Beneath the Ever-Bending Sky
by leupagus

Summary

When Thorin summons the company to the Lesser Hall and Bilbo explains what she wants done, there is a long silence, followed by thunderous argument.

“I suppose we shouldn’t have expected better,” Bilbo mutters as Óin and Dwalin bellow at each other.

It’s typical, Thorin thinks, and is disgusted with himself for the rush of fondness he feels.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Their first meeting in her dismal rabbit warren of a hole fixed Thorin’s default reaction to Bilbo; adventures and battles and deathbed confessions have changed how he feels, but whenever his best beloved gets a certain lift to her chin part of Thorin always heaves an enormous, growling sigh.

“You what,” he says, too exhausted to raise the pitch at the end of the sentence and turn it into a question. He’s spent the entirety of the day being called from his very important job of glowering at Bard while Balin wrangled compromises out of the Esgaroth trade delegation in order to check on repairs to the diamond mine (which has finally been uncovered, long blocked by a truly staggering amount of fossilized dragon shit) and approve various other repairs that Bilbo usually oversees.

She, as far as he can tell, has spent the day fiddling around with yarn and knitting needles while Ori wore out his voice saying, “No — not like that.” When dwarves are with child, they usually work right up until the delivery, and it is not uncommon for a baby to be born halfway down a mine shaft and get swaddled into some spare rags until such time as the day’s work is done. Hobbits, apparently, are more fragile creatures.

His great treasure — “I wonder if you keep calling me all those endearments to remind yourself you can’t throw me off the wall when I annoy you anymore,” Bilbo mused on their wedding night, and Thorin stopped her from pursuing that line of thought as best he was able — props her chin on his chest, the rest of her warm and comfortable against his side. “I need to go home,” she repeats. “Back to the Shire.”

“If there were a scribe nearby, I’d ask him to remind you that this conversation is how you wound up pregnant and I was forced to marry you in a great rush several months ago,” Thorin says, because snatching her up in his arms and refusing to let her go is, he’s been told, undignified.

“Yes, well, that ended very nicely for all concerned, you included,” she wrinkles her nose at him, brushing some strands of hair out of her face. It is loose and unbraided, the beads that Thorin no longer allows anyone but himself to work into her hair each morning now carefully put away for the night in her jewel-box on the shelf. “And do stop pouting, you look exactly like Kíli when you do that and it makes me feel like I’m molesting a tween.”

“Kíli’s almost thirty years older than you — stop changing the subject.” Thorin revises what he’s irritated at her about. “Why do you need to go to the Shire?”

“Stop saying ‘the Shire’ the way you say ‘Mirkwood,’ if it pleases your lordship,” she says, because she’s a queen now and still can’t be bothered to remember the proper forms of address. “And, ‘need’—” she makes a considering face. “I want to be there. For when Little One and Little Two are born,” she says, wiggling against him in a way that he’s vaguely aware should remind him that she’s four months along.

Instead, it just makes him aware that she’s naked and in his bed. “Hmm,” he says, palming her hip, marveling anew how it fits to his hand. Dwarves love craftsmanship and care in all things they create, but in the course of his decades he has found nothing so worthy of praise as the way Bilbo molds to him, and he to her, as though wiser hands had planned them both before the dawning of the world.

“Thorin,” Bilbo reproves, but her voice holds laughter, and when he pushes her onto her back, hungry the way he always is, her small hands twist in his hair and pull him closer.
The next day, however, he’s forced to confront the fact that she’s serious.

Someone pounds on the door before the red-tinged dawn lamps are lit. "Your Majesties? Her Majesty asked me to wake you, I hope it’s not too early—"

"It’s well too early," Thorin mutters, but Bilbo makes a pleased noise and rolls out of bed, pulling her robe on as she pads toward the door.

"Dori," she greets him. "Thank you so much. Come in."

And come in he does, his arms full of what seem to be rags but are, upon closer inspection, Bilbo’s old traveling clothes. Thorin recognizes that thrice-bedamned waistcoat which Bilbo had worn for the entirety of their journey and which had caused a great deal of confusion when she’d lost all the buttons and revealed, rather dramatically, that she was in fact female. Thorin had dragged Gandalf aside, berating him for the better part of an hour for letting a Hobbit-lass — surely as rare and valuable amongst her kind as dwarf-women were amongst his — go on this journey.

"She’s from a long line of adventurous Took, and she just saved your life. For the second time, by my count," Gandalf said, as Thorin was taking another deep breath. "Besides, Hobbit-lasses are as common as Hobbit-lads — quite unremarkable, really."

Thorin had gaped at Gandalf, wordless in the face of Bilbo being anything like common or unremarkable; wordless in the face of his own relief at having a reason he could’ve hidden behind for his dread at Bilbo’s continued presence in their Company. Thorin had known, in a distant sort of way, that the Quest for Erebor might kill them all; he forded streams and hunted for food and accepted, every night, that he might be leading his nephews and kinfolk to their deaths. But softly and secretly, the way he — she, apparently — had done everything, Bilbo had become the loss Thorin could not tally; to find a reason to leave Bilbo behind only to have it snatched away from him was a cruelty Thorin should have expected from the Wizard.

"Yes, I thought so," Gandalf had said, infuriating, before he wandered off.

"What are you doing?" Thorin asks Bilbo now, who is burbling at Dori about fabrics.

"Arranging for a decent traveling cloak," Bilbo replies. "Perhaps fur-lined, that would be very smart."

"And sensible, in view of the weather we’re likely to suffer on the journey," Dori nods, writing something down in a little book. "There’s a weaver in Esgaroth who’s quite reasonable—"

"‘We’?" Thorin asks carefully, still unwilling to get up but increasingly aware that events are developing in a way he should probably shout about.

Dori blinks at him, twice. "Your Majesty," and of course of all people it’s bloody Dori who always gets the address right and makes Thorin feel like he’s a dwarrow learning etiquette and protocol from old Groin, "You’re not suggesting Her Majesty goes back to the Shire unattended?"

"I’m not suggesting she goes at all," Thorin growls, and throws off the bedcovers. Dori just sniffs, no doubt irate that his plans to make Bilbo an entirely new wardrobe are being thwarted, but Bilbo turns bright red. Thorin takes brief pleasure in the fact that he can still fluster her by standing up without trousers.

"I am going, we settled this last night," she says, and despite her blush there’s that damned tilt to
her chin.

“Dori, leave us for a moment,” Thorin sighs.

“If I could just get her measurements very quickly—” he tries, but he gives up when Thorin crosses his arms. “Aye, Your Majesty,” he grumbles.

“That wasn’t very nice,” Bilbo points out as the door closes. She’s fussing with her decrepit old clothes, and Thorin can’t tell if it’s because he’s bare-arsed or because she’s choosing this as one of the many, many things she’s going to be unreasonably stubborn about. Either way, he goes to her and rests his chin on the top of her head, wraps his arms around her, locks her away for a few precious moments. She used to complain about it, but now she tangles her fingers in his.

“I need a midwife,” she says into their clasped hands. “And there are none to be had in the mountain.”

“What’s a midwife?” Thorin asks.

“That would be part of the problem,” Bilbo tells him. She turns in his arms, still holding one of his hands. “Hobbits don’t— we don’t,” she corrects herself, “Give birth so easily as you, for all we do it more often. And I’d be easier in my mind if I had aid.”

“Óin could not aid you?” Thorin asks. The idea of Óin speaking to Bilbo about anything related to childbirth is horrifying, but it’s a solution that at least has the advantage of not sending her halfway across the world.

Bilbo winces. “I don’t believe you can possibly imagine how much Óin cannot help me,” she says. “Nor the fine herb-witches of Laketown. This is hobbit business, and a hobbit midwife is what I want.”

He examines her face, sees in it no deviousness or deception; he has known her long enough to have seen both. She is determined, and sorrowful in the slant of her mouth, regret at leaving pulling down her smile. He touches her lip gently and nods. “Then we shall depart, with all haste.”

“What?” she blinks, huge and alarmed. “We?”

*  

It’s recorded as the most involved and complex shouting match between His and Her Majesty in the First Year, though it’s far from the loudest or the longest — the loudest was, according to Ori, their argument about what crown Bilbo would wear at the wedding (Bilbo wanted no crown, Thorin wanted her wearing the Queen’s Diadem with a few new rubies set in just to make a point), while common consensus holds that their longest was over what kind of berry bushes ought to be planted in the new gardens (Bilbo wanted gooseberries, Thorin wanted something that wasn’t obviously made up).

This argument’s place is earned by the fact that every cursed dwarf with a few hairs on his chin feels compelled to put in a word.

“Impossible,” Balin scoffs, still poring over the Esgaroth contracts. “The King of the Seventh Kingdom, last and mightiest of the dwarven realms, Erebor the Reconquered, doesn’t heave himself about to go fetch back a bunch of hobbit nursemaidens.” That does bring him up, squinting thoughtfully. “What do you call a group of hobbits?”

“A nuisance,” growls Dwalin from behind Thorin’s right shoulder, where he’s been since Thorin
was thrown out of his own chambers by Bilbo and Dori, of all people, earlier this morning.

“Surely Erebor can survive without me for a few months,” Thorin tries, but Balin swivels on his stool and fixes Thorin with a disapproving look, fingers drumming impatient on the parchment.

“Laddie, you’ve done the impossible and brought us to a life I’d never let myself dream of. Erebor is free and will thrive once more under the house of Durin. But would it survive without you, so new in its rebirth?”

He gets to his feet and pulls a tome from one of the shelves, opening it to reveal Ori’s careful script. Names alongside ages and professions and needs — the page Balin’s opened runs top to bottom, crammed to the last with information. Thorin takes the book from Balin and flips through it; every page is full.

“This is our sixth such record-book since the doors reopened,” Balin says. “More of our people come every day, every hour. I’ve heard of dwarves leaving the smiths of men with naught but the clothes on their backs and the boots on their feet, called home to us. And you are their king.”

“I am a husband, and hope to be a father,” Thorin says, as his fingers touch the ink of those names.

“And you’ll be both, laddie,” Balin says. “But you’ll do it here.”

* 

Unfortunately, the rest of the Company seems to be in various states of preparedness. “Of course we’re going,” Bofur says. He’s hunched over a drafting table, charting out the latest mithril seam that’s been reopened; all around are other charts, shaded to show the three planes of a seam’s run in the two dimensions that paper affords. The new mines are faring well under Bofur’s eye — the dwarves returning to Erebor were the sons and grandsons of those who had fled, and they made their living as tinkers and smiths, not miners. Training them to their new professions has slowed exploration, but the old seams still yield ore and jewels to the patient novice.

Bofur jerks his head over his shoulder toward the corner where Bifur is sitting quietly, working at something with his whittling knife. “We’re going to pack up some of Bifur’s soldiers for her cousins and their dwarrows. Or whatever hobbits call them.”

On the hand-carved shelves behind Bifur are are dozens of small figures, carved and painted. Most are dwarves in full battle gear, snarling defiance, but here and there is a man or an elf or a wizard. There are even a few small curly-haired hobbits, brandishing splinter-sized blue blades, though at the moment Bifur is whittling something too big and blocky to be a toy soldier. It looks like—

“Is that an axe head?” Dwalin asks, grabbing it out of Bifur’s hands and brandishing it at Bofur. “Is he carving a wooden copy of the axe head in his head?”

Bifur grabs it back, looking disapproving, and Bofur shrugs. “Some of the children like to dress up as members of the Company.” The dimple in his cheek flashes. “Apparently all three of Laketown’s hat makers have me to thank for some brisk business.”

“All the gods in their halls defend us,” Dwalin mutters.

“So you’d not want to hear about all the children painting your tattoos on their arms and hacking at people with wooden axes and making knuckledusters out of bits of leather and wool, then?” Bofur leans back in his chair. “It’s awfully cute, so’s you know.”

Thorin tries not to think about dwarrows running around pretending to be members of the Company
in their spare time. “When did you speak with the Queen?”

“Bilbo asked us last week—” Thorin glares, and Bofur amends with a great, unimpressed sigh, “Her Majesty asked us last week—“

“She asked you last week?” Thorin says.

* 

“She asked all of us,” Bombur says, the butcher knife coming down with a thwack on the slab of pork ribs. “She came by, said everyone was going—“

Thorin turns on his heel to glare to Dwalin. “Everyone,” he repeats.

“Is this one of those things I should’ve told you before?” Dwalin asks. “Aye, she asked me. Asked if I’d ask my brother, too. Must’ve slipped my mind, with all your trade talk.”

“Did she tell you she planned to go without me?” Thorin presses.

Bombur and Dwalin share the look of two dwarrows debating which has the better chance of confessing to a misdeed without getting a hiding. At last Dwalin admits, “She may have mentioned that the journey would be of too little consequence to merit Your Majesty’s personal accompaniment.”

“Does this mean Dori’s not going to get us matching cloaks?” Bombur asks, disappointed.

* 

Dís is of the same opinion as Balin. “Though it’s not that the mountain cannot spare you, brother dearest,” she says, walking along Jeweler’s Line and nodding her approval, pausing once or twice to advise a young craftsman. Thorin has only ever worked with iron and silver other metals; for all he is their leader, he feels misplaced in this part of the mountain, a stone badly set. But Dís’s pace is steady, assured, and Thorin trails after her whilst trying to appear as though he is not trailing after her.

“It isn’t?” he asks, after a young dwarf who cannot be over thirty has shown Dís a ruby cut in some fine manner that Thorin did not take note of.

“Of course not,” Dís says. “It is Bilbo that Erebor cannot spare. She is not just your wife, Thorin, and she certainly is not just your brood-mare.”

“She is my queen,” Thorin says, impatient, “I know that—“

“I wonder if you do,” Dís says, and leads him down another line, where emeralds are being shaped. “The new dwarves who come in — they are most of them young, too young to remember the Desolation or the slaughter at Azanulbizar. Many of them lived amongst men, born under nothing but sky and clouds. They come here and fear they are not dwarves. But then they see their liege’s wife, the great love of the King Under the Mountain, who stole from a dragon’s horde and helped win the Battle of the Five Armies. They see her and they understand.”

“Understand what?”

Dís nods at another jeweler, his large hands cradling a sparkling jewel the size of his thumb. “That we are a new people, newly reborn. We can honor the old ways without binding ourselves to them. Bilbo is not just a queen, she is a symbol. And that symbol will tarnish if she leaves us.”
Dís’s brand of philosophy has always given Thorin a headache. “Then you do not think I should
allow her to go.”

“I do not think you should consider her in terms of what you allow her to do and not,” Dís replies,
sharp. “But if I were to counsel her, I would counsel against it.”

* 

Mercifully, Glóin has the look of one who is staying put. “Aye, she asked, but my duty is clear,” he
says.

“That is good of you,” Thorin nods. “I could wish all the Company were so easy to convince of the
wisdom of staying—“

“Staying?” Glóin makes a gargling noise. “You can’t stay. She’s said she needs a midwife, and…
herbs and things!”

“Herbs,” Thorin says, hating the uncertainty in his own voice.

“Well, what would I know. My brother’s a healer and even he’s agreed that she needs better hands
than his to help her through childbirth.”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps — she needs to go! You’d insult your own honor as a father to stay?”

“Watch your tone, cousin,” Dwalin rumbles, but considering the fact that any such talk from
someone outside the Company would have a knife at their throats, Thorin’s starting to doubt
Dwalin’s loyalty.

“I’ll watch my tone and anything else I like,” Glóin snaps back. “I cannot go because of my duties
here. Besides, Gimli’s gotten lost down the mines twice this week and… truth to tell, we’re starting
to worry about his earth-sense. But you,” he says, re-inflating and looking Thorin up and down. “Are
you crippled?”

“Glóin,” he warns.

“That gut wound still festering somehow? Because I think we all remember this summer’s goings-on
all too well, you seemed in fine shape then—“

“Glóin,” Thorin says.

“Your wife will go,” Glóin says, “Then so will you.”

* 

Dwalin, who Thorin is now convinced is completely faithless, abandons him at the door to his
chambers. “Bid you good evening, Your Majesty,” he says, and disappears down the hall, whistling
like the son of a beardless whore he is. Thorin grips the handle to the door and pushes.

His nephews are sitting in his and Bilbo’s chairs by the fire, pipes in hand; the smoke ring that Fíli
just blew wavers in the draught from the door and sails across the room before being caught in the
vent in the corner and unwinding like so much skeined thread into nothingness. “Doesn’t count!”
Kíli protests.

“Does so,” Fíli counters. “You said no pushing it along by flapping my hands. You said nothing
about doors.”

“He makes a fair point, Kíli,” Bilbo says, where she is leaned up against a ridiculous number of pillows (even in his childhood, when this was the chamber of the King and his playroom besides, Thorin could never remember so many pillows on the bed) with her own pipe. She catches Thorin’s eye and her mouth twitches, just a bit, and something too-light in Thorin’s stomach settles, weighted down.

“Of course you’d think so,” Kíli says, cheerfully sulking. “Everyone knows you play favorites.”

“No doubt your uncle will side with you,” Bilbo says, still smiling.

“He plays favorites, too.” Kíli glances up at Thorin. “Though I doubt I’m on the list at present.”

“None of you are on the list,” Thorin says, still holding open the door. “Everyone who isn’t my wife, get out.”

Instead of scampering to obey their kin and king, Fíli and Kíli scrunch up their faces in thought. “Your Madge?” Fíli asks Bilbo, drawing on his pipe.

“Be off,” she says, and only then do they clamber to their feet and leave, clapping Thorin on the shoulder in bruising succession.

He shuts the door behind them with more force than is probably necessary; a few of Bilbo’s more frivolous gewgaws shudder on the mantlepiece. “Shall we pick up where we left off?” he says, folding his arms over his chest.

“Where we left off was me throwing you out, and I’m sure you’d like to sleep eventually,” she replies, putting her pipe on the bedside table. She arranges the blankets around her, then looks up at him as though surprised he is still on the other side of the room. “Come here,” she says, and pats the bedspread.

Feeling rather like a dog being summoned, Thorin nevertheless goes and sits, his back pressed against her bent knees. He does not look at her as he says, “If you would take this trip with the Company, and promise to take care for yourself, I will allow—“

“Allow?” she says, knocking her knee against his spine. “You’ll kindly remember that I’m no subject of yours, Thorin Under A Giant Rock, but—“

All of his good intentions are forgotten in the face of her outraged expression. “What have I said about the disrespect you show for the halls of my—“

“The halls of your grandfathers still smell like dragon droppings and so long as they do I’ll call this place a midden heap if I like—“

“Then you can do it from the comfort of horseback as you traipse back to your badger den—“

“It’s a smial, it can’t possibly be difficult for even your knocked-about brain to remember—“

Thorin is distantly aware of a pain at the base of his skull, and he moves his head to feel Bilbo’s fist gripping his hair tightly, her other hand bunched up in his tunic. He’s sprawled across her, between the bracket of her thighs and his own hands are busy at the curve of her elbow and the divot of her knee, pulling her in closer to him. He takes another breath, and another, and looks up to see her grinning.
“Bebother and confusticate you dwarves,” she says, and kisses him on the nose.

He closes his eyes and lays his head on her stomach, hearing the soft hum and gurgle of her body and their children. Her hand in his hair loosens and traces along his ear, and dully he notes it, stores it away along with the smell of her breath and the press of her knees against his sides, cataloguing it for neat retrieval during the long months that she will be gone. “I have not yet been tested by your absence,” Thorin says into the secret of her palm, where it now rests against his cheek. “But you will come back to Erebor greater than when you left. I can promise that much.”

“Oh, Thorin,” she sighs, her thumb brushing against the grain of his beard.

“I’ve endured far worse than the loss of a hobbit,” he says, but his hands around her waist betray him, tightening.

“Well, you’ll endure far worse again,” she says, brisk. “I’m not going.” His hands tighten again, and she twitches. “That tickles,” she complains, and tugs on his braid.

“I was going to appoint you the finest guards,” he says, uncertain, looking up at her. “I was going to buy the swiftest ponies Esgaroth had to offer, and load them with treasures from the mountain so you could buy whatever comforts you desired on the road.”

“Well, if you were going to buy speedy ponies,” Bilbo scoffs, tugging on his braid again. “I’ve changed my mind.”

“I’m resentful of Fíli’s ability to charm you,” Thorin says. “For the record.”

“It was not Fíli, nor Kíli,” Bilbo replies tartly. “It was my own decision. I’ll send one or two of the Company along to the Shire to see if they can bring back some healers and midwives. There are a few in my family; one or another is bound to come.”

“More adventuresome hobbits,” Thorin says, trying his best to sound displeased.

“We’ll take over your giant rock yet,” she agrees.

* * *

When Thorin summons the Company to the Lesser Hall and Bilbo explains what she wants done, there is a long silence, followed by thunderous argument.

“I suppose we shouldn’t have expected better,” Bilbo mutters as Óin and Dwalin bellow at each other.

It’s typical, Thorin thinks, and is disgusted with himself for the rush of fondness he feels. “Enough,” he says, once Glóin begins threatening to cut every one of Dori’s braids off and shove them up his jackie. “This is not a quest for riches or glory, I grant you, but I would have thought at least one of you——”

“You said we could all go!” Ori yelps, from under the arm of where Kíli seems to be trying to strangle him. He seems not to notice, probably toughened from years of being Nori’s little brother; instead he is aiming his wounded cow eyes at Bilbo, who plucks at her sleeves. “You’re not coming?”

“Well,” she says, and clears her throat. “That is, no. I’m not.” Another roar of protest, but all Bilbo has to do is lift her hand for silence. “I’m not, because there are trade routes that still need to be established and new seams that need supervision,” she says. “Not to mention relations with
Mirkwood and with Laketown. I am needed here.”

“Those arguments sound familiar,” Thorin says, vowing to send Dís back to the Blue Mountains on the back of a warg at his earliest convenience.

“Do they?” Bilbo says, her voice a little too high. “Well, it’s settled. So, if I am not to leave, one of you must go in my stead and represent my interests.”

Once more Thorin swears at his sister in the privacy of his own head. Represent my interest is a phrase designed to appeal directly to the hindbrain of every dwarf in the room — the honor of being appointed an envoy is one rooted into their culture. In Thror’s prime, there had been days of tournaments to determine who would journey to all corners of Middle-Earth as Erebor’s diplomats.

In the end it is Dwalin and Ori who go — Ori is Bilbo’s pick, and Dwalin is Thorin’s, because Ori is a terrible choice.

“Dwalin is a much more terrible choice,” Bilbo protests later, when the rest of the Company has scattered, still grumbling. “He’ll frighten all my neighbors and eat their food.”

“Ori thinks a slingshot is a suitable weapon of self-defense,” Thorin counters. “Dwalin will make sure he survives the journey there and back again.”

Bilbo opens her mouth to counter, but takes a moment to consider it. “That’s a fair point, I suppose,” she concedes. “Besides, it will please Dís to have someone to irritate on the journey; Ori is far too deferential to dislike her properly.”

“What?” Thorin says.

Which leads to his discovery that his sister is already planning a journey back to Ered Luin, though on the back of a pony. “Did it slip your mind to mention this when we spoke yesterday?” Thorin demands, pushing into Dís’s chambers where she’s calmly directing a bevy of servants into packing various things into crates.

“Of course not,” she says, serene. “I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d pout almost as much as if Bilbo were coming along. Besides, you can hardly send Ori and Dwalin to the Blue Mountains to collect the rest of our people; there are still over a thousand of them, waiting for word that Erebor can house them.”

Thorin blinks. “Can we?”

“By the new year, we should be well able to take them in and more,” she says. “The mines are progressing well and space has never been a problem; there are still ten thousand empty living chambers in the Heights above us. I’ll not return with more than your mountain can sustain.”

“Our mountain, sister,” Thorin reminds her.

Dís was a toddler when Erebor was taken; Frerin plucked her with shaking hands from the charred arms of their mother, who had shielded her daughter from that terrible first blast of dragon fire. She grew up knowing of Erebor the way so many of their kin knew it; second-hand and too-perfect, a story to tell children. Fíli and Kíli were raised with stones in their bellies, eager to reclaim their homeland, but Dís had only ever wanted a home.

She lifts a dark, braided brow. “So many of us claim ownership,” she comments. “We can hardly call it lonely anymore.”
They leave with little fanfare, Dís and Dwalin on sturdy Iron Hill ponies and Ori on a sweet little donkey that he’s apparently named Gandy. Wherever Gandalf’s buggered off to, Thorin hopes he somehow knows about this.

The tempo of the mountain every day seems to increase, their days filled with new problems; the reformation of Erebor’s police force, restoring the old sewers, repairing the crumbling watchtowers. Smaug’s final assault on the secret entrance left shears of rocks crumbled along the mountainside; Bilbo takes over supervising those repairs, ensuring that the tunnel is sealed off permanently.

This leaves them with a problem. The fall of Erebor taught them one lesson about the folly of a single great entrance, and the retaking taught them another. Every exploration into disused and abandoned halls has yielded bodies, centuries dead; for those who had not escaped in the first great flight were trapped between the only entrance and the great worm, and so died not from flame but from hunger or thirst — or simply fear. Thorin works with Bofur to bore new entrances and exits into the mountain, tunnels that can be well-guarded and defended, but that can allow flight if ever a disaster should strike the mountain again.

Added to all this is Durin’s Day fast approaching, and with it the first anniversary of the refounding of Erebor. Bilbo commandeers what seems to be every nonessential dwarf and a few essential ones, aided (of course) by Fíli and Kíli, who have attached themselves to her like two hyperactive carbuncles. She sketches plans for feasts in the Great Halls and fireworks at night, great explosions of green and blue and silver to illuminate the mountainside.

“Though it won’t compare to the shows Gandalf used to give back in the Shire,” Bilbo says, wistful.

“Anything that old—“ goat is how he is going to end that sentence, but Bilbo gives him a look and he amends, “Friend of ours can provide, Erebor will more than match.”

“You do realize that no matter what you do, you’ll never change the fact that he knew me when I was a tenderling running naked along the hedgerows.”

Privately Thorin thinks Bilbo lacks imagination; he absolutely can change that horrifying fact if he tries hard enough. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“And also that he will always be taller than you,” Bilbo says blithely, and orders another gross of onions.

Invitations are sent out to the Men of Esgaroth and the dwarves of the Iron Hills, though the thought of Dain exclaiming over Bilbo’s fecundity makes Thorin want to hit something with a hammer. He puts his foot down, however, when he sees her musing over a shiny piece of new parchment.

“For whom is that intended?” he asks. He knows the sheen — it is warg vellum, stripped from the thousands of foul creatures that littered the battlefield after the Victory of the Four Armies. Cured with the cold springs of the mountain and scraped clean by centuries-old lunellim, it is reserved for only their most important missives, proclamations of war and terms of peace.

Bilbo squints up at him while her feet swing freely under the table. She has four of the nocturn lamps clustered around her, and Thorin makes a note to order brighter lights for their chamber, traditional hours bedamned. “Good evening, my lord and king,” she chirps.

Thorin is immediately suspicious. “Indeed,” he says, and sits next to her. This morning he threaded the beads of his line into her hair along her left temple, and she rolled her eyes and complained that
the braid would hit her in the face all day, then proceeded to ruin his hard work by putting her hair into a bun so that only the braid lay along the side of her head, the beads hidden. Now she nudges him with her elbow and he sighs, pulling the small silver hairpins out carefully, obedient. “You still haven’t answered my question,” he reminds her.

“Indeed,” she says, mocking, and as he pulls out the last pin she shakes her head, curls bouncing down, her braid swinging loose. But she tucks it behind her ear and says, “I’m writing to Thranduil —“

“Absolutely not,” he announces, because no amount of letting him stroke her hair is going to get him to agree to this.

She pouts, her bottom lip plump and dangerous. “Thorin. I thought the trade negotiations this summer went rather well.”

Thorin scowls, because she knows as well as he that the trade negotiations this summer were cut abruptly short by Bilbo more or less barricading them both in his — now their — quarters, leaving Fili and Balin and Dís to hammer out a profitable compromise while Thorin was subjected to the most sexually exhausting two weeks of his life. “That doesn’t mean I want him and his weed-eating brethren back.”

“And you wonder why the old alliances were so fragile,” Bilbo says, reproachful. “This is an important party and we’ve invited Dain and Bard to our halls. We would be remiss if we did not extend an invitation to Thranduil. Were Rivendell not so far I would ask Lord Elrond—“

“Absolutely not.” He still remembers coming upon Bilbo chatting happily with Elrond on some balcony overlooking some miserable trees; the elf looked as if he’d have liked nothing better than to stow Thorin’s burglar away in his pocket.

“Well, besides, I wouldn’t want them to get trapped by an early blizzard and have to spend the whole winter here,” Bilbo teases, and Thorin isn’t physically able to suppress the choking noise in the back of his throat at the thought. She laughs, and uncaps her inkwell.

“I thought we just settled this,” Thorin protests, because the first words she’s written in the strange, rounded letters of the halflings are “To The Most Gracious Lord.” Whenever she writes to Bard she starts it with “To the Great Bowman” and when she writes to Dain (which Thorin would very much like to forbid) it is always “My Dear Friend and Cousin” (which Thorin would very much more like to forbid).

“No, you whined at me for a bit and I am inviting him anyway,” Bilbo replies, and Thorin goes to find Glóin — acting as guard-captain in Dwalin’s absence — to see about increasing the number of highly visible weapons each ceremonial guard can get away with carrying during the festivities.

*  

Dain, thank Mahal in his dungeons, sends his regrets; there has been an outbreak of coal-lung in the Iron Hills. I would wish Nothing More than to Gaze upon Your Smiling Face once again, Most Precious of Kinfolk, Thorin reads, after Bilbo — smiling and pinkly pleased — hands him the letter, But not for the Riches of the World would I risk Infection to You and Yours. Pray think of me alone and Pining for your soft Laughter in my Lonesome Halls—

“Was that truly necessary?” Bilbo asks as Thorin chucks the letter into the fire.

“Yes,” he says decisively, “As is this,” and he drags Bilbo out of her chair and into their bed.
Whatever triumph Thorin feels at Dain’s absence is crushed when, on the eve of Durin’s Day, a
dozen riders from Mirkwood are reported from one of the westernmost watchtowers. “Shall we shoot
them, sire?” asks one of their archers, hopeful, as they watch them approach the gates. The early
dawn light seems to limn them with gold and their horses have all been magicked into walking in
step as though they were a set of Bifur’s clever toys.

Thorin, who was roused five minutes earlier, mutters “Would that we could,” as Bilbo snaps, “No.”
The gates are opened and Bilbo hurries down to the inner courtyard to greet them, ordering Thorin
not to follow her because she’s fairly certain she saw a barrel strapped to one of the horses.

Thranduil has not come. “My lady,” Legolas says, bowing low though not, well for him, trying to
grab at Bilbo’s hand. “My father regrets that he cannot join you on this great occasion, and sends me
in his stead.”

“Oh, how lovely,” Bilbo says. Thorin watches from the stairwell as she bites her lip, clearly trying to
remember if she’s supposed to curtsey back.

“I rejoice in the news of your recent marriage,” Legolas continues, “And may I say that you are
looking particularly, ah…”

He stalls out, and for the first time in his entire life Thorin feels some form of affection for an elf
as the prince rummages around for a phrase that isn’t “enormous.”

“Gravid,” Legolas settles on, and the expression on Bilbo’s face as she tries not to laugh may make
this entire debacle worth it.

Thorin is less sanguine when it turns out there is, in fact, a barrel. “Is this a joke?” Thorin rumbles,
coming down the last few steps as elvish lackeys unstrap it from a very put-upon horse and set it on
the courtyard stone.

Legolas bows to him, too. “Your Majesty,” he says, looking awkward. “It is — my father’s gift,”
and once again Thorin is irritated by the fellow-feeling he’s forced to endure. Back when he was just
a dwarrow-lad, Erebor received a state visit from the strange Men of Gondor; his grandfather, never
able to remember how brief shone the candle of Men’s lives, heard that their Steward was a mere
sixty-five years of age and refused to meet with him, roaring that sending such a lad was tantamount
to a declaration of war. It seems a constant among all the races of Middle-Earth that children will be
forever embarrassed by the antics of their parents.

So rather than shutting the gates and killing everyone, Thorin merely says, “Indeed?” and ignores
Bilbo’s muttered, “Oh, graces and spirits defend us.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” The princeling at least looks miserable; although Thorin still recalls his history
lessons and knows that Legolas of the Greenleaf is older than the Third Age, he feels a strange
impulse to clap him on the shoulder and tell him he’s a good lad.

“Well, thank you very much, anyway,” Bilbo says, and rams Thorin in the side with her elbow
because she never had any history lessons and refers to Legolas as “that poor child.”

Just then there’s a clattering from within and Kili trips into sight, his hair damp, boots half-laced and
his tunic on backward. “Uncle, is she—” and he skids to a halt in front of the delegation. “Um,” he
adds.

“Well put,” Thorin says. “Your Highness, I’m sure you remember another one of your guests from
last year.”

“The shouty one,” Legolas agrees.

“My lord,” Kíli says, bowing low, but his eyes are flicking around the courtyard. “Is — this all of you?”

“I fear so,” Legolas answers. “Did you expect an addition to our party?”

Kíli’s face falls. “I thought perhaps Tauriel—“

He is, sadly, too far away to kick, but Thorin glares fiercely at him anyway. He should’ve sent the brat off with Dís back to the Blue Mountains, but Kíli would probably have fallen in love with a cave troll or an Ent on the way. It is only by some stroke of providence that Kíli didn’t fall in love with some elf-maid in Rivendell, or Thorin would probably be chewing lettuce at some horrible wedding shower this very moment.

“No, of course not,” Bilbo says, grabbing onto Kíli’s elbow and yanking him to her side. “We are delighted to have you. Please don’t mind Kíli, he was struck a terrible blow in the Battle last year and sometimes spouts absolute nonsense.” This last is hissed at Kíli, who at least looks chastised.

“It’s true,” Kíli says, too quickly. “Healers have tried everything to cure me of it.”

“Perhaps one of our fallaner could see to him,” Legolas offers, too solemn to be anything but mocking, though it’s not as though Thorin has any grounds to take offense. “They are well-versed in every form of illness and injury.”

“What a generous offer,” Bilbo says. “Kíli, if you would show our honored guests their chambers?”

The elves sweep past, one of them carrying the damned barrel over a shoulder. Thorin can hear Kíli’s hopeful questions about how the Guards of Mirkwood are fairing and Legolas’s bemused replies before they are mercifully silenced by the doors swinging shut once more.

“Well,” Bilbo says. “I thought that went rather well.”

Thorin stares at her for a moment, then begins to laugh, lacing his fingers with hers and drawing her close for a kiss. She submits to it as she always does, laughing in her turn and flicking his braid out of his face, and he thinks that if Erebor had remained lost — if he roamed the wilderness for another century — he would still know joy this perfect, if she were there, too.

*

The feast that night is, even matched against the hazy memories of his youth, stupendous. Food of every kind is set on the stone tables of the Feasting Hall and for the first time since coming home, Thorin stands on the great dais and takes in the enormity of his kingdom — his people. Every few minutes another member of the Company gives a speech about their Quest, the adventures they managed to survive. Tomorrow will be more serious — a day of reflection upon the past and an avowal toward the future, the Day of Two Years — but tonight there is riotous merry-making.

“I’m touched that you’ve given me place of honor,” Bard says, seated to his left. His gangle of legs are shoved under the table and his ill-advised and frankly pathetic attempts at growing a beard seem at last to have run their course; he looks almost reputable. “Though it may’ve been a tactical error to hand the elf over to your queen.”

Thorin can’t help liking the man, child though he is and thorn though he has been. There is
something in Bard that speaks of confidence without ambition; they share a similar inheritance, but Bard has made no move to reclaim the lordship of Dale. It is true that the Men of Erasgoth have begun planning the restoration of the great city-state in the coming years with the wealth won from the Mountain; for all the dragon’s destruction, much of the stone city still stands. But though he has spearheaded these plans, Bard seems unmoved by the calls to take up the lordship of his forefathers. It seems clear that it is this disinterest that will make him a remarkable ruler.

Thorin glances to his right, where Bilbo seems to be advising Legolas on how to make lembas taste more palatable. “You’re only seated there because Gandalf never arrived,” he tells Bard. “Otherwise we’d have you down with the the other lordlings.” He nods at the table directly below the dias, where Glóin’s and Bombur’s brood are having a belching competition with Bain, Sigrid and Tilda. The little girl seems to be winning, if the cheers are any indication.


Thorin wishes he could pretend not to know what he means, but he sighs and admits, “I’ve been informed that in the past when my wife has spoken to a male, I’ve acted not unlike a constipated badger.”

Bard laughs, loud even in the din of the hall, and laughs again a few minutes later as fourteen of Erebor’s youngest dwarrows reenact the Battle of Trollshaw, with Bain and two of his friends playing the parts of the trolls.

“Did you put them up to this?” Thorin asks Bilbo, as the smallest dwarrow tries to recite a poem (in passable amphibrachic verse) about the terrible stench of dwarves while the rest of them hop around in potato sacks shrieking about how they’re infested with worms in their tubes.

“But I can be blamed if the young people are inspired by my quick thinking and grace under pressure?” she replies innocently, grabbing at another chicken leg.

Thorin narrows his yes. “Yes,” he says, and is about to expound when there’s a flare of bright light from the door, and a voice says,

“Gandalf!” Bilbo cries.

“I doubt it,” Thorin says.

But it is. The fifteenth dwarrow trailing behind him is dressed up in a silver tunic that no doubt belongs to her father, with a staff inlaid with silver and gold, dragging a beard made out of an old knitted scarf that’s twice her height. As for Gandalf, he looks the same as he ever did: as though he’d slept a week straight under a hedge and washed up in a coal sluice.

“Your stand-in is better dressed for our table than you,” Thorin greets him as he approaches the table, one hand companionable on the child’s shoulder.

“Fortunately, Her Majesty’s invitation made no mention of a dress code,” Gandalf replies, serene.

“No, I mean it, and am off to the lordling table?” Bard asks.

But instead Gandalf takes a seat near the end, apathetic toward protocol and chatting happily with Bifur over some buttered parsnips and wine. He gives his fair share of toasts and tells more than his fair share of stories, but Thorin leans back and finds himself laughing along with the rest of the hall. At some point Bilbo’s hand finds his and he looks up to find her smiling at him, radiant and pleased. He strokes his thumb along her palm, surprised all over again at its softness. In dwarves and men, it
would be the indication of a too-comfortable life, but he has seen the work Bilbo has done, during
their hopeless Quest and in their hopeful kingdom. He raises her hand to his lips and kisses it,
reverent.

“Charmer,” Bilbo murmurs.

He’s interrupted from charming her further by a furious, if muffled, argument happening at the
lordling table — Gimli is struggling to get to his feet, with Bain and Tilda dragging at his elbows.
Bofur is just wrapping up his account of their escape from “the Lord of Mirkwood’s hospitality”
(which Legolas at least looked embarrassed about), and in the riotous applause and laughter it’s hard
to hear Gimli’s shouting.

Not for long, though. “Your Majesties!” Gimli says, still grappling with Bain and his sister, “I
request — get off — I request a boon — I’ll slice your nadgers off,” he hisses at the two children.

Bain lets him go, but Tilda snaps, “I don’t have nadgers, you hairy little shrub, and you’re being
ridiculous!”

“Oh dear,” Bilbo murmurs, then raises her voice. “What boon would you ask of us, Gimli?”

Gimli finally shakes free of Tilda and points at Legolas. “I wish to address the Prince of Mirkwood.”

Thorin looks over at Legolas; the princeling blinks back, clearly baffled. “Very well,” Thorin says,
cautiously. “Make your address.”

“Oh,” Gimli says, much quieter now, though his voice carries all too well in the ringing silence of the
hall. “I thought — perhaps in private?”

“A bit late for that,” Thorin says, dry.

Gimli clears his throat. “Very well. Legolas Greenleaf, Prince of Mirkwood, for the honor of my
mother, whose beauty you impugned in the forests of Mirkwood and whose honor I now restore by
challenging you, I, er, challenge you.”

“Oh dear,” Bilbo says. Out of the corner of his eye Thorin can see Gandalf lighting his pipe and
getting comfortable.

“So much honor in such a little creature,” Thorin hears Legolas murmur. He’s too busy swallowing
his own tongue in combined rage and mortification to respond.

“Glóin!” Bilbo hisses, leaning across the table to scowl at Gimli’s father. “What in heaven’s name is
he talking about?”

Glóin, for his part, is still seated, his fingers laced over his stomach. Himlis has covered her face with
her hands. Thorin suspects the shaking of her shoulders is not despairing tears but hysterical laughter.
“I may’ve shared with my son the tale of a certain spirited exchange of ideas I was honored to have
with his Highness,” Glóin says, eyebrows lifted in an expression of innocence that’s about as
convincing as an orc’s. “The prince liberated from me a picture I carried close to my heart of my dear
treasure, and commented upon her visage. During the course of that conversation, it may have come
to pass that I learned of the differing standards of beauty prized by dwarves and elves.”

“I believe I called her hideous,” Legolas says, low, to Bilbo and Thorin. “For which I am very
sorry,” he adds quickly.

“I am banishing that whole family,” Thorin mutters.
“You can’t do that, Óin’s the only one who knows how to make that blister ointment,” Bilbo says absently. She turns to Legolas. “My lord, I am most profoundly sorry for—“ she waves her hands, “Every single thing that is happening at this moment.”

But where his father would have pouted and stomped off, Legolas smiles at her, with a worrying twinkle in his eye. “With your permission, my lady, my lord, I will accept his challenge. I do not wish the little one to feel he is not being taken seriously.”

“He shouldn’t be taken seriously!” Bilbo protests.

“He’s sixty-three,” Thorin feels obliged to point out.

Legolas ignores them both and gets to his feet. “Gimli, son of Glóin, son of Groin, I accept your challenge, on the condition that you explain to me the terms. Such challenges are unknown among my people.”

Himlis is now being thumped on the back by Óin.

“Er. The terms are as follows,” Gimli says, shuffling his feet. “We… fight?” This is asked with a slight nod from Glóin, whom Thorin truly is going to throw out of Erebor. Possibly from off the battlements. “And if I win, you will make humble apology to my mother for your impertinence.”

“And if I win?” Legolas asks, cocking his head.

Gimli’s gaze flicks back to his father, panicked — clearly this possibility didn’t occur to either of them. Thorin rubs at the bridge of his nose.

“If you win,” Himlis says, still wiping tears from the corners of her eyes, “Then Gimli will serve as your page and squire until such time as you see fit to release him.”

This causes some controversy. “Over my dead body,” Glóin roars, thumping his fist on the table, and the rest of the Company chimes in with suggestions or protests of their own.

But Himlis glares them all down. “Since it is my honor that seems to lie in this balance, I’ll dictate what shall restore it,” she says, “And as for you, husband and dearest treasure of my heart, your dead body can be easily arranged, so don’t think for a moment I won’t go over it.”

“And what of the right of champion?” Gandalf says, examining his pipe closely.

“The right of champion?” Legolas echoes. He turns to Fíli on his right, who’s spent the entire discussion with his forehead on the table.

“As the one being challenged,” Fíli says, not lifting his head, “You have the right to appoint someone else to fight for you, should you feel you are outmatched by your opponent.”

“Interesting,” Legolas says.

“Allow me to make a suggestion,” Gandalf starts.

The Durin line has long borne the gift of prophecy, though it manifests in stutters and droughts; generations born with nothing more than a sense of when a seam will peter out, followed by a trio of siblings who can predict the wax and wane of kingdoms. His cousin Óin can read the portents and his brother Frerin knew, as their family marched to Khazad-dûm, that only Thorin would march home again. “Tell Dís not to weep for us,” Frerin had said, a broad smile upon his beardless face. “Not that she will. She’ll far more likely break an axe over your head.” And so she had — before
falling to her knees, a widow and orphan and sister in mourning, all at once.

Thorin knows the gift runs true, but he never saw the things made his brother’s eyes burn bright; he’s sat with Óin during long nights waiting for the smoke of sacred incense to reveal some secret and felt only the cold seeping into his bones. Nevertheless, in this moment he knows with the certainty of the the most powerful seers of his lineage that no matter what Gandalf’s suggestion is, it will end with someone losing an ear.

So he says, “I submit myself, my lord, as your champion.”

If the hall was quiet before, the beat of the mountain’s heart can be felt in the silence now. Gimli looks set to soil his breeches.

Legolas, still standing, turns slowly to make an indescribably hilarious expression of surprise. “You?” he says, adding belatedly, “My lord?”

Thorin leans back in his seat. “If you will do me the honor,” he says, tilting up his chin.

Legolas shuts his eyes. “Of course, my lord.”

Bard leans in. “You look just like your wife when you do that,” he says.

* 

“Two days in a row of waking up at dawn seems a bit much.” Bilbo mumbles the next morning. Her face is almost entirely buried in her pillow, though there is one baleful eye visible through a thatch of brown curls.

Thorin sits back down on the bed, pulling on his boots. “It is not yet dawn, to be fair.”

“Confounderate you dwarves and your duels of honor,” Bilbo moans, rolling onto her back and shuffling still deeper into the bedcovers. “Wake me if you get stabbed.”

“I won’t get stabbed.”

From beneath the covers, Bilbo huffs. “Well, of course you won’t.” She pokes her head out again. “And don’t stab Gimli, poor lad already thinks you hate him.”

“He was too young to go with us on the Quest,” Thorin protests, for what feels like the seventeenth time. “His parents decided—”

“Yes, and apparently he spent a month after his father left with you crying in his rooms. Himlis had to promise him that one day he could go on a quest, too. Which reminds me, in fifty years or so you’ll need to think up a quest for Gimli to go on. Are there any long-forgotten treasures of Erebor that need finding?”

“None spring to mind.”

“Well, we have a little time.” Bilbo yawns. “I suppose you want me to come with you,” she says, sounding accusing.

Thorin shrugs. “If you would prefer to lie abed, I cannot fault you. I’ll send Fíli or Kíli to inform you if I am killed or excessively maimed—”

“You know, this sense of humor you’re developing is absolutely dreadful,” Bilbo complains.
“Gandalf will be in attendance, as well; you could not speak long with him last night.”

“Gandalf will no doubt overstay his welcome and afford me ample opportunity to talk with him at my leisure, therefore yawning through a conversation before decent folk have had their breakfasts does not particularly appeal.”

“There may also be food there,” Thorin says. There probably won’t be — the Lesser Dueling Chamber is far from the kitchens — but a happy marriage thrives on hope.

Bilbo harrumphs, and flings back the covers. “Help me up.”

*

Gimli and his parents have already arrived; along with Legolas, Fíli, and Kíli, the three of whom seem to have struck up a very unnerving friendship. “Gandalf swore at us when we knocked on his chamber door, so I don’t think he’ll be joining us,” Fíli reports.

Bilbo’s expression, when Thorin looks down at her, is eloquent.

“But, like the loyal nephews we are, we decided to come along,” Kíli says cheerfully, handing Thorin a dueling axe. “We reckoned if Gimli overpowers you, we can always reenact the Battle of Five Armies and lay down our lives in your defense. That way Legolas at least has a good story to tell when he explains to his father why he had to apologize to a dwarf on this trip.”

“And honestly, better you should lose, Uncle,” Fíli adds, “Else Legolas will have to explain to his father why he’s being followed around by an insolent dwarrow-lad who mutters curses at him under his breath.”

“I’m not accustomed to losing,” Thorin warns.

“Indeed, and while the addition of a dwarf to my household might present its challenges, I’d far prefer you win, my lord,” Legolas says. “Your nephews are quite mistaken when they suppose that my father would accept news of my apology with any degree of… equanimity.”

“I believe it,” Thorin says, testing the axe’s balance.

Bilbo crosses her arms. “You’re going to fight Gimli with that thing?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s bigger than he is!”

“Be fair, Bilbo,” Kíli says, “Gimli’s axe is bigger than he is, too.”

“Now now,” Fíli protests, “Everyone knows it’s not about the size of the axe, but what you—“

“It’s specially made,” Thorin interrupts, handing Bilbo the axe. She takes it gingerly.


“Flimsy, too,” Thorin says, “Made to break in three or four strong blows. And the blade’s duller than a butterknife—”

“Of course dwarves have special dueling axes,” Bilbo grumbles, handing it back.

Thorin smiles, steps back far enough to try a basic block formation. He can hear Glóin muttering
something about intimidation tactics, but ignores it. “Dwarves are warm in blood and temper, and duels of this nature are common.”

“Aye,” Fíli says. “If we fought them with real weapons, we’d have died out long ago.”

“The first duel I fought was before we’d settled in Ered Luin,” Kíli tells Bilbo. “Had to fight it with a stick. My challenger had a table leg.”

“What did you do?” Bilbo says, narrowing her eyes.

Kíli makes an exaggerated gesture of injured innocence, which Fíli negates by telling her, “He cut off his tutor’s beard.”

“Accidentally,” Kíli lies.

At long last, Gimli seems to gather his courage and stands at the center of the room. “By right of arms and honor,” he says, voice breaking only a little bit, “I challenge — uh — my lord Thorin Oakenshield.”

“King Thorin,” Fíli shouts from the sidelines.

“King, yes, of course,” Gimli stammers. “My lord King Thorin Oaken—”

“Son of Thror, son of Thrain,” Kíli prompts him. “You can’t forget that, were you raised in a troll cave?”

“My lord King Thorin,” Gimli says, looking near tears, “Son of Thror, son of Thrain—”

“And Founder of the New Kingdom of Erebor,” Fíli chides. “Honesty, Gimli.”

“My lord, um—“

“All right, yes,” Thorin sighs. “And I accept this challenge of Gimli, son of Glóin, son of Groin. Shall we begin?”

Gimli nods, and heaves his axe into a defensive position. Thorin moves to strike at his unprotected shoulder but pauses; Gimli has not moved, and is simply standing there, eyes — Mahal in his dungeons, Thorin thinks sourly — squeezed tightly shut, waiting for the blow.

“Difficult to fight if you can’t see,” he comments, and pulls back.

Gimli squints one eye half-open. “It’s an act of treason to take arms against the royal line,” he says, with the cadence of a parroted lesson.

“What?” Glóin yelps from the other end of the room. “Who told you that piece of driveling dreck?”

“I did,” Himlis says. “So unfortunate. I discovered an old law from the founding of Durin’s line that all who would take up arms against their rightful liege were guilty of treason. Punishable by exile or death.”

“You did not,” Glóin says, though he sounds more awed than disbelieving.

“As chief zarabul of our laws and histories, I should challenge you to a duel for calling me a liar,” Himlis tells her husband, sweetly. Glóin kisses her soundly on the cheek.

“So does this mean I can go back to bed?” Bilbo asks. “Or at least get something to eat?”
Legolas remains in Erebor for another four days, all blessedly uneventful. Relations are, in fact, considerably improved by Legolas’s revelation that the stupid barrel actually contains the weapons and armor that Thranduil confiscated, smelling only slightly of stale beer. “The barrel was my father’s gift,” Legolas says, “And this is mine.” Even Balin seems to approve.

Mostly the princeling entertains himself by 1) making more and more outrageous bets with Kíli over feats of archery, usually involving dangling from a high ledge upside down and hitting a butterfly on the wing a quarter-furlong away and 2) tormenting Gimli, whose parents are adamant that he honor the terms and so is now a scowling part of the elf’s retinue.

Thorin is ill-schooled in elvish facial expressions — to him they always look like they’re nobly suffering some embarrassing venereal disease — but he’s fairly certain that Legolas finds the situation delightful.

“Gimli, my wineglass has a spot on it,” he says. They are once again all seated at the high table; the feast of Durin’s Day itself is quieter and more formal, with speeches about loyalty and sacrifice, tradition and respect. Hardly anyone has thrown up or passed out.

Gimli takes the glass the elf hands him and stalks off, no doubt wishing he could break it over Legolas’s head. Kíli, acting as the royal squire tonight, makes a tsking sound from behind them.

Bard leans over. “My lord, if you’ll forgive me saying so,” he says to Legolas, “This borders on abuse.”

“It did have a spot on it,” Legolas says, defensive.

“Of course it did,” Kíli says. “I made sure of it.”

Bilbo, for her part, drops a chicken bone in Thorin’s own glass. “Oh look,” she says, holding it out to Kíli.

Kíli scowls and grabs at it. “I should’ve broken every bit of your crockery when I had the chance,” he mutters.

“Too late now,” Bilbo says. “Off you go. Make sure Gimli doesn’t get lost on his way to the kitchens again.”

Thorin steals Bilbo’s wineglass. “You shouldn’t have any, anyway,” he says at her protest. “In your condition.”

“You won’t be having any in any condition, I can promise you,” Bilbo retorts.

Bard nearly chokes to death on a grape.

*  

Although Legolas privately assures Thorin that nothing short of a decree from Valinor could persuade him to take a dwarf back with him to Mirkwood —

“He’d probably try to cut a tree down and then we’d have to stone him ritually.”

Thorin frowns. “You stone people for chopping down trees?”

“…No?” Legolas says.
— no one ever gets around to telling Gimli. Legolas seems not to realize, Thorin thinks it serves him right, and Bilbo is too busy spending most of her free hours gossiping with Gandalf before he runs off again to notice. Glóin and Himlis find the whole thing hilarious.

“I gave him one of my old axes last night and told him to make the family proud, even though he’d probably not see us again until we gathered in the Halls of Mandos,” Glóin says, during their morning security meeting. The elves, and Gandalf with them, are due to leave shortly; apparently Gimli is still in his rooms, trying to decide which helmet to pack.

Thorin bites at this inside of his cheek. “Truly, cousin,” he says, “I look to you as an example of fatherhood in all ways.”

“See that you do,” Glóin says.

They adjourn early in order to see the elves off. Himlis is already there, helping Gimli affix his bags to the back of a large grey stallion, which is probably the elves’ idea of a joke. Legolas is already mounted on his own horse, watching Gimli with a puzzled twist to his brow; when Bilbo arrives with Gandalf in tow, he opens his mouth to say something.

Gandalf waves him quiet. “Well Gimli,” he says, clapping Gimli on the shoulder. “You’ve begun your new life. In a few decades you’ll make a truly exceptional squire, and who knows? Perhaps after two hundred years or so my lord Legolas will release you, and you can come back here to the Lonely Mountain to die amongst what family you’ll have left.”

“What family I have left,” Gimli repeats blankly.

“Well, your parents will be long dead by then. After all, even to dwarves, two centuries is a long time. But still, better that you spoke your heart to the prince of Mirkwood and withstood the consequences like the noble’s son you are.”

Gimli nods, staring at the ground.

“This is very cruel,” Bilbo mutters, but when Thorin looks over it is to observe her fighting a smile.

“Unless…” Gandalf says, musingly.

Gimli’s head shoots up. “Unless?” he says.

Gandalf makes a dismissive sound. “It’s a ridiculous notion, really. But,” and he leans down, whispering hoarsely, “You know how proud the elvish folk can be. Perhaps, if you apologized to the princeling, he might release you from your duty and you could remain here.” Gandalf straightens up. “Of course, I can understand that you’d wish to honor your vows. But only yesterday your mother was telling me how much she’d miss you, how she would weep day and night for your return—”

Thorin glances over at Himlis as Gandalf prattles on, an eyebrow cocked. She shakes her head minutely.

—so perhaps, Gimli son of Glóin, you should think where your greater duty lies. With your own honor, which a thing fleeting and ill-remembered; or the responsibility you owe to your family and kingdom?”

Gimli almost trips over himself hastening over to Legolas, who has dismounted and listens to his apology with his hands clasped before him. He murmurs something in response, and all the tension seems to run out of Gimli like water, though he does his best to seem nonchalant as he bolts back to the horse (which, judging by the way it nudges at the wizard’s pockets for treats, was clearly
intended for Gandalf in the first place) to untie his bags.

Legolas approaches, and makes a bow. “Your Majesties,” he says. “I look forward to news of your children. May their days be blessed and yours be ones of peace and plenty.”

“And to you,” Thorin begins, but Bilbo tugs Legolas down and presses a fond kiss on his cheek.

“You’ve done your father proud,” she says, ignoring protocol and what ought to be said the way she always does; when Thorin first announced their betrothal, Balin broached the idea of etiquette classes, to school the halfling in the ways of dwarvish nobility. Bilbo had laughed at him for ten minutes straight.

Her words seem to trouble the elf, however. “I believe you are right, and yet my conscience is not clear,” he says. “Pray excuse me.”

“You do realize that one of these days Balin will simply lock you in a room somewhere and pile books about ceremonial greeting and farewell protocols on your head until you agree to read them,” Thorin tells her.

“And you do realize that I’ll just threaten to show him my breasts and he’ll break open the door with his nose,” Bilbo replies. “Now hush, I want to hear what they’re saying.”

Legolas has approached Himlis, who is supervising her son’s work removing his bags. “My lady,” Legolas says, going gracefully down one knee, “Before I take my leave, I must seek your most merciful pardon for the thoughtless falsehoods I heaped upon you many months ago, before I was ever privileged to know you. When I offended you to your husband, I spoke out of malice and a petty desire to offend. Now with time has come some little wisdom, and I wish most heartily to make amends to you and your family for my dishonorable words. I am a callow and foolish creature, yet already I have begun to learn that it is the goodness that shines from within them that grants dwarves exceptional beauty that fades with time no more than the light of the Valar or the song of the Creator.”

Himlis looks to Bilbo, who shrugs. “Well, that’s all right then,” she says, and pats Legolas awkwardly on the head.

* *

A raven arrives with the first frost of the new year with a message from Dís; one of the servants presents it to Thorin while they’re sharing a quiet meal in their quarters, something Bilbo seems to prefer more often these days.

“What does she say?” Bilbo asks, plucking the letter out of his hand.

“It was addressed to me,” Thorin observes mildly.

“Marriage means that there is only ever we, my dearest,” Bilbo says. She scans the letter and begins to laugh.

Thorin tries to snatch the letter back. “What?”

“Eat your chicken,” Bilbo says, and clears her throat. “‘Have reached the Halls, after depositing Dwalin and Ori in amongst the hobbits,’” she reads. “‘Ori’s the only one they’ll talk to; they’re terrified of Dwalin and weren’t sure what to make of me, though the gardener who’s been taking care of Bilbo’s little cave is civil enough, and after reading Bilbo’s letter has given them the run of it’ — oh good lord, poor Hamfast. I do hope they didn’t give him too much of a fright. Where was I…”
‘Tell Bilbo all seemed in order, though truth be told I would not know what would be missing. There were a great deal of knitted things. Expect their message when they traverse once more through Rivendell, which you might have mentioned smells distressingly of leaf mold.’” Bilbo makes a disapproving sound. “Honestly, dwarves.”

“It does smell of leaf mold,” Thorin points out.
Chapter 2

The snow atop Erebor begins its descent down the mountainside, and winter settles over the kingdom. True to Bilbo’s prediction last year, they are comfortably prepared, stockrooms full to bursting with apples and potatoes, cured meats and onions - things that will keep and nourish them through darker months.

“If it weren’t for the number of stews we’re stuck with,” Bofur says, belching into his fist, “I’d hardly know the season.”

Bombur, sitting next to him, sniffs. “That’s gratitude for you.”

“Stew is good for you,” Bilbo chides. “Sticks to your ribs, my father always said.”

“To some more than most,” Bofur agrees, which starts a minor scuffle amongst the brothers.

The Company are sharing their twice-monthly luncheon in one of the lesser halls, a custom that Bilbo started sometime during Thorin’s long and tedious convalescence; she’d return to his sickbed brimming with news of Bombur’s children or another dirty joke from Nori, the smell of dwarvish pipeweed in her hair. She refused to let him come, at first. “You’ve been split nearly in half,” she scoffed when he first expressed displeasure at her jaunting off to gossip with the Company, leaving him to the tender ministrations of Óin’s lackeys. “When you’re well enough to be up and kinging properly, I’ll let you come, but until then you can have my leftovers and be grateful.”

His first excursion past the length of his room was to the luncheon, where Bifur had presented him with his new-carved staff and everyone had been very gruff and talked about promising mining nodes while Bilbo insisted she wasn’t crying, she just was allergic to the fur on Thorin’s new cloak. Since then, it’s been an unspoken rule that there are to be no interruptions during the meal, short of another dragon trying to break in.

Bofur finally succeeds in arranging a truce with his brother; he leans back in his chair and lights his pipe. “I spoke with a dwarf the other day who’s been working the north-sevendeep mithril seam since it was opened in March; he’s not been atop in months. Had no idea it was winter.”

“Well, the ventilation system is quite clever,” Bilbo allows, as though the work of generations of engineers was an impressive bit of gardening. “I do worry about my relations when they arrive, however. Do you think you’ll be able to connect the smials to it somehow? I’d hate to think of them shivering through the winter and early spring.”

“What smials?” Thorin asks.

“Er,” Bilbo says.

*  

Thorin is not unaware of his own reputation, both as a leader and a husband. He knows that there is a tendency among his advisors already to bring difficulties to the Queen, rather than to him, when it is nothing very serious but is likely to get anyone he isn’t married to shouted at. What people don’t seem to realize is that Bilbo gets shouted at, too; she just shouts back.

“It’s not as though we were going to simply leave this place the way it was!” she says, hands on hips. “Honestly, Thorin, you’re acting as though I’ve defaced your mountain.”
“You have,” he says, resisting the urge to tear all the hair out of his head.

They’re having this particular argument on the path up western side of the mountain where once lay the hidden door. The hidden door which, along with a great chunk of the cliffside, was destroyed during Smaug’s temper tantrum; Thorin remembered agreeing to plans to shore up the area and ensure the entryway was permanently sealed.

He didn’t remember agreeing to this.

Bilbo says, “I think they look rather nice. Cosy.”

“They” are three circular doors, fitted precisely into the rock. They look hauntingly familiar.

“Each one of them has an entry into the mountain in the back, as well, so they won’t have to go traipsing along the side the way you and I just have for absolutely no reason except that you wouldn’t listen to me,” Bilbo adds.

“What, they’re all connected to the treasury?” he demands.

Bilbo rolls her eyes. “Give me credit for some sense,” she says, which is an instruction so preposterous it borders on the fantastical. “The treasure passageway has been blocked off completely. The engineers built a new one that leads to one of the dining halls — that reminds me, we need to stock up on flour and honey before they arrive — and from there they can come and go as they please.”

“So instead of one secret entrance to the mountain, you have built three very obvious and easily-accessible entrances.”

“I somehow doubt anyone’s going to stage an assault on the Lonely Mountain by sneaking through a hobbit hole,” Bilbo grumps.

The hypocrisy of that remark seems lost on her. “I should’ve let you fall off the cliff,” Thorin mutters.

“And I should’ve left you to rot in Thranduil’s prisons — we all have to pay penance for our mistakes.” When he doesn’t smile at that, she sighs. “It’s not as though they could stay in the mountain—“

“Why not?”

Bilbo screws her face up. “My dearest,” she says, which immediately puts him on guard, “I have never seen anything so splendid or beautiful in my entire life as the wonders of Erebor, nor do I expect I ever will. But even for me, living a mile underground with no sunlight or flowers is sometimes… difficult,” she says.

“You’ve never said,” Thorin says, the beginnings of real dread roiling in his stomach. If she asks him to live in one of these infernal things—

He’ll do it, more than likely. He wonders if flinging himself off this cliff will result in instant death or whether he’ll linger. Fili will hopefully smother him with a pillow if things draw out excessively long.

“Because I love you much more than the mountain,” she says, matter-of-fact, and takes his arm.

*
The promised raven arrives laden with not one missive but five; only one is for Thorin, written in Dwalin’s cramped, horrible script. Avalanche at High Pass. No getting through for the moment. Suspect Rivendell witch-elves responsible. Have refused whining from Ori and the hobbits to stop there for a rest. They need toughening. Will travel back to meet up with the dwarves of Ered Luin. Dís plans to muster & march as soon as possible. We should be there by spring thaw. Send us Eagles if you want us there earlier. Still can’t tell any of the hobbits apart. One of them sends love to Bilbo. Don’t know which.

“Just as well you didn’t try to make the journey yourself,” Thorin says as he hands Dwalin’s letter over to her, trying to sound mild but more likely ending up smug, if the way Bilbo thumps his shoulder is any indication.

“If I had, I’d at least be with them,” she reminds him. He watches her sit down next to him, rereading, a furrow between her brows. The other letters are gathered loosely in her other hand; the top one is from one of the hobbits, flowery script that takes up more of the page than is necessary.

“Is it so very important?” he asks, because her expression has not changed, and she is reading her letters now for a third time. “Are our healers here so unsuitable?”

Instead of answering, she folds up the pages, places them in a neat stack on her lap. Thorin lets the crackle of the fireplace fill the silence; he is unused to having to wait for his burglar to speak.

“At first it wasn’t,” she says at last. “Oh, I wanted to go — I still do miss my books and my armchair, at times. And I thought it would be more comfortable, to bring our children into the world in the same bed in which my mother brought me. But it was a fancy easily put aside, when—“

“When Dís stuck her nose in,” Thorin supplies.

“When I was made aware of my duties here, as well as the benefits of having our first children born in the shadow of the mountain.”

“That even sounds like her.”

“I’m a horrible plagiarist, it’s true,” Bilbo says, smiling. “But now—“ she takes a deep breath. “I think I’ve been carrying too long, for a hobbit,” she says, “And I find myself tired from little things that never troubled me before. Not to mention that Dori comes in twice a week to let out my skirts.” Her smile grows stiff, brittle. “I do not know much of childbirth; my mother only ever had the one, and I was never apprenticed to a midwife.”

The “but” hangs in the air.

“If there is something,” Thorin says, “If I can set your mind at ease—“

“Oh, there is,” she says. She leans back in her chair and looks at him, appraising. “You’re going to like it much less than you liked the idea of me going to the Shire.”

“And I’ll agree to it still,” he says, echoing words he’s said before, in this very chamber. He wants to sit at her feet once again, close his hand around the delicate work of her ankle, affix her to him.

She surprises him with a smile, and as though she is remembering that same moment she tugs at his sleeve, pulling him out of his chair and to his knees in front of her, his hands braced on the arms as she cradles his face in her hands. Thorin has seen the deaths of thousands in battle, has stared down cold nights that showed him nothing but his own failures. Yet his eyes feel new, watching her.

But then she opens her mouth and says, “If we could send a delegation to Mirkwood—“ and trust an
undersized burglar to ruin the moment.

*

Kíli, blast his eyes and may he never grow a beard, of course volunteers before breakfast is done.

“I know the way,” he says, breathless and wide-eyed, leaning his elbows on the table. “And they like me best.”

Fíli, eating porridge stoically beside him, snorts.

“That is saying very, very little,” Thorin says.

“I’m sure Legolas would make sure you came to no harm,” Bilbo says. She tilts her head, her eyes sparkling. “Besides, you’re too small for them to bother with.”

Kíli glowers at her and stabs at his bowl with his spoon. “I’m big enough.”

“Big enough for what?” Thorin says, but he truthfully does not want to know the answer. He does not want to even imagine the answer.

“Big enough to do Erebor proud as a representative,” Bilbo says, still grinning. “Yes, Kíli, an excellent notion and a kind offer. I’ll write a letter to Legolas, though I’m sure he’ll be too busy to come himself, but perhaps he’ll send that very nice Captain, what was her name…” She taps her lips thoughtfully with her finger.

“Tauriel,” Kíli supplies, too quickly, then coughs. “Um. I believe. Is her name. She survived the battle, did she not? I wasn’t sure. Oh, there is Glóin, I should go and speak with him.”

Fíli finishes his porridge and switches for Kíli’s half-empty bowl. “Yes, he’ll make an excellent ambassador. With that keen political mind of his.”

“Shut up,” Bilbo orders cheerfully, and takes the bowl away from him.

*

With Dís and now Kíli gone, Thorin assumes that any stone-shattering arguments to be had among the remaining members of the family will be kept to a minimum. Bilbo seems preoccupied with the new hobbit holes that Thorin will definitely have torn down after the birth of their children, and Fíli’s duties as heir keep him busy enough that Thorin rarely even sees him.

It’s a deeply stupid assumption, and later Thorin feels foolish for even entertaining it.

The first argument starts when he catches Bilbo at the table with a piece of paper and her quill; she looks startled when the chamber door opens and makes a movement to cover whatever it was she was writing. “Oh,” she says. “You’re — here.”

“I am,” he agrees, cautious. He’s starting to reflexively scowl every time he sees her writing anything, and considering the last time she was doing terrible things like inviting Dain and Thranduil for Durin’s Day and made no effort to hide it from him, he’s even more concerned.

“Yes, well,” she says. She fusses at the sheets in front of her.

“What are you writing, jewelheart?” he asks in as kindly a way as he knows how. Dís has told him on more than one occasion it makes him sound like a demented elf-harpist.
Bilbo slants him a look. “Whenever you call me endearments, I worry,” she says, and pulls out the sheet of paper she was writing on, slightly smeared now from hiding it under the others. “It’s just—we haven’t yet talked about it, and we probably should.”

“About what?” Thorin asks.

She hands him the paper. On it are two columns. One is full of what look like names of flowers, the other half look like nonsense words from a baby: *Borbo, Thorbo, Bungin*. And what she’s doing begins to dawn on him. “Bungin?”

“It’s a nice, respectable name for a lad,” Bilbo says, reaching out to snatch the paper back.

Thorin takes strong issue with it being a name at all. “And the flowers are?” he asks, keeping the paper out of reach.

“Girls’ names. It’s traditional,” she adds, sounding defensive. “Girls are named after flowers, boys are usually named some variant of their father’s name. Now give it back.”

“You aren’t named after a flower,” Thorin points out.

Bilbo gives up trying to get the paper, and actually blushes a bit. “Yes, well, my parents were convinced I was going to be a boy. The midwives all said so, and she was carrying low, which amongst hobbits is a sure sign. So when I came out and I wasn’t… quite what they expected, they named me Bilbo anyway, because they hadn’t time to think up another name. Hobbits must be named as soon as they’re born,” she adds off of his confusion. “It’s dreadfully bad luck otherwise.”

“Interesting,” Thorin says. Now this conversation starts to make sense. “Amongst dwarves, naming is more complicated.”

Of course it is,” Bilbo laughs, but she leans back in her chair and laces her fingers over her belly.

Thorin knows an instruction to continue when he sees one, and takes the seat next to her. “One is our secret name, known only to a few—our parents, perhaps a sibling, perhaps even a wife, but one would have to be exceptionally devoted, loyal, trusted beyond the telling—“

“You blurted out your secret name the night you proposed to me and got terribly cross when I laughed, as I recall,” she says, “So if you’re trying to make me feel guilty for that all over again, you’re going to have a rough time of it.”

Thorin sighs at the perfidity of females everywhere, but continues. “The other name, common to all dwarves and people of the world, is chosen years later; usually he chooses it himself, when he is a decade or so.”

Bilbo looks puzzled. “What on earth do you call them until then?” she says.

“Thorin-dwarrow, or Bilbo-dwarrow, depending on if it was a boy or girl,” Thorin says. “Most dwarves don’t have children more frequently than once every twenty years or so, so there’s rarely confusion as to which offspring it is.”

“So—is that why so many brothers have similar names?” Bilbo asks.

Thorin nods. “Generally the firstborn is raised by his parents, then in his turn raises his younger brothers, if they are far apart enough in age, when his parents go back to work. Dwarrows tend to then name themselves after their eldest sibling.”
“Hence Dori, Nori, and Ori,” Bilbo murmurs to herself.

“And Balin and Dwalin. I believe Bifur raised his cousins, though why Bombur chose his name I don’t know.”

“I do,” Bilbo says. “Bofur and Bombur had an elder sister, Bambis. She died in a mining accident when they were still young.” Something seems to occur to her. “So then why did Dís name herself Dís?”

“Because she has always been a terror, and she did not like me when we were children,” Thorin admits.

“Well, she seems to like you just fine now,” Bilbo lies, patting him on the knee. “So all right, what do you think of these?”

She points at the list, and Thorin frowns. “I just told you, dwarrows—“

“Your dwarrows are going to be half hobbit, Thorin, and I’m not giving birth just to have them get named ‘Bilbo’s spawn’ for the next decade. And if their secret names are to be half as silly as yours, they’ll need something sensible to be called.”

“Sensible?” Thorin repeats. “As sensible as calling you Bilbo because they thought you’d be a boy?”

“Bilbo is a fine name! It suits me!”

“And our children must be free to choose something that suits them — you can’t just force a common name on a child like you’re handing down an old pair of gauntlets!”

“I’m not forcing anything! I’m giving them — we’re giving them — names so they can know who they are—“

“They’ll know who they are—“

“I absolutely refuse to call any son of mine ‘Thorin’s son’ as though he were a belt or a kitchen knife,” she says, folding her arms. “And that goes double for a girl. As though she were some sort of… of… walking stick!”

“And you’d prefer her to be named after a plant?” he asks, disbelieving. “What if she grows up hating the damned things?”

“Then apparently when she’s no older than a toddler, she can spit out a few random letters and give herself a whole new name!”

Thorin is starting to realize this argument isn’t going his way. “It’s unlikely you’ll even have a girl,” he tries as his next volley.

It is, as he should have expected, supremely unsuccessful. “Oh is it,” she says, glaring. “And I suppose you would know, having knocked up a veritable baker’s dozen hobbit-lasses in your day?”

“Dwarves don’t have—“

“I’m not a dwarf,” Bilbo says, “Which you seem to forget every third hour, so perhaps I should find some glue and paste a reminder of the fact onto your forehead!”

“And perhaps you have forgotten that you are no longer some common-born hobbit-lass living in some muddy dank hole in the ground! You are the Queen of the Seventh Kingdom of Erebor and
mother to the children of the King, and no matter what superstitions your Shire indulges in, they have no place amongst us!"

“Superstitions? Of all the — if my superstitions have no place, then perhaps I don’t either! I seem to recall you telling me that on more than one occasion! Perhaps it’s time I listened!”

“Perhaps it is!”

From a purely practical standpoint, it’s more difficult for Bilbo to storm out — but when she slams the door shut the room itself seems to rattle, which makes up for it.

* 

By the time Thorin has finished kicking at the fireplace and going over the fight a dozen times in his mind, the evensong has begun and Bilbo hasn’t returned. Thorin’s aware that he is, for all intents and purposes, sulking, but it still takes him another hour or so to go to the door in order to hunt her down.

Only to find Fíli on the other side, hand raised to knock. “Uncle,” he says, flat.

“Nephew,” Thorin acknowledges.

“I’d like to request an audience.” Fíli looks serious, far more serious than makes Thorin easy.

“What is it? Is Bilbo all right?”

Fíli blinks. “I — assume so. Why, have you misplaced her?”

Not too serious, obviously. “Can this wait until she’s been un-misplaced, at least?”

“I think it might be a better conversation in her absence, my lord,” Fíli says.

“And now you’re calling me ‘my lord,’ this bodes well,” Thorin sighs, shutting the door behind him and heading for the kitchens.

Fíli dogs his heels. “I thought it a good time to discuss your plans for succession.”

“My plans,” Thorin says, slanting a look over.

Fíli shrugs. “I’m not sure if it’s come to your attention,” he says, “But your wife seems to be in a family way. Which means the King Under the Mountain will soon have heirs of his own. And I thought it’d be best—“

“What would be best is if we had this conversation later,” Thorin says firmly, stopping at a fork in the corridor. “You request an audience — fine. Tomorrow, at noon, we’ll meet to discuss it.”

“But—“

“Tomorrow, Fíli,” Thorin says. “Now, if we’re done here, I have indeed misplaced my wife, and ought to find her before she does something terrible.”

“I’d hurry, then,” Fíli counsels.

* 

Bilbo isn’t in the dining halls. Nor is she in the kitchens with Bombur (who gives Thorin an irritated look), nor in the state room with Balin (who gives Thorin a pitying look), nor lurking along the
battlements with the guardsmen (who don’t give Thorin any look at all, because they’re all afraid of Glóin) nor sitting with Himlis in the library (Himlis is not there, either, but her assistant sneezes on him).

He finally tracks her down, sobbing in the middle of one of the hobbit holes while Bofur frantically pushes handkerchiefs into her lap. “Why is she crying?” Thorin demands, dragging Bofur to one side. “What did you do?”

“I swear on my life I didn’t do anything,” Bofur says, waving his hands around. “She came in and sat down at the table we just sanded down — I thought it was a pretty piece of work, but then she started with… that. I suppose it must be all wrong,” he adds, dejected.

“The table is lovely,” Bilbo sniffles, “And I’m not crying.”

“There’s snot and tears and things all on your sleeves,” Bofur contradicts.

“Out,” Thorin orders.

“As my king commands.” Thorin would commend Bofur’s obedience if it wasn’t for the gesture he made as he left — an igenous sign of thanks to be made after escaping great danger.

“I’m not crying,” Bilbo insists, even as she grabs fistfuls of handkerchiefs and swipes at her eyes. “It’s very dusty in here, that’s all.”

“Aye, the dust,” Thorin agrees. He perches on the table next to where she sits. “My nephew just tried to abdicate.”

“What?”

“He’s apparently noticed that you are soon to give birth to what he assumes are my offspring, and since it is tradition that the heir is the first-born son of the King, he wishes me to know that he will renounce all claims.”

Bilbo looks horrified. “But — he can’t! Did you tell him he couldn’t?”

“I told him I would speak with him on the morrow. I thought perhaps among other conversations, this one we’d best have sooner rather than later.”

She opens her mouth, no doubt to scoff at a millennia of dwarvish tradition in the face of what’s practical, but to his mild surprise she pauses. “What do you think?” she asks.

“We ought to mark this day,” Thorin observes, and winces only slightly at the kick she aims at his knee.

“We ought, because it won’t happen again this century.” She kicks at him again, more gently. “What do you think?”

“He is right to expect that he will not become king, after the birth of our children,” Thorin says slowly. “It is the custom of our people.” He gathers one of her hands in both of his. “What is the custom of yours?”

“Perhaps we had ought to mark this day,” Bilbo says, but her fingers squeeze his. “We don’t have kings and lords in the Shire; it’s not a land that holds rulers. Our thains and mayors only ever organize parties, really. But thains and mayors amongst hobbits are elected by others; they’re usually of the same family, often an eldest son or clever brother. But it’s no insult to elect another who is
“And you think Fíli will be better suited than our children?” Thorin asks. It is ridiculous of him to be offended when it’s Bilbo who says this, but he can feel his brow lowering.

“I think that Fíli will be a truly remarkable king, and will lead our people to great things when we are gone,” she says, even. “And I do not think we should deny him that chance simply because I’ve had a child or two.”

“It would be against tradition that goes back millennia,” Thorin feels compelled to point out.

“It is also what you want,” Bilbo says, “And I know why, and I feel the same. Let our children be Fíli’s heirs; he’ll agree to that much, I think, if it troubles your conscience so.”

They sit in silence for a few moments, Bilbo running her free hand against the rough grain of the table, lost in her own thoughts. For his part Thorin is content, for a few moments, to sit and be with her, uncomplicated by thoughts of realm or duty.

“I am sorry I quarreled with you earlier,” he tells her suddenly, thinking back to her earlier tears. “You are right, to say that I forget we are not alike. It is just…”

“Just?”

Of course she is impatient. He holds her hand palm upward, smoothing his thumb along the lines of her palm. “You are part of me, the best parts. It is easy to forget how incomplete I was before I found you.”

He’s sure it’s not enough, but she stands up between his knees, cupping his face. “This is a sad commentary, if I am what is best in you and you are what is best in me,” she says, and kisses him softly. She does it again, and Thorin can feel the tight knot in his chest loosen, and he gathers her close, burying his face in her hair.

* 

It’s too much to expect that that is the end of the argument about names, but Bilbo agrees to table the discussion until at least the elves have come and made their pronouncements. “Besides, I need to arrange my position so that I don’t get my way in naming them immediately only to have to name them after your great-grandmother or something,” Bilbo says the next morning as they make their way to the lesser throne room and Fíli’s audience.

Thorin frowns. “What’s wrong with the name Xit?”

Bilbo shudders.

Fíli is already there, standing in the middle of the room as though facing judgment; he starts at the sight of Bilbo. “Uncle, I did not think—“

“Very right you didn’t,” Bilbo says as Thorin helps her down onto her throne, and Fíli shuts up.

Thorin settles himself in his own seat. “All right, Fíli, son of Chali, we are here to attend your request. Speak what is on your mind.”

“Yes, well.” Fíli shifts from foot to foot. “I know that during our years of exile I was considered your heir and a prince of our people, but now that we have come back and you have, er, married—” He waves awkwardly at Bilbo.
Bilbo waves back.

“And you are now expecting children of your own—”

Thorin raises an eyebrow. “You come now to renounce your claim in their favor.”

“I never had a better,” Fíli shrugs, spreading his hands. “First son has followed first son since the last Durin was reborn. There’s something to be said for tradition.”

“It’s hardly tradition for a dwarf king to marry a common-born hobbit-lass,” Bilbo pipes up. “Maybe our children would be horrible at kinging.”

“True,” Thorin says solemnly. He’s enjoying this, just a little bit. He turns back to Fíli. “You don’t think my children will be less suitable to rule, considering their halfling blood?”

Fíli’s brow darkens gratifyingly. “Put any that would claim so in front of me and I’ll give them a thumping,” he says. “Bilbo’s worth a hundred such. If anything, I worry more about the Baggins line.”

“Agreed,” Bilbo says.

“I am sitting right here,” Thorin says, before turning his attention back to Fíli. “So if you abdicate, what then?”

Now Fíli looks uncertain. “What then, my lord?”

“What will you do to earn your keep? You don’t imagine I’ll allow you to simply lounge about uselessly. What will you do for the good of my kingdom?”

“I, uh.” Fíli shifts his feet. “Well, I might ask for a place under Balin, if you think I might be of value assisting with matters of state.”

“You might,” Thorin says. “But what guarantee have I that you would not simply abandon your duty to him with the same ease you’ve abandoned your duty to me?”

Fíli is at last starting to look irritated; Thorin is only surprised it took him so long. “Uncle—“

“My choice of heir is unchanged, Fíli,” he tells him, “And will remain so with the birth of a son or two or seven.”

“I don’t understand,” Fíli says, in that stubborn way he’s had since he was no higher than an axe-shaft.

He looked just the same the day Thorin came to his mother’s rooms in Ered Luin and spoke of his meeting with Gandalf, of a hope for Erebor rekindled. Dís had disapproved, loudly and at length, but her sons had sat fidgeting and when Thorin left that night Fíli sneaked out after him, grabbing him by the elbow and telling him that if he did not take them along, they would follow anyway and probably get eaten by bears, so it would be wise of Thorin to include his nephews in his new Company.

Thorin’s love for his nephews was always tempered by fear — as perhaps every parent’s is. Thorin looked at them both for decades as children, and they are children still. But Fíli deserves a king’s answer.

“I fell wounded in the Battle of Five Armies,” Thorin tells him. “And you and your brother defended me, with shield and body. I could have no child that would make me so proud, nor one to whom I
would entrust this kingdom so gladly.” He clears his throat, finding it oddly tight. “My sons and daughters will be heirs, but they take place after you and Kíli. And they will be raised to understand what an honor it is to be thought so worthy.”

“I see,” Fíli says, his voice hoarse. “Well, if you’re going to be stubborn about it, I suppose there’s no way out.”

“It was an admirable effort,” Bilbo says, holding her hand out to Fíli. He takes it and bows to her, and she rolls her eyes and tugs him close for a kiss on the cheek. “We both discussed it, and it’s my wish as much as Thorin for you to king after him. Besides, Thorin is very, very old—“

“But not in any way deaf,” Thorin points out.

“—And between his death, which grows closer every day, and the majority of our children, which may be in the next Age for all I know, Erebor will need a strong and level-headed King to guide her.”

“That argues against me rather than for, my lady,” Fíli says, but he kisses her back. “I thank you for your foolish trust in a foolish dwarrow.”

“And now we’ll have no more discussion of it,” Thorin concludes, “And I can enjoy what rest there will be before the return of your brother and those—“

“Very generous and kindhearted,” Bilbo finishes for him, “healers.”

“You’ll have ample time, then,” Fíli says. “I doubt Kíli will be hurrying back.”

* *

But it’s only a few days later when he’s awakened by a rhythmic rapping, and a voice in his ear. “Thorin,” he hears from the darkness. It’s Bilbo, flailing at his head and shoulder. “Thorin, wake up.”

“Give me compelling reason.”

She continues to hit him. “There’s someone at the door.”

“Someone knocking?” It seems so unlikely.

A servant is waiting in the hall, looking anxious. “Your Majesty,” he says, bowing low, “We have reports of an elvish company from Mirkwood, sighted at the westernmost tower. They should be at our gates by noon.”

“Very well,” Thorin says.

Bilbo, when he climbs back into bed, insinuates herself under his arm. “It seems your respite is over, then.”

“I love you very much,” Thorin reminds himself, “And would do anything to bring you comfort and ease.”

Bilbo’s warm chuckle sends him back to sleep.

The elves come clattering in on time; Thorin has strategically locked himself into a meeting with Fíli, Balin and Bofur to go over the mining progress, but he hears about it from runners who come in periodically to report that there are five elves, four of them healers of some stripe or other, and a fifth
who seems very fond of Lord Kíli and smiling in what is assumed to be a threatening manner.

Bofur nudges at Fíli. “It looks like your brother’s picked up something from the forest,” he says.

“Best hope it’s not catching,” Fíli agrees, before turning back to the great stack of reports and charts and accounting-books.

Erebor had, in his youth, felt static in its riches; great rooms already filled to bursting with treasures for the keeping, with every addition only an increase in what was already ludicrous plenty. Thorin still holds a memory, brighter than the Arkenstone, of being carried into the great treasury for the first time. Expected to marvel at the wealth entombed, he had felt only happy to be with Thror, clasped safe to his grandfather’s chest. When they had at last come into the mountain and he saw the hall once more, he felt no happiness; only a relief, that so much of this treasure would be given up to his Company and to Bilbo, no longer to be gloated over.

But that’s left Erebor with something of a cash flow problem; and so one of Thorin’s first decrees, once he was well enough to sit up and give instruction, was to reopen what mines they could safely explore. Bofur himself has lead the expeditions to recover old seams long since buried under dragon filth or rubble, and now, after a year, they are in good position to pay back what debts they have to the Iron Hills, to Esgaroth, to the Company who held off on collecting their shares until the mountain was able to stand proud once more.

“And what will you do with your shares?” Thorin asks, amused, as Bofur and Balin start arguing about what weight system they’ll use to divvy up the gold still held in the treasury against their debts.

“I thought I’d build my own mountain,” Bofur says cheerfully, pulling out his pipe and leaning back in his chair. “There’s scant few around these parts, which means I can get one made to precisely my measurements.”

“Aye, Dori often says there’s nothing like bespoke,” Balin agrees solemnly, gesturing for Bofur’s tobacco pouch.

“I take it the meeting’s adjourned,” Bilbo says when Thorin arrives back at their chambers, still working on his own pipe.

“We’ll not have the lower mines stabilized until we reroute the spring to the northeast,” he says, getting into bed beside her and ignoring her disapproving sound at his boots on the bedspread. “But work goes apace, and the first of Bofur’s novice miners finally seem to understand which side of the pickaxe to use, at least.” He offers her the last few puffs. “I take it the elves have been and gone.”

She takes it. “Been, yes. Gone, no — at least, not gone home. I’ve had Kíli take them to their quarters.” She hands him back the pipe. “Fair warning, Kíli trailed after that guard of his like a duckling. Don’t let Fíli make too many visits to Laketown, or he’ll end up falling in love with one of the Big Folk and the entire line of Durin will be a hopeless mishmash of—”

“What did the healers say?” Thorin asks. He recognizes that brittle, cheerful prattle.

Bilbo plucks at the bedspread. “Two daughters, fine and healthy.”

Whatever elation Thorin might feel — a first-born daughter is auspicious, twins are remarkable, and to have both seems to augur great fortune — is subsumed by the way Bilbo’s hands will not still.

“And what of you?”

“They do not know,” she says, so soft he might not hear if he were not a dwarf. “They are all of them wise and learned in the ways of birth and death, but seldom have they ventured West and none
of them have ever set eyes upon a Halfling,” she says, sing-song as though she were reciting. “I fear I brought them here for nothing. I wish—” she chews at her lip. “Gandalf had already left Mirkwood by the time Kíli got there; nobody knows to where, of course.”

“I am sure we will not need him or his eagles to complete this quest,” Thorin says, covering her still-fretting hands with his own, speaking words for both of them to believe.

* 

The elves counsel bed rest and, perversely, a strange series of stretching exercises that will “give your body greater comfort carrying its burden.” For the first few mornings and evening she is taken through these exercises by a humorless elf with an unpronounceable name, but after sufficient observation Thorin feels comfortable in his decision to direct Bilbo’s routine himself.

“You—” Bilbo gapes at him from between her own legs, her face ruddy and upside-down from where she is bent over with her hands on the floor. “You think this is erotic!”

“You should remember to breathe through your nose,” Thorin says solemnly, sitting on the bed and enjoying the view immensely. “That means no talking.”

“You didn’t throw Qironel because you wanted to get more sleep, you threw him out so you could leer at me!” Bilbo wobbles slightly as she straightens up. “You think I’m attractive like this!”

“Of course,” Thorin answers, surprised at any other possible reaction. She was attractive when he thought she was a hobbit-lad — he suspects he will always find her so.

“That’s it, that is just the straw that broke the oliphaunt’s back,” Bilbo says, and before Thorin can yell at her to get back into the Moonrise Position, she’s tackled him backward onto the bed, kissing him soundly.

“What did the healers say about this?” Thorin says, between hopeful kisses and a few strategic unlacings and unbucklings.

“Damn what the healers say,” Bilbo replies.

But most of the time Bilbo’s time in bed is spent reading, or gossiping with members of the Company or with Himlis or one of the dozens of other friends Bilbo collects like gold dust on fingertips. It doesn’t seem particularly restful, but he comes back to her every night looking happy, and the faint lines of pain that had begun to etch themselves around her eyes are fading, so he grudgingly gives the elves some little credit. His resentment toward them is further eased when Bilbo tells him that she’d installed the healers in the brand-new hobbit holes.

“It was, after all, specially designed for the midwives who would aid me,” she says, wide-eyed and badly stifling her own giggles. “Kíli said the look on their faces could’ve curdled milk.”

Which is all well and good, but one person who attends Bilbo in their chamber is Tauriel, who seems inordinately fond of the hobbit and laughs at her jokes. This is usually sufficient action for Thorin to bring someone up on charges, since most of Bilbo’s jokes are terrible and the only reason someone would laugh at them is if they had nefarious designs on Bilbo or her virtue (see: Dain). But Kíli is present whenever Tauriel visits, and whatever Thorin suspects of elves, he’s fairly sure they’re not proponents of polygamy.

“Or incest,” Bilbo murmurs, after Thorin discloses his concerns in an unguarded moment. She’s half-asleep in his arms, her hair tangled with his. “Although I suppose since I’m married to Kíli’s uncle —”
“Which is me,” he reminds her.

“—That means it’s not incest in the proper sense. But however it may be, I don’t think you need to worry about my virtue. Although,” she adds, “She does come to visit me out of love, if you’d like something to worry about.”

“I truly don’t,” Thorin says, but it’s too late. “So Kíli and—“

“I’m afraid so,” Bilbo confirms. “Thranduil’s apparently as horrified as you are. The two of them come to visit me because she was ordered by her liege that she could only speak with Kíli if she were chaperoned.”

“Isn’t she a thousand years old?”

“So speaks the dwarf who took a wife a hundred and fifty years his junior,” Bilbo yawns. “But no, my dearest husband, you need not fear that in my final months of gestating the largest and most irritating children alive I have succumbed to the sexual wiles of an elf-maiden and agreed to run off with her to a tree house.”

“A relief indeed,” Thorin says.

*

Thorin does feel better knowing that whatever understanding Tauriel and Kíli might have between themselves is causing Thranduil as many chest pains as it’s causing him. And their agreement to see each other only in public provides another measure of comfort, because there are many things Thorin can endure but the thought of his nephew buying a stool so he can try his hand at seducing an elf is not amongst them. They are clearly in love, but just as clearly keeping their hands to themselves, and Thorin is honest enough to admit that he is content to leave them as they are until Dís returns and tears apart the mountain with her bare hands.

His contentment lasts until he passes by the princes’ tunnels one evening and sees a figure carefully easing open the door to Kíli’s room. It freezes, and in truth it is that which gives her away, sudden stillness so complete it could only be elvish.

Thorin clocks which door she’s opening and lifts an eyebrow. “Guard-Captain.”

“Your Highness.”

She’s still motionless, one hand braced on the oak and the other turning the handle, and Thorin makes himself comfortable against the opposite wall to wait her out; he finds himself more curious than enraged, though he prods at that spot where anger had lain so long and wonders at its absence. It’s probably Bilbo’s fault.

Elves are good hunters, Thorin remembers both from the lessons of his youth and the recent experiences of his Company in Mirkwood. They can outwait the wiliest fox or deer, hidden on tree branches or behind rocks until their prey wanders into range. Thorin’s always assumed it was because they were too stupid to get bored.

He doesn’t get to test that particular theory; there’s a thumping noise from inside, and they can hear Kíli’s voice approaching the door as he says, “Is that you, Lanks? What are you doing with the door half — oh, bugger,” he finishes, jerking the door open and catching sight of Thorin.

“Good evening, nephew,” Thorin says.
“I was just — returning this book,” Tauriel says, producing a slim volume out of nowhere and handing it to Kíli. “As I respect the traditions both of your people and mine, I would of course not dream of risking your honor, my lord Kíli, by asking a personal audience at this time of night unchaperoned. But I felt it only right to return this to you as soon as possible.” She sounds perfectly bland, but she’s talking far too fast.

“Right, yeah,” Kíli says, fumbling with the book slightly. “I’m glad you enjoyed…” he tries to sneak a peek at the spine. “It,” he finishes lamely.

“This is all extremely pathetic,” Thorin announces. “Kíli, go to bed. Guard-Captain, perhaps you would do me the honor of seeing me in the throne room tomorrow morning. Alone.”

“But what about the chaperone—” Kíli tries, but Thorin glares at him and he squeaks and slams the door shut in Tauriel’s face, shouting “Good night everyone!” through the door.

Thorin sighs. “Out of morbid curiosity,” he asks, “What exactly is the attraction?”

Tauriel purses her lips. “I am as baffled as you, sire.”

*

He is interrupted from his plan to demand of Tauriel a precis of her intentions, however, by the rather abrupt arrival the next morning of Dís, Dwalin, Ori, and thousand or so dwarves from Ered Luin.

Thorin and Fíli go through the formal motions of greeting the new arrivals; Fíli even gives a speech, and clearly the conversation about remaining heir to the throne of Erebor has helped give him some renewed confidence. Of course afterward, Dís embraces him and then proceeds to critique his performance, but the Durin family has always believed in expressing love through criticism and disapproval.

“Eleven hundred and seventy-four new subjects,” she tells him later, shaking the snow off her cloak as Fíli and Balin lead the new arrivals out of the courtyard and into the mountain. “Although I suppose they were your subjects before. I can report that four hundred and twenty-nine of our people have elected to remain in the Blue Mountains indefinitely; they have no intention of following their lord and king—“

“Dís,” Dwalin rumbles, and of all impossible things to witness, Dís actually pauses.

“Well, at any rate, we’re here.” She turns to where Ori is having some kind of lively debate with two tiny figures huddled together on a pony. “And we come bearing gifts.”

“I thought there were more of them,” Thorin says, not quite making it into a question. The hobbits — for hobbits they are, wrapped in three cloaks apiece — stumble off their mounts, seemingly unbothered by the frozen stone under their bare feet but looking chilled and miserable all the same.

Dís makes a disapproving face. “They were a touch perturbed about our manner of travel,” which is when Thorin learns that Dís had her eleven hundred and seven dwarves dig a new tunnel straight through the mountains. “Oh, calm down,” she says over Thorin’s strenuous objections. “We mostly dug through the avalanche, it was perfectly safe.”

“Aye, only four or five cave-ins the whole trip,” Dwalin mutters. “And no more than three battles with goblins.”

“I thought you were supposed to be some great warrior, celebrated in song and story,” Dís snaps. “And besides, my sister-in-law required hobbits, so hobbits I brought. I did what needed doing.”
“Aye, and more besides.”

“You didn’t seem to have a problem with—“

“If the two of you are quite finished,” pipes up a voice from behind Thorin, “I’d like to see my cousin. We’ve been night and day driven along like so many chickens to market, and I presume it was for a good reason.”

Thorin turns and comes face to face with the most cross-looking creature he’s ever seen. She’s even tapping her hairy little foot on the cobblestones, her arms folded over a large and well-worn book.

She gives him a look up and down. “You’ll be the one who got us all into this mess,” she deduces, and Dwalin makes a despairing noise.

Ori, who’s been hanging back with a terrified expression, jumps in at this point, dragging the other hobbit into the conversation by the elbow. “My lord, please allow me to introduce Primula Brandybuck, of Buckland, and Drogo Baggins, of Hobbiton.” He makes a bowing motion at Thorin, which the hobbits stare blankly at.

“Yes, all right,” the girl hobbit — Primula, apparently — says. “Now that introductions and speeches and flirting,” this with a severe look at Dís and Dwalin, “Are done with, can we get inside?”

“I’d be happy to take them, my lord.” Ori sounds nothing of the sort, but Thorin nods and dismisses them. He does catch Primula’s irritable, “Bilbo best be planning to give me all her Westfarthing silver for her next birthday. And what is that smell? It’s like Farmer Maggot’s fields on Tilling Day.”

Thorin arranges with Balin and Fíli the assignment of quarters and positions for the influx of new arrivals; Bofur is overjoyed at the miners amongst them, and there are a fair number of metalworkers as well.

“We should be in fair shape for the spring,” Balin says, pleased. “Give your sister my thanks.”

Which is when a blood-curdling scream is heard reverberating throughout the mountain.

“Well,” says Fíli, rolling up his charts, “Looks like Mother met Tauriel.”

The rest of the day is spent keeping sharp implements away from Dís as she rages at her youngest son, who’s clearly too frightened to do much more than fend her off whenever she thumps him on the head. Thorin dispatches Fíli to find out where the elf-maiden has gone; between the time Dís started yelling and their arrival at Kíli’s bedchambers, Dís has had ample time to kill her and hide the body, but they’re choosing optimism over experience.

“Of all the disgraces you could inflict on our house — of all the ways you could shame your family and your lineage and your very kingdom — you pick an elf? Why didn’t you couple with the Pale Orc? Or a warg? What about those trolls you met west of the mountains? I’m sure one of them would’ve made a lovely bride!”

Kíli has the look of someone who wants to make a cheeky comment but knows his death will come swiftly upon him if he dares so much as open his mouth. Instead he covers his head as her pacing brings her back within range.

Thorin hands Balin another axe to pass along outside to where Dwalin and Bofur are waiting with a satchel full of the princes’ weaponry. “The trolls were not exactly marriage material,” he points out.
“Neither is an elf,” Dís wails, collapsing on Kíli’s bed before springing back up, her face a rictus of horror. “This is befouled, isn’t it?” she shrieks as she points at the rumpled sheets.

Kíli, still dressed in only his undershirt with his hair unmistakeably mussed, hunches further into his chair, tucking his hands under his thighs.

“Oh, Mahal in his dungeons and all his spirits defend us,” Dís concludes. She whirls on Thorin. “Did you know of this? You did.”

It’s been a century and more since Dís was able to land a blow on him, but Thorin still has to resist the urge to take a step back. “They were not discreet,” he admits instead.

“I’ll murder her in front of the assembled council,” Dís says, decisive.

“No!” Kíli at last finds his tongue and scrambles to his feet. “Mother, she’s done no wrong.”

“Done no wrong? She’s seduced a prince of the realm as part of some — nefarious plot of the elf-king’s! Mark my words, she means to destroy us all with her—“ Dís looks ill.

“She hasn’t seduced anyone!” Kíli protests. “I remember the stories you told me, and I swear, there is no witchcraft in how I feel for her. Nor in how she feels for me.”

“You’re not even a century old!” Dís roars at him, “You’re far too young to know how you feel!”

“You were younger than me when you took a husband!” Kíli shouts back, which seems to surprise him as much as it surprises Dís, but he forges ahead. “I do not expect the blessing of my king or my mother when I say this, but I will say it all the same. I love her as I love the darkness of the mountain, I treasure her more than all the gold in Erebor. I will give up any dear thing to look upon her face. And if you lay a hand upon her, it will be because I have given up my life in protecting her.”

Dís is prevented from putting that to the test by Fíli’s arrival. “She’s gone,” he reports to Thorin. “The elf healers say she took her leave and saddled a horse, heading West.”

Kíli doesn’t wait — he’s out the door before anyone can grab hold of him. Dís shouts for him to come back, but silence is the only answer.

“He’ll have a drafty ride,” Fíli observes.

“You must certainly have known,” Dís growls at him, her hands still bunched in fists.

Fíli looks at his mother for a long moment. “I know a great deal, it’s true. I know that in our weeks trapped in Mirkwood, Tauriel was the only one who looked upon us with respect and treated us with kindness. I know that she lead the elven charge in the Battle of Five Armies when Thorin called us to arms. I know she defended my uncle with shield and body alongside us as he lay broken upon the field, and took up Kíli’s sword when he too fell wounded. I know you have her to thank for your brother’s life, and the life of your son. And I know what the custom is for such a debt.”

It’s the most Thorin’s ever heard Fíli say at one time, outside the speeches he’s been compelled to make, and it seems to drain him more than a day’s forced march; he leaves without another word, boots loud in the hallway.

Thorin takes the seat vacated by Kíli and pulls out his pipe, studiously ignoring the way Dís swipes at her eyes. It’s quiet for a good while until she says, “You didn’t tell me about that.”

“I didn’t know,” Thorin says, honestly. If he had, he might have been more careful.
“Do you think Fíli told her? About the blood debt?” she asks, running her finger along the fireplace mantle, clucking absently at the dust. “Is that why she’s here?”

“If Fíli told anyone, it was his brother,” Thorin says.

He offers his pipe, now drawing well, to her. She takes it, coming over to sit in the chair beside him. It’s a larger chair than the one Thorin sits in now, and he notes its place in front of the fire, an echo of the two armchairs arranged just so in the chambers he now shares with Bilbo.

Erebor has broken many traditions in its rebirth; the marriage of its king to a hobbit is perhaps the most noticeable, but it’s far from the most controversial. Old ways have ill suited new realities, and Thorin has made many decrees voiding or modifying the laws that once governed the mountain: pathmaking rights, property inheritance, ideas covered in the patina of age. But the repayment of a blood debt has stayed a fixed point around which the rest of dwarven law and lore has spun.

Anyone who saves the life of a dwarf has the right to ask anything he might desire, up to and including the death of the dwarf he saved. It is one reason that the King’s Guard is made up of only those most trusted and trustworthy; more than one royal line has been overthrown by a plotting advisor who, arranging to save the King’s life, then demanded as payment his throne. If Tauriel did indeed stand over Thorin and Kíli during the battle, saving them both, her power is now as great as any ruler in the Seven Kingdoms.

“She could destroy everything we’ve worked for with a word,” Dís says.

“And yet she hasn’t,” Thorin reminds her. It is strange beyond imagining to be on this side of the argument, yet Thorin settles into the chair, finds it comfortable.

“You honestly believe she won’t? She’s an elf.”

“Yes, she is. But yes,” he answers, “I do.”

From out in the hallway, Bofur calls, "Can we bring the weapons back in? There's a knife digging a hole in my back."

*

It’s early evening, dusk candles guttering in the sconces, by the time Thorin makes his way to his chambers — only to find one of the hobbits sitting just outside, cross-legged with his chin on his hand.

“Good evening,” Thorin says, nonplussed.

The hobbit scampers to his feet, straightening his jacket and smoothing it down. “Sorry to be cluttering up the hall,” he says, “But Prim’s still in there with Bilbo, and there’s so many twists and turns in this place I was sure I’d get lost if I tried to find my way out, although Ori was very kind about giving us directions but honestly, but all these tunnels start to look alike and—“ at long last the hobbit seems to run out of breath. “Anyway, sorry."

“Drogo, is that your name?” Thorin asks, going to the door.

“I wouldn’t—“

There’s a wordless exclamation of annoyance as he tries to walk through, and the hobbit-lass’s face suddenly looms into view. “What do you think you’re doing?” she demands. She’s still clutching her book, an ink smear on her nose.
Thorin blinks. “I thought I was coming to bed,” he replies, too surprised to be anything but honest.

“Well you can think of other things, for the time being. We’re busy.” And she slams the door in his face.

“Er,” Drogo says, anxious. “She’s a bit like that.”

So Thorin ends up drinking a great deal of ale with the hobbit-lad down in the kitchens.

It turns out he is also related to Bilbo. “Rather distantly, by blood,” Drogo says, hiccuping, “Second cousins on my father’s side. But my uncle Rudigar married her aunt Belba a few years past, so now we’re related that way too. Though it’s hardly surprising, the Bolgers and Bagginses have been close for years, everyone’s a cousin or an aunt or nephew of somebody.”

“Are you indeed,” Thorin says. “And is that why you braved the wilds and mountains in the dead of winter? I don’t believe you’re well-versed in midwifery.”

“Well,” Drogo says, and takes a swig of his ale. Bombur, supervising both the stoves and their drinking, makes an approving noise and fills up another stein. “Truth to tell, I came more for Prim’s sake than anything.”

“Worried for her safety abroad?”

“Worried for everyone else,” Drogo burps.

Thorin braves the doorway once again near to midnight; Primula’s disappeared and Bilbo is half-asleep, murmuring complaints against his shoulder as he eases in next to her. “Remind me never to have any more children,” she says, and snuggles in. “I heard shrieking earlier. I take it Dís and Tauriel have made each other’s acquaintance?”

“Aye, and at the moment we’re missing both an elvish Guard-Captain and a prince of the realm,” he says.

Bilbo laughs. “Your family never learns.” She’s asleep again before he can reply, and he follows her soon after.

* Thorin finds out just what Drogo meant the next day, when Primula corners him after breakfast at the high table. “I need to discuss what sexual positions you and Bilbo used when you impregnated her,” she says.

Fíli and Dwalin disappear so fast Thorin suspects witchcraft. Which leaves Thorin alone with the tiny hobbit-lass and her rather imposing leather-bound book. He tries not to feel outmaneuvered.

“What?” he asks, carefully.

“I asked Bilbo, but when hobbit-lasses are in heat things are usually a bit blurry,” Primula says, sitting down in the chair opposite. She fetches an ink bottle from her pockets and pats at herself for a moment, puzzled, before fishing about in her hair and pulling out a pen. “All she could remember was that your refractory period was a bit frustrating at first before she devised a—”

“I remember,” Thorin interrupts, because there are still people in the hall and Thorin has no intention of surviving dragons and orcs and elves only to perish from sheer embarrassment at his own high table. “And whatever Bilbo may have told you—”
“Are you going to make up lies about your own sexual prowess?” Primula demands. “Because I don’t have time for it.” She seems to recall something, and makes a mulish expression as she adds, “My lord.”

“I was going to say,” Thorin says, clawing marks into the tabletop, “That dwarves do not discuss such matters with others. We value our privacy.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t have expected a less stupid response,” she mutters, scribbling something in her book. She looks up and seems to understand her own rudeness. Understand, and disregard; the way her eyes narrow reminds Thorin very much of her cousin. “You have a choice, my lord: you can throw me in the dungeons for my impertinence, or you can save your thainwif by answering my questions.”

And beyond his own rising anger he hears the sharp note in her voice, one that was not there yesterday when she met him in the courtyard, irritable and cold and impatient. The sharp note that means only fear, badly covered; he has heard it in his own voice times beyond counting. “What do you suspect?”

Instead of a retort or a dismissal, Primula sighs heavily, rubbing at her nose and depositing another smear of ink along the bridge. “I suspect that it is a good thing I made this journey.”

Thorin knows all too well that fear is catching; he feels it in the back of his throat as he says, “Ask your questions, then I’ll ask mine.”

*  

Himlis is visiting, busy recounting some story or other that involves lots of wild gestures, when Thorin comes back to their rooms. Bilbo is laughing so hard her face is turning red, and he squashes the panic he feels at that, the urge to rush to her side and slow her breathing.

“Good evening, my lord,” Himlis says, standing up and offering a shallow bow. “Any news of the prince?”

“That he has acted the fool is hardly news,” Thorin says. “But other than that, no.”

“Thank you for coming by, Himlis,” Bilbo says, and she nods, taking her leave. Thorin closes the door softly behind her but can’t bring himself to turn back right away.

“You spoke with Prim, then,” Bilbo says.

“Aye,” he says, and gathers his courage. It seems impossible that she looks the same as he approaches; he half-expects her to fade from his sight.

“I did try to tell you,” she says. When he reaches her she holds out a hand to him, and her grip is still strong and warm and alive.

“Once again I did not attend,” he confesses, kneeling by her side. “But no matter, now that your halfling midwife is here, for all she seems about as old as Bain—”

“Primula’s of a fine age,” Bilbo scoffs. “I’m sure she shouted at you a good deal. Our aunt Donnamira was just the same, and Prim learned everything from her and then some.”

He brushes damp hair from her forehead. The children are lying wrong in her belly, from what Thorin could understand from the diagrams and strange hobbit letters crowded together in Primula’s book and her terse, impatient explanations. They have grown too large for Bilbo to survive bearing
them into the world, and such an attempt will kill them, too.

“The elves say there is nothing to be done,” Primula spat, writing something else on a fresh page. “Which is an awfully defeatist attitude for an immortal, I must say.”

“But you disagree,” Thorin said.

“Of course I disagree,” Primula told him. “But you won’t like my ideas much better.”

“I am sorry,” Thorin says to Bilbo now, uselessly.

“Be sad,” Bilbo chides him. “Be sad, or angry, or even afraid. But never be sorry. I’m not. Primula said the children are strong — which is rather the problem, truth to tell.” She tugs him up and into bed, for once making no comment about his boots. “Prim says she needs a week or so to make preparations. She’s done this before,” she adds, “And I remember one or two hobbits of my acquaintance who had to bring their children into the world in such a way. It won’t kill me.”

“Of course it won’t,” Thorin scoffs, and appreciates the fact that Bilbo doesn’t complain when he holds her tightly enough to leave bruises.

*

Bilbo invites Dwalin to their chambers the following evening for dinner and a personal recounting of the trek to the Shire and back again; she invites Dís too, but his sister begs off, citing homicidal rage that ill bears company.

“You’ll not extend the invitation to Ori?” Thorin asks, eyebrows raised.

Bilbo laughs. “According to Dís, he almost wet himself every time Dwalin raised his voice above a whisper, and he - I believe the word was ‘cacked,’ though I’m a well-bred gentlehobbit who has no idea what that could mean - his trousers whenever Dwalin shouted. The poor child deserves a rest.”

Dwalin arrives and is pleased with the return of Grasper and Keeper, his axes that had been stolen by the Mirkwood elves and returned in Legolas’s barrel. “They smell of stale beer, but who knows if that’s from the barrel or from me,” he says, testing the edge of one.

The journey there was, by recent standards, fairly dull, but Bilbo makes much of the various orc packs they ran into in the Wastelands and the lone spider in Mirkwood that had Ori halfway up a tree before Dwalin woke up. More entertaining is the accounts of the Shire, which was tipped fairly upside-down by their arrival and recruitment.

“I’ll say this for my lady,” Dwalin says, admiring, “You were right to send Ori. None of them would so much as look me in the eye, for all they’ve had dealings with dwarves before. Every one of them thought Ori was some sort of deformed hobbit. Some relative of yours even put it about that Ori was my prisoner, forced into indentured servitude.”

“Let me guess,” Bilbo says, “Otho Sackville-Baggins?”

“Sounds about right. Squinty, squeaky little bugger. He quieted down after I thumped him a few inches into the ground.”

“Good,” Thorin says.

“Dwalin,” Bilbo says.
“But it sounds like there’s been more interesting goings-ons around these parts,” Dwalin says. “What with Kíli and Gimli falling all over themselves for a couple of straggly-haired elves.”

“Gimli would take great issue with the idea that he’s in love with Legolas,” Bilbo replies, grinning, “But who knows — he’s young yet.”

Thorin tries not to be violently ill at the thought of yet another member of the Durin family, however distantly related, singing odes about elf-arses. “That quest you have planned for him in fifty-odd years better not include Legolas as a member of the party,” he warns her.

Bilbo pouts theatrically. “But as for Kíli and Tauriel,” she says, pointedly ignoring Thorin, “That seems to be the case. We’ve still got no word of where they’re off to.”

“Laketown, most likely,” Dwalin says. “Plenty of places for a young dwarf and elf to make themselves comfortable. And Bard’ll think it a lovely joke. My wonder is what on earth the lass could see in that boy.”

“I’m sure he charmed her,” Bilbo says, sounding defensive. “He’s terribly sweet.”

“He’ll take after his father’s line, then,” Dwalin mutters.

Thorin considers being offended. “The Durin dwarves can be charming, if the situation calls for it.” He’s met with two flat stares.

“Your idea of asking for my hand in marriage was to make me a handful of hair beads,” Bilbo points out. “Although perhaps age addled your propensity for romance—“

“That one?” Dwalin snorts. “He could hardly talk to a lass until he was fifty. Nain once came to visit and brought Dain and his sister Hirais to visit; Thorin nearly tripped off the ledge of the Throne Room saying hello to her.”

This is why Thorin doesn’t like it when Bilbo and Dwalin get to gadding. “I didn’t trip off the ledge.”

“No, you didn’t,” Dwalin agrees. “You did break your nose walking into a wall, though.”

Bilbo looks torn between enormous love and enormous disgust. “Thorin, that’s — so sad,” she says.

“We tried everything,” Dwalin sighs. “I even took him to a whorehouse for his fiftieth. Figured he’d get some practice talking to girls who’d be well-paid to smile at him.”

“What happened?” Bilbo asks, looking as though she would rather not know.

“What do you think? I came back a few hours later and the tyke had taken apart three separate bedsteads.” Dwalin takes a swig of ale and enjoys the pause far too much. “Of course,” he continues, “He took them apart with a hammer and crowbar. Told the Madam they weren’t stable, shoddy craftsmanship; he used the money I gave him to buy some decent joists and nails and rebuilt them to be sturdier. Then the girls asked how he braided his hair so neatly and after that apparently there was some harp-playing,” and at this point Dwalin has to raise his voice above Bilbo’s hysterical laughter, “Which much to my shame as a dwarf, a warrior, and a friend, is not a euphemism for anything but actual playing of harps.”

It takes a while for Bilbo to recover.

“If this is all working up to some great confession that I was your first,” she says at last, still
laughing, “I’m not sure how I feel hearing about it from Dwalin rather than you.”

Thorin covers his face with his hands. “You weren’t,” is all he says, even though he knows what’s coming because of who else is in the room.

“I mean,” Bilbo says, “I should hope I wasn’t — what about when you were wandering the wilds as a handsome, brooding blacksmith? I’ve heard stories about blacksmiths; it’d be such a shame if all those randy farm wives and widows and maidens of loose virtue who meet up with a strange blacksmith upon the road went away disappointed.”

“Let me assure you they didn’t,” Thorin snaps, which is the stupidest thing to say ever.

“Aye, that they didn’t,” Dwalin agrees. “Rage kicked in then. And a good deal of mead. He had a decade or so being a portly, angry whoremonger blacksmith before we found the caverns of the Blue Mountains and he settled himself down a bit. Mind you,” he adds, once again pitching his voice over Bilbo’s laughter, “He didn’t give it up for a good century at least. Not that the whores seemed to mind. I remember every time he’d visit Bree, there’d be a muster at the houses of ill repute to see who got to bed him first.”

Thorin returns to his previous tactic of covering his face with his hands, but Bilbo just pats him on the arm.

“Not to fret, husband,” she says. “We’ve all got our youthful indiscretions. I’m sure if Dwalin had thought to ask around, he could’ve found plenty of stories to level against me.”

Thorin stares at her from over his fingers, though his reaction is less conspicuous than Dwalin, who drops his mug. “Burglar?” he says, wiping beer of his chin. “You—“

Bilbo looks surprised at them right back. “Haven’t you ever heard the term ‘at it like hobbits?’ It’s perfectly normal, especially in our tweens — I’ve played more than I’ve had hot dinners, and you know me well enough to know that’s saying something. Besides, it’s hardly as though last summer was the first time I had my heat.” She sips at her water, very unconcerned with the images that had better not be going through Dwalin’s head but are most certainly going through Thorin’s.

“So is that how you knew about the—“ he thinks better of discussing their sex life in front of Dwalin, who looks like he’s contemplating suicide.

“Yes,” Bilbo answers, “And once numbers One and Two make their exit, perhaps I’ll show you a few more things I know about.”

Dwalin shudders and pours himself another drink. “The pair of you are revolting in every way,” he says.

*  

A raven arrives a few days later, bearing a message for Fíli; Thorin is informed of this by a runner from the watchtower, rather than his nephew.

Fíli, when he tracks him down later, is unrepentant. “Of course I wasn’t going to tell you,” he says. “You’d tell Mother, and she would track them down and murder them both, and winter’s such an unpleasant season to order the execution of a relative. Much better to do it in late spring.”

“What does he say?” Thorin orders.

“I should remind you that you owe me a blood debt, too,” Fíli complains, but he produces a grubby,
winkled note, written on what looks like a grocer’s receipt.

F - safe and sound in Esgaroth. Bards given us Masters old house for now and were got firewood and lots of blankets so its not bad. T hasnt cried at all which seems odd since Luthien cried rivers and lakes and things when it seemed she would be torn asunder from the side of her true love. T just pointed out that we havent been torn asunder also that story as told by mortals is full of defemitions of elvish character. T also just pointed out that I spelled defemitions wrong. Stop reading over my shoulder then if you dont want me telling Fíli all about what youre doing. All right shes gone over to the window but shes laughing at me. Anyway dont tell Mother or Uncle were here as I dont fancy getting chopped into bits. Well come back after the new dwarrows have made everyone happy and less inclined to chop us into bits. T would like to add her sisterly affections to you etc. Please send some money as the clothes Bard loaned me are too big. -K

“Are you going to tell Mother?” Fíli asks, resigned.

“Tell her what?” Thorin sighs.

*  

“Thorin,” he hears, whispers in the dark. It’s Bilbo, shaking him gently by the shoulder.

He turns into her, still drowsing. She’s trained him in this, too; to rouse slowly and relish the moments between sleep and wakefulness. It’s been a pleasant lesson to learn, and he’s discovered in himself a greed for her warmth and softness in these dark hours, limbs tangled with his and mouth pliant and lush.

He found this out the first morning he woke with her by his side, months before she had tricked him into bed and before he had tricked her into matrimony, even before they had made their assault on the mountain and fought in the Battle of Five Armies. She caught a cold while they were being feted in Esgaroth and holed herself up in a tiny chamber on the ground floor near the fireplace, answering all knocks at the door with assurances that she was fine belied by copious sneezing. Bombur and Óin were the only ones allowed in — Bombur because he brought her food and Óin because he didn’t hear her shouting at him to stay out, and instead forced various herbal drinks on her.

But the rest of the Company fretted and his nephews in particular kept worrying at him, so on the evening of the third day Thorin knocked on the door and ignored her, “I’m fine, go away!” to open the door and see for himself how she fared.

She fared poorly, teeth chattering and looking extremely pathetic, and memories of Fíli and Kíli suffering chills of their own as dwarrows prompted his mad impulse to climb into the bed with her, drape the hill of blankets around them both and curl one arm around her shoulders. It was stupid and reckless beyond measure, but to his unending surprise she only sneezed a few times and then fell asleep on him immediately, snoring louder than he would have thought possible for one so small.

He woke the next morning to the sunshine streaming reluctantly through the shuttered windows and to Bilbo, still sprawled across his chest. She wasn’t snoring any longer, but when he shifted to look at her face her eyes were still closed, a small smile on her face. She looked better, and that should have been reason for him to get out of her bed and her room; instead he drifted back to sleep, one arm curled around her waist, cheek pressed against her hair.

So when she whispers his name again he only draws her a bit closer, lets his nose trail along the curve of her ear. “What is it?” he murmurs, voice still sleep-rough.

“I think you should send for Prim,” she whispers back.
That drags him closer to awake, and he opens his eyes to see her face pale, her eyes wide and unseeing — the pitch of the chamber at this time of night is too dark for her, so he rolls to his feet and finds the midnight lamps, turns them on too-bright.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, coming back to sit by her side.

“I don’t know,” she says, but she lifts her hand to the light — red-brown with slick blood.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

**Glebionis segetum**: a herbaceous perennial with a height of approximately 2 1/2 feet, with bright yellow flowers. Commonly known as the corn marigold, it was once considered a weed; a law dated from the 13th century fined a sheep against any farmer who allowed a single plant among his crops.

***

“You will kill her with this madness,” says the head elf healer, when he finally arrives at the chambers to find Primula already making preparations.

“Not unless I am very stupid indeed, and I make it a habit to be as intelligent as possible,” she replies, and turns to where Drogo is waiting for further orders. “Go and fetch boiling water from the kitchens — two buckets at a time, if you can manage it. Tell them to keep bringing us pails until we tell them to stop.”

“Yes ma’am,” Drogo says, and eels his way through the growing crowd. Dís has arrived on the elves’ heels, but she’s keeping quiet, braiding her hair quickly out of her face and putting an apron on.

Thorin pays them little attention; he is wiping Bilbo’s forehead with a cool, damp rag, murmuring soothing nothings to her as she frets. The blood has not stopped, and she grows paler with each passing moment. “My ring,” she whispers, eyes wide and frightened. “Where is it?”

Primula leans over her from the other wide. “What is she talking about?”

“She has a ring she found on our Quest,” Thorin says. “She often carries it in her pocket—“

“I put it away,” Bilbo says, still restless. “But it’s so pretty — can I hold it, just one more time?”

Thorin looks at Primula for guidance. She shrugs. “It’ll do her no harm, and I need her calm.”

He goes to the mantle where Bilbo keeps her favorite knick-nacks, necklaces and beads and earrings. At last he finds the ring, heavy in his hand; he has a strange urge to try it on, but it is a tiny thing too small even for his littlest finger, and the impulse passes. He presses it into Bilbo’s hand and she closes it into a fist, sighing with a sort of relief.

“You propose butchery,” the elf accuses Primula, as Drogo dodges around them with two buckets.

“I propose surgery,” she corrects them, taking the first bucket and dumping several of her instruments into the steaming water.

“And you proposed nothing at all,” Thorin adds, turning to the elves. “You proposed watching her die.”

“We did not propose helping her do it,” the healer snaps back. “This — child — cannot possibly hope to save them all.”
“I don’t practice my craft with hoping,” Primula says. She takes a deep breath, and for once seems not angry or irritated, or even afraid. The tilt of her chin is very familiar.

“You can call me a child, and accuse me of butchery, and condemn my methods,” she tells the elves. “But I’ve brought more hobbits into this world than you’ve ever seen. I trained under the Old Wife Donnamira, and her blood — and Bilbo’s — runs in my veins. I swore to save life and keep it when I took up my craft, and I’ll not let my cousin die hiding behind my own cowardice.” She wraps her hands in clean cloths and plunges them briefly into the second bucket, lifting them out and scrubbing vigorously at the reddened skin.

The elf blanches, and turns to Thorin. “I will not be party to this, my lord,” he says. “To do this is to court death.”

“Then go,” Thorin orders, reaching for rage and finding only weariness. “Go and keep your hands clean.”

“By your leave,” the elf says, and his retinue follows him out the door.

“I’m here for you,” Dís says, and wraps her hands as well. At a nod from Primula, she plunges her hands in as well, wincing at the heat. “Tell me what needs doing.”

The two of them draw Drogo into conversation, heads bent in conference. Thorin ignores them for the moment, pulls the sweat-soaked hair away from Bilbo’s face. “Quite an adventure,” she says, voice faint.

“You always did get us into difficulties,” he says.

“Fíli told me about the debt you and Kíli owe Tauriel,” she says, and for a moment the pain in her face is lessened as she smiles. “You never mentioned anything about that — how many times over are you in my debt, Thorin Oakenshield?”

“That is, of course, why I married you,” he says. “A dwarf cannot incur a blood debt against his spouse; I needed to make my kingdom safe.”

“You were wise to be afraid of what I’d ask,” she teases.

He runs a finger down her cheek, reverent. “I will give all that you would ever ask, burglar,” he tells her.

“All right, that’s quite enough,” Primula says. “My lord, it is time for you to go.”

“What?” Bilbo says.

“No,” Thorin says.

“Yes,” Dís counters.

Primula nods and gestures toward the door. “This is no place for a husband, and I haven’t time to argue over the whys with you. Go, unless you would build three graves tonight. I will send for you when—” she stops. “When the names must be given.”

“Oh, dear,” Bilbo says, her eyes wide. “We never did get around to that.”

* *

The Company is standing just outside the door, grey-faced and silent. “Is she—“ Ori starts, but is
shushed by his brothers.

“She lives,” Thorin says, “For now.” Thorin cannot give a better answer, and he is ashamed to think that he is somehow their king. At the moment he feels weaker than a sapling bent under a gale.

They bundle him off to Balin’s chambers, the closest ones along the tunnel, and there they sit with pipes and flasks, Dwalin on his fiddle and Bofur playing his recorder as they sing songs of the mountain. Thorin remains silent; he cannot lift his voice to them and wind his own song amongst them, not yet.

It is past midnight when the door slams open and Kíli bursts in, dressed — as he’d described it — in mannish clothes, too long in the limbs and too tight around the chest. “Is she—“ he gasps, tripping over his cuffs and sprawling at Óin’s feet.

“She lives,” Balin tells him. “We’re waiting to hear more.”

Thorin tries to pull his thoughts away, and he focuses on Kíli with difficulty. “Your bride is in danger, if she came with you,” he manages.

It brings a smile to Kíli’s face, gone as quick as a spark from the bellows. “She didn’t,” he says. “She’s headed South, hoping to find word of where Gandalf’s gone to. Though I’m sure it won’t come to that.”

Silence answers him, and his face falls as he curls up at his brother’s feet by the fireside.

It’s Dwalin, of course, who breaks it. “I’m gone a season and you go and break the burglar,” he says, shaking his head disapprovingly. “But not to worry, laddie. She’s survived worse than this and lived to nag us all into early graves of our own.”

Dwalin hasn’t called him “laddie” since their days training in the King’s Guard, his face still unscarred.

“It’s tradition,” Thorin says, “To name a hobbit as soon as it’s born. But we hadn’t yet—“ he cannot trust his broken voice for a moment.

“Hardly traditional for our kind,” Balin says. “But then, nor is our burglar. What about Xit? A good family name.”

“Aren’t they usually named after flowers?” Fíli asks. “Bilbo told me once she got stuck with a boy’s name. Most hobbit-lasses are named Daisy or…” he visibly runs out, and shrugs. “That sort of thing.”

“There were all kinds of hobbit-lasses at the Shire,” Dwalin admits, “And I never met one whose name wasn’t some sort of a plant. They’re a strange bunch. Mind you, not bad at all to look at. Know a fair bit about dancing, too.”

Which leads to a few more stories told about Dwalin and Ori’s time in the Shire — how Dwalin seemed to attract children wherever he went, leaving them trailing in his wake like eddies after a boat, how the thain himself came to Bag End to greet them and find out what they were doing there, how no less than three hobbit-lasses made a bid for Ori’s affections.

“So you’ve left broken hearts in the West, have you?” Fíli asks. “Not very gallant, young scribe.”

“I told them all I was bound in honor to return to Erebor,” Ori says. “But maybe in a decade or two I’ll go back. They were very nice girls,” he adds with a sigh.
“You know,” Bofur says, pulling out a carving knife and whittling away at some defect in his recorder, “Time was, I carried a bit of a torch for Bilbo myself.”

There’s a roaring reaction from the Company, and Thorin can feel a disbelieving smile tug at the corners of his mouth.

“Oh aye,” Bofur continues, and tests a few notes. “When we were still making our way along the Great East Road, me and Bilbo had some grand old times.”

“We were with you the entire way — what grand old times could you’ve gotten up to?” Nori demands.

“None of that,” Bofur scolds. “Your imagination, such a filthy thing. All I mean is we got to chatting along. Even taught me a few hobbit songs. Quite a pleasant lad — or so I thought at the time.”

“And you still fancied your chances?” Dwalin says, plucking his fiddle in absent counterpoint.

“Our little burglar seemed amiable, is all I’m suggesting. And then there was that business at the Carrock and one thing lead to another—” and Bofur makes an evocative gesture with his hands around his chest, to the further laughter of the Company, “—and I fancied my chances a bit better. But then we got to the great Bear’s house.”

Thorin scowls, because he well remembers the story Bofur’s about to recount.

“After we all recovered from the meeting, most everyone kipped up and left me and Bilbo by the fire, still chatting away, and I thought, well, this might be my best shot. So I was all set to tell her how pretty and really not at all like a lad she looked, now that we knew, when who should come storming in but the King Under the Mountain, still bleeding, if I recall correctly, from where dear old Azog’s pet had ripped a chunk out of his side.”

“You recall perfectly.”

“I thought so,” Bofur says. “At any rate, Thorin comes limping up to where we’re having quite the pleasant conversation and shouts, ‘You undersized, underhanded burglar!’ and for a moment I thought he was going to take Bilbo by the shoulders and shake her until her head fell off. ‘What do you mean by venturing outside your village and your people! You mean to disgrace us all with your feminine wiles?’ And Bilbo, of course, hasn’t got a clue what he’s talking about, thinking we’d all known all the time, but you know how our hobbit is, she gives back just the same as she gets and it’s not long before she’s calling him a — I believe the term was dunder-brained clothead with no more sense than a Bracegirdle. Is that right, Your Majesty?”

“It is,” Thorin admits.

“So she said, ‘Why did you think I kept politely declining whenever you complete muffins played “Who Can Piss Furthest Off The Mountainside”?’ Although as I recall she blushed something furious at saying ‘piss,’ and Thorin said, ‘Well, how should I know what a hobbit’s got down there —’ and lads, I shan’t forget this until the day I stand in the Halls of Mandos — he waves at her personal area.”

More laughter, and Thorin finds himself joining. She’d been absolutely incandescent with rage, purple-faced and beautiful and she’d shouted at him—

“‘Thorin Oakenshield, King Under Whatever Mountain You Please, I can promise you you’ll never find out what this particular hobbit’s got down anywhere, and on that I can swear every last hair on my feet!’ And bang out the door she goes, we could hear her stomping up the steps and
into her little rooms all the way at the end of the house. And of course His Majesty won’t be outdone by any mere halfling, so he goes stomping off as well, only by now the blood loss has gotten a bit serious and he ends up fainting dead away before he gets to the door.” Bofur waits for a few minutes until the laughter subsides, then heaves a great sigh. “It was then that I knew.”

“Knew what?” Ori asks.

Bofur shrugs and plays another few notes, making a face at their sourness. “Knew that there wasn’t a power in this world or the next that would keep Thorin from one day tricking his burglar into becoming his bride,” he says.

“What I remember best about our journey,” Dori says, picking up the seam, “Is those adventures we had in Esgaroth, trying to keep Nori here out of trouble.”

And between their songs, they tell each other stories, some of them about Ered Luin or their own childhoods but most about the Quest, about Bilbo, about the ridiculous scrapes she got them into and out of. Nori complains at length about her curtailing of his “perfectly legitimate business practices” now that he’s a Lord of Erebor, and Glóin and Bombur commiserate over the way Bilbo united their wives against them.

Balin is halfway through a recounting of his first impressions of Bilbo’s house when the door opens once more, and Dís comes in. “She lives, and has born you two daughters,” she says, but although her hands are scrubbed clean, the apron she wears is bloody and soiled.

* 

It is difficult to know where he should look first; Primula and Drogo both hold dwarrow-babes, healthy and pink, but Bilbo lies pale on the bed. “Is she—“

“Alive, yes, and I intend to keep her so.” Primula comes forward, waving him into his chair with her free hand. “My lord, this is your eldest daughter that I present to you now. Have you a name for her?” Thorin shakes his head, and she makes a faint disapproving noise but still settles the little creature in his lap.

Thorin does not want to look away from where Bilbo is so still, but his eldest daughter makes a peevish, irritable sound and grabs at his beard, grasping with sure fingers, and Thorin looks down at her bright blue eyes and downy cheeks. She is fair-haired, like her mother and his, with a snub nose that must be a trait of the Baggins line.

“And this,” Primula says, gesturing Drogo over, “Is your second daughter, who also doesn’t have a name yet.”

She is a bit bigger than her sister, with hair black as coal — she looks like Kíli as an infant, right down to the wispy patch of beard on her chin and her grey-brown eyes. She lies in the crook of his arm without fussing, watching him curiously while her sister continues to tug at his beard. “They’re perfect,” he observes, unsure why he is so surprised. Bilbo has always surprised him.

“They’re strong and healthy, and apparently the hair is normal, for dwarves,” Primula concedes. “You should care for them now — we’ll tend to Bilbo.”

Drogo appears at his shoulder with a skinful of milk. His eldest daughter makes a grab for it and Thorin allows her to nurse, muscle memory kicking in from long nights feeding Fíli and Kíli in their swaddling-cloths. After a while her eyes begin to drift shut and her mouth slackens; Drogo is there with another skinful, and Thorin feeds his youngest, who is more patient but greedier, sucking the
bag dry before she begins to drowse.

A quiet commotion at the door gets his attention; Fíli and Kíli are sidling in, eyes alight. “Can we see?” Kíli asks.

Fíli doesn’t wait for permission. “They’re much better looking than you,” Fíli whispers, craning his head to get a better look.

“Better natured, too,” Kíli agrees.

Dís comes over to smack him on the back of the head. “Mind yourself,” she warns. “When this is over I’ve a hide to take off of you.”

“We come bearing gifts,” Fíli says quickly. “Uncle told us that it’s bad luck not to name hobbit children as soon as you can.”

“And it turns out Ori brought back a book full of flowers and plants and things from the Shire,” Kíli adds, “So we went through and found the prettiest two flowers in the book.”

Fíli peeks down at his cousins. “Hmm,” he says. “I think this one looks like Marigold.” And he plucks Thorin’s eldest daughter out of his arms, tucking her firmly into the crook of his elbow. She squirms and grumbles but settles again, and Fíli looks pleased. “I’m an excellent judge of these things,” he confides.

“And this is Athelas,” Kíli says, crouching down next to Thorin and stroking one curious finger along Thorin’s youngest daughter’s cheek. She wakes up, eyes wide, and Kíli smiles down at her. “I think she likes it.”

“Marigold and Athelas,” Thorin repeats. They seem to fit.

“They’re very nice, Your Majesty,” Drogo chimes in. “Unique.”

Thorin frowns. “Those are flower names, aren’t they?”

Drogo coughs. “Of a sort,” he temporizes.

By the bed, checking Bilbo’s pulse, Primula snorts.

“Is there a problem with the names my sons have chosen?” Dís asks her, hands on her hips.

“Not at all, especially if you want to wake Bilbo up faster,” she says.

Thorin tries to believe there is more color in his wife’s face than there was before. “How so?”

You named her children after two types of weed,” Primula says, scribbling at something in her book. “That’ll wake Bilbo up quicker than anything.”

“Indeed?” Dís says, still sounding dangerous. Primula is impervious to glaring, however, so Dís swivels on Drogo, who shrinks away.

“Where there’s life there’s hope, eh?” he says, timid.

* 

But Bilbo does not wake; not that night, nor the day after, nor the day after that. She takes the water Primula gives her and her breathing is clear and even, but her eyes are glassy when Primula opens
them, silver-grey and sightless.

It would be a fine flourish to a story, Thorin knows, to say that he never leaves his wife’s side. But Thorin does not care for what stories will say of him and he knows that Bilbo would expect him to king in her absence. So he drags himself away to rule over matters of state while Dís keeps watch over his daughters.

She took charge of them that first morning. “I’m not doing it out of a dwarf-dam’s obligation,” she said, speaking over his muddled protests as she tugged Marigold out of his arms. “Or a sister’s. This is a debt.”

Thorin almost smiled. “What will you ask of me?”

But she shook her head. “This is a debt I have long desired to repay. From decades ago, before we broke stone in Ered Luin.”

He tried to think what she could mean, and something about his confusion seemed to irritate her further.

“When you came back from Khazad-dûm, you brought news that I had lost my father, my grandfather, my husband and my brother,” she said. “I remember reaching for an axe to cut you down — but I don’t remember the week that followed. You never spoke of it, and Dwalin would only say that I was not myself. But when I came back to my mind, I found you caring for my newborn and my dwarrow, tending their hurts when they ran too fast and teaching them our songs and stories. I incurred a debt stronger than a blood debt — stronger than any we have a name for.”

She looked down at Marigold, reaching for the bright beads woven into her beard. “I do not think I can ever hold us in balance, brother. But I will do my best.”

And so Thorin’s life is cleaved in three pieces. Days are spent tending to the business of the mountain; the winter has not yet broken, and supplies, though not scarce, are beginning to dwindle. Bombur and Bofur draw up plans for some strange outdoor structure to be made of glass and heated from the vents of Erebor in order to grow foods even in the chill of the new year. The blueprints are taken from one of the dozens of books Ori brought back, and Thorin approves the spending. More dwarves come under the shadow of the mountain, not just from the diaspora of Erebor but from other kingdoms; the Blacklocks and the Ironfists, in particular, must be appeased when several of their more celebrated smiths emigrate. Bard requests leave to begin surveying the ruins of Dale with a thought to rebuilding. Thorin rules on all of this with Fíli and Balin at his side, reminding him of the matters at hand when his thoughts drift.

His evenings are reserved for his daughters, who seem to understand that something is amiss; Marigold cries a good deal and Athelas is too quiet, a solemn expression on her small face. But they sleep soundly in his arms and smile up at him when he sings half-remembered lullabies, and he feeds them and counts their fingers and toes in wonder. Bofur comes by to sing the hobbit songs Bilbo taught him long ago on the Great East Road. Others in the company also come by, spending a pipe’s-worth of time bouncing the new princesses on their knees, wincing as Marigold clutches at their beards and fussing over Athelas’s smile.

At night he returns to his rooms, where Bilbo remains in the twilight-sleep that nothing seems to end. He lays beside her and rests his hand gently over the healing scar across her belly and tells her of the day, the irritations of court and the antics of their daughters. She sleeps, and does not answer.

Primula, for her part, will not be budged from her charge’s side; she sleeps on a small cot by the fire. At any hour Thorin finds her changing sheets or checking Bilbo’s wounds or shifting her frame so that she will not develop sores. She is quiet, and day by day shadows grow under her eyes.
At the end of a week Thorin wakes to see Primula bent by the fire, poking at it with an iron. He gets to his feet and she turns, startled; her eyes are wet.

“Oh,” she says, voice choked. “I’m sorry, my lord. The fire smarted my eyes—“

“A cousin of the queen does not need to call her cousin’s husband ‘my lord,’” Thorin says, joining her. “‘Thorin’ will do, amongst kin.”

“You’re just saying that because I keep forgetting anyway,” Primula guesses. She looks back at Bilbo.

“Will she live?” he asks, quickly, before his cowardice can clamp shut his jaw.

“She’s lived this far, and gone on living,” Primula says. “I will — do my best for her.”

“But?” Thorin says, because he hears it in her downturned frown.

“But it is very bad, my lord — Thorin,” she says, spreading her hands. “To tell the truth, I am not sure how it is that she does keep living. When I stitched her up I had little hope — she lost more blood than even I expected. I have only heard of one birth so difficult, and—“ she swallows, loud, and does not continue.

“What happened?”

“Bonnie Bracegirdle, a dozen years ago, fell in love with one of the Big Folk down in Bree. Of course there were jokes when they first wed, fun made. Someone gave her a pair of stilts as a wedding gift. But we didn’t truly mind a man among us. He was sweet to her, a good and kind husband. She thought he would make a good father. There’s a midwife’s song — ‘dwarf and elf can never bear, man and hobbit can never dare.’ But she bore her husband a son. And she was right — he was as good and kind a father as any the world’s ever seen.”

“What happened?” Thorin repeats, with a voice that wants nothing more than to crumble into dust.

Primula’s eyes are too-bright as she tends once more to the fire. “She lingered, and grew weak, and died. And their son did not live to see the spring.”

* *

Thorin does not keep close track of days, after that — each dawning seems too precious for counting, as Bilbo’s frame wastes away — but winter still has its hold on the mountain when the great bells sound in the halls. The peal is for an honored guest, not a warning, so Thorin does not stray from his task of changing the sheets on their bed. Dís, who has come in wordlessly to help this morning, clucks disapprovingly but says nothing.

Her silence lasts until the door opens and Tauriel comes marching in, her hand on the pommel of her sword. She sees Thorin first and takes to her knee. “My lord Thorin,” she says, and gets no further.

“You,” Dís says, voice full of loathing.

Tauriel blanches, a rare sight to be treasured another time. “Me,” she says.

“More accurately, we,” Gandalf adds from the door.

Thorin is prevented for replying by the third figure to enter. “Lord Elrond,” he says, wishing for his own sword at hand, “You are an… unexpected guest in my halls.”
“I hope not unwelcome,” Elrond replies, grave as ever. “The Guard-Captain’s quest to find Gandalf brought me along with him, to lend what aid I could.”

“Then you are not unwelcome,” Thorin admits. Behind Elrond’s shoulder, Dís makes a revolted face but keeps quiet.

Meanwhile Gandalf has pushed Primula aside and knelt beside Bilbo’s bed. “I trust we do not come too late.”

Primula pushes back and hands Gandalf a clean rag. “Wash your hands before you touch my patient, and I ought to make you strip that robe, seeing as how you’re carrying half the mud between here and the Shire on the sleeves.”

Gandalf takes the rag bemusedly. “Do you know who I am, tenderling?”

“You’re that wizard, I assume,” Primula sniffs.

“Among other names, I’ve answered to ‘that wizard’ on more than one occasion, but not more than three,” Gandalf says with some asperity, looking down his nose at the hobbit-lass. “And I suppose you’re the only hobbit with the courage to make the journey.”

“Not a bit of it,” Primula says, her chin up. “Drogo Baggins has been my faithful companion all this while, every bit as brave as me. Anyway, it’s about time you turned up.”

“I quite agree,” Gandalf mutters, and seems to see Thorin for the first time. “We are well-met, Thorin, son of Thrain. I came as soon as I could; the journey was more eventful than I had expected.”

Thorin cannot express in words how little he cares. “Can you save her?”

“We can save more than that, I think, if my suspicions are correct,” Gandalf says. “Where is the Ring?”

“What ring?” ask Thorin and Primula together.

* 

It lives in Thorin’s memory as the longest day of his life; recalling it feels, in future years, as though pressing on a bruise that goes to the bone.

He will not be ordered out of his chamber a second time, though it be Gandalf and Elrond — or Mahal himself — who order it so. And so he is charged to hold Bilbo’s limp form against his chest as the wizard and the elf spend long hours coaxing open the clenched fist that holds the Ring. The air soon grows rank with the stink of magic, muttered spells that are growled like curses or uttered like prayers. Finger by finger unfurls, but the dread weighs down on them all.

Primula, white-faced, stands by Elrond’s shoulder, chapped lips bitten until they bleed. Several times she rushes to the corner and is sick, though after the fourth hour Thorin cannot imagine what she would have left in her stomach. But she comes back always, waiting, her own hands twisted in her apron.

At long last the Ring lays exposed in Bilbo’s palm. Thorin knows well the trickery of rings of power, and yet looking at it he can hardly credit that so much could pivot on it, gleaming in the lamplight. "What will you do now?" he asks, though he has his notions — the whispered conference between Elrond and Primula beforehand left him in little doubt.
"We will draw the poison out," Gandalf says, looking thoughtfully at the Ring.

"You will give it to her?" Thorin asks, tilting his head to where Primula is — again — throwing up in the corner.

"Would you have me entrust it to you?" Gandalf's tone is mild.

He feels that same strange impulse that he has so carefully forgotten; holding the Ring and knowing it would not fit, yet wanting it with a creaking, alien desire. Looking into Gandalf's eyes now he feels as though he were standing on a cliff, winds pushing him out to the abyss; he shakes his head, and shifts his grip. "Do what you will," he says.

"Primula," Elrond urges. She comes forward with her hand outstretched, and for a moment Thorin can hear a dull whisper in his mind, reminding him of the lovely tug of riches, the sweetness of his victory and an end to the dark nights spent dreaming of vengeance.

But he tightens his grip on Bilbo's shoulders; the smell of the soap she buys from Bard's wife in his nostrils and her hair brushing his cheek.

Primula takes the Ring.

Two things happen at once: Primula puts the Ring hastily into a pocket of her apron and Bilbo's body seizes, as though she were surfacing for air after too long trapped under ice. Thorin holds her tightly as she shakes, her eyes open but still unseeing, her hand that gripped the Ring groping at air, as though to pluck it back. Primula stumbles back, falling, but Thorin cannot spare a thought for her as he murmurs nonsense into Bilbo's ear, soothing as one would a skittish pony.

It does little good. "Gandalf!" he cries, for she seems determined to tear herself apart with thrashing. From the dread that feels an almost tangible thing now he can hear the whispers again, a call to him. He looks down and it is Bilbo, mouth forming words that she seems to have no breath to voice. But when she looks at him with her wide, pale, terrible eyes there is no recognition in her face — only hunger.

The wizard bends over her, one large hand upon her forehead, and she goes limp once more, a last ragged gasp before her breathing settles. Cautious, Thorin loosens his hold upon her, conscious of the bruises that will show on her fragile skin. "Is it done, then?"

"Unfortunately not," Elrond says. "The Ring kept her alive—"

"Then you will do no less," Thorin says. Gandalf hisses something, but Thorin does not look away from the elf.

Elrond only smiles, flat and brief. "That is why I have come."

"Not the only reason," Thorin can't help but point out, his gaze pulled toward where Primula is standing against the wall, looking as worried as he's ever seen her.

"The main one, I can assure you," Gandalf says, getting to his feet with some difficulty. "I'll tend to the Ringbearer. The two of you now face a harder task."

Thorin never learned the healing arts, beyond how to set a dislocated shoulder or bind a wound; he accepts the ointments and brews that Óin makes and thinks little beyond that. But holding Bilbo as Elrond works gives him — not exactly respect, and certainly not understanding, for the the spells that
Elrond's eyebrows raise almost to his circlet. "Well met again, my lady Dís."

"I would hope so," Dís replies, and visibly dismisses him to address Thorin. "Gandalf came out yesterday evening with your nursemaid in tow — the others would know what is happening. As would I," she adds.

"I have given her a road back," Elrond says. "But she will walk it or not — no one can command her now. I shall leave you, my lord and lady. You need only call for me."

Dís waits until the door shuts behind him, the susurrus of sound from outside rising and falling, before turning back to Thorin. "Thorin—"

Thorin eases himself out from behind Bilbo and lays her carefully down on the bed once more. "What time is it?"

"It is dawn, or near," Dís says. She sniffs at the air, disapproving. "You've been holed up with these spellcasters a day and a night. You should rest."

"No doubt I should," Thorin says, smoothing the lank hair off Bilbo's forehead.

"Your daughters cry for you, Thorin. Come away."

"You heard Elrond. You would have me leave her to die?"

"I heard him fine — she will choose her own path, you being here won’t change it."

It is as stupid a thing as Dís has ever said in her life, and Thorin feels welcome anger in the back of his throat. "You are a widow," he says, unutterably cruel, "And know the pain of that loss. If Father had allowed it, would you have marched on Kazad-dum with us? Even if all you could have done was watch your husband fall?"

She flinches, but does not look away. "Yes."

"Yes," he echoes.

But she is not finished. She comes forward, straightening the blankets that cover Bilbo's feet. Her eyes watch the wrinkles disappear as she says, "I would not have watched him fall, Thorin. I would have followed him into death. Why else do you think Father forbade it? Why do you think I want you out of this room?"
"Our family is hard and dark of heart," she continues. "Avarice has been our curse since Celembribor gave us our ring; in our need to hold tightly we have often let too much slip through our fingers. Remember that. Remember what you owe — not just to Bilbo. To all of us."

And she finishes tending to the bedspread, retreating to the door. The sound swells a third time, but Dís is already snapping for quiet, and in the silence of the shut door he can hear the muffled sound of boots trooping down the hallway and away.

For most of his life, Thorin felt buried under the debts of others. He never questioned that he would pay; it was his duty as a son and king. But it left him with a poverty in his soul, emptiness where there should be riches. He thought he had paid all that he could during his quest, but it is only now that he understands how foolish he was to consider himself in the black. He was still borrowing, buying wealth and happiness and love, the ledger bleeding red against a darkness that had burrowed into his mountain without his knowing. And now the price has been reckoned, in this simple chamber deep in the heart of his homeland.

“And I know you would pay it,” he tells her, kneeling at the edge of their bed the way he has so often, taking her hand — the hand that held the Ring, but that now lies empty, only a fading red circle indented into the heel of her palm. “Gladly and with goodwill, for that is your way — perhaps the way of all Hobbits. You have never seen the danger of debts between friends, have you? You gave your share of the mountain’s treasure to a Man you barely knew; you value food and cheer and song above any hoarded gold. You would leave my side and say that what we have had already is enough. But I — have no such concept. I cannot be satisfied with what we have had; I will always want more. The line of Durin grasps for what we want and cleaves to what is ours. Often I’ve looked at you and wondered if I ever conquered the curse of our family at all, or if I merely chose love over gold. Greed — such a small word for the yawning, great thing in our hearts.

“Dís is wrong to fear for me,” he continues. "If you choose the path that leads to your death, burglar, I will not follow you tonight. Nor the next nor the next after that. I will rise from this bed. I will be a father to our daughters, a brother and uncle and king. I will go on living without you. But it is not because you have taught me to be generous of heart, or because I have learned to let go of what is mine. I will live because death will not give you back to me.

"Amongst men and elves there is the belief that upon death, dwarves return to the rock from whence Mahal carved us. In truth we too are sent to the Halls of Mandos, to Mahal's grace in the afterlife, where we are united again with those dwarves we loved and lost in ages past, but kept apart from the children of Ilúvatar. When I die there will I go — but not you. The Halls are only for the children of Mahal; death will sunder us forever, our two halves to spend eternity incomplete once more. I know this, and yet I would not change finding you, finding my whole; I will stand in those halls and treasure what time we had together, brief as it was."

Her eyes do not open, nor does she stir, and he runs a careful thumb across her wrist. “I lied, the first time we met,” he admits. “I did not lose my way to your house. Or smial, if you prefer. I suspect you do.

"I arrived in good time, but lingered on the doorstep — I could hear laughter and singing within. And it frightened me more than I can say. All adventures we had were nothing compared to the quiet of that dirt path as I gathered the courage to knock on that door, knowing who was waiting for me. Not you,” he admits. "I did not know you then, and I thought little of your qualifications, whatever Gandalf might have said on your behalf.

"I'd come from the meeting of the seven kingdoms, and knew they would not stir from their own mountains, risk their own strength — not even for the riches of Erebor. For though there were
rumors amongst men that Smaug was no longer a threat, our memories go deeper. Four other times in ages past have dwarf kingdoms fallen to dragon fire; that they had been regained centuries later gave me little hope. I was sure that we would fail; that I would die taking my nephews and my companions with me. The fact that I had no choice was cold comfort on that warm night.

"But still I knocked. And you let me in. I thought little of you at the time — a dumpy hobbit-lad who wanted to pretend at adventures, complaining every step of the way. But I’d taken those moments to listen to the laughter of my new Company, so I could hold it close to me in the long months to come, and even then I remembered that your laugh was the loudest, the merriest. I thought that I could find the silly halfling in any darkness by that laughter. I do not know if there is anything about me that you could find, in darkness, with your path unclear."

His throat is dry, but he does not stop. "So it is a selfish thing I ask, but that is the way my love for you has run; selfish and perhaps unfair. Come back to me, burglar. Come back and steal a little more time."
He must sleep, then; for certainly he dreams, of ever-bending skies and distant roads, of danger
unseen but oppressive all the same, and of a burning eye passing over the mountain as it searches. He
dreams of voices raised in rage and in strength, of songs that have not yet been written but chill his
blood. He dreams of gathering all that is dear to him close into his arms, impossibly wide and vast
and safe in the darkness. “I can always find you,” he hears, and he wakes.

Bilbo smiles down at him — a smile that reaches her eyes, no longer glassy and pale but the familiar
dark jumble of blue and grey, green and brown. She puts one fragile hand to his cheek; her fingers
are warm. “You were snoring again,” she says.

“You’re the one who snores,” he disagrees, reflexive, and she scoffs. She is still wax-pale and gaunt.
Thorin should call for Elrond, or Gandalf; he should ask if there is anything she needs. Instead he
surges forward, unable to help the helpless kisses he gives to her. She laughs and kisses him back,
tears salting his beard but radiant for all of that. She pulls him up into the bed, her arms around his
shoulders.

“I take it the children are named?” she asks, after he has settled his head upon her breast. She winces
as she shifts. “Since I can feel the great uncomfortable gash in my belly, and I seem a trifle smaller
than before. What did you choose for them?”

“Marigold is our eldest,” he says, “And Athelas our youngest. Both fine and strong—”

She claps her hand to her forehead. “You named them after weeds? Thorin—“

“All we had was a book with pictures,” Thorin argues, defensive. “And Fíli and Kíli thought—“

“You left the naming to your nephews, small wonder,” she sighs, but when he dares a look up at her
she is shaking her head fondly. “Truly, my love, I cannot leave you unattended for even a moment,
can I?”

“I would prefer that you didn’t,” he says.

“I’ll do my best,” she says, a promise and warning both. She frowns as something catches her eye,
and she turns her own hand over. Thorin can just see what she is looking at: the Ring’s mark has not,
after all, faded. “It was so heavy,” she says, running her finger over the reddened skin. “At first I
found comfort in it, but then it — was like a great rock on my chest, weighing me down under a
swift current. I could not float up. I was not even sure which way was up. I was so lost.”

“But you found your way,” he says. “How?”

“I told you,” she says, surprised. “I can always find you. I know you as I know the beat of my heart
and the breath in my lungs. And that,” she adds, smiling more broadly still, “Is a line from a poem by
Ferubas North-Took, who was considered quite wild even for his family, but I always thought he
was the only poet who really understood what love was like, in the end.”

*

The wisest course of action is to persuade her to sleep once more, but Bilbo is biddable as ever and
insists on seeing her daughters, immediately if not sooner. Thorin confines himself to a few
reasonable objections before being shushed for sounding like a nagging fishwife. “The moment I
speak to the servant outside,” he points out, “Everyone will descend upon you like so many hungry
gulls.”

Bilbo simply pulls herself up into a sitting position. “Let them come,” she says, lifting her chin. “I’ve a few choice words to share with your nephews, for one thing.”

Outside the door lurks no servant, but Bofur, sitting on a chair dragged in from some dining hall or other and whittling. He lurches to his feet, grey-faced. “Is she—“

“Awake, and preemptory,” Thorin says, and finds himself shoved to one side as Bofur darts through the door.

“You look dreadful!”

“Shut up,” Bilbo orders, “And have someone bring me my children this instant.”

“As my lady commands,” Bofur says, and reappears. “Sorry about that, Your Madge,” he says to Thorin, and takes off toward the nursery.

Thorin doesn’t bother shutting the door. “It’ll be all over the mountain in five minutes,” he says.

“Saves you the trouble of ringing a peal, or making Fíli give another speech or something,” she replies, unrepentant.

As Thorin predicted, their chamber is soon taken over by well-wishers. Elrond even makes a brief appearance, looking as disapproving as elves ever do. “You should take care not to overextend yourself,” he warns, but Thorin is fairly sure Bilbo can’t hear him, too busy ordering Kíli to offer everyone refreshments and cooing over her dwarrow-babes’ dimples. After a while Elrond gets some ale spilled on his frock and swirls out.

Over the next few days the color returns to Bilbo’s face and she regains her strength, no longer exhausted by the effort of holding her daughters. She’s permitted some careful exercise — “I’m not doing any of those confusticated elvish stretching routines, so don’t even ask,” she grumps at Thorin — and one of her first long walks is out to the top of the battlements, squinting in the weak morning sun, wrapped in wool and furs but her nose soon red from the cold. Thorin stands by her side and does not mention the tremble in her hands as she lays them on the stone wall, or the tears on her cheeks whipped away by the wind.

“I kept forgetting things,” she confesses that night, cradled safely in the circle of his arms. “I dreamed of so many terrible things that even now I can recall with perfect clarity, but I couldn’t remember the simplest of pleasures — the smell of fresh-tilled earth, the feel of the sun on my face, the sound of running water. As though something were rummaging through my head and stealing away any comfort I might have kept close.”

“I’ll have a spring installed in our chambers tomorrow,” Thorin promises, and she laughs, turning to kiss him on the cheek, on the mouth.

“You always know exactly the worst thing to say,” she says, too affectionate for him to take more than passing offense, especially when she presses him down onto his back and clambers over him. “I almost forgot this, too,” she adds, with a sly smile.

“Allow me to refresh your memory, milady,” Thorin says, in what would be a solemn tone if she hadn’t hit him in the face with a pillow.

Over the next week half the mountain comes to pay its respects to the awoken queen, who greets everyone like a dear friend and prattles endlessly about “all I’ve missed” in the month she’s been
lying cold and still in their chamber. Dís even drags in Drogo Baggins at one point; he blushes furiously as Bilbo busses him on the cheek and thanks him for all he’s done.

“I just took orders, Miss — milady,” he says. “Prim’s the one who did all the work.”

Bilbo’s smile fades a bit. “Yes, well.”

Thorin waits until Bilbo gets embroiled in a discussion over nappies with Dís and Drogo — apparently the linen versus cotton argument is a serious one — and slips out. It isn’t very difficult to find Gandalf, though possibly the wizard thought he was clever. “An interesting choice of accommodations,” Thorin tells him from the doorway of the largest of Bilbo’s hobbit holes. “The last time you stayed with us, Bilbo gave you the run of an entire network of rooms.”

Gandalf starts a bit, looking up from where he has been gazing at the fire, but he recovers quickly. “There’s something very comforting about a nice, well-appointed smial,” he replies. “I’ve spent a good deal of time in one of them or another; I confess I’ve gotten quite used to the chairs.”

“Bilbo has asked for you,” Thorin says. “And for her midwife. Your absence grows conspicuous.”

“I’m glad to hear dear Bilbo’s on the road to recovery,” Gandalf says. He pats at himself for his tobacco pouch. “I’ll be sure to pay my compliments in a few days; allow her a little more time to regain her strength.”

“Do you think the Queen will lunge for Primula the moment she’s within reach?”

Gandalf relights his pipe, a delaying tactic Thorin wishes he were not so long familiar with. “I thought it best not to test her so soon,” he temporizes. “She has had a trying time.”

“Yes,” Thorin agrees, “Being held under the sway of the Ring of Sauron would likely try most people.”

There’s something truly gratifying about the way Gandalf’s jaw drops. “You knew?”

“I guessed,” he admits, pulling up a seat. “We dwarves have worked with many magic rings, but one that hides its wearer from view and keeps its bearer alive? That is magic beyond the powers of this Age. The Ring of Durin was said to have extended the life of our line, and well I know the provenance of that. Besides, I cannot believe you and Lord Elrond would come in all this haste and fury if it had simply been—” Thorin finds he does not want to finish that thought, much less the sentence.

“You think poorly of me, Thorin Oakenshield, if you cannot believe that,” Gandalf says, not with anger so much as weariness. “But perhaps it is well-deserved.”

“How did you know?” Thorin asks.

“Much like your honored self,” Gandalf says, “I guessed.”

It’s unlikely he’ll get any more information, if the smile on the wizard’s face is any indication. So instead he asks, “Who else knows what Primula carries?”


“I will not say you think poorly of me.”

“Nor should you,” Gandalf says. “I have known Bilbo since before she was born, and a more
trustworthy hobbit I could not name. Her mother was cut from much the same cloth. Belladonna would have liked you, I think.)

“That is a flattering remark meant to distract me,” Thorin says, “Though I thank you for the sentiment. What are you going to do with it?”

At least he doesn’t try to pretend confusion. “Ought something be done?” he asks instead, mildly.

“Sauron was vanquished many centuries ago—”

“Respect your host at least enough to not consider him stupid, Gandalf,” Thorin snaps, his temper at last beginning to wear. “I am king of the last of the great dwarf kingdoms. I was raised with all the lore of my people and history of Middle Earth. I know the stories. Sauron’s Ring held much of his power; so long as it remained lost we could never call him vanquished, merely defeated. And now that it has been found—”

“Oh, very well,” Gandalf harrumphs, the irritable scowl Thorin remembers so well. “Then perhaps I should rephrase — why do you suppose I aim to do anything?”

“You sought counsel with the lord of the last Homely House and, I suspect, went back to the Goblin caves under the Misty Mountains to look for that creature Bilbo won the Ring from.” Gandalf’s scowl deepens; Thorin continues, heartened. “You have given the Ring to yet another hobbit, though I hope this isn’t out of some foolish belief that Mistress Brandybuck is any more likely to do as she’s bid. And even now, speaking with me, you have your sword within easy reach, to defend the Ringbearer whom I suspect is in one of the other rooms, should I or anyone else attempt to take the Ring from her.” Thorin pulls out his own pipe. “That is why I suppose.”

Gandalf almost looks impressed, but he says only, “Goodness gracious,” as he hands over his tobacco pouch.

“If I were of a suspicious bent, I would accuse you of aiming to slip out the back door.”

“The idea had occurred to me. But this is a threat shared by all of Middle Earth; the remedy should also be shared.”

“Then you do have a plan,” Thorin says, and Gandalf leans forward.

* *

“Is she all right?” Bilbo greets him when at last he makes his way back to their chambers. She is cradling Marigold; someone has brought in two cribs and placed them near the fireplace, and in the firelight he can see Athelas sleeping in one. The chamber is otherwise empty, though there are a few tankards and plates left piled in the corner that give testament to recent and boisterous occupation.

“I should warn you that our daughters have both been known to cry through the night,” Thorin says, but he seats himself behind Bilbo and pulls her against his chest, looking down at their eldest daughter who, for once, seems relatively unperturbed.

“So did I, when I was a tenderling,” Bilbo confides, leaning back against him. “My mother confessed to me that she would often soak a rag in rum and let me suckle on that — it was the only thing that would settle me.”

“This explains a great deal,” Thorin says, and gets an elbow in his stomach for his trouble.

“You didn’t answer my question,” she reminds him. “Did you see Primula?”
“I did not,” Thorin confesses. “My conference was with Gandalf; but I believe she fares well. Do you not wish to speak with her yourself?”

She shakes her head, a little too violently. “No, I—” she takes a deep breath. “I don’t think so. Not right now.”

“She saved your life,” Thorin says, gently.

“The Ring saved my — this is why I don’t want to see her,” Bilbo says. “I’m afraid of myself at the moment.”

Marigold has fallen asleep, drooling; Thorin takes her from Bilbo and sets her in the crib next to her sister’s. He disrobes, the silence growing thicker between them, but when he slips into bed beside Bilbo she curls into him, wrapping her small hands around his wrists.

“I need to tell you — the creature I found down in the tunnels,” she says. “I told you I won the Ring off him, with a game of riddles. But I didn’t — that is, I won the game, but the prize wasn’t the Ring. I took it after Gollum dropped it—“

“Gollum?”

Bilbo smiles a bit. “I had to name the poor creature something, even if it was just in my head. It’s funny, thinking back — I was so frightened of him. But I think of him now and I feel only pity. And — dread.”

“Why dread?” Thorin asks, though he suspects he knows.

Bilbo swallows; her grip on his hands tightens. “When I ran out, I could hear him behind me, shrieking and wailing. He said ‘curse that Baggins, we hates it, we hates it forever.’ And at the time it just made me run faster, but now that Primula and Gandalf took the Ring from me… I know they had to. And I hope that if I were given a choice, I would have given it up. But I don’t know. And there’s a part of me that hates them both, so very much, for never giving me a choice.” She closes her eyes. “Am I so weak, Thorin? You’ve told me tales of your grandfather’s sickness. Am I—“

He kisses her, soft but quick. “First, let me tell you what Gandalf and I discussed.”

She listens intently as he recounts the conversation in the hobbit hole, though she interrupts a great deal to express disbelief. “The Evil Ring of Mordor? How—“ she sits up. “I can hardly credit it. How is it even possible?”

“We may never know,” Thorin says, sitting up beside her. But she swings her legs off the bed and pads over to where the dwarrow-babes lie still sleeping, wrapping her patchwork robe that Ori had brought back from the Shire around her. Her back tells him little of what she is thinking, so he prompts, “Bilbo?”

“I never thought of myself as brave,” she says, still leaning against Athelas’s crib. Thorin gets up, pulling on his own robe. She flinches slightly when he stands behind her, but continues, “Hobbits are good at hiding and getting out of trouble, but that’s because most of us make sure to keep out of trouble. I sat at my mother’s knee and heard wild tales about her adventures, and I would drag out her maps and journals and pore over them after she died. But I never thought to go out into that big world, so full of trouble to get into. Not until Gandalf interrupted my pipe that morning. Great deeds were things to be told about, I thought, but nasty uncomfortable things that made you late for dinner. And here I am, less than two years later, a queen and a mother and a Ringbearer and all manner of titles that would probably get me thrown out of the Shire if ever I ventured back.”
At last she looks up at him; her expression is not happy, but nor are there tears on her face. “If anyone tried to turn you away I’d set fire to their rabbit warren,” he says.

“Exactly the wrong thing to say,” she laughs, and perhaps it does not sound convincing, but she takes his arm and leads him back to bed. “I just mean to say that — before I found the Ring, before I ran out my door without a hat or handkerchief, my life was so small. Small and quiet, and it was only after I left that I realized it wasn’t what I wanted to go back to. What if the Ring… the stories say it grants powers to its bearer, gives them power and all manner of things they want. What if all of this is the work of—” She clenches her jaw.

Thorin gathers her carefully into his arms, hooking one ankle around her knee, keeping her close. “I do not love you because you wanted my love,” he tells her. “And though you no longer have the Ring, I am still here. Can you not take comfort in that?” She does not respond, and so he sets his chin upon the crown of her head. “We dwarves are not so easily moved by magic; though our minds may succumb to an evil will, our hearts are flinty and do not warm with a mere spell. Besides, dwarves love only once. Even if you brought me to your side with a magic trick, I’m afraid I cannot be shifted now.”

“So I’m stuck with you for life, no matter what?” she says, sounding hopeful.

“At the very least.”

“There is something to be said for consistency. I — am glad to hear that. It’s a frightening thing, to stand on solid rock and fear that it’s quicksand.” She rearranges his limbs to better suit herself, pillowing her head on his arm. “It still seems curious, to have the most powerful weapon in the world discovered in a mucky goblin tunnel by a harmless little hobbit.”

“I consider it proof of forces at work besides the will of evil.”

Bilbo twists around to give him a peck on the cheek. “Very pretty,” she approves, then settles herself to face him. “What else did you and Gandalf talk about? Has he got a plan?”

“He wishes to hold a Council of some sort, to decide what is to be done next; but we both see the peril in telling the world that the One Ring has been discovered.”

“Knowing Gandalf, the idea of telling anyone anything must be giving him heartburn,” Bilbo says tartly. “So, an excuse to gather the powers of Middle Earth; to bring our most trusted allies without arousing suspicion — though goodness knows just who it might be that we don’t want making suspicious — oh! What a clothead I am.”

“If you could provide me with evidence, I’d be happy to agree.”

She scrunches her nose at him. “You’re not in the least amusing, Thorin Oakenshield. I’ve got it: a celebration of the birth of our children — wouldn’t that provide a good excuse? The heirs of Erebor, two daughters — you’ve banged on and on about how a firstborn daughter is such good luck, and it must be some kind of event to have twins — the rebirth of Erebor itself, et cetera — surely that is an occasion that would merit a party.”

Thorin turns the idea over in his mind. It has merit. “Dwarves are not given to birthing celebrations,” he says.

“Well then you can say it’s a sop to that unreasonable hobbit you married — trying to incorporate her traditions into your new kingdom, and all that.”

“Is there a hobbit tradition of celebrating births?”
Bilbo shrugs.

* 

By what means Bilbo and Gandalf have reached a detente, Thorin does not know, but she invites him to the Company’s luncheon the following day. “My dear Bilbo,” Gandalf says, “I’d be utterly delighted.”

“Yes, I’m sure you would be,” Bilbo says. “But if you’ll do me a small favor, be sure not to contradict a single thing I say.”

Gandalf’s eyebrows practically disappear under his hat. “This promises to be most intriguing.”

The Company reacts to Bilbo’s announcement with equal parts enthusiasm and trepidation. “A feast for the dwarrow-babes?” Glóin asks, gaze flicking from Thorin to Bilbo and back.

“Of course,” Bilbo says, pouring herself more tea. “It’s tradition amongst my people. A great huge party, commensurate with the status of the hobbit in question. It would be disgraceful not to have a party.”

“But — I mean, they’re fine babes,” Balín says, hastily, “But what would be the point? We all know they’re here already. It wasn’t exactly a secret.”

“Do hobbits keep babies secret?” Kíli asks.

From his seat at Thorin’s right, Gandalf coughs around the stem of his pipe.

“Yes, we swaddle them up in sackcloths and pretend they’re very noisy potatoes,” Bilbo says, with not nearly enough sarcasm in her voice. The Company nods thoughtfully, and she darts a glance at Thorin.

Thorin, for his part, bites down hard on his cheek. “You aren’t suggesting that we disrespect the traditions of the Queen, I hope?” he says.

It’s a mark of how far he’s fallen that instead of eagerly agreeing with him as his council seems wont to do, the Company to a dwarf just roll their eyes. “All right, tell us what’s to be done, then,” Dori says, pulling out his notebook. “Are there any particulars that we should know about?”

It is possibly the most demanding task of Thorin’s life, sitting at the table stone-faced while Bilbo and Gandalf make up great elaborate lies about the customs surrounding the feast, which Gandalf christens the Party of Birthgiving and reminisces over the many such parties he has been invited to. “I was even at Bilbo’s mother’s birthgiving party,” he says. “Splendid affair. The presents in particular were very fine.”

“Presents?” Bofur says, looking worried and rummaging around his pockets for a notebook of his own.

“Yes, of course,” Gandalf says, greatly surprised. “One must give presents to the newborn child, to show your intention to care for it as though it were your own. In the Shire, it’s terribly important that everyone has a hand in rearing tenderlings.”

Fíli frowns. “But Uncle had to teach you how to hold the girls so you wouldn’t drop them,” he says to Bilbo.

“I was more involved once they learned how to walk and talk and wipe their noses with
handkerchiefs,” Bilbo says. “Which makes my running off with you lot all the more incomprehensible.”

By the time the luncheon adjourns, the Company is drawing up elaborate plans for two large cakes with life-sized representations of the princesses done in spun sugar (Bombur looks equal parts terrified and determined), a procession with the princesses in specially-designed carriages pulled by Mearas, and Balin himself is the one to suggest inviting dignitaries from far-flung kingdoms. “We should make it known to all that the line of Durin will not just endure, but thrive,” he says, lacing his fingers over his stomach.

“Oh, certainly, if you think that’s a good idea,” Bilbo says, eyes wide. Gandalf starts coughing again.

Dwalin catches Thorin’s arm on their way out. “Out of curiosity, milord,” he says, “How much of that was horseshit?”

Thorin claps him on the shoulder. “You wouldn’t accuse Gandalf and your Queen of telling untruths, would you?”

“Wouldn’t I,” Dwalin says darkly.

*

Thorin leaves the planning of the celebration-cum-council session to Gandalf and Bilbo, while he gets on with overseeing the real business of the mountain. Ring or not, the wizard and the hobbit still bicker as much as ever, Bilbo reporting irritably on arguments ranging from the delegations to be invited to the food to be served, but nothing seems to come to blows.

Thorin keeps a watchful, if distant, eye on Primula, who has kept to herself in the hobbit holes and seldom ventures into the mountain anymore. Gandalf appears sanguine, but Elrond (who has hung about for reasons passing understanding) does not, and so Thorin does what kings so often are forced to do: he watches and waits. His best spy is Drogo Baggins, who spends a good deal of time running errands for Primula, looking in turn put-upon and fretful. “She may be a bit unsociable at the moment, my lord,” he says, over a tankard one evening, “But she’s as bossy as ever in her own home. Or — not presuming, of course — her guest quarters, I suppose.” He hiccups. “God help us if we’re still here in the summer.”

“I’ll be sure the two of you are adequately hydrated and fed, in that case,” Thorin assures him.

“Oh, she’d not want me——” Drogo’s offhand response is cut off and he chokes on his ale. “What? I didn’t — how do you——”

Thorin lifts a brow. “You were present at the birth of my daughters,” he points out.

“Well yes, but…” Drogo visibly recoils from the idea. “Begging your pardon very much I’m sure, my lord, but, well, before coming here I thought dwarves carved their children out of rocks and gemstones.”

“And I used to think hobbits grew their children alongside the cabbages in their gardens,” Thorin says. “It appears we were both wrong.”

“I suppose I can handle a bit of change to the way the world works,” Drogo says, taking another drink. “So long as it’s still true that elves sing their babies into being and men steal any animal cub they can find and raise them as their own.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s true,” Thorin says, bland.
Bilbo does not send for Primula nor does Primula pay her compliments, and after a while that seems as close to a solution as is likely. Thorin does not raise the subject with his wife, preferring to spend his evenings arguing over what languages Marigold and Athelas should learn to read first or teaching Bilbo how to change nappies.

"Why are they so disgusting?" she complains, washing her hands for the fifth time, though she scoops Athelas back into her arms as soon as she's done, counting all her fingers the way she seems to delight in doing. "I'm sure this is your fault. Hobbit tenderlings are pink-faced and adorable, not like these hairy little beasts." She says this last in a cooing tone, tapping Athelas fondly on her nose. Athelas makes a delighted noise, flailing at her face.

"Aye, I'm sure they don't shit or burp or drool, and are tiny little dolls to be burbled at," Thorin says. Marigold yanks at his hair; Bilbo has already laughed a great deal over the fact that their dwarvish-looking daughter has the hobbit temperament, and their hobbit-looking daughter the dwarvish charm.

"They're a sight less smelly, I'm sure."

"When were you ever near enough a babe to smell it?" Thorin asks, mildly curious.

Bilbo purses her lips. "That's not the point," she argues.

But the peace between the two cousins is not something that can be balanced forever; it's as fragile as a crystal goblet, and as easily shattered. Drogo comes pounding into a council meeting one afternoon, dodging the guards outside the door. "Thorin!" he gasps, his hands on his knees. "Thorin, you've got to — I got a bit turned around, goodness only knows what they're doing now—"

He's already risen to his feet, he realizes. "What's happened?"

"Bilbo and Prim," Drogo wheezes. "They're locked up the Queen's Hall."

Half the council rises to follow Thorin out, but he orders everyone to stay where they are and leads Drogo back to the Queen's Hall, an impressive, echoing chamber to the left of the Great Throne, where the Queen may see to her duties. Bilbo has never bothered with it, preferring to wander around Erebor and chat people up. The door is locked, but Thorin's key opens most rooms within his kingdom and it turns in the lock easily. Drogo makes to follow him.

"No," Thorin warns. "Stay here. There are—" he looks at Drogo's wide, honest face, and cannot explain. "You are better to stay without and make sure no one else comes in. Tell them the King has ordered it so, if anyone gives you trouble."

"Thorin — my lord," Drogo starts, but bites his lip. "Yes, all right."

Thorin slips in. The chamber is empty aside from two figures at the other end. On her throne — too large for a hobbit, her feet dangle off the edge — sits Bilbo, head bent down over something in her hand. Standing next to her is—

"Mistress Brandybuck," Thorin says; he sounds all wrong in the quiet of the room. "I would ask you to step away from the Queen."

Primula looks up, fear wild in her eyes, but she doesn't move. "Please," she says, low. "Please, just let her be."

Thorin comes closer; in Bilbo's hand is the Ring.

"I found it in the dirt," she says. She has fitted the Ring to where the scar rests in her palm; with her
other hand she strokes it gently. “I could feel bits of grit on it when it slipped onto my finger — I thought it was just because I was so covered in muck myself. But however much I washed my hands, however much I polished my pretty little ring, whenever I wore it I could still feel that grit, scraping my skin raw.”

“Bilbo,” Thorin says, softly, but Primula pulls him back.


Bilbo tilts the Ring back and forth. “Such a funny thing,” she murmurs, then takes a deep breath and turns her hand downward. For a moment it seems as though the Ring clings to her hand, but then it falls, hitting the ground with a heavy, dull noise. Primula scoops it up into a handkerchief and pushes it into a pocket, and Bilbo blinks, seems to see Primula for the first time. “You’ll want to get a chain for it,” she says, vaguely, scrubbing her hand on her skirts. “It used to slip off my finger or out of my pockets all the time.”

“I’ll do that, cousin,” Primula says gently, gathering Bilbo’s hands into hers. “Thank you for entrusting it to me.”

That seems to bring Bilbo further back to reality. “Oh goodness,” she says, horrified. “Oh, Prim, I am so sorry. Sorry for everything—“

“None of that,” Primula chides, as though Bilbo were one of the dwarrow-babes and she an old dam shushing them to sleep. “It’s all right, Bilbo. You gave it up.” She looks up at where Thorin still has a hand on his sword. “No need to lop anyone’s head off.”

“Thorin?” Bilbo says, surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“I might ask the same thing of you,” Thorin replies. “I was summoned here by a hobbit who is even now having hysterics in the outer chamber.”

Primula makes a disgusted noise. “He’s going to give himself an ulcer one of these days,” she says, and straightens up. “By your leave, Bilbo. And you too, I suppose,” she adds, turning to Thorin.

“We’ll talk later of this,” Thorin promises. “At length.”

“Something to look forward to,” Primula calls over her shoulder as she skips out the door.

“What were the two of you doing?” Thorin demands.

Bilbo sags in her throne, wiping at tears on her cheeks. “Something very stupid,” she admits. “So it would seem.”

“She came to see me. I was — angry. I told her what I told you, how I was never allowed to let it go, how she stole it from me.” She starts to scrub her hand again, then clenches it into a fist. “To be honest I’m not sure just what I said. I hope to never remember. She pulled it out of her pocket and handed it to me, told me it was mine to give to her or not, as I chose.”

“That,” Thorin says, “Was something far beyond stupidity.” But he takes her clenched fist, raises it to his lips for a gentle kiss along her knuckles.

“Well, it’s been rumored Brandybucks have insanity in their family,” says Bilbo, “And of course the Tookes have always been a bit off. I should tell you about my great-uncle Bullroarer sometime.” She shakes her head, as though shaking water from her hair. “She gave it to me, just like that.”
“She’ll make a fine Ringbearer. As did you.”

“She’ll do better,” Bilbo says. “That’s what young people are for.”

* *

It’s early morning in April when the first delegation is reported on the South Road; Thorin and Bilbo go up to the battlements to watch. She shades her eyes. “I can’t see anything.”

“They’re still miles off, by the watchtower’s signal,” Thorin says. “And I’m not sure what there is to see. No doubt it’s one or another of the elf tribes, come to seduce more of my relatives.”

“Well, can anyone blame them?” Bilbo says, grinning. “The line of Durin is full of such charming, handsome, gregarious fellows.”

Thorin huffs. Three weeks ago Kíli announced at the high table his intention to wed his Guard-Captain. Dís’s fit has been thorough and comprehensive; there are still workers repairing the damage done to the Main Hall. The affianced couple have once again taken themselves off, this time to Mirkwood where hopefully Thranduil will suffer some kind of seizure and die from the shock — though Kíli has pledged to return before the birthgiving feast, as he has a gift he seems particularly proud of to present to his cousins.

Erebor has been full of other events: new plantings along the mountain face, Esgaroth’s slow barges moving up the river at last after a long winter’s freeze, the birth of another son to Himlis and Glóin.

“I didn’t even realize I was pregnant,” Himlis confessed, visiting with Bilbo and Thorin one evening. “So embarrassing when that happens.” Gimli has been delegated caretaker for his new brother and the princesses, and takes his duties far too seriously; already he has begun fighting with Gandalf over his use of firecrackers as “irresponsible showing-off.” (In truth, the babes are in far more danger from their various babysitters than from anything that Gandalf might indulge in; the Company seem to view Athelas and Marigold and Glóin-dwarrow as communal property, to be carried off whenever they want entertainment. Gimli has already raised the mountain’s alarm twice, shrieking about a royal kidnapping, only to find the princesses in the chartroom, watching bemusedly as Bifur rattles a new wooden toy at them, or in the armory, curled up with Dwalin taking a nap.)

It has been, in short, like the warm springs and summers that Thorin remembers — not from his youth, which had grown cold and fearful even before Smaug had arrived to wreak his havoc, but from the dusty recollections of his childhood, when Erebor had stood untouched and proud, a fortress not only against its foes but against time itself. It was probably foolish to imagine the mountain in such a way; a child’s recollection, in truth. He is old now, and he knows that fortresses can crumble all too easily from without and within.

The riders are still out of sight, though another watchtower’s horn signals from down the road. “I wish this were over already,” Bilbo sighs, then snorts at herself. “And I wish it didn’t need to happen at all. Such a jumble of wishing.”

“Do you still fear what will be done?” he asks her, taking her other hand in his.

“I fear for those who will have to do it,” she replies. “But wishing and fearing aren’t going to get us very far at all, are they?”

From far off there is a glint along the road, past the snowy ruins of Dale. “Perhaps we can hope, then,” Thorin says.

He means it. Where there are people like him and Bilbo and the Company, and even Tauriel and
Gandalf and Primula, there will be the chance to rebuild and remake, even after long desolation. He does not know what will happen tomorrow — or in a month, or a decade — and along with Bilbo he fears for those who will carry the weight of their future. But where there is life, as Drogo has said, there is hope.

“I married a philosopher,” Bilbo laughs, still squinting at the horizon. “Some day I’ll have to write a book about all this.”

“A Hobbit’s Tale’?”

“That’s a terrible title. Yours would sell much better: ‘There And Back Again.’”

Thorin winces. “Perhaps we should leave it to someone else,” he says.

“Who better to tell our story? Besides, I’ve already thought of the ending, for both our books.”

“And what’s that, burglar?’”

The first riders come within view, banners flying; Bilbo turns away to smile up at him, threading her fingers through his. “‘And they lived happily ever after,’” she tells him, “‘To the end of their days.’”

End Notes

Thanks firstly to rageprufrock; without her termazing “hobbits go into heat every summer” idea, this pseudo-sequel would never have been written. She also shared with me the first part of her own story, and all credit goes to her for Thorin’s fond, exasperated, lovely POV; his voice in this story is entirely due to me trying to imitate what she began as faithfully as I could. Getting her blessing to write this was what brought me back into writing enthusiastically after a long drought, and I am endlessly grateful to her.

But the most thanks go to waldorph and screamlet. Waldorph was an absolutely amazing beta for this entire work; she pushed and prodded me into creating a better story, and every time I got notes back from her I’d swear and stomp my feet that I hadn’t thought of her excellent points first. If you’re a good writer, and you’re lucky, you’ll get a beta who’s almost as good as you. If you’re unmentionably, unathomably lucky, you’ll get a beta who’s better; and the only reason I don’t resent the hell out of her for being so much better is that she’s one of the sweetest people I know. Screamlet also deserves a heaping barreelful of praise for her tirelessly cheerleading and her affectionate threats of violence. Whenever she sent me a death threat I knew that I was on the right track, and she encouraged me through countless moments where I wasn’t sure what to write next. In fact, the email chains we had between the three of us are, I can promise, much more entertaining than this story could ever hope to be, and it’s a mark of my own selfishness that I will hold them close and never share them. I have been friends with these assholes for over four years now, and my life is unbelievably richer and better for knowing them.

Further thanks go to gyzym, who insisted that the ballad of Gimli and Legolas be included and whose contributions made this story all the better (and more hilarious); to queenku, panpandeus, toadpuff, feelslikefire, and worset, who all read this as it was being written and gave me the best possible motivation in the form of their own keymashing replies and profanity-laden concrit. As much as I’ve enjoyed posting this story and getting the wonderful
reactions from readers, I’ll never have as much fun as I did sending these guys a chunk of writing right before going to bed, and waking up to (for example), an email that looks like this:

NO
FUCK YOU
NO
JE REFUSE
THIS IS FUCKING BULLSHIT
YOU MAKE THIS BETTER
OR I SWEAR
I WILL REACH THROUGH THE INTERNETS AND MAKE YOU
I SWEAR BY WHATEVER POWER YOU HOLD DEAR
JUST
NO

That being said, thanks to you, dear readers; all your comments and feedback are cherished and appreciated.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!