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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Mature</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>Gen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>The Hobbit (Jackson Movies)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Fili &amp; Kili, Bilbo Baggins/Thorin Oakenshield</td>
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<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Fili, Kili, Thorin Oakenshield, Bilbo Baggins</td>
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<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Angst, Family, Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, background bilbo/thorin - Freeform, Past Child Abuse</td>
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<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 2 of Under New Management</td>
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<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2017-06-07 Updated: 2017-07-18 Chapters: 3/? Words: 22625</td>
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### Learning by Doing

by [frostyjack](http://archiveofourown.org/users/frostyjack)

**Summary**

Kili hits a bump in the road. As always, Fili is there to help. Short sequel to Under New Management.

**Notes**

The setting for this is Nottingham, during Kili's first term at university. I'm guessing it'll be two chapters, but don't hold me to it!
Chapter 1

Fili woke with a start, his heart in his throat, fighting off something heavy that had just landed on his chest. There was hot breath in his ear and a snuffling sound, and--

“Fuck me,” he muttered, lying still and putting a hand over his eyes. “Dog, you scared the shit out of me.”

Dog wuffled in his ear, and Fili sighed and shook his head. He pushed Dog off him, and went to sit up, only to hear a thump as something slipped off his chest onto the bed. He groped for it and found it was his tablet. Why had his tablet been on his chest?

Oh, yeah. Because he’d fallen asleep while still surfing the internet.

“Getting old,” he muttered, then turned the tablet on for a moment to check the time. 3:29. Dog wuffled again at the sudden brightness, then nosed at Fili insistently. Fili ran a hand through his hair and frowned down at the screen, remembering why he’d been doing his best to stay up the night before.

“Where’s Kili?” he asked Dog. “Why aren’t you sleeping with him?”

Dog, of course, didn’t answer, and Fili, starting to feel a little too awake now, scrambled out of bed and fumbled for his phone on the bedside table. There were no messages, and Fili shook his head and headed for the hall, phone in hand. The door to Kili’s room was ajar, but when Fili stuck his head round it, he saw the curtains were open and the light from the streetlamp outside illuminated an empty bed, neatly made.

“OK, shit,” Fili muttered. He started for the end of the hall, already bringing up Kili’s number on his phone, but when he stumbled into the kitchen, he was briefly terrified and then hugely relieved to see the shadowy bulk of someone sitting at the table in the dark.

“Oh, Jesus Christ,” he said, putting a hand on his chest like that might somehow get his heart to slow down. “Fuck me, kiddo, you scared the shit out of me.”

The shadow shifted. “Sorry,” Kili said, voice sounding kind of hoarse.

Fili turned off his phone screen to avoid being any further blinded. “Did you just get back?” he said. “You should have texted to say you’d be late.”

“Yeah,” Kili said. “Sorry. You said – one a.m.”

“Ye-es,” Fili said. “It’s half three.”

“Yeah, but--” Kili said. “I’ve been back since one, so. You were asleep.”

Fili frowned into the darkness. He’d definitely tried to stay up till one, but he was pretty sure he hadn’t made it. OK, that was fine. He’d definitely have preferred it if Kili had woken him up to let him know he was home safe, but he knew pretty damn well that the kid had weird issues about waking people up, and he’d only panicked for a minute or two, so that was OK. But then why--?

“Why are you still up, then?” he asked. “I mean – you’re just sitting here in the dark. So – what’s that about?”
Kili shifted again. “Nothing,” he said, and cleared his throat. “I – couldn’t sleep.”

“Plus ça change,” Fili said. He poured himself a glass of water, fumbling a bit in the dark, then turned to lean against the sink, contemplating the vague shadow that was Kili. Something was definitely off, but he didn’t want to push too hard. The kid had been a bit touchy lately, trying to get the hang of his course and student life and all that. And he was home, he was safe, he was coherent. OK.

“Did you have a good time?” Fili asked.

There was a pause. “Yeah,” Kili said. “I – didn’t really like the pub.”

“I bet it was a shitty student dive, hey?” Fili said. “How much did you have to drink?” He hoped slipping the question in amongst casual conversation might stop Kili from thinking he was being overbearing. He wasn’t being overbearing, anyway. He was just interested.


“At the pub?” Fili asked. There was the problem, then. Kid always had been a lightweight. Time to learn some limits.

“No – when I got home,” Kili said. “I cleaned it up. Sorry.”

“No probs,” Fili said. “It happens. Enjoy being a student while you can, I say. But hey – maybe remember next time and don’t drink so much, right?”

“Right,” Kili said, sounding relieved. “Right. Yeah, I was having rounds and – whiskey.”

Fili shook his head, grinning to himself. Kili really wasn’t much of a drinker, but then, he hadn’t had any studenty mates up till now. “We’ve all been there,” he said. “Top tip from a past master – no mixing. Got it?”

“Yeah, I’ll remember,” Kili said. He stood up, seeming to wobble a little. “I’m – uh, I need a shower,” he said.

“Don’t drown,” Fili said. He drank the rest of his water, then smiled to himself in the dark. Kili the dirty stop-out. Who’d’ve thunk?

And Fili the early-to-bed. He yawned a jaw-cracking yawn and sighed. Definitely getting old.

“Come on, then, Dog,” he said, and headed back to his room.

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Kili surfaced late on Sunday, and when he did, he didn’t look like the extra sleep had done much for his hangover. His eyes were blood-shot and he looked kind of lank, like he hadn’t washed for a while, even though he’d just come out of a shower long enough to drown Noah.

“Feeling any better?” Fili asked, smirking behind his coffee.

“Yeah,” Kili said, sounding like he wished he was dead.

“Remember that thing I told you about mixing your drinks?” Fili said. “Yeah, I really meant it.” He watched as Kili poured himself into a chair and sat with his head in his hands. “There’s brunch in the fridge,” he added.

Fili shrugged. “There’ll be more brunch next week,” he said. “Anyway, Dog and I had a pretty good time without you.”

Kili blinked at him. “I didn’t walk Dog,” he said.

“Nope. Lucky I’m here to pick up your slack, now that you’re a beery lad and so on,” Fili said. Kili didn’t laugh, though, or even crack a smile – instead he shot to his feet and went to grab Dog’s lead where it hung on the back of the door.

“I’ll take him now,” he said, and then dropped to his knees and put his arms round Dog’s neck. “Sorry,” he whispered.

“Hey,” Fili said. “Aren’t you going to have any brunch?”

“Yeah – when I get back,” Kili said. “Sorry – sorry.”

And with that, he was out the door, Dog following in delight at the prospect of a second walk in four hours. Fili shook his head, wondering if he should have a Big Conversation with Kili about the wonders of alcohol and learning your limits. But no – he was pretty sure Thorin and Bilbo had managed at least two of those apiece before letting Kili step foot out of Cambridge, and Kili wasn’t the wild type, anyway. In fact, he was the type who’d take the dog for a walk it didn’t really need because he felt guilty for sleeping in on a Sunday, of all things.

“You are really bad at this whole slacker student thing,” he said, and went back to reading the paper.

****

On Monday, Fili decided to take advantage of a long lunch break and head down to the uni for lunch with Kili. He’d barely seen the kid the day before – Kili’d had a bunch of uni work to do and then gone out for dinner with some of his new mates – and even though Fili definitely wasn’t worried or planning to be overbearing in any way, he still thought it was a good idea to do a bit of checking up. After all, Kili was his brother, and there was nothing wrong with wanting to have lunch with your brother, right? Fili was just – happening by. Not even checking up. Just... wandering past the uni. The uni that was twelve miles out of town. Right?

Right.

He texted Kili, but got nothing back – probably had his phone on silent for lectures. But by the time he got to the out-of-town campus where Kili’s department was located, he still hadn’t had a reply, and he realised he didn’t really know how to find the kid. He’d been to the vet school a few times before, but it wasn’t the only building on campus, and it was pretty big even on its own. Fili stood staring up at it, checked his phone for the fifteenth time, and then finally buttonholed a kid coming out of the doors.

“Hey, excuse me?” he said. “I’m looking for Kili Oakenshield. Do you know him?”

The guy frowned in thought, then nodded. “The quiet kid with all the hair?” he said. “Yeah. I mean, we’re not mates or anything.”

“So you don’t know where he is?” Fili asked.

The guy shrugged. “He wasn’t in labs this morning,” he said. “Sorry, I got nothing.”
“Wasn’t—” Fili started, then stopped. OK, now he was starting to get worried. “Is he usually in labs?” he asked, after struggling a moment with deciding what counted as valid concern and what was just snooping.

“Yeah, I think so,” the guy said. “Keeps pretty quiet, though.” He frowned. “Is everything OK?”

“Yeah – yeah,” Fili said, fervently hoping he was right. “Just – wanted to catch up with him, that’s all. Thanks, anyway.”

He turned and headed back to his car, checking his phone again. No texts. He tried calling, but got voicemail. Should he leave one? No – no, because he was pretty sure he’d crash and burn at trying to sound casual, and he’d promised, he’d promised Kili he’d give him a decent amount of space. A drunken night out and a missed lab or two were completely standard student behaviour, after all – and that was what Kili wanted to be: a completely standard student. So Fili should just butt out like he’d promised, at least as long as that was all it was.

“Thank God Thorin’s not here,” he muttered to himself.

Anyway, Kili had probably felt sick and gone home. He’d been looking like crap ever since Saturday night. Yeah, that was obviously it. He’d gone home, fallen asleep, and that was why he wasn’t answering the phone.

Right. Well, Fili felt kind of stupid for driving all the way down to the campus, but he still had some lunch break left, so he figured he’d just go and check at home – just so he didn’t end up spending he entire afternoon worrying.

“Are you being overbearing?” he asked himself out loud as he pulled out onto the main road. He shook his head. “Nope. No, you’re being a model of restraint.”

Still, he drove a bit too fast all the way back to town. And when he parked outside their building, he took the stairs up to the flat two at a time. Mostly because he was rapidly running out of lunch-break, but after years of practising being honest with himself and other people, he couldn’t quite ignore the fact that some part of him was a little bit freaked out about what might be up with Kili. Old habits, and all that.

That part of him definitely got a lot bigger when he strode into the flat, doing his best to seem nonchalant, only to find that it was empty (barring Dog). The door to Kili’s room was ajar, and his bed was neatly made, his books stacked on his desk, and he himself was quite clearly not there. OK, so – Kili wasn’t at uni, but he wasn’t at home, either. So what did that mean?

Fili took out his phone and stared at it. Still no reply to his text. He tried calling Kili again, but got voicemail. Leave a message? No, he was going to sound like a lunatic, given that Kili was almost certainly absolutely fine, just skiving, which was a completely normal thing for a first-year undergrad to do. Well, any first-year undergrad except Kili, anyway.

One other option, then. For emergencies only, and Fili spent a good two and a half minutes wrestling with himself trying to decide if this counted or not. Then he opened the app and tapped find my phone. A moment or two later, a map popped up with a marker, located in a park about ten minutes’ walk from the flat.

Fili took a deep breath, shoved his phone in his pocket, and headed for the door. Park it was, then.

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Fili didn’t walk, but drove, which took him all of two minutes (and most of that was finding
somewhere to park). It was drizzling now, not heavy, but not particularly pleasant, either, and getting
colder with it. Fili flipped up the collar of his coat and peered at his phone in the rain, then looked
around to see if he could see Kili. The kid better still be with his phone, or–

Then he spotted him on the other side of a broad expanse of grass: a dark, huddled figure sitting on a
bench. It was too far away to see his face, but that way of hunching and projecting misery to a five-
mile radius was all Kili. Fili closed his eyes for a moment, breathing deeply and letting some part of
his fear drain away. Then he shook himself, and headed over.

Kili didn’t look up when he arrived, which was a sure sign that he’d seen him coming over well in
advance. Fili stood in silence a moment, then sat down next to him.

“Having a day out, are we?” he asked. “Nice weather for it.”

Kili swiped his hand across his eyes – maybe just because of the rain dripping into them, or maybe
not, Fili couldn’t tell – and sighed.

“You used the app, then?” he asked.

Fili felt a brief stab of guilt, because yeah, he had promised to let Kili have a bit of space now that he
was finally out from under Thorin’s watchful eye. But it was only a very brief stab.

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s what it’s for, remember? For when I’m worried because I can’t find out where
you are. You weren’t answering your phone.”

Kili did look up at him, then, frowning in confusion. He pulled out his phone and stared at it, then his
shoulders slumped a little.

“Oh,” he said. “It’s on silent. I always put it on silent when I get the bus in the morning because of –
uh, because of lectures.”

“Right,” Fili said. “Lectures that you’re currently skipping in favour of sitting in the rain looking
miserable.”

“Yeah, I–” Kili said, and then seemed not to be able to come up with any kind of excuse. “Yeah, I’m
skipping them,” he said at last.

“Yes, you are,” Fili said. “Do you skip lectures a lot?” It occurred to him that this could be
something Kili had been doing for weeks, and Fili wouldn’t have known. Fuck, Thorin was going to
murder him.

“No,” Kili said. “No, just – today. I feel sick.”

“Yeah, getting soaked in the freezing cold is a well-known remedy for all ills,” Fili said. “I can see
why you’d want to try it out.”

“All right, OK,” Kili said. “I know, I’m in trouble. But other people skip lectures all the time, so – I
mean, I’ll catch up with the work later, I promise.”

“I know you will,” Fili said. “It’s not the work – I mean, obviously, I don’t want you skipping
lectures too often, but I know you won’t let it all slip. But – OK, is that all it is? Just – you know,
skipping because everyone else does? Because I’ve got to tell you, kiddo, when most people skive
off they stay in bed or go paintballing or something, they don’t do – this.” He gestured to encompass
the dreary, dripping trees and the heavy grey air that seemed ripe for a serious rainstorm. “This is
pretty rubbish, if you don’t mind a bit of constructive criticism of your technique. So – is there
something else? Do you need to talk to Paula?”

Kili abruptly got to his feet. “No, I’m fine,” he said. “I’m fine. I’ve got my appointment next week anyway, so – anyway, I think – I think–” He stopped, wrapping his arms around his middle and hunching his shoulders. “I think maybe I should go back to Cambridge,” he said, very quickly and so quietly Fili almost didn’t hear him.

“Uh – what?” Fili said, and then shook his head, slipping into the old familiar Kili crisis mode. “Hold that thought.”

“Hi, yeah, it’s me,” he said. “Listen, I haven’t got any appointments this afternoon, and my brother’s sick, so I’m going to have to take him to the doctor. So – I need to take the afternoon off. I’ll sort out the paperwork tomorrow, OK?”

“Right,” he said. “Run that by me again?”

Kili started to look even more intensely miserable, which Fili thought showed real talent. “I just – I’m fucking it up,” he said. “I can’t do this, I’m not doing it right, so – I should go back to Cambridge. I think I should.”

“Yeah, no,” Fili said. “What? You’re not fucking anything up. I mean – you did OK in that test last week, didn’t you? I thought you got a B plus? You weren’t – I mean, you were telling the truth about that, right?”

“Yeah, I got it,” Kili said, flushing a little. “I’m not going to lie about something like that. I mean – you know I’m not going to, I’m not like that any more.”

“OK, all right, I do know,” Fili said, raising his hands in a conciliatory gesture. “I mean, I do know, of course I do. That’s why you’re not making any sense to me right now. If you got a B plus, how is that fucking up? Why would you want to go back to Cambridge?”

“Hey – you weren’t going to do that, were you? I mean – if you ever decided to go back home, you’d talk to me before you left, right?”

“No – shit,” Kili shook his head, then scrubbed his hands over his face. “I’m fucking this up, too,” he said. “I didn’t want to tell you because I knew you’d be upset.”

“OH, so you were just going to disappear and then text me when you got there?” Fili asked, and then, even though he’d meant it to be sarcastic, he felt a sudden swooping in his stomach. Was that what Kili was doing, sitting in the park? Was he getting up the courage to head for the train station or something? “Hey – you weren’t going to do that, were you? I mean – if you ever decided to go back home, you’d talk to me before you left, right?”

“No, no,” Kili said. “Shit, Fili, I’m – I just can’t do anything, OK? I’m not – I’m not ever going to be able to do it, so – I’m going to go. I think I should go and stop – because it’s costing a lot of money and there’s no, I don’t think there’s any point.”

Fili opened his mouth, then stopped and closed it again. He took a brief moment to calm down, considered what Kili had said and then what he might have meant and what the best way to respond to that was, then drew in a breath.

“All right,” he said. “First of all, you know the money’s not a problem. As long as you’re studying hard, Thorin’s going to pay your fees for as long as you need. You know that. Second, even if you were having issues with your course, what would you do if you went back to Cambridge? Sit around all day twiddling your thumbs?”

Kili looked like he hadn’t really considered that question, which Fili added to his store of indications
that this was not a course of action he’d been planning for a long time. “I could – maybe Bilbo would give me my old job back,” he said. “I could work in the bookshop like before, and maybe at the zoo, too. Lots of people work at bookshops for their whole lives.”

“Yeah, true,” Fili said. “But is that what you want for your life? Seriously, Kili, do you really not want to be a vet any more? Because if you can look me in the eye and tell me your dream is to work in the bookshop for the rest of your life, then I’ll go to bat for you with Thorin, I promise. But if this is because of – if something’s happened and it’s making you feel like you can’t stay, then you’ve got to tell me, OK? Me or Paula, or even Bofur if that’s what you need. But no-one’s going to let you quit this thing unless you really genuinely don’t want to do it any more, so you’d better make sure you think this one through.”

Kili stared at him, and it was pretty obvious from the look on his face that he didn’t want that at all. But all this shit was coming from somewhere, and if it wasn’t a suddenly conceived dislike of animals, then Fili was going to have to do some more work to figure it out. He didn’t see why he had to do it in the rain, though, so he stood up.

“OK,” he said. “I tell you what, why don’t we go home and talk about it? Or to a coffee shop or something, if you prefer. My treat.” He put a hand on Kili’s arm to steer him towards the car, but Kili suddenly jerked and pulled sharply away.

“No, don’t–” he said.

Fili stood still, hand still in mid-air. He hadn’t seen a reaction like that for a good while, and he definitely hadn’t missed it. “All right,” he said. “I won’t.”

“Sorry – sorry,” Kili said, scrubbing frantically at his arm where Fili had touched him. “I just mean – I’m not, I feel bad. Shit, I should just – I’m OK here, why don’t you leave me here and you can go to work? And I’ll come home later and, and–” He trailed off, shaking his head rapidly.

Fili waited until he was sure the kid had said everything he was going to say, then nodded. “You know I can’t leave you here on your own,” he said. “I’m sorry I didn’t realise before you were getting in a mess about something, but now I know and we’ll sort it out. OK?” He thought about the weekend, Kili sitting in the dark at 3 am, disappearing all day on Sunday. “Something happened,” he said. “On Saturday night. Was someone a dick to you?”

Kili shook his head again. “No, no, it was – they were nice, I think. I didn’t really – talk to many people, but it was fine. It was fine, I’m fine. I’m really fine.”

“Don’t bullshit me,” Fili said. “You don’t have to tell me what happened if you don’t want, but I need to know how fucked up you are from whatever it was. OK? We agreed on this, remember?”

Kili’s nervous twitching subsided suddenly, and he stood very still. “Yeah,” he said at last.

“OK,” Fili said, and took a deep breath. “Hit me.”

Kili didn’t speak for a moment, then closed his eyes briefly. “I’m not going to do anything stupid,” he said. “I don’t want to hurt myself. I – I did, for a bit.” His eyes flicked up to Fili’s for a second, then away. “I would have told you before I did anything.”

“For a bit,” Fili said, feeling slightly sick. “For how long? When?”

“Don’t – don’t make a big deal out of it,” Kili said. “It wasn’t a big deal. I didn’t do anything, and I just want to – just not talk about it. Can we not talk about it?”
“No, we can’t not talk about it,” Fili said, and then bit down on his tongue. He really did not want to be yelling like a loony in the middle of this miserable shitty little park right now. “No,” he said, once he’d got hold of himself. “You know you need to talk about it with someone. It doesn’t have to be me. But if you’re – having a relapse then we need to do something about it. I can’t let that slide, kiddo, you know that.”

“No, I’m not – Jesus – I’m not having a relapse,” Kili said. “It’s nothing. It’s nothing, it was just a– Because– You’re just being dramatic.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Fili said before he could help himself, and Kili looked so astounded that he felt a slightly hysterical laugh bubbling up in his throat. “OK, shit. We’re not doing so well at this right now, are we? Let’s just get coffee. We’re getting coffee, and if you say no I’m going to call Thorin.”

Kili’s eyes widened. “No, don’t – He’ll–”

“Yep, he certainly will,” Fili said, feeling a small twinge of satisfaction – because fuck, he definitely wasn’t the dramatic one around here. “So: coffee. Or certain obliteration. Your choice.”

****

Kili’s favourite café was a dark little place in a building that was three hundred years old if it was a day, full of weird corners and unexpectedly uneven floors. It did stellar hot chocolate and mediocre cappuccino, and it was a great place to hide in public, which Fili figured was one of the main reasons Kili liked it. Also, they had really good chelsea buns.

“Chelsea bun?” he asked, and Kili nodded. He was looking a bit like a drowned rat, and Fili supposed he didn’t look much better. The woman behind the counter certainly seemed to think not.

“Still raining, is it, love?” she asked.

“Mm. I’m thinking we might need to build an ark if these keeps on,” said Fili, paying for the drinks and then glancing around. “Back room,” he said to Kili, who obediently led the way to the darkest, most private recess of the coffee shop. There was no-one else there on a wet Monday afternoon in November, and Fili decided it was as good a place as any to do – whatever it was they were going to do. He set the drinks and buns down on the table, sat down opposite Kili, and nodded.

“All right,” he said, feeling significantly calmer than he had in the park. “So you wanted to hurt yourself.”

“No, I didn’t,” Kili said.

Fili raised an eyebrow and waited, and Kili sighed, peering into his hot chocolate.

“Yeah, OK,” he said. “I didn’t want – I just wanted to cut myself a little. Just a little bit. But only for a couple of hours, and – I didn’t do it. That’s why – I mean, I was sitting out in the kitchen, I came home because I knew then I could shout and you’d come. But I didn’t want to wake you up unless I really needed to.”

“Good,” Fili said. “That’s great. OK, I’m glad.” And he was – still freaked out, because he’d thought Kili was doing remarkably well adjusting to the giant shift in lifestyle that moving up to Nottingham represented, but still. At least he knew Kili was still working hard to stick to their agreements. That felt like something solid he could put his back against to brace himself for whatever was coming next.

“So – you were out,” he said, trying to construct a picture out of the fragments Kili had let slip so far.
“You were out with these mates from your course. You had too much to drink and then – it made you want to hurt yourself? Is that what happened?”

“Yeah,” Kili said, and then closed his eyes for a second. “No,” he said, much more quietly. “No, it’s not.”

“Right.” Fili wrapped his hands around his coffee, feeling the warmth in his palms. “So what did happen?”

He waited. Kili sat in silence, eyes still closed. Somewhere in the front of the shop, the bell jingled, distant and muffled. Fili opened his mouth to ask again, but Kili beat him to it.

“I only had two pints,” he said. “No whiskey.” He opened his eyes and looked briefly at Fili before looking away. “I made that up. I mean, I’m a lightweight anyway, so– But – there was this girl there. Alix.” He swallowed, starting to look like he might cry, and Fili began to see where this was going.

“A girl?” he said. As far as he knew, Kili had shown no interest at all in romantic prospects since he’d come to live with them, and they’d all been torn between worry and quiet relief. But now – a girl. “Is she a friend of yours?”

Kili shook his head, looking at something on the wall behind Fili. “No, she came with Preeti. One of the girls from my course. But she’s – she’s not doing Vet. She studies, um, French.”

French. A crude joke came to the tip of Fili’s tongue and was ruthlessly discarded. “Was she pretty?” he asked, trying to be casual about it.

Kili nodded. “I mean, she – she had her hair all done up – I don’t know. It was complicated.”

“I bet,” Fili said. He wanted to grin and say something congratulatory, because the idea of Kili voluntarily talking to a girl he’d never met before would have been unthinkable a few years ago, but the knowledge that somehow this had all ended in him wanting to hurt himself nagged at him, and so he kept his face as neutral as he could. “Did you talk to her?”

“Yeah,” Kili said. He fiddled with his bun, tearing strips from it but not eating them, eyes fixed on his plate. “She was nice.”

“OK,” Fili said. “So what happened then?”

Kili’s hands stilled on his plate. He stared at the bun so intensely that Fili thought it might catch fire, and then suddenly ripped it in half, drew a deep breath, and closed his eyes. “Her flat was only five minutes from the pub, so I went back there and we had sex,” he said, talking so fast that his words slurred into each other. “I know I’m supposed to call you, I know. Don’t tell Thorin, I can’t – I can’t cope with him being angry with me as well.”

Fili stared at him, mind almost entirely blank of thoughts. “What?” he said.

Kili mashed his palm into his bun. “I know, I know,” he said. “I was going to call you, I promise, but – there never seemed to be a right time and – she really just wanted to do it as soon as we got in the door and I didn’t – I didn’t – I didn’t want to.”

Fili tried to say something, then half-choked on the spit in his mouth. “Ugh – Jesus–” he said, swigging from the water glass at his elbow. “Fuck – Christ, Kili, what? You what?”

“I’m sorry,” Kili mumbled, eyes still fixed on the table. “I know I fucked up.”
But Fili’s thoughts had sharpened now, past the initial shock, to what seemed to be the highest priority of a whole lot of what the fuck at that moment. “Wait – you didn’t want to?” he said. “You didn’t want to what? Kili, did she make you do something you didn’t want?”

“No – no,” Kili said. “No, I meant – I meant I didn’t want to call you. I knew I was supposed to, and it really was – there was a lot of stuff going on and I wasn’t sure – I couldn’t just drop everything and call, I didn’t think I could. But – but I think – I think I didn’t want to, either.” He hunched down in his chair. “I know I broke my promise. I’m really sorry.”

Fili laid his palms flat on the table and stared at them for a moment. OK. All right. Kili had – Kili had gone out and had sex with a girl he’d just met. But – assuming he was telling the truth – at least he’d done it because he wanted to. That was something.

“Why didn’t you want to call me?” he managed at last.

“Because–” Kili said, and then seemed not to be able to speak for a few seconds. “Because – I knew you’d tell me not to do it,” he said at last, so quietly that Fili had to lean forward to hear it. “And I really wanted to.”

“Jesus,” Fili said. “What’s the point of–” Then he stopped, cut himself off not just in mid-word, but in mid-thought. OK. All right. Forget the broken promise for now. What was this about? Kili had wanted to fuck this girl, and he’d felt like Fili wasn’t going to give him the space he needed to live his life. That definitely wasn’t the point of the agreement they had. Christ knew, they’d all had enough trouble over the years trying to negotiate the balance between letting Kili have some freedom and protecting him from himself, but back when Kili had still been living in Cambridge, he hadn’t seemed to be that keen on the whole “freedom” thing anyway. But now – well, now he’d left home. He was a student – a little late, maybe, but still, this was the time when he was meant to be learning how to be independent. And it turned out maybe he was changing faster than Fili had realised.

So. What was the most important thing?

Oh yeah, that one was obvious.

“Did you use a condom?” Fili asked, sending up a prayer to the gods of safe sex that the answer would be yes.

“Yeah, yes, of course,” Kili said. “I don’t – I’m not taking those pills again.”

Fili nodded. “Thank Christ,” he muttered. OK, what next? His thoughts were in a whirl, but he carefully drew a dividing line in his mind between the part of him that was going what the fuck and the part of him that was considering the details of the situation. “All right, so – you had sex. Was it – uh, was it the first time for you since you came to live with us?” If you’d asked him ten minutes before he would have said yeah, of course Kili hadn’t been with anyone since then, but now – but now apparently Kili had secrets that Fili hadn’t even suspected.

“Yeah,” Kili said. “I mean – apart from the barn.”

“Yeah, obviously,” Fili said, shuddering a little. “Right. And – all right, so – I mean, how did it go? Did you – um – find everything all right?”

Kili finally met Fili’s eyes with an expression of such astonishment that Fili couldn’t help but flush. Yeah, OK, he sounded like an idiot. Wow.

“I mean – shit, I mean – was it OK?” he said. “I mean obviously I know you know what to do – oh Jesus, look – did you enjoy it?”
Kili looked away again, then, and that look came back to his face, like he might burst into tears any minute. “No,” he whispered.

“Oh,” Fili said. “Shit.” He remembered what had led to this whole conversation – Kili skiving off uni, sitting in a park in the rain. Kili sitting in the dark at the kitchen table, apparently wrestling with his desire to hurt himself. Something bad had happened, that was clear enough. This girl had messed with Kili’s head, and suddenly Fili was pretty pissed off with her. “Can you – do you want to tell me about it?”

Kili shook his head, then swiped the back of his hand across his eyes. “I couldn’t do all the stuff,” he said. “I mean, because it was her flat, so I didn’t have any – candles or whatever, or – the right kind of music. And I tried to do foreplay but she just wanted to have sex, so – we just did that. I mean – yeah, so maybe I did it wrong. Maybe that’s why.” He brushed at his eyes again and frowned ferociously at the wreckage of his bun.

“Foreplay?” Fili said, and then became aware that his tone implied he didn’t know what foreplay was, which he definitely did, thank you very much. “I mean – candles and stuff – you don’t have to do that every time, you know that, right? It’s really a girlfriend thing more than a one night stand thing, anyway.”

“Is it?” Kili said. “Oh. The things I’ve read said it was good to – for getting in the mood and making it good for her. I really wanted to get it right.”

“The things you’ve read?” Fili asked. “What things?”

“I read – I’ve been reading about it,” Kili said. “Because – yeah, obviously I know what to do, I’ve got – I’ve got experience, but not in the – the nice stuff, you know? The stuff that makes people want to do it. Girls, I mean. I didn’t want to get it wrong.”

“Wow,” Fili said. “OK – wow. So – you’ve been planning this for a while then, have you?”

“Not planning,” Kili said. “Not – I mean, I didn’t know she would be there and she would want – I didn’t have anyone to plan for. But – yeah, I’ve been – thinking about it. I thought – I wanted to know what it was like.”

“With a girl?” Fili asked, wondering how he could have managed to be living in the same flat as Kili and never suspect any of this.

“I mean – what it’s like when you want to,” Kili said.

“Oh,” Fili said. “Yeah.” He passed Kili a napkin, and Kili took it and scrubbed at his eyes. “But then – OK, you didn’t enjoy it. It sounds like maybe you took it too fast? I mean – doing it while you’re a bit pissed with a girl you just met – that’s kind of advanced level, if you know what I mean. Not the best idea for your first time. Next time maybe you can spend some time working up to it.”

“No, I don’t want to do it again,” Kili said. “No – no, it’s – it’s disgusting.” Then he put a hand over his mouth, like he hadn’t meant to say that.

That made Fili sit up a little. “What?” he said. “What do you mean – disgusting? You didn’t – what did you do, just normal sex or – did you do anything else?”

“No, just normal – I mean, we did mostly what you’re supposed to, except without the – all the foreplay and stuff,” Kili said. “It was – yeah, there was nothing – she just wanted normal stuff. I think it’s the normal stuff, the stuff in the books – um, the first chapter.” He shook his head. “I sound like an idiot,” he muttered. “I don’t know. I never know what’s normal, but it wasn’t anything –
complicated.”

“OK,” Fili said, deciding that would have to be good enough for now. He’d let Paula ask about the mechanical details, if she decided that was a good idea. “But – it was disgusting?”

“No,” Kili said, then, “Yes. No, it’s me. I’m disgusting. I feel – I feel disgusting. I felt disgusting.”

“You’re not disgusting.” Fili said. “I mean, what you’ve done to that bun would give Bilbo a conniption, but other than that.”

Kili didn’t smile, though, just hunched down in his chair. “Can we stop talking about this, now?” he asked. “I should have called you, so you’d tell me not to do it. You know this shit and I don’t know. I thought I knew, I thought I should do it, but I was wrong. I never get it right. I just want – I want to go back to Cambridge so I can – not be here any more.”

Fili frowned at him. “You thought you should do it?” he asked. “I thought you said you wanted to? Did she put pressure on you or something?”

“No,” Kili said. “No, shit. I know you think I can’t make any decisions on my own, but I–” He swallowed and shook his head. “But– Maybe I can’t. Maybe I’m just an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot,” Fili said. “Kili – I know you don’t want to talk about this, but just – can you just tell me what you meant when you said you thought you should do it? I thought you said you wanted to?”

“Yeah, I–” Kili said, and then stopped, looking worried. “I did want to. I wanted to know – what it would be like. I thought if I did it, I’d like it, like everyone else does.”

“So... OK, so you did it – as an experiment?” Fili said. “I mean – were you attracted to this girl or – was she just convenient?”

Kili frowned. “I – she’s pretty,” he said. “I don’t know – isn’t that the right thing? How do I know if I’m attracted to her?”

“Uh... well, did you – did you look at her and think that you’d really like to see her naked?” Fili asked.

“No, I – I didn’t,” Kili said, starting to look even more worried.

“What about – did you get, like – a weird feeling in your stomach at any point?” Fili asked.

“A weird feeling – I was sick afterwards,” Kili said. “Do you mean that? Is that – I thought that wasn’t normal.”

“No – before. And not like being sick,” Fili said. He remembered Kili telling him he’d been sick, and hoped to God he’d waited till he got home and not thrown up in the poor girl’s flat. “Like – kind of fluttery and warm. Or maybe you really wanted to touch her, when you were in the pub?”

Kili closed his eyes. “No,” he muttered. “Nothing like that. She was sitting really close and she kept touching my leg and I wanted – I wanted to go home but I thought – I didn’t know when I’d get another chance. I did all that reading and I thought I got it. It seemed like maybe it wasn’t so difficult, but I–” He put a hand over his eyes. “Fuck, I’m so useless. I messed it up and it was horrible. And now everything’s screwed up.”

“Hey, you didn’t screw anything up, all right?” Fili said, and then had a horrible thought. “What
about the girl? I can’t remember her name, how did she seem? Was she enjoying herself?”

“Alix,” Kili said. “I think so. She seemed like she was. Then she went to sleep and I thought I was going to be sick, so I left.”

Well, at least that answered that question. “Well, then,” Fili said. “You haven’t screwed anything up. You wore a condom, you made sure the person you were with wanted to do it, and you even gave her a good time. Yeah, OK, maybe it wasn’t great for you, but everyone has bad sex sometimes.”

Kili stared at him. “Oh,” he said. “Uh – do they?”

“Ye-es,” said Fili, suddenly starting to think that maybe they should have had this conversation earlier. Like, five or six years earlier. “Just like anything else people do. Sometimes it just doesn’t work out. Especially if you’re new at it and you don’t know your partner well. I mean – I know you’re – uh, you’ve got experience, but it’s not really–”

“But,” Kili broke in, “but everything – all the films and TV and – it’s supposed to be great, like, the best thing. Everybody talks about it all the time and – I didn’t think – fuck, I’m really stupid, I just – thought it was always meant to be amazing. I mean – you know, when you want to do it, anyway.”

He looked suddenly stricken. “Shit, I’m so stupid,” he said. “It’s obvious, isn’t it? It can’t always be good, I just didn’t even think. If I’d thought about it more – I mean, yeah, it’s obvious. It’s obvious.”

“Not really,” Fili said. His mind was racing, thinking back on all the many, many conversations with Kili about sex he’d been a party to. They’d worked so hard to get him to understand that it was something enjoyable and desirable and an expression of love and pleasure – it had never even occurred to any of them to tell him that it wasn’t always the pinnacle of human experience. “Yeah, uh – so, you see, you didn’t mess anything up. I think there’s probably more people out there who don’t enjoy losing their virginity than who do. Not that – I mean I know you weren’t a virgin – uh.”

He stopped, feeling like shutting up was definitely the best course of action at this point.

“Oh,” Kili said. “So – everyone feels disgusting? It’s like that for everyone? Because – I don’t really get why people do it if it feels like that.”

Hm. OK, Fili had got a bit carried away with reassuring Kili and forgotten the whole disgusting part. Not to mention the spewing and the thoughts of self-harm. “When you say you felt disgusting,” he said slowly, “what does that mean, exactly?”

Kili drew a deep breath. “You’re not going to let me not talk about this, are you?” he said.

“Not if you keep talking about going back to Cambridge,” Fili said. “Sorry, kiddo.”

Kili fiddled with his napkin, frowning in a sullen sort of way, but after a few seconds he seemed to be thinking rather than just sulking, and finally he came up with an answer. “Um – you know, skin crawling and stuff. And sick. And just – greasy and – uh – I wanted to – I’m just really angry with myself for being such a loser.”

Fili didn’t miss the switch into present tense, and he was hit with a sudden memory of Kili showering far too much in the last couple of days. “You’re not a loser,” he said, but didn’t belabour the point. He had other fish to fry. “Right, so – it sounds like maybe you feel ashamed? Is that it?”

And that was when Kili started to cry. There was no warning – one minute he was looking sullen and angry, the next tears were rolling down his cheeks. “Oh, fuck,” he muttered, scrubbing at his eyes with his already-soaked napkin. Fili, taken aback, grabbed a handful from the next table and slipped out of his chair, coming round to offer them to Kili.
“Hey,” he said. “Do you want a hug?”

Kili, though jerked away from him, shifting his chair until he was in the far corner with the table between them. “No, don’t,” he said. “Don’t touch me. Don’t touch me.”

“Hey, OK, fine,” Fili said, holding his hands up. He grabbed his own chair and sat back down, a decent distance from Kili. “It’s fine. I was just asking.”

Kili nodded jerkily and shoved the heels of his hands into his eyes, leaning over with his elbows on the table and his shoulders shaking. Of course, the waitress chose that moment to come in, but thankfully she was quick on the uptake and backed out again without saying anything, quietly closing the curtain between the back room and the rest of the café. If Kili noticed, he didn’t say anything about it, just sat there breathing thickly for a little while before sitting up and digging his jar of pills out of his pocket.

“You all right?” Fili asked carefully.

“Yeah,” said Kili, then, “No. Yes. Yeah, I’m – I’m ashamed. I feel so fucking – stupid and – disgusting.”

Fili nodded. “You know what I’m going to say, right?” he said.

Kili shoved a pill in his mouth and took a gulp of water, then swiped at his eyes and sighed. “You’re going to say I’m not stupid or disgusting,” he said. “But you don’t – you don’t know what it’s like in my head. I can’t even – do sex right. It’s biological instinct, it’s – it’s evolution and stuff. It’s supposed to be the most natural thing, and I suck at it, so – I’m never going to be like – like a real person. So you might as well not bother.”

“Right,” Fili said. “Do you really think you can put me off that easily? I mean, I’ve taken the afternoon off, now, so I’ve got nothing better to do for the next few hours than sit here and tell you the only thing you’re being an idiot about is being so down on yourself.”

“All right, fine,” Kili said, flinging the napkin he was holding on the table. “Tell me, then. How can I be a normal person if I can’t even figure out whether I like girls or not? Come on, Fili. All the people on my course are years younger than me, and they know. They know what they’re doing, they’ve all had – girlfriends or boyfriends, they can have sex with someone they don’t even know and enjoy themselves. Do you think they’re throwing up afterwards? Because I don’t.”

“No, I don’t think that,” Fili said. “But I don’t think they’ve got everything figured out, either. Not at their age, and probably not for a good few years. They’re just – talking bollocks to make themselves look confident, like your average eighteen-year-old idiot. I know, I used to be one of them. But listen, you can’t compare yourself to them, Kili. You’ve got different experiences, different history. Of course you’re going to feel differently about all kinds of things. And just because they’re shagging around every weekend doesn’t mean you have to.”

“What if I want to?” Kili asked, glaring at Fili now.

Fili raised his eyebrows. “Do you want to?”

Kili managed to hold the glare for about a second and a half, and then his shoulders slumped and he looked away. “No,” he muttered, then shuddered and wrapped a hand around his stomach.

“All right,” Fili said. “All right.” He sat and considered for a moment or two. “So – have you thought – maybe you’re gay? That could be why it didn’t work for you with that girl.”
Kili swallowed, looking at something to Fili’s left. “How would I know?” he asked, his voice soft now, like all the fight had gone out of him.

“Well – uh, why don’t you try thinking about – an attractive guy,” Fili said. “Like – Zac Efron or – that guy from Iron Man 8. Maybe think about what it might be like to have sex with whoever you’re thinking about.”

Kili frowned at nothing for a long moment, then suddenly swallowed hard. “Uh,” he said, lurching to his feet. “I think–” And then he bolted, sending the curtain flying. Fili, caught off-guard, jumped up and followed, only to see Kili darting into the gents, slamming the door behind him.

“Shit,” Fili muttered, leaning against a pillar and wondering if he should just have told Kili he couldn’t go out with his mates in the first place. But no – as much as Fili still thought of him as a kid, he was an adult, and it had been his right to try and experiment. It was just shit for all concerned that his experiment hadn’t worked out the way he’d hoped.

“Girl trouble, is it, love?” the lady from behind the counter asked, appearing out of nowhere.

“Um – sort of,” Fili said.

The lady made a sympathetic face. “I’ve made him another hot chocolate,” she said, producing a mug out of nowhere.

“Oh,” Fili said. “Oh, wow – yeah, thanks. That’s really nice of you.”

The lady nodded. “Got one his age meself,” she said. “Very sensitive, he is. I wouldn’t want to be that age again, even if I could have me old waistline back.”

Fili smiled, taking the hot chocolate, and the lady bustled back into the front part of the shop. When Fili turned to go into the back, he saw that someone had put a sign up by the doorway, reading Closed for Private Party.

“Yeah, OK, maybe it’s my favourite café, too,” Fili muttered.

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By the time Kili came back, Fili and the café staff had between them managed to clear off all the debris from the table, and Fili had bought another round of Chelsea buns and another coffee for himself. He’d pulled the curtain back over the doorway, and Kili paused, halfway through, staring.

“You don’t have to eat it if you’re feeling sick,” Fili said.

Kili finished coming into the room, closing the curtain carefully behind him, and sat down, reaching for the water rather than the hot chocolate. “Sorry,” he said, voice a little hoarse.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” Fili said. “So – I guess you’re not gay, then.”

Kili sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I’m not anything,” he said. “I don’t want anyone to touch me – like that. I thought maybe I’d like it once I got started, but–” He shook his head. “But I’ve got to be something.”

“Maybe,” Fili said. “People are weird, you know? It’s not just gay and straight, people don’t just fit into boxes. Did you read about that?”

Slowly, Kili shook his head. “I just thought – most people are straight, so statistically I, um, I thought
I probably would be. So I concentrated on reading about that.”

“Statistically? You nerd,” Fili said, grinning a little. “But you know what the important thing is? You don’t have to have any sex if you don’t want. And you don’t have to figure it out straight away, or ever. It’s supposed to be nice, kiddo. If it’s not nice, then just – don’t do it.”

Kili frowned. “What if I never do figure it out?” he asked.

Fili shrugged. “You’ll be in good company,” he said. “Look – do you want a girlfriend? Is that what’s going on here?”

“Yes,” Kili said, then thought about it for a moment. “I mean – not – I don’t really think I want to go on dates, like – um, the cinema and having dinner and stuff.” He lapsed into silence, frowning, and Fili waited. “I mean – not with anyone I can think of,” Kili said. “Uh – hm. I thought – it sounded nice, with all the flowers and candles and music. In the stuff I read, I mean. But – when I see it in my head, it’s someone else doing it, not me.”

“Huh,” Fili said. “What if you try and imagine yourself doing it?”

Kili frowned so fiercely that Fili started to worry he’d give himself a headache. “Uh – no, it feels–” He shook his head, making a pained expression. “I think if I hadn’t taken the pills I’d be freaking out.”

“OK, well, let’s assume you’re definitely not ready for a girlfriend. Or boyfriend. Or anything mushy and romantic,” Fili said. “So – that’s fine then. You don’t have to do that. Just keep on the way you are.”

“Yeah, but – but then I won’t be normal,” Kili said. “Everyone else does all that stuff. I mean – wasn’t that the point of why I came up here? So I could learn to be a normal person?”

“Uh, no,” Fili said. “You came up here to learn to be a vet. Remember? That thing you’re supposed to be doing today but you skived off to sit in the park and mope?”

“Yeah, but–” Kili said, and then subsided into silence.

Fili sighed. “No-one’s normal,” he said. “And I know, I know, you’re definitely more – unusual than a lot of people. And yes, you’ll always be unusual. But that’s OK, Kili. There’s nothing wrong with that. And there’s definitely no point forcing yourself to do things that make you miserable just because you think it’ll make you more normal.”

Kili didn’t say anything, seemingly sunk in gloom. At last, he shifted and glanced at the clock on the wall.

“Dog needs walking,” he said, even though it was only two and Dog didn’t usually get his walk till after five.

“Yeah, OK,” Fili said. “Let’s go and walk him, then.”

He stood up, and waited for Kili to go ahead of him down the three steps into the rest of the café. It was still raining outside, and the two of them paused to stare glumly at it in silence before taking the plunge. The lady behind the counter caught Fili’s eye and smiled.

“You’ll be wanting that ark, then,” she said.

“You’re welcome, love,” she said, and then Kili pushed open the door and they stepped out into the rain.
Chapter 2

Walking Dog was a miserable experience that afternoon, even – apparently – for Dog. He sloped along, head down and tail drooping, looking much like his owner, if a bit more German shepherd-y. Fili did his best to be cheerful, but the relentless rain made it a tricky proposition, and by the time they got back to the flat, the overwhelming mood was one of dreariness.

“Right,” Fili said, as soon as they got through the door. “Time to – uh, kiddo? Where’d you go?”

As it turned out, Kili had gone into the bathroom, and Fili heard the shower turn on before he’d even finished locking the door behind him. “Huh,” he said, and then looked down at Dog. “Well, just you and me, then. Where’s your towel?”

Once he’d dried off the dog and himself, he settled down at the kitchen table with some paperwork, because he might have taken the afternoon off, but that didn’t mean he could just show up unprepared for his 9 am the next day. The client’s story was a complicated one, and Fili found himself absorbed in it pretty quickly, and only came up for air when the steady background noise of the shower suddenly stopped. He looked up at the clock, then frowned. Four pm. That couldn’t be right – if it was four, that meant the Kili must have been in the shower for almost an hour.

Fili shook his head, then pulled out his phone. 4.01 pm. Jesus. What was the kid doing in there?

The bathroom door opened and closed, and a moment after that, Kili’s bedroom door closed. Fili tapped his fingers on the table, wondering. Maybe he’d just been warming up after all that time out in the rain. But it was the third or fourth unusually long shower Fili had noticed Kili taking since Saturday night, and he really didn’t like that. But what to do about it? Go barging in and accuse the kid of being too clean?

Fili dithered for a minute or two, then decided to leave it for now. He went back to his files, but his concentration was shattered, and when his phone buzzed in his pocket, he was glad of the distraction.

The text was from Arpad, a mate of his from kickboxing. Trying to set him up on a blind date, again. Fili shook his head with a smile. Ever since he’d broken up with his last girlfriend a few months before, Arpad had been going all out to get him attached. It was like he’d been a yenta in a previous life or something. He ignored the text, but once he did that it was either go back to the client’s file or find something else to do.

“Fuck,” Fili muttered. Then he got to his feet and headed for Kili’s room. The door was ajar, now, Kili sitting at his desk with a textbook open in front of him and a pen in his hand. His page of notes was blank, though, and he was staring into space. Fili knocked at the door, and Kili started and looked round.

“Hi,” he said.
“Hey,” said Fili. “Feeling clean?”

Kili shrugged half-heartedly. “Yeah, I suppose.”

Fili tried to think of a clever segue, failed, and just stood there gormlessly for long enough that Kili started to frown.

“Are you OK?” he said. “Did you want – help with something?”

“No, I’m good,” Fili said. He turned to go, and then turned back. “Hey–” he said, and then came fully into the room and sat on the bed. “So – can I talk to you a sec?”

Kili looked wary, but he turned his chair to face Fili. “We’ve already talked,” he said. “A lot.”

“I know,” Fili said. “But – I feel like we didn’t really solve anything.”

“No, I get it,” Kili said, picking morosely at a loose thread trailing from the hem of his hoodie. “I don’t want sex, I don’t want a girlfriend. I thought I did, but I was just being stupid.”

“Yeah, no,” Fili said. “I mean – great, OK, we’ve established that you’re probably not ready for a girlfriend, but – hey, kiddo, do you still feel – disgusting?”

Kili pulled sharply on the thread, breaking it off and glaring at it like it had done him a personal injury. “I’m fine,” he muttered.

“So... fine as in actually fine or fine as in I’m showering for England because I feel gross and I can’t make it stop?” Fili asked.

Kili didn’t answer, still glowering at his hoodie. Fili waited a moment or two, then said, “Kiddo? Did you–”

“Why do you have to – always talk about everything I do?” Kili said – or rather, snapped, which was far enough out of character for Kili that Fili found himself staring in astonishment. “Can’t you just leave me alone? I’m screwed up, we all know it, I’m never going to get better, but you can’t just let me go back to Cambridge and – just work in the fucking bookshop and not have to try and be a real person, you always fucking – you just talk and talk and I just want to – I want to go home.” He turned back to the desk, slamming his book shut, and then put his head in his hands, hair falling over his face.

Fili sat still for a few moments, trying to decide what to do. “OK,” he said at last. “Well – I’m sorry for – not giving you enough space. I just wanted to make sure you were all right. And – it’s pretty obvious you’re not, but it’s also obvious I’m not helping, so I’m going to leave you alone for a bit now, OK? And – uh, maybe we can – watch a movie together later or something.”

Kili didn’t respond, didn’t even twitch, his shoulders tense. Fili sighed and stood up. When he reached the doorway, though, he looked back.

“Hey – you are a real person, you know,” he said. “You’re just as real as everyone else.”

Kili just sat silent, hiding his face, and Fili took the hint and went back to the kitchen table and his files. But he didn’t get any more work done that evening.

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They didn’t watch a movie, in the end. Kili closed his door and didn’t open it again that night, and if
Fili hadn’t known the dog was in there with him, he might have been seriously worried. As it was, he left food out on the counter and went to bed early. If the kid needed him to be out of the way, well, he was knackered anyway and happy to oblige. He emailed Thorin with a carefully phrased précis of everything that had happened so far and a warning not to call, and got a text less than a minute later: *Understood.*

“Aren’t we the chatterbox tonight?” Fili said to his phone. As if in answer, it buzzed. A text from Bilbo: *I hope you’re looking after yourself. I’ve just looked at the weather and it really looks quite unpleasant up there. Keep the heating on and make sure you eat something hearty! It’s so easy to forget your own wellbeing when someone else is having a difficult time, isn’t it? We’ll call you tomorrow, unless we hear otherwise.*

Fili grinned at the phone, tapped out a quick response, then decided it was time for bed. He lay awake for a long time, though, thinking. Kili had been up in Nottingham now for two and a half months. Saturday night had been the first time he’d gone out with anyone other than Fili, and Fili had been really pleased to see he was making friends. But the whole time, Kili had been making other plans. Plans that involved sex, and romance, and somehow using those things to become a “real person”, whatever it was Kili thought that was. And whatever he thought it was, apparently discovering he wasn’t actually ready for sex – or romance – had left him questioning the entire enterprise. The problem was, there wasn’t much Fili could do about it. If Kili wasn’t ready for sex, he wasn’t ready for sex. And if Fili was honest with himself, the kind of emotional instability that came with dating and fledgling relationships seemed unlikely to do Kili much good even if he didn’t throw up at the mere thought of it. It was hard enough moving away from the support of family and friends in Cambridge and studying with other people for the first time without throwing the meat market into the mix.

“For fuck’s sake, stop thinking and go to sleep,” he muttered to himself.

It didn’t work, though.

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The next morning, Kili was already up and eating breakfast by the time Fili made it to the kitchen. Well, not so much *eating breakfast* as *pushing toast around a plate.* He looked like he’d slept even less than Fili.

“Morning,” Fili said, trying for a reasonably cheerful tone and coming out sounding a bit like a maniac.

Kili mumbled something that might have been a greeting. Fili wondered if he was going through an awkward teenage phase. It would be several years too late, but Kili never did do things the way you’d expect. He peered into the fridge, pretending to look for the milk while actually giving himself time to think. He knew he couldn’t just head off to work and leave things as they were, but he felt like he needed a serious caffeine injection before getting down to tackling this mess. Still, the silence was getting kind of awkward.

“Hey, so—” he said, turning around, but at the same time Kili said “I wanted—”, and they both stopped, staring at each other. So, yeah, that definitely hadn’t helped with the whole awkward thing.

“You go,” Fili said.

Kili shifted, looking uncomfortable. “Um – I’m sorry for being a dick,” he said. “I mean – to you, yesterday. I know you’re just trying to look after me. It’s just – sometimes it’s really hard to have to talk about this stuff all the time. I get really tired. But – I was a dick and I hope – you’re not too
“I’m not,” Fili said. “I’m not angry at all. But hey, it’s nice to get an apology anyway, so – thanks for that. And I’m sorry for poking at you. I just want to understand how you’re feeling, so I know how much I have to worry.”

“You don’t have to worry.”

“Yeah, but – I kind of do, though,” Fili said. “It’s my job. Speaking of which, do you want a lift to uni today?”

“Oh – uh--” Kili said, suddenly avoiding Fili’s eyes. “I was thinking...” He trailed off, tearing the crust off his sorry-looking toast.

“You were planning to skive again?” Fili asked. When Kili didn’t say anything, he sat down at the table and sighed. “Are you worried you’ll see – um – Alix?”

Kili shook his head. “She does French, so she’s at the other campus.”

“Then what?” Fili asked. “Longing for another day at the most miserable park in England?”

Kili swallowed. “The people on my course,” he said, voice almost a whisper. “They’ll know – she’s probably told Preeti and Preeti will tell everyone else.”

“Tell them what?” Fili asked. “That the two of you hooked up? Yeah, maybe they’ll gossip about it a bit, but it’s not exactly unusual for a couple of students to have a one night stand. I shouldn’t think they’ll care that much.”

Kili didn’t say anything, and Fili frowned at him, trying to figure it out. If there was one thing Kili generally wasn’t embarrassed about, it was sex, so he didn’t get why he was suddenly worrying about it now.

“Hey – I really don’t want you spending all day at home stewing,” Fili said. “I’ve got appointments today, so I can’t take it off, I’m sorry. So – why don’t you tell me what this is about?”

Kili seemed to shake himself, then, and sat up. “No, it’s nothing – it’s fine,” he said. “OK. I’ll get my – uh – will you – can you pick me up as well?”

“I’m not done till five – is that OK?”

“Yeah, yes,” Kili said. “Yeah, I’ll go to the library.”

“Cool,” Fili said. “Just let me finish my coffee, and we’ll go.”

Fili was a little late arriving to pick Kili up, and it was dark by the time he parked and texted Kili to let him know where he was. It was raining, too – not the dreary drizzle of the day before, but absolutely chucking it down – and Fili was just reaching into the back seat for an umbrella so he could go and find the library when the passenger door opened and Kili slid into the seat. He was absolutely soaked, hair plastered to his head and trainers squelching. Fili stared at him.

“Jesus,” he said. “Did you lose a fight with Aquaman?”

“It’s raining,” Kili said.
“No shit, Sherlock. You could have waited in the library.”

“Yeah,” Kili said. “Can we go home now?”

Fili sighed and put the car in gear. It was pitch black, and his headlights mostly just lit up a billion raindrops. The drive back was going to be great fun.

“How was your day?” he asked. “OK?”

Kili didn’t say anything for a moment or two, then mumbled something that Fili couldn’t hear over the engine and the roar of the rain on the roof.

“Fascinating,” Fili said. “Do tell me more.”

“Fuck,” Kili said – and that, Fili heard perfectly well. “I said – I said I hate that I have to tell you everything.”

“What?” Fili said. “You don’t have to tell me everything. I was just making conversation.”

“No, I mean–” Kili sighed explosively. “I didn’t go to my course today.”

Fili frowned, glancing at Kili, but he could see much in the dark. “What do you mean? I took you there myself.”

“Yeah. I mean, but I didn’t – go to the lectures. I just went to the library. And then a guy from my course came into the library and I thought he might see me, so I – I panicked and I went and hid in the woods.”

“You – what?” Fili said, and then, “You panicked? Did you take your pills?”

“Yeah.” Kili sounded miserable. “I almost – I spilt some of them because my hands were shaking and so – I maybe need to ask Paula for some more.”

“OK,” Fili said. “That’s all right. Are you all right now?”


“Well, don’t.” Fili tried to concentrate on what Kili was telling him while simultaneously not crashing the car. It was harder than it sounded. “So – all right, so you were, what – you were scared of the guy from your course? Has he been bullying you or something?”

“No, no – they’re all nice. I mean – I don’t really talk to most of them. I’ve never talked to the one who was in the library.”

“Oh.” Fili pondered that a little. He wasn’t sure exactly how many people were on Kili’s course, but he didn’t think it was so many that the kid shouldn’t have talked to all of them at some point by now. Maybe he wasn’t adjusting as well as Fili had hoped. “OK, then, so why did you panic if you don’t even know the guy? And – why didn’t you go to your course today? I don’t get it, kiddo, I thought you loved that course.”

“Yeah, I do,” Kili said. “I was reading about it in the library, I wasn’t just – skiving off. I just--” He took a deep breath. “I don’t want--”

Fili waited, but Kili didn’t say anything else, and at last he decided this whole simultaneous driving and thinking was a bit much, so he pulled over into a layby and turned to Kili.
“Hey,” he said. “I’m worried, you know that. But if you need to talk to someone other than me, you know that’s OK, right? Anyone you want.”

“I don’t want – to talk to anyone else,” Kili said. “I don’t want to have to talk about it at all. But – I can’t not, because every time I think I’ll just pretend everything’s going all right, Bofur’s in my head telling me it won’t do me any good to lie in the long run, it’ll just make everything worse.” He sighed. “It’s really annoying.”

Fili couldn’t help laughing, at that. “He knows his stuff, that’s for sure,” he said. “I’ll have to get him to teach me how to get something so thoroughly through someone’s head.”

“I really don’t want you doing it to me as well,” Kili said, and it was almost like they were just having a normal silly conversation. But they weren’t, and Fili wasn’t going to let himself get distracted.

“So... are you going to tell me?” he asked.

Kili sat in silence for a couple of seconds, then tried to pull his feet up in front of him. Unfortunately, he was significantly taller than he’d been at sixteen, even if he hadn’t filled out that much in other ways, and the manoeuvre didn’t work too well, leaving him cursing under his breath.

“Shit,” he muttered, jamming his knees back under the dashboard, and then, “I’m – I just feel like they’re going to be able to look at me and – tell, you know? They’ll see how – disgusting I am and they’ll – I know they’re not really my friends but I don’t want them to look at me and see it.”

Fili opened his mouth, but Kili raised a hand.

“Don’t tell me I’m not,” he said. “I know what you think. I know what all of you think. But I feel – I have all this – filth, it’s all over me, inside me. I just want to – be someone else. I wish I was anyone else, I wish – I wish I was no-one at all.”

He hunched down, then, maybe not able to curl up into a ball, but still definitely good with the scrunching himself into as little space as possible. Fili was hit with a sudden memory, of the day years before when Kili had hidden under the bed, staring out at him, silent and fearful. Things had changed a lot since then. But apparently they still had a way to go.

“OK,” he said, once he was sure Kili had said everything he was going to say. “I won’t tell you what I think, since you already know. But – OK – you feel dirty. Right?”

Kili gave half a shrug, barely visible in the light from the streetlights. “Yeah,” he muttered.

“All right. How long have you been feeling like that?” Fili asked. “Just since Saturday night?”

“Uh – yeah, I suppose,” Kili said, sounding like he hadn’t really thought about it. “I mean – I’ve always known.”

Fili’s stomach lurched slightly at that familiar turn of phrase, one that he hadn’t heard for a while. “Have you?” he said. “Did you feel that way about yourself last week?”

Silence. Fili hoped that meant that Kili was trying to figure it out, so he didn’t say anything, just waited.

“No,” Kili said at last. “No, just – since Saturday. But – I used to.”

“Yeah? Like when?”
“Uh – always,” Kili said. “I mean – yeah, I always felt this way before. I thought it was just – normal.”

“Then what happened? Why did you stop feeling that way about yourself?”

A silence. Then: “I don’t know. I don’t – I don’t know when it stopped. It just – faded away.”

“After you came to live with us?”

“Yeah. Uh – yeah, quite a long time after.” Kili shifted in his seat. “I hadn’t thought about it before. I thought it was normal, so I – I didn’t notice. Until it wasn’t there any more.”

“So you don’t think it’s normal any more?” Fili asked.

“No,” Kili said, and then, “yes. I mean – I know it’s not normal for other people to feel this way.”

“Not for you, either,” Fili said. “This is just a blip because of what happened on Saturday night.”

Kili didn’t say anything, and Fili almost reached out and tapped him on the shoulder, then remembered he wasn’t really feeling very touchy-feely right now. “Hey,” he said. “Right?”

“Yeah,” Kili said. “But – what if – maybe it’s just – supposed to be that way? Like, I just forgot for a while, but now I remember?”

“Right,” Fili said. “So – OK, you used to feel like you were disgusting, and then you stopped feeling that way, but now you feel that way again. You know it’s because of something to do with sex, and you know that the shit you went through when you were a kid wasn’t your fault and that it gave you all kinds of weird hangups. But you’re still sure that you really are disgusting and you’ve just forgotten to feel that way for the last few years, even though you know that no-one else feels that way about themselves.”

“You make it sound stupid,” Kili said, sounding a little pissed off.

“Well – I mean, I don’t mean you’re stupid, kiddo, but brains do stupid stuff sometimes, you know that. So that’s what I’m here for – to point out when your brain’s doing something stupid so you know to try and ignore it.”

There was a long pause, then. Fili hoped that Kili was thinking about what he’d said and seeing he was right, rather than working himself up to disagreeing again. He listened to the drumming of the rain on the roof of the car and wondered what would happen if the road flooded while they were sitting there.

“Maybe,” Kili said finally.

“No maybes about it,” Fili said. “This is just your brain fucking with you. It’s a well-known repeat offender, your brain. We need to put it on probation or something.”

Kili made a noise that was maybe meant to be laughter, but mostly just sounded uneasy. “What should I do?” he asked.

“Hm,” Fili said. “What did you feel like last week, before all this happened?”

“I can’t – really remember,” Kili said, after a brief pause. “I mean – I know I didn’t feel like this then, but I – can’t remember how I did feel. Like I was a different person then.”

“OK,” Fili said. “Do you think it felt better than you feel now?”
“Yeah,” Kili said immediately. “Loads better. I mean – when I used to feel this way before, I didn’t realise I could feel different. So – it feels like it wasn’t as bad back then. But now I do know, and it’s – horrible. It really sucks.”

“All right,” Fili said. “So we know you can feel better than you do now, and we know you’d prefer to feel better than you do now, so all we have to do is figure out how you started feeling better last time, and then just do that again.”

“I don’t know, though,” Kili said. “It didn’t happen all at once, and I didn’t – really notice till later. So how are we supposed to find out what happened?”

“Well – do you remember when you first noticed that you felt better?”

“Um – uh--” Kili fell silent for a long moment, then said “--I think – when we were in Mull. Do you remember when we went to Mull and we climbed that hill?”

“Yeah,” Fili said. It had been the year after Kili came to live with them, when they’d spent basically the whole three months of Fili’s summer vacation on holiday in one place or another. Towards the height of summer, they’d gone up to Mull for a week, tramping around the peat bogs and curing their wet feet with whisky and hot chocolate. “When we saw that golden eagle?”

“Yeah,” Kili said. “Yeah. We were up there looking at the eagle and it was – everything tasted so clean. And I realised I felt clean, too. I felt – different. I realised it then.”

“Huh.” Fili remembered the day, certainly – the eagle, anyway, which had been perched on a rock a few feet in front of them, camouflaged against the landscape, and scared the shit out of them when it suddenly took off. He didn’t remember Kili behaving any differently that day. He’d been thrilled to see the eagle, of course, but apart from that.

“So – what does that mean?” Kili asked. “What should we do?”

“Hm.” Fili considered for a moment. “Hey – are you really behind from not going to lectures today and yesterday?”

“Um – I’ve been trying to read all the stuff – I missed the labs, so that’s – I can’t catch up on that now, but--”

“OK,” Fili said. “But – I mean – if you had a test next week, would you be able to catch up in time?”

“Yeah,” Kili said. “Yeah – but--”

“Right. I’ll make you a deal,” Fili said. “It’s only two and a half weeks to the end of term. You stay at uni at least until Christmas. If you still want to leave then, we can talk about it in the hols. And if you can get properly caught up by this Friday afternoon, we’ll go away for the weekend. How’s that?”

“Go away?” Kili asked. “Go away where?”

“Haven’t figured that out, yet,” Fili said. “I’ll look into it when we get home. If you decide you want to come, anyway.”

“Yeah,” Kili said immediately. “Yes, I want to. I’ll study, I’m not that far behind.”

“And you’ll stay at uni till Christmas?”
Kili didn’t answer that one straight away. Fili could almost hear him wrestling with himself in the darkness. At last, he let out an explosive sigh.

“Yes, all right,” he said. “Yeah.”

Fili sighed himself, more relieved than he’d really expected to be. “Great,” he said. “That’s great, kiddo. That’s what we’ll do, then. And now we’d better get home, before Dog loses his mind.”

And he started the engine and pulled back out onto the road.

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Once they got in, Kili immediately went out again to walk Dog (carrying the biggest umbrella either of them owned) and Fili got on with making dinner. He was in the middle of chopping onions when his phone rang.

“Bilbo, you always have the best timing,” he muttered, and went to rinse his hands.

“Good evening!” Bilbo said when he answered the phone. “Dreadful weather, isn’t it?”

“Yep, pissing it down,” Fili said. “Cambridge, too?”

“Oh, no, it’s actually rather fine here,” Bilbo said. “But I’ve been looking at the webcam, you know.”

Fili shook his head with a grin. For reasons which Fili couldn’t begin to fathom, Nottingham town council had set up a webcam streaming views of the town centre to the internet. Bilbo was obsessed with the bloody thing. Although in fact, Fili had a sneaking suspicion that it was actually Thorin who was obsessed and Bilbo just happened to be a lot less subtle about the whole stalking thing. Fili wouldn’t even have been at all surprised to learn that it was Thorin who’d got the council to install the webcam in the first place. Huh. Well, at least he hadn’t put it outside their flat.

He tuned back in to what Bilbo was saying and they had a pleasant chinwag about nothing much for a minute or two before Fili heard Thorin say something in the background, and then suddenly he was on the line.

“Fili,” he said. “Is Kili all right?”

“In the background, Bilbo said something that sounded like leave the poor boys be. Fili sighed.

“He’s not perfect, yeah. The whole – sex thing has thrown him for a loop. But he’s coping with it OK. A bit miserable, but not losing it.”

“Put him on,” Thorin said.

“On the phone? Can’t, he’s walking Dog.”

“You let him out on his own?”

“Uh, yeah,” Fili said. “He’s a grown man. And Dog’d rip the balls off anyone who got near him.”

Much as he loved Brunhilda, Dog was definitely a better bodyguard.
Thorin was silent for a moment, then there was the sound of a muffled argument. Finally, he came back on the line.

“When will he be back?”

“Dunno,” Fili said. “Listen – I don’t know if he really wants to talk to you right now, anyway.”

He could almost hear Thorin glowering down the phone at that, and he hurried to clarify.

“I mean – he’s a bit touchy right now. You know what he’s like when he gets in that mood. He doesn’t want to talk to anyone. He’s only talking to me because we live in the same flat.”

“You shouldn’t let him get too withdrawn,” Thorin said. “Have you talked to his therapist?”

“No, Thorin, I’m not allowed to talk to his therapist. Remember that whole ethics thing we discussed?” Fili shook his head. “I’m not letting him get withdrawn, OK? We’re working it out. It’s fine.”

“We’ll come and visit,” Thorin said. “This weekend.”

“Uh, no, you can’t,” said Fili. “I’m taking Kili on holiday. He needs a change of scene. Seriously, Thorin, you remember what we said about taking a step back? You really need to do that right now.”

“Am I not permitted to be concerned about my own nephew?” Thorin asked, beginning to sound pretty pissed off now. Great, an argument about this was exactly what Fili needed.

“Come on, don’t do that,” he said. “You know that’s not it. Just – Kili needs a bit of space right now, OK? He doesn’t need you breathing down his neck. I promised I’d keep you posted, and I am doing, so you need to hold up your end of the bargain, too, right?”

Silence. Fili waited, hoping Kili wasn’t about to walk in the door. Then Thorin sighed.

“I would like to speak to him,” he said. “Not to breathe down his neck, as you put it, but because he is my nephew and I would like to hear how his studies are going.”

Fili couldn’t help but smile at that. He’d managed to convince Thorin not to call every single day to ask Kili what he’d learned, but it had been a close-run thing. “Well, I tell you what, when he gets back I’ll ask him if he wants to talk to you,” he said. “How’s that? I’ll text you if he says no.”

Another silence. “Agreed,” Thorin said.

“Do you want to hear about my life, or is Kili the only nephew you care about these days?” Fili asked. “Put me on speakerphone, I don’t want to have to repeat everything twice.”

He listened to the sounds of Thorin and Bilbo arguing about how to put the phone onto speaker and smiled to himself. Maybe he could chop onions and update Thorin and Bilbo at the same time.

Only one way to find out.

****

By the time Kili got back, Thorin and Bilbo had gone off to make their own dinner, and Fili had got back to his onions. Kili had been out much longer than expected, given the disgusting weather, and Fili had been alternately worrying and telling himself off for worrying. When the kid walked through the door looking like several oceans’ worth of water had fallen on him from a great height, Fili, a bubble of relief swelling in his chest, shook his head and laughed.
“I thought you were going for a walk, not a swim,” he said.

Kili made a noise that was something close to sarcastic and knelt down with an audible squelch to start towelling Dog off. Fili turned back to his cooking, and when he looked back, Kili was standing, dripping on the floor and staring at him.

“You all right?” Fili asked.

“You’re, uh, you’re going to say I should do what I want because it’s my house too,” Kili said. “Right?”

“Yep.” Fili eyed him. “So what are you going to do?”

“I’m – going to have a shower,” Kili said. But as he was squelching in the direction of the bathroom, Fili had a sudden thought.

“Hey,” he said, “Just a sec.”

Kili turned and looked towards him enquiringly, and Fili rearranged his thoughts in his head until he had them where he wanted them.

“Do you feel at home here?” he asked. “I mean – I know it’s been a big thing, moving away from Cambridge. I know we’ve talked about how this is your home just as much as it’s mine, but – I never asked if you actually feel that way. So – do you? Do you feel safe here?”


“Sometimes?” Fili asked. “What about right now?”

“Now I –” Kili said. “I – everything just – feels wrong now. It’s not your fault – it’s not you or the flat or anything – I’m just having, uh, a thing. It’s me, I’m – I’m messing up.”

“You’re not messing up,” Fili said, and then shook his head. “Take your shower. I’m making moussaka, God help me, so you’ve got plenty of time.”

Kili nodded and disappeared into the bathroom. Fili listened as the shower turned on, then sighed and turned back to the recipe.

“What have I got myself into?” he muttered.

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Kili’s shower was definitely longer than usual, but he got out in time for the moussaka (which was
only slightly weird-tasting, for which Fili congratulated himself heartily), and after dinner Fili remembered his promise to Thorin.

“Hey – Thorin called,” he said. “While you were walking Dog. He was sorry he missed you.”

Kili’s shoulders hunched a little. “Have you told him about me – missing lectures? And – having sex and not calling you first?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Fili said. “I know you’d have preferred it if I didn’t, but you know I promised Thorin I’d keep him up to speed. He’d be camped out on the doorstep otherwise.”

“Yeah,” Kili said. “Is he angry?”

“No. Worried, like the rest of us,” Fili said. “He asked if you would call him. But only if you want to.”

Kili licked his lips. “I don’t – I’ve got to study,” he said. “So we can go away at the weekend.”

Fili sighed. “Fair enough,” he said. “But hey – you know, he won’t get on your case. He’s not angry. He just misses talking to you. I think he’s getting a bit of empty-nest syndrome. But yeah, you’ve got to study, I get that.”

Kili nodded and stood up, heading off to his room, Dog in tow. But a few minutes later, Fili heard his voice drifting through to the living room.

“Hi. Yeah, Fili said. No, I’m studying. About the musculoskeletal system. Yeah, it’s – it’s pretty complicated.”

He launched into a description of what he was studying – which really did sound complicated – and Fili smiled to himself and tuned out, putting on his headphones and burying himself in an intensive bout of facebooking.

A couple of hours later, on his way to bed, he knocked on Kili’s door. The kid was deeply absorbed in his textbook, making notes in the slow, awkward way he had.

“Hey,” Fili said. “Still studying?”

Kili looked up from his book and nodded. “There’s a lot of this,” he said. “I’m never going to be finished.”

“Probably not,” Fili said. “It turns out no-one ever gets to the end of studying. It just... keeps on going. The more you learn, the less you know.”

“I must have learned almost everything, then,” Kili said, and then, before Fili had a chance to laugh at the rare joke, “Hey – the showering thing. I know it’s weird.”

“It’s not that it’s weird,” Fili said. “I just – worry about what’s causing it.”

“Yeah,” Kili said. He shifted in his chair, scrubbing briefly but almost violently at his chest with the palm of his hand. “Yeah, I – can’t get clean. I can’t – yeah, I think maybe it’s a problem.”

Fili’s heart sank, but he kept his game face on. “OK,” he said. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not – not now,” Kili said. “Not yet. Maybe I’ll – talk about it with Paula. Next week. If it doesn’t go away.”
“Maybe?” Fili asked.

“I will,” Kili said. “Yeah, I will. I promise.”

“OK,” Fili said. He sighed, then came in and sat down on the bed. “This thing with this girl has really done a number on you, hasn’t it?”

“Alix,” Kili said. “Yeah, I – I wasn’t ready. I thought I was, but–” He sighed. “Don’t freak out, but – can I have a sleeping pill tonight?”

“Not sleeping well?” Fili asked. Kili had long since graduated to looking after most of his pill supply himself, but after an incident a few years before they’d agreed that Fili would be in charge of the sleeping pills. Since then Kili had never asked for them back, and Fili had been happy enough not to offer.

“Yeah, the last few nights – it’s been – not great,” Kili said. “Too much stuff in my head. And I want – I really want to be able to concentrate properly tomorrow. So I can get all my studying done and then – we can go on holiday, like you said.” He met Fili’s eye, then looked quickly away. “Is that OK?”

“Course,” Fili said. “Hang on a tick.” He headed to his room, fetched the sleeping pills, and brought them back to Kili’s room. “One OK?”

“Yeah.” Kili took the pill and swallowed it, then made a face and muttered something that Fili couldn’t hear.

“You OK?” Fili asked.

Kili sighed and shook his head. “But I’m coping,” he said. “I know I’m – I’ve done a few stupid things this week, but – I can make it to the weekend. I think I can.”

“You’ll tell me if you decide you can’t, right?” Fili said.

“Yeah,” Kili said. “Yeah. Promise.”

“Right. And then we’ll go on holiday,” Fili said. “Where do you want to go?”

“Uh – I don’t know,” Kili said. “Somewhere we haven’t been before.”

“Tall order, but I’ll do my best,” Fili said. He said goodnight, and left Kili and Dog to it, heading off to his own room. He found he couldn’t sleep, though, and after some tossing and turning, he pulled out his tablet and brought up a map. It was only a weekend, so they couldn’t go too far, but that still left most of the UK and a big chunk of Europe.

“Somewhere we haven’t been before;” he muttered to himself. “And somewhere good. It’s got to be somewhere good.” He stared at the map, scrolling around looking for inspiration.

He had a feeling this was going to be a long job.
Chapter 3

On Wednesday morning, Fili and Kili made a deal.

“Hey,” Fili said, when he got up in the morning and found Kili in the kitchen, looking more rested than the day before but still kind of miserable and anxious. “So – you’ve got lectures today, right?”

“Yeah,” Kili muttered. He didn’t look very happy about it, but given that yesterday he’d literally hidden in the woods to avoid one of his classmates, Fili wasn’t overly surprised by that.

“All right,” Fili said. “Hey – they video them, though, don’t they?”

Kili nodded slowly, and Fili nodded, too.

“Have you got a lab today?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Kili said.

“All right.” Fili considered. He’d been thinking about it the night before – had woken up thinking about it. He didn’t want Kili to fall behind, but he didn’t want to push him into a situation that was going to freak him out, either. If he was honest with himself, he was kind of amazed Kili had made it this far into term without having a meltdown, given his lack of experience with any kind of classroom environment. Fili had been ready and waiting for the first six weeks, but nothing had happened, and eventually he’d decided that all those lectures Kili had attended at Cambridge had made the adjustment a lot easier. But apparently, Kili had been walking a thin line, and now he’d been thrown off balance.

“So – OK,” Fili said. “How about this? You go to your lab, but you watch the videos of the lectures. How’s that?”

Kili frowned down at his tea. “Thorin said it’s not the same to watch the videos,” he said. “I might miss some stuff.”

“Yeah, he’s right,” Fili said. “But I think it’s probably better to miss one or two things than to miss the entire lecture because you’re losing it.”

“I’m not going to lose it,” Kili said. “I’m not a total freak.”

“No, you’re not,” Fili said. “But you are pretty stressed right now. I think Thorin would let you off this one time.”

“I don’t – I don’t need Thorin’s permission,” Kili said, which Fili would definitely have been more convinced by if there hadn’t been a pronounced wobble in his voice. “I don’t – I’m an adult.”

“No, you don’t need his permission,” Fili said. “But – hey, you might feel better if you knew he didn’t disapprove, right?” He paused. “I mean – do you want to go to lectures?”

Kili swallowed. “No,” he muttered, still staring into his mug. “I don’t want – people looking at me.”

Fili felt the wind taken out of his sails a little at that. He knew Kili didn’t like the way he looked – even though he looked like a perfectly normal twenty-something these days, and Julie was always telling him he was a real looker – but he didn’t care for the way Kili said it, like he thought people would think he was disgusting. Which, given what he’d said in the car the day before, almost
certainly was what he thought, the poor kid.

“No-one’s going to look at you,” Fili said. “It’s a lecture. They’ll be looking at the lecturer. Or at their phones, more likely.”

Kili shrugged, but he didn’t look very convinced, and Fili realised he’d wandered off track.

“Look, hey,” he said. “You’ve got to go to the lab. Right? You can’t get much out of a video of a lab. So – how long is it?”

“Three hours,” Kili said. “Two till five.”

“Right,” said Fili. “So – if you’ve got three lectures in the morning, how are you going to feel by two? Ready to spend the entire afternoon with a roomful of thirty teenagers?”

Kili started to look like he might cry, and Fili throttled back a little.

“How about we call Thorin?” he said. “See whether he thinks you should go to the lectures or not.”

“No, I--” Kili said. “I don’t want – he’ll think I can’t handle it. I don’t want him to think I can’t handle it.”

“Hey.” Fili sat down opposite Kili, then reached out and took his mug away. Kili frowned unhappily down at his hands for a moment, then raised his gaze to meet Fili’s. “Thorin knows you can handle it,” Fili said. “We all know. Do you think he would have let you come up here if he didn’t think you could manage?” He had a sudden flashback of one of the many, many fraught conversations he’d had with Thorin about that very concern, but he shoved it aside. “Part of being able to handle it is knowing when to give yourself a break,” he said. “Right? And I think when you’re having panic attacks because one of your classmates just walked into the same building as you, that’s when you need to start considering that.”

Kili’s fingers tapped nervously on the tabletop. “You think – he’ll be OK with it? If I watch the lectures on video?”

“You know Thorin as well as I do,” Fili said. “Do you think he’d want you to go if it was going to make you this unhappy?”

Kili sat silent for a moment or two, apparently thinking about this. Then he scrubbed a hand over his face.

“We can call him,” he said. “Yeah – can we? I think – I mean, you’re right, I know you’ll be right about it, but I want – it would be good if we could ask him.”

“Yep, that is something we can definitely do,” Fili said. He pulled out his phone and brought up Thorin’s number, then put it on speaker. It rang two or three times, then Thorin answered.

“Fili,” he said. “Has something happened?”

“No, unless you consider me burning my toast something,” Fili said. He realised, suddenly, that it was still pretty early, and calling at that hour usually didn’t mean anything good, but he wasn’t about to apologise for that in front of Kili, because he knew the kid and he definitely didn’t want him starting to feel guilty about something that ridiculous. “Hey, so, Kili had a question about going to lectures. You’re on speaker, by the way.”

Thorin paused, and the next time he spoke, he sounded a lot calmer. “What about going to lectures?”
he asked.

Fili looked at Kili, and Kili sighed and ran his hand through his hair.

“Hi,” he said. “So I – did Fili tell you what – I did yesterday?”

“He told me a number of things,” Thorin said. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“I mean – I – didn’t go to lectures,” Kili said, a little too fast.

“Yes, he told me that,” Thorin said. “He said you were upset.”

“No, I wasn’t,” Kili said, and then shook himself. “I mean – yeah, yes, I was upset. I got – it was stupid – I got all tied up in, in my head. And then I couldn’t – get untied.”

“I see,” Thorin said. “And how do you feel now?”

“I’m fine,” Kili said. “I mean – I’m not – feeling great. But Fili said – maybe I could watch the lectures on video and just go to the lab. But I know it’s not as good, so I wanted to – what do you think? Is it OK?”

“I think that sounds like an excellent solution,” Thorin said. “But if you don’t feel capable of going to the lab, you shouldn’t feel that you have to. I am quite sure your lecturers can make accommodations for you.”

Fili spent a brief, enjoyable moment imagining Thorin bursting into the Vet Department common room demanding *accommodations* from all and sundry, then turned his attention back to the conversation.

“Oh,” Kili said. “Yeah, but – it’s important. So I’ll go. But – I thought you said the videos – I mean, you said I shouldn’t rely on them, so--”

“Why do you think those videos exist, Kili?” Thorin asked then.

Kili frowned. “So you can watch them,” he said. “Right? I watch them again, because I can’t keep up with the notes. But maybe – I don’t know, everyone else writes faster than me, so maybe they don’t need to watch them again.”

“It’s true that diligent students such as yourself use those videos as a revision aid,” Thorin said. “But they are also designed for students who, for whatever reason, cannot attend the lectures. That is their purpose. Surely you must have seen that not all the students come to every lecture?”

“Yeah – yeah, they don’t,” Kili said. “But I thought – that was just, they were being – I don’t know, lazy. Not – taking it seriously.”

“No doubt some of them are,” Thorin said. “But there is also no doubt in my mind that at every lecture you attend, at least one student is absent because they feel themselves mentally unable to cope with the pressure at that time. That is why those videos exist, so it is quite appropriate for you to use them for that purpose.”

Kili frowned at the phone. “No, I don’t think—” he said. “I mean, the other students – they’re all normal, so I don’t think – they need that.”

“How do you know they’re normal?” Fili asked. “You think you’re the only student who’s ever been stressed out by going to lectures?”
Kili blinked at him. “No, I – Uh, yeah,” he said. “I mean, all the other students – they’re supposed to be there so –” He paused, frowning. “I hadn’t – uh, really thought about it. But – you think they’re stressed, too?”

“Uh, yeah,” Fili said. “Everyone gets stressed when they go to university. It’s hard work, a big adjustment – for everyone, not just for you. I’ve told you this before, right? We’ve definitely talked about this.”

“Yeah, but I–” Kili said, and then closed his mouth on whatever he’d been planning to say next. Fili waited a moment, but that seemed to be all they were getting, and time was getting on, so he turned back to the phone.

“So we’re agreed, anyway,” he said. “Kili can watch the lectures on video without seriously damaging his academic progress, right?”

“I have no concerns at all about his academic progress,” Thorin said. “It is your choice, of course, Kili. But I would not be at all worried if you were to watch the lectures on video from time to time.”

“Oh,” Kili said. “Oh, yeah – OK. So – yeah, if it’s all right – I will, then, because I – I don’t want to – uh, do anything stupid, like yesterday.”

“What you did yesterday was not stupid,” said Thorin, before Fili had the chance. “But I’m proud of you for looking after yourself and being careful with your mental health.”

Kili blinked, looking like he hadn’t expected that at all. “Um, thanks,” he said, flushing a little. “Thank you. Yeah, Fili’s – he suggested it.”

“Then I’m glad he’s there with you,” Thorin said, and it was Fili’s turn to feel a slightly embarrassed warm glow. “And I’m sure he will call me tonight to let me know how it all went.”

“Message received and understood,” Fili said. “Hey, we’ve got to go, though, so – cheers. Speak to you later.”

Thorin said goodbye and ended the call, and then Fili turned to Kili. “So – happy with that?”

Kili half-shrugged. “Yeah, you were right,” he said. “I mean – I knew you would be, but if you hadn’t said it – I don’t know, I wouldn’t have thought about it. I mean, calling Thorin, I wouldn’t have thought he might be OK with it.”

“Hey, no matter how much Thorin gets on your case about taking your studies seriously, he’s always going to want you to put your health first,” Fili said. “He just doesn’t mention that because – he probably thinks it’s obvious, or something. But I’m telling you now, right? Health comes first. Always.”

“Yeah,” Kili said. “Yeah – obviously.” He mumbled something under his breath that was probably sorry, and then got up and started stacking the dishwasher. “I’ll go in in the afternoon, then,” he said. “Can you, uh – is it OK if you pick me up?”

“Course,” Fili said. “And hey – you’ve got my calendar, right? Call me if you need to. Doesn’t have to be an emergency.” He and Kili had worked it out a couple of years before, when Fili had first started working at the practice: if it was an emergency, Kili could call any time, but if he just needed to talk, he had to check Fili’s online calendar and see when he had appointments. Mostly, he didn’t call at all, but it was good to have a system, just in case.

“Oh – yeah,” Kili said. “Yeah, cheers.”
“Right,” Fili said. “You’re sure you’re going to be OK?”

Kili nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “It’s not that bad, really.”

Fili paused a moment, remembering Kili sitting in the dark on Saturday night, wrestling with the desire to hurt himself.

“OK,” he said at last. “I’ve got to go to work. Call me if you need to, OK? Promise?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course I will,” Kili said.

But that didn’t stop Fili from worrying.

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In the end, though, the worry turned out to be without foundation: Kili didn’t call all day (not that that really set Fili’s mind to rest), and when Fili pulled up in the car park of the Vet Department, exhausted and on edge after a day with two particularly difficult appointments, the kid was waiting there in the dark for him.

“Hi,” he said, sliding into the passenger seat.

“Hi,” Fili replied. “Lab OK?”

“Yeah,” Kili said. “Hard.”

Fili considered asking whether he meant academically or in some other way, and then decided against it. He was tired and not really up for any more heavy stuff right then, and Kili undoubtedly felt the same way. They’d both survived the day, and that would have to be enough for now. So he pulled out of the car park and headed for home.

They were almost there when Kili shifted and turned to him.

“Are you going to kickboxing tonight?” he asked.

“Uh – no, I was going to skip it,” Fili said.

“Oh,” Kili said, then, “I think you should go.”

Fili raised an eyebrow at that. “Are you trying to tell me I’m fat?” he asked.

Kili made the weird, slightly wheezy noise that he seemed to think was the same thing as laughing. “No, I – you’re stressed. So you should go. You always feel better when you go.”

That had both of Fili’s eyebrows rising. “I’m not stressed,” he said. “I’m fine.”

Kili didn’t respond to that, turning to stare out of the window. Fili focused on driving for a minute or two, but eventually he couldn’t stay quiet any longer.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“I was just wondering,” Kili said. “Because – if I say I’m not stressed when I am, you always make me admit it. But then – I guess it’s different for you, then.”

Fili glanced at him. “What?” he said, and then, “Yeah, it’s different for me.”
“Oh,” Kili said, sounding suddenly kind of pissed off. “OK.”

And Fili, feeling a little off-balance, shook himself. “No, sorry,” he said. “No, it’s not different. I just – sorry, you surprised me. I’m not used to you – uh –” What? Pushing back? It wasn’t that Kili never did that, but this time – it was just surprising, that was all.


Fili pulled up outside their building and killed the engine. He didn’t get out of the car, though, sitting and staring out of the windscreen. “Yeah, OK,” he said. “I’m stressed. Guess I’m not doing a great job of hiding it. But it’s not you, kiddo, OK?”

Kili’s shoulders hunched a little. “OK,” he muttered, like he didn’t believe Fili.

“No, really,” Fili said, feeling suddenly like he needed to defend himself. “I mean – yeah, OK, I can’t say watching you go through more shit is fun for me, but – I had a bad day. With my appointments, nothing to do with you. That’s why, that’s what it is. I mean – I worried about you, too, yeah, but – I knew you’d call me if you ran into something you couldn’t handle, so it was OK, I didn’t have to worry too much.”

“Oh,” Kili said, sounding suddenly less sullen and more relieved. “Oh, OK, that’s what it is?”

“Yeah, kiddo,” Fili said. “That’s what it is.”

They both sat there in silence for a few moments. Kili made no move to get out of the car, so Fili didn’t either. And at last, Kili took a breath.

“You should go to kickboxing, though,” he said. “I’ll be OK. I’ve just got to get my head down and study, and – it’ll make you feel better.”

Fili opened his mouth to argue, and then closed it again. After all, he knew he was on the losing side this time. Bofur had said the same things to him often enough.

“You promise to call me if you need me?” he said at last.

“Yeah, course,” Kili said. “Yeah, I’m – I know I need some help, so I’m not going to – pretend I’m OK. Or – I’m going to try not to, anyway.”

“OK,” Fili said. “All right. I’ll go then.”

And so he did. And it was great, too – after ten minutes or so of sparring, Fili stopped thinking about his appointments, even (mostly) about Kili, and just thought about how to move, when to move, where to move. The strength seemed to flow through his body, and Fili closed off the more complicated parts of his mind and just let himself enjoy it.

Halfway through, there was a break, and Arpad came jogging over, looking sweaty and cheerful, as always.

“Mate,” he said. “You never answered my text about Jasmine.”

“Jasmine?” Fili asked. “Like the flower?”

“Like the girl, you div,” Arpad said. “What the fuck are you on about, flower?”

“Oh – yeah, sorry, I completely forgot.” Fili pulled out his phone and paged back to the text. “Yeah,
“I didn’t even suggest a time,” Arpad said, looking mock-offended. “Are you rejecting me, here?”

“Yeah, you’re not my type,” Fili said with a grin. “No, listen, I’ve told you – I don’t fancy getting back into dating right now, OK?”

“Come on, mate, you’ve just got to get back on the horse,” Arpad said. “You can’t let yourself be traumatised just cos you had a bad break up.”

Fili couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Traumatised?” he said. “Uh, no. And it wasn’t a bad break up. It was fine, Katie and I are still friends. I’ve just got other shit going on right now and I can’t be bothered. Right?”

“Who can’t be bothered with getting a bit of action?” Arpad asked. “You’re a weirdo, hope you know that.”

“Yeah, whatevs,” Fili said. “How do you know so many single women, anyway? This is, like, the fifth one you’ve tried to set me up with.”

“Big family, innit?” Arpad said. “I know everyone. Even know some people in Derby.” He shuddered slightly.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll be able to find someone else to set Jasmine up with, then,” Fili said. “Come on, we’re starting again.”

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When Fili got home, Kili was sitting at the kitchen table. He was buried deep in his textbook, concentrating so hard he barely responded to Fili’s greeting, but he looked pretty OK, if a little tired, so Fili made a round of tea and was just sitting down to his laptop when Kili’s phone rang. The kid answered it without even looking at who it was, eyes still glued to the book. But a moment later he sat up straight, eyes widening, and Fili – who’d assumed it was Thorin – sat up too, frowning.

“Yeah,” Kili said into the phone. “Yeah, hi. Yes. Yeah.” He sounded mostly normal, but he looked like he’d seen a ghost, and Fili stared at him.

Who is it? he mouthed, but Kili only shook his head.

“Yes,” he said, voice rising a little in pitch. “Oh – good. Yeah, OK. No I’m g- I’m going away at the weekend. No, Monday – Monday’s – yeah, yes. All right. Yes. OK, I’ll – I’ll see you.”

He took the phone away from his ear and then stared at it as if it was a snake, and Fili reached out for it, checking the name of the call that had just ended. It wasn’t a name, though, it was a number – someone Kili didn’t have programmed into his phone, and Fili suddenly felt very cold. Who was calling Kili who wasn’t already in his phone? Shit, that was not something Fili wanted to happen.

“Who was that?” he demanded.


Fili sat back, feeling slightly dizzy with relief. Ogilvie had been in prison for eight years, but still, every now and then, whenever Fili caught someone looking at him or Kili weirdly, he couldn’t help but wonder about all the other people who would almost certainly never seen the inside of a cell. He closed his eyes a second, then understood what Kili had said and opened them again.

“Alix?” he said. “Alix from Saturday night?”
Kili nodded, looking miserable. “I gave her my number,” he said. “She really wanted it, so.”

“Yeah, but--” Fili said. “Wait – did you just arrange to go out with her again?”

Kili ran a hand through his hair. “She wanted to,” he said.

“But you didn’t want to,” Fili said. “Or – you didn’t want to, did you? I thought you didn’t want a girlfriend?’”

“No – no, I don’t,” Kili said. “No, I don’t – I don’t want to see her again. She wants – she said she wants to have sex again. I mean – she didn’t say that exactly, but she meant it.”

“Yeah, I bet she does,” Fili said. “But you don’t. So – why did you say you would?”

“Because I--” Kili started, then shook his head, starting to look pretty freaked out. “Because – she wanted to,” he said, and then put his hand over his mouth.

Fili started at him, then took a deep breath. He remembered, suddenly, the one and only time that Kili had gone to school, all those years ago. How he’d been such easy pickings for anyone, so eager to please. A lot had changed since then. But maybe not enough.


“You know what I’m going to say, right?” he said.

Kili swallowed. “I shouldn’t have said I would,” he said. “I – I’m not supposed to have sex unless I want to.”

“And do you want to?” Fili asked.

Kili shook his head, then groaned. “Why am I so bad at this?” he asked. “I wanted to say no, but I – I said yes instead. Why did I say yes?”

“Why do you think you said yes?” Fili asked, and Kili hunched down, glaring at his phone.

“You sound like Bofur,” he muttered.

Fili replayed what he’d said and realised the kid was right – not that the tone and intonation he’d used sounded like Bofur, exactly, but that he’d slipped into what he thought of as his therapy mode, without really noticing he was doing it. But he wasn’t Kili’s therapist – wasn’t even ethically permitted to be Kili’s therapist. So he took stock, deliberately switched back into brother mode, and carried on.

“OK, yeah,” he said. “So – you fucked up. Not your fault, by the way, not entirely, anyway, but still. You know you can’t go out with her, right?”

Kili put his head in his hands and sat silently for a few seconds. Then he sat up.

“But – it’s not that bad,” he said. “I mean, if she wants to – it’s not that bad.”

“Uh, no,” Fili said. “You’re not going off having sex with people you don’t want to have sex with. Right? That’s not going to happen. Ever.”

“Yeah, but – I mean, if it was just once,” Kili said. “I could manage. I mean – I’ve managed before, so I--”
“Hey,” Fili said sharply. “Hey, no – what the fuck? You’ve managed before? Tell me you’re not talking about what I think you’re talking about.”

Kili stared at him, and it was obvious he was, in fact, talking about that exact thing. Fili felt suddenly kind of sick.

“What is this?” he said. “Is there something else going on here? You don’t have to fuck this chick, Kili. Why would you do that if you didn’t have to? Just call her back and tell her you’re not interested.”

Kili swallowed hard and stared at the phone. His hands were twisting together on the table, and he just sat like that for a long, long moment. Then he took a deep breath.

“If I--” he said. “If I just – went out with her once, and then – she’d realise I’m not – that she didn’t want to be with me anyway, and then – then that would be OK. Wouldn’t it? Because then she’d break up with me – and that would be OK.”

Fili closed his eyes. All the relaxing vibes he’d got from his kickboxing session were rapidly dissipating, and it was taking everything he had not to shout at Kili. But seriously, how could the kid just sit there and say it was all OK because he’d managed before? Jesus Christ.

“Kili,” he said, once he was sure he had a handle on himself. “Kiddo. You can’t string this girl along. It’s not fair on her and it’s not fair on you. You’ve got to tell her now, OK, before things go any further. I know it sucks, but that’s just how it is.” He picked up the phone and held it out to Kili. “You’ll feel better once it’s done.”

Kili looked completely unconvinced by that, but he took the phone, closed his eyes a second, and then dialled the number. He looked pale and sweaty, and a moment later he opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

Hello? Fili heard a woman’s voice from the phone, tinny but audible. Kili?

Kili’s throat worked, but there were no words. Seeing the way the sweat was standing out on his forehead, Fili suddenly realised that this had the potential to go south fast, and he grabbed Kili’s pad of paper and scribbled on it as fast as he could, then held it up in front of Kili.

Hellooooo? the voice said, and Kili blinked and then gasped.

“I’m sorry I said yes about Monday,” he said, eyes fixed to the paper. “I should have said no. I’m not in the right place for a --” He paused, mouth moving like he was trying to spell out the word, and Fili cursed his own terrible handwriting. Relationship, he mouthed, and Kili gulped.

“Relationship,” he said. “I’m not in the right place for a relationship. I’m really sorry. I’m really sorry.”

He seemed to run out of words, then, and he looked so freaked out that Fili leaned over and took the phone from him, ending the call. Good enough, he decided. It would do the job, anyway. And save any trouble if Alix decided to argue, given that Kili would apparently be pretty likely to capitulate instantly.

“There,” he said. “You OK?”


Fili jumped up to get it for him, but Kili was already on his feet, stumbling and almost falling against
the fridge. “Oh God,” he whispered, leaning his head against it. “Shit. She’ll be angry. She’ll – she’ll be angry.”

Fili grabbed a glass and filled it with water, then held it out. “Yeah,” he said. “Maybe she’ll be a bit pissed off.”

Kili stared at him, eyes round, and Fili shrugged.

“So what?” he said. “She can’t do anything to you. And hey, you know what? She’ll be a lot less hurt that you dumped her now, when she barely knows you, than if you’d strung her along and then dumped her when she’d got attached to you.”

Kili just stared in silence for a moment, face still pressed against the fridge. “I didn’t – dump her,” he whispered at last.

“I’m afraid you did, kiddo,” Fili said. “And hey, you know what? Dumping someone and then feeling kind of shit about it is a totally normal, extra-standard thing to do. You, my friend, are having an entirely average student experience right now.”

Silence from Kili. Maybe the kid was going into shock.

“And hey,” Fili said, “you feel better, right?”


“OK, that’s fair,” Fili said. “But you’ll feel better once you get over the feeling shit part. Here, drink your water.”

Kili took the glass and stood up properly. He had a backwards letter g imprinted on his forehead from the fridge magnets, but Fili, magnanimous older brother that he was, didn’t point it out.

“So, you mean what I said, you know,” he said, pointing at the chair and refreshing his cup of tea while Kili sat down. “Dumping someone is always shit. I mean – unless you’re a dick and you don’t give a shit about them. Or if they’re a dick and you’re just happy to get away from them. But if you just – you care about them, but you don’t feel that spark, and you know they like you more than you like them – yeah, it sucks. It makes everyone feel terrible, but it’s not fair to keep lying to someone just because you think they’ll be happier in the short term.”

Kili swallowed half his water in one gulp, then swiped the back of his hand across his forehead. “Have you done that?” he asked. “Did you – is that what happened with Katie?”

“Not exactly,” Fili said, sitting down opposite him. “I mean – she dumped me, for a start.”

Kili looked astonished at that, like he couldn’t fathom why anyone would ever want to dump Fili. Which was fair.

“But yeah, I think it probably sucked for her,” Fili said. “I mean – it sucked for me, too, but – it wasn’t there. I think we’d both figured that one out. Sometimes it just – isn’t there, and no amount of trying’s going to change that.”

Kili frowned down at the table. He was still sweating, but there were no other signs of panic apart from slightly shaky hands, and Fili was pretty impressed with that. “I didn’t think about it,” he said. “I’ve been thinking – all about having a girlfriend and stuff, all the things you do. But not about – if it didn’t work out, and what – what happens then.” He shook his head. “I mean, I never thought – I would have thought it would be me getting dumped.”
“Yeah, turns out these things are pretty unpredictable,” Fili said. “Anyone can get dumped, even perfect specimens like yours truly.”

Kili made a face at that, then shook his head. “It’s more complicated than I thought,” he said. “Everything’s just been – more complicated than I thought.”

“Sounds like a good summary,” said Fili. “You know, of life in general.” He paused, pondering for a moment what it might be like, to have no experience at all in romantic relationships. “Yeah, it’s – you know, it’s one of the most complicated things there is. Finding another person you want to be that close to, making it work even though sometimes you just want different things, dealing with all the – compromise and disappointment. It’s not all candles and music. Hell, it’s not even mostly candles and music. And it’s – risky, kiddo. Having a relationship like that, making yourself that vulnerable – it’s a big risk.”

“Why do people do it, then?” Kili asked.

“I dunno,” Fili said, and then realised that that sounded... kind of weird. “I mean – yeah, having someone like that – it’s nice, I guess. Look at Thorin and Bilbo. They make each other happy, right? They just really like hanging out together doing their gross lovey-dovey thing. And – uh, yeah, sex, too. I mean – not Thorin and Bilbo – I mean obviously they do, but – oh shit, uh, I’m just going to – stop now.”

Kili didn’t seem to notice his embarrassing stumble into a giant rhetorical pothole – he was still frowning at the table. “I thought I’d figured it out,” he said. “Or – at least some of it. But I think I don’t really know anything.”

“That’s the spirit,” Fili said with a grin. “Now you’re on the same level as the rest of us.”

Kili gave him a look, but Fili only shrugged. “I’m serious,” he said. “Really, I am. This isn’t a you thing, Kili. Everyone goes through this shit. Most people keep going through it until they die. Romance is complicated. The end.”

Kili’s mouth twitched. “Yeah, OK,” he said, not sounding totally convinced. “Anyway, I’ve – I’ve got to study, so--”

“Yeah, yeah,” Fili said. “I need a shower, anyway.”

He got up to go to the bathroom, but paused and turned back when Kili called his name.

“You OK?” he asked.

“Just--” Kili said. “You don’t think she’s really upset, do you? I didn’t want to upset her.”

“I know you didn’t,” Fili said. “And hey, like I said, you barely know each other. She’ll be annoyed for ten minutes and then she’ll be coping off with another guy by the weekend. Meanwhile, you and me will be in Lisbon.”

Kili sat up a little. “Is that where we’re going?” he asked.

“Yup,” Fili said. “10 am Friday, you and me are out of here, baby.”

“OK,” Kili said. “Yeah – yeah, OK.”

“Good,” Fili said. “Don’t forget it, all right? You’ve just get through these next thirty-six hours.”
“Yeah, OK,” Kili said, already turning back to his text-book. Fili watched him for a moment as he became instantly reabsorbed into whatever it was he was studying, and then turned back to his quest for a shower.

“OK,” he said to himself, very quietly.

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Things weren’t OK, though – not totally. Fili found that out the hard way, when he woke up in the middle of the night to someone clutching at his arm. He sat up sharply, making some kind of noise that definitely didn’t sound squeaky and terrified, and his brain caught up just before he reached out to push whoever it was away. Caught up to the situation – middle of the night, no lights on, someone apparently trying to grab his hand – and to the sound – wheezing breaths, quiet whimpering from a dog. It was all a bit too familiar, and he took a deep breath to calm his jangling nerves and then held out his hand.

“Hey,” he said. “Here. I’m here.”

Kili’s fingers fastened around his wrist, squeezing a bit too tight for comfort. That seemed to be where he wanted to be, so Fili shifted into a more comfortable position to wait it out.

“Did you take your pills?” he asked.


“Do you want a hug?” Fili asked, running through his mental checklist.

“N-- No,” Kili said, half-choking. The grip around Fili’s wrist tightened a little further.

“Do you want me to talk?” Fili asked.

“No – no,” Kili gasped.

“OK.” Fili sat, then, heart beating a little too fast, and listened to the sound of Kili panicking in the dark. The pills always worked pretty fast, but even so, it felt like forever before the gasping breath started to even out a little, and then a little more, inching by degrees towards something that sounded, if not normal, then at least not like Kili was going to pass out any minute. At last, Kili’s grip on Fili’s wrist loosened a little, and he gave a heavy sigh.

“Sorry,” he whispered.

“Hey,” Fili said. “You OK now? Want to tell me about it?”

“No, I just--” Kili said. “I just – couldn’t stop thinking. You know, same as – as usual.”

“Thinking about Alix?” Fili asked.

There was a pause. Then Kili sighed again. “Yeah,” he said. “Not just her – the whole thing. I keep getting – stuck.”

Fili nodded – not that Kili could see him. Stuck was familiar – Kili had told him often enough about how his thoughts just kept going in tighter and tighter circles sometimes until something had to give. Not great, though – it had been a good while since Kili had woken Fili up in the middle of the night, and he hadn’t missed it. “Do you think you’ll get back to sleep?”

“Uh,” Kili said. “Uh – no, no I think – yeah, I don’t think so.”
“OK.” Fili glanced at the clock. Three a.m. “Yeah, me neither. Movie?”

“I–” Kili said, then stopped.

Fili waited a long moment, but Kili didn’t say anything else. “Yeah?” he said at last.

“Those – they were my last pills,” Kili said. “Because I spilled them yesterday. And – I’ve been taking them a lot. More than usual.”

“Oh,” Fili said. He suddenly felt a bit panicky himself – the idea of Kili in his current emotional state without any pills to help when it all got too much was – yeah, not Fili’s ideal situation. “OK, it’s all right. The ones you took will last you till morning, and then we’ll call Paula and get you an emergency prescription.”

“What about – lectures?” Kili said.

“Don’t worry about it, OK?” Fili said. “We’ll sort it. We’ll sort it in the morning, but right now your job is not to worry about it and to come and watch a movie with me. OK?”

Kili hesitated. “OK,” he said.

“Right.” Fili got out of bed, half-tripping over the dog and fumbling his way into his dressing gown. “Come on, then.”

He led the way to the sofa, and then flipped on the TV and started going through the hard drive, diving into Kili’s gigantic folder of horror movies. For some reason, the kid was an absolute sucker for creature features – no serial killers or psychological horror, but if it had a monster or an alien or a reanimated corpse in it, he would watch it a hundred times. “Creature from the Black Lagoon?” he suggested.

“Uh – what about – Tremors?” Kili said.

“Tremors it is,” Fili said, settling back on the sofa. They sat in silence for a minute or two, but then Kili suddenly glanced at Fili.

“Hey – I’m sorry for waking you up,” he said. “I know you’ve got work and stuff.”

“What have we said about apologising for having panic attacks?” Fili asked.

“Oh – don’t do it,” Kili said. He paused. “Sorry for apologising,” he said, so deadpan that if he hadn’t known the kid so well, Fili would have sworn he was serious.

“Don’t mock me,” Fili said, putting a hand to his brow. “My feelings are delicate. Oh, hey, Kevin Bacon.”

Silence fell again, but this time it was an OK silence. Not perfect, but not awful, either. After about ten minutes, Fili glanced over to see that Kili had fallen asleep. No big surprise there – the pills tended to put him out, especially at night – but it was a shame he’d missed all the giant-killer-worm action. Still, Fili supposed that if there was one eternal truth to life it was that there was always time for more giant killer worms.

“OK, kiddo,” he murmured, turning off the TV and standing up. “Let’s get you sorted.”

He manoeuvred Kili until he was lying down, fetched his duvet and pillows from his bedroom, and stuffed them around the kid as best he could until he looked mostly comfortable. Dog spent a little
time trying to figure out whether he could fit on the sofa too (answer: no), and then curled up on the floor next to it, looking disgruntled.

“You look after him, OK?” Fili murmured.

Dog peered up at him and wagged his tail half-heartedly. Fili stooped and gave him a quick scratch behind the ears.

“Good dog,” he said.

And he went back to bed.

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