

## I'll Always Be

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# I'll Always Be

by [nori\\_mari](#)

## Summary

Sequel to "By Your Side"

It picks up right where we left off-- Bilbo and Thorin have just gotten married.

Continues on the themes from before- overcoming prejudice and navigating cultural differences, but now introducing the complexities of parenthood as well as exploring the (deceptively simple) question “what is family?”

Still canon-compliant for the most part, taking a lot of artistic liberties when it comes to cultural interpretation and some timeline things, but trying to make it so the whole thing could arguably sit between Hobbit and Fellowship without really changing the events of either book (or movie):

All shall crash and all shall burn,  
Gone to ash when he returns.

Smite the light from moon and star,  
Cover the sun for he has come:  
The Lord Who Cannot Die shall rise,  
From beneath the putrid skies,  
And all shall crumble, one by one.

Succumb to darkness and your fate,  
Night is coming, the hour is late.

But—

Beneath the earth, a precious gem,  
Lost and found and lost again.  
A son of Durin’s mighty line:  
For should this son come to arise,  
The Dark Lord meets his last demise.

## Notes

Just a heads up, this first chapter is more like a prelude rather than an actual chapter...



# Chapter 1

When Thorin opened his eyes, he immediately looked around the room for evidence to make sure it hadn't all been a dream. But no. There were his lover's— rather, his husband's— clothes, white and ivory, scattered amidst his own, blue and silver. They had done it. Against all odds, he had married the love of his life.

*Bilbo .*

His husband was still sleeping, and Thorin took the time to enjoy the sight. His hobbit's curls, not quite the color of gold and not quite the color of the earth, but someplace in between. The shape of his body, curled up in the covers, a picture of perfection...

He wondered how many of the partygoers were still at it— probably a good amount. It was the first feast Erebor had seen since her resurrection, and his people deserved a break. They had worked hard for it. They had earned it.

“G'morning love...” Bilbo's sleepy voice floated up from the sheets.

“Good morning, dear husband,” Thorin smiled. “I love you. Have I told you lately?”

“I love you, too. And yes, I believe you may have mentioned it last night. Once. Or twice. In multiple languages,” Bilbo teased.

“Well then, let me tell you again,” Thorin whispered in his husband's ear.

*Erebor can wait. The world can wait. Today, I have a hobbit—no, a husband. Today, I have a husband to love.*

Within a week, Thorin and his new husband had finally settled into their routine of ruling the Mountain. It wasn't that much different from before; they had been living together this whole time, after all. In many ways, their schedule was now easier to manage, for Bilbo was expected at many of Thorin's meetings and he could even take his husband's place altogether for some of them, which left Thorin free to go handle a different task.

True to his word, Kili left after the wedding, Tauriel and his children in tow. As much as it pained him to say goodbye to his nephew (again), Thorin found it much easier this time— learning to let his boys go had been a difficult lesson indeed, but now that all was said and done, he was free to simply enjoy the time they had together. Kili and his family would be back someday, and when they returned, every moment would be a gift for Thorin to cherish once more. And so, he bid his nephew and his daughter-in-law and his grandchildren goodbye, he kissed them and hugged them and promised to write to them, and then he let them go. It was difficult for sure, but no longer the searing, breaking pain that it had been before. *Until next time, Kili.*

Dis left soon after; she was heading back to the Blue Mountains before journeying south to join Kili and his family. Once more, Thorin said goodbye, and once more, he found it easier

this time around. *Until next time, dear sister.*

And thus began the reign of Thorin II, King Under the Mountain, with his Consort, Master Baggins, at his side.

The rest of the summer passed by in a whirlwind; there were endless preparations to get the Mountain ready to endure another winter and the City's population had once again grown. Complications continued with the Men of Dale, and Bilbo spent long hours in discussion with Bard figuring out how best to navigate the cultural differences between Dwarves and Men. It was a hassle for sure, but nobody beats a hobbit when it comes to haggling prices, and Bilbo was able to find solutions that managed to make everyone, if not happy, at least satisfied.

Summer folded into autumn and activity within the Mountain began to turn inward. Is there enough fuel for the forges, are the food shipments arriving on time, have the final deliveries made it to their purchasers? The first snows started to fall, and Bilbo entered his third winter in the mountain.

Thorin worried about his husband.

He couldn't place it. And he realized, somewhat to his dismay, that he had very little information for comparison.

Their first winter together had been marked by the overall newness of their relationship: They were busy discovering each other. Bilbo had gotten sick only once that winter, granted, he had gotten *really* sick, far sicker than Thorin ever wanted to witness again, but it was still only the one time. At least, as far as Thorin had been able to see.

The second winter saw their relationship deepening, and Thorin had again found himself focused on navigating uncharted territory. What does it mean to love someone, to choose someone and— more importantly— have them choose you back? You don't get to pick your siblings, or your children, but you do choose your partner. And they have to choose you, too.

Last winter, Bilbo had managed to make it through without getting sick at all. Well, again, as far as Thorin could tell.

But this third winter, Thorin knew and understood his partner much better now. In retrospect, he wished he had taken notes (or something!) over the past two years. Was he only just noticing these things now because he had been so focused on other things, the bigger things, before? Or was really it new this winter?

Bilbo, on the other hand, kept insisting he was fine.

But Thorin swore he saw the increased pallor on his husband's face; he was so sure his hobbit was sleeping more— and longer— than usual; he was eating less, or was he? Hobbits eat a lot, so it was hard to tell. And when Bilbo got sick again, more than once this year, it was confirmation for Thorin that he wasn't just imagining everything. Or was he? It was all so subtle. Were all hobbits like this in the winter?

The days grew longer, the snows began to melt, and with the onset of spring, color came back to Bilbo's cheeks. Thorin breathed easier and made sure his husband spent as much time outside as possible during the summer months. Bilbo thrived in the sunshine, collecting plants for his greenhouse and cultivating a garden on the slopes of the Mountain.

The next winter passed in much the same way, and Thorin now had a distinct feeling that he would have to find a solution.

And then it was the start of their fifth winter together.

Thorin felt he should be more proactive from the beginning, and told Bilbo he didn't want him venturing into Dale at all this season. Last year, it seemed that every time Bilbo came back from the human city, he came back sick. Only somewhat reluctantly, Bilbo agreed—something that once again had Thorin feeling uneasy, for it wasn't like his husband to accept something like this without putting up so much as an argument.

It seemed to be working alright thus far. Bilbo spent long hours in his greenhouse, tending his garden. He had even found plants to grow inside their suite, placed under their skylight, and Thorin felt cautiously optimistic about the whole thing. Hobbits grow everything they touch, and can call even the most barren earth to life. Just look at the slopes of Erebor! In a few summers, Bilbo had managed to bring greenery back to the Mountain, inside and out. Maybe the desolate northern winters had been too much for his husband, and what his hobbit needed was to be around *living* things. Life.

*Life.*

Hobbits can call life out of anything, it seemed.

It was a far cry, beyond even a shot in the dark, more like a fool's dream. But once he dared to think it, Thorin found he couldn't shake the thought from the back of his mind.

*It's not possible.*

*Or is it?*

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

I sort of feel obligated to point out that this whole thing actually *\*will\** end up being canon-compliant with the books (and movies?), at least, for the most part...

They had managed to make it through the worst of the winter with relatively little need for concern, at least, as far as Thorin could tell. Bilbo seemed to be holding up alright, all things considered. Thorin already knew that Hobbits were built for warmer climates than that of the Mountain, and every winter he felt like he learned a little more about getting his husband through the long, cold darkness. Warm clothes. A fire roaring at all times. Lots of hot cider. Tea as well, but Bilbo really took to the hot, thick, sweet Dwarven cider, something that had Thorin smiling inside. At least there was *something* in this Mountain that seemed to be doing his hobbit some good.

Bilbo stayed out of Dale that winter, and managed to make it through the coldest months without so much as a sniffle, something Thorin took note of and checked off as a victory in his personal taking-care-of-my-husband box. And then the darkest days were behind them, the snows thinned, the days grew longer, and they reached the point of time where, at least by Thorin's recollections, Bilbo should start to be getting better.

Except that this year, he wasn't. In fact, he was getting worse.

He was definitely sleeping more, it was now no longer questionable as to whether or not it was a figment of Thorin's imagination— Bilbo was going to bed earlier and rising later, despite the longer days. And he seemed so tired so often, stopping to rest throughout the day and sitting for long periods of time, curled up in a blanket, without so much as a book.

But when questioned about it, Bilbo obstinately refused to admit or acknowledge that anything was wrong, leaving Thorin wondering whether Bilbo even knew himself what was going on.

And so it continued, and as the days passed by, Thorin watched helplessly as his husband's condition grew worse.

First it was just the fatigue, but when Bilbo started getting sick— despite having no contact with the Men (and their illnesses) of Dale all season long, the alarm bells started ringing.

It had been, by accounts, a fairly normal day— and night— before: Thorin had his various Council meetings and a court session in the afternoon; Bilbo stayed home and proofread trade documents. They had dinner together in the evening, and Thorin noted (thankfully) that his husband had eaten a full plate tonight.

But sometime early in the morning (or was it still considered very late at night?) Bilbo shot out of bed and made straight for the washroom. Thorin followed, and spent a good amount of time fussing over his husband, who kept brushing aside all concerns and, for reasons Thorin simply could *not* understand, still stubbornly insisted that everything was fine. By the time the day had properly started, Bilbo sent Thorin out, saying he would not be responsible for his husband missing work. Thorin spent the day in and out of meetings, doing his best to remain focused, until Balin finally told him to just go home already and deal with whatever was distracting him.

He was relieved to find Bilbo at the desk, reading over some papers, looking pale but at least he was out of the washroom.

“Bilbo, ghivashel, please talk to me,” Thorin tried again wearily. “You told me once that the difficult conversations are the important ones. And I’m trying to help you, I don’t know if you can see it, but I can’t help you if you won’t let me!”

“I’m fine, love,” Bilbo said dismissively, “It must have been something we ate last night...” He then turned to his husband, gentler this time, apologetic, “I’m so sorry... Please, don’t worry... it’ll be fine. Everything is fine, we’re fine...”

“But *you* are not!” Thorin cried out desperately, “Ghivashel, please! I’m your *husband* ! It’s been two years, almost three, and they have been the happiest years of my life. And I’ve learned so much from you, including how important it is to talk when things get hard! I know winters are hard for you, I understand that, but this is something else, this is more than just that. Whatever is...going... on...”

And Thorin found himself suddenly transported back to another conversation, one he’d had with Kili, three, or was it four, years ago? About someone else... someone they both loved, albeit for very different reasons.

*No. Not possible. It’s not possible.*

*Is it?*

“I– I’m fine... Don’t worry about me...” Bilbo brushed aside his husband’s concerns, turning his head back to his papers on the desk.

“Ghivashel... you can tell me... anything. I... I’m your husband. I love you. I will love you no matter what,” Thorin said, gently this time. Tender. Loving. Caring. *You... you are hiding something from me. What are you hiding? My love... you can tell me... anything...*

Thorin felt like he should feel anger at this realization. But instead, he felt sadness, concern. It was like the time he learned how most hobbits felt about relationships like theirs– his brain thought he should be feeling anger, but none came and he felt worried instead. Whatever was happening was something Bilbo did not yet feel safe to share.

*Bilbo... please... you can trust me... I’m your husband.*



But he also knew that when someone doesn't feel safe to share, no amount of prodding could change it. He would have to be patient. But he could do that for his husband.

And so passed another week, with Bilbo wavering back and forth between being passingly healthy and terribly ill, with an increased tendency towards the latter. He was getting sick at all times of the day, now, and running out of excuses. For his part, Thorin was beside himself with worry. Eventually, Bilbo would have to share what was going on. If he didn't... Thorin couldn't bear the thought...

There came an evening when Bilbo was thoroughly, miserably, absolutely, and unequivocally sick, and Thorin decided he needed to put up a stronger stand.

"Look, ghivashel, I won't pretend to know what you're going through, although I really, *really* wish I knew. I will love you *no matter what*. I've tried so hard to tell you, and show you, and I am so sorry, for anything I may have done to make you feel like it's something you can't tell me... Amralime..." Thorin had to work hard now to keep the tears from falling, "My love... there is nothing you could do that would make me love you less. There is nothing that could happen to you that would make me love you less. If anything..."

*Is it even possible?? Do you dare to speak your suspicions???*

"If anything, I would even love you more..." Thorin said, barely a whisper.

"Please, Thorin...I don't... I can't..." Bilbo finally managed to say, helpless. The way he was feeling was bad enough. But the prospect of dealing with both his aching head and his husband's worries was overwhelming right now. A wave of nausea washed over him as the world started spinning again... He wasn't sure if he would make it to the washroom in time...

But Thorin was ready, grabbing the nearest receptacle he could find and catching his hobbit, holding back his husband's hair and whispering words of comfort.

"I didn't think it was possible," Bilbo finally said, barely audible, admitting defeat, "I'm so, so sorry, Thorin, I didn't... think... didn't realize...I didn't think it could actually happen... I'm so sorry... I didn't know..."

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Ghivashel...”

Thorin’s voice took on a different tone; his hands took on a different touch as he stroked his husband’s hair and tucked it behind his pointed ear. Bilbo’s face was pale and his eyes were tired.

“I’m sorry... I should have said something... before...” Bilbo whispered once more, accepting the glass of water from his husband. He took a tentative sip, and leaned back into Thorin’s arms.

*Was it really possible? They weren’t young... well... Bilbo was still young. How long could hobbits...? Is it even...? Thorin could barely dare to dream.*

“Sorry for what, my love?” Thorin asked, taking the cup from Bilbo’s shaking hands and placing it on the floor. “You have nothing to be sorry for...”

“Sorry for throwing up all over you.”

Even when sick to his stomach, Bilbo still managed to be cheeky. Thorin rolled his eyes. Well, that was a good sign at least.

“Don’t be,” Thorin said, grabbing a tea towel. “I’m your husband.”

“Exactly—”

It started again and Thorin was stuck waiting for answers once more— he didn’t mind Bilbo being sick, he’d taken a vow to love and care for his husband, a vow he planned to uphold to the end of his days— but it felt like he was finally getting close to some answers and very much wanted to delve further into their conversation, if Bilbo would allow it.

It finally passed, for good it seemed, and Thorin seized his chance while he could.

“Ghivashel... Bilbo... please tell me... what is going on?”

Bilbo looked trapped, helpless. Thorin had only seen that look in his husband’s eyes a couple of times before, and they were all times he’d hoped he would never have to relive again.

“Amralime... you know I love you no matter what,” he coaxed.

“I know,” Bilbo said at last, miserably. “And... I’m... so... so... sorry...”

*You have nothing to be sorry for.*

“Sorry for what, my love?”

“I didn’t know... I didn’t think it was... possible... it makes no actual sense...”

*Mahal has granted miracles before. We have both seen it.*

“What doesn’t make sense, ghivashel?”

“I should have told you sooner...”

*I don’t mind.*

“It’s okay, you can tell me now.”

“There’s something... hobbits... I thought it was just stories... I didn’t think it was an actual thing that could happen to us...”

*Really? Stories? So hobbits could actually...?*

“What could happen to you, my love?”

“Homesickness...”

*Wait.*

*Wait.*

*What?*

“Beg pardon...?”

“I... Thorin, you... you know how hobbits never leave home? We were always told that if we were gone for long enough, it would make us... ill... Homesickness... I’m so, so sorry, I thought it was just a legend. No hobbit, at least none that I know of, has ever been gone long enough, or far enough, to succumb to it... but... I suppose now we know... how long... and how far... before it starts to set in...”

“Oh! Oh. Oh... I... see...”

Thorin rearranged his brain to comprehend what he had just heard.

“Thorin... hey, hey... are you alright? What... what’s wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong,” Thorin quickly corrected his face, but Bilbo had already read his expression. “Ghivashel. I love you. No matter what. There’s nothing that can happen that would make me love you less. What... What can we do to help you? I— I’m sorry, I didn’t know... I... I’m...”

But this was absolutely the furthest thing from what Thorin had been anticipating—Homesickness??? An actual, physical ailment...? But that means... Bilbo wouldn’t be able to live in the Mountain...? What... How...

“Thorin...” Bilbo said softly, “What... what did you think was happening?”

“No, ghivashel, you’re the one who is sick, I should be comforting you, not the other way around,” Thorin shoved aside his burning guilt– he made all these promises to love his husband regardless, and now that he knew the truth, what was he doing with it!? Bilbo thought he was disappointed in him. Yes, it was partly true, but he was disappointed in himself, not his husband, for building up an impossible hope. But Bilbo didn’t know that.

“Just tell me,” Bilbo pressed, “I know you... You will bury it away, whatever it is, and brood about it for days, so just– out with it already and then we’ll deal with things together, alright? Like you said, there’s nothing you can do or say that will make me love you any less. What... what did you think was going on...?”

“It... I– I’m sorry, ghivashel, it’s nothing you’ve done, it’s all me, I... it... I just... I mean– I had hoped– you are a hobbit... everything you touch comes to... life...”

And Thorin saw the realization dawn on his husband’s face.

“You thought I was... you thought there was....”

Thorin sighed sadly; despite his best efforts, his disappointment was clear.

“Thorin... love...” Bilbo reached up to his husband’s cheek, “I’m so, so sorry... I may be a hobbit... we are experts in all things that grow... but even we have our limits... I’m sorry... that... that’s something even I can’t grow for you...”

“I’m sorry,” Thorin apologized, “I shouldn’t have assumed... I just... it... In any case, please don’t you worry about anything like that. It’s neither here nor there now. Bilbo, ghivashel... What can we do, what can I do, to help you?” Reality was now sinking in, or more like, flooding in.

“I... don’t know,” Bilbo answered truthfully. “But I guess now we know how long hobbits can stand to be away from their homeland...”

Thorin stared. He couldn’t believe how nonchalantly his husband was behaving about all this. He felt like his entire world had just been incinerated again, and his hobbit was just sitting there, practically on death’s door, musing about how long he could live in the Mountain before he died...?

“Bilbo. Ghivashel. Why... why didn’t you... I love you, and nothing you say will change this, but... It’s been five years. Why... why didn’t I know about this...?”

“Because *I* didn’t know!!!!” Bilbo cried out in despair.

*Finally, some sort of normal reaction.* Thorin felt strangely better, which then somehow made him feel worse.

“I thought it was a myth, just a legend, scary stories you tell to children to keep them from running off into the woods,” Bilbo continued, helpless, “How would I know otherwise? It’s not like hobbits will just take off for three years! Sure, we travel, but we don’t go far and we

always come back home! And they say the farther you go, the less amount of time you have before it gets to you!”

“It’s alright, okay, ghivashel, it’s nothing we can’t fix,” *For the love of Mahal and all his creations, this had better be something we can fix.* Thorin racked his brain. “When... when did you first... notice...?”

“I... I don’t know...” Bilbo said, thinking back, “I suppose... I mean... it gets worse in the winter... except... the first two years were fine... but... after that...”

“You went home the first summer,” Thorin remembered, forcing himself to stop panicking and start thinking.

Bilbo suppressed some laughter.

“What?” Thorin asked warily. He was having an incredibly hard time finding anything funny right now.

“You thought I’d married Hamfast’s wife...”

“Oh... right...” It was a summer Thorin would prefer to forget. A lot of things had happened, many of which fell into the let’s-never-repeat-this-again category. But at the same time, a lot of those events had ended up bringing them closer together... so close that they could end up here...

*Thorin. Focus. You have a husband to take care of.*

“Then... we... take you home again? The sooner the better?” It was all Thorin could think of.

“I’m not staying there,” Bilbo said miserably.

*I know... I know, ghivashel... but we will figure this out.*

“You don’t have to,” Thorin said, thinking fast, “A year was no problem, right? Anything... else...? It’s worse in the winter. This year seemed better, though, or did you just get better at dealing with it...? Did you know then...?”

“I... sort of... suspected... at times. This winter was better, I suppose all the time spent in the greenhouse must have counted for something... but... it’s just not the same... as home...”

“Right.”

“Right what?”

“We get you home.”

“Don’t you have a kingdom to run? Come to think on it, don’t WE have a kingdom to run?”

“Won’t be much of a kingdom if its Consort succumbs to... what is it called? Homesickness? Is... is that really what it’s called?”

“I don’t know,” Bilbo said, starting to look pale again, “It’s what hobbits call it. We sometimes call it Traveler’s Sickness too. Who knows about everybody else. It probably only affects hobbits...”

*Probably.* Thorin couldn’t think of any other race that was so attached to their homeland.

He cleaned up his husband and laid him in bed; he whispered comforting words and tucked the blankets in around him, and long after Bilbo fell asleep, Thorin lay awake far into the night, holding tight to the one he loved.

Still, he couldn’t shake the feeling of distant disappointment.

Mahal had granted them miracles before. Thorin himself had witnessed the impossible become possible.

*Was it possible? Is there even a chance?*

## Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry!!!

Canon-compliant, though.... I'd always planned on this being able to fit between Hobbit and Fellowship with as little alteration to the story told in the books(... and movies?) as possible...

BUT... for anyone who was hoping for different outcome, "Concerning Dwobbits" can be read in lieu of Chapter 6 in this story... choose your own adventure regarding Frodo's parentage ;)

## Chapter 4

Bilbo insisted he was feeling better the next day, but Thorin had his doubts. And they now began the increasingly daunting task of getting Bilbo back to the Shire, the faster, the better. But Bilbo was too sick to travel at speed, and the longer he stayed away, the worse it would get.

First things first, though: Despite Bilbo's extremely logical argument that Thorin shouldn't come with him— he did have a Kingdom to run, after all— Thorin had put his foot down. There were a million reasons why he shouldn't go, but there was only one Bilbo, so there was really no arguing against it. He sent a raven to Dain at first light, and by afternoon, he'd had his response. As his official successor, it only made sense for Dain to rule in his stead. He would be there in a matter of days.

As much as he would have liked to dedicate every waking hour to taking care of his husband, reality was that Thorin had to prepare the City for his departure. Bilbo stoically insisted on helping, saying that he wasn't actually sick per se (“You were throwing up last night, what do you call that then???” “That's different!” “How???” “I don't know!!!”) and Thorin eventually gave in and handed his husband a pile of papers to proofread as long as he did so while resting.

And then there was the issue of security— Thorin and Bilbo were both royalty now, and therefore tempting targets while on the road, especially like this. Dwalin would come with them, that was an easy decision, and in the end, they decided Bifur and Bofur would come along as well. They would travel light, Bilbo would ride with Thorin, and Thranduil had even granted them safe passage through his lands with an offer to stay in his kingdom should the need arise.

*Bilbo really is good at making friends .*

The first part of their journey was slow, but uneventful. When they reached Thranduil's realm, it was clear that Bilbo would need a proper rest, so Thorin swallowed his pride and took the Elvenking up on his offer. Thorin's husband was on good terms with the Woodland Elves, and everyone had an exceedingly more pleasant stay than the last time they were all there, except for maybe Bilbo. And they were off again.

They stopped at Beorn's house as well, unannounced, but upon seeing his Little Bunny, the bear quickly ushered them inside. They spent a few days resting and recovering, but also listening to Beorn's advice regarding what to do, for the bear understood the natural world in ways that Thorin and his people did not.

They had been on the right track with Bilbo's garden, and they should return with as many seeds from the Shire as they could carry— pieces of Bilbo's home. Beorn also mentioned that the Sickness might lessen in the presence of another hobbit, a prospect that Bilbo shot down immediately, but got Thorin suddenly wondering again... another hobbit? What about a half-hobbit...?

*Don't set yourself up for disappointment again. Stick with what you know.*

They set off once more, and as they put more miles behind them, Thorin could see a noticeable difference in his husband. Bilbo's eyes were brighter, the color came back to his cheeks, his energy started to return, he started eating again (and keeping it down).

*So it is true...*

*One more impossible thing that turned out to be possible. What about other impossible things?*

By the time they reached The Shire, Bilbo was back to normal and Thorin was torn. How could he do this to his husband, to the one he loved??? But every time he broached the topic—that maybe they should just stay there, for his husband's health—Bilbo flat out refused, saying he would rather live half a lifetime with Thorin in freedom and happiness than a million years in a place like The Shire. And the worst part was that Thorin understood exactly what his husband was talking about.

Nobody really knew how long Bilbo needed to stay, so they took up a room in the inn and set about finding things they could bring back. They visited Hamfast and Bell—Bilbo wisely omitted some details about why exactly they came back, something Thorin was most grateful for. Hamfast was deadly with a frying pan. But he was good with gardening, and he was happy to set them up with seeds and saplings of all kinds.

Bilbo visited his cousin next, Drogo, who had taken up residence in Bag End. Barely of age, Drogo was a bright young lad who had his eyes on a pretty hobbit girl. They reminded Thorin of Kili and Tauriel, fearless in their youth.

Eventually, they ran out of things to do and people to visit, and Bilbo insisted he had had enough for one year. Their return journey was considerably faster, with Bilbo in far better shape than he had been on the way there, and they were back in Erebor before summer.

And thus began Bilbo's yearly escapades to the Shire.

He went with the Spring Trade Route, as he had done during his first year, but he would ride back without them. At first, Thorin insisted on going, but eventually it became clear that Thorin's presence was more trouble than it was worth, for every time he left Erebor, he had to call in a replacement. There were only so many times Dain, and on occasion, Dis, could be brought in like this, and eventually, Bilbo started making the trip alone. And then he started going every second year, for the Mountain was now full of life from Bilbo's homeland.

The years blended together, as they do, and Thorin fell into a happy routine with his beloved husband. But still... there were those moments, few and far between, when Bilbo would look at Thorin a certain way or Thorin would catch a glimpse of his husband out of the corner of his eye...

*We are not young anymore. And it's an impossible dream. So why is it still there?*



# Chapter 5

## Chapter Summary

Broody Thorin, in more ways than one <3

Had it really been twenty years?

The Mountain had changed, of course, for nothing can remain the same for such a long time. And yet, nothing had changed— Thorin loved his husband, doting on him and caring for him, and Bilbo loved him in return.

Of course they had their moments, like all couples. There was the time that Bilbo stayed in Dale overnight during trade negotiations, except that Thorin had no idea where his husband was and nearly lost his mind. Bilbo insisted he had said something about it the day before; Thorin had no recollection of any conversation of the sort, and each stubbornly maintained that they were right for an entire week. Then there was the time that Thorin threw out all of Bilbo's cheese (to be fair, it hadn't actually become cheese yet and really did just look like milk gone bad) which had Bilbo yelling at his husband about useless royalty being unable to recognize basic food staples. But all in all, they were happy in each other's arms, completing each other and bringing out the best in both their partner and in themselves.

And yet, Thorin couldn't help the distant feeling of sadness. It didn't happen often, but when it came along, he felt as if something was missing, although he couldn't quite place what. Bilbo was his heart, his love. What more could he possibly need in this life? It made him feel selfish and ungrateful when these feelings came along, which only made everything worse, and over time he buried it all down so deep that it caused him actual, physical pain every time they insisted on resurfacing.

It had been a faint and distant hope, one that was only getting less and less likely with each passing year. For they were not getting any younger— even Bilbo was starting to show his age, his sandy-colored hair now starting to become flecked with gray. But Thorin had seen the impossible happen before, and part of him staunchly refused to give up altogether, no matter how ridiculous the notion may be.

Bilbo was managing the winters better overall, but this year was particularly cold with a harsh bite in the air that lingered on into the spring. Bilbo spent long hours by the fire, wrapped in blankets, working, reading, writing... And Thorin caught himself once again struck by the familiar feeling of longing for things just out of reach.

"You're brooding again," Bilbo pointed out affectionately. "Come on over here. It's warm."

“I’m not brooding,” Thorin argued back pointlessly. He was and he knew it. “But I accept your invitation.” He got up and took his place on the floor in front of Bilbo’s chair, leaning his head against his hobbit’s knees and enjoying the feel of his husband’s hands running through his hair.

“What’s wrong, love?” Bilbo asked.

“Nothing.”

Bilbo laughed.

“We’ve been married twenty years, love, I know when something is bothering you.”

“Nothing is bothering me. At least, not now, not anymore,” Thorin replied. That was mostly true. He’d learned early on that he couldn’t hide things from his husband.

“Mmm-hmm,” Bilbo hummed, making no effort to contain his doubt.

They sat in silence for a while, staring into the fire and musing on unspoken things.

“Are you happy?” Thorin asked suddenly.

“What kind of question is that? Of course I’m happy. I have you,” Bilbo replied.

Thorin chuckled softly to himself.

“But I know what you mean,” Bilbo continued, serious this time. “I recognize that look on your face. You wear it every time we say goodbye to Ayanna and Little Fili, though I suppose he’s not little anymore, though is he? And when you spend time with Bain’s children. Or... any children, really...”

*Oh.*

“Is it that obvious?” Thorin asked guiltily. But he already knew the answer.

“Yes,” Bilbo smiled at his husband’s reaction. Thorin may be a master at hiding his emotions from the rest of the world, but Bilbo could read him like one of his books.

“I’m sorry,” Thorin apologized. “I... I don’t know why...”

“No, it’s okay... no really, I understand, I... I feel it too,” Bilbo admitted, more to himself than to his husband, barely a whisper.

They sought comfort from each other that night. Thorin had never really believed in asking his maker for things, but now that he knew Bilbo shared his longing, somehow it felt right... He took his time, loving his husband in every way he could, determined to show the world, the universe, whoever or whatever was listening... Mahal, or Yavanna, or both?

*We are running out of time. If the impossible is to happen, please let it happen.*

The next day, Bilbo bundled up for the cold (why was it still so cold this spring?) and set out for his homeland with the merchants. And Thorin watched him go, his heart aching, wondering if anyone had heard his prayers.

Thorin had learned a great deal about himself during his marriage to Bilbo, and one of them was just how little self-control he had without his husband around. When he was miserable, he was productive, and with Bilbo gone, he coped with his pain by burying himself in his work. Bilbo wasn't there to feel ignored and Erebor prospered, so the only one who really suffered from this coping mechanism was Thorin, although even that was debatable because he preferred the distraction to the loneliness. As the days ticked by, slowly as they always did when Bilbo was gone, Thorin worked. And waited.

But Bilbo did not return from his trip this year— or rather, he did not return to Erebor within his usual timeframe. He always left with the merchants, breaking off from the group in Bree to go spend a week or so in The Shire before returning home on his own. Some years he would take longer than others, but he was always back well before the traders. But this year, nothing. Thorin waited and worried, and then waited some more, and worried a whole lot more, until finally, at last, a letter arrived:

*My love,*

*I apologize in advance, for the news I have to share cannot properly be expressed in a letter. Please just know that I love you, and I only hope that you will still love me when I return, for I had no idea at the time when I left Erebor. But when I learned of the news this spring, I had to make a choice immediately, and I can only hope that you would find it in your heart to agree with me that it was the right decision to make. I will be coming back with the merchants this year, for I don't think I can manage the journey back on my own this time.*

*I will explain everything when I see you again, but in the meantime, it is probably a good idea to prepare a crib.*

*I love you,*

*Bilbo*

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Summary

\*~Choose Your Own Adventure~\*

For anyone who was hoping for a dwobbit, feel free to read the separate piece "Concerning Dwobbits" for a different take on Frodo's parentage <3

For anyone who wants to keep things in canon (I had to mess with the timeline, though, in order for them to adopt Frodo as a baby, but we are still on track for Fellowship to start at the right canonical time), or maybe dwobbits aren't your thing, no worries-- read on below :)

Or... feel free to read both?

And... as always, if you're here, thanks for reading <3

Thorin found himself drifting back and forth between extreme excitement and crushing restraint. For if what Bilbo said was true, if somehow the impossible had become possible, it was probably among the best news he had ever received in his entire life. And yet there was still so much room for doubt. But as the days dragged by, even slower now that he was waiting in anticipation, he found himself leaning more and more towards excitement: Bilbo had specifically mentioned a crib (was it more than wistful thinking that he took it upon himself to carve one immediately?), and anything involving a baby had to be good news, right?

Still, he forced himself to exercise caution— the last thing he wanted was to get his hopes up to the point where he would be mad or disappointed if things turned out to be different than what he was imagining. But oh, the things he could imagine! In many ways, he had lived this adventure many, many years ago, bouncing Kili on his knees while Fili toddled around underfoot. Even the idea of getting to do it all over again, this time with Bilbo at his side, was a gift in and of itself.

Finally, at long last, right when Thorin thought he would actually keel over and die from the ceaseless *waiting*, shadows appeared on the horizon that could only mean one thing: The merchants had returned.

Thorin couldn't stand it any longer; he took a pony and met them on the road.

"Bilbo, where's Bilbo??" he called to the front of the line. He was met with knowing smiles (a good sign, right??) and was directed to the middle of the column, and yes, there was a small figure, unmistakable to him, carrying— in his arms— was that— ?

*No. Yes???? No. YES!? There's only one way to find out.*

“Bilbo!!!!” Thorin dismounted and his husband’s face looked up in surprise.

“Thorin!? What– what on earth are you doing here??”

“I... I received your letter! I couldn’t wait any longer... Bilbo... ghivashel... is this... did... Bilbo... please... tell me... are you.... Is this...?”

“None of that was a complete sentence, love, well, except the first part I suppose,” Bilbo smiled. “And now that you’re here, there’s someone I’d like you to meet...”

And Thorin’s husband placed a baby in his arms.

He looked down at the chubby cheeks; this was no newborn, or was he– he? She? It was hard to tell with hobbits, and Thorin also found he was having difficulty gauging his, for Thorin was now pretty sure he was a boy, his age. He was *so* small... and those blue eyes... his dark curls... how...

*It's not possible. Is it? No. Yes? It can't be...*

“Bilbo... ghivashel...”

Thorin realized he was crying. His husband had just placed a baby in his arms, a baby who, against all logical sense, looked just like him– how could he not cry? *Tears of joy.*

“Thorin... this is Frodo,” Bilbo said softly, watching his husband intently, gauging his reaction and his expression. “My cousin. Well, my cousin’s son. Drogo. And Primula... You’ve met them before... Thorin... there.... There was an accident. A boating accident. Drogo... his wife... they... I didn’t know until I got there... It happened this fall... right after little Frodo was born... And... I... I...”

Bilbo was crying now, unable to speak; he buried his head in his husband’s side, and Thorin shifted Frodo to his right arm so he could console Bilbo with his left. Drogo had been one of Bilbo’s only family members that he had still been on good terms with.

“I’m sorry I didn’t explain everything in my letter,” Bilbo said through his tears, “I couldn’t bring myself to form the words... they wouldn’t come... it... I... I arrived home, and everything was in turmoil, Drogo and Primula were gone and Bag End was about to go up for sale again and... and... Frodo... Thorin... I knew I would have to catch up with the merchants, there was no way I could bring Frodo back alone, if I was going to, and I had to set my affairs in order, Dora is living under the Hill now, another cousin, Drogo’s sister, and... and... Thorin... I... I’m sorry... I know I shouldn’t make decisions like this without you, you’re my husband, but I had no time, and I had to make a choice, and I am so, so sorry, I hope you can forgive me, but Frodo’s family... you can’t... I couldn’t leave him, not there, not with everything that was going on, I’m so sorry, please, please forgive me...”

*The greatest heartbreak brings the greatest joy.*

Only this time, Bilbo bore the heartbreak while Thorin got to receive the joy. The bitter unfairness of it ate away at him.

“Bilbo...” Thorin kissed his husband’s head. “Everything is going to be okay. You’re here, I’m here, Frodo is here...”

“Thorin... you do realize... What I’ve done? What we’re getting into? I couldn’t leave Frodo there with all of them, not with the way they were talking of putting him in a home. And I couldn’t choose between Frodo and you. So I did the only thing I could... What other choice did I have?”

Bilbo started crying again, beside himself with worry. It was clear that this had been bothering him for the whole journey, and Thorin suddenly wished he had gone with him this year.

“Bilbo, ghivashel, yes, of course I know what we’re getting into! Your letter was one of the greatest things I’ve ever received. I’ve been waiting and waiting ever since, hoping beyond hope... then you show up with Frodo and I... Bilbo... I...”

And Thorin’s eyes drifted down once more to the baby– their baby, *his* baby– cradled in his right arm. Frodo. He gave a sincere and silent thanks to Drogo and Primula, and promised to do everything he knew they would have done for their son. Who was he to understand the workings of the universe? All he knew was that, by some miracle, a baby had been delivered to him, a baby in need of a loving home, and the fact that Frodo looked exactly like him (in hobbit form anyway) was only more confirmation that this was something Mahal (Yavanna? Both?) had in mind all along.

*Someone had been listening that night after all.*

“Bilbo... why didn’t you just tell me? I mean... we talked about it, right before you left... I don’t understand...”

“Thorin, you know he’s not yours and mine, right? No matter how much he looks like you. I– I’ve already told you, there are some things I can’t give you, and a– a baby is one of them. I love Frodo, I love you, but facts are facts. Just so we’re clear.”

“What do you mean, not yours and mine?” Of course he was, Frodo was their son now, wasn’t he?

“THORIN. I can’t have a baby!”

“I know. How... how is that relevant?”

“Frodo’s parents are my cousins, Drogo Baggins and Primula Brandybuck.”

“I know.”

“And I adopted Frodo without consulting with you first. You... you’re okay with that...?” Bilbo’s voice was tiny, hopeful, asking permission, worried, scared.

*Wait. What?*

Thorin's levels of suspicion rose. By now, he was getting better at detecting when they were about to run into one of their many different cultural norms, and he had a feeling there was one staring them in the face.

"Why... why would I not be okay with that...?"

The look on Bilbo's face was confirmation enough.

"...Because... a lot of... husbands... would? Not be. Okay."

"Aren't I your only husband? Does it matter what other husbands think? What husband would think something like that?"

"You know what I mean! It's a big deal, at least, at least for... hobbits.... It's... not always well-received to take on a child sired by somebody else..."

*Ah. So Bilbo is catching on too. Well, let's clear this up and get this over with. We have a baby to tend to, a delightful, little... oh! He's sleeping!*

*Focus, Thorin.*

"Bilbo... For dwarves... your child is your child, regardless of who their birth father is, or mother. Kili and Fili are my boys. I... thought you knew that...?"

"I know, but they call you Uncle..."

"It would be disrespectful to my brother-in-law's memory to grant me the title that is rightfully his," Thorin explained, "But that doesn't mean there's anything against me raising his boys as my own, they are my boys just as much as they are his. It's an honor, actually... Bilbo, for dwarves, children are rare and precious gifts. Remember, we have so few of them, and not every couple is able to bear them..."

Thorin was having trouble wrapping his head around this. Why would this be a thing anyone would care about? Well, yes, dwarves cared as much about genealogy as anybody else, perhaps more so, but it was different from what Bilbo seemed to be describing. There is your family and then there is your birth family—often, they are one in the same, but not always. There wasn't a good translation for the concept. *Why is there never a good translation???? How is that, after twenty years, we still end up having these conversations? What else is there to discover about each other??*

"Is that why you didn't write more in your letter...? You thought I would be..." *Mad? Upset? Hurt?* Thorin couldn't comprehend. "Offended?"

"Adoption is definitely not the sort of thing one discusses over letters," Bilbo said at last, "Personal discussions are best had face to face..."

"That's true... but we'd just talked about it before you left... the gift of children..." Thorin let his thoughts wander back to that cold spring night. "Can I be happy now?"

“What?”

“I’m so sorry to learn of your cousin’s passing, I really, truly am. Drogo and Primula were wonderful, I remember them both, so young and so full of life... And I shall live the remainder of my days indebted to them, for they have granted us the greatest gift of all... The night before you left... I... er... I... I’d... asked. Mahal. Yavanna. Anyone who was listening... I asked... I begged... I... and here you are... with Frodo, just look at those cheeks! Bilbo! How is it possible????”

Bilbo smiled at last, a genuine and radiant smile. Thorin breathed a sigh of relief. Bilbo didn’t have any reservations about adopting Frodo as their own, he had only been worried about Thorin’s reaction.

“Yes,” Bilbo said, wiping the last of his tears, laughing at the look on Thorin's face. “Yes, you can be happy now. And do you want me to carry Frodo? You’ve had him for a while, is your arm getting tired?”

“Not a chance, you got to carry him across half the world,” Thorin replied, “My turn now.”

He looked down again at the little bundle in his arm, oh how he had missed this feeling!!!

“Hello, Frodo,” Thorin kissed his new son’s dark curls, “Welcome to Erebor. We have been waiting a long time for you, and we are so happy you are here with us...”



# Chapter 7

## Chapter Summary

For anyone who opted to ~\*choose your own adventure\*~ featuring dwobbit Frodo, I apologize in advance for the inevitable inconsistencies that will happen through the rest of the story as Frodo's adoption comes up from time to time. I think a good amount of it could be interpreted as Frodo being bi-racial though, so it still sort of works?

Thanks for understanding, and thanks for being here <3

Twenty years is an excruciatingly long time to wait for anything, but Thorin would gladly have waited another twenty if it meant ending up here.

It was like falling in love with his husband all over again as they embarked together on a new journey, one that had them discovering all sorts of things about each other just as they had done so many years ago. Thorin had more experience with babies, having raised two of them before, and while Bilbo had less experience with children, he was a hobbit, so Thorin found himself turning to his husband for advice on just about everything. It was an unusual, but satisfying, balance with an occasionally steep learning curve.

The first time Thorin fed Frodo, he prepared a dwarven porridge— simple, nourishing, cooked down to mush. He'd made it for his nephews countless times, then his grandchildren years later, and was happy at how some things come right back to you as if no time had passed. He sat Frodo down and his hanai son squealed and babbled and immediately dunked his hands into his bowl.

But his poor boy!! Frodo withdrew immediately, crying and wailing while Thorin scooped him up on instinct, rocking him and calming him and wondering what on earth he had done wrong. Was he really so old that he had forgotten how to feed a baby??? No. He'd done this a million times.

Bilbo appeared in their little kitchenette.

“Everything okay, love?”

“He touched his food!” Thorin exclaimed, at a loss for words. “All he did was touch it... Bilbo, ghivashel... what...? You’ve eaten everything in this bowl before, it’s just earth bread and milk, steeped practically forever... what have I missed?”

One look at the steaming pot on their stove was all Bilbo needed to know. He filled a bowl with cold water, drawn from Erebor's wells deep within the earth, and brought it over to his husband and his boy.

“Thorin... here, put his hands in this... Did you let it cool down at *all* before giving it to him?”

“Yes... Wait, what?”

“This is too hot for him,” Bilbo pointed out, clearly trying his best not to get angry.

“What? No, I let it cool first!”

Bilbo dipped his finger in Frodo’s bowl, then gave his husband a chiding look.

“You can’t feed him something this hot.”

“It’s not hot.” To prove his point, Thorin scooped some up with his finger.

“It is to *me*. Thorin. *You* can take the kettle off the stove with your bare hand. If I do that, I will burn my skin off. Frodo isn’t a little dwarf, love...” Bilbo sounded like he had decided anger wasn’t going to be the best course of action, something Thorin noted and appreciated. They would have to learn to either control their tempers or at least time their arguments to not happen in front of Frodo. Well. As much as reasonably possible. Everyone has disagreements.

Thorin learned then that he would not be able to take anything for granted with his hanai son. Bilbo was an adult, and therefore capable of communicating when he had a different need from that of a dwarf, but Frodo was a baby and unable to articulate such things. Thorin made a note to check the temperature of everything with Bilbo first, at least until he learned to gauge for himself what hobbits— specifically hobbit babies— could tolerate. Beyond that, he would have to defer to Bilbo. A lot.

But Thorin wasn’t the only one learning. For Bilbo had never lived with a baby before. He had spent time among children of all ages throughout his life... before giving them back to their parents. But Frodo needed constant, neverending supervision and care. Thorin knew what this meant and was prepared for it, but Bilbo not only had to learn to multitask everything he did, but he also had to make peace with the fact that Thorin had already crossed this bridge long ago. Thorin had no qualms about bouncing Frodo on one knee while writing up Erebor’s latest official trade agreement with Thrandiull, secretly amused that the document presented to the Elvenking would have dried baby drool on its corner. Bilbo, however, had a terribly hard time getting anything done while Frodo was under his care, and it made for some heated late-night discussions about who was contributing more to what.

Then there was the question of language.

Thorin wanted his hanai son to learn Khuzdul. Bilbo had his doubts— wasn’t this the sacred, secret language of the dwarves? He had lived in Erebor for over twenty years, and while he understood well enough just by being around it all the time, he had never really known where his official stance was when it came to just how much he was allowed to know. But Thorin insisted that, as his child, Frodo was entitled to an education just like anyone else in the Mountain. Which Bilbo agreed with on principle, but he worried about backlash from other dwarves, particularly those who lived outside the relative safety of Erebor. But Thorin

insisted there was no difference between your hanai child and one related by blood, and it wasn't just him, this was something deeply ingrained in the way all dwarven family structures work. As his child, Frodo was entitled to learn. In the end, Thorin won out. Bilbo liked languages- he would finally learn too!- and Frodo would only benefit from being bilingual, especially when one considered he was growing up in a dwarven city.

And so, Thorin began speaking to Frodo in Khuzdul. It was frustrating sometimes to have to say things twice, once in Khuzdul for Frodo and once in Westron for Bilbo, and Thorin often forgot altogether. But Bilbo liked the way the foreign words sounded in his husband's deep voice, and would let Thorin talk himself out before saying he had only understood half of it, much to Thorin's annoyance.

For Bilbo's part, he was determined to instill into his boy the culture and customs of their people. For hobbits are a collective society- how well known is the saying that the nail that sticks out must be hammered down!? Bilbo certainly had no qualms whatsoever about Frodo being a sticking-out-nail. After all, his own nail stuck out so far it was practically falling out of the board! But he knew how to hammer it back in when necessary, and this was a skill that Frodo would need in order to be around other hobbits. They would have to return to The Shire throughout their lives, although Bilbo now clung to the faint hope that maybe having Frodo around would decrease the effects of Homesickness, or maybe even cease it altogether!? For hobbits are a collective people, meant to live together in a group. He would be cautious with his hanai son, for sure, but he also allowed himself some careful optimism regarding their prospects.

Thorin lay awake that night, holding his sleeping husband in his left arm and his sleeping baby in his right. A moment of calm. Another gift.

*Thank you. Thank you Drogo and Primula. I will take care of your son, and love him and provide for him in the way I know you would have done. Thank you Mahal. Yavanna? Both? Thank you. I will not forget your generosity.*

"Hey..." Bilbo's sleepy voice drifted up, "Everything okay?"

"Yes, my love... go back to sleep. Everything is..." *Amazing. Incredible. Beautiful. Miraculous. More than I deserve.* "Wonderful. Everything is wonderful."

And thus their journey into parenthood began as it does for so many others: with a long list of things they absolutely *will do* , an equally extensive list of things they *will never do*, and a reality that lay realistically someplace in the middle.

## Chapter 8

He must have dozed off at some point, because the next thing he knew, the room was lit with the soft gray light that meant morning was on the way. His right arm, well, his whole right side, was stiff from holding Frodo all night, and the rest of him was equally stiff from having slept sitting up. But he merely laughed to himself— baby-sleeping had been SO much easier to do when he was young!

For there is no sleep— if you could even call it that— quite like the sleep you get when your children are babies. You may be asleep. But you are not. You are ready to wake at a moment's notice, the slightest movement or the quietest noise. Half-sleep. Baby-sleep.

Bilbo had rolled over in the night and was now curled up in a blanket to his left. Thorin took the moment to simply enjoy his family; it felt downright indulgent to be able to do this. He had waited and waited for so long, with nothing more than a selfish hope, a fool's dream. *Not a dream anymore.*

But time waits for no one. Now that he was up, he could think of a million things to do.

He started work on breakfast. Bilbo usually did the cooking, and had done so for the past 20 years, but now that they had Frodo, Thorin was preparing more of their meals. There was no question that Bilbo was better at it, but Thorin had, after all, kept himself and his boys (and his sister) fed for a whole lifetime before Bilbo came along. He dug through the pantry, taking out his husband's various breads and jams, he set water to boil (coffee for him, tea for Bilbo), put some sausages on the stove, and set out Frodo's baby food.

He then moved over to the desk, where he started collecting the various papers he would need that morning. They were finalizing the winter budget today, then there was the meeting with the kitchen heads, the census data was still coming in— there was nothing more he could do with that at the moment— but he should probably make an official announcement soon that yes, it does matter that every one of Erebor's citizens was accounted for so they could be sure that they would have adequate supplies for winter...

A little whimpering, followed by a wail, had him up in an instant, heading for the bedroom. But when he burst through the doorway, he was met by the sight of his husband carrying their baby, rocking and calming Frodo, whispering words of comfort and love...

*Oh. Right.*

The last time he did this, he had been on his own a lot. Not always, and he would take no credit away from his sister for the amazing job she had done raising their boys despite all the hardship that life had thrown at her. But still, there were many times when he had the boys with him on his own, tending to every cry every time. It was nice to do this with a partner. His partner. His husband.

“Good morning, love,” Bilbo smiled, “What's that face all about?”

Thorin laughed.

“Just happy to see you both.”

“We were only in the next room,” Bilbo went over and planted a kiss on his husband’s cheek.

“Still happy to see you both.”

“We’re going into Dale today,” Bilbo announced as they made their way to the kitchen, “Want to meet us there this afternoon? Frodo and I can walk in the morning, and if you come with the ponies after your meetings, we could ride back together.” Thorin had no problem carrying a baby while on a pony, but Bilbo didn’t trust himself to do so, and Dale was far to walk both directions in the same day with a baby in your arms.

“Sure, that sounds good to me. What do you plan to do in Dale?” Thorin lifted a spoonful of mush up to Frodo’s eager mouth; his hanai son then proceeded to plop his chubby fists into his breakfast and smear it all over himself.

“Frodo needs more clothes,” Bilbo laughed. He had a point– they were less than an hour into their day, and already their baby had managed to soil his first outfit.

“Clothes from Dale?”

Bilbo simply smiled, wiping Frodo's hands clean once more, and now Thorin saw it too: Frodo was swimming in his shirt, and the dwarven fabric seemed so heavy on his soft, delicate baby skin.

“We could do with some more food, too, love...” Bilbo smiled. “And the sunshine will be good for him.”

*For both of you*, Thorin thought. He kissed his family before heading off to his first meeting. The morning dragged by, as it always does when he had something far more interesting planned up ahead, but eventually he was able to get away and head down to the stables, fitting two ponies and riding down the familiar path into the city of Dale. He found Bilbo in the marketplace and immediately offered to take Frodo to the tailor’s shop so Bilbo could have a break from baby duty.

Thorin was used to not fitting in– he had spent most of his life in exile, away from his homeland, living countless years as the only dwarf among men. And he had witnessed their prejudice, for his marriage to Bilbo was something that did not sit well with many who lived in Dale. But what he had been completely unprepared for was the shopkeeper who couldn’t wrap his head around how Frodo could possibly be his son.

“What can I do you for, Master Dwarf?” The Man approached him, arms open in welcome, not recognizing Erebor’s King. Thorin guessed he must not look particularly regal while browsing in a human shop with a baby in his arm, which was fine with him. Anonymity was nice sometimes.

“I would like to pick up some things for my son,” Thorin answered courteously. “What do you have that would be suitable for him?”

The Man looked at the baby snuggled in Thorin’s right arm. And he looked up at Thorin.

“That’s not your son,” he said bluntly, bordering on confusion.

“I beg your pardon?” Thorin’s voice had lost all its warmth.

“Well, I suppose he looks like you, in a way. But he can’t be your son,” the Man pointed out nonchalantly, as if he were talking about a change in the weather. “He’s no dwarf. Just look at those cute little ears!”

The Man reached out to Frodo, smiling, either not noticing his own rudeness or simply not caring. Thorin pulled back, bristling with anger. Why were they even having this conversation???

Bilbo chose that moment to enter the shop, his arms full of groceries, smiling at their little boy.

“Ah, so he’s *your* son!” The Man bowed to a very confused Bilbo. “Do you know this Dwarf? He is making claims that this boy is ‘his son.’ Shall I see him returned to you then? We have excellent law enforcement here in Dale, just say the word and this Dwarf will leave you two alone.”

Bilbo looked back and forth between his husband and the shopkeeper, thoroughly bewildered.

“I thank you, Master Tailor,” Thorin said, his voice low, icy and dangerous, “My husband and I will be on our way. We shall seek to have our needs accommodated elsewhere.”

But in one swift movement, the Man stepped into the doorway, blocking their exit.

“Not until I have confirmation from this one here,” he gestured to Bilbo. “Little Master, do you know this dwarf, and what is he doing with your child?”

"YES. I do 'know this dwarf,' although it really is none of *your* business! He is *my* husband and he is holding *our* child," Bilbo glanced over at Thorin, who was radiating icy cold fury, before turning back to the now extremely confused and rather irritated-looking shopkeeper. "Now if you'll excuse us, we were having a perfectly lovely day, and shall continue to do so elsewhere!"

And Bilbo, despite his tiny size, all but shoved the Man aside and marched out of the shop, his husband and Frodo in tow.

Bilbo, it seemed, had managed to let the incident go almost immediately, but Thorin found he couldn’t shake the feeling of injustice. Family is family, no matter how you look- families come in all different colors, everyone knows that. And in any case, Frodo looked just like him! How would this Man be so ignorant of families that he would dare make such assumptions...

“Not all Men think like that, you know,” Bilbo said, taking his place at his husband’s side, pulling Thorin's left arm around him. “Tauriel and Kili did just fine here. Don’t let one Man’s ignorance ruin your whole day. It's not worth it.”

“I know,” Thorin answered. He did *know* . But his brain and his heart were not in agreement at the moment.

“People say all kinds of things,” Bilbo pointed out, “And not just Men. Dwarves and Hobbits do too. You and I both know that. And Frodo will learn that. And he will learn to deal with it, just as we have.”

“He shouldn’t have to,” Thorin said darkly.

Bilbo sighed, then looked thoughtful.

“Yes, but Thorin, love... this Man didn’t mean you any harm, or Frodo, you know that right? He just didn’t know any better. Men, and Hobbits for that matter– they don't have the same... views on families as dwarves do. You should have heard the way everyone was talking about Frodo back home. It’s part of why I needed to take him here, to Erebor, with us. Thorin, you do remember what Drogo and Primula looked like, don’t you?”

It had been so long ago, but Thorin remembered their faces well. Smiling. Joyful. Youthful. Drogo looked a lot like Bilbo, and Primula... well, Thorin knew he would be a terrible judge of such things, but she was quite pretty with bright brown eyes and curly brown hair, light brown, like cider or maple...

“Yes, I remember. Why... why is this relevant again?”

“Because of the scandal it caused. The outrage and the gossip. Because Frodo doesn’t look like either of his birth parents.”

“Why would that matter to anyone?” Dwarven families could look as different as night and day– granted everyone had to be a dwarf, but still...

“Because family means blood relatives only, or at least for hobbits, and probably for Men too,” Bilbo pointed out. “The only exception is for your spouse. That Man couldn’t understand how you and Frodo could be family because their definition of family, like the actual word itself, is different from yours. From ours. You are a dwarf. Frodo is a hobbit. And he couldn't understand how a dwarf could have a hobbit for a son because in his eyes, there is only one way to have a son.”

*Oh.*

Thorin felt a weight lift at last, an unclenching in his heart; he laid a kiss on his husband’s hair as Frodo gurgled happily in his arm.

*Thank you, ghivashel. It’s been over twenty years, and I am still finding new ways to understand you and you are still finding new ways of helping me.*

“I love you,” he said.

"I know," was Bilbo's reply. "And I love you, too."

They enjoyed the rest of their day together, picking up new clothes for Frodo (from a different tailor) and ordering more for later. When the afternoon sun began to cast its rich golden light, signaling sunset was near, they fitted their ponies for the return journey- Bilbo couldn't help laughing to himself as his husband set about this task one-handed, with Frodo still snugly in his right arm, declining Bilbo's offers to help.

"Stubborn dwarf," Bilbo teased.

"My hobbit," Thorin retorted, kissing Frodo's head, "Hobbits," he corrected, kissing his husband next while Bilbo rolled his eyes.

They were interrupted by a raven landing on Thorin's shoulder. Roäc.

"There's no way you will be able to pull this off," Bilbo at last managed to retrieve Frodo from his husband, "I've seen you do this before, you'll need two hands for that tiny knot."

"Fine, fine..." Thorin grumbled affectionately, "And thank you, Roäc."

The Raven gave them both an exasperated look before winking at Thorin and settling himself on a tree.

"What does it say?" Bilbo looked curiously over his husband's elbow while Frodo busied himself by playing with his hair.

Thorin pulled a toy from his pocket and handed it to his hanai son, who promptly started eating it while Thorin laughed affectionately.

"Thorin!"

"Oh. Right," Thorin unrolled the scroll, scanning over its message. Tears promptly flooded his eyes, and he enveloped both his husband and his baby into his arms, burying his face in his husband's hair.

"Does this mean it's good or bad?" Bilbo said, muffled, into his husband's chest.

"Good," Thorin managed to say through his tears, tears of joy. "Better than good. Kili's coming home. They're all coming home."



## Chapter 9

“Da! Da-da-da-da-da. Da!”

“Thorin,” Thorin smiled.

“Da.”

“Thorin,” he repeated.

“Guk?”

“Thorin.”

“Go?”

“Thorin.”

“Thorin, I love you, but do you really expect a baby to be able to say ‘Thorin’?”

They were sitting on the slopes of the Mountain in a little patch of green, one of Bilbo’s many gardens that surrounded the City, pockets of life breaking through the barren landscape. Frodo pulled himself up to standing, his chubby baby fists clinging to Thorin’s shirt sleeve, before plopping back down and trying again. Thorin gave him an affectionate kiss.

“Go!” Frodo announced.

“Thorin,” Thorin corrected gently.

“Go.”

“See, he’s learning,” Thorin lay down, his head in Bilbo’s lap and his hand held firmly by Frodo’s little fingers. He looked up at his husband, who smiled and rolled his eyes in response. Frodo, meanwhile, had pulled himself up again, using Thorin’s hand to balance as he stood on his little legs.

“Go! Go-go-go!”

“Good job little one!” Bilbo praised, “Did you do that all by yourself? Thorin, look!”

Thorin’s smile wavered, but he didn’t say anything; he simply looked at Bilbo with a curious expression and then turned his attention back to Frodo, who had let go of his hand with a triumphant smile before wobbling and falling down, crying in surprise.

Thorin sat up, not to get their baby, but to put an arm out preventing his husband from doing anything.

“Thorin— hey—”

“No, no, wait. He’ll let you know if he’s not okay,” Thorin said. “Come on, Frodo, you can try again.”

He offered his hand, and after a few moments, Frodo was back at it once more.

“What if he had hurt himself??” Bilbo whispered sharply.

“But he didn’t.”

“He could have!”

“If he did, he would have let us know,” Thorin replied nonchalantly. “And he doesn’t need to be praised for everything he does. Otherwise, he will not learn the difference between a job well done and a job simply done.”

Now it was Bilbo’s turn to give his husband a scrutinizing look.

“Or he will learn to do nothing. How will he learn to try if receives no credit for his effort?”

Thorin sighed. It was one of many differences in child-rearing between dwarves and hobbits. Or maybe just Thorin and Bilbo. Or both. Probably both.

“Go!” Frodo announced, pointing up at Thorin.

“Yes, that’s right, I’m Thorin!” Thorin bubbled with excitement.

“Who’s praising nonsense now?” Bilbo teased, pulling his husband back into his lap. It was so hard to be annoyed at each other while the warm summer sun shone down on them with their baby rolling around all over the place. As if to reiterate this point, Frodo climbed up onto Thorin’s chest and snuggled in, yawning. Thorin closed his eyes, one hand protectively on Frodo’s back and the other in his husband’s hand...

*The best moments really are the small ones. The quiet ones. Thank you...*

The next thing he knew, the sky was a whole lot darker, the air a whole lot cooler. And the warmth on his chest was gone, his hand...

*Frodo!!! Where’s Frodo!?*

He shot up, ignoring the stiffness in his body from sleeping on the ground, and looked about, frantic.

*Bilbo is gone too.* He forced himself to calm down; if Bilbo wasn’t here, that meant he was probably with Frodo. Still, he didn’t like not knowing. What time is it even??? The sky was dark, but it wasn’t as late as he’d thought it was—raindrops were starting to sprinkle down on him. A late summer thunderstorm. But if it was still afternoon, that meant...

He cursed his own stupidity, or was it a lack of foresight, or just irresponsibility? Who knows. But he was late for his Council Meeting, and he had lost his family. Well. Bilbo is probably with Frodo, which meant he could attempt to do at least one thing right.

He burst through the chamber doors to the High Council, and was promptly met with a roomful of stares, followed by a round of “Your Graces” and “Your Highnesses” before everyone went back to discussion... with Bilbo taking the lead. Thorin took his seat next to his husband, torn between anger and fear.

“Where’s Frodo?????” he hissed at his Consort.

“What are you doing here? I thought you were sleeping,” Bilbo whispered back before taking the next question from another Counselor. “We’re almost done, you can go home if you like...”

“Frodo?????” Thorin whispered back through his teeth.

“With Dwalin, now will you be quiet and let me focus!?”

Thorin sat it out through the remainder of the meeting; he had to admit that Bilbo had things under control, but now that he was here, he couldn’t just get up and leave.

“No, we *have* to find a way to *work* with Thranduil,” Bilbo was saying, “We cannot afford to lose him as an ally, not with the growing rumors about foul things circulating once more. For twenty years, we have kept the darkness at bay, but you cannot deny that it is creeping in upon the edges of our borders once more. We lose Thranduil, we stand no chance. I’m sorry, no, we cannot go back on our word, regardless of whether or not it seems that he has gone back on his. We. Find. A. Compromise.”

It finally reached a point where they (well, Bilbo) could call to adjourn, and the Counselors filed out one by one, leaving Thorin alone with his husband at last.

“Bilbo! Why didn’t you wake me!?”

“You were sleeping. You looked like you needed it. I didn’t want to disturb you, so I dropped Frodo off with Dwalin and went to the High Council meeting in your stead. Thorin, we’re going to have to do something, and soon... darkness is starting to fester far to the south, there are whispers... I know it seems far away, but those same dark things are creeping towards our borders too... I’ve seen it myself, things are changing out there... We are going to have to be cautious, and keep our allies close. I don’t think that sits well with everyone on the Counsel, but you and I both know we don’t have much choice in it...”

Thorin was torn between anger and relief. Bilbo was an excellent Consort. But Frodo!

“I had no idea where you’d gone! I had no idea where Frodo had gone!!!! Have you any idea how worried I was?!?!?”

“Well, now I do.”

“You should have woken me!”

“I tried! And you kept sleeping, so I just decided to let you!”

*So much for baby-sleep.* Thorin felt old.

“Bilbo! I love you, but we’re supposed to be a team in this! You can’t just take Frodo like that without at least saying something! It’s not about permission, and you did an excellent job with the Counselors, just that if Frodo is going to be someplace, I would very much like to KNOW WHERE HE IS!”

“What was I supposed to do, wake you up!?”

“YES!”

“NEXT TIME I WILL THEN!!! AND YOU’RE WELCOME FOR THE NAP! FEEL FREE TO RETURN THE FAVOR!”

“ALRIGHT I WILL! COMPLETE WITH THE PART ABOUT NOT TELLING YOU WHAT I’VE DONE WITH OUR BABY!”

“Bad time?” Kili’s voice had them both frozen. Thorin put his hand on his forehead in the Kili-why-do-you-have-to-have-such-impeccable-timing gesture, and Bilbo turned a variety of interesting colors.

“Balin said I’d find you in here,” Kili wandered in cheerfully, dropping his axe on the table. ‘Hello Uncles!!’

Thorin put his head on straight again and immediately squashed his nephew in a hug.

“It’s good to see you!!! Look at you!!!” Thorin pulled back to examine his boy. Not a boy any more. Kili had filled out over the years, emanating strength and confidence. His beard had come in thick and his hair was long, donning a new braid since last time. Thorin thought he saw the glimpse of a new tattoo as well. “When did you arrive??”

“Just now. Tauriel and the kids are bringing our things up to our rooms. We’re taking mine again, and I thought they could have Mum’s room if that’s okay with you. Balin said I’d find you here wrapping up your meeting, and then you’re done for the day. So get on with it, I don’t know, either punch each other or kiss each other and get it done with because don’t I have a baby brother to meet!?”

## Chapter 10

Tauriel looked exactly the same, but Thorin wasn't surprised— she was an elf, after all. Ayanna was practically an exact replica of Kili at this age, except for her ears, while Fili took after his mother and grandfather. Fili was enamored by Frodo right away, playing with him and blowing raspberries and laughing as his baby cousin crawled around underfoot. Ayanna, on the other hand, seemed more interested in proving that she could hold her own in conversation with the grownups, and Thorin was both slightly amused and slightly impressed at her animated contributions.

For Bilbo was right— there were whispers of darkness, so much so that Kili and Tauriel decided it would be safer for them to spend the winter up north, rather than staying in Gondor again. Of course, meeting his baby brother had played a role in this decision as well, and Kili delighted in bouncing a baby on his knees again, teasing and congratulating his uncle for managing to have a son who was a whole twenty years younger than his own grandchildren. Thorin's face put a stop to those comments right away, but not before Kili had had a good-natured laugh about it.

Tauriel was happy to see all that Bilbo had done with the Mountain— it was nearly ten years since she had been there last, and there was a whole world of difference. She'd had her reservations about spending another winter cooped up within Erebor's walls, but it turned out that the barren Mountain had nothing against Bilbo's green hobbit thumbs.

They stayed up long into the night, catching up on all that had passed and sharing all they looked forward to; Frodo fell asleep on Thorin's shoulder and stayed there until at last Kili announced it was bedtime, which had Ayanna and Fili (mostly Ayanna) protesting loudly that they weren't babies anymore and should be allowed to stay up late, too.

“Bedtime for *everyone*,” Kili clarified, “We are robbing our Uncles of some much-needed sleep, and we'll all be able to see each other again in the morning. Now OUT, otherwise your mother and I might change our mind and bunk you in our room instead!” He pulled his wife into his arms and gave her a loving kiss, which had both his children squealing in disgust and running from the room.

Thorin laughed and shook his head. *Just like Fili and Kili.*

“They think they are so mature and grown-up,” Tauriel laughed.

“Not unlike someone else I know, when he was this age,” Thorin side-eyed his nephew with a smile.

“The apple doesn't fall from the tree, dear uncle, and we all know whose tree it is,” Kili retorted with a cheeky grin, before turning his attention back to his wife. “Come, my love, we have a room to ourselves tonight and I look forward to putting it to good use...”

Thorin put his hand on his forehead in the gesture generally reserved for Kili's presence while Bilbo turned a rather fetching shade of pink. *Hobbits*, Thorin smiled to himself. But

Kili was right, they were both so tired– even after a nap, which had Thorin feeling old once more– and Thorin settled for holding his husband in his arms that night, managing to give him a kiss goodnight before sleep took them both.

The next morning found them both groggy, for Frodo had woken up twice, but Thorin was so happy to have his family home again that he would gladly give up sleep altogether if it meant ending up here. Still, running a city is hard enough without a baby in tow, and Thorin had to concentrate to keep his focus: At Bilbo's request, he called a meeting with Balin, Dwalin, Nori, and the heads of the First and Second Guard. Kili tagged along as well, leaving Tauriel (and a delighted Fili) with Frodo.

Bilbo put up an adamant argument that Erebor should be, if not strengthening defenses, then at least putting far more effort into keeping an eye on not just the surrounding lands, but all of Middle Earth. Maintain contact with the foreign dignitaries; keep your eyes and ears open. What harm could come from simply knowing more about the world we live in? For there is a darkness spreading, seeping forth from the southern lands, lingering out of sight. A darkness that will ooze through the cracks if left unchecked. At least, that's what the rumors were.

Except that Erebor had finite resources. As prosperous as the city was, increasing security– especially in lands so far away– would drain money and food, not to mention the difficulty of finding dwarves willing to work with foreigners. And Thorin found himself faced with a horribly difficult decision:

“I'm sorry, Bilbo, I hear you and I respect your opinion, but I have to agree with Dwalin. I cannot justify the cost when weighed against what we would stand to gain from such a venture. Perhaps if there was an actual threat closer to home, more than whispers and rumors, but right now, we have to take care of our own. Our Kingdom. Our people. We can keep a wary eye out for when and if this rumored darkness decides to show itself, but no more than that, at least at this time.”

“But that's just it!” Bilbo countered, “By the time it shows itself, it will be too late for us! We got lucky in the Battle of Five Armies, so lucky! Do you really think we can count on luck a second time?? We need to be prepared!”

“Luck? No, that was far from luck,” Thorin said, bordering on defensive anger, “Now, I move for a vote on the issues presented. Those in favor of maintaining our current system of security and foreign relations?” Almost all hands raised– only Balin and Bilbo (and Kili) kept theirs down. “And those opposed–” Balin and Bilbo. “Noted and decided. We keep what we have in place. We thank you, Master Baggins, for raising these concerns, and shall reassess the situation in the future as more information becomes available to us. Meeting adjourned.”

Bilbo didn't wait– he pushed back his chair and left. Nothing in his face or mannerisms showed anything but calm, but Thorin knew his husband better than that. He would have to explain himself later, and apologize, but for now, he might as well let Bilbo calm down first.

Kili was the last one out; he said nothing, but raised an eyebrow at his uncle before he left. Thorin put his head in his hands. He'd had to make a choice, their winter supplies were so carefully rationed... Erebor couldn't afford to take on the expense, not without a tangible threat to the City...

Finding a private moment with his husband turned out to be all but impossible with Kili's family and Frodo around, not to mention his constant workload. Thorin *knew* he was neglecting his husband, his brain told him the words, but the reality was that he felt simply trapped by the demands of life, unable to do anything more. And he felt Bilbo drifting away.

Summer gave way to autumn early this year, or at least so it seemed to Thorin. Were Bilbo's words of warning turning out to be true— was a darkness really beginning to creep forth from the cracks in the earth? There was no question that something was festering far to the south. Was it possible that it was starting to reach them up here...? Or were they simply looking at an early autumn?

Frodo was growing every day. He practiced standing on his little baby legs, reaching for everything and squealing in delight with every new discovery. Thorin and Bilbo loved their hanai son; they doted on him and shared his joy in every success and comforted him when he was hurt. And yet, despite their happiness— for they all truly were very happy— Thorin couldn't help but feel the invisible divide between himself and his husband. It was getting wider, and deeper, and he didn't know what to do to stop it.

The deep snows of winter were still about a month or so away, but there was an unmistakably cold bite in the air now. Thorin worried for his husband and son, and was constantly checking on them— are they warm enough? Did they eat? Did they drink? Bilbo took it all in stride, laughing at his husband and giving reassurances that if they weren't okay, Thorin would be the first to know.

And it was here, in the space that wasn't quite autumn and not yet winter, that Gandalf arrived with his first warning.

## Chapter 11

Erebor's great doors burst open; the chill air of late autumn bit through the warmth of the Hall as a tall, gray figure entered the Kingdom. He was received by the door guards and deposited his sword at the entrance, grasping tight to his walking stick as he allowed himself to be escorted to the Throne Room for an audience with the King.

Gandalf smiled to himself as he approached the Thrones, for there were now two: the Throne of the King and the Throne of the Consort, the latter of which bore a familiar figure with a familiar face.

"Gandalf!? Is it really you! Of course it is, my dear Gandalf!! It's wonderful to see you again, my old friend!" Bilbo Baggins exclaimed. "Leave us be," he directed the guards, "This man is an old and dear friend to both the King and his Consort."

Gandalf's eyes crinkled as he smiled, putting his hand upon Bilbo's shoulder before pulling him into a hug.

"Look at you! Consort Under The Mountain! Has it really been twenty years?"

"More than twenty, by now," Bilbo smiled. "And yet, it looks as though not a day has passed for you! Come, come, let us not waste time with formalities. Won't you join us up in our rooms then? Would you care for some tea? It is cold out there, is it not? How long are you staying for?"

"Tea would be lovely, yes," Gandalf replied, accepting Bilbo's offer and following him through the halls. "I cannot stay long, I am afraid. I have urgent business to tend to, as always, but my dealings have brought me up north and I thought to myself that it is high time I stopped in... for a visit."

Bilbo suspected there was more to it than just that, as he often felt in his discussions with the wizard, but chose to just go with the explanation given and began filling Gandalf in on all that had happened since the end of the battle, which had the wizard sharing a few cautionary words. Then with some thoughtfully-presented questions on Gandalf's part, Bilbo eventually launched into an explanation as to how he, a Hobbit, had been able to live for so long away from his homeland, and by the time he had finished, they found themselves up in the Royal Wing.

"Look who blew in with the wind!" Bilbo announced as he pushed open the door, revealing a very happy Thorin feeding mashed carrots to an equally happy Frodo. Thorin looked up in surprise, followed by an enormously grateful smile—after all, if it hadn't been for Gandalf, Thorin never would have met his husband. No matter what the wizard did, or didn't do, he would always be indebted to him.

"Gandalf!" Thorin scooped Frodo up before crossing the room to embrace his old friend. "What brings you this far north? We are happy to see you. Come in!"



Gandalf smiled and allowed himself to be escorted inside; Thorin took a seat with Frodo on his lap while Bilbo set about making preparations for tea.

“Long years have passed, my friend! We have a new arrival for you to meet!” Thorin announced, all smiles. “Gandalf, this is Frodo, our hanai son. Frodo, this is Gandalf.”

A knowing look passed through Gandalf’s eyes, but he simply smiled and nodded.

“It is an honor to meet such a charming young lad. You have a delightful family,” he said to Thorin, “I am happy for you all. For a world with more love in it is a better one indeed.”

Bilbo began setting the tea things down when Gandalf caught his eye again.

“You must be feeling better, then, my dear hobbit! You have waited long enough, it sounds,” the wizard smiled.

“Beg pardon?” Bilbo put out a plate of scones. “Better?”

“Hobbits are a collective people,” Gandalf continued, still smiling, “Meant to live together. He is lucky to have you, and you are lucky to have him... To have each other...” Gandalf trailed off, before looking thoughtfully in Thorin’s direction.

“Gandalf,” Thorin announced, “We have known each other a long time, you and I, long enough for me to assume you stopped by for more than just for tea. What business brings you to Erebor?”

Gandalf smiled again.

“Nothing slips by you does it, my old friend? You’re quite right, I’m afraid. I come to bring you a word of caution, just that and nothing more. I will be back in the spring, and hopefully my return will bring more news for you. But in the meantime, hear my message and heed my warning.”

“Go on,” Thorin invited.

“You survived.” Gandalf said simply.

Thorin merely looked on.

“That I did.”

“You survived, and so did Kili. For twenty years, the whispers of your fate have been circulating among the dark creatures. It is now inevitable that they will reach the ears of those who should, by all accounts, not hear such things.”

“Azog is dead,” Thorin said, “As is Bolg. Their deaths were witnessed by many that day. Including you.”

“Ah, you can take out the rook and the knight, but the game is far from over,” Gandalf replied. “I offer little more than speculation at this time. A shadow has fallen over Mordor,

whose shadow has yet to be made clear, but it is a foul wasteland that attracts equally foul creatures. The shadow will spread. It has already begun. You must proceed now with caution.”

Bilbo was giving Thorin a look, who then made a note to apologize to his husband the moment this was all over.

“What sort of caution?” Thorin asked.

“The cautious sort,” Gandalf answered unhelpfully.

Thorin raised an eyebrow.

“You cannot act, at least not yet,” Gandalf clarified, “For that would give away that you know more than you should. But keep your eyes and ears open. There are things in motion that concern me greatly, and I fear there is no land in Middle Earth that will be untouched by this shadow... Even lands so far away as Erebor.”

“Faraway lands... Gandalf? Does that include the Shire? My home? Frodo’s home? Erebor has the defenses to survive, but who will see to the safety of the Shire?? If what you say is true...” Bilbo found himself unable to shake the terrible images... he had seen war and its brutality, he had witnessed unspeakable darkness and destruction. If it was to come to that, if the impossible were to happen, if somehow Gandalf’s warning was true and the shadow would actually spread to all corners of the earth... his homeland would go up in flames quicker than a dry haystack in summer...

But Gandalf simply smiled and took another sip of tea.

“As it were, this is my business up north. For I seek the company of some northern Rangers, one in particular. Rest assured, your homeland will be in good hands and its inhabitants will all be none the wiser. For the world needs a place like that... a place where goodness can grow...”

“And now, my dear friends,” Gandalf went on, announcing the end of the conversation, “I really must be heading out once more. I thank you for your hospitality, and your warmth, and for your time and company. I hope to stay for a slightly longer visit in the spring. As for the coming winter, hold tight to one another. Congratulations once more on your darling baby boy, and I wish you all the best. No, no, stay put, I can see myself out! See you in the spring! And thank you once more!”

Gandalf smiled once again to Frodo, a knowing smile, leaving Thorin with the distinct feeling that the wizard knew more than he was letting on. And as quickly as he had come, Gandalf was off.

## Chapter 12

“So,” Bilbo said, staring daggers at Thorin.

“I’m sorry,” Thorin said quickly, holding his hands up in surrender. “You were right. But so was I.”

“You can’t say you overrode my opinion because you knew Gandalf was going to come and give us an ominous warning to do nothing,” Bilbo said pointedly.

*Fair enough.*

There was a knock on the door. Thorin sighed. Would he ever get a chance to talk with his husband?

“Come,” he commanded, sounding weary.

Kili wandered in.

“So what did Gandalf want? I passed him in the hall, he stopped just long enough to say hello. Figured he must have been in here talking to you, there’s no other reason he would be up in the Royal Wing.”

“He stopped by for tea,” Thorin said, not really knowing how else to start.

“Mmm-hmm, just tea, right,” Kili replied, picking up Frodo and sweeping him into a hug. “Hello little brother, how are you doing today? You look like you had a nice lunch, I can see it all over you! So what did Gandalf really want?”

Thorin was saved the trouble of relaying Gandalf’s message by his husband giving a rather accurate and only slightly unbiased account of what had just happened.

“Thought as much,” Kili said absently. “We ran into him this past winter, down in Gondor. He recommended against staying much longer in the south; then I got your raven in the spring saying that you’d had a baby, and it was a done deal. But I’ve told you this before, Uncle, there is a cloud hanging over Morder, I’ve seen it. A cloud that lingers, never blown by the wind and never produces any rain. The shadow is real. Whether it will spread and how far it goes, I don’t know and I don’t know if we’ll ever know, not until it’s too late. How are you feeling, Bilbo?”

“What?”

“How are you holding up in this cold?”

“Erm, alright, I suppose?”

“Think you could do your favorite nephew a favor?” Kili’s grin was far too innocent to be anything but suspicious.

“Depends on the favor.”

“Fili’s driving me crazy, the lad needs something to do, and so does his sister. Why don’t you drop Frodo off with them, but tell them they’re doing *you* a favor, not me, okay? They’ll be far more willing to help you out than their grumpy and un-fun father,” Kili said with a wink.

“Something tells me you are anything but a ‘grumpy and un-fun’ father,” Bilbo laughed, but he got up. “Let me get some new clothes for Frodo, they can put something clean on him. Give those tweens something to do.”

“You go ahead, I’ll catch up,” Kili called as Bilbo headed out.

The moment the door was closed, Thorin gave his nephew a look.

“Alright, what do you want.”

“Me?? Do you really think that I, your favorite nephew and ex-heir, would actually be that conniving?” Kili feigned innocence again.

“Yes.”

Kili laughed, which got Thorin laughing too. It felt good to laugh.

“Really, though, Uncle, is Bilbo alright?”

It was moments like these that caught Thorin by surprise, moments that showed the depth of Kili’s perceptiveness and caring. He’d always known Kili was a good lad, no, that’s not what was surprising– it was the moments where Kili showed the serious side that Thorin knew lay hidden beneath his carefree exterior. They were alike in that regard: keeping the innermost pieces of their hearts safe and guarded.

“Uncle?”

“I don’t know,” Thorin said, finally. If Kili could let his walls down here, so could he.

Kili lifted an eyebrow and handed his uncle a scone. Thorin took it and nibbled on the corner. Bilbo’s baking. He felt the familiar warmth spread through his body.

“I feel... it feels like...” Thorin sighed. Kili stuffed a whole scone in his mouth, listening intently, and gestured for Thorin to go on. Thorin took another bite, and felt the words unsticking in his brain.

“I’m losing him,” Thorin said finally, shaking his head in defeat. “I don’t know... I’ve never been happier. We’ve never been happier. So why do I feel us drifting apart? I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be bothering you with these things... the problems of an old man and his husband...”

“You’re not *THAT* old. And I asked, so bother away,” Kili said, now working his way through a second scone.

“Why do you even care?”

“Because you’re my Uncle,” Kili said. “But more than that. You... you didn’t have to do what you did. You’re not my birth father, but you chose to become my father nonetheless. You could have left us, and Mum, alone. But you didn’t. You took us in, you took care of us... I had no idea how much you’d... given up. For us. How could I know back then? Fili and I were children... babies... You never complained. You never asked for anything in return. And I didn’t think to give anything back, because I didn’t know. And now you’re doing the same for Frodo, without question or hesitation or condition. I’ve lived every day for the past twenty years, more than twenty now, grateful to you, understanding more and more... I owe you everything, more than you know and certainly more than I could ever know. I’ll never be able to repay you, and I know you’re too stubborn to ask anyway, so just do me a favor and let me help you when I can, alright? What do you need right now?”

Thorin smiled through his tears. He would have happily lived the remainder of his life without hearing these words. But for Kili to speak so freely and openly, to give thanks and appreciation... It was more than he deserved. He hadn’t done any great deeds. He’d simply done the best he could with what he had.

“I don’t know,” he said at last.

“Think on it, alright?” Kili said gently. He stood up to leave. “And let me know. It’s okay to need help sometimes, and it’s okay to ask for it. I’ll talk to Bilbo, too. We’re family. We take care of each other.”

*Yes. Yes we do.*

Bilbo returned moments later empty-handed. So Kili really had wanted to give his children something to do.

“How did it go?” Thorin asked.

“I think Frodo and Fili are on the same maturity level at times,” Bilbo laughed, “They find the same things funny, at least. But Ayanna is there, too, Frodo is in good hands.”

*What is wrong? What do I need? What does Bilbo need? What do we need?*

If nothing else, he now had a problem to solve, questions to answer. It was somewhat better, after all, than just the overarching feeling that his husband was drifting away from him. Like Bilbo had been keeping something from him... a secret... all these years...

“Ghivashel?”

“Mm?”

“Are you alright?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is anything wrong? Is there anything... I should know about? Anything I can help you with?”

Thorin knew his husband too well, his eyes gave it away first. Bilbo absently reached his hand into his waistcoat pocket, thinking, deciding what to do next.

“Nothing you say could make me love you less,” Thorin whispered as he pulled his husband into his arms. It had been a while since they were able to hold each other like this.

“Thorin...” Bilbo’s voice was barely audible. “There is... something... you should know. I should have told you, long ago... I’m so, so sorry... but... before I tell you and you lose all trust and faith in me, please know that I kept it to myself all these years because I wanted only to protect you...”

## Chapter 13

Thorin worried his husband might collapse; Bilbo was going limp in his arms and his breathing had become quick and shallow. He picked up his hobbit, holding him and comforting him, then deciding to bring him to the warmth of the fireside.

“There is nothing you can say that would make me love you less,” Thorin reassured. “Please let me help you.” He pushed Bilbo’s hair back, and was saddened to notice the absence of tears— *It’s that bad? So bad that it has gone beyond tears into the void of nothingness...*

Bilbo looked very much like he wanted to say something. He was on the verge of speech; he had taken a breath, it was right there... but he stopped.

“Amralime...” Thorin whispered.

Bilbo’s face took on a look of resignation: a decision had been made.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last, “I’m sorry I didn’t say anything... Gandalf is right, though. Hobbits need to live together. But I have Frodo now. And he has me. And we both have you.”

Deep inside, Thorin had the feeling that this was not what Bilbo had planned on saying. Or was it? In any case, Bilbo looked far better, as if a weight had been lifted, and Thorin would take anything he could get.

He kissed his husband, slowly at first, tentative, asking permission. Bilbo’s response was hesitant, then tender, then passionate. Thorin couldn’t remember the last time they had been alone like this—

*Ah. This is what’s been missing. You are such an idiot, Thorin, a complete and utter...*

But he lost all train of coherent thought. Bilbo’s lips on his, the feel of his husband beneath his hands, exploring and discovering and loving and giving and taking... the world was theirs and yet they were alone, nothing mattered anymore, except one thing and one thing only...

Late afternoon turned to evening; the fire had died down to embers and Thorin knew they would eventually have to reemerge into reality once more.

“We have a son to pick up,” he reminded his husband, or was he reminding himself?

“He’s in good hands,” Bilbo whispered, “And so are you... we could stay here on the rug... or you can come with me to bed...”

Somewhere in his brain, Thorin felt a pang of guilt for leaving Frodo with Kili’s family overnight. But Kili had said it himself: “What do you need?”

*This. This is what we need. Sorry, Kili, and thank you, I owe you one.*

He followed his husband to the bedroom.

The next morning found them both refreshed; it was as if they had slept for a week, not to mention they were far happier with each other than they had been in recent days. *Weren't we disagreeing about something yesterday...*? Thorin had vague recollections. But right now, all he had were fresh memories of just how much he loved his husband, and how much Bilbo loved him in return.

But time waits for no one: Kili couldn't watch Frodo forever and Erebor wouldn't run itself, so they washed up (including the bedding... and the rug...) and went to rescue Kili from baby duty.

"Ah, I see you've figured it out, then," Kili gave Thorin a knowing grin when he opened the door. At his side, Bilbo turned a wonderful shade of pink, so Thorin reached down and playfully grabbed his husband in a place that nobody really needs to know about, which had Bilbo turning redder still while Kili laughed at the pair of them.

*Back to normal. Well, as normal as things can be around here.*

"Oi!" Kili turned around and called, "Fili, Frodo's going home now... and YOU can clean that mess up!" Kili turned back to his uncles as Tauriel appeared with Frodo on her hip. "Drop him off anytime. No really, don't forget, I have a room to myself with my beautiful, lovely wife... our children are old enough to be sent out to fend for themselves from time to time, so don't worry about it. You're welcome!!"

As much as he truly enjoyed (and needed!) his night with Bilbo, Thorin really was very glad to have Frodo back in his arms once more. And as he set about getting ready for the rest of his day, he found himself once again overcome by feelings of gratitude. He had his husband. He had his sons, and his daughter, and his grandchildren... it was a good feeling.

The snows started to fall, light at first, then thick and heavy. Bilbo was faring far better this winter than Thorin had ever seen him, and had to push back feelings of guilt for what his husband had had to put up with for the past twenty years. Hobbits really were meant to live together. But now they had Frodo, and life was simply radiant.

Frodo was walking, toddling around on unsteady little legs, growing in confidence with each passing day. Thorin chased after his hanai son, through the halls and down the corridors, Frodo squealing in delight as Thorin caught him and spun him upside down and kissed his cheeks and ruffled his hair.

Bilbo outdid himself this year, teaching Frodo his way around the little kitchen in their apartment, and their chambers had taken on a permanent smell of cinnamon and other good things. Determined not to miss out, Thorin joined in and after twenty years, he finally learned how to roll cookies, shape biscuits, and how a pie is different from a tart:

"No, love, here, roll the crust like this, from the center outwards," Bilbo was explaining to his husband, "Good job, Frodo, yes, that's right!" Thorin laughed to himself— why were his baking skills on par with their one-year-old's? Or was it the other way around?

"Go!" Frodo announced to Thorin, standing on a chair and rolling out his own little pie crust, "Ba da guk! Goodie. Bo?"



“Yes, love?” Bilbo kissed Frodo’s floury cheek.

“Pie.”

“Good job, love! Yes, pie. Although we are making a tart,” Bilbo smiled.

“Tat?” asked Frodo.

“What?” asked Thorin.

Bilbo laughed at them both.

“Frodo is one, but *you*, my dear husband, have no excuse! I’ve made you both before, and you’ve eaten both before!”

“But they all look the same,” Thorin laughed. “And are all equally delicious...” he stole a kiss from his husband before taking a piece of dough from their son’s hand. “No, no, Frodo, don’t eat that, it’s not ready yet.”

“Bo?”

“He’s right, love, it’s not ready for eating yet. And this is a tart because the crust is thicker than a pie, and it doesn’t have a top crust.”

“Wait...what...?” Thorin racked his brain.

“Not every pie has a top crust, love, but a tart has a thick, crumbly crust while a pie crust is thin and flaky. And a tart never has a top crust,” Bilbo explained patiently. Thorin didn’t see how any of those things mattered– it was all pie to him. But he accepted the explanation and could at least remember that if it had a top, it was definitely a pie.

He showed Frodo how to handle the knife, and together they sliced their way through all the apples, Frodo’s little hand beneath Thorin’s big one. Frodo helped arrange the slices into the pan like a flower, sprinkled on the cinnamon sugar; Thorin placed the whole thing into the oven and the entire suite took on a delicious smell.

“Eat?” Frodo asked, hopeful.

“No, not yet, love,” Bilbo smiled as they waited by the fire.

“Eat?”

“No, but look!” Thorin pointed up to the skylight, “It’s snowing!”

“No?”

“Yes! Shall we go see it?”

Frodo jumped up and down, clapping his hands.

“See! See! See no!”

“Dress him up warmly, alright love?” Bilbo reminded his husband, getting up to help.

*The layers are endless*, Thorin smiled to himself. He didn’t know if he would ever get used to it— when Fili and Kili were little, it had been just boots and a cloak, mittens if it was really cold. But by the time Frodo was ready to go out, he resembled a fluffy little snowball.

He took his hanai son out to one of Bilbo’s gardens, up on the slopes of the mountain, where the frosty tips of the little trees sparkled like jewels. Jewels above the mountain to match those within, and Thorin found himself lost in a moment of appreciation for what his life with Bilbo had done to him: Never before would he have stopped to appreciate such things.

They played in the snow, throwing it and rolling in it and laughing... Thorin felt a hundred years younger. Frodo squealed with delight as he chased after the snowflakes, trying to catch them in his mittened hands. All too soon, for Thorin worried about his boy being out in the cold, they tramped back inside, trailing snow and making puddles. Frodo laughed and talked the whole way back to their room, curled up in Thorin’s arm.

Their suite was warm and smelled of apple pie (tart?); Bilbo was curled up in front of the fire with a book; Frodo giggled as Thorin unwrapped and dried him off. And Thorin felt nothing but joy, and gratitude, for in this moment, he didn’t feel the need for a single coin from Erebor’s treasury.

*Everything I need is right here in front of me.*

## Chapter 14

The winter passed in a flurry of warmth, moments, and memories. Thorin learned more about hobbits in a matter of months than he had in twenty years. Some things he knew, but he didn't *know* – it was different hearing Bilbo's explanations to Frodo, things Thorin had only known about just from observation. Bilbo prepared a whole variety of hobbit foods, some of which Thorin had maybe tried once or twice before, and some were new altogether. Frodo learned songs and nursery rhymes, clapping along as Bilbo recited the words, familiar sounds to all hobbits and completely foreign to Thorin. How did he not know all this about his husband before?

It wasn't always easy. The first time Frodo got sick, Thorin practically lost his mind with worry. To see Frodo sitting so quietly, looking off into the distance without his usual spark, had Thorin staying up for three days straight, carrying his little boy and telling him stories of grand adventures. Dwarven babies got sick from time to time too, but nothing like this and they outgrew it by the time they were done with their first year.

Ironically, Bilbo was the one who took on the nonchalant attitude– usually it was Thorin who maintained that Frodo could handle whatever it was that was happening to him. But Bilbo insisted that all hobbits get sick in the winter, especially children, and all they had to do was wait for it to pass. Then Bilbo got sick, too, and Thorin was left tending to them both, wondering how on earth hobbits managed to survive altogether. And when would they have to bring Frodo back to the Shire? What was the difference between Homesickness and regular sickness??? But Bilbo assured him that he could tell the difference by now, and that he had never felt better during any winter in Erebor. Granted, he said this whilst confined to bed with a mug of tea while running a fever, so Thorin wasn't entirely sure how much truth was in that exact statement, but he couldn't deny that Bilbo seemed to be doing better than usual this year, at least when he wasn't sick with whatever Frodo brought home from wherever he picked it up.

Soon, the snows began to thin and the days started growing longer. Frodo was walking with confidence now, and talking! Nothing brought Thorin more joy than hearing Frodo figure out words with his tiny baby voice– words in his own native tongue! He brought Frodo into the mines and forges (after convincing Bilbo that yes, Frodo would be safe) and taught him the names of the different minerals, precious metals, gems, and tools.

Spring came, and with it, Balin's departure for Moria. He had been talking about it for years, and Thorin felt he couldn't hold his friend and mentor back any longer. Balin had given him everything, without hesitation or condition, over so many years. Oin and Ori went with him, and Thorin's Company was now down to nine.

Not long after Balin left, Bilbo and Frodo prepared to journey back to their own homeland. Thorin was fully prepared to go with them, but Kili stepped in and offered to go instead– with Balin gone, Erebor would feel Thorin's absence in a way that nobody could deny. Kili insisted that he and his family had grown restless over the winter, itching for a new adventure, so Thorin reluctantly bid them all goodbye and then the *waiting* began...

That was when Gandalf showed up.

“Thorin. I have information for you.” His words were urgent, but his tone was warm, “Information that is best discussed behind closed doors.”

“Come, upstairs, to our chambers,” Thorin invited, “I must apologize in advance; my tea-making skills are nowhere near that of my husband, but Bilbo is on his way to The Shire now, with Frodo...”

“You really have been married a long time! For I can hear your husband’s voice in yours!!” Gandalf laughed, following Thorin up to the Royal Wing. “It is a good thing, my dear friend,” the wizard reassured, “For a world with more love in it is a better world than before.”

Soon, they were sitting at the table, tea in hand and the last of Bilbo’s scones at the ready.

Gandalf looked thoughtful, almost scrutinizing.

“There is a shadow lingering over the land of Mordor,” he said at last.

“So I have been told,” Thorin answered.

“A shadow that will spread.”

“So I have also been told.”

“But the Enemy remains hidden, and will remain hidden at least for now, since there are two tasks he seeks to accomplish before he can fully reveal himself to the world. The first is arguably of far greater importance but also far less likely to be accomplished within the foreseeable future and only really pertains to you because it means you may still have time on your side.”

Thorin’s thoughts went instinctively to his husband, but he couldn’t place why. It worried him.

“And the second?”

“A prophecy was made, a prophecy which I dare not utter aloud, for such things when spoken by the wrong voices hold a terrible power indeed. As is the case with this one. Too many voices warping and distorting the message... fate is not a thing to be handled carelessly, my friend. Parchment, a candle, if you please!”

Thorin got up and fetched both, along with a pen and ink, and gave all to Gandalf, who wrote something down.

“Read it, learn its message, but do not speak the words, even translated like this, for fate is a tricky device.”

And Gandalf turned the paper over to him:

*All shall crash and all shall burn,  
Gone to ash when he returns.  
Smite the light from moon and star,  
Cover the sun for he has come:  
The Lord Who Cannot Die shall rise,  
From beneath the putrid skies,  
And all shall crumble, one by one.  
Succumb to darkness and your fate,  
Night is coming, the hour is late.  
But—  
Beneath the earth, a precious gem,  
Lost and found and lost again.  
A son of Durin's mighty line:  
For should this son come to arise,  
The Dark Lord meets his last demise.*

Gandalf took paper to candle, and burned it all to ash.

“A son of Durin,” Thorin said at last, “Durin has many descendants. This could refer to a good many dwarves.”

“Ah, but remember, Thorin, family means different things to different peoples. In this case, family is viewed as linear. Nain had two sons, but Dain I was the one chosen to continue the line. And of his three sons, your grandfather, Thrór, was marked as the one who continues the line. And then your father. Down to you...”

“And this Enemy knows of this Prophecy?”

“Heard it, knows it, and has set his sights on ensuring it does not come to pass. Do you know why Azog wanted to destroy your bloodline, Thorin?”

“Vengeance. I took his hand, and his victory.”

“Yes, and no! Who was it that sent those thoughts into his mind in the first place, turning vengeance into obsession? You may have taken out the rook, and the knight, but the game is

far from over. There is a price on your head, a price that has been there ever since the Prophecy was made all those years ago. A Prophecy that has since been told to all manners of dark creatures, searching for you, determined to hunt you down. Azog was only the beginning. For the Enemy seeks to accomplish two tasks: First, to find that which he has lost, and second, to find and destroy you and your line. And word has at long last reached The Enemy's ears that the Son of Durin survived. And that he has borne a son."

Thorin felt his heart drop and his insides freeze. Linear family trees, no branches. This means...

"So I have been chosen to continue the line. And Kili is now a branch, not the trunk."

Gandalf nodded gravely.

"What must we do?" Thorin asked quietly. But he already knew the answer.

"The Enemy knows that you live, and that you now have a son, your own son. And there is only one place in Middle Earth where you would be."

"Erebor..."

"It is only a matter of time before he sets out to find you, and Erebor is the first place he will look. And I do not think he will come with an army, for he does not want to show his hand just yet. Which means he will likely seek to use other, far more subtle and far more deadly, devices... But know this, Thorin," Gandalf continued, "Fate is a tricky and complex creature. In his blind obsession to destroy you and prevent the prophecy's fulfillment, our Enemy may just create his own demise.

"Hardly a comforting thought."

"Hardly!? No, not at all my dear friend! Live your days and love your family! For if there is anything in this world that can counter the darkness of evil, it is the light of love."

## Chapter 15

A decision was forming inside Thorin's mind; a complicated decision made easy by the fact that it all came down to one thing.

*Where will my family be safe?*

The selfless thing to do would be to send them away to the safety of The Shire. Hide them someplace far from darkness while he stayed in Erebor to face whatever evil fate awaited him. For wherever he went, the shadow would inevitably follow— if not today, then tomorrow or the day after... If there was a price on his head, a price from Mordor, there was only so long he could run from it. As for Frodo... Frodo at least had the benefit of anonymity, he could live out his days in peace, in quiet, loved and protected by Bilbo in The Shire...

The easy thing to do would be to write to Bilbo, tell him they were done, and say he and Frodo were no longer welcome back in Erebor. It would keep them safe, yes, but Thorin knew he could never do that to the ones he loved.

In the end, he decided he would ride out and meet them on the road. See his husband and his son one last time. Accompany them home. Explain everything as best he could. And tell them to stay where they would be safe. It was selfish to go and see them, he knew, but what other choice did he have? If he waited for them to return, they might not be able to make the journey again for another year— it was hard enough to travel with a toddler within a group, let alone by yourself. If everything was as Gandalf said, if he truly did have time on his side, he might be lucky enough to make the trip this summer. It was now or never. Yes, Erebor would be reeling from his sudden departure, but the Mountain wasn't going anywhere. He only had one family.

An easy decision in the end.

He fitted his pony and rode out into the unknown. An undecided fate hanging over his shoulders. His kingdom, uneasy. Himself, uncertain.

*Keep your family safe. That's all that matters.*

He rode swift and light; it didn't take long for him to catch up with the traders just outside of Bree. The clouds hung ominously low in the sky, and it gave a sense of foreboding. The merchants, however, were delighted to see their King had decided to come along after all, but Kili caught Thorin's eye and knew something was wrong. He gave his uncle a reassuring nod as Thorin made his way to the center of the column.

"Hey! What are you doing here??" Bilbo looked up in surprise with the appearance of the familiar boot by his face.

"Missed you," was all Thorin managed to say.

“Hi! Go!! Go up! Hi!!” Frodo reached up happily; Bilbo laughed and handed their son to his husband— Frodo was getting heavy, but Thorin merely scooped him up and took the reins one-handed. There was no way he could have a private conversation now. He would have to wait until they made it to The Shire...

The dull thump of an arrow hitting a tree was their warning: Instantly, a clamoring rang down the line as swords and axes were drawn— they may be merchants, but every dwarf was a fighter, especially those who ran the trade routes. Robbers were common, but the Dwarves of Erebor never lost their goods.

In one swift movement, Thorin jumped from his pony, Frodo still safe in his arm.

“Bilbo, take Frodo! I’m sorry, I should never have come!”

Another arrow, better aimed this time, into a cart wheel.

But Bilbo wore an unmistakable look of pain and guilt.

“Thorin, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I didn’t— I should have told you— I just—”

“TAKE FRODO!” Thorin shifted his son to his left arm, drawing his sword with his right. At his side, Tauriel and Kili sent their first shots into the tree cover.

“I can’t!!!” Bilbo cried out, “They— they’ve— they must have started their search and I should have told you, but I— I—! No, you take Frodo, get out of here, ride! Go!”

“What on earth are you talking about!? I never should have come, I’ve led them straight to you all, I’m so sorry—” Thorin took out his first orc, Frodo still tucked in his left arm, as more jumped from between the trees.

“WHAT!?” Bilbo cried out, Sting glowing as he guarded their son and Thorin’s uncovered left side, “No, they’re here for me— wait, what did YOU do!?”

“WHAT DID *YOU* DO!?” Thorin was getting desperate. He was an excellent fighter, but a battle was no place for a child.

“OI!” Kili shouted at the pair of them, exchanging his bow for his brother’s daggers. “You can finish your little domestic AFTER we kick everyone’s ass, yes!? GOOD! FILI! AYANNA! Get over here! Come, mind your cousin!” Fili took Frodo as Tauriel covered them from the oncoming ambush. “Get under the cart, I KNOW you can fight, but family first! Take care of Frodo!”

Their raiders were fixated on finding something, which Thorin found unusual for Orcs. They were focusing on the treasury cart, fighting their way through the lines of dwarves making for the chests of Erebor’s goods... Usually orcs wouldn’t raid for treasure, not like this in any case...

And then, he was spotted. Recognized. Thorin didn’t know how he knew; but he felt the burning of someone’s eyes on him... someone who had realized who he was... and the battle shifted.



He heard the noise first— a dull thump on his left shoulder. The pain came next, searing and burning as he realized this was where Frodo had been mere moments before. And then the world stood still.

“Anyone dares to move, and I release this arrow into your King,” the Orc leader growled.

Thorin forced himself to focus on the voice; he looked up and a second arrow was pointed straight at him.

“You,” the Orc continued, “Where is your son? Your real son. Not this runt.”

Thorin stood tall and stared down his foe. The burning in his shoulder was spreading, his entire left side was searing pain, but he forced it away. If he was to go down fighting, so be it.

The Orc released one finger from his arrow.

“There are others who will speak. Save them, and us, the trouble. Where is your son?”

Two fingers.

“Last. Chance.”

Thorin lunged forward, sword at the ready. If this was the end, fine. Frodo and Bilbo would be safe, that was what mattered most. *To some, there is only one way to have a son. Family means different things to different peoples. Not everyone is able to recognize that Frodo is my son... and it may just save his life.*

All fingers.

But the Orc’s aim was off; something had pushed his bow, something unseen... it merely grazed Thorin’s arm and thudded into a tree; Thorin sliced through his foe, sending the Orc’s horrid head reeling and rolling on the forest floor.

And then... darkness.

## Chapter 16

*I can't be dead. Please. Not yet, no, my time is NOT up, I have to tell my son I love him, I have to tell my nephew and my daughter and my grandchildren that I love them... my husband... I have to tell my husband... my husband...*

But the pain shooting through his body, starting from his left shoulder and radiating outwards, was a clear sign that no, he was not dead. Death was painless. Right? There was a fight going on, a fight against himself, and as long as the fight was happening, he stood a chance. Right?

He couldn't focus his eyes, or hear anything properly, or move, but he was able to vaguely register that there were people around him. Voices, muffled voices. Voices he knew... Someone lifted his head, there was a cup at his lips, could he swallow? Who knows. Perhaps. We can try. We? Who is we?

A strong, bitter, taste— *if I can taste, that means I'm not dead, right?*-- and slowly, the bright shadows became dark as the room folded in on itself and the world went black once more.

When he woke again, the pain was still there, everywhere, burning, radiating out from his shoulder, but he could open his eyes properly now. He couldn't move without sending sharp, shooting, screaming pains through his entire body, but he was at least able to see. *A good sign?*

"Hey," a familiar voice said, rough, as if it had just been crying, "How— how are you feeling?"

Thorin registered the cool comfort in his right hand that could only mean one thing. *Bilbo! Still here. After all these years. After all I've put you through.*

And that must mean that someplace, nearby...

"Frodo?" Thorin's voice came out barely more than a whisper.

A soft and shaky laugh, one of relief.

"Yes, Frodo is here too, sleeping."

Thorin turned his head towards his husband's voice. Bilbo's eyes and nose were red, he had most definitely been crying earlier, but he was smiling now. *How long has it been?*

"Bilbo... What happened?" Even talking hurt.

"Once you took out their leader, the rest were overcome easily. I think some managed to escape, though. But everybody is safe, we're all safe, and you... you're— you..." Bilbo couldn't finish his sentence, his voice cracked and faded off. "You're still here too," he finally said softly, "Thank you..."

“What on earth for?”

“For staying.”

Thorin smiled and squeezed his husband’s hand.

“Of course I stayed.”

Bilbo’s face crumpled into tears once more, and Thorin reached up through the pain to stroke his husband’s cheek with his fingertips. Bilbo held onto his hand as if it were a lifeline.

*It was that close? I’m sorry, so sorry my love...*

“We got it out,” Bilbo said at last, “The arrow. All of it. You are so lucky... it was just a little high... any lower and... Thorin... I thought... I am so sorry... I couldn’t... there is something I have to tell you, I am so sorry, I’ve kept it a secret from you all these years, I had always thought I would say something when the time was right, but it was never right and then I— I’d feared— I...”

“Ghivashel... It’s been twenty years, twenty five? I have loved you all this time. There’s nothing you can say that would make me love you any less,” Thorin coaxed, wiping his husband’s tears with his thumb.

“I should have said something long ago.”

“Love holds no debts and love holds no regrets,” Thorin said wisely.

“And even now, I cannot tell you, not yet. There are too many listening ears in a place like this,” Bilbo said miserably, “The secret I’ve kept from you all this time, I’m finally ready to tell and the cruel irony is that I still can’t. But I will, I promise. Once we’re properly alone, in The Shire, I will tell you everything. And if I don’t, I’m now giving you my permission to make me.”

Thorin smiled as he imagined all the ways he could take his husband up on this offer.

“Oh really...?”

“Not like *that*, idiot, you can barely move!” Bilbo laughed through his tears.

“I’d move for that,” Thorin grinned. “Some things are worth the pain.”

Bilbo rolled his eyes.

“I have something to share with you too,” Thorin said, serious once more, “Something that also can only be discussed in utmost privacy. It appears we will have a lot of sharing to do once we find the right place...”

The grave reality of the situation finally began to sink in. Thorin was injured— badly, and he knew it, facing a long recovery. He couldn’t stay at the inn forever. Journeying back to Erebor was out of the question now, too- even if he traveled with the merchants, his presence

would be far too great a liability. There was really only one place he could go now... But he couldn't ask that much of his husband. Bilbo adamantly maintained that he had no intention of living together at Bag End, despite Thorin's many offers over the years. Prejudice is real, and some wounds run too deep— invisible, unable to ever heal completely...

"Hey," Bilbo interrupted Thorin's thoughts, "It'll be okay, alright? We— we'll figure it out together, yes? Just... do me one more favor and— and— stay with me, okay? And Frodo. Please don't— don't leave us."

*It really was that close... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come. I should have done the selfless thing. I should have written that we were through, I should have told you to stay away... I should have...*

There was a quiet knock on the door; Bilbo reluctantly let go of his husband's hand to let in a tired-looking Kili, whose face lit up immediately upon seeing his uncle awake. He took his place by their side, catching Thorin up on everything that happened.

It had been two days, two hallowing and nerve-wracking days with sleepless nights in between. Kili and his family were in the room next door; Tauriel and Ayanna worked wonders to keep Thorin alive and Bilbo had finally sent them out to get some sleep right before Thorin woke up. The merchants were doing their best to rest and resupply, but everybody was on edge listening and waiting on the fate of their beloved King.

And Thorin found himself facing a choice. With or without him, the City of Erebor must continue on and endure.

"Bilbo. Please... tell the merchants to continue. They cannot wait for me. Erebor needs these trade deals. They will listen to you, their King's Consort... reassure them that everything will be alright, their service to their Kingdom must come before their service to their King, and that's an order from me to them..."

"Alright," Bilbo nodded, "And then you're coming home with me."

"I can't ask that of you," Thorin said softly.

"I'm not asking you. To ask that. Of me," Bilbo retorted. "Where else will you go? What will you do?"

"First things first, Uncle," Kili said, once again revealing his innermost compassion, "We take care of you. Everything else can wait. The merchants will be fine. They've done this a million times. Something's wrong, I could tell the moment I saw you, but it's nothing we can't fix. Together. We're family, that's what family does, yes?"

Yes.

## Chapter 17

Bilbo took a reluctant nap while Kili stayed up with Thorin and Frodo. Nothing brought Thorin more heartbreak than being this close to his little boy, his hanai son, but being unable to take him in his arms and hug him and kiss him and hold him... It was clear that Frodo understood something was wrong, but was too little to understand what, so in the end, Kili did what Kili does best— he had Frodo laughing and giggling at his antics, but Thorin saw the shadow behind his nephew's eyes.

*It had been far too close. I'm so sorry...*

Tauriel and Ayanna came in eventually, sending Frodo and Kili out; they redressed Thorin's shoulder and gave him some more of the bitter brew. The last thing Thorin registered before the familiar darkness set in was the sight of his husband, dressing and getting ready to make his announcements to Erebor's merchants...

When he woke again, the pain was slightly less potent, and more isolated to his left side. Bilbo was sleeping on the neighboring bed, curled up protectively around a sleeping Frodo, and Thorin was torn between guilt and gratitude. Why did he have to come out? Why couldn't he have been selfless for once??? He could have stayed in Erebor, he could have spared them all the pain...

Well. No. That would have broken them all. He had to come out to see them. What choice did he have?

"Go?" Frodo's tiny voice floated up across the room, "Hi. I go. Bye bye Bo. Hi Go."

"Hello Frodo," Thorin smiled, turning his head, hoping Frodo could make it off the big bed on his own. His little boy wiggled over to the edge of the man-sized bed, then backed up on his tummy with his legs dangling over the side. It was such a far drop...

Frodo let go, falling the rest of the way down, landing on his feet before falling onto his bottom. He looked surprised, but didn't cry— he simply got up and toddled over to Thorin's bed.

"Hi Go," Frodo announced.

"Hello Frodo," Thorin said softly, reaching his hand out to his son, stroking back his boy's dark curls.

"Up?" Frodo said hopefully.

What other choice did he have? Those big eyes, that small voice...

Thorin rolled over to his right side, his good side; his left screamed in protest, but he stubbornly continued. He offered Frodo his right hand and helped him climb up onto the bed;

he tucked his son safely away in his right arm and rolled onto his back, his left shoulder burning with pain.

“Hi Go,” Frodo said, snuggling into his safe place. “I tared. Monter. Gone?”

“Yes, my love, the monsters are gone,” Thorin whispered, “There are no monsters in here. Only me,” he kissed Frodo’s curls, “and Bilbo. And you.”

“Oh-tay,” Frodo said, “Hi Go. I love. You. I taw... I taw a bird!”

“I love you too,” Thorin said softly, turning his head and kissing Frodo once more. “You saw a bird?”

“Big bird.”

“What color was it?”

“Back.”

“Black? I see.”

“And I... I taw... I taw a tee!”

“You saw a tree?”

“Yep.”

“Did you see anything else?”

“Nope. Dus a tee. I seep now. I love. You. I hap-py.”

Frodo nuzzled in and yawned; he clung onto Thorin’s shirt with his little fists and fell asleep in the place where he felt safest.

Thorin dozed, weaving in and out of sleep through the pain in his shoulder, but his heart was full. He’d made the right choice.

When he woke properly, the thin watery light announced it must be early in the morning. Frodo was still curled up in his arm while his husband loomed over the pair of them looking like he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“Dare I ask how Frodo even managed to get up here in the first place!?” Bilbo interrogated.

“No,” Thorin said, “Don’t ask. But it was worth it.”

“I bet it was. You can explain yourself to Tauriel, or better yet, Ayanna. I’m sure she’ll be thrilled,” Bilbo said, shaking his head. “How are you feeling?”

“My right arm is fine.”

“That’s nice, love,” Bilbo said, “What about your left?”

“My left leg is fine too.”

“Fine, don’t tell me,” Bilbo laughed, “Try pulling that with Ayanna. Are you really ready to face the wrath of Kili and Tauriel put together??”

It was worth it to see his husband smile. At his side, Frodo stirred sleepily.

“Did you deliver my message?” Thorin asked, serious now. “What did they say? Are the merchants ready to head out soon?”

“Yes,” Bilbo replied, “And yes. They are worried about you, though. And so am I.”

Thorin considered his situation. He couldn’t stay at the inn, not with his family; eventually word would get out that he was a sitting duck here and then they would all be in danger. But he needed to send his people off first. Being King had its benefits for sure, but it also had equal drawbacks: it didn’t matter if you were on death’s door yesterday, if your people need you, you are there for them no matter what.

“What are you planning?” Bilbo asked, clearly suspicious, “I know that look in your eyes.”

“Help me get cleaned up,” Thorin said, “I need to see them off.”

“Are you crazy!?”

“They need to hear it from me! My legs work just fine.”

“Stubborn dwarf.”

“You know I’m right.”

“Doesn’t make you any less stubborn.”

With Bilbo’s help, Thorin made himself presentable and (slowly) went downstairs to the large merchants’ room. It was a risk, he knew, but one he had to take. He couldn’t leave his people with nothing. He delivered his orders— “I thank you for your service to your King, but remember! We all serve the great City of Erebor, and that service must come first, before all else! There is a task to be completed, a task that cannot wait for one dwarf, King or no! I ask you to go forth, not with fear or doubt in your heart, but with purpose and greatness. For you know that your King, but more importantly, your Kingdom, still stands!”

His vision was clouding, and the pain from his shoulder was spreading through his body once more, but he kept it inside until he made it back to his room. First task done.

Tauriel and Ayanna were waiting for him, fuming.

“What were you thinking!?” Tauriel chided, “There are only so many times I can put you back together!”

“I’m sorry,” Thorin apologized. He meant it— he owed his life to his daughter-in-law, many times over now.

Kili strode in, holding Frodo, with Fili in his wake.

“Uncle! What are you doing up– do I even want to know!?”

But all Thorin felt was relief– finally! His family was together at last:

“Fili, the door– thank you, that’s a good lad,” Thorin said, urgently and quietly, “I am sorry, I cannot tell you everything, not here and not now. But none of you are safe, not while you are within my presence. You should leave with the merchants and leave me here–”

“Not a chance,” was Bilbo’s flat refusal, “We already discussed this. You are coming to The Shire with me.”

“With us,” Kili said.

“That attack was no accident,” Tauriel observed.

“No,” Bilbo and Thorin said together. Thorin felt a burning surge of guilt; he glanced over at his husband who looked just as guilty as he felt.

“No,” Bilbo repeated, “Thorin. What do you need?”

“I need to disappear. The sooner, the better.”

“Right,” Kili took charge, and Thorin found himself smiling in pride at his sister-son, “We ride tonight. Sorry, Tauriel, Ayanna, you’ll have to patch this one up again afterwards. Bilbo, you know these lands. Is there any safe place we could go? Family, friends?”

Bilbo looked thoughtful. Thorin swayed on the spot. The pain was getting to him now, his vision was clouding, the last thing he knew was his husband’s voice, coming to him from far off in the distance...

“Yes... I can find a place...”



## Chapter 18

The following days (or was it weeks?) passed in a foggy haze for Thorin. He was vaguely aware that he was sharing a horse with Tauriel; then at some point, they all spent several days in another inn before settling into a house (smial?) that Thorin only recognized as *not* Bag End. Through it all, he wove in and out of consciousness, everything blending together into one long nightmare of pain. The only thing he felt certain of was the inexplicable feeling that this was his last journey; somewhere deep inside, he knew that there was to be no return trip for him. But instead of sadness, it only brought him comfort. With or without him, Erebor would continue on for generations. But he only had one life to live with his family.

At some point, the pain lessened and he found himself finally able to succumb to sleep, a real, restful sleep. And then he opened his eyes to find himself in a strange bed, in a strange room, with a familiar face at his side.

“Hey,” Bilbo smiled, stroking back his husband’s hair, “How are you doing?”

“This isn’t Bag End,” Thorin finally spoke what his foggy brain had long suspected but his voice hadn’t yet been able to articulate.

“No,” Bilbo replied, “We’re in Crickhollow.”

“What?”

“Just outside of Buckland,” Bilbo explained, “I bought a house here.”

“Wait, what!? What’s wrong with Bag End?”

“My cousin is living there! I can’t just walk in and say ‘Oh, hello, Dora, I know I said you could live in my house but I’d like it back now, so please go live somewhere else!’ Besides, I’d been thinking about it all year anyway. This way, when Frodo gets older, if he ever wants to spend more time here, in The Shire, he has a place to stay...”

“How did you just *buy* a house!?”

“Like I said, I’d wanted to anyway.”

“And you just *happened* to find one up for sale overnight!?”

“It’s been more than one night you know... and I’d been thinking about it for ages, I’d asked Hamfast to keep an eye out when Frodo and I left last spring, so while you were all staying at the inn, I went over to his place and he said there was one up for sale over in Buckland. So I paid in full and here we are.”

“Paid in full, wait, with *what* !?”

“One fourteenth share, remember?”

*Oh. Right.*

“I can’t believe you just *bought* a house .”

“Well, technically, it’s a smial...”

“Still! What are you going to do with it!?”

“Have you rest in it, for starters.”

“You are unbelievable.”

“So are you,” Bilbo kissed his husband’s forehead.

“So *what* was wrong with Bag End again...?”

“First of all, I’ve already said, my cousin is living there and managing the properties, I couldn’t very well just up and change my mind without so much as a warning. Or show up out of nowhere with this whole circus at the door, which brings me to my next point that discretion would be practically impossible if an elf, two dwarves, two dwelves, and two hobbits just paraded through all of Hobbiton and took up house at Bag End.”

“Where are they? Where’s Frodo?”

“Frodo’s with Kili, they’re all outside, playing in the garden... it’s safe... secure... we were lucky to find this place, it’s been empty for some time, but everyone’s been pitching in to get it liveable again...”

“Why go through all this effort?”

Bilbo gave his husband a rather pointed look.

“You’re not going anywhere anytime soon. You... you do know that, right? Do you have any idea just how *lucky* you are to be alive at all???”

The burning pain returned, not in his shoulder (that was always burning), but the agonizing feeling of guilt for what he was putting his family through.

“It was something I had wanted to do anyway,” Bilbo reiterated. “And you said you need to disappear... well... I... I do too...”

They had finally reached the inevitable part of the conversation that Thorin had been both dreading and somehow strangely looking forward to... *What had Bilbo been hiding all these years? Was it really so bad? What...?*

“Ghivashel...” Thorin reached up and stroked his husband’s cheek with his fingers, “You said you would tell me when we were alone...”

Bilbo looked torn.

“I can go first,” Thorin offered quietly. They promised to share their secrets, had they not? What good could come of continuing to keep these things hidden from each other?

“No, no,” Bilbo said quietly, “I need to start. If I don’t, I’m afraid I won’t ever... You see... I found something.”

Bilbo looked like he wanted to say more, but didn’t.

“What did you find?” Thorin asked gently.

Silence. But Thorin knew his husband. Bilbo wasn’t being difficult on purpose. He tried again:

“Can you tell me when you found it?”

“A lifetime ago,” Bilbo whispered, “Back... when we first met...”

*Okay. These are the right kinds of questions.*

“Where did you find it?”

“In... in the goblin tunnels... when we all got separated...”

“I see...” Thorin had no idea what it could possibly be.

“I didn’t steal it, if that’s what you’re thinking!” Bilbo said suddenly, bordering on defensive, accusatory...

“I would never think that of you,” Thorin replied gently, “I know you too well, my love...”

“I found something, something... precious,” Bilbo said finally, “Something... magic.” The last word was barely a whisper. “I didn’t tell you at first because I didn’t tell anyone. There was no need to... we were all busy just trying to survive. And then... then everything changed...”

*I fell in love with you. You fell in love with me.*

Well. Thorin had felt it the moment he laid eyes on Bilbo, all those years ago, when he entered Bag End for the first time. The hobbit ignited a spark inside him that he didn’t even know existed. He wasn’t sure if Bilbo felt it then too, even to this day— he wasn’t sure he wanted to know anymore. But that spark wasn’t love, not yet. Love takes time to grow into what it is...

“Everything changed,” Thorin agreed, giving his husband a soft smile. “The best changes I could ever hope for...”

“And I didn’t tell you... all these years... and now... now... I— I’m so, so, sorry...” Bilbo looked trapped again, like he was being torn apart from within. Thorin reached up and took his husband’s cheek in his hand, turning Bilbo’s face ever so slightly.

“Hey, amralime, my love, look at me,” Thorin encouraged, “There’s nothing you can say that would make me love you any less. Whenever you are ready to share, I am ready to hear, okay? And then we will fix it. Together. Like we always do. Alright?”

Bilbo nodded, he closed his eyes, and when he opened them, he wore a look of steadfast determination, looking at his husband as if it were the only thing holding him together.

“I’m so sorry, I’ve been selfish all these years, and I fear it’s been hurting you all this time and now I’m paying the price for what I’ve done! You cannot wear gold because it hurts you... and I cannot wear gold because I am around you all the time. And yet, here I am, too selfish to give it up! For what I found... it’s a piece of *gold*. Magic gold... I used to keep it in my pocket, with me, but then I stopped when I saw how it was affecting you... so I hid it away, which seemed to help... But what I should have done... I should have brought it back here, to The Shire, far away from you. But I couldn’t bring myself to part with it. Even knowing that you shouldn’t be living so close to a piece of gold, magic gold nonetheless... Please... please don’t... please... I’m so sorry Thorin... please don’t... leave me...”

Bilbo looked away at last, crushed by guilt and pain and a million other things. But Thorin simply felt relief. Now he knew. And he suspected there was more.

“Ghivashel... I would never leave you. You’ve done nothing wrong, there was no need to share at the time, and I don’t need to know every one of your secrets. You’re my husband. I trust you. But I am glad you told me.”

“There’s more...” Bilbo whispered.

“I know.”

“Gandalf... Being Gandalf, he figured it out ages ago. And then last fall, he cautioned me to be careful with it, and I know I should have left it at home, but I always travel with it because I don’t like leaving it behind, it makes me worry... I worry about leaving the gold alone with you. And it feels, I don’t know, it feels better to travel with it, it feels like it belongs in my pocket. But then Gandalf ran into us on the road, he asked if it was safe and I patted my pocket, and I knew it was a mistake just by the look on his face. ‘There are many like it, but only One that is being hunted, and its pursuers will not differentiate between those who carry one of many and those who carry the One,’ he said, ‘Keep it hidden.’ So I decided I would leave it in The Shire, something I should have done years ago but could never bring myself to go through with... it would be safe here, nobody cares for such things, and it would be far away... from you...”

Thorin nodded, not entirely sure what to say.

“But then we were attacked on the road, you know what they were doing, right!? They made straight for the treasury cart, they were looking for it. Well, they were looking for the One. But they have no way of knowing which is the One and which is just another magic ring.”

*Ah!! So it’s a ring. A gold ring. A magic ring. That... explains a lot. And that’s the Enemy’s first task. Find his missing Ring? Wasn’t that all just a legend?*

But Thorin suspected Bilbo had let those last words slip, and decided not to draw attention to it.

“My love. What do you need?”

“I need to keep it hidden,” Bilbo said, “Nobody knows exactly how many were made, at least, that’s what Gandalf said. There is only One that is being pursued, but they will hunt down everybody in possession of any of them in their search for the One...”

“You need to disappear...”

Bilbo looked at his husband with sad eyes.

“And so do I,” Thorin said at last. He launched into an explanation of Gandalf’s Prophecy; the Enemy’s hunt to find and destroy the Line of Durin. And while he was talking, Thorin realized that the wizard had been right.

Fate is a tricky thing, indeed. For all paths had been leading them here— they had followed blindly, taking the next step in the only direction they could, until they ended in this spot, in this moment...

The King of Erebor and his Consort Under the Mountain were clear targets that stood out in the sun and glowed in the dark. But perhaps Bilbo and Thorin of Crickhollow were not.

## Chapter 19

Thorin kept his decision to himself. He wasn't even sure he had made a decision at all— it felt more like accepting an inevitable fate rather than choosing between options.

For Bilbo had been right. Thorin wasn't going to go anywhere for a while, and a return trip to Erebor this year was looking less and less likely with each passing breath. Dwarves may be a hardy folk and elves may be Middle Earth's most skilled healers, but at the end of the day, Thorin was incredibly lucky to be alive at all. Someone had seen fit to keep his soul on this earth, and he had no intention of wasting his final days. A lifetime ago, he would have stubbornly returned to his Kingdom, and if he didn't make it back, he would have died trying and gone down in a fit of honor and glory. But that was then and this was now. Now, he had his family at his side.

Crickhollow, it turned out, was a lovely little cottage surrounded by a high hedge and trees on the edge of the Old Forest. It had been owned by the Brandybuck family, who were generally more progressive and accepting than their kin living across the river and therefore still mostly on good terms with Bilbo. He'd made a good offer, with Frodo toddling around underfoot, and pointed out not-so-subtly how nice it would be for Frodo to be able to spend time with his Brandybuck family once more. Bilbo walked away victorious from the whole affair— twenty years as Erebor's Consort meant no hobbit stood a chance against him in negotiations now.

Kili and his family spent a good amount of time exploring the Old Forest and beyond, bringing back news and information on the surrounding lands. They had met a group of Dunedain Rangers tasked with patrolling the borders of the Shire and its outskirts, a job that everyone found Ayanna and Fili far too eager to volunteer for.

So Thorin found himself with one task and one task only: To heal. Surrounded by his family, safe and loved, all that was asked of him was to rest. It was a luxury.

An infuriatingly boring luxury.

The most frustrating part was that his legs and right arm were completely fine. He *should* be able to help his husband fix up their new house. He *should* be able to run after his son, play with him and scoop him up in his good arm. But he could do none of these things right now, and it was driving him mad. Despite having everything he needed in front of him, despite *knowing* in his brain that he should be grateful and thankful and happy, he couldn't help the horrible feeling creeping in from the edges— the feeling of being *useless* .

He tried to push it away, burying it deep inside along with his guilt. But it was a double edged sword, a never ending spiral. The more he tried to make himself feel all the things he knew he should be feeling, the guiltier he felt for being unable to feel anything at all.

Eventually, he found he didn't have it in him to fight anymore and simply succumbed to it. His shoulder ached and every movement sent pain radiating from it. He lay for long hours staring at the ceiling and wondering how it all came to this— he had everything he'd ever

asked for and more, and yet here he was, still unable to find joy. He lived his life always searching for *the next thing*, knowing that *the next thing* would bring him fulfillment at last. When I reclaim my kingdom. When I marry my love. When we have a child. When my family is safe.

And now here he was, at the very last thing. There were to be no more next things for him, this he knew and accepted. He wasn't dying, not anymore, Tauriel and Ayanna (and perhaps Mahal?) had seen to that. But his journeying days were done— ready or not, this was to be his final chapter. He should be enjoying these moments. So why couldn't he?

And it was here, in the darkness, that his son found him.

“Go? Hi Go. Hi hi. Up. I come up,” Frodo's chirpy voice floated up from the side of the bed. And before Throin could do anything, his hanai son had climbed up and sat himself down. Thorin wrapped his right arm around his boy, worried about him leaning back and falling off.

“Hello, Frodo,” Thorin said softly, turning his head.

“I taw a bird!” Frodo announced, “Big bird! Back bird.”

“Another big, black bird?”

“Yep. And and and I made. Tum-ting. For you.”

“You made me something?”

“Yep. Aaaaall a-self.”

“All by yourself? Really?” Thorin found himself smiling— the first one in days.

“Yep. You tay. I get,” Frodo climbed down and disappeared, coming back moments later with something in his hand. Bread. Thorin chuckled to himself. *Hobbits*.

“You made this by yourself?” Thorin pushed himself up with his right arm, ignoring the radiating pain from his left shoulder. Some things were worth the pain.

“Yep,” Frodo said, and Thorin felt his face burst into a smile, a real genuine smile. Frodo looked proud of himself.

“Did Bilbo help?”

“Bo? Nope. Yep,” Frodo replied, now trying to climb up onto the bed with a loaf of bread in his hands. Thorin laughed to himself and helped his son up. Frodo handed him the bread.

“Eat! Go. You eat now. Yum yum,” Frodo said.

“This looks delicious, are you sure you made this all by yourself?” Thorin asked, feeling more alive than he had in days.

“Yep.”

Thorin took a bite.

Dwarves are craftsmen, putting their heart and soul into their creations. Thorin had always assumed this was a feature unique just to dwarves, but being married to Bilbo for twenty years forced him to rethink this. For he could tell his husband's cooking, especially his baking. It took a while to figure it out— at first, he'd wondered if Bilbo was putting some special ingredient in, but over time, he came to realize it was the same phenomenon that had him able to recognize Kili's work in the forge and Bifur's woodwork. Bilbo was a craftsman in his own right, putting his heart and soul into his creations.

But this was different. Thorin recognized his husband's baking, he would know it anywhere, and this was something else entirely... This... this was his son's creation. Made for him. He could taste it, he could *feel* it.

"...Go...?" Frodo's little voice asked, uncertain.

Thorin felt the wetness on his cheeks before he registered what was happening— tears. *Tears of joy.*

Finally, a feeling.

"Thank you, Frodo," Thorin scooped his son in close, kissing his soft dark curls and holding his little boy as tight as he could. "This is, without a doubt, the best thing I have ever eaten!"

By all logical reasoning, it wasn't. It was a little dense and a little dry. But, regardless, it was still the best thing he'd ever eaten. Because Frodo made it for him.

From the doorway, Bilbo watched, a knowing smile on his face.



## Chapter 20

It was a slow process, but Thorin gradually began to feel like himself again. It was the second time the world he knew had been ripped out from under his feet, leaving him alone in the darkness. But this time was different:

It was the little things– Frodo bringing Thorin the wildflowers he'd picked outside with Bilbo. Kili taking Frodo for walks, going over the Khuzdul words for everything they could find– tree, rock, bird, sun, sky. The birthday cake Frodo made (with Bilbo's help), covered in sticky sweet icing and the first strawberries of the season. And Bilbo– Bilbo relentlessly dressing his husband's wound, staying up with him long into the night, helping him bathe, dress, eat...

Some days were better than others; there were times when Thorin found himself barely able to accomplish even the simplest of tasks, all but paralyzed by the pain radiating from his left shoulder. And it was on one of these days that Kili and his family stayed inside, keeping him company while Bilbo and Frodo ran errands in Hobbiton. Ayanna and Fili were begging for more stories– it was almost as if they were children again– and Kili was holding his wife on the armchair looking way too pleased about something. If he had been able to move, Thorin would have been far happier, but Kili's family had an infectious joy about them and he couldn't help smiling despite the pain.

The door burst open and Frodo marched in, making an announcement:

“A bird! A bird! I taw a bird! Big back bird! I taw it, I did, I did! Hi bird! Come bird, come!”

Everyone laughed and smiled at his toddler antics, but then the room stood still as an ancient raven flew in behind Frodo.

Röac glided to a stop by Frodo's feet, looking up at the little boy with a knowing expression in his eyes.

“Hi bird! Hi! Hi! I have a bird!”

Bilbo came in last, arms full of groceries. Fili got up to help his uncle, but Thorin and Kili were frozen. Erebor's Ravens were only able to find direct descendants of Durin. Even Bilbo, after twenty years of marriage to Thorin, was not able to summon a Raven, let alone be found by one.

Röac glided to Thorin's bedside and held out his leg. Thorin started to get up– the pain was overwhelming– but Kili rushed over to untie the scroll, leaving Thorin feeling a frustrating combination of gratitude towards his nephew and disappointment towards himself.

“Here,” Kili said, handing it over, “It's for you.”

Thorin took it. He didn't dare read it yet. There was only one person it could be from...

*And so it begins. Here ends the Reign of Thorin II, King Under the Mountain.*

Kili noticed the look in his uncle's eyes; he picked Frodo off the floor and planted a kiss on his cheek...

"Hello little brother! What say you and I go outside, maybe find out if Röac brought any friends with him? Come on Ayanna, Fili, you've been inside long enough!" He gave Bilbo a wink over his shoulder, kissed his wife, and ushered everyone outside, including Röac. And Thorin was left alone with Bilbo.

*Cousin-*

*We heard the worst. How are you faring? Thorin III and I are both in Erebor now. Rest assured, the City is prospering, you've set the system up well. We even have a dwarf tasked with keeping your husband's infernal plantlife alive. So far, so good. We await your return.*

*-Dain*

Thorin felt a cool and comforting hand on his. He hadn't told anyone, not even Bilbo... How exactly does a King retire? Usually one is King until death. He couldn't think of any Dwarven Kings who left the throne like this... injured, half a world away, unable and unwilling to return...

But when had his rule ever followed the conventional way of doing anything??

He'd spent most of his time as King ruling a Kingdom that didn't exist. He married an outsider, after an arduous courtship that snubbed tradition left, right, and center. His hair had been cut— he would never forget that night— cut so short that anyone else would have been exiled and scorned immediately. He'd announced his only heir's abdication to the Throne. And yet, his people loved him regardless. Could he ask one more thing of them?

"Hey," Bilbo said softly, "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," Thorin said, beyond tears— instead, he felt hollow. Empty. "And everything." He showed his husband the letter.

"There is no return for me," Thorin finally said quietly. "You know. I know. Everyone knows." It was the unspoken truth, lingering in the space between all of them, hanging in the air in plain sight.

Bilbo's face crumpled; he held onto his husband's hand and bowed his head, tears falling freely.

"No, no... love... You... we'll be able to go back next summer. You'll spend the year healing, and then we can return. You... you'll see..."

"Hey, amralime, no, look at me," Thorin said. "It's okay, it'll be okay..."

"Thorin... I... I can't... I... I've lived a lifetime here, punished for being... me. And then I met you, and I lived among your people, and those were the best years of my life... free to

love you and become your husband... Thorin... do you really understand what you're getting into by staying here?"

"No," Thorin admitted. He'd never understood hobbits' strange and limited views on marriage. "But I do know that we would never survive the trip back to Erebor. Even if Kili's family came with us... and I couldn't ask that of them, anyway. And we'd be traveling with Frodo... You and I are both targets, targets that will be hunted and killed the moment we step out beyond these borders into unguarded territory."

"Do you know what it's like to be forced to love behind closed doors?" Bilbo whispered.

"No," Thorin admitted again, "But I know that I will love you anywhere. Behind closed doors. Out in the open fields. In the center of the marketplace. In the closet. I don't care. Wherever I can love you, I will love you."

"And the things they will say to Frodo..."

"We will teach him to let the words roll off his back," Thorin reassured, "He has both of us to help him. He is a child of two worlds, my love. He will be facing hardship wherever he goes, and he will have to learn regardless of where we live. But it is these children who grow up to become the most extraordinary people."

Bilbo's tears started again, and Thorin pushed himself up to a sitting position despite his husband's protests. He gathered his hobbit in his arms (well, his arm) and held him close, whispering reassurances and kissing him and stroking his hair... He understood, to some extent, what Bilbo must be feeling. He'd spent a lifetime living among Men, a shamed and exiled King. The last thing he wanted in this life was to return to their cities and live that life once more.

"If you really don't want to stay, we don't have to," Thorin said softly. "We can go back to Erebor next spring."

"No," Bilbo choked through his tears, "You're right. What choice do we have? I'm so sorry, I shouldn't—I should just be grateful that you're alive at all to even have this conversation, and I am, I truly am! I just... never thought I'd return... here..."

"I love you," Thorin said, his own tears starting now, "I love you, and I love Frodo, and I love our family, and we are together. And that's what matters most."

"That's what matters most," Bilbo agreed.

How long they stayed like that, they couldn't tell. But it felt like a lifetime. After all they had been through together, here they were, back in the place where it all started and back in the place Bilbo had always maintained that he didn't want to end up in ever again.

"We'll take it one day at a time," Thorin said softly.

Bilbo nodded. And Thorin suddenly realized he had one more favor to ask of his husband...

“Do... I’m so sorry, my love, do you think you could write...? This time? I don't... I'm sorry...”

“What? Oh, yes, yes, of course, you shouldn’t even have had to ask, I’m sorry, I should have offered sooner... What would you like me to say to Dain?”

Bilbo got up to fetch parchment and ink, but not before Thorin caught a glimpse of his husband’s eyes... He knew, Bilbo knew...

*There is no return trip for us. This is our final adventure. But we will do it together, and it will be wonderful because of that.*

## Chapter 21

Spring had become summer, and Thorin couldn't stand being cooped up inside any longer. He took Frodo out for long walks through the countryside and into the forest. Frodo was a good walking partner for him— they both moved slowly and stopped to rest often, but it suited them. Thorin talked to his hanai son in Khuzdul, and it filled his heart to hear Frodo's chirpy little voice answering back in his native tongue.

Kili and his family were spending more time with the Dunedain Rangers, patrolling the far borders of the surrounding lands and doing what they did best— having adventures, fighting orcs, and looking out for one another.

Summer folded into autumn, and Bilbo took Frodo out nearly every day, visiting this farm and that market, returning with more and more food to preserve and save for winter. Thorin was moving about with considerably more ease; he had accepted that his left shoulder would never be the same, but the pain was retreating into a dull ache and he could finally use both arms again.

And it was a good thing, for he had never had so much time before! No Erebor. No meetings, no Counselors, no negotiations, no budgets. Just... his family.

He started cooking again. Granted, Bilbo was better at it, but Thorin was determined to have his hanai son eat— and be able to prepare— Dwarven food. Frodo, being a hobbit, was a natural in the kitchen and Thorin spent many happy afternoons showing his son how to make the different stews. Bilbo even managed to round up enough apples for Thorin to show his family how to make the Dwarven cider they were all so fond of, and Thorin found it oddly satisfying to teach his husband something involving cooking.

The weather turned colder, and with it came the return of Kili's family. Together, they endured the snows, laughing and telling stories, playing chess and other games, drinking cider and eating something crunchy and delicious that Bilbo called popcorn. Tauriel, Ayanna, and Fili taught Frodo Elven songs and poetry; Kili and Thorin talked to him in Khuzdul, and Bilbo kept everyone so well-fed that Thorin wondered if there would be anything left for spring.

All in all, it was a cross-cultural, metropolitan hodge-podge of different languages, foods, customs, and occasional arguments (absolutely NO shoes of any sort within a Smial!!) all confined within the little cottage while the snow fell and sparkled outside.

Tauriel left on occasion to go hunting and seek out the Dunedain Rangers for news of the outside world. Mostly, it was not good news— the Enemy was first and foremost searching relentlessly for that which he had lost, and countless orcs and other minions had been assigned the secondary task of hunting down the missing Son of Durin. But the Shire was far away and unassuming, the last place anyone would think of to accomplish either of these tasks, and they were all still safe for now.

Winters in The Shire were indeed far shorter and far less severe than those in Erebor, and before Thorin knew it, the snows were thinning and the nights less frigid. He still wasn't moving as quickly as he used to— he doubted now that he ever would— but he was able to carry his hanai son again, a feat he considered to be his greatest accomplishment to take place in recent months.

With the spring thaw came the departure of Kili and his family once more, out to join the Rangers in their border patrols. They were already talking of spending next winter in the wild with them; there was one in particular who took a good deal of liking to them and even spoke Elvish with Tauriel and the twins while Kili tried his best not to get annoyed.

So Thorin was alone with his husband and son once more. Together, they settled into their new routine— they may have been in Crickhollow for nearly a year, but this was the first time that it really felt like their new home. Bilbo showed his family how to prepare the earth for planting, and Thorin got to know his husband all over again in a new light once more. Sure, Bilbo had kept gardens in Erebor, but this was The Shire— this was where he belonged, and Thorin could tell. Bilbo was in his element here, creating life from what seemed to be his bare hands and nothing more. It was like falling in love with his husband for a third time.

In twenty-five years, Thorin had seen Bilbo in just about every situation imaginable. Fighting on the battlefield, the very definition of dwarven honor and glory. Their wedding day, shining bright in white and ivory, like the foreign pearls Erebor sometimes imported from faraway lands. Standing up to foreign dignitaries, arguing down the great Elvenking and trapping Thranduil in his own word games. And countless moments, alone, in the bedroom, in his arms...

Thorin was, however, entirely unprepared for the sight of his husband spending hours in the garden, on his knees, covered in dirt and sweat and who knows what else, his sandy curls now flecked with gray sticking to his head and neck, his eyes focused on the tasks on hand, lost in his own world...

It was driving him mad in the best possible way and Thorin was pleasantly surprised to discover that his husband could still do this to him, even after all these years— was there really any doubt though??? If anything, time had only made Bilbo more attractive. Love is strange that way. They hadn't been young to begin with when they first fell in love, and now there was really no question that they were both showing their age. And yet, here they were, Bilbo digging his way through another row, planting seeds as he went, and Thorin watching from his spot in the shade, envisioning all he would do to his husband the second Frodo went down for his nap...

It was, all in all, the best afternoon.

Their loving had taken many different forms over the years— from passionate discovery to tender love over the course of their courtship and marriage; to rushed and hushed in the quiet moments as they got used to sharing their once private lives with Frodo; and it now took a whole different form once more as they navigated Thorin's injured shoulder. At first, Bilbo had been nervous and Thorin had felt guilty, but in the end, it was just one more thing to discover about each other, not unlike their first tentative kisses all those years ago while they both recovered from their battle wounds.

The garden bloomed that spring, and so did their love.

Frodo turned three in the fall (and Bilbo 81!), leaving Thorin once again with the feeling that time was slipping away from between his fingers. Frodo was a baby no longer; he was drawing with sticks and singing songs and helping out around the house as best he could with his little hands.

True to their word, Kili and his family spent this winter with the Dunedain Rangers, stopping by occasionally to warm up and bring news. Thorin ceased his regular correspondences with Dain, not wanting to send Röac through the snows, but Erebor was doing fine. Deep inside he'd always known that with or without him, the Mountain would endure. Dain's final letter had encouraged him to stop worrying and just enjoy the winter with his family. He'd earned it.

And so he did. And then again. And again.

And before he knew it, Frodo was a little boy of five, almost six, years old.

## Chapter 22

Something was wrong with Frodo, but Thorin couldn't quite place what, although it seemed to be centered around his mouth.

He was eating funny, and at first Thorin thought he was trying to be troublesome, but he soon realized that it wasn't the case. But there was nothing wrong, at least nothing that Thorin could see— no bumps, bruises, cuts. For hobbit children bump, bruise, and bleed far more easily than dwarven ones do! Thorin felt he had spent every other moment of the last three years tending to the next thing. Frodo reminded him of Fili at this age, more cautious than Kili, yet he somehow managed to injure himself more than both his nephews put together.

But no, there was no noticeable injury on his boy's mouth.

Then Frodo started complaining: "I'm not hungry for apples," and "Bread is too hard, can I have soup again instead?"

Bilbo didn't seem to notice or care, which also had Thorin wondering. Of the two of them, Bilbo was the one who worried. Thorin worried too, but his worrying tended to take the form of action while Bilbo's tended to take the form of discussion. For whatever reason, it worked somehow and suited them all.

Thorin was telling Frodo a bedtime story, tucking him in while Bilbo cleaned up in the kitchen, when Frodo at last articulated what Thorin had been suspecting for weeks.

"Thorin? My mouth hurts."

"Does it now? Can you show me where?"

"Uh-huh," Frodo pointed to his lower front tooth. "It hurts when I eat."

Frodo took his finger and gave his tooth a nudge. It wiggled.

It was everything Thorin could do to remain calm— where were those seasoned diplomat and battlefield skills now!? Gone with his retirement it seemed! He forced himself to be reasonable, he racked his brain, thinking back to what they were doing three weeks ago; did Frodo fall and knock his tooth loose without anyone knowing about it??? It was the only thing he could think of. But why would Frodo not say anything until now? And Thorin was pretty sure he would remember a fall like that...

"Am I going to be okay?" Frodo asked, feeding off Thorin's reaction and starting to get worried. Thorin noticed and fixed his face into a reassuring smile.

"Of course! Porridge for breakfast and soup for lunch!" Thorin couldn't think of anything else to say. He didn't want to promise anything he couldn't deliver. He kissed his hanai son's forehead. "Thanks for telling me. Bilbo and I, we'll see what we can do to fix you up, okay? Think you can get some sleep?"



Frodo nodded, but still looked unsure. Thorin scooped up his hanai son and tucked him in the safety of his right arm. He sang to him softly in Khuzdul, the lullabies he had sung first to Fili and Kili, then to Ayanna and Little Fili. Frodo may be five and a half, but he was still Thorin's little boy.

Frodo's eyelids started to droop, and Thorin placed him gently back in bed.

"That took a while, everything okay?" Bilbo asked, wiping his hands on a towel as Thorin reentered the kitchen.

"Did Frodo fall and hit his mouth on something?"

"What!? No. What are you talking about?"

"I think it was a while ago, do you remember anything from two, three weeks ago?"

"What!?"

"He's knocked a tooth loose, but I have no idea how!"

Bilbo smiled. Thorin raised an eyebrow.

"Finally!" Bilbo said, sounding strangely relieved and happy, "I was wondering when it would start. He's been complaining for weeks!"

"Wait... What...?" Thorin felt like he was missing something. Bilbo gave him a curious look.

"Thorin..." Bilbo said slowly, "Do dwarven children... lose their baby teeth...?"

"WHAT!?" Thorin was well aware of the many subtle differences between dwarves and hobbits, but this just seemed absurd. "No! What do you mean, lose their baby teeth? What is a 'baby tooth,' and how is it different from a regular one? You have all your teeth, does this mean they grow back after they fall out...? Do they all fall out at once? How do you eat!? When...?"

Thorin trailed off. Bilbo was laughing.

"It's not funny!" Thorin insisted.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry for laughing," Bilbo said between laughs, "But you should hear yourself right now."

"You should hear *yourself* right now," Thorin grumbled.

"Okay, okay," Bilbo said, calming down, crying now from laughing, "Hobbits have two sets of teeth, a pair of little teeth as children and bigger teeth as grownups. When we are about five or six years old, the little teeth fall out and are replaced by the bigger ones. Why am I explaining this again, wait, what... how does it work for dwarves???"

“One set of teeth that grows with our children as they age?” Thorin said, as if it were incredibly obvious, “Just like every other body part. Are you going to tell me next that hobbits grow new fingers when they enter adulthood?”

Bilbo laughed again.

“No, just teeth. Dwarves... dwarven children really don’t lose their teeth???”

“Really,” Thorin said warily. “And hobbit children really *do* ???”

“Why would I make up something like that?”

“No idea,” Thorin said. “You’re sure Frodo will be okay?”

“Yes,” Bilbo rolled his eyes, “And you’d better get used to it, because he’ll be losing teeth for the next... five, six years?”

“SIX YEARS!?”

Bilbo rolled his eyes at his husband.

“How do you hobbits survive if your children have to spend six years of their childhood eating nothing but soup!?”

Bilbo laughed and pulled his husband close.

“No idea,” he whispered in Thorin’s ear.

They made sure Frodo was sound asleep before retreating to their own room and closing their door.

Thorin held his husband in his arms afterwards, like he did on so many other nights, tired but satisfied in every possible way.

“Thorin? Love?” Bilbo spoke up suddenly.

“Mmm?”

“Tomorrow I’m taking Frodo to the market. Want to come along?”

Thorin smiled to himself. He was proud of his husband, although Bilbo insisted he was simply getting too old to put any further effort into caring about such things anymore. Whatever the reason, though, one thing was clear: After a lifetime of self-consciousness and anxiety, Bilbo was at long last breathing easier when it came to his public relationship with Thorin around hobbits.

For his part, Thorin finally understood what Bilbo had been talking about all these years— the disapproving faces, the whispers, the mutterings. Hobbits were a collective people, and he could see how a lifetime of this would send his husband down into some dark places. But at the end of it all, he and Bilbo were on the last leg of their adventure together, and they

weren't going to let a bunch of backwards-minded hobbits get in the way of their happiness. They lived far enough from the center of things that their cottage was a safe and private space, and Thorin honestly felt that most hobbits were content to just ignore them—something that bothered Bilbo on occasion but Thorin was perfectly happy about.

“Sure,” Thorin kissed his husband’s curls, “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

## Chapter 23

Thorin enjoyed watching his family as they went about their daily lives.

Frodo was a boy now; he was starting to come out of his shell and play with the other hobbit children. Thorin had been wondering, since hobbits are such a collective people and dwarves tend to be individualist— so where would his hanai son end up? Someplace in the middle, it seemed. For Frodo could be quite content by himself, pursuing his own adventures or playing alone. But he would also just as happily join in with the other hobbit children, running and laughing as they played this game and that.

Bilbo was a master negotiator now, and Thorin couldn't help smiling to himself every time he went with his family to the market. The other hobbits didn't stand a chance, and usually had no idea what just hit them. Bilbo had been good at it before— as most hobbits are— but twenty years as Consort Under The Mountain meant that Bilbo had taken these skills to a whole other level. He could coerce Thranduil into signing trade agreements. Finagling over pumpkin seed prices now seemed like child's play in comparison, and Thorin was far too entertained watching his husband clearly enjoying himself by getting the last word in. Every. Single. Time.

And the weeks passed.

Frodo's tooth finally fell out. Thorin was a seasoned veteran warrior ex-King, and he had seen (and stomached) every injury possible, including a whole slew of *im* possible ones. But he was wholly unprepared to watch his hanai son pluck out a tooth from his little mouth and hold it up, victorious, in front of him. Thorin had witnessed literally everything, and yet for some reason, he found himself getting queasy at the sight of his little boy and his bloody tooth— mostly it was the nonchalant way in which Frodo just pulled it out of his own mouth...

Either he was getting soft in his retirement, or this whole business of losing baby teeth was just too much for him to handle. But Frodo was his boy, and Frodo was excited, so Thorin was excited right along with him. They brought the tooth over to Bilbo, who beamed at his nephew and explained what they would do next.

"Wait, we are going to do WHAT with it!?" Thorin whispered, incredulous, at his husband. Bilbo did not seem to find any of this strange whatsoever, which Thorin supposed was normal since all hobbits lost their teeth like this, but still! *Hobbits!*

"Come on Frodo," Bilbo took the tooth (he'd washed off the blood), and ushered them out into the garden. Bilbo and Frodo dug a hole, dropped the tooth in with a seed, and buried it again. Thorin eyed them both warily.

"Your tooth will give the seed the nutrients it needs to grow," Bilbo explained, "And a new one will grow in its place in your mouth!"

“So... the entire Shire is filled with buried teeth in the ground...!?” Thorin whispered as Frodo bounced off to go play.

“It’s like I said!” Bilbo laughed. “They become soil and nourish the plants!”

Thorin raised an eyebrow. In nearly thirty years, he was still managing to discover new things about hobbits.

The summer passed, and with it, a second tooth. Autumn came and went— another tooth.

Thorin taught his son (and his husband) Khuzdul letters; they spent the winter reading and writing. Kili and his family stopped by during the coldest month, and ended up staying for the rest of the season. Eventually, surrounded by everyone practicing, Tauriel gave in and started trying out the foreign Khuzdul words, but only under the condition that Kili attempt to read and write Elvish.

News of the outside world was more of the same— darkness was continuing to seep slowly out of Mordor. Rumor was that the Enemy had heard of Balin’s expedition to Moria; Thorin could only hope that his friend and mentor would be able to remain hidden and safe inside his mountain fortress. As for Erebor, it was now common knowledge that Dain was King Under the Mountain, and Thorin’s whereabouts— along with that of his mysterious son— remained unknown.

Spring came, and with it, the departure of Kili and his family once more. Ayanna had spent all winter talking about a Man she’d met, a young Ranger who was friends with Strider, and Thorin couldn’t help laughing at the way Kili clenched his fists when she said she couldn’t wait to see him again.

*They grow so fast.*

Another tooth, another season. Frodo was spending more time playing with his friends and cousins this summer. He may not remember much of his year in the Mountain, it was so long ago now, but Thorin could see it in his boy— the way he thought, the way he moved, the way he viewed the world and interacted with others... Whether he knew it or not, whether it turned out to be for better or for worse, one thing was clear: Frodo had been defined by that first year in Erebor.

Frodo's new teeth grew in (finally!) and with them passed another year.

Seven-year-old Frodo was now playing outside every day this summer. He spent long hours with his cousins, playing in the vast fields surrounding Buckland, coming home hot and sweaty and dirty and happy in the afternoons.

Except one day, he came home crying. He raced past Bilbo in the garden, into the house and into Thorin's arms.

"Hey, hey, what's all this? Are you hurt?" Thorin asked, surprised. This was unlike Frodo...

"No!" Frodo kept crying, burying his face in Thorin's shirt, clenching his little fists up in anger.

"What happened? Can you tell me?" Thorin asked.

"NO!"

"Frodo..." Thorin shifted his hanai son to his lap, "Hey... I can't help you if I don't know what happened."

Frodo sighed, still angry and upset.

"They were saying... they were teasing... I don't have a mother... or a father... they were... saying mean things... but... but... but when I said I *have* a father, I have a hanai father, they said that doesn't count because I call you Thorin not Father and I'm an orphan and nobody loves me..." Frodo turned and hid his face in Thorin's shirt once more.

"Oh... I see," Thorin pulled his son in closer. Frodo was getting bigger, but he was still so small in Thorin's embrace. "Who said?"

"EVERYONE!!!"

"Everyone?"

"Well... just... Hilda. And Milo..."

"That's what they were saying, is it?"

"Mmm-hmm," Frodo nodded, sniffing, starting to relax at the sound of Thorin's calming voice.

"Well, they just don't know any better, do they?"

"Hmm?"

"There's more than one way to have a son," Thorin said, "You know that, but it sounds like Hilda doesn't. And Milo."

"I'm your hanai son," Frodo hiccuped, crying again, his anger gradually being replaced by sadness, "They don't know what that is. They said I'm not really your son."

"Not everyone in this world thinks the same way," Thorin replied, "And it would be a horribly boring world if we were all the same! There are some who think there is only one way to have a family. But think of all they are missing out on! There is no limit on love, Frodo. That's the beauty of it! You can love and love and love, endlessly, and never run out! It is the one thing in this world that is truly endless. You can mine all the jewels out of a mountain, sow all the crops from the earth, and but you can never give away all the love in your heart. There is always more, if you know where to look for it."

Frodo had stopped crying, but still looked unconvinced.

“Okay, but what do I do if someone doesn't understand? Do I *have* to explain everything? Can I just... I mean, Bilbo is my Uncle and I don't remember my real father at all... if... if someone doesn't know... can I just... Can I just tell them that... that *you're* my father?”

Thorin felt his heart break and swell at the same time. There was a piece of him that clenched up in guilt— he would never want to disrespect Drogo's memory by taking away the title that was rightfully his. But Dwarven understandings of families were different from hobbits'. Could he be Frodo's hanai father among dwarves and his father among hobbits? *I'm sorry, Drogo. I know you are Frodo's father, and he knows too. We have not forgotten you, and I am grateful to you every day. I hope you can understand.*

“As long as that is what feels right to you, you can go ahead and tell them that. Not everyone thinks about family in the same way, and that's fine,” Thorin smiled. “But no matter what anyone says, there's really one thing that matters most.”

“What's that?”

“Uncle, Thorin, Father... any name you choose to give me, one or the other or all three or different names at different times... whatever you need me to be, that's what I'll be. And I'll always be. I love you and always will. Okay?”

“Okay. Always. Promise?”

“Promise. To the end of time.”

# Chapter 24

## Chapter Summary

Thought it was done at ch23, but decided it needed one more...

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Thorin was distracted for the rest of the evening— thoughts and questions buzzed through his mind, questions of hobbits and dwarves and children and family.

He had always been so sure before. He was a dwarf, through and through. Even living among Men, he had always been able to maintain his dwarven approach to his family. His boys were his children *and* his nephews. He was their Uncle *and* their hanai father. Nobody questioned the reasoning and the logic. They lived among Men, sure, but Fili and Kili had each other, and there were always plenty of dwarves around them, too. Dwarves who understood the dwarven definition of family.

But Frodo was different. Maybe if they were still living in Erebor, it wouldn't be an issue or even a topic of discussion. But they were living in the Shire, where hobbits have a very different understanding of family.

For dwarves, there is no difference between your hanai family and your blood family, no stigma or strings attached— they are all the same. But once Frodo came into his life, Thorin quickly learned that this was not a concept shared with the other cultures of their world. Including hobbits.

He was quiet through dinner, smiling at his son and doting on him, but wondering with a guilty conscience if he was somehow imposing on Drogo's territory as Frodo's father. It had been so easy with his nephews— Fili and Kili were his hanai children, and nobody gave it a second glance. But that was a relationship that didn't exist in the Shire— there wasn't even a translation for the word into Westron that he could use!

He tucked Frodo into bed, and Frodo whispered those beautiful words, the word that Thorin had selfishly longed to hear for six, almost seven years, but knew it was not his to hear, let alone his to take:

"Good night... Father," Frodo whispered as he kissed Thorin's cheek before snuggling into his blankets.

"Good night, Frodo... I love you," Thorin whispered back.

He left Frodo's room in a daze.



“Hey,” Bilbo took his hands and led him into the sitting room, “Something’s been bothering you all night. You okay?”

*Yes. And no. Never better. My heart is breaking. Why?*

“Frodo said the other children were teasing him,” Thorin ventured cautiously.

Bilbo looked sad, but understanding.

“As children do,” he said, “What happened?”

“They were making fun of his... our... family,” Thorin said, not really knowing how to go about having this conversation. *I’m sorry, Drogo, Primula. I truly am. I hope I am doing this right.*

Bilbo simply nodded:

“Our family is... unusual... in The Shire,” he said, “You and I know this. And as Frodo gets older, he will unfortunately learn this as well. What were they teasing him about? Us?”

“To some extent? They were teasing him for... not having parents. They could understand that you are his Uncle, that makes sense to hobbits... But they couldn’t understand that he is my hanai son. He said he tried to explain... but...”

“But that’s not something that exists here,” Bilbo said, “Thorin, I think... what... What do you want to do? As much as I want to believe that Frodo can go out and teach all of Hobbiton to broaden their minds when it comes to families, at the end of the day, he’s just a little boy. I think... I think you might have to make a choice, love. Who are you going to be to him?”

“Amralime... I... I can’t... I can’t be that selfish...or disrespectful...”

“I knew Drogo, and you did too,” Bilbo said softly, “He was my favorite cousin and a good friend... and a hobbit, not a dwarf. He would never want to deny you the title that you’ve earned. Hobbits have different customs and different understandings than dwarves, love, this goes both ways. The relationship you have with Frodo is one that doesn’t have an equivalent here. But you and I know both know what the closest translation would be. It would make things easier on Frodo, too, as he grows up.”

Thorin held his head in his hands. The world made so much more sense when he was a dwarf living among dwarves.

“It feels... I don’t know, it feels like I am betraying Drogo if I do this...”

“Drogo was a hobbit, love, not a dwarf,” Bilbo said patiently, taking his husband’s hands in his. “He understands how things are here. Frodo will need a father as he grows up, and we all know who that father is. It’s okay. You can take the title. Nobody is more deserving than you.”

## Chapter End Notes

If you're still here, thanks for sticking it out through part 2 <3

We're still not at the end yet, but thinking this might be a good time to let anyone off the ride who isn't feeling it because the last part will bring us to the opening of Fellowship which means we will have to say goodbye to Thorin (\*sob\*). It will have a happy (eventual) ending, though, because they deserve it

As always, thanks for reading <3

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