"Do I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Durinson, or Mr. Feirson?" asked the gentleman with the hat, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet. "As Mr. Feirson had been dead these seven years," responded Durinson in an unflattering tone, "I should hope it is the former. What can I do for you?"

Thorin Durinson is a hard-nosed moneylender of Dale, a dwarf who seems to bear a grudge against the world for being beyond his control. On a night when the world had gone mad with their ridiculous Christmas cheer, something extraordinary happens, and Durinson is given a second chance.

Notes

I'd like to give mucho credit to A Muppet's Christmas Carol as my primary source for the feel of this fic. Michael Cane is perhaps the best Scrooge I've ever seen, and I re-watch it every now and then to remind me of what I'm writing. :)

See the end of the work for more notes
Hard as Flint

There was a small establishment in the moneylenders' lane in the old city of Dale. Above the door, painted in glossy letters, were the words "Durinson and Fierson." Now, there are a couple things you must know about this establishment and its owner before our tale can start in earnest. Fierson was dead, to begin with. Dead as a doornail, and there can be no doubt about that. To the other name, there belonged a miserly old gentleman by the name of Thorin Durinson. He was a hard dwarf, and even harder were the deals he drove with the poor and needy of that city who were desperate enough to come to him. Do not think that he was unfair. There was no cruelty in him, only the embers of an age-old anger, and bitter resentment toward those over whom he had no control.

Inside the office, there were two simple rooms. The furniture was spartan at best, and the decor, if it could be called that, was plain and dark. The old stove in the corner creaked often, though it was usually due to the wind outside, not heat radiating from within. Wood and coal and such things were only as cheap as one was willing to pay, and though everything Durinson owned was high-quality, he owned very little. Thus, the office was generally very cold in the winter, and Fili Bergman, Durinson's nephew and clerk, rarely removed his coat after the first of September.

The day on which our tale begins was especially chill. In fact, there was snow falling outside the thick windows, and the distorted figures of passers-by were muffled in thick, dark coats and cloaks. The short, thick forms of dwarves, the taller, sturdy forms of men, all bowed against the wind and snow, all in a hurry to get out of the weather. Fili, the young clerk in the front room, would have been handsome, if not for the redness in his nose and cheeks, and the blue in his fingers, both from the penetrating cold. His thick mane of golden-blond hair fell into his face often, and he made little effort to remove it as he copied numbers from a small, well-worn notebook into a much larger, heavier tome. Occasionally, his blue-grey eyes would flick up to the clock that hung on the wall. This day, of all days, it seemed that time moved slower than ever. Indeed, if closing hour ever came, it would be a miracle to the poor lad.

When the front door opened, admitting a flurry of large, wet snowflakes and a pair of wind-blown gentlemen, Fili looked up in mild surprise. When he saw the quality of the men's coats, however, his surprise faded. These were not customers. The taller of the two, a middle-aged dwarf wearing a funny-looking hat with the ear-flaps sticking out to the sides, wore a well-kept wool coat with dark brown fur at the collar and cuffs. His companion seemed to be enormously fat, but very cheerful nonetheless, puffing and blowing into his mitten hands.

"Is your master in?" asked the hatted gentleman, smiling at Fili as he doffed his strange cap. The blond nodded and hopped down from his high stool. The door that separated the inner office from the outer had silver letters on the window that read "Durinson and Feirson" again, just in case someone had misread the names above the outer door. And the window, of course, was there so that the dwarf sitting against the back wall would be able to see those who entered. A large, heavy oaken desk separated the man from the door, but he was gazing measuringly at the two visitors, who were clearly not customers, and clearly not well-wishers.

"Mr. Durinson, two gentlemen to see you, sir." Fili's voice was deep enough to carry across the space between them, despite the lad's obvious hesitance.

"Show them in." Durinson's voice was fuller and more mature, and the family resemblance was more than passing between the two, though they looked little enough alike.

Fili obediently opened the door wider and stepped aside to allow the gentlemen to enter, bowing slightly at the waist. The one with the hat bowed in return, still smiling and looking rather messy...
without anything to contain his wind-blown hair, and the fat one nodded, grinning.

"Do I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Durinson, or Mr. Feirson?" asked the gentleman with the hat, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet.

"As Mr. Feirson had been dead these seven years," responded Durinson in an unflattering tone, "I should hope it is the former. What can I do for you?" Durinson was a dwarf who had clearly been something of a warrior in his youth, with strong shoulders and broad, calloused hands—hands ill-suited to writing in ledgers and notebooks all day. His jaw was covered with what looked like a three-day growth of dark, scruffy beard that matched his long, slightly unkempt locks of coarse black hair very well. Streaks and patches of grey added character and gravitas to what might have otherwise been an untamed visage. He was handsome in the same vein as his nephew, though the effect had been lost through time and frowning. Now he was as unpleasant to look at as he was to do business with. His guests seemed to be learning this.

"Ah, well, Mr. Durinson." The middle-aged dwarf worried his hat between his hands, smiling a little less broadly now. "I'm Bofur, and this is me cousin, Bombur. It is that blessed time of year, when those of us among the well-to-do take the opportunity to show our generosity to the poor and needy of Dale. We provide the less-fortunate with a few small things to make the 'olidays more pleasant—a little meat, some wine and bread and t'ings like that. Some are in need of blankets and shoes, and we 'ave a special fund for that." Though the words were clearly something he'd repeated again and again, he bounced a little more eagerly, his smile regaining its former width. The fat one, Bombur, chimed in.

"If you're of a mind, you can help sponsor a family in need. We offer a chance to connect with them-

"Are you quite finished?" Durinson's expression hadn't changed one jot during this entire time, and Bombur trailed off, looking quite shocked.

"Sir?"

"I do not have the time or luxury to make merry during the holidays, and have no intention of paying my hard-earned wages so that someone else may do so." He stood up, followed by the appalled gazes of the two men. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do, as I'm sure you do also. Wasting time never put money in anyone's pocket. There's the door--you may use it. Good day." Durinson gestured to the door, but made no move to escort them out as he reached for his strongbox.

Bofur spluttered a protest that sounded like "you can't possibly mean-" before Fili touched his elbow hesitantly and nodded toward the door. The message was clear enough. Please go, before you make him angry.

"Well." The fat one, though less outwardly disturbed than the other, was nonetheless incensed. "Well! If a man of such wealth cannot afford to help those in need, then... very well. Good day to you sir, and merry Christmas!" The blessing came out rather like an insult. Durinson then lifted his gaze to the two gentlemen, and for the first time, a look of contempt crossed his face. Until then he had been polite, but if there was one thing that the moneylender hated more than wasted time, it was a merry Christmas.

"If the poor wish to celebrate, then let them seek work in the work-houses and charity from the churches, which are designed to give it in lieu of whatever god they worship. Now I'll thank you, sir, to keep your merry Christmases to yourself."

"Uncle," said Fili, in a faintly disapproving, mostly unhappy tone.
"Humbug! That's what it is. Now get out, before I throw you out." This last was directed at the two charity collectors, both of whom gathered themselves and their relatively nice coats and marched out the door in high dudgeon. No sooner had they left than a young fellow in a well-worn, well-patched overcoat entered, looking rather concerned. He was a dark-haired lad, with a bright, youthful look about him. This was Durinson's other nephew, the one he pretended not to have. Behind the young dwarf came a sturdy-looking female of the same race, with hair just as dark as his, and just as wild as Durinson's. The resemblance between this fellow and the dwarrowdam was as plain as day. Dis Bergman and her younger son stepped into the office, rubbing their hands together as the door closed.

"It's colder in here than it is out there!" said the woman with a smile, as though it were a good joke. "Fee, however do you survive in this old miser's office? One would think you'd have frozen by now."

In spite of Durinson's glowering, Fili couldn't help but smile. "It's not so bad, Mother." He looked like he might have said more, but Durinson, with his greying beard and very angry scowl had appeared in the inner doorway, silencing him quite as effectively as if he'd been frozen solid, and indeed the room seemed a little colder as the man's gaze swept around the little group.

"Throw these ingrates out, Mr. Bergman. Now."

The younger of his nephews, Kili by name, seemed completely unphased by his uncle's open hostility. Bounding across the space between them, Kili came to rest in front of Durinson with a bright smile and open arms.

"Mother and I came to invite you -"

"No. Go away."

"-to Christmas dinner with us." Kili kept right on talking, a determined set to his chin that made his smile seem slightly manic. "Tauriel is helping Mother make a magnificent feast, and we've invited plenty of friends. Please do join us, Uncle. It will be a wonderful time." Though the old man neither smiled nor moved to accept his nephew's embrace, Kili didn't look at all concerned, though he did let his arms drop to his sides.

"Come, Brother, there's no harm in it." Dis stepped forward and stretched out a hand toward Durinson. Rather than taking his sister's hand, or looking at all moved by their words, the man's lips twisted in a look of deepest disgust.

"Why did you ever get married?" To whom the question was directed was unclear, but it wouldn't have mattered anyway. Dis and her son exchanged glances.

"For love," said Kili with a laugh.

"Love," sneered the old man. "The only thing sillier than a merry Christmas. It's never put a cent in your pocket or a day's salary on the books."

"Ah, but it's made us all the happier." His sister nodded firmly, but she was smiling fondly at her son.

"What right have you to be happy? You're poor enough."

"What right have you to be miserable? You're rich enough."

If the chill of a midwinter's night could have been crystallized into a look, then Durinson had
mastered the art. Indeed, if it were at all possible, that moment seemed to develop frost around the edges.

"Get out," he said at last, and the anger in those two words might have been enough to warm the office to a ripe old blaze had words been capable of such things. "Out! And I hope never to see either of you again. You shame yourselves, your family, and go about with that humbug on your lips—if I had my will, every fool who went about wishing the world a 'merry Christmas' would be baked into his own pie and buried with a stake of holly through his heart."

At last, the two visitors withdrew, huddling closer together as though to shelter one another from the dwarf's anger. His nephew's spirit, irrepressible as it was, made him smile once more as they turned to leave.

"Have a good day, Fee. Don't let him get you down." Then, turning his eyes upon the hunched, miserable figure that still stood in the inner doorway. "Well, Uncle, I hope you come anyway. The food will be very good. Merry Christmas."

"Humbug!"

"And a happy New Year!"

The door closed, and the office was quiet once more. The silence was utterly complete, save for the muffled sounds of the folk in the lane, and the creak of the stove in the corner. Fili stood at the window and watched his brother and mother disappear past the bubbled edge of the thick, greenish glass, and sighed. It seemed to him, though he would never say so to his employer, that with every Christmas that passed, Thorin Durinson became meaner and more bitter. He wondered, at times, if the old man didn't resent them the happiness they had found in the marriage he had never dared to risk. At other times, he was sure of it.

"Back to work," snapped Durinson irritably. "You still have another hour before closing time."

Without complaint or comment, the young dwarf returned to his desk and to his work. Durinson would have qualified as 'out of sorts' under the best of circumstances. Today, plagued with interruptions and nonsense, the man had been pushed beyond the bounds of 'sorts' of any kind, and into the realm of 'unreasonably angry.' It was more than an hour later (not that his clerk would say anything to point this out) when finally, reluctantly, he announced it was time to lock up for the night.

The young clerk did not immediately leave his desk, which was surprise enough to give Durinson pause. "Sir?" said the blond, with a measure of trepidation in his face. "Might I... make a request?"

Durinson scowled. "I suppose you'll be wanting the day off tomorrow."

"Well, it is Christmas Day, sir, and it's customary to take the day off. Besides, there won't be anyone to do business with. None of the shops or banks will be open. Everyone will be home with their families." It was with a certain amount of wistfulness that the dwarf's nephew spoke, watching his employer's hard face. The hope of youth doesn't care a whit for the harshness of reality, so Durinson's scowl made little impression on the young man.

"Poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December," growled the old miser. "You will be here at noon tomorrow, and no later, or it'll come out of your wages." Even a stony heart like Durinson's couldn't remain unmoved at the sight of the grateful smile that spread across his faithful nephew's face. A whole half-day off. It was nothing short of a miracle, as far as the lad was concerned.
"Thank you, Uncle! Thank you! God bless you, sir. And Merry Christmas!"

"Christmas. Bah! Humbug."

Durinson tolerated his clerk's good cheer for only a few moments longer, and those moments were filled with gathering his coat, hat, scarf and gloves. Then, out of the chilly office and into the chilly evening he went, tugging his gloves on as he paused outside the door.

"And don't let me find this office a mess," he called in to his clerk. "I expect it to be clean as usual when I return on the morrow."

"Aye, sir."

The door closed with a click of finality, and Durinson stood in the quiet street for a long moment, peering through the snow at the warm glow of the streetlamps. The dwarf let out a slow sigh that hung in the air, a hoary reminder of the cold he no longer cared to feel. Then, as though he'd not stopped at all, the old gentleman set off at a brisk pace toward the warm bustle that was Blathenly Garden. Blathenly Garden was a large, open square in the middle of the city which, in addition to lying between him and his bed, also housed several small businesses which together owed Durinson a fair amount of money. Money that, as it happened, was coming due on the very day of Christmas. A poor choice on the part of the debtors, Durinson thought, but no bother at all to him.
Debt Collection

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

No heat nor cold nor biting wind can touch my weary bones.

I am only out tonight to collect on all your loans.

The choice was not a poor one to spend money that is mine,

Only not to save a pence for when your debt is out of time.

The wind whipped at the tails of Durinson's coat, large white flakes settling on his hat and shoulders only briefly before they were scoured away again. Blathenly Garden was largely sheltered from the wind, though there were considerably more people on one side of the square than the other, which was filled primarily with snow. Many carts and small shops were open for business, plying the tired workmen on their way home for a bit of the Christmas bonuses that jingled in their pockets. Most of the faces Durinson could see wore cheerful smiles in spite of the grime and exhaustion laid on by work and hard labor. Coachmen, bargemen, ostlers, mercenaries, ferriers, smiths, tailors--any number of artisans, traders and laborers mingled with the working women of Dale. Maids, cooks, housekeepers, laundry women, flower-sellers, seamstresses, both working and off-duty. Sellers hawked their wares, barking and calling the value of their goods like so many dogs.

It was into this confused bustle that Durinson pressed, grim determination in his face as though he were enduring some painful torture. From the deep, inside pocket of his heavy overcoat, the dwarf withdrew a small notebook, flipping the delicate pages and peering down at his own cramped handwriting with a frown. As though following the directions given him by the little book, Durinson turned aside and stepped into a small, well-kept butcher shop. While some such establishments displayed their wares in the windows and advertised their bloody services in what Durinson saw as a tasteless and morbid display, this shop had the bright, scrubbed appearance of a place that was kept ruthlessly clean. This was the way Durinson liked it, which was just as well, since he owned it.

"Mr. Fundinson." The greeting was formal and clipped.

"Mr. Durinson," replied the gentleman behind the counter. He was a heavy-set fellow, with broad, muscular shoulders and an impressively full beard. Like Durinson, he was a dwarf, though he had not, apparently, let his current occupation affect the build and bearing of a warrior that he still carried with him like a visible aura. The shiny-bald dome of his head rose over the fringe of dark hair that started just above his ears and hung down around his shoulders. All in all, he cut a formidable figure, and it was a wonder a man that intimidating could sell anything.

"Your rent is due."

The Fundinson account was by far the oldest in Durinson's book, and of his current customers, Dwalin here and his brother were the only ones that would remember. It had occurred to him that they could be patronizing his business "for old time's sake" or some such sentimental nonsense, but their reasons didn't concern him. Mr. Fundinson produced a package wrapped in heavy brown paper from under the counter, along with a heavy metal thermos that let out puffs of steam when the lid was jostled.

"The rest 'as been sent up to yer 'ouse fer yer cook to deal with," said the butcher in his low,
"Good, good." Durinson marked something down in his notebook, tucked the package under his
arm and took the thermos with him as he left. There was no exchange of pleasantries or smalltalk.
There was no reason for it, as far as dwarves were concerned, and that was even worse among the
warriors. Some were convinced that if dwarves could communicate by grunting, they would.

He was hard man, Durinson, and some claimed he had no heart. His next stop was a tea cart, the
owner of which was one of those who resented his debt to Durinson as a necessary evil. The
dwarf and his young human partner were doing brisk business tonight, passing out cups of
steaming, lightly sweetened tea at two coppers apiece.

"Mr. Bleu, Mr. Calico." Durinson eyed them distastefully. He liked neither of these men, nor did
he like their business. However, their business was little more than collateral to him. Mr. Bleu was
a short, sturdy dwarf with slate-grey hair, bound up in many neat, intricate braids. It was
traditional, or so he informed those that stood still long enough to hear him, for a dwarf to braid his
hair. It was an artform, he'd say, to those who looked even vaguely interested. Durinson was not
one of those who looked interested in the least. Mr. Bleu suffered a moment of what seemed to be
very intense dislike before he mastered himself enough to answer the moneylender's greeting.

"Mr. Durinson. How can we help you tonight?"

"Your loan has come due. Two gold, four silver, and seven coppers."

Mr. Calico bore a passing resemblance to a lean hound, his young face permanently set in a
lonely, mournful expression. When he smiled, it seemed a very sad thing, though genuine. Now
the poor lad looked all but stricken, as though he might faint away in a moment.

"But, sir... surely you mustn't mean that!" he exclaimed, his wide brown eyes only adding to the
impression of a kicked puppy. "It's Christmas Eve!"

"I most certainly do mean it," Durinson snapped irritably. "Now, you've had your eight weeks,
Bleu. Your payment, if you please."

All this time, Mr. Bleu hadn't moved except to receive back a cup and a tip from one of his
customers. Now he stood very still, holding the cup between his hands as though it were a
reminder of how fragile his reality had just become.

"Mr. Durinson... you must understand," he began in a trembling voice. "You must understand--it's
the Christmas season. Our families are waiting for the money we make today, the money we'll
spend on tomorrow's dinner."

"What you were planning to buy with your earnings is none of my concern," Durinson cut in
sharply. "What is my concern is the debt you owe to me that has come due today. Since you failed
to come to my office to pay it, I have come to collect it. Now, do you have my money or not, Mr.
Bleu?"

For one dreadful moment, the dwarf seemed to lose control of himself. He dropped the cup, which
shattered on the flagstones at his feet, and lurched forward, face twisted with anger and grief.
"You monster!" he hissed.

"Dori!" Mr. Calico caught the dwarf's shoulders and held him back until he regained control of
himself again. It only took a second or two, but it was enough to gather the attention of several
passers-by, and all five of their current customers. Durinson didn't react to or acknowledge the
stares of the others. His attention was solely on Dori Bleu, and his young business partner.
"Do you have my money, Mr. Bleu?" The question was repeated in a very quiet voice, almost threatening, almost lost in the bustle of the crowd. Mr. Bleu looked absolutely furious and didn't bother hiding it.


Though the gentleman's words were spoken in deadly earnest, Durinson didn't seem bothered in the least. He stood calmly by the cart and counted out the coins, as meticulously as if he'd been in his own office. Then, carefully returning two small copper pieces, he nodded to Bleu and his associate, bid them a good night, and turned away, leaving the vendors and their customers behind.

It was no understatement to say that Durinson thought nothing of Dori Bleu's distress. The truth of the matter was that he had stopped caring about others' happiness or lack thereof many years ago. That, however, is another story, and shall be addressed later.

Leaving the bustle of the Garden behind him, the dwarf made his solitary way through the snowy streets to his lodgings. By rights, he ought to have been staying on the property once owned by Mr. Fierson, but having no wish to accept charity in any form, he stubbornly remained in his own dismal flat, a cold apartment located above a shop that had been closed almost as long as he'd lived above it.

Now, I must ask you to remember that Fierson was seven years dead and rotting in his grave, or nothing that follows will seem at all wonderful.

As Durinson mounted the steps before his door, there came to his eyes the familiar sight of an old, brass door-knocker. It had hung there many years now, and only came of use when those unfamiliar with the neighborhood had the misfortune to ask the gentleman who owned it for some charitable donation of time or money. In any case, the thing itself was rather unremarkable, being of a basically round and undecorated shape. As Durinson gazed on it, however, a most curious change seemed to come over the old knocker, which had never before varied in all its years of service.

In fact, very shortly it looked not so much like a knocker at all, but rather like a brassy, hollow-cheeked face. A long face, with rough scales along the high cheek-bones and deep-set eyes that gleamed with a dull, orange light. This face stared at Durinson, and the dwarf stared back. For a long minute, or perhaps a short Age, nothing moved, and nothing changed. Durinson looked away first and rubbed his eyes, but when he looked again, there was nothing left of the strange vision but a plain, brass door-knocker. To say he was unbothered by this unusual interruption in his neat, ordered routine would have been untrue. Still, the gentleman took out his keys and unlocked his door as though nothing had happened.

"Humbug," he assured himself gruffly. "Just a humbug."

Durinson made his way through the dim flat, not caring a button for the darkness. Like his office, the place was cold and utilitarian, the furniture sparse, and the atmosphere derelict. Though the place was well-kept and clean, it felt un-lived-in, as though it were waiting for an occupant. Still unsettled by the apparition at the door, Durinson was obliged to light the lamps and make a thorough search of his chambers. He found nothing there that oughtn't have been, but this did not ease the feeling of being watched that hung over him. But being a hardy and stubborn dwarf by nature, Durinson made every effort to act just as though the night were like any other. Lighting the one fire he allowed himself on winter nights, Durinson settled in his armchair with the heavy
thermos and a bowl, a slightly stale roll and a glass of water.

The old gentleman cut an almost comical figure, broad shoulders hunched against the cold in his worn housecoat, threadbare slippers and tattered nightcap. At several points, there were holes in the long dressing gown he wore, some from burns, others simply worn through the fabric. In spite of this, he ate neatly, and there was no trace of a stain or spill on him.

His meal was interrupted, somewhat unpleasantly, by a loud, metallic rattling sound, and then by a dull scraping noise, as of something heavy being dragged across the ground. At first, he thought it might be coming from the street below, but there came a thump, scrape-clunk, and he realized with a certain chill that the 'something heavy' was being dragged up the stairs from the shop below.

_Scrape clunk rattle scrape clunk rattle scrape clunk rattle scrape clunk rattle rattle._

A horrible, slow rhythm developed as the heavy thing was hauled up one step at a time. Each _clunk_ vibrated through the floor under Durinson's feet. The inside stairs, he knew all too well, opened into the hall directly outside his chamber door. Swiftly, and not showing even a flicker of the fear this sound inspired in him, the dwarf set aside his supper and crossed the room to the door, shooting the bolt home and drawing the latch fast. Whatever it was, he didn't want it coming inside his chambers. He thought briefly of leaning out his window and calling for aid, but this thought escaped him and he knew it no more, because hand had just come through the heavy oaken door.

It was a ghastly hand, nearly transparent and faintly green, each finger terminating in a thick black claw. The hand of one of the dragon-folk, no doubt, but nothing like any of the dragons Durinson had ever known. For, though the hand was clearly protruding through the door, the door itself sustained no visible damage. The hand seemed to have sprouted from the wood as it might have from the end of a dragon's arm. Durinson retreated swiftly, looking for a weapon. The hand was indeed attached to an arm, and that arm came through the door also, followed by the body to whom the arm belonged, if indeed the word 'body' could be applied to the spectre.

The figure was tall and lean, with strong shoulders, high cheek bones, and hollow, scaly cheeks. About his body were wrapped thick chains of apparently tremendous weight, severely hampering his efforts to walk properly. Thus, the apparition, rather than striding the width of the room to confront Durinson, merely shuffled noisily forward, dragging each foot laboriously before the other. At length, he halted beside one of the dusty armchairs situated before the fire, and stood quite still.

For a moment, Durinson gazed silently at the greenish figure and his translucent, rattling chains. Neither did the figure move at all, staring malevolently back at the dwarf. Durinson's hand closer around the artfully wrought iron poker.

"Do you think to strike me, Thorin?" The spectre spoke in a raspy voice, incredibly deep for how thin he was. Then again, Durinson knew from long, jarringly fresh experience that he only looked thin because of his great height.

"Smaug?" The dwarf shivered, and nearly averted his eyes.

"Are you afraid, Durinson?" rasped the ghost of Smaug Fierson. "Does it frighten you to see your old friend again?" The familiar sneer that curled his lip could be heard in his deep voice, and the old gentleman tensed, as though they were young again, competing for their employer's favor. Fierson had always known how to get under his partner's skin with the least amount of effort.

"I hardly think we qualified as friends." Suppressing a second shiver, the dwarf squared his
shoulders. "You had little enough reason to visit this place in life, Fierson. Why are you haunting me? Or are you just here to make my life miserable?" The dragon let out a derisive snort, blowing bright orange sparks from quivering, scaly nostrils.

"You don't need me around for that, Durinson. You make yourself quite miserable enough without my help."

The dwarf wasn't sure if he was disturbed by this or not. Perhaps not any more disturbed by this statement than by the sudden appearance of his seven-years-dead business partner. With this in mind, the gentleman ran a hand through his greying hair, removing his nightcap in the process and frowning at the ghostly form of Fierson.

"So why are you here? Speak up. I haven't got all night." Durinson's tone was firm and confident, but there was a part of him that still refused to believe what his eyes and ears and heart were telling him—that there was a ghost in the room. The senses, he told himself, could be easily fooled. A little thing could upset them. Lack of sleep. A disorder of the stomach. Cold or pain.

"Unless you're expecting company of a more pleasurable sort," Fierson retorted snidely, "I believe you do have all night, as it happens." With every appearance of aloof superiority, the dragon lowered himself into the armchair nearest him, managing somehow to perch there with smug dignity in spite of the heavy chains about his person. It was this action of sitting, more than the attitude with which it was accomplished, that convinced Durinson that this was, indeed, not a figment of his overworked imagination.

"Are you going to tell me why you’re here or not?" And if he didn’t? What more could he do? He certainly couldn’t throw Fierson out. He doubted he could lay a hand on the dragon, even if he’d had a mind to. Durinson sank into his own chair, more out of a desire for something to do than of any real desire to sit.

"I have been sent here to deliver a message." The ghost’s languid tone communicated distaste for the task he’d been set. In fact, the dwarf suspected that if some greater power hadn’t been forcing him to act, the dragon wouldn’t be here at all.

"What message? From whom?" Durinson continued with his determinedly brisk manner. The sooner this was done, the sooner he could sleep, and good riddance to this dragon and his ghostly chains.

"What’s the matter, Thorin? Unsettled? You’d like to be rid of me, wouldn’t you?"

Durinson didn’t answer. In truth, yes, he would like to be rid of the whole ghastly mess, but he didn’t think it wise to give the dragon that pleasure. The more Smaug enjoyed himself, the more likely he was to stay. That had always been the case before his death, and the dwarf saw no reason for it to have changed afterward. The silence lasted for several long seconds, broken only by the snap and crackle of the fire. Then the ghost sighed.

"I have been sent from beyond the grave to bear you a warning. Durinson, you see these chains I wear?" Once more languid and uninterested, the dragon's translucent orange eyes slid away from his former partner, alighting instead on the fire beside them.

"Yes, I see them." Durinson spoke just as he sat. Stiffly. "What of them? What is their meaning?"

"See for yourself. They are quite tangible. For the moment." Fierson's challenge, just as lazily put as his purpose, was more heated. More eager. The dragon wanted him to come closer, and the dwarf thought it both tempting and unwise. Would Fierson have been sent if whatever greater powers were using him thought he would kill the object of their message? Would it really matter if
he did? What if that was his true purpose, and the message was just a ruse?

These thoughts chased one another around Durinson's mind, while the dwarf eased himself out of his seat and approached cautiously. One translucent greenish hand lifted a thick chain, offering it as though it were a tempting treat.

*Honestly, what have I to lose?*

Durinson reached out and took the chain. It was incredibly heavy, forged of iron or lead, perhaps, or something even heavier. It was also bitingely, achingly, piercingly cold. The hand that touched the chain quickly started to lose all feeling, as though the chain didn't merely leech warmth from living flesh, but also life itself. And before his fingers lost the strength to hold the chain any longer, Durinson noted that the metal wasn't, in fact, as smooth as it appeared. There were tiny ridges etched into the links, miniscule words carved into the impossibly cold, heavy chain.

It fell from his fingers, and the dwarf pulled his numb hand back to his chest, eager to warm it again. The whole process took little more than a handful of heartbeats, but it seemed so much more.

"The words, etched into the chain. What to they say?" Durinson's voice was steady, but his fear would no longer be contained. The tone of the words was uncertain. Bothered. Fiersun's ghost leaned forward in his seat, fangs bared in a malicious grin.

"Don't you recognize them, old friend? So many of these links, we forged together in life. You and I, side by side, beating the sorrows of the living into the shapes we desired." His scaly, transparent hands gathered the chains and lifted them, shaking them until the rattle was nearly deafening. "Our sins, etched into each and every link. Every life we ruined, every death laid at our doors, every heartless denial of goodwill. It's all here." A manic light shone in the dragon's eyes, nearly scarlet in his excitement. "You and I, Durinson, we worked together until the chain was so heavy it could hardly be borne. Yours was this long seven years ago, and since then you've labored on without me, sowing pain and sorrow, reaping gold and interest. I am proud of your progress, Thorin."

"Begone!" Durinson was holding the iron poker again, on his feet and backing away. "It's all a humbug."

"A humbug?" The ghost rose to his greenish feet, towering over the dwarf even as he had done in life, fully four feet taller. "You call this a humbug, Thorin? Each soul is doomed to carry the deeds they wrought in life, suffering as their peers suffered." In a sudden, violent movement, the dragon threw his chain forward, lashing the enormous length about Thorin's body, holding him as surely as he himself held his useless iron poker.

"I'm waiting for you, Durinson. You may have survived me, but your life is still mine. Everything you cherish is mine, and when you die, we shall be bound for all eternity in the chains of brotherhood you forged." Smaug's deep-throated snarl seemed to be growing fainter. More distant. "I'm waiting, Thorin."

Suddenly, he was alone. The bone-deep chill slowly lifted, and when Durinson opened his eyes, the room was vacant save for himself and his dinner. The old gentleman was, by then, rather unsettled. He finished his dinner swiftly and made his way to his large four-poster bed.

"Just a humbug," he assured himself. "A humbug. Must have a word with Fundinson about what he puts in that stew."
Another ghost invades Durinson's house, and he is made thoroughly uncomfortable. Sometimes memories are best left unremembered.

Even wrapped in every blanket he had at his disposal, even with the doors locked, shutters drawn and curtains tightly shut, the old man slept but fitfully. Every creak of the old house, every snap of the dying fire brought him suddenly awake. Durinson went so far, even as to arm himself with a knobbly stick the schoolmaster had once used on disobedient boys. That sturdy fellow, Mahal rest his soul, had passed on some years before, and Feirson had thought it a great joke to give the old beating stick to his partner. It was, then, in spite of the weapon's origin that the dwarf held it across his knees, propped up as he was against his pillows.

Ten o'clock came and went, the chiming of the clock in the hall marking the time. Outside also, muffled by the shutters, came the mournful tolling of the nearby church bells as they, too, counted the hours before the dawn of Christmas Day. Eleven o'clock. Then twelve. Durinson found himself sleeping deeper as the fright of Feirson's visit passed. He had very nearly persuaded himself that the whole thing had been but a figment of his imagination when the clock struck one. A second or two passed, then the church bells also tolled the passing of the first hour of morning.

Quite suddenly, the room was aflutter with light. The old dwarf tensed, leaning away from the curtains. Thin spots and narrow openings between the drapes admitted shafts of incandescently white, shifting light, and the bright spots slid over the blankets as the source moved around the bed. What disturbed Durinson more than the fact that the light had appeared without any warning was that, even now, he could hear no footstep, not even the quietest tread of bare feet upon the cold floor. There was certainly a light. Where, then, was the creature that held it?

Durinson had never been one to cower and wait for the danger to confront him. "Stay, intruder, and face me if you dare." Gripping the stick in one hand, he pulled aside his blankets, grasped the curtains, and threw them violently open. What he saw stopped the blow he'd been prepared to deliver. The beating stick dropped from suddenly nerveless fingers.

Before him stood a hobbit. At first glance, there was nothing singularly unusual about the creature, other than its presence in his bedchamber. But the longer he looked at it, the stranger it seemed. The hobbit was clad in a long tunic of dazzling white, bound about the middle with a belt of exceeding beauty, a thing of expert craftsmanship inlaid with gems he'd never seen the like of. On its head, the hobbit wore a crown of fresh holly, and from this crown sprang a long white flame, which was the source of the light that had so unsettled him. The hair, curly and thick, was also white, as though with great age, but there was no trace of time's curse upon the creature's face. And indeed, as Durinson looked into the face, he noted that it appeared ever more Dwarf-like.

"Who are you?" the old dwarf growled, now overcoming the shock of seeing such a thing beside his bed. He had thought, for a moment--but no. It wouldn't have been, even if he'd not been so unsettled. She was long since gone, and would never have entered a place like this in any case.

"I am the Ghost of Christmas Past," answered the hobbit, in a voice that seemed simultaneously
soft and distant, as though two voices were speaking at once; one very far away, and one whispering close at hand. "My coming was foretold to you by your partner, Smaug Fierson."

There was a short pause, in which Durinson frowned at the bright figure, who was indeed becoming more Dwarf-like, and now approaching him in height. "If threatening my soul and foretelling your coming are one in the same, then yes, he did." There was a sort of deep satisfaction about seeing surprise flicker across the Ghost's bright face, and Durinson found himself smiling grimly.

"I shall have a word with Feirson when next we meet, I think," said the Ghost, and sighed. It gestured to the window, and the shutters flew open, the pane sliding upward to admit a gust of icy wind.

"What are you doing? Where are you going?" It had been many long years since Durinson had felt a situation so entirely beyond his control. The Ghost had already turned toward the window, but now looked back over its shoulder to gaze at him, again in surprise.

"We are to do as I came to--we shall see to your welfare."

"My welfare would be better served by a night of unbroken rest," the dwarf pointed out grumpily, though inwardly he shuddered at the thought of anyone but himself seeing to his welfare.

"We shall see to your salvation, then. Come, take my hand." The Ghost, now most definitely a dwarf, extended a hand to him. It struck Durinson that the gesture was not an invitation, as it might have been from another mortal, but a command. There was nothing for it but to take the offered hand. It felt solid and warm, and inspired a strange comfort in him as they turned together and moved toward the open window.

The act of passing through the window was as casual as walking through a door, and though their feet remained far above the ground, it felt rather like taking a walk through the cool of a spring morning. Their surroundings faded as they walked together through a thick cloud of woodsmoke and steam, but when they emerged again, it was into the colored light of a lamplit corridor. Dwarves bustled this way and that, some carrying bolts of cloth, others pushing heavy carts, or studying rolls of parchment, or mumbling to themselves in the distracted manner of those trying to hold complicated sums in their heads.

Durinson looked about in wonder, a hundred sights, smells and sounds assaulting him from every side. It was like a wondrous family reunion, as each sensation carried with it memories he'd thought long lost to the cares of the world.

"Do you remember this place?" The Ghost's voice, though quiet, seemed to have no trouble in carrying over the tramp of boots and merry greetings around them.

"Remember? I was raised here. This is Erebor." Durinson's heart ached in a peculiar way it hadn't in many years. "This is the main southwest corridor, where supplies were stored and..." He trailed off into silence, for just then, a boisterous party of dwarrows, scarcely a one with more than a handful of hairs upon his chin, crowded into the hall from a side passage, blocking the flow of traffic.

"And the training forges are kept burning for the use of those too young to work among the adults," completed the Ghost, its voice as even and calm as one could wish. But Durinson felt anything but even and calm. He had lost these things. He was not supposed to be here.

"Ghost, why do you show me this? Dwarves don't keep Christmas. It's a holiday of Men and Elves." He turned away from the raucous young dwarves, only to see a second group, much like
the first. Five or six youngsters moving toward the side passage the others had just vacated, and now Durinson felt a chill crawl down into his stomach. He knew those faces, those voices. There was Goro, and Nuin, and his best friend Ganin. More faces, more voices, memories that had been too long buried, surfacing with a vengeance. There was Vili, alive and well, a smile stretching his mouth crookedly in precisely the same way Kili had done when trying to persuade his uncle to come to Christmas dinner.

"There is one dwarrow that does. He loved it, in spite of the ridicule he received from his fellows." The Ghost's words were lost on Durinson as he moved forward, as in a dream.

"Come on, Thorin," Vili was saying cajolingly, "it's just for the evening. Besides, I heard there's gonna be some pretty 'dams about tonight, and you've not even started courting yet."

"I told you," replied the laughing, raven-haired youth beside Vili, "I have plans tonight." Durinson watched his younger self pass with his friends, motionless and silent. Had he ever been so carefree, so happy? This dwarrow seemed like a different person altogether from the dwarf he glimpsed in the hall mirror early in the morning--if, indeed, he cared to glance that direction at all.

Durinson followed the young dwarves into the training room, where the air rippled with the heat of four small furnaces along each wall. Directly opposite the door by which they entered was another doorway, marked with a dark rune. A storage room, though it also connected to another series of rooms. There weren't many places in the dwarf city where there was only one entrance.

"Alright, you larvae," barked a harsh voice from the center of the floor, "listen up. We're making a shipment of horseshoes to go out at the next quarter-moon. Remember last week's lesson, and try not to make fools of yourselves."

"It's Mr. Fundin." Durinson's tone was wondering once more. "I'd forgotten he was the one that taught me to use a hammer and tongs. It was such a long time ago. But these lessons never ended well." Durinson's expression darkened as he watched his younger self. Nothing was said between the students as they worked. Little could be have been heard over the din of hammers, fire and creaking bellows anyway. But Fundin seemed to spend a lot of time looking over the young Durinson's shoulder. The other younglings noticed, and shot unhappy looks at their fellow.

"Mr. Durinson?"

Another dwarf, wearing the livery of a servant, stood near the door. When Thorin set his tools down and wiped his hands on a rag, one of the others snickered visibly.

"So long, princeling," he called. "Hope you enjoy your time off." It was bad enough to leave a task undone, but to depart from the unfinished task to go elsewhere and enjoy the luxuries of a high station? Thorin's face burned with shame, and so did the face of his older self.

"Why do you show me this, Ghost? I know what happens next."

"You used to enjoy celebrating the holidays of other races," said the Ghost softly. "You've forgotten."

"I haven't!" snapped Durinson, though he followed his younger self out into the hall. "I remember every year--the foolishness in my youth that only led to harm."

But what waited for them in the feast hall was far from harmful. Roaring fires, glittering decorations, festive crowds of Dwarves, Elves and Men. Durinson thought the Ghost must have blurred over some time between leaving the forges and arriving in this place, because his younger self was now wearing fine, clean, brightly-colored clothes.
There was much laughter, many smiles and a great deal of good wine. Deals were struck, alliances reaffirmed, and old friends reunited. Among them, a blond elf with deep blue eyes and a young face, and a dark-haired dwarf lad. Durinson scowled unhappily, even as his younger self greeted the elf enthusiastically.

"Why do you frown so, when there is so much joy?" The Ghost's voice seemed somehow nearer than it had been. A glance at the bright spirit revealed increased stature, finer features, and the white hair of an old, yet ageless Man, arms crossed patiently over its narrow chest. The dwarf felt no wonder, even at that, but sneered, directing his attention back to the scene before them.

"This joy won't last. That traitor's father is the leader of the Elves, as mine was the leader for the Dwarves. I thought him my friend--it was foolishness to think he felt kinship for me."

The two companions, arm in arm now and laughing, were moving nearer the grim old dwarf, though they neither heard nor saw him. Though still apparently young, the elf had hardly changed from the moment they had first seen him, while Durinson's younger self was now only a head shorter than his fair friend. Years had passed in a blink, and the old gentleman listened to their conversation without any trace of the happiness that radiated from the young pair.

"Would I lie to you?" asked the elf with a laugh, nudging his friend. The young dwarf ran his fingers through the scruffy beginnings of his dark beard, trying to hide a grin.

"No, Legolas, I don't think you would. I just--really? For a whole year? We've known each other for decades now, and I don't think I've seen even half of the Woodland Palace."

The two of them stopped beside a table heavily laden with drinks, and as Durinson watched the two fill their mugs, the elf shook his head slightly, still smiling.

"I don't think you've spent nearly enough time outside your Mountain, Thorin. Your world is bigger than forges and mines."

"That's enough." Durinson turned, scowling at the Ghost beside him. Thin face, pointed ears, flowing white hair--the creature took in his angry gaze with Elven impassivity. This seemed to make the old dwarf even angrier.

"I said that's enough. You've inflicted enough torment on an old soul, memories best forgotten. I've no desire to see any more of your Christmas nonsense."

"There are other Christmases that marked your life, changes that have plagued you since." The Ghost's calm voice did nothing to soothe Durinson's temper.

"No more! I'll not tolerate it."

But already, the scene around them was fading and changing. Now standing upon the crest of a low hillock, the wind whipped about them, rattling the branches of the trees above and tangling Durinson's nightgown about his legs. Ice in the air stung their faces, and the thick cloud cover ensured that the Ghost's crown of white light was a beacon in the dark woods. Ahead, a lantern flickered between the trees. Shortly, a grim-looking dwarf came into sight, his hair tangled and unkempt, his beard in need of a trim, but finally long enough to touch his chest.

"Thorin, you can't go back now. The Mountain is too far to make the journey tonight." The elven voice that followed him held only mild concern.

"You don't have to follow me, then," barked the dwarf as he started up the hill. It wasn't steep, but ice made the slope very slick. His lantern swung, buffeted this way and that by the wind, and his face almost had a grim light all its own, communicating deep anger and possibly a touch of
desperate fear. Durinson's gaze tracked his younger self almost reluctantly, as though the old moneylender couldn't tear his eyes away, in spite of the pain the memory wrought on him.

"Thorin, please don't do this. You don't understand the situation you-" The elf that stepped into view was dark-haired and clad in the green of the Woodland Guard. Though she carried no light, the young dwarf seemed to have no problem seeing her as he whirled, lantern swinging wildly. There was something in the way his pack was tied, in his wild braids, in the crooked, haphazard fastening of his cloak, that told volumes of the extreme haste of his departure.

"I don't understand?" Thorin's tone was incredulous and frustrated. "What I don't understand is why you refuse to tell me why my father has been banished, and why I can't go home! Elven hospitality has never stretched to written correspondences before. The other half of that letter should have been given to me."

The elf's expression gave away nothing of her reaction, as impassive as ever, but she turned her head slightly to look back the way they had come.

"That portion of the letter wasn't addressed to you," said a smooth voice, and a familiar blond figure stepped off the path and into sight. "We thought it unwise to disturb you unnecessarily." Legolas' hair was whipped about his shoulders by the icy wind as he stood some three lengths from his dwarven friend. Neither elf seemed very willing to follow Thorin any farther.

"Unwise?" roared Thorin, outraged. "My father is an exile from his home! How is any information about this unnecessary?"

"There's more at work here than dwarven politics." The wind picked up around them, whistling through the trees, and Durinson moved forward with a stiff, angry gait until he stood right behind his younger self.

"More at work," he snarled, his rough old voice hoarse in comparison to the clear tones of his younger self. "Pretending they know everything-" But the young dwarf was speaking again, his lantern shaking slightly with the same insulted anger displayed by his older self, invisible to the eyes of memory.

"If there's more at work here, it's not of my making, or my kin. The Elves are no more my friend than the dark things in the mines of Moria when they refuse me news of my own family."

"Don't go to the Mountain, Thorin. You won't like what you find there." Legolas' warning might just as well have been part of the wind's wordless hissing. As though he hadn't heard a word, Thorin turned his back on them and marched off into the storm, taking the light with him. Durinson made to follow, but was arrested by the Ghost's hand on his shoulder. Its limbs seemed to possess extraordinary strength, though it was once again losing stature, its hair becoming curly and thick. In the darkness, pierced only by the light of the Ghost's burning crown, the two elves glanced at one another, eyes gleaming blue and green.

"What will he find?" asked the female, her face showing a flicker of deep unease.

"Death," answered Legolas heavily. "None are untouched when the greed of the dragon folk over-reaches its limits."
Durinson has to face his greatest mistakes, and mourns the opportunities he threw away when he hadn't cared enough to know them.

As the wind-lashed forest faded around them, Durinson turned an angry look on the little Ghost, whose round, Hobbitish face betrayed not even a hint of contrition.

"You rejected their friendship," the Ghost observed quietly.

"They betrayed my trust. And they didn't exactly welcome me back with open arms, either." Durinson scowled. "My grandfather was dead, my family banished, and they told me nothing."

Maddeningly, the Ghost didn't even acknowledge the insultingly disrespectful tone. Rather, the white-haired hobbit nodded with an air of understanding.

"People often make unwise choices when they're trying to protect those they care about."

Durinson heard in those words a veiled reference to a mistake he'd never stopped regretting. A cold finger of dread trailed down his spine, and in a moment, hot anger gave way to a peculiar mixture of fear and grief. Grief, for what was lost. Fear, for seeing it again.

"No, Spirit, Please, show me no more."

But the years performed their terrible dance before him and they watched the young dwarf wander Middle-earth, aging and hardening in the absence of his exiled family. Dis, still young and sweet-faced, found him time and again, asking him to join them, begging him to come home. For their father, for their mother, for their brother, for her wedding.

"I couldn't face them," Durinson confessed in a whisper, watching Dis insist that he had to see their new home, offering him a cheerful Christmas wreath. He looked away as his younger self took the wreath and threw it into his forge, stone-faced. "If I had been there, we could have stayed in the Mountain. None of this would have happened."

The Ghost lifted its eyebrows, seeming completely unbothered when Dis stalked to the door, straight through its pearlescent body. "Is that so? And what would you have done to prevent the tragedy you never learned the cause of?"

"My grandfather went mad," said Durinson sharply, dashing tears from his eyes surreptitiously. "I didn't need to know any more." There was no greater shame than suicide. Clearly, the nobles had cast them out after the family name had been sullied. But the memory of Legolas' words in the forest bothered him. Thought it seemed decades ago now, he recalled them perfectly.

None are untouched when the greed of the dragon folk over-reaches its limits.

The old dwarf shook his head. What did it matter? The past was the past, and he couldn't change it. He watched his younger self work his forge diligently until the scene changed again, and this
time a bitter smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"This was my first position in money." The bank was built of sandstone and populated almost entirely by Men in bright, cheerful costume. Here and there, a Dwarf bowed respectfully, speaking in their sonorous voices, so different from their human counterparts. And there, standing quietly some distance from the drink table, stood a dwarf with a severely short beard and hard blue eyes. Thorin looked more than ever like his older counterpart, but this likeness seemed to dim when a fat, jolly man in a red velvet waistcoat approached, escorting not one, but three young ladies.

"Mr. Fezziwig. An honor, I'm sure." Thorin bowed, a faintly exasperated smile tugging at his lips. The man flapped a hand at his newest apprentice, chuckling merrily.

"None of that now, Master Durinson, none of that. I want you to meet some absolutely extraordinary young women - friends of the family, don't you know? This is Eliza Harbeck," the tallest of the girls nodded, seeming a little unnerved, "Kleya Tumwater," a pretty blond with a smile that showed too many teeth curtsied enthusiastically, "and Billa Baggins." The smallest of the women, a curly-haired brunette, offered a slight bow and murmured a polite greeting. There was a smile hidden in her eyes as she looked at Thorin, and the dwarf seemed puzzled by her.

Through a series of circumstances, all completely orchestrated by the jolly Mr. Fezziwig, Thorin shared two dances with Miss Baggins, and his older self looked on with lips pursed, determined not to let the Ghost know how much this sight tore at his heart.

"You remember this young woman." The Ghost's voice was again terribly distant, but clear.

The old dwarf shook his head slightly. "Remember? How could I forget?"

"There was another Christmas with this woman, some years later, that also changed your life."

"Please, Spirit… don't make me live it again." The protest came too late, the scene about them already fading away, replaced with a snowy overlook. The roofs of Dale stretched away below them, half-hidden by the drifting white flakes that muffled the world, swirling around the chimneys and fluffy pillars of smoke. Durinson and the Ghost were standing near three large, skeletal trees, gnarled branches reaching upward to the slate-grey sky, dripping with icicles. If he could have fled the scene, the old dwarf would have done so in a heartbeat. The snow, the overlook, the outlines of rock formations, softened by winter's blanket. It smacked of pain he couldn't forget. But his feet were frozen to the stone, immobilizing him, anchoring him to the memory that haunted him still. The deaths of his grandfather, father, and brother had weighed on him before, but he hadn't been there - he hadn't seen it. He had never been crushed by the knowledge he might have changed it. This… this was different.

Two figures crested the top of the rise, flushed with exertion, arm in arm and smiling. The young woman was not so young anymore, her face and figure now fuller and more mature. She hadn't lost the smile that hid in her eyes, or the laughter that never truly left her mouth.

"Come now, Thorin, tell me what we're up here for. And without a chaperon! You know my mother will scold you when she finds out."

"We're engaged, Billa. She can't complain that much." The dwarf was smiling, but it didn't seem to reach his eyes. He turned to look out over the city, his gaze resting only briefly on the woman at his side. Unseen by the young couple, Durinson winced.

"Look at her, you fool," he whispered. "Look at her." The halfling had seen the distant look in her fiance's eyes and sighed softly, a mist that hovered before her for a moment, almost masking the
sadness in her face.

"So what did you bring me up here for?" Her smile returned, less genuine than before. Thorin glanced down at her and tilted his chin proudly.

"I wanted us to have a minute of privacy, and… I wanted to give you your Christmas present."

Billa blinked, the sadness momentarily disappearing from her eyes. "Christmas present? But I thought you didn't do Christmas."

"I don't. For you, though, I'll make an exception."

Durinson seemed to follow them almost against his will as they moved off to the side, and his younger self ushered his intended bride onto a low shelf of rock, where she sat.

"Look at her. Please. Just… look at her. Really look." Durinson's mantra didn't ebb as his counterpart drew a small package from an inside pocket of his heavy coat. "Can't you see? She knows. She already knows. Look, before it's too late."

But of course, Thorin neither heard, nor looked. The touch of pride in his expression only intensified as he offered the package to the little woman, who accepted it with apparent delight. The bright smile that graced her features faded a little as she noted the size of the box, small enough to fit only one type of gift. Under the colorful bow, nestled in the velvet lining, there was a plain gold ring, unadorned and unetched, polished to a shine and hung on a delicate silver chain.

"When we marry," said Thorin, not seeming to notice the disappointed expression on his fiance's face, "I'll engrave it properly, and then you can wear it as your…" He trailed off with a frown, tipping his head to look into Billa's face.

"Too late," moaned Durinson, weeping openly. "Too late."

"What's wrong, love?" Thorin's tone was concerned, and perhaps a little frustrated. She was supposed to be happy.

"When?" Her question was almost too quiet to be heard, and the snowflakes drifting around them grew thicker as the wind picked up the snow from the ground, tossing them into the air again.

"When what?"

"When will we marry, Thorin? How much longer must we wait?" Now lifting her face so she was looking into his eyes, Billa raised the ring to eye-level. "You give me tokens and promises, but I don't want them. I want you."

Thorin's expression darkened. "Tokens are how I express my love. Do you doubt?"

"I never said that, Thorin. I just… I want to be married. We've been engaged for almost five years now, and I'm not getting younger, even if you never age." Billa reached for his hand, but Thorin, insulted, took a step back.

"Your age means nothing to me. And my tokens mean nothing to you, apparently."

"Thorin, please. What are we waiting for? You said you wanted to be established in the business, that you wanted your own office - you're a partner in your own firm now. What else do you want? What else needs to be done before we can be happy together?" Billa stood, not quite pursuing him. The ring stayed on the rocky shelf where she'd set it, seemingly forgotten.
"I've told you before and I'll tell you again, I'll not marry until I can support you as you ought to be supported. I haven't the means."

"To what? You have a house. You have a business. I would be happy with half of what you have. Thorin, I only want you."

"No. Not until I've reclaimed what is mine." Thorin's tone was suddenly harsh, and the halfling flinched, hurt clear on her features. Immediately, the dwarf softened. "Only a couple more years, I swear, and then we'll marry." But she was shaking her head now. Thorin seemed to realize his mistake, and stepped forward, taking her hand between his own. "It will be soon. I still love you, Billa, and will have no other. Please. I just need a little more time." She shook her head again, and gently withdrew her hand from his.

"You did love me, once. I know that. And I you. That's why... I release you."

"What?" Thorin seemed dumbfounded, his world shaken.

"Dedicate yourself to what really matters to you. It's... not me." She twirled the ring from her finger, a silver band decorated with Thorin's careful engravings, and offered it to him. When he didn't take it, she dropped it in the snow at his feet.

"I matter so little to you?" Thorin seemed torn between betrayal and anger.

"You will always mean the world to me." Billa turned away and tucked her hands into her muff. "Goodbye, Thorin. Valar keep you." And with that, she was gone into the swirling snow.

"Go after her. Go after her, you idiot. You fool, you imbecile. Don't let her go! Follow her!" Durinson tried to give his younger self a shove, but the dwarf neither heard nor felt him. He stood there on the overlook, watching the place where Billa had disappeared, anger hardening his expression.

"Her choice," he muttered glancing down at the gold ring on the shelf before him, "her life. Let her go. Makes no difference to me." But there was pain in his face, even as he snapped the little box closed on the ring and stuffed it into his pocket.

Snow swirled around them, obliterating the scene and leaving them standing in a white void. Durinson turned on the Ghost and scowled through his tears, which he didn't even bother trying to scrub away now.

"Why? Why do you show me these things that can't be changed? The past is the past, and there's no point in lamenting what could have been done differently!"

"The past cannot be changed," the Ghost agreed, "but it can teach you. Only, however, if you're willing to face it." The creature, now dwarven in appearance peered at him over a bushy white beard, seeming unrepentant. Unfeeling. Durinson wanted to strike it, to make it hurt, to make it bleed. To make it hurt like he hurt. The crown of flame on the Ghost's brow burned only brighter in the white void, until Durinson wanted only to smother it. There was too much in that light, too much he didn't want to see. More memories that would burn and tear and taint. The dwarf pulled his nightcap off and jammed it violently over the creature's glowing white crown.

"Leave the past to its own devices, and leave me be! You've done enough damage for one night."

The last words, growled between clenched teeth, were accompanied by the most curious sensation of fitting the worn, frayed cap over the Ghost's broad shoulders. The resistance below the cap mounted, light splintering through threadbare patches as the Ghost's entire body disappeared into the old cap. Then, all at once, the resistance disappeared, and Durinson collapsed into the cool,
rumpled sheets of his own bed.

Durinson was once more alone in the dark solitude of his chambers, but he didn't find the silence as comforting as it had been. The appearance of his old business partner had been troubling, but this Ghost, a shadow of Christmas Past, had stirred up fears and hopes that had been long, long forgotten. He wished to forget them again, but now that they were awakened, the memories plagued him like small, hungry urchins. He could do nothing to escape those memories or their cousins, Regret, Grief, Heartache, and Bitterness.

The fire had gone out, and not even coals remained. Crawling between the blankets of his four poster bed, the old dwarf wept in secret for the stupidity and ignorance of youth, and the mistakes he recognized, but couldn't undo. It was only then, in the loneliness of night, in the deep cold of winter, that he allowed these long unshed tears to fall, unseen and unheard in the safety of his home. If, indeed "home" was a word that could have ever been applied to the house.

Perhaps, he thought, the morning would take away the ache in his chest, and things would go back to normal. That thought heralded the tolling of the church bells, and Durinson listened quietly.

**DONG.**

He waited, but there were no more. The dwarf sat up. That couldn't be right. One o'clock? But hadn't the Ghost appeared at the first bell? Had he slept through the night? Perhaps it was not so much of a surprise, then, when his bedchamber filled with light for a second time, warm and golden, and a deep voice rolled through him like an ocean wave.

"Come, and know me better, man."
"Not a man," Durinson muttered as he parted the curtains of his bed and peered out at his chambers. Though, to call them "his" chambers would be misleading, as the old dwarf had never seen these rooms as they were now. His bedchamber and the adjoining sitting room were filled with the most magnificent feast he had seen in years, as extravagant as anything he'd witnessed in his youth. Meats roasted to perfection, potatoes and carrots and onions in steaming dishes, rolls and fresh butter, gravy and mince pies and savory puddings. Fruits in woven baskets and jewel-bright preserves in beautiful jars, cakes and pies and decanters of cordials and wines. Turkeys and hams and roast geese and suckling pigs heaped to the ceiling, towers of delicious candied fruits. In the fireplace, which seemed larger than he'd ever noticed, a cheerful blaze crackled, with several small cast-iron pots nestled into the coals, from which came mouth-watering scents that might have wafted from the king's kitchens.

"I am the Ghost of Christmas Present, whose coming was foretold to you by your partner, Smaug Feirson." The voice that spoke must have come from a man so impossibly large that Durinson could hardly believe it. Of course, when he stepped into his sitting room, he could hardly do otherwise. There he sat, easily twelve feet tall and wild as a summer storm, his thick black hair sticking out in wiry spikes around the wreath of holly he wore on his enormous head. From his chin sprang a full black beard, long enough to brush against his hairy chest, which was exposed through the open front of his flowing green robe.

"There were no Ghosts foretold to me," Durinson snapped, already at his wits' end. "Fierson came only to stir up trouble, as ever he did in life."

The huge Ghost frowned slightly, stroking his beard with his free hand. In this room, too, there was a bright fire in the hearth, but the Ghost held a large torch, the handle of which was curved and richly engraved with vines, fruits, birds and foods of all kinds. "We shall be having a word with Fierson when we return, I think. Until then, come in, and know me better, man."

"You already said that." Durinson was irritable and on edge. What right did these spirits have to barge into his life and start mucking things up? And he had a sneaking suspicion that if there was a Ghost of Christmas Past and a Ghost of Christmas Present, there was likely to be a Ghost of
Christmas Future as well. Already being tired and short-tempered, he didn't want to deal with any of it.

"I don't want you lessons, I don't want your memories, Spirit, just go and bother someone else. I'm going back to bed." Durinson turned, fully intending to crawl back into his bed and pretend nothing had happened. It was, therefore, both shocking and humiliating to feel the Ghost grasp the back of his nightgown and lift him off the floor, as one might pick up a young pup or kitten.

"I don't like Dwarves," said the Ghost calmly, his dark eyes fixed unwaveringly on Durinson's face as he dangled, feet kicking, some distance off the ground. "You're greedy and blind; blind to the needs of those you deem lesser than yourself. You're stiff and unloving. I'm here to show you what Christmas means, since you've forgotten so thoroughly." The Ghost stood, and the room seemed to grow to accommodate him. Durinson could do no more than hang from the giant's large hand like an oddly-shaped purse, and it was more than a little unnerving to watch the window expand to admit them as the Ghost stepped out into the snowy street. Below, the men and women of the city were bustling to and fro in the morning light, calling cheerfully to one another as they ferried parcels hither and thither.

"Welcome to Christmas morning, Mr. Durinson," rumbled the Ghost, making his way down the street with great long strides. Though he didn't seem to expend much care in where his feet fell, no creature was ever in danger of being stepped on, as there was always a clear space for him to step. Durinson crossed his arms as they passed a small choir on the street corner, shrieking one of those infernal Christmas ditties they liked so much.

"It's a lot of bustle and humbug," growled the dwarf. "Rushing here and there and spending money they don't have, celebrating when they've no reason to. The only thing special about Christmas is that insanity becomes contagious this time of year." The Ghost shook him a little, jostling the old gentleman rather badly.

"You have eyes," said the Ghost seriously, "but you don't see. Perhaps I'll show you the Christmas you rejected just yesterday. Your kin are more forgiving than most."

It seemed to take only a handful of the Ghost's enormous strides to bring them to an unknown part of the town. The houses here were built of stone, as everything in Dale was, but were small and neat. 'Well-kept' was a phrase that could be easily applied to these homes, and as the door expanded to admit them, the Ghost dropped his unwilling passenger. The dwarf sprawled, his hands and feet tingling as though they'd fallen asleep.

It was as though the world came sharply into focus as he made contact with the glossy hardwood. Smells both savory and sweet filled the air, the warmth and sound of a cheerful fire on the hearth, the gentle vibrations of off-key carolers out in the street - and above him, the soft, breathy chuffing of dwarf laughter. It was a sound both familiar and long-forgotten, inspiring comfort in him despite the ache in his hands and knees.

As he pushed himself upright, Durinson took in a startling, wondrous sight. It had been many long years since he'd seen the tension and grief erased from his sister's face. Yes, she was laughing now, that soft chuffing sound that he hadn't heard in so long.

"I don't think that's how you told the story last time."

"All good stories deserve a little embellishment," chortled Kili, giving his mother a mischievous wink. Around them, seated on mismatched chairs and stools, were three or four dwarves Durinson didn't recognize, and a tall, red-haired elf. A scowl crossed his face, and he glared at the elf that couldn't see him. He had only met her once, and very briefly at that, but it was enough. No dwarf in his right mind, particularly one of the Durinson line, would ever have even considered marriage
"Maybe next time, your brother will be here to defend himself. Give an accurate account of what happened." Dis' warning was benevolent at best, but it caught the attention of one of the other dwarves, a youngster about Kili's age, with scarred hands and clumsy braids in his short beard.

"Where is Fili, anyway? I expected him to be here."

Dis sighed, and though she smiled, Durinson could see the tension returning to her face.

"You know how they are. He wanted to spend time with his family."

"The old goat gave him time off, then?" The messy young dwarf was grinning, and it took Durinson a moment to realize that the "old goat" in question was him. He frowned and looked to his sister, expecting her to defend him, but she was smiling again, albeit mirthlessly.

"A half-day. My brother has been touched by the Christmas spirit, it seems."

The reaction from Kili's guests was immediate and passionately outraged. The old dwarf took an instinctive step back, reminding himself forcefully that they couldn't see, hear, or touch him.

"A half-day?! That's ridiculous!" fumed a dwarf with a thick chestnut beard.

"Insulting," agreed his companion, darker of beard and complexion. More than one hand had gone to the hilt of a belt-knife or short sword already.

"Someone oughta burn down that stupid office," growled the messy dwarf, to general agreement from the others.

"Hey now - it's Christmas, remember? A time of goodwill and charity. Just because the old miser refuses to show any Christmas spirit doesn't mean we're excused from it. Come, friends, let's play a game." Kili's tone was surprisingly stern, and Durinson felt touched by his defense, even if it wasn't necessarily the sort of defense he'd hoped for. He watched as they settled in to playing a question game and the anger that had so stirred them started to dissipate. It was remarkable, if somewhat confusing, to see them interact so cheerfully, relax so quickly, when the outrage had been so genuine. They were so happy together, so unbothered by anything in the outside world.

"Why are they so..." Durinson trailed off, unable to find the words to describe what he was seeing. His nephew was silently imitating someone while the others called out names, laughing as they teased one another about their guesses.

"Happy?" suggested the Ghost dryly. Durinson scowled up at the enormous man, who never seemed to need to stoop or even bow his head. He towered over the old dwarf, and that just made Durinson grumpier.

"They ought to be out for my blood, but instead they're here, playing games and laughing. It doesn't make sense."

Above him, the Ghost let out a soft chuckle. The sound was so deep that the old moneylender thought he could feel it through the ground under his feet.

"This is Christmas, little man. No one wants to seek revenge when there's good company and good food to be had." The Ghost's explanation was punctuated by laughter from the dwarves, just as if they were proving his point. Durinson had to remind himself that they could neither see nor hear the Ghost, and even if they could, they certainly wouldn't have defended his point. It was not the way of Dwarves to let go of anger so easily.
"Come, my friend. There is still much to see." The Ghost shifted slightly and rested one huge, heavy hand on Durinson's shoulder. His torch guttered, then burned brighter, blotting out the warm, friendly room around them.

"No! I've seen enough, and I'll thank you to just leave me be." Though Durinson tried to slip away, the Ghost's hand remained as firmly as before on his shoulder, fingers curled down over his collar bone.

"Almost three thousand of my brothers have come before me, and with some you were quite friendly, but when I and my kin are so rejected, so despised, shackled like criminals and prisoners of war," here the Ghost paused, his wild appearance lending a frightening aspect to grief as his torch grew dim once more, "I cannot help but wonder what would become of the world, if you had your way. But then, every fool who went about with 'merry Christmas' on his lips would be cooked with his own turkey and buried with a stake of holly through his heart." And suddenly he released the dwarf. Durinson stumbled a little, surprised by how heavy had grown the hand of the Ghost.

"It is folk like you, son of Durin," rumbled the Ghost softly, "that make my stay in this world so brief."

Durinson straightened, and found himself in a narrow, crooked lane. Children shrieked and screamed with laughter as they ran hither and yon, flinging snowballs at one another. The dwarf sneered at the sight, but thought privately that the sound of uncontrolled mirth wasn't entirely unpleasant.

"Why did you bring me here?" he demanded with a scowl. The buildings were as dirty and crooked as the street they lined, though festively decorated for the holiday. He could see by the height of the doors and windows that these homes were built for dwarves. Those that lived among the Men of Dale couldn't help but pick up some of their habits and traditions, a silent tip of the hat to their hosts.

"Because this is the home of your faithful clerk, your nephew."

The Ghost's answer shocked the old gentleman greatly, and he looked up at the bearded man in anger. "Fili lives here?" Immediately, he moved forward to peer through the window of the nearest house, hardly believing it and not wishing to at all. His nephew, of the noble line of Durin, living in a slum like this? It was insulting. Outrageous! Why would Fili so disgrace the name of his forefathers?

Inside the little ramshackle house, built of stone and covered in dirt and snow, the fire blazed merrily, warming and lighting the space within. An iron stove, attached to the fireplace, creaked and popped quietly, the saucepans on its top steaming happily and doubtless filling the air with delicious smells. At first, the place seemed to be empty. Then a figure pushed the back door open, carrying an armload of firewood. From the quick glimpse he'd gotten of the wood stack in the alley beyond the door, Durinson surmised that the nights after Christmas would be cold.

"Dearheart?" The blond had set his firewood down on the hearth and turned to scan the room. A second figure stepped into the light from the door to what must have been the bedroom. She was swathed in a heavy robe, and honestly, Durinson doubted there was space in the little house for more than the two rooms.

"Here."

Fili went to her immediately, and Durinson felt a jolt, like someone had just plunged a knife into his gut. The female his nephew had married was drastically changed. Her once-plump, freckled
face was pale, her cheeks hollow, her usually neat braids unkempt. Fili supported her to a chair, and though she gently protested his fussing, she leaned against him until she was seated.

"How do you feel?" As Fili spoke, he moved to kneel in front of his wife, and Durinson got an unobstructed view of his niece. Her voluminous robe, wrapped tightly around her body, did little to disguise the pronounced swell of her belly. The old dwarf felt his heart drop a few inches into his stomach. She was with child. The heir to the line of Durin. And she was ill. Warnings that had been dully sounding in the back of his mind now began to build into a tension headache.

"Better now, thank you. The nap helped."

"Do you need anything? Tea? Water?"

"Fili." She covered his hand with one of her own, and the blond became still. With a gentle smile, she seemed almost to grant him some of her calm serenity, as though it were a gift. He relaxed. "I'm fine. We're both fine. The nap helped. I'm just tired, alright?"

Fili chuckled self-consciously and gave her burgeoning stomach a rub with his free hand before answering. "Alright. I just... I worry. Here all alone every day - anything could happen."

Her only response was a fondly exasperated shake of her head. Durinson frowned, straightening away from the window.

"Why didn't he tell me? If I'd known...."

"Then what? Would you have given him the whole day off?" The old dwarf could hear skepticism in the Ghost's voice, but didn't look away from the window. "Lad, this is your family, and the need you've seen in them is but a dim reflection of others in this city. Haven't you wondered why the people hunger, why the buildings fall into ruin?"

For a moment, Durinson thought about arguing. A glance around the street showed him only the decay and filth he'd seen for years already. A second glance reminded him of a time, so recently remembered, in which the wealth of the Mountain had flowed freely through this town, and its people were fat and prosperous in a land without want.

"Do you see them, little man? The spawn of Ignorance and Want, conceived in dark obscurity and left in the shadow of better times; they will learn nothing of the truth until someone cares enough to teach them."

"Let them look to their parents," snapped the old dwarf, unnerved by the Ghost's words. But his eyes were drawn to the children who played in the street, as though he himself had little control over where his gaze rested. The thin faces and ragged clothes and jealous glances into warm houses. Durinson turned back to the window, and saw his niece stirring something in a pot on the stove while Fili pretended not to watch her anxiously.

"Some have none. Others might as well not."

And how, thought Durinson, would a child without parents survive to make them proud, when he knows nothing of what would inspire such pride? When all the world taught him was survival? He was no longer seeing his nephew and niece through the window of a small, dingy house on a crooked lane, but imagining what sort of a person their unborn child might become, should he lack one parent, or both. A dwarf might not survive the death of a spouse. Not really.

*His heart died with your grandmother,* whispered Thrain's tense voice in his mind, echoing out of memory. *He was never the same after that.*
"Tell me she will live, Spirit. Tell me her child will not become like these." It had been many a long year since he had felt such concern for another. Even longer since he'd felt it for one whose face he had never seen. The child his nephew expected was inexplicably precious to him.

"It's not for me to say. My realm is the present, and only the present is certain. I see an empty seat at this table, however. If these shadows remain unchanged, I fear she may die."

Durinson turned to the Ghost, as though he thought arguing with him might somehow alter the truth of the big man's words. The sight of the Ghost's face brought him up short, and the words he'd thought about saying shriveled on his tongue. Where before there had been thick, wild hair, dark with youth and vigor, now was a beard thin and grey with age, his face lined by the ravages of time.

"Are spirits' lives so short?" The dwarf honestly hadn't expected so mundane a change in the Ghost. As far as he knew, creatures like these spirits that had haunted him this night (or was it nights?) never aged, as timeless as the elves and not as liable to betray him.

"I am the Ghost of the Christmas Present. My time on this earth is restricted to the presence of Christmas. I believe my time here will end on the stroke of twelve."

Durinson felt a sense of loss and shifted uncomfortably. He had grown a little... dare he say fond of the big man. The Ghost had taken no argument from him, and had shown the sort of strength of character that Durinson so prized in himself and others of his kind. Not to say he would admit any such thing.

"Well, there's no need to be dramatic about it," he growled, crossing his arms over his chest. "If you're going to kick the bucket, be quiet about it and do it somewhere else. I won't be cleaning up after you."

The Ghost let out a soft chuckle. "Very well. I shall release you, then. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come waits for you, and he is not patient." Before the old dwarf could ask anything, he jolted awake in the dark silence of his own bed. Durinson cursed aloud, twisting to bury his sweaty face in his pillow. Who or what he was cursing was unclear, but giving vent to his emotions helped to steady him somewhat.

Why hadn't Fili told him they were expecting a child? What did the ignorance of the common folk have to do with him? What was he supposed to do about it? More frustrating than any of this was the feeling of responsibility that came with it, as though there were something he ought to be doing to fix it.

Still buried in his own frustration, Durinson almost didn't hear the clock on his wall strike the hour.

Chapter End Notes

It's BEORN!

Did I enjoy making our beloved skinchanger into a Spirit? Yes. :) Yes, I did. He just seemed... suited to the position. Next update on the twelfth. Hope you're enjoying the story as much as I am.
Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come visits Durinson and begins the conclusion of a haunting he's not likely to forget.

Chapter Notes

NOTICE: YOUR NOTICING THIS NOTICE HAS BEEN NOTED. THANK YOU.

In other news, ISeeFire (the wonderful, amazing author of the epic Homeward Bound; An Unexpected Journey and its sequel, Homeward Bound; Grace and Redemption) and I have collaborated on a BotFA fix-it titled "Once More," which you can find in my gallery, or in hers. :) If you enjoy my writing, please go find her. You will drop me like a hot potato.

DONG

One o'clock. Again. Durinson felt a skewing, sliding sensation, and wondered if he was going mad. Was this what his grandfather had felt before he'd killed himself? Feelings too big to be contained in his chest, threatening to break him in their effort to be free.

A soft click, as of talons, alerted the old dwarf to the presence of another in the room. At once, the words burst from him.

"Leave me be! By Durin's beard, leave me alone! There's nothing to be gained from more torment." Despair washed over him as talons wrapped around his body, lifting him out of his bed. It was both curious and unnerving to feel the brush of silky feathers as he was dropped, for the second time, in a heap on the floor. Hard, cold wood stung his hands, his knees ached, and his mind reeled. When he lifted himself off the floor (the talons were very large and tapped impatiently when he didn't move) Durinson found himself looking up into the largest, fiercest, most unforgiving eye he had ever seen. Only one eye, because the other was hidden by a large, sharp, hooked beak, and this was how all eagles looked at folk. Or prey.

"You are the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come?" His question was soft, as though everything had suddenly become infinitely more serious. The eagle nodded its great black head. Black from beak to tail, black from crest to talons. Certainly, though he'd never seen one of the great eagles up close, he knew none had been so black, with great golden eyes and an imperial mein. "Show me what you came to teach, and I'll pay heed." With a willing heart? Maybe not. But he was paying attention. That was something.

The eagle inspected him for a long, silent moment, then bowed, lowering his body in an
unmistakable invitation to mount. Durinson suffered a stab of intense irritation. Couldn't any of these stupid ghosts show any respect for the proper use of a door? Or could they even pretend to be physically possible? Keeping his complaints to himself, the old dwarf clambered onto the eagle's broad, feathery back. How they got out of the room was never quite clear to Durinson. As soon as the enormous wings had spread, he closed his eyes. He was a creature of earth and stone, of deep places and darkness. Flight had never been one of the things he had wanted or pursued.

It was with a deafening rush of wind that they somehow became airborne, and when Durinson opened his eyes, the city was spread below them like a dirty, smokey picnic blanket. They soared over the city, and it sprawled on and on, as though it had no end. The horizon started to lighten, and still there was no end to Dale. Though the eagle tilted its wings neither left nor right, Durinson concluded that they must be flying in circles. In fact, as he looked down, he saw the street he lived on. The church at the corner. The market square.

The eagle dropped into a lazy spiral, honing in on Blathenly Garden. Why it would be called that, Durinson didn't know. It looked like like a garden to him.

The folk in the square seemed especially cheerful and energetic today. As they landed a little space cleared, and Durinson slid off the Ghost's back, the silky feathers cool under his hands. Around him, drinks were being passed, smiles exchanged, cheerful greetings called.

"More Christmas madness," grumbled the old dwarf with a scowl. "What purpose is there to this? Why do you show me these things?" Durinson would see Dori Bleu and his droopy companion. There were others, too, that he recognized, frequent patrons or business owners here in the market square. Many of them owed him money in varying amounts.

"Cheers!" called a flower girl, a human wench he recalled owed him two mortgage payments. "To freedom!" The steaming contents of her cup spilled only a little, and others around them lifted there cups as well.

"To freedom!"

"Thank Mahal he's finally dead," groused an old man, one Durinson thought looked familiar, but couldn't place. "I thought he'd never go."

"What'd he die of? Does anyone know?" Mr. Bleu sipped his tea somewhat smugly as others spoke up to answer his question.

"Don't know, but i heard he went last night."

"I don't much care how he died. I, more interested in what he's done with his money." There was a murmur of agreement from the others, and the woman who'd spoken gave Mr. Bleu a crooked smile. Durinson felt a prickle of foreboding and looked about. There were an extraordinary proportion of folk who owed him money in this crowd.

"Well, he didn't leave it to me." A laugh went up from the listeners and Durinson turned to the eagle at his side. Black feathers stirred silently in the cold breeze, the sharp gold eye focused unblinkingly on him.

"The man these people speak of..." The dwarf trailed off after a moment, then tried again. "I'm dead, aren't I?"

The Ghost nodded, as silent as ever. Durinson shivered slightly. That wasn't exactly what he'd expected to see. Not that it bothered him. He'd always known that one day, he would die. Death was a simple fact one could not escape. Still, it was unnerving to know that right now, his body
was being interred.

"And is there a soul on this good earth that would grieve my passing?" He had never expected wailing and weeping, but this filling of his expectations, this lack of grief or sadness, touched a cold place in his heart. Suddenly, the emptiness that had protected him from the world felt vast and lonely.

The eagle cocked its head to the side, pretending to think about it. Then, without offering any sort of answer at all (Durinson suspected this was an attempt at being mysterious) the Ghost turned away. It spread its wings, and for a moment, the dwarf feared he would be left behind. It was a silly, irrational fear, and as soon as it had registered, the old gentleman rejected it. By that point, the eagle was folding its wings again. The crooked street this motion revealed brought a sudden ache to Durinson's sturdy chest. They stood before the house of his elder nephew, and the street seemed oddly somber, despite the wreaths and bows that hung on various doors and window boxes. Durinson almost turned away, for he guessed at what he would find when he stepped, ghost-like, through the front door. But step he did.

The main room was again lit by a hearty fire under the mantle. Only one pot sat on the stove, and its savory, slightly burned aroma filled the little space. He might have missed her completely if not for the tousled mop of blonde hair. A dwarrow, barely tall enough to reach his shoulder on tip-toes, clambered onto a chair beside the stove, grasped a wooden spoon in both hands, and started to stir cautiously.

Durinson wasn't sure whether to be anxious or proud. This child, she could be no older than twelve, was already engaged in the art of Making. No dwarf could do better.

"Adad?"

Her little voice made Durinson jump, and he wasn't the only one. In an armchair near the fire, Fili twitch awake. As the blond sat up, running a hand over his face, the old dwarf realized that his nephew was sitting in his old armchair. The very one he'd eaten dinner in before Fierson had shown up to ruin his evening.

"What is it, sweetling?"

"Will we take the soup to Uncle's?" She turned to look at him, and Fili smiled at her - Durinson could only assume it was a think he couldn't help. The old gentleman himself was also smiling, though he didn't know why.

"Yes, I think we will. It'll be an excellent part of our Christmas dinner." Fili leaned forward and braced his weight against his knees. The dwarrow watched him, her eyes narrowing with concern in precisely the same way her mother's had. Deep brown eyes, they were.

"Adad, why were you gone all night Did you have to do lots of work?"

At once, a look of sadness settled over Fili's expressive face, a familiarity and a grief Durinson wished not to see. The blond sighed, bowing his head slightly.

"I was with my Uncle Thorin," he said softly. "He was very sick."

it was amazing, how perceptive the child was. Her round, innocent face filled with dismay.

"Sick like Mum was?"

Pain flickered across her father's face, and the girl clambered down from her perch to put her arms around him.
"Yes. Like your mum. He's... he's returned to stone, now."

"Do you think he's less grumpy, now that he's not sick?" The question was so innocent, so incongruous, that Fili laughed. Durinson's throat was tight, but he felt wonder that his nephew could bear so much.

"I hope so, little one. I really hope so."

It seemed hardly more than a blink before they were in a house he recognized as Kili's. None of the laughter he recalled rang in the festive room, though there were more decorations and Christmas nick-nacks than there had been. Fili and his daughter were there, and so were Kili, Dis, and the she-elf. There were no guests today, no teasing or games. The family gathered quietly about the table, which was laid with food and - Durinson looked again, startled. A small portrait of himself. He didn't remember sitting or a portrait of any sort, but it was accurate to the last detail.

"The old fool," growled Dis, making those closest to her jump. "He just couldn't resist ruining the holiday, could he?"

"Amad." Fili gave his mother a faintly reproachful look. The dwarrow, his precious gem, was already moving to Dis' side, tugging at her sleeve.

"You're just angry 'cause you're sad, aren't you, Nana?" Her sweet little voice pierced Durinson's heart as he watched. This child had such faith in the world that he'd not seen in a long time. Kili shifted slightly, leaning toward his mother as she nodded.

"Yes, child. I am very sad."

"You loved Uncle Thorin lots and lots." The girl rested her blonde head against Dis' leg and looked up at the portrait on the table. "What was Uncle Thorin like, before he was grumpy and sick?"

Silence descended over the room, and even the quiet chatter of the fire seemed to cease for a moment.

"I don't remember. It as so long ago, now. Before the king died." There was such grief, such sadness in her face that Durinson stepped forward, reaching out to her. The fact of his death had been so constant, so unavoidable, that he'd never thought about the effect it would have on other folk. The reactions of his clients in Blathenly Garden was no more than he would have expected. There was, after all, no love lost between the old dwarf and those who borrowed money from him.

"He wandered so long in grief and anger that I think he lost himself." Soft and melodious, this voice startled Durinson out of his uncharacteristic empathy. With a scowl, he turned his gaze on the she-elf. Her eyes, liquid green, were somber; deep with the wisdom of uncounted years, of unnumbered losses. He realized with a start that this was the first he'd heard Kili's wife speak, but not the first time he'd heard the elf's voice.

A stormy night. Icy wind. Fresh, biting grief. He had he not known that the she-elf as one of Legolas' ilk? What's more, she was on speaking terms, one might almost say friendly with the so-called "prince" of the elves. Age-old anger simmered in his chest as he glowered at the elf, remembering all the wrongs done to him.

"I only hope he's not still wandering," murmured Dis and Fili nodded his agreement. The somber mood seemed too much for the younger folk. Kili stooped to pick up his niece, who seemed to be shedding silent tears.
"Come now, friends! We've had enough of grief and sorrow. It's Christmas! Let us celebrate in Uncle's honor." He turned a slightly strained grin on the gathering. "Let's make up for his lack. Come on, the food's getting cold!" Durinson turned away, his anger still fresh. The she-elf, whatever her name was (he didn't much care to remember it) was as much a traitor as Legolas, if not more so. She could not have held any grudge against him, been angry for any personal offence, therefore her betrayal was clearly out of spite or flawed character. He knew now, more firmly than ever, that no elf could be trusted.

The Ghost was waiting for him in the street. It seemed almost... dare he say disappointed? Durinson tried to smooth his expression into something more acceptable before he spoke.

"What else have you to show me, Spirit?"

The eagle lowered its body to let Durinson mount again. With a sigh, the old dwarf did so, no longer caring to look either left or right. He therefore missed the shadow of a red-haired elf in the window, watching the street with a furrowed brow, as though she'd seen something that troubled her. What was on the wretched female's mind, Durinson neither wondered, nor cared.

With a sweep of its great wings, the Ghost lifted them into the air. Once more, the city spread out below them, buildings and streets shrinking into broken lines and crooked squares. Ahead, the sky grew dark, then light again, and as before, the city never seemed to end. When they began their downward spiral, it was near the squat form of a dark building called "the tomb," built of large slabs glossy black rock.
Beyond Grief

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Durinson is nearing the end of his journey with the Ghosts, but his learning curve is about to get steeper.

As Durinson slid off the eagle's back, he eyed the building uneasily. The old dwarf didn't like the houses of the dead, or the thought of the things within them.

"Where...?"

The Ghost pointed to the heavy iron doors with its beak, then swept him forward with one huge wing. Durinson found himself herded through the entryway, the doors of which neither opened nor were large enough to admit the eagle's bulk. That didn't stop the creature from following him in, though.

And once they were through the doors, it was as though he had lost control of his legs. Drawn inexorably down the hall, Durinson felt an unearthly chill. The torches flickered as he passed, casting strange shadows over the walls, and he assured himself that they weren't frightening at all.

*Dead things are dead. The dead cannot hurt me.* His internal pep-talk didn't seem to help, though. As his feet carried him ever deeper, ever downward, the old dwarf imagined he could sense the anger and resentment from the spirits of the dwarves buried here, jealous of the life he greedily hoarded within himself. So angered, surely the dead wouldn't hesitate to steal the life and breath from its undeserving host. How he wished he were armed. Even if the fear was ridiculous, the heft of an ax or a hammer in his hand would be a comfort.

Why did he fear? Durinson's steps continued as relentlessly as the tolling of church bells, down a shallow flight of stairs as he thought. He feared because so many deaths lay already at his door. Deaths he might have prevented. And in his dreams, the dead returned to avenge themselves. When at last the dwarf was freed from his visions of death, it was by the jarring sound of female weeping. Durinson found he was standing in a large, shadowed gallery arranged in spacious tiers. Solid pillars sported iron sconces where more of the guttering torches lived, and along the walls were neatly-carved alcoves, rectangles of deeper darkness in the shadow. Each space, though shrouded in eternal night, obviously contained a sarcophagus, and beside some of them were glints and flashes of brightness, the torches' inconstant light catching on plaques, nameplates of the dearly departed. Durinson wondered if any still came to read them.

A muffled squeak recaptured his attention. turning, the dwarf saw a lantern on a coffin of fresh-cut stone, the sparkle of quartz chips embedded in the walls of the alcove, a plaque that bore his name in the common tongue. Thorin Durinson. And there, half in shadow, as a small figure in a simple grey dress. With one finger, she traced the dwarven runes on the lid of the sarcophagus.

**Here lies Thorin, son of Thrain, Lord of Erebor**

Lord of Erebor?
"Idiot," she whispered, her fingers lingering over his name.

Durinson's mind went immediately to his sister, but he found himself hesitant to approach, even if she was his kin. Intruding on such an intimate, emotional display would be... unforgivable. Yet even as he determined to leave well enough alone, a thought niggled at the back of his brain. This female was too small to be his sister, her voice too soft and high. Her hair caught the light, more silver than black, and curly. Very curly. The dwarf felt a jolt in the region of his stomach, a disorienting lurch. It couldn't be possible. She was long gone.

But there she was. And the hobbit was no longer small and pretty and young. The years had worked their will on her until only her curls and the color of her eyes remained. Durinson took a step forward, half wondering, half afraid. She stood before he reached her, wrinkled hands braced against the sharp corner of the coffin.

"Idiot," she repeated emphatically, wiping the tears from her face with a handkerchief. Not that this motion did much good, all things considered, as she was still crying. New tears replaced those she'd wiped away, and Durinson could only watch.

"Billa." He was beside her now, looking into her face as his heart made a concerted effort at exploding in his chest. "You're not supposed to be here. You're supposed to be home, in the West, with your family. Billa, you weren't supposed to stay." She didn't answer, of course. She couldn't hear him. Her face was seamed with wrinkles, her skin almost paper-thin with age, a spill of thick silver curls softening the sharp outline of cheek- and jaw-bones. His eyes swept over her body, and he felt another jolt. The curves she'd just been developing the last time he'd seen her, nearly five decades ago, had blossomed into the plump figure of a mature hobbit, a matron of good standing. His thoughts turned to the children that figure spoke of, the marriage he had never claimed.

"You could have asked. I would have come, I would have helped." It was then, as she brushed dirt from her skirts that Durinson recognized the plain grey dress she wore. It was a uniform, one of the Sister of Mercy, a healers' charity in Esgaroth. "I would've--you stupid, pig-headed ass! I could have at least said goodbye." Her breath hitched in her throat, and Billa scrubbed at her face again, her handkerchief coming away damp with tears. Durinson was stunned. She was no dwarf, bound forever to a single love. She could have found another. Moved on. She should have. Maybe she did, whispered a malicious little voice in the back of his mind. Maybe she was happily married, with a brood of little hobbitlings and this was an outburst of anger--a debt unfulfilled?

A wing suddenly blocked his view of the halfling and started to pull him away. Durinson tried to resist, to duck under the long feathers and return to her.

"No. I'm not done yet. There's more I can learn!" If she had stayed, then he could find her. He could beg her forgiveness, meet her children, threaten her husband with death if she was unhappy. A torrent of emotions boiled just under the surface, shrieking for freedom, for release. But when he succeeded in getting past the eagle's wing, they were no longer in the tomb.

They stood together before a set of enormous metal doors, doors that would put the very gates of Erebor to shame. Upon the dark metal, words were expertly and beautifully etched. The old dwarf read them, despite not wanting to.

Enter, Sons of stone and earth

Where Lord and Lady dwell.

Listen well for sounds of mirth,
Or drums both deep and fell.

For what you hear beyond these doors

Your deeds alone have made;

The fate within, forever yours

Until all things shall fade.

"Terrible poem," muttered Durinson, staving off shivers that had nothing at all to do with the temperature. "The last line throws it all off." He turned away from the doors, rolling his shoulders uncomfortably. There stood the Ghost, as motionless as stone, watching him with one large, fierce eye.

"Well? What did you bring me here for? If you're trying to scare me, it won't work." His voice neither resounded nor echoed, but seemed to fade into nothing. The huge doors and the building to which they were attached seemed to be set among empty hills, grey and lifeless. It felt deeply unsettling, unnatural, to Durinson. More so when the eagle didn't acknowledge his words or even blink. Did eagles need to blink? He couldn't remember.

"What is this place? Why have you brought me here?" His demands elicited no response. There was nothing here to see except the doors and that stupid poem. He wanted to go back to his tomb and be with Billa. She hadn't left--there was certainly more he could have learned there than from a dumb eagle and these....

Durinson's gaze landed again on the doors, and found them partially open. Such massive structures ought to have made noise when opened, even if it as only the sound of the air they moved with their enormous panels. He has heard nothing. A glance at the eagle showed that the creature was as motionless as before, its gold eyes still fixed unerringly on him. It didn't take a genius to know that someone (or something) wanted him to enter the dark hall beyond the doors.

"What I find in there--all that you've shown me--can it be changed? Can any of it be changed?" Was it just his imagination, or did the eagle nod just ever so slightly? It was almost imperceptible, but Durinson was nearly certain that the Ghost had nodded.

Then again, it might all be a humbug.

He turned toward the doors, which were fully open now. The dwarf stepped forward, noticing for the first time that he wore neither slippers nor boots. He suffered a moment of confusion. Had he been wearing them? Had he lost them? It didn't matter, he decided, and took another step forward. The doors toward impressively over him, looming as surely as if they themselves had a will and a sinister purpose all their own.
Durinson meets one who has never stopped watching over him.

The hall was huge, dark, and hauntingly empty. Durinson remembered the great halls of Dwarrowdelf, conjured from old tales and history lessons. There was no cheerful greetings, no music or warm fires or hot food. It was simply bare. The dwarf could smell fresh-cut stone, but there was no evidence of the creature that would have cut it.

"You have come at last." From whence the voice came was hard to tell--if Durinson hadn't known better, then he might have thought it came from the very stone. But he was a practical dwarf and thought no such thing, even in an impossible hall in a dead land sometime in his own miserable future.

"I've come where? Who are you?" THe dwarf took another breath to ask 'where are you?' but the voice was already speaking.

"You know this place well, as you know me, but it's been a very long time since you thought of either."

Deep into the endless shadows, Durinson squinted, trying to find his host. The light filtering through the doors didn't penetrate far, watery and weak as it was. Around him, the shadows deepened and grew. Durinson realised what was happening only a moment before the door shut with a muted boom. He turned, but it was too late. Total darkness had fallen, a shroud that not even his keep eyes could penetrate.

"Humbug!" he snarled into the blackness. "It's all a humbug. You're trying to scare me--well, it won't work. Take your cheap tricks and your shadows and begone!" Durinson's heart beat fast and hard, a comforting reminder that he remained. He survived. He would not be so easily swayed.

"A humbug, Thorin? Surely you don't mean that." The echo of his younger nephew's words, deep as the Mountain's roots, made him shiver. Distantly, faintly, he heard the soft boom of a large drum.

"Do not address me so informal, sir. I don't know where I am and I certainly don't know who you are." As Durinson spoke stiffly into the darkness, he received the impression of a vast, warm presence. He assumed it was this presence that sighed quietly, seeming very sad for some reason, though he couldn't fathom why. Sentimental things, Ghosts.

"Once, you called me your father. That was a very long time ago for you, wasn't it?"

Durinson moved cautiously in the direction of the doors, keeping an eye on the surrounding shadows. He was sure, absolutely sure, that this was a trick. That eagle had decided he wasn't scared enough of these visions of the future, wasn't unsettled enough. It was a trick. But perhaps he believed that because the alternative was so much more frightening, that he simply refused to
"My father is dead. As he should be." The last words had been meant as a statement of fact, or propriety, but that wasn't how it sounded. The old dwarf winced slightly, grateful to the darkness that hid him from his unseen host. Then, all at once, it was as though that presence, the source of the Voice, was very near him. It was... old, and vast, and as ancient as the stones. There was also a scent... the old gentlemen struggled to name it, and eventually settled on 'sadness.' It was strong, somber and dry; the musk of a hardworking man at rest for too long.

"Do you enjoy being alone, Thorin?" In the quiet that followed the question, Durinson heard the deep drums again, a little faster and a little closer. "Of course you don't," the Voice answered himself. "And yet you push them all away. Push _me_ away. I can't imagine you could be happy with such an existence."

"What I do with my time is none of your business," the dwarf rumbled, edging closer to the door, away from the near-overpowering presence. There was, he reluctantly admitted to himself, something familiar about it. But it certainly wasn't anything to do with his father. Blindly, his hands fumbled against stone, and he felt to either side, realizing he'd found, not the doors, but a wall. Durinson felt a twinge of unease and turned so his back was to the wall. He had thought the door was this way for sure.

"It _is_ my business, and I think you know why." The Voice was very close, and Durinson tensed, then held very still. A hand rested across his shoulders, huge and rough and calloused, and impossibly gentle. It was the touch of one who cared a great deal, who wanted his children to come to no harm.

"Mahal," Durinson breathed, knees weakening at the sheer weight of the revelation. If this was a dream (and the chances of that seemed impossibly remote at the moment) then it was a very powerful one.

"Yes, my son."

The drums thundered from the levels below, drawing ever closer, ever louder. Under his bare feet, the stone vibrated minutely, a faint tremor in the hall all around him.

"Why... why am I here? What can I learn from this forsaken place?" Durinson felt the enormous hand of his creator lift from his shoulders. The absence of that weight left him feeling empty. It was as though he'd removed a heavy coat in the middle of a snowstorm, only much deeper.

"You cannot see the feast, hear the clamor of your kin, feel the warmth of the fires. Thorin, you've blinded yourself to the good in the world, and thus you cannot see it in this world, either." The Voice of his Maker was becoming hard to hear as the drums swelled, the tremor in the stone becoming a quake. Durinson didn't need to ask what it was. Deep in the very core of his being, he already knew.

"You can change your choices, Thorin. They will still forgive you, if you give them a reason to."

As the words faded, the presence at his side disappeared. He knew, though there was no Voice to tell him, that Mahal had turned his face away. Then there was nothing but the drums and the biting cold. Durinson's search for the doors resumed, almost frantic, his hands skimming over the stone, and he began to shiver furiously. Despite his denial, his fear grew, and in spite of his fear and his need for escape, he knew there was no way he would be able to get away from the drums, from the creatures that beat them.

Then came the pain.
It wasn't the pain that came of a blade in his flesh, or of burning, or of cold, or of being struck. It wasn't even the pain of tripping or of skin rubbed away by rough stone. Durinson let out a hoarse cry, baffled and hurt.

Grief.

Guilt.

Regret.

*It's all my fault.*

Like a piercing, squeezing, grinding in his chest. It was pain unlike anything he'd ever felt. Freezing iron bands around his lungs.

His family. His clients. His subjects--the people he *should* have led. The people he ran away from and pushed away. The people who suffered and struggled and *died*--his people.

With a gasp, Thorin woke, half a second before he hit the cold floor. Sunlight streamed through the window, splashing cheerfully against the hardwood to his left. The floor was his. The window was his. The bed was his. Thorin pushed himself up, feeling the old strength return to his limbs. For a moment he stood, trembling, straining to hear the rolling, pounding drums. There was nothing on the air but the quiet creaking of a cold, empty house.

Thorin looked around, heart thudding in his chest. After a moment, he stumbled stiffly to the window. Throwing it open, he inhaled deeply, shuddering. The dream, if it had been a dream, was filling his mind, as vivid and immediate as his memories of yesterday. Had it really been yesterday? The clock had struck one three times. Down on the street below, a group of young men was trudging toward the distant line of factories. It must have been very early, Durinson realized. Only just after dawn.

"You there, boy!" Thorin felt that if he didn't know, right now, what had happened to him, but would burst. A boy near the back of the group, wearing a floppy blue cap, stopped and looked up at him. The others didn't even pause.

"Me, sir?"

"Yes, you. What day is it, lad?"

"What day?" The tone and expression that accompanied the words informed Thorin that the youth thought him either insane or unintelligent. "It's Christmas day, sir."

Christmas day. The Ghosts had done it all in one night. The dwarf shook his head slightly. It was remarkable, but he couldn't get sidetracked. Another look down at the street showed him that the boy was alone now, his group having moved off without him. His first inclination was to send the lad off--he had finished his task, after all. But he noticed, almost against his will, the boy's ragged clothes and hollow cheeks, and his presumed destination, the factories. On Christmas day. The thought was somewhat repulsive to him, and Durinson silently scolded himself for being a sentimental fool.

"Something for your time, lad," he called, and drew from the pouch on the side-table five copper coins. A day's earnings for a lad his size. These he tossed down into the snow. A waste, he berated himself, but it seemed to have no ill effect. The boy picked up the coins and counted them carefully before stowing them in his pocket.

"I'm at your service, sir. What can I do for you, sir?" There was no guile in the youth's voice, and
Durinson (Thorin? They felt like two different people, now) decided he must have snagged one of the old breed--men of Dale had ever honored their debts. He had paid the young man a day's wages, and he would have a day's service of him.

"Come in and out of the cold, boy, and don't track mud on my rug." It took only a moment to wrap himself in a dressing gown and unbolt the door to let him in through the shop. It took only a little longer to settle the lad to starting and tending the kitchen fire while Thorin went to dress himself. He felt the day would hold many tests for him, and little in the way of moneylending. Loans would have to wait. It was then, as he pulled on his jacket, that he heard his housekeeper shriek at the boy to "get out this instant!"

"Mrs. Dilber, I would thank you to leave my page well enough alone." Durinson was disgruntled at the need to exit his rooms so hastily on behalf of another, and the woman turned to stare at him in open-mouth disbelief.

"Your… page, Mr. Durinson?" 

"Aye. My page. And you'll leave him be, Mrs. Dilber, thank you."

The woman retreated to the stove, eyes wide. "Well, I never," she mumbled. Thorin sighed and glanced to the heavens for patience.

"Humbug and nonsense. My breakfast, Mrs. Dilber, if you please. I have much to do today."
Trying Again

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Durinson wrestles with the new information given him by the Ghosts, and tries to decide whether or not a dream is appropriate reason to change his entire life.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, folks. I must confess that I was still working on writing this chapter yesterday, and though I did finish it on time, I write it in a little notebook I carry with me. Once written in the notebook, I type it up and edit it as I go, and then I paste it into AO3 and format it. It's quite a process, and yesterday, I'm sorry to say I was rather distracted by the television, and it took me two hours to type the chapter. By the time I was done, I wanted to go to bed, and left the chapter unposted until today. *shame* Please forgive me.

Durinson strode down the street, his gait stiff and swift. Behind him, he heard the irregular steps of his "page." The young man (whose name, he'd said, was Bain) was three or four inches taller than the old dwarf, but he seemed to have some trouble keeping up with his new employer. Secretly, the moneylender felt a spark of perverse pleasure at the boy's difficulty.

Without planning to, he found himself walking the path that would take him to his office. Durinson slowed a little, already doubting, second-guessing. Why shouldn't he go to the office? Would he just change his life because he had a dream?

A surge of stubborn determination flared through him. He would look for proof. If that dream had been true, then he would change. If there was truth in what the Ghosts had told him, then maybe that change would be worthwhile. Clenching his jaw, he lifted his head. The market square spread before him, the crowd sparse, but boisterous in the early morning light.

Christmas.

The concept was still a burr in the old gentleman's boot, but he focused instead on the people. What he saw was no surprise. Stall owners hawking their wares, smatterings of Dale's working folk milling about with manic smiles on their faces. Some were already flushed with drink, others haggard from sleepless nights; everywhere Durinson looked, he saw poverty, filth, and vice. Their songs were hollow, their greetings false, their wishes vain. Christmas did nothing for these folk but foster empty hopes and force them to pretend all was right with the world.

_I owe Christmas no allegiance. I have no need of pretentions and promises._

"Humbug." Shrugging a little deeper into his coat, the old dwarf made his way across the square.

"Fresh fish, direct from Laketown!"
"Pressed flowers, copper a bunch! Add a bit o’ color to your day!"

"Pots of all sizes! Ceramic, stone, and bronze!"

Durinson felt himself beginning to sneer, but faltered when he heard a voice he was more familiar with, one he’d heard just yesterday.

"Hot tea! Black and strong, two coppers a cup!"

The old dwarf slowed as he approached the tea cart and a thought occurred to him that never had before. What of Dori Bleu had a family? What is his wife was at home, caring for their little ones? He was here to earn his keep, same as the dwarf at the forge or in the mine. And though he didn’t regret collecting on his debt, Thorin found himself suffered a flash of empathy.

"Two cups." The words surprised even him as he stepped up to the cart. Dori turned to him with a gracious smile, and froze mid-greeting. After a moment of stunned silence, cold fury passed across this face.

"You can take your coppers and-"

"Dori!" The tea vendor's hound-like companion, Mr. Calico, interrupted, putting a hand on the dwarf's arm. As the cart owner fell silent, his partner gave Durinson one of his sad smiles. "Two cups, sir?"

The old gentleman nodded, and the mournful young man moved to serve him. A cup for him, and one for his page. They stood quietly and drank, the page boy shifting nervously while his employer contently ignored Mr. Bleu's hostile looks. It was almost as though he had plenty of experience paying no heed to people who hated him. So much experience, in fact, that it no longer bothered him at all. The boy was not yet so experienced, and continued to look rather uncomfortable until, rather suddenly, Mr. Bleu could contain himself no more.

'Why are you here?' he exploded angrily, making Bain jump. "What do you want? Haven't you done enough damage?"

Durinson finished his drink calmly and turned a calm, disinterested look on the irate dwarf.

"My dear Mr. Bleu, there's no reason to get so excited. I merely wanted a cup of tea. In future, if it bothers you, I shall take my patronage elsewhere." His response was so completely unruffled that the tea vendor opened his mouth, but could apparently find nothing to say. As the old gentleman passed his cup back and retrieved payment from his coinpurse, Mr. Bleu shook his head slightly.

"I would swear you're enjoying yourself," he muttered, moving to wash the used cups. Durinson hid a smirk as he handed over the coins and turned to his page. Bain finished his tea quickly and stood to attention, shoulders squared and chin raised. The old dwarf nodded his approval and turned to leave.

"Merry Christmas, sir," called Mr. Calico, and Durinson grunted in response. It wasn't a merry reply, by any means, but it wasn't an irritable dismissal, either. Together, dwarf and page made their way through the square, following Durinson's regular path to his office. Only a thing or two to be done, he assured himself. After all, one needed to mark the delayed eviction notices in the records - there were two that were to be sent out that day. He would make an effort to show generosity, as the second Ghost had wanted.

This was the train of thought Durinson was following as he approached his office and unlocked the door. As he looked about at the empty space, though, something shifted inside him. It was a
fracturing, sliding feeling, like a great weight slipping off an ice shelf. And when Thorin shook his head and looked again, he saw a dusty, dirty, cold and empty office with no... body. No life. It was a sad place, and he couldn't but wonder how long it had been that way. Since Feirson's death? Before?

"Build a fire, boy, and fetch rags from the corner."

It was some time before the old gentleman became aware of the day again. The floor was swept, counters and shelves dusted and oiled, records sorted, and a number of other chores done that seemed to clear the misery from the air. He was seated at his desk, totaling loans and payments when the door opened, letting a gust of frigid air into the warm office. Bain looked up from his seat on the floor, where he was fixing a squeaky chair leg, and tipped his cap to the blond dwarf in the door.

"Good day, sir."

At that, the old gentleman looked up from his desk, and glanced reflexively at the clock. Half past noon.

"You're late." He hadn't intended those to be his first words to his nephew, but Fili cringed, a look of shame crossing his face. Thorin could see the shadowed, hollow look about him - the look of a man who had something to worry about - and wondered why he hadn't noticed before. Did it truly take otherworldly intervention, for him to see what was before his eyes every day?

"I'm sorry, Mr. Durinson. It won't happen again, sir."

"It most certainly won't. Go back home to your wife."

By the look of absolute horror on his face, one might have thought Fili had just been sentenced to work in a factory for the rest of his life.

"No, sir, please-" The blond stumbled forward a few steps, catching himself on the edge of his employer's desk. "I won't let it happen again, sir, I swear."

Thorin frowned at his nephew, perplexed by the boy's reaction. "Is she angry with you, then, that you're so scared of returning to your own home?" There was a beat of silence, strained by the confusion rebounding between the two dwarves. After a moment, Fili shifted.

"No. She's not... why would she be angry with me? I'm the one that's upset." While the clerk's face seemed to read only of confusion and fear, his uncle shook his greying head.

"Then why don't you go home, boy? It's not every day I give you time off - do I need to escort you to see you don't wander off?"

"Time... off?" Fili stared. Thorin Durinson, giving him a full day off? Offering to escort him home? The world as he had known it had turned inside-out.

"Yes, time off. To spend with your wife. That's what holidays are for, isn't it?"

As the blond stood in silent shock, the old dwarf marked his place in his loan book and closed it, pushing himself to his feet. Ordering Bain to lock the door behind them, Thorin took his nephew's elbow and led him out onto the street. The biting cold, besides seeming immediately through their thick coats, seemed to knock some sense back into the young dwarf, and he became suddenly animated, turning to gape at the old moneylender.

"Are you alright, Mr. Durinson? Should I call the doctor? Are you ill?" His tone was so similar to
the fussing Durinson had witnessed with the Ghost that he bristled a little. He didn't like the implication that he was infirm, helpless, and in need of assistance.

"Save your fussing," he growled. "I'm fine. Never been better." Regarding his nephew with narrowed eyes, he snorted and gave him a push. "Back to your wife and babe, now. We'll discuss the terms of your employment tomorrow." Though he kept moving, Fili stopped, his expression a mixture of surprise and horror.

"Terms of employment? Uncle, what's going on? And who told you we're expecting?" The blond seemed equal parts baffled and frightened, and Thorin realized his nephew thought he was going to be fired. Discharged. Unemployed. And could he really blame the fellow? Yesterday, he probably would have.

"Boy, I can't let you and that little wife of yours raise a baby on your current salary. Now, go on home. Get. She's waiting for you and how I know doesn't matter. Go on, Nephew." He gave the young clerk an extra shove, and as Fili stumbled off, he looked back over his shoulder several times, as though he couldn't quite believe it. Durinson watched him go, and felt the young human at his elbow, hovering anxiously.

"What's the matter with you?" asked the old dwarf irritably. Bain took a hasty step back, avoiding the sharp blue gaze of his patron.

"I was just curious, sir. You seemed... well, sir, your..." he was surprised, sir. Like this wasn't normal."

And that, thought Durinson, was a brilliant example of the tact of youth. Almost completely nonexistent. With a long-suffering sigh, he fixed the boy with a no-nonsense look.

"I'm an old miser. A crotchety, prickly old fool with no time for holidays and 'making merry.' Don't pretend otherwise - it's not flattering." Thorin felt a weird sort of ache in his chest. It wasn't as though he hadn't known the truth for years. He was an unpleasant, unfriendly person, and he preferred it that way. But saying it out loud made the fact seem like a dark smudge on a dirty window. It was unattractive, even from the inside.

"You'll pardon me for saying so, sir, but you don't seem very miserly today." The young man had the audacity to smile as he spoke, and Thorin found himself smiling back. He felt torn - as though there were two people in his brain, fighting for control.

"Humbug," he muttered rebelliously. "Come along, boy. We have things to do yet."

The frost on the front step was thick, even though the night's snow had already been swept away. On the door hung a festive wreath, and the folk passing this way and that with cheerful greetings were mostly humans. These houses, after all, were sized for the Big Folk, and not for dwarves. Durinson stood on the pavement, gazing at the front door with a powerful feeling of déjà vu, as well as a curious sort of tight nervousness in his gut.

"Are you going to knock, sir?" Bain stood just behind him, and the dwarf scowled at the innocent question. Presumptuous.

"I was making sure this house was the right one," he growled, and pulled his coat more tightly around himself as he marched up the steps leading to the entrance. The process wasn't difficult at all, but it was somehow taxing. The old dwarf hesitated at the door.

You're giving in, whispered a nasty little voice near the back of his mind. You swore for years that
you wouldn't come here, that you would never celebrate Christmas again. What would be the point? Your best friend, your family, your only love - they're all gone.

Thorin frowned slightly. It wasn't right. Familiar, but definitely not right. What sort of dwarf would he be if he gave in to such obvious self-pity? Squaring his jaw, he lifted his fist and knocked firmly. The door opened before he had time to reflect on all the ways this encounter could go wrong.

His tall, red-haired hostess stood in the entryway, looking down at him an unreadable expression. Durinson stiffened slightly. Somehow, he'd managed to forget about his nephew's pointy-eared mistress. He tried to forget about her as often as possible, after all, but this was like a fresh - right in his face, when he was trying to mend these wrongs. And now he saw the faint smile he wore, as though she'd planned it all! When she spoke, her voice was gentle.

"I thought you might come today."
Durinson belatedly accepts an invitation that he swore he never would, and learns some new things about his family.

Chapter Notes

*grovels at your feet* Please forgive me for disappearing! The hiatus was completely unintentional, and I know I missed two updates, and this is very late, and life blew up and I have no real excuse and please don't kill me! *hides under desk*

In sum- I sorted through ALL of my storage, went to the dentist (learned I have three cavities that need seen to, and no insurance to pay for them) got a job, injured my knee, and had an emotional breakdown (which was only slightly triggered by the above list) in the last week, and the week before that was full of searching for a job and trying not to be desperate/frantic about it.

In other news, Loki went to the "One Last Party" in Hollywood and met fans (real-life, breathing, talking PEOPLE) that read our stories. 0.o Like... actual people. With arms and legs and everything. She has informed me that there were several folk there that literally "fangirled" when they heard that she and a friend posted under the name Lady Juno. I'm still sort of in shock. Sure, I know you guys are out there, but... I can't imagine actually meeting people who read (and even LIKE) the things I write. To the reader who mentioned Of Gold and Ghosts by name in that conversation with Loki, I would like to send you a thank-you card. Or a thank-you email. Either would be fine. You know who you are.

Durinson resisted the urge to splutter, because he knew very well what sort of blustering idiot spluttered. Still, it was a near thing. The elf was still smiling faintly as she stepped aside and politely invited them in. He would not, would not give her the pleasure of seeing precisely how thoroughly she'd ruffled his feathers. Setting his jaw, Durinson strode through the door without acknowledging the she-elf. As he wasn't looking at her, he didn't see the sadness that creased her brow as she watched him. Just as well - it would have just made him mad anyway.

"Tauri? Who's at the door? Don't they know it's Christmas? It's rude to-" Kili nearly tripped over his own feet when he saw who was standing in the entryway, giving him an unimpressed look. Durinson had to admit to himself that he didn't know very much about his younger nephew, nevermind knowing him personally. As the lad gaped at his uncle, the elf glided past him, giving her husband (even unspoken, the word tasted of sour pride to Durinson) a gentle nudge.

"We have new guests," said the redhead as she passed into the room beyond and out of sight. "I'll set extra places at the table." Her smooth, unflustered tone rankled Durinson's pride. He briefly
considered telling her not to bother, but was distracted by the appearance of his sister. Kili was still
gawking, though he had managed to step the rest of the way into the hall, hands fluttering
nervously about his pockets as though he wasn't quite sure what to do with them. Dis, on the other
hand, had gone very still. There were slim streaks of steely grey in her dark hair, and Durinson felt
a tight, queasy sensation at the thought of all those years, those *decades* he had forced her to
shoulder the burdens of life alone.

*Loneliness made me isolate myself from the people that needed me the most.* The revelation made
him sick. He realized, then, that he was still standing in the entryway, wearing his coat and an
undoubtedly unpleasant expression.

"Sister, I-" Thorin was interrupted by a strangled sort of grunt, an outraged sound that cooled his
blood by a couple degrees. He thought, at first, that Dis was upset with him. Then Kili spoke.

"You finally decided to come, then?" The lad's voice was pitched high with tension, his eyes a
little wild. "What made you change your mind? Did you have a crisis of conscience?" Perhaps this
outburst wasn't altogether unforeseen, but the old moneylender felt a certain measure of
disappointed surprise. Dis, standing right next to her younger son, turned on Kili with an outraged
scowl. Her hand, ever so much more delicate than Thorin’s, whipped out, fast as a snake, and
dealt Kili a sharp smack to the shoulder. Kili skittered a couple steps away, massaging his
shoulder gingerly and looking defensive.

"What? He chooses *now* to come, of all times? While Fili's-"

"Kee." The disapproving voice that spoke wasn't Dis'. The she-elf reemerged from the room
behind her mother-in-law and put a hand on Kili's shoulder. Thorin could tell it was a firm gesture,
but not harshly so - though he would never have imagined the elf to be anything like *gentle*. She
had been one of Legolas' guards, after all. But maybe Kili didn't know that.

"I sent your brother home." He wasn't sure what had prompted him to speak just then, but a
shocked silence followed the announcement. Only the she-elf seemed unaffected - practically
serene.

"Is he... you didn't fire him, did you?" Dis' hushed question inspired a mixture of irritation and
shame in the old gentleman, and he averted his gaze.

"No, I didn't. I gave him the rest of the day off." More silence. The surprised thrumming between
mother and son was nearly tangible. Thorin drew a deep breath and continued. "I..." It took
several heartbeats and two attempts at swallowing before he could properly summon the words
that needed to be said. "I'm sorry, Sister."

The phrase seemed altogether too small to contain the world of meaning he was trying to convey.
He couldn't resist letting his gaze flick up to his sister's face, just for a moment. Her jaw was tight
under the silky sideburns and short, glossy bristles of her beard, her eyebrows drawn down over
piercing eyes, though not pinched together in anger. The expression was foreign, hard to read.
Was she upset? Disappointed? The silence stretched into increasingly uncomfortable seconds, then
a minute.

"Sister, I know this isn't a welcome visit. Words have never been enough, and if you wish it, I
shall take my leave. Just... please say something." Around him, Thorin felt the entryway closing
in, becoming all but stifling with potential - and the longer the pressure built, the more likely an
explosion became. It seemed like an eternity before Dis moved. She sighed, then took three steps,
just enough to close the distance between them. Thorin was more than a little surprised when,
rather than receiving a solid punch or smack, he found himself locked into a tight embrace, his
sister's cheek pressed against his shoulder.
"Welcome home, Brother."

He knew better than to comment on the way her words quavered, the thickness of her voice as she spoke. That didn't stop him from noticing, thought. She, his fierce, strong sister, was on the verge of tears, and she was welcoming him back.

"They will still forgive you, if you give them a reason to."

He hadn't thought those words, Mahal's blessing, would be proven so quickly. Thorin felt utterly undeserving as he put his arms hesitantly about her shoulders, half convinced she would vanish. Never in his wildest dreams had he even thought his little sister would accept him back so easily.

"Well, don't just stand on the mat like a muddy dwarrow. Come inside, you ridiculous old codger."

After that, Dis was a whirlwind of activity, removing and hanging his hat and coat, welcoming Bain, ordering them both to take off their wet boots, thank you kindly. Kili turned away, his expression a painful conflict of hope and distrust, and shooed away the small crowd that had gathered behind him. Thorin remembered them from his time with the second Ghost, and wondered if he was inviting trouble by coming there. None of these dwarves (the exception being, of course, his own sister) were particularly fond of him. But rather than angry comments and muttered insults, he heard soft, wondering questions ("That's really him?" "Did you hear what he said?") and saw appraising glances. It was an entirely new sensation, being measured and weighed like this, and Thorin found that he actually wanted them to approve.

Introductions were made (the elf's name was "Tauriel," and she was an apparently impeccable hostess, much to his disappointment - it would have been easier to continue being angry with her if she ever made a bloody mistake) and after a few minutes of polite chatter among the other guests (because he hadn't the faintest clue what to say to these people) they were invited to sit around the table. It wasn't until that moment that he realized exactly how badly he'd messed up social standards and general polite good sense seemed to have completely escaped him during his years of solitude. Durinson stood, hands gripping the back of the chair assigned him at the little table. His gaze swept over the dinner spread on the table, noting the perfectly-browned roast, the gravy and vegetables and pudding and rolls - enough to comfortably feed a gathering of five or six. There were now eight places set, and the diners would be hard-pressed to eat without sticking elbows into neighboring plates.

Not only had he specifically declined the invitation to dinner, but he'd gone and brought an extra mouth to feed. The old dwarf shot a look at Bain, and saw that he was hanging back, his expression distinctly self-conscious. It was clear the boy had known for some time what his patron was just now realizing.

Thorin felt like an idiot; and a rude one, at that.

A quick glance at his sister assured him that Dis had not miraculously lost her ability to apparently read his mind. She was giving him a half-worried, half-warning look, as if she suspected he might turn around and leave without a word. He wondered how much of the food had been prepared by her hands, and how much by the elf's. With a sigh, he sat down and resigned himself to feeling like a rude idiot until he could make it up for his faux pas.

Dinner was a boisterous affair, and it seemed that Kili and his friends were determined to make up for his uncle's silence. Wine and ale were had in abundance, while the food was shared among them with much laughter and many compliments. Durinson almost completely avoided the roast, which Tauriel received glowing praise for, but someone served him a slice before he could make
up his mind about it. It was appallingly delicious. He was struggling to find any faults in her skill as a hostess, homemaker and daughter. She said little, and when she did speak, it was to diffuse a friendly argument, or rein in her husband.

And even if she had nothing else in her favor, Kili seemed absolutely besotted with her. He even (to his uncle’s very great surprise) obeyed her very quiet request to stop drinking after he'd had a couple pints of the home-brewed ale (brought by one of his friends, apparently). At length, the friends were seen off with many cheerful goodbyes and a number of curious, sidelong looks at Thorin. Bain, too, was sent home, for which the may seemed conspicuously grateful. Then only Thorin remained, pinned by the weight of Dis’ "Won't you stay for coffee?" and Kili’s cautious assurances that it was "No trouble at all, Uncle, truly." The lad had regained a good portion of his composure and good humor, though there was still a great deal of hesitation in his manner whenever he regarded his uncle.

"Do you think less of him for coming, when we invited him?" Dis’ voice was hushed enough that Thorin didn't hear it until he stood outside the sitting room, towel in hand to mop up a bit of spilled coffee. He paused to listen, anxiety lancing through his chest.

"Mam, he's never come before. What changed that now he's pretending to care? What if it's just a test to see if he should retract our stipend?" Kili's voice was nothing if not earnest, and Thorin winced quietly. Providing a small fund for his widowed sister and her children - he had thought it a generous gesture, once. Now the thought filled him with shame.

"Kili, if I ever hear those words out of your mouth again," Dis growled warningly, but didn't actually finish the threat. As she trailed off into silence, Thorin wondered what it was she would do if her son had been right. She let the threat rest for a moment, then continued. "I trust him, and that should be enough for you, nevermind that he's kin. When he's ready to share what changed, he will, and not a minute sooner."

Thorin winced again, this time at the thought of sharing precisely what had changed his mind. They would think him mad, or worse. Tightening his grip on the towel in the hand, the old gentleman stepped into the room. Dis turned to face him, flapping a hand at the towel as though trying to wave away a fly.

"Oh, don't you start that, Brother. You're a guest, not a servant. Now sit down, before I make you." She snatched the towel and mopped up the spilled coffee, which was very well soaked into the rug by this point, though that didn't seem to upset her. Thorin remained standing as he watched her, thoughts buzzing about in his mind. This proved nothing. The dream might yet be a dream, a figment. But he couldn't deny his strengthening inclination to believe what the Ghosts had shown him. He could still feel that icy chill of Fierson’s chains, the weight of grief and regret that his partner had never felt in life, and now carried in death. Willfully ignorant, blind, greedy.

"I have other things to do, Sister." Thorin all but surprised himself with the words, and turned to glance at the front window. It was getting dark outside. Dis straightened to look at him, her expression reproachful. Thorin shook his head slightly. He wouldn't be persuaded to stay all night.

"It's Christmas Day, Thorin - surely you can stay a little longer."

Kili watched his mother, then his uncle, scratching at his scruffy jaw uncertainly.

"No. I have someone I need to check on. Stay here and enjoy your evening." It was getting easier to remember how to be polite - not that he had ever really been impolite, per se, but he had certainly ceased caring whether people were hurt by his words many years ago. And that was the heart of the problem, wasn't it? "It's not forever, Sister. I'll come back." As an afterthought, he
extended a hand to her, and Dis took ahold of it as though he were threatening to jump off a bridge.

"Promise, Thorin. Promise you'll come back soon." There was a shockingly vulnerable tone in her voice, and Thorin felt another stab of guilt for putting it there. It wasn't hard to see why she wanted assurances that he wouldn't disappear again.

"I promise. I'll come back."

The words may as well have been magic. The dwarrowdam relaxed visibly and gave his hand an admonishing shake.

"You had better." There was a smile in her words, and it warmed the old dwarf to hear it. After a moment, he disentangled himself and turned toward the door.

"I'll show him out, Mother." As Kili all but leapt forward, flashing Dis a reassuring grin, it occurred to Thorin that when the lad had thought he wasn't present, he had called her "Mam," not "Mother," as he always had done in Thorin's presence. He allowed his nephew to show him to the door, though the short walk hardly warranted an escort, and as they stopped by the coat rack to collect Thorin's things, Kili turned a very serious look on him.

"If you hurt her - if you run off and ignore her again - I swear, kin or not, I'll make you hurt." Kili's tone was dark, thick with anger. Thorin wasn't foolish enough to think he wasn't serious. For all that he could remember the tyke clinging to his mother's skirts, knee-high and sporting the first baby-fine wisps of a beard, Thorin could see that Kili was a dwarf grown, now.

"My promise stands. A Durinson doesn't give his word lightly."

After a tense moment, the lad's shoulders relaxed slightly. His nephew was a fool, but no one could say that his heart wasn't in the right place. Thorin put on his hat and coat, slipped into his boots, and turned toward the door, only to be arrested once more by a hand on his arm.

"I'm… sorry, Uncle. I'm just… I want them to be safe." Kili's dark eyes flicked toward the kitchen, and it was clear the lad's mind strayed also to his strange, pointy-eared wife. That, he decided, was a fight for another day.

"You'd hardly be a dwarf if you didn't, lad. Breathe deep - tomorrow's another day."

The words rang with unexpected truth, and Thorin opened the door, letting himself out into the icy twilight. Tomorrow was another day, and another chance. The world waited.

Tonight is not the end;
Together we defend
The realm of hearth and home,
From which fools roam.
A lantern keeps alight,
Steadfast, warm and bright;
For a fool's return,
We let the lantern burn.
Our foolish kin come back
To find the home they lack.
Let them not forget
Their wand'ring lessons yet.
Thorin pays a visit to Fili, who is rather confused about the whole "life-changing" bit.

Finding his way back to the little house without the Ghost there to guide him (or carry him, as the case might have been) was difficult, especially as true night fell about him. The streets were nearly vacant, save for himself and a few lonely ravens, but Thorin didn't think it unusual or even unpleasant. The quiet afforded him the chance to calm his mind once more. His nephews were good lads. Foolhardy and stubborn, true, but they were sons of Durin - surnames notwithstanding, no dwarf of Durin's blood would be otherwise. It was therefore with a sad smile that Thorin paused before the door to Fili's modest home, still hung with its cheerful wreath. The expression felt very strange on his face; weak, like an atrophied muscle.

No one waited for him to knock this time. The door opened, emitting a flood of warmth and golden light, and the floating words 'I thought I saw someone outside...'. The figure in the doorway was too small to have been Fili, so by default it must have been-

"Ori, love, what's is it?" The blond put a hand on his wife's shoulder as he approached, then shook his head in wonder. "Uncle. What are you doing here at this time of night? I would have thought you'd be home by now. Come in. You must be freezing." As Thorin nodded and stepped inside, Fili and his wife drew back to allow him to pass. It was with a certain amount of dismay that he noticed the little female (her name had already escaped him again, dash it all) had one arm wrapped protectively about her middle, and was leaning - almost cringing - away from him. He recalled the dwarrowdam was a skittish thing, but the idea that she was scared of him... it wounded the gentleman to think of it.

"What brings you here, Uncle?" Fili had shut out the dark and the cold, leaving only warmth and light and one old man dripping melting snow onto the rug. Thorin felt a fool. He shouldn't have come. But he was here, and there was nothing else for it.

The old dwarf opened his mouth, but he could think of nothing. What had brought him here? His eyes gravitated toward his nephew's wife, and she drew back half a step, regarding him as one might a growling dog. Her burgeoning stomach was trying to hide in the folds of her housecoat, but a one-eyed mule could see that she was in a family way. The sight was wondrous, but also worrisome. For Thorin, at least, the idea of protecting a woman that was so... delicate made him more than a little nervous.

"Mr. Durinson?" Fili was tipping his head a little, peering into his employer's face with an expression of concern. That the fool boy cared was just as baffling as Dis' acceptance, and Thorin found himself shaking his head slowly. The fresh snow in his hair was melting, trickling over his scalp, making him shiver. No. He wasn't supposed to be here. He wasn't welcome - shouldn't be welcome - and being here was nothing less than an intrusion on their Christmas day. Thorin turned to go, and his nephew caught his arm, stopping him before he could even reach for the door.

"What's going on, sir? What's wrong?" He flapped a hand at his wife, and the dwarrowdam
scurried over to the fire, carefully lifting a hot kettle from its stand and pouring the water into a little earthenware teapot. Thorin shrugged off his nephew's hand.

"Nothing is wrong. Nothing at all. I oughtn't have come. I was… confused. Good night." He reached for the latch, his bad temper returning. This had been pointless. He should have been at home, he should have been in bed. Mahal only knew how much rest he'd gotten the previous night.

"Uncle." Fili's voice was softer now, gentler, as though he were speaking to a someone who was frightened. "I know something changed. I don't know what, and I won't demand an answer, but please come in. Sit down a while and have some tea. We can talk, if you want, or not. I just want to be sure you're alright."

Thorin gazed at his clerk, uncertain whether he should be frustrated or grateful. The lad cared, and Mahal help him, he wanted so badly for people to care. But why was he worth caring for? Shouldn't he have earned it first? Shouldn't he have done something to demonstrate the, too, cared? And how in the name of Durin's ax was he supposed to do that? He allowed Fili to guide him to a chair (Fili's chair, he already knew from his visit with the Ghosts) and sat when his nephew gave him a gentle push. A moment later, a mug of something hot and sweet-smelling was pressed into his hand.

"Doesn't seem right," muttered the dwarrowdam, as she refilled and hung the kettle from its hook again, "not having coffee in the house."

"You heard what the doctor said," responded Fili in warning tones, though there was a gentle undercurrent of concern in his tone, rather than the expected irritation. "You shouldn't have coffee until the baby is born."

"Not for me," exclaimed the female, looking defensive. "For guests."

"We both know how much you like coffee. If we had it in the house…." The blond trailed off, poking her sides playfully until she giggled and pushed him away.

Thorin held very still, almost not daring to breathe. This sort of display (he wasn't even really sure what to call it) had been so rare in his life, he was astounded to see it at such close quarters. Here, his clerk was relaxed, happy in a way he'd never seen the lad before. Smiling. In the office, Fili's only smiles were strained and… forcibly polite.

Valar. What have I been doing to this boy?

Was everything he looked at, everything he heard, going to remind him now of the years he'd wasted, the pain he'd caused? Thorin would almost rather not see or hear anything at all. With a shiver, he clutched the mug a little tighter and averted his gaze. Neither of the young folk seemed to notice, as Ori was now engaged in hissing at her husband to "behave!"

The thought "This could have been me" was slow in coming, but when it hit, Thorin felt it like an ice shard plunging into his chest, and knew it cut as only the truth could. But 'could have's and 'would have's and 'should have's had no place in life.

The past is a painting, finished, framed and hung.
The future is a window, can't see through for sun.
The present is a door where you are welcomed in,
If you're busy looking back, you'll find you've never been.

The old rhyme came back to him as clearly as though he'd just heard it yesterday, and Thorin
swallowed hard, remembering the voice of the dwarrowdam who'd recited it to him. His mother. Still, he'd take it to heart. Or, at least, he would try. All that mattered, all that was certain, was right now.

"Mr. Durinson?"

Thorin jogged out of his reverie and realized his nephew was looking at him, again concerned. He cleared his throat and shifted in the chair, as though only just remembering that he was seated. "What is it?"

Fili straightened a little at the gruff tone, but his concern didn't waver. "You've been very quiet. I just wanted to be sure you were alright."

"I'm fine, boy, quit your hovering." Thorin directed a scowl at the blond, who flushed. "It's a wonder you don't drive your wife mad with all this fussing. You ought to know better." As the lad glanced at his wife, Thorin took a long drink. It was rich and creamy, and sweet - he could only imagine what might have gone into it. Whatever it was, it was good, and it warmed him to his toes.

"Why are you here, Mr. Durinson?" The hesitant question came from the female (Thorin cudgeled his memory in an effort to remember her name). She had one hand on the arm of her own plush chair, and the other rested on the swell of her stomach. It seemed to be an unconscious gesture, and the old gentleman averted his eyes after a moment.

"I've… not been as aware as I ought," he admitted grudgingly. "You have a mortgage on this house, yes?" His gaze cut to his clerk in time to see the blond flinch at the word. Obviously, they did.

"Yes," Fili answered. "But what does that have to do with-"

"It's not fitting for a man in your position to be in debt, Nephew."

The look that crossed the lad's face now was nothing short of horrified. "Sir, I can… I'll pay it off. I've been setting some aside, I swear-"

"Quit your blathering," snapped Thorin, distaste heavy in his tone. "You sound like an idiot." Fili had gone pale, but the moneylender ignored this for the moment, determined to continue. "You are a married man, not to mention in the moneylending trade, and expecting a child. If you cannot master your own finances, how can you expect to manage others?"

"Sir… I'm just a clerk." Fili's voice was small. Pathetic. His wife was moving toward him, taking his hand as she stared at his uncle, frightened. Thorin's voice lowered to a growl.

"There is no such thing as 'just a clerk.' I started as a clerk, and look where I am now. Boy, you need to plan ahead, which you clearly haven't been doing."

"I'll do better, Mr. Durinson, I promise."

"Too right, you will. I will pay off your mortgage - just this once, mind you - and you will prove to me you're ready to graduate from being my clerk. Settle your affairs, Nephew, and maybe you'll actually achieve something in the world."

"I'm sorry, sir, I'll do better, I promise I-" Fili stopped, caught completely off-guard for the second time that day. He stared at his uncle, mouth hanging open. "You'll… pay…?"

"Yes, that's what I said. Now shut your mouth, unless you'd like to catch flies with it." Thorin was
ruffled by all this trying, but felt a little surge of satisfaction as Fili's teeth clicked together. "Good. Now that's settled, I have a task for you. Before you come into the office tomorrow, you'll be asking after the Sisters of Mercy in Esgaroth. I have reason to believe an old associate of mine is with them, and I don't intend to lose the present to the past." He finished his drink, set the mug aside and stood.

Fili mumbled something about getting his coat and hurried toward the door before returning to his wife to kiss her cheek. "I'll be right back, love, I promise. Just - gimme a minute." He grasped Thorin's arm and guided him (towed him, more like) out into the dark street. The snow was falling in earnest now, and the footprints from the day were already half-obscured by the fresh layer of powdery ice.

"Mr. Durinson… I… I don't know what's going on. Can you tell me - something? Anything? This isn't - I mean, not that I don't appreciate it, sir, I do, but… Uncle, what changed?" The words came out in a broken rush, and as the blond quieted, Thorin gave him a long, considering look. Of all his family, his clerk was the one he trusted the most. Dis was his beloved little sister, of course, but he no longer knew who her confidants were, or who she would talk to if he told her something difficult to swallow. Fili, though… perhaps it was safe. Not safe enough for the whole truth, but perhaps for part of it. And he seemed honest in his desire to understand.

"Someone… reminded me of all the opportunities I've wasted. Fili, take care of your wife and your daughter. That's what's important."

Fili looked absolutely stunned. "Daughter? What? How could you possibly-"

"It's not important, lad. Just do as I say. Now… I need to head home. Early start tomorrow. And if you're late… just make sure you have the information I want." Thorin turned to go, but the hand on his arm tightened its grip, rather than releasing him.

"Wait. You haven't told me who you're looking for. What do the Sisters have to do with this?"

"Her name… is Billa Baggins."
Fili aimed a stern look at his uncle. The dwarf had been very serious when he pledged to test his clerk, and had upheld every promise he'd made since Christmas, but it had been nearly two weeks since then, and despite having the information that Billa Baggins was indeed working for the Sisters of Mercy in Esgaroth, he had done nothing. And it wasn't as though the old gentleman was making excuses and dithering about it - he just didn't go.

"Uncle." Their lunch hour was nearly over now, and Thorin looked up from his nearly empty bowl, turning his full attention on the blond. Fili shifted. It was still unnerving to be able to call his employers not insignificant attention to himself with so little effort. "You've been avoiding a task you set yourself, and I believe you ought to see it through."

Thorin's eyebrows lowered fractionally, a sign that he was trying not to frown. "What task?" He had been impressing on his clerk that there was no reason to put off a task which could be handled the same day, and having this lesson turned against him was neither pleasant nor endearing.

"You... you said you needed to speak with Miss Baggins, in Esgaroth. You haven't gone, and you haven't made preparations for the trip." Fili shifted again, all too aware of the sharpening of his uncle's gaze. "I don't believe you would have said that you needed to speak with her if it wasn't important."

A brief silence descended over the office. Thorin knew his clerk was only saying these things out of concern - they had become markedly closer in the last few days, and had even dined together with Dis and Kili and the she-elf (Tauriel, he reminded himself sourly) a few nights ago. To be honest, these new demands on his evenings, though time-consuming, were not unpleasant. The old dwarf sighed. He did need to speak with Billa, and even wanted to, very much. But what if... what if she rejected him, as he had her? What if she had moved on, married, had children? But no - the halfling custom was to take the man's surname after marriage, and her name was still Baggins. So really... the only thing he had to fear was that nothing at all would change, and he would continue without her in his life. It was not surprising, but perhaps a little unsettling, to realize how much he didn't want that to happen.
"You're right, of course. You will mind the office while I'm away, of course."

Fili's eyes widened. He'd never run the office by himself. And now Thorin withdrew the key to his strongbox from his pocket and set it on the desk.

"If I find one coin misplaced, I shall be most displeased."

"Yes, Mr. Durinson."

"You will not grant any substantial loans while I am away, not without consulting me by raven if absolutely necessary."

"No, Mr. Durinson."

"And should an emergency arise, you will contact Mr. Fundinson at the butcher shop off the market square. He will either direct you or deliver a message to me directly."

"Yes, Mr. Durinson."

Thorin shrugged into his coat. Ordinarily, he would have finished out the day's work and planned the journey for tomorrow, but Fili was absolutely right. He had delayed long enough. He needed to set out now, immediately, before he lost his nerve. Oh, and he probably ought to warn Fundinson about the possibility of his nephew consulting him in the case of an emergency. Though they had been steadily exchanging money and favors for years, they hadn't actually spoken since… well, since Thorin had left Erebor. The old dwarf glanced toward the window, though the Mountain was impossible to see from here. The front of the shop was facing the wrong direction. Still, the sentiment was there. What now was being said and sung in the halls of his youth? Was it even still inhabited? He expected so, but now that he was more conscious of it, the idea seemed less and less likely - there simply wasn't enough money or business flowing through Dale for the dwarven kingdom to be prospering as it had under Thror's rule.

As Thorin gave his clerk another series of instructions, he moved toward the door, followed by Fili’s 'yes, sir's and 'no, sir's. At length, he was in the street, and as the door swung closed behind him, he heard the blond call, "Good luck, Uncle!" The old gentleman was tempted to pull the door open and inform his nephew of the many reasons he didn't need luck or anything of the sort. But that, he reminded himself, would be one more thing delaying him when he could be on his way to Laketown.

With a sigh, he discarded the numerous explanations about why wishing someone 'good luck' was about as useful as a poke in the eye, and turned instead to move down the street toward the market square, and beyond that to his house. The trip to Blathenly Garden was quicker than he'd thought it would be, and soon enough, he was standing in front of Fundinson's butcher shop. Through the front window, he could see the snowy head of the elder Fundinson - a rare sight, these days. While the younger had settled in Dale (Thorin suspected it had been in order to keep an eye on him, but there was no reason to think the world revolved around him) the elder had (at least at first) stayed in Erebor. Where he lived now, Thorin didn't know, but as he pushed the door open and entered the shop, both of the Fundinson brothers turned to look at him quizzically.

"Mr. Durinson." Dwalin Fundinson lifted his eyebrows, wrinkling his tattooed brow impressively.

"Thorin." Balin Fundinson gave a little bow, not quite low enough to be formal, but enough to be notable. It was a little disconcerting to realize that the older dwarf was, in fact, getting on in years. His hair was now completely white, his eyes wrinkled and twinkling in a grandfatherly way Thorin thought the had no right to. After all, he could remember a day when Balin was fostering his first infatuation - a thoroughly embarrassing series of events had followed, and the name
"Katie" would be forever linked with the image of a half-destroyed yellow bouquet and a rather large mud puddle.

"Good. You're both here. I'm heading to Esgaroth for a day, possibly two, and I advised my clerk to contact you two if an emergency arises." Not necessarily the exact truth, but close enough for his purposes. Thorin continued speaking, fully aware that the moment he stopped, thing would become awkward, as they had with everyone else who had encountered his new mode of life. "I trust you both to dispense advice as necessary, and not to cost my clerk or my business any profit."

For a moment after he finished speaking, Thorin thought the brothers might simply call him mad and be done with it. Balin seemed stunned into speechlessness, and Dwalin was staring at him as though trying to discern what sort of demon had possessed him.

"Aye, a'right. Which one's yer clerk, again? The dark-haired one, or the one expectin' his first?"

Dwalin's words caught the old gentleman completely off-guard. Not only did the butcher apparently know that his clerk was also his nephew (not a fact that Thorin paraded about) but he also had intimate knowledge of the goings-on within the family.

"How in the name of my first ancestor did you know that Fili's wife is expecting?" Thorin glared at the brawny butcher, who shrugged, seeming as apathetic as ever. Well, as apathetic as he had been since settling in Dale.

"He comes in for cuts of lamb on Sundays. Bought a whole leg a few weeks back, and told me they were celebrating. When I asked what, he said his wife was going to have a baby. Good on 'em, I say."

Thorin scowled, but said nothing more on the topic. Balin was still looking a bit startled, but seemed to have relaxed a little. Turning his attention on the elder Fundinson was nearly a relief after this new revelation of his complete isolation from his kin.

"Balin, can I trust you to be available, should the need arise?"

One bushy white eyebrow twitched upward, and Thorin thought he could see the shadow of a smile hiding in his old friend's beard. "You can. I hope you'll explain all of this at some point."

"I'm going to Esgaroth. My clerk will be tending the office-"

"You already said that. I mean more than that - like why you're suddenly speaking with us again, after years of silence." Balin gave him a stern look that made the moneylender feel rather as though he were young and inexperienced again.

A short silence stretched into a long one, and Thorin tried to come up with a reasonable-sounding explanation. One that didn't involve ghosts and dreams and the presence of Mahal reminding him of the importance of his family.

"Let's leave it at 'I'll tell you later' and be content with that." Thorin nodded slightly and turned to leave, more than ready to be done with this conversation.

"I'll hold you to that, lad," said Balin quietly, and though the dwarf neither looked back nor stopped, he imagined the brothers were exchanging a look now, one of those looks that seemed to hold volumes even though they lasted no longer than a blink. Thorin strode swiftly toward his house, where he packed his things, left a note for Mrs. Dilber to let her know he'd not be there in the morning, and promptly summoned a carriage to take him to
Laketown. It wasn't far, as journeys went, but it had been so long since Thorin had traveled anywhere, it seemed wise to expedite the process as much as possible. And as (relatively) short as the trip was, it still gave him more than enough time for second-guesses, doubts and more fears than could ever possibly make sense.

It was past nightfall when the carriage left him at the bridge (it was much easier to turn around here than in Laketown, and Thorin was unwilling to express anything that might be construed as weakness, like not wanting to walk across the bridge in the dark). With his bag tucked under his arm and his free hand pinching his coat closed at the throat, the old dwarf made his way into town. Even in the thick mist and dim light of the waning moon, it was clear that the mighty trade center was dying. Building in disrepair, trash littered about, stray animals and homeless waifs rooting through barrels of fish parts for something edible. Thorin strode past them without pausing, and felt his skin crawl with a combination of loathing and shame. These people were suffering, and though it was by no fault of his, he also had never done anything to help them or their kind. His mind turned to Bain, and he wondered if the boy had returned to the factory the next day, or if his earnings on Christmas had been enough to give him a day of rest.

The building from which the Sisters of Mercy operated was in better condition than its neighbors, and though it wasn't clean, it wasn't falling apart, either. An elderly human answered Thorin's firm knock (and if he had hesitated for several minutes before knocking, that was his own business and no one else need know) looking down at him with a troubled frown.

"Something ails you, sir?" she asked in a quavering voice, thin with age and misuse. It occurred to Thorin then (and why couldn't it have occurred earlier?!) that it was rather late, and perhaps calling on the Sisters at this hour was impolite.

"No, nothing ails me. My business can wait until morning." One more delay. One more method of stalling.

"Don't worry, sir, the night is still quite young. Come in. Tell me how we can help you." The old woman pulled the door open further, and Thorin knew then it would be more than impolite, it would be downright rude to walk away. Curse his ability to empathize and its sudden return to life. The world had been easier to deal with when he hadn't cared. Stepping through the door, he met the woman's inquisitive gaze, and realized that she wasn't as old as she seemed - merely overworked, and with a twisted back that made her walk with a hunch and a limp.

"I was looking for someone, Madame. I believe she works here."

"Oh? Who?"

"Billa Baggins."

A smile spread across the woman's face, and for a moment, her aspect was altered. She became almost beautiful in that moment. Odd.

"I'll fetch Miss B for you. It won't take but a moment. I think she's just coming free now." And before Thorin could speak a word of protest, she whisked off, leaving him standing in the entryway with a bag under his arm and fingers still smarting from the cold. Not at all what he'd imagined when he thought about meeting his ex-fiance again.
Thorin is finally reunited with his One, and suffers even more doubts than he had BEFORE he saw her again.

I know, I know, I'm late again. This is getting to be a bad habit. I'm still trying really hard to post once a week, though, so that's something, isn't it? Car issues are slowly getting resolved. Hoping to get my car towed to the mechanic sometime today... possibly tomorrow.

"An older gentleman, ma'am. And he asked for you specifically."

"I see. And did he happen to say why he was looking for me?"

Thorin could hear the two women long before he could see them - long enough to contemplate whether or not escaping out the door was still a viable option. As late as it was, there was still a chance he could slip over to the inn without being noticed by the wrong sort of folk. In the end, it was a combination of his distaste for cowardice and unwillingness to face the damp cold outside that kept him in the entryway as the Sisters rounded the corner at the bottom of the stairs and greeted him with short, respectful curtsies.

"This is him, Miss B. Very respectable sort of fellow, I thought." The hunch-backed Sister was smiling placidly, but her companion had an altogether different sort of expression on her face. As she inspected this 'respectable fellow,' her smile fell away, bewilderment stamped across her plump face. Thorin noted, with some measure of surprise, that her hair was solidly brown, a mass of curls pulled back from her face and spilling down her back, honey-brown at the ends and the color of deep, damp earth near the roots. It was strange how he saw these little variations of color, marking them in his memory as though they were as important as the rising sun. When he turned his attention to her face, he saw that, as in his time with the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, she wore a care-worn, matronly look, with laugh-lines etched deeply around her mouth and wrinkles about her eyes. She was not the young hobbit lass he recalled on the hilltop in the snow. She was a grown woman, bearing the cares of a cruel world on her shoulders. And what lovely shoulders they were. Strong and slightly curved, set back stubbornly as her expression firmed into a frown.

"Thorin Durinson. What in the Green Lady's name are you doing here?" Even though years had separated them, decades, he could see the telltale crinkle of her eyes that meant she was trying not to smile. She was stubborn alright, determined not to let him get away with this reappearance without some sort of comeuppance. He couldn't blame her.

"I... Billa, I came to apologize." These words, which he'd rehearsed in the carriage all the way
here, were clearly not what the hobbit had been expecting. Her frown became more genuine, a little crease of confusion appearing between her eyebrows.

"Apologize? You?" Something in her face softened slightly. "Really?" She flapped a hand distractedly at her hunch-backed companion, clearly telling her wordlessly to go away, give them some space. The woman curtsied and departed, grinning broadly.

There was a moment of silence between them, a pregnant pause as the hunch-back's footsteps receded up the stairs. Thorin wondered if Billa had told these women about him, and if so, what she had said. The idea made him anxious. The idea that she was so ready to forgive him made him even more anxious, though he wasn't sure why.

*It's late, I'm tired. Surely, that's all there is to this superstitious nonsense. If she forgives me, then so be it, and if she doesn't, then I made my best effort.* This was his best effort? Thorin took a deep breath, his gaze skating away from the woman before him. The hobbit stood with her hands folded before her, watching him expectantly. Patiently. He would need to speak first.

"Billa, I.... It was wrong of me to treat you like I did. I lost focus. I didn't see what was actually valuable." And now that the words had been loosed, he couldn't bring himself to stop. If he did, he might never open his mouth again, and the apology would be lost to years of silence. "I was a fool. A blind old fool. I turned my back on my family, then thought I would be able to make right by you. It was stupid of me to think you could be bought with favors and affections... I ought to have known enough of you by then to see that what you wanted had more value than any gem or gold I could have offered." He definitely wasn't looking at her now. The dwarf felt as though his chest were trying to implode, his lungs straining as he fought to keep his breathing steady. The truth of his words was piercing, and he was half convinced there was someone else speaking through him, someone who'd always seen him for what he was. "Please forgive me, Billa. I know the years have soured me, and there's nothing left of the dwarf I might have been. I would take back my words on the overlook, and all the words unspoken since then. I would take it all back and... part in friendship, if you will it." There was a detached part of his mind that told him, in a smug sort of way, that he was trying too hard. That he was coming off as stiff and formal, and that she would throw him out on his ear, as he deserved. But when Thorin finally worked up the courage to look into her face again, he saw a radiant, tearful smile on her round face.

"You beautiful idiot," she murmured, and lifted a hand to stroke his whiskery cheek. "Of course I forgive you. I forgave you years ago, you great silly."

Thorin felt ashamed, and completely undeserving. "You shouldn't have," he assured her quietly. "I didn't do you credit, and when you left... I just let you walk away. What kind of a dwarf does that, when he claims to love a woman? We protect the ones we love fiercely, and to the last breath. The only thing I've protected is my money, and... I was wrong." It was strange, he thought as the hobbit wrapped her arms around his chest to hug him tight, to be standing here decades after their last parting, still knowing he was irrevocably in love with this woman and yet trying with all his might to convince her he didn't deserve her forgiveness, let along her love. Almost of their own accord, his hands released the bag he's carried in, returning her embrace for all he was worth. Not much, but it was all he had to offer.

"The important part is that you've seen what you did wrong, and now you're turning away from it." Billa's voice was muffled as she spoke into his thick coat.

"And... you're not angry with me?" Thorin felt a little knot of tension loosening in his stomach. He didn't understand her - or any of them, really. Why should Dis and Fili and Billa all be so ready to welcome him back? What had he ever done to earn their respect, their loyalty?

"Heavens, no. Thorin, being angry for that long would have worn me clean out. I don't think I
could have, even if I wanted to. I'm disappointed you took this long to come find me, but that's different. You're here now." Billa gave his ribs a squeeze and let him go, while Thorin reluctantly echoed her actions, feeling a distinct sadness at the loss of their closeness. Not angry. Disappointed, but not angry. If he had been the one truly wronged that day... could he had said the same? Would he have still been angry?

That question was shamefully easy to answer. Yes. He would most certainly have still been angry. After all, he was still angry with Legolas for withholding information. That was less than he'd done to Billa.

With a sigh, he hung his head, grey-streaked hair swinging into his face. A gentle hand touched his jaw again, and the little hobbit directed his gaze into her own smiling face. She was still almost two feet shorter than him, the perfect height to fit under his arm and snugly against his side.

"Don't look so down, Thorin. This is a step in the right direction. This is good. Now, do you have a place to stay tonight?"

Thorin hesitated, strongly tempted to say he did. He had a plan, at least, but for all he knew, the inn was locked up for the night. And what would be more humiliating than leaving confidently, only to return some time later, shivering and miserable, to admit that his plan had fallen through? After a moment, he shook his head with a sigh. Billa chuckled softly, a warm sound that reminded him of younger, less bitter days.

"Alright, then. Come on, Thorin. There are rooms here where you can stay the night." He opened his mouth to protest, but the hobbit gave him an admonishing look, still smiling faintly. "Don't even try. I've heard every argument you can think of and many more besides. There's nothing you can say that I can't counter."

Thorin closed his mouth again without saying a word. It was a wonder that, even after all their years of separation, she could treat him with such familiarity. Or did she treat everyone like this? The Sisters were known for their hospitality and compassion, after all. Perhaps it was something she'd learned to do, even with complete strangers. Or maybe she'd always been this way. The stairs passed under his feet without his notice, and when Billa stopped in front of an open door, he bumped into her before he realized that she'd paused. Thorin took a hasty step back and muttered an apology. This was terrible. He felt like a dwarrow all over again, all elbows and big feet and embarrassment.

"This will be your room for the night, or as long as you need it. We only ask that you do your share of the chores while you stay with us. A list will be posted in the morning," Billa ran a hand through her bushy hair loose curls wisping around her face and ears as she glanced at him and tugged the ribbon loose that held her hair back. "Thorin, be honest with me. Did you really come all the way down here, just to apologize? I thought you had... well, I thought you'd gone back to your Mountain." There was a shamed tone to her words, and Thorin wondered if she was as anxious as he was. Unlikely, he thought, but... possible.

"I don't have a mountain. My family was banished over two hundred years ago."

"Oh." Billa's gaze was confused as she looked up into his face. Something about this seemed to have caught her off-guard, and she took a moment to process as they stood together in the dime hallway. There was a lamp in the room before them, and its yellow light cast shadows on the hobbit's face. Thorin studied her, feeling the weight of wasted years as he saw the effects of the decades on his One. He had let her walk away and gather those laugh lines alone, allowed her to gift her smile to others, and never tried to win her back.
"Could I ever... make up for all that wasted time?" he wondered aloud, the whispered words like a forlorn wind on the heath. Billa's eyes refocused on his, and there her ready, gentle smile was already warming her expression as it curved her lips.

"Where there is life, there's a chance." She braced one hand on his shoulder and lifted herself onto her toes to kiss his jaw. A gentle peck, nothing more, but it set his skin to tingling. "Good night, Thorin. I'll see you in the morning."

He watched her retreat, disappearing down the hall as he stood at the door. Change didn't come easily to dwarves. They were hard as the stone they were carved from, stubborn and strong. This change, he thought to himself warily, if it came too quickly, would break him. Shatter him. The question was… is it worth it? Thorin moved into the room and set his bag on the floor beside the cot, lowering himself onto the blankets with a sigh.

Is it worth it?

He could still return to his safe, isolated world of money and business. Not caring. He could squash the spark that thawed his heart, that opened his eyes. He could.

But it would be a lie.

Dis… needed him. Fili needed him. Perhaps Kili didn't, but he was young and foolish and was bound to need him somehow before all was said and done. The people of Dale needed him, though he disliked the idea of needing to shoulder such a burden. The people of Esgaroth needed him, and that brought with it a whole new level of distaste, bitterness against the necessity of reaching beyond his own home to those he neither knew nor felt justifiable responsibility for.

And Billa? Did she need him, too?

Thorin looked forlornly at the closed door and sighed. It certainly didn't look like the hobbit was lacking in anything that he could give her. He opened his bag and withdrew a soft tunic. He would make sure the shirt he was wearing stayed unwrinkled as much as possible and sleep in his old things. Meanwhile, his brain worked on the problem of Billa. The others had forgiven him because they needed him, clearly. Billa forgave him because she was an angel. A short, hairy-footed angel. The thought made him smile. She didn't need him, though, and that thought made his smile fade as quickly as it had come.

The dwarf shrugged out of his coat and carefully unbuttoned his shirt, pulling the tunic on quickly. The room, in spite of its warm lamp and tidy appearance, was cold. Sitting over icy lake water couldn't be helping the insulation problems this building undoubtedly already had. With a sigh, he laid his shirt out over the foot of the cot and slipped between the blankets. It wasn't his big soft bed, but he'd slept on much worse surfaces in his time. Thorin doused the lamp, and stared into the darkness.

What would he do if she wasn't interested? What would he do if she sent him home empty-handed?

He would go home, and pretend that nothing of the sort had happened. But he would know. He would know his One had given him exactly what he deserved. The moneylender closed his eyes and prayed that Billa was kind enough, willing enough, to love him anyway. It was selfish to think, more selfish to ask for, but he was a selfish person. He would try, tomorrow, to show her that he wasn't a complete lost cause. That… that he was the one that needed her.

Billa Baggins sat on the edge of her own cot, alone in a tiny room with a single candle and a tiny
potted plant she'd dubbed "Sunshine." Its leaves had turned yellow and the stalk was growing frail, but it held on as determinedly as she had. The hobbit looked at her Sunshine and clasped her hands tightly.

"I'm not sure what's going to happen, Sunshine," she told the plant quietly. Her eyes crinkled with a smile she couldn't hide. "I'm sure that whatever it is… it'll be good."
"Well? How did it go?" The blond's anxious voice broke through his reverie almost as soon as the door to his office was open. Thorin tensed slightly, and tried not to let the lad know that he had been caught off-guard. There was honestly no excuse for letting himself be lost in thought like that, not when there was so much to be done.

"Without context, Nephew, I have no idea what you're talking about." The old gentleman slipped out of his coat and hung it up neatly, adding to the peg his scarf, hat, and remembering at the last moment to tuck his gloves into the pocket of his overcoat. He nodded slightly as he smoothed the patched wool under his hands for a moment and then turned toward his desk, only to encounter the form of his nephew, blocking his path. Hovering behind her clerk was a skinny lad with a mess of dark hair - Bain had evidently returned, and the dwarf didn't blame him. Serving as a page must have been infinitely more pleasant than working in Dale's crowded, noisy factories.

"Your... your trip to Laketown, sir. Was it... successful?"

Thorin studied Fili for a long moment, then looked at Bain, who also seemed curious about his answer. His memory took him back to the Esgarothian bridge, where he and a small, soft hobbit female had parted ways the previous day. Her smile as she told him to come back soon, the worry in her eyes that he'd suspected came from the fear that he might not, in fact, return. The warmth in his chest as he'd promised to see her again when he had the chance. The weight of the small, gold ring that he'd pressed into her hand.

"Collateral. Insurance, for my return." The words had come unbidden, and though he felt foolish for using money terms, he had been unable to stop the smile from crossing his face. Billa had
looked down at the ring, then up into his face, an expression of shock in her wide hazel eyes.

"You don't mean it--do you? Really? I mean... you want to-"

Thorin then silenced her with a kiss, feeling particularly brave. After all, that hadn't been an unhappy surprise. Neither, it seemed, had the kiss. A moment of stiff shock had passed, then her body leaned in to his. Neither of them, he suspected, had experienced physical desire in some years, but there had been a comforting warmth between them as she pulled back, looking a little flushed.

"Thorin Durinson, you're going to be the death of me," she had muttered, avoiding looking up into his eyes. "Go on, you, and don't come back until you're ready to live up to that kiss." Still, she had smiled as she turned away; a shy, girlish smile.

Thorin realized that the silence in the office had become awkward, and he took a breath, an echo of a smile curling the corners of his lips upward.

"Success. Yes, I suppose you could call it that." That said, he brushed past his clerk and his page, making his way to his desk and preparing to handle the day's business.

"You can't just leave it at that!" The blond actually pursued him into his office, which was both amusing and not. The lad was, in many ways, still a lad, and he was showing it now, his expression one of burning curiosity as he placed his hands on the old gentleman's desk, leaning eagerly across it in a way no one had in a long time. Well, no one other than Dis, when she was being especially emphatic, anyway.

"I can just leave it at that, and I intend to. When I am ready to divulge the full tale, then I shall do so, but not before then." Thorin gave his clerk a sharp look, and Fili withdrew slightly. "You may return to your work, Mr. Bergman. Mr. Fletcher, come here. Can I assume you were here in my absence?" As the blond returned to his desk, looking only very slightly like a kicked puppy, Bain moved forward to answer his new employer. The day, Thorin was sure, would be productive, in spite of his nephew's inexplicable, insatiable appetite for gossip.

Dinner that night didn't seem to be any different.

"So, you finally went to find that woman Fili told us about." Dis heavy eyebrows were arched in what Thorin supposed was meant to be an innocent way. Really, it just made her look suspect. "Are you going to tell us what happened, or will you just leave us in suspense?"

"Sister, it would very well serve you and your nosy family right if I said nothing at all about my excursion to Esgaroth or anything that happened there." Thorin hid a smile in his coffee as he observed his family, varying expressions of disappointment and dismay on their faces. Fili and his wife sat near the fireplace, pretending not to listen (and looking disappointed when he didn't answer the question), while Kili and his wife were nearer the card table, where Dis and Thorin had been playing a game of Stone, which Thorin had just won. He allowed his gaze to linger a moment on Fili's expectant wife (Ori was her name, he now knew). Her condition seemed to have improved in the last couple weeks, leaving her rosy-cheeked again, and better rested. Whatever she had been lacking, she was getting it now, and it showed.

"Brother, even if it would serve us right, what satisfaction would you have in keeping it from us, when we'll see the outcome anyway?"

Dis and Thorin watched one another for a long moment, each seeming to measure the other's defenses. Thorin concluded that his sister was much more wily, more sly than he recalled. A force to be reckoned with.
"You seem... rather determined," he observed after a long pause.

"You seem to have a talent for understatement," she retorted, and a smile hovered around the edges of her tone. They shared another moment or two of silence before Thorin spoke again, his words carefully measured and weighed.

"I will tell you what passed in Esgaroth... only if you have something of equal value to trade for it." His words brought an excited gleam to his sister's eyes, and he acknowledged it with a nod. They were playing a game now, and Durinson games could get rather... involved. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the red-haired elf give her husband a mystified look, but didn't watch them for Kili's response. Dis was his opponent, and she required his full attention.

And it was truly remarkable how highly valued information could be.

The bids became larger and more ridiculous, sometimes in fun, sometimes deadly serious, and the siblings haggled energetically over the telling of one simple story. It wasn't until Dis promised the blueprints of the Mountain that Thorin fell silent. She watched him intently, and the dwarf struggled not to show his surprise, not to mention a wide range of other emotions called up by the mention of his childhood home.

"You... have the blueprints?" A map to the Mountain's inner workings. A way in. Leverage. Thorin shivered slightly at the thought. Well, if he had already gone mad with his sudden urge to care about people, why not take it a bit further and go truly off the deep end?

"Yes." Dis' eyes shone. She knew she was close. Very close to her goal. "Shall I fetch them, Brother dearest?"

"Yes. And don't ever call me that again."

As Dis rose and glided smugly out of the room, Thorin turned his gaze on Kili, who was watching him avidly. When the gentleman lifted an eyebrow, his nephew gave him an embarrassed sort of grin.

"I've never seen Mam get that... intense about something positive before."

"She's happier now," observed Ori softly, and Fili made an affirmative noise. "Was... was she like this before your father died?" She looked at her husband, and Thorin felt a little stab of guilt. He hadn't ever met Chali. Dis had asked him to come to the wedding, then asked him to come to the funeral several years later - he had refused both times. Everyone was looking at Fili now, and the blond shifted slightly, looking down at the toes of his boots.

"I... don't remember."

Ori looked at Thorin, to see if he had a different answer, but the old gentleman didn't answer. Dis swanned back into the room a few minutes later, holding a slender metal tube between her hands.

"Here you are, brother. Take a look at that, and tell me it's not worth telling me what happened in Laketown."

As the tube was deposited in his lap, he ran his hands over the smooth metal surface, feeling almost like he didn't deserve to open it. Not after all he'd done. His sister, however, stood beside his chair and made soft impatient noises until he unscrewed the cap and slid the old, bleached vellum from its case. The scroll was dry, and crackled quietly as he spread it out on the table. The map was detailed, drawn in a delicate hand with tiny, slanting labels under each room. Even after all these years, it was easy to identify Thrain's spiky handwriting, the runes of the ancient tongue
rendered in delicate script on the thick, hardy vellum. He could imagine his father, painstakingly reconstructing the Mountain from memory by candlelight, scratching out walls and passageways level by level, seated at a table far from his ancestral home. Thorin sighed, and his hands shook slightly as he smoothed the map out again.

"Well? Is it enough?" Dis' prompt was relatively gentle, considering how impatient she was. The old gentleman looked up at her, and nodded slightly, jaw flexing.

"Why... would you part with this? It's worth far more than what you ask."

Dis shrugged. "I've no use for it. And it's rightfully yours anyway. He wanted you to have it."

Thorin blinked rapidly, clearing his eyes of the sentimental heat of tears. Thrain must have had a greater respect and faith in his son than Thorin had ever given him credit for. After all... they had parted ways only shortly after their banishment from Erebor, and hadn't seen each other since. All the old moneylender knew of his father's demise was that he had gone missing after Thror's attempt at reestablishing the old mining colony. It was possible that he was still alive somewhere, though Thorin doubted it. Death was the only believable recourse at this point. The only recourse he would accept.

"So? Are you going to tell us what happened or not?"

How could she think of something like that at a time like this? Thorin felt a stab of irritation toward his sister. It wasn't really her fault - she had never understood the important things. Almost immediately, he regretted the thought. That wasn't true, and he knew it. She had always understood and cared about the really important things. He was the one that had missed the boat on that point. Thorin let the map spring back into a tight roll and nodded, his eyes still on the cracked border of the map that might still restore his family to their rightful place.

"I went to Esgaroth to meet a woman... Billa Baggins. She and I were once engaged to be married, but things... hadn't worked out. I apologized for my behavior and... promised to visit again." It was a struggle to say the words aloud, not because it was a difficult story to tell, but rather because his mind was on other things. Dis looked positively excited.

"You were engaged? When? Oh, nevermind. Thorin, you will marry her, won't you? It's about time you married, all things considered." The dwarrowdam's words brought Thorin's mind back to the present with a startling bump.

"What? Dis, you can't be serious. Our engagement was broken off decades ago. Why would she want to marry me now?"

"Because you're worth it, you big sap. You're a good, strong, honorable dwarf, and I can't imagine a 'dam anywhere who wouldn't see you for what you are."

"Ridiculously rich?" Kili's suggestion earned him a patented glare from his mother, and he mumbled an apology.

"Point being, if she's not married and you still love her, you had better not let her get away again. I want a sister in law."

Thorin mumbled a protest as he slid the map back into its tube, but now his mind was torn two ways. He could use the map to reclaim his home, win it back from whomever had stolen it. Or he could go back to Esgaroth and see Billa again. He could restore the Durinson line to the throne and see his nephews taken care of properly. Or he could get married.

Life really just wasn't fair sometimes.
Proposal

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Thorin makes his choice, and once he's made up his mind... it's made up.

Chapter Notes

I want to extend a sincere apology to all my readers—the hiatus of several weeks from posting GG chapters on Mondays was completely unforeseen. I'm currently several states away from home, visiting family, and the planning that led up to this trip, as well as the trip itself, took me rather by surprise. I hope you'll find it in your hearts to forgive me, and bear with me as I try to get back on the ball.

In other news, thank you all for your prayers and good wishes concerning my poor car, Dilly. My mechanic has reported that the repairs would indeed cost more than the car is worth, and that it would be best if I sold her and buy a new car. A moment of silence for the passing of a faithful vehicle. *takes off hat solemnly*

It was with a measure of resignation that Thorin returned to Esgaroth the following week. Seven days from their goodbyes on the bridge, the dwarf found himself once again standing in the entryway as the hunch-backed Sister went to find Billa. She couldn't have looked more pleased to see him if he had come to see her, rather than a matronly hobbit. Thorin had only just decided to ask her name when Billa came down the stairs to meet him. There was a radiant smile on her face, and the old gentleman actually felt himself relax a little at the sight. He had made the right choice. Going to Erebor, no matter how much he desired it, couldn't possibly be more satisfying than knowing he had put that smile on the face of his One.

"I thought you might have forgotten me," she teased, wiping her hands on the stained apron she wore.

"If I had, then there are several of my kin that might have carved a fresh crypt for me." Thorin's dry tone served to make the halfling laugh, and he felt warmth return to his heart. It had been so cold since he'd made the decision to return, but now he remembered why he'd chosen this course. Billa had reached him by then, and took his hand with a smile, giving it a friendly squeeze.

"Well, then you'd best not forget me. I'd be rather upset with them if they'd disposed of you before I could extract a proper apology." The teasing words gave him a minor chill. She had every right to demand the nothing short of his entire fortune. Base groveling, that was what she deserved, and in a way, Thorin felt she really ought to be asking it. Still, she didn't. Maybe he would always feel this way; unworthy and indebted. Billa rocked forward onto her toes and touched her nose to his. Maybe he could deal with feeling unworthy and indebted, if this was how it was going to work out.
"Billa... I have something to ask of you. I've no right to ask it, but I will anyway." He hadn't really intended to just come out and ask, right there in the entryway, but where would be better? Out on the boardwalk? Upstairs, in her private chambers? Part of him wanted the moment to be perfect. The rest of him was already aware that if he tried to wait for the "perfect moment," then he would get himself right back into the mess that had kickstarted their problems in the first place.

"Yes?" Billa was looking up at him, wide-eyed and almost pathetically hopeful. It was a bit of a shock to realize it was possible, more than possible, even, that the hobbit had been longing for this question and its aftermath almost as ardently as he had.

"Billa Baggins... I hurt you. I insulted you, belittled you, and worst of all, I failed to value you as my One, as the lady you are. In spite of that, I ask," and here he lowered himself to her level, kneeling before her and wincing only a little at the ache in his knees, "I... beg you, to consider becoming my wife."

There was a beat of silence, the pause made interminable by the pounding of his own heart. The worst she could do, he reminded himself forcefully, was to say no. The absolute worst outcome would be that he returned home tonight, and nothing changed. That was it. He was risking nothing but his own damnable pride. So why was this so frightening?

"Thorin..." That wasn't a yes OR a no. The dwarf suppressed a surge of panic, swallowing hard as he met Billa's gaze. There were tiny wrinkles fanning out from the corners of her eyes, echoes of the lines he'd seen etched into her face during his time with the Ghosts. There were streaks of grey in her thick brown curls, but nothing like the age-dusted silver he'd seen when she knelt at his tomb and wept over his stubbornness and stupidity. He had time. He still had time. He hoped. "Thorin, the first time you asked me... I said yes. I gave you all of me, and didn't think twice."

There was another pause, and it was heavy. So heavy. It pressed down on him, as though determined to force him into the floor.

"What assurance can you give me this time, that it won't turn out that way again?" Thorin's heart plummeted. What was he supposed to say to that? What assurance could he possibly offer? Promises were meaningless, and the gifts he could give her would mean nothing if he didn't have something... anything....

"I... Billa, I didn't... I mean...." He was floundering and he knew it. The ache in his knees was turning to actual pain and he knew that if he didn't stand soon, he wouldn't be able to. "I want... I want to marry you. I don't want to be engaged or promised or affianced. I want you to be mine. I want to take you away from this place. Please... don't make me leave here alone." Reduced to pleading. It was sickening. At the same time, he knew he deserved this. She deserved to witness his humiliation. A gentle hand touched either cheek, and the old gentleman swore his heart stopped for a moment. Her small, warm fingers cupped his jaw, and he wondered if they were as soft as he remembered. The thick scruff off a beard he maintained was just enough to stop him feeling her skin. He could see the chapped pink of her lips as she started to smile.

"That's all I needed to hear." And then, wonder of wonders, she kissed him. Briefly, he wondered if this vacillating from despair to soaring hope might not be bad for his health. He decided he didn't care about that. Thorin's arms slipped around her waist and drew her closer. At one point, he might have expected heated passion. Perhaps they would have had it, once. But what flames had sparked and leapt between them decades ago had been banked to warm embers, settling on the hearth of their love like a pleased cat. So when they pulled apart, there was no gasping or desperate grabbing, though Billa was rather flushed. Thorin chuckled.

"How soon can I steal you away from this place?" For a moment, the glowing happiness from
their kiss remained prominently on Billa's round face. Then, like a cloud passing across the face of the sun, her smile dimmed.

"I... don't know. I pledged my service to the Sisters years ago. I would hate to leave them if it meant that some of the people here would go wanting." The hobbit bit her lip and glanced around the entryway at the rough wooden boards and the cheerful little potted plants - her handiwork, no doubt. This had been her home for a long time, Thorin recognized that, and her business had been taking care of the poor of Laketown. If the rest of the city was anything to judge by, their poor would be needy indeed. As confusing as it was, he felt both a measure of understanding for her desire to help these folk, and intense jealousy flaring against the idea that Billa might choose to stay over coming away with him.

"Do you see them, little man? The spawn of Ignorance and Want, conceived in dark obscurity and left in the shadow of better times; they will learn nothing of the truth until someone cares enough to teach them."

The words of the Ghost gave the old dwarf a slight chill, a minute shiver racing across his skin.

"Here, Thorin, you can't be comfortable down there. Let me help you." Billa took his hands and leaned back, putting her weight into pulling up upright again. Thorin's knees creaked and popped, and the muscles in his calves and thighs burned from the effort of kneeling for so long. It took a minute for him to realize that Billa was looking up at him, wearing an expression of concern.

"What?"

"You're upset with me, aren't you?" Thorin's fingers tightened around hers, and he could see her relax slightly. "No. I was just... thinking." Telling her that a twelve-foot Man claiming to be the Ghost of Christmas Present had told him to look after the poor of Dale in a dream seemed a foolish move at the moment. Or at any moment, really.

"Thinking about what?" Thorin took a minute to arrange his thoughts, stretching his legs carefully. "The Sisters do good work here. There's a need in Dale as well, since the Mountain doesn't seem to be putting out any... well, anything. If you're willing to invest as much time there as you are here, then maybe we could make a difference." The gentleman wasn't exactly sure where these words were coming from, but they sounded good, and they felt right. He wasn't one to rely overmuch on how things felt, but had been finding himself doing so more often recently, when other decision-making factors seemed to fall short. A glance down into Billa's eyes told him that she was deeply impressed, and he felt a spark of pride lighting itself in his chest.

"I'll speak with the House Mother. I never thought... I always knew there was kindness in you, but it always seemed so reserved. What changed?" With his One peering hopefully up at him, he couldn't deny her the answer. She wasn't like his sister, who would beat the information out of him if he didn't give it. Saying no to Billa would make him bleed inside.

"I... it's a long story, Billa. Perhaps another time. But I promise, I will tell you." Maybe he could find a way to phrase it that didn't sound insane. She nodded, seeming willing enough to give him time, though she clearly didn't understand why he was asking for her to wait. To her credit, she let the subject fall away in favor of something a little more pressing.

"I won't leave for Dale until I have a place to live there." She must have seen the protest in his face before he had a chance to speak it aloud. "What I mean is I will stay with the Sisters, at least until we are properly married. Perhaps that will be good incentive for you."

Thorin took a moment to compose his answer, realizing now that perhaps this was a little more than his One was prepared for. Indeed, it was more than he'd been prepared for, if he was being
perfectly honest, which he tried not to be. "Billa... would you come with me?"

"Where?"

"To the temple."

The hobbit's eyes widened, and he could tell she'd figured it out. "You mean... today?" Her voice had dropped nearly to a whisper, laced with awe, and the dwarf couldn't honestly say he felt differently. This was a very big step. All the same, he wasn't going to let this second chance slip away from him.

"Yes. Billa, I will marry you, and I don't see any reason to wait." Except maybe to preserve sanity. Whose, he couldn't have said. Now that it was said, though, there was no taking it back, and he could see a mixture of overwhelming joy and uncertain fear in Billa's smile.

"Well, when you make up your mind, you really do make it up. Alright, Thorin. I'll... go speak with the House Mother presently." Before she pulled away, she leaned against him, a sort of embrace that meant more than anything of the sort had a right to mean. In comparison, words seemed completely inadequate. Maybe it was some sort of secret language.

Whatever it was, he needed to learn it.
Chapter Summary

Thorin brings his new bride home, and finds more than he'd intended to deal with.

Chapter Notes

I want to extend an apology to any readers that are waiting for the (now late) update on BC (Buried Coals). I know it's overdue, but Loki has been very busy recently, and I'm out of state, visiting family. You can expect a two-chapter update on the fifteenth, when I have a computer that doesn't hate Google Docs.

In other news, Oklahoma is quite beautiful. I might decide to live here. :)

As the huge, dry snowflakes fluttered about them like fledglings, it felt very nearly warm. For the first time in Thorin's memory, there was no wind coming down from the Mountain. The air was still, and his fingers, laced through the much smaller digits of a matronly hobbit, seemed more than capable of withstanding the below-freezing temperature. One night in Laketown had been more than enough. The old gentleman was ready to return home, though he couldn't say he was ready to face what he was sure would be waiting for him there. Fili would surely have told his mother about Thorin's departure, and Mrs Dilber, if questioned, wouldn't have kept a tight lip at all. The woman was an incorrigible gossip.

"What's our first stop?" Billa asked, as though reading his mind. When he looked down at her, there was a smile in her eyes and curving her soft lips. She gave his hand an encouraging squeeze, and Thorin's sigh stayed in the air like a flag of truce.

"I've no doubt that the debtors have come to collect, and are lying in wait for us." He saw her eyes widen slightly, and couldn't help the curl of his own smile. "You'll see." The walk was a peaceful one, but short-lived. Just inside the door was precisely the scene he'd thought might be waiting for him. A fire was blazing in the huge hearth, meant specifically for the baked goods this shop had once sold. The savory smell of a sumptuous noonday meal filled the air, the lanterns were lit, the table was laid (for three, as it happened, though he was unaware he had ever owned more than one set of dishes). By the fire, Dis bent over a large metal pot, and Kili appeared to have melted into an armchair he was sure hadn't been there before.

"Ah! So the wayward brother returns." Dis had looked up, and was smiling, arms crossed over her chest. "I hope there's an introduction about to be made." As the dwarrowdam spoke, Thorin felt Billa's hand tighten sudden in his own. Perhaps he should have warned her of the possibility that his family would be here. He had thought it wouldn't be that big of a deal, but then, he wasn't the one that would be meeting new folk tonight.

"You hardly need one," muttered the cantankerous old dwarf, but gestured between his sister and
the hobbit. "Billa, this is Dis, my sister. Sister, this is Billa. My wife."

For a moment, all was silence, save for the fire, then Kili fell out of his chair. "Your what?!" His nephew's incredulous yelp brought a scowl to Thorin's face (though some might insist that "his face always looked like that").

"You heard me full well. Don't think I'm going to repeat myself."

Billa touched his arm with a gentle hand and whispered something to him that made him turn slightly pink, but he said nothing more on the subject. His sister, however, was not so willing to be silent. With an exclamation of pleasure, the dwarrowdam moved forward, her heavy skirts rustling softly about her feet. Outstretched hands caught Billa's free one, and Dis drew her into an ecstatic, though dignified, embrace.

"You have no idea how long I've waited for this. Welcome to the family, Billa!" It was clear Dis' warm reception was doing much to allay the halfling's anxiety, and her grip on Thorin's hand eased, though she didn't let go of him. The dwarf suspected there was something of fear in it - she hadn't let go since they'd woken up that morning. He sympathized, knowing that feeling of irrational fear, as though if he'd let go of her she would disappear.

"Aunty Billa!" Kili threw himself into the embrace, hugging both his new aunt and his mother, and there was nothing of dignity in his enthusiasm. He lifted his head and grinned at the startled halfling. "Just making it clear right now - you're my favorite. You're not grumpy like Uncle."

Thorin rolled his eyes, but he began to relax out of tension he hadn't been aware he was holding in. "Billa, this is my younger nephew, Kili." He glanced pointedly at the third place set on the table and glanced at his sister, who chuckled.

"Tauriel. She should be arriving soon. Fili and Ori were planning to join us for dinner."

"So you thought you would just make yourself at home in my house while I was away?" he asked, though the discontent in his tone was almost entirely in jest. Dis seemed to be able to tell, and waved a hand at him.

"Piffle. You know you like the look of the place now that we've brightened it up a bit."

And Thorin admitted (silently, to himself, where his sister would never hear) that it looked a lot more homey now than it ever had before.

"Though I have to say, I'm a little surprised you didn't move back into the Mountain, all things considered." Dis' words chilled the very air. The world seemed to freeze and fall away, leaving icy emptiness where there had been love and warmth. Thorin turned slowly toward his sister, all his insides shocked into numbness. When he finally recovered his voice, it was for one bare word.

"What?"

Dis realized that something was amiss. She and Billa both turned to look at Thorin, whose face was white as a dead man's. "Erebor. I thought you would have moved back." Thorin shook his head, his mind refusing to produce an appropriate argument.

Kili was the one that frowned, speaking what was on everyone's mind already. "Didn't you know? After Feirson died, the whole kit and kaboodle reverted back to the original owners. You're the heir of the last owner, so the Mountain is yours." Thorin felt every word like a heavy blow to the gut. His head spun wildly, trying to grasp this immense concept. The Mountain... all these years, it might have been his, and here was he, plotting a way in through a secret entrance! A strange, strained laugh bubbled up from the pit of his stomach, forcing its way out through his
"Why didn't anyone tell me?" He gave his sister a wild look, and her gaze was level as she looked back at him.

"We thought you knew, Brother. You were his business partner, after all."

There was a long moment of silence. Billa and Dis exchanged anxious glances as the quiet stretched into minutes. This was obviously a very weighty moment for Thorin, so none of them spoke. The old dwarf stood very still, swaying only very slightly on his sturdy feet before shaking off the silence with disbelieving shake of his head.

"I... need time to think. You lot... go ahead and eat." With a vague wave of his hand, he seemed to dismiss them to their meal as he renewed his grasp on Billa's bag (which he'd been carrying in the hand not occupied with holding onto his hobbit) and turned toward the stairs. Billa took a step toward her husband, concern on her soft face, but Dis put a hand on her shoulder.

"Leave him, lass. The time alone will do him good." Dis' voice was soft, as though she didn't want Thorin to hear her. The halfling turned to look back at Dis, her concerned expression giving way to slight traces of fear.

"But what if he doesn't come back?" she whispered. The words fell like stones in a deep pool, and the stillness that followed was broken only by the creak of the stairs as Thorin mounted them, moving away from the women. Dis took a deep breath and shook her head a little, her free hand moving up to stroke her silky beard.

"We just have to trust him, Sister. This is his choice to make." There was a strained sort of look in Dis' face as well. This was a choice she had thought her brother had made long ago. She hadn't thought that it would ever be a choice between her little family and his precious kingdom. He was, after all, a lord in his own right. No one would ever fault him for returning to his ancestral home. But what if he did, and they lost the tenuous relationship they'd built since Christmas? What if she lost her brother again?

"He'll come back. He has to come back." This last statement was unusually stern, nearly angry, and Kili made a fierce gesture to accompany it. Billa gave him a frightened glance, but he didn't relent. "I mean it. He has to. If he doesn't, I'll make him."

"Kili." Dis gave her son a sharp look, and he returned her gaze, completely unrepentant. The door opened and, as one, the little group turned to see who had come to join them. In the doorway, an elf paused, a dusting of snow making a sort of white cap on her heavy red tresses. Surprised green eyes looked back at them, taking on an anxious look as the silence persisted.

"Is there something going on I don't know about?" she asked at last, stepping through the door and closing it behind herself. Dis and Kili exchanged glances, but Billa stepped forward, reaching forward to shake Tauriel's hand.

"I'm Billa. Thorin's wife." The little hobbit was clearly determined to keep things as normal and polite as possible.

The she-elf started to smile, the expression deepening as she let her usual taciturn facade fall away. "My name is Tauriel. Kili's wife."

"I suppose that makes us cousins." The halfling was returning Tauriel's smile, looking up at a stiff angle to meet the elf's gaze. If Thorin was twice her size, Tauriel was twice her height. Maybe not as much taller than her as some of the Men she had met, but it was still a decent difference
between them.

The elf shook her head, chuckling. "No, that makes me your niece." They laughed together and moved toward the fireplace to warm up properly. The situation and the tension that Tauriel had interrupted was explained to her in short order, and the elf shook her head again, sadly this time.

"Considering how much anger he's carried around for these long years, he's doing really well." The redhead took off her coat and draped it on the corner of the armchair Kili was sprawled in.

Dis looked at her curiously. "I'll never figure out if you actually know more than you're letting on or if you're just really good at sounding that way." The dwarrowdam's fond exasperation was as much an attempt to lighten the mood as it was an honest observation, but Tauriel gave her mother-in-law a sad smile.

"I had the pleasure of meeting Thorin many years before I knew Kili. At one time, I was a captain of the Woodland Guard, in the elven kingdom of Mirkwood. I was there when news came that Erebor had fallen."

Kili sat up so quickly he almost fell out of his chair again. "You what? How come you never told me?" His expression was wounded, but that was remedied quickly enough by the press of soft elven lips to his forehead as she stooped over him affectionately.

"There was no reason to tell you, my prince," she told him with a fond smile. "For now, let's give Thorin some time to process things. He'll let us know when he's ready."
Thorin and Co. return to Erebor, and meet someone unexpected (because meeting the expected ones is too boring to be mentioned).

In all honesty, this chapter ought to be longer, but there you have it. I got distracted by family. In two days' time, I'll be back in Oregon where I belong. *nods firmly* Until then, I hope this chapter will tide you over. I foresee only two chapters after this. I hope things are wrapping up satisfactorily.

"What do you mean, he didn't know?" Fili frowned at his brother, then at his mother, then as his aunt (and wasn't that a strange thought!) and finally looked at the darkened stairway, through which his uncle had passed hours before he'd arrived and hadn't yet returned.

"We mean that Thorin bloody Durinson didn't know that Fierison was the one that took over the Mountain, and so didn't know that we could have gone back any time in the last seven years." Dis was very much on edge as she explained, a state her sons hadn't seen her in for a good many years.

"But he was Fierison's partner! How could he not know?!!" Fili grabbed handfuls of his mustache, tugging on the braids anxiously. This didn't make sense, and yet it did. Ori spoke his thoughts aloud, as though she had extracted them from his very mind.

"It makes sense, in a way. I don't think he would have agreed to work with the Dragon if he'd known." His wife was seated near the fire, where the halfling was kneeling before her chair and delightedly pressing her palms to the dwarrowdam's swollen belly. Ori continued. "He just doesn't seem like the type that would let go of a grudge like that." There was a reluctant sort of rumble of agreement from around the room. Kili was sprawled on the rug like a limp dog. There were times when Fili couldn't help but look at his brother as irresponsible and lazy, even though he knew it wasn't true. Kili, like his wife Tauriel, served as a member of the Dale City Guard, taking shifts on the wall and training new recruits as the Lord of Dale chose to hire them. Not that Dale's current lord had much in the way of motivation or funds to hire new guards. There were rumors that the lord lavished money on insane luxuries while the city starved. Other rumors held that the Lord of Dale starved to give his people enough to get by on. No one knew the truth, not really. Not many cared. It was more fun to gossip and speculate than to state and accept the truth.

"He mentioned wanting to help the folk of Dale," said the hobbit suddenly, looking up from the muffled kicks of the unborn child. Fili could hardly contain his disbelief. Billa (that was her name, wasn't it?) shook her head slightly, apparently seeing his skepticism plainly on his face. "Thorin told me that he wanted to help the city, that he had the funds to do so and that he felt responsible
for the people here. He's never lied to me before - at least not intentionally. I believe he actually means to do something."

Fili could see that the halfling was anxious. Though he'd never met her before, he'd learned enough of females through his experience with Ori to know that no woman was actually as calm and distracted as she seemed in tense situations unless she was unintelligent, and Billa didn't seem the vacant sort to him. Neither did she strike him as a liar. All the same, it seemed as unbelievable as the idea of Thorin not knowing who had taken over the Mountain.

"What does he mean to do? What could he do? Honestly? So he's got money - so what? That's not enough, and you know it's not. It's not about the money. You have to have support from the people to make things change, to make things happen. Everyone hates Uncle Thorin." Fili hadn't meant to say so much, but it seemed as though the world was trying to explode inside of his chest.

"It's nice to hear you have such a high opinion of me." Thorin's voice was dry and a little hoarse, as though he'd been shouting a lot recently, though no sound had come from the chambers above since he'd gone up there. Fili flushed, looking properly ashamed of himself. His uncle stood now halfway down the stairs, watching his family with a tired look in his eyes.

"Thorin!" Billa leapt to her feet and ran to him as though she were a young woman meeting her lover after a long parting. Thorin descended the stairs and caught her, letting her momentum carry him back until they were sitting together on the bottom step.

Dis tried to hide a smile, but it wasn't very successful. "If I was any kind of artist, I would keep this moment forever." The dwarrowdam's voice was very soft, and Fili doubted anyone other than himself had heard it. He might have responded, but he didn't really think it was his place to do so. Thorin stood slowly and, with a halfling attached to one arm, made his way into the dining room to join his family. He looked tired. Tired all over.

"I'm closing down the office." He looked at Fili, and the blond felt a lurch in his gut. The office was Thorin's life. That business was everything to him. "Why?"

"Because a Lord of Erebor doesn't need to run a loan office."

Billa looked up at him in surprise. "But, Thorin... I don't understand."

There was a solemn look on his face as he returned her gaze. "You will. Kili, Fili, I want you with me when we go back. Dis, Sister... I can't do this without you." Dis nodded slightly while her sons exchanged glances.

"What about Tauriel? And Ori?" Fili watched his uncle closely. His brother's question was a good one, and he wanted to hear the answer, preferably sooner than later. There was the briefest of hesitations, then a sort of resigned expression crossed Thorin's face.

"Let them come, if they are able. I advise against Ori accompanying us, however. I don't know what sort of damage may have been done to Erebor's interior in the last two centuries."

Days passed as though fettered, dragging lamely by as necessities were taken care of. It took relatively little effort to persuade Thorin to keep the loan office open, at least until the situation in Erebor had been properly scouted. At length, the thing was done, and the office was locked for the night, a sign posted to let clients know that the office would be closed for the whole of the following day. Fili, Kili, Dis, Thorin and Billa wore heavy overcoats as they trudged up the steep path toward the gates of Erebor. The Mountain had been sealed for many years, and the path was ill-maintained, if indeed it had been maintained at all.
Thorin confessed quietly to the others that he didn't know what to expect inside. Not only would the long occupation of a Dragon have altered the Mountain, but there were many Dwarves to take into account; the subjects of Thorin's grandfather and their progeny. Were they still inside the Mountain? If so, what were they doing? If not, where had they gone? These sorts of questions couldn’t be answered until they had explored the Mountain themselves, as there had been no open communication from Erebor or its residents since before the Dragon's hostile takeover in Thorin's youth.

"So why," asked Kili, "are we trying to go in through the front gate? If it's barred from the inside, we'll never be able to get it open by ourselves."

"With any luck," said Thorin softly, "we won't have to." He approached the gate and raised a fist to knock. Almost before the echoes had faded, there was a terrific grinding sound, and the whole apparatus started to swing heavily outward. The little party backed up hastily, and Billa might have fallen into the stream flowing from just under the part in the massive gate if Dis hadn’t caught her and pulled her back onto the path.

A very old dwarf, with grey beard and hair, emerged as soon as the doors were clear of the stream. He was resplendent in armor, each piece polished to perfection, the ax in his belt seeming just as much artwork as it was weapon. "I've been watching you," said the dwarf with a smile. "I always said someone would come for us. Eventually. Took you long enough, though."

"Us? How many are you?" Thorin, of the group, seemed the least bothered by the Dwarf's appearance, practically archaic in his barbaric splendor. Then again, Thorin was very good at seeming unbothered. Kili was looking down at himself, dressed in his Guard leathers and armed with a short bow, and looked as though he found himself wanting.

"Alas! There are only a score of us left. The rest died or left long ago." The old dwarf shook his head, the beads that capped his elaborate braids chiming softly against one another. "Still, better late than never, eh? State your name and business, and we can get along with things."

"Thorin Durinson. I've come to reclaim my birthright." Thorin's voice had become suddenly solemn, deep and impressive in the emptiness that surrounded them.

"Durinson?" asked the dwarf in surprise, staring at them. "I thought Durin's line had passed! A thing of memory! Well, where in Mahal's name have you been all this time? Why didn't you come back?"

"We didn't know," said Dis defensively. "And how could we? Never a letter or a plea. I've not seen refugees or even heard rumors."

"You're a Durin too, then?" The guard was all but flabbergasted, shaking his head in wonder.

"Aye. I am Dis, daughter of Thrain, and this is my brother Thorin, my sons Fili and Kili, and my sister Billa."

"A whole brood!" exclaimed the guard, shaking his head again. "Welcome, lords and ladies, and I certainly hope you're prepared. Erebor waits." And with a low bow, he stepped aside so they could enter.

In some ways, the Mountain was precisely as he remembered. In others, nothing was right. The halls were still huge and grand, the sweeping arches and high ceilings speaking of wealth beyond imagination. The floor was coated with dust on either side of the main thoroughfare, criss-crossed with the skittering paths of rats and other unsavory things, pierced by the occasional offshoot,
leading to a side passage. The Hall of Kings was draped in magnificence, the colorful glass lanterns still hanging, lit and glittering, among the pillars and arches. They required no maintenance, a testament to the workmanship of the Dwarves. But the hangings were not in the blue and gold of Durin's House, but brightest scarlet, the insignia a gold dragon rampant, holding a white diamond. This foreign crest in the home of his fathers brought a curious sort of tension to Thorin's bearing, and he paused, looking up at the hangings with a dark expression in his eyes.

"I had hoped you'd think so," said the old guard softly. "I didn't want us to forget who sat this throne for so long. Didn't want to forget who was supposed to sit it." He gestured to the elaborately carved seat upon the dais. There draped a beautiful, rich velvet cloak, deep blue and trimmed with an angular design, picked out in gold. Upon the lower folds, on the seat itself, there rested a black and gold crown, shaped like an echo of the ravens that lived on the Mountain's slopes.

"We've been waiting a very long time," continued the guard. "Shall I call the others?" Thorin swallowed, and nodded slightly.

"What are they going to do?" asked Billa in a hushed voice, watching the guard retreat and taking her place at Thorin's side. She once again attached herself to his arm, but he seemed insensible to her presence, still gazing at the throne.

"They're going to crown him," murmured Dis, a proud sort of grief in her face. "They're going to welcome their king." Slowly, the little group advanced toward the throne.

"What Tauriel wouldn't give to see this," Kili murmured, sounding rather over-awed by the whole experience. "Too bad she's on duty." His mother shushed him, and they proceeded in silence until Thorin had reached the throne and touched the crown gently, reverently, with one hand.

"This was my grandfather's," he said softly, mostly for Billa's benefit. "He sat here, and held court. My grandmother..." He turned toward the second, smaller throne set into the dais beside the king's seat. "She sat there. She always wore the most beautiful gowns. Queen Under the Mountain. He couldn't give her enough... it was how he said he cared."

Billa's eyes grew huge in her round face and she looked up at him, startled. "Wait... does this make me a queen?"

"Indeed it does." A familiar voice echoed through the hall, and as the party turned, they saw a second, white-haired dwarf moving toward them. He was clad in heavy robes, expertly patched and embroidered with curiously geometric vines about the shoulders and hems. It was Thorin's turn to look startled now.

"Balin." It was a question, but then, it wasn't, as the question was itself the answer. The grandfatherly dwarf bowed deeply and smiled.

"At your service."

"What are you doing here?"

"Until very recently, waiting for you." Balin Fundinson scanned the little group and nodded, as though satisfied. "Good. You're all here. The rest of us will be present shortly. And then, I believe you will have a few choice words to say, my king."

"If by that you mean reprimanding you for not telling me-"

Balin interrupted with a laugh and waved away Thorin's irritation as though it were nothing. "Ah, my friend, but I did. Indeed I did. More on that later. For now, there's a coronation to host, and a
feast to plan. Erebor has a king again!"
Return of Hope

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Thorin is King Under the Mountain, but things are not yet as settled in his mind as he would like. It takes a late-night walk and the words of a hobbit to make things clear again.

Chapter Notes

It took me long enough to finally come up with an ending for this. *dies* Next time I decide to do something like this, I'll write all the chapters before I post it.

It is astounding how very cold stone can be in the middle of the night. However, one's need for the privy can occasionally overwhelm the more fleeting protests of bare feet. The echoes of his passage in an empty hall were more than a little unnerving for one so accustomed to small, wooden building, but at the same time, the feeling of stone all around, the wide hallways, the solid doors - it all brought on a cascade of memories.

He waded through them, moving from one to the next as if in a dream. Perhaps he was in a dream. The half-shuttered lanterns, colored teardrops of glass dimmed for the night, threw grotesque shadows on the wall. Though the flameless lights neither flickered nor shifted, the dark shapes seem to stretch out toward him with unbelievably long arms, trying to pull him away from the childhood he could but vaguely recall.

"Thorin?"

A woman's voice. The dwarf stopped, blinking at the darkness, startled from his reverie.

"What are you doing? Are you alright?" A warm hand touched his, both making him jump and bringing to his attention that he was cold. There'd been no sound of footsteps, other than his own.

"Billa." The name was part of a sigh, but she gave his fingers a squeeze, and he knew she'd heard him.

"Are you alright?" She was beside him now, and he turned his head, looking through the shadows down into her face. He realized with a start that the hall was darker than he’d thought. Although he could see her features, they were blurred by darkness, and the way her eyes wandered told him that she could see little, if anything.

"Just… thinking." He glanced about. Fewer lanterns, narrower hall. This wasn't the section of the royal wing their chambers were in, if indeed this was the royal wing at all. "How did you find me?"

"I followed you a while. I wasn't sure… you seemed very far away. I didn't think I should
interrupt, but it's dark here, and I didn't want to lose you."

"You can't see?"

"Only barely." Billa's smile was quick, a flash of white teeth in the darkness. "I can hear much better than I can see right now."

Thorin was quiet for a moment, then turned back the way he had come. While his stone-sense wasn't as keen as it had once been, he was still astute enough to retrace his steps accurately. With Billa on his arm, he began to walk again, listening to the sound of his own footsteps echoing back to him, and the ghostly silence of his wife's passage.

"Is it… a good feeling? Being back? Being… king?" Billa's soft voice broke him again from his thoughts, and Thorin hesitated before answering. He'd hardly dared to think about it since the coronation. Messages had been sent by raven to dwarf colonies the world over, telling them that the dragon was dead, and the rightful king was on the throne again. It would take time to repair the once-grand kingdom, but like most things dwarves did, there was little to no chance of them stopping until it was done.

Slowly, Thorin nodded. Then, realizing she wasn't likely to see the motion, he murmured an affirmative. "It's good to be back. I… never thought to inherit my father's kingdom, after everything that happened." Now that he was speaking, it seemed easier to keep going than to stop. "The coronation, the halls, the rooms. It all seems unreal. Like if I try to touch it, it'll disappear. I know it's here. I can feel it. Smell it. Hear it. I can taste it in the air, but there's something in me that tells me it cannot be true." There was a brief pause, and Billa gave his hand another light squeeze.

"Is that why you wouldn't go in the treasury?"

It wasn't until she gave an uncomfortable hiss that he realized he was gripping her hand too tightly. Loosening his hold, he apologized quickly.

"No, that's not why. I… fear what lies behind those doors. If the gold is there, the gold that caused the fall of this kingdom, I will have to divide it and send it out to the folk that need it, in such a way that they don't suspect its origins or that I am bestowing charity, which they would protest or worse, reject. If there is no gold, then my kingdom is bankrupt, and it will be some time before we will be able to help anyone at all, least of all ourselves."

The halfling was quiet for a moment, and he could sense more than see the frown on her face. When the silence stretched longer than he was comfortable with (why in the world would silence bother him now, when it hadn't for all those years?) Thorin cleared his throat.

"What is it?"

A beat or two more of nothing but footsteps, then, "Why do you think it would be hard to support the dwarves that are already here? They've been doing very well for the last seven years, that I can see."

Thorin processed that for a moment, then felt a frown of his own begin to creep across his own face. "Nothing has come into the Mountain nor gone out of it in twenty years or more. I don't know how they've supported themselves all this time."

"Maybe you should ask."

The solution was so elegant, so simple, he relaxed immediately. A laugh bubbled up his throat and he chuckled quietly, patting Billa's hand. "Thank you. I worry about nothing, and you have the
solution all wrapped up in four words." With a sigh, he paused outside their chamber and released her. "I'll be with you in a moment. Go warm yourself."

In answer, Billa lifted herself onto her toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "I'll be waiting for you. That bed is too big for one."

As he moved away, steering directly for the privy, he smiled to himself. Life was far from simple, but it was at least much more pleasant than it had been. Hope had returned to his world in many ways.

Thank you, Ghosts. I'll not forget your lesson.

End Notes

10 points to anyone who identifies the reference in the title, which has nothing at all to do with Dickens.

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