra, daughter of Onur, at your service.’ She made a half-bow, as far as she could with the baby she had in her arms.

‘Kate, daughter of John, at yours,’ Kate returned the favour before her thoughts came to another sudden halt. No, she can’t be.

But it appeared as though she was. And the fact that Thorin had gone rigid as a statue once again only confirmed that idea. She’d known that his mother’s name was Theyra, but she’d never been able to really picture her. But she looked every bit as friendly as Thorin had described her.

And if she was Thorin’s mother, that would make the baby in her arms a very young Thorin himself. And once she realised that, it was impossible to not look at him. He was asleep, calm and content in his mother’s arms, so very unaware of the things that happened today that would shape his life in so many ways.

This is so strange. Surreal almost.

Theyra had noticed her watching. ‘And my son, Thorin,’ she introduced the child.

I know. And she couldn’t say. It would sound absurd and far-fetched.

‘Pleasure to make your acquaintance,’ she forced herself to say. She must be that good of an actress that Theyra didn’t think anything of it, because she seemed to take Kate’s remark at face value. ‘Both of you.’

‘I’m pleased to hear you think so,’ Theyra replied cheerfully. ‘Here, will you hold him while I find the King?’

Kate’s eyes widened to the size of saucers. ‘I am not sure that’s a good…’

She wasn’t allowed to finish that sentence. ‘Thank you!’ Theyra said and she pushed her son into Kate’s arms.

There was nothing she could do. And Kate had handled too many babies for her to act any different. Instinct took over and she grabbed the child the moment Theyra let go. She adjusted her grip so she held him more securely.

Theyra dashed off to the study almost immediately and she was left standing there with a very young Thorin asleep in her arms. Panic rose fast and threatened to overwhelm her. This was never meant to be. Two versions of her husband at the same place at the same time was probably not a very good idea. The world hadn’t imploded yet, so they were probably safe in that area, but the emotional carnage this could wreak was considerable.

She looked at her husband from over his younger self. He had been struck dumb as well. She saw her own alarm reflected in his eyes.

And at the same time, it felt very natural to hold a baby, even if it was this particular one, yet another thing she could add to her ever-growing list of things she had never thought she would ever do. He was just a helpless baby now. He couldn’t help it that the world had just stopped making any sense overnight.
Still the unease remained.

Thorin was still looking at her. Their eyes met.

‘This is not good,’ Kate heard herself say.

*In the category of understatements, this one is a winner.*

Chapter End Notes

Next time: meet Theyra.
The Book is not cooperating with certain details, so you’ll get another chapter of this next week.
Reviews/feedback would be much appreciated. I’d love to hear what you’re thinking about this.
Thank you for reading!
Theyra wasn’t sure of anything at this precise moment, least of all about what exactly was happening today. It was nothing new for Thráin to be taciturn and unsociable. Theyra remained unflappable in the face of his moods, because she knew he was a good dwarf. He was hard-working, a loyal husband and a gentle father. True, he had bad days now and again. Everybody had those. Thráin’s bad days came more frequently than those of other folk, was all.

But this morning he had scared her. It was not unusual that Thráin would claim his father had gone and lost his mind. The King under the Mountain ran his kingdom in a different way than Thráin was convinced it ought to be run. But something about that meeting this morning had been different. Look to them for clarity, if that is what you seek. But it will bring you no joy. What did it all mean?

Then there was that odd episode with Thorin. Normally she had to prise her son from his father’s arms and even then Thráin only relinquished his hold when it became clear that Thorin needed to be fed, the one task he could not perform himself. But today he had deliberately stepped away, without so much as an explanation. He’d looked at the babe as if he’d turned into a rabid warg overnight.

So off she had gone to her father-in-law for answers, since he was apparently the one who had been struck by insanity most. She would go to him and request an explanation for the fact that her husband seemed to have received a whole new personality in the course of an hour.

The dwarf and the woman she had encountered in front of the fire were unexpected and perhaps part of the reason why her husband had behaved so oddly just now. The dwarf hadn’t said much. There was something familiar about him, but Theyra couldn’t put her finger on it. And her attention was not on him. The woman introduced herself politely enough. And she seemed like a sensible sort, so Theyra had handed her the baby and had gone to see Thrór. Whatever was the matter here, she doubted it was the kind of conversation one would bring an infant to.

The woman was as good as her word and she found the King under the Mountain in his study, looking over some documents, or at least making a brave effort to do so.

‘Theyra!’ he exclaimed, surprised to see her and, to her astonishment, a little alarmed. ‘I did not expect your presence.’

There were many secrets all of a sudden. Theyra was a dwarf and as such used to keeping them, but never from her kith and kin. They were entitled to know all there was to know about her. And now
she was being shut out. There was an unpleasant feeling in her gut.

‘My husband claims you’ve gone mad,’ Theyra announced. He didn’t look insane to her eyes, so she would reserve judgement until she knew more.

Thrór rubbed his forehead. ‘Aye, he would.’

‘And have you?’ she asked. ‘Gone mad, that is?’

‘Not to the best of my knowledge, lass,’ he reassured her.

Theyra believed him. But still, something must have prompted Thráin’s behaviour just now and it could only have happened in his parents’ home. It was the only place he had been today and he had been perfectly well when he had left home this morning. It stood to reason whatever disaster had taken place had happened right here.

‘I think Thráin might have,’ she said hesitantly. The way he acted had deeply unsettled her. ‘He was so angry and harsh. I do not know him like that. He would not even hold Thorin. I had to take him with me, because he would not mind him while I came here.’

Now at last her father-in-law showed signs of alarm. ‘Where is he now?’

‘At home,’ Theyra replied. Brooding, most likely. But over what?

Thrór shook his head. ‘Not your husband, your babe,’ he clarified.

‘Oh,’ Theyra understood. ‘I left him with the woman in the living room. She seemed nice enough.’ If anything, she seemed to know what she was doing. The way she’d held Thorin radiated practised ease, as if she’d held many infants before and could do it without needing to think about it. Thorin was safe enough there for a little while.

To her surprise, Thrór echoed the woman’s words. ‘I’m not entirely sure that’s a good plan, Theyra.’

‘Why, because she is of the race of men?’ Theyra never much cared for those views and she didn’t think Thrór held with them. ‘Those are Thráin’s notions, not yours, are they?’

He did not answer. ‘Follow me,’ he said. ‘We’ll need to explain a few things, but our guests had better be there for it.’ She was almost convinced he had taken lessons in being enigmatic from the elves by now.

Not knowing what else to do, Theyra followed him out of his study and back into the living room. The woman had sat herself down in the chair in front of the hearth, Thorin cradled in her arms. Her son was still asleep, content if anything. He’d grabbed one of Kate’s fingers and held on tightly. Kate’s companion was staring at the child in what appeared to be horror. She’d seen that same look on Thráin’s face just a short while ago.

What is it with folk thinking a mere babe can do them harm? Theyra thought furiously.

Freya had emerged from the kitchen now as well and went to stand next to her husband. The look on her face was concerned, though she managed a reassuring smile in Theyra’s direction.

Her well of patience had run dry. ‘Will somebody enlighten me as to what it is that I am not seeing?’ she asked. She could not altogether keep the annoyance out of her voice.
Thrór took a deep breath. ‘Theyra, I would like to introduce you to your son, Thorin.’

‘I know my own son!’ she snapped before she realised that Thrór had indicated the full grown dwarf and not the baby she had birthed mere weeks ago.

Her mouth fell open.

Thrór took the time she had been struck dumb to explain the situation. Any other day Theyra might have laughed, have declared that this was too ridiculous to be true, but there were several things that argued against such a response. There was Thráin’s odd behaviour to consider, his sudden aversion to holding the son he had adored only hours before. And then there was the grown-up Thorin himself. Now that she knew who he was, she knew why he had looked so familiar. And Maker be good, she understood why he had looked so alarmed when he had seen her. Thrór said he had come from a good two hundred years into the future. She would most likely not be alive anymore.

It was a sobering thought.

Then her eyes shifted to the woman Kate. Thorin’s wife, she was told. It was a most unlikely sort of union, but Thrór had never given her any reason to doubt his word before. And what reason could he possibly have to lie to her?

‘So I reckon you probably want to take him back now,’ Kate said. She looked a bit sheepish and more than a little uncomfortable.

‘Ah,’ she said. She had temporarily lost the capacity for coherent speech, or movement. Something told her it would not be such a bad plan to take her infant son back from the arms of his future wife, but she was still looking at the grown Thorin.

A few hours ago Theyra would have thought it to be impossible to feel a bond with someone she had for all intents and purposes never met. He was older than she was now and yet he was her son. Her arms were itching to hold him now as much as they wanted to hold her baby.

This cannot be the natural way of things. She knew that, but there were some things that defied the rules of nature. And there was a longing in her son’s eyes as well. He attempted to conceal it, badly, almost as if he dared not look for her affection. Well, given what Thráin may have done – and she would be having some choice words about that with him later – perhaps he did not hope for a welcome here.

And she would prove him wrong. This may be as confusing as any situation she had ever faced, but at the heart of it the truth was simple. Thorin was her son, whether he was only weeks old or past his two hundredth birthday. The fact that there was time travel involved should not make a difference.

Mind made up, she strode forward and enveloped her grown-up boy in a warm embrace. It felt a little odd, given that he was taller now than she and she had to stand on tiptoes to reach him.

And then he froze under her touch.

Had she gone wrong? Had she mistaken what she had seen on his face? It almost appeared as if she had somehow made a mistake.

But her doubt evaporated when after only an awkward moment or two he returned the embrace. And there was nothing awkward or formal about that. Strange, she hadn’t even heard him speak yet, hadn’t exchanged so much as a greeting with him.
She held him at arm’s length to have a good look at him when the hug reached its natural end. He
did look like Thráin, but she fancied she could see a few of her own features in his face as well,
not least of all in the hesitant smile he favoured her with now.

‘It is a pleasure to meet you,’ she told him. And she meant that. It was beyond strange, but it felt
completely right. And if Theyra was being really honest, she rather liked that she got a look at what
her son turned out to be. So far, she was rather pleased. She wasn’t sure what to make of the
woman yet, but she seemed nice enough. Theyra might learn to like her. After all, she trusted
Thorin’s judgement; no son of hers would be so stupid as to marry someone not worthy of him.

It took him a little longer to find his voice, but find it he did. ‘It is good to see you again, amad.’

They both smiled.

This is surreal.

Thorin had hardly dared to dream that the meeting with his mother would go off without a hitch,
not with the confrontation with his father fresh in mind. Of course, he knew his mother was hewn
from a very different rock than Thráin, but she might not necessarily be pleased to see him either.

In hindsight he should have known better.

She was as she had always been: kind, friendly and so, so young. He was older now himself, which
was why her youth stood out to him. And because of Smaug, she would never know old age.

The guilt made a spectacular return.

He knew that he should let things happen as they had, as he remembered them. The consequences
of what would happen if he lost that battle against himself were unthinkable, though doubtlessly
his father would approve, he thought bitterly. To undo his marriage, his wife and their children…
The thought alone caused an ache in his chest so strong he could barely breathe. But to let his
mother die when a simple warning could change her fate... Oh, the temptation was so strong he
could hardly begin to fight it. He was not strong enough.

Fortunately Kate stepped in and saved him from himself. ‘So, ehm, would you mind taking him
back now?’ she asked.

Theyra at last seemed to recognise the problem. ‘Ah, yes. I see.’ But she made no attempt to take
her baby out of Kate’s arms.

It was an odd sight. Of course, Thorin had no memories of being so young, so he could not
remember this encounter. Even so, it was odd to think that the first time Kate had met him had not
been the first time he met her. Of course neither of them had known it at the time. They couldn’t
have. It was as Kate said: this whole time travel debacle was enough to do one’s head in.

Just looking at this scene now could cause headaches. Kate was standing in a way he’d seen her
stand countless times before. She’d held their own children in that manner. She knew how to do
this. There was an ease to her manner, a quiet confidence that she had been given a task she knew
how to perform. And infants felt that. Thorin observed wryly that at least the baby version of him
had been completely content to be held by her from the start. He knew something it had taken an
older Thorin a long time to learn: that he was in safe hands with her.

He maintained his distance, not least of all because he did not know how to behave around his younger self. And he looked at him with not a little envy. He had been so innocent at that point, a blank slate. Nothing had happened yet.

No, that was not entirely true. This very morning he had ensured that for the rest of his life, he would never have a good relationship with his own father. All because my choice of wife displeased him.

He had spent many a sleepless night wondering why he had never found approval in his father’s eyes, had gone over his own actions in great detail in a doomed attempt to identify where he was lacking. And now he knew that it was not for something he had done, but for something he had yet to do.

No one holds grudges like the dwarves. Although, to be fair, dwarves generally did not hold the grudge until after the offence.

Theyra still did not take the baby. Her brow furrowed, as it always did when she was deep in thought. ‘Is that why?’ she asked. ‘Is that why my husband has been behaving so strangely this morning?’ She indicated Kate.

Thrór saved Thorin from having to answer that question himself. ‘Afraid so. He’ll come round, I’m sure.’

Thorin was not. And if the look on his mother’s face was anything to go by, she had her doubts as well. And she had them with good reason. Thráin had always been steadfast in his beliefs.

We are sowing the seeds for the future we know. The more he saw, the more he believed that Kate’s theory had merits. It made sense. True, if they wanted to, they could probably change it, but they had decided not to. And because they had come here from a specific future, that would mean that they were always going to have to make that choice: after all, they already knew they had made it. Causing headaches indeed.

‘And if he does not, it will be his loss,’ Theyra said decisively after a lengthy silence that spoke volumes. She marched over to the couch and sat down. ‘I for one would like to get to know my son better.’ She directed a dazzling smile at Thorin that took him completely off guard. ‘After all, not every mother is so blessed as to get a sneak peek at what her son is going to be like when he’s all grown.’

She was kind. Thorin had always known this to be true, but seeing her in the flesh, being exactly like she had always been in his memories, it made the pull towards her so much stronger. It was hard to resist and he did not want to fight it. But he also knew that if he got pulled in, he would be tempted to do something he should not.

‘And to be honest, I’d like to think I raised him with better manners,’ she carried on. She gave him a pointed look. ‘He might introduce his wife to me for instance.’

The corners of his mouth curled up. ‘Why would I?’ he asked. ‘When she has already introduced herself?’

Her eyebrows jumped up, but the smile stayed on her face. ‘Cheeky as well, huh?’

Kate must have sensed the shift in mood, because she joined in. ‘Can’t be helped,’ she said lightly. ‘I’d shake your hand, but, you know, I’m still holding your baby.’ He could see that it made her as
uncomfortable as it made him. The time travel and its complications were odd enough, but this brought home the strangeness of it all more than anything else that had happened before.

‘Eager to be rid of me, are you?’ he asked, keeping the conversation light on purpose.

Kate rolled her eyes at him.

And if anything, his younger self was not quite ready to be moved. He was awake now and had taken hold of Kate’s index finger, which he’d stuck into his mouth. He, unlike the woman who held him, was happy exactly where he was.

In some small ways it vexed Thorin that he’d clearly been smarter as an infant than he had been as an adult. At least he’d known who to trust then.

Theyra looked at her, took stock of her. ‘It looks as though he is in good hands,’ she observed. There was definitely a double meaning in those words.

He exhaled in relief, though he shouldn’t have. He’d always thought his mother would have approved of Kate if she had been in possession of all the facts. As it turned out, the facts were not even required.

‘The best,’ he agreed.

He did not often speak of his feelings, not explicitly anyway. But his words were true. Kate had shielded him from madness and had brought him a peace he would have believed impossible ten years ago. He was content now, a feeling he had all but forgotten.

‘Well, I see how it’s going to be,’ Kate nodded. She looked as if she’d given herself a mental kick in the behind to go along with this. ‘It seems I’m outnumbered. Looks like baby Thorin is going to have to stay right where he is.’ She shifted the babe into an easier position. He obviously did not mind.

‘It appears you have experience with this,’ Theyra observed.

Kate nodded. ‘I do,’ she replied.

‘We have two boys and a girl,’ Thorin added. He had not trusted his father with that information, but he felt comfortable sharing this with the people currently present. They would not use it against him. And it was one of the very few things that he could speak of. Mentioning that he had children would not change the future. He was reasonably certain of that.

His grandfather did not look surprised to learn this. Perhaps Kate had already told him. It was not impossible. After all, when he had woken this morning he had found the two of them in front of the fire. He had intended to ask what had happened, but the encounter with his father had driven that question right out of his mind. It was yet another thing that had not gone according to plan.

These past few days nothing appeared to.

His mother’s face split in a wide smile. ‘Why, I’m barely a mother before I’m a grandmother!’

The reaction to this news was not entirely unexpected, but still a pleasant surprise. Thorin had heard too many comments about Kate’s so-called negative influence and the way her mannish blood polluted the line of Durin. Had Thráin learned of his grandchildren, he would doubtlessly have joined the ranks of those who ventilated these views on a regular basis. Worse, he might have taken practical steps to undo what he thought was a grave crime against his people.
His thoughts came to a sudden halt at that. No. He believed that his father had sunk low, but he would not, could not believe him capable of raising his hand against Thorin’s loved ones. No dwarf worth anything would ever commit so grievous a sin. And Kate was a woman at that.

And yet…

Thorin now knew that from this day onward his father had worked against his marriage in the only way he could, that he had fought for his own ends with all the strength he possessed. Was he really certain what Thráin would and would not do?

*I disappointed him all my years.* And perhaps Thráin had entertained hopes that Frerin would turn out better, that he would marry well and father children to carry on his line. But Frerin had fallen at Azanulbizar and Thráin had lost his mind very shortly after.

*Did he run mad because he had lost all hope that his line would endure?*

The longer he was here, the more pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. He felt sick to his stomach.

Kate had seen the change in his mood and communicated the question with her eyes.*Are you all right?* he read there. *Can I help?*

But she could not, no matter how much he wished for it. And he could not solve this himself either. It was in his past. He understood matters now that had confounded him for so long, but now that he had clarity, he wished for ignorance instead.

Theyra seemed to have followed that line of thought at least partially. ‘I reckon it’s best we don’t tell your father,’ she said. She knew her husband well enough to know that his response would not be favourable.

Thorin smiled ruefully. ‘I think that would be wise.’

And even with that precaution taken, could he really be sure Kate was safe? He may have agreed with his mother that he could be in no safer hands, but was the same true about she in his?

Kate could not have failed to notice that from one moment to the next, something had seriously started to bother her husband. Yes, she agreed that it would probably not be a good idea that Thráin would be informed that he was a grandfather. He had taken it badly that Thorin had married a woman of the race of men. The news that he had half-dwarves for grandchildren would probably do him in. As it was, she was fairly sure that his blood pressure was already heading towards the danger zone.

But Thorin did not elaborate and she had to wait until Theyra was good and ready to leave – which wasn’t until after dinner – to actually ask him.

That didn’t mean that she didn’t like Thorin’s mother. In fact, she had reached the conclusion that Thorin’s esteem of her was well-founded. She was kind and open-minded and unexpectedly witty. That had come as something of a surprise.

For about an hour she had been stuck with baby Thorin, which was fine, more or less, so long as
she didn’t think too hard about who she was holding. Kate honestly did not mind holding babies; after all, she’d had three of her own. It was a task that came easy to her now. But it was a strange thought that the dwarf she loved with all her heart, whose bed she shared and whose children she’d borne was the same dwarf as the child she was holding. These were two images of him that could not be reconciled. She could not be his caregiver and wife both at the same time. That wasn’t the way the world was supposed to work.

So she had been beyond relieved when Freya had finally put her out of her misery a good sixty minutes later. The baby hadn’t liked that very much and had wailed a little, something Thorin – the little so-and-so – found vastly amusing. She was glad he’d loosened up a bit – his mother clearly had a very good effect on him – but all that time there had been a shadow in his eyes that she found hard to interpret.

But she wouldn’t ask, not with Theyra still there.

‘So,’ she said, when Theyra had left and Thrór and Freya were in Thrór’s study catching up on paperwork. ‘Will you tell me?’ They were in front of the hearth, the same place they had been this morning when Theyra had come in. Only now it was early in the evening. ‘Whatever it is that unsettled you so much this morning?’ she clarified.

Unsettled was still an understatement; he’d looked as though he’d been stabbed in the gut.

He took a moment to gather his thoughts. ‘I fear for your safety,’ he admitted.

Kate had not seen that one coming. ‘Why?’ she asked. It really did not make much sense. Thrór and Freya had offered them a place to stay. It was safe here. Why would Thorin fear any threat towards her now? And why only since this morning?

‘I do not trust my father,’ Thorin said. Even confessing that much pained him, and Kate reckoned that it shamed him as well. And it shouldn’t. Whatever Thráin got up to, it wasn’t Thorin’s fault. He certainly hadn’t asked for his father to be such a prick.

‘Because he would try to tear us apart before we’ve even started,’ she recapped, trying to understand if that was what had him so worried. ‘I thought we had already agreed that it wasn’t going to work, in spite of his very best efforts?’ Now that she knew that Thorin had made up his mind in favour of preserving the timeline as they knew it, she was confident that he would not be swayed from that course. She had nothing to fear from Thráin’s meddling. It was unwelcome and infuriating, but ultimately without result.

Either way, even if he managed something in that department, she was not personally at risk. Everything and everyone she cared about would be, but Thorin would not have referred to her “safety” unless he had meant exactly that.

‘That may not be enough for him,’ Thorin said. His eyes were willing her to understand without him having to spell it out for her, because saying the words would be too painful.

So she tried. Even though she felt particularly slow, eventually she cottoned on. ‘Oh.’ The fact that he had thought of it at all caught her off guard. Dwarves were far too honourable for such things. It was beneath them, a mannish practise they abhorred. ‘You think he would try to… remove me from the board here and now?’

‘I do not know.’ Thorin stared into the flames. ‘And I cannot know. But yes, I fear it.’

It was a novel idea. Kate had met with more than her fair share of haters. But they had all observed
certain boundaries. There was a line they would never cross. They would not lay hands on her. Dwarves would sooner cut off their hands rather than consider murder. But now Thorin suggested Thráin might have done that, or would. Or might.

Kate didn’t rightly know what to make of that.

‘Dwarves don’t kill,’ she replied cautiously. ‘As a rule.’

The smile on Thorin’s face was utterly devoid of amusement. ‘Have you forgotten that my family is particularly susceptible to madness?’ The words were harsh and bitter.

As if she ever would. Thrór fell prey to greed, Thráin to grief or shattered hopes… And Thorin, he had come close to paranoia. It was years ago and it had been during that awful two weeks when they hadn’t talked. Just remembering it made her feel cold and lonely all over again. But he had won that fight. They had made up and Thorin had regained control over himself.

Is he losing control now? Kate did not honestly want to even seriously consider this possibility. She knew he had not acted rationally yesterday, but the circumstances were hardly favourable. And besides, everybody had moments of poor judgement. It didn’t indicate insanity. Could this be paranoia or is he really on to something?

She considered the evidence. No, she decided. Thorin was completely sane. He was afraid, but perhaps with reason. Thráin had frightened her this morning. There was something in his eyes that gave her the shivers. She’d seen loathing there and a hatred the strength of which had taken her completely by surprise. She did not trust Thráin. If she encountered him in a dark alley, she would run without a second thought.

Was that not all the answer she needed?

‘We don’t know anything yet,’ she said empathetically. ‘We can’t jump to conclusions. We mustn’t.’

Thorin nodded. ‘I know.’ He shook his head. ‘And yet…’

Kate knew what he meant. It was another uncertainty added to the pile that had started forming since they arrived in this place yesterday morning. There was nothing to build on. Their whole lives had been turned over and inside out. Nothing was as it ought to be. Thráin was only the top of the iceberg.

‘I don’t know what to do,’ Kate admitted. There had been times when she had felt like that before. She had lost count of the number of times on the quest when something happened that shouldn’t have. But they had found a way through every time.

Kate could not see the way ahead now. Her path was shrouded in mists.

‘Nor I,’ Thorin said. He looked at her. ‘Don’t be alone with him.’

That was a promise easily given. ‘I won’t.’

She might consider finding a dagger to carry with her from now on, just in case. Either way, it might give Thorin some peace of mind.

‘What will we do?’ she asked. ‘Goodness knows how long it will take to locate Gandalf. We can’t stay here all that time, can we?’ She’d be climbing the walls before the week was out. And Thorin would not be far behind. Besides, it was a bad idea to expose Thorin to his lost loved ones for
extended periods of time. She could see the strain around his eyes, the rigid way he held his shoulders. It was torture for him to be here and being unable to interfere. They needed a little distance.

Not in all the time Kate had known him, had Thorin looked so lost. ‘I do not know.’

She could only hope the answer would come to them. So hope she did.

Chapter End Notes

I’ll be busy all day tomorrow, so this chapter is a little early.
Next time there’s trouble on its way.
On another note, I’ve been writing bits and pieces for another Duly Noted multi-chapter project, which would be published when the Into the Past project is done. The only thing is that it would be a bit of a crossover with Jasper Fforde’s Thursday Next series. The focus is definitely on Kate and Thorin and their story, but I would use the rules of that universe and a few of the characters. Would you be interested in reading it or would you like me to publish one chapter and decide then?
Do let me know.
As always, thank you for reading. Reviews would be most welcome.
Into the Past Part 5: Off the Deep End

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Your chances of survival are about one in a thousand. So here's what you do. You forget the thousand, and you concentrate on the one.

Doctor Who

‘Good morning, Mistress Lily!’ a cheerful voice called from across the street.

Even after three weeks Kate’s mind needed half a second to realise that she had been the intended recipient of that greeting. Bugger this whole false name business, she thought. It was necessary, she knew that, but Lily sounded nothing like Kate and she had never gone in for the whole cloak and dagger business anyway.

‘And a good morning to you as well, Master Vidar,’ she returned, swivelling around and directing her friendliest smile at the early customer. ‘You are very early.’

‘Off to work,’ he said. ‘Thought I’d swing by to see if my tools are all done.’

‘They are.’ They had been ready since yesterday afternoon. ‘Let me fetch them for you.’ She vanished inside the workshop.

This whole set-up had been Freya’s idea. She had come in at the tail end of Thorin and Kate’s conversation and had agreed that it would be best for everyone involved if the two time travellers had a place of their own to stay. She had arranged a place – with windows, Mahal bless her heart – for them to live and a workshop for Thorin to work. They were now passing themselves off as Fryrson of Vari, wandering blacksmith, and Lily of Bree, his business partner. Folk would remember a dwarf-human married couple even two hundred years on, but even though people thought this combination a little odd, they didn’t comment much.

‘Customers this early?’ asked Thorin. He was already hard at work. Thanks to Thrór’s not so subtle advertising – a good thing dwarves were not naturally inclined towards suspicion of their own – they’d had a roaring trade going within the week. And of course word spread when it turned out that Thorin really was good at what he did.

‘Vidar, come to collect his tools,’ she replied.

‘Top shelf,’ Thorin helpfully supplied.

‘Thanks!’

It was odd really how well they settled into this. Perhaps this was what their lives might have been like if Thorin had not been a king. They could just have been a married couple running a business without everyone and their mother sticking their noses into her private life. She felt a sense of
security in this way of life. To her own surprise, she found that it suited her.

And at the same time there was this sense of wrongness that would not leave her alone. This was not their life. They were never meant to live like this. They were imposters. They had to be, because the timeline might come crashing down if they came clean to the Mountain at large.

And she longed for home. Home was where her loved ones were. Sometimes she woke at night and the longing for her children was so strong that she could feel a stabbing pain in her chest. How were they getting on? Was time passing for them at the same rate it passed for Thorin and Kate? Did they miss them? Did they wonder what had become of them?

*Do they think we are dead?*

That thought had been so potent it had turned her stomach and she’d needed to run to empty its contents into a bowl. She had cried for hours that night. It was happening all over again. Everything that her family in England had suffered through after her disappearance was repeating itself. And now her children suffered. She had never before felt so angry and so powerless at the same time.

‘All done,’ she announced to Vidar once she returned to the counter, tools in hand. ‘Would you like to inspect them?’

Dwarves, she found, generally did. It was not suspicion, but rather a mark of respect, to show that they took the workman’s job seriously. And so it came as no surprise that Vidar took his time to give his tools a thorough once-over while Kate talked him through what had been done to repair and improve them. After the customer had declared himself satisfied with the work and the service, he paid, wished her a good day and left. He had been unfailingly polite throughout the whole exchange.

‘You are becoming quite good at this,’ Thorin observed. He came up behind her.

‘I must have missed my calling,’ Kate said lightly. She had noticed herself how easy all of this was, how simple and uncomplicated. There had been a remarkable absence of having to fight for everything over these last few weeks. It had left her feeling oddly bereft. And if that was not a tell-tale sign of just how strange her life had become, she would not know what was. ‘Any more orders that’ll be collected today?’

‘A few in the afternoon,’ Thorin replied. ‘Most of which are done.’

‘Good,’ Kate nodded. ‘Well, there’s not a customer in sight, so I’m going to put the kettle on. You fancy a cup?’

He did. Kate walked to the back of the shop to make it. It was very early in the morning, so there were very few people about. That would probably change before too long. It was promising to be an ordinary sort of day, their new normal for as long as the wizard was not found.

*I wish he shows up quickly.* But wishing could not make him arrive any sooner.

As it turned out, ordinary was not quite on the agenda today. She had barely dropped off a cup of steaming tea with Thorin when she saw they had customers. Thrór was marching towards their forge and shop with definite intent, Thráin and an unknown dwarf trailing behind. Thrór was chatting animatedly while he walked, but his enthusiasm clearly did not rub off on his companions. Thráin sported a face like thunder and the other had an expression of long suffering weariness.

‘Good morning, Mistress Ka… Lily!’ Thrór hailed her from across the street. ‘A fine day, is it
Kate could not suppress a smile. She liked the current King under the Mountain. A few days after their unexpected arrival they had decided to avoid all topics they could not talk about and instead only discuss the ones they could. After that, they had hit it off nicely. Thrór was an easy dwarf to get along with. There was something disarming about his manner, an almost childlike enthusiasm and energy that drew a body in almost without their noticing. Small wonder Thorin loved him that much.

‘Very fine indeed,’ she agreed. ‘What brings you to our humble shop this morning?’

‘My brother’s in need of a new axe,’ Thrór announced, indicating the unknown dwarf. ‘His old one’s as good as gone. Shoddy craftsmanship in the Iron Mountains, you see. So I said to Grór: “Dearest brother, I know exactly where you should be looking for a replacement. Best work within a thousand miles. You won’t find any better.” So I invited him along to show him in person and here we are.’ Thrór had taken great delight in promoting Thorin’s work since they had set up shop. Kate suspected he was showing off his grandson in the only way he could, given the circumstances. He never even bothered to hide that he was proud of him, something that endeared Kate to him even more.

So this was Grór. Kate had heard of him, but she’d never had the pleasure of meeting him. He looked like he could have been Thrór’s twin, albeit he was an inch or so taller. And alike though they looked, their attitudes were as different as night and day. Where Thrór was cheerful and outgoing, Grór was chagrined and closed off. One might almost mistake Thráin for his son rather than Thrór’s; the expressions on their faces were a perfect match.

‘You’re very welcome here,’ Kate told him. She’d worked a summer when she was sixteen in a grocer’s shop and had seen her fair share of difficult customers. It had taken her considerable effort not to lose her temper multiple times a day and by summer’s end she was only too pleased to hand in her resignation. It turned out that being nice to people who had no intention to return that courtesy was not in her nature.

Yet here she was, essentially doing the same job.

Funny how things turn out sometimes. Just a shame she wasn’t laughing.

‘It’s not your work we’ve come to see, so cease your idle chatter, girl,’ Thráin told her, glowering at her. If there’d been awards for Most Vexing Customer of the Century, Thráin would have won that award with one hand tied behind his back. He’s get first prize for rudeness as well.

Take a deep breath and count to ten, she told herself and she really needed to do that. Thráin was just begging to get his nose broken, preferably by her fist, and the longer she was forced to suffer his presence, the more she was tempted to just get it over with.

But it would harm business and Mahal only knew how long they would still be stuck here. It would make things very awkward to say the least.

So she ignored Thráin and invited Grór to come inside and have a look at the axes on offer. By now she knew enough of Thorin’s trade to answer Grór’s questions and she neatly side-stepped the trick question he sent her way as well. He was testing her, but she would not stumble.

‘Very well,’ Grór nodded eventually. ‘This is good work.’

Kate sensed that this was the best compliment he was going to give. She readily agreed with it.
Thorin would never be content to sell something that was anything other than completely perfect. If anything, Grór’s assessment of Thorin’s work was a rather big understatement. But under the motto of *don’t offend a paying customer* Kate plastered on her best smile and merely agreed politely.

Thráin wrinkled his nose. ‘It’s lacking,’ Thráin interjected just as Grór appeared as though he might be ready to ask for the price. ‘No good smith would employ the services of a mannish lass, if indeed business is all she is here for. They share quarters, as I understand it.’

It was a good thing those axes were too heavy to lift; Kate was sure that was the only thing stopping her from planting one in Thráin’s forehead and timeline be damned.

She ignored him as best she could. ‘Would you be interested in purchasing, sir?’ she asked Grór.

But he had listened to his troublesome nephew. ‘Is that true?’

‘I don’t see how my living arrangements are any of your concern,’ she replied, taking care to keep her tone light, which was increasingly difficult. ‘I don’t inquire after the customers’ personal affairs either.’

Grór was taken aback by her reply, but grudgingly ceded the point. That was one of the best things about dwarves; unless you happened to be the monarch, they were fairly content to keep their noses out of somebody else’s business when it was made clear to them that their attention was unwanted.

Thráin on the other hand was affronted. ‘There is the matter of scandal to consider,’ he insisted. ‘If it became known that the Lord of the Iron Hills did business in such a place, there would be consequences.’

That was it. She’d had it with him. ‘I’m used to such small-mindedness in mannish villages and towns,’ she observed, copying Thorin’s best icy disapproval tone. It was either that or shouting and his way was more dignified. ‘I find that dwarves in general are more civilised and less eager to jump to conclusions, especially when they are not in possession of all the facts. I would advise you to take care with your words, sir, or I will feel compelled to ask you to leave.’

Thráin appeared to be choking, but Grór considered her words carefully. ‘Aye, you’re right, Mistress Lily. Shall we discuss terms?’

When he left the shop with a new axe, Kate felt like she’d won a battle. And if she was petty enough to feel a little smug to see Thráin sulking behind him, well, so long as she made no mention of the sentiment, no one would call her out on it.

Thrór stayed behind, face apologetic. ‘Sorry about that, lass.’

‘You’ve nothing to be sorry for,’ she pointed out. After all, he hadn’t been unbelievably rude just now. And she’d never seen the point of apologising for someone else’s behaviour. ‘And I believe your brother just bought an axe in spite of all that unpleasantness.’

‘He’d be a fool not to,’ Thrór remarked. ‘Finest work this side of the Misty Mountains.’ His voice rang with pride. ‘It must have been me who taught the lad, don’t you think?’

Kate was fairly certain Thrór did have a hand in Thorin’s education. ‘Absolutely,’ she agreed. It was one of the very few things about the future that she could tell him. And Thrór was always fishing for more. Usually she had to disappoint him and, to be fair to him, he took the rebuffs with grace.
His face lit up in a brilliant smile. ‘Good, very good.’ He revelled in that little bit of information for a little while and then returned his attention to the conversation. ‘I had another purpose in visiting today,’ he said.

‘Oh?’

Thrór nodded. ‘Aye, you see, the elves are coming for a visit. Trade talks and the like. And it’s customary to welcome them with a feast and suitable entertainment.’ Kate had learned that the elves’ and dwarves’ definition of “suitable entertainment” were not even on the same planet. That in itself was rather entertaining.

‘That’s still the custom where I’m from,’ she agreed.

‘So you know what to expect,’ Thrór said, pleased with her response. ‘That’s good, for I’ve come to invite you.’

Normally a night of feast, music and dance was enough to make Kate accept, especially when she was not there in any official capacity. But this was not her time and Thranduil was about the last person she wanted to meet here. Because he would remember and that would certainly have consequences. She was not ready for any of that. And neither was the world.

So with a regretful smile she related her reasons for refusing the invitation.

Thrór waved her concern away. ‘Nah, he won’t know you’re there. There’ll be some men from Dale too and if you stay out of his way, he won’t pay you any mind. You’ll be beneath his notice.’

There was something to say for that view. ‘There’ll be a risk.’ And still a considerable one at that.

The King under the Mountain shrugged. ‘There’s a risk with being here and being in the public eye. You’ve done admirably so far. And I would like to see that grandson of mine smile some more,’ he added.

Bloody hell. The moment Kate was convinced he had not much depth to him, he would make a perceptive remark like that and remind her once again that there was a lot more to him than met the eye. He’s got such a big heart. It was hard to even conceive the idea that this was the same dwarf who would in some years put gold above people.

It is such a tragedy. Kate hadn’t realised the scale of it before she had come here. And now her heart ached for him. Was it any wonder that the temptation to tell him and save him from that fate was so strong in Thorin? Kate herself had to resist the urge to come clean and prevent that catastrophe.

And if put that way, how could she still refuse?

She could not.

Thrór was beyond pleased to see his grandson and his wife show up to the feast. They’d taken care to arrive separately, but they drifted back together once they were inside the great hall. He had noticed that before. Where one went, the other was not far behind.
Thrán didn’t see it. Thrór suspected that he did not particularly want to either. But Thrór had never believed in closing his eyes to truths that were right in front of him. And it was clear as daylight that his grandson loved his wife and that she loved him in return. It was an unlikely match, granted, but it was a true one. And, more importantly, Kate made Thorin smile.

It had not taken Thrór long to establish that Thorin did not smile easily or often. At first he had contributed that to the shock of finding himself in the past with no clear way of how to get back to where he was supposed to be.

Then Thráin had come and Thrór had begun to see that there may be some solid foundation for Thorín’s behaviour. He had never been one to analyse situations to death, but he found he could not help himself here. Most of what had gone on that morning had gone right over his head, but he had seen and heard enough to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that the relationship between Thorin and Thráin was complicated and strained at the very least.

So Thrór had set himself a task, of making Thorin’s stay in this time as pleasant as he could make it. He’d had a stern word with Thráin about what conduct was and was not acceptable, but Thráin hadn’t taken note of anything he’d said since age twenty and clearly wasn’t about to change that now if the exchange at the forge was any indication.

He made small talk with elves for a bit. He was lucky enough to escape the company of the elven king himself tonight, who obviously thought it was beneath him to converse with a dwarf. He might think of this as a slight to the dwarves. Thrór only counted it a boon.

‘Ah, Mistress Lily,’ he hailed Kate when the dancing started up and he found the opportunity to disappear onto the dancefloor. ‘How are you this fine evening?’

‘Watered and fed and certainly not lacking good company,’ Kate returned. ‘Thank you for the invitation.’

Thrór would never claim to not like men. They had their merits to be sure. He just wasn’t particularly close to any, so he never saw their good qualities up close, which was why he couldn’t name any without giving it some solid thought.

But he liked Kate after a fashion. Thorin seemed a sensible dwarf – how could any grandson of his be anything else – and Thrór trusted his judgement. And he soon found that he had been right to do so. There was something just a bit dwarvish about Kate’s manner that he rather appreciated.

‘No trouble.’ He waved her thanks away. He’d seen Thorin enjoying a good conversation with a few smiths at the feast and it looked like he had actually had a good time. And since that had been the point of this exercise all along, Thrór counted the night a success. ‘It’s a good night. One can almost ignore the elves.’

Kate started to chuckle, but stopped midway. Her eyes had landed on someone a little distance away. ‘Oh.’ The smile vanished.

Thrór turned to look, but there were too many folk about to tell which one had drawn her attention. ‘Everything all right, lass?’

She shook herself out of her apparent shock. ‘Yes, I’m fine. I just didn’t expect to see him here.’

When she noticed that Thrór was at a loss for what she meant, she discreetly pointed out a tall red-haired elf who stood by himself near the far end of the hall, observing the dancers. ‘I know him. Or I will know him,’ she corrected herself. ‘Time travel, it’s a bloody nightmare to use verbs all of a sudden.’
Thrór found that the elf looked rather gloomy. ‘He doesn’t look very pleased to be here,’ he observed.

Kate shook her head, a sad smile on her face. ‘No, he wouldn’t be,’ she said softly. ‘His name’s Elvaethor. He is, or will be – I’m not sure exactly – the captain of the guard. Some time ago he had a couple of mortal friends and, well, they died. He’s taken it rather hard.’

Odd. He had been given the impression that Kate did not particularly care for elves. She’d never hidden her disdain, but this was different.

‘Friend of yours?’ he asked.

Kate nodded. ‘Yes. Well, we only owe him our freedom and our lives.’ She thought for a moment. ‘He went against his own king for us. We didn’t ask him to do that. He just did it and then kept following us. To be honest, at first I wished he’d just leave us alone. There just wasn’t getting rid of him. But he’s a good sort.’

‘As elves go,’ Thrór added.

Kate shook her head. ‘Nah, he’s more of a dwarf at heart really. Doesn’t look like one, I’ll give you that.’ Her gaze strayed to the elf again. ‘Blimey. I’ve never seen him so sad. Still, it must have been some centuries now. Since he lost his friends,’ she added as clarification. ‘Elves don’t act as we do,’ Thrór told her wisely. They were entirely other. Mourning for hundreds of years just wasn’t practical. It made no sense. But it was clear that his elf was hardly in a celebratory mood; he wore his sorrow like a cloak around his shoulders.

‘I know,’ Kate said. ‘It’s probably best he doesn’t see me here. He would probably remember.’

‘Who would remember?’ Thorin asked. He had come up behind them and had caught just the last piece of conversation.

‘Elvaethor,’ Kate replied, indicating the elf in question.

Thorin followed her finger and frowned. ‘I did not expect to see him here. I was my belief that he did not leave Mirkwood for some time.’

‘Maybe Thranduil made him come,’ Kate suggested. ‘He doesn’t look like he volunteered.’

Thorin’s frown deepened. ‘Perhaps,’ he said.

‘Friend of yours as well?’ Thrór inquired.

To his surprise Thorin conjured up a wry smile. ‘After a fashion,’ he replied. ‘The elf rather insisted upon it. Trailed after us like a lost puppy until we did.’

Kate elbowed him in the ribs. ‘That’s hardly fair,’ she pointed out. ‘He helped us out a great deal.’

‘That he did.’

‘Well, either way I suppose it’s best to stay away from him,’ Kate said. ‘The last thing we want is to change that bit of the future. I’m going to pop back to our place for a moment. Fetch more comfortable shoes. These ones look fancy, but they’re not made for dancing.’ She smiled at Thorin. ‘And I would be disappointed if we didn’t have at least one dance.’

‘So would I,’ he told her.
Kate disappeared and left Thrór with his grandson.

‘Is there any news of the wizard at all?’ Thorin asked as soon as his wife was out of earshot.

‘He’s been seen in Rohan,’ Thrór replied. ‘But that news was three months old when my messenger heard it.’

He had the good grace to pretend not to notice the disappointment on Thorin’s face. While Thrór liked having his grandson from the future around, it didn’t appear as though he felt the same way. Well, he wouldn’t. Thrór was ashamed of Thráin’s behaviour towards his own flesh and blood.

*It wasn’t such a good idea to let him spend so much time in the Iron Hills*, he reflected. All those Iron Hills folk had a rigidity that rubbed Thrór the wrong way. They were forever insisting that everything should be done the way their ancestors had always done them. And while there was nothing wrong with holding on to traditions from the past, clinging to them for dear life was something else entirely.

‘He’ll be found, lad,’ he said, patting Thorin on the shoulder. The gesture lacked reassurance; Thrór had to stand on tiptoes to make it.

‘Aye, he will,’ Thorin agreed. ‘But who’s to say how long it will take?’

Thrór had nothing to say to that.

——

Thorin was sure that his grandfather had meant well when he had invited the two of them to the feast. Although Thorin had been apprehensive about it at first, he had managed to enjoy the food and the company during the meal. Some remarked on the co-habitation with a mannish female, but Thorin told them it was not their business and they backed off. That in itself was a novelty. In his own time his marriage was not just his own private concern but that of every dwarf under the Mountain. It was one aspect of his own time that he did not miss.

It was however the only one. His heart yearned for home. To some extent he was used to that. For most of his life he had become intimately acquainted with it. It was a shadow, never gone, always hovering over him, not giving him a moment’s peace. But that shadow had lifted. He had almost forgotten what its presence felt like.

It had come back with a vengeance, stronger than it had ever been before. And Thorin did not know how to shoulder this burden now without stumbling.

Kate, as usual, was better at presenting a cheerful face to the world. He knew that her cheerful countenance did not mean that her longing to go back was any less strong than his own. She could hide it better. And she even hid it from him because she assumed that his hurt was worse than her own in this case. True, she experienced none of the anxiety of seeing loved ones who had long since died alive, but this was the second time that she had been taken from her home to a place she didn’t know without warning. And while she had carved out a place for herself in the Erebor of the future, she could not boast the same about this time. They had a place now, but it was a lie. They were not who they claimed to be and the falsehood did not sit well with either of them.

‘You should go and have a dance,’ Thrór announced, delivering this sentence in the way a healer might prescribe a cure to a patient. ‘Once your wife is back from fetching her shoes.’
Thorin looked at him in surprise. ‘Why?’

‘Because no grandson of mine would be a bad dancer,’ Thrór replied easily. ‘And because I would like to see if you’re capable of laughing,’ he added. ‘Theyra and I have a wager going, you see. I told her: “I bet I can make him laugh sometime. Lad looks like a good sort, happily married at that. It stands to reason he has to laugh from time to time. He can’t have attracted that lovely lass with scowling at her, after all.” So Theyra says: “I’m sure he’ll laugh, but I reckon he doesn’t much feel like it, with the way things stand. Can’t blame him. Nah, I’ll settle for his smile. That’s bonny enough for me.” But you know me, lad, I like to aim high, so here we are.’

Thorin could feel the corner of his mouths curl up in amusement. ‘Aye, but if a dance with Kate will make me laugh, then she’s the one who made it happen,’ he reasoned. ‘And not you. How would that affect your wager?’

Thrór was wholly unconcerned. ‘Perhaps,’ he allowed. ‘But I was the one to convince you to dance in the first place, so I can still take the credit.’

Thorin nodded, as if he considered this. ‘A good point,’ he agreed. ‘Were it not that she made the suggestion before she left.

He had never talked with his grandfather quite like this in the time before the dragon came. For much of that time he had been too young, only a child still. And when he grew a little older the sickness sunk its claws into his grandfather and changed him beyond all recognition. His physical appearance changed little, but this cheerful dwarf had been all but erased. As always, as easy as it was to talk with him, there was the underlying hurt of knowing of what was to come. And the guilt was never far behind.

Thrór laughed loudly. ‘Ah, you’ve got a good, sharp mind,’ he said in approval.

‘It’s required when dealing with our elvish neighbours,’ Thorin remarked wryly. He usually saw through their tricks a little late, but he could always rely on Kate to figure them out. Yet lately he felt like he had to look for tricks all the time. He had to watch his mouth, filter his words with the utmost care in the hopes of preventing saying something he should not.

And then there was his father. Thráin had kept his distance. When he was forced to interact with either Thorin or Kate, he was acid and cold. Thorin had heard the exchange in the shop and it had taken him all his self-control to remain where he was. He might have done his father some grievous bodily harm otherwise. And Kate had managed beautifully.

The unease about Thráin and his determination to undo the future still gnawed away at him. On one hand he did not believe him capable of wilful murder and on the other… Well, there was no telling what such deep-seated hatred and a tendency towards madness could do. He knew that Kate carried a dagger strapped to her leg, concealed beneath her skirt, and that gave him some peace of mind. He knew she had been instructed how to use it. Dwalin himself had seen to her training. Kate would never be a great fighter, but she could make do.

He gave the room a thorough once-over, looking for Thráin. But he was nowhere to be seen.

‘It’s a sorry state of affairs,’ Thrór agreed. ‘But we’ll manage just fine, as we always have.’

But not as it always would be. But could Thorin possibly tell him just how badly things would deteriorate? He wanted to, to warn him to not put any faith in any promise the elven king would make, because in time he would break every last one of them.
'Your wife’s taking her time,’ Thrór went on, oblivious to Thorin’s thoughts.

She was, Thorin realised. Their rooms were not so very far away and Kate was quick on her feet. Now that the hallways would be as good as deserted, she should have been able to make good time.

‘Indeed,’ he said. There was a vague, undefined feeling of dread in the general vicinity of his stomach. Thorin swatted at it. After all, the Mountain was safe. What harm could she come to? Folk had no reason to hate her here and the only one who did was… not in the room.

His thoughts came to a sudden standstill. No. It couldn’t be, could it?

‘Where is Thráin?’ he asked. He had decided not to call that dwarf by the title of father. As he’d said to Kate, he was no longer worthy of it. Still, this solution of his was not without its complications either. Because Thráin was the name of his son, the name he had come to associate with that little mischievous boy who had nothing in common with Thorin’s father save the colour of his hair and some similarity in facial features.

Looking around him did not provide him with the kind of answer that he wanted. The room was filled with people, but the two he was looking for were nowhere in sight.

*Maker, please no. Do not let it be what I fear.*

There was no rational ground for his fears. No dwarf would ever harm a woman. It was one of those unspoken rules. Of course breaking it was punishable by law, but the law was there only as a precaution; no dwarf would ever dream of striking down an innocent.

And yet.

Something told Thorin that his father was different. There was something sinister about him that he had failed to recognise when he was younger. Perhaps he had not wanted to see it and had therefore ignored it. There was no way to tell now.

‘I will go and see what keeps her,’ he said.

If he was overreacting, he could live with the teasing and mocking that would come his way. If however his worst fears were founded, he would never forgive himself if he did not act now.

Thrór failed to see the urgency, made a remark about how she would be back soon enough and was there maybe any ground for Freya thinking that Thorin and Kate were very nearly joined at the hip? Nevertheless, he tagged along. Thorin did not mind, though he had no patience for empty prattle, so he tuned his grandfather out.

‘Lad, there’s no cause for concern,’ the present King under the Mountain said at last. ‘This Mountain could not be safer and your wife seems like a sensible sort of woman.’

All of this was true.

And yet he could not shake the cold fear that wrapped itself around him like a cloak and chilled him to the bone.

Soon enough he found that it was wholly justified. They rounded a corner that led into a hallway that contained a large staircase leading to the higher levels. Kate lay at the foot of the stairs, unmoving.

‘No.’
Fingers of steel curled around his heart and squeezed. He’d had nightmares about this or something very similar. They had frightened him, but that horror could not hold a candle to the terror that overwhelmed him now.

Mahon, no. Let her live. Please let her live. I’d do anything.

He rushed forward to where she had fallen, Thrór at his heels. The hallway was poorly lit, but he could see the blood.

Maker, no.

Kate’s skin was warm and he reached for her wrist. There was a pulse beneath his fingers. It was weak, but it was there.

‘She lives.’

Would that it took the fear. He was no healer, but he could tell that she was gravely injured and that even though she lived now, she might not do so for very much longer.

He had seen death before, had held the lifeless bodies of those he loved in his arms, numb with grief. It was a burden he carried every day of his life. Some days the ghosts were more tangible than others. Thorin could feel the weight of them very keenly now. If Kate were to die now, Thorin was sure that he would falter and be crushed.

‘She’ll need a healer,’ Thrór said, all ready for action, an unfailing dwarf characteristic. ‘Can you carry her?’ At Thorin’s nod, he added: ‘Gently, then. Try not to jostle her about too much. I’m not much of a healer, but it looks like her head got the worst of it.’

Thorin had seen as much for himself. But he did as he was instructed.

Kate had always been small for her people and she had a fragile build. She weighed not much when he lifted her. He had been aware of how vulnerable this made her from the very beginning. First he’d used it as a way to make his point that such a woman should not be allowed to come on such a dangerous quest. If she was hurt on his watch, the responsibility would be his, and the blame as well, for he should have known better than to allow her to come near the source of that harm.

Now that he was her husband, the blame was twice as much. He had been aware of the danger to her and yet he had let her out of his sight. He had let his guard down. And though he cursed himself for a fool and solemnly vowed never to make such a mistake ever again, it was too little and too late.

Kate was immobile, still unconscious. The uninjured side of her head rested against Thorin’s right shoulder. It gave him a good enough view of the bloody mess on the other side of her head.

He could feel his blood run cold.

Thrór ran ahead to alert the healers to their imminent arrival, leaving Thorin to follow at a slower pace. It would be unwise to run, because he did not know what further damage he could inflict on her that way. And he had no desire to hurt her any worse than she already was.

‘Wh’re ‘m I?’ Kate muttered. He could tell she was barely conscious.

‘You’re safe,’ he told her. And she was, in some ways. He would not be so foolish as to leave her on her own again. ‘Try not to move.’
‘Someone there,’ she continued, a little more eloquent. ‘He’s gone?’

‘He’s gone,’ Thorin confirmed, silently drawing his own conclusion. She had been pushed, as he had already suspected. Kate was as sure-footed as his own people; she would not have fallen. She may not have seen her assailant, but Thorin didn’t need that information. Only one dwarf under this Mountain had a reason to wish her harm, and Thorin knew full well who that was.

*He did sink so low.* For the first time he began to understand why folk were so concerned with the madness in his line; it had run rampant in Thráin, long before it had become clear to the world.

The moment he passed the threshold of the healing rooms, he was surrounded by healers, instructing him where to place Kate and what he should be doing. As it happened, the best thing he could do for her was to move back and let them do what they could for her. The inaction went against the grain. He had failed to protect her and now could not lift a finger to alleviate her suffering. After all she had given to him, he had repaid her very poorly indeed.

*What use am I to her now?*

He must have spoken aloud, for Thrór answered him. ‘You had the good sense to go and look for her. If you hadn’t, help would almost certainly have come too late.’

It was not much of a consolation. ‘She was alone,’ he snapped. ‘Vulnerable. I should have gone with her.’

‘Anybody can slip on the stairs, lad,’ Thrór told him.

The words fell from his lips before he had thought it through. ‘She did not fall. She was pushed.’

‘You cannot know that,’ Thrór argued.

‘I do. She told me. She only regained consciousness briefly, but long enough.’ He hesitated to tell his grandfather who he believed the culprit had been. No father should have to be told such things about his own son. But the need to protect his wife from further attacks outweighed the need for secrecy for just this once. He had failed Kate once, he could not afford to do it again.

‘I’ll organise a guard to be posted at the door,’ Thrór said, turning around and walking away to organise one. It was perhaps good that he refrained from asking questions at the moment; Thorin would be unable to lie about this.

*Don’t be alone with him,* Thorin had told her. She had promised that she would not and he doubted she had broken her promise willingly or even knowingly. All she had told him was that somebody had been there with her. If she had seen that it was Thráin, she would have said so. Thráin must have seen her leave and while Thorin was distracted, had followed her. And then it would have been a simple matter of biding his time until the opportunity presented itself. If not for Kate’s recollection of another’s presence, it could have been an accident.

But it was not. And Thorin knew that.

*We should not have come here.* But knowing that did not provide him with a way back. Nor could he undo what had been done to Kate.

He could see the healers at work, but could not hear their words from where he was standing. And they would not permit him to come any closer. He had tried and had been firmly rebuked. All he could do was watch. She had lost consciousness again. Her skin was too pale, almost as white as the sheets, the only colour the red of her hair and the far darker shade of red of the blood.
'Fryr, that’s your name, yes?’ One of the healers had approached him. Thorin had a vague recollection of seeing him at the forge about a week before, to collect some tools.

‘Aye,’ he said.

‘Mistress Lily has been badly injured, I’m afraid to say. Multiple bones have been broken, but it is the damage to her head that concerns us the most.’

Thorin felt likewise.

‘Is there anything to be done?’ he asked. *Is there anything I can do?*

The healer’s entire posture radiated sympathy. Thorin braced himself for the worst. ‘There are limits even to our skill,’ he said, patting Thorin on the arm. ‘Does your business partner have any family in the area, do you know?’

He felt cold all over. He knew what such a question meant. There wasn’t much time. Death was fast approaching and not even the best healers Erebor had to offer could stand in its way. It was coming for Kate.

A sudden fury filled him from top to toe. They had been so careful to leave the past as they found it, at Kate’s insistence that it was the right thing. After a fashion, Thorin had agreed with her. After all of that, his future had been destroyed in spite of his efforts.

‘She is my wife,’ he said firmly. He was beyond caring for the consequences. And if she was to die in this nightmare of a place, she would do it under her own name. ‘And her name is Kate.’

If the healer was taken by surprise by either this statement or the vehemence with which it had been uttered, he hid it very well. He merely repeated the question. ‘Does she have any family nearby?’

‘None but me,’ he replied truthfully. Her family by blood was in another world and another time. They had not even been born yet. And the family she had in this world was two centuries away. It might as well be another world.

The sympathy increased tenfold. ‘Sit with her while you may.’ His hand was squeezed very gently.

*No.* ‘Are you giving up?’ he demanded, wrestling his hand free. Was she not worth fighting for?

‘We’ve done what we could about her injuries. And we will not cease our efforts to lessen her suffering, but some things are beyond us. She’s in the Maker’s hands now.’ Then, realising that Kate was not a dwarf and that he had spoken the familiar phrase out of habit, he corrected himself: ‘Pardon, she’s in…’

Thorin shut him up with a look and a wave of his hand. Kate had chosen Durin’s Folk as her people. She had been adopted by dwarves and she had wed a dwarf. She was one of them.

The healer looked like he found it all a little awkward. ‘Be with her,’ he said simply. ‘There may not be much time.’

Thorin did not need telling twice. He marched over to the bed and took Kate’s hand in his. It felt cold and lifeless in his grip, though her chest still rose and fell and he felt the pulse in her wrist. Up close her skin looked paler still, the contrast made greater by the vibrant colour of her hair.

She was not ever this still, Thorin reflected. Even in sleep, Kate was always in motion, alive and
active. She was no longer active now and only barely alive.

Others might have uttered desperate pleas for her to come back, but the words stuck in his throat and he could only think them, over and over again, a silent prayer to whoever would listen to let her live.

They had been made by different makers, and Kate came from another world at that. There was no telling where she would go after this life. But Thorin feared that it was a place where he would not be allowed to follow her. He knew himself well enough to know that he would fight to stay with her and he knew she was bound to do the same. But there was no certainty that their pig-headedness, as Kate called it, would be enough. And the nine years he’d had with her were not nearly enough time.

‘Come back.’ The words finally crossed his lips. ‘Don’t leave.’ Don’t leave me alone.

She remained unmoving. Thorin did not doubt that she was fighting hard to stay alive, but she was at a disadvantage and he had nothing to offer her in the way of aid. Nobody did.

As he thought it, he realised that this was not true. He would risk the timeline itself in pursuing that path, but there was no choice. He would sooner have her be alive to scold him for his actions than seeing her dead. And if she died here today, the future was not a place he particularly cared to be anyway.

‘Hold on,’ he instructed her. It tore his heart apart to leave her even for a short time, not knowing if she would even live long enough for his actions to make a difference. He would be lucky if she was still breathing by the time he returned. But he had to do something. ‘I love you,’ he told her. The words were never easy to speak, but they came without difficulty now. ‘I love you. Live. I will bring help.’

Thrór had returned with Freya in his wake just in time to hear those last words. ‘Where are you going?’ he asked.

‘To find the one person under this Mountain who may yet help her,’ he replied, rising to his feet.

Freya looked at him with compassion, though fortunately not pity. ‘Then give me the name and I shall fetch them here.’

He appreciated the offer, but this was one errand he could not ask of another. ‘The request has to be made in person,’ he said. ‘Don’t leave her on her own.’ He did not know how deep the madness ran in Thráin; if he had become unhinged enough to try again when he realised his victim still lived. But he had taken enough chances.

‘We will,’ Freya vowed. ‘Now go. Be as quick as you can.’

He threw one last look at Kate and then ran.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: meeting with an old friend. Also a friendly reminder not to come at me with pitchforks just yet…

Thank you very much for reading. Reviews would be so very much appreciated.
Never *use force, you'll just embarrass yourself. Unless you're cross, in which case... always use force!*  

Doctor Who

Elvaethor wished he had been allowed to remain in the forest, with nothing but trees and birds for company. He found that the presence of others was often unbearable in recent centuries. And of all the places to come, Erebor was the worst.

Was it not bad enough that the memory of his friends would not leave him, not one waking moment, not one second of sleeping? Did he have to come here and have his nose rubbed in his losses?

The world had gone on without Dari and Inga. Their passing had made no mark on these people. When asked about them, the names would mean nothing to their ears. They lived before their lifetimes. They had done no great deeds or accomplished anything noteworthy in all their days. They had only loved and their tale had ended in tragedy.

Since then Elvaethor found that his taste for merriment had deserted him. He could pretend and he had made a brave effort to that end at the beginning of the evening.

Until he had seen *him.*

The dwarf likely had not noticed him, engaged as he was in conversation with the fellow seated opposite him. Elvaethor’s eyes had glanced over the hall, taking in who was there and what they were doing. They had not been meant to linger, but Dari’s spitting image had drawn his gaze.

And his heart had stopped beating.

It had only been for a moment, but Elvaethor felt himself whisked back to the past, to happier times of friendship and contentment. Then reality caught up with him and he knew that those times were as dead as his friends. And he was no more capable of travelling back in time to meet them once more than he was able to lift this Mountain and move it.

When he looked closer, he could see that the dwarf who looked so much like Dari was not all like him. There were dissimilarities. He reckoned that this dwarf was taller, the nose was a little bigger, the shape of his mouth slightly different. And he was older than Dari had ever been; his hair was greying and something about his eyes betrayed that he had experiences of life that Dari had lacked.

He had never grown old enough to live through them.

So Elvaethor had turned away and blocked out the proceedings. Thranduil had demanded his
presence and that order he would obey. But so long as he had not been ordered to interact with the people present, he would not initiate contact on his own.

Which was why it came as a surprise when somebody else did.

‘Master Elf, might I beg a moment of your time?’

Elvaethor looked and almost staggered back into the wall. The one who so resembled Dari was in front of him, urgency written all over his face. It was an expression Elvaethor recalled only too well.

‘Of course,’ he blurted out before his better judgement could prevent him.

‘It has come to my attention that you are a healer of some skill.’ The dwarf said this with absolute certainty. ‘My wife lies gravely injured. My own people’s healers can do nothing for her, they say. But I believe you can boast greater skill. Would you see to her?’

The words sounded formal and confident, but Elvaethor could taste the underlying anxiety in every syllable. It was in his voice and in his eyes. He hid his hands from view, but Elvaethor could have sworn they were not steady.

He recoiled. ‘I never made such claims.’ And after his greatest failure he could never make them without being untrue.

The dwarf never once looked away, eyes beseeching Elvaethor to stop dawdling and get on with business. There was a determination in them that betrayed he wasn’t used to folk saying him nay and he would not accept refusal. ‘Then make them after you’ve tended to my wife,’ he said impatiently. ‘Or don’t make them, as you will. Will you see her?’

He should. Elvaethor knew that. It would be cruel and cowardly to walk away, but every fibre of his being begged it of him. He had gotten involved before and it had not ended well. With such a poor record he would be of little use, especially if this lady’s injury was as severe as the dwarf implied.

‘Your people have great knowledge of the healing arts as well. I would not claim to know better than they.’ He felt a tightening in his stomach that he could not rationally explain. Fear, his mind whispered to him. Fear of failure.

‘Maker be good!’ the dwarf growled. ‘This is not the time for false modesty, Master Elvaethor. Will you come? I would beg if you required it of me.’ From his whole posture it was obvious that this was not something he would do without reservations on any other day.

‘Do not beg,’ Elvaethor replied quickly, too quickly perhaps. ‘There is no need.’ He remembered Dari begging of him to save Inga. But it had already been too late and Elvaethor had been powerless.

‘You will come?’

The badly concealed hope in that question decided him. ‘I will come.’ He could not in good conscience do anything else. And if he failed here tonight, perhaps he could find out if the dwarves had any of that Dorwinian wine. If so, he might decide to indulge in it.

The dwarf turned on his heel and marched out of the hall, fully expecting Elvaethor to follow him. He did follow, though every instinct told him to run. But he had never been known as a coward and he could not begin today.
‘I do not know your name,’ he observed. ‘Though it appears you know mine.’

‘I am known as Fryr,’ the dwarf replied. From the way he phrased it, Elvaethor was reasonably certain that it was not his real name. He would not press the matter.

‘Your wife, what injuries did she sustain?’ he asked.

‘She fell down a flight of stairs.’ The replies were short and to the point.

More clarification was not forthcoming, so Elvaethor merely accompanied Fryr in silence. He had a feeling that the dwarf had no patience for words, too anxious about the fate of his wife to carry on a pleasant conversation.

He knew that dwarves loved fiercely and that their love, once given, ran deep. Dari had not been unusual in that. His only oddity was whom he had bestowed his love on. Others of his kind would choose to marry eligible folk from their own people. Or they would love their crafts so much that there wasn’t time to love another person as intensely. There had been room in Dari’s big heart to love Inga above everything else, yet still have space enough left for his children, his craft and his elven friend. Elvaethor had never taken that friendship for granted.

Because he knew a little about dwarves, he could tell that this Fryr loved his wife in the same way that Dari had done, placing her above all others. And he had seen what the loss of such a loved one could do.

He would not care to see it again.

Fryr held the door open for him and beckoned him into the healing rooms. ‘Quick,’ he said. ‘There may not be much time.’

Elvaethor did as he was bid, but was not yet permitted to see his patient; his view was blocked by another dwarf who had come up to them the moment they came inside. To his surprise he recognised the Queen under the Mountain, with the King himself sitting on a chair behind her at the bedside.

‘I’ve brought help,’ Fryr announced. ‘Is she…?’

The Queen took his hands very gently. ‘She lives.’ Worry was etched into her forehead. ‘The healers are stunned by it. It seems your lass is clinging to life.’

‘Too stubborn to die,’ Thrór declared. ‘She’ll live, I tell you.’

The strained expression on his wife’s face spoke of her doubts.

‘I will do for her what I can,’ Elvaethor vowed. Privately he wondered at the presence of both the King and the Queen here. There was a mystery here that eluded him.

The Queen moved aside and Elvaethor could see the lady he was to tend to. And the world came to a shuddering halt there and then. He had very reasonably expected to see a dwarven lady in the bed. After all, Dari had been unique. No other dwarf had ever done what he had, nor would any repeat his actions.

And yet, the lady in the bed was undeniably of the race of Men.

‘We do not have much time, Master Elf,’ Fryr reminded him brusquely. ‘Do what you came here to do.’
Elvaethor turned to him, stunned. ‘She is…’

‘Gravely injured,’ Fryr said pointedly.

He was right. Any questions he had would have to wait. But there were so many, all of them bubbling up in his chest, only barely contained. Was it possible? Obviously it was, or he would not see what was now in front of him. Then how? Why were the King and Queen under the Mountain here? Who were this dwarf and this woman? What had happened?

Worse of all was the hope and the first stirrings of hope that took root. He had not thought to see this in his life, for however long it would be. He had thought such bright lights extinguished forever when Dari and Inga passed.

Yet here he was. And something was tugging at his heart.

Even if she lived, this lady, she might not welcome his attempts to get to know her. Her husband had not given off many signs that he was interested in any other aspect of Elvaethor’s than his healing skills. Then again, Dari had only come to him in the slightly misguided understanding that all elves were poets, so naturally any elf would do for the purpose of helping him compose a line or two to his chosen lass. He hadn’t meant for Elvaethor to stick around after the fact.

The wound on the woman’s head was ugly. It confirmed Fryr’s explanation of a fall down the stairs, but if that was all there was to it, there would not now be a guard on the door. Elvaethor feared, though he did not ask, that she had been pushed. One of her kin perhaps, who resented the match she made? Inga had certainly endured much from her people when she chose to marry Dari, and very serious death threats had been among the injustices she’d had to endure.

‘It is bad,’ Elvaethor reported after the initial examination. ‘But not so bad as to give up all hope.’

The strength of the emotion in Fryr’s eyes almost stopped his heart. Fear, hope and a love so strong as Elvaethor had not seen in centuries. He did not think he was meant to see it and so he averted his eyes. Besides, this battle was not yet won and as intrigued as he was, he could not afford to become attached.

He had walked that path before, had seen where it led. He did not think he was strong enough to face it again.

And so he worked, used all the skill of his people to hold on to this woman’s life. Her injuries were bad, but she was clinging to life with all the stubbornness of the dwarves. Fryr assisted him where he could. His skill in the healing arts was rudimentary at best, but Elvaethor would not send him away. He did not know he could even if he decided the dwarf needed to be removed. The determination in his eyes betrayed that he would not leave his wife’s side even under duress.

The King and Queen left after some time, as minutes turned into hours. Fryr had frozen in place, his wife’s hand in his. He uttered no words, no pleas for her to wake, to fight. There were no declarations of love either. That didn’t mean however that he did not feel the sentiment. Dwarves were creatures of actions after all, whereas elves were made of words and song.

‘She will live,’ Elvaethor said at long last. The battle had been long and hard, but when dawn came he knew it had been won. Partially at least. ‘But there is no telling what damage the wound to her head may have done,’ he added with heavy heart. ‘Not until she wakes.’

Fryr held his gaze. ‘But she will wake?’

Elvaethor understood that he was clinging to whatever hope he could. ‘Yes, she will,’ he
confirmed. ‘I cannot tell you when, but she will wake.’

The relief was written all over Fryr’s face. ‘Good,’ he said, all the verbal indication of that relief. He rose to his feet. ‘Would you remain here with her for a while? I have business to attend to.’

That was a surprise request, for two reasons. For one, Elvaethor had not expected him to leave his wife alone, not for any reason. His love for her ran too deep for that. But the moment he was told that she was out of danger, he decided to leave her. In the hands of an elf. ‘You trust her into my care?’ He could not disguise his shock.

Fryr held his gaze. ‘She has been in your care for the past night and you have not failed in your duty,’ he pointed out.

Perhaps it was that simple for Fryr. After all, dwarves did not believe in overcomplicating matters. But neither were they very fond of elves. ‘You have barely known me for a few hours.’

There was an almost smile tugging at the dwarf’s lips. ‘Your reputation precedes you, Master Elf. My wife will be in safe hands.’ His words rang with certainty.

He had left the room before Elvaethor had recovered the gift of speech.

What he had done was wrong.

Thráin was only too well aware of the crime he had committed in the eyes of the law. Yet he felt a remarkable absence of guilt. Aye, he knew he had taken the life of another, but it was the only course of action open to him.

Of course he would give it his all to prevent Thorin from ever wedding that girl in the first place. His goals were unchanged. And if that worked, well, none of this would have ever happened, so he would not have killed her anyway.

But if he failed in the execution of his duty towards his son, then this was the best he could do for him under the given circumstances. Naturally Thorin would not agree with that assessment of Thráin’s actions, but Thráin was his father and in this case he knew best.

He had not planned to do this before he did. It had been an impulse, a spur of the moment action. All he’d intended to do was to find some solitude away from the noise of the great hall. Feasts were generally chaotic and loud and Thráin had his fill of loudness generally long before others. So he had gone out and found a little niche at the top of a flight of stairs where he had found refuge before. He would sit quietly and re-join the celebrations before he was missed. After all, it was his duty to be present and he would not be found wanting.

He’d sat there for a little while when he heard singing and it was coming in his direction. It was a pleasant enough voice, a little high to belong to a dwarf, but there were enough men in Erebor tonight not to make him think anything of it.

Then he’d looked into the hallway. Kate had walked in his direction, the direction of the stairs. Obviously she was in high spirits. Well, she would be, he though vindictively. She had won that little spar at the forge. She had gone as far as to compare him to the men, which was an insult he would not soon forget. Even worse, she had behaved as though she had every right to take him to
task like that, in front of his uncle and his father. The worst was, that they had both agreed. Grór had bought the axe – in the privacy of his own mind Thráin could admit that the craftsmanship was sublime – and rather than offer a reprimand for her quick tongue, Thór had invited her to the festivities.

The world had been turned upside down.

So yes, he was angry with her and with the whole world for accepting this mannish woman’s place in it. It should never have been hers. She should not have reached so high. And if she had, she should certainly not have been rewarded for it. That was not the way the world worked.

It had been easy after that. Kate never saw him until he shoved her. There was barely any resistance at all. Men were very weak. That was well-known.

He remained at the top of the stairs afterwards, still sitting in his little niche out of sight. Thorin had not been long in coming after that. The whole display at the foot of the stairs had sickened Thráin to his stomach. The care, the gentleness, the love… It was genuine, that much he could tell, even if it was wildly misplaced. If the woman was not a witch – and Thráin still had his doubts on that account – then Thorin would not thank him for her death. He would not see that ultimately it was the best thing for him, for their people.

One would think he would have at least instilled a sense of duty. Thorin should have known to place his people above his own sick desires. Maker knew how he had come by them, but Thráin could not condone them. That his own parents could baffled him.

The night passed. The woman’s body was removed. Sound carried in these halls, so Thráin had heard Thorin when he had said that she lived when she was found. Thráin also knew that it was not a state in which she would remain for long. She would die before the sun rose.

Thorin found him there when dawn came. All the guests had gone to bed at last, and either way the footsteps marching along the hallway were too steady to belong to one of the drunken revellers.

True to expectation, a moment later he was grabbed by the throat and slammed against the wall. Thráin recoiled in spite of himself. Never before had he beheld such fury and the force of it took him somewhat by surprise. There was something in Thorin’s eyes that had not been there in these past few weeks. Soul-filling rage burned in those eyes and it was all focused on him, every last bit of it.

‘You would have murdered her.’

Thráin had expected a roar that could have brought down the roof, to match the violence in his actions. But the words were soft, a low growl that was so full of ice that it chilled him to the bone.

His thoughts needed a moment to recollect themselves, but then he realised. ‘She yet lives?’ Maker be good, was everything against him?

For just a moment he feared that Thorin would tear him limb from limb where he stood. His son’s hands were shaking, but definitely not with fear. ‘She will live, in spite of what you did to her.’ Thorin looked at him with unadulterated loathing. ‘I will not ask you how you could so such a vile thing, because I do not care to hear. And I know the answer.’

Thráin gave it to him for good measure. ‘It is for the good of our people, the endurance of our line.’

Thorin shook his head. ‘No. You are mad.’ He barked out a short laugh utterly devoid of mirth.
'Utterly mad. All these years…’ He trailed off and shook his head. ‘You were never sane. You hid it well, but all that time…’ He shook his head again, as if shaking some order into his thoughts. ‘You were the worst of all.’

He was making little sense.

It didn’t matter. Thráin had more than enough to say to him. ‘You are,’ he fired back. ‘You have taken leave of your senses. You were never free to marry where you chose, especially not one of that race. We are of Durin’s line, Durin’s ruling line. We can trace our lineage back all the way to Durin the Deathless, father to son for countless generations. You soiled that heritage when you wed that slip of a girl. You should have known better.’

Whereas Thorin had been distracted by his own thoughts just now, the unparalleled rage was back in full force. ‘She is counted as a hero among our people, one, an outsider under no obligation to lend us aid, who dared to tread where many others, our own people, did not. She was loyal where our own people deserted us, honourable when they forgot the meaning of the word, brave when they were trembling with fear. And you would have taken her life for their sake?’

Thráin did not know from what future Thorin came. He wanted to know, but did not reasonably expect an answer.

‘You sank so much lower than I ever believed possible.’ Thorin almost sounded disillusioned.

‘So did you.’ It seemed they were both destined to disappoint the other. ‘I would sooner see our line end than allow you to carry on our bloodline with such a woman.’

Thorin laughed again. There was something just slightly unhinged about it. ‘Even if Kate had died tonight, it would make no difference. My line does not end with me.’

Thráin’s mind went blank with shock. He had not honestly believed it possible, but he could discern no deceit in either Thorin’s face or words. He could taste the bile at the back of his throat.

‘If she had died here tonight, what would I have told my children?’ Thorin’s face was inches away from Thráin’s. ‘Should I have told them that their mother was murdered in cold blood by their grandfather? Aye? Is that the tale you would have me tell?’

Children. He had fathered children on that worthless mannish girl. He was torn between a sense of complete bewilderment that any dwarf could ever get the job done when their kind held no appeal for dwarves and an ever increasing urge to empty the contents of his stomach on the floor. How had this world gone so wrong? How had his own son, his very flesh and blood, strayed so far from everything that was good and right?

‘Maker have mercy.’ Thráin had not heard his father until he spoke. He could not tell if he had been there all this time or if he had only just arrived. ‘You did it.’

‘Aye,’ Thráin said, not bothering to deny it. He was no elf that he had need for falsehoods on a daily basis. ‘For the good of our people.’

‘I’m beginning to think you are not the one most capable to judge what is and isn’t good for them.’ Thrór sounded like he was in shock, almost lost for words, which was a first for him. Normally he would not stop talking. But then the moment passed and he gathered himself. ‘You have lost your marbles.’ He heard the same disgust as he’d heard in Thorin’s voice. ‘And I will not be succeeded by a madman.’ He looked Thráin straight in the eyes. ‘You will never be King under the Mountain. Today, this very hour, I will take steps that will exclude you from the succession. Thorin will be
my heir.’

Thráin could only stare at him in open-mouthed shock. ‘You cannot do this.’

‘If not for the healing skill of an elf, Thorin’s impeccable instincts and a tremendous amount of
luck, you would have committed murder tonight.’ He’d never seen this side of Thrór before. All of
a sudden the resemblance between him and Thorin was not so difficult to see. Their fury froze like
ice. ‘I can hardly bear to look upon you. Murder is reviled, an abhorrent practise you always claim
belongs to men and orcs.’

‘For the greater good…’

‘Whose greater good?’ Thrór snarled. ‘You would have wrought tragedy on a family, your own
family at that. Your actions would see your own grandchildren motherless! By your own
admission, you would be a murderer. I would be mad indeed if I allowed such a one to lead our
people.’

‘What will you do?’ This was a consequence he had not foreseen. Dread landed in his stomach and
made itself at home.

‘That is not for me to decide,’ Thrór said, looking at Thorin. ‘I am not the injured party in this.’

He was effectively placing Thráin’s life, his own son’s life in the hands of the one who hated him
most. Thorin might be Thráin’s son, but he doubted it counted for much. He had seen that look in
his eyes. It was a miracle he was yet drawing breath.

Thorin held his gaze for long moments. A rapid succession of emotions flashed past, almost too
quick to register: pain, hate, loathing, grief, righteous rage and then, at last, defeat. That same
moment the pressure vanished from his throat and the force holding him up disappeared so
abruptly that Thráin stumbled.

When he had regained his balance and looked up, he saw that Thorin had done several steps
backward. ‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘I will do nothing.’

It was the hardest decision he had made in all his life. Every fibre of his being begged him to spill
his rage in violence. He yearned for justice to be done. This could not stand. He could not allow
this to pass.

And yet he had to.

‘What?’ Thrór’s shock made his voice sound distinctly higher.

‘I will do nothing to him,’ Thorin repeated. It went against the grain. He desperately wanted to do
something. He had already failed Kate by not protecting her when he should have and now he was
effectively allowing her would-be murderer to walk free.

‘Why?’ It was the only question Thrór could ask, because from where he was standing Thorin’s
decision made no sense. ‘I have not yet myself reached a point where I would tear him apart with
my bare hands, but he very nearly killed your wife. Worse, he did it on purpose. And you would
not see justice done for that?’
'I cannot,' Thorin replied through clenched teeth.

And how he hated it. It was even worse because Kate would agree with him if she were here to advise him. He could almost hear her voice in his head, warning him not to upset the timeline, because goodness knew what results that might have. And because she lived, only because she lived, he would heed that counsel.

He turned to Thráin. ‘But make no mistake, if she dies, I will end your life myself, timeline be damned.’

He would preserve it for her sake, but it could all be blown to smithereens for all he cared if she did not survive this. Thráin would feel exactly how well Thorin could avenge his loved ones if that sad day ever came. He prayed it would not. It was shrouded in the kind of darkness Thorin instinctively shied away from.

‘The timeline,’ Thrór understood. ‘Durin’s stinking beard!’

‘Aye,’ Thorin said. ‘I know you lived beyond this day. I will not change that.’ He looked the dwarf who was supposed to be his father straight in the eyes. ‘I will tell you this once. You do not go near Kate. You will not speak to her. If you see her in the street, you will take a detour to avoid her. If I see you anywhere near her, I will assume the worst and act accordingly, regardless of the results that may have for the future. Am I making myself understood?’

It was odd. For years he had craved reconciliation or at least closure. He’d yearned for Thráin’s affection and pride. On some levels his opinions had still mattered, at least until some weeks ago. But all emotion had gone, leaving only freezing rage coursing through his veins. He was not making any idle threats. If Thráin killed Kate, Thorin would make sure Thráin did not live to see another sunset. Perhaps the thought of killing his own father ought to bother him. But the image of Kate’s motionless body at the foot of the stairs was still in front of his mind’s eye, and it did not.

Thráin looked at him, a mixture of surprise and contempt on his face. ‘Mercy, then?’

Thorin shook his head. ‘Not mercy.’ Thráin had lost the right.

‘We can’t just let him walk off like nothing’s happened!’ Thrór sounded both indignant and incredulous.

‘If you were serious about the threat, about removing him from the succession, then that is a punishment too.’ And it was something that could be done without endangering the timeline as Thorin knew it. Thráin had not been around long enough after Thrór died to lead his people. The burden of kingship had come to Thorin immediately after the battle. But neither Thrór nor Thráin knew how events would unfold. And losing every chance to become King under the Mountain and rule Durin’s Folk in accordance with his own wishes was not nearly enough punishment in Thorin’s eyes, but it would be in Thráin’s.

It is not enough. Not nearly enough to satisfy Thorin, but it was all he could do, all he could allow. It felt like meagre repayment at best, as though he somehow valued Kate’s life far less than he did. Thorin was used to making the hard choices – he had done little else lately – but this one sat particularly wrong with him. But my hands are tied.

‘I’ll tell Theyra,’ Thrór said. ‘I imagine she will have a thing or two to say on the matter as well.’

She would. And once she was in the possession of all the facts, she would be enraged. And she would not forgive.
'No.' Blow after blow and it never ended.

'Maker be good, lad, I hate to be the one to tell you, but shielding him isn’t the right way and Theyra wouldn’t thank you for it.' Thorin suspected that his grandfather was angrier than he had let on so far.

'It is not for his sake.' He all but spat the words out. ‘But my mother would never forgive him.’

‘Obviously not.’ Thrór had not expected any different. ‘Why should she? After what he did…’

He did not see. Thorin had been cursed with clearer vision. ‘Exactly.’

Understanding dawned in Thráin’s eyes. ‘You have siblings.’

Thorin did not bother to deny it. And he could not unwrite them. Frerin had been his closest friend during childhood, for all that he could be an obnoxious little pest as well from time to time, as all younger brothers were. Dís was his beloved sister, the one who had kept him going when he thought his strength was all gone. And Fíli and Kíli, the lads who were so full of life, who made the world brighter just by existing… If he let Thrór do as he wished, none of them would ever be born.

It was not a price he was willing to pay.

All things considered, Thráin would very much get away with what he had done.

Bitterness clawed its way up his throat, seeped into his bloodstream. It was never fair. After this atrocity, he would not see any justice done. He had to shove his hands into his pockets and clench them into fists so hard he drew blood to stop himself from losing all control and doing something he would surely regret.

‘So there is hope yet,’ Thráin murmured thoughtfully. Hope for another son who might be everything Thorin was not. That was why he had always looked at Frerin and Dís with pride and hope and affection, and never at Thorin. It was yet another piece of the very complex puzzle falling into place.

He turned on his heel and left then. Behind him he heard his grandfather’s voice raised in anger, a rare enough thing, but he could not bring himself to listen. Nothing that could be said now would make a difference. His own inaction burned like poison in his veins. Even though he knew it wasn’t so, it felt as though his own refusal to act and see justice done condoned what had been done to Kate.

And yet there was no other choice.

It was the worst sort of torture imaginable.

The combined force of his grief and rage at last brought him to a halt. A scream tore its way up his throat and emerged in the kind of howl that he had not believed himself capable of. It went on for a long time. He did not even think he was fully aware of either himself or his surroundings for a while.

He only came back to himself when he felt a hand on his shoulder. ‘Enough now, Thorin.’ The voice was gentle, the words phrased as kindly advice rather than a command.

He turned around to see his grandmother. If she was unsettled at all by his display of emotion, she showed no sign of it.
'Give me your hands,' she said, holding out her own.

He did as he was bid and only now saw that they were hurt. In his distress he must have beat them bloody against the wall – he could see the corresponding marks on the otherwise spotless stone – but his recollection of doing so was hazy at best.

'I'll bandage them if you like,' Freya offered. She did not remark on the state in which she had found him and he could detect no judgement from her.

But now that he had come to his senses, he could not help but feel ashamed of his own conduct. It had been a very long time since he had lost control in this manner. 'I apologise,' he began.

A wave of her hand cut him off. 'Thrór has filled me in,' she said calmly. 'Seems to me you dealt with this the only way any sentient being could deal with it. Come, we'll need the healers' supplies.'

He followed her.

'Is there any news of Kate?' he asked suddenly, as a second wave of shame washed over him. Blinded as he had been by his own misery, he had lost sight of the fact that he should have been with her. Aye, the worst danger had passed, Elvaethor had said, but there was no telling what that head injury could have done. He ought to have been with her all along, not on his own doomed quest for justice.

*There is no justice for what happened, not in this place.* There could never be. He longed for home, wished desperately that none of this would ever have happened. There was no certainty here, there was only balancing on a tightrope in a gale. And he was walking it blindfolded. He only knew what should be.

It turned out that the price to pay for that was even heavier than he had ever been able to imagine.

'She hasn’t woken yet,' Freya reported. 'Your elf is keeping watch over her.'

As Thorin had charged him to do. The Elvaethor of this time may not know Thorin yet, but Thorin knew him. If not friendship or honour, then curiosity would keep him in place.

'Good,' he said.

So he let himself being led into the healing rooms and obediently sat down as his grandmother cleaned his wounds and bandaged him. After his outburst he felt strangely numb and tired. He did not think he had the energy for another fight, but fights were all he could find in this Erebor.

'Go to your wife,' Freya counselled him when she was done. 'And get some sleep. This place is well-guarded.' And since she must know from which direction the danger came, Thorin trusted her word on that implicitly.

Kate was still as he had left her, quiet and unmoving. And Elvaethor was as he had left him, still in the same posture he had been at Thorin’s departure. He could have been hewn out of rock for all the moving he did.

Thorin inclined his head in the elf’s direction. ‘You have my thanks, Master Elvaethor.’ The words were far too formal to adequately express his deep gratitude. Without his help, Kate would be dead and well he knew it. And Elvaethor would know the same. ‘I am in your debt.’ After everything that elf had done for them, that debt amounted to more than Thorin could pay off in ten lifetimes.
Elvaethor shook his head. ‘It was a service rendered of my own free will,’ he said. ‘I do not require payment in either gold or favour.’

‘Then you simply have my deepest thanks,’ Thorin said. That seemed like poor repayment for a service that great.

‘I ask for no more,’ the elf replied. His eyes were inquisitive, but his tongue wasn’t. Then again, this was hardly the time for questions. ‘I shall leave you now for a while, but I will return in a few hours. I would counsel you to get some rest, but I doubt a dwarf would take advice from an elf.’

Before Thorin could think up a suitable retort, he was gone.

The healing rooms were quiet. He could hear the fire in the hearth, but otherwise there was not a sound. No, that was not entirely true. If he listened closely he could hear Kate’s breathing. It reassured him, but only slightly.

‘Come back,’ he told her. At least when she woke he would know what damage the fall may have done, the part that couldn’t be seen by the naked eye. ‘Fight it.’ Her mind was stronger than the minds of many a dwarf, but her body had not been made the same way. Would that it had been.

There was no response from her. Her wounds had been taken care of, concealed from sight by blankets and bandages. But Thorin remembered well enough how severe they were without a visible reminder. She was still so pale, even though there was more warmth in her hands now than there had been. Thorin took it as a good sign, a reason to hope that she would pull through.

‘Come back,’ he whispered again. *I cannot do this alone.* His own loss of control was testimony enough. He needed her well and at his side. And he was so tired from trying. It drained him.

He took her right hand in his, fingers gently on the place at her wrist where he could feel her pulse. It was steady now, and stronger. It felt as though a weight came off his chest and he could breathe again.

*She will live.*

It was with that thought that he fell asleep at last.

Chapter End Notes

 Basically, everybody has a lot of issues. This chapter has been an absolute nightmare to write, but I hope it turned out all right. Next time: Kate wakes up. Thank you very much for reading everyone. Reviews would be very much appreciated.
‘Sit down.’

It had been a very long time since Thrór had gotten his dander up about anything, Freya reflected. Obnoxious court officials bored him and, if they were being particularly vexing, annoyed him. But he’d shake it off the moment he left the room. Arguments with Thráin about how the kingdom should be run could nudge the irritability level a little closer towards anger, and conversations with elves could push it just a little bit further. Only orc raids and the loss of innocent lives ever provoked this kind of a response and it had been many years since Freya had been forced to witness it.

She would have gladly not witnessed this either, but she did not have a choice. Like it or not, what had happened today warranted her undivided attention. And Thráin was her son. She had a responsibility there.

Having said that, she could hardly bear to look upon him.

She had returned to their place just in time to see Thrór hauling Thráin in by his collar. The image of Thorin beating his hands bloody against the wall was still playing in front of her mind’s eye. It was an image that would not leave her alone for some time. To be honest, she didn’t think she’d ever seen a body who was in so much emotional pain that inflicting violence on himself became the only way to deal. He had not been aware of himself or his surroundings when she had come upon him. There was an intensity to every blow, to every tear on his face that she had found deeply unsettling.

He has seen much, she’d known then. And little enough of it has been good.

The more she saw, the more convinced she became that Thráin was to blame for much of it. And after what he had done tonight, she was certain.

‘I prefer to stand,’ Thráin said. He held himself rigid, but calm.

‘I told you to sit,’ Thrór growled at him. ‘And you will obey me.’ Thrór pulling rank on anyone was rare. Over the years she had only seen him do it once or twice and never in this manner.

When Thráin did not follow that instruction, Thrór pushed him into the nearest chair with force.

‘I am not a child anymore,’ Thráin said indignantly. He appeared as though he was getting ready to stand again, but Thrór’s withering glare made him reconsider.
'Which makes this so much the worse,' Thrór said. 'I will respect Thorin’s decisions, because I think he’s the only one who has any right to cast judgement on you. Or his wife, come to think of it. I hope you realise that is the only reason you yet draw breath.’

‘You do not see!’ Thráin protested. ‘I did it for the greater good of our people.’

‘Any greater good that condones the murder of innocents is not a greater good I would care to support,’ Thrór replied. ‘As we tried to teach you, though I reckon we failed in that endeavour.’

‘She is not an innocent,’ Thráin snarled, back on his feet now. ‘By what means she managed to bind my weak-willed son to her, I do not know, but she has polluted our line with mannish blood. Children!’ He shook his head. ‘Am I the only one who understands she had to be stopped?’

Freya rather thought this painted Kate as far more scheming and cunning than she was. Truth be told, she still wasn’t sure what to make of the woman, but she seemed nice enough from what Freya had seen. And there was no doubt that she loved Thorin, wholly and unreservedly. She had been fighting his corner whenever the situation called for it, supporting him, speaking when he could not.

It had taken her a day to work it out, to see the pattern. When it all became too much for Thorin, Kate stepped in. She would keep conversation going or just provide some sort of distraction until Thorin was ready to join them and it all was so natural that it’d be hard to even realise that Thorin had not been mentally present for the proceedings for a little while. Freya may not have the full measure of her character, but her behaviour towards Thorin definitely endeared her to Freya.

Thrór shoved Thráin onto the chair again. ‘Even if that were the case, which it is not, you do not decide who lives and who dies. You’ll find that this particular privilege only belongs to me under this Mountain. And the way things stand, it will never be yours.’

Freya inhaled sharply. That would be a shock.

‘You weren’t serious,’ Thráin said. Thrór had informed her what he intended to do before he had gone to retrieve Thráin. It was a drastic step, but one Freya felt he had no choice but to make. A murderer could never rule their people.

Thráin had attempted murder only hours ago.

It was as though it was finally starting to sink in. Her own son, her boy, had tried to kill another person. The thought made her sick. She remembered the day she had discovered she was with child, the difficult pregnancy that followed and the hard labour to bring her son into the world. He had been tiny, but perfect. Ten fingers, ten toes and the sweetest smile she ever saw. When he grew up, Thráin had been a quiet child, who preferred his own company to that of others. While unusual for dwarves, Freya didn’t think it was any cause for concern. He seemed perfectly happy as he was, after all. And when childhood eventually passed, he spent some time in the Iron Hills. It had been hard for her to be without his company, but she knew he’d return. But he had come back changed.

Is that where it all went wrong? Freya wondered. His ideas before his stay with Grór had been conservative, but they had never been this strong or so radical. And never, even if she lived to be a thousand years old, would she have believed him capable of wilful murder if she hadn’t seen it for herself.

Where did we go wrong? Surely they’d had to fail in the execution of their duty somewhere in order for Thráin to become so… twisted? She wasn’t even sure that was the right word for it.
a voice in the back of her mind whispered. *He has lost his wits, gone insane.*

Had he? Freya considered the evidence in front of her and had to conclude that it was the truth. There was a gleam in his eyes that was almost feverish. And he was still defending what he had done. There was no remorse, no sense of wrong.

The sharp pain in her chest was the feeling of her heart shattering into a million pieces. It was all she could do to remain upright and not crumble to the ground, weeping without restraint.

‘You cannot be my heir.’ Thrór’s tone of voice could have frozen the room. He felt things more deeply than he often let on, but Freya suspected that he had not quite moved on from fury to grief. It would come, but not yet. ‘You have shown me that.’

‘You have no other heir,’ Thráin retorted.

‘Thorin will be my heir,’ Thrór pointed out. ‘Because, unlike you, he has demonstrated considerable talent for being a leader.’

‘Like what?’ Thráin scoffed.

‘Like placing others above himself.’ Thrór’s response was quick. ‘Even a blind fool could have seen he wanted to tear you apart, but he didn’t. He didn’t even so much as strike you, as you well deserve, make no mistake on that account. He has a self-control I have seldom seen in others. He’s a good judge of character too, as far as I can tell.’

Thráin growled. ‘Fine judgement he demonstrated in his choice of bride!’

Thrór looked Thráin right in the eyes as he quoted: ‘“She is counted as a hero among our people, one, an outsider under no obligation to lend us aid, who dared to tread where many others, our own people, did not. She was loyal where our own people deserted us, honourable when they forgot the meaning of the word, brave when they were trembling with fear.” Those were Thorin’s words,’ he added to Freya. ‘Spoken in the heat of the moment, too, so I doubt he made it up on the spot. And nothing I’ve seen of her contradicts it, so I am inclined to believe him.’ He looked at Thráin again. ‘All those qualities your son possesses that you clearly lack.’

Thráin turned to Freya. ‘Amad, you cannot allow this.’ He was pleading now.

For just a second she saw her little boy again, begging for something he was not allowed to have. Her heart softened for a moment.

But then she remembered the state of the woman when she had come into the healing rooms. Unconscious, barely breathing, a bloody mess on one side of her head. Even Freya, who as a dwarf was not squeamish, had felt a little nauseous. It was a miracle she lived. She also remembered how distraught Thorin had been, had heard the words he whispered to her when he believed there was no one but Kate to hear them. *Hold on. I love you. I love you. Live. I will bring help.*

Thráin had sought to tear them apart. He would have seen Kate in the grave and Thorin alone with his grief. And it had been a deliberate act.

So with great effort she closed her heart to him. That act alone made her feel as though what little was left of it broke anew. And though she did not crumble and she did not howl, a few tears slipped out unchecked.

‘I will allow it.’ Four words had never been harder to speak. No mother should ever have to be in Freya’s shoes. It felt as though she was choosing between her son and her grandson. Both were
loved equally. Or they should be, at any rate. And a part of her would always love Thráin, because he was her son. She had no choice in that regard. But she could not condone what he had done and what he had become. ‘And I will support it.’

Thrán’s mouth fell open in disbelief.

‘And I suspect I was always going to do it,’ Thrór said.

Freya looked at him, puzzled. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Thorin has made every choice he’s made since arriving here with the future as he knows it in mind,’ he explained. ‘It’s why Thráin still has a head on his shoulders with which he can utter all his protests. But when I told him what I fully intend to do, he did not object. He as good as gave me permission.’

He gave both Freya and Thráin some time to let it sink in. And then it hit her like a rock avalanche. If Thorin had indeed told Thrór that he could do this, then it had been like that all along in his memories. He might not have known why Thráin had been passed over, but he had known that it was so. And if that was the case, then Thorin and Kate had been meant to come here too, because without their presence, Thrór never would have had any reason to disinherit Thráin.

Just thinking about this would give a body a headache.

‘You take orders from him now?’ Thráin demanded at last.

‘No, I heed his suggestions.’ Thrór was calm and determined. ‘The notion was mine. Thorin only approved it. You should have known that, seeing as you were there.’

‘You cannot do this!’ Thráin cried. ‘Folk will wonder why.’

‘Then let them wonder to their heart’s content,’ Thrór said. ‘I care not.’ He levelled his sternest stare at Thráin. ‘This is my final word. I suggest you go home and inform Theira of your change in circumstances and I suggest you do so without telling her the truth.’ A shadow of bitterness swept over his face. ‘I am sure you don’t need me to tell you that would be in your best interest.’

‘You have gone mad,’ Thráin declared.

‘Have I indeed?’ Thrór asked. All of a sudden he seemed exhausted. All the fight had gone out of him. ‘If so, I count myself blessed. A madness that preaches me not to harm others is one I fully embrace. Get out. I can hardly bear to look at you.’

Thrán hesitated for a moment and then turned to the door.

Thrór’s voice stopped him before he could take his leave. ‘If I find you have gone near Kate, I will call the guard on you.’

Thrán slammed the door shut without answering.

Thrór lowered himself into a chair, staring at the flames in the hearth without seeing them. ‘You’d think we’d have noticed that out own son went so far wrong,’ he said. ‘You’d think we’d have noticed that his sanity abandoned him.’

Freya sat down beside him. She was feeling oddly numb, as though the aftermath of the pain of her heart being crushed left her without the capacity for any further emotion, at least temporarily.
'I don't know,' she admitted. She felt like she didn’t know anything, not anymore. ‘What did you mean before, that Theyra cannot be told? Surely she has a right.’

‘Thorin is supposed to have siblings,’ Thrór replied, rubbing his forehead as though fighting a headache. Then again, he probably was. ‘Not something she’s going to allow to happen if she ever knew, is she?’

A few days ago the prospect of more grandchildren would have cheered Freya immensely. Now it seemed the price to pay for their existence was paid in lies and deceit. It left a bad taste in her mouth.

‘We’re letting him get away with it,’ she said softly. Every fibre of her being rebelled against the notion of someone or something hurting her only son, but her principles spoke louder. No other dwarf would be allowed to take another’s life – or attempt to do so – and walk away unhindered. Just because Thráin was her son did not mean she should judge him any different.

‘We have no choice,’ Thrór said. ‘The decision was Thorin’s. It is not my place to take any more from him than he’s already lost.’

They exchanged looks. They had never discussed it, but they both knew it. Thorin and Kate had been careful not to reveal too much, but Freya had pieced together much by herself, simply by observing. She could tell that the place they came from was good, because it was spoken of in warm tones and remembered with looks of fondness and longing. It was the bit between here and then that worried her. They carefully avoided mentioning any of it, but Thorin certainly did not seem to have had an easy life. Much of that was down to Thráin, she knew now, but there were other things. And when Thrór had quoted Thorin just now, he had said something about their own people abandoning him, and Kate being one of the few to stand with him. What could ever lead our people to such a dishonourable course of action?

‘No,’ Freya agreed, though she did not like it. ‘It is not.’

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Kate woke to an excruciatingly pounding headache. She didn’t think she’d ever had one that bad, not even after the time when she had accidentally walked into a lamppost.

She had seen Thorin at work countless times. Her husband never was a shabby sight really, but Kate was partial to seeing him busy at the forge. She had always admired the strength of him and felt almost somewhat sorry for the poor object that got stuck between the anvil and the hammer he wielded, because there was considerable force behind his blows. Today she felt like she was not a spectator, but instead whatever object was on the anvil. And there was a hammer pounding relentlessly on the right side of her head.

She reached for the memory for how it had come to be that way, but came up empty. It was like grasping fog. It swirled and fled before her hands and reformed before she could get a decent look at the other side. She got glimpses, fragments, disjointed images. They made little sense.

So she opened her eyes. The room she was in was dimly lit. By the way the light flickered in the corner of her left eye, she could tell that there was a candle on a table and there was the tell-tale glow of a fire in the hearth from across the room. But she did not know this place.

But she knew its occupant and that was a relief.
‘Elvaethor?’

Her chest swelled with hope. If he was here, that must mean she was home. In the time that she had been asleep – but if that was the case, then why couldn’t she remember? – they must have found a way back.

His head snapped up. And Kate knew she had been very wrong. She had known the former captain of the Mirkwood guard for more than eight years now, so reason demanded that he looked at her with recognition. But his eyes were only inquisitive and just a tiny bit suspicious.

Well, shit.

‘You know me?’ he asked, wonder in his voice.

‘Not really.’ If she was at the top of her game, she would never have made a mistake like this. But her head hurt and she couldn’t think straight. And she still couldn’t remember what happened.

‘Where am I?’ The filter between her mouth and her brain was gone as well, so she blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

Fortunately Elvaethor’s task as a healer took precedence over his questions. ‘The healing rooms of Erebor.’

That made sense, seeing as how she was in considerable pain. The rest of her body was starting to remind her that it was there with a series of stings and aches that she didn’t think she’d had before she had ended up here.

‘I’m injured.’ The realisation came with the words. Would that it provided her with clarity about how she had gotten these injuries.

‘Rather badly, my lady,’ Elvaethor confirmed quite unnecessarily. He hadn’t addressed her like that in years. If he wanted to vex her, he called her Lady Kate, but generally he used her first name. But this Elvaethor did not know her yet. And in her befuddled state she may have just dropped one of the biggest spoilers on him. Good job, Andrews.

She tried to move and instantly regretted that. ‘I can tell. How bad?’

‘Your right leg is broken,’ he reported. ‘Several of your ribs have suffered the same fate. And there are numerous other bruises, but your head was hurt worst of all.’

Again, she could tell. When she had tried to move it just now a blinding spike of pain had almost made her lose consciousness again. As it was, she was still trying to catch her breath. ‘Huh, must have got a concussion. Never had one of those before. I think.’ Her memory as a whole was a little fuzzy at the moment. ‘Aren’t you supposed to ask me all sorts of questions to determine that I still know who I am and all of that?’

A smile tugged at his lips. It was gone again almost before she could register it properly, but it was definitely there and not a figment of her pain-riddled imagination. ‘Indeed, my lady. If you are conscious enough to allow me to do so?’

‘Do I look asleep to you?’ she retorted.

‘What year is this?’ Elvaethor asked, not dignifying that too rude remark with a response.

‘27… 50?’ She hated that she had to think about it. ‘No, damn it, 2746. That’s it.’ She’d been thinking about 2950, because that was the year she really came from, but they had gone a little over
two hundred years into the past. The headache was not helping matters. ‘Third Age.’ At least she had that one right.

Worry was etched deep into his forehead. Kate had known without this that her answer was both lacking and too slow in coming.

‘Who is King under the Mountain?’ was the next question.

Sense was slowly catching up with her, so that one she could answer quickly. ‘Thrór son of Dáin.’ If that had been the question he’d chosen to start with, she couldn’t be sure that she wouldn’t have answered with Thorin son of Thráin and then where would they have been?

‘Your name?’

‘Lily.’ Bloody stupid flowery name that it was.

He nodded. ‘Your memory seems to be in better shape than I had feared.’

If that was the case, she had bad news for him. ‘I don’t remember how I got here,’ she confessed. ‘Do you know what happened, how I was hurt?’ Somewhere beyond the fog an alarm was going off. There was something she should remember, something urgent and important. But the harder she tried to reach it, the more it evaded her. It retreated deeper into the fog in her mind, teasing her, but never offering her any real answers. All she had was a sense of dread and more questions than she had answers.

‘I only know stairs were involved,’ Elvaethor replied. ‘Beyond that I was not informed.’

Kate frowned. There was a faint sense of recognition when he mentioned stairs, but it was gone before she could pursue it. And at the same time it sounded ridiculous. She had never taken a tumble down the stairs before. It wasn’t like her to start now.

‘Bloody hell.’ Trust her to actually get into such a scrape. She had survived a dragon unscathed, but now a staircase nearly did her in? It was honestly quite embarrassing. Kate began to laugh at the absurdity, but quickly thought better of it as the movement made her ribcage hurt like hell and her head soon joined in. ‘Aw…’

Worry made a spectacular reappearance on her elvish friend’s face. ‘Are you in pain?’

‘Only when I breathe.’ It seemed that was all the movement she could manage for now.

‘How much pain?’ Judging from the tone of voice he could hazard a relatively educated guess, but he clearly preferred to hear it from her. Healers were the same everywhere.

‘Giving birth was fun compared to this,’ she replied, laying on the sarcasm perhaps a little too thickly. Then again, it was the truth.

He held up a cup of something. ‘Drink this,’ he said. ‘It will help.’

It tasted horrible in the time-honoured tradition of medicines everywhere. It also made her eyelids far too heavy, so heavy, in fact, that when she opened them again Elvaethor was gone and the fire in the hearth was only barely smouldering. But he hadn’t lied. The medicine did help. The pounding in her head was ever so slightly dulled and so long as she didn’t move, she could pretend the rest of her body was fine. Just a shame that she actually needed to breathe.

Kate tried to move her head just a little. The pain returned in full force and she had to force herself
to breathe deeply a few times – another thing her body didn’t thank her for – in order to keep herself from blacking out. Note to self: do not move.

But she had managed to turn her head ever so slightly to the right. And now she could see what she hadn’t been able to last night – had it been night? – the person holding her hand. Not that she had realised that somebody was holding it, but she had a vague recollection of it being inexplicably being warmer than the other hand.

Thorin was lying, if one could call it that – in the most uncomfortable position Kate could think of. He was sitting on a chair, but had slumped forward so that his head was on the mattress just next to the hand he was holding. He must have been watching over her when sleep overtook him. Knowing just how long Thorin could force his body into staying awake – honestly past the point of common sense – they might have been here for a long time.

Just how bad was it?

People could actually die from falling down the stairs, couldn’t they? And Kate could tell from the amount of pain that she was in that she must have made a very unfortunate sort of landing.

She squeezed her husband’s hand gently, which took up most of her strength anyway, but she was pleasantly surprised that she could do it without causing her pain levels to go through the roof. Well, that was one reason for optimism.

True to expectations, Thorin woke immediately. Unless he was in his own bed, he was a very light sleeper. He blinked a couple of times and looked up at her.

‘You’re awake.’ He sounded as though he could barely believe it.

Uh oh. It had been that bad? ‘I suppose so,’ she said.

Concern flashed across his face, quickly followed by something that looked like fear. ‘Do you know who I am?’

‘Of course I know who you are.’ She’d better; she’d been married to him for years. Then rational thought caught up with her and reminded her that she had a head injury – as if she needed reminding – and that could cause all kinds of problems. So she obliged him: ‘You’re Thorin, you’re my husband, the year is 2746 of the Third Age.’

The relief washed over him. ‘Thank the Maker.’

Kate bit her lip. ‘You might want to wait with that for a bit,’ she told him. ‘Because I can’t for the life of me remember how I got here, in this state no less.’

A shadow moved across his face. ‘Thráin.’

That single word left Kate lost for words. She remembered that Thorin had been afraid of such a thing happening. And while she had not thought his fears were completely unfounded, she still hadn’t believed something like that could actually happen. After all, murder wasn’t something that was done by dwarves, ever. And whatever else Thráin was – and Kate had opinions about that – he was still a dwarf.

Apparently that counted for less than she’d thought.

‘He pushed me down the stairs?’ she asked, putting two and two together.
‘You remember?’ She could hear the hope in his voice.

‘Not really,’ she was forced to admit. ‘Elvaethor mentioned stairs when I woke earlier. But I don’t remember. I’ve got a glimpse here and there, but that’s about it. I’ve got a clear memory until the morning, Thrór inviting us to a feast with the elves. Everything after that is a little fuzzy.’ She didn’t like it one bit.

Judging by the concern on Thorin’s face, neither did he.

‘You regained consciousness briefly after I found you,’ he said. Kate found the fact that he had found her reassuring. Not that she remembered any of it, or of what she had said to him, but that didn’t matter. ‘You told me someone had been there with you.’

‘I don’t remember any of that.’ That frightened her. She had never been a fighter, but she had always been able to rely on her own wits, her memory. But a part of it was gone now, hidden behind the fog and she couldn’t reach it.

‘He didn’t deny it,’ Thorin added softly.

They were quiet for a while. Even if her thought process wouldn’t be suffering from a Thráin-induced fall from the stairs headache, she didn’t think she had words for this. Her heart went out to Thorin and she desperately wished she could be there for him now. He must be going through hell right now. Nobody ever needed to find out that their father was… well, like Thráin. Kate’s own father might have been an arse, but he had never been a murdering arse.

And of course she wouldn’t mind shredding Thráin to pieces with her bare hands for what he had done to her, but she wasn’t half as mad as she probably should have been. Oh, she was furious with Thráin, no doubt about that, but more over what this would have done to Thorin than what it had very obviously done to her. Maybe that would come when she could think straight again.

She squeezed his hand again. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I wish…’

He looked at her. ‘That we had never come here?’

‘Do you?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’ Brutal honesty.

‘At least you got the chance to say goodbye properly,’ she reminded him. ‘And I liked meeting your family. They’re rather amazing, well, most of them.’

There was blazing fire in Thorin’s eyes. ‘You almost died.’ Kate didn’t need another reminder. Her body was taking care of that job well enough on its own. ‘Your life is not a price worth paying for an opportunity to do something I want.’ She might have felt afraid if she had been convinced that this growling was in any way him being furious with her.

‘Well, we both know Thráin is not in his right mind,’ she said sensibly. In fact, she was pretty certain that the madness was already there, long before it had really shown itself to the world at large. ‘And neither of us asked to come here, as I recall. Though my recollection is a little hazy at the moment, so don’t quote me on that.’ Her mouth was running away with her again. Turned out that it wasn’t only lack of sleep that caused it. A good knock on the head would do the job as well.

Thorin looked at her. ‘Don’t.’ It was more a plea than a command.

Kate grimaced. ‘Sorry.’ That joke had been distasteful.
‘Why?’ he asked her, completely bewildered. ‘Why are you not angrier?’

It was a valid question. If there was one thing Kate excelled at, it was being angry with people who had gotten on her wrong side. And Thráin had attempted to kill her. Perhaps it was because that was something she could barely wrap her head around it that her reaction was so different from what it probably would have been. Or perhaps she was more angry with Thráin on Thorin’s behalf, because no father should ever do something like that to his own son. And Thorin had suffered enough for a hundred bloody lifetimes already.

‘I am,’ she said and that was the truth. She was silent for a moment while she contemplated how to explain it best, which wasn’t easy with that raging headache going on. ‘But more for you than for me. But that’s probably because it hasn’t quite landed just yet.’

She wasn’t quite sure how to describe the expression that settled on Thorin’s face then. She decided on a mix between horror and disbelief in the end. ‘Do you value your own life so little?’

‘No.’ Of course not. It was her life and she loved it. ‘But I live. I survived. I’m more or less in one piece and when I’m up and about again, I’ll gladly tell Thráin exactly what I think of him, which is probably all I can do, given that we have a timeline to maintain.’

Bloody hell, there was the timeline to reckon with as well. For all she knew that could have gone straight to hell while she was out.

‘You didn’t…’ There were bandages around his hands that suggested that he had been in something of a fight.

‘Kill him?’ Thorin supplied. ‘No.’ Of course that did not exclude the chance that Thráin had received quite a beating.

She decided not to ask. ‘Good.’ Or it should be. Those two weren’t necessarily the same. He needed to be alive for the future to be as it was, but at the same time, Kate would not really mind spinning Thráin’s head around a couple of times.

Thorin shook his head. ‘It is not. None of this is.’ Kate hated that look in his eyes, so haunted. And from where she was lying right now, there was not a single thing she could do about it, yet another thing to add to her rapidly growing list of frustrations.

‘I’ll get better,’ she said. ‘It’ll take a while, but I’ll get out of this bed sooner or later.’

Thorin’s face was troubled. ‘You very nearly didn’t.’

Kate was very glad she had not been awake for that bit. Or perhaps she had been, but she simply didn’t remember it.

‘I know.’ She wanted to say she was sorry again, but technically it wasn’t her fault. She hadn’t asked to be shoved down a flight of stairs. All she wanted was to save him the pain of losing yet somebody else. So get well and stop moping, Andrews. And then, for good measure, break Thráin’s nose. That won’t damage the timeline in any way. And he certainly deserved it.

Thorin looked pensively ahead of him. ‘If you hadn’t survived, I would have killed him.’ The tone suggested that he still wanted to, but wouldn’t for the timeline’s sake.

‘You could have unwritten everything,’ Kate breathed, slightly shocked.

‘It wouldn’t have mattered.’
It sounded like madness, and maybe it was. Thorin had said it himself: his family was susceptible to it. And Thráin would owe his ultimate fall to grief. *Am I the only thing standing between Thorin and that fate?* That would be a very heavy burden to bear if that was the case and she did not want it. *I am not supposed to be the last bastion of sanity.*

‘I am not worth such a reaction,’ she replied decisively. ‘If I died now, we would still have our children in the future. We couldn’t do that to them.’

‘It would not be a place I cared to be,’ Thorin said.

‘No, it would be a place where I cared you to be,’ Kate insisted. They were, to her own surprise, rapidly heading towards an argument. ‘To look after them, see them grow up and do all those things with them that I wouldn’t be able to. And if you killed Thráin, who knows what would become of the future. We may not even have met, for all we know. Is that really a chance you’d want to take? Because I sure as hell wouldn’t.’

That got through to him. She could see the realisation on his face, the horror when he finally saw what consequences his potential actions could have.

‘It matters not,’ he said eventually. ‘You live.’

Part of Kate wanted to press the point, but her head ached too much for a full-blown argument and so she let it go. After all, he did have a point. She was alive and out of danger. Well, she was relatively sure she was. If that hadn’t been the case, she might have noticed. She liked to think so, anyway.

‘I do,’ she agreed. ‘But if something ever happened… just don’t go off the rails. I’m really not worth that.’

Thorin looked at her. ‘Worth that? You undervalue yourself.’

Kate didn’t think she was.

Thorin looked like he was struggling to find the right words and Kate gave him that time. It was never easy for either of them to discuss matters of the heart and to her endless frustration they had gotten only a little better at it over the years. Then again, they didn’t often need to speak of it, because they knew. Talking about it wouldn’t tell either of them anything they did not already know.

‘You are irreplaceable,’ he said at last. ‘To me, if not to others. Valued.’

On some level, she had known that. After all the hurdles they’d had to overcome to get married in the first place, he had to feel that way. Else, why would he have bothered? But to hear it spoken did something to her.

She would never go as far as to say that she had been unhappy before she came to Middle Earth. Well, she had been at times, with good reason to. But all things considered, she’d had a good life, with friends and family who loved her. And of course she was irreplaceable to her mother – the familiar stab of guilt blended in well with all the other pains and aches she had – but not exactly to a lot of other people. That point had been more than driven home by Marc when he cheated on her. She was replaceable, quite easily too.

But she wasn’t to Thorin. He’d had few reasons to like her, even less to love her. There was pressure on him from so many sides to set her aside, to undo what he did when he married her. But still here he was. And for reasons quite beyond her comprehension, she was special in his eyes,
loved and valued.

Tears came to her eyes.

‘Are you in pain?’ Thorin asked.

Pain? Well, yes, perhaps. ‘Good pain,’ she told him. ‘It’s just, well, I guess I’m not used to being cherished by someone like that.’

‘You are by me,’ he said, holding her gaze. ‘Never doubt it.’

She never really had. Still, the words meant something to her, more that she could eloquently put into words. ‘I love you.’ That was the best she could do, but it was the truth. And it would do for now.

Elvaethor had gone outside. The Mountain felt stifling, both the memories and the walls closing in on him. He craved the open air and the stars above him. As it happened, night had made way for day and there were no stars to be had. He must have lost track of time, because the full light of day took him almost completely by surprise.

But his head was reeling. The woman had known him. She had called him by name. Puzzlement, relief, warmth. All of that he had heard in her voice when she woke and found him there keeping vigil at her bedside. She had even started to smile when she recognised him, before the pain caught up with her and overtook her.

He was unused to mysteries. He had searched his memory long and hard, but had come up empty. Never in all his days had he met this lady. And though he had tended to her for hours, he did not know her name, not her real name. The one she had given him, Lily, did not fit her. Apparently she was of that opinion herself, for she had wrinkled her nose in disgust when she answered him.

Fryr and Lily were an enigma. Neither of them had given their real name, there was the involvement of the King and Queen under the Mountain to consider and then there was something else that made little sense. When asked about the date, Lily had answered wrongly at first. The year 2750, she’d said. Now it wasn’t unusual for one with a head injury to get the date wrong, but their answer was generally a date of sometime in the past, not the future.

The answers eluded him. The only way he was going to get anything was by asking. And at least for now his curiosity overrode his urge to run and not look back.

So his feet carried him back into the Mountain and straight to the healing rooms. The trade talks would have begun by now, Elvaethor’s absence noted. Thranduil would not be pleased, but Elvaethor could not bring himself to care. He had more pressing matters to attend to.

The guard on the door looked him over with barely concealed suspicion when he reached his destination. It was another than the one who had been on duty during the night, but he must have received orders that Elvaethor was allowed to enter, for after a moment of intense and almost hostile scrutiny, he stepped aside and gestured at him to pass and be quick about it.

Lily was dozing on the bed when he came in. Her husband had only removed himself as far as the bed that was closest by, where exhaustion had caught up with him at last. Even in sleep his face
looked troubled.

Lily’s eyes opened when she heard the door. ‘Good morning,’ she said. ‘Or afternoon. I’m not entirely sure.’

‘Afternoon,’ Elvaethor told her.

‘Good afternoon, then,’ she said. She nodded before she remembered that her head did not appreciate motion. She winced. ‘I keep bloody forgetting not to do that.’ She turned to Elvaethor again. ‘What can I do for you, Master Elf?’

He shook his head. ‘Please, do not pretend, my lady. You and I both know you are familiar with my name. I would beg you to be so kind as to use it. And perhaps you might tell me how it is that you know me.’

‘I know of you,’ Lily said. Another lie.

‘You are telling a falsehood, I think,’ Elvaethor remarked. ‘You greeted me as you would a friend, when you first awoke.’

And he had not been met with such friendship in a long, long time. For a moment he had almost believed himself to be in the past, when he arrived at Dari and Inga’s humble house and his dwarvish friend would come out to meet him. ‘Elvaethor, my pointy-eared friend!’ he’d exclaim jovially, or something very similar. ‘You’re a sight for sore eyes. Come in. It’s so good to see your face again.’ It had never failed to warm his heart, never failed to wake a sense of belonging in him that he no longer felt among his own.

But those days were dead and buried and the belonging had died with his friends. And while Elvaethor believed that the longing for such a friendship had died as well, he now found that it was very much alive after all.

Lily sighed, winced as that caused her more pain and then looked at him long and hard. ‘I can’t tell you the truth. Not all of it anyway.’ He could tell by the look on her face that she didn’t like it.

‘Your name, perhaps?’ After all, he was curious. ‘The one that is yours, not the one that you now use.’

‘Not an option, I’m afraid.’ At least she no longer pretended that the name she’d given him was her own.

‘When I asked you about the date, you answered 2750,’ Elvaethor said.

She tapped lightly on the uninjured side of her head. ‘I cracked my skull open, more or less. If you were expecting me to think straight after that, you need some more healer training.’

He laughed. ‘Most folk with such injuries would think of a date in the past. None of them have ever answered with one that has not yet arrived.’

Lily looked at him again. Elvaethor could tell she was weighing her options, how much she could tell him. ‘We’re out of our time, Fryr and I,’ she replied at last. ‘I’m guessing you already suspected as much.’

He looked at her, not understanding. And when he did understand, he must have looked incredulous, because it wasn’t possible.
He must have spoken aloud, because she responded. ‘Time travel is supposed to be impossible,’ Lily agreed. ‘I’d have paid good money to never have to discover that it is real, but here we are.’

‘You have come here from the future?’

How long had he not been wishing for time travel, for a way to reach into the past and undo what went wrong? He could have saved Inga, could have had many years of that wonderful friendship before it was ripped away.

Lily nodded.

‘And you know me.’ He had known it already, but he felt he needed the confirmation. Hope was growing, ever growing. Did he perhaps find this kind of friendship again in the days to come? Could he ever find that companionship again? This woman’s way of treating him suggested, more than suggested, that it was so. Yet he could barely believe it, dared not believe it perhaps for fear of being disappointed.

‘Don’t tell me you hadn’t worked it out yet,’ she said.

‘I had.’ But he had needed to hear it from her lips. ‘How?’ he asked. She should not be here. Logic dictated that it was impossible.

‘I wish I knew. One moment I was in the future, the next in this place.’ She bit her lip. ‘Thrór has sent messengers to try and track Gandalf down. You might know him better as Mithrandir,’ she added.

‘The grey wizard,’ Elvaethor nodded. He knew him and liked him. The wizard had the best interests of this world in mind before anything else, which was refreshing after encountering so many who only furthered their own. Elvaethor’s own king was like that and he found it tiring and frustrating.

‘Hopefully he can put us back where we belong,’ Lily said. ‘Because I haven’t got a clue how to go about it.’

Elvaethor looked at her. Truth was that he knew where the wizard would be. They were friends of a sort after all. If need be, Elvaethor knew how to contact him. It would mean leaving Erebor against his king’s orders, though. No doubt Thranduil was already displeased with his apparent lack of effort and his continued absence. There would be consequences if he disobeyed his orders any more than he already had, especially on behalf of people he barely knew.

‘Indeed,’ he said. He thought for a moment. ‘Are we friends, in this time to come?’

Lily looked at him, searching his face. ‘You need to ask?’ She was careful about revealing too much and he understood why now. Even so, she had given him all the answer he needed.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I do not think there is any need.’

He wanted to scold his future self for throwing himself into such a scenario again. Hadn’t he learned the last time that it could only ever end in heartbreak? Should he not be wiser than to risk so much? Yet something tugged at his heart, a longing so strong it was almost a physical ache.

‘You should sleep,’ he instructed her.

‘I do nothing but sleep,’ Lily grumbled. And although it was her husband who resembled Dari so much in looks, it was this woman whose manners reminded him most of his lost friend.
‘You will have to be confined to your bed for some time,’ Elvaethor gently reminded her. ‘Sleep will help to pass the time.’

‘I might get sick of my sickbed before long.’

Elvaethor chuckled, a real one that verged on an actual laugh. The feeling was so foreign that he was startled by it, by the sincerity of it. How long had it been since he had experienced real joy? It had been so long.

And that decided him.

‘Sleep, my lady,’ he counselled her. ‘You will mend.’

The lack of protest was testimony to how tired she still was. Her eyes closed and did not open, which allowed Elvaethor to leave the room unnoticed by its occupants. From there he made his way to the stables to fetch a horse. The guard on duty at the gate asked where he was going, but Elvaethor gave no answer. It wouldn’t do to raise anybody’s hopes.

Not yet.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: an interesting meeting. There might be a slight delay, because I’ve got a busy week ahead, but I’ll try to upload something. But just in case I won’t manage, you’ll know why.
Thank you very much for reading. Reviews would be very much appreciated.
Into the Past Part 8: Returning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘You are not of this world.’

‘No, but I’ve put a lot of work into it.’

Doctor Who

Kate was a bloody awful patient.

She could at least own up to her own failures. Thorin thought that counted for something. And he understood. He had been climbing the walls – not literally of course – when he had been injured by Smaug and later again on the battlefield. All folk would tell him was that it was in his best interests to remain stationary. It had been good advice even though he had been reluctant to accept it. Likewise, it was good counsel for Kate as well, but she was no more pleased than he had been to live by it.

In some ways, it was worse for Kate than it had been for him. She was always in motion, even in sleep. Now she could barely turn her head without screaming. Of course, she tried to hide how much pain she was in, but he knew. At least when Thorin had been recuperating, it had been because he had been injured as a consequence of something he had chosen to do. He had taken on the dragon, knowing he might very well die, of his own free will. There were times he was surprised to find he had survived at all. The same sentiment applied to the Battle of the Five Armies, perhaps even moreso because Kate’s book had predicted his death.

But this was different. Kate hadn’t been meant to be in danger. She hadn’t chosen to take the risk, because there had never been supposed to be one. Yet still, here she was. And it was only because of Kate’s own stubbornness and Elvaethor’s skill that she was not dead.

And speaking of Elvaethor… ‘The elf has deserted us,’ Thorin observed about a week after he had last seen Elvaethor. The captain of the Mirkwood guard had just disappeared. A few inquiries turned up that he had retrieved a horse from the stables and that he had ridden off without telling anybody where he was going.

‘Perhaps,’ Kate allowed. ‘But he isn’t our Elvaethor yet, is he? He told me he was this close to running away and never looking back when we had just met him. And that’s two centuries from now.’

Thorin knew that it was true, and yet felt his trust had been flung back in his face. He had learned to trust Elvaethor, especially after he had come to his aid in the campaign against the orcs two years ago when he was under no obligation to do so. He had taken a blow for Thorin and then tried to inform him that it was nothing. He’d gained Thorin’s respect and perhaps even his friendship.
And even though the Elvaethor of this time had done none of these things yet, it felt like a betrayal.

‘He promised to tend to you,’ Thorin insisted. What vexed him was that Elvaethor’s conduct neatly fitted the pattern of elvish behaviour that he had no longer come to expect from this particular elf.

‘He just didn’t say for how long,’ Kate pointed out.

For someone with a head injury she was remarkably sharp, but she still had no recollection of the day leading up to her fall, which worried Thorin. Perhaps he should count it a blessing that the memory remained out of her reach, but he knew that it bothered Kate, that it alarmed her to miss something that should be so easily accessible to her on any other day.

‘Elves!’ he spat.

Reason dictated that he could not hold this against the Elvaethor he knew, who had gone above and beyond to help them, who had yet to let them down. Perhaps he had only done so for the lack of care he had demonstrated in the past, Thorin had thought when he had been in a particularly uncharitable mood.

Kate however was firm in her defence of her future friend. ‘Let’s cut him some slack,’ she said. ‘He’s lost friends before. I reckon he’s not too keen to throw himself headfirst into another friendship that’s bound to end in heartbreak, especially considering that I was in something of a predicament when he first saw me. Must have brought back all sorts of painful memories. It’s no wonder he ran.’

Thorin understood grief far better than most, but he had never run. No, instead he had been about to tear the timeline itself to shreds when it appeared as though he might lose Kate.

It was as though she had heard his thoughts. ‘Grief isn’t exactly rational.’ She smiled apologetically.

He was forced to concede that point. He knew full well that he had only been capable of sanity once he learned that she would live. It had been a warning and one he would be a fool to ignore. Whatever stain was in his blood, whatever penchant for madness lurked just below the surface, it hadn’t died. It was there and it could come out. He should have realised that some weeks before, when he had been foolish enough to wish to unwrite his whole life in his present to rearrange the past. Only Kate’s sensible words had brought him back from the brink. And only Kate’s survival had stayed his hand.

She was his tether to sanity. *My life in her hands.*

It both frightened and reassured him. He knew he had not made the wrong choice when he married her. If anything, the Maker had made his blessing on their union more than clear. But times like these reminded him that what they had was also fragile. He had come so close to losing it all.

‘I was not.’ They were alone, which was the only reason he could admit to it aloud.

‘Truth be told, if our places had been reversed, common sense might not have made it to the top of my priorities either.’ Kate shook her head, then inhaled sharply as the pain struck her again. She was on the mend, but any sudden movement would cause severe headaches. ‘Bloody hell!’

Thorin silently echoed the sentiment. The colour had drained from her face and she looked as though she was about to pass out. Any other person probably would, but Kate was usually a good deal more stubborn than most folk and would try to prevent such an event through sheer determination. It was one of the aspects about her that was entirely dwarvish.
‘Don’t move,’ he told her.

His efforts were rewarded with a withering glare. ‘Don’t ever become a nurse. Your bedside manner stinks.’

Her spirit at least had suffered little from her injury. Thorin was grateful for that. And while he was a little vexed at her manner, he also knew that he had been the same, if not worse. It allowed him to keep a tight leash on his temper. And he was far too relieved to have her still with him to be seriously put out by her sharp words.

‘What on earth…?’

Kate looked past him, mouth falling open in what appeared to be shock. Thorin quickly turned around and grasped for his sword. Thráin was standing in the doorway. He was alone and, from what Thorin could see, unarmed, but he had been unarmed when he had attempted to murder Kate, so that counted for nothing.

He was on his feet in moments, blade pointed at the dwarf he had once called father. ‘Out!’ he snarled.

Contempt was writ large on Thráin’s face and he did not budge. ‘Put that away,’ he said dismissively. ‘I am here to talk, no more.’

‘You’ll forgive me if I don’t believe a word that comes from your lips.’ He was utterly untrustworthy. Thorin had learned that lesson the hard way, but at the very least he learned from his mistakes.

‘You’ll find that I have never not told you the truth,’ Thráin pointed out. Strictly speaking that was true. After all, he had never attempted to hide his hatred of Kate and of Thorin’s choices. But that did not absolve him.

‘Get off your high horse,’ Kate snapped. ‘So maybe you’re not a liar, but that doesn’t change the fact that you’re something worse.’ As long as she did not move, she could still very much hold her own in an argument. Thorin was even relieved that she finally seemed capable of summoning a decent amount of anger towards Thráin.

‘Be that as it may, I am only here to talk,’ Thráin said. ‘You can take my word for that. But keep the sword close if it helps you.’

The patronising tone made Thorin want to run him through on principle.

‘Speak, then, and be gone.’ As it was, he had to control the urge to grab him by the collar and forcefully escort him from the room.

Thráin looked at Kate. ‘You.’

‘She has a name,’ Thorin interjected. ‘I’d advise you to use it.’

Thráin appeared to ignore that, but the fact that Thorin was still holding the sword made him think better of it. ‘Kate,’ he began again. ‘What do you get out of this?’

She frowned, hissed in pain and then focussed her attention on him. ‘I’ve a head injury, as you’re probably well aware. You’re going to have to be a bit more specific, because I’m not following.’

‘This marriage. What is it you want from it?’ The tone was decidedly demanding.
And he could not stay his tongue. ‘Perhaps that’s the question you should have asked before you
tried to kill her.’ Who could know what went on inside that head? And Thorin could not escape the
feeling that he only asked now because he hoped the result would enable him to cook up more
mischief.

Thrān ignored him. ‘My father tells me you came from a different world. Why not return there?
You have no business here.’

Thrór should not have told him that. He would have had his reasons, but it wasn’t wise. The more
information Thrān had, the more harm he would be able to do.

‘You know what, that’s actually none of your bloody business,’ Kate told him.

Thrān appeared taken aback.

So Kate continued: ‘No seriously, you’ve got some nerve, coming in here and demanding answers
out of me. You tried to kill me. I don’t owe you anything, least of all answers and certainly not
when you’re standing there demanding them as if it’s your God-given right. Piss off.’ Incredulity
mixed with Kate’s unique brand of rude anger. Naturally, Thrān deserved every last scrap of
rudeness she had to offer and much more besides.

‘Tell me.’ Thrān was unmoved and unashamed.

‘I think you’d better begin with apologising for the hell you put us through.’ Of course, Kate was
equally unmoved. Elvaethor – the future Elvaethor – had once said that Kate could easily out-
stubborn any dwarf and he was right. ‘That’d be a good place to start. And when you’re done with
that, you could perhaps grovel for forgiveness a bit. Maybe then, if you asked nicely and said
please, I might have a think about doing anything for you at all.’ There was sarcasm there, but also
boiling fury.

Thrān exploded in rage. ‘Grovel? For your forgiveness? You presume much, woman.’

Thorin had often referred to Kate by that title before they came together. He wondered now if it
had ever sounded so derisive from his lips as it sounded from Thrān’s.

‘Yeah, well, so did you when you pushed me down the stairs.’ Kate may not be able to move, but
there was fire and passion in her words. ‘You lost the right to the moral high ground, pal.’

He stared her down. ‘What I did, I did for the greater good of my people. Can you claim the same?’

Kate did not avert her eyes. ‘Funny enough, all I did was get married. People for some
incomprehensible reason can’t seem to stop making a fuss about it.’

‘You should have stuck to your own,’ Thrān snapped. ‘You reached too high, polluted our line
with your blood.’

Thorin would happily have run him through for that alone.

Kate made a gagging noise. ‘Good morning, Herr Hitler.’

Thrān of course did not understand – Thorin himself was slightly more educated on her world and
its history and understood better – and went on as though she had not spoken at all: ‘I had heard
that men will go far in their pursuit of power, but I did not think they would ever go this far.’

Kate laughed without humour. ‘Really? That’s what you think this is? A stupid little power play?’
Thorin drew himself up to his full height. ‘I am the King under the Mountain in my time. Such privileges are entirely within my gift.’ Never would he have believed that one day he would pull rank on his own father.

Then again, there had been a time when the title of King under the Mountain had sounded equally foreign and unobtainable to him. And when it was finally his, not just by right but because he had fought for his Mountain and had retaken it from a dragon, it took time to get used to it. It was like a new coat he put on, all stiff so that he couldn’t move properly, with the collar sticking into his neck when he walked so he couldn’t manoeuvre. But he grew used to it and more or less comfortable with it and he had seen the same process with Kate. At first she’d remained in the background, uncertain in her new position as Queen under the Mountain. Only when she was properly riled would she stand up and claim it. But, like him, she had grown into it over the years. She now stood with quiet confidence and spoke with authority. And she had earned what she had a hundred times over.

Would that the same could be said about Thráin.

‘You dare…’

‘Yes, I dare.’ It was odd, really. Thráin was so much younger than he was, lacking both experience and wisdom. In his mother, her youth had stood out to Thorin, whereas he had only been able to see Thráin as the older, bitter dwarf he had been at the time he disappeared. And still that had not changed.

‘Are you rejoicing now that you have taken everything from me?’ And there it was, the reason why he was here.

‘I am rejoicing that my wife still lives.’ Thráin did not know the first thing about loss yet.

Thráin’s face twisted in a sneer. ‘All this time, you must have known,’ he insisted. ‘You must have known that I would never succeed my father.’
In a way he had and in another he had not. When he was younger, all he knew was that his grandfather was dead and his father gone – either to the halls of their forefathers or to some unknown place in Middle Earth – and that the burden of kingship had come to him. Thráin would never be King under the Mountain, whether he had a right to that title or not. It was the only reason why Thorin had permitted his grandfather to do that. And that had been strange in and out of itself, Thrór looking at him to approve his idea.

‘I did,’ he replied at last. *Though not in the way you think.* It was infinitely more complex than that. And after the battle he had so often wondered why he had to shoulder that burden, why it all fell to him. He was inexperienced, not well enough prepared, mourning. He did not think he was what his people needed. But he was what they had, so he had put one foot in front of the other and he had done what needed doing.

And now he knew that perhaps it was good that he had been the one to lead his people and not Thráin. Of course he could only say this with the benefit of hindsight, but at the very least he understood now. Thráin would have broken under the strain. Thorin had often felt as though he would, but he never had. And that was the difference between them.

‘Though I did not know why,’ he finished. How could he, when he had never known that Thráin had been disinherited? The situation being what it was, the subject had never come up. It might even be that it had been kept from Thorin deliberately.

Thráin’s gaze settled on Kate. ‘What have you done to him?’

‘Nothing,’ Kate replied. ‘Thorin’s quite capable of making up his own mind.’

‘What in Durin’s name are you doing here?’

So, it appeared, was Thrór, who had come in behind Thráin and was clearly very displeased to see his son where he was told very explicitly not to go. He grabbed Thráin unceremoniously by the back of his tunic and hauled him out of the room. Thorin should have done it himself, might even have done so. But it would have involved removing himself from between his father and Kate and if Thráin had broken free… It did not bear thinking about.

Thrór came back a moment later, muttering angrily about the uselessness of the guard on the door. ‘Apologies, lass, Thorin.’ He nodded at them. ‘That won’t happen again.’

Thorin suddenly realised he was still holding the sword and put it away at last. There was no need for it now.

‘How are you feeling today, Kate?’ He came closer and sat down on the chair Thorin had vacated when he jumped up.

‘Little better,’ she replied, tension melting out of her shoulders. Thorin knew she liked Thrór, a fact that pleased him. To his relief she got on well with most of the people she met in this place, this Erebor of the past, with only one notable exception. ‘Head’s not pounding so much, so long as I remember to keep it still, which is not one of my natural talents, it seems.’

Thrór chuckled. ‘You’re a dwarf at heart,’ he declared. ‘We’re none of us made to be idle.’

‘Absolutely,’ Kate agreed.

‘Well, nothing I can do about it, but I reckon I found you something better,’ Thrór announced, quite enigmatically. ‘A couple of visitors have just arrived at the gate, requesting to see the two of you.’ Before Thorin had much opportunity to wonder who would know them well enough here to
want to call on them, Thrór had already bid them enter.

Two tall figures stepped inside, one of them all in grey, the other with bright red hair: the grey wizard and Elvaethor.

It took Kate a moment to process the fact that Elvaethor and Gandalf were both here. News from the latter had been all but non-existent, so she hadn’t expected him for months yet and she hadn’t allowed herself to hope for a quicker arrival.

And Elvaethor? She had not thought to see him again in this era. It was hard to find him gone, but she had understood. Kate herself was something of an expert when it came to running from heartache and so it was nothing she could hold against him in good conscience. And her elvish friend felt things deeply, with his whole soul. The very risk of engaging in a friendship only to lose it again must have terrified him. He wasn’t ready now, but in the future that would be different. That being the case, she wasn’t going to force him into something he did not yet want.

But here he was again. What’s more, he had brought Gandalf. Kate recalled that she had discussed the wizard with him before he vanished. But she had never even imagined that the reason he had left was that he had set out to find Gandalf for them.

Now that she saw them both here together, it did make sense. After all, the reason why Elvaethor had initially helped them was because Gandalf asked him to. That more than implied friendship, because as far as Kate was aware, Elvaethor had never once asked why. Of course, in her state she hadn’t thought to ask Elvaethor if he perhaps knew where Gandalf was, even though he was clearly the one best placed to known.

Stupid concussion. She was decidedly slower in the brain department since the attack.

‘I’ve brought you the wizard, my lady,’ Elvaethor announced with a half bow in her direction.

‘Thank you,’ she said, meaning the words with all her heart.

She looked at Gandalf now. It was odd, because he looked just as she remembered him. Two centuries before she met him he looked no different from the first time she set eyes on him at Bag End. Time never touched him. Of course, it was the same for Elvaethor, speaking in terms of appearance. But with him she could tell the difference between past and future by his eyes – so sorrowful now, however much he tried to hide it – and his conduct, not to mention his annoying insistence to call her by titles and overdo the courtesies.

But Gandalf was the same now as he would be. For all she knew, he was even wearing the same clothes. If he wasn’t, there wasn’t any noticeable difference.

‘Gandalf,’ she acknowledged. ‘Thank you very much for coming.’

He looked at her face and Kate wished she could hide it. When the healer had changed the dressing yesterday, she had requested a mirror, just to know why people always winced when they looked at her these days. When he had obliged, she kind of wished he had refused her instead. The whole right side of her face was a rainbow of discolouration and scabbed over wounds. In short, she very much looked like she had fallen down the stairs.
‘Please sit,’ she invited when Thorin didn’t speak. Hardly a surprise, because Thorin didn’t like having to ask for help. It was even worse, because this was Gandalf. And they all had quite a history. It just hadn’t happened yet.

Elvaethor and Gandalf both did and Thrór announced he would leave them to it, as he had some urgent business to attend to. Kate suspected he would be having a few words with Thráin in private. He had it coming as far as Kate was concerned.

She was wondering how to explain what had caused them to look for Gandalf in the first place, but it appeared that Elvaethor had already taken care of it. That too made sense, because Kate knew Gandalf and there was no way that he would let himself be dragged off anywhere without having a very good reason to do so.

‘Time travel?’ he asked. It was hard to tell from his face if he was shocked or surprised. He seemed to take it all in his stride. Then again, he’d had the shock when Elvaethor brought him up to speed. He might have had days to let the news sink in already.

‘About two centuries,’ Thorin responded. ‘It was 2950 of the Third Age where we came from.’ It was not information he would have volunteered easily, but Gandalf may be the only one who could get them home.

Gandalf nodded, then turned to Kate. ‘What happened to you, dear?’

Kate grimaced and instantly regretted that excess of movement. ‘The past disagreed with me,’ she replied, only too well aware that there were multiple ways to explain that comment. Unfortunately they were all true.

‘Can you heal her?’

Kate would have swivelled her head around if she had not just had a reminder that would be a very bad idea. Thorin wasn’t given to making requests of anyone, least of all Gandalf. But he was making one now.

Gandalf looked at him.

And Thorin did not withdraw. ‘Or take the pain at least,’ he said, meeting Gandalf’s eyes. ‘Please.’

At last it looked as though the grey wizard was slightly taken aback. Then again, dwarves only seldom asked for help. And if they did, they asked for themselves. Whatever thoughts he had on their marriage, Maker only knew, but he hadn’t so much as blinked when he first saw them.

‘Healing is a natural process,’ Gandalf said. ‘That will take time. But it may be persuaded to hurry along.’ He looked at Kate again. ‘If you would permit me?’

‘Of course,’ she replied, still somewhat on the back foot. In all the time she had known him, Gandalf had never so readily complied with any request. Then again, she had usually asked him to send her home and he couldn’t have done that.

Going home was never an option. It hurt to know that. Even though it had been her own choice in the end, she had perhaps been at least coerced into staying long enough to make it. And it wouldn’t have helped her at the time to know that Gandalf only did what he did to maintain a timeline. Honestly, if she had known it, she would have fought that much harder. Who knows, she might have even succeeded. And that could have had all kinds of unforeseen consequences of the unpleasant kind.
So where did that leave her? More specifically, where did that leave her resentment towards Gandalf? She had low-key hated him for years, and had felt at times uncomfortable with that, because what he had done, he had done for the good of his world. And it now turned out that he had orchestrated her life even more than she had believed at the time. All to preserve a timeline.

Logic dictated she resented him more than she did before.

Except Kate loved her life. She had been terrified of losing it all when Thorin had indicated he wouldn’t mind rewriting the past when they had just arrived. She had fought tooth and nail to hold on to what she had. And she had done that because in spite of everything, she wanted it. So could she truly hate the person who had set her on her path?

It was a difficult question to answer.

Gandalf put his hand against the injured side of her head, closed his eyes and muttered words she didn’t understand. Judging by the deepening frown on his forehead, it took a great deal of effort.

*Which sums up all my interactions with him in a nutshell.*

At first there was nothing much. Gandalf’s hand was pleasantly warm, but that was it. But then the tingling started, first only where the hand made contact, but rapidly spreading. The stinging and pain followed shortly after and Kate inhaled sharply.

As soon as it started it was over.

‘The pain is gone.’ Or well, not all of it. Her ribcage was still sore and she felt it would be better to postpone moving her leg for a bit, but she was fairly certain that at least her head was feeling much better. She’d gotten so used to the low-level pain – and not so low-level when she stupidly tried to move – this past week, that the absence of it almost made her feel like she was missing something essential. Her head was feeling strangely numb.

Gandalf nodded. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘Very good.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, realising that was the thing she should have started with. Honestly, that was just rude.

The wizard nodded. ‘Can you tell me how you came here?’

They did. Of course, there wasn’t much to tell. Kate had gone over it in her head so many times now, and never once had she gotten something that resembled a reasonable explanation. Right up to the moment that she realised there was no carving in the wall where there should be, she hadn’t even considered the possibility that she was no longer in her own time. It was supposed to be impossible, and Kate had been dragged into *The Hobbit*, not *Doctor Who*.

Gandalf listened attentively, nodded every now and again and frowned a lot.

‘I have never heard of something like this,’ he pondered when they were done. Kate’s heart was already starting to sink, when he added: ‘But there is no reason to lose hope just yet. No, there may be a way.’ He looked long and hard at the both of them. ‘One spell in particular might work.’

Kate could read the impatience on Thorin’s face that was likely a mirror image of her own.

‘It’s called a There and Back Again spell,’ Gandalf announced.

Kate couldn’t have stopped herself from gasping if she’d tried, and she was far too shocked to try.
‘I thought that was meant to transport people from one place to another. Just across space, not time as well.’ After all, it would be useless to try and conceal now that the name did not mean anything to her. *Never become a spy, Andrews. You’d be completely useless at it.*

If Gandalf had opinions, there was no evidence of it on his face. Elvaethor had no such reservations and stared at her with badly concealed curiosity.

‘It is meant to take people from one place to another, dear girl,’ the wizard said. ‘There is no reason time should be an obstacle.’

‘I have never heard that time travel was even possible,’ Kate said. It was good and well in stories, but in real life? Well, she had seen the chaos it could cause first-hand.

‘It is not meant to be,’ Gandalf replied. ‘But forces greater than I placed you here.’ *Is he suggesting the Valar are involved?* If so, Kate wouldn’t know why they had bothered with Thorin and her. They’d done an important thing or two in their day, but nothing that warranted that kind of attention, she felt.

Then again, perhaps they had a timeline to maintain as well, she thought wryly. After all, after everything that had happened to her, she couldn’t rightly rule anything out anymore. *It’s like the moment I think that something is impossible, someone sets out to prove me wrong.* First it had been Gandalf, disproving both the notion that Middle Earth did not exist and that travel between worlds was impossible, if there were other worlds to begin with. And now it was time travel and all its complexities. And Gandalf had more or less suggested the Valar had some hand in it.

Kate really didn’t like it. *After all the times we’ve asked the Maker to be good, it would be about bloody time he humoured us for once.*

‘You can send us back?’ Thorin asked. He, unlike Kate, did not seem very interested in how it was possible that they were here. He had never been comfortable here, not even before Thráin had attempted murder. It had been worse this past week. He’d been restless, something he tried to conceal from her, rather badly.

That didn’t mean Kate was any less anxious to go back; Erebor had become something of a hostile environment so long as Thráin was in it. And she wanted to go home, see all her loved ones, hold her children and rest assured in the knowledge that everything was as it was supposed to be.

Because ever since their arrival here, there had been this nagging sense of being stuck, of history repeating itself. She had been dragged kicking and screaming from one world to another and there had been no return trip. True, it had been her own choice in the end – more or less – but she had been unable to squash that little voice saying that it would be no different now, that she would be forever cut off from everyone she loved again.

Gandalf nodded. ‘Without a doubt.’ That of course was the only answer that would settle Thorin’s frayed nerves.

‘How soon?’ Thorin was in no mood to beat around the bush. Now that he had what he needed within reach, he would no sooner let go than a dragon would abandon his treasure.

Gandalf gave him a long look. ‘Perhaps it would be best until your wife has healed.’

That wouldn’t stand. ‘I can recuperate as well at home as I can here,’ she was quick to say.

Thorin wouldn’t say it, because Gandalf had used the one thing that would ever cause him to delay: her health. And Kate did not want to delay. For so long she had felt like their efforts to return
to where they were supposed to be were going nowhere. She wanted to go back. Besides, if she was home, there was no risk of Thráin barging in at some point to finish the job. Even the guard on the door had not been enough to keep him out and if Thorin had not been here, who knows what might have happened.

Kate certainly didn’t want to spend too long thinking about that.

Gandalf looked at Kate this time. He was reading her face, almost as if he was measuring her up, making up his mind about whether she was strong enough for this magical journey or not. Personally she felt that she would make it even if she fainted at the other end of it, even if it meant that she had to keep to her bed for another year.

*Just take me home.*

She had tried to banish the longing she had felt since they arrived, because if she let it take over, she would break down where she stood. But now she let it fill her, top to toe. And every last bit of longing washed over her in waves, every scrap of hope that she hadn’t dared to let herself believe in, just in case that it would prove to be a disappointment. The strength of it brought tears to her eyes.

Thorin was, as always, more guarded, but she could read the emotion in his eyes, as strong, or stronger even, than hers. ‘Take us home.’

Chapter End Notes

There’s one more chapter left on this project, of farewells, returning home and tying up loose ends.
I’ve got a few more things planned, including the AU I mentioned a couple of chapters ago. But if you have ideas for things you’d like to see, feel free to let me know.
Apologies for the long absence. Much of it had to do with the nightly trouble of my noisy downstairs neighbours and the resulting lack of sleep and focus. If you’re still here, thank you very much.
Thanks for reading. Reviews would be lovely.
My journey is the same as yours, the same as anyone’s. It’s taken me so many years, so many lifetimes, but, at last, I know where I’m going, where I’ve always been going: Home, the long way ‘round.

Doctor Who

Even though Gandalf granted that request – and Thorin had tried his hardest to make it sound as such and not as a command – it would take several hours at least until all was ready for their departure. The healers insisted on giving Kate another thorough once over, backed up by Elvaethor. All they knew – Elvaethor excluded – was that Kate, very much against their advice, would go on a journey. Several had concluded that the grey-robed interloper had something to do with that decision and sent him withering glares as they walked to and fro.

Thrór had disappeared after he had left them alone with their guests – and mercifully, so had Thráin – but someone must have told him, because he returned a while later, Freya in his wake, with bags of their belongings. They had come here with nothing but the clothes on their backs, but Thrór had been generous.

‘We do not need these things,’ Thorin told him, nonetheless moved. ‘Not where we are going.’ He had accepted enough of their charity. If he had been in his own time, he would never have needed it and now that he knew he was going back, it seemed greedy and wrong to accept more.

Thrór had clearly anticipated this. ‘Well, the way I see it, it’s not going anywhere. It’s just going to make a jump into the future, but since I intend to make sure that everything I possess is going to be yours after I die anyway, I don’t see the trouble with accepting anything now. One way or another, it’ll be yours.’

It was hard to argue with this. Nevertheless, he tried to find words to do so, before Kate cut in and saved him from himself. ‘You’ve been more than generous,’ she told him.

Thrór shook his head. ‘Nonsense, lass. ‘Sides, there’s some gifts in there. For your children,’ he clarified. ‘Looks like I’m not going to meet them in this life, so this’ll have to make up for it.’

Kate frowned. ‘You have nothing to make up for.’

A shadow fell across Thrór’s face. ‘Indeed,’ he said, communicating with the tone of voice that he was of a different opinion. ‘Have I not?’

It was odd to hear him talk in such tones. Thorin had memories of his grandfather being bitter and irritable and mad – it hurt to think of it, so he did not dwell on it – but never here, not in this day and age. But it had happened after what Thráin had done. It had changed Thrór.
Is this the start of it? Thorin wondered. The beginning of the end?

He did not dare dwell on that either.

Kate was decisive and quick in her answer. ‘You really don’t.’

Thorin wondered. ‘The beginning of the end?’

Kate was decisive and quick in her answer. ‘You really don’t.’

Thrór might have been unwilling to let the matter rest – he was a dwarf after all – had Theyra not entered the room. ‘They said you were leaving,’ she said. ‘Looks like they are right.’

Thorin nodded. ‘It is for the best.’ He knew that. He felt that. But his resolve wavered yet again when he saw her. When he left this time, it would be in the knowledge that it would be for good, that he would never see them again. Worse, he would leave them to what he knew was coming, the darkest years. The guilt rose up hard and fast, as it always did.

Theyra nodded in return. ‘I know.’ She thought for a moment, then nodded again and strode towards him. Before Thorin could anticipate what was about to happen, she caught him in a hug.

Not usually being on the receiving end of affection, it took him a few seconds to catch up and return it. Realisation that this was the last time he would see her made him hold on tighter. Theyra was his mother, one of the best and brightest souls the world had ever seen. She deserved all the best it could give her, but she wouldn’t receive any of it. None of his family present here today would. They would die before their time and he could do nothing about it.

‘I will miss you,’ he said, finding to his amazement and embarrassment that he could barely hold back tears.

‘And I you,’ she said, ending the embrace and holding him at arm’s length. ‘Odd though that feels to say, because I still have you. A smaller you, but still.’

She had not brought his younger self here today, for which Thorin was grateful. He managed a smile. ‘So you do,’ he agreed. There would be some good years to come for her before everything went so terribly wrong. And at least she would not be alive for the years of destitution and exile. At least she had been spared that humiliation.

She had looked near tears herself just a moment ago, but she rallied wonderfully. ‘So I do,’ she said. ‘And I’m leaving you in the best pair of hands.’ She looked at Kate.

Kate managed a grimace. She had clearly been aiming for a smile, but moved at the same time. Gandalf had taken some of her pain, but not all of it. ‘Thank you,’ she said, not taking the sentiment for granted. After what Thráin had done, neither of them would ever make that mistake again.

Theyra moved on to Kate and left Thorin in front of his grandmother. ‘You will be missed,’ Freya said, looking at him quizzically. ‘Though I believe you will not miss this place.’

She was not wrong, but neither was she entirely right. ‘I will miss the good people who populate this place,’ he corrected her, drinking in the sight of her. The last time he would be able to do so.

Soon enough he would be back home and everything that happened here would be two centuries in the past, out of his reach, safely out of his reach. When he was back home, the urge to change matters that should not be changed would die. Perhaps guilt that he had done nothing would take its place, but that mattered not. Guilt could not transport him back to the past and make changes. It was better that way. Or it should be, which was not the same thing. And he knew himself well enough to know that if he could rewrite the past and keep what he had in his present at the same time, he would grasp that opportunity with both hands. And why should he have a care for the
consequences?

But he had, because he could only have one or the other. And so his hands were still tied.

Freya reached for them and held them between her own.

‘I do not know what it is that you have not been able to speak of,’ she began. ‘But I know that you’ve not had an easy life.’

Thorin remained quiet, because he had nothing to say that could contradict it. Of course, he could have said that there had been others who’d been worse off than he, but that was confirmation of what she’d said rather than denial.

‘I don’t doubt Thráin is to blame for much of it,’ she continued. It must be hard to speak those words. Whatever else Thráin was, he was still her son.

‘That is not your doing,’ he reminded her.

She smiled wryly at him. ‘Perhaps,’ she said. ‘But I did not notice the change when it occurred.’

Perhaps not. But even though Thorin had suspected that Thráin had lost his mind much sooner than he’d always thought, even he had not really believed that he would go that far, not until it was already too late. The blame was more his than hers; he’d had experience with Thráin’s madness before.

‘You couldn’t have,’ he said.

‘We will make do,’ Freya said, finishing the thought she started with.

You will not. But that was something he could not tell her either.

She must have read the answer in his eyes all the same. She embraced him and held on tight. He did likewise, but he knew he must have scared and worried her. And he could not ease her fears. It would be a lie.

‘Farewell,’ he said when they parted. Because for him in a few minutes she would have been dead for a very long time. Not for the first time he wished they had never come here. It had been hard to meet them, but it was even harder to part with them.

‘Good luck to you,’ she said. He suspected she knew more than either of them had said and he hated himself for having destroyed her ignorance, however unintentional. If he could not stop what was coming, at least he would have had them happy before it came. But just by being here, by being who he was, he had already given away too much.

Everything had changed and yet nothing had changed at all either.

Thrór was next. ‘Good luck, lad. Go take care of the future.’ He was solemn for once.

Thorin nodded. ‘I will,’ he promised. He would have done that even if he had not been charged to do so. It was his responsibility, the burden that had been passed down to him.

Thrór clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Never doubted it.’ He looked Thorin in the eye. ‘Take good care of that wife of yours, and those children I’ll never get to meet.’ He held his gaze. ‘Looks like our line will endure.’

Not in the way Thráin wanted. He had made that point very clear. He knew Thrór had a different
opinion, but it was good to hear him say it.

‘It will,’ he vowed. That was one of the few things that he could promise, one of the few pieces of good news he was able to relate.

‘Good,’ Thrór said. ‘Very good. It was good to have met you.’

Their coming had turned everything on its head. As far as Thorin was concerned, nothing had been good about it. ‘And you,’ he said, because it was the truth. He had so many memories of his grandfather either mad or deeply sombre, but very few of him happy. He was glad to have seen that at least, even if their presence here had also taken much of that happiness. All things considered, the downsides far outweighed the upsides.

‘Maker keep you,’ Thrór said. ‘Now, go, my lad. Go home.’

There were no more words he could say. There were many he wanted to utter, but he could not. He wondered if he would ever stop feeling guilty for it, or if it would ever stop hurting. And he doubted that. Perhaps he ought to resign himself to the idea that this was one thing to be added to his burdens.

‘I shall,’ he said instead.

‘Are you certain you are warm enough, my lady?’ Elvaethor asked.

‘Perfectly sure,’ Kate replied. Besides, she was not going to be in this bed for much longer.

Home. So soon she would be home. Now that she knew it was both possible and imminent, her heart yearned for it. She would never fully belong in this world, but she belonged there more than she ever would in this era. And she had come to think of it as home over the years.

At first she hadn’t, those first couple of years, when the longing for England would sneak up on her and take her unawares. She’d feel something tugging at her heart, almost as strong as the ties that bound her to Thorin and Erebor. The fact that his people were not always welcoming did not help much.

Slowly, and almost without her noticing, that had changed. It had taken her until a trying visit to the Iron Hills in 2947 to realise it. The dwarves there got on her every last nerve and the proceedings had dragged on so long that even patient Ori had been overheard saying he wished he could strangle each and every one of them. At that point Kate had thought that she was more than ready to go home again. And that thought had stopped her in her tracks, because she’d never really thought of Erebor that way before.

‘Thank you,’ she added. ‘For what you did for us.’ She meant that, every word. Not only had he saved her life, but he’d also enabled them to return to where they belonged. Sometimes it felt as though she was getting deeper into his debt with every encounter they had. *There’s no repaying him for all of that, not if I’d lived to be a thousand years old.*

Elvaethor conjured up one of his enigmatic smiles. ‘It was my pleasure, my lady.’

But Kate had known him long enough to know when he was fibbing. ‘No, it wasn’t.’ Hell, it must
have been more stressful for him than she could imagine. There was a reason she’d assumed he had run off, never to return. Honestly, if she had been in his place she might have run for the hills without a second thought. ‘But you’ll change your mind eventually.’

The smile faded. ‘How long?’ he asked.

Kate didn’t need any clarification. ‘A while,’ she replied. Giving him the exact date wouldn’t be a good idea. If her memory served her right, he had been surprised to encounter them in Mirkwood. And not even Elvaethor was that good of an actor to fake that. ‘But we will meet. Of course, Fryr and I won’t have any memory of this encounter, because for us it won’t have happened yet.’ She grimaced, not in pain for once. ‘Time travel. It would be enough to give me a headache. You know, if I didn’t have one already.’ Gandalf’s magical healing had done much, but, like he’d said, healing was a natural process. And Kate knew already that she didn’t have nearly enough patience to deal with it.

*How Thorin puts up with my company at the moment is a miracle. I don’t even like my own.*

‘You will mend, my lady,’ Elvaethor assured her.

*Just not fast enough for my liking. And she also knew that Thorin wouldn’t stop feeling guilty until most of the visible reminders of this incident had gone. Kate had no idea why he thought he should have developed psychic abilities that should have told him about Thráin’s intentions before the dwarf in question had them, but that was beside the point. Thráin was Thorin’s father and so Thorin thought he had some responsibility there. Kate disagreed. She thought that Thráin being a little shit was mostly his own fault. Thorin had nothing to do with that.*

‘The sooner, the better,’ she said.

Gandalf moved into sight, stopping Elvaethor from saying whatever it was that he wanted to say.

‘Are you prepared?’ he asked.

*I was prepared weeks ago.* She’d been ready to be sent home whenever Gandalf would set foot inside Erebor. ‘I am.’

It felt awkward, interacting with Gandalf. After all, it was difficult, meeting someone you’d hated for so long. And Kate *had* hated him. It had been low-key and she hadn’t felt any real anger towards him in years, but neither was she comfortable with his presence. Call it dislike, for lack of a better word. He *had* taken her from her own world without so much as a by-your-leave, without explanation and without a chance to say goodbye to her loved ones. That was abduction. And for uprooting her and trapping her in a world not her own, she had never forgiven him, no matter how much she loved her life as it was now.

Except now it had become clear that her hate had been wholly misplaced. The specifics of time travel would give anybody nightmares, but she had understood enough to know that Gandalf had never really had a choice when he took her. If he’d told her what she was going to do before she switched worlds, she wouldn’t have believed him. She certainly would not have come willingly. And her not coming to Middle Earth would have done things she did not want to contemplate.

*I can’t hate him, not now.* In fact, Kate was not even sure that she could so much as dislike him anymore. Yes, he had lied to her, but with good reason. *I would never have believed him and I would most certainly have tried to prove him wrong. And then where would we be?* No, much as she hated it, she owed him not only gratitude for helping them now, but also a very big apology for the way she had treated him – or would treat him in his future – when she had first met him. And
Kate Andrews had never liked to admit that she was wrong.

But it had to be done, and so she took a deep breath and got it over with. ‘I owe you an apology,’ she said bluntly.

He frowned. ‘Whatever for?’

Right, of course he wouldn’t know. And she could not tell him all of it. But she had to do it now, because if she did not, she would chicken out and not do it in the future. Now that she had plucked up the courage, it was the best to make use of it.

‘In the future, when we meet, I’m not going to be all that nice to you,’ she explained, remaining vague on the details, because he couldn’t know those yet. She had been abrasive, argumentative and downright rude and he had borne it with the patience of a saint… most of the time. ‘Knowing what I do now, that wasn’t right.’ She smiled wryly. ‘I am sorry for it, so please bear that in mind when I’m being unbearable then.’

Kate was older and wiser now. And on top of that, she had the benefit of hindsight and some years’ distance between the time of the quest and her present. It helped putting things into perspective. It suddenly occurred to her that perhaps Gandalf had chosen her – would choose her – as advisor because today she had made a far more favourable impression on him than she would on the actual quest. The thought almost made her laugh out loud.

Apparently this was such a new situation for Gandalf as well that for once in his life, he was lost for words. Time travel was uncharted territory, even for him. He frowned a little and then looked long and hard at Kate.

Eventually he nodded. ‘I shall remember that.’

Kate felt instinctively that it was wise not to take this any further. There was nothing really more to say, not without giving away things that should remain unspoken of. And it was good the way it was. Kate felt lighter for having said it. It wouldn’t mean that she would ever be friends with the grey wizard; that would be stretching it a bit. But at least she had finally been able to let go of her resentment towards him, and that had to count for something.

_Please this is what it feels like to forgive._ Kate wouldn’t really now, not being intimately acquainted with the institution. She was like a dwarf in that respect; once wronged, the offence was hard to forgive and even harder to forget. Kate Andrews had never been in the habit to forgive any major slight; she’d sooner break the offender’s nose and have done with it that way.

But that wouldn’t have sufficed now, so she had done the right thing. And now that it was done, she was ready to go home.

Thorin must have been thinking along the same lines. He had been taking to Thórór, but now there was one last hug and Thorin tore himself away from his grandfather one last time. Maker knew what it cost him. He had forced his emotions under control quick enough, but Kate knew. These days, she always knew.

_We know each other so well now._ And if someone had told her that ten years ago, she’d have told them they were bonkers.

‘Ready?’ he asked.

Kate nodded, relishing the feeling of being able to do so without screaming her head off with pain. ‘Home,’ she said decisively.
Gandalf had explained that it would be best if they were touching when he sent them back. Kate couldn’t stand yet, so Thorin would have to carry her. Fair play to him, he did his level best to lift her gently and to keep the most injured side of her body away from his, but Kate hadn’t left the bed in a week and had rather underestimated the amount of damage done to it. Being lifted was extremely painful and it took every last scrap of will-power not to scream.

Bloody Thráin. The more she realised what he had done to her, the more her anger with him blossomed into hatred. He had not actually succeeded in killing her, but he had ensured that now her own husband could barely touch her without hurting her. That Thorin, and not Thráin, was feeling guilty for it was just icing on the cake. That little piece of shit must be feeling very pleased with himself.

‘I am sorry,’ Thorin said, because of course he had noticed Kate’s discomfort. He had probably anticipated it.

Kate gritted her teeth and forced the pain under control. ‘Not your fault.’

Thorin took her word for it. He probably didn’t believe it, but, like her, he was not willing to waste any more time. They had said their goodbyes. Dragging it out would serve no point. It might only make matters more painful.

‘Begin,’ he told Gandalf.

Kate had wondered if it would be the same as it had been when she had been taken from the street years ago. She had almost believed that because time travel was involved, it would be different.

It wasn’t.

The soft breeze came first, barely there, but it quickly grew in strength. Thorin said nothing and stood as still as a statue, but he radiated tension. Never a fan of magic on a good day, this must be an absolute nightmare for him. Kate herself was calmer. She had done this once already – or had it done to her would be a slightly more accurate description – and she knew where she was headed this time.

*Home. I’m going home.*

As it had been the first time, it was over as soon as it had begun. The healing rooms had gone, as had the people in it, and the light had faded to semi-darkness. Kate blinked a few times, allowing her eyes the time to adjust.

‘The carving’s there.’

And it was. They were back in the same corridor they had been in when they had accidentally stumbled into the past and the carving, the lack of which had first alerted Kate to the reality of their time travelling, was firmly back where it belonged. She’d never found it particularly beautiful, but right now she could have sworn to it that it was the most inspired piece of art she had ever come across.

Home. They were really home.

‘We are,’ Thorin agreed. She must have spoken aloud without realising.

He began to walk, not in the direction of the council chambers – Maker only knew how much time had passed on this end, so it made no sense to go to a meeting that had probably finished weeks ago – but back towards their own rooms. Every step hurt, but she clenched her hands into fists and
bit her tongue. She wouldn’t scream. And, like Elvaethor had said, she would heal. She would be fine. Eventually.

‘Maker be good, what happened?’

Kate could hear Lufur before she could see him. The familiar voice was another firm reminder that their ordeal was now over.

‘Kate had an accident,’ Thorin reported.

She could tell how much it pained him to not be completely honest about this, but this was neither the time nor the place for explanations. She for one would be perfectly happy to tell the whole story at some point, when she was feeling better and she had slept a while, preferably a week. Good grief, she didn’t remember being this exhausted after her first magical transportation. Then again, she had not been injured at the time. The pain drained her energy faster than she could replenish it these days.

‘When, my lord?’ Lufur asked in bewilderment. ‘Why, you only left the quarter of an hour ago.’

Thorin stumbled and halted as the implications of this started to sink in. They hadn’t been missing for weeks, as they had feared. Gandalf must have put them back right at the time after they had disappeared. In this familiar Erebor, they had never really been gone.

The strength of her relief almost made her pass out.

‘It is a long story,’ Thorin replied brusquely.

Lufur’s face hovered into view, brow furrowed. Confusion and worry fought a war for dominance on his face and neither emotion appeared to be winning. Of course, her injuries did not look as if only just sustained; they were a week old already. And now he had to struggle these two irreconcilable things into some sort of harmony: the fact that he had seen her barely fifteen minutes ago and the fact that she was showing up with a week old injuries and in clothes she hadn’t worn this very morning.

But he was a dwarf and for a dwarf action was always better than idle chatter. He told them to come inside, held the door open and ushered them in, making offers of finding healers and supplies and whatever they could need.

‘Sleep, I think,’ Kate said. Not so long ago she had been complaining about how it was all she seemed to be doing lately, but her body’s demands were stronger than her frustration. Much though she loathed it, she needed the rest. She could barely keep her eyes open.

Thorin nodded and carried her into their bedroom. Kate had a vague recollection of forgetting to make the bed before they went out and, true to expectations, it was unmade and messy, even still a little warm. They had slept late, she recalled, and had needed to hurry up before the meeting with Dáin.

The meeting…

Bloody hell. ‘You need to go,’ she told Thorin when he had put her down.

He frowned. ‘There is no need.’

If they didn’t want to explain the extent of this debacle to Dáin – and that was something they could really do without – then he had very little choice. ‘The meeting,’ she reminded him. ‘With
Dáin.

Judging by the look on his face, he had forgotten all about it. Not anymore, though, not now she had reminded him of it. And she could read the reluctance on his face. He didn’t really want to leave, but his duty dictated that he went and sorted out whatever it was that Dáin had come here for in the first place. It had been so long she had completely forgotten the reason for his presence in Erebor. Trade, maybe? Some laws that needed reviewing? It’d probably come to her once she’d slept. She could only hope Thorin’s memory was more reliable.

‘Are you certain?’ he asked.

‘I’m going to sleep.’ It was a trial just trying to keep her eyes open. ‘I won’t be fit company for anyone for hours yet. And I wouldn’t know if you were here or somewhere else,’ she added for good measure.

Truth was, she didn’t feel like being parted from him quite yet either, but being Queen under the Mountain had taught her that there were times when personal preference just didn’t come into it. And it would be a bad idea to antagonise the Iron Hills dwarves. Kate remembered Grór and honestly, she didn’t think there had been much of an improvement since then. Dáin could be reasonable enough, she supposed. But he point blank refused to show up to kill a dragon.

‘I will leave Lufur here,’ Thorin said. It was a compromise, one he wasn’t happy with. But Kate knew he trusted Lufur. He had kept her safe during the Battle of the Five Armies, after all.

Kate didn’t say she wouldn’t be much aware of his presence either. Neither did she point out that there was no murderous dwarf lurking nearby intent on killing her as soon as his back was turned. As it was, she was only barely aware of him leaving the room.

In fact, the first thing that she heard when she regained some form of awareness was the presence of another person. Must be Thorin, come back early, her sleepy brain supplied. Or late. These days she could be out for hours at a time. She hadn’t slept so much in years.

‘Quiet,’ a voice instructed. Not Thorin. ‘Amad’s ill.’

Kate smiled. ‘Not ill, just a little bruised,’ she corrected her eldest.

Now that she had her eyes open, she could not keep them off her children. Thoren and Thráin, much more well-behaved and quiet than they usually were, each held one of Duria’s hands, so she could more or less move on her own legs. If she had been capable, she would have got up and embraced them all until they’d start to wriggle out of her arms, complaining that they were too old for this. But she couldn’t. She had to wait for them.

‘Bruised,’ Thoren corrected, completely unfazed. ‘Carefully now.’ He mimicked his Aunt Thora so well it was a little scary.

‘Up,’ Duria demanded. ‘Ma, up!’

Thráin looked at her for either confirmation or denial. ‘Can she?’

And Kate was not ever going to turn them away. She had longed to hold them for weeks and now here they were. ‘With your help, certainly,’ she said.

Thoren was the one who actually lifted his sister – something he wasn’t allowed to do and he knew it, judging by the skilful looking in the other direction – onto the bed. Duria wasted no time and crawled under Kate’s uninjured arm as if she was drawn there by a magnet. She lay down and
curled up, thumb in her mouth, and then promptly fell asleep.

Kate had not spent any time thinking about her homecoming, what it would or should look like, but this was the closest thing to perfect she could have with an injury of this magnitude. Her daughter’s body was warm and tangible. Real and present. And it didn’t matter that she had gone right back to sleep, because Kate didn’t need her to be awake. She just needed her there.

She beckoned to her boys. ‘Come on in, lads. The bed’s big enough for all of us.’

Thoren was still hesitating, but Thráin didn’t need telling twice. He climbed on up after his sister and installed himself next to Kate’s head. ‘Are you ill?’ he inquired, looking her over. He was too young to realise that her injuries looked older than they could reasonably be expected to be. But he was old enough to question his brother’s judgement and feel the need to ask for himself.

‘I fell down the stairs, darling,’ Kate explained. ‘Nothing more.’ She almost ended by saying that she would be back on her feet in no time, but that would be a lie. This morning’s short trip had made it more than clear that she wouldn’t be walking anywhere in the foreseeable future.

Thráin nodded solemnly, pondered this information for a moment and then leaned forward to press a quick kiss to her forehead. ‘Kissing it better,’ he declared. ‘Now you’ll be better very soon.’

‘I feel much better already,’ Kate told him. It was not even a lie. Just being home gave her a sense of peace and belonging. Just seeing her children again eased the insistent ache in her chest. This was how it was supposed to be, this was where they were supposed to remain.

Having completed his job, Thráin lay down as well. There was a contented smile on his face. Her little boy was nothing like the dwarf who had also borne his name. She had wondered at times why Thorin had insisted on the name Thráin for their second child, had wondered if he had ever experienced any trouble keeping the two apart. But now she knew. She had no issues telling one from the other. Her Thráin had made that name his own without even trying. And he was wonderful, kind and loving. In short, he was everything his grandfather was decidedly not.

‘Aren’t you coming in?’ Kate asked Thoren.

He looked a little torn between wanting to come in and a completely misplaced sense of being too old for such a family moment.

Thráin rolled his eyes. ‘Don’t dawdle,’ he told his brother, imitating his Uncle Dori. ‘We’re not waiting all day for you.’

‘Thráin…’ she chided.

He pretended he hadn’t heard her. Either way, it was enough to convince Thoren he didn’t want to be left out after all. He hopped onto the bed and sat down on Kate’s other side, the injured side. He was sensible enough not to touch her, another thing Kate held Thráin the Elder entirely responsible for. *I wonder Middle Earth has something like hell. If not, it should be invented for that waste of space alone.*

But Thráin was far away now, long years in the past. Dead and gone. He couldn’t hurt them here, not anymore. He had done what he could to prevent the future and he had failed. That Kate and her children were still here was proof enough of that.

*We will heal, she knew. And it will all be well.*

With that though she fell asleep again.
And that concludes the Into the Past project. I hope you all enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. I’ve got one chapter of the new project as good as done, so I will upload that either Friday or Saturday to see what people think and then I’ll go on holiday for a couple of weeks. But I’ve had this idea that since I actually have a Tumblr account, I might as well use it to keep readers up to date with what I’m up to concerning my writing (you know, if I can remember to use it). Username is amy-a, so do take a look and say hello, if you feel like it.

As always, thank you very much for reading. Reviews/feedback/DN prompts and ideas would be very welcome. I’d love to hear what you think.
The Oakenshield Affair Part 1: One of Our Thorins Is Missing

Here’s the new chapter, as promised. This is the start of a new multi-chapter project and it’s something rather different from what I’ve done so far, but this little idea has been demanding my attention for a while now and I thought I might as well go ahead and write it. Technically it’s a crossover with Jasper Fforde’s Thursday Next series. If you don’t know it, I can highly recommend it.

If you’re not familiar with it, don’t worry. I’ll give you the basics. Imagine that there is this whole world, the BookWorld, on the other side of the pages of every book. It looks like an enormous library filled with every book in existence, twenty-six floors above the ground with published books and twenty-six basement levels where books (and characters) are constructed, called the Well of Lost Plots. In this AU, The Journal is a published story in the BookWorld. Within those books the characters live/play out the story, almost like actors in a film. That is, if all is going well…

Of course, this being a story about Thorin and Kate, not all is going well. Obviously. Lengthy author’s note over. Enjoy!

Kate was not entirely sure what made her come back to the world of the waking in the end. It could not have been the light, because when she opened her eyes there hardly was any. There was more light than there had been – not that it could be less – but still everything and everyone was painted in greys and blacks. But at least she could see something again and that was a relief, more than she felt ready admitting to anyone.

For a little moment she felt disorientated. Her neck was hurting because… No, hold on a moment. There was no pillow…

It was a very unpleasant surprise to find that when she woke up, Kate’s husband was missing. This would not usually be cause for any alarm, but the second part of chapter 36 was about to start and he was supposed to be there. After all, when Kate’s own point of view began, her head was supposed to be lying on his lap. Her head was on the ground now.

A quick study of her surroundings revealed that she hadn’t merely slipped off during the night. Thorin was not here.

She only briefly entertained the notion that he’d gone off to do something else between the end of his own point of view and the start of hers, but dismissed it almost right away. Thorin was a professional, as she was. Sneaking off during work was not the mark of an A-grade character, which they both were.

She sat up and surveyed the scene. It was hard to see anything in the dark of Mirkwood, but she was ninety-five per cent certain that everybody else was still asleep, as they were written to be. So far, so good. Except usually Dwalin was awake at this point. He was supposed to be watching her, which would lead to a conversation between the two of them in a couple of paragraphs. But Dwalin
was passed out on the forest floor.

*This is not good.*

Kate Andrews considered herself something of an expert on books and what could and could not be changed. It was the way she was written and one of the reasons Jurisfiction had approached her about joining, an offer she’d accepted without a moment’s hesitation. After all, there were well over sixty years between her written wedding and the moment she died and very little of it was documented. She had to fill that time somehow.

She was good at her job. So she knew that whatever it was that had happened between the line breaks of chapter 36, it was not boding well for the story.

She got up and roused Dwalin.

‘What time’s it?’ he asked, speech slurring. There was a bruise on his left temple.

‘Thorin’s gone,’ she reported. There was no time for beating around the bush. ‘And I think you were knocked out.’ Though probably not by Thorin himself. That would have made no sense.

It was the quickest way to wake him up. ‘Where is he?’ Dwalin was on his feet almost immediately. ‘The next part is about to begin.’

‘I know,’ she replied. At this point in the story she was not really supposed to get on well with Dwalin yet, but they had been through the story many times now and they had become good friends. And as long as they observed the proper behaviour when they were being read, none of the readers would be any the wiser.

But readers would certainly know something was wrong if they didn’t sort this mess out before the narrative started, so acting quickly was of the essence.

‘I’ll go and get us moved to the Well of Lost Plots,’ she said. It was not an ideal solution, but it would have to do for the time being. At the very least it would give them some time to figure out what had happened.

And, more importantly, where Thorin had disappeared to. There was an unpleasant niggling in the area of her stomach. It felt a little like dread.

Dwalin frowned. ‘What about the readers?’

‘They’ll find something else to read.’ They weren’t her biggest concern right now. The BookWorld was massive; there was more than enough to choose from. And if they wanted fanfiction, well, there was plenty of that too. ‘And without Thorin, there isn’t much of a story anyway.’

‘And the ones already reading?’ Dwalin asked.

‘They’ll suddenly remember that they have an essay due or a grandmother they haven’t visited for far too long or a cat that needs immediate feeding. Or they lose their Internet connection all of a sudden. Something like that. They won’t be able to find the story once the Text Grand Central moves it.’ Say what you like about them, but they were thorough.

Dwalin did not seem very happy – then again, neither was Kate – but it was the best she could do for now. Of course, it would actually help if people took her seriously. After all, The Journal, Duly Noted and The Book were only works of fanfiction. They were the black sheep of the BookWorld; people were forced to accept that they were there, but they would very much prefer to pretend they
didn’t exist. It wasn’t until Kate started waving her Jurisfiction badge in their faces that they adopted something approaching a helpful attitude. Of course, at that stage Kate was about ready to strangle each and every one of them.

This mission completed, she read herself into Sense and Sensibility to brief the rest of the Jurisfiction agents, who had their headquarters in Norland Park.

‘Good morning, Kate!’ called Commander Bradshaw. ‘How are you?’

‘Could be better,’ she replied. In fact, it couldn’t be much worse.

‘I heard your series got moved to the Well,’ he said, completely missing Kate’s actual mood. ‘You up for maintenance?’

‘You could say that,’ she said. ‘Thorin’s disappeared.’

‘Your Thorin?’ Bradshaw asked. It was a justified question; with the amount of Hobbit fanfiction out there, there were a great many Thorins in the BookWorld today, though granted, there weren’t many high-quality ones.

Kate nodded. ‘I have no idea what happened,’ she confessed. ‘He vanished between the line breaks of chapter 36. Dwalin was knocked out when I woke up and Thorin was just gone.’

Up till now the panic had been remarkably absent. The immediate crisis of having a story without its main character had taken precedence. It had been easier to focus her efforts on that and the obstinate morons at the Text Grand Central had made it all too easy to bypass her fears and head straight on to anger.

The fear was settling in comfortably now. Where was he? Was he all right? Unharmed? Alive? How would she ever find him again? Her hands started to shake, so she clenched them into fists and shoved them in her pockets so that nobody would see.

‘I thought you might have gotten swept up in that gramma-site infestation,’ Mrs Tiggy-Winkle remarked. ‘It’s a dreadful business, with so many works affected.’

Kate shook her head. ‘It’s over in the slash section of the Lord of the Rings fandom.’ It had kept her busy all hours lately. Fanfiction always needed more resources, but because it was only fanfiction, they weren’t anyone’s main priority. As per bloody usual.

‘Well, at least most people can’t tell the difference.’

And with attitudes like that, nothing would ever change.

But as far as Kate was concerned, the whole slash section and its gramma-sites could go hang. She had more pressing concerns.

‘That’s not the point,’ she said impatiently. ‘Thorin has disappeared without a trace. He’s not anywhere in the series at the moment.’

‘PageRunner?’ somebody suggested. It was a good thing Kate couldn’t see who had spoken; she might have ripped their heads off and damn the consequences.

Even so, she sent a withering glare in the general direction of the speaker. ‘Have you met Thorin?’ she growled. ‘He’s a professional. This is not his style.’
Besides, if he wanted to leave his own series, he could. While he was not a Jurisfiction agent as Kate was, he often accompanied her on official business. They worked well together and Kate would sooner go on a mission with him than with Emperor Zhark, for example. It wasn’t entirely legal, but it was conveniently overlooked because she got results that way.

‘I am not entirely sure what you mean, Kate,’ Commander Bradshaw said.

Neither was she, but she was starting to have a theory. Because if Thorin hadn’t left of his own volition – and that was extremely unlikely – that must mean that he had been taken by somebody. And unfortunately, there was a precedent for that.

Kate took a deep breath and shared it with her colleagues. ‘I’m sure you all remember Jane Eyre being taken from her own book and held to ransom,’ she said.

Judging by the shocked looks she received, everybody did.

‘The Written Word is not Jane Eyre,’ a dismissive voice said. Kate knew it well. It belonged to George Warleggan, from the Poldark series. He had been written as a pompous little prick and never failed to act accordingly, even outside his own series. He never let the opportunity pass to lord it over her that he, unlike her, came from published original fiction. It had been a trial to shut him up once he found out that his series was due for a boxed set. ‘It is only an inferior work of fanfiction. Who would ever go to all that trouble to steal a pale imitation of the original when the real one is available as well?’

Needless to say, George did not have a good relationship with his fanfiction alter egos.

‘Oh, I don’t know, George,’ Kate sneered sarcastically. Normally she tried to ignore him, but her nerves were frayed and the tides of panic were rising rapidly. ‘Perhaps somebody who would like to see if their methods work.’ Honestly, the fact that she had to explain this at all did not endear her to him. ‘And if they do, they can move on to bigger and better, to works like Jane Eyre.’

So far, it was the only theory that made any sort of sense at all. Thorin was invaluable to her, but not to a great many others. After all, George was right; Kate’s series were only fanfictions. The characters in those stories were better developed than some others she could name and they were still relatively well-read within their little corner of the world wide web. But they weren’t on any bestseller lists and they would never have so much as a paperback on sale in a real book shop. And George was always first in line to remind her.

She had lost her temper with him only once. He had made another patronising remark and she had turned around and told him that he only acted that way because he was jealous that she, unlike him, was happily married without the complications of a spouse’s first love hanging around.

George had almost had a stroke.

Kate had felt rather smug.

‘It is possible,’ Commander Bradshaw admitted. ‘We don’t want another disaster like that on our hands.’

‘We already do,’ Kate reminded him. It came out a little bit sharper than she had intended, but she’d had it with the inferior status of fanfictions. True, a good portion of that work was inferior, but the same was true for many published works. Fifty Shades of Grey was a name that sprang to mind.
‘You think that somebody found a way into the BookWorld?’ asked Beatrice, clearly shocked at the suggestion. Benedick was not in attendance today, which made communicating with her so much easier; usually they had a battle of wits which only the Bellman could put an end to before anything useful came out of their mouths.

‘Or somebody from within the BookWorld with a penchant for kidnapping characters is at work here,’ replied Kate. It wasn’t unprecedented either and she had spent a solid three months on Heathcliff Protection Duty that had taught her precisely that lesson. ‘I don’t know and until we investigate, I’m not going to know. All I know is that somebody took him and I don’t know where.’

‘Kate is right,’ Bradshaw said, coming to her rescue. ‘Something is amiss.’ He patted her fatherly on the shoulder. Normally Kate found this a little annoying, but today she needed the support. ‘Kate, can you go and make the rounds around the *Hobbit* fandom and see if anybody else is missing a character?’ She nodded and Bradshaw continued, sending Jurisfiction agents to the neighbouring fandoms and Tolkien’s original works to see if anything odd had gone on there lately.

‘Rotten luck,’ a male voice commented when roll-call had ended and Kate was packing her bag near her own desk.

She turned around to see Vernham Deane. He had taken some years of absence after he’d gotten married following the plot realignment of his book *The Squire of High Potternews*, but claimed that since their readership had dropped somewhat - meaning that these days it was all but non-existent – there wasn’t much for him to do in his own book and consequently, he had come back to Jurisfiction.

Kate had gotten more agitated with every minute and “rotten luck” really was something of an understatement. ‘Just that, is it?’ she snapped at him. ‘Listen, Vern, I’m not in the mood for this. Can you just go?’

He didn’t. ‘We’ll find him,’ he said confidently.

‘You know this how?’ She really wasn’t in the mood for this. And empty promises weren’t going to bring Thorin back. She needed something more substantial.

‘Because you would sooner tear down the whole BookWorld book by book rather than give him up,’ Vernham replied easily. Kate liked him, generally. He’d moved heaven and earth to get the plot realignment that allowed him to marry the woman he loved, so he knew a thing or two about holding on in the face of adversity.

Perhaps she had been too harsh with him just now. ‘Sorry, Vern. It’s just…’ She trailed off, because she didn’t know how to put it into words.

Fortunately he knew. ‘I know. We’ll sort this out. And then we’ll deal with the fiends who took him in the first place.’

‘I would be happy to lend you my death-ray once we catch them,’ another voice chimed in. Emperor Zhark loomed over Vern’s shoulder.

Kate suppressed an exasperated sigh. Emperor Zhark was the lead in a series of cringe worthy science-fiction novels with an unfortunate tendency for annihilating entire star systems to make a point. Outside his books however he was a good Jurisfiction agent, albeit a little too eager for solving matters the violent way. Still, she appreciated the sentiment. ‘Thanks, but I wouldn’t want to destroy the entire Library to kill a few criminals.’
‘I could get my hands on a few Eraserheads in a pinch,’ Vernham pondered. ‘Of course, it would be extremely careless of me to leave them lying around, but I could just be so busy with paperwork that I might take my eyes off them for a minute or two.’ He gave Kate a meaningful look.

‘Careful with what you’re offering,’ she warned him. It was highly illegal, but suddenly strangely appealing.

‘You were helping me defeat the Rambosians when the criminals were shot,’ Zhark suggested, providing her with an alibi she hadn’t asked for.

Vern rolled his eyes. ‘I don’t think committing mass murder is going to help her case, Your Mercilessness.’

Zhark reconsidered. ‘You were helping me prepare my defence for my court case,’ he amended. What with slaughtering entire galaxies on a regular basis, he always had a pending court case, sometimes more than one at the same time. So far, not one judge had dared to convict him.

‘I was offering some sound legal advice,’ Vernham chimed in.

It was just the tiniest bit unsettling that neither of them appeared to be fooling around. They were completely serious.

Kate clenched her fists. ‘You should not be making that kind of offer to me right now.’

‘Why not?’ Zhark asked, clearly unable to wrap his head around the idea that somebody could ever turn down the opportunity to torture, maim and kill.

‘I might take you up on it.’ If Thorin was found in anything other than the state she last saw him in, she might be in exactly the right mind-set for that kind of violence.

Thorin woke up tied to a chair. It was not the way he liked to wake up. The pounding headache usually didn’t figure into his ideal morning routine either. And the last thing he remembered was falling asleep in *The Journal*, midway through chapter 36, with Kate’s head in his lap.

This was not Mirkwood. And Kate was nowhere to be found.

He did not believe he was even in *The Journal* anymore.

The room he was in was dimly lit and mostly empty. There were no windows, so he could not determine where he was, but the solitary light bulb hanging from the ceiling was more than enough to suggest that they had left both the Fanfiction and the Fantasy genre behind.

Comprehension came slowly but surely and he realised that he had been kidnapped. It was unexpected and almost without precedent. Almost. Everyone in the BookWorld had heard what had happened to Jane Eyre years ago, but as far as anybody knew, that had been the only time.

‘Ah, you’re awake. That’s good.’

The voice came from somewhere behind him and he couldn’t turn his head around far enough to get a good look at his captor. He could make out a tallish shape from the corner of his eye and the voice that belonged to it was definitely male.
‘It speaks of cowardice to not look me in the face,’ Thorin snarled. The more he started to understand the situation he was in, the angrier he became. It didn’t help that none of this made any sense whatsoever. Jane Eyre being stolen had been an outrage, but one that could be understood. She could have been held to ransom. But Thorin was well aware that he was not the original Thorin and that made him far less valuable. The original was probably still safely in The Hobbit. So what would anybody want with him?

‘I suspected you might be a bit cross, but you’ll thank me in a minute,’ the voice said.

Thorin seriously doubted that.

‘If that is the case, why don’t you untie me?’ he demanded.

His captor ignored that. ‘I’ve done you a favour,’ he insisted. ‘You’re wasted in that worthless drivel of a fanfiction. We’ve seen it all before. Girl drops into Middle Earth, meets one of the lead characters, they get off on the wrong foot, end up seeing the other for “what they really are” and fall in love. Blah, blah, blah.’

It appeared that the man liked the sound of his own voice, which in turn led Thorin to suspect that he could be dealing with a classic villain, either B or A-grade; they were all rather prone to endless monologues and patting themselves on the back.

‘Nobody writes any good Hobbit fanfictions anymore,’ he went on. The tone of voice became decidedly more whinging. ‘It’s all romance and pining, badly written too. It’d be enough to make anyone want to bleach their eyes. And quite frankly, you were rather decently written, well worth salvaging.’

‘Excuse me?’ He could hardly believe his ears.

‘You deserve a far better story than a useless romance. Hell, you probably deserve a medal for being stuck in that story, if you can even call it that. It’s a good thing I managed to extract you before things got too serious between you and the girl you were supposed to be paired up with. Can’t even remember her name. Not that it matters now.’

Thorin was very quiet for a moment while he processed that new information. ‘You are an Outlander,’ he said at last.

It happened, occasionally. Some people in the Real World were born with the ability to enter books, but they were usually recruited to Jurisfiction. There were only two agents from the Real World with Jurisfiction at present and both of them were women. So who in Durin’s name was this?

He had shocked the man into temporary silence. ‘What makes you think that?’ There was a defensive tone in his voice, which told Thorin he had reached the right conclusions.

‘Because only Outlanders have memories that are so linear,’ he replied.

They moved steadily from start to finish, with no option to skip either ahead or backwards. That was a strange concept in the BookWorld. Thorin could experience his own death today and attend his wedding tomorrow, and do the same the day after that if he so chose. As long as it was written, he could live it. Granted, he needed to be inside his own book for that to be possible and he wasn’t, not now. He struggled against the ropes that bound him, but they did not give way.

‘I demand to be returned to my book and to my wife,’ he commanded when his captor did not utter any sort of response.
He snorted in annoyance. ‘Blimey, mate, cut it out. She isn’t your wife, not at the point where I took you from. That wasn’t supposed to happen until chapter 95 and that’s not ever going to happen now.’

Thorin had just told him that his memories did not function the same way and yet the fool still insisted he knew better. And he did not suffer fools lightly, especially not when they had abducted him.

‘You have made a grave mistake,’ Thorin said. Much as he did not want to be here, he also knew that his stay was unlikely to be indefinite.

‘Which is?’

‘My wife is with Jurisfiction,’ Thorin informed him. Knowing Kate, she would have the whole BookWorld on full alert by now. ‘She will track you down.’

The man scoffed. ‘She couldn’t do anything to me,’ he said. ‘I read enough to know that she is not a fighter.’

If he meant that Kate was not very skilled in the wielding of a sword, then he was absolutely right. However, that did not mean that she was a hopeless case with each and every weapon. The narrative of The Journal unfortunately didn’t allow any room for the use of a gun. If that had been the case, this Outlander might not have underestimated her. And either way, swords were all good and well, but they were not usually the deciding factor in the BookWorld.

And so Thorin laughed. ‘But you are in the BookWorld now,’ he said. ‘And here the pen is always mightier than the sword.’

The silence from behind him was deafening.

‘Well, thanks for your help,’ Kate said to another fanfiction Bilbo before she read herself back into the Library. This was the fifty-sixth story she had been in today and in every single one she had been told the same thing: every character that was supposed to be there was present and correct and not a single odd thing had happened in forever.

It was utterly disheartening.

Of course, it was good news in the sense that the damage was likely to be contained to Kate’s own series. It also meant that there were no witnesses, no leads and very little hope of picking up Thorin’s trail.

‘Damn them all to bloody hell!’ she growled, kicking the table in frustration.

She felt like she was wasting her time with this. Then again, she couldn’t exactly think of a more productive thing to do either. And all the while she was busy here not getting results, Thorin was out there somewhere. And whoever had taken him was unlikely to have just invited him round for tea and biscuits.

‘Thrice the brinded cat hath mew’d,’ a cackling voice announced behind her.
Really? Kate hadn’t thought it was possible for this day to get any worse, but the addition of the three witches from Macbeth was not exactly an improvement.

The second witch carried on: ‘Thrice and once the hedge-pig whined.’

‘Harpier cries: - ‘tis time, ‘tis time.’ And the third completed it.

The witches were mostly harmless. They left their book from time to time to make a little extra cash on the side by peddling prophecies, with varying measures of disaster as a result. Granted, it was known that their prophecies always turned out to be true, but whether that was because of their powers or people making them come true on their own – and just look what they had done to poor Macbeth – that was still somewhat unclear.

‘By the pricking of my thumb, something wicked this way comes,’ she remarked sarcastically as she turned around, whipping out her Jurisfiction badge. ‘Peddling prophecies again, ladies? May I see your license?’

The witches, who could very convincingly pretend to be half-deaf when it suited them, came closer.

‘Prophecies, kind lady?’ the first witch asked. ‘t Will only cost a shilling.’

‘I don’t go around carrying spare change when I’m on Jurisfiction business,’ Kate told them brusquely. Part of her longed to ask about Thorin, where he was kept and if he was still alive. But even she knew better than to get involved with these three. Trouble always followed in their wake and she had more than enough of that already.

They ignored her.

‘All hail, Kate Andrews! Hail to thee, agent of Jurisfiction!’ cried the first witch.

That death-ray of Zhark’s would have come in handy right about now. Kate did not have the patience for this today. ‘Everyone in the BookWorld knows that. Now, clear off.’

But the witches weren’t done. ‘All hail, Kate Andrews! Hail to thee, Queen under the Mountain!’ the second witch added.

‘I already knew that as well. Now, are you going away on your own or do you need me to come back with a warrant for your arrest?’ She wasn’t sure what charge she’d put on it. Obstructing the course of justice? Unlawfully preventing a Jurisfiction agent from doing her work? There were so many stories she had yet to go through and here she was, listening to the endless prattle of the witches.

‘All hail, Kate Andrews!’ the third witch exclaimed. ‘Thou shalt be Bellman hereafter!’

‘The Bellman isn’t due to retire for another eight years.’ If she strangled the three of them now, would she be able to get away with it? ‘And try your luck on a more gullible fool. I’m not Macbeth; I’ve no intention of killing the current Bellman to take his position. Now, sod off!’

‘Double, double toil and trouble; fire, burn; and cauldron, bubble!’ the three of them chanted.

Realising there was no easy way to get rid of them, Kate selected the next fanfiction on the shelf, pulled it out and opened it. She was experienced enough that she didn’t need to read the words out loud in order to bookjump. All she had to do was concentrate and ignore the witches.
Sure enough, the Library disappeared and she found herself on the shores of the Long Lake just as the company and the resident OC came crawling out of their barrels. The chapter was still in progress, so she waited until it had finished before she approached them.

‘Kate Andrews, Jurisfiction,’ she announced to the nearest dwarf, Kíli in this case.

‘We don’t see one of your sort around very often,’ he said, studying her badge.

‘Good,’ Kate said. ‘You only usually see us when you’ve done something wrong or when there’s any sort of problem with your story.’

Kíli snorted. ‘This story has more than enough problems, if you ask me.’ He sent a not so subtle look of disdain in the direction of the OC, who was all over his brother. ‘You’d need a dozen holesmiths to fix all the plotholes in this piece of shit.’ He gave Kate an interested look. ‘Are we up for maintenance anytime soon, do you know?’

Kate smiled apologetically. ‘Not my area, I’m afraid. You’ll need to take that up with the Council of Genres.’

‘Worth a try,’ he shrugged. ‘What brings you here, Agent Andrews?’

So Kate explained.

‘A character, stolen?’ he repeated incredulously when she was done. ‘Like Jane Eyre?’ Even in this backwater they knew about that, even though it had been decades ago.

‘We don’t know yet.’ That was the diplomatic answer. Unfortunately it was also the truth. ‘What we are trying to find out is if there have been any more incidents like this.’

Predictably, Kíli shook his head. ‘No, everybody is still here. Though I wouldn’t mind if we lost her,’ he added, indicating the OC.

Kate couldn’t blame him. She looked like she was in her early twenties and she was far prettier than any woman had any right to be. Unfortunately she was also extremely clingy and clearly hadn’t been at the front of the queue when the intelligence had been handed out. To be honest, she looked like she had a far lower rating than was recommended for a leading character.

‘C-grade?’ she asked.

‘C-8,’ Kíli confirmed.

She cringed inwardly. That was even worse than she’d thought. ‘What’s she doing in a leading role?’ Kate asked. C-grades usually were the small speaking parts, a few lines at most. They simply did not have the emotional depth to carry the leading role, which would go some way in explaining the quality of this story, come to think of it.

Kíli grimaced. ‘Budget cuts.’

Kate winced sympathetically. ‘Tell me about it.’ Fanfiction was notoriously underfunded. No matter what she did, that hadn’t changed yet. It probably wasn’t likely to any time either.

‘Couldn’t we just… Well, you know, do something about her?’ Kíli asked, still looking at the simpering blonde who was clutching Fíli’s arm. Fíli himself did not seem to mind her; he looked at her with pure adoration. He couldn’t help it; he was written that way.
‘I would advise against that,’ Kate told him sternly. ‘That’d be a Fiction Infraction and they really
don’t like that up at the Council of Genres. You’d be arrested and reduced to text, worst case
scenario. And I might have to be the one doing the arresting.’

He was nothing if not optimistic. ‘And the best case scenario?’

‘A story of this calibre without its main character would be dismantled and auctioned off in parts,
those parts that can still be used anyway.’ There wouldn’t be many from what she could see. ‘The
same for the characters. You’d either be auctioned off or if there was no use for you, you’d be
reduced to text. I really wouldn’t risk it, if I were you.’

He sighed, resigned to his fate.

‘You could always sign up for the Character Exchange Programme if you want a change of
scenery,’ she suggested, trying to soften the blow that way. ‘You wouldn’t be the first.’

Kíli thanked her from the bottom of his heart, shaking her hand to express how much that
opportunity would mean to him. It took thirty-seven words before he was done and Kate could ask
her other question.

‘Have you seen anything odd around here lately perhaps?’

‘Odd?’ asked Kíli. ‘How do you mean?’

‘Anything out of the ordinary,’ Kate explained. ‘Details that are different from how they usually
are, people you don’t recognise. That sort of odd.’

‘Oh, well, then yes,’ Kíli replied. ‘There was this fellow a few days ago, in Mirkwood. Now that
you mention it, he was behaving a little strangely.’

This was the very first time she had gotten even the smallest bit of success. Of course, it could still
be a PageRunner – there were several on the Jurisfiction wanted list – hiding out in a place where
people would not quickly look.

‘Can you describe him to me?’ she asked.

He did. The stranger had been tall, definitely a man, with longish fair hair and freckles. ‘Freckles?’
Kate asked. ‘You’re sure?’ That kind of detail was usually only seen in B or A-grade characters. Or
in Outlanders, she thought, but it seemed wiser to keep that thought to herself.

‘He had a fair amount of detail,’ Kíli nodded. ‘There was a tear in his shirt and his boots were
looking like he’d gone to give them a scrub but lost patience halfway.’

Bloody hell. If it wasn’t an Outlander, then it was almost certainly an A-grade. Only they would
ever have that much detail written in. And there wasn’t an A-grade on the PageRunner list at the
moment.

‘Listen, would you mind coming back to Norland Park with me and repeat that statement to my
colleagues?’ Kate asked. It was the best lead she’d found so far – not to mention the only lead –
and her colleagues would need to know.

Kíli favoured her with an incredulous look. ‘Do I want to get out of this book for a time? You are
joking, aren’t you?’

Then again, if she had been in his shoes, she would have been keen to leave as well.
‘Follow me.’

Chapter End Notes

I’m really rather nervous about this whole thing, so any feedback you could give me would be very, very much appreciated. Is it any good, is it rubbish? Should I continue, delete it? Do please let me know.

Next time: Kate’s search continues, while Thorin is trying to figure out what has happened to him and why.

Thank you very much for reading!
She wasn’t the only one to be physically morphed by reader expectation. Miss Havisham was now elderly whether she liked it or not, and Sherlock Holmes wore a deerstalker and smoked a ridiculously large pipe. The problem wasn’t just confined to the classics. Harry Potter was seriously pissed off that he’d have to spend the rest of life looking like Daniel Radcliffe.

Jasper Fforde: One of Our Thursdays is Missing

The silence dragged on for so long that Thorin was more or less convinced that his captor had left the room when he spoke at last.

‘What is Jurisfiction?’ he asked.

If he did not know, Thorin was in no mood to enlighten him. Dwarves were well-known for keeping secrets and this was one he was determined not to spill. Right now he was unaware of what would be coming for him and the longer he could keep it that way, the better.

The man’s ignorance of the policing force of the BookWorld also confirmed that he was indeed dealing with an Outlander here. And that was worrying. For years the Goliath Corporation in the Outland had attempted to invade the world of fiction. Had they now at last succeeded? If so, it did not bode well for the future.

‘Listen, mate, I’m on your side here,’ the man whined. ‘Least you could do is help me out.’

On his side? ‘You took me from the place I belong for your own ends. I did not require intervention.’

In Thorin’s opinion, Outlanders could read the stories and think of them what they liked. That was of no concern to him. They could argue their opinions until they were blue in the face, but that did not affect him. But he took exception to those empty-headed busybodies who thought it was up to them to rewrite the stories the way they wanted to, especially if there was an element within the tale that they thought of as problematic. It was a trend that had been going on for a while. But judging by the evidence, new lows had just been reached.

‘Face it, your story is shit.’ The man was obviously still blinded by his own self-righteousness. ‘And that girl you’re paired up with is no better than any of the other so-called Original Characters that are invading all fanfictions these days.’

‘That girl, as you refer to her, is my wife.’ The words came from between clenched teeth. If he’d had the use of his hands, he would have cheerfully strangled the man and have done with it.

‘Because you were written that way,’ the man argued. ‘Stuck in the rigidity of that worthless
narrative. You didn’t have a choice. But now you can break away.’

He really didn’t know the BookWorld at all, did he? ‘Kate is my wife by choice.’ About this at least he could set the man right. It was no great secret. In fact, the BookWorld had been whispering and gossiping about it for months when it happened.

‘You only think that because you’ve been written that way,’ the man explained, the way you would explain something to a small child.

‘We were married before we came to The Journal,’ Thorin snapped, his well of patience run dry. Not that it had been very full to begin with, but that was another matter entirely.

They had met in college, when they were just Generics, too undefined even to be named. They’d gone through character training together and had done well there. They had both achieved A-grade with ease, top of their class. There had been plenty of offers in original fiction for both of them, but they had grown so close by then, that they had requested to be placed in the same story. The only dual placement available had been in fanfiction, which nobody had expected them to take.

‘Well, if that’s what we can get, we’ll take it,’ Kate had said, leaving their teacher to stare at them in open-mouthed horror.

‘That is throwing your future away!’ he’d exclaimed. ‘You could do so much better.’

‘Maybe so,’ Thorin told him. ‘But I would only ever consider it with her by my side. So I ask again, are there any other dual placements available, even if it is for B or C-grades?’

There had been none.

‘Then we shall pack our bags and head away to The Journal, I believe it was called?’ It had been the easiest decision of his life and he had not regretted it for even a moment.

And all things considered, The Journal was not such a bad place to be. Considering that it was fanfiction, it was decently written and their author generally treated them well. Granted, he wouldn’t have minded if she hadn’t decided to drop a dragon on his legs, but it could have been worse. Besides, she had given them sixty almost entirely unrecorded years in which they could basically do what they wanted. And he had Kate by his side for all that time. In his opinion that was worth more than being in original fiction.

Of course, this fool did not know that. And suddenly Thorin didn’t feel in an divulging sort of mood anymore. Whatever he said, this man would use it against him without a second thought.

‘Untie me,’ he demanded, deciding that it couldn’t possibly have any less effect than attempting to reason with one so unhinged. ‘If it is your belief that I should be grateful for your so-called interference, then you should have nothing to fear from me.’ That was the way Kate would reason, had she been the one in his position.

The man said nothing and, more importantly, didn’t move either.

The silence dragged on and, having nothing better to do, Thorin tried the strength of the ropes again. They still wouldn’t give and Thorin had not really expected them to. As it was, he had barely enough space to wriggle his fingers and that wasn’t going to do him a lot of good.

‘It won’t work,’ the man said. Of course he would see, standing behind him.

Thorin was beginning to find his presence unnerving. His manner was not unlike that of a prison
guard and so far he hadn’t made any real attempts at either changing Thorin’s mind about his circumstances or doing anything with him at all. And all efforts to start a conversation of sorts had originated with Thorin as well. His captor was waiting for something or, more likely, someone. There would be others, or at least one other, involved in this mad scheme. Perhaps the Goliath Corporation was involved after all?

Either way, getting out of this situation had become his main and indeed only priority. Once he had his freedom, he would gladly devote some efforts to getting to the bottom of this mystery, but it could wait.

So he rested his hands and devoted his energy to summing up what he knew. So far, he was reasonably sure that he had not left the BookWorld. Not that Thorin had ever been to the Outland – he would stand out too much there – but Kate had been there a couple of times on a Jurisfiction assignment and she had told him about it. The Outland was not as structured as the BookWorld, she’d explained. It was overwhelmingly rich in detail and everyone looked as detailed as A-grade characters. Possibly because they all thought of themselves as the main characters of their own stories, she had theorised. In the Outland people didn’t categorise themselves as mentor figures or villains or sidekicks; they all took centre stage or at least strove for it.

The place he was in now, was sorely lacking in detail. In fact, the far end of the room was barely described at all. Either the author hadn’t bothered or Adjectivores had been having a go at it. From what Thorin could tell, it was probably the latter. After all, he would have expected the wall to be made of stone, perhaps a little old and crumbling like the rest of the room. It wasn’t. It was simply a wall. There was no a single adjective that applied to it anymore. Well, there wouldn’t be if an Adjectivore had been snacking on it.

Normally Thorin would find that annoying, because it meant another gramasite hunt or at the very least a mission to repair the damage done, but for now he was relieved to see it there, because it meant he was definitely still in the BookWorld, quite possibly somewhere in the backstory of a book, since that was where Adjectivores felt most comfortable.

And if he was in the BookWorld, he should theoretically be able to read himself back into the main Library. He would have been able to do that even from the Outland, but it would have taken more effort. And he had never taken the transfictional jump himself. It seemed foolish to attempt it from his position now.

But now that he knew he was still inside the BookWorld, he was confident he could make it out. True, he would still be tied to a chair, but at least he could cry for help and somebody would find him soon enough. And it was better to at least try than throw in the towel and admit defeat.

Outlanders would need a book to travel, as would some Jurisfiction agents, but reading himself into the Library was easy even without a Travel Book. He had accompanied Kate so often that he knew the words by heart. It was a risk to utter them in the presence of this man, but since he had already kidnapped Thorin from his own story, it was safe to assume that he had at least some basic knowledge of how to navigate travel in the BookWorld.

He looked over his shoulder, but it appeared his jailer had, at least for the moment, lost interest in him. He had moved to another corner of the room to another chair that was presumably for his own use and had turned his back on his prisoner.

All for the better.

He began to recite: ‘I was in a long, dark, wood-panelled corridor, lined with bookshelves that reached from the richly carpeted floor to the vaulted ceiling.’ He knew the Library well, pictured it
in his mind as he recited, slowly and precisely. ‘The carpet was elegantly patterned and the ceiling
was decorated with rich mouldings that depicted scenes from the classics. High above me, spaced
at regular intervals, were finely decorated circular apertures through which light gained entry,
reinforcing the serious mood of the library.’

Something was wrong. By now he should have been almost out of this place and into the Library
itself and there wouldn’t be a single thing the man in the corner could do about it. But nothing had
happened. Thorin’s surroundings remained as solid as they had a minute before.

Even so, he wouldn’t let this deter him. ‘Running down the centre of the corridor was a long row of
reading tables, each with a green-shaded brass lamp. The library appeared endless; in both
directions the corridor vanished into darkness with no definable end.’

‘It won’t work.’

The man’s voice broke Thorin’s focus and destroyed whatever progress, if any, he may have made.

Thorin turned his head around in order to glare at him. It was a difficult thing to achieve
successfully; he was once again standing behind Thorin in such a way he could not make out a
face. ‘You have no right to keep me here.’ Of course, that phrase had never stopped kidnappers
before, but he was so furious now that the futility of his words didn’t matter much. ‘What have you
done?’

‘There’s a textual sieve on this book,’ the man replied, sounding smug. Thorin realised that in
trying to make his escape this way he had only played into his kidnapper’s hands; he had been
expecting it. For someone who expected gratefulness from his prisoner, he had certainly taken
some extreme measures to prevent escape. ‘Though nobody’s really explained it to me.’

Nobody could. It didn’t have to be explained in the BookWorld. It was a place that ran on
imagination – and enormous amounts of paperwork – and as long as somebody was able to imagine
it and write it down, it would work.

Textual sieves however needed approval, written, signed and sealed in triplicate. The Council of
Genres was rather strict on the use of extreme measures such as that. The use of one here would
almost certainly have left a trail somewhere, if it had been an official one. Thorin doubted that.
There was no question that the Council of Genres had many issues, but they would never give
permission for the abduction of a character.

None of this made sense.

‘Not as grateful as you thought he was going to be, is he?’

The voice speaking was female and none Thorin recognised.

‘Did you know about this?’ the man demanded.

Thorin tried to turn around, but the new arrival kept to the shadows and he couldn’t see her face.
Hard to tell from where he was if she was a character or an Outlander like her partner in crime.

‘You don’t understand this place,’ the woman said. Her tone was distinctly patronising. Even if she
hadn’t had a hand in his abduction, Thorin very much doubted he would have liked her. ‘It’s alive,
you see. Not in the same way you and I are, obviously.’ So she was an Outlander too. ‘The
characters have more agency than you’d think.’

‘If that were the case, he should be grateful,’ the man argued as if Thorin wasn’t there. ‘That toxic
relationship he’s been forced into… I mean, he should be able to recognise that the girl wasn’t good for him, that he was effectively a prisoner in his own book.’

‘Well, if Stockholm Syndrome exists in our world, it could exist here.’ The woman sounded almost distracted. This discussion was not her primary focus. ‘You see now, don’t you, that your approach won’t work?’

‘I need more time,’ the man said. ‘Give him the opportunity to change his mind, let it sink in. I’m sure he’ll come round.’

‘I will not,’ Thorin snarled, very angry by now and also feeling the first traces of dread creep in and make themselves at home. There was a greater scheme here and though he did not know what it was, he had already decided he did not like it.

‘There you have it,’ the woman said. ‘It’s time for Plan B, don’t you think?’

Thorin did not like the sound of that either.

‘It must be an Outlander, surely,’ Vernham Deane said.

Kate grimaced. The same thought had occurred to her over and over again. But every time she thought it, the notion that it did not make sense came hard on its heels. What interest could an Outlander possibly have in Thorin? He wasn’t the original Thorin after all. He was next to no use if people wanted to extract a ransom from the Council of Genres. Fanfictions were ten a penny these days and the loss of one story was not a great one. Characters could be sold off to other stories and whatever remained could be chopped up and reused elsewhere. Kate herself would probably be spared, given her job at Jurisfiction, but her friends…

*Stop it right there, Andrews.* This fight wasn’t fought and lost yet. As it was, the fight had barely even begun.

‘Yes, but why?’ It always came back to that.

Vern invited himself to perch on her desk. ‘Let’s see what we actually know,’ he suggested. He was approaching this far more reasonably than Kate did. Normally, that would have annoyed her. But she was too restless now to pay it much attention.

‘Right.’ She forced herself to take a deep breath and focus. ‘Thorin disappeared between the line breaks of chapter 36 of *The Journal*. Clever move, because everyone was asleep at that point, except for Dwalin. And he was knocked out before he could see who was there, so that’s no use either.’

She didn’t blame Dwalin. It wasn’t his fault. Nothing was supposed to be attacking them at that point, so there was no need to be vigilant.

‘And a few days earlier, there’s this suspicious Outlander creeping around in another *Hobbit* fanfiction. So far as we know, he’s done nothing, but he wasn’t supposed to be there in the first place.’

‘Perhaps he was looking for high quality characters,’ Vern suggested. ‘And he didn’t find any
Kate shook her head. ‘Their Kíli is more than halfway decent,’ she argued. ‘A few of the other dwarves as well.’ She looked over to where the Kíli in question was still giving Commander Bradshaw the details of the man he’d seen. He was a B-2 character, wasted in that piece he was stuck in. ‘Why not go for any one of them?’

It felt so unfair. They to face more than their fair share of conflict of one sort or another in their book; Kate could count the number of quiet times on the fingers of one hand and then she’d still have fingers to spare. And now they faced it outside of the narrative as well? And she couldn’t blame an author for this or the folk down in the Well of Lost Plots who constructed the story. This was an outside force that she was somehow defenceless against.

It only served to make her angrier.

‘But no A-grades as far as I know,’ Vernham pointed out. ‘They’re rare in fanfiction.’

‘But not unique.’ Kate could name eighteen A-grade fanfiction Thorins at the drop of a hat and then there were probably some more that she’d missed. A couple of them were in fanfictions that adhered a lot closer to the *Hobbit* canon than *The Journal* did. And if you were going to steal a copy, wouldn’t you want to get as close to the genuine article as you could get? Because that would have been the logical thing to do.

Which brought her back to her initial point. ‘None of this makes any sense.’

Vernham thought this over. ‘Perhaps this Outlander is a little insane.’

‘Delete the little and you’re probably right.’ She pulled her hand through her hair for lack of something better to do.

She felt restless. Usually she had at least something to go on. Even this morning, she had been going round other stories looking for clues. She had been busy. She had contributed something. But now that new information had emerged, she couldn’t see how to continue. Tracking people in the BookWorld was difficult. Unless they messed about with a story, they were untraceable. And the BookWorld was vast; they could be anywhere.

The quiet went on for 98 words and then Vern said thoughtfully: ‘Well, if that’s true, then maybe he’ll make a mistake, mess up in the book he’s hiding in and we’ll find him like that.’

‘He could have fled to the Outland already.’ Her heart sank at the idea. While finding him in the BookWorld was hard, the RealWorld would make it harder still. She had been there a few times now, but she never stopped finding it horribly overwhelming. There were so many details everywhere.

And the sheer amount of people had baffled her. The BookWorld had more than enough people to be passers-by or townspeople and the like, people who were just background in the stories because they never did anything other than walk past and occasionally wish one a good morning. Passers-by in the Outland were distinctly different, not least because they were all at least as detailed as A-grade characters. And they all seemed to be doing a lot of things other than simply walking past. They were carrying on conversations of their own, glowering at people who got in their way or stopping her to ask directions. It was chaotic and alien. She had always been glad to return home to a world more organised than theirs.

Before she could sink too deeply into that idea, Commander Bradshaw approached her. ‘There’s a
message from *The Hobbit,*’ he said.

Kate groaned. ‘Their Thorin has gone missing as well, has he?’ After all, it was only to be expected.

‘No,’ he replied. And that at least was cause for some relief. Although the abduction of the original Thorin would doubtlessly have made her colleagues a bit more motivated to take this seriously. ‘He wants to have a word with a Jurisfiction agent on a sensitive matter.’

‘For goodness sake!’ Kate exclaimed. ‘I’m trying to find my Thorin. Can’t somebody else go?’

Vern stepped in and saved her from herself. ‘The original Thorin asking to see a Jurisfiction agent on the same day another Thorin disappears? You don’t think that’s a coincidence, do you?’

Kate could have kicked herself for not seeing the connection right away. Her focus had been too narrow and as a result, she’d not only behaved like a fool, she’d likely lost valuable time as well. *Bloody hell, Andrews, keep your head in the game.* ‘Right. Sorry.’

Bradshaw patted her on the shoulder. ‘He’s requested you drop in near the end of the first chapter.’ Kate could tell he felt sorry for her, but was grateful that at least he didn’t say so. She might not have responded in an acceptable manner. ‘We’ll keep looking through the other *Hobbit* fanfictions, to see if he has visited any others. Perhaps he spoke to somebody.’

It was a long shot and they both knew it. Unfortunately it was also the best they had.

The end of the first chapter was where she needed to go and so there she went. It ended with Bilbo falling asleep and so, when she arrived at Bag End, she waited a few minutes until she was sure the chapter had ended and then she knocked on the door of the bedroom Thorin was supposed to occupy. ‘Agent Andrews from Jurisfiction,’ she announced.

She had been expected, because she was let in almost straight away.

‘Agent Andrews,’ the original Thorin acknowledged.

‘Thorin Oakenshield,’ she greeted. ‘I’ve heard you had an urgent matter to bring to my attention?’

They hadn’t met before. Like many original characters, the original Thorin often liked to pretend his fanfiction alter egos did not exist. He was unlikely to appreciate someone from the *Hobbit* fanfiction to come poking around his book and since Kate’s area was fanfiction by default, she had never come near the original *The Hobbit.* She imagined it would be an awkward experience for everyone involved.

Awkwardness was now the last thing she cared about.

‘Come in,’ he invited.

Kate did as she was bid, only to find that Thorin had not been alone. Nori was with him, looking equal parts sheepish and terrified. She didn’t know what exactly was going on, but Nori was generally a troublemaker in whatever story she found, her own included, and so it was no difficult leap to make to assume he had something to do with the reason why she had been called here in the first place.

Thorin closed the door behind her and remained standing in front of it as if to cut of escape. Nori’s escape, she imagined, not afraid for her own freedom.
‘What is this about?’ she asked briskly.

‘He has been seen in conference with what is presumed to be an Outlander,’ Thorin informed her. The tone of voice was icy and dripping with disapproval. ‘And we have been told that a character has been taken from his own story.’ Kate strongly suspected he knew exactly what character, but he just couldn’t bring himself to say it. And she didn’t mind, not now anyway.

She turned her attention to Nori. ‘You’ve spoken with this man?’

‘Don’t know anything about a man,’ he said. ‘Looked like a woman to me.’

*Great, so there’s two of them. At least. This woman, then,’ she corrected. ‘What exactly was the conversation about?’*

Any reluctance Nori may have felt about divulging such information was undone by the way Thorin looked at him. ‘Information,’ he confessed.

‘About?’

‘The BookWorld,’ Nori replied promptly. ‘And *The Hobbit*. And fanfiction.’

Kate could start to see where this was going. ‘Why?’

The sheepishness for one moment outweighed the terror. ‘Money.’ He hesitated, then continued: ‘Well, it’s not like it’s cheap to make your story better. Décor costs a fortune these days, not to mention the price of decently written dialogue and characters above C-grade. And the price of a good backstory is going through the roof just now.’ All of a sudden he sounded very irritated and put-upon.

Realisation dawned on Kate. ‘You are not the original Nori.’

She should have bloody realised. This Nori was A-grade, the original one somewhere between C-3 and B-8. She wasn’t entirely sure. The original Nori couldn’t have thought of such a scheme.

‘Where’s the original?’ she demanded, turning to Thorin for an answer.

‘On the Character Exchange Programme,’ he replied, not sounding pleased about it. Well, he had no reason to. ‘An agent from Jurisfiction provided a stand-in until his return.’

Kate knew the procedure. Sometimes it was best to recruit from fanfiction when an original character wanted a holiday. They were already familiar with the part and, in most cases, more or less looked as they were supposed to.

Kate was normally in charge of selecting the right fanfiction alter ego to temporarily step into the shoes of the original. And she was good at her job. And it wasn’t an easy job either, because fanfiction was a mess even on a good day. It was where the flotsam and jetsam of the BookWorld washed up: the rubbish, but also the gems who couldn’t find employment in original fiction, usually because they resembled existing characters too much. Over the years fanfiction had become the place for those characters who had nowhere else to go.

And it was tricky to get it all right. But Kate knew the genre – and honestly, that term was so wrong for a group of stories that encompassed every genre known to man – like the back of her hand. She always made it work. Except these past few weeks she had been so busy fighting gramasites that she asked Brashaw if somebody else could handle that part of her duties for the time being. And Kate knew for sure she had not authorised this particular transfer.
Somebody had royally messed up here.

‘Who handled this?’ she asked.

‘A Master George Warleggan, I believe.’ Judging by the look on Thorin’s face, he didn’t have the first idea of who that was.

Would be that she was blessed with that ignorance.

‘I’ll bring that to the Bellman’s attention,’ she promised. A part of her revelled in the idea of having George – finally – cut down to size, but it didn’t take prominence as much as it would have on an ordinary day.

This Nori was overqualified for the job he was doing and clearly George hadn’t bothered to so much as meet him to determine whether this Nori would be a good fit in the original story. He really should have done his homework.

That didn’t mean that Kate didn’t sympathise with Nori’s plight. She was only too well aware of just how underfunded fanfiction was and how the quality of the stories suffered as a result. If she had been in his shoes, she would have tried to improve it as well, in order to attract more readers and to make her story a more pleasant place to live and work.

But I wouldn’t take money from a dubious source in exchange for information.

And now her Thorin was gone, vanished into thin air. For all she knew, Nori had enabled that to happen. For just a moment she had the violent urge to scratch out his eyes with her fingernails, but that wouldn’t bring Thorin back. It changed nothing.

‘Why?’ she demanded. ‘Why did this woman want to know all these things?’ It took considerable effort to rein in her temper and stick to the case. She’d see him in court for this eventually, preferably after she got Thorin back. Until then, he had information that she needed. You’ll need to do this by the book, girl. Her little fantasy about hurting him would have to sustain her for the time being.

Nori shrugged. ‘How am I supposed to know?’

‘Meaning: you didn’t bloody well ask, did you?’ Kate growled. ‘Just took the money without question.’ She laughed without humour. ‘How very like you.’

He shrugged again. ‘I’m written like that.’

How many times had she heard that one as an excuse? She’d lost count. And of course, certain types of characters acted a certain way, but especially the higher graded ones weren’t slave to that. They had more agency, more freedom and intelligence to break away from the confines of writing when not inside their own narratives. Take Emperor Zhark for example. Inside his books he was the tyrant to end all tyrants, but outside of his stories, at Jurisfiction, he was capable of more balanced social interaction, albeit still with a slight tendency to solve matters the violent way. And this Nori, being A-grade, really should have known better.

‘Cut the bullshit,’ she snapped at him.

Nori held up his hands. ‘Whoa, calm down. What’s it to you anyway?’

Kate held his gaze, doing her very best to mimic Thorin’s iciest stare. Judging by the horrified look on the recipient’s face, she was succeeding. ‘The character who’s been abducted is my husband.’
She let those words sink in before she continued. ‘That is what it is to me. My husband, whom I love, has been taken. But not only that, because of this, if he is not found, my story and everything and everyone in it, is at risk. Because of you.’

Nori seemed to realise he had pissed off the wrong woman. ‘I didn’t know.’

Kate wasn’t fooled. ‘Would it have made a difference if you had?’

She had him there. ‘Well, no. I think.’ He seemed to take a few words to determine whether his next sentence would see her throttling the life out of him and evidently decided she would not, because he continued: ‘But I would have warned you. Probably.’

Kate’s glare must have informed him his reassurance was not appreciated.

She commanded him to describe the woman he’d spoken to and Nori answered in some detail. He described her as in her late twenties, as tall as the elves, with green eyes and curiously coloured purple hair; the fashion trends in the RealWorld must have gone completely bonkers. It was hard to argue with that assessment.

‘But how did you know she was an Outlander and not an A-grade character?’ Kate asked.

‘Well, she told me.’

_Did she?_

_It doesn’t make sense._

‘Did she perhaps tell you what she was up to while she was at it?’ Kate asked.

‘Like I said, I didn’t ask.’ For the first time Nori looked apologetic. Kate couldn’t decide if it was genuine; for all she knew he was just trying to save his own skin. After all, she knew where the Eraserheads were kept and he had just helped to facilitate her husband’s kidnapping.

Kate looked back at Thorin. ‘Could I have a word with you alone?’

He agreed and gestured for her to move into the hallway beyond the door. Once again, he stood against it, just from the other side, so that Nori would not be able to get out, unless he wanted to take his chances with the small window in the room itself.

‘You did not say you were married to the stolen Thorin,’ he observed. He didn’t seem very pleased. Well, he wouldn’t be, given what some of the Original Characters in the _Hobbit_ fanfiction section got up to. They made Kate cringe on a fairly regular basis. The blonde whimpering C-grade from this morning’s story sprang to mind almost straightaway.

But she prided herself on being nothing like that.

‘Wasn’t aware I needed to,’ Kate retorted, keeping her tone light and businesslike. The whole thing hadn’t been awkward until he started about it, but now it suddenly was. Because in effect she was married to another version of him. That was the way he was clearly looking at it anyway. ‘You’re not him.’

There had never been any confusion in her mind. She knew who she was married to. Perhaps they were made from the same basic material, but their experiences were different and therefore the sort of people they were today were also not the same. Of course, they kind of looked the same. The original Thorin had been morphed by collective reader expectation to look more like the movie
version of himself. Rumour had it he wasn’t happy about it.

But most characters whose books had been made into movies underwent some kind of change, especially if both movie and book got a lot of attention. And Thorin had got off relatively well. Harry Potter had more grounds for complaints.

She had taken him by surprise. ‘I did not say so.’

‘You were wondering if I was thinking it.’ It didn’t really matter which version of The Hobbit she was in, blunt honesty was always valued by dwarves. ‘And I’m not. I want my husband back. I haven’t got the faintest interest in you.’

She missed him. A mission of this magnitude they would have undertaken together. He would have had her back and she in turn would have watched his. They’d each pick up on things that the other missed. She tried to do by herself what they usually did with the two of them and it made her feel incredibly lonely. Maybe seeing someone who looked like him but wasn’t him only made it moreso.

Where is he? Is he alive? What do they want with him?

She had more answers than questions.

Thorin nodded. ‘Good.’ Then he swiftly moved on. ‘What is to be done with him?’

‘Keep him close,’ Kate counselled. ‘If we’re lucky, she’ll come back for more.’ Unlikely, seeing as she already had what she came for. ‘If so, kindly detain her and send word to Norland Park. I would appreciate it.’

Again, she had received a snippet of information, but had no idea how to use it. It made her feel weary to the bone. And at the same time it made her blood boil with rage. Why her Thorin? Why of all the people in the BookWorld had they gone after him? What reason could there be? How dare they?

If only she had a place to start, if only she knew more. But she hadn’t and she didn’t and so the investigation, such as it was, was moving at a snail’s pace. And quite frankly, that was an insult to snails in general.

‘It will be done,’ the original Thorin informed her. It seemed that a few pieces of the puzzle had finally fallen into place and now at least he realised who exactly she was. ‘It was said that you could have done well in original fiction, yet you chose fanfiction.’

‘I did.’ She hadn’t regretted it once.

The next question was predictable. ‘Why would you do that?’

‘Because it was the only place where we could be placed together. It was a choice.’ People asked her sometimes if she wondered what it would have been like to work in original fiction and if she ever wished she had made a different choice. The answer had always been no. It wouldn’t ever change either. ‘I love him.’ It was hard to remember a time when she hadn’t. It was hard sometimes and people were always judging, both in the narrative and outside of it. And it’s still worth it. This is still worth fighting for. ‘Where he goes, I go.’

But now she hadn’t followed. Not from choice, but because someone had decided to separate them.

She couldn’t recall if she had ever felt so alone before.
Next time: The woman who shouted a lot. Kate really isn’t happy with George right now.
Personally I think that Thorin and Kate wouldn’t really be themselves if their relationship was not a conscious and somewhat controversial choice. It’s at the heart of their story and I would not dream of changing it.
If you do know the Thursday Next series, I’m keeping to the canon up to Something Rotten (book 4). I’m certainly disregarding most – if not everything – of that series where it concerns fanfiction, which I am happily making up as I go along.
Also, on a completely unrelated note: has anyone any recommendations for good Hobbit fanfics? I need something to back up Kate’s claim of knowing 18 A-grade Thorins and I can’t find them.
Thank you very much for reading. Please let me know what you thought about this one! Is it enjoyable? Are there things I haven’t made clear enough? Reviews would be very much appreciated!
Something was not right.

Kate dreamed. People did. It was the most natural thing in the world. But the dreams usually were not this vivid. She was not usually aware that she was dreaming either.

The halls she was in were beautiful and light. Having said that, the design of them seemed more elvish than she was used to. Whoever had a hand in designing this place must’ve had a good long look around Lord Elrond’s halls, because here were all the fragile swirly bits that no dwarf worth his beard would ever have in his home. After a lifetime of hanging around with dwarves, Kate rather saw their point. These little pillars didn’t look like they’d hold up in a gentle summer breeze, never mind a storm.

But the tapestries were pretty, she’d give them that.

She wandered over and had a look around. In the distance there was a man on a sort of throne, but since this was a dream, she decided he could wait while she admired his house. In dreams at least she could do that without appearing rude.

Most of the tapestries were of battlefields and important looking folk doing important looking things. There was even the occasional dwarf now and again. She was fairly sure that someone had woven the fall of Khazad-dûm into a tapestry and, since these things seemed to be ordered chronologically, a little further along the wall she found the Battle of Azanulbizar.

Well, that’s nice of them, she thought before she found herself.

Huh.

The weaver was very good – the Bayeux tapestry had nothing on this – she had no trouble recognising herself, standing on the mountainside with four companions, holding off the orcs. They’d made it look a lot more heroic than it had felt at the time.

She became aware of someone behind her. ‘This is very good,’ she said, because this was a dream, so why bother with the niceties?

The lady behind her inclined her head. Long hair obscured her ears from view, but Kate’d wager that she was an elf. ‘Thank you, Catherine. This is my work.’

‘You’re good at it,’ Kate said, only slightly taken aback by the fact that the unknown lady knew her name. ‘This must have taken forever.’

A smile tugged at the lady’s lips. ‘Ages,’ she agreed. ‘Come, my husband is waiting for you.’

That sounded slightly ominous, but deciding that there wasn’t a whole lot of harm she could come to in a dream, she followed. The husband in question turned out to be the fellow on the throne-like contraption. It too continued the theme of the rest of the hall and was covered in swirly bits.
Oh joy.

As she walked it occurred to her that she felt more spry and lively than she’d felt in ages. Tugging a strand of hair within view revealed a colour she hadn’t been able to claim for a good thirty years. Her hands were smooth and suspiciously devoid of wrinkles. All the little complaints she’d accumulated in the last decade had equally done a disappearing act.

Huh again.

The man on the throne stood quite a bit taller than Kate – nothing new there – but fortunately he remained seated so he did not tower over her as much as he could have done.

‘Catherine Sarah Andrews, welcome to my halls,’ he said. He had a deep booming sort of voice. She wouldn’t like to be around him when he was in a foul mood.

So she kept it light. ‘I like what you’ve done with the place,’ she said. ‘I especially like your wife’s tapestries. They’re true masterpieces.’ Only the truth and at least that prevented her from speaking her mind about the rest of his interior decorating.

‘Long have we watched your doings from afar,’ he continued as though she had not spoken at all. ‘Yet now your tale is done.’

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him that it had been done for about sixty years now, but something in his voice and posture stopped her. Pieces of the puzzle were falling. Her mind finally connected dots that should have joined as soon as she first opened her eyes.

‘I am dead.’

Her heart dropped. Hold on, did she still have a heart? Did she still have a body? Pinching herself still hurt, so that was good. It also did not wake her up, which was not good, not good at all.

Shit, I’m dead.

Oh, Thorin.

She swallowed – she was still capable of doing that as well – and took a steadying breath. She knew she was getting on in years, but she’d felt on top of the world last night. Most of the company had been there on the mountainside and they’d all brought spouses, children and friends along. Even Jack had put in an appearance. It was nothing special, just a bit of a knees-up with the people she loved best in all the world. She’d felt alive in ways she hadn’t felt for a good long while before that. Only hours ago she’d told her husband that they should do this more often. Then she’d kissed him goodnight. Only she would never wake again and he’d wake up to a nightmare.

This isn’t how this is supposed to go.

‘Shit.’ The word just rolled off her tongue.

The man frowned at her.

Oops. ‘You must be Mandos,’ she guessed, which would make his wife Vairë, known for her weaving. Bloody hell, she’d been a little slow. She’d always maintained that her body deteriorated, but that her mind was as quick as it’d always been. Clearly it had taken a holiday and left her to fend for herself.

He inclined his head.
Right. ‘Begging your pardon for the language.’ One did not annoy a Vala. Rumour had it that this was bad for one’s health, as Morgoth could probably testify, as well as scores of Noldor elves who’d pissed the Valar off three ages ago. Note to self: keep your tongue under control. Ghostly or otherwise. ‘It’s just a bit of a shock, finding out I’m dead.’

Meanwhile her mind kept up its own running commentary on the situation – shit, shit, shit, shit, oh, bloody bleeding hell! – because this was all wrong. Ori had been convinced that for all intents and purposes she now belonged to Durin’s Folk. He’d been almost annoyingly concise about the whole thing and it had involved veritable mountains of paperwork and oaths and vows. When it was all done he swore up and down that apart from her physique she was very much a dwarf and there was no reason that he could see why she should not be counted as such after her death.

It was not something she had often – if indeed at all – brought up in discussions with Thorin. She knew he feared their separation. It wouldn’t do to raise his hopes, but Kate had privately resolved to go where he went after death. She had no intention whatsoever to spend an eternity sharing the fate of the men of Middle Earth, most of whom she had nothing in common with.

And now the whole thing hadn’t worked, because here she was.

You know what they say about best laid plans.

Mandos regarded her calmly. It was said of him that he was grim, that he had to be. Only Lúthien had ever moved him to pity before. And Kate did not have the right sort of singing voice required for such a task. No song of hers could move Mandos when he was not of a mind to be moved. He was a guy who did his job.

And I am a wife doing mine. So she prepared to be obstinate. According to Dori it was not a skill that required much work on her part; it came to her quite naturally.

‘You may rest and recover in these halls, Catherine,’ he said. ‘And then you must go.’

She kept her silence. He may yet send her where she wanted to go.

He did not. ‘You must share the fate of Men.’

‘Ah. I was afraid we’d hit that little snag.’

Mandos did not look overly pleased. ‘You have lived an interesting life,’ he granted. ‘But this is the fate to which you are bound. It is not for you to question.’

‘That’s where you’re wrong.’

From that look she should have dropped dead on the spot. Good thing you’re already dead, Andrews. She had a feeling that not a great many people took that tone with Mandos. For good reason.

‘Explain yourself.’ The tone suggested she’d better make it good.

‘I made a promise.’ When all was said and done, this was what it all boiled down to. ‘I made a promise when I married Thorin to stay with him, in that world and the next. I don’t do keeping only half of my promises.’ She crossed her arms over her chest to drive the point home. ‘So with all due respect, sir, but I’m not going where you are sending me.’

‘It was not for you to make such promises.’ Queen Victoria could not have that unamused look any better than he did. She might even have learned a thing or two.
‘Well, no one gave me the rulebook.’ Wasn’t that her whole Middle Earth experience in a nutshell?
‘You can’t come at me now and say that it wasn’t allowed. You’re over sixty years too late for that.’

‘It is not for you to make your own rules.’

‘Be that as it may,’ she said, well aware that she was playing with fire. ‘The truth of the matter is that I’ll not be going.’ She stared at him.

It had no effect. ‘You will go.’

‘Then I’m afraid you’ll have to force me there, kicking and screaming.’ Perhaps she shouldn’t give him any ideas in case he were to treat them as suggestions. ‘And then, in due time, you’d have my husband to reckon with and why on earth would you do that to yourself?’

*Oh, Thorin.*

The realisation that everything they’d had was all over, that he mourned her even now, was tearing her heart into a million pieces. It was as if someone had taken a sledgehammer to her chest, creating a gaping hole that she could not seem to close. Something essential was missing. She’d been on her own before, but never like this, never facing the sure knowledge that she would never lay eyes on any of her loved ones again.

*Oh, Thorin.*

Her heart wept for him most of all. There’d been too much pain, too much loss and now she’d gone and left him without so much as a farewell. How did he bear this? She only knew that she could barely stand up from the force of it.

And then there were the others. Her children that now she’d never see again. Her friends and family in Erebor. Good grief, Dori must be in a right state! Her mind turned to her elvish friend, the one who’d nearly lost himself to despair when she so much as hinted at the fact that her time was running out.

She hadn’t said goodbye to any of them.

And if Mandos had anything to say about it, she would never see any of them again.

*We’ll see about that.* Kate was not known for giving in without a fight. She’d rather hoped that death would be peaceful after all the conflicts she’d got caught up in during her time alive. That was not to be.

Laura had once accused her of thriving on conflict. *Time to put that to the test.* Kate was used to having to fight for her marriage. It was the noblest of causes.

So she stood her ground.

Mandos’s eyebrows were up near his hairline. ‘Do you threaten me?’ Presumably nobody in their right mind ever did that, but, like she’d said, nobody had given her the rulebook.

‘Not at all. I’m just painting you a picture of what’s going to happen.’ Because Thorin was not going to take this proposed separation lying down any more than she was. ‘I am stating my position, if you will, as I believe you have stated yours, which currently seems to leave us at a bit of a stalemate.’
Not much, as it turned out. Mandos was either incapable of dragging her away or he simply didn’t
want to put the thing to the test, because she was still in his halls. Having failed to incinerate her on
the spot, he had dismissed her from his presence while he presumably went off to ponder the
question of how to resolve this situation.

She had not seen him since.

It took Kate less than a week to discover that being dead was boring. She no longer needed sleep or
sustenance, which led her to believe that her body was not as corporeal as it felt. Interesting
observation though it was, it did little to distract her from the mind-numbing boredom of the
place. She had far too much time on her hands – more than she’d had in years – and nothing to fill
it with. She’d grown used to the dwarvish way of life, so this idleness nearly drove her up the wall.

It almost made a body want to move on.

Almost.

Kate knew what she had chosen and she would stick with it to her dying breath… Oh, whatever.
She knew who she was and she knew what she’d chosen. It had taken the dwarves years to come
around to the idea and if that was what it took to get Mandos to see it her way, she was prepared to
wait.

Every mind-numbingly boring second of it.

So she explored the halls just to give herself something to do. The men who came here only stayed
briefly to recover from whatever shitty life they’d had and then were always eager to move on. The
elves currently in residence gave her a wide berth.

Apparently her reputation preceded her.

It was lonely. There was no one to talk to and nothing could distract her from her losses. No one
ever thought about the losses of the dead, because the living lost a loved one when said loved one
died. It was not supposed to be the other way around. All the pain was supposed to stop after
death. That was the accepted way of it.

Then again, she hadn’t read the rulebook, so what did she know?

Her heart yearned and her arms craved to hold. She wished she could hold her children, kiss their
foreheads and cradle them close, never to let them go again. She longed to see her husband’s face,
to wrap her arms around him and feel his heartbeat. She wished to hear his voice, soft with love,
chuckling in amusement, even tight with barely controlled anger would do.

How did I get it so wrong?

So she wept often. Since she was always alone, there was no one to notice it anyway.

It only made her feel lonelier.

‘You often weep,’ a voice one day observed, about two weeks after her arrival. The voice itself
seemed to contain all the sorrow of the world. It did not in any way help to stem the tide of tears.
‘What grieves you so?’

Kate looked up from her hiding place a choice, a secluded little nook off one of the corridors. The lady before her was tall and graceful. Later she couldn’t say what colour her eyes were, only that they were filled with grief and compassion both.

The truth slipped out before she could check herself. ‘I miss my husband. He is a dwarf, you see.’

Understanding dawned. ‘Full of sorrow is your fate, Catherine.’

‘Yeah, I know.’ She tried to wipe the tears away, but her eyes had developed a leak and they kept coming. Her control over this body was as poor as over the one she’d left behind in Erebor.

The lady did not do anything. She only looked. But Kate felt understood and comforted for the first time since she’d died. Here was someone who understood grief, who had seen it all before and who yet bore it. This must be Nienna, the Vala she’d privately dubbed “the weepy one.” But she had done Nienna an injustice by it. This was not someone who wept for the sake of it. This was someone who saw all the hurt in the world and was sore grieved by it. And it seemed that included Kate’s heartbreak.

She weeps for all of us who hurt, for the unfairness of it.

‘I shall remember you,’ Nienna said.

Kate inclined her head and then made an impulsive decision. Nienna was already on her way again, but this ought to be said. ‘Thank you,’ she called after her.

The lady turned around, looking askance.

‘Thank you for caring,’ Kate said, struggling to put this thing into words. ‘Thank you for seeing all the hurt and not going numb with it. I’ve got a sister-in-law who’d tell you that crying means that we still feel, that we still care despite what the world decides to throw at us.’ Thora, she realised, was exceedingly wise in her own no-nonsense way. ‘So thank you.’

Nienna smiled sadly, then turned and walked away.

But Kate felt better for having met her.

‘Will you go?’

‘No.’

‘You were not meant to linger in these halls, Catherine.’

‘Finally something we can agree on. So send me where I want to go and I’ll get out of your hair.’

‘…’

‘For heaven’s sake! It means I’ll stop hanging around and being a thorn in your side.’
'I cannot grant that wish.'

‘Then, with regret, sir, I must disappoint you again today.’

‘You cannot stay here until Arda is remade.’

‘I should hope not. I’d die. Again. But of boredom this time.’

‘…’

‘Shall we say same time tomorrow?’

It was the day after Kate had met Nienna that Mandos began his routine of summoning her before his throne to see if she was ready to comply yet. So far the meetings generally ended in bitter disappointment for both parties. He didn’t want to see it her way and she did not want to see it his way. Without fail this left both of them frustrated.

About two weeks after this she found an elf waiting outside when she exited the audience hall. He smiled and bowed slightly before he entered the hall himself. Kate had seen him before. He’d stood out to her because most other elves were apprehensive around him and he himself did not seem to seek out their company.

Odd.

Curiosity got the better of her – and it was not like she had places to be – so she hoisted herself up onto an obliging banister and waited until he came back out again. He was not in there long.

‘You are curious,’ he stated.

‘True,’ Kate said. ‘From what I’ve heard Mandos does not have many audiences, so I wondered what you had done to incur his special attention.’ Having been the subject of it herself repeatedly, she could wonder.

‘I refuse to obey his wishes,’ the elf said.

Kate grinned at him, somewhat pleased to find that she was not the only one after all. ‘So do I,’ she said. ‘Kate Andrews, pleasure to meet you.’

He inclined his head. ‘Fëanor. The pleasure is mine, my lady. It is not often one meets a kindred spirit.’

Oh. She’d heard of him, of course. He was the hot-headed one, the one who had created the Silmarils and then began one hell of a feud against Morgoth who took them. He would not have been one to cross. Rumour had it he still dwelled in the Halls of Mandos, though nobody knew for certain and certainly nobody knew why.

‘You must have been here for centuries,’ she said.

‘Millenia,’ he corrected her.

‘Why?’ She realised that was too blunt and added: ‘If it’s none of my business, you are very
welcome to tell me to shove off.’

‘I do not belong now to that world,’ Fëanor said. ‘It has moved on without me.’

He said no more, so Kate did not ask.

‘And what of you?’ he asked. ‘What have you done to so displease Mandos?’

_Uh oh._ ‘He was in a bit of a mood then?’ The quick nod confirmed that. ‘I refuse to move on. Mandos thinks I should stop being so obstinate and go be with all the other men.’

‘You do not wish to?’

‘I was married to a dwarf.’ She took a little private amusement over his shocked face. Seeing as how he was apparently not in on the whole story, she filled him in on what he’d missed. It took a while, but neither of them had anywhere they needed to be, so that was all right. Fëanor was a good listener, which she had not really expected from him, but he clearly approved of her actions, which she had expected. He was a bit of a rebel himself after all.

‘Lúthien sang to Mandos,’ Fëanor said eventually.

Kate scowled. ‘Not the right singing voice.’ She pondered that and added: ‘Or the composing skills.’

Begging and pleading had never really been her kind of way. She had become too dwarvish for it. This was not where she was meant to go. This was not her place. Someone somewhere should realise this and set it all right. And until then she was not going anywhere. Once she left, there was no coming back.

‘Besides, I don’t think singing a song is going to do the trick, especially not now.’ If that had been her strategy, she should have implemented it straight away, not four weeks on when she had already made it plain that she for one was not going to budge.

He conceded that point gracefully.

‘So, what do you do to keep busy around these parts?’

‘The time has come.’

‘To what exactly?’

‘You must go. Men were not made to linger in these halls for so long.’

‘I quite agree. So, are you sending me to the dwarves yet?’

‘That is not your fate.’

‘Then I won’t go. Sorry, not sorry.’

‘This cannot continue.’
‘Good grief, I hope not.’

‘Go.’

‘Only out the door, I’m afraid. See you tomorrow.’

It is an unquestioned rule that outcasts usually find each other to band together, because nobody else will have them. It was like this for Kate and Fëanor. He knew this place like the back of his hand. He pointed her in the direction of the library and the outdoorsy bits that she could visit without actually leaving the premises. She was not supposed to do that. Fëanor seemed to think they wouldn’t be capable and Kate was not putting it to the test.

He also showed her the halls filled with tapestries. Mandos’s audience hall was not the only one practically groaning under the weight of them and Fëanor had been around these parts long enough to see most of them woven and hung up when they were new.

One day they stopped to peer at a tapestry showing the Battle of the Unnumbered Tears. The figures on the right side were depicted in bright colours and great detail. The other side was shown in dark colours. Kate might have said a thing or two about bias, but the wrong side was Morgoth’s and he was good news to nobody, so she quite agreed with it.

‘Vairë is a master in this.’ For all that the lady sided with her husband concerning Kate’s case, she was a skilled weaver. Only a blind man would deny it. The scene was very vivid. If she had known any of those present, she might have recognised them in real life easily.

*Hold on.*

She moved closer and squinted. ‘Oh. Wow.’

Her elvish companion had become used to her outlandish words and phrases enough that he did not question them. ‘What is it that you see?’

‘A friend of mine, I think.’ She tilted her head a bit and considered the evidence before her. ‘Yes, I’m fairly sure. That’s Elvaethor. Blimey!’

She had always known that he was old. But he had never told her how old and she had never been able to wheedle it out of him. But here he was, fighting in one of the most well-known battles of this world. And he didn’t look a day older these days than he had then.

What in the world was he doing playing at serving someone like Thranduil?

Fëanor’s response surprised her even more. ‘Elvaethor? Maethor’s son?’

*Right.*

‘Yes. Bloody hell, you know him?’

The answer was obvious of course. By now she should have learned her lesson that she could never quite figure her elvish friend out. His past was shrouded in mystery. He seemed to have been present at every major event of the past three ages. She tried to recall if he had ever told her which group of elves he originally belonged to, but came up empty.
‘I only knew him as a child,’ Fëanor replied. ‘But yes, he was known to me.’

The tone implied that this was the end of the discussion, so Kate asked no further questions. Instead she looked at her friend’s likeness and wondered if he was all right now, if he was dealing with the loss any better than he had the last time he lost a mortal friend. *I did all that I could for him,* she knew, but her best did not feel like enough.

*I’ll never see him again either way.*

The thought saddened her greatly.

‘Have you made up your mind to be obedient?’

‘What do you think?’

The Halls of Mandos were pretty – even if they were still far too elvish in design – and thanks to Fëanor she was no longer so isolated. She even had something to do to fill the days. But she was drifting still.

Mandos had not told her a lie when he said that she was not meant to linger here; Kate felt it. Something pulled at her and urged her to leave. Kate ignored it as best she could. It grew stronger as time passed. By the time she had been there for two months – good grief, two entire months cut off from everyone she loved! – it was becoming hard to fight. It was no more than a feeling, but one that told her that she did not belong, that she was meant to go elsewhere.

*But Thorin is not there, so screw that.*

Her mind had been made up long ago.

Fëanor accompanied her to the audience hall, as had become his habit. He himself only had to appear once a month on account on having been here so long. Even then it was mostly a formality; Mandos had no real hopes of getting the most recalcitrant elf who ever lived to comply with his wishes.

Why on earth he still thought to get anywhere with Kate, she never knew.

‘This shouldn’t take long,’ Kate said at the doors. ‘In and out in under five minutes.’

‘I shall wait here.’

‘Yeah, because you have nothing better to do.’

‘There I many things I could do, Kate Andrews, all of them without your sparkling company.’
He was bluffing of course. It was just better with company. They’d both been alone too long. ‘We
could have a look at the northern section of the library later,’ she suggested.

She opened the door and all thoughts of books went right out of her head.

Oh.

Well, shit.

She almost backed away and out of the door again, but she stopped herself. She didn’t run away.
That was no longer what she did, so she walked forward with as much courage and dignity as she
could muster.

‘My lords and ladies,’ she acknowledged with a nod of the head when she had come close enough.

They were all here. Oh, bloody, bleeding hell they were all here. She did a quick and discreet
headcount, but yes, every single one of them was assembled in this room. Mandos had ceded his
chair to a taller guy she suspected was Manwë. He did Queen Victoria even better than Mandos.

And none of the others looked particularly pleased to be here.

‘Catherine Sarah Andrews, come before the Valar.’

She couldn’t see who had spoken, but obediently she did another few steps forwards.

‘You have disobeyed Mandos’s commands,’ the one she thought was Manwë said.

‘I have.’ She saw no reason to deny that.

‘Never has one of your kind done so before.’

‘Is that a question?’ Keep your tongue in check, girl, before he loses patience. He might just hurl
you into the void to keep Morgoth company for all eternity. That prospect was not very tempting.

‘Why have you done so?’ The tone was annoyed, but not yet angry.

Kate took this as a good omen. ‘Because that is not in accordance with my promise. I promised to
stay with my husband in that world and the next. And he is a dwarf. So that’s where the problem
lies, sir.’ Because courtesies never hurt anyone and better late than never.

Having said that, Kate was fully prepared to be just as recalcitrant and cooperative with all fourteen
as she had been with just Mandos. She had made her choice. She had married Thorin and that
didn’t mean chickening out when it all got difficult.

I miss you.

Just the thought of never seeing him again made tears trickle down her cheeks. It was more than
she knew how to bear. She had never thought of herself as the sentimental type, or the weepy type
come to think of it, but isolation had done that to her. Why would this not end? It could not be so
terrible to let her go, could it?

‘And if I am right I am not the first in a similar situation,’ she said. Inga and Dari had lived and
died some centuries ago. She didn’t think they had been content to be separated for all eternity, not
after all the stories Elvaethor had told her about them. Neither of them were here, which was
interesting.
The Valar’s faces reflected this estimation.

She did not ask who went where. It was not relevant. ‘It is my firm belief that Dari and Inga were not permanently separated, so I see no reason why Thorin and I should be any different.’ And she had not seen Inga skulking around because the world did not mysteriously rearrange itself in accordance with her wishes.

‘You would ask to be counted as one of Aulë’s children,’ one of the female Valar said.

‘I do.’

‘None has asked that before of us,’ she continued, answering the question Kate had not been about to ask. Dari had given up his people for Inga. Kate was not about to ask the same of Thorin. She had joined his people, not the other way around.

‘I have lost one of my children,’ a booming voice spoke. ‘He was given the grace to go where none of mine have gone before.’ Kate looked up and saw the one whose name she had quite often taken in vain. Oh, well. ‘Can I not claim one as mine who was not born as such?’

Manwë looked like there was not enough time in the world to deal with all of this. He looked at Aulë, whom Kate knew better as Mahal these days, and then back at Kate again. ‘Would you choose this?’

Honestly. ‘I have been stating that desire since the moment I came here, sir.’ She crossed her arms over her chest, even if only to stop them from shaking. It could not be this easy. She daren’t even hope.

‘The fate of the dwarves is different than those of men and elves,’ he said.

Kate nodded. ‘I am well aware.’ Why did everyone assume that she made this choice lightly? She knew what she was doing.

And she hardly dared to hope now, because this was the closest she had come to getting her way. Yet nothing had been easy these past two months and Mandos had been singularly uncooperative in every imaginable way. It could not be this easy.

‘And yet you still choose it?’

Time to be frank. ‘You’ll have been made aware that I am not of this world,’ she said. She wondered if he had been one of the Valar who’d had a hand in that unfortunate time travel debacle fifty years ago. ‘I left behind everyone I ever knew and loved when Gandalf brought me here. The dwarves took me in. They are not my family by blood, but they are the family I chose and the family that chose me. I married a dwarf I love dearly, with all my heart, and I miss him greatly. I will not be separated from him for eternity. I won’t do that.’ She refused point blank to be alone forever. That was not what she had chosen.

‘You love a dwarf?’ another Vala asked, incredulity in his voice. She had no clue which one he was. None of them had bothered to introduce themselves.

Typical.

She answered promptly. ‘Yes, I do. With every fibre of my being.’ She’d been about to say with every breath in her body, but she didn’t have a real body anymore on account of being dead. It was vastly annoying.
He fixed her with a stare. ‘Why?’ He almost made it out like Thorin was some sort of criminal. ‘All dwarves lust after gold and riches more than folk of flesh and blood.’

Could she get away with punching him? On reflection, probably not. So words would have to do her. It was therefore a good thing that they did not often let her down. ‘Well, _someone_ hasn’t had a look around Middle Earth in forever,’ she sneered. ‘Thorin is the best and brightest soul you could ever hope to meet, who led his people through years and years of exile before he retook Erebor from a bloody fire-breathing dragon. He’s not greedy. He never has been.’ Why did people always insist on thinking the worst of dwarves? There were very few things that really made her mad these days, but this never failed to rile her. If she had blood, it’d reach boiling point by now. ‘And he’s a great deal more pleasant to be around than anyone I’ve ever met and certainly anyone present in this room. Bloody hell!’

She stopped herself at last, but she’d probably done more than enough damage anyway. If she wanted them to give her what she wanted, it probably would not do to annoy them to such an extent that they’d rather toss her into an active volcano.

*Have I just messed up my chances of ever seeing him again?*

It took all her willpower to remain standing.

Silence ruled supreme for what felt like an eternity.

‘I vouch for her,’ a soft voice spoke.

Every head in the room turned to Nienna.

‘Sister, would you explain yourself?’ Mandos asked. He did not at all like where this was going if that look was anything to go by. He had however been surprisingly quiet during the proceedings.

Kate wondered about that.

‘Catherine has a compassionate soul,’ said Nienna. ‘I have seen this myself.’ Kate remembered that encounter, but her recollection was nothing like what Nienna described. She’d just done the decent thing. ‘What she says is true. We know this. She has given up much. Are we to begrudge her this boon now?’

Mahal spoke up, because as a smith he knew to strike when the iron was hot. ‘I should like to claim this soul for myself,’ he said. ‘One of my children was lost to me. If I shall have one that was not born as mine in recompense, I shall declare myself satisfied and consider a debt repaid.’

Did he smile? It was gone again too quick to be certain.

But it worked. The arguing went back and forth for a while. All Kate could do was to stand back, let them get on with it and hope for the best. She had her fingers crossed behind her back. It was a strange superstition from her own world that she’d never been able to shake. And it was not like it could harm her cause.

She did that well enough herself.

‘You are certain of your choice?’ Mandos asked at last and she knew that the fight was won. ‘Once chosen, you cannot go back on it.’

‘I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life. And death.’ Being dead really wreaked havoc with popular expressions. ‘Yes, I am sure.’
She could have done a little happy dance on the spot, but she contained herself.

‘Then go with Aulë and leave my halls.’ He sounded extremely relieved to be rid of her at last. The feeling was entirely mutual. ‘You belong with his children now and they have no place here.’

‘Thank goodness, because your interior decorating is really grating on my nerves.’ Because keeping your mouth shut is just so difficult, isn’t it, girl? Then again, he’d started the insulting game. ‘Sorry, none of my business anymore. Begging your pardon, sir, would it be permitted to say goodbye to a friend of mine before we leave?’

‘What friend is this?’ asked Mahal.

‘Fëanor,’ Kate replied, keeping her voice carefully neutral.

‘Him,’ said Manwë. The other troublemaker. He didn’t need to say it for Kate to hear it. ‘Be quick about it.’

She knew better than to risk it, so she ran the length of the hall – it was nice to be able to run again after decades of not being able to on the account of creaky joints and dodgy knees – and through the door to find Fëanor on the other side.

‘They are letting me go,’ she said without preamble.

He looked pleased and disappointed all at once. ‘It is good for you,’ he said.

Yes, it was. ‘I hope you’ll find contentment,’ she wished him, taking the initiative to give him a hug. Inappropriate by Middle Earth standards, but what could she care? Dwarves were well known for being completely inappropriate anyway. ‘You’re Fëanor. You’ll be fine.’

He held her at arm’s length. ‘I do not believe that this is the last we shall see of one another.’

‘Oh, I should think not,’ Kate grinned. ‘Take care of yourself. And if Elvaethor’s ever stupid enough to get himself killed, you’ll tell him where I’ve gone, yes?’

He’d want to know.

And that should give him hope.

Kate had no idea where they were going. Mahal ensured her that it was not a long journey. At this point she didn’t mind how long it’d take, so long as she got there in the end. Now that it was all happening it felt a little surreal, but she wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. She was too happy to be here.

‘Thank you, sir,’ she said to the Maker whose name she’d so often called out in frustration. He did not seem to hold that against her. ‘For adopting me. I’m very grateful, honestly.’

He inclined his head. ‘You did not belong there,’ he said. ‘I made my children to work and live their lives to the full, as I am wont to do. You share those gifts.’ He grinned at her, the solemn mask falling away. ‘And if I did not bring you home, some of my children would never have forgiven me. Go. The door is open to you.’
She hadn’t noticed her surroundings in a bit, but now she did. She stood in a corridor of stone, so reminiscent of the halls she had lived in most of her life. A door was at the end of it, slightly ajar, beckoning her through.

‘Thank you,’ she said again, but he was already gone.

*So get a move on yourself, Andrews.*

She didn’t think the offer would rescinded if she did not get on with this within a certain time frame, but it was foolish to risk it. So she walked the short distance and halted just before the ornately carved door. Here were the patterns she had so missed these past two months. Here were the sturdy structures she had longed for. The stone was cool beneath her fingers and reassuringly strong.

*This feels like home.*

With that thought in her head she pushed the door open and stepped over the threshold.

She did not get the opportunity to take in her surroundings. She had a fleeting impression of a great hall before she was enveloped in a hug that involved too many arms to belong to just one person. The purpose of this seemed to be to squeeze the life out of her lungs, which would be quite the achievement given that she was already dead. Then again, no dwarf worth his beard ever shied away from a bit of a challenge.

‘Can’t breathe!’ she choked out.

Her assailants let her go so that she could get a good look at them. Kíli was the first one she saw, grinning like a madman and looking really pleased with himself. Kate recalled Mahal’s comment about some of his children. She’d hazard a guess that Kíli had been as good as first in line in this mad venture. Next was Bifur, minus axe, also smiling and also a little bit smug. The last one of that trio she’d never met.

He smiled at her, almost shyly, and oh, Mahal, she knew that smile.

‘Hello, *amad.*’

If she’d still had a heart, it’d have stopped. She knew him, but she had never known him like that. He hadn’t lived long enough. Here was the child she’d borne too soon, who had never once drawn breath in the living world. But he was here, alive and whole and everything she’d ever hoped he would be. Most of his features were Thorin’s, including that heart melting smile of his. But the curls were all her and so was the nose.

‘I am so very pleased to meet you,’ she said, because all other words failed her. She drew him in for another hug and relished the experience of holding this child she’d never raised. And yet he was still hers, every inch of him. She had mourned his death, but here he was.

*He was never lost,* she thought. *He still made it here.*

‘I’m feeling left out,’ Kíli complained playfully.

‘You can wait your turn,’ she admonished. ‘I’m meeting my son.’ She held him at arm’s length. ‘I am so sorry, love, I don’t even know your name.’ Well, wasn’t that embarrassing.

He smiled again. ‘Kíli said you were going to call me Dari, so that’s my name.’
It suited him well. ‘I am so pleased to meet you, Dari.’ *Thorin, you would be so proud of him.*

This reunion was bittersweet. The elation still reigned, and she was overjoyed to be here at last. But she still missed Thorin. How she would have loved to share this with him, to look over her shoulder and tell him that they had a son and that he was wonderful. Wasn’t he everything they could ever have hoped for?

But Thorin wasn’t here.

It felt as though she had left a piece of her heart behind in Erebor, where it lay, still in Thorin’s keeping.

She was not allowed to dwell on it. Kíli demanded another hug, Bifur clapped her on the shoulder and greeted her, with no small amount of satisfaction, in the Common Tongue. Kate, with no less pleasure, returned the courtesy in the Khuzdul that she now spoke fluently. They hadn’t been able to communicate in life, but those obstacles were all gone here.

‘Let me through, my lads,’ another voice she recognised demanded. Thrór elbowed his way through and clapped her jovially on the shoulder. ‘It’s been a long time, my lass, but here you are at last!’

The last she’d seen of him was during that whole time travel nightmare, before he ever lost his mind. She’d never known him mad. He certainly was not in this place either. In fact, he was as she remembered him, jovial and cheerful, bouncing on his feet with enthusiasm, as he had been when he tried to wheedle information about the future out of her and was very pleased with the meaningless little titbits she’d allowed him to coax out of her.

‘I am indeed,’ she said. ‘It is very good to see you again.’

‘A rocky road it was,’ he agreed, summarising two hellish centuries in just five words. ‘You did very well, very well indeed, my lass. I knew I’d left the future in capable hands.’

She felt herself grow an inch or two at the compliment.

Theyra and Freya came to greet her as well, followed by Thorin’s brother Frerin, whom she recognised on sight because he resembled his brother so much. Thráin the Elder was nowhere to be seen however, and she didn’t want to ask. That was not an affair that should be dragged up at such a happy occasion.

But eventually the greetings were out of the way and something Dari had said demanded her attention. ‘Kíli, how did you know that my son was going to be called Dari?’ She had only ever discussed that with Thorin. Nobody else could possibly know. And after her miscarriage there had never been any need to speak the name.

It was too painful.

So how had he known?

‘We can watch,’ Kíli explained. ‘So we do, from time to time, just to see how everyone fares.’ He looked slightly apologetic.

It was an effort to not ask him what exactly he had seen. Kate decided she did not need to know.

‘You can see?’ she asked. ‘How?’
So he showed her and she saw her husband. Who was not coping.

The days had often felt endless and heavy to Thorin, but they were more so now than they had ever been before. There seemed to be so little point to them these days. His hands felt too heavy to lift up to work. The world had faded to greys and blacks.

The colour had gone out of it when Kate died.

The moment between sleeping and waking was both the best and the worst. Still half asleep he reached out to the other side of the bed to touch her. Without fail there was nothing there and the truth would make itself known to him.

She was gone.

So nothing made any sense anymore.

He had never craved sleep in the way he did now, because in his dreams at least the world was still right. During the day Erebor was full of ghosts, of echoes and memories, of reminders of people long gone. There was nothing there to hold them at bay anymore. So sleep became a refuge.

This dream however was different. He stood in a hallway that felt like the halls he knew, but that he did not recognise. Some distance before him was an ornately carved door standing slightly ajar. Light fell through the crack into the dark corridor. Laughter and excited voices drifted through it.

He did not look behind him, but began to walk. It seemed it was expected of him. At the door itself he halted. He put his hands against it, without yet pushing. They were not the hands he recognised. These hands were young and smooth as they had not been for some time now. He plucked up a strand of hair for his inspection and found that it was no longer grey.

How odd.

He did not knock. Dreams never warranted that. The door swung open and he stepped over the threshold.

There she was, young and unscarred and smiling so widely that it should have split her face in half. It didn’t.

He had no memory of moving, nor did he see her move. He only felt her in his arms, vibrant and tangible. He heard her delighted laughter in his ears. Some of his dreams had played tricks on him where she evaporated the moment he reached out to touch. This was not one such.

‘Can’t breathe,’ she reminded him at last. ‘Not that we technically need to.’

The comment puzzled him, so he broke the embrace and held her at arm’s length. ‘What do you mean?’

Kate smiled, but it was one tinged with sadness. ‘We’re dead,’ she told him. ‘That’s why I am here and that’s why you’re here now. It’s not a dream, Thorin. We’re here. We’re both here.’ She reached out and caressed his cheek. Her hand was warm against his skin.
The pieces fell into place. The thought caused surprisingly little distress. Where else could he have been bound? His life was at its end, he had known that. He had just not anticipated it to be like this.

‘You are here.’ He reached out and brushed a strand of hair away from her face, red and wild as it had been when he first met her. ‘I believed we would never meet again.’ How could they? She was mannish. He’d attempted to trick himself into believing that sixty years had been enough to sustain him, but they were not, not by a long stretch. He had barely lasted four without.

‘Together or not at all,’ Kate said, smiling again. ‘That was the promise.’ The smile widened to a grin. ‘It took some doing to get everyone else to see it my way, but we got there in the end, that’s all that counts.’ She looked him in the eyes. ‘I have missed you,’ she whispered. ‘And now you’re here and I shouldn’t be so glad about it because it means you’ve died and…’

He stopped her mouth with a kiss that stole the breath they no longer needed from their lungs. ‘Tell me later,’ he told her at last, his forehead resting against hers. ‘It does not matter now.’ Against all the odds, here she was. He kissed her again. ‘I love you.’ How he’d wished these past months that he had told her more often. It was not an oversight he’d allow to happen again.

‘And I you,’ Kate said. She had not let him go yet. Neither had he relinquished his hold on her. Not yet. ‘And so do a lot of other people.’ She reached for his hand and smiled even more. ‘Come and meet our son, Thorin…’

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was born a couple of weeks ago when I listened to Eurielle’s Lúthien’s Lament and I wondered how Kate would have gone about persuading the Valar to let her stay with Thorin after death. Somehow it did not seem likely she would sing Mandos a song and get her way like that. Inspiration struck and two days later I had somehow written this piece.

Next weeks it’s back to The Book. Tragedy is lurking only just around the corner for our protagonists in Erebor…

Thank you so much for reading! Reviews would be so very much appreciated.

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