



Title: The Hospitality of Hobbits

Author: Jilly James

Fandoms: The Hobbit

Pairings: Thorin/Belladonna Took

Genre: Fantasy, Romance

Content Rating: PG

Warnings: AU, timelines fucked all to pieces (seriously).

Author Notes: For the purposes of this story, the Thain significantly outranks the Master of Buckland and the Mayor of Michel Delving. Buckland is already officially part of the Shire. Hobbit lifespan is approximately 200 years.

Beta Thanks: To the amazing Naelany, who is willing to take on even my forays into The Hobbit.

Word Count: ~20k

Summary: As Durin's Folk make their way from Dunland to the Blue Mountains in the wake of the battle of Azanulbizar, they find hobbits waiting for them with an offer of Hospitality. They accept without understanding exactly what Hospitality means to a hobbit, and the future is irrevocably altered.

Chapter One

Belladonna Took set down her pack and scrambled up the side of the rocky outcropping. It took several minutes of careful maneuvering to reach the top, but she finally settled on a flat rock facing northwest toward the Far Downs. She swung her feet idly, wishing she wasn't turning back toward Tuckborough so soon.

She had told her father, Gerontius Took, Thain of the Shire, that she would stay within the bounds of the Shire on this adventure, but in point of fact, she'd crossed the bounds yestereve. When she broke camp this morning, she should have turned her feet toward home, but instead had continued further south, skillfully managing to avoid any bounders.

Longing for adventure, Belladonna would rather continue south, but despite the fact that she was recently of age, she had promised her father. The farthest she'd been from home was Bree, and she desperately wished to one day visit Rivendell, and even go beyond the Misty Mountains.

Before her thoughts could become too melancholy, she caught the distant sound of horses approaching from the south. Keenly aware she was travelling alone, Belladonna shuffled back from the edge and lay on her stomach, keeping a careful eye on the horizon. Her pack wasn't visible from the road, so as long as she remained hidden, she wouldn't be discovered.

Quickly she determined the riders were two men travelling at a purposeful but not hurried pace. A couple of minutes passed before she was able to recognize the two as Rangers of her acquaintance. As she stood, she easily discerned when she had their attention and waved gaily.

Within moments, they halted their mounts at the base of the outcropping and peered up at her. "Well met, Miss Belladonna," Gannyn said with a roguish grin. She'd met Gannyn a number of times over the years and had always found him to be wonderfully pleasant. Her father thought him a bit strange. "*Oddly cheerful for a Dúnedain,*" he would say, as if good spirits in a Ranger warranted great suspicion.

"Hello, Gannyn! Greetings, Master Rorraent," she said politely to the elder Ranger who was more apt to scowl at her than ever smile.

"Does your father know you're beyond the bounds of the Shire?" Rorraent grumped at her.

Belladonna flushed a bit. Rorraent always took pains to remind her of their first meeting. She'd been a lass of but twenty when he'd come upon her on the road to Bree. After several minutes of questioning, he'd ignored her insistence that she be allowed to continue on her journey and

snatched her up and promptly taken her back to Tuckborough. Her father had been displeased with Belladonna for sneaking away, but since that fateful day, he'd been inordinately fond of Rorraent.

"Leave off," Gannyn answered before Belladonna could reply. "She's but a half day's walk from the bounds." Kindly, deep brown eyes peered up at her. "That said, you should point yourself back towards home, lass. Large caravans of dwarves will be passing through beginning next week. We're en route to give the news to your father and the bounders."

"Dwarves?" Belladonna asked eagerly. "Coming through here? For what purpose?"

Gannyn's lips quirked up at her enthusiasm. "Durin's Folk seeking a new home in the Blue Mountains."

She wasn't really sure who "*Durin's Folk*" were, but wondered why they'd need to seek a new home. Just as she was about to ask, Rorraent grouched, "If you're going to ask all manner of questions, come down from there!"

With a huff, she hurried down the rock face, grateful she always traveled in trousers. It was just like tall folk... couldn't bear to have to look up at someone. Gannyn had dismounted by the time she reached level ground, but Rorraent remained astride his horse.

Gannyn readily explained the history of the dwarves he called Durin's Folks; from how they'd lost their home to a dragon — a dragon! — to the six year long war waged by many dwarf clans against the orcs over the death of one called King Thrór. While the dwarves had finally won the war many months past during the great final battle at Azanulbizar, Durin's Folk had suffered heavy losses and were leaving their homes in Dunland. They feared ongoing reprisal from the orcs, and with their depleted populace, their current King was moving them to a hopefully safer location.

Belladonna's heart ached for these dwarves who had lost their home to a dragon and again to a war, and were now wandering in search of yet another home. And this new home was apparently an unknown. "They don't know what they will find when they reach Ered Luin? They don't know that it will be a suitable home for their children?" she asked aghast.

Gannyn shook his head, his eyes conveying a touch of sadness.

"Which matters not," Rorraent interjected. "The issue, Miss Took, is that you should turn yourself back toward the Shire. We need to discuss these matters with your father and work with the bounders and the Watch to ensure their passage is peaceful."

Belladonna narrowed her eyes in annoyance, but Rorraent just arched a brow. Then she offered him a pleasant smile. "You're quite correct, Master Rorraent, I should return home forthwith, for I too desire to speak with my father." She looked to Gannyn, "Might I impose upon you to convey me home? I would prefer to speak to my father as soon as can be managed." She truly loathed riding a horse, but she had made up her mind to tend to these dwarves and would not suffer any unneeded delays.

"Now, Belladonna, you simply must understand that we cannot be—"

"Father!" she interrupted, tiring of his insistence that they not become involved.

He had listened to everything the Rangers had said, had summoned her eldest brother Isengrim to take the Rangers to meet with the bounders and the Watch, and then had patiently listened to Belladonna's appeal to extend Hospitality.

He had then said, "*No*," which she stubbornly refused to accept. Her mother, Adamanta, had listened in silence, but had thus far said nothing. Both her father and mother had reacted oddly at the news that the dwarves had been ousted from their home by a dragon, but neither had offered to explain.

She decided to try a different tactic. She'd been relying on reason coupled with a dash of emotional manipulation, but that wasn't working! "Yavanna has blessed us greatly, and we have Hospitality in order to share that blessing with those who are in need."

"There are over a thousand of them," he retorted quickly.

"Which makes it all the worse! An entire people reduced to a mere thousand! The magic in hobbits exists for a reason! Yavanna would want us to care of the children of Aulë."

After she and her father had been locked in visual combat for several moments, her mother cleared her throat. "Excuse us for a moment, my dear, I'd like to speak with your father privately."

Belladonna threw up her hands and stomped out of her father's study. She headed to the largest kitchen to help with supper. Despite all the family around who were no doubt curious for gossip, the thundercloud that followed Belladonna kept everyone at bay. Though not angered easily, Belladonna's temper was rather frightful when stirred. Aunt Cinoic simply directed her to a heap of dough that required kneading and she worked out her frustration on hapless loaves of bread.

She had moved on to abusing scones when everyone in the smial was summoned to the great dining room. Belladonna stood in the back behind several of her younger cousins who were fidgeting with anticipation. Her father and mother waited for silence and then her father explained the situation the Rangers had come to report and the circumstances of the dwarves known as Durin's Folk. Meeting Belladonna's eyes directly, he then added, "We will be extending the dwarves Hospitality until their home in Belegost is prepared to our satisfaction."

Questions immediately came from every corner of the room, but Belladonna just whispered, "*Thank you,*" to her father, her Thain, even though he could not possibly hear.

He dipped his head in acknowledgement even as he quieted the room. "I will meet with the Master of Buckland and the Mayor of Michel Delving in two days. Bounders had been dispatched to summon them here, but our efforts must begin immediately if we are to be even slightly prepared for the dwarves' arrival. The Rangers report they are travelling in three groups a week apart. The first group of over three hundred will arrive in a little more than a week."

He paused and pinned Belladonna with a look. "My daughter, Belladonna, will be responsible for overseeing our efforts."

Belladonna's eyes opened wide even as the room erupted in more questions.

Oh, Yavanna help her!

Belladonna was completely and utterly exhausted and would be perfectly happy to never see another bit of ink or parchment for the rest of her years. For six days she had labored to coordinate the efforts of the Shire to prepare for the coming dwarves. It constantly niggled at her that the dwarves might not choose to accept the Hospitality, and then this would all be for naught.

The bulk of the early preparations were being managed in Tookland and the whole of the South Farthing. Today more than fifty hobbits had set off with supplies to set up camp near the bounds, south of Sackville. Belladonna, her father, the Rangers and a small contingent would journey further southeast to meet Durin's folk at the Greenway. Rorraent had confirmed that while most of the dwarves would travel toward the northwest, a small group would split off to travel north to Bree to gather additional provisions.

It would be a two-day journey by horse, and she was hopeful that they would intercept the dwarves in a timely fashion so they weren't forced to chase them about Breeland.

She consulted her notes again. Preparations were just beginning in East and North Farthing for the dwarves who would arrive later. The bounders seemed near ready to strangle Belladonna. She'd run them ragged, and they were even forced to travel by pony to facilitate faster communication. Which, naturally, made their dispositions quite sour when they came in with letters from the mayors.

To her surprise, most hobbits seemed quite enthused about extending Hospitality once again, even though it had been many years since they'd last done so, and never for quite such a large number. There were some naysayers, of course, but they seemed to be in the minority. Or were saddle sore bounders.

A cup of tea appeared in front of her and she blinked a few times before glancing up at her Aunt Cinoic. "Thank you, Aunt. I don't know what I'd do without you."

While her mother and father had been busy overseeing the preparations in Tookland, and reporting back to Belladonna, her Aunt had taken it upon herself to tend to Belladonna. She'd become quite insistent when Bella seemed to not be taking care of herself. Not that Belladonna was doing this without assistance. The entirety of the Took clan were rendering aid, but Aunt Cinoic had been her personal lifeline.

As she went to take a sip of the tea, she belatedly realized it was the sleep blend her Aunt preferred. She set it aside because she still had work to do.

Aunt Cinoic tutted her disapproval. "You've done as much as you can, my dear. Everyone else has long been abed and it's time for you to rest. You depart right after first breakfast, and pouring over your parchments won't change anything between now and then."

"What if this has all been in vain?" she asked, looking into her Aunt's wise eyes. Cinoic was her mother's elder sister, who had married a cousin of Gerontius', Perudoc, so both sisters became part of the Took family.

"It'll work itself out, child." She leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Belladonna's curly red hair. "I believe Yavanna herself guides you. There must be a reason she desires us to shelter over a thousand dwarves, and so we will follow her lead by following *you*. Now off to be with you. Morning will be here soon enough."

Thráin, son of Thrór, son of Dáin, King Under the Mountain, which he didn't actually *have*, was a giant pain in Belladonna's arse. She had stood attentively by her father through introductions

and explanations and then the yelling had begun. The bluster was so great with the two leaders that Belladonna feared they might actually blow each other over. She'd eventually just walked away and sat by the side of the road, watching them argue with one another.

King Thráin, whose countenance was made even more fearsome by a grievous eye wound, was suspicious of their motives. The more he aired his suspicions, the more defensive the Thain became. And by the Valar, could her father become stubborn when he was on the defensive. When the King demanded to know the *price* the hobbits would exact for their *kindness*, Belladonna winced and watched her father puff up indignantly. This would not be resolved easily or soon.

The caravan of dwarves was resting, but seemed on alert. For the most part they spoke amongst each other in a language she did not understand, though what she could hear in the common tongue were the occasional mutterings about wishing someone named Thorin were there. She longed to speed the dwarves, *dwarrows* as they preferred to be called, moving toward where they had provisions waiting, but King Thráin and her father had to first come to an accord.

Belladonna had more than a little difficulty determining ages, and in some cases even gender, but the group seemed light on males in their prime. It had taken her a few moments to absorb that this was likely the effect a six-year war takes on a people. The thought made her very sad. Though they were a proud people, Belladonna could practically feel the fatigue emanating from the dwarrows.

"Your Highness?" a feminine voice much deeper than any hobbit lass asked from her left.

Belladonna glanced up, then glanced around, but there was no one else in the vicinity the daughter of King Thráin could be addressing. "Umm... I'm not a princess," she said after a moment, then gestured for Princess Dís to join her.

The beautiful dwarf maiden with long dark hair, short beard and striking blue eyes took a seat. "Your father rules your lands, no?"

"Well, yes, but I think it's a bit different than what you mean."

"Would you not consider my father *Thain* of our people if we used your system of government?" she asked carefully.

"I, um... I suppose so." She glanced at the other female, who was *actually* a princess, and replied, "Hobbits just don't think of things in that manner. I'm not a princess like you."

"I see," she said vaguely. "May I ask why you desire to help my people?"

"It's a long held tradition of hobbits; to aid those in need, particularly those who travel or are without a home." She glanced away for a second, before continuing. "There's magic in the Shire because of hobbits; magic granted to us by Yavanna and it needs purpose."

"Granted to you by Yavanna?" The princess sat up a bit straighter. "Why by Yavanna?"

"We are the children of Yavanna," Belladonna responded easily.

"Mahal's beard," Princess Dí's muttered, rubbing at her forehead. "I'd always heard hobbits were the result of elves and men intermixing."

Belladonna scowled. "I should say not!" The very idea! While they typically kept their origins to themselves, they most certainly were not descended of *men*. And how two *tall* races could produce a hobbit was beyond reasoning.

"What magic is it that hobbits carry?" the princess asked carefully.

"Yavanna has graced us with the ability to bring life from the most barren earth. When you see the Shire you will understand. And Yavanna protects us, for despite how rich our fields, and how poorly equipped for war, our lands are secured with minimal of our numbers and some aid from the Dúnedain. It's almost as if our borders deter those who do not belong from entering with ill intent, or desiring to stay. That is, unless we extend Hospitality to them."

"You *never* have skirmishes on your borders or rogues and thieves on your roads?" she asked incredulously.

"Well, not *never*, but it's quite infrequent. Bree is our neighbor and they have a great many more issues."

Princess Dí's swiftly got to her feet. "Excuse me, I must speak with my father immediately."

The dwarf maid quickly went to her father, pulling him away for a private word in spite of his blustering protests. Belladonna followed at a more sedate pace, moving up between her father and Gannyn.

"And what is the meaning of this, daughter?" her father asked, relaxing a bit now that he was not arguing with the foreign King.

“I do not know. The princess asked a few simple questions, then desired immediate consult with her King.” After a brief pause, she offered softly, “You are being terribly stubborn.”

Gerontius stiffened briefly, then blew out a breath, turning to look at her more closely. “The King does not desire our Hospitality, Bella,” he said gently, laying a hand on her shoulder.

“I know,” she replied quietly, feeling incredibly bereft that she would not be taking these dwarves back to the Shire.

After several minutes of conversation in their dwarvish language, the princess, the King and his two elderly advisors returned. Much to Belladonna’s shock, King Thráin was smiling with his arms spread wide. “We are pleased to form an alliance with the hobbits of the Shire,” King Thráin thundered even as he clasped Gerontius’ by the shoulders... and then slammed their foreheads together!

“Papa!” Belladonna screamed, reverting to the informal in her fright as her father dropped like a stone.

Belladonna glowered again at the dwarf King, who unsubtly nudged his pony further away even as he winced and rubbed his knee again. The knee Belladonna had soundly kicked after her father had been dropped by a dwarvish head-butt. Rorraent had ridden ahead with her father to the camp at their southern border. He was merely dazed, but the long slow progress of the caravan would do him no good.

While she was happy that their Hospitality had been accepted and that she would be able to bring Durin’s Folk to the Shire, she wished it hadn’t come at the cost of her father’s head!

“I do apologize again for my father,” the princess murmured as she stepped close to Belladonna again. Both had chosen to walk rather than ride, Belladonna happily offering her pony to an elderly dwarrowdam — as she had recently learned female dwarfs were called.

Bella glanced at the striking dwarf maiden, who had already apologized once. “It’s... well, I should apologize as well.” She huffed a little. “No doubt my father will chastise me terribly for doing something so unseemly as to kick a King.”

The princess laughed. “Oh, you should not apologize! My father will have great respect for you for defending your father, even though no affront was intended. We dwarrows are quite hard headed and that is an... affectionate gesture. He meant honor to your father by greeting him thusly.”

“Well we hobbits are quite soft headed!” She paused to consider that the statement sounded a bit odd, but it was too late to alter her choice of words.

Lips twitching, Princess Díś replied, “Yes, but hard of foot, no?”

Belladonna giggled then clapped her hand over her mouth, hoping no one heard. Eventually she managed to reply, “Indeed. Our feet are quite tough, the bones more solid in our feet than any other part of our body. My Aunt Cinoic once kicked a man from Bree who was rather inappropriate with her. He later said he’d rather be kicked by a mule than a hobbit.”

The princess openly laughed. “I look forward to learning more about your people, Miss Took.” She stumbled a bit at the address, and Belladonna could tell she was struggling not to address her as royalty.

“Please call me Belladonna, or even Bella. There are dozens of hobbit lasses who would respond to ‘Miss Took,’ and we hobbits are not much for formality.”

The princess gave her an odd look but nodded. “Thank you, Belladonna. I’d be honored if you would call me Díś.”

Belladonna smiled brightly and the two fell into easy conversation. She learned that Díś had an older brother named Thorin, and there was a brief mention of a brother Frerin, but it was apparent he’d been lost in battle, so she didn’t press on that issue. Prince Thorin would arrive with the third caravan, hopefully within a fortnight. She could tell from the way Díś spoke that she was close with her brother.

She also learned, to her dismay, that dwarves only ate three times per day. *Three!* She refused to have any reaction to the news, but the other hobbits travelling with her, though few in number, shot her looks ranging from upset to annoyance. The annoyance primarily from the bounders who were already vexed with her.

When Díś asked about Belladonna’s family, the princess stumbled a bit in her shock at Bella’s answer. “You have ten siblings?”

“Living, yes,” Belladonna clarified. “The eldest daughter passed before my birth. There are seven older brothers, then myself, two younger sisters and a younger brother.”

Díś blinked at her a few times. “Your parents were truly blessed... twelve children. Is this number typical for a hobbit?”

“Oh no. Two or three would be more common, I suppose. Some clans have more or less. For instance, for the Bagginses it’s not uncommon for there to be only one faunt, while for the Tooks a half dozen or more would not be out of the ordinary.”

“I gather there are rather a lot of Tooks, then?” Dís asked with a merry twinkle in her eyes.

“Entirely too many,” Belladonna retorted on a laugh. “Each more foolish than the last.”

“Yourself included?”

“Oh, yes. Quite foolish, my father would say, and with a horrible desire for adventure. Though we do tend to settle as we become older. I don’t think my father will rest well until all of his children have come of age.”

Dís looked thoughtful for a moment. “Pardon my forwardness, but I have rarely encountered a hobbit, and while I could see your father is of a more mature age, of the seven others here, I am unable to determine how old you are. Are you all of age? His two advisors at least appear older, though I cannot be certain.”

Belladonna smiled a bit. “It’s as difficult for me with you dwarves. And, yes, we are all adults. I’m the youngest of our group by many years having recently turned thirty-four.”

Dís actually stopped walking briefly, gaping momentarily. “I... Thirty-four is *adult* for a hobbit?”

“Thirty-three is the coming of age marker. You seem quite surprised... may I inquire what constitutes *of age* for a dwarf?”

“The first coming of age is at forty, and full adulthood is achieved at sixty-five.” After a moment, Dís offered, “I am recently turned forty.”

Belladonna considered that for a moment. Dís was of age but not fully adult by dwarf standards, yet she was several years older than Bella. “And yet you’ve already lived through a dragon and a war,” she murmured eventually. “I rather think *adult* is not always marked by the number of years we’ve lived.” She felt painfully young next to the dwarf princess, who had been through so much in her short life.

Dís gave Bella a searching look, then simply nodded her head. They continued on in comfortable silence before the topic eventually shifted again.

Eventually Belladonna found the nerve to ask, “Are you able to reveal why your father’s view changed on our offer of Hospitality?”

Nodding, Dís replied, "It's rather simple. You are Yavanna's children, and we are the children of Mahal, who you no doubt call Aulë. In a way, we are already kin. I cannot say all dwarrows would feel the same, but it is true for Durin's Folk. That was enough for my father."

Belladonna sensed there was more to the tale, but Dís' answer had been quite definite and she felt further questions would be unwelcome. For whatever the reason, the dwarves had changed their mind, and for that she was grateful. Perhaps she would learn more in the days to come.

By the time they stopped for the night, Belladonna felt the beginnings of a friendship bond forming with the dwarven princess. She'd never had a bond develop with a non-hobbit; not that there were many non-hobbits of her acquaintance. She called Gannyn friend, but her heart had never reached out to him the way it did to Dís. She entertained the notion of trying to stop it, but her heart had served her well in her life, and she would not obstruct it now.

She assisted with supper, offering up the contents of her pack to the communal meal and ate with the dwarves. It seemed they would arrive at the hobbit camp by midday on the morrow. While the dwarves had done well with the journey, as had Belladonna and the four bounders, the two hobbits her father had brought along as senior advisors were looking rather done in and ate silently by the campfire.

And though she didn't apologize for kicking the King, she did bring him his supper as a peace offering.

Chapter Two

As they crested the small hill, Dís halted in shock at the sight of what looked like a small marketplace set back from the road. Belladonna had said they were close to where the hobbits had made their camp, but she hadn't expected quite so *much*.

She glanced at her father who had also paused, staring at the mass of halflings in surprise. He had still been favoring his knee this morning, but had insisted on walking most of the remaining journey. It was well into lunch hour but they had pressed on knowing they were close to the hobbit camp. Dís was happy to conserve their supplies for as long as possible.

Belladonna gave her an inquisitive look and arched a brow. "Are you well?"

"Yes; I was just uncertain what to expect."

"It's only a start," Belladonna offered. "It will be better when we reach home."

"I meant that this is *more* than I expected," she clarified.

Belladonna frowned, but only said, "Come, my father will need to invite you formally to accept our Hospitality."

Dís began walking again, the rest of the dwarrows taking their cue from her. She was still trying to understand the enigma that was Belladonna Took. The hobbit princess — and Dís refused to accept that anything else was correct — was lovely with her smooth skin and curly red hair, was gregarious and charming, and much more accepting than any being Dís had encountered in her years on Middle Earth. She was uncertain why Belladonna had been so inspired to render aid to their people, but she was grateful. It would be difficult for her people to accept graciously, so Dís felt the diplomacy of the situation fell to her.

As they moved toward the hobbit camp, there was a moment where Dís felt a distinct desire to turn back. It was peculiar, and she thought on what Belladonna had revealed about their lands seeming to deter people from wanting to be there. She began to believe there was actual magic at play, though she was uncertain if it was the land or the hobbits themselves.

Thain Took and the Ranger named Rorraent met them as they approached the camp. Dís winced at the large bruise on the hobbit's forehead, though he seemed well enough. Belladonna crossed to stand with her father, who whispered something in her ear, eliciting a look of surprise, followed by a soft conversation.

After a moment it was Belladonna who stepped forward and said, “King Thráin, on behalf of my father, Thain Gerontius Took, and the hobbits of the Shire, I bid you and your people welcome. We extend to you our Hospitality for as long as you have need of it. May Yavanna bless you and your kin.”

Dís shivered as the inclination to keep travelling suddenly vanished and her spirits felt lighter than they had in a many years. She was stunned at the confirmation that there was actual magic at play. Because she was standing right next to her father, she heard his breath catch. She also heard the murmurs of the dwarrows behind them.

“I, Thráin, son of Thrór, son of Dáin, of the line of Durin, accept your hospitality and thank you,” her father intoned formally.

Much to Dís’ surprise, there was another wash of what she thought was magic and she felt oddly safe and at peace in a way she hadn’t experienced since she was a young dwarfling. She had the sudden clarity of thought that there was more happening than she had heretofore realized; though the time to solve that riddle was not now.

As soon as the words were spoken, the hobbits seemed to lose their reserve, and they began moving amongst the dwarrows. Dís had been unaware that the hobbits even had been reserved until they no longer were. Whatever magic was at play had affected them all.

Dís wanted to discuss these observations with Belladonna, but the hobbit lass was suddenly the center of a furor of activity and directing hobbits and dwarrows like a military commander on the battlefield. It was really rather awe-inspiring.

The feast, and there was no other adequate term for the amount of foods the hobbits had prepared, was astoundingly good, especially after weeks of travel. Her father was in unusually good spirits, better than long before her grandfather had been killed. She wasn’t certain if it was the magic of the Shire, the food or some other cause.

Through the course of the afternoon, Dís checked on the health and wellbeing of her kin as they spent the remainder of the day at rest. She knew they’d journey again soon and was grateful for the respite. The three pregnant dwarrowdams with them were her first concern, and all seemed to be well.

In the late afternoon, Belladonna pulled Dís aside to review some sort of elaborate plans. She asked question after question, but the more questions, the more Dís was confused. She had assumed the hobbits were offering supplies and a camp within their grounds, and to ease their journey. And yet there were questions about housing.

Finally, Dí's asked, "Bella, how long do you anticipate we will be in the Shire?"

Belladonna looked up at her with those big clear green eyes filled with confusion. "Until your new home is ready, of course. It would not be proper Hospitality if you left any earlier."

Dí's froze in shock. "I may have misunderstood what hospitality means to a hobbit. I assumed we were discussing meals and a safe location for our camp, time to rest and possibly provisions." She hadn't even been sure of the last.

"Oh. Well, no. I mean, yes, certainly those things. But we would extend those courtesies to any traveler welcomed in our lands. That's not Hospitality," Belladonna replied, hands clenched tightly.

"And what exactly is it?"

"Until you find a new home and the preparations are complete, the Shire is your home," Belladonna finally responded.

Dí's could only stare in mute shock.

Two weeks later, Dí's was once again at the Greenway to meet the third and final caravan of her people; the group led by Thorin. Rorraent and Gannyn had agreed to meet the second wave and escort them to the Shire where the extension of Hospitality was once again extended. The two Rangers had carried a letter from her father, which was sufficient for the leader selected for the second caravan. A simple letter would not suffice for her brother.

There were no hobbits with her on this trip, though the Rangers once again accompanied her along with five dwarven warriors. She was grateful that Gannyn and Rorraent were willing to see all the dwarves safely to the Shire, though she rather thought they were both accommodating more for the sake of the hobbits than the dwarves. Regardless of the reason, she was happy for their aid.

When the last group finally appeared, Thorin was easy for her to recognize, even from a distance. From a young age, he'd had a regal bearing, and that had only increased over years of hardship and war. While her father was most assuredly King, their people looked more and more to Thorin. Their father was at his best when he had a clear purpose, but he became obsessed when his attentions were not firmly engaged. She was concerned about how idle time in the Shire might affect his disposition. Thorin's presence not only reassured her, it reassured all of Durin's Folk.

Rorraent had ridden ahead to let Thorin know they were here, but she knew the moment Thorin spotted her. He mounted a pony and rode toward her at a brisk pace. He slid out of the saddle quickly and immediately pulled her into a firm hug. "Namad, you should be halfway to Belegost... why are you here? What has happened?"

"I am well, Thorin; we are *all* well. Come, I have brought extra provisions for your meal. Let everyone rest and then we will talk privately."

It was near an hour before they could walk away a bit and speak privately. It took quite some time to relay what had occurred up the point where Hospitality was finally explained.

Thorin was staring in shock. "Shall I infer from your presence that our people are still with these halflings? Why would father delay our journey for some misunderstood notion of courteous behavior?"

Dís sighed. "It's not as simple as just leaving Thorin. There is real magic involved." At Thorin's skeptical look, she added, "You'll understand when you arrive, however, the issue is adad was eventually persuaded that we needed to remain. He desires your counsel as to how we should proceed. Thain Took has suggested that a scouting party eventually explore Ered Luin and then a plan made to make ready our homes." She hesitated a moment. "I... the Thain's initial plan would take two years, Thorin! I do not know what to make of it."

Thorin stared at her, obviously stunned. "These halflings would—"

She held up a hand to stop his question. "It would be best if you cease calling them halflings before it becomes habit. They are quite displeased by it. Adad persisted until Belladonna eventually threatened to kick him in his other knee."

Thorin scoffed. "And what a fearsome threat from a hobbit lass to a great dwarf warrior such as our father."

Dís glared at her brother. "It *is* a rather fearsome threat. Hobbits are quite willing to kick when vexed and it's frightful enough that adad has ceased using the term '*halfling*.' Please act like the crown prince that you are and do not unnecessarily vex our hosts."

"I care not for hobbit sensibilities, Namad. I only care that it seems that more than two-thirds of our people are in the Shire. Do they have such space?"

"Yes and no. They have much land and we may set up a permanent camp if that is our wish, but the notion of living outdoors does seem to horrify our hosts. At present all the unwed adult

males are in a camp near Tuckborough, which is the location of the Thain's family home. We are staying with the Thain himself, and the rest of our people have slowly been moving throughout the Shire. There seem to be many empty hobbit holes that have been surrendered to dwarf families, or multiple couples. Others are living with hobbits with an abundance of space. Quite a few have gone further away to somewhere called Brandy Hall."

Thorin was making a face she knew well. He could be just as annoying and stubborn as their father when he wished it. "Hobbits live in holes?"

"Oh, Nadad, you are a source of great pain," she said with a glare. "They carve their homes out of the side of hills. They are as much holes as our home in Erebor was a cave. It is the least important portion of anything I've said. Their homes are charming and the hobbits even more so. That is not the issue."

"I do not understand your conundrum, Dís. If we wish to leave, we will leave. I won't have our people scattered about farmland, living in holes and reliant upon charity."

Dís smacked Thorin on the side of his head. "Would you think for a moment! These are the children of Yavanna. I felt the blessing of Yavanna when we accepted their Hospitality." At his look of consternation, she huffed. "Think, Thorin! What instructions were we left by Durin I?"

A look of dawning realization graced his features. "To always honor the children of Yavanna. But that was the ents!"

"No," she quickly replied, "that's what was *assumed*, because none were aware of hobbits' connection to Yavanna. I had to remind adad as well, and it is why he is being uncharacteristically cautious in his dealings with the Thain. It is also why our people are so easily led about the Shire. Not only are they grateful for the feeling of safety and an overabundance of food, but many feel as if Mahal himself has led us here. The Shire feels blessed, Thorin."

At the return of his skeptical look, she could only sigh. "You will see soon enough. We will be at the bounds in two days. And if you persist in being an arse, I look forward to the expression on your face when the little hobbit princess kicks *you!*"

Dís knew she was taking absurd enjoyment in Thorin's reactions to her explanations about life with Hobbits. Balin and Dwalin had joined them as the caravan continued toward the Shire. She had always been close with Balin as there was a mere three years between them, Balin being thirty-seven and three years her junior. It saddened her that he had been old enough to fight in

the battle of Azanulbizar and had been present to see his father, Fundin, fall under an orc's blade; just as Thorin had seen Frerin fall.

Her heart clenched painfully at the thought of Frerin. He had been but forty-three when he died, also too young for war. Dwalin had also been in the battle at a mere twenty-seven, and had been the one to retrieve the bodies of both Frerin and Fundin.

Even though the three were making odd faces and muttering about pushy hobbits, it lightened her spirits to see some expression other than the crushing grief they had all been enduring. The difficulties of post-war life and preparing to move Durin's Folk to Belegost had left little time to properly mourn, but the weight of the many deaths had sat heavy on them all.

"I do not believe you, Namadith. No one can eat seven times per day," Thorin said with a faint scowl at his perception that she was teasing him.

"I confess that it is sometimes six. If the day has been particularly hectic, they skip dinner and have supper early," Dís replied with a grin.

"They are able to feed themselves thusly and tend to more than a thousand dwarrows?" he asked with a frown.

"You will see soon enough, Thorin. They truly live in a bountiful land and are... *gifted* in the arts of farming and bringing life from the earth." She could tell by his expression that he was thinking what she often had... that it was astonishing that such a rich land had been left untouched by those of greater might.

It was one of the many reasons why Dís was sure Belladonna's assessment about the Shire having magic that almost repelled travellers was entirely accurate. She too had desired to immediately leave before they'd been made welcome. And while Dís was leery of magic, she wasn't prepared to dismiss it as Thorin seemed wont to do.

When they finally neared the bounds of the Shire, Thorin became increasingly reluctant to continue, which Dís had been expecting. She had asked several of her dwarrows how they had felt before the extension of Hospitality, and she noticed that those of a more warrior mindset were the most averse to entering the Shire. Not that all dwarrows were not warrior minded to some degree, but those most battle-hardened had the most troubles and felt the most relief when Yavanna's blessing was given. She expected she'd have had more trouble with her father if he were not forced to still take the pain tonic for the damage sustained to his eye in the last battle.

“Dís, we should not be here,” Thorin said lowly. She noticed Dwalin was just as tense as Thorin, but quiet, and that Balin was more at ease.

She sighed quietly before replying, “Thorin, you must come. If for no other reason than to at least persuade adad to continue on the journey. We cannot avoid going to the Shire. Accept the hobbit princess’s Hospitality and you’ll see adad in two days.

Thorin grumbled his assent and they finally crested the slight rise in the road that would allow them to view the hobbit camp. Her brother paused to stare. “What is this?” The few dwarves at the Shire camp were waving and calling out greetings to the last to arrive.

“They are preparing dinner for us.” She threaded her arm through her brother’s and pulled him forward. “Come along. Everyone will be tense until the Hospitality has been extended and accepted.” She’d noticed the hobbits always became very reserved until the agreement had been exchanged and then they were very engaging. She believed whatever magic was at work affected them as much as outsiders, keeping them leery of travelers.

She, Thorin, Balin, and a few of the older warriors reached the camp and she could see Isengrim and Belladonna headed their way, Belladonna giving an enthusiastic wave. Thain Took had insisted that Belladonna continue to extend the Hospitality, which was significant in some way, but no one had explained and Dís had not pushed for an explanation. She would think that traditionally it would be the Thain or his heir, and Belladonna had clearly expected that, but the Thain had made a different choice.

Isengrim was a bit of an enigma to Dís. He did not live within the Took family home they referred to as the Great Smials, an enormous multi-level underground home she had yet to see all of. Instead, he lived a mile away in a smaller smial with his husband Degrin. While still fairly light-hearted compared to the average dwarf, he was more serious than any of his siblings. She thought it rather made sense as he was heir to the Thain.

She had found it encouraging that hobbits accepted same-sex pairings, as not all beings were so open minded. Dwarf males outnumbered females to such a degree that same-sex couples were quite common, and it would have been a source of discomfort if the hobbits proved to be intolerant.

As the pair of hobbits neared, Dís noticed Belladonna’s eyes widening as she first laid eyes on Thorin. She bit back a smile. While dwarrows were unlikely to swoon over her brother, she had seen more than one human lass do so, and apparently hobbit lasses were much the same.

She made introductions for the arriving dwarrows and Isengrim introduced the two hobbits. Thorin was oddly still and quiet beside her.

After a moment of silence where Belladonna and Thorin appeared to be staring at one another, Isengrim nudged his sister, who immediately said. "Oh, yes, of course. My apologies, ah, yes..." She paused and cleared her throat and her normal composure seemed to settle around her. "Prince Thorin, on behalf of my father, Thain Gerontius Took, and the hobbits of the Shire, I bid you and your people welcome. We extend to you our Hospitality for as long as you have need of it. May Yavanna bless you and your kin. Welcome home," she added softly at the end.

It was the first time Dís had heard the addition of, "*Welcome home*," to the formal invitation, and her brows lifted in surprise.

She felt Thorin react to the magic of the hobbits' invitation because she was standing right next to him, but he kept his visible outward reaction minimal. Then it was Dís' turn to nudge her brother when he failed to respond. "I, Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór of the line of Durin, accept your hospitality," he finally said tersely.

Belladonna's expression shuttered slightly, but she smiled and nodded.

Dís resisted the urge to roll her eyes at her brother. Before anything else could be said, the forty or so hobbits descended on the caravan of dwarrows, bringing them into the camp and offering them food and all other manner of aid.

She waited until they were alone again before turning her attention back to her brother. But his attention was firmly fixed on watching Belladonna chattering away at Balin and Dwalin as she herded them further into camp.

Not sure what had her brother's attention, she looked back at him just in time to watch him raise his hand and rub the center of his chest. He was so focused on watching the hobbit princess, he didn't seem to be aware of his actions.

With a gasp, Dís reached out and grabbed her brother's hand away from his chest, tugging him back away from the crowd of people even more. His expression turned stony but she was having none of that. She let her hands rest on his shoulders. "Are you sure?" she said intently but as quiet as possible.

His expression was fixed. "I don't know what—"

"Thorin!" she interrupted. "When have you ever been able to hide anything from me? Now, are you sure?"

After a long, nearly frigid silence, he finally relented and nodded. "As soon as our eyes met, I was sure."

Dís blew out a breath and closed her eyes for a second. She had heard of those who knew their One on sight, but had never seen it herself. For most it was a more gradual realization. "Oh, Nadad, you never take the easy path. What will you do?"

He stiffened and tried to pull away, but Dís kept hold. "Stop it, Thorin. I'll happily rip your braids out to keep you here until you talk to me."

"There is nothing to be *done*, Dís," he ground out. "I have nothing; no kingdom, no home, nothing to offer," he replied woodenly.

"You are an idiot," she snapped. "You cannot marry until you are sixty-five, and you do not know what might change in the next eleven years, Nadad. Don't be an arse now and ruin any chance you might have."

He said nothing, so she gave him a little shake. "Thorin, promise me."

Finally he relented and gave a faint nod. "I will be polite to the little princess, Namadith. But tell no one of this."

"I will be silent on the matter, but do not expect me to not remark on it if you are being a bigger idiot than usual."

His lips eventually quirked faintly in amusement. "I can always depend on you."

"Always," she replied.

They gently knocked foreheads, then returned to the camp even as Dís began plotting how to persuade Thorin to act in his own best interest and not the best interest of his pride.

Chapter Three

Belladonna opened another post from Waymeet with an update on how the dwarrows were settling in, but found it hard to concentrate on her work. It had been a month since the first dwarves had arrived in the Shire, two weeks since the last of them crossed the bounds, and Belladonna was working just as hard as she had before they arrived.

Any thought of life returning to normal vanished when her father left her in charge of keeping everything running smoothly. And since she needed a counterpart amongst the dwarves, King Thráin had assigned the task to Dís. As a result, the two worked together almost daily to ensure that everyone was cared for and supplies were distributed properly. There were many hobbits and dwarrows assisting them, but they were the central organization and it was a *lot* of work.

But the work wasn't why Belladonna couldn't concentrate. No, that could solely be laid at the feet of the most aggravating dwarf of them all; the bloody crown prince, Thorin Oakenshield. From the moment she had seen him, she had known he was her *heart mate*. It was awkward to be sure, he was a prince after all, a *dwarf* prince, and she was a just a hobbit, but if Yavanna had made her heart to join with his, it couldn't be *wrong*, could it?

She wondered if it were a mistake... maybe dwarves didn't have heart mates? She bit at her lower lip absently as she contemplated it for a moment. Could she be wrong? The easiest way to know would be to talk to Thorin, but he was so busy avoiding her that it was impossible! While she respected his need to see to the care and safety of his people, he was gone nearly every day, and when he was in the smial, as soon as she entered a room, he found reason to leave it!

"What troubles you, Bella?" Dís asked.

"Oh, nothing. I was just reading..." she trailed off, not sure what she had been reading. She glanced at the parchment in time for Dís to pluck it from her hands and examine it herself.

"Hmm. Yes. Two paragraphs about how the smithy in Waymeet is now open and how impressive is the quality of dwarven metal work. I can see how that would captivate the attention for nearly half the hour." Dís made a quick note on her parchment, then set the letter from Waymeet in the *completed* stack. "What matter really preoccupies you, Bella?"

"Do dwarrows have a destined mate?" she blurted out, then immediately flushed "I'm sorry. That was very forward of me."

Dís' eyebrows shot up, but she then waved away Belladonna's concern. "We are friends, and you may ask me anything. I may not always be able to answer, but please do not trouble yourself with worry simply over the query." She got to her feet and closed the door to the study, a bit of discretion Belladonna greatly appreciated.

After a moment, Dís replied, "Dwarrows have what we call our *One*. Not every dwarf is fortunate enough to find their One, but it is a sacred thing to us." She gave Belladonna a look that seemed speculative. "And hobbits?"

Belladonna looked intently at her hands for a moment. "Not all hobbits have a heart mate, though many do."

"A heart mate?" Dís prompted.

"A hobbit may form many types of bonds in their life... do you know what I mean by bonds? Do dwarves have those?" Belladonna asked, wondering if this was another difference between them.

Dís frowned a bit and seemed to be thinking it over. "I take it you mean something more than the bond warriors might share, or something of that nature?"

Belladonna thought that over for several seconds. "I do not know. Warrior bonds are rarely formed for hobbits." It certainly wasn't something with which Belladonna had personal experience. "Bonds are an extension of our connection to Yavanna and the earth and each other."

"How do you mean?" Dís looked genuinely curious.

"Our hearts reach out to some and not to others. I'm not certain how to explain why the bonds form or how they form. Family bonds form easily and young in life, but we don't form bonds with all of our family members. And though I have many friends, I have a friendship bond with only a few," Bella replied earnestly.

Dís blinked a few times and then finally asked, "These bonds you describe are different than what we experience. A hobbit's bond sounds very much facilitated by magic, where a dwarf's bonds are forged through common experience." Her eyes narrowed a bit before she asked, "May I ask if you have a bond with me?"

Belladonna felt her face warm, but nodded. "My heart reached for you very quickly."

Nodding, Dís looked thoughtful. "A friendship bond?"

“Yes.” After a moment of silence, Bella prompted, “Does this trouble you?”

Dís cocked her head to the side and considered for a second, and Bella’s stomach felt tied in knots. “No, it does not trouble me. It perhaps explains some things. But tell me what a heart mate is?”

“Oh, yes...” Bella paused to order her thoughts, relieved that Dís wasn’t upset about the friendship bond. “The most precious bond to a hobbit is the heart mate bond. I think it’s like what you call your *One*. The one who completes us, and that our heart opens fully to. Some don’t find their heart mate, and may never feel a longing to either.” She shrugged one shoulder. “It’s not spoken of much except in private.”

“Do your people wed when they don’t have a heart mate?” Dís asked, a note of curiosity in her voice.

“Yes. It’s common. Spouses who are not heart mates do form other bonds to one another. It all works out eventually,” she said vaguely. Bonds were incredibly complex, but also quite simple in that they happened where they would and could not be forced.

“And why did you ask me about destined mates, Bella?” Dís prompted gently.

Belladonna opened her mouth to try to come up with some sort of response, but just closed it again, uncertain what to say.

“Bella... have you found your heart mate?”

Face flaming again, she nodded. “I was certain, but he does not act like a heart mate, so now I do not know.”

“Is it a dwarf?” Dís prompted again.

“Yes! And he seems to hate me,” Belladonna blurted out.

Dís sighed and leaned back in her chair. “He doesn’t hate you.”

“He avoids me,” Bella insisted.

“I cannot argue with you on that, but it isn’t because he hates you,” Dís insisted.

“Heart mates don’t avoid each other. It’s precious to a hobbit, and not something we avoid like mashed turnips.” Belladonna recognized that she sounded pouty, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself. Thorin had been avoiding her, of this she had no doubt.

Dís’ lips twitched with amusement. “Our *Ones* are precious to us as well. A dwarf would have a good reason if they were avoiding their *One*. Or, at the least, what they *thought* was a good reason,” she seemed to mumble the last.”

Belladonna suddenly realized they hadn’t mentioned a name. “I didn’t mention his name.”

“No, you didn’t,” Dís agreed.

“Hmm.” Belladonna understood that talking about who it was would put Dís in a difficult position. “So how do I keep him from running from me at every opportunity?”

“You may have to be a bit sly...”

Much to Belladonna’s frustration, it was an additional month before she got her chance.

The dwarves had been quite adamant about contributing to life in the Shire as much as possible. Belladonna would sooner rip out her garden completely than ever let another dwarf near it, so growing food was *not* possible for the dwarrows amongst them. But dwarves had many skills that could be employed about the Shire, and it was in that direction that the answer had been found.

Thorin had personally overseen setting up several smithies throughout the shire to handle the items they typically had to obtain in Bree, as well as help with repairs and heavy work. Then her own father had gotten in her way by telling Thráin and Thorin about suspected mineral deposits in the Far Downs. The Thain gave permission for mining provided the location was kept secret and only the most trusted dwarrows were shown. Thráin also had to give assurances that no one would ever reveal that anything had ever been mined in the Shire. Durin’s Folk would have to claim whatever they mined had been theirs before the Shire.

The magic of Yavanna protected their lands, but they feared the avarice that came to big folk over gems and precious metals would overcome that fragile magic. Thráin said dwarrows would not be immune to that avarice either, so assured them that it would be kept secret.

Of course Thorin had to *personally* oversee that as well. Her father had been right and they had found a deposit of garnets. Belladonna had seen the reddish rocks on the ground when she’d

journeyed to the Far Downs, but it had never occurred to her they had value. And to a hobbit, they didn't.

Garnets weren't so valuable that they'd cause undue attention, but were valuable enough when cut properly to be a source of income for preparing the dwarves' new home. Fortunately, the dwarves had the skills necessary to cut the gems.

Between smithies and the secret mining, Thorin had barely been in the Took family smial, other than to occasionally rest or restock provisions, for the last month. But he had returned yestereve and Belladonna had a plan for getting Thorin alone!

She made sure she was late to first breakfast, when she was usually early to arrive and one of the first to leave. First breakfast was the dwarves only meal before lunch, so her only opportunity to corner Thorin.

He was just sitting down when she arrived, no doubt thinking she'd already gone. He froze briefly at the sight of her, but turned his attention quickly to Balin.

Belladonna took a seat as close as possible, across the table from him and two chairs down next to her younger brother Isengar. She greeted everyone then smiled sweetly at Thorin who wasn't paying her any mind. "Good morning, Prince Thorin, welcome home. How did you find Michel Delving?"

Thorin swallowed thickly and stared at her silently. When she just smiled brightly and raised an inquisitive brow, he finally replied woodenly, "The journey was... good."

"Excellent! By chance would you be travelling to Tookbank today?"

His eyes widened slightly and he quickly said. "No. I must be off to, uh, Hobbiton! Yes, I'm going to Hobbiton today." Thorin had been in Hobbiton just the week prior, but Belladonna kept smiling serenely.

"Wonderful!" Aunt Cinoic said right on cue. "Belladonna is journeying to Hobbiton today, and must be back before nightfall. Thank you for accompanying her!" Belladonna loved Aunt Cinoic to the depths of her being. It had taken very little to persuade her aunt to aid her in cornering Thorin. The prince was fortunate Cinoic Took was willing to take the subtle route. She'd said she would be perfectly happy to teach him not to avoid her niece!

"Perfect solution, Cinoic," her father chimed in from the end of the table. "Belladonna is wont to get up to trouble in Hobbiton. I'm sure the prince will be a good influence. And Belladonna is

the perfect guide,” her father added, a subtle reference to Thorin’s propensity for becoming lost his early days in the Shire.

Belladonna wanted to scowl at her father, but he was helping her, so she didn’t respond.

Aunt Cinoic got to her feet. “Belladonna, I’ll pack additional provisions so there will be enough for the two of you. I’ll see you two off from the gate in half an hour.”

“Thank you, Auntie,” Belladonna replied, accepting a kiss to the cheek from her aunt.

Thorin began eating his breakfast in a very aggressive manner. Half of her relatives still in the dining room were happily oblivious, but the other half were trying to contain their amusement. Her own father was almost laughing into his tea. Her mother was keeping King Thráin occupied, for which she was grateful. The King had more than once inadvertently foiled Bella’s attempts to get Thorin to stay in one place for five minutes.

Belladonna just smirked and turned her attention to her own food. She was certain Thorin Oakenshield was her heart mate, and before this day was done, she would know why he was so desperate to avoid her.

Dís appeared a few moments later and asked Balin for assistance, which was Dís’ subtle way of aiding Belladonna. Balin was the most likely person for Thorin to induce to journey with them, and if Dís kept him occupied, then Thorin would be well and truly caught.

Belladonna had always been happy to follow the whims of her feet, but she had begun to appreciate the joys of a good plan.

Belladonna had decided this was the worst idea she’d ever had, and Thorin Oakenshield was the most stubborn dwarf alive. They’d been walking for over an hour and he still wouldn’t really *talk* to her. Even when courtesy demanded that he give a verbal response, it was terse, and he insisted on calling her ‘*your highness*,’ despite the fact that she had repeatedly asked him not to!

To add to her aggravation, her pack was unbalanced, which was exactly why she always packed her own. With a huff, she didn’t bother to say anything to the annoying dwarf, just stopped and slid her rucksack off her shoulders. Before she could even open it, Thorin had walked back, plucked it up and began walking away.

“Hey! Give me that!” She trotted after him, grabbing the pack and tugging. He was already carrying his own pack, plus his sword and other various items dwarrows seemed to be unable to walk five miles without.

“It’s obviously too heavy for you,” he retorted, not letting go.

“It most assuredly is not!” she insisted and gave another tug.

“You’ve been struggling with it the entire hour, it’s too heavy! You’ll carry a lighter pack in the future,” he decreed arrogantly.

Eyes narrowed in anger, Belladonna gave a firm yank on one of the straps. “It is not too heavy! I’ll have you know that I’ve travelled all over the Shire and beyond with a much heavier pack. I do not require your aid, you arrogant dwarf!”

He tried to lift it away, but she held on determinedly. “It’s too much for you!”

“Don’t you tell me what’s too much for me! Now give me that!” she hollered tugging with all her might but barely managing to move the dwarf. She didn’t even come up to his shoulder and he had incredible strength as well.

“Leave it be, halfling!” Thorin snapped.

“*Halfling?! I am not half of anything, you overbearing arse!*” She pulled the kick enough that she wouldn’t do him serious harm, but when her foot connected with his leg, even through his ridiculous dwarvish boots, he yelped and abruptly released the pack Belladonna was still yanking on. She went flying back to land in the dirt, the pack soundly thumping her in the chest and catching her sharply in the face.

Air rushed out of her at the impact, and all she could do was try to breathe and be grateful she never wore skirts on her journeys about the Shire. Having her skirts around her ears would be a blow to her dignity she simply could not manage on top of trying to cope with her ridiculous heart mate. And she now had no doubts about that, even if she wasn’t sure why Yavanna would plague her so.

She managed to push the offending item off her face just as Thorin appeared above her, scowl firmly in place but what she thought was concern in his eyes. He held out a hand, but she ignored it, moving to a seated position even as she cradled her cheek, which was throbbing.

A surprisingly gentle hand touched her chin, tilting her face up. Thorin was crouched down in front of her. “You are injured.”

She jerked her chin away from his touch. "I am *fine*." Pulling her pack close so it was between them, she began going through it. "My pack is unbalanced. Aunt Cinoic is wonderful but she does not care much for being away from home and has no experience with adventuring. She does not put thought to how to properly balance it."

Keenly aware of Thorin watching her, she adjusted the food and supplies in her rucksack, then got to her feet, determinedly ignoring the offered hand. She started down the road again, but then wheeled back around and stomped up to the stubborn royal arse. "You may not like me," she said, poking him in the chest, "but you need to find a way to be civil to me." She turned again and began walking away.

The damn dwarf walked beside her in silence. She was pleased to see he slightly favored the leg she had kicked. They traveled a ways before he offered, "I do not dislike you."

"And yet you run from every room I enter." She snorted her disbelief.

"Your highness—"

"And that's another thing!" she interrupted. "I can assure you that I am fully aware of your disregard for me personally, but you disregard all hobbits when you insist on calling me that! We do not recognize the Thain as a king, and therefore I am not a princess. I won't waste my breath by asking you after today, but if you regard any of us in even the smallest measure, you will cease!"

She finally glanced over at him and saw that he looked a little startled. He eventually replied, "I am simply trying to be respectful."

"And yet you do the exact opposite when you ignore my wishes," she snapped. Having nothing left to say, she increased her pace. She was determined to get to Hobbiton as soon as possible. Perhaps she would stay and return home on the morrow. Walking back with his Royal Annoyance held little appeal.

The walk to Hobbiton was approximately four hours depending on pace. Belladonna ate second breakfast while walking, not wanting to stop and take any precious moments that might delay their journey. Thorin made two overtures to speak to her, but she ignored him. She felt a little spiteful for it, but he had been ignoring her for weeks, her breastbone was sore, her cheek was burning, and she was entirely tired of the company. Besides, it was probably best not to give him any further opportunity to lodge his foot firmly in his own mouth. It was really for his own benefit that she was ignoring him.

As they came into the village, Thorin cleared his throat. "What manner of business have you?"

Before she'd set her plan in motion this morning, she had made certain she had a viable reason for visiting almost any village in the Shire, but she truly did have business that had to be attended to in Hobbiton.

"I need to stop by one of the Baggins' smials and tend to a request from one of the Baggins family, and then I plan to make short visits to several of the widowed dwarrowsdams with young ones." Hobbiton was one of the best villages for those with young offspring as it was a larger village and had many resources.

"I will tend to that," Thorin retorted stiffly.

"And yet I wasn't asking your permission, your Royal Highness. You mentioned having business of your own to see to. I will meet you at the smithy in three hours and we will then determine how much longer our sojourn in Hobbiton will take." She slipped off her pack and pulled out a cloth wrapped bundle. "Lunch," she said shoving it at him. "Three hours, then."

She stomped off toward the large Baggins smial, which was at the far edge of the village. The Baggins family had many smials in Hobbiton, Bywater, and Overhill, many of which were rented to other families as the Bagginses had decreased in number over the years while many other families had grown.

When she reached the rather large hobbit hole, she rapped firmly on the door and was quickly greeted by Laura Baggins. "Belladonna! What a lovely surprise. What brings you—" Laura broke off and halted her motion to pull Belladonna into a hug. "What has happened to your face, my dear? It looks like it's starting to purple a bit on the left."

Belladonna sighed and slumped a little. "I stumbled and my rucksack landed on my face."

Laura blinked a few times in surprise. "I haven't seen you take a tumble since you grew into your feet some twenty years ago. Always were a graceful little thing. Come in... I'll fetch you something to help with any swelling and prevent some of the bruising."

It took several minutes, but Belladonna was soon situated in the kitchen with a steaming cup of tea and a cloth soaked in an herb solution pressed against her cheek.

Taking a seat and preparing her own tea, Laura asked, "Now, what brings you here, my dear?"

“Bungo sent a letter with the bounder asking that I come as soon as I was able. He didn’t say why, but here I am.” She tried to smile brightly, but knew it came out wan. It had been a trying day.

“Ah. He has had something on his mind for several days; good that he’s going to get it sorted. He’s down the way checking in on our two single mothers; Ysassa and Gwyllyn, and their three children. He should be back shortly, and we can all have lunch together.”

Belladonna smiled. “I’ll have to stop in and see how they are faring before I journey back to Tuckborough.” She liked the two dwarrowdams increasingly with each meeting, and their children were especially sweet. Gwyllyn’s two, Dori and Nori, were as different as night and day. They were twenty and nine respectively, and Nori was secretly a favorite of Belladonna’s. Ysassa had but one dwarfling who was still in nappies and he was painfully adorable.

The quiet of the smial was unusual. “Where is everyone?”

“Well, Mungo is attending to some repair work and the children are running about. The warmer days have inspired many a picnic lunch of late.” They chatted about the Baggins’ children, and about the changes since the dwarves had moved into the Shire.

It was a good hour before Bungo returned, and she had to go through the whole explanation about her face again, though it already felt much better. She’d known Bungo her entire life and he seemed oddly out of sorts... almost nervous. He rushed through his lunch in a very un-Bagginslike fashion.

When his plate was put in the kitchen, he nearly fidgeted in place as he stood in front of Belladonna. “Perhaps we can speak privately? I thought we might take a walk.”

Laura looked surprised but said nothing, and Belladonna pushed down any visible reaction, wondering what in the name of Yavanna was wrong with her friend. “Of course, Bungo.”

They were soon underway and walking toward the party tree, where they often played all through their tweens. The silence became thick, and despite Bungo asking for her presence, he did not seem inclined to actually speak.

“What troubles you, my friend?” she prompted as they took a seat on one of the benches. His silence persisted, along with nervous fidgeting, and she finally snapped, “Bungo!”

He jumped and then blurted out, “Did you know dwarf ladies experience their pregnancy sickness within the first two weeks?”

Belladonna blinked in shock, feeling utterly confused by the non sequitur. “Huh?” When he just stared at her pleadingly, she managed to finally say, “I... well... that’s... interesting? Or maybe unfortunate? That does seem awfully early.” Her thought processes began to move a little better. “Are you saying one of the dwarrowdams here in Hobbiton is newly with child? Wait... why am I hearing this from *you*?”

At his wide-eyed, panicked look, the pieces fell into place.

“BUNGO BAGGINS!” she screeched. At his wince, she reached out and grabbed his earlobe, yanking him toward her. “Who?” she nearly hissed. A hobbit’s ear was sensitive in its entirety, but the earlobe at least was safe to abuse.

He flinched, but still answered, “Gwylyn.”

With a gasp, she released him. “They are here under Hospitality, Bungo! How could you?”

“She is my heart mate, Bella!” he finally managed to say.

Belladonna slumped and rubbed at her temples. Of course Gwylyn was his heart mate. If Belladonna could have a heart mate amongst the dwarves, so could other hobbits. “Who knows?”

“Just Ysassa, because she lives in the same smial, and then Gwylyn’s two boys, Dori and Nori. They’ve promised to say nothing for the moment, and they’re good lads. Nori is very young though, and he’ll let it slip soon enough.”

“Yes, they are good lads, and they don’t need to see a respectable hobbit taking advantage of their mother,” Belladonna snapped. At Bungo’s hurt look, she sighed. “I apologize. That was cruel. You are going to marry her, yes?”

“Of course! I want nothing more. I just don’t know the proper way to go about it. I’ve already begun to build a new smial at the top of the hill.”

“Well, I can assure you the proper way was not to start with a pregnancy!” she said sharply. After a moment, she asked, “I take it you want me to take the matter to the dwarves and my father?”

He gave her a pleading look in response.

“Very well, but you will march right back to your house and tell your mother! She’s the best midwife in Hobbiton and she needs to tend to Gwyllyn. Yavanna only knows what difficulty there might be with the first...” she trailed off, not sure what to call the child.

“Dwobbit,” Bungo supplied.

“*Dwobbit?*” Belladonna replied, blinking rapidly.

“Yes, Nori called it a dwobbit. It seems appropriate and the other mashups sound quite peculiar.”

Sighing, Belladonna closed her eyes and rubbed her temples again. “Go to your mother, Bungo. I will see you at Gwyllyn’s. I wish to check on her and the children.” As Bungo got to his feet, Bella added, “You might want to be out of grabbing distance. Laura won’t confine herself to your earlobes!”

Belladonna was a half an hour late to the smithy, and Thorin was scowling as she approached. As he opened his mouth, no doubt to complain, she held up a hand. “I know I’m tardy, there was an unexpected development. Do you have any further business in Hobbiton?”

“No,” he said, brows furrowed. “Something has happened?”

Closing her eyes, she took a steadying breath. “I’d like to return to Tuckborough now, if you please.”

There was silence for a moment. “As you wish,” he replied and led the way out of Hobbiton.

Belladonna paid Thorin little mind, thoughts turning over the happenings of the day. Gwyllyn had insisted that Bungo was her *One* and that she would happily be wedded to him. Laura had reported Gwyllyn had seemed to be in good health, but wanted a dwarven healer to tend to her as soon as could be arranged. Though Gwyllyn noted that hobbit sickness remedies were much more effective than anything she had tried in her first two pregnancies.

Nori had been effusive and excited about the prospect of his *amad* marrying Bungo. Dori had been less enthusiastic. She thought it likely the young dwarf feared Bungo would leave his mother just as the boys’ two fathers had done. Belladonna would do everything in her power to ensure those boys had no cause to feel abandoned again.

Laura Baggins was thrilled about a grandchild, but not pleased with how her oldest had gone about the matter. Proper courting was very important, even more so to hobbits like the Bagginses who placed high value on respectability. The Baggins family would want the wedding within the month if it could be arranged.

She was chewing on her thumbnail, a horrible habit when she was under stress, and one her mother and Aunt Cinoic would severely chastise her for. She wondered how soon they could have the wedding? She doubted her father would raise much of a fuss, but what about King Thráin? How would the dwarven King feel about one of his dwarrows wedding a hobbit and having a... dwobbit.

Internally cringing, she mentally flailed about trying to find another name for the upcoming child. The couple had already decided to name the child Madeline if it was a girl, a very Hobbit name, and to name him Ori if it was a boy. It was uncertain when the *dwobbit* would make its appearance. Hobbits carried their children for eight months at most, and dwarves carried slightly more than nine. She thought it likely that it would be the latter, but she was no midwife.

"Belladonna, what troubles you?" Thorin asked almost softly.

So surprised to hear him use her proper name, Belladonna tripped and would have had a face full of dirt if Thorin hadn't caught her. She blinked up at him in astonishment even as he held her by both arms. "You called me by my name," she blurted out.

His brows snapped together, and he defensively replied, "You instructed me quite clearly that I was to—"

"I like it," she interjected. "It just surprised me. I..." hesitating a second, she took a deep breath and finally said, "I don't want to fight with you. It... it hurts me that you dislike me so."

Thorin looked slightly pained. "I do not dislike you, Belladonna," he finally whispered.

She blinked, unable to tear her gaze away from his striking blue eyes. The moment seemed to stretch unendingly and her throat felt constricted.

Abruptly, he released her and she stumbled back a bit. He ran his hand through his hair. "What has happened to trouble you so?"

Startled, she automatically replied, "Hobbits and dwarves in love."

He made a choking sound. "What?" If she didn't know better, she would think he were being strangled.

"You sound like you're choking on a fish," she said with amusement.

"Why are you thinking about *that*?"

"Because you sounded funny," she retorted.

Shock melting away, he fixed her with a glare. "Why are you thinking about... *love*?"

Sliding her pack off her shoulders, she moved off the road to the long grass growing by the Bywater Pool. She flopped down and braced her elbows on her knees, looking out over the water. When Thorin settled on the ground a healthy distance from her, she finally said, "Hobbits have a heart mate."

"A *heart mate*?" He sounded utterly bewildered.

"Yes, the person our heart calls out to, the one the will make us feel whole." She glanced over at him. "Much like you dwarrows have your *One*." When his eyes widened and he looked panicked, she huffed. "Oh, stop it. I'm not talking about you and me."

His face suddenly blanked and she noticed that his hands fisted in the long blades of grass, ripping them from the ground. "Then to whom are you referring?"

"Bungo Baggins and Gwyllyn. She is his heart mate, and he is her *One*."

Thorin's brows drew together and he appeared to be thinking the matter over for some time. "And this troubles you?"

"No, Your Highness, it does not trouble me that they have found their destined mate."

He winced and held up a hand to stop her from continuing. "You insist that I address you by your given name and yet you would persist in such formality with me?"

She turned to look at him directly. "And when have you given me leave to speak to you so informally?"

Flushing a little, he glanced away. "I would prefer it if you would call me Thorin."

"Thank you, Thorin," she said simply.

He cleared his throat. "If their newfound connection is not the source of your upset, what is?"

“The half-dwarf half-hobbit child that will be born in six to eight months.” The noise Thorin made had her chuckling again. “You sound as if you’ve swallowed another whole fish.”

He glared at her, which just made her laugh merrily. “You are saying that Gwyllyn is... pregnant?”

“Yes, and Bungo and Gwyllyn desire to marry. These are matters our fathers have not discussed, and I doubt they have yet to even consider. The scouting party for Belegost does not depart for another month so we can anticipate being one people for some time yet. It seems rather unlikely that this will be the last such occurrence. And so a difficult discussion awaits.”

Thorin stared out across the pond, expression closed off. Eventually, he asked, “Will your father take issue?”

“I find that exceedingly doubtful. He will certainly have issue with the lack of proper courting, but not with the marriage or the... babe,” she finished awkwardly. “Will yours?”

“I... I do not know. I cannot imagine he would interfere with the business of the finding of a dwarrows’ *One*, and it has always been a poor choice to order about a dwarrowdam, but I do not know how he will react to the news of a *One* not being a dwarf.” His shoulders were tense and he stared fixedly at the water. Unexpectedly, he said, “You have not found your heart mate?”

She blinked a few times, and stared at him, but he was still inspecting the pond. “Of course I have. And he’s the most stubborn and annoying dwarf I’ve ever met.” He glanced at her sharply, expression blank, and it was her turn to shift her focus to the water. “As I said before, it pains me that you *appear* to dislike me, and avoid me at every turn.”

He was silent for so long, she felt like her heart was being squeezed. Finally, he said, “I have nothing to offer... my people have lost almost everything. We have no home.”

Turning a bit, she met his gaze, seeing the conflict in his eyes. “Is this your way of acknowledging that I am your *One*?”

Even through his short beard, she could see his jaw clench. But he eventually managed to say, “You are. But that does not change the circumstances.”

“So Gwyllyn and Bungo may love, but we cannot?” she wasn’t prepared to accept that, but she wanted to understand his rationale.

“It is not the same. I am the heir to a kingdom that is besieged by a dragon, responsible for a people who have no home, whose future is uncertain, and their present only made bearable by the grace of Yavanna and the will of very stubborn hobbits.” Before she could say anything, he quickly continued. “Whether you accept it as such or not, in the eyes of *my* people, you are a princess. You are the eldest daughter of the King of a wealthy land and a noble people. We are neither of us free of expectation or responsibility.”

Eyes narrowed, she snapped, “And neither ‘*expectation or responsibility*’ mean we should not be together. My people will not care one whit about your circumstances. They will simply rejoice that I was fortunate enough to find my heart mate. If your people would disdain me for... well, I know not what.”

“My people would not disdain you!” he barked, clearly affronted.

“Then the issue is your pride and not your obligations!” She hopped to her feet and went to collect to her pack. “You say what you will, Thorin Oakenshield, but do not for a moment expect my agreement!”

Chapter Four

Belladonna opened her eyes and then immediately groaned as the sun shining through the window caused her to flinch. Usually it thrilled her that she was fortunate enough to have a room with an exterior window, but she did not want to face this day; she was rather tired from an excessive amount of walking yesterday, emotionally wrung out from dealing with Thorin all day, and completely unnerved from nearly four hours of awkward silence as they finished their walk back to Tuckborough.

When she'd arrived home, she'd found that her father and King Thráin were in her father's study seeing who could best hold their liquor. After explaining to her mother that she needed audience with both of them on the morrow, she had quickly finished her dinner and gone to bed. The only thing that could have induced her to stay up would have been if Dís were about, but she had been visiting other dwarven families scattered about Tuckborough.

Reluctantly, she rose and began her ablutions, noticing that her face was only a bit bruised. Her mother had insisted on another application of herb solution when she'd arrived home, and the two treatments had done wonders. She chose her favorite pale green dress for her discussion with her father and King Thráin.

Just as she finished pinning up her hair, there was a tap at her door. She opened it to find Dís bearing a tray of food. "You missed first breakfast. Your mother was preparing a tray for you and she also wants you to apply this herb solution to your face after you eat." Dís was peering intently at Belladonna's bruised cheek.

Before Dís could ask, Belladonna accepted the tray. "I'm so sorry. I can't believe mum had you bring up my tray."

"I volunteered. I wished to see you and possibly speak to you privately. May I come in?"

"Certainly." They had met in Belladonna's room before, so it was nothing unusual. She set down the tray, then took a seat at the small table.

As Dís took a seat, she gave Belladonna a speculative look. "And what happened to your face, Bella?"

"A ridiculous accident that resulted in my pack landing on it," Belladonna replied.

"Hmm," Dís murmured noncommittally. "What of your plan? How did you fare with Thorin?"

Belladonna stabbed her eggs like she was trying to murder them. "He's a stubborn arse. He admits I am his *One*, but he will hold himself apart from me for the sake of his pride."

Dís eyebrows shot up. "He admitted it... that you're his *One*?"

"On the journey home, yes... the ridiculous dwarf." Belladonna scowled. "He spoke of everything he lacks, of expectations and responsibilities."

"And what did you make of that?" Dís asked carefully.

"I think it's utter rubbish. Oh, I have no doubt that he believes what he says to be true, but what those things have to do with me, well, all I see is he's using it as a cover for his own pride."

Dís looked thoughtful. "Though I do not doubt that Thorin's pride is much involved, there is perhaps some truth as well. He would be a callous dwarf indeed to lead you into a life of hardship without giving the matter great thought."

Belladonna reluctantly conceded the matter. It would be easy to say her own family would never allow them to experience much hardship, but she could readily *acknowledge* that that particular argument might not be well received. "I simply do not see why we should be different from other dwarf-hobbit pairs."

"*Other dwarf-hobbit pairs?*" Dís sounded mystified.

"Oh! I have yet to tell anyone the events of yesterday. Later this morning, I'm meeting with our fathers and Thorin, and hopefully you will be there as well." She quickly told Dís everything that had happened with Gwyllyn and Bungo the previous day.

After the telling, the dwarf princess was lost in thought for so long that Belladonna laid a hand on her arm and prompted, "Dís?"

"I apologize... I was simply thinking through all the possible responses my father might have," she said, offering a wan smile.

"Do you think he will take issue?" Belladonna asked worriedly.

"I wish I could say with any certainty. Adad has been... *different* since we came to the Shire. I do not fully know what to attribute it to, but he is less angry and obsessed. I see that he allows himself to grieve over Frerin. All of these things are welcome, but I know not what can be expected in the way of his reaction."

Belladonna squeezed Dís' hand. It had taken near a month before the princess had discussed the recent loss of her elder brother at Azanulbizar, and Bella knew the wound was still raw.

Dís returned the squeeze but said nothing further about her brother, instead, she gave her an assessing look. "You and Thorin will need to tell our fathers about your circumstances."

Wide-eyed, Belladonna slumped back in her chair. She knew Dís was correct. If there were two such pairings already, there could easily be more. "Will you give Thorin warning?"

"I will do so immediately," Dís replied with a faint smile.

Belladonna spent the time until second breakfast tending to her personal garden. There were several plants some hobbits were more adept at growing, and Belladonna was one such hobbit. As such, she was required to keep a personal garden. When she was off on adventure, her brother Hildibrand and her sister Donnamira cared for it in her absence.

Balin decided to keep her company, though she made him stay firmly seated on the bench. She had learned her lesson about dwarves and gardening! Since coming to the Shire, he had spent a good deal of his time reading and studying, and had no end of questions about hobbits and their history. Many questions she could not answer, for not even she knew. She suggested he take up the matter of ancient history with her father at some point.

She did not see any of the Durins before she went to her father's office on the second level of the smial an hour after second breakfast. She found she was the last to arrive, even though she was not late. The three Durins were present along with her mother, father, and her brother Isengrim.

Having not seeing Isengrim in several days, she gave him a quick hug and a peck on the cheek. "Hello, brother."

"Bella," he murmured cupping her cheek and inspecting it. "Prince Thorin was just telling us how he dropped your pack on your face."

"What?" she yelped, glancing over at Thorin, who look stoic and then to her parents who looked flabbergasted. "That's not what happened!"

"That's not what he said, dearest," her mother murmured. "Isengrim, don't tease your sister. The prince simply explained that he released Belladonna's pack unexpectedly and she fell as a result." Her mother gave her a steely look. "Is there anything you'd like to add, Bella?"

"I may have caused him to release it when I kicked him," she finally admitted.

“Belladonna Took!” her mother said reprovingly.

She wanted to defend herself, but really she was too old for finger pointing.

Before anything further could be said, King Thráin gave a hearty laugh and slapped Thorin on the back. “I told you the lass kicked like a mule!” When the King had his amusement under control, he glanced around. “Is this why the meeting was called? Because of a little tussle?”

“No,” Belladonna quickly interjected before anything further could be said about their *‘tussle.’* “A matter requiring both leaders’ attention came to light in Hobbiton yesterday.” She took a steadying breath, carefully choosing her words. “King Thráin, has the matter of hobbit bonds or heart mates been discussed as yet?” Her parents exchanged a worried look, but said nothing.

“Nay, lass, what are they?” he asked with amused tolerance.

She quickly explained and likened a heart mate to a dwarrows’ *One*. “What we found yesterday was that one of the dwarrowdams has found her *One* with a hobbit named Bungo Baggins, and he has said his heart calls out for her. They wish to wed.”

“They’re certain?” her father asked quickly.

“Yes,” she said, though her attention was on King Thráin as he thoughtfully stroked his beard, metal beads clinking against each other. When he didn’t respond immediately, she added, “Also, they are expecting a child.”

Various exclamations filled the room, though King Thráin remained silent, bushy brows shooting up to near his hairline.

“They know so soon?” her mother finally asked.

Dís replied, “A dwarrowdam will know within two weeks of conception that she is with child.”

“Has Bungo taken leave of his senses?” her father barked, and she noticed that King Thráin immediately sat up straighter, a scowl appearing on his face. Gerontius looked to the King and said, “I assure you, Thráin, our lads know how to properly court! I would not have you think this is the normal way of things.”

Thráin’s expression relaxed and he sat back into his chair. “Well, the matter is before us, and circumstances cannot be changed. I have never been in the habit of telling my dwarrowdams what they can or cannot do! I would normally expect a reasonable courting period, however...”

he gave Belladonna a searching look. "You are certain they plan to wed? And which of my dwarrowdams is expecting?"

"It is Gwyllyn, mother to Dori and Nori, and they are both most earnest about marriage. The Baggins family, provided both the King and the Thain agree, would like to hold the wedding within the month."

Thráin nodded, but still had his eyes on Belladonna. "And why did this Bungo Baggins not present himself here directly and plead his case?"

Belladonna just blinked in surprise, not sure how to respond. Fortunately her mother saved the day by offering, "Thráin, Bungo is recently of age and I fear that youth likely played a role in him seeking counsel and aid from his childhood friend. Though I certainly agree that he should have come himself."

"Well, Gwyllyn is a fiery one, she'll have him in shape in no time," Thráin said jovially, though Belladonna suspected that the King might have words with Bungo at the earliest opportunity.

"Adad," Dís interjected, "We have discussed the matter of one hobbit marrying one dwarf, but what if our people continue to join?"

Thráin waved the concern away. "One case is not worth worrying over, Dís. If another *One* is found amongst the hobbits, we can discuss it further."

"I agree," her father said, clapping his hands together. "Now we must decide what to call a child who his half dwarfling and half fauntling."

"There is more than one instance already, adad," Thorin said brusquely even as he looked at Belladonna. "Belladonna Took is my *One*."

She kept her gaze on Thorin as she offered, "Thorin is my heart mate."

The silence was deafening.

Abruptly, Thráin got to his feet and looked to her parents. "Excuse us. I must speak with my children in private. We will return." He gave Belladonna a searching look before leaving.

Dís squeezed her shoulder as she passed, then the door was closing and she was alone with her family.

Her mother came over to the settee and waved Isengrim away so she could sit next to Belladonna. She put her arm around Belladonna's shoulders. "I thought you had a harmless crush. You said nothing, Bella, why?"

She looked to her father who looked an odd mix of shocked and worried. "Because he's been avoiding me. And because he made it plain yesterday that he will not court me."

"Oh, dearest..." her mother pressed a kiss to her temple and Belladonna felt her eyes tear, but forced the emotion away. She wasn't giving up. Not yet.

Dís watched her father pace the small study he'd been granted by the hobbits when they'd first arrived. She was seated, but Thorin stood stiffly near the door.

Finally he halted and glared at her brother. "How long have you known the little princess was your *One*?"

"Since the moment I first saw her," Thorin replied woodenly.

"For more than six week have you known that your *One* was amongst the hobbits, was their Thain's favored daughter, and you did not bring the matter to me?" He looked to Dís, not waiting for an answer from Thorin. "And you?"

"I was present when they met... I saw the signs," she admitted readily.

"Mahal give me patience!" he thundered, then sat in his chair, glaring between them. "Why would you keep this from me?"

"I meant no disrespect, adad, but what can come of it? I have nothing to offer her but hardship and duty," Thorin intoned gravely

Their father scowled. "A *One* is the greatest gift from Mahal, and you would dishonor that gift?"

"I seek to *honor* it!" Thorin insisted.

Her father looked saddened. "Is this my doing, inùdoy? Has my obsession with vengeance, and with reclaiming some measure of our past caused this? Even if Erebor was ours, a life by your side would be one of duty, so what you seek to spare her is a life of hardship. Have you failed to see that hobbits do not value the wealth you would seek to provide her? Does she seem the type of lass who would be an idle queen?"

Thorin's jaw was set stubbornly, though he eventually bit out, "What would you have me do? Court the *princess* while I am a guest in her home?"

"Your pride will be your undoing!" Thráin snapped harshly. "And I do blame myself and my father for it, for we have taught it readily enough. Though if I can change my ways, Thorin, so too can you." He shifted his attention to her, giving Thorin no chance to reply. "What say you, nathith?"

Dís carefully considered her answer, before she replied, "As his sister, I wish to see Thorin happy. I have come to know Belladonna well and she would make him a better dwarf, a better King when that day comes. Politically, it's a good match, an alliance between our people and this rich land, though I think many of your advisors would protest a half-hobbit heir. I believe they are complacent for now as the Shire has given us a great respite, but they will be whispering in your ear soon enough."

Her father stroked his beard thoughtfully. "It has been rather pleasant to not have them yammering away for the time we've been here. Is that all?"

She hesitated for a moment, because her father had been reluctant on the subject of the magic of the Shire. "I think their joining is the will of the Valar." Ignoring Thorin's incredulous look, she continued, "I believe Mahal brought us here and intends our peoples to have some profound connection. Just as I believe Yavanna herself has blessed Belladonna and guided her to us."

Thorin threw up his hands. "Namad, this is fantasy!"

To her surprise, it was her father who said, "Your sister speaks the truth, inúdoy. The moment I was accepted into the Shire, my thoughts were clear for the first time in many a year. Since even before Smaug." He looked away and sighed heavily. "The gold sickness does not touch me here, and I comprehend things in a new way. How can you argue against the hand of fate given everything that has occurred?"

Dís had seen the changes in her father, knew he had spent as much time with Thain Took as she herself spent with Belladonna. She knew not what the two discussed, but it was apparent the time in the Shire was changing her father tremendously, and in ways she thought were for the better. She only wished she had attempted to speak to him on the matter before now.

Slumping back against the door, Thorin rubbed his hands over his face. "I believed you would be against the match," he finally offered sounding tired.

"I cannot say what I would have done, or how I would have felt, had we not come here. Perhaps I would have been angry, or perhaps felt favorable for reasons of a political nature, but these are no longer our circumstances. I would see you with the *right* mate, Thorin. I would see you happy."

When Thorin didn't immediately reply, Dís added, "Since we came here, I dream of you, Thorin. Of you and Belladonna, and I see you in Erebor."

His gaze snapped to her and he looked stunned, but then his expression closed off.

Their father leaned forward, capturing Thorin's attention. "What will you, inùdoy?"

After a long silence, Thorin slumped a bit and said, "I would court Belladonna, though she may not be pleased by an eleven year courtship."

"Ah." Adad nodded knowingly. "The two of you need to spend time in your studies once again. Thorin is of age, he is battle tested, and he is the heir to the throne. I encourage a long courtship for the two of you, but you may wed under our laws at sixty."

Thorin's brows shot up in surprise, but he revealed nothing else. Finally he simply nodded.

Father rose to his feet, briskly rubbing his hands together. "Let's return so we can attempt to smooth things over with our hosts." He gave Thorin a piercing look. "You will speak with your intended and then her parents. I will have them know that the line of Durin is an honorable one."

Dís left the room last, thinking on the part of her dreams she hadn't revealed. She was uncertain whether to believe what she'd seen, but the lure of Erebor was as much as she felt she could risk saying. But she'd also dreamt of their child... a son named Durin.

Belladonna was ready to strangle her father. He'd asked multiple ways if Thorin had tried anything inappropriate. "Father!" she finally snapped. "He will barely stay in the room when I'm present! I had to persuade Dís and Aunt Cinoic to aid me so that I could spend enough time with him to clarify matters between us. Aside from the fact that he is an honorable dwarf, he does not wish to pursue me!" She felt pained at having to admit it so plainly and so frequently.

"Gerontius," her mother said harshly, "enough. I have observed Thorin these many weeks and he would do nothing untoward."

Her father's expression was mulish. "And why should my daughter not be good enough for him?"

The sudden change in her father's tactic had Belladonna wincing.

Her mother got up, squeezing Belladonna's hand as she left, then went to her husband and soundly smacked the back of his head.

"Adamanta!" he yelped.

"You're lucky I didn't take my cue from our daughter and my sister and kick you soundly. We will wait until they return and discuss this calmly, and you will cease upsetting your daughter!"

Isengrim took the seat vacated by their mother and slung his arm around her shoulders. "Are you all right," he whispered.

"I am well," she said reflexively, unwilling to be anything else when the Durins could be returning at any moment.

"I see," he returned, and she knew she hadn't fooled him for a moment.

It was a good while before there was a tap at the door and the King entered, followed by Thorin and then Dís. "My apologies," Thráin said as soon as they were behind a closed door again. "I needed to find out from my son and daughter why I had not been informed of this development." He took a seat again. "Where shall we begin?"

Her father looked like he had *much* to say, but to her surprise, Thorin quickly responded, "I'd like to have a word with Belladonna. If she is amenable," he added giving her a searching look.

Belladonna hopped to her feet. "Certainly!" she said, crossing to his side quickly. "Anything to be free of this room," she muttered under her breath. "We'll be in the garden!" she called back as she opened the door, ignoring her father's sputtering and King Thráin's laughter.

They left the smial and walked in silence for several moments before Thorin suddenly said, "Have we not passed four gardens?"

She looked up at him. "But I want to go to my garden."

"I confess I was unaware you had your own garden. Does every hobbit have their own?"

Belladonna found the question so odd coming from Thorin it took her a moment to reply. “No, though many do. Hobbits tend to be very territorial of their gardens, and only those with permission should enter them. Many gardens are jointly tended, but it will be considered the possession of only one. We have passed several that I have permission to enter, but I’d prefer to go to my own.”

When they finally reached the gate to Belladonna’s garden, she bid Thorin enter and was surprised that he actually looked around a bit. She kept careful eye on his big dwarvish boots to make sure he didn’t trample any of her bumblebrush seedlings she’d planted just this morning.

He paused at her irises and she found herself asking, “Of all the flowers here, why the iris?”

“Dwarrows typically do not care much for growing things. Most flowers have no name in our language, we simply call them *flowers*.” He paused for a moment, still looking at the irises, stroking the petals. “It is said that Durin II found his *One* early in his life; she was fond of plants and all manner of growing things, but her favorite of them all was the iris. For her, he added a word to our language so that her chosen bloom could be called by its name, and not confused with any other common flower.”

Belladonna was enchanted by the story. “What is the word?” she knew their language was secret, but she hoped he could tell her that much.

“Nang,” he replied softly as he turned to look at her. “I wish to apologize for any pain I have brought you in refusing to acknowledge what is between us.”

Surprised, she found herself moving a couple steps closer. “Why?” she asked, needing to know before she was willing to be vulnerable to him.

He stepped even nearer so there was perhaps a foot of space between them. “My father helped me see the truth of what you were trying to tell me. While I truly do not wish to see hardship brought upon you, I will concede my pride was much at stake.”

Belladonna could easily see how difficult the words were for Thorin. “If you can set aside your pride, and at least come to know me, I will bear no ill will for past word or deed, Thorin.”

“I have paid more attention to you than you perhaps realize. I know a great deal about you, Belladonna Took; I see your love of your people and the greatness of your heart, I see how much you long for adventure, and to see new things. And I have seen your incredible stubbornness and tenacity even in the face of opposition. Though by the customs of my people I cannot wed for near six full years, I would court you properly in the ways of both our people.

For your spirit is as fierce as your kick." Belladonna's eyes widened as he reached up and cupped her cheek. "If you'll have me," he added softly.

"Of course, I'll have you, idiot dwarf," she murmured, blinking furiously. "My heart was yours the moment our eyes met. I just needed time to persuade you that yours would be mine as well."

His lips turned up in what she was certain was the first smile he'd ever given to her, and she felt her heart skip. Suddenly, he pulled her close and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Thank you, Nangel," he whispered.

After they returned to her father's office, Belladonna kept watch on her father as the courting traditions of the two races were discussed. He was outwardly pleasant, but she knew when something was bothering him. She'd make sure to talk to him alone as soon as they were through with the mortifying discussion of hers and Thorin's courtship.

And that still felt unreal and she found herself smiling every time she thought on it. Isengrim kept nudging her and whispering, "*You're grinning like an idiot.*"

She finally whispered back, "Do you want me to tell everyone here how foolish you were over Degrin when you met?" That shut him up quickly enough. She was still seated on the settee with Isengrim, though Thorin now occupied a chair next to her.

In the end, it was decided that dwarven courting would be followed, as hobbit courting was very informal, consisting mostly of affectionate overtures until the couple decided they were ready to wed. Whereas dwarrows had very formal stages and procedures. She and her mother both insisted that room for hobbit gestures had to be allowed. Also, Thorin and Belladonna having leadership in the Hospitality would be in contact more than was typical of a lengthy dwarven courtship, so there would be chaperones for at least a year, something practically unheard of in hobbit courtships.

Belladonna found the entire discussion horrifying, and was quite happy when the conversation shifted to what seemed like the probable occurrence of more dwarrows finding their *One* amongst the hobbits. To her surprise, neither side seemed inclined to discourage the joining of the two peoples. It was now late spring, but there would be many festivals and celebrations over the summer leaving ample opportunity for hobbits and dwarrows to meet.

Eventually Thráin asked, "And what should these half hobbit, half dwarf offspring be called?" He looked directly to her. "Had Gwylyn or this Bungo Baggins any suggestion?"

“Young Nori had called the child a, um... a *dwobbit*,” she admitted. “Everyone seemed quite comfortable with the name.”

Silence reigned for several moments before Thráin started to laugh, followed by her father. Her mother seemed more appalled than amused. Finally Thráin said, “Yes, *dwobbit* will do nicely!” He got to his feet and gave Thorin and Belladonna speaking looks. “Courting braids before dinner,” he ordered. With that, he departed.

Everyone was ready for lunch, but Belladonna hung back, asking to speak with her father. When they were alone, she immediately asked, “What troubles you, papa?”

He was quiet for long moments before he sighed. “I am pleased you have found your heart mate, Bella, but it is too soon to ask me to be happy that you shall be so far away.”

“Oh, papa...” She rounded his desk and insisted on giving him a hug. “It will be years before that will come to pass. And Belegost is not so far.”

His arms tightened around her. “It could be farther than you think, daughter... much farther than you think,” he murmured, and she wasn’t sure what he meant.

After lunch, Belladonna was left with the issue of a bead for Thorin’s courting braid. She was pacing her bedroom with Dís watching her fret. “Courting beads!” she said, again. “Where am I to obtain a courting bead? And before dinner?”

“I will loan you one, Bella,” Dís said again. “Thorin knows our customs are different. He would not expect you to have courting bead prepared. Do hobbits even use beads?”

“Of course we do,” Belladonna replied quickly. “We have wood beads and some enameled beads, but mostly ceramic beads, and they’re all used for decoration. For instance... Oh!” She quickly began rifling through her wardrobe, pulling out a box. “My annas wreath!”

“Pardon?” Dís asked bemusedly.

Belladonna set the box on the bed and pulled out the dried flower crown woven with ribbons and various ceramic beads. She held it up excitedly. “It won’t do for long, ceramic beads are too delicate, but it will give me time to secure something sturdier.” She began picking out the bead she knew would be perfect.

From there time seemed to drag as it only can when you are eagerly anticipating something. Or nervous. Belladonna was both. While hobbits were quite tactile and affectionate, dwarves

allowed very little physical contact for the first year of courtship. They'd be allowed to hold hands and occasionally hug, but other forms of contact were discouraged. They were allowed one kiss when beads were exchanged, but otherwise it was discouraged. And so she was nervous.

Thorin was not present for afternoon tea, but then the dwarves rarely were, finding the hobbit meal customs to be peculiar; typically only attending first breakfast, luncheon, and dinner. Afterward, Belladonna fidgeted nervously until she decided to just go her garden early. She'd much rather sit in the fresh air.

The ten hobbits who seemed set to accompany her brought her up short. "Absolutely not!" she finally said. "You will all stay here!"

"Mum said you'd be having a chaperone," her youngest brother Isengar, who was still in his tweens, chimed in.

"And if *one* is necessary, it will be Dís or Aunt Cin, not the whole lot of you! Now off with you," she ordered, shooing the other hobbits away, feeling incredibly flustered.

She finally relaxed once she was back in her garden. Not wanting to become dirty, she occupied herself with some pruning while she waited. She was in the midst of gathering some forget-me-nots when Aunt Cinoic appeared with a somewhat tense-looking Thorin. Her aunt sat on the far bench, busying herself with some sewing and Belladonna was very grateful for the illusion of privacy.

Thorin crossed to her and she nervously rubbed her hand along her skirt. She did not know why she was so anxious; it was a bead, a braid, and a kiss. Before she could get herself even more worked up, Thorin took her hand and gave her a searching look. "Dís explained everything?"

Belladonna nodded. "Yes. I understand that if it should need to be redone, whenever possible, I should be the one to do it, yes?"

"Yes. We should tend to each other's courtship braids if it is feasible to do so." He took her hands, squeezing gently. "You seem nervous. Would you prefer to wait? My father truly has no say on when we exchange our first bead."

Holding onto his hands like a lifeline, she shook her head. "No. It's just very new. Hobbits have no tradition like this and it's quite... odd. I do not wish to wait. If you were a hobbit, you'd offer me some flowers and we'd sup together. We certainly do not braid each other's hair, but I'm happy to embrace your customs." The hair braiding was the most unnerving but it seemed the longer she was in his presence, the less nervous she became. "Let me do yours first."

“As you wish. Come then,” he said, guiding her over to the other bench away from Aunt Cinoic. He took a seat, which put him at a good height for her.

“I... hobbits do not much use metal in our beads, so I had to take one I made. It’s ceramic. As soon as can be arranged, I’ll replace it with something sturdier.” She pulled it from her pocket along with her comb.

Thorin took the bead and looked it over. “This was made by you?” It was one of her more elaborate beads, carefully etched with flowing vines and flowers and leaves before it was painted and fired.

“Yes, um, when a hobbit comes of age we make a flower crown for the celebration. It is called an annas wreath. All close family and friends contribute something for the wreath, be it ribbon or flowers or beads. The last thing added to the wreath is something you have made or grown yourself. And this was what I made. I wish for you to have it, even if it is not truly suitable for a courting bead.”

Thorin smiled at her. “It is entirely suitable, Bella. Though I may not be able to wear it always in my braids, I would keep it and wear it about my neck if that would suit you.”

She found herself smiling back and impulsively hugged him. He stiffened for a moment, then returned the embrace. After a moment, Bella pulled back, feeling a bit flushed. “Here, I’ll do your braid now.”

Thorin turned so she was able to begin. Belladonna was adept with braids, but the whole experience was so novel and strange to her that it took her a lot longer than it should have. Having her hands in Thorin’s hair seemed so oddly intimate that it unnerved her terribly. She started it below his temple and braided it back and behind his ear, then down to hang in the front. She wove in the bead easily enough, and then threaded in some forget-me-nots toward the end of the braid.

He peered intently at the end of the braid where the petals were. “Flowers?” he asked looking up at her.

She nodded brusquely. “I’d be considered a poor hobbit indeed if I did not gift you with forget-me-nots when we formalized our courtship.” Fidgeting a little, she added, “It’s just the first braid, I promise. It was this or give you a flower crown, and I thought you might prefer it.”

Taking her hand, he raised to his lips and kissed the back of her hand gently. “The flowers are fine, Bella.” Her breath caught and all she could do was stare at him. Thorin got to his feet,

breaking the spell. He passed a bead to her. "When we turn forty, we begin to carry a plain silver bead, we carry it with us always in the event that we should ever meet our *One*. When we meet, we etch the bead with a word or image that our *One* inspires in us."

He passed her the silver bead and she peered at it closely. It was clearly a beautiful etching of an iris with some runic symbols. "What are the runes?" she asked, feeling a bit choked up.

"It says '*nangel*' in Khuzdul. I asked your aunt the symbolism of the iris for your people. She said they symbolize faith, hope, courage, and admiration, and so it seemed even more appropriate that I think of you as my *nangel*. My iris of irises."

She nodded, feeling overwhelmed. "Thank you, Thorin. It's perfect." Reaching up, she released her hair from its pins so it fell to her shoulders. Thorin immediately dropped the comb and the bead and she helped him retrieve them, the mishap alleviating some of her tension.

He completed her braid swiftly, though the experience was just as peculiar to her. Her heart felt like it was in her throat the entire time his hands were working gently through her hair. When he finished, she touched the braid gently, running her fingertips over the bead.

Then Thorin was cupping her face, thumbs rubbing over her cheekbones and Belladonna stared up at him wide-eyed. He said something lowly in the rumbly dwarven language, then leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. Eyes fluttering shut, Belladonna leaned into the kiss, her entire body seeming to come alive, acutely aware of the firm press of his lips, the tickle of his beard.

Too soon, he pulled away, and she blinked up at him dazedly. "What was it that you said?"

"I thanked Mahal for giving me the treasure of all treasurers, though I do not deserve it."

Smiling brightly, and unable to help herself, she threw her arms around him again, hugging her intended with all of her strength.

Belladonna had always wondered why Yavanna had given her a heart longing for adventure and wandering feet. But those feet had led her to Thorin and her dwarves, and she would be forever grateful that she was just a little bit different from most hobbits.

The End